

The British Commercial Interest in Myanmar as Mentioned in Times Newspaper (1852-1878)

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Abstract

During konbaung period, the British - India was one of the foreign powers which had a close relation with the kingdom of Myanmar. The main purpose of the British in early years of Konbaung period to obtain commercial concessions from the Kings of Myanmar. They made attempt to negotiate the commercial treaties since the time of king Alaungmintaya and again in the reign of King Badon. However the effective commercial treaties were signed only in the reign of King Mindon in 1862 and 1867. This paper examines the political and economic consequences of these two commercial treaties.

Keywords: History of commercial relation.

Introduction

The main purpose of the British in early years of Konbaung period to obtain commercial concessions from the Kings of Myanmar. They made attempt to negotiate the commercial treaties since the time of king Alaungmintaya and again in the reign of King Badon. However the effective commercial treaties were signed only in the reign of King Mindon in 1862 and 1867. The commercial treaties are main policy of colonization.

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The beginning of the British commercial interest began since the late Nyaung-yan period. During that time the British interested Myanmar trade items of saltpeter, teak, ivory, cotton, gems, etc. They tried to make attempt to open ship yards and factories. Later the British were followed by the French. When the Mon-Myanmar power struggle broke out, both the British and French made attempts to establish their influence by entangling in the internal affairs of Myanmar. (Hall, 1945, 57-59) However, the French were distrusted by King Alaungmintaya who also drove out the British from the Haigy Island for their support to Mons. (Hall, 1977, 62,63) After the Haigy Island problem the relations between Myanmar and the British had lapsed for thirty years.

The commercial interest of European into Myanmar had revived in King Badon's reign. In 1782, a British military surgeon Dr. William Hunter accidentally arrived Myanmar. He pointed out negligence of Calcutta authorities on commercial opportunities of Myanmar (Hall 1945, 74-75). Indeed the reign of King Badon witnessed the reawakening of diplomatic and commercial relations with the outside world. During that time Yangon, Thanlyin, Bago and Patheingyi became the busy ports of Myanmar. After the annexation of Rakhine Myanmar's contact with Bengal via ports of Rakhine had opened. King Badon encouraged the development of trade and issued orders to take care of foreign merchants (ROB.V 1986, 611) When Michael Symes, agent of the British East India Company, visited Myanmar in 1795 he witnessed the involvement of the subjects of British-India. He suggested that the British-India should try to get Myanmar teak, to increase the export of British manufactured goods to Myanmar, to look for the possible trade route to south-western China via Bhamo through Ayeyawaddy River and to prevent other foreign powers which made attempt to divert the British commercial interest from the Kingdom of Myanmar (Syme, 1969, 456-57). Anyway the British noticed the valuable trade items of Myanmar including teak, cotton, gems, etc. However the British diplomats like Symes, Hiram Cox and John Canning were not able to conclude any commercial treaty with King Badon.

relations with the kingdom of Myanmar and conclude a commercial treaty, the authorities of Calcutta sent John Crawfurd. The British government assigned Crawfurd to

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relations with the kingdom of Myanmar and conclude a commercial treaty, the authorities of Calcutta sent John Crawfurd. The British government assigned Crawfurd to negotiate a commercial treaty of twenty-one points (Crawfurd, 1829, 259-60). However, after a series of discussions with Myanmar ministers, a commercial treaty with four points was concluded. The articles of the treaty were protection to the persons and property of those engaged in trade, all British vessels, not exceeding fifty tons burthen, or there abouts, are exempted from the payment of tonnage duties and port charge, secure some advantages to British merchants resident in the Burman dominions, although for short of these required by the justice and necessity of the case, and fourth article stipulates for British property shipwrecked, the same immunity and protection as under civilized governments (Crawfurd, 1829, 8-9).

After the Crawfurd's mission, a British Residency was opened at Inwa. Major Henry Burney, the Resident of the British East India Company, made his effort to facilitate trade and to protect the interest of British merchants (Desai, 1939, 145). However the relations between Myanmar and the British deteriorated after the accession of King Thayawaddy. The terms of commercial treaty were not implemented. On 12 August 1840 the British Residency had withdrawn from the royal capital of Inwa. Owing to the lack of diplomatic negotiation, the second Anglo-Myanmar War broke out on the ground of minor complaints of the two British merchant ships.

