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OVERSHADOWED BY *KALA*

INDIA-BURMA RELATIONS

ABSTRACT

India seems to fit well with Burma. Long common history, deep cultural relations, similar heritage and geographic proximity – all this should help to upgrade India-Burma relations. There is, however, one major obstacle: a historical and cultural burden, which can be summarized by the Burmese name for Indians: *kala*. Literally *kala* means “alien,” but at present it refers to Indians only. In Burmese conditions it has a wider, metaphorical meaning: something between “unwanted,” “hated” and “despicable.” In this sense, *kala* is a cultural phenomenon, a kind of “burdensome heritage” that influences the political relations between India and Burma. In this way, *kala* still looms large on the horizon of India-Burma relations blocks their development.

Keywords: *kala*, Burma, Myanmar, India, India-Burma relations

In this article I will use international relations theory, in particular the neorealist's perspective, complemented in some aspects by liberal and constructivist way of thinking, respectively. There are two meta-schools of international relations theory, though they differ fundamentally in the conception of the nature of politics. The first one – known by quite a few names, but usually as liberalism – believes that a rational and moral political order, derived from universal values, can be achieved in this world. It believes in the essential goodness of human nature, and blames the failure of the social order to fit up with the ideal standards on lack of knowledge, imperfect social institutions or wrong doings of certain individuals or groups. Therefore, it trusts in knowledge, science, education and – sometimes – in use of force to repair these defects. Realism is its contradiction. It believes that the world, as mankind, is imperfect and full of contradictions – opposing interests and conflicts. In this approach, the interests, not values, constitute the core of politics and – therefore – moral principles cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract universal formulation, but must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place, which means that the moral principles cannot be fully realized. Realism, in spite of believing in any universal values, puts trust in a system of check and balances – *aims at the realization of the lesser evil than the absolute good*.¹ These two meta-schools of international relations are being challenged by another one – constructivism. This school focuses on ideas and their influence on international relations; it believes that *international politics is shaped by persuasive ideas, collective values, culture, and social identities*.² In other words, constructivism believes that it is ideas (goals, threats, fears, identities etc.) that shape the international system.

To understand the political thinking of Burmese elites one needs to use the (neo) realistic approach, for Burma's military men-turned-state builders think and act entirely in a realistic manner. Colonel Maung Maung's words from the 1950s illustrate that thesis. He criticized the then-Prime Minister U Nu's politics by saying *U Nu thinks we can make friends with everybody [...] Friendliness is okay but we need to have a big stick*.³ Since *Tatmadaw's* (Burmese army) successful coup d'état in 1962, Burma's policy, including policy towards India, has entirely been shaped by realistic approach.

On the other hand, liberalism is essential to understand India's foreign policy, particularly after independence. Gandhi's moral approach towards politics was enhanced by Jawaharlal Nehru and his idealistic attitude which is still strongly (although not exclusively) present in Indian political thinking – and – consequently in New Delhi's politics towards Burma (most obviously after the 1988 protests). Liberalism in international relations theory also explains the political agenda of Burma's democratic opposition, with particular and striking example of Aung San Suu Kyi.

¹ H. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Boston 2006, p. 3.

² E. Adler, 'Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics,' *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1997), p. 319, at <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1354066197003003003>>.

³ M. Callahan, *Making Enemies. War and State Building in Burma*, Ithaca, N.Y. 2003, p. 162.

Finally, constructivism helps to understand the key concept in this work – *kala*. In accordance with the constructivist approach it can be understood as a cultural phenomenon, as an idea that shapes – or at least influences – the Burmese politics towards India. Although it is quite difficult to conceptualize the term *kala*, on the other hand it is quite easy to show its significance and – consequently – repercussions for India-Burma relations. They are, to put it simply, still overshadowed by *kala*.

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Burma's relations with India are almost as old as Burma itself. According to *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma* – the most comprehensive (but not reliable) Burmese chronicle, written in the nineteenth century – the first kingdom in Burma was founded in the early first century BC by an Indian refugee, Sakiyan prince named Abhiraza, a direct descendant of Gautama Buddha. According to *The Glass Palace*, Abhiraza left India after a violent conflict, went eastwards and founded Tagaung, the first Burmese capital.⁴ Although this story is almost certainly a myth, it reveals the great influence that India had on Burma in the first centuries BC. India was by far the most important source of foreign cultural and religious inspiration. The Indian merchants and princes travelled to the east in search of gold and glory – it is them who called South-east Asia *Suvanabhumi*, or the “Golden Land” (the name Burma likes to refer to itself until now). The Indian impact, called afterwards “Indianization,” was overwhelming. Although they did not colonize these lands (rather mixed with the existing population in a peaceful way), it is them who created the first socio-political structures in the region. Burma was where the kingdom of Pyu – or Sri Kestra as it was known then – remained, which can be compared to ancient Greek city-states. Pyu's pagodas remind those of South India. Pyu's rulers styled themselves *Vikram* and *Varman* (*Vikram*, or valor, a title used by contemporary Indian Guptas, *Varman*, or protector, name used by Indian Pallavas). In general, *the countries of the region, from Burma to Bali, were known to Europeans as Farther India and scholars referred to the Indianized states of Southeast Asia [...] for centuries this vast area was profoundly influenced by its connections with Indian civilization, from notions of kingship to cosmology to literature.*⁵

India's most far-reaching impact was religion – Buddhism. Again, the most important legends about the beginnings of Buddhism in Burma do mention India. It was in India where Buddha was supposed to meet the Burmese merchants and gave them his eight hairs on which the holiest Burmese shrine – Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon – was later build. According to another legend, Buddha himself went to Burma a few times (but never crossed the Irrawaddy River). It is believed that during one of his trips he climbed a hill in Northern Burma and prophesied that in the 2400th year of his

⁴ *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma*, trans. by Pe Maung Tin and G.H. Luce, Rangoon 1960, pp. 1-6.

