

1.4. LAND: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, POLICY AND CONFLICTS

Agricultural Changes in Myanmar Through Ages

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Abstract

In Myanmar's history, changes in agriculture have taken place at least three times. Natural rain-fed rice cultivation was substituted by irrigated cultivation in the Bagan Period. It greatly affected society, especially on the religious sector. The second change took place in the middle of the Konbaung Period in which some new crops were introduced and cultivators were encouraged by providing them with agricultural loans, and advanced money for economic development was discernable. Some crops became export items like rice and cotton. King Mindon made efforts towards the development of agriculture by replacing self-sufficient economy with commercial agriculture. In the colonial period, Myanmar had been a sole exporting country of rice. The whole of lower Myanmar became paddy-growing area and the majority of people were engaged in it. Because of an influx of Indian immigrants who dominated all sorts of public works, natives suffered a great deal. Animosity (hatred) grew about between the two societies; natives and aliens. After independence, a new agrarian economy was introduced by eliminating old landownership systems. The AFPFL government announced that all cultivators must own land. Land redistribution was carried out. But due to insurgency all over Myanmar, the government's development programmes were not met with success. A political change brought about an economic change. The military government tried to introduce a socialist economy. Thus under the BSPP government, all land and businesses were nationalized. Thus, a new socialist economy came into being. People have, since then, faced economic hardship. Black marketeering prevailed all over Myanmar. Because of the failure of the socialist economy, government officials and people alike became corrupted to a greater extent. Myanmar's society broke down. Consequently there came about a great social upheaval or a bitter political crisis that the Myanmarese had never met in their history. It was ended with a military coup d'état. And thus agrarian development deteriorated.

Keywords: agriculture, cultivation, parabaik

First and foremost, let me confess that this is a preliminary survey of my intended research on agricultural changes in Myanmar throughout the ages. Myanmar has been an agricultural country since time immemorial. It has a long history, and cultivators are still working with only-slightly modified primitive agricultural implements on different soils, growing a variety of crops. They have undergone many different rules from a monarchical system to a democratic way of government,

passing through a planned socialist state economy under which cultivators had but to grow new imported inferior paddy species that greatly yielded enough for domestic consumption. Many native superior species of paddy were therefore lost forever. This paper will be concluded with an assumption of economic conditions and the life of people in general.

As historical evidences show, agricultural changes had taken place at least three times in Myanmar history before the occupation of Myanmar by the British in 1885. The first change came about during the reign of King Aniruddha (AD 1044-1077) popularly known as Anawrahta. It was an introduction of irrigated cultivation by means of constructing weirs, dams, lakes, and canals. (U Kala, III, 2006, p. 178) This irrigated agricultural system was established in the Eleven Districts of Myittha or Kyauk-se. (Toe Hla, 2015, pp. 81-89) It was the first change from traditional rain-fed rice cultivation to irrigated cultivation. Since then the area had been a major region of wet or rice cultivation (Parabaik No.35). Prosperity of the Bagan City and its Buddhism were somehow related with the development of irrigated agriculture in this above-said region.

Some later kings followed suit, by constructing weirs and canals in other places like Salin, Meiktila, Madaya (Mandalay), Dipeyin (Shwebo) and so forth. King Sithu I of the Bagan Dynasty is well known as the one who built dams and weirs in Kyauk-se and elsewhere. (U Kala 2006, I, p.192) In the post-Bagan Period King Mingyi Swasawke of Ava (Inn-wa) renovated the Meiktila Lake for irrigation. (U Kala, 2006, I, p.281) In the Nyaungyan Period King Thalun took *sittans* — revenue inquests to develop agriculture. (U Kala, 2006, III, p.175)

