

## Rebel Bases in Myanmar

The Guwahati based Srimanta Foundation for Culture and Society recently organized an Interactive Session titled *'Abolokon – Quest for Light'* on the subject of *Dynamics of Rebel Bases in Myanmar – Perspective of Indian and Chinese Interests thereof*. Noted journalist and writer Mr. Rajeev Bhattacharyya initiated the proceedings. His presentation was drawn from his firsthand experience while spending four months in Eastern Nagaland at various rebel camps. As a journalist and author, he maintains strong network and he could draw some insight on recent developments and changes in mindset across the border, both north & south of NE India.

Mr. Bhattacharyya, during his stay in Myanmar in 2011-12 had interacted and interviewed some top rebel leaders of northeast militant outfits including S.S. Khaplang (NSCN/K), Songbojit (NDFB/S) and Paresh Barua (ULFA/I). In his presentation he used some maps (open-source) and pictures (proprietary) to drive home his point as to how the Myanmar Government definitely



maintains very close liaison with S S Khaplang and how it is a win-win situation for both parties. He also spoke about how the Myanmar Government, through Khaplang, maintains a status-quo with other Indian Insurgents Groups (IIGs) like NDFB/K & ULFA/I. He also drew his own analysis on where China stands on this entire affair and how she stands to benefit. According to him, China's interest in helping the IIGs is not aligned with the IIGs' stated goal of statehood. Mr. Bhattacharyya is of firm opinion that it serves China to keep internal conflicts alive in NE India & Kashmir region so that it can leverage on these to keep the balance of power tilted towards them at the high-table of geopolitics. He also mentioned how China follows a carrot and stick strategy with Myanmar, working with the Government and investing on projects on one hand and helping the Han Chinese rebels like UWSA on the other. He spoke about the stated goal of ULFA/I leader to form a Government in Exile by the end of the year. The most remarkable part of his presentation were two photographs, one showing a Myanmar National flag in one of the villages under the governance of GPRN and the other of Myanmar children from the same region learning Burmese. Mr. Bhattacharyya was



also emphatic that no genuine help to contain the Northeast insurgents can come about from the present Myanmar Government. In this context, he mentioned China is already ahead of the game with their cordial relationship with the junta and also courting Aung San Suu Kyi in case of a regime change. He reiterated and the audience agreed that India missed a step or two in this context.



The other speakers too gave valuable insight to substantiate their views and in the process touched several important aspects concerning India, Myanmar and China. The widely traveled Mr. H.N. Das, IAS Retd. (former Chief Secretary of Assam) put forth his viewpoint drawn from his rich experience. He primarily focused on the need of creating far better economic engagement on part of India with respect to Myanmar. He however, pointed out that China has taken the lead in making rapid inroads to capitalize on Myanmar's rich natural resources. Improving road connectivity over

and beyond the Stillwell Road was something the retired civil servant was very emphatic about.

Brigadier Ranjit Barthakur who retired from MI presented a comparative analysis of India and China's military might and how things have changed particularly for India after the 1962 war. He was however optimistic of India's growing capabilities vis-à-vis China's military might. He like, Rajeev doesn't believe that there would be any solution to the China-instilled IIG issues or sorting out of the border disputes in the near future. However, with India's growing prominence and tactful use of soft-power, the balance of power in the geopolitics of the region is slowly tilting towards India which will help in open table discussions with China.

Mr. Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta, IPS, Managing Trustee of Srimanta Foundation for Culture and Society moderated the Interactive Session. He took a quick look at the age old connection between Burma and the northeast of India referring to the marriage of *Bharmo Aideu* of Ahom monarchy to the then Burmese king in 19<sup>th</sup> century, cross cultural links of the people of Burma and Assam-Arunachal border and the gradual detachment thereafter. He spoke on the relationship between Burma and China which started with a bit of suspicion and got better in due course. He also pointed out the present uncomfortable ties between the two countries due to China's increasingly domineering attitude and how India can take a lead by having a much better economic relation with Myanmar through bi-lateral trade. Mr. Joydeep Saikia, noted security analyst, stressed on better economic ties with Myanmar to win them away from the Chinese hands. He also favoured better military exercises with Myanmar in the lines of Operation Sampriti that is currently underway with China and Bangladesh which he opined would lead to better cooperation in the border.



During the interactive session opinions were expressed. Sasha Choudhury, Foreign Secretary of ULFA



9.	Oil - proven Reserves	Billion bbl	18.60	5.70
10.	Steel Production	Million tons/year	280	45
11.	Food grain production	Million tons/year	418	210
12.	Crude Oil production	Million tons/year	180	40
13.	Electricity generated	Billions of Kilowatts	2,190	557
14.	Mobile/cellular phones	Millions	400	100
15.	Internet users	Millions	111	51

(now pro-talk) shared his experience with the Karen rebels who he thinks to be in receipt of America's patronage. He also spoke about India's involvement with the Kachins. There was an interesting exchange between Mr. Choudhury & Mr. Bhattacharyya regarding Myanmar's involvement in Operation Golden Bird. Mr. Bhattacharyya insisted it was not a joint operation between the two armies whereas Mr. Choudhury maintained it was. He was quite vocal in his detailed descriptions about the camps, alleged arms supply by China to ULFA and the objectives therein. Entrepreneur Shyamkanu Mahanta talked

about the two projects in Myanmar which was conceptualized long back but rued the Indian government's failure to convert those projects on ground. He was of the opinion that these two projects can make India hub and make Myanmar as the main business centre. He stressed to put more emphasis on economic might and that lot of projects should come on the ground.