⁵ Thant Myint-U, *Where China Meets India. Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia*, New York 2011, p. 240.

faith a great city would be founded below that hill. By our calendar that 2400th year was 1857 – the year the then-King Mindon announced the plan to create a new capital, Mandalay (the very fact that this prophecy has been founded short before the announcement of Mindon's decision rises suspicion to its reliability). Finally, Burma was supposed to receive some of Emperor's Asoka missionaries that preached the new religion in the every corner of his dominion.

These stories are of course only legends, but they reveal the extent of Indian influence and – particularly – the very fact that Buddhism came to Burma from India. It is unclear how it reached Burma (via land from Northern India, or – more likely – via sea from South India or/and Ceylon) and when (in the fourth-sixth century AC it was probably first introduced in the kingdom of Mon, to the south of 'Burma proper'),⁶ but the fact that the many inhabitants of Irrawaddy Valley have converted to Buddhism is *the single most important development in Burma's long history*.⁷ Since the reign of the Pagan king Anawrahta (eleventh century), founder of the First Burmese Empire, Buddhism became the state religion of Burma,⁸ and with time – the most important pillar of not only political order in Burma, but until now also the most important aspect of the social life there.⁹

In Burma no one questions the Indian origins of Buddhism, but the attitude towards India changed with the demise of Buddhism there. The image of India as the homeland of religion and culture was replaced by the notion that it degenerated itself, brushed aside the true religion and – as a result – has been conquered by foreign powers. The only true heir to the great tradition of Buddhism was therefore Burma, and this assumption, combined with growing self-assertiveness and political expansionism of Burma's last dynasty, Konbaung (1752-1885) led to the failed attempt to invade India. For Burmese monarchs whose legitimization and future incarnations depended on collecting merits, the dream of conquering India was too tempting to be refrained: *the restoration of Buddhism to the Buddha's own homeland was perhaps the greatest merit-exercise the Konbaung rulers could imagine*.¹⁰ This political adventurism led to defeat, the fall of the dynasty and the conquest of Burma from the hands of another *kala* – until-then unknown – the British.

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Until the nineteenth century the world known to the Burmese consisted of five overarching categories of people: Myanma (Burmese), Tayok (Chinese), Shan, Mon and

⁶ G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma. From the Earliest Times to 10 March 1824, the Beginning of English Conquest*, London 1983 (reprint from 1925), pp. 1-21.

⁷ Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps. A Personal History of Burma*, New York 2008, p. 51.

⁸ M. Aung-Thwin, M. Aung-Thwin, *A History of Myanmar since Ancient Times*, London 2012, pp. 83-85.

⁹ More see: M. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society. A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes*, Berkeley 1982, pp. 191-425.

¹⁰ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, New York 2001, p. 94.

Kala.¹¹ Three of these (Myanma, Shan and Mon) compromised people who lived in Irrawaddy valley (Arakanese were classified as Myanma, whereas all the Thai people were seen as Shan, as well as Kachin or Khmer), the forth – Tayok – meant Han Chinese and beyond. People from these four categories were seen as insiders. The fifth category, *kala*, was the broadest and most distinctive one. In the early-nineteenth-century Burma it roughly meant an “overseas person” – somebody from South Asia, West Asia or Europe and beyond. The root of this name is believed to be *ku la* meaning either “to cross over (the Bay of Bengal)”.¹² *Kala* included a variety of Indians (mostly Bengalis), Persians, Armenians, Jews, Portuguese, Dutch, English and French – for the Burmese they were all quite similar. *Kala*’s religion was Islam. This ethnic category existed before the first Europeans arrived in Burma, so they were fitted into an existing category – *they were viewed as “Indians,” different from say Gujaratis and Tamils, but no more different from either of those people than they were from each other.*¹³ Europeans were a sub-group of *Kalas*, initially labeled *bayingyi* (Burmese corruption of Arabic *feringhi*, or Frank) – this term at first applied to Portuguese, and then to all Catholics. The newly arrived English were simply named English *Kala* (*Ingaleit kala*), or *Bilat Kala* (*Bilat*, a Burmese corruption of Mughal name *Wilayat*, or province, came to mean all the countries of the “far west” and specifically Britain) or – more commonly – *thosaung kala* (“sheep-wearing *kala*”), a reference to their woolen clothes and hats. They were regarded quite low in the hierarchy of *Kalas*.¹⁴

This underestimation had negative consequences for the Burmese monarchy. Although the King’s spies tried to warn the King against the British incomers – comparing them to a banyan tree which leaks on others at first, but then drains the life from all around – their warnings were ignored. Consequently, Burma had been colonized in the three subsequent wars (1824/26, 1852 and 1885). It was during colonial times that the new meaning of *kala*, in the pejorative sense, came to mean Indians only.

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The British never exactly built a colonial state; they simply copied it from India. Once conquered, Burma became India’s appendix. It was officially incorporated into India in 1886 as a province, not as a separate colony (a deeply humiliating fact for the Burmese, who not only lost independence but also their national status in the colonial hierarchy).¹⁵ Moreover, Indian thinking dominated in British rule. The Indian model of administration and the bureaucrats to run it were conscripted from India

¹¹ “Chin” was an occasional extra category and “Shan” and “Tayok” were sometimes merged, *ibid.*, p. 88.

¹² M. Yegar, *Muslims of Burma. A Study of a Minority Group*, Wiesbaden 1972, pp. 111, 36, 37, 29, 30, 32.

¹³ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, p. 89.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Only in 1937 the British did separated Burma from India and gave it a colony status. It was much too late, though.

and transferred to Burma. Consequently, Burma was governed in a typical British Indian way, with a governor at the top and then a hierarchy of divisional commissioners, district deputy commissioners and subdivisional officers running the country, collecting taxes and dispensing justice based on the legal system from India which was grafted onto Burmese law. These officers were usually Indian, relatively professional, modern bureaucrats tested in India, who suited colonial purposes well. This meant that Indians comprised most of colonial administration and, therefore, the colonial state for an ordinary Burmese was usually associated with the face of an Indian clerk.

