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Is it in India? Colonial Burma as a ‘Problem’ in South Asian History

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Abstract

Despite being governed as an integral part of the Indian Empire for over fifty years, it is commonplace for historians to consider Myanmar/Burma as a distinct entity beyond what is usually taken to be South Asia. This is a heuristic separation indulged by both scholars of colonial India and colonial Burma and is in part a legacy of the territorial assumptions of Area Studies. Recently new geographic frameworks—particularly the Indian Ocean, Eurasia and Zomia—have begun to undermine the basis of this artificial division. Building on these insights, this essay argues that the apparent distinctiveness of the Burmese experience of the Raj might be a useful problem for historians of colonial India to think with.

Key words: Burma, Myanmar, Area Studies, colonialism, British India

In 1900, W. Northley, a colonial buying agent, wrote to the India Office asking whether Rangoon was in India or not. He explained that one of his clients insisted that the city was in ‘Burmah’ and not India. For his part, he contended that ‘Burmah’ was itself a province of India and thus, by extension, Rangoon was in India. The response from the India Office was simple and straightforward. Rangoon was a town in British Burma, which was a province of British India. They confirmed Northley’s belief that Rangoon was indeed in India.¹

This innocuous correspondence on the administrative arrangements through which Rangoon was incorporated into the Indian Empire hints at some of the deeper uncertainties about the colonial historical geography of the region. The status of Rangoon (a corruption of the Burmese name

Yangon) in Myanmar/Burma was transformed by colonial rule.² After being occupied by the Indian Army in the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852, it was rebuilt and became a thriving commercial hub. British rule also made it into the administrative centre for the colony, which it remained after 1885 when the Konbaung dynasty was unseated in Mandalay as rulers of the landlocked remnants of the independent Burmese empire. When this last region too was annexed, political power shifted from the northern dry zone to the coastal south. In addition, the city's demography changed. As a major port situated in the middle of a rapidly expanding rice producing region, it attracted large numbers of Indian labourers seeking work in the mills and other urban industries. By the twentieth century, Indians began to outnumber Burmese in the city. It was now a plural, or, perhaps more accurately, a cosmopolitan, urban society.³

For some historians—particularly those with an implicit nationalist bent—whether colonial Rangoon was truly a Burmese city remains an open question. Historian of the Pagan Dynasty, established in the tenth century, Michael Aung-Thwin has argued that the traditional cultural and political heartland of Myanmar has long been, and remains, the 'up-stream', dry region in the centre of the country. It was from here that the majority of pre-colonial kingdoms have ruled and here that they had built their courtly capitals. In his analysis, British imperialism had only a superficial impact on this state of affairs. The deeper psychology of the Burmese, he suggests, was largely unaffected by colonial rule and the dry zone was never displaced as the spiritual centre. Rangoon's place as a political centre was a temporary shift in the historically more significant dominance of the dry zone, around the confluence of the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy, the country's major rivers. Moreover, for him, it was a foreign imposition and a site in which exogamous influences exerted themselves, although failing to meaningfully penetrate the rest of country.⁴ If Aung-Thwin were asked if colonial Rangoon was in India, his response might be that in a strict bureaucratic sense it was in British Burma and, thus, in India. But, he would perhaps note, it was not *of* Myanmar and resembled more an imperial city of the Indian Empire.

