



# FESTIVALS AND EVENTS AS A MANIFESTATION OF COMMUNITY COHESION

Buddhist and Hindus Residents in an  
Impoverished Urban Neighborhood

Chan Myawe Aung San



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International Development Research Centre  
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

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## Foreword

Myanmar is undergoing an exciting and often unpredictable time of transformation on many fronts after decades of isolation. Outsiders have only a limited understanding of the complexities, dynamics and the depth of change taking place—affecting the social, environmental, economic, and governmental spheres, and directly impacting the livelihoods and practiced culture of the peoples of Myanmar. How are they actively taking part in their country's developmental process, and in the face of what obstacles? In this pivotal moment, Myanmar's need for both mind- and manpower to help fill the gaps of data and research on critical development issues has never been greater.

RCSD has established the Understanding Myanmar's Development (UMD) Fellowship program, supported by the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, to enhance the knowledge of Myanmar's development, strengthen the research capacity of Burmese researchers, and encourage them to become actively engaged in the study of development policy and practice. The fellowship seeks to promote sustainable academic exchange and dialogue among researchers from Myanmar, Thailand, and other GMS countries. Under this program, 30 fellowships have been awarded to mid-career researchers in their respective areas of social and economic change, agriculture, environment and climate change, health and health care systems, and social media and innovations.

In this volume, Chan Myawe Aung Sun explores how community events are a force for community cohesion in the bustling and diverse city of Yangon. Focusing on a mixed-ethnicity neighbourhood

of the former capital, the paper analyzes several different festivals to provide an intimate understanding of the practice and the significance of community events for people in the community. The area is nestled behind downtown Yangon, and despite its prominent former role in the city's trade, decades of neglect have left the neighbourhood's current residents facing insecure forms of existence in informal sectors. Nonetheless, this paper shows how Buddhists and Hindus in the community participate in occasions that are driven by their religious beliefs and cultural practices. The paper describes the forging of space to foster community pride, and how these events bring a plethora of social benefits to people, most notably through strengthening relationships across religious divides. This work is a useful contribution to the knowledge of community cohesion and cultural practice in Myanmar.

*Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, PhD*  
*Director, RCSD*

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## Abstract

This paper describes cultural and religious festivals and events, as evidence of community cohesion, in a deprived urban neighborhood where Buddhists and Hindus reside together. The study focuses on a mixed-ethnicity neighbourhood in Rangoon that is covered with congested living quarters and where the provision of public services is largely neglected. Most residents are poor and earn their living in the informal sector, regularly shifting from one job to another to support their families. In the neighborhood, there is a sizable community of Indian people that are mostly devotees of Hinduism. They are able to perform and participate in their own cultural and religious practices and live peacefully with their Buddhist neighbors. They have representatives in the township administration, and spaces available in the neighborhood, including religious halls and the concrete pavement, are used as regular places for communal activities and everyday practices.

The neighborhood celebrates a number of communal festivals and events. These include the *Neiban-zay* festival, the festival for the immersing of bean sprouts, Buddhist novitiation and ordination ceremonies, and the sword-ladder climbing festival. The neighborhood also creates a space for health-care provision for elderly people. These communal occasions are driven by the religious beliefs and cultural practices of the two dominant faith groups. This paper shows how these occasions bring social benefits to the people, including community pride and the strengthening of relationships among its residents.

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# 1

## THE RESEARCH PROJECT

### **Introduction**

The paper describes cultural and religious festivals and events, as evidence of community cohesion, in a deprived urban neighborhood where Buddhist and Hindu devotees live together as dominant ethnic groups. The mixed-ethnicity neighborhood is located just outside downtown Rangoon, also known as Yangon, Burma (Myanmar). Much of the neighborhood is covered with congested living quarters where houses are closely built and the provision of public services is largely neglected. Most residents are poor and earn their living in the informal sector. By employing livelihood capabilities and assets, they are wrestling with income poverty for their everyday survival. At times, they shift from one job to another in order to manage the prospect of fluctuating incomes that will not be enough to cover their daily household expenses.

In the neighborhood, there is a sizable community of Indian people that are mostly devotees of Hinduism. They are able to perform and participate in their own cultural and religious practices. Living peacefully with the majority Burmese population as law-abiding residents, they have elected a household elder of the same ethnic background who is a member of the ward administration office. There appears to be very few discriminatory practices between the different dwellers, with them collectively sharing in the joy and sorrow of their neighbors. Spaces available

in the neighborhood, including the religious hall and even the concrete pavement, are used as regular places for communal activities and everyday practices.

The neighborhood celebrates a number of communal festivals and events. These include the *Neiban-zay* festival, the festival for the immersing of bean sprouts, Buddhist novitation and ordination ceremonies, and the sword-ladder climbing festival. The neighborhood also creates a space for health-care provision for elderly people. These communal occasions are driven by the religious beliefs and cultural practices of the two dominant faith groups – Buddhists and Hindus. This paper shows how these occasions also appear to bring other social benefits to the people, including community pride, the forging of a bond between public organizations and neighborhood groups, and the strengthening of relationships among residents - especially Buddhist and Hindu people.

## **Research Objectives and Questions**

Through the communal festivals and events, it is seen how people's diverse backgrounds and circumstances are appreciated and valued. This suggests the existence of community cohesion in the neighborhood, because different people and groups are able to construct strong social ties. In their everyday life, positive relationships are also being developed between different faith-based groups. This study is intended to focus on two objectives dealing with this common theme;

- To learn about the existence of community pride in a deprived and mixed-ethnicity neighborhood of urban Rangoon.
- To understand how communal cohesion is embedded in festivals and events that are driven by religious and cultural beliefs and practices.

## **Methodology**

The study primarily draws on field research conducted in *Yanon-nar Neit* neighborhood, Dawbon Township, in late 2012. Long-term residents were interviewed about their everyday experiences,



beliefs and practices. Social interactions, religious and cultural festivals and events were also observed to supplement this data. The interviews were conducted not only in private areas such as respondents' houses, but also in public areas including teashops, on the street, religious buildings and the workplaces of the respondents. Throughout the observation, ordinary events and everyday activities were studied in a natural setting. In the study areas, there are formal authorities whose approval is necessary to carry out field research. They include the administrator of the local office, and household elders of relevant sections in the neighborhood. An official request for access to the field site was made at the local administration office. After the request was granted, the field research was conducted with the cooperation of household elders in the area.