Agriculture in irrigated areas of Kyaukse and Myittha districts developed rapidly because of their accessibility to irrigation networks implemented by King Aniruddha (AD 1044-1077). Consequently the regions where water was easily available all-year round for watering rice-fields became crowded with crown servicemen who were settled there either for permanent residence, or for cultivation or for their maintenance. Many hundreds of glebe lands were located in such irrigated areas as Kyauk-se, Myittha, Salin and Taungbyone Regions that surrounded Bagan, the capital city of Myanmar in a fan-shape. Buddhism and Buddhist monuments consequently mushroomed in Bagan. (Searle, 1928.p. 51) There were other irrigated regions developed in later times like Shwebo, Taungdwingyi, Yamethin, etc (Toe Hla, 2017, pp. 270, 277, 278, 280, 281, 283, 284). According to literary evidence, double cropping or triple cropping of *muyin* paddy (an inferior quality of rice grown in cold season) was in practice in irrigated areas. (Toe Hla, 2003, p. 41) In Bagyi Taik and Myinmu Town of present day Monywa District and many other areas of Sagaing District, dry cultivation prevailed to a greater extent. Dry cultivation lands were also donated to Bagan Temples and Pagodas. All of these glebe lands were tenanted to local cultivators or pagoda slaves. Some cultivators of glebe lands, being poor, they used to mortgage or sell them to local chiefs or money-lenders; thus, privatization of glebe lands appeared in later periods. King Badon took *Sittans*--inquests in ME 1145 and ME 1164 of local chiefs to investigate the cultivation lands of the Buddhist institutions in the kingdom. (Trager & Koenig, 1979, p.5)

In areas where rain water or irrigation was not sufficiently available and soil was poor for paddy rice, other suitable crops were grown. Among them were chili, corn, cotton, millet, sesame, various beans and many others. In the post-Bagan period, inscriptions and literary works like the *Pyos* (illustration

and embellishment of the *Jataka* stories in poetic form) frequently mention crops that consisted of chili, cowpea (ပဲလွမ်း-*Vigna catieng*), egg-plant, garlic, green gram (ပဲနောင်-*Phaseolus mungo*), Italian millet (ဆိတ်-*setaria Italica*), onion, paddy, snake gourd (ပဲလင်းရေ -*Tricho-santhes anguina*), sugar cane, turmeric (နန္ဒင်-*curcuma longa*), etc. (Toe Hla, 2003, p.43) Tobacco (*Nicotlana tabacum* Linn) seemed to be introduced in the post-Bagan Period. We come across these crops in the *Pyos* and in rural ballads. (Toe Hla, 2003, p. 43) (Po Latt, 2011, pp. 41, 47, 49, 50) On river islands and in inundated areas where annual floods silted, cultivators mainly grew vegetables like variety of beans, cucumbers, bananas, gourd, pumpkins, tobacco, and the like. In early days of the Konbaung Dynasty, such crops like maize (မြောင်းဖူး-*Zeamays* Linn), potato (ဆာလူး-*Solanum Tuberosum*) peanut (မြေပဲ-*Arachis hypogaea*), and wheat (ကျွဲ-*Triticum aestivum*) could not have been introduced yet. They are found only in the Mandalay and colonial Periods.

Another change took place during the reign of King Badon (AD. 1782-1819). The king is well known for his successful attempts in renovating and constructing old lakes and irrigation works, and looking forward to development of agriculture and establishing a peaceful society. The king also encouraged cultivators by urging them to grow all kinds of edible crops in all available areas. (Than Tun, 1986, Vol.IV: 177) Most importantly he annually issued a kind of farmers' almanac (*Thingyan-sar*) a month or so ahead of Myanmar New Year in order to let all cultivators know the right time for tilling the fields, broadcasting seeds, and harvesting crops. (Than Tun, 1990, p.97) He let cultivators grow cotton as a cash crop and cotton was exported to China via Bamaw since his reign. (*Parabaik MS*, No.250)

King Mindon (1852-78) was a greatly reputed monarch in Myanmar history. It was he who one-sidedly ended the second Anglo-Myanmar war of 1852 soon after he ascended to the throne. When he became king Myanmar was shrunk to one-third of the Alaung Mintara's territories. Provinces of Rakhine, Taninthari, and lower Myanmar were annexed to British India. King Mindon made vigorous efforts to keep sovereignty alive; the situations forced him to introduce reforms for all-round development of his landlocked kingdom which was lagging behind a century or so to the British.

