Although Burma lost its sovereignty to Britain after the third Anglo-Burmese war in 1885, which took place when the last King of Burma, Thibaw (1878-1885), refused to give any concession to a British Teak Company and Great Britain opted for a war and annexed the Burmese territories to check any possibility of French expansion into the western part of the Indo-Chinese Peninsula. But this loss of independence never reconciled the Burmese masses to the new situation of power-change and whenever the opportunity came they tried to get manumission from the yoke of colonial rule.

But the British colonial administrators refuted any report of resistance in their newly conquered territory and dubbed it as a 'law and order problem' created by 'dacoits' and 'anti-social elements'. Even British parliamentarian like Mr. Gladstone, who was considered a liberal critic of imperialism (while in opposition), after coming to power, replied in Parliament that even if the evidence should indicate
that this war of annexation (Third Anglo-Burmese War) was wanton and needless, the annexation should not be reverted.¹

So, whether it was liberal or conservative, the British were firm in their objective of perpetuation of imperial rule over Burma, whatsoever be the consequences. Earlier resistance and discontent which was dubbed as 'law and order problem' created by the 'band of dacoits' were best described emphatically by the Russian Indologist Minayeff, who happened to be there immediately after the British forces entered the royal Burmese capital, that, there were daily killings of several so called Burmese 'dacoits' after the occupation of Mandalay. And they faced the British firing-squads smiling and died smoking chiroots. Then their corpses were carried through the streets to intimidate the population.² Scholars like James G. Scott mentions in his 'Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the Shan states, that, 'the brutality of British military operations were such that even the peace loving monks were not spared because of their dislike of the British rule and mentions that a monk known as ‘the Pongyi of

² Ibid., p.102.
Mayanchaung" was publicly hanged by the English forces and those Burmese who had not surrendered their arms were shot out of hand without trial'. These salutary severities contributed to the spontaneous resistance against the British imperialism; and apart from germinating nationalistic feelings among the Burmese people, it attracted wide attention of international media questioning the right motives of British pacification movement against early Burmese nationalist or resistance leaders. Even questions were raised in the British parliament about the justification of the execution campaign and when the resistance became more and more desperate the British media. The Times’ of January 21, 1886, reported, “that the ghastly scenes which constantly recur in executions carried out by the Provost Marshall constitutes grave public scandals. And taking notice of these news reports, the then Viceroy of British India, Earl of Dufferin, had taken serious note on these amateur photographing of prisoners in the process of being executed and ordered Lieutenant General Prendergast and Colonel Sladen to stop military executions. But instead of following these orders, peasants were flogged and

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1 Ibid., p.101.

entire villages were burned down. Thus, according to one estimate forty six villages with six hundred and thirty nine houses and 509,000 lbs of paddy besides many cattle were destroyed. Although after the defeat of the last King of Burma, Thibaw British administrators sent him and his members of the family into exile in India to check the growth of a new resistance movement around the defeated but well revered king. Even after that, seeing the volatile situation, the British administrators realised that even the empty throne of the last Burmese monarch could turn into a unifying and symbolizing factor in the Burmese resistance movement and they swiftly removed the Burmese throne to a museum in Calcutta from Mandalay in order to forestall any new Burmese attempts to seize it; and to nip in the bud Burmese folk notions insisting that as long as the throne remained, the Burmese kingdom would rise again.

The brutality of the British 'pacification' methods was keenly observed by the then British commissioner and he honestly admitted that, "villages from where or near which any opposition was offered

5 E. Sarkisyanz, n.1, p.102.


would be destroyed; on those who did not submit as much damage as possible would be inflicted by destruction of their houses and property, and other villages who resisted would be blockaded, food supplies being cut off until they were starved into submission."8

But defying the repressive tactics of British imperialistic forces thousands of Burmese people offered their valient resistance to the alien power under the great leadership of U Oktama, Boh Hlaing, Bo Yit and Yan Byan Bo and many others. Prince Myinzaing continued the resistance till his death and the heads of Kyi-Myin-daing Prince and of Boh Hlaing were cut off after a fierce resistance carried to Meiktila. Apart from these resistance which continued for five years after the third Anglo-Burmese war, the resistance offered by the valiant son of King Thibaw, the Mintha continued till 1922 from 1886.9

Western scholars like Cecil Hobbs feel uncomfortable in accepting the fact that the nationalistic spirit in Burma was deeply embedded itself in the root of British colonial rule. While writing in

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8 Ibid., p.103.
9 Ibid., p.104.
'The Far Eastern Quarterly' in February 1947 on "Nationalism in British Colonial Burma", he writes that, "Burmese nationalism is of fairly recent origin. After the annexation of Burma by the British 1886, there was no nationalistic movement revolving about the dethroned Burmese King or the royal family. It was not until after the First World War that the Burmans showed any marked interest in national politics".10

