

AUNG SAN SUU KYI: THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL FIGURE OF MYANMAR'S POLITICS

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Abstract:

Aung San Suu Kyi was born in Yangon, Myanmar, in 1945. After years of living and studying abroad, she returned home only to find widespread slaughter of protesters rallying against the brutal rule of dictator U Ne Win¹. She spoke out against him and initiated a non-violent movement towards achieving democracy and human rights. However, in 1989, the government placed Suu Kyi under house arrest, and she spent fifteen of the next twenty one years in custody. In 1991, her ongoing efforts won her the Nobel Prize for Peace, and she was finally released from house arrest in November 2010 and subsequently held a seat in parliament for the National League for Democracy (NLD) party until 2015². That November, the NLD won a landslide victory, giving them a majority control of parliament and allowing them to select the country's next President. In March 2016 Suu Kyi's adviser Htin Kyaw was selected for the post and the following month Suu Kyi was named the state counsellor, a position above the presidency that allows her to direct the country's affairs³. In 2017, critics have called for Suu Kyi's Nobel Prize to be revoked, citing her silence over the persecution of Rohingya Muslims, in Myanmar. Some activists criticized Aung San Suu Kyi for her silence on the 2012 Rakhine State riots (later repeated during the 2015 Rohingya a refugee crisis), and her perceived indifference to the plight of the Rohingya, Myanmar's persecuted Muslim minority.

Key words: Liberation, Independence, Democracy, Freedom, Justice.

Introduction:

Aung San Suu Kyi is known all around the world as one of the greatest spiritual and moral leaders of Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi received the Nobel Peace Prize and has been recognized for her struggle against tyranny for freedom and dignity. She has showed enormous amount of courage and strength by dedicating her life to fight for human rights and democracy in Myanmar. She cannot be silenced because she speaks the truth and because her words reflect basic Burmese and moral concepts. This remarkable woman said that she bore no one malice; she nursed no grudges against those who treated her so unjustly; she had no bitterness and she was ready to work for the healing of her homeland that had suffered so greatly. Suu Kyi has propagated for democracy and human rights, and calls the people to fight for it. Her belief, individualism and thought can make such a difference to the people of a nation who are in great need for a leader in the resistance against tyranny. Aung San Suu Kyi has a great pride for her country and a great love for the people. As being a true patriot of her country, Aung San Suu Kyi was sad of the fact that why her motherland was so poor and aggrieved. She felt great pity for the people who were suffering from poverty. This was probably the main reason for Suu Kyi to start her struggle for the development of democracy in Burma.

Background of the Study:

The economy of the country is not well managed and Myanmar is not a very prosperous nation in spite of the vast amounts of natural resources. The Burmese government oppresses the country with their Socialist Republic political regime by taking away the basic human rights of the country⁴. The causes of decline includes many reasons; when democratic rights had been lost to military dictatorship, sufficient efforts have not been made to regain them, moral and political values have been allowed to deteriorate without attempts to save the situation, the economy has been badly managed, and the country is being ruled by men without integrity or wisdom. Because of this decline Aung San Suu Kyi has been in a struggle for basic human rights and a democratic system of government since 1988⁵. Her perseverance has been remarkable through all the hardships she had to face. She insisted at all times that the movement should be based on a non-violent struggle for human rights as the primary object. Suu Kyi regards the

common people of her country as individuals worthy of love and respect, to make them able to have a voice in governmental political issues. She is proclaiming to the people of Burma to abandon what is wrong and uncertain, to accept what is good and to stand up for what they feel is right.

