

INTO THE HEART OF THE UNKNOWN

(An appreciation of the contributions of the Pioneer Missionaries to “Lakherland”)

- K. Malsawmdawngliana

History is replete with the feats of great men and women whose exploits have changed the course of humankind’s march in civilizations and of the destiny and fate of many nations and tribes in numerous ways. There are those explorers and adventurers who would venture out into the unknown, treading the thin line between death and fame, courting indignation or applause. Theirs is a heart that is restless like a child’s, ever eager to know-all, and try-all. Which is why it is no wonder that, in history, we come across certain explorers and adventurers who had wiped away almost the entire native inhabitants; and, also, of the savagery of some conquerors who would trade-away all their human sensibilities for cruelty and “barbarianism” in their lust for fame, greed for wealth and thirst for power.

One striking similarity in almost all the ventures of the pioneer adventurers and explorers is that: more often than not, they usually have either a Monarch or a wealthy merchant who would bear the costs of their expeditions and voyages. So was the case with even the pioneering Missionaries who pierced in to the heart of the *Dark Continent*, Africa and of those, who carried forward the *Whiteman’s Burden* to almost every nook and corner of the globe. There are those big and wealthy Missionary Societies and those individual philanthropists, with a burden for spreading the Gospel, like Mr. Arthington and his Arthington Trust mission, whose benevolence even we in this remotest part of North East India had benefitted from. Amidst these trends of patronages and sponsorships, there are those few brave-hearts who dare to challenge the odds and resign to fate, and only to fate alone, for their trust with the unknown in obedience to the mandate of Jesus Christ to spread his Gospel.

By Faith Alone

It isn’t too hard to imagine what could have been the fate of a Christopher Columbus or a Vasco da Gama or even a Livingstone, without their patrons in their explorations. However, it is almost inconceivable to imagine the trials and tribulations that, those who ventured out **into the heart of the unknown** with a burden for the Gospel, will have to endure and sustain when neither a Missionary Society nor a wealthy mighty-hearted philanthropist, with a burden for the Gospel, there to back them. It is just Faith, and Faith alone in the bountifulness of the Almighty that they look-upon for their sustenance in their lonely venture in carrying forward the message of the Gospel to those yet un-reached. I wonder if history is not fair enough to such brave-hearts! However, I for one, solemnly believed that such men are the real heroes, and worthy of veneration in the annals of history (At least in our own local History).

The Un-sung Heroes

I feel blessed to be a living testimony to the venerable deeds of a God-fearing gentleman and his family, who had tremendously transformed beyond imaginations, the fate and history of my people, the Maras (also known as the **Lakher**). At the early age of 22 years in 1902, he had accepted upon himself the burden of carrying forward the message of the Gospel to those who had never heard or experienced it. The gentleman in question is Reginald Arthur Lorrain (1880-1944), founder of the **Lakher Pioneer Mission** and the pioneer missionary to “Lakherland”. Ms. Violet Lorrain Foxall-Anne Mark, the granddaughter of R.A. Lorrain, and the lone surviving member of the **Lakher Pioneer Mission** missionaries, is still with us today in their humble, yet, blessed abode at Lorrainville, Saikao (Serkawr),

our spiritual *El Dorado*. It would be a gross underestimation here if one were to mention the name of his spouse, Ms. Moud Louise Ulander (1875-1960) only in parenthesis. For, her contribution is no lesser to that of her husband's towards the work of the Gospel of Christ to the Mara people and in the improvement and transformation of their temporal existence. There are a couple of other missionaries too who had faithfully labored for the work of the Lord and for the welfare of the Mara people. However, herein, I will be stressing on the works of the Lorrains alone only for want of space and other considerations.

On the Road Less Travelled

At least to me, their adventure to this part of the globe, which R.A. Lorrain had vaguely described as "*Further India*", is no less intriguing or engaging than even those of Phileas Fogg's in Jules Verne's ***Around the World in 80 Days***. In fact, it holds more fascination for me, for they seek no glory, nor fame or mortal rewards in their enterprise. For the sake of the uninitiated, that "*Further India*" or "*Lakherland*" which is their mission-field is, roughly speaking, today's Saiha district, the southern-most Mara Autonomous District Council in the state of Mizoram, North East India. During the Colonial period, and practically for a very-very long time even after Independence, the country (i.e., "*Lakherland*", henceforth *Maraland*) "lay practically a month's journey from civilization" and their Mission station "some seven days' journey from the nearest white man", "and the same distance from a post office". For someone who is not a native of the highlands, even if one chooses to have a poor estimate of the description of the distance of the mission-field from contemporary "civilization" as rather insignificant, one could be excused for having such an assumption. ***However, even for a native with knowledge of the terrain in these parts of the sub-Himalayan mountain range, one cannot help but admire, at the least, the perseverance and determination of the Lorrain's as fellow mortals, and to venerate the love and compassion they showed for lost-souls drifting aimlessly in this ocean of darkness.*** As such, comparing them to the likes of a Livingstone or a William Carey, or men of such descriptions, is often difficult to resist.

