

# School, State and Sangha in Burma

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**ABSTRACT** *This article explores by means of an historical descriptive analysis of schooling in Burma the merits of historical descriptive analysis in comparative education. It demonstrates how control over schooling is likely to relate to state legitimacy. Prior to the nineteenth century, the supervision of teaching in Burma was undertaken not by the state but rather by the monasteries of the Theravada Buddhist order, the Sangha. The monastic schools were widespread and they served as an important legitimising device for both the Sangha and the Buddhist state, which were engaged in a competitive partnership. During the nineteenth century, the British colonial administration demolished the pre-existing socio-political structures that assured the Sangha its authority, and permitted alternative forms of public instruction. The teaching role of the Sangha was diminished, however not destroyed, and it continuously resisted the British intrusion. Following independence, rather than re-invest authority over schooling in the Sangha, the new state instead expanded its mandate over public instruction as a means to inculcate the 'national idea'. In the present day, schooling is subject to the dictates of an autocratic military regime, and the Sangha has been forced into a subordinate role in support of nationalist objectives, in contrast to its earlier powerful part in structural opposition to the state.*

Over twenty years ago Lawrence Stenhouse proposed that comparative education should be located 'within the co-ordinates of the living rather than the co-ordinates of theory'; concerned less with making predictions than with making observations that may lead to some insight into schooling (Stenhouse, 1979, p. 5). Patricia Broadfoot has similarly expressed the need for comparative education to be seen primarily as a cultural, rather than scientific, project (Broadfoot, 2000, p. 368). More specifically, Andreas Kazamias has stressed the importance of the historical element in comparative research, lest it be 'truncated, dehumanised and perhaps de-intellectualised' (Kazamias, 2001, p. 446).

Challenged by these concerns, this article offers some insight on schooling in Burma by considering its historic role as a device for social and political legitimacy. It is part of a larger study that arose out of a number of years' work with people from Burma, which permitted many interesting and varied conversations about schooling and education. Something that became apparent from these discussions was the extent to which state schooling in Burma has permeated and coloured the social fabric—within a little over a hundred years it has become almost universally accepted as the means by which one obtains 'an education'. While the speed with which state schooling has become 'normal' in Burma is not unusual in comparison with other countries, what is particularly interesting about it is the manner in which it succeeded in displacing—although not eliminating—a widespread, centuries-old highly influential predecessor: the schooling managed by the Buddhist monastic order, the *Sangha*.

The control of schooling is a key problem for comparative education because it speaks not only to the goals of schooling but also the legitimacy that may be derived from its exercise

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(Archer, 1984, p. 1; Kandel, 1955, p. 21). So far as this concern pertains to Burma specifically, the proposition of this paper is that historically while the control over schooling lay in the monasteries, the state and Sangha alike obtained legitimacy through the public instruction proffered by the monks. However, as state schooling assumed its position of pre-eminence, the role of the Sangha was steadily subordinated and eventually brought entirely under the all-enveloping aegis of the state. In the current period, the consequence is a highly centralised and autocratic state schooling structure with only a marginal role demarcated for the Sangha. Among the conclusions of this study are some tentative suggestions on where the future for schooling in Burma may lie. However, the point of this article is not prescriptive—rather, its modest aim is to explain a little of how things in Burma came to be as they are. To do this necessitates a few preliminary words in defence of the humanist tradition in comparative education.

In his recent review of comparative education studies since the 1960s, Kazamias outlines how the humanist tradition so important to early studies was impoverished by a 'scientific' generation of scholars (Kazamias, 2001). Humanist comparative education began to suffer attacks on the grounds that it was insufficiently analytical, and was treated by some authors as if occupying a middle rung on an imagined ladder of evolutionary scholarship. It was deemed an earlier 'phase' or 'stage' of comparative education, useful for its day, but inevitably something that would be superceded, or at least improved via more empirical methods (e.g. Noah & Eckstein, 1969). Concomitantly, 'real scholarship' was equated with 'scientific' work; research not incorporating 'impartial' methods for verification was devalued as a form of comparative education 'tourism' (Eckstein, 1970). It did not allow the possibility for other conceptual frames aside from 'science', or at least, the possibility that they might be considered its equal.

Advocates of the scientific approach to comparative education denied a role for the subjective, claiming to use 'objective' frames for analysis, but as Stenhouse has observed, comparative education is not about seeking 'general laws' (Stenhouse, 1979, p. 5): it does not consist of absolute truths; rather, located as it is among the living, it necessarily involves a degree of the subjective, the moral, and even the ideal. Isaac Kandel, among others, has been criticised by subsequent authors for holding to a kind of meliorism that prevented dispassionate and distanced analyses (e.g. Bereday, 1966, p. 148; Kazamias & Schwartz, 1977, p. 158). Kandel's stark portrayals of different coloured totalitarianisms on the one hand and democracy on the other may appear to the contemporary reader an antiquated and simplistic view of the world, but his idealism is something that deserves appreciation, not condemnation. Totalitarianism *is* offensive: no ethical grounds exist for its justification. Anybody engaged in comparative education would be a hypocrite to suggest otherwise, as it would be to deny the right to free enquiry that is the essence of genuine academic research, and is that which so offends autocrats. The shame is not in idealism, but in practitioners of 'social science' who in the name of rationalism deny that their research begins with values.

