

BURMA AND INDIA

Some Aspects of Intellectual
Life under Colonialism

AUNG SAN SUU KYI



Knowledge
Exchange
Movement

KEM (Burma), 2011

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDY
Shimla

in association with
ALLIED PUBLISHERS PVT. LTD.
New Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras
Lucknow Hyderabad Ahmedabad

© Indian Institute of Advanced Study 1990

*All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form,
or by any means, without written permission of the publisher.*

First Published 1990

by the Secretary (Administration and Finance;)

for

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDY

Rashtra pati Nivas, Shimla 171005

in association with

ALLIED PUBLISHERS PRIVATE LIMITED

Prarthna Flats, 1st floor, Navrangpura, Ahmedabad 380009

15 J.N. Heredia Marg, Ballard Estate, Bombay 400038

3-5-1129 Kachiguda Cross Road, Hyderabad 500027

16A Ashok Marg, Patiala House, Lucknow 226001

5th Main Road, Gandhinagar, Bangalore 560009

17 Chittaranjan Avenue, Calcutta 700014

13/4 Asaf Ali Road, New Delhi 110002

751 Mount Road, Madras 600002

ISBN: 81-7023-134-5

Typeset by Navchetan Photoset Pvt. Ltd., and printed by Raj Bandhu
Industrial Co., C-61, Mayapuri Industrial Area, Phase II
New Delhi- 110064.

Foreword

Aung San Suu Kyi stayed at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study as a Fellow for no more than six months to produce this delightful book. A study of intellectual life in Burma under colonial rule, as reflected in literature, compared with the contemporaneous developments in India, becomes fascinating when the story is told in simple yet meaningful terms by an author who combines delicate sensibility for literature with robust appreciation for politics.

I have read this thin volume with great pleasure and I feel sure that others are bound to enjoy reading this book.

J. S. Grewal
DIRECTOR

Preface

WHEN I first proposed a study of intellectual life in Burma and India under colonialism, I had counted on spending one year on the project. However, my appointment as a fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study was delayed by the need for government clearance, and I found myself with only six months to work on a very broad and diffused subject. The limited time at my disposal, combined with the difficulty of obtaining the material I needed, has led to a much shorter study than I had originally planned.

My time at the Institute was interesting, happy and fruitful. I would like to record my sincere thanks to the director, consultant, administrative staff and fellows of the institute who contributed to the pleasantness of my brief stay at Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla.

Aung San Suu Kyi

Introduction

A COMPARATIVE study of the literature of two different nations can be a hazardous task fraught with the dangers of generalization, oversimplification and the temptation to find contrasts and similarities where none, in fact, exists. On the other hand, the comparative approach offers opportunities to highlight the salient characteristics of a particular tradition as well as to indicate those trends which might be considered the product of the human creative impulse independent of the national setting. Yet, the latter also take on forms which are decided by the social and political context in which they were given shape. Thus the treatment of love and religion, two of the most popular themes in the literature of many cultures, can differ not only between different societies but also between different periods in the same society reflecting changing values. Consequently, the study of literature is enhanced by an examination not only of the broader corpus of ideas, beliefs and creative thinking which make up the intellectual life of a society, but also of the political and social factors which have shaped this life.

In the course of the study of Burmese intellectual developments under colonialism, my interest was drawn to intellectual life in other Asian countries which had also gone through the colonial experience. Of these, India presented itself as the most obvious choice for a more detailed comparative study with Burma - the two countries had been ruled as part of the same British administration for several decades; while at the same time each preserved its own distinct character. Burma had been open to cultural influences from India since the early days of her history. Of these influences, the most important was Buddhism which became so integral a part of the Burmese ethos that it has become common to say: 'To be Burmese is to be Buddhist.' These early cultural and religious Indian imports were selected and adapted by the Burmese in a way which brings out the contrasting values of

the two societies. By the time of the British conquest of Burma cultural influences from India and other neighbours had long since matured, in some cases one might say hardened, into attributes of the distinctive culture of the Burmese. Thus, in comparing the intellectual traditions of the two countries, Buddhist concepts and ideas which had originally come from India could legitimately be treated as particularly Burmese in contrast to the predominantly Hindu attitudes of Indians.

The choice of India as one of the major components in a comparative study of intellectual traditions poses a considerable problem of selection. It would be impossible to give satisfactory attention to all the areas of the subcontinent in several tomes, let alone in one very slim volume. I have therefore, concentrated on those aspects which seem to offer interesting points of comparison with developments in Burma. It has not been possible to avoid the pitfalls of generalization and oversimplification mentioned earlier, but it is hoped that they might be balanced to some extent by the insights that are afforded by the comparative approach. I would like to make it clear that this study has been made in a speculative spirit: possible interpretations have been put forward without the intention to assert that they are the only plausible ones.

One

I

THE TIMES and circumstances under which India and Burma were incorporated into the British Empire were vastly different. It is not possible to recount the story of the British conquest of India with a few precise dates: it was a process which took over two hundred years stretching from the time the East India Company started exercising administrative powers over the settlements which grew up around their factories until 1858, when Victoria was proclaimed Queen Empress. British annexation of Burma, on the other hand, was accomplished in three clear-cut phases spread out over little more than half a century. The First Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-26 ended with Arakan and Tenasserim passing under British rule; the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852 added the province of Pegu to the British possessions; and, finally, the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885 led to the subjugation of the whole country and brought an end to the Burmese monarchy.¹ For the Burmese people it was a sudden and wholly unprecedented break with a past which had been turbulent and often unhappy, but which was nevertheless an irrefutable part of a recognized traditional order.

The annexations, subsequent to the first two Anglo-Burmese wars, had touched the pride of the Burmese but not seriously shaken their confidence. With their home in the central dry zone of modern Burma, they were, in spite of their Buddhism, a militant race accustomed to regarding the boundaries of their kingdom as a variable dependent on the ability of the individual monarch. Under powerful kings the Burmese would extend their sway over the Mons to the south, the Shans to the east and the Arakanese along the western coastline. On occasions they even penetrated into Manipur, Assam and Thailand. The last royal dynasty had been established by the military prowess of its founder, Alaungpaya, who had wrested control of lower Burma from the Mons in 1757, while Arakan had been conquered during

the reign of one of his sons, Bodawpaya, as late as 1789. Thus, the cession of Tenasserim, Arakan and the Pegu province to the British could be viewed as part of the waxing and waning cycle of the Burmese kingdom concomitant with the fortunes of war. But, as long as the king reigned in his royal capital, the symbol of Burmese freedom remained intact. As admitted even by an author who consciously focuses on the positive aspects of British rule, the people in the province of British Burma:

...looked to the King in Mandalay with respect and indeed reverence; they were proud that he still ruled but they showed no great anxiety to count among his subjects. The Talaings (Mons), the Arakanese, the Karens and the rest had at first been glad to see the English; as memories of anarchy and extortion faded, they, no doubt, like people in India, began to be less sure. But hardly any native of Burma was pleased by the outcome of the Third Burmese War.²

Thibaw, the last king at Mandalay, was one of the least competent monarchs in the history of Burma. He, or at any rate his queen, Supayalat, had instigated many well-known acts of atrocity from a narrow and ferocious impulse towards self-preservation. Nevertheless, their removal roused much patriotic indignation among the Burmese who lamented the exile of the royal couple in compositions, which have passed into the realm of literature as a recognized genre.

Conquest was an entirely new experience for the Burmese. Unlike the people of India, who had been subjected to successive waves of foreign invaders from the Northwest since their early history, the Burmese had not known any serious foreign intrusion other than a brief Mongol incursion which had destroyed Pagan in the thirteenth century. Later periods saw the three largest ethnic groups within the confines of the present Union of Burma (the Burmese, the Shans and the Mons) engaged in intermittent wars to

establish their supremacy. From these struggles the Burmese emerged as the paramount power by the sixteenth century. But even during the period of Shan ascendancy in Upper Burma the predominant cultural influence had been Burmese, and the Shan monarchs of Ava had become highly Burmanized. For close on a millennium, the Burmese had been firm in the Buddhist faith which provided a philosophy that could meet the challenges of other religions with supreme confidence. On the secular side, the monarchy, while weak in administration, had proved itself strong in battle often enough to have acquired the reputation of a considerable - one might almost say imperial - power in South-east Asia. Thus it was that, when the Burmese king considered himself the very equal of the English queen, his assurance was not so patently absurd as it might have appeared to those, who viewed the still medieval kingdom from the perspective of a western nation upheld by the technical achievements of the Industrial Revolution. Unfortunately, an indifference to developments in the outside world was a characteristic of the Burmese monarchs, who had traditionally held sway over the country from the landlocked heart of their kingdom.³ The sum of it was that the outcome of the third Anglo-Burmese War came as a rude shock to the Burmese: they hardly knew how to deal with the novel experience of complete political conquest, soon to be followed by cultural subjugation. For a few months after the fall of Mandalay, the British were undecided as to what they would do with their latest colonial acquisition, but by the beginning of 1886 the die was cast: 'Burma, so radically different from India, by force of circumstances became an appanage of the Indian Empire.'⁴

II

THE LAST quarter of the nineteenth century was a time when imperial attitudes hardened. The British came to assume the role of first citizens of the world with the unquestioned right to mould the destinies of the less fortunate:

The British were now exporting to their dominions a kind of package civilization, offered in competition with the local product, and backed by powerful service arrangements. Sometimes this was conscious policy... More often, though, it was instinctive or even incidental, and was seen by the British, if they saw it at all, simply as an aspect of historical determinism.

The indigenous cultures reacted variously to this assault. Some, like the Hindu and Muslim civilizations of India, yielded but did not break, treating the western culture as a transient phenomenon. Some, like the Burmese, simply took no notice.⁵

To yield without breaking was an attitude, both pragmatic and philosophical, which the people of India had long adopted in their encounters with foreign conquerors.

In this sense, they were better equipped than the Burmese to deal with the changes brought about by colonialism. But for the Indians also British rule spelt many unprecedented developments and breaks with the past. Muslim invaders had made India their home and over the centuries had become an integral part of the subcontinent, even though the line of demarcation between them and the Hindus remained strong and vivid.

For the British, on the other hand, India was a commercial outpost which, through a series of largely unpremeditated events, became a colonial territory to be ruled by an increasingly complex and impersonalized bureaucracy. It was very rare that any Englishman looked upon India as his home, even if the major part

of his life were spent in that country. This feeling of apartness increased in the later half of the nineteenth century with the development of the steamboat and the opening of the Suez canal. These made it possible for more English women to come out to India and make English homes for their menfolk, taking them further away from the people of the land they were ruling. But perhaps the single most important event that widened the gulf between the British and the Indians was the conflict of 1857, which the former regarded as the Sepoy Mutiny and the latter now define, as did Marx and Engels, as the First Indian War of Independence. The mutual violence and excess, generated by this conflict, added hostility and suspicion to the sense of aloofness and racial consciousness which were fast developing in the high noon of Victorian imperialism.

The racial factor was perhaps the most conspicuous feature of the relationship between the British and the Indians. The Muslim rulers had behaved with the arrogance of conquerors and indulged in bouts of religious persecution, but they had not asserted their superiority over the Hindus in aggressive terms of race and colour. In the words of an Indian journalist:

While colour-consciousness undeniably exists in Indian, its manifestations are not as abrasive or offensive as the colour consciousness of many European whites towards Africans and Asians... In European eyes... colour seems to have a special social connotation and, until recently, a special political significance: to be a coloured man was to be politically dependent on the European and to be socially his inferior.⁶

However, there had been a time in the early days of British association with India when the sense of racial superiority was not acute in white people. It had been a time when the length and amours of the voyage from England to India had forced lone men to spend many years away from their English families, when they

were more dependent on the local people for social intercourse, when it was not unknown for an Englishman to establish a long-term liaison with a local woman. It was also an era when the atmosphere of eighteenth-century liberalism prevailed, and ideas and attitudes were imported into India which were to pose serious challenges to many tenets of the Hindu faith. It was these challenges which sparked off the train of intellectual, social and religious speculation and activity that constituted the Indian Renaissance, a movement which was to influence much of Indian thinking and tactics during the years of colonial rule.

