



# Diaspora as a Factor in India–Myanmar Relations

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*The paper studies the presence of Indian Diaspora in Myanmar in transforming the India–Myanmar bilateral relations. At present, both these countries treat Indian Diaspora as a liability. However, if India and Myanmar consider ethnic Indians an asset, the ties between New Delhi and Nay Pyi Taw will improve significantly.*

Myanmar<sup>1</sup> is going through an unprecedented political and socio-cultural transformation. During the past five decades of military rule, the country witnessed suppression of democratic norms/institutions, human rights violations, armed insurgencies by the sidelined ethnic minorities, detention of the opposition activists and leaders, especially the Nobel Peace laureate Ms Aung San Suu Kyi and the economic policies enforced by the junta, and left most of the common people impoverished, including the Indian Diaspora.

Diasporas have emerged as a powerful factor in developing relations between nation-states. The Indian Diaspora has notably acted as a catalyst in strengthening bilateral relations between India and the host nations. The India–US Civil Nuclear

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Deal is a case in point, as ethnic Indians in the United States successfully lobbied for clinching of the nuclear deal. However, the recent incidents of maltreatment of the ethnic Indians in Australia and Malaysia seem to have gone against the general trend of strengthening relations between India and the host countries. Relations with Myanmar, which has a significant number of ethnic Indians and the Diaspora, too could go either way.<sup>2</sup>

According to the 2001 report of the High Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora (HLCID), the total numbers of ethnic Indians in Myanmar is estimated to be around 2.9 million, which is roughly 5% of the total population of Myanmar. This accounts for around 2,500,000 people of Indian origin (PIO), 2000 non-resident Indians (NRIs) and 400,000 stateless.<sup>3</sup> However, July 2009 estimates of the Central Intelligence Agency of Washington (CIA) noted that the size of the Indian Diaspora is about 2% (945,000) of the total Burmese population. Though the report of HLCID mentioned that the size of Indian Diaspora is 2,902,000, some studies indicate that the Indian Diaspora is no larger than 1,000,000. Nevertheless, others believe that the actual number of the ethnic Indians in Myanmar could be much higher than the abovementioned data. Even the Ministry of the Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) and the Indian Embassy in Myanmar do not have any substantial data on ethnic Indians residing in Myanmar. This could be because Myanmar has been under the military regime since 1962 and therefore data manipulations are highly possible especially when the last official census was held in 1983.

However, on 15 September 2013, the Myanmar government announced plans to conduct its first census in three decades, with plans to visit all households nationwide in just 12 days between March and April 2014. The 2014 census is deemed an important step in preparation for the next general election of Myanmar scheduled in 2015.<sup>4</sup> There is optimism among the scholars of Diaspora studies that after the 2014 census, the actual number of the ethnic Indians residing in Myanmar may surface.

The paper aims to study the role of the Indian Diaspora in bridging the gap between India and Myanmar, and enhancing India–Myanmar bilateral relations. This paper will also analyse the role ethnic Indians can play in fulfilling Myanmar's regional quest. It traces the history of Indian immigrants in Myanmar and will examine issues related to the Indian Diaspora in the context of Myanmar's authoritarianism. It will also examine the socio-cultural and politico-economic conditions of ethnic Indians in Myanmar. In addition, the study critically analyses

the impact of India's Diaspora policy on ethnic Indians in Myanmar and its impacts on Burmese Indians.

## Historical Background

Historically, in another part of Southeast Asia, India's contact with Burma goes back to the pre-Christian era. Myanmar also came under the spell of Indian cultural influence, as Buddhism spread directly from India and indirectly through Ceylon, profoundly influencing all spheres of Burmese life.<sup>5</sup> After the end of the third Anglo-Burmese War in 1886, the British integrated the entire Burmese territory with the Indian Empire and ruled the Burma province directly from Calcutta, and after 1911, from Delhi. Being the largest and richest province in British India, Burma was formally separated in April 1937. However, the colonial government's unrestricted immigration policy continued. From the mid-1800s until independence, people migrated from India to settle in Burma, particularly in Rangoon.<sup>6</sup>

During the three Anglo-Burmese wars in 1824–1826, 1852 and 1885, the British used Indians in their army to subdue the royal forces of the Burmese. Consequentially, the affair sowed the seeds of Burma's prejudice and grievances against Indians and India, fuelling nationalist fervour in the 20th century.<sup>7</sup> Most of the ethnic Indians migrated to Burma under the British colonial rule, numbering 300,000–400,000, and engaged themselves in the bureaucracy, police and military. The British started exploring production of oil, rubber, teak, timber, sugar, rubies and rice. They needed skilled labourers and therefore encouraged large-scale migration of labourers. Situated on the eastern frontier, it was easy for the Indians to go to Burma.<sup>8</sup>

