

Education reform and national reconciliation in Burma

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Abstract

Burma is ethnically diverse country. Its education policy does not reflect its diverse ethnic groups. Burma education system is not only out of date but also the medium language is dominated by the Burmese (Myanmar) language, while other ethnic languages have been banned from teaching in schools. The prohibiting of the teaching of ethnic languages is seen by ethnic leaders as a threat to their ethnic identities. It has been one of the major causes to ethnic conflict in Burma. Moreover, Burma's education has been centralized and used by the Burmese governments to indoctrinate Burman nationalism and political ideologies into the society. Over sixty years of civil war, the quality of Burma education has been degrading. Therefore, Burma's education reform should not only promote the quality of education but also promote ethnic identity and harmony. As the country moves toward the democratic and federal political system, education policies should reflect the democratic values and the ethnic diversity of Burma. That is, the education system should be decentralized; curricula should also include ethnic cultures, histories and literature; core ethnic languages should be recognized as official languages; and mother tongue education should be implemented. Implementing these polies is essential to promoting ethnic identity and harmony in Burma.

Introduction

Over the past three years, Burma has been in transaction to democracy. Many reforms have been taken place. One of the reforms is Burmese education system. Scholars, activists, politicians, and ethnic leaders are alike have been discussing and formulating new policy for Burmese education system reform. Reforming Burmese education is not only important for improving education quality for the people of Burma but also important for the peace process and national reconciliation.

The educational system of Burma is not only out of date but also the medium language is dominated by the Burmese/Burman language while other ethnic languages have been banned from teaching in government schools. Successive Burmese governments have been centralizing the education system and have been using it to indoctrinate Burman nationalism and political ideologies into the society. The education system has been less autonomous from the state control. Over sixty years of civil war, the quality of Burma education has been degraded. The

state budget for education has been only 4% of the national budget while the military budget is about 21% of the national budget in 2013. Due to civil war and lack of government support for education, ethnic parties/armed organizations created their own education departments and provided education to thousands of students in their controlled areas every year. Moreover, due to the government restrictions on the teaching of ethnic languages in government and non-government schools, ethnic leaders see it as threat to their ethnic identities. It has been one of their causes for taking up armed against the government. Therefore, Burma's education reform should not only promote the quality of education but also promote ethnic identity and harmony. As the country leads toward democratic and federal political system, education policies should reflect the democratic values and the ethnic diversity of Burma. That is, the education should be decentralized and curricula should include ethnic cultures, histories and literature, core ethnic languages should be recognized as official languages, and mother tongue education should be implemented. The implementation of these polies is essential to promoting ethnic identity and harmony in Burma. This paper discusses and analyzes Burma's education system and provides recommendations for education reform in Burma.

Burma's ethnic background

Burma is one of ethnically diverse countries in the world. It has eight major ethnic groups. They are Burman, Mon, Karen, Karenni, Shan, Arakanese, Chin, and Kachin. Each of these ethnic groups has its own language, culture and customs. In addition, there are many smaller groups such as Wa, PaO, Palaung, Padaung, Naga, and Kokang. Over one hundred dialects are spoken by these ethnic groups. Some ethnic groups such as the Chin have 53 dialects or sub-ethnic groups. The government considers each different dialect as a separate ethnic group. Therefore, according to the government, Burma has 135 national races. For example, the government considers the Chin as 53 separate ethnic groups and Kachin as 28 separate groups. Other ethnic groups such as Chinese and Indian or Rohingya (Muslim) are not included in Burma's list of national races (Smith, 1994, p.35).

In April 2014, Burma collected its national census for the first time in 30 years. The result of the census has not yet been released. The last time the census was collected in 1983. Thus, there is difficult to estimate current Burma's population and composition of its ethnic groups. As of July 2014, Burma's population was estimated slightly over 55 million (CIA the World Factbook). According to a 1983 census, Burman constituted 69 percent of the total population. The next largest groups were Shan (8.5 %), Karen (6.2 %), Arakanese or Rakhine (4.5 %), Mon (2.4%), Chin (2.2%), Kachin (1.4 %), Karenni (0.04 %), and others including Chinese and Indians (5.4%) (Steinberg, 2001:p.xx).

Banning on teaching of ethnic languages in government schools

Teaching of ethnic languages was granted during U Nu's administration in 1950s. However, after General Ne Win took over the power in 1962, the government imposed a tougher assimilation policy 'Burmanization.' The government banned the teaching of all non-Burman

ethnic languages and literatures in both government and private schools. The International Crisis Group (ICG) documented that,

After the 1962 military coup, the use of ethnic minority languages in the education system and for publication of newspapers and books was banned. Ethnic minority communities saw this as a deliberate policy by the central government to Burmanise them: The ethnic non-Burman communities of the country have systematically been deprived of their birth right to teaching their own ethnic languages and literature and to preserving their own cultural heritage, under a policy of Burman ethnocentrism and Burmanisation traditionally exercised by the successive Burman-dominated governments in Rangoon (ICG, May 7, 2003).

Martin Smith (1994) also described the Burmanization as “[f]or many citizens, the open discrimination against ethnic minority groups in matters of culture, education, language and religion is the most disturbing evidence of a long-term policy of 'Burmanisation' carried out by all governments since independence” (Smith, 1994, p.103) and the trend toward Burmanization continued under military regime (State and Peace Development Council / SPDC).

