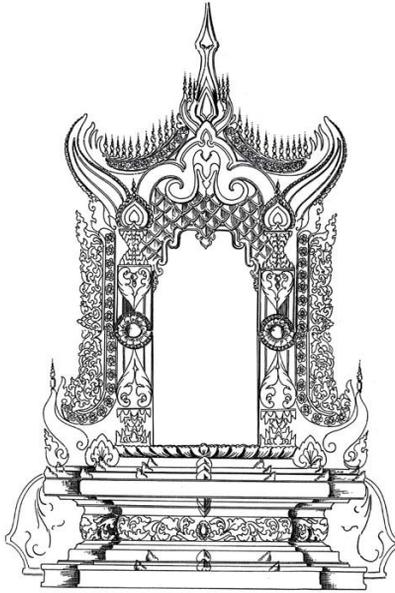


The Journal of Burma Studies



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The Self-Conscious Censor
Censorship in Burma under the British, 1900–1939
Emma Larkin*

It is often assumed that censorship was not used to any great degree by British authorities in Burma. Yet, by looking at the way the British colonial government reacted to a variety of media including traditional Burmese drama, western blockbuster movies, and Burmese political pamphlets agitating against colonial rule, it is possible to see that censorship was very much a part of the British administration. British authorities censored pamphlets, books, dramas, and movies not only to contain political thought contrary to colonialism, but also to control the image of British officials as seen in the eyes of the Burmese.

Today Burma is one of the most heavily censored states in the world. While much has been written about censorship in Burma in the second half of this century, little or nothing has been written about pre-war censorship under the British. The assumption among scholars and writers seems to be that it simply didn't exist, yet censorship was one of the tools used by the British to enhance their power and control over the Burmese. The British censored to shape the Burman mind by controlling what he read, saw, and heard. Concern with the British image meant using censorship to ensure that the ruling power was never ridiculed. The authorities also censored political material in order to stunt the growth of nationalism and ideologies contrary to the British imperial ideal, and to enforce and maintain peace in times of political crisis. By looking at what the British didn't want the Burmese to see it is possible to gain a deeper insight into the State's fears. Censorship can shape the

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intimate relationship between the individual and the State. This article looks at how the British attempted to shape that relationship in their favor.

The colonial government of Burma took its censorship guidelines from the British administration in India. There was no clear-cut policy; rather, legislation evolved on a localized basis as and when political upheavals, issues of censorship, or new media arose. A Dramatic Performances Act was formulated in 1876, a Books and Publications Act in 1898, a Press Act in 1910 and a Cinematograph Act in 1918. The legislative arsenal was impressive. All publishers had to be registered with the government, identify their authorship on each published item, and submit copies in duplicate for inspection. Because Burma took its lead from the rest of India, there was already a substantial black-list of proscribed items from India. This ever-growing list included books—such as the *Karma Sutra* and *Mein Kampf*—and films, all of which had to be pre-censored before exhibition. The British rarely censored material produced in the vernacular prior to its release. They preferred to encourage self-censorship among the Burmese by holding substantial securities which could be forfeited, or by taking strong punitive action against articles or books which crossed the censorial line.

Legislation in India was amended periodically towards leniency or tighter control, depending on political conditions in India. Legislation controlling the native press, for instance, was not thought necessary until 1910, after a period of violence and increasing acts of terrorism in India. In Burma, the 1910 Press Act was felt to be totally unnecessary. “The reason for this is obvious,” wrote a British official. “Politics play no part in the literature of the province and sedition is not as elsewhere a marketable ware.”¹ In Burma it was not until the mid 1910s that the British administration became worried about censorship. Despite this late start, Burma’s censorship policies were to become the strictest in India.

The first half of the 20th century saw a boom in popular mass culture in Europe and America as monthly magazines and weeklies began to multiply. The advent of new technologies such as cinema

¹ Director of Public Instruction, British Government of Burma, *Books and Publications Issued in Burma* for the year ending the 31st December 1910, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1098).

and radio meant that one single play or story could reach millions more people. It was this cultural monster which British colonial authorities sought to tame using capricious rules wielded with an unshakable sense of their own moral superiority.

A Note on Content and Layout

Much of the following material is gleaned from primary resources available at the India Office Records in the British Library. The library has a collection of material proscribed by British authorities in India. In other words, I have concentrated on what was caught in the India Office censorial net. By many accounts, Burma enjoyed a lively pre-war press. A strong tradition of freedom of speech in Britain meant that over-zealous use of censorship legislation—particularly the 1910 Press Act, a controversial tool from the outset—led to loud protests and awkward questions in the House of Commons. Because of this, cases which made use of the stronger laws were sent to the India Office in London for inspection. Smaller cases involving warnings or edits and cuts were not sent back and are therefore not in the files. What follows then is a study of the most excessive cases.

I have covered the main media: leaflets, newspapers, magazines, books, plays, and cinema. I do not cover speech. While the files contain plenty of instances where speeches were punished by the British for seditious content, they do not contain the actual speech and thereby prevent analysis. Neither do I cover the introduction of radio in the 1930s—a great headache for the colonial authorities as a seemingly uncontrollable source of information and anti-British propaganda—for the reason that relevant files on Burma are not available. I have not dealt with the period during the two world wars as the Government of Burma was issued with standard censorship manuals and war-time cases are therefore not indicative of anything particular to Burma.

This article is divided into four roughly chronological sections:² Morality: censorship which is concerned with the effect a play or book might have on the moral character of those who see or read it. Image: censorship which attempts to prevent the image of the

² These categories are not watertight. A case discussed in the political section may also have implications for, say, the image of the British rulers.

British as omnipotent rulers from being sullied. Politics: censorship which attempts to prevent any seditious materials from inciting immediate violence or dissent among the Burmese populous. Ideology and religion: censorship which is concerned with systems of thought and belief. (While ideology is obviously a part of politics, this section covers the bigger picture—the British attempt to check the flow of ideologies antithetical to British imperialism.) Religious censorship in Burma was mainly aimed at material that might encourage conflicts between Muslims and Buddhists.

Morality: Building a Better Burman

The earliest forms of British censorship in Burma dealt with moral issues. The British thought that by controlling the Burmese cultural diet they could shape the Burman mind, creating model citizens of the Empire, molded in the image of an Englishman. To do this the authorities had to cut out any native influences that did not meet their approval. The first case of censorship in Burma to appear in the India Office files was that of Burmese drama. The British authorities disapproved of this popular form of entertainment in Burma. Wrote one British reviewer, “Most of them [dramas] form the romantic food of schoolboys and are of no absolute literary importance.”³ Another claimed Burmese drama had “even less moral restraint than the pre-Elizabethan drama.”⁴

The British government in Burma believed that local drama had a bad effect on the character and moral fiber of the Burmese. A report on fostering the “Imperial Idea” in Burmese schools advocated the banning of certain dramas on the grounds that they contained “much that is immoral, cruel or foolish, and to this infiltration into childish minds, generation after generation, must be attributed many of those characteristics which are handicapping the

³ Director of Public Instruction, British Government of Burma, *Books and Publications issued in Burma*, for the year ending the 31st December 1917, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1537).

⁴ Director of Public Instruction, British Government of Burma, *Books and Publications issued in Burma*, for the year ending the 31st December 1914, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1378).

