

Revisiting Perceptions of Colonial Burma

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Abstract

Orwell's 1934 novel "Burmese Days" is based on his time as a constable in the Imperial Indian Police. The book depicts Colonial Burma as a poorly developed, mostly neglected outpost of the British Empire, administered by incompetent British officials and corrupt Burmese ones. Orwell's work has shaped perspectives of Colonial Burma to the present day. Indeed, peer-reviewed studies in fields as diverse as critical theory and international relations this decade continue to site Orwell as a reliable narrator of conditions in Colonial Burma. This is a problem, as the picture Orwell paints is not an entirely accurate one. Fortunately, there has been a rise in research that shows a more complex, and more accurate, picture. Colonial Burma was attractive to immigrants, and native Burmese worked hard to rebuild their nation. The British invested time and resources into Colonial Burma, albeit not for entirely altruistic reasons. The British saw great potential for profit due to Colonial Burma's geographic location, and abundant natural resources. Rather than using Colonial Burma as a dumping ground for their least capable civil servants, the British often sent officials with proven track records and years of experience in colonial administration. They often erred, however, thinking experience in India would necessarily be applicable to Burma, a wholly distinct nation with its own culture and people. This work builds on recent trends in Burmese studies, demonstrating the prevailing view shaped by Orwell was a misguided one, and highlighting Colonial Burma's growth and innovation.

Keywords: Burma, colonialism, imperialism, Orwell

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Introduction

In the end the secrecy of your revolt poisons you like a secret disease. Your whole life is a life of lies. Year after year you sit in Kipling-haunted little Clubs, whisky to right of you, Pink'un to left of you, listening and eagerly agreeing while Colonel Bodger develops his theory that these bloody Nationalists should be boiled in oil. You hear your Oriental friends called 'greasy little babus', and you admit, dutifully, that they are greasy little babus. You see louts fresh from school kicking grey-haired servants. The time comes when you burn with hatred of your own countrymen, when you long for a native rising to drown their Empire in blood. And in this there is nothing honourable, hardly even any sincerity. For, au fond, what do you care if the Indian Empire is a despotism, if Indians are bullied and exploited? You only care because the right of free speech is denied you. You are a creature of the despotism, a pukka sahib, tied tighter than a monk or a savage by an unbreakable system of taboos. (Orwell, 1934)

These are the words of Eric Arthur Blair, better known to the world as George Orwell, author of such groundbreaking novels as *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949). The above quote is from one of his earliest and most personal works, *Burmese Days* (1934). Orwell served in Colonial Burma (present day Myanmar¹) as a constable in the Imperial Indian Police. With the Imperial Indian Police, Orwell traveled much of the country, in a variety of roles. In Mandalay² he trained for the position of assistant district superintendent, though he also visited Maymyo during this time period. Orwell later found himself at a posting in Myaungmya, in the Burmese Delta, and then the Delta city of Twante. From there, Orwell was moved to Syriam, and then Insein, both on the outskirts of Rangoon. A promotion saw Orwell moved to Moulmein, where he ran the police headquarters, and finally his tour of Burma ended in Katha, Sagaing Region, which served as the inspiration for the fictional town of Kyauktada in *Burmese Days*. While one would think that this whirlwind of movement and new jobs would mean Orwell spend a lengthy amount of time in Burma, in fact he was only in country from 1922 until 1928 (Larkin, 2005).

Burmese Days, while fiction, has numerous scenarios based on actual people or events Orwell encountered. In fact, Orwell so accurately recounted the corruption and bigotry he saw that he was forced to make changes lest he face libel lawsuits (Larkin, 2005; Orwell, 2021). Throughout *Burmese Days*, Orwell describes a neglected and underdeveloped colony, administered by incompetent British officials who could not be trusted in more important locations, and by greedy and corrupt Burmese officials looking to exploit their own countrymen just as much as the British. Orwell painted such a vivid picture in his magnificent book that it has shaped the perception of Colonial Burma for decades. In fact, to this day scholars continue to refer to *Burmese Days* in their research on Colonial Burma (Wimuttikosol, 2009). There is only one problem with this reliance on Orwell as a source for information on Colonial Burma: the picture Orwell painted is not an entirely accurate one! Orwell himself said that "I dare say

¹ For the purposes of this narrative, I use the term "Colonial Burma" when referring to the state in the time period from 1824–1948. I will use Myanmar when referring to the post-1948 independent state purely for purposes of avoiding confusion on the part of the reader. I am not using these names as a way of making any statement as to the legitimacy of the present regime. This practice has been utilized by respected scholars in the field (Saha, 2013b).