Happily, the neglect of the humanist tradition, and in particular, its historical element, has been increasingly perceived in recent years and calls for its revitalisation made in order to correct this imbalance (e.g. Kazamias, 2001; Watson, 1998). For Kazamias (2001) this task demands the 're-invention' of historical comparative studies through the use of conceptual structures for their analysis. This has been an ongoing concern of Kazamias, who has for some years pointed out that 'a historical approach to the comparative study of education [does] not necessarily preclude conceptualization, generalization, regularities or indeed quantification' (Kazamias & Schwartz, 1977, p. 165). Kazamias and Karl Schwartz have particularly felt the inadequacies of antecedent historical investigations, referring to case studies by Kandel as 'no more than parallel and non-comparative historical descriptions'

(Kazamias & Schwartz, 1977, p. 158); although Kandel himself understood the limitations of his work, when he observed that

Descriptive analyses of national systems of education are valuable, provided that they are accurate and written with a knowledge of and insight into the forces that give them meaning, and they provide the materials for comparative education without themselves being entitled to be called by that name. (Kandel, 1955, pp. 8–9)

For its part, this study seeks to demonstrate the value in descriptive work, while at the same time being influenced by the conceptual structures of critical theorists and sociologists, discourse analysts and others looking at schooling as a means to social control and the relationship between power and ‘knowledge’. (See, for example, Althusser, 1971; Apple, 1979, 1982; Archer, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Foucault, 1977; Giroux, 1981; Young, 1971.) Studies of this type have sometimes been criticised, with good reason, as inadequately accounting for the multiplicity of responses that students and communities have to state schooling, and treating learners as passive recipients of learning (e.g. Keyes, 1991b, pp. 2–3). Many also tend to offer simplistic class-based analyses that lack broad applicability. These works are pertinent, but inevitably subject to limitations.

The contents of this paper are simply ordered chronologically, beginning with the pre-colonial Theravada Buddhist states, then the British colonial period, the period since independence, and finally, the present day, which exhibits characteristics of all the preceding periods. In each case the discussion is oriented towards the locus of control over education and its shift from the Sangha to the state. However there are numerous other points for comparison: with other Theravada Buddhist polities, with schooling by religious institutions of non-Theravada Buddhist polities, with state and religious schooling in Burma in other former British colonial territories or non-British territories, and with schooling in other post-colonial independent states in Asia.

Lastly, before proceeding it is necessary to make some observations on terminology. Any writer on Burma inevitably faces controversy over the use of ‘Burma’ versus ‘Myanmar’, the latter being the name adopted by the military government that took control of the country in 1988, the former preferred by those opposing the regime. In this study, with the exception of the last part, the older name is used simply because it was the conventional and official Anglicisation during most of the period under consideration. It is not used with contemporary political reference. The term ‘Burman’ is used in this paper to refer to the ethnic nationality of that name. ‘Burmese’ refers to all groups cohabiting the region delimited as ‘Burma’, including non-indigenous inhabitants who settled under the colonial state and were recognised as subject to its authority in the post-independence period. ‘Burmese’ is also used when referring to the Burman language.

### **Buddhist Sangha, Buddhist State**

‘Burma’, like other Southeast Asian states, began as a fiction, a product of European demarcation. Today it shares borders with China, Bangladesh, India and Thailand, and is home to some 52 millions, yet before nineteenth century British colonial expansion, like other Southeast Asian polities there were no fixed boundaries encompassing the whole region as a single nation or kingdom. For centuries people had moved along rivers from the mountains of Central and Eastern Asia into its fertile lowlands. Numerous diverse groups settled in and around the extensive Irrawaddy river basin and established competitive kingdoms. Others developed more discrete low-technology communities.

The Buddhist lowland rulers competed for scarce human resources and maintained domineering albeit ostensibly paternalistic relationships over their subjects based on principles of kingship founded upon Buddhist theology and cosmology that mandated Sangha participation in state affairs. The two main obligations of a king were to provide for both the security and welfare of the people, and to see to their moral uplift (Lieberman, 1984, p. 65). Notwithstanding, rulers in Burma have traditionally been classed—similar to the Marxist interpretation of the state—among the ‘five traditional enemies’ from which protective verses are recited to this day. By contrast, the Sangha has been historically perceived as an essentially benevolent institution to which people have had recourse, particularly in times of hardship. Founded over 2500 years ago by Gautama Buddha to practise and propagate his teachings, in Burma its contemporary form consists primarily of some hundreds of thousands of monks and novices, plus a much smaller number of nuns. For centuries the Sangha has existed as an extensive but loose alliance of monasteries and communities spread across the lowlands. In the past it was the highest depository of learning, and then as now it had an obligation to demonstrate the ‘miracle of instruction’ to the lay people (Kevatta Sutta, DN11) [1]. Hence, the locus of educational control came to rest in the monasteries.

Schooling was an integral part of the relationship between state and Sangha, which was both co-operative and competitive. Pre-colonial states did not directly manage schooling, but rulers did have a keen interest in its development, given its bearing on their authority, and the extent it could assist them to obtain greater control over their subjects (Mendelson, 1975). Lowland rulers sought to attract and benefit from the presence of monks via charity and the construction of religious edifices. In exchange, the Sangha fulfilled its vital religious and educational functions. The state’s support of the Sangha provided the latter with material assistance and social influence, while the Sangha’s cooperation with the state gave it an ideological foundation that ensured continued stability and authority (Mendelson, 1975). But the two were subject to a structural contradiction (Aung-Thwin, 1985). Both were competing for the same limited resources: during times of excessive hardship and poor administration the ranks of the Sangha would swell, severely affecting a ruler’s ability to prosecute his objectives; at such times, government departments established to counterbalance the power of the Sangha were largely ineffectual (Adas, 1992; Lieberman, 1984). The decentralised nature of the institution, the monopoly it held over religious ritual, the regular turnover of its personnel and technological limits on rulers’ administrative capacities were all significant obstacles to effective control of the Sangha by the state. Hence, the two offset one another in an uneasy competitive partnership.

While all lowland Theravada Buddhist states are believed to have had schools operating through the monasteries, among those of the Irrawaddy river basin the Burman-managed schooling is the best documented. Burman monastic schooling may have begun around the eleventh century of the Christian Era, though evidence suggests that its origins lay with a Mon-dominated kingdom of some centuries earlier (Kaung, 1963, pp. 12–13). In either case, its development in the Irrawaddy basin preceded that of Christian public instruction in Europe by many centuries. For the Burmans, monasteries were synonymous with public instruction. In Burmese, the word for ‘school’ and ‘monastery’ is identical; only contemporary adjectival prefixes can distinguish the two. The word for ‘education’ is also a product of the monasteries, derived from a Pali word with connections to learning, wisdom and knowledge.

