

# National hero U. Ottama

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**Abstract:** Myanmar is a very old country in South East Asia. After the British annexation (1885), it was renamed as British Burma. In the first half of the twentieth century, nationalist movements developed in various parts of the British-occupied province of Burma. This movement was completed in 1948 through independence. One of the most successful leaders of this movement was U. Ottama. He was an ordinary Buddhist monk. He spent several years of his life in Calcutta for studying. He was inspired by the Indian National Congress and Gandhiji's ideology of non-violence. In the 1920s, he brought about a new change in the nationalist movement in Burma. The method of his movement was 'Non-violence' and 'Boycott'. That is why he is also called "Gandhi of Burma". Returning to the country after learning from India, Japan, etc., Ottama saw that different classes of people were angry on British rule and revolts had started in different parts of the country. He inspired the Burmese, by his speech and his "patriotic" writings in 'The Sun'. He became a member of 'Young Man Buddhist Association' and brought a new momentum to the nationalist movement, by his ideology of Non-cooperation and Boycott. Inspired by Ottama, a large number of Buddhist monks (Pongyi) took part in the political movement. He was first imprisoned in 1921 for his famous speech "Craddak Get Out" - in that time, Reginald Craddak was a Governor of British Burma. Even after this he was imprisoned many times. His Non-Violence ideals still memorable him in the Burmese nationalist movement.

**Keywords:** U. Ottama, Pongyis sentiment, Nationalist Movements, 'Non- Violence' and 'Boycot't movement, Article in "The Sun" etc.

Burma was conquered by the British in the course of three wars fought in 1825, 1852 and 1885. The First War was concluded by the Treaty of Yandaboo resulting in the occupation of Arakan and Tenasserim, the Second War witnessed the occupation of whole of Lower Burma with that of Pegu and Martaban and finally the Third War completed the whole process of annexation of Burma. With the completion of the Third Anglo Burmese War in 1885 the rule of the Konbaung Dynasty in Burma came to an end. The British rule lasted in Burma till January 1948 when Burma regained her lost independence.

The study of Burmese nationalism having multi facets characters is a direct offshoot of the protracted resistance movements of the Burmese peasantry under the leadership of the dissatisfied Myothugyis (Burmese village headmen) during the second half of the nineteenth century, the uprisings were desultory, sporadic but spontaneous in character. The two major groups, namely the Myothugyis and the Pongyis practically organized protest movements against the British between 1885 and 1900 and set the stage ready for the awakening of the Burmese nationalism. My present study seeks to explain how the Pongyis, i.e., the religious leaders gradually involved themselves actively in this process of resistance movement.

Nationalist agitation attained a new political and cultural dimension with the emergence of the Pongyis "as politicians in Burma during the years 1921 and political monk became a very important factor in the development of Burmese nationalism as a popular movement. Of all sections of Burmese society, the Pongyis "had the strongest reason for hating the British. They became the most uncompromising nationalist. They had nothing to lose and firmly believed that the traditional Buddhist sangha life was at stake.

The really politically violent and forceful agitation which entailed courting police action was to come later under the tutelage of U Ottama, a rahan who was known as the Gandhi of Burma.<sup>1</sup> He subsequently brought about a change in the aims and thoughts of all political activities in Burma from

1920 onwards. But his style, however, was that of Subhash Chandra Bose. When he came back to Burma from India, he was already a well known member of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Indian National Congress of Bengal in 1918.<sup>2</sup> He brought the dissatisfied and dissented Buddhist monks, the Pongyis into politics. Immediately after the occupation of Burma in 1886 there was a tremendous outburst from within the Pongyis against the British. Before this time there were few occasions when pongyis had taken part in public meetings.