In early 1980s, the government further restricted the teaching of ethnic languages, especially to Mon language. Prior to 1982, although the teaching of Mon language was banned in state and private schools, the teaching of Mon language was allowed in the monasteries. In 1982, although the government did not directly ban the using of Mon language for the monastic educations per se, the government required all Mon monastic students to take examinations in Burmese language. This requirement indirectly forced them to replace the Mon language with the Burmese language even in the monastic education. The Mon monasteries have been using Mon language as the medium for teaching Buddhist literature even under the British rule in Burma, and that monastic education has been the backbone of the Mon language and literature for many centuries (Mon, Pon 2010, pp. 109-110)

However, during the cease-fire talks between NMSP and Burmese military (SLORC) in 1995, the NMSP demanded the teaching of Mon language in government schools and allowing the monastic students to take examination in Mon languages. Although the government did not grant the first demand, it granted in the second demand.

Current status of the teaching of ethnic languages in government schools

After President Thein Sein took office in 2010, ethnic leaders, especially the Mon, submitted proposals to the Burma’s parliaments and have discussed with President Thein Sein on the teaching of ethnic languages in government schools. In March 2011, a Mon parliament member, Dr. Bannya Aung Moe proposed to the Burma’s National Parliament to grant the teaching of ethnic languages in government schools; however, his proposal was rejected because he could not answer some questions on the current situation of ethnic education (IMNA, May 10,

2011). In response to the rejection, ethnic representatives from five political parties¹ drafted another proposal and submitted to the Burma's Parliament for debates in June 2011. In the proposal, the group demanded the teaching of three languages: Burmese, English and a local or regional ethnic language in government schools (Htwe, The Irrawaddy, June 2, 2011).

In September 2011, the National Parliament passed a Private School Bill and permitted the operating of secondary level private schools and the teaching of ethnic languages as an additional subject in the schools. However, the bill did not allow the opening and operating of primary level private schools. According to Thein Lwin, the intent of the bill was indirectly preventing ethnic children from learning their mother tongue from an early age (Lwin, October 15, 2011).

After many rounds of meeting between ethnic leaders and the Burmese government, the government allowed ethnic language to be taught outside normal school hours in government schools. The government also promised to support one million U.S dollars for the Mon teacher trainings and curriculum development (Kaowao Newsgroup, July 19, 2012). However, the fund has never been provided

The government's offers on the teaching of ethnic languages outside normal school hours were rejected by the Mon leaders. In August 2012, Mon ethnic leaders from the Mon Democracy Party (MDP) met with President Thein Sein and again requested the President to grant the teaching of ethnic languages in government schools during normal school hours.

Nai Kyaw Win, a Mon delegate said,

I told the President at the meeting to let our curriculum be taught at the government schools during school hours. If our curriculum has to be taught outside of the school hours, it will make the students more tired because after they've finished normal school hours in the government schools, they will have to join our class again (Kaowao Newsgroup, August 7, 2012).

Although the government granted the teaching of ethnic languages in government schools, Burma's 2008 constitution does not clearly state that ethnic languages can be taught in government schools. According to the Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008), Section 22 (a), "The Union shall assist to develop language, literature, fine arts and culture of the National races." But, it does not clearly state that ethnic languages are legally allowed to teach in government schools. Moreover, Section 450 of General Provisions of the Constitution states that the *Burmese* language is the only official language. This indicates that no other ethnic languages are allowed to use as instructing languages. The clause, therefore, would prevent any ethnic languages to be used as the medium of instruction in government schools.

In October 2012, a group of scholars, activists, teachers, and religious leaders from the National League for Democracy's educational block, the 88 Generation Students and the

¹ The five political parties are the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party, All Mon Region Democracy Party (AMDP), Rakhine Nationalities Development Party, Chin National Party and Phalon-Sawaw Democratic Party

Democratic Society, Thinking Classroom Foundation, Teachers Unions, Buddhists monks, ethnic education groups and Christian churches formed the National Network for Education Reform (NNER) in order to give advices to the government's education policy. The NNER has organized many seminars with scholars, teachers, parents and students to formulate an education policy. In June 2013, it held a national conference attended by 1,200 participants. The conference came out with a list of recommendations for the Burma's Parliament and the government's committee overseeing the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) to create an inclusive education system. Its recommendations included decentralization of education system, granting the teaching of ethnic languages in government schools, and the use mother tongue as the medium of instruction at the primary school level. The CESR, however, ignored the recommendations and went ahead with drafting the new education law. The NNER criticized the government education policy that the draft 'lacks transparency, freedom of thought and limits the rights of universities' (Oo, Sandar, Irrawaddy, and January 6, 2014). The drafted also has been widely protested by students and activists for lack of academic freedom.

Although the CSER's draft has been criticized by many education reform advocates, it does allow a limited right on the teaching of ethnic languages. The draft provides the power to division and state governments on the teaching of ethnic languages in schools at primary level (The Mirror, March 16, 2014). Although it is a positive move, the draft still has many constraints. The draft still restricts the use of ethnic languages as medium languages because instructing language must be only Burmese language. Since the draft allows only teaching of ethnic languages at primary level, ethnic languages cannot be taught beyond primary level. Moreover, the draft does not clearly state that if ethnic languages can be taught during normal school hours and will be taught as a required subjects or optional subjects.²

As a result, the Mon State's Parliament passed a bill in April 2014 and granted the teaching of Mon and other ethnic languages in government schools in Mon State during school hours from kindergarten to the 3rd grade. However, since the central government provides very limited funding to the program, the state government finds difficulties to implement the program because the state government does not have enough budgets to support teachers' salaries, curriculum developments and school materials (Weng, The Irrawaddy, April 10, 2014).