The reason of copying the Indian administrative system resulted from the nature of the British conquest of Burma. Although colonial forces easily won the Third Anglo-Burmese War (1885), once they removed the last Burman king, Thibaw, deported him to India and abolished monarchy, a mass popular uprising broke out. To deal with it, the British used the merciless tactics of scorched earth, massive killings and cutting heads of suspicious villagers.¹⁶ Furthermore, to break the resistance, the British pacification forces introduced the Village Act under martial law. The Act broke up traditional local-level administrative organizations (non-territorial ties of the indigenous social units, *myo*) and replaced it with Indian administration and territorial grid of the village. This caused the destruction of the social and cultural fabric of late-nineteenth-century Burma.¹⁷ The implementation of central, bureaucratic government had far-fetching consequences for an ordinary Burmese: *even up to 1,900 the people saw little of any Government officials, and very few ever caught more than a passing glimpse of a European official. By 1923 the Government was no longer remote from the people but, through various department subordinates, touched on almost every aspect of private life.*¹⁸

It touched and changed it, – to the despoisement of the Burmese – and *most of the subordinate officials were regarded as agents of oppression.*¹⁹ Generally, the colonial period in the eyes of the Burmese was considered as a period of “order without meaning.”²⁰ “The British Leviathan,” as the colonial state was called,²¹ a Western superstructure put on the Burmese social life – brought modernity to Burma, but not as a way of social progress, but as an instrument of foreign occupation and economic exploitation. The profits from trade and extraction of natural resources accrued not to the Burmese, but to the British; the salaries of British and Indian administration were also remitted to England or India, whereas the wages of Indian laborers were also sent back to their rela-

¹⁶ Ch. Crosshwaite, *The Pacification of Burma*, London 1912, pp. 19-80.

¹⁷ M. Callahan, *Making Enemies...*, p. 23.

¹⁸ J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice. A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*, New York 1956, p. 77.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ M. Aung-Thwin, ‘British “Pacification” of Burma: Order without Meaning,’ *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (1985), p. 245.

²¹ A term introduced by John Furnivall, the most important colonial historian on Burma, J.S. Furnivall, ‘The Fashioning of the Leviathan,’ *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1939), pp. 1-137.

tions in India – *in other words, the Burmese candle was being burned at both sides.*²² The British introduced modernity to Burma, no doubt. It meant economic progress, creating transportation lines, introducing technological inventions, connecting the country with the external world etc. Colonialism, too, removed many injustices of the old system and introduced economic liberty. On the other hand, it undermined all elements of Burmese social structure. It made people rich for a while, but it took away their state and their world. It took the Burmese some time to realize what they lost. Before, they had their own state, full of injustices and cruelty, but it belonged to them. The colonialists created in its place a “British Leviathan” – a structure much more efficient, no doubt, but a one that regulated and stepped into all aspects of social life. Thus, colonialism annihilated the social order and atomized the society, defenseless against the power of market forces. The Burmese had been losing their lands and jobs, falling into debt and eventually became completely excluded. John Furnivall, the most important colonial historian of Burma summarized it by saying that *British rule only opened up Burma to the world and not the world to Burma*, the Burman was forced to live a modest life, his culture and religion degraded, he was unable to carry on his social, trade and industrial roles – due to colonial changes his social life impoverished, not improved, and he *remained imprisoned in a dying civilization.*²³

The Indians were an irremovable part of the colonial superstructure; in fact it was built on them. From the very beginning of the colonial rule, the Burmese considered British administration an occupying force and were reluctant to join the colonial administration. The colonial policy did not help this matter either: *establishment of law and order increasingly became based on conceptions of the population as enemies to be pacified rather than subjects to be incorporated into or even ignored by the newly defined political entity.*²⁴ As the British needed somebody to handle the administration, they simply imported Indians – *The British never built a colonial state in Burma; they merely packed up some components of administration in India and shipped them to the new territory [...]* *Colonial administration sailed over from the other three provinces of India, complete with English-speaking, mostly civilian Indian personnel to operate it.*²⁵ The administration became Indianized for one main reason: employing Indians instead of the Burmese was a cost-saving option. It was always cheaper and less troublesome to import inexpensive, English-speaking, already trained Indian employees, accustomed to the European way of administration, than to train the Burmese the Western methods of governance. This was true not only about public service, but about almost all aspects of modern life – *in the administration, commerce and industry, it was less trouble and usually cheaper to recruit Indians than to train Burmese; and Indians, once they get a footing, naturally tended*

²² Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma*, New York 1967, p. 273.

²³ *The life of the ordinary native is similarly incomplete. He is a cultivator and nothing more. Under native rule the people lived within a little world, but their cultural horizon was co-extensive with its boundaries; under western rule their horizon is contracted to their life as cultivators and their social life is less comprehensive than before* – J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice...*, p. 299 and 307.

²⁴ M. Callahan, *Making Enemies...*, p. 16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

to build up an almost insurmountable barrier against the admission of Burmans.²⁶ As the British were building modern Burma – for it is them who founded the first *state* in Burma in a Western understanding of this word²⁷ – they needed cadres in administration, business enterprises, transportation etc. Indians were an obvious choice – they were cheap, lived nearby, and – in the eyes of the British – they were quite similar to the Burmese. Consequently, colonial administration encouraged, and at the beginning even subsidized, the influx of Indian labor.²⁸ Therefore, the most important social aspect of the British opening Burma up to the global world was Indian migration. The Indians saw Burma as a land of great opportunity, so they arrived in big numbers.

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For centuries, people had been moving across the Bay of Bengal, between Burma and India. Indian merchants were permanently present in Rangoon. Indian scholars lived in Burmese towns, and Brahmans conducted court rituals and determined the most auspicious time for all kingly actions, and – for ordinary people – presided over important ceremonies such as weddings and ear-piercings but most notably in Thingyan, the Burmese New Year festival.²⁹ Finally, many Burmese dishes and breads were a result of Indian influence.

