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Burmesse Indians: The Forgotten Lives

By Samart Butkaew

Kala Lumyo is the word the Burmesse call the Indian who live in Burma. The word Kala is, in general, for those who have dark skin. They originated from India and they come from South Asia and the Western part of Asia in general, most notably form present-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The word kala literally means degrading, disgusting and to look down upon. The word “alien” is also used by Burmesse people to describe the Indians. However, the Burmesse Indians see themselves as a part of the Burmesse people. They have fought for Burma together with the Burmesse and other ethnic people to be free from colony rule and independent.

In the midst of the struggle for human rights and democracy in Burma, the international community mostly focuses on the democracy movement lead by Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League of Democracy or on the fighting for the independence by the ethnic groups. When looking to situation as a whole, the Burmesse Indians are also in need of the same freedoms as all the other Burmesse people. In their struggle for freedom most people see them as outsiders.

Approximately 2 per cent of the Burmesse population is Burmesse Indians. However this number is not dependable as there is no reliable information. In Burma, the majority of Burmesse Indians are Muslim (Suni Set), others are Hindu, Sikhs and Buddhist. Most of the Burmesse Indian Muslim population lives in urban areas and big cities such as Rangoon and post British Hill towns such as Pyin U Lwin (formerly Maymyo).

The first Burmesse Indians migrated to Burma in the glorious Bagan period (A.D. 1044-1287) when Indian, Persian and Arabian merchants came to Burma. In the 18th and 17th centuries, the Golden Age of the spices trade attracted more Indian merchants to Burma. This migration continued until the British invasion.

When Burma became a part of India under the British colonial rule in 1824, a large number of Indian people moved to Burma. These included entrepreneurs, politicians and government employees. In the following decades infrastructure initiatives of the British caused an unprecedented economic boom in Burma. From 1855 to 1930 the area of the Irrawaddy delta used for rice cultivation increases ten times to roughly 4 million hectares. Coolies (Indian labourers) from southern India migrated continuously to Burma in search of work. In 1930 the number of Indians in Burma had grown considerably and in Rangoon 53 per cent of the whole population was Indian. Things were going smoothly for the Burmesse Indian population even after British left and independence dawned Burma in 1948. There were even Indians in the Cabinet.

Things changed after the coup d’etat in 1962 led by General Ne Win and the introduction of Nationalism. Some Burmesse Indians were forced out of the country as a result of the economy’s nationalization. Their wholesale and retail businesses were taken away without any compensation and they were all given 175 Kyat to return to India. The Cabinet was pushed out of the government. Although, many Indian had been living in Burma for generations and had integrated into Burmesse society, they became a target for discrimination and oppression by the junta.

Today many Indians, particularly Hindus live in central Rangoon on the both side of the Su Lei Paya Road. Most are involved in either legal or illegal businesses, including restaurants, jewellery shops and money exchanges. It is not surprising that the Burmesse people believe that these Indians have a better economic rank, than they do. It seems that there are no problems for the Burmesse Indians because they are rich, but in fact this is not true. They have many personal issues.

Although Burmesse Indians have not been violently oppressed by the military government like
other ethnic groups in Burma, their rights have been continuously restricted and they have faced different forms of oppression. If Burmese people’s rights are limited, the Burmese Indians’ rights will be doubly limited.

Religion is being used as a tool of oppression against the Burmese Indians by the military dictatorship. Burmese Muslim Indians and Burmese Hindu Indians are not allowed to grandly celebrate any of their religious ceremonies. These religious rights are prohibited. They can not run religious parades anywhere in Burma, like they do in other countries. In South East Asian countries like Thailand and Malaysia the governments allow people to grandly celebrate their religions, but in Burma, the military just allows them to quietly celebrate behind closed doors or in the few temples. The military dictatorship rejects or ignores their request when they want to build Mosque in the country or to go abroad for religious ceremonies. The military dictatorship never encourages or supports the Burmese Indians.