Monastic teaching was generally rural-based, decentralised and rigid, open to pupils irrespective of class or background, but not gender, as the monks’ religious code prevented them from teaching female students above a young age. However, some evidence exists of another parallel, albeit much smaller group of schools, run by educated lay-people for female

pupils (Kaung, 1963). The monastic schools also served to 'civilise' non-Buddhist groups, extending into the peripheral territories as a means to assimilate people into the lowland polities. An early colonial administrator travelling in the western Assam Hills, for instance, wrote of having met with

people who wear Burmese dress, speak Burmese, and send their boys to the Monastery and their girls to the Lay School, bathe daily in the river and to all appearance are Burmans. Yet some of them admitted to me that two or three generations earlier their ancestors had been naked unwashed Nagas living in the mountains to the west and north... the reader will have noticed that the civilising influence was the Monastery school. (in: Kaung, 1963, p. 93)

Technically, education was free, but as the Sangha relied predominantly upon local communities for its needs, it was a voluntary village-based collective undertaking. Wealthy donors also funded the construction and maintenance of schools (Aung-Thwin, 1985, p. 175). The monks themselves were generally from the same background as the community in which they were situated (Kaung, 1963, p. 20; Keyes, 1991a, p. 93). Most pupils entered the monasteries around their eighth birthday, and were subject to their strict moral code for a number of years. Like religious educators elsewhere, the Buddhist monks were harsh disciplinarians: when not studying boys were occupied mainly with domestic chores.

Vocational training was unnecessary for a society of largely self-sufficient agriculturalists whose skills were learnt on farms and in workshops. The main point of monastic schooling was to build moral character (Kaung, 1963). For the majority of students, emphasis was given to the rote learning of basic literacy and grammar in Burmese and Pali, and critical aspects of Buddhist doctrine. Sons of rulers—and others demonstrating academic competency—were given more extensive training, including astronomy, arithmetic and Burmese medicine (Lu Pe Win, 1931, p. 9). Few families would have missed the opportunity to send their boys to the monasteries. The practical effect of this was that virtually every Burman Buddhist male received adequate schooling to meet his day-to-day spiritual, social and cultural needs (Kaung, 1950, p. 1; Thein Lwin, 1996, pp. 7–8).

Kings showed their concern for monastic learning by ordering detailed and regular censuses that revealed an impressive literacy rate among their subjects. This was not missed by the first European visitors and later, colonisers [Sangermano, 1995 (1893), p. 180]. An early Venetian traveller observed that

It is a kingdom governed by the pen, for not a single person can go from one village into another without a paper or writing, whereby the government is made most easy (in: Lieberman, 1984, p. 104)

J. S. Furnivall, the foremost colonial-era historian and one-time administrator, suggested that of all the pre-colonial schools in Southeast Asia, Burma's were pre-eminent (Furnivall, 1943, p. 13).

Evidently, both the state and the Sangha benefited from monastic schooling. It played a vital role in establishing, enhancing and preserving the authority of both the state and the Sangha. It was an explicit link between the people and their religion, and by extension, their state. It transmitted standardised cultural and intellectual matter across all sectors of society. It instilled a valuable sense of discipline that allowed rulers to maintain control over their subjects and reinforced a respect for tradition and hierarchy. It also mandated community participation and support, and was highly valued: proverbially, education became 'the gold pot that cannot be stolen'.

The British state took administrative control of a society already equipped with a keen sense of 'education', but most of its agents dismissed monastic schooling—like indigenous

schooling encountered by European colonialists elsewhere—as having little inherently ‘true’ educational value, a sentiment echoed by many subsequent writers (e.g. Donnison, 1970, pp. 44, 72; Harvey, 1946, pp. 45–46; Scott, 1921, p. 165). While its personnel used their own criteria to measure the value of monastic schooling and to justify the changes that they made, they appear to have underestimated its social significance, and particularly the role that it played in legitimising the state. Pursuing opportunities for economic advantage and seeking alternative bases upon which to establish their authority, the British did not adequately account for the important social and political functions of the monastic schools, and found their subsequent policies frustrated as a consequence.

### **Buddhist Sangha, British State**

The absorption of ‘Burma’ into the British Empire occurred in three phases. The coastal regions of Tavoy and Arakan were, after a two-year war, annexed in 1826, and lower Burma in 1852. These were consolidated under one administration in 1862. It was not until the third war of 1885–6 that the heartland and throne of the Burman kingdom, along with the vast plateau to the east and mountains to the north and west populated by other groups, were decreed a province of India.

While the British crown was motivated by profit, and security for India, which was its most valuable ‘possession’, efficient achievement of these ends necessitated that it obtain some measure of legitimacy for its control (Smith, 1999, p. 40). Yet the basis for British rule during the first half of the nineteenth century was ambiguous. The territory was won by conquest, but the British lacked the politico-religious grounds to justify expansion that had been at the disposal of earlier Buddhist empire-builders. Instead secular, material justifications were used: the establishment of ‘law and order’, the building of roads and the development of ‘modern’ education. ‘Police’, ‘roads’ and ‘education’ were all shaped to form a new version of truth, a new mundane, rather than cosmological, universe (Day & Reynolds, 2000, pp. 20–22). But the erosion of the former state inevitably had adverse effects on the authority of the Sangha, and not least, the role of the monastic schools.

Although the British authorities were initially indifferent to schooling in their new acquisition, their interest expanded in increments. In 1826–7 they acquiesced to American Baptist missionaries’ requests to establish the first non-monastic schools. In exchange, the missionaries provided valuable intelligence and advice (Kaung, 1963, p. 59). A degree of success encouraged the local chief administrator to secure funds for further expansion. In keeping with Macaulay’s *Minute* of 1835, English-language instruction was emphasised. During 1835–44 three Anglo-vernacular schools opened in Tavoy, with a bi-lingual, English-centred curriculum (Furnivall, 1938, pp. 80–81).

The embryo British administration, then, affected the monastic schools first, by causing the dissipation and eventual demise of the social structure that the Sangha had both relied upon and helped secure, and secondly, by offering an unprecedented alternative model of ‘education’. The effect of the first seems to have outweighed that of the latter: Furnivall remarks that although ‘the people acquiesced perforce in the desertion of the monasteries and the degradation of their own system of education’ they were relatively uninterested in the new schools (Furnivall, 1938, pp. 81–82). While the British state undermined the important role that the Sangha had obtained through public instruction, it struggled to obtain the lost legitimacy for its own purposes. Inadvertently, it triggered problems for both itself and the monks.

