

## **Bengali Diaspora in Burma: Dynamics of Political Interactions (1885-1948)**

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'Diaspora' means dispersal and the term was referred to the Jews living in different parts of the world i.e., outside Israel, their ancestral homeland. Of late, however, the purview of the word 'diaspora' has been broadened to refer to any " ethnic minority group of migrant origins residing and acting in host countries but maintaining strong sentimental and material links with countries of origin –homeland."<sup>1</sup> In recent times it is also referred to the Indian immigrants settling in the various parts of the world. But in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the word 'diaspora' was not in use and it is not mentioned in the British colonial reports of the Indian colonial migrants. The general nominator was 'overseas Indians' and this was also used by the academics in the post colonial times<sup>2</sup>. It is especially from the mid-1970s that historians, geographers and anthropologists started to produce research in the field of what we now call the 'South Asian Diaspora'. Phillip D. Curtin his book *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History*, Cambridge 1984, had introduced the term 'trade diaspora'. The growing interest in the area of studies culminated in an international conference on 'South Asian Communities overseas' in the Oxford University in 1987. It is to be noted that the word 'diaspora' was not yet in use at Oxford University in 1987. The published proceedings (1991), however, do use the term diaspora<sup>3</sup>. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, the term 'diaspora' became popular and its connotations were no longer monopolized by the Jewish Diaspora. Social scientists now use the term diaspora to describe any population which is considered transnational whose origins are said to have arisen in land other than in the land they are residing currently and their economic, social and political networks cross the border of their nation state<sup>4</sup>. In the present day the Indian community spread throughout the different parts of the world is also considered by the social scientists within the concept of Diaspora.

The modern Indian diaspora is largely the creation of the British colonialism in India. It can be stated that it began with the abolition of slavery in Britain in 1834 and the need of labourers in the various colonies for the plantations and public works. It was also directly proportioned to the penetration of the British mercantile capitalism in Asia. In the second half of the nineteenth century, as a result of the technological improvement in communications and the opening of the Suez Canal, Asia was integrated with the world capitalist economy which helped the British to earn a considerable surplus of trade with Asia as well as India in particular<sup>5</sup>. The surplus was invested in the mines and plantations of Asia and Africa. This profit from the trade was invested by the British in the mines and plantations which were in urgent need of large supply of labours and trading classes in various parts of Asia. Along with this there were other factors like excessive dependence on agriculture, decline of handicraft industries, huge burden of agricultural revenue, seasonal unemployment, illiteracy,

poverty, caste bound occupational structure and repeated famines forced the Indians to seek for employment in the overseas. Indians were, therefore, exported as indentured labourers and also free passage immigrants to various British colonies like British Guinea, Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad, Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa and Burma<sup>6</sup>.

Indians also migrated to Burma for the same causes and there were also Indian traders and government officials. Among the Indians the Bengali community had been an important segment of the population and played a very significant role in Burma. In this historical background the present study attempts to highlight the history of the Bengali diaspora in Burma and the impact of the community felt particularly in the realm of politics.

## I

The British made conscious and concerted attempts to encourage Indian emigration to Burma while pursuing the goals of expanding and consolidating the empire in this region during the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Skilled and unskilled labours of Indian origin were taken to Burma for the work of construction projects of roads, railways and public works. In Burma, Indians were taken to work as rice cultivators and also to occupy positions in expanding bureaucratic and commercial establishments. Businessmen and capitalists also went to Burma along with middle class and the labourers under British encouragement. Under such situation in the later decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the number of Bengalis who migrated to Burma was 30% in 1881 to 25% in 1901. Among the Bengalis 40% were from Chittagong who migrated as cultivators and labourers. Till 1886 most of the migrants were seasonal labourers or came as temporary workers in Burma. After the establishment of separate linguistic schools for the India's community in 1878 there was growth of permanent residents of Bengalis in Burma. More after 1886 the British completed their colonial ambition in Burma and the establishment of British rule saw the influx of huge population in Burma<sup>7</sup>.

The first phase of British administration in Burma in 1898 – 1899 invited the coming to more cultivators and labourers and also middle class educated migrants for the white collared jobs. The economic activities of the British in Burma such as construction of roads, railway lines, mines, oil fields, etc. demanded a huge labour force. The non-enterprising Burmese people could not meet the rising demand for the labourers for the much extension of cultivation. This paved the way for the import of labourers from India, so close to Burma. The economic change of Burma was a stimulating factor in the process of immigration. The main lots of labourers were supplied by Indian provinces of Madras and Bengal. Numerous workers moved from Bengal to Burma from Chittagong, Cumilla and Dacca chiefly for harvesting rice and rice milling and other jobs in Rangoon. Under the British patronage the middle class intellectuals and professionals like engineers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, clerks etc. also migrated to Burma. They filled in vacancies in bureaucracy and expanding social services and professions. In bureaucracy and legal professions the Indian community's prior acquaintances in English language, rules, procedures and practices proved to be of an added advantage. The British could rely upon them and the local Burmese could not compete with them. As a result, they soon started dominating in their host societies<sup>8</sup>.

