

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Bengalis in Burma: The Cultural development and impact on the Burma.**

The Bengali community who formed a large portion of the population in Burma had carved out a separate cultural identity of their own. With the Bengal renaissance in the nineteenth century the Bengal community's attachment to the cultural activities had become more strong and clear. The Bengali residents in the province of Burma, who were already learned in English education, actively promoted the cause of English education along with the vernacular education in the province. In this process of the spread of western education, the British were the first to start schools and educational institutes. The Bengalis took jobs in these schools as teachers and also took the initiative to open up Bengali medium schools.

The cultural development of the Bengalis led to the formation of various social clubs, vernacular schools, celebration of different social and religious occasions, and opening of branches of various religious reform organisation like Brahmo Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission who also took up many the humanitarian and charitable works. The educational and other social activities of the Bengalis did influence to an extent the newly enlightened Burmese youths who were being imbued with the spirit of nationalism and western education. The activities of the Bengalis also included social programme on special occasions, literary activities leading to the publication of various little magazines, etc.

## I

The cultural connection of Bengal and Burma had been there since the ancient times. There had always been a cultural tie with India but the connection with Bengal had been on religious line. The Buddhist religion had been always a source of inspiration for the Bengali population particularly the scholars, political leaders and also to the common people. It did not matter whether they went to Burma or the 'Golden land' but the people of Bengal always felt attached to 'Bromhodesh'. The Bengal –Burma friendship or Hindu-Buddhist ties had been seen in the history of both the countries. Before the coming

of Islam in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Bengal was a Buddhist kingdom and during the entire period from 5<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> century Bengal became a strong centre of Buddhism. Furthermore, there existed a number of small kingdoms throughout Chittagong and Comilla districts of Eastern Bengal now in Bangladesh namely Khadgas, Chandras and Devas<sup>1</sup>. Most probably the rulers came from their original home located in Arakan. The Chandras of Bengal are related to the Chandras of old Arakan (Mrauk-u) has been well-established. A large part of northern Bengal and Bihar (Pundravardhan) was under the Pala dynasty. The Sena dynasty particularly before the Islamic rule was not Buddhist yet Buddhism played an important role in the life of the people of Bengal<sup>2</sup>. The people of Bengal also considered Buddha as one of the incarnation of Lord Vishnu and at a time Vaishnavism played a significant role in the social and religious life in Bengal. However, there remains a political, religious and cultural connection of Burma with Bengal. There are evidences of the Brahmanical traditions existing in Burma with the traces of the Brahmanical gods in various places. A link of the cultural and religious life of Burma and Bengal existed not only through the Buddhist religion and tradition but also through the existence of the Brahmanical gods namely Shiva, Durga, Brahma, Surya, Ganesh and others<sup>3</sup>. The inscriptions reveal that along with Buddhism there was importance of the Brahmins and the kings of Burma had patronised the Brahmins of the Northern India, Manipur and Bengal. They have gradually turned into Ponna or Ponnya of the Burmese religious society. Ramayana is also a religious treasure for the Burmese<sup>4</sup>. Burma and Bengal has a spiritual bond. Burma was never a foreign land for the Bengalis.

In Arakan the Vishnu coins of the Chandra dynasty has been found with a trisula in one hand and the conch in the other hand. The Chandras ruled from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century. In their coins the script of the Northern India is found and possibly they were in Chittagong and the nearby areas of eastern Bengal.<sup>5</sup> The Ananda Buddha Stupa has been considered by many of the archaeologists as similar to the Paharpur structure of the Varendrabhumi. The ancient Buddhist architecture of Burma reflects the influence of the architectural styles of the Pala period. In many of the writings of the Burmese ancient

literature there is a reference of the word 'gol' in connection with the migrants to Burma, which is the corrupt version of the word 'Gour'<sup>6</sup>. Thus cultural relation of Burma with Bengal was established and existing during the ancient and also in the medieval times with Chittagong being a part of the Arakanese kingdom in the early seventeenth century. In the colonial times the connection was further strengthened with the influx of a huge number of Bengali immigrants in Burma. They established a rich cultural life in Burma and their influence was also felt in the life of the Burmese.

The most significant feature of the life of Bengali community of this period was founding a social club or an institution for recreational purpose and also the establishment of a library along with a reading room. Wherever they migrated the Bengalis founded a club or a library. The idea of a club was probably taken from the British, their colonial master. But along with the club they always attached a library which demonstrated their love for learning. Rangoon being the capital of Burma attracted more of Bengalis than any of the other towns of Burma. Thus the community which numbered 3, 76,994 in 1931 according to the census in Rangoon had formed a Bengali Social Club<sup>7</sup>. These were purely a non political organisation with cultural aims. Almost every evening there were cultural programme like music, drama, literary discussions, recitation, etc. The club encouraged education and patronized the members in sports and games. The famous Bengali litterateur Shri Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay who resided in Burma for a long time had been an active member of this club<sup>8</sup>. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay regularly visited the club and he also joined musical programmes in the club. His musical skills were appreciated by the Bengali community in Rangoon. He was an excellent singer of various Bengali songs like Rabindrasangeet, kirtans and bhajans. Nabin Chandra Sen, the famous patriot poet of the nineteenth century had visited Rangoon in 1905. His poem 'Palasiryuddha' is considered as an epic poem of that period was felicitated by the Bengali Social Club. In this programme Shri. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay had presented a song. Nabin Sen was mesmerised by hearing such a voice and the song. He later praised the vocal talent of Sarat Chandra and bestowed him with an honorary title of

'Rangoon Ratna'. The musical programmes included Rabindrasangeet, Kirtans, bhagans, etc. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay is always identified as a novel writer but his interest and talent in music came to the forefront for the first time in Rangoon. Sarat Chandra developed a special knack in cultural aspect while staying in among the workers and labourers in Rangoon. He had organised a theatre group with the daily wage labourers<sup>9</sup>. Jogendranath Sarkar has mentioned in his book 'Brahmo Probasi Sarat Chandra' that the members of the Bengali Social Club later had a differences among themselves and some of them came out of it to form the Bengali Club in Rangoon. This club helped the Bengali group to cultivate the literary activities in Rangoon<sup>10</sup>.

Beside this there were two more clubs of the Bengali community in Rangoon. There also existed a Bengali Yuval Samiti (Bengali Youth Organisation) and Bengali Sporting Club which organised sport activities of the settlers in the country<sup>11</sup>. There were clubs who organised Bengali drama namely Banga Natya Samaj. There were three to four such drama and theatre groups in Rangoon among the Bengalis. The Rangoon Jubilee Hall was the centre for the recreation of the Bengalis. The Bengalis generally organised dance, drama, music and other recreational programmes in this hall. In 1332 B.S. famous dramatist and actor Ahindra Choudhury and other actor and actresses of the Art Theatre of Calcutta had come to Burma. They had become very popular in Burma and performed in Jubilee Hall in Rangoon. This Hall had witnessed the welcome of the national poet of India Rabindranath Tagore. Jubilee Hall, in fact, served as a centre for all social functions of the Bengalis<sup>12</sup>. One of the brightest stars to shine over the Bengal stage, was Niharbala. She performed in different theaters of Calcutta and in 1923 history was created with her role as Niyoti in the play Karnarjun. Her songs like Kalprabaha Chale Dhire, Ami Kakhan Bhangi Kakhan Gari and Pran Heena Putul Samaan were great hits and the songs published as gramophone records. In 1925, Niharbala went to Burma as part of Star Theatre group. Karnaarjun and Iraner Rani were the two plays staged in Rangoon in Burma<sup>13</sup>. The recreation of the residing Bengalis were, moreover, not restricted to Theatre but it included the screening of films which was brought from Bengal. Madan

theatre which started in 1919 and produced the first Bengali film Bilwamangal also spread in Burma. It screened films like Bishbriksha (1922), Durgesh Nandini (1927), Radharani (1929) and Giribala(1929) in Rangoon<sup>14</sup>.

The Bengalis in Myamyo had organised themselves into a social club known as Friends Union Club. There were sports activities in the club namely volley ball and others. The club was centre of the Bengali activity in Myamyo<sup>15</sup>.

