

THE SWINGING PENDULUM: FROM CENTRALITY TO MARGINALITY – A STUDY OF SOUTHERN TENASSERIM IN THE HISTORY OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract

From early in the first millennium AD, southern Tenasserim, now part of Myanmar (Burma) has played a significant role in the history of Southeast Asia, being always open to trade and cultural influences from India and the West. From the 15th century it was the major port of the Siamese Kingdom of Ayutthaya until its conquest by the Burmese in 1760 when its importance declined and today it plays a marginal role in the economy and politics of both Myanmar and Thailand. Recent developments in both states, particularly in the field of gas and oil exploration, promise to give back the region some of its former importance.

Introduction

Southern Tenasserim is the most southerly part of the state of Burma. Lying on the west coast of the narrow neck of land, it adjoins the even narrower Isthmus of Kra linking mainland Southeast Asia to the Malay Peninsula and wider maritime Southeast Asian region. Historically Mergui has been the most important town on this coast, though now it is virtually unknown to the outside world, a state of affairs exacerbated by the fact that much of this region has been largely in the grip of insurgents for the last half century. The period when it achieved greatest fame, moreover, was when it was the major western port of the Thai state of Ayutthaya until its fall to the Burmese in 1760, for Mergui lies much closer to both Ayutthaya and Bangkok than to any of the major cities of Burma – past or present – so that its history is as much a part of that of Thailand as it is of Burma.

For much of that long history, Mergui, sometimes also known as Tenasserim because of the river it stands on and the old entrepôt town of that name some forty miles inland, has been on the periphery of major

political and economic developments in the history of this part of Southeast Asia but at other times has been of pivotal significance. Possessing both resources of economic value and a position of strategic significance, Mergui undoubtedly has had its history shaped by what Trevor Roper (1957: vi) once called the 'interplay between ... intractable geographical facts and the creative or disruptive forces which wrestle with them'.

Lying atop the long tongue of land stretching from the mainland to the Malay Peninsula that divides the waters of the Bay of Bengal from those of the Gulf of Thailand, Mergui is one of a number of places at river mouths on the isthmus situated astride the main sea routes from East to West. In the early history of the region the narrowness of the peninsula at these places, and of the watershed along its spine separating streams flowing down both sides to the coasts, greatly facilitated transpeninsular crossings. These portage routes, circumventing the longer sea voyage around the peninsula, were particularly attractive at times of political instability or hostility in the Straits area further south and their importance was enhanced because of the access they provided to the interior of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and

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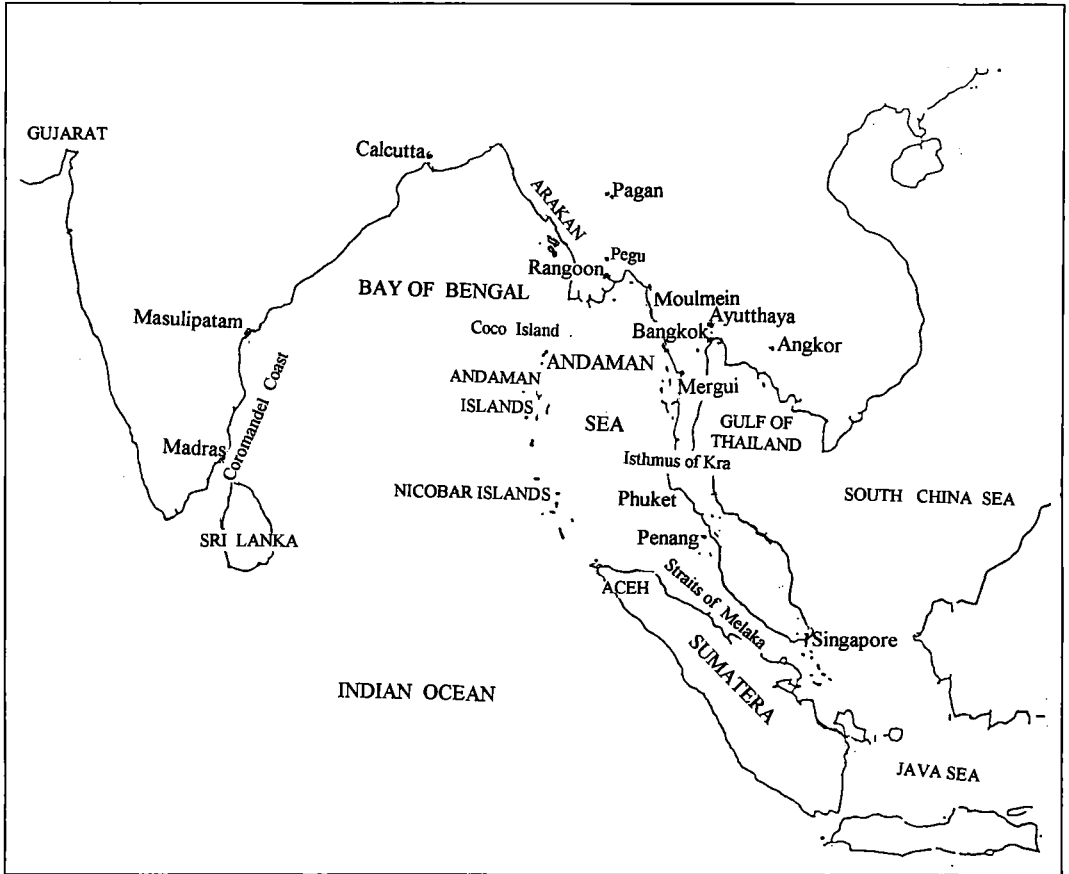


Figure 1. The Indian Ocean and surrounding areas, locating important places mentioned in the text.

even inland China. Trading and entrepôt centres grew up along the coast where ships could shelter, their crews seek provisions, and their traders engage in commerce with others from afar, aided by the yearly rhythm of monsoons bringing and sending traders from east to west and back again.

Archaeological and historical evidence suggests the port of Mergui was integral to one of the number of early isthmus entrepôt centres created by the growing trade of India and further west with China and the east. Once powerful mainland states such as Pagan, Ayutthaya, and later Ava arose, the capacity of Mergui and its hinterland city of Tenasserim to sustain their autonomy was considerably reduced and mostly they became instead valuable outliers of the domains of these larger states as well as focuses for periodic inter-state contention.

After the establishment of Singapore in 1819 as the major entrepôt for Southeast Asia and the advent of steamships, Mergui and the isthmus largely lost their strategic significance. In the colonial period Mergui became merely a small and somewhat neglected coastal port for the immediate hinterland, though several stillborn schemes to cut a canal through the narrow Isthmus of Kra along the border between Burma and Siam served as reminders of the strategic potential of this zone. Once Burma regained its independence, insurgency ensured that the district remained marginal to the Burmese state; but towards the end of the 20th century there are indications that this southern Tenasserim coast is regaining importance, because of both its position and its resources.