There were immigration from various other parts of India but the flow of people from Bengal was very high. In 1891, 1,12,084 persons had migrated to Burma from Bengal. After 1891, there was further development in the flow of Bengali labourers and agriculturists from Chittagong to Arakan.<sup>9</sup> The story of migration from Bengal to Burma reached to a considerable height by 1901 and it is visible in the figures of the

Census of 1901 that 1,57,034 persons had moved into Burma from Bengal. But many of these migrants were seasonal labourers. Most of these migrants were from Cumilla, Dacca and Chittagong<sup>10</sup>. The Census of 1901 (Table 1) shows that among the Indian languages spoken in Burma Bengali was spoken in a large amount.

**Table-I:** Number of individuals who spoke Indian languages in Burma in 1901

<b>Languages</b>	<b>Number of Individuals</b>
English	18,500
Hindusthani	95,122
Bengali	204,973
Hindi	28,689
Punjabi	15,803
Tamil	99,576
Telegu	96,601

**Source:** The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Volume-IX, Bomjur to Central India, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1908, p.139.

Table I clearly indicates that the Bengalis were present as the highest number of the Indian immigrants present in Burma. The Census of India, 1911 gives a similar picture. It records that 1,34,985 persons had migrated from Bengal to Burma. Among these huge immigrants the population mainly consisted of the seasonal labourers. The Census of 1921 states that 1,46,087 persons had migrated from Bengal to Burma out of which 26,932 had been to Rangoon, and 3584 to Mandalay. By 1921, the Census provides that the total persons who migrated in Burma were 1,46,058. In the Census of 1931, there was further growth of Bengali speaking persons in Burma which numbered to 2,42,415 males and 1,34,579 females, a total of 3,76,994<sup>11</sup>. The migration was mostly temporary because there were mainly seasonal labourers for the purpose of agriculture and reclamation of waste lands. There was also migration of persons with non-agricultural professions. The agricultural professionals or farmers mostly settled in Akyab, Prome, Bessein, Pegu, Myaungmya, Pyapan and other places where agricultural lands were available.<sup>12</sup> The districts from where the bulk of Bengali immigrants were from Burdwan, Calcutta, Hooghly, Howrah, Nadia, 24 Parganas, Chittagong, Dacca, Faridpur, Mymensingh, Noakhali and Tippera (Tripura).<sup>13</sup> The Census of India, 1921 (Table II) shows that the classification of the races in Burma in which the number of the Bengalis had struck the highest in number. It also includes the population from Chittagong and the eastern part of Bengal.

**Table II: Indian Races in Burma, 1921**

Race Group	Males	Females	Total
GURKHA	26,689	12,843	39,532
BENGALI	212,594	104,769	31,7363
HINDUSTHANI	132,842	42,125	174,967
ORIYA	58,905	3,680	62,585
GUJARATI	46,221	1,847	48,068
TAMIL	93,435	56,453	149,888
TELEGU	123,269	35,819	159,088

Source: Census of India, 1921, Volume-X, Part-II, pp.245,231,225.

Along with the migration of labourers, farmers and other professionals, there was also an influx of Bengalis who came for administrative posts in Burma. The British administration wanted the Bengali English educated men to take the posts in Burma because they were available in abundant as well as they were cheaper to employ than the British officials. Moreover, due to the spread of English education the newly educated Bengali 'babus' wanted jobs in the administrative posts which was not easily acquired in India. Thus the intellectuals flowed in huge number to fill up the posts in Burma, a virgin land with resources which could be utilized in full extent. The British also found it better to employ the Bengalis instead of the Burmese who had to be trained for such posts and the business could also not compete with the Indians or the Bengalis who were educated in the British educational system<sup>14</sup>. Thus the figures reveal that the Bengali speaking population was quite high among the Indian immigrants in Burma and had an ever reaching influence on the host country and its people. A significant reason for the Bengalis to migrate to Burma was also its geographical location. There is no natural barrier between Burma and Bengal except only tropical jungles and Arakan Mountains which are not too high. Chittagong was attached to Arakan and Akyab of Burma. The Arakanese Mugs often migrated to Chittagong before 1824 when the English captured Arakan. In the colonial times the migration was to opposite direction, i.e. to Burma. 'Burma muluk' was a special attraction for the nineteenth century Bengalis and they emigrated to try their fortune. The attraction of the Bengalis towards Burma also depicted in many contemporary literatures, both Bengali and English. Rajkumar the leading character of the fiction *The Glass Palace* of Amitava Ghosh refers to Burma as a "golden land."<sup>15</sup>

## II

The migrant Bengali community had interactions with the host community in the field of politics, society, economy and culture. Politics was the most vital field where both communities interacted with each other and the Bengal politics had influenced the national political course in Burma. The middle class Bengalis who immigrated to Burma were mostly the educated class and since Bengal was one of the political centres of India they carried with them the ideas of revolution and nationalism. The Burmese nationalism depicted in its character and disposition the touch of Bengal nationalism.