Struggle for the survival of ethnic identity

Many minority or indigenous languages around the world have been disappearing over the past decades. According to the UNESCO, there are over 6000 languages today in the world. If there is nothing done, about 50% of those languages will be extinct or seriously endangered by the end of this century (UNESCO, 2003). There are two paradigms explaining the disappearing of languages. One is that language is naturally death and the other is language is being murdered

² The draft was approved by the Burma's Parliament on July 31, 2014. President Thein Sein reviewed it and sent the bill back to the Parliament with 25 amendments in the bill. However, the Parliament accepted only 19 out of 25 on the proposed amendments and the bill became law on September 26, 2014. After the draft was approved by the Parliament, university students and activists have been holding demonstrations against the draft.

or killed. The languages are naturally death when the speakers are no longer using them and voluntarily leave them for their own good. The languages are murdered or killed when dominant languages and cultures dominate the minority's languages and cultures, and when the education system and policy prevents the learning of other ethnic languages in schools while imposing only dominated language as the medium of instruction in schools (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000).

Of the two explanations, the language killer or dominant becomes a great threat to the identities of ethnic minority or indigenous people around the world. Many researches have showed that the mother tongue education system is highly correlated to the educational success of bilingual students and maintaining indigenous languages and cultures. In education system where mother tongue is not allowed to use, indigenous languages are disappearing because dominant language is learned at the cost of the mother tongue. Such practice is called 'subtractive language learning system'. In this system, the minority languages are displaced by the dominant language; Instead of adding values to students, it subtracts from students' linguistic repertoire. Eventually, minority children are effectively transferred to the dominant group linguistically and culturally. Such transformation, when a whole group of people changes their language, contributes to the disappearance of the world's linguistic diversity (Magga et. al. 2005)

Similarly, ethnic minorities' languages in Burma have been undergoing disappearing. Burma education system has been dominated by Burmese (Burman) language. Ethnic children in Burma have been forced to learn dominant language while ethnic languages had been banned from teaching in government schools for many decades. Such banning became a great threat to identity of non-Burman ethnic groups. Therefore, struggle for identity survival become part of ethnic minorities' armed struggle against the government. Mon leaders often stated "if Mon language disappeared so do Mon people." Thus, banning the teaching of Mon language was a great threat to Mon ethnic identity. On the 63rd Mon National Day, the Chairman of the New Mon State Party (NMSPP), Nai Htaw Mon, reaffirmed that the objectives of the party were to prevent the extinction of Mon race and to re-gain self-determination for the Mon people (Mon, Pon 2010, p.110).

Similarly, Vice Chairperson of Karen National Union (KNU), Zipporah Seinz wrote in the Irrawaddy news online that, "[o]ur cultures and traditions are given no protection. We will be given no rights to practice our customs, or to speak and teach our languages. The process of Burmanization that has already been going on for decades will be accelerated" (Seinz, October 13, The Irrawaddy, 2009). Smaller ethnic groups such as Pa_O in Shan State also claimed that their fighting against the regime was for protecting their ethnic identity. A Pa_O rebel group claimed that the Burmese government was trying to destroy their culture. Although the group signed the cease-fire agreement in 1994, the group felt that their culture was gradually disappearing. Therefore, a PaO rebel group led by Khun Thurein resumed fighting in 2007, after 13 years of cease-fire with the government. The group leader said, 'I would rather die fighting than bowing down to the pressure of the Burmese military regime to lay down arms without a political solution' (Aung, Ko 2009).

In order to respond to government assimilation policy, ethnic armed groups and civilian alike have been struggling to maintain their ethnic languages under oppression conditions. Regarding the government's ban of the teaching Mon language in schools, a Mon national

conference was held in Moulmein on February 26, 1978. The conference passed a resolution to form the All Ramonyadesa Mon Culture and Literature Committee. Based on the conference's resolution the committee wrote a letter to the government of Burma demanding the government to immediately allow the teaching of Mon language from primary to high schools in both Mon State and in Mon areas outside the Mon State and to provide costs for teachers' salaries and for publishing text books. The committee also demanded to recognize the Mon language as official language in Mon State. The demand was rejected. The rejection outraged the Mon population, especially Mon monks who were in the fore front of the civil movements for protecting the Mon national identity (Mon, Pon 2010, p.109).

As the repression of Mon language and cultures increased in Burma so did the intensity the Mon nationalist movements. Even though the Mon armed struggle was nearly halted for a while after the Mon People Front (MPF) lay down its arms in 1958, the struggle regained momentum in early 1970s. Most of the leaders of the MPF were released from jail in early 1970s and some of them rejoined the armed struggles under the leadership of the NMSP. The members of Mon National Liberation Army (MNLA), the arm wing of the NMSP, increased from hundreds in early 1970s and reached three to four thousands in 1988 (South, 2003, p. 141).

The administrative activities of the NMSP grew with the growing strength of the party. The NMSP created many departments including departments of health and education in 1970s. Of these departments, the Mon National Education Department, formed in 1972, is the most important department for the revival of Mon language and literature and for embracing the Mon nationalism among Mon youths (Lwin, 2002). The department comprised of two committees: the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) and the Textbook Committee. The department opened many schools in the NMSP's control areas. As of 2000, the MNEC has supervised the teaching of Mon language and literature in 340 primary and secondary schools. Of these 340, 150 are directly control by the MNEC and 190 are under the Burmese government control. The schools served 46,202 students and 826 teachers were employed (Lwin, 2002).