India in the nineteenth century has been described as a country 'afflicted with the diseases of discord, disunity, lethargy, infidelity, scepticism, irreligion and false religion, pedantism, slavishness, introversion, rigidity and man's inhumanity to man.'⁷ This is perhaps an overharsh judgement, but there is little doubt that many social practices then accepted in India as an integral part of Hindu mores - such as child marriage, sati and rigid caste discrimination - were inimical to humanitarian values and political progressiveness. It was the recognition of the fact that Hinduism was not simply a religion but a social philosophy pervading the lives of the majority of Indian peoples, which led those men concerned with social reform to interest themselves also with the reinterpretation of ancient Hindu texts.

Rammohun Roy, widely acknowledged as the 'Father of the Indian Renaissance' wrote to a friend:

...the present system of religion adhered to by the Hindus is not well calculated to promote their political interests... It is, I think, necessary that some changes should take place in their religion at least for the sake of their political advantage and social comfort.⁸

Born in 1772 to a Brahmin family, Roy possessed the classical attributes of the renaissance man - a questioning mind, a lively intellect, catholic tastes, the courage for innovation and the

command of several languages. Moreover, he had considerable financial resources, an undeniable asset for those who would bring about reform. Roy's most significant contribution in the socio-religious realm was the founding of the Brahmo Sabha, a movement which advocated a purified form of Hinduism, based on the Vedas and the Upanisads, theistic but rejecting idolatry, incorporating some of the ethics of the Christian West.

Rammohun Roy set the tone for the Indian Renaissance, which was essentially a search for ways and means of revitalizing the classical heritage of India, so that it could face the onslaught of new and alien forces without losing its individual character or failing to fulfil the demands of a rapidly changing society. Among the men who followed in the wake of Roy to make the renaissance a strong, influential movement spanning the whole of the nineteenth century and spilling into the twentieth were Keshub Chunder Sen, Swami Dayananda, I.C. Vidyasagar, M.C. Ranade, G.K. Gokhale, Sri Ramakrishna and his chief disciple Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghosh, Bankimchandra Chatterji, and, of course, Rabindranath Tagore. For many of these thinkers it was important that the social, religious and political aspects of reform should move together. Some put greater emphasis on one aspect, some on another, while others preferred a balance between all three. But, despite the differences in approach as well as tactics, the underlying purpose tended to be the same: to bring India into harmonious step with modern developments without losing her identity.

III

WHILE INDIAN intellectuals were caught up in accelerating attempts to master, absorb and adapt ideas imported from the West to meet the needs of their own country, the Burmese were still steeped in their traditional ways, lulled into a false sense of security by the military successes of the Konbaung dynasty founded by Alaungpaya. The second half of the eighteenth century and the greater part of the nineteenth century was a period when Burmese literature flourished, traditional forms elaborated and polished, contemporary imports adapted into the classical mould. The booty brought back from the victorious campaign against Thailand in 1769 had included works of drama, which introduced a genre that was to gain rapid popularity first among the literati centred on the royal court and later among the Burmese people in general. King Bodawpaya who came to the throne in 1781 collected Sanskrit texts from India. These imports from India and Thailand were not novel developments but simply the most recent in a traditional process which had used elements from neighbouring cultures to diversify and enrich the Burmese civilization. Thus the spirit of eighteenth-century social liberalism and intellectual scepticism, which had triggered off the renaissance in India passed by Burma, still proudly attached to her traditions.

An important factor in directing Indian thinkers towards their Hindu heritage had been the work of Orientalists such as William Jones, founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, and Max Mueller. Both of them placed the study of ancient Sanskrit texts in the domain of high scholarship. Their translations also made it possible for many Indians who had not learnt Sanskrit to become acquainted with their own classical heritage.

In Burma, there had been no similar impulse on the part of the early British administrators to attribute scholastic importance to classical works or even to consider them worthy of great notice. Rangoon College, founded in 1873 as an affiliated body of

Calcutta University, did not include Burmese in its curriculum. Pali was taught in the college, but the bulk of the Pali literature of Burma belonged to the Buddhist canon which had originated in India. In any case, the greater part of traditional religious scholarship in Burma suffered from the same defects that have been attributed to traditional Indian scholarship:

The field of intellectual enquiry was extremely limited. Since growing up in the ancestor's shadow was the desideratum, a scholar, however eminent, could never think in terms of originality of thinking or of questioning the validity of existing systems or texts. A scholar's sole intellectual preoccupation was exposition and elaboration of those texts or clarification of existing commentaries, which in the words of an eminent intellectual of today, 'not infrequently became exegesis of exegesis.'⁹

The British conquest of lower Burma did not provide any external stimulus to encourage the Burmese to review their literary heritage in a new perspective. The king at Mandalay continued to provide patronage for traditional learning, and there was no feeling of immediate threat to the established order. Even after the development of the rice trade in the 1830s had begun to attract large numbers of immigrants from monarchical Burma into British territory,¹⁰ the Burmese felt they could afford to ignore the presence of an alien power.

A prime reason for Burmese complacency was the absence from their society of the crippling inhibitions and harmful practices of Hinduism that had driven some Indians like the 'beer and beef' radicals of Hindu College in Calcutta to a total rejection of their religious heritage.

The same practices had aroused in others the urge to pursue the path of reform and revitalization of old traditions. Burmese society, imbued with the spirit of Buddhism which enjoined nothing at which the reason jibs,¹¹ was remarkably free from

social injustices. It had no rigid caste or class stratification. Women enjoyed rights and privileges which a Victorian lady might well have enjoyed. The practice of the ubiquitous monastery providing at least a basic education for local children had resulted in a high percentage of literacy. There existed alongside the teachings of Buddhism a fund of superstitious and supernatural lore, some of which dated back to the pre-Buddhist era. However, these rarely entailed sinister taboos or practices. In fact, the social life of village Burma - and Burma was fundamentally a land of villages owing allegiance to the king who, remote in his distant capital, left them to the jurisdiction of a governor or to their own ministration - presented such an idyllic picture that Fielding Hall, an early British administrator was moved to write:

...in Burma it was only the supreme government the high officials, that were very bad. It was only the management of state affairs that was feeble and corrupt; all the rest was very good. The land laws, the self-government, the social condition of the people were admirable.

It was so good that the rotten central government made little difference to the people, and it would probably have lasted for a long while if not attacked from the outside.¹²

Tilak, who paid a visit to Burma in 1899, was also struck by the social order of Burma, but it only helped to strengthen his view that political action was separate from and more important than social reform:

All the reforms like absence of caste division, freedom of religion, education of women, late marriages, widow remarriage, system of divorce, on which some good people of India are in the habit of harping *ad nauseam* as constituting a condition precedent to the introduction of political reforms in India, had already been in actual

practice in the province of Burma. But there was not evident among the Burmese a feeling for their religion, their country or their trade to a degree expected of them. Therefore we can conclude that there is no inherent connection between social reform and national regeneration. Some European writers have sought to advise us to bring about social reform as a preparation for political reform. But it is human nature that this piece of precept should stand suspect till we see with our own eyes what kind of political reform is given to Burma which is socially in a position to deserve it.¹³

Tilak's remark that the Burmese did not have strong feelings for their religion and country can only be explained by the fact that his stay in Burma was so brief. (Later he was sent to prison in Burma for six years, but as he was confined in Mandalay jail with only the company of an Indian cell mate and European prison officers he never really got to know either Burma or the Burmese.) It is true, however, that the Burmese had little feeling for trade which had not played a vital part in their traditional economy. That lack was a prime reason for the hold which immigrant groups were to get on commercial interests in the country.

While it could be pointed out that social reform, though not a sufficient cause, might well be a necessary condition for 'national regeneration', Burma certainly presents a situation which demonstrates that a sound social system can go hand in hand with political immaturity. In fact, it could be argued that, because the social system placed no inordinate burden on the lives of the people, it made them more tolerant of the deficiencies of government. The Burmese experience of monarchical administration had bred in them a tendency to live their own lives and keep away from the central administration as far as possible. Arthur Phayre, the Chief Commissioner of British Burma, wrote to the Home Department of the Government of India in 1884:

The people of British Burma as yet know very little of the British government except as a Police, a Revenue, and a judicial power. They know indeed that the British Government has established a milder and a more efficient Government than existed before the conquest of the country. But from the comparatively few Europeans who speak the language and from the utter absence of Europeans from the interior of the country, the masses of the agricultural population know nothing of the desire of the British Government to educate and to raise them in the scale of civilization. How is the idea to be imparted to them? How are they to be made aware of the fact? ... I reply then that the only effective way to impress this fact upon them is to establish one or more Central Schools in each district, which shall be so situated as to be under effective control, that is at the head-quarter station or where a European Officer resides. In time such Schools will spread knowledge and the desire for increased knowledge.

They will testify to the people the wish of the British Government that its subjects should be taught. I would not establish these Schools all at once in the district, but gradually as opportunity offered... The general plan of instruction would be Anglo-Vernacular, that is, English to be more or less the medium of instruction, but Burmese not to be altogether neglected. As the desire to learn English is prominent at the seaport towns, and at various other places, I leave the degree and extent to which the English language is to be taught to be settled by local requirements.

* * *

I have already stated the support that has been given to Village Schools supported by Missionaries. Besides those, as already noted, there are no schools in the country except

the Buddhist Monasteries. I think in time we may be able to improve the education given in those institutions. I know of no other feasible plan for imparting sound education to the agricultural population in the interior.¹⁴

The above has been quoted at some length not only because it is one of the most cogent expressions of British views on education in Burma, but also because it offers an interesting comparison with the sentiments, embodied in Macaulay's much better-known Minute of 1835, which defended the views of those members of the Committee of Public Instruction of India who were in favour of an educational system dependent on English for higher learning:

We have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother-tongue. We must teach them some foreign language. The claims of our own language it is hardly necessary to recapitulate. It stands pre-eminent even among the languages of the West... In India, English is the language spoken by the ruling class. It is spoken by the higher class of natives at the seats of government... Whether we look at the intrinsic value of the literature or at the particular situation of this country, we shall see the strongest reason to think that, of all foreign tongues, the English tongue is that which would be most useful to our native subjects.

* * *

The languages of western Europe civilised Russia. I cannot doubt that they will do for the Hindoo what they have done for the Tartar.

* * *

I feel that it is impossible for us, with our means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern - a class of

persons Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.¹⁵

It can be seen that Phayre's views on education are at once more modest and more paternalistic. He wanted the Burmese to know that the British Government cared for them, that it wished to 'raise them in the scale of civilization'. Things were to be taken slowly, the existing system of monastic education was to be disturbed as little as possible. There was a recognition of the desire for learning English in the seaport towns, where there were large numbers of immigrants and few Burmese. But, still, Burmese was not to be neglected. Phayre sees the establishment of schools as a means for imparting 'sound education'.

The tone of Macaulay's *Minute* is altogether more grandiose, but at the same time more utilitarian; he also thought in terms of civilizing the natives, but the immediate need was to create a class of people who could help the British to rule India. The emphasis on the greatness of the English language is understandable in the context; but it reflects not only the controversy over the relative merits of English and Sanskrit as mediums of higher learning but also the important position English had acquired in nineteenth-century India. It could already be looked upon as the language of the ruling class, the higher classes. More than a decade before Macaulay composed his *Minute*, Rammohun Roy had written to Lord Amherst arguing against Oriental education: 'The Sanscrit language, so difficult that almost a life time is necessary for its acquisition, is well known to have been for ages a lamentable check to the diffusion of knowledge.'¹⁶ Roy himself had been educated in Sanskrit as well as, Arabic and Persian; so his advocacy of Occidental learning was, therefore, very much a

matter of conviction. He had come to English only in his adult life, probably for practical reasons, and he quickly saw that it was the language which would open the doors of intellectual and technical advancement to Indians. Vidyasagar a generation later was another able Sanskrit scholar who also accepted the importance of English in the educational scheme, but as a balancing factor to classical Oriental studies and as an aid to the development of the vernacular:

An elegant, expressive and idiomatic Bengali style required Sanskrit scholars to be well-versed in English, language and literature. Mere English scholars were incapable of expressing their ideas in idiomatic and elegant Bengali.¹⁷

Vidyasagar was a pioneer in recognizing the importance of education in the vernacular, and his efforts in that direction have made him known as the father of modern Bengali prose. He might well be said to have been carrying out Macaulay's injunction to make vernacular languages fit vehicles for spreading popular education.