The rise of nationalism in Burma was much late than in India. The First World War had led to remove the concept of provincialism in Burma and widened the political outlook of the people of Burma. The Young Men's Buddhist Association during 1916-1918 became linked with political activities. It came involved in the 'Footwear Controversy'. It was an agitation carried out against the wearing of shoes at Pagodas by the Europeans. It was first popular expression of protest against the British and ultimately the Burmese demand was accepted by the British. This was historically, the first clear victory won by means of mass protest and action in Burma and it gave a great impetus to the growing national awareness<sup>16</sup>. The growth of national movement was felt first in the demand of national schools and colleges and Universities by the political activists. The growth of any activities make in Bengal, national schools which would one of the agenda of the Swadeshi movement has a deep influence in the political movement of the Burmese. There was the movement of national education for which national schools were set up in 1906 under Arobindo Ghosh. Rabindranath Tagore also made a successful attempt in establishing the Visva-Bharati, Shantiniketan. The national education in Bengal had influenced the Burmese people as they had kept 'national education' always as a prime agendum in the nationalist movement of Burma. The Rangoon College was established in 1878 as an affiliated college of the University of Calcutta. The Rangoon College was operated and managed by the British. It was opened by the Education Syndicate which was established by the colonial Government to manage educational institutions in Burma.<sup>17</sup> In 1904 it was renamed as Government College and the University College in 1920. The Rangoon University was opened in 1920 and the national college was opened at Shwe Kyin monastery, Bahan, Rangoon in 1921. In its opening ceremony a call was given to support the national education system. The Council of National Education (CNE) was constituted in 1920 and was registered under the Act for the Registration of Literary, Scientific and Charitable Societies, 1860. By 1921 there were more than 80 national schools, which enrolled at least 15,000 students.<sup>18</sup> There were 70 students in the national college and Professor of English was Bhaumik Kabyanidhi, Professor of History, H. K. Chakraborty, Professor of Chemistry, B. Banerjee<sup>19</sup> and Muhammed Siddiq Khan as lecturer in Political Science<sup>20</sup>. The national education movement in Burma as a central force gave an impetus to the national movement. It must be mentioned in this connection that prior to 1920, i.e. before the establishment of the University and national schools in Burma, most of the Burmese youths who wanted to be educated in western lives came to Calcutta University for the completion of their education. The Calcutta University mentions in its 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary that the University is for the people of Bengal, Assam, Bihar, Orissa, Chota Nagpur, Assam, Bihar, Agra and Oudh, Punjab, Central Provinces and Berar, Burma and even remote Ceylon. It should be further mentioned that the Calcutta University in its prospectus stated that it allowed candidates for its matriculation to pass their vernacular language examination in any of the vernacular languages i.e. Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, Oriya, Burmese etc.<sup>21</sup> This indicates that students from Burma must have been present in the University and it is not unlikely that these students were influenced by the political upsurge of Bengal. The Calcutta Medical College was another centre of attraction for the educated middle class Burmese. They were inspired by the swadeshi and boycott movements in

Bengal. The Calcutta University was the centre of anti colonial protest and the youths of the University became the future leaders of the nation later. The Rangoon University which was founded later in the year 1920 also followed the tradition of students protest against the British, a political impact of Bengal. They protested against the centralized policy adopted by the British Government and its refusal to give affiliation to other colleges.

In the same year of the Swadeshi movement there was the formation of the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) and it was for a number of years had been only widespread public organization in Burma. It had accepted boycott, hartal (cessation of commerce) and the legislative walkout as techniques of political agitation from India. The principal members of this association were U. Ba Pe, U Maung Gyee, Ba Yin, U Sein Hla Aung and others. Young officers and clerks were also the member of this association. It was a non-political organization but soon it became associated with national activities. It played an important role in arousing the national consciousness in Rangoon and other towns. It had its branches in district towns and villages<sup>22</sup>.