In 2010, the cease-fire was almost broken down between the NMSP and Burmese government. In fear of interrupting education for Mon children, some Mon National schools were temporarily handed over to Mon National Education Committee for administration. The schools, however, were later transferred back to MNEC. There are currently over 142 schools, 13,155 students, and 784 teachers under MNEC direct management.

In another front, Mon Buddhist monks and Mon leaders came out with a new idea for reviving the Mon language after the government rejected the demand of the All Ramonnyadesa Mon Culture and Literature Committee in 1978. In early 1980s, rather than openly aiming for teaching Mon language and literature, Mon monks initiated summer schools to teach Buddhism and Buddhist culture to Mon children. Since the government granted permission to teach Buddhist culture to school children to prevent the influence of other religions, especially Islam, Mon monks took the opportunity to promote the teaching of Mon language. Initially the government was not aware that the summer school movement would threaten the government's Burmanization policy. They supported the movement in order to prevent the influence of other religions among the Buddhists. Indeed, in order to teach Buddhism to Mon students, those students needed to learn basic Mon language. Thus, Mon Buddhist monks opened Mon language

schools under the pretext of Buddhist culture schools. Mon Buddhist monks play major roles in promoting the Mon language (Mon,Pon, 2013, pp.112-113).

The summer school movement has gained momentum and many Mon students have joined the Mon summer schools. Hundreds of young Mon monks and university students have volunteered to be Mon language teachers. The Mon Literacy and Culture Committees (MLCC) have formed across Mon State, Karen State, Pegu, and Tenasserim Divisions where Mon people live (Mon, Pon 2010). As of 2010, over 65,000 students participated in the program.

As the Mon summer schools gained momentum under the leadership of MLCC, the government viewed it as a threat to its Burmanization policy and started harassing and oppressing the Mon summer schools. For example, in May 2000, Mon State SPDC (Mon State Peace and Development Council) ordered the MLCC in Moulmein to shut down the Mon summer schools in Moulmein and forced the committee to sign a promissory note not to open the Mon summer schools again. The committee had opened Mon summer schools in 11 city wards of Moulmein and taught 500 Mon school children. The authority threatened the committee members with imprisonment if they continued to open the Mon summer schools. Therefore, the committee had to shut down the schools.

Since the language and literature are important for the Mon identity, the Mon public requested the NMSP to include the rights for teaching of Mon language in its cease-fire negotiation with the Burmese government in 1995. Thus, the NMSP made the following requests in regard to preserving Mon language and literature in the cease-fire negotiation.

1. To allow teaching of Mon language in government schools in Mon State as a minor subject.
2. To build more government schools in Mon State and upgrade schools and education levels in various Mon villages and provide more assistance to those schools.
3. To assist building Mon National High School in undeveloped areas in Mon State.
4. To allow Mon monks to take government sponsored Buddhist literature examination in Mon language (Mon, Pon, 2010, p.114).

The government agreed to these demands to a certain extent. The government agreed to allow the teaching of Mon language in government's schools outside the regular school time, and it also agreed to allow Mon monks to take government sponsored Buddhist literature examination in Mon language.

Initially the agreements were implemented smoothly. But, only three years after the cease-fire agreement, the oppression against the teaching of Mon language were again implemented by the government. As Mon students became more interested in Mon language classes, the government felt a threat to its national unity policy or Burmanization policy. Thus, it ordered a shutdown teaching of the Mon language classes in government's schools as well as a complete shutdown of the Mon National Schools managed by NMSP in the government controlled areas. The order stated, 'the State must not allow the establishment of unregistered illegal schools and teaching in there in any regions and villages. We will take action against who do not follow according to this order. And if the teachers, the students and supporters consider

or plan against the laws and order and implement into action, they must be completely taken action according to emergency acts' (Mon, Pon 2010, p.115). In 1998, 170 schools were ordered to shut down teaching Mon languages by the government and over 10,000 students lost their opportunity learning Mon and language (Mon, Pon 2010, p.115).

Due to the government's suppression, the numbers of Mon National Schools have declined. In 2008-2009 school years, numbers of school reduced to 268 from 340 in 2000. The enrollment declined to 35,000 from 46,202 in 2000 (Mon, Pon, 2010, p.117). When the NMSP re-signed cease-fire agreement with Thein Sein's government in February 2011, the party again asked the Burmese government to officially permit the teaching of the Mon language in government schools.

Despite the government's oppression and restrictions, Mon language school movement is still active in rural and NMSP's control areas. Some Mon national schools were run and supported by the local community rather than the NMSP's education department. The new elected members of Mon National Education Committee are comprised of both NMSP members and civilians. The Mon Summer School movement is also still growing under the Mon monks' leadership.

Similarly, other ethnic armed organizations established their national schools to provide education in their control areas. For example, in Karen National Union (KNU) controlled areas, The Karen Education Department was established. Their curricula included Karen history, culture and language. Currently Karen Education Department manages over 1,200 schools. In Kachin areas, Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) also has its own education department. The Kachin National School has its own text books and curricula. After KIO and Burmese military government signed a ceasefire agreement in 1994, the agreement allowed students in Kachin National Schools to take state's colleges and universities entrance examination in order to study in state's colleges and universities. To accommodate the examination requirements, the schools required to teach both curricula. However, the cease-fire agreement between Burmese government and KIO broke down in 2011 and fighting renewed in Kachin and Northern Shan State, displacing tens of thousands of people. Over 10,000 students in Kachin National Schools and government schools were reportedly displaced as their families moved to refugee camps in KIO-controlled areas (Michaels, 2013).