Among many reform schemes an agrarian development plan was included. People of Upper Myanmar previously relied on Lower Myanmar for rice. It was then no longer under Myanmar rule. So this became the first priority in reforms to cultivate more rice in the kingdom. Firstly the king renovated old weirs, lakes, canals and dug many more new ones at the cost of state funds for paddy rice cultivation in order not to rely on lower British Myanmar. He was successful in implementing agrarian reforms. Apart from old rice growing areas of Kyaukse, Madaya, Mandalay, Meiktila, Salin, Thazi, Yamethin and Yazagyo of Upper Chindwin District, (Toe Hla: 1994, p.150) Shwebo had also become a major rice growing region during his reign. The king helped needy farmers by providing them with agricultural loans and advanced money for their crops. He turned an aged-old self-sufficient economy into a market-oriented one. It was in his reign that he declared some important crops to be trade items of the royal monopoly in order to prevent muddling of crop prices by alien merchants and their agents in rural areas. The king's agricultural schemes were evidently successful.

He introduced many cash crops that consisted of ရုံလျှော် jute, ဝဲနယ် indigo, and rubber for export only. These were grown in Sagaing Township. The king also built an indigo factory at Sagaing. Plantations of fruit tree orchards were introduced to Singut Village in Shwebo Township. (*Parabaik* MS, No.20) People planted such fruit trees as သစ်ဆိမ့် belleria myrobalan (*Terminalia belerica*), တည်သီ persimmon (*Diospyros kurz*), and လွန်ဝင် cherojee (*Buchanania lanzan Spreng*) by order of His Highness Prince Kanaung. (*Parabaik* MS, No. 20, 215, 224, 243, 258, 310, 312) In areas where dry cultivation prevailed, where soil was poor and annual rain fall was scant, rural people mostly grew dry cultivation crops. People faced economic hardship due to droughts that usually came three or four times a year. When they could not overcome difficulties to make ends meet, mortgaging or selling their cultivation lands was commonplace; often their last resort to ease their immediate problems. We have thousands of *Thet-kayits* collected from all parts of Myanmar.

The mortgage deeds so far collected belong to the Konbaung and colonial periods. Major differences are seen in the terms agreed upon, and the material used for writing. The deeds reveal the contractual terms that both parties agreed upon. Unlike those made during the time of Myanmar kings, money-lenders were mostly aliens known as Chettiars. And the deeds were mostly written in English which Myanmar cultivators could not read or understand. Interest rates were considerably high and consequently the debtor or mortgager rarely redeemed them within a year. Thus cultivators become landless farmers. During the time of Myanmar kings, the life of cultivators was not much different when compared to that of free cultivators who were also liable to become indebted or a bondage slave at any time. In lower Myanmar, cultivation lands slipped away into the hands of alien money-lenders as seen in the following table.

Table (1): Land Sold & Mortgaged

Year	Land Sold. Acres	Land Mortgaged. Acres	No. of Tenants
1887-88 1891-92	106,037	36,202	30,791
1895-96	263,686	63,326	46,971
1896-97	304,580	96,237	-
1898-99	338,983	89,289	-
1899-1900	-	-	-
	473768	-	-

Source: Nisbet, 1901, p.279

In the Konbaung Period, one can find many *thetkayits*—land mortgage deeds written on toddy palm leaves or in *parabaiks*—a homemade rough note books blackened and folded in a zigzag way in which were written with soapstone pencil, mostly mortgage deeds and medicinal formulae for various illness and diseases. In *thet-kayits*, mortgagers used to say why they mortgaged or sold their land. And, often it was because of an emergency need of money (Toe Hla, 2014, pp.71-86)

The whole of Myanmar (Burma) had been a British colony since AD 1886. It was on New Year's day of 1886 that the British government announced the annexation of Myanmar to its British India. They had twice previously chopped off, and taken away Myanmar territories, both times waging its aggressive wars: Rakhine and Taninthary in 1826; and Lower Myanmar including the Ayeyawady

deltaic Region, the Bago Region and the Madama Region in 1852. And finally the whole of Myanmar fell under British colony in 1886. After that, Myanmar was a British colony for more than sixty years.