The demand for labour and capital in Burma, and increasing profits in investments, became the main reason for the large-scale migration. Indians had a lower standard of living, and after arrival in Burma made profits and competed with the indigenous Myanmarese for land tenancy and other endeavours. The British encouraged Indian *chettiers*, the money lenders, to assist the cultivators. At the same time, European exporters agreed to provide money in advance to boost agricultural production. The policy was successful in expanding the agricultural areas and boosting production. But the ownership of the land rapidly changed hands and within two decades Indian traders, brokers and money lenders purchased a large chunk of the agricultural lands. Between 1915 and 1930, the native owners lost no less than

1,300,000 acres of land and the small Burmese rice millers were driven out of their business as large steam-driven mills were introduced.<sup>9</sup> The Indian population grew rapidly and crossed the half-million mark by the turn of the century, i.e. 1901. The presence of ethnic Indians was felt most in terms of sheer numbers as well as diversity of occupation, in Rangoon, the capital city and the commercial centre, where the lingua franca was Hindustani. In fact, Rangoon resembled an Indian city until the Japanese invasion in 1942.<sup>10</sup>

During the initial years of migration, several migrants were unmarried males who were seasonal labourers and temporary residents. The majority of ethnic Indians came from Bengal, Madras and Uttar Pradesh. According to the 1931 census, there were on average only 19 females (ranging from three for Oriyas to 43 for Tamils) per 100 males in British Burma. Unfortunately, most labourers found themselves living and working under miserable conditions with little savings and were heavily indebted to the exploitative labour contractors known as *maistries*.<sup>11</sup> In the beginning, the condition of Indians in Burma was not much better than that of slaves. The proportion of women to men was totally skewed during that period. A settled family life was impossible in the barracks provided to them by the planters. The different castes and even the more distinctive religious differences between Hindus and Muslims had been dimmed by having to live together, and thus being compelled to forget the divisions that had separated them in India. Once it became certain that Indians were there to stay permanently, they started working hard and progressed in every sphere of life, and their population increased. The Indian population in Burma on the eve of the Japanese invasion in 1941 numbered over 1.1 million and in 1931 Indians represented 7.5% of the total population of Burma.<sup>12</sup>

Indians were very hard-working and their hard labour resulted in turning Burma into one of the richest nations in Southeast Asia at that time. In British Burma, the Indians were monopolising jobs and dominating businesses. Consequently, the prosperity of the ethnic Indians in British Burma led to the envy of indigenous people and this in due course became a serious matter against the Indian Diaspora. Ethnic Indians excelled in all the spheres with the support of British colonial masters. The Burmese disliked the fact that Indian migrants were trusted and supported by the colonial masters to the detriment of the indigenous people. They became critical about the economic influence of the Indian Diaspora and started opposing it. Propaganda was launched in which Indian migrants were projected as a

part of British exploitation and campaigns were launched to equate them with the colonial mistreatment. Anti-Indian sentiments were high and the slogan: “Burma for the Burmans”, voiced by the nationalist forces, was directed mainly against the Indians.<sup>13</sup>

The resentment of the indigenous population against the Indians started escalating after the end of the First World War. In 1930, there was an outbreak of anti-Indian riots in Rangoon, when 120 Indians were killed and 900 wounded. They thought that the action against Indians would be considered action against colonial rule. After 1930, a vicious campaign was launched against Indians. They were projected as exploiters and more dangerous than the British. Although teak wood of Burma was increasingly being used by the British for building rail networks in the region, Indians were targeted as exploiters of forest resources. Besides teak, Burmese bamboo, cutch and firewood were used in steamers, mills and railways engines; there was great demand for charcoal in the areas administered by the British. Although the management was controlled by the British, the impression was that Indians were constantly misappropriated them with the support of the bureaucracy, which had monopoly of the ethnic Indians.<sup>14</sup>

However, the British government overtly or covertly allowed the situation to deteriorate further. Besides, they were unhappy with the Indians in Burma during the Second World War. Indians, by and large, were supporting the freedom movement in India. They were funding either the Indian National Army (INA) of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose or the Indian National Congress (INC). They refused to support the British war efforts against the Japanese. The British were annoyed to find that the Indian immigrants were sustaining anti-British crusades in India. In return, the British treated them in an unfriendly manner. Indians were indeed considered a liability. The Indian Diaspora in Burma suffered mainly because of the negligence and apathy of the former colonial rulers.<sup>15</sup>