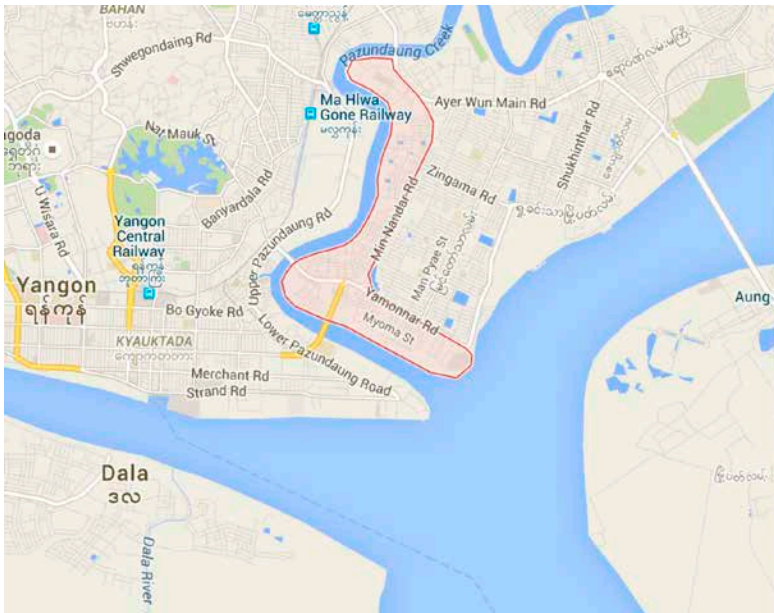
### **Field Site: Dawbon Township**

The paper is based on field research that has been carried out in *Yamon-nar Neit* ward of Dawbon Township. According to the state structure of Myanmar, a township is an administrative unit into which wards are organized, while a district is made up of townships, and is organized into a region or state<sup>1</sup>. In the paper, the terminology of ward and neighborhood are interchangeably used. Dawbon Township is located in the southeastern part of Rangoon, also known as Yangon, sharing borders with Pazundaung Township in the south, Thingangyun Township in the north, Mingalar Taungnyunt Township in the west and Thaketa Township in the east. The township is a long stretch of land that lies along the eastern side of the lower section of the *Pazundaung* Creek. Before running into the confluence of Yangon and Bago Rivers, the lower section of the winding creek borders the western and southern parts of the township with Mingalar Taungnyunt and Pazundaung respectively. *Min Nandar* is a road that stretches from Thuwunna Bridge in the north and serves as a line of demarcation between the township and its eastern neighbor, Thaketa.

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1 See chapter 2, State Structure, Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008)

**Figure 1** Map of Dawbon Township (Source: Google Maps)



The area shaded red in the above picture represents Dawbon Township. There are four bridges built over the creek through which the township can be accessed. Apart from the obsolete Old Thaketa Bridge, the rest are in use as reliable channels to transport people and goods between the eastern and western parts of the creek. The Thuwunna Bridge links the southeastern townships, including Dawbon, with the northern part of Rangoon. The Maha Bandoola Bridge (built in 2011) and the New Thaketa Bridge (built in 1962) serve southeasterners as transport routes to downtown Yangon.

Dawbon is one of 45 townships in Rangoon, which was the political capital of Burma up until 2005 when the military government moved the capital to Nay Pyi Taw, a newly built city in the center of the country - 355 kilometers north of Rangoon. The city, however, remains the commercial capital of the country. According to the Ministry of Information (2010), it has a total population of 6,943,705, with a density of 1,768 people per square mile. With a total area of 3,927 square miles, Rangoon is home to large numbers of ethnic Bamar, Kayin and Mon people.

Before Burma achieved independence in 1948, there were also other smaller communities of Chinese, Europeans, Americans and even Latin Americans in Rangoon. In order to describe a wide diversity of nationalities in Rangoon, J. S. Furnivall, a political economist, coined the term “plural society” (as cited in Thant Myint-U, 2011: p. 19). In paying a visit to the very heart of downtown Rangoon, Burmese historian Thant Myint-U (2011: p. 26-27) described the city as dotted with the old religious structures of different faiths, including Buddhist pagodas, Sufi shrines, Jewish synagogues, Mughal Shia mosques, Sunni mosques, Christian churches and Hindu temples. Many South Asians were forced to leave during the 1960s under the administration of General Ne Win, with Anglo-Burmese effectively disappearing during this era. However, sizable South Asian and Chinese communities still exist in Rangoon.

The spatial area of Rangoon was divided into three parts in the colonial era (Morley, 2012), the vestiges of which still remain. The eastern area of Rangoon, where Dawbon Township is located, belongs to the last category of outlying townships that were established after national independence. They are situated on the eastern side of the Pazunduang Creek. The western side is occupied by Rangoon's downtown quarter. The three areas formed in the colonial time are; the flat and high-density downtown district, the low-density area north of downtown (which includes Shwe Dagon Pagoda, the People's Park and Kan Daw Gyi Lake), and the section located in close proximity to Inya Lake - which is about ten kilometers from downtown.

The construction of new towns to the north and east of Rangoon occurred as the city sprawled after national independence, as a response to overpopulation and social problems. In addition, the large-scale relocation of squatters was carried out between the late 1950s and the 1960s, with the aim of relocating old sites to the victims of fire whenever possible. However, as the urban population gradually increased alongside a scarcity of developed land, fire victims were relocated to other places. By the end of the 1950s, around fifteen percent of the city's population lived in newly established townships, including Thaketa, North Okkalapa, South Okkalapa, Hlaing Tha Ya and Shew Pyi Tha. During the

period under the Burmese Socialist Programme Party (MSPP), headed by former general Ne Win, the area of present-day Dawbon was within Thaketa Township, before later establishing itself as a separate township level administrative site.

A large-scale redevelopment of land in Rangoon's periphery took off in the late 1980s with the founding of the Dagon and Myothit townships. Those who lost their homes to fires, and public sector employees, were allocated land in these townships. However, specific data on Dawbon and its neighboring townships' squatter resettlement is not available. Most studies on squatter locations and resettlement programs in Rangoon focus on a few townships, such as Hlaing Tha Ya and Shwe Pyi Tha, which were built in 1985 and 1986 respectively. How urban sprawl was managed in other townships during the MSPP is largely neglected in the literature. In addition, many reports cover efforts to resettle slum dwellers and those who supported the 88 uprising, along with land development programs under the military regime between 1988 and 2010.

Relying on unpublished internal documents from the Dawbon township administrative office<sup>2</sup> (2013), issued by the township administration office in April 2013, it is learned that the township is made up of 14 wards with 9,002 houses that accommodate 13,552 households. Among the total population of 70,643, are 50,833 Buddhists, 17,691 Muslims, 1,291 Christians and 828 Hindus. However, the actual numbers are possibly more than the official figures, because some households squat in congested quarters without any land title. In terms of ethnic population, the administrative data categorizes the non-Burmese population as "Foreign Nationals". It accounts for 12,200 people – 6,097 Bangladeshis, 5,635 Indians, 266 Chinese and 207 Pakistanis. With regards to the occupational structure of the township, the majority of the people earn their living on a casual basis. Those who work

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2 The circulation of the 60 page document is mentioned as "Limited" with the signature of the township administrator of Dawbon. It has 58 sections of classified data ranging from climatic conditions to the number of religious buildings in the township.

in trading and service industries are the second largest population, while the smallest number of people work for public offices.

In the following discussion, the next chapter continues in explaining the socio-economic conditions of the economically deprived people living in the neighborhood of Buddhists and Hindus. Chapter three discusses the festivals and events taking place in the poor neighborhood on a regular basis. Although they are celebrated and organized for the religious and cultural purposes of different ethnic groups, they bring about a sense of belonging, togetherness and communal pride within the neighborhood. Finally, the last chapter discusses the connection between these special occasions and the positive relationships present among poor urban dwellers, and looks at the manifestation of social cohesion between the residents and local authorities in the neighborhood.



