

A Close View of Encounter between British Burma and British Bengal

By

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18 th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies, Lund, Sweden, 6-9 July 2004. Panel No. 19 Joint Convenor, Dr. Swapna Bhattacharya (Chakraborti) Reader & Head of the Department, South & Southeast Asian Studies, Calcutta University
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Introduction

Placing the theme in the frame of our panel is problematic, since it will sing a different song than we are used to hear. Yet, it is extremely challenging. There is no doubt that Burma was a different country with different tradition and history than India. Mahatma Gandhi rightly stated that Burma (Myanmar) was never a part of Bharatavarsa. Rabindranath Tagore on one occasion expressed his view that the “double colonialism” gave the city of Rangoon the most unpleasant form of *Vanijyalakshmi* (Goddess of Commerce). For him the city, due to its over concentration of Indian inhabitants, became an “obstruction”. Thanks to the spiritual protection of the Shwedagon pagoda, however, that Tagore could ultimately find his peace in Rangoon. He found the entire city of Rangoon smaller than the Pagoda. The leading linguist of modern India, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, while visiting Burma in 1930s, found the same peace under the cool shadow of this pagoda. Calcutta, the intellectual and cultural capital of British India maintained a very close contact with Burma throughout the period which comes under the scope of our panel. There are certain given factors which made this contact obligatory. Those factors are purely political, commercial, strategic and economic. It started with making Fort William in Calcutta the centre of military operation from where the annexations were executed. The University of Calcutta as the first University of colonial India produced “educated” and “smart” Bengalis who were sent to Burma to run the day-to-day show of the bureaucracy. Petty business in timber attracted the Bengalis to cross the seas while the Chittagongian Muslims and Hindus felt attracted to cross the river Naaf and tried their fortune in the emerging commercial centre of Akyab (modern Sittwe). The Imperial Gazetteer of Burma and other sources show a high percentage of Bengalis living in Burma (S. Bhattacharya, 2003), especially in Arakan and the Irrawaddy Delta regions. A large number of the Bengali immigrants must have gone to Burma with the advent of colonial rule. But, there is yet another side of the coin. Burma’s Buddhist identity and the old Arakanese Buddhist tradition came as an inspiration for the Bengali people, scholars, political leaders and general public alike. It hardly mattered whether they went to the “Golden land” or not, they felt deeply attached to Burma (N. R

Chakravarty 1971). Many events of Burmese history can only be properly understood if we put them against the then (1886-1937) prevailing mood of Hindu-Buddhist brotherhood. The Buddhist renaissance, inaugurated by Anagarika Dharmapala through his Mahabodhi Movement in 1890s, had a conservative character for it made the Muslim Rule in India responsible for the decay of Buddhism in India. Be that as it may, this “conservatism” has to be reinterpreted. The present contribution upholds the urgent necessity for such revision. Overdoing of Marxist interpretation of Bengal history has left little space for true understanding of Bengal which could quite successfully combine Marxism with many other indigenous ideas and ideologies. The case is not very different from Burma; Thantins did that quite successfully. To properly understand the religious tradition of Bengal, one must go back to some background stories. Bengal in the 19th century could become a strong centre of Buddhist renaissance because of two major reasons. The first reason is found in its pre-existent Buddhist heritage. The second reason is found in its pluralist and liberal tradition in which, streams of other thoughts accommodated with each other without going into any conflict. Before the coming of Islam (13th century), Bengal was a Buddhist kingdom (S. Bhattacharya, 1985). Bengal during the entire period from 5th-12th century was a strong centre of Buddhism. A number of small dynasties (Khadgas, Chandras and Devas) ruled over various parts of modern Chittagong and Comilla districts of Eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh). Most probably the rulers came from their original home located in the old Buddhist centre of Arakan. That the Chandras of Bengal are related to the Chandras of old Arakan (Mrauk-U) has been well-established. On the other hand, a large part of Bihar and northern Bengal (Pundravardhana) was under the Pala Dynasty. The Senas, the last dynasty in pre-Islamic Bengal, however were not Buddhists. Yet, Buddhism continued to play its role in the lives of the Bengali people who rejected ritualism and hierarchy. The basic platform for the intensive encounter between Bengal and Burma could only be made due to Bengal’s liberal approach to life and nature, and to which Buddhist Burma spontaneously reciprocated by not accepting orthodoxy ever (N. R. Ray, 1932 & 1936; E. Sarkisyanz, 1965; D. Smith, 1965). Nevertheless, warnings were given to those who violated the Vinaya rules (Tin Htway 1987). The story becomes exciting since Bengal, even after Buddhism “disappeared” from her soil, took inspiration from the Buddhist convention of Burma. How the British colonialism gave a new dimension to this Buddhist link is presented here.

I. Bengal in the context of her historical relation with Burma

As indicated above, Bengal and Burma placed against the background of some comparable developments in their respective religious, cultural and political lives is the subject of my deliberation. Before I go into the details, let me place before you some of my basic

observations about the Bengali quest for Burma. The province of Burma (modern Myanmar) was annexed by the British through three Wars (1824, 1852 & 1886) _ three grotesque events of the history of British colonialism in Asia. The events which are generally marked as the causes for the outbreak of the three Wars were only occasions. In all the three cases, the major factors, which played behind, had more to do with the ever growing tension between the British authority, based in India, and the Burmese monarchy. The intensity of this tension can be read in the “Shoe Question” which has no parallel in any other country. The British envoys while visiting the royal courts in Mandalay refused to put off their shoes. And the Burmese insisted on that practice as they could not tolerate the insult perpetrated on the royalty and the Buddhist-Burmese tradition in general. Later on the issue was taken up by the Young men Buddhist Association (YMBA) as one of their political agendas. And the YMBA in the early years of the 20th century was massively involved in the movement. The Swedagon Pagoda premises was open to those visitors only who would putt off their shoes. The “war” was won by the Pongyis (monks) and the shoe question was solved, though the British normally avoided paying visit to Swedagon Pagoda. But, the struggle against British expansion and penetration went on.

One of the leading historians of modern India once expressed me his desire to know more about this rather “strange” episode of Burmese history where putting off shoes became a political agenda, a factor in commercial negotiation. I gave him my opinion that the Indian historians, at least those who want to study Indian history in the context of the nationalist movement of South-East Asia including Burma, should give more attention to the Buddhist heritage of India, Bengal-Bihar, in particular. Only then, logic behind such episodes becomes easier to understand.

A common spirit of religious brotherhood brought together the people of Bengal and Burma who vowed to fight jointly to save the motherland from the foreign rule. The concept of saving Dharma (righteousness or justice) had little to do with hatred to any other religion. At the same time while following political developments in Burma and Bengal over the entire length and breadth of colonial rule (1826-1948), one can witness certain developments which gave tremendous impetus for joint actions along the line of common religious identity. The call was given by the monks, who drew their inspiration from India. In spite of that, joint actions in reality never materialized as the Burmese nationalist movement never identified with the Indian nationalist movement. As a result, the Dobama Thakin Movement partially “ignored” the Pongyi involvement and gave a new dimension to the nationalist struggle. This is quite understandable as Burma was a separate country with separate cultural identity. Yet, it was

Burma which never allowed Bengal to forget the latter's Buddhist past. For Bengal Burma acted as an ever alert sentinel for keeping the Buddhist identity alive. The political impact of this Bengal-Burma interaction is largely ignored. This partial ignorance lead historians on Burma to great confusions depriving them from the opportunity to do little justice to the virtue of this relation.

The story which I am going to tell at this juncture becomes extremely complex as it was the base of Bengal which was used for consolidation of British power in India and Burma. This became a big hurdle. Yet, again the historical tie which Bengal and Burma maintained provided the people with necessary strength to withstand, not letting the Buddhist past ossified at any point of time.

In all the three Annexations, the involvement of the province of Bengal was very intensive. It could not be otherwise, as the political, strategic and economic control of the Empire was centered in and around Calcutta. All three wars were announced from Fort William in Calcutta. The pacification of the Eastern Frontier of the British Empire (Assam and Chittagong Frontier) was closely connected with the Annexation of Burma (A. C. Banerjee, 1944 & 1964). In reality, the years of the First War (1824-26) coincide with the Annexation of Assam. It was also the years of the English involvement with the affairs of the Rakhine (Buddhuist Arakanese) refugees who sought British asylum to escape from the "evils" of Burmese supremacy. The last Annexation which saw the fall of Mandalay and the last Burmese dynasty (Konbaung Dynasty) had a tremendous repercussion on Bengal, or, for that matter, on entire Buddhist world of Eastern India. It was seen as the "last defeat". We will come to the topic how the leading intellectuals of Bengal reacted to the event.

