

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-85211-1 - A History of Modern Burma
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Excerpt
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Introduction

This book examines approximately 122 years of Burmese history, from the annexation of Upper Burma by the British at the beginning of January 1886 until the devastation of Cyclone Nargis in 2008. The main reason for writing this book has been to provide the story of modern Burma as the country moved from the era of high colonialism, through the Japanese occupation and the Cold War, to the present. Although it is sometimes claimed that there is a paucity of research on the country, a view no doubt strengthened by very real limitations placed by the current government on access to government archives and even to everyday Burmese people, in reality both Burmese and foreign scholars have persevered. The body of specialized work on the country is huge, diverse, and valuable. Perhaps because of the enormity of the task of bringing this research together, few general histories of modern Burma have emerged since the works of John F. Cady and D. G. E. Hall half a century ago. Thus there is a need for a general history encompassing the colonial and postcolonial periods. Despite government censorship and political suppression, international interest in the country, awakened mainly by the events of 1988, 1990, and 2007 and fed by the work of indefatigable political activists, NGOs, foreign governments, and Burmese political organizations inside and outside the country, has not diminished. This book has been written to provide a general view of the country's experiences, often relating events as they unfolded, for both the nonspecialist audience and for undergraduates who might find the specialized literature too inaccessible to develop what in popular parlance is referred to as "the big picture."

The present history is divided into chapters according to the major phases of the modern Burmese experience. While colonial rule in Burma did not begin in 1886, this year marked the beginning of what is generally understood as "colonial Burma," when the major institutions of colonial rule were in place. Stepping back any further would necessitate a lengthy

diversion into the politics, economy, and society of the Konbaung Dynasty, Burma's last, and its competition with the areas of Burma under British rule that would eventually be welded together into British Burma. This would have expanded the volume to an unwieldy size, and in any case this period has already been more than satisfactorily covered by other histories, some of them very recent. Instead, the first two chapters of the present history focus on the 1886–1937 period, when Burma was a part of British India, a colonial possession within a colonial possession and when Burmese were not only under the British, but also at the bottom of a social hierarchy headed by Europeans and a range of Asian immigrant minorities. During this period, liberation meant not only separation from London but also separation from India. The division of this period into two chapters is intended to address the unique position of Rangoon (present-day Yangon) in the colony both as a foreign city on Burmese soil and in terms of its central position in the narrative of Burmese anti-colonialism and early nationalism. By contrast with the wealth, large colonial buildings, and feisty “big city” politicians of Rangoon, rural Burma was another world, closer to fields, the monastic order, and to Burmese Buddhist traditions. The third chapter, covering the period from 1937 to 1947, was perhaps the most volatile and certainly one with the most serious ramifications for the future political history of the country. Although not completely independent, Burmese were subject to two different kinds of limited self-rule, one British and one Japanese, that attempted to mask very real foreign control. This period might also justifiably be called the “era of Aung San,” for it saw this student leader rise to head an army and then a nation, before he fell to an assassin's bullet shortly before Burma achieved true independence. His death, as much as his life, would remain the focal point of Burmese understandings of the birth of their nation.

The four decades between 1948 and 1988 have been divided into four chapters according to the different regimes that held sway over the country. The main reason for doing so is not to provide an essentially political history, but in recognition of the fact that a succession of different social, economic, and cultural policies accompanied political change, often influenced to a degree by the changing international context or the direction in the tide of a civil war that figured prominently in the concerns of most Burmese. Chapter 4 examines the first democratic period, from 1948 until 1958, which saw a regime fight desperately to preserve itself from powerful political and ethnic insurgencies, in the face of the threat of a spillover of the Cold War across its borders, plagued as well by political infighting and the challenges of erecting a socialist system in the country.

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The consequences, explored in Chapter 5, were the establishment of a military caretaker regime (1958–1960), its more Western-oriented economic policies, and its succession by a new democratic government that compromised on such issues as the separation of church and state and rejected the economic reforms only recently introduced. From 1962 until 1988 Ne Win dominated Burma, in two essentially separate but not easily delineated periods. Chapter 6 examines the first, the military government of the Revolutionary Council, which sought to build a new Burma from scratch eschewing democratic principles and civil liberties in favor of fostering tight national unity. One of Ne Win's underlings, Tin Pe, helped pave the way to economic disaster as he sponsored a Marxist reworking of the economy. A new ideology, intended to give the Revolutionary Council "revolutionary" credentials, provided justification for political, intellectual, and social suppression. This period established the foundations for the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) government years, discussed in Chapter 7, when new constitutional arrangements gave an apparently civilian face to what remained essentially a one-man dictatorship. Nonetheless, Burma's economic problems increased and by the end of the BSPP years, Burma had become one of the least developed of third world nations.

