

# Colonial Burma's prison: continuity with its pre-colonial past?

The practice of confining convicted criminals in prison for a stipulated period of time – to punish or reform – is a modern western innovation. Pentonville in north London, opened in 1842 and said to be the first modern prison, had four wings radiating from a central hub from which guards could observe every cell, each holding a single prisoner. The 'modern' prison then became one of many western innovations (including the railway, scientific medicine and the filing cabinet) transported to the colonial world from the mid-19th century.

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The Pentonville model, most dramatically the Pentonville architecture, could soon be found across the world, and not just in the colonial world. Aerial photographs of the Rangoon Central Jail (now demolished) and Insein Prison clearly show the central hub, from which radiate, like spokes of a wheel, the long prison wings in which the convicts were held and observed. As the 'modern' prison was transported to the colonial world, it was transformed, or modified, partly by local circumstances, including colonial attitudes to the potential for reforming the character of 'native' peoples. But innovation had to take account of existing indigenous practices of punishment, and in many cases had to adjust substantially to them.

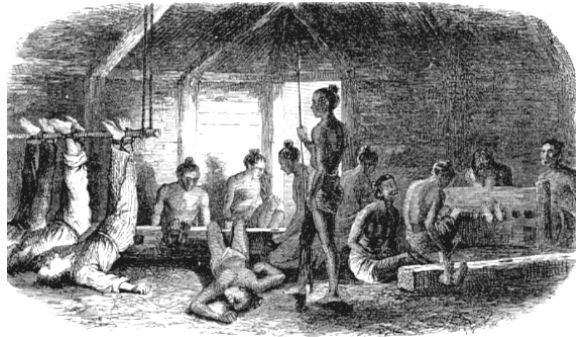
## Breaking with the past

At first sight, there appears to be the clearest contrast between the punishment regimes imposed by Burma's kings before British conquest and the prisons and practices constructed by the colonial rulers. Convicted criminals in pre-colonial Burma were most commonly punished by flogging, execution or exile; alternatively, they were tattooed, often on the face, to indicate their crime – 'murderer', 'rapist' – or had their bodies mutilated. At some point in the judicial process, individuals would be held in confinement while their alleged crimes were investigated or during trial. They could also be held in order to be tortured to secure an admission of guilt, and if guilty, were held until the sentence was carried out. Thus the pre-colonial prison was a site in which important stages of the judicial process took place; confinement in a prison was not, however, in itself one of the punishments imposed by the pre-colonial state. In sharp contrast, by far the most common punishment imposed in a modern judicial system is confinement for a stipulated period.

There was also the sharpest contrast in the physical structures of the pre-colonial and colonial prison. The former had relatively flimsy outer walls, essentially bamboo fences. The main building was a single block, housing all the inmates, who were fettered to prevent escape. The colonial prison was the familiar structure of thick, high, stone walls and double gates; the central hub and radiating wings; and within the prison compound, separate buildings and dividing barriers to ensure the separation of different categories of prisoner and the different aspects of prison life.

## Continuities

On closer reflection, the contrast between the prisons of pre-colonial Burma and the prisons and prison system constructed by the British is less sharp. Important aspects of the prison under the Burmese kings were carried over into the British period and are still present, while some of the 'innovations' introduced by the British had pre-colonial antecedents.



The interior of Let-Ma-Yoon prison at Ava

From Henry Gouger, *Narrative of a Two Years' Imprisonment in Burmah*

Both the Burmese kings and the British colonial regime made considerable use of convict labour outside the prison. The kings would put convicts to work building irrigation canals and cultivating rice fields. The colonial regime used convict labour to construct roads and, again, irrigation works. In January 1918, the 148th (Burma) Jail Labour Corps, made up of 1,523 convicts, left Rangoon for service in Mesopotamia. In the late 1920s, camp jails were established in two government-owned stone quarries in distant parts of the province. Under the Burmese kings many convicted criminals were exiled far from the capital; the colonial regime also sent large numbers into exile, the vast majority to the penal settlement in the Andaman Islands.

