

Aung San Suu Kyi

A Legacy of Endless Struggle

Arnab Dutta
Centre for European Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi, India

Abstract: This paper tries to look into the part of the activities of Aung San Suu Kyi, a prominent political leader from Myanmar, has emerged as an unwavering champion for democracy in her relentless pursuit of justice, peace, and human rights. It further delves into her life and accomplishments, highlighting her unwavering commitment to democratic values and her transformative impact on the socio-political landscape of Myanmar.

Her journey as a democracy advocate began during Myanmar's oppressive military rule in the late 1980s. Despite being subjected to house arrest and enduring prolonged periods of isolation, Suu Kyi displayed exceptional courage, resilience, and unwavering determination in her struggle for democracy and freedom. Her efforts culminated in her co-founding of the National League for Democracy (NLD) in 1988, a political party committed to democratic reforms and the promotion of human rights. However, the military junta refused to recognize the results and maintained its grip on power, leaving Suu Kyi under house arrest for a total of 15 years.

Index Terms- Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar, Democracy, National League for Democracy, Military Junta

Holistic Scenario

Ever since the progress of human civilization, the themes of super ordination and sub ordination has juxtaposition wise been traversing their course to bring about the contentiously composite picture of settlement. Racial and ethnic incompatibility always had the elements of volatility that often catapulted into a struggle for supremacy. From such competitive tendencies emerged some races that had the capacity to surpass their fellow brethren in every aspect of human life.

Such transformative aspects became known as imperialism, colonialism and so and so forth. These groups of people went far and wide in search of prospect and exploited every available resource in their favor to become more prosperous. Along with prosperity came development which in turn made them more powerful than the rest. Thus, arose the phenomenon of domination which rapidly engulfed the weaker inhabitants of the world into a web of dependence.

The British were one such ethnic group who demonstrated an incredible development in the fields of science, technology, politics, society, philosophy and economics from around the times of the globe with colossal feet, conquering and colonizing the major landed regions. In the Asian continent, they colonized the sub-continent of India and began to make indents into her surrounding areas. One such land was Burma, an independent kingdom under the rule of the Konbaung Dynasty (1752-1885).

Temperance of the Steel

If we cast our spotlight from the year 1752, it is seen that for over a century, the highly militaristic Konbaung dynasty, speedily created the largest Burmese empire. By 1759, king Alaungpaya successfully drove out the French from Thanlyin and the English from Negrais. Another spate of expansion took place at the time of King Bodawpaya. It was a sort of an intimidatory gesture on his part towards China and Siam who continuously hounded the north-eastern and south-eastern frontiers of the empire. Bodawpaya advanced westward conquering Arakan(1784), Manipur(1813) and Assam(1817). At this point of expansion, he, like his predecessor, came within close conflict with British India. For a long time, the latter was nursing the wounds inflicted upon him by Alaungpaya. Hence, they immediately put up stiff resistance against Bodawpaya's forces,

compelling the latter to keep open the borders in a disarrayed state. The following years i.e. from 1819-1823 saw frequent disturbances fanned by the British in Manipur and Assam. These destabilizing activities conjured up to the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826). King Bagyidaw faced a comprehensive defeat and parted with Arakan, Manipur, Assam and Tenasserim. Thereafter, overwhelming of Burma by the British became only matter of time. And that very time came in the form of the Third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885 when they eventually annexed the rest of Burma and sent the last Burmese king Thibaw and his family to exile in India.

Thus, Burma became a province of India in 1886 with the capital at Rangoon (modern Yangon). Traditional Burmese society was radically changed by the demise of the monarchy and the separation of religion from the state. However, smoldering flames of protest still flickered through guerilla activities until 1890. The British with remarkable rapidity managed to put a halt to such activities through systematic destruction of villages and appointment of officials. All these whiles, the economy of the land also improved dramatically. The demand for Burmese rice grew and vast tracts of land were opened up through concerted reformative measures by the British for cultivation. This led to a significant economic growth clustering round several British and Anglo-Burmese firms as also the migrants from India. The civil service sector too was largely staffed by the Anglo-Burmese community and Indians. The military service also cried in vain for the participation of the local populace deliberately noughted by the colonial masters. Though the country prospered, the Burmese people failed to reap the rewards. Throughout the tenure of the colonial rule, the domination of the Anglo-Burmese community increased poignantly from the mid-1890s. This naturally caused maximum discontent among the local inhabitants.