Phayre acknowledged the central role which the vernacular would have to play in any educational scheme for Burma. In this he could have been influenced by the Education Despatch of 1854, which had admitted the need to encourage vernacular learning in India. However, it is more likely that he recognized that there already existed in Burma a language in which widespread education could be achieved. Burma like India is a land of many racial groups speaking many languages and dialects, but only Burmese could be claimed to have a 'national' character, and no other language could boast quite so extensive a body of literature. As mentioned earlier, even when Shan monarchs had held sway in the heartland Burmese had remained the dominant language. The territories Phayre was administering in 1864 were the home-lands of the Mons and the Arakanese, but the vernacular

which he proposed was Burmese. In a Memorandum on Vernacular Education for British Burma dated 1865, he states:

The Burmese language is the mother tongue of three fourths of the inhabitants of British Burma. The first plan, therefore, for diffusing Vernacular education among the people must proceed upon the basis of using that language as the medium of instruction. Hereafter the language of other peoples may be used for the same purpose as regards those races...¹⁸

It should be mentioned here that the Arakanese belong to the larger family of Tibeto-Burmans, and that their language might be defined as an archaic form of Burmese. However, the Mons belong to the Khmer racial group, and their language is distinct from that of the Burmese although there had been a fair amount of interchange in the course of history. The dominant position of the Burmese language in the South was a legacy of recurrent conquests, in particular of the period when the monarchs of the Taungu dynasty had made Pegu their capital for close on a century.¹⁹

Traditionally, the Buddhist monasteries had been the schools of the Burmese people - the word for 'school' is 'Kyaung', which originally meant simply 'monastery', and to this day the same name continues to be applied to both institutions - so that the link between religion and education was very strong. The texts used were often in the form of verse, Burmese and Pali, religious or ethical in content. Many of the children would leave school after acquiring the rudiments of reading and writing which some might lose in later life through lack of practice. The brighter ones would stay on to acquire further learning, and it was not unusual for some of the brightest to become monks themselves. All Burmese boys should join the religious order at least once in their lives, usually as a novice in their early teens. In traditional village Burma, it often happened that some would choose to remain in the

monk hood for years, if not for life. Little stigma attached to a man who returned to the secular world, and those who had spent long years in a monastery mastering the Pali texts and widening their knowledge of classical literature would be lauded and admired.

Traditional Burmese education did not encourage speculation. This was largely due to the view, so universally accepted that it appears to be part of the racial psyche of the Burmese, that Buddhism represents the perfected philosophy. It, therefore, follows that there was no need either to try to develop it further or to consider other philosophies. As a result, in spite of the essential tolerance of Buddhist teachings, religion in Burma was monolithic. It had broad out inflexible boundaries. Theological disputes, which were not numerous, centered on the interpretation of the monastic code the *vinaya*; so the little sectarianism that did exist was confined to the monkhood. The lay people were only affected to the extent that they might prefer to worship at some monasteries rather than at others. Such preferences would in no way lessen the respect given to all monks as the vehicles by which the teachings of the Buddha are disseminated.

In India, besides the presence of a large minority of Muslims, Hinduism presented a far more diversified picture than Buddhism in Burma. The deities are so many, the forms of worship so various and the complex philosophies so compounded by the interpretations of orthodox scholars and the mysticism of saints. One is forced to take refuge behind the excuse that 'Hindu' was originally a geographical term referring to the people who lived in the region of the Indus and could not possibly be defined. The only other alternative would be to resign oneself to at least half a lifetime of intensive research on the subject. Fortunately, for the purpose of this study the latter drastic course is not necessary. It needs only to be pointed out that religious speculation could be nothing alien to a country that has produced the Buddha, Vardharmana Mahavira, Nagarjuna, Kabir and Ramakrishna

Paramhansa, to name but the best known of the spiritual figures. The Hindu world with all its rigid taboos was strangely flexible. It was in part this heritage of flexibility which enabled the Indian Renaissance thinkers to meet the challenge of British rule in intellectual and philosophical terms.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri, perhaps the only true son of the Bengali Renaissance alive today, in writing of intellectuals in India describes Hindu reaction to the changes brought about by the impact of western governance, ideas and culture as the search for answers to the following questions:

- (1) What were the shortcomings of their own institutions and outlooks and how were they to be removed?
- (2) How was national self-respect and confidence to be revived?
- (3) In what manner were the, incoming and irresistible elements of western culture to be absorbed and combined with their own traditions?
- (4) What attitude was to be adopted towards British rule and since in the ultimate analysis the only aim could be political independence how was it to be secured?²⁰

It would not be far wrong to say that questions (2) and (4) were the only ones which first occurred to the Burmese as they faced the *fait accompli* of foreign domination. Question (1) would have been an absurdity for them. Like Fielding Hall they saw their social system as 'very good', and so it was to a large extent that the monarchical government could be very bad also they acknowledged. After all, did not the live enemies from whom every Burmese prays he might be protected include the *min*, ruler?²¹ That one system had, in fact, produced the other was largely ignored. The shock of the fall of Mandalay had moved some Burmese to rail against their own impotence and foibles, but there was no serious attempt to analyse the causes of the deficiencies.

If question (1) was patently absurd, question (3) was at the least baffling, why should the Burmese people absorb elements of western culture, and what was it all about anyway? Their experience of 'foreign rule' - and that under the Shans several centuries back - had only taught them that it was the conquerors who were eager to acquire the Burmese culture. Therefore, the Burmese felt no particular urge to understand their colonial rulers. This indifference was also encouraged by British attitudes. While the Englishman tended to see the Hindu as 'serious', 'mysterious', 'deep', 'introverted', and so on, he usually saw the Burmese as 'gay', 'open', 'careless', 'childlike', not a people who needed deep philosophical interpretation. The Burmese returned the compliment by assuming that there was not much that he needed to know about the Englishman beyond the necessities of unavoidable intercourse between the ruler and the ruled. How different it was from India with the earnest, almost obsessive desire for comprehension at the intellectual level that was producing a string of scholars and philosophers in the western mould! It was true that such Indians constituted only a tiny section of the population, but their impact was strong on the upper classes; and they set the tone for those who would be leaders in the independence movements that were to gather momentum in the twentieth century.

Two

I

AS COLONIAL rule took on a more settled aspect in Burma, some of the complacency wore off. The Burmese, no less than the other Asian and African peoples of the colonial world, had to recognize that those who wished to get on in the ranks of the British Empire had to learn English and acquire the rudiments of a western-type education. Lower Burma was naturally ahead of upper Burma in the process of modernization, and many Arakanese numbered among the first people of Burma to be educated under the colonial system. It is interesting to speculate whether the cultural and at times political links which Arakan had forged with Bengal throughout much of her history had created in her people a more receptive attitude to foreign influences. The Mons, who had come under British rule at the same time as the Arakanese, did not seem to have produced as many English-educated people at quite the same speed. Another important ethnic group in lower Burma, the Karens, were also quick to respond to the missionary activities which proliferated under British rule. With the acquisition of Christianity many of them received missionary education and began to emerge as a modern educated class.

Besides the indigenous peoples, the rapidly increasing immigrant groups were in the forefront of those in the market for modern education. British policy gave active encouragement to large-scale immigration of Chinese and Indians who could undertake those commercial and professional functions which could not be discharged by the predominantly agriculture-oriented people of Burma. Moreover, the increasing acreage of land brought under cultivation gave rise to a need for indentured labour which was supplied by India. Thus it was that Burma found herself not only conquered by the British but also threatened by the overwhelming presence of Indians and Chinese who began to play key roles in the development of the economy. This

unchecked influx of foreigners was a major cause of the disintegration of traditional society. Another disruptive factor was the all-pervasive efficiency of an administration that was implementing changes in the time-honoured systems of social custom and usage. The Burmese could no longer afford to be complacent, they had to recognize the need for defensive action. Moreover they had to decide if the weapons to be used should be traditional or modern.

The Burmese monarchs thought of their capital as the 'Centre of the Universe'. It was to this centre that men of learning and ambition came if they desired advancement or fame. Thus, the capital was the cultural stronghold as well as the source of possible honours and material rewards. After the royal couple had been removed from Mandalay a period of cultural hiatus followed. Burmese learning attracted no official patronage, and English became the language which laid the path to new opportunities created by the colonial government. And those opportunities were not within easy grasp of the Burmese who had to compete with the Indians and the Chinese; peoples so much more experienced in dealing with westerners and their institutions. While upper Burma remained under Burmese rule, the danger of being outstripped by others in the land where they had always maintained ascendancy did not present itself to the Burmese. Phayre wrote in the Memorandum of 1865 which has already been mentioned:

The Burmese people must be taught to feel that unless they have their children educated both in sound knowledge, and in a more systematic manner than at present prevails, they will assuredly be surpassed by other races in the country.²²

The speed with which Burma changed after the arrival of the British was alarming. Moulmein in Tenassarim and Akyab in Arakan had sprung up as urban centres in a matter of years, bustling with such cosmopolitan and commercial activity as the Burmese could never have imagined. When Rangoon became one

of the capital cities of British India, that city, too, rapidly assumed a hybrid character. Already in the nineteenth century, it had begun to be described as a city of Indians rather than Burmese and by the time of the visit of the Prince and Princess of Wales (later George V and Queen Mary) in 1906, the Special Correspondent of the *London Times* was to write:

In this modern city where Europeans and Burmese, Hindus and Chinese jostle one another in a kaleidoscopic confusion of types and races, where the Burmese population has in fact been completely outnumbered by immigrants from Southern India and Bengal, where the ubiquitous Chinese asserts his superiority as a trader scarcely less irresistibly than the European his superiority as a ruler of men...it is difficult at first sight to tell which is the really preponderating element. But there is one monument essentially Burmese that still dominates Rangoon, that still embodies the soul of a nation... the Shaw Dagon pagoda...²³

The observation of the Times correspondent was an astute one which recognized the importance of Buddhism and Buddhist symbols in the lives of the Burmese people. As the twentieth century progressed and the breakdown of traditional society throughout the country accelerated, it was in the realm of religion, that the first alarm bells began to be heard. Among those, who had led insurrections against the British after the fall of Mandalay, there had been an appreciable number who had exchanged the Monastery for the battlefield. Under the Burmese kings a *thathanabaing* (*sangharaja*), usually the abbot of a monastery patronized by the monarch, would be appointed to ensure ecclesiastical discipline throughout the kingdom. When lower Burma fell to the British, the colonial authorities refused to recognize the authority of the *thathanabaing* in their territories which was the expression of a narrow and short-sighted policy.

The removal of control from above resulted in the deterioration of ecclesiastic discipline which, combined with fears that Buddhism would wither under rulers of an alien creed, would make the clergy a rallying point for anti-British movements of the early twentieth century. After the annexation of upper Burma, Burmese appeals to the British for official support to the incumbent *thathanabaing* were rejected, and the office was allowed to lapse with his death in 1895. It was very likely that in an effort to respond to an increasingly urgent need for cohesion and a sense of direction that the Buddha Sasana Noggaha Association was founded at Mandalay in 1897 for the preservation and promotion of the Buddhist religion. But the association remained limited in scope, and it was only in the next decade that organizations of national character and compass were to appear in Burma.

It has often been remarked that, while Indian nationalism was essentially a product of British rule, there had always existed a traditional Burmese nationalism arising from its cultural homogeneity. Buddhism obviously played a large part in creating this homogeneity, but it could not be said to have supplied ideas to support nationalism; rather it provided an essential component of the self-concept which enabled the Burmese to see themselves as different from foreigners.²⁴

And foreigners under the colonial administration were not just the English but also the Indians and the Chinese. Thus, the feeling that grew among the Burmese was not the intense racial antagonism which developed in India but a more diffused xenophobia fed by a well-justified apprehension that their very existence as a distinct people would be jeopardized if the course of colonial rule was allowed to run unchecked. The threat to their racial survival came not so much from the British as from the Indians and Chinese who were the more immediate targets of twentieth century nationalism. Not only did these immigrants acquire a stranglehold on the Burmese economy, they also set up

homes with Burmese women, striking at the very roots of Burmese manhood and racial purity.