Before the study of agricultural changes in the colonial period of Myanmar, we should understand the population growth during this period. There were no census-taking efforts made during the reign of Myanmar kings. Indeed, manpower or human resources should be very much appreciated for all-round development of a nation. By utilizing human resources properly, a government could bring forth success in the implementation of development plans. See the increase of population under British rule in the following table.

Table (2): Growth in Burma's (Myanmar's) Population

Year	Lower Burma (Myanmar)	Upper Burma (Myanmar)	Total
1872	2590332		
1881	3567211		
1891	4408466	3313587	7722053
1901	5405967	5084657	10490624
1911	6212412	5902805	12115217
1921	6862106	6350086	13212190
1931	7765873	6881883	14647756
1941	8917533	7906265	16823798

Source: Andrus, 1947, p.23

Before the British annexation of Lower Myanmar, the population living there was less than that of Upper Myanmar. Since 1852, Upper Myanmar was superseded by Lower Myanmar both in population and in economic development in the 1860s and 1870s. This was firstly due to an influx of immigrants from upper Myanmar. Many of them were political dissidents, followers of the Princes of Myingun and Myinkhundaing who tried to dethrone their father King, Mindon and Heir Apparent by means of rebellion. But their attempt failed. They fled to British Lower Myanmar with their followers. The implementation of reforms was greatly hindered by the Myin-gun- Myin-khun-daing Rebellion. As the heir apparent, Prince Kanaung was assassinated in the melee of armed uprising all his reform schemes were almost nearly defunct. But the king's efforts for development of agriculture seemed to be successful. He helped farmers by granting loans and advanced cash for their harvests. All of the outturns were collected by royal agents at their villages.

Under British rule Myanmar, the agricultural system greatly changed. Such changes took place to cope with the colonial administrative systems by annihilating the deeply rooted traditional monarchical system. It is evident that the British colonial government wanted Myanmar to be their market place for British industrial products, and they also wanted Myanmar as a country that supplied raw materials for industries in Britain. These raw materials included rice and other crops; teak and other forest products; and minerals that included earth oil, precious stones, gold, silver and other industrial minerals. As the majority of people were agriculturists, the government tried to develop agriculture.

The government enacted laws for the improvement of agriculture. Two laws were enforced in order to help cultivators; the first one was the Land Improvements Loans Act and the second one was the Agricultural Loans Act. These were intended to improve the cultivation lands and for cultivators, to

get agricultural loans. It was hoped that these acts might help peasant farmers in their attempt to get good yield of crops. There were cooperative societies established to help them. But it is seen in history that their life seemed to become worse for a variety of reasons. Chettiers took loans from the Banks at 10-12 percent interest rates; they lent money out through agents to cultivators at 15 to 20 percent. Thus a cultivator who was entangled in debt could never come out. (Furnivall, 1957, pp. 121, 124-26)

The British wanted Myanmar to be their colony for three reasons: for exploitation of its natural resources, i.e. teak and mineral ores; for paddy-rice and other varieties of crops to feed the people of the Indian and African colonies; and to be a dumping ground at the backdoor of China for cross-border trade. They set up agricultural industries like rice mills, saw mills, oil pressing mills, earth-oil refineries, railway lines for trains, melted roads for busses and lorries, and ships in rivers and seas for conveying rice, teaks, and minerals.