After the Montagu – Chelmsford reforms of 1916, the Burmese nationalism developed in an organized and articulated form. There was rapid development of political activities in Burma during 1920 – 1923. In the twentieth century Bengal became the primary centre of nationalist movement. The Burmese youths and the Buddhist pongyis established a close contact with Bengal. The common spirit of Buddhist tradition had helped to strengthen the bond. During 1920s there was the appearance of Bengal revolutionaries in Burma. The Anushilan Samiti of Eastern Bengal and Chittagong took initiative to build up revolutionary secret societies on their lines in Burma. The history of Bengali revolutionary terrorists in Burma began in 1920s because of the release of hundred of Bengali revolutionaries in 1919, many fled to Burma in order to avoid detainment. Their secret societies also played an important role in any activities like in Bengal, in influencing the Burmese youths to fight against their common enemy. Driven underground by a series of repressive measures instituted by the colonial government in the 1920s, Bengali terrorists used imperial networks to expand their influence, particularly in urban parts of Burma where many found clerical work in British offices and where new branches of anti-colonial political parties were founded. The route to Burma from Chittagong through Arakan was used by the revolutionaries. Sarat Chandra mentions about this route in *Pather Dabi* where Sabyasachi, the principal character and hero of the fiction, came to Burma crossing the hills of Arakan. The only objective before him was the independence of India and he considered Burma been exploited by the British similar to India.<sup>23</sup>

The Anusilan Samiti of Eastern Bengal and Chittagong took initiative to build up revolutionary secret societies on their lines in Burma. Chittagong Samiti opened its branch in Rangoon in 1922 and Eastern Samiti in 1923. In 1924 both these samities joined their hands together to form the Burma Jugantar Party. The Jugantar Party sent its agents in different districts in Burma to organize the district units and to build up secret cells. Burma provided them a strategic place to regroup and respond to British efforts to tamp down violent resistance. The Calcutta Jugantar Party, Prabartak Sangha of Chandannagar founded their branches in Burma. However, the Burma Jugantar Party remained as the most active

revolutionary organization in Burma. These revolutionaries organized a Bengali Students' Association on the lines of the youth association of the then Bengal. It wanted to foster unity among the students and teachers throughout the province to create a cultural atmosphere by encouraging physical, intellectual and moral education to enable the students to be in touch with the cultural movements at home and abroad and to have debating competitions<sup>24</sup>.

The Bengal revolutionaries in its early stages showed that the party had four primary aims: (1) to provide help with arms smuggling from Japan, Singapore and China, (2) to raise funds and awareness of the difficulty of the Indians (3) to recruit new revolutionaries in Burma, particularly among the large groups of Bengali clerks who worked in British administrative offices, and (4) to provide shelter to the absconders.<sup>25</sup> The revolutionaries established contacts with the Burmese revolutionaries active at that time and started to be friendly with Burmese youths with a view to encourage them to undertake revolutionary activities. Secondly, they started revolutionary activities like in Bengal, for e.g., killing of top officials and British personnels, robbery for funds etc. Bhikhu U. Ottama, the most popular nationalist leader of Burma also joined hands with the Bengal revolutionaries to induce the Burmese youths to adopt the path of revolution. Through him the Bengali revolutionaries had established contacts with the Burmese youths. He was related with the revolutionary extremism of Bengal. He took part in the anti partition movement. He worked to involve large number of youths for revolutionary work. Under his initiative a number of young phongyis started to recruit school and college students for revolutionary work.<sup>26</sup>

The Prabartak Sangha was an association whose headquarters was in Chandannagore and was directly under the leadership of Motilal Roy in 24 Parganas. They smuggled arms through Burma into Chittagong and Assam and with this intention there were two local organizers who moved from Akyab to Rangoon<sup>27</sup>. In 1926, over 25 high levels Bengal terrorists, including Surja Sen, came to Burma seeking shelter, showing that the Burma organization was closely connected to branches in Chittagong, Dakhineswar and Bhawanipore. The organization had spread itself in various parts of the country like Namtu, Mandalay, Insein and became involved in the national movement of Burma. Towards the end of 1925 there were leaflets and booklets which were distributed among the students and youths of Bengal and also circulated in Burma. An English pamphlet appeared under the title "The Revolutionary, An Organ of the Revolutionary Party of India, Volume-I, No-1, Dated India 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1925". The Pamphlet purports to set forth the political programme of the revolutionary party and to justify their methods and ideas, while it threatens the onset of a remorseless campaign of terrorism. This pamphlet was clearly the work of Sachindra Sanyal and was widely circulated not only in Bengal but also in Burma. In the first quarter of 1931 the government founded large number of 'seditious and very inflammatory' leaflets in Rangoon, Akyab and various other town of Burma. Rangoon University and other educational institution were filled with the leaflets which were distributed by both Burmese and Bengalis<sup>28</sup>. There are various instances and incidents which prove the existence of Bengalis as revolutionaries and their interaction with the political life of Burmese. It is true that Bengal had a favourable position in Burma and the Burmese people also had sympathy for them because both of them wanted to achieve freedom. *Pather Dabi* of Sarat Chandra

Chattopadhyay was written using the plot drawn on the basis of Burma, which was published in 1936. It provided a naked criticism of British and Indian capitalists in Burma. Sabyasachi, the main character of the novel became a role model of the Bengali youths. It describes the sacrifice and dedication of the freedom fighters and it also confirms the activities and involvement of the Bengal revolutionaries in Burma.<sup>29</sup>