Nevertheless, the Indian presence was insignificant in the social sphere. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century this changed significantly – Indian migration had become “a flood”: Burma witnessed a mass influx of Indians – millions made the journey with great hopes for easy money and a better life. Burma offered more jobs and higher income, a growing and dynamic economy and a place full of opportunities: *a sort of frontier where anything was possible and lives could be remade – for Indians Burma was the first America, the land of opportunity and new beginning*.³⁰ The numbers of Indian migrants rose steadily – in the peak year of 1927 immigration reached 480,000.³¹ Rangoon then exceeded New York City as the greatest immigration port in the world.³² At the start of World War II, 5%³³ to 16% of the population of Burma was

²⁶ J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*..., p. 118.

²⁷ G.E. Harvey, *British Rule in Burma 1824-1942*, London 1946, pp. 4-16.

²⁸ N.R. Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma. Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community*, London 1971, pp. 8-14. The first Indian brought to Burma by the British was Bahadur Shah Zafar, or “the last Mughal,” whom the British killed almost all his family and deported him to Rangoon where he died, more on him, see: W. Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal. The Fall of a Dynasty. Delhi 1857*, New York 2006.

²⁹ S. Yoe, *The Burman. His Life and Notions*, New York (reprint from 1882), p. 436, 249-251, 348, 450 (Norton Library, N212).

³⁰ Thant Myint-U, *The River*..., p. 185.

³¹ N.R. Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma*..., pp. 8-20.

³² M.W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma*, Cambridge 2009, p. 19.

³³ N.R. Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma*..., p. 22 (Chakravarti excludes Arakan in his estimation).

ethnically Indian.³⁴ The Indians *flooded in to exploit the resources of the country and to take up posts for which no trained Burmans were available*, as one colonial servant noted.³⁵ The colonial government ignored the problem – *the obvious measure the government should have taken was to restrict the immigration, but again it refused to recognize the separate identity of the Burmese, as Burma was merely an Indian province, it seemed only right that Indians should come and go at will*.³⁶ Moreover, Indians quickly filled the niches that appeared once the British opened the Burmese market to the world. Finance is a good example. Indians, contrary to the Burmese, had long done business with European banks and understood the methods of business (e.g. how to obtain credit), so they came to function as middlemen between the English and the Burmese.³⁷ The most obvious example was the *Chettyars*.

The Chettyars were a Hindu caste from South India, precisely nearby Madras, well known for their financial dealings, business ability and cleverness. They went to Burma and participated in the colonization of the Irrawaddy Delta – an unprecedented enterprise in the nineteenth-century history, comparable only to the conquest of the Wild West. Burma's openness to the world provided a certain and profitable market for Burmese rice (Burma became world's largest exporter of rice). Everyone rushed to Delta and took as much land as he could.³⁸ They, however, needed money to buy tools needed for cutting the jungle and cultivating the fields. The Burmese lacked the necessary funds and had no access to capital. They knew neither English language nor English banking method, and English bankers knew nothing of Burmans or cultivation. But in the ports there were Chettyars. They had capital and were accustomed to dealing with Western banks in India. Starting in 1880s they began to supply the people with all necessary capital. At that time very few cultivators were in debt, but Chettyars *readily supplied the cultivators with all the money that they needed, and with more than all they needed*.³⁹ The cultivator took all that he could get and spent the surplus on imported goods. Everything went smooth as long as the crops were good. But at the first reverse (failure of the crop, death of the cattle, fluctuation of rice price etc.), the cultivator was sold out, land passed to a Chettyar who found some other thrifty laborer to take it, leaving part of the purchase price on mortgage. Within two or three years the process was repeated.⁴⁰ Consequently, many Chettyars in less than a generation became immensely rich. Moreover, the Burmese had to compete with Indian laborers who came in thousands and were able to undercut the Burmese by accepting

³⁴ J. Christian, 'Burma,' *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 226 (1943), pp. 120-128.

³⁵ Quoted in J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice...*, p. 116.

³⁶ M. Htin Aung, 'British "Pacification"...', p. 273.

³⁷ N.R. Chakravati, *The Indian Minority in Burma...*, pp. 20-29.

³⁸ M. Adas, *The Burma Delta. Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier 1854-1941*, Madison 1974, pp. 5-24.

³⁹ J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice...*, p. 86.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

lower wages.⁴¹ Generally, *the system encouraged bad cultivation, because an inferior cultivator would bid higher than a man who could earn good wages as a laborer – it likewise expedited the substitution of Indian for Burman tenant, for Indians, though they got less out of the land than Burmans, could offer a higher rent on account for their lower standard of living.*⁴² As a result, in the 1920s and 1930s only less than half of land was held by non-agriculturalist, and Chettyars alone had a quarter of it. The Delta was in a state of constant unrest, the mass of people were steadily growing poorer, and the social relations between the inhabitants were sour. As a Government Report from 1920 concluded, the social conditions in Delta *would furnish an ideal example for any philosopher desirous of expounding the homo homini lupus theory of mankind.*⁴³ Thus, the “epic bravery” and “greatest achievements in the history of Burma” – as colonial press praised the colonization of Delta, *ends with the picture of imposing Government offices and business houses in Rangoon, and gilded chettyar temples in Tanjore [...] while nearly half the land is owned by foreigners, and a landless people can show little for their labor but their debts.*⁴⁴ This resulted in bloody peasant uprisings, with the Saya San Rebellion being the most striking one.⁴⁵

The Chettyars were not the only ones. The Indians arrived in Burma as clerks, doctors, teachers and lawyers and formed the essential part of the new urban class. Other Indians arrived as coolies and seasonal workers.⁴⁶ The Administration Report from 1885 shows the steady increase in Indian migration: *a large number of natives of India are permanently settled in the seaports and large villages, and they have driven the Burman out of the more profitable fields of employment.*⁴⁷ Later this trend was even enhanced: postal and telegraph departments were managed from India – it was cheaper and less problematic to employ Indians. The same happened with post and telephone – up to the 1930s one could not use telephone without the command of Hindustani. Furthermore, all branches of engineering remained Indian for the same reason. In all branches of the public services Indians had a monopoly of employment. Indians found it easier than the Burmese to dominate the middle and lower echelon of commercial

⁴¹ M. Htin Aung, ‘British “Pacification”...’, p. 273.