By the 1860s the state was openly promoting the practical advantages for students of its schools over those in the monasteries. In 1866 Burma’s first educational bureaucracy, the

Department of Public Instruction, was established (Than Oo, 1999b, pp. 27–28). It oversaw the introduction of ‘grants-in-aid’ to schools in lower Burma, whereby those meeting certain criteria could apply for financial assistance from the government: as in India proper, the grant scheme was the preferred means for expansion of mass Western-style education by the British. Although monastic schools were eligible for grant-in-aid monies, few sought them. Meanwhile, graduates from Anglo-vernacular schools were soon entering government service, to the exclusion of traditional leaders (Furnivall, 1943, p. 27). Burmans desirous of social advantage abandoned the monastic schools in favour of the alternative. Once the bastion of learning and prestige, the monasteries rapidly became a poor man’s preserve. Graduating from one of the élite Anglo-vernacular schools meant prospects for authority and wealth; completing studies at a monastery equipped one for no more than a life on the farm. The decline in student numbers in the monasteries resulted in higher levels of illiteracy. The 1872 Census Report held that among males in the British administered area the total literacy rate had dropped to 32 %, whereas even the older adult male population of the jails had a literacy rate of 60 %. Furnivall wryly remarked that it was unlikely that the ‘criminal element’ would have had a higher level of literacy than the average for the population educated in pre-colonial times, suggesting that the drop in literacy was even higher than supposed (1943, p. 27). While figures such as these are muddled by the lack of durable and consistent criteria for measuring literacy, evidently basic schooling in this period was undergoing a crisis in parallel with the expanding colonial state.

In spite of the damage it had inflicted upon the monastic schools, the early British administration was cautious in its dealings with the Sangha and preferred attempts to influence it rather than to compete. Unfortunately, these efforts led to confusion and resentment on both sides born of mixed messages, tangled objectives and contradictory priorities. Hopes were that education could be expanded cheaply and conveniently on the back of the monasteries. By 1866 the state was training ‘circuit teachers’ to visit monastic schools and offer additional subjects such as geography, but few monasteries demonstrated interest (Kaung, 1963, pp. 79–81). Not surprisingly the monks viewed with suspicion any attempts by the state to become involved in their affairs. This led to misunderstandings where British administrators accused them of obstinacy, and one Director of Public Prosecution dismissed them as ‘ignorant’ and ‘bigoted’ (Furnivall, 1943, p. 55). Such reactions were born of a fundamental miscommunication between the British state and Buddhist Sangha. Although the monks’ objections were in part based on religious doctrines that were incompatible with secular teachings, for the most part their resistance was due to being systematically disenfranchised by the colonial state through its demolition of the pre-existing Buddhist political order. At its most basic the conflict came down to the problem of authority and control of both school and society.

In this regard, the contrasting experience of Thailand (Siam) in establishing state schools is informative. Historically, the management of schooling there was likewise basically a prerogative of the Theravada Buddhist monastic schools (Wyatt, 1969, pp. 6–23, 84). In 1880 an education department was founded under royal administration, which was upgraded to a ministry in 1889. However, popular demand for state-managed teaching remained low. Most people continued to subscribe to the monastic schools which, unlike in Burma, had not suffered a decline in authority, having not been subjected to the superintendence of a non-Buddhist power. Nonetheless, the Thai state desired to centralise schooling as much as practically feasible. Being a Buddhist kingdom with an historic mandate, it met little resistance from the Sangha, compared to its counterparts in neighbouring territories, where any initiatives emanating from non-Buddhist colonial officials—irrespective of details—were seen as unconditionally illegitimate (Wyatt, 1969, pp. 130, 156–157). The Thai state,

importantly, was also using Thai language as the medium of instruction, in contrast to the diminished role of Burmese under the British (Keyes, 1991b, p. 6; Lu Pe Win, 1931, p. 2). By the 1930s the role of the monastic schools in Thailand had been successfully subsumed by the state, yet in collusion rather than competition with the Sangha (Keyes, 1991a, pp. 96–97).

On the other hand, British policy towards the monastic schools in Burma showed greater inclination towards co-operation than was the case in Sri Lanka (Ceylon). There the Christian mission schools established a powerful presence from early in the nineteenth century, and the colonial administrative response was to oppose any attempts to modernise or expand monastic schooling, out of fear that the mission schools' role would be jeopardised (Jayasuriya, c.1977). The government legislated to deny grant-in-aid funds to new schools within a certain distance of older schools—initially suggested as five miles, later two miles, finally a quarter of a mile. As in most populous areas Christian schools had already been established since the first part of that century, Buddhist schools were stymied and the majority of graduates into the public service continued to be products of the Christian schools. After independence this situation was deliberately reversed, with nationalisation of denominational schools in 1961 and Buddhist monks serving as advisors to the independent state (Horowitz, 1980, pp. 35, 43; Jayaweera, 1968).

The difficulties encountered by the British educational administrators in Burma were also due in part to their confusing Burma with India proper. The colonial state eroded the prior structure of administration and authority of which the schools had been a part, and imposed ill-fitting alternatives based on Indian prototypes (Moscotti, 1974, pp. 17–18). At the time of the British take-over of India there had been no comprehensive egalitarian schooling managed by a single agency throughout a greater part of the territory, as had existed in Burma (Basu, 1982, p. 1). In India, access to schooling—in contrast to the relatively open and affordable monasteries of Theravada Buddhist polities—was regionally determined by social status, as defined by caste, wealth, political power, profession and gender (Basu, 1982, p. 29; Saiyidain *et al*, 1952, p. 12). Throughout most of India the British were offering schooling to people for whom it was an opportunity for social advancement without cost. In Burma, by contrast, this process was taking place at the expense of the monastic schools, and hence the result was a far greater amount of turmoil. To the extent that the new schools were available to previously unschooled people, the effect was also highly provocative, as these were predominantly non-Burman non-Buddhist peoples who had either been excluded or remained voluntarily outside of the earlier schools (Furnivall, 1943, p. 27). These groups—most notably the Karen—soon forged pan-nationalist identities and alliances, often through Christian organisations, in radical opposition to the majority Burman population (Cheesman, 2002b). 'Education' of an altogether different variety became an integral part in this new minority nationalist activism. The cumulative effect was the exacerbation of conflict between the British regime and the Burman Buddhist majority, which felt its fortunes waning both politically and religiously.