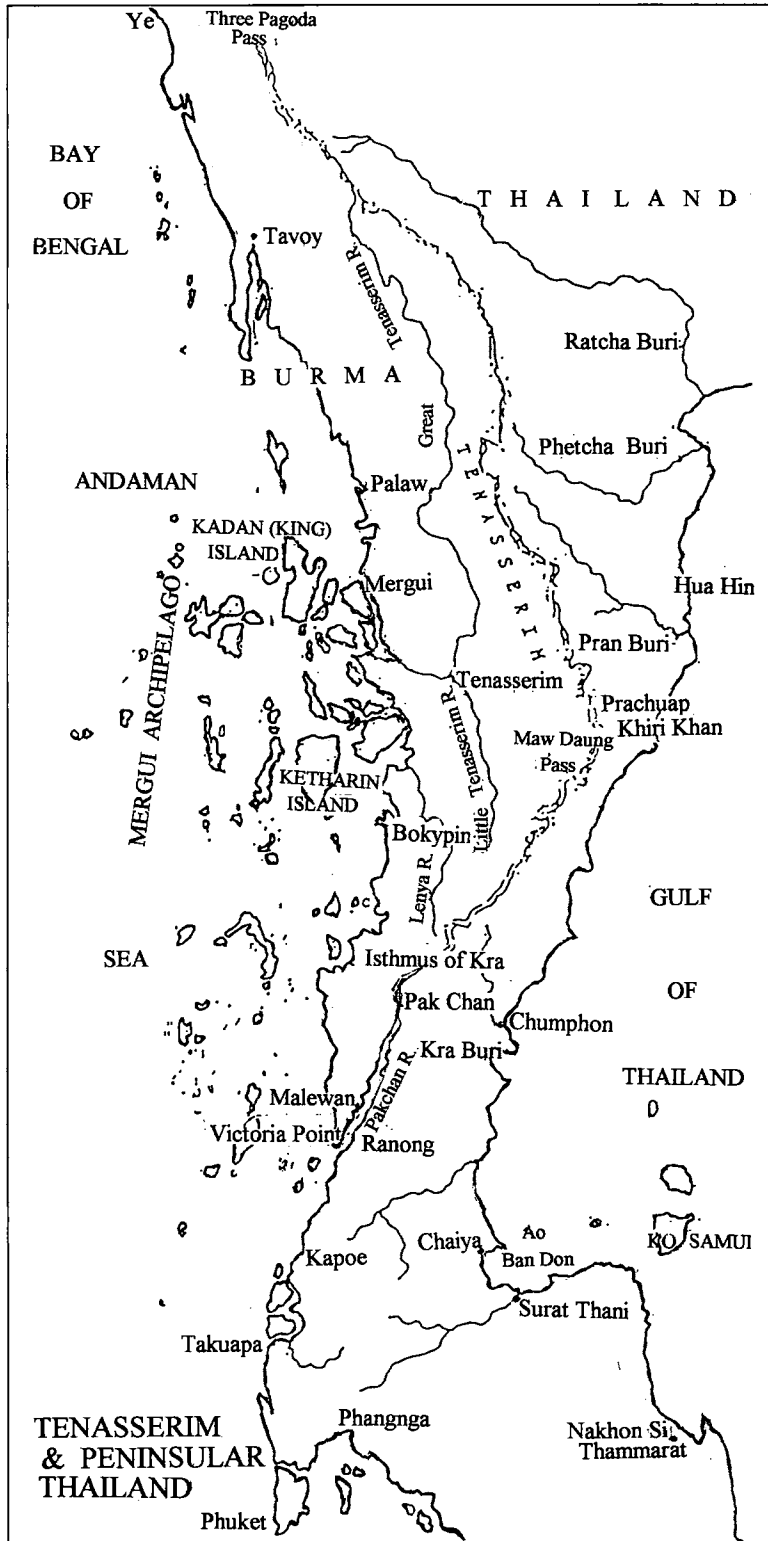


Figure 2. The southern Tenasserim Coast and Peninsular Thailand.

Geography

The south Tenasserim littoral lies sheltered from the open sea by the fringe of 900 or so islands of the Mergui Archipelago extending about 80 miles north of Mergui and many miles south beyond Victoria Point (Kawthaung) on the boundary with Thailand. Though Victoria Point stands on the Pakchan River which cuts well into the Isthmus of Kra, the river is shallow and tidal, unsuitable for sizeable craft (Smyth 1898 II: 30). From north of Tavoy to as far south as Kapoe (Takuapa) in southern Thailand, Mergui was undoubtedly the best port along this stretch of the coast, though some of the islands also possessed good harbours (Brown 1907: 476; Collis 1953: 240). Navigable channels along the coast are tortuous, sometimes no more than a quarter of a mile wide, with unmarked shoals and islets on either side, and historically the harbour itself was not always easy to find, as attested by Caesare dei Fredici who spent eight days fruitlessly looking for it among the maze of islands in 1568 (Tregonning 1967: 145-7; Collis 1965: 34). Because of the calm sheltered waters lying behind the island on which Mergui largely stands, the town was widely regarded as a safe all-weather port, offering protection from the monsoons which caused many shipwrecks along this coast. The Tenasserim River itself was navigable for quite large boats up to Tenasserim, the main entrepôt, which possibly had developed there to be out of reach of pirates on the coast (cf. Smyth 1898 II: 64) or else to be more accessible from the Gulf of Siam.

In climate, terrain, and physical resources this part of Burma can be regarded as an extension of the Malay Peninsula with its heavy rainfall, narrow coastal plain and rugged mountain spine as well as mineral deposits of tin, antimony, coal, wolfram and offshore deposits of petroleum. Of these, historically tin was undoubtedly the most significant. Indeed there is evidence suggesting the tin deposits of Tavoy and Mergui have been worked for many centuries, probably contributing to the attractions of the

early isthmian entrepôts (Tremenheere 1886: 251). Mergui may also have been one of the sites the Arabs called Kallah, (cf. Wheatley 1961: 223-4; Hall 1985: 176, 200, 326). The hinterland was also the source of valuable forest produce – sapanwood, gums, and honey. In its entrepôt period Mergui-Tenasserim also had a reputation for the quality and exports of its rice. But fertile soil was limited to a narrow coastal strip and it is likely locally-grown rice was supplemented by imports from the larger granary areas of Tavoy and Pegu (Collis 1965: 168; Milburn 1813 II: 289-90; Burney 1971 II ii: 207). By the late 1930s the region was a rice deficit area but ideally suited to fruit growing and by then the main rubber producing area of Burma. The irregular and highly indented coastline and island shores, mostly edged by mangroves, constitute rich fishing grounds, yielding sea produce similar to that of the Malay region, while edible birds' nests come from caves in the islands.

Population density has fluctuated in this region mostly because of political factors, but its limited agricultural capacity and comparative remoteness from the major Thai and Burmese political and economic centres ensured it has never had the same demographic potential as the mainland river kingdoms. Even when Tenasserim was famous as an entrepôt, travellers in the region noted that much of it was more the haunt of wild animals such as tigers, elephants, crocodiles and rhinoceros than of man (Kerr 1933: 205; Smyth 1898 I: 310; Gervaise 1989: 50-1).

The peoples of this region are ethnically diverse, reflecting historical events as well as geography, and this ethnic fragmentation serves to undermine political development and any long-term communal cohesion. Much of the population to the north of Tavoy and Mergui has always had a strong Mon component but the people of Tavoy regarded themselves as quite distinct, with memories of a separate identity dating back to the time of the empire of Pagan (Smith 1991: 31; Lieberman 1978: 468, 479). Similar to Tavoy, the population of Mergui was, according to

Henry Burney, 'neither Burmans nor Siamese but a peculiar race with a language of their own' and he gave credence to local traditions claiming the original inhabitants were Arakanese (Burney 1971 II ii: 8, 209). Over time the population also became very mixed with a Portuguese element in it, a Chinese or 'baba' component, and an Arab one (Collis 1953: 212-4). Only after 1760 did the Burman element gain any significance but there were also Indians, Malays, a few Siamese, and a sizeable community of what are now termed Zerbadees (i.e., Burmese Muslims, descendants of the local population and 'coastal Muslims', presumably Muslim Indo-Malays involved in trade) (Andrews 1962: 12; Yegar 1972: 118). Pockets of Pwo Karens were also in the district, principally in the Palaw area to the north of the town of Mergui, though Karens extended to both sides of the isthmus, reflecting their shifting agricultural practices (Ryan 1858: 1; Smith 1991: 430; Smyth 1895: 406-8). Inland a community of Shans survives, possibly descended from a garrison dating from the wars between Burma and Thailand (Smith 1991: 281) or one of the communities from Upper Burma resettled there after the depopulation of the region in the 18th century after the wars with Siam (Spearman 1987: 402, 405). In the south the Chinese, Siamese, and Malay elements increase towards the border and in the mid-19th century the town of Malewan on the southern Burmese border had no Burmans at all (Ryan 1858: 4).

A further ethnic element exists in the islands of the Mergui Archipelago – the so-called sea gypsies, called Mawken by themselves, Salon by the Burmese, and Chao Nam or Chao Lay by the Thais (Forbes 1991: 1020). With a life style similar to that of the *orang laut* of the Malay world further south, the Mergui *mawken* are part of a wider group found in the island fringe of the eastern Andaman Sea. Like their southerly confrères, the Mergui *mawken* appear to have once engaged in the piracy widely associated historically with these people. This ensured the coastal areas south of Mergui remained at times largely deserted in the past (Bowrey

1895: 237-8; Hamilton 1930 II: 68ff). By the 20th century they had become a timid and primitive people, open to exploitation by others, and for decades were themselves at the mercy of pirates based further south (Brown 1907: 470; White 1922: 106-17). Because of government policies they became, after 1947, even more isolated from mainland developments, though under pressure from by Chinese and Sino-Burman patrons and by insurgent groups (Sorenson 1994: 228-9; Lewis 1954: 64-5, see below).

Yet it is possible that they played an even more important role in shaping the history of Mergui as an entrepôt. Similarities in its circumstances to those of the Malay entrepôt of Melaka, are striking. Not only did the *orang laut* have a crucial role in the latter's emergence (cf. Andaya and Andaya 1982: 40) but Mergui, like Melaka, was a safe harbour, relatively easily defensible, among the maze of islands and tortuous channels along the coast. It is therefore not inconceivable that the *mawken* played the role both of pilots into the port and boatmen on the rivers and of patrolmen and protectors (cf. O'Kane 1972: 44). The Persian scribe accompanying the envoy of Shah Sulaiman the Safavid to Siam in the mid-1680s noted:

...the standard form of transport ... is boat. And so boats are the mainstay of the populace, the very pivot of these people's lives. Their boats are their houses as well as their markets. They ride their boats wherever they wish, tie them up alongside one another and do all their buying and selling without going ashore. (O'Kane 1972: 47).

