

Growth of Burmese Nationalism under Young Men Buddhist Association (1906 to 1916)

Anindita Choudhury

Research Scholar, Department of History, Visva Bharati

The earliest political movement on the British model was the Young Men's Buddhist Association, popularly known as the YMBA. It was a native version of the YMCA, founded in 1906 by Rangoon College students Maung Ba carlPe, MaungMaung Gyi, Maung Hla Pe, Maung Sein Hla Aung, Maung Ba Dun and friends.¹ It should not be mistaken for a modern religious institution that grew into a political organisation. There were Buddhist associations then in Burma distinctly, with modern concepts, founded by the laity for the preservation and service of the Sasana (the Buddhist spiritual realm). They were, the Mission Associations founded in Mandalay on 6 July 1897, which set up a school in its name. The Buddha Kalyana Mitta Athin (friendship) of Myingyan was also founded about the same time, which later moved to Mandalay, and was absorbed into the former; the SasanadaraAthin (service) of Moulmein founded in 1899, which set up the Shin Boddhagossa school; the Asoka Society of Bassein founded in 1902 by an English convert to Buddhism and the Rangoon College Buddhist Association in 1904.² Besides, a YMBA was founded in Arakan in 1902, complete with student hostel following the YMCA model. From about 1905 the Lediaayadaw organised AbhidhammaThankhatt Associations, Foreign Mission Societies, and Thathana Hit Athens, in almost all towns.³

The idea of organising the YMBA, according to U Ba Po was thought up by him as he and his friends, MaungMaung Gyi and Maung Hla Pe, were taking a morning walk along Dalhousie Street, Rangoon. They passed by the YMCA building at the corner of Judah Ezekiel Street and thought they could set up a similar association through which political views could be disseminated. The idea was perceived because they were already preoccupied with the need for some way of preventing the arbitrary and excessive use of coercive means by the authorities. In those days, the British and Indian officials made the Burmese address them as "Thakin" (master) and when called to respond "Hpaya!" (lord). Furthermore, Burmese had to take off their footwear, fall to the ground and assume a respectful posture (used generally for the worship of God, King or Sangha) when addressing or being spoken to by the officers. Pupils not wearing European socks and shoes also had to take off their footwear when entering classrooms for studies.⁴

This abject state of the Burmese people disturbed the egos of Ba Pe and his friends even when they were in college only. In their fourth year, just before they sat for their B. A. examinations, they thought of a practical means to realise their aims. Thus, the Rangoon YMBA came into being in Rangoon College. It numbered about twenty - six close friends as active members for the first two years. They first made MaungMaung Gyi's home the clubhouse and met weekly. MaungMaung Gyi went to Calcutta to study for the

M. A. degree, Maung Ba Yin for medicine, and Maung Ba Pe, who was not rich enough to go abroad, remained at home and kept the association going with his house as the clubhouse. The association aimed to promote Amyo, Bartha, Thathana, and Pyinnyar (Race or Nation, Language, Sasana Buddhist Spiritual Realm and Education). It met regularly every week when one of its members delivered a lecture or organised a debate.⁵

Many of these gentlemen were members of the Governor's Council or senior government officials. They indeed were the new aristocracy of British Burma. Later, after the Morley - Minto Reforms of 1909, their ranks were to swell even more. It was clear that with the entry of the young barristers, the loyalist elements had decided to take over control of the association, which they or the government could not legally stamp out. Most of the newcomers, both young and old, were extremely sensitive about their relations with British officials. Indeed, the British authorities became very apprehensive and thought that government servants might join the YMBA.

Almost all Burman officers in government service, Burman brokers and traders, retired officials, teachers, Burman clerks, whether of business firms or government offices, avidly joined it. By 1910 when the leaders decided to hold the first All - Burma meeting of the YMBA in Rangoon on 20 March, there were about twenty - two associations. In this first conference, it was decided to form a General Council, as soon as possible, to direct and administer the YMBA associations all over Burma. The speeches of its leaders, the deliberations, the resolutions at monthly meetings, and the annual All Burma Conferences (until the Third Conference in 1915), all exhibited a deep concern to express repeated loyalty to the British Crown. It also recognised the need to appreciate and thank the British administration of Burma for its blessings, even to the extent of servility, in order to assure that YMBA was not marked as a seditious organisation.⁶

The government rejected this and aroused resentment among YMBA members and the public. At the third conference, the YMBA became a little bolder and decided to send memorials to Ashin - Say - In (His Worship the Sovereign Governor), to respect (not to confiscate) Wuttakanmye (Sasana Land), and to exempt it from land tax. They also claimed to appoint a Minister for Buddhist Savana, to appoint Dhammakatikan (lecturers) who would go around teaching Buddhism in schools, and to grant the power of writing wills to Buddhists, to prevent the sale of liquor to Burmese and encouraging Burmese salt - making, enforcing compulsory education, and holding primary school mathematics examinations for poor children, etc⁷

Volume 10 Issue 11, November 2021

www.ijsr.net

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution CC BY

During 1908 the YMBA also produced in English its official organ, The Burma Buddhist weekly. There were then in Burma a couple of English dailies, and a few weeklies, and their subsidiary weekly Burmese news bulletins, which were translations of certain parts of the English paper. All of them were pro - official and therefore on 4 July 1911, Maung Ba Pe and his friend MaungHla Po decided to produce a vernacular newspaper of nationalist orientation.⁸

Though it was not the official organ of YMBA later it adopted the policy of political. YMBA made step by step demands for the appointment of Burmese, but British never gave them. There was no serious conflict within the YMBA but in the early 20th Century Burmese Nationalism divided in two ways under YMBA organisation.⁹ One was moderate and other was extreme. YMBA was the first organisation in Burma which help to fight for the cause of the freedom of the nation. These helped to grow the sentiment of Nationalism in Burmese people. In this way the Nationalist movements reached their goal by getting the independence in 1948.¹⁰

References

- [1] Donald Eugene Smith, op. cit, p - 10 - 12.
- [2] Cady. F. John, A History of Modern Burma, New York, 1958, p - 201 - 204.
- [3] MaungMaungU, Burma and General Ne Win, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1969.
- [4] Maung Maung U, op. cit, p - 2.
- [5] F. S. V. Donnison, Burma, Ernest Benn Limited, London, 1970, p - 103.
- [6] Sagaing Han Tin, Myanma - NaingngandawHmattan, I, Rangoon, 1967, p - 107.
- [7] Sagaing Han Tin, op. cit, p - 111 - 113.
- [8] Ibid, p - 156 - 162.
- [9] MaungMaung. U, From Sangha to Laity (Nationalist Movements of Burma 1920 - 1940), Manohar Publication, New Delhi, 1980, p - 5.
- [10] Singh. Surindar. Prasad, edited by Growth of Nationalism in Burma, p - 25.