In spite of the damage they had sustained, even after the exile of the last Burman king to India in 1886 monastic schools continued to obstruct the implementation of a broad secular curriculum by the state. By then a roughly demarcated 'Burma' encompassed the entire Irrawaddy basin, while suzerainty was also established over the mountainous regions populated by non-Burman groups. In 1890 the Education Department began operations across the whole territory, which demanded a far greater administrative effort. However British-controlled education expanded much more slowly in the Burman heartland of the north than it had in the south: well into the twentieth century monastic schooling remained 'the backbone of national instruction throughout all the rural districts' there (Scott, 1921,



p. 167). The 1891 Census Report identified the willingness of some monks to adopt new educational techniques, implying preparedness on the part of the authorities to expand primary schooling through the monasteries, but the plans never reached fruition (Jardine, 1995, p. xvii).

Generally perceiving the monks to be antiquated and recalcitrant, out of line with colonial objectives, the British adopted an increasingly uncompromising attitude towards monastic schools, thereby contributing to the Sangha's growing role in the burgeoning nationalist movement. In 1906 the Director of Public Instruction declared that 'future education was to place first the welfare of the State, and next the welfare of the child, while religion as an element in education was an unnecessary accident' (Furnivall, 1943, p. 55). The number of vernacular state schools was expanded rapidly in an effort to overwhelm the monastic schools. By 1930 government-managed schools and those that were grant-aided numbered about six thousand, but a further seventeen thousand or more were known to be entirely outside state control, virtually all located in monasteries (Kaung, 1930, p. 59). After the British parliament announced plans for provincial self-government in India in 1917, evolving majority nationalist organisations found the disgruntled Sangha a willing ally. Some, such as the prominent Young Mens' Buddhist Association, began by registering as bodies with educational objectives, establishing special Buddhist schools after the Christian mission model (Htin Aung, 1967, p. 279). Increasingly, Buddhism and schooling were linked with the nationalist agenda. This trend included a movement for the establishment of 'national schools' in the 1920s: autonomous institutions emphasising Buddhist ethics and Burman culture (Aye Kyaw, 1993). The national schools movement waned over time but its existence indicates burgeoning popular dissatisfaction with the state schooling of the period.

A plethora of reports on the monastic schools in the late 1930s revealed continued policy confusion regarding the enduring, albeit weakened monastic schools. The 1936 *Report of the Vernacular and Vocational Education Reorganization Committee* claimed that attempts to absorb monastic schools into the government programme as a cheap and fast way to expand primary education had proven ineffective and should be discontinued; the 1939–40 Education Department report estimated that there were 18,000 monastic schools and 200,000 students operating independently of the state, but agreed with the 1936 argument that efforts to merge them would cause far too much trouble and would probably alienate moderate monks (Thompson & Adloff, 1948, p. 21). The 1941 *Report of the Committee of Inquiry on National Education in Buddhist Monasteries* suggested that renewed efforts should be made to reconcile the two sides, and that the wrong approach had been taken in the past (Kaung, 1950, p. 3).

The onset of war soon brought this policy impasse to a close and led to an educational hiatus: many schools were seized by Japanese troops (and subsequently by Allied forces). In late 1942 the Japanese re-established the Ministry of Education and thousands of schools were reopened under a new mandate. The Japanese state was an enthusiastic propagator of schooling after its own model (Trager, 1971, p. 195). However Burman nationalists were unwilling to compromise on Burmese language-only schooling, and resisted Japanese intrusion by developing their own distinct programmes (Kaung, 1950, p. 9). The new curriculum included religious study, however, teaching materials were in short supply and poor economic conditions kept students away. Finally, late in the war these schools collapsed. Notwithstanding, the effect of a unified school programme was felt in policy initiatives after the war. The Japanese had, for the first time, facilitated implementation of a single curriculum emphasising teaching in the Burmese language. It soon fell to the newly independent state to pursue populist educational change.

### **Buddhist Sangha, Burmese State**

After independence in 1948, the socialist government set out comprehensive welfare policies; the education policy was outlined in the same year but political instability prevented its inception until 1950. It centralised schooling and made it dependent on state funding (Ministry of Education, 1953). The policy recognised a role for religious instruction: 'The five elements essential to a sound educational tradition were identified as religion, discipline, culture, athletics and service' (Ba Sein, 1950, p. 2). In 1950 the Pyidawtha Conference on social welfare approved unprecedented expansion, reclassification and reorganisation of state-run schools.

For many commentators, a solution to the gamut of schooling problems may have been found in a resurgence of the monastic schools, however the state remained at best ambivalent towards the role of the monks (e.g. *Report on the Public Instruction in Burma for the Year 1946–47*, 1954, p. 16). Policy-makers credited monasteries with producing over four million literate people (out of a total seventeen million) (Cin & Sandlen, 1985, p. 10). But government encouragement for monastic schools seems to have been as cautious as that of its non-indigenous predecessor, and limited to the role they could play in teaching the basics of literacy to those with no other means of obtaining it. As remarked by the Minister of Education,

In modern times, though the function of the monastery schools is not the same as in the past, for the purpose of teaching the 'Three Rs', it can safely be said that monastery schools are still to be relied upon (*The Pyidawtha Conference*, c.1952, p. 99).

In 1950 a body of monks was formed to advocate a place for Buddhist ethics in state schools (including for non-Buddhist students), with little result (Than Oo, 1999a, pp. 197–198). A specific policy on religious teaching in state schools remained conspicuous by its absence.

The determination of the newly independent state to implement broadly equitable mass schooling as soon as possible and without inviting significant assistance from the Sangha is interesting, as it illustrates the certainty with which schools were viewed as an efficient vehicle to instil the 'national idea' (Economic and Social Board, 1954). The first prime minister, U Nu, himself a Buddhist revivalist, later wrote in his autobiography of having, in the first years after independence, to break through a 'ring of insurgents' around the capital even to meet with the people—who then demanded of him teachers and doctors (Nu, 1975, p. 206). When the first post-independence school year was finally initiated in 1950, it was so hectic that according to a government report, 'the schools were flooded with pupils... so crowded that effective teaching had become difficult' (*Octennial Report*, 1956, p. 35).