# 2

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS, COMMUNITY AND LIVELIHOODS IN DAWBON TOWNSHIP

The Yamon-nar Neit ward is one of fourteen wards under the jurisdiction of Dawbon Township. *Yamon-nar* is the name of a tributary of the Ganges River, but Burmese prefer to use its secondary meaning, “waters of the river”, while *Neit* is the number two. Before attaining the name *Yamon-nar Neit*, the ward was known as Kala Sue – *Kala* stands for Indians, and *Sue* translates as a cluster – the majority of the residents in the area were people of Indian ancestry. Another colloquial name for the area is Satt Wun Na-na Bie, which is a significant local icon in the area – *Satt* refers to machinery in English, and *Wun* means compound. Indeed, *Satt Wun* is the local people’s understanding of the nearby dockyard where machinery is operated. *Na-na Bie*, meanwhile, is the name of an Indian who held many acres of farmland before the agricultural land around the area was repurposed for housing squatters and slum dwellers.

**Figure 2** Map of Yamon-nar Neit neighborhood (author's drawing)



The neighborhood is roughly laid out according to a grid pattern. The present pattern came into existence when a government land allotment project was carried out under the Burmese Socialist Programme Party in the late 1980s, as a response to the increasing slum population in the area. Under the project, the relatively large landholding squatters in the slum were allotted 25x50-feet, while smallholders were allotted 12½x50-feet.

Most of the public offices are situated along the *Yamon-nar* road, which is to the north of the neighborhood. Most residents who are poor largely rely on the road for commuting and transporting. The Dawbon government dockyard – which employs a large number of workers – is located in the southwestern part of the neighborhood. Apart from the two *Yamon-nar* estates situated in its western part, poorer residents occupy most of the area. In the neighborhood there is an official governance structure, which is known as the ward administration. The senior most position in the structure is the ward administrator, and below them in the governance hierarchy are positions termed as 100-household



elders and 10-household elders. These titles indicate that a representative is selected for every 10 and 100 households, irrespective of the actual number of households that they oversee, which varies between each village tract or ward.

### Availability of Social Services

Most of the poor residents depend on private water suppliers who invest in building tube-wells and sell barrels of water for K 200 (approximately \$0.20 USD). Although there are several water-supply spots across the neighborhood, most respondents said the quality of water available at the corner of Kan-na Street and Yurma Street is the best in the area, so the majority of poor residents in the neighborhood depend on the supplier. The same is true of the availability of electricity. Concerning the street lamp-posts and power lines long-neglected by the relevant public department, the community's members raised funds to bribe government workers in the electricity department into connecting the street power lines to the public electricity grid - otherwise it is not possible for deprived sections of the neighborhood to have light at night. But there are still many poor residents who cannot afford the installation and recurring fees for the electricity meter that measures the amount consumed by the household. These people rely on candlelight and use light coming in from the street at night.

**Figure 3** Push-carts carrying barrels at a private water-supply spot



**Figure 4** Power cables in the alley of an impoverished section



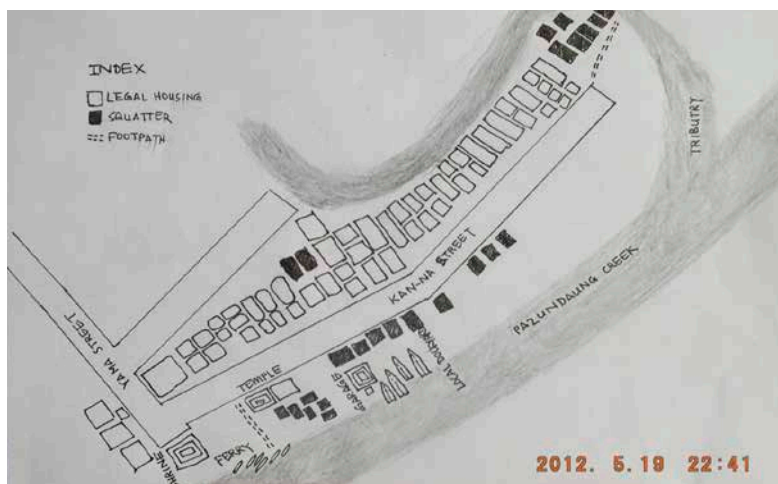
Other public services that would generally be provided by the city municipal committee are not available. Without sewage systems, the houses build poorly constructed toilets over shallow pits, which lack appropriate flooring and walling. In the absence of drainage systems, foul stench comes through the wide gaps between the component units of the flooring, as pieces of wet garbage underneath vaporize in the daytime hours.

### **Kan-na Lann: Example from a Poor Residential Area in the Township**

Among the sections is Kan-na Lann, which is home to the poorest households in the area, according to most of the respondents. *Kan-na* means next to the embankment, and *Lann* means street in English. The section stretches along the bank of the Pazundaung Creek. A short concrete road – an output of the financial contribution made by the (military-backed) Union Solidarity Development Party before the 2011 national elections – runs as a sole piece of public infrastructure down the middle. On either side of the newly built street are residential areas, and those squatters without land title use a long stretch of land between the creek and the street. In the monsoon season, their houses are occasionally inundated with high tides overflowing from the nearby creek running parallel to the slum. Those who have been granted land title occupy the other side of the street. Apart from the

residential area, there are two religious buildings in this section. A South Indian-styled single-story Hindu temple is located at the corner of Kan-na Street and Yurma Street. Beside the temple is the Buddhist shrine of *Shin Upago Yahanda*<sup>3</sup>. Between these religious structures is a footpath leading to the Kala Sate ferry, where a group of sampans are docked to wait for passengers and freight.

**Figure 5** Map of Kan-na Lann section (author drawing)



Despite being just outside downtown Rangoon, the dwellings of some sections in the neighborhood are really poor. The houses are constructed with old, cheap and low quality materials, including rusted corrugated zinc sheets, old and decaying wood, ragged tarpaulin and bamboo matting. As the houses are built very close together, the overall impression of the settlements for a person initially visiting is likely to be that there is no demarcating line between them. For example, within one 25x50 foot plot of land, there are 5 houses built in the space where a 97-year-old man allows the families of his children to live with him. Inside the settlement there are narrow wet footpaths, occasionally facilitated by low wooden bridges, and bricks that are used as stepping-stones leading in several directions in a labyrinth-like manner.

3 It is widely believed among Buddhists that *Upago Yahanda* is a monk who entered into the current of perfection, and after death attained the dreamful joy of *Ne'ban* - the cessation of existence.

**Figure 6** Houses built along Kan-na Street



**Figure 7** Houses inhabited by squatters in Kan-na Street





**Figure 8** Squatters' houses by the footpath near *Kala Sate* ferry



In fact, the section is a settlement made up of fifteen plots of land officially allotted for fifteen squatter families when the government land allotment project was carried out in the late 1980s - the postage numbers in the settlement ranges from 348 to 362. But the layout has gradually changed into the existing settlement pattern as more dwellings have been constructed. When the resettlement program started in the neighborhood, squatters who did not have any official documents were relocated to Aye Mya Thar-yar village in a far-flung part of northern Rangoon. Landholding families with larger holdings, who possessed household census registration, were announced as eligible for the granting of 25x50-foot allotments, while smallholders were granted 12 ½ x 50-foot allotments under the program. While implementing it, staff from the office of Human Settlement and Housing Development carried out land surveying in the slum area, and erected small flags hoisted atop bamboo on the dilapidated houses in which poor families were still living. After drawing lots for allotment in the presence of local authorities, families dismantled their houses and moved to the plot chosen by the lot to build their new houses. They all were granted land title following this process.

