

BOOK REVIEW

The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941 by Michael Adas, Madison, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1974, xv + 256 pp.

Studies of the Burmese economy have witnessed no observable progress either in Burma or abroad for some time. Not until two economic history works of note were published recently: one by Cheng Siok-Hwa, lecturer of University of Malaya, *The Rice Industry of Burma, 1852-1940* (University of Malaya Press, 1968), the other by Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta*, both deal with the century after 1852, when Lower Burma was annexed by Great Britain, until British rule crumbled under the Japanese military advance. Both focus on the development of the rice industry in this region.

During the period of colonial rule, the Burmese economy was characterized by what Levin calls an export economy. Socially the country had developed into a pluralistic society with socioeconomic confrontations between Burmese natives and foreigners. An analysis of the economic significance of this period may be one of the most important tasks in Burmese economic history, but hardly any major works have been produced on this subject, except papers drawing their sources from Furnivall's accomplishment. The two recent studies by Cheng and Adas have brought about a major change in this situation.

Furnivall's works were soundly based on what he learned and observed as a colonial official. Cheng and Adas base their studies on numerous government publications during the colonial age still preserved in Great Britain, which are thoroughly reviewed by the two scholars. Adas in particular uses over eighty volumes of settlements reports published in several series by each district office, and extends his analysis to economic trends of these districts. He thus succeeds in tracing the economic expansion of the Delta in minute detail, and establishes a standard of achievement for the study of the economic history of Burma.

The author sets up three stages of economic development of the Delta: Stage I, 1858-1907, stage of healthy economic growth; Stage II, 1908-30, a transitional stage, when the peasant economy lost ground in the midst of overall expansion; and Stage III, 1931-41, the crisis stage, when the Delta economy was destroyed by the Depression. Each stage is described as follows.

During the first stage the rice economy of Lower Burma rapidly expanded owing to the existence of large areas of virgin land and to the great number of migrants from Upper Burma. Peasants, whether owner-cultivators, tenants, or agricultural laborers, fared well economically with no distinct lines of demarcation among them, with resultant mobility among social strata. The influx of Indian immigrants mainly from the lower castes in Madras and Bengal continued, and they almost monopolized the labor market for urban port works, rice-milling, and harvesting. Some division in the labor market was thus already observable, but a constant excess demand for labor produced no serious conflicts among laborers of various racial origins, but they peacefully co-existed while maintaining different residential sections, cultures, and customs.

During the second stage continued expansion was observable in terms of land under cultivation, unhulled rice production and rice export, but the economic plight of the

peasants worsened. The author says the principal cause of this discrepancy lies in the disappearance of the frontier. Rising land prices and decreasing production due to lower land fertility, dealt a severe blow to the peasants, many of whom were subsequently forced to abandon the land to pay their debts, putting the concentration of arable land in the hands of absentee landlords. Meanwhile, deteriorating economic conditions, which prevailed longer in Southern India, continued to bring a large amount of migrant labor force to the Delta finally causing reversal of the labor market condition. Urban workers of lower standing, as well as tenants and agricultural laborers, now faced severe competition in employment. In agricultural finance, the former dominant place of the Burmese usurers was taken over by the Indian financial caste, the Chettiars. Antagonistic feelings of the Burmese grew gradually against the advancing Indians.

During the depression-stricken third stage, the rapid fall in prices of paddy touched off serious dislocations in the economy, which in turn brought about communal violence and peasant uprisings. In Rangoon and other urban areas there were armed clashes between Burmese and Indians in 1930 and 1938. In rural areas, the government refusal to lower land taxes was a factor in severe uprisings against colonial rule and they rampaged through the Delta for two long years.

The author places particular emphasis on the following points. (1) The first stage was an age of healthy economic development with simultaneous expansion of the aggregate economy and peasants' welfare. (2) In this process the Burmese made profound advances into various fields, not only in agriculture but also financing, commerce, and rice-milling. (3) The plural social structure of Burma was somewhat different from what it has been commonly understood to be, i.e., Europeans at the top, followed by foreign Asiatics, Chinese and Indians, and then the indigenous population at the bottom. The Burmese advanced into all areas of economic activity, except the very top, and concentrations of each racial group were observed in certain sections of the same occupational strata. (4) The racial confrontation of peasants and laborers was primarily a function of economic conditions and did not come to the fore as long as demand for labor exceeded supply.

The author gauges the significance of his own work as follows: an empirical study which disproves the prevailing view of economic development in Eastern colonies under European imperialism. The examination of the role the Burmese played in the economic development of Lower Burma flatly denies Boeke's hypotheses regarding the natives of Eastern colonial societies, such as "limited wants" and "lack of constant profit seeking." The author claims that the rigid nature of Eastern societies or their peasant class should not be emphasized in an effort to understand the peasants' reactions to change. Also that we should look first instead at the various economic conditions that prevailed at that time.

