

# **MYANMAR'S ETHNIC POLICY, 1990-2010**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the award of the Degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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**DECLARATION**

I declare that the dissertation entitled “MYANMAR’S ETHNIC POLICY, 1990-2010” submitted by me for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. The dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other university.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

*I am extremely grateful to a large number of people and institutions who have helped me in a number of ways without which this dissertation could not have come to fruition. First and foremost, I am extremely thankful to my supervisor Prof. Ganganath Jha for his guidance and support ever since I joined JNU. Without his constant guidance and encouragement this dissertation would not have been possible. My heartfelt gratitude to my guide as he was always available for my questions and gave his generous time and vast knowledge.*

*I am indebted to the library staff of Jawaharlal Nehru University, USI and IDSA for making the materials readily available. Further I am beholden to chairman of the Centre Prof. G.V.C Naidu and all the teaching faculty members of the centre for facilitating my research.*

*I am also profoundly indebted to friends and dear ones who supported me immensely in different ways while writing this dissertation, Chin, Sony, Rosy, Eva, Kaar, Megha, Bimol, Gunamani, Bibi, and JNUPC (CH) members. Many more require special mention for all the help and assistance and I am thankful to all of them even though I do not mention their names here.*

*Finally, I would like to give special thanks to my family, who always were there to encourage me and had confidence in me. I am also deeply indebted to my parents for their prayers, affection and immense support.*

*Above all, I am deeply obliged to the God Almighty for blessing me with an opportunity to study in JNU, which is known for educational and academic excellence. Affiliation with it itself is an honor for me. I also thank God for enabling me to finish this dissertation.*

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## PREFACE

Ethnicity as a concept has come into regular usage rather recently. Every nations of the world is facing the problem of ethnicity in one form or the other. Since 1960's scholars have come to appreciate the centrality of ethnic cleavages in the operation of states and has now become a central issue in the social and political life of every continent. A.D Smith and J Hutchinson said "the end of history, it seems, turns out to have ushered in the era of ethnicity". Therefore a careful attention is needed to understand this new emerging issue. So ethnicity deals with ethnic groups interactions with other groups in the realm of political, economic and social spheres.

Myanmar is a diverse country ethnically and ever since gaining independence from the British in 1948 it has witnessed an intricate conflict between the various successive government and the ethnic groups fighting for separate states or autonomous states within the union of Myanmar. Surprisingly there are 135 ethnic groups exist in such a small country, having an area of 676,578 square kilometers. So it is quite easy to predict that ethnic complexities are also bound to happen. Till today the ethnic factor remained potentially the single most sensitive and explosive element in contemporary Myanmar.

Moreover, in Myanmar the actual and potential sources of national power, the military and the NLD are the Burman based. In such a situation it is quite obvious that the other ethnic groups are not represented well in the stake of government. Much of the writings which exist on ethnicity concern itself with the problem of minorities within nation-state and its quite right that this should be so. Taking all these facts the aim of the research is to discuss and analyse the policy of the successive government towards the diverse ethnic group and the impact and resonance of such policies for the development of the country.

In this dissertation 'Burma' which is renamed as Myanmar by the SLORC in 1989 is used interchangeably with Myanmar for convenience sake. In 1989 the Junta had changed the name from Burma to Myanmar, which many still did not accept and still prefer to use Burma. And also ethnic Burman group will feature as majority while the various ethnic races will be taken as a minority group. The period from 1990 to 2010 is taken for my research because this period witnessed the shift in the intensification of overarching

policy of the government in dealing with ethnic minority issues despite 1990 election results in which the opposition (NLD) came to power but the military junta refused to hand down power to them. The NLD as a political party stood for restoration of democracy which endorsed unity in diversity. Once again the junta's suppression of the opposition groups and the ethnic dissident groups clearly could be seen in the 2010 election in which Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), the military support party came to power illegitimately. So the ethnic groups find it difficult to survive in their own land. In short, the entire research would revolve round- the junta (SPDC/SLORC) policy of assimilation and to the extent marginalisation; the Myanmar's opposition i.e. the NLD policy of Multiculturalism; the aspirations of Myanmar's ethnic nationalities i.e., the policy of ethnic consciousness.

This dissertation has been studied in six chapters.

The first chapter titled 'Introduction' focused on explaining the concepts of the various terms related to ethnicity and its variants like- race, ethnic groups, ethnicity, multi-ethnicity or ethnic diversity and theoretical understanding of ethnicity. It also discussed at length divergent approaches to ethnicity like- Primordialist approach, Instrumentalist approach, Assimilationist approach, and Pluralist or Multiculturalist model approach. It also dealt with the theorisation of ethnicity in the context of Myanmar.

The second chapter titled 'Myanmar's ethnic diversity' deals with a brief explanation of Panglong agreement, which embraced 'unity in diversity' under Aung San's leadership and the present need for another Panglong conference which was talked about in Kale Declaration. In understanding the ethnic problems these two declarations is a must and cannot be ignored. It also gives an overview of the diverse ethnic groups in Myanmar.

The third chapter titled 'Ethnic Policy under SLORC' highlighted the 1990 election in Myanmar and examines the assimilationist policy of the state especially of Gen. Saw Maung and Khin Nyunt. It also delves into the logic behind the Junta's policy of ceasefire agreements with the ethnic groups and the consequences thereof.



The fourth chapter titled 'Ethnic Policy under SPDC' examined the Myanmar's policy towards various ethnic nationalities during the reign of General Than Shwe in the country and analyses how Karens and other nationalities were suppressed. It also traced the policy of the state resulting to marginalisation and de-recognition of some ethnic groups like the Rohingyas (Muslims) and other small nationalities etc.

The fifth chapter titled 'Democracy (NLD) and Ethnic Groups' reviewed and analysed the prospect for democracy taking into consideration the multi-ethnic diversity and the reconciliation for it. Moreover, it also analyses the mighty myth guiding the patrimonial authority of the military for building unity in diversity. This chapter dealt with an analysis of countering assimilationist policy of military leadership by pluralism or multi-cultural goal of the NLD.

The last chapter has 'conclusion' which testifies the relevance of various ethnicity theories discussed based on the basis of the above observations.

## ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
BADP	Border Areas Development Programme
BGF	Border Guard Forces
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CNF	Chin National Front
DAB	Democratic Alliance of Burma
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation
KNU	Karen National Union
MNDF	Mon National Democratic Front
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUP	National Unity Party
NCGUB	National Coalition Government Union of Burma
NMSP	New Mon State Party
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
SNLD	Shan Nationalities League for Democracy
UN	United Nations
UNLD	United Nationalities League for Democracy
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association

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# CHAPTER-1

## INTRODUCTION

*“Now when we build our new Burma, shall we build it as a Union or as a unitary state? In my opinion, it will not be feasible to set up a Unitary State. We must set up a Union with properly regulated provisions to safeguard the rights of the National Minorities. But we must take care that united we stand and not united we fall”-Aung San, 1947 (Steinberg 2001: 181).*

### 1.1 BRIEF BACKGROUND

Renamed Myanmar in 1989, Burma is an ethnically diverse nation with 135 distinct ethnic groups officially recognised by the Burmese government. These are grouped into eight major national ethnic groups- kachin, kayah, kayin, Chin, Mon, Bamar, Rakhine and Shan. The Bamar are the largest ethnic group. Burma has a population of 48 million, and two- third belong to the majority Bamar and the rest comprised of the other ethnic groups with 100 indigenous languages. “The major national ethnic groups are grouped primarily according to region rather than linguistic or ethnic affiliation, as for example the Shan Major National Ethnic Race includes 33 ethnic groups speaking languages in at least four widely differing languages. Moreover many unrecognised or derecognised ethnic groups also exist, like the Rohingyas (muslims), Burmese and Chinese and Panthay, Burmese Indian, Anglo-Burmese, Gurkha, etc”<sup>1</sup>

No country in Southeast Asia is essentially homogeneous in ethnicity or religion and Burma is not an exception too. The creation of such nations, the search for unity and cohesion and a sense of power justly shared, has been the task, never easily fulfilled of the newly independent countries of the region. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Burma. David I Steinberg has rightly pointed out that: “each government of the Union of Burma has attempted to create this sense of nationhood- a sharing of national values and

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<sup>1</sup>. Wikipedia, Ethnic groups in Burma.  
URL:[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_ethnic\\_groups\\_in\\_Burma](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ethnic_groups_in_Burma)).

will amongst its entire diverse people. Yet, each effort has to a major degree been unsuccessful. Although, 'a union of Burma' as a state was titularly created, a union of people as a nation was not" (Steinberg 2001: 182).

The issue of ethnicity has always been the most problematic one facing any Burmese regime, and far more significant than any issues of economic policy or even representative government. It is the single most enduring question facing any Burmese government, and yet it is treated with less attention and sensitivity than it deserves. Aung San, the founder of Modern Burma acknowledged the sensitivity and threat of ethnic diversity to the newly formed Burmese state and this has been reflected in the 1948 constitution. The Panglong Conference held on the soil of Shan state in February 1947 was an important landmark in the history of Burma, as the Union of Burma comprising of all ethnic groups finally forged. This was possible due to the charismatic leadership of Aung San. Under the constitution of 1948, "the Shan state and the Kayah state were theoretically able to secede from the union after a ten-year trial period and a referendum" (Steinberg 2001: 184). Therefore, when their demands for autonomy were ignored the ethnic minorities taking this as the base reinforced their insurgent groups to secede from the union. Subsequently, 1974 constitution derecognised the former constitution which in essence means neglect to ethnic issues and continued even under the SPDC rule. The insurgency became a serious challenge for the government especially the military junta. As such, autonomy was to be given to the ethnic states but the administration closely geared to the Burman central system. In short, Burmanisation in all aspect of life started to the much detest of the diverse ethnic minority groups.

Ethnic politics since 1989 have been handled crudely. During this period, the military Junta once again changed its name to SLORC in order to give a more civilian identity than as a mere authoritarianism. As soon as the SLORC took over power, issued decree and changed the name of the country from Burma to Myanmar. Considering the atrocities meted to the populace 1989 has been chosen by many scholars in analysing ethnic relations in this country. Since 1990 election the "Burma's leading military generals focused on four objectives-

- 1) They sought to expand the size of the armed forces in order to be in a stronger position against their armed and unarmed opponent.
- 2) The ruling generals worked to break up the organizational structure of pro-democracy movement, and particularly the NLD by keeping Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest and top party strategists in prison.
- 3) The regime attempted to neutralize the ethnic armed resistance movements by making ceasefire agreements with many of the armed groups.
- 4) The SLORC tried to improve the economy by opening up the country to trade and foreign investment”<sup>2</sup>.

In November 1997, the SLORC renamed itself as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). Christina Fink said that the switch was meant to project a softer image, because the regime had been ridiculed for years for calling itself by such a monstrous-sounding name. The SLORC/SPDC has insisted on using the term “race” for the diverse ethnic groups within the country. Ironically, they count the number of such races to 135, which is a figure from the colonial era and were based on a survey of linguistic diversity, including a variety of dialects, and certainly not race in any internationally acceptable use of that term.

The military regime was scoring victory in its long standing battles with the armed ethnic groups. The ceasefire deals resulted in the weakening of the strength of the armed ethnic organizations and greater tatmadaw access into ethnic nationality areas. Whereas in the 1970’s and 1980’s the tatmadaw was facing numerous armed opponents along its northern and eastern borders, but by 2000, only pockets of resistance remained. This is due to the ceasefire agreement signed between the Junta and the ethnic insurgent groups. The announcement of a Seven Point Road Map to political reform in 2003 by General Khin Nyunt was neglected by all section of the society and the military were not ready to discuss the political rights of the ethnic minorities.

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<sup>2</sup> Oxford Burma Alliance, “1990-2010: Military Rule”, URL: [www.oxfordburmaalliance.org/1990-2010-military-rule-continues.html](http://www.oxfordburmaalliance.org/1990-2010-military-rule-continues.html)

The 2008 constitution once again changed divisions into regions. Therefore the seven Bamar divisions were changed into seven regions down and seven ethnic states created, and all of which are given equal status only in paper. “Echoing one nation strategies found in China and other parts of Asia, the military elite has sought to rally the people around a single Myanmar language, religion and identity held in harmony by all major ethnic groups. But this initiative has met with limited success. However, the military junta has also concluded the series of ceasefire agreements that has returned many ethnic groups to the sphere of legality” (Ian Holliday 2010: 199). This shows that “The SPDC hold firms to the formula established by Ne Win in 1974 and 1982, which asserts that the country has eight ethnic races and 135 ethnic groups within them” (Ian Holliday 2010: 199). According to the official record of the Government of Myanmar in 2010, the following are the lists of the national races, along with the subsidiary ethnic groups in brackets: “Bamar (9); Chin (53); Kachin (12); Kayah (9); Kayin (11); Mon (1); Rakhine (7); and Shan (33)” (Government of Myanmar, 2010).

In 2009, the government pushed to get all the ethnic militias to disarm and join the Border Guard Force. The government policy ended up into a major fighting in the country. A few group agreed but most hesitate to accept and Kachin intensified their military training. Their leaders now say they will not enter into another ceasefire unless Mr.Thein Sein can guarantee real political dialogue. Their aim is to maintain autonomy. Independent Kachin candidates were banned from taking part in the parliamentary elections of November 2010.

The present Thein Sein led government backed by the military often criticised as “nominally civilian government” has taken steps towards providing greater freedom and rights to its people. Among other things it has signed ceasefire agreements with ethnic rebel groups in 2011 with the state’s fiercest ethnic opponents, in particular the Kayin and Shan and allows people to hold peaceful protest marches, strengthening of provincial legislatures also showcases that piecemeal changes are being put in place. Edward Wong has described Myanmar as a tightly controlled democratic system – a halfway house between democracy and authoritarian rule. The biggest challenge, however, lies in peaceful transition and national reconciliation in managing the masses and bringing

ethnic minorities back to the mainstream. So, all the stakeholders, the government, the military, Suu Kyi and her party members, ethnic leaders and the international community have to develop a greater mutual understanding and be more flexible and accommodating in envisaging a roadmap for Myanmar.

Moreover, the military junta in its goal of one nation often applied the policy of assimilation as well as marginalization throughout the country resulting in persecution of minorities particularly, the Rohingyas (Muslims). “With respect to one of Myanmar’s small ethnic groups, however, the SPDC has consistently departed from its overarching assimilation policy and pursued a Policy of marginalisation. The Rohingyas, concentrated in Arakan areas and accounting for 68 per cent of Rakhine state’s population according to government statistics, are in key respects the most distinctive of Myanmar’s many ethnic groups, with religious beliefs, social customs and physical features that set them apart from other groups and attract hostility not only from the government, but also from many ordinary citizens. For decades, government policy has been to marginalize them” (Ian Holliday 2010: 121-122).

Moreover, “The Rohingyas are not included in the list of 135 ethnic groups enshrined in the 1982 nationality law, and their rights to property, marriage, travel, education, employment and so on are largely non-existent. This is one of the clearest cases of ethnic persecution in the world today” (Ian Holliday 2010: 122). Ms Suu Kyi and the NLD kept away from the Rohingya’s cause all these years, perhaps because of concerns that it might not appeal to the majority Buddhist population. But that is no longer an option for a political party that is now seen as playing an important role in shaping a new Myanmar.

In this chapter an attempt is made to discuss the various theories or divergent approaches related to ethnicity and to apply them into the Myanmar context in order to understand the dynamics of ethnicity and the government policies in handling the ethnic issues.

## 1.2 THE VARIOUS VARIANTS OF ETHNICITY/ BASIC CONCEPTS

The term ethnicity became increasingly crucial in the social sciences in the 1960’s, a period marked by the consolidations of the process of decolonization in Africa and Asia



as numerous new nation states were created (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 3). The term ethnicity first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1972. Its first usage is attributed to the American Sociologist David Riesman in 1953. The word ethnic is however much older. It is derived from the Greek word *ethnos* (which in turn derived from the word *ethnikos*), which originally meant heathen or pagan. “It was used in this sense in English from the mid-fourteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, when it gradually began to refer to racial characteristics. In the United States ethnics came to be used around the second world war as a polite term referring to Jews, Italians, Irish and other people considered inferior to the dominant group of largely British descent” (Eriksen 1997: 33). The meaning of ethnicity is also equally uncertain. It can mean “essence of an ethnic group or the quality of belonging to, an ethnic community or group, or what it is you have if you are an ethnic group generally in the context of opposed other ethnic groups” (Hutchinson and Smith, 1996: 4). Therefore, ethnicity is always associated with the minority issues. This is exactly what has happened in Myanmar over the issues of ethnic minorities and dominant group.

### 1.2.1 ETHNIC GROUPS

The term ‘ethnic group’ was first introduced into social studies by German Sociologist Max Weber. He defined ethnic group as, “Those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization; and migration; this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation; conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists” (Weber 1996: 34). Therefore, ethnic group is said to be a socially defined category on the basis of common culture or nationality. Ashley Crossman has given a clear understanding on the terms ethnic groups, which is given under quote, “An ethnic group is a social category of people who share a common culture, such as a common language, a common religion, or common norms, customs, practices, and history. Ethnic groups have a consciousness of their common cultural bond. An ethnic group does not exist simply because of the common national or cultural origins of the group, however. They develop because of their unique historical and social experiences, which become the basis for the group’s ethnic identity. For example, prior to

immigration to the United States, Italians did not think of themselves as a distinct group with common interests and experiences. However, the process of immigration and the experiences they faced as a group in the United States, including discrimination, created a new identity for the group. Some examples of ethnic groups include Italian Americans, Polish Americans, Mexican Americans, Arab Americans, and Irish Americans. Ethnic groups are also found in other societies, such as the Pashtuns in Afghanistan or the Shiites in Iraq, whose ethnicity is based on religious differences”<sup>3</sup>.

But at times the term ethnic group may be used only to classify the minorities and inferiors, whereas majority and dominant groups do not see them as ethnic at all. Thus in Britain the term ethnic minority is primarily used to refer primarily to non-white immigrant (Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex 1997: 4). The terms ethnicity and ethnic group are also often used interchangeably. But there is a nuance of difference dividing them. “While ethnic group is a social group based on ancestry, culture, or national origin, ethnicity refers to affiliation or identification with the ethnic group” (Yang 2000: 40).

### 1.2.2 ETHNICITY AND RACE

Sometimes race and ethnicity are difficult to distinguish. Ethnicity is often assumed to be the cultural identity of a group from a nation state, while race is assumed to be biological and/or cultural essentialisation of a group hierarchy of superiority/inferiority related to their biological constitution. Weber clearly distinguished ethnic groups from races conceived in biological terms. It is not biological difference alone that constitutes an ethnic group, common culture are also a factor. However, it is not simply having physical or cultural characteristics that is important but rather the subjective perception of these characteristics both by those who share them and by those who react to them. “Like ethnicity, race is primarily, though not exclusively, a socially constructed category. A race is a group that is treated as distinct in society based on certain characteristics. Because of their biological or cultural characteristics, which are labelled as inferior by powerful

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<sup>3</sup> Crossman, Ashley , “sociology of Race and Ethnecity: Studying the Relationship between Race, Ethnicity and Society, URL: [sociology.about.c/od/Disciplines/a/Sociology-Of-Race-Ethnicity.htm?p=1](http://sociology.about.c/od/Disciplines/a/Sociology-Of-Race-Ethnicity.htm?p=1).

groups in society, a race is often singled out for differential and unfair treatment”<sup>4</sup>. It is not the biological characteristics that define racial groups, but how groups have been treated historically and socially. Society assigns people to racial categories (White, Black, etc.) not because of science or fact, but because of opinion and social experience. In other words, how racial groups are defined is a social process; it is socially constructed.

### 1.2.3 MINORITY GROUPS

Minority groups are “defined by their powerlessness relative to other groups in a society and the majority groups are the reverse: they dominate other groups” (Encyclopedia of Sociology, 834). So a “minority group is any distinct group in society that shares common group characteristics and is forced to occupy low status in society because of prejudice and discrimination. A group may be classified as a minority on the basis of ethnicity, race, sexual preference, age, or class status. It is important to note that a minority group is not necessarily the minority in terms of numbers, but it is a group that holds low status in relation to other groups in society (regardless of the size). The group that assigns a racial or ethnic group to subordinate status in society is called the dominant group”<sup>5</sup>. Charles Wagley and Morin Haris have put forward a widely accepted definition of the term minority group. They argued five characteristics as essential.

- 1) “relatively powerless;
- 2) distinctive culture or physical traits;
- 3) distinctive traits cause them to become self-conscious social units;
- 4) established rule of descent exist among them;
- 5) endogamy practices ( i.e. marriage within their groups)” (Parivelan 1998: 56-60).

Almost all these characteristics are applicable to ethnic group of Myanmar and formed their own ethnic enclave. Ethnic enclave results from the failure of groups to

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

accommodate acculturate and assimilate. In this dissertation the term ethnic minority is used for the most part simply to distinguish other ethnic groups from the majority Burman population.

#### 1.2.4 ETHNIC ORIGIN AND IDENTITY

Ethnic identity and ethnic origin refers to “The individual level of identification with a culturally defined collectivity, the sense on the part of the individual that she or he belongs to a particular cultural community” (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 5). Identity is both a psychological and a sociological term. “Ethnic identity is constantly reinforced through common characteristics which set the group apart from other groups”<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, “Ethnic origin likewise refers to a sense of ancestry and nativity on the part of the individual through his or her parents and grandparents; although the concept may also have an even more problematic collective dimension, referring to the usually diverse cultural groups and migration origin of ethnies” (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 5).

#### 1.2.5 MULTI ETHNIC SOCIETY

The notion of a multicultural society is sometimes confused with that of a plural one, the concept of the plural society is has been developed to analyse the nature of colonial and post- colonial societies rather than those which are modern, industrial and democratic, though it is also true that something called pluralism is a virtuous feature of these more democratic societies. The concept of multiculturalism may then be used to refer to features which are both democratic and egalitarian and those which are anti-democratic and hierarchical (Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex 1997: 9). A multiethnic society is one with members belonging to more than one ethnic group in contrast to societies which are ethnically homogeneous. By some definitions of society and homogeneous virtually all contemporary national societies are multiethnic. One scholar argued in 1993 that fewer than 20 of the then 180 sovereign states could be said to be ethnically and nationally homogeneous, where a homogeneous state was defined as one in which minorities made up less than five per cent of the population (Welsh 1993: 43- 60). Sujit

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<sup>6</sup> O'Neil, URL: [http://anthro.palomar.edu/ethnicity/ethnic\\_2.htm](http://anthro.palomar.edu/ethnicity/ethnic_2.htm)).

Choudhry therefore argues that, "The age of the ethnoculturally homogeneous state, if ever there was one, is over". This is true to the case of Myanmar where diverse ethnic groups exist.

### 1.3 ETHNICITY: DIVERGENT APPROACHES

There are various Approaches to ethnicity. Only few approaches relevant to the context of Myanmar are taken into considerations. They are discussed as under;

#### 1.3.1 PRIMORDALIST APPROACH

The term was first used by Edward Shils (1957), who was influenced by his readings in the sociology of religion. Primordialism, in relation to ethnicity, argues that "ethnic groups and nationalities exist because there are traditions of belief and action towards primordial objects such as biological factors and especially territorial location" (Steven 1994: 168). "If you are born poor, you may die rich. But your ethnic group is fixed." (Economist, May 14-21, 2005: 80). So goes the "primordialist" way of thinking about ethnic identity. According to it, each of us belongs to one and only one ethnic group that group membership remains fixed over a lifetime, and it is passed down intact across generations. Wars begin and end, states grow and die, economies boom and crash, but through it all, ethnic groups stay the same (Kanchan Chandra, 2). This way of thinking about ethnic identity drives theorizing in the social sciences on the relationship between ethnicity and political and economic outcomes and processes.

