

**University of Technology- Sydney**

**“Popular education, cross-border civil society  
and possibilities for democracy in Burma”**

By

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requirement of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **CERTIFICATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Sai The Naing Oo

March 2012

“Education is about enhancing students’ knowledge and ability to face challenges in their lives. School education is important, but there is also a kind of education that takes place outside of the educational institution. We need to take on both kinds of education, and since the schooling education system in our country does not adequately prepare young people to face challenges later in their lives, they must find ways to improve their knowledge and ability with education occurs beyond the school.”

Aung San Suu Kyi

A translation of an interview in Burmese by Myat Lay Ngon of the Yan Gon Time Media Club (14/9/2011)

## **Abstract**

I grew up in Burma and went to the *Rangoon Arts and Science University*. I participated in the student-led democracy uprising in 1988 and was forced to flee the country to avoid imprisonment or worse. The military regime may have suppressed that and subsequent uprisings, but the spirit for restoring democracy in Burma has remained strong. After the democracy uprising in 1988 was crushed by the military regime, some members of the opposition groups chose armed struggle to continue their struggle for regime change while many have formed organisations outside the country and focus on mounting international community pressure on the military regime to bring about change in Burma. The movement for democracy has taken place not only inside Burma but also among Burmese exile and refugee communities. The most important site outside Burma for the democracy struggle has been Thailand and in particular in the Thai-Burma border region. The purpose of my thesis is to contribute to the ongoing struggle to combat the military dictatorship and work towards a democratic future. While focusing on the particular task of democracy-building for Burma my interest also extends to the wider question of how informal adult education can build democracy in the face of dictatorships. This study argues that the Burmese opposition movement has, by and large, overlooked the value of grassroots social change, community development and education.

Successive Burmese military regimes have crushed any possibility of sustained people power. Public space for social action inside Burma is almost nonexistent. The declining Burmese economy since the 1970s, authoritarian rule and ongoing civil war are major push-factors behind unprecedented numbers of Burmese leaving their country. More than one hundred and fifty thousand refugees and over two million migrant workers from Burma are currently in Thailand and the numbers are increasing. In the 1990s, most armed ethnic groups that had been waging war

against the ruling regime since the 1950s, entered into cease-fire arrangements. Although these agreements were widely subjected to criticism among opposition groups, they have subsequently provided an opportunity for civil society groups to emerge along the border regions with Thailand. "Civil society" in this thesis refers to traditional, social, welfare, humanitarian, local self-help and advocacy organisations. These cross-border civil society groups initially emerged in response to a humanitarian crisis among Burmese refugees and migrant workers. After a decade, they have transformed into a hub of capacity building for the democracy movement. In here I analyse the nature of teaching and learning democracy in the everyday life of Burmese labourers in Thailand. Burmese migrant workers in Thailand are mostly illegal and face various forms of marginalisation, exploitation and unfair treatment by their employers, local government authorities and human traffickers. Unlike political leaders and activists in the movement, they are pre-occupied with everyday survival and cannot take part in political programs. My findings reveal that teaching and learning democracy amongst migrant workers tends to occur informally, often in unexpected locations and under unlikely circumstances. Informality is an important element in workers learning because it allows them to express deep-held feelings, make use of their practical wisdoms and make critical inquiries about the nature of their exploitation. This study also found that workers develop capacity for active citizenship as a result of participation in small and unlikely social spaces.

The challenge to bring about democratic change in Burma is far greater than replacing an oppressive authoritarian regime with a democratically elected government, since the legacy of more than six decades of oppressive rule has led to the building up of internalised fears amongst people and passive attitude toward collective actions for changes. Many of these anti-democratic characteristics are deeply embedded in social and cultural practices. The oppressive military rule is not the only barrier to democracy in Burma because, in addition, there are non-political factors such as the top-down spoon-feeding education system and hierarchical

socio-cultural practices that breed patron-client relationships amongst people which are equally destructive to the development of democracy. The military dictators have built on such cultural traits and led the people to be so passive about their own power to make democratic changes. Enabling common people in and outside Burma to become active citizens remains perhaps the great challenge to, and represents the most sustained possibilities for, the Burmese democracy movement.

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I am grateful for the support of my supervisor Dr Rick Flowers who patiently guided and helped me by challenging my assumptions, cautioning me to be as objective as I could be, editing and commencing on my drafts. English, as my fourth language, was challenging for me to produce academic writing. I was so lucky to have my supervisor Dr Rick Flowers and my co-supervisor, Professor John Macdonald as my friends and colleagues. Rick gave me friendship during the isolation years of dissertation writing and John always provided me guidance and moral support. This dissertation would not have been possible without the warm friendship and emotional sustenance of Dr Rick Flowers and Professor John Macdonald.

I owe a great debt to my parents who were teachers themselves and did their best to ensure their children receive education all the way to the university. I grew up in a remote town in Burma where only a small number of young people of the town reached high school. My parents sent me and all my siblings to schools in major cities of Burma in order to help their children access good education. I am so lucky to have parents who saw education as prime importance for the future of their children. My father, who passed away in 2008, inspired me by his ethical actions and helped me understand values in education at young age. I will always remember advice and wisdom I received from him and they will be my guiding lights forever.

Fieldwork for this study is an outcome of the effort of many minds and hearts. I have so many people to thank for their support, advice and work, particularly, Sai Mawn of *Ethnic National Council*, Dr Thein Lwin and Saya Sai of *Migrant Learning Centre* (Chiang Mai), Ko Aung Myo Min of *Human Rights Education Institute of Burma*, Ko Aung Myo of *Protection of HIV/Aids Among Migrant Workers in Thailand*, Steve Thompson of *Environmental Desk of Images Asia*, Nang Hseng Nong of *Shan Women Action Network*, U Theing Oo of *Burma Lawyer Council*.

Finally to my children, Sai Mong, Khaee and Roshan who have made this intellectual exercise in tune with the rhythms of everyday life. I am sorry I could not spend time with them as much as I wanted to. They made my life busy and messy in this journey but they always lifted my spirits and cheered me up.



Base 801745 (801313) 6-91

Source: Lambert Conformal Conic Projection (Map of Burma with cities)

[Http://www.vidiani.com/maps](http://www.vidiani.com/maps)





Burmese Refugees camps locations (Map: TBBC)

## ABBREVIATIONS

AAPP-	Association for Assistance for Political Prisoners
ABSDF	All Burma Students Democratic Force
ABSU	All Burma Student Union
AFPFL	Anti-Fascist and People Front League
Aids	Acquired immune deficiency syndrome
Altsean	Alternative Association for South-east Asian Nations
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BRC	Border Rescue Committee
BSPP	The Burmese Socialist Program Party
BWU	Burmese Women Union
CBOs	Community Based Organisations
CDCE	Community Development and Community Empowerment
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
DAB-	Democratic Alliance of Burma
DTP	the Diplomacy Training Program
DVB	Democratic Voice of Burma
DVB	Democratic Voice of Burma
ECS	Economic Corporation Strategy
EBO	Belgium based the Euro-Burma Office
ENC	Ethnic Nationalities Council
EDD	Doctor of Education
E-Desk-	Environmental Desk
ERI	Earth Rights International
ESC	Economic Cooperation Strategy
EU	European Union
FBC	Free Burma Coalition
FCC-T	Foreign Correspondent Club -Thailand
GONGO	Government Organised Non-Government Organisation
GHRED	Grassroots Human Right Education and Development
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HREIB-	Human Rights Education Institute of Burma
IDP	Internally Displaced People
ICG	International Crisis Group
INGOs	International Non-Government Organisations
IRC	International Rescue Committee
JACDB	Joint Action Committed for Democracy in Burma
KED	Karen Education Department

KF	Karuna Foundation
KIO	Kachin Independent Organisation
KNU	Karen National Union
KNOW	Karenni National Women's Organisation
KWAT	kachin Women's Association-Thailand
KWHRO	Kuki Women's Human Rights Organisation
KWO	Karen Women's Organisation
LWO	Lahu Women's Organisation
MAP	Migrant Worker Assistance Program
MDSA	Myanmar Dental Surgeons Association
MFO	Myanmar Film Organisation
MHAA	Myanmar Health Association
MLC	Migrant Learning Centre
MMA	Myanmar Medical Association
MNA	Myanmar Nurses' Association
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MPs	Members of Parliament
MRC	Myanmar Red Cross Society
MTAA	Myanmar Tradition Artists Association
MTO	Myanmar Theatrical Organisation
MVA	Myanmar Vocalists Association
MWDA	Myanmar Women's Development Association
MWEA	Myanmar Women Entrepreneur Association
MWJO	Myanmar Writers and Journalists Association
MWSF	Myanmar Women Sport Federation
NCGUB	National Coalition of Government of Union of Burma
NCUB	Nation Council for Union of Burma
NDD	Network for Democracy Development
NDF	Nationalities Democratic Front
NED	National Endowment for Democracy
NHEC	National Health and Education Committee
NGOs	Non-Government Organisations
NED	Karen Education Department
NHEC	National Health and Education Council
NLD	National League for Democracy
NLD-LA	National League for Democracy- Liberated Area
OSI	Open Society Institute
PDC	Political Defiance Committee
PHAMIT	Protection of HIV/Aids among Migrant Workers in Thailand
PWO	Palaung Women's Organisation
PWU	Pa-O Women's Union
RASU	Rangoon Arts and Science University
RFA	Radio Free Asia

RIT	Rangoon Institute of Technology
RMIT	Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology
RWU	Rakhaing Women's Union
SBEZ	Special Border Economic Zone
SHAN	Shan Herald News Agency
SSA	Shan State Army
SWAN-	Shan Women Action Network
TWU	Tavoy Women's Union
TACDB	Thai Action Committee for Democracy in Burma
TBBC	Thai Burma Border Consortium
TOT	Training for Trainers
UNLD-LA	United Nationalities League for Democracy (Liberated Area)
UNHCR	United Nation High Commissioner of Refugees
USAID	U S Assistance for International Development
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association
VOA	Voice of America
WLB-	Women League of Burma
WRWAB	Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma
WVO	War Veteran's Organisation
YCOWA	Young Chi Oo Worker Association
3Ds jobs	Dirty, Difficult and Dangerous jobs

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## CHAPTER ONE

“...people are worried that the Burmese will not be ready for democracy, should they get the chance for it, because they are not trained to challenge or question others but only to follow orders...” (Aung-Thwin 1997, p. 43)

### Note to recent political development in Burma

Toward the end of this thesis in 2011, the political situation in Burma has rapidly changed. The military regime has shown signs of willingness to lose its total control of the country. Following the unashamedly rigged election in November 2010, held under the new constitution that guarantees the military 25 per-cent of the seats in the parliament (Litner 2012), the military backed *Union Solidarity and Development Party* (USDP) is now the ruling party. The new civil-military government has initiated several political reforms including releasing most political prisoners, easing press and internet censorship and introducing of more liberal labour law. Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma’s democracy icon was freed from the house arrest and has been personally invited by the new president to re-enter politics (Murdoch 2011; Hartcher 2011; Kyaw San Wai 2012). The current political situation in Burma has significantly changed from the circumstances when the fieldwork for this thesis was conducted from 2006 to 2009. It is important to bear in mind that the political circumstances discussed in this dissertation were in the time prior to the current political transformation in Burma. Nevertheless, the basic idea of the thesis remains valid, if not more than ever. The need for intelligent and grassroots democracy is as strong as ever. Circumstances may have changed but the culture of rigid thinking and internalised fears that have developed in many Burmese as a result of more than half a century of dictatorial rule which this thesis investigated, will require the Burmese to critically look at their values and beliefs and unlearn those that are not democratic, in order to build intelligent and sustainable democratic society.



## **1.1 Purpose of the thesis**

I grew up in Burma and went to the *Rangoon Arts and Science University*. I participated in the student-led democracy uprising in 1988 and was forced to flee the country to avoid imprisonment or worse. The military regime may have suppressed that and subsequent uprisings, but the spirit for restoring democracy in Burma has remained strong. After the democracy uprising in 1988 was crushed by the military regime, some members of the opposition groups chose armed struggle to continue their struggle for regime change while many have formed organisations outside the country and focus on mounting the international community pressure on the military regime to bring about change in Burma. The movement for democracy has continued to take place not only inside Burma but also among Burmese exile and refugee communities. The most important site outside Burma for the democracy struggle has been Thailand and in particular in the Thai-Burma border region. The purpose of my thesis is to contribute to the ongoing struggle to combat the military dictatorship and work towards a democratic future. My research focuses on the possibilities of adult education contributing to democracy building. While focusing on the particular task of democracy-building for Burma my interest also extends to the wider question of how informal adult education can build democracy in the face of dictatorships.

## **1.2 Explaining my focus on informal, adult and popular education**

I am interested in the challenge of developing democratic culture for Burmese inside and outside Burma. One barrier to developing a democratic culture is, of course, a military regime that imprisons those who dare voice political opposition. In June 2011, the Amnesty International estimated more than two thousand political prisoners were behind bars in Burma (Amnesty International June 2011). But other

barriers include divide-and-rule politics, an authoritarian education system, curtailment of civil society and socio-cultural beliefs that value deference and hierarchies.

The military regime has tightly controlled all aspects of civil society and education in Burma, and the spaces for independent teaching and learning are, therefore, few and far between. Political oppression and extreme poverty have forced Burmese leaving their country. In the past two decades, an unprecedented number of Burmese have sought to make a living in neighbouring countries. While more than one hundred and fifty thousand people live in various refugee camps, an estimated two million Burmese are in Thailand as illegal migrant workers (Thein Lwin 2007; Lang and Banki 2007; TBBC 2008). I will elaborate on the nature of Burmese cross-border society further on. I contend that this cross-border region presents rich opportunities for education and democracy-building.

Having said this let me emphatically note that the conditions for education and democracy-building in this cross-border region are weak and fragile. There is an obvious challenge in teaching and learning democracy with Burmese citizens who have so little experience of it. What little schooling they have had, has been didactic, strictly censored and the ruling regime has been openly mistrustful of anybody that might teach history and politics. The status of Burmese citizens in Thailand is generally illegal and tenuous.

I think that the cross-border civil society movement presents as an alternative public space to strengthen grassroots democracy for Burma. And so my research largely focused on emancipatory learning with illegal Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. Working conditions for most Burmese migrant workers in Thailand are typically horrendous and they work long hours up to sixteen hours per day, seven days per week (Nang Lao Liang Won 1998; Koetsawang 2001; Arnold 2007; Saw Yan

Naing 2009 and Weng 2010). And so when studying the possibilities of education for democracy-building I do not think it is meaningful to focus only on conventional and formal education. However, the resources and opportunities for formal education for Burmese people in Thailand are limited. Burmese migrant workers have no or little opportunity to engage in formal training programs and so I examined informal education activities in various locations. Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith (1990), Rick Flowers, Robbie Guevara and James Whelan (2009) describe informal education as a form of education that is dialogical, clearly planned and monitored but relied on no regular or prescribed teaching or learning form, and can take place in a variety of physical and social settings. I define informal education as a form of reflective dialogue which depends not on regular or prescribed methods of education, but nonetheless clearly planned learning activities with an aim to achieve specific outcomes. In chapter nine, I discuss definitions of informal education and non-formal education in detail.

When analysing how teaching and learning democracy occurs I am mainly examining a particular type of informal adult education, the one that fosters democratic values, critical consciousness and civil courage. I will describe and discuss the nature of these three concepts further on. Here it suffices to mention major theoretical influences that have shaped the way I conceive this type of informal adult education. I will name Paulo Freire, John Dewey, Jim Crowther, Michael Newman, Bud Hall, Shirley Walters, Stephen Brookfield, Myles Horton, Jack Mezirow, Griff Foley, Mark Smith, and Jose Roberto Guevara as just some relevant scholars. I locate these scholars in a tradition or field known as popular education. I will define and discuss popular education in some depth further on.

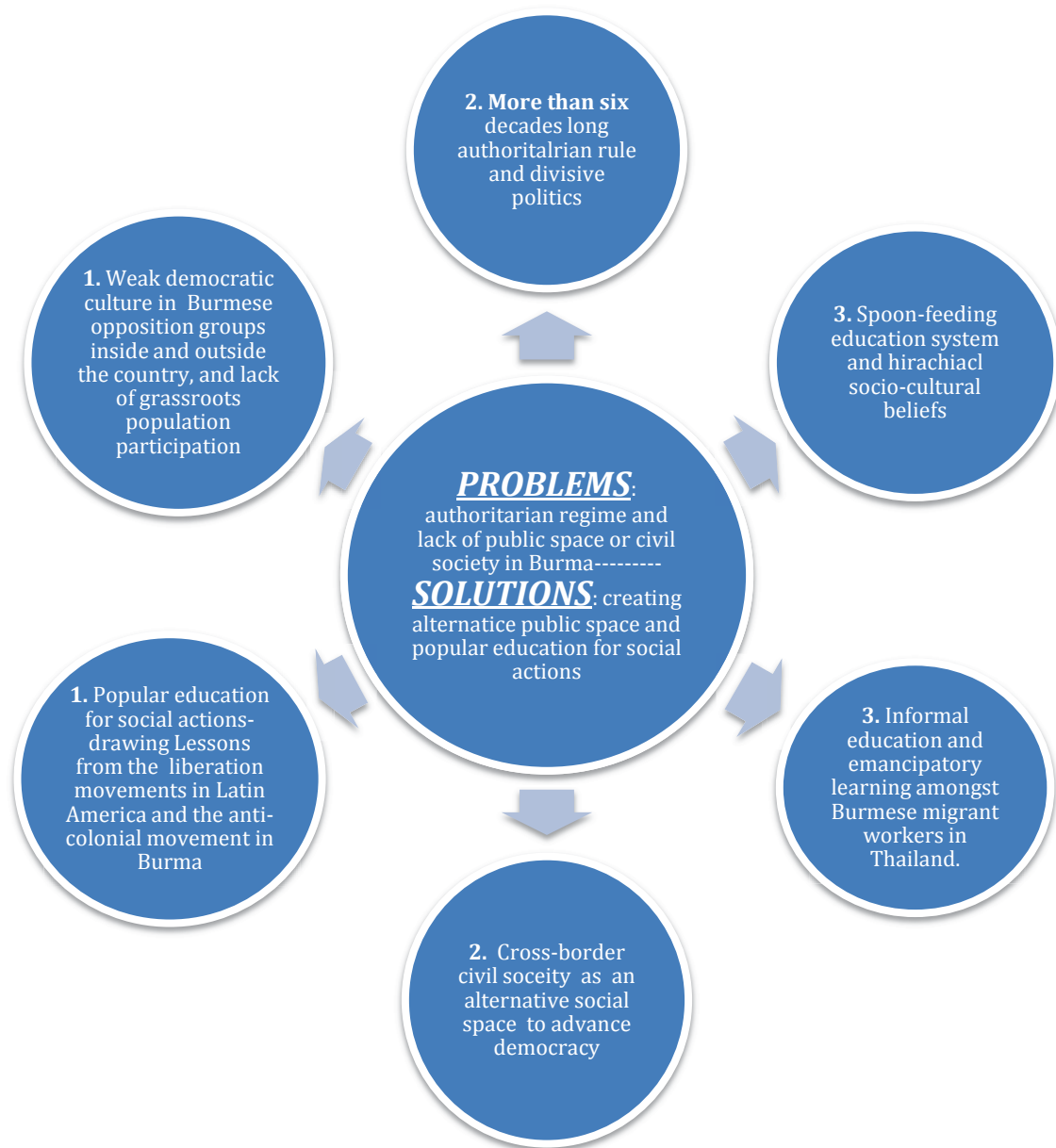


Fig.1 A landscape of thesis argument

This dissertation is a study into the nature of popular education with a focus on *teaching and learning democracy* among the cross-border civil society activities in Thailand. I have undertaken research about the learning experiences of various community activists and participants in a human rights and migrant education program in Thailand. I describe and theorise about the emergence of Burmese cross-

border civil society along the Thai-Burma border, and its role in facilitating Burma's democratic transition.

Therefore, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges and possibilities for a future with democracy in Burma it is important to analyse the experiences of teaching and learning that contribute to the strengthening of a democratic culture at a grassroots level. And indeed, a purpose of my thesis is to make a case for more attention to be paid to building Burmese democracy at a grassroots, not just elite level. Educating leaders in Burmese opposition groups and non-government organisations (NGOs) about legal and human rights is one thing. Enabling grassroots migrant workers to develop elements of a critical and democratic consciousness is quite another, but equally important thing.

### **1.2.1 Opposition groups or civil society organisations**

In the Burmese democracy movement, the distinction between opposition groups and civil society organisations is often unclear. For the last 50 years, a succession of military regimes has made little distinction between opposition political groups and civil society organisations. As far as the regimes were concerned, even those civil society organisations with overtly stated welfare purposes, all organizations that were not part of the government, were regarded with suspicion. It is therefore important I explain how I define these two types of groups.

I use the term "opposition groups" for those organisations that are seeking to achieve a degree of power over the State. Opposition groups include political parties such as the *National League for Democracy* (NLD) and ethnic political parties; political organisations outside of the countries such as the *National Council for Union of Burma*

(NCUB) and the *Ethnic Nationalities Council* (ENC); and the armed resistance groups such as the *Nationalities Democratic Front* (NDF) and the *Karen National Union* (KNU). In the 1980s and early 1990s, there were more than fifteen different ethnic groups some numbered up twenty thousand troops and the powerful Burmese Communist Party waged armed struggle against the military regime (Litner 1994 and Smith 1991).

“Civil society” in this thesis refers to traditional, social, welfare, humanitarian, local self-help and advocacy organisations. These organisations are generally community groups, NGOs and advocacy groups, and are usually non-profit, local, religious, cultural, social or professional organisations engaging in educational and health services. A number of Burmese civil society organisations in Thai-Burma-border areas, for instance women organisations and environmental organisations (O’Kane 2005) normally see themselves as opposition groups since they seek to influence political organisations’ policies and eagerly align themselves with the call for political reforms. However, these organisations, although they support political opposition groups, do not seek power for themselves or over the State. Therefore, to distinguish them from political organisations, I refer to organisations that are politically active but are not seeking power as “civil society organisations”.

### **1.3 Structure and logic of the whole thesis**

As illustrated in the diagram below, the thesis is divided into four component parts; one: introduction, two: popular education and possibilities for democracy in Burma, research concept and methodology, and the emergence of cross-border civil society, three: discussions of case studies, and four: conclusions.

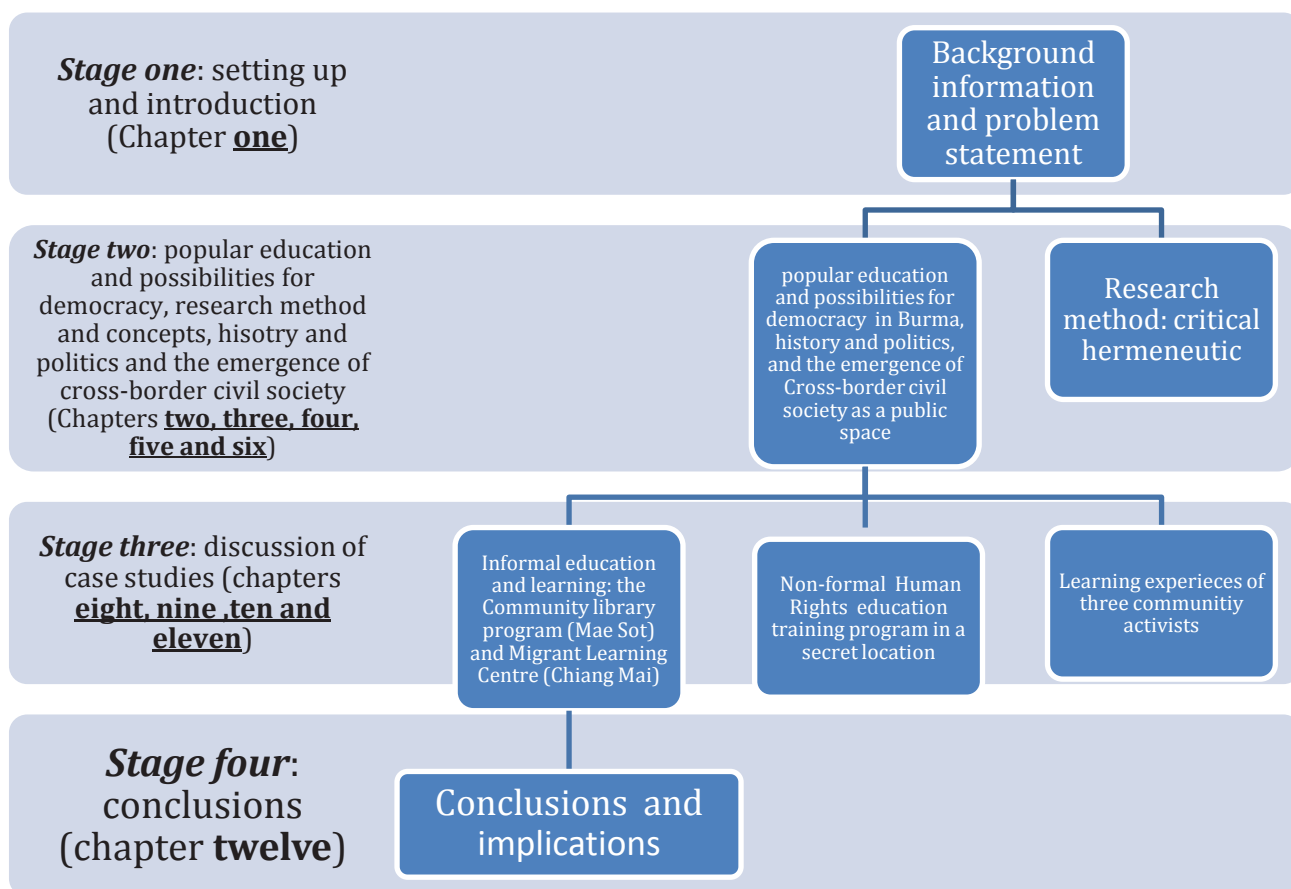


Fig.2 thesis structure diagram

In chapter two, I discuss how theories and practices of popular education are relevant to developing the capacity of grassroots communities to participate in the Burmese democracy movement. I also look at the literacy movement during the Burmese’s anti-colonial movement and the lessons that can be drawn for the Burmese democracy movement today. It is argued that the Burmese opposition groups’ strategy to bring about democracy, in general, has over emphasised the struggle for structural or government change. Until cross-border civil society organisations began to appear around the year of 2000, the possibility of social change movement and more importantly, the grassroots’ ability to participate in building a sustainable democracy was largely overlooked by the opposition groups.

Chapter three, I describe and reflect my personal learning experiences and politicisation to demonstrate the important role of informal social learning in every day life and how those experiences can be transformed into identity formation as well as politicisation. I start with my own learning experiences as a young boy growing up in Burma until I had to leave the country to escape for my life in 1988. In this chapter, I give an account of my own experiences of politicisation.

In chapter four, I present the logic of my research methodology and the nature of my fieldwork. I describe how I arrive at a hermeneutic phenomenology study and the methods I adopted to gather and analyse the data from my fieldwork in Thailand.

Chapter five outlines Burma's political history and highlights three types of deep-rooted barriers to advance Burmese democracy. I also describe and discuss the emergence of cross-border civil society and propose popular education or teaching and learning at a grassroots level as a mean to strengthen democratic culture and promote participation of ordinary people in political processes.

In chapter six, I present an in-depth discussion of ongoing political dilemma and the deepening Burmese economic crisis, the nature of civil society in relation to the emergence of Burma's cross-border civil society. Burma despite its rich natural resources has been one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world (UNDP 2011; Kingston 2008). Millions of Burmese have been forced to leave their home either by extreme poverty or civil war and more than two million Burmese have been in Thailand as refugees and migrant workers. Because of their illegal status, Burmese migrant workers in Thailand generally face appalling working conditions (Arnold 2007; Saw Yan Naing 2009 and Weng 2010). The scale of needs for basic education and health services among the Burmese population in Thailand and in frontier war-torn areas has led to the emergence of numerous civil society organisations. The number of Burmese civil society organisations active in the Thai-



Burma border and in Thailand has grown repeatedly in the past two decades. What is more important is these civil society organisations create an alternative public space and offer hope for Burma's future democracy as many of these organisations have advocated to promote the rights and wellbeing of the grassroots communities.

In chapter seven, I describe and discuss the scale and nature of Burmese political and civil society organisations in Thailand with a particular focus on political literacy activities.

In chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11, I present case studies of various informal and non-formal education activities.

In chapter 8, I analyse the personal learning experiences of three Burmese community activists - a community health worker, an environmentalist and a women's rights activist - all based in Thailand. Drawing on Tracey Ollis's work I describe them as '*circumstantial*' or '*accidental*' activists because they became activists due to a series of changes in life circumstances and were motivated by personal or social issues (Ollis 2010, p. 8). These three activists quickly learned new skills needed for their political actions. Being exposed to new ideas and facing challenges to their deeply held beliefs and values have been 'transformative' learning experiences.

In chapter 9, I describe and discuss the possibilities and challenges to facilitate informal and popular education for Burmese migrant workers who normally do not have time to engage in formal training programs and are, at first glance, not interested in political issues. A community library project in an industrial area of Mae Sot where more than one hundred and fifty thousand Burmese migrant workers live and work provided a rare opportunity for migrant workers to come together and share their experiences. I draw on James Scott's (1990) "*Domination and the arts*

*of resistance: hidden transcripts*” which acknowledges the potential for a social milieu that is free from the surveillance and suppression of the foremen or in this case the danger of political informants, to instigate resistance-learning. I investigate and uncover the nature of emancipatory learning experiences among migrant workers at the community library.

In chapter 10, I present a case study of informal education activities at the *Migrant Learning Centre* (MLC), led by a Burmese educationalist Dr. Thein Liwn, for Burmese citizens in Chiang Mai. The informal education at the MLC contributes to the building of social capital among Burmese migrant workers who learn to develop social networks, engage in positive conversations and participate in social and political actions. The MLC is more than a school; it is a ‘*safe haven*’ for many migrant workers. Honest, open and supporting relationships among the MLC staff and students lead to the development of a trusting social environment, and thus foster better and greater understanding between different ethnic groups and individuals from different backgrounds.

Chapter 11 is a study of a non-formal human rights education program. While most of my focus is on informal education, I did study and recognise the importance of training programs for Burmese community activists. These are not credentialed and can be defined as non-formal education programs. I present how learning occurs at the human rights training program that was held in a clandestine location by a grassroots NGO called the *Human Rights Education Institute of Burma* (HREIB).

In the concluding chapter, chapter twelve, I present hypothetical popular education projects that can be developed to help strengthen the capacity of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand in the face of injustice, extreme hardships and exploitation. Informal adult education is a vehicle to reach to the heart of the Burmese people. Theories and practices of popular education can help build a democratic future for

Burma. But in the face of a military dictatorship, popular educators have to adapt to the circumstances. In my thesis I have described and analysed ways to do popular education in these circumstances.

## CHAPTER TWO

I derived my education from the uneducated.

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

### **Analysing the Burmese democracy movement through the lens of popular education and a concern with grassroots political capability**

#### **2.1 A lack of attention to building grassroots political capability**

This thesis rests on the assumption that democratic transition is in the best interest of the population in Burma and it calls for changes in the political (structure) system as well as social change among common people. Establishing a more democratic 'system' is not just about re-installing a more accountable government but it is also about building a new political culture which has to take root among common people if a democracy is to be sustainable. Democracy is a '*way of life*' and requires strengthening the capacity of people not only just among the privileged few but the grassroots to participate in matters that are directly related to their lives. Unless democratic values and practices have taken roots in everyday life of common people democratic change is incomplete. John Dewey remarks,

“...the keynote of democracy as a way of life may be expressed.... as the necessity for the participation of every mature human being in formation of the values that regulate the living of men together, which is necessary from the standpoint of both the general social welfare and the full development of human beings as individuals” (1938, p. 21).

The Burmese people have long been excluded from participating in public life or in making decisions on the matters that affect their lives. The authoritarian rule, since 1962, has not only prevented 'the people' to participate in public affairs but has effectively weakened their capacity to organise, participate, make choices and live as a free people. The Burmese military dictators' idea for unity and a strong country is that people must obey them and follow their orders. I know from continuing first-hand experience that the spirit of myself, my family and other Burmese citizens has not been completely crushed. But I have to agree with Christina Fink (2001) and Chris Cusano (1999) that 'the people' of Burma, for nearly five decades, have lived in fear; they have lost hope and belief in their ability to make changes for themselves. I am left to wonder how the Burmese will learn about democracy if they have not been given opportunity to participate and be involved. People's lack of power to organise themselves could be observed in the general election in November 2010 when, for the first time in 20 years, the military regime held a tightly scripted general election which the regime-supported-party won a landslide victory. People were made to vote for political parties and candidates they did not really know.

Burmese migrant workers in Thailand are free from the oppression of the military dictatorship, but face a new form of exploitation and mistreatment. More than two million Burmese migrant workers are in Thailand (TBBC 2008) and most of them work in jobs with poor conditions known as three-D's jobs; *dirty, dangerous, and difficult* jobs in various industries including light manufacturing, construction, fishery, agricultural as well as sex industries (Arnold 2007, Kudo 2007 and Nang Lao Liang Won 1998). Despite facing these difficult challenges, some Burmese groups in Thailand have developed organisational skills, learnt to participate in collective social action and above all learnt to build trust among themselves and keep their hope alive. It is the key intent of this thesis to explore and reveal these sort

of experiences that are valuable for building the capability of grassroots Burmese groups to contribute to participatory-decision-making in a future democratic Burma.

Top-down decision-making culture and oppressive military rule has been more insidious than suppressing political opposition because it has permeated into the political culture of opposition groups. Many opposition, as well as armed ethnic resistance, groups which have been resisting the military rule for more than five decades have authoritarian decision-making structures. Their work and actions for the past twenty years have proven this. Many of these resistance groups structure their organisations similar to that of the Burmese military regime. A Burmese scholar, Professor Kanbawza Win now working in Canada, who has been working closely with the Burmese opposition groups in Thailand for the last two decades observes:

“...studying the structure of each ethnic group one can clearly see that they did not care much about democracy e.g. The Karen National Union (KNU) the largest ethnic armed groups with nearly ten thousand troops during its peak time, would not tolerate any other group like KSO as it is a one party dictatorship something akin to The Burmese Socialist Program party (BSPP) that dictated Burmese politics for more than two decades. The same can be said with Mon, Kareni and others...” (Kanbawza Winn 2008, p.3).

Many leaders in opposition groups tend to discourage the expression of diverse opinions and socio-political initiatives beyond the scope of militarised hierarchies (South 2004, p. 245). The idea that democratic change can begin among ordinary people and in their everyday experiences has not yet taken root among Burmese opposition leaders. Ashley South a close observer of Burma’s armed ethnic organisations writes:

“...although opposition tactics will vary according to the circumstances, a number of strategic considerations remain the same. .. in general, opposition strategies have

focused on elite-level politics, rather than grassroots democratisation....” (2004, p. 233).

Several scholars and observers of the Burmese opposition movement agree that the Burmese democracy movement has generally focused on elite-level leadership to bring about institutional reform and regime change (South 2004; Callahan 2000; Kanbawza Win 2008). But this approach is sadly a top-down way of thinking which is shared by the military regime which sees “*that political transition in Burma must come from the top that is directed by the central government*” (South 2004, p. 234) and pays little attention to grassroots democracy.

It would, however, be misleading to assert that all parts of the Burmese democracy movement are concerned only with elite-level political change. There are some progressive leaders, including Burma’s democracy icon, Aung San Suu Kyi, who do believe in the power of people and always seek to up-lift political consciousness of the grassroots. Analysing Aung San Suu Kyi’s speeches and comments, we can clearly see that she believes in the people’s ability to make change. In encouraging people to take control of their lives Aung San Suu Kyi writes:

“ the people of Burma had wearied of a precarious state of passive apprehension where they were ‘as water in the cupped hands’ of the power that be.....”

Emerald cool we may be,

As water in cupped hands,

But oh what we might be,

As splinters of glass,

In cupped hands” (1991, p.181).

Aung San Suu Kyi explains:

I've always said that people really must learn to question people who order them to do things which are against justice and existing laws. Ask, according to which law are you forcing us to do this? What right do you have to make me do this? They have also got to ask themselves, should we do this? People must ask questions and not just accept everything..... we are trying to help people to educate themselves, to understand the situation better and to see clear, not to be blinded by fear...." (1997, p. 40).

One might ask then; has the Burmese democracy movement been divided in their ideas to bring democratic change or does Aung San Suu Kyi have enough support in her efforts, even in her own party, to create the people's movement to bringing about democracy in Burma? Part of the answer lies in the level of political consciousness among members of the Burmese democracy movement itself. The Burmese military regime knows that the general population has little idea how a democracy works since they have never experienced it. The military rulers also know that Burmese people are heavily dependent on their popular leaders such as Aung San Suu Kyi, and by detaining these leaders the military regime has removed the capability of the movement to articulate political alternatives and visions.

After the nation-wide democracy uprising in 1988 was suppressed by the army, thousands of students and democracy activists sought refuge in areas controlled by armed ethnic groups along the borders. The Burmese students subsequently formed an armed organisation called the *All-Burma Student Democratic Force* (ABSDF) which numbered up to nearly ten thousand in the early years of the organisation. The organisation was formed with ideas and aims to bring about democratic change. In less than a decade, the ABSDF has been reduced to a handful of members, mainly due to internal and personal conflicts. Kanbawza Win (2008) observes that

"...Most of the generation of 8888's (the name given to the nation-wide democracy uprising day on 8<sup>th</sup> August, 1988) mentality is far from the workings of democracy as



the disintegration of the ABSDF indicates and partly is not their fault, but rather that of the Burmese regime because they were brought up under the *Burmese Way to Socialism* of the New Win regime and the majority of them still needs to be educated themselves about democracy and change their mentality...". (excerpt from Professor Kanbawza Win's lecture tour in Europe: Burma's digest- 12/02/2008).

With my interest in building political capabilities of grassroots groups, I find it useful to draw on the theorising of Paulo Freire who argues it is necessary that revolutionary leaders be able to read and understand political feelings and desires of people. Paulo Freire says:

"...revolutionary leaders commit many errors and miscalculations by not taking into account something so real as the people's view of the world: a view which explicitly and implicitly contains their concerns, their doubts, their hopes, their way of seeing the leaders, their perceptions of themselves and of the oppressors, their religious beliefs (almost always syncretic), their fatalism, their rebellious reactions. None of these elements can be seen separately, for in interaction all of them compose a totality. The oppressor is interested in knowing this totality only as an aid to his action of invasion in order to dominate or preserve domination. For the revolutionary leaders, the knowledge of this totality is indispensable to their action as culture synthesis..." (1970, p. 163).

## **2.2 Defining popular education**

Popular education is about setting up opportunities for people to become aware of the nature of the oppressive system, to be critical about their own assumptions and values, and taking back control of their affairs with collective efforts and actions. In the rest of this chapter, I will describe, discuss and consider popular education theories, popular education in the experience of Latin American nations' liberation struggle and lessons that can be drawn from the Burmese anti-colonial movement. There are multiple traditions of popular education (Flowers 2009). But what they have in common is a concern with helping excluded people exercise more leadership. This is underpinned by a belief that '*grassroots community people should be*

*leaders in deciding what changes are needed in their own communities'* (Highlander 2002). Popular education is concerned with strengthening pluralist and participatory democracies. In this vein of strengthening pluralist democracies, Jim Crowther has in a wide-ranging body of work, and who is one of the leading contemporary theorists in the field of popular education, researched and written about ways in which particular sorts of education practices play a role in strengthening democratic traditions in Scotland (1999), in higher education across the world (2005), in adult literacy teaching (2010), and adult education and social movements (2005, 2006 & 2007).

Popular education is essentially a form of grassroots education and aims at developing people's leadership capacities for change through a collective problem-solving approach emphasizing participation, reflection and critical analysis of social problems (Bates 1996, p. 225-226).

The type of popular education I particularly focus on could be described as a type of informal adult education. The first book written by Malcolm Knowles was entitled 'Informal Adult Education' and drew on his work in Pakistan doing education for community development (Knowles 1950; Smith 2002). I follow the typology of adult education proposed by Rick Flowers, Jose-Roberto Guevara and James Whelan (2009) who define informal adult education as education that is non-credentialled; it is structured but usually not in classrooms, instead in settings that are convivial and where people are engaged in collective action. This definitional perspective is influenced by the work of Mark Smith (1988, 1994, 1999 and 2008), Michael Newman (1994, 1999 and 2006), Griff Foley (1999 and 2000) and Jim Crowther (1999, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010 & 2011). Chapters 8, 9 and 10 can be seen equally as case studies of informal adult education as they are of popular education.

In this thesis I analyse connections between informal adult education, development of critical consciousness and the concept of lifeworld. I argue that Burmese migrant workers' everyday experience is a valuable source of knowledge. They learn to survive and develop new skills and knowledges; these can include group work, tolerance, courage, inclination and capacity to question the 'justice' system. In other words, teaching and learning democracy among members of Burmese grassroots in Thailand takes shape in the form of informal adult education.

Popular education is interpreted in various ways and the origins of popular education may be traced back to various sources. Flowers (2009: 10) describes four major traditions of popular education as:

- one- rooted in working –class education in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,
- two-in progressive and radical education,
- three-in adult education for democracy in the early twenty century, and
- four- in Paulo Freire and his “pedagogy of the oppressed”.

I subscribe to popular education for democratic change as well as Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed. The definition of popular education that I choose is rooted in the real interests and struggles of ordinary people that is overtly political, critical of status quo and committed to progressive social change. This draws on definitions proposed by Jim Crowther. In a recent conference, Fifth International Conference of the Popular Education Network in April 2010, he convened, the following definition of popular education was offered.

Popular education was an important source of inspiration for the liberation movements in Latin American countries in the 1930s (Smith 2004; Bulmer-Thomas 1994; Thorp 1984). There are other popular education traditions, such as the Highlander Folk School established by Myles Horton in the 1920s in Tennessee in the US which played a key role behind the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s (Jones 2007).

Jose-Roberto Guevara (2002), in his study of popular environmental education in the Philippines, characterises popular education as an alternative form of education that focuses on empowering the poor to develop their own social actions. Popular education *“is an alternative form of education, works with people within the poorer sectors, focuses on people’s empowerment and action, is within the context of a wider movement, and is liberative”* (Guevara 2002, p. 37). In popular education, curriculum comes out of the concrete experiences and material interests of people in communities of resistance and struggle; its pedagogy is collective, focused primarily on group as distinct from individual learning and development, and it attempts to forge a direct link between education and social action. It starts with learner’s experiences, their concerns and leads to participation, critical reflection, generation of local knowledge, connecting the local to global and collective action for change (Arnold and Burke 2001; Kerka 1997 and the Popular Education Network). An essential purpose of popular education is that it seeks to develop critical capacity in the oppressed to understand and analyse social mechanisms and power relations which underpin the present structure of society. This can loosely be defined as ‘consciousness raising’ or ‘conscientisation’ (Ireland, 1987 p. 52). It is assumed that if the workers are to become not only critically aware of but also capable of analysing the context in which s/he works and lives, the educational processes must be part of the action from which they draw the content and to which they return their new learning and knowledge.

### **2.3 Analysing popular education in Burmese cross-border civil society**

Burmese civil society organisations in Thailand seeking to promote and develop democratic culture generally face the challenge that the people with whom they are working - who have experienced social exclusion, poverty, discrimination, and alienation - see themselves as political objects. One of the underlying tenets of popular education is to help Burmese people see themselves not as 'objects' controlled by others but as 'subjects' who can shape their destiny. For Freire a key and practical way to do this is enable oppressed people to 'name their world.' Freire worked with people who were illiterate and he relied on the use of visual materials in his education practice. Freire commissioned a well-known artist, Francisco Brennand, to draw a series of pictures that depicted themes of people's experiences that could be used to stimulate discussions about nature and culture, about men and animals, and about culture in the lives of people (Brown 1974, p.8). Art generated from contextually specific themes were used to reflect social issues and create a dialogical learning experience as oppose to didactic instruction.

Freire was concerned with the vast number of Brazil's illiterate population, largely poor and slum dwellers, who were so submerged in their daily struggles for survival that they had little awareness they have the power to change their lives. Freire was overt about his interest in promoting education that will change what he called passive and fatalistic attitudes. Freire and his team argued that literacy for adults learning to read should be a process of analysing reality in order to become critically conscious of their situation (Brown 1974, p. 2). Freire's literacy campaign was therefore less about the 'functional act' of reading and writing but more about assisting the poor to learn to reason, question and develop understanding about the

distinction between what people can make and change (for example, clothes, weapons and water wells) and what is ordained by nature (for example, rivers, mountains and weather). Freire launched 'culture circles' in villages and slum areas and developed teaching materials that helped learners understand the distinction between what is man-made and could be called 'culture,' and what is made by nature and could be called 'nature.' Freire's rationale was that most of the illiterate people his programs were intended for saw the world wholly as made by 'nature.' Freire's analysis was that to see the world this way explained why they saw themselves more as objects with no capacity or right to change the world – no matter how unjust it might be - rather than subjects who can exercise self-determination to change parts of the world. By teaching them what parts of the world are cultural is to teach them what parts of the world they can, and indeed have a responsibility to, change. In the 'culture circles' facilitators led discussions and debates on topics including nationalism, profit remittances abroad, the political evolution of Brazil, development, illiteracy, the vote for illiterates, and democracy (Bee 1980 p. 1). Beginning with the experience of 'the people' rather than relying on textbooks written by North Americans not only helped peasants relate to the literacy lessons but see the connection between their own economic situation and the particular political regime who currently had power. Studying problems, in which the actual content and material were from their daily reality, peasants were able to name their world, became critically aware of their situations and understand the possibilities for action and change.

Most education and training programs for Burmese in Thailand which I will describe and discuss in chapter seven, are highly exclusive because they are mostly for elite leaders, and they are intensive, full-time residential programs often one-year long. For migrant labourers it is just not an option to participate in a long-term residential program let alone any short course. It is not uncommon for a Burmese migrant

labourer to be working six or seven days a week and between 12 to 16 hours a day. My interest is, therefore, less focused on formal training programs for political leaders and NGO workers, and more focused on learning opportunities that are made available for labourers and other grassroots groups.

When I define popular education in the context of the Thai-Burma border region, I am also referring to education that helps labourers name their world; specifically in this case to name the nature of their working conditions, the nature of their exile, and why are they in Thailand in the first place? What's wrong with Burma? Note the emphasis here is not eliciting their knowledge but getting them to talk about working conditions in Thailand and their experiences in Burma. An alternative method would be to organise workshops and invite Burmese experts to lecture about labour laws and the latest political developments. It is possible that such training workshops could be facilitated in a creative and interactive manner. But it is generally impossible for most Burmese migrant workers in Thailand to participate in formal courses. In any case, popular education does not rely on experts or textbooks. Instead it starts with how people see and name their work, in other words, their local knowledge.

Although it may seem daunting, particularly when working with Burmese migrant labourers in Thailand, I am interested in a form of popular education that enables grassroots community members to exercise leadership in deciding what changes are possible and desirable for fellow Burmese citizens. Raymond Johnson (1993) distinguishes between *“useful knowledge”* and *“really useful knowledge”*. *Useful knowledge* serves the interests of others, in most cases employers, and is often concerned with individual advancement. *Really useful knowledge*, on the other hand, is concerned with emancipation of workers, and promotes alternative analyses and

collective action (Crowther 1999 & 2011; Flowers, 2009). Popular education is concerned with 'really useful knowledge'. Let me apply these concepts to the Burmese situation. It could be asserted that knowledge of the common people has been made irrelevant and unimportant because the military rulers decide what knowledge is useful for them. For instance, the Burmese military regime sees scientific and technological knowledge as more useful and important than historical and political knowledge. Therefore, the education systems under the various Burmese military regimes have promoted science and technology in the name of modernity and material progress while other modern knowledge such as social science was silenced (Zani 2005, p. 103; Thein Lwin 2003, p. 60).

We can see the parallels with the history of Mechanics Institutes in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century when working class people in English speaking countries did not have the right to education. Flowers (2009 p. 12) drawing on Tom Steele's body of work, explains that the Mechanics Institutes were intended for the working classes to acquire knowledge and skills to make them be economically more self-reliant, but did not lead them to learn their own place in society and question the status quo. Such education may be in useful for the working class to be more effective in their jobs but it also entraps them in disadvantaged positions in society because the education does not help them to analyse the status quo.

The sober reality is that Burmese people in Burma and even those in Thailand have little say in the decision-making that affects their lives. Contemporary training courses for Burmese oppositional groups in Thailand heavily rely on textbook knowledge as opposed to workshops that get people to analyse their situation for themselves.



The assertion I am making is that Burmese in Thailand will be in better control of their own lives if they privilege the knowledge that most makes sense to them. Jane Thompson writing about working class, feminist struggles argues that such knowledge is derived through everyday experience and the struggle for survival. It is this sort of knowledge that enables people to both understand the root cause of their social reality also helps them to make changes (Thompson 1997, 2000). The aim is to create their own version of “really useful knowledge” to challenge dominant knowledge by generating counter-information. New and critical knowledge can emerge when workers recognise and validate the knowledge acquired in everyday life or “*tacit knowledge*” (Crowther 1999, p. 36). Wainright (1994) explains “*tacit knowledge*” is embedded in what we do and think and ‘what we know but do not say’.

### *2.3.1 The challenge of raising political consciousness with Burmese people*

For more than half a century, the dictatorial rule of the Burmese military regime has not only disabled people’s ability to create and take initiative in their own affairs but effectively broken the spirit of resistance. The majority of Burmese have lost hope in their ability to make change for themselves including those who resorted to armed resistance. There would be few Burmese who do not want to see democratic transition take place, but many do not know or see that they can play a critical role in democratic transition. The dictatorships have created a widespread attitude that I would describe as being characterized by a dependency on authority-figures and a tendency to seek heroes who can be worshipped. Many have even sought answer to their suffering in superstition and religious belief. The oppressive system in Burma has subdued the people to see their current living condition as their fate, or in Freire’s terms as ‘natural’ (Fink 2000 and Cusano 1999). My argument here is that raising political consciousness of Burmese will require lifting the creative capacity and a perspective-change of the oppressed in Burma. The challenge is to create

possibilities where the oppressed can see that they are the actors who can make changes in their society. Jane Thompson (1997) quoting a Black poet, June Jordan, writes

‘Good poetry and successful revolutions change our lives. (but) you can not compose good poetry or wage a revolution without changing consciousness. And you can not alter consciousness unless you attack the language that you share with your enemies and invent a language that you share with your allies’ (p. 157).

Freire defines three levels of consciousness; *‘magical’* as the lowest level of consciousness, *‘naïve’* as the middle level of consciousness, and *‘critical consciousness’* or *‘critically transitive consciousness’* as the highest level of consciousness (Alschbler 1980; Elian 1994; Beck & Purcell 2010). The lowest level of consciousness is associated with the oppressed whose consciousness is characterised by a fatalistic mentality which views life as related to destiny of fortune or forces beyond human control. People with *magical consciousness* harbor internalised negative values that the dominant culture ascribes to them, hold excessive emotional dependence to such a degree that to be is to be subservient or to depend on others. *Megical consciousness* persists among Burmese who see the current political and social injustice in their situations in association with the concept of *“Karma”* that views life as destiny or a consequence of the past life.

The middle level of consciousness or *naïve consciousness* is described as people who are aware of the problem that affects their lives, they have spoken out about their suffering, silence has been broken, and people begin to find ways out of the misery that lie upon their lives. However, with this level of consciousness there is still a lack of self-analysis and may be loaded with distorted meaning and inaccurate interpretations of the social reality. People in this state of development, however, are

easily swayed by populist leaders, and lack the ability to carry out critical collective actions. *Naïve consciousness* is perhaps the level of consciousness most Burmese experience. Generally, the Burmese are dissatisfied with the conditions under the military rule, and many have spoken out about their suffering and their discontent with the generals. However, there are naïve consciousness characteristics such as over dependence on rebel military leaders, populist opposition leaders, lack of self-analysis, and inaccurate interpretation of the social reality still prevailing among Burmese people including members of opposition groups.

The highest level of consciousness or *critical consciousness*, which Freire says can be achieved through the process of *conscientization*, is marked by “the depth in the interpretation of problems, self-confidence in discussions, receptiveness to other ideas, and refusal to shirk from responsibility” (Elian 1994, p. 125-127). The nature of discourse at this level is clearly dialogical. At this level, persons scrutinise their own thoughts and see circumstantial correlations between events. This is the consciousness that challenges dominant culture implicitly and explicitly. This is where the seed of democracy sprouts and foundation of democratic culture is formed. With the highest level of consciousness, people begin to analyse the problem with more openness to different views, develop critical arguments, and take necessary responsibilities. People make choices with a clear understanding; they accept and reason with sound judgments (Freire 1974, p. 18). Very few Burmese I have encountered have demonstrated critical consciousness and those few who have are among leaders of the opposition who were able to articulate in-depth understanding of social and political reality of Burmese society, were open minded to different ideas, and assumed responsibility with full awareness.

However, it must be stressed that political consciousness among Burmese is much more complicated than the three levels of consciousness discussed above. My purpose in discussing these three levels of consciousness is to point to different types of education that can address the issues that hinder the progress of critical consciousness. The Freirean classification of consciousness is close to Marxists' notion of 'false consciousness' that the proletariat are misguided as to their own desires and wants and will not properly understand their true beliefs and desires until they are enlightened (McCarney 2005). I find Marxist and Freirean typologies of consciousness simplistic and crude because they encourage another form of classism which divides peoples as either enlightened or not enlightened. That in turn creates conditions for authoritarian rulers to justify their power, nonetheless I find it is helpful to analyse the level of consciousness of grassroots Burmese because it helps to indicate the kind of education and learning that is relevant to address the issue of democracy-deficiency at the grassroots level.

### *2.3.2 Raising consciousness requires changing social and cultural values and traditions*

My investigation of popular education among Burmese in Thailand largely focuses on informal education and learning that occurs in social activities. David Boud and Nod Miller (1996) and Jack Mezirow (1991) highlight the social and cultural dimension of learning which helps people to make connections between personal experience and worldview. Informal or social learning environment provide the space for people to be able to share and broaden their tacit knowledge and then to act upon it (Foley 1999). For instance, through informal learning in social context, women learn that gender stereotyping they often face in their personal circumstances is a widely shared problem because many women face similar problems. As they come to recognise that problems in their personal lives are related to power relationship in society, they also learn that the situation can be changed

through social action (Mezirow 1991, p. 209). Perspective transformation is an important part of this realisation of the world has been transformed. Perspective transformation is a social process where we share, evaluate, test and reaffirm our beliefs and understanding. It is in this social process that people are empowered to see the world through a new perspective, validate tacit knowledge through rational discourse, and form new relationships to be evident that is central to perspective transformation (Mezirow 1991, p. 194). Although there is no one method fit all, it is safe to assume that when people make connection between their everyday experiences and the condition they are in will let them to see the world around them in a new perspective.

Mezirow (1991) highlights the two dimensions of transformative learning; *the transformation of meaning schemes* and *the transformation of meaning perspective* (p. 192). The transformation of meaning schemes is integral to the process of reflection. As we assess our assumptions about the content or process of problem solving and find them unjustified, we create new ones or transform our old assumptions and hence our interpretations of experience. The transformation of meaning perspective refers to the process when understanding the same thing in a new way or perspective take place.

Burmese traditional values that privilege knowledge from above and preserve top-down problem solving approaches is a barrier to the development of critical consciousness as alternative views and opinions are discouraged. Freire explains that conscientisation is by definition a method; a method of understanding deeply the most general sense of the world and working to transform consciousness must take into account people's behavior, view of the world, and their ethics (1974 p. 37). This transformation process is an emancipatory action which largely involves

communicative learning (Mezirow 1991, p. 98). In the context of Burma, new perspectives, especially those which threaten the status quo will not always be welcomed by those who benefit from the status quo in the name of tradition and culture preservation. Resentment to change would be strong as Burmese people have little experience of democracy and the existence of rigid social hierarchy. However, members of the younger generation and more open minded leaders are likely to accept practical approaches to the social problems.

Most Burmese migrant workers in Thailand do not have opportunity to engage in training programs and for them learning to develop a wider worldview is likely to occur in their everyday social activities and in their workplaces. My cases studies of informal learning experiences among Burmese labourers reveal that these experiences, when certain conditions come together, can lead to a shifting in consciousness.

#### **2.4. Emancipatory learning**

The concept of emancipatory learning is relevant in the context of Burmese democracy transformation. As discussed above, the quality of democracy in a society relies upon the ability of its people at the grassroots level to be able to participate in making decisions for themselves. The purpose of emancipatory learning is to develop understanding about the nature and root causes of unsatisfactory social circumstances in order to develop practical approaches to change them. Emancipatory learning helps people understand the psychological and cultural assumptions that constrain the way they see the world and that influence the way they think, feel and act. In this domain, learners learn not only to see the world more clearly, but to *see themselves seeing* the world (Foley 2000 p. 272). The implication for the Burmese democracy movement is that if Burmese at the community level are empowered to not only see how the dominant power functions in their local areas,

but also understand that they are the ones who can create and make changes for themselves. It is expected that with emancipatory learning, people will not only confront external threats that are forced upon them but also will begin to analyse their own values, attitudes and assumptions that hold them back from advancing democracy.