In fact it was not only Cecil Hobbs but many other European writers who deny vehemently the fact that the Burmese nationalism has it roots from the beginning of British colonial rule in Burma. That scholars like Kenneth Perry Landon held the same view as Hobbs and while writing in February 1943 in 'Far Eastern Quarterly' on "Nationalism in Southeastern Asia" tried to prove that "Burma's loyalty to the empire was unquestioned during the First World War. And no nationalist movement tried to take advantage of Britains preoccupation with the business of war. The period before 1930 was

an era of Burmese acceptance of things British."11

But the resistance offered by the early freedom fighters of Burma after the Third Anglo Burmese war to the British colonialism tells the different story of nationalist spirit for manumission. As analysed earlier, resistance leaders like Bo Yit and Yan Byan Bo, who were still continuing their resistance were betrayed by their own people by a Burmese village headman, and captured and executed in public under the supervision of Mr. J.G. Scott.12 Another rebel leader U. Oktama, who had left the monkhood to become one of the most determined opponents of the British invaders continued his struggle through the years 1886-1889 in the Minbu area till his death. But European writer like Hobbs and Landon who were unable to accept the beginning of nationalism in Burma at an early stage against the British administrators dubbed the whole movement as dacoits' bid to destabilise the just rule of British empire.


12 E. Sarkisyanz, n.1, p.104.
And the contemporary British Commissioner Crosthwaite while writing about U. Oktama says, "Oktama inspired his followers with some spirit, whether fanatic or patriotic. The exertions of the British-Indian troops had made little impression on Oktama's influence. The peasantry were on his side. The relations of the dacoits were removed from their villages and a fortnightly fine imposed on all harboring villages. On this the villagers gave him up, our success had been entirely achieved by imposing a periodical general fine on them until they helped us, by removing the relations and sympathizers of the dacoits, and the military police came upon Oktama sitting dispairingly by the Chaungdawga Pagoda, near Legaing with only one follower. It was a tragic picture. When Burmans shall point historical scenes or write on the events following the fall of their king, "Oktama at the golden Pagoda" will be a favorite theme for ballad or drama."13 But unlike Cecil Hobbs and Landon, Crosthwaite had some generosity and honesty to accept this fact that freedom fighters like Oktama's name would remain unforgotten forever in the history of Burma and a time would come when his name would become a favorite theme for ballad or drama among Burmese people. Crosthwaite records frankly that the methods of his administration were more of political expediency.

13 Ibid., p.103.
rather than those of abstract rights or justice. And the British Chief Commissioner had instructed the Superintendent as, “you must not be guided solely by considerations of abstract rights or abstract justice. You must give great weight to considerations of expediency.” Further Crosthwaite honestly admits about the patriotic feelings among the Burmese people and writes that, “to those who had any patriotic feeling, and no doubt many of them had, the representative of foreign government standing in front of the empty throne must have been the abomination of desolation. My duty, however, was not to show sympathy with sentiment of that kind but to impress them with the permanence, benevolence and power of the new government.” But its benevolence and power as exemplified by public hanging of the rebel leader like Bo Yit, Yan Byan Bo and thousand others and imposing regular fines over the whole village community and other methods of atrocities.

Nationalist India, under the same colonial rule, couldn’t remain indifferent to the suppression and atrocities committed by the British Imperialism in the neighbouring country of Burma. And, time and again, Indian National leaders tried to impress upon the people to get

14 Ibid., p.105.
into the habit of looking at India as a part of the wider Asian world. As most of the Asian countries were under the domination of western powers and were thus, comrades-in-bondage, leaders of Nationalist India realised that the basic problem of India and other countries of Asia under the colonial rule was the same. So when the annexation of Burma took place after the third Anglo Burmese war, Indian leaders vehemently opposed the annexation to the Indian Empire by the British Government. In his resolution moved at the very first session of Indian National Congress session in 1885, Phiroz Shah Mehta regarded the annexation as unjust, immoral and unwise.\footnote{Birendra Prasad, \textit{Indian Nationalism and Asia} (B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1979), p.30.} Although one of the reasons of this resolution was the fear of heavy taxation on the cost of annexation, but the real reason behind the opposition to the annexation was the sympathy of the Indian people for their neighbours. It was a protest against the British aggressiveness for their forward policy in India. Although India being a subject country, all the thought and energy of nationalist India was directed towards the achievement of its own freedom, it tried to evince keen interest in the neighbouring countries like Burma and developed an Asian consciousness or the spirit of fellow feeling with Asian nations. And
from the very inception of Indian National Congress Indian leaders tried to cooperate with the fellow neighbouring countries against colonial rule. Thus, imbued with a sense of Asian consciousness and moved by a motive to forge Asian solidarity, the Indian National Movement emphasised the need of closer collaboration among the national movements of Asia for eliminating the common enemy viz. Western imperialism. Since beginning of the Indian national movement, Indian leader, and thinkers like Tagore and Aurobindo Ghose had rejected the English theory of liberal justification for its domination, tutelage and its claim of acting as a 'trustee for civilization in order to build up those conditions of liberty and opportunity for the individual in which the people can learn to govern themselves rather than being the 'White Man's burden'.16