This argument relies on a concept of kinship, where members of an ethnic group feel they share characteristics, origins or sometimes even a blood relationship. "Primordialism assumes ethnic identity as fixed, once it is constructed". As historian Sandra Joireman argues, 'this type of explanation of the Rwanda genocide and its horrific violence, with its emphasis on the causes being due to the difference in Kinship and beliefs of the two ethnic groups, is a primordialist view (Sandra Fullerton 2003: 19). Furthermore, the primordialist argument "suggests that irreconcilable differences due to cultural gaps cause fear and conflict that beget violence" (Sambanis 2001: 263). Primordialists believe that ethnicity is a natural phenomenon with its foundations in family and kinship ties

(Geertz 1963; Shills 1957); ethnicity emerges out of nepotism and reproductive fitness, narrowing down the social concept into biological terms.

### 1.3.2 INSTRUMENTALISTS APPROACH

To instrumentalists ethnicity is often a social, political and cultural resource for different groups. Instrumentalists school view ethnicity as a mechanism for gaining resources. According to this school people become ethnic and remain within their ethnic when their ethnicity yields significant results to them. In other words ethnicity remains and persists because it is useful. To Nathan Glazar and Daniel Moynihan (1975) who are the pioneers of this school ethnicity is not simply a mix of affective sentiment but like class and nationality it is also a means of political mobilisation for advancing group interests. Ethnic groups are also interest groups. One of the central ideas of instrumentalists is the socially constructed nature of ethnicity, and the ability of individuals to cut and mix from a variety of ethnic heritages and culture to forge their own individual or group identities. Another recent formulation of instrumentalism is the rational choice theory (Blanton 1983; Hecter 1986: 87). Rational Choice Theory maintains that ethnic affiliation is based on the rational calculation of the costs and benefits of ethnic association for the advocates of rational choice theory, ethnicity is an option. People choose one ethnicity over another or avoid association with an ethnic group because of the utility or cost of such affiliation. Some people favour an ethnic affiliation because it is beneficial, while other people hide or deny an ethnic identity because it will bring disadvantages (Yang 2000: 47).

### 1.3.3 ASSIMILATION APPROACH

Assimilation model focuses on social processes and outcomes that tend to dissolve ethnic relations leading to the assimilation of one ethnic group by another or by a larger society. It is a process in which formerly distinct and separate groups come to share a common culture and merge together socially. As such it is said as a society undergoes assimilation, differences among groups decrease. But this is not true all the time, Myanmar can be cited as the best example where the more the assimilation, the greater divergence from the central government policy. Pluralism, on the other hand, exists when groups maintain

their individual identities. In a pluralistic society, groups remain separate, and their cultural and social differences persist over time. The assimilation theory is more applicable to Myanmar Junta period i.e. since the inception of their rule till 2010. How Myanmar government policies tried to forcefully assimilate the diverse ethnic groups into the mainstream which is often dubbed as Burmanisation.

Robert E Prank and Milton Gordon are the main proponents of this approach. Many theories of assimilation are grounded in the work of Robert Park. Park felt that intergroup relations go through a predictable set of phases that he called a race relations cycle. When groups first come into contact (through immigration, conquest, etc.), relations are conflictual and competitive. Eventually, however, the process, or cycle, moves toward assimilation, or the “interpenetration and fusion” of groups (Park & Burgess, 1924: 735). Milton Gordon made a major contribution to theories of assimilation in his book, *Assimilation in American Life* (1964). Gordon broke down the overall process of assimilation into seven sub-processes. The most important or ‘critical difference lies between the two: acculturation and structural assimilation’ (Encyclopedia of Sociology, 576). Acculturation means the adaptation of ethnic group of the cultural patterns of the surrounding society. Such acculturation “encompasses not only external cultural traits, such as dress and language, but also internal ones, such as beliefs and values” (Encyclopedia of Sociology, 587).

#### 1.3.3.1 TYPES OF ASSIMILATION

##### A) MELTING POT MODEL

Assimilation is a general term for a process that can follow a number of different pathways. Assimilation is expressed in the metaphor of the “melting pot”, a process in which different groups come together and contribute in roughly equal amounts to create a common culture and a new, unique society. Melting pot model stressed that assimilation is all about sharing and inclusion. This view stresses the ways in which diverse peoples helped construct U.S. society and made contributions to American culture. Contrary to this, the melting pot model also has its drawback like, some groups, especially the racial

minority groups have been largely excluded from the “melting” process. Furthermore, the melting-pot brew has had a distinctly Anglo-centric flavour.

## B) ANGLO-CONFORMITY OR AMERICANISATION

As opposite to melting pot model, there is also a way of assimilation in U.S, which is termed Americanization or Anglo-conformity. Some scholars were of the opinion that, “Rather than an equal sharing of elements and a gradual blending of diverse peoples, assimilation in the United States was designed to maintain the predominance of the English language and the British-type institutional patterns created during the early years of American society”, Under Americanization, immigrant and minority groups are expected to adapt to Anglo- American culture as a precondition to acceptance and access to better jobs, education, and other opportunities. Assimilation has meant that minority groups have had to give up their traditions and adopt Anglo-American culture. To be sure, many groups and individuals were (and continue to be) eager to undergo Anglo-conformity, even if it meant losing much or all of their heritages. . Since the rule of military junta 1962 up till 2010, a basic assimilationist model formed the centrepiece of state policies towards ethnic differences in Myanmar. But on the other hand the policies of assimilation lost credibility among many group of ethnic minorities and were subjected to unprecedented challenges by opposition NLD and ethnic insurgent group.

### 1.3.4 THE PLURALISTS THEORY OF ETHNICITY (MULTICULTURALISTS)

Sociological discussions of pluralism often begin with a consideration of the work of Horace Kallen. In articles published in the Nation magazine in 1915, Kallen argued that people should not have to surrender their culture and traditions to become full participants in American society. He rejected the Anglo-conformist, assimilationist model and contended that the existence of separate ethnic groups, even with separate cultures, religions, and languages, was consistent with democracy and other core American values. “Pluralism is the acceptance of group diversity and the preservation of ethnic differentiation within a larger society” (Encyclopedia of Sociology, 408).



Multicultural or pluralist theories do not view ethnicity as a temporarily persistent phenomena doomed to decline or fade. From a pluralist point of view ethnicity is in its essence a way of being American. Ethnic minority of groups are viewed less as outsiders or foreigners and more as a part of the larger American population. Ethnicity is said to persist because it can become political means of claiming place or advantage in a competitive society (Nicholas Tarling 2008: 101). So Pluralists model embraced the notion of cultural diversity.

“Multiculturalism is often contrasted with the concepts of assimilationism and has been described as a salad bowl or cultural mosaic rather than a melting pot” (Burgess et al 2005: 31). In contemporary debates, discussions of diversity and pluralism are often couched in the language of multiculturalism, a general term for a variety of programs and ideas that stress mutual respect for all groups and for the multiple heritages that have shaped the United States.

In a country with diversity, the debates over multiculturalism centers around whether or not multiculturalism is the appropriate way to deal with diversity and integration. Multiculturalism centers on the thought in political philosophy about the way to respond to cultural and religious differences. Nonetheless, multicultural education can promote racial tolerance and sensitivity towards the history and culture of ethnically diverse group.

#### 1.4 THEORISATION OF ETHNICITY

After taking into consideration of the nature of diversity and the policy governing the successive military government the importance of ethnicity cannot be ignored. Throughout the history it has been found that the in the name of maintaining the unity of Myanmar, the government took up an aggressive authoritarian policy of assimilation which outsiders termed it as Burmanisation. In the long run to achieve their goal resulted into marginalisation of the important ethnic groups thereby enhanced ethnic consciousness resulting into internal conflict between the Barman dominated tatmadaw and the minority groups. Therefore, after having analysed an overview picture of the problems which has plagued Myanmar it is found that the question of ethnicity is the

main factor. All the above mentioned approaches to Ethnicity is Present in one form or the other but the most prominent being the assimilationist model and the pluralist model. In every policy of the government the assimilationist model is without absent and the opposition mainly the NLD makes pluralism or multiculturalism as its watch word in dealing with ethnic issues. So, I would like to employ pluralist or the multiculturalist approach as against assimilationism model in my research taking into fact the diversity of ethnicity. Pluralism, exists when groups maintain their individual identities. In a pluralistic society, groups remain separate, and their cultural and social differences persist over time. Though, assimilation and pluralism are opposite processes, they occurred together in a variety of combination in a particular society. Some groups in a society may be assimilating as others are maintaining (or even increasing) their differences. In Myanmar ethnic enclave (consciousness) and assimilation are the contenders for ethnic policy. Some optimism has been seen in dealing the ethnic issues by entering into ceasefire agreements. This study would focus on examining the assimilationist ethnocratic state policy of the military junta and its impact on the country development. By analysing the qualities of the new reform under taken by the present civilian government in Myanmar, it is also hoped that a realistic appraisal may be given. The role of NLD headed by Aung San Suu Kyi in view of the ethnic minority issues would also be the focus of the study. Multiculturalism which is the variants of liberal principle of democracy has always been the goal of NLD, taking into consideration the ethnic diversity of Myanmar. So, Pluralists or multi-culturalism approach would be employ throughout my research. It is important to note that ethnicity is one of the most important questions for any form of government to come in Myanmar. Therefore, understanding and addressing multi-ethnicity in the context of Myanmar would be the best and quickest solution to establish a stable and peaceful government and “Burmanisation without equality will lead the country to nowhere”.

## 1.5 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of the study is to examine the policies of the government in respect to the diverse ethnic groups in Myanmar and suggesting a suitable theory which can be best for the development of the county. Against this backdrop the study endeavours:

- To give a conceptual clarity of various variation of ethnicity for better understanding of the problems
- To critically examine the assimilationist ethnocratic state policy of military junta in its roadmap to establish a unified state.
- To study the impact of the successive government policy.
- To find out the area of contest between the policy of government and the various ethnic enclaves consciousness.
- To analyse and suggest a better policy which can best incorporates all the ethnic groups in Myanmar in the process of nation building.

The various aspects to be answered verified are;

- What is ethnicity? Give a conceptual clarity of the various variants associated with ethnicity.
- What are the kinds of state strategies or institutional mechanisms and specific policies that government have used to control ethnic identity formation and ethnic group conflict?
- What are the reasons which divide the military from the ethnic groups?
- What could be the reasons for the non- inclusion of the ethnic group from tatmadaw? Was it the problem with the government or reluctance on the part of the ethnic groups to join it?
- Can pluralism (multiculturalism) be a better option in a military ruled civilian government?
- Can the ethnic issues be solved once Suu Kyi comes to power?

## 1.6 HYPOTHESES

The study will test the following hypotheses:

- Ethnic diversity has not been viewed in terms of pluralism by the government of Myanmar.
- The policy of assimilation has been enforced to integrate diverse ethnic groups into the national mainstream.
- The assimilationist policy of military junta resulted in the ethno-nationalistic consciousness of various ethnic groups and also as Burmese nationalism became more assertive, it became the genesis for the rise of ethno-centrism.

## 1.7 CONCLUSION

Since Myanmar is one of the most complex societies ethnically in Southeast Asia, the respective successive government has faced a big challenge to sail through the path. So, the question of ethnicity cannot be kept aside to understand the socio-economic and political development of the country. Therefore, any literature related to government or understanding of the country history has with it the topic of ethnicity. The politics of government in Myanmar has always been the tussle between various ethnic groups on the one hand and the assimilationist policy of government on the other hand. Ethnic groups played as a hindrance in the way of junta regime. So the study of ethnicity is very important in the context of Myanmar. Moreover, it is pertinent to have a conceptual clarity of ethnicity and its variants as well as clear understanding of the various successive regime of government and its policy of Burmanisation. Myanmar is chosen for the study of ethnicity in order to understand the dynamics of various ethnic groups interacting in respect to the changing political milieu both internally and externally.

## CHAPTER-2

### ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN MYANMAR

#### 2.1 GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

Burma also known as Myanmar is a sovereign state “situated in Southeast Asia, bordered on the north and north-east by China, on the east and south-east by Laos and Thailand, on the south by the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal and on the west by Bangladesh and India. It is located between latitudes 09 32’N and 28 31’N and longitudes 92 10’E and 101 11’E”<sup>7</sup>. It is also strategically located between South Asia and South East Asia. More interestingly, Myanmar is also sandwiched between the two most populous nations in the World-China and India. The country covers an area of 677,000 square kilometers (261,228 square miles) ranging 936 kilometers (581 miles) from the east to west and 2051 kilometers (1275 miles) from north to south. It is a land of hills and valleys and is rimmed in the north, east and west by mountain ranges forming a giant horseshoe. Enclosed within the mountain barriers are the flat lands of Irrawady (Ayeyarwady), Chindwin and Sittaung River valleys where most of the country's agricultural land and population are concentrated (Basic Facts about Myanmar, [www.Myanmar-embassy-tokyo.net](http://www.Myanmar-embassy-tokyo.net)).

Myanmar comprised of 135 ethnic nationalities, grouped under eight major ethnic groups as under Kachins, Kayah, Kayin, Chins, Bamar, Mon, Rakhine and Shans. “Population of the country is estimated at 52.4 million (July, 2003) and the population growth rate is 1.84 percent. The Bamar form the largest national race constituting 70% of the whole population. In the religious sector, 89.2% of the population is Buddhist, while Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism and Animism are also practised” (Basic Facts about Myanmar, URL: [www.Myanmar-embassy-tokyo.net](http://www.Myanmar-embassy-tokyo.net)).

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<sup>7</sup> Basic facts about Myanmar, URL: [www.myanmar-embassy-tokyo.net/about.html](http://www.myanmar-embassy-tokyo.net/about.html)

## 2.2 STATES AND DIVISIONS

There are seven states and seven regions in Myanmar. Earlier regions were known divisions; the government renamed divisions to regions on 20 August 2010. The country is divided into seven states and seven regions, formerly called divisions. Regions are dominantly inhabitat by Bamar (dominant ethnic group). While the States, are occupied by the ethnic ethnic minorities. The administrative divisions are further subdivided into districts, which are further sub-divided into townships, wards and villages. The seven states and seven regions are as under;

1. Ayeyarwady Division
2. Bago Division
3. Magway Division
4. Mandalay Division
5. Sagaing Division
6. Tanintharyi Division
7. Yangon Division
8. Chins State
9. Kachins State
10. Kayah State
11. Kayin State
12. Mon State
13. Rakhine State
14. Shans State

### 2.3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Burma has a complex history of ethnic diversity since time immemorial. Burma as a nation is the result of the waves of migration in different periods of its history which started from central Asia, eastern India, and Southern China etc. It is this periodic migration and the existence of new ethnic groups to maintain its hegemony over the already settled ethnic groups which created ethnic rivalry and eventual war. In modern terms the same old practice of establishing its hegemony by a majority ethnic group over other minorities has led to war, rebellion and ethnic insurgency in the country.

“The first historically significant ethnic people in this kite shaped country were the Pyus who probably migrated from southwest China in about third century A.D” (Sardesai 1997: 33). The Pyus were believed to be the followers of Hinduism as well as Buddhism. Later on in the eight century the Pyus were were defeated by the Mons, a minority kindered to the Khmers in language and appearance living in lower Myanmar today. They fled northward and became the vasals of the Thai kingdom of Nan Chao. In 832, the Thais attacked the new Pyu capital and took a large number of Pyu subjects captive. However the people who would dominate the whole of Burmese history from second century A.D were the ethnic Burmans, an ethnic group of Tibeto-Burman race. They were probably pushed from their home in the Northwest Chinese province of Kansu by ethnic Chinese in the second millennium B.C. to eastern Tibet, from where they moved through Yunnan to Myanmar over several centuries (Sardesai 1997: 33-34).

“The Burmans built their first and greatest capital at Pagan (849-1287) on the banks of Irrawady” (Steinberg 1982: 6). The Burman culture slowly became dominant over the other culture in Myanmar. During this period, even in the field of religion, Theravada Buddhism dominates over the other. “The Burmans defeated peace loving Brahmanical Pyus and then went on to subjugate the Mons and other non-Burman peoples under the leadership of King Anawartha, he was considered to be the founder of Myanmar, and the boundaries of his kingdom matched those of the modern state of Myanmar. He is also known as the first unifier of the state, whose reign lasted from 1044 to 1077” (Steinberg 1982:18). Anawratha’s conquest of the Mon resulted into the conversion of his people

into Theravada Buddhism and the assimilation of the more refined Mon culture by the Burmans. Many analysts and historians say sowed the seeds of ethnic dissent which continued to haunt all the successive rulers, Monarch, democratic government and the junta who succeeded King Anawartha in different phases of Burmese history. Dr. Sardesai has rightly said that “the experiment of composite polity begun by Anawratha, however, provided an ambition and a frustration for every Burman government thereafter” (Sardesai 1997: 35).

The Pagan Empire finally fell due to the Mongol invasions (1277–1301) in 1287, and several warring states emerged. The stage was set for the temporary pre-eminence of another of Burma’s ethnic groups, the Shans, in central Burma and for the resurgence of the Mon kingdom in the South (Steinberg 1982: 19). In the second half of the 16th century, the country was reunified by the Taungoo Dynasty which for a brief period was the largest empire in the history of Southeast Asia. The early 19th century Konbaung Dynasty ruled over an area that included modern Burma as well as Manipur and Assam. Since independence in 1948, the country has been in one of the longest running civil wars among the country’s diverse ethnic groups that remain unresolved. The Western influence in Southeast Asia began in the year 1511 which is considered as an important landmark in Southeast Asian history. Burma’s first proper contact with Europeans started in 1519 when the Portuguese started operating their trading station at Martaban. Steinberg pointed out that Portuguese were not the first Westerners to visit Burma (Steinberg 1982: 20). There were two other nationalities i.e. a Venetian, Nicolo de’Conti (1444) and two Italians Hieronimo de’ Santo Stefano (1496) and Ludovico de Varthema (1502) visited Burma. The Portuguese were the first to spread the modern religious animosity among different Burmese ethnic groups, a policy which in the following centuries was adopted by the British to keep a successful hold over a multi-ethnic society. For example a Portuguese, Philip De Brito who later on became the head of Syriam alienated the Mon by attempting to convert them to Christianity (Steinberg 1982: 21).

King Alaungpaya (1752-1760) founded the last Burman Dynasty i.e. the Konbaung dynasty (1752-1885) in 1752 and it was during the zenith of this Empire that the British



moved into Burma. Like India, Burma became a British colony but only after three Anglo-Myanmar Wars in 1825, 1852, and 1885. Britain annexed Burma in 1886 and incorporated it into its British Indian Empire until 1937 when it became a separate, self-governing colony; independence from the Commonwealth was attained in 1948. The British devised and implemented Divide and Rule policy in Burma to facilitate their exercise of power over the whole country. British administration came in full power in January 1, 1896 permitted autonomy to the country's many racial, religious and ethnic minorities as against the majority Burman. Thus to maintain the status quo from the beginning of its rule the British had sought to protect minorities from the dominant Burman (Silverstein 1997: 15).

The British aggravated the already divided Burma long before the foreign conquest by following the familiar "divide and rule" policy. Thereby dividing Burma into two sections:

1) The area of Burma Proper: where the Burmans were in the majority (it also included Arakanese and Mon region). This area was administered directly by the British and old elite had no power here.

2) The hill areas inhabited by other minorities: these areas included the Shans states, the Karenni states (later called the Kayah state), the Kachins and Chins Hills, and the Karen Salween District. The hill areas retained some of the traditional leadership under overall British supervision. The hill regions eventually came under the control of a separate frontier administration in 1922. (Steinberg 1982: 28-29).

This division of Burma into two administrative division is a clear indication of divide and rule policy of British. Steinberg was of the opinion that "the separation of the Burmans from the minorities was designed to protect the latter, but it limited interaction between both groups, thereby freezing majority-minority relations" (Steinberg 1982: 29). The Burman population were seen as a threat to their control while the ethnic minorities settled in the frontier areas were treated with fervour. This policy had unfortunate impact even after the British left. A history of ethnic antagonism was created rather than a history

of ethnic cooperation and accommodation where where hill and valley peoples exchanged goods and services in mutually beneficial manner (Robert H Taylor 2007: 76).

The British further adopted a distinctive administrative and military administration in which they divided Burma into- lowlands (Burma Proper) and highlands (Frontier Areas). In this British colonial administrative structure the Karens and even Indians to some extent were accorded special treatment and were given reserved seats in the legislature to protect their interests. “The senior levels of government occupied by Europeans, middle levels by Indians, and much of the army staffed by minority peoples. This deliberate discriminatory practice is also found place in the British military in which only Karens, Kachins and Chins were recruited as members of British-Burma Army under the Burmans. This division which Taylor says were only the beginnings of the complexities which were soon conceptualized into a historical model of the characteristics of Myanmar social formations” (Robert H. Taylor 2007: 75-76). By 1930’s the whole country was divided into various ethnic group on occupational lines. This separated identification made the several races of Burma conscious of their ethnic and cultural differences and kept the society divided. As a result after the British left the country in 1948 the new Government had to confront with several minorities who in no way were prepared to be in the Union of Burma or the government dominated by the majority races, the Burmans.

Burmese struggle to sever the British colonial yoke was essentially led by the majority Burmans in which other ethnic groups did not participate very much. It is highly significant that the issues of Buddhist and Burmese language played a very important role in that movement for independence (John Cady 1974, Muang Muang 1981). On the other hand the British also expanded the Christian mission in which most of the non-Buddhist minorities were converted. “The tie between some of the minorities and the colonial power, especially the Karen and the British, was quite strong, and the Karen insurrections, fit for an independent Karen state, which some British had unofficially advocated, and later for autonomy, became the major insurgencies after independence and continued in truncated form at the close of the century” (David I Steinberg 2001:183-184).

Burma was also even dominated by majority-minority confrontation in which British joined hand with the minorities on the one hand and fought with the Burman supported by Japan on the other side to undermine Burmese hegemony. “Moreover, differential governance practices were reinforced by the events of the world war II, when distinct ethnic group fought on both sides of the overarching conflict between Britain and Japan” (Ian Holliday 2010: 117). It resulted into animosity between them.

The British raised the hopes of minorities during their rule in Burma did not pay sufficient attention toward their concern and aspirations when they negotiated the transfer of power to the Burmese leaders from 1945-1947. The absence of coherence help shaped the nature of the ethnic rebellions that have been a principal feature of Burma since 1948 (Lim Joo-Jock 1984:5). Burma became a divided entity the day it attained independence. The preservation of the Union of Burma became the chief task of the Government during the first decade of independence. Of all the issues facing both British and the Burmese, and of those among the Burmese themselves, the minority problem was the most difficult. “Similarly the subsequent 1948 constitution enshrined complex quasi – federal arrangements that satisfied neither the Burman majority nor any of the country’s minority ethnic groups” (Ian Holliday 2010: 117). Through the personal magnetism and trust generated by General Aung San, a solution was found to this problem, a solution that unfortunately proved to be temporary (David I Steinberg 1982: 48).