Like the *orang laut*, the *mawken* may also have lapsed into piracy once the fortunes of the entrepôt declined (see below), so that some of the forces shaping the history of Mergui may possibly be regarded as another extension of the Malay world.

Early History

Despite the lack of conclusive evidence for the early history of Tenasserim, it seems likely that a trans-isthmian portage route to reduce the passage by sea was already in use by the second century AD when travellers from the Roman empire to China passed this way (Hall 1992: 192). At that time Tenasserim may have been part of what the Chinese referred to as Tun-Sun, an identification not undisputed by scholars though Paul Wheatley regarded this as most probably referring to Tenasserim (Wheatley 1964: 44-5). Straddling the isthmus, the Tun Sun polity had as its centre a market city some ten *li* from the sea, a place of exchange for traders from across the Indian Ocean with those from the east (Hall 1985: 64-5). This bustling entrepôt situated on the Isthmus of Kra portage attracted the attention of the southern Mekong state of Funan which sought to control trade on both sides of the Gulf of Thailand and have access to seaborne trade from India. By the 5th century Funan's commercial dominance was in decline when new sea routes south were opened round the Malay peninsula so that the trade of the Isthmus of Kra portage area also gradually decreased (Hall 1985: 41, 72).

The portage route did not fall into complete disuse, as Chinese ceramics from the Tang period right up to the 18th century have been discovered in the area (Collis 1953: 227). In the Tang period the rise of Srivijaya in the 7th century brought the upper isthmus and its various crossings within its orbit and Tenasserim may have been one of the ports visited by Chinese pilgrims such as I Ching en route to India from the Srivijayan capital in Sumatra (Ray 1936: 24-5).

From about the ninth century the expansion of Mon trading cities from Lopburi to the Burmese delta probably loosened the Tenasserim coast from Srivijayan control as the region came under growing Mon influence (Hall and Whitmore 1976: 308; Wyatt 1984: 18; Luce and Pe 1939: 272; Aung-Thwin 1985: 104). Wheatley even suggested Tun

Sun was a Mon city, a claim given some support by H. L. Shorto, though Lieberman believed Ye was the most southerly centre of Mon settlement with Tavoy, according to Luce, the most southerly site for Mon inscriptions (Shorto 1963: 583; Wheatley 1961: 17-30, 286, 292; Lieberman 1978: 468; Luce 1953: 9; cf. Bauer 1990: 21, 39). By the 10th century the isthmus had gained further economic significance. This was mainly because of the expansion and increased economic activity of Khmer Angkor as its empire extended into the Chao Phraya valley. This improved access to the trade routes across the isthmus, particularly round Chaiya on the east coast (Hall 1985: 171-6), though Mon hegemony seems to have prevailed further north. Traders and travellers were also possibly more attracted to the isthmian crossings because the waning power of Srivijaya had led to increased piracy in the waters under its control.

When in the 11th century the southern coastal cities of Mon Burma were absorbed by Burmese Pagan, Mergui shared their fate, coming for the first time, about AD 1057, within the Burmese orbit, as it was pushed as far south as Takuapa on the west coast at the terminus of the transpeninsular route to the Bay of Bandon (Hall and Whitmore 1976: 309-10). These port towns became Burmese fiefdoms, some ruled directly by princes of royal blood, Mergui being given to Aniruddha's son, Sawlu (Aung-Thwin 1985: 105, 114).

Although the Burmese had secured domination of the isthmus with little apparent Khmer resistance, they held this position for possibly less than a century (cf. Hall and Whitmore 1976: 3). The fact that the upper isthmus and its hinterland lay on a direct route linked with South India and Sri Lanka began to have greater impact on developments there (Collis 1965: 31), especially after 1070. Then Theravadan Buddhist Sri Lanka became a significant factor in political, religious and commercial developments in both Angkor and Pagan (Hall 1985: 199, 201-5) and seems also to have promoted religious activity in the isthmus itself (Wyatt 1994:

31). The emergence of an apparent three-way contest between Sri Lanka, Angkor, and Pagan for domination of the isthmus and its commerce culminated in a successful Sri Lankan naval raid on Burma, which Hall described as 'the high point of the twelfth century competition for control of the isthmus' (1992: 250). As a result the isthmus entrepôts became largely independent, neutral or possibly even part of an isthmian galactic state centred on Tambralinga (Nakhon Si Thammarat) (Wyatt 1994: 30-1, 35).

At about the same time – the end of the 12th century – new maritime trade routes from China opened further south, by-passing the upper isthmus and its hinterland. This marked a significant change in the history of the upper isthmus. In the words of Hall and Whitmore, 'the upper Malay Peninsula receded from the patterns of power and trade in the island world and was drawn into those of the mainland' (1976: 319).

The period of Thai dominance

Towards the end of the 13th century, after the collapse of Pagan, new autonomous Mon centres, loosely aligned within what Lieberman has called the galactic state of the Kingdom of Ramayana (1978: 461), emerged along the coastline of southern Burma and on the upper isthmus as far south as Mergui (Hall 1977: 166). These exported local produce and served as links in the international entrepôt trade, particularly with the emerging Thai principalities in the lower Menam basin (Lieberman 1987: 172; Harvey 1967: 132-3). This trade became important in helping the Thais throw off the yoke of Angkor and establish the state of Ayutthaya and inevitably Thai interest was attracted to controlling it. According to Phayre (1969: 67), Tavoy and Tenasserim came under Siamese sway in the early 14th century, Harvey claiming the Siamese founded the town of Tenasserim in 1373 with the frontier of Siamese territory drawn at Tavoy (1967: 112, 157). This initial Thai authority over the Tenasserim area seems to have been ephem-

eral because of the upheavals in Siam in the next century. Wyatt (1984: 86) notes that Tenasserim was seized by Ayutthaya by the 1460s and Tavoy in 1488, and this marked the beginning of a lasting Thai interest in the area because of its access to the Indian Ocean and relative proximity to the Thai heartland.

Given the paucity of historical data for this period, it seems most probable that Mergui-Tenasserim, like other coastal states such as Tavoy, Pegu and Martaban, merely reasserted their autonomy to participate in the new era of prosperity dawning in the region. This was generated by the steady build-up in the momentum of maritime trade in the 14th and 15th centuries, when Melaka emerged as the preeminent peninsula entrepôt (cf. Lieberman 1980: 548; 1987: 172). By its paramount position on the convergence of the major maritime trade routes, Melaka facilitated the exchange of major commodities such as Southeast Asian spices for Chinese ceramics and Indian textiles. Inevitably in the growing tide of regional prosperity brought by this maritime trade the upper isthmus port cities were also affected as new and wider links were forged, integrating the economy of the region more closely with that of China and the east and that of India and further west. Old centres such as Mergui-Tenasserim, Tavoy, Mon Pegu and Martaban prospered, the port city of Ye being reclaimed from the jungle by the Mons in 1438 (Lieberman 1980a: 205). These centres became renowned for their shipbuilding, their ships venturing throughout the region and beyond. Traders from Tenasserim were reported as far afield as Ormuz in 1442 (*Imperial Gazetteer* 1908: 292; Reid 1993: 38,42).

This trade and prosperity attracted a resurgent Ayutthaya under King Trailok (1448-88). Denied any claim to suzerainty over Melaka by Ming China's sponsorship, he instead seized control of Tenasserim in the 1460s gaining 'direct access, rather than indirect access through Melaka, to the international trade of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean' (Wyatt 1984: 86). Possession

of Tenasserim as Ayutthaya's Indian Ocean port and Ayutthaya's own position as port on the Gulf of Siam on the networks of trade routes through the Malay Archipelago and South China Sea contributed significantly to Ayutthaya's rise to commercial prominence in the 15th century and later (Pombejra 1993: 127).

By this time the isthmus and mainland states were important markets for Indian textiles and supplied the tin, elephants, precious stones, scented woods and other local luxury products in growing demand by an increasingly stable and prosperous Indian subcontinent. Because of its pivotal function as conduit for the valuable trade in goods from India and Burma for markets in Siam and China, Tenasserim by the opening of the 16th century had been elevated to become the seat of a viceroy, one of the most important official positions in the kingdom (Pires 1944 I: 109-111; Arasaratnam 1984: 122).