Already, at the turn of the century, a nationalist movement began to take shape in the form of Young Men's Buddhist Associations (YMBA), modeled on the YMCA as only religious associations were allowed by the colonial authorities. They were later superseded by the General Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA) which was linked with The National Associations (Wunthanu Athin) that sprang up in the villages of proper Burma. During these times, points of contention between the rulers and the ruled began to escalate and one finds the 'Irish Buddhist' (U Dhammaloka) challenging Christianity and the British rule on religious grounds. The air began to get heavily ionized with anti-British sentiments making it a sound platform for the youths to build up a strong nationalist movement. Obviously, one sees the rise of a new generation of Burmese leaders from amongst the educated classes that were permitted to go to London to study law. They believed progressive constitutional reform would broaden the path of justice and likewise, in the early 1920s a legislature with limited powers was formed along with a university and more autonomy for Burma within the administration of India. Efforts were also undertaken to increase the representation of Burmese in the civil service. Still, an air of dissatisfaction and disappointment loomed large among the majority of the Burmese.

Crystallization of the Legend

During those turbulent years of confrontation with the British, Aung San, enthusiastically cherished the idea of gaining complete independence thereby, making a free nation for his race. He was already walking in the direction of in-breed resistance which he thought would compel the colonizers to withdraw. His strategy harked back to the steps taken by the university students in the year 1920 when they made the first ever strike in history as a protest against the then new University Act as they believed that it would only benefit the elite and perpetuate colonial rule. Thus, throughout those years National Schools sprang up across the country in protest against the colonial education system and the strike came to be commemorated as 'National Day'. Another significant incident was a protest raised by Saya San in Tharrawaddy against a local tax. Here, the elements of insurrection gripped the imagination of young Aung San, who quickly realized the potentialities ingrained in such widespread organized resistance to achieve total freedom. In fact, this Galon Rebellion, named after the mythical bird Garuda- enemy of the Nagas i.e. the British- emblazoned on the pennants the rebels carried, required thousands of British troops to suppress along with promises of further political reform. The eventual trial of Saya San, who was executed, allowed several future national leaders, including Dr. Ba Maw and U Saw, who participated in his defense, to rise into prominence.

By this time, Aung San was getting involved in an array of political activities within the broader spectrum of multiplicity. May, 1930 saw the founding of the Dobama Asiayone (We Burmans Association) whose members called themselves Thakin (Master)- proclaiming that they were true masters of the country. Carrying the same sentiments, he too, began to call himself a Thakin and came to the forefront of the students' agitation from the year 1933 as their leader. The spirit of agitation was so ingrained in him that he promptly got elected to the executive committee of the Rangoon University Students' Union (RUSU) and subsequently became the editor of their magazine 'Oway' (Peacock's Call). With the other leaders of the time, Aung San quickly placed a series of demands to the British Government which would put an end to the biased educational policies. The government reacted sharply by expunging him along with Ko Nu from the University in 1936, thus, triggering the second university students' strike. It spread like wildfire to Mandalay and its adjacent areas leading to the formation of the All Burma Students' Union (ABSU). Aung San and Nu subsequently joined the Thakin movement progressing from student to national politics. Such was the former's popularity and acceptability that in 1938, he was elected president of both the Rangoon University Students' Union and All Burma Students' Union. The very same year, the government appointed him as a student representative on the Rangoon University Act Amendment Committee. Here, he drafted a list of demands which already envisaged a radical policy of greater representation of the Burmese people in every significant arena of national life. He showed no hesitation in unambiguously projecting his anti-British and staunchly anti-imperialist sentiments. With an uncompromising zeal, he went forward to press the importance of national solidarity and urged his countrymen to unite against such nefarious colonial powers like the British.