## II

The Bengalis who migrated to Burma maintained a separate racial identity which influenced to a large extent their day to day living. As a community they preserved their identity by establishing separate schools of Bengali medium both for boys and for girls. Bengali schools were established almost every part of Burma where ever Bengalis had settled. The most well known Bengali medium school were situated in Rangoon. It had separate branches for boys and for girls. The most well known school was 'Bengal Academy' established separately for the boys and the girls<sup>16</sup>. The Governor of Burma, Sir Charles Innes had also given financial assistance for the building of the school. Important and influential Bengali personalities of Burma took active part as the member of the management Committee of the school. The school was patronised and provided with the financial assistance by the renowned barrister of Rangoon Shri. J.R. Das. He also later became the judge of the High Court of Rangoon. It was started by Prasun Majumdar and Shri Shashi Bhushan Chakraborty in 1909. Initially it had only eight boys. It virtually took twenty long years to develop into a full-fledged high school and in 1929 there were more than 500 numbers of students<sup>17</sup>. This number also indicates the increasing number of Bengali families and population in Rangoon. There was also assistance on the part of the British Burma Government which clearly explains that the British wanted to make the Bengalis an ally of their colony. They wanted the spread of western education among the Bengalis who would serve them and help them to run the administration in Burma. Prior to the establishment of the Bengal Academy there was also initiatives and interests were

shown for the foundation of an English medium school to provide education to the children of Bengali families. In 1307BS there was the foundation of Indian Seminary School under the supervision of the Babu Jashodananda Sen in Rangoon. Schools providing education separately for the Bengali children were opened in various other places of Burma particularly in Moulmein, Pyapon, Bassein, Michigan, and other towns of Burma where the population of the Bengali settlers were in considerable number<sup>18</sup>. Jogesh Chandra Banerjee , who served in Rangoon Corporation also established a big school , Veena Pani Pathsala , which turned into Vivekananda Institution<sup>19</sup>.

Though there were several schools which provided education for the Bengali boys separately but there was a problem to obtain Bengali teachers who would reside and teach the students in Burma. The Bengali settlers of Burma had approached the education department of Government of Burma to assist them with a teacher and the solution which was given by the government was to submit a sum of 12000 rupees with the department of education of Burma. The interest of the said amount would help to bring the Government a Bengali teacher to Burma. But such proposals were not accepted by the settlers. The Bengal Academy in its initial years had Shri Nishi Bhushan Mitra as their main teacher but within a couple of months he was arrested by the Bengal Government on being involved in the Dacca Conspiracy Case. Thus there was again a crisis of teacher which was to be brought from Bengal. Shri Chandi Charan Bandopadhyay was appointed as the next teacher and he continued for ten long years. There were more teachers from Bengal who came on being provided with a handsome salary with residential facilities. There are various other names of Bengali teachers who served in the schools and dedicated their best years to the betterment of the students. The Bengal Academy had been a primary school for four years, seven years it was a mid-school and in the next ten years it became a high school. A new building was erected for this purpose which was inaugurated by the Governor of Burma, Innes. The fund for the building was donated by the affluent Bengalis of Rangoon namely Shri. Sashi Bhushan Neogi(merchant), Justice

J.R. Das, P.C. Sen(Barrister), K.C. Basu(Barrister), S.P. Das and Gyan Chandra Basu (contractors). The Governor of Burma also provided funds for the school.<sup>20</sup>

The necessity of a school for the Bengali girls of the town was first felt in 1918. Dr. Manilal Kundu and other members of the society of Bengal Academy initiated to open a girls section attached within the boys' school of the Academy. Prior to this endeavour Shri Prasanna Kumar Majumdar and Shashi Bhushan Chakraborty had taught girls in the in the early morning, before the day school within the same building of the boys school. He had started informally and many other teachers served this section voluntarily. Later Shri Majumdar had opened a co-educational school in 1910 named Rammohan Academy. This institute worked smoothly for six years. Later on the request of the managing board of the school of Bengal Academy Shri Chakraborty agreed to in cooperate it with the Bengal Academy. In 1918 Smt. Jyotishmayi Mukherjee was formally brought from Bengal as head Mistress of the Girls section of the school of Bengal Academy. In 1922 within the compound of the Bengal Academy a new three storied building was constructed as the separate girls' school. Number of well known personalities of the town of Rangoon had contributed money. Mention may be made of a few like Shri Kumadini Kar, Professor Maulavi Gulam Akbar, Shri Sachin Mukhopadhyay Doctor Prasunna Kumar Majumdar, Professor Ramprasad Choudhury and others<sup>21</sup>

There were many competitions which were held in these schools among the students. These competitions were not only of academic in character but also of outdoor activities. One such reference is available where the students took part in a continuous cycling race in Rangoon. The participant has to cycle continuously day and night. The person who won the race was S.N. De who cycled continuously for 40 hours and 50 minutes. This was an event for the Bengalis of Rangoon. The boy could have continued his endeavour for few more hours but he was stopped by a policeman. Since the organisers did not take

the permission from the police department to hold the competition in the main road the competitor had to stop immediately with the instruction from the police<sup>22</sup>.

It is necessary to mention here that that the chief educational institutions of Rangoon is the Rangoon College and Collegiate school established in 1874 administered by the Educational Syndicate from 1886 and placed in 1904 and 1902 respectively under the direct control of the Government and the secondary schools were affiliated to the Calcutta University. The St. John's College founded in 1864 was affiliated as high school to the Calcutta University<sup>23</sup>.

The Bengalis are music lovers with a knack to listen, perform and patronise music. It is a general trend among the community to listen and make their girls and daughters learn music. This attitude of the settlers is reflected in the establishment of the music schools namely Arya Sangeet Vidhyapeet and Arya Sangeetalay in Rangoon. These music schools provided the Bengali students with standard Bengali music and songs<sup>24</sup>.

Bengali vernacular schools developed in the various towns where the Bengalis had settled. In Myamyo there was a Bengali vernacular school (B.V.School). There was a system of providing scholarships to the students in the schools. The examination for the scholarship was held in their respective mother tongue of the student. The memoir of Nilima Dutta who was residing in Myamyo describes her success as she received General Proficiency Award of the School of Myamyo, a small town of Burma. She also received the Anukul Chandra Memorial Silver Medal and the All Round Best girl Award. Her name was remembered in the Rangoon Gazette of the year. In this occasion of the school annual function and distribution of the scholarships there were the presence of few important personalities of Myamyo named Mr. Bireswar Ganguly, Mr. Banerjee and his wife Mrs. Parul Banerjee, Shri. N. N. Majumdar, the first Bengali Chief Military Accounts Officer and his wife Smt. Nilima Majumdar and Captain Basu. Mrs Nilima Majumdar was well known singer among the Bengali world of Rangoon and she used to record songs in Rangoon. One of her popular song was 'Aaj Rajani uttal holo chander Madhu Kheye'(Free translation: The night has become crazy for the light of the moon)<sup>25</sup>.

Further to mention there were also schools in the form of madrasas which were opened by the Bengali Muslim community. There was the existence of Khatim-ul-Islam madrasa.

The community also established Khatun Rangoon School for the Muslim girls in Rangoon. In addition to this there was a madrasa which was operated in the Botatang mosque of Rangoon. The Muslim girls of the Bengali settlers in Burma were thus provided with education and many of them had achieved success in their academic life. Mosimat, who was the daughter of Abdul Majid, the Government Interpreter of Arakan had successfully qualified in the Matriculation examination in Rangoon. She had come out in flying colours by securing the first position among the women of the Muslim community. Janab Abdul Bari Choudhury, an affluent person of the Mussalman community of Burma had taken an active role in the establishment of the madrasas, schools, supervision of the mosques and other social works. He has also taken initiative to start a movement to eradicate gambling, selling and use of liquor as well to restrict the performance of 'poya' dance of Burma in public. He has been successful to some extent<sup>26</sup>. There were also chances to study Bengali in India Matriculate College'. But after the process of nationalisation started in 1941 in Burma the chances faded out for the local Bengalis in Burma<sup>27</sup>.

### III

The cultural life of the majority Bengali Hindus was affected by the religion. Religion had occupied an important place in the lives of the Hindu Bengalis in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> till the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The religious outlook of the Bengalis was guided by the emotional and the imaginative nature and their preference to Mother Goddess which represented female energy. Due to the imaginative power they made Gods more humane and closer to the day to day life of an ordinary man. Goddess Durga is transformed into Uma or the daughter coming to her parent's home with her four children once a year. This humane transformation of the Goddess founded its expression in the Bengali Durga Puja, which is unique and is not found in any other part of India. Another important feature of the Bengali religious belief is the worship of Goddess Kali,

which was the outcome of the growth of Tantrism in the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries. The worship of the Kali or Shakti, the goddess of the destruction which grew in Bengal led to the development of the Shakti cult. The expansion and growth of the worship of Shakti is typical to Bengal. Goddess Kali became another symbol of fearlessness and strength in the Bengali mind.