## 2.4 POPULATION/ ETHNIC COMPOSITION

### 2.4.1 Bamar (Burman):

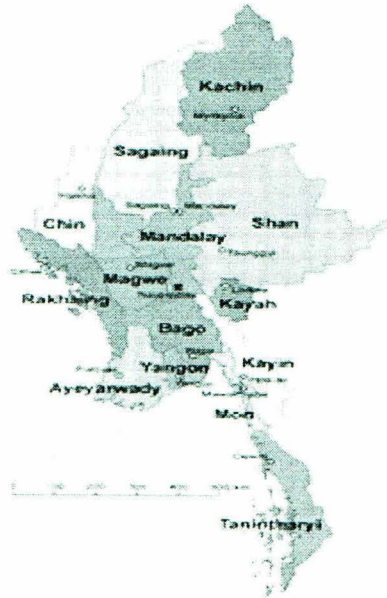


Fig: 2.1 (states and regions in Myanmar)

The Bamar (also called Burman) are the dominant ethnic group of Myanmar, constituting approximately two-thirds of the population and controls the military and the government. The Bamar are of East Asian descent and speak a Sino-Tibetan language. The exact time to which Bamar enter into Burma was not known. So authors are of divergent views regarding the exact arrival of Burman into Burma. Steinberg has written that the “Burmans, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family and speaking Burmese as their primary language, may have migrated south from western China and entered central Burma, perhaps from the Shans Plateau, sometime before the ninth century A.D” (Steinberg 1982: 5). Some were of the opinion that they migrated from the present day Yunnan in China into the Irrawady (Ayeyarwady) river valley in Upper Burma about 1200–1500 years ago. Sardesai recorded that they were “probably pushed from their home in the Northwest Chinese province of Kansu by ethnic Chinese in the second millennium B.C. to eastern Tibet, from where they moved through Yunnan to Myanmar over several centuries” (Sardesai 1997: 33-34). Over the last millennium, they have

largely replaced/absorbed the Mon and the earlier Pyu, ethnic groups that originally dominated the Irrawady (Ayeyarwady) valley.

“Traditional Bamar culture strongly influences contemporary Burmese national customs and identity. The Bamar are predominately Theravada Buddhists. Their native language (Burmese) is the official language of the country, and they dominate the government and military. Due to the ethnic group’s predominance, its members are often believed to have a social and political advantage over the country’s minority populations. Some ethnic groups claim that the country has been subject to a policy of ‘Burmanisation’ since the 1962 coup. Nevertheless, the Bamar have not been exempt from the human rights abuses and repression that have characterised the country in recent years”<sup>8</sup>. All the seven division (regions) of Myanmar are occupied by the Burmans.

#### 2.4.2 Chins

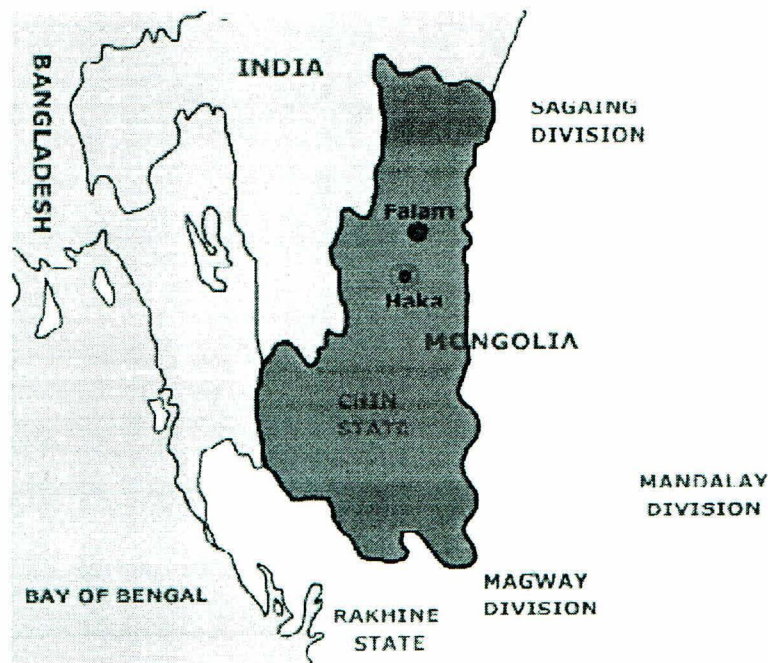


Fig 2.2 (Chins State, Myamar)

<sup>8</sup> Oxford Burma Alliance, Ethnic Nationalities of Burma. URL: [www.oxfordburmaalliance.org/ethnic-groups.html](http://www.oxfordburmaalliance.org/ethnic-groups.html).

“Like the Karens the Chins are not new comers to Burma. There is some evidence that they were in the plains when the Burmans arrived, that they may have been well established there by the middle of the first Christian millennium” (Bixler 1971: 139). The Chins people are estimated at 1.5 million and like the other major ethnic groups, the Chins also comprised many different sub-groups in Burma. They are “the members of Tibeto-Burman linguistic family and have sizable populations on the Indian side of the border” (Steinberg 1982: 8). The Chins live in the north-western mountainous Chins State, which separates Burma from India. “The entire Chins Hills came under the authority of the Burmese kingdoms between 1555 and 1559 when King Bayinnaung of the Toungoo Dynasty conquered all of Upper Burma and its surrounding regions, stretching from the eastern and northern Shans states to the western Chins Hills and Manipur” (Maung Htin Aung 1967: 117).

“Their history from the 17th to the late 19th century was a long sequence of tribal wars and feuds. The first British expedition into the Chins Hills in 1889 was soon followed by annexation, and British administration ended raids by the Chins on the plains of Burma”<sup>9</sup>. “Under the British till independence the Chins were divided between northeast India, the Frontier areas and Ministerial Burma” (Martin Smith 1994: 37). The Chins was at first denied a state of their own; instead they were granted a mountainous ‘Special Division’. “The 1974 constitution finally upgraded the Chins Special Division into a 36,017 square km state, but the neglect of the Chins people has continued” (Martin Smith 1994: 37). Chins villages, often of several hundred houses, were traditionally self-contained units, some ruled by councils of elders, others by headmen. There were also hereditary chiefs who exercised political control over large areas and received tribute from cultivators of the soil. “An estimated of 80-90% of the Chins population is Christian, although some are Theravada Buddhists” (COI Report 2012: 94).

“Like many other ethnic groups in Burma, the Chins are subjected to forced labour, torture, rape, arbitrary arrest and extra-judicial killings as part of a Burmese government policy to suppress the Chins people and their ethnic identity. The United Nation’s World

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Food Programme believes that food consumption in Chins State is the lowest in Burma”<sup>10</sup>. Faced with this situation thousands have left their homes and scattered in different part of the world as refugees. The state has little infrastructure and remains extremely poor and undeveloped.

#### 2.4.3 Kachins

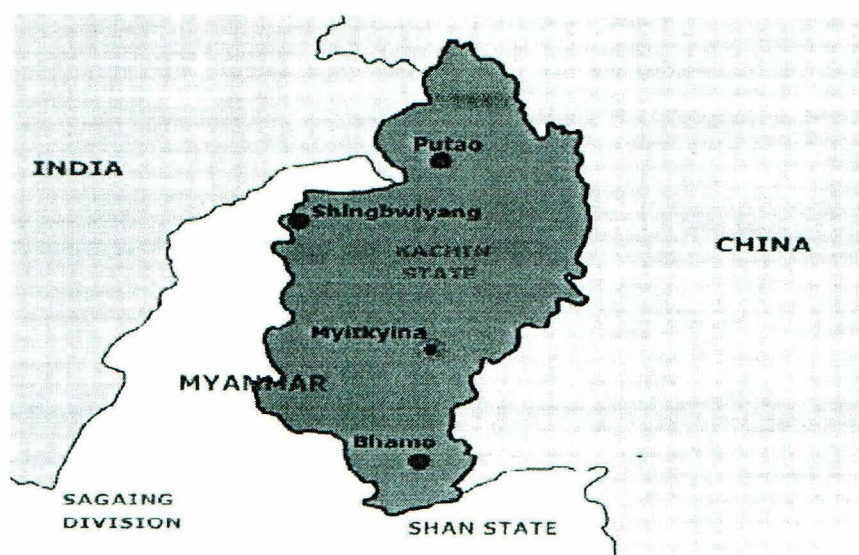


Fig 2.3 (The Kachin State, Myanmar)

The Kachins, like other major ethnic groups in Myanmar comprised a number of different ethnic sub-groups. The Kachins live mainly in north-eastern Burma as well as parts of China and India. The Kachins are also the Tibeto-Burman group of people “estimated to number between 1 to 1.5 million and are traditionally hill dwellers peoples, resilient hunters, practitioners of swidden agriculture, and organised clan systems” (COI service 2012: 95, Steinberg 1982: 8). “Like other hill peoples in Burma, the Kachins initially put up fierce resistance to the British annexation. During British rule of Burma (from 1886-1948), most Kachins territory was specially administered as a frontier region. Christianity spread among the Kachins people at this time. Over two-thirds of Kachins are Christians today and together with the Karen and Chins, came to form the backbone of the British Burma army” (Smith 1994: 38-39). “In recognition of the strength of nationalist

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

demands, a vast 89,042 km square Kachins state was created under the 1948 constitution” (smith 1994: 39). When Burma gained independence in 1948, the northern mountainous extremity of Burma was designated as Kachins State. There is also a sizeable population of Kachins people in northern Shans State.

After independence many Kachins grew increasingly dissatisfied with the discriminatory policies of the central Burmese government. “Two major political bodies seek to represent the Kachins: the Kachins Independence Organisation (KIO), with formal control over some functions of local government, and the Kachins State National Congress for Democracy (KSNCD), which won three parliamentary seats in the 1990 elections” (COI service 2012: 94). The government under the leadership of U Nu applied the policy of assimilation by imposing Buddhism as Burma’s official state religion resented the Kachins people. This led to the launch in February 1961 of a Kachins armed resistance movement, the Kachins Independence Organization (KIO) formed by a group of intellectuals and Rangoon university students to demand the complete secession of the Kachins state. Decade of conflicts ensued. Due to central government rule opposition. ruthless policy known as the “Four Cuts” campaign has had been imposed on them. The KIO nationalists built up an extensive health and education system in Kachins villages from the northern Shans state to the Indian border. However, in 1976, the KIO change its political aim to one of supporting the creation of a federal Union of Burma, and it then began to work more closely with other groups.

In 1994 the KIO signed a ceasefire agreement with the Burmese military regime and was granted the right to maintain its own administrative and military infrastructure in certain areas of Kachins and Shans states. The regime took advantage of the ceasefire agreement to increase its presence in Kachins State.

In 2009 the military regime tried to convert all the ethnic ceasefire groups including KIA into Border Guard Force. However on 9 June 2011, the military break the cease fire agreement and attacked the KIA for its refusal to transform into Border Guard Force. The renewed conflict has led to an increase in human rights abuses against the Kachins people and has resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of civilians, most of whom are



now living in makeshift refugee camps. On 10 December President Thein Sein intervened into the matter and instructed the army to stop its offensive.

#### 2.4.4 Karenni (Kayah)

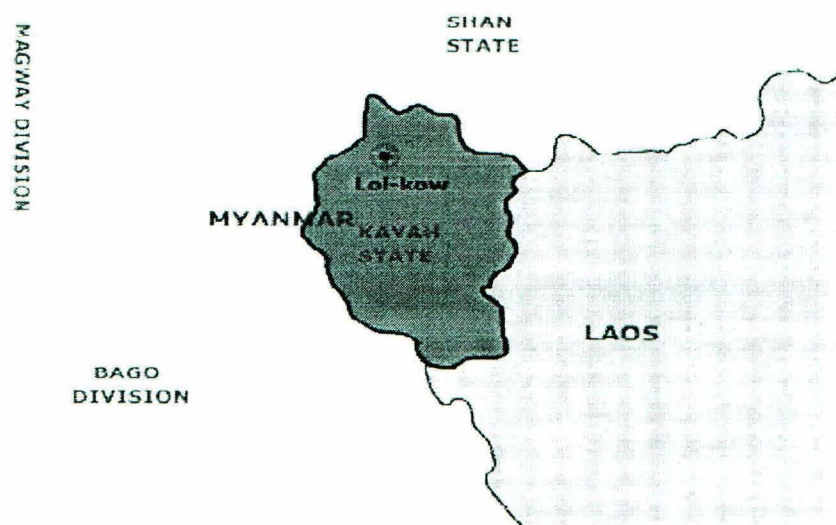


Fig. 2.4 (Kayah State, Myanmar)

“The Karenni, also known as the Red Karen or the Kayah are found in Kayah state in the east of Myanmar bordering Thailand. Christianity and animism are their predominant religions. While there are many languages spoken in Kayah state, the Karenni language is spoken among different communities as a common language” (COI Report: 2012). Mostly Karennis are Christians by religion. “Their traditional name, Karenni (Red Karen), is taken from the brightly-coloured clothing of the largest ethnic group, the Kayah” (Smith 1994: 47). There is no reliable data, but it is estimated that they may number 250,000. Karenni (or Kayah) state is situated between Karen and Shans state along Burma’s border with Thailand. The Karenni live in Burma’s smallest state in the least developed region of the country.

Karenni leaders claim ancient traditions of independence. Even Burman king Mindon and British acknowledged the independence of the western Karenni. Under the 1948 constitution, the Karenni state was granted the right of secession after a ten year trial period. Which never came into practice instead they were suppressed. “In 1952 ‘Karenni’ was renamed ‘Kayah’ by the government. Some historians still claim that this was a deceptive move with two main objectives: first, to make a divisive distinction between the Karenni and other Karen and, second, to get rid of a name synonymous with Karenni independence” (Smith 1994: 48). The government has increased its militarisation activities in the state and like that of the other ethnic minorities the Karenni also suffered a lot in the hands of the military junta. The Karenni faced lots of hardship, they were forcibly driven out from their homes in the name of developmental projects and army operations have resulted to the rise of refugees under the ‘Four Cut’ campaigns of the government. After over 60 years of fighting, the Karenni army signed a ceasefire with the Burmese in 1994. But still the situation has not improved in the region. “Forced displacements and militarization of the state by the Burmese army has been accompanied with claims of forced labour, land confiscation for mining and logging activities, involuntary relocation, torture, arbitrary executions, and sexual violence. Such violations have all negatively impacted the small population of Kayah State and have led to malnutrition, poor health and a disproportionate lack of education opportunities compared to other parts of the country. The Karenni have been excluded from any benefits that have arisen from development projects” (Chizom Ekeh 2007: 5)

#### 2.4.5 Karen (Kayin)

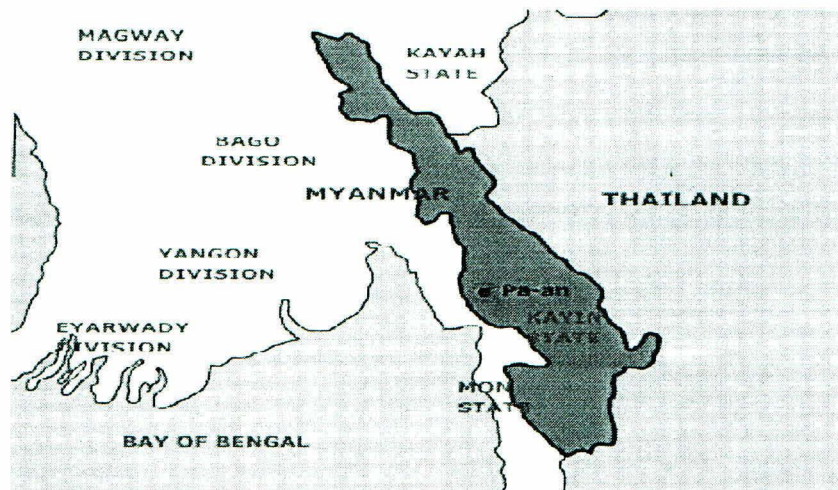


Fig. 2.5 (Karen State, Myanmar)

The Karens are a large and heterogeneous series of tribes in Burma. They make up the second largest ethnic population composed of eleven groups in the country. The Karen make up approximately 7 per cent of the total Burmese population of approximately 50 million people (Louise: 2008). "The Karen proper are segmented into three dialect groups- the Sgaw, Pwo, and the less numerous Bwe and are scattered throughout the eastern reaches of the country and the Irrawaddy Delta" (Steinberg 1982:9). "Ethnic Karens live throughout much of Lower Burma, from the Arakan Yoma and Delta region to the Shans state, and throughout the Western Thai border region to the Tenasserim Division" (Smith 1994: 42). Buddhism, Animism and Christianity are the main religion professed by the Karens.

Like other ethnic minority groups the British have also played well in dividing the Karens. Some Karens are converted to Christians but still the majority are Buddhist. Those Christians converted Karens are favoured by the British and recruited in various post in their administration as a result some Karen spoke of the British as liberator from the historical oppression by the Burman kings. Smith noted that "this identification by many Karens with social and political advances under British administration was the beginning of a dangerous ethnic polarisation between Karen and Burman communities which has continued to the present" (Smith 1994: 42-43).

Some of the Karen, led primarily by the Karen National Union (KNU) formed in 1947, waged a war against the central Burmese government since early 1949. The aim of the KNU at first was independence. Since 1976 the armed group has called for a federal system rather than an independent Karen State. The government has imposed four cuts policy on them and had taken up various policies and military offensive to suppress the Karens even during the 1990's. This made Smith concludes that "Of all Burma's minorities, the Karens have probably seen the most severe reversal in their fortunes since independence. In the days of the British, there were Karen cabinet ministers and army generals. Today there were few Karen (or any minority) in any prominent national position. The entire Karen region has collapsed, quashing dreams at independence of a prosperous free state of Kwathoolei" (Smith 1994: 47). In January 2012, in a significant development, Karen - the Karen National Union (KNU) - signed a ceasefire agreement with the government renouncing its long armed struggle.

#### 2.4.6 Mon

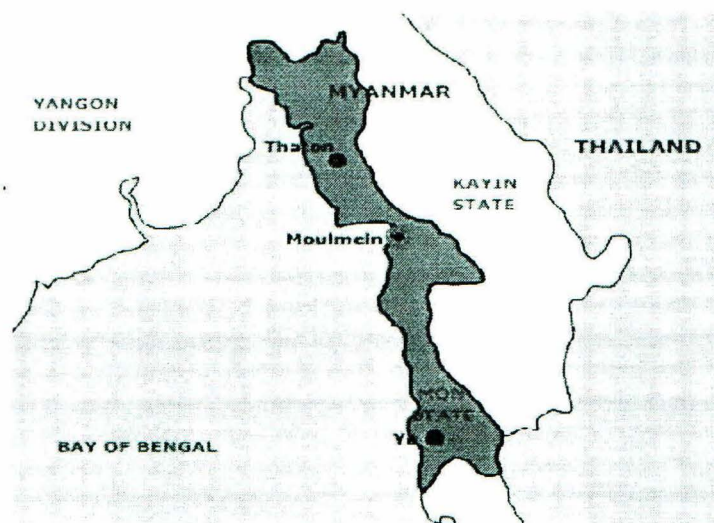


Fig. 2.6 (Mon State, Myanmar)

The Mons are also one of the major ethnic groups in Myanmar inhabited mainly in the Mon state, which is situated in the Southeast part of Myanmar, Bago division but smaller populations live in Irrawaddy Division and along the Myanmar-Thailand border. "The Mon culture is credited as a major source of influence on the dominant Burmese culture.

The Burman assimilated important elements of the culture of the Mons and waged many of their internal wars over control of this group” (Steinberg 1982: 10). The Mons are of Austro-Asiatic linguistic origins, but are linguistically closer to the Khmer of Kampuchea (Cambodia) than to the Barman. “The Mons are considered to be one of the earliest peoples in the Southeast Asia and the earliest one to settle in Burma. The Mons were responsible for spreading Theravada Buddhism in Burma and Thailand. The Burman evolved their script from the Mon” (Steinberg 1982: 18). Later on “Mon script was incorporated into the unified Burmese language. However, the regime does not allow the Mon the right to speak their language or cultivate their traditions”<sup>11</sup>. This is the clear evidence of a one-way experience of assimilation and Burmanisation over the past 150 years. Currently, they (Mon) are estimated to be around 8 million in Burma.

Under Burman rule, the Mon people had been massacred after they lost their kingdom and many sought asylum in the Thai Kingdom. The British conquest of Burma allowed the Mon people to survive in Southern Burma. After independence of Burma in 1948 they sought self-determination. Mon political demands were largely ignored. They revolted against the central Burmese government on a number of occasions, initially under the Mon People’s Front and from 1962 through the New Mon State Party headed by Nai Shwe Kyin. In 1947 a partially autonomous Mon state was created. “NMSP has always in support of the revival of Mon cultural traditions. Mon territory and culture, however, remain under constant threat” (Smith 1994: 50). Resistance continued until 1995 when NMSP and SLORC agreed a cease-fire in 1996. Despite the cease-fire, disturbances in the area were witnessed and often the government was charged of human rights violations. The people therefore support the demand for autonomy and reiterated that ensuring that human rights are not violated there.

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<sup>11</sup> Oxford Burma Alliance. Ethnic Nationalities of Burma. URL: [www.oxfordburmaalliance.org/ethnic-grou.html](http://www.oxfordburmaalliance.org/ethnic-grou.html).

#### 2.4.7 Rakhine (Arakan)

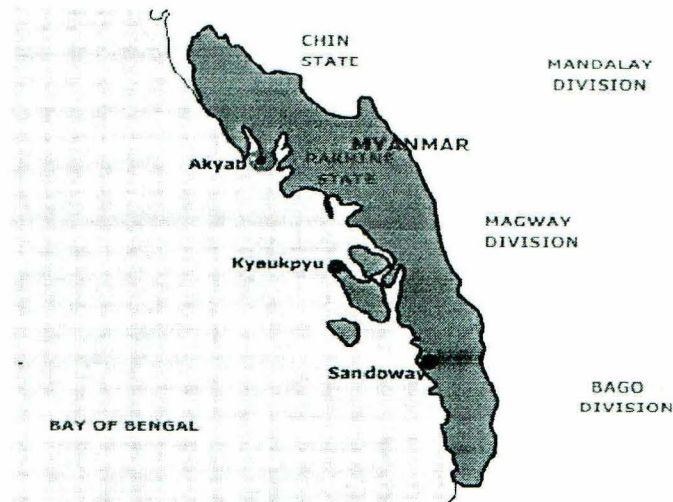


Fig. 2.7 (Rakhine or Arakan State, Myanmar)

Rakhine State (formerly known as Arakan) is a state in the union of Burma, situated on the western coast, it is bordered by Chin State in the north, Magway Region, Bago Region, and Irrawady (Ayeyarwady) Region in the east, the Bay of Bengal to the west and the Chittagong Division of Bangladesh to the northwest (Wikipedia, Rakhine state). It is estimated that those in Rakhine state make up 4-5.5% of the total population of Burma. “The official population in 2007 was 3,744,976, and in 2010 the population was estimated to be 3.83 million. The state is inhabited primarily by two major groups of people, the Rakhine ethnic group and the Rohingya ethnic group. According to Government Divisional Administration estimates, 10,33,212 Rohingya live in Northern Arakan State. The majority of the people of Arakan State are Buddhists, with the second-largest group being Muslims. The Rakhine people or ‘Arakanese’ i.e. ‘The Buddhists’ are the largest ethnic group in Rakhine State” (Mohammed Ashraf Alam 2011: 1). “Most Arakanese are Buddhist, but perhaps 15 per cent of them follow Islam. The Islamic Arakanese, known as Rohingyas, a name based on the historical name of the region, Rohang” (Encyclopaedia of Britannica, Arakanese). The Muslim Rohingya primarily lives in the Arakan region of the country where they constitute around 30% of the total population of Arakan State and speak a dialect distinct from Burmese and Bengali.

“In Arakan State, the majority-ethnic Rakhine reside mainly in the lowland valleys, including Lemro, Kaladan, and Mayu, as well as Ramree and Manaung (Cheduba) Islands. The Rohingya primarily live in the northern part of Arakan State. Other Muslim groups include Kaman Muslims (indigenous to Myanmar) and Rakhine Muslims (descendants of mixed marriages with Rakhine Buddhists). There are also a number of other ethnic minorities, such as the Chins, Mro, Chakma, Khami, Dainet, and Maramagri, who inhabit the hill regions of the state” (Mohammed Ashraf Alam 2011: 2).