² For reasons of continuity and to attempt to avoid confusing the reader, this paper will use the historical names of Burmese regions, towns, and cities, rather than using the names those areas have been re-named by the current (2026) Myanmar government. Again, this convention has been used by other scholars in the field, and is in no way a statement as to the legitimacy of the present regime, or an apologia for colonialism (Saha, 2013b).

it's (*Burmese Days*) unfair in some ways and inaccurate in some details, but much of it is simply reporting what I have seen" (Larkin, 2005).

Some may argue that the use of *Burmese Days* as an accurate work upon which to build scholarship should not be a matter of much concern to all but the most niche of academics and social critics. The problem with that argument is that Orwell's experiences in Colonial Burma continue to attract attention from fans of literature *and* academic researchers alike from a wide array of disciplines. *Burmese Days* being cited in recent, peer reviewed research in fields as diverse as critical theory (McManus, 2022) and international relations (Lubina, 2024), demonstrates that Orwell, unfortunately, continues to be seen by scholars as a reliable narrator as to what Colonial Burma was like. As it was under colonial governance that "so many features of contemporary Myanmar would become visible", it is important for scholars of modern Myanmar, too, to have an accurate picture of just how Colonial Burma was administered (Keck, 2015).

Literature Review

Looking at scholarship in the field from both contemporary accounts, as well as modern research, the present study will argue that Colonial Burma was not a neglected colony, or a dumping ground for incompetent or dissolute British civil servants who ran out of chances in more desirable outposts. The British understood the geographical and material value of the nation that they had conquered, and sent experienced personnel to administer it. However, they found that Burma was not a land to be easily administered! The geographic and cultural particularities of the land made it a difficult one to subjugate (Keck, 2015). The multitude of languages in their newly conquered colony also seemed to flummox the British. The various languages of Burma were then—and remain now—ones where intonation and the use of diacritical marks distinguish various homonyms from each other. One can sense how overwhelmed the British were in Forbes' 1878 discussion of the languages of Burma: "The Burmese has three of these tones, but the Karen, Chinese, and other dialects have six. Thus in Burmese, 'tao' may mean, 'to speak', 'to be wicked', or, 'to stop', according to the intonation given to it" (Forbes, 1878, pg. 339). Moreover, British reliance on administrative and bureaucratic experience in India as if it were a fungible quality with knowledge of Colonial Burma did not help matters.

Administrative structures were based on those utilized in India, with the Indian Civil Service (ICS) simply expanding to include Burma, and the use of the Indian Penal Code. The administrators sent to create and oversee the new civil structures of Colonial Burma did not speak Burmese, did not have any knowledge real of Burmese culture, and the new borders they drew of the subnational states were done so without any understanding of the various different ethnicities and religious groups that lived in those areas (Aung-Thwin, 2011; Saha, 2013b; Targosz & Sławik, 2016; Thant Myint-U, 2001). This is not to say that British government—or public—was monolithic in its belief that Burma was rightly seen as part of The Raj, or British India. So-called "Burmaphiles" tried their best to accurately convey their experiences in the colony, and to present Colonial Burma in the most positive light, fully cognizant of the fact that Burma had a bad reputation, particularly with regards to crime (Keck, 2015). To their credit, the Burmaphiles were among those who insisted that "Burma was fundamentally different from India in every way" (Keck, 2015). Writing in 1897, Alice Hart—publishing as "Mrs. Ernst Hart"—included in her book *Picturesque Burma: Past and Present* a section that flatly states, "Though Burma is for the purposes of government treated as a province of India, it has little in common with India proper...make Burma as distinctive in character from the

Hindu nationalities as is Japan” (Hart, 1897; Keck, 2015). Hart is just one of many Burmaphiles who worked to carve a unique Burmese history and identity in the minds of the British public, one distinct from India, and from South Asia, broadly (Keck, 2015). Despite their best efforts, and despite the growth of the Burmese economy and its increasing urbanization, as the Twentieth Century dawned, Colonial Burma was “still regarded as something of a colonial backwater” (Keck, 2015).