The Bengali settlers of Burma brought these religious traditions with them into the new land and the founding the Durga Bari and the Kali Bari became an essential part of their community life. There were establishment of the temples of Durga, Kali, Shiva, and other popular gods and goddesses of Bengal near about the residential areas of the Bengalis. Rangoon also witnessed the foundation of the Durga Bari in 1296 BS under the initiative and enthusiastic work of Nimai Sinha. He was the employee in the office of Rangoon Accountant General. Durga Bari was a place of social gathering, where Durga Puja was held annually and it served as a guest house for the Bengali Hindus visiting Rangoon. It is been said that the idol of Goddess Durga was brought from Banaras in the inaugurating year of the worship of the goddess. The place provided night stays for few days to the tourists, fortune seekers and travellers<sup>28</sup>.

The Durga Bari became the part and parcel of the Bengali life in this period. These temples not only became venues of the religious festival during the Durga Puja but it served the purpose of the social get together. Durga Puja for the Bengalis was more than a religious festival. There were social programmes like the community lunch (bhog), mela or exhibition, drama or theatre and other recreational programmes. Durga Bari was not only typical to the living of the Bengali settlers in Rangoon but also to the other towns of Burma where the Bengalis had settled<sup>29</sup>. Michkina another important town where considerable number of Bengalis had settled also celebrated Durga Puja. There were celebrations in the town in the form of theatre, drama, musical and dance concerts. The much notable Bengali film actress Smt Supriya Devi was born in the small town of Michkina in 1935 and had spent her early days in Burma. Her father Gopal Chandra

Bannerjee was a successful advocate. Her mother Kiranbala Devi was a housewife extremely interested in music and dance. Supriya Devi herself was a keen dancer since her childhood even receiving an award from Mr. Thakin Nu, the Prime Minister of Burma, who was moved by one of her dance recitals. She has described how the Bengalis had celebrated Durga Pooja with various recreational activities, theatre, and drama. Under the direction of her father the Bengalis of the town had staged three dramas namely, Naranarayan, Shahjahan and Alibaba. She had also participated in one of them and it was her first stage performance at the age of eight<sup>30</sup>. In Myamyo the Bengali Vernacular School was the centre for the social activities for the Bengalis in the town. The Bengalis used to gather here for the celebration. There were cultural programmes for the occasion. The school also organised Saraswati pooja. The other members of the family had also participated in the various programmes arranged for the social gathering<sup>31</sup>. Such social gatherings during the time of the Durga Pooja are typical to the Bengali settlement in any particular place. Thus the migration of the Bengalis in Burma was not only a process of political or economic in character but it was a settlement with a separate identity and cultural development which also had an everlasting influence on the Burmese western educated youths.

The Durga Pooja is so attached with the life of the Bengalis that it is reflected in the observance of the festival by Subhas Chandra Bose even when he was a political prisoner in the jail of Mandalay. It was the same jail where Lokmanya Tilak and Lala Lajpat Rai were imprisoned for seven and one year consecutively. Subhas Bose describes the Mandalay prison structure which is recorded in his collection works. The structure was built of wood. Bose states that "The buildings looked exactly like cages in the zoo or in the circus. From the outside and especially at night, the inmates of these buildings appeared to be like animals prowling about behind the bars. Within these structures we were at the mercy of the elements. There was nothing to protect us from the biting cold of winter or the intense heat of summer or the tropical rains of Mandalay"<sup>32</sup>. In the jail he also developed a liking for the Burmese men. With the coming of the month of October 1925, Subhas Bose appealed to the Superintendent of the jail to grant the prisoners the

permission to perform the festival of Durga pooja as similar facilities were given to the Christian prisoners. The superintendent agreed to provide the facilities but the Government had not only refrained but also censured the Superintendent Major Findlay for taking decisions disregarding the authority. As a result of such a step by the Government Subhas Bose and other Hindu prisoners went on a hunger strike in February 1926. After three days of hunger strike a newspaper named Forward published the news of the hunger strike in Mandalay as well as the reports of the Indian Jail Committee of 1919-21. It also revealed the false health reports of some prisoners which replaced the true ones by Lieutenant Col. Mulvany. He was instructed to do so by his superior, the Inspector General of Prisons of Bengal. The reveal of this fact led to a protest and uproar among the people of India and also T.C. Goswami, who was a Swarajist, took up this issue in the House of Legislative Assembly. The Home Member found the situation uncomfortable and beyond control and promised to look into the matter to remove the grievances of the prisoners. Thus the Government without delay provided some funds for the observance of the religious festival of Durga Pooja. The facilities and other necessary requirements for the festival would also be given by the Government. With such an order from the Government and having won their point Subhas Bose and other prisoners including Mr. Jiban Lal Chatterjee gave up the hunger strike. Thus in 1926 October the prisoners of Mandalay jail had celebrated the Durga Pooja. Bose always considered that Burma and Burmese had a close affinity towards India culturally<sup>33</sup>.

In the prisons of Mandalay Subhas Bose was practising the concepts of Vaishnavism and Saktism, the two predominant religious traditions of Bengal. Along with this he also sang devotional songs like kirtans, songs of D.L. Roy, Rabindranath Tagore and Nazrul Islam. He was joined also by other prison inmates. There are even some songs in his prisons notebooks which may have been his efforts or fragments of song by others. These songs expressed the growing love of the bonded, earthly believer and his surrender to the divine. They also contain many images of imprisonment and passion for freedom. Though the religious ideas were predominant but it was inter-mingled with the idea of

patriotism. There was love for the Infinite and the Mother both the religious and the country<sup>34</sup>.

Several other prominent temples with appropriate resources had also been holding religious and language instructions on an informal basis as a part of their religious activities which also include regular Pooja or religious sessions and festivities on auspicious days associated with the principal deities of the temple in Burma. A few groups endeavouring to perpetuate the traditional Gita and Bhajans also existed. There were also three Hindu Dharmashalas or guest houses in the downtown Rangoon under the management of the temple trust for the Sri Kali Temple and Shri Satyanarayan Mandir. These were the places where the visitors could secure temporary lodging. The mandir or temple maintained a free dispensary on its premises<sup>35</sup>.

An important aspect of the Bengali cultural life was the establishment of libraries or reading rooms. The attachment to the libraries developed from the British who started many reading rooms and libraries in Calcutta their early capital. The Bengali settlers had formed as early as in 1895 the Rangoon Vidyasagar Reading Room. This library was named after the educationist Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. It was opened under the initiative of a wealthy businessman Girish Chandra Basu who bought books worth Rs. 2000. There were books both in English and Bengali language. Besides this, library and reading rooms were further opened by the Chittagong Muslim community in Rangoon. Sheik Muhammad Israil Khan and other learned Muslims had opened the Moslem Pustakalay or library. This organisation had Maulavi Muazzim Ali Khan as its secretary. He was a native of Manikganj in Dacca. He was an academician and a regular reader of Bengali literature. This organisation also functioned as a club for the residing Muslim community in Burma<sup>36</sup>.

There were various other organisations which were opened by the Bengali settlers of both the Hindu and the Muslim communities. Such organisations were mostly centred near

and in Rangoon as that was the capital of the country and also large number of the community were engaged in numerous activities in this area. There was Rangoon Brahmo Samaj, Shri Ramkrishna mission, Bengal Mohhamadan Association, Chittagong Moslem Samiti, Burma Provincial Khilafat Committee, Rangoon District Khilafat Committee, Chittagong Buddhist Samiti, Bengal Co-operative Credit Society, Bengal Labour Organisation, Rangoon Maiyat Sahajya Tahbil, Bengali Samabay Rindan Samity, Chittagong Samity and others. 'The important among the associations formed by the Bengalis were Milan Mandir, Bengal Social Club, Bengal Club, Brahmo Samaj, Bengal Academy, Chattal Samiti and Ramakrishna Mission. The Bengali settlers gathered in these places and they were the meeting grounds for them'<sup>37</sup>.