“An independent Arakanese kingdom was probably established as early as the 4th century and was led at various times by Muslim as well as Buddhist rulers. Modern Arakanese continue to follow distinctive traditions and to celebrate this part of their history. The huge Mahamuni statue (now in Madalay) is considered by Buddhist Arakanese to be their national image and is alleged to predate the Burmese kingdom centered at Pagan (AD 1044–1287) by a millennium. Eventually the Mongols, and later the Portuguese, invaded Arakan. In 1785 Burmese forces conquered the Arakanese kingdom and carried the Mahamuni statue off to Mandalay. The Arakan region was ceded to the British in 1826 through the Treaty of Yandaboo. When Myanmar became independent from British rule in 1948, the province in which the Arakanese are dominant was named Arakan; this name was changed to Rakhine in the 1990s”. (Encyclopaedia of Britannica: Arakanese).

“The Rakhine also have a long history of distinctive culture and identity, and ethnic grievance and tensions with the central government have continued until the present day. The human rights situation of the Muslims has especially deteriorated since Burma’s independence. Citizenship restrictions on the Rohingya population in the Bangladesh borders have deepened their exclusion from employment and other opportunities. Delays on marriage permits have led to a backlog of applications, and the requirement of passes to travel from villages has disproportionately affected the Rohingya population, even for day trips to health clinics” (Chizom Ekeh and Martin Smith 2007:) “The Rakhine language is widely spoken in the region and is mutually intelligible with Burmese. The Arakan League for Democracy (ALD), which won 11 out of 26 contested seats in the

1990 elections (becoming the country’s third largest political party) seeks to represent the Rakhine” (COI Report 2012: 97).

Today the Rohingyas are one of the most discriminated communities in the world. Although they have been living in Rakhine (Arakan) State in western Burma for centuries, the Burmese Government considers them to be foreigners in Burma. Thus, they are refused citizenship and face some of the worst discrimination and abuse in the country. This persecution of the Rohingyas is part of a national policy of ‘Burmanisation’, They lack access to basic services such as education and health care, and are often victims of human trafficking.

#### 2.4.8 Shans

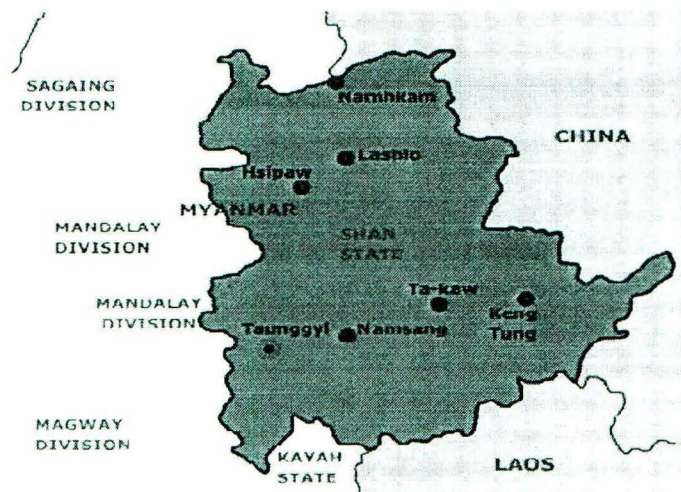


Fig. 2.8 (Shans State, Burma)

“The Shans have been politically the most autonomous and organizationally the most sophisticated” (Smith 1982: 6) one when compared to the other ethnic minority groups in Burma. Most ethnic Shans live in Shans State which borders China to the north, Laos to the east, and Thailand to the south, and five administrative divisions of Burma in the west and smaller Shans communities also live in Kachins State and Kayah state. Most of them are Buddhists by religion. Some Shans are also Christians. Though current census information for Burma is unavailable, there are an estimated 4-6 million Shans in Burma. The census in 1982 notes the Shans state as having 4.2 million inhabitants. “The term



Shans itself is however problematic, at least as it is used by Burma authorities, since they include under this term 33 ethnic groups that are in fact quite distinct and to a large degree unrelated except for close geographic proximity” (Minority Rights Group International, 2008).

British colonial rule from the nineteenth century resulted in Shans states being ruled by their hereditary chiefs as British protectorates. Most of these protectorates were brought together in 1922 under the banner of the 'Federated Shans States' administered by an appointed commissioner. This eventually led to the creation of a 'Shans State' under the 1948 Constitution of independent Burma, which also provided for a right to secession after 10 years.

“The Shans have a strong hierarchical society with traditional authority vested in the sawbwas (prince or maharaja), who, up until 1959, retained title in name at least to all the land of their domain” (Steinberg 1982: 8). Actually in 1947, Shans leaders signed the Panglong Agreement with the Government of Burma, which aimed to create a unified Burma in which Shans State would be largely autonomous in which they were allowed to keep many of their traditional feudal rights, and would also have the option to secede from the Union after 10 years of independence. This Agreement never came to practice. Later on “In 1958-59 the military caretaker government of General Ne Win finally managed to persuade the Shans Sawbwa to give up their traditional rights, but this only accelerated the growing number of young Shans beginning to join the underground resistance movement” (Smith 1994:59). The Shans along with other ethnic minority groups the Mon and Karen hereafter become more apprehensive of the government authorities in Yangon (Rangoon) which was completely dominated by ethnic Burmese and discriminating against non-Burmese contributed to the emergence of violent opposition. From 1962 the government's increased its centralising 'Burmanisation' efforts by making Burmese the exclusive medium of instruction in state schools (with on occasion some teaching of English). This aggrieved most of the minority ethnic community.

Two main Shans armed insurgent forces operate within Shans State: the Shans State Army/Special Region 3 and Shans State Army/Restoration Council of Shans State as the Shans have been engaged in intermittent civil war with Burmese regime. Even during 2007 their conditions reveal no significant improvement as a result of the on-going conflict between some Shans rebel groups and the Burmese army resulting into all sorts of atrocities and even leading to the upsurge of refugees' problem resulting into underdevelopment of the region. However, on 2 December 2011 the government signed an agreement with the Shans State Army-South. The report noted that "the agreement included not only a ceasefire, but government assurances of economic development, a joint-task force working against illegal drugs in Shans State, and the opening of liaison offices."(COI Report: 2012).

## 2.5 THE PANGLONG AGREEMENT, 1947

In February 1947, in Panglong Conference, General Aung San expressed his government's commitment to minority rights. "The first Panglong Agreement signed on 12 February 1947 had accepted full autonomy in internal administration for the ethnic controlled frontier areas after independence from Britain" (Ganganath Jha 2011: 44). The Agreement, signed by representatives of the Shans, Kachins, and Chins, stated that "citizens of the Frontier Areas shall enjoy rights and privileges which are regarded as fundamental in democratic countries", thus ensuring ethnic minorities the same rights and treatment as ethnic Burman citizens, and granted "full autonomy in internal administration for the Frontier Areas". However, this agreement has never been enforced as Bogyoke Aung San was assassinated in July 1947.

"Bogyoke Aung San, who headed Burma's independence movement and government as the acting Prime Minister of independent Burma, fully understood that only a federal arrangement would work in a multi-ethnic Burma. Ethnic nationalities were granted the right to self-determination, a certain degree of regional autonomy, and separate state legislature in accordance with the terms and conditions set forth in the historic Panglong Agreement" (Kanbawza Win, Feb 13th, 2013).

The Burmese government had promised the minorities of a degree of local autonomy (only to some minorities) and constitutional protection under the 1948 constitution on certain matters in the early years of independence. However with the ascendance of the military all these hopes had disappeared. And the religious minorities have begun to feel that their religions have been placed in jeopardy by the Buddhist oriented military government. By 1950's Burmese ethnic divisions were deep. "Burma's experience of functioning democracy ceased, ethnic division intensified further as army leaders sought a military solution to the ethnic conflict that now plagued the country" (Ian Holliday 2010).

A new constitution promulgated in 1974 established a structure of seven Burman divisions and seven ethnic states that persists to this day, and a 1982 nationality law identified 135 ethnic groups located within eight major national races. The Rohingya people are not recognised by the government as an ethnic nationality of Burma, and thus suffer from some of the worst discrimination and human rights abuses of all the people of Burma. So, ethnic tension remained a key motive guiding every new government and is the greatest challenge faced by any government even at present in such an ethnically diverse nation. The leaders of many minority ethnic nationalities are of the opinion that fighting will never end unless another Panglong Agreement is signed and respected. It is the aspiration of the ethnic groups to call for another Panglong conference.

## 2.6 KALE DECLARATION

After six decades of the first Panglong conference (1947), "The NLD had a meeting with all the ethnic leaders at Kale on 22 October 2010, which called for a federal system based on equity and democracy to be established through a second Panglong conference" (Ganganath Jha 2001: 45, Ganganath Jha, *The quest for democracy* 6). As a result Kale Declaration was announced and support for the provisions of Panglong Agreement was once again reiterated.

The Kale Declaration was signed by 109 ethnic leaders and politicians. The Declaration "emphasized that dialogues with ethnic leaders are important and the ways to resolve the problems of the Kachins, Karens, Shans, Chins or Rohingyas can be found with

continued dialogues and understanding” (Ganganath Jha *The quest for democracy* 7). It also called for an end to dictatorship, respect for human rights and democracy for the people. “Many Mon, Arakan and Karen ethnic leaders who did not take part in the Panglong Conference signed the Kale Declaration and most ethnic case-fire groups and armed ethnic groups now support a second Panglong Conference” (Kanbawza Win 2013).

Ethnic communities supported the call of Second Panglong conference by Daw Aung San where all the ethnic groups can attend on the basis of equality and find a solution to their decade long pending ethnic issues. “All the ethnic communities residing in the country wants to be the components of the Genuine Union of Burma as envisage by its founder Bogyoke Aung San and is desirous to stay in the Union but not at the expense of the dominance of the Myanmar race over the other ethnic nationalities, who have become second citizens” (Kanbawza Win, 2013).

The ethnic political parties that won alongside NLD candidates have issued a statement titled “Declaration of Decision in Kale Township,” which supports a second Panglong statement with four basic political goals. “The four goals are

- (1) an end to dictatorship,
- (2) to restore democracy,
- (3) to promote human rights and
- (4) to bring about national reconciliation with the united support of all nationalities” (Kanbawza Win, Feb 13th, 2013).

Moreover, the statement reaffirmed the importance of a federal democratic system while rejecting the unitary system enshrined in the 2008 Constitution. It also rejected any cessation from the union, a charge level against ethnic groups by the junta throughout its history.

Suu Kyi is influence by Gandhian philosophy of non-violence. As a result she refused the ideas of separatism and violence in her long struggle for democracy and ethnic inclusion.

She argued that the desired objectives can be achieved through peaceful and nonviolent means. “She had stated that she agrees with the broad objectives of Panglong Agreement but she will never support secession of any part of the country. The issue of autonomy can be discussed under the rubric of federal structure and her opinion is supported by majority of ethnic leaders. Khuensai Jai-Yen, a Shan intellectual is quoted as saying that, “Of course the decisive authority is in junta’s hands, but we have only Suu Kyi who holds Bogyoke Aung Sang’s legacy to bring it from the military to us” (Ganganath Jha The quest for democracy 7).

## 2.7 CONCLUSION

Burma has presence of complex ethnic groups since time immemorial. Understand today’s Myanmar rely heavily on going back to the history of Burma. A country with diverse ethnic groups colonised by western power is always an easy prey for divide and rule policy of the colonisers. Burma is not an exception too. It is because of the British legacy of this policy which is manifested in the outcome of the Panglong Agreement which wielded the country into deep ethnic wound. Therefore, the genesis of present ethnic rebellion by the ethnic minorities could be traced back to the Panglong Agreement (1947) which guaranteed secession from the Union of Burma after a decade. The second Panglong statement could be a significant move forward on the part of the NLD and ethnic groups, designed to strengthen the democratic movement and assert leadership in the new political landscape. For the NLD, it represents a follow-up action to its recent announcement that it will seek opportunities to talk to leaders of ethnic cease-fire groups under its long-term pursuit of genuine national reconciliation.

The tussle for power between the Junta regime and pro-democracy supporter, and the ethnic groups demand for greater autonomy or even to the extent of secession dominate the politics of Myanmar which leave the country to the least developed country in the world. Therefore, it is high time the military, NLD and ethnic groups should take responsibility to go for reconciliation for the development and restoration of peace and tranquillity in the country.

## CHAPTER- 3

### ETHNIC POLICY UNDER SLORC

Myanmar has been ruled by a succession of military regimes since 1962. The country has been under military caretaker government from 1958 to 1960 but after military coup the country was ruled by military-backed regime headed by General Ne Win from 1962 to 1988, in which Burma was totally isolated from the outside world. From 1962 up till 1988 Burma's military regime was called the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). During this period Ne Win abandoned Aung San's "unity in diversity" enshrined by the 1948 Constitution which stood for a mixture of nationalism, communism and parliamentary ideas. Aung San called for "equal economic development and simultaneous independence for all ethnic groups as the best way to bring the country together" (Martin Smith 1994: 26). Ne Win instead adopted two-fold strategy under Burmese way to Socialism of Burma Socialist Programme Party in dealing with diverse ethnic groups. The two-fold strategy mentioned by Martin Smith are "To run an all-out counter insurgency campaign in the rural country side while at the same time trying to establish a centralised, one-party system of government radiating out from Rangoon into the ethnic minorities states" (Martin Smith 1994: 25). It is important to note that Ne Win's harsh policy of 'forced assimilation' failed to capture the heart of various ethnic minorities and thereby resulted into unsuccessful peace talks under the Burma Socialist Programme Party government. As a result human rights violations were meted out to the general public and led the country to abject poverty in consequence to the 'Four Cut Policy'. Such policy of the Junta led Brown described Myanmar as an 'ethnocratic state' that 'acts as the agency of the dominant ethnic community' and requires of other ethnic groups their 'assimilation into the dominant ethnic culture' (Brown 1994, 36-37). The Burmese military government promoted the dominant Burman culture through a process that has been called Burmanisation" (Walton 2013: 11).

However 1988 marked the dawn of BSPP regime and the formation of SLORC. "In the wake of the September 1988 students' uprisings, that was ruthlessly put down by the then governing junta, two groups emerged on the political front in Myanmar- The State Law

and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and the National League for Democracy (NLD) under the charismatic leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi”<sup>12</sup>

### 3.1 WHAT IS SLORC (STATE LAW AND ORDER RESTORATION COUNCIL)?

The State Law and Order Restoration Council abbreviated as (SLORC) was the official name of the military regime of Myanmar, which seized power in 1988. It comprised of nineteen officers (Steinberg 2010: 82). On 18 September 1988, the SLORC was formed when the armed forces commanded by General Saw Maung seized power, crushing a pro-democracy uprising also known as ‘8-8-88 Uprising. From 1988 to 1997, Myanmar was ruled by State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which had replaced the role of Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) of General Ne Win. On 15 November 1997, SLORC was formally dissolved and reconstituted as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The powerful regional military commanders, who were members of SLORC, were promoted to new positions and transferred to the capital of Rangoon now Yangon (Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia on State Peace and development council).

There were five key members of the SLORC- the chairman, Saw Maung; deputy chairman, Than Shwe; Secretary-1, Khin Nyunt, Maung Aye, and later Secretary-2, Tin Oo. The others were mainly regional military commanders. Power lay with the SLORC and not with the Cabinet. Most ministers were also military officers. Individual cabinet members could have influence in so far as they had the ear of the top junta members, but they were clearly subordinate to the junta (Steinberg 2010: 82).

“The followings are the objectives of SLORC:

- (i) to ensure law and order;
- (ii) safe transportation and communication;

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<sup>12</sup> Shankari Sundararaman. “From SLORC to SPDC” <http://www.idsa-india.org/an-jan10.html>)

- (iii) adequacy of food;
- (iv) housing and other essential needs;
- (v) Preparations for the holding of multi-party elections”<sup>13</sup>

The newly formed SLORC proclaimed martial law, “declared its government to be extra-constitutional,” suspended the 1974 Constitution, and dissolved administrative and legislative organs. It announced an “open-door” economic policy, and promised political reform. For a short time, new political parties were allowed to form, and allowed to register under Law 6/88, the Law on Associations. The SLORC declared its intention to transfer power to a civilian government, and conducted a largely free election in May 1990<sup>14</sup>. In 1989, The State Law and Order Restoration Council under the leadership of General Saw Maung announced that the country’s name be changed from Burma to Myanmar, which many ethnic opposed thinking that it is the assimilationist move of the government and still prefer to use the term Burma even today.

In 1990, the regime rejected the election result and kept the leader of pro-democracy movement under house arrest from time to time. So it can be said that elements of BSPP totalitarian Burmese way to socialism is still practiced. As a result of the brutality of SLORC regime many were of the opinion that SLORC’s mission was to eliminate all forms of internal dissent or rebellion. After the establishment of power, the SLORC expanded the Tatmadaw or the SLORC officers to 321,000, almost double the 1988 size. It also procured arms and increased its intelligence capabilities.

### 3.2 GENERAL SAW MAUNG AND THAN SHWE

Senior General Saw Maung was the founder of the State Law and Order Restoration Council, later renamed State Peace and Development Council in 1997. He served as

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</sup> URL: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/slorc.htm>).



Chairman from 1988 to 1992. He was the first Chairman of SLORC, and served as Chairman from 1988 to 1992. Later on he became the Prime Minister. He was removed as both Chairman of SLORC and Prime Minister on 23 April 1992, when General Than Shwe, later Senior General, took over both posts from him.

Senior General Saw Maung was an important figure of SLORC as well as BSPP. He assumed responsibility as chairman of the newly-formed SLORC on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1988 and promised for multi-party election. He publicly stated that he would hand over power to the winning party and would have the army return to the barracks; where in his own words they “rightfully belonged”.

SLORC held free elections in 1990. The 1990 parliamentary elections were won by the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi, but SLORC did not accept the results. Saw Maung resigned as Chairman of SLORC in April 1992. According to the junta this was for health reasons. Some believed that Saw Maung's decision to hand over power to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy was too much for other generals who also had the consent from Ne Win to carry out the palace coup. Apart from all these, he is said to have considered himself “as the reincarnation of one of the great Burmese kings, Kyanzitha of the Pagan Dynasty. He dressed himself in royal ragalia and performed various rituals associated with royalty. Ne Win eventually gave the informal authorization for his removal, and he was replaced by General Than Shwe” (Steinberg 2010: 83).

Finally in 1992 General Than Shwe became the leader of the junta and took the position of the Prime Minister. As such political prisoners were released, most martial law decrees were lifted and plans to draft a new constitution were announced. However despite these moves the army gave no sign that it would be returning the government to the civilian control, which drew the condemnation of the United Nation Security Council.

### 3.3 NATIONAL UNITY PARTY /USDA

The SLORC in order to legitimise its position had gone for certain political reforms- “first, the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) was replaced by National Union

Party (NUP). The NUP like the BSPP was the political wing of the SLORC and was expected to give the much needed civilian hue to the SLORC”<sup>15</sup>. A number of civilians were made the member of NUP, though many of them were retired Army Officers, so that the regime looks more civil-oriented. Moreover, NUP was remodelled in order to broaden the SLORC’s power base. “As a result NUP was replaced by Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA)- this was not an officially registered party but was more of a broad association”<sup>16</sup>. According to historian Andrew Marshall, the USDA is a “nationalist organization which acted as the regime’s Rotweiller...” (Alison Koistinen 2003: 353).

As given in Irrawady News, “The USDA was formed by the regime’s top generals in 1993 to foster ‘political leadership’ among civilians and to form a people’s militia to carry out the regime’s ‘people’s war strategy’ which was intended to protect the state from internal and external threats while co-opting the entire nation into the general’s military mentality. During the 1990’s, civil servants (including the armed forces) and many teachers and students were coerced into joining the USDA. Ostensibly formed as a social organisation, the USDA was in fact a civilian structure of the regime, and its policies mirrored those of the ruling junta. Wearing a white shirt and green longyi, the USDA’s civilian uniform, the members of the organization were used by the general to promote the regime’s image in the eyes of the public” (The Irrawady, April 26, 2013). The USDA functions as the main channel in disseminating the military’s view and acts as one of the most important elements of the military machine (K. Yhome 2008: 10). Senior General Than Shwe is the patron of the USDA. This indicates the importance the military attaches to this organisation. Despite the effort to legitimise their rule by forming USDA which included the civilians it failed to establish the continued junta’s rule as civilian oriented regime. Many still regards USDA as equally synonymous with the military junta. “In 2010, the USDA was renamed as Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and participated in the national elections” (Sampa Kundu: 2012).

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<sup>15</sup> (Shankari Sundararaman. “From SLORC to SPDC” URL: <http://www.idsa-india.org/an-jan10.html>)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3.4 THE 1990 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN MYANMAR

The 1990 General Election was an important landmark in the history of Myanmar as it was held for the first time since 1960 in which various ethnic minorities groups contested the national election. In September 1988, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in its Declaration No. 1, had set four goals for the country: to maintain law and order, improve transportation, improve the humanitarian situation and hold multi-party elections (James F Guyot, 1991). By early 1989, 235 political parties were lawfully registered under the Political Parties Registration Law 4/88. On 31 May 1989 SLORC enacted Law No. 14/89, the Pyithu Hluttaw Election Law, clearly stating that free and fair multi-party elections were to be held to “elect the representatives of the Pyithu Hluttaw”, or People’s Assembly (*Pyithu Hluttaw Election Law*, 31 May 1989) This law clearly indicates that Parliament would be convened after recognizing the election results. As per the declaration a date was fixed and general election was held on 27 May 1990, the first multi-party election since 1960, after which the country had been ruled by a military dictatorship.

On the eve of 1990 elections, all the ethnic leaders had come out with their manifestos and had supported NLD in the hope to dislodge the military and gain autonomy. Interestingly, many ethnic parties have also come up to contest the election to assert their stake in the mainstream politics. 93 political parties presented a total of 2,297 candidates to contest the 485 constituencies, with at least 2 candidates per constituency. Of the 93, 19 different ethnic parties also took part in the election (David I Steinberg, 2001: 46). The National League for Democracy was able to win 392(80%) of the 485 seats. The military backed party, the National Unity Party (NUP), won only ten 10 seats (2%). The outcome of the results shows the intensity of people’s aspirations for democracy in the country. Military backed party was voted out from form further forming the military government. The ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus pointed out that, “the results of the elections indicate that many people in the military institutions themselves did not vote for the military-backed party” (ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus: 4).

TABLE 3.1 THE STATISTICAL RECORD OF THE ELECTION IN 1990

No. of constituencies	492
No. of elections held	485 (7 constituencies suspended for security reasons)
No. of eligible voters	20,818,313
No. of votes cast	15,112,5243
No. of valid votes cast	13,253,606
No. of party candidates	2,209, , of whom 479 were elected
No. of independent candidates	87, of whom 6 were elected
No. of registered political parties	235
No. of parties presenting candidates	93

	No. of Seats	% of 485 Contested	No. of Valid Votes	% of Valid Votes Cast
National League for Democracy	392	80.82	7,934,622	59.87
Shan Nationalities League for democracy	23	4.74	222,821	1.68
Arakan League for Democracy	11	2.27	160,783	1.21
National Unity Party	10	2.06	2,805,559	21.16
Mon Democratic Front	5	1.03	138,572	1.05
Miscellaneous parties and 2	55	11.35	2,152,032	16.24

National League for Democracy	447 candidates	(392 elected)
National Unity Party	413 candidates	(10 elected)
League for Peace and Democracy	309 candidates	(0 elected)
United National Democracy Party	247 candidates	(1 elected)

*Source: (Derek Tonkin, 2007: 35).*

Despite the party's clear victory, the SLORC refused to hand over the power to the NLD claiming that a constitution needed to be drafted first by convening a National Convention for drafting a new constitution. The NLD and ethnic party representatives issued a joint statement calling SLORC to convene the Pyithu Hluttaw in September, 1990. SLORC refused to honour the election result crackdown on the leaders of the political parties and supporters. "SLORC proceeded to isolate, imprison, and torture many of those elected, as well as activist students. Three years later, SLORC still refuses to hand over power, asserting that there must first be a new constitution, which it is trying to impose through the device of the National Convention (David Arnott: 22)". After two years of political impasse, and with members of the NLD still in jail or under house arrest, the SLORC announced, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, that it would hold a National Convention, which was eventually convened in 1993. "Daw Aung San Suu Kyi remained under house arrest from July 1989-July 1995. She was later put under house arrest again from September 2000 – May 2002 and yet again on May 30, 2003 until today" ( ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus: 5). Recently, in 2010 she is released from house arrest. This is the last time she is debarred from house arrest so far.