So far relation with Eastern India (Bengal-Bihar) was concerned, the kings of the Konbaung Dyansty actually believed in a tradition of continuity. Pagan Empire had also looked westward and gave their attention to knot the marital and strategic ties with the Buddhist kingdoms like Pattikera (S. Bhattacharya, 1997), which was lying in the region between Bengal and Arakan. Pagan king Kyanzittha was married to a Bengali Mahyanist, Abeyadana. The "Pagan spirit" experienced resurgence in the Konbaung period. Missions were sent to the Buddhist centers of Bihar and Bengal. The holy city of Vanarasi (Benaras), which was also in the itinerary of the Burmese pilgrims, was seen more within this circle of Eastern Indian pilgrim centers, than as a part of Northern belt of India. This pilgrimage had a political or strategic significance, though it brought a message of apprehension to the British power that was

massively involved in spreading their commercial and political net across Burma, India and China. A considerable number of those pilgrims acted as royal envoys (spies) who visited India from Kashmir to Madras (Sir A. Phayre, 1884) bringing back home, stories of the latest resistance by the Indian people and princes to the expanding power of the British Raj. King Bodawpaya (1782-1819) was very active in exploring the possibility for this joint resistance program to the expanding British power. The old route through which Buddhism once spread to Arakan and Burma from its centers in Eastern India (like Magadha) time and again came to the prominence. The only overland route to reach India from Burma went through Chittagong, the house of the Buddhist Barooahs of the plains and Chakmas and Marmas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Between Chittagong of Bengal and Arakan of the Burmese Empire, there flows the river Naaf. The Annexation of Arakan by Bodawpaya in the year 1784 considerably minimized the hazards of reaching the heartland of Bengal-Bihar, a fact which is hardly taken note of. Indeed, this Annexation of Arakan came as a relief to the people of Bengal since they had been suffering from the raids jointly undertaken by the Arakanese (popularly called Maghs) and the Portuguese in the bay of Bengal and the coastal Bengal. The 16th-17th centuries was not a good time for the Bengalis who were taken as slaves by the Portuguese and the Arakanese. Therefore Bodawpaya's action of annexing Arakan enjoyed acquiescence from the Bengali people.

Interestingly, the spread of Islam in Bengal did not hinder the spontaneity of the contact between Buddhist Bengal-Bihar and Burma. To explain further, the rhythm of this continuity and spontaneity, a few remarks on Islam in Bengal appear necessary. After the publication of R. Eaton's *Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* (R. Eaton, 1997) not much is left to be added to the subject of how Bengal (especially Eastern Bengal) became an Islamic state. Muslim population of Bengal (modern Bangladesh) practices a very unique type of Islam. This has been the case since in the past, Islam accommodated in its fold elements of Vaishnavism, Shahajiya cult, Yogic and Tantric Buddhism. The Sufis of Bengal preached messages which are not very different from what the vaishnavas and *Shahjiya Sadhakas* preached. Enamul Haque in his book *History of Sufism in Bengal* (Haque, 1975) has brilliantly shown this transformation. Side by side one should read yet another path breaking work, *Obscure Religious Cults* Shashi Bhusan Dasgupta (S. B. Dasgupta, 1947 & S. Bhattacharya 1997). The book gives an insight view into the Buddhist background of Bengali identity. The Islam which Bengal embraced gave a lot of importance to human souls and bodies than invisible Allah. One can still hear this message of "invisible soul within" in the songs of the Bauls of Bengal, who are neither Buddhists, nor Hindus nor Muslims, but who have combined elements of all three in them. The Hinduism which the people of Bengal adhered, also gave less importance to caste-hierarchy and rituals; it

gave more importance to love and egalitarianism. Jatindramohan Bhattacharya's work, *Banglay Vaishnavbhavapanna Musalmankavi* (J. Bhattacharya, 1962) goes into this Vaishnava origin of the Muslim poets of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Muslims of Bengal in large numbers took to Vaishnavism (S. Bhattacharya 2002). Thus, both the major religions of Bengal, Hinduism and Islam, owe a lot to their Buddhist heritage. The Buddhism of Bengal itself also preached a liberal school. The Sangha indulged in practices which were seen from orthodox point of view violation of Vinaya rules. But, Bengal was least bothered about strict observation of Vinaya rules. Instead, Bengal gave birth to a different brand of Buddhism, a lax Buddhism, which permitted highly esoteric schools to operate within its domain. The Buddhists of Bengal worshipped a number of Mahayana Gods, like Avolokitesar, Manjusree and others, while Hindus worship Buddha as an Avatar of Vishnu. The art and sculpture of early medieval Bengal (the Pala-Sena period: 9th-13th century) bear evidences of worshipping female Goddesses like Tara, the influence of which reached even as far as Pagan Empire (N. R. Roy, 1932, 1936). Numerous personal names, like Sidhartha, Maitreya, Buddhadeb, Tathagata, Nirvan, Gautam, Sakya, etc. (all male names), and Sujata, Jasodhara, Maya, etc. (all female names), are still popular among the Bengali people, bear the legacy of this Buddhist imprint. Even Manjusree, one of the Gods of Mahayana pantheons is used as a female name in Bengal, indicating the extreme popularity of ideas of Boddhisattvas in Bengali society. The Bengalis who name their daughters, 'Iravati' and their sons, 'Aniruddha' perhaps are not aware of the fact that by doing so they are expressing knowingly or unknowingly their indebtedness to Burma. As early as in the 9th 10th centuries Nalanda and later Odantapuri became active centers of Tantric practice (S. K. Dutt, 1962, Niyogi, 1980). A large number of their masters later found home in Nepal, Burma, Tibet and Arakan. One of the landmark discoveries in the history of the exploration of the Buddhist identity of Bengal is the publication of Harprasad Shastri's *Bauddha Gan O Doha* in 1915. These manuscripts discovered in Nepal are believed to be the oldest specimen of the Bengali language. More importantly they bear the social influence of the Siddhacaryas (the enlightened teachers) who were the last propagators of Buddhism in Bengal and Eastern India. Because of their liberal approach to life, they enjoyed popularity among the masses of Bengal. Their popularity in Pagan Burma was reflected in the repeated warning by the kings of Burma to get rid of the obscure and immoral practices of the Aris. Scholars like G. Luce, Sir A. Phayre, Duroisell and N. R. Ray point out Bengal as one of the source regions from where these Aris came to Burma (S. Bhattacharya, 1994). And their popularity among the masses became a matter of concern for the Buddhist kings of Pagan. Burma in later days, therefore, had to look to other countries (Ceylon or modern Srilanka) for inspiration and reorganization of the Sangha. And, there is no doubt that the kings and people of Burma successfully fulfilled the mission of

purifying the Sangha. The Empire of Pagan tells the story (T. Frasch 1996) Myanmar scholars go back to often quoted Kalyani Inscription of the king Dhammazedī. The onslaught of imperialism on Burma generated a new vigor among the Buddhist population. They again looked at India, especially Bengal. Bengal this time became the meeting spot of Ceylon and Burma. When the first mission consisting four monks from the Mahabodhi Society of Colombo (founded in 1891) reached Bodhgaya, they took shelter in the Burmese Rest House. This particular house was built by the Burmese king Mindon Min (1853-1878) in whose reign Buddhism experienced a grand resurgence. This piece of information is given by B. P. Bapat in his (ed.) book *2500 Years of Buddhism* (Bapat: 468).

