The Making of Modern BURMA

Thant Myint-U

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Burma has often been portrayed as a timeless place, a country of egalitarian Buddhist villages, ruled successively by autocratic kings, British colonialists and, most recently, a military dictatorship. *The Making of Modern Burma* argues instead that many aspects of Burmese society today, from the borders of the state to the social structure of the countryside to the very notion of a Burmese or Burman identity, are largely the creations of the nineteenth century, a period of great change, away from the Ava-based polity of early modern times, and towards the 'British Burma' of the 1900s. The book provides a sophisticated and much-needed account of the period, and as such will be an important resource for policy-makers and students as a basis for understanding contemporary politics and the challenges of the modern state. It will also be read by historians interested in the British colonial expansion of the nineteenth century.

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Introduction: The fall of Mandalay

Late in the afternoon, on 29 November 1885, King Thibaw of Burma appeared at the steps of his summer palace, holding the hand of his queen and half-sister Supayalat. The evening before, a British expeditionary force under the command of General Sir Harry Prendergast had entered Mandalay unopposed and had ordered the king's immediate and unconditional surrender. A request to remain in the city for another day had been rejected by General Prendergast and, instead, Thibaw was given a few more hours to collect his possessions and leave his kingdom forever. And so, after a brief interview with the gentleman from *The Times*, the last of the Konbaung monarchs abdicated his throne and began his journey into exile.

Thibaw and Supayalat were accompanied by their three young daughters and other close family, as well as by several ministers of state and an entourage of servants carrying trunks full of treasure and royal costumes. Riding in an ordinary ox-drawn carriage, they slowly made their way out though the Kyaw Moe gate to the south and then towards the steamer *Thooreah* anchored in the Irrawaddy river three miles away. Several hundred British soldiers, men of the 67th Hampshire Regiment, escorted the royal party as they emerged unceremoniously from the walled city and proceeded through the thick crowds of ordinary people who had gathered to watch. As Thibaw made his way past, the townspeople seemed only then to realise that he was being taken away. Thousands prostrated themselves on the ground alongside the road to the pier. Some cried out and several stones and clumps of earth were thrown at the scarlet-coated troops marching alongside the carriage.

Nearer the river, Supayalat called on a few of the British soldiers close at hand and then favoured one by granting him the privilege of lighting her royal cigar. When they finally reached the Irrawaddy after dark, Thibaw, a white umbrella of royalty held high over his head, walked across a narrow wooden plank and onto the waiting steamer, never to set foot on Burmese soil again. Aged 28, he would spend the remaining thirty years of his life as a state pensioner and prisoner just outside the town of Ratanagiri along western India's steamy Konkan coast.

Thibaw's fate had been sealed several weeks before with a decision by the British Secretary of State for India, Lord Randolph Churchill, to occupy Mandalay. The British and the Burmese had already fought two wars, in 1824–6 and 1852–3, both resulting in decisive British victories. Assam, Manipur, Arakan and the Tennasserim were ceded to Calcutta after the first war, and the remainder of the Indian Ocean coastline was taken during the second. But the heartland of the Burmese kingdom, what the British called 'Ava' or 'Upper Burma', remained in the hands of an enfeebled Burmese monarchy, together with a collection of nearby Shan principalities. For twenty-five years, attempts were made by both sides, British India and Burma, to find a mutually agreeable system of bilateral relations. Treaties were signed which opened the country to European commerce and several embassies were exchanged.

But by the death of Thibaw's father, King Mindon, in 1878, many businessmen both in Rangoon and Calcutta were calling for the outright annexation of the remaining royal domains. Political unrest under Thibaw, allegations of frightful imprisonments and massacres of suspected opponents provided ammunition to the interventionist cause. Politicians and officials in Calcutta, Westminster and Whitehall also began considering intervention by the late 1870s. At a time when France was consolidating her hold over Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, they feared increased French influence at the Court of Ava and eyed with suspicion the diplomatic missions of Burmese envoys to Paris and other European capitals. The Burmese had insisted on maintaining their independence in their foreign affairs, and the limits of British tolerance were soon breached.

The decision to employ military power in support of commerce and strategic concerns was certainly nothing unusual for Victorian Britain.[1] The Empire was enjoying a period of continued expansion, pushing forward colonial boundaries and enlarging spheres of influence across Africa and Asia. What were highly unusual, however, in the history of late-nineteenth-century imperialism, were the decisions taken by London and Calcutta in the aftermath of Thibaw's sudden exile. These decisions, taken primarily between December 1885 and February 1886, amounted to no-

[1] Ronald Robinson, 'Non-European Foundations of European Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Collaboration', in Roger Owen and Bob Sutcliffe (eds.), *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism*, London, 1972, pp. 132–7; Ronald Robinson, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism*, London, 1961.

thing less than a complete dismantling of existing institutions of political authority and the undermining of many established structures of social organisation. The monarchy, the nobility, royal agencies, the army, all disappeared, virtually overnight. In the countryside, local ruling families, many of whom had governed their charges for centuries, lost their positions as all hereditary status effectively came to an end. The political framework which had organised life in the Irrawaddy valley for at least three hundred years vanished under the weight of new colonial policies. 'Modern Burma' was born out of this transition.