British Burma became a battlefield between the allied forces and the Japanese. Most of the Indians as well as indigenous people lost their wealth and belongings in looting and war damage. On the other hand, in a bid to liberate India, the INA under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose, seeking Japanese assistance, created a difficult situation for the Indians in Japanese-occupied Burma. However, the Indian community in Rangoon on Netaji's birthday in January 1945 demonstrated their trust and confidence in INA by organising a massive rally, donating gold and jewellery

in large quantities for India's freedom struggle. In his message to the ethnic Indians in Burma Netaji said:

*When the history of India's last war of independence comes to be written, Indians in Burma will have an honoured place in this history ...*<sup>16</sup>

On the eve of Burmese independence, the leader of Burma acted in vengeance, censoring rights of Indians not only over the land, but over their existence in the country as well. The Burmese government passed a Citizenship Act in 1948, according to which every Indian migrant in Burma was required to have a citizenship certificate. The process of extending citizenship in Burma was made cumbersome and complicated to such extent that only 7994 Indians out of 740,000 received this certificate. The remainder were declared illegal migrants and stateless.<sup>17</sup>

After its independence, Burma made it difficult for Indians to continue service in bureaucracy. In 1953, about 3000 Indians in the government service and 8500 in the Burma railways were dismissed. The Immigration Act was passed by the government of Burma, which imposed restrictions on the movements of Indians. The government discouragement of foreigners to retain properties in the country mostly affected Indian landlords and businessmen. The Burmese authority took systematic steps to hurt Indians. Wherever they worked, i.e. in administration, business, medical and engineering services, they were compelled to resign.<sup>18</sup>

The new constitution of independent Burma was furthermore discriminatory to the ethnic Indians, as it left the Indian Diaspora deprived in every sphere of Burmese life. The military staged a coup in March 1962 and ruled the country by decree for 12 years under the authority of the Revolutionary Council (RC), chaired by the armed forces chief, General Ne Win. Under its unique ideology, called the Burmese Way to Socialism, the RC launched a relentless programme of nationalisation and indigenisation that dispossessed capitalists, petit bourgeoisie and foreigners of their livelihood.<sup>19</sup> Since then, the successive military rule of Myanmar followed the same practice of Burmanisation. Therefore, most of the ethnic Indians, especially the "affluent" fled Myanmar and those left behind were the poor working class, who had nowhere to go, as well as some remnants of the trading community. The present Indian community in Myanmar is largely composed of these people. Due to a lack of available data, the exact size of the Indian community in Myanmar is largely a matter of conjecture, but most of the ethnic Indians are still stateless, despite being third- or

fourth-generation residents, since they do not have documents to prove their citizenship under the Burmese Citizenship Law of 1982.

The status of education of the Indians has also been pathetic. At one time, the faculty and alumni of the University of Rangoon comprised mainly Indians. Today, there are hardly any Indian students in the universities, which results in a virtual extinction of a professional class. This is primarily because Indians were denied admission to the universities and professional courses from 1964 to 1988.<sup>20</sup>

Since social status in any society is linked to economic well-being, the Indian community in Myanmar does not at present enjoy much social or political clout. The military junta does not permit any political activity. Hence, in the parliamentary election of 1990 and the recent general election of November 2010, the Indian community played a negligent role. As a result, the ethnic Indians in Burma have been suffering incessantly.

### **India's Policy Mind-set towards Indian Diaspora in Myanmar**

Indian nationalism played an integrating role in mobilising the Indian Diaspora around the world to gain India's independence. They were exhorted to identify with India's cause as "only a free India could hope to protect and safeguard their interests". Since most of them were taken under a coercive colonial rule, they were visualised by INA or INC as a segment sharing the socio-cultural space within India. Hence, the overseas Indian community – not only limited to Burma, but every corner of the globe – supported most of the activities of the INA and the INC. However, this identification and association was limited to the colonial period only.

While discussing India's Diaspora policy, one observes that after independence, India followed the policy of disassociation with regard to its Diaspora. The basic principles of India's foreign policy were laid during the independence under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1957, Nehru stated:

*Indians abroad should always give primary consideration to the interest of the people of those countries; they should never allow themselves to be placed in a position of exploiting the people of those countries; in fact, we have gone thus far and said, if you cannot be, and if you are not, friendly to the people of that country, come back to India and do not spoil the fair name of India.*<sup>21</sup>

This quote reflects the importance that he attached to the positive role the overseas Indians could play by assimilating themselves in the host countries. Nehru did not want the presence of Indians to have a negative impact on India's relations with the host countries.

