

The Condition of Cotton Cultivation During Late Konbaung Period

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Abstract

The cotton was the staple cash crops of Myanmar since mid-Konbaung period. It was the major export item of Myanmar in Sino-Myanmar over land trade. The major cotton cultivating areas such as Sagaing, Meiktila and Myingyan yielded cotton not only for domestic hand looms but for Chinese merchants. Since the time of King Badon, cotton becomes the item of royal monopoly. During King Mindon's reign cotton fell under total monopoly of the king who appointed agents to buy raw cotton. This paper is an attempt to discuss the situations of cotton cultivation and cotton cultivators. During later Konbaung the discussion is also made on the ruin of cotton cultivation in the time of the collapse of agrarian economy after the outbreak of Myingun rebellion.

Keywords: economic history

Introduction

Many scholars had written papers and dissertations on economic history of Konbaung Period. Some of them made a brief discussion on cotton cultivation of that period. Accordingly, the main purpose of this paper is to fill up the gaps of the economic history of Konbaung Dynasty.

Cotton Cultivation during Late Konbaung Period

The cultivation of cotton is fell under *ya* dry cultivation. Therefore their economic life had depended on the weather situation. In addition, the domination of local headmen, taxation and exploitation of crown agents in late Konbaung Period affected the economic life of cotton cultivators. In the cotton growing area, the raw cotton or coarse cotton were used as the item of the payment of tax. During King Badon's reign, the local headmen of cotton tracts submitted the list of the yield of cotton to *myo-tha-gyi*-town officer whenever they succeeded the *tha-gyi* office. Following instance from the land roll of Taywin-daing Myo in 1784 shows:

when there is a succession to the position of subordinate *tha-gyi*, one roll of cotton quota is submitted and matter reported to the *myo-tha-gyi*.¹

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The above mention land roll of cotton was submitted by the cultivators to *tha-gyi*. The land roll of Ywa-tha Myo in 1788 mentions that;

The crown tax is 5 *kyats* of copper per plot of the dry cultivation, average 50 *kyats*, headman's share 25 *kyats* and 1 *viss* of cotton for young men to write.²

When traced, the cotton was grown in Myanmar since Bagan Period. It became the cash crops since king Badon's reign. It was exported to China as an important trade item as well as used by the local weaving industries which spread along the Ayeyarwaddy riverine area, stretching Nga Mya Gyi in the northern to Shwedaung Myo in the south.³

Thus, King Badon extracted revenue not only from the cotton cultivators, but from the weaving and related business. Sittan of Talok Myo, 1788, reveals that;

Each 150 houses of the hereditary weavers is divided into four units (*taing*). 14 roll of cotton cloth (must be paid) per list of weavers and the same as average and headman's share. There are four indigo dye pots per 150 houses and each pot pays 50 *kyats* in weight of indigo dyed yarn and the same as average and headman's share. Mi Win Tha calculates and collects and dues of the hereditary weavers and submits them as crown revenue to the authorities concerned. Half of the average and Headman's share is taken by the writers and half by the collector.⁴

The above mentioned evidence mentions that the king imposed tax not only on the weavers but on the possession of indigo pots.

In addition to the payment of above mentioned regular taxes, the cultivators particularly *athis*, had to pay miscellaeous taxes such as *dasamabaga*-tithe and *hsenahmu-mintaing*-twelve items to be submitted to the king.⁵ Owing to the exhaustion of the economic resources and loss of Bago Province after the Second Anglo-Myanmar War, the new King Mindon Min abolished the customary taxes and introduced *thathameda*-income tax. In order to collect *thathameda*, the king ordered towns and village headmen to

¹ Frank W. Trager and William J.Koenig, *Burmese Sit-tans, 1764-1826; Records of Rural Life and Administrations*, with the Assistance of Yi Yi, William, J. Koenig (trans), Tucson, The University of Arizona Press, 1979, p-280 (Henceforth: Trager and Koenig, 1979)

² Trager and Koenig, 1979, 280

³ John Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy from the Governor-General of India to the court of Ava in the year, 1829*, London, Henry Colburn, 1829, p.337 (Henceforth: Crawford, 1829)

