
Notes

Social Life in Burma in the 16th Century

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The main source materials for this paper are the stone inscriptions in Burmese found largely at *Ava*, *Pañ:ya* and *Cakuin* (near *Mantale*, on both sides of the big river *Erāvatī* [*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 *Toññū* respectively as their centres, another in lower Burma with *Hāmsāvatī* as its centre and the fourth on the western coastal strip of *Rakhuin* with *Mrok U* as its centre. The kings ruling at *Ava* were: *Rhwenan: kyoau*, *rhañ* (1501–1527), *Suihambhwā:* (1527–1542), *Un:bhoñ Khunmuin:* (1542–1545), *Mui:brai Narapati* (1545–1551) and *Cakuin: Cañsū Kyoua Thañ* (1551–1555); at *Toññū: Mahāsīrijeyasūra* (1485–1530) and *Mañ:tarā:rhwethī:* (1530–1551); and at *Hāmsāvatī: Bañā:rañ* (1522–1526), *Surhañtakārwatpi* (1526–1539), *Mañ:tarā: rhwethī:* (1530–1551; he conquered *Hāmsāvatī* and made it his capital in 1539), *Hāmsāvatī Rhañphurrañ* (1554–1581) and *Nā:chu Dāyakā* (1581–1599).

The Burmese did not occupy a large area at this time. According to the *Cakuin:*

Ratanācetī 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 *Erāvatī, Panroñ, Panloñ* and *Khyañ: 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 *Erāvatī, Khyañ: twañ:, Mrañcay* and *Mū:*. In the *Ratanābimhan* 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 *Erāvatī* runs in the centre with *Sunāparanta* to the north and *Tambadīpa* 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 / *Sampyaṅ* [*List* 1045/58; 64; 66]
 Clerk Junior / *Cakhī, Cakhīy* [*List* 978b/

18]
 Clerk Senior / *Cāre:* [*List* 1014/40; 1043/29]
 Governess / *Athin:toau* [*List* 1040a/4; 1055a/6]
 Guard / *Kuiwraṅ* [*List* 1014/27]
 Holder of Town in Fief / *Mrui, Cā:* [*List* 1055a/9]
 Horse Messenger / *Mrañ: Lhyaṅ* [*List* 1050/65]
 Inner Group Chief / *Atwaṅ: saṅ: mhū:* [*List* 1037a/5]
 Inner Three Thousand Chief / *Atwaṅ:-sum: thoṅmhū:* [*List* 1057a/7]
 Land Officer / *Mretuiṅ* [*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 Sūkrī:* [*List* 981a/7]
 Privileged Man or Noble / *Sukoṅ:* [*List* 981a/7]
 Reservoir Chief / *Kan Puiṅ* [*List* 1043/7]
 Steward / *Bhaṅṭā Cuiw* [*List* 978b/18; 1045/63]
 Supreme Leader of Monks / *Samgharāja* [*List* 1005/8]
 Three Thousand Boats Chief / *Lhoaukā: Sum: thoṅ Mhū:* [*List* 1037a/6]
 Town Chief / *Mruiw, Sūkrī:* [*List* 1002/23]
 Village Chief / *Rwā Sūkrī:* [*List* 1001/33; 1014/25]
 Village Controller / *Rwā Kai* [*List* 1045/63]
 Village Ruler / *Rwā Maṅ:* [*List* 978b/18]

Worker / *Amhu Lup* [List 1014/27]

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 [List 995/7].

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 (Just ignore him.) [List 995/15].

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 / *Acwat Khwan* [List 1045/68] on the products of rivers and lakes and the Dry Tax / *Akhrok Khwan* [List 1045/68] 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 sesamum, to collect cotton, bamboo, pelts and to enjoy certain commission fees [List 995/11-14].