That having been said, what failures in managing the colony existed was not for lack of effort or willingness to spend time, manpower, or treasure on the part of the British. As will be demonstrated in this work, the British were very concerned, for example, with issues such as crime and banditry (*dacoity*) and invested heavily in building a constable corps and in establishing criminal courts throughout Colonial Burma (Keck, 2015; Myoe, 2009). One may very well be able to argue that Colonial Burma was not a wisely administered colony, or an effectively administered colony, or a humanely administered colony, but this work seeks to demonstrate that it was not a neglected colony, or an afterthought of the British Empire.

As the administration of a colony is a multifaceted task, an attempt to evaluate it could have seemingly endless areas of exploration and discussion. For the sake of space, the paper will be broken into three broad areas of discussion, each large enough to encompass several sub-topics within them. These areas will include law and order, or attempts to reduce crime and insurrection in the colony, and have a peaceable existence for those who dwelled therein. Economic development will also be discussed, particularly with an eye towards trade and the management—or exploitation—of Burma’s numerous natural resources. This work will also discuss public hygiene, which will include demographic information such as population growth, and infant mortality rates, as well as education efforts and vaccination programs. I want to stress that I am not implying that the British were doing this for any altruistic reason—though individual government or religious figures did approach their tasks with genuine concern for the people of Burma (Bryant, 1997; Jarvis, 2021; Leigh, 2011)—rather than engaging in these undertakings to maximize the profitability of colony.

It should be stated early and explicitly that in no way, shape, or form is this manuscript an apologia for colonialism. My research never has been, and never will be in the furtherance of colonialism or whitewashing past violations of human rights. The purpose of my research project is not to praise The Raj, the British Empire, or any other imperialist, colonial power. I want it stated explicitly that countries and cultures may be *influenced* by being colonized, but they do not *benefit* from being colonized. Thus, the scope of this paper is more “disproving that the British Empire neglected and did not care about their Burmese colony” rather than “proving that the British Empire did a good job administering Colonial Burma”, as one cannot do a normatively “good job” of subjugating a people. That all having been said, if Orwell’s depiction of Colonial Burma was not accurate, what do we know about that country during that period of time?

Discussion

It's a fact that Colonial Burma was a highly diverse country. This is in part due to the fact that the Konbaung Empire, the Burmese nation-state that existed prior to British subjugation, was an expansionist nation that swallowed territories and subjects from a heterogenous mix of peoples (Bowman, 2000; Lieberman, 1996). It was also in part due to the fact that Colonial Burma was highly attractive to immigrants from a wide variety of religious, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. While even today Myanmar is home to eight official major races, subdivided into

135 officially recognized ethnic groups (Embassy of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar in Brazil, Retrieved April 30, 2025), in the colonial era immigrants from numerous other ethnic and religious groups, including neighboring Indians and Chinese, but also peoples far from home such as Iraqi Jews and Armenian Orthodox Christians, also immigrated to Burma to build new lives for themselves (Cernea, 2007; Cockett, 2015; Li, 2017). While the fact that a diverse group of immigrants sought to migrate to Colonial Burma does not tell us everything about the state of affairs in Colonial Burma in and of itself, to put it bluntly, people do not voluntarily uproot their lives to travel thousands of miles, far from the lives they've known, to move to economically moribund, stagnant nations with no opportunities. However, this is far from the only indication that Orwell's novel, while a brilliant piece of writing, and undoubtedly informed by his own experiences in Colonial Burma, is not an accurate or full account of the development of Colonial Burma. This article will present data relating to the improvements in infrastructure and establishing a professional civil service in support of the assertion that the British actually made great pains to develop Colonial Burma. While these efforts were more successful in some areas than others—despite British effort, Colonial Burma was long associated with crime for most of its existence prior to independence—one can point to numerous areas where this work by the British bore fruit (Keck, 2015).