A challenge for Burmese democracy activists is how to design strategies and create both formal and informal education settings that will facilitate emancipatory learning. It is about challenging values, attitudes and behaviours of the oppressed that they have long been comfortable with. It is important that the oppressed not only understand the intention of, but also aware of the stratagem of their action response to injustice, because their choice of action reflects their belief and values. James Scott, the director of the Southeast Asia Council at Yale University and an advisory board member of *Burma Debate*, a bi-monthly magazine that is dedicated to providing analytical issues concerning Burma, explains the concept of “the hidden transcript” that

“the resistance, like domination, fights a war on two fronts. The hidden transcript is not just behind-the-scenes griping and grumbling, it is enacted in a host of down-to-earth, low-profile stratagems designed to minimize appropriation” (1990 p. 188).

## **2.5 Popular education in the experience Latin Americans’ liberation movements**

The situation in Burma today can be compared to that of Latin American nations in the 1960s, 70s and early 80s, a period when many countries in Latin America were under the control of dictatorial military governments. Authoritarian regimes were particularly strong in Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Uruguay. In each of these

countries there were high levels of poverty and unemployment. A majority of the people in those countries were *campesinos* or land people as the economy depends primarily on agriculture. Agricultural products such as grain, coffee, sugar and beef were the major source of export earnings (Thorp 1984; Smith 2004). However, the life of the *campesino* was never prosperous. Rural poverty and the increase in the number of the landless went up together (Hammond 1998). People in rural areas were exploited and farmers were displaced from their own traditional land. Finding enough food to survive was greatly difficult for many communities (Foweraker 1995 and Kane 1999, p. 59). Opposition movements were severely suppressed. This is exactly the situation the poor and unemployed in Burma are facing today.

Popular education was important in the experiences of Latin American liberation movements and was largely understood as the intellectual property because it played a major role in the struggle of grassroots organisations to bring about social changes (Kane 1999). Popular education offers relevance for people involved in a wide range of social practices, especially in grassroots organisations. 'Popular', in Spanish or Portuguese means 'of the people', and 'the people' are offered to the working class, the unemployed, peasants and the poor and even the lower middle-class. The purpose of this section is to discuss what inspiration can be drawn from the theory and practice of popular education in Latin America. For Burmese people to achieve democracy it will be necessary to struggle on various fronts. Overthrowing government and changing the legal system, but another crucial front for struggle has to be in building more education for grassroots people. And it is in this respect that Burmese activists can draw lessons from the Latin American nations' experience of popular education.



### 2.5.1 Paulo Freire and the literacy movement

At a broad theoretical level, when Burmese activists turn to Latin America, they can examine Paulo Freire's work which was shaped by his determination to change what he called a '*culture of silence*' (Freire 1985, p.60). Being marginalised and alienated, the oppressed, in general, lack the means and opportunities to articulate their own view of the world. As their voices are made unimportant and irrelevant, the oppressed are socially alienated and wrapped up in called the '*culture of silence*'. His pedagogies are designed to give voice to people submerged in a culture of silence. Freire saw it was the culture of silence that kept people from seeing themselves as fully human (Olds 2009). The primary objective of popular educators is to create contexts where people have the courage and right to speak up, and can discover their humanness. In previous chapters I have described and discussed the culture of silence that prevails among many Burmese people in Thailand.

Beginning with Paulo Freire's literacy movement in Brazil in the 1960s, popular education was the struggle for human dignity, survival, and about breaking silence under the oppression of dictators. Literacy campaigns inspired by Freire were developed and implemented in several Latin American countries in both urban and rural areas (Torres 1989; Hammond 1998). In a Freiran adult literacy program, learners began to understand that to acquire knowledge is to acquire power (of understanding the social reality). The poor began to see the struggle for acquiring literacy skills and the struggle for breaking the poverty circle as the same battle.

Before Spanish and Portuguese colonisation, Indigenous peoples in Latin America had knowledge how to live off the land and the seas. They cultivated diverse crops for subsistence and local trading purposes, they hunted and fished and passed on knowledge from one generation to the other (Barndt 1991, p. 1). Spanish and

Portuguese colonisation led not only to dispossession for Indigenous peoples but also to the introduction of mono-cultural cropping to establish agricultural export economies. Coffee is one such example. Local people who previously had knowledge and experience in growing a diverse range of vegetables, fruits and crops, became either wage labourers on coffee plantations or small-holding coffee growers. In this change, they gained a much narrower knowledge and in some cases this led to local people gaining knowledge about growing only coffee beans. Colonial education systems established by the Spanish and Portuguese had the interests of big businesses in mind rather than Indigenous peoples.

In the 60s, 70 and 80s most Latin American nations experienced rampant mismanagement and corruption. In some countries, the military dictators ran the countries as a family business, and corruption and disparities were highly visible (Miller 1985, p.19). The parallels with Burma are obvious. Burma's military generals run and control Burmese economy as if it is their own family business (Maung 1991, p. 119, Mungpi 2009, Turnell 2010). Corruption among the authorities in Burma is one of the most serious cases in the world and it has been ranked only next to Somalia (Zarni 2011).

In the face of over 50 years rule by military dictators it may seem hopeless that political change will ever happen for Burmese people. But many Latin American countries, particularly Mexico, Chile, El Salvador and Paraguay experienced similarly long histories of military domination and there was a widespread pessimism among people that political change could ever be possible. It is in this context that we should understand the remarkable take-up in various Latin American countries of popular education theories and practices inspired by Paulo Freire. Freire sees education as a political act; on the one hand it can be a tool for the

oppressor to maintain domination, on the other hand it can be a key to overcome ignorance and suffering. For Freire, educators do always take sides; if they do not side with the oppressed in an attempt to transform society, then they necessarily side with the 'oppressor' for helping to maintain the status quo. This is the underlying message of Freire's literacy movement. Popular education is a political pedagogy that always commits to work with the oppressed to enable them to gain more control over their lives, and to bring about social change in the interests of greater equality and justice (Freire 1974 p. 38; Bee 1980 p. 55 and Shor 1993 p. 29).

Freire's literacy movement was about helping people to understand the world around them and the connection between their immediate issues and wider (national) issues. In the process of learning to read and write, people learn to understand how decision-making take place in their community, the existence of their rights and to see the need to be involved themselves in collective action to improve their own lives as they learn to be conscious of the historical process being experienced. In addition, participants learn to express their opinion in public, to make decision by consensus and to resolve conflicts through words and reason. In other words, the literacy movement was about no less than a program for "reading the world" (Kane 2001, p. 43).

The idea of popular education has begun to take root in Burmese struggles for democracy. There are a number of educational programs that apply or draw inspiration from popular education, particularly from Freire. There are, for example, workshops for women's empowerment aimed at combating gender-based violence and promoting peace and gender justice (Norsworthy and Khuankaew, Aug 2010), human rights which I discuss in detail in chapter eleven, social education for Buddhist monks, economic literacy training and grassroots education for workers

affected by tsunami- destructive waves in Southern Thailand are some examples of progressive education for Burmese in Thailand. However, popular education in the context of Burmese democracy movement is undoubtedly underdeveloped and is far from being a form of grassroots education as most education and training programs generally lacks a wider participation of grassroots communities. Since Burmese migrant workers and grassroots in general do not have the ability to participate in training programs, informal education activities interwoven with cultural activities is a way of creating opportunities for people to participate.

Popular education is essentially a form of social and cultural practice that encourages people to challenge their own beliefs and values. The educational work of the “Landless People’s Movement” in Brazil, for instance, people ‘deliberately’ learn to stop looking down at the ground and to look middle class people straight in the eye when they encounter their landlords (Kane 2001, p. 16). Such teaching to be less servile could help Burmese migrant labourers strengthen their ability to organise and lead in collective actions.

### *2.5.2 Church and popular education*

Freire’s ideas became popular among the poor and had a significant impact on the Catholic Church in Latin American nations. The deepening economic crisis and worsening political disorder forced the church to make the declaration of “Option for the Poor’ or “Vatican II Declaration” at the Latin American bishops’ conference in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968 (Kane 2001, p. 51). This declaration was crucial in lifting up the spirit of church and community workers working in poor communities and opened up opportunities for them to embrace popular education which became a common practice in community development activities.

In similar ways to the Catholic Church in Latin America, Buddhist monks in Burma have a long history of engaging in the struggle for liberation under the colonial rule and have often risen up against military dictators in the post-colonial era. Buddhist monks remain a potent political force in Burma. Buddhist monks continue to play an important role in maintaining social cohesion as they have strong influence on the people. In recent decades, the monks have become more active in the provision of basic education and social welfare services to the poor in areas where the state has failed. In chapter four, I described the role of Buddhist monks in the development of Burmese civil society in Burma. At the political level, the monks have always stood by the people because they understand that people are essential to functioning of religious communities. In September 2007, thousands of Burmese monks in several cities took to the streets in protest of the growing cost of living, and it was known as the Saffron Revolution.

Buddhism in Burma, however, has been co-opted as the official state religion by the dictatorship (Norsworthy and Khuankaew 2010) and the military regime has created fragmentation and division among Buddhist monk communities. This suggests that it is not possible to draw direct comparisons with the experience of the Catholic Church movement in Latin America which was not only organised across whole countries but also across the continent.

Besides the state's intervention and manipulation, Buddhist monks in Burma are bounded by the custom and practices of Theravada Buddhism which supports social hierarchy and cannot be intimately involved in the life of lay people. In other words, the monks, as followers of the Buddha, are expected to keep a distance from the life of lay people and this doctrine therefore makes it difficult for, indeed discourages them, to comprehend the social reality of the grassroots. Within Theravada

Buddhism, women are prohibited from ordination as monks (Norsworthy and Khuankaew 2010, p. 174). Theravada Buddhists in Burma accept the fatalistic concept of '*Karma*' or reincarnation, and thus see life as a circle of 'actions and consequences'. For instance, if one does bad things in his or her past life one must suffer or pay for the actions in the present life. People who are poor or being treated unfairly often believe that what happens to them is because of their bad actions in their past lives. This fatalistic notion of reincarnation leads people to be more concerned with action that will bring about freedom for an individual rather than collective action to challenge the system that create or allow those injustices in the first place.

The experience of the Catholic Church in the liberation movement in Latin America reveals the important role of religious institutions can play in the domain of civil society and its ability to be defiant in the face of the oppressive regimes. As a form of civil society organisation the Church was able make use of available social space and build alliance with the oppressed. The Church was also important in providing activists with moral and social standing. For example, the Catholic doctrine of liberation theology inspired church workers to politically take side with the poor (Barndt 1991, p. 147). Church workers working closely with the poor in their local communities felt that it was no longer relevant to justify the situation by praying to God and find answers in miracles. Popular education was embraced by Christian activists and community workers and was widely practiced including in Bible reading circles.

What we might learn from Latin America is that if monks in Burma continue to play a more prominent role as a civil society actor and take stronger measures for moral and social standing, they will begin to help people see that freedom can be a self-

made rather than '*Karma*' or a pre-determined happening. Using their influential role, monks could take the lead in challenging dependent political culture characterised by passivity and dependency on figures of authority. This could extend popular education in the Burmese democracy movement. In helping people to reject the circumstances that are imposed on them, leadership in monk communities can unanimously say to the people that poverty is not "karma", the past action/s do not necessarily determine or influence the future occurrences, and people can take action to change their present social circumstances.

### *2.5.3 Consciousness rising and participation of women in public spheres*

Latin American women's participation in the struggle for liberation reveals that unconventional political methods can be effective in challenging the power of authoritarian regimes (Jaquette 1994). Jelin (1990: 2) remarks that in Latin American situations women's participation in social movements must take into consideration certain basic cultural features, which have a decisive influence on the situation of women. Women are in charge of the domestic tasks associated with the private sphere of reproduction and maintenance of the family. Women's activities in the domestic sphere have been perceived to pose no political threats to the military regimes and therefore have often been overlooked or underestimated. But women's movements in Latin American countries began in domestic and community activities and later changed the role of women's participation in the public life. One of the most significant developments in Latin America's social changes was the rise of critical consciousness in women. Unemployment combined with poverty had a dramatic effect on women. The rising living costs caused by the economic crisis placed a heavy burden on women who were responsible for making ends meet with their husbands' small income. Many women were forced, especially, those from the lowest income sector into the informal labor market for the first time. Women were

concentrated in the low-wage sectors of the economy, primarily in service occupation and local self-help projects (Chuchryk 1994, p. 68).

Participating in local self-help activities such as community soup kitchens and small income generation projects for women not only reduced their household financial pressure, but improved their skills to organise and collaborate. 'Women and Development' projects focusing on poverty alleviation strategies such as micro-enterprises, income-generating and credit schemes had training and capacity-building components oriented towards the development of critical consciousness (Walters and Manicon 1996, p. 10-11). With the Church's support and encouragement, middle-class intellectuals became involved in peripheral urban neighborhoods and rural areas. In Brazil, women's involvement in neighborhood projects such as the mothers' clubs and the housewives associations were common throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Through mothers' clubs, lower-income women's groups moved to build up campaigns to place pressure on the ruling regime for better social welfare such as the Day Care Movement. Participation in these organisations and activities itself empower many women activists to question gender power relations in their communities and even their parishes (Alvarez 1994, p. 116).

The patriarchal belief that women and their organisations were not a political threat led the ruling military regimes to be more tolerating and allowed women's associations greater political lee-way than that was granted to the men-led militant resistance in student and labor organisations which were seen as more threatening to national security (Alvarez 1994, p.19) As a result, a new wave of women's movements spread across Latin American nations (Jaquette 1994). Many community



organisations moved on to take on political positions and began to challenge authorities.

Women's movements in the Burmese struggle for democracy have begun to take root in recent decades. More than twelve Burmese women's organisations are in Thailand and many associated themselves with the resistance force from the outset of their formation. This is because most of their members are refugees and internally displaced women, and usually have close association with revolutionary groups. Burmese women's organisations in Thailand, however, do not have official approval from the Thai government. Although their activities include running schools for refugees and capacity building training workshops etc, they do not have the freedom to set up a soup kitchen. They are 'country-less' and they do not have a local community base, in many cases they have no address. In this regard, the liberation experience of Latin American women does not offer directly relevant lessons. Nonetheless, there are things we can be inspired by their methods and techniques in their liberation struggle.

Women organisations in Latin America were able to create public space by using unconventional political methods and languages. Chuchryk (1994 p. 69) notes

it was the language used by these women that helped them become immune from the oppression of the harsh rule of military regimes. The women's groups used not the language of conventional political discourse but rather the language of their reality daily life.

They were the mothers, wives, sister and grandmothers of the victims of repression who took the initiatives and mobilised against the dictatorships. In Argentina, for instance, the well-known mothers' organisation, "*the Madres*", was begun with some

fourteen women between ages of 40 and 62, mostly mothers, who decided to break silence in their endless pain and frustrating search for their sons and daughters who had vanished after being taken away by the forces of the ruling military dictator, and they demanded their “disappeared” children were to be returned alive by the junta (Feijoo and Nari 1994, p. 112). In Chile, women’s mobilisation at the grassroots level led to some becoming influential public figures who went on to participate in national politics (Chuchryk 1994, p. 92).

Popular education helped develop women’s capacity in Latin America to undermine the power of the authorities in many ways. Women used knowledge that was drawn directly from their experiences to advance their causes. High level of unemployment and poverty encouraged women to participate in public spheres. In Mexico, Peru, Brazil and Nicaragua where many thousands of women, unable to bear the burden of poverty, mobilised around prices, basic needs of families, schools and sanitation. In doing so, they redefined the nature of politics and created a new role for women in the public sphere (Barr 1999, p. 77). Through the popular education movement, women in Latin America collectively developed a new identity and they have re-written their own history.

Burmese women’s organisations, even though based outside of the country, have been able to challenge the Burmese regime’s power by lobbying for international pressure to be exercised on the regime. For instance, the *Shan Women Action Network’s* (SWAN) research about human rights abuses committed by the regime called “*License to Rape*” received the international community’s attention and forced the Burmese military regime to respond (SAWN’s Website accessed 2/7/2010). Burmese women’s organisations in Thailand have been able to create a uniting voice of women under an umbrella organisation called *Women’s League of Burma* (WLB).

However, the reality of statelessness is a challenge for Burmese women's organisations in Thailand. In recent decades, through cross-border civil society activities, women's organisations have been able to establish networks, promote women's issues and carve out some social space on the border, but their ability is limited by being in exile.

#### *2.5.4 Popular education for low-paid workers*

Burmese labourers in Thailand, particularly the factory workers I observed in Mae Sot, have very little freedom and time to participate in activities outside of their work. This makes it especially challenging to plan learning activities in which it is possible for them to participate. The Latin American experience reveals that informal and unplanned learning activities are often an effective method to draw people into various attempts to change their social situation (Kane 2010 p. 281). Learning is easier when people can relate it to their everyday experience. The work of Augusto Boal, a Brazilian dramatist and politician, has been used widely by popular educators and offers practical ideas about how to use participatory theatre. Boal's '*theatre of the oppressed*' as it became known is an example of informal education. For example, Boal developed the notion of '*invisible theatre*', where a group of actors perform a scene in real life, as opposed to the stage, such as on a train, in a shop, on the street, and on the street and deliberately designed to provoke public debate (Boal 2000, 1992; Kane 2001, p. 64-65).

Learning for migrant workers often means learning to survive in exploitative environment. In their study of the learning experiences of Latin American labourers in Canada, Aziz Choudry, et al (2009) argue that complex and important informal learning arises directly from struggle to survive. Maitra and Shan (2007), elaborate and describe two types of informal learning; one is '*learning in reverse*' which refers to learning that requires to adapt new situations to survive, and the second is

*'transgressive learning'* in which learners learn to express resentment, build collective action, and take risk to challenge employers. Learning to resist and take action can occur through involvement and participation in union, community organisations and informal relationships with co-worker and friends (Choudry, et al 2009).

My observation of a community library project for migrant workers in a factory area in Mae Sot and the Migrant Learning Centre (MLC) in Chiang Mai reveals that a great deal of *'transgressive learning'* occurs among workers through involvement and participation in informal relationships. (I present a detailed discussion about how *'transgressive learning'* occurs among migrant workers at the community library and the MLC in chapter nine and ten). The experience of popular educators elsewhere points to the possibilities to design creative, participatory, informal and experiential learning initiatives for Burmese migrant workers. But it is also possible to study the experiences of Burmese anti-colonialist activists to find examples of creative, informal and experiential learning initiatives.

## **2.6 Drawing lessons from Burma's anti-colonial movement: Literature movements for the development of mass consciousness**

Burma's anti-colonial movement in the early twentieth century offers some lessons in developing political consciousness with the masses. Under British colonial rule, the native Burmese were economically marginalised and politically paralysed. The Burmese anti-colonial struggle was a broad-based people's movement. Unlike today's Burmese opposition groups which have focused their efforts to bring about top-level institutional change with an assumption that sanctions, boycotts and pressure from the international community will bring down the ruling military junta (South 2004; Callahan 2000; Than Myint-U 2006, p. 342), the young anti-colonial

activists during British rule knew very well that it was essential to win the minds and hearts of the people, and so they set themselves the task of changing the political consciousness of the people. The key to their success in overturning the British colonial rule was by transforming political consciousness of the masses from being fearful of their colonial masters into highly self-confident citizens who were willing to volunteer or even to lay down their lives for liberation.

### *2.6.1 The rise of nationalist spirit*

In November 1885, the last Burmese kingdom, known as the '*Konbaung dynasty*' was defeated by the British army and King '*Thi Baw*', the last king of Burma, was taken away to India, where he was put into exile until his death. The Burmese, with the loss of their monarch, were psychologically broken. The Burmese struggled with life under a foreign occupation. It took many years for Burmese to rise up again as a people.

In the early twentieth century, young Burmese nationalists observed the worsening life-conditions of the Burmese under British rule and began to search for national identity. Ordinary Burmese were poor even though the country had a thriving economy. Burma was exporting rice, oil and valuable timber such as teak to many parts of the British Empire. But the Burmese themselves did not enjoy the fruits of the economic success as the economy was in the hand of foreigners. They included not only the British, but also migrant workers who mainly came from India. The number of foreigner landowners multiplied, particularly, the *Chettiar* money lenders from South India who were brought into Burma as part of a labour-supply scheme by the British to make up the labour shortage in Burma (U Maung Maung 1989, p. 19). Burmese farmers mostly worked as hired labourers because they had lost their

own land to the *Chettiar*. The *Chettiar* would not only take over the land from farmers for failing to pay back their debt but also their wives and daughters.

The extreme poor conditions among Burmese people in rural areas were one of the factors that led the rise of an armed rebellion in 1909-1910. A young man, known as '*Saya San*', in a small town came to acquire a reputation for having magical powers. It was rumored that he could disappear at will or become invulnerable to bullets and bayonets. '*Saya San*' and his followers fought the British under the banner of the '*Golon*' Army, a mythical bird from Buddhist tradition. The rebellion did not have much impact as the farmers were lacking in military skills and modern weapons to match the British troops, and the movement was crushed. '*Saya San*' and many of his followers were captured and sentenced to death (Thea Pan Soe Yin 1978). However, for many years to come the '*Saya San*' rebellion was an important resistance symbol against the colonial power and served a valuable lesson for the next generation of the anti-colonial movement.

The British authorities' attitudes and behaviours humiliated and angered local Burmese. Here are just two examples. Burmese were required to take off their shoes when walking past British officials. There was a long-standing British habit of walking on pagoda platforms in shoes and boots, something deeply inimical to Burmese custom and it was an insult Burmese had to take every day (Than Nyint-U 2006, p. 205; U Nu 1998, p. 71).

In 1906, one of the first modern Burmese civil society organisations was established; it was called the *Young Men's Buddhist Association* (YMBA), a Buddhist version of YMCA. However, it was not until 1920, that the Burmese anti-colonial movement

gathered greater momentum. In 1920, a student strike was organised against the *Rangoon University Act* which was seen as a move to restrict higher education to a small group of privileged people. The general public supported the boycott. As a result '*National Schools*' and self-help schools aiming to provide education for the poor and promote Burmese literature and language, were set up in many parts of the country. The schools were run by patriotic volunteers with financial support of local Burmese. In the same year, a major nationalist organisation or the first national alliance organisation called the *General Council of Burmese Associations* (GCBA) which incorporated the YMBA which had been providing nationalist education activities since 1906, was formed (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, pp. 5 – 6; Lu Htu U Hla 2007, p. 10; Thea Pan Soe Yin 1978, p.68; Victor 1998, p. 59).

In the 1930s, Burmese anti-colonial activists became more sophisticated in their tactics as well as organisational skills. Many of them were young men who came from the national schools which had been established after the 1920 student strike and used Burmese language as the medium of instruction in those schools (Lintner 1994, p. 32). In the 1930s, the anti-British movement, no longer confined to some groups of militant students in Rangoon, had spread across the country. In 1930, the '*Dobama Asi-ayone*' or '*We the Burman Society*', the organisation which was to play a major role in the Burmese independence movement, was formed (Than Myint-U 2006, p. 254; Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, p.129). Rangoon University was the breeding ground of anti-colonial activists. Most members of the '*Dobama Asi-ayone*' were young university students who were passionate about nationalist ideology and Marxist literature. Members of the '*Dobama Asi-ayone*' began to address each other '*Thakin*' or '*Lord*' or '*Master*', as a symbol of saying they were no longer slaves under foreign rule. Later, students as well as the general public began referring to the members of the groups as '*Thakins*' (Victor 1998, p.61).

### *2.6.2 Transforming political consciousness of the masses*

The Burmese anti-colonial movement may not be exactly a kind of popular education movement but several methods and tactics applied in the movement were about transforming political consciousness of the masses. The anti-colonial activists believed in the strength of the Burmese people. The activists sought to tap to religion and popular culture to get their message across to the masses. They worked among the people, took people's concerns seriously and made them their political issues. In other words, they valued the experiential knowledge of the broad masses.

The Burmese anti-colonial activists believed that the strength of their struggle for freedom lay with the people themselves; in their culture, traditions, habits, attitudes and religion. Many young anti-colonial leaders were familiar with Marxist literature and had learnt about other anti-colonial movements around the world. They built political alliances with neighbouring anti-colonial forces such as the *National Congress* in India. These young leaders had refined their political debating skills in their university years as leading members in the student unions. The anti-colonialists were committed to no less than changing political consciousness of the native Burmese whose morale was at its lowest. My interest in the anti-colonial movement is the educational techniques that the anti-colonial leaders used to transform political consciousness of the mass. I will identify some educational methods in the anti-colonial movement.

### *2.6.3 Resistance identity and the literature movement*

In the 1920 student strike, which was the first national student boycott against British rule, a student named Aung Kyaw was fatally wounded in the police action. To show solidarity many student leaders after the strike copied Aung Kyaw's crew-



cut hairstyle to show that their struggle was not over and Aung Kyaw's fighting spirit would live on (Tucker 2001, p. 82).

One of the most important tactics employed by the Burmese anti-colonial forces was the use of modern literature to reach out to the people. Many young activists were reading foreign and Marxist literature. Although the *Burma Book Club* was begun much earlier, owing to a colonial officer turned anthropologist, John Sydenham Furnivall, it was around 1931, that Marxist literature became widely observed in Burma. The J. S. Furnivall's *Burma Book Club* and individuals who had been abroad brought back leftist books and they were instrumental in spreading socialist and Marxist ideas (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, p.130; Tucker 2001, p. 79; Than Myint-U 2006, p. 170). In 1937, a leading member of the '*Dobama Asi-ayone*' called '*Thakin Nu*' and other members formed the '*Nagani*' (Red Dragon) Book Club and publication group. The '*Nagani*' Book Club was established with an aim to make modern literature in economy, politics and history from other societies available to the public in Burmese language at low prices (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, p.130). Many book clubs later appeared in other parts of the country. Through the '*Nagani*' publication, the '*Thakin*' leaders introduced literatures from different parts of the world which served to shape social and political opinion of the public (Aung San Suu Kyi 1990, p. 157). The literature movement offers a home-grown example of Burmese political education methods that were informal, creative and experiential.

#### *2.6.4 Using media and practical issues*

The anti-colonial leaders effectively used newspapers, journal and books to get their messages and opinions to the public. In some cases the activists published their own publications such as the Rangoon University Students Union's '*Owey*' or the '*Fighting Peacock*' journal which were critical of the university authorities, and

instrumental in shaping students' anti-colonial views. Many ex-student leaders continued to work in well-known news agencies after university life. '*Thu Ri Ya*' or 'The Patriot' newspaper and '*Lu Htu*' or 'The People' were just some of the publications controlled by the anti-colonial groups. The growing role of political literacy was recognised by the British government all along, but the government could not prevent it effectively. They could and did arrest well-known leaders but repressing the movement required more than a few arrests. Anti-colonial literatures were not just attacking the colonial rulers, but they were promoting new ways of understanding social and economic issues. Social and economic problems were turned into political issues. For example, gambling was a serious problem among the poor and the media criticised the authority's gambling policy and educated the public that gambling problem as social illnesses. The anti-colonialists argued that the causes of gambling should be understood in a structural manner and pointed to systemic poverty and local corrupt officials using gambling to raise unofficial funds (Lu Htu U Hla 2007, p. 82). The '*Thakins*' or anti-colonialists built their argument around social issues and they were able to shape and drive public opinion toward the independence movement.

#### *2.6.5 Traditional art and culture for political literacy*

Members of the anti-colonial groups worked closely with the people as they sought to understand their local, social and economic problems. The '*Thakins*' and young students used songs and other traditional means of communication to promote their patriotic messages. Using important landmarks and religious centres such as the '*Shwe Dagon*' pagoda that is the most important symbol for Buddhists in Burma and has a long historical connection to every Burmese, the anti-colonialists sent out their political messages to the public. And, in doing so they touched the heart of the people (Tucker 2001, p. 74). For instance, the song called "We the Burman" that was

to become a historical song, was first sang at a public gathering at the 'Shwe Dagon' Pagoda and sent a thrilling message to the population for many years to come.

### *2.6.6 Expanding the spectrum of alliances*

By late 1930s, anti-colonialists in Burma had expanded into labour organisations in industries that opposed the economic policies of the British government. Dock workers, oil field workers and peasants in the rural areas were organised into unions and associations (U Maung Maung 1989, p. 22; Victor 1998, p. 62). In 1938, two years after the Second National Student Strikes at the Rangoon University, the 'Thakins' and workers organised what became known as "the year of the Revolution", or the "1300 (years) Movement", in which oilfield workers marched from the 'Yenangyaung' oilfields in central Burma, the main oil production areas of the colonial days, several hundred miles to Rangoon (Lintner 1994, p. 33). The 'Thakins', by then, had also extended their political alliances with the National Congress of India which was carrying out similar anti-colonial movement in India (Trager 1966, p. 56).

### *2.6.7 We must work with the people*

The influence of Marxism and Gandhi's non-violence mass-movement methodology on the Burmese anti-colonial movement was important and it was reflected in their political tactics and actions. The young 'Thakin' leaders' efforts that took several years to politicise the masses finally paid off. The success of politicisation efforts could be seen especially during the resistance to Japanese imperial forces led by the *Anti-Fascist and People Freedom League* (AFPFL). The Japanese occupied the country for three years (1943-45). They were then militarily defeated by the British army, but people's participation and involvement was critical in the anti-Japanese occupation movement. The Burmese nationalists who helped the Japanese Imperial Army in the taking of the country were disappointed when the Japanese failed to deliver the

country a genuine freedom, and so they in turn mobilised the anti-Japanese movement and the people to support the return of the British forces.

After the Japanese occupation was ended in 1945, the Burmese continued to struggle for independence from the British until 1948. General Aung San, a leading member of the *Thakin* movement, father of today's Burmese opposition leader and democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, was the most prominent figure in the struggle for independence from the British colonial rule. The key strategy for the independence movement was mobilising the mass movement. Although Aung San was assassinated by a political rival group on the eve of independence, his legacy and ideas have remained influential in the minds of many Burmese people. During his political campaign for independence he constantly reminded that people were the back-bone of the struggle and that only the people had the power to make change. In preparation for negotiation with the British for the independence of Burma he engaged in a series of talks and meetings with the people during his political tours around the country. In his fiery speeches at meetings and public gatherings, Aung San frequently reminded that the revolution strategy was of a non-violent civil disobedience mass movement. He constantly reminded his colleagues of the importance of people's participation and involvement at every level of resistance work and to hold people as paramount in politics (Tucker 2001, p. 83). Following are excerpts from General Aung San's speeches during the final campaign for independence.

At the *All Burma Teachers Association* conference in Rangoon on 29 April 1946, Aung San explained

“education is politics...colonial education is not for all...do not rely on the government for every thing... education is politics therefore only when politics is free education will be freed” (A Collection of General Aung San's Speeches (1945-47) 1971, p.125).

In addressing to the Members of Parliament, MPs, of his own party, the AFPFL, on 19 March 1947, he explained the meaning of the revolution as

“..Revolution is direct participation of the masses themselves to shape their own destiny fundamentally by all possible means; historically inevitable and necessary, and inadmissible of all forms of dry schematisation unrelated to given historical condition, and of blind negative, spontaneous, destructive character, and therefore creative in the highest degree. Its fundamental objective is the emancipation of all toilers; its basis mass participation; its grantee of victory mass consciousness” (A Collection of General Aung San’s Speeches (1945-47) 1971, p. 312).

In giving a political talk to the people in Nat Mout City, his home town in April 1947, he explained that

“people are the government... and the authority would lose touch if he/she chooses not to work and live with people..” (A Collection of General Aung San’s Speeches (1945-47) 1971, p. 184).

In June, 1947, less than a month before he was to be assassinated, he addressed at the *National Fire Brigade Association* meeting, and stated that

“people must be involved .. in any work....we must work with the people..” (A Collection of General Aung San’s Speeches (1945-47) 1971, p. 352).

## **2.7 Conclusion**

More than five decades of authoritarian rule in Burma has not only crippled the ability of the people but also broken their spirit of revolution for social change. Burmese opposition’s strategy to bring about democratic change has solely focused on structural (governmental) change which is a top-down approach, has made little impact on the authoritarian regime. The Burmese people have been excluded from participating in public life or in the matters that affect their lives for too long and they have lost hope and become passive about their ability to make changes.

Popular education which has a history associated with social change is largely understood as the intellectual property of the grassroots for change. Popular education was crucial in Latin American countries' liberation movements. The literacy movement in Latin American countries was about helping the oppressed learn to read the world.

The anti-colonial movement in Burma was a people's movement and offers valuable lessons for Burmese struggle for democratic change today. The experience of the anti-colonial movement reveals that the Burmese people were capable of overturning an authoritarian regime with a mass movement. Raising political consciousness of the public was critical in the anti-colonial movement. The leadership of the movement understood that the real power of the resistance lay with the people themselves. Grassroots political education has been largely underdeveloped in the Burmese democracy movement and I believe that much of the education effort of Burmese political groups in Thailand has been dedicated to didactic methods and elite style approaches. Informal and social learning plays a fundamental part in our political consciousness development and identity formation. In the next chapter, I will investigate the role of informal adult education and learning in my politicisation experiences.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Formation of political identity: a reflection on my own learning and politicisation experiences

#### 3.1 Introduction

One of the key research questions in this dissertation is to understand how to enable Burmese citizens who have been oppressed and disempowered for more than sixty years to learn and become active democratic citizens. Politicisation is about how the individual attains a new understanding of his/her relation to the social world (Freire 1970, p. 33, Brew 1993, p. 96 and Roberts 1996). I am using my childhood experiences to illustrate political identity formation and development. In this chapter I will describe and discuss experiences and incidents that I believe to have contributed to my learning about democracy and activism. My experiences as a Burmese citizen, a member of the Shan ethnic group and in an oppressed political situation in my childhood days have undoubtedly influenced my understanding of Burmese politics and shaped my political identity.

Much of political understanding and learning in young people takes place in informal contexts through families, volunteering and community activities (Torres 2007). My experiences in my family and community undoubtedly contributed to the development of my political identity. Learning to be political or an active citizen is about actively participating, making and creating the world we live in (Crick 2000, p. 14).

In an attempt to understand my own learning and consciousness shifting experiences I turn to my childhood experiences to bring a picture of the world I grew

up in order to understand how those experiences helped me in making sense out of the world and shaped my way of thinking and decision making as I grew up. Experience is a significant source of learning and development when critical reflection of the experience takes place as the renowned educationist John Dewey and others have noted (Dewey 1938; Kolb 1984). David Boud, Ruth Cohen and David Walker define experience as “the foundation of, and the stimulus for learning” (1993 p. 8-16), and every experience presents an opportunity for learning. The journey of growing up for me has been many “up and down” occasions that often entail life-changing experiences. Taylor (2009) argues that to be political is to be actively involved “with and against power”. As a child and a young man, I was curious, single minded and unaware of dangers. I spent my time away from my family most of the time, as I was studying in different major cities of Burma. In 1988, was involved in the democracy movement and was arrested for my role in a student organisation. I managed to escape from the hands of the soldiers and joined the armed Shan ethnic resistance movement in the jungle of Burma; later became a refugee and political exile in Thailand. In 1993, I was awarded a scholarship to study in a tertiary education in Australia. In Australia, I have been exposed to new and different ideas and learned to develop critical thinking skills in my higher education studies.

### **3.2 Growing up: learning to recognise oppression**

I was born in a remote border town, Nam Kham, in the North-Eastern Shan State of Burma which has been constantly at war since I was born. There was an ongoing armed conflict between the *Tatmadaw* or the army against the *Burma Communist Party* and various armed ethnic resistance groups since 1948. Located near the border line of Burma and China, Nam Kham was an ideal place for armed resistance groups to be active as they could easily disappear in the border areas when facing heavy



offensives from the *Tatmadaw*. Battles regularly took place near Nam Kham and the town's infrastructures such as the hospital and the power station were often targeted by the armed resistance groups. It was normal for children in Nam Kham to learn from adults the battle news and casualties of war. Among the local population, I could sense the strong resistance and resentful attitude toward the *Tatmadaw* or the army for they were often forced to serve as labourers or made to contribute against their will in that indecisive war. The locals were regularly forced to meet whatever the *Tatmadaw* demanded, such as their vehicles to carry soldiers, food or money for soldiers and even serving as porters to carry military equipment in the front lines. Memory of my early childhood was filled with armed conflict and people's anguish as a result of the civil war. I remember people running for their lives to escape the army's porter conscription and families had to hide in underground bunkers often in their backyards whenever fighting broke out near the town. These memories often come back to haunt me whenever I am in a shocking experience. I remembered people often had to leave the town's only cinema, half-way through the movie because of the army's porter conscription. The cinema was a poorly constructed building and it could only show movies at night time. The army would target cinema-goers to forcibly take them to work as forced labourers or porters in the front lines. People would run all directions to escape from the soldiers waiting at the exit doors of the theater. I remember there was an underground bunker in my backyard, as in most houses in the town, for my family to go in and hide whenever we heard the sound of rocket shells near the town. We often ended up sleeping in the bunker for several nights in precaution whenever heavy fighting took place near the town.

My curiosity also often put myself at odds with my parents and they were worried about my adventurous activities. At the age of nine, I used to go and speak to soldiers who camped in the classrooms at the local high school in summer holiday. Soldiers came from areas outside of my town to reinforce the troops based in town

that had been under the pressure from the attack of the resistance groups. I would visit the soldiers in their bunkers and curiously looked at their military equipment.

The civil war was a constant reminder of the ruling regime's "*divide and rule*" policy. Burma's ethnic minority groups have been subjected to political manipulation and exploitation. The ethnic minority groups have been denied not only their rights but their livelihood. Paulo Freire (1970 p. 119-148) describes the characteristics of domination and anti-dialogue action as "*conquest*", "*divide and rule*", "*amputation*" and "*cultural invasion*" (Brown 1996, p. 146). All these characteristics were presented in Burma, a country dominated by military forces.

The majority of Nam Kham's population (estimated around twenty thousand) was Shan ethnic who saw that their country (land) had been under the occupation of the ethnic Burman force. The locals' attitude toward the government soldiers, who were usually Burman ethnic or spoke only Burmese and had different appearance to the locals on account of their darker complexion, was full of fear and hatred and they felt alienated. The soldiers (uniform men) spoke authoritatively and aggressively when communicating with, and they did not seem to trust the locals. Some of my uncles, like many other young people in the town, were involved in the resistance movement. Conversations among the local adults always included reflections about life under oppression and segregation. I believe listening to adult conversations in my childhood had a significant impact on and shaped my early political knowledge and thinking. Reflecting on my childhood experiences, I know that I learnt a great deal from my family and community.

Informal teaching and learning takes place in many ways in family and community. I learnt to understand how collective decision making and actions were carried out among community members. As Pierre Bourdieu says, *cultural capital* as an "embodied" form is acquired over time as it impresses itself upon one's habitus

(1986, p. 47). The home environment and the community I grew up was a significant source of '*cultural capital*' for me to acquire political and social education as well as develop skills and knowledge necessary for my survival. Diane Reay (2005) asserts that family life is a "*primary site of social reproduction*". In my family, my father always encouraged us to be truthful and independent.

The local people in Nam Kham collectively made decisions about what they could do together to survive or to deal with local affairs as the government authorities were not so helpful. In fact, the locals saw the government authorities as unhelpful and devious for they often made things difficult for the locals to do and manage their own affairs. The local people had to find ways to sort out their own water supply and make sure electricity was available at night as the government electricity service could not (nor had it ever) provide the electricity. The authorities used all kinds of excuses including not having enough petrol to run the generator. The locals would organise themselves and built small dams that were big enough to generate electricity to provide power to thirty to fifty households (roughly for three to four hours a day) or bought small electricity generators from China and provided power to a handful of households in different parts of the town. The local elders would meet and plan religious ceremonies and annual festivals. They raised funds from the community and formed a fire brigade with an old truck converted into a fire-engine which the government officials later came and took control of. I was exposed to conversations in community planning, meetings and gathering in many occasions as my father was a senior member of the community, and often held meetings at his house. My father's patriotism and his life-long participation and contribution in community meetings and cultural activities undoubtedly influenced my way of seeing the world.

### **3.3 Ethnic minority groups and the Burmese Socialist Program Party's (BSPP) rule**

The lack of political and economic equality for ethnic minority groups has been, in actual fact, the root cause of Burma's more than sixty years long civil war. Several ethnic minority groups resorted to armed resistance believing that their political and civil rights had been violated under the Burmese military regime. The BSPP banned teaching all ethnic minority groups' languages and made Burmese (Burman) language the only official ethnic language of the country. As a consequence, some members of ethnic minority groups came to see their own languages and cultural practices as unimportant and impractical. I remember, at the age of six when my mother planned to enroll me to a local school and I was given a Burmese name so I would not be laughed at by other kids in classroom. Under the *Burmese Socialist Program Party* (BSPP) all schools in Burma were nationalised and became public schools. All curricula was planned and controlled by the government. Burman language was the only official language. Non-Burman ethnic students like me faced not only language barriers but social and cultural exclusion at the schools. Students with non-Burman names were often made fun of by not just fellow students but often the teachers. My early experience of racial discrimination and inequality was a significant factor that helped me analyse power and the nature of oppression under the BSPP regime.

Nam Kham, as a border town located near China and Burma border became an important trading point in the 1980s. During the 1970s, Burma's economy was in decline and people faced shortage of basic domestic commodities. Small border towns like Nam Kham quickly became an (unofficial) trading centre between the two countries. The ruling socialist regime of Burma never recognised these border trading routes, but did not completely stop the trading activities. Under the BSPP regime, black market or border trading activities were booming in many border

areas with China, Thailand and India. The government's refusal to acknowledge these trading activities made the price of goods coming through border trading routes unreasonably high. Corruption was rampant as the local authorities such as the police, custom officials, forestry authorities and even the soldiers saw border trading as an opportunity to make a quick fortune by collecting unofficial tariffs. Local people who depended on the trading activities were regularly forced to meet unrealistic demands by the local authorities. These bullying behaviors of the authorities, who were usually members of Burman ethnic group, undoubtedly contributes to the mistrust between Burman and non-Burman ethnic groups.

### **3.4 Burmese racism and my political and ethnic identity**

My memories from high school days were also marked with racism and discrimination. While civil war and the ruling regime's divide and rule policies had created racial tension among the local communities, racial segregation and discrimination practices were also common in schools. Non-Burman ethnic students generally faced language barriers at the school as Burman language was the only official language used in schools. Many students adopted Burmese names, sometimes given by the teachers, in order to avoid been harassed at the school. I could not spell or pronounce my Burmese name properly for several years, but the name has been my official name since.

At the age of nine, my father sent me and all my siblings to a boarding school in May Myo, a town that had a good reputation for schools, but which took a journey of two days by car from my home town. Since then I became a distant member of my family. Although my brother and sisters finally went back to live at home, I never really had the chance to live at home again. I made short visits to my home town in

summer school holidays, but never to live there. After completing my high school I went on to study at the Rangoon Arts and Science University in the country's capital city.

My life in boarding schools from nine years old to my university years defined me. In my boarding school years I was faced with many challenges and developed my own survival techniques. Being away from my parents for most of my life, I always resort to my comfort of being a loner in boarding schools. Cruelty and shocking racist attitude among the Burman and the non-Burman ethnic minority in my boarding school years were very common. It was socially "OK" for adults to make fun of a young minority ethnic child's name or his/her Burmese accent or his or her clothes. Burman ethnic students also held common assumptions that non-Burman ethnic minority kids were backward and not clever enough to meet academic challenges. Non-Burman students received little support and were left to struggle on their own. As a consequence, many non-Burman students dropped out of school at an early age.

### **3.5 Learning civil courage**

At a very young age, as discussed earlier session in this chapter, I developed the consciousness and awareness of how people can be subjected to mistreatment on the basis of their racial background alone. On many occasions, the corrupt behaviour and arrogant attitude of the local Burmese authorities were so dehumanising and they were the source of my anger about the misuse of authority. My experiences in dealing with the authorities in difficult circumstances helped me to develop 'civil courage'. *Civil courage* refers to action when civilians stand up against something that is deemed unjust and evil, knowing that the consequences of their action might lead to their death, injury or some other forms of significant harm (Misztal 2004 and Lang

2007). Ironically, my survival was to depend on my comfort in being a loner. I had to work out how to deal with or overcome my fears. My early learning to overcome my own fears made me realise that how so much of what we fear can shape who we become. In summer school holidays, I would go back from my boarding school to my parents' home for a visit. The traveling from where I studied to my hometown was always challenging. It was about how to get back home safely because the government troops always looked for men and grown-up boys from travellers and took them off the bus to serve as porters in the frontlines. People taken to serve as porters often never returned home, and if they did, returned with horrible experiences they faced at the hands of the soldiers. Summer had always been the time of military offensives and the army always needed civilian labour for carrying military equipment to the frontlines. There was an exception for students who held student cards which only university students had. However, if there was an emergency in the frontline the students were not spared. I'd take my chance to go home in summer holidays. Occasionally, I had to argue with the army officers or made up stories to buy my way out of porter recruitment. Army officers were not used to having students speaking assertively and they would give me a hard time, even after finding out I had appropriate papers and a valid reason to travel. The common punishment practice was locking me in their bunker for a long time before letting me go. My experiences in these encounters has given me confidence to speak to the authorities and made me believe that there were always ways to refuse the unreasonable demands of the authorities.

As I turned into my mid-teenage, I became aware of myself as being curious, adventurous, quite a risk-taker, but also impatient sometimes. These characteristics came with advantages as well as disadvantages. Curiosity got me into trouble many times as well as gave me an advanced knowledge among my close friends. I remembered how my mother stopped my plan to go to China for a visit during a summer holiday because she found out that I was also planning to visit the head

quarters of the *Communist Party of Burma* (CPB) that was waging an armed campaign against the government troop and located not far from the Burma-China border. I was about thirteen and did not really have any idea what I would do when I got there but I knew I wanted to see the headquarter. I did not end up going to the headquarter until 1988 when I joined the armed Shan resistance group which was a military alliance to the CPB, and the Shan Army had a representative office at the headquarters of the *Burmese Communist Party* in Pan Hsang in Northern Burma.

My childhood adventure instinct and survival methods did help me overcome some of my fears. I also became quite defiant towards the authorities and was involved in activities that I saw as challenging the misuse of authority. However, until the democracy uprising until 1988, my defiance to authorities was usually non-political. The BSPP regime was politically sensitive and tolerated no opposition. Civil courage is not an act of self interest and it is necessary that pursuing action against the authority must represent the consensus interest of the community (Schwan 2004).

In summer 1984, I helped form and lead a student organisation of Nam Kham to help fellow students who were financially struggling to go to universities, as well as to show the local authority that they were not helpful and we the people did not need them to organise and manage our own affairs. At the end of summer school holiday in each year, I also organised a convoy of buses for students returning to their universities. In the name of equal access to education, I would approach the local authorities to grant travel permission to students returning to universities and allow them to carry some small amount of Chinese goods so students from poor socio-economy could pay for the cost of their universities. (I discuss this topic in more details in the following section.) In doing so, I learned to communicate with the authorities as well as to organise the students to collectively express our voices. I learned how power functions in the military regime's ruling system. These were examples of my civil courage in action.



### **3.6 Teashops: a place of political formation and informal learning**

In various parts of the world, teashops and coffee houses have played an important part in political formation. Jürgen Habermas's (1989a) 'the Structure Transformation of the Public Sphere' describes political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs and coffee houses, meeting halls, and other public spaces as public sphere where socio-political discussion took place. The characteristics of public sphere encompass freedoms of speech, expression and assembly, and the right to freely participate in political debate and decision-making. The public sphere is where individuals and groups, through participating and debating, shape the public's opinion on political matters (Kellner 1999). Ray Oldenburg (1991) advances the notion of *third place*, in contrast to the first and second places of home and work, which include informal everyday gathering and meeting places such as bars, coffee shops, general stores, bookstores, and community centres where social intercourse takes place. These are important sites for political learning and Oldenburg argues that third places are central to local democracy and community vitality.

We can also see this kind of informal public life as a crucial communication and learning site and in the heart of Burmese democracy movement. Tea shops were an important site, in my experience, for political learning and formation. Young people in Burma had a custom, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, of sitting in teashops with friends and gossiping and joking about all sorts of issues. Sitting in a teashop with friends was more to do with socialisation than drinking tea. Teashops were generally small, set up in open spaces and had five or ten small tables and with four or five stools for each table. Young people would sit around the table, sipping their tea, smoking Burmese traditional cheroot and talk about all kinds of matters in teashops

around university campuses in Rangoon and Mandalay. It was a common practice for young people to go to their favorite tea shops to meet with friends and listen to their favorite music. There we would learn about the latest news and hottest gossip about celebrities and public figures. In the 1988 democracy uprising, teashops were instrumental as they were convenient places for meetings, exchanging news and even developing networks among the student activists. Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993), Boud and Miller (1996), Illeris (2002) and Dewey (1975) assert that learning is '*socially and culturally constructed*'.

Socialisation and tea drinking had a long history in Burma. In the historical days, prior to the British colonisation, tea drinking and gathering at someone or the village headman's house at the end of their hard work days was a custom among grown up men as were washing places for women in small villages. The tea-circle was a socialisation activity as well as a kind of informal meeting and learning place where news and knowledge were exchanged. Villagers and farmers would, for instance, share and discuss current issues and problems in their farming practices, in the tea circles. It would not be mistaken to say tea-circles were Burmese informal adult education centres where social issues and problems were discussed, brought to public attention in which solutions were found. In these tea-circles, young people learnt new skills and knowledge from older generation to deal with their everyday problems.

In modern times, young people are more accustomed to frequenting tea-circles or teashops than older generations. This is because the older generations' contribution to the community activities became less needed, especially, in the urban cities. Under the *Burmese Socialist Program Party* (BSPP) regime, sitting in teashops was a fashion among young people as employment and skills development opportunities for young people were scarce and young people had so much free time. In the early 1980s, the custom of tea drinking and betel nut chewing among young people spread

from Burma proper to Shan State. The custom of tea drinking was not new to the Shan people, but teashop sitting and socialising among young people only became common in the 1980s. In Nam Kham, teashops appeared in the early 1980s, set up by some university graduates who studied in Mandalay and Rangoon universities.

In teashops young people talked about issues that they could not freely talk about in other places such as school or home. I would go to my favorite teashops just to catch up with friends. The teashops were our meeting places when we formed student organisations to support students who were financially struggling to go to universities after completing their final year of high school. In summer 1985, I returned from my first year of university to Nam Kham on my holiday. Some thirty university students and I formed a student organisation with an aim to encourage more young people to go to universities. We knew that some qualified students would not go to the university because of financial difficulty or their parents needed them to work in the family business at home. Students in Nam Kham had to travel to major cities such as La Shwe, Mandalay or Rangoon to attend universities. The teashops were the places where we met, planned and organised to set up the student organisation. The new Nam Kham student organisation was supported by the local population, but the local authorities saw it in a different light and made it hard for us to get permission to run the student organisation. Since, the local authorities could not find a reason to stop the students from forming the organisation, they kept close eyes on every activity of the organisation. The dissatisfaction of the authorities became obvious when a grenade was found near a student organised music festival intended to raise funds. On the festival day, some army officers demanded to have some front seats reserved for them, and when they did not get what they want some soldiers went looking for trouble with the students. But the incident was defused and assumed to have gone away, until a grenade was found near the festival. The army never admitted that the grenade belonged to the army, although it was

obvious that the grenade was the kind used by the Burma army not the resistance groups which, unlike the army, used Chinese made military equipment.

In April 1988, when the nation-wide pro-democracy uprising broke out, I returned from Rangoon to Nam Kham where some students and I set up a student union to support the democracy movement. Again, teashops were our meeting places to discuss, plan our activities and form the *Nam Kham township student union*. Later the union used the local high school to run its campaign.

A great deal of informal education and learning took place in teashops as we discussed, debated and planned our activities. Some listened deeply while some discussed actively. Many became regular attendants at these discussions in teashops. Prior to the forming of the *Nam Kham Township Student Union*, a group of more than ten would regularly occupy a corner of their favorite teashop and intensely discuss and debate about how and what they should do to support the democracy movement.

During the democracy movement in 1988, the security of the town became the responsibility of the students as all local authorities, except the army, such as the police, the city council, the local branch of the BSPP and the immigration authorities left their posts and walked out of their offices. The town was virtually left to the students to take charge. Security of the town was a serious issue because the town was constantly under threat from armed resistance groups and the army was always ready to intervene. Criminals and some people who wanted to take advantage of the situation gave students a hard time. The students organised a security unit, a joint-operation between the students and local community members, and took control of the town. Members of the security unit wore a red banner on their left arm to let the people know that they were authorised to look after the town's security. Although they were lacking in experience to be in charge of a town, students tried to do

whatever they could to keep the town safe. Students were approached to solve all sorts of problems in the communities including stealing, breaking in and domestic violence issues. On some occasions, students had to take prisoners of drug addicts and people who were suspected of being government spies. The town was under the control of the students for nearly two months but this abruptly ended when the military seized power on 18<sup>th</sup> September in 1988 and arrested student leaders. I was arrested and put in an army's underground bunker near the town. In the process of organising and planning demonstrations, and taking care of the town's security matters and other duties, we, the students learnt new skills in organisation, planning, and public relations skills, and above all we learnt and developed new perspectives about our own capacity to exercise power.

### **3.7 Learning the limits of teacher-centered education**

Since I was nine, on many occasions, I have been thrown into situations that required me to adjust and adapt to survive. At the age of nine, I was sent to a boarding school in May Myo. I was usually quiet in classrooms because I could not speak Burmese properly. I began learning to speak with students who sat next to me and copied from their notes when I could not understand what the teacher was saying. This helped me realise that learning did not necessarily have to be with the teacher or come from information on the blackboard. Instead observations of the immediate environment and communication with other students can all be a source of learning.

As my literature taste extended, I began to search for books in shops and would read any book I could get my hand on. I began to develop a taste in old books which were published before the Burmese military regime came into power in 1962. The BSPP regime had a censor board that strictly controlled all publication materials in the

country. It was the books published prior to the military's take-over in 1962 that interested me most. But old books were only available in second-hand bookshops. During my university years in Rangoon, I spent more time in the second-hand bookshops than in my classrooms. I loved searching for books and had long conversations with shop owners who had a great deal of knowledge of the books they were selling. By the time I turned seventeen, I had read a number of 'international best sellers. I read biographies of world political leaders translated in Burmese. I remember reading 'great classics' such as 'Gone with the Wind', 'The Count of Monte Christo' and 'The Old Man and the Sea' in my room and had forgotten the time and missed my lunch and dinner many times. My curiosity kept increasing as I read more and more books. My exposure to these books and new ideas affirmed my belief that the political system in Burma was unjust and it could be changed.

The knowledge I gained from reading books was put to the test when I was with the armed Shan resistance in Burma's jungle in 1988-1990, and when I was a refugee in Thailand. Beliefs and values I held were put to test in my exiled life. The reality of being a resistance fighter and in exile is that one experiences hardship and uncertainty. I would say to myself that the books about great leaders did not really tell much about this raw reality - lives in prisons, on-going struggle to be alive in exile and years of going through difficult times and isolation. Being an exile is not what one would call a normal life. It is a life full of anguish, uncertainty and sometimes all you can do is struggle to keep your hope alive.

In Thailand, being a refugee, in the year of 1991-1993, I was exposed to and impressed by media freedom in Thailand and became very interested in global issues and problems. I learnt about unequal trade between the North and the South and the social and environmental problems of modernisation. In the early years of the 1990s, Thailand was going through a turbulent political transformation with a

military coup, border conflict with Burma, a steadfast changing in the middle-class's political ideas and the university student movement for democracy and greater freedom. Thailand's English language newspapers, *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*, were reporting the country's affairs and readers' opinions and comments. My curiosity to understand the Thais' democracy movement led me to observe the Thai students' protest against the Thai military regime closely, and I went to support students' protests at the universities and public demonstrations in Bangkok. I noticed the important role of the media which not only kept the nation informed about current affairs promptly but also experts' opinions, comments, the voice of the opposition and the people. The military coup and students' demonstrations in Thailand helped me to better understand the role of media in keeping the authorities in check and why the Burmese military regime suppressed the media so hard to keep its grip on power.

I learnt to understand how the environment had been extensively exploited in the name of development, and later led me to study environmental policy at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in Australia. I remember how I became aware of the fragility of the environment. When I read an article about the death of the ecosystem of the Chao PhaYa River, Thailand's most vital river system which a large number of its population depends on, I was led to see the dark side of modernisation and came to understand the fragile relationship between nature and human activities. The river has been the lifeline of Thailand's economy as key industries such as agriculture, fishery and tourism depend on the river. It is an important means of transportation in the city of Bangkok. The awareness took me back to my childhood experiences. Nature was the classroom where I learned about the environment when I was a kid in Nam Kham. Nam Kham, a small and remote town was blessed with clean and fresh air. We'd breathe and not wonder if the air was pure or not polluted. We drank water that came from mountains and never wondered whether if it was contaminated. I learned how seeds placed in the ground

become a tree in spring, and how trees bear fruits. I understood and accepted this as part of my life, a tree's life and a part of nature itself. But we yearned for a modern life because we believed that the big city had everything people need.

### **3.8 Learning through participation**

Learning through participation has been a true transformational experience for me. As a shy boy who liked being on my own I had not developed strong social skills. I was at odds with the highly acculturated Shan community in Nam Kham where young people engaged in social and cultural activities at a young age. I remember one summer holiday I came back home, after the final high school examinations, from Rangoon, and found myself taking part in a local traditional ceremony. My mother had arranged for me to take part in the ceremony as a guarantor for a young boy to be ordained. Every boy, traditionally, in his ordaining ceremony would have two men and two women as his guarantors and supporters during the ceremony. The men and women, during the seven day ceremony, would live in the same house, usually at the boy's family house to care for him. I was ordained when I was ten. Men and women during their stay would become close friends, or sometimes even lovers. It was a good opportunity for young people to develop communication skills and expand social networks. My mother was concerned that I did not have many friends. By making me taking part in such a ceremony she believed I would make more friends and become a more socialised person. However, I was happy the way I was and never felt the need to have more friends. I often found conversations among young people of my age were too shallow and not challenging. I had my close circle of friends and we discussed issues and shared similar interests. We liked talking about current affairs, injustice issues in society and great leaders who changed societies in different parts of the world.



