

Destiny's Child

Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's Daughter of Destiny

By

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Abstract

"As a mother, the greater sacrifice was giving up my sons, but I was always aware of the fact that others had given up more than me. I never forget that my colleagues who are in prison suffer not only physically, but mentally for their families who have no security outside - in the larger prison of Burma under authoritarian rule."

- Aung San Suu Kyi, *The Voice of Hope*, 1988: Conversations with Alan Clements

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Myanmar's Daughter of Destiny

They call her The Lady.

And for many, she is Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the honorific Daw being Burmese for mother/aunt.

The 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi was born on 19 June, 1945, in Rangoon (now Yangon), British Burma. The youngest of four children born to Aung San and Khin Kyi, she was a tiny toddler of two when her father, General Aung San, who had

negotiated Burma's independence from the United Kingdom in 1947, was assassinated by his political rivals.

Suu Kyi spent her early years in Rangoon, brought up by her mother, Khin Kyi. After her husband's assassination, Khin Kyi now assumed a more prominent role in the newly formed Burmese government. She was appointed Burma's ambassador to India, and the family shifted to New Delhi in the early 60s. Suu Kyi attended a well-known girls' school - the Convent of Jesus and Mary - and then went on to study Political Science at Delhi University.

After she was awarded a Bachelor's degree Suu Kyi went to Oxford in England, where she obtained a Master's degree. She then went for postgraduate studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. It was while in London that she met her future husband, Englishman Michael Aris, a scholar of Tibetan, Bhutanese, and Himalayan culture and history. Michael at the time was working as a tutor to the children of the Bhutanese royal family.

Suu Kyi spent the next three years working for the United Nations in New York. She stayed in touch with Michael Aris, however, writing to him every day. And on New Year's day in 1972, Suu Kyi and Michael were married in a simple Buddhist ceremony in England.

The newlyweds lived in Bhutan for a year, before moving back to England and settling in North Oxford. Suu Kyi spent the next few years in happy domesticity, raising their two sons, Alexander and Kim.

It was late one evening in 1988 that she got a call from Rangoon, telling her that her mother was critically ill. She flew into Rangoon to care for Khin Kyi, expecting to be back in England in a few weeks time, after nursing her mother back to health.

It was not to be.

Of Khin Kyi's four children, only two - Suu Kyi and her eldest brother, Aung San Oo - were surviving now. Aung San Oo, an engineer in California who was estranged from his sister, had by now become an American citizen.

Consequently, as her father's daughter, destiny beckoned Suu Kyi, and the mantle of Burma's democracy movement - after resting briefly on her widowed mother's fragile shoulders - was now to be passed on to the daughter of General Aung San, the Father of the Nation, the architect of modern day Myanmar.

Thus began Suu Kyi's long and arduous struggle against the military junta, leading the people's movement in their fight for democratic rule. Her country needed her, her people believed in her, and, as her father's daughter, she had to place her people and country first, ahead of her own immediate family and personal desires.

Aung San Suu Kyi thus became 'The Lady' of Myanmar, while some also called her Daw or mother/aunt.



Image 1: Aung San Suu Kyi

Her life was not easy.

Suu Kyi's political career began when the longtime military ruler, General Ne Win, decided to step down. Mass demonstrations for democracy followed. And as her father's daughter, Suu Kyi found herself in the thick of it all.

A new military junta came to power. Demonstrations were quashed, protestors arrested, tortured and many killed. Through it all Suu Kyi relentlessly continued with her fight for democracy, addressing rallies and exhorting the people to call for a democratic government.

Greatly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence, and further reinforced by her belief in the concepts of Buddhism, Suu Kyi now formally entered politics to work for democratization. In September 1988, she founded the National League for Democracy.

Enjoying enormous popularity and support among the youth, Suu Kyi caused further consternation in the minds of the military rulers, who now sought desperately to try and clip her wings. Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest.