## **Economic Lives of the Residents**

In the neighborhood, there are some residents who work as government employees, but the majority earns their living in the informal sector on a casual basis. The police station and the Dawbon dockyard are located in the neighborhood and are among the largest public institutions situated in the township, with a sizeable population of the area's residents living in their premises. The police station has a township level apparatus of 77 members, meaning the population of workers and their family members is greater than any other section in the township. The dockyard also employs more than 200 workers, though this number has been reduced from more than a thousand workers previously. A 70-year-old resident, who worked as a foreman at the dockyard during the successive eras of the Revolutionary Council and the Burmese Socialist Programme Party, said his welding department alone once had more than 60 workers. He remembers times when the dockyard operated with sufficient stocks of materials for operation. When stock has diminished over the subsequent years, it has not been refilled with enough supply of materials to continue operating at the same level. The dockyard is now only capable of dismantling damaged ships, instead of repairing and building them, meaning the labor force was cut to its present day functioning capacity.

Apart from the police station and the dockyard, there are no economically productive enterprises, either government or private, that are able to employ large numbers of local people. People of working age who must support themselves and their families depend upon different markets and industries in their neighborhood and around the township, where they can exchange their labor, services and goods for money.

As mentioned above, the poor dwellers in the neighborhood are low-income earners who are mostly engaged in the informal sector. The majority of them are working as sampan drivers, collectors of garbage, firewood and scrap-iron, shopkeepers, street vendors, laundresses, hairdressers, fishermen and stevedores. For almost all these people, their sources of income are likely to be insecure since they rely on work on a casual basis, meaning their level of income fluctuates. Through interviews with the local

people, it can be assumed that they earn on average, around K 2,000 a day. The ability to have regular meals is not taken for granted among for some poor families; with them regularly uncertain whether the breadwinner will return with sufficient wages to put food on the table. A housewife said that her family waits for her 78-year-old husband, who works as sampan driver, to return to buy rice for the family's dinner.

Some residents who are relatively better off in the neighborhood are moneylenders, who receive daily interest from small loan repayments. Some residents are merchants who bid in auctions for worn-out ironware, and sell them on to melting enterprises. Others buy houses that are going to be demolished for new construction, and then tactically dismantle them for building materials such as wood, iron and bricks, and sell them at a profit. There are also residents who work as real estate brokers for developers who seek to negotiate land with other land owning residents for the construction of apartment buildings. They operate on the legal terms that they are mutually entitled to half the number of apartments after construction is completed.

However, most residents are engaged in several livelihood activities, because their earnings barely cover daily expenses, so they are not dependent on a single source of income. Robert Chambers (1995) likens the livelihood strategies of the poor as those of a fox with ways of finding different sources of support, unlike those of a hedgehog with a single big idea for a single source of living. With complex and diverse ideas, poor people diversify their livelihood activities in order to increase their income as long as opportunities favor them. A poor woman sells small bundles of firewood as a main source of income, after procuring them from boys who collect floating branches in the nearby creek from dismantled and damaged boats. At the same time, in order to manage the risk of poor business, she keeps open a separate livelihood channel by doing laundry in the neighborhood on a sporadic basis to ensure she can cover her regular family expenses. As another example, a 38-year-old sampan driver raises pigs and piglets in the backyard while his wife sells fish in the nearby market. A 46-year-old woman sells yoghurt around the neighborhood, and also supports her family with the sale of

Burmese salad in front of her house when the supply of yoghurt is not available from her wholesaler. Seven months after initially interviewing her, it was learned that the respondent also works as a cook for a massage parlor. In some cases, body parts are counted as a category of asset. A widow from the same section sold a foot-long section of her hair for three thousand kyats, in order to secure a day of living costs for her family.

In addition to these complex and diverse ways in which poor people diversify their livelihood activities, in order to increase their income, some households have single, female heads that are breadwinners. They have unfavorable household compositions in which most of their members are not ready to enter the labor market. In some cases, older people are forced look after grandchildren whose parents have divorced and remarried. While encouraging her two grandchildren to live together with her, a 70-year-old breadwinner, who sells junk food in front of her house, remarked to them “Only when I die will you starve.”

These poor residents are not able to save money for the future or for emergencies. Therefore, they have to rely on moneylenders when a family member is sick and the cost of medical treatment and consultation fees at private clinics and public hospitals are beyond their financial capacity. A 38-year-old fishmonger remarked that repaying four hundred thousand kyats had taken her family several years after her son underwent an operation to remove gallstones from his bladder. In addition, poor dwellers ask moneylenders for loans for investment to start small-scale businesses. As time goes by, they face growing debts as they struggle to cover their minimum household consumption and also suffer from the accumulation of credit sales from poor fellow residents. In order to keep financing the business, they approach other moneylenders before completely repaying the previous one. Since most of them are trying hard to address the immediate issue of feeding the family, they don't have time to imagine life without savings when income earners cannot support the family any longer.



## Accessing Livelihoods through other Townships

In earning a living, the livelihoods of most residents is extended to other townships by exchanging their labor, services and merchantable goods for income. For example, the poor boys in the neighborhood support their families by collecting plastic floating down the creek and sorting it with other recyclable materials such as metal, glass and paper from the waste bins. They then carry the collection with them to the downtown areas where it can be sold to recycling centers for extra income. Some poor men leave home early in the morning and wander from street to street in downtown Rangoon, shouting at the top of their voice attempting to sell recyclable material. The profession is generally seen in society as something done by people of Indian ancestry.

Some men who do not have enough capital to set up even a small business, but do have particular skills, work for enterprises in the old iron trade. After evaluating how much profit can be made at the market from selling old iron at auctions, garages and building-demolition sites, they act in consultation with businessmen who will make decision to purchase these materials. These businessmen sell the materials to melting factories in the industrial estates of South Dagon and Mawbee townships. Some poor men, alternatively, go fishing with their family members in the nearby waters. With other livelihood assets such as fishing nets and bamboo poles, they usually paddle the boat along the section of the *Pazundaung* Creek that runs parallel to the neighborhood. They also fish in the part of the larger Rangoon River that joins the creek, and sometimes travel far downstream to the confluence of the rivers to look for a potentially more lucrative site. When they get back home, their wives take the haul of fish to the markets in the nearby townships to sell. An old ex-soldier, who has lived in *Kan-na Lann* section as a squatter for nearly two decades, was glad to say he “had been able to keep sending all of my kids to school up to matriculation grade”.