When some university students formed the student organisation of Nam Kham in 1985 with an aim to support new university students with financial difficulty, there were some young people who shared the same interests and who put in enormous energy and dedication to the emergence of the organisation. We wanted to be useful and able to contribute to the society and hopefully made changes. In my role as the secretary of the organisation I faced several challenges. I would take part in negotiating with the local authorities, organising functions, and went out to the community to raise (collect) fund. Within the organisation, I was aware that while I had strong support from my fellow students who were my age, some senior students were using me and my support base to get what they wanted. Senior students were smarter and managed to control the agenda of the organisation. My experiences in these early years of participation in organisational work helped me learn organisational politics. I learned that managing an organisation was complex and full of unpredictability.

As mentioned earlier, the reason for me wanting to work in the students' organisation was to show my defiance to the authorities. Later years, in 1986-87, I led students' bus convoys to Mandalay. The convoys were organised at the end of summer school holiday for transporting students from Nam Kham to one of Burma's major cities, Mandalay, where many Nam Kham students attended universities. Students would carry Chinese-made goods (for the merchants or for themselves) with them when they went back to school and they would sell those goods in Mandalay for some small profits. Normally, the authority (the police, soldier or custom officers) would collect fees from people and truck owners before they let goods pass through their controlled gates into towns and cities. We the students obtained permission from the local authority in Nam Kham to take the goods to Mandalay so we would not have to pay or bribe the authorities on the way. The permission was requested on the grounds that students were poor and they needed some financial support. Officials at Nam Kham agreed and provided an

authorisation letter for the students to carry a small amount of Chinese-made domestic commodities to Mandalay. I would then take the letter and negotiate with authorities in every town and city for the convoy to pass through. The authorities in some towns were reluctant to let the student convoy pass their territories because they did not get the usual bribes. I would not let those authorities stand in our way or pay them any sort of bribe. My involvement in organising students' convoy helped me understand the power of collective effort and unity in people in the face of injustice. It was also good to see students were able to make some money to support their college fees.

In March 1988, students from Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT) clashed with some local boys who happened to be the sons of local officials, over the choice of music to be played in a teashop near the RIT. The next day after the clash, I attended a student gathering in the compound of the RIT where the police had assaulted the students the night before. The students who witnessed the event explained about the police's excessive use of force that resulted in the death of one student. Students called for justice and many began to criticise the government and talked about the need to have a new system that cared about people. After the meeting, I went back to my university, Rangoon Arts and Science University (RASU), the largest university in Burma at that time, and helped spread the anti-government messages and students' plan to boycott until justice for the dead student was achieved.

In May 1988, I returned to Nam Kham from Rangoon when the government closed down all schools and universities in order to control the student-led democracy uprising. In Nam Kham, I organised students returning from their respective universities and formed *Nam Kham Township Student Union*. After becoming the General Secretary of the Union, I and many students organised several public demonstrations in Nam Kham until the military seized power on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1988 and began to arrest student leaders. With the help of an armed Shan resistance

group, the *Shan State Army* (SSA), I and some fellow students managed to escape from the hands of our captors. Since then my life began to take a new direction that I had never imagined and I can no longer set foot in Nam Kham again. I joined the *Shan State Army* and received basic military trainings and jungle survival skills. After two years with the resistance army I left it for Thailand and became a refugee, like many students who came to Thailand. In Bangkok, with some non-Burmese ethnic students, I helped form a student alliance organisation which aimed to promote awareness of the plight of ethnic minority population in frontier areas and human rights violation the ethnic groups had suffered. However, the organisation did not get very far and faced objections from Burman ethnic students living in Bangkok.

I arrived in Australia in July 1993 and went on to study social science and environmental policy at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). Being a new student I was curious and willing to experiment. I was surprised to learn that students' socio- emotional issues were regarded as important in their learning and students with difficult issues could get support from their university lecturers. My schooling experiences in Burma were different. I never witnessed teachers paying much attention to socio-emotional issues and if students were not doing well in the eyes of the teachers, they were often labeled as being lazy and disobedient. In the Burmese school system, the personal circumstances of students were regarded as being of little importance, and punishment applied if students did not show up in the class on time or perform well in the eyes of the teachers. The rigid rule and dogmatic attitude of many Burmese teachers, in fact, produced counter effects and often led the students to be rebellious.

I was astonished by the freedom that university students in Australia enjoyed. I attended student meetings and volunteered in student activities and union organisations. In 1996, I was welcomed to join a student body which was running a campaign in the student election. I enrolled in the election as a general

representative of the students and won a seat in the election and became a member of the *Student Union Council*. My involvement in the *Student Union Council* of the Royal Melbourne Institute of technology (RMIT) as a student representative not only improved my communication skills but allowed me to develop interpersonal skills and self-awareness as an active citizen.

My learning experiences in the student election, as a member of the Student Union Council and in participating in different campaigns was about being exposed to activist organising and mobilisation skills. It gave me confidence in my communication with other students and better understanding of the way freedom of speech and organisation were used to protect students' rights and welfare.

The experience and skills I gained at the RMIT later helped me in various campaigns in the Burmese democracy movement. After completing my study at RMIT, I worked at the *Burma Office* (the office of Burmese opposition groups) in Sydney for two years and later co-ordinated a political alliance group called *Joint Action Committed for Democracy in Burma* (JACDB). I was able to introduce some partnership programs and promote the idea of shared leadership among its members. For the first time, the organisation formed a partnership training program with the *Diplomacy Training Program* (DTP) of the University of New South Wales to provide a training program for Burmese activists in Australia. Through the partnership program, diplomacy courses for Burmese activists in Sydney and Australia wide were organised in 2007 and 2008, and more than fifty activists completed the training program.

### 3.9 How have I overcome my fears?

Fear is a personal and emotional matter. My fears have shaped my understanding of the social reality as I've battled with my own fears for survival. I am not talking about fear of external threat or power but fear that is internal and that has been a force behind my thinking and decision making. As a shy and quiet boy, I was not known for my 'outspokenness'. In fact, it often led me to believe that I was not as courageous as other kids of my age. My younger brother was a brave one and more courageous than me at least in the eyes of many adults in the family. As Sidney Poitier says: *fear, doubt and desperation are almost related* (Poitier 2008, p. 134-135). I remember that I could not talk in front of the classroom when I was asked by the teacher in year one and instead I cried and went home. Fear dominated and kept me silent until I was nine. When I was sent to a boarding school in May Myo, I had to depend totally on myself and learn to defend myself. Although it took me about a year to speak properly Burmese language and to talk back to people at the boarding house and school, the progress in my school work and my Burmese in the following years improved my confidence, self-esteem and ability to communicate with people around me. When I was twelve, I overcame my deepest shyness and became talkative among friends as I felt more comfortable speaking Burmese. But I still found it very hard to get up and talk in front of many people until I was sixteen. I believe taking responsibility not only for myself but for others and knowing that I was trusted by my friends helped me get out of my shy and hermitic habits. My participation in the Nam Kham student organisation and the confidence my fellow students placed in me gave me enough justification and courage to stand firm and speak for everyone when meeting with the authorities. I had little experience in dealing with officials but I was confident that I was fighting for the right and just cause. I was able to do my work without fear, perhaps, it was the consciousness that I felt I was not alone and my failure would affect not only me but also many others, helped me do my best. Each time I faced and battled my fear, I came out stronger.

There were many occasions that made me unhappy at school and unable to face and stand up to teachers and fellow students. In my school years, after leaving Nam Kham, I often encountered racism and hostility. Racist comments such as being called by my race rather than my real name or being made fun of because of my ethnic background, was common in my schooling years. Making fun of people who were from different racial backgrounds was common in Burmese society and there was little or no education about racial discrimination. I hugely resented being maltreated. Although I could not stand up to people who made fun of me, I have always wanted to search for solutions to racism. I was always a reasonable person, but I do think I have a volatile mind inside me – an explosive potential when provoked. I disliked racism since I was young and have refused to host hatred inside me.

### **3.10 Learning in accidents**

There were times and events that I learnt from accidents that had profound impact on me and touched my inner sense. I know there is a body of literature about learning from critical incidents, but here I will write about learning from ‘accidents.’ These were accidents that took me close to death and made me see life in a different light. When I was seven or eight, a few friends and I would go to the Mao River near Nam Kham for a swim, and we often did it in summers. The Mao River was a mountain river, the water ran fast and its currents could change in a very short time without warning for there might be rain in the upstream of the river. Often boats sank due to powerful currents in the river. Parents usually did not approve their children going for a swim in the river. In one summer, when my friends and I were swimming in the river, I was drawn by a current and I fought very hard to get out.

For one moment I thought I was going to die. There were some occasions I was almost drowned when swimming in different places, but that was the most frightening one. After that accident, my understanding of life has changed and it led me to understand that life is impermanent and full of uncertainty.

There were a couple of occasions in my teenage years I faced near death accidents. Both took place during my years in the jungle with the *Shan State Army*. At one time, we were ambushed by the enemy troops while on a convoy, travelling from one jungle headquarter to another. I ran for my life without thinking. I felt the reality of armed resistance. Life in the jungle was full of challenges and uncertainty, and it was hard enough just to keep myself alive. It Not only the *Tatmadaw* or the government's troops that could kill us, but also tropical diseases such as malaria. Moreover, we had poor healthcare service and lack of medicine in the resistance groups. Many resistance fighters lost their lives not in battles but to malaria. In my first year with the resistance group I was sent to the *Marnaplaw*, the head office of the *Karen National Union* (KNU), to join an ethnic alliance group called *Nationalities Democratic Front* (NDF). In *Marnaplaw*, I suffered malaria and did not recover for a long time. I could not eat or drink (nor did we have anything to drink other than water) and I became very weak after several weeks of sickness. The impure water we drank was also a source of malaria unless it was boiled. But boiled water was hard to get hold of. At one point, I thought I would not see another day. I made my last wishes as I went to sleep that night. The next morning, I woke up and realised that I was still alive and felt much better. But the accident touched me profoundly and made me rethink about what I know about life and what I wanted to use my life for. My frightful experiences in those accidents that nearly cost my life. My learning in those situations was deeply emotional and entails personal development in such a way that alters the worldview that I held.

In Australia, I was touched by some public debate issues that led me to see my own values in a different light. The debate about the use of illicit drugs such as heroin and marijuana for medical purposes and the debate over euthanasia made me rethink about how we should value life. In Burma, using illicit drugs is understood to be evil or sinful, and there was no excuse for medical or recreational use. People's perceptions about drug dependency were totally one-sided. Drug addicts were blamed for everything. When I came to know about legality and the medical purpose of drug use it made me rethink about values I held and I began to see better reasons and what make drug addicts become addicts. One good thing about this was I have become non-judgmental about issues that I do not fully understand. In Burma where life was cheap and human rights abuses and summary execution were frequently carried out by the government troops in the name of national security, there was not much room for ethical debates over ending one's life. Buddhist teachings and values which respect all forms of life are against killing are cherished by the majority in Burma. But the people are so powerless to speak out about their values and beliefs. The debate over euthanasia in Australia fascinated me and I began to see the meaning of life in a wider spectrum and the ethical issues of the debate is a fundamental question for all to critically think about.

### **3.11 Conclusions**

Having grown up in an oppressive environment and under difficult circumstances, I learnt to understand the oppressive system of the Burmese military regime at a young age. The harsh rules of the military regime, the people's resentment and racism were all important in my political identity formation as well as the family, home environment and the community were an essential source that strengthens my cultural capital. The oppressive system has forced people see themselves on the other side of the law and one way of regaining their access to social justices is sometimes to break those laws that do not serve their interests. I learnt to distrust the



authority at a very young age and the situation had worked out to be a positive learning process for me and shaped my worldviews.

My political learning and identity formation largely took place in informal context such as in teashops. Informal public gathering sites are essential and central to functional democracy for they promote and preserve social glue and trust through social interaction and networks which often promote discussions and shape views and opinions of the participants.

Reflecting on a life changing experience and choosing to see it in a positive way is a learning process in itself. Emotional and life changing events were also an important source of learning and they have led me to see social reality with different perspectives. In the next chapter, I will discuss the research approach and methods I used to collect, interpret and analyse data from my field study.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESEARCH APPROACH AND FIELD WORK METHOD

#### 4.1 Epistemology

In this study I employed a qualitative research approach and applied both interpretive and critical research orientations. I sought to gain in-depth understanding of the experiences in teaching and learning democracy for Burmese in Thailand. I am drawn to the concept of everyday life because it draws our attention to the capacity of ordinary people to make change, as opposed to institutions and figures of authority. Michel de Certeau (1984) in the *"The Practice of Everyday Life"* helps us understand that everyday activities of ordinary people constitute new forms of meaning making. It is in their everyday activities that people are able to develop capacity *"to subvert the rituals and representations that institutions seek to impose of them"* (Beck & Purcell 2010, p. 13).

At this point, it is relevant to introduce the concept of exile pedagogy. Although a few academics (Freire & Faundez 1989; Ayers 2006 and He 2010) have written about the concept of exile pedagogy, I believe, it is relevant to my thesis. As an exile myself, I question the usefulness of my study into the lives of my fellow Burmese who have experienced oppression and marginalisation. It must be noted that I have politically taken side and explored experiences of the oppressed. I am not only interested in the issues that marginalised them, I seek to have dialogue with them in order to understand their everyday experiences and obstacles they face. My chosen field study is about the lived experience of Burmese in Thailand who essentially live

a life of exile. Freire and Faundez (1989) and He (2010) describe the life of exile as life *in-between*. Exiles live in double lives with one life struggling “to break with the negativity caused by the break with the past and with the other to seize the opportunities of the new environment” (Freire and Faundez 1989 p. 11). Exile pedagogy is concerned with equity, equality, social justice, and human freedom (Ayers 2006). In order to advance the conception of exile pedagogy, He (2010) and Ayers (2006) call attention to the need for a greater researching on people’s endogenous experiences that can provide or point the way toward solutions to their problems.

I have undertaken research about social and educational factors that contributed to the development of critical consciousness of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. I carried out ethnographic observations of more than ten education and capacity building programs and spent a significant amount of time with many migrant workers. But for the purpose of my thesis, I am presenting an in-depth analysis of learning experiences of migrant workers at three chosen locations. I conducted semi-structured interviews with more than 50 Burmese individuals in Thailand, for my thesis I have prepared an analysis of just three Burmese migrants who initially did not identify as, but clearly became, community activists. I describe and discuss the nature of critical consciousness in chapter 2, but let me say here already that I lean heavily on Paulo Freire. The purpose of these case studies was to be able to understand the nature of teaching and learning democracy that occurred in the everyday lives of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand.

Ethnographic and interview-based case study research allows researchers to explore and investigate phenomenon - a program, an event, activities, individuals and groups, within its real-life context (Yin 1994, p. 13; Creswell 2003, 15; Denzin 1989).

Lofland and Lofland (1995) describe a case study as a holistic investigation of a phenomenon. A case study attempts to capture the meaning of an event.

Both Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1989) philosophical hermeneutic approach and Jurgen Habermas's (1984) critical hermeneutic approach inform my data interpretation and reporting. In my field research I focused on observing and understanding learning experiences in daily life and everyday activities of Burmese (largely) migrant workers in Thailand, where they face oppression, exploitation and unfair treatment by their employers as well as the Thai police and immigration authorities (Kealing 2003, pp. 166-167).

I find Gadamer's (1989) notion of '*openness*' useful. He asserts that in order to achieve a new level of understanding, '*openness*' is important. This was the approach I chose with my interviewees in Thailand. To establish some levels of trust, I relied on being open and honest to their queries and about the purpose of my study. Openness is, therefore, a way to co-create a new understanding between conversation partners. Gadamer (1989) says we cannot pre-determine or plan the outcome of a true conversation prior to the conversation. Rather, a conversation is a co-creation of understanding between the partners. Freire (1974) calls this process as "co-learning".

I seek to gain not only deeper understanding and the meanings behind Burmese individuals' experiences in Thailand, but also to analyse how their knowledge is generated and whose interests are being served. My study is about understanding experiences of teaching and learning democracy among Burmese in Thailand who are, in many cases, victims of oppression and exploitation. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate and identify the source of their knowledge and whose interests are being served.

Habermas (1984) is critical of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics because it does not question the dominant meanings and values within a particular culture. Ideologies, assert Habermas, are not fixed codes of rules but function as complex social processes, and dominant ideologies play an influential role in every society shaping beliefs, assumption, hunches, inclinations, fears, hopes and discourses. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the way Burmese interpret and understand the meaning of their experiences.

Using narrative inquiry, I investigate life stories as well as worldviews of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. Narrative inquiry places value on storied experiences (Merriam 1998, p.157) and this information is then retold or re-storied by the researcher into a narrative chronology. In the end, the narrative combines views from the participants' lives with those of the researcher's life in a collaborative narrative (Creswell 2003, p.15). And it should be noted that I include a chapter analysing my own stories; my experiences of learning in my childhood in Burma and as an exile in Thailand and afterward.

In summary, I describe my epistemology broadly as interpretive, and more specifically as critical hermeneutic. But I value and am influenced by traditions of philosophical hermeneutics and phenomenology.

#### **4.2 Field trips and the research participants**

I made two field trips and in total spent about six months in areas where Burmese migrant workers were concentrated - Chiang Mai, Mae Sot, Bangkok and Maha Chai. Chiang Mai was my base where I rented a room for six months. I visited some refugee camps in the northern and south-eastern areas of Thailand. I visited

Burmese communities in these areas, spent time with some Burmese migrant workers on their days off and attended community and planning meetings in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. In Mae Sot, I spent two and half weeks with participants of a Human Rights Training Program organised in a clandestine location. In those two weeks I observed the participants and their teaching and learning activities. In Chiang Mai, I spent most of my time at a *migrant learning center* (MLC), the place I used as my base to meet people, and developed close relationships with a number of Burmese migrant workers. I met with political leaders, human rights activists, community development workers, health workers, environment advocates, educators and students.

In early 2006, I traveled to Thailand to identify possible locations for a second and longer field research trip. I visited many places including Burmese migrant workers' communities, refugee camps, educational programs, and NGOs to get a good understanding of their situations. I attended and observed health education workshops, community meetings and schools. I negotiated with gatekeepers of organisations, schools and refugee camps to seek permission to speak to my research participants.

<b>Field trip one- (Feb –Mar 2006)</b> ( <i>five weeks in Chiang Mai, Mae Sot and Bangkok</i> )
<b>Preparation</b> : making contacts via email and phone calls
Mapping locations and possible organisations and to conduct field visit
<b>In Thailand:</b> visited political organisations, NGOs, migrant learning centres and attended community network meetings in Chiang Mai
Visited NGOs, Burmese opposition groups, migrant schools and learning centre,

refugee camps in Mae Sot areas
Visited migrant workers sites in Mae Sot and Bangkok
Visited Mae La and Umphem refugee camps
<b>Field trip two (Jul- Dec 2007 )</b> ( <i>Six months in Thailand</i> )
Jul 2007-Three weeks in Chiang Mai: meeting with NGOs, activists and migrant workers. Visited activist school programs, migrant learning centre (MLC), and got myself a place near the MLC
Jul –Aug-Three weeks in Mae Sot: meeting with NGOs, migrant workers, began the case study at the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB) training
Aug-Sept-three weeks in Chiang Mai: interviewed migrant workers, NGOs workers, activists, visited activist training programs and refugee camps in Northern Thailand
Sept- Oct- two weeks in Mae Sot: observed the HREIB training, attended a planning meeting among migrant schools, visited the community library, refugee camps, training programs, and work sites
Oct-Nov-Four weeks in Bangkok and Maha Chai: visited a migrant worker learning centre and monasteries in Bangkok, community health centre and work sites in Maha Chai.
Nov -two weeks in Northern Thailand: visited Shan refugee camps in Northern Thailand, observed an HIV/Aids education program for young people from Shan state

Table 1.1: Time line of my field study

There were several training and education programs for Burmese along the Thai-Burma border and in Thailand. Most of these educational programs were school programs for children. There were also training programs primarily aimed at improving specific and technical skills of adults. Teaching and learning methods in these programs relied heavily on traditional and didactic methods of teaching and lecturing. It should be noted that these training programs represented only a ‘drop in the bucket’ for the population of more than two million Burmese workers in

Thailand. The large majority of Burmese in Thailand do not have opportunities to participate in these training programs.

It was obvious to me that the political knowledge gap between political activists and ordinary Burmese was large and far apart. Burmese migrant workers in Thailand are, generally, unaware of the democracy movement and are pre-occupied with their everyday survival. Many migrant workers came from rural poor families and often have little education. However, some young migrant workers I interviewed in the Human Rights Training Program in Mae Sot and in some other structured training programs did have university qualifications and some worked in non-government or community-based organisations. What struck me was that even those who had participated in formal courses were not necessarily more politically active than those who had not.

This led me to the realisation that to understand teaching and learning for democracy among Burmese migrant workers it is necessary to look beyond formal training programs. And so I interviewed single-issue activists (eg. environment, women HIV-AIDS), human rights activists, health workers and migrant workers. I am also presenting my analysis of a community library, a migrant learning centre, and a human rights training program.

Most participants who I observed and interviewed in my fieldwork spoke Burmese while some also spoke their own ethnic languages. I used Burmese language in most interviews and Shan language, my mother-tongue, with Shan speakers. Many saw me as a long- lost friend who had come back and that was helpful to gain trust quickly among research participants. Please note that I devote chapter 3 to a



description and analysis of my political biography. Non-Burman minority ethnic groups have long lost trust with the ethnic majority Burman and the Burmese military governments' chauvinism and ruthless oppression have further worsened the situation. Being a Shan ethnic gave me an advantage to gain trust among non-Burman ethnic minority groups. A small number of participants in my study who identified as political leaders and activists demonstrated a high level of political knowledge about democracy but most interviewees were mostly blue-collar migrant workers – typical occupations included assembly line workers, building labourers, night-security staff, domestic servants. They had little formal knowledge of political concepts and structures. A migrant worker, who had very little formal education and did not know much about the Burmese democracy movement, explained his experience of participation in a demonstration in front of the Office of American Consulate in Chiang Mai. The demonstration was organised by Burmese opposition groups in Thailand in support of the Buddhist monk movement against the Burmese military regime in 2007. He explained:

“.... I was a bit afraid in the beginning, I saw many police were watching us, but we kept marching to the embassy where we stopped and some demonstration leaders spoke. That was my very first political action or demonstration in my life. I knew I could be arrested and deported anytime. I was quite scared for a while. But, I think I was doing the right thing. We need democracy and human rights in our country. I felt quite pleased after the demonstration.....”. (excerpt from interview with Sai Hla (pseudonym) on 29 Aug 07 at the MLC)

I was interested in cases where migrant workers were able and willing to discuss their experiences from Burma and Thailand and, in particular, learning. A migrant labourer turned a health worker in the migrant workers' community in Maha Chai, Ko Aung Myo (pseudonym) explained:

“...whenever I have the chance to inform policy makers, academic and the media I often tell them that the Burmese migrant workers in Thailand have been misunderstood and

victimised. The Thai authorities are often surprised whenever I explain to them the real situation of Burmese migrant workers and the problems they are facing. I point out that our wellbeing is important for the Thai economy. The better the migrant workers know about health issues, the more they will be careful about their own health and this is good for the factories to have workers with good health knowledge. Otherwise, workers' health problems become a problem in workplaces. Many factories in MaHa Chai are food packaging factories so health and hygienic knowledge is very important. The better the workers are educated about health issues the safer the products will be. The business community agrees with this argument but they are still slow to put resources into health education such as allowing workers to attend health training....." (excerpt from interview on 10 Sept 2007).

Mu Sae (pseudonym), a migrant worker who became a women rights activist after joining the *Burmese Women Union* (BWU) in Thailand said;

"I disliked organisations until I joined the BWU. In Burma, people are forced to join and follow the government backed organizations. I was not so sure at first when I joined the BWU. My friends encouraged me to stay on. I was just a volunteer at the beginning. After a while I began to understand the role and the work of the organisation. It opened my eyes, changed my views and I now better understand why we are so poor. I understand why we need democracy" (excerpt from interview on 12 Sept 2007).

#### **4.3 Nature of the data that I sought to gather**

My broad interest is to analyse quality of teaching and learning about democracy among adult Burmese in Thailand. And so I sought to understand the nature of political consciousness of diverse Burmese people in Thailand. I was guided by Paulo Freire' notion of three levels of consciousness: *semi-consciousness*' as the lowest level consciousness, 'naïve' or *'semitransitive consciousness*' as the middle level of consciousness, and *'critical consciousness*' or *'critically transitive consciousness*' as the highest level of consciousness (Beck & Purcell 2010; Alschbler 1980; Elian 1994).

In order to gain insight about their political consciousness I focused on gaining knowledge and understanding of their personal development and consciousness changes in their experiences in Burma, as refugees and as illegal migrant workers in Thailand.

I faced various challenges in undertaking my field study in Thailand both theoretically and practically. I did not just want to look at educational programs that focus on technical knowledge and skills rather than changing participants' perspectives and worldviews. I sought to understand how (emancipatory) learning occurs in everyday life of migrant workers and how migrant workers interpret their own experiences and make sense of them. Such kind of knowledge development takes place outside of formal learning programs and education in this sense is embedded in everyday survival experiences (Choudry, et al 2009). And so I set out to observe where teaching and learning democracy happens where people have little or no time to engage in formal training programs. I asked myself how would I analyse the learning experiences of people who have been living in uncertain circumstances and have painful experiences. And how would I overcome my own prejudice and bias.

I am not only interested in participants' understanding the meaning of their experiences but also the way they make sense of their experiences. I looked at education factors in everyday activities in which people learn to overcome their problems, make sense of their experiences and above all develop their critical consciousness in dealing with everyday problems such as exploitation at work and their illegal status.

Participants in my field research normally did not see themselves as learners and articulate what they were learning. But by talking and sharing significant

experiences among themselves, in some cases migrant workers did learn to articulate a high level awareness and political consciousness as a result of participating in collective actions. Participants in my study were composed of community activists who worked in NGOs and CBOs to improve quality of life of fellow Burmese people in Thailand, in most cases who were illegal migrant workers.

The notion of *'experience'*, *'pre-understanding'*, *'fusion of horizon'*, *'prejudice and judgment'*, and *"language as universal medium"* in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutical tradition of understanding and interpretation were helpful theoretical tools for me. Research in the tradition of philosophical hermeneutic seeks to genuinely engage with what happens in the field and to communicate the meaning and truth of what was encountered in that disclosive engagement (Sharkey, 2001).

#### *4.3.1 Defining experience*

A hermeneutic research approach does not place an emphasis on method/s, but rather prepares to set up a moral engagement with the object being investigated and allow the engagement to lead to deeper levels in order to understand the phenomenon of the object. In "Truth and Method" Gadamer explains

"Genuine experience is experience of one's own historicity. ...the concept of experience thus arrives at a conclusion that is of considerable importance to our inquiry into the nature of historically effected consciousness. As a genuine form of experience it must reflect the general structure of experience..." (1989, p. 357).

The experience of living and working in Burma and working as illegal migrant workers in Thailand I consider to be citizenship experiences. All these experiences in Burma and Thailand are related to the concept of democracy. Citizenship experience is critical in the way Burmese migrant workers see and interpret their own social

reality. They learn to understand what is possible and what is not in their own circumstance.

#### *4.3.2 Pre-understanding*

Sharkey (2001) and Holroyd (2007) explain that pre-understanding provides the point of entry for every act of interpretation and understanding. New understanding inevitably emerges during the genuine conversation with text. The task of interpretation is not reproduction of one's prior understanding, it is rather one of discovering and testing, rejecting or affirming, in the dialogical play of interpretation.

My experiences as a refugee and migrant worker in Thailand prior to coming to Australia formed my pre-understanding about the life of illegal migrant workers. My pre-understanding helped me to have vivacious conversations and dialogues.

#### *4.3.3 Fusion of horizon*

Gadamer (1989) characterises the rise of new understanding and formation of knowledge within the hermeneutic circle, a concept that relates part and whole in the process of our understanding and knowledge formation, as a *fusion of horizon*. "Horizon" refers to one's standpoint or situatedness in time, place, culture, gender, ethnicity, etc. (Usher 1996; Van Manen 1990 and Sharkey 2001). The scope of horizon is limited but it is open to connection with other horizons (perspective standpoints).

Hermeneutic understanding is, therefore, a learning experience involving 'dialogue' between ourselves as researchers and that which we are trying to understand (Usher 1996, p. 21-22). Blaikie (1993, p. 64) suggests the taken-for-granted assumptions should be analysed in order to gain genuine understanding. My experiences as a

refugee and migrant worker in the past were my standpoints and they helped me analyse the text and information from my field work.

#### *4.3.4 Prejudice*

'Prejudice' is an important notion in Gadamer's hermeneutic understanding. He sees that all understanding, in one way or another, involves pre-conceptions or prejudices (Teigas1995, p. 39). Prejudice is in many senses very close to pre-understanding. For Gadamer, prejudice is something we not only need to be aware of, but to accept it as part of the nature of knowledge formation. Gadamer says:

"A person who believes he is free of prejudices, relying on the objectivity of his producers and denying that he is himself conditioned by historical circumstances, .... A person who does not admit that he is dominated by the prejudices will fail to see what manifests itself by their light" (1989, p. 260-261).

My experiences in the past were very similar to that of many of my research participants. I was aware that my assumptions or prejudices greatly influenced my way of seeing and interpretation of my research findings. But I did not allow these 'old' knowledges and understandings to dominate, but merge with my 'new' findings to broaden my understanding.

#### *4.3.5 Language as universal medium*

Gadamer argues that language is the most important medium in understanding the world. However, this is not to say that language creates the world but we come to know the "world" through "language" (Teigan 1995, p. 63- 64 and Blaikie 1993, p. 65). The use of different languages to analyse meanings in experiences is relevant to this study. In my field study I mainly used Burmese and Shan languages. Therefore, the use of different languages prompts a question about hermeneutic understanding.

Gadamer explains that the power of hermeneutic understanding does not depend on the kind of language used. He states that understanding depends on the interpreters' ability to see the object being investigated and the limitation they face is not so much the type of language that applies but rather his ability to encapsulate the world of the object. Gadamer explains

“...in bridging the gulf between languages, the translator clearly exemplifies the reciprocal relationship that exists between interpreter and text, and that corresponds to the reciprocity involved in reaching an understanding in conversation. ...The fact that a foreign language is being translated means that this is simply an extreme case of hermeneutical difficulty- i.e., of alienness and its conquest. In fact all the “objects” with which traditional hermeneutic is concerned are alien in the same unequivocally defined sense” (1989, p. 387).

The use of different languages in my field work raises questions about the nature of how I understood the data. Languages may be the medium to expose understanding, but my interpretation of Burmese's experiences in Thailand had more to do with my ability to interpret the world I encountered than the languages I used.

#### **4.4 How I gathered the data**

Gathering data was challenging in my field study. The illegal status of most Burmese in Thailand presented a difficult situation to make contact with them. Due to unstable and insecure situations of participants in my study I made use of every possible opportunity to have conversations with them. I relied on semi-structured interviewing and often my interviews were in un-conventional settings because I had to conduct them in difficult situations. I took notes about most interviews and conversations. I also made notes about the nature of the surrounding environment, people's relationships and the way they interact with each other.

In Chiang Mai where I made my base during the field research, I often used the *Migrant Learning Center* (MLC) as a meeting place since it is a well-known location among migrant workers and it always had some free spaces during the day. Many Burmese migrant workers felt safe to meet at the centre. Coffee shops and restaurants were also often used for meetings and interviewing. Sometimes, NGOs workers would welcome me to their offices. Offices were a good location to have in-depth and long discussions because they were safer and more private. Some NGOs workers were happy for me to meet at their offices but many were also very careful of taking strangers to their offices. Many Burmese NGOs are not registered organisations and they are, for security reason, usually very careful to take non-members to their offices.

I taped the interviews whenever the situation allowed. I usually typed the interview note as soon as the interview was complete and “paraphrased” most interview conversations and tried to keep the original meaning as authentic as possible since interviews were predominantly in Burmese and Shan languages, and translating the conversations was a challenge as expressions in those languages are different to that of English. I made translations as close as possible to their original meanings.

#### **4.5 The actual data I managed to gather**

I had reflective conversations with more than fifty people during my six months field study in Thailand in 2007. Collecting data (interviewing) was a challenge in many ways. Participants’ concern for their security was a real issue, and the uncertainty they face in their everyday life made it hard to set appointments with them, and I was often unable to contact them when they failed to show up for an interview. In some cases, participants did not quite understand the purpose of the



study and worried that they would be exposed themselves to the authority. On several occasions appointments were cancelled or did not happen and so I often conducted interviews with people on the first encounter rather than make appointments to see them again. Where possible, I would take notes during the interviews but in some cases I wrote the notes after the interview because participants were not comfortable with me taking notes during the conversation. Mostly, migrant worker participants were more comfortable in informal conversations and in groups.

In my six months field research I had conversations and interviews with more than fifty people in different cities, centres, locations and workplaces. But only about ten of them signed the consent forms I had with me. Consent forms were often inappropriate as participants did not want to disclose their identity or in many cases they were not used to the idea of signing a document. Note taking was the primary method to gather information.

#### **4.6 Ethics and challenges in field work**

I was fortunate to know a number of Burmese living in Thailand and those people served as initial contacts for me to get in touch with others. Most Burmese in Thailand, due to their illegal status, keep a low profile and regularly re-locate their place or residence in order to avoid being recognised as illegal migrants by the Thai authorities or sometimes by their Thai neighbors. Fear of being exposed to the government authorities was a real concern among Burmese in Thailand. I considered safety and security of participants seriously in my field study. I initially worked out a list of people in different locations who I intended to meet and arranged to meet

with them face-to-face. I would find out their availability and arranged a time to meet with them at locations nominated by them.

Most people I interviewed understood the purpose of my study and happy to be interviewed. The activists I interviewed saw me as one of them and my study about them was good for their cause. There were, however, some who were not clear about the purpose of my study and declined to be interviewed.

Due to the illegal status of most of interviewees, I had to take any opportunity given. Meetings with them were often unanticipated and improvised. I usually asked permission to record the conversations on my voice recorder. There were several occasions I could not tape the conversation because I did not have the permission or the background noise was too loud to do recording, for example, in restaurants and coffee shops. With the ethical approval from the university, I prepared with me consent forms in English and Burmese languages prior to my trip, and always carried those forms with me while conducting my field work. However, most participants in my interviews saw those ethical consent forms little relevant to their situations and many showed no willingness to sign the form because they did not see those forms could do any thing to help them in their defenseless and unstable situation. Most people's names in my field-data and thesis have been altered. I have used real names only in those cases where they are high-profile and public figures.

Being known among some influential people helped me; in particular to establish credibility that I was not a Burmese government spy. But being a researcher among people I knew was challenging. Some people I met regarded me as a long-lost friend. The conversation often became too informal and moved away from the topic of my research focus.

As a critical hermeneutic researcher I sought to critically understand the learning experiences of Burmese in Thailand. I listened carefully and encouraged participants to express their feelings. I took notice of the language they chose to use, and their visual communication such as the tone of their voices and their body language.

#### **4.7 The way I reported the data**

Narrative methods are interpretative and a means of producing life-stories. Analytic interpretations are, in fact, partial and intended to provide alternative truths that aim for *“believability, not certitude, for enlargement of understanding rather than control”* (Riessman 1993, p. 22). The life-stories were retold or restoried by me, the researcher into a narrative chronology. In the end, the narrative combined views from the participants’ lives with those of my, the researcher’s life in a collaborative narrative (Creswell 2003 p. 15).

Baenacle (2001 p. vii) claims that narrative provides an appropriate tool for philosophical hermeneutical research that seeks to present the lived world of people in everyday life with clarity and authenticity, and in doing so it employs every reasonable and appropriate measures in order to produce deep reflection Van Manen (1990 p. 78) reminds us that meaning is multi-dimensional and multi-layered.

After carefully editing my field notes, I developed four categories or themes to understand the way teaching and learning democracy takes place among Burmese in Thailand. I grouped some interviews according to similarity in types of learning experiences and others to types of geographical location. The types of physical environments had a significant influence on participants’ capacity to learn. The

clandestine nature of the location for the human rights training, for instance, did shape the learning experiences of participants.

### *The four case-studies*

#### 1<sup>st</sup> case study (chapter eight):

This is a personal account of three migrant workers who became community activists or as Tracey Ollis (2010) conceives ‘circumstantial or accidental activists.’ All described their experience of embarking on a ‘steep learning curve.’ their participation in social action and community development changed their understanding of their social and political situation.

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> case study (chapter nine):

This is a community library project set up by a Burmese labour rights advocacy organisation. It has been created to provide a space for Burmese migrant workers to meet, develop social networks and engage in informal (conversational) learning. This project provides opportunities for Burmese illegal migrant workers in a factory to engage in emancipatory learning.

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> case study (chapter ten)

For this case study I describe and discuss the teaching and learning that takes place outside of classrooms at a *Migrant Learning Centre* (MLC) in Chiang Mai. I was welcomed by the Centre’s director to spend time ‘hanging around’ and take part in the centre’s activities. I was given permission to speak to students so long as they gave consent. I rented a room near the MLC and made it my base during my five-month stay in Thailand. I hanged around with people at the learning centre and developed close relationships with several migrant workers at the centre. It was clear that the teachers did not just teach their students but also actively assist their students to develop necessary social, survival and life-skills.

#### 4<sup>th</sup> case study (chapter eleven):

I had an opportunity to observe a clandestine Human Rights Training Program for Burmese activists in a border town in North-Western Thailand. It was a one-month residential training program organised by the *Human Rights Education Institute of Burma* (HREIB) for NGO staff workers working inside Burma and on the border of Thailand. The HREIB was founded by former student activists who survived the brutal crackdown of the military regime in the 1988 democracy movement. I observed teaching methods and style of the facilitators. I had conversations with many participants in the program and gathered their personal stories and experiences. I listened to conversations between them, their jokes and gossips. Many told me their personal experiences in their work and their past experiences. I paid attention to their personal stories, their experiences, feelings and the way they made sense of their experiences.

### **4.8 How I interpreted and analysed the data**

#### *4.8.1 Using personal experience as a starting point*

I seek to critically understand my own prejudice and pre-understanding in my attempt to understand the experiences of research participants (Laverty, 2003 p. 17).

My personal experiences as an exile, illegal migrant worker and a refugee in Thailand (1988-1993) provide me with some insightful understanding of the lives and experiences of Burmese in Thailand.

After the Burmese military regime used brutal force and crushed the student-led pro-democracy uprising in late 1988, I was briefly arrested and detained. I managed

to escape to the Thai-Burma border shortly after the arrest. I joined an armed resistance organisation and spent time in the jungle of Burma and on the border, before becoming a migrant worker in Thailand and later a refugee in Thailand. I spent my life as an illegal migrant worker and a refugee until I left Thailand for Australia in late 1993. My experience in those years helps me relate to the experience of Burmese I met during my field study. Burmese workers in Thailand face alienation, discrimination and exploitation by their employers and the Thai authorities. They live with fear of being arrested and deported back to Burma. I could relate to these experiences well since I was once a refugee and migrant worker in Thailand. However, there are more Burmese NGOs in Thailand now than when I lived in Thailand. There are many more Burmese civil society organisations in Thailand that are actively working with Burmese workers and refugees. Modern communication technology such as mobile phone and the internet has increased the ability to communicate among Burmese in Thailand. The Burmese democracy movement today has gained better recognition from the international communities than in the 1980s and 1990s.

Gadamer (1989) argues that it is impossible to separate oneself as a researcher from the historical and cultural context that defines one's interpretive framework. Knowledge is always a matter of knowing differently rather than cumulative increase, identity or confirmation (User 1996 p.19).

Stage one (in Thailand)	Data from field research; interviews, conversations and observation
Stage two (in Thailand)	Writing up the interview, conversations and observation of sites in Thailand

Stage three (in Thailand)	Reviewing information and data- this stage involves triangulation of data and maintaining authenticity of information
Stage four (in Sydney)	Rewriting - making analysis, theorising and paraphrasing interviews ( in Sydney)
Stage five (in Sydney)	Grouping interviews and learning activities in themes according to their similarities in learning experiences and locations
Stage Six (in Sydney)	Writing up four educational case studies developed from stage five

Table 2: stages of data collection and analysis

I draw on a number of adult education theories and civil society concepts in my data analysis. The concept of critical “consciousness” was particularly helpful in my analysis of perspective transformation of participants.

Freire (1974) is very clear that learning is not about knowing new that one does not know before, instead learning is knowing something one already know but in a different way. Freire refers to conscientisation which has double meaning in Portuguese, that is, to be aware of something but also to have a moral responsibility to act. Becoming critical of own situation is associated with not only being able to see the situation critically but also involve assuming responsibility, at least develop moral responsibility within oneself. Mezirow (1991) says *“Learning is process of constructing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience as a guide to awareness, feeling and action”* (p.35).

My analysis of learning experiences of Burmese community activists and migrant workers reveals that learning is a process of constructing new meanings about their experiences. Mark Smith's body of work about informal education (Smith 1988; 1994; 1999 & 2008; Jeff and Smith 1990 & 2005) has been particularly useful in my analysis of Burmese migrant workers' learning in social activities and networking at the community library and the Migrant Learning Centre (MLC). My close observations at the community library for Burmese migrant workers in Mae Sot's industrial areas led me to understand the importance of a safe social environment to enable emancipatory learning. I was inspired by James Scott's (1990)'s *"Hidden Transcript: the Art of Resistance by the Oppressed"* which claims a safe social space (site) can assist the oppressed to learn and develop skills that are necessary in the struggle for emancipation.

My investigation of teaching and learning democracy among Burmese in Thailand is situated in the context of civil society. In the last decade, a new form of Burmese civil society has emerged in the areas of Thai-Burma border and in Thailand. This new type of civil society operates across the border and embraces the concept that civil society organisations act in the interest of the oppressed and civil society is a social space free from the domination of the government. The Italian Marxist thinker and political activist, Antonio Gramsci's concept of civil society as a site of struggle or *'war of position'* is relevant in my investigation of the nature and development of Burmese cross-border civil society organisations and their role in facilitating teaching and learning democracy along the border and in Thailand. For Gramsci, civil society is the space where dominant ideologies can be countered through a wide range of social organisations and cultural influences (Mayo 1999, p. 38). The struggle for democracy is not only for political change but also social and cultural transformation through participation of the grassroots. Cross-border civil society, because it is free from the control of the Burmese regime, is where the dominant



ideologies are contested and where the oppressed learn to strengthen their capacity and ability to carry out social transformation.

#### **4.9 Quality standards for my interpretative research**

##### *Credibility, authenticity and limitations*

My close relationship with some Burmese in Thailand and my background as a refugee and migrant worker validates the credibility of my research. My field study was enriched by a number of factors. My Burmese and Shan language was helpful in building close relationships and gaining trust with my research participants. Although I was able to tap into the life-stories of my research subjects, I acknowledge that the chosen sites and participants may not be perfectly representative.

##### *Rigour*

The aim of my field study was to gain both insight into the experiences of my research subjects and obtain reliable and authentic data. I usually took notes in interviews but in some cases I was not able to take notes, as discussed in the ethical issues, due to the safety issues and sometimes because the interviews were conducted in open public places where taking notes was not appropriate. For instance, I had to take the chance to interview a community activist who had been very difficult to meet with, on a return trip from a funeral service while traveling on a motorbike and another was during a waiting time for a graduation ceremony in a hotel lobby. My notes included not only the conversation but also my observation of surrounding physical environment which I believe to influence the ability of learners to learn. The three case studies reveal that surrounding physical environment has significant impact on learners' ability to learn. I also taped some conversations for

reviewing. However, taping the interview was not always easy as many participants feared for their safety or the situation was inappropriate to tape the conversation. Most participants in my research were illegal migrants in Thailand and they were very concerned about their safety and constantly moved their living place from one to another to avoid being recognised as illegal migrants. I was aware that my contact with them was sporadic and I would not be able to see them again for checking my interpretation of their experiences. Many did not know how to use email. Because of these reasons and limited opportunities, I always asked for verification and confirmation as much as possible whilst taking notes. I typed my field note as soon as the interview is completed so I could record the origin of conversations and interviews while my memory was still fresh.

Field notes, therefore, include paraphrases of interviews and conversations and personal characters and social interaction of participants, observation and the physical environment of the training sites. I could not produce verbatim transcripts as most interviews were semi-structured and in conversational nature. Using different languages such as Burmese and Shan also makes the translation task difficult to produce verbatim transcripts. Therefore, I paraphrased my interview notes as soon as I had a chance to type after the interviews.

### *Triangulation*

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe triangulation as a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning and verify the repeatability of an observation. This research was designed to draw on the personal learning experiences of Burmese migrants at the source – namely illegal Burmese migrant worker and community activists who experience isolation and marginalisation in Thailand and Thai-Burma border areas. In-depth interviewing as the primary methods and participant observation provided a sense of balance and enhanced one another.

Having participants from different locations and backgrounds offered multiple perceptions and implies a broad consideration and inclusion different positions of perceptions. Secondary methods, including document analysis, information from websites and NGOs reports not only helped broadened the comprehensiveness of data and the overall picture of chosen programs and participants, but also support my findings and arguments. As a critical interpretative research, the case studies emphasised the largely subjective nature of reality and the importance of the lived experiences of participants and how they make sense of their own experiences (Popkewitz 1984 and Merriam 1998).

### *Data analysis*

Data analysis, synthesizing findings, extracting the critical aspects and information to form the basis of the case studies was done in Sydney after coming back from field research in Thailand. Interview notes and individual stories were the key elements in this stage of data analysis. The aim of data analysis was to determine education factors in participants' experiences and theme the experiences in different types of learning. The research also seeks to explain whether or not participants' experiences have changed the level of their critical consciousness. During this phase, I drew upon my field notes to clearly define the social reality of participants within the research environment

### **4.10 Conclusion**

In conclusion, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences in teaching and learning democracy amongst Burmese, mostly illegal workers, in Thailand who face danger, exploitation and uncertainty in their everyday life, this study employed a qualitative research approach and applied both interpretive and

critical research orientations. I describe my epistemology broadly as interpretive and more specifically as critical hermeneutic. However, traditions of philosophical hermeneutics and phenomenology also influenced my interpretation and ways of reporting data from the field. The quality of my field research is supported by credibility and authenticity of my field data and systematically detailed data analysis that produced insightful everyday learning experiences of Burmese migrant workers and activists working in the cross-border areas of Thailand and Burma. To have a broader understanding of the nature of political dilemma in Burma, in the next chapter, I will discuss history and analyse politics in Burma.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### History and Politics in Burma

#### 5.1 A long history of authoritarian rule

The Burmese military regime, for the first time in 19 years, held tightly controlled general elections in November 2010, under a new constitution that gives the military permanent dominance (Hartcher, 2011). As predicted by most observers, pro-military party namely the *Union Solidarity and Development Party* (USDP), won an overwhelmingly victory. The whole exercise was dismissed by Western governments as a fraud. There are, however, glimmers of hope that the regime will introduce some measures of democracy. These measures include the release of some political prisoners including the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi from her house arrest, the country's new president announcing his intention to reform the country's economy and find a way to political reconciliation, and for the first time in years the UN special envoy to Burma has been allowed to visit the country and access to prominent member of opposition groups. However, given the account of oppressive authoritarian rule for more than sixty years, it is still too early to assert that democracy will be returned in Burma. There is consensus from most international observers that the current military regime maintains dictatorial powers. Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the democracy movement cautioned; "I'd like to see a few more turns before I decide whether or not the wheels are moving along" (Hartcher 2011).

There has been a long history of authoritarian rule in Burma. There were numerous kingdoms in the territory now known as Burma. Burmese kings were periodically

able to build empires stretching across much of modern-day Burma, but at other times, Mon, Shan and Arkanese rulers presided over flourishing kingdoms of their own (Fink 2001, p.15). From the eleventh century to the beginning of the British colonial rule in 1885, for more than 800 years, people were ruled by absolute monarchs (Maung Maung Gyi 1983 and Fink 2001).

In the old Burmese system of government, the king was the centre figure. The king was perceived as not only the ruler of the people by a being distinctly above them occupying the chief and central position in the country and wielding great power. Without him the entire business of administration would come to stop (Mg Mg Gyi 1983, p. 14-16). Although Burma kings normally depended on the threat of force to maintain their rule, there was strong believe that they attained such high positions because of their meritorious actions in their past lives (Fink 2001, p. 16). The concept of national welfare for most Burmese kings was confided to religion, religious needs and institutions. As a result, they did little to improve the material welfare of common people (Mg Mg Gyi 1983, p. 26 and Fink 2001, p. 16). There are no historical records of any major people's revolts against Burmese royal courts. And so the kings and queens were unchallenged until 1885 when the British conquered Burma and made it a colonial territory (Mg Mg Gyi 1983; Silverstein 1977 and Steinberg 2000).

In 1885, Burma came under total occupation of the British Empire. The British colonial government introduced the Western civil administration system and education. However, most Burmese were not happy to be under foreign rule. They abhorred being treated as second class citizens in their own country (Trager 1966 and Than Myint –U 2006). Monks and lay people were particularly incensed by what they perceived as British disrespect towards Buddhism (Fink 2001, p.18). Nationalism emerged as a resistant symbol.

Burma achieved her independence from the British in 1948 and a parliamentary democracy was established. However, Burma's short-lived parliamentary democracy system was in trouble water and it came to an end when the military stepped in and took over power in March 1962. The self-claimed home-guard military government led by General Ne Win quickly began to formulate its long-term total domination in the name of preventing the Union of Burma from disintegration. After the military coup, following in the footsteps of the Karen, thirteen other ethnic groups started armed campaigns against the military rulers. In 1988, there were fourteen armed ethnic organisations and a Burmese communist insurgence that were actively engaged in military conflict with the Burmese military regime (Lintner 1994; Smith 1991).

In 1974, the regime solidified its grip on power by introducing a constitution with a one-party political system and thereby formalised the military domination. General Ne Win, head of the *Tatmadaw* (Burmese for the army) and the self-proclaimed head of the home-guard government, became the undisputed leader of Burma's single political party, the *Burmese Socialist Program Party* (BSPP). After more than twenty-five years under the BSPP rule, Burma which was predicted to be one of Asia's economic power houses for its abundant natural resources and well-educated large population, became one of the least developed nations in the world in 1987 (UN annual economic and social report: 1987; Mya Maung 1991, p. 119 and Brandon 1997, p.12). Burma, once known as the rice bucket of the region and blessed with a wealth of natural resources, has more than 90 percent of its 56 million people living on less than \$1 a day. An estimated 75 percent live below the poverty line, and up to 10 percent of children die of malnutrition (See Altsean- Burma: research website: key issue- Burmese Uprising Redux- Aug 2009). In 2007, United Nation agencies operating inside the country reported "one in three children under five years old are suffering malnutrition, and less than 50 percent of children are able to complete their primary education" (Kingston 2008, p. 4).

## **5.2 The repression of independent, and establishment of state-sponsored, 'civil society'**

Following the coup in 1962, the military regime suppressed not only political opposition but also banned most private business activity and nationalised the country's economy. Civil society in Burma was systematically repressed (Steinberg 2000; South 2004, p. 244; Toe Zaw Latt 2005, p. 3). Independent media groups were stripped of and banned. Social and religious activities were forbidden.

Following the formalisation of a one-party political system in 1974, the regime established various mass membership organisations. The regime leaders claimed these were civil society organisations but they clearly were not independent. These mass membership organisations included youth leadership programs such as *Tae Za Lu Nye* (Tae Za youth) for five to ten years olds in schools; *Shay Saung Lu Nye* (Shay Saung youth) for ten to fifteen year olds; and *Lan Zin Lu Nye* (Lan Zin youth) for fifteen to twenty-five year olds. Workers' and peasants' councils (*Asiayone*) were also established across the country (Silverstine 1977, p. 110). Teachers were made to attend a summer political training camp known as *Phong Gyi* training where they were taught the doctrine of the *Burmese Socialist Program Party* (BSPP). The BSPP sought to win loyalty by ensuring that career promotions only went to those who joined the political party.

Anti-government spirit, however, was not completely wiped out. During the twenty-six year-long reign of the BSPP, from 1962 to 1988, no less than eight major uprisings or civil unrests took place (Lintner 1994, p. 355-372). Those uprisings were usually led by university students or monks, and all were met with severe military action (Htun Aung Kyaw 1997 and Lintner 1990). Rangoon University has a long history of anti-government movement since the British colonial time and it has always been a



centre for political critics and anti-government movements. Another important political resistance in Burma that was a critical force in the fight against British colonialism, came from the religious sector, the *Sangha* or monk community. Burma has nearly half-a-million monks, roughly equivalent in number to the armed forces (Toe Zaw Latt 2005, p. 12) and the monks occasionally stood up to the military rule. However, during the BSPP period, monk organisations were systematically controlled and suppressed (Steinberg 2000).

Another major fault line in the rise of a modern and repressive Burmese State is armed resistance by up to 14 ethnic groups. The most populous ethnic group is the Burmans and they dominate senior positions in the ruling regime's armed forces and other government agencies. Burma has over 100 ethnic groups, languages and dialects, and collectively Burma's ethnic minority groups comprised about forty per cent of the population (Ekeh and Smith 2007). The three largest of these 'minorities' the Mon, Shan and Arkanese had kingdoms of their own were historically rivals to the Burmese kings. Steinberg (1990) remarks

“when the pre-colonial pattern of centralised governance was carried into the contemporary era, it proved ill suited to the rising ethnic nationalisms of a multi-ethnic state, one in which the Burmans have a two-thirds majority but in which various minority groups have a struggled for autonomy or at time independence” (p. 14).

Burma has a deeply entrenched military culture and this represents a major political challenge to the Burmese democracy movement. Understanding militarism in Burma will enable us to see a root cause of the country's political crisis.

## 5.3 Military rule and barriers to democracy

### 5.3.1 Understanding militarism in Burma

Military culture in Burma is largely a result of the rise of the nationalist movement during the anti-colonial and independence movement in the early 1900s (Mg Mg Gyi 1993, p. 77). In order to understand the issue at stake, however, it is necessary first to describe where the *tatmadaw* or the military has come from. The military's attitude toward civil society and its keen interest in clinging onto power is reflected in the history of the struggle for independence.

The Burma army was born during the struggle for the national liberation under the British colonial rule. While the British focused on its war with Germany in Europe during the early Second World War, young Burmese nationalists and some leftist groups saw that as an opportunity to advance their anti-colonial movements. They reached out for help overseas. The Japanese imperial force which, at that time, sought to expand its base in Asia welcomed the young Burmese people's search for help in their anti-colonial efforts. With military training and assistance from the Japanese imperial forces, Burmese anti-colonial forces were transformed into an armed force called the *Burma Army*. Later the armed force was called the *Anti-fascist and People Freedom League*, AFPFL, as the army turned against the Japanese imperial forces occupying the country (Callahan 1997). The Japanese did not deliver the political goal that the Burmese revolutionaries fought for. The Burma Army, mostly formed with Burmese nationalist revolutionaries, transformed itself from a revolutionary to a national army within a short period of time during the struggle for independence. In March 1945, the AFPFL joined hands with the British armed forces and drove the Japanese imperial forces out of the country after three years of its brutal occupation. After the Japanese occupation, the young Burmese revolutionaries continued their efforts for independence in a more sophisticated political way to gain total independence from the British.

However, a major political trauma befell Burma just before it was granted independence. The architect of Burma's army and the widely admired national independence hero, General Aung San was assassinated by his political rivals one year before independence. Aung San's vision for the Burma Army as the protector of the people and his call for the army to stay out of politics were soon forgotten. The army grew quickly during the post-independence era from 1948 to 1958, the number of troops grew from 2000 to more than 100 000 (Smith 2002). Given its important role in the independence struggle, the Burmese military leaders assumed that it was their continued role to safe-guard the nation and this led to a belief they had the right and responsibility to intervene in the nation's affairs whenever they judged it to be necessary.

Although exact and reliable numbers of current Burma military force are not readily available figures like 400, 000 and 500, 000 are often cited, and it has been ranked in the top ten of the world and second largest army in Southeast Asia after Vietnam (Selth 2010; Beech 2007; Becker 2002).

As the size of the military growth, so the costs to maintain the military have increased drastically at the expense of the country's economy. The military spending has surpassed forty percent of the national income (Kingston 2008, p. 4 and ICG 2000, p. 12).

The ruling regimes have been able to justify their enormous investment in their military forces for two main reasons. The first is to do with managing political dissension and the second with ethnic rivalries. Immediately after independence from the British, the new government was not only facing civil war, but also internal conflicts within its own ranks. These internal conflicts paved the way to the military's intervention (Ansari 2010; Collier 2006). In March 1962 the military seized

power and the short-lived parliamentary democracy period from 1948- 1959 came to an end. Burma's hope for democracy has drifted even further ever since then. The military's obsession with military style national development and failure to see and acknowledge the role of civil society led it on the path of dictatorship.

Burma civil war broke out as soon as it gained independence in January 1948. It began with armed rebellion of Burma communist party, and the *Karen National Defence Organisation* (KNDO) later renamed as *Karen National Union* (KNU), and several major ethnic groups took up armed struggle. In the 1970s and 1980s, more than fourteen armed rebellious organisations were active in the country with some groups as strong as more than ten thousand troops (Lintner 1994). Although the scale of the civil war conflict was largely unknown as the country was kept closed to the outside world, the Burmese government spuriously increased military spending up to 40 per cent of the nation's budgets (Kingston 2008). The war with armed insurgencies in the country provided justification for expansion of the army (Ansari 2010; Collier 2006).