### 3.5 ETHNIC MINORITY POLITICAL PARTIES 1990 ELECTION

The participation of the ethnic minorities in the election of 1990 sent a message to the government their willingness to take part in the politics of the country despite their long pending struggle against the government. Though the election result was ignored and suspended by the Government it created a big impact in the history of Myanmar. Mainly because it was held for the first time since 1962 military junta rule the country. The 1990 election presented ethnic minorities with their first opportunity since the military took

power to form political parties. It also gave a opportunity to form any parties or association to represent their own ethnic interests. Moreover, despite almost all ethnic groups struggle against the government they are willing to take part in the developmental and administrative process of the country. International interest on Myanmar increased as a result of the 1990 election. As a result of the importance given to the ethnic minority community, the assessment of their performance in the election is worth knowing:

TABLE 3.2 ETHNIC MINORITIES POLITICAL PARTIES IN 1990 ELECTION

Name Constituency		Seats Won
1. Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD)*	23	Shan state
2. Arakan League for Democracy (ALD)	11	Rakhine state
3. Mon National Democratic Front (NMDF)	5	Mon/ state Karen
4. Chin National League for Democracy (CNLD)	3	Chin state
5. Kachin State National congress for Democracy (KSNCD)	3	Kachin state
6. Union Pao National Organisation (UPNO)*	3	Shan state
7. Democratic Organisation for Kayah National Unity (DOKNU)	2	Karen/ shan state
8. Kayah State All Nationalities League for Democracy (KSNLD)	All	Kayah state
9. Naga Hills regional Progressive Party (NHRPP)	2	Sagaing division
10. Ta-ang (Palaung) National League for Democracy (TNLD)	2	Shan state
11. Zomi National Congress (ZNC)	2	Chin state
12. Kaman National League for Democracy Kaman (KNLD)	1	Rakhine state
13. Karen State National Organisation (KSNO)	1	Rakhine state
14. Lahu National Development Party (LNDP)*	1	Shan state

15. Mara People's Party (MPP)	1	Chin state
16. Mro (Khami) National Solidarity Organisation (MNSO)*	1	Rakhine state
17. Shan State Kokang Democratic Party (SSKDP)*	1	Shan state
18. Union Danu League for Democracy (UDLD)	1	Shan state
19. United Nationalities League for Democracy (UNLD)	1	Sagaing division
20. Kokang Democracy and Unity Party (KDUP)*	0	Shan state
21. Union Karen League (UKL)*	0	Karen state
22. Wa National Development Party (WNDP)*	0	Shan state

Total seats contested in the election 485.

Only parties marked with an asterisk (\*) are operating legally today. All other ethnic minority parties have been disbanded by the government, most in early 1992. The only other legal political parties are the National League for Democracy (392 seats) and the National Unity Party (ten seats).

Source: *Myanmar Backgrounder: Ethnic Minority Politics*. ICG Asia Report No. 52, 7 May 2003. pp.29.

It has been always difficult to understand the policies of the military junta. It has once again come up with new policies which disbanded many political parties which took part in the election of 1990. Under Law 6/88, the Law on Associations, for a short time, new political parties were allowed to form, and allowed to register. As a result there were also a growing number of religious or community-based organisations that work to further the interests of their communities and have significant local influence. Later many of these organisations were officially banned by the military junta. "By 1992, of the 93 parties that contested in the election, most were deemed illegal. Currently, only 10 political parties remain legal, including the NLD" (ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus: 5). However, out of the ten legal parties, eight were minority parties.

By 1990's international community have started showing solidarity to the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar but the ethnic minority issue has been sidelined. "The international community interested in Burma supports the democracy organisations, with the ethnic organisations encouraged to demonstrate their solidarity with the democracy movement and Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. This has reinforced the predisposition of

the pro-democracy movement to relegate the ethnic issue to secondary importance” (ICG Asia Report 2007: 20)

“The main objective of most ethnic minority parties is the establishment of a federal state with equal rights for ethnic minorities based on democratic principles. Some parties also have specific demands related to local issues. Their first priority has often been simply to survive as legal entities and be included in the limited political activities allowed by the military government. Despite their weaknesses, the political parties are an important factor in ethnic minority politics since they are the only organisations to have been elected by the people” (ICG Asia Report 2007: 15-16).

### 3.6 THE SLORC AND ARMED ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS

Since the late 1980's or to be more specific since the elections of 1990 the military had given attention on ethnic minority issues. From 1962 till 1990, the military had downplayed ethnicity. The period from 1962 to 1990 witnessed enormous growth of ethnic insurgency in the country, each group fighting for either greater autonomy or to the extent cessation from the country against the military junta. Therefore, Insurgency has become a way of life in Myanmar since it attained independence in 1948.

With the coming of General Ne Win to power in 1962 life in the country became miserable for the ethnic minority communities. Ne Win was known for his assimilationist policy and to the extremity marginalisation policy. His ‘four cut policy’ further heightened the policy of ethnic assimilation leading to burmanisation. V.R Raghavan had rightly analysed and summed up in his book “Internal conflicts: a four state analysis’ the various way of assimilation policy of every successive government as under;

“While U Nu (1948-1962) opted for cultural and religious assimilation as a means of a Nation building process by promulgating Buddhism as a state religion, General Ne Win(1962-1988) imposed the national language policy of *Myanmar-batha-ska* as a means of creating a homogeneous unitary state. Supplementing U Nu’s policy of state religion and Ne Win’s national language policy, the current military regime is opting for *ethnicity* as a means of national integration, by imposing ethnic assimilation into *Myanmar-lumyo*.



They, thus, changed the country name from Burma to *Myanmar* in 1989” (V.R. Raghavan 2013: 250).

### 3.6.1 THE SLORC ETHNIC POLICY

By late 1980's the political climate in Myanmar got changed. Insurgency has no longer been seen as a threat rather economic disparity between the ethnic minority groups and the majority Burman has become a major area of difference and issues. K. Yhome, a famous writer on Myanmar has written that, “By 1988, the ethnic insurgencies were no longer seen as a serious threat to the integrity of the Union of Myanmar, though several group remained undefeated. However, the increasing protests from the pro-democracy supporters and others discontented with the worsening economic conditions in the cities now turned out to be the major problem for the regime”. (K. Yhome 2008: 6). “But in the ethnic minority regions the situation has remained tense and the period 1988-92 initially witnessed some of the heaviest fighting in all the years since independence in 1948” (Martin Smith 1994: 28). However, ethnicity still acts as one of the major headache for the ruling regime, the difference with the earlier regime being only in degree of struggle. While in the past ethnic aspiration against the junta was at its peak but now at present they come to the negotiation table with the junta through signing of cease-fire agreement.

The military once again used ethnic card for its continued rule after ignoring the 1990 election results in which NLD got the thumping majority. The military gave a justification by giving an argument for its continued military rule that, “without the army in control, the different ethnic nationalities would secede from the Union and split the nation. SLORC has therefore avoided a peace settlement with the ethnic opposition as a whole up to this time, though it has approached most of the groups individually, and made deals with some of them (David Arnott: 3).

The SLORC has “Increased its military strength drastically, increasing troop numbers from an estimated 190,000 in 1988 to over 300,000 by 1993” (Martin Smith 1994: 28). This indirectly creates a pressure on the non-Burman ethnic nationalities to come to a ceasefire on SLORC's term otherwise military offensive.

In 1989, in a switch of policy, the SLORC played divide and rule policy upon the various ethnic groups by offering ceasefire agreement. Therefore, two types of ethnic insurgent group emerged- one group who signed ceasefire agreement with the Junta, while the other groups who are not part of the cease fire agreement. "The junta began offering selective ceasefires to a number of breakaway ethnic minority armies of CPB. Simultaneously, however, it sent over 80,000 troops into action against the KNU and various Mon, Kachin and Karenni armed nationalist groups in the NDF coalition. Fighting was particularly fierce along the Thai and Chinese borders, and there was a growing exodus of refugees, before the SLORC suddenly called an unexpected halt to all military offensives in the name of 'national unity' in April 1992" (Martin Smith 1994: 29). In the non-ceasefire areas, especially in the Chin, Karen, Karenni and Shan borderlands, there were still clashes and intensive government intensive counter insurgency operations (V R Raghavan 2012: 64).

"Since April 1992 when the first SLORC chairman, General Saw Maung was replaced by his deputy, General Than Shwe, the cease-fire process with armed ethnic minority groups has rapidly accelerated. By late 1994, over 15 insurgent groups had cease-fires or were in direct talks with the government" (Martin Smith 1994: 30). "The Kachin Independence Organization signed a cease-fire with SLORC on 24 February 1994, and the Karenni National Progressive Party on 21 March 1995". (David Arnott: 23). "The ceasefire agreements that the Myanmar government signed with 17 ethnic armed groups between 1989 and 1997 brought the signatories under the government's Border Area Development Programme. Basically, the armed groups were allowed to retain their arms and their territory in return for a ceasefire with the junta. As a result, these groups posed less of a challenge to the junta-backed State Peace and Development Council. Gen Khin Nyunt, former chief of intelligence in the Myanmar army, who was subsequently put under house arrest for criminal charges against him in 2004, was the brain behind this strategy. This allowed the junta to focus its energies away from the armed insurgents in the ethnic areas and the territories under their control" (Medha Chaturvedi, IPCS Special Special Report 131, June, 2012).

The ceasefires had a major impact on the strategic balance. Despite the ceasefires, many armed ethnic groups preferred to remain outside the political reform. The table below has given a clear view of the cease fire and non-ceasefire ethnic insurgent groups.

TABLE 3.3 MAIN CEASEFIRE GROUPS LOCATION AND DATE OF AGREEMENT

1. Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)	1989	Shan State
2. United Wa State Party/Army (UWSP/A)	1989	Shan State
3. National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA)	1989	Shan State
4. Shan State Army – north (SSA)	1989	Shan State
5. New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K)	1989	Kachin State
6. Kachin Defence Army (KDA) [former KIO 4th Brigade]	1991	Shan State
7. Pao National Organisation (PNO)	1991	Shan State
8. Palaung State Liberation Party (PSLP)	1991	Shan State
9. Kayan National Guard (KNG) [breakaway group from KNLP]	1992	Kayah State
10. Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO)	1994	Kachin State
11. Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front (KNPLF)	1994	Kayah State
12. Kayan New Land Party (KNLP)	1994	Kayah/Shan State

13. Shan Nationalities People's Liberation Organisation (SNPLO)	1994	Shan State
14. New Mon State Party (NMSP)	1995	Mon State
15. K.N.U. 7 <sup>th</sup> Brigade*	2007	Karen State

TABLE 3.4 OTHER ARMED GROUPS WITH CEASEFIRE STATUS

Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) [breakaway group from KNU]	1995	Kayin State
Mongko Peace Land Force (MPLF) [Kokang splinter group]	1995	Shan State
Shan State National Army (SSNA) [breakaway group from MTA]	1995	Shan State
Mong Tai Army (MTA) [dissolved]	1996	Shan State
Karenni National Defence Army (KNDA) [breakaway group from KNPP]	1996	Kayah State
Karen Peace Force (KPA) [former KNU 16 <sup>th</sup> Battalion]	1997	Kayin State
Communist Party of Burma – Arakan State	1997	Rakhine State
KNU 2 Brigade Special Region Group- Toungoo	1997	Kayin State

Source: Myanmar Backgrounder: Ethnic Minority Politics. ICG Asia Report No. 52, 7 May 2003, pp.27-28

### 3.6.2 GOALS AND STRATEGIES OF CEASEFIRE GROUPS

“The main grievances of ethnic minority groups in Burma are lack of influence in the political decision-making processes; the absence of economic and social development in their areas; and what they see as a Burmanisation policy of the military government that translates into repression of their cultural rights and religious freedom” (Tom Kramer, 2009: 16). The ethnic minority groups rebel against the government due to the unfair treatment meted out to them by the government. “Most ethnic minority organisations now reject separatism, instead calling for a federal state based on democratic principles that would safeguard the political, economic and cultural rights of ethnic minorities. The key words for ethnic minority aspirations are self-determination and equality” (Tom Kramer, 2009: 16). Most of the ethnic leaders extend their support to the NLD’s call for a tripartite negotiation between ethnic groups, NLD and the military government for bringing solution to the problem faced in Myanmar for so many decades. “For such groups as the KIO, NMSP and UWSP the ceasefires are part of a longer-term strategy to achieve change. While the goals of these groups are similar, it is useful to look at the cease-fire agreements as a peace-building and reconciliation approach, and compare the different ways in which the different groups have tried to use the cease-fire to reach their goals. All have had successes and failures. However, generally speaking, all have an ethnic nationalist agenda, and, after decades of war, have focused on promoting political change through dialogue (Tom Kramer, 2009: 16, V R Raghavan 2012: 65).

### 3.6.3 ARMED ETHNIC MINORITY ORGANISATIONS

TABLE 5 NON-CEASEFIRE GROUPS LOCATION

1. Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP)	Kayah State (1995 ceasefire broke down after three months)
2. Karen National Union (KNU)	Kayin State and Tenasserim Division (1996/97 negotiations broke down)
3. Shan State Army (SSA)	South Shan State (formed after MTA dissolved)
4. Wa National Army (WNA)	Shan State (1997 talks broke down)
5. Hongsawatoi Restoration Party (HRP)	Mon State (break-away group from NMSP 2001)
6. Mergui-Tavoy United Front (former CPB group)	Tenasserim Division Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) Kayin State
7. Lahu National Organisation (LNO)	Shan State
8. National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN)	Sagaing Division
9. Chin National Front (CNF)	Chin State
10. Arakan Rohingya National Organisation (ARNO)	Rakhine State
11. National Unity Party of Arakan (NUPA)	Rakhine State

Source: Myanmar Backgrounder: ethnic Minority Politics, ICG Asia Report.

The Four Cut Strategy has been employed by all the three military governments as a strategy to assimilate the various ethnic nationalities. It resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Burma's ethnic nationalities. The military governments also promote Burman identity and culture through institutional means.

“Historical KNU leaders such as Ba U Gyi, Mahn Ba Zan, Bo Mya and, currently, Saw Ba Thin, have maintained their platform of no surrender. As a result, the fighting between the Karen and the pro-Burman military governments has the dubious distinction of being one of the longest and most under-reported civil wars throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (Jack Fong, 2008: 329). Politically, the ethnic minorities are divided over goals, strategy, and other issues, and have been unable to come under one organisation in their struggle for autonomy.

### 3.7 WHY MILITARY JUNTA INITIATED CEASE-FIRE AGREEMENT

Min Zin, has given the following reasons, “The Burmese junta has accepted this situation for at least three reasons. First, the ceasefire accords have allowed the military to avoid multiple enemy fronts in the aftermath of the 1988 pro-democracy uprising and to focus mainly on suppressing political opposition in central Burma. Secondly, the ceasefire condition that prevails in the border areas has enabled the Burmese military to make unprecedented advances in its relations with neighboring countries— especially China and Thailand—in both security and economic terms. The neighbors that once supported Burma's ethnic rebels along their borders as a key part of their buffer policy or because of an ideological affinity have now shifted to the policy of full economic cooperation with the Burmese junta through massive investment and border trade. Lastly, the ceasefire accords give the military regime the much-needed political legitimacy that they have lost since the bloody crackdown on the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. The regime constantly points to the ethnic ceasefire groups as the most defining feature of its “national reconsolidation” policy and as evidence of its claims to legitimacy” (Min Zin, *The Irrawady*, January 23, 2009). However, the main drawback of the ceasefires was the absence of a sustainable peace process and political development as a follow up to the

agreements. Even today after 2 decades of ceasefire agreement no political solution has been discuss so far.

### 3.8 CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it has been concluded that with the assuming of power by SLORC Generals, and the subsequent signing of the cease fire agreements with various armed insurgent group Myanmar caught the attention of international community. But this is not enough to bring peace in this diverse ethnic state. Kramer rightly pointed out that, “politically oriented armed-insurgencies had largely withered away, but ethnic-based insurgencies remained alive well during the conflict” (Kramer, Tom July 2009).

Even today since the country’s independence the internal conflict has engulfed Myanmar in which successive government fought myriad ethnic and political rebellions. The ethnic groups felt desolated in the hands of the centralised administration of the junta in which power flows from their hand. Walton argued that “Ethnicity is one of the primary lenses through which scholars view conflict in Burma/Myanmar” (Matthew j. Walton 2012: 1). So understanding the root cause of ethnic problem is very important in case of Myanmar.

To resolve ethnic conflict a proper political solution be brought forth with. Military rejection of discussing with the ethnic minority groups should be replaced with political dialogue. Without addressing ethnic minority issues, democracy will still be a far dream.

No doubt the cease-fire agreements reduce fighting, still minor skirmishes also do occurred between tatmadaw and troops of ethnic opposition who are not a signatory to ceasefire agreement like in Karen, Kachin, Mon and Karenni areas. The military junta make tall claim of ceasefire agreement officially as its biggest achievement. For this reason they don’t want to break the cease fire agreement. So, one can say that cease fire is just for the security and military matter of the regime

It is desirable that instead of isolating the issue of ethnic minority issues entirely to the military junta, all national and international actors concerned with peace and democracy in Burma should actively engage with them, and involve them in discussions about political change in the country.



## CHAPTER 4

### ETHNIC POLICY UNDER SPDC

The ethnic policy of the military government under the SPDC regime is no different from its predecessors. Policy making in Myanmar has been opaque and centralised since inception. This top down approach is still very much evident under the SPDC rule. From 1962 to 1988 the government impoverished the country through its autarkic policies in which ethnic minority groups suffered the brunt of the over centralised policy of the junta. The successful changes which took place in the country were only the name of the regime which brought no significant impact on the ethnic policy. Since 1962 the military regime has ruled the country under different name, from 1962 until 1988 Burma's military regime was called the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). In 1988, when the military staged a coup on September 18, they renamed it the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). David I Steinberg called this transfer of power which was designed to continue military control by alternative means as "coup by consent" (Steinberg 2010: 81). In 1997, when the military government was allowed into Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), they made a public relations move and changed their name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

No wonder that the regime is always eager to retain power. In the process of retaining power the regime come up with various policies in the name of development for all sections of the country. Such policies always sound good but in reality when implemented it turned out to be a mechanism to control and subjugate the diverse ethnic groups. The ethnic people even find difficult to survive in their own land. Many development activities had been carried out in the name of developing the entire infrastructure of the nation, in consequence forced relocation and human right violation are not uncommon. For example, the ceasefire agreement has been used an instrument for greater tatmadaw access into ethnic nationality areas. The regime hardly cares for the plight of the minorities in the land; rather its objective has always been to project a dominion Burman status. The government ethnic policies and the outcome of those

policy frameworks are always mismatch. The various technique and policies in which the government tries to legitimise its rule are discussed in this chapter.

#### 4.1 WHAT IS SPDC (STATE PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL (SPDC))?

It is abbreviated as state peace and development council. It was the official name of the military regime of Myanmar, which ruled the country from 1997 to 2011. Some were of the opinion that it was no different from its predecessor, the SLORC. The change was only in name. From 1988 to 1997, the military regime was known as State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). In 1997, SLORC was abolished and reconstituted as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). The powerful regional military commanders, who were members of SLORC, were promoted to new positions and transferred to the capital of Rangoon (now Yangon). On 30 March 2011, Senior General Than Shwe signed a decree that officially dissolved the Council. It is important to note that the “SPDC is no different from the SLORC, even the four core generals from the SLORC- Than Shwe, Maung Aye, Khin Nyunt, and Tin Oo were retained and the remaining members were also from the regional commanders, who were occasionally rotated” (Steinberg 2010: 83).

The national objectives of State Peace and Development Council are listed under

##### **“Our Three Main National Causes**

- Non-disintegration of the Union
- Non-disintegration of National Solidarity
- Consolidation of National Sovereignty

##### People’s Desire

- Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views
- Oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the state and progress of the nation
- Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State

- Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy

#### Four Political Objectives

- Stability of the State, community peace and tranquillity, prevalence of law and order
- National reconsolidation
- Emergence of a new enduring State constitution
- Building of a new modern developed nation in accord with a new State constitution

#### Four Economic Objectives

- Development of agriculture as the base and all-round development of other economy sectors as well
- Proper evolution of the market-oriented economic system
- Development of the economy inviting participation in terms of technical know-how and investments from sources inside the country and abroad
- Initiative to shape the national economy must be kept in the hands of the State and the national peoples

#### Four Social Objectives

- Uplift the morale and morality of the entire nation
- Uplift national prestige and integrity and preservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage and national character
- Uplift dynamism of patriotic spirit
- Uplift health, fitness, and education standards of the entire nation”

(Ian Holliday 2007: 388).

The junta considered the ethnic opposition as the primary threat to the realisation of the above mentioned goals. The above objectives of the SPDC government clearly reflects the over centralising ethnocentric state policy of the junta in which the diversity of the country was ignored.

#### 4.2 BORDER AREAS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME OF THE GOVERNMENT

Border Area Development Programme was initiated in 1989 as a part of the ceasefire movement. In 1992, this became the Ministry for the Progress of Border Areas and National Races and developed a master plan for border area development involving all the main line ministries (V R Raghavan 2012: 100). A 1993 SLORC decree set out the objectives of the programme, which were ostensibly about development and preserving “the culture, literature and customs of the national races” (Chin Human Rights Organization 2012: 11),

“The Master Plan for the Development of the Border Areas and National Races sets five goals:

- a) To develop the economic and social works and roads and communications of the national races at the border areas.
- b) To cherish and preserve the culture, literature and customs of the national races.
- c) To strengthen the amity among the national races.
- d) To eradicate totally the cultivation of poppy plants by establishing economic enterprises.
- e) To preserve and maintain the security, prevalence of law and order and regional peace and tranquillity of the border areas”. (Curtis W. Lambrecht 2009).

Border development is explicitly subsumed by the Three Main National Causes and, as such, is heavily focused on bolstering the strength of the regime and eliminating opposition. As mentioned earlier the policy of the government had always talked about

noble causes for the entire ethnic races but nothing impacted the standard of living of the people and even border development programme has remained a vehicle for oppression.

“Burmese development, particularly in the border regions, is principally a State-building exercise oriented toward the realisation of three goals: the extension and solidification of the regime's control over the populace, the extraction of natural resources, and the construction of a national identity through efforts to depoliticize ethnicity” (Curtis W. Lambrecht 2009). As per the development project, infrastructure building is one of the key factors, which according to the Junta will develop the underdeveloped peripheral areas. So that there can be more mobility in public transportation..

#### 4.3 SEVEN-STEP ROAD MAP TO DEMOCRACY

In 1997 when the SLORC was renamed as SPDC, General Khin Nyunt was appointed as its first secretary (Secretary-1). He held this post until his appointment as the Prime Minister of Myanmar in August 2003. He was the Prime Minister of the country from 25 August 2003 until 18 October 2004. Immediately after his appointment as Prime Minister he announced seven-point road map to democracy, officially known as “the Roadmap to Discipline-flourishing Democracy” on 30 August 2003. It is a seven-step process in restoring democracy in the country. This entailed reconvening the constitutional convention, holding a referendum on a new constitution, national elections, and the formation of a new civilian constitutional government” (Robert H. Taylor 2012: 232). The following are the seven step road map to democracy announced by Khin Nyunt on 30<sup>th</sup> August 2003:

1. “Reconvening of the National Convention that has been adjourned since 1996.
2. After the successful holding of the National Convention, step by step implementation of the process necessary for the emergence of a genuine and disciplined democratic state.
3. Drafting of a new constitution in accordance with basic principles and detailed basic principles laid down by the National Convention.
4. Adoption of the constitution through national referendum.

