Notes

Social Life in Burma in the 16th Century

Than Tun*

The main source materials for this paper are the stone inscriptions in Burmese found largely at Ava, Pan-ya and Cakuin (near Mantale, on both sides of the big river Eravati [List]) together with some inscriptions written in the Mon language of lower Burma [U Chit Thein 1965]. Burma in the early 16th century was divided into at least four states, two in central Burma with Ava and Tonnu respectively as their centres, another in lower Burma with Hamsavati as its centre and the fourth on the western coastal strip of Rakhwin with Mroku as its centre. The kings ruling at Ava were: Rhwenan: kyoau, rhañ (1501-1527), Suihambhwa: (1527-1542), Un:bbho Khunmuin.o (1542-1545), Mu:i:rai Narapati (1545-1551) and Cakuin: Cañsu Kyona Thañ (1551-1555); at Tonnu: Mahãstrijeyasûra (1485-1530) and Mañ:tarã:rhwethi: (1530-1551); and at Hamsavati: Bañ:ram (1522-1526), Surhañtakarwatpi (1526-1539), Mañ:tarã: rhwethi: (1530-1551; he conquered Hamsavati and made it his capital in 1539), Hamsavati Rhañphurwañ (1554-1581) and Ña:chu Dâyakã (1581-1599).

The Burmese did not occupy a large area at this time. According to the Cakuin: Ratanãceti inscription of 1485 the Burmese were living in such places as:

Arimattana, Mrañcuin:, Pañ:ya, Cakuin: and Ava. In these places the kings led luxurious lives in golden palaces full of precious jewels, etc. There are four rivers, the Eravati, Panroñ, Panloñ and Khañ:twañ:. The population along these river valleys is so dense that literally the river banks are bending low with the weight of the people that they have to carry. This certainly is the place of the Burmese [List 1014/14-15].

According to this record, the Burmese were confined to the area around the confluence of four rivers, the Eravati, Khañ:twañ:, Mracñay and Mû:. In the Ratanãbimhan inscription of 1509 we find that:

The (political centres) were located at Cakuin:, Pañ:ya and Ava. Each of these places in turn was the city where the kings resided [List 1043/15-16].

The record continues to define Burma:

The clear cool water of the Eravati runs in the centre with Sunaparanta to the north and Tambadipa to the south. A dynasty of kings ruled over these two divisions where the Religion of Buddha prospered [List 1043/17-18].

This area constitutes only a small fraction

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of the present state of The Union of Burma. Nevertheless the ruler was “absolute” in the sense that he was usually described as “the Lord of all Water and Land” [List 1055a/5] and also as “the Victorious Leader of One Hundred Kings” [List 1055a/6]. He was, to his subjects, “the Ruler of all Life in Water and on Land and Much Superior to all Other Kings” [List 1055a/20–21]. His kingdom was small but it was often described as “an extensive land, teeming with towns and villages” [List 1055a/10] and the king as an overlord frequently received as hostages “pretty daughters” [List 1055a/21; 66; 79] from his vassals. The defence of such a country required the ruler to be well versed in the martial arts of combat on horseback or elephant [List 1045/15–16]. In the hard task of administration he would have the assistance of the Crown Prince [List 1845/22; 42], the Chief Queen [List 999/4; 1001/29–30], the “Old Ministers” [List 1005/14] and many wise ministers and officers [List 1055b/1]. The king, to his subjects, was in fact “King of Kings” [List 1055a/3; 9] who maintained an army [List 1014/3; 1045/15] comprised of infantry [List 1050/8; 15] and cavalry [List 1050/65]. Men and officers in his service were as follows:

Cavalry Chief / Mrañ: Mhū: [List 1037a/7]

Chief / Acui: Akai [List 1045/62]

City Chief / Prañ Sui: [List 978b/18; 1045/63]

Civil Officer Junior / Sāmpyañ [List 1045/58; 64; 66]

Clerk Junior / Cakhī, Cakhyā [List 978b/18]

Clerk Senior / Cāre: [List 1014/40; 1043/29]

Governess / Athin:tonau [List 1040a/4; 1055a/6]

Guard / Kuivram [List 1014/27]

Holder of Town in Fief / Mrui, Cā: [List 1055a/9]

Horse Messenger / Mrañ: Lhyañ [List 1050/65]

Inner Group Chief / Atwañ: sañ: mhrū: [List 1037a/5]

Inner Three Thousand Chief / Atwañ:-sum: thonmhrū: [List 1057a/7]

Land Officer / Mretuiñ [List 995/7; 1045/63]

Mercenary / Kre: cā: [List 999/3]

Officer and Minister / Amhu: Amat [List 1050/8; 65; 79; 1055b/1]

Paddy Store Chief / Capā: Cuiw Sākrī: [List 981a/7]