The Hindu revivalist movement in the nineteenth century culminated in the preaching's of the mighty and modest Shri Ramkrishna Paramhans (1836-1886) and his disciple Swami Vivekananda who revitalised the Hindu religion and brought it before the world. Swami Vivekananda established the Ramkrishna Mission, as a social, cultural and spiritual organisation. The institution believed in charity, service to man and welfare to the people. It was their duty to look after the sick and the poor and take them back to health particularly in the times of epidemics. They provided services to the people without discrimination of sex, religion, caste and economic status. Thus with the numerous existence of the community in the Burma there was the foundation of the Rangoon Ramkrishna Mission. The Rangoon Ramakrishna Mission Sevashram was a philanthropic institution and by the Bengali in particular, as the Indian labourers in and about Rangoon, when they fall ill, are treated and taken care of her alone practically<sup>38</sup>. The Ramakrishna Mission was started and organised by the Bengali sanyasis(sages) of the Mission namely Swami Shyamananda and others. But here all communities irrespective of class, creed, religion and sex received services. They particularly provided medical assistance to the people of Burma. The monthly expenditure of the mission is approximately 3000 rupees and it takes real toil and hardship to acquire the amount to run the mission. Some of the owners of the factories of Rangoon rarely donate funds to the organisation but no other source of income was available to them. The government of

Burma also provides some financial assistance but it is not enough to run such a work and the mission deserves much more. The principal of the Madras Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Sarbananda had established the Ramakrishna Sevak Samiti and Shri Ramakrishna Society in Rangoon<sup>39</sup>. This organisation would deliver a proper spiritual guidance to the settlers. The organisation continued with its own mission of providing service to the needy and poor which was recognised by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru after the independence in Burma. Pandit Nehru accompanied with Mrs. Indira Gandhi visited Ramakrishna Mission Hospital in Rangoon on June 22, 1950. He was received by the secretary of the mission, Swami Nichkamananda and Mrs. Aung San and also Dr. Hariharan the Chief Medical Officer of the Mission. Welcoming Pundit Nehru the Foreign secretary Mya Bu thanked Pandit Nehru and the Government of India for their munificent capital grant of Rs. 120000 and recurring grant of Rs. 250,000 for the rehabilitating the hospital which was destroyed in the last war. Pandit Nehru personally donated Rs. 2500. Nehru paid warm tribute to the silent and unostentatious work of the Ramkrishna Mission not only in Rangoon but everywhere else where they functioned. He urged the Indians to take pride in this institution and help it to the best of their ability and make it a notable instance of cooperation between the Burmese and the Indians living in Burma<sup>40</sup>.

Swami Atmasthananda who received diksha or spiritual initiation from Swami Vijnanananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, in 1938 and joined the Ramakrishna Mission at the Belur Math January 3, 1941. He was sent to Rangoon Sevashrama as its secretary in 1958. He soon developed the Sevashrama hospital into one of the best hospitals in Burma or Myanmar. When military rulers took over Rangoon, he returned to India in 1965. Atmasthananda was elected a trustee of the Ramakrishna Math and member of the Governing Body of the Ramakrishna Mission in 1973. In 1975, he was appointed an assistant secretary<sup>41</sup>. Swami Ranganathan the thirteenth president of the Ramakrishna Order who served the mission from 1933-42 had been to Rangoon as the librarian of the Ramakrishna Mission. He made important contributions for the improvement of the Ramakrishna Pustakalay in Rangoon<sup>42</sup>.

The Ramakrishna Mission society which had enjoyed a long intellectual tradition since its inception in Burma or Myanmar more than 80 years was converted into the Ramakrishna Temple Trust in 1977. The Ramakrishna Temple Trust maintaining the reading room and the library which is the part and parcel of the organisation devoted to the comparative study of all religions. The Ramakrishna Temple Trust conducts daily sessions for worship. A guest house for the travelers and destitutes has also been functioning under the supervision of the board of the trustees. Several prominent Burmese socialites have served on the board of thee trustees and the Ramakrishna Temple trust has been steadily carrying on its task to fulfill its principal aim and objectives of serving the needy before self<sup>43</sup>.

The Brahmo Samaj was the first movement which sprang up as a result of the socio-religious reform movement in Bengal in the nineteenth century. Under the impact of the western education and culture Brahmo Samaj was “the earliest form of Protestant Hinduism in Modern India.” Since there was the existence of large number of Bengali settlers in Rangoon in fact all major socio-religious organisation had sprang up in the area. Gradually, there was the foundation of Brahmo Samaj in 1880 in Rangoon. Two more branches of the Samaj were further opened in Rangoon in 1883 and 1884. Ramananda Chattopadhyay in his visit to Burma mentioned that there was a Brahmo mandir (temple) in Rangoon. There were religious ceremonies held every week<sup>44</sup>. From the Census of the Brahmos in 1911 it indicates that there was not a single person who was a Brahmo in Burma but there were considerable amount of Brahmos existing in the country. This indicates that there are, as late Mr. S. Fletcher Williams of the British and the foreign Unitarian Association used to say during his period of sojourn in India, more Brahmos outside the Brahmo Samaj than within it<sup>45</sup>. Furthermore, it also shows that The Census of the Brahmos was not accurate but there are many within our own personal knowledge. The expansion of the Samaj started during the zeal of Keshab Chandra Sen. Under the influence of Keshab Chandra Sen and Bijoy Krishna Goswami, a religious scholar named Bhai Girish Chandra Sen became a Brahmo in 1871 and

travelled to Burma. He stayed in Rangoon to propagate in 1880 the new faith. He is the first religious scholar who has translated Quran into Bengali. Initially he worked at Dhaka Prakash and later as Assistant editor at Sulabh Samachar, Bangabandhu and editor of the monthly magazine Mahila<sup>46</sup>. Nagendranath Sen, an employee of the Rangoon Accountant General Office was one of the leaders and active member of the Brahmo Samaj in Rangoon. There were regular prayers and Brahmosangeet was sung in the Brahmo Samaj. Interestingly Nagendranath Sen was a colleague of Sarat Chattpadhyay in Rangoon. His son Dr. Amiyo Kumar Sen was born and brought up in Rangoon. He had practised medicine in Burma for thirty years and had spent 65 years in Rangoon. He came back to Calcutta in 1965<sup>47</sup>. Another Brahmo member was the well known barrister Shri. P.C. Sen who became judge and Administrator General of Rangoon. He was the father in law of Smt. Sujata Devi, the youngest daughter of Keshab Chandra Sen<sup>48</sup>.

A number of associations and missions of Islam had also entered into the arena of Bengali Muslim life in Burma. One of the missions was started by Anjuman –i- ulema-i-Bangla. They had sent out preachers to various parts of the country including Burma. These preachers had devoted their life to the cause of Islam. Moulvi Muhammad Akram Khan, the founder of the Anjuman had devoted his life for Anjuman and the cause of the mission. The work set before the mission was a big one and it required also a huge fund. The Anjuman had secured a fund in the form of permanent grant of Rs100/- per month from two devoted persons of Rangoon namely, Mr. A. K. S. Jamal C.I.E., the merchant prince of Rangoon and Moulavi Abdul Karim, the retired inspector of schools. Besides this there were other donations and funds were also collected from the subscriptions. The mission had crossed the boundaries of Bengal and Assam and reached in Burma where Anjuman had permanently placed a preacher who worked for the organisation in Burma<sup>49</sup>. One of the renowned businessmen of Rangoon from Chittagong was Abdul Bari Choudhury who helped the organisation to run smoothly in Burma. He also enthusiastically took many works of the mission and under his financial support the organisation had expanded to an extent in Burma. The success of the mission was largely due to the presence of a huge number of Bengali Muslims who came from Dacca,

Comilla and Chittagong<sup>50</sup>. There were other Islamic organisations namely Bazam-e-Gulshan-e-urdu, Zafar Shah Dargah Trust , The Muslim Central Fund Trust and The Islamic Religious Affairs Council which was visited by the numerous Bengali Muslims who lived in Burma<sup>51</sup>.The Ahmediyya movement also took a shape in Burma by the Islamic organisation named The Ahmediyya Anjuman Ishaat Islam under the initiative of Captain N.A. Khan, a retired captain and owner of a Burma Pharmacy in Yenangyaung in Burma<sup>52</sup>.

#### IV

The immigrants from Bengal were mostly middle class educated and they were related to a large extent to the development of literature and journalism of this country. They contributed definitely to the progress of the Bengali language which received vital literary thrust during the nineteenth century. The impact of western education and ideas along with the change in the social, political, and intellectual thinking of the Bengalis was reflected in their literary and journalist efforts. The rising nationalism and anti colonial feeling among the Bengalis after the anti partition movement acted as another force to the growth of vernacular literature and journalism. The educated middle class in Bengal who earlier had faith and was loyal to their colonial masters soon they lost their confidence. The medium to express their grievances was seen through the literature in the form of novels, newspapers, weekly journals and others. These social and educational ideas brought an upsurge in the minds of the Bengalis. The Bengali settlers were not untouched by the new ideas of the nineteenth century and therefore they also ventured into the realm of literature and journalism. But at the same time they were careful enough to preserve their language, literature and culture from the Burmese who differed from them in many respects. They on the other hand had influenced either consciously or unconsciously the Burmese youths who came in touch with the spirit of Bengal renaissance.

The Bengali settlers in Burma had thus published newspapers, journals, weekly magazines, and other form of printed material. The well known Bengali authors, intellectuals, writers, thinkers had visited Burma either as invited guest or as travellers or seekers of job. An important section of the Bengali literary personalities had visited Burma and they have left some account of their experience in the country in their writings. Thus their newly acquired experiences also enriched the Bengali language and culture.

