

'Varsity life in Burma.

[N.B.—The writer of this article is the eldest son of our worthy colleague Prof. Nripendra Chandra Bannerjee M. A. Master Bannerjee is prosecuting his studies at Rangoon. His portrait of Burmese University life, life will, we hope, interest our readers. Editor, B. C. M.]

It is a pity that Indians who have never been to Burma, generally are hopelessly ignorant about a country which is an integral part of the Indian Empire. The Press in India supplies articles on European social and political problems, and even on rebellions and revolutions in south American countries but rouses little interest in the hearts of its readers for knowledge about people living nearer home. All schemes of Pan-Asiatic Federations and World-Brotherhood would remain chimeras while the channels of mutual understanding have not been at all navigated and utilised.

The anti-Indian feeling in Burma has been somewhat discussed in the Indian Press lately. It is a well known fact that nothing unites people so much as the bond of a mutual knowledge of the history, manners and customs of their countries. The recent Hindu muslim riots have been traced by an Indian Review to the ignorance of the two communities of each other's history and traditions; the Indo-Burman discord can also be traced to the same source, though in both the cases other reasons of misunderstanding exist. I have turned over the pages of several vernacular and English magazines and found few articles about Burma; and those also mostly about Burma's women or music or distorted versions of Burmese History. It is high time that we should be more interested in Eastern Countries and their past and contemporary history than constantly fixing our gaze to the west for the supply of novel ideas and ideals which are often square enough not to fit the round gaps in our life. This, however, is by the way, of an appeal to cultured men who care about our progress in the different spheres of life to take a leaf from the pages of contemporary civilised countries around us which in temperament and character resemble us more than countries in our antipodes.

When talented people are not coming forward with their knowledge and keen observations to speak about Burma and especially about her progress in Education, I have deemed it proper to record my impressions in this article about the University life in Burma. I shall confine myself to the life in the Colleges of Burma which only are controlled by the University of Rangoon; High School Education being controlled by the Government and a greater part of Primary Education being at the hands of Burmese *Hpoongyis* (priests) at the village *Hpoongyi-Kyaungs* (monasteries).

The two most remarkable features of the colleges of Burma are their cosmopolitan character and the system of co-education. About the latter something will be said in its proper place as co-education is being gradually introduced in Bengal colleges also.

The University of Rangoon is only of six years' standing having been constituted in 1920. The University College (till then affiliated to the Calcutta University under the name of the Rangoon College) in Rangoon prepares students for the Bachelor's and Master's degree in Arts and Science, B. Sc (Engineering), B. Sc. (Forestry), B. L. and M. B. degrees. The Judson College also in Rangoon is a very long standing institution and is controlled and financed by the American Baptist Mission. It prepares students up to the Master's degree in Arts and Science. In Mandalay, the last capital of Burma, there is the Agricultural College and an Intermediate College newly started. The cosmopolitan character of the students and Professors is witnessed everywhere in spite of the attempts by the University authorities to close many of the branches of learning to non-Burman students!

Professors of different nationalities and a few foreign students can be found in all Universities of India but not as remarkably as in Burma. Students and lecturers of both sexes hailing from many European countries, the provinces of India, China and the mixed communities of Burma, read, play, meet in social gatherings in a spirit of great fellowship that modifies

greatly their national differences. Reasons for this cordial relation are not also far to seek. We can divide the students into two groups according to dress and temperament—the Burman and the Anglo-Indian, the students of the other communities being included among either of them according to costume. The mixed communities of Burma as the China-Burmans, Anglo-Burmans and Indo-Burmans and a part of the Indian students have adopted European costume and manners for the College. The Anglo-Indian element does not balance the Burmese and had it been in India the cleavage between the two would have been great, But in Burma it is not so. The Burman has the easy, flippant and merry manner of the Anglo-Indian and social customs as in the case of marriage and subsequent relations with the wife and family (to mention only two) being similar, they are more akin than the Indian and Anglo-Indian. Secondly, the Burman student has developed a passion for things western, especially English, and has taken up very quickly English games, and light literature and musical airs. Thus the Burman and the Anglo-Indian student have approached each other so closely that temperamentally they are very close,—speaking in a comparative way. Naturally the Burman and Anglo-Indian students spend most of their leisure with their own folk, but when an Anglo-Indian and a Burman student meet they would chaff and cut jokes at each other without letting any observer feel that East and West cannot meet. The Burman student would speak in the same careless English bespattered with slangs and interjected with loud laughter as the Anglo-Indian on a shield-match or a cinematograph success.

Between professors and students of different races there is also a friendly yet dignified relation. The Burman student has more reverence for his Professor than the students of Bengal (of whom I can speak with some confidence), and the Professors have a more fraternal feeling for the students, whereas the gulf between the tutor and the taught in many

Indian provinces is widening so much for the cosmopolitan character of the 'varsity life.

From what has been said it might be seen that talking about 'varsity life in Burma one can talk about Burman students who are not only in a majority, but who have influenced and have been influenced by other communities in a way so that no appreciable difference exists to-day between the Burman and non-Burman in mentality and tastes. This is my opinion after being one of them for some years.