The natural course for British policy-makers would have been to place another Burmese prince on the Konbaung throne and rule indirectly through a protected native court. Working through indigenous elites and institutions was a policy with which the British were certainly familiar. Even those who favoured annexation would likely have settled for the establishment of Thibaw's dominions as a new princely state of India. Senior civil servants had called for a protectorate rather than direct rule and even the Court of Ava seemed to believe that this would be the most likely outcome of a British victory. In Calcutta, a draft treaty had been prepared for the signature of the new 'Prince of Upper Burma'. The country would have become the largest and the richest of all the Indian princely states, the royal family and aristocracy would have remained intact, and the course of twentieth-century Burmese history would have taken an entirely different path.

But instead, by January 1886, the monarchy had been abolished altogether. Important members of the royal family were exiled to disparate places in India and many others were sent far to the south, to Tavoy and Moulmein, banned from returning home until the very end of British rule in 1948. Royal lands were seized, royal slaves and hereditary servants released from their obligations and a 'Prize Committee' divided palace possessions to be sent as gifts to notables at home in England and Ireland.

A series of further decisions and events then conspired to destroy the old nobility of Ava. The high officialdom had been composed of interrelated families, strictly organised according to relative status, the most senior of whom were often in turn closely related to the extended royal family. The majority of Thibaw's ministers seemed willing and even eager to assist in setting up a new administration, British-controlled, which would work through existing agencies of government. For several weeks, attempts were made to direct policy through the Hluttaw, the Council of

State. Court grandees were reorganised under the overall supervision of Sir Charles Bernard, the chief political officer, and orders were sent to the various governors and garrison commanders up and down the valley. But this experiment soon failed and a purely British regime was established.

The nobility had lived in elaborate compounds near the royal palaces, within the walled city of Mandalay. In late 1886, their homes, which had been meticulously placed according to rank, were demolished, and the thousands of people who had made up court society, their servants and retainers, were forced to join the common population outside the great ramparts. The palace itself was turned into a British headquarters, the principal throne rooms serving as the 'Upper Burma Club' and the garrison chapel. Even worse for the nobility than the loss of their special residences was the destruction of the royal treasury. The treasury had contained all official records related to aristocratic family genealogy. They had been inscribed on palm-leaf manuscripts and were burned by drunken soldiers on the first night of the occupation. With their loss, claims to noble status could no longer be authenticated. Without a king, a court or ways of verifying aristocratic descent, the nobility as a separate class collapsed within a generation.

As puzzling as the reasons behind Britain's decision to abolish the Burmese monarchy and impose direct rule were the changes in local administration which were brought about by the new state. In many other parts of Britain's imperial realm, colonial administrators had tended to work through intermediary classes. Even where the British imposed formal control, they still, more often than not, chose to leave day-to-day government in the hands of local elites, landlords or tribal chiefs. In the Shan hills, a peripheral part of Thibaw's kingdom, this is what the British did. The hereditary chiefs or *sawbwa* were allowed considerable autonomy under the general supervision of a colonial superintendent. But in the Irrawaddy valley itself, the new state imposed bureaucratic control right down to the village level. From the village headmen, through the township officers up to the deputy commissioners and finally the Chief Commissioner, a wholly new framework of government rapidly supplanted existing institutions.

In the Irrawaddy valley, the counterpart of the Shan chiefs were the Burmese *myothugyi*, hereditary office-holders who ruled over small town-based polities of various sizes. They and other lesser office-holders and their families had comprised the gentry class which governed the country-

side under varying degrees of royal direction. Often titled and granted special sumptuary privileges, these men served as intermediaries between the distant Court of Ava and the thousands of villages and hamlets scattered across the lowlands. And yet British policy-makers, rather than attempting to co-opt their services into the new regime, deliberately shunted them aside. *Myothugyi* quickly lost their dominant position. What had been a complex hierarchy of local hereditary office dissolved into a sea of undifferentiated and salaried village headmanships.

The military expedition which had been charged solely with the occupation of Mandalay and the removal of King Thibaw thus became a permanent military occupation, one which dramatically changed the social and political organisation of the country and created a new colonial state and society. The explanation most often given for the abolition of the monarchy was that there was no suitable prince whom the British could place on the vacant throne.[2] The Nyaungyan Prince, an elder half-brother of Thibaw, had been living in Calcutta and had been the obvious choice for future king. But he had died only a few months before the outbreak of the war. Another senior member of the royal family was the Myingun Prince, but he had fled British territory, first for Pondicherry and then for Saigon, and was thought by the British to be much too close to the French to be considered as a possible puppet. Several other sons of Mindon had been killed in the political executions of the late 1870s. But despite this, many other possible candidates did exist. There was, in fact, no shortage of princely contenders, including, for example, the young Pyinmina Prince, who was finally considered as a possible king, but not until more than half a century later by very different masters, the Japanese.

