

Understanding prostitutes and prostitution in democratic Burma, 1942–62

State jewels or victims of modernity?

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Abstract: Prostitution in Burmese society, as in many South East Asian countries, is a taboo subject. Unlike prostitution in countries such as Thailand, however, prostitution in Burma does not attract strong media or scholarly debate. The state and the media in Burma, during both colonial and post-colonial periods, have tended and tend to see the problem of prostitution as one of ‘others’. Colonialism, a decline in morality and the corruption of women influenced by modernity or Western culture have often been portrayed as the culprits. This article analyses the Burmese terms for prostitutes and examines how prostitution was portrayed by the print media between 1942 and 1962, during which time the press was thought to have enjoyed a certain degree of freedom. Seen as a threat to the British troops during the colonial period, prostitutes were subject to controversial medical screenings; yet, seen as victims of modernity during Burma’s parliamentary period (1948–62), they were often left on their own to ‘resurrect’ their morality.

Keywords: prostitution; morality; Burmese press; Prime Minister Nu; Buddhism

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National hero of Burma, Aung San, once compared his nation to a prostitute, a term a Burmese public speaker would generally avoid.¹ When

¹ It is expected in Burmese custom that a speaker will use apologetic words before he or she utters profane ones. ‘Prostitute’ is one such word, and phrases such as နားနဲ့ မနား၊ ဝါးနဲ့ နှာဝါး။ [Nà né ma na hpa wà né na ba], meaning ‘don’t listen with your

attempting to encourage his followers – who had gathered to listen to what would turn out to be his final public speech – to have extra determination in rebuilding the country on the brink of independence, Aung San deliberately chose a word as crude as ‘prostitute’ so that his followers would always remember his message.² He achieved his goal. Many years later, his message was still remembered. Indeed the word ‘prostitute’ became politically charged, used in reference to any government’s shortcomings. Critics of the post-independent Anti Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) government led by Prime Minister Nu, referred to a Burma with few employment prospects and crippling social, economic and political problems as a ‘prostitute’ country.³ Aung San used the word prostitute as a signifier for laziness and unaccountability, and the term in those contexts was deployed as a reference not just by the government’s critics but also by the government itself. But, for the former, the term was used to attack the government, while for the latter it was used to highlight the decline of national morality and to discipline the morally lax women.

This article explores how prostitution was understood by different governments – colonial as well as that of Nu – and how their regulations, or the lack of them, influenced the attitudes of the media and the general public towards prostitution. It focuses specifically on urban prostitution in late colonial and democratic Burma from 1942 to 1962. Using vernacular newspapers, magazines and books published in and on the democratic period as well as the colonial records on lock hospitals, the paper looks at how prostitution was interpreted by different governments, and how it was presented to the public by the media. It also examines how prostitutes were given a voice by different women’s groups and public champions such as cartoonists *vis-à-vis* the depiction of prostitutes by the colonial government health campaigns and Nu government morality campaigns. The article further analyses the historical shift in the acceptance of

ears, but with the soles of your feet’, would be used to forewarn the listener. Aung San said, ‘Since we have to start from zero, if other countries hit one stride, i.e. if other independent countries hit one stride, we have to try four, five or ten strides. Only then will [we] be equal. I want you all [to] understand very clearly that unless [every country] is equal, this country, albeit free, will have to please everyone and [consequently] become a prostitute country.’ Parliament (1971), *ဗိုလ်ချုပ်အောင်ဆန်းမိန့်ခွန်းများ* [*Bo Gyoke Aung San Maiñ Hkuñ myà, Bo Gyoke Aung San’s Speeches*], 2 ed, Sarpay Bateman, Rangoon, p 385.

² Aung Than (nd), *၁၆နှစ်နိုင်ငံရေး အတွေ့အကြုံများ ၁၉၄၅-၁၉၆၁* [*Saq Chauq Hniq Naingan Yè Atwè Acoun Myà, Political Experiences Over Sixteen Years from 1945 and 1961*], Pyithu, Rangoon, p 37.

