

OUTLINE OF BURMESE HISTORY

G. E. HARVEY



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BY

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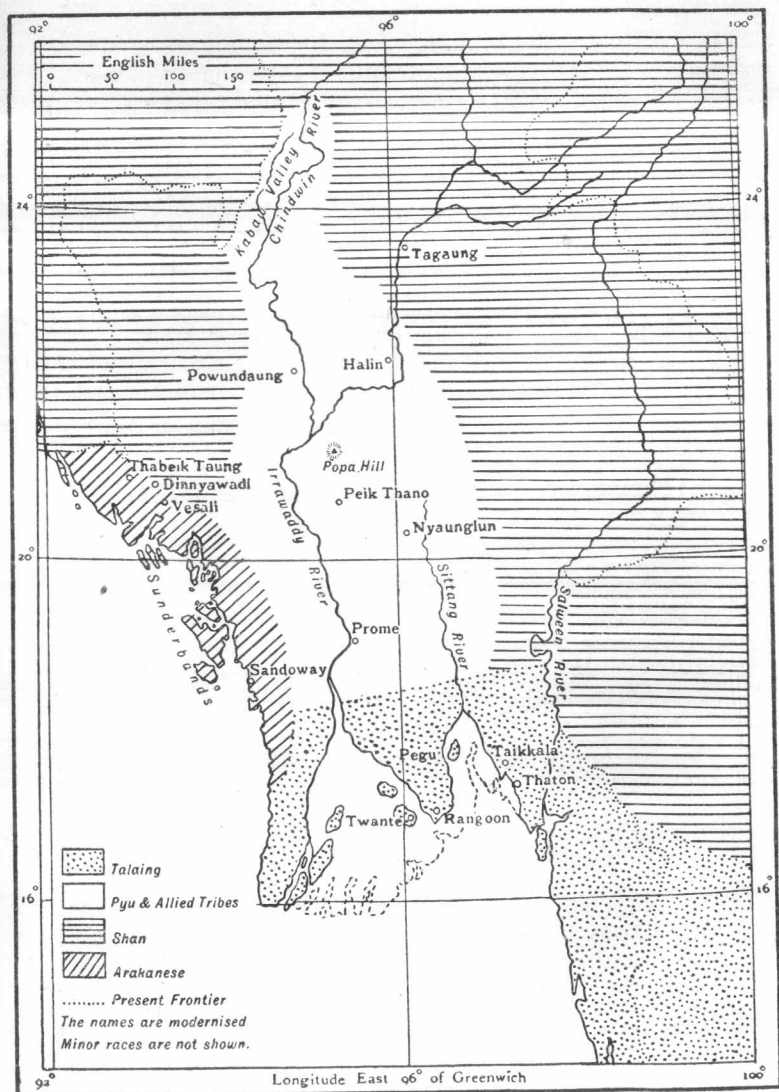
First published	1926
New Edition	1929
Reprinted	1947 (Twice) ; 1954

Price Rs. 3/-

Printed in India by B. N. BOSE, at the Bose Press,
30, Brojo Mitter Lane, Calcutta.

This book is unreferenced because it is only an abridgement of the same author's *History of Burma* (Longmans, London, 1925) which is fully referenced. The author is indebted to the following gentlemen for reading the draft of this abridgement—J. P. Bulkeley, Indian Educational Service; Professor D. G. E. Hall, University College, Rangoon; Maung Kha, Chief Translator, High Court, Rangoon; The Hon'ble Mr. Justice May Oung; A. G. Mosely, Indian Civil Service; Mg Sein Tun Aung, pleader; Maung Zwin, Anglo-Vernacular High School teacher—and to Mr. John Murray for permission to reproduce the illustrations on pages 54 and 179.

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CHAPTER I

BURMA BEFORE 1044

BURMA, being little more than the valleys of a river system shut off from the outer world by hills and the sea, is fitted to be the home of a unified people. But even now the process of unification, though accelerated, is incomplete; and when history began, the country was a medley of tribes.