However, the attitude of the Burmese people towards the Burmese Indian is worse. The Burmese Indians are looked down or mistreated because of their religion, the way they dress or the way they act. Burmese people believe that the “Kala Lumyo” will take over the country and rule Burma. They believe that if there are too many Indians this will happen. According to the religious beliefs, if you were marry someone who is a Muslim or a Hindu you have to change your original religion to their religion and your children will also automatically become Muslim or Hindu. Consequently, Burmese people do not want their children to marry Indians.

Furthermore, the military dictatorship prohibits Burmese Indian from becoming involved or being employed as the government employees or working in any companies run by the State government.

While the military dictatorship is persuading ethnic minority groups to enter what they called the “legal fold” and participate in the drafting of a new constitution which includes sections on religion and political rights, Burmese Indians have not been invited by the military dictatorship to participate. They will never be invited as they are not seen as important in the eyes of the military dictatorship.

The international community does not see that the main issues facing the Burmese Indians are the State’s policies. The military government always says to the international community that they have opened the opportunity for all religious and ethnic minority groups to live together peacefully. It seems like the Burmese Indians should not have any problems. In reality, they do not receive any of these opportunities. The military government tries to block them getting in touch with the wider community and working together for a better society, human rights and other meaningful activities.

Like all people in Burma, the quality of health care depends on how much you can pay. Burmese Indians who can afford to pay for health care, receive reasonable care. However, Burmese Indians who cannot afford to pay, receive no health care. The government is suppose to provide free health care for all Burmese people, but this does not happen for most people in Burma, including the Burmese Indians.

Another issue is that the Burmese Indians who have good businesses will send their children to study abroad such as to the USA. Many of them are poor and can not manage to send their children to school. The government is not supporting the education system. There are some private schools or schools owned by foreign companies from the Middle East who provide free education and basic knowledge on Islam to Indian Muslims. Furthermore, Burmese Indians are not allowed to use their native languages and the junta has banned literature in these languages. The government has even banned some Bollywood movies. The New Light of Myanmar is the trumpet of the government, but in this newspaper it never talks about the Burmese Indians.

Living as the stranger in their own country Burmese Indians are not trying to make any problems for the society. There is an obvious image of the Burmese Indians “looking after their own”. At the moment we can clearly see that the Burmese Indians are out of sight of the junta and are looked down upon by the Burmese people. The status of the Burmese Indians in terms of religion, culture and civil rights are the same as the other ethnic groups. The government has used religion to oppress the Burmese Indians. What will happen to these people when transition comes? There are plenty of questions. Will they treated equally like other Burmese people or will they continue to be outsiders?

Endnotes:
3 Ibid
4 Indian and Burma: working on their relationship, The Irrawaddy (online), March 1999
5 The outsider, The Irrawaddy vol. 14 No.1, January 2006
6 Ibid.
Politics

Since Burma was accepted as a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997, the organization has pursued a policy of constructive engagement towards the military leaders of the country. The term constructive engagement has never been clearly defined, but it is based on the principle that it is better to engage and create ties with Burma rather than to ignore and isolate it. While the official strategy of the ASEAN policy is to influence and push forward the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) towards reforms by entering into political, economic and security relations with Burma, it in fact offers ASEAN member states the possibility to pursue their own strategic interests under the guise of constructive engagement.

Consequently, in dealing with Burma the priority is based on lucrative business deals. Burma, as one of the most resource-rich countries in the region, enjoys strong economic relations with other ASEAN countries as well as with China and India. These countries are looking to benefit from Burma’s enormous gas and oil resources to handle their future energy problems.

One significant reason for ASEAN to follow the concept of constructive engagement is to provide Burma with an alternative to forming a closer relationship with China, known as the strongest ally of the military regime. ASEAN members fear China is gaining ascendancy in Asia. Consequently, underlying the idea of sharing markets is the plan of creating a regional counterbalance to China through promoting peace and stability in the region is another important driving force of ASEAN. This might be an explanation why ASEAN has been reluctant to criticize Burma too strongly by invoking the non-interference principle.