While at least some explanation is usually offered for the abolition of the monarchy, little if anything is ever said about the destruction of the nobility or the undermining of local elite positions. Where the *myothugyi* and other gentry leaders are mentioned at all, historians have argued that they formed the backbone of anti-colonial resistance in the 1880s and were effectively wiped out as a class. But this does not agree with the records of the fighting which took place. Where local hereditary leaders did play a role, they are usually portrayed by contemporary British observers as supporting the new authorities. In most English-language

[2] See, for example, D.G.E. Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia*, London, 1955, p. 681; John Cady, *A History of Modern Burma*, Ithaca, 1958, p. 120.

histories of this period, however, the nobility and gentry are not discussed at all.[3]

To a large extent this was the result of a reading of pre-annexation Burmese society which saw the political system as a sort of 'oriental despotism', a king ruling ruthlessly and absolutely over an otherwise egalitarian society.[4] The nobility and the gentry were not recognised as distinct groups, and office-holders were simply seen as clients of the king, serving at his whim. Little was known about the elaborate hereditary structures which had developed over the preceding several hundred years, and few early colonial writers were concerned with the details of local social organisation. In addition, this image of a corrupt king ruling over a mismanaged but otherwise attractive and egalitarian Burmese society fitted well with British attempts to justify the imposition of direct rule.

But while these later historians focused exclusively on the removal of Thibaw and tended towards this simple image of pre-colonial Burmese society, the discussions of policy-makers at the time reveal a much broader set of considerations which moved events in their peculiar directions.

A key reason given at the time for the abolition of the monarchy was not that there lacked a suitable prince but that the Court of Ava was simply unable to fulfil the role of a local collaborator, and that successive kings and governments had shown themselves incapable of accommodating British interests, permitting free trade or keeping out unwanted rival European influences.[5] This reason seems much closer to the truth. Despite a clear awareness by the late nineteenth century of its extremely weak international position, Mandalay had continued to resist British

[3] See, for example, J.S. Furnival, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*, Cambridge, 1948, pp. 70–4; D.G.E. Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia*, London, 1968, pp. 770–4; Ernest C.T. Chew, 'The Fall of the Burmese Kingdom in 1885: Review and Reconsideration', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (hereafter *JSEAS*), 10 (1979), 372–81; David Steinberg, *Burma: A Socialist Nation of South East Asia*, Boulder, 1982; Michael Aung-Thwin, 'The British Pacification of Burma: Order Without Meaning', *JSEAS*, 16 (1985), 245–62; and the more recent Carl A. Trocki, 'Political Structures in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', in Nicholas Tarling (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* (hereafter *CHSEA*), vol. II, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 119–20.

[4] See, for example, Htin Aung, *A History of Burma*, New York, 1967, pp. 266–9; H. Fielding-Hall, *The Soul of a People*, London, 1898, pp. 79–93.

[5] See, for example, V.C. Scott O'Conner, *Mandalay and Other Cities of the Past in Burma*, London, 1907, p. 26.

efforts aimed at securing a stable 'informal empire' over Upper Burma. France and other continental states were courted by Mindon's and Thibaw's ministers, royal monopolies remained over key sectors of the economy, and even on issues of protocol the Burmese would not give in to British demands for greater accommodation.

And while this poor record of collaboration had pushed many colonial policy-makers in the direction of annexation, it was the situation in the countryside during the first few months of the British occupation which settled the issue. The British knew that the area around Mandalay had been plagued for several years by banditry. But it was only during attempts to work through Thibaw's former ministers, and the royal agencies which they were supposed to control, that the extent to which law and order had broken down throughout the kingdom became clear. The writ of court mandarins no longer extended far beyond the city walls and a few garrisoned towns along the Irrawaddy. Their position had already been weak and the blow to their legitimacy resulting from the king's surrender and exile had been fatal. Governors and other provincial officials were fleeing their posts and bands of armed men up to several thousand strong held sway across the valley. By April 1886, the bandit gangs were joined by others, including men of the old royal army, Buddhist monks and even a few displaced nobles and princes. What had been a continuation of the banditry under Thibaw became an organised countrywide resistance against the new colonial regime, with calls by new royal pretenders to protect 'Buddhism and tradition' and drive the English 'infidels' into the sea.

The response of the Marquess of Dufferin, Viceroy of India, and his Burma-based subordinates was to 'pacify' the countryside through a campaign of violent suppression. Tens of thousands of villagers were forcefully relocated and suspected rebel sympathisers were summarily executed as the British army took the offensive. Over the next year, 40,000 British and Indian troops were poured into the old kingdom and harsh measures against civilians continued. Gradually, the colonial authorities gained the upper hand and, when the dust had cleared, very little of the old regime was left. The colonial state was born as a military occupation.

But this interpretation of the events surrounding the fall of Mandalay invites a whole new set of questions: why, for example, were existing political structures so brittle? And what underlay the considerable resistance to British rule? Why did the Court of Ava not become a better

'collaborator' and preserve a degree of autonomy, if not nominal independence, as did nearby states such as Nepal, Afghanistan or Siam?

This book is an attempt to answer these questions and to explore more generally a much neglected chapter in southern Asian and in British colonial history: the long transition in the Irrawaddy valley away from the Ava-based imperial polity of the early nineteenth century and towards the British Burma of the early twentieth.

