

BULLETIN OF THE BURMA STUDIES GROUP

BURMA RESEARCH SOCIETY'S JOURNAL.
JUNE, 1911.

Vol. I, Part I.

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Journal
of the
BURMA RESEARCH SOCIETY

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THE BURMA MEETINGS

The meetings will be held during the annual meeting at AAS Washington Hilton.

Friday, March 27, 7-9 p.m. Edison Room
Burma Studies Foundation, Trustees Meeting:

Friday, March 27, 9-11 p.m. Edison Room
Burma Studies Group (of SEAC, AAS)

Saturday, March 28, 7:15-9 p.m. Edison Room

Reception (sponsored by BSG & BSF)

The Reception, which will be open to all attending the AAS meetings, is to celebrate the 50th anniversary of both the AAS and the Independence of Burma/Myanmar. It is intended to serve and to bring to the wider attention of the AAS membership at large the work of the Burma Studies Group and the Burma Studies Foundation, and, indeed, the work of Burma scholars generally within Asian Studies.

60 Years of Research

[This article first appeared in March 29, 1970 *The Sunday Working People's Daily*.

In 1979, the society was abolished and the publication ceased with volume 62, pt. 1 & 2, December 1979.]

In June 1911, a slim unpretentious looking little volume of some 178 pages or so was published in Rangoon. Entitled "*The Journal of the Burma Research Society*" –Vol I Part I, only about 500 copies of it were printed. It was published eight months later than the scheduled date of October 1910.

But this little volume costing about kyat 2.50 was the beginning of sixty years of service in the interest of knowledge and greater self-understanding among the people of Burma. And the Burma Research Society has come a long way since then.

Though people in their forties and their fifties may be able to remember some of the activities of the society, including the publication of many interesting papers on a fascinating variety of subjects, the younger generation today may not very well be aware of the background and to what extent the Burma Research Society played a role in the interests of the Burmese nation and the Burmese people.

The society was founded in 1910 at a time when a great deal of interest was being aroused in the study and documentation of eastern cultures. It was at a time when a number of books and documents which stimulated and sustained such interest were being published by scholarly institutions and learned bodies in quite a number of countries. Frazer's "*The Golden Bough*" had just recently been published while the Archaeological Survey of India was already bringing out its reports regularly. Under these circumstances, it was felt that Burma with

its rich cultural heritage largely unexplored and undocumented offered a virtual storehouse of opportunity for research.

This and the fact that certain other eastern countries, notably India and Thailand (Siam) already had formed organisations dedicated to this kind of research and documentation made it a matter of prestige for those who were then in responsible positions that Burma too should have such a society of its own.

On this background of events, the most important single person who must be accredited with having directly inspired the formation of the Burma Research Society was none other than a Burman who resided in Thailand. U Aung Thein (1870-1958) was then an Honorary Assistant Secretary of the Siam Society and his research papers regularly appeared in the society's journal.

On March 31, 1909 U Aung Thein sent to *Sardaw-pyan* (Government Translator) U Tun Nyein (the same U Tun Nyein to whom over two generations of Burmese student owe much for his monumental English-Burmese dictionary) Volume V Part I of his society's journal published in September 1908. It contained a long research paper by him, of some 100 pages or so, about some aspects of the "Burmese Invasion of Siam". It was presented under the Thai name of Nai Thein.

If this little volume containing U Aung Thein's was the inspirational catalyst, then Mr. J. S. Furnivall of the Indian Civil Service was the main moving spirit behind the eventual formation of the Burma Research Society. He managed to get the small volume from U Tun Nyein and became greatly taken up with the idea of getting together interested personalities for the formation of a research society. The little volume made the rounds of the

people most likely and a Provisional Committee was eventually formed when quite a number of people expressed more than just a passing interest in the idea. In November 1909, the committee sent out circulars of invitation for the formal founding of the society. A total of 238 people sent replies expressing their interest and enthusiasm.

