

A Blend of Cultures in Myanmar

Dr. Jenny Ko Gyi

Lecturer, ITBMU Yangon, Myanmar

Abstract

A brief description on a blend as a result of coexistence of people from different countries and of different faiths. Facts are based mainly on the integration of people in Myanmar, its natives and those from neighboring countries. A short description on cultural and religious outcome is presented, followed by some salient aspects of explanation from a Buddhist point of view.

Keywords: Blend, Cultures, Myanmar

Introduction

Coexistence of people of different faiths, ethnicity and nationality has in countries all over the world been found to be on the rise through migration because of better ways of travel and better ways of communication due to modern technology. Myanmar, like the rest of the world has had its share of immigrants from the World War II days besides the flow of people from surrounding countries at various times. When descendants of various citizens from various countries gradually blend in with natives, religious faith, bloodlines, culture, features mingle and results vary and differ, mostly favorably and sometimes not. In this age of constant, wide, fast travel this is what takes place in a large part of the civilized world, with the exception of a few and Myanmar has been no exception. There has been the entry of natives from countries around Myanmar, like China, India and Bangladesh, which was formerly known as East Pakistan.

Indians along with the Chinese are one of the largest group of migrants in Myanmar. The grandfather of S.N. Goenka¹, known to the Buddhist community world wide as Guruji Goenka, was one of the many Indian Hindus that came to Burma during the rule of the last dynasty, the

¹ S.N.Goenka http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S._N._Goenka

Kone-Boung dynasty. A lingering headache eventually let S.N. Goenka to his mentor Sayagyi U Ba Khin and started his journey as one of the world's leading meditation masters. Half a century ago, Goenka's enterprise, Bandoola, was among Myanmar's leading companies. When a new regime took over and sequestered a number of leading enterprises Goenka at first hang on but finally had to follow the steps of those who left the once secure and prosperous country for a better, more stable live abroad.

The Tiger Balm² dynasty now based in Singapore and Hong Kong also had its roots in Myanmar. The first settler of the Tiger Balm family came to Yangon (formerly Rangoon) in 1860 and the herbal balm was started in 1870. This family was also one of those, after the sequestration, who tried to stay behind but finally had to leave. Elders of the Tiger Balm family, who now live abroad still regard Burmese, along with Chinese, as their mother-tongue and still read and write Burmese.

Descendants of Portuguese³ settlers and invaders led by Philip De Brito during Burma Toungoo dynasty still live in some villages, located as far North as Myanmar's Sagaing Division. They still show distinct non-Myanmar features despite the gap of many generations between the current people and their ancestors - large eyes, distinct eyebrows, high noses, curly hair, etc. Even though exposure to the tropical sun leave them brown and tanned one can see traces of their non-Tibeto-Burman ancestry when one looks at them.

Descendants of Burma's British rulers, who stayed behind after the British left, are easier to recognize, with their pale-skin and lighter colored-eyes, though the number has now markedly dwindled as they move out of the country. Gurkhas, from Nepal, known as the Chindits, fierce and strong, were known for their loyalty and were much relied on by the British. Their descendants still also known as Gurkhas live in clusters of villages in Myanmar's highlands in the Kachin State and the Shan States. Myanmar used to have descendants of WW II participants like Scotsmen and Jews.

The gradual and recently massive migration of Bangladeshi Muslims⁴ into Burma's Arakan Frontier needs no elaboration.

² Tiger Balm http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiger_Balm

³ Portuguese http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Burmese_people

⁴ Muslims http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Burma

A Blend of Culture

Having been together for decades and even centuries descendants of immigrants and natives blend through mixed marriages and mixed culture, interfaith families, imported architecture become evident to the result of coexistence. Children of Indian fathers and Myanmar mothers showed a distinct Indian look, while children of Chinese and Myanmar parents show their part of Chinese in them. Likewise Anglo-Myanmar Children show their part of Caucasian in them. The language they speak is mainly Myanmar and the English they learn from school. Some children of these mixed families speak their non-Myanmar parent's language but gradually they end up speaking only Myanmar with English from school.

Faiths the children follow is of a similar pattern. In wedlock one partner might convert to the other partner's religion and many go on with the religion of their parents. Hindus could be said to be the best blended of immigrants in Myanmar. There almost never has been a problem in marriage between a Hindu and a Buddhist. Since most Hindus themselves have diffused into their Buddhist neighbors and now most of them call themselves Hindu-Buddhist. Buddha status can be seen in many Hindu temples alongside status of Hindu gods. But a large number of Muslim families in Myanmar like to have the prospective bride or groom of their children to convert to their religion before marriage. Children of Christian and Buddhist parents often liberally follow their choice. Therefore churches, mosques, Hindu temples and Chinese temples can be readily seen along site pagodas in Myanmar's big cities. It is a significant site in Myanmar's city of Yangon that in its downtown a Baptist church and a mosque lay on either side of the Sole pagoda, a synagogue and a Hindu temple are situated nearby and a Chinese temple can be seen not far away too.