5. Holding of free and fair elections for Pyithu Hluttaws (Legislative bodies) according to the new constitution.

6. Convening of Hluttaws attended by Hluttaw members in accordance with the new constitution.

7. Building a modern, developed and democratic nation by the state leaders elected by the Hluttaw; and the government and other central organs formed by the Hluttaw” (Tom Kramer, 2009: 33).

However, this roadmap was not free from criticism. It was heavily criticized by the Burmese opposition as well as by many foreign government especially Western ones as it envisaged a permanent military participation in the government. “No pro-democracy and/or ethnic group has endorsed the roadmap, and many have strongly condemned it as a plan to perpetuate military rule. Groups which have openly rejected the roadmap include: the Committee Representing the People's Parliament, the National Coalition Government Union of Burma, the National Council of the Union of Burma, the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (Foreign Affairs Committee), All Burma Students' Democratic Front, Democratic Party for a New Society, Network for Democracy and Development, Karenni National Progress Party, the United Nationalities League for Democracy (Liberated Area), Women's League of Burma, Burma Communist Party (BCP), the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, the Naga Nationalities League for Democracy, the Chin National Front, Shan Democratic Union, and the Arakan League For Democracy” (ALTSEAN Burma, September 1 2003 – February 29, 2004: 10). Moreover Khin Nyunt leadership was also short lived as he removed from office the following year, largely because of internal politics within the SPDC centering on allegations of corruption within his military intelligence organisation (Robert H. Taylor 2012: 232).

The ceasefire groups have come under immense pressure to follow the government's “seven-step road map” to democracy, which the State Peace and Development Council claimed will lead to a modern, developed and democratic nation (V R Raghavan 2012 : 99). Under this step the ceasefire signatories were brought under the control of the

Ministry of Defences as Border Guard Forces which many ethnic armed ceasefire groups has rejected it. It is also important to note that under the government's fifth step of its seven-step roadmap, a multi-party democracy general election was held in 2010 in accordance with the 2008 new state constitution to produce parliament representatives and form a new civilian government to which the state power is said to be transferred.

#### 4.4 THE 2008 CONSTITUTION

The National Convention under the SPDC government has been rigorously engaged since 2003 for drafting a new constitution. The drafting process of the new constitution came to an end in 2007. Critics have argued that it is no different from the earlier constitution which placed the military junta at an advantaged position while the main grievances and aspirations of the armed ethnic opposition groups remained the same. Some of the new additions in the new constitution were:

- a) "A Presidential system of government will come into effect along with a bicameral legislation in all ethnic areas.
- b) There will be seven regions and seven ethnic states.
- c) Nay Pyi Taw administration will lie with the President. Responsibility for special self-administered zones within certain regions or states will be given to minorities (Wa, Naga, Pa-O, Pa Laung and Kokang groups).
- d) Regions and states will have a chief minister who will be selected by the President from within the region. 'Leading bodies' will take care of the special self-administered zones but, with limited legislative and executive powers" (Medha Chaturvedi 2012: 7-8).

The provisions regarding ethnic groups were considered biased as it put the ethnic groups on behind. Also, "the 25 per cent mandatory reservation for the military in the parliament along with military nominated Minister of Home, Defence Services and Border Affairs increased the ethnic groups' suspicions" (Medha Chaturvedi 2012: 8). Moreover, the ethnics groups were suspicious of the nature of the outcome of the constitution as it was framed entirely by the National convention comprised mainly of the SPDC. Despite

widespread protests by all ethnic and opposition groups, 2010 election was conducted as per 2008 constitution in which military captured power.

#### 4.5 BORDER GUARD FORCES IN MYANMAR

In the late 80's and the 90's the Myanmar military was successful in signing ceasefire agreement with various armed ethnic ceasefires groups. In order to bring the ceasefire groups under their control the military has come out with a plan to incorporate them into tatmadaw. "In late April 2009, Burmese generals, including Lt-Gen Ye Myint, the chief of the Military Affairs Security (MAS) of the Tatmadaw (Burmese armed forces) and secretary of the BGF Transformation Committee, travelled to Shan State and Kachin State to meet with leaders of the Kachin, Kokang, Shan and Wa ethnic armed groups based along the Sino-Burmese border" (Wai Moe, 2009 August, The Irrawady).

As a result of the visit, on 28 April 2009 Ye Myint announced the plan to transform the cease-fire groups into a 'Border Guard Force' (BGF) in order to provide security along the border after the 2010 general elections". The generals outlined the blue print of the Border Guard Force. So far only few groups have agreed, but the larger ones have not. Those who agreed to join the BGF were permitted to register themselves as a political party and contest the general and state elections. The BGF plan was authorized under the military-backed 2008 constitution.

Border Guard Force (BGF) is a regular military force and has a military structure like the Myanmar Army. Although the battalion commander is from the ethnic armed group, the Myanmar army is in total control over the activities of the BGF and work together during military operations. Under this, "a BGF battalion would have 326 soldiers including 18 officers and three commanders with the rank of major. Among the three commanders, two would be from ethnic armed groups and one from the tatmadaw who would manage day-to-day administration. Other key positions such as general staff officer and quartermaster officer would also be from the tatmadaw. Twenty-seven other ranking non-commissioned officers would be from the tatmadaw such as company sergeant majors, sergeants, clerks, nurses and so on. The Salary and benefits for BGF troops would be paid by the tatmadaw, at the same level as regular soldiers" (Wai Moe, 31 Aug 2009).



The structure of the BGF clearly shows tatmadaw greater control of the armed ethnic ceasefire groups. “BGF plan gives greater control of ethnic armed groups to the Tatmadaw by putting all ethnic armies under the command of the commander-in-chief of the Tatmadaw...” (Wai Moe, 31 Aug 2009). BGF clearly shows the over centralising policy of the military junta in which all ethnic groups are being planned to be assimilated under the fold of the dictatorship of the military junta. It is no exaggeration that all armed ethnic cease fire groups are disinterested and refused the implementation of this policy of the government.

As always understood the military cracked down all ethnic ceasefire groups who are against this policy. Thereby leading to extensive gun-firing in the border area and increasing of refugees and mass human right violation. “In 2009 the kokang ceasefire group rejected to join the junta's border guard force, it led to the armed clashes between government troops and the Kokang Army, the subsequent loss of the kokang headquarters and the end to two-decade ceasefire” (Wai Moe, 31 Aug 2009).

“To date, however, only two groups have agreed: the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and the National Democratic Army-Kachin. In August 2009, the refusal to join the BGF by one of the smallest ethnic factions in the country - the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army operating in the Kokang region of Northern Shan State - resulted in a military offensive launched by government troops which led to more than 30,000 refugees fleeing over the border to China”. (Bangkok, 29 November 2010, IRIN). “Many of the ceasefire groups, including the Kachin Independence Organisation, United Wa State Army and New Mon State Party refused to become border guard forces. They saw these demands as breaking ceasefire agreements and amounting to unconditional surrender, without any of their demands for autonomy and ethnic rights being granted” (V R Raghavan 2012: 114).

Under Myanmar's military-drafted 2008 Constitution, all armed forces in the country must be placed under central military command - an ambitious undertaking in a country which has over a dozen armed ethnic groups (all but a handful of which have ceasefire agreements with the military government). To achieve this, the regime has demanded

that all of the ceasefire groups be incorporated into a Border Guard Force (BGF).“The BGF is an indirect order (by the regime) for the ethnic groups to surrender their weapons,” said Zin Linn, a Burma analyst who lives in exile in Thailand.

To conclude BGF if endorsed by the ethnic group can be of great help for both the sides. So the tatmadaw should carry out in the true spirit of the ceasefire agreement for a better modernised Myanmar not as an opportunistic policy to dominate its diverse ethnic groups. Otherwise it would led to more clashes between government forces and ethnic groups opposed to the junta's plan to create a border guard force made up of ethnic armies.

TABLE 4.1 BORDER GUARD FORCES AND MILITIAS

Border Guard Forces (established 2009-2010)	
BGF Battalion Number	Former Name/ Prescription
BGF 1001-3	New Democratic Army- Kachin
BGF 1004-5	Karenni Nationalities Peoples Liberation Front
BGF 1006	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army Kokang
BGF 1007	Lahu Militia, Mongton (Maington), Shan State
BGF 1008	Akha Militia, Mongyu (Maingyu0, Shan State
BGF 1009	Lahu Militia, Tachilek, Shan State
BGF 1010	Wa Militia, Markmang (Metman), Shan State
BGF 1011-22	Democratic Karen Buddhist Armya
BGF 1023	Karen Peace Force (Ex-KNU 16 <sup>th</sup> Battalion)

Source: V R Raghavan 2012: 114).

#### 4.6 THE ASSIMILATIONIST POLICY OF THE JUNTA (GOVERNMENT)

Since the rule of military junta 1962 until 2010, a basic assimilationist model formed the centrepiece of state policies towards ethnic differences in Myanmar. But on the other hand the policies of assimilation lost credibility among many groups of ethnic minorities and were subjected to unprecedented challenges by opposition NLD and ethnic insurgent group. Since independence the government has carried out its ethnic forced assimilation policy or policy of Burmanisation in matters of culture, education, language and religion, accompanied by centralisation of administration.

During the BSPP regime, public signs of Burma's multi-cultural life were limited to folk-dances and national costume parades, and Burmanised culture of the 'Burmese way to socialism' became the only real national cultural expression. The Press also became very restrictive. "Under General Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party government (1962- 1988), ethnic minority languages were openly downgraded and a tacit policy of ethnic, cultural and religious assimilation was instituted by the state" (Martin Smith 1994: 18). Karen National Union once stated that all governments have followed the same policies.

"Clinging firmly to the policy of Burman Chauvinism, they muffle the basic birth rights of the indigenous races and absorb them of their cultures and traditions. Despite their shoutings of national unity, they ignore the equality of races, and they are systematically trying to make the whole country become Burman through their wily, unscrupulous absorption and assimilation schemes" (Martin Smith 1994: 21).

"Although Article 152 (b) allowed for minority languages to be taught in schools and colleges in their respective areas, and Article 153 (b) of the constitution guaranteed the right of every citizen irrespective of race and religion to 'freely use one's language and literature', under the BSSP the status of minority languages was so downgraded as to put minority citizens at a great disadvantage. Similarly, though the freedom of religion was technically permitted under the 1974 constitution, the activities of minority Muslims and Christians are severely curtailed" (Amalendu Misra 1994: 34).

The ruling military has often treated Myanmar as a homogenous nation, which is often considered by most ethnic groups as Burman-centric view. At the same time the government is never interested in the economic development of the ethnic region. The government's policy has always confined on counter-insurgency campaign in the peripheral region and controlling the ethnic minority states through its centralised administration from the centre. Even under 1974 constitution centralised every aspect of political, economic, social and cultural life and even abolished the right of secession which was granted to ethnic minorities by the Panglong Agreement 1947.

The SLORC's decreed a cultural revolution in June 1991. "Under this policy, all writings, music, art and films have to conform to 'Patriotic standards', adjudged by the SLORC on the basis of the existing laws or martial law decrees" (Martin Smith 1994: 104). According to the SLORC this policy was meant to protect country's cultural heritage but in reality it was a move to suppress the minority and establish their dominance over them in terms of culture and religion. "Echoing one-nation strategies found in China and other parts of Asia, the military elite has sought to rally the people around a single Myanmar language, religion and identity held in harmony by all major ethnic groups" (Ian Holliday 2010: 119).

Despite ethnic groups desire for federal Union, the tatmadaw projected on unitarist state policy. "Every steps towards political reform has been slowed down while the supreme command of the Burmese armed forces, known as the tatmadaw, has struggled to keep control of the constitutional process" (Martin Smith 1994: 28). Inclusion of Ethnic rights and ethnic political autonomy has always been sidelined and no government has taken step on this issue.

The Burmese military government promoted the dominant Burman culture through a process that has been called Burmanisation or Myanmafication. Promotion of Burman cultural has always been a part of government policies whether directly or indirectly. The thrust of assimilation argument is that "members of non-Burman ethnic groups are forced (either through direct coercion or through incentives) to adopt various aspects of Burman culture, speeding their assimilation into the Myanmar "cultural nation," while at the

same time ridding them of those cultural elements that are deemed dangerous to national stability or contrary to the spirit of national unity” (Matthew J Walton 2012: 11)

“Non-Burmans might not (always) be forced at gunpoint to assimilate Burman culture, but the fact that they cannot enjoy the same set of privileges while identifying and practising according to their ethnic identity speaks to their systematic disadvantage and to the corresponding privilege that Burmans enjoy” (Matthew J Walton 2012: 11). The government is never explicit about its assimilation policy; instead it carried out in the name of development effort for border region mainly inhabited by the national races. Clear example is the establishment of a department “Development of Border Areas and National Races” for border area development.

In the realm of education too, the government has tacitly played the role of promoting its Burmanisation policy. Burmese was the standard of language of instruction after fourth-grade and other native dialects were devalued. This resulted into high school drop-outs among the non-Burmese speakers. Moreover unequal distribution of funds for education could also be seen. “While there is limited spending on education in the entire country, ethnic states have received the smallest amounts and, fifteen years ago, literacy rates in those areas reflected that spending inequity, at 50–65%, compared to 80% nationally” (Matthew J Walton 2012: 15). Since the early 1990s, the government has extensively rewritten textbooks in order to emphasise a common “Myanmar” identity among the next generations. Which most ethnic groups find it hard to absorb to it. Steinberg pointed out that “educational institutions designated for the Development of National Groups, are in effect, designed to educate minority youth in Burman ways” (Matthew J Walton 2012: 11, Steinberg 2001: 55).

Any move of the government for developmental projects or activities benefitted only the regime in control and only meagre percentage has reached to the frontier areas. Moreover the developmental projects or programmes when not endorsed by the armed ethnic groups, the civilian populace fall prey to the government’s atrocities.

The government also carries out cultural assimilation through religious missions that seek to spread Buddhism to other ethnic groups (Brown 1994: 49). In this way, they not only

reinforce the dominant Burman identity, but the specifically Buddhist cultural traditions of the Burmans” (Matthew J Walton 2012: 12). The Rohingyas Muslims faced the worst of the government policy in which full citizenship status denied to them and were derecognised as Myanmar citizen since the 80’s. Moreover, they were also subjected to burmanisation through religious policy and renaming campaigns though not considered as part of Burmese nation.

Another step in in the programme of assimilation was seen in the renaming of various cities, streets etc and even the country name was changed from Burma to Myanmar in 1989. “The term Myanmar, indeed, refers exclusively to one particular ethnic group in the country, while the term Burma refers to the post-colonial multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-culture plural nation-state of the union of Burma....The term Myanmar, therefore, does not include the Chin, Kachin, Shan, and other nationalities who become the members of the Union only after signing the Panglong Agreement” (Lian H. Sakhong 2013: 264). The name changed has been a contested one, as revolving around the question about whether the terms are inclusive (referring to all citizens of the union) or exclusive (referring only to the Burman). As a result all ethnic groups and pro-democracy supporter use Burma instead of Myanmar. “While the government claimed that the reason for the name change was to de-emphasise the connection that “Burma” had with the majority Burman ethnic group, most people remain sceptical of the government’s claims to racial inclusion, not least because, as pointed out by an ethnic minority leader, “Myanmar” is actually just another commonly used name for the country in Burmese, the language of the Burman majority” (Matthew J Walton 2012: 12).

“The ethnic minorities feel that the new flag of the country as prescribed by the 2008 Constitution is another indicator of their exclusion from the country’s mainstream as the stars on the old flag represented the ethnic minorities in the country while one star in the new flag represents only the Burman group” (Chaturvedi Medha: 2012). To control the populace, Burma's dictatorship frequently violates the human rights of the citizens.

The more the government tried to assimilate the ethnic groups into the mainstream policy, the more rise in ethnic consciousness leading to formation of strong ethnic enclaves

among the different groups. It is not to confuse that the way the government assimilate the ethnic group is always through coercion and undermining the culture of every groups. According to Ian Holliday, “ethnic enclaves and assimilation are the major contenders for ethnic policy in Myanmar” (Ian Holliday 2010: 113). Therefore assimilation and ethnic enclaves go hand in hand. It is also important to note that self- government to defend their own culture is always the aspiration of a minority group in a country with diverse ethnic groups. So as is the case of Myanmar in which many armed ethnic insurgent groups sprang up to defend their culture and ways of life from the majority Burman domination tatmadaw’s burmanisation/assimilation policy.

In the case of Myanmar the ethnic minority groups are expected for many decades to adopt the majority culture. Marginalization and assimilation are thus found out to be the opposite of multiculturalism. It is concluded so, “For it not only denies equal rights to all ethnic groups, but also restricts the movement of designated groups to particular part of the national territory”. Multiculturlism will be discussed in detail in the context of Myanmar in the next chapter.

#### 4.7 ASSIMILATIONIST POLICY OF THE JUNTA TOWARDS KAREN

In the assimilation move or the so called Burmanisation policy of the government the Karen has fall prey to the government. The Karens are not free from exploitation in the process. “The Karens suffered a lot at the hands of the Burmese military. “About one-third of all Karen in the Karen state have been displaced from their homes. There are about 120,000 karen in refugee camps along the border of Thailand (the figure includes some Kayah and Mon)” (Steinberg, 2001:191-`192). The Karen National Defence Organization started its armed struggle in January 1949 and soon after, more ethnic armies followed suit. Karen National Liberation Army is a part of the Karen National Union and never entered any ceasefire agreement earlier but in February 2012, they signed an informal peace agreement.

“Since implementing recent political reforms, the Thein Sein government has attempted to make a number of state level ceasefire agreements with both previous ceasefire groups and other anti-government forces. On 13 January 2012, the Burmese government signed

an initial peace agreement with the Karen National Union” (Burma Centre for Ethnic Studies 2012: 1).

“The KNU rebellion is the longest running in the world today and throughout its 63-year history has presented one of the most serious challenges to the central government. Since the beginning of hostilities, officially declared on 31 January 1949, the Karen National Union has held a number of discussions with successive governments of Burma. While initial discussions centred on the recognition of a free Karen state of ‘Kawthoolei’ and the need to retain arms, later talks, primarily those that began in 2004, sought merely to protect the Karen populace from further abuses at the hands of the Burmese army and preserve some form of role for the organisation. One of the main reasons for the lack of progress in earlier talks was the legal status of the Burmese government. For example, the 1995/96 talks with what was then SLORC were hindered by the government’s claim that it could not enter into an official agreement due to the fact that it was a military government and could not act on political matters until after the National Convention” (Burma Centre for Ethnic Studies 2012: 5-6).

The Myanmar army resorted to Gen Ne Win’s ‘Four-cuts’ policy of military offensive in these areas to repress any action against the government. This policy refers to cutting off supply of food, funds, news and new recruits to the ethnic armies, isolating them completely and drawing them out eventually. Gen Ne Win had first used this policy in 1965 against the Burmese Communist Party and Karen National Union.

Due to the assimilationist policy of the junta under the guise of Border Guard Forces, many ceasefire groups started rearming themselves and fought with the junta in their own capacity. They rejected the 2010 elections as illegitimate. Karen and southern Shan state, bordering Thailand, also saw some strengthened offensives against the junta, which responded by brutally cracking down on the dissidents in the area.

Subsequently, in February 2011, 12 major ethnic minorities joined forces to form the United Nationalities Federal Council with the aim of forming a bigger, stronger and combined armed force. Having faced brutal offensive actions by the Myanmar army, the UNFC changed its position in May to constitute six associations, which would have their



own political party and armed forces and increase their zone of influence. As a result, the Shan State Progressive Party, the New Mon State Party, the Karenni National Progressive Party, the Karen National Union, the Chin National Front and the Kachin Independence Organisation became the six dedicated associations under the UNFC.

#### 4.8 MARGINALISATION OF MUSLIM ROHINGYAS IN THE ARAKAN REGION

According to UN, Rohingyas are “one of the most persecuted peoples in the world”. With respect to the Rohingyas the the military government has pursued a policy of not only burmanisation but also marginalisation. The Rohingyas are the minority ethnic group which concentrated in the Rakhine state. They are termed by the Myanmar government as “Bengalis”. The government says the Rohingya are Muslim migrants from Bangladesh who arrived during British colonial rule between 1824 and 1948. They professed islam as their religion. Religion is one of the prism through which the government looked at other ethnic community. They accounted for 68 percent of Rakhine population according to the government statistics. Despite this the nationality of Rohingyas is always a controversial one. The government claimed that they are Bangladeshi immigrants while the Bangladesh government opined that they are Burmese migrants. “The fact is that they have lived in Myanmar even before the formation of the Union of Burma in 1947” (Nehginpao kipgen, Refugees Daily: 17/3/2009).

According to Ian Holliday the Rohingyas in many key respects are “the most distinctive of Myanmar’s diverse ethnic groups, with religious beliefs, social customs and physical features that set them apart from other groups and attract hostility not only from the government, but also from many ordinary citizens. For decades, government policy has been to marginalize them” (Ian Holliday 2010: 121-122).

The government has applied the Burmanisation policy on the Muslim- Rohingyas since 1978 when the authorities started pushing the ethno-religious minorities out beyond the country’s political boundaries under a census operation code named ‘Nagamin’. This led some 200,000 Arakanese muslims crossed into Bangladesh as refugees. In the twist of the story, “The government of Burma regarded them as citizens of Bangladesh; whereas the Bangladeshi government considered them to be Burmese nationals” (Kessings

Contemporary Archives: 6 Oct, 1978). Bangladesh come out in defence of the Rohingyas, arguing that ‘Rohingyas have been in Burma since the 12<sup>th</sup> century’ (Amalindu Misra 1994: 37). This shows the uncertainty of the fate of the Rohingyas in which no country is ready to accept them as its citizens.

“The Rohingyas are not included in the list of 135 ethnic groups enshrined in the 1982 nationality law, and their rights to property, marriage, travel, education, employment and so on are largely non-existent. This is one of the clearest cases of ethnic persecution today” (Ian Holliday 2010: 122, Human Rights Watch, 2009). In 1982, the Rohingyas were derecognised by the junta and were considered as Bangladeshi immigrants. “In 1978, over 200,000 Rohingyas escaped into Bangladesh from repressive military crackdown. Another 250,000 followed suit in 1991. After deliberations between the two countries, the erstwhile junta-led Myanmar government took back most of the 1991 refugees leaving about 28,000 who still live in UN-run refugee camps on the Bangladesh side of the border. However, since 1992, Bangladesh has also refused asylum to them. The Rohingyas have for long demanded their rights as most of them have been living in the country for many generations” (Medha Chaturvedi 2012).

Even under the SPDC regime the Rohingyas concentrated in the Rakhine state were persecuted. They are treated like foreigners in their own land. In the New Light of Myanmar daily newspaper, the government has stated that “The Rohinja is not included in over 100 national races of the Union of Myanmar’, it may well have expressed an opinion shared by many citizens” (New Light of Myanmar, 2009). Ironically, in the 2010 national elections, the Rohingyas were not allowed to vote and yet, there have been many cases when they have been arrested on unlawful immigration charges in the country.

Once again recently in the month of June 2012 Myanmar was in the news as it was marred by sectarian violence in Rakhine state between the ethnic Rohingyas and Rakhinese Buddhists which left over 60 people dead and more than 1500 Rohingyas displaced. The riots sparked off as a result of the gang rape and murder of a Buddhist woman, allegedly by three Rohingya youth.