⁴ Trager and Koenig, 1979, 341

⁵ U Maung Maung Tin, *Shwenanthone Wawhara Abhidan*, Yangon, Yapye Publishing, 2005, p.330 (Henceforth: Maung Maung Tin, 2005)

collect the list of original households and additional households and total population without omission. The king would like to prevent from tax evasion and embazzlement of provincial officials and headmen.⁶ The difficulty of the assessment of *thathameda* was to get the accurate number of households. As a result, the actual imposition of tax was different from one place to another. In this condition, the local officials were imposed to fix the rate of *thathameda* tax. According to evidence collected so far, one people lived in the area where the *Ya* cultivation was favourable such as Meiktila, Natmauk, Myingyan, etc had to struggle to pay *thathameda* tax in various ways. They usually mortgaged their lands to pay tax. Some poverty-stricken people petitioned local monk leaders. For example, *athitaing*⁷ in Taungtha and Myingyan, on 23 November 1861, submitted their petitions to local monk leader *Gaing-ok Sayadaws* of the region to write epistle to *Hluttaw* to exempt the payment of tax for that year.⁸ However, *Hluttaw* did not exempt the payment of tax. In the same year, *thathameda* tax imposed from Taungtha and Nyaung-ok townships totalled 6100 kyats. The tax collected from Yindaw and Yanaung townships in Shwepyi Yan-aung Cavalry District (East) one of the principal cotton growing areas, amounted 1250 kyats and 19,460 kyats respectively.⁹ On the contrary, local monk leaders, under the supervision of Thuddhama Council, performed the duties to supervise the local headmen to assess *thathameda* tax. On 10 August 1864, King Mindon gave the duty of supervising the imposition of *thathameda* tax to Salin Sayadaw, Madaya Sayadaw, Myadaung Sayadaw and Thingaza Sayadaw in the separate parts of the kingdom¹⁰. Sayadaws made instructions to local monk leaders to admonish the people to pay taxes.¹¹ Some officials omitted the actual number of households and increased the number of destitute families.¹² Such

⁶ *The Royal Orders of Burma (A.D.1598-1885)*, Edited, compiled, translated and annotated with long preface by Dr. Than Tun, Part.IX (A.D. 1788-1806), Kyoto, The Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 1989, pp.664-65 (Henceforth: *ROB*, IX, 1989)

⁷ The administrative unit where commoners resided.

⁸ *The Epistles of Gaing-Oks, Myingyan and Taungtha, Parabaik*, MS, Dhammayon Monastery Collection, Meiktila, Collection (Henceforth: *Parabaik* MS DMC)

⁹ *The Order Relating to Thathameda Tax, Parabaik* M.S, 1861, Department of History, Mandalay University, Collection (Henceforth: *Parabaik* MS, History MUC)

¹⁰ *A Receipt of the Letter of Thuddhama Sayadaws to Collect Thathameda Tax 1235 M.E, 1783 AD, Parabaik*, M.S, Meiktila University Library Collection, No.250 (Henceforth: *Parabaik* M.S MULC)

¹¹ Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.123 (Henceforth: Thant Myint-U, 2001)

¹² *Parabaik*, M.S, MULC

problems were more apparent in Meiktila region. The cotton cultivators become the victims of heavy taxation.

As mentioned earlier, cotton became the most important cash crop since King Badon's reign. Myanmar raw cotton attracted the demand of Chinese market as well as the attention of the British East India Company.¹³ The important role of cotton cultivation and trade did not diminish and even stronger in King Mindon's reign. After the Second Anglo-Myanmar War, Myanmar lost the revenue of maritime trade and of the wet-rice cultivation of lower Myanmar.¹⁴ Therefore King Mindon made utmost effort to extract and sought the way to boost agricultural production. He practiced a strict monopoly on some important trade items such as teak, petroleum, precious stones and cotton. He encouraged the cotton cultivators to increase production. The king even forced the cultivators and Crown servicemen from Shwepyi Yanaung Cavalry District, Myingyan, Sagaing, Chaung-U, Alon who used to growing of other crops than cotton, to grow cotton.¹⁵ They faced with the problems because growing cotton was not get much benefit for them.

Before the establishment of Mandalay, Amarapura was crowded with the various merchants and agents including cotton traders and agents. The king appointed his agents to facilitate the monopoly of cotton trade. Henry Yule, when visited Amarapura as the secretary of Arthur Phayre's Mission in 1855, witnessed the thriving cotton trade and said that the Chinese merchants often to make advances to the cultivators and taking the produce of the cotton in return. After the introduction of royal monopoly on cotton, these advances were made entirely by the king. He also noted that the present rate paid by the king to cultivators was twenty *kyats* of silver per 100 viss, and the rate at which he disposed of cotton at the capital was from forty to fifty *kyats* of silver for the same quantity.¹⁶ The king practiced strict control on the cotton cultivators. They were not allowed to sell their produce except the agents appointed by himself. Thus the cultivators were exploited at least 20 *kyats* of silver by the king whenever they sold 100 *viss* of paddy.

