BRITISH BURMA, 1886–1942

Britain's greatest mistake in dealing with Burma was to attach the country to the Indian empire. It was the natural thing to do, seeing that each stage of the conquest was organized and carried out by the Government of India. But its inevitable result was the standardization of Burma's administration according to the Indian model. In Malaya the mistake was avoided because the British forward move there came after the transfer of the Straits Settlements to the Colonial Office. Even as late as 1886 it could have been avoided if, when the whole country came under British rule, the fact had been adequately recognized that its culture, history and outlook gave it an individuality which it was the duty of the conquerors to preserve with all possible care. But as few people knew anything about these things administrative convenience was the overruling consideration.

It used to be said that three generations in Ireland makes an Irishman. It would be equally true of Burma. Moreover, the earliest British administrators found that the only effective way of getting anything done was to do it according to the Burmese method. The Burman judged everything according to the extent to which it conformed to Burmese custom, and the reply, 'It is not our custom', given by the Court of Ava to a proposal made by a British envoy, was final. It was useless to argue further. Hence in Tenasserim after its annexation in 1826, and in Pegu after 1852, although the administrative layout conformed to the Indian model, administrative practice tended to conform to Burmese traditional methods. And although in theory the Bengal method of direct rule was employed, in practice indirect rule not unlike the Dutch system in Java prevailed. The life of the ordinary villager went on much as it had under Burmese rule, and very few Burmans lived in towns.

Various factors combined to bring a fundamental change in this state of affairs. In the first place the process of standardization according to the Indian model received considerable impetus from the efforts that had to be made to quell disorder after the annexation of 1886. In the long run, however, the effects of this might not have been
decisive, and the traditional Burmese methods might in time have reasserted themselves, had it not been for the development of increasing specialization in functions and the additional responsibilities which governments of the modern Western type began to undertake during the succeeding period. The old policy of laissez-faire was abandoned and new forms of governmental interference, aiming at improved efficiency or social welfare, were invented. And along with them, as a result of immensely improved communications, came greater and ever greater central control—the control of the Rangoon Secretariat over district administration, and the control of the Government of India over provincial administration.

The immediate problem after the annexation was that of disorder. The Burmese army disregarded the order to surrender and melted away into the jungle villages with its arms to carry on guerilla warfare over a wide area. The thugyis, who had been the backbone of the Burmese system of district administration, became the leaders of the resistance movement, and at the head of marauding bands roamed far and wide to prevent the establishment of settled government. No less than five princes of the royal family, each claiming the throne, held out in different regions. And a serious rebellion broke out in Lower Burma. The abolition of the kingship, worthless as Thibaw had proved himself to be, evoked a nation-wide reaction against foreign rule. It took five years of hard campaigning to subdue the country, and at the peak period of the resistance an army of 32,000 troops and 8,500 military police was fully engaged.

For purposes of civil administration Upper Burma, excluding the Shan States and the extensive hill tracts inhabited by non-Burmese peoples, was divided into fourteen districts, each under a Deputy or Assistant Commissioner. So far as revenue and civil justice were concerned, the original intention of Sir Charles Bernard was for these to work through indigenous agencies according to local methods. But Bernard’s successor, Sir Charles Crosthwaite, who came with firmly fixed ideas of Indian administration, brought with him a ready-drafted scheme for making the village, as in India, the basic social and political unit. His theory was that the circle headman of the older administration, known as myothugyis or taikthugyis, had, in the words of a recent study,¹ ‘overshadowed and usurped the rightful power of the village headman’. His plan, therefore, was to break up the circle into villages and strengthen the village as an administrative unit, primarily in order to use it for the restoration of law and order. For his