Indian national awakening made the Indian leaders realise that the enslavement of other Asian countries rests on the stability of British Indian empire. So these leaders believed that India itself has the remedy of imperialism and that once India became free, the whole edifice of western imperialism in Asia would collapse like a house of cards. For the nationalist leaders, free India was the best and surest

16 E. Sarkisyanz, n 1. p 120
guarantee of a free Asia. Thus Mahatma Gandhi very aptly observed that, "India was the key to the exploitation of the Asiatic and other non-European races of the Earth. She is held under bondage not merely for the sake of her own exploitation but that of her neighbours near and distant. India's freedom would be the first death blow to the insolent exploitation of the nations of Asia and Africa." Keeping in view the share India had contributed in purchasing the freedom of the Asiatic and African nations; Gandhi declared, "My ambition is much higher than independence. Through the deliverance of India, I seek to deliver the so-called weaker races of the earth from the crushing hulls of western exploitation." Indian leaders followed this assumption of Gandhi in their struggle for independence against British colonialism and always tried to show concern over the happenings in neighbouring countries, whether was in Burma or in China and Indonesia.

Even before the establishment of Indian National Congress or emergence of Gandhi on national scene, Indian thinkers and leaders tried to establish the fact of Asian spiritual unity. So, when western imperialism had reached its high-watermark and Asia was regarded

17 Birendra Prasad, n.15, p.25.
as 'Whitemen's burden', Keshab Chandra Sen, a Brahmo Samaj leader and a brilliant product of the 19th century Indian Renaissance spoke of Asia and impressed upon the people of India that they must get into the habit of looking at India as a part of the wider Asian world. Keshab Chandra Sen's Asian unity came long before the Japanese thinker Okakura Kakuzo's proclamation that 'Asia is one' and more than a decade before Swami Vivekananda's spiritual unity of Asia. And Sen delivering a lecture on 'Asia's Message to Europe' in 1883, proudly proclaimed that, "I am a child of Asia. Her sorrows are my sorrows, her joys are my joys. From one end of Asia to another, I boast of a vast home a wide nationality, an extended kinship.... To me the dust of Asia is far more precious than gold and silver."18

The call for Asian unity by Keshab Chandra Sen gave the Indian national movement a pan-Asian outlook against imperialist forces. And this pan-Asiatic sentiments expressed by the great and brilliant representative of the 19th century Indian renaissance were later on imbibed by the Burmese leaders like U. Ottama and the Indian National movement which gathered momentum with the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885.

18 Ibid., p.27.
Following the footsteps of Sen, Swami Vivekananda and Gandhiji, even Jawaharlal Nehru observed that the Indian empire of British colonialism was an important factor in suppressing the nationalist resurgence of other countries and realised the strategic importance of India in Asian scenario. In the Congress against Imperialism held at Brussels in February 1927, Jawaharlal Nehru himself admitted that other lands had suffered and were suffering still on account of India because British used Indian troops to crush the nationalist uprisings of these lands. On another occasion Nehru observed that, "India is very curiously placed in Asia and her history has been governed a great deal by the geographical factor plus other factors, whichever problem in Asia you may take up, somehow or other India comes into the picture." Actually what Nehru was observing about India and its role in raising Asian consciousness was the policy adopted by the pioneers of Indian national movement resurgence like Sen, Vivekananda, Gandhiji and other founding fathers of Indian National Congress. That's why since the inception of Indian National Congress in 1885, Congress leaders in their resolution vehemently opposed the annexation of Burma after the

19 Ibid., p.24.
20 Ibid., p.20.
third Anglo-Burmese war. Later on, even in the seventh session of Indian National Congress in 1891, great Congress leader Dinshaw Wacha referred to the forcible seizure of Upper Burma and regarded the year of the annexation as the 'year of calamity' for India. And he further criticised the expansionist policy of the British Government beyond the eastern frontier of India in obedience to the call of "pious Manchester for the sale of the product of its spindles and looms."\(^{21}\)

When Dinshaw Wacha was pointing to the 'call of pious' Manchester for the sale of the product of its spindles and looms, he was referring towards the economic basis of British imperialism which changed the economic or agrarian structure of India and also of the Burmese state. This economic basis of British imperialism was the root cause of peoples' unrest in both the countries under British colonial rule. Under British imperialism India and Burma had to play a subservient role to the British economy. And those social, political, and economic processes that produced industrial development and social and cultural progress in Britain also produced and maintained economic underdevelopment, poverty and social discontent in India and Burma. Britain under its colonial policy subordinated the

\(^{21}\) Ibid., p.21.
economy of both countries, as Dinshaw Wacha had earlier pointed out, and determined the basic social trends and structure according to her own needs which soon generated large-scale discontent among the people and in later years shaped the course of freedom struggle in both the countries.

