

2.3 THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF LIVELIHOODS IN COLONIAL BURMA

Businesswomen of Myanmar in Colonial Period: A Historical Overview

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Abstract

Since more than 50% of the Myanmar population is women, their role is significant in political, social, economic and education sectors and their participation in the workforce is important in the development effort. In Myanmar, where the whole of rural society is generally engaged in agriculture, it is not surprising to find women engaged in agriculture – in paddy and cotton fields, and in the domestic industry, as spinners and weavers. But they are also engaged in trade. If one walks into a market, most of those sitting at the stalls are women. Furthermore, women can be seen conducting business skillfully in the markets. Whether in large cities or small towns, a large number of women are involved in the wholesale and retail trade as brokers, agents, shopkeepers, vendors and hawkers. They put in a lot of effort even in small scale businesses, this being one of the best ways to earn extra income for the family.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of businesswomen in Myanmar and to explain how these women contribute to the socio-economic development of Myanmar during the colonial period.

Keywords: Businesswomen, Colonial period, Trade, Society, Entrepreneurs

1. Introduction

Economic, social and political developments in Asia have brought with them profound changes in the status of women. In general, women's conditions have improved with economic development and social and political change that favors equality and individual rights. At the same time, cultural traditions, especially those related to family life, continue to have a strong influence on the status of women in the region.

In Myanmar, the status of women has always been high since the days of Myanmar kings. There are many historical evidences showing that women and men enjoyed equal rights in Myanmar. There were no social or cultural discriminations against gender, but Myanmar women gave priority and leadership role to men and they usually deferred to their husbands. They contentedly accepted their role next to their husbands. These traditions made women house-bound and subservient to their husbands. (Myanmar Gender Profile, 2000, p. 5)

Traditionally Myanmar people accepted the view that the main responsibilities of women were housekeeping and childcare, while men were expected to support the family. The husband provided

for the financial needs and the wife managed daily family affairs, providing food, clothing and schooling etc. Nevertheless, Myanmar women have a great say in family decisions as well as in earning and managing the family income. Moreover, Myanmar women not only have domestic responsibilities, but are also active in business when family circumstances so require.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of the businesswomen in the Myanmar economy and to explain how these women contribute to the socio-economic development of Myanmar in colonial period.

2. Business Tradition among Myanmar Women

Since more than 50% of Myanmar population are women, their role is significant in political, social, economic and education sectors and their participation in the workforce is important in the development effort. In Myanmar, where the whole of rural society is generally engaged in agriculture, it is not surprising to find women engaged in agriculture - in paddy and cotton fields, and in domestic industry, in spinning and weaving. But they are also engaged in trade. If one walks into a market, most of those sitting at the stalls are women. Putting up a stall in the house or in the market has always been the pattern for young women, and is considered a suitable occupation for those not engaged in the fields. (Hall, 1989, p. 33-38)

In Myanmar, women can be seen conducting business skillfully in the markets. Whether in large cities or small towns, a large number of women are involved in the wholesale and retail trade as brokers, agents, shopkeepers, vendors and hawkers. They put in a lot of effort even in small scale business, this being one of the best ways to earn extra income for the family. It also broadens their views, teaches them to know their strengths and weaknesses and ways of making the best of their abilities.

The role of Myanmar women in business was noted by foreigners who came to know Myanmar society in the colonial period. British colonialist marveled that Myanmar women managing and running large shops and business skillfully when they annexed the country. One of the British government officials remarked that "Burmese women take an active part in the business of the country. Most of the retail trade is in their hands sometimes they manage more important commercial affairs." And also noted "A large proportion of the purely Burmese commerce was carried on in markets, large and small almost all stall holders would be women. Burmese women have excellent business sense."(Aung Tun Thet, 1998, p. 99-100) In addition the Rev H.P Cochrane, a missionary noted "The bazaar is almost wholly run by the women, each having her own stall and keeping her accounts in her head...she knows how to make money and keep what she makes." (Cochrane, 1904, p. 55)

The tradition of Myanmar women in business and trade noted by foreigners during the colonial period continues to flourish to the present day. Women are active in commercial life, ranging from women hawkers, who walk from house to house with baskets of fruits, vegetables or sweetmeats on their head, or sell food in the streets, or near factories, campuses and bus stations to women who conduct business as entrepreneurs. According to the data on Mi Mi Khaing (1984, p. 131), Myanmar is the highest percentage of women who are participating in trade as self-employed in Southeast