Before picking up this discussion in earnest, a brief overview of how the British came to be in Burma will be useful for many readers. The British engaged in three wars with what was then known as the Konbaung Empire, an ethnically Burmese empire that controlled area in all of present-day Burma and, for a time, parts of modern-day Thailand. The First Anglo-Burmese War resulted in land being seized from the Konbaung Empire and added to British India, as well as a round of economically crippling sanctions being placed on the Konbaung Empire. Under thirty years later, with *casus belli* viewed as questionable even at the time, the British launched a second large scale invasion, in what is now known as the Second Anglo-Burmese War. As a result of the Second Anglo-Burmese War, additional land was seized by the British from the Konbaung Empire, thus creating two distinct states: the British controlled colony of “British Burma”, which was administered as part of the British Raj,³ and the independent state of “Upper Burma”. This state of affairs did not last long, however. A little over thirty years later, despite earlier assurances after the Second Anglo-Burmese War against further imperial designs, the British completed the conquest of Burma by conquering Upper Burma, as well, with a formal declaration of annexation proclaimed by the British Empire on January 1st, 1886, and incorporation into the British Raj. Burma would not be administered as a separate colony in its own right until 1937. During this time period, there were several periods of insurrection, including the lengthy pacification period from 1886–1890, and the rebellions inspired by Saya San in the early 1930's. Even in dealing with uprisings in their new colonial holding, the terminology and phrases used by the British were the ones they used in India (Aung-Thwin, 2011; Chew, 1979; Keck, 2015; Lange, et al., 2006; Means, 2000; Pollak, 1978; Trager & Maung, 1956).

From the late 1800's until 1940, Colonial Burma “experienced a substantial and broadly sustained rise in production and trade, establishing the territory from the outset as a hugely important possession” (Brown, 2011). While economic development, improvements in agriculture, and population growth do not tell a complete story, especially in the case of a colonized nation, they can be useful first indicators as to the general health of a region. Forbes,

³ The British Raj was massive British colony consisting of the present-day states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar.

in one of the earliest accounts of Colonial Burma, gives such descriptive statistics as to the state of the colony:

A province such as British Burma, which during the twenty years between 1855 (that is, two years after its annexation) and 1875–1876 has increased in annual revenue from 532,100*l.* to 1,527,296*l.*; in its commerce from 4,856,400*l.* to 14,665,286*l.*; and in its population from 1,274,640 to 2,896,368 souls; a province, which is now looked on by the commercial world as the trade high-road into the vast regions of Western China, we think deserves to be a little better known to all classes. (Forbes, 1878, viii)

By the time Orwell arrived in Burma, Burma was exporting half the world's rice supply, over three million tons of rice (Larkin, 2005). By the beginning of the Twentieth Century, "if not before" Burma, "an important province" was "producing rice, oil, teak and minerals, while helping to support the eastern flank of the Indian empire" (Keck, 2015). In fact, Burma was the second largest producer of oil in the British Empire, and by the twentieth century was so synonymous with teak production that it was known as "the land of teak" (Bryant, 1997; Larkin, 2005). In the roughly fifty years from 1855 to 1905–1906, Colonial Burma went from exporting 162,000 tons of rice to exporting 2,00,000 tons of rice and paddy. The number of acres cultivated for rice grew from 700,000–800,000 to 6,000,000 during the 19th century, reaching 9.93 million acres in 1940 (Brown, 2011; Keck, 2015). Crude oil production went from roughly one million barrels at the turn of the century to between 6 and 7 million barrels a year up to the outbreak of World War Two (Brown, 2011).

One can argue that these resources could have been squeezed from an exploited, oppressed, or brutalized colony, but it seems improbable that this sort of economic output is the result of a neglected or mismanaged colony. For example, let's look at the rice industry again. Between Burmese labor, labor and capital provided by Indian laborers and Chettiar moneylenders from Madras (present day Chennai), respectively, and capital brought in by British entrepreneurs, the expansion of rice cultivation and trade in Burma from the final decades of the nineteenth century has been called "one of the most impressive examples of sustained economic growth under the aegis of a European colonial regime" (Adas, 1974; Brown, 2011). While it would be naïve to say that this was done solely out of altruistic reasons by the British, it should be noted that by the 1920's, well over half of the rice mills in Burma were owned by Burmese (Brown, 2011; Cheng, 1968).