The next section of research tries to understand and explain this economic basis of freedom struggle in Burma which spurred the literary movement drawing upon themes of poverty and struggle and served as catalysts for the nationalist movement.

**ECONOMIC BASIS OF NATIONALISM IN BURMA**

The seeds of Burmese freedom struggle and the Indian National movement germinated as a result of the economic and social conditions created by British imperialism, its so called ‘new system’ for economic prosperity uprooted the traditional system of agricultural cultivation and established the new business or merchant class for exploitation. The self sufficient village economy got supplanted with the liberal 'laissez-faire' principles. And even these principles of laissez-faire were applied with double standards benefiting more the English mercantile community and to some extent the locals such as the emerging new money lending class like Chettyar of Burma. The
economic exploitation, although immediately did not spark the nationalist resurgence in Burma but was an important factor which set the pattern of future course of struggle against the British colonialism.

During the pre-British Burma the Burmese people were a happy lot and according to a description by a British envoy of 1826, "Burmese peasantry and labouring class owing to high wages were well fed, well dressed, housed, and their standards of living might bear a comparison with the peasantry of most European countries." And an early nineteenth century catholic report substantiates these facts by reporting that "beggars are rare in this country on account of the cheapness of provisions." 

After the complete subjugation of Burma in 1886 in third Anglo-Burmese war Lower Burma went through an agricultural revolution almost unprecedented in Asia. Although the process was started after the Second Anglo-Burmese war in 1852 and got pace after the opening of Suez Canal in 1869 which provided easy access to overseas

23 E. Sarkisyanz, n.l, p.137
market. But the British administrators and mercantile community got firm ground after the third Anglo-Burmese war. And after having the complete control, vast tract of fertile monsoon land was cleared for rice cultivation and exports in which thousands of Burmese people died in clearing the dense jungle in the malaria ridden swamp areas. And the Lower Burma received the highest influx of British and Indian capital which was spectacularly invested in financing rice production and its exports. Although earlier, the rice exports had been a prohibited item before the British conquest but the rules were later changed to serve the British economic interest in a new situation.

Between 1830 and 1940 the acreage under rice cultivation in Lower Burma increased about fifteen times and from 1869 to the end of British rule there was a more than ten fold increase in rice production.24 Although there was also four-fold increase in the population between that very period, the benefits of harvest were reaped by the British export firms and not by the Burmese people. If this phenomenal growth in acreage and agricultural productions would have taken place in any European country or in any independent nation the benefits would have also gone to the real

21 Ibid., p.138.
farmers or cultivators of these economic changes. But country under foreign rule or bondage can’t think of reaping these benefits unless their master would have translated these gains for the benefit of real agents of this change. But as it generally happens in a colonial rule, between 1870 and 1930 agricultural real wages in Lower Burma fell by 20%. And the Burma’s own consumption of rice had fallen by nearly 25% during the last two decades of British colonial rule 1921-1941.

So, the motives of Britishers in transforming the Burmese agricultural economy was not with a view to improving Burmese agricultural to increase production and ensure the welfare and prosperity of the Burmese involved in agricultural production but to force Burmese agriculture to play its assigned role in colonial economy. Old relationships and institutions were destroyed after the end of Burmese monarchy and new ones were born and these new features represented a change towards serving best to the colonial masters and its agents.


26 E. Sarkisyanz, n.1 , p.141.
Rice export and milling were concentrated in the hands of few British entrepreneurs who jointly determined the prices, which they were willing to pay the peasants for rice paddy. And gradually from Rangoon they extended their control over rest of the Burmese mills and took control of the prices paid to the rice cultivators. In this way they managed by 1894 to force down the average price the Burmese peasants were receiving for their produce, even when rice values were rising in the world markets and in 1921 the four principal English rice export firms agreed along these lines on "a common policy in rice purchases and sales, which was blamed for the hardships of Lower Burma countryside."21