¹³ Dr Khin Maung Nyunt, *Burma's (Myanmar's) Cotton trade under Burmese (Myanmar) King*, Yangon, Myanmar Historical Commission, 2004, pp.63-64 (Henceforth: Khin Maung Nyunt, 2004)

¹⁴ John Nisbet, *Burma under the British Rule and Before*, Two Volumes, Westminster, Archibald Constable & Co Ltd. 1901, Vol I, p.305 (Henceforth: Nisbet, 1901)

¹⁵ Dr. Toe Hla, *Konbaung Khit Kyeilet Luhmu Sibwa Bawa (The Socio-Economic Life of Rural Area during Konbaung Period 1752-1760)*, Yangon, Myanmar Historical Research Department, 2004, p.94 (Henceforth: Toe Hla, 2004)

¹⁶ Henry Yule, *A Narrative of the Mission sent by the Governor-General of India to the Court of Ava in 1855*, London, Oxford University Press, 1968 (Reprint), p.144 (Henceforth: Yule, 1968)

It is necessary to estimate their loss by referring the list of cotton grown in Sagaing and Alone township in 1873.

Table - I
List of Cotton produced from Alon and Sagaing Townships

Alon Township	500,000 viss
Chaung-U Hse-ywa	200,000 viss
Shwe Yin Mar	200,000 viss
Cavaliry Villages in Southern Sector	120,000 viss
Sagaing Township	1,000,000 viss
Total	2,020,000 viss

Source: San San Win, 2013, 48

If the cultivators of above mentioned regions were forced to sell their produce to the king, they lost 404,000 *kyats* of silver coins. In addition, the king ordered, on 19 April 1871, to collect ten percent of produce of cotton cultivators.¹⁷ In this situation, King Mindon assigned some village headmen to purchase cotton from their villages. In 1871-72, the cultivators from Sagaing township trade to sell their cotton to the village headmen at the rate of between eight and nine *kyats* (of silver coin) per 100 *viss*. The village headmen handed over these cotton at the rate of ten *kyats* to the town office of Sagaing. So, the cultivators lost between one and two *kyats* whenever they sold their cotton to the headmen.

In some cases, the village headmen could not collect the cotton under estimated amount. It is partly due to the changes of weather or visit of drought. The cotton bought by the *thagysis* were sent to the warehouses of the king. King appointed four agents to receive the cotton from *thagysis*. They were Nga Saw and Nga Yun from Magyizin village and Nga Paw Ke and Nga Chein from Tindeik village. They took charge on the transportation and inspecting of cotton brought by headmen.¹⁸ All of the raw cotton were accumulated at Sagaing jetty where the warehouses were opened by the king. According to the account of Yule, it is known that income of king from cotton export in 1855 alone was amounted to £ 225,000.¹⁹ However the cultivators could not enjoy the benefit of thriving cotton trade due to the exploitation of headmen and agents. Some needy cotton cultivators sold their

¹⁷ *ROB*, IX, 1989, 742

¹⁸ *List of Cotton Purchased from Sagaing Township, Parabaik*, M.S, Department of Religions Affairs, Gaba Aye Pagoda, Yangon, Collection, No.171 (Henceforth: *Parabaik*, M.S DRAC)

¹⁹ Yule, 1968, 149

cotton in advance. They could not fetch the market price. Although Chinese and Indian merchants had settled to buy cotton by paying reasonable price, the cultivators could not sell their surplus produce because the transportation of cotton from one place to another was strictly prohibited. No one could accept or buy the cotton without royal permission.²⁰

Not only the cotton cultivators, but also weavers suffered economic hardship. As mentioned earlier, they had to be imposed taxes by the king. As the silk was imported from China in large quantity in King Mindon's region, the weavers around the royal capital used silk to produce expensive textile. Some *Kathe* and Mahomedans engaged in dyeing and silk-spinning.²¹ However the weavers of rural areas could not afford to produce expensive silk fabrics.