A preliminary meeting held on February 19, 1910 decided that the society should be called the "Burma Research Society". There was however one proposal to call it the "Burma Society" but this was deemed unsuitable. The draft rules of the society were also discussed at this meeting. An interesting aspect was the decision to invite, among others, the Prince of Pyninmana, son of King Mindon to serve as a member of the General Committee. This decision to include a member of the royalty was apparently inspired by the fact that the Siam Society also included royalty among its members including the Crown Prince.

The inaugural meeting of the Burma Research Society took place on March 29, 1910 at the Bernard Free Library and the first general meeting was held at the Rangoon College on August 16, 1910 when a paper entitled "Matriarchal Vestiges in Burma" became the first paper to be read under the auspices of the newly-formed Burma Research Society. The first President of the Society was Mr. H. L. Eales of the Indian Civil Service.

The Secretary of the Society in reading was the intention of the Society to publish Volume I Part I of its journal in October, 1910 with four or five research papers, some general articles, some book reviews or critical notes and other interesting items. The Secretary invited scholars in Burma to contribute to the journal

pointing out that most of the-then available works on Burma were by those living outside Burma.

Though the publication of the journal was scheduled for October 1910, there was a long delay due to various reasons and it came out only eight months later in June 1911. It was printed at the American Baptist Mission Press and its size 8" by 5".

The aim of the Society was stated as, "For the Investigation and Encouragement of Arts, Sciences and Literature in relation to Burma and neighbouring countries."

Out of the 215 original members listed, 75 were Burmese names. Hmawbi Saya Thein (1861-1942), U Tun Nyein, and U Taw Sein Ko (1864-1930) were among the eight life members of the Society. Rev Bhikkhu Ananda Metteyya was the only Buddhist monk among the list of members.

The table of contents listed nine research papers, four general articles and 22 reviews and critical news. The volume also features the minutes of the preliminary meeting, a report on the first general meeting of the Society, the treasurer's report and the list of members. There was even an obituary section.

Notable among the works featured in the volume were "The Anthropometric data of the Talains" by B. Houghton; "The Early use of the Buddhist Era in Burma" by Taw Sein Ko; "Harvest Home in Burma" by J. S. Furnivall; "The Kings of Burma" by R. G. Brown; "The Burmese Calendar" by J. S. Furnivall; "Human sacrifices near the Upper Chindwin" by G. E. R. Grant-Brown; "The Lahoo Narrative of Creation" by Rev. C. B. Antisdell; "Matriarchal Vestiges in Burma" by J. S. Furnivall and Burmese and Karen Folklore.

Notable among the book reviews was one by Bhikkhu Ananda Metteyya who lauded U Shwe Zen Aung's (1871-1932) translation of the Abhidhammatta Sangaha (Compendium of Philosophy) as a great achievement which Buddhism, Burma and the Rangoon College would truly be proud of.

In the treasurer's report dated August 13, 1910, Honorary Treasurer U Tun Nyein stated that the total amount of members fees collected was kyat 3,081.

This little volume was the beginning. This launched the Burma Research Society on a distinguished career of service to the nation in the name of research.

Unexpected role

It is true that at the time of its inception, the birth of the Burma Research Society was based probably more on considerations of prestige, on the part of those in responsible positions, than on a desire to re-instate the spirit of Burmese nationalism by reviving and increasing interest in Burmese traditions, cultures and all things Burmese. But this is exactly what happened.

Though the learned scholars who contributed to the early volumes may not have thought about the impact of their works upon the prevailing scene, many of the research papers read and many of the general articles contributed eventually wrought a subtle influence upon the Burmese mind, albeit in the minds of Burmans educated and trained according to the colonial system of the British.

Many facets of our cultural heritage which might have been forgotten and lost were recalled and maintained due to some of the works published in the Society's Journal. Of course not all the works

featured could be considered fully free of looseness in judgement or error in interpretation. There might have been instances which in one way or another tended to downgrade the Burmese way of life by revealing only those certain aspects, which regarded from a stilted point of view, might make it seem excessively primitive or barbaric. But in most cases treatment was learned and scholarly and as intellectually objective as could be possible under those circumstances. However, the richness and grandeur of our history our language, our literature, our arts and all other aspects of our cultural heritage were such that the simple truth alone, ably presented with scholarly objectivity was enough to move all patriotic Burmans. And a very important fact was that these works reached those very Burmans, who being most exposed to the influences of the colonial education and training, were most likely to fall victim to its opiates. Even a casual perusal of the papers and articles on Burmese customs, Burmese history, language and literature provided for educated Burman an anchor of stability. For some in fact these works inspired a burgeoning sense of national awareness which in turn eventually led to more concrete manifestations of patriotism in other fields of human endeavour.