As such a powerful and rich province, Mergui was also a significant Buddhist centre, King Trailok himself possibly serving as a high-ranking monk for a brief time while ordaining a large number of monks (Vickery 1973: 66-68). Whether this was purely an act of piety or cloaked more explicitly political motives, the 16th century Tibetan monk, Buddhagupta, testified to the role Mergui played as a centre of Buddhist pilgrimage as well as its relation to Tenasserim, the entrepôt upstream:

In this island [of Dhanasri] also there are very many monks. There is a great stupa of immense proportion ... On the east there is a very big town where there is an enormous assemblage of merchants coming from different countries such as Cina, P' ren gi (=...Firingi) land and India. (Ray 1936: 86)

When Melaka fell to the Portuguese in 1511 the attractiveness of Mergui, as well as

of Ye, Junk Ceylon (Phuket) and other northern peninsular ports was greatly enhanced for Muslim traders. The access these ports provided to transpeninsular trade routes to the Gulf of Siam allowed traders to bypass Portuguese Melaka on their way to Ayutthaya, now the most powerful kingdom in mainland Southeast Asia. As trade continued to expand with China and Japan it was estimated that over eighteen per cent of India's eastern trade was going to the ports of lower Burma and Mergui at the close of the 16th century (W.H. Moreland, as in Lieberman 1980a: 217).

Even the Portuguese were forced to come to the lower Burma ports when their enemies disrupted the supply of foodstuffs to Melaka (Lieberman 1980a: 210, 213; Arasaratnam 1984: 123) and by the end of the 16th century Portuguese trade at Tenasserim, then the main entrepôt for Pegu as well as Siam, had grown considerably. From there the Portuguese exported goods to their settlements along the coast of Madras and Bengal, a significant export being the coconut wine called '*Nype da Tanassaria*' which the Portuguese shipped in great Martaban jars all over India (Linschoten 1885: I, 103). By the second decade of the 17th century Portuguese influence in the Bay of Bengal and along the Burma coast had expanded to such an extent that the Siamese regarded it a threat to the Tenasserim trade (Wyatt 1984: 109).

An even greater and earlier threat to Siam with its prosperous transpeninsular trade was Tabinshweti of the new Toungoo dynasty in Burma. Having recently reunited that country, he had hitherto had only indirect access to this trade via Mon Martaban but after its fall in 1541, he went on to attack Ayutthaya in 1547-1548. Although Mergui did not fall to him then, Ayutthaya was so much weakened that Tabinshweti could set the harbour tolls of Mergui for the Siamese king as part of his price for the release of some high-ranking prisoners (Lieberman 1980a: 213, 217).

Two decades later in 1569 his successor, Bayinnaung, conquered Ayutthaya and

seized Mergui. For the time being Burma then dominated the maritime trade of mainland Southeast Asia. The importance Bayinnaung attached to the isthmus commerce can be attested by the detailed administrative arrangements he made for Tavoy and Mergui. Weights and measures were standardised, special officials appointed to supervise shipping, and accommodation erected for envoys from India, with the crown also profiting from tribute in Burmese commodities for the Indian Ocean luxury trade, such as musk, benzoin and rubies (Lieberman 1980a: 216-7).

The benefits to Burma of control of the coastal trade did not last long, as three years after Bayinnaung's death in 1581, Ayutthaya threw off the Burmese yoke and under the leadership of Naresuan conclusively secured the defeat of the Burmese at Nong Sarai in 1593, when the Siamese also regained Mergui. Tavoy was retaken too and, according to Ralph Fitch in 1599, had become a major source of tin for 'all India', its tin resources much greater than those of Mergui (quoted in O'Connor 1972: 12). With the capture of Tavoy in 1614 by the Burmese King Anaukpetlun this source of riches passed finally out of Siam's commercial orbit (Hall 1977: 275, 359).

Despite this loss, with Mergui firmly under Siamese control again, the 17th century opened on an epoch extraordinarily 'outward-looking' as Siam deliberately fostered an even wider trade with outsiders ranging from Europe to Japan (Pombejra 1993: 128). In this Mergui played a major role as the western gateway to Ayutthaya with the governorship of Tenasserim still considered 'one of the finest appanages of the Siamese crown' (Gervaise 1989: 50), ranked, according to the 15th century Palatine law, as one of the eight great cities of the kingdom (Vickery 1970: 864).

Mergui, as the port to Tenasserim, had significance in its own right, being regarded as 'one of the most beautiful and safest anywhere in the Indies' (Gervaise 1989: 17). It probably appeared then much as it did in this early 20th century account of the

harbour with its view of 'the pagoda-crowned hills of Pataw and Patit on the islands opposite and the distant heights of King Island beyond' (Andrews 1962: 35). The reputation of Mergui for its shipbuilding and timber for refitting vessels cheap and readily available also enhanced its attractiveness (Gervaise 1989: 17). Tenasserim itself at the peak of the transpeninsular trade to Ayutthaya was described in a Persian account of about 1670 as,

... a town of lush greenness ... [with] a population of about five or six thousand householders. The inhabitants are made up of Siamese, Indian Muslims of the Shav'i and Hanafi schools and Hindus and Franks. (O'Kane 1972: 27)

River valleys such as the Tenasserim with their fruit orchards and rice-fields 'backed by wooded hills, ... [were] hardly less beautiful than the outer islands of the archipelago ... [though there were] 'also vast areas of dismal swamp and almost impenetrable forest' (Brown 1926: 140-141). Famous among travellers for its rice and fruit (Choisy 1993: 233), the town of Tenasserim, situated on one side of the river, was walled to enclose an area of about a square mile containing court house, pagodas, warehouses, and hostelries for the various merchants. On the other side of the river was the elephant market (Andrews 1962: 36-7; Collis 1965: 57-9).

From Mergui supercargoes from ships berthing there could go up to Tenasserim to select goods and bring them down in barges for loading on their ships (Collis 1965: 42). Alternatively, ocean-going ships could come up river to Tenasserim and off-load their cargoes which were then carried first in small dugouts further upriver to the village of Jeling. From there they went by carts or porters across the isthmus to various ports on the Gulf of Siam. The principal route seems to have gone through the Maw Daung

Pass down to the lowlands around Prachuap Khiri Khan on the shore of the Gulf of Siam but there was also a route through the Isthmus of Kra through the headwaters of the Lenya River to Chumphon, also of significance for travel to Tavoy (Burney 1971 II ii: 182-3; Smyth 1898 II, 47-52; Collis 1965: 44-5). The name, Chumphon, is derived from the Thai for 'meeting place'. Small boats, carts and elephants were the main means of transport, the journey ranging from six to twenty days, according to season and urgency (Kerr 1933: 212; Smyth 1898 II: 47-52). This mode of transport in such comparatively difficult terrain was feasible because the trade goods were high in value and relatively low in bulk and weight and because transport, while not exactly easy, was safe and well-organised across a Thai-controlled isthmus.

Trade by this time was dominated by ships owned by Muslim Persians and Indians, including a large group of Mughal state officials in Bengal and possibly even some from Aceh. A few Hindus from the Coromandel coast and some Siamese officials, including the king himself, also traded (Prakash 1985: 229; Pombejra 1990: 134; Forbes 1991: 1021). In the 17th century the king's role as trader increased markedly, particularly in the reign of King Narai (1657-1688) (Reid 1993: 249). Virtually all cotton textiles for Siam were supplied by Muslim merchants from Golconda so that in the first half of the 17th century all the major towns en route to the capital were governed by Indian or Persian Muslims. Until about 1680 the *shahbandar* of Mergui and governor of Tenasserim were Muslims, controlling a market which the growing number of Europeans in the region, especially the Dutch, found difficult to penetrate (Prakash 1985: 226-8; Arasatnam 1984: 120-21).

In addition to textiles, imports to Ayutthaya across the isthmus included opium, iron and dyestuffs. Exports entering the Bay of Bengal from Mergui included aromatic woods and gums, mostly destined for the Yemen and Hijaz, tin, ivory, elephants, spices – particularly cardamom.

The latter came mostly from the Mergui-Tenasserim area itself, while Chinese porcelain and Thai Sawanhalok ceramics were trans-shipped out (Forbes 1982; Milburn 1813 II: 289-90).

While some of the expansion of the Tenasserim trade could be attributed to the Portuguese conquest of Melaka, the coming of the Dutch and British to the region was to contribute to its decline as the Straits of Melaka became again a viable and cheaper route for commerce (Forbes: 1982). By the early 1680s the trade of Mergui had declined dramatically. Changing circumstances in India and increased European pressure on the textile trade also played a part, coinciding with changes in the political situation at the court of Ayutthaya and in Mergui itself (Gervaise 1989: 50; Prakash 1985: 229-30).

Paramount among these was the rapid elevation at the Siamese court of the former East India Company employee, the Greek, Constantine Phaulkon, who, like many other foreigners in the seventeenth century, had entered the service of the Siamese king. This enabled him to bestow on his English associates, Richard Burnaby and Samuel White, the positions of governor and *shahbandar* of Mergui, much to the resentment of the resident Muslim community. Under White, Mergui was to develop the trade with Coromandel in Siamese ships built in Mergui and captained by English seafarers, but as much of White's activities were little more than freebooting, the resulting tensions with Golconda caused trouble also for the East India Company as well as tensions between the Company and Siam. This led to costly fortifications of Mergui soon outweighing the revenue from trade (Choisy 1993: 186); then in 1687 the Siamese massacred most of the English community in Mergui, allowing a short-lived French attempt to secure Mergui as a shipbuilding and repair centre.

