

# A trip into Myanmar



People in Myanmar are treated as slaves. They are even asked to provide labour for government projects free of cost. They are also not allowed to leave Myanmar. In fact, for the Myanmarese, it is not easy to travel even within the country. Even as Aung San Suu Kyi has tried several times to exercise the power that the people of her country have given to her, she has not emerged victorious on any single occasion. But Myanmar's military dictators cannot win, and in the long run the woman who incarnates the South-East Asian country's long struggle for democracy cannot lose. Not even if they kill her - and it is significant that they do not dare, though they would love to, says Jayant Bhandari, who was in Myanmar recently.

**M**y trip to Myanmar, as always, was to learn how people live, the ups and downs of their lives the extremes they face and accept, the extend to which they can be kept under control, dictated and be fooled. This is what I had heard Myanmar had a lot of; one of the world's poorest and most isolated countries. Against my expectations, there was no harassment at the airport: Simple questions at the customs and immigration, no unnecessary checking. The road to my hotel gave me a feeling of being in a developed country. Nice solid roads, extremely well managed traffic, huge university, nice gardens and people walking around with a relaxed pace. There was not much stress to be seen. People seemed happy and helpful. Women unlike many other countries looked free and equal to men. The hotel, Queen's Park, was quick and efficient with helpful staff. The room was nice and clean. This was the second week of January 2000. Still the heat and humidity was uncomfortable in the afternoon. Very quickly I saw all my keenness to see a dictatorial government going up in fire. I stayed in Yangon for two nights. The plan was to go out to see other areas in Myanmar and then see Yangon for a few more days while I waited for my return to India. Both Myanmarese men and women wear Indian style lungis. Living under a military regime and in a very conservative society women usually were blous-

es which are closed right up to the neck. Most of the time both men and women dress in a simple way. It is not easy to find the locals wearing trousers. Every few minutes men and women re-adjust their lungis as they start loosening up. The adjustment is done so well that no way in my entire journey could my voyeuristic interests be satisfied. The footwear is a pair of slippers. It was a romance to be in a country so untouched by modern clothes and life-style. In fact there is not much of the technology - telephones, faxes, computers, internet - to be seen. My seclusion was a meditation; and I fell for the peace that life of simplicity gives! A lot of films that Myanmarese watch are Indian. They find it easy to relate to their mushiness. They have their own version of street-side hawkers selling exotic looking goods: "Imported" watches, condoms etc. I went to the Indian high commission the day after my arrival to register myself and was relieved to find friendly staff. This given that I can never forget the obnoxious treatment I got at the one in London a few years back! There had to be something very Myanmarese about it. During my whole trip I never saw a visitor from India. And I was to get a lot of attention from the people of Indian origin who live there. The Indians speak accented Hindi as they are neither educated in it, nor can they talk with very many people. The much ridiculed Hindi cinema is their source of keeping the language alive. I was to discover that many Hindi-film

fans among the local Myanmarese and Chinese could understand some Hindi. Marriages between Indians, Burmese and Chinese is not uncommon. Also, I met a lot of people where a Hindu had married a Muslim. Most of Indians I met were either descendants of the retirees of the Indian-British army or the poor Muslim immigrants of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The kind of distance that exists between races and religions in the outside world seems much less here. On the bus to my next destination, Taungoo, I sat next to a military officer. I decided to open my guide book at a page where Aung San Suu Kyi's (leader of the biggest Democratic Party) picture was prominent. I wanted to see his reaction. Nothing happened. My vision of a simple utopia now existed in reality! At the same time I was getting frustrated for having not seen a single beggar in a country which is supposed to be one of the poorest. People seemed to go around their lives peacefully, they even managed pleasantries with the military and police personnel! I saw no dirty chimneys. So easy was to conclude how clean the country was when there was actually not much of

industry. And yes this was to prove true for most things in Myanmar. I was in for a shock! Not very long into my holidays, I had tears in my eyes for what actually happened behind the surface. How easy it is to miss what is happening behind the surface! I recall how huge the university was and so difficult to know that it had been closed for several years. Yes, a proper University education is non-existent. I was slowly starting to understand that lack of modernity was such a luxury for me because I was a tourist with a lot of money compared with hush about USD 80 per capita GDP. When the Myanmarese talk to a foreigner they keep looking around to make sure no one else is listening. "I had nothing to worry about - I was a foreigner before who government keeps a helpful image." Among the trusted radio stations for reliable information are VOA and BBC. All India Radio's Myanmar station cannot be heard clearly. The government run TV channels are repetitive. In a typical programme one of the government people plants trees or inaugurates a road or bridge while people watch it with folded hands and utmost admiration; or several men and women wearing dresses of different regions dance on patriotic songs. Myanmarese understand little English and therefore CNN and BBC TV isn't of much use to them. For the people who understand Hindi, Zee and Sony TV channels provide an access to information outside Myanmar. I heard a recent-story of government high-handed-



ness in Pyin-U-Lwin. A restaurant owner was asked to organise help to let the local government set up a propaganda hoarding. He was given four hours. He failed and found himself in jail for four months. When he returned all his businesses were asked to be closed. I could see no institutions in Myanmar; and certainly judiciary was conspicuous by its absence. The trials are summary and done by the military. Another story is of a person of Indian origin, whose mother died several years back in India. He was not allowed to leave Myanmar. It is almost impossible to get a passport. In fact, for the Myanmarese, it is not easy to travel even within the country. They need an internal identity card. One needs to pay as much as two years of his or her salary as bribe to get such a card. People told me that if a big-boss is visiting from Yangon it is not uncommon to ask houses to be demolished to make a path for the convenience to the 'godly' visitors. It's house owners job to demolish the house! No compensation is paid. Where these people go later is no one's business. Then there is slave labour. People are asked to provide labour for government projects free of cost. Most of these people work on roads or the at the residences of the officers. There is no sexism here - men and women are mis-treated equally. I was now struggling to find out why the hell do they let foreigners in. I could not get a very clear answer to this but here are some possible reasons. Most visitors are packaged tourists. They are provided guides who are a part of the secret police. When it is so easy for even the independent travellers to get fooled by the exterior, packaged travellers can go back with some great opinions about Myanmar. Above all you are kept confined to a sanitised circuit - god knows what more happens elsewhere!!! Another reason is that International tourists help justify the huge foreign currency earned by narcotics. Unfortunately, Myanmar government's friendship and a long common border with China makes it difficult for any effective embargo to be put by the International community. I was also to hear stories that one of the important reasons why China supports Myanmar's dictatorial government is to get access to the Indian ocean and hence to the long-term foe India. Apparently, in the past Myanmar frigate carrying Chinese navy personnel has been apprehended inside the Indian waters. There is almost (excluding smugglers etc.) a unanimous feeling that the military government is pathetic; and so pathetic that no amount of government propaganda will make people believe otherwise! Sorry, dictators, that's what you are and so clearly that no one has another opinion. Your propaganda is wasteful. But, what can one expect from those who print fifteen, forty-five and ninety denomination currencies. Try concentrating on filling up your Swiss accounts!