The greatest disadvantage that arose out of the British policies with regard to the Burmese agricultural economy or earlier in the same fashion to Indian agricultural economy was the emergence of the moneylender as an influential economic and political force in the country. Because of the high revenue rates and its rigid methods of collection, the peasant cultivation had often to borrow money to pay their dues. In addition to paying high interest rates, when his crops

were ready he was invariably forced to sell his produce cheap and this forced him gradually to abject poverty. And this chronic poverty of the peasant compelled them to take recourse to the moneylender especially in times of natural calamities. And, the new emerging class of moneylender in Burma was 'Chettiar', who came to Burma from South India to seek new fortunes after the third Anglo-Burmese war. This money lending community or Chettiar had the support of colonial administration and they could easily manipulate the new judicial system and the administrative machinery to their advantage. And the Government in fact needed Chettiar community to collect agriculture produce in time and without them, nor could the agricultural produce be brought to the ports for export. Even to get the crops for export produced in the first instance, the Government depended on the Chettiar to persuade the cultivator by offering to finance him through loans. And in due course of time they occupied the dominant position in the Burmese agricultural economy which led to later on in the early twentieth century Indo-Burmese riots and the peasants discontent were turned into Saya San's rebellion in 1930-32.

And therefore supplanting the Burmese customary law, the British-Indian legal principles were forced upon the untrained Burmese masses of this legal system. Earlier Burmese customary law
was that all who had taken part in cultivation were entitled to a first claim upon its produce but British courts disregarded such priority.\textsuperscript{28} And legality was no longer the largely oral customary law familiar to the people, but a foreign law written in a foreign language, which became incomprehensible to the people, and required a lawyers class of intermediaries to interpret it.

Thus in colonial Burma, the introduction of British Indian law made possible the alienation of land through mortgaging and foreclosure. The farmers, not being used to the possibility of losing their land, frequently borrowed more than they needed from the 'Chetyars' for cultivation and spent the surplus for non-productive purpose while paying exorbitant rates of interest. And the change from traditional cultivation to rice exporting economy made the part of Rangoon, in the beginning of the nineteenth century as a bustling urban agglomeration of diversified population with a majority of Indian labour immigrants and moneylenders like 'Chettyars'.

But, for the British policy makers the Burmese people had to be changed to play the subservient role for the development of colonial

\textsuperscript{28} E. Sarkisyanz, n. 1, p. 147.
In British evaluation of the Burmans, in the official Census Report of 1901, Burmese were "unbusiness like, irresponsible, perfectly incapable of sustained effort, content with what can be gained by a minimum toil."29 Thus taxes were collected from impoverished peasants, living under miserable conditions, even when the revenue was not actually needed and was only in part spent by the government. The condition of Burmese peoples, poor and unfortunate position was better scrutinized by Furnivall as, "And in this business concern the Burmans played a very minor part, where economic forces have free play. The weakest goes to the wall, and in the economic development of Burma, the Burmans have been in the unfortunate position of the weaker. Relatively, at least they are poorer than before.30 So in the same way like Indian cultivators, the Burmese people suffered in the new colonial agricultural economy, having subordinate position and serving the interest of British manufacturers.

The Burmese peasants who made possible the rapid expansion of rice cultivation in Lower Burma benefited little or least from the

30 E. Sarkisyanz, n. , p.141.
economic development under British colonial rule. So, under British regime relatively few agriculturalists in the newly developed rice cultivation areas of Lower Burma escaped indebtedness to the moneylenders like 'Chettyars'. The process of their dispossession started already in the late nineteenth century and by 1901/1902 moneylenders and other non-agriculturists owned already about seventeen percent of cultivated land in Lower Burma. And by 1908 almost half of the cultivated land in the Thaton District was no longer owned even nominally by agriculturists.\footnote{John F. Cady, \textit{A History of Modern Burma} (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1958), p.94.}

According to contemporary British officials District Report, much of the land is in the hands of moneylenders and traders, who let it out on yearly tenancies, so the indebtedness is general and cultivating owners are often merely creatures of the Chetties (South Indian moneylenders). And by the time of the Census of 1921, only one half of the agriculturalists in Lower Burma owned their own land, twenty seven percent being landless agricultural labourers and twenty two percent tenants. Consequently, with the fall of rice prices during the World Depression worsened their conditions more and resulted in
the mass dispossesion of Burmese rice cultivators by foreclosure of mortgages. By 1930/31 moneylending landlords owned already 33½% of Lower Burma’s arable land, and by 1933, forty one percent of it. So the fact was that before the end of British rule, in 1941 in the economically advanced part of Burma about two-thirds of the rice land was held by non-agriculturists, many of them being Indian moneylenders. This demonstrates the perennial failure of successive projects and proposals to protect the Burmese agriculturists by legislation until the last year of British rule. And all such proposals to protect the Burmese rice peasants by legislative measures, with monotonous regularity were failed to achieve its desired goals from the decisive government authorities and from colonial Burma’s British business community".32 This later on became instrumental in fomenting unrest among Burmese peasants against Colonial rule and themes of many ballads and literature of Burmese literary genre on writing on miserable condition of Burmese peasant class. Even writer like Cady is critical in analysing British colonial policy and says that, “The modern administration that the British colonial system imposed for the sake of efficiency and economic progress created rules unintelligible to the simpler people, and applied them largely for

purposes of extortion. And European scholars like G.E. Harvey observed that the British ruler's new economic policy was more focussed on the tightening and perpetuation of colonial rule rather than the deliverance of civic rights and goods to the Burmese people. Harvey further wrote that, "The higher British bureaucratic echelons which could have restrained such extortion practices remained mostly removed from and inaccessible to the people through its consciousness of racial distance and not only did crime increase under British rule, it is even arguable that it was caused by British rule and indeed much more was spent on police than on education, on prisons than on public health and agriculture combined".

