Tribute to an Educator and Peace Builder

Patricia Mukhim*

Ishani is fortunate in telling about two outstanding educationists who served the North-east. There is an article on the good Prof. V.V. Rao. This particular article pays a tribute to another outstanding educationist, Prof. Austin John. There are a few things common to both these great personalities. Both of them were not born in the North-east. They did not belong to the North-east by virtue of their birth. But the dedication and the manner with which they served the region has shown that they rendered invaluable service to the region by turning out outstanding citizens.

Prof. Austin John was in our midst till a few months back. He came to the North-east for the first time in the year 1954 and he remained in the region and served the region with dedication for 54 years in all. The article on him is written by Madam Patricia Mukhim, an eminent journalist and Editor of one of the two oldest circulating dailies of the region. She pays a moving tribute to the departed soul and mentions many important events of his life.

I had the good fortune of having Mr. and Mrs. Austin John as my esteemed friends of long standing. I also recall here that Prof. Austin John is one name which is well-known in all the seven States of the region. He has his students in all the States. The kind of person he was attracted large number of them to Shillong to pay their respects at the hospital where he remained bed-ridden for a few days.

A noble human being, a good Christian, a warm-hearted friend and devoted teacher was the Late Austin John. I salute the departed friend and great servant of the North-east region.

N.Th.

Mr Austin John, born on 16th August 1927 passed away in Shillong on May 9, 2008. His significant contribution to the cause of education in the North-east will remain a part of the history of the region. He served for 36 years as lecturer and as Principal of Union Christian College (UCC) at Barapani. Hundreds of past students and well-wishers from all parts of the North-east poured in to pay their last respects to their teacher and counsellor. Some of his students include the renowned Naga peace activist Niketu Iralu. He was asked to speak on behalf of past pupils. Iralu said, “It is a great privilege to be asked to say something on behalf of the students Austin John taught, befriended, understood with sensitivity, and helped during his years at UCC. How much they were won by his approach and the message of his life as perceived by them is the story of Austin’s legacy to North-east India: Meghalaya, Assam, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Nagaland. It is said being guided by God means being in the right place, at the right time, with the right people, doing the right thing. I believe Austin John’s life matched this fascinating measurement and pattern of how one’s life is lived.”
Prof. Austin John

In 1954, Mr Austin John came to North-east India to visit some of his friends he had studied with at Allahabad University. He also met Rev. B.M. Pugh, the first Principal of Union Christian College at Barapani who put it to him to become a History lecturer at the tiny college that had just been launched by some of the Christian Churches of North-east India. Instead of being daunted he must have been intrigued and irresistibly drawn by the challenge of the unknown that confronted him. He was told that the thatch and bamboo structures at the base of a beautiful pine-clad hillside were the college campus, and the few young men and women who had come were the scholars to be taught. Mr Austin John immediately accepted the invitation. He had come to the right place to be with the right people who were to take him to their people in the whole North-eastern region in the following decades.

At Bethany hospital where Mr Austin John was laid up for 18 days, present and former students of UCC, and numerous friends, young and old, from all parts of this region came to see him. Many shed tears as they said goodbye. Last week a nurse on duty in his section of the hospital asked his devoted wife Maya, “So many tribes have come to show their love and respect to your husband. From which tribe are you?” A former student, who has become a trained nurse took leave from her job in her State and came all the way to look after him at the hospital for a week.

The responses that have started to come in from former students spread far and wide, “overground” and “underground”, all show how this educator was regarded with affection, trust and respect by all whose lives had been touched by his dedication to his calling. On hearing of the demise of their former Principal, classfriends and contemporaries at UCC conversed on the phone with one another about Austin John. They include Mr Lalkhama, who rose to be the Chief Secretary of Mizoram and the man credited with helping to coordinate the political process of negotiations that culminated in the Mizo Accord, and Rev. Zaithanga, one of the senior most servant-leaders of the Presbyterian Church in NE India. He has just arrived in Diphu to help establish the Synod of Karbi Anglong. Then there is Anderson Tokbi, Executive Secretary of the Baptist Association of Karbi Anglong, and a prominent administrator in the Bodoland Territorial Council in Kokrajhar, both of them also graduates of UCC.

THE LEGACY*
When I die, give what is left of me to the children.
If you need to cry, cry for your brothers walking beside you.
Put your arms around anyone
And give them what you need to give me.
I want to leave you with something;
Something better than words or sounds.
Look for me in the people I have known and loved,
And if you cannot live without me,
then let me live on
In your eyes, your mind and your acts of kindness.
You can love me most by
letting hands touch hands and
letting go of children that need to be free
Love does not die, people do,
So when all that is left of me is love......
Give me away.

*This is what Austin John noted down in his diary a few days before his passing away.

Dr. Tuisem Sishak, foremost Naga educationist and founder of Nagaland’s premier institution, Patkai Christian College, spoke for all when he said of the much admired Professor. “We will remember his humour, wisdom and zeal in doing good for the public. Thank God he is now in the presence of Jesus Christ!”

