Myanmar — 75 Years after Independence: A Planetary Reading

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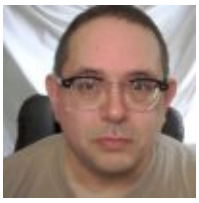

MYANMAR @ 75

What is the dominant academic narrative about Myanmar, 75 years on from its full independence? Has the tendency to obsess with politics and related developments created an incomplete, impoverished and patchy corpus of knowledge about the country? In this inaugural post marking 'Myanmar @ 75', ***Michael W. Charney*** *offers a 'planetary reading' of the history of Myanmar.*

Scholarly attention to Myanmar during its 75 years of independence has been misdirected. Taking a lead from Dipesh Chakrabarty's recent book *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021), I argue that scholars — particularly and most influentially historians and political scientists (but they are not alone) — have been fixated on particular questions because of their own political orientations and contexts, influences that have been largely shaped by contexts external to the country and the people.

Like many formerly colonised peoples, liberation from colonialism, popular Democracy and civil liberties have been important to the educated élite. Unlike many of its peer societies, Myanmar had varied experiments with Democracy (some limited, some full) and self-rule (again, some limited and some full) from 1923 with dyarchy, political parties, and even a Burmese Prime Minister after separation from India in 1937; then, under the Japanese, with very limited self-rule from 1943–45, a socialist Democracy from 1948–62, minus two years of a caretaker government (1958–60), then military dictatorship from 1962, the limited run of a transition government from 2011–21, and now another military dictatorship (from February 2021), avowedly temporary. This periodisation shapes most general and particular modern histories of the country; they follow the national political record of the country.

What is missing in these historical and political narratives is the bulk of Myanmar society, not just of the ethnic 'races' relative to the Bamars (during the height of the Civil War years about half the country and a third of the people were not under Myanmar control), but even *among* the Bamars and those living under the control of the military. As Chakrabarty argues, Humanist scholars who view people through the artificial construction of the global (and similarly, the national) have missed out on the main story affecting all of our lives, in Myanmar and outside, as things in planetary terms; we have

focused only on what shapes Burmese (the broader, inclusive population of the country) as people(s), as a nation, as a political body of citizens deprived or limited in their universal rights, and even as commercial consumers and producers in the economy.

But we have pushed off to a secondary place the main drivers of Burmese life, those in planetary terms — the biological consumers and producers, the demographic expansion and mortality. We have even pushed into the shadows social structural violence (not those conducted by the military, and not just those directed at ethnic groups, both of which have received sustained, voluminous, even exclusive, attention) in the form of race. Yes, the attack on the Rohingyas in 2017 received global scholarly attention, but the same cannot be said about most such earlier episodes; likewise, there has been some historical attention to the attacks on Indians in the 1930s and in 1942, but less so on the more enduring, daily phenomenon of racial xenophobia.

There has been no hesitation to including in our histories and political stories of the country the numerous studies of how the Burmese have failed to obtain lasting Democracy or how they became predominantly Buddhist, but almost no history will tell you how the expanding lifespan of the Burmese — in 1950 at about 33.6 years, currently about 68 years — has shaped life, the availability of food and soil pressures throughout the country, or what role medical advances have played in this development. Various UN agencies, the Ministry of Health, NGOs, and medical historians might have particular accounts of these developments, but they do not shape the general historical narratives.

The disciplines of History and Political Science are now changing, and in the last few years, historians and political scientists have paid much more attention to groups and topics that have been left out of ‘state’ histories for so long. But what happens when we look back at the last 75 years and consider what the main stories might have been, had we not let ourselves be carried away by politics alone? I will identify several of what I see as the main themes of a modern Myanmar history, but not exclusively so. Many of these cannot be isolated to the period beginning from 1948 or even from 1962, but are in fact of longer duration and enduring effect. Moreover, if Niall Ferguson can identify the six ‘Apps’ that made the West work well, we might see the below as indicative of a series of missing ‘Apps’ that Myanmar might now invent.

Myanmar: A Planetary Reading

First, the geological impact of human life in Myanmar is a continuing story that has accelerated and contributed in positive, but also negative, ways and is a hugely important but an often neglected part of the country’s history. If we look at the pre-colonial period, the existence of a central dry zone necessitated a growing system of irrigation to make possible growing rice, mining (of silver and other metals and rubies), building dams, dredging rivers, culling (teak) forests, and expanding the range of mines and oil rigs; post-Independence in 1948, hydro-electric projects, extraction of oil and natural gas, and the periodically expanding size of the Yangon, Mandalay, and now Naypyitaw, metropolises

has been a continuous story of the geological reconfiguration of the country's physical surface. This, of all the neglected parts of the planetary history of Myanmar, will have the most serious consequences for Myanmar in the future.

Second, in planetary terms, Myanmar has seen (over several thousand years) the in-and-out movements of different groups of Homo Sapiens which continues even today. Some of this movement was by inclusive force (in the pre-colonial period) or by invitation and contract (in the colonial period) and, increasingly in the post-1948 period, by resistance. The main story with regards to population is the exchange of DNA, demonstrably overlapping and not limited by the country's political borders; just as demonstrable is the 'extraordinarily diverse' heterogeneity of the group that call themselves 'Bamars'.

The planetary story of Myanmar's human diversity told in scientific literature has not found an easy entry-point into discourses shaped around imagined concepts of race, some of it inherited from the pre-colonial Myanmar court but much of it built on the foundation of the political and cultural construction of 'race', populated and sustained with definition and discrimination by the British. Chinese and Indians were not brought into the country on indigenous terms but on British ones, and became the first targets of anger that should have been directed at the colonial authorities — hence the nationalist hostility to inter-racial marriages in the 1920s, the outbreaks of violence against Indians and Chinese in the 1930s, against Indians in 1942, the expelling of Anglo-Indians and Anglo-Burmese in the 1950s (under U Nu), the anti-Chinese policies of the 1960s (under Ne Win), the citizenship laws of 1982, and the various attacks on the Rohingya in 1979, 1991, 2012, and 2017. These are not separate episodes, nor just stories of the occasional political instrumentalisation of race that should occupy a paragraph here and there, but represent a larger and deeper narrative of Myanmar as a node at the centre of shifting human populations whose mobility the state (or the military) has tried to obstruct.

Third, daily structural violence, the kind measured and studied by social scientists, has been one of the main themes that has pervaded Myanmar history from the pre-colonial period to the present. The experience of the transition Government revealed that business cronies exercised just as much influence as under the military, and actually sustained the general continuity of influence of the same group. The political systems that have maintained this persistent élite's near monopolisation of resources and disinterest in the welfare of the people is of course part of the global sphere of human activity. But the material impact of this neglect, in terms of slow pace of improving health and mortality, limited caloric intake and undernourishment, and, again, limited mobility, lies within the planetary sphere. Instead, anti-colonial nationalists blamed foreigners (the British and Asian immigrant minorities), the 1950s Burmese Democracy blamed Anglo-Burmans, the military blamed traders and transitioning colonial era-élites, and many others would blame the military — all themes well represented in global history terms. Nevertheless, regardless of what group they represented, everyone with power has kept most Burmese, Bamar or not, poor.

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Ironically, the three neglected themes of Myanmar's planetary history are those which continue to exercise the greatest impact on its life today, and will do so in the future. A better understanding of their actual centrality in Myanmar's historical experience, if not its historical understanding, will be the main key to saving the country from its chronic problems it still faces 75 years after it gained full independence.

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The views expressed here are those of the author and not of the 'South Asia @ LSE' blog, the LSE South Asia Centre or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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