As nationalism in Burma was fundamentally a part of the traditional ethos, nationalistic movements also sprang from Burmese sources, even though they were inevitably influenced by western ideas and institutions. The Indian National Congress owed its birth to an Englishman, and English people such as Annie Besant were involved in the political movements of Indian nationalists. Such British involvements in Burmese independence politics did not take place and, very likely could not have taken place given the conditions that prevailed. In spite of the open, laughing face that the Burmese presented to the world, the ingrained, if inarticulate, conviction of their own nationhood prevented them from truly admitting those they saw as 'foreign' into their inner sanctions. Alien concepts had to be redefined in Burmese terms before they could be accepted. In a strange way the Burmese seemed to value their cultural integrity almost more than their ethnic identity. They could often feel greater affinity for a foreigner who had adopted Buddhism and Burmese ways of living than for a Burmese who had embraced an alien creed. In one sense, this cultural chauvinism made for a closed mind which adjusted but slowly and painfully to the changing times. In another sense, the attitude was surprisingly modern in its insistence that there had to be an intellectual conviction that new ideas fitted into the basic cultural scheme before they could be assimilated. Because the Burmese had adopted social and religious practices which minimized the need for intellectual activity, this conviction could not come easily.

II

LANGUAGE AND ideas are intimately connected. The early acceptance of English as the language of the day by the Hindus had given them the edge over their erstwhile Muslim rulers in the race for progress and privilege in British India. The Hindus were able to forge ahead in both the political and the intellectual fields. A crop of lofty personalities sprang up who, reversing Macaulay's conception of the role of the educated Indian, made known to the West the religious and political aspirations of India.²⁵ Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Tagore, Gandhi, Radhakrishnan, Nehru - these men were able to use the English language to make their views known to the world. Because they could handle the western intellectual idiom so masterfully, the world regarded those views as worthy of serious consideration.

The people of India accepted that their leadership came from the ranks of the western educated whom they admired and emulated. *Swadeshi* ideals, which were at least equally based on economic as on cultural considerations, may have put Indian nationalist leaders into homespun, but it was accepted that they would work, write and even dream, as Nehru was popularly believed to have done, in English. This was, of course largely due to the lack of a truly national language in India but the very acceptance of the necessity of English in their political and intellectual life coloured the outlook of the educated Indian. Nirad C. Chaudhuri puts it cogently:

The linguistic basis of modern Indian culture, which is made up of a combination of English, a denatured written Vernacular, and a mixed colloquial language, is the first proof of the essentially foreign character of modern Indian culture. The second proof is to be found in the almost exclusively exotic forms of modern Indian literature, art, thought, and moral and spiritual activity. Literary

expression in prose is itself a creation of British rule in India...²⁶

The same writer gives an idea of the eclectic intellectual tradition inspired by the renaissance in Bengal. In his father's modest house in a small town of East Bengal at the opening decade of the twentieth century, there were such books as the Holy Bible in Bengali, Milton's poetical works, Cunningham's *History of the Sikhs*, Burke's speeches on the impeachment of Warren Hastings, some plays of Shakespeare, novels of Bankimchandra Chatterji, volumes of the poems of Michael Madhusudan Dutt.²⁷ Among the names which belonged to Chaudhuri's 'proto-memoric age' were, in addition to those already mentioned, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert (hardly avoidable), Napoleon, Raphael, Wellington, Gladstone, Martin Luther, Julius Caesar and Osman Pasha. These were quickly followed by others which included Fox, Pitt, Mirabeau, Robespierre, Danton. Homer, too, was an early acquaintance alongside the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.²⁸

Bankimchandra Chatterji, whom Nirad C. Chaudhuri regards as one of the most powerful intellects produced by India,²⁹ has left an interesting picture of the 'Bengali gentleman' - is essentially a person of wide erudition in both western and Indian literature, with a cultivated taste in the fine arts.³⁰ No little wonder it was said that the 'genuine Indo-Anglian synthesis' was to be found in Calcutta before the war.³¹

Bengal was the first British province in India, and Calcutta remained the Capital of the Raj for the greater part of colonial rule. It was, therefore, natural that Bengalis should feature in large numbers among modern educated Indians. But there were others from different parts of India who, although they may not have felt as intense a passion for the renaissance ideal as the Bengalis, were remarkably familiar with western learning. Ranade, Gokhale and Tilak came from Maharashtra; Radhakrishnan was a south Indian from the Madras area; Jawaharlal Nehru, scion of a Kashmiri Brahmin family settled in Allahabad, presents the classical picture

of a sophisticated, Anglicized Indian. Taught by English tutors at home before going to Harrow and Cambridge, he draws on the words of Euripides, Aeschylus and Yeats to express his thoughts and yearnings.³² The *Bhagavad Gita* appealed to his questing mind as a 'poem of crisis, of political and social crisis and, even more so, of crisis in the spirit of man'.³³ But he had only read it, as he had read other Sanskrit classics, in the English translation.

Nirad C. Chaudhuri holds that few Indian intellectuals were perfectly integrated in their mental life, a circumstance which prevented them from achieving a truly intellectual outlook and which returned them to traditionalism and orthodoxy in their later years. Nehru was obviously one of the small minority, a man so thoroughly intellectual in his approach to life that he learnt to accept his own anomalous cultural identity with equanimity. He did not, like Sri Aurobindo, feel the need to balance his western education with a thorough investigation of Hindu thought, although he studied it from a historical perspective in his desire to understand India. He, too, was in the tradition of the renaissance which searched for a synthesis of traditional and western ideas that could help in the struggle to raise India out of the morass of irrational practices and mental inertia into which she had sunk by the end of the middle ages. He denounces as a 'Kind of art for art's sake'³⁵ the study of the past, which is not linked to the present and which does not derive from it the urge to action. For him the ideal was action which was not divorced from thought but which flowed from it in a continuous sequence.³⁶

The link between ideas and action was a theme which featured large in the life of Mahatma Gandhi. It is not easy to decide to what extent, if at all, concepts of the West influenced him in his youth. He came from a traditional family in Gujarat, and had no contacts with westerners in his early years. However, the event which he regarded as a tragedy of his childhood, the secret eating of meat, was caused chiefly by his notion that it was meat-eating which had made the English powerful. Later, as a

young man not quite twenty, he persuaded his reluctant and none-too-affluent family to send him to England to train as a barrister. Gandhi, who could be so frank about some matters, is reticent about the sentiments which had spurred him on to this venture.' He simply wrote in his autobiography that he jumped at the chance to get away from the difficult studies at his college, when a family friend suggested that he should go to study in England. Reaching England, he became an 'aspirant after being an English gentleman' for about three months, then turned into a serious student and gradually pared his expenses down to the bare necessities. Gandhi had promised his mother that he would not touch meat in England, an undertaking which caused him some hardship until he discovered a vegetarian restaurant. At the same time he discovered books on vegetarianism. These made him a vegetarian by choice, when previously he had felt bound by his vow and had looked forward to becoming a meat eater 'freely and openly some day'.³⁷ It was an early personal experience of ideas as an aid to the better working of action. Gandhi was of a practical turn of mind that looked for ideas to suit the needs of situations.³⁸ In spite of his deeply ingrained Hinduism, Gandhi's intellectual flexibility made him accept those elements of western thought which fitted into the ethical and social scheme he considered desirable.

III

SYNTHESIS, OF east and west, of theory and practice, constituted the vital element in the tradition initiated by the renaissance in India. The lack of a similar tradition in Burma resulted in a gulf between the earlier educated elite and the mainstream of Burmese aspirations. The designation of Rangoon, away from the traditional stronghold of the Burmese, as the capital divorced the political from the cultural centre. At the time King Thibaw and his family were taken away from Mandalay, a large number of Burmese manuscripts from the palace were destroyed in the general looting and vandalism initiated by the British troops. A stop was put to this wanton destruction only when a week had passed. The remaining manuscripts which were then collected made over forty bullock-cart loads. This substantial collection was taken eight years later to Rangoon to be housed in the Government Secretariat. These manuscripts were the sources on which a Burmese scholar, U Tin, drew for a history of the Konbaung dynasty.³⁹ The resulting work was among the first literary stirrings that developed in the early twentieth century after the initial quiescence brought about by the annexation of upper Burma.

The first Burmese printed books had been produced by the Vatican press in Rome in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Serampore missionaries acquired a typeface for the Burmese script. Some of these typefaces and a printing press were sent to a Baptist missionary in Burma, Adoniram Judson, in 1816. But the press was not put to much use for some time, and Burmese books continued to be printed in Calcutta until the British annexation of Tenassarim. The first Burmese books printed in Burma were biblical tracts produced by the missionary press in Moulmein, which moved to Rangoon after the Second Anglo-Burmese War. The first press in the still independent Burmese kingdom was set up by King Mindon in the North Garden of the Royal Place in

Mandalay (*circa* 1868). A few years later, the *Mandalay Gazette*, a Burmese newspaper under the proprietorship of the king, began to be issued four times a month. Newspapers had already appeared in British Burma, starting with the *Maulmain Chronicle*, of 1836. However, the majority of them were in English, chiefly aimed at the foreign community. The Burmese publications were the *Religious Herald*, a monthly Christian missionary paper issued from Moulmein in 1841, the *Burmah Herald* of Rangoon which started in 1871, and the *Burmah Gazette*, also started in 1871.

The simultaneous existence of British Burma and the independent Burmese kingdom made the development of the press in Burma somewhat different from that which took place in India. The first Indian newspaper was the *Bengal Gazette* or the *Calcutta General Advertiser*, brought out by an Englishman, James Hickey, in 1785. The venture was not welcomed by many Bengal officials, and their fears were confirmed some months later when Hickey's *Gazette* started attacking the government of Warren Hastings, mainly, it appeared, because the latter had given his approbation to another newspaper, the *Indian Gazette*. Thus, the notion of newspapers which either supported or opposed the government was introduced by Englishmen themselves almost at the very inception of the press in India. The freedom of the press was soon to become an issue under the governor-generalship of the Marquess of Wellesly (1798-1805) who established rigid regulations which were to control the activities of the newspapers for many years.

The *Maulmain Chronicle* in Burma had also been started by an Englishman, but he happened to be the Chief Commissioner of Tenasserim; so it was very much in the nature of a government publication. Other newspapers which followed within the next ten years included the *Maulmain Advertiser*, sponsored by the East India Company and Christian missionaries publications. News items in the *Burmah Herald* were written by its English editor, J.A. Haney, and translated with the help of an able Burmese

scholar.⁴⁰ This newspaper proved to be very popular with the common people as well as with the king in Mandalay, and it set the tone for many Burmese newspapers that were to follow. King Mindon is even said to have invited Haney to come to Mandalay to start a newspaper. The Englishman apparently refused on the grounds that an editor who was in the habit of writing the truth would in Mandalay be like the Persian vizier who had to feel his head every morning to make sure it was still on his shoulder.⁴¹

When King Mindon set up the *Mandalay Gazette* in 1874, eleven official aims of the newspaper press were recorded. These indicated a desire to make Burma internationally known so that foreigners and foreign trade might be attracted to the kingdom; to refute adverse propaganda about the Burmese kingdom that might be circulated by the European, Indian and Rangoon press; to give incessant information on the affairs of the kingdom to the official class so that they might strive for its progress; to publish foreign works at a low cost with the aim of disseminating knowledge among the people and thus helping them to progress.⁴² Such brave hopes read a little sadly in retrospect. Mindon was seen as a good king, because he was pious and there was peace during his reign. To some extent he tried to keep up with modern developments; but he had neither the mental equipment, nor perhaps the inclination, to implement political and administrative reforms which would have widened the power base of the kingdom, ensured an ordered succession and perhaps prevented the annexation of upper Burma. When he died, the weak Thibaw ascended the throne through the machinations of his mother-in-law, although there were several royal princes with stronger claims. There followed seven years of misrule and bloodshed until the Third Anglo-Burmese War brought the Burmese monarchy to an end.