Asia. Moreover, the data on the proportions of male and female in the labor force by selected occupational groups for the years 1973 and 1983 shows that women outnumber men in the trade category, with women accounting for 60.63% in 1973 and 58.72% in 1983. Today, firms with female participation in ownership in Myanmar are 27.3% and firms with female top manager are 30%. Among them, in large forms (over 100 employees) 42% have female owners and 41% have female management. In small (5-19 employees) and medium (20-99 employees), 27% have female owners, 29% have female managers. (Women and the Economy in Myanmar, 2016)

3. Myanmar Businesswomen in the Colonial Period

Myanmar women started their business in various ways, and had many different reasons for starting their business. Perhaps a common reason was the desire for independent achievement relying on their own self-confidence, and their inborn abilities. Women played a leading role in many small and medium scale enterprises. They were great as they had skills and economic outlook to lead, manage and facilitate an enterprise. Myanmar women's involvement in business has been since the days of Myanmar kings. The economic role of women included large-scale purveying, contracting of supplies and establishing brokerage houses.

Several Myanmar businesswomen have come to prominence in the colonial period. Daw Nyein Tin, born in 1886, and her younger sister Daw Ohn Tin were able to run a successful business importing and distributing newsprint and crepe paper – a business which was largely under the domination of foreign businessmen. Competing skillfully against Indians and Chinese in the business, the two sisters acquired their secrets and tried to outdo them in their commercial tactics. Daw Nyein Tin imported newsprint and crepe paper and marked them under the Myintzy Rupa and Kalama Gaung brands which well-known and popular. Even their foreign competitions were astonished by the skill of the two sisters in conducting their business (Kyi Mar, 1975, p.116)

Another leading Myanmar businesswoman before the Second World War was Daw Thet May, a native of Kyaiklat, born in 1895. With her husband losing his sight in 1938, she was left with the responsibility of earning the family income. On the advice of her husband, she started a business in Yangon, Daw Thet May & Sons which rented tables, chairs, mattresses and furniture for various occasions and receptions. Against strong competition from other rental firms, she successfully established and expanded business by excellent management, skillful marketing and the provision of good services (Kyi Mar, 1975, p. 116).

Another successful enterprise run by a Myanmar businesswoman in the colonial period was May Thet Brothers which designed and made artificial flowers of velvets, cloth and crepe paper which for young women wore at social or religious ceremonies. The proprietor of the company was Daw Mya Thet, born in 1913, early learned the skill of making paper flowers and with her younger sister, opened a shop on 32nd street, a site street in a downtown location. As her business prospered she moved her shop to Maha Bandoola Street (Dalhousie Road), the major downtown area. The May Thet Brothers Company won prizes in the floral designing competition held annually in the Jubilee Hall, expanded its business to make studio settings for a leading film company, the A-1 Company. Later it manufactured cosmetics, including hair lotions, face and body powders, whose popularity continued after the Second World War (Kyi Mar, 1975, pp. 118-119).

A Myanmar businesswoman who made her mark soon after the Second World War was Daw Ngwe Tin, born in 1915. Gaining business experience from working for her aunt Daw Nyein Tin, a paper merchant, she established her own stationery business in 1946 under the name of Ma Ngwe Tin Company. She visited Japan and India to buy the necessary machinery to expand and develop her paper and stationery enterprise. She produced the Triple Three brand exercise books and distributed these across the country, competing successfully with well-established foreign firms such as the Royal Stationery Company and the Bandoola Stationery Company (Kyi Mar, 1975, pp. 120-121).

Another prominent businesswoman was Naga Daw Oo, whose business was cheroots. Daw Oo was born in Mandalay in 1910. Her parents and grandparents conducted business in tobacco and other ingredients for making cheroots, and also rolled cigars as a small cottage industry. With this background in the tobacco trade and cigar rolling, her husband, Ko Tun Chun decided to start a cheroot rolling business. They named their product the Naga cheroot and the brand quickly established in Mandalay and the several regions (Ahmar, 1991, p. 41). During the Second World War, the cheroot business had to be shut down and Ko Tun Chun died. However, Daw Oo reestablished the business immediately after the war and was successful enough to extend her business to the Yangon market. Naga Daw Oo died in 1995, an ideal businesswoman and a model for younger generations (Ahmar, 1991, pp. 42-50).

Another Myanmar businesswoman made her mark with the Set-kya-wa-lar press in Thonze town, Thayawaddy district. It was one of the earliest Myanmar press and Thonze was outstanding in publication in the colonial period. Daw Pwa Shin was the owner of Set-kya-wa-lar, and with her press established a publishing house, publishing the Thayawaddy newspaper and books of all sorts from Yangon. In 1947, she moved her business to Yangon. The Thayawaddy newspaper was published every Saturday, and was printed out the Universal Electric Press managed by Maung Zan, the husband of Daw Pwa Shin. Apart from her printing and publishing business, Daw Pwa Shin also owned an ice factory and saw mills. Daw Pwa Shin died in 1957 at the age of 78 (Mone Nyin, 1976, pp. 260-262).