Burmese race today.”⁵ One British official was convinced that violent scenes from plays were acted out in real life. He observed the exploits of one “gruesome hero” re-enacted as a direct result of a dramatic performance and concluded that, “In Burma, if nowhere else, a good case could be made out for censorship.”⁶

In 1913 the British authorities cracked down on Burmese drama. Many plays were proclaimed obscene and published scripts which did not meet British standards of decency were confiscated by the police.⁷ The number of published dramas fell sharply from 37 in 1912 to five in 1913. It may be that the plays continued to be performed, but were no longer published in order to avoid censorship. Because there are no specific examples available it is hard to analyze exactly what the British objected to in these plays. Mi Mi Khaing provides one possible clue: “The jokes of the clowns were mostly based on pornographic punning ... and on mispronunciations of English words to give them a bawdy meaning.” Indeed, mimicking the British, particularly if there were any in the audience, was a favorite of the clowns. Perhaps when the British banned certain dramas they were also concerned about preserving the sanctity of their own image.⁸

A few years later, the report on fostering the “Imperial Idea” in Burma stated that education might be a better tool than police repression to quash the bad influences of Burmese drama: “This is an

⁵ Burma Government, *Report of the Committee Appointed to Ascertain and Advise How the Imperial Idea May Be Inculcated and Fostered in Schools and Colleges in Burma*, Rangoon, 1917.

⁶ Director of Public Instruction, British Government of Burma, *Books and Publications issued in Burma*, for the year ending the 31st December 1911, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1203).

⁷ The Indian Dramatic Performances Act of 1876 states the authorities might object to plays, (a) of a scandalous or defamatory nature, or (b) likely to excite feelings of disaffection to the Government established by law in British India, or (c) likely to deprave and corrupt persons present at the performance.

⁸ It is interesting to note that censorship in the dramatic world worked both ways. In the biography of the Burmese actor Po Sein, there is an incident in which a Burmese political association threatened to picket his performances unless he took down the British flag he customarily flew above his stage. (Sein, Indiana, 1965: 76-77)

evil that should be eradicated by Burmese public opinion rather than government censorship.”⁹ The writers of the report felt that Burmese children “lacked a sense of responsibility, moral courage and self control” and proposed that it was possible to educate a new generation of Burman who would be able to realize the immorality inherent in Burmese drama and refuse to watch it.¹⁰ This new and morally sophisticated class of Burman would, it was thought, need neither censorship nor moral direction.

In keeping with the same policy of reshaping the Burman mind, the government decided to take strict control of student reading matter in 1919. Paying heed to a 1907 circular to education departments stating that no newspapers, journals, or magazines should be read by students which were not first sanctioned by the Director of Public Instruction, the government declared that only the English-language *Times of India*, *Rangoon Gazette* and *Rangoon Times* could be read in government schools. The decision was not well-received. In England questioners in the House of Commons asked why no newspapers printed in Burmese could be read in Burmese schools. In Burma the press complained that students unable to read the vernacular press would lose their command of Burmese and understanding of Burmese affairs. The Director of Public Instruction defended the government’s actions arguing that all well-regulated schools decided what reading matter was suitable for their students:

It is quite futile to attempt to inculcate loyalty to the Empire and to the British throne in the minds of the young, if the *pabulum* constantly supplied to them is made up of vicious attacks and of scurrilous defamation of the king’s Government in order to support a contention that the Burmese people are being treated

⁹ Burma Government, *Report of the Committee Appointed to Ascertain and Advise how the Imperial Idea may be Inculcated and Fostered in Schools and Colleges in Burma*, Rangoon, 1917.

¹⁰ Burma Government, *Report of the Committee Appointed to Ascertain and Advise how the Imperial Idea may be Inculcated and Fostered in Schools and Colleges in Burma*, Rangoon, 1917.

with gross injustice and the country ruined by its subjection to the British.¹¹

A Burmese newspaper columnist called “Town Mouse” provides an interesting indicator as to how the Burmese felt about this moral mollicoddling. A teacher said to him, “Teachers cannot now read any newspaper without the express sanction of the authorities concerned. I wonder whether the authorities will in future prescribe how many cups of tea should be taken daily.” As their conversation about British policies became too heated, the teacher put a halt to it joking, “I am afraid lest we be bound over to good behavior by a certain Act.”¹²

In their efforts to build loyal citizens of the Empire, the British attempted to control the Burmese cultural diet. They tried to stamp out obscenity in traditional drama and ensure that school-children read only pro-government newspapers. Such cases are only evident in the early years of this century. As new and more threatening media like cinema entered the colony, the British channeled their energies towards themselves and the protection of their own image.

Image: Bound by Fanatical Natives

The rulers of the colony were shackled by the opinions of the ruled. British authorities were very concerned about how the Burmese viewed them. The following cases of censorship demonstrate examples of instances when British morality was being brought into question. Like moral cases of censorship, the issue of British image dominates the early files, but unlike moral censorship, this concern remains evident throughout British rule.

The first major case concerns the portrayal of Rangoon’s brothels in a collection of pamphlets. In 1914, a man called John

¹¹ Letter from Director of Public Instruction to Department of Education, Government of India, 21 April 1920, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1653). His words also give an indication of what British officials thought about material that *was* allowed to slip through the censorial net.

¹² Burma Press Abstract (translated excerpts from the Burmese language press compiled by the British administration of Burma), 16 November 1919, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1653).

Cowen was invited to Burma by the Bishop of Rangoon. Cowen was famous for having rid the capital of Ceylon, Colombo, of its red-light district and the Bishop hoped that Cowen would be able to clean up Rangoon's own infamous red-light ghetto. Since 1902 the British had practiced a policy of segregation whereby prostitutes and brothels were confined to certain areas of town. Rangoon's red-light quarters, estimated at being the largest in India, were home and office to some 500 prostitutes from as far a field as Germany, Russia, Japan, and even England.¹³ Within the segregated areas they sat semi-clad on doorsteps or wandered around the alleyways soliciting customers. Prostitution was so rife in Rangoon that one college principle told Cowen there was no point in trying to resist it, at least not in his school, as most of his Burmese students over the age of 15 already had venereal diseases.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Cowen began a noisy campaign that would last six years until the British relented and produced legislation to sweep Rangoon clean.¹⁵

Cowen began his campaign with a series of pamphlets entitled "Tracts for Rangoon". Two of these were proscribed by the government under the powerful India Press Act, 1910. This was the first use of the act in Burma. "Tracts for Rangoon" is a colorful series, to say the least. The first pamphlet to be proscribed was entitled, "Rangoon's Scarlet Sin, or, Lust Made Lawful." It accused the state of creating brothels and supporting prostitution. The second pamphlet, "Welcome to the Territorials," discussed how the government sanctioned an area of prostitution especially for use by the territorial army. Wrote Cowen: "Acts of outrageous indecency,

¹³ District Superintendent of Police in Rangoon, "Extent, Distribution and Regulation of Social Evil in the Cities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay and in Rangoon Town", Rangoon, 1917, and John Cowen's "Report on Brothel-Keeping, Prostitution, Segregation and Immoral Conditions in Rangoon and other Towns and Stations in Burma", written for the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, London, 1916, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1448).

¹⁴ District Superintendent of Police in Rangoon, "Extent, Distribution and Regulation of Social Evil", Rangoon, 1917, and John Cowen's "Report on Brothel-Keeping", London, 1916, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1448).

¹⁵ A Bill for the Suppression of Brothels and Immoral Traffic, 1921, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1448).

the filthiest practices known to man, are daily carried on in these quarters, Government consenting.” Cowen also made more specific accusations: “It [prostitution] continues moreover with the deliberate consent of the Local Government and under the aegis of the Superintendent of Police, who has received the special thanks of the Lieut.-Governor of the Province for his admirable work.”¹⁶

Given the war in Europe, Cowen’s comparison of the Burmese government to the German enemy must have infuriated the local authorities:

Much cruelty is attributed to our German foes ... but they have not been bold enough to plant in the path of our men hundreds and hundreds of diseased prostitutes ... who shall undermine your morality, destroy your manly virtue, contaminate your mind and corrupt your flesh, bringing your very souls to the brink of hell. This the Germans have not done. This has been left for the Local Government of Burma.¹⁷

Not only was Cowen embarrassing the British authorities as a whole, but also individually. He candidly informed the India Office that while Governor Harvey Adamson appeared full of good intentions he was no paragon of virtue as he had an illegitimate son by a Burmese concubine. Cowen also pointed an accusatory finger at other members of the administration who indulged in “concubinage”.¹⁸ With a ruling body of men like this, Cowen argued, it was no surprise that Rangoon’s red-light district was thriving. It is also no surprise, then, to find Cowen’s pamphlets in the British Library’s collection of proscribed materials.