Another striking aspect of schooling in the period immediately after independence is that whereas the rhetorical commitment to education by the new state was ideologically opposed to that of the colonial regime, the practical effect of its programme was to intensify the trend in educational control away from the Sangha and community-based initiatives, and into its own hands. Not surprisingly, the U Nu government set about criticising its predecessor for offering narrow élitist curricula such that it

did not generate in us a feeling of pride in our culture; it did not teach us to use the tools of modern technology; it did not give us enough scope for teaching the ways of democracy nor for the expression of patriotism and citizenship (Economic and Social Board, 1954, p. 113)

But as it set about rectifying all these perceived wrongs, among others, the new regime

automatically assumed for itself all the educational roles of the earlier state, and more: within a few years state interventions dramatically increased across all school affairs (Ministry of Education, 1953, p. 2). The rapid demand for additional resources to cope with this expanded agenda soon met with practical limitations. Although the state was determined to proceed, it totally lacked the means to be able to do the job effectively, if at all (Government of the Union of Burma, 1951, p. 64). While on the surface this situation can be likened to the difficulties faced by many newly independent territories suffering from shortfalls in materials and funds, in the case of Burma it also suggests a problem with specific popular attitudes.

As noted above, the monastic schools had never relied upon a provision of funds from the state—although some received largesse when the state found it expedient to distribute wealth—and yet, in earlier periods they had flourished through the contributions of local communities. By contrast, the Burmese were in the 1950s and 1960s quite prepared to send their children to state schools, but were chary of providing anything towards their upkeep, so much so that one independent researcher observed that

Although education, in the abstract, is highly valued by Burmans, support for schools and teachers is meagre at the local level... A [state] school and its equipment needs leave a villager unmoved, as does any project for which the national or district government has a major responsibility (Nash, 1965, p. 95).

For the Burman villager, agents and agencies of government have long been a complex and omnipotent force that, much like a malevolent earth-bound deity, should be propitiated when necessary and otherwise kept at a safe distance (Spiro, 1967, p. 53). By contrast, the monasteries long obtained voluntary local support, which afforded their agents a far more subtle and elusive influence. The early independent state was attempting to co-opt their schooling function, while fusing ‘traditional’ principles and practices into the school structure left behind by the British, and at the same time accommodating the historically uneasy relationship between the Burmese people and their rulers. Little wonder that its progress was less than commensurate with its efforts, an outcome that was to have regrettable consequences.

Social and political collapse in the late 1950s was partially attributed to ongoing damage suffered by the monastic schools. Escalating civil war and political mayhem led to a military ‘caretaker’ government during 1958–60. In 1959 a powerful association of monks demanded reversion to monastic instruction at primary school level in order to prevent a nationwide breakdown (Smith, 1965, pp. 178–179). Admittedly these monks may have been jockeying to regain their former position in the social hierarchy, but rising anti-social activities and crime were increasingly attributed to the perceived inadequacies of secular schools. The corresponding decay of the monasteries’ schools was described in at least one government report as a ‘national calamity’ (*Report on the Public Instruction*, 1954, p. 16).

The purported threat of national disintegration led the army commander Ne Win to re-assume the mantle of state in 1962, this time for an indeterminate period. Ne Win announced plans to implement a ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ with the guidance of his Revolutionary Council. Burma was subsequently transformed into an inward-looking, one-party totalitarian state under a highly centralised, military-dominated administration. Under the Revolutionary Council, schools—now all nationalised—became subject to unambiguous directives that emphasised military-style ‘socialist’ prerogatives (*Burma Administrative and Social Affairs*, c. 1963). The new government allowed a quiet role for the Sangha in schooling: the Burmese Way to Socialism theoretically encouraged the blending of both spiritual and material elements of society. Although there was no religious education, daily students paid

homage to the 'Five Gratitudes': Buddha–Dhamma–Sangha, Parents and Teachers (Thein Lwin, 1996, p. 7). In 1963 a programme to supervise and register monastic schools and the Sangha more systematically was pushed ahead. In 1980 the Sangha was brought under a single centralised council. Now subordinate to the state and with its teaching role appropriated, the role and influence of the monks was being further delineated and confined. The introduction of the first Basic Education Law in 1966 continued the trend towards tighter supervision of schools, including monastic schools.

The 1970s saw a period of quantitative growth in state schooling, increasing vocational emphasis and further marginalising of the monasteries. Government data maintained that by 1985 the number of state schoolteachers had multiplied considerably, with corresponding increases in student numbers. By 1981, about 81% of eligible students were in primary schools as against 56% in 1960 (Taylor, 1987, p. 359). Although state statistics maintain that this expansion was a product of increased government expenditure, autonomous surveys suggest that the costs of schools in this period were now in fact borne largely by local communities, as had been the case under the Sangha (Cin & Sandlen, 1985). But unlike earlier periods, when persons either voluntarily contributed or opted out of the schools, the 'successful' expansion of this period may be attributed to the leverage applied to the population by the military-run state apparatus.

In 1988 Burma's newest regime took over, and current policies on schooling began. Mass protests against the socialist regime led to the deaths of thousands of demonstrators, including numerous students, teachers and monks. A junta of hard-line military officers reasserted the army's pre-eminence and declared the Burmese Way to Socialism to be dead. For the nation's students this may have lessened the ideological component of their school instruction, but by no means its authoritarian features.

### **Buddhist Sangha, and 'Myanmar'**

Since 1988 official schooling in Burma has remained the exclusive prerogative of the ruling body, configured as a means by which people may be converted to human resources of *benefit to the state*, not unlike the earlier socialist period. Attempting to ensure that the population does not deviate from its particularistic programme, the state leadership—dominated by members of the armed forces—constantly reiterates everybody's obligations and roles. The populace is answerable to the state, controlled by the armed forces, which is answerable to no one. Gone are the days of any institutional balance between the Sangha and state: Napoleon-like, the army has again snatched the crown and with a cry of 'Myanmar' placed it atop its own head. The result has been the further subordination of all other institutions, not least of all the Sangha, to its singular project for purported national development.