I

Annexation of Burma, Repercussion on Bengal and other Narratives

This natural bond between Burma and Bengal over centuries came as an advantage for the British rulers. The colonial policy was aimed at rapidly building up a workable system with least financial adventure. The entire administrative structure of British Burma was dependent on Indian labour and in some cases Indian training and expertise. After the Annexation of Arakan and Tenasserim in the year 1826, Arakan remained tagged with the administration of Chittagong, while Tenasserim was brought under the jurisdiction of the Governor General of India. However, we are not concerned here with the British administration in Bengal and Burma, our concern is how the Bengalis and the Burmese built up their resistance, the strength of which was emanating from a common tie of religious and cultural brotherhood. Obviously the tie between the Buddhist Burmese and the Hindu Bengalis was more intensive, than between Muslim Bengalis and Buddhist Burmese. But, in the initial phase there was little religious polarization. Muslim Bengalis and Hindu Bengalis joined the Buddhist Burmese and strengthened their hands. In spite of a large number of Muslim Bengali population (mainly from Chittagong, Noakhali and Comilla) in Burma one does not come across any event of communal tension in the earlier period of the nationalist Movement (1886-19120). The Mutiny in Oudh in the 1857 put a big challenge and as a result the East India Company handed over the charge of the Empire directly to the Crown of England. Calcutta's importance was greatly enhanced as Bengal began to flourish as one of the most vibrant intellectual and cultural centers of the British Empire. Policies were formulated to "educate the natives" and "teach them the method of acquiring the ability to absolve the self-rule". Bengal became the first guinea pig for this experiment. The 19th century Bengali renaissance (David Kopf 1969) became possible since Bengal came into direct contact with the west. The two Delta regions surrounded by the Bay of Bengal have similar features (Van Schendel 1991), but Burma had a economic and social structure quite different from Bengal. There was no big Zamindar in Burma. The population

lived in relative prosperity and enjoyed the patronage of the rural monks. As a result Burma went ahead of India in the sphere of literacy. In Burma there was no social hierarchy or religious dichotomy (Hindu-Muslim) as in Bengal. On the other hand, Bengal offered the emerging Burmese middle class opportunities in higher education. The University of Calcutta founded in the year 1857 attracted the affluent Burmese middle class. Even earlier Hindu College was founded in 1817. The Calcutta Medical College became another popular destination for the Burmese middle class. The college was founded in 1835 (A Mukherjee 1992:7). The unstable administrative structure and political uncertainties enforced the British administrators to link everything of Bengal with Burma. Judson College and Rangoon College were the two institutions which were affiliated to Calcutta University. This arrangement continued until 1920 when the University of Rangoon was established. This plan of giving Rangoon a separate status certainly fulfilled the long-cherished hopes of the Burmese youth. But, what angered the Burmese students and the Burmese public in general was the conservative character of the University Bill (Aye Kyaw, 1993) which foresaw an elitist structure, concentration of power in the hands of the British administrators and its plan not to allow affiliation. Besides, the Burmese also expected replacement of English or Indian languages and introduction of Burmese. At the same time, the demand was raised for financial protection by the Government. The Government had to face an acute opposition to the Bill and had to partly succumb to the pressure.

If we turn our attention to Bengal of early years of the 20th century, we witness an unique kind of nationalist awakenin.. The YMBA's contact with Bengal appears to me an important phenomenon. It appears to me even more interesting that the Young Men Buddhist Association, the first organized body of the nationalist movement in Burma, was founded in the same year when the National Council of Education was registered in Bengal. In the same year out of the same movement, the Bengal National College and School, and Bengal Technical Institute were established. The rebel monk U Ottama was associated with the Bengal National College and it was through U Ottama that much of the contact between the Burmese nationalists and the Bengali nationalists (also those affiliated with the Indian National Congress) maintained their close contact. Bengal of early years of the 20th century turned to be a platform of various agitation and protest. Before I come to a detailed description of the scene of Bengali nationalism, let me introduce a little-known episode which may serve the purpose of creating a proper gamut to understand the logic of YMBA's and later GCBA's involvements with Bengal. This episode is connected with Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's reaction to the Annexation of Upper Burma and Burma's attachment with the British Indian Empire. Bankim Chandra

Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) is legitimately regarded as the father of Indian Nationalism (P. Chatterjee 1986) His novel *Anandamath* (Ananda Monastery) preached the message of an armed revolt against the British Raj. The central figure, a monk called Satyananda, led the revolt and guided his followers (*Santandal*) to take up arms against the British Forces. The plan was kept secret and was hatched in a monastery (*Math*). The song *Bande Mataram* (Hail to mother/motherland) inspired hundreds of Indians to come together to stand against the Raj. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's works greatly inspired Sree Aurobindo, yet another great revolutionary of the early nationalist revolution in India. In Sree Aurobindo's vision home land or mother land emerged as one's own mother. He was a true follower of Bankim. Inspired by *Anadamath* he wrote *Bhavanimandir* (Temple of Bhavani, the mother). These two books along with numerous other books and pamphlets calling for an armed resistance against the British became extremely popular in Bengal. Certainly Bengal owes a lot to Maharashtra where the same call was thrown by persons like Phadke, and later Balgangadhar Tilak (P. Heehs, 1939, 1998).

Annexation of Upper Burma in 1886, as I have already mentioned, was a natural consequence of the ever uncompromising British policy aiming at total control of the state economy, external trade of Burma and internal resources, teak for example. The previous two annexations had already established the British supremacy in the region of Arakan and lower Burma (Pegu). The French were only trying their luck for the last time, while the rising power Germany and Italy were watching the scene closely. The war itself was sparked off due to the illegal logging by the Bombay Burma Trading Corporation. The concern was alleged to have been involved in illegal logging. Illegal, since it went beyond the area in which it was given permission by the king. As a result, the king Thibaw (Keeton, 1974) got impatient and reacted sharply going into open confrontation. The British Government in Bengal also expressed its anger and all these led to the outbreak of the war. The war itself was a short event taking a few weeks' time only. But, the destruction of Mandalay palace, the symbol of the last Monarchy which defended the *Dharma* in the eve of the severest challenge, left a deep impact on the people of Burma and Bengal. The religious vacuum (Dahm 2002, Christie,) created by the Annexation greatly trembled not only the Burmese people, but also the people of Bengal. After all, (including the exiled king and his party) going to other parts of India had to pass through Calcutta.

To express in Bankim Chandra's words, 'Bengal was stunned, but kept quite, since she was afraid of protesting'. These words were uttered by Bankim Chandra when he was receiving

a visitor from Russia in his home in Calcutta. This visitor was a famous Russian indologist who along with Haraprasad Shastri visited Bankim's house. Other intellectuals who were assembled at Bankim's house to receive the Russian guest were Ramesh Chandra data, Pandit Rajani kanta Gupta, Babu Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay and Hem Chandra Bandyopadhyay (Kar, 1988:68). This Russian Professor was on his way back from Burma where he had witnessed the desperate situation in the aftermath of the Annexation. He was eager to know from his Bengali friends whether any one from Bengal had written any book on the Annexation of Burma. Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay replied that the Press in Bengal had given its view on the annexation, but no book was composed. Bankim Chandra was particularly asked about the reason for this silence. To this Bankim stated that Bengal was afraid to protest. This discourse can be connected with the situation in which Bankim Chandra was put to defend his plot of *Anandamath*. Questions arise: first, why this guest from Russia did ask this question to Bankim Chandra? Second, why of all the foreign imperialist powers, Russia, was concerned with the Annexation of Burma? To the first, I have the answer to offer that Bankim Chandra was greatly impressed by the Resistance Movements taking place in various parts of Burma between the period of the second and the third Annexation. To the second question I have the answer to offer to my readers that the Annexation of Burma came as a shock to yet another imperialist power of the 19th century, i.e., Russia. Though Russia's expansion was not visible in the region of Southeast Asia, in China, in central Asia, Persia and Afghanistan, Russia was very active to reestablish her supremacy at the point of time when upper Burma was annexed. Afghanistan became something like "Burma" in the western frontier of the British Empire (D. Ghosh, 1960). The way Bankim Chandra had to revise his stand in every edition of *Anandamath*, indicates the fact he was either having the Burmese resistance in his mind or he was suspected on having the plot of the Pongyi resistance to describe the arm struggle of the *Santandals*.