The British image was most directly, widely, and artfully flaunted by the advent of cinema. The new medium was fast-growing. In 1921, Burma had 27 cinema houses. Just six years later the number had almost tripled with the total number of cinemas

¹⁶ Tracts for Rangoon, in the British Library Collection of proscribed materials (EPP 45/1-4).

¹⁷ Tracts for Rangoon (EPP 45/1-4).

¹⁸ Letter from John Cowen to MP Sir George Toulmin, 25 May 1914, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1448).

seating some 48,300 viewers.¹⁹ As each cinema showed one film every weekday and two or more at weekends, films reached a substantial number of Burmese. Indeed, the authorities found films more threatening than books. While the novel *Burmese Silver*, which detailed British exploitation of natural Burmese resources at the expense of the Burmese, did not worry the authorities, the proposal to make a film based on the book was of great concern “since films have a wide appeal in Burma which English novels have not.”²⁰

With the introduction of cinema to the colonies, white men were all too often portrayed as criminals and clowns; while white women were portrayed as loose and easy. This was especially the case in American films which the British felt touted slack morals. Sir Hesketh Bell, former Governor of Mauritius, felt that cinema had done more “than anything else, in recent years, to diminish the prestige which the European used to enjoy.”

It is true that no man is a hero to his valet, and it is probable that the Sahib’s ‘boy’ has few illusions as to the vaunted moral superiority of the European. But to the vast mass of black, brown, and yellow people the inner life of the European, and especially that side of it which flourishes in centres of crime and infamy, was unknown until the American films showed them the travesty of it.²¹

Burma, however, was better prepared than the rest of India to meet this attack on British character. While authorities elsewhere debated whether the antiquated Dramatic Performances Act could cover cinema, the Government of Burma already had a vigorous gagging act in the form of legislation controlling *pwe* (traditional Burmese shows which included drama and dance), which included any form

¹⁹ *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-1928*, Calcutta, 1928, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1747).

²⁰ Private letter from the Secretary of State for Burma to Sir Robert Vansittart, 7 August 1938, from the Burma Office Files (M/3/506).

²¹ Sir Hesketh Bell, *Foreign Colonial Administration in the Far East* (London: Edward Arnold & Co., 1928), 121

of public entertainment.²² The government could prevent the screening of a film and both the Deputy Commissioner of a district and the Commissioner of Police in Rangoon were able to pre-censor the new medium.²³ Controls on cinema in Burma were considered the tightest and most efficient in British India and the censors at Rangoon received many complaints from producers unable to sell their films to Burmese cinemas.²⁴

One film which found its way to the Rangoon Royal Cinema de Paris In 1914 provides a good introduction to British concerns. *Adventures of Kathlyn* was an epic series of thirteen films—“the greatest film that ever the brain of man could evolve,” boasted the flyers. Indeed, the coming films had become the talk of the town for Rangoon cinema-goers. On the morning the first reel, *The Unwelcome Throne*, was to be shown, two police inspectors arrived at the cinema and confiscated the film. When the American company that sold the film later demanded an explanation, the British authorities voiced their concerns. The film was about a white woman and her adventures in a mythical land modeled on India. It displayed both her and her father tied up in chains by Indian natives. The Commissioner of Police “considered most undesirable that a racial question of this nature should be exhibited especially at the particular time proposed, which was immediately after the declaration of war [WWI], when the town of Rangoon was in a very disturbed state.”²⁵

The Commissioner of Police censored the film without seeing it. He had looked at booklets advertising the various reels and had underlined objectionable passages. Among these were phrases such as “you will see her bound by fanatical natives” or “place her in a

²² Letter from the Government of Burma replying to an India Office circular regarding legislation to control cinema, 17 June 1915, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1468).

²³ Letter from the Government of Burma to the Government of India, 17 June 1915, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1468).

²⁴ Letter from the Secretary to the Bombay Board of Film Censors to the Deputy Secretary of the Government of Bombay, 25 January 1922, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1747).

²⁵ Letter from the Chief Secretary to the Government of Burma to the Government of India Home Office, December 1914, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1350).

slave market and sell her,” both referring to the white heroine, Kathlyn. A picture of the white colonel in chains is described by the advertisement as “the pitiful scene of chaining him to the throne” and circled in heavy red crayon by the censor.²⁶ Despite the protests of the agents in London at Rangoon’s “stringent measures,” the government refused to relent and *Adventures of Kathlyn* was not shown.²⁷

Throughout the period of British rule in India there was much debate about how seeing white people abused on the screen affected British subjects in the colonies. Strict controls came in the form of the Cinematograph Act, 1918, necessitating venues in which films were shown to apply for a license from the government. While the India Office always claimed there was no *official* censorship, films which had not received certification from an authority prescribed by the government could not be shown in licensed venues, and therefore not at all. Authorities also retained the overriding right to proscribe films in certain circumstances. Film censorship boards were set up in Rangoon, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. In Rangoon, the eight-person board consisted of the Commissioner of Police (as President), the Assistant Commissioner of Police, three Burmese men, a Burmese woman, a military man, and a European “medical man”.²⁸ The committee met once a week to scrutinize the flow of cinema into Burma.²⁹ Each film had to be examined by at least two members and, if in any doubt, by the full board.

Decisions of any of the four boards across India were applicable India-wide but films could be re-examined locally for

²⁶ These advertising booklets are from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1350).

²⁷ Letter from Selig Polyscope to India Office, 14 September 1914, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1350).

²⁸ *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-1928*, Calcutta, 1928, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1747).

²⁹ It is a surprising fact that during this period Burma had more film production companies than anywhere else in India including Bombay, today’s “Bollywood”. *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-1928*, Calcutta, 1928, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1747).

regional sensitivities.³⁰ Films passed by the Bengal board, for instance, might later be banned by the Rangoon board. When, in one instance, the cinema trade complained that Rangoon's criterion was too strict, the Commissioner of Police explained that some films had been banned "owing to the difference in local conditions but others because the Rangoon Board considered them as unfit to be shown in any civilized country."³¹ The Rangoon board does seem particularly puritanical. While the rest of India certified *Our Girls and Their Physique*, Burma's censors thought it might be fit for "a limited audience of artists" but certainly not for Rangoon. They considered a film called *Fine Nights* to be "full of extravagantly amorous incidents stimulating an impure atmosphere and tone" and a "gross misrepresentation of English life." In *Damaged Goods* they cut a scene showing British soldiers and sailors meeting prostitutes by their barracks. In *Head Waiter* they removed a scene showing scantily-clad women.³²

The central governing body of the India Office provided no hard and fast rules and the final cut was left at the discretion of local authorities. The film censors' criteria were roughly based on those of the British Board of Film Censors and these guidelines were coyly worded: "unnecessary exhibition of feminine underclothing," "excessively passionate love scenes" or "bathing scenes passing the limit of propriety."³³ Decisions based on these rules would depend on each censor's definition of necessity, excess, and propriety. References to controversial politics were ruled out, as were scenes in which Indian or British officers were seen in "an odious light."³⁴ Any scene which might bring "into disrepute British prestige in the

³⁰ *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-1928*, Calcutta, 1928, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1747).

³¹ Letter from the Commissioner of Police, Rangoon, to the Chief Secretary to the Government of Burma, 4 April 1922, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1747).

³² Letter from the Chief Secretary to the Government of Burma to the Honorary Secretary, Burma Cinema Trades Association, Ltd., 10 November 1921, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1747).

³³ *The Bombay Board of Film Censors' General Principles*, upon which the India Office recommended all censorship boards base their decisions, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1747).

³⁴ Tom Dewe Mathews, *Censored* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1994), 86.