⁴² J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice...*, p. 86.

⁴³ Myaungmya Settlement Report 1920, quoted in: *ibid.*, p. 94.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁴⁵ More on Saya San Rebellion, see: M. Aung Thwin, *The Return of the Galon King. History, Law and Rebellion in Colonial Burma*, Athens, OH 2011, pp. 23-76 (*Research in International Studies. Southeast Asia Series*, 124).

⁴⁶ N.R. Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma...*, pp. 8-22.

⁴⁷ *The money lending business of the country is in the hands of Chetties, the retail piece-good trade is chiefly in the hands of Suratis; the natives of India have also driven the Burman out of the field where hard manual labor is required; the coolies employed by the Public Works Department are almost exclusively Indian, the gharri drivers everywhere are chiefly Madrassis, the coolies on the wharves and at the railway stations are also natives of India, and natives of India are here and there settling down to permanent rice cultivation* – Regional Administration Report 1884, quoted in John S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice...*, p. 118.

and government position.⁴⁸ Hindustani emerged as the lingua franca of the colonial capital and *Europeans in government (and often even commercial) service were required to pass exam on this language and not Burmese.*⁴⁹ Burmans, apart from employment under Government (which was disliked), had to occupy themselves with agriculture for a living. In towns they were unable to compete with qualified Indian staff on top positions or cheap labor in manual work. The main reason of the mass employment of Indians was – again – their low cost. John Furnivall called this process “the survival of the cheapest”.⁵⁰ As a result, towns and cities of Burma became Indianized, with Rangoon as the most striking example: *The Burmese who attempted to make a life for themselves in Rangoon were the outsiders in a very real sense.*⁵¹ One colonial governor depicted the Indian share in Burma: *her military forces, her military police [...] her prison wardens, her clerks, her post office, her labor force are largely manned by the Indian races. In her capital, Rangoon, there are 190,000 Indians or nearly 60%.*⁵² In Rangoon, as well as many larger towns, such as Mandalay, Moulmein, Bassein, the Indian immigrants became a majority of the population. What is even more important – they constituted what was new in society – they occupied the most professional jobs and formed the urban working class – *The Burmese no longer had their kings and princes, soldiers and officials. And now they would not be commissioners and judges, the businessmen and bankers, or even shopkeepers and factory workers. What has been urban and cosmopolitan in old Burma had vanished. And what was modern in the new Burma was alien.*⁵³

British colonialism created a “racial pyramid.” The Europeans directed or controlled all large-scale enterprises. Indians manned the urban occupations and acted as middlemen between Europeans and Burman cultivator. The Burmese, with small exceptions, were confined to agriculture.⁵⁴ With time, this order evoked anger in the Burmese. At first, it was aimed at Indians.

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Until the twentieth century, ill-feeling and hostility towards Indians in general were absent in Burma. With the gradual strengthening of the colonial superstructure, the situation changed dramatically. It led to a break, which had never existed before, between

⁴⁸ E.g. Hindu Brahmins monopolized the cash departments of British companies, Ooriyas worked mainly in docks or on the railway; Tamils were field laborers, rice mills workers or governmental/commercial clerks; Chittagonians worked on the river boats and Telugus worked in factories, mills and transport, A. McCrae, *Scots in Burma. Golden Times in a Golden Land*, Edinburgh 1990, pp. 70-71.

⁴⁹ M.W. Charney, *A History...*, p. 34.

⁵⁰ *The whole trend of development illustrated the economic process of natural selection by the survival of the cheapest, justified in contemporary thought, and especially in the eyes of those who paid for labor, as the survival of the fittest* – J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice...*, p. 291.

⁵¹ M.W. Charney, *A History...*, p. 24.

⁵² R. Craddock, *The Dilemma in India*, London 1929, p. 128.

⁵³ Thant Myint-U, *The River...*, p. 187.

⁵⁴ R.H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, Singapore 2009, p. 126.

the Burmese and Indians. Already in the 1920s, according to colonial data, the Burmese were held to feel a "natural antipathy" to Indians.⁵⁵

Burmese antipathy towards Indians was based on economic and political reasons, combined with social aspects: *The Indian with his caste system was in some ways more foreign than the European, and Indian competition and the employment of Indians in the administration and in private enterprises were resented.* The Burmese dislike for Indians combined feelings of superiority and fear: *superiority because many Indians whom Burmese people came across were unskilled workers, menials and house servants, wretchedly poor and willing to do any job. Fear because of the sheer numbers but also the business acumen and success of so many.*⁵⁶

Burmese nationalist campaigns were led against Indians. Burmese nationalists (*thakins*, later they developed into state builders and dominated Burmese politics)⁵⁷ feared that the unrestricted flow of Indian immigrants would result in the extinction of their race, and opposed marriages between Burmese woman and Hindu or Muslim men.⁵⁸ The Indians came to symbolize the "second colonialist" and were blamed for most ill-doings of the colonial state. The reason for that was clear: the Burmese rarely had a daily contact with the British, but it was constant with Indians. It was the Indians who symbolized the colonial state (Leviathan) on the one hand, and – on the other – modernity. Both those connotations were negative. And both originated from British colonial policy: *being considered by the colonial administration as too backward for equal treatment with the Indians, as well as too lazy to compete with them for manual labor [...] Burmese easily associated their complaints against colonial rule with the Asian immigrant communities.*⁵⁹ In short, Indians were a convenient scapegoat for colonialism. This notion has been long-living; strengthened by the very fact that it was *thakins* (nationalists) who came to rule Burma after independence in 1948 and it is them who crafted historical discourse in Burma.