### *5.3.2 Army as modern men*

In an attempt to understand the motive and behaviors of armies in nations newly liberated from their colonial past, Finkle and Gable (1971) explain that armies in these countries were enamoured by modern Western military technology. In particular, the armies in countries which gained independence from European colonial powers after World War II were infatuated with the spirit of rapid technological development. The fact that these new armies in pre-industrial economies are modeled after industrial-based organisations has implications for their political roles (Ansari 2010; Collier 2006; Finkle & Gable 1971). One implication is that the armies have had to establish various specialised departments that require

skills that are either in short supply or non-existent in their countries. The Burmese army, for example, in addition to its engineer and signal corps has special sections for chemical warfare, psychological warfare and even a historical and archeological section which have no relevance in the Burmese society. All the new armies have attempted to introduce specialised training schools and advanced technologies of personnel management and procurement (Smith 1999; Callahan 1997). Consequently, the more intelligent and ambitious officers have had to be trained in industrial skills more advanced than those common to the civilian economy (Ansari 2010; Collier 2006; Finkle & Gable 1971, p. 279).

The Burma Army divorces itself from the challenges of the civil society and economy. It can strive to build the army to a standard that is on par with more industrialised countries, while the country's economy stagnates. Armies, with the above features, concentrate on creating an image of a 'good' soldier. In developing nations, army training is thus designed not only to be technologically effective but to create an impression for civilians of being the protector of the nation. But the double tragedy in Burma is that not only do military officers in Burma understand their role as 'protectors' through the lens of dictators, but they have earned a reputation for terrorizing as opposed to protecting civilians (Egreteau & Jagan 2008; Smith 2002; Silverstine 1977). Burma now has the largest number of child soldiers in the world (Becker 2002) and the army regularly rounds up civilians to serve as porters or human shields around soldiers in front lines (Thornton 2011).

This type of militarism has undoubtedly contributed to the development of authoritarianism in Burma. In the following section I will discuss factors other than militarism that hamper the development of democracy in Burma.

## 5.4 Four factors that hamper the development of democratic culture in Burma

The four factors are: (a) the military regime's practice of divisive politics, (b) an authoritarian and banking model of education, (c) conservative socio-cultural practices and political values, and (d) patron-client relationships.

### 5.4.1 *Divisive politics*

The role which the military forces in Burma has adopted, since independence, has been largely to deal with the country's internal political affairs and up to 40% of the country's meager income is spent on the military (Kingston 2008). The Burmese military has always been at war with the people, especially with the ethnic rebellious groups and communist insurgents. The war with the country's insurgents has been long-lasting, costly and indecisive. One of the military force's methods that has been used in this arduous civil war is the policy of *divide and rule* - using its enemy against enemy. This "*divide and rule*" method is applied not only to suppress armed groups but also effectively used in oppressing the ethnic population in war zones and the political opposition in urban cities (Smith 2000, p. 15).

The divide and rule practices have multiple effects. They not only serve the interest of the generals but also foster conflict among the opposition groups. The regime's most obvious divisive political strategy has focused on the racial and religious different groups. Burma's modern politics is marked by the profound exclusion and marginalisation of non-Burman ethnic groups, which comprise 40 per cent of the country's 56 million people (Ekeh and Smith 2007). The non-Burman ethnic groups see this exclusion as a political act against their rights and very existence. The regime portrays ethnic diversity in the country as a form of weakness and a sign of disunity.

Dr. Chao-Tzang Yawngghwe (2001), a respected ethnic Shan scholar and political leader, states

“the conflict is political because it is both about ethnic identity and rights, about democracy and equal opportunity, and about building nation and state.... It has much to do with problems arising from the application of nation-building formulae by the state or by a set of power holders....” (P. 21).

The politics of divide and rule has its roots in the British colonial rule and the struggle for the independence. The British applied a similar policy, creating divisions between the ethnic Burman and non-Burman, to maintain their control over the population. The Burmese independence movement which began in the 1920s with religious-based anti-colonial and nationalist movements was led by young university students and well educated middle-class professionals. Along with the spread of Marxism in the early twentieth century, the number of young university student grew and they quickly moved to take up the leading role in the struggle for independence. These young Burman student activists became political and military leaders in the post-independence period.

During the British rule, some ethnic groups, especially the Karen, formed a close relationship with the British and many served in the British Colonial army and worked in the health sector. But this contributed to Burman anti-colonial nationalists forming a view that ethnic groups such as the Karen were too pro-British and mistrusted ethnic groups. During the occupation of the *Japanese Imperial Army* (1942-1945), Burman nationalist forces with their Japanese allies were involved in a series of bloody clashes with ethnic groups who stayed loyal to the British (ICG 2003, p.2) particularly with the Karen in the Irrawaddy delta areas.

And the military coup in 1962 that was predominantly led by Burman military men exacerbated the conflict between the majority Burman and non-Burman ethnic

groups. This continuing conflict has dragged the country into one of the world's longest civil wars. Burma's civil wars which began in 1948 have continued to fuel divisions among various groups and have given the successive regimes justification to use force in their oppressive and authoritarian rule. In the eyes of the military rulers, unity has to be "*unitary and one*" and any individual or group with different idea to the regime has to be eliminated in the name of national solidarity and unity. The regime's "*divide and rule*" policy fosters fear and distrust among the population. Toe Zaw Latt (2005) a prominent Burmese activist observes that;

"the politicization of ethnic differences in Burma produces ethnic based conflicts and has prolonged civil war and paranoid ethno-nationalisms that have left communities living in a state of mistrust and fear" (p.2).

The ethnic diversity in Burma, instead of being seen as an asset, has instead been constructed as a source of implacable conflict.

One of the '*divide and rule*' tactics used in the frontier areas of ethnic communities is the '*four-cut*' strategy employed by the *Tatmadaw* since mid -1960s against the ethnic nationalist armies. The aim of the four-cut strategy is to weaken the ethnic armed resistance groups. In this strategy, the *Tatmadaw* or the army de-populates its operation areas by forcing people to move away from their home into areas controlled by the *Tatmadaw* to cut the rebel groups off from the four main links of supply (food, funds, intelligence and recruits) (Fink 2001 p. 125; ICG 2003 p. 3). Villagers are fined, tortured or killed in retaliation when *Tatmadaw* soldiers are killed by the ethnic armies. This, of course, is deeply divisive with the intention of inciting fear among ethnic minority villagers who refuse to co-operate with the ethnic armies. To further humiliate the local indigenous groups, the regime also imports large numbers of non-local population to ethnic minority areas in order make them become minorities even in their own districts (Fink 2001, p. 120).



The same divisive tactics are applied to suppress urban-based opposition. People are made to believe that they are constantly under surveillance of the military intelligence, and this leads the population to live in fear and distrust of one another. The divisive structure has reached the level of not only group to group but also person to person. Christina Fink's (2001) study of life under Burmese military rule compares the military intelligence to *nats* or the spirit that always keeping you under their surveillance. One of the interviewees in her study said that *"you have to respect, fear and appease them (members of the army), because otherwise they may just show up and make life very uncomfortable for you"* (Fink 2001, p. 129). While pro-democracy activists are imprisoned, people who link with the activists such as close friends and families are also punished or harassed. Burma's jails currently hold more than two thousand political prisoners (see: "Altsean-Burma: research website: key issue- Human Rights", "The Irrawaddy: research website"; <http://www.aappb.org/>; and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11741612> ).

#### *5.4.2 An authoritarian and banking model of education*

The education system established under British colonial rule was openly elitist and disregarded the interests of ordinary people. The British set up a small-scale college education system that was to train some Burmese so they could fill vacancies in colonial administration and business positions.

The 1920s were, however, a period of transition for Burma. The Rangoon University Act of 1920 which was intended to create the University of Rangoon from an amalgamation of the existing Rangoon and Judson College sparked anger in Burmese nationalists who saw the Act even further limiting education to the

privileged few (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, p. 125). The British proposed that the standard of academic requirements should be raised and that the university should be of a residential character. The Act was boycotted by young nationalist students and supported by the general public. One of the results of the student movement against the Act was the establishment of National Schools in different parts of the country. These schools were set up with funds raised from the public (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, p. 126). These National Schools reinstated the importance of Burmese language and culture. The advancement of Burmese language, as a result of the National School movement, later served as an important vehicle in the anti-colonial movement.

Education is highly valued in Burmese society and plays an important part in shaping moral foundations and political values. After the military coup in March 1962, the military regime introduced a one party political system with the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP). This was nominally structured after the model of the single-party system of the *Volkskammer* (German Democratic Republic) and established a People's Assembly or *Phithu Hluttaw* in Burmese (Maung 1991, p. 145-146). The country was named the Socialist Republic of the Union Burma.

The country's education system under the *Burma Socialist Program Party's* (BSPP) rule, 1962-1988, was solely designed to serve BSPP's political goals, and the objective was to build a Burmese socialist model. It should be noted that socialism was part of the aim of parliament democracy government period (1949-1959), but only when the military regime came to power did socialism become the country's official ideology.

Dr. Maung Zarni, a prominent figure in activism for Burmese democracy and who is currently a research fellow at the London School of Economics, observed in his thesis:

“... despite its educational policy pronouncement the discursive construction of the traditional notion of the “student”, “educator”, and “citizen”, and the selective reworkings of Burmese cultures, traditions and pasts, the BSPP government was, in the final analysis, preoccupied with the political, and to a lesser extent, ideological control of the Burmese educational community. In BSPP schooling, the extensive employment of the intelligence apparatus and the use of coercion became the most significant features in Burma’s education” (1998 p. ii).

Despite the BSPP’s commitment to ‘new socialism’; the teaching and learning methods in Burma’s education model were largely built on the British colonial education system that was established in 1866 (U Than Oo 1999 p. 21). Little has changed in the teaching and learning methods since. Under the BSPP regime, although education was aimed at physical and moral development of students, in reality it was geared towards indoctrination (Han Tin 2008). The schools placed significant emphasis on teaching military instruction, moral and science education. Little value was placed on developing students’ skills in critical analysis and independent thinking. Han Tin observes that “*the social roles of teachers and students are drawn so rigidly that expecting the latter to participate in dialogue and decision making is often deemed inappropriate*” (2008 p. 114). Technical skills education and training was valued over critical thinking skills. Exams focused on memory based tests and encouraged competition for individual advancement over team and collective work skills.

School textbooks were used as a tool to reinforce the regime’s propaganda. The curricula were developed by BSPP officials with little input from teachers and students. Re-writing the history of the country has always been a key project to make the history fit in the military’s claim. One of the most important moral values under the BSPP education was loyalty. Loyalty in Burmese culture implies absolute acceptance without question. In the BSPP period, government leaders including the party leader Gen Ne Win often talked about ‘*lu gOUNg, lu daw*’, meaning a good, or loyal, person is better than a clever one (Fink 2001 p. 183). As a result schooling was

a system of producing loyal and compliant citizens who did not question the ruling regime.

The BSPP also invoked a narrow ideology of nationalism in planning a modern education system. This was, for example, reflected in a Burman supremacist outlook and the choice of languages used in schooling. Burmese and English languages are the only recognised languages in schools. English as a second language was, however, not keenly encouraged because the regime saw it as the language of colonialism. The focus on Burmese language in the education sector leads to discrimination and marginalisation of non-Burmese ethnic groups. Ethnic minority teachers have particularly suffered, because they are forced to teach a curriculum which almost completely excludes their histories and cultures (Fink 2001, p. 176).

Racial discrimination and exclusion is a common practice. In chapter seven, I discuss my own experiences as a Shan ethnic boy in Burman dominated schools in the BSPP era. Non-indigenous groups such as Chinese and Indian descendants also face discrimination and exclusion from the education system (Thein Lwin 2003, p. 23) and have been banned from studying in some professional institutions such as medical schools.

Schooling is narrowly focused on the development of science knowledge in students rather than a balanced and broadly based curriculum (Thein Lwin 2003, p. 58-59). There are two reasons that help explain the BSPP regime's desire to put technological and science knowledge above arts and social sciences. One is the desire to modernise the nation with the advancement of modern science and technology. As most key members of the BSPP were made up of ex-military men, they were only familiar with the 'military-style development'. The consequence of favouring science and technology over arts and social subjects has not only weakened understanding of social and cultural diversity in society but also strengthened the society's

hierarchical structure. The classification of academic grades was also used to distinguish between and discriminate against arts over science students. For instance, exam results were segregated into “A” and “B”. Students on “A” list could study science subjects in their high school and “B” list students could study only arts subjects. The result of this segregation was to down-grade the importance of arts and social science subjects such as history, philosophy, psychology, sociology and so on. The vast majority of brighter students opted to follow the science routes (Thein Lwin 2003, p. 60).

Another reason is the government’s unwillingness to allow critical thinking to develop in students. The regime’s idea of unity is a *unitary union*. The regime tolerates no diverse opinions and beliefs which they see as being unfit for the unity of the nation. In the BSPP education system, students learn everything to be ‘black’ and ‘white’ with little tolerance of differences.

The “top-down” education system also reinforced gender inequality. The privileging of technology and science tends to favour boys over girls in schools. Thein Naing (2005), a pro-democracy educationist on the Thai-Burma border, notes in his *“Diversity and Multicultural Education”* that the use of education to serve political goals only diminishes women’s role and produces a large gender gap in education. Despite a state-sponsored free education system under the BSPP rule, male literacy rates in 1995 were 88 percent while women only stood at 69 percent (Thein Naing 2005, p. 21).

One Burmese scholar living abroad remarked after returning from a visit to her birth country in the first time for several years;

“ ...we have a much clearer picture of daily life for people inside Burma—falling standards of living, precarious health...educational levels dropping rather than raising, and many people can no longer even afford to buy fish or fish paste (Burmese

traditional basic food that usually eat with rice) to eat with their rice. Intellectuals are extremely concerned about the declining levels of education and system of learning which allows no room for critical thinking. People are worried that the Burmese will not be ready for democracy, should they get the chance for it, because they are not trained to challenge or question others but only to follow orders" (Maureen Aung-Thwin 1997, p. 43).

#### *5.4.3 Socio-cultural practices that discourage democracy*

Democracy is not merely an institution but essentially a way of life. In other words, the degree of the effectiveness of democracy in a society depends on its citizens' social behaviors and attitude toward one another and their government. For a democratic society to function effectively, not only is there a need to have democratic institutions but it is also vital to have its citizens understand democratic principles and practice them in their everyday life. John Dewey (1937) remarks:

"After democratic political institution were normally established, beliefs and ways of looking at life and of acting that originated when men and women were externally controlled and subjected to arbitrary power, persisted in the family, the church, business and the school, and experience shows that as long as they persist there, political democracy is not secure" (p. 459).

Mya Maung (1991), a Burmese economics professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, asserts that contemporary Burma is:

"a traditional society in which ways of behavior remained unchanged from generation to generation.... with respect to irrationality or authoritarianism, and that both civilian and military personalities were formed in the same traditional socio-cultural mold"(p.92).

In this section, I will describe and discuss Burmese beliefs, attitude and socio-cultural practices that have negative impact on the development of democracy in Burma.

Firstly I will examine the attitude of Burmese toward their government or the ruling elites. In this context I am employing a definition of 'Burmese' to include Burmans and the 13 other major ethnic groups in the country. The government in Burmese traditional doctrine is identified as the enemy of the people. The Burmese traditionally believe that there are five natural enemies to be wary of. The government comes at the top, followed by (b) fire, (c) water (in the form of flood and storms), (d) thieves and (e) malevolent people (Fink 2001, p. 29; Maung Maung Gyi 1983, p.155). This folklore belief explains that even the most democratic form of government authority is likely to encounter mistrust among many traditionally-minded people. The military's unforgiving oppressive methods and the lack of opportunity for people to participate in the political process have only compounded this belief.

Burmese, in general, associate power with the person rather than the structure of the institution. This perception has its origins in religious concepts and traditional attitudes. Steinberg (1990) observes that:

"power in Burma has historically been viewed in personal terms. Throughout recorded Burmese history, loyalty was to the person of the ruler not to the throne. Allegiance was rarely paid to ideology or abstract ideals, except perhaps to the principles of Theravada Buddhism that pervade Burman society" (P. 15).

Power is considered finite and highly personalised. This means that the role of ideological, legal, or institutional structures in Burma have little impact in governance practice. Steinberg (2000) explains,

"in Burma such perceptions still have an important influence on contemporary leaders. When power and loyalty are personalized, factionalism becomes common, with highly developed patron-client relationship prevalent" ( p. 96).

Related to this perception of power and attitude to the government is the *patron-client relationship* as a socio-cultural practice which prevails in Burmese society. Patron-client relationships are problematic in a democracy and this practice has persisted in Burmese society. In the following section, I will examine the nature of this patron-client relationship in Burmese society.

#### 5.4.4 *The undemocratic exercise of power through patron-client relationships*

One of the most undemocratic practices that supports a deeply entrenched social hierarchy in Burma is the practice of *patron-client relationship*. Social relationships in contemporary Burma are characterised by rigid social hierarchy, inequality and obsequious relationships. Chris Cusano (1999 p. 2) who describes this as a *patron-client system*, asserts that in addition to mechanisms of state control, such as the military force, the police, repressive laws and an unfair legal system; dictatorship also depends on a corresponding social system which governs how people perceive and treat one another. In Burma, this system is a pervasive social code prescribing the freedom and privileges of nearly all members of society. The nature of patron-client relationship is a “give and take” relationship in the form of “protection” and “security”. The two categories of social actors, patrons and clients, relate through the exchange of tribute and political favour. Cusano refers to a hierarchical order which shapes the basis of a patron-client relationship where ‘little’ people must find a patron and offer respect, gifts and service in order to ensure favour and security. ‘Big’ (more powerful) people on the other hand are keen to build up their clientele in order to maintain or extend their influence (Cusano 1999, p. 2).

In traditional Burmese society a person’s identity and standing was tied up with occupation or rank. In contemporary Burma little has changed. To the Burmese “*awza* (authority), *gon* (prestige) and *ah-na* (power) reside in a person not in the law.



The traditional social hierarchical order begins with a *pongyi* (monk), who comes first in order of importance, or as a *min* (high-ranking government official), a *bo* (military officer), a *thu-te* (rich man), a *se-ne* (lawyer), a *saya* (teacher), a *kon-the* (merchant), a *sa-ye* (secretary or clerk), an *ah-loke-ta-mar* (laborer), or *taung-tu-le loke* or *le-the-mar* (peasant) (Maung Maung Gyi 1983, p. 171). Since a person is not viewed as a neutral member of a society who has the right to be free and is protected by rights, the social status of a person, which may be high or low depending on his occupation and personal wealth, respect and attention are regulated according to the social scale (Maung Maung Gyi 1983, p. 171). The military rulers understand this mechanism well and have promoted the role of military and its officers as important members of the society. Military personnel are promoted to all important occupations and professions in the society. Ex-military men are given opportunities to take up important civil and economic positions and status. Military men are now viewed as persons who have authority, prestige and power over the rest of the society. The military also demands respect and full co-operation of the people.

The patron-client relationship flourishes in a society where there is no equality in property, status and power. The more pronounced the hierarchy, the more obvious the relationship is. The social hierarchy is fundamental in Burmese culture and is both expressed and reinforced in a variety of cultural institutions, including Theravada Buddhism, the national education system, and the military forces (Cusano 1999).

The patron-client relationship can be seen even at the basic level of Burmese social strata. At the village level where professionalism is not clearly defined, the hierarchical order goes as follows: the *phongyis* (monks), the village elders, and the *thugyis* (headmen). This social hierarchical order also represents the order of the *awza* (authority) (Maung Maung Gyi 1983, p. 164). Patron-client relationships are an important function of the social hierarchy system which helps sustain authoritarian

rule by rewarding loyalty and providing security for those who obey. For instance, the headman of a village would be held responsible for organising the village to meet the demands of the *tatmadaw* or the army. The demand could be for porters to carry military equipment for the army in the front line, or food from villagers for the army, or villagers to provide hospitality to army officers. The village headman generally faces punishment if he fails to meet the demands. The village headman then, with no choice, compels his own villagers to comply to the demand.

As long as the patron-client relationship practices remain strong, social and more equal distribution of resources will remain weak and unable to provide fair and equal treatment under the law. People have to seek protection and security from local personalities instead of government authorities. As a result of these patron-client relationships, people generally become less outspoken about matters that do not directly concern with them. People tend to leave the welfare of their communities (or their country) to the people who are more powerful than them. As a consequence, people become more conformist and less critical about matters even those which affect them a lot. In other words, democracy is effectively silenced as there is no constitution that guarantees and protects fundamental rights to all citizens, and individuals can not practice their rights. The ruling Burmese military regime understands how the patron-client relationship functions and knows very well how to keep the population silent under its rules. Fink reports

“by constantly humiliating people such as making regular and sometimes arbitrary demand on the citizens and checking on over-night visitors and the residents against the household list, eventually people don’t even think about protesting” (2001, p.121).

At the individual level, the patron-client relationship has a dramatic effect on the morale of the people and their power to resist. Raymond Tint Way, a Burmese psychiatrist who now lives abroad, said:

“people have regressed under military rule. They have become more dependent. They have to endure so much hardship that they have become “immunized” to it. They can handle and cope with it. There are positive and negative consequences: they survive, but they don’t overthrow the regime. They have learned helplessness. They see no point in resisting. People are treated like children who must obey their elders. Moreover, since 1988 the military has encouraged people to greet them with a prayerful gesture of respect formerly reserved for kings and monks...” (Fink 2001, p. 122).

This patron-client system produces both helplessness and doubt, and it paralyzes life; in order to live, man tries to escape from freedom and becomes negative about freedom. Eric Fromm (1942) asserts that people find new and fragile security at the expense of sacrificing the integrity of their individual selves (p. 221). Patron-client relationships reproduce a culture of fear. People’s ability to question has been seriously crippled by this culture.

The nature of political challenges which exists in Burmese society discussed above brings to light that the absence of democracy in Burma is rooted in the oppressive and divide and rule military rule, top-down spoon-feeding education system as much as in the socio-cultural practices of people’s everyday lives. One can only wonder how and where Burmese can break free from these layers of oppression in their struggle for democracy.

In this chapter I argue that the Burmese pro-democracy movement should focus not only on bringing about institutional and regime change but also socio-cultural change. Democracy is a way of life and so it is necessary to understand the people’s teaching and learning experiences in their everyday life. In this thesis I specifically look at the experience of teaching and learning democracy among members of Burmese grassroots communities in Thailand through the lens of popular education.

## 5.5 The people's movement for democracy in 1988 and onward

The economy under the *Burmese Socialist Program Party* (BSPP) rule went from bad to worse. The BSPP's centrally controlled economic system produced no progress but high levels of corruption and mismanagement. State owned factories could not produce enough to meet basic needs for the population (Maung 1991). At the same time, the cost of supporting the army's campaign against insurgent groups put enormous pressure on the country's economy (Lintner 1994). Burma, a resource rich country, evidently suffers from mis-management under the military regime. The situation in Burma today is not much different to the situation under the BSPP era. The UNDP's 2011 Human Development Indicators placed Burma at 149 as one of the lowest human development in the world (UNDP 2011 <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MMR.html> - accessed 28/9/2012).

In 1988, a nation-wide democracy uprising led by students erupted. People from all walks of life took to the streets and demanded political reform and democracy. General Ne Win resigned from his supreme post as the chairman of the BSPP and the party was dis-established, but members of the old regime remained closely involved in the politics. However, the ruling socialist regime failed to acknowledge the political reality. The army stepped in and brutally suppressed the peaceful democracy movements. More than eight thousand people were said to have been killed by members of the *Tatmadaw* during the peak period, March - September 1988, of the uprising. On 18<sup>th</sup> September 1988, the military regime declared martial law, staged a military coup and named a new military clique as the *State Law and Order Restoration Council* (SLORC). The leaders of the democracy movement were hunted down and many were arrested and jailed. The ray of hope for democracy was abruptly obliterated.

Several thousand students and activists fled urban cities to take sanctuary on the borders with neighboring countries where armed ethnic resistance groups are active. The Thai-Burma border, where the stronghold of the *Karen National Union* and many other armed ethnic groups are active was the most popular destination for students and pro-democracy activists fleeing from urban areas for fear of persecution. Students re-grouped in the border areas and continued their struggle for democratic change. In 1989, a student army called the *All Burma Student Democratic Front* (ABSDF) was born in the jungle of Burma and based along the Thai-Burma border. The ABSDF, at its peak, had more than seven thousand members. Due largely to internal conflicts, many members of the ABSDF later took asylum in Thailand and then migrated to Western countries (Lintner 1989; Lang 2002).

In an attempt to convince the population that the country was heading toward a democratic system, in May 1990, the SLORC held general elections for a democratic transition. More than two hundred political parties registered in the general elections. The military regime backed a political party, the *Union Unity Party*, which was made up of several ex-members of the BSPP, and they expected it to win. However, they mis-calculated and to the regime's surprise, the majority of votes went to the *National League for Democracy* (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi. But the military regime then ignored the election results. Many political parties were banned and elected representatives were arrested and jailed.

## **5.6 Refugees, Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and the reality of cease-fire agreements**

Despite the regime's constant claims of success in its economic development strategies the country's GDP is one of the lowest in the world. As the economy is

going from bad to worse, millions of people have left the country to find jobs in neighbouring countries. Aung Thwin notes that chronic unemployment in Burma and the lack of a domestic manufacturing base and a viable economic strategy has forced Burmese to seek menial jobs aboard (1997, p. 41). The situation described by Aung Thwin in 1997 continues to this day. Most people, as they could not get official traveling documents such as passports, have left the country illegally. Thailand has become the most popular destination for most Burmese illegal migrant workers. More than two million Burmese migrant workers are in Thailand alone (Lubeigt 2007; TBBC 2008).

While economic difficulty and poverty is a driving factor for migration, there is another large group of the population who are forced to leave their homeland out of fear for their safety. Although little details are known to the outside world, Burma's ongoing civil war has become the cause of the largest population displacement and influx of refugees in the region of Southeast Asia. More than half a century of civil war has left behind about 500,000 internally displaced population (IDP) inside the country (Lang and Banki 2007; TBBC 2008; Thornton 2011). Several hundred thousand Burmese refugees remain in neighboring countries. Burmese refugee camps are in Thailand, Bangladesh and India. While some refugees are recognised by their host countries and the *United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees* (UNHCR), many are regarded as unwelcome guests and are not recognised. Refugees who are not recognised usually become illegal migrant workers and live with the daily risk of deportation. More than 150,000 refugees are estimated to be in Thailand (TBBC 2008; Banki 2009).

In the 1990s a series of ceasefire arrangements – known as “*gentlemen's agreements*” were made between the army and several armed insurgent groups. This included the most powerful armed resistance group, the Burmese Communist Party (BCP). Brigadier General Khin Nyint, who was seen as a moderate and reformist military

leader, negotiated cease fire agreements with several armed groups. But the ceasefire arrangements, do not necessarily guarantee sustainable peace and development. Major displacement of civilian populations has continued to occur after ceasefire deals in several parts of ethnic minority areas. Ashley South (2007 p. 56) describes how the “state-society conflict-induced displacement” which occurred after ceasefire arrangements was caused by military occupation or development activities such as land confiscation by the *Tatmadaw* for infrastructural development. Families and communities in many areas lose their lands or have been displaced, as a result of increased resource extraction such as logging, and jade and gold mining, and infrastructure development. The Burma army’s expansion into previously contested areas also causes population displacement as the army would seize land and displace communities to secure militarily strategic positions (South 2004, p. 239). Facing limited availability of productive land, the lack of education and health services and food security, local people choose to look for jobs in Thailand. More details on ceasefire agreements and related problems will be discussed in chapter four.

### **5.7 Lack of public space and the emergence of cross-border civil society**

I will turn my discussion to public space or civil society in Burma and the emergence of cross-border civil society. I believe, along with other commentators, namely David Steinberg (2007), Toe Zaw Latt (2005), Jasmin Lorch (2006), Dhammar Vappa (2004) and Ashley South (2004), that a strong and independent civil society is essential for a sustainable democracy. Civil society is the locus for democratic learning processes which in turn are a pre-condition for democratization (Gosewinkel 2005). But the pervasive oppressive system in Burma since 1962, has wiped out space for an independent and vibrant civil society in Burma. There are some surviving civil society networks but their purpose is confined to traditional religious and social

activities (Steinberg 2000). While public space is lacking inside the country, a new form of civil society networks has emerged in Burma's frontier areas in the last decade. This form of civil society has been shown to embrace democracy and social movements. I term these civil society networks as *cross-border civil society*.

Civil society is one of the key concepts in this study. In chapter four I present an in-depth discussion about the concept of cross-border civil society, and its relevance to the Burmese democracy movement. In the next chapter, I describe the emergence of cross-border civil society in the Thai-Burma border areas and in Thailand, and then theorise how adult education in cross-border civil society could foster democracy in Burma.

## **5.8 Burmese opposition groups and their focus on regime change, not cultural change**

After twenty years of struggle for democratic change, since the 1988 nation-wide democracy uprising, Burmese opposition groups now face not only a ruthless military dictator but also the failure of their own grand strategy in bringing about democratic change. For the past two decades, Burmese opposition groups' strategy has focused on elite-level regime change and relied heavily on international pressure. The opposition groups with their international allies have put their efforts towards exposing the regime's record of human rights abuses and lobbied for trade sanctions and diplomatic pressure. However, this strategy has had little impact on the regime. The Burmese military junta has remained in total control of the country for the last twenty years and survived the suspension of economic aid, the ban of investment and trade sanctions, the imposition of an arms embargo and ban on visas for senior military officials (Callahan 2000; South, 2006). The lack of political progress in Burma has frustrated the population. The opposition groups inside the



country are tightly controlled. Those based in Thailand or other countries have achieved little to bring about democratic reform in Burma.

Growing up under authoritarian rule, most members of opposition groups themselves have never experienced democracy in practice. It can be observed that factionalism, lack of genuine unity and autocratic decision-making are common among the opposition groups. Many share the vision that democratic change will be achieved by abolishing the ruling military regime and setting up a government that is accountable to the people. This thinking is reflected in the opposition groups' work which focuses chiefly on regime change, and has given little attention to the role of common people and their potential power to bring about change. Fink (2001) observed that members of the democracy movement find it difficult to develop the openness and tolerance required of a democratic culture. She quoted a student-journalist activist who writes:

"the idea that democracy is a way of life that you must practice in your daily life, in your organisation, and in your community is pretty far removed from our practice, attitude and behavior". "Rigid thinking, hierarchical power structures and a culture of mistrust have characterised not only the military regime but, in many cases, the opposition group as well" (Fink 2001, p. 253).

Burmese democracy leader and 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi foresaw the challenges facing the Burmese democracy movement and she says;

"A revolution which aims merely at changing official policies and institutions with a view to an improvement in material conditions has little chance of genuine success. Without a revolution of the spirit, the force which produced the iniquities of the old order would continue to be operative, posing a constant threat to the process of reform and regeneration. It is not enough merely to call for freedom, democracy and human rights. There has to be a united determination to persevere in the struggle, to make sacrifice in the name of enduring truths, to resist the corrupting influence of desire, ill will, ignorance and fear" (Aung San Suu Kyi 1991, p. 183).

Aung San Suu Kyi urged members of the democracy movement to critically look at their own weaknesses and work for the development of critical consciousness. However, after twenty years democratic movement, her call for a deeper democratic transformation, unfortunately, has not been answered by the opposition.

After more than half a century of authoritarian and military rule, the Burmese have not only suffered poverty and injustices but also grown to live with a culture of cynicism, fear and passivity. Members of opposition groups are no exception. In recent decades, many younger members in the opposition groups themselves have questioned the deficiency of the movement. A prominent young member of the opposition groups and a political analyst, Aung Naing Oo, based in Thailand writes *"the opposition groups have been limited by relentless restrictions from the junta, their own self-interest, and above all, the lack of critical thinking and analysis"* (Aung Naing Oo 2002, p 34).

In summary, the Burmese democracy movement has reached a point that it should be more critically analyse its own grand strategy to bring about democratic change. The nature of consciousness not only among opposition activists but also ordinary residents should be examined in closer detail. In some ways the nature of their consciousness compares to what Paulo Freire terms *'naive consciousness'* - which keeps men's understanding far from reality and produces sectarian irrationality (Freire 1974). A person with naive consciousness has a *'magic'* understanding of the reality he is in and when faced with opposite idea, responds with emotional irrationality rather than critical analysis. Popular education is about developing critical consciousness and, in turn, critical action (Freire 1974, p. 18). In the following section I briefly discuss popular education and its relevance to the Burmese democracy movement.

## 5.9 Popular education

My attempt to understand the absence of democracy and possibility for the return of democracy leads me to look at what lies beneath the smile of Burmese people who generally appear to take life as it comes. The closest description of the situation in Burma today can be found in the classic novel *"Nineteen Eight-Four"* which is regarded as the 20th century's greatest fictional commentary on totalitarian regimes that control the masses through propaganda and government institutions. Its author George Orwell whose real name was Eric Arthur Blair served as a colonial police official in Burma (1922-27). Orwell reflects on his experiences with the Burmese in his first novel *"Burmese Days"* (1934). Orwell describes how ordinary Burmese learnt to survive under the British colonial system. Emma Larkin (2007), a British journalist who visited Burma to experience for herself the trail of Orwell's *"Burmese Days"*, describes an Orwellian situation in Burma in her *"Finding George Orwell in Burma"*. She compares Burma's modern slavery and human rights abuses with scenarios in Orwell's book *"1984."* Larkin describes the Burmese population being subjected to total control by their rulers, fearing to speak up, take action and to even complain. She observes the Burmese people believe every one in three persons in the country is a spy for the military regime. The Burmese regime as the Big Brother in *"1984"* is well and alive in Burma.

More than five decades of authoritarian rule has not only reduced the Burmese to being one of the poorest people in the world but also turned them into objects that can be easily manipulated and controlled, and many have come to live with their *"internalised fear"*. Internalised fears are difficult to detect and when detected are not easy to address. Unpacking internalised fear is concerned with examining and decoding social relationships with the world around us. Often what we fear most is also what we most want. People generally seek approval of others by making themselves indifferent to others. The concept of *"automaton conformity"* in Eric

Fromm's "*The Fear of Freedom*" (1942) suggests that people are alienated because they fear that being different. It is easy to believe the majority is always right, and more comforting to conform with the majority but in doing so we become an enemy of our own existence. People in Burma were the subject of absolute monarch rules and the British colonial rule in the past and have lived under a series of dictators in their modern history. Under those circumstances, they have learnt to live with a lack of or limited freedom and have accepted the situation as a normal life. With this flawed contentment with their lives people have little motivation to make changes of their life pattern, especially, when it comes to challenging the authority or dominating power. In other words, people have learnt to live with their "internalised fear" to make sure they remain in their groups. Foucault's notion of disciplinary power also supports this concept; people are exercising a perverted form of agency on themselves to ensure they stay in line (Brookfield 2005, p. 52).

In search for an answer for a break-through in the Burmese's Orwellian situation, I look to popular education that is known as *pedagogy of the oppressed*. The essence of popular education is making the oppressed realise their capacity to address and assume power.

Popular education or teaching and learning democracy in Burmese cross-border civil society organisations in Thailand is about the struggle for freedom from fear, self-doubt and delusion. I observed teaching and learning democracy in the form of informal and non-formal education programs for Burmese community activists and migrant workers in Thailand. I choose to look at informal adult education rather than formal training programs for the very reason that the ability and power of Burmese grassroots communities to contribute to the democracy movement is immeasurable, but the existence of the grassroots power has not been acknowledged and given opportunity to develop. My thesis is about bringing this potential power

to light and establishing credibility for the long neglected education for emancipatory learning in the everyday life of the oppressed Burmese.

The following chapter will discuss and theorise the emergence of cross-border civil society on Thai-Burma border areas. Cross-border civil society represents a prospect of hope in the struggle for democracy in Burma. Although in a small scale, it is a symbol of the return of democracy.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Cross-border civil society and the struggle for democracy in Burma

#### 6. 1 The nature and importance of civil society

##### *6.1.1 Why is civil society important for the Burmese democracy struggle?*

The struggle for democracy in Burma continues to be a long haul and the current ruling military regime since taking over power in September 1988, has made no attempt to relinquish their dictatorial hold on power. Although the regime held a general election in November 2010 and has subsequently created a military-civilian governing system, no real political reform has taken place and the top military clique remains in total control of the country. In 2011, in an attempt to gain recognition of the international community and reduction of economic sanctions imposed on Burma because the country's records of serious human rights violations and oppression. The new military-civilian government has begun releasing some members of opposition from prisons, eased press and internet censorship and introduced more liberal labour laws. Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's democracy icon was freed from house arrest and invited by the President of the new civil-military government to re-enter politics (Murdoch 2011). Democratic countries have cautiously welcomed the latest changes and urged the new government to further prove its genuine commitment to democratic reform and cease hostility toward armed ethnic groups that are calling for equality (Hartcher 2011). Burmese opposition groups now face not only a well-entrenched military regime but also the

added challenge of struggling for genuine democracy in the face of the regime's duplicitous discourse of democracy.

Due to dramatic changes in the nature of the Burmese democracy movement in the last decade, the difference between opposition groups and civil society organisations is often unclear. For the purpose of definition, as discussed in chapter one, I define "opposition groups" as those organisations that are overtly political; and so they include political parties, organisations and armed insurgent groups. Civil society organisations conversely do not seek to directly participate in the political decision-making processes of the State, but confine themselves to traditional activities, religious, social, welfare, humanitarian, local self-help and advocacy purposes.

But I acknowledge that a number of Burmese civil society organisations in Thai-Burma-border areas, for instance women's and environmental organisations (O'Kane 2005), do see themselves as part of the opposition movement. They seek to influence political organisations' policies and call for political reforms. However, these civil society organisations do not seek power for themselves.

The opposition's strategy to bring about democratic change, for the past twenty years, has relied heavily on garnering international community pressure and continued insurgent warfare. The Burmese military junta, however, has remained in firm control of the country surviving the suspension of economic aid, bans on investment, trade sanctions, the imposition of an arms embargo and ban on visas for senior military officials over the past twenty years (Callahan 2000; South 2004). Burmese pro-democracy opposition groups have received support from sympathetic nations, and the United Nations has offered assistance to pave the way out of the political deadlock. However, these efforts have not been able to bring about democratic reform in Burma. Scholars and observers agree that civil society in

Burma is weak and this has been seen as a major hold up in Burma's democratic transformation (Mutebi 2000; South 2004; Toe Zaw Lat 2005; Lorch 2006 and Steinberg 2007). Civil society has been recognised as a key player in bringing democracy to former authoritarian countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America (Dhammar Vappa 2004 p. 43).

Although civil society is still weak in the context of Burmese democracy movement, there has been a significant shift in the idea of bringing about change and development in Thai-Burma border areas. A number of Burmese opposition groups have turned into or endorse civil society organisations. As a result, civil society organisations and networks that are free from the control of the state have emerged and they have changed the nature of the opposition movement. In the Burmese opposition movement there has been a shift away from traditional resistance methods to being a more social change-oriented movement.

I define these civil society networks on the Thai-Burma as cross-border civil society. I will discuss the emergence of cross-border civil society in more detail in the second part of this chapter. The emergence of cross-border civil society calls for a critical review in the existing ideas and strategies to bring about democratic change in the Burmese opposition movement. There is no doubt that democracy in practice has been weak among the opposition groups (Kanbawza Win 2009; Simbulan 2007; South 2004). Furthermore, the idea that democratic change will seamlessly come about by removing the military regime remains deeply entrenched among the leadership of the movement. The trouble with this idea is that it leads the opposition parties to focus on elite level change and pay little attention to bottom-up change with active participation and involvement of the grassroots. A premise behind my thesis is that when people band together for a common purpose to pursue the interests of their



communities through group activities and peaceful ways, effective changes can be made in the face of authoritarian regimes (Dhammar Vappa 2004).

Dieter Gosewinkel (2005 p.13) states "*civil society is established as the locus for democratic learning processes, seen as a pre-condition for democratization of policy and decision making and finally as a monitoring centre of democratic self-government*". Civil society is a "public space" where associations, non-governmental organisations and social movements operate and display a high degree of societal self-organisation. Social movements are always rooted in social networks of family, community and face-to-face groups. Their activities and actions articulate their 'felt needs', develop networks and demand a kind of civil legitimacy, or 'recognised right to exit' (Cohen and Arato 1992 p. 48).

Public space and freedom of association is generally absent or limited in societies that are run by authoritarian and military regimes. These societies are often weak and deliberately divided. Trust outside of immediate associates is a scarce commodity in such society. Democracy can only be sustained when social trust is sufficiently strong. Civil society helps develop and promotes social trust, and ensures that the public is the key protector of public interest (Cox 2000 p. 92-95).

But in the case of Burma, the military rulers have successfully suppressed and made civil society compliant, or at least one type of civil society. I suggest that there are, at least, six types of Burmese civil society including cross-border civil society that has emerged in the last decade. Burma's civil war in the past fifty years has resulted more than 700,000 Burmese seeking refuge and asylum in different countries, and there are nearly half-a-million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the country (Altsean 2009). Burmese refugee camps are scattered across border areas of its

neighbouring countries - Thailand, and Bangladesh. In the last decade, a new type of civil society has emerged along the border areas, largely as a result of lack of public space in Burma. This new type of civil society has shown that independent and vibrant civil society organisations can have impact on the society by operating across the border as well as outside of the state's control. I describe this as cross-border civil society. Here we see joint operations between civil society organisations in Burma, largely on the frontier areas, and Burmese civil society networks based in Thailand.

Since the space for free and vibrant civil society inside the country is tightly controlled and suppressed, alternative public spaces for Burmese people that are outside of the state's control are vitally important. I have little confidence or hope that political change in Burma will be brought about from inside the country. This could be seen to resonate with theories of social equilibrium. Equilibrium theorists see societies as smooth running organisms, highly differentiated, therefore highly complex and change does not happen from the 'bottom-up, but is more likely to happen through outside intervention. Richard Applebaum explains

*"social systems change, but only with great difficulty... . In general, forces for change originate outside the system; change is exogenous, not an inevitable aspect of social organization. Values and beliefs, and the institutions in which they are embodied, are extremely durable and tend to prevent changes originating at the 'bottom' from affecting more general structures or the nature of the society itself" (1970 p.132).*

In the case of Burma, cross-border civil society represents a force for change that comes from outside of the social and political system. The struggle for democratic change in Burma demands its citizens not only participate but also make change for themselves. More and bigger civil society organisations are not necessarily better, but those with the ability to promote emancipatory learning and encourage more

participation among the grassroots are more important for breaking down passive attitudes to collective effort and action. Cross-border civil society that has emerged in the last decade has shown that small but critically poised civil society organisations are capable of making significant contributions to social change movement.

## **6.2 Defining the nature of civil society**

I will briefly discuss some key thinkers of civil society. There has been a long history of contestation about the nature and role of civil society. Here I will present concepts which I think are most relevant to theories about civil society in the context of Burma.

John Locke (1632-1704), is one of the earliest known thinkers on civil society. He asserts a society is civil when it has a political formation in which citizens mutually decide to relinquish power to the State for the good of all (Waldron 2002). Individuals resign their power to a higher authority in exchange for public services such as security. This is the kind of civil society that the current and recent past Burmese military regimes see fit for Burma. The rulers tolerate no opposing views. They regard themselves as the only guardian who knows what is best for the people, and therefore, individuals should submit to the state.

Adam Ferguson, one of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, in contrast to Locke fostered the idea that one must guard against authoritarianism by developing independent “societies” within general society (Oz-Salzberger 1995). The idea was that civil society was an improvement not a compromise. For Ferguson, “*men are*

*united by instinct... they act in society from affections of kindness and friendship*". Civil society in Ferguson's concept was less political than social. Thomas Paine, who was greatly influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment, came up with the more radical idea that the state itself is an obstacle to civil society's hope for social equality and liberty. That was the beginning of theorising that emphasised the potential of civil society to defend citizens against an oppressive state. At this point, civil society emerged as a separate entity from the state that acted in the interest of citizens. Civil society organisations in Burma are still struggling today to create a space free from domination of the state.

Georg Hegel's (1770-1831) analysis of civil society took the notion to another level and broke away from viewing civil society as natural or static. Hegel conceptualised civil society as a form of social development rooted in the family (Kierans 2008). Civil society is not, as with the Scottish Enlightenment, the realisation of the unity of the particular with the universal, but a form of unity that constitutes consensus and orientation. Hegel, however, is concerned with the degree of freedom that civil society should have and stresses the possibility of conflict with the state if the civil society is too free. For him the state is the protector, suggesting that civil society could not remain civil? Unless it is ordered politically, therefore, civil society is subjected to the surveillance of the state (Edwards 2004).

Karl Marx (1818- 1883) continued developing the theme of civil society as the "base" where productive forces and social relations are taking place. He saw civil society as a sphere separated from political society or the superstructure, but also recognised the relationship between capitalism and civil society (Edwards 2004; Keane 2003). For Marx civil society represents the interests of the bourgeoisie (Evans 1975). Civil society, including family, are active elements but centered upon narrow purpose and

self-serving, therefore, intervention by the state was necessary (Holst 2002, p. 62-65). Marx saw civil society needed to be incorporated in the state as all means of production. However, Marx's view of civil society does not consider the full potential of the bourgeoisie to maintain hegemony over the working class.

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) on the other hand, advanced the idea that even a democratically chosen government might suffocate civil society of sufficient vigilance if independent citizens' association were not maintained. In his *"Democracy in America"*, he describes civil society as embodying community spirit, volunteerism and association forming. For de Tocqueville, civil society was a defense mechanism to safeguard the spirit of community from the tyranny of the state and political life outside of the official apparatus of the state was both possible and necessary (Lively 1962; Mitchell 1995). Tocqueville's version of civil society can benefit communities in Burma. While community organisations in Burma are strong and active in organising traditional cultural and social activities, they have not been able to protect themselves from the state's domination or mobilise the community for change.

In the late nineteenth century, the Italian Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), revived discussion about the role of civil society in the 1930s. Gramsci's civil society came out of *"the analysis of power relations in society and it is closely linked to the notion of class hegemony- a control exercised at all levels; economic, social, political, and cultural spheres"* (Gallin 2000:2). Hegemony is pervasive and intimately part of everyday life. For Gramsci, civil society was a set of institutions autonomous from the state and controlled by the ruling classes. It is an arena in which battles for class power and against capitalism can be fought. Gramsci stressed two different modes of social control that can be exercised by the ruling classes. One is *'coercive control'* that is manifested through direct force or its threat. This is normally where the state

imposed its law-enforcement power on its citizens. The other is '*consensual control*', which arises when individuals are, often unwittingly, socialised into the worldview of the ruling classes. In other words, hegemonic power is exercised in the form of social and cultural activities and Gramsci urges the working classes to resist it. He terms this as a "*war of position*" (Gramsci 1978). Gramsci saw that it is necessary to replace the dominant hegemony with the hegemony of the oppressed if a revolution is to attain its goals. Peter Mayo (1999) in his comparative study between Freire and Gramsci explains that:

For Gramsci, the terrain wherein hegemony can be contested is the very terrain that supports it, namely that of civil society, which is conceived of as a site of struggle...people working for social transformation...had to engage in a 'war of position', a process of wide-ranging social organisation and cultural influence. It is through this process that the group creates, together with other groups and sectors of society, a historical bloc, the term Gramsci uses to describe the complex manner in which classes or their factions are related (Mayo 1999 p. 38).

Gramsci's analysis of hegemony is relevant to the case of Burmese democracy movement. The Burmese military rulers, on one hand, could be understood as exercising power in a crude and primitive manner through the 'barrel of a gun'. On the other hand, the regime manifestly and deceitfully uses some traditional values and beliefs to serve its interests and justify its harsh ruling practices. For example, military rulers have invoked Buddhism to justify 'strong' leadership and passive following. Military rulers have fanned chauvinism, fanatical patriotism, hierarchism, and xenophobia. The military regimes proclaim that a 'strong' state is necessary to unite all ethnic groups. But this 'idea' is used to exercise hegemonic power and in my view is as much about creating a 'reality' of one people with no different ideas. This hegemonic 'spin' on unity can be seen to prevail when a large number of Burmese population agrees to the regime's actions against minority groups with religious or racial differences. For example, Burmese opposition groups were silent

when the military regime selectively oppressed Rohinger Muslim communities in Western Burma. Many ordinary Burmese share the xenophobic fear of the Burmese regime. Many members of opposition groups are often worried that the ethnic minority groups will break away from the union and the country will fall into a state of balkanization. Obviously, such hegemonic beliefs not only create fear but effectively divide the opposition groups.

The military regime understands the potential of counter-hegemonic power that can be exercised by local independent organisations and has politically paralysed them. Civil society provides a public space where the hegemony of the Burmese military regime can be challenged. Democratic transformation in the context of Burma demands the kind of civil society that not only facilitates community organisations and activities but also empowers people to participate and take control of their very own matters at the local community level. Gramsci appeals to activists in civil society to recognise the scale and importance of their role in bringing about change for democracy.

*“The ‘war of position’ demands enormous sacrifices by infinite masses of people. So an unprecedented concentration of hegemony is necessary, and hence a more “interventionist” government, which will take the offensive more openly against the oppositionists and organise permanently the “impossibility” of internal disintegration- with control of every kind, political, administrative, etc., reinforcement of hegemonic “positions” of dominant group, etc. all this indicate that we have entered a culminating phase in the political historical situation, since in politics the “war of position”, once won, is decisive definitively” (1978, p. 238-239).*

To lay more groundwork for my analysis of ‘Burmese’ civil society I will now describe and discuss contemporary conceptualisations of civil society. One contemporary perspective sees civil society as a space located “between” the state,

the economy and the private sphere or family. This space is usually filled by social movements and NGOs. The idea of civil society as being a public space outside the state is essential to maintain democracy in its most effective function (Havel 2004). Another is “function-related” and this perspective sees civil society in instrumental ways and seeks to measure its contribution to implementing and stabilising democracy (Goeswinkel 2005, p.13). For functional perspective, the role of civil society is to ensure that the democratic state has the information to address the needs of citizens. In the view of the functionalists, it is necessary that civil society is able to carry out independent action, be self-creative, and fortify the power of the oppressed. There is also a compelling view that civil society’s function is to counterbalance the state in order to prevent an over-concentration of state-power (Baker 2002, p. 147).

David Steinberg argues that what is more important than to have a standard or universal definition for civil society is to recognise the concept as:

The significance of the term today and its importance as an analytical tool to explore societies lie in the hypothesis that if civil society is strong and if citizens band together for the common good based on a sense of community or programmatic trust and efficacy, then this trust and efficacy somehow translate into overall trust in the political process of democracy or democratization and lead to diffusion of the centralized power of the state. Civil society is thus an essential element of political pluralism--the diffusion of power that is the hallmark of modern democracies (1999, p.3).

### **6.3 Public sphere and emancipatory learning**

Jurgen Habermas’s (1989) concept of ‘the public sphere’ as an area in social life where people can get together and freely discuss and identify social problems is relevant in my quest to enable civil society to advance democratic transformation for Burma. Under the BSPP regime public space was tightly controlled and monitored. People met discussed and exchanged their opinions at unlikely meeting places such as tea- shops or coffee-houses. Teas-shops were a significant and essential meeting



place for pro-democracy activists and for the emergence of the democracy movement in 1988. In chapter three, I discuss my experiences of politicisation in tea-shops. Habermas (1989) argues that the public sphere is a kind of social intercourse that disregards status, a domain where issues of common concern are discussed, and a space where everyone can be involved. The key character of the public sphere is that it is free from the control and intervention of the state.

Habermas's work is routinely criticised by postmodernists, poststructuralists and feminists. Critics of the concept of public sphere including Foucault, Gadamer and Lyotard, argue that it is an idealised concept and only relevant to the upper social classes. But I think the idea of the public sphere applies well to the Burmese situation. I have, in chapter two, described and discussed the importance of tea circle (or shop) which provided an important informal social or public space for Burmese 'democrats'. Tea-shops in Burma continue today and are not exclusive to the rich but a place where people from all walks-of-life can voluntarily meet, discuss and argue with one another about the big questions of the day and negotiate their differences peacefully. Recognising the effectiveness that tea-shops can contribute, some overseas based Burmese democracy activists have called for a Tea-Shop campaign to promote freedom of association and democracy (pls, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FwI0xK7yyXs>). Tea-shops (in Burma) indeed constitute a fabric of the lifeworld by providing crucial and informal public sphere for the oppressed to express their viewpoints freely.

For Burmese migrant workers in Thailand, a 'public sphere' cannot be clearly defined since they are illegal and illegal workers can not associate freely. However, there are other and creative ways in which a 'public sphere' has been developed by and for Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. I observed, for example, how a

community library and migrant learning centres were de facto public sphere spaces. I draw on James Scott's theory of "*hidden transcript*" that describes resistant methods used by slaves under their master's nose and conditions in which resistance can take place (1990). The concept of "*hidden transcript*" and its relevance to the notion of public sphere and Burmese migrant workers in Thailand is discussed in details in chapter nine.

Hannah Arendt and Vaclav Havel suggest that public space outside the state represents the future of politics, not just some transitional phase on the journey towards liberal democracy (Baker 2002, p. 148). The lack of public space is more to do with mental culture of Burmese who have been living with fear for too long and fear has become part of their internal thinking (Houtman 1999 and Fink 2001). People, in general, are not content with the status quo, but they have lost hope as well as belief in their power to make changes. The challenge for civil society organisations (CSOs) working for change in Burma is changing the mental culture of the oppressed. In other words, it is necessary that civil society organisations promote a culture of self-dependence as well as collective effort. More and bigger CSOs are not necessarily better, but CSOs with the ability to promote emancipatory learning and encourage more participation among the grassroots are crucial attributes for breaking down the mental culture the Burmese.

#### **6.4. Historical perspectives on modern Burmese civil society**

For the purpose of definition, civil society in this thesis is broadly referred to those traditional, social, welfare, humanitarian, local self-help as well as oppositional organisations. These are generally non-profit organisations, and may be local,

religious, cultural, social or professional organisations engaging in educational and health services and local developmental.

Rigid social hierarchy and autocratic rule by monarchs in the country's past suggests that Burmese's political life, since pre-colonial times, has had little room for legal opponents and public opinion in governance and legislative matters. Some commentators observe that the most widely prevailing Burmese perception of "power" is vested in individual authority figures more than the ideology or the ruling system of the state (Steinberg 2000). Htun Aung Kyaw (1997), a leading Burmese democracy activist and who has found a Burmese civil society foundation in 1997 in the USA observes that:

"Civil society in the western sense has no equivalent in the Burmese lexicon. ...Regimentation and the pervasive use of a state-sponsored network of spies and informers undermined the trust and bonds of social fabric."

Civil society organisations under the elected governments between 1948 and 1958 were allowed a larger degree of freedom. However, following a military coup in 1962, civil society in Burma was systematically eliminated (Steinberg 2000, p. 112; South 2004, p. 244 & Toe Zaw Latt 2005, p 3). The military took power on 2nd March 1962 in the name of the Revolutionary Council (RC) and in the same year, the regime began to nationalise the press and all private sectors (Lintner, 1994: 355). By 1965, all previous civilian political leaders and other opposition groups including students, monks, journalists, and newspaper owners were detained (Maung, Mya, 1991, p. 105).

In 1974, the Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP) established several government-sponsored mass organisations or Government Organized Non-

Government Organisations (GONGOs). Some examples included 'the workers' and peasants' councils (*Asiayone*) and the BSPP youth organisations. There were various youth organisations: the *Tae Za Lu Nye* for young people five to ten years old; *Shaysaung Lu Nye* for young people ten to fifteen years old; and *Lanzin Lu Nye* for fifteen to twenty-five year olds (Silverstein 1977, p. 110, Khin Zaw Win, 2006: 75, & Peterson, Rudland and May (eds), 2000, p. 11). However, in reality these organisations were no more than puppet-organisations of the government. They were created not only to ensure that the regime has control over the population in different sectors of the society but also to pre-empt possibility of emergence of non-government organisations.

During the twenty-six years BSPP rule (1962-1988) no less than eight major anti-government demonstrations broke out (Lintner 1994), but they were met with brutal suppression. Many members of anti-government movements were killed during the demonstrations or arrested and put in long-term jail (Kyaw Yin Hling 2004, p. 398). Civil society organisations, on the other hand, were silent. Some traditional civil society organisations in the form of religious and traditional activities and self-help groups, however, survived under the BSPP rule. Steinberg (2000) explains

“civil society, however, was not entirely rooted out. Especially, in rural village areas the Buddhist temple- or in some areas, the local Christian church- still provide ritual service for the people, and were able to function and provide support in locals' cultural and religious activities” (p. 113).

These surviving grassroots civil society networks have played a significant role in the insurrection of the civil society networks in the post-BSPP era. The current military regime, the *State peace and Development Council* (SPDC) previously called the *State Law and order Restoration Council* (SLORC) from Sept 1988 to Nov 1997, has reluctantly opened up some spaces for local self-help groups. This is mainly due to

the state's failure to meet basic healthcare and education needs in many parts of the country (Lorch 2006), and non-government organisations and community based organisations have begun to take responsibilities and provide services that are normally under the state's obligation. The deepening crisis of the national economy and rampant unemployment are also important factors behind the wary gradual return of civil society in the Burma.

During the seven months student-led nation-wide democracy movements in (March-Sept) 1988, several civil society organisations emerged and newspapers, magazines and pamphlets appeared overnight. For example, the YMCA emerged and took care of young people who had been released from juvenile prison (Fink 2001, p. 58-59). In Rangoon, the *Law Bar Council* spoke out and issued statements supporting the popular democracy movement. However, after the military coup in September 1988, most civil society organisations disappeared or dissolved, fearing persecution for supporting the democracy movement. Some turned into political parties as the new military regime promised to hold a general election to make a transition to parliamentary democracy. Under the new military regime's laws, particularly, the Associations Act of SLORC Law 6/88, civil society organisations were permitted to exist, provided that they remain as non-political organisations and register with the Home Ministry (Kyaw Yin Hling 2004, p. 405). In practice, however, civil society organisations could do very little as the new military regime imposed Martial Law and prevented gatherings of more than five people at any one time.

