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Why Solidarity and not Charity

Mutual Aid in Myanmar

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According to the London-based Charities Aid Foundation (CAF), Myanmar ranked highest in the Charities Aid Foundation's 2016 World Giving Index, which measures charitable activities in 145 countries first in position and second in the United States. There is no doubt that Myanmar people are not only generous. Helping others is also a part of its culture, but it is not a whole story with only one narrative. This narrative is due to its strong influence from the particular form of Buddhism practice (called Theravada) as mainstream scholars and experts say.

Amid the recent coup, arm revolution, and the war where the regime banned the gathering of people and cracked down on social activities like charity; where there are brutal breaks down on reactionary arm forces, the strong-minded individuals are trying to share their food and clothes as much as they can with those in need as a community spirit.

Daw Nan is among those individuals; in her Shan traditional attire shop, she was doing free lunch giveaways with collective money and labor with her neighbors. She explained to us why she was doing that "Free Food" and it is not a special and occasional type of "a-hlu"(donation) from religious-related ritual events and social events like a funeral, birthday, or a wedding where everyone can come and eat freely whether they have a relation with the host or not. Rather, free food is non-religious.

There is a Myanmar custom called "Sadudhteethar" which is originally a Sanskrit Word, ("Sadu" means four directions and "Dhteethar" means location) which can be roughly translated into "food for anyone who lives in four directions of your home". During this time, she wanted to share food with her neighbors and her friends who are in need rather than offering it to monasteries and monks who have less need than common people. And she said, "people are going to starve so much that they rob, steal, and in some cases, they are going to murder. This is very sad to see: poor taking prey on each other who are already fragile and weak". In one case, a wandering vendor girl that she used to know was robbed and killed.

Daw Nan continued, "even if they take prey on the rich, the rich may trade their money to save their life and everybody gets what they want and nobody is going to be hurt." She also admitted that she does not understand politics but she chose to use her own money for free food for the people rather than offering it to the monastery. It is because she wants to do some action and something practical. "One meal can save a life from him/her becoming a robber and a murderer or from committing suicide."

The Covid and the Coup have trembled the country down in economic crisis and the suicide rate has risen two years of the coup. However, there is no monitoring and attention from the public. Recent news from social media that says that

a mother and her three-year-old child jumped off the bridge into the river went viral.

Doctor Zun who is currently working in the mental health field states that the significant case of suicide and suicidal tendency rise after the coup but data collection, monitoring, and treatment are confiscated in the current situation. “There are so many physiological factors and mental suffering that have led to suicide during this political and social turmoil but most of the cases are because living and the material conditions can no longer provide mental healthiness.

Like Nan, in Thingangyun Township, Aladdin fashion Shop has been selling 10 eggs for 100 Kyats and 1 sack of rice for 100 Kyats, which is almost 10 times the current market price. In a media interview with the owner of the Aladdin fashion shop, he stated that the commodity price is too high and people are in trouble, especially the grassroots population, which is why I try to sell with a discount price for egg and rice, which are the main food. I did this not because I am rich enough to do so. And I have my limitations and my capacity as an individual” There will be many more like-minded individuals like Aung and Nan who have the community spirit and who have the consciousness that “ all we have is each other” worldwide.

These people’s actions are supporting the Evolution Theory of Peter Kropotkin that “Mutual Aid “ is the factor of evolution and Survival of Fittest is just an option. Like in every culture and every civilization, the mainstream history and academics not only in Asia but also in the whole world, the history of libertarian ideas is always mistranslated or misinterpreted as the history is always written by the conqueror. In the book “Anarchist Modernity Corporatism and Japanese-Russian Intellectual Relations in Modern Japan” by Sho Konishi from Harvard University: Asian Center, Dr. Sho Konishi presents two different accounts of interpretation from British Japanologist Lord William George Aston (1841– 1911) and Léon Mechnikov (30 May 1838 – 30 June 1888) who was a mentor of Peter Kropotkin and comrade in the arm of Bakunin, both had witnessed the Meiji Revolution with their own eyes.

“A comparison of two translations of this Ishin- period text, one into Russian by Mechnikov and one into English by the prominent Aston” demonstrates how each translator accentuated in his translation a competing direction of progress that Japan’s “opening” implied and thereby gave added meaning to the text. Mechnikov emphasized mutual aid throughout his translation as a basis for Japan’s postrevolutionary development independent of the Western model of capitalism. Aston, on the other hand, interpreted the text as Katō’s assertion of Japan’s embarkation on the path to join the community of civilized capitalist nation-states

as an expression of a universal law of progress.” As we can see in Mechnikov ‘s *Civilization and the Great Historical Rivers* (1889), mutual aid is a part of Asian Culture that is embedded and synchronized with the wet rice paddy field of their commune village. From the folktales, village, and tribal customs to the cinematography art like “Kurosawa ‘s Seven Samurai” which is popular in the west.

Humanity has its instinct for survival, knowing its strength and weakness. For the oppressed who have no wealth and no arm but only in numbers of the masses, knowing that helping others is helping oneself in a rational and secularist way that is free from religious teaching and moral compass.

As I mentioned in the beginning, the poorest third-world country has the highest charity index rate in the world but not everything is a charity here, especially in this situation where the state and market are falling apart, and some like-minded volunteers and individuals are not a part of state or religious, who have strong faith in humanity and in restoring of social order with their way. We have the option to choose either “survival of the fittest or mutual aid” even in times of hardship some people choose to cooperate rather than annihilate.

Reference

1. Charities Aid Foundation’s 2016 World Giving Index Report
2. Harvard University Press, *Anarchist Modernity Corporatism and Japanese-Russian Intellectual Relations in Modern Japan* By Sho Konishi
3. Queen Media “Rice and Egg for One Hundred Kyat”