The English-language historiography of this period is almost entirely confined to specialist monographs or to chapters in more general histories of 'Burma'. These chapters are either found at the very end of books on 'Burma before the British', or at the very beginning of books on 'modern Burma'. Scholarly works which are set entirely within the nineteenth century have all focused on specific themes, nearly all related to Anglo-Burmese diplomatic relations or war.[6] The reaction of successive royal regimes to European expansion and other contemporary challenges, in particular the reformist programmes of Mindon and Thibaw, are thus never placed in a broader historical context. Attempts by Mandalay in the period 1853–85 to modernise administration are dismissed as well-meaning but insignificant.[7] Attention is focused on the gradual consolidation of British rule in the south, and the annexation of 1885 is seen almost as an inevitable final episode in the growth of British Indian power across the Irrawaddy basin.

Burmese-language historiography is not very different. While the Burmese court is predictably portrayed in a kinder light, the focus remains the same. The possibility of political and social change over the course of the nineteenth century is similarly ignored. Within the study of local history, much greater interest is always paid to the time of the Pagan and the early Toungoo monarchs, than to what is seen as the sad and ignoble decades preceding alien occupation.

[6] For example, Htin Aung, *The Stricken Peacock: Anglo-Burmese Relations 1852–1948*, The Hague, 1965; Oliver Pollack, *Empires in Collision: Anglo-Burmese Relations in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, Westport, 1979; Charles Keeton, *King Theebaw and the Ecological Rape of Burma: The Political and Commercial Struggle between British India and French Indochina in Burma 1878–1886*, Delhi, 1974.

[7] For example, Furnival, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, esp. pp. 73–4; G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma from the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824 – The Beginning of the English Conquest*, London, 1925; Cady, *History of Modern Burma*, esp. pp. 141–4; Frank Trager, *Burma: From Kingdom to Republic: A Historical and Political Analysis*, London, 1966, esp. p. 38; Joseph Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*, Ithaca, 1977, esp. pp. 11–12.

More generally, both English and Burmese scholarship tends to assume a fairly static and passive Burmese society. The nineteenth century is viewed in terms of a political transition from Burmese to British rule over an otherwise stable 'Burma'. If one were to remove the recent Indian immigrants and the occasional European trader, civil servant or solider, the Burma of, say, the 1920s was not thought to have been very different from the Burma of a century before. Both colonial and nationalist writers saw an undifferentiated and unchanging rural landscape of egalitarian Buddhist villages and assumed little had ever been otherwise.

At an even broader level, there is hardly any questioning of 'Burma' or the 'Burmese' as a stable category. The boundaries of post-1885 Burma are viewed as 'more or less' the same as the boundaries of the various royal polities over the previous thousand years. The 'Burmese' themselves, following their immigration from some distant snowy homeland are seen as being the predominant people around which history revolves. The 'Shan', 'Mon' and 'Karen' were always 'minorities', their relative power waxing and waning over periods of 'Shan dominion' or the Burmese–Mon 'civil wars'. With British rule there then follows the 'unnatural' administrative attachment of Burma to 'India proper'.

A number of recent works on the early modern history of the Irrawaddy valley have helped to much better illuminate local society and political institutions in the hundred years or so prior to the first Anglo-Burmese War. Seminal works by Victor Lieberman, William Koenig, Than Tun and others have given us a much clearer picture of the world of the Restored Toungoo and early Konbaung kings.[8] The challenge thus remains to bridge from this world to the world of contemporary Burma and offer some explanations of the changes and continuities which took place.

Through this book, I will argue the following points: firstly, that the period 1853–85 was in fact a period of sustained innovation and attempts at adaptation to rapidly changing local and global conditions. The Ava (or Mandalay) based polity, reduced to its core territory through military

[8] Especially Victor Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Circles: Anarchy and Conquest c. 1580–1760*, Princeton, 1984; Victor Lieberman, 'Secular Trends in Burmese Economic History, c. 1350–1830, and their Implications for State Formation', *Modern Asian Studies* (hereafter *MAS*), 25 (1991), 1–31; William Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752–1819: Politics, Administration and Social Organisation in the Early Konbaung Period*, Ann Arbor, 1990; Than Tun, *Essays on the History and Buddhism of Burma*, Edinburgh, 1988.

defeats, was fully aware of the need to refashion state structures and find a place within the emergent international system.

Secondly, these policies failed, as a result of several internal and external factors, to achieve their prime objective of creating an independent and modern Burmese state. These included the loss of the Irrawaddy delta to British India, the imposition of British commercial treaties which limited state involvement in the economy, the effects of the 1870s world depression, the effects of the Panthay revolt in Yunnan and contemporaneous crises in China, and the chronic political instability at home related to the ever present threat of British intervention.

Thirdly, the net result of the interplay among British imperial policies, the reaction of Ava to changing circumstances and a host of other local and global factors was the creation of a peculiarly unrooted colonial regime, one which started (and ended) as a military occupation with little popular support. The interplay of these various actors and processes also led to significant social change. Just as new landed elites emerged under the old regime, colonial policies largely undermined their position and created a much more homogeneous and egalitarian social order.

Fourthly, local reaction to British expansion and other challenges was itself conditioned by the region's recent history, including a long era of imperial conquest from an Irrawaddy valley core and the development of patriotic sentiment tied to the Ava polity and the related 'Burmese' or Myanma identity. On the opposite side, Calcutta's policies were framed within the context of Indian interests and strategies and saw the Burmese kingdom with reference to Indian experiences, knowledge and objectives.