There was also striking continuity in the use of convicts as jailors. In pre-colonial Burma, few individuals freely sought work in prison, particularly in the lowest grades or for positions involving the most gruesome tasks. It was therefore common for convicts, indeed the most violent and degraded, to be pardoned in return for performing the duties of prison executioner, flogger, or interrogator. Clearly they were men of considerable power in the pre-colonial prison. Similarly, convict staff – long-serving and trusted inmates who were appointed night watchmen, overseers, or convict warders – were essential in the running of colonial Burma's prisons. Indeed the position of convict officers was pivotal. Since senior staff in the prison, from the superintendents down to the warders, was exclusively either European or Indian, Burmese convict officers were the only ones able to communicate easily with the mass of inmates. It was a position they could use to protect fellow inmates, but perhaps also to exploit and abuse them.

There may also have been continuity in the use of the prison to punish. As noted earlier, the prison in pre-colonial Burma was a site to hold the accused – a place for torture, interrogation, and execution – but not for the confinement of convicts who had received custodial sentences. But in practice, individuals were often held for long periods – the remainder of their natural lives – in effect as a punishment, perhaps also as a deterrent. Monks claiming supernatural powers and disturbing the social order could be confined, for the king would be reluctant

from Frank G. Carpenter, *Prisoners in Rangoon, 1910-1920*, Library of Congress



to challenge those powers by executing or exiling the alleged offender. Political opponents, dishonest officials and debtors could also find themselves put away for a long time.

There is one final continuity of particular importance for the historian seeking to understand the daily conditions and administration of Burma's pre-colonial and colonial prisons. The sources for the pre-colonial and colonial prison are strikingly different, but both tend towards what might be termed 'an exaggeration of authority'. For the pre-colonial prison, the most vivid descriptions are provided by European residents who experienced it first hand. A particularly fine example is Henry Gouger's *Narrative of a Two Years' Imprisonment in Burmah*, first published in 1860 and reprinted in 2002, an account of the author's incarceration in Ava's death prison Let ma yoon between 1824 and 1826 during the first Anglo-Burmese war on suspicion of being a British spy. In words and striking line drawings, Gouger conveys the stark horror of the place – the fierce brutality of the jailors, the pitiful condition of the inmates, the dirt and smell:

*Putrid remains of cast-away animal and vegetable stuff... the stale fumes from thousands of tobacco-pipes... the scattered ejections of the pulp and liquid from their everlasting betel, and other nameless abominations, still more disgusting... the exudation from the bodies of a crowd of never-washed convicts, encouraged by the thermometer at 100 degrees, in a den almost without ventilation – is it possible to say what it smelt like?*

In using such contemporary western descriptions, some allowance must be made for cultural positioning. But perhaps more importantly, and as a close reading of Gouger's own account makes clear, it was common for those unfortunates held in the prisons of pre-colonial Burma to avoid or lessen the most brutal conditions by paying off the jailors. Horrors surely took place, but in day-to-day existence, the brutal authority of the prison regime was often exaggerated.

A comparable exaggeration, although for quite different reasons, can be seen in the material on the colonial prison. Perhaps the most striking feature of this material is its sheer volume and obsessive detail. The annual reports on the prison administration of British Burma each run to 50 pages or more, come laden with statistical appendices, and are supplemented with reports by India-wide jail commissions, jail riot enquiries, and special investigations. The number of inmates who contracted malaria in the Rangoon Central Jail in 1908, the number flogged at Mandalay in 1920, the details of diet and death are all recorded. This detail, in particular its sheer volume, gives the impression of a colonial prison administration with immense control and authority, with extraordinary capacity and reach. But the day-to-day dynamics of colonial Burma's prisons may well have been very different. As indicated earlier, authority within the prison lay less with the European superintendents or the Indian warders, but with the Burmese convict staff. Physically, culturally, and linguistically close to the mass of inmates, they were decisive in the running of the jails, and often used their position for personal gain, but in ways that eased the harshness of the prison regime.

Both the pre-colonial and colonial prison in Burma can easily be portrayed as immensely powerful institutions – the former with a frightening capacity for horrific brutality, the latter, for harsh regimentation. In reality, that power was an exaggeration, undermined and weakened by the pivotal position occupied by the jailor staff and by the inmates themselves. <

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