Owing to the uncertain weather situations and exploitation of king's agent, the cotton cultivators were forced to mortgage or sell their *Ya* lands to ease their problems of the payment of taxes or debts or other requirements. Some mortgaged their land to buy oxen,²² some for buying staple foods.²³ The deeds were concluded under various agreement between mortgagers and mortgagees. The reasons of mortgagees were in need of money,²⁴ to settle debt,²⁵ to buy food, to initiate the children, etc. Indeed, the king allowed to reclaim any vacant land or waste land to boost the production of cotton and other crops. The cultivators, however, did not want to take risk by reclamation of land under various reasons. They were;

1. fees or revenue to be paid to respective *thu-gyis* for reclamation,
2. fees for hiring labourers.
3. the vacant lands usually located some miles distance from the village of cultivators,
4. the possible poor, yield
5. possible situations to be faced with the danger of wild beasts, and
6. potential occasion to be faced with the transport problem.²⁶

²⁰ *Parabaik*, M.S, BRAC (No.161)

²¹ Yule, 1968, 156

²² *Ya-land Mortgage Deed of Maung Kauk*, 4 June 1836, Palm leaf Manuscript MS Dr. Khin Saw Oo, Lecturer, Department of History Mandalay University Collection, No.25 (Henceforth: KSOC)

²³ *Land Mortgage Deed of Shin Hnwe*, 6 June 1845, *Parabaik* MS. No.13, KSOC

²⁴ *Land Mortgage Deed of Me Soe Khaing*, 11 May 1892, *Parabaik*, M.S, No 1 Dr. San San Win Associate Professor, Department of History, Mohnyin University Collection, (Henceforth: *Parabaik*, M.S SSWC)

²⁵ *Land Mortgage Deed of Ko Lin*, May 1879, *Parabaik*, M.S, SSWC

²⁶ Toe Hla, 2004, 103-104

Therefore, those who lost their *Ya* land through mortgage or selling became the landless cultivators or tenants. They could not afford to reclaim new land. Some poverty-stricken cultivators who did not want to mortgage or take risk to sell their cotton without permission. Following table reads;

Table - II
The List of Cultivators and the price of Cotton

Name of Cultivator	Date	Type of Money	Total Value (per 100 viss)
Maung San Tin	22 Apr 1841	Ywet-ni	6 ²⁷
Maung Nyunt	15 Jan 1849	Ywet-ni	20 ²⁸
Maung Kala	26 July 1865	Silver Coin	16 ²⁹
U Chit Pu	30 Sept 1886	Silver Coin	20 ³⁰
Ko Swe Pwint	25 March 1888	Silver Coin	8 ³¹
Ko Lu Maung	8 March 1889	Silver Coin	10 ³²

Not only the cotton cultivators, but also weavers could not get benefits from the thriving cotton trade and weaving industry. Before the massive infiltration of foreign textile in King Badon's reign, the people of rural areas and urban alike mostly depended on the products of cottage industries. The using of home looms spread as far to the north in Kachin hills, south to the primitive weaving industries of Kayin people and east to the Shan Hills. In central Myanmar along Ayeyarwaddy Basin, the weaving industries deeply overwhelmed the everyday life of the rural communities. Even in this situation, the domestic weavers could not get much profit from their work due to various reasons. Firstly, almost all of the common people could not afford valuable textile pieces. For instance, a silk *paso* was as worth as 7 *kyats* of silver while the value of *me-paso*-coarse cotton *paso* was on 5 *mus* in Amarapura period. The common people could afford to use the latter. Naturally, almost all of the domestic looms, except that of royal Capital which produced silk fabrics, were not able to rivest expensive silk in their business. The price of raw silk was as worth as 25 *kyats*³³ per skein in 1799.³⁴

²⁷ *Cotton Selling Deed of Maung San Tin*, 22 April 1841, *Parabaik*, M.S Ye-U U Thaug Collection, (Henceforth: *Parabaik* M.S, UTC)

²⁸ *Cotton Selling Deed of Maung Nyut*, 15 January 1845, *Parabaik*, M.S, UTC

²⁹ *Cotton Selling Deed of Maung Kala*, 31 January 1849, *Parabaik*, M.S, UTC

³⁰ *Cotton Selling Deed of U Chit Pu*, 26 July 1865, *Parabaik*, M.S, SSWC

³¹ *Cotton Selling Deed of Ko Swe Pwint*, 30 September, 1886, *Parabaik*, M.S, SSWC

³² *Cotton Selling Deed of Ko Lu Maung*, 25 March 1888, *Parabaik*, M.S, SSWC

³³ Toe Hla, 2004, 153

As the value of a *tical* of gold was as worth as 18 *kyats* of silver³⁵ the average value of a silk *paso* was equivalent to about one *tical* of gold. Thus, the common people could afford to wear *me-paso*.