The principle of non-interference in each other’s affairs is one of the fundamental principles of ASEAN declared in 1976 during their first summit. One could say that this principle was made to avoid tackling problems that ASEAN would be confronted with. In the case of Burma the use of the non-interference principle is morally inappropriate in relation to ongoing human right violations, suppression and continuous deterioration of living conditions by the SPDC against the Burmese populace. Nevertheless, the principle has worked well as a shield to avoid any discussion about the grim situation in Burma.

Burma is placed, not just geographically but also politically, between China, India and the ASEAN member states. Consequently, it plays an important role in maintaining the balance of power in the region. The Burmese junta seems to be very conscious of this. If Burma would leave or be expelled from the ASEAN grouping, it would lead to a shift in the balance of power, quite likely for the benefit of China. But this scenario is not foreseeable as long as the international community is unable to put constant pressure on ASEAN to force them to speak out critically or take action against the SPDC, ASEAN will not feel compelled to do so. Instead of breaking down their relations with Burma ASEAN member states continue doing business with Burma. However, economic factors are nearly always involved in any relations with Burma and must be taken into consideration to understand the policy of Burma’s neighbouring countries as well as ASEAN towards the military regime.

At the end of 2005 the policy of ASEAN towards Burma seemed to shift. In the fore field of the 11th summit of ASEAN, which was held in Kuala Lumpur from December 12-13, one headline topped another and all chorused the same message: ASEAN will make a great stance by speaking out critically against the extension of Aung San Suu Kyi’s house-arrest and the unwillingness of the junta to put any effort toward their self-proclaimed Roadmap to Democracy. But there was only an informal briefing about the recent developments in Burma and its policies were not too much of a distraction during the summit. Pressing issues on the formal agenda, like developments on the Korean peninsula, terrorism, maritime security and the threat of bird flu were still discussed. Only at the sidelines of the summit and after the event critical voices against Burma were raised, but have not yet led to an official ASEAN statement.

The significant push factor behind the superficial shift of the ASEAN policy can be mostly ascribed to the effort of the United States of America (US), the world’s only superpower, to regain influence in Asia. President Bush made a journey through Asia in November last year to strengthen the relationship with its allies, namely Japan, India and some ASEAN States. The reason why the US has tried to get a foot back in Asia’s door lies obviously in the role of China and its rise as a prospective superpower.
but also in the nation’s primary mission to spread democracy all over the world.

In this context, the case of Burma seems to enjoy a high priority in the US; not for another military invasion, but for improving their image in the international community, which has become tarnished following the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The White House Administration does not seem to tire of calling Burma one of six ‘outposts of tyranny’. Recently, at the annual meeting of the Asia Pacific Economic Conference forum in Busan, South Korea, from November 18-19, President Bush urged seven of the ten ASEAN member states to move on Burma. In his words, the ASEAN members should use their neighbourly influence to push Burma to democratic reforms.

But, the ASEAN states prefer profiting from the US sanctions against Burma instead of fulfilling American desires. The combination of sanctions and domestic political pressure prevent most western companies from doing business in Burma, which give Asian companies a competitive edge in this market. Statistics show that the biggest investors in Burma are companies from Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia, as well as China and India.

With his effort in Asia Bush could only win the support of the President of the Philippines. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo supported the move by the US to bring Burma on the UN Security Council, which resulted in the first-ever discussion by the body over the Asian country in December last year. Malaysia and Indonesia also spoke out critically against the Burmese junta and urged them to take concrete steps towards democracy outlined in the junta’s road map. However, Burma has not been compelled to act. What does it matter, when for example while criticizing the junta at the same time the Malaysian state oil company Petronas secured revenues for the Burmese government by being recently granted three more contracts to explore for natural gas in Burma. Additionally, the recent visit of the Indonesian Prime Minister Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to Burma aimed the to deepen bilateral ties between the two countries rather than addressing the issue of Burma’s progress towards democracy. The question is how much weight do political announcements have, when the economy obviously pulls the strings?