Empire” was frowned upon.³⁵ The British were also suspicious of humor. It could send mixed messages and cause disrespect for traditional figures of authority. “Film-makers like Charlie Chaplin, therefore, who based a lot of their humor on bamboozled policemen or undignified clergymen, were heavily censored throughout the colonies.”³⁶

A much acclaimed film, *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, made in 1933, was banned throughout India, including Burma. The censors objected to the coarseness of Henry VIII, especially the way he kissed women with “passionate abandon” and was seen “pigging” at a banquet with his hands “in a particularly animalistic and disgusting manner.” The censor was clearly reluctant that a British monarch, no matter how long dead, should be seen eating his meals without cutlery like most Indians and Burmese. The censor even feared the film might have been used as propaganda against the British crown.³⁷

It was not just British sensitivities which were pandered to. Among the members of the Burmese Board of Censors were four Burmese. They banned, for example, an Indian film entitled *The Life of Buddha* due to the fact that it showed a human representation of Buddha on screen. That this holy manifestation was played by an Indian actor was sure to further insult Burmese audiences.³⁸ Impetus to censor films also came from within the Burmese community through women’s groups and religious societies calling for less sex and crime on the screens.³⁹ Due to the large Indian population in Burma, Indian sensibilities also had to be observed. In January 1925 some 5000 Indians gathered to protest the showing of *Shah Jahan*, a

³⁵ *The Bombay Board of Film Censors’ General Principles*, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1747).

³⁶ Tom Dewe Mathews, *Censored* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1994), 91-92.

³⁷ *Report by Bengal Board of Film Censors*, January 1934, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1995).

³⁸ *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-1928*, Calcutta, 1928, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1747).

³⁹ *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927-1928*, Calcutta, 1928, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1747).

film about the seventeenth-century Mogul emperor, claiming it an insult to Islamic culture.⁴⁰

The British government in Burma believed that films could undermine their rule and so created an effective net of censors across India. No film was shown in India without government approval. Believing the Burmese to be particularly impressionable, the authorities felt that films like *Adventures of Kathlyn* might encourage Burmese to treat the British disrespectfully. The British carefully censored their image as reflected in the silver screen for any signs of ridicule. Indeed, criticism in any medium could provoke the authorities. Cowen's attacks on the brothel-keeping Governor may have been exaggerated but the authorities reacted with their full legislative might. It is interesting that the first use of the Press Act in Burma involved, not a Burmese, but a European. Cowen's pamphlets established a precedent: critics of the government could only go so far. Over the next few years, it would be the Burmese who would test the limits of British tolerance.

Politics: The Grey Matter of Sedition

The British authorities were most concerned by sedition: that is, anything which might prove a direct threat to their rule. They believed a seditious press to be both a cause and a symptom of political unrest. Yet the punitive side of the Press Act of 1910 was used with great restraint, at least at first. This "gagging act" earned vocal criticism from the Indian, and later Burmese, Legislative Councils. The India Office in London also discouraged use of the controversial act. Instead, the local authorities relied more on the act's preventative measure of holding large securities from each local publisher. These securities were substantial enough to inhibit publishers from starting up newspapers as they would be forfeited if offensive articles were published, thus encouraging editors and publishers to practice self-censorship.⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Forward* magazine, 3 February 1925, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/ 6/1747).

⁴¹ Director of Public Instruction, *Books and Publications issued in Burma*, for the year ending the 31st December 1911, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/4191/1912).

One major difficulty with this form of censorship was how to define what material needed to be censored. Like censorship boards everywhere, then and now, the British authorities never produced clear-cut guidelines for editors, or for their own officials. In his book *Trials in Burma*, Maurice Collis, the Chief Magistrate of Rangoon from 1930 to 1931, was critical of British laws defining sedition. Collis felt that law governing sedition was “so wide that it left a great discretion to the executive ... [to] decide what might amount to ‘dangerous hatred’” (Collis, 1938:113).⁴² At one trial, Collis even found that the police advised him not to order a mild punishment because “the crime of sedition would lose its dark repute and ignorant people would think that disaffection towards His Majesty was grown no worse than petty assault or drunkenness” (Collis, 1938:114). In other words, it suited the British to keep sedition ill-defined. The Burmese were kept uncertain as to where the line was drawn and, the colonial authorities seemed to hope, would therefore be forced to err on the side of caution.

The authorities themselves seemed at times unsure of what constituted sedition, or at least their response to potentially seditious material was inconsistent. Pamphlets predicting apocalyptic catastrophes or the coming of the *Setkya Min* (the avenging king of Burmese legend) to replace the British rulers were fairly common, and could prompt either nonplussed indulgence or outright fury. In 1912, one such pamphlet prophesied a mighty flood and the advent of the *Setkya Min*. It was dismissed by a British official as “an odd jumble of ideas.” As an afterthought the reviewer added: “One may hope that neither of these prophecies come true, since both are incompatible with the continuance of British rule in this country.”⁴³ Two years later, in 1914, a similar pamphlet entitled “Golden Palm-leaf Dropped by the King of the Nats on the Summit of the Eastern

⁴² Section 124A (Sedition) of the Indian Penal Code punished “whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by signs, or by visible representation, or otherwise, brings or attempts to bring into hatred or contempt, or excites or attempts to excite disaffection towards, His Majesty or the Government established by law in British India.”

⁴³ Director of Public Instruction, Books and Publications Issued in Burma, for the year ending the 31st December 1911, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1203).

Pagoda Hill, Mandalay” was confiscated under the Press Act. The pamphlet claimed the English king would vanish when the *Setkya Min*, led by sea dragons, returned on a pony the color of the moon. The words the British authorities deemed to be seditious were those which prophesied the disappearance of the English king. Having deposed and exiled the Burmese king on acquisition of Upper Burma in 1885, the British authorities were sensitive to any cries for restoration of the Burmese monarchy. Warnings and proscriptions of such material are a recurring theme in the India Office files.

In April 1920, the British announced reforms introducing a higher degree of Indian involvement in government which would lead eventually to self-governance in India. Burma was excluded from these plans. In June 1919 Sir Reginald Craddock, Governor of Burma, published a separate and slower system of reforms for Burma. The report had what John F. Cady characterizes as an “unimaginative and patronizing tone” (Cady, 1958:201). Members of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA) vigorously protested the Craddock scheme. As Burma moved into the modern political arena it is no surprise that the Press Act was wielded in earnest just a few months later. By the end of 1919, three newspapers had been subjected to the Press Act.⁴⁴ Such a heavy-handed action had an unexpected result; it sparked debate in the House of Commons back in London, attracted the disapproval of the India Office, and ended up in an amnesty on all press securities in Burma.

Since 1916 the YMBA had campaigned against foreigners wearing shoes in sacred pagoda grounds where Burmese went barefoot as a sign of religious respect. Albert D. Moscotti mentions an early example of blanket censorship, pointing out that the protests had aroused enough attention by 1918 to cause the government to impose “a closure on public discussion ... in the interest of public tranquility” (Moscotti, 1974: 24). Tin Htway cites a cartoon published in *The Sun Daily* in 1917 which depicted pagoda trustees sweating beneath the weight of Europeans as they piggy-backed them around a pagoda so their shoes would not touch the sacred

⁴⁴ British records account for some 53 newspapers in Burma that year. From Burma Government, *Report on the Administration of Burma for the Year 1919-20*.

ground (Tin Htway, 1969: 184–185). According to Tin Htway, this cartoon so angered the authorities that the editor and publisher of *The Sun Daily* was reprimanded by the Police Commissioner and warned not to repeat the offence.