Another significant evidence of Myanmar's diverse population is its people's affection for Burmese, Indian, Chinese and European food that can be seen in the variety of restaurants and food stalls in many corners of Myanmar's towns and cities. These days there is an edition of Korean, Japanese, Italian, French and Thai restaurants indicating the recent influx of newcomers.

Children of Chinese parents and of Indian ancestry, both Hindu and Muslim are regulars among Myanmar's students. Government employees

also consist of Indian and Chinese, who by now are Myanmar citizens. Private firms regularly present a number of Indian or Chinese workers, and there are Myanmar workers working under Chinese or Indian employers.

Chinese-Myanmar, Christian-Myanmar, Hindu-Myanmar or Muslim-Myanmar children are equally well-acquainted with Buddhist festivals as the Buddhist-Myanmar children are. The water festival representing Myanmar's new year and the lantern (lighting) festival representing Buddha's descent from the deity plane to the human world are the festivals enjoyed by children of all faiths. In multi-faith communities Christmas, deepavali and Sugar Feast (Bayram) are likewise equally celebrated by all.

In Myanmar's recent history there has been a few clashes between its people of different background. A part from these Chinese, Indians and Myanmar with differing ancestors and religion get along well. Even during the recent Rakhine riots dealings between Muslims and Buddhists, who have been childhood friends, classmates, colleagues, employer and employee remain steadfast. All these bonds and friendships could be said to have come naturally since children learn goodness, compassion and loving-kindness from parents.

Buddhism for A Multi-cultural Society

Loving-kindness⁵, compassion and tolerance are basic teachings of Buddhism and it also comes naturally to people of good heart irrespective of the faith they follow. But then a child born with an inherent good heart could turn into one who is cruel.⁶

A person's goodness comes from examples he gets from people around him. Avoiding evil, not wanting to harm others, also come from ingrained Buddhist belief in Kamma and its result in the unseeably long, beginning less and endless samsara cycle⁷. Kamma is the Buddhist version of the law of cause and effect. It teaches that whatever you reap in life is what you sow. Each day gives people the opportunity to rewrite their kamma, with the chance to do good or not to do good. It represents, on a moment-by-moment basis, all the good or bad people do through their lives. Kamma is the "potential energy that can induce effect or result. If

⁵ http://www.buddhanet.net/metta_in.htm

⁶ "Puggalopiupanissayapaccayenapaccayo- by strong-dependence condition; a person is related" _Introduction to Basic Patthana, AshinJanakabhivamsa http://www.dhammadownload.com/books/Patthana_by_Janakabhivamsa.pdf

⁷ <http://buddhists.org/buddhist-symbols/samsara-in-buddhism/>

we did something good, we got a good kamma and if bad, a bad kamma. These good or bad potentials always stay with us without being able to be sensed their existence and we only know them when the effect are shown due to revealing of its result.”⁸

The ready mingling of people, along with their culture and faith is brought about when people are easily acceptable and receptive of others. Accepting others of different backgrounds, forgiving and ignoring their faults has become even when it’s not an easy habit instinctive and nurtured in almost all places in this modern society. A person learn goodness from those around him and so also a person could learn from others and turn into a person filled with hatred and grudge.

Meditators while they are deep in contemplation will be able to ignore adverse objects or look over them so that they will be undisturbed by things which ordinary people may find difficult to bear. For them differences in race or faith do not come as a problem when these mediators are turning attention to the ultimate realities. Finally when the Buddha’s teachings of impermanence is contemplated all things that come up, all things that are heard or seen will be merely objects of impermanence that arise only to pass away. Then the so-called differences of nationality, ethnicity or faith are only part of the objects, which are conceptual and which basically bear no difference apart from that they are objects of the mind. For those who repeatedly contemplate the impermanence of conditioned realities will be able to accept all without prejudice, there will be no boundaries, no nationalities. Thus the wise with knowledge of the Buddha’s teachings have taught us to accept and love those, who are different from us and with their teachings based on love and compassion we have learned to love and accept all. This will make the community we are in together blessed with peace, love and harmony under the guidance of the wise and teachings of the Buddha.

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⁸ Kamma, Samasara Cycle <http://buddhists.org/buddhist-symbols/samsara-in-buddhism/>

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