

Burma came alive in New Delhi on September 3 and September 4, 1993, when the India International Centre and Manushi jointly organised a programme entitled, "The Gong of Burma". The main objective of the programme was to express solidarity with the Burmese students who have played an active part in the Movement for Democracy and in defending human rights. These young people, most of them in their teens or barely out of them, high school and university students, have risked their very lives and sacrificed their professional careers by participating in the Democracy Movement. Many of them have had to flee Burma since the crackdown of August 1988 and live in exile in neighbouring countries. A few hundred are in India, from where they are doing their utmost to carry on their crusade, despite conditions of poverty.

Since Manushi came into existence to be part of struggles to make this world more just and humane, we had organised this programme to lend support to and express our solidarity with the Burmese student exiles in India.

The venue of the two-day programme was the India International Centre. On September 3, an exhibition of paintings was inaugurated by environmentalist Maneka Gandhi. The paintings were the work of the well known Burmese artist, Sitt Nyien Aye. The ethos of the non-violent movement for democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, was aptly captured in several of the paintings — the moving portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Aung San Suu Kyi, but most of all in a painting entitled, "The Brave New World", a celebration of peace over war. The canvas depicted a soldier forsaking weapons for a guitar, which he strummed as he sang along. (See Cover, Manushi No 76).

The backdrop of the exhibition

The Gong of Burma

Solidarity with Democracy Movement in Burma

Kavita Charanji

was the extensive collection of Burmese artefacts which belonged to Lady Susan Fenn, wife of Sir Nicholas Fenn, a former British High Commissioner to Burma currently serving as High Commissioner in Delhi. On display were exquisite *objets d'art* and costumes of the Burmese people. On September 4, the evening's programme got off to a good start with



Portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi by Sitt Nyien Aye

a well attended panel discussion on Burma, despite a heavy downpour. The speakers were Soe Myint, a representative of the Burma Students League, Dr Baladas Ghoshal, professor at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal University, I.P. Singh, a former diplomat and Malvika Karlekar from the Centre for Women's Development Studies. The discussion was chaired by well-known journalist and former diplomat, Kuldip Nayar.

The main focus of the discussion was on the political situation in Burma and possible steps to end repression in the country. As speaker after speaker asserted, the tragedy of Burma is the tragedy of a small ruling

clique trying to feed their unbridled lust for power, while exercising tyrannical control over the social, cultural and political life of the Burmese people through repression and terror.

The insider's viewpoint was presented by Soe Myint, a representative of the Burma Students League. Soe Myint focussed on how

the military regime's shortsighted economic policies had brought Burma to the brink of disaster. Once the "Rice Bowl of Asia", Burma was an exporter of both oil and rice to other parts of the world, pointed out Soe Myint. However, when the Burmese dictator General Ne Win

took over at the helm in 1962 after toppling the

democratic government of U Nu, the rulers' brand of socialism changed all that. Large scale nationalisation was carried out, the effects of which are all too visible now. Today Burma is one of the world's poorest nations with a debt burden of over US \$4 billion.

In the last few years, said Soe Myint, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the new name for the military regime, has liberalised foreign investment regulations. Several foreign countries such as Thailand, Singapore, and China have promoted private enterprise in Burma and, thereby, indirectly propped up the oppressive regime. "Other countries

like the US, Canada, Britain, India and Japan condemn the SLORC but allow their corporate sector to operate and invest in Burma,” he said.

Intervening in the discussion, C.B. Muthamma, a former diplomat, commented that Burma needed no planning, no ideology, and certainly no socialism. It was traditionally a society of natural abundance and very egalitarian in its ethos. Today that culture of easy abundance and equality is being wilfully destroyed by the Burmese ruling clique whose use of xenophobic nationalism and authoritarianism masqueraded as socialism.

All the speakers agreed that much greater international pressure needed to be exerted so that democracy could be restored in that country. In Soe Myint’s words, “What is required is coordinated international action by all organisations of the United Nations and member countries. We also need the backing of ASEAN countries to pass a resolution against the military regime in Burma.” As a round-up to the discussion, Lady Fenn presented a slide show on various facets of Burmese life. The evening ended on a pleasant note with a Burmese food festival to the accompaniment of Burmese music. Around 200 people braved the rain to acquaint themselves with the finer points of Burmese food — all prepared by the students themselves.

At the end of the day, the response had far exceeded our expectations. Sales from the paintings were Rs 61,000. Further orders, valued at Rs 40,000, were booked. Sales of dinner coupons raised Rs 9,000. The money raised at the two-day programme (orders are still being received for paintings) went to the Burma Students League for its Movement for Democracy. This was a small example of the varied efforts undertaken in many parts of the world to encourage the emergence of a more humane and democratic Burma. □

Anarkali

*When the walls rose up
Around Anarkali
She sang paeans of joy
(So the movie says)
Celebrating love.*

*Her song soared up
Higher, sweeter
Even as the last patch of sky
Was bricked out.*

*Salim mourned
But life is long
There is always
Consolation
And ultimately,
There was Noor Jehan.*

*The slave girl
When she dared to love
Little knew
(Or didn't she?
Deep within her innermost heart
Or underneath the surface of her skin
Where feeling is keenest)
That the walls of love
Press close
Fatal
They shut out the sky
And once
The air inside
Is breathed up
Nothing remains but the song
And often
Even that is lost
Scattered, dissolved,
In the winds of time...*

Deepa Agarwal