Curricula conflict

Ethnic conflict in Burma also brought conflict to the school curricula. The contents of history and culture in ethnic school curricula and government school curricula have contradicted one another. Government curricula are dominated with the history, culture, and language of the majority Burman while ethnic national schools' curricula are dominated with respective ethnic history, culture and language. The two curricula become a conflict. For example, the education policies of the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) and the Burmese government are contradictory. While the Burmese government's education policy embraces Burmanization with the expense of other non-Burman nationalities, the MNEC embraces Mon nationalism and anti Burmanization (Lwin, 2002). Burman see Burman Kings such as Anoratha, Bayintnaung, and Alaungpaya as heroes for conquering the Mon Kingdoms, while the Mon see them as invaders for the same reason. The Mon treats Mon king, Rajadhirit, who had never lost a war against the

Burman in his forty years reign, as a hero (Lwin, 2002). The MNEC not only provides education and teaches Mon language to Mon students, but also promotes the Mon ethnic identity and nationalism by teaching Mon culture, language, literature and history. Indeed, such different perspectives of history of Burma cause wider conflict between the Mon and Burman (Lwin, 2002).

Similarly, history texts used in other ethnic schools also embrace ethno-nationalism. For example, Karenni schools in Karenni refugee camps taught world history and Karenni history, but do not teach Burmese history. The Karen National Union and the Shan State Army-South also created their own history curricula which presented Burman as oppressors while their ethnic groups were oppressed or innocent (Metro, 2014).

Burma basic education system comprised of three levels: primary level, secondary level, and high school level. History was taught as a core subject at primary and secondary levels. But at high school level, science students are not required to take history classes. One of the objectives of the textbooks is ‘to inspire patriotism, union spirit, and the spirit to protect independence.’(Metro,2014). To meet the objective, the school history textbooks have incorporated long history of Burma, mainly ethnic Burman history which embraced Burman kings and warriors and wars against non-Burma ethnic kingdoms.

The text books are also used for promoting people in powers and promoting Burman cultures, languages, and history. The text books contain very little history of other ethnic groups such as Kachin, Chin, Karen, and Karenni and Shan. Therefore, education reformed activists have been urging the government “to decentralize education system and school curricula which reflect diversity of Burmese society and encourage ethnic language as curriculum and abandon using the education nationalist ideologies indoctrination” (Lwin, October 15, 2011).

Politically sensitive issues such as Panglong agreement are rarely mentioned in the text books. The agreement is the most important agreement between the Burman, represented by Burma’s independence hero General Aung San, and ethnic nationalities agreeing to form the Union of Burma. However, the agreement was nullified when General Ne Win took over the power in 1962. Moreover, after General Ne Win took over power in 1962, school textbooks became more ethnic Burman-centric. Text books emphasized more on Burman kings and leaders and how they unified the country. In 1991, the government enacted a new education law that supported national solidarity and presented ethnic armed groups as terrorist groups and destructive elements and Thailand as a hostile neighbor. The text rarely acknowledged the Mon as the pioneers of Burma’s civilization. Due to politicizing Burmese history, the textbooks have received widespread condemnation from ethnic leaders and Thai and Burmese scholars. Some scholars like Metro Rosie criticized the textbooks “fraught with political imperatives” and “for exacerbating ethnic tensions” (Metro, 2014).

The importance of maintaining mother tongue

Approximately, 40 percent of population of Burma is made up of non-Burma ethnic groups. Many of ethnic children have not spoken a single word of Burmese by the time of starting their school days. Implementing mother tongue education system is very important for maintaining ethnic languages and cultures, reducing conflicts between non-Burman and Burman

ethnic groups, and improving of the education of ethnic children. *RTI International and MTB-MLE Network* provided six reasons why mother tongue education is so important: 1. improving reading and learning outcomes, 2. improving access to education, 3. facilitating learning a second or foreign language, 4. improving internal educational efficiency, 5. improving children's self-concept and identity, and 6. supporting local culture and parental involvement (RTI International, MTB-MLE Network, August 22, 2011). Moreover, according to the UNESCO, children learn best with their mother tongue because mother tongue-based instruction helps children to participate in learning process in early age. Thus, UNESCO has been providing training and educational programs to use mother tongue as the medium of instruction in schools.

Although ethnic languages have been restricted from teaching in government schools, mother tongue education systems have been introduced in Burma for many years. As part of anti-government assimilation policy and for maintaining ethnic identity, ethnic armed organizations have created mother tongue education system in their administrative areas. For example, the Mon National Education Committee was created by the NMSP and it was managing over 142 schools, 13,155 students, and 784 teachers in NMSP's administrative areas in 2014 (MNEC Facebook). Similarly, Karen Education Department was created by the KNU and it was managing over 2000 schools in KNU administrative areas. Both Mon and Karen schools have been using their respective ethnic languages as medium of instructions. In the case of Mon national schools, Mon language has been used for instruction in most subjects except Burmese. However, those schools are located in conflict zones and very limited in funding. Therefore, they have been struggling for providing high quality education.

Many experimental studies have been done on comparing the performance of bilingual students or children between mother tongue education system and non-mother tongue education system. The results of these studies consistently showed that students under the mother tongue education performed in schools better than students in non-mother tongue education system. The mother tongue education also provides equal rights to ethnic children to access education.