The British, in response, took pre-emptive steps by separating Burma from India in 1937. Simultaneously, in order to pacify the Burmese also charted a new constitution having provisions for a fully elected assembly. But this proved to be a divisive issue as some Burmese felt that this was a ploy to exclude them from any further Indian reforms whereas, others saw any action that removed Burma from the control of India to be a positive step. Despite such differences, elections were held and Ba Maw served as the first Prime Minister of Burma though for very brief time and was succeeded by U Saw in 1939. He served from 1940 until his arrest by the British on charges of treason in keeping in touch with the Japanese on January 19, 1942. In all these aspects, Aung San played the role of a guide, instructing leaders and formulating ways to get rid of the British once and for all. His immense devotion towards reaching such a goal also led to the foundation of another nationalist organization, 'Bama-htwet-yat-Gaing (The Freedom Block), by forging an alliance between the Dobama, the ABSU, politically active monks and Dr. Ba Maw's 'Sinyetha' (Poor Man's) Party and in the process becoming its general secretary. What remains relatively unknown was that he also became a founder member and first general-secretary of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in August 1939. Shortly afterwards, he co-founded the People's Revolutionary Party, renamed the Socialist Party after the Second World War. In March 1940, when major parts of Burma were already afire against the oppressive hunt down of the British, Aung San attended the Indian National Congress Assembly in Ramgarh, India. He wanted to abreast himself more with the specific techniques and planning of the Indian nationalist leaders to whet up his own liberation struggle. Already, the condition in Burma was extremely volatile as waves of strikes and protests from the oilfields of Central Burma began to surcharge the anti-colonial atmosphere with a huge momentum. In Rangoon, the student protestors, after successfully picketing the secretariat, the seat of the colonial government, were charged by the British mounted police wielding batons and bringing down a Rangoon University student named Aung Kway. In Mandalay, the police shot into a crowd of protestors led by the Buddhist monks killing 17 people. Unfortunately, while his own country was going through such shock-waves of confrontation and beating, Aung San had to flee Burma before he could muster sufficient knowledge and resources to upturn British rule on account of an arrest warrant in his name by the colonial authority. He went first to China, seeking assistance from the government there (China was still under nationalist government during WWII), but was intercepted by the Japanese military occupiers in Amoy and was convinced by them to go to Japan instead.

War and the Legend

While he was in Japan, the 'Blue Print for a Free Burma' was drafted. In February 1941, he under Japanese assurance and temporary British blight, returned to Burma. The Fumimaro Konoe Government offered to assist him with arms and money. Aung San, once again went to Japan to receive more military training keeping U Saw in charge of the nationalist movement launched from the united platform of the Dobama, BCP and Nationalist Associations. While in training, he met up with the first batch of young revolutionaries who came to be known as the 'Thirty Comrades'. Such was his foresight that he quickly organized them and thousands of Burmese youth who fled to Japan into the Burma Independence Army (BIA). He contacted the 'Minami Kikan', a secret intelligence unit formed to close the Burma road and convinced them to operate in unison with BIA under the entrusted leadership of Colonel Suzuki to mobilize a national uprising.

In the initial stages, the logistical trajectories of the war favored the Axis Powers. The concomitant resultant of which was that in March 1942, taking full advantage of the weakness of the British forces, Japan got a hold over Rangoon (Yangon). Aung San was long waiting for such an opportunity to arrest formed an administrative stricture for the country under the Thakin Tun Oke that operated in parallel with the Japanese military administration until the latter disbanded it. In July, Aung San, now aware of their duplicity, obstinately reformed the disbanded Burma Independence Army, desperately trying to corroborate to his suffering countrymen the message that they should try to fight now for the establishment of their own identity as Burmese. Simultaneously, at the organizational level, he re-named the Burma Independence Army as 'Burma Defense Army (BDA), himself taking charge of it. Thus, he made his own path toward independence away from the parties involved in the war. His diplomatic endeavor was well commended by the Japanese when the emperor presented him the 'Order of the Rising Sun'.