Another prominent figure in business circles was, Yangon Film Daw Ma Ma. She started the Yangon Film Company in 1932, a year before her husband died and as a widow successfully developed the Yangon Film Company for the next 38 years into a well-established enterprise. The Yangon Film Company produced the first technicolor film in Myanmar "Chit Thwe Nyi" in 1948. In 1958, on its 25th silver anniversary, the Yangon Film Company produced another technicolor film, "Chit-ke-dar-a-mhan-bar-be". Daw Ma Ma not only produced films but entered the cinema house industry; she bought the Palladium cinema house in 1946 and made extensive renovations. When the Myanmar Film Association was invited by the Italian government to participate in Milan Film Festival, U Shwe Baw (son of Daw Ma Ma) and U Mya Han were chosen as delegates to represent the Association. Loved and regarded by her staff as their mother, Daw Ma Ma also raised her family of nine children, died in 1963, at the age of 70 (Mone Nyin, 1976, pp. 175-179).

In the post-independence period, many Myanmar businesswomen established brokerage houses dealing in domestic products such as pickled tea leaves and green tea leaves and an export business. They made good headway in exporting pulses and beans in competition against of foreign and domestic enterprises. Daw Nu Yin, daughter of Daw Kyin Aein, born in 1914, and her sister-in-law

Daw Kyi Kyi founded the Panlong brokerage house in 1948. They made study tours to foreign countries, imported selected goods and expanded their business. With the AFPFL government giving encouragement to Myanmar enterprises, the Panlong Trading Company, received an export license in 1950 and started exporting rice, beans and potato to Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, England, India and Sri Lanka. It also expanded its importing business in 1951, and imported textile and consumer goods from Japan. In 1957, Daw Nu Yin and Daw Kyi Kyi established a textile factory and manufactured a wide range of products including towels, longyis, clothes under the Shwepyitan brand, winning admiration from the Japan businessmen with whom they dealt. During the period of the Caretaker Government (1958-60), Daw Nu Yin established a Joint Venture Company, managing her export-import business alone. She visited England, Germany, Italy, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and India to explore and expand her business. Daw Nu Yin and Daw Kyi Kyi were elected as executives of the Myanmar Traders Association (Kyi Mar, 1975, pp. 122-124).

These businesswomen provide examples of the flourishing of the business spirit among Myanmar women in colonial period. Furthermore, women's position in the retail economy as bazaar traders was important in nationalist movement since it gave an organizational precedent in the form of bazaar associations. Some women associations related with politics and business were established at the colonial period. Many nationalist women were merchants, and many were members of trade associations connected with the bazaar in which they conducted their business. These trade associations would have provided an important network for exchange of information on boycotts and other matters and cooperated with the YMBA and GCBA. They sent their representatives to the annual meetings and took part in the political agendas of anti-colonialism. The most notable work by women organizations was boycotting the foreign products made in England and encouraging the Myanmar people to use local products instead. Daw Kyin Aein, president of Darnathuka Association (later Wunthanu Konmari Association), Maw Tin market, and Daw Thein (Daw Thein Tin), Secretary of Myanmar Hita Konmari Association, broker from Theingyizay and Daw Daw Su, president of Myanmar Women Association, founder of Aung Mingalar Thuka and Aung Zeya Mingalar Presses, were very knowledgeable women in business world. They participated in the struggle for independence in various capacities along with men. Daw Kyin Aein, the owner of Myanmar Wunhtan Newspaper press and did the business on tea-leaves at Maw Tin market founded the Darnathuka Association (later Wunthanu Konmari Association) as she interested in politics than in business. The members of that association usually wore the traditional Myanmar Pinni blouse and Yaw longyi as their uniform and encouraged the people awareness of Myanmar tradition and culture. Daw Thein (Daw Thein Tin), broker of the betel leaves/nuts from Theingyizay was one of the active ladies in politic in colonial period. When the first university student's boycott broke out in 1920, Daw Daw Thein supported the boycott students in several ways especially for food. In addition, another well-known and active woman in nationalist movement was Daw Daw Su. She established the Aung Zeya Mingalar Private School in 1920 and also Aung Mingalar Press and Aung Zeya Press. As a president of Myanmar Women Association, Daw Daw Su worked for Myanmar women migrant workers who were facing hardships in the foreign countries. Due to the association's extensive campaign, the government made arrangement for the return of Myanmar women laborers working in the tobacco making industries in Malaysia (Mone Nyin, 1976, pp. 22-44). Furthermore, countless women participated in the women associations and took part in the political agendas of anti-colonialism.

