THE ORIGINS OF BRITISH BURMA: ARAKAN AND TENASSERIM,
1826 - 1852

by

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ABSTRACT

This study pertains to the history of Arakan and Tenasserim during 1826-1852. With the conclusion of the first Anglo-Burmese war in 1826, Arakan and Tenasserim which were ceded to the British, witnessed impressive political, economic and social changes.

Within less than two-and-a-half decades of British rule, Arakan and Tenasserim were turned into profitable acquisitions. Arakan became a major rice supplier while Tenasserim developed a profitable rice, teak and ship-building industry. Though apart from the introduction of secular education, British administration did not make significant strides towards improving social services, debt-slavery was successfully abolished. This and other factors, such as the prevalence of peace and security, general improvements in income and livelihood contributed to population growth and the expansion of commerce.

Apart from the significance of British rule in Arakan and Tenasserim to internal developments, it contributed both directly and indirectly to the economic growth of Rangoon. In this and other ways the British administration of Arakan and Tenasserim constituted the prelude to British rule in Burma.
ABSTRAK


Pengenalan pentadbiran British sememangnya merupakan suatu titik tolak dalam sejarah Arakan dan Tenasserim kerana bukan sahaja ianya membawa perubahan kepada kedua kawasan yang suatu masa dahulu diselubungi peperangan, lebih daripada itu ianya adalah permulaan kepada penjaja-han British di Burma yakni asal-usul kepada British Burma. Akhirnya, menjelang 1885, keseluruhan negara Burma telah-pun berada dalam lingkungan kuasa British.
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PREFACE

Burma or Myanmar as it is now known was, during colonial rule, the rice granary of the British empire. As a high proportion of British exports originated from Lower Burma since its acquisition in 1852, the development of Lower Burma has been the major focus of interest among scholars, able to draw copiously from British sources. Although similar sources are available for Tenasserim and Arakan, acquired by the British in 1826, scant attention has been paid to them due to the assumed unimportance of these territories relative to mainstream developments in the rest of Burma.

To date, Barbara J. Stewart's study in 1930 entitled: "Administrative Beginnings in British Burma, 1826-1843" is the only available work on the genesis of British administration in Arakan and Tenasserim. Apart from its

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2. This doctoral dissertation was submitted to the University of London in 1930.

xv.
primary focus on the administrative structure, the study does not cover what appear to be eight crucial years in the transformation of Arakan and Tenasserim between 1843 to 1852. This is because, the correspondence from the office of the Commissioners of Arakan and Tenasserim, on which the study is based, terminates in 1843. In actual fact, sources for the subsequent period are to be found in the *Tenasserim Papers* and *Foreign Miscellaneous* in the records of the *Foreign and Political Departments* as well, as in the *Bengal Original Correspondence*. It is the aim of this study to achieve a broader appraisal of British activities in Arakan and Tenasserim before the British conquest of Lower Burma in 1852, using the supplementary sources. The study also seeks to look beyond administrative history, at socio-economic developments. However, due partly to the peripheral position of Arakan and Tenasserim in relation to the Burmese core region, there is a dearth of indigenous sources. This has meant reliance almost exclusively on British reports even for an understanding of the pre-colonial structure of society.

The term 'British Burma' was, strictly speaking, conceptualized only after 1862, when the British amalgamated Arakan and Tenasserim with Lower Burma. For the purpose of this study, however, the term 'British Burma'
is used for the period before 1852 when referring to Arakan and Tenasserim, as distinct from the territories still under independent Burma.
INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ARAKAN AND TENASSERIM

In order to understand the respective roles played by Arakan and Tenasserim within the framework of the Burmese empire, it is important to take into account their geographical locations. Situated on the peripheries of the empire and some distance from the core region of Ava, they evolved in different and distinct ways. In addition, though culturally different, both shared one similarity in their strategic location.

Arakan, situated on the southwest of Burma, is a coastal province stretching for some 350 miles along the Bay of Bengal. The Arakan Yoma, running in the north-west to south-east direction forms a natural barrier separating Arakan from Burma proper. In the north-west, the Naaf River forms the boundary between Arakan and Chittagong while the southern extreme of this province is the town of Kyaukchun, situated south of the Gwa Bay. A large portion of this province constitutes hill tracts and mountain ranges and its plains extend to some 14,526 square miles only.

The majority of the indigenous populace of this country are the Arakanese who are mainly Buddhist. Though most nineteenth century writers referred to the Arakanese as Mugs/Mughls/Maghs, strictly speaking, the latter is actually an offspring of a Bengali mother and an Arakanese father. Though a majority of the Arakanese are Buddhist, they also included some Muslims of lesser numbers which were the Kula and Dom, the former being Bengalis brought in earlier as slaves. The Dom were Bengali outcasts who were also brought in at earlier period as pagoda slaves. These were unlike the pagoda slaves in Burma proper who were predominantly pardoned Burmese convicts.\(^2\)

The Arakan population included too a number of hill tribes inhabiting the mountain ranges and the hill tracts. These were mainly the Khoung-tha/Chaungtha/Rakhaing, Kami/Kwe-me/Kume, Kaungso/Anu, and the Chin, the latter being the majority.\(^4\)

The economy of Arakan was based mainly on agriculture, namely, the cultivation of paddy. It formed the preoccupation of the bulk of the Arakanese inhabiting the

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plains who cultivated wet paddy. Rice was thus their staple diet with fish forming an important source of protein as in many parts of Southeast Asia and Bengal. The hill tribes cultivated 'dry' paddy as well as engaging in the collection of a variety of jungle produce such as bees' wax, cardamuns, sesamun (Sesamoides orientale), dammar, horns and hides which they traded for salt and tools such as the axe.