. In 1882, *Anandamath* was first published. It was a protest not against the Muslim rule of Bengal but against the looting of Bengal by Britain. It was first published in the journal *Bangadarsan* in the Bengali years 1287-1289. Bankim Chandra was a Govt. servant. For Government servants it was obligatory to submit copies of their publications to the Government. After the publication of *Anandamath*, Bankim was dismissed (January 1882) from the post of the Assistant Secretary, Govt. of Bengal. *Anandamath* was not proscribed by the Govt. But Government tried to stop the channels through which the message of *Anandamath* was spreading across Bengal and India as whole. The message was a clear "yes" to an armed revolt against the Raj. There is a view that Bankim Chandra wrote *Anandamath* taking the plot of the Sanyasi Revolt of Bengal as the background. This argument may sound eligible on the basis of the fact

that in the third edition (1886) he included Glieg's Memoris of the life of Warren Hastings and Hunters Arnel's of Rural Bengal from where he quoted the story of Sanyasi Revolt of Bengal. But was not this an act of defense to cover up the real plot? The question was succinctly raised by Shishir Kar (Shishir Kar, 1988: 68-69) in his book, *British Amale Bajapta Banglabai*. Kar further points out that Bankim had to go to the extent in "inviting" one Krishnabihari Sen to write a review on *Anandamath* in one of the journals *The Liberal and the New Dispension* in the issue of 1883, April, to tell the British that *Santahndals* were fighting to establish the Muslim Rule and in order to establish the British Rule (Kar: 69). Now, why *Anandamath* became politically so fiery? The answer is simple: the gusts for secret societies emanated from the literatures like *Anandamath*, *Bhavanimandir* along with *Bhagavatgita*. Bengal entered a path of extremism (Tripathy 1967). Two of the most well organized bodies, Anushilan and Jugantar, later developed a close contact in Burma. The programs included smuggling of arms, disruption of communication system, making of bombs and operation of individual or group action. The story of success or failure of these actions do not concern me. What concerns me precisely is the common ideological platform from which the people of Bengal and the people of Burma operated. The concept of *Mukti* (Nirvana to express in the Buddhist term) greatly occupied the revolutionaries. Hinduism and Buddhism were no religion of passivity (Johnson 2001) A book by Abinash Bhattacharya, one of the leading revolutionaries of Bengal, *Mukti Kon Khane* (where is the salvation) became yet another Bible for the revolutionaries.

The second half of the 19th century saw an acceleration of the European imperial move into Burma. The urban centers marginally benefited from this penetration, while the rural people were increasingly felt isolated Bengali people and the Press in Bengal took note of this ever growing expansion (K. Ghosh 1965). Bengali intellectuals, as I have shown above, felt deeply concerned. There was a great tension when the royal party on their way to Ratnagiri had to pass through Calcutta. One of the most vivid descriptions of this ruthless annexation and imperialist strike have been given by Sarat Cahndra Chattopadhyay who personally witnessed how the people of Burma were made subject of extreme humiliation. Sarat Chandra took the yellow robe and wandered as a Bengali Buddhist through the mountains of upper Burma to show his sympathy for the annexed country. A considerable part of his creative life (1904-1916) was spent in Burma

The people of Burma always dreamt of debut of an ideal king, under whose rule golden days would usher, ending the darkness and the gloom. The same notion is displayed in the *Bhagvadgita*. One is acquainted with the verse *Sambhavami Juge Juge* : the ideal king has to be

born again and again when the Dharma is threatened. The status of Setkya-min in Burma, the Cakkavatti, was claimed to be made by other men of merit and power also, like weikza, Saya and monks. The foreign occupation was seen as the result of decline of Buddhism.. But the people of Burma were hopeful that the future Buddha – the Maitreya would finally appear to save the world. This ideological framework also helps us to understand the base of the Bengali extremism, sparked off by *Ananadamath*, popularized by Swami Vivekananda and practiced in the early years by Sree Aurobindo. Further discussion will highlight how the Buddhist heritage of Bengal was constantly being reminded by mentors like Anagarika Dharmapala, the founder of the Mahabodhi Society of Ceylon and India (Ananda Guruge 1991 & Anagarika Hewavitane Dharmapala 1997).

The appearance of Setkya-mins and other Buddhist Messiahs became intensified after the annexation of lower Burma in 1852. The popular belief of appearance of an *Avatara* (incarnation) was so strong that any one having appropriate signs was recognized as the Mettaya (Maitraya). A simple fisherman could be such a figure. N. Tarling has shown that appearance of such Buddhas could even lead to collapse of local colonial administration. In 1861-2 the German ethnologist Bastian heard Burmese songs which were composed laud the expected victory (Tarling, 1995, vol II: 217).

Earlier I have mentioned that the *Mantra* of the armed revolt came from Bankim Chandra's *Anandamath*. Equally significant appears to me to note here that the *Anushilantattva* (the theory of *Anushilan*) was also Bankim's contribution to this particular school of Indian nationalism. The word *Anushilan* means intensive mental and physical exercises to prepare the body and the soul for endurance which is a must to go into the life of a revolutionary. The word Tattva simply means theory. Bengal produced a large literature on this theory (S Kar, 1992) The 'Theory of Anushilan' mesmerized hundreds and thousands of Bengalis, especially from Eastern Bengal districts. Bankim must have thought if the Muslims could resist the way they did (Mutiny), if the Buddhists could resist, the way they resisted in Burma, why could the Hindus not stand up and fight? But, due to his status as Government servant, he could not directly address the events of Burma. The *Mantra* of this religious militancy gave birth to a school of political thought which is known in the historical research as *Agnijuga* (the age of fire). There is no need to mark this movement as a costly movement of an elite class (Bengali Bhadralog).

The spirit of this *Agnijuga* as experienced in Bengal and Burma should further be perceived properly when we place the Buddhist resurgence in Bengal throughout the period

started from the last decade of the 19th century up to the year 1930. Swami Vivekananda, another propagator of Hindu-Buddhist amity and humanism was actually a product of his age. Swamiji reinterpreted the Vedantic Hinduism and explained his view before a distinguished audience in Chicago in the year 1893. The occasion was the World parliament of Religion where Anagarika Dharmapala was also as one of the invited speakers. The publication of Edwin Arnold's (1837-1904) *The Light of Asia* is responsible for attracting the western public to Buddhism. This distinguished Englishman and the editor of *The Telegraph* was attracted to Bodhgaya, especially to save the holy shrine from the decaying condition. German philosopher Schopenhauer and Nietzsche became staunch believers in the virtue of Buddhism as the religion of the world. Two messages of Buddhism actually impress the western thinkers: its interpretation of life as Maya and its promotion for selfless action. The most important event in the history of the Buddhist revival of the late 19th and early 20th century is the rediscovery of Ceylon (modern Srilanka) as a classical land of Buddhism. Two enthusiasts from America, Madam Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott visited Ceylon, and this event, as the reputed Buddhologist Heinz Bechert puts 'is still considered as the Commencement of modern Buddhist revival on the Island of Srilanka'. (Bechert: 274). Calcutta, a city which was having the closest tie with Rangoon and Akyab, experienced a Buddhist renaissance in the truest sense of the word. Anagarika Dharmapala was able to re-establish the Calcutta-Bodhgaya-Akyab-Rangoon nexus and worked hard to bring the Mahabodhi Movement nearer to the people of Bengal and Burma. Even earlier, attempts were made by the Arakanese Buddhists to tighten their old contact with Chittagong. One of the most eminent monks from Arakan was Saramitra Mahasthabir (1801-1982), the Sangharaj.

His noble mission was to bring Chittagong and Arakan together. He came to Chittagong from Akyab in 1864 with the noble mission to train the Buddhists of Chittagong the art of saving the *Dharma*. After two years he went back to Arakan. According to Mabud (A. M. Khan, 2003: 29), Saramitra fulfilled two duties: to save Buddhism from dominance of Hindu priests and Tantric practices. The second mission was to bring reform so that Vinaya rules were observed. Dharmapala visited Bodhgaya in 1891; He saw the deplorable situation of the shrine and worked to restore the monastery from the occupation of the Hindu Mahants. At this point of point he felt the need for bringing the city of Rangoon nearer to Bengal. On his way to Rangoon he came again to Calcutta. In the city of Calcutta he was kindly adopted as an esteemed guest by Babu Neel Kamal Mukherjee (A. Guruge, XXXVI). Mukherjee remained his Dayaka for next twenty years. In 1891 he gave his first lecture (Dharmapala, 1997) at the Calcutta Albert Hall. The subject was the kinship between Buddhism and Hinduism with a view to rejuvenate

Buddhism as a religion within the broader Indian fold and not as a religion of an isolated corner (Burma and Ceylon). The most impressive aspect of this lecture was the combination in which Dharmapal upheld the common philosophical aspect of the two religions in the background of academic progress by Indians in the study of Buddhism. Maha Bodhi society moved its headquarters to Calcutta and the Maha Bodhi Journal was launched in the same year (1892). Rejuvenation of Buddhism in Calcutta (Bengal), India as a whole, became a political agenda as politics of those days could not be seen as a separate agenda than the religion.