The worst period of Thibaw's reign coincided with the golden age of colonial rule. Rapid economic progress and administrative order were the hallmarks of British Burma. But the social system

broke down just as rapidly, so the Burmese could still feel that life was better in the land of their monarch. In addition, racial pride and loyalty demanded that they should not compare the administration of the Burmese kingdom unfavourably with that of the foreign government. The press, which might have been a factor in promoting educated criticism, also represented the polarization between king and colonial power. When the former was finally removed, spontaneous rebellions flared up all over upper Burma. These were in part a demonstration of genuine patriotism and in part a result of the tradition that an empty throne was 'up for grabs'. The turbulent years of the 'pacification of Burma', the series of British military campaigns undertaken to stamp out the insurrections, had an untoward effect on the Burmese psyche, confusing, fissive. The numerous uprisings meant disorder, insecurity, disruption, and gave little promise of a future government that would be any better than those of the past. It was not in the tradition of aspirants after the Burmese throne to see their actions in terms of the betterment of the system; it was simply a question of ensuring that a Burmese sat in the seat of supreme power. And because of their patriotism, the people accepted this essentially irresponsible view of government as part of the traditional order administrator remarked that:

It is probable that most of the best men of the country were against us. It is certain, I think, that of those who openly joined us and accompanied us in our expedition (against the Burmese insurrections), very, very few were other than men who had some private grudge to avenge or some purpose to gain by opposing their own people.⁴³

Burmese patriotism was homogeneously behind their monarchy unlike the situation which had accrued in India where many Hindus felt no obligation to show loyalty to the Mughal emperor. Once the insurrections in upper Burma had been stamped out, the people settled down to their age-old habits of living their lives

apart from the government. But it gradually dawned upon them that this was no longer possible. The administrative tentacles of the colonial system reached out to the villages bringing irreversible changes. The need for adjusting their traditional perspectives slowly percolated down to the level of the ordinary man.

It has already been mentioned that under the Burmese monarchs, opportunities for advancement could only be found in the royal capital. With the British annexation of lower Burma Rangoon had developed as a rival centre, but the position of Mandalay as the stronghold of Burmese culture remained unchallenged. However, the deposition of King Thibaw put an end to royal patronage of the arts and literature and shifted the balance of power decisively in favour of Rangoon, which soon began to attract ambitious and able people. The development of the railways together with road and river transport contributed to the crescendo of southward migration.

Rangoon, more than anywhere else in the country, offered opportunities for acquiring an English-based education. But because it was a city of large immigrant communities, because it was removed from the cultural heartland of Burma and because the British government adopted a dismissive attitude towards traditional learning, the climate in which a synthesis of modern education and classical Burmese scholarship could be fostered did not emerge. The culture that had filtered down from upper Burma was of a popular character. Dramatic performances had become a much loved form of entertainment and many well known troupes from upper Burma found it profitable to tour the centres of new affluence in the south. Such was the popularity of drama that the printing presses which were beginning to spring up in Rangoon found the publication of plays a lucrative business. These plays followed loosely in the tradition of the classical playwrights of the Konbaung period, but they far outdid their predecessors in the range of character they introduced, and in the elaboration of the

comic element and in the verse in which they wrote'.⁴⁴ Some of them reflected social conditions, giving vivid pictures of the devastation which new economic practices were creating in rural Burma.⁴⁵ Thus it was that in Burma an awareness of the problems of the times was first voiced through popular literature and not by the modern educated class. This was to set the tone for later developments under colonialism.

Three

I

IN 1906 the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), inspired by the Young Men's Christian Association, was founded by a group of students of Rangoon College. A Buddhist Association had already existed in the College since 1904, but YMBA was broader in concept and was to emerge as the first truly nationalist association of the country.⁴⁶ The founder members of the YMBA represented the early generation of Burmese who had grown up after the fall of Mandalay and received their education in the English-oriented system of missionary and government schools. The kind of 'new Burman' that this system had created was described by U May Oung, one of the young 'England returned' barristers who joined the YMBA in 1908. The modern Burman, he said, was:

A Burman to all outward appearance, but entirely out of harmony with his surroundings. He laughed at the old school of men; they did not understand existence as he did; their beliefs and superstitions were childish and silly, their way of life was exceedingly uncomfortable - in short, he thought there was nothing to be learnt from them.... It was one of the greatest curses of their generation that their young men were learning to drop Burmese ideals, to forget and even to despise the customs and habits of his ancestors, and to hanker after much that was bad and very little that was good in those alien races. Thus, for instance, he had adopted the luxuries but not the steadfastness and high-souled integrity of the European, the lavish display of wealth but not the business instincts of the Indian, the love of sensuous ease but not the frantic perseverance of the Chinaman.⁴⁷

Although there is much that is valid in the above description of the modern Burman, it must be pointed out that it is based on the character of the people of lower Burma. May Oung himself was an Arakanese brought up in Tenassarim and Rangoon. It was widely accepted that the people of Upper Burma had retained their culture and their racial pride. Therefore, when the need for revitalization of the Burmese culture was felt, the modern educated of Rangoon had to look to men of traditional learning from Upper Burma. One such person who became a leading figure in the world of Burmese letters and politics was Hsaya Lun, better known by his later appellation of Thakin Kodaw Hmaing.

Hmaing, born in 1875, was in Mandalay as a young novice at the time of the annexation of Upper Burma. From his monastery he saw Thibaw and the royal family on their melancholy journey to the boat that would take them away to exile. It is said that this experience sowed the seeds of the deep patriotism which would form an essential feature of his literary output. There is little detailed information about Hmaing's early life. The foundation of his classical education was laid in several monasteries in Upper Burma. Later he came down to Moulmein where, as a young monk he began to write newspaper articles. It is known that at some point he took the government seventh standard examination, which was in those days a preliminary step towards service either in the civil departments or in the large commercial firms.⁴⁸ However, Hmaing seemed to have made no practical use of this 'modern' qualification, although he left the monkhood. His writings, which ranged from popular plays, through newspaper articles, history and poetry, were strongly traditional in style. Their content showed a vivid awareness of contemporary economic, social and political developments. In particular, the extended essays, known as *digas*, provide valuable glimpses of the issues that engaged the attention of the politically awakening public. The *Boh Diga*, written in 1913, expresses concern over the breakdown of the rural economy in Upper Burma and the

increasing instances of Burmese women marrying foreigners which also Hmaing attributed to economic reasons. In 1917, the YMBA passed a resolution condemning such marriages. On the same occasion, the government was urged to prevent land from passing into the hands of aliens, the most damaging consequence of the economic difficulties of the indigenous population. Thus, Hmaing, representing traditional learning, demonstrated an earlier awareness of the ills of colonial society than the modern educated class whose ranks would provide the leaders of the early nationalist movements.

May Oung indicated in his lecture on 'The Modern Burman; His Life and Notions' part of which has already been quoted, that the 'new Burman' had not assimilated and adapted new notions to his own life, he had merely substituted them for his old ones.⁴⁹ It was in recognition of this gulf between the old and the new that May Oung, Ba Hpe (with whom the idea of founding the YMBA had originated) and others of the modern educated class, sought to understand the Burmese classics through such men as Hmaing, whom they revered greatly. Yet the true synthesis of traditional and modern, Burmese and western was not achieved by that generation who neither translated new ideas into acceptable traditional terms nor reviewed old notions in the modern context.

Hmaing has been compared to Tagore by the Burmese as a great nationalist poet. Such a comparison is valid only if nationalism is defined in broad cultural terms rather than simply in its political sense. Rabindranath Tagore, though born more than a decade earlier than Hmaing, was undeniably the more modern of the two in experience and in intellectual development. The grandson of the wealthy and unorthodox Dwarkanath Tagore and son of Debendranath who invigorated and reorganized the Brahmo Samaj, Rabindranath inherited much of the renaissance quest for social and spiritual values which would ensure India's integrity in the modern world. He was familiar with English literature from his youth, and the assimilation of foreign elements

in Tagore's intellectual apparatus was so complete that they form an integral part of the depth and breadth of his unique talent. A more important influence on his spiritual views were the Hindu Upanisads and the *bhakti* devotional literature with its yearning for union between man and the divine. Tagore's works became known to non-Bengalis in India only after 1912, when English translations of his poems were popularized by the enthusiasm of such literary figures as W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound. The accepted Indian image of Tagore would seem to be based on the ideas contained in the widely known verse from the *Gitanjali*:

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by
narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards
perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into
the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by Thee into ever-widening
thought and action -
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country
awake.*

Knowledge, freedom, universalism, truth, reason, thought joined with action within a spiritual framework - the aims and ideals of the Indian Renaissance are encapsulated in a few manageable lines. But although Tagore was accepted as a national institution, he was not always viewed as a nationalist. There was his well-publicized rift with Gandhi over the latter's wholesale condemnation of western civilization. This led to a decline in Tagore's popularity even in Bengal, for Gandhi represented the patriotic aspirations of the common people whereas Tagore's internationalist ideals often distanced him from the masses.

Nehru, who admired both men, provides a sympathetic comparison of the two:

Tagore was primarily the man of thought, Gandhi of concentrated and ceaseless activity. Both, in their different ways had a world outlook, and both were at the same time wholly Indian. They seemed to represent different but harmonious aspects of India and to complement one with the other.⁵⁰

Hmaing was closer to Tagore in being primarily a man of thought but nearer to Gandhi in his political nationalism. Much of Hmaing's writings were on contemporary events, matters both great and small which had any bearing on nationalist developments in Burma. He lauded May Oung's attendance of an official British function in traditional Burmese costume; he exults over a YMBA delegation going to London to present the views of the Burmese people to the British government; he enthusiastically follows the exploits of a famous dacoit whose success in evading arrest, in spite of the desperate efforts of the police, had turned him into a folk hero. Hmaing was so much a man of the people that the temper of the country could often be judged from his writings. But, while he drew public attention to current events and expressed his criticism or approbation, he did not offer a philosophy which could have guided nationalist efforts. The expression of criticism and approbation could be said to have been in the classical tradition Burmese historical writings sometimes provided critical assessments of monarchs, especially if they were notable failures.⁵¹ And, of course, it was nothing unusual to eulogize the achievements of kings. There was also in Burmese classical literature the *myittaza* (a communication appealing to *maitri*). This began as epistles from monks requesting favours of the monarch, and later developed into compositions containing appeals, advice and even advertisements. Thus, the didactic role

of scholars was an old one which continued to be manifest in the works of the early twentieth century in Burma.

The Burmese language itself was beginning to change under the same influences which had led to "the modern forms of many languages in India: the impact of western literature, the growth of printing, the dissemination of newspapers, the creation of a wider reading public. Classical Burmese had become heavily laden with Pali loan words, stereotyped literary expressions and artificial flourishes. The early newspaper articles in Burmese retained many of the old conventions, frequently breaking into verse when reporting such dramatic events as a lover's suicide pact. However, with the burgeoning of news despatches the style became more factual and terse. Here it is difficult to decide how much of the change was due to the nature of journalistic writings and how much to the influence of English. There is reason to think that the latter might have been more potent: the writings of those Burmese who had learnt English showed earlier and more obvious signs of the modern idiom.

The work which is generally recognized as the first Burmese novel, *Maung Yin Maung Ma Me Ma*, was written by James Hla Gyaw in 1904. The author had been educated in missionary schools and possibly belonged to the Christian faith. His novel, which is an adaptation from the earlier parts of the *Count of Monte Cristo*, does not indicate a great familiarity with Buddhist beliefs and practices. It is written in a simple, straightforward language which entirely dispenses with the ornate classical style. The success of *Maung Yin Maung Ma Me Ma* led to a spate of novels which soon replaced the drama as popular reading. However, many of the early novels were closer in form and language to the old dramas than to the unadorned but effective style adopted by James Hla Gyaw. As to content, the emphasis was on romance; there was little attempt at realism.