Burma and India cooperated in their struggle for independence and their independence came only a few months apart. Thereafter, the biggest cause of contention between the two countries was the fate of the PIO, who were being treated as foreigners despite having lived in Burma for generations. Initially, Nehru insisted on compensation for the PIO, but soon reverted to the Nehruvian policy of not pushing Indian interests by claiming special privileges for Indians in Burma, in order to maintain good relations between the two countries. Unfortunately, New Delhi attached greater importance to the improvement of state-to-state relations rather than protecting the legitimate interests of the Indian community. Subsequently, there was noticeable continuity and change in India's Diaspora policy but most of the successive governments followed Nehru's path blindly.

In 1977, when a non-Congress government led by the Janata Party assumed power, the first signs of an official rethink vis-à-vis the Diaspora appeared. The official policies sought to strike a balance between safeguarding India's foreign policy interests and show legitimate concern about Indians overseas. Although the Janata government did not remain in power for very long, the debate on expatriate Indians had restarted within the Indian government.<sup>22</sup>

The proactive Diaspora policy, from "active-disassociation" to "active-association" started especially after 1991, when the Indian economy faced severe crisis arising from the bankruptcy of its foreign exchange reserves. The crisis triggered a process of economic reforms as India prepared itself to exploit the opportunities to counter the threats arising from globalisation and liberalisation. There was a realisation that India needed to restructure itself economically and needed investment for infrastructure restructuring. Neither the Indian state nor the private sector had the capacity to counter the drastic situation. If India intended to develop economically and remain competitive in a swiftly globalised world, it had aggressively to attract Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) and the infusion of new technologies. In this context, the larger policy shifts appeared in the re-engagement of India with its Diaspora in the 1990s because only affluent section of the overseas Indians, i.e. non-residential Indians (NRIs) could be safeguards for the Indian economy in the 1990s.<sup>23</sup>

This was the same time when India also initiated its “Look East Policy” under P. V. Narasimha Rao’s Congress government. When India’s initiated its Look East Policy towards the Southeast Asian countries, the large presence of ethnic Indians in the region was unquestionably in the minds of the foreign policy makers, but unfortunately India could not leverage its Diaspora in strengthening bilateral as well as multilateral relations with the ASEAN. India also missed the opportunity to constructively engage its Diaspora and gratify its “aspiration” and “inspiration” of the Diasporic community. In contrast to Nehru’s policy of active dissociation of PIO from Indian foreign policy objectives, the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) government in 1998, under the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, stood for active and overt association of PIO for India’s foreign policy objectives. They started celebrating the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) and offering few “benefits” to the overseas Indian community. In 2004, when Congress-led coalition spearheaded by Dr Manmohan Singh assumed power, it established a separate Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) to address the grievances of the Indian Diaspora.

As historical evidence shows, the Indian leadership only occasionally addressed few of the Diaspora concerns at their own convenience. These trends also manifest themselves during the racial attacks on Indians, especially towards Indian students in Australia, when the government of India watched the whole episode as mute spectators and engaged themselves only in lip service to pressurise the Australian authority. Another example of government apathy to the Indian Diaspora is during Malaysia’s recent unrest, on 25 November 2007, when Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) internationalised the wretched condition of the ethnic Indians in Malaysia, and the Government of India’s initial response was tight-lipped.

Since January 2003, onwards India has hosted 10 PBD but it seems to be merely a yearly ritual and annual jamboree of the Diaspora. During the initial age of PDB, there were plenty of expectations from the Indian government, especially towards the plight of PIO in the host countries, which the Indian government did not address. Rather, the government was more investment-centric. Therefore, lesser participation of the overseas Indians has been witnessed in recent years. It has also been witnessed that during the “pro-Diaspora” years the Indian government never uttered a single word on the plight of the ethnic Indians residing in Myanmar in the PBD or with the leaderships of Myanmar.