From this time dates the Anglo-French appreciation of the strategic advantages of Mergui with its links to Melaka, Aceh, Bengal, Sri Lanka, Pegu and the Coromandel Coast. Phaulkon had noted them in his letters to Louis XIV and Phaulkon's contempo-

rary, Sir Joshua Childe, the English East India Company President in Madras, was also aware of them. The Anglo-French rivalry in the region for a strategic base on the eastern shore of the Bay of Bengal began at this time and was to endure for more than a century (Hall 1953: 3; Collis 1965: 96-100, 191; Hall 1977: 369-71, 489). This rivalry also contributed to British opposition in the 19th and 20th centuries to the possibility of a canal across the Kra isthmus; this despite various surveys which indicated the impracticality of such a canal (Fisher 1966: 153, 526).

After 1688 Siam's trade with India declined somewhat, but because Indian textiles were considered essential imports by the Siamese court, Mergui continued as Ayutthaya's main western port with King Phetracha ordering a new ship and two new sloops to be built at Mergui in 1697 for the trade (Pombejra 1993: 263-4). Although the Siam-China trade grew significantly in the 18th century (Wyatt 1984: 127), and Chinese provincial officials increasingly replaced the earlier Chulia ones, even at Junk Ceylon on the west coast (Bowrey 1895: 257), there is no indication that this happened at Mergui. This was part of the Syriam-Martaban run for traders from the Coromandel coast, Madras and San Tome, the last-mentioned port assuming greater significance after 1690, particularly with traders from Siam (Arasaratnam 1984: 125; Bassett 1989: 633, 636). For a time after 1688 Mergui was avoided by country traders but by the second decade of the 18th century it ranked second after Pegu among Southeast Asian ports for the country trade from Madras. Asian shipping dominated the trade; elephants being the preferred export cargo, while the country traders carried mostly tin (Bassett 1989: 636-7).

South of Mergui coastal shipping was hazardous because of the depredations of the *mawken* from the islands, possibly stimulated by the activities of White and his associates earlier. *Mawken* piracy and slave-taking for the Aceh slave market ensured the coast between Mergui and Junk Ceylon was

virtually uninhabited and must have enhanced the attractiveness of the Mergui portage routes (Bowrey 1895: 636-38; Hamilton 1930 II: 37; Smyth 1895: 418).

Tenasserim under the Burmese

The end of Siam's centuries of control over the upper isthmus and of the lucrative portage traffic came in 1760 when a resurgent Burmese force conquered Mergui and the briefly independent states of Martaban and Tavoy (Hall 1953: 3; Lieberman 1978: 478-9). Seven years later in 1767 Ayutthaya itself was forced to capitulate to the Burmese. Though destroyed, it was soon replaced by the new capital downriver at Bangkok which struggled to regain control of the upper isthmus and for more than half a century to maintain control over the southern isthmus. For a time Junk Ceylon (Phuket) was in Burmese hands and even Kedah was drawn into the Burmese orbit (Skinner 1993: 2; Cushman 1991: 8). Only in 1793 did the Siamese abandon serious efforts to retake Tavoy and Mergui, though frontier skirmishes continued for decades thereafter. What these events highlighted was the strategic significance of the upper isthmus and Martaban region for both Burma and Siam, the vulnerability of their kingdoms to whoever was in possession of it, as well as the importance to Siam of continued access to the Bay of Bengal through its remaining Indian Ocean seaports (Koenig 1990: 14, 20-1; Bonney 1971: 165; Kobkua 1988: 17).

For the Burmese Mergui did not have the significance for Indian Ocean trade that it had for the Siamese. Denial to the Siamese therefore rather than rivalry in trade was a more likely factor in Alaungpaya's acquisition of Mergui, though complaints about Siamese officials' obstructing Burmese boats in peninsular ports may have had some effect (Lieberman 1984: 267). Possibly the resources, especially the tin deposits of the region, were of greater significance. The Siamese had worked various deposits from Tavoy to Bokypin in the past as had the Burmese (Burney 1971 II ii: 184; Tremenheere

1886: 283) and the desire to regain access to the wealth of the region may also have had some bearing on the unsuccessful 1793 Thai attack on southern Burma. This was centred not on Mergui but on a rebellious Tavoy though supported by a sympathetic Mergui (Wenk 1968: 72-9). Thai preference for Tavoy over Mergui was still maintained in the 1826 discussions with the British over the future of Tenasserim, when the Siamese revealed they regarded Tavoy as more desirable than Mergui because of its natural resources of tin, sapan and teak wood (Burney 1971 I i: 160).

Once in possession of Mergui the Burmese provincial officials attempted to foster trade on their own account but its days as a major entrepôt were over (Burney 1971 II ii: 208). The establishment of the British settlement at Penang in 1786 off the Malay Peninsula hastened Mergui's decline to merely a local centre and the Thais developed isthmian crossings further south. Rangoon became the more significant port with revenue from trade in 1797 amounting to three times that of Mergui (Koenig 1990: 120), and even that probably reflected the effects of a French trading factory there in the 1780s and of Mergui becoming again a centre for French cruisers and privateers and base for attacks on British shipping during the Napoleonic wars (Milburn 1813 II: 290; Burney 1971 II ii: 205-8).

The old trade conducted by Indian Muslim merchants continued but under the Konbaung dynasty policy of encouraging Chinese traders, Mergui was linked with Rangoon, Junk Ceylon, Kedah and other Malayan ports in the Chinese coastal trade which particularly focussed on the birds nests of Mergui. Some country traders such as James Scott also traded China goods as well as Bengal opium and Madras piece goods (Milburn 1813 II: 290; Forrest 1792: 32). In addition to this, Mergui became the main source of salt fish and *ngapi* (fish or prawn paste) for Ava. Despite considerable depopulation of the area because of conflicts with the Siamese, and a constant drain of manpower for the various projects and wars

of the king, Tavoy and Mergui were far more prosperous than any towns between Rangoon and Ava visited by Burney in the 1820s (Burney 1971 II ii 208; Hall 1974: 209).

Siamese reluctance to accept the loss of the upper isthmus and their various attempts at recapture caused parts of the area to become almost deserted in the cross border raids which continued after the British occupation of Mergui in 1824. Lenya and Bokypin, places of some importance under the Siamese, declined into straggling villages and the prosperity of towns on the other side of the isthmus dependent on the traffic from Mergui atrophied as other isthmus crossings were revived or developed further south (Spearman 1987: 408). The town of Chumphon, once a thriving port, the eastern counterpart to Mergui, became little other than 'a military post' for monitoring Burmese movements and launching cross border raids and its governor was specifically forbidden to trade (Anderson 1890: 395, 399; Burney 1971 II ii 182-3). Crossings between Pungha (Phangnga)/Takuapa and Chaiya on the Ao Ban Don became the main Siamese portage routes as access to the Indian Ocean remained vital for Siamese trade until the rise of Singapore impacted on trade routes (Burney 1971 II iii: 210). Even then until the southern rail line went through in the 20th century these routes retained significance for east coast local trade because of isolation in the northeast monsoon and lack of safe harbours (Smyth 1895: 421).

The Colonial Period

Following the first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-26 Mergui was retained as a district in the new British province of Tenasserim, a distant adjunct of British India, on the initial justification of its being a protective barrier between Siam and Burma. Major Burney (1971 I iv: 765) also revived the argument about the dangers to British shipping from foreign possession of Mergui and the adjacent islands. Once it became apparent, however, that the old portage trade to Siam would not be revived and that the heavy

defense costs against border raids made Tenasserim province a financial liability, the British Indian government contemplated exchanging it with the Siamese and even with the Burmese for some other equivalent territory (Furnivall 1991: 71; Woodman 1962: 99-101).

Under British rule the trade of Mergui declined and that of the old town of Tenasserim virtually disappeared. By 1891 the town had waned to only a small village of fewer than 600 inhabitants with the former fortifications in ruins (Keith 1891: 40). Until Rangoon was annexed by the British in 1853, Moulmein became the main British Burmese trading port to which Mergui products were transported for the inland trade established with the Shan States and China (Smyth 1895: 417). They were also taken south to Singapore, now the preeminent entrepôt for the region and the new destination for shipping from India that had previously gone to Mergui.