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]

Kharañ [List 949a/25]

Khyañ: [List 958a/5; 963a/21; b/11]

Krwañ [List 963b/52; 54; 55; 1014b/40]

Kulā: [List 934b/24]

Lankhrow [List 963a/38]

Lawa [List 934a/23; 943b/15]

Mranmā Kan Ū inscription b/17

Mrun [List 963a/21; b/11]

Nāga Rañ On Mrañ inscription/8

Panse: [List 963a/21; b/11]

Pasañ [List 963a/25]

Pa Uiw [List 963a/38]

Phrum Nakya Kan Ū inscription b/17

Poñloñ [List 947a/36]

Prow Rañ On Mrañ inscription/18 and 34

Puiw Cetilha inscription b/34

Pyū [List 963b/53; 55; 1050/7]

Rakhuñ Kan Ū inscription b/17

Rokchwai Kan Ū 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]

Toñsū 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 / *Laksamā*: [*List* 981a/23; 1014b/26]
 Carrier of the Sick and Wounded / *Sūnā Tham*: [*List* 1045b/6]
 Cowherd / *Nwā*: *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 / *Lañkhwañ*: *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 / *Chuiñ*: *Wuiñ*: *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 / *Sikhrañ*: *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 *pay*¹⁾ 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*: *Sī*: [*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 / *Kharam*: [*List* 1014b/18]
 Eugenia / *Sapre* [*List* 1050/70]
 Foetid *Sterculia* / *Lakkhup* [*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.

- Heritiera attenuata* / *Kanacui*: [*List* 1014b/18]
Holarrhena antidysenterica / *Lakthut* [*List* 1014a/48]
 Lily / *Krā* [*List* 1005/47; 52]
 Lime / *Samparā* [*List* 1014b/18]
 Mango / *Sarak* [*List* 1014b/18]
Mesua pedunculata / *Kam koau* [*List* 1014b/18]
 Millet / *Chapswā*: [*List* 1045/44]
 Olive / *Samlwan* [*List* 1050/19]
 Palmyra Palm / *Than*: [*List* 1014b/18]
 Pine / *Thañ: rū*: [*List* 1050/46]
 Pomegranate / *Salai, Talañ* [*List* 1014b/18]
Pterocarpus indicus, Gumkino Tree / *Pitok* [*List* 1050/70]
 Rice / *Capā*: [*List* 981a/7; 25]
 Rice, Early / *Koklyañ* [*List* 1045/64]
 Rice, Husked / *Chan* [*List* 1045/69]
 Rice, Late / *Kokkr̄*: [*List* 1045/64]
 Rice, Rainy Season / *San* [*List* 1001/28]
 Rice, Spring / *Murañ*: [*List* 1001/28]
Shorea siamensis / *Ankran*: [*List* 1014b/18]
 Sugar Cane / *Kram* [*List* 1045/60]
 Tea / *Laphak* [*List* 1045/29; 40]
 Tobacco / *Che*: (AD 1485) [*List* 1014a/48]
 Yam / *Saṅdwe*: [*List* 1050/63]

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 *Th̄*: (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 1485²⁾ 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 *Pugaṃ*, *Pañ:ya* and *Cakuñ:* which were nearby, various religious monuments, together with many libraries where copies of the *Piṭaka* 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 “*siy*” 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 *Mañ: tarā: rhwethī:* 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 enor-

mously 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 *Rāmādhipati* (1472–1492), known popularly as *Dhammaceti* [Pe Maung Tin 1958a], who was a Buddhist monk in his early life.

He could recite by rote the Three *Piṭaka* and *Weda*. He was well versed in the texts of *Witak*, *Byākaruñ*, *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 *Rāmañña* went there (and joined that sect). With reverend senior monks of that sect as *upajjhāya*, they were ordained at the *Udakukkhapa Sīma* 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 *Rāmañña*. They in their own turn became *upajjhāya* 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 Śrīlāṅkā. On 16 July 1476 they were reordained as Buddhist monks in Śrīlāṅkā. They came back and reached *Hamsāvati* 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 Sīma*. Various other *Sīma* 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. *Hamsāvati Chaṅphrūrhañ* was in fact a usurper who began his attempt to become king early in 1551. On 11 January 1551 he seized *Toññū*, on 30 August 1551 *Prañ*, on 12 March 1552 *Hamsāvati* 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 *Erāvati* using a boat-bridge at *Thī: khyuiñ* on 20 February 1557 and he took *Mui: ñhañ*: on 6 March 1557. *Mui: koñ*:, 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: ṅhaṅ: who ruled *Ava* temporarily from 1526, treasures from many pagoda relic chambers were looted. And, considering monastic establishments centres of potential enemies, *Suihambhwā:*, 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 Chāṅ-phrūrhaṅ*'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.

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