Most women living in the poor sections of the neighborhood work as daytime-housemaids in Mingalar Taung Nyunt and Tamwe townships. Tamil women predominantly do this job. A 54-year-old Tamil man said “Tamil women from about 80 out of every 100

houses in the neighborhood work as housemaids cleaning houses and kitchen utensils, and washing and ironing clothes in people's homes". He continued, "They have to go out for work since the husband's income is not enough to afford household expenses". Every morning, they make themselves available at particular teashops in *Yae Kyaw* in **Pazundaung township**, and *Kyut Maung* in Tamwe township. The housewives who want their services come to the teashops and take them home. Since this wage labor market is accessed through social relations, someone who wants to enter the informal labor market can come along with their neighbor when they go to look for work in the morning. Some earn wages from a single house on monthly basis, while others work for different houses in several shifts a day.

### **The Hindu Community**

According to the local administration office, there are 790 houses that are inhabited by 1,300 households in the neighborhood. The population accounts for 7490 people made up of 3590 males and 3900 females. Although its dwellers have different social and ethnic backgrounds, an ethnic group called Tamil is the second largest population, totaling over 2,000. Another ethnic group, referred to as Bengalis, also resides in the settlement. They all are adherents of Hinduism, which generally includes Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism, among numerous other traditions.

The households of the Hindu community are quite widely distributed across the ward, but a sizable number of its members live along *Yurma* street. These Indian people are called in *Ka-la* in Burmese, which is a term generally used to refer to dark skinned people from India. As Burma was part of British India prior to independence, a steady stream of Indians moved to the country as a supply of both professionals and manual laborers (Thant Myint-U 2011). In the early twentieth century, when Burma was required to meet the need for cheap laborers and professionals for its economic development, the population of indigenous Burmese in Rangoon was actually dwarfed by the influx of Indian immigrants – which includes Bengalis, Gujarati, Sikhs, Tamils and other Indian ethnic groups.

Although these Burmese Indians are from an array of ethnic backgrounds and religious practices, the clerk of the ward administration office said they are officially categorized as Tamil. They are the second largest population in the neighborhood. Due to a long-standing relationship with Burmese society for many years, they all are able to communicate in Burmese well, and in the neighborhood they are able to elect ten and one hundred household elders from their ethnic and religious group as their representatives at the local administration office. They live peacefully with the majority Burmese as law-abiding residents.

The majority of the Indians hold a particular identity card issued by the township immigration office. The citizenship identity card that Burmese hold is red, with the acronym of the township in which the holder resides. This is followed by a bracket for a single word (*Naing*), which stands for *Naing-ngan-thar*, the Burmese word for citizen. However, Indians were granted a green card upon which the word *Pyu* is inscribed in the bracket. This is short form of *Pyu-lote-sell* – the Burmese word for something being in process. This card essentially recognizes its holder as just one step from being fully recognized as a Burmese citizen. On the green card, their ethnicity is described as the more generic “Indian”, without specifically mentioning ethnic groups such as Tamil, Bangladeshi, Gujarati. A 55-year-old Tamil woman said how they were consoled by the immigration officer when they went to the immigration office to collect the issued cards two years ago: “The officer said it is the same as the red one, apart from its color”. A 52-year old man with Indian ancestry said: “We avoid making any complaints about the situation as there are no difficulties in using it as document when travelling” (this is a necessary requirement when moving within Myanmar).



# 3

## COMMUNAL FESTIVALS AND EVENTS

In general, it can be argued that community-based festivals and events reflect the values, interests and aspirations of the residents concerned. They play an active role in supporting and promoting the identity of the community as a whole. In the neighborhood studied, there are a significant number of community festivals and events, such as the *Neiban-zay* festival, the immersing of bean sprouts, Buddhist novitation and ordination ceremonies, sword-ladder climbing festival and health-care provision for elderly people. These activities are driven by religious and cultural beliefs and practices, as a means of merit making and petitioning a higher power, especially worshipping deities or asking them for help. But these community-based celebrations yield a number of social benefits. A sense of community pride which is less visible, but nonetheless important, is fostered through the celebrations of community festivals and events. In addition, relationships within the community are strengthened. Relationship building occurs in the event planning phases, and bonds and connections between public offices and neighborhood groups are constructed throughout the entire process of celebrating an occasion.

### ***Neiban-zay* Festival**

The neighborhood celebrates *Neiban-zay* festival on the last night of the *Tazaungdaing* Festival, which is also known as Buddhist's Lighting Festival, and is usually held on the full moon day of the eighth month of the Burmese calendar. The festival involves the

free offering of household goods, utensils, food and foodstuffs and anything donors wish to give. Such alms giving and charity is also undertaken alongside the holding of the lighting festival as a means of merit making. At night, every house and street is lit-up by candles and electric lights as a way of offering them to the Lord Buddha. Both rich and poor people who are generous in alms giving have erected stalls to be used as donation centers at the front of their houses. Although it is a Buddhist festival, Hindu neighbors participate in and donate goods just as Buddhists do.

**Figure 9** A queue of poor dwellers at a donation center



At the event, every street in the neighborhood was crowded with people and music blares out from big sound boxes placed outside different houses. Amidst the intense noise were people wearing friendly smiles on their faces, and both Buddhists and non-Buddhists were participating in the joyful celebrations. At some relatively big donation centers, there were long queues in which the dwellers were standing to draw lots. Indeed, there were no blank tickets, and in the raffle everyone was given the chance to win items such as baskets, *longyis*, glasses, clothes-hangers, packages of charcoal, husked rice, dried noodles and fried noodles, bottles of cooking oil, frying pans and bowls.

**Figure 10** A poor Indian woman with food to give away at the festival



Even in *Kan-na Lann* – the small and poorest section of the neighborhood – there were seven donation centers. In the festival poor people can be donors too, and express piety in a small way. The donors were pleased with their pious acts and the joyful participation of their fellow residents, and some poor participants benefited from the donation. A 65-year-old widow said the foodstuff freely available at the *Neiban-zay* forms the main part of her household's diet for a few days. A 58-year-old relatively rich Buddhist donor, who runs a grocery business in a deprived part of the neighborhood, expressed that it was a good place to give away anything. As the majority of people in the neighborhood are poor, they said that donors immediately feel the grateful response by poor people to their acts of charity. While people try their luck in the donation pavilions, some relatively better-off families are preparing for a midnight feast in open space, which their poorer fellow residents will enjoy.

**Figure 11** Neighbors help clearing and cleaning household goods after the festival



The festival creates a sense of togetherness and communal belonging, through which camaraderie is constructed among the residents. For example, the neighborhood has no shortage of labor contributions and other forms of support for each other in these ceremonial occasions, and even in emergency cases. Despite being poor, they are readily involved in neighbors' experiences of joy and sorrow. With regards to the voluntary contribution of labor by poor neighbors to these special occasions, a 56-year-old housewife said her family has never been burdened with tasks. Whenever feasts or other forms of donations are arranged she could "leave a great deal of work for neighbors to help with". One household elder also said "if someone is in a traffic accident, there will be a flurry of activity as poor residents quickly rush to the scene, and you will find yourself being at the hospital without even asking anyone for help".