Aung-Thwin's approach was influenced by 'autonomous history', a method applied by some Southeast Asian historians, and one that encourages researchers to focus on underlying continuities in societies and cultures over long time periods. This method was itself deemed necessary, in part, as a response to the perceived lack of internal dynamism in Southeast Asian historical processes in much colonial-era scholarship. This work generally ascribed causation in pre-colonial changes in the region to the influence of its sub-continental neighbours, China and India, and subsequent changes to Europe's influence.⁵ However, one of the problems perennially faced by historians attempting to write autonomous histories of the region has been finding processes that were uniquely endogamous to the region, or any that were shared across its diverse states and cultures.⁶ Reflecting on this, it has been shown that the separation of Southeast Asia from East Asia and South Asia in the Euro-American academic discipline of Area Studies was the result of universities' institutional responses to the geo-political imperatives of the Cold War.⁷ Today the Indian Ocean, conceived of as a space of historical interconnection, communication and exchange, appears to have better purchase as a geographic framework for historians, especially at a time when networks and webs are the social arrangements that scholars are most concerned with uncovering—although the inherent coherence and unity of the Indian Ocean has also been questioned.⁸ Eurasia too has been suggested as a useful geography for mapping connections and identifying parallels that transcend the traditional Area Studies territorial categories, bringing East, South, Southeast and Central Asia together with the Near and Middle East and Europe.⁹ I do not wish to dwell on these, perhaps intractable, problems of historicising the regions of the world here. It suffices to note that the persistent limitations of Southeast Asia as a geography, and the apparent utility of more expansive spatial frameworks, make locating Burma more difficult than Aung-Thwin's approach would suggest. Exogamous and endogamous processes are not so easily distinguished given the existence of wider, intra- and trans-continental connections and broadly synchronous patterns of historical change. If, as result of these trends, the geographies deployed by historians are becoming more tentative and fluid, we might also need to ask, not quite if Burma is in India, but whether it

might usefully be thought of as part of South Asia. This is a question that is most pertinent for studies of the colonial period.

Aung-Thwin's argument that colonial rule had little lasting impact in Burma notwithstanding, historians have most often viewed its incorporation into the Indian Empire as a profound moment of rupture, the effects of which continue to be felt. John Furnivall, the colonial official, Fabian socialist and Burma scholar who mostly wrote in the early-twentieth century before independence, perhaps did the most to set this narrative in motion. In his analysis of early British rule in Tenasserim after the first Anglo-Burmese War of 1824, he argues that attempts to govern Burma according to indigenous patterns and expectations were swept aside by the bureaucratic juggernaut that was the Government of India.¹⁰ Whilst Furnivall's own subjective perspective has been critiqued and the substance of his arguments substantially challenged,¹¹ his overarching story still holds in many histories. Historians have focussed particularly upon the development and imposition of the Village Act following the annexation of Upper Burma in 1885. This legislation, taken from British Indian legislation, was enacted in the newly occupied colony by imperial fiat displacing the forms of local government that had been reformed by the Konbaung court during the nineteenth century.¹² It has been argued that in this sense Burma experienced a form of double colonisation, at the hands of both the British and also India, whose laws were imposed and whose populace staffed many branches of the colonial state. It has also been suggested that the colony was a 'neglected appendage' onto the Indian Empire and that in an attempt to keep costs down the British maintained a minimal 'skinny state'. As a result, they relied excessively heavily upon the military to keep order.¹³ Whatever the utility and accuracy of these characterisations, they rely upon a homogenising representation of the state in colonial India, one that fails to recognise the diversity of administrative structures present across the Raj and as a result misses parallels that might otherwise be drawn with places, for instance, such as the North West Frontier Province.

Whilst India might have an overly simplified but important role attributed to it in Burmese historiography, this is certainly not the case when positions are reversed. Burma is usually left out

of studies of colonial India that otherwise pertain to offer an overview of the whole imperial territory. This is clear in text books. Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal's popular book *Modern South Asia*, still a staple of many undergraduate reading lists, makes only fleeting references to Burma. These are mostly confined to the subcontinent's cultural influence in Southeast Asia, the military engagements of the Indian Army under British rule, and the fate of the Indian National Army as it was led into defeat by Subhas Chandra Bose. It would not be apparent to a reader that the country was ruled as part of British India for over fifty years.¹⁴ An earlier offering, Sumit Sarkar's *Modern India*, likewise barely touches on Burma. This book begins in 1885, when Burma was annexed into British India, and when the Raj reached its fullest extent, but the selection of this date was based on the foundation of the Indian National Congress. Sarkar's book is instructive because of the effort made to incorporate a diverse range of different political and social movements from localities across the colony. Yet, events in Burma find no place in his study.¹⁵ This omission means that the largest peasant rebellion faced by the Indian Government in his time period, the Hsaya San rebellion in the Burma delta in 1930, is overlooked.¹⁶ The failure to cover Burma in these overview texts, written for audiences new to South Asian history, is a symptom of the implicit national framework used by historians to limit their studies geographically. However, it is an implicit framework that is anachronistic and ahistorical, and it is one that the critical deconstruction of national frameworks has done precious little to displace.¹⁷

