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# The Assam Tribune READING Sunday



Anyone visiting Asha Dhan (which means Gift of Hope) in Kolkata, Mother Teresa's home for the destitute, will not miss seeing a legend along the staircase that leads to the chapel, which reads: "Joy is the only infallible sign of God's presence." These are the oft-quoted words of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French Palaeontologist, which beautifully summarises the message of Christmas. Asha Dhan is a place that could make anyone miserable, as they witness the plight of the dying destitutes, whom the Missionaries of Charity shelter there. It could also make anyone immensely angry at a world that allowed human beings to come to such desperation. Yet, the legend does not seem out of place, because it is quite evident that God is truly present there amidst the pathetic conditions. The clearest sign was the serenity on the faces of the inmates and, perhaps more surprisingly, the joy on the face of the sisters who served the inmates of Asha Dhan.

Christmas is quintessentially a festival of joy at the realisation that God has become a human being. In the Hindu tradition, joy defines God, the Ultimate Absolute: *Sat-Chit-Ananda* - Being, Consciousness and Bliss. In Islam, submission to *Allah* infinitely merciful and bountiful, bestows immeasurable joy. In Buddhism, enlightenment, *Nirvana*, always implies the deepest compassion that leads to joy. In the Christian tradition, self-emptying best describes God's love for humanity, a love that must bring joy.

It is joy that pervades the homes and hearths of Christians during the celebration of Christmas. It is joy which best captures the atmosphere during the season of Christmas. Yet, from the beginning, when Christ was born in a manger to migrant parents in Bethlehem in utter poverty, until His end in a humiliating death on the cross on Calvary, joy seems to be apparently illusive, if not completely missing. So what kind of joy is celebrated when one is remembering Christmas? In a world darkened by endless suffering and tragedy, does joy have any meaning?

Perhaps one can begin to understand the depth of joy by examining the central characters of the Christmas story. One can learn about joy by gazing at the child Jesus and Mary, His mother, at Joseph, His father and the shepherds, at Herod, at the three kings and their gifts. What does one see while looking at the Babe of Bethlehem? Christians see with their eyes of faith the Creator of the universe dressed in humility and simplicity. He has emptied Himself and has come to share Himself with His creatures unreservedly, to the point of becoming one of us as Emanuel - God with us - eventually even to pouring out His life on a cross. Such is the boundless compassion of our God. This is precisely the secret of Christmas joy that is revealed in the Christmas story. It can be experienced by those who generously empty themselves of their selfishness, and share what they are and what they have with others; by those who can be genuinely compassionate to all, especially the less fortunate.

In Mary, we find a simple, yet alert woman, who absorbs the mystery that is unravelling in front of her eyes. She is an exemplar of silence and solitude that searches



## Joy to the world

**Dr. Melvil Pereira** discovers the true spirit of Yuletide season.



mas? Or is there still a little of the Herod within, who needs to be excoriated and redeemed? Is there still a little of the Pharisee or the scribe hidden inside, as one teaches others without ever learning the meaning of the message for oneself?

The manger in Bethlehem makes evident that joy is never incompatible with hardship and suffering, but can always be negated by hate and fear and the negative emotions that all too often plague our lives. People who are angry or jealous, selfish or possessive can have no place here. They belong rather in the palaces of the present-day Herods, where pleasure, excitement, and the lust for power are such poor substitutes for true joy. Persons who are filled with their own importance and learning cannot experience Christmas joy. They are more at home with the sophistication of the present-day Pharisees and scribes, where hypocrisy and pretence have displaced sincerity and honesty.

Today our world seems so far from Christmas joy when we think of the wars that still rage with indescribable destruction, as in Israel and Syria. The joy of Christmas seems far-off when we are confronted with billions of people living in poverty, while a minuscule minority enjoys affluence. The joy of Christmas seems to be miles away from us when human dignity is torn asunder by rape, communal violence and ethnic conflicts.

And yet, Christmas celebrates joy, a joy that presages the presence of God, a God who never gives up on us, who forever loves this world, whose redemption cannot fail. One experiences this joy by unselfishly emptying oneself, by generously gifting oneself, and compassionately engaging with others. God shows all of this at Bethlehem.

This Christmas, as one celebrates God-with-us or Emmanuel, may we also be with this God of joy, of compassion, of mercy, of love, who comes to us today and every day. It might benefit to reflect with Mary at the manger and ponder these things in our hearts. May the Christ child bring to new birth the child within us that we too often suppress; the playful and joyful child, because when God is present, we cannot but be joyful, for joy is the only infallible sign of God's presence.

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for answers to profound questions. In Joseph, one finds a caring head of the family, who stands tall in times of crises. He is the model of compassion, protective of the weak and vulnerable. The shepherds, despised by the 'decent' people of that age, become carriers of good news. They are not overly preoccupied with just the care of their sheep; rather, they are enthralled by the message of angels and rush to the Babe of Bethlehem to be bathed in joy. The three kings were willing to risk themselves on their arduous journey following their star. Like Mary, they, too, search for answers. Their relentless search brings them face to face with the infant and they honour Him with their gifts and in turn, they are ablaze with joy. This

is the kind of joy Christmas celebrates!

Herod is the counterpoint to this Christmas joy. He is full of fear and hate, compulsively concerned only with himself and his own obsession with power and control. The Pharisees and scribes, too, those who hold positions of leadership in Jewish faith, exclude themselves from this joy because though they may know the scriptures, they fail to live by them.

With whom should one stand as one recalls the Christmas story? With the unselfish simplicity of the shepherds, the bountiful generosity of the kings, the compassionate concern of Joseph, the boundless joy of Mary? Will one allow the child within oneself to come alive this Christ-



## Drink of doom

**Sanjoy Ray** confronts a disturbing truth in Assam's tea gardens.

Served at least two times a day and that too in as-much-as-you-can-drink quantities, this scheduled tea-time of the day cheers up the workers in almost all the tea gardens of Assam, just the way the 'happy hours' in a food joint excite urban teenagers.