Before the 1920s few novels appeared which reflected the contemporary scene. Among the exceptions were the works of U

Latt, like James Hla Gyaw a product of the new educational system. But, unlike Hla Gyaw, Latt demonstrated a familiarity with classical Burmese writings as well as with contemporary drama. Born and brought up in lower Burma he nevertheless exhibits a strong nostalgia for the days of the Burmese monarchy. The language of Mandalay is shown as graceful, the manners as courtly. In his best, loved novel, *Shwepyiso*, the heroine is the child of a minor royal consort brought up by loyal attendants. She is kept in ignorance of her parentage, although she realizes that she is of noble birth. It was to protect her from the malice of one of the powerful queens that she was so carefully kept incognito. But in the end it is revealed that it has all been a grave misunderstanding; the much feared queen has nothing but goodwill towards the young girl. It would perhaps be going too far to suggest that Latt was trying to counter stories about the atrocities attributed to Thibaw's queen; but it does indicate that already the shortcomings of the monarchy were beginning to be forgiven, if not forgotten.

Nostalgia for the past was more likely an indication of the dissatisfaction with the colonial status than a genuine longing for old institutions. No concerted effort was made to reassess the past with a view to formulating a viable philosophy for the future. Many Burmese, in the early twentieth century, felt that their patriotic duty required the preservation of old ways without examining them carefully to see if they were fit for the new times. However, in 1910 there was a development which created a situation in which the heritage of Burma could be examined in the light of modern scholarship. The Burma Research Society was founded at the instance of an Englishman, J. S. Furnivall. He had been inspired by reading a copy of the *Journal of the Siam Society* to create a similar society in Burma that should bring together Burmans and Europeans with a common interest in the welfare of the country.⁵² Furnivall also connects the inception of the Research Society with May Oung's lecture on the 'Modern

Burman' which he had attended in 1908.⁵³ There was some official resistance to the founding of the society on the grounds that it might encourage nationalism and subversiveness, but the governor was in favour of the project. Furnivall, with May Oung and Charles Duroiselle, a French lecturer in Pali at Rangoon College, were the men who organized the Research Society.⁵⁴ The *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, which continued until the beginning of the 1980s, remains to this day a most valuable repository of scholarly articles on Burmese history, language, culture and geography. Furnivall writing in 1916 when the society was passing through a temporary phase of the doldrums, outlines his views of its purpose:

... we were looking for human Burma; that mysterious entity of which each individual Burman, and in a less degree every one living here, is on an infinitesimal scale a manifestation and a representative, which is a norm subsuming all their individual activities, and which represents all that is vital and enduring in this country as we know it; the partnership, as Burke puts it, between the dead, the living and those yet to be born.

* * *

For the Burma that we hope to assist in building is like some old pagoda recently unearthed and in course of restoration. Much of this restoration is and perforce must be dull work. I remember visiting the Petleik pagoda at Pagan when the excavation was in progress, and seeing a workman with one sweep of his brush remove the earth and plaster from a plaque that had been buried and forgotten for some centuries. But before he could do this it had been necessary to clear away cartloads of rubbish. We have carefully to set in order the foundations and the whole building brick by brick, but I for one firmly believe that if the Burma of the future is to be a lasting fabric, it must be built up on the old foundations.⁵⁵

In such views can be seen the seeds of a renaissance: the urge to create a vital link between the past, the present and the future, the wish to clear away 'cartloads of rubbish' so that old foundations might become fit to hold up a new and lasting fabric. But it was a renaissance that did not really come to full fruition.

II

THE BURMA Research Society attracted some of the finest Burmese scholars of the day including Hmaing to write for its journal. Yet there remained an indefinable barrier between men of traditional learning and the modern educated. Those who had been grounded in one system somehow seemed incapable of truly mastering the other. There were many highly intelligent men and women in Burma then as at any period; their failure to assimilate two different strains of intellectual tradition must be put down to psychological rather than cerebral factors. Perhaps the most important of these was the reluctance to examine the past with objectivity. There is a Burmese proverb that cautions people from giving up ancient usages. While there is wisdom in refraining from implementing change merely for the sake of change, clinging to old ways solely for the sake of their antiquity is obviously equally futile. May Oung had complained of the modern Burman's failure to assimilate and adapt new notions. He did not point out that old ways, too, should be adapted, pruned, revitalized, or in some cases even discarded altogether. Perhaps he and others of a similar educational background felt incompetent to assess traditional values. On one occasion Ba Hpe wrote in the *Thuriya* newspaper, which he had set up in 1911, that the Burmese spent more than ten million rupees a year on religious institutions and practices when there were other areas where funds were needed. This article created a furore, and the *Thuriya* was attacked for its irreligious tone. In the journalistic battle that followed Ba Hpe, unable to keep up with some of the learned ripostes of the seasoned Burmese writers, had to recruit the help of Hmaing. Nobody without a mastery of the Burmese language and cultural background could hope to reach out to the people of Burma. Therefore the modern educated felt too diffident to suggest the reassessment and reform of accepted values. The scholars of the old school on the other hand were too close to traditional institutions to be able to judge them objectively.

Fielding Hall was one of those Englishmen who fell in love with Burma and the Burmese, of whom he had a romantic and in some ways simplistic vision. Nevertheless his observations on Burmese society were often shrewd and he noted a phenomenon which must surely lie at the basis of the failure for a true renaissance to take place under colonial rule. He remarked of monarchical Burma that there was no noble or leisured class between the king and the villagers. Consequently, the monarch had to recruit as his ministers men from the villages who, for all their natural capacity, did not have the 'breadth of view, the knowledge of other countries, of other thoughts, that comes to those who have wealth and leisure'. The situation had not changed radically under British rule. There were in Burma no Rammohun Roys, no Tagores, no Nehrus, people with the wealth and leisure to pursue knowledge for the sake of knowledge, to travel, to see for themselves how other civilizations worked in their own milieu, to set standards of cultural refinement and intellectual excellence. It is surely no coincidence that men like Vidyasagar, Tilak and Gandhi who came from less privileged homes concentrated more on practical solution to India's problems than on intellectual speculation at a universal level. A western scholar, discussing the differences between Tagore and Gandhi, explains them partly in terms of their dissimilar backgrounds:

India in the eyes of a Kathiawad Bania, raised in conservative Jain-Vaishnava religious and Rajput political traditions, appeared a quite different India from that seen by a Bengali Brahman whose unorthodox family had pioneered in assimilating modern Western ideas and synthesizing them with Hindu religious and artistic traditions. Gandhi's image of India and the West also reflected a very different experience with individual Westerners. His treatment in a colonial outpost at the hands of South Africa's white supremacists had been as

brutal as Tagore's welcome in literary circles of Western civilization's leading metropolis had been exhilarating.⁵⁶

The men of action in India were imbued by the ideals of the renaissance, but by the twentieth century some of the universal approach had begun to narrow. It is disturbing when a man of Gandhi's vision casually writes of English women as wandering in the streets and slaving away in factories,⁵⁷ of western students as recognizing no law 'save that of their fancy,'⁵⁸ and of those who had received their education through the foreign medium as having lost their intellectual vigour.⁵⁹

Gandhi's ideology was not only the guiding force of Indian nationalist movements in the 1920s, it also provided the themes for many writers of poetry and fiction. Imaginative literature in India as in Burma reflected much of the changing mood of the nation. Hindi Poet Maithilisharan Gupt wrote on the occasion of the coronation of George V that there was no nation in the world more loyal than India. He describes Bharat as having two eyes: one filled with tears of love resting on the prosperity which the British regime had given to India and the other filled with tears of sorrow for the degradation which had befallen the Indians.⁶⁰ During the period when Indian nationalism had entered a new phase under Gandhi's leadership, the same poet writes eulogistically of the, *satyagrahis* of Bardoli, making comparisons with Haldighati and Thermopylae.⁶¹ The most famous of Hindi writers, Premchand, was a staunch follower of Gandhi. Premchand had a strong belief in the didactic role of fiction. He was an admirer of Gokhale while at the same time sympathizing with Tilak's radical politics.⁶² In an early book review, he criticized Hakim Barham's *Krishna Kunwar* for its lack of social purpose. Premchand considered it the duty of the novelist to strive for the removal of moral evils. The novelist can function sometimes as a friend, sometimes as a guide or philosopher. He can sometimes function as a physician'.⁶³ In accordance with his views, Premchand used his novels to express social and political

ideas. One of his major works, *Sevasadan* (1919) is considered to have been influenced by Gandhi's faith in 'change of heart'.⁶⁴ In *Rangabhumi* (1925), the central figure, a blind beggar, becomes the mouth piece of Gandhian philosophy. His other novels also display the social and political preoccupations of the age: the Hindu-Muslim conflict, *satyagraha*, the peasant movement. Not only Premchand but many other writers of India were deeply influenced by the ideas and actions of their political and intellectual leaders.

Bankimchandra Chatterji's novels in the nineteenth century had also reflected social and political trends; his *Ananda Math* in particular exhibits strong patriotic traits. Yet, in the fore word, Bankim wrote that the book expounded the truths of the suicidal nature of social revolution and the redemption from anarchy which the English had achieved for Bengal.⁶⁵ Bankim lived in the period of transition when appreciation of achievements under British governance was giving way to a growing dissatisfaction with the effects of foreign rule. A number of his novels are set against a historical background. Humayun Kabir sees Bankim's predilection for the past as a sign of his inability to achieve a satisfactory synthesis between his Bengali identity and western values. 'Whenever he was faced with a choice, he turned to the past traditions of his own country.'⁶⁶ Bankim's attempt to write his first novel in English and his subsequent decision to use only Bengali as the medium of his imaginative genius also suggests that there had been a conflict between the western and the Bengali side of his intellectual person.

The song, 'Bande Matram' from *Ananda Math*, became the 'mantra of nationalism' in the early years of the twentieth century. It is a song of intense patriotism which praises the glory of India and exhibits flashes of militancy:

*Who has said thou art weak in thy lands,
When the swords flash out in twice seventy million hands
And seventy million voices roar*

Thy dreadful name from shore to shore?

* * *

Thou art Durga, Lady and Queen,

With her hands that strike and her sword of sheen.⁶⁷

The sentiments of 'Bande Matram' did not appear to have appealed to Tagore who abhorred the extremism which could be perpetrated in the name of patriotism. In his novel, *Home and the World*, Tagore's views are represented by the gentle, moderate Nikhil who feels that 'to tyrannise for the country is to tyrannise over the country'.⁶⁸ Sandip who has no moral values uses nationalism to satisfy his own ego and laughs at Nikhil's scruples. He is an opportunist, clever and cynical: 'Who says "Truth shall Triumph"? Delusion shall win in the end.... Bengal must now create a new image, to enchant and conquer the world. *Bande Matram*.'⁶⁹

III

TAGORE STOOD fast by the ideals of the Renaissance with which he had grown up even when it brought him unpopularity during the years of intense nationalism. It was through such minds that the thoughts of the nineteenth century flowed into the twentieth in India. Ideas, put forward by those who had imbibed the tradition of the renaissance, influenced the middle intelligentsia who in turn spread their views at the popular level. In Burma, with its lack of an effective leadership, the people had to fend for themselves in the twentieth century as they had done throughout their history. Traditionally, the Burmese had always had a great respect for education. Unlike India, where ancient learning had been confined to the higher castes, education had always been universally available in Burma. And this education was connected with the teachings of the Buddha who had pointed out the way to *nirvana*. Thus, to be educated meant more than the mere acquisition of book learning; it meant the mastery of the supreme knowledge that would lead to enlightenment. A people with such a view of education could not take easily to the British policy which saw education as practical training for the new jobs and opportunities that had been created under colonialism. And when they did accept the necessity of entering the modern education system the Burmese brought to it a utilitarian, materialistic approach lacking in intellectual curiosity. The age old conviction that true knowledge resided only in the teachings of the Buddha remained unshaken.

Together with the suspicion of foreign ways, there was also in the Burmese mentality an ingrained resistance to elitism. It was a widely held belief that education of a national character should be made available to as broad a section of the population as possible. And it was this belief which lay behind the boycott against the Rangoon University Act of 1920. The boycott has been described as the result of an 'unfortunate misunderstanding'.⁷⁰ The act was intended to create the University of Rangoon from an

amalgamation of the existing Rangoon and Judson Colleges. The British authorities proposed that the standard of academic requirements should be raised, and that the university should be of a residential character. The Burmese objected on the grounds that such conditions would have the effect of limiting education to the privileged few. The boycott against the act is seen by some as a political manoeuvre instigated by elements outside the resident university student body.⁷¹ But the enthusiasm with which it was supported by parents and, the country at large denotes that the issues involved had touched a deep chord within the Burmese character. There was certainly a misunderstanding, but it was not just a Burmese misunderstanding of British motives, it was also a British misunderstanding of the Burmese mentality. A people who had derived no real leadership from their rulers (except in the field of battle) could not be expected to understand or welcome a move to create an intellectually privileged class.