There were three monthly journals and a weekly journal which was published by the Bengali settlers of Burma. Rangoon Mail was an English newspaper. It gradually took the shape of a national newspaper. The editor of this important journal of Burma was Shri Nripenchandra Bandopadhyay. Nripendra Chandra Bandopadhyay through his newspaper could publish the latest of the Bengal politics which could reach the people of Burma<sup>53</sup>. He had a cordial relationship with Bhikhu. U. Ottama. The British Government was concerned about the presence of Shri Nripendra Chandra and due to the pressure of the Government of Burma he could not survive much long in the country. But under his editorship the newspaper Rangoon Mail had reached its zenith and it was politically as well as socially the most awakening newspaper of the period<sup>54</sup>. The paper and the editor both faced problems from the British strong censorship and this led to protest from the Indians in Burma against the British government. On 18 November 1920, the Rangoon Mail had reprinted a number of articles from another source. Two of these detailed British atrocities around the Empire, in places such as Egypt and Fiji. Two book reviews also attracted the attention of British censors: published in Manchester, described the merciless exploitation of the "coloured people of the world" and World Supremacy debate claim that "no good can come to the human community on this planet save through the whitest type of white man." Within days the editor and manager of the Rangoon Mail were respectively sentenced to four months and two months imprisonment for sedition. The British authorities handled the court case clumsily. In court the editor and publisher of the Rangoon Mail were handcuffed and had their coats and shoes

forcibly removed. Again, there was a public outrage at the press suppression and the treatment of the criminals. The Indian Independent described the editor as being “incapable of hurting even a fly” and called his treatment “barbarous and humiliating.”<sup>55</sup>

There were the existence of other newspaper and journals published by the Bengalis settlers. The ex-students of Bengal Academy organised and published a journal called Dipali. The editor of this journal was Babu Paresh Chandra Deb. This journal was published after every three months. Shri Shashi Bhushan Chakraborty who was also the founder member of the Bengal Academy took the initiative to publish a journal named Swabhilambi. It was a weekly journal. There were a number of printing presses in Burma which belonged to the Indians among whom Bengalis had owned them in a large number.<sup>56</sup>

The Bengali Muslims had equally contributed to the growth of literature in Burma. Moulavi Mohammad Didarul Alam an educated and enthusiastic youth had taken the task of publishing two journals in Burma for the community. He was the editor of the Bengali journals named ‘Juger Alo’ and ‘Sammelani’ which were monthly and weekly journals respectively. The importance of the journal Sammelani was that it was a joint effort of both the Muslim and the Hindu Bengalis residing in Burma. The history of the publication of the journal was of great importance regarding the communal harmony of the Bengali community in Burma. In 1331BS the Bangla Sahitya Sammelan was organised by both the Hindu and the Muslim.<sup>57</sup> One of the popular news papers of Burma was the Rangoon Daily News which was edited by a Bengali Muslim. A weekly periodical named Bangla Gazzete was published by the Bengali settlers in Rangoon. It was launched in the year 1929 and its office was in the Strand Road, Rangoon. Farooq Ahmed Nizampuri was its editor. The weekly had published the news of ill-treatment of the Bengali passengers by the British steam Navigation Company who used to board the ships from Chittagong to Akyab and Rangoon<sup>58</sup>. Quite a large number of magazines and

periodicals were published from Burma by the resident Bengalis. More than hundred such periodicals and magazines were published from all over Burma by the Bengalis<sup>59</sup>.

The cultural and literary connections with Bengal and Arakan existed in the early times. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century AD when Muslim in Arakan nurtured Bengali Literature, the Muslim poets of that time identified the country as “Roshang” (corrupt Bengali for “Rakhaing”). The study of Bengali literature that the Muslim initiated reached perfection under the aegis of the courtiers of the Roshang kings. It is needless to say that the Kings’ Court of Roshang got filled up with Muslim influence long before this. From the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD the Kings’ Court of Roshang by luck was compelled to heartily receive the Muslim influence. Roshang king Meng-tsau-mwun (1404 -1434 AD) known as Narameikhla in the Burmese history ascended the throne in 1404 AD forcibly gained possession of a lady named Tsau-bongyo, the sister of the chief called Ananthiu. In the King’s Court of Roshang during seventeenth century there were Muslim courtiers who appointed their own poets to uplift Bengali literature. Roshang King, Thiri thu-dhamma Raja (1622 -1638 AD) was as greatly powerful as his father, Meng Kha Moung or Hussein Shah (1612 -1622 AD). He ruled a vast area from Dhaka to Pegu. During his rule, Poet Daulat Qazi, with orders from Ashraf Khan, while living in King’s Court of Roshang, started the poem Daulat Qazi. He wrote Sati Maina Lor Chandrani in local Bengali language in 1622. Mardan also appeared in the court of Thiri Thu-dhamma. He wrote Nasib Nama . Alaol , one of the Bengali poets living in Mrohaung in the seventeenth century contributed remarkably for the development of Bengali literature in Arakan. The other was Qureshi Magan who wrote a book named Chandravati. The influence of Bengali literary culture began to grow in the medieval period and the literary connection was further strengthened with the Bengali settlers in Burma<sup>60</sup>. Among the Bengali settlers there were many well known literary personalities who had produced masterpieces from Burma. Their literary works were held in high esteem by not only the Bengalis but also the Burmese in Burma.

The most important literary personality who resided in Burma for a longer period from 1903 to 1916 was Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. He went to Rangoon in 1903 and started to stay with his uncle Shri Aghornath Chattopadhyay. His uncle was an established lawyer. He started to learn Burmese and law while staying with his uncle. He also secured a job in the Burma Railways in Rangoon. But the sudden death of his uncle changed the life of Sarat Chandra. The details of his professional life have been provided in chapter II<sup>61</sup>. His stay in Burma had opened a new chapter of mental awareness and outlook towards imperialism and the society which came in the forefront in his writings. In fact the literary qualities of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay were nurtured in Burma. He frequently changed his residence while residing in Rangoon. While residing in Rangoon he started visiting the Bernard Free Library regularly. He had a great pleasure in reading the European classics. He read books on Spencer, Zola, Tolstoy, Kant, Dickens and Bernard<sup>62</sup>. These readings had led to the definite shape of his writings from Burma. In 1912 he for the first time sent a novel from Rangoon named Ramer Sumati to Phanindranath Pal, the editor of the Bengali periodical Jamuna in Calcutta. It was published in 1319B.S. It was in Burma he started writing short stories like Chabi(portrait). In the short story all the characters were Burmese. He portrayed the hero Ba Thin in a period before the colonial rule when Burma was a free country. It was in Burma he started writing the famous novel Charitrahin( characterless). It was in the flat of Botataung that the manuscript of Charitrahin was completely burnt and he had to rewrite it. Interestingly Sarat Chandra resided in the Mistri Palli of Rangoon with the Indian coolies and countrymen<sup>63</sup>. This stay gave certain values and observations which in future made him the most popular writer of Bengal. Burmese background was provided in the novel Srikanta. While residing in Burma he had gathered the idea for his novel 'Pather Dabi' which was banned by the British Government .Pather Dabi was written in the background of the Burmese jungles, social and economic exploitation of the Burmese poor labourers and its main character Sabyasachi , became a national hero. Pather Dabi had become a bible for the Bengal revolutionaries. The novel reflected the views and activities of the Bengal revolutionaries residing in Burma. His book made a naked criticism of the Burmese imperialism in India and Burma. The book was equally banned

in Burma and in India<sup>64</sup>. Sarat Chandra was impressed by the Burmese women. In his Presidential Address of the Congress session of the Howrah Zilla Committee that on 14<sup>th</sup> 1922, entitled Swaraj Sadhanay Nari, he mentioned the active role played by the women in society, religious and economic field of Burma. He also mentioned about the high literacy rate among the Burmese women<sup>65</sup>. Therefore, the writer rather began his literary career in the plains of Rangoon. He had number of Burmese friends<sup>66</sup> and it is understood that the effect of the Pather Dabi was equally felt in Burma and with the Burmese. May be that was the explanation for the ban on the book in Burma too.

Nabin Chandra Sen another important personality of Bengal literary field came to visit Rangoon. He was greeted by the local residing Bengali community in Rangoon which also included Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay<sup>67</sup>. The detail of the visit and felicitation has been mentioned earlier in this chapter. Nabin Chandra Sen also began to reside in Burma in No.11, Yark Street, Rangoon during 1906. He maintained a close connection and association with Girish Chandra Ghosh, the famous theatre personality. He wrote letters to Girish Chandra Ghosh appreciating and congratulating the nationalist play Sirajuddaula<sup>68</sup>. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee while giving his presidential address in the Nikhil Brohmo Probashi Bangiyo Sahitya Sammelan held in 1937 has mentioned the name of Nabin Chandra Sen as an important Bengali personality present in Burma. The poet's son Nirmal Sen was a famous barrister of Rangoon<sup>69</sup>. Sita Devi, the daughter of Ramananda Chattopadhyay, the famous editor of Probasi and 'The Modern Review' came to Burma in 1923. She was married to the renowned writer Sudhir Kumar Choudhury. She had spent six years with her husband at Rangoon. In her novels namely Parabhritika she had referred to the Burmese life and the beauty of the landscape<sup>70</sup>.