Dharmapal's visit to Akyab (Sittwe), the capital of Buddhist Arakan, gave a tremendous impetus to the rejuvenation move. In 1892, he accompanied with Col. Alcott, visited Akyab where he received financial support to hire a house in Calcutta for the Mahabodhi Society. The address was 2 Greek Row. Again a bold step to make the old Arakan-Bengal link stronger! He also visited Benaras, Sarnath, Colombo, Shanghai, Bangkok, London, Chicago several times, and worked tirelessly to start a Buddhist world forum. Though he visited several countries, like Holland, Denmark and Italy, his contact with America became most intimate.. One of his American donors was Mary Foster from Honolulu. In 1915 a land was purchased in Calcutta College Square to build a Vihar. The Vihar was completed in 1920 and it was ceremoniously inaugurated by the Governor of Bengal, Lord Ronaldshay himself. A grand procession started from the Government House bringing a Buddhist relic to the newly built Vihar. In these years of early 1920s the British Government in Bengal spoke of bringing back the "Nalanda Spirit" and praised the genius of Indo-Aryan race (Hundred Years of the University of Calcutta, 1957: 282-283).

It is in the background of this Buddhist renaissance of Bengal that one has to place the academic part of the story. The University of Calcutta started its Pali course which again strengthened the relation between Bengal and Burma-Ceylon. 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. Other names of Bengali intellectuals who vigorously promoted Buddhist and Pali studies, and contributed considerably to the cause of Burma-Burma relation were: Haraprasad Shastri, Benimadhav Barooah, B. C. Law and Nalinaksha Datta. Benimadhav Barooah visited Burma in 1920s. Professor Stella Kramisch, eminent art historian, who taught in Calcutta University, also visited Burma. Calcutta during this period also experienced a new age in her relation with Burma, Ceylon, Siam and the entire Buddhist world. It was Sir Asutosh Mukherjee under whose patronage Calcutta University made the name as center of Buddhist studies. Taw Sein Kyaw, an

eminent Bengal admirer from Bengal and the author of *Burmese Sketches* expressed his admiration for Sir Asutosh Mukherjee, the Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University. Taw Sein Kyaw stated that by appointing him Vice Chancellor for the fourth time the British Government of Bengal had given the recognition to a Hindu which he deserved (Taw Sein Ko, 1920). It is in the context of this Buddhist Axis between Bengal-Burma-Ceylon that one has to place U Ottama, the rebel monk and his activities in the early years of the 20th century (S. R. Chakravarty, *Quarterly Review of Historical Studies*, Vol. 17). His going to Japan was also quite in harmony with the then prevailing mood, for Japan was closely tightened with the movement. We may mention in this context that in the early years of the 20th century a Japanese India-enthusiast Okakura stayed at the House of the Tagores at Jorashako. This Japanese is regarded as one of the early propagators of Bengal Extremism.

Earlier I have mentioned the national education Movement that started in Bengal. The Movement itself was born out of an extremely important incidence which shook Bengal and India at large. Bengal was partitioned in 1905. The Province was found too large to be administered as a single unit; therefore a new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam was to be made while the western part would remain separated. This came as a great shock to Hindu Bengalis who read in this plan a British intrigue to separate the Hindu Bengalis from their Muslim brethren. Surendranath Banerjee, an eminent Congress leader from Bengal came in the forefront of the protest movement against the plan. Lord Curzon, the Governor General, found his plan quite legitimate and went on. A meeting was arranged in the Calcutta Town Hall on 7th August, 1905, which gave new dimension to the entire nationalist movement. The call was given to boycott British goods (textile in particular) and use the Swadeshi (indigenous) goods. Bengal was reborn through this movement and the country (Bengal as a symbol) was hailed as the motherland. Rabindranath Tagore, who was the spiritual leader of this Swadeshi Movement, composed his famous song *Banglar Mati, Banglar Jal* (A. Mukherjee, 1992: 29). The plan was executed in October 1905. Later (1911) it was annulled, but ultimately Bengal became again a victim of the British Policy of 'divide and rule.' In 1947 Bengal was again partitioned.

Earlier we have heard of the movement of national education, the experiment of which also started in Bengal. The year was 1906. Yet, another successful experiment in this regard was made by the poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Tagore got the Nobel Prize in the year 1913. It is mentioned by Dutta and Rabinson (Dutta and Rabinson, 2000: 184) that Swedish Academy had chosen Tagore under the pressure from Prime William of Sweden, who had visited Calcutta not long before. In the year 1913 Prince published account with

memorable moments spent at Tagore's home and wrote 'in all my life, I never spent moments so poignant as at the house of the Hindoo poet Rabindra Tagore' (Dutta and Rabinson, 2000: 184). Also in Germany, Tagore received unprecedented reception (1921) and his writings found a large reader circle in Germany.

Tagore was a humanist of rare combination, wanted the world to come to India, thus he named his University as Visva Bharati. Visva = World and Bharati = goodness of learning, Saraswati. While naming the University after the Goddess of Speech (Bharati) he did not feel that he did not prove himself to be a staunch Hindu, neither he rejected his Hindu identity. He was actually more concerned to bring Buddhist countries of Asia closer to India, a mission in which he spontaneously exploited his contact with the western scholars. The foundation stone was laid on 22 December 1918 at special meeting of students, staff, ex-students and well-wishers of the Ashram, held in the mango grave (Amrakunja) in Santiniketan. On 22 December 1921, Visva Bharati was formally inaugurated in the presence of its Chancellor Sir Brajendranath Seal, leading scholar and its first western visitor Sylvain Levi.

The opening of Visva Bharati must have impressed the Burmese people, for as we have seen national education had always been a prime agenda (Aye Kyaw, Ch. 3) in the nationalist movement of Burma. It was in Rangoon only that Tagore was greeted and welcomed by a speech in Bengali (P. Pal, 1997: 174). And this again happened on his birthday (8 May, 1916).

Nripendra Chandra Banerjee, the Editor of the *Rangoon Mail*, who was sent to Rangoon by the leading members of the Indian National Congress, acted as Tagore's host in Rangoon. China and Japan were the other two countries which were in Tagore's itinerary. Mr. Leonard Elmherst, Miss Green, Prof. Kshitimohan Sen and artist Nandalal Bose were in his team. The Tagore Reception Committee of Rangoon was formed with Indians, Chinese, Burmese and Europeans. The news papers like the *Rangoon Mail*, *Rangoon Daily News* covered his visit in considerable detail. The *Rangoon Mail* wrote in its editorial: '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' (B Datta, 1993, 995). The first reception took place in the famous Jubilee Hall of Rangoon. The Meeting was chaired by the Burmese Swarajist and a friend of Bengal, U To Kyi. The hymn *Bande Mataram* greeted Tagore before he started speaking before his audience. The second reception was in the Sooneram Hall where N. C. Banerjee himself chaired then session (N. C. Banerjee, 1974: 149-167). The Head master of Bengal Academy Mohit Mukherjee and eminent intellectual Sudhir Chandra Choudhury had arranged this reception. The

third reception was a Chinese reception arranged at Kemmendine, a suburb of Rangoon. The meeting was presided over by Lim Ngo Chiong. He stressed the need for a deeper relation between India and China which would be helpful to improve the Burma-India relation. During 1924 visit one of the eminent Bengali residents of Rangoon Mr. Kassim was all around and gladly performed his duty as the host. Kassim was deeply committed to Buddhism. Kalidas Nag, one of the leading intellectuals of India noted that he was deeply impressed by Mr. Kassim's identification with Buddhism. The Bengali delegation also met the famous Burmese Professor Gordon Luce and his Burmese wife. The Luce couple also came into close contact with the Bengali delegation (Kalidas Nag 1986: 6) Discussions were held between the Bengali delegation and the Burmese host with Rabindranath Tagore in the middle; the subjects of discussion were Bengal's age-old contact with Burma, Buddhist psychology, philosophy and religion. One sees Bengal and Burma felt the urge to come closer to each other.