The most important outcome of the 1920 boycott was the founding of national schools, set up with funds raised from the public. Not many of these institutions survived the burst of popular enthusiasm which had provided the initial means for their foundation. Those which managed to keep from shutting down were moved by necessity to accept government subsidies. But the effects of a system of education guided by nationalist principles was far-reaching. A crop of students would grow up whose intellectual foundation was an amalgam of the patriotic spirit and the western tradition of learning based on objective empiricism.

The 1920s was a period of transition for Burma. The associations which had begun as institutions for the preservation of Buddhism and Burmese culture had taken on a political aspect. The newspapers had matured as organs for expressing popular sentiment, in particular the nascent mood of nationalism. Rangoon had become the centre of the hybrid culture produced under colonialism. A nucleus of writers and scholars who combined traditional learning with western methods of scientific analysis

was beginning to emerge. The language also was changing to accomodate the needs of the times. Two of the writers who pioneered the modern style were P. Monin and U Po Kya. They favoured short sentences, simple phrasing, few, if any, Pali expressions. The impetus which the Burma Research Society had given towards a scholastic study of Burmese culture and literature had begun to bear fruit. The Burmese language became an important subject in the university curriculum, and the first honours student in Burmese graduated in 1927.

Burmese studies in Rangoon university were fostered and encouraged by U Pe Maung Tin, the first Burmese to be appointed to a professorial post. Under his guidance and with the co-operation of other scholars, Burmese teaching achieved a high standard. Old Burmese, Pyu (the language of the Pyus, a proto-Burman ethnic group), Mon and Pali were also added to the curriculum. Thus, young students, who already had a knowledge of English and the literature of the west, acquired a broad linguistic base and an eclectic intellectual outlook. It was not surprising that some outstanding literary figures should have emerged from this pioneer group of modern Burmese scholars.

In the early years of the 1930 there appeared two volumes of *Khitsan Stories* and a volume of *Khitsan Poems*. These were collections of the works of students well known to Professor Pe Maung Tin. *Khitsan* means 'to test the age', and the anthologies were published with the intention of seeing how the public would react to the modern approach. These writings represented the fusion of Burmese and western scholarship achieved by introducing the teaching of Burmese into the westernized higher education system. Some hailed the *Khitsan* publications as an important literary movement, others attacked it as inimical to classical traditions. To the present day, there is controversy over the place of the *Khitsan* writers in the development of Burmese literature.

The *Khitsan* approach was essentially represented by three persons: Theippan Maung Wa, known for his short stories, and two poets who have risen to great eminence, Zawgyi and Min Thu Wun. All three could be described as belonging to the renaissance tradition. They combined knowledge of and respect for the past with a modern spirit of innovation. Their sympathies were broad, covering an ample sweep of cultures and interests. All three of them had opportunities to spend some years pursuing higher studies in the West. Their writings were widely read and admired, yet it cannot be said that they carried the country with them in the spirit of renaissance. There would appear to be three main reasons for this failure. First, the perfect fusion between old and new had not quite taken place: The university students for all their knowledge of classical Burmese works were still looked upon as a breed apart by those who had not been educated in the modern system. Secondly, all three went into government service, Theippan Maung Wa as an administrator and the two poets as university teachers, thus narrowing the scope of their activities. Thirdly, and perhaps most important, they confined the application of their liberal education to the world of arts. It was only very occasionally that their writings touched on social or political matters. Theippan Maung Wa's short stories often reflect conditions in rural Burma, but he did not examine their underlying causes. It was chiefly for the last reason that the *Khitsan* writers would be attacked by socialist thinkers of a later era. In a way, the *Khitsan* movement was an isolated phenomenon contained within the achievements of a small group of writers. But their importance goes beyond the immediate boundaries of their literary influence for they represented a possible goal of East-West, old-new synthesis at the intellectual level in Burma.

Four

I

IN INDIA, political and intellectual leadership had often coincided. Moreover, there had been an uninterrupted stream of able leaders from the last years of the nineteenth century until independence. This provided a cohesive framework within which social and political movements could experiment and mature. The course of Burma's development under colonialism was more fractured. Actions without ideational content lose their potency as soon as the situation which had called for them ceases to be valid. A series of pragmatic moves unconnected by a continuity of vision cannot be expected to sustain a long term movement. The Burmese who aspired to positions of leadership under British rule were pragmatic in their approach and prided themselves on it. This lack of a satisfactory leadership in Burma was recognized by Aung San, later to emerge as the leader of the independence movement, while he was still a university student in the 1930s. In an article on education he remarked that the old did not provide the young with either example or inspiration:

We are fully prepared to follow men who are able and willing to be leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, C.R. Das, Motilal Nehru and Tilak of India; like De Valera of Ireland; or Garibaldi and Maziini of Italy. Let anybody appear who can be like such a leader, who *dares* to be like such a leader. We are waiting.⁷²

Aung San belonged to the generation of students who had been raised in the patriotic ethos of the national schools and whose search for a philosophy to guide their nationalist endeavours would lead them to socialist ideology. The 1920s had been a period of political awakening punctuated by a few significant but largely uncoordinated events. The next decade was an era of change and revolution; it was a time when the younger generation

strived to broaden the base of nationalism and to give it an intellectual framework.

The year 1930 was a momentous year for Burma. It saw the birth of the Dohbama Asiayone, an organization which was to play a major role in the Burmese independence movement. It also witnessed the peasants' uprising led by Hsaya San. One represented the future, a forward-looking movement with revolutionary tendencies based on ideas and tactics imported from the West. The other represented the past, an armed enterprise relying on the call of racial pride and the charisma of the leader. The two were perhaps not entirely separate, but the connection was somewhat tenuous one. Hsaya San had been a member of the General Council of Buddhist Associations which had been founded in 1920 by amalgamating the YMBA and other minor associations. In that sense, he could be said to have been a part of the contemporary political scene to which the Dohbama Asiayone also belonged. The dissatisfaction of peasants with government measures to allay the hardships of the rural economy provided Hsaya San with a following large enough to start a rebellion. But the insurrection collapsed quickly, and by 1931 the leader had been captured, to be tried and executed.

Hsaya San had made an appeal to the atavistic instincts of the Burmese. He had presented himself as a future monarch; his men had fought with a desperate courage, pitting sword and magic amulet against the firearms of government troops. Although there was sympathy for the patriotism of the rebels throughout the country, there was little practical support. The Burmese had quietly decided that they wanted no more of at least one old outmoded institution. There had not been much cause for the people to love the monarchy in the past – the king in his golden palace had simply been a symbol of the power and the glory of their race. Now that the glory was extinguished the Burmese were too canny to wish the power to go back into autocratic hands if they could help it. But neither did they wish for a continuation of

foreign rule. They would find a way to end colonialism on their own terms, not on the terms of men who would be kings.

The Dohbama Asiayone was a direct result of the Indo-Burmese riots which had broken out in May 1930. The riots had their origin in the dashes which had taken place between Indian dock workers on strike and Burmese labourers who had been employed as strikebreakers.

The Burmese had long resented the role which immigrant groups had come to play in their country. All the passion of their fears for the dignified survival of their own people was poured into the ensuing conflict. Their rallying cry as fighting broke out in the streets was *Dohbama* (We Burmese). Ba Thaung, a young tutor from Rangoon University, conceived the idea of the Dohbama Asiayone (organization) as he wrote pamphlets on the Burmese who had died during the riots. Its slogan was race, language, religion. The organization was to become known as the Thakin Party. *Thakin* means 'master', and was the term commonly used in referring to or addressing Englishmen. Ba Thaung and his associates used the word as a suffix to their names to denote that the Burmese, too, were a race of masters, not slaves. It was this simple, effective device for emphasizing their spirited patriotism combined with the educated approach of Ba Thaung and his association that attracted young people to the Dohbama Asiayone. The Thakins were not satisfied with a mere organization, they began to look around for ideas to give direction to their nationalist aspirations.

Leftist literature became available in Burma around 1931. Books brought back by individuals who had been abroad and those circulated by J.S. Furnivall's Burma Book Club formed the core of socialist and Marxist works introduced into the country. These were eagerly consumed by young Burmese whose eyes had been opened to the exciting political currents which were sweeping across the world. As they were also searching eagerly, perhaps unconsciously, for radical ideas, there was a tendency to

swallow much of the whole socialist theory without digesting it properly.

The spread of leftist sympathies among the younger Burmese nationalists has often been explained in economic and political terms. In fact, Burmese society with its Buddhist values, lack of extreme poverty and freedom from class exploitation was not a natural candidate for Marxist socialist ideology. It was the view that socialism was opposed to imperialism which made the former attractive to young nationalists. The Burmese were caught up in the tide of the times that saw the leftist ideologies as progressive alternative as to capitalism and colonialism. In addition to this, the intellectual climate of Burma was ripe for the broad sweep of ideas which socialism introduced. The young Burmese were very now intellectuals and their minds longed to grapple with theories, concepts, challenges. They were equipped by their Anglo-vernacular education, not just to absorb new ideas for themselves but to spread them among the people. Unlike the older generation of politicians who were not at home in the Burmese written idiom, the generation of the 1930s had grown up reading Burmese books, newspapers and magazines. They were as familiar with the anachronistic flavour of Hmaing's language as with the spare elegance of *Khitsan*.

Among the young nationalists who sought for ideas to buttress their actions were Aung San, Soe, Nu, Than Tun, Thein Hpe Myint. All of them became politicians; all of them imbibed leftist ideologies, some more deeply than others; all of them wielded the pen with greater or lesser felicity. Soe used Buddhist terminology to interpret communist works, Nu tried to show that communism and Buddhism were, in fact, not incompatible. Leaving aside the question of how far they succeeded in their endeavours, they showed a practical recognition of the Burmese need to translate foreign concepts into their language, literally and metaphorically. Aung San, Than Tun, and Thein Hpe Myint too, searched for ideas to fit the needs of Burmese nationalism. All of

them believed in forging strong links between thought and action, particularly Aung San for whom the two followed each on the other in an uninterrupted chain of endeavour.

Thein Hpe possessed outstanding literary gifts. He produced a string of novels and short stories which, while acting as vehicles for his political ideas, were also fine works of art. He, in common with a number of his political colleagues, combined patriotism with a broad-minded approach to the worth of other cultures. The hero of his novel, *Boycott Student*, based on the Rangoon University boycott of 1936, advises a young girl to read translations of good English novels rather than shoddy Burmese fiction. He also states the view that to write Burmese well it was important not only to study the works of traditional scholars such as Hmaing but also to read good English books.

Nu, Aung San and Thein Hpe were among the leaders of the boycott of 1936, which was essentially a protest against the heavy-handed attitude of the authorities towards nationalist students. Within the next two years, all three together with Soe and Than Tun joined the *Dohbama Asiayone*. Henceforth, they were to feature among the most widely known Thakin leaders of the independence movement.

Nu, Soe and Than Tun were among the founder members of the Nagani (Red Dragon) Book Club started in 1937. The aim of this club was to make Burmese translations of works on economics, politics, history and literature available to the public at a low price. The idea behind the venture was that, if Burma wished to be known to the world, Burma herself must first get to know the world. It was a simple, modest, intelligent outlook. A glance at the list of books published by the Nagani Book Club reveals that, among the one hundred and one titles published, there were thirty-eight on war, thirty-six on nationalism, thirty-two on revolution, and twenty-one on Michael Collins. Titles on other popular subjects were nineteen on Burmese history, nineteen on Germany, eighteen on government, eighteen on economics,

eighteen on socialism, fifteen on communism, and fifteen on fascism. There was one book on Nehru, two on Gandhi, two on De Valera, three on Stalin, four on Hitler and six on Lenin. The revolutionary, leftist bias of the club was in little doubt.