So the British conquest and rule in Burma led the Burmese agricultural economy to evolve on new lines of development of colonial subordination, which did not proceed freely and therefore, did not lead to a prosperous agriculture and with the passage of time, this exploitative British rule sparked serious discontent and resentment among the Burmese people. As we have seen earlier, this growing

33 John F. Cady, n. 31, p.410.
discontent of the Burmese peasant formed the backbone of the peasant rebellions and civil rebellions which were often led by monks and petty chieftains. The peasant resistance movement offered by Saya San in early nineteen thirties was actually the culmination of the earlier movements of monk U Oktama and Boh Hlaing, Bo Yit and others. Although the earlier resistance offered by the Burmese monks and leaders to the British imperialism were local in character and had not an all Burma impact, it provided a symbol of immense courage and sacrifice to the later organised political struggle of Burma's freedom against colonial rule. Though it was a desperate effort to save Burma in the old way under traditional leadership, it was their glorious attempt to seek freedom from British imperialism. And the rebellions of the people were marked by immense valour and sacrifice on their part and veritable butchery on the part of the official machinery of suppression. In this first phase of struggle against British imperialism thousands died in unequal battles and perished in jails. It was a struggle between angry but disorganised men armed with such primitive weapons as axes, bows and arrows on the one side and the disciplined regiments of the British colonial army equipped with the latest weapons of the war available at that time. But the Burmese peoples supreme sacrifice against the best equipped military power of the world, later on, not only inspired the nationalist
leader of Burma, but also found its expression in local folklores and literary movements in Burma. Thus it played an important role in shaping the future course of struggle against British colonialism.

LITERATURE AND NATIONALISM IN BURMA

Folklore and literary writings played a significant role in the struggle of Burmese nationalist movement as well as in the Indian struggle for freedom. Modern Burmese literary movement can be traced to early 20th century, while Indian literary movement can be analysed from the 19th century in the writings of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya (1838-94), Govardhanram Madhavram Tripathi, Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850-85), Vishnu Krishna Chiplunkar (1850-82) and later on in 20th century by Premchand, Saratchanra, and other eminent writers.

Beginning with the peasant struggle and agrarian discontent when nationalist ideas began to emerge and literature in different Burmese and Indian languages entered its modern phase, more and more writers began to employ literature for patriotic purposes. So here, we have attempted to analyse the Burmese literary movement and its analogy with the Indian literary movement.
The emergence of modern Burmese literature coincided to a large measure with the evolution of those feelings and aspirations which constituted the foundation of the Burmese national movement.\textsuperscript{35} Most of the writers in fact believed that because they belonged to an enslaved country, it was their duty to create literature of a kind that would contribute to the all round regeneration of their society and pave the way for national liberation. The study of Burmese literature and Indian literature under colonialism is a vast subject, but here the objective is not to cover the broad ground but to simply analyse the important literary figures who contributed in the nationalist resurgence of their country. The choice of these literary figures has been determined by personal preference without undermining the contributions of other writers who too, made an important contribution in nationalist resurgence by their weapons of writing skill.

One of the most important writer of Burmese resurgence was Thakin Kodaw Hmaing also known as 'Rabindra Nath Tagore of Burma',\textsuperscript{36} who inspired thousands of Burmese through his writings

\begin{footnotes}
\item Aung San Suu Kyi, n.6, p.149.
\item E. Sarkisyanz, n.1, p.126.
\end{footnotes}
called 'Tikas'. Thakin Kudaw Hmaing or Hsaya Lun or Maung Hmaing as he was successively known, was born in 1875. Having received a traditional monastic education he spent much of his younger days in Upper Burma. As a young boy at Mandalay, Hmaing witnessed the cruel occasion when British troops took away King Thibaw and his queen from the royal palace. For the young Hmaing, with his strong attachment to the monarchic tradition, was a great tragedy\(^37\) And this traumatic event found its place later on in his historical writings when he popularized the Burmese historical heritage in his Glass Palace chronicle of the Burmese King, tracing their genealogical derivation from Buddha's family with the Sakya ancestry and the Indian background of the Burmese dynasties as well as the Pali digressions, thus secularising the Panorama of Burmese history in a nationalistic sense.\(^38\)

Hmaing's writings, since his early days, portray the 'wunthanu' spirit in his literature, which signifies the preservation of one's lineage and culture. His 'Boh Tika' written on Europeans, in 1913, reflects this early Wunthanu awareness of the problems created by

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\(^37\) Aung San Suu Kyi, n.6, p.149.