Privileged Man or Noble / Sukon: [List 981a/7]

Reservoir Chief / Kan Puiñ [List 1043/7]

Steward / Bhañtā Cuiw [List 978b/18; 1045/63]

Supreme Leader of Monks / Samgharāja [List 1005/8]

Three Thousand Boats Chief / Lhoaukā: Sum: thoñ Mhū: [List 1037a/6]

Town Chief / Mruiw, Sākriñ: [List 1002/23]

Village Chief / Rwa Sākrīñ: [List 1001/33; 1014/25]

Village Controller / Rwa Kai [List 1045/63]

Village Ruler / Rwa Māñ: [List 978b/18]
The relationship between the ruler and the ruled might well have been of a strained nature since the ordinary common people avoided any dealings with government servants if possible. One record of 1481 says:

The Land Officer could not be trusted. He might reckon a piece of land measuring one unit as only half a unit and a half unit as only a quarter unit. This statement suggests that the officers were usually corrupt or oppressive. There is also another statement in a similar strain. It says:

Try to avoid meeting a king’s servant when one comes into the village. Let not even a dog bark at him. Let him pass you without a glance. But we know that it was impossible to ignore king’s servants who went round the villages to collect taxes. They exacted the Wet Tax on the products of rivers and lakes and the Dry Tax on the products of cultivation. In detail the taxes were:

Taxes on the use of bullock carts, wheelbarrows, ports, ferries, scales, baskets, looms, licenses to collect toddy juice, to produce oil, to receive court fees or fines, to run a brokerage, to start cultivation on plots of land subjected to yearly inundation, to raise cattle such as buffaloes and oxen, to make pots, to grow sesame, to collect cotton, bamboo, pelts and to enjoy certain commission fees.

The majority of the people who were thus taxed were Burmese and most of them were cultivators. Here is a list of people living in the Kingdom of Burma at that time:

Cakraw [List 802/46; 1046/10]
Kantū [List 802/55]
Karañ Mratle: chu inscription/9
Kasañ: [List 936a/23]
Kharan [List 949a/25]
Khyañ: [List 958a/5; 963a/21; b/11]
Krwañ [List 963b/52; 54; 55; 1014b/40]
Kula: [List 934b/24]
Lankhrow [List 963a/38]
Lawa [List 934a/23; 943b/15]
Mranmā Kan Ü inscription b/17
Mrun [List 963a/21; b/11]
Nāga Rañ Oñ Mrañ inscription/8
Panse: [List 963a/21; b/11]
Pasañ [List 963a/25]
Pa Úiw [List 963a/38]
Phrum Nakya Kan Ü inscription b/17
Pōloñ [List 947a/36]
Prow Rañ Oñ Mrañ inscription/18 and 34
Putw Cetiñha inscription b/34
Pyū [List 963b/53; 55; 1050/7]
Rahuiñ Kan Ü inscription b/17
Rokchawai Kan Ü inscription b/17
Sak [List 943a/5; 963a/21; b/11]
Syam Thūpārum inscription 15a/2
Tanluñ Thūpārum inscription 15a/1
Tanu Thūpārum inscription 15a/8
Taruk [List 947a/5]
Toñsù Re Mrak inscription/11
We notice that the name of Pyū does not appear in any inscriptions after 1500.

The livelihood of the people as found in the inscriptions was as follows:

Architect / Pissukā [List 1050/22; 25; 26; 72]
Astrologer | Hūrā [List 1050/23; 25; 72]
Big Drum Player | Pat Ma Tī | Krānīkan inscription a/28
Blacksmith | Panbhai [List 1014b/26; 38]
Breaker of Stones | Kyok Khwai [List 1045/37]
Carpenter | Laksāma | [List 981a/23; 1014b/26]
 Carrier of the Sick and Wounded | Sānā Tham: | [List 1045b/6]
Cowherd | Nuwā: Thin: | [List 1045/59]
Dancer | Kakhre Sañ Ma | [List 1045/20; 1050/67]
Harpist | Coñ: Tī: | [List 963b/34]
Mason | Puran | [List 981a/22; 1014b/26; 39; 1045/30; 31]
Massage Expert | Laksā Krānīkan inscription a/7
Nautch | Pantyā | [List 963b/52; 1014b/40]
Painter | Pankhī | [List 981a/22; 1014b/40; 1045/39]
Palanquin Bearer | Tham Cañ Tham: | [List 1045/72]
Player of Brass Drums | Kre: Pat Sañ | Kre: Pat Tī: | [List 1014b/40]
Krānīkan inscription a/28
Player of Cymbals | Laṅkhwañ: Sañ | [List 1014b/40]
Player of a Ring of Leather Drums | Sare Pat Sañ | [List 1014b/40] Krānīkan inscription a/28
Player of a Series of Leather Drums | Chuin: Wuñ: Tī: | [List 1014b/40] Krānīkan inscription a/28
Player of a Set of Brass Gongs | Pat Narañcarā Sañ | [List 981a/12; 15]
Sawyer | Lhwa Sañ | [List 1045/39]
Sculptor | Tamo, | [List 981a/22; 1014b/26; 39; 1045/38]
Singer | Sikhran: Sañ | [List 1045/19]
Umbrella Bearer | Thī: Chwai | [List 1045/72]
The cultivators’ main crop was rice. Due to the frequent inroads of the Shans of the north, many farms did not get proper care and as a result yields were poor. In one case we find that:
One pay1) only produced one basket of paddy [List 1045/61].
Usually it would be twenty baskets or more. Unfortunately the inscriptions do not give much information on economic conditions, but from the names that we find in them we have the following list of trees and plants:
Acanthus illicifolius | Karā: | [List 1014/88; 1045/35]
Areca catechu | Kwam: Si: | [List 1014a/48]
Artocarpus integrifolia, Jackfruit Tree | Pinnai | [List 1014b/18]
Arum | Pin: | [List 1014b/18]
Banana | Nhakpyoau | [List 1050/22]
Calophyllum | Punñak | [List 1014b/18]
Citrus | Rhok | [List 1014b/18]
Coconut | Un: | [List 1014b/18]
Cringe Tree | Coñ: rhā: | [List 1014b/18]
Custard Apple | Ojā | [List 1014b/18]
Egg Plant | Karham: | [List 1014b/18]
Eugenia | Sapre | [List 1050/70]
Foetid Sterculia | Lakhpup | [List 1050/67]
Gourd Creeper | Bhū: | [List 1055a/22; b/5]
Grass | Nejā, Mrejā | [List 1050/70]
Gum | Sacce | [List 1050/70]

1) 1.75 acres/0.70875 hectare.
Than Tun: Social Life in Burma in the 16th Century

This list gives us some idea of what herbs, plants and trees the people used for construction materials, food, medicine, etc.

The second quarter of the 16th century was, as we all know, a very troubled period and the reconstruction of various important buildings destroyed during this time was carried out from about the middle of the century. One record says: “Damaged parts of some pagodas were repaired” [List 840a/10] and another record mentions that “a finial on one pagoda top was fixed in AD 1482” [List 1001/16]. In the Pagan period pagodas did not have the crown which is now called Thi: (Umbrella) and this record of 1482 suggests that the practice of fixing a finial to pagoda-tops had started by the 15th century. Repairs at some religious establishments were carried out very often and one record of 1484 says:

The religious edifice was completely whitewashed. The bulbous part was (made new) and five tiers of finials were fixed on it. Golden bells were hung around these finials so that they chimed most pleasantly (at every waft of breeze). Bright colours were also painted (all over the building) [List 1050/6-10].

Perhaps it was through such repairs that many old and original works of art were lost in Burma, as even today in Burma antiques are usually ruined by repairs. Apart from the ravages of the wars, there were natural calamities like earthquakes and floods that also caused much damage to the ancient monuments. One record of 1426 says: “Because of a great earthquake the earth trembled intensively and many walls fell” [List 1014a/19]. In another record we find:

On Thursday 14 July 1485 at dawn, there was a great earthquake that broke up the pagoda into several pieces. As a result the whole pagoda fell to the level of the flower alter (which was not very high above the ground) [List 1014b/10].

2) Using Irwin’s Tables all Burmese dates are given AD equivalents.
In another record the cause of the destruction of old buildings was clearly stated:
At Ava the Capital and at Pagan, Pañ̄ya and Cakuin: which were nearby, various religious monuments, together with many libraries where copies of the Pitaka were kept, were destroyed by non-believers (who came to loot and plunder) [List 1073b/8]. These non-believers were the Shans of the north, whom we know were converted to Buddhism by the middle of the 16th century. Towards the end of the 16th century large-scale looting of pagoda relic chambers occurred again in lower Burma. This time it was the Portuguese who did the looting [Mhannan 1829(III): 169].

At the end of an important social activity or a business transaction, a kind of feast was usually given to celebrate the occasion. During the whole of the Pagan period and for some time after the fall of Pagan, plenty of meat and fermented drinks called “sīy” were consumed at such feasts. Arak, the distilled alcoholic liquor, was introduced into Burma by the second quarter of the 16th century and the downfall of King Man:tarə:rhwethî: was attributed to the fact that he became an alcoholic [Mhannan 1829(II): 252–253]. It seems that Buddhism was able effectively to suppress this important social custom of drinking liquor in public. Eating the pickled tea called Labhak, which was probably a Shan custom, took the place of alcohol. At law courts, when both parties were happy about the judgement, they took tea together.