While Arakan formed the buffer zone on Burma's western front, Tenasserim, a tiny strip of land running along the eastern shores of the Gulf of Martaban and the Andaman Sea, bordering the Malay Peninsula, formed the eastern front. The name Tenasserim is derived from that of a small town situated south of Mergui, in the Mergui district. In 1826, the British consolidated the districts of Mergui, Tavoy, Ye and the southern parts of Martaban on the left bank of Salween river to form the Tenasserim province. The Salween River formed the northern boundary of this province, separating it from the Burmese district of Martaban. To the south, Pulo Ru (Island of Ru) formed Tenasserim's southern most limit. This province extended to some 37,614 square miles in a north-south direction with a backdrop of the Thaninthari Taungdan mountain range separating it from Siam.

Unlike Arakan's relatively homogenous population, Tenasserim's population comprised a variety of ethnic
groups. The narrow coastal plains were populated by the Mons or Talaings. In addition, there were also some Burmese and Siamese. The highlands of this province were inhabited by the Karens belonging to a number of sub-groups: the Kayah/Karen-ni (or Red Karens), Paku, Pa-O, Pwo and the Sgaw (the latter two groups are also referred to as White Karens). Inhabiting the islands of the Mergui Archipelago were the Mawken or Salon/Seelong, a seafaring race.

The coastal people engaged in wet paddy cultivation and fishing. The Karens planted hill paddy and, like the hill tribes of Arakan, collected jungle produce such as cardamums, sesamun, dammar and bees' wax. The Mawken were not cultivators and were predominantly a maritime people engaged in the collection of sea produce and edible birds' nests from the innumerable shoals and island caves.


I. ARAKAN

Arakan was influenced historically by its proximity to Indian sub-continent especially the Bay of Bengal. The Kingdom of Arakan, known traditionally as Rakhaing or Yakhaing, was founded by an offshoot of Tibeto-Burman tribes whose migration into the area is believed to have lasted for centuries. Harvey suggests that the Konrans were probably the ancestors of the Arakanese, who claimed to have been ruled by their own chiefs as early as 226 B.C. These tribes were later consolidated into a kingdom. Like Burma, Arakan was characterised by political instability, arising from palace revolutions.


9. On the other hand, one source states that the classical name of Arakan is Dha-gmya-wa-ti, see Phayre, "Account of Arakan", p. 685.


and factionalism amongst chiefs. An important reason for this was the lack of fixed rules of succession based on premogeniture. Commenting on the political instability of Arakan, Phayre writes that "the ancient history of Arakan presents such a tangled web of fiction".

Besides internal instability, frequent raids, especially from the hill tribes of the north, was a feature of Arakan's history. Equally unsafe was the west and north-west coast exposed to sea raids from Bengal. The Burmese do not seem to have settled in Arakan until probably as late as the tenth century A.D., about which time the Shans overran it.

Proximity to the Indian sub-continent brought Arakan inevitably under Indian cultural influence since ancient times. Ancient coins of the Hindu Wesali dynasty (A.D. 788-951) and the Mrauk-U dynasty (1430-1784) found in Arakan bear testimony to commercial contacts between the two territories.


13. Harvey, History of Burma, p. 137.


With the rise of the Pagan dynasty (A.D. 1044-1287), Arakan became a semi-independent feudatory state under hereditary kings. The Pagan dynasty's overlordship would appear to have been limited to the extraction of tribute from North Arakan. Only after 1287, with the fall of the Pagan dynasty, did Arakan succeed in warding off the Burmese yoke under the leadership of Minhti. His reign, which lasted some ninety-five years (r. 1279-1374) marked the highest point of Arakan's independence. The subsequent years were characterized by Arakan's conflicts with the Burmese and Mons. According to one account:

...Arakan was for a considerable time one of the theatres of war in the great struggle between Ava and the Mon Kingdom of Pegu.

Both the Burmese and the Mons of Pegu fought bitter wars to gain control over Arakan each placing, in turn, its nominee on the Arakanese throne. Finally, in 1404, the Burmese regained control over Arakan and the Arakanese monarch, King Narameikhla, fled to Bengal. With military aid from Bengal, the Arakanese successfully drove out the

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Burmese in 1430 when King Narameikhla established his capital at Mrauk-U in 1433. Following this, Arakan remained a vassal of the Gaur dynasty of Bengal.

In 1459, Basawpyu, a nephew of Narameikhla, and the new successor to the Arakanese throne took advantage of the weakness of the Bengal rulers to seize Chittagong, thereby throwing off the Bengali yoke. During subsequent centuries, Chittagong became a bone of contention between Arakan and Bengal, often changing hands, until 1666, when the Mughals regained it permanently for India.

