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## Aung San Suu Kyi's Visit to India: Some Observations from a Burmese Exile

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Guest Colum by Dr. Tint Swe

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's India visit was essentially an impetus for the next phase of developing India-Burma relations. The relation is diplomatically termed excellent by both governments of two nations. But Indian media did not fail to make headlines such as "I was saddened that India had moved away from us: Suu Kyi."

Nonetheless one major newspaper lamented that it was not fair to make such remarks. But Daw Suu made clarification on the issue in the much-watched TV interviews. She has right to say so and did not conceal her justifiable emotion and at the same time she also said she has buried the past hoping for better and brighter Burma-India relations.

Her central message during the 6-day India visit was that democracy was not yet restored in Burma and it could be the final phase which might be more difficult and if not managed appropriately it might go wrong. For that Aung San Suu Kyi, at least twice, appealed to India to stand by the people of Burma at this complicated point of time. Her people are eager to see India's assurance in response to her appeal.

In any event Indian government did all it could for her visit. One of these was the arrangement for her return journey. An Indian special aircraft carrying her landed a day before the Air Force One at Yangon airport. It helped Aung San Suu Kyi to prepare her homework before receiving the President of the United States. When she was in Delhi the Indian President was believed to be busy to grant an audience to her at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. It is to be noted that the Prime Minister of India did not visit Aung San Suu Kyi's residence because of Indian protocol. However, the British Premier David Cameron, US President Obama came to number 54 University Avenue in Bahan Township, Yangon.

Although the MEA press advisory excluded Aung San Suu Kyi's meeting with her people, the community event was seen as a success in the hearts of thousands of Burmese refugees in India. In the West Delhi, the colourful Chin, Kuki, Naga, Arakan, Karen and other ethnic refugees and activists welcomed her with much enthusiasm. With her sense of humour she remarked that colours were better than one colour which reminded one party rule of the past and one-party dominance of the present. In front of different ethnic nationalities she emphasized on federalism and the significance of Pang Long spirit. Aung San Suu Kyi's speech given to the community was not only for Burmese there but also for Burmese origin Indians who were so delighted to hear that she will work hard for them too.

Suu Kyi also visited the Prospect Burma School which is merely a tiny education center for young Burmese refugee students and managed partly by her Nobel Peace Prize money. She talked about extra-curricular learning. As she was aware of Kachin refugees who did not show up she expressed that she wanted them to come and talk to her because resentment if kept without expression may grow day by day. She believed that all differences can be resolved through dialogue and negotiations.

One regrettable moment was that security restrictions were too tight and media was not allowed to cover the Oxford School in Vikas Puri where the community meeting took place. Although the India protocol and security officials of the highest level had agreed to the given media list, the Burmese and Indian media persons were barred to enter. Conversely the recently relaxed Burmese media took credit as the American President's Rangoon show was not that restricted. On the morning of 12th November young Burmese women and men waited for hours to greet Aung San Suu Kyi at the Indira Gandhi international airport. To their disappointment she was taken to the hotel so hastily before she could say hello to her supporters. On that afternoon Aung San Suu Kyi had no official engagement.

One of the fundamental needs to rebuild Burma is education and India appropriately responded by signing the MoU between the University of Calcutta and Yangon University which was the result of the Indian Prime Minister's visit to Burma in May 2012. Likewise two days after Barak Obama left Rangoon the American Institute of International Education (IIE) selected nine American Universities to help Burma's higher education. America which came to Burma later than India is doing better in this respect.

Aung San Suu Kyi came to India on an invitation from India. That is a significant sign of change from India's side because, according to her, India turned away from the people of Burma during the difficult times and she hoped India will support now. It will be too early to expect Indian government's support. That was why Aung San Suu Kyi emphasized that if not the governments the peoples of both countries must team up for lasting friendship. The people of India were always supportive during the last two decades. Unfortunately their voices did not go beyond Jantar Mantar and out of the small conference halls like India International Center, JNU, Gandhi Peace Foundation etc.

It is a fact that the path to genuine democracy in Burma is being blocked by the controversial constitution. Apart from border security, trade and infrastructure projects India should pay attention on that issue because this is the area where India can do best. In history an Indian jurist, Sir Benegal Narsing Rau helped draft the 1947 constitution of Burma while Aung San was alive. Burmese people are accustomed to

Indian constitution and judicial system. “The upcoming general election due in 2015 won’t be fair even if it was free if held under 2008 constitution”, Aung San Suu Kyi said in New Delhi.

Another good signal is that the visit indicates that India has come out of 20-year old one-way approach towards Burma. India has looked Burma habitually from the security angle and dealt with only the military. In the business sector India is working so far only with government holdings. It is believed that Aung San Suu Kyi tried to convince Indian decision makers for a realistic policy on Burma. Not only the government and the businessmen but also the people of India will have to establish relations with Burmese civilians which Aung San Suu Kyi has personally recommended. Equally Indian investment and business houses should be more responsible and help the middle class to develop and create jobs for the ordinary people of Burma to benefit.

Her visit was mutually designed with formalities followed by home coming events before the official meetings. The final part revealed India’s success story and she wanted the Indian expertise for rebuilding Burma. Although the fruits of the official meetings cannot be expected soon because of India’s traditional decision making pace, the outcome of her visits to technological institutions and agricultural development will be seen very soon in Burma. She laid importance of women’s role at Lady Shri Ram College and Papasanipalli in Andhra Pradesh events. It is said that the India-supported people friendly projects will begin in her constituency, Kawhmu near Rangoon and rural Burma shortly.

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