

THE NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE IN BURMA

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Abstract

The nonviolent struggle in Burma, started with the Second World War, which marked a turning point as Burmese nationalists refused to aid British war efforts unless they received a promise of independence in return for their support. But with this many new faces emerged with regard to the families and others and one face which emerged out of them was of Aung San, the magnetic commander of the army whose family had been in opposition to British rule since annexation of the country in 1886. But with the death of Aung San the new leadership emerged in the form of Aung San Suu Kyi later on who followed the path of Gandhian Non-violence and practically showcased the true nonviolent soldier of the country. The present paper tried to look into different situations how a new Non-violent path was practically can be applied and how Gandhian philosophy is still relevant.

Keyword: Gandhi, Non-violence, Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma, China, Japan

Introduction: With the world wars 1 and 2, the world has seen so many changes in the formation of different ideologies and working of the governments, some were able to change themselves with the passage of time but a few still stick to the old orthodox kind of governments with the hold of army and autocratic functioning and destroying the concept of rights and basic duties of state. In this segment, the case of Burma which was on the verge of the change of leadership after the world war 2 and with a hope of getting freedom with new leadership was staged down by the mighty forces for their own benefits.

Objective:

- The aim of the paper is to see how a new Non-violent approach and path can be practically applied
- To check the relevance of the Gandhian Philosophy for the present times
- How a non-violent approach can change the hearts of others

The nonviolent struggle in Burma, started with the Second World War, which marked a turning point as Burmese nationalists refused to aid British war efforts unless they received a promise of independence in return for their support. Young activists, dreaming of a free Burma, traveled to China and Japan in search of resources of training. They returned as the Thirty Comrades, ready to form an independence army. Among the Thirty Comrades was Aung San, the magnetic commander of the army whose family had been in opposition to British rule since annexation of the country in 1886. Aung San and the other nationalists had returned to Burma with Japanese troops, who were to help them to gain independence. He along with his fellow nationalists formed the underground Anti-Fascist people's Freedom League (AFPFL), and he was astutely able to use the unity of the league to obtain a position on Burma's Executive Council in 1946; Aung San had essentially become the nation's prime minister, although the office was still subject to British rule. From his newfound position, he hammered out an agreement in London, with British Prime Minister Clement Atlee, that provided for Burmese independence by 1948. Subsequently, Aung San's party won a majority of seats in the elections that were held for a constitutional assembly. The British were successfully removed from Burmese soil by 1947, but, although Burma was declared free, the nature of its freedom was elusive. Aung San would have become the country's first elected Prime Minister had he and his cabinet not been gunned down in that same year by agents of his principal rival. Martyred at thirty-two years of age, he left behind a widow and three children, among them a two-year-old daughter (Suu Kyi, later on who became the nonviolent soldier of the country). After his death, there was chaos, insurrection, communist insurgency, official corruption and political chicanery.

Aung San's daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, spend her early fifteen years of age itself in Burma, later on she came to India with her mother and she also served as the first woman as head of a Burmese diplomatic mission. Here she became familiar with the campaigns and writings of Gandhi and obtained insights that she would bring into play years later. Along with the influence of Gandhi, she was very much influenced by his father's writings, as she started writing about his father by 1984. And by 1988, she was back to her homeland, first to Rangoon, as her mother was ill at that time.

In 1988, the rule was under the General Ne Win, who was taking very strict and strong measures so that no one could raise voice against his regime. Suu Kyi's made her first public presentation on 26th August 1988, before a crowd of half million listeners at the immense multi-tiered and gold-gilded Shwedagon Pagoda, the most sacred of Burma's innumerable shrines (said to have been built 2,500 years ago). She provided a point of focus for popular disenchantment by directing the fury of the people toward democratic reclaim through coherent nonviolence. The sincerity of her convictions and the memories of

her father dazzled the crowds that hoped she would carry on his struggle. Beginning at that moment, Suu Kyi would rapidly gain attention as the most effective leader of the broad, popular movement to end Burma's military dictatorship and establish democracy and human rights. Perhaps most telling was the way in which she held high regard for the military in one hand, while bidding for rights and democracy with the other. She was able to straddle both the civil and military spheres of society because of her own personal history, speaking of her attachment to the military and how soldiers had cared for her as a child.

On 24th September 1988, Suu Kyi became one of the founders of the National League of Democracy (NLD), as well as its general secretary. Propounding the 'middle path' of nonviolent struggle and echoing her father's policies she also insisted on advocating for the rights of the ethnic non-Burmese nationalities in the country as well as the Burmese. She called for a new constitution to be drafted with the participation of every political element – one that would take into account the reasonable demands of all the people.ⁱ