However, unlike in the latter's case, the tradition of serving *Chai Pani* (tea with added/excess salt) to tea garden workers dates back to an era when the British ruled the country. And by the time the British left, *Chai Pani* became the official health drink of the tea gardens.

The colonial rulers, if the stories about the introduction of *Chai Pani* are to be believed, had popularised the drink, propagating that it helps to fight diseases and that it will imbibe in them that extra zeal to work for longer hours and thereby earn more.

The popular practice, however, left a telling effect on the lifespan of the entire tea garden community, more so on mothers and their children. And alas, the practice continues.

Over the years, the governments at both the Centre and the State appear to be least bothered about the growing health hazards, especially in the form of maternal and infant mortality in tea gardens of Assam.

As I walk through the narrow lanes of one such garden in Tinsukia district, I catch up with two young tea garden factory workers who guide me to an abandoned shack where the *Chai Pani* is being prepared in big paint drums under the most unhygienic conditions.

"*Chai Pani* is prepared twice or thrice a day and each plucker drinks at least a litre in one sitting," he informs.

The doctor there, however, was strictly warned not to speak to the media - unless written permission from the management was issued.

A few metres away from the hospital, groups of women are being served the harmful beverage, a phenomenon that goes unnoticed and unreported since times immemorial.

Given the level of awareness, in most cases, an untimely death is still seen as a mark of God's

wrath. Deaths of scores of labourers have gone unnoticed, intentionally or unintentionally.

As such, there cannot be a bigger question mark on the role of in-house medical staff, community leaders, NGOs, human rights organisations, the state health department, social welfare department and sundry.

Is it that difficult to convince people about the means and methods that would provide succour to their long-standing woes or is this just another way of singling out a community, suppressing them, and minting huge profits at the cost of their lives?

More than one section of people owe an answer!

By the looks of it, there does not seem to be any effort on the part of the tea garden management and the government to address the issue. The fact that local leaders speak and understand the language of the management more than their followers is not making things any better.

"The black tea with added salt is directly linked to high-risk pregnancy among women and thereby high-risk child. It has been found out that the drink is one of the major factors of high MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) in tea gardens of Assam," remarked a senior doctor at the National Health Mission.

Just by the sheer frequency and quantity of consumption of *Chai Pani*, day in and day out, the effect of iron supplements is also neutralised, posing serious challenges to the anti-anaemia drive in the tea gardens, especially among

adolescent girls and pregnant women.

"Most pregnant women are, therefore, found to be anaemic in tea gardens," says Lalita Borsalkia, Auxiliary Nursing Midwife (ANM) of the Greenwood Tea Estate Hospital, situated nearly 60 kilometres away from Dibrugarh town. "Even during the pregnancy period, they continue to take *Chai Pani*, which leads to several complications," she adds.

Assam has the highest incidence of MMR in the country, and tea gardens are one major contributor to the tally, the doctor says.

"Further, it has also led to a number of deaths due to hypertension and strokes among tea garden population," adds the doctor.

"Do you know what you are drinking?" Seema Tanthi was asked. Unfazed by whatever was happening in her surroundings, she, like many of her ilk in the Naharoni Tea Estate in Tinsukia district was trying to jump a queue to reach to an autovan that had thousands of litres of *Chai Pani* stored to be supplied to the workers, most of whom were women.

The situation in the Greenwood Tea Estate and the Majjan Tea Estate in Dibrugarh also appears identical. Women pluckers with big transparent containers for the *Chai Pani* is a common sight.

Shanti Murha, a young tea garden labourer, with a bright smile on her face, was the only one who seemed interested to converse or may be curious to know about something.

On asking her, I got the same reply, "It has become a part and parcel of our daily routine.

Not just at work, even when we are at home we take *Chai Pani* with rice. We hardly need *daal* (pulse) or any other curry to eat with rice."

"There would hardly be a tea estate where the practice is not followed and it is not just by the management alone, it has also become a household practice. From an infant to a grown-up, it has emerged as an addiction," says Israel Nanda of the Assam Tea Labour Union while sharing his decade-long experience.

Israel Nanda, like many others whom we met during the trip, questioned the steps initiated to spread awareness about health hazards gripping the tea garden community, more so about ante-natal and post-natal care.

"We have been fighting to bring transparency in all fronts involving the tea garden labourers. Our voices are, unfortunately, falling on deaf ears," he says.

The government statistics, which sometimes could be understated, reveal that in districts like Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Sivasagar, and Sonitpur, the child mortality rate is 65 deaths per 1,000 births, 66 per 1,000 births, 72 per 1,000 births and 73 per 1,000, respectively, and the majority of these cases take place at the tea gardens. The national average is 75 deaths per 1,000 births.

However, as far as maternal mortality is concerned, the situation is grimmer. The Upper Assam Division, which comprises Dibrugarh, Tinsukia and Sivasagar, has surpassed even the national average of 301 deaths per one lakh pregnancies. It has the dubious distinction of crossing the 400-mark, 404 deaths per one lakh to be exact; and unhealthy food habits is being bracketed as one of the major causes.

Tea garden management, however, contend that the labourers threaten to cease work if the supply of *Chai Pani* is stopped. "This should be done gradually," welfare officer of a Dibrugarh-based tea garden suggests.

But the question is - when and how the process of spreading awareness or rehabilitation will start, if at all it would? How long will be too long for those at the helm of affairs? How many more deaths will we have to undermine before reaching a solution? Will the dark side of the greenery ever be exposed?

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