Perhaps the earliest inhabitants were Indonesians but they have left scarcely a trace and in any case they were displaced by Mongolian tribes whose home was probably in western China. These were the Mon, and the Tibeto-Burman tribes from eastern Tibet. Doubtless they came down the great rivers, but the routes, order, and dates at which they came are purely conjectural. The Mon (Talaings) spread over Burma south of Henzada. The traditional names of the Tibeto-Burman tribes are Pyu, Kanran and Thet; perhaps the Thet are the Chins, and the Kanran the Arakanese; the Pyu, now extinct, may be an ingredient in what afterwards became the Burmese, and they seem to have been pushed inland from the Delta coast by Talaing pressure from the south-east, as if the Talaing route into Burma was down the Salween. The Karens may have been earliest of all. The latest immigration was that of the Tai (Shans) who came in the XIIth century (p. 58).

These races came owing to causes such as drought and ethnic pressure, in successive infiltrations, each driving its predecessor further south. Down from the north they came, tribe after tribe of hungry yellow men with the dust of the world's end upon their feet, seeking food and warmth, seeking tiny homesteads along the fertile river banks,

seeking that place in the sun which has been the dream of the northern races in so many ages.

The process took centuries. The Shans did not enter the plains till the XIIIth century, and the Kachins were penetrating Upper Burma when the English annexation in 1885 checked the movement. Many of the immigrants must have been settled in before the beginning of the Christian era. They lay thinly scattered over the country, illiterate animist tribes with little political organisation. Men dwelt in isolated units, divided by forest and hill, a scanty population whose hut-fires sent up smoke here and there above the jungle. The unit was doubtless the village, with communal land tenures and rigid clan customs. If after a time kings came into existence they were little more than tribal chiefs.

. . . . in times long passed away,
When men might cross a kingdom in a day,
And kings remembered they should one day die,
And all folk dwelt in great simplicity.

We read of seven kings who went up to do battle against Taikkala (Ayetthima in Thaton district); but as their dominions were all pressed in between the mouths of the Salween and Sittang rivers, each kingdom must have been no larger than a township.

Indeed there can hardly have been political units of any size before writing came into use. Although it was not unknown before A.D. 500, no inscriptions of earlier date have yet been found. It was brought, probably about A.D., 300, from south India to the Pyus first of all, as part of the great Hindu expansion overseas; the earliest Pyu inscription contains letters of the Kadamba alphabet which was in use at that date near Goa on the Bombay coast. Hindus had come long before but it was not till this time that their cultural influence took root; they brought writing, customary law, and other elements of civilisation. They founded kingdoms in Java and Sumatra, and dotted the coast from Bengal to Borneo and Tonkin

with little trading principalities such as Prome, Rangoon and Thaton. Their coming was generally peaceful, for if they came as individual traders they would be welcomed; and if they came in numbers to set up independent communities, there was usually room in so thinly populated a land. But as time went on, there was less room, at any rate in the places most worth having; and a few traditions such as the following suggest that at times there was petty fighting—

THE STORY OF THE TALAING HERO KUN ATHA

“Thamala King of Pegu [A.D. 825-37] made his younger brother successor to the throne and, promising to welcome him on his return, sent him to learn wisdom from a famous teacher at Taxila. Now on the border between the realms of Pegu and Thaton there dwelt an aged Karen couple working their *ya* fields, and they had a daughter, and Thamala the king made her his chief queen. And the months and the years went by . . . and the king forgot his brother Wimala.

Now Wimala, having learned wisdom bade farewell to his teacher, and returned home. But because his brother the king forgot his promise and welcomed him not, forthwith in anger he slew his brother the king. And inasmuch at that very time the queen gave birth to a son, he ordered that the new born babe also be slain. But the queen, with grief in her heart, hid the babe outside the town near a pasture where buffaloes graze; and the *nat* fairies guarded him, and day by day he grew in wisdom and strength.

When he was sixteen years old, Hindu strangers came to the land. They were angered because the Talaings had driven them out, and they came back saying ‘We will fight and regain Hantha-waddy.’ Led by Lamba, a giant seven cubits high, they came in their ships and surrounded Pegu town and sent a letter to Wimala the king. And when he had the letter, Wimala the king sent out messengers to seek a champion; but though the messengers searched, they found no champion.