The period from 1988 to the present is divided into two chapters. Revolutionary Council and BSPP rule led to a popular revolution in 1988 and national elections in 1990, this volatile two-year period being the subject of Chapter 8. Dire economic performance, political and intellectual suppression, and outright atrocities against Burmese students and others led to mass protests and violent confrontations with Burmese soldiers and police. Under the weight of domestic opposition and a crumbling economy, Ne Win had run out of ideas and his regime folded. The popular revolution brought to the fore of Burmese politics new leaders, especially Aung San Suu Kyi, and even returned some from a previous era, like U Nu. This revolution was not just about "bread and butter" issues, but also about the desire for genuine recognition of the principles of Burmese nationalism voiced since the days of anti-colonialism, especially for a return of representative, elected government and the return of civil liberties. In a bid to prevent the erosion of their power, the military, influenced or controlled by Ne Win behind the scenes, seized power to buy time to erode popular opposition. Although Aung San Suu Kyi's political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won an overwhelming electoral victory in 1990, the regime stepped back from its promises and refused to transfer power. Chapter 9 examines the two decades that followed. In what might best be referred to as the "politics of delay," the military regime, referring to

itself at first as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and then the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) spent these years attempting to intimidate, remove, and otherwise erode popular support for the NLD. It has simultaneously engaged in a circular series of face changes and constitutional steps apparently designed to prolong its hold on power rather than to make meaningful progress. When and how this period will end remains unpredictable, although the “Saffron Revolution,” in which monks led mass protests against the regime in September 2007, has made it clear that popular hopes for freedom and democracy have not diminished since the Burmese took to the streets in 1988.

While this book is structured according to periods of Burmese history, certain themes transcending these phases dominate its coverage. These include the struggle between civilian politicians bent on representative, democratic rule and those favoring authoritarian rule over the country, whether in the form of British colonialists or indigenous military officers; the political division of the country between essentially lowland Burma and highland Burma, both during the colonial period and the civil war; monastic opposition to state supervision and control; the attempts by Burma’s political leaders, both civilian and military, to separate domestic politics from foreign influence, and the chronic failure to foster economic prosperity. These themes will be brought together in the Conclusion, which will focus on the “rhythm” of modern Burmese history.

CHAPTER I

Burma under colonial rule

A century and a quarter ago, the British annexed the last vestiges of the kingdom of Burma, what had once been mainland Southeast Asia's greatest empire. Burma was carved up by the British in three Anglo-Burmese wars (1824–1826, 1852–1853, and 1885) and for much of the nineteenth century there were two competing Burmas, a shrinking independent state in the north and an expanding colonial entity in the south. While a desperate Burmese court raced to introduce administrative reforms and to modernize with the latest Western technologies, court politics and a poorly developed economy ensured its ultimate defeat.

Colonial rule created much of the “Burma” seen by the outside world today. The extension of the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India into Burma in the late nineteenth century defined Burma's political geography and recorded its topography. Western writers associated in one way or another with the colonial state produced representations of Burmese culture, how Burmese thought, and how they behaved, that have shaped contemporary understandings. It could be suggested that perhaps more foreigners over the years have read George Orwell's *Burmese Days* than any other single publication about the country. D. A. Ahuja who ran a photographic studio in Rangoon in the first quarter of the twentieth century produced by far the most popular series of postcards of Burma, amounting to over 800 “scenes” of Burmese pagodas, architecture, and people. Mailed out to locations throughout the British Empire, the English-speaking world was provided with snapshots of what “typical” Shan, Burman, Kachin, Mon, Karen, and other peoples looked like and how they dressed.

The foreign imagining of Burma had little to do with how Burmese viewed their own country – that is, how Burma was viewed from the inside. For the most part, indigenous chronicles and literature, the local monastery or spirit shrine, the general continuity of precolonial material culture, and a range of other survivors of the British annexation continued to shape daily life and perspectives on the vast rural landscape well into

the twentieth century. The most serious challenges to the continuity of precolonial social and cultural life would occur in the colonial capital at Rangoon, as we shall see in the following chapter. Nonetheless, important changes did occur for rural Burmese with the arrival of colonial rule and these involved mainly administrative and economic transformations.

