

India is the inspiration for Burma

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Across the Bay of Bengal lies our important and almost forgotten neighbor. Not all of the neglect is ours; in modern times (since 1960) Burma has shut down access. And like Sri Lanka, it has also expelled people of Indian origin who lived there for generations, ending familial connections. Now it seems Burma is opening up again. What sort of history does it have?

Thant Myint-U is the grandson of U Thant, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations. He studied at Harvard and Cambridge, and works for the UN. Thant Myint-U's "River of Lost Footsteps-A Personal History of Burma" is published as a paperback.

The modern debate is about Burma's isolation, the ban imposed by the US and the agitation for democratic rule. As Thant Myint-U says: "The most striking feature of the Burma debate is its absence of nuance and its singularly ahistorical nature. Dictatorship and the prospects for democracy are seen within the prism of the past 10 or 20 years, as if three Anglo-Burmese Wars, a century of colonial rule, an immensely destructive Japanese invasion and occupation, and five decades of civil war, foreign intervention, and Communist insurgency had never happened." But this is not all.

For Burma is an old country with evidence of mature civilization going back as far as 3,500 years ago, turning copper to bronze, cultivating rice, domesticating chicken and pigs and the Burmese were the first persons in the world to do so. Burma also traces its national origins from India.

"All Burmese school children are taught that their history begins at Tagaung ...According to the chronicle of Burmese kings, it was here that the Sakiyan prince Abhiraja and his followers had arrived from the Middle Country of India and founded the country's first Kingdom." This Kosala prince was of the same clan as the Buddha. But long before the advent of the Enlightened One, after a defeat he fled towards Burma accompanied by his personal army and belongings. It was a long and difficult trip but he made it and the Burmese seem glad he did. Most Burmese kings and aristocracy trace their origins back to Abhiraja.

Burmese tradition ascribes the advent of Buddhism to two Burmese merchants who met the Buddha in India and returned with eight of his hairs, which he gifted them. These are enshrined deep in the Shwedagon Pagoda, Burma's holiest shrine located in Rangoon. It is 300 feet high, situated on a hill, and is coated with 60 tons of gold leaf. But Burma's main international contacts were with South India as the monsoon helped drive their ships back and forth there.

As Thant Myint-U writes: "It was Burma's good fortune to have established close relations with such a dynamic place, its merchants and learned men going back and forth across the Bay of Bengal, absorbing Buddhist as well as Hindu art and ideas, and replanting them within the context of its already long-established civilization of the Irrawaddy Valley"

Burmese traders were also critical in transshipping Chinese goods through Burma and around South India to Central Asia as the Chinese official Zhang Qian discovered in 139 BC. This led to Chinese interest in Burma as an opening to the Indian Ocean and to the Middle East. This Chinese interest also led to attempts to conquer or coerce Burma into falling into the Chinese sphere of influence, a continuing process.

But the Burmese seem more oriented to India and were fiercely nationalistic (and still are) and fought Chinese armies while allied with militant Tibet. The first unified Burmese kingdom, the Nanzhao kingdom, was a powerful war State, which raided China in 755, sacked Chinese cities and even briefly captured the

Imperial capital. The Chinese helped shift alliances; Thant Myint-U writes: "In 801, a combined Nanzhao-Chinese army defeated a polyglot Tibetan force". So Burma played a critical role in the triangle of China - Tibet-Burma affairs. No wonder the Chinese are concerned about Tibet and Burma as they, unlike Indians, remember their history all too well.

The Nanzhao was replaced by mid-eighth century with the Kingdom of Pagan. "By the 12th century, the time of Saladin and Crusader kings, Pagan was at the height of its glory and extent. Buildings of sublime beauty soon rose up along the banks of the Irrawaddy. It was a society of great creativity and energy, absorbing and transforming art and ideas from across the Indian subcontinent. Its kings and nobility wrote in Sanskrit and Pali as well as different native languages, experimenting with different Indian alphabets. The Burmese language itself was reduced to writing (with an alphabet from South India), and new books of Burmese grammar were enthusiastically compiled. Ideas and institutions of government, many inherited from Prome (an older Burmese kingdom), others perhaps from Nanzhao or imported fresh from India, were brought together to become a tradition that lasted into the 19th century."

The period of Pagan's greatness was a period of great unrest and upheaval in the world around Burma. In India the Mahmud of Ghazni and his Muslim hordes were sweeping the Indo-Gangetic valley destroying everything in their wake. Hindu temples and places of Buddhist learning were destroyed and, in 1033 even the holy city of Banaras was sacked.

The great Buddhist universities of Nalanda and Vikramshila would soon be overrun and destroyed by Muslim armies. Pagan, like Tibet, would be a refuge for all those who escaped death there. Towards the north, China under the Sungs saw the decline of Buddhism and the rise of neo-Confucian ideas. To the South, the Cholas, the Hindu dynasty, were extending their reach to Ceylon and Sumatra affecting Burmese interests.

Thant Myint-U says: "The people of Pagan, as fervent practitioners of Buddhism and, increasingly, Theravada Buddhism, saw themselves more and more as defenders of a threatened faith and an island of conservative tradition in a hostile and changing world. Once Burma had been a part of a far-flung and dynamic conversation, a component of the Buddhist world that linked Afghanistan, and the dusty oasis towns of the Silk Road with Cambodia, Java and Sumatra, with scholar-officials in every Chinese province, and with students and teachers across India. Now the conversation was shrinking. Burma's Buddhism would become even more impassioned. Not part of Christendom, the Islamic world, or even the cultural worlds of Hindu India and Confucian China, Burma proud and resolutely Theravada, would be largely left to talk to itself."

It still had to cope with its immediate neighbors and their aggressive instincts. Burma may have left the wider world from which it learnt so much. However, in 1271, after the attack of Kublai Khan's general Nasruddin, the Kingdom of Pagan fell. But 300 years later, under its Universal Monarch Bayinnaung, Burma defeated Siam and Laos to the south and Manipur and, in another 300 years, by the 19th century, it conquered Assam. So much for its isolation!

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