"A Spiritually Controlled Mission"

Moreover, the everlasting-life giving message that they have brought has eternally reversed the fate of my people who, otherwise could have been easily overwhelmed and gorged-up by the more established belief-systems lurking in their very neighborhood. Besides, they have neither the wealth and fortune nor the goodwill and support of at least an established Missionary Society to bless or back their venture. Instead, their only earthly recourse was the **Lakher Pioneer Mission**, which Mr. Lorrain had "***founded on prayer***", and "***launched in faith***", in London in February 11, 1905, and, which too was heavily reliant on the efforts of a fund-raising group at his home church at Penge, London. Yet, he conquered the odds and faithfully responded to the bugle-call.

There is no doubt that theirs was a "Spiritually Controlled Mission" bordering those of the Apostles'. In as much as I admire the contributions of the great Missionary Societies, I admire still more, the dedication and devotion of men such as R.A. Lorrain and his spouse Ms. Moud Louise Ulander: For they do not seek a guaranteed stipend before they went out, nor influential committee to give them prestige and authority, and so forth. We admire and respect even those, who go out with their stipends, and guarantees, and committees at their backs, like the Welsh Mission Missionaries of the Mizoram Presbyterian Church (Aizawl) and the Baptists Mission Society's missionaries stationed at Lunglei etc. We must have a feeling of **special admiration** for this young couple, in going straight out into the "*regions beyond*" without any stipend to depend upon and without a committee to give them prestige and authority.

Launched by the Fire of Devotion

Despite failing to garner any sort of human support, neither from the then two leading Missionary Societies nor from the three branches of the newly formed Arthington Trust to send him forth to *Maraland*, but feeling sure in the Devine call, he went ahead. Then, for the sole purpose of raising funds for what he believed is a Devine Mission he founded the **Lakher Pioneer Mission**, independent of any existing society, denomination, or patron-church, trusting in *Jehovah Jireh* alone. R.A. Lorrain did not resort to any “worldly methods of raising money” for the mission. Instead, he had to vacate a promising business career in order to acquire medical knowledge at Livingstone College, for a year, which he believed was essential for his enterprise. The Almighty provided even the fees for the entire medical course. The fire of devotion that is burning inside him had landed his feet on the paths of the Cross—and the only recourse he has was the prayer of faith which has been answered, which is, and which continued to be.

Besides the bugle call, the urgency he felt for his proposed Mission to the Mara people has a temporal dimension to it as well. This is evident from his pamphlets and letters as well as the correspondences that the Mission had in later years with English officials working in “*far-eastern India*”. In a book ***Pioneering Lakherland***, reprinted in 1920 for raising funds for the Mission, R.A. Lorrain wrote, “The Lakher Pioneer Mission was founded for the express purpose of giving to this hitherto unreached tribe the Glorious Message of Salvation and God's Word, and to claim them for the Kingdom of Christ before Hindooism had laid its grip upon them. For if these tribes had been left without the Gospel—which they are so ready to accept—they would most probably, as time went by, have embraced the Hindoo religion, and the golden opportunity of giving them the Glorious Gospel of Salvation through Christ Jesus would have been lost forever.”

That Mr. R.A. Lorrain's fear of the Mara people embracing Hinduism (or for that matter Buddhism or Islam) is no imaginary danger is vindicated by a letter from Lieut. Col. John Shakespear, the retired British Resident Officer of Imphal, Manipur State, Assam, who is believed to be the first European ever to visit this part of the Empire. At the very commencement of its foundation, on August 23, 1905, in a letter written to the treasurer of the **Lakher Pioneer Mission** Major Shakespear had said, “Your remarks as to the danger of these hill tribes becoming Hindooised is very real, and Manipur is an instance in point. The Manipurese have become Hindoos within historical times, and are more bigoted than the highest Brahmins of Hindustan. The result is such as to make it incumbent on everyone who has the interests of the Hill people at heart, irrespective of his own religious views, to exert himself to save other tribes becoming Hindooised.”

“Off to the East”

On January 18, 1907, Mr. Reginald A. Lorrain and his wife left England on their journey to “*Further India*”, *Maraland*. Across the mighty oceans by ships, through the Indian plains by train and other odd means of transportation and, over the hills and ravines atop mules and on foot, they finally arrived at their proposed mission station Saikao (Serkawr) “just before four o'clock in the afternoon” on September 26, 1907. Thus, on September 26, 2007 the Mara people could celebrate **the hundredth year of the arrival of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to their land** through His faithful servants, the Lorrains. Unlike the other Pioneer missionaries who came to Mizoram, we are proud, and feel tremendously blessed too, to have with us in our own country the mortal remains of both our pioneer missionaries at Saikoa village, their mission station. His Devine favor in sending the Lorrains for the Mara people is also manifests in that, by the turn of a century, the Mara people can claim to be a hundred per cent Christian community, irrespective of the geographical boundaries in which they live.