After the Bengal Criminal Law Amendment Acts in 1924-1925 was passed, the Bengali revolutionaries turned to Burma as alternate site of reorganizing. The Anushilan Samiti moved towards a closer connection with the New Violence Party. The party had its branches all over United Provinces, Bihar, Assam, and Burma. From Burma communication was maintained through Debendra De alias Khoka at Singapore with Rash Behari Bose in Japan<sup>30</sup>. The New Violence Party was formed in 1925 had its main function to smuggle arms. Its important leaders were Nirmal Sen, Kedareshwar Bhattacharjee and Nagendra Das of Chittagong, the district to which all the members belonged.<sup>31</sup> Shri Nripendra Chandra Bannerjee, the editor of the Rangoon Mail, had started a party with Rajendra Dasgupta, Nirmal Sen of Chittagong and a boy of Karimganj, Assam. The latter was sent to Rangoon by Hari Narain Chandra and thence on an unsuccessful mission to Siam and Singapore to arrange the smuggling of arms. There are correspondences and documents which prove that connections were there between Rash Behari Bose and Nripendra Chandra Banerjee.<sup>32</sup>

Letters containing plans and programmes were exchanged between revolutionaries of Burma and Bengal. Bhikhu U Ottama participated in the Martyr's Day celebrated in Chandannagore of a Bengali Terrorist named Kannailal Chatterjee in 1930. In the commemoration he stated in favour of the political assassins and the revolutionary terrorists. He opposed the moderates and spoke that "Swarajya is not to be attained as a gift from Britain .....it has got to be earned by the sheer weight of force....." His speech was published at Sree Saraswati Press, Ramanath Mazumdar Street, Calcutta, by Kalicharan Ghosh of Chandannagore. It was in a booklet form. This revealed a relation being established with Burma and Bengal politics.<sup>33</sup> After he returned to Rangoon on July 4, 1930 he started a mission to recruit large number of Burmese youths for the revolutionary work. Under his influence several phongyis turned towards anti-British movements and they also helped in recruiting students and youths in the revolutionary works.<sup>34</sup>

The decade 1930s seem to be politically significant in the history of nationalism in Burma. The outbreak of the Saya San rebellion against the colonial policy was important step towards the foundation of the nationalism in Burma. Saya San was a leader of the GCBA but he represented the masses and the peasants who were exploited by the British as well as the Indians, the protégés of the colonial masters. Moreover, the British in order to suppress the rebellion used Indian forces. Most of the organizers of the revolt were political phongies or Buddhist monks who had local and grassroot connections. Like any other revolutionary movement or activity particularly of Bengal it was suppressed by the British Government by 8000 arrests and 128 hanged.<sup>35</sup> Saya San was arrested and the Tharrawaddy Case continued which was defended by Dr. Ba Maw like Dr. C.R.Das defended the cases of the Bengal revolutionaries<sup>36</sup>. The significance of the Saya San rebellion was that it was

first outburst of the Burmese anti colonial rather anti –alien protest. During the rebellion many Bengali Revolutionaries were arrested from Rangoon. In February 1931, three Bengali Revolutionaries were arrested and convicted. One of them was attempting to shoot the Magistrate of Rangoon. A telegram was sent to the Home Department from Rangoon that the Saya San Rebellion was not local revolt it had relations with the Bengali revolutionaries. There were agents of the Jugantar Party namely Paresh Chatterjee, B.B. Roy and J.K.Ghosh. It claimed that there were evidences which establishes connections of U.Ottama, GCBA, Thoe Soe and Bengal Revolutionary Party.<sup>37</sup>