During its period of independence from about the mid-fifteenth to the later part of the eighteenth century Arakan, though chaotic, was an important participant in the politics of south-eastern Bengal. Arakan's maritime location and the seamanship of its inhabitants contributed to the economic importance of trade. Unlike the Burmese rulers who banned rice exports to maintain national granaries, the Arakanese made this article one of their main exports. The importance given to trade is evident in the existence of a special officer for trade affairs. The commerce which brought


market exchange and currency became sufficiently important such that by 1660 Arakan struck its own coins. So important was trade that the port of Mro-haung, which also served as the capital city, was a well populated trading centre and the king who had a large fleet, pursued trade vigorously. There was also some shipbuilding carried on and the port was frequently visited by vessels from the Coromandel Coast.

Arakan's period of independence proved its golden era. To what extent Arakan's florescence was Bengali related remains debatable. According to M.S. Collis:

Contact with a modern civilization [i.e. India] resulted in a renaissance. The country's [Arakan's] great age began.

If, as Hall suggests, this period of greatness in Arakan's history coincided with the period of weakness in Bengal's internal administrative decline, such a situation should have removed any potential threat to Arakan's growth.

20. Harvey, History of Burma, p. 146.


During the reign of King Minbin (r.1531-1553), the first European ships reached the shores of Arakan. By the early 1550s, with the aid of Portuguese mercenaries, who supplemented Arakanese forces, Arakan became a terror of the Ganges, with slave-raiding as its main business. One 1630 source records:

..... [I]n the kingdom of Aracoa [Arakan] [there are] six hundred Portuguese and two thousand Christians who are employed by that King in his wars against the Mogar [Mughal], and the said Portuguese, and their sons; who are fighting men, inclusive of many topaz Christians, comprise the entire force of the King.....

Fear of frequent raids by the Arakanese prompted the Moghul governors of Bengal to construct an iron chain, as an obstructive measure across the Hugli river, stretching from Calcutta to Sibpur. Another source points to the existence of a Bengal folk song about the tyranny of the Arakanese. This song was still being sung in the 1920s, in the neighbourhood of Faridpur, a town situated quite near the present-day Indian border.


25. Harvey, History of Burma, p. 143. There were even Afghan pirates who made their nest in this area, see Hall, A History of South-East Asia, p. 391.

Arakanese raids were evidently the source of its ready supply of slaves for export. According to Reid, Arakan was probably an important supplier of slaves to the major Muslim cities of Southeast Asia. Aceh, for example, obtained its servile labour, among others from Arakan. By the early years of the seventeenth century, Arakan's trade potentialities even attracted the Dutch who, in 1607, visited Arakan. Here, the Dutch were offered customs-free trade in exchange for military aid to drive out the Portuguese freebooters who had, by then become a problem to the Arakanese. This led to the flourishing trade between Arakan and the Dutch in Batavia. Arakan's exports to Batavia consisted mainly of rice and slaves with some gold, while imports constituted tobacco, iron and painted cloth. The export of rice and slaves to Batavia supplemented the shortage of food and labour for the Dutch spice-growing areas in the Malay Archipelago. Rice and slaves continued to remain the significant exports with the Dutch throughout the seventeenth century, particularly in the first half. Other items traded


with the Dutch were benzoin, lac and indigo. While benzoin and lac were collected from the wild, indigo could have been cultivated although there is no evidence of this. Though it is difficult to establish the extent of land devoted to the cultivation of rice, the basis of Arakan's agricultural economy, Arakan would appear to have produced a surplus for maintaining exports between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries.

Arakan's days of glory lasted for some one hundred and nineteen years, over which period some twenty-five kings reigned at the capital of Mrauk-U. During this period of eminence, Arakan established full control over the areas around the Bay of Bengal. However, from about 1660, Arakan's steady growth showed signs of gradual decline. This was brought on mainly by internal disturbance caused by frequent dynastic struggles and factionalism. During such periods, Arakan laid itself open to Burmese or Mon interference in its affairs such that, according to Harvey, "settled government was the exception". Externally, even its close ally, the Portuguese tried to take

30. Ibid. See also D.G.E. Hall, "The Daghhregister of Batavia and Dutch Trade with Burma in the Seventeenth Century", JBR, Vol. 29, pt. ii (1939), pp. 139-156.
33. Harvey, History of Burma, p. 137.
advantage of this situation to gain a foothold in Arakan which King Minhkamaing (r.1612-1622) was able to fend off with Dutch military aid.