### **6.5 The nature of civil society in Burma today**

Traditional social, religious and cultural organisations continue to play an important role in the everyday life of Burmese people at the grassroots level. Kyaw Yin Hline (2004, p. 414) remarks that to understand the role of civil society organisations in

Burma it is necessary to consider beyond activities of legal organisations, and search for traditional, social, religious and cultural activities which generally operate on the outside of the legal space for civil society set by the state. Ni Ni Aung (2006) in her study of a cultural preservation project in the Chin state of Burma argues that local grassroots organisations play a critical role in both keeping the tradition alive and negotiating room for civil society organisations to manoeuvre at the grassroots level. Lorch (2006) explains the private or non-state education movement inside Burma in the last decade is a new form of civil society activities and has provided important service to the grassroots population. South (2004) notes that traditional Buddhist monks are the key player in the emergence of civil society networks in war-torn ethnic communities' areas.

The state of civil society in Burma is, however, fragile, and organisations have to be creative in order to survive the iron fist of the regime (Mutebi 2001, Lorch 2006). This creativity has led to a diversity of organisational and group forms. I will discuss different types civil society related to Burma.

In the last decade, a new type of civil society networks has emerged in the border areas with Thailand and they play a significant role not only in providing necessary services in these areas but also a crucial part in building a democratic culture. I call this type of civil society: cross-border civil society.

## **6.6 Six types of civil society related to Burma**

Civil society in Burma is far from dead and is indeed still going strong. Burma now has civil society organisations ranging from those organised by, and ones critical of, the State. There are also many traditional and self-help organisations which solely

focus on the welfare of local communities I propose that there are six types of Burmese civil society. Four of these six types of civil society organisations are found inside the country, while the other two are active in areas outside of the control of the military regime, on the border areas and in other countries.

*Type one (compliant civil society)*

The Burmese military regime recognises the need for having civil society organisations showcased in the country and has organised its own Non-Government Organisations. These *Government Organized Non-Government Organisations* (GONGOs) are created for several purposes including pre-empting independent civil society, humiliating the opposition, and supporting the military regime's propagandas (Houtman 1999; NDD 2006). These organisations make up what I call compliant civil society. There were sixteen government organised non-Government organisations (GONGOs) in 1999. They included:

*Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRC),*

*Myanmar Women Entrepreneur Association (MWEA),*

*Karuna Foundation (KF),*

*Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA),*

*War Veteran's Organisation (WVO),*

*Myanmar Medical Association (MMA),*

*Myanmar Theatrical Organisation (MTO),*

*Myanmar Vocalists Association (MVA),*

*Myanmar Film Organisation (MFO),*

*Myanmar Writers and Journalists Association (MWJO),*

*Myanmar Tradition Artists Association (MTAA),*

*Myanmar Dental Surgeons Association (MDSA),*

*Myanmar Health Association (MHAA),*

*Myanmar Nurses' Association (MNA),*  
*Myanmar Women's Development Association (MWDA), and*  
*Myanmar Women Sport Federation (MWSF).*

As government backed organisations they are permitted to directly and openly raise funds from individuals, businesses, government institutions and other NGOs (Houtman 1999, p. 114).

These GONGOs are created as 'shopfront' organisations to protect the interests of the regime as well as to monitor the activities of the opponents of the regime (Kya Yin Hling 2004, p. 406-407). Let's look more closely at one such organisation - *the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA)*. The Senior General Than Shwe, the head of the ruling military regime, is the founder and patron of the *Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA)* which claims to have more than twenty-two million members around the country, about half of the nation's population. The USDA recruits its members in education, business, and civil service sectors, and from the opposition groups, and mobilises its members to support the government's propaganda (NDD 2006, p.18-19). People are coerced into joining because of threats to their jobs or of their family. I know of people who go through the motions of membership as many BSPP members did, but who deep down do not support the government and/or the USDA. If necessary, the USDA employs political violence and incites religious conflict to effectively control any potential opposition to the military regime (NDD 2006, p. 60-61). In May 2003, hundred of the USDA members launched an attack on a tour of opposition leaders from *the National League for Democracy (NLD)*, led by the 1991 Nobel Peace prize winner Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, killing several hundred NLD supporters. The incidence is known as the *Depayin Massacre*, and to this day, none of the attackers has been brought to justice (NDD 2006, p. 64).



### *Type-two (the opposition)*

I have grouped the opposition political party inside the country such as the NLD in the domain of civil society because they have been marginalised and reduced to the role of non-state element and many opposition groups also engage in social, religious and welfare activities.

In this second category of civil society organisations I place the opposition groups such as the *National League for Democracy* (NLD) led by democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi; ethnic political groupings, students and monks. The NLD claimed that the general election in November 2010 was not fair and boycotted it. The regime banned the NLD for not taking part in its election. Members of the NLD are now more active in community activities. Political opposition parties in Burma have been suppressed and they have almost no space to function in overtly political activities. Instead, many have chosen to engage in community welfare and religious activities to keep their organisations alive. For instance, the NLD donated rice to people during the rice price crisis in 2002, many of its members engage in social welfare and religious activities such as healthcare and HIV/Aids prevention activities and actively work in rebuilding communities ruined in the Cyclone Nargis since 2008 (Phyu Phyu Thin 2010).

Students and monks also constitute a major anti-regime force inside Burma and despite cultural inhibitions and numerous restrictions imposed on them, they have sought to carve out some space for independent actions. More than two hundred political parties registered in the 1990 general election after ten years, only ten parties remained (ICG 2001, p. 13). Most of them were banned or dissolved by the regime. Although fear of torture and lengthy imprisonment starkly limits their activities, political parties continue to be the most important civil society actors.

### *The Student Movement*

Students have a long tradition of political activism beginning in the colonial period. Student-led anti-government activism has continued to be a potent force for social and political change in Burma after independence. Universities, in particular, have been an important site of anti-government activities. During its 26 years rule, the BSPP faced the challenge of student-led anti-government movements no less than eight times. In 1988, an argument between students and children of politicians in a tea shop sparked the nation-wide democracy uprising which led to an end of the BSPP era (ICG 2001, p.16). The current military regime or the SPDC suppressed student activism by closing down and re-structuring universities and re-locating them so they would away from town (public) centers. Classrooms were changed in such a way that made it more difficult for students to organise dissent and mass unrest. Lecturers were made more responsible for their students and expected to report students' activities (ICG 2001, p. 26).

Students are also a social force that is at the forefront of voluntarism in social and cultural activities. In the colonial era, the students instigated their anti-colonial activities through social and cultural activities. Many student leaders were actively engaged in the National School movement (more details on the student anti-colonial movement is discussed in chapter four).

### *Monk Unions*

The Burmese Buddhist monks (or the *Sangha*) are another potent force for the anti-military regime movement. Like students, the *Sangha* were a prominent force during the anti-colonial rule period. With more than 85 percent of the country of over 50

million people being Buddhist, the *Sangha* command strong support. The *Sangha* were traditionally teachers and educators. Buddhist monks were the primary educator in pre-colonial time and many have continued providing basic education for children in rural areas where school does not exist or poor in quality. In recent years, the number of monastery- based schools have been growing and they have been forefront of education providers for the poor (South 2004; Lorch 2006). Today, the *Sangha* are still held in high esteem for their role in providing moral guidance and cultural leadership. Having understood the potential political power of the *Sangha*, the BSPP regime systematically restricted and eliminated the politicised monks during its twenty six years rule. Today, there are 300,000 Buddhist *Sangha* who retain considerable moral authority over the population.

In the 1988 nation-wide democracy uprising, independent monk unions emerged and joined the anti-government movement. Monks were among the thousands killed in this particular democracy uprising (ICG 2000, p. 27). In September 2007, due to the deepening economic crisis and drop in living standards, thousands of monks were back on the streets to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the ruling regime. The movement was known as the "*Saffron Revolution*". The regime again brutally crushed the peaceful demonstrations, disrobed, arrested, imprisoned and killed several hundred monks (See: Altsean website: Saffron Revolution).

### *Type-three (Traditional civil society organisations)*

Type-three civil society groups come in the form of traditional, religious and cultural organisations and many are local self-help groups. In this category of civil society, I include not only cultural and religious organisations but also intellectuals, performers and artists groups. The decline in economy, dropping living standards and the State's failure to meet the basic needs of the locals is part of the explanation for why

these traditional and local self-help groups have become more active in the last decade. As traditional and grassroots organisations they play an important role in not only preserving unique cultures and customs but also maintaining social cohesion in local communities. These organisations organise cultural activities and provide social welfare services for the poor. They provide management, community development trainings for young people and women. There are some literacy programs that have been developed, especially in ethnic minority groups, under the guise of preserving culture and identity. The regime tolerates the activities of community-based and local self-help organisations because they fulfil basic welfare demands that are not met by the state (ICG 2001; Ni Ni Aung 2006). This type of civil society is especially important in the non-Burman ethnic areas and in ceasefire areas where the State has ignored welfare services for so long. In these areas, civil society organisations typically focus on food security, income generation as well as acute intervention in basic health and education support (Lorch 2006).

The military regime keeps a close eye on activities of these civil society groups and never hesitates to intervene whenever it believes the organisation has too much influence in the community (Human Right Watch 2010; ICG 2001). Any local organisation that becomes too popular or receives popular support from the people are at risk of being overtaken by the government organisation or pushed out of the business. For instance, a local self-help organisation, called *Byamso A-thin* that provides ambulance and medical services for a nominal charge to the poor in Mandalay became more popular than the government's *Maternal and Child Care Association* which provides similar services to the public. The Mandalay regional commander, patron of the *Maternal and Child Care Association* in Mandalay, offered financial assistance and planned to take over the organisation (Kyaw Yin Hling 2004, p. 407). In 2003, the *Free Funeral Service Society* (FFSS) for the poor, a well known

locally-based social welfare association in Rangoon was refused registration renewal for not incorporating with the government agency (Htain Linn 2003, p. 26-27).

Civil society inside Burma is limited in its ability to effectively function and promote participation of the grassroots. Mutebi observes that civil society organisations in Burma have been given “*little room to move*” (2001, p. 178) and by themselves cannot secure a level of consensus that is required to engender and consolidate broad-based reforms in governance.

#### *Type four (International NGOs)*

International NGOs (INGOs) play an important role in the development of civil society networks in Burma. The presence of the INGOs in Burma serves two ends. For the regime, having the INGOs in the country means improving its image in the international community. They also bring foreign currency into the country through the INGOs workers and project activities. The INGOs are mainly engaged in the field of humanitarian services and support development projects in partnership with local organisations. INGOs are normally required to obtain Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) which helps the Burmese authorities control them (ICG 2001). Although some local groups have been working closely with INGOs at the ground level, there are several challenges INGOs face. Local civil society organisations are generally restrained in their ability to work with an INGO. For instance, a well-known comedian and community aid worker who spoke out about the military government’s unreasonable restrictions on organisations helping victims of the Cyclone Nargis that killed more than 140,000 people in May 2008, was sentenced to 35 years imprisonment (Human Right Watch April 2010).

The situation in Burma is so bleak and INGOs are often unsure how to respond. Health standards are very low and health services are largely short-staffed. Many agencies ceased their operations due to lack of ability to carry out effective operations (ICG 2001; Broadmoor 2001; Jagan 2010). There are also allegations that some of the largest United Nations Development Projects have fallen into the hands of government members. The UNDP is working in 60 out of 325 townships, but its work has had a negligible impact on health, education and food security, the report said (Jagan 2010).

While the INGOs' ability to operate may be limited for the time being, their existence in the country is significant as they have gradually been pushing boundaries and opening up small spaces. They are helping to expand spaces that otherwise do not exist for local NGOs. With the military regime's desire to transform into a civilian government, the potential for INGOs' to negotiate more space and contribute in the future is encouraging.

#### *Type-five (Burmese advocacy groups in overseas exile)*

Burmese opposition groups and advocates who are in exile and mainly in democratic countries such as the USA, UK, EU and Australia, make up another and fifth type of Burmese civil society. After the nation-wide democracy uprising in 1988 was brutally crushed, a large number of political activists and students fled to Thailand and later migrated to Western democratic countries.

Burmese in exile have formed Burma support groups and continue to work for democratic change in their homeland. In the 1990s, more than forty such groups emerged in North America, Europe, Australia and Asia (Kyaw Yin Hling 2004, p.

408) and many have mobilised their supporters in their host countries and the international community to put pressure on the Burmese regime.

A Burmese civil society organisation based in the U.S and called the *Free Burma Coalition* (FBC) is a good example how effective these Burmese civil society organisations-in-exile can be to put pressure on the regime in Burma. Formed in 1995 by a Burmese graduate student, Zar Ni, from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with an aim to force international corporations out of Burma, the FBC has undertaken successful political cyber campaigns. Making good use of cyber space, Zar Ni and his associates managed to build alliances with various student organisations, community groups and human rights organisations in North America. With skilful and tireless political campaigns, by 2001, the FBC had forced more than fifty major international corporations, including Compaq, Pepsi, Eddie Bauer, Kodak, and Hewlett-Packard out of Burma. Building on the idea of ethical investment, the FBC has made impact on many local and state governments and their policies toward Burma. Many cities in the USA passed the “Purchasing Laws” and stopped buying products from companies that are doing business in Burma. Twenty-five cities in the USA including San Francisco and Los Angeles have passed these Purchasing Laws. The US Government and many governments in Europe have imposed economic sanctions on Burma (Kyaw Yin Hling 2004, p. 412-413). Burma support groups in Australia adopted a similar strategy. Several city councils including Marrickville in New South Wales and Belmore in Victoria have passed the selective purchasing laws to prevent money flowing into the hands of the Burmese regime. Although, the Australian government’s policies on Burma were not as decisive as the US and some EU countries, the Australian government was cautious in encouraging Australian business corporations to do business in Burma. Many Australian companies including Foster Beer announced their withdrawal from Burma (author’s own campaign experiences in the 1990s).

### *Type-six (cross-border civil society)*

A combination of political and economic factors has driven Burmese to leave their country and most have fled to Thailand (Koetsawang 2001; Kingston 2008; Min Lwin 2009). The cease-fire arrangements between the armed ethnic groups and the military in the 1990s have reduced armed conflicts in many ethnic frontier areas, but the lives of the people in these areas remain unchanged and in some cases devastated, despite the cease-fire agreements. The absence of war, however, provides opportunities for some local self-help groups and NGOs to emerge in areas where communities have been devastated by the civil war for many decades. The exact number of Burmese civil society organisations in Thailand and Thai-Burma border areas is difficult to know largely due to the illegal status of their members. My six months field study reveals that no less than fifty Burmese local self-help groups and NGOs networks are based in cease-fire areas and along Thai-Burma border. Civil society groups in the cease-fire zones have worked closely with Burmese civil society groups based in Thailand (Oo 2010a). I call this type of civil society - cross-border civil society.

Cross-border civil society is a new phenomenon in the modern history of Burma. Cross-border civil society is a response to the social catastrophe of dis-enfranchised ethnic peoples in frontier areas, Burmese refugees and migrant workers in Thailand. Here civil society groups have their own vision of a future society and undertake advocacy work for democratic change (Oo 2010b). My case studies in cross-border civil society explore possibilities and challenges for teaching and learning democracy among the grassroots.



## 6.7 The emergence of cross-border civil society

After re-seizing power in September 1988, the new ruling body of the military regime called itself the *State Law and Restoration Council* (SLORC) continued hunting down pro-democracy groups. Consequently, a large number of students and pro-democracy leaders left cities and took refuge in border areas - also known as liberated areas - controlled by armed ethnic resistance groups. Many also set up organisations to provide welfare services. Some armed ethnic groups such as the *Karen National Union* (KNU) have been operating community-based organisations since the 1970s (O'kane 2005). But what has emerged in the border areas since 1988 is a new phenomenon, namely NGOs that are not affiliated with political organisations or ethnic insurgent groups. This is a new type of civil society that is free from the State's control.

The emergence of cross-border civil society is a new phenomenon in Burma's modern history and is an upshot of the isolationist policy of the Burmese socialist regime and more than fifty years of civil war. There are at least five factors that have shaped the development of cross-border civil society. They are the:

1. deepening economic crisis in the last two decades and declining living standards;
2. regime's dogmatic and political oppression and tight control over civil society organisations inside the country;
3. withdrawal of support for armed insurgent groups from the ex-Cold war patrons, namely China and Thailand, in the late 1980s and 90s led to a decline in the strength of armed resistant groups (South 2004, p. 245);
4. ceasefire arrangements between armed ethnic groups and the army in 1990s have created opportunities for the emergence of spaces to focus on

community development and political education in frontier ethnic group areas;

5. State's failure to meet the basic needs of local communities especially in frontier areas.

The combination of these factors creates opportunities for NGOs, CBOs and local self-help groups in frontier areas and across the borders to emerge. It should be noted that in this dissertation I am focusing only on civil society organisations in the Thai-Burma border areas. Many Burmese civil society organisations based in Thailand provide cross-border services and have worked closely with many local self-help organisations based inside the country. This close working relationship among them is crucial in cross-border civil society operations. In less than a decade, cross-border civil society has grown from humanitarian service responding to emergency needs into long-term capacity building and social movement activities.

## **6.8 Thai-Burma border relationships**

Thailand and Burma share a 2401-kilometer long border marked by a range of mountains and rivers, which in many places are isolated, rugged and richly forested (Lang 2002, p.137). For the last four decades, several armed ethnic insurgent groups have roamed and controlled these frontier areas. The Burmese regime regarded these areas as the '*black zone*' meaning it had no control over the areas. In these border areas there are Burmese refugee camps usually on the Thai side, illegal border trading (black market) and narcotic businesses, and mass migration of migrant workers from Burma. Until late in the 1980s successive governments in Thailand saw the Burmese ethnic armed groups - who are largely non-communist groups - based along the border areas as a "*buffer zone*" that would help prevent the

spread of the communism from Northern Burma into Thailand, especially to the leftist groups in Thailand (Lintner, 1994, p. 240-244).

Burma's economy under the BSPP regime was unable to produce sufficient goods for domestic consumption. The population relied largely on imported domestic products smuggled through illegal border trading from neighbouring countries. Thailand was the major domestic products supplier in the 1970s-80s. The BSPP's isolationist policy not only sustained the illegal or black-market border trading, but also worsened the already corrupt practices among the government officials. Furthermore, the armed ethnic groups collected tax from business activities at the border crossing points to sustain their armed campaign against the Burmese army (Litner 1994; Smith 1991).

In the 1990s, the military regime initiated ceasefire deals with most armed ethnic groups. As a result, armed conflict has been reduced in many border areas, and the Burmese and Thai governments subsequently created trading and industrial zones near the border lines. The development of official trading zones between the two countries in the early 2000s has, of course led to a significant reduction of the illegal border trading. The opening of three permanent border checkpoints at Mai Sai-Tachilek, Mae Sot- Myawaddy, and Ranong-kawthaung and the construction of the "Myanmar-Thai Friendship Bridge" between Mae Sot and Myawaddy (Lang 1991, p. 173), have speeded up the transformation of the border trading between the two countries. In addition to these three major checkpoints there are 13 other official and unofficial 'points of entry' along Burmese side of the border (TBBC 2008).

## **6.9 Ceasefire arrangements and the emergence of civil society in ethnic frontier areas**

The strength of armed ethnic insurgencies has declined significantly as a result of changes in neighboring countries' domestic policies in the 1980s. The end of the Cold War in the early 1980s diminished the threat of communist expansion in the region. The Thai government now sees trading activities along the border areas with Burma as an opportunity for economic growth. Armed ethnic insurgent groups based in the Thai-Burma border areas, who once enjoyed the support of the Thai government came under pressure and simply did not have the choice but to strike ceasefire deals with the military regime. At the same time, in Northern Burma, once the most powerful enemy of the military regime, the *Communist Party of Burma* (CPB) and its army, and which has been active since 1948, faced a new challenge to sustain its more than ten thousand troops as China, withdrew its support. China's priorities shifted from supporting comrades in Burma to nurturing trading on the Sino-Burma border. In 1989, the CPB leadership split and the new leadership of the CPB struck a cease-fire deal with Burma's military regime.

Ethnic insurgent groups in Burma now find it harder to mobilise their troops, obtain necessary arms supplies and generate income to finance their organisations for they no longer have total control of the border areas. Some fifteen armed ethnic organisations have made ceasefire agreements with the military regime since 1989. Most of these organisations, as part of a cease-fire term, have retained their arms and sometimes still control extensive territories (South 2004, p. 238; see The Irrawaddy: research website).

As the intensity of armed struggle has declined, members of a younger generation in ethnic groups began to look for opportunities to continue their struggle in a non-

violent ways. They see working in civil society organisations as a way to continue the struggle for democracy (Oo 2010a). The ceasefire agreements have led to the emergence or enlargement of the space for civil society (Smith 1999 p. 37-49; Purcell 1999, p. 89ff; South 2004, p. 233). Civil war for more than half a century has left ethnic minority-populated areas with serious humanitarian crises. They are in desperate need for basic services in healthcare, education, and food security and these have opened up opportunities for civil society networks to emerge. Some ceasefire groups have been able to negotiate a small degree of autonomy and organise community development activities in areas they control (Toe Zaw Latt 2005; South 2004). The degree of freedom and autonomy enjoyed by the ceasefire groups varies depending on the size of the organisation and the term of the ceasefire arrangement. The development of civil society networks in ceasefire areas needs to be understood in the broader context of the enormous underdevelopment that these war-torn communities face. It might not be in the regime's best interest to invest proper resources in the reconstruction of ethnic areas, but by allowing the armed resistant groups run the task of administration and development in the territory they control prevents them from calling off the ceasefire arrangements (ICG 2001, p. 23).

The ceasefire arrangements, in reality, do not necessarily guarantee peace. Civilian population displacement continues to occur in ceasefire areas. South (2007 p. 56) describes the "*state-society conflict-induced displacement*" which led to military occupation or development activities such as land confiscation by the *Tatmadaw* for infrastructural construction. For instance, ceasefire arrangements in *Kachin State* (1994) in the Northern Burma and in *Mon state* (1995) in Southern Burma have had a negative impact on the local population. Families and communities have been displaced as a result of increased resource extraction projects such as logging, jade and gold mining, and infrastructure development. The Burma Army's expansion into previously contested areas also causes population displacement as the army

seizes land and displace communities to secure militarily strategic positions (South 2004, p. 239). Facing limited availability of productive land and food security local people choose to look for jobs in Thailand.

### **6.10 The economic crisis and Burmese migrant workers in Thailand**

For more than two decades, since 1988, the Burmese economy has continued to decline and living standards have dropped. Unemployed Burmese have looked for work in neighboring countries. In recent decades, Thailand has become the largest home of Burmese nationalities outside of Burma. There are some other important factors that make this massive movement of migrant workers possible. The creation of official trading centers and industrial zones along the Thai-Burma border areas following the *Economic Cooperation Strategy* (ECS) agreed in November 2003 in Burma's Pagan city has been a crucial factor for Burmese to look for jobs in Thailand. The development of a Thai industrial zone near a border town, Mae Sot, is well-known among Burmese migrant workers (Arnold & Hewison 2005). Mae Sot is particularly attractive to Burmese because in contrast with other well-known industrial zones in Thailand such as Bangkok and Phuket, this zone is strategically situated near the Thai-Burma border, just opposite the old Burmese town of Myawaddy. The Burmese migrant workers can just cross a bridge over the Thai-Burmese Friendship Bridge over the Mae Nam Moi River (Lubeigt 2007, p. 172). Other than Mae Sot region, Burmese migrant workers are also found to be concentrated in the Bangkok areas, especially the zone of Mahachai-Samut Prakan, Tachilek- Mae Sai in Northern Thailand and Kawtaung-Ranong in the South (Arnold 2007). The number of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand has alarmingly increased in the last decade and was estimated to be more than two million in 2005. This number represents more than 11 per-cent of Burma's workforce of 17.28 million in 2005 (Lubeigt 2007, p.168; Lang and Banki 2007).

The reality for Burmese migrant workers in Thailand is shocking. They generally work in what David Arnold describes as 3D's jobs – *Dirty, Difficult and Dangerous* jobs (Arnold 2007). For Thai business owners, Burmese workers are illegal, passive, easy to handle and exploit. Since Burmese workers are illegal they face difficulties to demand better working conditions. The Burmese workers are often not provided with housing, running water or medical care. If they are not registered, their working hours are extended at will, often to sixteen hours a day, and poorly paid or not paid at all (Lubeigt 2007, p.175). Burmese in Thailand are vulnerable to transmittable diseases such as HIV-Aids, tuberculosis and water-borne diseases because they live and work in poor and unhealthy conditions with no welfare provision. Some former members of Burmese opposition groups in Thailand began in 2000 to work in basic healthcare and children education services for Burmese workers in Thailand. Movements to provide basic education and healthcare for migrant workers and their families have later shifted Burmese civil society groups in Thailand from humanitarian service to community capacity building for long-term development (Oo 2010a). Some organisations have focused on advocacy work such as workers' rights, human rights protection, women rights movements and environmental protection.

### **6.11 Burmese exiles, refugees in Thailand and cross-border civil society**

Apart from the growing presence of migrant workers in Thailand, there are Burmese refugees and political exiles who have taken sanctuary in Thailand. More than half a century of civil war in Burma has left behind several hundred thousand refugees living in neighboring countries. More than 150,000 Burmese are now living in refugee camps in Thailand (Lang and Banki 2007; TBBC June 2008, p. vii). The number of refugees from Burma coming into Thailand continues to increase because the military regime continues waging war against armed ethnic groups that have not

entered ceasefire agreements, including the Karen National Union and the Southern Shan Army. As a result the number of Burmese (Karen and Shan) refugees coming into Thailand has continued to increase.

Political exiles and democracy activists in Thailand have been important players in the cross-border civil society movement since they see civil society activities as part of their continuing struggle for democracy in Burma (Oo 2010a). Most civil society organisations began providing humanitarian assistance to newly arrived refugees and Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) in the early 1990s and ten years on, several organisations moved on to advocacy work, capacity building and long-term development projects such as school and health program for population in border areas. In chapter seven I describe and discuss Burmese opposition groups and their political literacy programs in Thailand.

## **6.12 Conclusion**

The 'public sphere' remains tightly controlled in Burma since the military took over in 1962. However, civil society has made a return and the number of civil society organisations is growing in areas where the state has failed to meet basic needs of local population. Civil society in Burma, however, due to the regime's dogmatic control, is underdeveloped and unable to make much impact on the government's decision making. But ceasefire arrangements in the 1990s have paved ways for the emergence of civil society networks in frontier areas responding to the acute needs of war-torn ethnic communities in these areas. Lack of political development combine with the deepening economic crisis have forced thousands of Burmese citizens to look for work in neighbouring countries. The emergence of cross-border civil society is a new phenomenon in the history of modern Burma and also represents the struggle for alternative social space for the oppressed and excluded. In the case of cross-border civil society, NGOs and CBOs are able to engage in social



change movements through networks of civil society organisations across the boundary of the state. In this type of civil society, younger generation of the resistance groups has widened the spectrum of the democracy movement by engaging in social movements. In the next chapter, I describe and discuss the scale and nature of Burmese political and civil society organisations in Thailand with a particular focus on political literacy activities and programs.

## CHAPTE SEVEN

### A review of Burmese political literacy programs in Thailand

#### 7.1 Introduction

In chapter two I discussed the significant role of grassroots education or popular education in raising political consciousness of the oppressed and argued that Burmese opposition groups, in general, have paid little attention to the role of grassroots communities in the struggle for the democratic transition. In this chapter I will describe and discuss the range of Burmese political literacy programs that are in Thailand. I should explain why I have chosen to use the term political literacy. Many of the practitioners involved in the programs that I describe below would not name their work as political literacy. But when they do talk about their work, it quickly becomes apparent that an important dimension of their practice is raising political awareness. This suggests that I call it popular education, but in some cases the political awareness-raising work is neither participatory nor experiential. This is not a reason to necessarily be critical of it, but it is an attempt to reveal the diverse nature of educational practices. I think the term political literacy is sufficiently broad-ranging to capture this diversity. Bernhard Crick (2000: 18) defines political literacy as “the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are necessary to make a man or woman both politically literate and able to apply this literacy”. Political literacy programs seek to promote awareness and accurate understanding of main political disputes and the beliefs that the main contestants have of them. A political literate person knows “how they (the main political disputes) are likely to affect him, and he/she will have a predisposition to do something about it in a manner at once effective and respectful of the sincerity of others” (Crick and Porter, 1978, p. 33).

The importance of grassroots political literacy programs can be understood against the observation that although the goal of the Burmese opposition groups is to bring about democracy, their top-down problem solving approaches contradict democratic ways (South, 2006 and Kambawza Win, 2003).

After the 1988 democracy uprising was brutally crushed, thousands of democracy leaders and activists from urban areas set up new political organisations in border areas under the control of armed ethnic resistance groups. Both the armed ethnic forces and democracy activists saw the need to unite against the military regime and they formed political alliances and joint working groups. Given the experiences of the opposition groups in the past two decades, it is hard to make claim that a strong coalitions among the different groups has been established. Nyo Ohn Myint, the head of the foreign affairs committee of the *National League for Democracy* (Liberated Area) based on Thai-Burma border, said

“...One of our weak policies was you are with us or against us”. ... there is no middle position. You could not become a political leader unless you used ruder, harsher, more insulting words against the military regimes.” “Consequently, both sides – the military regime and the opposition groups - always approached each other with annihilation rather than compromise in mind” (Kyaw Zaw Moe, 2008: 29).

My field research reveals that there are changes taking place among a younger generation of Burmese opposition groups in Thailand and many have abandoned orthodox methods of resistance. This is because they have come to understand the need to develop alternative approaches in their struggle for democracy and many have moved to work in civil society organisations as a way to continue the struggle for democratic change.

In recent decades, the Burmese democracy movement in Thailand has increasingly focused on providing capacity building and skills development training programs.

Some of these programs are directly intended to raise political awareness and others aim at improving educational and health conditions of Burmese in Thailand.

## **7.2 Cross-border civil society and democracy**

Democracy and civil society have been seen as interdependent and civil society is a crucial and essential element of political pluralism (Steinberg, 2007). Burmese cross-border civil society, as discussed in chapter four, has emerged as an alternative public space where Burmese opposition groups work for social change. The idea that civil society must be free from the State's control is now taking root among Burmese activists in Thailand. Three hundred thousand refugees and more than two-million migrant workers in Thailand, most of whom live in appalling conditions have provided an opportunity for Burmese civil society organisations in the border areas to grow. Capacity building and skills development programs, largely in education and healthcare, have rapidly increased in the last decade. A significant amount of resources and effort have been invested in schooling. There are a number of school programs in refugee camps that provide education up to the equivalent of year ten. More than fifty schools are in Mae Sot area alone (Lenton, 2004, p. 45- 46).

School programs for children of Burmese migrant workers are, however, not officially recognised by the Thai authorities. The *Burma Education Office* (BEO) which was established in 1996 to provide assistance to schooling programs for Burmese children living in Thailand reported that

“...without a doubt, the greatest challenge to the work of the education office stems from the fact that we are operating without official permission from the Thai authorities and with a population that is considered illegal and is therefore subject to arrest” (Burma Education Office Annual Report, 2001. p. 8).

The *National Health and Education Council* (NHEC) is the largest provider of schooling education and health programs on the border. There are also programs that provide education for particular ethnic groups. The ethnic Karen who have made up the largest number of Burmese refugee population in Thailand, for instance, have their own education program called the *Karen Education Department* (KED).

There are a wide range of capacity building and skills development training programs, run often in conjunction with International Non-Government Organisations (INGOs), with a focus on healthcare, community development, human rights education, nature conservation and leadership skills development. Many participants in these programs work across the border- traveling in and out of Burma through border access points.

My discussion will mainly focus on programs and trainings that promote political literacy. I will examine the nature and practices of their educational activities.

### **7.3 Political literacy and training programs of Burmese in Thailand**

I have identified eight different types of organisations and their training programs.

The categories are:

1. Political groups and their activities
2. The women movement across all ethnic groups
3. The environmental movement
4. Human rights, community development and leadership training
5. Training and internship for community activists and organisers
6. Teacher training program
7. Workers organisations and labour rights training
8. Media training

### 7.3.1 Type One: Political groups and their activities

Various political opposition groups were set up along the Thai-Burma border after the 1988 democracy uprising and particularly after the results of the general elections in May 1990 in which the *National League for Democracy* party won a landslide victory but was calculatingly ignored by the military regime. Many of these organisations were made up of democracy activists, students and some elected representatives in the 1990 elections and who left Burma when their continued political activity became impossible because of constant surveillance. On the border, the political activists from big cities teamed up with armed ethnic resistance groups which have been waging war against the military regime for several decades. Alliance and umbrella groups between these democracy forces were formed to continue their struggle for democracy in Burma. I will briefly describe some major organisations and their political literacy work.

<p><b>The National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB)</b></p>	<p>When the results of the May 1990 General Elections revealed a landslide victory to the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the ruling military regime boldly ignored the results and began to arrest elected representatives. Many NLD politicians left the cities for Thai-Burma border to continue their struggle outside the control of the Burmese military regime. The stronghold of the National Karen Union (KNU), the largest armed ethnic group on Thai-Burma border, called Marnerplaw, became a centre for opposition forces. In December 1990, a group of elected representatives formed an acting government body called, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB). The NCGUB took on the task of political lobbying to increase the international community's pressure on the Burmese military regime for democratic reform. The NCGUB later set up its operational office in the USA. Many of its members are active in Thailand, India and some democratic countries.</p>
<p><b>The National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB)</b></p>	<p>The National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB) was formed in September, 1992 and became the largest umbrella organisation among Burmese opposition groups in exile. It was also formed in <i>Marnerplaw</i> with the support of the National Democratic Front (NDF), the largest armed ethnic umbrella organisation, the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), a grouping of democracy activists, students and armed ethnic groups, and later more organisations such as the National League for Democracy-Liberated Area (NLD-LA) and Women's League of Burma (WLB) joined the organisation. The NCUB acts as a strategic co-ordinator for the resistance movement.</p> <p>The education activities of the NCUB include training programs for non-violent direct action with a working group called the People's Defiance Committee (PDC). The PDC provides one to two weeks training courses about political and organisational skills trainings to leaders of the opposition (excerpt from interview with Ko Kyaw Kyaw, the director of the PDC in Mae Sot 14/08/2007). The NCUB also supports a diplomacy training program known as the "Foreign Affairs Training" which recruits ten to fifteen participants each year for a one-year residential program.</p>

<b>Association of Assistance for Political Prisoners (AAPP)</b>	Burmese ex-political prisoners who fled to the Thai-Burma border formed the Association of Assistance for Political Prisoners (AAPP). The aim of the AAPP is to reports conditions and plights of political prisoners in Burma. Members of the AAPP keep close contacts with members of the families of political prisoners inside Burma. They set up an exhibition room about living conditions and torturing methods in Burmese prisons in their Thailand base office, and regularly report the plights and conditions of political prisoners in Burma. By exposing the plight of political prisoners in Burma to the international community, the group hopes to raise awareness of political situation in Burma.
<b>All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF)</b>	The All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) is an armed student organisation which was formed in early 1989 on the Thai-Burma border with mainly student activists who escaped from arrest, torture and imprisonment after the military coup in the 1988. The group has no territory of its own, and is spread across many ethnic controlled territories. They take part in joint military operations with the respective ethnic group in the areas they operate. With no own territory to raise revenue to support its more than nine thousand members, the organisation quickly weakened. Most of its members have left the organisation and moved to third countries under The UNHCR's re-settlement programs. In the early years, the ABSDF introduced several political literacy programs for its members including a jungle university. Many leaders in the ABSDF acknowledged education as a political action and the important role of education in the democracy movement, and they encouraged members of the organisation to keep on learning while taking up armed struggle. They named one of their schools in their jungle base as "Jungle University".
<b>Burma Council (BLC) Lawyers</b>	To assist opposition groups become familiar with different types of constitutional laws and be more articulate about the illegitimate nature of the military dictatorship in Burma, a group of Burmese lawyers formed the Burma Lawyers Council (BLC) in the early 1990s. The BLC has published a list of basic constitutional laws for the general public, and has its own legal education training program called "Peace Law Academy" in Mae Sot and provides one-year residential constitutional law training programs for young activists.
<b>Network for Democracy Development (NDD)</b>	The Network for Democracy Development (NDD) was an initiative of ex-ABSDF leaders and seeks to develop networks for promoting democracy and human rights. The aim is to support the democracy movement without having to rely on external funding. The NDD's research unit focuses on uncovering the military regimes' structure and governing mechanism, and regularly publish its research findings online.
<b>Ethic organisations</b>	Ethnic organisations, armed and unarmed, have played a significant role in border politics. The association of armed ethnic groups called the National Democratic Front (NDF) was formed in the 1970s and comprised of twelve armed ethnic resistance groups. In the 1990s, however, several members of the NDF entered cease-fire agreements with the <i>Tamattaw</i> or the Burma Army. An umbrella ethnic political organisation comprised of armed and unarmed organisations called the Ethnic National Council (ENC) was formed in 1995 and continued to be active in the border region. The ENC is dedicated to promote ethnic groups' political vision for future democratic Burma and the self-determination right of minority groups. It has focused on policy development and reconciliation programs. The ENC, together with the United Nationalities League for Democracy (in Liberated Areas) (UNLD-LA), has produced a series of publication on ethnic political histories of the ethnic struggle for equal rights, self-determination and democracy.
<b>National League of Democracy (NLD -LA)</b>	Several members of the National League for Democracy (NLD), the largest opposition party led by Aung San Suu Kyi, escaped the arrest of the regime and settled on the Thai-Burma border and they later formed the National League of Democracy in Liberated Areas (NLD-LA). The NLD -LA, as mentioned above, is largely made up of ex-NLD members but it does not officially represent the NLD inside Burma. The NLD-LA has quickly become a prominent organisation on the Thai-Burma border and set up several branches in different countries. The NLD-LA concentrates on lobbying and promoting awareness of the situation of Aung San Suu

	Kyi, other political prisoners and the NLD inside Burma.
<b>Student Unions and organisations</b>	There are student activists who are not members of the ABSDF have continued their anti-military regime activities in the names of student organisations used in the anti-colonial time including the All Burma Students Union (ABSU). Relatively small organisations, these organisations and unions focus their educational effort mainly on publication of poems, articles and stories of student movements from the past. Their literatures aim at uplifting the spirit of revolution and the role of students in the anti-military regime movement.
<b>Alternative ASEAN (Altsean-Burma)</b>	Altsean-Burma or an Alternative Association of South-East Asian Nations for Democracy in Burma (see Altsean website) is a network of organisations and individuals, formed in October 1996 in Bangkok, with an aim to support and work for the emergence democracy in Burma. The network has an affiliation with human rights and social justice organisations, political parties, think-tank groups, academics, journalists and student activists in Thailand. The Altsean has a gender empowerment program in which young women from different ethnic organisations are recruited into for a six months or one year internship program. Many young women activists have completed the program and returned to work in their respective organisations. Other training programs run by the Altsean include economic literacy training program for members of political organisations to enhance their understanding in national economic planning and management.

Table 3: Major Burmese political organisations based in Thailand

### 7.3.2 Type two: The women movement across all ethnic groups

The emergence of various ethnic women organisations in cross-border civil society is the most significant sign of social change. Women's organisations began to appear around the year of 1999, and have changed the political landscape of the Burmese opposition movement. The women's organisations have quickly filled in a political vacuum which has been historically unoccupied, and have made themselves a key stakeholder in the traditionally male dominated Burmese opposition movement. Many ethnic groups now have their own women's organisations. Women's organisations have taken an interest in non-hierarchical organisational culture and are active and committed to make changes in social, cultural and political domains. The *Women's League of Burma* (WLB) which represents twelve women's organisations from different ethnic groups was established in December 1999. Members represent different ethnic groups who often were victims of civil war and injustice committed by members of the military regime.



Following are current members of the WLB and they are the *Burmese Women's Union* (BWU), *Kachin Women's Association-Thailand* (KWAT), *Karen Women's Organisation* (KWO), *Karenni National Women's Organisation* (KNWO), *Kuki Women's Human Rights Organisation* (KWHRO), *Lahu Women's Organisation* (LWO), *Palaung Women's Organisation* (PWO), *Pa-O Women's Union* (PWU), *Rakhaing Women's Union* (RWU), *Shan Women's Action Network* (SWAN), *Tavoy Women's Union* (YWU), and *Women's Rights and Welfare Association of Burma* (WRWAB) (source: Women of Burma, 2010).

These organisations run women's empowerment and capacity building programs including gender equality, women against violence, and women's participation in all aspects of social change activities. Women organisations have quickly become important part of the opposition movement in recent years and representing the voice of woman in Burma, and they have gained the support of the international community for their struggle to improve women's conditions.

Members of these women's organisations also work in migrant workers and refugee communities. Following is an example of how women's organisations do political literacy work.

#### *A. Shan Women Action network (SWAN)*

Formed in March 1999, *Shan Women's Action Network* (SWAN) is committed to work for gender equality, justice for women in the struggle for social and political change through community-based action, research and advocacy. SWAN has effectively promoted women rights and become an influential organisation in the Shan social and political domain. Its empowerment program, a live-in one-year internship program, focuses on capacity building for community-based activities and has produced a number of women community development workers. The organisation has successfully promoted gender, human rights and environmental issues among local women. The organisation also supports and runs sixteen schools for children of

refugees from Shan State on the Thai-Burma border. On the international front, the SWAN has received support from women's organisations from other countries. One of SWAN's publications known as "*Licence to Rape*" that reported atrocity and violence against Shan women by the military regime received international attention and was used in the United Nations' country assessment report in 2006, and one of its members was received by the American president of that time, George W. Bush (Jr) in the White House for her tireless and remarkable work in campaigning to promote human rights in Burma in 2005 (SWAN 2010).

### *7.3.3 Type three: The environmental movement*

The concept of protecting the environment among the Burmese opposition groups is relatively recent, but it has firmly taken root. Several ethnic environmental organisations, many of them led by young people, have emerged in recent decade. The emergence of the environmental organisations has added a new political dimension to the opposition movement.

*Earth Rights International* (ERI) has provided training and capacity building programs on campaigning, documentation and community mobilisation. Many environmental groups have joined their efforts and formed umbrella conservative groups such as the "*Salween River Watch*" and "*Burma River Network*". Formed in February, 1999, the Salween River Watch group, named after one of the great rivers of Southeast Asia running through China, Burma and Thailand, has provided an opportunity for environmental groups in these countries to work together to protect the river. In Burma, the river runs through various ethnic communities areas in the eastern part the country where there has been civil war for the last five decades. The environment movement to protect the river has provided a great opportunity for different ethnic groups to work together and prevent irresponsible development projects on the river. Other major activities in the environmental movement focus on

the problems caused by deforestation, oil and gas exploration. In Burma, these development activities not only cause damages to the environment but often comes with a heavy human cost because the ruling regime would force local ethnic population out of their land to make way for development projects and members of local communities are often forced to work on land clearing and road building for those projects (Global Witness Oct 2003; The Salween Watch, 2010).

Free Burma Ranger is another organisation which works to expose humanitarian disasters caused by the Burmese army and major 'development' projects. The livelihoods and rights of Burmese ethnic communities in frontier areas have been seriously undermined in the name of 'development'. The Free Burma Ranger workers go inside Burma and reported about the human and environmental cost of development activities to the international community.

Environmental training programs are often run by international conservation organisations. They are usually three to six months live-in programs and normally target young people with tertiary education. The "*Environmental Desk*" or "*E.Desk*" of Images Asia has been working with the Burmese opposition groups since 1989 and has trained Burmese ethnic environmental advocates who then returned to their respective regions and set up their own environmental organisations. Many environmental organisations take on the task of reporting Burma's environmental issues. The environmental movement has created a new frontier for the Burmese's struggle for democracy and social justice.

#### *7.3.4 Type four: human rights, community development and leadership training*

Human rights and community leadership development training programs have been popular among younger generations of ethnic groups. Until recently, these kind of programs took place in refugee camps. In the last decade, however, these programs

have been available to Burmese who are not in refugee camps. As the number of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand continues to grow, with their appalling living conditions they present with pressing social and health problems. Several organisations are now working to improve migrant workers' conditions. There are human rights, community development and leadership training programs provided by Burmese NGOs. In the following table will describe three case studies.

#### *A. Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB)*

The *Human Rights Education Institute of Burma* (HREIB) provides short courses about human rights, children's rights, women's rights and community organising. The HREIB's programs are specifically for members of the grassroots communities and seek to bring about social change. The HREIB was established in 1999 by a former student activist who spent several years documenting human right abuses on the border before setting up a basic human rights education program.

I would describe the HREIB as a non-formal adult education centre that practices learner-centred pedagogy. The HREIB's Training for the Trainers (TOT) program has been particularly successful and has produced several community and human rights trainers and organisers who have returned to their communities and convened local programs there. The lengths of the HREIB programs are varied and they are ranging from a few days (on weekends) to four to five weeks live-in training depending on the group. Trainings for migrant workers is usually short as they normally do not have much time to participate. On the other hand, training for activists and community workers can be four or five weeks long. Most participants in HREIB's programs are younger activists, who work in inside and outside of Burma. The HREIB has published training manuals, books, and posters. In chapter eleven, I will discuss the HREIB's activities in more detail.

### *B. Grassroots Human Right Education and Development (GHRED)*

In 2004, thousands of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand's fishing industry were among those seriously affected by a *tsunami*. In response to the disaster, community re-building programs have been organised to assist these devastated communities. *Grassroots Human Right Education and Development (GHRED)* is one organisation working to promote human rights and safe working environments for Burmese communities in Southern Thailand (*Grassroots Human Rights Education and Development, 2009*).

### *C. INGOs*

There are several international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) that provide education and training programs. Some INGOs run their own training programs while others run them in partnership with local Burmese organisations. One of the organisations that actively promote grassroots democracy is *Burma Rescue Committee (BRC)*. The BRC works closely with local communities in frontier areas, and has introduced self-reliance projects called "village development" program which runs courses for people to become more self-reliant, confident and self-governing.

#### *7.3.5 Type five: Training and internship for community activists and organisers*

*School for Shan State National Youth (SSSNY)* runs by Shan community activists in Chiang Mai and the *Wide Horizon School* run by the World Education in Mae Sot are one-year live-in training programs that aim at improving skills of program participants in organisational, networking, project planning and advanced computer skills. Participants in these programs come from community organisations in the border areas as well as inside Burma. Many participants, after completing the training program, return to work in their respective communities.

### 7.3.6 Type six: Teacher training program

The *National Health and Education Committee* (NHEC) provides the largest assistance to school programs in the Thai-Burma and Indian-Burma border areas. It regularly runs teacher training programs and workshops. Some international NGOs such as *World Education* and *ZOA*, a Dutch NGO, also provide teacher training programs in refugee camps. Thein Lwin, a Burmese educationalist with a doctorate from Newcastle University in England, has introduced teaching in critical thinking to Burmese schools in Thailand and runs annual programs for teachers working inside Burma since 2001 (Education Burma, 2009). A joint program between Burmese scholar activists and the Chiang Mai University has run a course called *Community Development and Community Empowerment* (CDCE) at the University of Chiang Mai for teachers working for community schools inside Burma.

### 7.3.7 Type seven: Workers organisations and labour rights training

There are skills development and advocacy programs for Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. They are often subjected to exploitation and unfair dismissal (Hardman 2011 and Adams 2010). Advocacy organisations such as *Migrant Assistant Program* (MAP) and *Yong Chi Oo* (Burmese for New Dawn) are among the most active organisations that provide assistance and training for migrant workers. They provide emergency accommodation and vocational training for unemployed workers. Some of their programs also provide basic healthcare and worker rights education. The *Human Rights Education Institute of Burma* (HREIB) frequently provides worker rights education and organising skills. Dr. Thein Lwin set up a *Migrant Learning Centre* (MLC) in Chiang Mai in 2005 and has provided language and basic computer skills courses for several thousand participants. Similar training programs for migrant workers are also set up in monasteries in Chiang Mai and in Bangkok by various organisations (Education Burma, 2009).

### 7.3.8 Type eight: Media training

Media has been instrumental in the social change movement in Thai-Burmese cross-border civil society. Modern communication technology such as internet and mobile phone has allowed Burmese media groups in exile to be able to do their work in the way that was not possible in the past. Yossi Cukier (2006) explains

“because the internet makes it easier for people to give their time and knowledge through blogs, discussion forums and the like- it allows for non-monetary, non-market activists that in the past were difficult to co-ordinate and benefit from. This in turn, enable for greater media creation and consumption and even more political participation than before. This promises to bring about greater social justice”.

With the help of modern communication technology, Burmese opposition groups outside of the country have been able not only to get information out of Burma and dispatch to the international community more efficiently, but also inform Burmese living inside Burma who usually do not have access to current affairs and news that are not controlled by the military government’s censorship. The population in Burma, in general, relies on news and information from foreign media sources such as the Burmese program of the *British Broadcasting Corporation* (BBC), *Voice of America* (VOA), *Democratic Voice of Burma* (DVB) and *Radio Free Asia* (RFA). The DVB is a Burmese radio and TV program based in Norway and run by Burmese-in-exile. Although these media organisations are forbidden in Burma, they are popular among local populations. People are able to get news that is not available from the government’s media. During the *Saffron Revolution* in September 2007 when thousands of monks took to the streets and demanded the military regime commit to political reform, the DVB-TV program was able to broadcast the images of the military’s brutality against the monk’s peaceful demonstration. Since the military government did not broadcast the incidents, the people in Burma could only get news from external media sources.

Although print media has been an important form of spreading news and information, internet and on-line media has been fast embraced among the

opposition movement. Burmese media organisations in exile such as the *Irrawaddy* and the *Mizzima* began with a small number of young enthusiastic Burmese activists, and have grown into professional media groups. Their insightful and accurate reports on the country's situation have made them a reliable source of news and information for not only political organisations but among scholars, observers and ambassadors. *Khit Pyaing* (or New Era) newspaper, *Shan Herald News Agency* (SHAN), *Burma Point*, and *Network Media Group* are among the most successful and widely read Burmese media publications based in Thailand.

Internet and blogger websites are the latest instrument in the Burmese media revolution. Although it is risky business, bloggers inside Burma have posted video clips of the military regime's oppression through their blog websites. Their video clips are insightful and often carry images of the military government's brutality against the people. The blog websites have been a popular method of sharing news and information among young people.

In Thailand, since 2000 a journalism school (aka *J. School*) has been set up to provide media skills for members of the Burmese opposition movement. Young people from different ethnic groups have been recruited into *J. School's* training programs where they learn different aspects of media production skills. Graduates move on to work in media organisations or set up their own media group.

#### **7.4 A critique of Burmese political literacy and training program in Thailand**

As my survey of programs illustrate, there is an encouraging depth and breadth of political literacy and community-based advocacy practice in the Thai-Burma border region that serves the Burmese democracy movement. I will, however, dare to



undertake a critical discussion that is informed by a political and theoretical position that is informed by traditions of popular education. I say dare because it may seem divisive and mean-spirited to be critical of some features of political advocacy and literacy programs. I present this critique with a commitment to broad solidarity and an intention to extend and strengthen the movement. Broadly speaking, I think there is insufficient commitment to participatory and experiential approaches to political literacy practice in the Burmese democracy movement.

#### *7.4.1 Education is schooling*

A close examination reveals that Burmese opposition groups' interest in education is largely confined to schooling education. When talk about education, many opposition members refer to schooling as the only form of education. Therefore, a large part of their effort focuses on providing formal schooling. The education strategy of the *National Health and Education Committee* (NHEC), the largest education provider for Burmese in Thailand and in frontier areas solely focused on providing formal schooling. Thein Naing, the academic co-ordinator of the NHEC reported that the NHEC assisted more than 800 schools for children inside Burma and in the areas of Thai-Burma and Indian-Burma border in 2006-2007 (excerpt from interviewing Thein Naing 11/08/2007).

In Burmese education system, young people have been taught to absolutely respect older people, teachers and senior ranking officials. Burmese students are generally familiar with learning by rote. There is also a common assumption among members of opposition groups that everyone in the opposition movement is anti-military regime and understands how democracy works. I have observed that teaching and learning methods in training programs often rely on didactic presentations of information and facts, and focus on technical skills development. Since this naïve consciousness (Freire's three level of consciousness and their implication to the

Burmese democracy movement was discussed in chapter two) has persisted, meaningful debates are discouraged by such assumptions and generalisations. In an online debate, a Burmese activist responded to a prominent Burmese commentator, Professor Kanbawza Win, the former Foreign Affairs Secretary to the Prime Minister of Burma and currently a Senior Research Fellow at the European Institute of Asian Studies, says

“...for any democratic lover/activist to have political tolerance toward dissents and ability to work together even with the people who are impressed by our weakness or negative aspect of our activity is essential as this must be one of our most important differences from those of the regime leaders’ political practices. To value other’s ideas, opinions, and feelings is an essential leadership quality for our needed political and historical challenge.” (Personal email exchange between the two on the subject of “Are the Burmese People Fit for Democracy?” appeared in the Reader’s Opinion column of on an online media called *Kao Wao* (24/12/2003) run by the Mon ethnic independent media group.)

Among Burmese opposition groups, it is a common belief that anti-military dictatorship and democracy are the same, and, as a result, the need to improve their capacity to participate, organise and respect other’s opinions and ideas is overlooked. A Burma supporter, Professor Roland Simbulan (2007) of the University of the Philippines, and a senior fellow at the *Centre for People’s Empowerment in Governance* (CENPEG) remarks

“Democracy is about an awaken citizen at the critical mass, organised and unorganised, that can make their government accountable, transparent and fundamental rights needs and aspirations, where the fundamental rights of the people are respected, even for those who are a minority. It is about waking up the consciousness of the people, developing their full potential as human beings, bringing people together in a true spirit of debate, dialogue, consensus and participation to provoke change in public and state policy. This is the fundamental deficit in Burma’s struggle for democracy...”

#### *7.4.2 Elite level approach to change*

There are various legal advocacy programs some of which are substantially funded offering a 12 month residential study experience. For a description of these programs, see my survey below. But these programs focus mostly on teaching about the institutional structures of representative democracies rather than possibilities for grassroots and participatory democracy. Furthermore, only the 'elite' or established 'leaders' have the time and cultural capital to participate. Such programs perpetuate the idea that democratic changes can only be made through reforming or restructuring government system. Democratic change at the grassroots level and community based social change activities are often overlooked.

I observed that that mostly young people with formal education were given priority in political literacy programs. Here it should be noted that to have formal education, in the case of the Burmese opposition movement in Thailand, means that these young people have graduated from Burma's universities, have extensive schooling experience and some English language skills. They are also likely to come from well-to-do families. There is also a gender dimension to this elitism. Burmese middle class boys are given preference above girls, and therefore have better chance to go to university if the family can afford so. Most young Burmese university students rely on their parents' support until they complete their university education. In fact, many never work and so have little experience in making their own living. Because of they have few life-skills and little understanding of the social reality of the grassroots. The education system under the dictatorship rules for more than five decades, as I argue in chapter two, has been designed to serve the interest of the ruling elite, and students at the Burmese university are likely to be de-politicised by the education system. Young graduates who come to Thailand to participate in political training programs find it hard to understand the underlying social and

economic problems of their country and often see leadership as a handed down duty.

The strong hierarchical organisational practice among opposition groups also creates a problem for training programs to get suitable participants. As organisational hierarchical practices remains important, favourism and bias also prevail (Brown 1994 and South 2004). A young person with strong political or family connection in the organisation has better chance than someone who may be more suitable to participate in the training program but does not have important political connection. Training providers or agencies which often come from outside of the organisations are usually unable to influence the process of choosing participants for the training program or persons to represent an organisation. As a result, many suitable and sincerely committed participants have missed out on training programs they deserve.

#### *7.4.3 Women organisations and the opposition movement*

In the last decade, women organisations have become one of the most vocal voices in the Burmese opposition movement and have gained support with women from all walks of life. Women's organisations highlight issues such as economic disadvantage, innocent victims of the civil war, human rights abuses and violence against women. In contrast to Latin American women's movement experiences which began with non-political activities Burmese women in Thailand had clear political aims and objectives as they established their organisations. This is because Burmese women activists in Thailand live in exile and many were active members in political organisations long before they joined women's organisations. An important contribution women's organisations make to the wider democracy movement is the way they develop and practice participatory and creative ways of working. They

pay attention to the everyday experiences of a diverse range of women and this informs their political literacy practices.

#### *7.4.4 Funding bodies*

Most Burmese cross-border civil society organisations rely on funding from international non-government organisations (INGOs) or donor countries that support the emergence of an open society and democracy in Burma. Political literacy activities of Burmese NGOs and opposition groups are, therefore, directly influenced by their funding bodies' guidelines and principles.

The (original) funding body behind a Burmese NGOs and their activities in Thailand may not always be easy to be identified. Many local Burmese NGOs or community based organisations usually receive funding from multiple sources to finance their different programs and activities. Some major donors that openly support Burmese civil society organisations in Thailand are the *Open Society Institute (OSI)*, the *National Endowment for Democracy (NED)*, *Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)*, the *Euro-Burma Office (EBO)* based in Belgium, *ZOA* (a Dutch NGOs), *World Education*, the *Border Rescue Committee (BRC)*, *United Nation for High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR)*, the *International Rescue Committee (IRC)*, the *Thai-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC)* and unidentified various sources of supporters. Some donors such as the NED and the EBO usually provide funding to projects and programs, while some large INGOs such as OSI, World Education and ZOA run their own training programs in Thailand and border areas. In some cases, local NGOs form umbrella groups based on the similarity of their objectives and project activities to avoid competing for funds. NGOs operating school programs in Mae Sot have formed a working committee among themselves for the purpose of fund seeking (notes from my field visit in August 2007).