One of the strong points of the book may be seen in its presentation of a methodology through which the economic process and social phenomena can be grasped in an integrated manner on the basis of an analysis of the labor market. The author makes a very detailed examination of how the labor market was divided among various racial groups at each stage of development. He gives a very lucid description of the way in which nationalism was born among lower rank peasants and laborers. The same methodology is applied to give an introduction of the dynamic historical process of the concept of plural society, which has thus far been seen as a static entity. Furthermore, the author takes up the issue of the large peasant rebellion in 1930 led by an ideology of restoring past order. He sees its intrinsic momentum in the downfall of peasants

since 1920, thus elucidating its universal significance. The author's methodology in such areas is of great importance.

Despite this, however, the reviewer feels some shortcomings. One is the way the materials are treated. The settlement reports undoubtedly are the best material available and reveal the form of land tenancy and economic conditions of the peasants. And yet there is a great possibility that judgment based solely on the reports of settlement officers may be slanted in certain ways. It is unavoidable that one must rely heavily on materials of the suzerain states in studies of colonial economic history, but critical evaluation of the materials used is quite essential.

For instance, the author seems to place excessive emphasis on the point that peasants were well off economically during the first phase of development. The author's view is naturally derived from settlement reports, but in the case of Henzada District they have been criticized as describing the peasant economic state in too optimistic terms ignoring their demands to restrict high tenancy fees.¹

Furnivall, who himself served in determining the land tax rate, adopts a far severer view than the author regarding the economic conditions of peasants, and points out that the downfall of Burmese peasants already began around 1890, i.e., in the midst of the rice industry expansion.²

The reviewer also notices a lack of critical examination of original documents on other points. For instance, the customary short tenancy period of one year is explained by the author as the result of the tenants' yearly change in land cultivated from their desire for better conditions, and made possible by a superior position. This, however, is very peculiar behavior for peasants, who actually till the soil.

In describing the national uprisings in the 1930s the author resorts to reports from the British government. That they present the rebelling Burmese as offenders reveals their orientation.

The second point I wish to raise is concerned with the author hardly mentioning the monocultural structure of the colonial Delta economy, wholly dependent on the production, processing, and export of one commodity, rice. The author's analysis is solely of quantitative expansion of the entire Delta economy, and the trends in shares of various racial or peasant groups. The crippled nature of the Delta economy and its accompanying vulnerability are not examined.

The second issue is that this book deals only with the Delta economy as such and does not treat it as part of the Commonwealth economy. The fact that the agriculture of Lower Burma specialized in rice and thus was made fatally vulnerable to the fluctuating unhulled rice price cannot be explained adequately simply by natural physical conditions of the region or peasants' preferences, as the author tries to do. The role of Burma in the framework of the Commonwealth economy was gradually affirmed and fixed as the food supplying base for Ceylon and other colonies. This is thought to be the more fundamental factor in determining the monocultural formation of the Delta economy.

The reviewer also wishes to express certain doubts of the claim of the author that British colonial rule brought general benefits to the mass of the Burmese and that economic development in this region was the best of the European colonies. Since this

¹ W. S. Morrison, *Burma Gazetteer, Henzada District*, Vol. A (reprint ed., Government Printing and Stationery, 1963), pp. 81-82.

² J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice* (New York: New York University Press, 1956), pp. 103-4.

book does not deal with colonial policy at any length, it is not quite clear on what ground such judgments are made. One surmises that the author takes the basic stand of equating quantitative expansion of the economy with progress as such and not inquiring into its crippled nature.

The author wrote a previous paper entitled "Imperialistic Rhetoric and Modern Historiography" published in 1972,³ in which he made a rebuttal of the age-old Western-centered cultural orientation that "establishment of European rule brought peace and order to the eastern countries where barbarism and poverty had prevailed. White men conferred benefits upon indigenous people as economic, social condition improved greatly." He analyzed the conditions of pre-colonial Burma and disproved the above thinking. It is quite regrettable that in the book under review he comes out in support of the Western-centered philosophy of civilization, when he makes mention of English colonial rule in Burma.

Adas uses the method of economic analysis very effectively in this book and thus succeeds in furthering series studies, as already described. However, this reviewer feels that it is quite necessary at this time to inquire into the totality of economic development, specifically the various social background of economic development under colonial rule. (Furnivall described, with a sense of urgency, the destruction of rural villages, and the loss of peasant identity.)

(Teruko Saitō)

³ M. Adas, "Imperialistic Rhetoric and Modern Historiography," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (September 1972).