Through the years of decline, a vision of society in which the leadership and people could unite in efforts to achieve prosperity remained in the thoughts of the people. In 1988 the movement for democracy gave rise to the hope that the vision could become a reality. Suu Kyi gives hope to the people by introducing ideas of liberal democracy which means a representative government appointed for a constitutionally limited term through free and fair elections. By exercising responsibly their right to choose their own leaders, the Burmese have hope that they can reverse the decline of the nation. A democracy reflects individual ideas formulating to come up with a greater good for the people and for the country Suu Kyi talks about how fear is limiting the freedom of the people. She claims that it is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts the government and the fear of the government's power corrupts those who are subject to it. Any society that has fear of power is subject of being entrenched with corruption. Her protest is that every individual should strive to promote the basic rights and freedoms to which all human beings regardless of race, nationality or religion are entitled. She pleads with her people to develop courage, which is an essential attribute of those who would free themselves from the grip of oppression. A person should not depend on the courage and intrepidity of others. Each and everyone must make sacrifices to become a hero possessed of courage and intrepidity. Then only we shall be able to enjoy true freedom (freedom from fear). Suu Kyi always pleaded for a change in the mental attitudes of the people, which will shape the course of the nation's development, there had to be a united determination to persevere in the struggle, to make sacrifices in the name of the cause, to resist corrupting influences. It is all part of developing individual attitudes and not compromising for the higher authorities. Suu Kyi believed in doing the right thing and she believed that one day Myanmar would receive democracy. The central position of human rights in Aung San Suu Kyi's thinking reflects her sense of need to protect human dignity. Her stance has gone farther than being an ideal. It has been translated into an action taken in by the people of Myanmar. Her quest for democracy has translated into the people of Myanmar becoming individuals and thinking on their own. Standing up for what is right without living in fear is what Aung San Suu Kyi has established. She has shown humility and fearlessness and the result may be a better world to live in.

Early days of Suu Kyi:

Aung San Suu Kyi of Myanmar is known as one of the exemplary moral figures of our age who stood for freedom, human rights, values and democracy. She was praised and feted all around the world and received nearly every prize and recognition that the international human rights community has to offer. She stood for democratic values against all types of tyranny and oppression.

Aung San Suu Kyi is the daughter of Myanmar's independence hero, General Aung San. He was assassinated during the transition period in July 1947, just six months before independence, when Suu Kyi was only two⁶. In 1960 she went to India with her mother DawKhin Kyi, who had been appointed as Myanmar's ambassador in Delhi⁷. Four years later she went to Oxford University in the UK, where she studied philosophy, politics and economics. There she met her future husband, academician Michael Aris. After living and working in Japan and Bhutan, she settled in the UK to raise their two children, Alexander and Kim, but Myanmar was never far from her thoughts.

Political career :

Suu Kyi arrived in Rangoon (Yangon) in 1988 to look after her critically ill mother. At that time Myanmar was in the midst of major political upheaval. Thousands of student office workers and monks took to the streets demanding democratic reform. Suu Kyi could not remain silent and indifferent to all that was going on in Rangoon⁸. She was propelled into leading a revolt against the then dictator general Ne Win. Inspired by the non-violent campaigns of US civil rights leader Martin Luther King and India's Mahatma Gandhi, she organized rallies and travelled around the country, calling for peaceful democratic reform and free elections. But the demonstrations were brutally suppressed by the army, who seized power in a coup on 18 September 1988⁹. Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest the following year. The military government called national elections in May 1990 which Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD convincingly won – however, the junta refused to hand over control.

Political Uprising:

Suu Kyi remained under house arrest in Rangoon for six years, until she was released in July 1995. She was again put under house arrest in September 2000, when she tried to travel to the city of Mandalay in defiance of travel restrictions. She was released unconditionally in May 2002, but just over a year later she was put in prison following a clash between her supporters and a government backed mob. She was later allowed to return home – but again under effective house arrest. During periods of confinement, Suu Kyi kept herself engaged in studying and exercising. She meditated, worked on her French and Japanese language skills, and relaxed by playing piano. At times she was allowed to meet other NLD officials and selected diplomats. But during her early years of detention, she was often in solitary confinement. She was not allowed to see her two sons or her husband, who died of cancer in March 1999. The Military authorities had offered to allow her to travel to UK to see him when he was gravely ill, but she felt compelled to refuse for fear she would not be allowed back into her own country.