#### *7.4.5 Moving beyond training to political literacy*

Donor organisations and INGOs may intend that their activities strengthen democratic culture but a close review of the content of several programs reveals that their focus is on technical skills and functional knowledge. In effect, they may deliver effective training but do little to develop political literacy. I see this as a serious shortcoming. The Burmese opposition movement, by and large, is still hoping for a miracle and external intervention. In the meantime the capacity for building democracy has been hindered due to lack of self-criticism and interest in political literacy among members of opposition groups. This problem is evident and can be seen in the dramatic decline of the morale among younger generation. In the last few years, many young people in the movement, especially those who do not have opportunity to apply their skills and knowledge have chosen to abandon the movement either for survival reason or they have lost hope in the movement (Shah Paung 2007). Even some people who work in the movement for many years revealed little confidence for change as they began to see no difference between the hierarchical structure of the opposition groups and the structure of the military regime. This is leading to a 'brain drain' which is a serious problem, especially in refugee camps the Thai-Burma border region as young activists choose to leave Thailand to settle in third countries. As a consequence, the opposition movement has lost capable people.

My critique of political literacy and education programs is by no means intended to discredit training programs which in many ways contribute useful knowledge and skills needed in the movement. However, the deficit in the central concept of democracy and the development of critical consciousness cannot be left unquestioned if the opposition movement in Thailand is to successfully build a democratic future.

This moral crisis can be turned around when the spirit of democracy is up-lifted again and the opposition groups review the organisational cultural practices that have prevailed for many decades. New ideas and approaches may not be comfortable for people in dominant positions. The opposition will need to move beyond conventional resistance approaches and place their effort in empowering the grassroots population which eventually will become the strength of the democracy movement. The leaders of the opposition will need to work more closely with the grassroots in order to better understand their feelings, sufferings and desires, and more importantly gain their trust. Political literacy programs can develop the capacity of grassroots groups to participate in discussions about the issues and challenges they face. But the role grassroots groups do and can further play in resistance and democracy-building is not readily visible. This is a challenge for the Burmese opposition take on. Vinthagen (2007) observes

“between 1988 and 2006 Burma has been a case of what James Scott calls the ‘hidden transcripts’ of everyday resistance. The opposition has rarely been visible in public but it was very alive underground, behind the backs of regime, taking more subtle forms. This kind of resistance is a lot more difficult to detect but it has been there, built on the popular criticism of the military junta, evident in the overwhelming election victory of the democracy opposition party 1990.... the hidden resistance has obviously built a resistance culture that is strong enough for the popular uprising we see today” ( p. 1).

The task for the opposition force is to foster this hidden resistance into a more forceful movement for change. More than two million Burmese migrant workers and 150 thousand refugees are a force for change rather than as social and economic burden which has been portrayed by the Thai media and the Burmese military regime.

This dissertation will now move to stage three of the thesis which examines teaching and learning democracy in everyday experiences of some members of selected grassroots communities. Begin with three Burmese community activists’ learning

experiences in their journey to become “*circumstantial*” or “*accidental*” activists (Ollis 2010) and the importance of their personal experiences in learning to develop perspectives changes in the next chapter, and for the next four chapters, the discussion will focus on my field research findings of informal adult educational activities in community settings and among Burmese migrant workers.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **Learning to become activists: Experiences of three Burmese community activists in Thailand**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

This dissertation has, so far, discussed disempowered citizens, internalised fear, the rigid social hierarchy in Burmese society and the lack of strategy for grassroots movement, and presented arguments in favour of an educational process which strengthens grassroots activists and their role in strengthening democracy at local community level. Active citizens promote “social responsibility” and “common good” (Daloz 2000). In this chapter I will describe and discuss three Burmese grassroots activists’ learning experiences.

There is little research about the pedagogy of activism in cross-border civil society, and particularly, none about grassroots activism. Members of Burmese grassroots communities in Thailand are largely migrant workers and they are, generally, pre-occupied with survival and, usually, they see politics far from their everyday experience and themselves as having no power or capacity to contribute to the democracy movement. However, my study reveals that Burmese migrant workers are a potential source of grassroots activism and some are already making a contribution to the Burmese democracy movement by being actively engaged in local grassroots social movement activities and there is much to be learned from these efforts.

In this chapter, I argue that Burmese grassroots individuals and groups have experiences and knowledge to become active citizens and their experiences are significant sources of learning to become activists or active citizens.

Burmese grassroots activism in Thailand is about advocating for the rights of Burmese migrant workers and refugees in Thailand. In the process of advocacy, activists learn to overcome their internalised fear, engage in emancipatory learning and transform their worldviews. Burmese grassroots activists in Thailand become so due to a series of changes in life circumstances and are motivated by personal or social issues, or by facilitating their transition from one life-phase to another (Ollis 2010, p. 8). I find that the terms used by Tracy Ollis in her study of activists resonate. She compares '*life-long activists*' with what she calls '*circumstantial or accidental activists*.' The latter often lack the skills and ability when they decide to join movements, and have to rapidly learn to make up the skills they need (Ollis 2010). Lack of political freedom in Burma has allowed little room for its citizens to learn to become activists, and this has made most Burmese activists 'accidental' or 'circumstantial' activists. 'Accidental activists', in contrast to 'life-long activists', have not had political training and education (McAdam 1986), and so they draw on their own experiences to construct new meanings or viewpoint of their new circumstances and encounters.

Experiences in everyday activities are an essential source for our own meaning formation and our understanding of the world around us, and some of our experiences lead to emancipatory learning. John Dewey in his volume *Experience and Education*, postulates that '*all genuine education comes about through experience*' (1975 p. 25). Experience happens in different places and at different times, but they form

*“connected thinking blocks”* which previous experiences inform and shape the way learners construct meaning of the present experience (Dewey 1975).

Accidental or circumstantial activists’ learning experiences in Burmese cross-border civil society can be seen to entail *‘informal and social learning’*, *‘perspective transformation’*, *‘emancipatory learning’* and *‘emotional embodied learning’*.

## **8.2 Informal and Social learning**

Learning is defined and shaped by social and cultural factors, and is therefore informal and socially situated (Lave & Wenger 1991). Quoting Henning Salling Olsen (1989 p. 68), Knud Illeris reaffirms learning as socially constructed consciousness.

“Experience is a collective process because when we experience as individual we also do so through a socially structured consciousness” “the concept of experience is active, it creates coherence, it is critical and it is creative; it is also collective. The socialised individual cannot experience individually” (2002, p 197).

Whelan (2005), Branagan & Boughton (2003), Foley (1999), Newman (1994) and Horton & Freire (1970) all note that social and informal conversation is a significant form of learning for activists who engage in social movements and communities (Ollis 2010, p 39).

Griff Foley (1999) observed that learning occurs informally and incidentally in people’s everyday lives. He explained that the struggle against oppression is, in fact,

a process of learning for the oppressed to understand the world around them. Foley remarked

“...the most interesting and significant learning occurs informally and incidentally, in people’s everyday lives. And some of the most powerful learning occurs as people struggle against oppression, as they struggle to make sense of what is happening to them and to work out ways of doing something about it” (1999, p. 1).

Eraut (2000) reminds us that learning that occurs through socialisation is often tacit or implied (Ollis 2010, p. 34), and activists’ learning is often incidental and informal (Whelan 2005). Branagan and Boughton (2003), Foley (1999), Mayo (1999) and Newman (2006) all highlight that activists gain new skills, new ways of knowing and construct new meaning of the world around them through participating in social movements and with one another (Ollis 2010, p. 31).

### **8.3 Perspective transformation**

Perspective transformation, according to Jack Mezirow (1991) is about learning to transform oneself by reflecting on one’s own experience. Perspective transformation is an integral process of adult development. For transformative learning to take place, one must shift from taken-for granted meaning perspectives and values to a mindset which is more inclusive, reflective, open-minded and emotionally capable of change (Mezirow 2000). Mezirow develops two notions of meaning; ‘*meaning scheme*’ and ‘*meaning perspective*’. By ‘*meaning scheme*’ he refers to beliefs, attitudes or specific emotional reactions inherent to the way one interprets an experience, a situation or a problem. Meaning schemes are produced by former interpretations and understanding, therefore, often unconscious and taken-for-granted meanings that have not been consciously analysed. ‘*Meaning perspective*’ refers to systematic habits of anticipation that allow one to assimilate new experiences. Meaning

perspectives act like filters through which one discriminates and interprets the world, but they are not necessary rational (Alhadeff-Jone 2010). These two notions help us to understand that meanings and assumptions are not politically neutral: without political consciousness and critical reflection meaning-making can be subjected to reproduction of domination. In this regard, Stephen Brookfield reminds us of the importance of distinguishing between '*transforming habits of mind*' and '*transforming structure*' (2000, p. 143-4).

In order to learn and transform oneself, one has to be able to reflect on one's own experience (Mezirow 1991) and become more aware of the source of one's values and assumptions and able to change to more inclusive understanding. Although transformative learning focuses on deep change in individuals' frame of reference, it can change broader systems and structures. Daloz (2000) argues that transformative learning can be used in learning '*social responsibility*' and to build '*the common good*' in society.

For Burmese circumstantial activists in Thailand, the concept of perspective transformation is relevant as they struggle against not only the oppressive system but also to overcome internalised fear and the Burmese dictatorial hegemony. With Freire's liberation pedagogy in mind, Mezirow's perspective transformation theory provides us with tools to challenge social oppression.

#### **8.4 Everyday experience and emancipatory learning**

Oppression is an act of dehumanisation. Experiences and encounters of the oppressed help them make meanings of their social reality and shape their worldviews. Because previous experience forms the background of our interpretation and understanding about the meaning of current experience,

dominant values and worldviews unconsciously influence our meaning making (Boud and Miller 1996; Dewey 1938).

However, everyday experience can also be emancipatory since the oppressed are capable of learning from their experience and critically reflect (Foley 1999; Boud and Miller 1996). Foley explains that

“People’s everyday experience reproduces ways of thinking and acting which support the, often oppressive, status quo, but.... This same experience also produces recognitions which enable people to critique and challenge the existing order” (1999, p. 3-4).

Michael Newman argues that emancipatory learning must focus on learning to understand the oppressors’ values, cultures, ideologies, motives and delusions (1994, p. 144). What he suggests is that by learning to understand the oppressors and their hidden oppressive ideology, learners would learn to become more outward-looking and ultimately will lead them to take actions to change the status quo.

### **8.5 Embodied learning and the importance of emotion in learning**

In her study of activists’ learning behaviours Ollis (2008) claims that learning is embodied and activists’ feeling, emotion, intuition, passion anger, and the use of the whole person is central to how activists make meaning and their way of knowing. Activists use emotions, reason, cognition and the physical body to make meaning (Ollis 2010). Jesson & Newman (2006) explain that by participating in social movement activities, activists develop instrumental knowledge about systems of government and politics (Ollis 2010, p. 14). Schön (1987) highlights that activists’ learning is informal and often rooted in the *‘junk category of knowledge’* which refers to learning associated with activists’ concrete material experiences of the world which they inhabit (Ollis 2012 p.14).

Emotions are a significant part of all social life and connected to a deep sense of our knowing and understanding. Emotions are more than a state of mind, but they display and constitute our ideas, identities and interests (Jasper 1998, p. 399). In the domain of learning, it is widely understood that emotion is a significant connection between learners' deep understanding and the curriculum (Hunter 2004; Beckett & Morris 2003; Beckett & Hager 2002; Freire 1974). Freire's (1970) *'The Pedagogy of the Oppressed'* makes a clear connection between mind and emotions. For Freire, teaching is an act of love. David Boud and Nod Miller claim emotion and feeling are key pointers to both possibilities and barriers in learners' ability to learn and make meanings (1996, p. 8-11). In their study of environmental activists, Kovan & Dirkx (2003, p. 109) claim that activists are motivated primarily by both intellectual and emotional urges. Eyerman (2005) reveals that emotions such as love, desire and hope can help strengthen solidarity in a group or movement (Ollis 2010, p. 172). My field study reveals that emotions were important in the learning experiences of Burmese grassroots activists in Thailand.

As discussed above, activists' learning encompass informal, social, emancipatory, perspective transformational and emotional aspects, activists' everyday experiences can also be a significant source of their emancipatory learning. I will look at learning experiences of three Burmese community activists; a community health worker, an environmentalist and a women's rights activist, based in Thailand.

## **8.6 Brief background of the activists**

I choose to look at three Burmese accidental or circumstantial activists; a community health worker, an environmental activist and a women rights activist, and in all three cases reveal that they experienced perspective transformation and most of their learning occurs in informal and social contexts. All three activists came to Thailand as migrant workers with an aim to work and go back home to Burma when they had earned enough. Like most of the more than two million Burmese migrant workers in Thailand, these three activists came to Thailand because of poverty and had little or no experience in political activities. By connection or by chance, they become 'circumstantial' or 'accidental' activists (Ollis 2010), and have been involved in advocacy organisations. The activists quickly learnt new skills and knowledge, and more importantly developed critical consciousness through their critical reflection on their experiences and actions. I will focus on how they have learned to grow through their journey to become activists. I will examine their learning experiences and factors that have helped them learn to become proficient activists.

### *8.6.1 Learning from experiences in an oppressive environment*

Ko Aung Myo (pseudo name) is a community health worker who works with Burmese illegal migrant workers in the city of Ma Ha Chai, an industrial town about twenty miles from the city of Bangkok, Thailand. Ma Ha Chai is a fishing port and has hundreds of food packaging factories where more than two hundred thousand Burmese migrants live and work. Ko Aung Myo started working with an NGO called *Protection of HIV/Aids among Migrant Workers in Thailand* (PHAMIT) in 2004. Ko Aung Myo is not only well known for his helpfulness but also trusted by members of Burmese migrant communities in Ma Ha Chai. Before becoming a community health worker, Ko Aung Myo worked in various factories in the area. His insightful knowledge of migrant workers' situations has made him well known among the Thai authorities, the media and policy makers, and he has been able to



make positive contributions to the development of the Thai government's policies toward Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. Ko Aung Myo spent almost all his life as an illegal migrant worker working in seafood sorting and packing factories until he joined the PHAMIT in 2004, and his life experience as a migrant worker gives him in-depth knowledge of Burmese illegal migrant workers' lives in Thailand.

Ko Aung Myo, a forty year old man, was brought to Thailand as a young boy when his parents came to work in Thailand thirty years ago. He worked in several different factories, mainly seafood sorting and packaging, in Ma Ha Chai. Ma Ha Chai's fishing industry is notorious for its exploitation of migrant workers (Weng 2010 and Cho 2008). Since a young age, he has lived and worked in Ma Ha Chai.

Seafood sorting and packaging is a labour intensive industry and has attracted Burmese illegal migrant workers who generally work in low-skilled labourer jobs. In the last decade, the number of Burmese migrant workers coming to Ma Ha Chai has increased rapidly as the Burmese economy has continued to decline. Thousands of Burmese migrant workers have flocked into the area and filled factories. It was estimated that in 2007, more than two hundred thousand Burmese migrant workers lived and worked in Ma Ha Chai area alone (interview with Ko Aung Myo on 10 Sept 2007). Burmese migrant workers, because of their illegal status and language barrier, are easy prey for corrupt local authorities and exploitative employers. The workers are regularly targeted and harassed by corrupt police officers seeking to make quick money.

Ko Aung Myo had a few years of schooling in Burma and had no opportunity to attend school again since coming to Thailand. He cannot read and write Burmese but

has learnt to speak Thai fluently. He recalled how he was exploited by his employers and saw how many young women migrant workers were physically mistreated by the Thai authorities, usually the local police. He observed that the migrant workers usually did not know where to turn to. He has always been unhappy with the situation that Burmese migrant workers face.

Ko Aung Myo could not understand why the Thai people see Burmese migrant workers as a problem in their society while the migrant workers do *Dirty, Difficulty and Dangerous* (3Ds) jobs – slang terms - that the Thai do not want to do and they are paid poorly (Arnold 2007). He argues migrant workers are being used as a political scapegoat. The harsh conditions of Burmese migrant workers, who are regularly abused and exploited by their employers and corrupt authorities, is rarely seen in the media. Mg Aung Myo wanted to do something to help his fellow Burmese.

In 2000, a health promotion agency for migrant workers called *Protection of HIV/Aids among Migrant Workers in Thailand* (PHAMIT) was set up in the area by a Thai NGO to promote sexual health and assist Burmese migrant workers community in Maha Chai. In the beginning, the organisation employed some Burmese health workers to work with Burmese migrant workers. However, the migrant workers found the community health workers were unhelpful. Ko Aung Myo explained;

“The (Burmese) health workers spoke very authoritative language. Most Burmese health workers come from big cities in Burma and are educated, but they know very little about the reality of Burmese migrant workers in Maha Chai” “ they had passport and work permits so they could work in NGOs, but they did not understand the life of migrant workers and they did not know how to relate to us... what they usually did was distributed health information pamphlets and went away”... “no one in the community could attend their meetings or health workshops because they organised those meetings during the time when people were not free” “they could not go to living places of

migrant workers because they did not know the people” ‘I was wondering in the beginning what those health workers were doing... I did not understand the NGOs’ work” (excerpt from interview 10 Sept 2007).

In 2002, Ko Aung Myo volunteered to help the health workers as he began to understand that the NGO was trying to address migrant workers’ health issues. He took time off from his factory work and attended basic health trainings provided by the NGO. As an ‘*accidental*’ or ‘*circumstantial*’ activist, Ko Aung Myo’s learning is holistic and arises from personal experience (Boud and Miller 1996), and he rapidly acquired skills he needed to become an activist (Ollis 2010). He quickly learnt how he could promote community health among migrant workers. He knew most people in the community and how to relate to them. His ability to relate to people and effectiveness was noticed by the management body of the NGO. His fluency in Thai language has also been helpful to communicate with Thai NGO workers and the Thai authorities in the area.

Ko Aung Myo is now the coordinator of a community health service project of the PHAMIT. His in-depth knowledge of migrant workers’ lives has gained him the respect and acknowledgement of the Thai academics and decision makers. Ko Aung Myo is a good communicator and able to articulate clearly the plight of Burmese migrant workers in Ma Ha CHai. He helped de-mystify the image of the reality of Burmese illegal migrant workers. Ko Aung Myo explained;

“The media often shows only the negative side of migrant workers, many Thais, in general, think Burmese migrant workers bring disease to their country. I told the media, when they interviewed me, most Burmese migrant workers came from rural areas of Burma where they lived a healthy life and now they are living in city life, in abhorrent living conditions and are paid poorly. They are made to work long hours and in unhealthy working conditions. Employers do not provide appropriate health care. Because of exploitation and maltreatment some migrant workers were in poor health,

they did not have the disease or bring the disease from Burma" (excerpt from interview on 10 Sept 2007).

Ko Aung Myo demonstrates that his first-hand, everyday experience is the source of his learning. These experiences enable him to see not only what has been happening to his fellow Burmese migrant workers, but he has also learnt to understand the way the oppressive system works to serve a particular group's interest and how illegal migrant workers have been victimised.

Ko Aung Myo's learning is embodied; his feelings, anger and emotion are significant stimuli in helping him to critically assess the situations and gain a deeper understanding the social reality. His personal experiences as an illegal migrant worker, his insightful knowledge of the dark world of (illegal) migrant workers and his intimate relationship with other migrant workers allow him to develop a trusting relationship with them. Ko Aung Myo himself understands that trust is the most important in this kind of job. He said:

"You really need to have closeness and trust of migrant workers to work with them effectively. Many migrant workers do not understand the nature of NGOs' work and they generally do not trust health workers. They think you (community health worker) are working for the Thai authority and usually do not want to cooperate unless you know them personally or have some trustful relationships between you and them. I am lucky because I have been living in this area for more than thirty years and I know most people and local networks. They trust me as one of them. I and my colleagues also really care about the welfare of our people here (excerpt from interview on 10 Sept 2007)."

Ko Aung Myo has been regularly invited to participate in community consultation workshops and conferences on migrant workers. His views and arguments for migrant workers have been observed by the authorities and progressive politicians.

He has been able to articulate his views to the Thai public and influence Thai policies toward migrant workers.

Ko Aung Myo believes the media can play a role in making changes. Ko Aung Myo knew who can change these negative images of migrant workers, and he got his message out via influential groups such as policy makers, advocates, academics and the media. Migrant workers' abhorrent situations have been exposed to the Thai public. Ko Aung Myo explained;

“...whenever I have a chance to inform policy makers, academic and the media I often tell them that the Burmese migrant workers in Thailand have been misunderstood and victimised. The Thai (authorities) are often surprised whenever I explain to them the real situation of Burmese migrant workers and the problems they are facing. I also argue that our welfare is important for the Thai economy. The better the migrant workers know about health issues, the more they will be careful about their own health and this is good for the factories to have worker with good health knowledge. Otherwise, workers' health problem becomes the problem in workplaces. Many factories in MaHa Chai are food packaging factories so health and hygienic knowledge is very important. The better the workers are educated about health issues the safer the produces will be. The business community agrees with this argument but they are still slow to put resources into health education such as allowing workers to attend health training.....” (excerpt from interview with Ko Aung Myo on 10 Sept 2007).”

Ko Aung Myo is able to make critical analysis of his oppressors' values and the way the system works to oppress the workers, and at the same time he is self-reflective and understands that the worldviews of most Burmese migrant workers have been influenced by the values and beliefs of the dominant groups. I see this as emancipatory learning.

He works in a team of five Burmese health workers and he has been a role model. He “walks the talk”, and is fair to his colleagues. He demonstrates ways of working “with” not “for” the people. His attitude and willingness to do advocacy work has

gained him respect and trust among people. Ko Aung Myo makes clear his emotional connection with his colleagues. In 2006, when the PHAMIT planned to restructure the organisation and decided to terminate employment of some of his work colleagues, he proposed to take lower payment to enable his colleagues retain their jobs.

In the case of Ko Aung Myo, he has developed '*really useful knowledge*' which is concerned with emancipation of workers and promotes alternative analyses and collective action (Johnson 1993; Flowers 2009). He is able to conceptualise the reality of everyday life of migrant workers and analyse the experiences in a way that makes sense to others. His learning experiences were holistic, embodied and emancipatory.

#### *8.6.2 Nang Si Pang's learning in social action*

A young Shan ethnic woman, Nang Si Pang (pseudo name), came to Thailand in 2005 to look for work after completing her study in English and Physics from Toung Gyi College in Burma. The prospect for employment for young graduates in Burma is not so bright and many have ventured to Thailand to find a means to support themselves and their family. In Chiang Mai, the capital city of Northern Thailand, Nang Si Pang met a friend working in a Shan environmental organisation called "*Sa Pa Wa*", a Shan-Pali word for nature. Nang Si Pang, who is a keen learner, volunteered in campaigns and has developed an interest in environmentalism. Later in the year, she attended a six-month (live-in) environmental training program ran by an INGO called *Earth Right International* (ERI) under the name of the *Mekong* (named after the Great Mekong River) *School*.

For more than a decade, environmental NGOs such as *Earth Right International* have provided environmental education and trainings for young people from Burma. Environmental problems in Burma such as deforestation, top soil loss through poor agricultural practices, poorly planned and regulated mining practices that have caused population displacement as well as environmental damages, and dam construction in major rivers mainly in ethnic minorities' areas have been going on for years and largely unnoticed by the outside world. Environmental training programs empower participants to take up their own issues and graduates of these programs went on to set up their own environmental organisations. Most Burmese ethnic minority groups based along the Thai-Burma border now have their own environmental organisations and these organisations monitor and report on major mining activities and dam projects on major rivers in their areas to the international communities. Ethnic environmental organisations based along the Thai-Burma border have formed networks among themselves and with international organisations. The *Burma River Network* is one of the largest environmental alliance groups that has been formed to protect major rivers from unsustainable damming practices in Burma. In 2006, the *Burma River Network* launched a campaign to protect construction of a major dam on the Salween River, one of the three major rivers in Burma, proposed by a joint venture between a Thai construction company and Burmese authorities. The river begins in China and runs through Burma's Shan State to the North, passes through Thai-Burma border in the Mon and the Karen states of Burma and ends in the Andaman Sea. The river is one of the longest in Southeast Asia and has been under the threat of damming by the Chinese and Thai construction corporations and the Burmese military regime provide protection for those projects located in Burma. The damming projects on this river will alter the river's course and cause major damage to the ecosystem of the river. Local population and communities will be displaced from their homes as a result of these damming projects. The campaign gained worldwide attention and was able to contribute to the halt of the construction of the dam in the Salween River.

Nang Si Pang is passionate about preserving Burma's natural environment and preventing human rights violations associated with major development projects. She later moved to work in a larger and well established environmental organisation called *Environmental Desk (E.Desk)* of the *Images Asia*, an NGO which has been working to promote the environmental and human rights issues and to empower local populations to protect the environment. Nang Si Pang, in a short time, has learned to become an effective grassroots networker and environmental campaigner. She has learned how to conduct and plan grassroots campaigns and use technology such as computer mapping and documentation to support campaigns.

As a learner Nang Si Pang was challenged to critically assess her own assumptions and values. In other words she experienced 'unlearning.' Unlearning is about knowing the same matter in a new way and that new knowing usually change our worldview or an aspect of it. Boud, Cohen & Walker explain

"Unlearning takes place when experiences necessitate a conceptual reordering of the whole or a part of one's worldview. This process not only puts us in touch with our ignorance but it provides a basis for coming to know ourselves by coming to access our inner knowing..... in coming to know ourselves, we transform ourselves. In transforming ourselves, we transform society..." (1993, p. 96).

Being exposed to a new way of teaching and learning in her environmental training has also been useful for Nang Si Pang. She found teaching and learning in the training was different to that of rote teaching and learning practices in Burma. In her experience of schooling in Burma she never had an opportunity to put theory into practice. Here in the environmental training in Thailand she learnt to theorise about



practice and was allowed to take her own initiatives. Ollis (2010, p. 14) explains circumstantial activists learn '*out of their comfort zone*'. Nan Si Pang explained:

" it was very difficult in the beginning because I was not used to interactive teaching and learning and I had language difficulty.... open discussion was very hard ...it took me a long time to be able to speak up my own opinions in front of people...". (excerpt from interview on 4 Sept 2007)

Nang Si Pang is now an experienced grassroots campaigner. She is passionate about her job and able to describe local environmental issues and critique the Burmese government's policies and laws.

Sharon Merriam & Rosemary Caffarella explain that experience is the starting point in reflection and a critical reflective manner is a necessary condition for transformation (1999, p. 332). By participating in environmental campaign activities, Nang Si Pang gained experiences that took her understanding onto a new level as the following comment by her reveals.

"... environmental problems and policy crisis are closely linked. I came to realise this better when participating in an anti-dam campaign. The lack of a good policy to govern the environment is a real big problem in Burma" (excerpt from interview on 4 Sept 2007).

Reaching a new level of political knowledge and consciousness is necessary to become a well-informed or active citizen (Merriam & Caffarella 1999, p. 254). Ollis (2010, p. 8) explains circumstantial or accidental activists are often motivated by personal circumstance or a particular social issue. The experience in the past has influenced Nang Si Pang's outlook and formed the foundation of her new understanding of environment problems. It is her past experiences that help her see beyond her personal needs and concerns and see her role as an advocate for the

environment. Making connection with the past experiences and a reflection of the current experience make her enter into wider perception of the world. As she recalled:

“... when I went back inside the country last time, I saw how the environment was devastated by human activities such as rubber and palm oil plantation, excessive logging and mining. I was very saddened. ...I want to know more about the environment and go back to help people become more aware of the environmental issues.... If people know the impact and effect of their activities that cause damages to the environment, they would change the way they do things. But the government’s policies are very crucial to prevent these from happening. People should be given support and options to change....” “most people are poor and have no other option to change their way of life without support” ...“the Burmese government sees only the short-term gains from major constructions and ignore the damages to the environment those projects cause, and profit has been put before people’s lives...”. (excerpt from interview on 4 Sept 2007)

Nang Si Pang has demonstrated that her passion for the environment and motivation to become an advocate for the environment has arisen from her personal experience. Her experiences involve ‘unlearning’ and ‘learning out of her comfort zone’. Her personal experiences, as building blocks, certainly helped her to reconstruct new perspectives and make new meanings. Her emancipatory learning experience is that she learns to understand not only oppressive methods of the Burmese military regime but also how the system is created to maintain social and economic injustice.

### *8.6.3 Mu Sae’s perspective change experiences*

Back in 1988, Mu Sae (pseudo name) was a ten year old girl in a small town in Burma’s Karenni State not far from Thai- Burma border. After the 1988 uprising, the economy in the area declined dramatically. Mu Sae was thirteen years old when her parents decided to leave for Thailand in 1989.

Mu Sae and her younger brother were left behind in the care of their grandmother as their parents went to find jobs in Thailand. For the next five years her parents regularly sent money to the grandmother to support them. On a school summer holiday in 2003, Mu Sae came to Thailand to visit her parents and ended up working in a food shop to make some money before going back to school. However, she did not end up going back to school that year but continued working as a shop assistant in Mae Hong Song in Northern Thailand hoping to make more money for school fees for the following year. However, Mu Sae's dream of going back home and school faded away and instead she ended up working in Thailand.

After a couple years working in Mae Hong Song, she moved to Chiang Mai and worked in a garment factory where she became more aware of other Burmese migrant workers who were in similar situations; they face all kinds of discrimination at work. In 2005, when working in a garment factory she had a chance to attend a human and workers' rights training program ran by the *Human Rights Education Institution of Burma* (HREIB). Mu Sae recounted:

“...a friend in the factory told me about the (HREIB) group which traveled around Thailand to provide trainings to migrant workers. It was a three days training in a hidden area in Northern Chiang Mai. It was during one of migrant workers' rare holidays. ....the training was an eye-opening experience and very encouraging. I met many people who faced the same fate as me. I came to understand better that working conditions for (illegal) migrant workers in different places were all the same. People in the training I met were unhappy with their working conditions and the way they were treated. After the training I did not feel lonely anymore. I made many friends in the training. One of them introduced me to a member of the Burmese Women Union (BWU) who later took me to the office of the BWU where I met many other members.....”  
(excerpt from interview on 12 Sept 2007)

Mu Sae was interested in activities at the office of the *Burmese Women Union* (BWU) and for the next few months she visited the office whenever she could. At first, she was there just to talk to some friends, then later she helped do some work in the office and campaigns. After one year of regular contact with the BWU she decided to do full-time volunteering work where she was paid a small amount and provided with a place to stay.

“... I did volunteering work for one year at the BWU. It was a life-changing experience. I have changed the way I understand the world I live in. I used to think poverty was a kind of sin or “*Karma*”. I used to think the military government is doing the right thing for the people and believed in its propagandas. I did not have alternative views before and just accepted the way things were. Work experiences at the BWU have changed all my understanding. I am now very aware of injustices in society and the way women are marginalised in Burmese society, especially, in many important decision making matters. I do not regret joining the BWU and enjoy working with the organisation. I still do not have a specific position or specialised role as many other BWU members do. I have just been assigned to work in different projects. They have been good experiences for me...” (excerpt from interview on 12 Sept 2007).

Early in 2007, the BWU decided to send Mu Sae to an internship program run by an advocate organisation called *Altsean* in Bangkok. Every year, the Altasean internship program takes four or five women nominated from different organisations into their live-in training program for six months or longer. *Altsean* is a policy advocacy and women’s empowerment organisation set up in 1999 by a group of women from neighboring countries who are concerned about the plight of women and the democracy struggle in Burma (more information on *Altsean* can be seen in chapter seven). *Altsean* have been focusing on promoting women’s rights and providing capacity building programs for women in Burma since 1999. Participants in internship training program are required to speak only English with the staff in the organisation in their everyday communication. As a circumstantial activist in the program, Mu Sae was required to acquire skills rapidly and learn out of her comfort zone (Ollis 2010). Mu Sae explained:

“...I’ve been in the program for nearly five months and have enjoyed it. The Altsean training program has a very different teaching and learning method. We have to take plenty of initiatives, be responsible and assertive. I’m still learning but I know I have made progress every day. ...we, all interns, are only allowed to speak English here and every morning we have to go through English newspapers which are provided to us, and find news and articles related to Burma. We have to read them and take notes for later presentations in the classroom. It was very hard for me in the beginning, but I enjoy doing it now because it gives me better knowledge about what is happening in Burma and how the international observers see Burma. We occasionally have foreign journalists and NGOs workers came and shared their knowledge with us at the training centre. For outside exposure, the Altsean training program organisers often take us to attend functions of the Foreign Correspondent Club -Thailand (FCC-T) in downtown Bangkok, especially, when Burma issue is on the club’s agenda...”( except from interview on 12 Sept 2007).

“...It is also very good to know and work with other interns who come from different ethnic organisations. We share our experiences and have become very close friends as we live and work closely for the last five months. Working with other interns and learning their experiences give me better confidence and stronger belief in what I am doing and in the cause I work for...” “...while the teachers train us to be competent in our English, critical skills and ability to work well together, we also learn from each other experience, support each other emotionally and build special friendship bonds among us. We have become very close after five months being together. Peer support is important when you are not sure who you can talk to. We all, four interns, are like sisters and we can talk to each other anything. We share our feelings and support each other when one needs it...” (except from interview on 12 Sept 2007).

In joining the *Burmese Women Union* (BWU) Mu Sae took on something she knew little about, but she did know that it was for an important cause. Her experiences with the BWU helped change her perceptions of social reality and she has become more critical about the status quo.

“I disliked organisations until I joined the BWU. I was not so sure at first when I joined the BWU. My friends encouraged me to stay on. I was just a volunteer at the beginning. After a while I began to understand the role and the work of the organisation. It opened my eyes, changed my views and I now better understand why we are so poor. I understand why we need democracy” (excerpt from interview on 12 Sept 2007).

Mu Sae has, for example, become critical of gender relationships in Burmese society.

“Men think they are stronger and they are better than women. I think women are not much different from men, there are many jobs women can do as good as men.... they do not need to rely on men and all they need is empowerment”(excerpt from on 12 Sept 2007).

Emancipatory learning occurs when the learners begin to see themselves in a disadvantaged position. Changes in the worldview of the oppressed are the starting point for taking action for change. The ability of the oppressed to critically reflect on their experience leads them to develop critical consciousness, become social actors and seek to make change.

Mu Sae’s learning experiences as discussed earlier comprise ‘learning out-of –her-comfort zones’ and emotion. Emotions such as love, desire and hope can contribute to the sense of solidarity in a group or movement (Eyerman 2005) and they also influence learners’ ability to learn and overcome their fears (Boud and Miller 1996, p. 8-11). Learners can overcome their anxieties when they receive emotional support especially, from someone who they see as knowledge contributor and look up to. In the beginning of the *Altsean* internship program, like many students from Burma who have never been exposed to interactive learning or learner centered learning, Mu Sae was uncertain and shy to express her own opinion in class. Mu Say recalled;

“The teacher (at Altsean) always encourages us to express our opinions. It was quite inhibiting in the beginning but now we are very keen to express our different opinions. But, the support from members of your own group or peer learners was very encouraging. It makes you feel safe and supported when knowing your friends or peer learners are with you. I like the way the teacher makes summaries after a debate or

discussion. I am fascinated by the way we use reasons to advance our arguments and make our points in discussions” (excerpt from interview on 12 Sept 2007).

Freire remarks “responsibility cannot be acquired intellectually, but only through experience” (Freire 1974, p. 16).

## **8.7 Conclusion**

All three activists’ experiences demonstrate that perspective transformation and widening worldview requires unlearning and reconstruction of the meaning of their previous understanding. Informal learning, perspective transformation, emancipatory learning and emotion as embodied learning are important features in these activists’ learning experiences.

The three activists developed their critical consciousness through learning to analyse their first-hand experiences. As circumstantial or accidental activists, their learning is partly motivated by their personal social issues. The development of critical consciousness in these activists leads them to see themselves as political activists in the struggles for freedom and equality. In the next chapter, I will discuss the importance of informal education in community settings to foster emancipatory learning.

## CHAPTER NINE

### **The importance of informal and emancipatory learning in community settings free of surveillance and suppression**

#### **9.1 Introduction**

In Thailand, Burmese migrant workers are marginalised and face exploitation and human rights abuses (Fink 2001; Cusano 1999; Moethee Zun 2007). One of the most apparent problems is the lack of 'public sphere' – to use this Habermasian term that was discussed in the context of teahouses in chapter five - for Burmese migrant labourers to be able to come together and engage in discussion and dialogue freely. There have been creative projects to enable migrant workers to meet outside of their work environment, discuss and exchange information and personal experiences and encounters. While these projects have been relatively small, I contend that they have helped migrant labourers become politicized. In this chapter, I will examine the importance of informal education (Jeffer and Smith 1990) for Burmese factory workers in Mae Sot and emancipatory learning in community settings.

Social milieu (Scott 1990) and freedom of expression, in the context of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand, are closely associated. A community setting where the oppressed can discuss freely about matters that are unspoken in work places and among the general public, is a pre-condition for political resistance. James Scott (1990) describes the conditions of a social milieu where a resistant spirit can be fostered as a space free from the surveillance and suppression of the foremen, supervisors or the boss, and allows the thriving of rumors, gossip and hoaxes. James Scott's (1990) 'hidden transcripts' was written in the context of the "Black slavery" in America where the slaves learnt to speak against their white oppressors; they



spoke out the unspoken in their own social milieus where they felt a sense of trust and belonging, and freedom to articulate their deep-held feelings. A social milieu where the oppressed feel safe and trusted, is an opportunity for the oppressed to speak out against their oppressors, break silence through conversation, share their experiences and grief, and discuss their deep-held feelings.

Learners learn and construct meaning within a particular social, economic and political setting and set of cultural values (Illeris 2002; Boud & Miller 1996; Boud, Cohen & Walker 1993, and Dewey 1938). Henri Lefebvre (2008) argues that our interpretation of meanings and experiences in everyday life is in fact politically loaded and, in most cases, with the dominant values and beliefs. Antonio Gramsci sees this process as a product of hegemony and Paulo Freire describes the acceptance of this state of affairs as "*naïve consciousness*". However, it is not all negative as Foley (1999) explains the same experiences can also help the oppressed to develop critical understanding of their own social reality and see a different set of values in their interpretation of their experiences.

## **9.2 Burmese migrant workers in Thailand**

Extreme poverty, political oppression and the brutality of civil war have forced an unprecedented number of Burmese to leave their homeland and look for jobs in neighbouring countries. In the last decade, the number of Burmese migrant workers coming into Thailand has dramatically increased and it was estimated to be more than two million in 2006 (Lubeigh, 2007, p. 170).

Burmese migrant workers face shocking and repressive working and living conditions (Sanganet 2004, Asian Human Rights Commission 2003a and b 2004;

Arnold and Hewison 2005). The attitude of the Thai authorities toward illegal Burmese migrant workers is, generally, no different to that of the Burmese regime, and in some cases intolerant and abusive. Most Burmese in Thailand are illegal because obtaining a travel document or a passport in Burma is increasingly difficult and too expensive for ordinary Burmese citizens. Therefore, most Burmese choose to cross the borders illegally to Thailand. Many bribe the Thai and Burmese authorities to make their way to Thailand while some have arrived in Thailand through organised human trafficking networks.

In 2004, the Thai authorities introduced a registration system for unregistered foreign workers and issued identity cards for migrant workers. Under this scheme, registered migrant workers are protected by the Thai law and can access health care (Arnold & Hewison 2005, p. 15-16). But most Burmese migrant workers are hesitant to register themselves as they do not fully understand the program or some fear it might be a trap and hesitate to give out their details. The annual fee for registration, 3000 bath (est. Aus \$120), is too expensive for most Burmese migrant workers who work in low skill jobs and are low income earners. Burmese workers who have registered find it is difficult to get assistance and they are not really protected from employers' exploitation and the authorities' harassment. In fact, it makes it easier for the employers to control the workers since workers are required to provide the original copy of the registration card to their employers who use them to prevent workers moving from one factory to another factory. This limits workers' ability not only to change jobs but also restricts them to move freely in the areas they work (Lubeigt 2007, p.171). Jackie Pollock, the director of *Migrant Workers Assistance Program* (MAP) explains:

“it was common practice for the police to round up all workers in a sweep, whether registered or not, and put them in jails. The migrant workers are encouraged to pay ‘fines’ if they want to get back quickly to their families and work” (Saw Yang Naing, Sept 2009, pp. 10-11).

Burmese migrant workers mainly work in low skilled jobs that are known as the 3D's - *dirty, difficult, dangerous* - jobs, and are concentrated in light manufacturing including textile and garment trades, ceramics, electronic assembly, food processing, farming and fishing industries etcetera (Arnold 2007, p. 13; and Panam et al. 2004, p. 11). Most Burmese workers live and work in appalling conditions and their welfare and healthcare have been largely ignored by the authorities and their employers.

In Burma, the citizens have been denied participation in local and political affairs for so long and the people have lived in constant fear. Consequently, people perceive they are powerless in their ability to make change. The strength of future democracy in Burma will depend on the ability and capability of its citizen's participation in local affairs and matters that affect them and their family. Participation in small and local issues helps people become active citizens.

The most immediate concern of most Burmese migrant workers in Thailand is understandably to survive and to work in a safe environment. My research is concerned with understanding the emancipatory learning dimensions in everyday life of Burmese migrant workers. The ability of Burmese people at the grassroots to learn and become active citizens who are well informed and able to participate and act in matters that affect their lives is a crucial part of the democracy movement. While migrant workers struggle to find ways to make a living, they also struggle to be treated fairly in work places. Although it has been a hard battle for Burmese migrant workers in the struggle against exploitation, they have made some progress in recent years. They have been able to taken collective actions and have responded to extreme exploitations. In 2004, there were worker actions against extreme exploitation in a Thai-Burma border town called Mae Sot in the North-western part

of Thailand. With assistance from the *Law Society of Thailand*, a Mae Sot based Burmese migrant worker organisation called *Yaung Chi Oo Worker Association* (YCOWA) and the *Migrant Workers Assistance Program* (MAP), Burmese migrant workers in Mae Sot staged demonstrations against one of the most notorious factories, *Nut Knitting Limited Partnership*, and took their cases to the Thai Labour Court in Tak Province. The court reached a decision in favour of the exploited Burmese migrant workers and some 34 workers were financially compensated for their losses (Kyaw Zaw Moe 2004; Baynes 2004; Arnold 2004, 2007; Arnold & Hewison 2005; Khun Sam 2006). The case was considered a landmark case for migrant workers in Thailand (Macan-Markar 2004) and the victory in the court has given a moral boost to Burmese migrant workers who have been subjected to exploitation for so many years. I am convinced that there were several grassroots education activities behind the workers' actions against their exploitative employers. But due to the illegal status of most workers and exploitative and oppressive work environments, worker education activities are often camouflaged in their nature.

I undertook fieldwork and studied an informal education program for migrant workers in a Mae Sot's factory area. The concern here is with informal education and the emancipatory learning that occurs in community settings where Burmese migrant workers who generally do not have time to engage in organised training programs, come to meet and talk.

### **9.3 Informal education and emancipatory learning**

The term informal education is often understood in a number of ways. Jeffs and Smith define the essential or key characteristics of informal education as a project that can take place in a variety of social and physical settings; can be in various forms of learning activities (including group activities and discussion), and is

essentially a planned and monitored education with “*careful attention to words, the ideas that they express and the actions that follow*” (2005, p. 44-45).

In order to highlight the distinctive characteristics of informal education and learning I will briefly describe different forms of education and learning. Foley (2000, p. xiv) discusses a four-fold typology of adult education; ‘*formal education*’, ‘*non-formal education*’, ‘*informal learning*’ and ‘*incidental learning*’. Foley’s definition of ‘*informal learning*’ is closely associated with ‘*accidental learning*’. Rick Flowers asserts that formal and non-formal education are more concerned with the context in which teaching and learning takes place, while informal learning and incidental learning refers to the way in which the teaching and/or learning is done (2009, p. 42).

According to Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith (2005) conversation (dialogue) is the potentially the most emancipatory mode of teaching and learning in informal education. Informal education can take place in any setting and the purpose of it is to work for the well-being of all, the unique value and dignity of each human being. Through dialogue learners are actively involved in conversation as an equal member over the issue that affects their lives (Jeffs & Smith 2005, p. 44-45). Through the flow of conversation, the opportunity opens up to understand the world of people’s feelings, experiences and relationships. The ambience of the community setting plays a significant role in informal education. Informal education is about facilitating and guiding learning that occurs as social activities and conversation evolves. Michael Singh remarks that the role of informal education in social movements is critical and it cannot be separated from social learning (2005, p.49).

Emancipatory learning involves learning to understand the ‘*meaning perspective*’ underlying the apprehension of a situation or a problem. The aim of this learning is

not only to identify the meaning but also to pin-point the inadequacies and issues in one's assumptions and meaning making in order to challenge them. It is a process of critical reflection and critical self-reflection of assumptions. Emancipatory learning explores why one understands one's own experience and why we explain things the way we do (Alhadeff 2010).

#### **9.4 The situation of Burmese migrant workers in Mae Sot**

Mae Sot is located opposite a Burmese town called MyaWa Dee across the Moei River and is an active trading town and one of the busiest gateways into Thailand. Mae Sot, following the Asian financial crises in 1997/98, was included in the *Economic Cooperation Strategy* (ECS) between the regional countries including Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Viet Nam. The idea of regional economic promotion via border economic zones of Thailand has made Mae Sot into one of the *Special Border Economic Zones* (SBEZ) (Arnold 2007, p. 37). The creation of the SBEZ in Mae Sot was followed by growth in the number of manufacturing factories. Although the exact number of factories in the area is unknown, since smaller factories are not registered, it is estimated to be between 200 and 300 (Arnold 2007, p. 47). More than 100,000 Burmese migrant workers are working in these local factories (Baynes 2004; Arnold 2007).

Burmese migrant workers in Mae Sot mostly work in manufacturing and farming sectors that demand long working hours. Their wages are far below the official rates (Arnold 2004, Myint Wai 2004; Asian Human Rights Commission 2003b). For many Burmese migrant workers, factories and farms are not only workplaces, but also their places of residence. Most workers in manufacturing industries usually live in the barracks provided by the employers near the factories. The barracks are usually over-crowded. The outbreak of health crises among the migrant worker population living in industrial areas is widespread and frequent. Factory workers are often

confined to where they work and they typically work long hours (16 hours a day or more, and six or seven days per week), have very few holidays, and generally, no time to engage in activities outside of their work (Arnold 2007; Lubeigt 2007; Myint Wai 2004). Getting migrant workers to attend training such as basic healthcare is a challenging task for Burmese community health workers and agencies because not only do workers not find time to attend, but the employers generally discourage workers to attend training activities fearing the workers would become more aware of their rights and demand better payment. In my fieldwork, more than ten migrant workers in Mae Sot I spoke to told me their experience of working in factories where they began working in the early morning and finish late at night (at ten or eleven pm at night), and generally having one-day off every month.

Employer organisations such as the Chamber of Commerce in Mae Sot actively constrain the actions of workers by limiting freedom of association and colluding to maintain low wages (Arnold and Hewison 2005, p. 12). The employers group keeps the low wage level evenly among themselves so migrant workers will not move from one factory to another to search for higher wages.

*Yaung Chi Oo Worker Association (YCOWA)* is a Burmese migrant worker rights promotion and protection association based in Mae Sot and has been working closely with Burmese migrant workers since 1999. Commencing with a small number of dedicated workers and willing volunteers, the organisation has made remarkable progress in the struggle for migrant workers' legal rights. As of this date, the YCOWA has nine full-time staff and more than twenty volunteers (see Yaung Chi Oo website accessed August 2011). The YCOWA has led several worker campaigns and staged demonstrations demanding better wages and better work conditions. In 2004, the YCHWA was a key player in taking some migrant workers'

law suit against their exploitative employers to the Labour Court in the Tak Province. As a result some factories were temporarily closed down and made to pay compensation to the workers who were mistreated (Arnold, 2007; Kyaw Zwa Moe, 2004; Baynes, 2004).

Moe Swe, the director of the YCOWA, was a student activist in 1988 and from Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT). He claimed that workers from more than one hundred out of two hundred factories in Mae Sot one way or the other have been linked with the organisation. He has been working to promote workers' rights since 1999.

Doing worker education in Mae Sot is challenging and dangerous. NGO workers face harassment from Thai factory owners as a result of their work on labour rights for migrant workers (McLaughlin 2010, p. 138). The employers are hostile to NGO workers as they know these advocates encourage workers to demand higher wages and better living conditions which increase the costs of production. NGO staff have been threatened and attacked on several occasions and sometimes they had to run away from Mae Sot or go into hiding as the employers had hired hit men to attack them (Kyaw Zaw Moe, 2004).

*“We all know from the start that fighting for labour rights is really dangerous. But we never think of giving up” (excerpt from interview with Moe Swe, 27 Oct 2007).*

Various NGOs employ people to advocate for Burmese migrant worker rights, but due to hostility by employers usually name them as health promotion workers rather than advocates so as to avoid direct confrontation. Factory employees who have close connection with the rights advocates or health promotion workers can be targeted for punishment or sacked from their jobs.



The legal victory of migrant workers over exploitative employers in 2004 was an indication of grassroots power over injustice through active participation and collective effort of workers themselves. Participating in demonstrations is a significant step for Burmese migrant workers who never had these rights and were not even aware that they could struggle against injustice if they stand and act together. In the process of the struggle, the workers learnt to express their voice. This is a type of emancipatory learning as workers have learnt to create an identity as important stake holders. Not all adult learning is acquired in formal education but is often gained through participation in actions or an aspect of social life such as work, community action or family activities (Foley 2000, Brookfield 1986).

### **9. 5 Creating conditions for learning in a factory area in Mae Sot**

Worker's rights advocates and community health workers use creative and non-threatening ways to engage with factory workers. In 2004, YCOWA set up a community library near the factories to encourage workers to read and socialise outside of their workplaces. At the library, workers can read Burmese literature as well as meet with people who they otherwise would not meet in their workplaces. Occasionally, the advocates organise short training courses for workers on their free days. They help workers to build social networks among themselves and in the factories. Short courses about basic health are attractive as workers and employers see no danger in it. But in the courses, worker representatives from different factories formed networks. Worker's rights awareness promotion and peer support campaigns - such as a petition campaign to support the demand for wage increases - have been effective as workers share the same concerns and issues in nearly all factories.

The aim of the community library project is to create a social space and provide an opportunity for migrant workers in the area to meet and discuss their views in a safe environment. Before addressing the problems among the migrant workers, it is necessary to get workers' most concerning issues expressed and worked out. A place where workers feel safe and are free to express their feelings is essential. Scott (1990) describes social place where the oppressed feel safe and trusted while offering pre-conditions for '*resistance conversations*' to take place. The community library seems to be an ideal place where workers can come and engage with one another on issues that they cannot discuss in the factories.

#### *9. 5.1 A story of an informal education site*

Everyday Hla Min (pseudo name), a health promotion worker of *Yaung Chi Oo Worker Association*, travels between to his workplaces in two different locations. Hla Min has an office at the *Yaung Chi Oo's* main office in Mae Sot and another office in the outskirts of the town where most manufacturing factories are located. Burmese migrant workers make up the majority of workers in those factories. Hla Min's workplace near the factories is a community library for migrant workers. He spends three to four evenings during the week and all day on Sundays at the library. Burmese migrant workers in the area come to use the library, and for some this has been their only leisure activity. The library is in a small apartment decorated with some book shelves that hold books, magazines and newspapers in Burmese. A few pieces of furniture are in the room; a table and three chairs are in a corner of the room. Most of the books and reading materials are in Burmese. Migrant workers from the nearby factories come to the library to read or borrow reading materials as well as meet with friends and other migrant workers. Hla Min explained there was an annual fee of about thirty baht (AUS 1\$) for accessing the library and it was to ensure that members were careful about the items they borrow and did not lose them. The library, with Hla Min's friendly and welcoming manner, serves as a centre

for social networking; the workers meet, exchange information, gossip, rumors and talk about their experiences and encounters in their time at the library. The workers use the library to meet with long-lost friends, family members and relatives. The library is occasionally used for health training workshops.

Hla Min's role is to plan and facilitate social activities and conversations that occur everyday at the library. Focusing on the issues and interests that people bring with them, Hla Min "goes with the flow" to help people open up their feelings and hidden desires. For Hla Min, the library serves both as a means as well as an end. It is very difficult for NGO workers to get access to the factories. Most migrant workers in Mae Sot do not know their rights and where to go for help. This situation has served the employers in Mae Sot well as they can keep exploiting the workers, and they do not want NGOs to come and educate workers, even in health and safety education.

"NGOs workers have to be very careful in the way they deliver their services. Their lives could be endangered if the employers believe the NGOs workers are harming their business" (excerpt from interview with Mr. U Mg Mg Gi, a worker organiser of the largest political alliance body based in Thailand, the *National Coalition of Union of Burma* (NCUB), on 20 Jul 2007, Mae Sot).

In this kind of environment, a safe and trusted place like the library serves various purposes for workers as well as health promoters. Hla Min can meet, talk and share information with workers at the library. Conversations with workers are about their interests and finding out their deep-held feelings, stories from inside factories and all the gossip and rumors of factory life.

Education activities that focus on specific skills such as basic health and legal rights education are organised in the area and the library is a good place for spreading

information. Spreading information on health workshops is usually done through mixed methods including word of mouth, personal messages, close networking among migrant workers and pamphlets. Word of mouth and personal networking are more effective methods than distributing printed materials because workers find it safer and easier to convey messages. Workers come to the library and take news and messages back to their work places. Through social networks workers are informed about the meetings and workshops. Hla Min explained:

“we have also set up an unofficial representative system. The representatives in these factories let us know what happen in their workplaces. But, we have to be careful because if employers know their employees have close connection with us they could be sacked from their job” (excerpt from interview with Hla Min on 23 Jul 2007).

Hla Min himself was a factory worker before becoming a NGO worker. He has been in Thailand for more than seven years and worked in many manufacturing factories. But Hla Min has always been concerned about the workers’ conditions and unhappy with the way the migrant workers are treated.

“We, workers, never get the assistance or support from employers when we get sick or have health problems” says Hla Min. “I always wanted to do something to help our people”. “When, Yaung Chi Oo was set up in 1999, I volunteered my time to help set up the first medical centre for migrant workers and donated my own money. I tried to help whatever I could to get a first Burmese clinic for migrant workers up and running. After a couple years of volunteering, the organisation saw me as an asset and offered me a position as a liaison person between the NGOs and migrant workers. I happily took the job. I have been with the organisation for more than three years now and I am very happy to continue working in my position because I can help my own people”(excerpt from interview with Hla Min on 23 July 2007).

The library project is a good way to tap into migrant workers’ communities. Many workers like to read books in Burmese because it is one form of getting news as well as keeping in touch with Burma. Many feel homesick and like to read materials in

Burmese. When asked why he chose to set up a library instead of other kind of projects. Hla Main said:

“Like all of us, Burmese migrant workers often get homesick and want to find out news back home. They usually do not have any other means to access information about what is happening in Burma. Some factories have TVs or radios for workers in the workplaces, but the media is in Thai language and most workers do not understand. So a library with Burmese literatures is a good way for workers to keep themselves informed what happens in Burma” (excerpt from interview with Hla Min 23 Jul 2007).

Migrant workers usually have little free time of their own. They normally work twelve to sixteen hours a day and six to seven days per week. Reading Burmese books and magazines in their spare free time has been the only way to keep themselves informed about what is happening in Burma. The ‘library’ is more than a book centre. It is a place to meet with people and find out news about Burma. The library is also a safe place free from employer’s ‘spys.’ In every factory there are some workers who spy for employers because in return they receive favours. These are the ones who inform employers if any worker has close connection with NGOs or spreads messages against the employer’s interests. At the library, however, workers freely share information about their workplace, employment, government announcements on migrant workers and wages. The library also displays information flyers and handouts from other NGOs. Workers will read them, talk about them and sometimes take them back to their factories too. The library is a meeting place where social networks are developed, information exchange takes place, and informal learning occurs. Many workers come to the library to socialise as well as to learn news about other workers. The library is also a place of solace for many. A migrant worker explained:

“it is like coming home when I come to the library, even though I only spend a short time here. I’ll talk to my friends or any other Burmese speaking people freely and we chat about many things. I look forward to come to the library every time I need to

borrow or return the borrowed items. If no one is there I can always speak to the library worker” (drawn from conversation with a migrant worker at the library 23-24 Jul 2007).

Another said:

“...at the library, we meet our friends from other factories and share our news and sometimes we find out very good news from back home too...” (drawn from conversation with a migrant worker at the library 23-24 Jul 2007).

## **9.6 Discussion: forms of learning at the library**

### *9.6.1 What kind of learning does the library facilitate?*

There is a number of learning activities taking place at the library. The library provides a social site for migrant workers and this creates an opportunity for workers to share their experiences, feelings and express that which may otherwise be unspoken, and to form social networks. In other words, the library creates conditions and provides possibilities for resistance work to emerge. James Scott states

“the social site of hidden transcript are those locations in which the unspoken riposte, stifled anger and bitten tongues created by relations of domination find a vehement, full-throated expression” (1990, p.120).

Scott further explains that hidden transcript or resistance conversations take place when the following two conditions are met. First, when the social site is safe and free from the control, surveillance and repression of the dominant group and second the social milieu is composed entirely of close confidants who share similar experiences (1990, p.120). The library meets the described two conditions for hidden transcript to take place. Workers coming to the library are fully aware that the library is an

environment where they are safe from control and repression of the employers, and it is common knowledge that all workers in the area are facing similar methods of repression. They are all willing to talk about the injustices and unfairness that take place in their workplaces.