The second reason of obtaining less profit of weavers was the lack of secured markets. The looms of cottage industries, scattering throughout the country, produced only for local consumption. As they produced under the motive of self-sufficient system, their produces could not compete against the foreign textile. In addition, they were imposed taxes by the king. Not only weavers, but also those engaged in indigo boiling business were liable to pay taxes to the king.³⁶ Anyway, the needy weavers were exploited by money-lenders in various ways. For instance, Ma Yin Min from Meiktila township was in need of money for marriage of her son Nga Shwe Taw. She borrowed 50 *kyats* of silver from *Thandawzin* Min-herald Min Maha Mintin Minkyaw. She promised *Thandawzin* Min to settle the borrowed money with 100 fine *me-ba-chi pasoes*-loincloth woven with standard cotton. In other words, she had to submit 100 *pasoes* at the price of 5 *mus* per piece. Another deed of borrowing paddy mention that Mi Pyu from Shwebo District borrowed two baskets of paddy for her consumption. She promised to dye 30 *ticals* of cotton yarn before she settle her debt. In July 1827, Shin Khaing was in need of money and borrowed 16 *kyats* of silver from Me Thet She. In this case, Shin Khaing agreed to render his monthly service in the weaving loom of money-lender.³⁷

During King Mindon's reign, the reformation on the customary economic performances was carried out by the king. Spinning mill and weaving machine were established under his reformation programmes. However, these textile mills, like the of other factories, were supposed to be the show pieces. No one knew the marketing of the products of these factories. The evidence shows that the king donated the products of his textile mills to the monks and novices for robe. However, the cotton cultivators who took the advance from the royal brokers were forced to submit their cotton by the king. Although the king noticed the atrocities of his brokers and ordered not to enforce the cultivator to submit their produce, the royal agent, brokers and merchants, threatened the cultivators to extract cotton as much as possible. Some local monks summoned the brokers to make pledge to pay reasonable price without any embazzlement or committing

³⁴ Toe Hla, 2014, 254

³⁵ Trager and Koenig, 1979, 280, 341

³⁶ Toe Hla, 2014, 176-77

³⁷ Toe Hla, 2014, 187

atrocities. In the beginning of the reign of King Mindon, not only Myanmar brokers but also Chinese and Indian merchants involved in the cotton trade.³⁸

Although the textile industry developed to some extent in late Konbaung Period, the cotton cultivators and weavers did not have much profit from their business. The king, largest wholesale trader of cotton trade, the merchants, and agents enjoyed the profit of cotton enterprise. The socio-economic life of cotton cultivators was disrupted by the outbreak of political instabilities in the second half of King Mindon's reign.

Conclusion

Kongbaung period saw the apex of cotton cultivation. The belt of central Myanmar, consisting Lower Chindwin District, Sagaing, Myingyan, Talok, Shwepyi Yanaung Cavalry District (East and West), Pyawbwe, etc became the major cotton growing areas. The cotton produced by these areas were distributed for cottage industries of central Myanmar and were exported to the Chinese market. Sagaing was the major emporium of cotton trade where the raw cotton were ginned, cleared and packed into bails for shipment to Chinese market via Bhamo. According to the contemporary sources of King Badon's reign, massive amount of cotton was exported to China. During that time, the royal monopoly was partially practiced. Thus the cotton trade attracted not only to the Chinese merchants but to the European visitors of these days.

When the royal monopoly was practiced since the time of King Mindon's reign, cotton became one of the important items along with teak, gems and earthoil to be categorized as the monopolized items. King Mindon relied on these items after the loss of lower Myanmar the source of revenue. King Mindon appointed agents to purchase cotton, and forced the cotton cultivators to sold their crops to the royal warehouses.

As the cotton is grown in tropical Myanmar, the frequent visit of drought and destruction of pests devastated the cotton plantations. The people were vulnerable to the various taxation, summoning of corvee labourers and other problems which threatened the stability of socio-economy of rural areas. Particularly, the Myingun-Myinkhondaing Rebellion of 1866 spread into major cotton growing areas. Another cause which help decline of cotton industry was the infiltration of imported goods. After the Second Anglo-Myanmar War, the cheap textile known as Thayet-hte-the fabric imported via Thayet-myo,

³⁸ *Cotton Selling Deed*, 6th Wanning Tabodwè, 1323 M.E. *Parabaik*, M.S Dr Mi Mi Hlaing, Associate Professor, Department of History, University of Distant Education Collection, (Henceforth: *Parabaik* M.S, MMHC)

were imported into Mandalay and Upper Myanmar. The people of urban and rural areas were greatly attracted by these imported textiles.

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