One of the most successful leaders of this movement was U Ottama. He was an ordinary Buddhist monk. He spent several years of his young days in Calcutta for higher studies. He was inspired by the Indian National Congress and especially Gandhiji's ideology of non- violence. In the 1920s, he brought about a new change and dimension in the nationalist movement of Burma. The method of his movement was "Non-violence" and "Boycott". That is why he is also called "Gandhi of Burma".<sup>3</sup>

U Ottama was born on 28th December 1897 in Akyab of Arakanese parents. During early days in school he and his younger brother distinguished themselves in their studies. They were selected to be taken by an Anglican missionary to England for higher education. As the parents could not bear to part with them they were taken out of school to prevent them from running away for better education or entering government service when they grew older. As a young monk U Ottama managed to go to Calcutta and study and teach there. He came into close contact with and took his political lessons from the Indian nationalist activists. After the Russo-Japanese War he went to Japan and studied and taught Pali in Tokyo. He returned to Burma in 1911 and found the people not mentally ready for a political struggle like the Satyagraha movement, went back to Japan. He came back in 1919 when the country was already in political ferment.

U Ottama returned to Burma after a long stay in India and was very much influenced by the ideals of the Indian National Congress and advocated a boycott of the reforms on the Congressional pattern. A large and powerful section

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of the Pongyis in Burma came under his influence. U Ottama along with other monks started getting the ideas of non co-operation and carried on a different campaign in favour of Home Rule and against the Dyarchical form of reforms.

He accused the British of debasing the Burmese religion and culture as well as corrupting the moral of the people. He carefully insisted that rebellion was not the method to achieve Home Rule, but the use of violence was not rejected in principle. Moreover, he was careful not to allow Buddhist religious appeals to become a decisive force in the anti-British movement. Even supported the Muslim khilafat movement the government seriously took up these activities of the mark and his associates as highly seditious.<sup>4</sup> The government adopted repressive measures to curb their activities. U Ottama was arrested and his arrest caused widespread indignation among the Burmans. The Rangoon Mail warned the Government that "such actions would shatter the faith which the Burmans might still have in the Government and appealed to the Burmans to guard themselves against rushing into hasty actions."<sup>5</sup>

On his return to the country after having experiences from India, Japan and other places Ottama saw and realized the change of political mind within the different classes of Burmese people who were very much dissatisfied with the British rule and revolts started in different parts of the country. He inspired the Burmese by his speech and his "patriotic" writings in "The Sun" which supported him and installed him in the press when no monastery would admit him as a political pongyi. At the outset his speeches were considered radical in the context of the times. Soon the spirit of national resentment against the government and political awakening spread to people of small towns. He founded Wunthanu Athins (patriotic societies) at every place he visited. He became a member of "Young Men Buddhist Association" and brought a new momentum to the nationalist movement by his ideology of Non-cooperation and Boycott. Inspired by Ottama, a large number of Buddhist monks (Pongi) took part in the political movement. He was first imprisoned in 1921 for his famous speech "Craddock Go Home" published in The Sun. At that time, Reginald Craddock was the Governor of British Burma. Even after this he was imprisoned many times. His Non-Violence ideals made him memorable in the course of the Burmese nationalist movement.

From that day he became a national hero. He was invited out to various towns and even distant villages to address the gatherings organized by the YMBA to inspire the people to protest against the Craddock scheme and demand more extensive reforms. But it is interesting to note that U Ottama's theme at the time was along the lines of the Khadi Movement of the Indian National Congress asking the people to organize themselves into an association pledged to use only native products and boycott British goods.<sup>6</sup>

He also gave the Burmese people some basic lessons in modern constitutional thought to rid them of the fear of the British government and its officials, whether British, Indian or native. As the tension between the government and the General Council of Burmese Association (the new title for

YMBA and its allied associations) intensified, U Ottama's speeches became more inflammatory.<sup>7</sup>

In 1921 he was arrested for one of these speeches, tried for sedition and sentenced to eighteen months "simple imprisonments. It was the first time in the history of British Burma that a prison term was given for making a political speech. He was arrested many more times later on, so that between 1921 and 1927 he spent maximum time in prison than outside. At his first arrest people all over Burma were incensed; men and women marched out into streets to protest and were met with mounted police charges.