The next line of speakers were more tilted towards establishing people-to-people contact through cultural exchange programmes, better economic ties and conflict resolution through spirituality, etc. Some of the notable speakers who endorsed these views were Mr. Chandranathan, IPS, ADG Assam Police, Mr. Sabyasachi Dutta from Asian Confluence, Mr. Samir Baruah, former Banker, Mr. Manoj Das, Director IIE, Dr. Biren Gohain, IAS Retd. (former Home Commissioner, Govt of Assam) and Dr. Dhruba Saikia, VC, Cotton College State University. Mr. S. Bhattacharjee from NERAMAC was however of the opinion that by leveraging the exotic produces of the northeast region in the global market, leading to overall development of the region and thus hindering insurgency. He however, shared his experience of the bureaucrats of Delhi not having the heart in the affairs of North East and the 'act east' orientation.



Dr Udayan Mishra, noted author and scholar of peace and conflict studies, summed up the proceeding of the day. He concluded that relationships between Nations should not be viewed from the state's perspective alone but rather from the perspective of the people. He praised the interactions of the speakers for giving lot of reference to the civil society in the discussions. He said they are all human issues through which bridges should be built. He was of the view to bring

in the people in every observation. Regarding rebel bases, he said that rebels are not abstractions but people and the people they are working with are also people. The vote of thanks was given by Mr. Samudragupta Kashyap, senior journalist and the Convener, Abalokan series.

### Srimanta Foundation's Perspective

Srimanta Foundation, a socio-cultural organization brought together experts on the subject and civil society together on this platform with the objective of formulating and



following it up with ground work. The Foundation would like to share the following perspective on the event as well.

Myanmar had drifted a lot from the original Panglong agreement of 1947 that guaranteed 'full autonomy in internal administration for the frontier states' like the Kachin, Chin, Shan states. The name 'Burma' itself was the reflection of a composite character of Myanmar. The frontier groups were even granted 'right to secession' by the Burmese constitution. However because of various geo-political and internal factors the *Tatmadaw* has taken over and a process of '*Buddha-batha Myanmar Lu Myo*' had started leading to forced assimilation of Myanmarisation and Buddhisiation. Change of name of Burma to Myanmar in 1989 by SLORC is an example of such assimilation process. A fight for democracy, and militancy in the frontier regions, Chinese involvement etc has further complicated the state of affairs in the region. Eventually Myanmar became the conduit of various non-state actors and armed rebellion with heavy concentration of illegal trade of drugs and arms. Non-state groups like United Wa State Army, Chinese backed Black House etc have been the main arms supplier to IIGs making Myanmar an indelible variable in the insurgency scenario of India. In recent times, this has not only impacted the NE India, but also the 'mainland India'. It is well known that Paresh Barua is the main arms supplier to the Maoists and this he cannot do that without the collaboration of section of the Myanmarese army.

In spite of sharing 1700 km with Myanmar, India's foreign relation is still at a nascent stage. However, a few structural changes have taken place –

- 1) Myanmar is no longer the 'Untouchables' for the western power. Heavy Chinese presence has forced even the USA to change its stand towards Myanmar and process of reconciliation backed by trade and commerce had started.
- 2) China's strong traditional ties with Myanmar are undergoing a change. Beijing for decades provided the junta with military and diplomatic support to the detriment of democracy in

Myanmar. However, Thein Sein government since 2011 significantly sought to decrease the country's dependence on China. There is a huge cry of exploitation of natural resources, oil pipeline and hydroelectricity projects by China. Mainland China and Hong Kong combined had invested \$20.8 billion in Myanmar but Thein Sein suspended the Chinese-led \$3.6 Myitsone dam project, meant for supplying electricity to China. This was a major achievement for India & its security agencies.



- 3) Natural, socio-economic and ethnic affinities between India and Myanmar provide a golden opportunity for India to look at Myanmar as a zone of opportunity rather than as a zone of trouble maker. The 1967 Free Movement Regime (FMR) already provides an institutional framework for cooperation and help.
- 4) There have already been some students from Myanmar who come to India for college education. More of these initiatives should be encouraged and if possible incentivized.
- 5) There are communities within NE India in general and Assam & Arunachal Pradesh in particular who are hereditarily very close to some regions of Myanmar. These historic ties should be further exploited and showcased further.
- 6) India should join the other powers of the world in encouraging a fair election to be held shortly in Myanmar, under formal or informal supervision of impartial international observers.

In the above background, the recent visit of our Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi to Myanmar and the GOI's renewed focus on to revalidate the *Swarna Bhumi -Bharat Bhumi* natural links under his leadership could go a long way in improving ties. There are over 2.5 million Indians in Myanmar. The Indian diaspora can play a useful role once the highway projects linking India-Myanmar-Thailand-Vietnam are completed. Linked to this is the imperative of promoting a brand of sustainable cultural tourism. A series of pilgrimage corridors from China across Myanmar could serve as engines of economic growth for the people living in the North-East. A vibrant initiative in the field of education and culture could be the hallmark of this renewed relationship.