In this incident contrary to the expectation of Rohingyas in particular and the world community in general, “President Thein Sein and leader of the opposition Suu Kyi did not react very sharply to the incidents, but the government’s actions were appreciated by the West” (Medha Chaturvedi :2012). During 2012 violence President Thein Sein stated that “the government would not recognize the Rohingya and that they were willing to ‘hand over’ the Rohingyas to the UNHCR in preparation for them to be resettled in any third country “that are willing to take them” (Democratic Voice of Burma, 13 July 2012).

In June 2013, in another move of oppression of the Rohingyas, “Khin Yi, Minister of Immigration and Population, publicly support the recently announced enforcement by local authorities of a two-child policy in northwestern Rakhine State for Rohingya Muslims, a stateless minority” (Jason Szep and Andrew R.C. Marshall, June 11, 2013). It was done to control fast-growing Rohingya population which was also earlier introduced in 2005. This policy has received widespread condemnation. The United Nations call it as discriminatory and a violation of human rights. Nobel Peace Prize winner Suu Kyi has called the policy ‘discrimination’ that is ‘not in line with human rights’” (Jason Szep and Andrew R.C. Marshall, Tue Jun 11, 2013).

#### 4.9 CONCLUSION

The solution to the ethnic conflict in Myanmar has become one of the major challenges the country is facing today. Assimilation has always been the policy of the military-backed governments of Myanmar for more than 50 years. The government has in many respects failed to achieve its assimilation policy in many peripheral parts, instead received widespread overt resistance, covert-non-compliance, resource constraints as well as state incapacity.(Ian Holliday 2010: 121). “Under successive military regimes in Burma, this has now become synonymous with “Burmanization”, an unwritten policy of forced assimilation in the name of ‘nation-building’. This attempt to assimilate all ethnic minorities into mainstream Burman culture, in order to create a single national identity, is also known as the three Bs or “one race (Burman), one language (Burmese) and one religion (Buddhism)” policy”. (Chin Human Rights Organization 2012: 6). The military has used development as military strategy to dominate and retain its power over the other

ethnic groups. Instead of this it will be the best solution if ethnic rights realized and democracy restored at the earliest possible.

On the ethnic issue a more proactive role by the government is needed, though, to ensure the success of addressing the minority issues. For the first time in four decades, the government in Myanmar has understood that a military solution is not the way to go in solving the ethnic issue. Only with the inclusion of ethnic minorities in to the mainstream politics the issue of ethnicity could be solved.

The Rohingya problem has always been a pain for every successive government. It will be in the best interest of all if the problem is tackled at the earliest. Otherwise the government is likely to face eminent ethnic clash between the rakhine Buddhists and ant the muslims as the majority population residing in Arakan state is the Rohingyas despite non-recognition of their citizenship. Not only does the exclusion of this community pose a threat to the process of national reconciliation, it also poses a serious law and order problems in Rakhine and other states too. The next census is due to take place in 2014 in the country and it is unlikely that the Rohingya community would be included in it.

From the above information it can be concluded that Ethnic groups still suffered in the hands of the SPDC government. It is a high time for the government of Myanmar to recognise the aspirations of its diverse ethnic minority groups. To note the main demand of the ethnic minorities is greater autonomy and acceptance of their cultural and religious identity in the process of their integration in Myanmar's mainstream. It is quite possible that the government is suspicious of the ethnic group once their demands are fulfilled the tatmadaw may lost its control over them. Ethnic problems unless solved, Myanmar would not progress or prosper. But the transitional civilian government under Thein Sein is hopeful to bring change in the near future.

## CHAPTER- 5

### DEMOCRACY (NLD) AND ETHNIC GROUPS

The concept of democracy is not new to the people of Myanmar. Parliamentary form of government has been adopted when it got independence from the British rule. Aung San, the founding father of Modern Burma supported parliamentary democracy which embraced 'unity in diversity' as the supreme goal of the political system. But this has never been properly implemented by any government in Myanmar so far. At present the NLD under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, is keen to carry forward the concept of 'unity in diversity' as its main objective or slogan for the party and struggling to bring back parliamentary democracy endorsing pluralism in Myanmar.

The ethnic diversity in Myanmar has given opportunity for the aspirations for multiculturalism which embraced 'unity in diversity' in post-colonial era. Multiculturalism is one of the main variants of pluralism in a democratic society. Sometimes the two terms multiculturalism and pluralism are used synonymously. So to look into or study an ethnically diverse country like Myanmar in the perspective of multiculturalism is significant. In the preceding chapters the government policy towards diverse ethnic groups based on assimilationism had already been discussed at length. In this chapter, countering assimilationist policy of the military junta by multiculturalism or pluralism ideology of the civil opposition group will be discussed. Significantly, the NLD is the torch bearer of the idea of 'unity in diversity' and federalism in Myanmar. Multiculturalism therefore becomes the only theory which can bring legitimacy and dispense justice to the various dissented ethnic groups in an ethnically complex country like Myanmar and counter assimilationism policy of the Junta.

#### 5.1 THE NATIONAL LEAGUE FOR DEMOCRACY (NLD)

The importance of NLD (National League for Democracy) as a political party and as an opposition group to the military regime made one curious to know more about the party. The National League for Democracy (NLD) is a Burmese political party formed on 27 September 1988. It is headed by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who

serves as its General Secretary. Regarding the formation of NLD, Steinberg mentioned that “widespread dissatisfaction with the BSSP regime and its thoroughly inadequate economic performance, together with pent-up general and local political frustration, which became manifest in the popular uprising against the military, and the announcement that multiparty elections would be held, the National League for Democracy was formed” (Steinberg 2010: 87). Regarding the membership, it got widespread response from all section of the population. Steinberg has stated that “The NLD was an amalgam of disparate individuals coalescing under the banner of democracy and under the leadership of former military officers under the BSPP but more immediately under the flag of antipathy to continuing military control” (Steinberg 2010: 87). The three most prominent figures in NLD are- former Brigadier Aung Gyi, former General Tin U, and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of General Aung San. The NLD was joined by many activists, students, young and old. In short, people from all walks of life supported the NLD.

According to Aung Sang Suu Kyi in an open letter to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights “the chief aim of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and other organizations working for the establishment of a democratic government in Burma is to bring about a social and political changes which will guarantee a peaceful, stable and progressive society where human rights, as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are protected by the rule of law” (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991: 222).

The NLD has also further stated that “it has been the consistent policy of the NLD to respect and uphold all just laws. At the same time the NLD in common with the majority of the people of Burma recognizes that those who wish to build a strong and peaceful nation have a duty to resist measures which attack the very foundations of human dignity and truth” (Suu Kyi 1991: 223). This shows that NLD speaks on behalf of the populace of Myanmar against the autocratic military regime. The NLD has been always against conflict and confrontation which brought suffering on a populace already troubled by much economic and political hardship. The NLD rather believed in “seeking understanding through dialogue and negotiations in an accepted principle of the

democratic tradition to which the NLD has been unswervingly committed since its inception in 1988” (Suu Kyi 1991: 223-224).

Significantly, the NLD in 1996 has stated that “Multiculturalism” has been the long stated policy of Myanmar’s leading opposition force (National League for democracy, 1996). “Both Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD in its rare policy documents expressed the desire to build a polity in which ethnic groups have full legal protection throughout the land” (Ian Holliday 2010: 121).

The NLD ventured into electoral politics for the first time by contesting election in 1990. The party won a substantial parliamentary majority in the 1990 Burmese General Elections. However, the ruling military junta refused to recognize the result. On 6 May 2010, the party was declared illegal and ordered to be disbanded by the junta after refusing to register for the elections slated for November 2010. In November 2011, the NLD announced its intention to register as a political party in order to contend future elections and on 13 December 2011, Burma's Union Election Commission approved their application for registration. In the 2012 by-elections, except for one seat lost to SNDP (Kyar Phyu Party), NLD won 43 seats in which it had contested 44 seats, out of the 45 seats where elections were held. Party leader 776 Aung San Suu Kyi won from the seat of Kawhmu. Significantly it is the most influential opposition party in Myanmar at present.

## 5.2 UNITY IN DIVERSITY AND PLURALISM IN MYANMAR CONTEXT

It is not surprising anymore that Myanmar has various ethnic minorities. The ethnic composition of Myanmar is rather complex as it has 135 different ethnic groups as given by the military regime. As such the socio-cultural foundation is always complex, leading to ethnic crisis at every point of time. Ethnically the country has been divided into eight major groups; and geographically, seven states and seven divisions. The seven states were occupied by the seven non-burman ethnic groups while the seven divisions were created for the dominant Burman group, which makes up about two-thirds of the total population.

Martin Smith an expert on Burma has stated that “Aung San’s ‘Unity in Diversity’, and Ne Win’s ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ are the two home grown philosophies that have

dominated Burma's political life over the last 50 years" (Martin Smith 1994: 26). Since independence these two philosophies are anti-thetical to each other. Aung San stood for a mixture of nationalism, communism and parliamentary ideas. "he called for equal economic development and simultaneous independence for all ethnic groups as the best way to bring the country together" (Martin Smith 1994: 26). "Ne Win, by contrast, believed that the military was the only institution which could hold such an ethnically diverse country together. A whimsical blend of Buddhist, Marxist and nationalist principles, the unitary philosophy of his 'Burmese Way to Socialism' was never elaborated on from a short text..." (Martin Smith 1994: 26). So these two contrasting political philosophies still thrive even today. The change is only in the name of the one carrying forward it. At present Aung San has been replaced by her daughter, Suu Kyi and Ne Win by Thein Sein. But now the scenario has changed positively leaning towards Aung San's aspirations.

For the military leader in power the idea of multiculturalism is something which they find it hard to digest. To them this idea is not suited to the Myanmar situation. Instead of tolerating the diversity, they try to bring the diverse ethnic groups into the mainstream through forced assimilation. Ian Holliday is of the opinion that, "Even before and after 1988 the military leadership does not intend to foster a form of unity in diversity that builds common bonds while acknowledging ethnic differences and claims" (Ian Holliday 2007: 389).

Pluralism on the other hand is a concept inherent in the functioning of democratic societies. Pluralism, or the diffusion of power to different and contending centres of public or private authority, has been a deterrent to the rise or continuation of autocratic rule. So as in the case of Myanmar the military regime has always been against diffusion of power. Instead centralized system of administration was implemented in all works of life. To add strength to their regime pluralism was destroyed intentionally. "Military rule following the coup of 1962 brought a regime that eliminated any legal centres of pluralism. Immediately on seizing power, the military eradicated the National Assembly, took over the legal system, abolished local ethnic governments, and declared all political parties illegal" (David I Steinberg 2001: 49). This shows the extent of the regime



atrocities towards the plural society who are antithetical to the regime propagandas and policies.

Interestingly despite the military having destroyed pluralism in Burma/Myanmar that Pluralism still do exist. Steinberg, an expert on Burmese politics has supported this stand. To quote Steinberg “pluralism did in a sense continue to exist, but it was an underground pluralism, on the periphery essentially in revolt against the central authorities” (David I Steinberg 2001: 49). So it is quite evident that through the understanding of pluralism in the context of Myanmar the contest between the policies of the military regime and the various ethnic groups who are mainly based in the peripheral areas ruled out. As against pluralism, the military endorsed for unitary state. Thereby adopted forced assimilation on the ethnic groups to forcibly join the Union. Contrary to the expectation of the military expectation in forming a Union of Myanmar, the ethnic groups rather than obliged to it get encouraged to seek solace in rebellion, some with a goal of federalism, but others for greater autonomy, even independence.

### 5.3 STATUS OF WOMEN IN MYANMAR

The role of Aung San Suu Kyi as the icon of democracy in Myanmar has made one curious to look deeper into the status of Burmese women. History has proven that the status of Burmese women has been higher comparing to other countries of Southeast Asia. Such justification can be extracted from the writings of Steinberg, to quote “They traditionally married under their own volition. There was no foot binding in Burma as there was China, nor the practice of suttee (widow suicide) as in India. Burmese women had equal inheritance rights with their male siblings and retained control over their dowries. If there were a divorce, the wife would keep the dowry; this kept divorce rates low. Early English observers felt that the status of Burmese women was higher than that in Europe at the time, and one British observer in the early nineteenth century believed that Burmese women were more literate than English women. Burmese women not only control most family affairs but also have important economic roles; most trading in bazaars is by women. In modern times, females equal males in the educational system,

and women have been prominent in the professions, especially in education and medicine” (David I Steinberg 2010: 109-110).

Contrary to the status enjoyed by the Burmese women, no women officers in the higher echelons of the Burmese military. Looking at this perspective their decision-making at the higher level is low. One Scholar wrote, “Military rule, however, has reinforced the authoritarian, hierarchical and chauvinistic values that underpinned male-dominated power structures” (David I Steinberg 2010: 110). Therefore, under the present military authoritarianism, women played an inferior role in the decision making process.

#### 5.4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMWORK ON DEMOCRATISATION IN MYANMAR

It is no strange that Myanmar has aspired to be a democratic country as against the military regime. While talking about democracy in Myanmar it is equally impossible not to talk about Suu Kyi. The movement for democracy gained momentum under the leadership of Suu Kyi. Therefore, a clear understanding of the meaning of democracy in the context of Burma is desirable. It is best to talk about the meaning of democracy in the words of Aung San Suu Kyi in which she has explicitly explained the real meaning of democracy, and she called for the involvement of the population in politics. In the word of Suu Kyi “But let me ask about the real meaning of democracy. Those who want popular government should also become involved in politics. They should have individual political ideas. They should have positive attitudes and a willingness to sacrifice” (Suu Kyi 1991: 229). She keeps on reiterating that “the people of Burma view democracy not merely as a form of government but as an integrated social and ideological system based on respect for the individual. When asked why they feel so strong a need for democracy, the least political will answer: ‘We just want to be able to go about our own business freely and peacefully, not doing anybody any harm, just earning a decent living without anxiety and fear.’ In other words they want the basic human rights which would guarantee a tranquil, dignified existence free from want and fear” (Suu Kyi 1991: 173).

The stand of the military on democracy is that democracy is ‘unsuited to their cultural norms’. In 1988 the movement for democracy under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi

has countered this claim of the military junta. The NLD hereafter became more vociferous in giving the concept of liberal democracy. “At its most basic and immediate level, liberal democracy would mean in institutional terms a representative government appointed for a constitutionally limited term through free and fair elections. By exercising responsibly their rights to choose their own leaders the Burmese hope to make an effective start at reversing the process of decline” (Suu Kyi 1991: 169). Democracy could be achieved by joining hands together. It cannot be achieved single handedly by NLD alone. It required all sections of the populace especially the diverse ethnic groups. Suu Kyi has reiterated for a united struggle “at this time there is very great need for all our ethnic groups to be joined together. We cannot have the attitude of I’m Kachin, I’m Burman, I’m Shan. We must have the attitude that we are all comrades in the struggle for democratic rights. We must all work closely together like brothers and sisters. Only then we will succeed. If we divide ourselves ethnically, we shall not achieve democracy for a long time” (Suu Kyi 1991: 231).

It is commonly assumed that restoration of democracy would ensure peace and make development possible. In consequence, the NLD under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi fight for democracy as against the military regime. The NLD as a political party see the lack of democracy as the primary problem, while the “armed ethnic groups are more concerned with the distribution of power and resources between the centre and the regions. Their support for any government in Yangon depends on greater local autonomy, ethnic rights and overall development of their areas” (ICG Asia Report N°82, 9 September 2004: 5).

Truly inclusive political system that gives all groups a voice in the governance of their areas and protects both individual and group rights is the need of the hour for a speedy restoration of peace and tranquillity in the region. “For these reasons, efforts to transcend the barriers created by the cultural and structural legacy of militarisation and repressive, autocratic rule must combine opening up the political system to democratic participation with major efforts to combat poverty, improve access to education and information, and strengthen local organisations to help lay the foundation for a more vibrant pluralistic civil society. Circumstances in Yangon are not favourable for the former at the moment

because of the military government's attitude but that should not prevent more being undertaken with regard to the latter so long as the programs are constructed and implemented in ways that do not strengthen the grip of the generals" ( ICG Asia Report N°82, 9 September 2004: 5).

Aung San Suu Kyi has once delivered a speech emphasising on the participation of the various ethnic communities in bringing a unified country through democracy. To quote, "the National League for Democracy believed very strongly that it is important in our movement for democracy that all ethnic groups in the country work together. It is in trying to help bring together all ethnic groups, all peoples, that we go on these organizational tours and try to visit as many places as possible. In the Kachin State there are many different peoples. Because of this ethnic variety, I think that you already know what problems there are in creating a unified country, what problems must be overcome. We must all work together if we are to live together in unity and harmony" (Suu Kyi 1991: 226). The NLD has drawn the attention of all ethnic groups in building a unified country. This could be achieved through sacrifice. To quote "We must all sacrifice our own needs for the needs of others. Without this it will be impossible to build the kind of Union that we need" (Suu Kyi 1991: 226-227). Suu Kyi reiterated the importance of teaching the children the concept of national unity and of nationhood.

Aung San Suu Kyi and her party NLD has since its inception focussed on democracy. To them democracy is above all other aspect of politics whether be it economics or social, political or culture, meaning it has placed the need for achieving democracy above all these elements. To convince the populace, she reiterated the importance of democracy citing examples of countries with successful democratic institutions. She quoted that "after the war, both Germany and Japan adopted democratic institutions. By introducing democracy, these countries have also gone on to become two of the most prosperous nation in the world. This shows clearly that only with an effective government and equitable political system can a country really progress" (Suu Kyi 1991: 229).

No doubt democracy is the watchword of NLD, to achieve so the diverse ethnic group has a stake. So one can be optimistic to point out that the NLD once succeed in restoring

democracy in Myanmar, multicultural principles are bound to be adopted to fit all the diverse ethnic groups and recognised the plural nature of the country. Therefore, in order to understand ethnic issues understanding on democratic movement under the stewardship of Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD cannot be ignored. The ethnic separatists also indirectly weakened the democracy movement as their secessionist demands gave the military the pretext to hold on to power so that the unity and integrity of the state is protected.

In a multi-ethnic state when the law of the land provides full legal protection for ethnic groups, this tolerance for all generates multiculturalism. "This is one variant of the liberal democratic ideal, in which a state guarantees equal rights for ethnic groups throughout the length and breadth of its territory" (Ian Holliday 2010: 114). The multi-ethnic Myanmar can live in harmony and peace once the demand for democracy is achieved.

The movement for democracy came in full swing in 1988, when all sections of the society displayed a protest against the military regime. During this time ethnic protest in the form of civil war has also sprang up in different parts of the country. The military which comprised mainly of Burman engaged in armed conflict on all fronts within the country. The military government attempted to bring all ethnic rebellion groups under their fold through cease fire agreements. This was the result of the economic liberalisation policy of the government in which most of the natural resources are in the peripheral region which inhabited mainly by the ethnic groups. So in order to extract resources the military regime came forward to sign ceasefire agreement with the insurgents in order to bring peace in the borderlands. Facing the brunt of the military dictatorship both the ethnic groups and supporters of democracy movement got to share common aspirations in fighting against the regime. It is not easy to conclude how the NLD the main party in support of democracy in Myanmar would handle the ethnic issues in which most of the members are of Burman.

#### 5.5 DEMOCRACY IN TRANSITION (NLD: ON THE ROAD TO DEMOCRACY)

The struggle against the military has been manifest ever since the military coup of 1962 in which the military took control of political power. But it became more prominent and

active after the four eight (8-8-88) incident. The period between 1962-1988 i.e Ne Win's era was marked by huge discontentment among the people, growing emergence of insurgent groups and abject poverty of the masses. At this backdrop, the need to have a strong unified resistance was felt the need of the hour to overthrow the inhuman military junta. As such NLD was formed and took up the lead role for the masses demanding for the rights of every residents of the country.

By 1988 after the incident of four eights (8-8-88), huge democratic movement crackdown the junta changed its name to SLORC (state law and order restoration council) which promised to hold a multi-party election in 1990 for the first time since the military takeover in 1962. The government of as such formally allowed the existence of a multi-party system which is one of the tenets of democracy. As such many parties sprang up and NLD is one such party which contested the 1990 election. The NLD got a thumping victory over 80 per cent of the seats in parliament but the military government refused to transfer power and detained many party leaders and members. Suu Kyi was put under house arrest for several occasions which was considered to be the greatest human rights violation.

In 1997 the military regime after widespread condemnation from the international community, especially United States and the European Union and pro-democracy groups for not respecting the 1990 election result changed its regime name from SLORC to SPDC in order to give more civilian hue. It came up with an idea of the so-called "seven step road map to disciplined flourishing democracy", but this remained only in name and received widespread condemnation. Several oppositions groups called for junta to have a genuine dialogue with the ethnic groups and the NLD. "They argued that only through a meaningful tripartite dialogue would the country's political problem be resolved." (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2010: 36). Till 2000 the military and the democracy supporter were in constant accusation towards each other. Widespread discontentment amongst the people toward the brutality of the regime enveloped the country. The NLD repeated called for the government to honor the 1990 election results.

In August 1989 Aung San was put under house arrest for the first time and was released in 1995 after more than 5 years of her arrest. Her released was mainly because the junta believed that “by doing so it could better control the opposition movement” (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2010: 36). The military at this juncture were never ready to enter into dialogue for reconciliation with the NLD as they were suspicious that talking to them would mean transferring of power and not sharing of power. As they were interested in power they were not ready to have such dialogue.

Regarding the National Convention, the government rejected the NLD’s demands to make it more transparent and democratic. Therefore, NLD decided to boycott the National Convention. In 1998 as per her statement “economic sanctions are good and necessary for the rapid democratization of Myanmar” (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2010: 37) Suu Kyi was put under house arrest for the second time.

By 2000 the regime on the other hand had already made “a series of ceasefire agreements with a number of ethnic insurgent groups to ‘strengthen its position vis-à-vis the NLD’” (K. Yhome 2008: 36). But this does not end the long struggled ethnic minority issues. It acted like applying a balm on the wound, meaning temporary solution. Therefore, the military regime was compelled to talk with the NLD as it has ethnic backing. “the logic was that if the NLD was on its side, it could deal with the ethnic groups more effectively” (K. Yhome 2008: 36). Some positive changes took place from both the sides in which Aung San was released from House arrest on 6 May 2002 and NLD also on its part has become less aggressive in their struggle. “The period between 2000 to May 2003 was thus a time of cautious move from both the sides to bring about peace between them” (K. Yhome 2008: 37).

Violent clash between the NLD and UDSA (civilian wing of the SPDC) members took place in central Myanmar in May 2003. K. Yhome (2008: 37-38) said, “the government claimed that four persons were killed and more than forty were injured, but the NLD put the figures at seventy killed and a hundred or so injured. The Government and the NLD put the blame on each other for the clash”. As a result Suu Kyi together with a large number of NLD members was again taken into protective custody. This is her third arrest

by the military junta. A local analyst noted that “Than Shwe would not have placed her under house arrest again if he had ever thought about having a true dialogue with her organization” (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2010: 37).

In August 2003, Khin Nyunt became the Prime Minister and he announced a ‘seven-step’ roadmap to democracy in Myanmar that included “reconvening the National Convention, drafting a new constitution in accordance with the principles adopted by the national convention, holding national referendum for the new constitution, holding free and fair elections, convening the Hluttaw (parliament), and formation of a new democratic government” (K. Yhome 2008: 38). However, the NLD rejected the government’s roadmap on the grounds that it was a design to divert the people and the international community from the 30 May incident and Suu Kyi’s detention. (K. Yhome 2008: 38).