The degree to which the state exerts control over schooling in the current period is without historic parallel in Burma. Schooling is universal (in principle), centralised and homogeneous, administered by government departments operating from the capital. Policy-making is the domain of the Myanmar Education Committee, which is chaired by the Secretary-1 of the State Peace and Development Council Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt ('Ministry of Education', 1991, p. 352). It offers 'advice' on, among other things, 'educational laws which will support the perpetuation of the physical integrity of the Union, national solidarity and national sovereignty' and 'educational policies in line with the social, economic and political system' ('Initial reports of States parties', 1995, para. 26). The Secretary-1 personally travels the length and breadth of the country in order to be seen ensuring that tasks are being carried out, and giving instructions. Among these is a strong narrative on improvement of school standards relative to those internationally and among the Association of South

East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. This reflects both current global discourse, and also the particular needs of the current regime for international legitimacy and prestige, such as when state media reports that

In line with the guidance of Head of State Senior General Than Shwe, the 30-year long-term education plan is being implemented to develop the human resources in the hope of catching up with the international education standard. It is necessary for well-wishers to understand the national education promotion programme of the State. With the active participation of the people, the State is striving [to turn] out intelligentsia and intellectuals who will shoulder the responsibility of the State in future and for development of human resources in order to build up the nation into a modern one. [The Secretary-1] said there are some who think that [the] education system in Myanmar is out of date. As they did not know the government's education promotion programme well, they said so... ('Secretary-1 attends ceremony', 2002)

Stripped of ideological pretences, the current state has ostensibly admitted a greater role for the Sangha in public life and schooling than its predecessor. However this must be understood as quite unlike the Sangha's historical position in society. In the period immediately following the events of 1988 both the monks and lay instructors were subjected to intense scrutiny and many arrests were made. The new regime placed much of the blame for the uprising on 'destructive elements' within both the Sangha and the state schools. Sangha and schools alike were purged of undesirables, and those remaining were warned to adhere strictly to the narrow parameters of the tasks prescribed for them ('Crackdown on unlawful monks', 1990; Fink, 2001, pp. 78–79; Smith, 1992; 'Teachers warned', 1989, Wun-tha-nu, 1989, p. 401). In the early 1990s the state began to reconfigure its relationship with the Sangha, modelling it on the earlier regal style of patronage, but now with the state unequivocally in charge. The Sangha has been systematically stripped of its capacity to counterbalance and potentially undermine the government, whether through schooling or other means. This is a dramatic contrast to its historic role, discussed above, where under certain circumstances its power and resources could become so great as to overwhelm a kingdom completely, and lead to its demise (Aung-Thwin, 1985). Instead, it has been reduced to a device for ritual legitimacy by the military regime.

To the extent that the Sangha has a continued presence in official educational discourse, it is through a limited prescribed role in both state and monastic schooling. The upholding of 'moral character' among the student population is among the primary aims for schooling (Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 2). Accordingly, monks are now expected to expedite the revitalisation of 'monastic spirit', such that all students learn discipline and their position in society through 'correct' teaching methods (Monastic Education, 1992). To this end, Buddhist culture courses and ritual have increased in schools ('Buddhism to be taught', 1991). The state has also sponsored mass ordination and devotion ceremonies for state schoolteachers and students (e.g. 'Ordination, novitiation of 3,000 students, teachers', 1999). And Buddhism permeates schooling in many other respects: much of the rote learning method of the monasteries endures in the state schools, in spite of the avowed intention of international agencies working in the country to change the practice, and Buddhism permeates the school textbooks in the form of duties, homilies, poems, parables, fables and discussion of Buddhist religious sites in both written and illustrated text (Cheesman, 2002a). Students' slogans are also adaptations from Buddhist discourses. By contrast, whereas around 13 % of the country's population (about six and a half million people) ascribe to other religions—most to Christianity and Islam—references to them are omitted altogether from the schoolbooks.

Monastic schools too have been allocated a specific place in the national development schema. Like many things, the cost of schooling has risen dramatically in the last few years. The proverbial gold pot can these days be purchased with enough wealth of the mundane variety: now it is quipped, 'If one has a gold pot one will get an education' (Zani Win, 2002). An apparent result has been burgeoning numbers of children attending monasteries rather than state schools to obtain basic literacy and numeracy skills. The state appears to have observed the trend, and responded by making publicised donations to monastic schools. In these donation ceremonies, state, Sangha and schooling merge, but again unequivocally in order to support the role of the state and its 'national interests' over others:

Secretary-1 Lt-Gen Khin Nyunt made supplication on donation of exercise books and pencils. He said the Myanmar Education Committee has been donating exercise books and pencils for monastic education students in the country. Efforts are now being made to enable all school-age children to get enrolled. As monastic education students are the needy ones, the monastic education schools are fulfilling their food and shelter needs. As a result, the number of monastic education students [has been] increasing. These students are also being trained to be pious and disciplined with the spirit to love and cherish traditions and culture.

Hence, to get their children to be imbued with such good characters and attitude, the parents wittingly enrol them at the monastic education schools. The Government is also fulfilling the requirements of the monastic education schools. With the cash donations of well-wishers, the Myanmar Education Committee is providing exercise books and pencils with the aims to support the monastic education schools and to [enable] all school-age children to go to school, he observed ...

These [monastic school] children who are clever, disciplined, imbued with the nationalist spirit, patriotism and the spirit to preserve traditions and culture will surely become those who serve the interests of the nation and the people brilliantly in the future. Hence, the Government has been providing assistance and encouragement to the monastic education schools [he said] ('Secretary-1 attends opening', 2002).

Currently there are reportedly around a thousand of these schools registered, with some 280,000 students out of a total student population of some five million ('Education', undated; Ministry of Religious Affairs, c.2001). The monastic schools have approval to teach children only to the end of primary school level—grade four—after which students must attend state schools or drop out.