During the 11th summit ASEAN managed to secure an invitation from the junta to host an official ASEAN delegation in January 2006. The delegation, lead by Malaysia’s foreign minister Syed Hamid Albar, aimed to check the political situation and study the progress of its democratic reforms. Syed Albar himself said his planned visit did not amount to interference in the internal affairs of Burma, “it is just to have a good feel of what they are doing”. However, in early January 2006 the ASEAN delegation received a severe blow, when the SPDC postponed the visit without setting a new date. The reason the junta gave was that they are too busy to host the delegation because the country is in the midst of moving government offices to their new capital Pyinmana. Recently, Syed Albar urged the junta again to let him visit the country before a ministerial meeting of the ASEAN States in Bali, Indonesia on April 17-18. But the junta made no reply yet.

Over the last months there has been increasing international pressure on Burma, led by the US. There has been plenty of encouraging and positive news that could make some think that a change might be indicated. A lot of political activity took place around the world, prompted by the worsening situation in Burma, which might raise hopes the international community is finally becoming serious about tackling the problems of the Asian country. Whether any actual changes happened, the situation remains very much the same. There must be a genuine political will from the neighbouring countries of Burma about helping the suffering populace. However, as long as economic interests still dominate the regional and international relations with Burma, the SPDC will retain a tight grip on power.

Endnotes:
1 “Burma’s neighbours eye energy resources, despite political  woes”, Agence France Press, January 15, 2006
2 “Bush visits Asia and challenges China’s growing profile”, South Asia Analysis Group, Paper no. 1645
3 “Bush urges ASEAN to move on Burma”, The Irrawaddy, November 18, 2005
5 “Indonesia urges Burma to take concrete steps towards democracy”, Agence France Press, January 6, 2006
6 “Going nowhere”, Time Asia, January 22, 2006
7 “Three more offshore blocks in Myanmar under gas exploration” Xinhua General News Service, February 26, 2006
8 “Democracy not the Issue as Indonesian leader visits Burma”, The Irrawaddy, March 1, 2006
9 “Delegation may visit Burma next month”, New Straits Times, December 15, 2005
10 “Malaysia foreign minister says visit to Burma not an interference”, Associated Press, December 16, 2005
11 “Too busy to host ASEAN envoy this month, says Burma junta”, Associated Press, January 6, 2006
12 “Malaysian FM pushes for Burma visit”, Associated Press, February 26, 2006
PROMISING "EDUCATION FOR ALL" IN THAILAND:
WHAT ARE THE TRUE BENEFITS FOR MIGRANT CHILDREN BEHIND THIS NEW POLICY

BY C. GUINARD

In August 2005, the Thai Cabinet approved a resolution under the auspicious name “Education for All”. The aim of this new law was to allow all children in Thailand equal access to educational opportunities, including migrant children, who were previously deprived of this right.

A long battle by advocacy groups led to this shift of policy at the Ministry of Education (MoE). Now that the legal ground is open to new perspectives, how this new law will be implemented remains the key challenge.

For more than two decades, Thailand has hosted millions of migrant workers, accompanied by their children. Many have come from Burma but also Cambodia and Laos. Until last August, these children were not legally entitled to attend Thai public schools. On occasion, if the teacher was willing to accept the children and the migrant family could afford it, children could attend classes, but with little hope of getting a Thai certificate indicating their level of education, an essential document to pursue further study.

Today, the number of Burmese migrants in Thailand is an estimated 1.5 million, including thousands of children. Displaced Burmese people and their families flee to Thailand in search of safety, but large numbers also come for reasons such as poverty, limited employment opportunities and low education standards in their homeland. UNICEF reports indicate that in Burma almost 38 per cent of children between the ages of five and nine do not enrol in school and almost 75 per cent of students fail to complete secondary school. It is reported that the Burmese government spends less than $0.28 per child in public education per year. Low family incomes mean children are often pressured into joining the workforce or even into becoming child soldiers.

The situation in Burma’s ethnic States is even more alarming. According to statistics from the All Burma Federation of Student Unions Year 2004 Education Reportt, only 1.6 per cent of the ethnic population attends school, while 32.7 per cent of ethnic people are school aged. Also years of discriminatory policies have led to the banning of teaching ethnic languages even as a second language, affecting millions of ethnic children who are now unable to master their native language.

