

Cultural Bond between India and Myanmar: Perception from the Past

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Abstract: Geographically Myanmar shared a long border of over 1600 km with India. Being a neighbour, Myanmar, played a significant role in the spread of Indian culture, trade, commerce, philosophy, custom, religion practices and belief system through land to South East Asia countries. This paper focuses especially on cultural bond that existed in the ancient time between the people of India and Myanmar. It shows that cultured linkage between the countries of India and Myanmar based on their closes association with the historical kingdom and the impact of Buddhist philosophy. This paper is based on secondary sources and for the purpose historical analytical methodology has been applied.

Keywords: Culture, India, Myanmar, Buddhist.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Culture is the mirror of a society. It presents before the world those iconic characteristics of people within its ambit, which are the sign of their own identity. A cultural envelops ideas, works, planning, values and achievement of people of its domain. Especially, values and virtues occupy the foremost place in a culture. They are the result of a long-term process of thoughts and actions. They prove to be exemplary for generations to come. Along with guiding people for the best and their large scaled welfare, they cause a long term impact on those in its direct range. Hence, importance of culture in life is self-evident.

A nation's culture radishes in the hearts and in the soul of its people. So, cultural linkage of two different countries also binds strongly with common ideas and common thinking of the peoples of the countries. It is also a fact that the governments of these two countries took up ambitious deliberation to strengthen the cultural relation between India and its neighbour Myanmar. The two countries are the land of magnificent cultures. The bilateral relations between India and Myanmar are based on deep rooted cultural, religious and neighbourly association between the people of the two countries. The common heritage of Buddhism and the philosophy of compassion, tolerance, non-violence and peace have laid strong foundations of this relationship.

II. METHODOLOGY

The data in the form of information are collected from various secondary sources and an analysis of this paper is based on those data. Historical analytical methodology has been employed in this paper. This paper is with the objective of revealing the cultural bond that existed in the ancient time between the people of India and Myanmar taking various factor into consideration that contributed for such contacts.

III. DISCUSSION

Cultural bond between India and Myanmar in the past: Geographically Myanmar shared a long land border of over 1600km with India as well as a maritime boundary in the bay of Bengal. Four North-eastern states viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram share international boundary with Myanmar. Both the countries share a heritage of religious, linguistic and ethnic ties due to the proximity of ethnic and cultural relation of the people of India in general and the people of north -east India in particular and Myanmar.

India's relation with South East Asian countries including Myanmar is an age-old phenomenon. Historically, it has its origin in culture and trade. The Mauryan Emperor, Asoka (ruling period 273-232 BCE) sent his representatives to various countries in South East Asia and helped to spread Buddhism in these countries. Even today, Myanmar is culturally and predominantly Buddhist in nature. Culturally, Myanmar as country of South East Asia is in close proximity with India and after independence, India had lost its connectivity with South East Asia to a certain extent. In the year 1967, the association of South East Asia Nations had been set up as a common platform for some South East Asia countries. Now it has 10 full members which geographically exist in the South East Asia region. ¹

India and Myanmar share close cultural relation ties. Burma, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar today [nomenclature of the both of which emerged from the Bamar ethnic group, which further emerged from the unique and historical blend of the early tribes that reached in the region from India like Piyu, from Tibet like Lisu and from China like Miao, and Myanmar is itself in a way or the other the literary formation of the word Burma], is one of the oldest country of the South Asian region with its old and wonderful history and civilization. Before it got its name as Burma it was, in fact, Bagan a varied pronunciation of Pagan [a present day Burmese name of a city] that is again derived from Pukam origin of which could be well found in the Pali word Arimaddana-Pura, the city of temples...It is also said that Bamar is derived from the *Vedic-Hindu* word *Brahmin* [related to priestly class]; therefore, Burma is itself a variation of the word *Brahmin*. There are evidences of hardworking inhabitants in this region since eleven thousands BC [the Stone Age]. It is also evident from the engravings on a number of stones and cave-paintings that people of the region of today's Myanmar were engaged in nature care [plantation and harvest growing] and animal rearing [domestication] in ancient period [between 10000-6000 BC] as is evident from the cave paintings near Taunggyi city, the current capital of Shan province of Myanmar. This also reflects people's engagement in developing art, caring for environment and carrying out a number of other constructive works even in those days. Further, it has had in its splendid history the famous *Pagan Empire*, known as the *Pagan Dynasty* also [the first kingdom to unify during its rule for approximately 250 year between 1044 and 1287 AD the regions that would later constitute Burma and Myanmar of the day, and the *Taungoo Dynasty*, particularly responsible for creating a legal and political system during its reign of approximately 266 year between 1486 and 1752 AD in the region in the medieval period while the *Konbaung Dynasty*, the last dynasty, which ruled Burma from 1752 to 1885 AD and created the second largest empire in the history of the region, the Burmese history, and continued the administrative reforms begun by the *Toungoo Dynasty* in the Nineteenth Century AD in particular.²