The Saya San rebellion had begun in Dec. 22. 1930 over a large part of Burma including Tharrawaddy, Pegu, Henzada, Insein and Prome Districts and Shan states in Upper Burma. The rebellion was anti-Indian and the outbursts were in the form of assaults, burning of huts and places of business in the districts.<sup>38</sup> Though the official view was that the Saya San rebellion or Burma rebellion was mainly political against the directed colonial government but there were also economic causes against both the Indians and British. The peasantry considered the Indians as their immediate oppressors and the British as their friends and masters of the India.<sup>39</sup> The Viceroy on behalf of the government did not take any steps against the misdeeds of the police and the poor law and order condition. On the other hand, the Viceroy Sir Charles Innes promulgated an ordinance on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1931 for a speedy trial of the captured leaders and mention was made of the association of Bengal revolutionaries with whom contact had already been established.<sup>40</sup> The Viceroy addressed in the Legislative Council on 12 February, 1931 stating the Bengal Revolutionary Party in Burma responsible for the rebellion and anti-colonial outbursts. He firmly claimed that, "All I need to say in this speech is that for the years past we have been aware of the existence in Burma of a small section of Bengali Revolutionary Party, and we have contented ourselves with keeping a careful watch upon them. Recently, however, they have increased in numbers, and some time ago we received warning that they were contemplating outrages in Burma..... We have also reason to believe that during the past few months, they have set themselves to the task of trying to corrupt the younger generation in Burma."<sup>41</sup> As a result of the passing of the bill twelve Bengalis were arrested from different parts of Burma of whom two were clerks from the office of Port Commissioner's, two school teachers, six at Rangoon and one each from Insein and Yamethin. But this proved that the revolutionary activities and anti-colonial political connections of Bengal with Burmese and their joint effort was to oust the colonial rulers.<sup>42</sup> While the passing of the Burma Criminal Law Amendment Bill, 1931 in the Legislative Council in February 1931 to an act. The Honorable Home member stated in the house: "The Bengalis are efficient people and very highly intellectual. They are ill-mannered people and well disposed as a rule... Bengal has given us Rabindranath Tagore, Jagdis Bose, Vivekananda, Ram Mohan Roy, Rash Behary Bose and many other distinguished people in different professions... but some Bengalis have a kink in their brain, that is, they desire to remove all persons who do not see eye to eye with them."<sup>43</sup> The name of a Bengali revolutionary, Bhupendra Kumar Dutta is associated with the Saya San Rebellion and he though did not take part in the rebellion directly but he had close ties with the monks who were leading the movement. Bhupendra Kumar was arrested and deported to Mandalay jail

in 1923 and even inside the prisons he had contacts with the Burmese monks and other Bengali revolutionaries who were absconding in Burma. In 1931 on the outbreak of the Sayasan rebellion they were arrested along with Jiten Ghosh, their leader.<sup>44</sup>

The Jugantar Party had similar its organization in Burma with its members namely Jitendra mohan Ghosh of Dacca, Khagendralal Mukherjee and Sukumar Sengupta. Sukumar Sengupta was a student of the medical college of Rangoon. There were S. N. Deb and Parimal Mukherjee who were also students in Burma. Jiten Ghosh had a shop named 'Students own Store' located in the Fraser Street in Rangoon which was suspected to be the hub for the revolutionaries in Burma. The Bengal Academy was also an important center of the Bengal Revolutionaries in Burma. There were many students from the school who were engaged in the nationalist activities. Khitish Chakraborty a student of the Bengal Academy was an assistant of the Jiten Ghosh. There were numerous students in Rangoon who were involved in the revolutionary activities. Trailokhyanath Chakraborty had a close contact with these members but however he was arrested in 1931.<sup>45</sup>

### III

The Thakin movement was in fact one of the effects of the Bengal-Burmese collaboration made by the efforts of the Bengal revolutionaries for the political development in Burma. Young Burman intellectuals formed the *Dobama* (We Burman) Movement which demanded that its members be addressed with the salutation, *Thakin* (master). It advocated "Burma for the Burmese." In addition to newspapers in Burmese, Western novels were adapted to Burman locales and given a local veneer. They gradually gave way to Burman stories, characters and issues.<sup>46</sup> The use of the word master to each other was probably a sarcastic expression against their colonial master who was considered as superiors. It was an expression of aversion for the Englishman. The Thakins were highly influenced by the Bengal revolutionaries took up the objective of the use of Burmese language, inspire national and to work in the ideals of non-violence like non-cooperation, ahimsa, and boycott. The Indo Burmese riot served as a powerful medium to expose the deplorable social and the economic conditions in Rangoon. In 1935 Thakin Ba Sein was elected as the first president. He had a close association with the Bengal revolutionaries and changed the name of the organization as 'Dohama Asi-Asyaon' or 'We Burmans Society'. They also contested the elections under the 1935 Act with the objective to wreck the government like the Swarajya Party. They were inspired by Chittaranjan Das and Motilal Nehru. The Party opened its branches throughout Burma. The organization was mainly led by student's leaders, like Aung San, U Nu, U Ne Win, M. A. Rashid, Thakin Soe, Than Tun and others. The Thakins formulated a revolutionary parliamentary programme. Their objective was complete independence. They aimed to divide their objective that while their representatives fought within the councils the others organized militant mass action outside the council chamber.<sup>47</sup>

The Thakins maintained a close relation with the mainstream Indian politics apart with the Bengal politics. The most important feature of the Thakin movement was similarity with the swadeshi movement in Bengal as there was active participation of the students. The swadeshi movement led to the development of the indigenous languages, literature,

drama, theatre, music and also gave an impetus to the indigenous industries. The Thakin movement led to the rise of the patriotic songs similar to the swadeshi songs of Bengal. Thakin Kodaw Hmaing, (the national poet of Burma) composed many swadeshi songs which were sung in gatherings of the Thakins. Thakin Kodaw Hmaing is one of the most respected nation builders, the father of the Burmese Peace Movement, and patron of the Burmese Nationalists for the independence struggle. He is popularly known as 'Tagore of Burma'.<sup>48</sup>