Apart from those monastic schools that receive donations from the state, and are counted in its statistics, unofficial community-supported monastic teaching is reportedly on the greatest increase in some areas of the country ('Monasteries take on education', 2002; 'Monastic education', 2002; 'Opportunities for children', 2002, p. 6). If this is in fact the case, a widespread move back to the monasteries may indicate a real change in perceptions of the qualitative nature of the state versus monastic schools, and not merely be a question of the 'needy' looking for cheaper alternatives. Whereas in the past monastic students were taunted by state school students for being 'beggars' (they would go with monks to collect alms), a new expression has ironically reversed the relationship, holding that 'Monastic students eat well; school students are beggars'. In other cases, non-Burman students are attending monasteries in order to learn to read and write in their own languages: an opportunity denied them in state schools under the successive Burmese-language curricula since independence. But whether students are learning at a monastic school that is obtaining

state support or otherwise, since the 1980s the state has, as noted, implemented numerous measures to restrict the role of the Sangha and purge its ranks of 'imitation and bogus monks' ('Crackdown on unlawful monks', 1990). Hence the state exerts—or at least demands the right to exert—indirect control over the teaching, staffing and management of the entire Sangha. Under the current regime, the Sangha, its schools and its status in society continue to be subjected to an explicit programme for control and manipulation by the national administration.

## **Conclusion**

Under the Buddhist kings of pre-colonial Burma, the Sangha's mandate to instruct the populace was presumed. Its schools were a tangible link between people, religion and state. They disseminated common cultural and intellectual property, engendered discipline and respect for tradition and hierarchy, and strengthened community cohesion. They helped maintain the uneasily counterpoised relationship between state and Sangha, as both derived authority through the monastic instruction.

The British colonial state terminated the lineage of Buddhist kings and in so doing massively disrupted the social role of the Sangha, and notably that of its schools. The growth of alternative schools under the auspices of the new state further contributed to the pressure on the monasteries, which had previously not been subject to competition for students. The British attempted to engage the Sangha in educational reform, but fundamental misunderstandings between the two parties, and the ongoing resentment felt by monks after the erosion of their authority with the decline and fall of the Buddhist monarchy, meant that relatively little was achieved. Overall, the British administrators underestimated the important functions of the monastic schools. Having demolished the social and political base for the Sangha's legitimacy but unable to acquire it for themselves, the British continued to be confounded by the Sangha.

The post-war independent state demonstrated no greater interest in reinvesting authority over schooling in the Sangha than did its colonial predecessor. Instead, it has sought to demonstrate its unequivocal control over matters 'educational' while tacitly approving a role for the monastic schools and monks. Since 1962 successive military regimes have both mandated and directed community and institutional participation in state schools. Teaching in Burma has become characterised by authoritarianism and central control. Both the Sangha and its monastic schools have been granted a limited role but are unequivocally subordinate to the state. There is no longer any sense of balance.

Although the British state can be held responsible for the decline in monastic schooling due to its destruction of the historic state-Sangha adversarial partnership, it is since the inception of 'Burma' as an independent territory that the state has truly consolidated and secured control over schooling. In the light of the extent to which centralised public instruction has swept across Asia this is not in itself remarkable. State schooling throughout the region now has the same basic characteristics, including graduated classes, standardised textbooks and examinations, full time professional teachers and a concise curriculum arranged sequentially (Shukla, 1983, p. 61). For a part of the world that is so populous and diverse, schooling in Asia is—in its objectives, methodology and management—remarkably homogeneous. The Asian school has become the pre-eminent extension of the state and its social hierarchy. What this paper has discussed as uncommon in Burma's case, however, is the extent to which state schooling has largely taken over from an influential predecessor.

The promise of a return to civilian rule has eluded the Burmese people on a number of occasions since 1988, however popular hope still lies with the eventual success of the

National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi. Be that as it may, whoever is in government is unlikely to surrender readily the reins of control over the nation's schools, as schooling is universally seen as an integral means by which to secure the 'national idea'. Aung San Suu Kyi, for instance, has exhorted the people to teach children 'so that they will understand the idea of the Union... the concept of national unity, of nationhood' (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1991, p. 227). Aung San Suu Kyi is herself very much the product of dominant nationalist and military traditions, being the daughter of Burma's independence leader and national martyr, a fact that she does not shy away from and frequently uses to political advantage. Other Burmese people and agencies working on a common curriculum for a future democratic society emphasise the need to teach 'good citizenship' (Opportunities for children', 2002, p. 13). These people, then, advocate a similar model of state-controlled schooling to introduce new concepts of national identity, rather than proposing a new model altogether. Whether or not schools under a civilian-managed state would be more successful at procuring the compliance of the Burmese people, and what new role the Sangha may play in that schema, to date remains a subject for conjecture; however the control of schools would evidently remain firmly in the hands of the state, irrespective of who is in control.

In closing, it may be appropriate to briefly revisit the terrain of comparative education discussed at the beginning of this paper, in the light of subsequent discussion. This study has lent support to the humanist tradition of historical and sociological comparative education by undertaking a review of schools in Burma that could not have been done through scientific means. Its description of the stages that schooling in Burma has passed through, emphasising the importance of the relationship between state and Sangha, has revealed a little of the intense contest for control over schooling in Burma since the nineteenth century, the significance of state control in the present, and the likelihood of its continued dominance into the future. It has not feigned neutrality by examining schooling under the current dictatorship with an air of distance and studied detachment. The military regime in Burma has no greater moral basis for its existence than any other dictatorship: its methods are typical of its sort, and its ongoing control of the state is a source of ongoing consternation for millions of people who would have it otherwise.

Comparative education should not be seen as an evolutionary ladder towards one innately superior model for its execution. Rather than being something vertical and linear, it is akin to something horizontal and dispersed, like a table that attracts a diversity of voices, characterised by a willingness to exchange ideas, challenge assumptions and ultimately, offer insights into what goes on in schools. It is this that makes it accessible and vibrant, and this that must be encouraged. There is room at the table for everyone: in the end, any means by which schools and their contents can be better understood has some kind of merit, so long as it remains located among the co-ordinates of the living.

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## **NOTE**

- [1] The Kevatta Sutta is a section of the Tipitika, the recorded teachings of Buddha. For further details see < <http://www.accesstosight.org/canon/digha/dn11.html>



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