

As we bid farewell to 2009 and welcome in the new year, am sharing my latest blog capturing memories that have lingered in my mind over the years. Have a fantastic year ahead each day filled with Abundant Joy, Good Health and Great Prosperity.

Milind

A Surprise Encounter

It was a steamy summer morning in Japan. The hot humid air hung heavy and listless. I was late to work and as I charged down the railway platform I could feel the beads of perspiration coagulate into tiny rivulets and run down my spine. The train doors closed just as I leaped in. I was basking in the satisfaction less at having accomplished anything but more out of escaping the disappointment of watching the doors slam in my face. My reverie was jolted by a tap on my shoulder and a halting voice saying 'Thank You'. I spun around to face an old man well into his eighties-The face wizened with the years, the voice rasping hoarse, the eyes fallow, the frame strangely erect-pride holding a tired body up against its natural proclivity to stoop. I must have bumped into him in my rush, I thought and a poor vocabulary confused thanks for an expletive. I stooped low in profuse apology. He wanted to know if I was Indian and when I confirmed it, he could not stop saying thank you. Tears welled in his eyes and pretty soon they were rolling down his cheeks. Imagine my consternation. I was heading for work. My mind preoccupied with what I had to get done and here was a strange old man weeping like a child while holding on to me in a crowded train. We alighted together after a thankfully short but intensely embarrassing ride. We were strangers headed in the same direction. As we walked, he managed to gather himself and narrated a tale.

1945 was drawing to a close. The War had ended in utter ruin for Japan. To add insult to injury, the Allies decided to try the wartime leaders as criminals. Unlike the Nuremburg trials, those in Tokyo were a less publicized and even less organized affair - whether due to war weariness that had set in by the time Japan surrendered or the crimes having been committed in far away Asia, I know not. The trials also differed in that the judgment against the war criminals was not unanimous. Of the eleven judges who heard the case, one dissented and declared the defendants not guilty on all counts. That judge was an Indian – Justice Radhabinod Pal. “Radha who?” I can well hear a majority of Indians say. Justice Pal is clearly a man as famous in Japan as he is anonymous in India.

I can picture the scene. The hearings have been completed and the judges gathered around to share their opinions. 'Guilty' one by one, they concur - until 'Not Guilty' thunders Mr. Pal. The disbelieving gasp, the shocked silence-one can hear a needle drop. Here was a judge from a slave country who had dared to go against the wishes of his masters. To be clear it was not Justice Pal's contention that the Japanese were innocent or that atrocities were not committed by them across Asia. He however felt that the trial was a mere veneer for the victors to whip the vanquished. That smelt of retribution. No side was innocent in the war. By dropping the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Allies too had committed crimes against humanity. For actions like the rape of Nanjing, he felt a special court should be set up to try the perpetrators. Consequently he declared the Japanese defendants not guilty on all counts. If a 'Profiles in Courage' is ever written for India, Justice Pal would make it to the list by miles. What

courage of conviction it must have taken for someone to have a point of view and to be unafraid to voice it against the torrent of public opinion demanding retribution and the inherent human impulse to conform to the thinking of one's peers!

Gratitude is a strange emotion amongst us humans. This incident took place over a half century ago and I, who had no knowledge of this was being thanked merely for being an Indian! Justice Pal is one of only two Indians to be publicly honored in Japan - the other of course being Mahatma Gandhi. A grateful nation erected a memorial to Dr. Pal at the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo after his death. In 2007 the visiting Japanese Prime Minister Abe also felt compelled to fly down to Calcutta to thank Justice Pal's family.

I have google'd the deepest recesses of my memory of the Indian history taught in Indian schools but have found it singularly devoid of any Radhabinod Pal's. Isn't it exceptional that there is not a mention of his name or the trial at all? Was it because of India's fixation with Europe that there is little coverage of the war in Asia and how it ended? Or was it because the Congress had thrown its lot with the British; since the Japanese were enemies; there was little sympathy for any viewpoint that spared the Japanese? There is an oft voiced opinion that respect in India is earned via the West. If true Justice Pal is an eminent example - Internet blogs excoriate his imprudence and vilify him for being a Bose acolyte. Mysteriously his memory remains alive amongst the bureaucracy. Successive Indian Prime Ministers have harped on his name when they have addressed their Japanese counterparts. Almost like the memory of a 'black sheep' ancestor whose photograph is brought out and dusted for an occasion only to be put away quickly. Whatever be the reason, fact remains that Justice Radhabinod Pal is better known and revered in Japan than in his motherland. A quote from his 1235 page judgment reads:

"When Time shall have softened passion and prejudice; When Reason shall have stripped the mask from misrepresentation; then Justice, holding evenly her scales, will require much of past censure and praise to change places".

I was left pondering on this as I made my way to another unexceptional working day.

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Memorial to Dr. Radhabinod Pal at the Yasukuni Shrine, Tokyo