The Thakin movement began to be influenced by the Communist movement of India and particularly of Bengal. The Communist Party of Burma was founded on August 15, 1939. The members were Thakin Aung San, Thakin Thein Pe, Thakin Ba Hein and Thakin Hla Pe later Bo Let Ya. In fact, Aung San a popular student's leader believed in violent method of achieving freedom under him there was the rise of another section of Thakins as communists.<sup>49</sup> The Bengal revolutionaries and Aung San formed a popular party with the objectives to the welfare of the students, peasants and workers. He was assisted by many Bengali communists namely Harinarayan Ghosal, Madhav Munshi, Subodh Mukherjee, Amar Nag and Barin De. Their objective was to free the country from British yoke. These leaders decided to meet the nationalist leaders both Congress and Communists before the formation of a larger political platform. Thus in 1938 Harinarayan Ghosal, Madhav Munshi and Amar Nag came to Calcutta via Dacca. They met Latika Das, the first woman communist in Dacca and in Calcutta Dr. Ranen Sen who advised them to leave for the Tripuri Congress session of INC. There they had a meeting with Jawarharlal Nehru, Subhas Bose, Jayprakash Narayan and P. C. Joshi. After returning to Burma, the Communist Party of Burma was formed in 1940. Aung San was the first secretary of the party and the pioneer leaders were Amar Nag, Madhav Munshi, Gopal Munshi, Harinarayan Ghosal, Thakin Soe, Than Dun, Ba Hien, Amar De, Subodh Mukherjee, Binoy Sen and Arobindo Dutta. The party kept contact with the Indian communist leaders as well as the Indian National Congress. There were also extremist Phongyis (Buddhist Monks) in this section of Thakins. These revolutionaries established many secret cells to organize terrorist activities.<sup>50</sup>

Ghosal was one of the foremost leaders of the Communist Party of Burma and the most prominent theoretician of the party for several years. Ghosal played an important role as a liaison between the Burmese party and the Communist Party of India (through its Bengal Provincial Committee). After the death of Thakin Ba Hein, Ghosal became the head of the All Burma Trade Union Congress. Ghosal's activities were mainly concentrated to Rangoon, organizing largely the Indian working class there. Ghosal edited a political and strategic document, calling for the Communist Party of Burma to prepare for armed struggle. The document would be nick-named the 'Ghosal Thesis' and was adopted by the Communist Party of Burma at a mass meeting in Pinyinmana on March 14, 1948. In the rally of the peasants there he promised to provide the peasants free land and no taxes.<sup>51</sup>

After the Japanese imperialist rule in Burma, many of the Bengali communists had broken the prison and came to India. But many of them stayed back to serve the motherland because for them Burma was no less than their own country. The poor condition of the Burmese peasants and workers touched their heart. H.N. Ghosal alias Thakin Ba Tin and

Dr. Nag alias Tun Maung, another Bengali revolutionary who had lived in Burma for a long time. There was a civil war in Burma between the two groups of the political party. Than Tun and Harinarayan Ghosal wanted to bring about a Mass revolution like in China but in their similar to struggle, which continued for two decades, led to the loss of lives of many Bengali communists namely, Harinarayan Ghosal, Subodh Mukherjee, Gopal Munshi, Amar, De and Amar Nag. The Communists were in the forefront of armed resistance which subsequently became a national uprising on 27 March 1945 led by the BNA under the command of General Aung San. The party that had started with a small group of men now became a major legal political party from 1945 until 1948 when Burma gained independence from Britain.<sup>52</sup>

Beside the Thakins there was the growth of another party called Freedom Bloc in 1939. Ba Maw was the prime leader of this party. The main objective of this party was independence, Constituent Assembly and cabinet supervision of the special authorities of the governor. The Freedom Bloc was an ultra nationalist organization. It derived its name from the Indian 'Forward Bloc' led by Subhas Chandra Bose. The Burma Revolutionary Party, Dr. Ba Maw's Sinyetha group and Buddhist groups had become the members of the Forward Bloc. It was modeled on the Bose's party in India. The forward Bloc in Burma made a mass demonstration in Burma demanding the abolition of the Constitution of 1935.<sup>53</sup> Aung San had also met Bose in India when he visited the INC session held in Ramgarh in 1940. Aung San and the Thakin leaders met him in the Anti Compromise Camp held in the Indian National Congress session of 1940. The Thakins admired and revered the courage of Subhas Bose<sup>54</sup>. It is impossible not be influenced by the charismatic personality of Subhas Bose whose presence in Burma was very conspicuous. The brave son of Bengal had inspired many Burmese youths to dedicate their lives to their motherland as well the political leaders in their course of political activities.