Tin mining, which Mr Maingy, the first British commissioner of Tenasserim, had great hopes of reviving attracted no interest from merchants in Moulmein and little from the few Chinese – not the many from the south he hoped for (Furnivall 1991: 65, 76; Tremenheere 1886: 300). What tin mining went on occurred on the southern frontier town of Malewan initially largely as an extension of the tin mining in Ranong started by the Siamese in the 1830s on the southern side of the Pakchan (Burney 1971 IV 1: 63, 84). Hopes for a sugar cane industry developed by Chinese sugar growers coming from Siam likewise came to little (O’Riley 1849: 731-2; Butler 1884: 36). Most Chinese were tradesmen and merchants in Mergui (Malcom 1840: 16), to whom were farmed out the rights to the birds’ nests and the sea produce of the Mergui Archipelago (Ryan 1858: 5; Furnivall 1991: 78; Lewis 1954: 64-5).

It was partly interest in facilitating the import of Chinese labour to Tenasserim that prompted the first brief examination in the 1840s of the feasibility of a canal through the Isthmus of Kra. Such a canal through the borderlands between British Burma and

Siam, it was believed, would improve communication with Hong Kong. The Indian Mutiny in 1857 revived British interest in the idea, as the canal would allow the China squadron faster access to the subcontinent (Kiernan 1956: 137). Pressure was also mounting for British Burma to be the conduit for British trade with inland China, and the Kra route was touted as a way of accessing the Chinese market via Bangkok. A survey undertaken in 1863 by two military engineers from the British Indian army showed the difficulties of cutting a canal but their alternative recommendation of a railway received little support (Fraser and Forlong 1886: 285-96; Woodman 1962: 172-3, 183; Fisher 1966: 153). In 1883 the French De Lesseps revived the idea of a canal for the Siamese king as *‘la route française au Tonkin’* but again nothing came of the idea largely because of the relatively small saving in distance it could offer. What it did achieve was an abiding British concern about retaining command of the seaways between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This underlay the guarantee in the 1909 Anglo-Siamese Treaty that no third party should acquire concessions of strategic significance on the west coast of the Gulf of Siam (Fisher 1966: 153, 156; Kiernan 1956: 146).

Under British administrative control, centred first at Moulmein and then at Rangoon, it was Mergui’s relative isolation – as well as its small population that hampered economic development. As a remote and poorly-paying outpost of British India, Mergui’s lot did not improve with the end of Company rule after 1857 and transfer to the Crown. A road linking Mergui with Moulmein, sanctioned initially by the new Governor of India, was shelved because of the expenses caused by the Mutiny (Marshall 1860 II: 252). Until 1865 all trade with the outer world was carried by a few Chinese junks though a government steamer made irregular appearances. After 1865 the government provided a monthly steamer service from Moulmein to both Tavoy and Mergui; ten years later this became a fortnightly service, by which time other ser-

vices linked it with Chittagong and Penang but even by 1940 the coastline and adjacent islands had never been properly charted (Butler 1884: 9; Tregonning 1967: 145). In 1898 the electric telegraph line was extended to Mergui and a beacon leading into Mergui harbour erected about two years later (Andrews 1962: 13). Access to the hinterland was still mainly by boat. Even after World War I when the government embarked on a major road building programme in Burma, it was estimated that there was 'probably not more than twenty miles of metalled road in the whole district' (Enriquez 1922: 52). By 1940 the railway had been extended from Moulmein to Ye but consistently showed a deficit indicating little prospect of further extension, but by the same time 'a road of sorts' linked Mergui to Tavoy in the dry season and Mergui, Victoria Point, and Tavoy all had airfields (Andrus 1947: 251; Lunt 1989: 65; Christian 1945: 296).

Undoubtedly the isolation of Mergui, hampering economic development, left it in some respects the frontier zone it had been on British acquisition. Across the eastern boundary in the adjacent Thai provinces the situation was little better with a similarly small population and rampant dacoity outside the main settlements at least through the 19th century (Smyth 1898 I: 278; Keith: 1891a: 64). In Ranong to the south, immediately opposite Victoria Point, the situation was generally rather better if only because of Thai sensitivities towards international pressures, particularly that of the British in both Burma and the Malay Peninsula (Cushman 1991: 30-2; Smyth 1895: 535; Tej 1977: 38).

Fishing remained an important industry for the district, with supplies of *ngapi*, salted fish and prawns providing a significant and staple export throughout Burma. This was boosted in 1892 by a pearl boom, carried out first by an Australian company, then by a syndicate of Chinese. The latter were interested not only in pearls but also in mother-of-pearl shell, sea slugs, and sea snails, collected mainly by *mawken* with Filipinos and then Japanese pearl divers operating in

deeper waters (Dautremer 1913: 157-8, 283-4; O'Connor 1905 II: 498; Smyth 1895: 522-4).

Despite the development of tin mining in the west coast Thai peninsular states, tin mining in the Mergui district was still slow in taking off because of the shortage of labour, a lack of water in the dry season, and the poor transport system (Andrews 1962: 14). Only after the World War I increased demand for metals was the government roused to begin some road building in the tin- and wolfram-rich Tavoy area (Enriquez 1922: 51). The tin price boom of 1924-27 provided some stimulus for British capital to enter mining in both Tavoy and Mergui. In the twenty years after 1921 tin output for all Burma (including Mawchi in Karenni) quadrupled but of this seventy-five per cent of tin production and sixty-two per cent of wolfram in 1939 came from only four per cent of the mines. The vast majority of mines were small, suffered from lack of capital, equipment, labour, and transport and used the tributing system where workers were paid for such tin as they could supply (Fox 1974: 75-7).

One critic noted:

These tributing methods were guaranteed to produce more tin, to employ the maximum number of part-time workers, to fit in with the agricultural life of a tin-containing area and to weaken the general future of the industry. (Fox *ibid.* 76)

Limited as these developments in tin mining were, they coincided with an expansion of rubber planting in the area. This allowed a further improvement in transport when the Straits Steamship Company began providing regular services linking all the tin ports from Penang to Moulmein in 1922 (Tregonning 1967: 56), so that a modest improvement in the economy of the region was underway by the 1920s.

Because of natural conditions similar to those in the Malay Peninsula, the Mergui district, both mainland and the islands, developed into the major rubber growing area

of Burma. After 1909 a number of large estates as well as a very large number of small holdings were established so that by 1937 rubber occupied a fifth of the district's agricultural area, representing more than thirty per cent of total rubber cultivation in all Burma (Voon 1973: 219-221; White 1922: 31). Unlike the situation in Malaya or Sumatra to the south, output was relatively unaffected by the International Rubber Restriction Agreement, but yield per acre was low and in the 1930s few estates made profits (Andrus 1947: 52; Voon 1973: 219). Moreover the fact that nearly seventy per cent of the rubber acreage was in estates worked by Indian labour reflected the distaste that Burmese felt for employment as estate workers, or even as smallholders, and the situation did not augur well for the industry once the Indian labour force disappeared after the Japanese occupation, and the policies of the postwar national government were in place (Fisher 1966: 441, fn.26; Fryer 1971: 377). Overall the modest economic improvements in southern Tenasserim in the interwar period were largely undertaken by non-indigenous interests so that prospects were bleak for continued improvement under a nationalist regime in the postwar period.

World War II and the Japanese Occupation

The outbreak of the war in the Pacific in 1941 was to highlight once more the strategic significance of the isthmus. Burma was revealed as poorly defended and Tenasserim virtually indefensible. Nevertheless some effort was made to defend it, though the logistics of this were compounded by British anticipation of invasion through Chiang Mai to cut the Burma Road to China (Chandra 1984: 34) rather more than from Raheng to Moulmein. In fact, at that stage the Tenasserim airfields were of prime interest to the Japanese because of the aircraft cover they provided for Singapore so that seizure of this part of Burma was an early Japanese priority and the rest of Burma only of secondary importance (Chandra 1984: 35;

Lunt 1989: 58). Japanese military activity also led to a revival of Siamese claims to Tenasserim in 1940 so that by early 1941 relations were decidedly hostile along the Burmese border near Kawkaik (Maybury 1984 I: 168; 1985 II: 58; Smith 1991: 290; Brailey 1986: 98-9).

The Japanese invasion of Thailand and Malaya on 7th to 8th December 1941 was followed on 11th December by the beginning of the Japanese offensive on Burma with the seizure by 23 January 1942 of the three Tenasserim airfields which provided fighter cover for bombing raids on Rangoon (Keegan 1990: 263; Allen 1984: 28). Allied air protection of Singapore was reduced and the way also opened to Moulmein for Japanese forces entering by the Three Pagoda Pass.

Apart from the mining of the harbour, Mergui was relatively untouched for the rest of the war apart from incendiary bomb damage mostly to the waterfront just before the Japanese surrender. Similar damage occurred at Tavoy and Ye (Craven and Cate 1953: 237; Maybury 1986 III 92: 137). The people suffered severely from food shortages, malnutrition and related problems, dependent as they normally were on rice imports to make up local shortfalls. A general breakdown of law and order also occurred with dacoity on land and piracy at sea increasingly frequent while a series of massacres of Palaw Karens by Burmese militia ignited long-term ethnic enmity and fuelled later Karen insurgency (Maybury 1986 III: 112-119, 131, 168; Tinker 1967: 47). Some tin mining continued but rubber plantings were tapped heavily to maximise latex output for distilling rubber fuel for motor vehicles because of wartime petroleum shortages (Andrus 1947: 127-8; Voon 1973: 220).