The most significant of the visits of the poets was by Rabindranath Tagore in Burma. He visited for three times in 1916, 1924 and 1927. When the poet had visited Burma for the first time observed himself that as the ship moved up the Irrawaddy towards Rangoon, he

could see the row of kerosene-oil factories with tall chimneys along its banks as if Burma was lying on its back and smoking a cigar. Closer to the city, the long line of jetties were clinging to the body of Burma like so many hideous, giant, iron leeches. Other than the Shwe Dagon temple, Tagore did not find anything in the city that was distinctively Burmese. He lamented the cruelty of the goddess of commerce. ‘This city has not grown like a tree from the soil of the country,’ he wrote, ‘this city floats like foam on the tides of time...Well, I have seen Rangoon, but it is mere visual acquaintance, there is no recognition of Burma in this seeing...the city is an abstraction...’ From Burma the Tosamaru traveled further east towards Penang, Singapore and Hong Kong. He was on his way to Japan<sup>71</sup>. He was greeted by the all races of Indians including the Punjabis, Gujratis, Bengalis, Biharis, and South Indians in Burma. There was also the presence of the Burmese too. Tagore was given a warm welcome by the residing Indians and Burmese in the Jubilee Hall of Rangoon. A huge crowd had gathered for the meeting. Among the Bengalis the well known was Shri. Ghosal, Dr. Raibahadur Sen who was the founder of the Bengal Social Club. Dr. Sen had been residing in Burma for at least thirty years. The gathering was emotional and joyful. One of the organizers of the meeting was Abdul Karim Jamal. A Burmese barrister U Ba Thein presented the Certificate of Honour and the Bengali presented version of the certificate of honour was read by the barrister and son of Nabin Chandra Sen, Nirmal Chandra Sen<sup>72</sup>. An enormous amount of letters and telegrams came to the poet and the most notable was a telegraph from the governor of Burma, Sir Harcourt Butler. Butler expressed his disappointment for not been present in the reception of the laureate<sup>73</sup>. When Rabindranath Tagore visited Burma in 1916 Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay was residing in Burma. It was for some unavoidable reasons he had to come back to Calcutta and could not attend the felicitation programme of the laureate. It is been claimed by, Sri Girindra nath Roy , the biographer of the Sarat Chandra that Sarat Chandra had drafted the Certificate of Honour but it is not mentioned in any of the other biographies of the literary personality<sup>74</sup>. In Rangoon he resided in the house of the barrister Shri. P.C. Sen who later became judge and Administrator General. The daughter in law of P.C. Sen, Smt. Sujata Devi was the youngest daughter of Keshab

Chandra Sen. Rabindranath Tagore had acquaintance with them for a longer period of time particularly during his visits in Calcutta<sup>75</sup>.

U To Kyi was one of the important Burmese admirers of Tagore. The Burmese nationalists in fact admired the effort of Tagore in the creation of national education in Shantineketan. The Chinese settlers of Rangoon had also organized a reception of Tagore in which Taw Sein Ko, the Chinese littérateur projected Tagore as the source of inspiration for the education of humanity and Asian unity. Bhikhu U. Ottama was an ardent admirer of Tagore and considered him as the supreme personalities of the mankind<sup>76</sup>. The visit of Rabindranath Tagore can be found in the book of N.C. Banerjee ‘At the Crossroad’ and also in the article published in the magazine Bashori by Jogindra nath Sarkar. Jogindra nath Sarkar had emphasized on the cultural activities of the Bengal Social Club in Burma and also that Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay as an admirer of Tagore. While promoting the Bengali culture and literature among the Bengali settlers in Burma Sarat Chandra had donated a copy of Rabindranath Tagore’s Chayanika to the Bengal Club<sup>77</sup>.

Tagore’s visit in 1916 was not much of significance as he could not spend enough time in Burma. As he was on his way to Japan so his visit to Burma as he described that it as ‘hurriedly visited’. The most important description given by him was that in the streets of Rangoon he saw the presence of the Bengalis, South Indians, Gujaratis, Punjabis and a very few number of Burmese. It seemed to him that the Burmese were the foreigners in the land. Rangoon to him was purely a commercial town and it did not impress him. But he found peace in the Shwe Dagon Temple as he felt it was a symbol of happiness, prosperity and luck of the Bengali household. He was highly impressed by the Burmese women. He compared them with the Santal women who are hardy and tough. He considered the men as lazy and dependent on the women. The women are powerful and free<sup>78</sup>.

In 1924 he again planned to visit China and on his way he came to Burma. The Rangoon Mail, one of the leading newspapers of Burma gave the coverage of his visit on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1924. The paper appreciated and praised all the literary works of Tagore and also the social works namely rural development, social reformation and national education. It stated that 'may we in India and Burma rise to a proper comprehension of Rabindranath's message and his work .In honouring such a personality , in helping the cause which he holds so dear , Burma will only be honouring the best in her own soul.' Three meetings were organized in Burma namely All Party Meeting in the Jubilee Hall, a Bengali Reception at the Soonaram Hall and a Chinese reception in Kemmendine . All the reception had the hall fully packed. The poet was honored not only by the Bengalis but by all races of Indians including Punjabis, Gujaratis, South Indians, and others which highly impressed the poet. He was named as the cultural exchanger between the Indians and the Burmese. The Bengalis gave a reception in Soonaram Hall and it was arranged by Shri Mohit Kumar Mukhopadhyay, the head master of the Bengal Academy and the literary personality Sudhir Choudhury, the son in law of Shri. Ramananda Chottopadhyay. The president of the reception was Shri Nripendra Chandra Banerjee. The girls of the Bengal Academy had presented an inaugural song and the Certificate of Honour was presented by Mr. Moazzam Ali. The Rangoon Daily News has given the description of his visit in details on 28<sup>th</sup> March 1924. The third visit of Tagore was in 1927 while going on the voyage to South East Asia, Java, Bali, and Borneo, etc. his companion was the linguist Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay<sup>79</sup>.

The visit of Rabindranath Tagore in 1927 was a story of dishonour and humiliation. It revealed the inner feuds of the local Bengalis in Burma. There was an association named Indo-Burma Federation which had handful of Bengalis, Burmese and other races of Indians as members of the organisation. Tagore was supposed to be the honoured guest of the Federation. But when the ship named Avamaru which was boarded by Tagore appeared in 1927 in Rangoon none of the members of the organisation was present. Though there was a huge gathering of men, women and children of other races and

nationality. There were also Bengalis who did not belong to the Federation. Since there was unavailability of proper host in Rangoon Tagore had to spend his nights in the ship. The Federation invited well known personalities of Rangoon to tea with the laureate. In that occasion the poet spoke on 'Greater India' (Brihottoro Bharat). He spoke in Bengali but the gathering mostly consisted of non-Bengali men. It is interesting to note that most of the Bengalis present there were well versed in English. However, the Bengali students of Rangoon had organized a reception and gave opportunity to the masses to see the poet. Tagore spoke on unity, brotherhood and condemned the internal feuds and conflicts of the Bengalis. The present crowds were disheartened with the poet's speech. The poet left Rangoon the next day. The poet's visit revealed shame for the Bengali settlers in Burma<sup>80</sup>.

Sudhir Chandra Sarkar mentions in his memoir Aamar Kal Amar Desh about his visit to Burma. He visited in Rangoon in 1920-1921. By that time Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay had left Burma. He was accompanied by Charu Bandopadhyay and Sudhir Choudury. He mentions about the large number of Bengalis present in Burma. The Bengalis of Burma had organized a reception in favour of the literary personality Charu Bandopadhyay in Bengal Academy. Sudhir Chandra Sarkar was also invited. The arrangements were made by the local Bengali settlers. It is evident that the Bengali settlers had often organized programme in the Bengal Academy<sup>81</sup>.