She was sidelined from Myanmar's first elections in two decades on 7th November 2010 but released from house arrest six days later. Her son Kim Aris was allowed to visit her for the first time in a decade. As the new government embarked on a process of reform, Aung San Suu Kyi and her party rejoined the political process. When by-elections were held in April 2012, in order to fill up the seats vacated by politicians who had taken government posts, she and her party contested seats, despite reservations. She and the NLD won 43 of the 45 seats contested. Weeks later, she took the oath in parliament and became the leader of the opposition. In May 2012, she embarked a visit outside Myanmar for the first time in 24 years, in a sign of apparent confidence that its new leaders would allow her to return. On 9th July 2012, she attended the Parliament for the first time as lawmaker¹⁰.

2015 General Election:

On 6 July 2012, Suu Kyi announced on the World Economic Forum's website that she wanted to run for the presidency in Myanmar's 2015 elections. The current constitution, which came into effect in 2008, bars her from the presidency because she is the widow and mother of foreigners. The NLD won a sweeping victory in those elections, winning at least 255 seats in the House of Representatives and 135 seats in the House of Nationalities¹¹.

In addition, Suu Kyi won re-election to the House of Representatives. Under the 2008 Constitution, the NLD needed to win at least a two-third majority in both houses to ensure that its candidate would become president, before the elections, Suu Kyi announced that even though she is constitutionally barred from the presidency, she would hold the real power in any NLD-led government. On 30 March 2016 she became the Minister for the President's office, for Foreign Affairs, For Education and for Electric Power and Energy in President Htin Kyaw's government; later she relinquished the latter two ministries and President Htin Kyaw appointed her State counsellor, a position akin to a Prime Minister created especially for her. The position of state Counsellor was approved by the House of Nationalities on 1 April 2016 and the House of Representatives on 5th April 2016¹². The next day, her role as state counsellor was established.

Criticism grows against Aung San Suu Kyi:-

Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian award in US in 2012¹³. She received unconditional support from Western nations in Europe. In 2017, critics have called for Suu Kyi's Nobel Prize to be revoked, citing her silence over the persecution of Rohingya Muslims, in Myanmar¹⁴. Some activists criticized Aung San Suu Kyi for her silence on the 2012 Rakhine State riots (later repeated during the 2015 Rohingya a refugee crisis), and her perceived indifference to the plight of the Rohingya, Myanmar's persecuted Muslim minority¹⁵. Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi is facing mounting international pressure for her handling of violence in Rakhine State and the Rohingya refugee crisis. Myanmar's Nobel Peace Prize winning Aung San Suu Kyi is facing intense scrutiny over her response to the plight of her nation's Rohingya population. According to UN, violence broke out between state security forces and the minority group and almost three lakh Rohingya have fled into neighbouring Bangla Desh. The disruption started after Rohingya fighters attacked police posts in Rakhine state, on Myanmar's (formerly Burma) western coast, triggering a military crackdown. Aung San Suu Kyi, the nation's state counsellor and defacto leader, claimed this week that the situation