RURAL ECONOMIC CHANGE

Colonial rule disrupted traditional reciprocal relationships between the landed gentry and the peasants. The basic unit of administration and realm of social life throughout rural Burma was the village. While the precolonial state had exercised tighter administrative control over the country than any of its predecessors, it had touched upon village life only lightly and indirectly. The village headman acted not only as an agent of the state or of the revenue-grantee, but also as a representative or protector of the village community. When harvests were bad, he could work through a chain of patron–client ties to soften the revenue demands for that year. The village headman was responsible for supplying the necessities for village festivals and a range of other communal needs. In return, villagers provided a pool of labor for working his land or for supporting him at times of conflict, whether in cases of contributing men to local contingents required by the throne for war or for more personal conflicts with other powerful men in the local landscape.¹

Economic change connected to the political reconfiguration of Burma from the mid nineteenth century encouraged the initial breakdown of the rural society. The piecemeal annexation of Burma by the British and the economic reforms in Upper Burma together changed the face of rural society in Burma. The eventual emergence of a large rice-exporting economy in Lower Burma after the mid-1850s led to a 600 percent increase in acreage under cultivation in Lower Burma between 1860 and the end of the 1920s, with most of this growth occurring between 1870 and 1910. Moreover, cultivation was intense, leading to a twenty-three-fold increase in the volume of rice cultivated over the course of the same period. The growth of the rice export economy in the south encouraged a massive migration of cultivators from the north into the delta, attracted by growing prosperity. Because of Lower Burma's sparse settlement, there was a yet unexploited rice frontier in the south that could be opened up for rice cultivation by northern settlers. Over the course of the next few decades tens of thousands of villagers packed up their possessions and with their draft animals in tow resettled in the delta.²

SUBMISSION TO THE COLONIAL STATE

For those Burmese who moved south between the 1850s and 1880s and for Burmese who came under British rule after 1885, life under colonial rule meant the loss of the headman as an important mediating buffer between themselves and the state. An even more unfortunate development was the colonial Village Act. Under its terms, all Burmese, except for Buddhist monks, had to *shikho* (a salutation reserved for important elders, monks, and the Buddha) British officers, as a demonstration of their recognition of submission to British mastery. Villagers were required to erect thorn walls around their villages and serve rounds as nightwatchmen. Villagers were also required to provide inter-village transport, as well as food and firewood, on the appearance of colonial military or civil officers. More importantly, the village headman was now an appointee of the government and was transformed into an agent who relied solely on the state for his status, income, and property rights and now owed his responsibilities to the colonial state alone. Villagers were required to attend upon the village headman upon the beat of his gong and to perform whatever service he demanded or be punished with twenty-four hours in stocks. With the end of the protective buffer of the village headman, the rural population also became more vulnerable in times of poor harvests and revenue demands were now marked by their regularity and uniformity rather than their flexibility in response to local and temporary conditions. Moreover, villagers suspected of theft could be imprisoned for a year without trial.³

The colonial authorities expected that they would receive the same obedience from the Burmese as the indigenous court had enjoyed and urged them to retain their “natural traits” of obedience to authority. When Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, visited Mandalay in 1901, he held an audience for chiefs from the southern Shan states, the chief notables of Upper Burma, and other “native gentlemen of Burma.” He did so in the West Throne-room of the former royal palace, seemingly presenting himself in the same position of authority as the old indigenous rulers of the kingdom. After speaking to the Shan chiefs, the first time a Viceroy of India had done so, he turned to the Burman attendees and explained to them (in English, which was then translated into Burmese) that

the British . . . do not . . . wish that the people should lose the characteristics and traditions . . . of their own race . . . The Burmans were celebrated in former times for their sense of respect – respect for parents, respect for elders, respect for teachers, respect for those in authority. No society can exist in a healthy state without

reverence. It is the becoming tribute paid by an inferior to a superior . . . The most loyal subject of the King-Emperor in Burma, the Burman whom I would most like to honour, is not the cleverest mimic of a European, but the man who is truest to all that is most simple, most dutiful, and of best repute in the instincts and the customs of an ancient and attractive people.⁴

Colonial authority was backed by the broad intrusion of foreign institutions and practices that regulated or interfered with rural life to a degree greater than any indigenous, central institution had attempted in the pre-colonial past. The degree to which paper now governed life was astounding. Relationships with local administrators, the resolution of gripes with one's neighbors, the establishment of land titles, the payment of taxes, and a range of other activities now required the completion of a myriad of forms, visits to township or district law courts, and submission to information-gathering by government clerks and investigators on a regular basis and everywhere, customary arrangements gave way to legal ones. Births and deaths now had to be officially registered locally.

The colonial state, through a series of censuses taken in 1872, 1881, and every tenth year thereafter until 1931 demanded information on every aspect of people's lives, from their occupation to their religion, and about every member of the household. The collection of census data was problematic. In many spheres of Burmese life, identities and identifications that were fluid, syncretic, multiple, or even undefined were common. Whether in terms of religion, ethnicity, or culture, it was not unusual for an individual or a group to change their self-identifications in different contexts. "Karens," or rather, "Kayins," for example, might be freely used by writers and others; these terms were vague and masked significant diversity. Colonial administrators and writers differed in their approach as they brought an understanding developed in the West that national, racial, and other identifications had to be essentialized so that they could be incorporated into classificatory schemes for people, following the same approach adopted for the classification of animals and plants. Thus, as one scholar notes, and despite the substantial cultural, linguistic, and religious differences among Karen groups, a Karen identification based on the practices of only one group, that of the Christianized Sgaw Karen, was applied to the Karen in general, in large part because this community had more records than others and because they had been the main subject of missionary reports.⁵ These generalizations would remain current in scholarship well into the twentieth century, with Karens often being referred to as Christians, and many would be surprised when, in the 1990s, Buddhist Karen rebelled against their Baptist leadership.