So far I have written little about Rabindranth's commitment to Buddhism. Little has been written so far about the topic. In the west as elsewhere in the world, Tagore is seen as a philosopher, poet and educationalist. He was born in a Brahma family and was trained to worship *Nirakar Brahma* (formless or invisible Brahma) of the Upanishad. But, it was only before the image of Lord Buddha in Bodhgaya that he felt prostrated (S. B. Barooah, B.E 1374: 45). Tagore was a frequent visitor to Bodhgaya and completely identified himself with the religion. He like Mahatma Gandhi in 1920s was deeply concerned with the communal cleavages between Hindus and Muslims. Equally disappointing for him became the problems of untouchability and caste tensions. At this point of time Buddhism appeared to him as the ideal alternative religion which could save India from further social and political distress. At the same time Buddhism would also bring India closer to her Asian neighbours, including China. He studied Buddhist literature (*Jatakas*, *Avadanas* and *Dhammapadas*) and inspired by the message of pure love and egalitarianism, he wrote numerous poems, songs and dance dramas, reminding the people of India of the country's Buddhist past. Moreover, he did everything possible so that the students of the Ashram in his Shantiniketan could get an intellectual taste for Buddhist and Pali studies. India owes a lot to Tagore for this revival of Buddhist studies which experienced efflorescence in his Ashram school in Shantiniketan. He sent young scholars to Ceylon and Burma. One of these scholars was Nityananda Vinod Gowasmi.

Indeed Tagore's visit to Burma in 1924 was aimed at reestablishing the contact between China-Japan-Burma and India. Tagore had no concern that Burma would ever ignore her Buddhist heritage. Indeed the opposite, standing before the Shwedagon Pagoda, he felt that the

city of Rangoon became smaller and the Pagoda emerged protecting the entire city (S. Bhattacharya, in print). One of the major objectives of Tagore's visit to China in 1924 was to remind the Chinese people of their Buddhist past. There is no wonder that rich people of India would come forward to take the financial burden of such a noble mission of such a great personality. Jugal Kishor Birla, one of the sons of the eminent business houses of India, gladly bore the expense of Tagore's journey to China, Japan and Burma in the year 1924 (B. Datta: 995) In 1927 Tagore again stepped in Rangoon, though for a very short period. He was on a tour to visit Java, Bali, Malay and Siam. Burma as always stands on the way to the East. So in 1927 also he did not want to miss the chance. This time the famous linguist and Professor of Calcutta University, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee accompanied the poet. Chatterjee himself was an admirer of Burma and the Burmese people. He was deeply impressed (S.K. Chatterjee *Bharat Samskriti*, 77ff) by the way the Burmese people kept Buddhism as a living religion while in Buddhist Bengal it went into oblivion. In 1927 an eminent Barrister from Gujarat and a resident of Rangoon, Mr. M.A Rauf, welcomed Tagore. Tagore met Bengalis students in Rangoon and visited a number of book shops. On the day of the Diwali (24 Oct 1927) he left the shore of Rangoon and sailed for his Calcutta.. Tagore's popularity in Burma can be attested by the fact that the famous nationalist and intellectual of Burma Kodaw Hmeing is called 'the Tagore of Burma' (Aung san Sui Kyi 1990 & 1991)

In the history of the nationalist movement of Burma the period between 1900-1917 is seen as little dormant (Moscotti 1974). It prepared the ground for the period to come, i.e. early 1920s. All three agendas of nationalist engagements that Bengal experienced and that we have described above, found resonance in Burma as well. The idea of establishing a Buddhist college captured the imagination of the YMBA members. In a conference held in Moulmein in 1918 and Bassein in 1919, it came up (Aye Kyaw: 44). The national college was opened at the Shwe Kyin monastery, Bahan, Rangoon, on August 14, 1921. The opening ceremony was attended by some 3,000 men and women; many prominent leaders were among them. Every body vowed to keep pancasila (five precepts) and the recital was led by Reverend U Kosalla. A call was given to support the national education system. Paritta was recited to keep away possible obstacles. One must remember that before the foundation of this national college, a 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. The objective of the CNE was the same as the National Council of Education in Burma –

- 1) to promote national scholars, collages, libraries, museums and Universities
- 2) to encourage translation of useful books in the Burmese language
- 3) to encourage production of books in Burmese language

4) to promote broad-based national education (Aye Kway: 42).

As I have already stated the Maucalyan idea of producing English educated youngster to serve the English interest in India was rejected by the Bengalis and Burmese alike. The University Act of 1920 was rejected as it attached no importance to indigenous tradition and values. A mass meeting was held on the platform of Shwedagon Pagoda on December 19, 1920 and it resolved that national schools and colleges be established across the country. The mood was actually not very different than in Bengal. Around 1920/21, there were about 80 national schools, in which about 15,000 students were enrolled.

The National College had 70 students. Eminent leader of those days U Pu was the Honorary Principal of the college. He invited the students to take part in the task of nation building. An Indian domiciled in Burma, Narayan Rao delivered a speech in English which was translated into Burmese (Aye Kyaw: 45). The staff and students of the National College had Indian and Burmese members. Aye Kyaw has given a list of Professors of the National College which may be reflect on the part Bengalis played in the academic lives of Burma.

- 1) Bhaumik Kabyanidhi M.A. (Calcutta), Gold Medallist, Professor of English.
- 2) H.K. Chakavarty M.A. (Calcutta), Gold Medalist, Professor of History.
- 3) A. Narayan Rao, M.A. (Madras), Gold Medalist, Professor of Political Science and Economics.
- 4) N.C. Ayyer, M.Com. (Madras), F.C.A. (Glasgow), Professor of Commerce and Accountancy.
- 5) B. Banerjee, M.Sc. (Calcutta), Professor of Chemistry.
- 6) U. Nyana, Pathamagyaw, Professor of Pali.
- 7) U. Lun (later Thakin Kodaw Hmaing) Professor of Burmese.
- 8) U. Ba Choe, B.A. (Nat), Lecturer in Burmese Language & Literature.
- 9) U. San Nyun, B.Sc. (Nat), Lecturer in Chemistry.
- 10) U. Lu Pe Win, B.A. (Nat), Lecturer in Pali.
- 11) U. Ba Chit, B.Sc. (Nat), Demonstrator in Chemistry (Kyaw: . 45).

While the National Education Movement in Bengal remained partially integrated into the broad national movement, in Burma the national education movement became a central force well integrated in the broad nationalist movement. In December 21, 1920, a mass meeting was held at the platform of Shwedagon pagoda where a detailed discussion came up about financing of national education, coordination various levels etc.. I may mention here that Subhodh Mallik one of the richest men in Calcutta generously donated for the cause of National education, when the same crisis of financing was faced by Bengal National Education Council. Subhodh Mallik earned the title ‘ Raja’. The Indian National Congress in Burma which was founded by Dr. P.J

Mehta in the year 1908, was actively involved in this movement in Burma. At a mass meeting, which was chaired by S.S.A Tyabji, an eminent member of the Provincial Congress Committee in Burma, all the communities were urged to stand behind the national cause (Aye kyaw: 35). The vigorous national education movement in Burma was actually an answer to the British endeavor to preach the imperial idea. In July 1916, Governor Sir Harcourt Butler appointed a permanent committee with Betram Carey, the commissioner of Sagaing Division, as its chairman. This committee consisted of eight British officials, four missionaries, and two Burmese (Kyaw: 13-14).

The General Council of the YMBA also urged the creation of the Burmese University when their delegation went to Calcutta to talk with the Secretary Montagu and the Viceroy Chelmsford in December, 1917. That Burma should have its own University was agreed upon.

Sir Reginald Craddock, then the Lieutenant Governor of Burma formed a text (draft). One must remember that Burma was taken out of the Montagu Chelmsford Reforms which gave to the people of India some opportunities for further development regarding self-rule. The Burmese were told that they were different than the Indians. Therefore suitable schemes were to be found out for Burma (Craddock 1929 & J.F. Cady).

Though the Burmese nationalist expressed their dissatisfaction over the proposed University Bill, on July 1920 in the Lieutenant-Governor's Legislative Council, the draft bill was presented by Mr. Hunter. The Bill had the following features:

- centralized University in Rangoon
- U May Oung as the only Council Member
- elite education.