The *Sangha* now felt that the time was propitious to take appropriate steps to support the principles of U Ottama, a member of their order.<sup>8</sup> In many of his speeches and writings he pleaded that the sangha should not ignore the sufferings of the people while they concentrated single-mindedly on their own spiritual benefit. His speeches in the public gatherings were found very direct, forthright and of powerful style. He had strong words against those whom he considered enemies of the people, but he was full of understanding for political leaders with whom he had differences of opinion. When U Ba Pe leading a section of the GCBA into Legislative Council elections under the diarchy reforms, and though he himself powerfully disagreed with U Ba Pe, he could still say, "U Ba Pe, the first delegate to London is also the first one to start politics. He is also the first one to forego government service and its rewards, in order to serve the motherland. Therefore, I cannot think ill of him".<sup>9</sup>

The Burma reforms came into operation at the end of 1920 and the first election was held in November that year. In May 1920 there occurred a matter of great importance the split in the General Council of Burmese Association over the question of reforms. The Moderate section of the GCBA was against boycott. The four nationalists advocated complete boycotts and the acceptance of nothing less than complete Home Rule. The Burmese leader was U Chit Hlaing, U Pu and U Tun Aung Gyaw, President Secretary and treasurer of the GCBA respectively were influenced by the political monk, U Ottama who stood for Non-Co-operation while the other members of the GCBA's managing committee wanted to work for the Reforms.<sup>10</sup>

Indian moderate opinion welcomed reforms and Indian extremist opinion was not prepared to advise Burmese leaders to boycott the Council on the ground that boycott would be useless. Burmans would be prepared to adopt the non-cooperation movement as a positive feature which apparently, they are not prepared to do. Monk politicians were all out for Home Rule and boycott. The General Council of the Burmese Association machinery "appears to be largely in the hands of Home Rulers and if the General Council of Burmese Association would come out officially for boycott of the Council there would almost certainly be an important its secession."<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile extremist had received considerable action to stream through the release of U Ottama who had served his year in jail. Accordingly, to the report on the political situation what the movement had made no definite pronouncement on reforms but there was little doubt that he would put himself at the head of the

movement to boycott the reformed council. His influence would be very much with monks and women who formed the backbone of extremist party.<sup>12</sup>

He had an absolutely impregnable personal integrity. This was an unbelievable thing in a period when corruption among government servants and later also among politicians was open and public. When he died on 9 September 1939 it was noted that he had for a long time in the Bank of Tokyo which he kept for Buddhist missionary purposes abroad.

Throughout the last few years of his life, he lived in great pain, begging for food with difficulty because he was sick and unable to afford medical treatment. During these days he was rejected by his old colleagues in politics who had brought him back from Calcutta to vote for them in the 1936 elections. His forbearance was phenomenal. He had no ill words and feelings for those who brought him to such a state.

Again and again U Ottama was arrested and imprisoned, until at last he died in prison in 1939. "U Ottama did for nationalism in Burma part of what Gandhi did for it in India by transforming an essentially political problem into a religious one".<sup>13</sup> But the important difference between Gandhi and the Indian National Congress Party were able to find their major support among the middle classes and business community, whereas the Burmese nationalist leaders having normal flashes to support them in the nationalist movement. U Ottama was only the person who had to turn to the politically activated monks and the villagers. By 1924 organizations known as Wunthanu Athins (nationalist association) were to be found almost every village in Burma. Wunthanu ideas propagated by U Ottama and followed by the Burmese people. The people in villages and towns of Burma became bold and refused against the unjust orders and ill treatment of the administrative officers, the police and village headmen also. The people treated their leaders as little less than gods.<sup>14</sup>

In Burma U Ottama was a popular leader. His arrest provoked the people for more radical action. The earliest created a great shock wave among the people and also in Sangha.<sup>15</sup> The feeling of strength and unity provided by this great leader has had a lasting impact on the Burmese people all over the country. His ideology of non-violent non-cooperation has made him memorable in the Burmese nationalist movement.

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