In the last few years before war came to Burma the Thakins searched indefatigably for ideas and tactics which would help Burma to win her independence. During this time, they came to realize that Burma was a nation not just of the Burmese but also of the Shans, Chins, Kachins, Karens, Mons and other indigenous peoples. There were, in addition, those members of the immigrant communities who had established indissoluble ties of love and loyalty with the country of their adoption. The young nationalists recognized the need to look beyond traditional values, which were simply based on the awareness of the nationhood of the Burmese people. A genuine lack of racial chauvinism, combined with a very real desire to learn from the rest of the world, marked some of the leaders who emerged in the 1930's.

But there was no time to allow political attitudes to mature intellectually before the Second World War came to Burma. With the advance of the Japanese the Burmese had to face a new set of problems. They had to learn to cope with a fellow Asian race whose achievements they had admired and who professed to be their allies but yet treated them with the arrogance and brutality of conquerors. It was against a different background from that which had prevailed under the British that the Burmese had to continue their search for a synthesis of ideas and action which would carry their nation to the required goal as an integrated whole.

II

A COMPARISON of the intellectual life of Burma and India under colonialism shows two very different societies facing the onslaught of alien forces in their own different ways. In India there was an initial enthusiasm for western ideas and institutions among its leadership. This early admiration was a major factor in the birth of the Indian Renaissance which was to influence intellectual development and political thought in the country right up to the time of independence. The language of the rulers not only helped to spread western ideas but also acted as a unifying factor in the multilingual subcontinent. English became so much a part of Indian intellectual life that Indo-Anglian works acquired their own place in the literature of the nation after independence. Even when Indian attitudes towards the British had changed to resentment and hostility, the intellectual impulse that sought a harmonious fusion of the east and west did not die out completely. And English continued to be accepted as the political language of the nation.

Leftist thought was not without its fascination for the intellectuals of India, where social conditions were such as to make the promises of a communist society seem most attractive. But the majority of the nationalist leaders, who still ascribed to the Renaissance view that social, religious and political factors were but different facets of the indivisible life of civilized man, preferred to select critically from the wide range of socialist ideas (in particular those with an economic bearing) rather than to accept whole ideologies in their entirety.

Looking from the Indian situation to that of Burma, there is the almost surreal impression of a time warp. Colonized at a much later date and for a much shorter period, the Burmese experience of British rule is in some ways a concertinaed version of developments in India. But there were also developments which took their own individual course, explainable not so much by the colonial experience common to many Asian and African countries

of that era as by the distinct cultural and historical background of Burma.

The Burmese people lacked a leadership which could have helped them to face the challenges posed by their confrontation with alien values. They learnt to adjust to new conditions slowly, almost imperceptibly. Towards the end of British rule some leaders arose who saw the need to adopt a broad assimilative approach and to develop a philosophy which could cope with modern developments. But on the whole, such changes as came about in the traditional values of the Burmese took place because the people themselves willed it and not because they were carried along by the force of dynamic leaders. The leaders that they did follow willingly were those who could communicate with them in their own language. As the founder of the Dohbama Asiayone had realized, language, together with race and religion, were the mainsprings of the Burmese sense of their unique identity. Even when the revolutionary young politicians dropped the notions of race and religion from their concept of modern nationhood, the validity of the Burmese language as a unifying factor was tacitly retained.

The aspects of intellectual life on which this study has focused reveals a strong link between nationalism and intellectual developments in Burma and India under colonialism. Indian society accustomed to the tradition of privileged castes, readily accepted the intellectual elite born of the Indian Renaissance which provided many of its national leaders. This elite led the movement which sought a harmonious union between western thought and Hindu philosophy in the search for nationalist ideals. In Burma, however, traditional attitudes shaped by an essentially egalitarian society militated against the acceptance of an elite. Moreover, the early generation of Burmese who acquired their education under the colonial system were largely ignorant of the classical learning of their own country. As a result they found themselves distanced from the traditional scholars as well as from

the people in general. Western education and traditional learning began to merge only in the 1930s when the study of Burmese language and literature became an integral part of the education system. The younger leaders who were the products of this system strived to give to nationalist aspirations an ideological framework which would be acceptable not only to the Burmese but to all the peoples of Burma. There always remained an intellectual, one might almost say a cultural, gap between the old leadership and the young politicians who were to carry on the independence movement after the war.

The situation in neither country could be said to have been wholly satisfactory. In India the elite demonstrated that Indians could reach the topmost ranks of intellectual excellence which combined the best in their own traditions with those of the best that the west had to offer. But the gap between the elite and the common people was so large that the momentum of the Renaissance could not be sustained. The forces which had provided the nationalist movement with ideas and ideals had already begun to dissipate before India became independent.

In Burma, the lack of an elite meant that there was little to guide and spur on the people to reach out for greater achievements. The younger generation of leaders appeared too late to bring about effective changes before the outbreak of the Second World War. Developments in Burma after 1940 took many abrupt twists and turns, and to this day, it still remains a society waiting for its true potential to be realized.

Notes

1. Just as the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah was sent to Rangoon where he died in 1862, Thibaw, the last king of Burma, was exiled to Ratnagiri where he lived until his death in 1914. His queen, Supayalat, was allowed to return to Burma in 1919. She died in Rangoon in 1925.
2. Phillip Woodruff, *The Men Who Ruled India: The Guardians*, London, 1963, p. 122.
3. However, for about a hundred years between 1540 and 1635 the Burmese monarchs of the Taungu dynasty made the port city of Pegu their capital.
4. Phillip Woodruff, *The Men Who Ruled India: The Guardians*, London, 1963, p. 118.
5. James Morris, *Heaven's Command: An Imperial Progress*, London, 1973, p. 337.
6. Frank Moraes, *Witness to An Era: India 1920 to the Present Day*, Delhi, 1973, pp. 46-47. Nirad C. Chaudhuri presents colour prejudice in India in an original, interesting light in *The Continent of Circe*, London, 1965.
7. Donald Bishop (ed.) *Thinkers of the Indian Renaissance*, New Delhi, 1982, p. 4.
8. Quoted in Arabinda Poddar, *Renaissance in Bengal: Quests and Confrontations 1800-1860*, Simla, 1970, p. 51.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 5. The 'eminent intellectual' to whom he refers is Nirad C. Chaudhuri.
10. U Kaung's 'A Survey of the History of Education in Burma Before the British Conquest and After' in *Journal of the Burma Research Society (JBRS)*, vol. xlvii, ii, Rangoon, 1963, provides appendixes showing the rise of the population, the total areas under cultivation and cultivated area per head for British Burma between 1830 and 1870. He also gives some figures for the export of rice from Pegu which rose from 457 *maunds* in 1853-54 to 3,420 *maunds* in 1856-57.

11. Phillip Woodruff, *The Men who Ruled India: The Guardians*, London, 1963, p. 117.
12. H. Fielding Hall, *The Soul of a People*, London, 1909, p. 83.
13. Ram Gopal, *Lolramanya Tilak*, New Delhi, 1956, p. 220-21.
14. U Kaung, Appendix I of 'A Survey of the History of Education in Burma Before the Conquest and After' in *JBRS*, vol. xlvi, ii, Rangoon, 1963.
15. *Selections from Educational Records Part I 1781-1839*, Calcutta 1920.
16. The complete letter is reproduced in Wm. Theodore de Bary *et al.*, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, New York, 1958, pp. 592-95.
17. Quoted in Donald Bishop (ed.), *Thinker of the Indian Renaissance*, New Delhi, 1982, p. 76.
18. U Kaung, Appendix III of 'A Survey of the History of Education in Burma Before the British Conquest, and After' in *JBRS*, vol. xlvi, ii, Rangoon, 1963.
19. See chap. I, n.3.
20. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *The Intellectual in India*, New Delhi, 1967, p. 16.
21. Dr. Than Tun, Burma's foremost historian of today, writing on life in sixteenth century Burma comments: 'The relationship between the ruler and the ruled might well have been of a strained nature since the ordinary common people avoided any dealings with government servants if possible'. See Than Tun, 'Social Life in Burma in the 16th Century', *Southeast Asian Studies*, Kyoto, vol. 21, no. 3. December 1983.
22. U Kaung, Appendix III of 'A Survey of the History of Education in Burma Before the British Conquest, and After' in *JBRS*, vol. xlvi, ii, Rangoon, 1963.
23. *The London Times*, 15 January, 1906.
24. Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Politics in Burma*, Princeton, 1965, p. 86.
25. Arthur Waley has remarked on the 'disquiet caused in some circles at Oxford when Radhakrishnan whose role had been

essentially that of an interpreter of the East to the West was succeeded in the Spalding Chair by a scholar who announced his intention of functioning simply as a scholar'. See Arthur Waley, *The Secret Life of the Mongols and Other Pieces*, London, 1963, p. 79.

26. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, Bombay, 1951, p. 497.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 192. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *The Intellectual in India*, New Delhi, 1967, p. 9.

30. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* (p. 191-92) and Arabinda Poddar, *Renaissance in Bengal: Quests and Confrontation 18-18-1860*. (pp. 32-33), quote the same passage from Rajani

31. Frank Moraes, *Witness to an Era: India 1920 to the Present Day*, Delhi, 1973 p. 153.

32. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, New Delhi, 1947.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

34. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *The Intellectual in India*, New Delhi, 1967, pp. 30-32.

35. Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India*, New Delhi, 1947, p. 6.

36. *loc. cit.*

37. Gandhi's experiences in England are recounted in his autobiography, *My Experiment With Truth*.

38. U Tin, *Myanmamin Okchutpon Sadan*.

39. U Myint Hpe, *Myanma soak thamain-u nhin thamain atweakyon*, Rangoon, 1972, p. 21.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 23-24.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 26-30.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 26-30.

43. H. Fielding Hall, *The Soul of a People*, London 1909, p. 66.

44. Hla Pe, 'The Rise of Popular Literature in Burma' in *JBRS*, li, ii, December, 1968, pp. 126-27.

45. *loc. cit.*

46. Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalist Movements of Burma 1920-1940*, n. p., 1980, p. 2.

47. From the report in the *Rangoon Gazette*, 10 August 1908, reproduced in *JBRS*, i, April 1950, pp. 1-7.

48. Thireinda Padita, *Thakin Kodaw Hmaing ahtutpati amhadawbon*, Rangoon, 1938.

49. See n., 2.

50. Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India*, New Delhi, 1947, p. 343.

51. Than Tun, 'Historiography of Burma', in *Shiryoku*, no. 9, 1976, Kagoshima University.

52. J.S. Furnivall, 'The Dawn of Nationalism in Burma', *JBRS* vol. xxxiii, i, April 1950, p. 1.

53. *loc. cit.*

54. John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, New York, 1958, p. 180.

55. H. Fielding Hall, *The Soul of a People*, London, 1909, p. 80.

56. Stephen Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and His Critics in Japan, China and India*, Massachusetts, 1970 p. 284.

57. M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, Ahmedabad, 1938, p. 37.

58. M.K. Gandhi, *The Problems of Education*, Ahmedabad, 1962, p. 18.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

60. Dharam Paul Saran, *Influence of Political Movements on Hindi Literature (1906-1947)*, Chandigarh, 1967, p. 47.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

62. V.S. Narvane, *Premchand: His Life and Work*, New Delhi, 1980, pp. 30-31.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 102. The author mentions that Premchand once remarked that faith in 'change of heart' was the only important idea stressed by Gandhi with which he fully agreed.

65. Sunil Kumar Banerjee, *Bankim Chandra: A Study of His Craft*, Calcutta, 1968, p. 118.
66. Humayun Kabir, *The Bengali Novel*, Calcutta, 1968, p. 27.
67. From the translation in Sri Aurobindo, *Bankim-Tilak-Dayananda*, Calcutta, 1940.
68. Surendranath Tagore (trans.) *The Home and the World*, London, 1928, p. 163.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
70. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
71. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
72. My translation from Aung San, 'Kyun pyinnya nhin thakin pyinnya', in *Oway e Shweyatu Letyweizin hsaungba mya*, Rangoon, 1971.

