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# SPMRF OCCASIONAL PAPER

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## Realising the hope of the “Asian Century”, a tribute to Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee



**T**he commemorative event happened in the first week of February 2019. But on return, since we were all sucked into the vortex of the battle for India 2019, I had thought of keeping the narration and reflection pending until the dust had settled. Prime Minister Modi's victory, as I have often argued, confirms that India's civilisational march on the world stage shall continue unabated. In the rise of India as a civilisational state, a state conscious of her civilisational dimension and responsibilities as envisaged by Modi, the soft power aspect, therefore, plays a crucial role.

Since 2014, with PM Modi himself imparting it a new and reassessed role, India's soft outreach, the retracing of her civilisational footprints, her articulation of civilisational and cultural cooperation has gained new momentum and credence. The articulation and delineation of

the term “Indo-Pacific” by Modi at the Shangri-La Dialogue, for example, does not merely contain a strategic and economic layer but its civilisational layer emerges as equally crucial and relevant. The commemorative event that took place in the first week of February 2019 in Yangon was in line with that vision. It symbolised, besides commemorating Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee’s civilisational vision for India, the present urge to create a new narrative based on the cultural and civilisational foundations of the past. India’s outreach has always had a distinct flavour—it was non-intrusive, non-violent, unimposing, assimilative and therefore accepted by those who were contacted. Dr Mookerjee’s own words come to mind. While speaking at the Asiatic Society he had eloquently observed about this phenomenon: “when Indian nationals visited foreign lands, they carried with them not arms, not ammunitions, but messages of peace and goodwill. Cultural intercourse between India, on the one hand, and China, Indo-China, Malaysia, and the South Sea Islands on the other is now a matter of history. People of India were equally catholic in their assimilation of other cultures.”

The 118th birth anniversary of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee on July 6, gives me an occasion to narrate the event as it happened. A historic event that quietly took place on one balmy February morning this year in the hallowed precincts of the sacred and symbolic Kaba Aye Pagoda in Yangon. In Myanmar, the event was widely reported and closely followed and touched depths of people whose lives revolve around the sacred aura of Buddha, and whose worship and faith in Sakyamuni is unfailing, unconditional and all-pervading. In India, the event largely went unnoticed. The correspondent of one national daily which had shown some interest backed out arguing that the event did not elicit wide interest. Affiliated to a certain political party, it was understandable that the daily would be reluctant to give space to Dr. Mookerjee and Narendra Modi. I write the account in

the first person eschewing for once the habit of keeping myself in the background.

I have been visiting Myanmar regularly since 2014. Each visit was aimed at trying to further our civilisational objective of greater partnership through fresh strategies. To say that India and Myanmar share a deep bond—religious and cultural—will be to understate the relationship. Myanmar continues to be the active link and bridge between India and the wider ASEAN world, the golden gateway, as it were, for India's outreach into the most dynamic region of the world. My studies on Dr Mookerjee's contribution as president of the Mahabodhi Society of India towards relaying India's cultural and civilisational relationship with the Buddhist world post-independence led me to discover the crucial role he had played in cementing bonds between a newly independent India and a newly independent Myanmar. I had read and learnt that besides touring Southeast Asia—mainly Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam where he addressed large gatherings—with the sacred Relics of Buddha's two chief disciples Mahamoggallana and Sariputta, Dr Mookerjee had intervened at the request of Myanmar's





first Prime Minister, the legendary leader and thinker U Nu, and had ensured that a portion of the sacred Relics were given out as “permanent loan” to the people of Myanmar on behalf of the government of India. In Cambodia, it is said that over half a million people had gathered to listen to Dr. Mookerjee speak on Buddha, India and the future of the world. U Nu was deeply moved, and he took the initiative of enshrining the Relics in the newly constructed Kaba Aye Pagoda. He saw it as a symbol of peace, unity, and reconciliation for his newly freed country. In recognition of his stellar role in facilitating this epochal occasion, Dr. Mookerjee was specially invited to attend the enshrinement ceremony in March 1952. In a sense, it was his last visit abroad. Each time I visited Myanmar, I made it a point to pay homage to the Kaba Aye Pagoda. Every time I went, I was led with great warmth into the sacred Relics chamber. Circumambulating the precincts, I almost always thought of Dr. Mookerjee and hoped that one day we could perhaps commemorate, through a permanent commemorative insignia or plaque, this crucial civilisational contribution that he had made. In terms of symbolism, Dr Mookerjee’s act was profound. Therefore, it had to be commemorated for posterity so that future generations in



both countries come to know about how an Indian leader—one who combined in himself the role of a leading politician and founder of a new political party while being the most active presidents of the Mahabodhi Society—had facilitated one of the most civilisational and strategically crucial act; an act which had also left a deep and lasting imprint on the psyche of both countries and the Buddhist world at large. I began writing and speaking about it at various fora in India and Myanmar. It elicited great interest and appreciation among people, strategic thinkers and scholars in general. We often discussed this among ourselves. The selfless volunteers and workers of the Sanatan Dharma Swayamsevak Sangh (SDSS), led by a self-effacing pracharak, Dr. Ram Niwas—an accomplished academic and worker who dedicated himself to spreading India’s civilisational message across Southeast Asia—and our other friends who continuously put in their best efforts to keep the well of India’s goodwill and goodwill for India in the region replenished, came forward with a plan. We decided to write to the Ministry for Religious and Cultural Affairs of the government of Myanmar, proposing the grant of permission for installing a marble plaque somewhere within the precincts of the Kaba Aye Pagoda, commemorating Dr. Mookerjee and his contribution. The SDSS took it upon itself to facilitate and mediate. It has a huge reservoir of goodwill in Myanmar and amongst all sections of society there. I wrote to the Minister making a detailed case, appending photographs, copies of letters and chapters from my book which describe the episode in some detail. A long period of silence followed my letter. We assumed that perhaps this was too minor a detail for Naypyitaw, perhaps it was not relevant at the moment, or perhaps that the emotional connect had become diluted. Yet, all through this period of what seemed to be a vacuous wait, Dr Ram Niwas kept at it, advising me to have patience and to keep willing. I received his call one morning towards the end of November