Finally, the end of the century witnessed the birth of Burma as we still know it today. The territorial limits of the country, the notion of who is Burmese and who is not, key social and political structures, all find their origins in this period surrounding the fall of Mandalay.

The nineteenth century in the areas in and around modern Burma is an interesting but largely unexplored episode in both British imperial and regional history. The century witnessed the gradual displacement, in the Irrawaddy, Brahmaputra and Salween river basins, of the once expansive authority of the Court of Ava by the authority of an equally aggressive British Indian state. It also witnessed quite vigorous attempts by the Court of Ava to construct a modern though territorially more modest state under the shadow of colonial encroachments. And finally the century saw the development of a strong patriotic sentiment centred on the rump Ava

polity and memories of a conquering past. Burma was created out of the interaction of these processes, as well as a number of other factors, not least contemporary events in China and the impact of increasingly global markets. This book is a story of that century, of the final decades of autonomous Burmese rule at Mandalay and the making of modern Burma.

1 Kings and distant wars

A still nameless ridge of mountains, rising to heights of over 20,000 feet, extends east from the Himalayas and separates Tibet from the headwaters of the Irrawaddy river. For more than two months each winter, temperatures fall well below freezing and fierce storms envelop the region in snow. Between the mountains, narrow and thickly forested valleys are crowded with rhododendrons, magnolias, maples, firs and tall Formosan pines, and the mountains themselves, in their lower reaches, are covered in dwarf junipers and an abundance of small evergreens and perennials.

Here, in this home of tigers, Himalayan black bears and the Asian rhinoceros, two small rivers, the Mali Hka and the N'Mai Hka, have their origin. Fed by the melting snows, they wind their way south and eventually merge to form the Irrawaddy just below the twenty-sixth parallel. From this confluence, the river rushes down, in occasionally violent torrents, through steep gorges, some only fifty yards across, before reaching the hot arid plains below.

The country which it crosses through nearly all of its 700-mile-long journey to the sea is very dry, with cool winters and scorching summers, a dusty expanse of alluvial land where temperatures climb to an average of over 100 degrees Fahrenheit in March and April and the annual precipitation in places barely reaches twenty inches. The rains, when they do come, come in a few sharp downpours, violent monsoon storms which transform waterless stream beds into dark brown torrents in a matter of minutes. Much of the region is covered in a dry scrub forest of short thorny acacias, euphorbia and cutch. Along the water lines there are taller tamarind and Indian elm trees and nearly all the cultivation is confined to these irrigated zones. An extinct volcano, Mount Popa, 5,000 feet high, dominates the middle part of this otherwise almost entirely flat plain. The only other exception is a long line of hills, the Pegu Yoma, which parallel the Irrawaddy along its middle course.

The river's valley is almost entirely surrounded by a horseshoe of increasingly high mountains. To the west are dense forests, mainly of ebony, and then series of mountain ranges – the Arakan Yoma, the Lushai and Naga Hills and others – the tallest mountains over 12,000 feet

high. To the east are thick teak forests which suddenly give way to the Shan uplands, a plateau averaging 3,000 feet, in some places rising in single steps of 2,000 feet from the basin below. Often treacherous passes link the valley to its nearest lowland neighbours: Arakan, Manipur, Assam and Siam.

Only to the south is the valley free from its mountain fastness. Here, the badlands, savannah and scrub-clad hills give way to the broad alluvial plains of the delta, as the Irrawaddy spreads out like a fan, the river dividing and sub-dividing and finally spilling into the Bay of Bengal through nine smaller rivers and countless streams. This lower region is as wet as the upper valley is dry, with some parts receiving nearly 200 inches of rain a year. Much is also relatively new: the gradual silting of the river has pushed the land forward three miles each century, with many parts of the delta still below the level of the spring tides. Mangrove swamps and great tidal forests along the coast turn to marshes and grassland further inland, and dense tropical jungle covers the higher elevations just to the east and west.[1]

Bodawpaya and western campaigns

The Prince of Badon was 37 years old when he ascended the throne of Ava in 1782.[2] His reign, which lasted until his death in 1817, was to be the longest in Burmese history since the days of Pagan, the longest in over five centuries. He is better remembered today as Bodawpaya or 'the royal grandfather king', the name by which he was often referred to in court writings of the mid-nineteenth century. With 53 wives and 120 children, Bodawpaya, the fifth son of Alaungpaya, the dynasty's upstart founder, was perhaps the greatest of all the Konbaung kings. He presided over the Burmese empire at its very height, marching his armies steadily westward to the very borders of an equally expansionist British India.[3]

His first target was Arakan, a small kingdom along the Bay of Bengal

[1] Eugene Dobby, *Southeast Asia*, London, 1950, pp. 147–67.

[2] On Bodawpaya's reign, see Tin(Mandalay), *Konbaungzet Maha Yazawindawgyi* (Great Royal Chronicle of the Konbaung Dynasty) (hereafter *KBZ*), vol. I, pp. 525–67; vol. II, pp. 1–219.