Now at that time a certain hunter went hunting in the forest, and he came to where the wild buffaloes graze, and lo! among the buffaloes there stood a valiant youth. And the hunter returned home, and told his wife, and she said ‘Husband, if this be true, tell it to the king, and he will reward thee’. And

the hunter told the king, and Wimala the king sent ministers to fetch the youth. And when they brought him, at once Wimala the king knew him for his nephew, and he ennobled him and called his name Atha-kumma, because he should conquer his enemies. Then Wimala confessed his sin, and in that moment Atha-kumma plighted his troth to fight the Hindu strangers. But first he waited seven days, and sought the buffalo who was his foster-mother to ask her leave, and she gave him leave and showed him how to fight and conquer. Then he returned to Pegu town, and did battle, and speared the Hindu giant in the side, and took prisoner seven ships and three thousand five hundred Hindu strangers. In memory thereof he built Kyaikatha (the pagoda of Atha, in Thaton district). And Wimala the king made him heir to the throne." (Hinthakan, near the Shwemawdaw pagoda at Pegu, is the traditional site of Kun Atha's combat.)

The Burmese are a Mongolian race, yet none of their traditions, hark back to China or to Mongolian things : all hark back to India. The early part of their chronicles reads as if they were descended from Buddha's clansmen and lived in Upper India. Even their folklore is largely Hindu; the fairy tale book *Princess Thudhammasari* contains clear references to caste; the legends of Princess Beda, of Alaungdaw Kathapa, of the Shwesettaw and Shwedagon pagodas, are all copied from Indian originals. As in the rest of Indo-China, most of their towns have two names, one vernacular, the other classical Indian. Just as the Latin Church made it fashionable for every city in mediaeval Europe to have a Roman name whether the Romans had been there or not, so the Hindu expansion caused a fashion for Sanskrit and Pali place names in Burma. A few of such names are due to actual immigration from the original namesake; thus Ussa, the old name for Pegu, is the same word as Orissa, and Pegu was colonised from Orissa. The surviving traditions of the Burmese are Indian because their own Mongolian traditions died out. The only classes among them who could read and write and thus keep traditions alive, were their ruling Indian class, the Hindu colonists.

These colonists came in two streams, one overland through Assam to Upper Burma, the other by sea from south India to Lower Burma. In both cases they may at times have been Mongolian, for in ancient days the Mongolian or hill-man element seems to have extended further south into the Indian plains than it does now, Buddha himself is thought to have had Mongolian blood in him, and even to-day some of the inhabitants of Bengal and Orissa shew traces of Mongolian descent. In localities such as Thaton, Prome, Pegu, Rangoon and the towns on the Arakanese coast, Indian immigrants doubtless formed a large percentage of the population; indeed the name *Talaing* is probably derived from Telingana, a region on the Madras coast, whence so many of them came. Like good Hindus, they built little shrines; and it is probably their shrines that form the original portion of such pagodas as the Shwemawdaw at Pegu, the Shwedagon at Rangoon, and the Shwezayan at Thaton, all of which may well date back, in some shape or another, to before the Christian era. They brought their clergy with them, just as chetties and European merchants do now in Rangoon and with as little result on the people at large; but in the course of centuries they became so numerous as to effect a peaceful penetration. Moreover, their Hinduism began to include Buddhist elements after 261 B.C. when Asoka invaded Orissa and introduced Buddhism into south India. Its spread there must have taken long—the absorption of a new religion is a slow process—and its spread overseas must have taken longer still. Probably the decisive event for Lower Burma was the rise in the Vth century after Christ of a vigorous Buddhist church at Conjeeveram in eastern Madras under the great commentator Dhammapala. Ancient Talaing writings frequently mention Dhammapala and Conjeeveram, and the earliest Talaing inscription is in the Pallava alphabet used there in his time.

Buddhism came to Burma as part of the Hindu overseas expansion and even after Dhammapala's day it had to contend with various Hindu sects. Doubtless these