II. TENASSERIM

As Tenasserim was a tiny strip of land sandwiched between two great traditional enemies -- Burma and Siam -- it is not surprising that the history of Tenasserim was one of continuous warfare. Like a mouse-deer trapped between two elephants, Tenasserim was frequently devastated as a result of prolonged conflict. The strate-


35. Tenasserim was traditionally (and also at present) known as Taninthari. One source suggests that the word Tenasserim is derived from 'Tanah' and 'Sri', both being Malay words, the former meaning country or land while the latter denoting property, beauty, grace or glory. In short, it means land of beauty, grace and glory, see Kyaw Din, "The History of Tenasserim and Mergui", *JBRS*, Vol. 7, pt. iii (1917), p. 254. Till the present very little research has been done on the history of Tenasserim. Though James Low's, "History of Tenasserim", (In three parts) *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (hereafter RASGBI), Vol. 3 (1836), pp. 25-54, 287-336; Vol. 4 (1837), pp. 42-50, 69-103, 304-332 and; Vol. 5 (1838), pp. 141-164; projects a lengthy discussion on Tenasserim's history but as a matter of fact, very little of Tenasserim's history is allotted space where in place is an account of contemporary observation by him. In addition, though Barbara J. Stewart's, "Administrative Beginnings in British Burma, 1826-42", Ph.D. Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1930, gives due consideration to Arakan's historical development, nothing is mentioned on Tenasserim.
The strategic importance of Tenasserim in offering passage between Burma and Siam, for military and commercial purposes, was the reason for the continued struggle between the two powerful Kingdoms for control over the territory. Hence, rarely did Tenasserim enjoy an era of peace and stability. These intermittent periods of peace allowed opportunity for commercial prosperity deriving from Tenasserim's configuration along a long coastline, delineating the eastern peripheries of the Bay of Bengal. It offered good harbour facilities and the advantage of proximity to Siam and the Malay Peninsula. Though there is not much evidence of the latter's influence, the name Tenasserim itself, reputed to have originated from the Malay language, bears testimony of the latter's influence.

It was the strategic location of Tenasserim which earned early mention of the area around 131 A.D., and again in 166 A.D., when a Roman embassy to China used it as a portage route, to save making the long journey around the Malayan peninsula. Because of its geographical location it became part of the feudatory territory of the early kingdom of Funan in about the third century A.D.


38. Harvey, Outline of Burmese History, p. 11.
According to a Pali inscription discovered in Mergui, Alaungsithu (r.1112-1167 A.D.) of the Pagan dynasty launched a military campaign to suppress an uprising in this province. This suggests that Tenasserim was sufficiently important during this period, in terms of its strategic location, to attract the attention of Pagan.

By 1350, the foundation date of the Siamese Kingdom, Tenasserim with Martaban was included in the list of provinces. In 1380, the Siamese are said to have built the Wutshintaung pagoda at the town of Tenasserim, attesting to Siamese influence which continued into the second-half of the fourteenth century, when Tenasserim was a vassal of Siam. From Burmese manuscripts, it is also known that in 1373, at the start of the written history of Tenasserim, the king appealed to a ruler of Launggyet dynasty of Arakan (1237-1433) for assistance to repel the Siamese invasion of Tenasserim. It is, therefore, evident that Tenasserim, at that time a vassal of Siam, was trying to cast off the Siamese yoke.

About the same time too, during the later part of the fourteenth century, the country from Martaban down to

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39. Ibid., p. 35.


Tavoy fell into the hands of the Kingdom of Pegu. Nothing of Tenasserim was ever heard of until the rise of the Toungoo Dynasty (1531-1752).

With the rise of the Toungoo Dynasty, Tenasserim became a fierce battleground or war-zone between the Burmese and the Siamese. Although, in 1564, the Burmese gained control of Tenasserim, it was short-lived because, by 1593, the Siamese succeeded in regaining it. Burma's brief rule over Tenasserim was due to its own internal decline by the end of the sixteenth century. The end of Burmese rule over Tenasserim was followed by about a century and a half of peace under Siam's protection. Trade began gradually to flourish and the name of Tenasserim was soon recorded in the annals of the commercial world.

The first mention of Tenasserim in European literature is made in 1563 by De Barros. He referred to Mergui as "Merguim" while the English who resided there


43. Harvey, History of Burma, p. xxviii - xxix.

called it "Mergen". The first European to land on Tenasserim territory is believed to be the Venetian merchant Nicolo di Conti. There were other European travellers who visited this province, particularly Mergui, between the second-half of the sixteenth century to the beginning of the seventeenth century. These included J. H. van Linschoten, John Davis, Duarte Fernandez (Albuquerque's ambassador to the Siamese court), the missionary Balthazar de Sequeira, and Monseigneur de la Mothe Lamberg, a French missionary and Bishop of Berythe.

During the period of its early contacts with Europeans, Tenasserim continued under Siamese rule. Caesar Frederick, a Venetian merchant, writing in 1568, described Tenasserim as follows:

.....[T]his citie of right belongeth to the Kingdom of Siam, which situate[d] on the grate [great] river's mouth, which commeth out of the Kingdom of Siam, and where this river runneth into the sea, there is a vil-lage called Mergui.....

45. While the Siamese referred to Mergui as 'Marit', the Burmese called it 'Myeit' or 'Beit' which meant "the last, extreme or end town", see Kyaw Din, "The History of Tenasserim and Mergui", p. 254.


Tenasserim was evidently the chief township on the main portage route to Siam, while Mergui probably functioned as a fishing base. As of the last decades of the sixteenth century, Tenasserim became a familiar port of call for European traders in the Bay of Bengal.