4. Myanmar Businesswomen Today

Myanmar society has changed with time and a new generation of businesswomen emerged and involved in various business fields. The Myanmar Enterprises Law makes no discrimination and extends equal opportunities to men and women in business. This provides the business for Myanmar women playing an active in current economic development. Currently, many young women graduates are performing well in the economic sector. In addition to trade, they have got involved in many fields such as production, services, management, construction, tourism industry, agriculture and livestock breeding.

A study by Yin Yin Myint (1997, p. 60) of 30 businesswomen who are outstanding performers show that they make substantial contributing on an equality with their husbands, they are self-confident and manage the duties of their families and economy efficiently. The majority of them are under 50 years and 43.33% are in the 31-40 age group. It can perhaps be said that younger businesswomen in that age group understand business opportunities better, are more energetic and therefore have started business enterprises as entrepreneurs. Another study conducted by Moe Mar Lar in 1995 (pp. 142-143) of businesswomen engaged in small and medium scale business in Yangon, shows that 86.29% of the businesswomen were between the age of 30-60 and more that 50% were graduates. Many businesswomen had parents who were in private business themselves. Some of their parents were educated and were not engaged in business but were in other occupations. Most of the husbands of the businesswomen worked in private sector and provided support and encouragement to their wives, so that the business was, to some extent, conducted by the two working hand in hand. (Myint, p.81) Domestic duties are one of the barriers to women's advancement but businesswomen play successfully a double role, engage in house work and of the children care, as well as developing most of their time to their business.

According to the survey conducted by Yin Yin Myint in 1997, 27% of the businesswomen were in trade, 20% in manufacturing, 13% in services, and 10% in construction. In addition, 30% conducted more than one type of business but did them in combination, such as trading and services, or trading and manufacturing, or trading, services, and manufacturing. The businesswomen who were in trade were not limited to conventional domestic trade but were also in importing-exporting as well as in such services as the hotel, tourism, and restaurant business. Manufacturing businesses in which women involved were foodstuff, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, paper, furniture and leather goods (Myint, p. 77).

Myanmar businesswomen also gained in knowledge experience by their relationship with the international business community. They have travelled abroad to explore and exploit new business opportunities; they have established foreign contacts for the expansion of their business. Myanmar businesswomen have developed to the level of taking the role of chairperson or president in private enterprises, joint ventures and cooperatives. Some Myanmar businesswomen serve as executive members of the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, a good indicator of the position women have achieved in the Myanmar business community. A few of the women on the UMFCI and MBF are high profile business women. One (Daw Thet Thet Khine) went on to be voted into Parliament in the subsequent election in November 2015, and another leads the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association (Women and the Economy in Myanmar, 2016). While there are successes, there are also problems for Myanmar women in business. A general difficulty for

businesswomen in conducting their business was facing up to risks. They had to take risks in starting a new business, trading in new product, using new sales techniques etc. Nevertheless, they faced these risks with the confidence that they could overcome them. Daw Hnin Wai, secretary of MWEA obtained an MBA from the Yangon Institute of Economics as well as an MBA from Hitotsubashi University, Japan. She said that the big challenge women faced in starting a business was that of finance. Although they may have a great idea, if they do not have adequate capital, cannot start their business. She also noted that Myanmar women were obliged to conform culture in which, when they were in a family business, they had to pretend that they were lacking in knowledge or competence and give a superior role to the husband. Nevertheless, the family was important for the integration of work and life as well as tradition and experience within the business (Myanmar Times, 24 March 2014).

5. Conclusion

Myanmar women have played an important role in many aspects of Myanmar society; one of these is that of taking part in business. In the informal sector, retail trade is largely in the hands of women. Starting a business was sometime a challenge for Myanmar women. Businesswomen in colonial period were able to conduct their business successfully due to their experience, business acumen, and effort. Most of the businesswomen started their business together with their husbands, but there were also some women who continued their parents' business. There were many businesswomen who have established enterprises on their own. Myanmar society has changed with time and a new generation of businesswomen has emerged and involved in various business fields. Today, there came out many Myanmar women's organizations involved in activities and programmes for the interests and welfare of women. These organizations play a significant role in promoting business opportunities for women, helping them to develop their business in various ways and have been carried out the tasks covering the project to uplift the health and education standard, ensuring a pleasant family life for them. Nevertheless, more still needs to be done to promote and support Myanmar businesswomen.

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