## **India–Myanmar Relations**

Myanmar is an important neighbour of India, as both countries share extensive land border and a maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal. During the long spell of military rule in Myanmar, India followed a policy of disengagement. However, India eased upon this and closed in somewhat after initiating the Look East Policy in 1991. The recent democratisation process in Myanmar has further prepared the ground for India to be more proactive in her Myanmar Policy.<sup>24</sup>

The Defence Minister of India Shri A. K. Antony visited Nay Pyi Taw along with the Defence Secretary, the Eastern Army Commander and the Vice Chief of Naval Staff on 21–22 January 2013. During the visit, Antony highlighted upon the importance of enhancing bilateral ties with Nay Pyi Taw in all the fields, especially defence. He underlined that the visit of all three Service Chiefs of India to Myanmar in the last 18 months was reflective of Indian government wishes to strengthen ties with Myanmar. While interacting with the delegation, the President of Myanmar Thien Sein assured that Myanmar would not allow its territory to be used by anti-India insurgent groups. He also welcomed the ongoing cooperation between the armed forces of both the countries and anticipated an enhanced interaction between the two navies and the air forces.<sup>25</sup>

Prior to Antony's visit, several high level bilateral exchanges had taken place in the recent past. In October 2011, the President of Myanmar visited New Delhi and was followed by a return visit in May 2012 by the Indian Prime Minister. The pro-democracy activist and the leader of the opposition Ms Aung San Suu Kyi visited India in November 2012 and the External Affairs Minister of India; Shri Salman Khurshid visited Myanmar in December 2012, furthering official engagement. The frequency of bilateral interactions between New Delhi and Nay Pyi Taw is noteworthy and has the potential of further elevating the India–Myanmar relationship to a new level.

At present, both New Delhi and Nay Pyi Taw are engaged at regional and sub-regional contexts on Mekong–Ganga Co-operation (MGC), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC). Consequently, in August 2008, Myanmar was accorded the “Observer Status” in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) with India's support and is now looking forward to be included as a permanent member of SAARC.

If Myanmar formally joins SAARC as a member state, it will also give them a fair chance to sort out their differences amicably with the member countries, as SAARC will prove to be a better market for its huge natural resources. In this globalised world, regionalism is growing in importance. Giving an opportunity to Myanmar to be a part of South Asian grouping will provide the country with worldwide recognition and also increase its responsibility in the international platform. India should wholeheartedly support Myanmar's entry into the SAARC, as it will prove mutually promising for engagement at a strategic as well as economic level.<sup>26</sup>

Myanmar's close economic and military relations with Beijing are a cause of concern for New Delhi. This is mainly because China has been actively engaged in Myanmar, building up port and naval facilities in Hanggi, the Coco Islands, Akyab and Mergui, all of which increase its footprint in the Indian Ocean. The Indian media had been particularly concerned about a rumoured intelligence listening post on the Coco islands, only 30 nautical miles away from the Andaman Islands – which are much closer to Myanmar's mainland than to the east coast of mainland India. Myanmar is the largest neighbour touching India's east and acts as a buffer zone between its North-Eastern region and the Chinese provinces.<sup>27</sup>

Myanmar also holds an important geostrategic position in the Asia-Pacific region and provides a strategic link to the East and South-East Asian countries. Therefore, further improvement of relations with Myanmar has become desirable requirement not just for India, but for the USA as well. Recently, US President Barack Obama visited Nay Pyi Taw, reflecting the importance attached to Myanmar as a potential strategic partner in his Asia-Pacific calculus that aims towards Rebalancing Asia. China, on the other hand believes that the US policy is an attempt to curb Beijing's regional influence. In Washington's Rebalancing Asia policy, India holds a significant place, with the US President himself saying India was the "Pivot of Asia". Therefore, the USA is also urging India to engage more proactively with Myanmar. However, it is not US pressure, but a more consensual approach of building a lasting friendship based on bilateral trust that is driving New Delhi at this juncture. India has also recognised Myanmar as a crucial link between India and China, which clearly reflects India's desire to increase its profile in Myanmar without jeopardising its bilateral ties with China.

For maintaining peace in the North-East, it is in India's security interests to keep the momentum going in the right direction with Myanmar, since most of the active

insurgent groups in this region are using the bordering areas as their safe havens. Although there have been some joint counter insurgency efforts between the two armies along the border, these need to be intensified on a regular basis.