### **Buddhist Novitation and Ordination Ceremonies in the Neighborhood**

Some relatively better-off families seek merit through celebrating the Buddhist baptism of their children in the neighborhood. Entry into the monastic order is the most important event in the life of Buddhists. They believe that one can "hope to find the way in the



abandonment of the world to eventual deliverance from the misery of ever-recurring existence” (Shway Yoe 1963: p.22). Buddhist parents hold a ceremony where their sons are sent to the monastery around the age of twelve. The boys wear a yellow robe denoting them as *ko-yin*, meaning novice, while adult sons wear the robe of *pyin-sin*, meaning monk. It is believed that these sons will gain a glorious life by performing good work at the monastery for a certain period of time, as they are subjected to the rigid discipline of the religious order. From the Buddhist parent’s perspective, it is a way of accumulating merit for their next existence. An 80-year-old poor housewife living in *Kan-na Lann* section said that she wants to hold a ceremony for her grandsons to enter the monastic order before she dies.

In some cases, poor Buddhist parents arrange to hold such religious ceremonies for their children. In some cases, they also sponsor the event for others who are relatively worse-off. Therefore, even poor people in the neighborhood have the chance to enter the Buddhist order as monks and novices at the expense of the better-off relatives, friends and neighbors who can afford to hold their own religious celebrations. A man who repairs damaged electronics at a second-hand market had saved a thousand kyats per day to contribute to a group where each member saved the same amount of money. They drew lots to find a winning a ticket number for their turn to withdraw the collective savings. After his turn to collect the savings, he realized his “strong desire” by holding a religious ceremony for his two sons and his nephew last April. He said he “felt delighted” at the success of celebrating the religious event because “it had been imagined for a long time.”

A 38-year-old sampan driver also held a same religious celebration in the same month in the neighborhood. Three boys – his son, nephew, and the son of his friend – and 2 men – his brother-in-law and his friend – entered into the monastic order as novices and monks respectively. He said, “I experienced so much joy in celebrating the ceremony”. His friend, a 56-year-old sampan driver who was invited to join the event as monk, said he was pleased to have a chance to fulfill the wishes of his mother who wanted him to wear a yellow robe as the eldest in the family. In expressing the experience of his monkhood, he also said how peaceful and

tranquil the period at the monastery was, as he had felt free from worldly affairs. The relationship between the sponsors of the celebration and the beneficiaries is not necessarily reciprocal. Nothing binds the beneficiaries to the sponsorship they receive. Regarding this sort of relationship in the celebratory context, Sen (2009: p. 33) argues that “our own well-reflected goals” lead to us crossing “the narrow boundaries of exclusive self-seeking together”.

**Figure 12** A novitiation and ordination procession is arranged in the poor settlement



On the day of procession, men are dressed in their finest clothes, while boys wear special clothes for the event and are showered with as much jewelry as the family could borrow for the occasion. Shaded by golden umbrellas, they mount trishaws to go to the monastery - they cannot afford the richly decorated automobile that wealthy families use in celebration. A band plays music, while friends, relatives and neighbors support them in the procession. The significance of this occasion is noted by Shway Yoe (1963 p. 331) who says that “the greatest amount of pleasure and publicity is accrued to the donors”, in describing a Buddhist religious procession.

## The Immersing of Bean Sprouts

In observing this occasion, Hindu devotees carried pots growing long bean sprouts to the creek, and emptied them into the water as an offering. It appears to resemble the practice in Jammu, India, where Hindus carry barley saplings as offerings to the River Tawi during the “*Navratri*” festival, which literally means Nine Nights in Sanskrit. This year the annual offering of bean sprouts to the goddess *Kali* was held on 3<sup>rd</sup> April in the neighborhood, as part of a ten day celebration of the 99<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Kan-na Lann* temple. Located at the corner of *Kan-na* street and *Yurma* street, the temple is the biggest among four in the neighborhood. According to a 42-year-old Tamil elder who looks after the temple, it is well known among not only Hindus, but also Buddhists, for answering prayers. He also noted that people from surrounding towns such as Bago, Thanlyin, Hlaing Thar Yar and Dagon Myothit often make pilgrimages to the temple.

**Figure 13** The procession of emptying pots of growing bean sprouts into the water



There were 108 pots of growing bean sprouts offered to the goddess *Kali*. Those who wanted to participate in the ritual activities had to first draw lots at the temple to receive a pot number. The person who won the number one pot was the first to

go down to the nearby *Pazundaung* creek to empty the pot, while number 108 was the last to perform the ritual. The Hindu devotees largely believe that the condition of the bean sprouts in the pot which people win gives an omen of one's wellbeing. The temple elder said each person has their own interpretation of the condition of the bean sprouts, and how it relates to one's marriage, health and wealth. The Hindu devotees, including both men and women seeking to offer to *Kali*, stood in a long queue on *Yurma* Street. When their turn arrived, they carried pots on their head and shoulders all the way to the *Pazundaung* creek, into which they emptied the pots of bean sprouts. A big crowd gathered on both sides of the footpath to witness the ritual.

The devotees participate in the religious celebration largely for spiritual reasons. Carrying out a meritorious deed is largely believed to bring prosperity, health and protection from the goddess. In preparation for the event, the temple elder said that Hindu devotees fasted for about 10 days. In explaining his understanding of fasting before and during the period of the celebration, a 45-year-old Hindu said prayers have a greater potential to be answered when they are accompanied with a vow to fast. A 54-year-old Buddhist woman said that some devotees pray for good fortune in return for providing offerings to the goddess, while others do so to keep their promise of carrying bean sprouts for the rest of their life after they feel their prayers are being answered by the goddess. A 54-year-old Hindu said the bean sprouts offering ceremony is held every year in the belief that the whole neighborhood community will be free from any danger.

### **Sword-ladder Climbing Festival**

Eleven long swords with sharp blades are used as ladder rungs in this festival. Attached to the lower part of the sword ladder is a protruding structure built as a base to support it. The structure is also made of swords in the section where it can be used as a platform for the climber to walk and lie on as part of their performance. A half naked Indian man climbed up the ladder. The man in his mid-forties wore short trousers and strings of beads around his neck and ankles, with white, red and yellow lace scarves

tied around his waist. He is widely known as having practiced vegetarianism, confined himself to the temple's area and restrained himself from sexual relations during the period of the ritual. The performer treaded on each razor-sharp rung, with the blades of the swords falling off as the ladder was climbed.

The audience was thrilled by the performance and wondered of the powers granted to the performer by the Hindu gods. The climber reached top with a pair of tridents, which is a symbol of the Hindu deity Shiva, who holds this weapon in his right lower arm. He also carried seven colored Buddhist religious flags, a representation of the halo of rays that emanate from the Lord Buddha when he attains enlightenment. He then sits on the last razor-sharp rung and accepts a big round of applause from the huge audience, the majority of whom are Burmese Buddhists. From the top of the ladder he threw flowers and leaves into the crowd, with people keeping them as an amulet of luck and prosperity.

**Figure 14** The audience receives flowers and leaves thrown by the Hindu performer



While climbing down the ladder, the performer thrusts his body through the blades of the swords all the way down, in a manner likened to a tailor threading a needle. Then he sets foot on the protruding structure, walking on the blades of the swords and reclining on them as the last part of his performance. Religious



ceremonies of the Hindu community are always closely connected to Buddhists living in the same settlement, in terms of their participation and assistance contributed to them. A significant number of Buddhist residents are found in these ritual events, and they often make cash and in-kind contributions to the ceremonies held by the Hindu community.

