

SEMINAR SUMMARY

Politics and Press Censorship in British Burma: The case of the *Moulmein Chronicle*

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Censorship in Burma has become a topic of considerable interest in recent years. Academic literature has also focused on the press as a tool of propaganda under British imperialism. Yet, precious little has been done on the history of censorship and other forms of press control under the British colonial administration in Burma. Burma's first newspaper, the *Maulmain Chronicle*, was also Burma's first casualty to the colonial press laws. Its story shows that in the middle of the 19th century, colonial officials manipulated the press laws for political or personal ends, and that the English press served less as a tool of propaganda than a means for private merchants to manipulate and antagonize the administration.

The laws controlling the press in India were patterned on the press laws in England. Formed in the crucible of radical politics and spurred on by widespread libel in the 18th and early 19th century press, these laws protected public officials from scurrilous personal attacks. This took on added significance in the colonies, where the appearance of benevolent moral superiority was seen as vital to preserving an unquestioned English rule. The Indian press laws changed periodically to reflect the views of the current governor-general. Under Warren Hastings and Lord Wellesley, offending editors were imprisoned or deported. The legal provision for outright censorship first appeared in 1795, but was abolished under Lord Hastings in 1818 when new rules were implemented. These rules were cast so broadly, however, that if followed to the letter, little freedom remained. Further restrictions appeared under the administration of John Adam in the form of mandatory licensing for all publishers. When in Sir Charles Metcalfe lifted this licensing requirement in 1835, a boom in newspaper publishing ensued.

The newspaper boom spread to Burma in 1837, when A.E. Blundell, then Commissioner of the Tenasserim Provinces, established a weekly paper, the *Maulmain Chronicle*, with his own funds. Reproved by the Government of Bengal for this venture, he transferred ownership of the paper to the local education committee after recouping his losses.¹ As editor, Blundell engaged the services of George Hough, a former missionary printer and head of the government Free School in Moulmein.² Appearing on April 15, 1837, the first issue set out its objectives: "This paper will be devoted to information connected with these provinces and surrounding countries, strictly avoiding all political and controversial subjects."³

¹ P. E. Jamieson, and B. O. Binns, *Gazetteer for Amherst District* (Rangoon: Burma -- Supt., Govt. Printing and Stationery, 1935): 102

² Phinney, Frank Dennison, *The American Baptist Mission Press, Rangoon, Burma; Historical Descriptive* (Rangoon: The American Baptist Mission Press, [1917?]): 11

³ *The Maulmain Chronicle* 1:1 (April 15, 1837): 1

But politics and controversy are a newspaper's lifeblood. Blundell did not silence his critics in Bengal by relinquishing his ownership of the *Chronicle*. The paper soon became a mouthpiece for Moulmein's motley merchant community, on whom the Commissioner depended for revenue. Many of the merchants, angered by King Tharrawaddy's resistance to terms set out in the treaty of Yandabo, clamoured for renewed war with the Burmese empire. Some complained of abuses by officials in the Burmese territories. Blundell's conciliatory approach to the merchants was seen to strain Anglo-Burmese relations, prompting Lord Ellenborough's appraisal of Blundell as, "a commissioner in the hands of merchants and their press."⁴

Blundell had gone to Moulmein from Prince of Wales Island, where he had absorbed the freewheeling, improvisational administrative style of the Straits. To impose more order in Tenasserim, Bengal replaced Blundell with a series of Commissioners more attuned to the politics of the subcontinent. The second of these, Henry Durand, had served as Lord Ellenborough's private secretary. Durand found Moulmein "a very troublesome place, the European part of the community," he complained, "incites the mixed population to discontent whenever they have the opportunity."⁵ He set about uncovering corrupt practices by merchants, cracking down on local Europeans in an effort to ease tensions with the neighbouring Burmese. His heavy-handed approach alienated the English-speaking residents, including his own subordinates. The burden of complaints against him led to his removal from the post in 1846.⁶

One of these complaints involved the editor of the *Maulmain Chronicle*, Emanuel Abreu. Durand's housecleaning policy targeted Abreu for reasons that remain unclear. Formerly an accountant in the Paymaster General's office, Abreu had been sacked due to charges of misconduct that were never proven.⁷ When Durand's assistant, Maj. W.C. McLeod, tried to hire Abreu and another man who was under criminal investigation, Durand relieved McLeod of his job.⁸ Perhaps Abreu retaliated in the pages of the *Chronicle*.⁹ Whatever the case, in the summer of 1846, Durand arrested Abreu, fined him Rs. 3,000, and sentenced him to two years in prison for violating articles 7 and 8 of the 1835 Press Act.¹⁰ These clauses required all newspapers to print the name of their owner, publisher, and printer in every issue. Abreu neglected to include this information in two issues of the *Chronicle*, and several weeks later, he was arrested. He claimed in his defence that it had been an oversight, partly due to the fact that he had lost his accustomed printer.¹¹ On the force of complaints by Abreu, McLeod, and others, the Bengal government recalled Durand from his post. The Deputy governor wrote, "Captain Durand evidently considers himself as placed in a position independent of the authority of the Bengal Government."¹²

The case of the *Maulmain Chronicle* demonstrates how easily the colonial press laws could be used for personal or political ends. While direct censorship was not legal at that time, the state retained broad powers of legal control that opened the door for abuses. This case also highlights the conflicted relationship between the colonial state and the

⁴ Ellenborough to Fitzgerald, 17 April 1843, quoted in Oliver Pollak, *Empires in Collision: Anglo-Burmese Relations in the Mid-19th Century* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979): 47

⁵ Quoted in Pollack, *Empires in Collision*, 49

⁶ F.J. Halliday to H.M. Durand, 16 Dec. 1846, in *Bengal Judicial Consultations*, 142/57 no. 173

⁷ G.L. Pendergrast, Copy of letter dated 13 May 1843 to Lt. R.W.H. Leycester, in *Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultations*, 2 Sept. 1846, no. 164.; H.M. Durand, Copy of letter dated 19 August 1846 to Maj. W.C. McLeod, *Bengal Criminal Judicial Consultations*, 2 Sept. 1846, no. 159

⁸ Durand to McLeod, 15 August 1846, in *Bengal Judicial Consultations*, 142/57 no. 159

⁹ The last two years of the *Chronicle* are not included in the British Library's collection.

¹⁰ E. Abreu, "Summary of Court Proceedings," *Bengal Judicial Consultations*, 142/57 no. 168

¹¹ T.G.E.G. Kenney to E. Abreu, 7 Aug. 1846, in *Bengal Judicial Consultations* 142/54, no. 155

¹² J.H. Maddock, "Minute by the Hon'ble the Deputy Governor of Bengal," 3 October 1846,

press at the dawn of newspaper publishing in Burma. Far from acting as an organ of colonial propaganda, the *Maulmain Chronicle* reflected the views of the local English-speaking community, and openly criticized officials and official policy. Although the *Chronicle* ceased publication at the time of Abreu's arrest, other papers – in English, Burmese, and a number of minority languages – continued to appear throughout the colonial period. These must all be considered in order to complete the picture of relations between newspapers and the colonial state in Burma.