Sir Reginald Craddock, Ex-Governor of Burma, in the course of a speech under the auspices of the East Indian Association in London has remarked that one cannot stop the Indian student from excessive reading and persuade the Burman student to read as much as is required. I regard the charges as greatly exaggerated. The facts, to my mind, are that speaking of the average, the Indian student is irregular at his studies and makes spasmodic attempts at cramming before the examinations; and I have found it from personal observation that the Burman student is regular at his studies; maybe, he considers an hour's study in the evening and another in the morning as sufficient for him, but when the examination approaches he might increase his study-hours only slightly, for to him an examination is not a calamity as even the greatest family misfortunes are not. Again, I think, that the average university student of Burma is more widely-read than the average Indian student, possibly because notes have to be 'imported to Burma' and he has to read original books on his subjects. The standard of studies from the school upwards is higher than in many Indian Universities; (though the best fruits of this much-bragged-about higher standard might not stand comparison with the best of most Indian Universities); and this higher standard accounts for the better knowledge of the average 'university student in Burma and a greater capacity of expression in English.

The Burman student has a knack for games and musical entertainments. The University College Boat Club is one of

the best of its kind, (I hope there are many such in India). In Boxing Tournaments; Varsity boys are quite smart. Football is very popular among Burmans, for their national game of Chin-lon (played with a cane-ball) which requires great control over the muscles of the legs eminently fits them for it. Cricket is not very popular among Burmans, possibly for the time and perseverance it demands; but Hockey and Tennis are fairly popular. As an athlete the Burman student might not be of the very first order—at least it has not yet produced any celebrity—but certainly he is more keen on sports than students in India.

One aware of the rapturous Burmese music, specially instrumental, can guess that amongst a gay people it must have great vogue, and so it has. Almost all Burmese students are extremely fond of music and know the elements of it and would sing on the rhythm of even a motor-bus or a train, play on the harp and the violin on a barge or under a cool sky. It is a part of their life and not reserved for occasional enjoyment and recreation.

Burmese hospitality and sociability are almost proverbial and the Burman student can be found during any hour of the day standing a treat to a friend and talking over a coffee-cup or while drinking soda or raw tea. These sons of an indulgent land would have tiffins at intervals of two hours, be they working in the office or travelling on a train. They spend money with little thought for the future; sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof—they would often repeat. Philosophers have opined that this outlook is due to the Buddhist theory of impermanence and casual observers have said that there is an enchantment in Burma's air and water which have made people following other religions also votaries of this cult. The Burman student is generally extravagant. Till recently it were only the sons and daughters of the well-to-do that joined the colleges (a fact which explains the paucity of students in the colleges in a country where almost all are literate) for the monthly remittances to students that were reported to be

necessary for a student to read in a college were too big for the majority of the middle-class people. The fact is that students according to a College Prospectus "were given a great deal too much money by" "too indulgent and trusting parents."

Another remarkable feature of Burma's colleges is the diversity of dress and the play of colours which catch the eye of an on-looker at every corner of the college precincts. The Burmese dress is the most spectacular in the world and is a veritable feast to the eyes in colours. But in Burma besides the Burmese dress there are the costumes of so many other nationalities, each attempting consciously or unconsciously to make the most of its own dress. Naturally the result is a picturesque body of men looking as gay in their clothings as in their beaming faces; the truth it is in the case of women-students.

In this care-free atmosphere women students appear in all their natural instincts which have found ample scope to flourish in a free land. An Indian lecturer on his first day at College was struck with awe at the sight of some Anglo-Indian lady-students in their short skirts crossing a lawn in a rapid, skipping pace: the atmosphere is so novel to Indian eyes. The Burman lady students, unlike their Anglo-Indian sisters who outnumber them, are generally very shy and reserved, yet none the less charming.

The main danger of co-education has been said to be the moral degeneration of the youth as a result of such close association of the two sexes in an unguarded age—a suggestion reflecting adversely on its authors. In Burma any baneful result of co-education has not been evidenced, no 'scandals' have been occasioned. On the other hand co-education makes it possible for young men and women on the threshold of entrance to the world proper to know the matter-of-fact man and woman, and not idealise the opposite sex in qualities which it generally does not possess. Probably in Burma co-education has been so successful because it is and was a national characteristic of the Burmans to give equal, if not a better, status to women in many spheres of life. Love-making

is not infrequent in the colleges but society has never censured such steps in Burma and none can take exception to it.

But in one respect the Burman students are lagging behind the time and movements among the youth. There is a lack of the spirit of social service and an ardent desire for the development and prosperity of their motherland. Thus they have not developed the capacity to organise. This is a somewhat serious charge against the students and also those who have taken the charge of educating Young Burma. Occasions which could be easily utilised for purposes of organising the students and inspiring them in a spirit of selfless service (a spirit essential amongst the young men to make good citizens of them) have not been utilised. The recent disastrous cyclone in Akyab would have created a craze for volunteering for service in the affected areas had Akyab been the part of any other Indian province. But the Burman student has managed to believe that beyond paying subscriptions to the Government Fund for Relief there is no other duty lying before them or the public. This is what I gathered from a talk with an energetic Burman student over the organisation of a party from the Rangoon Colleges for collecting subscriptions in the streets of Rangoon. The young gentleman, who hails from Lower Burma, suggested that it was the duty solely (or at least mainly) of the Arakanese students to organize themselves for helping in men and money the distressed Arakanese! I do not know that any encouragement to the students, to work in these lines, has come from responsible people who have influence over the students.

I have tried more to give an impressionist view of varsity life in Burma than an account of it and do not claim that the views expressed on several points are unassailable and I would like to be enlightened on such points. If only this humble performance proves to be the instrument to kindle in some hearts a desire to know more about Burma and things Eastern my object has been more than fulfilled.

B. N. B.