The military rulers offered her freedom if she left the country. But by now thoroughly committed to the democratic movement, Suu Kyi refused to leave, fearing that she would not be allowed back into the country once she left.

Under house arrest for years together, Suu Kyi nevertheless continued the fight for democracy from within the gates of her lakeside bungalow in Yangyon. The military junta cut her phone lines, and restricted her access to information, even as she would try desperately to obtain news of her family in England. Her husband and sons had initially been allowed to visit her, but later no visas were granted to Michael Aris, fearing that he would assist Suu Kyi by getting involved in the movement for democracy.

Thus, The Lady of Myanmar, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, was now all alone in her ancestral home, with merely two maids for personal assistance.

Her family in England missed her and suffered in her absence. But far greater was the call of the Burmese people, suffering terribly under military rule. The daughter of Myanmar's Father of the Nation simply had no real options. And so she chose to suffer with them all.

Michael and the boys began to fear for Suu Kyi's life. There had been horror stories of people in Myanmar being summarily picked up by the military junta, never to be seen again afterwards. Even from behind the walls of her house, Suu Kyi was proving to be a constant thorn in the side of the military rulers.

Her father, General Aung San, had been assassinated. Michael was afraid Suu Kyi could meet the same fate.

Michael Aris rallied around world leaders to seek the Nobel Peace prize for Suu Kyi. He hoped that international recognition of her fight for democracy would prevent the military rulers from harming her. And it worked, to an extent, with Suu Kyi safely locked up in her parental home.

The Nobel Peace prize was awarded to Suu Kyi in 1991. She was still under house arrest, so the honour was accepted on her behalf by her husband and their two sons in Stockholm, Sweden. Meanwhile, under house arrest in Myanmar, life went on just the same for Suu Kyi.

Michael Aris was diagnosed with cancer in 1997. Once again, his visa application to visit his wife was rejected, ostensibly because there would not be adequate medical facilities to care for him in Myanmar. Instead, the military government suggested that Suu Kyi travel to England to visit her ailing husband.

Suu Kyi refused, fearing that she would be prevented from re-entering the country once she left. Dr. Michael Aris, her English historian husband of over twenty-seven years, died of cancer in September, 1999, on his 53rd birthday.

The struggle for democracy continued.

Several world leaders, including the then UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-Moon, tried to prevail upon the military rulers to reach an agreement with Suu Kyi. In 2012, nearly twenty-four years after she entered the Burmese political arena, Suu Kyi announced her intention to run for President in Myanmar's 2015 elections.

The current constitution, however, which came into effect in 2008, bars her from the Presidency because she is the widow and mother of foreigners. These provisions appeared to have been written specifically to prevent her from being eligible.

Suu Kyi's party, the NLD, won a sweeping victory in the 2015 elections. Aung San Suu Kyi had announced earlier that even though she is constitutionally barred from the presidency, she would hold the real power in any NLD-led government. Consequently, President Htin Kyaw appointed her State Counsellor, a position akin to Prime Minister, created especially for her.

Suu Kyi's role in government has not been without controversy. In 2016, she was accused of failing to protect Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims. The international community has criticized her vociferously for keeping silent over the persecution of the ethnic minority.

The Myanmar military declared the November 2020 general election results fraudulent. On 1 February 2021, Aung San Suu Kyi was arrested and deposed by the Myanmar military, along with other leaders of her party, the National League for Democracy.

Since she began her political career Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest for a total of 15 years over a 21-year period. In a 2007 TV interview, she said that while under house arrest she spent her time playing the piano and reading philosophy, politics and biographies that her husband had sent her.

As of today, Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's Daughter of Destiny, still remains under house arrest.

About the Author



An experienced voice-over artiste who has written and spoken commentaries for short films and radio/tv advertisements, Kalyani has been an English News Reader with All India Radio for over three decades. Ms. Kalayni Menon is the Associate Editor of the Journal of Asian Art, Culture and Literature (JAACL).