By the second-half of the seventeenth century, trade had increased considerably in this province and Mergui emerged in its own right as an independent port, superseding Tenasserim's role as the chief port. In 1683, the Siamese Court appointed Richard Burneby, an ex-servant of the English East India Company, as governor of Mergui while Samuel White, a merchant-interloper, was given the post of syahbandar or port officer at Mergui and Tenasserim. The significance of Mergui to Ayutthaya's commercial links with the Bay of Bengal cannot be underestimated. According to Maurice Collis:

At that time Ayudhya was an important centre of country trade, for it was the emporium where Chinese and Japanese goods were exchanged for Indian goods. The trade route was from Canton by sea to Ayudhya, thence Mergui, a port on the eastern shores of the Bay of Bengal and in Siamese territory, and so across the Bay to Masulipatan, some two hundred miles north of Madras.


50. Andrew, Burma Gazetteer: Mergui District, p. 5.

Dhiravat Pombejra emphasises Mergui's contribution to Ayutthaya's rise to commercial prosperity during the seventeenth century. Equally important to Ayutthaya was the provincial capital of Tenasserim which serviced the portage route to Ayutthaya.

The governor of Tenasserim was styled a viceroy and nominated by the king of Siam. There was, in addition, a commissioner appointed by the king to oversee the activities of the viceroy. Foreign communities such as the Mons, Persians and Indian Muslims were allowed to be administered by their own chiefs. Due to Mergui's commercial role, the Siamese Court appreciated the importance of placing it under a competent chief, loyal to the king. By the 1670s and 1680s Muslims, namely Persians and Indians, held various important positions in Tenasserim, particularly at the port of Mergui.


Mergui. The employment of Muslims especially from Golkanda, as local officials and port administrators, exercising great influence in Mergui, was not uncommon.

Tenasserim province was said to be, during the 1680s, one of the largest and most populated in the Siamese Kingdom with some five to six thousand households residing at the capital. Its chief port, Mergui, was considered "the finest and safest [port] in the whole of the Indies". Ships up to two hundred tons could sail upriver from Mergui, for some thirty-seven miles towards Tenasserim, the provincial capital. One source notes that "hundreds of elephants were shipped away every year", together with exports of tin, sandalwood (Santalum album) and sapanwood (Caesalpina sappan). Mergui was an exchange point to which Indian merchants brought cotton cloth, Persian silk and rose-water, taking back with them


57. O'Kane, The Ship of Sulaiman, p. 47.


59. Arasaratnam, Merchants, Companies and Commerce, pp. 121-122.
Chinese silk, Siamese tin, eaglewood (*Aquilaria malaccensis*), and spelter. It catered to the western sector of Siams' trade with south and west Asia, while Ayutthaya served the east Asian sector, particularly trade with China.

The 1688 civil war in Siam, which distracted attention from Mergui, saw an aborted attempt by the French to gain a foothold at the port. At the same time, the trade of Mergui gradually declined, due partly to increased piracy. Mergui's dependence on Siamese protection and commercial partnership has been, thus, vital for its prosperity.

III. PRELUDE TO THE FIRST ANGLO-BURMESE WAR, 1824-26

The imperial policy of Alaungpaya (r.1752-1885), founder of the Konbaung Dynasty, and the incorporation of Arakan and Tenasserim within the Burmese empire, marked an important milestone in their history. For Arakan it brought to an end more than a century of independence.


61. Andrew, *Burmese Gazetteer: Mergui District*, p. 5. Prior to the French, the Portuguese had an establishment in Tenasserim where they founded a trading station which lasted till 1641 and is said to have rivalled Malacca where the Portuguese established their authority in 1511. When King Anaukpetlun (1605-1628) of the Toungoo Dynasty tried to capture Tenasserim, the Siamese aided by forty Portuguese drove him away with heavy losses, see Harvey, *Outline of Burmese History*, pp. 90 & 120.
Similarly, in an attempt to wrench Tenasserim from Siam, Alaungpaya reduced it from a prosperous commercial region to destruction.

In Arakan, internal instability became critical in the 1780s when at the invitation of an Arakanese chief, King Bodawhpaya (r. 1782-1819), sent an army of thirty thousand men to invade Arakan. The Burmese army successfully captured the capital of Myauk-U without much resistance and subsequently incorporated Arakan into the Burmese empire. A governor, representing the Burmese court, was placed at Myauk-U. According to various accounts, he opened a reign of atrocities including large-scale conscription and deportation of Arakanese to the Burmese core-region with resulting depopulation. To escape harsh Burmese rule, the large-scale flight of Arakanese into the British district of Chittagong became common. From Chittagong, the Arakanese made repeated attempts to regain their independence with a major onslaught in 1797, headed by the famous chieftain, Nga Chin.


Pyan (also referred to as "Kingberring"). But these proved futile. Undeterred, they pursued their cause. Even if unsuccessful in regaining their independence, the Arakanese, who had a deep-rooted maritime tradition, continued to be a permanent source of irritation and embarrassment to the Burmese whose boats were constantly under the threat of attack and pillage.