In less than one year, between August 1988 and July 1989, Suu Kyi gave a thousand speeches, sometimes traveling by bullock cart, small boat or bicycle. By August 1989, the nonviolent prodemocracy movement had grown to 2 million dues-paying members out of a population of 40 million.ⁱⁱ Suu Kyi's potent ideas about nonviolent struggle, justice, democracy, nationalism and human rights were spread by a video camera that was carried without much notice by an assistant. After videotaping her addresses, the videotapes were copied and recopied; Suu Kyi's speeches were distributed clandestinely into the most isolated sections of the country. Used to reduce the expenses incurred by the movement, the technology of Japanese-built videos served a function that the engineers who had designed them could not have imagined: they were 'ready-made to undermine the political monopoly of an authoritarian regime', and many persons were willing to pay three or four days' wages to buy one of the banned tapes.ⁱⁱⁱ Thousands consistently defied the ban on the assembly of more than four persons in order to hear Suu Kyi speak, a tiger orchid tucked in her hair. Next to loudspeakers, dozens of Burmese could be seen holding voice recorders and taping every word on cassettes that would multiply in number as they, too, were reproduced, the only other medium through which her message could be communicated. 'Word spreads', commented a chemist, 'from mouth to mouth.'^{iv} At rallies, buttons were passed out showing a photograph of her father with the tiny visage of his daughter perched on his shoulder.^v

Truth: The Ultimate Reality: The military government, on 20th July 1989, arrested forty-two key leaders of the National League of Democracy and placed Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest. An additional 2,000 party activists were also detained. When Suu Kyi was advised that SLORC had ordered her restrained, she turned to the men who had informed her and said, "I do not hold this against you." Brining a pitcher of water and drinking glass, she poured drinks for perhaps thirty friends and supporters who had gathered at her home for her impending arrest, yet her chief concern seemed to be to comfort them. One supporter recalls, "At 10 o'clock that night we were sent to the Insein jail. Aung San Suu accompanied us to the car. Her last words to us were those of encouragement... "Truth will come one day."^{vi} Forced to remain within her family compound, eleven truckloads of troops were stationed outside her house and forced her back inside when she tried to visit a mausoleum.

Further, as she was maturing in her understanding of peace, politics and perhaps most importantly in her understanding of what the people of Burma wanted in their future, she early had realized that it was the most basic of human yearnings inspiring people to speak out that were at the root of a peaceable resolution. The words of tolerance, dignity, freedom and security came to hold particular significance for Suu Kyi. She realized fully that there could be no peace without human security and that such security was not based in weaponry, but was concerned with life and dignity. Accordingly, the actions she took and the words she spoke reflected her understanding that the people of Burma were searching for freedom from fear and want of basic necessities. Besides, Suu Kyi emphasized the need for tolerance. Her predisposition to Gandhian strategies was evident in her emphasis on keeping open the channels of communication with SLORC and her bid for all parties involved to 'meet new challenges without resorting to intransigence or violence.'^{vii}

Thus, Suu Kyi's inspiration led to innovative actions. Perhaps the best example of nonviolent ingenuity was the monks' boycott. Following an incident in August 1990 in which two monks were killed and two lay persons injured, a group of Buddhist monks decided to apply their own distinct nonviolent sanctions. In Mandalay, the monks took the most serious steps that members of the clergy could take when they decided to boycott all dealings with Burmese military officials and their families. Refusing even the interaction of accepting alms from them, they also declined to officiate at weddings or funerals. This 'excommunication' had dire implications, putting the sincere believer in a grave predicament in the present life. By preventing their ability to attain spiritual worthiness, the monks were helping guarantee a painful rebirth in the next. The monks declared the government and military to be an abomination. Religious military families were visibly affected by this rejection. The boycott spread from Mandalay, South to Rangoon and out to other parts of Burma before it was crushed by a brutal military clampdown.^{viii}

Now, the question was what then had terrified the military dictators about a diminutive intellectual, a community of monks and student activists? Suu Kyi's frequent citing of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. invoked a form of power that they – with all their military equipment, coercion and repression – could neither purchase nor possess. Even in Burma,

immured against the world, Suu Kyi's words conjured up nonviolent tools against which military machines lose power. Justifiably, the unelected dictators would be fearful at her invocation of such potent images.

The world community stood as witness to the courage and conviction of Aung San Suu Kyi and the people of Burma, when she was awarded the Noble Prize for Peace in 1991. The Nobel Committee, accepting the nomination made by Vaclav Havel, stressed the significance of Suu Kyi's efforts in forging a nonviolent movement based on reconciliation. "She became the leader of a democratic opposition which employs nonviolent means to resist a regime characterized by brutality," the official announcement read. "Suu Kyi's struggle is one of the most extraordinary examples of civil courage in Asia in recent decades."^{ix}

Despite a hunger strike by Suu Kyi in 1992, and the proclamation of eight former Nobel Peace Prize winners who gathered in Bangkok in 1993 to press for her release, the regime remained unmoved. Her supporters sometimes feared that the already slender women was starving to death.^x The 1994 visit, of US congressman Bill Richardson, the first outsider allowed to see her, was widely credited with her release in July 1995, six years after her house arrest. "I have always felt free", she told the British Broadcasting Corporation, "because they have not been able to do anything to what really matters – to my mind, my principles, what I believe in. They were not able to touch that. So I am free."^{xi}

In fact the actual meaning of Aung San Suu Kyi means "A Bright Collection of Strange Victories."^{xii} After Martin Luther King (Jr.) and Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi is another name which still shows the relevance of Gandhian techniques of non-violence in this violent world.

Conclusion:

As mentioned earlier that with the Noble Peace Prize announcement Dr. Aung San Suu Kyi has not only applied the non-violent approach in defending the democracy of her Nation but has also shown to the world that the Gandhian approach can be applied still but no need to have the patience and courage to do so.

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See Also: Mary, King, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.: The Power of Nonviolent Action, Op. Cit., pp. 391-396.