On 1st August 1943, the Japanese declared Burma an independent nation and appointed Aung San its war minister. The army was yet again renamed as the Burma National Army (BNA). The general fervor of nationalism apart he could realize the surreptitious motive of the Japanese to dominate over his country. His natural insight into politics and sway over foreign affairs made him alert to thwart any such occurrences. He made plans to brew up an uprising in the country, thereby, seeking assistance from the British to quell it in the process nullifying the Japanese designs. He was also keen enough to extract the cooperation of the communist leaders Thakin Than Tun and Thakin Soe. His plans materialized on 27th March, 1945 when he spearheaded the Burma National Army successfully in a revolt routing the Japanese occupiers in collaboration with the Allies. This day came to be commemorated as the 'Resistance Day' until the military regime later named it 'Tatmadaw (Armed Forces) Day'.

Post-War and the Legend

After the return of the British who had established a military administration, the Anti-Fascist Organization (AFO), formed in August 1944, was transformed into a united front, comprising of the BNA, the Communists and the Socialists. This was rechristened as the 'Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League' (AFPFL). The Burma National Army, too, came to be known as the 'Patriotic Burmese Forces' whom the British gradually disarmed as the Japanese were being driven out of the various parts of the country. However, effective disbandment of the army remained a contentious issue resulting in much of the militaristic disturbances witnessed by the country in the later phases of her struggle for complete independence. The immediate success of overpowering a strong nation like Japan, albeit with British assistance made the general atmosphere so emotionally surcharged that the commanders of the Burmese forces generously offered an out and out democratic person like Aung San a position within their rank. Remarkable statesman as he was, in a flash realized the inconsistency of the British and declined it in favor of becoming a civil leader as well as the military head of *Pyithu Yebow* (People's Volunteer Organization or PVO).

In January 1946, he became the President of the AFPFL following the return of the civil government in Burma the previous October. In September, he was appointed Deputy Chairman of the Executive Council of Burma by the new British Governor Sir Hubert Rance and was made responsible for defense and external affairs. During this time, the Communists began to distance themselves from Aung Sung on ground of disjunctive loyalty and exhibition of pro-libertarian malady. The corrosive factors of electoral politics began to release its acidic

components leading to a serious rift between them and the nationalists. Aung Sung was a champion of democracy, though one might claim to have seen him in delightful dalliance with various strands of political ideologies. This was purely from the standpoint of a diehard patriot cutting through the parochial lines of straitjacket sentiments to accommodate whatever help from whosoever to free his captive country. With this single most aim he, steadfastly, expelled Thakin Than Yun and the Communist Party of Burma from the AFPFL.

He was to all intents and purposes the Prime Minister, although still subject to a British veto. In order to get rid of this pain in the neck, he signed an agreement with the British Premier Clement Attlee on 27th January 1947, in London which promised independence within a year. He made a stopover in Delhi where in a press conference, he plainly stated that the Burmese wanted 'complete independence' not dominion status and that they had no inhibitions of any kind about contemplating a violent or non-violent struggle to fulfill his goal. He further stressed that if occasion so demands both the strategies could be followed in right proportions.

Two weeks to this agreement, he signed another at the Panglong Conference on 12th February 1947 with the leaders from other national groups, expressing solidarity and support for a united Burma. Aung Zan Wai, U Pe Khin, Major Aung, Sir Maung Gyi and Myoma U Than Kywe were some of the noted leaders present at this meet. Their discussions along with the Bamar, Karen and other ethnic groups led to the unanimous decision of joining the Union of Burma.

Metamorphosis into Immortality

While such negotiations, deliberations and policy-making were going on, seeds of dissatisfaction, rivalry and enmity too were germinating fast upon the person Aung San. A dedicated soul, as he was, he brooks no resistance and trudged along the path of national integration. The general election of April 1947 was the fulfillment of his long cherished 'self-government' under the representation and control of the countrymen. The AFPFL won 176 out of 210 seats, Karens 24, the Communists 6 and Anglo-Burmese 4. In July, Aung Sung convened a series of conferences at Sorrenta Villa in Rangoon to discuss the rehabilitation of Burma.

Tragedy occurred when during this time, a gang of armed paramilitaries of the former Prime Minister U Saw broke into the Secretariat Building in downtown Rangoon on July 19, 1947 and assassinated Aung San and six of his cabinet ministers, including his older brother Ba Win. U Saw was later tried and executed. Complicity of the British, rivalry of Ne Win and the combination of both are often cited as probable reasons for the brutal end of one of Burma's greatest sons.