These ill-feelings led to ethnic tensions, particularly with the impact of the Great Depression. Riots, fights and communal clashes were common in the 1930s, particularly in Rangoon (in 1930 and in 1938), but not only. The mass migration of Bengalis into Arakan caused ethnic tensions that tear this province until now (with the well publicized ethno-religious conflict between Buddhist Arakanese and Muslim Rohingya).⁶⁰ In general, the ethnic relations between the Burmese and Indians, from friendly (or at least indifferent) evolved into hostile. All these circumstances contributed to the modification of the original *kala* name. Since the 1920s and particularly 1930s *kala* in Bur-

⁵⁵ J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice...*, p. 119.

⁵⁶ Thant Myint-U, *The River...*, p. 186.

⁵⁷ More on *thakins*: F.R. von der Mehden, *Religion and Nationalism in Southeast Asia. Burma, Indonesia and Philippines*, Madison 1963, pp. 60-80.

⁵⁸ D.M. Seekins, *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)*, Lanham, Md. 2006, p. 219 (*Historical Dictionaries on Asia, Oceania and the Middle East*).

⁵⁹ M.W. Charney, *A History...*, p. 23.

⁶⁰ I write more about this conflict in my book about ethnic question in Burma, M. Lubina, *Birma: centrum kontra peryferie. Kwestia etniczna we współczesnej Birmie 1948-2013* [Burma: Center versus Peripheries. The Ethnic Question in Contemporary Burma 1948-2013], Kraków 2014, pp. 243-250.

mese has been referred to Indians only – having a solely negative connotation. But this name bore (and until now bears) much more meaning than just the negative label of a specific group of foreigners. It was an emotional, hateful attitude towards those who were blamed for Burma's political dependence, economic exploitation and social plight. In short, *kala* in Burmese sounds like “Jew” for anti-Semites.

* * *

The Japanese approach on the eve of World War II was viewed with hope by the Burmese and with fear by Indians. Significant part of the Burmese nationalist movement did indeed collaborate with the Japanese. The Thakins joined hands with Tokyo and created a volunteer Burmese Independence Army (BIA) which fought alongside the Japanese Imperial Army.⁶¹ The Indians, on the other hand, were afraid of what might happen to them once the security umbrella of the colonial power is removed.

Once the Japanese attacked, in January 1942, a massive withdrawal began. The British Army suffered a humiliating defeat, later called euphemistically “the longest retreat.” But it was the Indians who suffered the most. A lot of them did not wait to see what happens once the Japanese arrive. They just packed their belongings and ran in the direction of Arakan. The colonial state collapsed in a day: police, hospitals staffs, municipal offices – all escaped: *the exodus stripped the countryside of police, jail attendants, clerks, medical officers, and aid raid wardens.*⁶² Those who escaped were in a desperate position – the British confiscated all means of transport, so more than a hundred thousand Indians were fleeing in whatever way they could, usually on foot: *entire families on foot or by bullock cart, their possessions piled high, and dying by thousand of hunger, disease, and exhaustion.*⁶³ Another hundred thousand were camped near Mandalay – the British allowed only five thousand a day to move on to the road in order not to block the retreating British Army. Those who arrived on the borders of Arakan were not in a much better position: *ahead there were no roads, only tracks, rivers of mud, flowing through green tunnels of jungle.*⁶⁴ No one knows how many died, but the number is likely in the tens of thousands. The total number of Indian refugees is estimated at around 350,000, during the entire war up to half a million Indians left Burma.

Nevertheless, the majority stayed. For a while it was a harsh time for them. Between January 1942 and July 1942 there was no direct control of the country.⁶⁵ In many villages it was the BIA units that took power and installed administration. There were inexperienced, but covered their lack of experience with brutality, which often meant killing the British, Indians, Chinese or ethnic minorities or stealing from their homes,

⁶¹ Maung Maung, *Burmese National Movements, 1940-1948*, Honolulu 1990, pp. 15-32.

⁶² D. Guyot, *The Political Impact on the Japanese Occupation*, Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University 1966, pp. 98-108.

⁶³ Thant Myint-U, *The River...*, p. 226.

⁶⁴ A. Gosh, *The Glass Palace*, London 2000, p. 468.

⁶⁵ D. Guyot, *The Political Impact...*, 98.

which was considered mere recovery of wealth originally squeezed by the colonialists.⁶⁶ This led to increasing anarchy in the countryside which forced the Japanese to remove the Thakins and install the central, imperial administration. So for Burma's Indians the rest of war went as for the majority of inhabitants. It was harsh – plight, poverty, famine, destruction etc. – but this was experienced by all the Burmese. There – save for individual cases – specific anti-Indian repressions no longer took place. The Indians were left alone, only the social dislike towards *kalas* remained.

The same can be said about the post-war and independence (1948) period. Many Indians left Burma for good – during and after World War II. Rangoon in the 1950s had a Burmese majority, but Indians were still a big part of the capital's professional and commercial class and a strong Indian presence across the country remained. The difficulties of everyday life experienced by Indians were similar to those of the Burmese. Although they were marginalized on the administrative level (the post-independence law regarded them as "resident alien," not citizen), there was no particular persecution or repression against them in everyday life. Their lives in post-independence Burma – as for the majority of Burmese – meant first and foremost economic hardship – rebuilding Burmese state from the post-war ashes while running the civil war became an impossible burden for the civilian government of U Nu. Once the world prices of rice collapsed in the late 1950s, U Nu's decline of power began.⁶⁷ Following the Burmese Army's second coup d'état in 1962, the power passed on to the hands of Tatmadaw's generals. This was not good news for Burmese Indians.