³ Min New (1952), *တနင်္ဂနွေ* [*Hpa Naingan, Country of Prostitutes*], Thahaya, Rangoon.

prostitutes as social buffers (hence the term ‘state jewels’) to victims of modernity often portrayed by Nu government and public writers.

Prostitution in Burmese politics

A decade after the 1948 independence, Prime Minister Nu highlighted the decline in morality in the country by drawing attention to the rampant prostitution, and called for support for his campaign to make Buddhism a state religion as a way of eradicating social problems.⁴ Nu, who defined politics as a holy endeavour which only noble men could undertake, had a tendency to polarize political opinion by mixing religion with the secular world. He firmly believed that religion was a silver bullet to remove social ills. In his *Ethics for the Federal State*, published in 1960, in which he laid out codes of conduct for citizens, he defined government as a naturally arising entity to solve conflicts in societies. Government was a spontaneous phenomenon that counteracted the conflicts that arose from human greed. If everyone lived in harmony with Dhamma, government was no longer necessary.⁵ Nu’s world view and political ideology reflected his understanding of Buddhist teaching, and his desire, as Prime Minister, to orient government towards sacred rituals. The attitude of the Nu government towards prostitution arose from the premise that prostitution is a corruption of morality and mind, resulting from a failure to control greed and lust.

Prostitution was a double-edged sword for Burma’s political culture. On the one hand, it could tarnish the government’s reputation, while on the other it had the capacity to act as a powerful force for a religion-inclined government like Nu’s to attract support from those concerned with public morality. The Nu government tied prostitution to moral corruption and emphasized that it was not indigenous to Burma, but rather that it was foreign, imported into Burma through colonialism and modernism.⁶ Such tactics of refusing to own or institutionalize the problem spared the government the trouble of providing welfare for

⁴ During his speech in the Chamber of Deputies in 1957, Prime Minister Nu stated that the reasons for the disintegration of a country were (1) wrongful lust, (2) wrongful greed and (3) wrongful practice, and he highlighted that responsible behaviour by individuals was the key to maintaining law and order. Nu (1958), *Premier Reports to the People on Law and Order, National Solidarity, Social Welfare, National Economy, Foreign Affairs: Translation of Speech Delivered by the Honourable Prime Minister U Nu. In the Chamber of Deputies on September 27, 1957*, GUBCPO, Rangoon, p 3.

⁵ Nu (1960), *ပြည်ထောင်စုနိတိ* [*Pyihtaunsu Niti, Ethics of the Nation*], Thant Shin AFPFL, Rangoon, pp 11–19.

⁶ *မာန်ဇင်* [*Mandain*], 7 September 1952, p 7, p 13.

prostitutes and drafting laws to control prostitution. Furthermore, it gave the government and its media mouthpieces, such as *Bamakhit*,⁷ grounds for arguing that the solution lay in embracing one's own native culture and religion and shunning foreign ideologies and practices.

As with neighbouring Thailand, Burma saw the bodies of elite women as a 'symbol of modernity and civilization of the nation',⁸ and they were regarded as cultural vanguards. Elite women were often asked by the state to act as moral guardians of lower-class women, and women writers such as Daw Yi Kyein were invited to give talks on national radio outlining moral principles for fellow women. The government's own organization, 'Women's Protection Group', which included the wives of senior government officials, looked after 'fallen' women, but only included prostitutes working in Rangoon within its remit. The state, via the elite women, attempted to police the bodies of lower-class fallen women. However, the agreement of the elite women to provide moral guidelines was not the principal means by which the government aimed to resurrect the corrupt souls of the 'fallen' women.