\(^38\) E. Sarkisyanz, n.1, p.130.
colonization and the desire to protect traditional Burmese values. One of its best parts, brilliantly captures the agrarian changes in colonial Burma; of a couple falling into debt and being forced to sell their beloved pair of oxen as well as a plot of land due to the onslaught of irresistible new economic forces.39 Interestingly, the same situation also found expression in Munshi Premchand's masterpiece work 'Godan', in which a farmer 'Hori' too was forced to sell his cow and land, to the new class of moneylenders produced by the colonial economy.40

Thakin Kudaw Hmaing's popularization of Burma's past and its plight under colonization was a prominent contribution to the movement for National School that followed the student strike in the University of Rangoon against the new University act of 1920. At that time Hmaing was a professor of Burmese history and literature in the Shwgyitaik monastery of Rangoon.41

39 Aung San Suu Kyi, n.6, p.149.
41 E. Sarkisyanz, n.1, p.130.
His political 'Tikas' published in 1920s, reflected his keen interest in nationalist activities. In it he evinces joy over such events as the journey of the YMBA delegation to London; when the all Burma conference protesting against the Craddock Scheme and the new University Act. Also, he exults over the patriotic spirit behind the Hsaya San rebellion. His writings express anger and indignation over the arrest of nationalist leaders like U Ottama and the quarrels among the members of the GCBA which led to the dissolution of the association. In his later writings like 'Thakin Tika' of 1935 reflects his disillusionment with the older generation of politicians and he later on decided to go with the young nationalists of the Dohbama Asianyone, and mentioned many of them by name in his verse.\(^4^2\)

One of the important contributions of Hmaing to the nationalist struggle of Burma was the giving of an ideological foundation to the Gandhian boycott methods, embedding them in canonical vinaya code of Buddhist monastic regulation that monks were not to accept anything from evil people.\(^4^3\)

\(^4^2\) Aung San Suu Kyi, n.6, p.150.

\(^4^3\) E. Sarkisyanz, n.1, p.133.
Hmaing’s writings, reflect the extraordinary dynamic spirit of nationalist resurgence which can change with the requirement of the times, for the manumission of Burma from foreign yoke. It was a paradoxical quality of Hmaing’s genius that while he confined himself almost entirely to the traditional Burmese world of letters, he was able to guide and sympathize with the new ideas that younger nationalists acquired from their exposure to western thought and education. Hmaing was closer to Rabindranath Tagore of India in being primarily a man of thought but nearer to Gandhi in his political nationalism. Much of Hmaing’s writings were on contemporary events, matters both great and small which had any bearing on nationalist developments in Burma.44

Besides Hmaing, others who played an important role in raising patriotic fervour in Burma through their writings are Thippan Maung Wa, Zwagy, Min Thu Wun, Maha Hswe, Aung San, Soe, Nu, Than Tun and Thein Pe Myint and others.

Thippan Maung Wa, Zwagy and Min Thu Wun were famous for their short stories and poems which are compiled mostly in Khitsan

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44 Aung San Suu Kyi, n.6, p.117.
stories and Khitsan poems in the early 1930’s. They combined knowledge of and respect for the past with a modern spirit of innovation and they could be better described as writers of the renaissance tradition in the Burmese literary history. Their writings were popular among Burmese people and they carried the country with them in the spirit of renaissance.45

The spirit of the Burmese struggle against the imperialistic rule was pursued by Maha Hswe through his impeccable writing skills. In his novel ‘Thabon-gyi’ and ‘Sithtwet thu’, patriots of Burmese freedom movement are exhorted to sacrifice their loved ones as well as their own lives in the cause of freedom, reflecting the spirit of the 1930’s which saw revolution and militant action as the most effective means of achieving independence against colonial rule.46

Aung San, Soe, Nu, Than Tun and Thein Pe Myint were prolific writers and versatile organisers of masses against unjust colonial rule. All of them became politicians in the course of Burmese struggle for independence against colonial rule, imbibed earlier with leftist

46 Ibid., p.155.
ideologies. Soe used Buddhist terminology to interpret Communist work, Nu tried to show that communism and Buddhism were, in fact, not incompatible, Aung San, Than Tun and Thein Hpe Myint too searched for ideas to fit the needs of Burmese nationalism. Leaving aside the question of how far they succeeded in their endeavours, they showed a practical recognition of the Burmese need to translate foreign concepts into their language, literally and metaphorically. All of them believed in forging strong links between thought and action particularly Aung San in his endeavour to fight against Burmese colonialism.47