“What hath God wrought?”

R.A.Lorrain's *5 Years in Unknown Jungles (For God and Empire)* reads more like a beautiful "romance", than being an account of the founding of the **Lakher Pioneer Mission** and its work amongst the Mara people. As such, it induces one to imagine that, it is more about the accounts and observations of a scholar-adventurer's, with a keen eye for learning and thorough on details. In addition, his account about his journeys and activities reminds one of certain similarities between his mission and those of the Apostle Paul and Silas to Phillipi. However, the Lorrains have done many things for the Mara people that Paul and Silas did not do for Phillipi. On the similarity front, Paul and Silas crossed the Aegean Sea and went into Phillipi alone; they were the first to introduce the Gospel into Europe. So were the Lorrains the first - the very first- after crossing two mighty oceans, the Atlantic and Indian oceans, through the dusty and humid plains of mainland India and over the hills and valleys of "*far-eastern India*", to introduce the Gospel into *Maraland*.

Paul and Silas went to Phillipi with a prior knowledge of the customs and cultures, and most importantly, of the language of the people therein. On the contrary, our Missionaries had first to pick up every word of the strange language, no white man, or for that matter no body from amongst other skin color or men of such descriptions, having ever before resided amongst them; they were then without a written language, and therefore there were no books of reference to help them. With Divine intervention, the Mara language was reduced into writing within six months of their arrival, March 18, 1908 to be precise; by using the English alphabets with slight modifications to suit the tonal distinctiveness of the dialect. "Paul, great as he was, did not reduce the language to writing." (Rev. James Mountain, D.D). Then by July of the same year, they started the first school in the history of Mara people, known as "*Lakherland School*" at Saikao. In addition, in less than three years after their arrival, they could gather their first harvest of a native soul for Christ in Mr. Thytu Tlapyu.

In five years time, the Mara language has been reduced into writing, a grammar and dictionary, a primer, and a hymnbook have been compiled; the Gospel according to St. John has been translated and the process of printing completed as well. The work is exceptionally tremendous if one knows anything about Missionary and literary work! After seeing all these, one cannot help but to exclaim, "*What hath God wrought!*"

The Breath of Life

One of the most fundamental necessities or preconditions for a nation to grow, prosper, and survive, I assume, is to have a written script of one's own. ***Considering the pace at which the Mara civilization was progressing even at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was doubtful that even in another hundred year's time, it would invent a written script on its own. It is here that one realizes-leave aside the Gospel- the real magnitude and true significance of the works our pioneer missionaries had done for us. In reducing the language into writing, they infused a new breath of life into the soul of this otherwise tapering "savage" agrarian nation.*** This observation, I believe, is validated when one observes the situation of our contemporary fellow tribals in different parts of the country who otherwise do not have the advantage of a pioneer missionary to them. How well did we nurture and pushed forward this advantage is another question. However, we must not take for granted the privilege that has been granted to us through our missionaries while many of our contemporary fellow tribal communities are reeling under the shadow of doubt and fear. At the least, we ought to acknowledge the responsibility that we have towards these communities of our neighborhood, so that they may also choose between eternal life or death, survival or assimilation/extinction as individuals and as a nation.

***"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you."*(Isaiah 60:1-2[NIV]).**

The above passage from the Bible holds a very sentimental place in the hearts of every Mara. For these words from the Scriptures are those that echoed for the first time ever across their hills since time immemorial. It was with these words of assurances from the Lord that R.A. Lorrain began his cultivation of the seeds of the Gospel in Maraland. And thankfully, I am the harvest from one of those seeds that they

had painstakingly planted. Had it not been for the grace of the Almighty and for the devotion of these brave Soldiers of the Cross- I doubt that I would be typing this article on a PC in Hyderabad with a concrete roof above my head! Praise the Lord!

However, despite being a native of *Maraland* and living only a few scores of kilometers away from that spiritual *El Dorado, Saikao (Serkawr)*, it tremendously hurts one's pride to admit that I have not been there to pay my respects at least to those noble souls who **had showed us the way to eternity and gave wings to our civilization**. I would repeatedly swallow this one bitter humiliation- though silently- all through these years. Still, I humbly pray that one fine day I would be granted the privilege. ***When that day should come, I will go there not with the discerning mind of the historian, neither with the enthusiasm of an adventurer nor with the sentimentality of a poet. Instead, I will go there with the open mind and spirit of a pilgrim.***

Notes:

1. The writer of this article K. Malsawmdawngliana, MA (History) is fondly called as Dawnga or Madawnga. He is the eldest son of Shri K.T. Daochai, former Headmaster of Chakhei H/S and retired teacher at GHSS, Siaha. Dawnga is currently based in Hyderabad. We wish him good luck in all his endeavours.

2. This article was first published at VIRTHLILENG Vol-III dated 16th November 2008 (Sunday), an Annual Magazine of Hyderabad Mizo Association.

(Maraland.NET online document)