War further highlighted the strategic potential of the isthmus, when the Japanese early revived the prospects of a Kra canal for quicker access to Indian ports across the Bay of Bengal but built instead a trans-isthmian railway from Chumphon to a port made at Kao Huakang near Victoria Point (Christian

1945: 291-7). In use in January 1944, with a capacity of four trains each way a day, it reduced sea traffic through the Straits of Melaka to Rangoon, then under increasing attack by Allied aircraft and submarines (Kirby 1961: 375; Fisher 1947: 85-6). Once the port of Kao Huakang was razed by Allied bombing its use was ended (cf. Fisher 1947: 97; Craven and Cate 1953: 237) and on October 19 the Japanese naval forces at Mergui surrendered, so that the Tenasserim region which had been the first part of Burma affected by war was also the last area to be liberated when it ended (Maybury 1986 III: 112).

Continued marginality in the postwar period up to 1988

In the period following the Second World War Tenasserim remained largely marginal to the political control of the central government up to the 1980s. To some extent the marginality of the area reflected not only its relative neglect by the colonial government but the residual memory of local autonomy in earlier centuries and concomitant defiance of local authority by its inhabitants. These developments, promoted both by the essentially frontier nature the region had assumed and by its ethnic fragmentation, were enhanced by the wartime legacies of anti-Japanese resistance as well as of smuggling and dacoity (Lieberman 1978: 478-9; 1980: 548; Maybury 1986 III: 200). Not only did these merge with insurgent activities in the postwar period they melded with yet another product of postwar Burma – the web of graft and corruption linking rebels, robbers, and rulers, often erstwhile wartime comrades in arms, sundered by postwar political differences but too frequently linked by the animus of personal gain (Walinsky 1962: 383-5). In other words maintenance of the status quo was in the interests of many though not necessarily of the majority living in the region. According to Walinsky (*ibid.* 325):

Too many politicians and officers in

the area were benefiting in one way or another from the situation, and their ties to Rangoon were such that little or nothing was done to change it. Of the political leaders in Rangoon, it was U Ba Swe himself, then Minister of Mines and Defense as well, who had the closest political ties to the area.

Although Walinsky was writing in 1962, comparatively little would appear to have changed in this respect in the thirty years or more that have elapsed since then, except that some of the players have changed, with some wanting even more control of the resources of the region than before.

What was also changing through this period was the political significance of the region. In the early years of the new Burmese state southern Tenasserim was a zone where Rangoon's power reached but imperfectly and competed not only with that of the various insurgent groups entrenched along the border but also to some extent with elements within the neighbouring state of Thailand. By the opening of the 1990s not only were the insurgents being increasingly outmanoeuvred by Rangoon but relations with the Thai state were also becoming more cordial and less fragmented even as Rangoon was forging closer links with China to the north.

Insurgents

In 1945 Tavoy-Mergui had emerged as a CPB (Communist Party of Burma) stronghold under the Tavoyan, Thakin Ba Thein Tin, leader of the anti-Japanese resistance, with CPB bases established in the mountainous jungle region behind Tavoy and near Palaw and Mergui in the late 1940s (Lintner 1980a: 101). By then Karen and Mon separatists were also active in this area, with both groups, but especially the Mon, receiving aid from Chinese Guomindang forces. Their hope of using the Andaman coast to secure supplies from Taiwan for continuing their struggle against

Chinese Communist (CPC) forces highlighted once again the strategic significance of the region (Lintner 1994: 108-9).

Until the end of the 1970s southern Tenasserim remained the arena of these various insurgent groups, including the CPB, U Nu's Parliamentary Democratic Party of the 1970s, the Karen National Union (KNU), the Tavoyan Liberation Front, and the New Mon State Party. While they were sometimes in alliance, more often each strove to take control of the area for itself, reflecting not only ideological differences but often ethnic enmity, such as that between Karen and Burman (Smith 1991: 31, 152, 292-3, 323).

Under pressure the CPB progressively declined but links established with the neighbouring Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) bases ranging down to the Malaysian border allowed it to receive valuable support in armaments and medicine, underlining the continued vulnerability of the Thai state from this area (Smith 1991: 306). It was partly this context which explained growing Thai support for the staunchly anti-communist KNU which, after 1962, controlled the increasingly important black market cross-border trade from Sawta on the Kayah State border to the Maw Daung Pass south of Mergui. As the Karen insurgent leader, Bo Mya, allegedly said in 1976:

We are like a 'foreign legion' for the Thai armed forces. We guard their border and prevent links between the Burmese and Thai communists. (Aung Kin 1980: 104).

Also funding the Karen rebellion was the sale of local timber, until supplies were exhausted, and of antimony and tin, until the collapse of the tin market in the mid 1980s. Timber mills and mines were run jointly with local Thai businessmen in arrangements receiving tacit Thai government support (Smith 1991: 283, 299; Falla 1991: 356). This situation also highlighted once more the value of Burma's border trade and, especially, of the natural resources of this area.

Economic factors

Throughout this time central government control was partially competing with the rebels, not only for tin, but also for marine resources which additionally attracted illegal fishing interests from Thailand. Poor transport and communications with Rangoon continued to hamper better economic and social development despite the expansion of state-owned shipping after 1955. This together with currency controls and dwindling cargoes led the Straits Steamship Company to cease servicing Tenasserim ports after 1962 which only augmented the isolation of the region (Tregonning 1967: 254-8). No new roads or railways were built to the region until the 1990s with the controversial rail link between Ye to Tavoy so that air transport and shipping remained the main means of communication.

The socialist policies of the Burmese government of this time also impaired the economic interests of the tin mining and rubber industries of Tenasserim because of nationalisation, limitations on capital inputs, and substitution of Indian estate and Chinese mine labour with Burmese. It meant there was no incentive to update plant and port facilities although the Korean War temporarily boosted prices and output (Fox 1974: 77; Tinker 1967: 302-3). The fishing industry was similarly hampered. It also had the problem of obsolete equipment and infrastructure and a joint venture of Burmese and Japanese private interests, the Martaban Fishing Company, operating for a time in the waters of the Mergui Archipelago did little to change things (Lewis 1954: 58; Hill and Jayasura 1986: 49), though a cultured pearl farm set up in the Bay of Mergui survived (Taburiaux 1985: 163).

Burma's historic under-utilisation of its marine resources partly explained the increase in illegal fishing in Burmese waters, particularly by Thai fishermen, with 273 Thai trawlers being caught with their crewmen imprisoned in Burmese jails between 1965 and 1976 (Aung Kin 1980: 108). The problem worsened as the 1970s progressed

and official Burmese interest in the fisheries increased. The difficulty was compounded by the fact that until 1980 no clear sea boundary between the two countries had ever been demarcated (Aung Kin 1981: 124). Thai-Burmese relations became somewhat strained with the Thai navy announcing in January 1977 that three gunboats would patrol coastal waters in the Andaman Sea between Ranong and Phuket for the first time and plans were announced for a Thai naval base at Thap Malu Bay, Phangnga Province (Moscotti 1978: 89). A further source of conflict lay in the existence of some 3000 illegal Burmese workers in Ranong Province, working as cheap labour in the numerous tin and coal mines there and constituting seventy per cent of the labour force (Aung Kin 1980: 105).

Rangoon's growing interests in the Tenasserim region in the 1970s reflected the serious economic difficulties the country was then experiencing so that the region's economic potential was scrutinised more closely. Mon-Karen insurgents came under greater pressure on the eastern border as the government opened new mines in Tenasserim Division. The region's marine resources also received greater attention, especially the pearl fisheries of Mergui, the valuable pearl trade becoming one of the most lucrative government agencies and, in the pattern established from the past, passing to the control of Ne Win's son-in-law after his marriage to Sanda Win (Aung Kin 1981: 113, 117; Lintner 1990: 62).

Developments after 1988

The 1988 political crisis in Burma and subsequent military takeover in September led to more intense government interest in the region in both security and economic terms. At this stage south Tenasserim provided one of several escape routes for dissident students fleeing the military junta. Fishing boats took them to Kawthaung (Victoria Point) where they crossed to Ranong on the Thai side of the Paknam. Many also fled to Karen rebel camps along the border with

Tavoy and Mergui becoming a centre for propaganda efforts by the All Burma Students' Democratic Front in 1989 (Lintner 1990: 147; *F.E.E.R.* 7.9.89: 27).