#### IV

The British police suspecting Subhas Bose to be one of the conspirators engaged in the assassination of police officers and also the smuggling of arms arrested him and was kept in the Calcutta jail. Later he was transferred to Rangoon and ultimately to Mandalay jail. Subhas Bose thus had his early connections with Burma in the year 1925-27 when he was imprisoned in the Mandalay jail. He was imprisoned along with Trailokya Chakraborty, Satyendra Chandra Mitra, Surendramohan Ghosh and Madanmohan Bhaumik.<sup>55</sup> Subhas Bose has mentioned about his experiences in his book 'The Indian Struggle' which was banned in India and also in Burma. There were other political prisoners namely Jibanlal Chatterjee and Bhupendra Kumar Dutta who were also in imprisoned to Mandalay jail prior to the arrival of Subhas Bose. Bose was highly impressed with the Buddhist pongyis or the monks whom he considered the finest specimen of humanity. He expressed his respect for the monks who had kept the flame of nationalism burning and never reconciled to the British culture. He was well informed about the political conditions in Burma and supported the Burmese nationalist struggle.<sup>56</sup> Further, the Calcutta session of 1926 was a significant event in the history of the nationalist movement in India. Burma-Bengal ties were further tightened

by the fact that Subhas Bose had won the election for the seat in the Bengal Legislative Council while he was in the Mandalay jail.<sup>57</sup>

The political career of Bose was closely related to the South East Asia particularly between the years 1941 and 1945. Subhas Bose made a contact with Rashbehari Bose, a great revolutionary and a meeting was called in March 1942 where the idea of Indian National Army emerged. Netaji also took tour to Thailand, Indo-China, Burma and to all parts of Malaya to establish new branches of Indian Independence League, to collect funds, to open new recruitment centers for the army and enroll voluntary workers and soldiers in INA. In 1943 he took the charge formally of Indian Independence League and the Indian National Army or the Azad Hind Fauj. Aung San the Burmese nationalist leader who often met Subhas Bose was inspired by his political ideas and charismatic leadership and inaugurated the Burma Independence Army. Like the Azad Hind Fauj of Netaji, the BIA made an attempt to liberate Burma from the British control with the help of a foreign power i.e., Japan. After the upheaval in 1940 there were arrests of the nationalists by the colonial Government on the basis of Defence of Burma Act. Aung San along with Hla Mya left for Amoy and made contacts with Japan.<sup>58</sup> In 1941 even General Aung San had a strong conviction regarding Bose deemed Subhas Chandra Bose as a sincere friend of Burma and Burmese people. Netaji and Aung San came into close and frequent contacts during the Second World War. During a speech at the City Hall Rangoon on July 24 1946, General Aung San said, "I knew Netaji, even before I met him for the first time in Calcutta in 1940 by reading various accounts of his life of sacrifice and struggle and last of all, his own book *The Indian Struggle 1920-42* which was in those days banned in India and Burma. I knew his burning love for country and his people, and his unflinching determination to fight for the freedom of his country. I knew him also as a sincere friend of Burma and Burmese people. Between him and myself, there was complete mutual trust; and although time was against both of us so that we could not come to the stage of joint action for the common objective of the freedom of our respective nation, we did have an understanding in those days that, in any event, and whatever, happened, the INA and the BNA (Burmese National Army) should never fight each other. And I am glad to tell you to day that both sides did observe the understanding scrupulously on the whole, during the days when we were up in the arms against the Japs."<sup>59</sup> Bo Let Ya, one of the followers of Aung San has described that Aung San had held Bose in high esteem. Aung San had described to Bo Let Ya while staying together during the University Strike in 1936 that how Subhas Bose had qualified successfully the Indian Civil Service examination and did not join the British Indian service to join the Indian freedom struggle. Aung San had a great respect for Subhas Bose and as Bo Let Ya describes in his account that Aung San said, "After I had passed I would then throw away as Subhas Chandra Bose did, and go into politics. Then the country would look up to me for my education as well as my dedication."<sup>60</sup> Bose thus created Asian consciousness and a new spirit which was joined together with the Burmese nationalists.

The political life was largely affected by the immigrant Bengalis. In the political sphere there was a close collaboration between the Bengalis and the Bengal revolutionary party with the Burmese and Burmese leaders like Bhikhu U. Ottama and Aung San. The

Thakin Party also drew inspiration from Bengali revolutionaries and the Burmese communist party had many Bengalis as its members. It always looked to Indian Communist Party in Bengal. They looked towards the INC, Gandhi, Nehru and Bose. They took up armed struggle like Subhas Chandra Bose. Many of the Burmese nationalists like Bhikhu U. Ottama did not support the separation of Burma from India. The Bengalis were in fact a part of the politics of Burma which changed its courses following Bengal. The interactions between the two communities led the Burmese struggle for independence been largely was guided, inspired and developed by the courses and political ideas and leaders of Bengal, which dominated the politics of India during the twentieth century.

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