Aung San's synergy with the thought and action was to a great extent influenced by the Gandhian philosophy and while writing on education he gladly accepts this fact by saying that, "we are fully prepared to follow men who are able and willing to be leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, C.R. Das, Motilal Nehru and Tilak of India.... Let anybody appear who can be such a leader, who dares to be like such a leader. We are waiting."48 And history of Burma's independence was a witness to the fact that Aung San had not to wait too long for

47 Ibid., p.131.
48 Ibid., p.128.
the appearance of Gandhiji on the Burmese political scene in their fight against British colonialism, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Thein Pe Myint was a well known leftist writer and without analysing his work in detail the discussion of modern Burmese literature would be incomplete. He was also known as 'Tet-hpongyi' after the publication of novel by this name. In one of his writings named 'Khin Myo Chit', a Burmese Muslim girl is unable to give up her religion to marry the young Buddhist she loves and nor could she ask the young man to convert to her religion, as this would have had an adverse effect on his nationalist activities. In an act of supreme sacrifice, the couple decided to part and the girl dies of a broken heart, leaving a letter urging the young man to carry on with the struggle for Burma's independence. Although the story of 'Khin Myo Chit' has a tragic end of love affairs but in the message it makes an imprint on the Burmese mind to rise above even love for the cause of Burmese independence.

Ibid., pp.156-157..
As said earlier that, the strong link between literature and nationalism can be seen not only in Burma but also in the Indian struggle for independence against British imperialism. And the study of literary movement under colonial rule reveals a strong link between nationalism and intellectual developments in Burma and India. That’s why frequently one finds the theme of the story of Hmaing’s reflecting the same pain and suppression like the stories of Premchand as well as the ideological foundation of Gandhian philosophy and Tagore’s thinking in many places in their writings.

The Indian literary movement against British colonialism when compared to Burmese literary movement started earlier than the later mainly because reasons was of an early colonisation of India under British imperialistic rule than of Burma.

Among the early writers of Indian nationalist movement, Bankim Chandra, based the story of his novel ‘Anandmath’ on the Sanyasi Rebellion in Bengal in 1708. The ascetics who led this rebellion felt that service to their motherland was service to the God. In his novel ‘Bhavananda’ the leader explained to Mahendra, the aim and purpose of the Sanyasis in glowing language:
"Mother, I bow to thee!
Rich with thy hurrying streams,
Bright with thy orchard gleams,
Cool with thy winds of delight,
Dark fields waving mother of might,
Mother free."

And this song convinced Mehendra that the 'Mother' is the country, we own no other mother said Bhavananda and he continued that the land of birth is the supreme mother of all. So giving the idea that birth place or motherland was supreme goddess was the theme of Bankim Chandra's writings. He tried to raise the patriotic feelings among his fellow countrymen for their motherland.

Apart from Bankim Chandra, Bhartendu Harishchandra also played a significant role in depicting the pathetic conditions of fellow countrymen under colonial rule. His prose and poetry are full of nationalist and revolutionary undertones and overtones. Here, one of his essays, 'Agrejon se Hindutaniyon ka Mann Kyon Nahin Milta' (Why does not the Indian Mind tally with the Britishers) is worth mentioning). It exposes the British rule and its misdeeds in a satirical and humourous way. His satire was both literary and having political

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connotation. In one of his political satire 'Rudra Ki Tika', which was published in 1874 in 'Harishchandra - Chandrika' Bhartendu's fearless thoughts about the misrule of the British Government were clearly brought out.\(^5\)

Another contemporary of Burmese literary movement in India, was Premchand who too occupies an important position. Like Hmaing, his early writings were also influenced by the Gandhian philosophy. During non-cooperation movement in India, he resigned his post in a Gorakhpur government school in February 1921 to work for the nationalist journal 'Aj' and for the 'Kashi Vidyapith'. His 'Premasharam' (1921) depicts a landlord with Gandhian leanings, while 'Rangbhumi' (1925) has as its hero a blind beggar, Surdas, who fights a prolonged, non-violent struggle to prevent the pastures of his village being taken over for an Anglo-Indian cigarette factory.\(^6\)

So, the literature which was earlier confined to the individual or personal interest started finding its expression to cover each and

\(^5\) Ibid., pp.946-49.

every detail of the society. And the inception of suppressive and exploitative British colonial rule in India and Burma couldn’t remain unnoticed to the great literary genre of their times like Hmaing, Premchand or Thein Pe Myint, who exposed the gory details of unjust British rule to their fellow countrymen. Particularly it became more apparent during the organised mass struggle in Burma and in India with the emergence of Gandhi on political scene and establishment of YMBA in Burma, which will be analysed in detail in the next chapter, “Myanmar’s Nationalist Movement between 1906-1939, and Influence of Gandhian Techniques".