This misguided belief that Burma was just a continuation of India, and what was utilized in India would doubtlessly work just as well in Burma, also plagued British efforts to roll out mass vaccination programs. Indian hesitancy towards vaccination was motivated by factors such as the caste system, as well, as Hindu religious customs. The caste system, for example, led to some Indians being concerned that the vaccine would contaminate their blood. The importance of the cow in the Hindu religion meant some Indians wanted to avoid the vaccine due to the pain inflicted upon the cow during the creation of the lymph. Still other Indians saw smallpox as the manifestation of the goddess Sitala, and thought that receiving a smallpox vaccine would no doubt invoke her wrath (Naono, 2009). However, none of these are issues in Burma, a country with a heavy Buddhist majority, and no caste system. The British, however, were still approaching the vaccination program thinking these would be obstacles in Burma. The British also failed to take advantage of the highly literate population in Burma. The Burmese were the most literate people in the Raj, as many had received the benefits of a Buddhist monastic education. Still, the British were slow to utilize the printed word to try and raise awareness and educate the public as to the benefits of being vaccinated against smallpox

(Naono, 2009). That all said, legislation such as The Vaccination Act of 1880, which gave municipalities and cantonments the “power to prohibit inoculation and to make the vaccination of children compulsory” did lead to an increase in the number of vaccinations, “with 110,149 vaccinations performed in Upper Burma, and 156,116 in Lower Burma” (Naono, 2009). However, the tendency to treat India and Burma as fungible qualities also damaged British efforts in their use of medical subordinates.

The British initially attempted to set up medical training centers in Burma, with locations offering free classes in Rangoon, Moulmein, Bassein, Henzada, Prome, and Akyab. The Akyab and Henzada schools never got off the ground, but the other four did in 1875. However, issues such as the language barrier and a demonstration-based teaching style, where students might be shown autopsies and vivisections, to keep their interest, but then never really have explained to them what, exactly is happening, soon caused attendance to dwindle (Saha, 2012). The poor pay for hospital assistants was another likely reason for why students soon lost interest in the classes. By 1877, all of the classes had ceased. Hospitals were to be staffed by Indians trained in India, with intermittent scholarship programs for Burmese to be trained in India occasionally offered (Brown, 2011; Saha, 2012). As a result, as they were staffed with Indian doctors, Indian, medical subordinates, and Indian ward menials, ostensibly Burmese hospitals were, “for all intents and purposes, Indian institutions” (Brown, 2011; Furnivall, 1948). These Indian-trained Indian medical assistants “abused their powers to protect friends, deliberately suppressed evidence of violent death, and inadvertently allowed corpses to go missing” (Saha, 2012). Saha also asserts that “the largely Indian hospital assistants in Burma uniformly failed to detect semen stains in evidence for criminal cases” and that “Colonial enclaves of biomedical practice, such as the hospital and lunatic asylum, became the sites of abuses of power and gendered violence” (Saha, 2012).

In addition to their efforts in the vaccination campaigns, the British also were slow to try and educate the public about the effects of proper nutrition, or lack thereof, in keeping infants and children healthy. Burmese mothers would often put themselves on a restrictive diet during, and after, pregnancy. This was done both out of a misunderstanding of what foods were or were not healthy for a developing foetus, and out of a desire to have a “not-too-heavy baby with a small head” (Boomgaard, 2007; Richell, 2006). Similarly, problems with tetanus in rural areas were linked to practices with the umbilical cord (Keck, 2015; Richell, 2006). It seems as though these would be prime areas in which a public education campaign could have greatly helped the lives of their colonial subjects. However, as some historians argue, the British were slow to respond to public health issues unless, as in the creation of the Sanitary Commission, when the health and well-being of the British Military would also benefit from the investment (Keck, 2015; Richell 2006).