when winter was gradually setting in Delhi. “Naypyitaw”, he told me “had agreed to the proposal and they had also agreed to the draft of the text that we had proposed to engrave on the plaque, with minor alterations and were happy to facilitate the event. The minister himself spoke and expressed his happiness and wished to be present on the occasion”. Events followed in quick succession. The venerable Trustees of the Kaba Aye Pagoda passed a resolution and designated a prominent spot where the plaque could be installed. The Indian community, inspired by the SDSS, took it upon themselves to get the plaque prepared. “It will be our honour to get it ready”, Dr. Venkatesh AR—one of the leading lights of the community—insisted. The plaque was finally ready by the end of December and transported from Mandalay—another sacred city for us because of its association with Lokmanya Tilak and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose—and February 9 was designated as the day of the unveiling. Invitations were sent out on behalf of the SDSS for the “unveiling of a special commemorative plaque in memory of Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee—Indian Patriot, Statesman, former Union Minister and President of Mahabodhi Society of India”. The Government of Myanmar was represented by the Deputy Minister of Religious and Cultural Affairs who was specially deputed for the event. The members of the Indian community were present in full strength, and other community leaders were also present. Imposing gateways were erected at the venue and the national media was present in a big way too. The proceedings began with speeches. Two large drums which were part of the Relics enshrinement procession in 1952, were prominently displayed and each speaker, the Deputy Minister, the Indian Ambassador, the senior Trustee of the Pagoda and Dr. Ram Niwas as convener of the SDSS, spoke of the occasion’s symbolism. I referred to Dr. Mookerjee’s contribution in cementing bonds between the two countries and also spoke of PM Modi’s vision of a civilisational





partnership between our countries and region. The audience repeatedly chanted “Sadhu, Sadhu, Sadhu” expressing their appreciation. In a procession, we then headed towards the plaque and together unveiled it to the sound of cymbals, incantations and the chants of ‘Sadhu, Sadhu.’ Sacred water was sprinkled and the flower-bedecked marble plaque was finally consecrated with the following inscription in Myanmarese and English engraved on it: “Gautama Buddha gave to the world his message of love, peace, and understanding 2,500 years ago in a simple manner which carried faith and conviction not only to the learned but, what is more, which carried hope and inspiration to the masses. They gave solace and strength to millions throughout the world. It needed no sword; no arms helped the spread of the doctrine to countries far and near.” - Syama Prasad Mookerjee This plaque stands in the memory of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee (1901-1953)–Indian Statesman, Educationist, visionary Patriot, one of the founding fathers of the Indian Republic, federal Minister of industry and supplies in independent India’s first ministry (1947-1950), President of the



Maha Bodhi Society of India (1947-1953), Member of India's first Parliament (1951-1953), and founder of Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) (1951). Dr Mookerjee played a historic role in forging and reinforcing a deeper civilisational friendship between India and Myanmar in present times. As president of the Maha Bodhi Society of India, Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee was instrumental in ensuring that India gifted a portion of the sacred Relics of Buddha's chief disciples—Arahants Mahamogallana and Sariputta—to the people of Myanmar for permanent enshrinement. He deftly negotiated and led the entire effort and saw to it that the government of India offered a portion of the sacred relics to the people of Myanmar in a fraternal act, which, in the words of then Prime Minister U Nu, "further cement the already very close and unique relationship between our two sister countries." On March 5, 1952, when the sacred Relics were finally enshrined at the iconic Kaba Aye Pagoda, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee was specially invited. He had flown down from Kolkata to attend the enshrinement ceremony in this very precinct. We were then led to the Relics chamber and granted a special darshan of the sacred Relics. The crystal caskets were brought out and the silver tray

bearing the sacred Relics of Buddha and his two chief disciples—as these must have been brought and seen by Dr. Mookerjee—was placed on our heads as a special gesture and blessing. It was a divine moment, which saw the fulfilment of a fervent wish and resolve that I had repeatedly made in these very precincts. In a sense, a portion of Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee was finally and permanently installed in the Kaba Aye Pagoda, an institution that he had frequented nearly seven decades ago. The installation also symbolised the permanency, the rootedness and the indissolubility of relations of our two countries and also of India's benign presence and contribution to this region and beyond in a spirit of true partnership and mutuality. The Deputy Minister dedicated the entire day and evening for the event. “When I was participating in this event”, he told us candidly, “I was transported to Bodhgaya, I could almost feel the breeze under the Bodhi Tree, it was an occasion that radiated Buddha's blessings.” The Myanmar media and papers were full of the news of the event, it was celebrated, lauded and appreciated as a landmark gesture that reinforced our shared past and destiny. The peoples' support, the proactive interventions by the SDSS, the facilitation and willing support by the Myanmar government and Trustees of the Kaba Aye Pagoda demonstrated that conviction. As our flight took off from Yangon, I looked out at the Pagoda studded greenery below, pondering on how we had taken one small step towards realising what Prime Minister Modi often says of making the 21st century the “Asian Century.” In the early years after Independence, Syama Prasad Mookerjee, too, in his own way had perhaps been impelled by such a vision; it was that which must have driven him to undertake this sacred peregrination across Southeast Asia with the message of Buddha upheld by India's civilisational wisdom. In a sense, he had scattered seeds and it was now time to water these with new thought and energy for realising the hope of the Asian Century.