It was the English-language, Rangoon-based newspaper *Knowledge* which was to truly excite British censorial sensibilities. On 25 September 1919, *Knowledge* ran an article entitled “The ‘Shoe Question’ and Pagodas.” It reported that a group of young Burmans had attacked foreigners in a Mandalay pagoda for wearing shoes within the sacred precinct. The article applauded the attack stating that “the owners of religious edifices have every right to prohibit the wearing of shoes within the precincts of religious buildings.” The British authorities claimed this report had no basis in fact. Eerily, nine days later some eight *pongyi* (monks) attacked a group of shoe-wearing Europeans at a pagoda with iron rods, dabs [Burmese sword] and sticks. An Englishman had his nose and cheek severed and an Englishwoman had her leg broken. The British authorities blamed *Knowledge* not only for inciting the attack, but for later condoning it. While other papers condemned the violence as “cowardly” and “unconstitutional”, *Knowledge* ran an article under the pen-name, Mr. Maung Da Thu (translated by British officials as “Mr. Bravo!” or “Mr. Well Done”), justifying the attack.⁴⁵ The Chief Secretary of Burma wrote that nothing could “justify statements being made in the public press which the writer and publisher must have known to be absolutely false, and the only object of which obviously was the stirring up of race-hatred.”⁴⁶ As punishment, *Knowledge* had to forfeit its security of Rs. 1000 and submit a higher bond of Rs. 3000, a considerable sum in those times. In addition the authorities prosecuted the editor and publisher for inciting violence.

Another paper which was punished by the Press Act around the same time was the *Burma Observer*. “The tone of this newspaper had for sometime previous become increasingly objectionable,” the

⁴⁵ *Burma Press Abstract*, 25 October 1919, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1634).

⁴⁶ Letter from the Chief Secretary of the Government of Burma to the Secretary of the Government of India, Home Department, 27 July 1920, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1634).

Chief Secretary of Burma wrote.⁴⁷ But what brought it under the censorial spotlight were three “obnoxious articles” written by the editor.⁴⁸ One was entitled “War Declared: Burmese versus Bureaucracy.” It announced a political war between,

“Constitution and brute force, between right and might.... Our birth right has been wrested from us by the greedy Bureaucracy which, though holding its spoils in a feeble hand and standing on its shaking knee, still blindly insists to own its booty.... The death-knoll of the Bureaucracy has been sounded and it is for its Commander-in-Chief to dig its own grave.... With our war-cry ‘Burma for Burmans’, let us all mobilize to annihilate this condemned Bureaucracy—seed, root, trunk, branch and all—Burmans Now or Never?”⁴⁹

The District Magistrate promptly sent a notice to the Sun Press, publisher of the *Burma Observer*, citing section 124–A of the Indian Penal Code in stating that the article “has a direct tendency to bring into hatred and contempt the government established by law in British India.”⁵⁰ The publisher apologized profusely, blaming his young, inexperienced and unruly editor and promising that no such articles would be published in the *Burma Observer* in future. The British authorities relented. Just a fortnight later, however, an article appeared in the newspaper entitled, “What is the Difference between Burmese Bureaucracy and Demon Despotism?” It said that “Craddockism”—a play on the name of the then British Governor of Burma, Sir Reginald Craddock—had its roots in the word “tyranny,” and listed ways in which the Burman was being degraded, citing everyday examples such as segregation on railways and the fact that

⁴⁷ Letter from the Chief Secretary, 27 July 1920, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1634).

⁴⁸ Letter from the Chief Secretary, 27 July 1920, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1634).

⁴⁹ Transcript from *Burma Observer*, 30 August 1919, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1634).

⁵⁰ Notice to the Keeper of the Sun Press, 13 October 1919, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1634).

the English (“those trousered creatures”) could gamble at the race club but when Burmans gambled at village cock fights they fell victim of the Gambling Act. The British authorities charged that this article created enmity among all classes. The following week the *Burma Observer* commented on the recent murder of the editor of the *New Light of Burma* newspaper, alluding to British involvement. The British police considered the tendency of all three articles was to create feelings of disloyalty towards the government. The owner’s apology was disregarded and an increase of security to Rs. 5000 was ordered “to impress the management of the Sun Press with their responsibility for the publications they issued.”⁵¹ In addition, further action was taken against the editor and publisher for sedition.

A telegram received by the editor of the *Burma Observer* from friends in England suggests that losing one’s security was almost a rite of passage for journalists operating under British rule. The telegram read: “Just heard forfeiture security. Congratulate your Admission [to] Roll of Honor Indian Editors.”⁵²

A third newspaper was to feel the effects of the Press Act in 1919. The *Rangoon Mail*, an Indian-owned English-language newspaper, was asked to deposit a security of Rs. 2000 (which it had not previously been required to do when it started two years earlier) due to what the British considered to be “the objectionable tone” of articles it had published.⁵³ The *Rangoon Mail* later complained that government officials were “unnecessarily throwing themselves into a mood of panic.” The editor professed to being bemused as to what exactly he was being accused of, claiming that “no definite passages—not even isolated sentences or sentiments—are quoted to justify his [the District Magistrate’s] drastic measure.”⁵⁴

This spate of press controls met with a loud outcry from all sides. The *Burma Critic* dramatically claimed that it was “the hardest

⁵¹ Notice to the Keeper of the Sun Press from the Chief Secretary’s Office, Rangoon, 13 October 1919, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1634).

⁵² *Rangoon Mail*, 7 December 1919, *Burma Press Abstract*, 14 December 1919, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1653).

⁵³ Letter from the Chief Secretary, 27 July 1920, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1634).

⁵⁴ *Rangoon Mail* 30 October 1919, *Burma Press Abstract*, 2 November 1919, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1634).

blow that was ever struck on journalists and journalism, throughout the whole civilized world".⁵⁵ The *Burma Guardian* lamented the bind under which the British authorities had them: "One is looked upon as a dullard if he does not speak. But he who speaks is regarded as an impudent person. One is branded as a lazy person when he lives in peace. But if he exerts himself and shows his mettle, he is regarded as a menace to the public peace."⁵⁶ "Burmah Muzzled" was the title of a *Daily Herald* article attributing the unrest to Burma's exclusion from Indian reforms bill:

"In addition to Press persecution, there is a deliberate and widespread plot on the part of the Government to put down all public discussion. All competent observers declare that the Burmese, the most peaceful and most educated people in India, are being driven to violence by the crass stupidity and brutality of the official class."⁵⁷

In the British Parliament, the opposition asked for details and justification of this excessive use of the Press Act. There were even hints of protest within the India Office as one internal memo asked, "Is it credible that the Press Act was intended and should today be used for such matters as these? Each action is an infringement of the principle of press liberty."⁵⁸ The British authorities in Burma defended their position stating that any more liberality "will merely have the effect of encouraging them to abandon the more moderate tone, which they have adopted in consequence of the action taken against them and to print the kind of anti-British innuendoes which are best calculated to increase their circulation."⁵⁹ The British government was, however, forced to issue a communiqué to the

⁵⁵ *Burma Critic*, 9 November 1919, *Burma Press Abstract*, 9 November 1919, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1634).

⁵⁶ *Burma Guardian*, 30 October 1919, *Burma Press Abstract*, 9 November 1919, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1634).

⁵⁷ Newspaper clipping from *Daily Herald*, 24 December 1919, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1634).

⁵⁸ India Office internal memo, 13 February 1920, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1634).

⁵⁹ Letter from the Chief Secretary, 27 July 1920, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1634).

press in England countering claims that the Government of Burma had acted on the military principle “that criticism of the government is dangerous, immoral and illegal.”⁶⁰ Indeed, such a furor was raised that an all round amnesty was declared for Burmese publishers and the securities which had been demanded from them were refunded.⁶¹

Yet, just a few months later, British authorities cracked down again. This fluctuation of leniency and harshness is characteristic of use of the press law in Burma. On 18 November 1920, the *Rangoon Mail* reprinted a number of articles from another source. Two of these detailed British atrocities around the Empire, in places such as Egypt and Fiji. Two book reviews also attracted the attention of British censors: *The Black Man's Burden*, published in Manchester, described the merciless exploitation of the “coloured people of the world” and *World Supremacy* debated the claim that “no good can come to the human community on this planet save through the whitest type of white man.” Within days the editor and manager of the *Rangoon Mail* were respectively sentenced to four months and two months imprisonment for sedition.