During the outbreak of Second Anglo-Myanmar War, Prince Mindon and Kanaung revolted against King Bagan. After the rebellion, King Mindon made attempt to end hostilities with the British and to prevent the British from annexing Bago Province. The King sent emissaries to end the war on the basis of a peace settlement. However, the British had already drawn a frontier line from Mt.Poganing in Rakhine Yoma to the border of the Western Karenni for the annexation (Myo Myint, 2012, 34). The British also tried to sign a treaty with King Mindon which legally recognize the occupation of lower Myanmar. For that purpose Sir Arthur Phayre Mission was dispatched to Amarapura in 1855. The British government made instructions to Phayre to negotiate with the king to sign peace treaty and commercial treaty.

Phayre's embassy was comprised of cartographers, photographer, painter, military adviser, botanist, zoologist and other technicians. This formation showed that the British prepared to extend their commercial and political interest and eventually to prepare for a possibility of a war against the kingdom of Myanmar. However King Mindon made attempt to maintain friendly relations and avoidance of direct confrontation with the British. The King neither challenged the arbitrarily drawn British frontier nor recognized the British acquisition of the Bago province in a treaty (Myo Myint, 2012, 312). King Mindon made utmost effort to modernize the kingdom. He sent state scholars to Europe and India. About ninety factories were built around the capital of Mandalay. However his efforts were done under the eyes of his next door neighbor the British. On the other hand, the king tried to overcome the economic difficulties due to the loss of the ample resources of Bago. As he noticed the flaws in the traditional made of taxation, the king introduced the *Thathameda* taxation which was needed in keeping with the newly-monetized market economy. He also introduced the salary system to abolish former fief system. The most important effort to increase the royal income was the introduction of the royal monopoly by which teak, cotton, petroleum and gems were monopolized only by the King. No one was allowed to trade these items. The British referred to

King Mindon as the "largest trader", "royal trader" in their reports and writings (Myo Myint, 2012, 288).

The British commercial circle, on the contrary, felt in easiness to the royal monopoly and wanted to lift restrictions on important trade items. They also wanted to open a trade route to China via Bhamo. In 1862 Phayre led an embassy to the court of Mandalay for second time. King Mindon realized the maintenance of friendly relations with the British would provide political and economic benefit. Thus he practiced appeasement policy towards the Phayre embassy. A British Resident was allowed to open at Mandalay. On 10 November 1862 a Commercial Treaty was signed between Phayre and King Mindon's government. The newspaper "The Times" mentions the negotiation of commercial treaty thus; The Times, dated 17 Jan 1863, p. 7:1, mentions the privileges of British merchants as follows:

A commercial treaty with the King of Burmah was signed at his capital on the 10th November last the following provisions: The free navigation of the river Irrawaddy; every facility for trade, with security for life and property, for the subjects of either nation in the dominions of the other; abolition of import duties each way on merchandise not the produce of the countries; the King of Burmah, in consequence of the reduced rate of his revenue (the result of our taxation of all the seaboard provinces his kingdom) to levy an export duty on the products of his country according to tariff to be agreed upon and here after published; and a transit duty of 1 per cent only to be levied by His Majesty on all merchandise passing through his country (The Times, 17, January, 1863, p.7:1).

I remain, Sir, yours obediently "R.H.F. Sprye".

According to this news, it is assumed that the treaty negotiated between Phayre and the King might be commercial Treaty. It mentioned the news on reducing of import duties. The Times, 13 April, 1863, P.9:3 India and China mention as follows:

----- Three weeks ago Colonel Phayre returned to Rangoon from Mandalay with a copy of the ratified Burmese treaty (The Times, 13, April, 1863, p.9:3, 1).

The 12 percent hitherto exacted on all imports is to be reduced to 6, and the 25 percent levied on timber to 10 percent (The Times, 13, April, 1863, p.9:3, 2).