As a consequence the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) government increased its attacks on the insurgent border groups to gain political and economic control of the region, especially after insurgent activity emerged in late 1991 in the Irrawaddy delta region, linked to Karen infiltration of the area and reactivation of old ties with former Karen rebels there. To thwart potential Karen alignment with anti-SLORC Burman groups, Burmese navy surveillance off the delta coast and in the Gulf of Martaban was stepped up to cut logistical support from Karen controlled bases on the Tenasserim seaboard and *tatmadaw* attacks on Karen border bases also increased (E.I.U. 1993 1: 33; Falla 1991: 218-9). The search for illicit arms on fishing boats also served to deprive insurgents of revenue from maritime resources, occasionally revealing the continuing ambiguity of politico-economic interests in the area, such as the exposure of the Sino-Burman Brigadier Aung Gyi as patron-employer of people, presumably *mawken*, collecting birds' nests in the Mergui Archipelago and carrying illicit weapons as well as paying protection money to Karen rebels (*F.E.E.R.* 14.11.91: 26; 3.6.93: 19).

The Open-Door Policy and the continuum of Thai interests

Increased government interest in the region coincided with the adoption of the so-called SLORC 'Open Door Policy', focussing largely on freeing up the economy and including the legalisation of border trade (Mya Than 1992: 53, 55-6). This was to have far-reaching ramifications for southern Tenasserim, as legal border trade would bypass the various insurgent groups profiting for so long from the government's old economic policies. For the Karens it meant an undermining of their position and strength as they became increasingly irrelevant to the Thais as closer

bonds were established between Rangoon and Bangkok after 1988 when significant logging concessions were granted to Thai timber companies as well as sanction to official border trade.

The strong trade relationship developing at this time with Thailand allowed a reassertion of Thai historic interest in the resources of the area and included not only timber concessions but fishing arrangements, generating reputedly US \$20 million in fees for the Rangoon government (E.I.U. 1991: 1, 34). They were also of considerable economic significance for Thailand, given the earlier closure of its own forests for logging and the needs of Thailand's voracious fishing industry.

Of even greater significance, for both Thailand and Burma, was exploitation of the rich natural gas reserves in the Gulf of Martaban to be developed in a joint venture by the California-based Unocal, Total of France, and a subsidiary of the Petroleum Authority of Thailand. A cornerstone in a strategic plan for meeting Burma's oil and natural gas needs, the venture was also intended to earn much-needed revenue from sales to Thailand through a pipeline across the upper isthmus north of Tavoy through Mon territory to Ratchaburi in Thailand (F.E.E.R. 13.7.95: 65). For Thailand, historically poor in petroleum reserves, the project was seen as only a beginning as a second project was soon under consideration to tap the Yetagun reserves in the Andaman Sea by another pipeline to Ranong and Krabi (E.I.U.: 1994, 1, 26).

These developments significantly boosted the economic significance of this part of the Thai coastline and with the growing economic links with Kawthaung as well, local Thai business interests and the Fourth Army floated a plan in 1993 to make Ranong Province a 'special economic zone'. In 1996 the Industrial Estates Authority of Thailand was considering the feasibility of extending this zone to include an industrial estate the Burmese government was planning for Tavoy (*Bangkok Post Weekly Review* 13.9.96). The concurrent expansion of the Thai tourist

industry along the coast from Phuket as far north as the Burmese island of Thaytay Island off Kawthaung, plans for a naval base at Krabi, for developing the Southern Seaboard and for trans-isthmian road communication between Krabi and Khanom showed the quickening of Thai interest in the area it had once controlled in the distant past (Arthit 1994; E.I.U. 1994, iii: 21).

For the Burmese regime these developments meant economic benefits as well as enabling the government to increase pressure on this historically recalcitrant region and its peoples. Timber concessions to the Thais hurt Karen insurgent coffers. Foreign fishing rights punitively prohibited local people in the Tavoy-Mergui area from fishing where they had fished for generations while entire villages in the Mon-Ye area were displaced for the Martaban oil pipeline and local villagers conscripted for work on the rail line, paid work on the pipeline being reserved for SLORC supporters. Further south Karen porters from Mergui were impressed for *tatmadaw* attacks on nearby KNU border camps (Falla 1991: 218-9; Lintner 1990: 179; F.E.E.R. 12.5.94: 64; 15.8.96: 66; Hazelton 1994: 5).

The continuation of Burmese military onslaughts on ethnic insurgents on the Thai-Burmese border and related incursions by Burmese troops into Thai territory inevitably precipitated tensions which threatened the wider economic relationship. In December 1992 border relations became particularly fraught along disputed sections of the boundary between Ye and Songhla Buri and along the Tha Sae district in Chumphon province. Thai memories of past Burmese depredation revived to fuel the tension, diffused eventually by the unprecedented intervention of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Maisrikrod 1993: 347; Hazelton 1994: 4; E.I.U. 1993, i: 33; Buszynski 1994: 729). Growing Chinese economic and political influence in Burma and competition with Thai interests served only to heighten Thai sensitivities.

Expanding Chinese interests

The relationship between Burma and China grew rapidly after government suppression of the 1988 Rangoon democracy demonstrations. Armaments deals with the Chinese vastly strengthened *tatmadaw* forces against dissidents and insurgents but there was also an almost exponential expansion of the Chinese role in the Burmese economy, Chinese commercial interests penetrating as far south as Tenasserim by 1991 with Andaman Sea prawns trucked to Ruili in southern China (*F.E.E.R.* 14.4.91: 55). Later developments suggested a Chinese interest in Burma's offshore petroleum reserves in the Andaman Sea (Steinberg 1993: 3).

The relationship with China also encroached on that being forged with Thailand. Not only were Thai consumer goods on the Burmese market undermined by cheaper Chinese ones but timber concessions to Thais were revoked in 1992 and at the end of 1993 fishing rights granted to Thai fishing companies suspended, with Chinese fishing vessels replacing Thai ones on Burmese waters. Harsh penalties were put in place for both foreign and Burmese nationals impinging on specified blocks of water, termed Exclusive Economic Zones (E.I.U. 1994,i: 43).

Wider regional concerns

What was also causing concern to Burma's neighbours was evidence of China's promise of increased military and economic aid to Burma in exchange for access to the Indian Ocean through naval bases, an interest foreshadowed in a 1985 Chinese document proposing China's becoming a two-ocean naval power (Steinberg 1993: 3). Chinese aid enabled the building of five new ports on Burma's coastline from Kawthaung to Sittwe in northern Arakan. In southern Tenasserim, Kaidan Island off Mergui became a base for new Burmese patrol boats under Chinese instructors and Zetdetkyi Island off Burma's southernmost point at Kawthaung a joint China-Burma listening post so that as the

20th century waned this region was gathering new international and strategic significance (*F.E.E.R.* 16.12.93: 26; 22.12.94: 23; 6.11.97: 17-18).

It was not only the Thais who were concerned but others in the region and further afield. With the security the *pax Britannica* had once offered to all those on the Indian Ocean rim long gone, India now with ambitions of its own in the Indian Ocean, indicated unease about the nature of China's naval aid to Burma. A particular issue was the refurbishing of naval facilities on Burma's Coco Island and installation of radar surveillance equipment close to India's naval base in the adjoining Andaman Islands. India's seizure of alleged Chinese surveillance vessels carrying the Burmese flag in August 1994 was an intimation and confirmation of these concerns (Steinberg 1993: 5; Boucaud 1994; E.I.U. 1994, i: 37; *F.E.E.R.* 20.10.94: 15; 22.12.94: 23). Indonesia also registered disquiet because its northern province of Aceh in Sumatra is not so far from these developments and Japan was also known to be concerned because it relies on these waters being kept open for vital Middle Eastern petroleum imports (Mya Maung 1994: 459; Badgley 1993: 158; E.I.U. 1993 i: 32). For Malaysia and Singapore it is also essential that the Straits of Melaka be kept open for sea traffic. Both have also invested heavily in Burma with even a Malaysian interest in tourist resorts on islands off the coast of Kawthaung. ASEAN economic and strategic interests in Burma and particularly those of Thailand in the Tenasserim and Andaman coast, in part only, offset Chinese interests, as in fact does Burma's membership in ASEAN in 1997.

Historically the isthmus and the neighbouring Tenasserim coast have tended to play a more prominent role in wider regional developments at times when strong states have existed in Burma and Thailand. These times have also tended to coincide with the existence of an assertive China. Moreover, since the end of the Cold War geopolitical patterns in this part of the world are reverting to ones where regional players

predominate – not external ones such as Britain in the *pax Britannica* days or the United States more recently. In consequence, highly strategic areas and ones rich in resources, such as the upper isthmus region, must inevitably be drawn into more mainstream activities. The Burmese government is now in control of more of the territory of Burma than any post-colonial government before it, and this comes at a time when an economically resurgent Thailand aspires to a much stronger role in Southeast Asia. Taking these facts into consideration, it seems likely that the Tenasserim coast will play an increasingly pivotal, rather than peripheral, role in events in this part of the Indian Ocean littoral.

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