* * *

Prome, Central Burma, the 1930s, a young twenty-year-old Burmese boy called Shu Maung, comes back from a failed attempt to take up medicine studies in Rangoon. He is forced to look for a job, just as the full weight of the Great Depression descends upon Burma and just as ethnic tensions are turning into violence. He first turns to coal mining enterprise, which seems like a good decision. There are coal deposits near Prome, the coal is much cheaper than in Rangoon, and selling coal is a profitable business. He energetically sets up his little business, and works hard to make it operate and gain profit. Unfortunately, as he starts to stand on his feet, he is crashed by competition, all of which is Indian. He realizes he has no chance against their collective grip over the retail market. He gives up and remembers this bitter lesson.⁶⁸

Thirty years later, in 1962, Shu Maung is a different man. After his failed attempts in business, medicine and civil service, he became a soldier. Trained and shaped by the Japanese, he found army a model institution and soldiering – a perfect lifestyle. During the WWII he managed to become a skilful commander, and at the beginning of the

⁶⁶ M. Callahan, *Making Enemies...*, p. 52.

⁶⁷ I write more about U Nu's government in my book: M. Lubina, *Birma*, Warszawa 2014, pp. 145-193 (*Historia Państw Świata w XX i XXI Wiek*).

⁶⁸ Thant Myint-U, *The River...*, p. 295.

Burmese civil war in 1949 he, as a new Commander-in-Chief of the Burmese forces, saved Rangoon. Then he built around himself *Tatmadaw* – the Burmese Army. In 1962 he made another move – took over the power. Now, for the man no longer known as Shu Maung, but as Ne Win – the powerful dictator of Burma – the time has come to revenge on Indians – on all of them.

Beginning in 1964, under the direct command of Ne Win hundreds of thousand men, women and children, around 300,000 in total, were expelled from Burma and sent to India – *they all left penniless, with only their clothes on their back and no compensation whatsoever for a lifetime (or many generation) of work, for their homes and property, their business (including many of the biggest in the country), or even for their personal possessions.*⁶⁹ A massive nationalization of almost all trade and taking over Indian enterprises followed.⁷⁰ The Indians were given 175 kyat for their trip to India. Ne Win made a deal with Jawaharlal Nehru, who sent special ships and planes to bring those people “home.” But it was not their home. Many of them for generations lived in Burma, spoke only Burmese and never lived outside Burma. India has been their ancestors’ home and nothing more – a similar way to how Americans regard Ireland or Italy. Many never accommodated in India, spoke Burmese until their last day, followed Burmese customs and met in their own company only. They became a refugee community in their old-new Fatherland.

The consequences for Burma were even worse. As many of these people were doctors, lawyers, journalist, businessmen and teachers – dynamic individuals, key to success in the postcolonial world – Burma lost part of its best elites. This was, partially, one of the reasons of this country economic plight after 1962. Indians in Burma paid a high price for shattering one man’s dream of becoming a coal king.

Those who stayed did this by disowning their Indian origins and undergoing the process of assimilation. As a result, in present-day Burma there is only around 2% of Indians, or 950,000.⁷¹ Exact figures, however, do not exist due to uncertainties over census results, the methods used and the fact that many people conceal their Indian origin out of fear of social stigmatization. For there are only few *kalas* in Burma now, this word is still considered rude and offensive. Similarly to the phenomenon of “anti-Semitism without Jews” in present-day Burma one can experience dislike towards Indians... without Indians.

* * *

The political relations between Burma and India since the end of colonial times have been quite stable but nothing more. During U Nu’s civilian government⁷² Burma with

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 296.

⁷⁰ R.H. Taylor, *State in Myanmar...*, p. 342.

⁷¹ *The World Factbook CIA: Burma*, 23 June 2014, at <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bm.html>>, 14 September 2014.

⁷² More about U Nu’s period, see: H. Tinker, *The Union of Burma. A Study of the First Years of Independence*, London 1957; R. Butwell, *U Nu of Burma*, Stanford 1957; M. Smith, *Burma. Insurgency and*

its foreign policy of neutrality, cooperated closely with the Non-Alignment Movement – the Bandung Conference being the most striking example – but joined this movement in 1961 only. U Nu has for long considered joining the Non-Alignment Movement as a way of aligning but rejected it because of traditional Burma's foreign policy paradigm – neutralism. Furthermore, in spite of personal friendship between U Nu and Nehru and the fact that Nehru's government helped to save Rangoon in the first years of the Burmese civil war by sending arms supplies, Burma – India relations never fulfilled their potential. The Burmese elites had a reserved attitude towards India and hampered attempts of any closer cooperation.

The relations deteriorated after Tatmadaw's taking over in 1962. Ne Win continued his predecessors' policy of neutrality, or rather took it to extremes by de facto withdrawing from international relations and concentrating on the autarkic policy that led to the plight of Burma.⁷³ Rangoon tried to keep a similar distance between socialist and Western countries (with slightly favorable attitude towards the former). Ne Win received funds, loans and development programs from both Western (USA, West Germany, Japan) and socialist countries (USSR) which helped to keep his incompetent and corrupted government in power for 26 years. Although Ne Win had good relations with other postcolonial countries, this did not apply to India. Although not hostile, the relations between the two countries were cold, particularly after the expulsion of the Indian community in Burma. Looking from India's perspective, Burma has been simply forgotten.

This changed in 1988 when a massive protest toppled Tatmadaw's government and a new democratic leader emerged – Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Aung San, the father of Burma's independence. Suu Kyi with her vision of democratic and open Burma matched well with India's democratic agenda. Furthermore, her political tactic of non-violence with a direct reference to Gandhi's policy earned her admiration and support in India, from both Indian society and Rajiv Gandhi's government (and alienated her even further from the military elites). Unfortunately, she lost the power struggle with Burmese generals. The Army counterattacked politically on 18 September 1988 by staging another coup d'état and – later – cancelling the results of the (victorious for Suu Kyi party, NLD) general elections. In the meantime, Suu Kyi had been put into house arrest and thousands of her supporters were arrested, jailed and sent to labor camps. Other thousands of democrats, usually students, left the country and formed exile organizations – many of which in India.⁷⁴

the Politics of Ethnicity, Dhaka 1999; B. Lintner, *Burma in Revolt. Opium and Insurgency since 1948*, Chiang Mai 1999.