Thus, though the Burma Research Society has been a scholarly institution dedicated to learned research and documentation, it is a point of fact that, it has played albeit passively and indirectly, a far more wider role than the purely academic. And in its own field of work, it can boast of a distinguished record of achievements in these last 60 years.

The most important and probably the best known aspect of the Society's work is of course the publication of its Journal

which in effect is a public record of the proceedings of the Society. And in these volumes, many of the pre-war publications of which have been irretrievably lost, one may find authentic documentation of events, incidents, customs and phenomena regarding a fascinating variety of subjects with reference to Burma.

But the achievement which the elder members of the Society today would probably be most proud of is the editing and publication of authentic Burmese classics. Referred to as the "Text Publications" of the Society, they are a collection of old classic in Burmese, Pali, Mon or other languages of Burma. How the publication of this series came about is an interesting one which drives home the fact that the Burma Research Society indeed played a certain significant role in the national revival of Burma. When the teaching of Burmese at the University became a matter of debate, those opposed to it maintained that there were not enough classical works in Burmese literature for the purpose. To correct this misconception, the Society searched for and collected from various sources rare copies of such classics and published them under the series. And Burmese literature regained many of its treasures which would otherwise have been lost forever.

Of late, a new series of Text Publications have also been published. Another achievement of the Society has been the recording of Burmese Classical Music by well-known virtuosos of those days some of whom saw service with Burmese royalty. Anybody who understands the unique nature of Burmese music will readily appreciate how priceless these recordings are today.

Mention must of course also be made of the "Burmese Pamphlet" series of

which about 11 were published. Though largely out of date today, they supplied interesting facts about Burma regarding natural resources, history and some aspects of culture.

Research today

Today, the Burma Research Society carries on with its work, working shoulder to shoulder with other organisations and departments which have sprung up to take their place upon the widening platform of the national research effort. Today there is a more urgent need for specialised and applied research and the Revolutionary Government accordingly provides full encouragement in all fields of work. In the field of medicine, in engineering, in chemistry, in physics, in education, in agriculture, in sociology and in a myriad other allied subjects, the spirit of research has taken hold with an intensity which is growing every year.

The Union of Burma Applied Research Institute has been at work for many years now devoting itself to specific enquiries in different fields of work ranging from agronomy to engineering technology and textiles. In the field of agriculture too we have the Agriculture Research Institute which has been at work on projects of direct concern with efforts to increase agricultural production. Then there is also the intensifying research in the field of medicine and national health with the assistance of United Nations specialised agencies.

Experimentation and research in also alive in the field of national education. New techniques of instruction are being tried out, particularly in the teaching of language and literature while the entire education system itself is being gradually

modified, through accumulating experience, into form which can best serve the needs of the nation and its people.

Beginning with the little book which was published some sixty years ago, the spirit of research has today blossomed into a major national drive embracing practically all fields of national effort. Besides the specialised official organisations which are devoted to research in one field or another, quite a large number of government departments, such as the Public Works Corporation and Transport and Communications have their own little informational research programmes to achieve specific goals. Out of these informal efforts have come initiatives and innovations which have helped to cut down expenditures considerably while the effort of trying out new things have given for our workers the priceless ingredient of experience, confidence and know how.

We must also mention the great nation wide drives being made for discovery and survey of our national mineral resources which we would one day exploit. The search for oil has already given us substantial dividends in a short space of time and we have not even covered one tenth of the country's total area. Geologically speaking Burma has all the conditions for the existence of a great many other minerals, possibly in abundant quantities and research continues today with a greater sense of urgency than ever before.