[3] For a first-hand description of Bodawpaya, see Hiram Cox, *Journal of a Residence in the Burman Empire and More Particularly at the Court of Amarapoorah*, London, 1821, p. 90.

which was separated by a formidable mountain range, the Arakan Yoma, from the Irrawaddy valley. The Arakanese ruling class spoke Burmese, and there existed many similarities in court culture and social organisation between the two societies, but the area's principal role as a centre of Indian Ocean trade and piracy also meant that Arakan was much more exposed to Indian Ocean influences, in particular from Bengal, but also from further afield. The religion was primarily Theravada Buddhist, but with a large Muslim minority and strong Brahmanical influences. In the late eighteenth century, the kingdom was in a period of disarray and more than one of its rival palace factions appealed to the Burmese for assistance, providing Ava with a welcome excuse to invade .

The Arakan campaign was led by the new crown prince, the king's eldest son, Thado Minsaw, the Prince of Shweidaung. The Burmese invaded in four columns totalling 30,000 men, three columns crossing the Arakan Yoma mountains and the fourth coming up along the Indian Ocean coastline from the erstwhile English base at Negrais, and they occupied the Arakanese capital at Mrohaung without serious loss in early 1785. Arakan was then annexed outright as a 'kingdom held by arms' (*lethnet naingngan*) and divided into four governorships, each backed by a garrison. Revenues from the occupied towns were divided between the treasury and selected members of the Court of Ava, with all the revenues from Mrohaung itself being granted to the king's white elephant. The Shweidaung Prince brought back with him the great Maha Muni image, symbol of Arakanese sovereignty, together with 20,000 captives to populate his father's new capital of Amarapura, the 'Immortal City'.

Earlier imperial dreams had rested on the conquest of the Chao Phraya valley and had led to the bloody sacking of Ayuthaya, the Siamese capital in 1767. But now the new and vigorous regime at Bangkok ended any real hope of expansion to the east, and it was an entirely new empire, to the west, which would now provide fertile ground for royal ambitions. In 1817, Bodawpaya died and was succeeded by his grandson (his son having died earlier) in the smoothest of all the Konbaung successions. The new king, Bagyidaw, though not nearly as capable as his grandfather, proved an even more ambitious imperialist.

Manipur, which had given so much trouble to the last Toungoo kings, had been the first object of Burmese aggression under the new Konbaung rulers. By the early eighteenth century, their nascent state, set in a small valley to the west of the Chindwin, had come under the influence of

Vaishnavite Hinduism and a process of 'Sanskritisation' encouraged by immigrant Bengali Brahmans. Their king, Garib Nawaz, had been the first to convert to the new faith and pursued a policy of repression of indigenous religious beliefs as well as of rival Hindu sects.

The first Konbaung invasion of Manipur in 1758 wreaked havoc on the small kingdom and was followed by an even larger and more devastating invasion in 1764.[4] Thousands of Manipuris were forcibly deported to the Burmese capital and the combination of war, flight and deportation left Manipur virtually empty for years. Many of these captives were boatmen, smiths, weavers and artisans who became hereditary crown servants at Ava, and for generations they, their descendants and later Manipuri deportees formed an underclass in the valley, acting as domestic servants, menial labourers and agricultural workers for the Burmese royal family and nobility. They also formed the new Cassay Horse, an elite cavalry regiment, a few gaining fame as the best polo-players of their generation.

In 1813 the Burmese, having moved their forward bases up the Chindwin into the adjacent Kabaw valley, decided to consolidate their position in Manipur, and Prince Marjit Singh, a member of the local ruling house, was installed on the throne at Imphal. Marjit Singh had spent much of his youth at Ava and the Burmese believed he would make a pliant tributary. But by 1819 he had proved much too ambitious for the Court of Ava's liking, asserting his autonomy and refusing to attend the coronation of Bagyidaw, Bodawpaya's grandson and successor. This then led to the final conquest of the Manipur valley and a change in Burmese policy from a simple demand for tribute to indirect administration through a puppet prince. A permanent garrison was stationed, backed by a long supply line up the Chindwin river.

From their most northern forts along the Hukawng river, the victorious and confident Burmese army pushed yet further west, to Assam.[5] The kings of Assam, with their capital at Rangamati, ruled over the Brahmaputra valley, from the descent of the great river in south-eastern Tibet to its entry into the plains of Bengal. A narrow valley hemmed in by high mountains, Assam had come under the rule of the originally Tai-speaking Ahom royal house in the thirteenth century. This old and distinguished family had led the mainly Tibeto-Burman-speaking peoples of the valley

[4] Gangamumei Kabui, *History of Manipur, Vol. I: Pre-Colonial Period*, New Delhi, 1991, pp. 194–291.

[5] S.L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, New Delhi, 1985, pp. 220–369.

in a series of defensive wars against the Mughal empire and had gradually, like the Manipuris, come under increasing Sanskrit and Hindu cultural influences. By the 1790s, however, the power of the Ahom court had begun seriously to decline, as intra-dynastic disputes combined with a widespread uprising by followers of the neo-Vaishnavite Moamariya movement. Rival groups turned to both Ava and Calcutta for assistance, leading to an initial British expedition in the winter of 1792–3 which aided in the quelling of the rebellion.