The British authorities handled the court case clumsily. In court the editor and publisher of the *Rangoon Mail* were handcuffed and had their coats and shoes forcibly removed. Again, there was a public outrage at the press suppression and the treatment of the “criminals.” The Indian *Independent* described the editor as being “incapable of hurting even a fly” and called his treatment “barbarous and humiliating.”⁶² Reading such press reports of the situation, one official of the India Office scribbled on an internal memo: “The summary is such as to make me despair. There is nothing but a chorus of hate.” Regarding the handcuffs, he added, “If this is true it is scandalous.”⁶³ The Government of Burma remained silent, refusing to issue a press communiqué because technically, it

⁶⁰ February 1920 Communiqué from the Government to the *Daily Herald*, London, cited in an Indian newspaper *Justice*, 20 February 1920, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1634).

⁶¹ The *Burma Observer* and *Knowledge* were exceptions but the amnesty meant their existing security would be limited to a 12-month period.

⁶² *Independent*, Allahabad, 11 March 1921, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1731).

⁶³ India Office internal memo, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1731).

claimed, no court rules had been broken.⁶⁴ The police held that handcuffing was necessary as the large, excited crowd present might have attempted to rescue the convicts.⁶⁵

By the early 1920s, press controls had become a focal point in India, where the government believed modification of press laws might create good will in the newly-created assemblies.⁶⁶ After much debate the Press Act was repealed in March 1922 and the authorities were no longer able to use the preventative system of holding securities. By 1930, however, the unpopular press laws were reinstated. Gandhi's non-cooperation movement, the growth of revolutionary activities in India, and the challenge of the Indian National Congress led British authorities to create emergency press ordinances which exceeded any controls they had previously used.⁶⁷ The Government of Burma made fast and effective use of these ordinances. Within three months the government had demanded securities from five newspapers and four printing presses, thus putting all of them out of business.⁶⁸

Burma also had its share of political turmoil in the early 1930s as the Hsaya San rebellion, a rural uprising led by a Burmese holy man who claimed he had a magical immunity to British bullets, broke out in December 1930. One case of censorship during this period took place over a somewhat gory pamphlet published by Burmese politician U Saw. Entitled "The Burmese Situation 1930-31", it listed British atrocities and misdemeanors in their efforts to quell the widespread rebellion and sported gruesome pictures as evidence. Not surprisingly, the pamphlet was proscribed by British authorities who threatened to prosecute U Saw for sedition. However, they were not eager to take the case to court due mainly to

⁶⁴ Letter from the Secretary of India to the Under Secretary of State for India, 10 August 1921, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1731).

⁶⁵ Telegram from the Viceroy, Home Department to the Secretary of State for India, 2 June 1921, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1731).

⁶⁶ Gerald Barrier, *Banned* (Missouri, University of Missouri Press, 1974), 76-99.

⁶⁷ Barrier, *Banned*, 108-128.

⁶⁸ Notes on use of Emergency Ordinances of 1930, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/1962) and Barrier, *Banned*, 115.

the fact that the pamphlet would be used as an exhibit and it or any extracts from it could be publicized and “doubtless would be published in some of the vernacular press in a most provocative form.”⁶⁹ Wrote the Chief Secretary of Burma,

“U Saw could have prepared the pamphlet for wide publication in Burma only with the object of creating hatred of and disaffection towards the Government and of embarrassing them in their effort to suppress the rebellion. They [the government] regard the pamphlet as definitely disloyal.”⁷⁰

The authorities particularly objected to what it called the misleading use of photographs and statements such as: “The process of shooting innocent villagers and burning villages wholesale has been going on merrily up till now.” Yet the British had to admit that U Saw’s writings were not the mere fabrications of a hot-headed nationalist: “Though it consists in part of facts which are not denied, [it] is arranged to put the worst possible construction on the facts.”⁷¹

In the India Office collection are four leaflets proscribed towards the end of the Hsaya San rebellion. They have in common the fact that they are calls to the educated—they are printed in English—youth of Burma to hark back to a former military grandeur of brave Burmans and join the revolution. They refer to the British as “white vampires” and call for extreme violence. They are blood-thirsty documents and it is easy to see why the British felt the need to proscribe them, if only in the name of self-protection. An excerpt from one:

“Beat the ‘White’ English you get hold of, even as you beat a dog and kill him with a knife, a stick, a stone, or

⁶⁹ Letter from the Chief Secretary of the Government of Burma to the Secretary of the Government of India, 24 August 1931, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/2020).

⁷⁰ Letter from the Chief Secretary, 24 August 1931, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/2020).

⁷¹ Letter from the Chief Secretary, 24 August 1931, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/2020).

even by the hands given by Nature. In a meeting or in a Bungalow, on the railway or in a carriage, at home or in office, in a shop or in a church, in a garden or at a fair, wherever an opportunity comes, Englishmen ought to be killed.”⁷²

In Burma, as in India, political upheaval was often the catalyst for new waves of censorship. It is strange then that the India Office files provide so few examples of censorship during the Hsaya San rebellion. U Maung Maung notes an initial attempt to prevent any news of the rebellion from being published and a general tightening of press controls (U Maung Maung, 1980: 95); and there are other indicators that censorship was prevalent. Just before the rebellion broke out, the British closed down newspapers and printing presses with the newly-installed emergency press ordinances. Later in the 1930s, the authorities’ methods of censorship were harsh enough to provoke confrontation with the Thakin movement, a revolutionary student organization. It is therefore hard to believe that the British could have been lenient during what a high-ranking official called “the most dangerous rebellion which has occurred in Burma for forty years.”⁷³

These examples, which represent the most extreme cases of political censorship, illustrate sentiments existing in Burma which the British wanted to eliminate. The authorities did their best to stifle severe criticism of their rule. They were also quick to suppress accusations of atrocities committed by British officials. Many examples of censorship concern calls inciting or condoning violence, especially that which was aimed at the British, such as the pagoda attack in *Knowledge* and the murderous leaflets distributed during the Hsaya San rebellion. The overriding theme of these examples, however, is how *little* they help in piecing together a consistent policy of censorship. These examples are more indicative of the hazy censorial boundaries erected by the British. As the 1930s progressed,

⁷² From the British Library collection of proscribed materials, as catalogued in Shaw & Lloyd: EPP1/47, “Shake to the Earth”, June 1932.

⁷³ Letter from the Chief Secretary, 24 August 1931, from the India Office Public and Judicial Files (L/PJ/6/2020).

more urgent cases were to occupy the censors in their efforts to halt the rising tide of nationalism.

Ideology and Religion: The Battle against Hearts and Minds

By the mid-1930s, the government had new enemies to face in the form of ideology and religious violence. To counter these threats, during the latter half of the decade, a great number of warnings and demands for securities from various newspapers were issued by the government as they attempted to calm the clamoring voices of dissent. These efforts were met with protest from Burmese ministers, the Thakin movement, and newspapers themselves.⁷⁴

Communism was the authorities' main ideological enemy. Communist influence was seeping across the borders of Burma in the form of books, pamphlets, and Indian comrades. But the censors' troubles then were just beginning. In the early 1930s reading matter became increasingly political with books published on Ireland, "Home Rule," and boycott strategies.⁷⁵ The Nagani (Red Dragon) Book Club began in 1937 and published books on characters including Filipino independence hero Jose Rizal, and on events like the French Revolution as well as polemics against capitalism and studies of socialism and Marxism.⁷⁶ Tin Htway pinpoints 1937 as being the climax of political writing in Burmese literature under the British:

"It covered reflections on the new administration, independence movements, internal political affairs, international politics, events of the world war, political ideologies, autobiographies of national leaders and heroes, and included propaganda on behalf of the poor people, peasants and laborers."⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Governor's Fortnightly Reports and Monthly Intelligence Summaries for the period of 1936 to 1939, from the Burma Office Files (M/5/3, M/5/4, M/5/5, M/5/6, M/5/46 and M/5/67).