As a community setting the library provides a safe place for expressing hidden transcripts including rumors and gossips. Gossips and rumors are an effective form of communication mode in an oppressive environment. Scott explains that rumor thrives most in situation in which events of vital importance to people's interests are occurring and in which no reliable information is available (Scott 1990, p. 144). Rumor provides not only an "opportunity for anonymous and protected communication, but also serves as vehicle for anxieties and aspirations" (Scott 1990, p. 145). Rumor, as defined below, works well in Burmese culture and society where people have lost confidence in official information and news, and rumor is taken seriously. Keiko Tosa's study notes that rumoring is a common social practice that is rooted in Burmese culture. She explains that in the old days of Burma kingdoms, villagers would gather around in circle in a particular place, sip Burmese tea and talk about all sort of things in the villages. In the tea circle all sort of matters and everyday events were brought for discussion and information and everyday stories including rumors become public knowledge (Tosa 2005, p.156). In modern Burma, similar tea circles exist in teashops, markets and workplaces. People call in to their regular tea shops and meet friends and neighbours, with whom they converse and gossip.

The reason rumor is still a form of public communication mode and plays a key role in information exchange in modern days of Burma is because the people have never experienced freedom of expression and have been living in the information dark-age

fostered by the Burmese military regime. The way rumor serves the subordinate class, however, is more to do with feelings of comfort they often lack in their work environment because they can control rumor. Tosa notes that rumors are an important facet and a method of conveying public opinion, and it can be said to be a conscious form of resistance (2005, p.170). The fact that rumor is still a flourishing method of communication also tells of the lack of freedom of speech and strong suppression of public opinion in Burmese society.

The library also offers a place that provides an opportunity to fulfill the need to belong to a social group. As workers frequently come into contact with people outside of their workplaces they learn more about other workplaces' conditions and develop a better picture of the nature of repressive environments. As the workers begin to speak about their suffering and the injustice that has been imposed on them, they are learning to break silence. Breaking silence is a necessary early step of resistance to injustice and exploitation.

Basic health courses at the library also offer workers an opportunity to engage in emancipatory learning by creating conditions for learning about solidarity to occur among workers and to form social networks among themselves. Learning about solidarity takes place among participants although it may not be part of any original learning objective of the health course. Freire (1973) highlights that in a learning environment, learning takes place not only between the subject concerned and the object of learning, but also between the subjects themselves.



### 9.6.2 How and what people learnt at the library?

Jeffs & Smith (2005) define informal education as a form of planned education and learning that can take place in any social and physical setting, and conversation (dialogue) constitutes a central component. Mark Smith (1994, p. 43) claims that conversation is a deeply political activity. Through the flow of conversation, opportunities open up for learners (participants in the conversation) to understand the world of other people's (participants') feelings, experiences and relationships. The purpose of informal education is to work for the well-being of all, the unique value and dignity of each human being (Jeffs and Smith 2005, p. 44-45). Through dialogue, learners are actively involved in conversation as an equal member over the issue that affects their lives.

Emancipatory education or education for freedom is about helping the oppressed raise questions about the status quo (Youngman 2000, p. 220), at the social level as well as personal level of feeling and belief. Jack Mezirow explains that emancipatory education's goal is to help learners move from a simple awareness of their experience to an awareness of the condition of their experiences (1991, p. 197). In other words, learners become aware of the reason why they experience as they do, which can lead to further reflection and refinement of understanding and to further engagement. This is what Freire calls "*praxis*".

Following are some conversations drawn from my observation and engagement with some migrant workers at the library. Some of the conversations reveal a great deal of critical analysis skills and understanding of the influence of cultural values on their reasoning and acting (Newman, 2006, p. 44). In expressing their discontent with their working conditions and the employers' divisive practices that are used against them, a worker complains how they are divided and controlled at work:

“...my supervisor at work is a Burmese, but he is no more than the dog of the owner. He only cares about himself and getting credit from the boss whose prime concern is his profit. One day when the boss does not need him (the supervisor), I’m sure he will be thrown out of the window” (draw from observation at the library on 23-24 Jul 2007).

Workers also come to understand the status quo only serves the interest of the dominant groups and realise the need to have collective effort to protect the rights that concern all. A worker explains that:

“... the employers know we (migrant workers) are desperate and they take advantage of our situation. If we begin to unite and work collectively they can not always exploit us. But most of us do not see this and just put up with the exploitation everyday. The employers hold our payment until long overdue. Many workers worry they might not get their money and keep silent about what is happening. The employers do not care if one or two workers are against them but they will be scared when many workers or the whole factory join in their cases together...” (drawn from observation at the library on 23-24 Jul 2007).

Another worker said:

“We are all struggling like “buffalos and cows on the farm” (Burmese expression of extreme hardship) as long as there is no organisation we can approach to complain about our cases, .... What we need is a Burmese organisation which understands not only our language but also the suffering we are going through every day” (drawn from observation at the library on 23-24 Jul 2007).

This kind of conversation shows the power of local knowledge and its significance. When a new perspective is developed in a worker, he begins to question the status quo and the conditions he is experiencing. The workers themselves come to know that their own knowledge is important and necessary in making a breakthrough.

Most of the assertions in conversations recounted above may be common sense but their meanings are pungent and probing, and they serve as the precondition for

resistance and genuine democratic process in helping workers develop new perspectives and directions to search for alternatives. Widening perspectives help the oppressed question the status quo and develop new language to express the way they see the status quo.

A worker enunciated his opinion on the oppressive system that he believed to be the cause of their suffering;

“We Burmese are losing both ends, we sell our natural resource cheaply to Thailand (referring to the Burmese military regime selling off natural resources such as gas, timber and etc...from Burma to Thailand) and we also come and work as cheap laborers for them (the Thai) too. What kind of a dump country.... can't we just do it by ourselves...I think if there is no military regime in Burma, the country could be better developed and we do not have to work as cheap labourers in other countries” (drawn from observation at the library on 23-24 Jul 2007).

*“Education involves the entire experience of many people coming to know one another and learning to respect one another. And this brought about a change in the society”* (Mayo 1999, p. 172). Burmese migrant workers come from different parts of Burma and often from different ethnic backgrounds. Meeting and talking freely at the library helps them learn from one another. This learning in socialisation helps people clarify myths and develop better understanding of their social reality. Some workers, through socialisation, come to realise that their understandings of their social reality are largely socially and culturally constructed. For instance, learning in socialisation allows some to understand others' positions and helps dispel some stereotypes, such as one that rural people are inferior to city people because they have less education. Another example of an internalised 'truth' is when members of ethnic minority groups in Burma believe that they are inferior to the members of Burman (the dominant) ethnic group.

Naw Sae, a Burmese migrant worker from Karen state describes her experiences. She says

“.....at work and at the library I have met many people from different places I never heard of. I came from a small village and I do not know many places other than those in my area. I also met many people from Rangoon, the capital city I only know the name and always want to go. I thought people in Rangoon were different and all rich and educated. But, I now know that we are very much the same.....” (drawn from observation at the library 23-24 Jul 2007.)

Workers are often involved in group conversations and signing petition letters or helping to convey messages to other workers and this helps them to develop a sense of participation. As Jane Thompson reminds us:

“using the energies generated at the margins of systems and organisations, taking back control and joining with others in collective action to achieve change is at the root of concepts like participation and democracy. It finds its impetus in human agency and can transform people’s lives. As well as transform views about oneself” (1997, p. 146).

Involvement in conveying information, spreading messages such as news of health workshops for representative workers are a form of participating in decision making processes and helps migrant workers understand that they are involved in a process of building social change. The emancipatory learning experiences amongst migrant workers in Thailand undoubtedly form part of the process of social change for democracy in Burma.

## **9.7 Conclusions**

In this chapter, I have discussed the importance of informal education and emancipatory learning in community settings. Drawing from James Scott’s (1990) theory of *‘hidden transcripts’* as a conscious form of resistance, I analyse the

community library as an informal education project and its necessary quality as a community setting that is free from surveillance and oppression. Informal education at the Burmese community library in a manufacturing factory area in Mae Sot is clearly a carefully planned educational action with an aim to promote the emancipatory learning among Burmese migrant workers in that area.

At the library, although it appears to be a social meeting place, workers express otherwise unspoken thoughts, shared experiences and deeply-held feelings, and built social networks. With a sense of feeling safe, trusted and belonging at the library, Burmese workers have learnt to express and share freely their experiences and discontent about their oppressive working environments. Burmese workers at Mae Sot's community library demonstrate their ability to draw largely from their interpretation of everyday experiences - which are often a reproduction of the dominant values- and reconstruct their understanding in a way that serves their own interests rather than the oppressors' (Foley 1999). Emancipatory learning occurs as workers not only learn to understand the oppression but also critically assess the meaning of their understandings.

Informal education in the context of the community library in Mae Sot promotes conversation as a form of emancipatory learning and encourages the oppressed to express their deeply-held feelings. In the next chapter, I will discuss the importance of informal education outside of formal classroom activities at a Migrant Learning Centre where Burmese migrant workers from different experiences and ethnic backgrounds come to learn languages and basic computer skills. Informal education can be used to build social capital among people who suffer from racial discrimination under the divide and rule practice of the Burmese military regime.

## CHAPTER TEN

### Informal education for social capital at the Migrant Learning Centre (Chiang Mai)

#### 10. 1 Introduction

Following chapter nine in which I discussed the importance of informal education in community settings, this chapter presents a case study of a different type of informal education. In this case, it is less overtly political and indeed it is not about workers' rights. But nonetheless, it plays an important role in enabling education and learning that will directly contribute to a democratic future for citizens of Burma. I will explore informal education and learning at a *Migrant Learning Centre* (MLC) for Burmese in Chiang Mai, a northern city of Thailand. The MLC is a language and basic computer training centre for migrant workers from Burma. However, my research reveals that teaching and learning at the centre is not confined to class teaching, as the centre is also a place where young migrant workers meet and socialize and more importantly it has been a '*safe haven*' for migrant workers who often face difficult and distressing circumstances (Wootten and Wootten 2011). Informal education, as discussed in the previous chapter, can take place in a variety of social and physical settings and in various ways to facilitate learning (Jeffs and Smith 1990, p. 6). I will examine and discuss the informal education that takes place at the MLC. My field study covers the informal and conversational adult learning that occurs at the MLC and how it can be transformative and empowering. And more importantly, my study reveals that informal education at the MLC has made great contribution to building social capital among young migrant workers who often experience lack of or breaking social ties as a result of their illegal status and

their isolation from their family and normal social environment (McLaughlin 2010, p. 151). Wootten & Wootten (2011) highlight the unique relationship between the staff and the learners at the MLC and acknowledge that the MLC is “more than a school”. Although Wootten and Wootten (2011) do not name social capital, I will argue that the value of the MLC lies equally in what it does to enable education for social capital. I hope that by naming education for social capital I will encourage and enable staff and funders at MLC to plan and expand it in the future.

## **10. 2 Social capital and adult learning**

Social capital is a concept that refers to the social glue and trust that people derive from their relationships with others. Becoming active citizens through participation in social interaction and activities is all about generating social capital. Robert Putnam (2000), a well-known author on this topic, says

“Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations.” (p. 19).

“Social capital is built particularly effectively through civic engagement, which appears to be more or less synonymous with active citizenship. Active citizenship is an important source of social capital because this is the main way in which people -in particular those who are stranger to one another - experience reciprocity through their pursuit of shared objectives. This helps to create a dense web of networks underpinned by shared values and producing high levels of social trust, which in turn further cooperation between people and reduce the chance of malfeasance” (Field 2005).

I observe that much theorising and research about social capital has been located in rich, industrialised countries and indeed tends to focus on addressing anomie that is a feature of urban life, even in rich suburban neighbourhoods. But I, nonetheless,

think the concept of social capital is relevant and applicable to working with people in poor, majority-world settings. And I note that there is a growing body of research about social capital in both rich and poor regions of Asia (McLaughlin 2010; Pye 2000; Unger 1998; Pekkane 2004; Carpenter, Daniere and Takahashi 2004; Tan 2006). I also note that several major funding bodies of NGO activities on the Thai Burma border seek to promote the idea of social capital. For instance, the *Canadian International Development Agency* (CIDA) specifically allocated funding under a social capital project called the *Burma Border Assistance Program - Building Social Capital* (see CIDA website).

Social capital is a rare currency in a deeply divided Burmese society. Burma ranked 166 out of 199 countries in the *Social Capital Achievement - 2009 Country Rankings* (Young and Lindstrom 2009). According to Young and Lindstrom (2009) social, cultural and political institutions are interdependently existed and the level of social capital achievement in these institutions influences the ability to create wealth in a society. Countries with high levels of social capital achievement are more economically prosperous and provide a higher quality of life for those who live in them, and those with low levels of social capital are more prone to poverty, and more severe economic, political, and social inequities.

The following indexes were used to create each country's Social Capital Achievement ranking.

- GDP(PPP)- Gross Domestic Product, PPP per capita
- HD- United Nations Human Development Program's Human Development Index
- FREE- Freedom House's Freedom Index
- EF- Fraser Institute's Economic Freedom of the World
- ESF- eStandard Forum's Compliance Summary Index
- S&P- Standard and Poor's Long and Short Term Foreign Currency Issuer Ratings.
- Moody's- Local and Foreign Currency Governmental Bond Ratings.
- VA- World Bank Governance Indicator- Voice and Accountability
- PSAV- World Bank Governance Indicator- Political Stability Absence of Violence
- GE- World Bank Governance Indicator- Government Effectiveness
- RQ- World Bank Governance Indicator- Regulatory Quality
- RL- World Bank Governance Indicator- Rule of Law
- CC- World Bank Governance Indicator- Control of Corruption



- CP- Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index" (Young and Lindstrom 2009, p. 1)

Other commentators also observe the paucity of social capital in Burma. Lucian Pye describes and discusses the nature and origins of this low level of social capital

"The problem in Burma is especially severe because basic distrust is so widespread. It goes back to Burmese socialization practices: Infants are not given predictable security, and children are routinely subjected to fear. For example, putting children to bed with the warning that they might never wake up if they have certain dreams is considered not cruel but amusing. Above all, Burmese culture evinces a deep ambivalence about power. Everyone wants it, but people are too timid to try for it. Nobody wants to be a subordinate, because inferiors are vulnerable and cannot trust anyone with power. Three Burmese concepts help to explain their outlook: Any Burmese, from a villager to a high official, wants to be recognized as possessing pon, that is, a person of quality, deserving of respect. Pon is a blend of charisma, commanding presence, grace, dignity, and holiness. Closely related is the concept of awza, or power, which is, in a sense, pon in a social context. Every group has someone who has the awza, and anyone can aspire to it. The common response to someone else in a favored position is, "Why him, why not me?" (Pye 2000, p. 379).

While I agree that traditional Burmese values may help explain low levels of social capital, I think a far more important reason is the series of military dictatorships. The military run Burma, as discussed in previous chapters, and members of grassroots communities withdraw from politics and are passive toward the authorities. Trust among members of different ethnic and religious groups is conspicuously low.

Eva Cox (1995, p. 15) defines social capital as a process of relationships between people which establishes networks, norm and social trust and facilitates co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit. Learning is as critical to the development of social capital and community as belonging is (Illeris 2002, p. 142). Relationships and networking among the members are strengthened by trust and

knowledge which facilitate reciprocity and co-operation of mutual benefit to the network group (Field 2005; Harris & Daley 2006; Faris 2004; Cox 1995; Putnam 2000; Balatti & Falk 2001).

Social capital generally entails three forms of social connection; *'bonding ties'*, *'bridging ties'* and *'linking capital'* (Coleman 1988; Balatti & Falk 2001; Cox 1995). *'Bonding ties'* refers to social relationships among members within a group, *'bridging ties'* is between groups, and *'linking capital'* is formed when well-connected groups begin to actively seek to extend their networks and promote similar concerns or issues beyond their usual networks.

Informal social interactions between members of the group lead to the development of *'bonding ties'* within a community. Forming bonding ties at the MLC allows students and staff members to form a community that is based on a shared common purpose which helps foster trust and identity transformation. Balatti and Falk describe bonding ties.

"A set of norms and values operating in the community that promotes a psychologically and physically safe environment where learning to develop trust, self-efficiency and confidence is necessary to try new ways of thinking and acting. Identity transformation also occurs from experiencing bonding ties within a community" (2001, p.16).

*'Bridging ties'* is the concept that refers to an extension of social relationships beyond a community group or a specific group where members of the group interact with people outside their own. It is about making relationships externally and how one sees oneself in relation to the world outside of their immediate *'comfort zone'* and actively participates and promotes the ties and activities between the two networks

(Balatti and Falk 2001, p.16; Faris 2004, p. 21). Connections and relations across families and community boundaries are examples of bridging ties.

When social networking constantly expands and forms an extended network beyond specific groups or 'comfort zones', this extended network inevitably contributes extra sources of knowledge and learning opportunities to members of both communities. At the *Migrant Learning Centre*, 'bridging ties' take place as migrant workers form relationship with people outside of their usual groups or make connection with NGOs workers who come to the centre to promote their services.

Learning and creation of new knowledge occurs while social capital is being generated because learning is, in essence, socially and culturally constructed (Boud, Cohen & Walker 1993). Social conversations allow understanding and closeness to develop. Casual social conversation in everyday life such as gossiping or conveying rumors helps produce social intimacy between individuals and thus develop closeness and trust. Accumulated social trust contributes to personal development in the way that helps individuals to be more receptive and tolerant. Trust usually develops when social barriers are removed and individuals begin to feel and see common issues among themselves. Trust is one strong indicator in the presence of social capital in a group whether it is an organisation, community or society in general (Coleman 1988; Balatti & Falk 2001; Cox 1995).

However, social capital will not necessarily develop in a positive sense without intervention that can be in the form of positive atmosphere, experiences and a shared common purpose. Facilitating social interaction to foster generation of social

capital normally requires “space, time, opportunities, precedents, willingness of its members to interact and volunteering, and so on...” (Newman 1994, p. 166).

Eva Cox stressing the necessity of positive atmosphere to build social trust, says:

“We need the opportunities to interact with a reasonably broad spread of people, and to build up a level of trust through positive rather than negative experiences. We need the time to engage in satisfactory processes of discussion, to acknowledge the input of others, and to develop outcomes which reflect inputs” (1995, p.23).

Learning to be part of a particular group involves cooperating with members of the group, being constructive and receptive in conversations and recognising positive experiences among members of the group. In other words, one develops new identity with improved self-confidence and esteem as one learns to fit in social groups. High level of trust enables genuine engagement and reflection to take place and learning to occur (Carnegie 1998, p. 25-259). New understanding or knowledge developed in a positive atmosphere essentially fosters democratic outlooks.

### **10.3 The *Migrant Learning Centre* (MLC) – Chiang Mai**

In a warm and drowsy evening of summer, in August 2007 in Chiang Mai, people began to arrive at around 5:30pm in the compound of the *Migrant Learning Centre* located in a small lane about five hundred meters from the fifteen stories building of the Grand View Hotel, one of Chiang Mai’s landmark buildings in the northern outskirts of the city. I sat on one of the chairs in the entrance room of the *Migrant Learning Centre* (MLC) that is also used as the lounge, and observed as people arrived for their evening classes. Many arrived on mini-motorbikes, Chiang Mai City’s most popular transportation to get around the city. Many motorbikes carried two people, and some even made more than one trip to pick up other friends waiting for a lift. Some motor bikers dropped off their passengers and moved on to

other destinations. Soon every possible parking space in the compound was filled with at least fifty motorbikes. In about half an hour more than two hundred students (young migrant workers) were in their evening classes.

The number of Burmese migrant workers in Northern Thailand is estimated to be more than five hundred thousand (Saw Yan Naing 2009, p. 10-11). Like most Burmese migrant workers in other parts of Thailand, the majority of migrant workers in Chiang Mai work in low paid 3D's jobs and are concentrated in service industries such as shop assistants in the city's popular night bazaar, restaurants, bars, night clubs and security services. Many of them are young and they came to Thailand due to either extreme poverty or civil war that often displaces people from their homes. Their aim in Thailand is to find employment to support themselves and be able to send their saving to family members back home in Burma. Most of the Burmese migrant workers in Chiang Mai come from the Shan State of Burma, a landlocked multi-ethnic state with the majority of Shan ethnic group. Next door to the Northern region of Thailand is Shan State of Burma and this makes a relatively easy access for migrant workers from Shan State to the Northern provinces of Thailand. The Shan people in Burma and the Thai share roughly the same language. Most people in the Shan State, as in many other parts of Burma, are people of the land and in general, have little or no formal educational background. Most students at the MLC are non-Burman ethnic members and Burmese is not their first language (Wootten & Wootten 2011). Learning to communicate in Burmese is challenging for members of non-Burman groups as normally most members of many ethnic groups do not speak Burmese and have little or no education.

Like most Burmese migrant workers in other parts of Thailand, Burmese citizens in Chiang Mai are illegal and have come to Thailand by passing through unofficial

border pass points. Between the Shan State of Burma and Thailand, there are three major border pass points, Mae Sai, Mae Hong Song and Fang, where thousands of people cross every day. From these border pass points most migrant workers find their ways to get to the City of Chiang Mai.

In recent years, more and more young people with university education have begun to come to Thailand due to a lack of employment prospects for young graduates in Burma. These young people come to Thailand not only for employment but also for opportunities to study or learn different skills. In 2005, the *Migrant Learning Centre* (MLC) in Chiang Mai was set up to assist migrant workers. The MLC offers free language courses in Thai, English, Burmese and basic computer skills. Dr. Thein Lwin, the founder and director of the centre, explained:

“The original idea of setting up the Migrant Learning Centre came from the migrant workers themselves” “...The aim of the centre is to give young migrant workers an opportunity to broaden their skills. They are keen to study. They are willing to make themselves useful and obtain skills that will enhance their lives in general” “...they want to further their education for the benefit of their community” (extract from conversation with Dr. Thein Lwin 27 Aug 2007).

At the start, the school offered only two sessions, one in the morning and another in the evening. Day shift workers attend evening classes and night shift workers attend the classes in the morning. The students usually come to classes straight from their work and after their classes they go to their places for a rest before the next shift of work. English and Thai languages are the most popular subjects. Many prospective students faced transport problems and conflicting times. The school eventually moved to a new location and has added midday classes for those who can attend. Some temporarily unemployed choose the day classes. Students usually rush to the learning centre as soon as they finish their work. Some night shift workers such as

security guards come to their classes before going back to their place to catch up on some sleep before the next night-shift work.

The migrant learning centre is more than a language school and students come to the centre not only to attend the classes but also for advice and support. The staff at the centre help with anything they can, such as passing on job-lead information and providing advice on their employment choices and further education opportunities. Teachers do not just teach but also help students build social networks for job security, they give advice to students on different matters and sometimes help students find ways to take up further education. The teachers at the centre make every attempt to help improve the livelihood of their students.

In military-ruled Burma, the prospect of employment opportunities for young people is slim and this makes talented young people come to Thailand to find any opportunity that can improve their lives. Dr. Thein Lwin said:

“Although the main reason they (migrant workers) come to Thailand is to look for employment, they also want education to improve their life”, ...“most migrant workers attending the Migrant Learning Centre are young people who have been unable to attend schools at home or have never had the opportunity to go to school”. “These young people sacrifice their education for the sake of their families. They miss out in their young lives entirely as they should normally be in school to learn and enjoy” (extract from a conversation with Dr. Thein Lwin on 27 Aug 2007).

#### **10.4 Migrant learning Centre with a vision (for social capital)**

At this point I will describe the vision of Dr. Thein Lwin, the founder of the MLC. I have placed social capital in brackets because he does not use this term. But, I think one way of interpreting his vision is to refer to the concept of social capital. (Note: Dr Thein Lwin kindly permitted me to use his real name.)

After working all day at the construction site, Aung Aye (pseudo name) would spend his evenings at the learning centre. He is in his second term in an English class and he wants to take every course available at the centre. His language skills have improved rapidly since he started attending classes. He remarks;

“Now, I can understand and speak a little bit of English. I can also use email and the Internet,” he said. “I like to be here. It is more than a learning centre and more like a home to me. I make many friends here and everyone is very kind and helpful. I went to school for a few years when I was young as a little boy, but my grandmother needed me to help her on the farm when I was in year two and after that I never got back to school again. My village only had a primary school with two teachers. Most people dropped out of school before they reached year three or four. Life is hard in the village. We do not see the use of going to school. Parents need their children to help them on the farm in busy seasons and they could not afford to send their kids to school during busy (harvesting) seasons. In the farm, we need to make sure we take advantage of the good seasons and get everybody’s help. People hate it when the army comes to the village to take people for portering or when they take food from the villagers. Getting enough food for each year is already hard and men have to hide when the army comes... they have to make sure they are safe from being taken away as porters by the soldiers. Village life had no stress but very hard.....and, I now know I need to know how to read and write. I need education and this will make my life better.....”

Young migrant workers face many kinds of challenges in Thailand. Most not only have language barriers in Thailand, but very poor life skills to help improve their life. Education in Burma, according to Dr. Thein Lwin, does not adequately prepare students for life beyond school. Dr. Thein Lwin explained:

“They come here to work with half the education they need to survive”... “Many don’t even finish their basic education and they cannot properly read and write. They have little survival skills. I know they want to study, but they have been deprived and did not have the opportunity.... I want to create an opportunity for them to be able to pursue education.” (excerpt from a conversation with Dr. Thein Lwin 27 Aug 2007).



Dr. Thein Lwin, a well-known Burmese educationalist on the Thai-Burma border, was a student at the *Rangoon Institute of Technology* (RIT) in 1988 and he was expelled from the university for his involvement in the 1988 pro-democracy student uprising in Rangoon. After completing his Doctor of Education (EDD) from the *University of Newcastle* in England in 2000, he has devoted his life to improving education for displaced Burmese in Thailand and back in Burma.

Dr. Thein Lwin sees educating young migrant workers as vital for Burma's future. He believes education can help make changes and young people can contribute more to their community and country when they are educated.

"I want young people to study and earn their living with a professional skill" said Dr. Thein Lwin. "When they become educated, their lives will be better off and they will benefit their communities and their country." (excerpt from a conversation with Dr. Thein Lwin on 27 Aug 2007 at the MLC).

## **10.5 Some personal stories at the migrant learning centre**

### *10.5.1 Saya Hsai: education is the future of young people*

Saya Hsai is one of the founders of the *Migrant Learning Centre*. He has been teaching and managing the *Migrant Learning Centre* since 2005 when the centre began its operation in a small house. (Note: Saya Hsai kindly permitted me to use his name.)

"Saya" means teacher in Burmese and is a title that evokes respect for the person. Saya Hsai, a stocky looking and soft spoken man, is indeed a highly-respected teacher at the centre. Saya Hsai with a degree in education is a former teacher from Burma. He taught English and Maths in high schools in Burma. He left the country

after the 1988 democracy uprising as he found a teaching career in Burma was unsatisfying and his involvement in the democracy uprising in 1988 also made it impossible for him to continue his teaching career in Burma.

When he came to Thailand in 1989, Saya Hsai worked in several odd jobs such as house painting, construction, and language translation. In 1995, he worked for the *British Broadcasting Company's* (BBC) Burmese-Shan language radio program for basic health and education promotion for Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. In 1997, he began working with the *National Health and Education Committee* (NHEC), an initiative of the Burmese political opposition groups in Thailand, which provided basic education and health services to people in refugee camps and in the conflict zones. In 2005, he and Dr. Thein Lwin formed an education centre for Burmese migrant workers in Thailand, and this centre later became known as the *Migrant Learning Centre* (MLC).

Saya Hsai, sees education as a bridge that can help different people from different ethnic groups not only to build better lives but also to have a better understanding and become more united. Following are excerpts from conversations with Saya Hsai in Aug-Oct 2007.

“...education can help us break through barriers in life. It helps us to gain better understanding. People from different backgrounds come to understand one another when they study and mix together socially...”

“.....young people are important. They need to have access to education. This is their future. We need to encourage young people to keep studying one way or the other...”. “Being an illegal migrant worker does not mean you cannot study any longer. Education is a continuing process. You need to take advantage whenever you are given a chance to study.”

He goes on to elaborate his broad understanding of the role of adult learning:

“At the MLC we do not just teach languages and computer skills, it is a place for them to come and meet different people, get to know each other, and exchange information and ideas.” “...many learners come to me for all kinds of assistance and advice. They come here when they lose their jobs, they come and tell us when they got news from back home, they talk to me about their private issues, they consult me in relation to their important decisions, some even ask me for advice when they plan to buy a motorbike and so on ...” “it is a matter of trust that people see in our service at the MLC”. “I think it is important for them to have people who they can talk to with trust, these young people have been away from their home and families for so long, and they do not really have people who they can turn to when they need (moral) support or encouragement...” “but many have been very brave, they learn to make decisions independently, they have faced critical moments in their lives, and they have managed well” “... I think experiences and the need to survive force them to learn and grow quickly...” (excerpt from conversations with Saya Hsai between Aug-Nov 2007).

Saya Hsai is an idealist who wants to use education to change society.

“Education also helps preserve our culture. Without education our culture will be gone soon. Including cultural study in education is the best way in our situation to preserve our culture”(extract from conversations with Saya Hsai between Aug- Nov 2007).

I spent time with Saya Hsai on several occasions during my field study and I saw how he handled the students who come for all kinds of assistance. It is obvious that he cares for his students a great deal and he does it with a true belief in them.

### 10.5.2 Sai Lin: “I believe I am helping my country men”

Sai Lin (pseudo name) is a young graduate in geography from *La Shore College* in Northern Shan State who came to Thailand in 2005. Like many young people in Burma he found it difficult to find a decent job. He knew many young graduates had gone to Thailand for jobs. Sai Lin has an uncle, his mother’s younger brother, who has been living in Thailand for more than twenty years. However, no one in Sai Lin’s family knew how to contact his uncle in Thailand.

Sai Lin’s father passed away just before he completed his studies at the college. He has seven brothers and sisters and some of them still live at home. Sai Lin knew the time had come for him to take some responsibilities to support his family or at least he should no longer continue to rely on his family. At the age of twenty-one he decided to leave for Thailand to find his uncle and find a job.

He and another four friends from school set out to Thailand in early 2006. He worked in odd jobs, mainly in the farming industry, in his early days in Thailand. After some months he found out his uncle was working at the *Migrant Learning Centre* (MLC) in Chiang Mai as a Thai language teacher. Later, Sai Lin was united with his uncle and came to Chiang Mai.

Sai Lin has now joined the MLC team as an assistant teacher. He likes his job at the MLC as he always wanted to help other migrant workers. His uncle suggested to him to upgrade his education. In the same year, Sai Lin joined the *Wide Horizon School* in Mae Sot. The *Wide Horizon School* is a training program for young Burmese working in NGOs. He was accepted into a ten-month live-in program. At the *Wide Horizon School*, Sai Lin was exposed to interactive teaching and learning practices

that he never had in Burma. The *Wide Horizon School* was set up with funding from the *US Agency for International Development* (USAID) and managed by the *World Education* organisation. The idea of the school is to train young Burmese in all aspects of project management skills. The school accepts twenty students each year. With an American teacher and several local teachers, students are encouraged to speak only English during their stay in the program. Recalling his experiences at the *Wide Horizon School*, Sai Lin explained;

“...it was like a totally new education to me. We had to learn to be critical, talk to teachers and other students only in English, learn to design projects on our own, use computers to do reports and design projects.... these were quite difficult for me, especially in the beginning of the course...”.

“I’m not used to expressing my opinion in class, we were never taught to do it in my studies in Burma”..... “debating is difficult too.” “it took more than a month before I began to feel that I fitted in the group and I was able to do things on my own...” “we had students from refugee camps and they had better English language skills than most of us who just came out of Burma... this is because students from refugee camps learn the English language in refugee schools since a very young age... In Burma, we do not have good English teachers and do not have a reason to learn it”... “but we are well ahead of the students from refugee camps in maths and general knowledge...”.

“The American teacher encouraged us to speak English”...“by listening and talking to the American teacher, I felt my English language improved and I gained better confidence in speaking English...”.

“The *Wide Horizon School* focuses on practical skills. We had to do research, come up with our own topic, ideas and design for (small) projects and we had to go out and contact other NGOs and apply for funding for our projects..... not every student managed to secure funding, but most of us were able to do it...”. “... I designed an environmental project that promotes health and hygiene. Many also created projects with their computer skills...”.

After completing his training at the *Wide Horizon School*, Sai Lin put his knowledge into actions at the MLC;

“After completing my study at the *Wide Horizon School* I returned to the *Migrant Learning Centre* and began to do volunteer teaching work. I began as a substitute teacher and helped look after the library at the centre. I now work as an apprentice teacher. I teach basic computer skills and some English language classes.”

“The MLC has a different teaching and learning style compared to the *Wide Horizon School*. Students come to the MLC only for a very short time, two or three hours a day. Most classes in the school are overcrowded. I try to have students participate in class activities as much as I can. I get them to talk to people next to them and use a lot of examples and metaphors in my teaching. I deliberately make mistakes and get students to find out the correct answers on their own. But I can only do what I can. These students are migrant workers; they are in a very different situation to the students at the *Wide Horizon School*”. “The students here do not have much time to study at home, they are often exhausted in class as they worked all day before coming to their classes. Learners often have very different levels of skills in their language. Some find it very easy while some are struggling very hard in the class. We only have two levels of language classes at the MLC” (excerpts from interview with Sai Lin on 19/08/2007).

Although Sai Lin earns less than some of his friends working in other industries, he is satisfied with his job at the MLC. He is committed to his job and believes he is making a contribution to the future of his country. Sai Lin explained:

“I like the school since the first time I saw it. I want to help my fellow countrymen and I think this school gives migrant workers the language skills they need”. “I like my job here. I have close contact with many people. I hear all kinds of stories from them. They come to us when they need help. We don’t just provide language and computer education here. This is a networking centre. People come to share their stories, help one another to find jobs. We put important news and information on the notice board here. So this is a lot more than a language centre. I feel I am doing something right for people from our country.” “I’m happy even though I earn less than most of my friends working in other industries. I have learnt a lot and I am improving my teaching skills. I see my future will be better working here than if working in a factory”.

Sai Lin dreams of going back home and teaching computers to young people.

“I like teaching computers. I want to learn more about computers perhaps computer sciences. I am currently working with a computer teacher at the centre. I want to become

a computer professional. I hope to be able to go back and provide computer education back home. Young people in my home town do not know much about computers or have the opportunity to learn about computers. I feel they we are lagging behind and cut out from the information age. So I really want to help people know more about computers and be able to use computers for their own good" (excerpts from interview on 19/08/2007).

### *10.5.3 Sai Hla's experiences of perspective change*

Sai Hla (pseudo name), a twenty-one year old man has been living at the MLC for the last six months. He is a night shift worker, working in the security service industry. Sai Hla is originally from Mong Hsu in Southern Shan State. He came to Thailand some four years ago. Sai Hla's father died when he was young. His mother is an old woman now and the family lost their farm when the military confiscated their land for building a military camp. He has one brother and one sister who are much older than him, and they all live in Shan state with their own families.

Sai Hla was having a lot of trouble before coming to the MLC. He lost his factory job and had no place to live. He came to the MLC because he had nowhere to go for help. Saya Hsai allowed him to stay with some interns in a room at the back of the MLC. There are four interns at the MLC who are learning to become teachers. Sai Hla has been living at the MLC for six months now. He helps do some cooking, domestic work and cleaning at the centre. He has been attending a basic Thai language class during the day and goes to work at night. Sai Hla has never really been to a formal school before and he hardly speaks Burmese.

After six months at the MLC he has learnt to speak some Burmese with some interns who are from mixed different ethnic groups. Sai Hla explained;

“I have made many friends here. I know people from other ethnic groups such as Burman, Wa, Kachin, Pa-O and Chin. Before, I did not really know about people from other ethnic groups other than my own Shan ethnic group. I Knew Burman because Burman soldiers often came to my village. I though all Burmese hate and dislike the Shan. But here at the MLC I have made friends with Burmans and many of them are good friends of mine now”.

“It has been good to get to know many different people here. We talk all sorts of things, we gossip, talk about work, and even girls too” ...“I like to know people from different ethnic groups... ‘their stories tell me that we are all oppressed by the same military regime”

“I have improved my Thai language too. I now can read basic Thai. I can read shop and street signs, but I cannot write yet”(excerpts from interview on 29 Aug 07 at the MLC).

Apart from helping with domestic work and attending classes at the centre, Sai Hla has been involved in a health promotion video project.

“I’ve volunteered myself to take part in a film for sexual health promotion among migrant workers. The *Migrant Assistant Program* (MAP) in Chiang Mai is making an educational (video drama) film for migrant workers on HIV/Aids prevention. The MAP group came to the centre and asked people for audition. I went for it and was chosen for a role in the drama movie”. (excerpt from interview on 29 Aug 07 at the MLC)

In November 2007, Sai Hla participated in a rally to support the monk-led democratic change movement in Burma. I will discuss the MLC’s involvement in the public demonstrations in more detail, later in this chapter. He described his experiences in taking part in the demonstration:

“I went with the group to participate in the rally to support the monk demonstration in November 2007 inside the country. This was my first political action.” “It was really exciting. I felt I was doing something for our country. It was fun although I was nervous in the beginning. But after a while, I forgot we were being watched by the police or could be arrested...”. “I met some high profile people at the rally. It was



good to talk to them and hear their speeches...” (extract from conversations with Sai Hla on 30 Nov 07 at the MLC)

Sai Hla and I became good friends after a few months at the MLC. He and I had long conversations on many occasions. Sai Hla usually stays at the centre during the day time before going to his security job at night. Sai Hla seemed to trust me and he would tell me all the gossip and inside news among students whenever we talked.

#### *10.5.4 AikYai*

AikYai (pseudo name) was a second year chemistry student at the *Sit Kaine University* in upper Burma in 1988. He was part of the *All Burma Student Union* (ABSU) during the nation-wide democracy movement in 1988. After the military coup, AikYai joined a sub-division of the *All Burma Student Democratic Front* (ABSDF), an armed student organisation based in the Ka Chin State. In 1998 the organisation moved its base from Ka Chin state to the *Shan State Army* area in the Southern Shan State near the Thai-Burma border so he moved there with them. In 2006, AikYai suffered from a serious illness and was hospitalised in Chiang Mai. While in the hospital, AikYai lost contact with his group as they had gone on a mission to Northern Burma.

After recovering from his illness, AikYai joined a student media group called the *Network Media Group* in Chiang Mai, and he has worked with the group since then. The *Network Media Group*, largely made up of Burmese students, collects and compiles news from inside Burma and on the border areas, and sends the news out to larger media groups in order to promote awareness about Burma’s political situation and human rights abuses.

AikYai would like to learn more about office management because he believes that organisational management is weak in Burma. He explained:

“I think organisational management in Burma is generally weak, I want to become an effective manager in my organisation and work for Burma.” (excerpt from Interview on 20-8-07 at MLC).

AikYai studies English, Thai and computer skills at the *Migrant Learning Centre*.

AikYai explains:

“It is very good for me to come to the MLC. I do not only learn English and computer skills but also make friends from many different backgrounds here.” “I feel like I am at home”. I have learnt how migrant workers find ways to make a living here” “they are new to me and interesting” ....” (excerpt from Interview on 20-8-07 at MLC).

He finds his political background and connections have been useful at the MLC.

AikYai explained:

“...many people who come to the centre do not have time or access to resources to follow up what is happening in Burma, but they all share the same concern that we are all being oppressed and we are here in Thailand because of the military dictatorship... I share with some people the updated news in Burma because working at the Media Network Groups gives me good access to internet and first-hand news from reporters” ... “People at the centre are always interested in what is happening in Burma and always keen to find out about the news because they all have family members back in Burma who they are often worried about...”.

“This place (the MLC) is like a little community centre where we can talk and share anything between us.... teachers at the centre are very friendly and supportive. We can approach them on any issue. They are really concerned about our well-being. I talk to the teachers, especially Saya Hsai, about my personal issues and ask for his advice... When I came out of the hospital and was not sure what to do he advised me to stay in Chiang Mai and study rather than going back to the jungle...” (excerpt from interview on 20-8-07 at MLC).

AikYai has been accepted into an online university study recently.

“With Saya Hsai’s support and recommendation I was accepted into an online university program called “Open University” based in Australia...I got good support and advice. I feel I have found a window of opportunity to change my life, and my life became much more exciting at the centre...”. (excerpt from interview on 20-8-07 at MLC).

## **10.6 Discussion**

### *10.6.1 Informal learning and conversations*

The majority of the Burmese migrant workers population in Chiang Mai is made up of non-Burman ethnic minority groups from the Shan State of Burma. Many come from rural and remote communities and have poor educational background. Many have experienced the destruction of the civil war, racial conflict and violence. They have lived in silence for too long, hence trust among different ethnic groups as well as between individuals is indubitably weak.

Migration breaks social ties in any existing network and this reduces the quantity of social capital available to those who move (Coleman 1990; Putnam 2000; McLaughlin 2010). Burmese migrants and- workers in Thailand are, in general, alienated from the mainstream society. Due to their illegal status and the lack of ‘local’ language skills, their social ties are limited and they usually remain as outsiders in Thai society. Migrant workers not only have limited social ties but they also do not have community space of their own and therefore, are socially and culturally isolated. On top of their social isolation, migrant workers face discrimination and exploitation in their work places and often they have no one or nowhere to turn to when facing difficulties and having trouble.

Although the main purpose of the *Migrant Learning Centre* (MLC) is to provide language and basic computer skills, it also serves as a community space where people can meet, socialise and exchange knowledge and information. When people share demographic, spatial and relational characteristics, they develop a sense of belonging to the same group (Woolcock 2002). At the centre, migrant workers feel free to express their feelings, take part in social groups with people of similar background and discover common interests as well as problems. Many non-current students also regularly drop in to catch up with friends. These informal meetings and socialisation activities at the MLC help individuals and groups create and broaden their social networks.

The socialisation and the networking that take place at the MLC create a situation for informal learning to occur through conversations. Smith (1994, p. 44) explains that people make contact by greeting or speaking to members of the group and become a feature of the centre, always around asking questions and giving information. This socialisation and conversations become learning activities.

The social dimension of learning is tied to community practice and influence on interpretation and creating meaning (Illeris 2002, p. 142). Conversation has to be a shared language and the opportunity for immediate response. In conversation

“...people think and act in response to what we say and language allows communication, social interactions, thought and control. Language is a means of relying ideas and perceptions of experience between individuals. It also provides a medium through which people can categorise, order and direct their experiences and understandings and relations with other people. However, putting things in words for other people is something more than exchanging information, it contains the possibility of experiencing, of making things real and so bringing one’s world alive.” (Smith 1994, p. 42).

Illeris argues that socialisation creates conditions for developing a sense of belonging which is the necessary characteristic for community building and social bonding among members (2002, p. 141). Conversation is more than exchanging information or claiming who is right or wrong and often no one in the conversation group has control or know what conclusion the conversation would lead to. It is a process of creating a new understanding, an understanding of new meaning because no one knows what will be the 'outcome' in a conversation (Gadamer 1989, p. 345). The new understanding often eases the tension or clears the limitations of the previous understanding because conversation opens up a new dimension and new ways of knowing. Eric Fromm says

“ while the having persons rely on what they have, the being persons rely on the fact that they are, that they are alive and that something new will be born if only they have the courage to let go and respond. They become fully alive in the conversation because they do not stifle themselves by anxious concern with what they have. Their own aliveness is infectious and often helps the other person to transcend his or her egocentricity. Thus the conversation ceases to be an exchange of commodities (information, knowledge, status) and becomes a dialogue in which it does not matter anymore who is right” (1979, p.42).

Another aspect of socialisation and conversations is that they allow individuals to develop a sense of belonging to the group as well as to the place. Social bonding happens when people begin to relate to one another as members of the same group. Becoming a member of a social group with members from different backgrounds fosters identity development which entails learning. Stephen Brookfield says

“the art of living with contrary decision is a form of identity transformation. Every social interaction is a kind of experimentation. There is no reliable way of determining rightness or wrongness prior to experimentation” (1987, p. 184).

I argue that the informal social contact at the Migrant Learning Centre has strengthened the sense of community among the migrant workers and fosters learning the essence of civil society and democracy.

### *10.6.2 The migrant learning Centre (MLC) and social capital*

The MLC's staff members welcome and accept students from different backgrounds non-judgmentally. This inclusiveness and welcoming atmosphere at the centre offers migrant workers a 'safe haven'. Wootten & Wootten report

“ the MLC does a very good job, in a relatively informal manner, of teaching young migrant workers. It is more than a school, it is a safe haven where students are accepted without question and taught for free without prejudice or discrimination. The MLC is a source of information about service and opportunities for students, and provides informal guidance on personal and social issues.” (2001, p.8).

The World Bank (2011) identifies five dimensions of social capital.

1. social groups and networks with diversity of membership;
2. high level of trust that extends to strangers and in the government institutions;
3. collective action that is not imposed by an external force;
4. social inclusion in collective action, decision-making and access to service;
5. the ability to communicate and share information among members of a community and with other communities (see the World Bank web site titled *Measuring the Dimensions of Social Capital*).

Teachers at the MLC do not just teach but are very much involved in their students' personal and other matters. Given their status as illegal and marginalised, Burmese migrant workers in Thailand do not have access to essential assistance services such as financial, social or health services. Many migrant workers see the MLC as their community centre where they can find help in dealing with their problems. Social interaction outside the classrooms is crucial as it allows students to interact with their teachers in their own terms and they are not bound by classroom rules and curriculum. This allows students to have some sense of control in the direction of the conversation and relationships. After completing their study, many migrant workers continue to come to the centre to maintain social connection, seek job-leads, look for other learning pathways or just simply to keep in touch with other people and share their stories. Outside a working life we all need a public life and above all we need to belong to a community or social group. In public life we learn to satisfy our needs and to know what goes on in the world around us.

*"We need to learn how to make a living as well as how to live well and purposefully; the person with skills, the trained artisan or professional, needs also to know something else if he is to be an active and useful participant in a democratic setting"*  
(Brookfield 1987, p.167).

The MLC provides the only community space that is readily available for Burmese migrant workers. Close friendships and trust have created bridging ties among members of different ethnic groups to develop and this has led many individuals to overcome misunderstanding and hostility. The centre, in a sense, is a 'racial melting pot' that provides an environment for reconciliation and better understanding among different ethnic groups to occur.

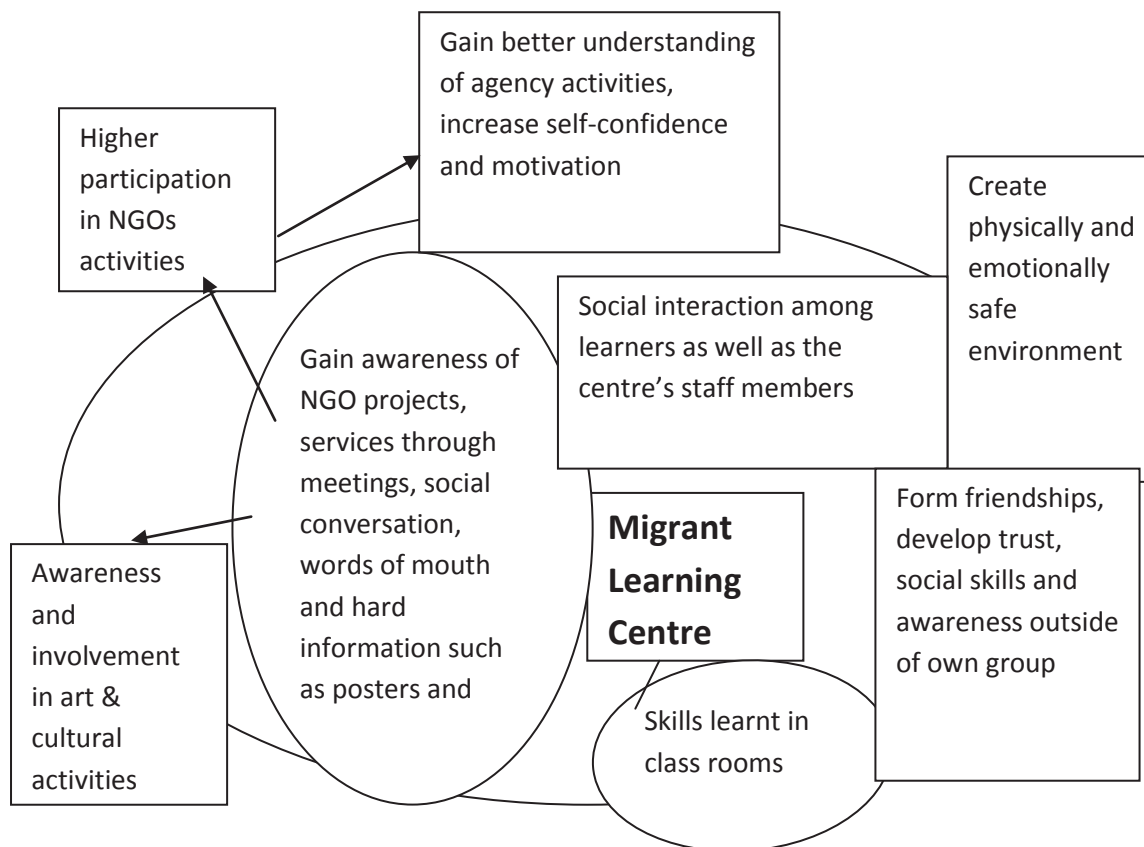


Fig. 3 Scope of social interaction and learning at the Migrant Learning Centre

An emotionally and physically safe environment is critical for people to form a social connection with other members at the centre and thus improve their capacity to learn. The social interaction and networks help form communities or social groups in which its members make regular contact. Opportunity and atmosphere for ongoing social interaction among students and the staff of the centre are the source of social bonding and community building. For migrant workers who have been traumatised by civil war, the MLC offers an opportunity to engage in a peaceful life and a place for solace.

Some of the individuals that come to the MLC are members of different organisations and they share news and information to students they meet at the MLC. Workers from different non-government organisations (NGOs) working for



migrant workers such as *Migrant Assistant Program* (MAP) visit the centre regularly to promote their services. Distinguished visitors such as staff from other training programs and international volunteer teachers, provide opportunities for learners to create links and with people outside of their immediate groups (Wootten and Wootten 2011). The free internet service for migrant workers also gives a window of opportunities to make links with outside world. All this builds bridging social capital.

### *10.6.3 Becoming active citizens: An example of collective action to support the common cause*

Burmese migrant workers in Thailand are, generally preoccupied with their survival activities and their immediate interest is to have a job and remain in the job as long as possible. As discussed earlier, Burmese citizens in general withdraw from politics, they are passive toward the authorities and usually stay away from politics in order to avoid the attention of the authorities. This has been the most effective survival strategy for migrant workers without legal status. It is understandable that most migrant workers have little or no motivation to risk their safety to take part in the democracy movement. Many have families back in Burma who depend on their money remittances.

Burmese resistance groups in Thailand, by and large, do not see migrant workers as a force in their struggle for democracy in Burma. As a result, the Burmese opposition groups in Thailand have little influence or connection with migrant workers. However, the Burmese migrant workers at the MLC have shown that they are a political force. In September 2007, a political uprising led by Burmese Buddhist monks broke out in Burma. It was known as the '*Saffron Revolution*' and it was later ruthlessly oppressed by the military regime. At the time, several dozen monks were

killed and many monks were imprisoned and tortured. The news of the movement in Burma, with the help of Burmese internet bloggers inside Burma, had quickly reached Thailand and many parts of the world. Computer students at the MLC had immediately scattered the news and information about the Saffron Revolution in Burma. At the MLC, political debates flared up quickly. More and more people, during the time of the Saffron Revolution came to the MLC to share the news and information they received as well as to find out up to date news. Most migrant workers at the MLC paid great attention to the event. Workers contacted their families in Burma to find out more news at the local level. In late November 2007, Burmese opposition groups in Thailand called for support from the international community and staged demonstrations in Thai cities in support of the Saffron Revolution in Burma. In Chiang Mai, Burmese opposition groups staged a public demonstration in front of the American Consulate building, calling for political change and for a stop to the killing of monks and their supporters in Burma. The number of people at the demonstration was small because the Thai authorities kept a close eye on movements of Burmese's opposition groups in Thailand. The Thai authority did not want to start a conflict with the Burmese regime because of Burmese opposition's activities in Thailand. Risking their safety, about 150 people actively took part in the demonstration. Surprisingly, most people at the demonstration were the MLC's students. The students knew that their involvement in the event exposed them to a great risk of being arrested and even deported back to Burma.

Participation in the demonstration may be just a minor political act, but for most migrant workers, participation in such public event is a great step. By attending a public demonstration they are exposing themselves to the Thai authorities and risk being arrested, imprisoned and deported back to Burma. They can be arrested at the demonstration or on the way to and back from the demonstration. In many cases, the

police followed them to where they lived and worked and rounded them up in the next few days. Their decision to take action and show their support for the social movement in Burma reveals that most migrant workers have developed a wider understanding of the social reality and that their action can bring change not only to their lives but contribute to a better life for all people in Burma. This shows that migrant workers who participated in the public rally, have raised their consciousness and they no longer let fear and ignorance dominate their thinking. They have learnt to build social networks and trust, take part in collective action, communicate openly and work with different social groups. It is clear that the MLC, a language and computer training centre, promotes the spirit of community and a sense of belonging, and more importantly, through creating opportunities for building social relationship and networking, it has built a wealth of social capital among people who are otherwise isolated and marginalised.

## **10.7 Conclusion**

This chapter demonstrates that informal education can be used to promote social capital among people who have been socially and culturally isolated, and politically manipulated. The MLC in Chiang Mai offers a community space for migrant workers who otherwise have little or no opportunity to meet people outside of their immediate social groups. At the MLC, students not only learn language or computer skills that maximise their capacity to gain employment, but they also learn to form positive social relationships and thus increase their capacity to build social networks. Positive social interactions encourage a sense of belonging and social bonding.

Through social networking, learners at the MLC build up their social connection outside of their immediate social groups and in doing so they have developed better social competence. Trust among participants also becomes stronger through open,

understanding and supportive social interaction and bonding. Informal learning in this environment occurs through observation, imitation and action. Belonging to a social group and acting as being an equal member is a process of becoming a new being. The MLC, as a community space where migrant workers are free to interact and express, fosters collective aspiration and promotes collective learning, allowing migrants to become active citizens. In the next chapter, I will analyse a non-formal human rights training program of the *Human Rights Education Institute of Burma* (HREIB) for Burmese grassroots community workers. Due to the illegal status of participants, the training program was organised in a clandestine location. My study reveals that it is important for community workers to have an opportunity to reflect their experiences in order to, not only learn from other experiences, but also validate their practices, actions and their role as important actors in the social movement.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### **“Non-formal education for Burmese community activists in a clandestine location”**

#### **11.1 Introduction**

In previous chapters I presented an analysis of myself, three Burmese migrant workers and of informal education and learning in a variety of community settings. In this chapter I will analyse a non-formal education program that is run in a clandestine location in Thailand for Burmese activists.

#### **11.2 Getting together**

**(Please note that the names of program participants mentioned are pseudonyms to protect their safety)**

In a decrepit building that is thickly enclosed by tall and enfolding tropical trees, a group of twenty young people were anxiously waiting for their breakfast before starting their very first day of a human rights training program. These young people came from different parts of Burma to participate in a training program run by the *Human Rights Education Institute of Burma* (HREIB) in a secret location in Northwestern Thailand. Most of them had just arrived as early as last night. As they were waiting anxiously, some began to talk to the person next to them while some were still uncertain as to what to do. Nai Hon Hsa (pseudonym), a young man in his distinctive red sported ‘longyi’ or ‘salong’ and white T-shirt with the writing “*Mon Youth Health Organisation*” in English and Mon, stood near the drinking water fountain with observing eyes. He looked in his mid-twenties. His brown skin, the features of his face and the writing on his T-shirt showed that Nai Hon Hsa was a Mon ethnic from Southern Burma. He was obviously anxious and feeling uneasy. I went and spoke to Nai Hon Hsa and found out he had just arrived the night before

to participate in the training program from Mon State of Burma. He obviously knew no one and was unsure how to get to know others in the group.

Apart from some people who began to talk with the people next to them, many looked uncertain and uneasy. Some were standing and some were sitting with curious eyes and waiting to see what would happen next. It was not surprising that these young participants were feeling uncomfortable. They were from different ethnic groups of Burma which have long ago lost trust in one another. Young people from non-Burmese ethnic groups generally can speak Burmese (many with a heavy accent) but often have difficulty expressing themselves fluently because most non-Burmese ethnics only learn Burmese in school. Nai Hon Hsa explained that he was selected by his organisation to participate in the training program. He was delighted and excited to come to this place and to take part in the program. I could see similar expressions and excitement in the faces of many other young people in the group. This was the scene of the *Human Rights Education Institute of Burma* (HREIB) training program in the early morning of its very first day. Soon the program director arrived and he broke the ice by welcoming everyone and led them into the training venue in the rear part of the compound. The venue was set in a hidden part of the compound that had been carefully selected. The twenty young people disappeared in the venue that was surrounded by large tropical trees which also provided soundproofing for the training. There were three buildings in the compound; one was used for the training, another one as a dining room and the last one located in the front of the compound, housed a family. The front building was not used for training purposes. It looked more like a family home from outside so the neighbors would not be suspicious about the nature of the activities inside the compound. The compound is located in the outskirts, and quiet area, of a town.