Under the rule of Myanmar kings, there were five types of land holding systems, viz., the crown land known as *Lamaing mye*; the state land called *ayardaw mye*; the religious land or glebe land called *wuttagan mye*; the private land or ancestral land called *pugglika mye* or *bobabaing mye* and lastly the confiscated land—that which was confiscated from the rebels or criminals or those of the heirless known as *thein-ya mye* or *zon-the amwe-pyat mye*. (Tin, 2012, pp.576-577) Under the rule of the Myanmar kings, land reclamation could easily be carried out by giving a quarter of one kyat, in the form of a silver coin, to a local authority.

The British government stepped up in Lower Myanmar for the reclamation of land to be brought under cultivation. The intention was to grow more rice in the delta to get more revenue for their administration. They wanted to turn the whole region into a rice frontier, by importation of Indian immigrants for the agricultural labour. So within a decade the population of Lower Myanmar rose by the influx of immigrants from Upper Myanmar and India. They all were engaged in agricultural work. The British colonial government enacted agrarian laws in favor of growing cultivations. For the reclamation of land and easy occupation, the government laid down an agrarian policy of landownership. All reclaimed lands were in accord with one of these systems: squatter system; leased system; grant system, patta system and the colony system. Under Myanmar traditional rule, all people could have the right to acquire land by means of clearing a nearby jungle for himself. In those days, working hand was very rare whereas land was plenty. People grew crops only for their family needs. No cash crop or market-oriented agriculture was known to them. Agriculture was for self-sufficiency alone.

To develop agriculture in the delta region the British government adopted a policy of granting land to land proprietors and cultivators in five kinds:

- The Colony system
- The Grant system
- The Lease system
- The Patta system and
- The Squatter system (Furnivall, 1957, p. 51)

People could acquire land for cultivation by these types of grant.

The British colonial government, on the contrary, adopted a policy of market-oriented agriculture. Thus the whole of Lower Myanmar was turned into a very vast rice field landscape. All the outturns of rice were purchased for export to India and African colonies. And merchandise like rolls of very beautiful cloth, household utensils and fancy-goods were imported to Myanmar markets. The life of the Myanmar people seemed to be livable at the beginning because they could have clothing, utensils and fancy goods cheaply and easily; but later on, they found themselves in a very hard life. People became indebted due to the temptation of foreign goods, and Myanmar traditional handiworks like woven textiles, potteries, umbrella-making and so forth were ruined.

In the British colonial administration, land surveying and teak extracting departments were very important for their trade. Bullenger Pool was then the most prosperous business in monopolizing the rice trade, while Bombay Burma Trading Co. took the lead in teak extraction. The whole of the Ayeyarwady Delta Region and the Sittaung Valley became the rice frontier area in lower Myanmar. In Upper Myanmar the pocket areas of Mandalay, Kyaukse, Meiktila -Yamethin Districts, the Minbu District of Magway Division, and the Shwebo District of Sagaing Division were and still are major rice growing regions where irrigation was easily accessible. Indeed, rice production increased year by year until Myanmar became the top rice exporting country of Southeast Asia.

Myanmar, in the early colonial period, had been divided into two major parts for agriculture: rice growing region and multi-crop growing region. Lower Myanmar had been the sole region where rice was predominantly grown. No other crops were ever grown there as it annually received heavy rainfall of over 80 inches a month. In central Myanmar, where many of Bamars live, there grew all sorts of crops including paddy-rice in irrigated regions. Myanmar kings constructed weirs, lakes, dams and canals for watering rice fields. But when compared to dry cultivation, it was minimal. The colonial government paid much attention to maintenance, renovation and new construction of irrigation systems.

Myanmar became a sole rice growing and exporting country. Changes could be seen in rice growing. The whole of lower Myanmar became a major rice growing area. In the Ayeyarwady Deltaic Region, more new rice cultivation lands were reclaimed by clearing tidal forests, and by constructing miles-long embankments to prevent salination of the cultivations. Moreover, canals like those of Twante and Bago, Sittaung, were constructed for transportation of agricultural and forest products. In those days the departments of Forestry, Land Survey, and PWD (Public Works Department) were the busiest departments under colonial rule for its exploitation of Myanmar natural and mineral resources.