The British expected that they might have opportunity of the freedom of trade under the terms of Commercial Treaty. They also objected to penetrate to the market of south-Western Provinces of China via Bhamo-important trade station of Sino-Myanmar border trade. Indeed, conclusion of Commercial Treaty was willingly encouraged by the British-India. However some British merchants disliked the imposition of taxes in frontier town of Thayetmyo. The Times, Jan 16, 1863, 8:4, mention as following news,

----- This treaty will allow us, in time, to travel all over Burmah; and from what Dr. Williams, an unaccredited agent of ours, reveals of the state of the country.

-----But the second result of the treaty, the abolition of frontier duties, will at once lead to great commercial results. The tea trade of British Burmah last year was in round numbers 5,500,000 pounds sterling, and the frontier duties were 62,000 sterling pounds paid to us, and at least half of that paid by our subjects to the King. These duties were surrendered; but in a few years the trade will certainly be doubled, and our customs' revenue in our sea-pots. The King is the sole whole sale merchant in the dominions, and hence he has clung to these duties while he keeps up a monopoly of everything (The Times, Jan, 16, 1863, 8:4, 1)

It is apparent that the British merchants bitterly protested against the royal monopoly of King Mindon. They also made several complaints that the royal monopoly and King's officials were major disturbances to the free trade. They urged their government to annex Upper Myanmar as soon as possible. The Times July 14, 1864, 5:2 mentions thus;

"Among the troublesome potentates whose independence we acknowledge is the King of Burma. Upon an average there is a cry for annexation of his territory about once a week. His views concerning commerce are very simple, ----- he will have none of it in his dominions. Englishmen in British Burmah complains solely of the obstructions he contrives to throw in their path; and indeed, the attempt to carry on a trade outside our own territory would be attended with nothing but run to the speculator. "Annex the country, they say, and besides removing these impeachments to our progress you will get a new route to China". The first thought of many Englishmen here, when they conceive an injustice has been done by these native monarchs, still finds its expression in that word "annex" (The Times, July 14, 1864, 5:2) .

When he met with King Mindon, Phayre made his utmost effort to urge the King to abolish royal monopoly system. He ever threatened the King that his (King's) only chance of preventing future rebellions and ultimate annexation was to surrender his monopolies. The Time Feb 8, 1867, p.9:4, "India" mention as follow:

Colonel Phayre has great influence with the King of Burmah. He pleaded earnestly with His Majesty to make such concessions as would secure the execution in its integrity of the existing treaty. He showed the King that his only chance of preventing future rebellions and ultimate annexation was to surrender his monopolies. But the King was blinded. He would do everything except that, but, as involves all other reforms, Colonel Phayre sadly refused to united in any new treaty which did not include it. The King farms out at a high rate to the most unscrupulous officers the five monopolies of cotton, wood, petroleum, jiggery, and tea. But as these almost exhaust the products of the country, it is evident that his injured people must sink into deeper poverty and discontent and the country be ruined. It was in vain, but Colonel Phayre deserves great credit for so manfully trying to save the king from himself, and his country from annexation (The Times, Feb 8, 1867, 9:4, 1).

Indeed Phayre used aggressive attitude towards the king. Phayre also remarked that his majesty could not see that free trade and even heavy duties would enrich his people. However the king seemingly to continue his monopoly on cotton, teak, petroleum, jiggery and tea. Gradually, the ambition of British was clear that they made attempt to annex territories of the Kingdom of Myanmar through the excuses of commercial grievances. On the contrary Phayre did not give up his plan to organize the King. They also tried to approach the King to conclude a new commercial treaty. However the effective commercial treaty for British interests was concluded by Lt Gen Albert Fytche. Fytche enabled to bargain the king's monopoly and to negotiate to reduce custom duties. Most importantly he was able to discuss with the king to open a tribunal known as "Mixed Court" to for the decision of civil suits between British and Myanmar subjects. The Times Aug 16, 1869, 4:1 following article reads,