His death robbed the nation of the one man whom Burmans and non-Burmans alike trusted. No leader after him had the political support he engendered nor the ability to translate his vision of a united, peaceful and prosperous Burma into reality. (1) A conglomeration of factors terminated the life of Aung Sung, thereby, immortalizing him in the annals of Burmese history.

Birth of the Legacy

Aung San's place in history as the 'Architect of Burmese Independence' and a national hero is eternally assured both from his own legacy and due to the activities of his daughter. Suu Kyi was only two when this dreadful incident occurred. She was raised up by her mother Khin Kyi who in 1960 became the ambassador to India. Thus, Suu Kyi started her schooling and went on to graduate in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from New Delhi in 1969. From her early days, she began to get the taste of variegatedness while staying at different places and developed a tolerant attitude towards the various placentas of thought circulating around the world as regards religion, society, economy and polity.

Her return to Burma in the year 1988 was to tend her ailing mother. However, may be that destiny had something else in store for her. To raise her up to the pulpit of the denizens battered scathed, tortured and stifled by years of derogatory military dictatorships. In the process, exorcising the spirit of Aung San into his daughter to fulfill the unfinished dream of providing the people of Burma a peaceful democratic rule.

Rationality would say that it was pure coincidence that the same year, the long-time military leader of Burma and head of the ruling party, General Ne Win, before stepping down announced the holding of a general election to determine the type of government for Burma. This unexpected gesture led to wide speculations and enthusiasm among the people of Burma who smelled an air of liberty in it. Soon they took to the streets in huge numbers organizing rallies and demonstrations. One such pro-democracy gathering took place on 8th August, 1988 (8-8-88), an auspicious day for the Burmese. But it was brutally suppressed by the army in what came to be known as the '8888 Uprising'. On 26th August, Suu Kyi, in her first public address said, 'I have always wanted to place myself at a distance from this kind of politics. Because of that I have kept away from politics, some might then ask why, if I wished to stay out of politics, should I now be involved in this movement. The answer is that the present crisis could in fact be called the 'second struggle for national independence'.'(2) This effectively started what can be called 'the continuation of the legacy' in the open challenge she threw to the junta from the Shwedagon Pagoda at Rangoon, in favor of democracy. For the next one year, she travelled the length and breadth of the country, delivering about thousand speeches. In this regard Lintner remarked, 'Aung San Suu Kyi stood out as the only one who could unify all segments of Burmese society. The urban as well as rural population, Burma's many ethnic minorities, the young student radicals, the older much more moderate pro-democracy activists, and most important of all, by virtue of being the daughter of the founder of the Burmese army, she was in a position to rally even the armed forces behind her'(3).

Several political parties were formed in quick succession to keep up the pro-democratic tempo unleashed by Suu Kyi's barrage of speeches. In the months between August to November, 1988 about six parties were formed including on 27th September, The National League for Democracy. As a repartee to such brisk political libertarianism, the junta under General Saw Maung, framed the State Law and Order Restoration Council, infamously called 'SLORC'. This was a tactical move on the part of the military to throttle any mass participation toward the political parties in the formation of a parliamentary form of government. Further, to deflect the tide of popularity from Suu Kyi, the junta on 20th July, 1989, put her under house arrest and went on to make an addendum to the constitution which forbade a person who was married to a foreigner to contest elections. Despite such moves by the authoritarian regime, she filed her candidature to the outright rejection of the authority.

In such promiscuous situation, election did take place on 27th May, 1990 where candidates from around twenty-three political parties got elected. However, for the next two months the country was under the cover of sheer confusion. Finally, on 27th July, the head of the security service, Khin Nyunt declared that the election had not been about voting for a new parliament at all. It had instead been about choosing a new assembly to formulate a new constitution. The election results were in the process of being declared null and void.