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), it is recognised that all children, regardless of their ethnic background, have a universal right to education. Ironically, Burma ratified this Convention in 1991 and, therefore, is bound by the provision it contains.

Given the above it is easy to understand why so many families finally decide to leave their home country behind, with the lure of better education opportunities in Thailand.

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Thailand is signatory, migrant children from Burma and children born stateless in the kingdom should share the same rights to education as Thai children. The fact that Thailand has finally amended its national law to conform with this international principle means that the freedom of equal access to quality education, that children from Burma have longed for, seems an achievable dream in Thailand. According to the "Education for All" Act, Burmese migrant children as well as those from other countries can now access the Thai education system and should be given a certificate at the end of their studies.

Apart from opening a great door of opportunity to migrant children, this new policy is also an encouraging step forward for all groups involved in providing and/or supporting education for migrant communities. But, for now, the reality of implementing such reforms shows a more complex panorama. Indeed, half a year after the law was approved, it is still very difficult for Burmese migrant children to attend Thai public schools. Various factors still prevent many from doing so. Above all, the price for a child to attend Thai school is very expensive for a migrant family. According to Naw Paw Ray, Chairwoman of the Burmese Migrant Worker Ethnic Committee (BMWEC), a migrant network gathering 20 schools in the Mae Sot area, it costs nearly 3,000 Baht (US$76) for a family to buy all the uniforms needed for just one child per year, plus additional expenses for transportation, books and food. This represents a massive sum of money for most migrant families, who earn an average of 1,500-2,000 Baht a month per person, especially when the child who is attending school will have limited opportunity to contribute to the already low family income.

But cost is not the only barrier. Indeed the education you want for your children does not only depend on the price you are willing to pay or what you can actually afford. It is also a question of cultural and philosophical matters: What is the curriculum you want your children to learn, in which language, under which guiding principles and cultural approach? These factors are deeply rooted in the true meaning of “education”. The school environment and the curriculum that children partici-
pate in contribute greatly to their development and future role in society.

On the Thai-Burma border, near the town of Mae Sot, Tak province, Thai schools do not teach any Burmese or Karen language in their curriculum. That’s not to say all schools are unwilling to do so, but a lack of proper funds to adapt the curriculum has undermined initiatives taken by dynamic local education officials and school directors to include Burmese or ethnic languages into the Thai curriculum.

It is also true that migrant parents usually prefer their children to be formally taught Burmese culture and language. Indeed, Burmese children are often behind in their studies compared to similar aged Thai students, and it is particularly challenging for these children to study a new curriculum in a language that they have not yet mastered. They often also lack confidence and motivation as there is still, in many cases, no formal recognition of their achievements. Despite the new policy, Thai schools are still reluctant to deliver Thai certificates to migrant children.

Another undermining factor is the challenging living conditions of illegal migrant communities who deal continuously with the fear of arrest and deportation. They are restricted in their movements, further isolating them. Consequently, people are afraid to send their children to Thai schools. Naw Paw Ray from BMWEC explains “because of the low level of communication between Thai schools and migrant communities which has been reinforced over the year by the lack of consistent government policy, many parents don’t even know that their children are now allowed to attend Thai school.” Until all these concerns and constraints are fully addressed, it is improbable that suddenly a high number of Burmese children will apply to attend Thai schools, despite this positive new policy. Indeed, a high number of Burmese migrant children still prefer to attend migrant schools, which are not part of the official Thai Education system, when accessible. There are approximately 100,000 Burmese migrant workers and families living in Mae Sot and Pophra District, Tak Province. In the 2005-2006 academic year about 5000 children were enrolled in 43 Burmese migrant schools with 350 teachers.