One area of research in which this separation of Burma and India has been questioned has been in studies of upland borderworlds. The work of Willem Van Schendel has done a great deal to enable scholars to re-imagine the borderworlds between the two and question the logic of a strict separation between South and Southeast Asia. The historical existence and persistence of networks of interaction across the upland regions of north-eastern India, Bangladesh, Myanmar/Burma and southern China led him to coin the term Zomia to capture the geography of this complex spatial system, which is irreducible to beginning defined as a bounded place or area.¹⁸ It is a term that has been picked up recently by James C. Scott, whose claim that the societies of Zomia were 'anarchist'

has sparked wider debates about the narratives and spacing of global history.¹⁹ On a smaller scale though, this re-imagining of space has led to work less restricted by formal territorial boundaries. Recent research into the emergence of Kachin identity has shown that historians' narratives can, and should, move across state borders.²⁰ Likewise, work on the colonial mapping of the north-eastern areas of British India have had to take account of historical processes on either side of what has been described as the 'embryonic border' between Burma and India.²¹ However, this acknowledgement of the dense entanglement of networks linking places such as Bengal, Manipur, Chindwin, Assam and Arakan, especially, although not exclusively,²² during the colonial period, has not facilitated a wider incorporation of Burma in discussions of the Raj as a whole.

I am not suggesting that Burma should simply be added into histories of colonial rule in South Asia, although more could be done in this direction. Instead, I think that the experience of colonisation in Burma is useful for South Asian historians to keep in mind as a problem. Despite also being ruled from Calcutta and, later, Delhi, as well as having a long history of pre-colonial interaction and exchange, Burma had a distinctive encounter with British imperialism. This distinctiveness might prove useful to historians exploring the nature of changes wrought by colonial modernity. This will necessitate greater engagement with the historiography on colonial Burma, that is currently flourishing. Chie Ikeya's book on changing gender ideologies and Alicia Turner's study of Burmese Buddhism are examples of recent studies with potentially important implications for the history of colonialism in South Asia more widely. The first brings the differentiation of, and hostility between, Asian 'races' in nationalists' rhetoric into our understandings of imperial gender politics,²³ often understood as a battle ground between the coloniser and colonised.²⁴ The latter uncovers ways in which contestations between Buddhists and British authorities modified imperial definitions of what constituted religion.²⁵ These authors are also a sign that the methods and concerns of historians of colonial Burma are closer to those of historians of colonial India than ever before.

The specific experiences of colonial rule in Burma might alter our wider understandings of British imperialism in South Asia by posing problems. In my own research and teaching, in which I am often attempting to straddle the divide between Burma and South Asian Studies, a number have emerged, although I am certain that there are plenty more examples that could be given. How do we account for the province of Burma reputedly being the most criminal in colonial India, and yet having some of the most repressive legislation available to the state, like the Criminal Tribes Act, applied infrequently?²⁶ Why did the British underinvest in Burma's medical institutions in comparison to the rest of the colony, whilst the opposite appears to have been the case for veterinary medicine?²⁷ How might situating the Hsaya San rebellion alongside the Civil Disobedience campaign alter our understandings of both events, and particularly the state's response to them? And, what might our narratives of partition look like if we were to factor in the Burmese nationalists' campaign to be separated from India and the subsequent creation of a fixed national border between Burma and Bengal in 1937? There may also be more profound and abstract questions about the legacies of empire raised by Myanmar/Burma's postcolonial history, and the parallels and divergences apparent between this newly independent nation and the others in South Asia.²⁸ Events and processes occurring in Myanmar/Burma might not always be integral to studies of South Asian history, but they are worth bearing in mind.

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Notes

¹ India Office Records, British Library, London, L/PJ/6/554: File 1276.

² I am using Myanmar/Burma when referring to a time period across which both names have been used. Burma, when I am referring to a time period when only this name was officially used—Myanmar also being a longstanding name for the country. And, when relating to the work of authors who exclusively use Myanmar, I follow their usage.