India looks at the connectivity through Myanmar as being crucial for its Look East Policy and for the development of stronger ties with the ASEAN countries as an extended neighbourhood. At present, both India and Myanmar are jointly working on quite a few projects, namely the upgrade and resurfacing of the 160-km long Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo road, construction and upgrade of the Rhi-Tiddim Road in Myanmar, etc. India is also implementing the Kaladan multimodal transport project, which involves upgrading the Sittwe port in Myanmar and constructing a highway to connect the town of Paletwa in Chin state to the border state in Mizoram. This flagship project, expected to be completed by 2015, will revitalise the economy of that area and link it with important commercial and shipping arteries. The Chief Secretary of the Manipur government has also announced the long-awaited luxury bus service between Imphal and Mandalay, the first link between India and Myanmar.<sup>28</sup> This connectivity holds the potential to integrate India's North-East with the broader ASEAN's inter-connectivity efforts with substantial benefits for both India and Myanmar. Furthermore, Myanmar is extremely rich in natural resources, notably oil and gas, and closer relations with Myanmar would facilitate India's energy requirements too.

There has been steady expansion of bilateral trade from US\$12.4 million in 1980–81 to US\$1.92 billion in 2012–13. India's imports from Myanmar are dominated by agricultural items (beans, pulses and forest-based products from 90% of our imports). India's main exports to Myanmar are primary and semi-finished steel and pharmaceuticals.<sup>29</sup>

Recently, the Lok Sabha Speaker Smt. Meira Kumar led the first-ever visit of an Indian parliamentary delegation to Myanmar on 12–15 February 2013. While interacting with the Indian parliamentary delegation, the President of Myanmar Thien Sein hoped that present visit of the Indian parliamentary delegation will not only contribute to strengthen relations between the two parliaments but also between the two countries. Smt. Kumar also alluded the training availed of by the 30 MPs of Myanmar and 30 Myanmar parliamentary staff in India. The present pace and growing momentum in India–Myanmar relations indicates that the bilateral ties are indeed poised to flourish in the near future.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

The Indian Diaspora in Myanmar can play a crucial role in strengthening India–Myanmar ties. Historically, Burma was the richest country of Southeast Asia with the active support of Indian Diaspora but today with the absence of Indians, Myanmar has miles to go before it regains the lost status. Burmese held Indians rather than the British as the root cause for their problems, but now have realised that depriving Indians of their properties and citizenship does not help them in the socio-economic and politico-cultural field.

After the Indian Diaspora in the USA successfully lobbied for clinching of the Indo-US civil nuclear deal, now Singapore is using the Indian Diaspora as an asset by wooing the cash-rich Indian Diaspora in the USA for investments, technology and other expertise. This could be an eye-opener for other countries having a sizable Indian Diaspora. Myanmar may consider the Indian Diaspora as an asset and not a liability, and could also learn from Singapore.

On the other hand, the Indian Diaspora in Myanmar should mobilise the Indian community to start lobbying for Myanmar's permanent seat in the SAARC, as this will improve their position in the host country. India should try to bring in an amicable solution of the citizenship dispute between the ethnic Indians and the Myanmar's authority. If Myanmar obtains permanent membership in SAARC with India's supports, India will gain a platform to engage and interact with Myanmar's "civilian" regime. Myanmar will also enjoy the benefits of SAFTA (South Asia Free Trade Area), in which trade within the member countries will be duty free.

On August 2010, the SAARC University has been started in New Delhi, where students from all the member countries are eligible to enrol and there will be no discrimination in visas against any student from any member country. According to the report of HLCID, education is also a concern among the Indian community in Myanmar. If Myanmar receives the SAARC membership, the country will become the part of this university, which will also facilitate the interest of the PIO. Myanmar's SAARC aspiration will, however, largely depend on their commitment towards democracy.

It is mutually beneficial for India and the USA to engage with Myanmar as much as possible, as this will automatically lead towards balancing China in the region, notably for maintaining the peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific area. This is therefore an opportune time for India substantially, rather than symbolically, to

recalibrate its foreign policy towards Myanmar. This recalibration can pay rich dividends to its on-going Look East Policy.

As of now, the reformative measures in Myanmar are likely to continue, as Nay Pyi Taw would like to live up to ASEAN's expectations and it will Chair the regional bloc in 2014 to further legitimate USDP's rule before the next general elections due in 2015. Thereafter, the result of the 2015 general elections will decide the future course of Myanmar. The future of Myanmar and the future of Indians in Myanmar lie in democracy, and if all goes well then the future of the Indian Diaspora as well as Myanmar will be bright, including their bilateral relations with India.

## Notes

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10. Brij V. Lal (ed.), n.7, p. 169.

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12. W. S. Desai, n. 8.
13. Ton That Thien, *India and Southeast Asia: 1947–1960* (Geneva, 1963), pp. 150–84.
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18. Ibid.
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