Now I would like to mention two important religious movements that enormously changed the society. One was a reformation in the Order of Buddhist Monks that was carried out during the last quarter of the 15th century and the other was the extension of Buddhism to the people of north and northeastern Burma during the middle of the 16th century. The reformation was carried out by King Rāmađhipati (1472–1492), known popularly as Dhammadeti [Pe Maung Tin 1958a], who was a Buddhist monk in his early life.

He could recite by rote the Three Pitaka and Weda. He was well versed in the texts of Witak, Byakaruin, Chan:, Alaṅkā and Che:bindo. He was also skilled in the arts of masonry and carpentry.

He had a high opinion of the religion of Śrīlaṅkā and sent several senior monks from his capital to be reordained there.

From its very beginning, the Buddhist Sect of Mahāvihāra (in Śrīlaṅkā) had had a line of venerable monks. Some monks from Rāmaṇa went there (and joined that sect). With revered senior monks of that sect as upājīhāya, they were ordained at the Udakukkhapa Sima on the bank of the Kalyāṇī river where the Buddha himself had bathed (when he visited Śrīlaṅkā). In this way these monks brought back the pure lineage of monks of the (Mahāvihāra Sect of Śrīlaṅkā) to Rāmaṇa. They in their own turn became upājīhāya and ordained new monks.

Now on 21 January 1476 the king invited the Most Reverend Moggalana to his palace and consulted him on how best he should carry out a reformation with Singhalese
help. As a result 10 senior monks went to Śrīlaṅkā. On 16 July 1476 they were reordained as Buddhist monks in Śrīlaṅkā. They came back and reached ṇamsāvatī on 12 October 1476. A site for a new ordination hall was selected on 22 November 1476 and when the hall was built, it was named the Kalyāṇī Śima. Various other Śima were constructed and consecrated throughout the kingdom and there were 15,666 new monks ordained altogether. The king made two special requests to all the senior monks who would lead the community of the new order of monks. Firstly that no one who had been punished by the king for being guilty of a crime or who was reputed to be a thief or who had a serious physical deformity should be accepted as a candidate for monkhood. Secondly he requested that the leaders expel the following from the community of monks.

1. Those who practised medicine.
2. Those who practised astrology and alchemy.
3. Those who painted or dyed clothes.
4. Those who carved wood.
5. Those who were engaged in one form or another of those occupations that an ordinary man would do for his livelihood.
6. Those who sang songs as part of a discourse on the Religion.
7. Those who begged agricultural products that could be stored up for later consumption instead of begging food daily for immediate consumption.
8. Those who sought the company of lay people.
9. Those who were already rich through trade, etc., though still kept up the pretence of being monks.

This second request of his was in accord with the prescriptions of the Vinaya but his first request had no real Buddhist sense in it. Obviously he disliked having anti-feudal elements in the Order of Monks.

The movement to extend Buddhism to the Shans of north and northeastern Burma was instigated by another king. ṇamsāvatī Chaṅphurhas was in fact a usurper who began his attempt to become king early in 1551. On 11 January 1551 he seized Tonni, on 30 August 1551 Pran, on 12 March 1552 ṇamsāvatī and on 22 January 1555 Ava. He then started a campaign in the north and northeast on 9 November 1556. When Mongmit, the Ruby Land, was taken on 10 January 1557, the king had a pagoda constructed and the chief and his subjects were converted to Buddhism. From there he marched north again. He and his army crossed the Erāvatī using a boat-bridge at Thikhyin on 20 February 1557 and he took Mui: khan on 6 March 1557. Mui: ko:, another Shan centre, was taken on 26 March 1557. The Shans were animists and at the death of a chief, his favourite wives, servants and pet animals were killed and buried with him. The king passed an order on 2 April 1557 to the effect that this custom was intolerable in his territories and should be stopped at once. Whilst Shans who had been living among the Burmans before and after the fall of Pugam might have been Buddhists from about the 10th century, during the reign of a Shan chief from
Mui:ñhañ: who ruled Ava temporarily from 1526, treasures from many pagoda relic chambers were looted. And, considering monastic establishments centres of potential enemies, Suihambhwa, the then conqueror of Ava carried out a massacre of monks in 1539 [Mhannan 1829(II): 142]. Now the king’s order prohibiting this horrible custom was to have a profound influence over the people living in the northern, northeastern and central parts of Burma. From about the middle of the 16th century all the people of Burma were politically unified under the rule of a strong king and as a result of Hamsāvati Cāna-phurhān’s conversions all of them embraced the same faith, Buddhism, so that living together would now be much easier.

In conclusion, we find Burma in the 16th century was passing through a difficult phase of its development, when several different races of people were politically unified and Buddhism was introduced to all these races. This conversion to a single faith proved to be quite advantageous as it helped the people to live peacefully together and this certainly paved the way for a much better situation in the 17th century.

References