³ For an overview, see Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* particularly chapter two, on the "colonial centre"; also see the excellent "colonial setting" chapter of Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*; for an overview of wider administrative changes engendered by colonialism, see Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*; and on the remaking of Rangoon in this new colonial order, see Maxim, "The Resemblance in External Appearance"; on the rice

industry, see Adas, *The Burma Delta*; Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis*; on Indian immigration, see Kaur, “Indian Labour, Labour Standards, and Workers’ Health in Burma and Malaya, 1900–1940”; Osada, “An Embryonic Border: Racial Discourses and Compulsory Vaccination for Indian Immigrants at Ports in Colonial Burma, 1870-1937”; and on diverse social, economic, political and cultural life of the city, see Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*; Lewis, *Cities in Motion*.

⁴ See, for instance Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times* which treats the upper dry zone as the site of authentically Myanmar politics and culture, despite the essentialising nature of such a claim; also see Aung-Thwin, “The British ‘Pacification’ of Burma”; he has recently outlined the symbiotic dualism between upstream and downstream Myanmar, beginning with the fifteenth century, arguing it was disrupted by British colonial rule which made this into an antagonist dualism by displacing the “traditional heartland” in the north, something he claims (repeating his early arguments) was never accepted by the Burmese populace and this lost symbiosis, he goes on, controversially, only came to be “resurrected” with the military coup in 1962. See: Aung-Thwin, “A Tale of Two Kingdoms.”

⁵ Smail, “On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia”; for a thorough overview of, and important intervention in, the historiography on the region, see the introduction to: Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 2003.

⁶ Emmerson, “Southeast Asia”; Legge and Tarling, “The Writing of Southeast Asian History”; Sutherland, “Southeast Asian History and the Mediterranean Analogy”; for recent discussions on this, see this debate on the strategic utility of the term for academics van Schendel, “Southeast Asia.”

⁷ Rafael, “The Cultures of Area Studies in the United States”; van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance.”

⁸ Chaudhuri, “The Unity and Disunity of Indian Ocean History from the Rise of Islam to 1750”; Vink, “Indian Ocean Studies and the ‘New Thalassology’”; historians of colonial India have been among the most enthusiastic proponents of this spatial framework, see: Metcalf, *Imperial Connections*; Bose, *A Hundred Horizons*.

⁹ Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia”; Andaya, “Southeast Asia, Historical Periodization and Area Studies”; Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 2003; Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 2009; indeed, some of the patterns that Lieberman posits as Eurasia-wide phenomena he first identified in Burma’s pre-colonial history, see: Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles*.

¹⁰ Furnivall, *The Fashioning of Leviathan*.

¹¹ Pham, “Ghost Hunting in Colonial Burma”; Englehart, “Liberal Leviathan or Imperial Outpost?”

¹² Taylor, *The State in Burma*; Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*.

¹³ Callahan, “State Formation in the Shadow of the Raj: Violence, Warfare and Politics in Colonial Burma”; Callahan, *Making Enemies*.

¹⁴ Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*.

¹⁵ Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885-1947*.

¹⁶ Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*; Herbert, *The Hsaya San Rebellion, 1930-1932, Reappraised*; Brown, *A Colonial Economy in Crisis*; Aung-Thwin, *The Return of the Galon King*.

¹⁷ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*; Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames*.

¹⁸ Baud and Schendel, “Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands”; van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance.”

¹⁹ Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*; see Michaud, “Editorial – Zomia and beyond”, and the essays that included in this special issue.

²⁰ Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin*.

²¹ Zou and Kumar, “Mapping a Colonial Borderland”; Iqbal, “The Space between Nation and Empire”; Osada, “An Embryonic Border.”

²² Charney, “Literary Culture on the Burma–Manipur Frontier in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries.”

²³ Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*; for some work in this direction, see Nijhawan, “At the Margins of Empire.”

²⁴ Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question”; Sinha, “Refashioning Mother India.”

²⁵ Turner, *Saving Buddhism*.

²⁶ Brown, “A Commissioner Calls”; Saha, “Colonization, Criminalization and Complicity”; Hingkanonta, “The Police in Colonial Burma.”

²⁷ Penny Edwards, “Bitter Pills”; Mishra, “Beasts, Murraings, and the British Raj.”

²⁸ Gould, Sherman, and Ansari, “The Flux of the Matter” although Burma is not included, this study offers a methodology for making such a comparison.