⁷⁵ Tin Htway, 'The Emergence and Development of Political Writing in Burmese Literature, 1914-42' (unpublished thesis, 1969).

⁷⁶ Tin Htway, 'Political Writing, 1914-42' (unpublished thesis).

⁷⁷ Tin Htway, 'Political Writing, 1914-42' (unpublished thesis).

Amidst this crowd of political voices it was Communism which the British objected to most. Communism, and imperialism as it was practiced in British Burma, sat at either end of the ideological spectrum. Unable to stomach the former and fearful of its detrimental effects on the latter, the British did their best to quell the spread of Communist ideology. With Burma's separation from India in 1935, the Burmese legislative council began the following year to debate some of the more unpopular Indian laws. One of these was the Press Act. In 1937, the council opted to dispense with the caution of demanding securities from printing presses. The Governor was against the move, pointing out that, if newspapers in Burma published articles which excited racial feeling or criticized the government, it would be more difficult to prosecute for sedition than to forfeit securities. The Governor predicted that in the absence of securities there could be "a flood of mushroom scurrilous journals."⁷⁸

The debate also honed in on the British government's policy of banning all Communist literature. While the authorities had proscribed many such publications since the late 1920s, in 1932 a notification expanded the policy to include any letters, documents or books in any way connected to the Comintern.⁷⁹ While Burmese ministers were for removal of the blanket ban, British authorities were against it. The debate centered specifically around two books—Stachey's *Theory and Practice of Socialism* and Palm Dutt's *World Politics 1918–1936*—which had recently been confiscated by customs authorities when sent from outside the country to a private address in Burma. The recipient of the books protested their proscription.⁸⁰ Burmese Premier Ba Maw was firmly against the ban. He wrote, "I know of nothing that can be said against Communism which cannot, with at least equal force, be said of all the other

⁷⁸ Governor's Fortnightly Report, 4 May 1937, from the Burma Office Files (M/5/4 6).

⁷⁹ Barrier, *Banned*, 126. This is not to say that Communist literature didn't circulate. Cady notes that the infiltration of Communist literature came from England itself in the hands of returning Burmese. (Cady, 1958:377)

⁸⁰ While many historians cite these particular volumes as evidence of the spread of Communist ideas, few mention that they were proscribed by the British government. They serve as examples of the stifling, not the spreading, of Communist theory.

ideologies, including imperialism.” He concluded that Communist literature did not promote immediate and unconditional violence or law-breaking, saying that the real object of the ban “is not to protect law and order, since it can hardly be maintained that every Communist publication would subvert law and order, but to protect Imperialist ideology against criticism.”⁸¹ British officials put a more altruistic spin on their motives stating they were “not in favor of allowing books on Communism to spread all over Burma and more particularly to fall into the hands of ill-educated and immature youths who might be influenced to carry on dangerous activities to the detriment of the people of Burma.”⁸²

Burmese Ministers also wanted to amend the machinery of political censorship of publications, books, and films. Before proscribing anything they felt it should be necessary to obtain the previous sanction of the central government rather than leaving the decision to localized authorities on the ground.⁸³ A compromise was reached and it was decided only to modify the act to allow more central government control of censorship.⁸⁴

Of the ideological movements in the 1930s, it is the Thakin movement which most often came to blows with the government’s censorship policies. The India Office special collection of proscribed literature contains a number of Thakin documents such as the manifesto of the All Burma Youth League. The government frequently objected to Thakin speeches and arrested its speakers for sedition. In their list of aims, the Thakins promised to fight for freedom of expression and the press.⁸⁵ Indeed, one very significant

⁸¹ From Further Note by the Premier, 29 January 1938, Governor’s Confidential Report, 2 February 1938, from the Burma Office Files (M/5/4).

⁸² From Supplementary Memorandum by the Home Department, 19 January 1938, Governor’s Fortnightly Report, 9 February 1938, from the Burma Office Files (M/5/4).

⁸³ From Memorandum by the Home Department, 4 January 1938, Governor’s Fortnightly Report, 9 February 1938, from the Burma Office Files (M/5/4).

⁸⁴ Governor’s Fortnightly Report, 23 February 1938, from the Burma Office Files (M/5/4).

⁸⁵ Daw Khin Yi *The Dobama Movement in Burma 1930-1938* (Ithaca, SEAP South East Asia Program, Cornell University, 1984), 16.

conflict between the government and the Thakins began over a case of repressive censorship, the school strikes of 1936. When provocative speeches delivered by a law student led to his expulsion, the *Journal* of the Student Union (edited by Thakin Aung San, who later went on to lead Burma's independence movement) ran an "inflammatory follow-up article entitled 'Hell Hound at Large'."⁸⁶ When Aung San refused to reveal the author's name, he too was disciplined. In protest, students went on strike, blockading halls, and boycotting examinations.

Another student demonstration led to a more sinister form of brute censorship. In December 1938, some 2000 students protesting the imprisonment of certain Thakins picketed The Secretariat and the Governor's residence. Police tried unsuccessfully to break up the protest. By noon students were marching through the streets. When they stopped for a speech, British and Indian mounted police charged at the gathering. Policemen on foot carried special riot batons and beat students, including teenage girls, one as young as 13 years old.⁸⁷ One of the two dead, Maung Aung Gyaw, later became a celebrated martyr of the nationalist struggle.⁸⁸ The government subsequently published a statement claiming force was necessary because the students had used sticks and stones against them. The District Magistrate prohibited the publication of any photographs depicting police charging the students. To ensure the policy was kept in force, officers, under orders from the Commissioner of Police, raided newspaper offices confiscating news sheets and negatives of police action.⁸⁹ The inquiry committee deduced that the police prevented the publication of the pictures because they would give the wrong impression to the public.

Authorities concerned with preventing the spread of threatening ideologies failed to notice the rise in calls for religious violence. For censors in India, publications or statements which

⁸⁶ John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (New York, Cornell University Press, 1958), 379.

⁸⁷ Burma Government, *Report of the Secretariat Incident Inquiry Committee*, Rangoon, 1939.

⁸⁸ Cady, *Modern Burma*, 401.

⁸⁹ Burma Government, *Report of the Secretariat Incident Inquiry Committee*, Rangoon, 1939.

could incite violence between Muslims and Hindus were of particular concern. This was not at the forefront of British priorities in Burma until religious riots broke out in Rangoon in July 1938. Causes of the riots were rooted in economic tensions between the Indian and Burmese community but the British government initially blamed the publication of a book offensive to Buddhists and the anti-Indian tendencies of the Burmese press. The post-riot inquiry committee condemned the fact that such a contentious publication could slip through the net and set off a debate about tightening the system of censorship.

The book which the committee found to be the immediate cause of the riot was first published in 1931 and then again in 1936. On neither occasion did it create any outcry. Neither, however, was it registered through the correct censorial channels. The Books and Publication Act requires that a publisher supply a copy of every book he publishes to an appointed officer of the local government within one month of publication. The act allows the government to be “informed of what is being published in the country so as to enable it to take timely steps to prevent the distribution of dangerous or objectionable books.” And that it is a “wise and necessary precaution and it is certainly not less necessary now than it was forty years ago.”⁹⁰ In this particular case the book should have ended up on the desk of the Director of Public Instruction. The latter’s registers for both years in question had no record of the book. The Director of Public Instruction said there had been a laxity regarding the act and that he had noticed a number of books circulating in Burma which never passed through his office.⁹¹ The committee didn’t blame the administration, rather the law itself, pointing out that it was a case of “shutting the stable door after the horse has gone.”

It was the third publication of the anti-Buddhist tracts, as an appendix to a novel called *The Abode of the Nat*, that set off the 1938 riots. In July 1938, the press reprinted the most offensive sections and ran retaliatory anti-Muslim editorials. A religious slanging-match was played out over the pages of Rangoon’s rival dailies. The

⁹⁰ Burma Government, *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*, Rangoon, 1939.