Nyein (Shalom) foundation, a Burma based non-government organization has conducted experimental study on 699 students at primary level from April to June of 2011. The objective of the study was to evaluate the language skills of non-Burman students in 21 villages in six states. The study was conducted by giving out to both Burman and non-Burman students to read a paragraph of Burmese text. The results of the study showed that of those 699 students, 68% could read a paragraph, 18% could read some text while 14% shows that they could not communicate at all. The study found that non-Burman students had difficult to understand the text compared to Burman students (Nyein Foundation, 2011). As a result, the group urged the government to provide equal rights to access education to all citizens. Daw Nan Raw, general secretary of Nyein Foundation said that "if education is meant for all the citizens of Myanmar then the government should let them exercise their rights to education. But the education policy is only limited to citizens who know the Myanmar language or native Myanmar speakers" (Myanmar Times, August 14, 2012).

A field research also confirmed the result stated above. Ethnic students find difficulties in understanding school texts and materials since they are taught in non-mother tongue. A group of Mon students from grade 5 to grade 7 were studying for final examinations together in classroom in January 2013 in Burma. They were reading the school materials loudly in Burmese because the materials were written in Burmese. They were asked if they understood what they were

reading. Most of them said they did not understand the materials. But, they studied them by heart or simply memorizing the texts. The majority of ethnic Mon students attend government schools where all the subjects are taught in Burmese³.

Saikia and Mohanty (2004) conducted a well-controlled study of indigenous/tribal Bodo children in Assam, India. The study compared three groups of Grade Four children from two different ethnic groups. Each group had sample size of 45 students. The result was measured in language and mathematics competencies. The study also controlled other factors such as the students' socio-economic status, the quality of schooling and the ecological conditions of their villages. The experimental setting was broken into three groups: Group A, B, and C. Group A comprised of students from Bodo ethnic group and were taught in the medium of Bodo. Group B comprised of students from Bodo ethnic group but were taught through the medium of Assamese. Group C represented Assamese students who were taught in Assamese as the medium language. The results showed that Group A students performed significantly better in all tests than students in Group B. Group B performed the worst on all the tests. Group C performed best on two of the three tests. There was no difference between group B and group A in the language test. The results from this study suggested that mother tongue education system showed positive performance in schools for the Bodo children.

Skutnabb-Kangas (1987) also conducted a similar study and showed similar results. Students in the mother tongue education system performed better in reading in any both primary and secondary languages. Skutnabb-Kangas conducted a study among Finish minority working class students in Stocholm in Sweden. The study compared Finish minority students and Swedish students in reading competencies in parallel class in the same school. The study was measured by offering a difficult reading test in Swedish. The Finish students who were taught in Finish as medium language and Swedish as second language performed better in reading than Swedish students who were taught in Swedish. Normally, Swedish students who were mostly from middle class families performed better in this kind of test. However, because Finish working class students had been taught in Finish-medium language for 9 years, they outperformed Swedish students in Swedish reading test even though the Swedish was their second language. The students also performed as good as the control group, the Finish students in Finland (Skutnabb-Kangas 1987). This study confirmed that students who are in the mother tongue education system performed better in second language or foreign language test.

The Ramirez et al. (1991) studied a group of 2,352 Spanish-speaking students in the United States. The study compared three groups of Spanish speaking students in their educational achievements. The first group was taught through the medium of English only. The second group had one or two years of Spanish-medium education and was then transferred to English-medium class. The third group had 4-6 years of Spanish-medium education before being transferred to English-medium class. It was normally assumed that students who started early in English-medium education would do better in educational achievements than those students who started late with English-medium education. But, the results showed the opposite. The students who had least exposure to English-medium education and had most Spanish-medium education showed the best results. This study explained that students who had longer mother tongue education did better in educational achievements.

³ Field research was conducted during my trip to Burma in January 2013.

Thomas, Wayne P. and Virginia P. Collier (2002) conducted the largest longitudinal study on the education of minority students. The study involved a total of more than 210,000 students in both urban and rural areas in the United States of America. The study tested across different types of educational models. Of these tested models, mother tongue education system model was found to be best model in providing education to bilingual students. Thus, the length of mother tongue education students had is a strong predictor to students' achievement, competence and learning second language such as English. In other words, the longer students have schooling in their mother language, the higher achievement students will obtain. In both Thomas and Collier's and Ramirez et. al's studies, the length of having mother tongue education is the most important factor predicting educational success of bilingual students in schools.

In brief, a large body of information is available on the mother tongue education and it points to one main conclusion that the longer mother tongue education the students have the better they perform in schools. Therefore, the mother tongue education is very important for indigenous students or bilingual students to be competence and successful in schools. With mother tongue education, students are able to think, learn, to communicate, understand, and discuss school materials in early age. That also means the students are given an equal rights to access education.

Mother tongue education and international law

Various United Nations and non-governmental organizations charters and provisions guarantee the rights of learning one's own language, rights of using mother tongue in schools, and rights of accessing high quality education. However, there has not been an international law that requires states to use mother tongue as medium of instruction in public schools.

Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights which was adopted at the World Conference on Linguistic Rights held 6–9 June 1996 in Barcelona, Spain stated that, language is “inalienable personal rights” and the “right to be recognized as a member of a language community; the right to the use of one's own language both in private and in public” and “the right for [one's] own language and culture to be taught”.