Balai Chand Mukhopadhyay, the well known writer with the pseudo name Banaphool has given a description of his visit to Rangoon in his autobiography titled 'Paschatpat'. He was invited by the Bengali settlers of Rangoon to honour the writer as the President of the Bengali Cultural Conference, 1957. He was received by Shri Manoj Mukhopadhyay, a relative of the writer and an agent in the Rangoon United Commercial Bank. The Conference was presided by Shri. Balai Chand Mukhopadhyay. There were two other sections particularly the literary section was presided by Shri Probod Kumar Sanyal and the other was the musical section which was presided over by Abbasuddin Ahmed, the

eminent Bengali folk singer. He was a representative of the East Pakistan Government of 1957<sup>82</sup>. Shri Suniti Kumar Chatterjee was also invited as an honoured guest by the Bengalis of Rangoon in the Sahitya Sammelan . He had emphasized on the need of the translation of the Burmese books into Bengali particularly of History, art, drama and religion <sup>83</sup>. The Bengalis organized such programmes were most probably annually. In Rangoon there also took place Banga Sahitya O Sanskriti Sammelan. The Bengalis and other communities in Burma did not hesitate to spend money and the tickets though priced high from Rs 10 to Rs. 101 were mostly sold. The halls were always fully packed with the lovers and admirers of Bengali culture and literature<sup>84</sup>. It seems that the Bengalis in Burma had crossed the political boundaries while preserving the culture of the country in the far off lands. Moreover, there was also a presence of a huge number of Bengali populations from East Pakistan particularly from Chittagong, Noakhali and Kumilla. The Bengalis remained tied up with the same bond of oneness irrespective of the political separation after 1947.

The Bengalis in Burma thus maintain a strong cultural group in Burma. They had successfully cultivated the cultural hold in Burma celebrating the main religious activities as well as the literary and artistic doings. Bengal had been in the nineteenth and the twentieth century at a time the main cultural hub of India and the Bengal reflected the growth of literature, drama, music and other cultural activities during this period. Sociologists generally believe in the trend of the migrant or diaspora community to cling to their culture more strongly in the foreign land than in the motherland. In cultivating the culture the migrant Indians cling to their culture so ostensibly that sometimes it seems that they are more Indian in their cultural orientations and practices than resident Indians in India. This was also reflected in the activity of the Bengali community in Burma but there was a healthy cultural impact on the Burmese culture due to the presence of a large number of Bengalis in Burma. The impact seems to be on the literary, artistic and also on the religious side.

## V

There were cultural exchanges and the western educated nationalist Burmese drank the spirit of cultural renaissance of Bengal. They read books and took ideas from the educated Bengalis in Burma. These middle class Bengalis were present in Burma in various works particularly Government services and as lawyers, doctors, engineers and other professionals. They discussed the problems of the colonial rule and the rich cultural heritage of both countries. The Burmese intellectuals were equally eager to receive and organize get-together for the reception of the Rabindranath Tagore when he visited Burma. It is more likely to mention that there was a huge flow of the Burmese youths in Bengal particularly in Calcutta for the study of medicine in Calcutta Medical College and also in the Calcutta University. This flow for education continued till 1920 when the Rangoon University was established. In 1911-1921 the Burmese immigrants into Bengal was 2,361 and out of that 952 were in Calcutta<sup>85</sup>. It increased slightly in 1921-31 when the Burmese people were 2381 with 1,461 in Calcutta. There was further increase in 8,152 in 1931. The Burmese immigrants were present in other districts but it was much high in Calcutta as the Burmese youths mainly came to Calcutta for higher education. There was presence of Burmese youths particularly for the purpose of higher education and they were not only influenced by the political ideas but also in the intellectual awakening of Bengal. These Burmese youths after they arrived in Burma became the educated middle class and were influenced and inspired by the Bengali culture. The University of Calcutta started its Pali course. Satish Candra Vidyabhusan, a pupil of famous Sarat Chandra Das, the writer of the famous book about Tibet, The Indian Pandits in the Land of Snow, was the first scholar to obtain the M.A Degree in Pali at Calcutta. He assisted Sarat Chandra Das in making Tibetan Indian Dictionary<sup>86</sup>. Other names of Bengali intellectuals who vigorously promoted Pali were Haraprasad Shastri, Benimadhav Barooah, B. C. Law and Nalinaksha Datta. Benimadhav Barooah visited Burma in 1920s<sup>87</sup>. Professor Stella Kramisch, eminent art historian, who taught in Calcutta University, also visited Burma<sup>88</sup>. Calcutta during this period also experienced a new age

in her relation with Burma. It was Sir Asutosh Mukherjee who promoted the Calcutta University as one center of Buddhist studies.

It is further interesting to note that the cultural influence was also felt in the Rangoon University. The Rangoon University was in fact a branch of the Calcutta University until 1921 and remained an off shoot of the Indian Education Service till 1937. Even then half of the students who attended were from Myanmar or Burma and none of the senior faculty was from the country<sup>89</sup>. Most of the teachers were Indians and a large number of Bengali teachers came to Rangoon University to take classes either as permanent teachers. There numerous professors namely Professor of English was Bhaumik Kabyanidhi, Professor of History, H. K. Chakraborty Professor of Chemistry, B. Banerjee<sup>90</sup> and Muhammed Siddiq Khan as lecturer in Political Science<sup>91</sup>. There were many visiting professors for the purpose of imparting knowledge in the Rangoon University. Nihar Ranjan Ray, the professor of Fine Arts and Culture and the Professor of Ancient Indian History had spent 1927-1933 in Burma working with his teacher Benimadhab Barua on the Buddhist architecture and Burmese temples. It was in Burma he did his groundwork for the integrationist approach to history which he perfected in his *Banglar Itihas* published in 1949<sup>92</sup>. Further Professor Ashutosh Sen, the Professor of Chemistry at the Dhaka University was a visiting professor in the Agricultural College in Mandalay while taking a leave from the Dhaka University. Amartya Sen, a well known economist and the noble laureate wrote about Burma that “It is difficult for me to talk about Burma without a deep sense of nostalgia. My memories are all of Burma, where I grew up between the ages 6 to 13. My father was a visiting professor at the Agricultural College in Mandalay, on leave from the Dhaka University. My first memory of striking natural beauty is that of sunrise over the Maymyo hills seen from our wooden house at the eastern edge of Mandalay. It was a thrilling sight even for a young boy. Mandalay was a lively city in the 1930s and Burma a magically beautiful country. The richness of the land and the Burmese people to be happy and friendly shone brightly the restraining lid of British colonialism”.<sup>93</sup> It is not unlikely that these educated teachers have not influenced the newly western educated

Burmese youths. Shri. Harinarayan Chattopadhyay in his book named Arakan has described that the principal character of his novel Lun Pe who was a student of Rangoon University and was inspired as well as close with Bengali teachers and friends. The relationship was strong and healthy but soon the Thakin Dobama movement changed the scenario of the Bengalis who utilized the English language as the official language of Burma. But the Dobama movement wanted the Burmese to be the national official language and therefore, they fought for the cause. These led to the tensions between the Bengali settlers and the nationalist Burmese youths<sup>94</sup>.

Rabindranath Tagore had inspired almost poets all over the world and Burmese poets were no exception. The Burmese poets and intellectuals had a relation with the Bengali intellectuals. They were guided and moved by the great personality in their literary life. The visit of Tagore in 1924 had an immense impact on the poets of Burma. Tagore had a talk with Jaiya , one of the Burmese poets. In the meeting there were forty Burmese monks. There were journalists and many other important Burmese personalities namely U Ba Chow, U Pakhau Cha, E Ba Khayin, U Ba Pakhyi. Jeiya wrote in his memoirs about the interaction with the poet that he did not know any of words spoken by him but he could understand everything. The Burmese writer Min U Bhei wrote in his book 'First Burmese' that the students of Rangoon University read the writings of Rabindranath Tagore with much interest and attention. The contemporary students of the university were Taipan Mauyun, Bha Jodathein, Mintu Tu Bhun. When the poet received the Noble Prize the Burmese too expressed that they were proud that a poet from Asia has received the highest prize. The Burmese poets namely Chi Paun and Maun Thai have considered Tagore as a shining star in the sky of Asia. Tagore is a symbol of power and knowledge<sup>95</sup>.

The national education of Rabindranath Tagore was a great inspiration for the Burmese. They supported national college and education. The young poets and literary personalities, artists like Kodaw Hmaing, socialists like U Pakhau Cha and many others. The Dobama movement also adopted national education as one of their agenda for the

national cause. The writings of Kodaw Hmaing had similarities with Rabindranath Tagore. The principles of the both personalities had many similarities and Hmaing was known as the Tagore of Burma. Hmaing supported the Tagore's decision to give up the title of knight as he was against imperialism<sup>96</sup>.

