

Myanmar- Sri Lanka Relations

Sri Lanka and Myanmar are steeped in a history based on Theravada Buddhism. Our relations' dates back to the 4th century, where Myanmar monks frequently visited the Maha Vihara of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka to imbibe orthodox traditions of Buddhism in order to propagate in their own country. Myanmar is one of the few countries in which Sri Lanka opened its resident missions soon after independence. Both countries celebrated the Golden Jubilee Anniversary of the establishment of the Diplomatic relations at the end of 1999.

Even though the diplomatic relations established in the mid nineteenth centuries, Myanmar Sri Lanka Cultural Relations could be traced back to 4th century B.C. It was during the reign of King *Anawrahta* the Sacred Scriptures (Thripitaka) have been sent to Myanmar by King Vijayabahu. Myanmar has also contributed immensely to preserve Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka when it was threatened with the extinction of the order of the Buddhist monks, consequent to the foreign invasions. Myanmar assisted Sri Lanka to re-establish it by granting higher ordination to Bikkhus according to the Theravada *Upasampada* (Higher ordination traditions). The **Kalyani Inscriptions** found in Myanmar is a testimony of history that Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka – "Sinhala Bikkhus" – who were invited to Myanmar have officiated as preceptors at higher ordination ceremonies. And also, The *Amarapura Nikaya* and Ramanna Nikya are two major Chapters of *Sangha* Council in Sri Lanka, established on the Bikkhu traditions of Myanmar. Since this time our two countries were entwined with the golden thread of Theravada Buddhism.

The sixth Sangha Council (Cattha Sangayana) was held in Yangon on 17th May 1954 and a delegation led by Professor G. P. Mallasekara including Maha Sangha from Sri Lanka participated and played a leading role in the deliberations. The Government of Myanmar had conferred the renowned monks from Sri Lanka with the title 'Abhidhaja Maha Rattha Guru'. Among them are Most Ven. Balangoda

Ananda Maithriya Mahanayake Thero (In 1997), Most Ven. Poththewala Pannasara Mahanayake Thero (1997) Most Ven. Walpola Rahula Thero (1998) and Most Ven. Madihe Pannaseeha Mahanayake Thero (2000). Myanmar temples regularly donate saffron robes and other 'Pirikara' items to temples in Sri Lanka.

President Ne Win Visited Sri Lanka in 1966. This was the first High-level visit from Myanmar to Sri Lanka. Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike paid an official visit to Myanmar in January 1976.

Official visit of Mr. Lakshman Kadirgamar, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to Myanmar from 29 January to 1 February 1996, opened a new Chapter in Myanmar Sri Lanka Relations. During this visit Sri Lanka and Myanmar signed an Agreement for the establishment of a Joint Commission for Bilateral Cooperation between Myanmar and Sri Lanka.

President Mahinda Rajapakse, in his capacity as the then Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, attended the World Buddhist Summit which was held in Yangon, Myanmar from 11 –12 December 2004. Hon. Ratnasiri Wickramanayake, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, visited Myanmar from 18- 21 December 2006. Both the visits re-invigorated the existing relation between the two countries.

The main commodities exchanged or exported by Myanmar to Sri Lanka are rice, wood, wood based products, pulses and beans, gems and jewelry, natural rubber and fisheries products. The main exports from Sri Lanka to Myanmar are semi milled or wholly milled rice, mace, Apparel and clothing accessories, fabrics, paints and varnish, pneumatic tyers, tablewear and kitchenware-Porcelain.

Union of Myanmar Federation of Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce signed an MOU on the 31 March 2006. A fact-finding Mission took place in the same year.

Myanmar gem merchants on a regular basis attend the Facets Sri Lanka Gem and Jewellery International Gem Show organized by the Sri Lanka Gem and Jewelry Association and Colombo Show organized

by the Celinco Gem's Corporation The number of the participants has been increasing every year. This positive trend contributed to the recent visit of the Sri Lanka Gem and Jewellery Association Delegation to Myanmar in March 2007. They envisaged signing an MOU with the Union of Myanmar Federation of Commerce and Industry UMFCCI.

The pilgrim tours between the two countries are on the rise. In the years 2006 and 2007 there were visits of two large groups of pilgrims. This is mainly due to the interest taken by the two countries to enhance the tourist trade by encouraging the Buddhist pilgrim tours. Due to increasing number of Business and Pilgrim travelers to Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan Air Lines have decided to up grade its office in Myanmar from Passenger Sales Agent to a General Sales Agent from year 2007.

There were exchanges of cultural troupes from Sri Lanka to Myanmar. Sama Ballet Troupe visited Myanmar in September 1996, and had several performances in Yangon. This was the first activity that had taken place under the Myanmar Sri Lanka Bilateral cooperation Agreement. In the year 2006 ten member cultural troupe from the Ministry of Cultural and National Heritage of Sri Lanka visited Myanmar and held performances in Yangon and Mandalay. These performances gave an opportunity to demonstrate Sri Lanka culture to Myanmar populace.

Myanmar and Sri Lanka are also cooperating in the field of education. International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University in Myanmar annually allocates six seats for Sri Lankan Buddhist Monks and scholars. Similarly Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka, University of Peradeniya and University of Kelaniya accept monks and lay students from Myanmar. Apart from the above Pha-Auk Tawya Meditation Centre in Mawlamyaing, Myanmar and Na Uyana Meditation Center Sri Lanka exchange monks on a regular basis to practice meditation. Most important aspect in this religious exchange is the continuity of the cultural relations between the two countries.

Between the year 2001 and 2007, about 50 Myanmar nationals have participated in training programmes under Sri Lanka Myanmar Technical Assistance Programme in the fields of Human resources Development, Horticulture, Bio Diversity and Conservation, and Information Technology.

Sri Lankan Community in Myanmar is limited to 40 Sri Lankan's working in the United Nations Agencies, Garment Factories and Hotels. Sri Lanka Association in Myanmar was formed in 1996. Misision together with Sri Lankan Association celebrates the Sri Lankan festivals in Myanmar.

Both Sri Lanka and Myanmar are members of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multisectoral Cooperation BIMES-TEC. Once the BIMST-EC free Trade arrangements are in operation both countries can improve trade relations moving a step forward from cultural relations that already exist to expand trade between the two countries.

In view of this long standing friendship between the two countries Sri Lanka Embassy in Yangon has directed its concerted effort to promote and enhance closer understanding and friendship between the two countries that existed for centuries, based on Theravada Buddhist traditions; and work for strengthening bilateral relations in the field of trade, Investment, Tourism, agriculture, Education and sports for the furthermore of peace, harmony, and mutual benefit.