Moreover, the rights to learn one's own language is also related to human rights and ethnic minority rights. Although the 1948's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) has not explicitly stated the rights of linguistic, it was mentioned under the categories of equal rights. According to Article 2, “[e]veryone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, **language**, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status...”

The Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights also provides that:

[i]n those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language.

In protecting of ethnic minorities' languages and cultures, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 1992 urged the states to protect the existence of minorities' languages and cultures, to allow ethnic minorities to enjoy their cultures and to use their languages. The declaration also urged the states to provide opportunities to ethnic minorities to learn their mother tongues or use them as instructing languages. According to Article 1.1 of the declaration,

[s]tates shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories, and shall encourage conditions for the promotion of that identity.

According to Article 4.3,

[s]tates should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue.

The article 30 of The Convention on the Rights of the Child also provides rights of ethnic minorities or indigenous people to use their ethnic language. According to the Article 30,

[i]n those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origins exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practice his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language⁴.

The latest international mechanism regarding indigenous people rights is the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The declaration was adopted by General Assembly Resolution 61/295 on 13 September 2007. The declaration articles 13 and 14 provide the rights of indigenous peoples to use their own languages, writing systems, educational system and institutions to access education that is provided in their own languages.

According to the Article 13,

[i]ndigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons.

According to Article 14.1,

[i]ndigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.

and Article 14.3 states that,

⁴ Burmese government ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991.

[s]tates shall, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, take effective measures, in order for indigenous individuals, particularly children, including those living outside their communities, to have access, when possible, to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.

The prevention of teaching indigenous or ethnic minority languages could also be implied as a crime against humanity. According to the article II (b) and (e) of UN Genocide Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, imposing dominant language to ethnic minorities in education systems would result of committing genocide or cultural genocide. Article II (b) and Article II (e) of convention provide that states or persons would commit genocide if they intend to destroy, in part or in whole, a national or ethnic group by “[c]ausing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;” and “[f]orcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”

Regarding the implication of the convention on cultural genocide, Dunbar and Skutnabb-Kangas (2008) stated that, “subtractive educational policies, implementing in the full knowledge of their devastating effects on those who suffer them, constitute international crimes, including genocide.” The “states persist in such policies, given such knowledge can from an educational and sociological point of view be described as a form of linguistic and/ or cultural genocide” Dunbar and Skutnabb-Kangas (2008). When dominant languages are learned at the cost of mother tongue, they can become the killer of languages (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). In other words, if a state policy imposes the dominant language as the medium of instructions without permitting ethnic languages to be taught in schools, the policy becomes the language killer policy. Under such policy, children do not only perform well in schools but also cannot read and write their own language. Such policy causes serious mental harm to children because it is lack of the promotion of academic and cognitive growth of children. The policy, therefore, causes “very serious and often permanent harmful mental and physical consequences” (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000).

Mother tongue education around the world

There are many countries around the world that are using mother tongue as the medium of instruction in public schools for ethnic minorities. These countries include China, India, Canada, and Belgium. The countries that are closed to Burma are China and India. Those two countries have different political systems but have similar diverse ethnic groups and education policy which allow the citizens to be educated in mother tongue education system. Constitutions and education laws in both countries guarantee the rights of using ethnic languages as medium of instruction in basic education government schools.

Although China seems to be a homogenous ethnic country, People’s Republic of China (PRC) officially recognizes 55 ethnic groups in additional to the Han. The Han is the largest ethnic group in China. It constitutes 91.9 percent of the total population. The next largest ethnic groups in term of population are the Zhuang, Uyghur and Tibetan. The Zhuang constitutes 1.72% (17 millions) of the total population while Uyghur and Tibetan comprise of 0.75% (11 millions)

and 0.47% (5 millions) respectively. Ethnic minorities' populations are growing fast because they have not been affected by the One Child Policy.⁵

China also granted autonomous regions to some of those ethnic groups. There are five autonomous regions in China. Both Xinjiang and Tibet are recognized as autonomous regions. Both Uyghur and Tibetan populations are majority in their respective regions. While Uyghur constitutes of 45% in Xinjiang, Tibetan is constitutes of 92.8% in Tibet.⁶

Since People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949, education for ethnic minorities has been the top priority on China's education policy agenda. The Chinese government has been strongly supporting mother tongue education in ethnic minorities' regions. The use of mother tongues as media of instructions in ethnic regions is guaranteed in People Republic of China's constitution, regional autonomy law, and education law (Uyghur Human Rights Project, July 24, 2007). According to the article 4 of the PRC's constitution,

[r]egional autonomy is practiced in areas where people of minority ethnic groups live in compact communities... All ethnic groups have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written languages and to preserve or reform their own folkways and customs.

The rights of using mother tongues in government schools is also guaranteed in the People's Republic of China Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law. Article 37 of the law states that,

[s]chools (classes) and other educational organizations recruiting mostly ethnic minority students should, whenever possible, use textbooks in their own languages and use these languages as the media of instruction.

The rights of using mother tongues for ethnic minorities are also mentioned in the PRC's Compulsory Education Law. According to the law, "[s]chools in which the majority of students are of ethnic minorities may use the spoken and written languages of those ethnic minorities in instruction."