The influence and popularity of Tagore can be further understood when in 1948 his writings were translated into Burmese. The most notable among the translated works were Gitanjali, Sonartari, Spulinga, etc. These were translated by Maung Pakhaung and Niyun Chu. In Burma the Mandalay Poets Association with members like Tin Maw, Maung Thein E, Chi Aung, were also influenced by the poet. The poets of Burma used names in the novel of Tagore in their works. Chi Aung has used such names in her novels. The romanticism and realism of Tagore were reflected in the writings of Dawgon Tai, min U Bheiya, Tin Maw and others. The ideals of humanism and politics had influenced the modern women Burmese writers like Nag Bheiya Tabir. However, the influence of Tagore was felt not only in the literary field but also in education and idealism. The Burmese artists and painters were similarly attracted to Tagore and Shantinekhan<sup>97</sup>. The Rangoon-based artist Bagyi Aung Soe (1924–1990) has been regarded by fellow artists as a pioneer of modern art in Burma. Influenced by precepts practiced at Rabindranath Tagore's Shantiniketan, he elaborated an original painting approach and style synthesizing diverse artistic approaches, which neither adhered exclusively to the European or Burmese artistic tradition nor regurgitated twentieth-century Western artistic innovations. Min Thu Wun. This leader of khitsan movement was inspired by the renaissance of Indian art at the beginning of the twentieth century driven by artists like Abanindranath Tagore. Having met Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and learned of the Nobel laureate's vision for his Shantiniketan he sought a suitable candidate who could bring about a similar revival in traditional Burmese art to send to study Shantiniketan. In July 1951, a young illustrator from Rangoon, Aung Soe (1924–1990), left for the Shantinekhan with a scholarship from the Indian government after a farewell party held in his honor and attended by prominent figures of the literary circle such as Zawgyi. Aung Soe was enrolled at the Kala-Bhavan (Department of

Painting). His gurus included Nandalal Bose, Abanindranath Tagore (who died a few months after Aung Soe's arrival on campus, in December 1951) and Ramkinkar Baij (1906–1980). Despite his ultimate signature style resembling little of his teachers' work, not only is the Bengali spirit constant throughout Aung Soe's writings, he continued to quote or reminiscence on specific aspects of the Shantiniketan in exchanges on scrap papers with friends and students right into the last decade of his life. He also signed "SANTINEKETAN" in Burmese and Roman letters on both his illustrations and paintings<sup>98</sup>.

The Burma muluk was very dear to the Bengalis who in fact did not consider the land as a foreign place. A large number of Bengali writers and poets were present in Burma and they included Burma in their writings and literary works. Shri. Prabodh Kumar Sanyal had been in Burma for along time<sup>99</sup>. Burma was very loved by the Bengalis particularly for the literary class. Banaphul or Balai Chand Mukhopadhyay has described in his autobiography the visit to Burma. He has written about the pathetic and painful travel of the Bengalis from Burma in his novel 'Dana'<sup>100</sup>. We further have literary personalities like Sailesh De's Tin Adhyay which describes the painstaking and dangerous travel of the evacuees from Burma to India<sup>101</sup>. Hironmoy Sen's film 'Burmar Pathé' gives a better picture of the Bengalis in Burma. The film was released on 29<sup>th</sup> August 1947. It had in casting Ahindra Choudhury, Chaya Debi, Sailen Pal, Samar Roy, and Kali Bandopadhyay. It was produced by Universal film Corporation. The story was set in the backdrop of the Second World War and the attack of the Japanese bombers. It truly revealed the problems of a Bengali family while returning from Burma through the jungles of Assam. The story was written by Hironmoy Sen<sup>102</sup>. Bibhuti Bhushan Bandopadhyay had visited Arakan which he has described in his writings<sup>103</sup>. These literary personalities had engraved a cultural development of the Bengali settlers in Burma and it is not unlikely that they have placed an impact on the lives of the Burmese in Burma. U Nu, the prime minister of the Burma had visited Calcutta in 1960. He was accompanied with his wife. He stated about the Bengalis that in his school and college days there were many Bengalis residing in Rangoon. Many of them were teachers in the

schools. He had Bengali teachers in schools and colleges. His wife had Bengali friends and got together with the Bengali girls. She could read Bengali. She was closer with some of the Sengupta families in Rangoon. These were the days before the Second World War. He was very close to the Bengali population influenced by the Bengali culture and residing Bengalis in Burma<sup>104</sup>. The influence of the Bengalis who were mainly the literary class of the period in India had a deep influence on the educated people of Burma. The result of such sway on the life of the educated Burmese was the growth of the Khitisan movement, a literary movement among the Burmese in Burma. The Burmese movement though not successful but it definitely led to a change in the literary world of Burma. The 'renaissance' if it is stated in a limited sense then it can be studied that the Burmese literary change took place much late than the Indian. While the Indian intellectuals were caught up in an accelerating attempts to master, adopt ideas imported from the west to meet the needs of their own country, the Burmese were still seeped in their traditional ways. The second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the greater part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period when the Burmese literature flourished in traditional forms and contemporary imports adapted into classical mode. Therefore, there always remained in Burma a traditional process which had used elements from neighbouring culture specially India to diversify and enrich the Burmese culture. As a result the spirit of the 18<sup>th</sup> century social liberalism and intellectual skepticism which had triggered off renaissance in India passed to Burma and is still proudly attached to her tradition<sup>105</sup>.

The main reason for delay of the renaissance in Burma was the absence of the harmful practices and crippling inhibitions of Hinduism that had driven some of the young groups in Bengal in the total rejection of the religious practices and heritage in India. The Burmese society on the other hand, imbued with the spirit of Buddhism was considerably free from social injustices. It had no rigid caste or class stratification. Moreover, women enjoyed rights and privileges. The practice of monastery education provided a basic education for all the people and therefore there was a high percentage of literacy. An important development in Burma was the foundation of the Young Men's Buddhist

Association in 1906 by the group of students in Rangoon College. The founder of the Y.M.B.A represented the early generation of the Burmese who had grown up after the fall of Mandalay and received their education in the English oriented schools. Just like the Young Bengal in Bengal .This group of the Burmese began to despise and drop the Burmese ideas. One such Burmese was May Oung whose lecture ‘The Modern Burman; His Life and Nation’ had not only assimilated and adopted the new ideas but substituted them for the old ones .<sup>106</sup>

Round about 1930 there was the first modern literary movement in the history of Burmese literature, which began at the University of Rangoon, which came to be known as the Khit-san Sarpay Movement (Time-Testing Literary Movement). The platform of the movement was the Ganhta-lawka magazine (“The World of Books”-1924) that was published and edited by retired commissioner Mr. J.S. Furnivall (1878 – 1960) under the slogan “With bricks fallen, we shall rebuild with stone,” with the help of his scholar friends at the University of Rangoon, aiming to encourage young Burmese writers and scholars on the campus<sup>107</sup>. Kodaw Hmaing well known poet of the Burmese has been compared to Tagore of India by the Burmese. Such comparison is valid if nationalism is defined in its political sense of the term. Tagore inherited much of the renaissance quest for the social spiritual values which could ensure India’s integrity in the modern world. Hmaing was closer to Tagore being a man of thought and his writings were on the contemporary events which had any bearings on the nationalist developments in Burma<sup>108</sup>.

Another epoch making development was the foundation of the Burma Research Society at the stance of J.S. Furnivall in 1910. A similar case can be sighted in Bengal which led to a large extent the growth of the Bengal Renaissance was the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal which later became the Asiatic Society of India. This organisation had immensely contributed to the growth of the cultural movement in Bengal. The Burma Research Society wanted to create such a situation in Burma that the

heritage of the country could be examined in the light of modern leadership<sup>109</sup>. The Khitisan writing however represented the fusion of the Burmese and western scholarship achieved by the teaching of the Burmese into the westernized higher education system. But the renaissance in the true sense could not take place in Burma. Aung San has rightly commented that, “There were no Ram Mohan Roys, no Tagore, no Nehrus, people with the wealth and leisure to peruse knowledge, to travel to set standards cultural refinement and intellectual excellence”<sup>110</sup>. However, there were not only similarities with the Burmese literary awakening with the Bengal renaissance and the adoption of the Burmese in the western style, practices and inhibitions were due the presence of the Bengali educated class in Burma.

The Bengali immigrants in Burma thus craved out for themselves a separate identity in Burma particularly in their cultural aspect. There were important developments of the Bengali population residing in Burma in the cultural field due to the presence of important and strong personalities like Rabindranath Tagore’s visit which created a strong bond between the Bengalis and the Burmese who equally and eagerly organized the reception of the poet. The presence of the personality like Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay gave a special and powerful cultural foundation of the Bengalis in Burma as there were regular cultural programme and he resided among the working population of the Indians. He also had Burmese friends. Moreover, the frequent visits by the Bengali theatre and writing personalities gave a new enthusiasm to the local Bengali residents. Durga Pooja and the establishment of temples were the other features of the cultural aspect of the Bengalis in Burma. However, the educated Bengalis in Burma had an influence on the lives of the Burmese in Burma. An interview with Indrajit Ganguli says that the Burmese also accompanied the local Bengalis in the ceremony of the idol immersion of Goddess Durga and they also went to the temples of the Bengalis<sup>111</sup>. The cultural ties led to a strong bond between the both countries and the both communities.

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