Mr Austin John was known in Manipur for his valiant efforts to bridge the bloody divides between Nagas and Kukis, at the request of the Baptist Churches of North-east India. Needless to say the key people he met on both sides were his former students! This untiring messenger of peace certainly was led to the right life partner in Maya Ingty after God led him to the right place! Maya, a champion of women’s rights and a peace builder in her home – Karbi Anglong, is a respected personality and a determined nurturer of principled leadership for tomorrow. You cannot talk of Mr Austin John without remembering Maya. The two were inseparable in life and in their world views.

Former students who have benefited immensely from Mr John’s life and giving said that the greatest tribute they can pay their former teacher is to walk the path he charted out for them. He was a man of unquestionable integrity but what they remember most about him is his defiant rejection of what he knew to be wrong and unethical. He and his family paid the price for their conviction and values. He did it all with “humour, wisdom and zeal”, and without fuss or excuses. Mr Austin John took the positions he took in his life with the same understanding of reality that, “what is right is right even if no one is doing it. What is wrong is wrong even if everyone is doing it!”

What is mortal perishes and Austin John lies interred in the All Saints cemetery. But what is imperishable from his life has passed on to future generations. It is for those who have passed through his hands to take his legacy forward. It is for them to understand what has been passed on to them and to decide the positions they will take in their families and societies in this troubled region.

Mr SC Jamir, Governor of Goa and Maharashtra, a personal friend of the couple lamented the loss of a great educationist. He recalled that Mr Austin John was a distinguished Member
of the State Education Commission of Nagaland and his contributions in that capacity was enormous and will always be remembered. Jamir calls him a scholar and academician of rare qualities who always worked with dynamism to bring about academic and educational reforms in keeping with the changing national and international scenario.

Mr Austin John has a list of awards to his credit. They include the Dr Ambekar Fellowship Award 2007 given by Bharatiya Dalit Sahitya Akademi in recognition of the commendable literary, social and cultural services rendered by him for the uplift of the downtrodden, oppressed and suppressed people of the country. He was also included in the list of ten outstanding educators of India.

As a mark of honour and respect for the services he rendered for the people of North-east and the Bodo people in particular, the Bodoland Territorial Council contributed a substantial sum of money towards his medical treatment. Indeed Mr Austin John will continue to live in the hearts and minds of all those who have had the benefit of his teaching and guidance.

During his last moments, this selfless soul although in confusion losing some of his faculties prayed the following prayer which his son Ashish could remember only partly. “Thank you God for giving me life to serve others, strength to help others and love to give others.”

What a great life indeed and one worth emulating!

* Patricia Mukhim was born on March 17, 1953 at Shillong. She has got her B.A. (Hons.) and B.Ed degrees and had been a high school teacher for 25 years. She is also a columnist of long standing and Director, Indigenous Women’s Resource Centre, Shillong. Currently the Editor of The Shillong Times, she is also a member of several government and non-government bodies and has attended workshops and conferences around the globe. Among the awards she has got is the Padmashree by the President of India for Social Service in March 2000, the FICCI-FLO award for excellence in journalism on February 26, 2008, and the UN Brahma Soldier of Humanity Award on May 11, 2008.

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KINDNESS PAYS!

One day, a poor boy who was selling goods from door to door to pay his way through school, found he had only one thin dime left, and he was hungry.

He decided he would ask for a meal at the next house.

However, he lost his nerve when a lovely young woman opened the door.

Instead of a meal he asked for a drink of water.

She thought he looked hungry so brought him a large glass of milk He drank it slowly, and then asked, “How much do I owe you?”

“You don’t owe me anything,” she replied “Mother has taught us never to accept payment for a kindness.” He said... “Then I thank you from my heart.”

As Howard Kelly left that house, he not only felt stronger physically, but his faith in God and man was strong also. He had been ready to give up and quit.

Years later that young woman became critically ill. The local doctors were baffled. They finally sent her to the big city, where they called in specialists to study her rare disease. Dr. Howard Kelly was called in for the consultation.

When he heard the name of the town she came from, a strange light filled his eyes. Immediately he rose and went down the hall of the hospital to her room. Dressed in his doctor’s gown he went in to see her.

He recognized her at once. He went back to the consultation room determined to do his best to save her life. From that day he gave special attention to the case.
After a long struggle, the battle was won. Dr. Kelly requested the business office to pass the final bill to him for approval.

He looked at it, then wrote something on the edge and the bill was sent to her room. She feared to open it, for she was sure it would take the rest of her life to pay for it all. Finally, she looked, and something caught her attention on the side as she read these words....

“Paid in full with one glass of milk.” (Signed) Dr. Howard Kelly.

Tears of joy flooded her eyes as her happy heart prayed: “Thank You, GOD, that Your love has spread abroad through human hearts and hands.”

(Received by e-mail from Samiksha Acharya, Kolkata)