

Suu Kyi 1979: Burmese perceptions of Indians, Chinese, Japanese and British

Extract from the record (attached) made by [British diplomat James E Hoare](#) of a talk by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi at St Antony's College Oxford on 13 November 1979.

“On the Indians, by which she meant primarily Indians in Burma, she said that there was a love-hate relationship, with hate perhaps predominating. India was respected as the land of the Buddha, but Indians were seen as either poor coolies or else grasping money lenders, or landowners. The image of the poor coolie was so strong that many Burmese, even well-educated ones, were astonished to see in India wealthy Indians and signs of past Indian greatness. There was a particular dislike of Muslims. Their dietary practices, especially some ritual killings, caused great offence. (In Burma, she remarked, it was alright to cut a man's throat, but to do the same to an animal was a heinous crime.) There was an irrational fear, again even among the educated, of the Muslims swamping the Burmese because of polygamy.”

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BURMESE ATTITUDES TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD

1. Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San the Burmese independence leader, gave a talk on this subject at the Far Eastern Centre at St Antony's College, Oxford on 13 November. She lives in Oxford, and is married to Dr Michael Atkes, a research fellow at St John's College. Her mother (LPR No 26) still lives in Burma, and she herself goes back from time to time. You may be interested in the following account both because of her background and what she said.
2. She emphasised that she was giving an essentially personal view of the attitudes of ethnic Burmese rather than of Burmese citizens. The Shans, Karens and other minorities would not necessarily share the same views as the Burmese proper. She also said that she was not talking about formal government positions, but how ordinary people viewed four outside people : Indians, Chinese, British and Japanese.
3. On the Indians, by which she meant primarily Indians in Burma, she said that there was a love-hate relationship, with hate perhaps predominating. India was respected as the land of the Buddha, but Indians were seen as either poor coolies or else grasping money lenders, or landowners. The image of the poor coolie was so strong that many Burmese, even well-educated ones, were astonished to see in India wealthy Indians and signs of past Indian greatness. There was a particular dislike of Muslims. Their dietary practices, especially some ritual killings, caused great offence. (In Burma, she remarked, it was alright to cut a man's throat, but to do the same to an animal was a heinous crime). There was an irrational fear, again even among the educated, of the Muslims swamping the Burmese because of polygamy.
4. The Burmese felt drawn to the Chinese, even in spite of a long historical record of Chinese interference in Burma, and the presence of a large Chinese minority in the country. On the whole the latter was tolerated. The Chinese had not, like the Indians, been great money lenders and had not bought land in the way the Indians did. They had not therefore seemed so offensive to the Burmese. She felt that most minorities felt the same as the Burmese about the Chinese, though some felt less drawn to the Chinese than did the Burmese. The Shan, for example, had close links with the Thai, and felt Thai culture was superior to Burmese.
5. As for the British, she said that for all Burmese, their feelings against the British and resentment at the period of British rule were the strongest of their emotions involving foreigners. No Burmese could accept that the British had a right or a duty to take over Burma. The British period was ignored in schools as far as possible. Burmese were not taught to hate the British; rather, the whole episode was ignored. It was perhaps partly because the British had failed to appreciate the importance of Buddhism to the Burmese that they were so disliked. She had been astonished to talk to elderly former British officials with excellent knowledge of the language and culture of the country who had dismissed questions such as the wearing of shoes in monasteries or pagodas as merely political ploys. Perhaps the British had not been able to accept that they were regarded as a superior race by the Burmese. One problem, however, was that while the British period could be ignored, there was one legacy, the pervasive influence of Western

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culture, which could not. The Burmese felt that their own culture was quite sufficient for all their needs, but were subject to Western pressures. Most of them disliked Western culture. Burmese women would not wear western dress, and ballroom dancing was frowned upon. It did take place in Rangoon especially, but most of those engaging in it were "not real Burmese".

6. The Japanese, however, were generally liked by the Burmese, and even though the occupation had been cruel, it had not been resented by the Burmese. Perhaps it was because the Japanese had defeated the British and Americans. Perhaps it was also something to do with the fact that the Japanese were Buddhists, although their Buddhism was not comparable to Burmese Buddhism.

7. All this was delivered with great ~~verve~~^{verve}. While some of it-especially some of what was said about the British - may have been slightly tongue in cheek, I think she was serious in most of her views. Much of what she said does reflect what I have heard from other Burmese and seen in Burmese writing. Her views also seem to me to reflect accurately what we know of the views of Ne Win, for example, though she claims to be opposed to Ne Win and his government. Perhaps Rangoon would like to comment on this.

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cc : PUSD
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