All what we asked of him was the concession of that treaty which he had before refused. Accordingly, in October, 1867, he received General Fytche, the new Chief Commissioner, with unusual cordiality and splendor, and signed a treaty in which he bound himself for the next ten years to abolish all monopolies except those of earth oil, timber, and precious stones and to reduce his duties to 5 per cent. More important still, he recognized our political agent in the fullest sense, and agreed that to quote Article V, he should have "full and final jurisdiction in all civil suits arising between registered British subjects at the capital. Civil cases between Burmese subjects and registered British subjects shall be heard and finally decided by a mixed Court composed of the British political agent and a suitable Burmese officer of high rank." The King was empowered to establish his own political agent in Rangoon or elsewhere whenever he chose to do so (The Times, Aug, 16, 1869, 4:1, 1).

During that time Major Sladen acted as the British Political agent at Mandalay. He played crucial role in the negotiation of commercial Treaty and also acted as the Magistrate at the Mixed Court to protect the interest of British subjects.

As mentioned above, the treaty also established a mixed court of British and Myanmar representatives to try cases involving British citizens. The 1867 treaty had a stimulating effect on trade, in 1856-66 the total value of the overland trade was Rs.155, 99, 053; in 1868-69 it amounted to no less than Rs. 211, 45, 050 and by 1875-76 it had increased to Rs. 287, 05, 320 (Myo Myint, 2012, 295).

The above mentioned article severely denounced the royal monopoly. They seemed to have a plan or probably drew up a plan to annex Upper Myanmar due to their Phayre was succeeded by Colonel Albert Fytche, late Chief Commissioner of lower Myanmar and agent to the Viceroy and the Governor-general of India who liked to take advantage of King Mindon's weakened political position and putting economic pressure on him. On 7 October 1867 Fytche's embassy arrived at Mandalay. He was allowed to attend royal audience on 10th October (Fytche, 1878, b, 262-4). On 25 October 1867 a new commercial treaty was signed between Fytche and Pakhan Wungyi in virtue of full power rested was signed between Fytche and Pakhan Wungyi in virtue of full power rested in him by the King Mindon (Fytche, 1878, b, 282-285). The treaty was comprised of thirteen articles. In the new treaty, article 6 and 7 of 1862 treaty were elaborated to allow the British subject to travel within the Kingdom of Myanmar. King Mindon was pressured into given economic concessions, including restricting his monopoly rights only three commodities namely earth-oil, teak and gemstones. Myanmar interpreted the treaty as saying that after ten years they had the right to re-impose the monopolies (Myo Myint, 2012, 294).

The negotiation of Commercial Treaty 1867 was the victory of British authority and commercial circle. Therefore, "The Times" newspaper, on Anglo-Myanmar commercial relations revealed the attitude of the British government and merchants to exploit the Kingdom of Myanmar through 1862 and 1867 commercial Treaties. The British merchants and Chambers of Commerce would like to abolish the royal monopoly practiced by King Mindon and made attempt to reduce the frontier duties in various ways. The articles of The Times shed light on the plan of British merchants who urged the Calcutta government to annex kingdom of Myanmar. They argued that the treaty abrogated the monopolies permanently while Myanmar interpreted the treaty of 1867 that the cancelling of royal monopoly was to be lasted only ten years. The Treaty allowed the British merchants to travel throughout Upper Myanmar under full protection. Anyway, the grievances of British merchants on commercial practices continued to exist. This friction over the interpretation of the treaty contributed to the causes of the outbreak of third Anglo-Myanmar War in 1885.

Conclusion

The news of "The Time" on Anglo-Myanmar commercial relations revealed the attitude of the British government and merchants to exploit the Kingdom of Myanmar through 1862 and 1867 commercial Treaties. The British merchants and Chambers of Commerce would like to abolish the royal monopoly practiced by King Mindon and made attempt to reduce the frontier duties in various ways. The articles of The Times shed light on the plan of British merchants who urged the Calcutta government to annex kingdom of Myanmar. They argued that the treaty abrogated the monopolies permanently while Myanmar interpreted the treaty of 1867 that the cancelling of royal monopoly was to be lasted only ten years. This friction over the interpretation of the treaty contributed to the causes of the outbreak of third Anglo-Myanmar War in 1885.

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