

Battle for Peace

A Film on the Movement for Democracy in Burma

WHILE the intelligentsia and the media focus attention, in varying degrees of intensity, on numerous groups of refugees—from Punjab, Kashmir, Bangladesh, Afghanistan—the Burmese who fled to India in the wake of the military crackdown on dissent after the August 1988 uprising in their country, appear to have been ignored. Perhaps they are too few in number—about 300 or so—to excite much interest. Or, they are possibly just one among the many dispossessed people already inhabiting India today. Whatever the reason for the general indifference to them, the fact remains that their struggle for freedom from the military yoke has not commanded the attention it deserves from Indian politicians, people and the media.

The voice of dissent in Burma has been brutally stifled by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the name under which the military regime now rules. The removal of SLORC and the subsequent restoration of democracy is the concerted aim of all nationalist Burmese, both within and without the country. That life is not too high a price to pay for freedom is the message that conclusively emerges from the film, *Battle for Peace*, made free of cost by Cendit Video Production at the behest of lawyer and social activist Nandita Haksar for the Delhi-based Burma Students' League, which has been active in mustering support for the Burmese cause in India. The 32-minute video film is part of the dissidents' propaganda, which includes the publishing of subversive

literature directed against the military regime and mobilising of funds through art exhibitions and music concerts.

The film must be viewed against the backdrop of Burma's post-independence history. For, while it focuses on the activities of students in exile (about 150 in India, of whom 127 are in Delhi alone) and the August 1988 uprising, it gains continuity from the matrix of Burmese politics in the past four decades. Briefly, Burma gained independence from colonial rule in January 1948 and thereafter followed a parliamentary form of government until General Ne Win seized power through a coup d'etat in March 1962. All dissent was brutally muzzled by a dictatorial military regime. In March 1988, a student uprising began against the military government, forcing Ne Win to retire from politics in July. However, Sein Lwin, Ne Win's successor, proved even worse. A military crackdown on demonstrators left 3,000 people dead between August 8 and August 12. The August uprising, as it is now known, continues to inspire Burmese revolutionaries in their struggle for democracy.

Following Sein Lwin's resignation on August 12, SLORC was set up in September 1988 and forced by the people to commit itself in principle to a democratic polity. However, SLORC reneged on this commitment: when a national election was held in May 1990 and the National League for Democracy (NLD) won over 80 percent of the parliamentary seats, the army threw NLD's leaders in jail. NLD's

most prominent leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who had led the party to victory, was detained even earlier and still continues to be under house arrest. She has come to symbolise the Burmese people's struggle and is the winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, among other awards.

Battle for Peace captures images of the struggle, interspersed with the reactions of individual dissidents based in India. It begins in a poignant manner, with shots of an idyllic Burma: singing youth, golden pagodas and the chanting of Buddhist hymns; normal everyday scenes of fishing, boats sailing on the water, a busy marketplace and laughing children. The camera cuts to Burmese students in Delhi taking out a *morcha*. A number of them subsequently speak about their personal experiences. SKar, who was a second-year physics student at Mandalay University when the uprising began, talks about a friend who was arrested and later turned mad. Thaun Thaun, who was studying history at Rangoon University, recounts the killings on the fateful day of August 8. Bogyi, an engineering student from Rangoon, recalls the time when the police opened fire on the campus. One of his friends died right there, while two others got gangrene—they are shown in static shots—and later died.

The horror of the atrocities perpetrated by the ruling junta is vividly depicted in a series of paintings by Sitt Nyien Aye, a renowned artist who fled Burma to join his compatriots in Delhi. Sorrow runs like a common thread through all of

them: an eight-year-old girl murdered by the police; Inya Lake into which many students jumped and drowned; the Irrawaddy, that turned red with the blood of the dead and injured thrown into its waters by the army; the poet who died after brutal torture on June 12, 1991; Rangoon University which stands deserted and forlorn after it was closed four years ago. The last painting shows a little girl saying: "I want to go home."

There is a brief, unforgettable shot of Aung San Suu Kyi walking down a pathway through a crowd of people. She looks fragile, yet firm and determined. This fleeting shot allows a glimpse of the inherent strength that has made her the fulcrum of the pro-democracy struggle. There is also some brief footage of George

Fernandas, the only Indian politician who is actively supporting the dissidents in India.

The film ends with an appeal by the students for support of their three main demands: transfer of power to the democratically elected parliament, release of all political prisoners and recognition of the government in exile (the National Coalition government of the Union of Burma, which India has not recognised). At the end, what clearly emerges is their firm resolve to win the battle at any cost. "Our spirit will never be crushed"—which has been the refrain of all lovers of democracy.

In terms of production values the film may fall far short of excellence. But, in view of the limited footage available, which is restricted mainly

to static shots taken from photographs, and interviews of a few of the Delhi-based students, it probably could not have been done better. However, the absence of movement does not seem to matter very much as the running commentary, juxtaposed with background music (the choice of Burmese songs being apt), takes the action forward. As a film in a specialised genre—propaganda, though not in a pejorative sense—it achieves its objective of convincingly highlighting the Burmese struggle, by capturing both the urgency and immediacy of the situation.

by Anuradha Dutt

The film is priced at Rs 225 and available on order from Manushi. □



MANUSHI is trying to help the movement for democracy in Burma by organising a sale of original oil paintings by

Sitt Nyien Aye, one of Burma's renowned painters. The proceeds of the sale will go towards funding the propaganda work undertaken by the dissidents against the repressive military regime. This includes a wide range of activities including the publishing of supportive literature and making of video films on the pro-democracy movement.

Sitt Nyien Aye, 36, is from Mandalay in Upper Burma, traditionally the breeding ground for famous Burmese artists. After

graduating from the prestigious State School of Fine Arts in Mandalay in 1973, he studied under U Aye Kyaw and U Khin Maung (Bank), leading exponents of modern art in Mandalay. He started commercial art in 1980. He rapidly made a niche for himself among the better known painters in the country. About 500 of his paintings were bought by art lovers in foreign countries up to the time when political unrest began in 1988.

Sitt Nyien Aye's deep love for his motherland and his hatred for the army led him to take a leading role in the August 8, 1988 uprising in Burma. He worked for various strike committees that controlled Mandalay in August-September 1988 when the civil administration collapsed totally. But

his main work for the cause of democracy was the printing and publishing of the *Red Gallon* newspaper. The paper, which focused on the army excesses and tried to keep alive the people's fervour for democracy, reached a circulation of 23,000. He did the news gathering, writing and editing himself.

He fled to India when the army took over power in Burma in September 1988. Before coming to Delhi in May 1992, he had stayed in the camp for Burmese students started by the Indian government in Manipur for two-and-a-half years. He has done his best to project the emotions and aspirations of the Burmese dissidents in his present paintings.

Buy one of Sitt's beautiful oil paintings and help the cause of democracy in Burma. On the inside covers we reproduce a few of Sitt's paintings. More are in stock at Manushi's office. You can see and buy them from the Manushi office on any weekday between 10 a.m. and 5 p.m.