

[Lecture on the Shans]

Rev. Dr. J. N. CUSHING

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The lecture given by Dr. Cushing on the subject of the Shans the other evening, does much to make one realize the extent of the country recently annexed to the British Empire, and the wonderful variety of peoples and races dwelling in it. Of course, everyone who has seen anything of Burma, and paid any attention to its history, knows that it is essentially not the country of the Burmese. The Burmese proper are probably a very small minority in it, though the peoples of other races, Talines, Shans, and some others, have in certain places become so Burmanized that it is difficult to distinguish them from the Burmese. The process has probably been going on for centuries in some degree, and was no doubt greatly accelerated first by the conquests achieved by Alaungpra and his immediate successors, and latterly by the policy of the British who, misled by the fact that the provinces they annexed were wrested from the kings of Burma, took it for granted that the great majority of the people were Burmese, and that Burmese was the language of the country. It will probably never be known exactly how much the British Government has done to make Burmese the language of the country, from the first by making it the language of the Courts, and the language which British officials in Burma must study; and latterly by the educational policy which almost forced every school-boy who came to school to learn English, to learn Burmese as well..

The fuller knowledge we now possess of the country known as Burma, show us that it was very far from being the country of the Burmese, in the sense of being the country peopled exclusively by that race and generally speaking that tongue. It was a country of many races and peoples, speaking many different tongues, and with our present knowledge of those different races the constant wonder is how the Burmese came so much to the surface as they actually did. They do not seem to be naturally more brave, more industrious, more capable of organisation, or more ready to admit to discipline, than such races the Shans, Talines, and Karens. On the contrary, looking at these races as we know them now, both the Shans and Karens at least, seem to have far more those qualities which ought to have brought them to the surface, than the Burmese have, who actually did become the dominant race. To say that the Burmese gained their ascendancy because they had become welded into a nation, while the others were still split up into petty clans and principalities, only throws the difficulty back a stage. The Burmese became welded into a nation because they had got possession of the plains, where the organisation of a kingdom is more easily effected than in mountainous regions where communications are difficult. But then the question naturally arises as to how the race, apparently least endowed with the qualities which contribute to success in the struggle for existence, got and retained possession of the plains, driving their "betters" 'from this point of view, to the hills and to the more inaccessible jungles.

Another curious point raised by the consideration of the condition of Burma as the British found it, is its striking contrast in many ways to India. Both countries had for centuries been the scene of incessant conflict among the petty Kings ruling over parts of them; both countries too had been swept over by wave after wave of invasion from abroad; and in both cases the

invaders, finding a more fertile land than their own mountains fastnesses, were apt to stay. The invasions of India by hordes from the north-west are matters of well known history; and in a similar manner successive hordes from the neighbourhood of China poured into Burma. According to Dr. Cushman the founders of the kingdom of Siam, were probably the last comers, and it can have been no petty irruption of a small fugitive band, which went so far and started that kingdom. But though both India and Burma had been subjected for centuries to very similar conditions before they passed under British control, there were great differences in the results. In India in spite of decimating wars common to both countries, and in spite of fearful famines which are peculiar to India, in great parts of that peninsula the British found a teeming population, while in Burma the country was so scantily populated that the greater part of its had lapsed back into impenetrable jungle. It is difficult to see why perpetual conflict and recurring famines combined, had failed to depopulate India. Probably when Eastern history is more carefully studied than it has yet been, some light may be thrown on these points, but meantime they seem to be inexplicable.