But by 1817, the situation in Assam had again reached a point of considerable instability, as the leader of one of the court factions appealed to Bodawpaya to intervene against the incumbent ruler or *swargadeo* of Assam, Chandrakanta Singh. Bodawpaya had already been looking to invade the Brahmaputra valley in support of the Moamariyas and in support of his own imperial aims. A well-equipped force of 8,000 men was marched north, swelled along the way by thousands more Jingpaw and Shan levies from the Hukawng valley and then, in an amazing logistical feat, was brought across the Himalayan passes along the Patkai ridge, and into the valley at its eastern end. The Assamese were decisively defeated at the battle of Kathalguri and the pro-Burmese premier Badan Chandra was installed. Chandrakanta Singh was allowed to remain as the nominal king.

Several years then followed of local intrigue and Burmese intervention, Assamese princes constantly switching allegiances and Ava becoming convinced of the need for tighter control. In 1821, a huge army of 20,000, including 10,000 Jingpaw levies, under the command of General Thado Maha Bandula again crossed the snow-clad mountains and began a pacification campaign intended to consolidate Ava's permanent hegemony over the country. In 1823, with the back of Assamese resistance largely broken, Thado Maha Bandula established his forward base at Rangpur and extinguished the Ahom court. He then began his initial forays into Cachar and Jaintia, and planned to march on Bhutan.[6]

Domination of this vast area, now sandwiched between British Bengal and Burma, was to have two profound effects. The first was the importation to the Court of Ava of many of the often Sanskrit-educated elites of these occupied states, a process which will be discussed in chapter 4. The second was to whet the Burmese appetite for further expansion, into the

[6] Baruah, *History of Assam*, pp. 361–8.

heart of India, a course of action which would lead directly to the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1824.

The British and the Burmese

The first two hundred years of Anglo-Burmese relations had revolved around occasional attempts by the British East India Company to establish profitable trade ties with the Court of Ava. Small branch offices were set up at Syriam, Ava and Bhamo in the mid-seventeenth century but these had soon closed, mainly for lack of business. Another attempt was made to resume trade relations in the 1750s and a fortified settlement was established at Negrais along the coast. But the unwillingness of the British to intervene on the side of the Burmese had aroused suspicions in Alaungpaya's court and he ordered the settlement destroyed in 1759. When contact resumed almost forty years later, the British and Burmese had, for the first time, a common border, between Bengal and Arakan. As this frontier expanded northwards and westwards, mutual mistrust and fears over security on both sides increased.

By the turn of the century, Amarapura had become deeply concerned with the growth of British power in India. Spies were sent to the Tipu Sultan in Mysore, to the Marattas, to Nepal and to the imperial court in Delhi as well as to British Bengal. Interest in the East India Company even led Bodawpaya to employ an Englishman, or perhaps a Eurasian, named George, to teach English to several of his sons.[7] Muslims and Armenians at the court had warned Burmese officials of the coming British threat. One intelligence report announced that 'only the East India Company flag flies along the Coromandal coast'. Another compared the English to a Banyan tree, which first leans on others while growing, only later to kill them when strong.[8]

The main point of tension between Calcutta and Amarapura was to be Arakan. The Burmese occupation of that country had been extremely repressive, with constant demands for men and material. In 1795 a levy of 20,000 men to help expand Meiktila lake, south of Amarapura, set off the

[7] Than Tun, ed. *Royal Orders of Burma 1598–1885*, part 9, Tokyo, 1989 (hereafter *ROB*), 3 March 1810.

[8] Tin (Pagan), *Myanma Min Okchokpon Sadan* (Documents Relating to the Administration of the Burmese Kings) (hereafter *MMOS*), 5 vols., Rangoon, 1931–3, vol. III, pp. 70–1.

first wave of refugees into British territory and the beginnings of an Arakanese insurgency. In 1811, a new royal levy for 40,000 men sent another huge exodus of refugees towards Chittagong, adding impetus to the local guerilla resistance which soon defeated the Burmese garrison and took Mrohaung. The guerilla leader Chin Byan had offered to hold Arakan as a vassal of the East India Company, and this increased Amarapura's suspicions of Calcutta's motives, especially as his bases were located well within Company territory. British troops had prevented the Burmese from pursuing his men across the Naaf river boundary and cross-border relations quickly soured.

The second arena of contention was in the far north, in Manipur and in the Himalayan states of Assam, Jaintia and Cachar, where Ava's forward policy was meeting with growing British influence and concerns over the security of Bengal. The Burmese occupation of Manipur had driven large numbers of refugees into Cachar and the raja of Cachar in 1823 invited Ava to help restore order in his country. The Burmese occupation of the Brahmaputra valley and its probing moves into the adjacent high grounds were clearly intended to place pressure on Bengal. The British, worried about losing this buffer and with expansionist designs of their own, unilaterally declared Cachar and neighbouring Jaintia as protectorates and sent a force to halt the Burmese advance. Clashes soon developed between the two armies in Cachar and this, coupled with a worsening situation along the disputed Arakan border, led Fort William, on 5 March 1824, to declare war on the Kingdom of Ava.[9]