The National Convention of 1996 was once again revived in 2004 by the junta. It was done at the backdrop of the seven-step road map to democracy. “The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) invited the NLD leaders to drop their boycott and rejoin the convention. The NLD at first agreed but then changed its mind and said it would take part only if the generals first released from custody all of its detained leaders” (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2010: 37). The government outrightly rejected these proposals and without NLD’s participation the Convention was reconvened in May 2004. The relation between NLD and the Junta got bitter since this incident. In May 2007, the government extended Suu Kyi’s detention for another year. Following her detention she caught the attention of the international community and remained an icon for the supporters of democracy.

On September 3, 2007, the national convention was concluded in which a new constitution was adopted. This newly established constitution gave weightage to the junta’s rule even in the future in which even the presidential post was reserved for the military personnel. The oppositions are in no way ready to accept the outcome of this convention and received widespread protests. But the military junta continued with it and expressed its determination to implement without proper revision. On the basis of the National Convention the junta formed a committee to draft the new constitution on October 18, 2007. “In February 2008 the junta announced that it would hold a



referendum for the new constitution on May 10, 2008, and that new elections would be held in 2010. While the junta was preparing for the referendum, some senior military officers publicly confirmed that Suu Kyi would not be allowed to run in the 2010 elections” (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2010: 38). “Thus Suu Kyi will remain under detention until after the elections in 2010 because the junta believes she would jeopardize their plan to institute their discipline-flourishing democracy” (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2010: 39).

In 2009 Suu Kyi expressed her willingness for lifting sanctions to the military junta. Since then she was allowed to meet her visitors. But in the twist of the turn, NLD was deregistered as a political party in May 2010. This has sent a negative impression on their relations. Despite various pressures from the international community, the junta proceed on with its power- monger attitude and keeping at bay democratic ideals. Kyaw Yin Hlaing noted that “it is clear that the kind of political dialogue NLD leaders want to have with the generals is not part of the agenda of the military junta” (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2010: 39).

“The flame still burns, and the spirit of democracy—though constantly suppressed—lives on. But to accomplish the task of bringing democracy to burma, the country needs more than a flame—it needs a wildfire” (Kyaw Zwa Moe, *The Irrawady* July, 2008). Suu Kyi once said to bring democracy in Burma a ‘lifelong struggle’ and more importantly a unity among the members is necessary. So No matter what obstacles is face in the future, the chief priority for all pro-democracy leaders should be to build a single force capable of uniting the country around one goal: democracy. Suu Kyi stressed on unity could also be quoted from her remark at the NED 2012 Democracy Award to the Democracy Movement in Burma, “What has happened in the past has taught us that if we want to succeed we have to work together and the whole future of Burma is before us,” said Suu Kyi. “If we are to ensure this future for the succeeding generations, we all have to learn to work together” (National Endowment for Democracy, September 21, 2012).

Once again after her release from the house arrest on 13 November 2010, she focuses on reconciliation, development and cooperation. She had several round of meetings with with President Thein Sein under the initiative of U Aung Kyi, Minister of Labour and

Social Welfare. On 21 August 2011 a meeting was held between U Thein Sein and Suu Kyi at Nay Pyi Taw, which was regarded as a landmark in the politics of Myanmar. “The agenda on of the meeting was around the four points that had been finalized between Suu Kyi and Aung Kyi on 12 August 2011, and they were

1. To join hand in hand to carry out tasks for the government stability, peace and development.
2. To cooperate constructively for the country’s economic and social development and for development of the democratic system
3. To shelve disputed views and to carry out cooperative tasks on reciprocal basis, and
4. To continue dialogue2” (Ganganath Jha 2011: 43).

The meeting clearly shows the positive development for bringing democracy in the state. It has revived hope for the people the possibility of installing a democratic government in the near future. Many changes in the attitude of the ruling government could be seen through this dialogue. Her arrest has now been replaced by dialogue.

In another development, “the ambience of the venue where the meeting took place was aesthetically decorated, and the photograph of Bogyoke Aung San was kept in the background. The photograph of General Than Shwe was missing. The efforts were made to recognize the contribution of Bogyoke Aung San and that of Suu Kyi, and a portrait of President Thein Sein and Suu Kyi standing next to each other were widely circulated” (Ganganath Jha 2011: 43-44). This is the result of the growing popularity of Aung San and the NLD in the struggle for democracy. Moreover it also due to the leniency of President Thein Sein which developed to the positive environment in which dialogue between the NLD and the military leaders is made possible. More positive developments are likely to be seen in the near future as well. The hope and aspiration of the people of Myanmar loom large to experience the much eagerly awaited democracy in their own land.

## 5.6 INDIA'S STAND ON PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT IN MYANMAR

India being one of the largest democracies in Asia and immediate neighbour to Myanmar (the struggling democratic nation), the expectation of the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar in particular and other democratic country in the world in general is enormous. The international community has been watchful of India's move in restoring democracy in Myanmar. Dates back to Indian Prime Minister Nehru and his Burmese counterpart U Nu (1948-1962) era who were close friends and decided policies based on trust and cooperation, the relation was cordial. All this happened due to the desire on both parts the realisation of the importance of democracy in an ethnically diverse country.

However, the political scenario changed after Ne Win's military coup in 1962, in which U Nu was ousted and democracy undermined. Since then the successive Indian governments opposed the military dictatorship and the relation between the two countries have been strained. The period from 1962-1988, the military junta followed an isolationist policy. The India's stand on the wake of the 8-8-88, considered as the cry for democracy which attracted the international community was harsh for the military junta. India being a biggest democracy was critical of the military junta since 1962, condemning the atrocities meted out to the people and the human rights violation. It also granted political asylum to political prisoners and gave room for Burmese refugees in its land. As a result so many Burmese refugees are still there in India. "as a result of the sympathy of the Indian Government to pro-democracy movement which started in 1988, the relations were strained from 1988-1993. Since then, coinciding with the launching of the Look East Policy, India followed a realistic and pragmatic policy of constructively engaging the military junta and to-day the relationship is flourishing though India has come under severe criticism that it has forsaken its democratic ideals" (C.S Kuppuswamy 2011: 31)

However, by 1990's India's support for democracy movement fade. It has replaced by a more pragmatic phase of India's foreign policy. Satya Sagar has given that "the pragmatic phase of Indian Foreign policy toward Burma meant doing anything required to further Indian strategic and economic interests. So for the last two decades the Indian

establishment has wooed the Burmese generals assiduously, promoting Indian businesses to invest in Burma and collaborated militarily without restraint” (Satya Sagar 2011: 68). Thereby, sideline the support for Burmese democracy, so as to come closer to the ruling military junta. “According to Indian defense analyst approvingly China in the last two decades has gained a significant foothold in Burma, setting up military installations targeting India and wielding considerable influence on the regime and its strategic thinking. They say that India’s pro-democracy stand in the wake of the 1988 Burmese uprising provided a window for countries like China and Pakistan to get closer to the Burmese generals.” (Satya Sagar 2011: 68).

But it is not to be mistaken that India in totality rejected democracy movement in Myanmar. Mani Shanker Aiyer (member of Indian parliament) says that, “while India was boycotting Burma, the whole world was not, above all China. He affirms India’s support for democracy, but not necessarily as a crusader for democracy. He observed that Burmese people are capable of taking independent political decisions, which is evident in the position of Suu Kyi and her party” (Burma Centre Delhi 2011: 85). He also further said that, “India will be far more comfortable with a military regime than a military dictatorship” (Burma Centre Delhi 2011: 85). Dr. Tint Swe, an exiled Burmese parliamentarian feels that, “today the pro-democracy movement in Burma is seen as immature and outdated by India” (Burma Centre Delhi 2011: 85). He holds that the Burmese pro-democracy movement should not be misunderstood and seek the attention of India in their struggle for democracy.

Aung San Suu Kyi has also expressed more than once since her release in November 2010, that India as a leading democracy, can do much for Burma. “India made its high level with her in June 2011, when Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao, had an Hour-long meeting with her and appraised her of the development assistance India is extending to Burma in various field. Suu sought for more people to people contacts” (C.S. Kuppaswamy 2011: 34). Whatever the case be India being a world’s largest democracy and the closest neighbour of Burma should stand up and effectively promote democracy and respond positively to the call of Suu Kyi. In an interview with Lalita K Jha,

December 1, 2011, Suu Kyi said, "I would like India to do more to promote democratic values" (Burma Centre Delhi 2011: 86).

Democracy could be achieved only with the strong opposition from within, meaning unless the people of the country unitedly fight to topple the military junta democracy would still be a far dream. So the dependency on other should be stopped. Nevertheless, the international community is bound to support the democracy movement but much cannot be done with them. So democracy in Myanmar can be achieved entirely on their own strength.

### 5.7 AUNG SANG SUU KYI AND THE MINORITY ISSUES

At the outset it is quite important to know Suu Kyi is. The Norwegian Nobel Committee on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1991 the day of awarding Nobel Peace Prize for her non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights have given the following statement; "Aung San Suu Kyi is the daughter of Burma's liberation leader Aung San and showed an early interest in Gandhi's philosophy of non-violent protest. After having long refrained from political activity, she became involved in 'the second struggle for national independence' Burma in 1988. She became the leader of a democratic opposition which employs non-violent means to resist a regime characterized by brutality. She also emphasizes the need for conciliation between the sharply divided regions and ethnic groups in her country. The election held in May 1990 resulted in a conclusive victory for the opposition. The regime ignored the election results; Suu Kyi refused to leave the country, and since then she has been kept under strict house arrest. Suu Kyi's struggle is one of the most extraordinary examples of civil courage in Asia in recent decades. She has become an important symbol in the struggle against oppression". (Suu Kyi 1991: 236).

On her visit to Europe in 2012 many people started questioning about her leadership stand on ethnic minority problems or issues. The ethnic minority groups in Myanmar started voicing their doubt about her leadership. This was the result of Suu Kyi response to the question asked "if the Rohingyas were Burmese, replied other than she did: I do not know" (The Economist, July 2012). Similarly, "One Kachin website objected to Miss Suu Kyi's response when asked in London about her reluctance to condemn the army's

offensive against the Kachin, whose unresolved rebellion is, at present, the most serious of many. A 17-year ceasefire with the Kachin broke down in June last year. Fighting has displaced an estimated 75,000 people, including up to 10,000 across the Chinese border” (The Economist, July 2012).

The junta made way for a civilian government since Thein Sein came to power and the NLD also rejoined mainstream politics in which 42 of her colleagues have seats in parliament. Some ethnic groups lingers suspicion that the NLD is a party of Burmans with no real commitment to the interests of the minorities. But Suu Kyi remained undisturbed by such speculation and still struggle for the restoration of democracy in which the ethnic minorities have a stake in it and she called for a second Panglong conference to redress the minority issues. “As for the NLD, Miss Suu Kyi and other party spokesmen have for years defined its ethnic policy by calling for a ‘new Panglong agreement’. This refers to a document signed in 1947 by Miss Suu Kyi’s father, Aung San, Burma’s independence hero, with Shan, Kachin and Chin representatives, promising ‘full autonomy’ in the frontier areas. Mr Thein Sein also says the peace deals he pursues are based on the spirit of the Panglong Agreement” (The Economist, July 2012).

On the other hand, as she is the only capable leader who could put the minorities issues to the junta, many of the ethnic groups also still rely on her and have faith that optimism appear in near future. “While some ethnic minority leaders appear to trust Aung San Suu Kyi, in large part due to the efforts of her father, Aung San, to build a Union of equal nations before he was assassinated, they are generally deeply suspicious of other NLD leaders, several of whom were high-ranking officers in the Myanmar army and former enemies on the battlefield” (ICG Asia Report N°82, 9 September 2004: 5).

In August, 2011, Suu Kyi had a meeting with Thein Sein, in which the contents of the dialogue “ included the release of political prisoners, political role of Suu Kyi and end to conflicts with ethnic minorities which may help Myanmar in getting development assistance and lifting of trade sanctions” (Ganganath Jha 2011; 44). On 14<sup>th</sup> November, Aung San Suu Kyi gave a call for a second multi-ethnic Panglong Conference taking into consideration 21<sup>st</sup> century concerns.

Ethnic leaders believe that Suu Kyi will carry on her father's mission to honor the agreement. Suu Kyi a charismatic leader of Myanmar is keen to work for the nation. Prof. Ganganath Jha "believes that changes are already taking place in the politics of Burma. He suggests that Suu Kyi and her followers should grab the opportunity to serve the interests of the people and the nation. Prof Jha strongly emphasises the capability of the leadership of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and that her charismatic leadership and involvement in the politics of the country will certainly lead the country along the path to development" (Burma Centre Delhi 2011: 84).

## 5.8 CONCLUSION

Thus it can be concluded that the NLD as the largest opposition group, has an important stake in the politics of Myanmar. The military, the ethnic minority groups and the NLD's reconciliation is an important step for a roadmap to development in the country. The unwavering and charismatic leadership of Aung San is worth appreciative. So even the ethnic minorities, fighting for greater autonomy should be firm enough to face the fierce junta so as to be successful in their mission. The struggle for democracy should be supported by all sections especially the ethnic groups as this can only be the right solution to bring harmony, peace, development and tranquillity in the region. Unity in diversity is waiting for all, so the fight for democracy should not be let down. At last the pluralistic nature of the society in which diverse group exists can best be tackled with multiculturalism which embrace and tolerate every group in the system. Therefore, multiculturalism should be a guiding policy of the government and not assimilation in Myanmar.

## CHAPTER- 6

### CONCLUSION

After a lengthy study on the topic, the complex nature of ethnicity in Myanmar is noticed. It can be said that Myanmar is one of the ethnically most diverse countries in the world. Since it became an independent state, it experienced a complex set of conflicts between the central government and ethnic minority groups seeking autonomy even sometimes for secession. The government has consistently sought to achieve a centralized, unitary state structure, while it seeks the allegiance and assimilation of members of minority groups. As a result, many rebel movements continue, as they have since 1948, to seek goals that range from separatism to independence. General Ne Win saw military action as an effective means of countering ethnic separatism. The military presence in areas dominated by ethnic minority groups got politicised and alienated the whole population, this strengthened the sense of ethnic identity and reinforced the view that the state is a foreign institution. Till today ethnic problems are not yet solved. Earlier the successive military regimes under Ne Win, Saw Maung and General Than Shwe were of the opinion that if autonomy is granted to the ethnic minorities the union of Burma will disintegrate. As such ethnic minorities are treated as anti-nationals and did everything to alienate them. With the advent of Thein Sein the scenario changed and dialogues have started for ending their alienation for mainstream politics.

The complexity of the issues of ethnicity is such that neither the divisions nor states are mono-ethnic. The presence of one ethnic group could be seen in other states. For instance in Shan State in addition to the Shan population, there are many other smaller ethnic groups, such as the Pao, Palaung, Wa, Lahu, and Akha. There is a significant Shan population in Kachin State, and many Burmans live in the cities and larger towns of the minority states, such as Shan State and Kachin State. Furthermore, there are substantial non-Burman populations in some Burman areas, such as the Karen population in the Irrawaddy Division.



The most fundamental grievance of ethnic minorities in Myanmar today is their lack of influence on the political process and thus on decisions that affect their lives. Since the military regime took over power they have been neglected by a strongly centralised military junta that regards them with intense suspicion. They have been deprived of their political and economic power even more acutely than the majority population. Moreover the Burman population dominated over the other ethnic populace in walks of life, be it in the government or military, as such for the ethnic minority the government is perceived as a foreign force. Until and unless the minority ethnic groups are given a fair share in the system the peace, progress and development aspects of the country will still be a far dream.

The application of forced assimilation also known by many as 'Burmanisation' has by the military junta on the ethnic minority through education, culture, religion etc has resulted into the mushrooming of ethnic insurgent groups for so many decades since 1962. Ethnic minority groups consider themselves discriminated against and have openly accused successive governments of a deliberate policy of "Burmanisation". They feel not only marginalised economically, but also that their social, cultural, and religious rights are being suppressed. This has created a wound in their relations. Therefore, the military junta should quit its Burmanisation policy and rule in a democratic way.

Insurgency has been a way of life in Myanmar since it got independence from the British rule. It has still been the greatest security threat for every successive ruling Junta. However, the military government, instead of redressing the grievances of the ethnic minority groups' demand to address the issues they turned a deaf ear and increased their sphere of influence by its brutal policies in minority areas. In the name of protecting the integrity of the Union, the junta justified its continued repressive rule. Ethnic insurgent groups originally fought for seperatism, but today almost all have accepted the Union of Myanmar as a fact and their focus has shifted to federalism with local authority and equality within a new federal state structure. This is the greatest decision on the part of the ethnic insurgent group with the dawn of democracy. This is possible because of the combined effort of the charismatic leadership of Suu Kyi, the willingness on the part of the ethnic groups desire to be within the federal system as against the unitary state

structure and the present military regime under Thein Sein's orientation towards giving civilian hue to the military rule. Comparing to previous regime, the present government under Thein Sein the relation between the military government at the centre and the minority ethnic groups has improved. Thein Sein reiterated on development of the border areas. A separate Ministry to look into the affairs of the border region has also been instituted. Border Guard Forces are also stationed in the peripheral areas. The developmental projects taken up by the government are also not without suspicion and criticism by the people in the region. This is due to the result of the long practised forced assimilation move of the Junta in the past decades conducted in the name of development. It will take time to clear this suspicion in the minds of the ethnic minority groups who been under suppression for many decades. To give a fair judgement, both the junta and the ethnic minorities should not be too fast in concluding the remarks made or the project taken up from both the sides. The Military junta should also be fast to respond to the need for the development of the peripheral areas. Unless the developmental activities reach to the peripheral region the country cannot developed and alienation feeling won't be removed.

Today the ethnic leaders and the democracy supporters are still not clear about the move taken up by the present government. To gain the confidence of the populace, the Junta has to come up with a new written constitution that would stand as a contract between federated units and the central government as a prerequisite for those ethnic national minorities to join and form a federal Union of Burma. Therefore, for an ethno-culturally diverse and divided society like Burma, a constitutional federation that would accommodate the aspirations of ethnic national minorities with separate legislatures and simultaneously integrate all federated units into one common polity under one flag is the best suited form of governance for the multi-national Burma.

Democracy cannot to keep aside while discussing ethnic issues on Myanmar. The National League for Democracy has been fighting for restoration of democracy since its inception. Myanmar being an ethnically diverse nation, "unity in diversity" which is the tenets of democracy has become a must. A country with 135 ethnic races is bound to face ethnic conflicts or challenges on the policies and programmes of the government. As such

the country has been under constant suppression in one form or the other throughout the history. Under the Britishers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the second world war by Japanese and at present rule by the repressive government. Since independence Myanmar has experienced with incessant ethnic conflicts between the Burman and other ethnic groups. The ethnic groups perceived the central government to be unsympathetic to its interest and identity. Thus the insensitivity and apathy of the government lead to demand for autonomy, self determination and secession. The military regime till 1988 used military actions as a means of countering ethnic separatism. But after the 1988 pro-democracy movement it changed its strategy to ceasefire agreements which is in a way better than military forced crackdowns. It can be said that the rise of democracy movement become the greatest obstacle on the path to dictatorship of the military regime. Thereby oriented themselves to a more humanitarian policies and programmes.

The prospect for democracy is high in Myanmar. Pluralism which is the variants of democracy can lead to a situation in which diversity is officially acknowledged and which allows groups to exercise power, thus fostering cordial relationships between the state and the multi-ethnic group. The government must be willing to allow the minority group a reasonable amount of separatism within the system. So all the stakeholders in Myanmar; the military, the ethnic minority groups and the supporter of democracy should join hand in helping the state to achieve peace, unity and development of the country. Since 2010, after Thein Sein took over power faint development could be seen and he often reiterated that his regime is more of a 'civilian government'.

On the other hand, the movement for democracy is bending upon ending the military rule and opens a new era of cultural, social and political understanding. The fight for democracy and freedom became a uniting force between minorities and NLD.

Suu Kyi charismatic leadership has once again came to the limelight since her release from the house arrest in 2010. She received various international awards, which in essence means her charismatic leadership and the support from the world communities in her struggle for restoration of democracy in Myanmar. Ganganath Jha also commented that "To me the developments in Myanmar are neither pro-western, pro-Indian nor anti-

Chinese whatever has happened since the release of Suu Kyi from her house arrest in 2010, are the steps towards democratization” (Ganganath Jha, the quest for democracy: 3). She has called for another Panglong conference in Kale Declaration with ethnic groups which if implemented could offer a framework to strengthen the democratic opposition while working toward genuine national reconciliation. She realised that reconciliation and political consensus between the Burman majority and the ethnic minority groups is the main criteria of Burma’s problem. As a result she could gain the confidence of the minority ethnic groups and her influence has extended to a large section of the populace. Today all ethnic leaders supported Suu Kyi’s stand on federalism in which issue of autonomy can be discussed under federal structure.

The military junta in its goal of one nation often applied the dual policy of assimilation and marginalization throughout the country resulting in persecution of selected minorities in particular parts like the Rohingyas. The Junta has even departed for its overarching assimilation policy and pursued a policy of marginalisation. Therefore gross atrocities has been meted out to the Rohingyas. It has even been described that the Rohingyas are the most persecuted community in the world today. All these years the Rohingya’s issue has been a test for a charismatic leader like Suu Kyi. She and the NLD kept away from the Rohingya’s cause all these years, perhaps because of concerns that may not appeal to the majority Buddhist population. As a result of the unclear stand for the cause of the Rohingyas muslims even the ethnic groups lost hope at times. Hence, despite desire for establishment of democracy, sometimes the ethnic minorities lack complete identification with the movement as is largely dominated by the Burmans.

It is high time for the ruling military government to give up its policy of ruling the state in the name of national unity and territorial integrity in which the ethnic groups and democracy supporters have been suppressed. The struggle between the military government and the political opposition perhaps represent a challenge for development, peace and democracy.

It is time to look for a viable political set up which can encompass the diverse ethnic groups. Taking the nature of ethno-cultural diversity, democracy could be the only viable political set-up in Myanmar.

Moreover, Myanmar can hope to overcome its ethnic issues political turmoil only when the majority Burmans and the minority ethnic groups recognise the need for mutual co-existence with respect for human rights, mutual understanding and equality under a federal set-up. For this the Burmans have to compromise with the privilege enjoy by them at the costs of the minority ethnic groups while ethnic groups have cooperate with the central authority and give up their demand for severing ties with the government.

Last but not the least, the three hypotheses are found to be valid in the context of Myanmar. In the first hypothesis which said, 'ethnic diversity has not been viewed in terms of pluralism by the government of Myanmar', the government so far has not recognise the plurality of the society, instead adopted unitarism which in essence encourages assimilation. The second hypothesis, 'the policy of assimilation has been enforced to integrate diverse ethnic groups into the national mainstream' looking from the perspective of military regime, myanmar being an ethnically diverse country civil wars between ethnic groups are not uncommon and the tendency to secede from the union is also high, therefore to control seperation from the union the successive military government framed policies in such a way as to integrate them into national mainstream, if resisted then used forced assimilation. The last hypothesis, 'the assimilationist policy of military junta resulted in the ethno-nationalistic conciousness of various ethnic groups and also Burmese nationalism became more assertive, it became the genesis for the rise of ethno-centricism'. Much to the expectation of the military junta, gun barrel doesn't integrate the state. while implementing their burmanisation policy, instead of coming closer to the mainstream union, the ethnic minority nationalities became more propective about their rights and thereby creating a strong feeling ethno-nationalistic conciousness. They become more isolated from the Union.

Therefore the movement for democracy has to be supported by all section of the society in Myanmar. Recently the movement has entered into phase of cultural, social and political understanding. The fight for democracy and freedom has also become a uniting force between minorities and NLD. Therefore, as democracy is the only platform which can bring unity in diversity every ethnic group has to comply with it without doubt and fight for its restoration to the earliest possible.

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