The next day the NLD gathered in Gandhi Hall in Central Rangoon and gave the junta a further two months in which to recognize the election results and demanded an open and unconditional dialogue in order to put a stop to the crisis that the country was facing. Within a month, on 8th August, on the anniversary of the massacres two years ago, a large protest action was held in Mandalay led by the monks from the monastery. Thousands of civilians and the students joined in to make the soldiers nervous and open fire resulting in casualties.

All this time Suu Kyi remained in house arrest and the junta had not the slightest intention of releasing her. On the contrary, it readjusted the laws to keep somebody in house arrest without a trial from one to five years. Undeterred by the pressures imposed upon her, she wrote to the Amnesty International, the United Nations and the Human Rights Commission about the excesses of the military regime strangling the basic necessities of civil life. Her grit and determination in the face of odds was recognized by the European powers in giving the 'Sakharov Prize' for 'freedom of thought' in 1990 and the Norwegian Nobel Committee, on October 14, 1991 awarded her the Nobel Peace Prize in recognizing the non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights. The committee honored her unflinching efforts to attain democracy, human rights and ethnic conciliation by peaceful means. On same ground, she received the Thorolf Rofto prize, UNESCO's Simon Bolivar prize, the Victor Jara distinction, the Jawaharlal Nehru prize, W. Averell Harriman's democracy prize and some years later the Freedom of the City of Dublin Award along with the Swedish Olof Palme prize.

The enormous amount of international attention Suu Kyi received was also due to the relentless efforts of Michael Aris who not only as her husband, but as an academician went places speaking about the despicable situation prevailing in Burma making a mockery of public life. It was to a great extent through his writings and speeches that the educated echelons of America and Europe came to know about the herculean struggle of Suu Kyi under confinement in trying to introduce the rule of justice in the land of brutalities. He also published her works under the title 'Freedom from Fear and Other Writings' and so on to bring the world into contact with her tussle. This made her movement globally sensitive creating immense pressure on the junta to restrict their severities upon her.

Role of the UN

The UN has attempted to facilitate dialogue between the junta and Suu Kyi. On May 6, 2002, following secret confidence-building negotiations led by the UN, the government released her. But a sudden attack on her envoy the same month led to her re-arrest.

International Pressure for Release

Throughout his life, Aung San demonstrated the vigour of speech and the vitality of movement. Amazingly enough, Suu Kyi, for the greater part of her political career exhibited the placidity of a pond and the stillness of silence. Yet, both these persons swayed the hearts of millions and ignited the flames of hope to achieve not only freedom from colonial rule, but to engage in constructive building of the nation.

Prior to the general election of 2010, it was announced by the government that she would be released from confinement on November 13. It was seen as a concomitant effect of US President Barack Obama's advocacy toward the release of all political prisoners, especially Suu Kyi, during the course of the US-ASEAN Summit of 2009. The military rule was becoming more and more untenable with the programme of economic liberalization of Burma to keep pace with the rapid development in Southeast Asia as a whole.

The Fight Continues

Whether the convenience of the junta or the pressures from the international organizations or a combination of both was instrumental behind her release would remain animated domains for discussions and debates. But one thing is for sure, gaining political leverage, legalizing trade unions and easing civic life were some ever-conflicting issues with which Suu Kyi deals continuously. Be it 2010, 2011, and 2012 or thereafter, Burmese national development has become synonymous with her.

The works for independence began by her father goes on through his daughter in a timeless warp creating potentialities of change which would rewrite the saga of Burma having an indissoluble soul.

References:

1. Smith, M. 1991. *Burma-Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, Zed Books, London and New Jersey.
2. Stewart, W. 1997. *Aung San Suu Kyi: Fearless Voice of Burma*, Twenty-first Century Books.
3. Kin, O. 1993. *Who Killed Aung San?* White Lotus, Bangkok.
4. Wintle, J. 2007. *Perfect Hostage: A Life of Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's Prisoner of Conscience*, Skyhorse.
5. Bengtsson, J. 2012. *Aung San Suu Kyi: A Biography*, Amaryllis.
6. Yerande, V. L. 2007. *Aung San Suu Kyi's Struggle for Democracy*, Chandralok Prakashan.
7. Karlekar, M. 1994. "Suu Kyi's, Future", *Journal of Indian Ocean Studies* vol.1, No.3.