**Figure 15** List of donors for the 99th anniversary of the local Hindu temple

The image shows a printed list of donors for the 99th anniversary of a local Hindu temple. The list is written in Burmese and includes names, addresses, and donation amounts. It is organized into columns and includes decorative elements at the top and bottom. The list is as follows:

Donor Name	Address	Donation Amount
1. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
2. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
3. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
4. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
5. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
6. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
7. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
8. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
9. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
10. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
11. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
12. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
13. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
14. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
15. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
16. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
17. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
18. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
19. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
20. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
21. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
22. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
23. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
24. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
25. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
26. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
27. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
28. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
29. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
30. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
31. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
32. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
33. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
34. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
35. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
36. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
37. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
38. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...
39. ဦးကျော်စိုး	...	...
40. ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်း	...	...

The image above is the back of the invitation letter on which the names of the donor families are described. Out of 114 donor families, there are 40 Burmese Buddhist families. However, the real number of Buddhist donors could be expected to be more than that because the invitation letter was distributed among the residents at the same time as the process of collecting donations from people was being undergone in the neighborhood. The same is true of Buddhist religious and cultural events, which fellow Hindu residents participate in. The clerk of the local administration office said: “they donate money to Buddhist robe-offering ceremonies and give helpful accompaniment to the procession of *Paday-thabins* – tree-shaped stands where various articles of offering are hung – to the monasteries”. The clerk also noted that

“Some Hindus who have the trust of the residents are invited as local elders to the meeting, where the fund-raising for the building of the pagoda in the neighborhood is discussed, and tasks are assigned to Hindu attendants”.

In planning the ceremonies, the board of trustees at the local Hindu temple enhanced its capacity by forming an implementing committee, made up of both Hindus and Buddhists, in order to manage the event efficiently. About one month before each celebration, trustees held meetings with the implementing committee at the temple several times to discuss the plan for the ceremony, and tasks were distributed among the attendees. For example, some people took responsibility for securing permission to hold the celebration from the different public offices, including the police station, the religious affairs department and general administration departments at different levels. If a religious procession is included in the celebration, they have to coordinate with the relevant authorities that administer the areas in which the temple procession will take place.

The township administration office of Dawbon allowed the temple's ritual celebration, including the procession, and took security measures to prevent possible communal clashes on the day. Although they are Hindu devotees, holding these religious processions across the neighborhood is likely to increase the risks of communal violence, which is viewed as a security concern. A notice board is placed against the front wall of the temple to announce to the community about the ceremony. Some trustee members go from house to house inviting Buddhist and Hindu families to the ceremony and collecting their donations. As the feast is always associated with Hindu religious celebration, people gather at the temple to contribute their labor by way of cooking, preparing and serving food to the people.

### **Ceremony to Pay Respect to the Elderly**

The neighborhood holds a ceremony to pay respect to elderly people once a year. It is celebrated on New Year's Day in the Burmese calendar. Burmese society considers the event to represent one of

their most auspicious acts for the year. Elderly people who will receive obeisance from junior residents are selected by the neighborhood on the basis of age, regardless of their ethnicity and religion. The main element of the event is to present each elderly person with a gift, which can be in cash or in-kind.

Every year 115 senior residents who are 75-years-old and above, are invited to receive the respect of younger people in the neighborhood. In this instance, the ward administrator took the lead of organizing the ceremony, in close coordination with household elders and other young volunteers in the neighborhood. Each household elder invited eligible candidates in their relevant constituency, and rose the funding necessary for the ceremony. A 78-year-old senior resident, who was attending the ceremony for the third time, said he was “pleased” to attend the auspicious event and expressed his wishes for the wellbeing of junior residents in the neighborhood. He also said that the gift was very “helpful” for his family. If individual well wishers want to pay their respects to elderly people and provide cash assistance for them, they purposely select or request household elders who do not have children to support them, or who are part of a very poor family. Those participating in these meritorious deeds do not discriminate against those who have a different ethnicity and practice a different religion.

### **Wednesday Healthcare Provision for Elderly People**

The community event is aimed at providing the elderly with healthcare and a supportive social environment, through which they can keep themselves active with the opportunities to socialize and reduce their feelings of loneliness. The local administration office took the initiative by supporting community members operating the program. At the community meeting, the township administrator encouraged all the heads of local administration offices in Dawbon Township to set up community-based care in their respective areas for senior citizens. Every Wednesday, a group of the local volunteers organize the gathering of elderly persons in the neighborhood at the religious building on *Myo Ma* street. The local administrator of *Yamon-nar Neit* ward said, “I am delighted when I see old people talking cheerfully to each other”.



**Figure 16:** A volunteer nurse takes a patient's blood pressure while old people socialize



People aged 75 and above are eligible to receive healthcare, regardless of their ethnicity or religion. About 100 out of 120 eligible people residing in the neighborhood are generally able to attend the regular gathering. At about eight o'clock every Wednesday morning, they arrive, one after another, at the local religious building and sit at the low, round tables in the hall. Breakfast is provided for them, and a volunteer goes around returning regularly kept medical records to the relevant people, before the nurse takes the patient's blood pressure and provides consultation to everyone present. Before the event concludes around 10 o'clock, attendees are given packages of dried noodles, various tonics and indigenous medicines. An 85-year-old ex-sailor who regularly visits the venue said, "The program gives us physical and mental wellbeing. But I am afraid it will be short-lived". In addition, home visitations are provided by local volunteers, for those who are not able to visit the regular event. The program is intended to increase feelings of self-worth and positive attitudes among the elderly. Twenty people in the neighborhood voluntarily work for the program.

Despite being led by the local administration office, funds for the healthcare provision are solely raised through the contributions of local people. There are groups of donors collectively contributing to the program's activities on rotation. Five donors each week are responsible for providing breakfast for the elderly at each

Wednesday gathering, with each donor called upon to assist every three months. In addition, another group of two donors finance the expenses of gifts for the elderly people, with each donor called upon every two months. A 42-year-old volunteer said, “More people want to join the program by providing cash and in-kind support when they come to see how beneficial it is to the older people, and the amazing collective contributions being made. The size of the donor group is growing”.

# 4

## COMMUNITY COHESION

The term “community cohesion” has recently become increasingly popular in public policy debates (Home Office 2001), and is linked to broader concepts such as inclusion and exclusion, social capital and differentiation, community and neighborhood. It is therefore a likely focal point for the formulation of policies and initiatives aimed at reducing social exclusion. In differentiating between cohesion and integration, the report of the Commission on Integration and Cohesion argues; “Cohesion is principally the process that must happen in all communities to ensure different groups of people get on well together” (2007, p.9).

But as it is also possible that different social and ethnic groups can inhabit different social and cultural worlds, with some communities marginalized from the mainstream, there are naturally concerns about residential segregation in particular areas. A study of residents in Moss Side in Manchester, and North Tottenham in the London Borough of Haringey, provides what the local policymakers and service providers in these two areas define as community (social) cohesion - “the presence of ‘harmonious’ relations between different communities – defined by culture, ethnicity or religion – living together in an area” (Hudson, Phillips, Ray and Barnes, 2007, p.91).

