

# Myanmar Undergoing an Exciting Phase: An Indian Traveller's Impression



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After collecting my baggage, I joined other co-passengers to face the immigration counter at Yangon airport. Being on a research trip, I was expecting the usual grilling and curious questions from immigration officials. The grilling was particularly more intense during my previous visit to Bangladesh. For almost half an hour, the customs officials posted at the Dhaka airport had interviewed me to get a clearer understanding on the exact purpose of my visit to Bangladesh.

Now as my turn to face the immigration officials at the Yangon airport came, I got increasingly nervous. Before my turn came, I diligently took out all the permission letters and documents which would ascertain my credibility as a researcher. I prepared myself to face pretty intensive questioning from the two lady officers in charge of clearing my immigration papers. But to my utter surprise, upon presenting my passport and visa documents, the lady officer at the desk did not even bother to look

at me. She and her colleague were having a light hearted chat in their local dialect and within no time I was happily standing at the other end of the immigration counter, waiting for my other colleagues to join me.

This episode as insignificant as it may sound, nevertheless speaks volumes about Myanmar's conscious efforts to open up to the outside world.<sup>1</sup> It also reflects the efforts undertaken by the decision makers to make their society more liberal,<sup>2</sup> from within and outside. Barring a few exceptions, in the next few days as I travelled across three different cities namely Yangon, Mandalay and Nay Pyi Taw, this initial impression that I had gathered at the airport



Downtown Yangon

<sup>1</sup> Joshua Kurlantzick, 'The Mysterious Opening of Myanmar', *The Boston Globe*, 04<sup>th</sup> December 2011

<sup>2</sup> UNDP, 'Democratic Governance in Myanmar Current trends and implications', *United Nations Development Programme, Myanmar*, 01<sup>st</sup> December 2013



**Nay Pyi Taw, the capital of Myanmar with usual sight of isolated streets**

increasingly got strengthened. Exception, I say here because there were a couple of encounters which still reminded us about the subtle but effective control of the military on the country. If Yangon is bubbling with confidence and excitement then in contrast Nay Pyi Taw, still reels under an air of formality and military styled discipline. If Yangon's culture



**Like on the streets of Kolkata and Dhaka, Cycle Rickshaws are a common site in Yangon too (Image Courtesy: Dr. Hippu Salk Kristle Nathan)**

symbolises the on-going political transition, then Nay Pyi Taw in many ways is indicative of the prevailing military control over the country's political and societal affairs.

The result of the opening up is that within a short time frame, Myanmar has made immense progress. Forget about government and privately released

figures and statistics. During my interviews with multiple respondents representing Myanmar's industry, political parties, and activists etc. all exuded an air of confidence about the on-going political transition and future economic growth. Roaming across the streets of Myanmar's three important cities gives a clear indication that the country is slowly, yet steadily heading towards a phase of rapid economic development.<sup>3</sup> One need not to be an economist to be able to figure out the causes behind such an optimistic assumption for Myanmar. The conditions for such economic growth were already present and it becomes very apparent to the visitor during his stay. To start with, Myanmar has abundant labour force at its disposal which can contribute significantly towards rapid industrial development.<sup>4</sup> During the trip, I got an impression that people in Yangon, mostly young and falling in the ideal working age group, always seemed to be in a hurry.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Aung Hla Tun, 'Myanmar projects economic growth of 9.3 pct for 2015-16', *Reuters*, 24<sup>th</sup> April 2015

<sup>4</sup> ADB, 'Myanmar in Transition : Opportunities and Challenges', *Asian Development Bank*, August 2012

<sup>5</sup> ADB report on Myanmar points to similar observations. For details See Ref No. 4

To add to this, the available labour is also hardworking and honest.

Another interesting feature with regard to labour availability that I experienced was that the Burmese society appeared to be extremely gender neutral and lets its womenfolk to be an equal contributor to economic prosperity. This is quite contrary to what a recent report in *The Guardian* notes that in Myanmar women enjoy a secondary role with respect to her male counterparts.<sup>6</sup> In fact one respondent during his interview noted that the ladies in Burma are able to strike a good balance between work and family life. During my field trip, I could notice significant presence and participation of women workforce in the services and manufacturing industry. The situation was



**A mosque adjacent to the Sule Pagoda in Yangon**

quite similar in Nay Pyi Taw and Mandalay too. I could notice good number of women participation in the education, bureaucracy, private sector, industry etc. Within the sphere of education particularly, women students in many instances outnumbered their male counterparts. Given this trend, it could be expected that in the coming years Myanmar would also see an increasing trend of women participation in politics and critical decision making. These and other such impressions particularly reminded me of a recent lecture at Nalsar University of Law given by Mr. Mohan Guruswamy who while referring to India noted that availability of larger labour force acted as a boon for its economic development.<sup>7,8</sup> He further noted that availability of such young population also had a great impact on consumption pattern within



**Buildings designed in the colonial style in Yangon**

<sup>6</sup> Sara Perria, 'On the road with the women building Myanmar', *The Guardian*, 25<sup>th</sup> January 2016

<sup>7</sup> Mohan Guruswamy, 'India: A Nation in Search of a State', Lecture given at NALSAR University of Law, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2016, Available at- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LYnwthA2-3E>, (Accessed on 11/04/2016)