The British spent no small amount of money and effort in attempting to address crime in Colonial Burma. For decades, Burma had the “dubious honour” of having the highest rate of criminal activity in the entire Raj, and it was, despite the attempts of the British government to present Burma as a land of commercial opportunity and a place to explore the mysteries of “the East”, inexorably linked with crime in the minds of the British public (Keck, 2015; Saha, 2013a). While somewhat beyond the scope of this paper, Saha explains that there is a continuing debate among historians as to just why there was such a high rate of reported criminality in Colonial Burma. Some argue that the rates of criminality reflect that Colonial Burma was never fully “pacified” by the British, and the crimes cataloged by the British were a sign of a nation continually trying to shake off the shackles imposed upon them by their colonial overlords. Indeed, the small revolts and rebellions which that were almost regularly

breaking out in the countryside would point to a country bristling under colonial occupation. Others argue that the British were coming up with “new and lasting definitions of criminality”, and thus arresting people for conduct that the Burmese themselves would view as perfectly legal. The first argument would say that the high rates of criminality are due to the state being so weak and ineffectual that it could not “impose its will”. The second argues that the state was so able to impose its will that it could incarcerate any number of people for whatever reason it saw fit (Saha, 2013a). Saha, looking at the case study of public gambling, concludes, at the risk of oversimplification, “It’s both”. This is due to the confusing definition of “public gambling” as codified by The British, the fact that gambling on pony races during festivals was a widespread practice in Burma, that many colonial administrators did not see prosecuting public gambling as a priority, and that the British did not wish to enforce the law in such a way that the British themselves could not gamble!

Gambling was not the only vice that the British regulated along racial lines. Regarding the sale and consumption of opium, the British allowed—and, depending on the colonial official, even encouraged—the use of opium among Chinese and Indian immigrants who had come to Burma as laborers, as well as among the Shan and Kachin populations along the border regions. However, they banned the sale of opium to the ethnic Burmese (Wright, 2014). The Burmese themselves wanted stricter opium laws, as elders witnessed the awful effects that the drug was having on the younger population. The British government, however, found the opium business to be a profitable one, and did not want to shut that revenue stream entirely. Private entrepreneurs, for their part, saw trade in commodities like teak to be better ventures than drug running. The British government also did not want to restrict opium use among the “foreign nationalities” within Burma, thinking that the drug did no observable harm to the Chinese, for example, while it ravaged the more “child-like” Burmese (Wright, 2014, pg. 8). Thus, Chief Commissioner of Burma, Charles Aitchison, penned a compromise whereby sale to native Burmese was prohibited, but sale to the Indian, Shan, Kachin, and Chinese communities was allowed, if not even encouraged.

Conclusion

Was Orwell a fabulist? Certainly not. Orwell, by his own admission, was only writing from his own experiences, and it is likely, as a constable, that he had to deal with people having the worst day of their lives on many an occasion. This could include Burmese, as well as English, as both accused and the accuser alike. Orwell would not be the first police officer—never mind one serving as part of a colonial corps—to find themselves growing jaded. Additionally, more than one thing can be true at once. Someone can be a well-trained, experienced administrator overseeing an area of expertise with skill and competence, and still have disgusting views on matters such as race or empire.

Did the British do a “good” job administering Burma. Again, it’s a difficult question, as how does one do a “good” job ruling over a people who don’t want you ruling over them. But, to return to the question framed earlier in the paper, it seems that Burma was not a neglected colony in any sense. The British did not send dissolute alcoholics who washed out in every other civic service position they ever held to Burma as a last resort. Charles Aitchison, for example, had over twenty years of civil service in India to his credit before being sent to Burma to serve as Chief Commissioner. The British themselves seemed pleased with how things were proceeding in Colonial Burma, viewing it as a success into 1930 (Aung-Thwin, 2011). However, it ultimately seems that the British government should have listened to the Burmaphiles, as, despite the fact that, as we have seen, the British put considerable time and

treasure into their Burmese possession, there were numerous areas where they erred due to their belief that Burma was, for all intents and purposes, another India. Recognition of Burma as a unique nation, with a unique culture, and unique challenges and opportunities, could have perhaps led to a more prosperous colony for the British, and a more tolerable existence for the colonized Burmese population.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

ChatGPT was used to assist in the formatting of the bibliography. Otherwise, no AI was used in the writing, proofreading, or formatting of this manuscript.

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