It is not only in things technical and scientific that the spirit of research has taken hold. In the field of culture too, it has found a home. Interest in historical, anthropological and archaeological has never been so widespread or so intense as it is today and the encouragement and

assistance provided by government is proportional to public popularity. But understandably on the background of more urgent priorities being made upon national resources the allocations made for this field are modest. The substantial strides which have been in spite of this only goes to show what more could be done if the resources available are sufficient for all needs.

An entire book could be written about the development of research, particularly about the intense developments which have taken place within the six or seven years in Burma. We could mention how the spirit of research remained largely dormant during the time of parliamentary democracy and how it surged forward under the stimulation of revolutionary needs after 1962. We could enumerate the amount of work which is being done and provide a critical survey of the total research effort in the country, point out the shortcomings and praise the achievements. We could also attempt to analyse the shifting emphasis of research during the past sixty years since the founding of the Burma Research Society, though born of considerations for prestige among the narrow circle of those responsible in those days, nevertheless developed into an instrument which Burmese nationalists used with no little effectiveness for developing a greater awareness, understanding and appreciation of Burmese customs, traditions and history among Burmans. We could elaborate on how research today is orientated more towards the achievement of material progress to improve the well-being and living standards of the people in contrast to the spiritual enlightenment which was more sought for the pre-war days of the Burma Research Society. Finally we can

give an account of the role being played today by the annual Research Congresses which are the most vivid manifestation of the research spirit in modern Burma.

But if we are to speak of the spirit of research in Burma we cannot avoid or overlook the role which was played by the Burma Research Society. In fact, "The Spirit of Research" as we know it today in Burma began with the founding of the Burma Research Society in 1910 and the 60-year story of the Society in effect the story of research in Burma.

Research Programme Tibeto-Burmese Studies

Co-ordinator: Françoise Pommaret

Denise Bernot conducted field research among Yaw people, Burmese living west of the central area in the Magwe division in Myanmar in March-April 1995.

The Yaw country has been opened up to researchers since security-wise it is relatively tranquil. The railway to this area is under construction and the small airport has been converted into a football ground. To reach the area it is necessary to take a plane from Yangon to Nyaung-U (one and a half hours), the boat from Nyaung-U to Pakokku (cross of the Ayeyarwadi: three and half hours), a jeep (ten to eleven hours) over an unmade road passable only during the dry season, cross three passes...Consequently, Yaw people are relatively isolated and their

speech has retained particularities which were the principal reason for this research.

During the time she has spent in the Chittagong region and in Burma between 1951 and 1995, Denise Bernot has been heading research into the following dialects: Marma, Arakanese, Tavoyan, Danu, Intha, and even Yaw. Yaw was initially studied from a Yaw-speaker from Mandalay who was completely under the spell of Burmese culture. Authentic Yaw was thus missing in the list of languages preserving archaic characteristics. Each language contains different archaisms. Their regrouping allows a hypothesis to be constructed about the older stone inscriptions (XII-XIV centuries). For example, Old Burmese opposed *ky*, *kr*, *kl* and *py*, *pr*, *pl* whereas modern Burmese 'melts' *c* on one hand and *py* on the other hand. The Intha and Tavoyan languages still oppose *ky* to *ky* and *py* to *pl* whereas Marma and Arakanese oppose *ky* to *kr*; *py* to *pr*... The ancient *an* services in Marma, Arakanese, and Yaw. In Intha and Tavoyan it was changed into the *en* heard by Western travellers during the eighteenth century, and into *in* modern Burmese.

The Yaw have an ingenious system of utilizing the river to husk rice. The miller, his assistants and their clients explained the superiority of this system underlining the lack of flavour in the rice produced on this high-yield variety rice field, which drives customers away. This was the first awareness of this kind met in a country generally fascinated by technological innovations and less concerned with their potential destructive effects.

The rest of the visit was dedicated to collecting documentation in Burmese: dictionaries, grammar books, other books and journals, comics, caricatures, and older

recent historical and linguistic publications found for sale on the streets of Yangon.

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