The government's print media, including the *Bamakhit* newspaper and *Myawadi* magazine, advocated the spread of Buddhist ideologies to help Burmans become civilized and moral.⁹ In the colonial and post-colonial cultural and political settings of Burma, prostitution was not seen as a national plight in which women fell victim to poverty, as widely argued by communists and by some women's groups. Instead, it was considered a prominent feature of the social landscape that could be

⁷ *Bamakhit* or *Times of Burma* endorsed government programmes, and the editor, U Thaug, openly admitted that the newspaper endorsed the government's policies and helped Nu win the 1960 election. *Bamakhit's* readership base was, as with other newspapers, educated elites in the major cities. As one of the leading newspapers in the 1950s, its readership, however, remained well below 100,000. The period between 1942 and 1962 was often branded a golden era for journalism. Between just 1945 and 1948, 44 newspapers were published, compared with 78 over the much longer period of 1900 to 1944. Between 1942 and 1962, 39 newspapers were published in Burma – 19 in Burmese, 1 Chin, 3 Urdu, 2 Tamil, 1 Talegu, 3 Hindi, 5 Chinese and 5 English. Dr Nyi Nyi (1978), မြန်မာနိုင်ငံအမျိုးသားဖော်ကွန်း (၁၉၇၅)၊ မျက်မှောက်ကာလ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ သတင်းစာများအညွှန်း [Myanmar Naingan Amyothà Mawkuh (1975), *Myaq Hmauq Hkit Kala Myanmar Naingan Hmaq Tañ, Burma's National Records (1975): Records of Contemporary Burma*], Bagan, Rangoon, pp 219–261. Takkatho Htin Gyi (1992), မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ သတင်းစာများအညွှန်း [Myanmar Naingan Thadiñsa Myà Ahnyuñ], Sarpay Bateman, Rangoon.

⁸ Leslie Ann Jeffrey (2002), *Sex and Borders: Gender, National Identity, and Prostitution Policy in Thailand*, UBC Press, Vancouver.

⁹ Nyana, 'ပြတ်ပြတ်သားသား' [Pyaq Pyaq Thà Thà, Strict and straight], *Myawadi*, February 1959, pp 77–80.

manipulated by political leaders to promote Buddhism, or instil nationalism in the economically disadvantaged, as the journal *Deedok* had argued as early as 1930.¹⁰ On the Burmese political stage in the late 1950s, prostitution was a campaign tool used, most notably by Nu, to highlight the danger of foreign ideologies, to promote Buddhism and to outbid less religious political rivals in the race to power. In democratic Burma, the problem of prostitution was an ideological one, engaging debates on Buddhist concepts of sin and the defence of national culture against modernity, as opposed to a pragmatic one that referred to the number of prostitutes, STDs, punitive measures and parliamentary debates.

Prostitution as a sign of national decline and weakened nationalism was the theme which print media such as *Bamakhit* and the government often used to explain the problem. Prostitution was the government extrapolation of the concept of modern women, frequently depicted as agents of colonial modernity, capitalism and consumerism by the nationalist camps and the Sangha.¹¹ What women wore and how they behaved were judged in terms of how they could advance or how much they impeded male-led nationalism¹² as well as how they could interfere with masculinity, especially in the context of the propagation of male *hpon*.¹³ But traditional knowledge of prostitution derived from the Jataka tales contradicted such a depiction of prostitutes as the destruction of the national culture and an impediment to the trajectory of the male rising to become a spiritual higher being.

Prostitutes as the state's jewel

Though commonly portrayed as vile and corrupt, dirt in the context of Burmese high culture and religion,¹⁴ prostitutes were in fact accepted

¹⁰ *Deedok*, 1 February 1930, p 2.

¹¹ Chie Ikeya (2008), 'The modern Burmese woman and the politics of fashion in colonial Burma', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol 67, No 4, pp 1277–1308, p 1303.