⁹¹ Burma Government, *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*, Rangoon, 1939.

inquiry committee placed a large share of the blame on these newspapers which it claimed had for some years been spreading “propaganda unfavorable to Indians.” The committee suggested that action against the press had in the past been too lenient and recommended increased vigilance over both newspapers and books, and perhaps an amendment of the law:

“We think that those sections of the Press which, in our opinion, have sought to disunite this country and detach its citizens from their loyalty and their duty have received more leniency than they deserve or than the safety of the country can afford. We think that, until these disturbances are over and until a sense of responsibility revives, those of the papers of Burma which cannot, or will not, observe the law ought to be told that they can print no more.”⁹²

The government did take considerable action against the press. In his fortnightly report the Governor wrote, “As *nearly every* Burmese newspaper had to be dealt with it was natural that this action of the Government should have been widely criticized, but I am satisfied that vigorous action was necessary.”⁹³

The action taken after the riots was extreme. The government issued warnings to the press that severe measures would be taken if anything calculated to promote feelings of enmity between Burmese and Indian communities was published. The 1931 and 1936 editions of the book were belatedly proscribed. At the end of July the District Magistrate issued an order for the press to abstain from printing any articles or photographs in connection with the disturbances in

⁹² Burma Government, *Final Report of the Riot Inquiry Committee*, Rangoon, 1939. Nowhere in the files can I find the actual offensive sections. *The Indian Law Reports*, Rangoon series, detailing the appeal of Shwe Hpi (author of the anti-Buddhist tracts) state that the court would not quote verbatim since further publication of the material would be undesirable. It did mention there was reference to, “The manner of the death of the Lord Buddha which must be held to constitute the offence charged.”

⁹³ (My italics). Governor’s Fortnightly Report, 1 September 1938, from the Burma Office Files (M/5/4).

Rangoon.⁹⁴ Three days later the *Sun* was asked to abstain from publishing for two weeks and a security of Rs. 3000 was demanded. A similar fate soon befell a stream of other newspapers. Editors were prosecuted for spreading malicious rumors. Even the author and publisher of the original 1931 publication were convicted of deliberately and maliciously provoking religious sensitivities.⁹⁵

By early 1939, the Governor congratulated himself on the success of his efforts at reigning in the Burmese press, noting that the anti-government press was not so vicious as it had been the previous year. The press was, however, protesting his repressive measures by refusing to publish government communiqués.⁹⁶ Later that year the press demonstrated other methods of protest. When, in September 1939, Acting Governor Booth-Gravely made a public address regarding the critical international situation and imminent danger of World War II, all newspapers except one refused to print the address as a protest against harsh government action during the past few months in “checking their worst excesses” by demanding securities from most of them.⁹⁷ The Governor may have been able to congratulate himself on a calmer press but it took powerful emergency ordinances, high securities, and alert censors to keep Burmese editors in check. As these protests show, the British were able to punish the press but they were unable to intimidate them into total submission.

There is an increasing sense of desperation in British censorship efforts in Burma in the late 1930s. The blanket ban on Communist literature, which the authorities were reluctant to remove, was an attempt to suppress an ideology antithetical to its own. The refusal to relinquish dated emergency press controls points to a sense of insecurity which was not present a decade before when the government had operated without the system of securities.

⁹⁴ Governor’s Fortnightly Report, 1 September 1938, from the Burma Office Files (M/5/4).

⁹⁵ *The Indian Law Reports*, Rangoon Series (Supdt., Govt. Printing and Stationary, Burma, Rangoon, 1939).

⁹⁶ Governor’s Confidential Report, 2 February 1939, from the Burma Office Files (M/5/5).

⁹⁷ Governor’s Confidential Report, 10 September 1939, from the Burma Office Files (M/5/5).

Clumsy suppression of discussion and debate within the university led to confrontations with students. But perhaps the most desperate move of all was the government's belief that it could simply proscribe evidence of its own misdemeanors, such as police brutality. Since censors were particularly tough against media efforts at inciting violence it is interesting to note that the examples of laxity—towards the anti-Buddhist tracts and then towards an increasingly anti-Indian press—did not involve threats against the British. A higher priority for the authorities was the suppression of attacks aimed specifically at British rule.

Conclusion

A secure and stable state can allow room for debate and is not threatened by criticism or rival ideologies. The British allowed debate in Burma, but only within ill-defined limits. Material which slipped across these hazy censorial boundaries could result in proscription, fines, and jail sentences. A Burman could get away with calling the government stupid, but not murderous. He could complain about an administrative policy, even the Press Act itself, but not call for active protest against it. In between these parameters was a gray area. Whether or not material provoked the censors depended as much on the regional and local political situation and censor's character or mood, as on the actual content of the material.

If the rules of censorship were inconsistent, the way in which they were worded was even more so. The *Rangoon Mail's* plaintive cry that British objections were "vague as vagueness can be" was not a gross exaggeration. The Government of Burma accused newspapers, books, and films of "hatred", "sedition, "disloyalty," and "disaffection"—all words which never received clear-cut definitions. This vagueness and inconsistency was a defining characteristic of British censorship in Burma. This policy may have been an informal attempt to keep the Burmese on their toes. Alternatively, it may also have been a product of Britain's strong tradition of freedom of expression which made the colonial authorities wary of overt and explicit censorship.

Traditionally, authoritarian regimes use censorship mainly to stifle political opposition. At first, however, British censors seemed more concerned with the moral issue of molding a "better" citizen of the Empire from a race they considered uncivilized and child-like.

But the focus soon turned onto the colonialists themselves. Threats arrived in the form of new media such as cinema in which anti-establishment characters like Charlie Chaplin made a mockery of the assumed moral superiority of the white man. A more political and daring press voiced Burmese anger towards the government. Censorship therefore became a tool aimed at protecting the British image and keeping it unsullied and sacred in the eyes of the Burmese. The Government of Burma felt that even small attacks—a reprinted article on the horrific aggression of their officers in Egypt, a film showing Asians triumphing over the British, a book promoting an ideology sneering at British values—chipped away at their rule. They believed that all these things could lead to a slow erosion of their power and they used censorship to try and prevent this.

The Government of Burma was, understandably, particularly sensitive to material that called for organized violence against the British. But the fact that such material was censored may not always have been because the authorities feared it would incite actual violence—such as in the case of the leaflets during the Hsaya San rebellion—but because they felt it undermined their image as a ruling power to even allow such documents to circulate. In other words, censors became more concerned with maintaining the appearance of British legitimacy to rule than with destroying any real challenge to that rule. As Burmese nationalism grew, holding back the tide of contrary opinions and increasingly loud dissent became futile. The censors seemed slow to realize that stopping a newspaper from publishing a certain sentiment did not destroy the sentiment itself. Aware of the right to freedom of expression yet concerned with its own unchallengeable control over the colony, the British administration in Burma was very much a self-conscious censor.

While it is beyond the scope of this article, it is interesting to note that Burma's current government has largely adopted some of the legal forms and methods of British censorship. After independence from Britain in 1948, the Government of the Union of Burma maintained British censorship laws. It used them liberally, if equally self-consciously, as it was very aware of the new constitution's promise of "the right of the citizens to express freely their

convictions and opinions.”⁹⁸ There were a number of cases of censorship in which “drastic measures were taken against publishing news or opinions not approved by the Government” (Tinker, 1967: 78). Today, in the heavily-censored state of Burma ruled by the military-run State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the main tool of the SPDC is the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Law—a law that bears some similarity to its British predecessor—which authorizes a Press Scrutiny Board to censor everything from books to song lyrics both pre- and post-publication.⁹⁹ Like the British government of Burma, the present regime keeps its censorial parameters vague. The British authorities developed their methods of censorship over some forty years and yet failed in their attempts to silence their critics and preserve their legitimacy. In contemplating ongoing censorship in the state of Burma today, it is thus well to observe these lessons of the past.

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⁹⁸ Hugh Tinker, *The Union of Burma: A Study of the First Years of Independence* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1967) 78.

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