As a response to this conservative educational program a protest meeting was organized at jubilee Hall. The YMBA, which was engaged earlier only in purely religious and cultural issues (Maung Maung & D. Smith) organized protest meetings. U Wipanla, a monk from Bassein, proposed that the University draft bill, drawn up in hurried manner, be postponed until after the Legislative Council was formed by the New Reform Act. U To Kyi, one of the admirers of Deshbandhu Chitranjan Das and Motilal Nehru, pointed out that there was only five Burmese on the 56 member University Council, and only two Burmese in the 24 member University Senate. It may be relevant to mention here that U To Kyi formed his own Swarajya Party which contested the election of 1925 (S. Singh: 72). But the Party could not score well (R. Kumar 1989)

Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress held in 1928 was a landmark in the history of the nationalist movement of India. So far Burma-India relation is concerned, it has also its own significance. Subhas Chandra Bose who was released from Mandalay jail appeared as the ideal

leader for a large section of the Congress members of Bengal. Even from the jail in Mandalay he won the election for a seat in the Bengal legislative council. Burma, especially the Pongyis impressed him a lot. He was also an admirer of U Ottama. He also felt the urgent need for arming India to actually fight the British. It was through Subhas Chandra's inspiration that a corps in military uniform entered the pavilion of the Congress session in Calcutta. The event came as an embarrassment for the right wing Congress members. The sojourn in Burmese Prison made Subhas Chandra the real hero in the political milieu of Bengal. Later developments showed even closer contact between Bengal and Burma, a story which I am going to tell elsewhere. Suffice to add that in the year 1930 Bengal the South- Eastern District of Bengal, Chittagong, showed her strength in raiding the Chittagong Armoury. The leadership to this adventure was given by a school master, Surya Sen, who was popularly called *Masterda* (teacher-brother). He and his followers were initially followers of Mahatma Gandhi and were active in the Congress Movement (Sharma 1993 & B. Bhattacharya 1979). Surya Sen and his group had a solid base in Burma including Arakan (S. Mukherjee 2001) But, the repressive policy of the British Government and continuous debate around communal representation etc. made them frustrated. This frustration was visible in other parts of India as well. The province of Punjab stood in the forefront of this new wave of nationalism.

The outbreak of the Saya San led Rebellion in Burma exactly at this point of time is remarkable. A lot has been written justifying its outbreak on the ground of Burma's economic distress, but little has been written so far connecting rebellion with the overall political situation in Burma and India. Given the fact that the Bhikkhu U Ottama and the Pongyi dominated GCBA were in the forefront of this rebellion, Ottama's relation with Bengal deserves more attention than it has drawn so far. Interesting for the future will be to explore U Ottama's relation with the Bengal Buddhist Association or Dharmankur Vihar which was founded by Kripasaran Mahasthavir (Ahir 1991: 13) One of the objectives was to provide a home for the Buddhist Barooahs from Chittagong.

Though Partition of Bengal was annulled, the capital of India was shifted from Calcutta to Delhi in the year 1911. This was a big blunder for Bengal and Burma relation Burma suffered from the injury which Bengal succumbed. Delhi is far away from Bengal-Burma and not only that, Delhi is the symbol of the Mughal rule in India. That too would not have bothered the people of Burma; more disturbing appeared to them the policy of the British Government to treat the Muslim population of India as a separate group. The apprehension of birth of a new nation

from the womb of a single mother was looming large. The Burmese political parties from extreme right to extreme left never accepted any plan of special constitutional arrangements for Indians, Karens, Chinese or any other minority group. Burma ultimately got her share of reforms and became a Governor's Province in 1923. The YMBA which changed its name from Young Men Buddhist Association to General Council of Burmese Association (GCBA) was also not in a stable condition (R. Taylor 1987, Ch. III). There was a split within the GCBA. This split showed the strength of the Pongyis, the monks, in determining the course of political developments in Burma. The 21 Party, so named due to its numerical strength of 21 groups within its fold, wanted to cooperate with the British. But U Ottama and Maung Chit Hlaing (Hlaing-Pu-Gyaw) went forward with agitation, non-participation in the election, boycott of British goods and boycott of capitation tax (S. Singh: 68). The General Council of Sangha Sametggi (GCSS), organized in 1922, was the principal coordinator of Pongyi political activities.

In 1924, while the All Burma Union Conference at Mandalay was in session, Ottama's plan to visit the area sparked off disturbances. Harcourt Butler, the Governor of Burma, undertook tours in and around Tharrawaddy, Prome and Thayetmyo during the period 19-20 Oct., 1924.

It is interesting to note that the Congress was well aware of Bengal's favorable position in Burma and the Burmese people's sympathy for the Bengalis, for they were in the same dilemma as how to achieve the freedom in peaceful way. N.C. Banerjee's deputation as the Editor of the *Rangoon Mail* came at a point of time when the Congress was suffering from this isolation. Bengal's close association with Burma became an asset for the Congress. By that time the political atmosphere in Bengal became highly volatile: *Pather Dabi* of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, written using the plot drawn on the basis of his Burma sojourn, had already been published (1936). The people of Bengal had been regularly reading the novel when it was coming in serials from the house of Sir Asutosh Mukherjee. No work was ever written in the past with such a naked criticism of the double standard of the British and the Indian capitalists in Burma. The entire Bengali youth was mad to get a copy of *Pather Dabi* since they saw in the hero Sabyasachi their own ideal figures (*Golden Book of Sarat Chandra* 1977). In the background of what I have stated so far it is understandable why this novel was proscribed in the year 1927.

One must understand that the INC accommodated a large number streams within its fold; by virtue of this inner strength, the Congress was in a position influence the people of Bengal who had otherwise had little faith in reforms and so called Dyarchy (Kulke & Rothermund 1986). The transfer of less important power like local administration did not impress them. They were interested in *Purna Swaraj*. Burma was found to be a dependable partner in this fight to acquire

the Full Freedom. N. C Banerjee was selected by the Congress so that the latest in Bengal politics could reach the people of Burma. Banerjee developed a keen friendship with U Ottama. The British Govt. in Burma and Bengal however did not appreciate the way Banerjee was publishing the news items of the maltreatment of the Bengali prisoners in the Burmese jails. As those news items were mostly printed before in the *Forward* of Bengal, the Government could not take any punitive action. However, Banerjee's presence in Rangoon ultimately became a matter of grave concern. He had to leave Rangoon in 1927, the year of the proscription of *Pather Dabi*. The Bengali book *Viplaber Padacinha* (Foot steps of Revolution) written by Bhupendra kumar Datta, yet another revolutionary who was jailed in Burma, contains interesting episodes of how the Bengali prisoners in various jails of Burma tried to smuggle news in and out of the prisons. Datta lived in various jails of Burma when Subhas Chandra, Trailokya Chakravarty and Harikumar Chakravarty were also imprisoned in Burma. Import of printed materials from Bengal to Burma came under constant watch by the British intelligence. The concentration of Bengalis in the region of Burma had always been a matter of concern for the British. Activities of Bengalis in urban centers of Burma were watched while measures were undertaken to control the free movements of people. The Sedition Committee Report published in 1917 took note of this "menace" of unwanted Indians. It is known that when ships left Calcutta ports, passengers were ordered to be present in the ship long ahead, sometime two-three days before the steamer started for Rangoon. It is in these years of mid 1920s that Bills were brought in the Legislative Council to halt the free wave of immigration from coastal provinces of British India, including Bengal.

III

Separation and Repercussion on Bengal

In the context of what has been described above, it is no wonder that the issue of separation of Burma from India caused a great anger in Calcutta and Rangoon. The idea of separating Burma from India was not a new idea; it had always been there ever since the Annexation of 1886. In fact the country was annexed to be separated. A large section of the Burmese population wanted separation; there was a Separation league which propagated the idea. But at the same time, a large section of Burmans wanted to remain united with India and urged the British Govt. to award the same reforms that had been awarded to India. The scope of the present paper does not include the agenda of separation as such. But suffice to add that separation came as a shock to many Bengalis who not only lived in Burma, but also those who lived in Bengal itself. The leading Bengali journals like – *Bangabani* and *Pravasi* raised their