is being twisted by a huge iceberg of information. The Rohingya, frequently described as the world's most persecuted minority, are a mostly Muslim ethnic group, who have lived a majority Buddhist Myanmar for centuries. A number of high profile individuals have publicly criticized Aung San Suu Kyi, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her campaign supporting democracy in Myanmar. This severe humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, where the government is persecuting Rohingya Muslims who live there have attracted the whole world. So many Rohingya Muslims have fled Myanmar's military crackdown. Myanmar's leader Aung San Suu Kyi is being criticized for engaging in the kind of repression she spent decades fighting. The Rohingya are essentially a stateless population. They have become the targets of Myanmar's military again after an insurgent Rohingya group attacked a number of police stations in Rakhine state. The military has since gone into these villages and engaged in what is being described as indiscriminate shooting. They have burned down houses. The violence has drawn the attention of the U.N. Security Council. People are dying and suffering at horrible numbers. This dramatic tragedy is described as some sort of ethnic cleansing. The global image of Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Laureate, has been damaged by the crisis and she has come under intense criticism to do more to end the violence and condemn those responsible. Several fellow peace prize winners have publicly condemned Suu Kyi for what they see as her apparent indifference to the plight of the Rohingya. For most of her thirty years of political career, Suu Kyi was a revered and distant figure. As the world's most famous political prisoner, she became, a perfect hostage, the exemplar of a democratic future held captive by a thuggish military regime. Since her release from house arrest in 2010, Suu Kyi's story has moved on quickly. In April 2012, her election to Myanmar's legislature indicated the country was slowly emerging from long term dictatorship. The peaceful transfer of power to her party in 2015, at the first openly contested democratic election in generations, offered hope that the worst of the country's troubles were history. The most damaging development during the NID government's term has been the military's brutal counter-terror campaign in northern Rakhine state, home to the Rohingya ethnic and religious minority. The campaign caused the exodus of at least lakhs of people across the border to Bangladesh. Despite living in the country for generations, the Rohingya are not one of Myanmar's recognized ethnic groups and therefore do not qualify for citizenship. The population of exiled Rohingya in Bangladesh's Cox Bazar district - driven out in successive programmes - is now estimated by the UN as more than eight lakhs. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights recently named Northern Rakhine state as one of the most prolific slaughter houses of human in recent times. It is a grim situation for which there is no quick flux. The Myanmar and Bangladesh governments have agreed on a structure for repatriation of some of the displaced people, but many of these people will likely never return to their homes in northern Rakhine state.

In spite of such criticism, Suu Kyi will be always remembered in history for her ideals, principles and the sacrifice she made for the cause of democracy. Her life story traces a romantic arc from the vales of Oxford, to the UN headquarters in New York, to her crumbling family home on the shore of Inya Lake in Yangon where she lived out more than 15 years of house arrest. Aung San Suu Kyi's life took on all the qualities of a moral fable: one in which the beautiful daughter of an assassinated national hero sacrifices her own freedom to her country from tyranny and give them a bright new future based on the principles of democracy and freedom. She is the leading politician of Burma and world's prominent political prisoner who has upheld the right for democracy and worked relentlessly for freedom of Burmese people against military rule and human rights.

Impact of Aung San Suu Kyi in History:-

When Myanmar elected Aung San Suu Kyi's party to power in 2015, she was widely portrayed as a sort of political saint, an icon who had endured great suffering to guide her people from dictatorship to democracy. Aung San Suu Kyi had demonstrated qualities where her people are able to adapt. She fought for democracy without violence, and made a choice to continue what her father had begun. Despite the fact that she had suffered a lot, she was a proficient leader that the people in Burma respect. The awards received by Aung San Suu Kyi are based on love to her country and the determination of her leading Burma. She considers each and every aspect of the outcome of her country and tries her very best to make the best decision, even though it consists of sacrifices. Aung San Suu Kyi was the General Secretary of the National League of Democracy, and her contribution united Burmese together as one.

Aung San Suu Kyi gave hope and determination to the deteriorating country of Burma by peacefully putting forth efforts to achieve her goal of democracy, freedom and human rights. She is an influential figure for people not only in Burma, but across the world. Aung San Suu Kyi took a stance to make a change in Burma after many years of injustice. She not only saved thousands of lives by using non-violent methods of resistance, but shaped the nation into a more peaceful one. Although there was not much change on the surface of Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi has managed to do the impossible: have her voice heard by the government. She continues to strive in bettering her country, and even though she is almost seventy years old, she does not plan to stop her efforts anytime soon. Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership cannot be attributed solely to her status as the daughter of a political hero. She is deeply influenced by non-violent civic leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. As a political leader, she has managed to find an elegant, sustained balance between defiance and non-violence. She is acclaimed for giving many memorable and inspiring speeches that have called for freedom and democracy. Despite being detained, Aung San Suu Kyi has been a fixture on her country's political scene for the past two decades. History will remember Aung San Suu Kyi as the world's most renowned freedom fighters and advocates of non-violence, being the figurehead of the pro-democracy movement and the leader of National League for Democracy.

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