<sup>8</sup> Anamitra Roychowdhury, C P Chandrashekhar, Jayati Ghosh, 'The 'Demographic Dividend' and Young India's Economic Future', *Economic & Political Weekly*, Volume 41, Issue No. 49, 09<sup>th</sup> December 2006, Available at- [http://www.jsk.gov.in/articles/the\\_demographic\\_dividend\\_cp\\_chandrasekhar.pdf](http://www.jsk.gov.in/articles/the_demographic_dividend_cp_chandrasekhar.pdf)



**Yangon-Nay Pyi Taw-Mandalay Highway**  
(Image Courtesy: Dr. Mayilvaganan)

India.<sup>9</sup> In the years to come, one can expect a similar trend in Myanmar too.<sup>10</sup>

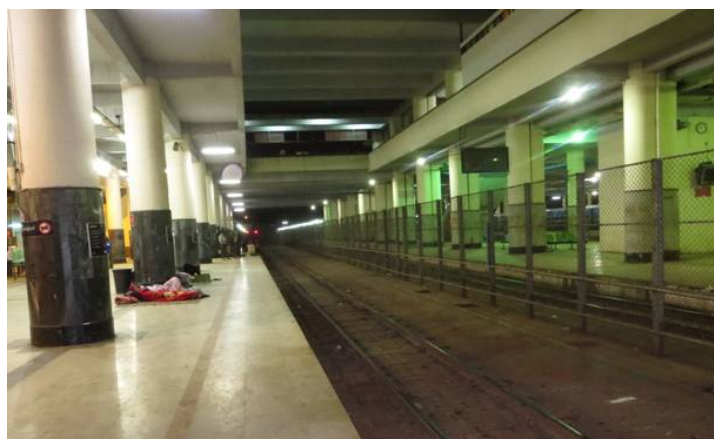
Another characteristic of the people in Myanmar is that they are hardworking, graceful and forgiving. Couple of respondents with whom I had a chance to interact had spent long years in jail. But despite such gruesome past they gave an impression that they have decided to make peace with their past. Nowhere during the interview, could I trace any element of remorse and hatred towards the military regime. They are more optimistic about their future and want to let go off the past. One respondent in fact thanked India for its consistent support for the pro-democracy groups in Myanmar in the initial years. Another example which in a small way indicates that people in Myanmar are forgiving and bury their past could be gathered from the interaction among different religious communities in Yangon. For example, quite contrary to news and media reports, I could not sense any tension throughout my stay among the Muslim and the Burmese

population. Muslims shopkeepers and street vendors freely went about with their business and interacted freely with their Buddhist brethren. Also during the days leading up to Christmas, many office employees organised Christmas celebrations in the evening hours.

To complement these inherent advantages, Myanmar needs to work on a few areas which will firmly put them on a dedicated path towards prosperity and enduring stability. Two areas which require urgent attention are physical infrastructure and development of knowledgeable human resource. For example in Yangon, the city's colonial inspired buildings as nostalgic as they may appear are nevertheless in poor shape.

Also, the highway that connects Yangon with Nay Pyi Taw and Mandalay is pretty smooth, but in many sections, I got a feeling that it could have been constructed in a better way.

These two examples are merely indicative of the larger infrastructural problems that Myanmar



**An inside view of Mandalay Station**  
(Image Courtesy: Dr. Mayilvaganan)

<sup>9</sup> See Ref No. 7

<sup>10</sup> Linda Yueh, 'Burma: Asia's last frontier is opening up', *BBC*, 02<sup>nd</sup> Jun 2013



**A Mini train spotted at Yangon Railway station  
(Image Courtesy: Dr. Hippy Salk Kristle Nathan)**

faces. For example, the railway stations that we visited in Yangon and Mandalay, apart from their colonial charm confirmed the view reflected in a report that Myanmar's railway connectivity infrastructure is not in a good shape.<sup>11</sup> It is essential for Myanmar to focus its resources on building transportation infrastructure. These will help in long term facilitation of free movement of labour and resources within different regions of Myanmar.

Other aspect which requires urgent attention is knowledge creation and an excellent human resource across different parts of Myanmar. For example, take the status of English speaking in Myanmar. Normal interaction even at the streets of Yangon proved generally difficult. According to one respondent there were very few English teaching schools in the country. Myanmar needs to consciously cultivate resources in improving the standards of English education in the country. Upon enquiring about the status of technical education in Myanmar, few respondents noted that they are looking

at outside countries to improve the level of technical education.

But there are a few bright spots too. The communication network in the country has been developed in an efficient manner. During my 8 hour journey to Mandalay even at isolated patches, I could easily access internet. Along with it quite a few respondents proudly boasted about the fact that there were no restrictions on accessing any websites hinting at the level of political freedom allowed by the transition government.



**An inside view of the Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon**

These are indeed challenging, but exciting times for Myanmar. I certainly felt happy to have visited it during its most crucial phase.

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<sup>11</sup> KPMG, 'Infrastructure in Myanmar', 30<sup>th</sup> May 2013, Available at- <http://www.kpmg.com/mm/en/issuesandinsights/articlespublications/pages/infrastructure-in-myanmar.aspx>, (Accessed on 11/04/2016)