The annexation of Arakan was the result of Bodawhpaya's obsessive passion to carve out an empire extending to the borders of India. Though Arakan at its heyday was an irritation to the Burmese, its existence posed no actual threat to the Burmese. On that point, Koenig writes:

The concrete motive behind the annexation (of Arakan), other than general imperial aggrandizement, was undoubtedly to strengthen the material base of Burmese power for the coming large operations on the eastern frontiers.

By conquering Arakan, Bodawhpaya had the opportunity to mobilize the Arakanese for operations against his arch enemy -- Siam. This undoubtedly contributed to the demo-


66. Harvey, History of Burma, p. 143.

graphic strength of the nuclear zone and was aimed at boosting the morale of his army before launching in the east the "butcher and bolt policy". Further, the minimal resistance faced by Bodawpaya's army during the Arakan campaign convinced him that he was destined to be a world conqueror. There were rumours in the royal palace of his ambition to annex China and defeat the British in India. Such ambitions would have enhanced his success in capturing from Arakan the famed Mahamuni image of Buddha, constructed during the reign of Sandathuriya (r.146-98 B.C.) However, Bodawpaya's conquest, far from strengthening Burma, brought its borders to the fringes of British India. Problems relating to a shared boundary with British territories culminated, eventually, in the Anglo-Burmese war of 1824.

On the eastern flank, Alaungpaya's expansionism stretched to the Ithmus region of Tenasserim, recognised to be important as a launching pad for military attacks against Siam. Effective control over Tenasserim would provide access to additional fighting forces as well as control over the three southern routes to Siam.

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70. Harvey, *Outline of Burmese History*, p. 257.

These were the Tan-daung pass or the Tavoy-Kanburi pass, the Amya pass from Tavoy direct to Bangkok and, some 38 miles to its south, the Maibhura pass, reputedly the most difficult. Tenasserim's importance lay ultimately in its role as a buffer-zone between two large kingdoms such that which ever party gained control over it had a superior advantage over the other.

Martaban, Tavoy and Tenasserim were captured in 1760, and remained under the Burmese kingdom until British annexation in 1826. Burmese invasion of Siam in 1766/67 and 1785, and Siamese retaliations in 1785/86 and 1803, inevitably affected Tenasserim in its role as transit territory. Apart from the destruction brought by invading armies, there was widespread depopulation. To escape the suppressive nature of Burmese rule, the Mons fled in large numbers to Siam in 1773 and again, in 1814, after an abortive revolt against the Burmese. Under the Burmese rule, the people of Tenasserim were forced to pay heavy taxes and provide corvee. The Mon chiefs were also required to furnish manpower everytime the Burmese invaded Siam. This forced large numbers of Mons to seek refuge in

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72. The time taken to travel through the Tavoy-Kanburi Pass was about sixteen days while the Amya Pass consumed some twelve days, see Hunter, The Imperial Gazetteer of India, Vol. XIII, Sirohi to Zumkha, p. 228.

73. Harvey, History of Burma, pp. xxx - xxxi.
Siam. Their better treatment there was evidently a calculated strategy employed traditionally by the Thais' to attract manpower from Burmese control in Tenasserim. According to Harvey:

Migrations like this began about 1595 and continued till the end of Burmese rule, for the Talaings received better treatment in Siam than in Burma..... Such as were not enslaved migrated periodically to Siam where they rose to high office and furnished the best troops. Such as remained in Burma were prone to rebel, and whenever they dared to raise a head it was once chopped off, they grew fewer and subsided, and their land [Tenasserim] relapsed into jungle.

Customarily, there were no Burmese-Thai negotiations to return Mon refugees to Burma. The situation was different in relation to Arakanese migrations into Chittagong. In this case, the Burmese governor at Arakan, in 1823, submitted his complaints to Calcutta, demanding the unconditional surrender of all Arakanese refugees in Chittagong, totalling some 50,000 people. Failure on the part of British authorities to comply with the demand resulted in a Burmese attack on Chittagong in 1795, ostensibly to claim the return of Arakanese rebels, but was interpreted by the British to be tantamount to the violation of their territory.

On the Burmese side, the lack of action on the part of the British to return the rebels led to suspicion

76. Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 282. The figure appears to be much higher (see to Chapter 2).
that they had instigated the uprising. After 1815, the Burmese were reported to have "adopted a warlike posture" to attack Indian territories. In 1816, Burma conquered Manipur, Assam and Cachar. Meanwhile, the tone of the Burmese letters to the British authorities in India became even more arrogant.

By the early 1820s, the situation deteriorated further over the disputed possession of the Shahpuri Island in the River Naaf, separating Arakan from Chittagong. By then, war seemed inevitable to the British. Chittagong was threatened by mobilised Burmese forces. The British who felt that the situation was serious enough to jeopardise the security of the city of Dacca and all of eastern Bengal declared war, on 5 March 1824. In a letter to his son, Lord William Pitt, Earl Amherst of Arakan, explained:

They [the Burmese] have been for some time molesting over frontier, and you cannot conceive the insolent language, which they use whenever they hold communications with us. Their sovereign like all Eastern Kings, considers himself the greatest potentate on earth, and he has premptorily rejected all our offers to arrange matters amicably, and has gone as far as to invade our territory, we have nothing left for it but to go to war in earnest.

