

## Burma-India: Glass Palace Prison

Monday 22 October 2007, by [CHHABRA Sagari](#) (Date first published: 18 October 2007).

I had the privilege of living a few houses away from Aung San Suu Kyi on University Avenue by Inya Lake, for several months. The sole reason for choosing my residence was I was hoping to meet or atleast get a glimpse of the most famous political prisoner and proponent of non-violence, alive. On her sixty second birthday Aung San Suu Kyi had spent a total of eleven years, ten months and twenty seven days under house arrest, with short spells in which she was allowed to meet the people. On one such occasion, she visited the office of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees in Yangon. The office then headed by Rajiv Kapur, had a poster; "A refugee would love to have your problems'. Suu Kyi looked at the poster poignantly and shook her head "no one would like to have my problems' she told him. Indeed after her party, the National League of Democracy won almost eighty per cent of the votes in the last elections, the military regime responded by imprisoning her and almost all her supporters. The spy and surveillance system was so intricately entrenched that I found the land-lord of the inn on University Avenue, copiously reading my diaries, eves-dropping on my conversation and reporting my activities to the regime, which resulted in my permit of stay not being extended.

Everywhere I travelled, I had to have a liason officer accompanying my research trips. At Ziawaddy the door banged at eight pm. "Who is it?" I asked alarmed. The voice informed me that I had to report to the police station along with my Burmese liason officer to record our visit. "If you neglect to do this, you will be imprisoned" and I know many Burmese who have been. This rule of informing the police if you stay overnight elsewhere, is in force to squash any underground activity for democracy. Enroute from the famed glass palace of Mandalay to Maymeo I came across a huge construction site. I was curious because I had hardly seen any new

economic activity in Burma with economic sanctions from the West in force. I clicked photographs and then asked the guard; "What are you building?" "A prison" replied the armed guard, blandly.

During my travels through the breathtakingly beautiful country; green with tropical forests and gold with pagodas in every village, I met the most deeply spiritual and gentle people in the world. The Burmese feed and clothe monks who have the highest position in the Buddhist hierarchy, which they believe earns them merit. These monks led the recent demonstrations, but the military brutalized them, raiding monasteries across the country, savaging and arresting thousands of monks and lay people. While the Indian government is practising a 'look east' policy, let me share with you the shame and horror I felt, on seeing so many people of Indian origin living without citizenship of Burma. Being without citizenship implies that they cannot hold a proper job, buy or sell property or even travel within Burma without permission. Some of them were members of Netaji's Indian National Army or those who fought for the freedom of India. Official figures indicate that there are over 400,000 people of Indian origin, without citizenship. Surely India should look after the interests of its own people by obtaining their basic rights?

I also tried to bring the matter to the attention of Kedar Nath who I was told was the head of the Arya Samaj in Burma. We talked on the telephone and agreed to meet in a week's time, but within that period he was dead. He was only sixty two and had been imprisoned in a Burmese jail for four years on the charge of 'having given a letter to a monk to take to India', my sources said. The conditions in jail were so pathetic that his health deteriorated and while he was released, he died soon after. This is the plight of many socially and politically active people within Burma. The pictures that are emerging are only the tip of the ice-berg.

While India maintains a 'look east' policy, the north-east states are victim to the golden triangle - drug-running that originates from Burma into India. In desperation, India is even

resorting to a 'harm minimisation' programme; which is distributing free needles so that the young are protected from HIV. The fact is, profits of drugs are what the Burmese militia use to build safe havens in the West, where they will eventually retreat once democracy returns to Burma, before long.

Burma has been isolated for too long and while India soft-peddles its approach, claiming that the generals help us in 'Operation Golden Bird' to control insurgency in the north-east; the truth is, the generals enjoy giving the insurgents a safe haven in Burma while unleashing a 'joint-operation' as an eye-wash. Absolute and brute power has been wielded to keep some of the most spiritual, gentle and compassionate people in the world oppressed; but the question is for how long? International opinion will have to build up to release Aung San Suu Kyi and the Burmese people from the prison-house that the militia has created out of Burma.

---

**P.S.**

\* From Hindustan Times, 19 October 2007. Circulayed by South Asia Citizens Wire | October 19-22, 2007 | Dispatch No. 2462 - Year 10 running.

\* Sagari Chhabra is award-winning film-maker & writer. "sagari.chhabra[AT]gmail.com"