As a result, in autonomous regions such as Xinjiang and Tibet, mother tongue is used in public schools as instructing languages. Although the text books materials had been translated from materials used in government schools, recently the textbooks were created with more locally base content. In ethnic minority schools, Mandarin is taught as second language up to elementary schools.⁷

India is also ethnically diverse country. It has over six hundred tribes and about 1,652 languages (Vulli 2014). Of those languages, 22 of them are recognized as official languages by the India's constitution. The majority of the population speaks Hindi which constitutes 41 percent of the population. The next largest linguistic group is Bangli which constitutes 8 percent of the population. Telegu is the third largest linguistic group which constitutes 7.2 percent of the population.⁸

Ethnic minority languages are widely used in both public and private sectors in India. About 58 languages are used in school curricula; 47 languages are used in public

⁵ Wikipedia: List of ethnic groups in China

⁶ Wikipedia: Autonomous regions of China

⁷ Wikipedia: Bilingual Education

⁸ Wikipedia: Demographics of India

administrations; 91 languages are used in radio programs; and 87 languages are used in print-media publication (Benedikter 2009, p.17 and Meganathan 2011). Indian education policy reflects its linguistic diversity. The Indian constitution guarantees linguistic rights to all citizens. Ethnic minority groups are granted special rights to use their mother tongue as the medium of instructions in public schools (Meganathan 2011). Thus, Indian education policy which is derived from those rights formulated a tri-language policy where students are taught in Hindi, English and one regional language. The schools have freedom to choose any languages for the medium language.⁹

Conclusions and recommendations

Burma is an ethnically diverse country. The promoting cultures and languages of ethnic nationalities is very essential to end a six-decade long civil war and for national reconciliation in Burma. Due to Burmese governments' policy of assimilation and Burmanization, Burma has been in civil war since Burma gained independence from the British in 1948. In order for Burma to become a peaceful, democratic, and prosperous country, Burma's education reform should be concentrated on the decentralization of education, promoting cultural and linguistic diversity, recognition of the use of ethnic languages in government sectors, and implementation of the mother tongue education system in government funded public schools.

Decentralization of education system

The current education system of Burma has been centralized. Most of decisions are made from the top or by the ministry of education. Decentralization not only increases the efficiency of education management but also allows state and division governments to have more autonomy in providing education needs to their respective state and division citizens. All regions do not have the same education needs. For an example, it may not be important for children who live in Burman populated areas to learn ethnic languages in schools. However, learning their languages or mother tongues in schools is very important for children in the ethnic populated areas in order for them to understand their cultures and languages. By decentralization, local governments have the power to raise fund for supporting ethnic language curricula. If a state or division government requires additional funding for the teaching of ethnic languages in government schools, it could raise fund by increasing local taxes or by requesting more funding from the central government. The decentralization of education system also allows schools to have the freedom in selecting which language should be used as the primary medium of instruction.

Promoting cultural and linguistic diversity in schools

In the current Burma's education system, the school curriculum is dominated by the language, history, and culture of Burman ethnic group. Other ethnic languages are not allowed to be used as the medium of instructions in schools. Ethnic languages, cultures and histories are also rarely presented in school text books. In order to maintain ethnic identities and to build the unity and harmony in Burma, ethnic languages, cultures and histories should be equally represented in school curriculum.

⁹ Wikipedia: Bilingual Education.

The right to teach ethnic languages in government schools during normal school hours is very important for revitalizing ethnic languages as well as for the peace process in Burma. Ethnic languages have been oppressed for many decades. As a result, many ethnic children cannot read and write their own languages. Therefore, ethnic languages should be part of the school curriculum and need to be taught as a mandatory course in ethnic populated areas. Moreover, the government also needs to create a language policy that reflects the ethnic diversity of the country. The bilingual (Burmese and a regional ethnic language) or tri-lingual (Burmese, English, and a regional language) policy should be implemented.

Recognition of ethnic languages as official languages in ethnic areas

The current Burma's constitution recognizes Burmese language as the only official language in Burma. Other ethnic languages are not recognized as official languages in their respective regions. For maintaining ethnic cultures and languages, core ethnic languages such as Shan, Mon, Karen, Arakanese, Chin, and Kachin should be recognized as official languages in their respective states. State governments should have the power to select an additional official language beside the Burmese language. For example, Mon state can choose two official languages: Mon and Burmese since the majority of population in the state is Mon. Recognizing ethnic languages as official languages provides an incentive for ethnic children to learn their languages and allows them to use their ethnic languages in employments and other official purposes.

Implementing mother tongue education system in ethnic areas

To implement the mother tongue education system is very important in Burma. The system would not only help promote and maintain ethnic languages and cultures but also helps ethnic children to be successful in schools. Many studies have pointed out that the mother tongue education system is a strong indicator of educational achievement for bilingual children. The right to learn one's own mother tongue or to have instruction in one's own mother tongue is also recommended by many charters and provisions of the United Nations and other non-governmental organizations.

In order to improve school performances of ethnic children and to preserve ethnic languages and cultures in Burma, the mother tongue education system should be implemented in government schools where ethnic groups mostly reside. Implementing the mother tongue education system is not a very difficult task. Since mother tongue education system is already in place in Burma under ethnic armed organizations' administrations, the government can look at the examples of those schools. The Mon national school system is one of the most successful mother tongue education systems in Burma. At the primary level, most classes are instructed in Mon. In other words, Mon language has been used for the medium of instruction for all subjects except Burmese and English. At the secondary level, Mon literature and history are conducted in Mon but the rest of subjects are conducted in Burmese. Mon students from a Mon National School can also sit in the government's matriculation exams and pursue their higher education in government's colleges and universities if they choose to do so. Therefore, the Mon National School system could be the best model to be applied in government schools in ethnic populated areas.

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