The First Anglo-Burmese War turned out to be the longest and most expensive in British Indian history. It lasted nearly two years, cost the British exchequer 5 million pounds, and led to the deaths of 15,000 British and Indian soldiers as well as tens of thousands of Burmese. At the onset of the war, the confident Burmese forces, under the command of their well-tried general and governor of Assam, Thado Maha Bandula, made a spirited attempt to break through British lines and march simultaneously on Syhlet from the north and Chittagong from the east. Bandula, a very tall man with a violent temper, had little time for precedence and protocol in a country obsessed with both. He was reported once to have decapitated by his own hand one of his senior officials for counselling retreat

[9] George Bruce, *The Burma Wars: 1824–1880*, London, 1973, pp. 1–127; Htin Aung, *History of Burma*, pp. 194–217; *KBZ*, vol. II, pp. 369–425.

and had been one of the main proponents at Bagyidaw's court of an offensive policy against Calcutta. He believed that a decisive victory could gain them eastern Bengal as well as allow them to consolidate their gains in their new western empire of Arakan, Assam, Jaintia, Cachar and Manipur.

But despite a few initial victories against British Indian border units, the Burmese were quickly thrown on the defensive. As the rains approached, Bandula, having crossed the Naaf, paused with his army of 40,000 on the road to Chittagong, only to receive urgent news that a British fleet had reached Rangoon. This was a possibility the Burmese had not taken into account. Bandula was then forced to wheel his divisions around quickly and march them over the Arakan Yoma at the height of the monsoon while keeping most of his army intact. But then, even with fresh troops from Amarapura and levies from throughout the Irrawaddy valley totalling 60,000 men the general was unable to re-take Rangoon.

With the coming of the cold weather, and reinforced and resupplied by sea, the British then managed to break through Burmese lines and begin their march up-river. At Danubyu, Bandula tried to make a stand, massing 60,000 at that small delta town, including 35,000 musketeers and Ava's best cavalry. He had continued walking among his troops under a gilt umbrella marking his rank, despite the obvious danger, and was killed by an exploding shell. In disarray, the Burmese, under heavy bombardment, retreated north.

The British Expeditionary Force was led by General Sir Archibald Campbell, a veteran of the Peninsula Wars where he had fought the French under the Duke of Wellington. He pushed his army north along the Irrawaddy and then halted for a second rainy season at Prome. A faction at the court, led by the Prince of Tharrawaddy advised the king to open negotiations. The prince, who was the king's younger brother, was a military man. He had been Bandula's deputy at Rangoon and Danubyu and had seen first-hand the enemy's superiority in arms. The king, however, decided to try his luck and fight on, sending down thousands more hastily raised and improperly equipped levies.

The British resolutely pressed on despite Burmese attacks both on land and on the river. The *Diana*, a steamer recently arrived from Calcutta and the first ever used in battle, was deployed to counter the huge teak war-boats which had been the pride of Amarapura's armed forces. These were one hundred feet long, with up to sixty oarsmen and thirty

musketeers and were fitted with six- or twelve-pounder guns, and it was the defeat of this river fleet, as well as a decisive British victory at Pagan, which finally led to a Burmese request for negotiations in early 1826. On 24 February at Yandabo, a small village along the Irrawaddy forty-five miles from the capital, a peace treaty was signed between Campbell and the Myoza of Lègaing, a senior minister.[10]

Under the Treaty of Yandabo, the Court of Ava agreed to cease interference in the affairs of Jaintia, Cachar and Assam and to cede to the British their provinces of Manipur, Arakan and the Tennasserim. They also agreed to allow for an exchange of diplomatic representatives between Amarapura and Calcutta and to pay an indemnity, in instalments, of 10 million rupees or 1 million pounds sterling. The British would withdraw to Rangoon after the payment of the first instalment, and withdraw from Rangoon after the payment of the second.[11] After much delay, the second instalment was paid, the British left Rangoon, and in the steamy towns and forests of the Tennasserim and Arakan began their creation of 'British Burma'.

The end of empire

The kingdom's inglorious defeat was a profound shock for the Court of Ava. But Bagyidaw held on to his crown and his government remained essentially the same as before the war, dominated by those who had counselled against negotiation until the very end. His closest and most powerful advisor was his queen, Mè Nu, who was intensely disliked by many in the aristocratic establishment because of her common origins and autocratic manner. She had ensured her position by having her brother, the Myoza of Salin, raised to princely status and made the *de facto* head of the Council of State. The two together established a huge patronage network throughout the country, appointing loyal followers to key offices both in the provinces and at the capital, and amassing a substantial private fortune. Mè Nu schemed to marry her only child, a daughter, to the crown prince, Bagyidaw's son by his deceased chief queen.[12]

The king himself changed in personality after the war, shunning all of

[10] For a translation of the relevant portions of the Konbaungzet chronicle, see Anna Allott, *The End of the First Anglo-Burmese War: The Burmese Chronicle Account of How the 1826 Treaty of Yandabo Was Negotiated*, Bangkok, 1994.

[11] *ROB*, 31 August 1824. [12] On Bagyidaw's reign, see *KBZ*, vol. III, pp. 220–545.