⁷³ More about Ne Win's period, see: Maung Maung Gyi, *Burmese Political Values. Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarianism*, New York 1983; L.W. Pye, *Politics, Personality and Nation Building. Burma's Search for Identity*, New Heaven 1962; J. Silverstein, *Burmese Politics. The Dilemma of National Unity*, New Brunswick 1980; M. Maung, *The Burma Road to Poverty*, New York 1991; D. Steinberg, *Burma. A Socialist Nation in Southeast Asia*, Boulder 1982.

⁷⁴ About the 1988 event and its aftermath, see: B. Lintner, *Outrage. Burma's Struggle for Democracy*, Bangkok 1990; Maung Maung, *The 1988 Uprising in Burma*, New Heaven 1999; I. Rotberg (ed.), *Burma. Prospects for a Democratic Future*, Washington 1999; P. Carey, *Burma. The Challenge of*

Since the very start of the protest and particularly after the emergence of Suu Kyi – who spent an important part of her life in India (her mother served as Burma's Ambassador to India) and always praised the Gandhian approach to politics⁷⁵ – India has vehemently supported Burmese democrats. Unfortunately, to no avail, because the real power in Burma was left in the hands of *Tatmadaw*. Burmese generals, ostracized and sanctioned in the West, turned to China, who supported them completely? Beijing served *Tatmadaw*'s need "for guns, funds and friends."⁷⁶ Soon, China's position at Ir-rawaddy became dominant.

This forced India to change its idealistic approach. As China remains New Delhi's primary strategic concern, Burma is next door – *if China takes the number one position in terms of strategic priorities/challenges to the Indian State, then Burma is 1A*.⁷⁷ India's next government of Narasimha Rao responded to this challenge by embarking "Look East Policy" in the early 1990s. Its aim was to connect India with the increasingly prosperous nations of Southeast Asia. The improvement of ties with the Burmese generals was an important part of it. The price was the abandonment of Suu Kyi and her battle for democracy and India paid it. Since 1993 no major Indian delegates visiting Burma met her or mentioned her in any official speeches. As a result, the relations improved – New Delhi and Rangoon (later – Naypyidaw) signed mutual agreements on fighting terrorism and narcotics and boosting trade on the borderlands. After twenty years of India's "Look East Policy," the ties between Burma and India were on a firm and friendly basis, but it was China that clearly dominated while Burma's relations with India lagged far behind. There was, for example, no breakthrough in gas projects between those two countries – it remained on paper.

Partial explanation lies in India's lack of real interest in Burma. As Thant Myint-U notes, *Burma had no real place in the emerging narrative of India as a twenty-first-century power [...] there were no Burmese-speaking experts in India. Instead, there were hints of a slightly forlorn connection: a relative who had been born in Burma, a recipe that had been kept in the family after a time spent long ago in Rangoon, a sense of old religious or cultural affinity, an interest, but otherwise little knowledge, and little focus on the changes taking place*.⁷⁸

In my opinion, however, it is not the main explanation. It is the Burmese army elites that are unwilling to engage and develop further the relations with India. For the Burmese Army and state builders, India serves as a good vector in strengthening the position

Change in a Divided Society, New York 1997; Ch. Fink, *Living Silence in Burma. Surviving under Military Rule*, Bangkok 2009.

⁷⁵ More about Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK), see: Aung San Suu Kyi, *Freedom from Fear and Other Writings*, London 2010; eadem, *Voice of Hope. Conversation with Alan Clement*, London 1996; J. Whittle, *Perfect Hostage. Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma and the Generals*, London 2007; P. Popham, *The Lady and the Peacock. The Life of Aung San Suu Kyi*, London 2011.

⁷⁶ D.I. Steinberg, *Burma. The State in Myanmar*, Washington 2001, p. 234.

⁷⁷ C. Udar Baskar, 'Myanmar: Advancing India's Interests through Engagements' in B. Challeney (ed.), *Securing India's Future in the New Millennium*, New Delhi 1999, pp. 415-419.

⁷⁸ Thant Myint-U, *Where China Meets India...*, p. 246.

against China, the ASEAN and the West. Thanks to its good relations with India, Burma's own position strengthens and the generals, now turned civilians, are able to demand more from Beijing, Washington or Bangkok. The policy of balancing foreign influence is still present in Burma. With regime liberalization and opening up to the West in 2011 (and the lift of Western sanctions), the Burmese army elites have many more options. They have a choice. The same can be said about NLD, victorious after 2015 elections.⁷⁹

Having a choice they would not choose India out of cultural reasons. The Burmese elites would not allow Indian political and economic engagement out of still-present anti-Indian resentments. They can do business with *kalas*, use them as a tool in their games with China and the West, but they would not let them enter Burma again. The latest developments prove this thesis. After 2011, when the authoritarian odium of the Burmese government was lifted, Burma's ties with almost all major powers improved, with the West in particular. There is only exception – India. Here, the relations have neither deteriorated, nor improved – they are stable but unpromising, and it is likely to remain so. It is due to *kala* syndrome that is still alive in Burma and overshadows its perception of India.

SUMMARY

After 2011, when the authoritarian odium of the Burmese government was lifted, Burma's ties with almost all major powers improved, with the West in particular. There is only exception – India. Here, the relations have neither deteriorated, nor improved. They are stable but unpromising. One may ask: why? The answer lies in the cultural sphere: it is the *kala* syndrome that is still alive in Burma and overshadows its perception of India.

This syndrome is stronger than the countries' common history, deep cultural relations, similar heritage and geographic proximity. The *kala* burden is the single one major obstacle to the development of India-Burma ties. This "burdensome heritage" influences the political relations between India and Burma even today in the supposed "post-national" world. Here, where Southeast Asia and South Asia meets, the reality is much different. The cultural sphere is still important and looms large on the horizon of India-Burma relations by blocking their development. It will take years, if not decades, of wise policy of both sides to remove this cultural obstacle and move on. The success of this endeavor is, however, still uncertain.

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