In the previous chapter, festivals and communal events are discussed as providing a forum for a shared purpose to be manifested in the neighborhood, where people with different social, religious and ethnic backgrounds live together. This experience provides a view of community as system of support, providing positive interactions

among people with different interests and backgrounds. A sense of community is “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan, 1976 quoted in McMillan and Chavis, 1986, p.9). In the studied neighborhood, there is a rich sense of belonging and vision-sharing, where the purpose, ideas and contributions of neighbors and other religious groups are valued. Community issues are addressed collectively, and all people in the different events encourage participation.

Indeed, the community serves a vital role in terms of providing camaraderie and acting as a support system. As most residents in the community are poor, they may have busy schedules and frequently shift from one job to another in order to secure their survival in the informal sector. This constant insecurity is likely to make it harder for them to feel any sense of community. But along with a sense of community pride, relationships in the community take different forms through organizing, attending and participating in communal festivals and events. In addition, meeting neighbors, enjoying togetherness and contributing what they can to support their fellow residents enhances the sense of community among people across the neighborhood.

**Figure 17** Poor residents socializing with neighbors



**Figure 18** Children playing together in the street



**Figure 19** A street feast offered by a wealthier family



People in the neighborhood spend a lot of their time socializing with fellow residents, chatting, gossiping and engaging in different activities. The opportunity to engage in these social activities presents itself not only on the street but also in the vacant places around religious buildings and in teashops. By placing plastic chairs in the street, residents regularly discuss community affairs with their neighbors, and sometimes entertain people who visit them. For the children, the street is something of a playground, while street vendors chat with residents while they go about their work. In the evening, the young people play *chinlon*, also known as caneball,

next to religious buildings. The poor residents are bound together through these forms of social interactions. Practicing this traditional way of life, as a form of communal living, ties people together and serves as a platform for social cohesion.

However, one could argue that the Indian community may be marginalized from the mainstream population in the neighborhood because they are issued second-class citizenship cards. It remains unclear when, if at all, they will be granted full citizenship cards. Whether they are still required to fulfill something necessary for the citizenship application process, and whether the immigration department will scrutinize their applications for citizenship before issuing them red colored citizenship cards is unknown. However, recent experience suggests that in many ways they are not excluded from the political community. The Indian community of eligible age was all enfranchised in the national elections held in 2010. A small number of people with ancestry in the neighborhood possess the red card, just as Burmese do. The difference between those who have the red card, and those who do not, is generally an administrative decision made by the relevant township immigration office.

Freedom of religion is enjoyed widely at the community level. Local Hindu temples located across the ward often organize their ceremonies of worship and religious processions with the approval of the local authorities. This particular ethnic minority doesn't have to adjust or conform to the mainstream Buddhist population, nor do they forgo their distinctive cultures and traditions for the sake of togetherness in the neighborhood. The religious ceremonies of the Hindu community are always connected with Buddhists living in the same neighborhood, in terms of participating in the event and contributing assistance. A significant number of Buddhists are found enjoying Hindu religious feasts and ritual performances.

The communal festivals and events taking place in the neighborhood indicate that common aims and objectives are met that respects people's differences, while inter-group cooperation shows the presence of community cohesion. The willingness to assist neighbors, the acknowledgement of social obligations and the high degree of social interaction between the residents brings people together in their daily lives. Both ethnic Hindus and

Buddhists, whether they are rich or poor members of the neighborhood, feel a sense of belonging and togetherness. It is generally found that the diversity of people's different backgrounds, and their different social circumstances, is appreciated and positively valued in the community.





# 5

## CONCLUSION

In the economically deprived neighborhood on the edge of downtown Rangoon, where two dominant ethnic groups, Buddhists and Hindus, live, communal festivals and events operate as a manifestation of communal cohesion. In the congested living quarters, most residents earn their living in the informal sector, often wrestling with insecurity and poverty as part of their everyday existence. As the provision of public services is largely neglected, residents rely on themselves in order to meet their needs independently, and in some cases; they collectively pool their resources to support each other in times of need.

In terms of population, Hindu devotees are the second biggest group, after Buddhists. They are of Indian descent and adherents of Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism. Despite the fact that members of the community are widely distributed across the ward, a sizable number of its population is situated along Yurma Street. With the exception of being granted a green identification card by the local immigration office, as an administrative tool to distinguish from the majority Buddhist community, they live peacefully as law-abiding residents and are able to elect hundred household elders to represent their voice at the local administration office. Like their fellow Buddhist neighbors, most Hindus receive low and irregular income from the informal sector, which barely covers their daily expenses.

Both religious groups hold a number of community festivals and events, and participate in them as a means of merit-making and

worship towards a higher power. These community-based celebrations yield a number of social benefits and operate as a manifestation of communal cohesion. In terms of gaining social benefits, they play an active role in supporting and promoting a sense of belonging, and forming the identity of the community as a whole. Regarding this evidence of social cohesion, it can be firmly said that positive relationships are ever-present. Bonds and connections among residents of different religious and ethnic groups, and between public offices and neighborhood groups, are fostered through the process of organizing and celebrating these community events.

Reflecting the values, interests and aspirations of the residents, communal festivals and events show that the residents get on well together in both the preparation and celebration of these events. Without inhabiting different social and cultural arenas, all residents are found to be building harmonious relationships and seeking to avoid social and ethnic marginalization. In a neighborhood where the majority of residents are poor, they are rich in achieving a sense of belonging. The paper also discovered from the observation of these festivals and events that the different ideas, contributions and forms of assistance provided across religious groups are greatly valued in the neighborhood.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# FESTIVALS AND EVENTS AS A MANIFESTATION OF COMMUNITY COHESION

## Buddhist and Hindus Residents in an Impoverished Urban Neighborhood

This paper describes cultural and religious festivals and events in an impoverished urban Yangon mixed-ethnicity neighborhood where Buddhists and Hindus reside together. This community lives in cramped quarters, the residents largely earn their livings in the informal sector, and the provision of public services is largely neglected. In the neighborhood, there is a sizable community of Indian people who are mostly devotees of Hinduism. They are able to perform and participate in their own cultural and religious practices and live peacefully with their Buddhist neighbors. They have representatives in the township administration and space available in the neighborhood—including religious halls and the concrete pavement—which they use for communal activities and everyday practices.

The neighborhood celebrates a number of communal festivals and events from both religious traditions. These include Buddhist events like the *Neiban-zay* festival and novitiation and ordination ceremonies for monks, as well as Hindu events like a sword-ladder climbing festival and *Navratri*. These communal occasions are driven by the religious beliefs and cultural practices of the two dominant faith groups. This paper shows how these occasions bring social benefits to the people, including community pride and the strengthening of relationships among its residents.

The Understanding Myanmar's Development series is an exploration of the transformation taking place in Myanmar on multiple levels: social, economic, and political. In this series, RCSD hopes to realize the dual goals of both building up the body of knowledge on Myanmar and strengthening the research capacity of Burmese scholars in their study of development policy and practice. This volume is just one piece of the puzzle of development practice, as felt by the people and communities of Myanmar.



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