78. Ibid.
The first Anglo-Burmese war ended some two years later, on 24 February 1826, with the Treaty of Yandabo. Apart from suffering humiliation, the Burmese lost the border territories of Arakan and Tenasserim to the British and were made to agree to a war indemnity of one crore, to be settled by 24 February 1828, in four equal instalments. Earlier works by Europeans on the Anglo-Burmese war have a tendency to blame the Burmese for the act of war in order to justify the British involvement.

Yet such was not the intention at the outset, no Machiavellian policy of expansion was involved. British official records show only too clearly that just as they had striven to avoid war before 1824, so after Yandabo they continued to search for ways, and means of establishing peaceable relations. What they failed to realize was that once they had a foothold in the country the sheer force of circumstances was bound ultimately to bring about complete annexation, no matter how unwilling they were to extend their territorial commitments.

To what extent the British were motivated by a Machiavellian policy of expansion is debatable; but it is true that ultimately, by 1885, the whole of Burma was under British colonial rule. Htin Aung, in a very nationalistic tone asserts that:


81. Hall, A History of South-East Asia, p.

82. Htin Aung, A History of Burma, p. 197
It was only the British who really wanted war. When only the events on the Anglo-Burmese frontiers are considered, it appears that the Burmese provoked the British, but when events in the whole region are viewed together it becomes clear that the British would have taken control of the Burmese coastal regions even if Bagyidaw and his court had acted with docility, humility, and humbleness, for the period of the first British intrusion in Burma coincided with the period of British struggle to acquire and hold the island of Singapore. The East India Company had already possessed Penang and with the acquisition of Singapore in 1819 it became necessary to obtain possession of the Burmese coast to turn the Bay of Bengal into a British lake.

This controversy over who motivated the war has continued until the present. Taylor's more recent appraisal attributes the war as resulting from Burma's campaigns to subdue and incorporate non-homogenous populations on its peripheries. As Alaunghpaya's campaigns demonstrated, Arakan and Tenasserim by virtue of their geographical position were integral to the political and economic interests of Burma. The British acquisition of Arakan and Tenasserim was a natural outcome of the war. From the British point of view, the aggression by the


Burmese on their territory, on the pretext of capturing Arakanese rebels, meant the violation of their sovereignty and a challenge to their rule over India. It is said that the Burmese, in 1818, went as far as laying their claim over the territory from Chittagong to Dacca and Murshidabad, north of Calcutta. Apart from setting the Indo-Burmese boundary question permanently, the annexation of Arakan was important in relation to British ambitions for gaining access to China's backdoor via Burma. British officials such as John Crawfurd knew about the existence of a lucrative Sino-Burmese trade, estimated between £400,000 - 700,000 annually, based largely on the export of raw cotton for silk.

While political as well as economic reasons influenced the British conquest of Arakan, commercial and strategic considerations were more important in the case of Tenasserim. With the growth of liberal ideas in Europe, there emerged a class of traders championing the cause of free trade. Frequent attacks by the Burmese on Siam, brought disruption to the profitable trade conducted by the British with Siam.

The founding of Penang in 1786 and Singapore in

85. Harvey, Outline of Burmese History, p. 166.


87. Ibid., p. 69.
1819 were other reasons which contributed to increased British official and private interest in the Bay of Bengal. In fact, earlier, Francis Light, writing to Calcutta in 1777, made mention of the usefulness of Mergui as a portage route for the English East India Company's trade with China. He also noted Siam's intention of ceding Mergui to the British, if it succeeded in wresting it from the Burmese, which seemed to indicate its desire for British presence in the vicinity as a stabilizing force against the Burmese threat. Again in 1784, Thomas Forrest proposed to the British government in India for establishing a commercial settlement on St. Mathews Island, south of Mergui.

With the growth of shipbuilding industries at Calcutta and Bombay, Tenasserim's importance as a source of teak cannot be ruled out as one of the considerations affecting British interests. In 1784, Thomas Forrest brought the attention of Lord Hastings to the provinces' rich teak resources.

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Finally, the French success in 1688 at establishing a naval base in Mergui and their renewed interest in the area around the 1790s posed a threat to British ambitions. Whatever was the actual reason behind the annexation of Arakan and Tenasserim, the event constituted a watershed in British colonial history, leading to its subsequent domination of the Indian Ocean. To quote Hall:

Burmese history was not to take an entirely new turn. She still kept her three chief ports of Bassein, Rangoon and Martaban. But she had lost her two large coastal provinces to the expanding British empire in India with its sea-power now dominating the Indian Ocean.

IV. INDIGENOUS ADMINISTRATION

Burma, like most pre-modern Asia, was ruled in theory at least by a strong monarchy. At the apex, the king ruled with absolute powers, assisted by a council of elders or senior officials known as the blut-taw. The king's powers were determined by stern customary and

92. Clodd, Malaya's First British Pioneer, p. 31.
94. Hall, A History of South-East Asia, p. 600.
written laws and his status enhanced by myth and ceremony, stressing his divine position. At the centre of the state was the capital from where the king ruled over his domains. The domains within the core and surrounding regions were directly ruled, while looser control over peripheral territories under semi-independent governors caused frequent uprisings. All provincial governors were appointed for a period of three years on a system of rotation aimed at introducing a system of checks and balances.