voices against the separation. We have already mentioned *Bangabani*'s role in bringing out *Pather Dabi* in serial forms before it was finally published in 1926. The voice of protest was heard through the lines of *Modern Review*, the reputed journal of Bengal. Ramananda Chattopadhyay, a close friend and admirer of Tagore acted as the editor. The restrictive measures in the immigration was seen as an pre-emptive measure, and preparation for separation. The voice heard in the Bengali *Pravasi* and *Bangbani* are more interesting. For example an article in *Pravasi* (1928, B.E 1335 Sravan, vol. 28: 622) states that Burma should remain a part of India. The article quoted the opinion of U Ottama who vigorously defended the attachment with India, as India was the birth place of Lord Buddha. Yet in another article (B.E1335, Phalgun: 745-46) it was reported that the Simon Commission's plan to separate Burma from India was aimed at actually separating the people of Burma from India. For the people of Bengal it was seen as a mental separation. It was pointed out that the list of passengers of steamer plying between Calcutta and Rangoon show that most of the third class passengers were not from Bengal. Therefore immigration of Bengalis could not have been the real reason. The main design behind the plan was to separate the people who were tied up in a knot of religious and cultural brotherhood. The *Pravasi* of 1338 from the month of Chaitra (vol. 31, pt. 2: 862), gave a report of celebration of Rabindranath's birthday in Rangoon. Another article of *Pravasi* (B.E.1334, Kartik: 37-39) reports of wooden craft of Burma. This indicates the attention of the Bengali people given to the inborn talent of the Burmese craftsmen. The author was one Kedarnath Chattopadhyaya. Another article published in 1341 (B.E 1341. vol.34 Pt. 2: 458) also raised its voice against the separation. Bhikkhu U Ottama was seen as a Hindu as well as Buddhist. It gave its consent to elect U Ottama as the President of the Hindu Mahasabha. Indeed Ottama was elected as the President of the Hindu Mahasabha. Another article in *Pravasi* (1339, vol. 32, pt. 1, p. 563) says that one Ma Gyi affiliated to the *Wunathanu* Athin Party raised her voice against the separation. This is quite understandable as we know from the works of P. Herbert (*The Hsaya San Rebellion Reapprised*) Maung Maung and R. Taylor that it were the *Wunthanu Athins* who popularized the idea of a grass root protest along the line of principle of Dhamma. The *Dhammakatikas* preached the method of protest which has astonishing similarity with the Gandhian method of practicing *Satyagraha*. Another article of *Pravasi* (B.E. 1339, vol. 32, pt. 2, pp. 835-837) has a very critical tone. The author is a Bengali lady, named Suruchibala. Like thousands of Bengalis she also lived in Burma. Her critical view made the Indians (including Bengalis) responsible for the anti-India mood that captured Burma in 1920s. She was of the opinion that most of the Bengalis lived in Burma in order to prosper themselves without taking any interest in understanding the Burmese people. At the same time,

she also refers to the fact that the Burmese people feel much attached to India, as India is the home of their beloved Buddha.

A deep feeling of kinship nurtured by the Burmese made the Indians possible to have a comfortable life in Burma.

U Ottama himself wrote in a monograph that the separation of Burma would hit the Burmese more seriously than it would hit Indians. The monograph, *The Case against the Separation of Burma from India. A Statement by Ottama Bhikkhu of Burma* was published from Calcutta. He said that Burma should maintain equal friendship with India and China; this was needed for Burma's own political and economic survival. U Ottama had already attended the Madras session of the Indian National Congress (in 1927) where he vigorously defended his case. U Ottama maintained contacts with Pravartak Sangha of Chandernagor. This Sangha or organization was founded by the great revolutionary, Matilal Roy. Of course the French dominated Chandernagor where the Bengali extremists could easily take refuge was found to be the most suitable place. The foundation of this organization in 1920 made it possible that seditious literatures published outside India (America, France) could enter India (Asok K. Roy, 2001:78).

Earlier I have mentioned that the radicalization of the Congress in Bengal built a separating wall between Mahatma Gandhi and the Congressmen from Bengal (Sisson & Wolpert 1988). Yet, as a great strategist Mahatma Gandhi thought how to bind Burma with India at this crucial stage of the nationalist struggle. In March 1929 he himself was in Burma, where he went not only to collect money for the National Fund (Congress Fund), but also to feel the political pulse of Burma regarding the question of Separation, Federation or further attachment. He himself carefully dealt the issue and was very cautious as not to hurt the sentiment of the Burmese people. Still his stake in Burma was very high as a large number of active Congress members did not endorse the Separation plan. They criticized the Government of ignoring the public opinion in Burma by wooing only the nationalist Burmans. Complain was also raised by them of blocking the Indian economic interest in Burma. M.M Rafi was extremely vocal in this protest move. Bengal, Eastern Bengal in particular, had an economic stake in Burma. A large number of passengers from Eastern part of Bengal used to sail from Bengal to Burma by steamers ran by Bengali owners. With the ever growing restrictions in the free movement of the people, the steamers were losing numbers of passengers.

One of them was Jatindramohan Sengupta. Factionalism and feud within Congress members from Bengal was a common problem those days. Subhas Chandra Bose and Jatindramohan

Sengupta were at loggerheads. Gandhiji was quite aware of his influence among the Burmese population, and of course among the Indian National Congress members of the Burma Congress Committee which was set up in Burma by his close friend Dr. P.J. Mehta. When Gandhiji visited Burma in 1929 (March) he felt that the large section of the Burmese people wanted to get rid of this unnatural Indian tie. Gandhiji too was of the opinion that Burma was irrationally tagged with India. Historically Burma was never a part of Bharatvarsa. At the same time, Gandhiji like Rabindranath felt the need to build up a solid friendship between India and Burma in which both the countries could use their common Buddhist heritage as the pillar (M. Desai 1929). Indeed he stressed the same need when he was in Ceylon in the year 1927. He was aware of the economic dependence of the poor Burmese peasants on the India money lenders (Chettiers for example). He was also aware of the growing Burmanisation trend which created a division between the domiciled Indians and the Burmans. Indian business community's interest in Burma and their involvement in "buying" Burmese politicians were in the air in those days. He knew quite all that Burma was going to be separated from India very soon. Yet, he tried to do his best to stop it. He always said that Burma would be left alone to decide whether she should remain attached to India, separated from India immediately, or separated in future. In spite of this Mahatma Gandhi did not lose time to "exploit" the Bengal-Burma relation in which he requested Jatindramohan to make a stop over in Rangoon and speak against the Separation plan. Jatindramohan did that and a large crowd assembled in Rangoon to listen him. Harinarayan Chattopadhyay in his Bengali book *Arakan* has described this event. But, this event of Jatindramohan's visit has remained unforgettable through the book by the British administrator, Morris Collis. Collis wrote a book *Trials in Burma* (M. Collis 1937) in which he described the event of Jatindramohan's visit, his arrest for the seditious speech, and his Trials. Jatindramohan was imprisoned only for a week.

Conclusion

Bengal and Burma could not remain together, since the province of Burma was separated from India, though for the benefit of the British administration many arrangements were kept as it was before 1937. However, after the Burma Round table Conference held in London in early 1930s there left no doubt that Burma was going to be taken out of the British Indian Empire. It would be only British Burma. The Government of Burma Act was passed and the formal separation was executed in the month of April 1937. Burma in 1940s again came very close to Bengal. This lies in a precarious situation. In Bengal a large section of people lost faith in Mahatma Gandhi and wanted to utilize the pre-war international situation. Burma rejected the path of step-by-step constitutional reforms. The Dominion Status within the British Empire

was not acceptable for a large section of the Bengali people. Subhas Chandra Bose, who was twice (1938 & 1939) the President of the Indian national Congress, symbolized this Bengali school of political thought. He had followers in various parts of India as well. His book *The Indian Struggle* was banned in Burma. He developed a very close friendship with eminent nationalist leaders of Burma, Dr. Ba Maw (a Calcutta University Graduate) and General Aung San. The Thakin philosophy and the political formulas which the Dobama Thakin activists (for Dobama Movement see Khin Yi, 1988) were pursuing were very similar to those ideologies which Subhas Chandra preached. It is not within the scope of my contribution to deal with the subject of their friendship or for that matter Subhas Chandra's activities in Burma in 1940s (J Becka 1983 & H.B Zoellner 2000). But, it should be added that the concept of Dharma (Righteousness) which Bankim Chandra gave birth, and which Mahatma Gandhi preached throughout his life, continued to inspire the people of Bengal and Burma. According to the concept of Dharma the occupation of motherland by alien power was an act of *Adharma* (unrighteous and illegal). The concept of motherland was extremely popular among the Dobama activists. The way in which the Burmese nationalists ignored the question of Separation and went forward taking India (especially Bengal) as partner indicates the prudent policy of the Burmese nationalists. Aung San in 1940 while visiting the Ramgarh session of the Indian national Congress visited both the camps of the Indian National Congress. He was not only in the official session with Maulana Abul Kalam Azad as the President which was conveying under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, Aung San also visited the Anti-Compromise Camp which was in business in the same place, Ramgarh (Becka 1983). It hardly needs to add that it was Subhas Chandra Bose, an expelled member of the Congress who was organizing the camp. The rest is also History.

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