Year	Cultivate Area in Acres	Average Annual Increase in Acres
1852-53	600,000	
1872-73	1,500,000	45,000
1882-83	2,860,000	136,000
1892-93	4,467,000	160,000
1902-03	6,649,000	218,000
1912-13	7,913,000	126,000
1922-23	8,936,000	102,000

Table (3): The Rate of Expansion of Cultivation; Source: Furnivall, 1957, p. 48

The table shows the annual increase of cultivated land in Lower Myanmar. One of the major factors for increasing cultivation lands may have been due to an influx of Indian immigrants as Myanmar was then thinly populated in proportion to the ample land. The land reclamation policy adopted by the colonial government was very much encouraging of landless cultivators.

Agriculture crop-yields increased in every sector due to changes in the landownership system, the use of fertilizer, and the encouragement of new tilling and growing cultivation methods. Many new crops were not only introduced but also grown largely for both domestic and foreign markets. Agricultural training schools and a college in Mandalay were opened.

Rice was and still is a staple crop in Myanmar. Since the time of Myanmar kings there were 187 species of rice grown in Myanmar. We often come across them in Myanmar literature and in inscriptions. They are all native rice species. And no foreign species were ever introduced or encouraged by the colonial government. For good crop yields, Myanmar cultivators hardly knew about the benefits of fertilizer. They did not know about the benefits of using cow dung as manure – there is no trace of using manure during the time of Myanmar kings. It was only during the colonial period that manure and fertilizer were used in cultivations. Thus crops doubled, and in some places tripled.

Newly Introduced Crops and Plants

It was easily discernable that there had been unfamiliar crops and plants introduced for cultivation in upper and central Myanmar. Among them were corn (maize), peanut (groundnut), potato, jute, rubber, sugar cane, wheat and several others.

Social changes also took place in Lower Myanmar. Myanmar became poorer and poorer - not only in the economic sphere but also in every sector of social life. Indian and Chinese people overwhelmed all the businesses and governmental departments. Myanmar was being deprived almost totally of jobs and opportunities in their own land. Because of illiteracy and poorness, they became landless farmers, tenants and coolies to Indian moneylenders commonly known as Chatterers. They were absentee landowners. At least one-third of the cultivation lands fell into the hands of the so-called Chatterers or absentee landowners. Because of such unbearable changes, poor peasants rose up against the British colonial government; this is known in Myanmar history as the Saya San Rebellion of 1930. Some western historians used to say that it was just a Messianic or millennial movement. It appears that the western historians wanted to divert the political awakening movement relating towards a religious movement. It was indeed a national awakening movement that finally led to Myanmar's freedom from alien rule.

Under the British rule, there came about another change in Myanmar society; it was the appearance of a political elite class or intelligentsia class which was thin as a social stratum but skillful enough to lead the people. These movements were seen in the YMBA (Young Men Buddhist Association) and the GCBA (General Council of Burmese Associations) movements. They were pro-British Government, but disguising themselves as nationalist leaders. They firstly tried to lead the people as national heroes and when offered ministerial posts they accepted posts in the colonial government. Those who had been western educated had hopes of becoming Officers of Indian Civil Service (ICS).

Together with the national awakening of Myanmar people, especially-educated members of the YMBA, GCBA and Dobama Asiayone took a lot of interest in political movements of peasants and farmers. Since the economic depression, the suffering of Myanmar cultivators finally led to another peasant rebellion headed by Saya San.

In conclusion, up until they regained independence, Myanmar cultivators were still in poverty-stricken conditions. The new national government conducted land nationalization and redistribution to landless farmers, but it could not make the agrarian society develop. National welfare development plans were met to no avail. Up until now, Myanmar cultivators are still in limbo.

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