

Significant Journey Underway

Suu Kyi's tour of India sets the stage for a deepening of relations with Myanmar

Rajiv Bhatia



Aung San Suu Kyi and Nelson Mandela are the two most celebrated living leaders in the world today. Freed after long imprisonment, Mandela visited India in 1990; four years later he became the first president of democratic South Africa. Two years after her release from house arrest, Suu Kyi undertook a six-day tour of India this month. Will she become the next president when elections are held in her country in 2015?

She candidly expressed her 'sadness' over India's failure to support Burma's pro-democracy movement all the way. Many seem to have inferred that reprimanding New Delhi was her main objective, but this would be an unfair conclusion. The visit, if seen in its totality, indicates that, despite some lingering bitterness of the past, Suu Kyi is fully conscious of India's role as a key player in the region; she expects it to play an active role in helping Myanmar's transition to democracy.

"We have not yet achieved the goal of democracy," she observed while delivering Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Lecture at a packed Vigyan Bhawan in Delhi on 14 November; "we are still trying and... and in this last, I hope, and most difficult phase, the people of India will stand by us and walk with us." She plans to focus on the future. So does India.

Although the memorial lecture was a useful anchor, hers

was a full-scale political visit during which Suu Kyi met almost every important dignitary, except the President. She paid a call on Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and held discussions with UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi. A separate session with external affairs minister Salman Khurshid provided the opportunity to review regional and bilateral developments. This was followed by an interactive meeting with a galaxy of eminent people at Hyderabad House where she defined democracy as a balance between freedom and security, conveying that her people enjoyed neither freedom nor security in Myanmar today.

Her trips to Gurgaon, Banga-

The visit, if seen in its totality, indicates that, despite some lingering bitterness of the past, Suu Kyi is fully conscious of India's role as a key player in the region

lore and Andhra Pradesh were designed to help her appreciate the excellent work our institutions have been doing in the field of energy research, information technology, rural development and women empowerment. This would have assisted her in updating her view of progress in India, a country where she completed her schooling and secured her first university degree in 1960s.

Later Suu Kyi spent a year as



Nostalgia in the air

a resident scholar at the Institute of Advanced Study in Simla. A new edition of *Burma and India: Some Aspects of Intellectual Life under Colonialism*, which she authored at the time, was released by Vice President Hamid Ansari at the Vigyan Bhawan lecture. His presence on the dais had its own significance.

Suu Kyi's visit was not so much about India's policy towards Myanmar, for the new line was adequately projected by the PM during his May visit there.

India is perfectly willing to work with all sections of the polity in 'the new era.' Rather, the Burmese leader's visit was a rare occasion for people in India to comprehend the true nature of a complex transition to democratic rule, presently underway.

Looking at the unending procession of VVIPs to that country — President Obama be-

ing the latest important visitor — one could be forgiven to conclude that Myanmar is already a democracy now. But it is not. The one leader who calls a spade a spade is Suu Kyi. She asserted in Delhi that establishing rule of law, resolution of internal conflicts and constitutional reform were the key issues confronting the country. Without progress on them, democracy was unlikely to be achieved.

Besides political reform, the country faces the serious challenge of securing economic development. It distresses everyone to realise that Myanmar's economy is among the weakest in Asean today, a realisation that partly drove military rulers to change track.

What is India's role in encouraging the desired transition? Relations are excellent at the government level, with South Block

demonstrating sufficient generosity and flexibility now. Sharper attention to the implementation of ongoing projects should help improve the situation.

Closer people-to-people relations, advocated by Suu Kyi, are important. India Inc, despite a preference for caution, is showing greater enthusiasm. Four Indian delegations have visited Myanmar recently. A visit by Commerce and Industry Minister Anand Sharma is on the cards.

A combined push by the government and business would be very helpful, but we should remember the exhortations by Suu Kyi: she has continuously urged foreign investors to help Myanmar even as they help themselves. At a major Wilton Park Conference in UK, which I attended last week, the notion that business has serious responsibility to protect human rights in Myanmar received considerable support.

Finally, answer to the question posed at the beginning: the jury is still out. Suu Kyi's prospects to become the next president will depend on whether the constitution is amended to delete a provision that bars her candidature and whether elections will be free and fair.

Her chances will also be moulded by the wisdom and generosity of Burman leaders to accommodate ethnic aspirations. Myanmar's neighbours should be concerned and optimally supportive, while leaving the country to craft its own way out.

The writer is director general of Indian Council of World Affairs, and former ambassador to Myanmar. Views are personal.