As both Arakan and Tenasserim were peripheral to the Burmese empire, it is difficult to ascertain the type of administration which existed before the British conquest. Moreover, there were periods when Arakan exerted its independence from Burmese rule, while in the case of Tenasserim, it frequently changed hands between the former and the Siamese. Therefore, the sit-táns and royal orders which deal largely with the Burmese core region do not throw much light on these territories. Available data on the administrative structure is thus limited to


information derived from British records on the eve of annexation.

Arakan was divided into four major districts namely Dwynawaddi (Arakan Proper), Yamawaddi (Ramree), Megawaddi (Cheduba) and Dorawaddi (Sandoway). Similarly, Tenasserim too was divided into two major provinces, that of Martaban and Tavoy. The province of Martaban constituted the former and Ye, while the districts of Tavoy and Mergui (including the Mergui Archipelago) formed the Tavoy province. The myo-wun of Arakan resided at Mrohaung and was assisted by three deputy-governors, each at Ramree, Cheduba and Sandoway. Martaban and Tavoy each had a myo-wun based at the town of Martaban and Tavoy.

Wielding absolute authority in the internal government of the province under his charge, the myo-wun sat in

98. Though this work relies on Mya Sein's, The Administration of Burma, she obtained information of the indigenous administrative structure prior to British rule from British reports written on the eve of conquest, particularly in the case of Tenasserim.


100. Low, "History of Tenasserim", Vol. 3 (1836), pp. 249-253.


the upper seat of the myo-yon or the Hall of Justice, whenever he chose to attend it. The general administration of the province, which included the preservation of law and order, defence, administration of revenue, weight and measures, were within his perview. Other officials of the myo-yon were the yewun, akunwun, akaukwun, sitke and the nakhan. The yewun designated as 'Lord of Waters', were appointed at seaports and were involved in the management of war-boats and crafts of every description.

The akunwun or collector of land revenue is said to have occupied the place on the second bench of the myo-wun whenever he chose to attend it. As a revenue officer, he was also given charge of the granaries. In the collection of revenue and assessments of cultivated lands, the akun-wun was assisted by several officers called pabia.

The akaukwun or collector of sea customs occupied the third place on the second bench of the myo-yon and was also called the syahbandar. The inspection of shipping and extraction of port dues were his main responsibilities. One of his important duties was the official "visit" to disembarking vessels before their cargo was unloaded.

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104. Ibid., p. 35.
105. Ibid., p. 37.
Appointed by the king and designated as chief of police in their respective districts, the *sitke* occupied the third bench of the *myo-yan* where their daily attendance was compulsory to conduct trials. The maintenance of law and order through the execution of law and justice was their main preoccupation.

To keep an eye on the local administration, the king appointed several 'spies', designated as *nakhan*. They were expected to report to the capital any misconduct among local officials. The *nakhan* could attend the *myo-yan* if he so wished. These officials were appointed as 'watchdogs' due to the instability of peripheral provinces like Arakan and Tenasserim and were to help check conspiracy against the Burmese capital.

Occupying the lowest, yet the most important rank in the hierarchy of the local government was the *myothugyi/thugyi* as he was known in Tenasserim. In Arakan he was at times designated as *kyouk* (*Khoung-aop/Kywn-aop*). Administering a *myo\circle* or a cluster of villages, he seemed to have enjoyed a larger share of

106. Ibid.
107. Ibid.
108. Ibid., p. 41.
influence when compared to other officials. He was closest to the masses due to his position being generally hereditary. Their families, through ruling for generations, were very much in the know about local affairs and were respected by the populace. But again, he was not, strictly speaking, the supreme overlord for, ultimately, every kyun/subject was expected to show loyalty to the king, who was considered "lord of land and water". At times, the myothugyi had at his disposal, several subordinates known as the asiying and myetaying. The first assisted the myothugyi in judicial work while the myetaying was in charge of land revenue, land alienation and transfer of land. He was a hereditary official and, in many instances, he worked with the myothugyi.

Townships (also known as circles) were often further divided into smaller units constituting villages or hamlets. Each village had its own elected headmen desig-


112. Mya Sein, The Administration of Burma, p. 43.
nated ywa-ok/ywa-gaung, in Tenasserim, and rawa-gaung in Arakan. At times the village head was directly appointed by the king and designated as ywathugi.

A common feature shared by Arakan and Tenasserim was that both were territories of strategic importance lying on the periphery of the Burmese empire. However, despite this similarity, both evolved historically in their own way, developing their independent characteristics. Arakan was moulded largely by influences from the Indian sub-continent, while Tenasserim was a product of Burmese as well as Siamese ascendency. Tenasserim proved strategically important to both Burma and Siam, while Arakan offered an additional pool of human resources, cardinal to Burmese victory over Siam.

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113. Ibid., p. 44.
115. Mya Sein, The Administration of Burma, p. 44.