In keeping with European practices, the colonial census required Burmese to give single, unqualified answers as to their affiliation with a prescribed set of exclusive ethnic categories. Although the Burmese language had generally become the main medium of daily intercourse throughout the Irrawaddy Valley, many who, to foreigners, appeared to be Burmese, dressed like Burmese, and spoke Burmese, would not, in fact, have considered themselves to be Burmese. Likewise, precolonial Burman migration into the Lower Delta was especially intense in the last half of the eighteenth century and there was significant intermarriage between different ethnic groups, so that individuals who could claim ancestry from among the Mon, the Burmans, the Karens, and numerous other ethnic groups were very common in the delta. Given these two situations, one in which non-Burmese might be confused as being Burmese and another in which an individual could claim multiple ethnic origins, problems necessarily ensued when census-takers sometimes asked headmen or others to inform them about the ethnic identity of people in the area or required that interviewees tell them exactly which particular ethnic group they belonged to. Census data collected on religion, ethnicity, language, and a range of other identifications thus presented an artificially rigid, and largely incorrect, picture of rural society and its components.⁶

Especially resented by rural Burmese was the required submission to the colonial medical establishment, particularly when it came to epidemic diseases such as smallpox. The practice of inoculation was common in rural Burma from the late eighteenth century and by the colonial period had emerged as the method of choice in preventing smallpox. Colonial medical authorities, largely dismissing indigenous medicine as quackery, preferred to impose on Burmese society a visually very similar but fundamentally different procedure: vaccination. The actual differences between inoculation and vaccination are largely irrelevant to the present discussion, as regardless of vaccination's eventually demonstrated advantages, the indigenous population preferred to be treated by indigenous inoculators by accepted means rather than submit to foreigners applying an equally foreign method. In the 1920s, the colonial medical establishment, stymied by the continued popularity of inoculators, turned to legislation as a means of enforcing vaccination. In the absence of significant efforts to persuade them on an intellectual basis of the advantages of vaccination, the Burmese were faced with fines and imprisonment by colonial authorities that preferred to force submission. Not surprisingly, when rural Burmese set up organizations to fight colonial courts and agents, as well as moneylenders, in the 1920s, these organizations also interfered with the work of colonial vaccinators.⁷

PEASANT CULTIVATORS

Although colonial rule alienated some segments of the population and introduced – by some accounts – over-intrusive regulation, it also presented economic opportunity. The main concern of colonial authorities was how to produce enough revenue to pay for the costs of administration. Ultimately this meant developing a large rural class of cultivator-owners. This was achieved with some degree of success in the early twentieth century. Participation in the rice-exporting economy provided cash incomes that could be used to pay land taxes and purchase the necessities of life, and even then many of the otherwise most costly requirements, such as building materials for homes, and fish and vegetables to supplement a diet of rice, were readily acquired from the local environment at little or no cost. Cash also provided opportunities to purchase a few luxuries, either products of indigenous cottage industries or even Western goods. On the other hand, the rigidity of the colonial taxation system, which rarely afforded relief during bad harvests, and dependence upon a single crop in the context of fluctuating world markets meant that a cultivator's economic situation could change dramatically from one year to the next. Moreover, the costs of opening up land and maintaining cultivation of a surplus for export, beyond personal subsistence, were high. To meet these demands, Burmese cultivators (see Fig. 1.1) increasingly found themselves turning to moneylenders.

LAND ALIENATION

From the 1890s on, rural agricultural land was gradually alienated to moneylenders. This problem is sometimes attributed to the nefarious practices of the Indian Chettyars. The Chettyars were a moneylending caste indigenous to Chettinad in the Madras Presidency. Although their business dealings in the colonial period extended throughout much of Southeast Asia as well as in Sri Lanka, their main area of interest was Burma. Their presence was uneven, however; in some districts they maintained a small presence, while in a few others, such as Hanthawaddy and Tharrawaddy, they were the overwhelming source of loans for Burmese agriculturalists. The Chettyars operated through widely cast family networks that could channel capital easily between India and Burma. These networks were geared toward taking reasonable risks in moneylending and hence loaned out money at low rates of interest to cultivators who appeared capable of paying the money back. The goal was to use the profits from moneylending