### 11.2.1 Secret location

The *Human Right Education Institute of Burma* (HREIB) was set up by Burmese student activists, many of them used to be members of the *All Burma Students Democratic Front* (ABSDF), an anti-Burmese military regime organisation based on the Thai-Burma border, to provide human rights education to members of community-based organisations, especially to young people who are working in NGOs and grassroots communities.

Although the course is for human rights education and capacity building for young community workers who primarily work in rural and remote communities, this kind of training is considered to be politically harmful by the Burmese military regime (Costello 2008, p. 97). Successive Thai governments have put the economic relationship with the Burmese military regime above the concern for the worsening record of human rights violations and oppression in Burma. Human rights training programs for Burmese community workers like this are viewed as damaging to the relationship between the two countries. Most participants also did not have official travel documents to be in Thailand. For all these reasons, training programs are usually organised in carefully selected clandestine locations for the safety and security of the participants.

Twenty participants from different ethnic groups had been selected for this four-week residential training program. In a small building with just one single large room in the back of the compound, the participants gathered and sat in a circle. The room was just large enough to have some twenty people move around. The building is surrounded by large trees that provide shade and is a healthy distance from the neighborhoods. The entrance door and windows in the building were usually closed or half open. The sound and voices from the training could hardly be heard from

outside of the compound. The big trees in the compound also help put the training room out of sight. There is a family, a couple with a baby, who live in the wooden building in front part of the compound. The family helped organise food supply for the training. A smaller and poorly covered building is attached to the large building. This attached building is used as the dining room for the participants. Participants, for the duration of their course, would come and leave the training place together, eat together and spend most of their time together. The front part of the compound is fenced and secured with a large and tall gate covered with old tin-roof plates. This is a carefully selected secret location for a human rights training program of the *Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB)*.

At night time, the participants slept in two buildings not far from the training compound. Two different buildings, one for the boys and the other for the girls, located about five minutes walking distance from the training place. The training began at eight o'clock in the morning and would finish at nine o'clock at night. Participants would arrive at the training centre about seven o'clock to have their breakfast before the training began. They would go back to the houses where they sleep after nine o'clock at night. In this way, their movements were not visible to the neighbours in the day time.

### **11.3 Multi-ethnic groups: difficulties and advantages**

Participants were from different ethnic backgrounds and there were equal numbers of males and females. Having participants from mixed-ethnic groups in a training program generally sounds democratic and accommodating, but given the history of ethnic conflict in Burma, it also comes with practical difficulties and barriers. While cultural and custom differences between the ethnic groups can be resourceful for the training program, they can also present a challenging task for organisers and



facilitators. The challenges include different languages, cultural and custom practices such as food preparation and religious practice.

Language is often a barrier among different ethnic participants. Although Burmese is the official language in Burma, due to poor and often inaccessible education services, especially in non-Burman ethnic populated frontier areas, non-Burmese ethnic members generally have difficulty speaking Burmese. Participants in the HREIB training programs were able to speak and write Burmese. However, some non-Burmese ethnic members still find it difficult to speak fluently and understand others in the group. Participants from ethnic minority groups generally work and live in their own communities and have very little need to speak Burmese in their communities.

Distrust among ethnic groups, especially, between the Burman and non-Burman groups, remains a sensitive racial issue. Jokes and remarks from one ethnic group can be misunderstood by the other groups as racial incitement. Religious differences also need to be taken into consideration. In this particular training group, participants belonged to Buddhism and Christianity. Although participants are mostly young and fairly open minded to different religions they still strictly practice their religions. For instance, Christian participants do not want to have training on Sundays and Buddhist participants want to have ritual celebration on their important religious day.

In this particular course, food preparation did not seem to be a major issue since participants did not have any special dietary requirements. However, there could be more complexity in the food preparation when having participants from different

religions. For instance, participants from Islamic religion may have difficulty having the same meal as non-Muslim participants. Given the circumstance and limited resources, food in this kind of training is prepared in a very simple way and all for the same everyone. Participants and facilitators have their meal together, the same kind of food and eat with their hands (eating with hands together has special meaning in Burmese and I will discuss in more detail in a later section).

Training with mixed ethnic groups, on the other hand, can be rich in ideas and wisdom and presents a unique opportunity to promote understanding and unity among different ethnic groups. Participants learn from one another and this helps build better understanding among different ethnic groups. These new ideas are often creative and provide practical uses for participants and facilitators.

#### **11.4 HREIB: the history and the idea**

Aung Myo Min, a young activist in the 1988 democracy uprising was a member of the ABSDF on the Thai-Burma border before he became a refugee in Thailand and left for the US in the early 1990s. After completing his studies in the US, he came back to Thailand and worked in a human rights documentation project in the Thai-Burma border areas. As a human rights documentation worker in the Thai-Burma border areas, Aung Myo Min became more aware of the needs for human rights education among Burmese people in exile.

In the year 2000, Aung Myo Min established the *Human Rights Education Institute of Burma* (HREIB) to provide basic human rights education to members of grassroots

communities. The program focuses on providing human rights training to young people from different ethnic groups working in NGOs and grassroots organisations.

The HREIB is now a well-known human rights training program and has run several human rights education programs for Burmese in Thailand and other neighbouring countries. The HREIB takes a different teaching and learning approach to the Burmese traditional education method. It uses learner-centered, problem-posing methods of teaching and learning which are relatively unknown to the Burmese. Participants in the training programs are challenged in many ways including their ideas and values, and encouraged to take their own initiatives.

Aung Myo Min explained;

“we adopted learner-centered approaches and this makes the HREIB different from many other Burmese training programs in Thailand..... we use Freire’s approaches and methods and they have been very useful.....But we do not follow the methods exactly, we apply mixed adult education methods and local cultural practices. We practice equality and fairness (between facilitators and participants), let people use their own initiatives... the organization itself is like a family” (drawn from conversations with Aung Myo Min on 9 July 2007).

The organisation has few paid staff and relies on volunteers. The manager of the organisation explained:

“HREIB is an NGO, not a traditional organisation like many other Burmese organisations in Thailand, ... it has staff and volunteers but not members.... we believe in voluntary participation rather than membership... after all we are a training program and our main task is to help build capacity of young people”(drawn from a conversation with the manager on 9 July 2007).

## **11.5 Participants**

Participants in the human rights training program were selected on the basis of the type of activities they were involved in and their commitment to the future of Burma. There was an equal number of men and women in the course because there is an overt commitment to promote female participation in the social change movement. Most participants were young and had been involved in local community activities such as education or health projects in their local communities. There were a few participants who worked in organisations with overt political agendas such as woman and workers' organisations based in Thailand. Participants were generally enthusiastic and keen to learn since most had little formal training and exposure to the world outside of their communities. The HREIB's training programs are popular because of the learner-centered teaching and learning methods. One of the facilitators of the program explained:

*"Young people in Burma received education in traditional learning method that generally offers no challenge and creative ideas. This type of education does not prepare the students to face real challenges in life. Although students completed their (university) studies they are not confident in their education..." "...exercises in our training are based on practical problems they face in their work... participants are encouraged to bring up the problems" "... participants are exposed to different ways to solving problems, and this has a significant impact on their attitude, values and ideas..." (drawn from a conversation with a facilitator 12 Aug 2007).*

## **11.6 The relevance of human rights education to activists working in diverse fields**

Participants in the HREIB course have worked in various fields and come from different parts of Burma. Participants' fields of activism can be categorised in three different areas; those who work with communities in the border regions, those who work with organisations inside (in urban areas of) Burma and those who live and

work with Burmese organisations in Thailand. Most participants work with communities in the border regions.

Participants from inside the country or in big cities have to take more precautions to avoid the watchful eyes of the authorities. Participants usually work in war-torn communities in border areas, with Internally Displaced People (IDP) and refugees and they face different forms of danger. Unlike participants from the cities, community workers on the border areas do not face the risk of being arrested in their daily work because they are relatively safe from the operations of the military intelligence and the regime does not see their work as a direct political threat. The challenges they face are more about survival in difficult environments such as taking risky trips to reach remote communities and face the risk of being mistaken and arrested as members of the armed resistance groups by the *Burma Army*. They often have to work with limited resources. The third group of participants who are based in Thailand, work with more openly political organisations such as resistance organisations, rights groups and workers' associations. Such organisations are not tolerated in Burma. Inside the country, political groups including workers' and students' associations face severe restrictions in Burma. Burmese political organisations in Thailand, on the other hand, can openly oppose the Burmese military regime and call for regime change and democratic reform.

In an attempt to understand how relevant the human rights training program has been to the participants who work in different fields, I asked their views and experiences of the training program. Following are excerpts from conversation with some participants in August 2007. One participant said:

“...this human rights education training not only focuses on human rights education, but also offers us new perspectives to see the bigger picture of how the oppressive

system operates. The training helps us understand the connection between our job and the political struggle for democracy. This reinforces our beliefs and values, ...I feel my work helps people and it is for the right cause. We learn to understand that politics is not confined to political parties or organisations, it is in our everyday activities.”

A young health worker working in the border region said;

“..... I like the empowerment aspect of the training, in my job I deal with local villagers in remote areas who often feel powerless under the oppressive system. They often think in negative ways as they have been under oppression for too long. When talk about their situations, they feel hopelessness and seek ways to escape rather than believing in their strength...this course has given me some ideas and tools to work with people who are disempowered...this gives me strength to continue my job....”

A young woman who works for a political organisation expressed:

“... team-work activities in the training help me to be very open and comfortable to work with others now. I learned to be more flexible in working with others...I feel I can work with any people now...”

A teacher who works in a community in Kachin state in Northern Burma expressed:

“...games and role-play make us (participants) become very close. We have so much fun and we also get to know each other better through jokes, laughing, teasing, and warm conversation... I think this kind of training is very good for us... I feel I have learned a lot and improved my confidence.... I’m excited to go back to work... I want to do many new things...”

“...I like the challenges put to us in the training because they make me think critically about my work and my beliefs. I’ve learnt about other participants’ work and experiences. It helps me understand that, like me, everyone is doing his or her best with limited support and resources.... we have now formed an email group among us and we will keep in touch and inform one another through this network...”.

## **11.7 Learning ownership and control through participatory ways of working and decision making**

Aung Myo Min, the director of the HREIB and the program’s principal facilitator. His ways of engaging with participants in the course is warm, friendly and at the

same time challenging. On the first day of the training program he carefully made sure every participant felt welcomed, connected and had a chance to talk. The first day of the training is an ice-breaking day and an important day to create a welcoming atmosphere. It is a good opportunity for the facilitators to find out participants' expectations of the program and observe and assess participants' skill levels, interests and experiences. Aung Myo Min often singled out the shy and quiet ones in the group and put them in a situation where they had to say something to express their views. He did it in a non-threatening way and helped participants to express their feelings. In the first few hours of the course participants were formed in two big groups and they played games competing between the two groups. It was an ice breaking exercise. The games forced participants to work closely and helped them become friendlier to one another. After a few games participants were broken up into smaller groups with four or five in each group. Participants routinely swapped groups. In a few hours the training room was quickly transformed and filled with laughter and jokes as the participants and facilitators had fun and got to know one another.

On the first day, the facilitators and the participants together worked out a list of topics participants wanted to learn during the course and time-frames for each topic and associated activities. Planning the activities together with the facilitators gives participants a sense of ownership of their learning activities and also sets a non-binding contract between the facilitator and participants. Participants are likely to be more committed to achieve the goals they helped set up.

Group exercises based on participants' experiences help participants learn practical problem solving skills, develop better confidence and a sense of belonging, solidarity and cooperation. As they work together, their positions, values and beliefs were

challenged. Together with the training facilitators, participants planned, organised and evaluated their activities. The practice of learner-centered approaches encourages participants to actively participate and take their own initiative (Guevara 2002, p. 301).

### **11.8 Learning responsibility and solidarity with metaphors**

My observation of the training methods reveals that facilitators regularly used metaphors in their workshops. Metaphors are effective communication and learning tools. Mezirow explains

“metaphors are the tools of communicative learning. Learning through metaphors transcends simply identifying isolated similarities; it may refer to whole ranges of similarities and associated implications. Metaphors often are based upon correlations between the experience perceived and something known” (1991, p. 80).

Culturally situated metaphors are effective as they are most familiar with and easy to conceptualise.

In making clear to participants that punctuality is an important rule of the training program, Aung Myo Min, the facilitator, used a commonly understood metaphor. On the very first day of the course, participants were reminded that “*time*” was one of their assets and punctuality would be taken seriously. There is a popular perception that in Burma, people find all excuses and reasons for being late to show up in classes or meetings. In an attempt to challenge this attitude and habit, Aung Myo Min used the clock metaphor to remind participants about punctuality. He said:



“...please, remember your own rules that you set for the training group. The rules you set are for you, so you have to practice according to your own rules.... do not bring your own clock (time) when you come to the class... we all use the same clock here (time)...”(excerpt from observations of the first day of the training 19 Jul 2007)

By saying “*Do not bring your own clock when you come to the class*”, Aung Myo Min refers to the habit of being late.

Using metaphors is common in daily spoken language among Burmese speakers. Metaphors are often used to describe the subject, concept or idea that the speaker intends to convey to another person in the conversation. Mezirow explains metaphor is a form of message and often transcends ideological meaning; “*Many concepts, such as understanding, argument, idea, love, happiness, health, and morality, can be described only in terms of metaphors*” (1991, p. 81).

The use of metaphors in the course was educational and led participants to reflect on their own experiences. One of the most popular metaphors in Burmese is the elephant and nine blind men who have the curiosity of finding out what an elephant looks like. All nine blind men describe their picture of an elephant after each touching different parts of an elephant body. Everyone has his own description about what an elephant looks like and no one has got the right description. Using the nine blind men and an elephant to describe people’s limited views and understanding, especially when there is not enough information available was useful as most participants can relate to the story easily. The exercise helped participants to understand that we do not always know everything and there are always more aspects of a situation or a condition.

To encourage genuine effort and participation, Aung Myo Min used the story of a small village that is under attack from a notorious tiger from the jungle nearby. Cattle and people are often attacked by the tiger. One day, the villagers gather together to work out a plan to stop the tiger's attack. The plan is to get the tiger drunk by putting alcohol in the water hole in the central village where the tiger each night comes and drinks water. Every household in the village is asked to put some amount of alcohol in the water hole so when the tiger comes at night, as usual, it will drink water from the hole. This time it will get drunk and the villagers can strike. As planned, everyone put some alcohol in the hole and that night the villagers waited quietly to catch the tiger. The tiger comes, as usual, and it drinks water from the hole. But the tiger was not affected by alcohol. The next day the headman of the village calls all the villagers for a meeting and says the tiger got away because no one put alcohol in the water hole. Everyone thinks that it will be alright if I put water in the hole because everyone else will put alcohol and my little water would not make any difference. But everyone thinks the same and all put water instead of alcohol. This story is used to describe the need to have honesty and genuine participation in team-work. Mezirow says

Such critical awareness will increase our effectiveness in analyzing problems by allowing us to examine the analogies, including possibly false or limited analogies that are being used to attribute meaning to an experience (1991, p. 82).

### **11.9 Learning equality**

Food was prepared on a low budget and in the same way for everyone. Sharing meals together is not only an opportunity to talk and get to know one another it also provides opportunity to develop a deeper level of closeness and trust. All participants and facilitators always eat together (usually with their fingers). In Burmese culture, eating together with fingers is an expression of true solidarity,

equality and unity among members. There is a saying: *"I know him very well, we used to eat together with our hand (fingers)"* which refers to closeness, openness and equality.

Eating together is also a way for facilitators to show participants that they are with them as an equal partner. Participants also increase their confidence in dealing with facilitators who are traditionally seen as superior to students. Schooling education in Burma emphasises students respecting the teachers. The concept of respect is closely tied with Buddhism and traditional practice in Burma which set the principle for younger people to unconditionally respect anyone older than them (Trager 1969, p.125-127). This concept of respect is often misinterpreted as young people having no rights to challenge the teacher. As a consequence, this custom gives way to misusing power by some teachers and building up fear and uncertainty in young people. Developing a closer relationship over a meal helps break down some traditional barriers to democratic practice.

#### **11.10 Learning in small-groups hypothetical problem-posing exercises and drawing from practical knowledge**

Problem-posing exercises were an important part of the training program. Participants were regularly divided into groups of four to five to develop hypothetical projects, identify problems and work out solutions to the problems. In these exercises, the participants learnt to be self-critical, analyse things for themselves and understand their peers' skills and problems. The participants were able to draw and apply their *'practical knowledge'*. Sarah Maddison & Sean Scalmer argue that activists commonly draw from their *'practical knowledge'* which includes common sense, rules of thumb, knack, folk wisdom and custom (2006, p. 43).

*'Practical knowledge'* is largely drawn from experiences and often based on solving problems and finding solutions. It is usually local and intuitive (Scott 1998 and Haper 1987). Maddison & Scalmer observe that activists commonly lack a conscious plan, act instinctively and often "didn't know where many of their most important skills come from" (2006, p. 48). Activists often apply their practical knowledge to deal with social issues in everyday experiences and in doing so they develop skills to work with others. Guevara explains that by focusing on the individuals' unique experiences, non-formal adult education offers skills needed in order to become productive citizens (2002, p.42). Community activists in the human rights training program learnt to understand that they were largely dependent upon their 'practical knowledge'. Understanding their strength and limitations, the community activists were able to identify the source of their knowledge and the reasons of the decisions they take for actions.

The concept of "*really useful knowledge*" is particularly relevant to the Burmese's situation in which they have been made to distrust their own capacity and experiences. "*Really useful knowledge*" is recognising the knowledge that is directly relevant and useful to them and having the ability to make use of the knowledge give the oppressed power they need to take better control of their own lives (Johnson 1979). That is the kind of knowledge that enables people to understand the root cause of their suffering in which they find themselves in order to make changes.

I observed that participants in this training program developed "*really useful knowledge*". In this course, participants discuss issues based on their own experiences in their field work. This is an important and useful exercise for the participants who work in different fields of practice and usually do not have an opportunity to reflect on their work. Merrifield (2002) explains experience without the opportunity to

make the meaning of it will not create self-awareness and pro-active citizens. Knowledge from experiences enables people to understand not only the problem but also its root causes. The purpose of developing '*really useful knowledge*' by the oppressed themselves is to be able to see the oppressive system from a different perspective so the oppressed can find ways to protect their interests. By reflecting on their experiences, the participants learned to better understand the connection between their actions and the system that oppresses them. As one participant explained;

"I now know that I have been doing human rights educational work without knowing ... I work in a local health promotion organisation, I talk with people about health issues and we often discuss how human activities cause damage to the environment and in turn impact on their health such as the effect of logging and mining had on villagers' drinking water and the damage to the forest and the ecosystem that was caused by those activities. Local people always have their points of view but lack analysis. We share our knowledge and experiences with them. This kind of conversations helps them realise that they can protect themselves from conditions that affect their health." (excerpt from an interview with a participant 12 Aug 2007)

In this regard, participants learnt to understand that their experiences in the field are an important source of their knowledge and whose interests are being served. They began to identify which knowledge is meaningful to them. In other words "*really useful knowledge*" is generated as participants develop a new way of understanding about the same reality.

### **11.11 Learning to develop their own projects and make peer assessments**

Participants were required to develop individual projects. The projects were an opportunity for participants to take their own initiative, use entirely their own ideas and imagination to develop problem-solving skills. Most participants use

community development models and focus on overcoming problems by negotiating with stakeholders and people with different ideas and opinions.

Evaluation and assessment in this course focused on three aspects: facilitators' observation, participants assessing their own work (including peer assessment) and the organisation of the training program itself. The facilitators' observation of participants focuses on the level of their participation and effort, and quality of their work. Participants gave comments and feedback to their fellow participants' presentations and work. This was a two-way and peer assessment. Peer assessment is often emotional but also offers a good opportunity for personal development. Emotion is not necessarily negative, and it can be the source of strength and energy in working for change (Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta 2001). Wells (2006, p. 246) recommends that adult educators and social activists can transform instinctive emotion into cognitive beliefs and concrete actions that can mobilise both individual and collective will against the force of oppression.

Getting to know a person from a different ethnic group is an opportunity to gain new understanding. Freire says "naive consciousness becomes critical transformation when people overcome views and perspectives that are based on naive understanding or over simplification of problems" (1974, p. 18).

The third form of evaluation is the way the program was organised and run in term of its transparency, equality and fairness. I observed that the program director shared a lot of inside information including the cost of running the program and how decisions were made in the planning of the training activities. Participants and facilitators shared and discussed various issues including matters that were not

related to the training activities. Open and frank discussion between participants and the facilitators led to trust developing between them. Social skills and leadership styles of the facilitators formed part of the total quality of the training program (Guevara 2002, p. 264). Overall, the training was run on the principles of democracy: tolerate differences, trust building, consultation and collaboration.

### **11.12 Some participants' experiences and stories**

Individuals' uniqueness and functional experiences are major influences to and crucial basis for popular education (Guevara 2002). In this section, I will discuss and highlight three participants' stories and experiences.

#### *11.12.1 Mya Mya Win: A woman participant's impression and idea*

One of the participants', Mya Mya Win, learning experiences show an important perspective change in her understanding of Burma's national crisis. Her exposure and experiences with people from different ethnic groups in the training not only lead her to develop a better understanding about the ethnic issue, but also to see that a lack of critical understanding in Burma's national issue is part of the problem in national reconciliation.

Mya Mya Win sat quietly on the first day of the training and she usually gave short answers whenever she was asked to give her opinion. She looked more mature than most participants in the training. She showed some reservation and most of the time she only smiled when others laughed with delight. In the second week of the training, I made an attempt to speak to Mya Mya Win during a lunch break. I mentioned my intention to talk to her and my background as a member of the

democracy movement in 1988. She seemed relaxed and willing to talk to me. Although she felt a bit embarrassed in the beginning, she expressed herself and answered my questions confidently and strongly. I could see how strongly she was committed to her cause.

Mya Mya Win was a former member of the *Thong Yaung Cheal* or the *Tri- Colour Flag* which was a prominent student organisation working alongside the *National League for Democracy* (NLD) during the nationwide campaign for democracy in 1988. Briefly after the military coup in Sept 1988, Mya Mya Win along with colleagues from her organisation were arrested. She spent more than five years in Rangoon's notorious Insein jail. After her release in 1994, Mya Mya Win kept a low profile. When many of her friends were released in 2003 she began to be politically active again. She now works with the NLD's women's wing in which she delivers human rights and community development training. In 2005, she was offered an opportunity to go to the USA to study community development by the *American Centre* in Rangoon. Mya Mya Win traveled to the US as a business woman to avoid the Burmese authority's suspicion. In 2006, she attended a women's conference in Malaysia. She has also participated in other short courses outside of Burma. Mya Mya Win said:

"lack of exposure is a major limitation for many young activists in Burma". She says "... I learnt the importance of community organisations for a democratic society while I was in America". ... " I was surprised to learn how local communities in America can do what they want and can empower local people..." She says "people inside need exposure. The more exposure we have the better we understand how democracy functions at local community level" ... "I began to see many different ways since I started coming out of the country... my exposure to different experiences and activities helps me become more confident and inspires me to do more..."

Learning about human rights in a bigger picture



"I come out of the country with a passport as a business woman, so I can travel freely in Thailand. Of course, I still have to be very careful about participating in this course. I understand most participants in the course are illegal and this training is illegal."

"What amaze me in in this human rights program is that I have learnt the situations of other ethnic groups and their suffering and concerns through observing their conversations and debates in class. Having lived in an urban area (Rangoon) all my life, I am ignorant of oppression in ethnic areas and their suffering, especially those who live in the frontier areas where the civil war has been going on for several decades. It is an eye opening experience. I see Burma's problems in a different light now".

"What we learn about human rights here allows us to break down misunderstandings among us. Before, I saw the ethnic minority groups as being destructive and do not support national unity because they always demand their rights rather than democracy. Now I understand their suffering and concerns in a better way".

"There are a lot of techniques I learnt in this training that are applicable to many other areas, especially, in community development. So the human rights education we learn here will be very useful....the training itself is very challenging and fun. Activities in the training program such as group work, debates and critical analysis help improved my critical thinking skills.

## Community development trainings in Burma

"Inside the country, as part of the NLD's women wing, I run community development trainings in small towns where the NLD party still has strong support. It is safer if we have the local support". "We do basic community development training in Burma. For instance, we promote the rights of children to quality education. Teachers' salaries in Burma are too little for them to survive on and the schools keep charging parents for all sorts of fees to make up the short-coming salary. These fees are illegal and students are not receiving good education. Parents are worried about the quality of the education their children receive and they are keen to support the school if it is to improve the quality of education. We sometimes have teachers participate in our training. Many teachers are not happy with the situation either. They come to the training to learn what are their rights as teachers or what they can do to help the community without risking their jobs."

She sees the training as being limited to a few people and wants this kind of training to be available to young people inside the country.

“..., only very few of us from inside are able to come to this kind of training. We need more people to participate in this kind of training. Training should be run inside the country. It is difficult for people inside to come and participate in programs in Thailand”(excerpts from an interview with Mya Mya Win on 23 Jul 2007).

### *11.12.2 A Mon ethnic participant's experience and vision*

A participant from Mon ethnic group, Nai Hom Hsa, learnt how his health work in local frontier communities makes a direct contribution to the democracy movement. He sees the importance of his work as he embraces the notion of “think globally act locally”. He has been working with a Mon youth organisation for some years. In his job, he goes to marginalised communities along the Thai-Burma border areas and provides basic healthcare service and training. Since the cease-fire agreements between some armed ethnic organisations and the military government in the 1990s, the lives of local villagers in the frontier areas have worsened because of the increase in the number of infrastructure projects by the Burmese military, the monopolisation of local businesses by ethnic armed groups and poorly planned mining and logging projects. These factors have severely impacted on the livelihood of local communities in many ways. As part of the cease-fire arrangement, the armed ethnic groups are allowed to operate and make a living in the areas they control. In the name of development, many cease-fire ethnic groups operate business activities to finance their organisations. Their mining, logging and gambling projects have caused social, cultural and environmental destruction in small communities because of poor planning and lack of consultation. Land and farms are often confiscated to make way for army's development schemes. The economic boom fueled by excessive logging and mining has attracted a large number of people from outside areas moving into some local communities. Longstanding, local businesses have been overrun by new businesses. The influx of a large number of new people coming into local communities has caused serious social and cultural destruction. Drug and alcohol have become widely available as the local economy booms. The sex industry

also booms. However, the welfare of the local population has not improved. HIV/Aids, TB and malaria are on the rise. Many locals have been pushed out of their businesses and forced to go to Thailand as migrant workers.

In recent decades, local self-help groups and community based organizations have emerged to respond to the lack of basic healthcare and education. The community-based organisations are an alternative option for young people to learn skills and many have been involved in local community health projects.

In Mon State many young Mon have joined the *Mon Youth Organisation* which provides primary healthcare for local communities and basic education for children. Nai Hon Hsa has been working with the organisation for some years and his job involves health promotion focusing on HIV/Aids prevention in local communities. The organisation is based in Thailand and provides cross-border assistance in health and education for the local communities inside the country. Nai Hon Hsa has to cross the border, from Thailand to Mon state, to deliver services to local communities. He regularly comes to Thailand to get resources and supplies, and goes back into the Mon state where he does health promotion. In this job, he has learnt a great deal about his own people and the way the oppressive military rule ruins people lives.

One of the greatest challenges Nai Hon Has perceives is working with fatalistic attitudes. Many members of the communities often accept the law of “karma”, the Buddhist’s concept of repercussion in life; *“bad things happen to you because of your action/s in the past or past life”* (Trager 1969, p. 164). For instance, local villagers see HIV/Aids as a punishment of God to bad people and they should be left alone

because nothing can be done about it. There is no medicine for this kind of diseases. It must be god's punishment. Nai Hon Hsa explained:

"...it was very sad to see how the local villagers see and treat people with HIV/Aids. People with HIV/Aids are totally isolated and marginalised from the community. People who died of HIV/Aids are not allowed to be buried in the same cemetery as other community members. They have to be buried in a different place with other people who had HIV/Aids. Many people with HIV/Aids do not want others to know about their illness. They become very ill. In many cases, it is the social environment that makes it very difficult to talk about this taboo issue. There is a huge need in public health education...".

What can Human Rights education do to help in your situation?

"The issue of human rights violation, I have come to understand, is not just about political prisoners or forced labour, but it is also about the rights of ordinary people to live in an environment free from disease and where everyone has the right to education. This human rights training gives me better vision and understanding about my job. I can see how my community health promotion job fits in the democracy movement. The training affirms my view that poverty, health crisis and most problems in many local communities are man-made and they can be changed. If you know human rights you know that health, water and food are included. The community development aspect of the training also gives me some good ideas to utilise the strength of the local community.

I have learnt a lot from other participants' experiences too. We, participants, have developed a close friendship in a short time. It is very useful to learn from other participants; their projects, activities, experiences, ways to dealing with problems. I am inspired by their experiences and they make me want to do better in job. I realise our country has a national crisis and we really need a more unified force and new culture of understanding and working together". (excerpts from an interview, 10 Aug 2007).

### *11.12.3 An Arkanese participant's idea to advocate for migrant workers*

Khing Min Thu's, an Arkanese migrant worker, experiences in the course allows him develop a new perspective in approaching solutions to workers' exploitation and discrimination problems. He develops the concept of "think globally, act locally" as he understands the need to have a unified force among organisations to deal with

worker's problems while he also sees the practical task for him as having to work on strengthening of his own organisation.

Khing Min Thu is a member of the *Arkanese Migrant Workers Association* based in Mae Sot. The Arkanese ethnic group mainly lives in the Western state of Burma that borders with Bangladesh and India. Due to lack of employment many young Arkanese have come to the eastern part of Burma and into Thailand to find employment. There are more than six thousand Arkaneses in Mae Sot. He explained:

"Arkaneses mostly work in factories and many suffer from all kinds of exploitations. They often do not know where to go for help or seek advice. This is because we Arkanese speak Burmese with a different accent and tend to keep our problems to ourselves. As a result we lack the knowledge and networks to look for help..."

"...we have just formed our organisation (the *Arkanese Migrant Workers Association*). The organisation is new and has not yet been able to do anything for its members. For the time being, we just get together to celebrate our cultural and social activities. We hope to become a stronger and proper worker association so we can help Arkanese migrant workers in Mae Sot..." "... there are more than 6000 Arkaneses that live and work in various factories in Mae Sot..." "only a small number of people have joined the organisation, but it has been a good contact point and a network among our members .... there are many problems and barriers largely exploitations and unfair dismissal ... most Arkaneses do not have the work permission card, and we have poor human resources to do advocacy work. The organisation is still depending on volunteers. I volunteer my time and I have to work to make money for a living too....".

Since 2005, the Thai authorities have allowed migrant workers to register. Registered workers get access to healthcare services. A one-year work permit costs each migrant worker about four-thousand four-hundred Thai Bath. This is more than a month's wage for most migrant workers in Mae Sot (Arnold and Hewison 2005, p. 4). Most Burmese workers simply cannot afford it. Even when they do manage to register there are still problems for registered workers to access

healthcare services in Thailand because of language barriers and uncooperative employers (Khruemanee 2007, p. 8-10). As a result, most migrant workers choose not to register.

What do you hope to learn in this training?

“I hope I can learn and improve my skills in advocacy, networking and organisation. I want to protect my people. It is a very hard and difficult situation we are facing. We are exposed to all kinds of exploitation but do not have any support because there is no Arkanese advocate. The association so far has served as social networking to break isolation. We meet, talk and celebrate our culture together. We want to build the association to become more effective in helping and protecting the rights of our people in their work place... I hope to become an advocate for the organization”.

What can this course about human rights do to help you and your association?

“The human rights training provides tools and techniques for me to organise and build network. I can see that human rights and worker rights are similar but in different contexts. The training not only focuses on human rights, but also helps us to see the problems we face in a wider context and learn from other experiences. We come to understand the connections between local activities and national agenda. For me, violation of worker rights is more than the greedy and selfishness of employers, it is about the way the government policies are laid down to protect the national interest of Thailand. Workers’ well-being is not considered in the Thai policy. Economic output is more important than the well-being of the workers. Illegal migrant workers like us have very little protection. But, I have learnt that worker rights are not a one way benefit. The well-being of the workers is good for business. Healthy and happy workers improve and increase productivity”.

“But, we have to fight for our rights. The employers will not improve workers’ living condition and pay proper wages unless they see the benefit. I want to help build a stronger worker association by forming a wider network of organisations. Discrimination and injustice in workplaces are common issues, and it needs a unified approach” ...“so this human rights course is good for me. It is not just human rights, it covers many skills; organisation, networking, analysis and constructive argument skills that I will need when I go back to work in my organisation”. (excerpts from an interview with Khing Min Thu 14 Aug 2007)

### **11.13 Conclusion**

In conclusion, my observation of the human rights training program of the HREIB reveals that non-formal education for Burmese community activists is vital and essential. The training program offered opportunities for participants to reflect on their experiences, learn from others' experiences, and validate their values and commitments to social justice in the democracy movement.

Despite facing critical challenges and lack of skills and resources, young people play a key role in local community development activities. The HREIB's learner-centered teaching and learning methods and problem-posing exercises offered an opportunity for these young community workers to draw on their 'practical knowledge' and develop new ways of understanding their own experiences. Learning to understand and identify the sources of knowledge they possess is emancipatory learning as activists learn to better understand the oppressive system. The human rights education training program not only provided participants with the theoretical knowledge that participants need, but helped them gain a new level of confidence and a better understanding of the connection between human rights education and community development activities.

The HREIB's human rights training program was able to affectively work with its participants because it was a grassroots non-formal adult education program that embraced people from all level of walks and applied resources, best practices and methods that are suitable to community-based organisations. What is more important is that these activists learnt to develop the perspective of "think globally, act locally" as they learnt how to make the connection between their activities at local community level and the democracy movement as a whole.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Conclusions and implications

#### 12. 1 Conclusions

Burma, as mentioned in the beginning of the thesis has rapidly changed since mid 2011. The military regime has shown signs of willingness to loosen its total control of the country. Following the unashamedly rigged election in November 2010, held under the new constitution that grants the military 25 per-cent of the seats in the parliament (Litner 2012). The military backed *Union Solidarity and Development Party* (USDP) is now the ruling party. The new civil-military government has initiated several political reforms including releasing most political prisoners, easing press and internet censorship and the introduction of more liberal labour laws. Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's democracy icon was freed from the house arrest and has been personally invited by the new president to re-enter politics (Murdoch 2011; Hartcher 2011; Kyaw San Wai 2012). Nevertheless, the basic idea of the thesis remains valid, if not more than ever. The need for 'intelligent' and grassroots democracy is as strong as ever. Circumstances may have changed but the culture of rigid thinking and internalised fears that have developed in many Burmese as a result of more than half a century of dictatorial rule, will require the Burmese to critically look at their values and beliefs and unlearn those that are not democratic, in order to build intelligent and sustainable democratic society.

The challenge to bring about democratic change in Burma is far greater than replacing an oppressive authoritarian regime with a democratically elected government, since the legacy of more than six decades of oppressive rule has led to



the building up of internalised fears amongst people and passive attitude toward collective actions for changes. Many of these anti-democratic characteristics are deeply embedded in social and cultural practices. The oppressive military rule is not the only barrier to democracy in Burma because, in addition, there are non-political factors such as the top-down spoon-feeding education system and hierarchical socio-cultural practices that breed patron-client relationships amongst people which are equally destructive to the development of democracy. The military dictators have built on such cultural traits and led the people to be so passive about their own power to make democratic changes. Turning common people in Burma into active citizens remains perhaps the great challenge to Burmese democracy movement.

This study argues that democratic change in Burma requires participation of the common people as active citizens to make decisions in matters that affect their lives. The grassroots' ability to participate in matters that are most important in their lives is fundamental in a functioning bottom-up democracy. After looking at informal and non-formal education programs for Burmese migrant workers and community development workers in Thailand, I have defined popular education as a form of learning to enable political and critical engagement in the course of social and community settings. Life experiences and practical wisdom are an important source of emancipatory learning for community activists or '*circumstantial*' activists, those who become activists due to a series of circumstantial changes in their lives. Drawing from Paulo Freire's concept of '*conscientization*', James Scott's '*hidden transcript*' and Mark Smith's '*informal education*', I argue that for illegal migrant workers who face many kinds of exploitation to develop emancipatory learning it is important to have a 'space' that is free from oppression or surveillance. For Burmese (illegal) migrant workers who cannot participate in formal training programs, conversations in social activities can lead them to learn from their life experiences to develop a deeper understanding of their own social reality. This type of learning

often occurs in informal (community) settings where the oppressed are comfortable to meet and talk about their deep-held feelings and reflect on their experiences.

This dissertation demonstrates that learning to better understand the social reality amongst Burmese migrant workers in Thailand occurs in community (social) settings as they exchange experiences amongst themselves. Through social engagement and conversations in these community settings, many labourers have been empowered to challenge their internalised fears. Learning to break away from a culture of silence is closely associated with learning how to survive in oppressive environments. When oppressed people learn to see the relationship between their disadvantaged position and the exploitative system that works against their interests, they begin to question the system. This represents a shift in consciousness.

## **12.2 Cross-border civil society as the movement for an alternative public space**

NGOs' and CBOs' activities to improve conditions of Burmese in Thailand and on the border have turned into a movement for an alternative public space where the voice of the oppressed can be expressed and heard. Building on Gramsci's concept of civil society as a site for struggling against dominant ideologies and revitalising knowledge of the oppressed (see chapter six), I identify cross-border civil society activities on the Thai-Burma border as a site where teaching and learning democracy takes place. The Burmese democracy movement on the Thai- Burma border has arrived at a crossroad moving away from a six-decade old armed resistance with a top-down approach for political change, to a democracy movement through grassroots community development. Civil society organisations and networks in the

Thai-Burma border areas have begun with providing humanitarian assistance and later focused on empowering people to participate and make changes. Burmese cross-border civil society is about these grassroots works, activities and communities.

There are many different forms of empowering and capacity building activities; while some programs focus on overtly political groups, there are programs working in less obvious political ways and targeting members of the grassroots communities. Exploitative conditions that most two million Burmese migrant workers in Thailand face in their everyday lives have created an opportunity for Burmese NGOs to work toward social changes through promoting equal rights and human dignity. A number of NGOs working to promote migrant labourers' ability to participate and embrace the notion of empowerment and emancipatory learning, and many of them take place in community settings and in the form of informal education. This study demonstrates that emancipatory learning occurs among migrant workers largely in community settings. It is stressed that such learning thrives because of the informality and flexibility that allows illegal migrant workers to participate and be involved voluntarily on their own terms. There are a number of important factors that support informal education to thrive in those environments, and these include:

1. Learning that is directly relevant to the experiences of migrant labourers;
2. The availability of community spaces where migrant workers are able to participate in social activities and conversations, develop social bonds and extend their social networks;
3. The availability of non-threatening social spaces where workers can freely express their deeply-held feelings and views;

4. In such a non-threatening space, workers develop confidence to speak up as they develop trust, and become critical of their own situations, and
5. Developing a sense of belonging, ownership and social cohesion amongst workers as they learn to share personal stories and experiences.

### **12.3 Breaking silence and political consciousness**

Perhaps the most significant educational progress among migrant workers has been the realisation of their own social reality as they begin to express their feelings and worldviews. In other words, this indicates that the oppressed have refused to accept the status quo that does not serve their interests and they want change. They learn to express their deep-held feelings through participating in conversations. Breaking silence also means that the oppressed begin to believe their ability to make impact and changes. Emancipatory learning amongst migrant workers in a community in an industrial zone in Mae Sot as discussed in chapter nine and the development of social capital at the *Migrant Learning Centre* (MLC) in Chiang Mai in chapter ten shows that they have capacity not only to critically assess their social reality but to step up and take actions. The MLC provides a 'safe-haven' for migrant workers who have no other place to meet. Social conversation and networking in non-classroom activities lead to development of social capital. At the MLC, social bonding and trust between the staff and students was strengthened through social activities outside of classrooms. These social bonds obviously contributed to consciousness transformation in migrant workers at the MLC. In 2007, when the Saffron Revolution, the social movement led by Buddhist monks broke out in Burma, Burmese opposition groups in Thailand organised public rallies in Thailand to support the movement. Despite the risk of being arrested and deported back to Burma, many migrant workers from the MLC took part in the public rally in Chiang

Mai. Learning to break silence is largely a result of understanding one's status quo in a society and the social reality and refusing to accept the status quo.

Myles Horton, founder of the *Highlander Centre* in Tennessee, says “people already know from their experience both the problems and the answers” (Kennedy 1981). Conversations in social activities provide opportunities for the oppressed to learn and develop new worldviews. When someone expresses his or her experiences of injustice that have been imposed on him or her, this gives an opportunity for others in the group to recall and reflect on their experiences. This process allows members of the group to develop a new perspective and understanding of their social reality, and this can also be a consciousness development experience.

The oppressed begin to speak out about their situation as they begin to see themselves as subjects rather than objects. For Burmese migrant workers who have no time to participate in training and education programs, participating in activities in community settings where they feel safe and supported is a way to learn to develop new understandings of the world around them.

#### **12.4 The nature of pedagogy and learning in grassroots community development in cross-border Thai-Burma civil society**

A great deal of learning occurs in social conversations. Social conversations in the context of Burmese migrant labourers in Thailand have been an important form of learning, and through participating in conversations and activities in community settings labourers have developed critical consciousness. Drawing from my own learning experiences and of three Burmese ‘*circumstantial*’ or ‘*accidental*’ activists in

Thailand (please see chapter eight), I have highlighted that activists' learning to develop critical consciousness often occurs out of their comfort zones and they are motivated to learn as a result of their perspective changes. My findings reveal a range of pedagogical activities including: learning to understand the oppressive system and the status quo which only serves the oppressors; learning to cooperate, network and plan for a better future; learning to understand the power of unity and to read the world; and learning from experience and being exposed to new perspectives.

#### *12.4. 1 Learning to understand the oppressive system*

Consciousness shift and becoming critical about one's social reality is an important characteristic of popular education. At the community library in Mae Sot, as discussed in chapter nine, migrant workers engage in an informal education program that is created to provide a social meeting opportunity for Burmese migrant workers who are confined to factories nearby. Workers, as they engage in social conversations at the library, learn to develop listening skills, share thoughts and feelings, and build the courage to speak up about their experiences and deep-held feelings. Emotionally-charged stories and personal experiences help workers to learn from each other's experiences and reflect on their own. Personal experiences and views of one worker often become a learning subject for another. Different views and experience help them develop a better understanding of the social reality and name the common problems they all face. Because the place is safe and free from surveillance, conversations taking place at the library are a form of "*hidden transcript*" in which workers express their dissatisfaction with the situations of the status quo. Through conversational learning, many workers begin to understand how the oppressive system works against their own interests and the way they have been exploited to serve the interest of their oppressors.

#### *12.4.2 Learning to cooperate, network and plan for a better future (MLC),*

Learning amongst participants at the *Migrant Learning Centre* (MLC) in Chiang Mai shows emancipatory learning was closely associated with daily survival activities. In chapter ten, I discussed how informal learning activities outside of class-rooms led to the development of social bonds and trust amongst people who previously had not known each other. One of the common practices amongst students at the MLC was that they lingered around the centre after their class room activities for the purpose of gaining job-lead information and knowledge necessary for their future references. The MLC's staff also encouraged students to expand their social circle amongst migrant workers by helping students to get to know each other. This kind of meeting offered a great deal of learning amongst participants, and the quality of this learning activity rested on the genuine interest and support of the MLC staff who essentially were a social bridge amongst students from different backgrounds. Sincerity and directness encouraged students to open up not only to the MLC staff but also to one another, and thus led them to develop a stronger social bond and trust. Meeting and learning for people from different ethnic backgrounds was another positive social learning that occurred at the centre. The social web and networks that were developed amongst migrant workers have led to the development of social capital. Strong social capital at the MLC was evidenced when student or migrant workers, risking their safety, decisively took an action to support the 'Saffron Revolution' in Burma in 2007 by joining a public rally in Chiang Mai.

#### *12.4.3 Learning to understand the power of unity*

The human rights training program that was organised by the *Human Right Institution for Burma* (HREIB) in a clandestine location for Burmese community activists, as discussed in chapter eleven, was a capacity building program. In the

training program, the participants, mostly community activists, reflected on their experiences in their field work. This allowed them to learn from others' experiences, reaffirm their values and strengthen their own commitment to human rights. Hearing the experiences of others, participants were not only able to compare their own experiences, but also developed new understanding of a bigger picture of the pro-democracy movement and their role as community workers in the movement. This is emancipatory learning and participants were able to apply their '*practical knowledge*'- acquired through experiences and actions - and validated their intuitive values and actions.

Another important dimension of the training program was the high level collaboration, openness and fairness between the facilitators and participants which made their learning environment a trusting atmosphere. Participants developed high level confidence in their facilitators and took ownership of their learning. Participants in the training program learnt to see the strength of unity in diversity. Undoubtedly a better understanding developed amongst participants from ethnic different backgrounds. They demonstrated high level cooperation and understanding amongst themselves. The six week residential training program provided an opportunity for diverse participants to realise that they may be in different locations and projects but they were all in the same struggle for restoring democracy. The idea of "*think globally act locally*" had certainly been realised for these participants.

#### *12.4.4 Learning from experiences and being exposed to new perspectives*

The learning experiences of the three community activists that were discussed in chapter eight revealed that personal experiences, which is also termed 'practice knowledge' (Maddison & Scalmer 2006, p. 43), is an important source in helping



activists develop new understandings of their social reality. The three community activists had little knowledge of the democracy movement until they became a part of the movement unexpectedly and later played important roles in their respective organisations. Through participation in project activities and social actions, and being exposed to new perspectives they developed a better understanding of their social reality. Ollis (2010) discusses “*circumstantial*” or “*accidental*” activists who have to learn new skills and knowledge in their work at a rapid rate. All the three activists’ learning experiences revealed that they experienced learning ‘out of their comfort zone’ and learning to acquire new skills and knowledge in a limited time frame.

### **12.5 Implications for practice**

Burmese illegal migrant workers in Thailand continue to face problems associated with vulnerabilities of their illegal status. Exploitation at the hands of unscrupulous employers and local authorities, debt bondage to brokers are common amongst the migrant workers. Due to the lack of concern and care for the wellbeing of migrant workers, health problems amongst Burmese migrant workers in labour intensive industries such as light manufacturing and farming industries have become a serious problem. Migrant workers in such harsh and deprived situations often have limited power and ability to create and make change on their own. As discussed in chapter eight, nine and ten, migrant workers’ ability to learn is directly connected to their survival skills. Since most migrant workers cannot participate in training programs, their ability to learn and become active citizens is limited. Education programs for empowering migrant workers cannot ignore limitations in their social reality and learning activities of such education program need to be directly relevant to everyday experiences of the workers.

It is my intention that my research will help inform the development of popular education practice that will promote participation and effective leadership, and revitalise grassroots knowledge for Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. In appendix one, I have included sketches of four practice examples. . They include a:

1. health awareness promotion radio program for migrant farmers who handle farming chemical produces on a daily basis,
2. "Photo-voice" project for migrant workers who live in birdcage like accommodations in a factory zone,
3. "Live theater" project to promote social debates and critical awareness of the social conditions of migrant workers at the Migrant Learning Centre (MLC), and
4. a techno-social networking project for women and men working in isolated or unreachable locations will be discussed.

(Note: a detail discussion about these programs can be seen in the appendix one on pages 317-322.)

Although more than 154,000 Burmese migrants are living in nine refugee camps in Western Thailand (TBBC 2010), most of the two million Burmese migrants, however, do not live in camps but are dispersed in various towns and villages across the Thai-Burma border area.

As explored in this thesis, internalised fear, lack of collective effort and passivity about collective action for social change are impediments to Burma's democracy transformation. Therefore, it is necessary that people from all walks of life participate in matters that affect their lives and become active citizens if a bottom-up democracy is to take root in Burma. I propose that education programs for the

grassroots migrant worker communities need to be designed and planned in ways that embrace their social reality. My field study reveals that Burmese migrants in Thailand, in general, are pre-occupied with day-to-day survival activities and lack of opportunity for social networking. I believe creative popular education programs can help extend social networks, improve participation, initiatives and leadership in these grassroots communities.

## Appendix one:

### Popular education programs for Burmese migrant workers in Thailand

#### (A) Program one

*“A radio program for promoting health awareness for farmers working with agricultural chemical products”*

More than one hundred thousand Burmese migrant workers are concentrated in a farming industry that grows oranges and lychees in the Northern region of Thailand near the Thai-Burma border. Burmese migrants in those farms are of farmer origin and most of them come from Burma's isolated communities in frontier areas. They came to Thailand to work as labourers in the farming industry because this is the work they are most familiar with and they can find farming work just across border from Burma. Many often migrated to Thailand with their families because they were displaced from their home by the *Burma Army* or they simply could not make a living out of their farms. In Thailand, they continue to work in farming, the job that they do best. However, farming in Thailand is highly commercialised and applies modern equipment and techniques that farmers from Burma are not familiar with. In this commercial fruit farming industry, the use of chemical herbicide and pesticide is common. Burmese labourers working in the farms usually handle these chemical products on a daily basis. Most migrants also live on the farm with their families in a little hut or shed and guard the farm. Heavy chemical use in farming practices has seriously affected the health of migrant labourers and their families because they are often not aware of the hazards of the products they handle and do not know how to protect themselves and their families living on the farms. Children, pregnant women, water sources and food are often exposed to harmful chemical products and consequently many migrants have fallen sick and suffered from illness that they never had before.

A popular education project to help improve the livelihood of migrant workers in this area is considered in a form of a FM radio project. In late 2006, a migrant worker community in this farming area collected some money from fellow workers and bought an FM radio broadcaster that can reach up to fifty kilometer radius, with an aim to provide a Shan ethnic language news and entertainment radio program for families in isolated farming communities. Chinese-made FM receiver radios are affordable and can be the most viable source of information for most migrant workers in this farming area. The organisers of the radio project also obtained a broadcasting permit from the Thai authority for the project. However, the radio project was halted shortly after a short period of its first operation due to a lack of funding, volunteers and an effective management body.

The proposed popular education project involves revitalising the FM radio program with different aims and practices. The new project will include a research project in public health in relation to chemical use in farming. Some migrants in the community will be involved in the research project and will go to families living in isolated locations to conduct research; collect information on farming practices and personal stories of families living on those farms. Stories and research findings will be used to create dramas and short stories, and broadcasted as the FM radio program. An open phone line for questions and discussion will also be available to encourage farmers talk about their experiences and provide feedbacks to the project. The program will promote dialogue and engagement among migrants in the areas. Research will be designed to have maximum participation of local farmers and promote their knowledge. This popular education project will encourage migrant workers in this farming area to participate in getting their stories heard as well as recognising their experiences as a source of important knowledge.

## **(B) Program two**

### *“A ‘Photo-voice’ project for migrant workers in a factory area”*

Manufacturing factories in an industrial zone in Mae Sot are filled with Burmese migrant workers. The workers work long hours (12 to 16 hours a day) and live in the provided accommodations near the factories. The accommodation for workers is often overcrowded and unhealthy. Outbreaks of water or air-borne diseases are regular and workers in the factories do not usually receive healthcare when they get sick. To make the problem worse, most migrants have little health knowledge. The owners of the factories, generally, not only neglect the wellbeing of their workers but also deny them the assistance from NGO health workers. NGO health workers are not welcomed in the factories by the owners, therefore, they have not been able to work effectively with the workers they are unable to establish contacts and relationships with the workers. As a result many migrant workers continue to live in unhealthy conditions and suffer from sickness that can be prevented with little effort.

A “photo-voice” education project is proposed to promote awareness in health and hygienic issues amongst the workers. Many factory workers, in their limited free time, go to a community library set up by a Burmese worker organisation in the area. The library is a low-key project and is aimed at creating a social meeting point amongst workers in the factories and for NGO workers to meet them. Very little is known to the outside world how workers work and live since NGO workers cannot go into their work and living places. The activities of the “photo-voice” project involve providing a basic photography training and information collecting skills course to workers. Workers, who have completed their photography training, will be given photo cameras to secretly take pictures in their living and work places, and collect information and personal stories from their fellow workers. Pictures and

stories will be put together in themes and displayed in an exhibition where the migrant workers can visit. The aim of this popular education project is to promote basic health awareness as well as participation in collective action and get their voice heard.

### **(C) Program three**

#### *“A ‘verbatim theater’ project at the Migrant Learning Centre (MLC)”*

The *Migrant Learning Centre* (MLC), located in the central part of Chiang Mai city, is well-known to many Burmese migrants. The Centre, since it was begun in 2005, has grown from a handful of students to several hundred students, and many migrants are still waiting to get into the program due to lack of available vacancies. My investigation of informal learning activities at the MLC reveals that students (migrant workers) not only come to the MLC for languages and computer skills but also for a purpose that is important for their survival as migrant workers. At the MLC workers catch up with friends, make new friends and exchange job-lead information. Belonging to social group/s is helpful or essential for migrant workers who constantly need to find work. The MLC, apart from providing language and computer skills, is also a safe-haven for migrant workers to expand their social network and improve survival skills. Migrant workers at the MLC exchange their stories, look for new job-leads, and help each other out of troubles.

A theater project is proposed to highlight the difficult and explosive situations many migrants are facing and general questions and dialogues. The idea of a “verbatim theater” project at the MLC is to help migrants workers analyse their own problems by using their stories and to find best solutions to some of their problems and barriers. Stories are collected from migrants. Some theater artists will help train

some migrants who are interested in taking part in the theater project. The artists will speak the exact words of Burmese labourers, as opposed to the words of a playwright. Migrants' everyday activities will be the central theme of the performance. It is hoped that the theater will generate discussions and debates among migrants and help them find ways to tackle their difficulties in a collective ways.

This popular education project is about empowering the grassroots to learn and see that they do have the strength and capacity to take control when they work together. It is about changing migrants' perspective from being powerless and victimised to initiators and change makers. They will learn to make use of their social networks and build a more effective collaboration among themselves.

#### **(D) Program four**

*“A techno-social networking project for women and men working in isolated and unreachable locations “*

A large number of Burmese women migrant workers are employed in family homes and home-based light manufacturing industry largely sewing and handy craft work. Women working in such industries usually work long hours and receive low wages, due to the nature of their work they are often cut off from the outside world. Workers in those industries often experience payment delays (and in some cases do not get paid at all) and they are powerless to make complaints fearing they will be sacked from their jobs. Many workers put up with abuses and mistreatments due to worrying about losing their jobs and not knowing where to turn for help or find another employment.



A mobile phone message networking project for women working in isolation is proposed. This will include providing training in sending quick and effective messages/ texts via mobile phones to women who are working in those industries. With the assistance of NGOs and women organisations working to empower women, a message service centre (or a message network-hub) is to be created. The centre will receive messages from program participants (or informers) and re-distribute them to its members in different workplaces. The identity and personal information of the original message sender will be kept confidential. Work opportunities and pay conditions in different workplaces and unfairness in the workplace such as discrimination, unfair dismissal and mistreatment will be the focus of the messaging service. Women in domestic work can send messages when they have been dismissed from their work and do not know where to go. The message centre will inform them about work availability and payment rates of other workplaces and factories in the industry. When women are forced out of their work and they do not know where to go the message centre will alert NGOs running women safe-houses, and the women will be connected to the NGOs that can assist them.

This project is aimed at helping migrant workers break down isolation barriers and promoting the culture of collective effort to improve the capacity of women to take control, make informed decisions for their own affairs.

## Appendix two:

### To call Burma or Myanmar

The name of the country since it has been changed from 'Burma' to 'Myanmar' in 1989 has generated political sensitivity and squabbles. Following the military coup on 18 September in 1988, the new military regime, the *State Law and Order Restoration Council* or SLORC re-named the country from 'Union of Burma' to the 'Union of Myanmar', or 'Myanmar Naing -Ngan' claiming the new name represents all ethnic groups in the country. Along with the name of the country, several major cities and administrative divisions were also changed. Among other changes, Rangoon became Yangon, Moulmein became Mawlaymyine; Tenasserim Division became Tanintharyi Division, and Pegu became Bago Division. Although the name changes were subsequently recognised by many governments, Australia, the United States, several European countries still refer to the name of the country as 'Burma'.

While some governments subsequently recognised the new name of the country, governments of Australia, the USA and many European countries continue to refer to the country as Burma. Burmese political opponents, inside and outside of the country, however, have strongly objected the name change and alleging the action was unlawful because of the illegitimacy of the regime's rule, the ongoing action of the Burma army against its own people and the continuing high level human rights violation in the country. In this study, I choose to use the name "Burma" as a sign of respect to those who continue to struggle for democratic change in Burma and in support of the people who have endured the hardship and tyranny at the hand of one of the most oppressive regimes in the world. The term "Burmese" is used to refer to all citizens of Burma and "Burman" as to the major ethnic group.

### The SPDC, the military regime or the new government

After seizing power on 18 September 1988, the military cracked down on the pro-democracy movement, and installed a junta with 21 members called the *State Law and Order restoration Council* (SLORC). Nine years later, on 15 November 1997, the SLORC was replaced with 19 members of the *State Peace and Development Council* (SPDC) headed by Senior General Than Shwe. Both the SLORC and SPDC took a task to draft a new constitution that grants the continued domination of the military. After more than fifteen years, by force and compulsion, the new constitution

was finalised. In November 2010, under the new constitution, a general election which was tightly scripted was held. The *Union Solidarity and Development Party* (USDP), a quasi-social organisation turned political party and backed by the military, won most of the seats in the newly installed government. In March 2011, General Thein Sein was appointed as the president of the country. The country, however, has not seen any major change despite the new government continuously claim that the country has been on its pathway to democracy.

This study began in 2006 and a final draft was produced in 2010. Therefore, the political situations this study investigated were largely during the period of the SPDC regime. I used the term the military regime to refer to the SPDC regime and its predecessor the SLORC.

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