This series of events undoubtedly proves that like India the region of Myanmar was stepping forward on the pathway to development since ancient time. People of the region were marching ahead with a spirit of mutual understanding, harmony, co-operation and co-ordination, which is self-proved from unprecedented amalgamation and unity of tribes, arrived in the region especially from India, China and Tibet. This also eventually endorses the presence of a culture in Myanmar of which harmony, co-operation, co-ordination and acceptability were the leading features, quite similar to the qualities of Indian culture. Hence, without a doubt it is easy to be familiar with reality of common qualities of cultures of India and Myanmar. Along with this, these foremost features of the culture of Myanmar, like those of Indian culture, have remained ideal for others. Along with this, developed art and method of music [known as the multileveled hierarchical system, melodious and combined with verses into songs], singing [retain melodic and stylistic *patterns* in particular] and dancing [especially traditional dance started during the Pyu period in 802 AD through ingenious musical instruments], creating literature [both in poetry and prose and focusing local folklore and culture, and using words from Pali], dressing [quite typical, in fact adopting *lungi* from India, being wore by both, man and woman], games [mainly the Chinlone as an indigenous sport, utilizing a rattan ball and it is played using especially the feet and the knees, but the head and the arms may also be used except one's hands] and cuisines [a good combination of Indian, Chinese and Thai cuisines with domestic ethnic cuisines] of Myanmar have been unique for hundreds of years and this state of affair is also similar to India. And national epic of Burma, the *Yama Zatdaw* is an adoption of Indian's Ramayana.³ Burmese traditions and many ceremonies, wedding and funeral, celebrations and people's respect for social values, [morality and ethics in particular], and making them the part of day-to-day practices could also be equated with those practiced in India. Like Bharat, convention of faith and devotion, mutual respect and goodwill too are the vital features of the culture of Myanmar.

Along with other elements, local-indigenous beliefs and traditions, people's conduct, way of thinking and working, and their dynamism in particular, the Indian philosophy have also played a vital role in the development of features of the culture of Myanmar. It is entirely true that the basic source or the basis of development of cultures of India and Myanmar, both, remained the Indian philosophical tradition, the way of life and values. In this process the *Vedic-Hindu* philosophy, traditions and values have contributed significantly. They left a deep impression on life and works of people of the region, which could categorically be observed even today from daily practices of people of Myanmar. Later since the first half of the Third Century BC Buddhism started becoming nucleus in life and practices of the people of Burma. It was the time of reign of the Great Mauryan King Ashoka in India. Ashoka, the Great, sent the two, Sona and Uttra, in 228 BC to *Suwarnabhoomi* [Burma] to propagate Buddhism there. Buddhism undoubtedly accorded a new dimension to the culture of Burma [Myanmar], deeply affected socio-religious life of the region.⁴ It is still so, which could be well comprehended from the number of Buddhist monks and nuns and temples in Myanmar. The basis of cultures of both the countries, Indian philosophy indeed, has for thousands of years contributed predominantly in developing mutual relations between the two, India and Myanmar. History of deep mutual relations between them speaks by itself. It is glorious, magnificent and inspirational, and is available in many of socio-religious treatises, especially in the Buddhist scriptures of Myanmar.

The relation between India and Myanmar are, in fact, very old stretching back to centuries even millennia. The land of Myanmar too has a name in Sanskrit, Suvarnabhumi (meaning land of gold or golden land). The cultural linkage in terms of spread of Buddhism from India to Myanmar, and settlement of large number of people of Indian origin in Myanmar the two countries. There are still many Hindu shrines in Myanmar.

During British rule, Myanmar, then called Burma, was a part of British India. Some of the note Indian Freedom fighters like Bal Gangadhar Tilak were imprisoned in Mandalay in Burma. From this jail, Tilak composed one of his famous book called *Gita Rahasya* (secret of Gita). The father of modern Burma, Aung San (father of Aung San Sun Kyi) too had good relations with Indian freedom fighters like Jawaharlal Nehru. The common linkages were however shattered after the military junta came into power in 1960s, which nationalized Indian enterprises and expelled many Indian from Burma. However, it was only in 1990s, India shed idealism and adopted a pragmatic approach to develop relations between India and Military Government of Burma at it viewed Myanmar not only as a gateway to SE Asia and ASEAN, but also as an important country for trade and strategic interests. Hence India set the tone of a new era in which old difference are transformed into new cordialities for enhancing cultural ties bilaterally. Now the democratic deficit in Myanmar's politics is warning. India is initiating at all levels to increase bonhomie between India and Myanmar, "India and Myanmar are national partners linked by geography and history".⁵

Cultures of both the countries have also contributed significantly in developing their mutual economic co-operation, besides social relation. This process still continues and can be noticed from current economic-commercial relations between India and Myanmar. Currently, India is the fourth largest trading partner of Myanmar after Thailand, China and Singapore. Hindustan is the second largest exporter of goods to Myanmar after Thailand, and it absorbs twenty-five percent of total exports of Burma. Further, India is the seventh most important source of imports from Myanmar.

India and Myanmar are not just the two neighbours, but the people of both the countries have somehow blood relations also. They are, therefore, inseparable from one-another. Further, they have, for thousands of years, been connected to one-another on the strength of a combined culture –values, traditions and rituals. A combination emerged on the basis of cultural values does not break easily. That is why; interests of people of India and Myanmar are naturally common and no one can separate them from one-another. It is, therefore, the demand of time that people of both the countries taking it as their responsibility come forward, having the common features of cultures of the both, India and Myanmar as the nuclei, to smoothen social, political and economic relations between them. It is also necessary and inevitable in these days of rapidly growing process of development at global level that they work in this direction for the security and balance in the region. It will pave the way to the common welfare and progress of people of both the countries and will also accord strength to all the positive and constructive efforts being made for peace in the world.

IV. CONCLUSION

Cultural aspects have always been a building factor in the strained relations between countries. Myanmar is considered as a crucial neighbour for India in the east. Undisputedly, India has to promote a good, stable bond with South East Asia in general and Myanmar in particular. The usage of various modern technologies of communication would help in re-energizing the age-old cultural relations. In the present age of globalization where there is increasing cultural assimilation, there is scope for the reshaping the ancient cultural contacts. This would greatly contribute in the strengthening of social aspect of the India-Myanmar relations.

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