

Democratization in Burma: Challenges and prospects



Dr. Shashi Tharoor delivering the keynote address



Mr. Tapan K. Bose of The Other Media addressing the inaugural session

The stage is set for India "to open Burma's windows to the world" which China "will be watching closely." These were the words of Dr. Shashi Tharoor, Member of Parliament, and former Union Minister of State for External Affairs, who inaugurated the two-day seminar on "Democratization in Burma: Challenges and Prospects" organized by the Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi.

Highlighting the importance of the 2010 elections and the recent bye-elections in Burma which have both ratified and subtly altered the consequences of three decades of military rule in Burma, Dr. Tharoor dwelt on the close historical links between Burma and India, right from the period when Burma was part of British India in 1935, to the present.

Elucidating it further, Dr Tharoor said that in 1980s when there was a political upheaval going on in the military dominated Burma, India being a democratic nation acted the way a democracy should by providing asylum to the students of popular '8888' uprising, allowed them to operate their resistance movement on the Indian side of the border (with some financial help from New Delhi) and supported a newspaper and a radio station that propagated the democratic voice. "Thus India was on the side of democracy but this was bound to change in the later years due to the emerging reality checks."

Explaining the context which prompted



Mr. Ravi Nair and Ms. Sagari Chhabra at the session on "Human Rights and Burma"

New Delhi to change its foreign policy stance towards Burma, Dr Tharoor said that the two archrivals of India- China and Pakistan were offered economic and geopolitical concessions by the military junta. Moreover China's development of a port on the Burmese coast, far closer to Calcutta than to Canton and the growing anti-Delhi movements raised grave concern about the security of the northeastern states of India.

But the clincher came when large deposits of natural gas were found in Burma, which it was clear, would not be available to an India deemed hostile to the junta. It was at this stage, said Dr Tharoor, that "New Delhi turned 180 degrees" by offering the military junta assistance in their fighting against their own rebels.

All this was perfectly understandable as India's primary obligation, like any other nation, is towards its own people. To Dr Tharoor, the recent developments in Burma "marks the winds of change in Myanmar hinting the need for change in the Indian Foreign policy towards it. He concluded: "India cannot and should not seek to outdo China in appeasing the military junta. Its natural instincts lay with the Burmese democrats Aung San Suu Kyi and the former students for whom it has, over the years, shown its support."

Dr Tint Swe, Burmese Ex-MP (NLD), emphasized that India should "do things differently from China." He expected among other things, party-to-party and people-to-people relations to be forged between the two countries. He called upon India to assert its role as the world's largest democracy. He was also well-disposed towards India countering China in Burma as the Chinese influence has grown since the "opening up" of the Government. The economy of Burma has seen little improvement and exhorted India to invest in Burma. He also urged the North Eastern states of India to extend their support to the Burmese struggle. Dr Tint Swe described the current situation to be "a black and white time for Burma"-- the black signifying the military and the white signifying democracy. He cautioned against excessive optimism about Burma

maintaining that "democracy in Burma is not irreversible."

The two-day seminar discussed various themes such as, challenges of democratization, how the international stakeholders see developments in the country, ethnic question, federalism and human rights. Academics, human rights activists, journalists and civil society representatives participated in the seminar. These included Mr. Tapan K. Bose, President, The Other Media, Ms. Jaya Jaitly, former President, Samata Party and Editor, the OtherSide, Mr. Sumit Chakravartty, Editor, Mainstream, Dr. Sonu Trivedi, Asst. Professor, Zakir Husain College, Delhi University, Prof. Manmohini Kaul, Centre for South, Central, South East Asian and South West Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Dr. Vibhanshu Shekhar, Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, Dr. Amit Singh, Asst. Professor, Zakir Husain College, Delhi University, Mr. Rahul Jalali, Senior Journalist, Dr. Jabin T. Jacob, Assistant Director and Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, Mr. Vishal Arora, Freelance Journalist, Dr. Jiten Nongthombam, Centre for Myanmar Studies, Manipur University, Prof. M.P. Singh, Former Professor, Department of Political Science, Delhi University, Dr. Pushkar Raj, General Secretary, PUCL, Mr. A.J. Philip, Senior Journalist, Prof. Sanjoy Hazarika, Columnist, author, film-maker and Director, Centre for North-East Studies, Jamia Millia Islamia, Prof. Balveer Arora, Chairman, Centre for Multilevel Federalism, ISS and former Pro-Vice Chancellor, JNU, Mr. Ravi Nair, Executive Director, South Asian Human Rights Documentation Centre, and Ms. Sagari Chhabra, author and film maker.



Mr. Mani Shankar Aiyar delivering the valedictory address.



Mr. Mani Shankar Aiyar, Member of Parliament, and former Union Minister, delivered the valedictory session. He said that "there are few countries in the world that are more important to us than Burma and yet strangely Burma had dropped out of our radar for some years." Nevertheless, "as a democracy which believed in freedom, we never had any hesitation regarding Burma as a frontier of our own freedom." He however cautioned that change in Burma can be lasting and sustainable only if it comes from within". Complimenting democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, Mr Aiyar said that "what has been achieved in Burma is almost Gandhian. Like Gandhiji, Suu Kyi believed in persuading the opponent by love and peace, and not by using physical violence."

The two-day seminar was organised by the Institute of Social Sciences in cooperation with The Other Media and Euro Burma Office.