A research study by the National Health Education Committee, revealed that in 2004 there were about 10,000 children of illegal migrant workers in and around the Mae Sot area. Among these children 40 per cent did not attend any school, 5 per cent had the opportunity to attend Thai schools and 55 per cent attended illegal migrant schools. Naw Paw Ray is in charge of 20 of these schools. Despite the hardships of overcrowded classes, illegal status and constant financial difficulties, she remains optimistic about the future education of her people, at least in the Mae Sot area. “I’m confident that if we find more support we will be able to reach the children who do not attend any school”.

In migrant schools, children learn in their native language and in many cases follow the Burmese educational curriculum with additional courses such as Thai language and computer skills.

The major drawback is that after finally completing high school, these young graduates do not have any prospect to attend university, as their education is not officially recognised by the MoE in Thailand. With no identification papers and no education certificate, hopes for a better future are suddenly dashed.

To overcome this frustrating stalemate, the solution would be to legalise migrant schools as non-formal education providers authorized to deliver recognised certificate. Indeed, the MoE is now looking at ways to register these migrant schools as “Learning Centres”. In consultation with migrant schools and international organisations, the MoE has drafted some guidelines explaining the steps that migrant schools need to follow to fall under MoE jurisdiction. This would then provide the school with recognized status inside Thailand and the capacity to deliver certificates to its students. The MoE is currently finalising this proposal before submitting it to the Cabinet for approval.

The “Education for All” Act and the likely forthcoming registration of migrant schools as “Learning Centres”, launched by the MoE in the past months, are truly encouraging initiatives. However to make the most of these new opportunities, much more needs to be done. Bangkok must allocate additional funds to educational district offices for better curriculum development and policy strategy implementation. Adequate financial support must also be provided to Thai schools to ensure they are able to cope with the higher running costs associated with the influx of migrant children to the schools.

More effort must be put into developing collaboration and trust between migrant schools, Thai schools and education district officials at the local level. Without a doubt, the registration of migrant schools as legal learning centres will be the first symbolic and constructive step. Let’s hope that no petty internal fighting among some of the decision-makers at the MoE will affect the future of these ambitious educational reforms, the sole beneficiaries of which are children.

Endnotes:

1 According to the Nationality Act of 1965 (amended in 1992), even though Burmese displaced children are born on Thai soil, they are not granted Thai citizenship.

Sources: Burma Lawyer Council and Refugee International
**Red Cross visits stopped:** Burma’s military junta has suspended visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross to 90 prisons and labour camps across the country, a spokesperson for the humanitarian agency said.

The military government has not given any specific reasons for the termination of the ICRC prison visits, which had been going on since 1999, the Red Cross spokesperson said.

The spokesperson said the ICRC’s ability to operate had become more difficult since the purge of Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, with the junta imposing unworkable conditions on the agency.

**ASEAN parliamentarians urge release of Suu Kyi:** Southeast Asian parliamentarians have urged governments of the ASEAN to expel Burma from the regional grouping unless it frees opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, a Thai senator said.

The ASEAN Parliament called on the military junta to keep its promises made four years ago to release the leader of the National League for Democracy.

Despite international pressure, Burma has shown no sign of freeing Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners.

**China makes a small stance:** China signalled to visiting Burmese Prime Minister Soe Win that Burma could continue to depend on China but it needed to reform its economy and relax political repression.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said after meeting Soe Win: “As Myanmar’s neighbouring country, China sincerely hopes Myanmar can continue to push forward reconciliation at home and realise economic development and social progress.”

Apparentiy Beijing wants Burma’s military rulers to do more to accommodate Aung San Suu Kyi and speed up the country’s growth.

China withheld its veto to permit a discussion of Burma at an informal meeting of the UN Security Council last December.

**NLD proposes military as interim government:** The National League for Democracy offered for the first time to publicly legitimise the military junta as interim government in exchange for reconciliation.

The terms of the interim government will be negotiated by both sides and a new government will come to power after an election.

Burma watchers and exiled activists welcomed the NLD’s statement but hold dim hope for response of the military junta.

Democratic Party for a New Society President Aung Moe Zaw was surprised by the statement.

“As you know, many observers and some democracy activists accused the National League for Democracy as stubborn. I believe this statement shall overcome this accusation,” he said.