¹² U Chit Maung, a journalist and editor of *Journal Kyaw* weekly, encouraged his wife, Ma Ma Lay, to participate in the nationalist movement, in the belief that Burma's independence movement could reach its goal only when women were involved. He said to her, 'I admit honestly and without a shame that men committed longer and strived harder only when women supported them'; *Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay* (2003), *ထူလောလူ၊ မာန်လိကီမာန်* [*Thu Lo Lu, Man Like Him*], 10 ed, Thiha Yadana, Rangoon, p 29.

¹³ For more discussion on how women could gain merit or demerit *vis-à-vis* men, see Khin Thitsa (1980), *Providence and Prostitution: Image and Reality for Women in Buddhist Thailand*, Change, London.

¹⁴ The *Bamakhit* editor wrote in late 1955 that 'It was very sad for a country like Burma, which was founded upon Buddhist culture and of practised asceticism, to see a growing number of prostitutes', *Bamakhit*, 5 December 1955, p 3.

as essential in the day-to-day functioning of the state according to popular Jataka tales, sources for Buddhist teaching and morality and the Burmese child's equivalent of the *One Thousand and One Nights* stories. The most common Burmese term for a prostitute is ပြည့်တန်ဆာ [Pyí Dan Sa] meaning decoration or jewel of the country. Such an autonym suggests that prostitution, contrary to the views expressed in the post-independent print media, was socially accepted and officially endorsed. Prostitutes were important social buffers, diplomatic tools or reliable social agencies. There were some Jataka stories in which wives of wealthy men and princes hired prostitutes to comfort their husbands when they, the wives, wanted to conduct meritorious deeds on holy days, during which sexual intimacy was prohibited. Here prostitutes were a temporary substitute for wives, easing marital tensions when conflicts might arise between conjugal and religious responsibilities. Prostitution served a functional requirement in keeping families or social networks intact. Such a role was appreciated by high-status women, since prostitutes secured their responsibilities as good housewives and devout Buddhists. Hence, prostitutes were thought of as 'jewels'.

The July 1958 cover of *Ludu Pyinya*, a journal published by the government, comprised a drawing of a prostitute and a man, illustrating a Jataka tale. During a drought in ကာလိင်္ဂ *Karlainga*, the king's astrologers asked the king to bless them with his purity achieved by keeping the five basic precepts of Buddhism,¹⁵ so that they could pray for rain. The king doubted his purity and recommended his queen to the astrologers. But the queen recommended other members of the family, and the astrologers finally had to ask a prostitute who had been kept waiting by a man who paid her money for sex but did not appear. This prostitute seemed to be regarded as morally pure, since she could have served other men but did not, feeling obliged to wait for the man who had bought her services. The story highlighted the loyalty and purity of the prostitute who did not solicit other men but continued to wait for the man who had paid her.¹⁶ This prostitute, the most morally upright person in this context, blessed the country with her purity of conduct or *sila*, thereby ending the drought.

Next to the story in the journal was Prime Minister Nu's message, urging citizens not to lead easy and corrupt lives but to keep *sila*, possibly like the prostitute, though she was not mentioned explicitly in his

¹⁵ Not to kill, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to lie, and not to consume alcohol.

¹⁶ *Ludu Phyinya*, 8, 11 (1958), pp 4–5.

message. The government's *Ludu Pyinya* journal did not think it inappropriate to use the example of a prostitute, and indeed was willing to do so whenever the message suited the political climate. A message repeatedly sent out by the Nu government in the 1950s was that only a government that was religiously strong could tackle moral corruption such as prostitution.¹⁷ Another underlying message was that the head of state should be a person able to interpret, understand and draw lessons from the Jataka tales and from sacred texts.

Prostitution during the colonial period

When power was transferred from the British to the AFPFL in 1948, the focus of measures against prostitution shifted from being health-oriented to morality-concerned. During the colonial period, prostitution had been monitored and prostitutes scrutinized for venereal diseases. There was little discussion about the effect of prostitution on Burmese society. Rather, the fear was the threat to the welfare of British soldiers. The colonial administration was most concerned over the health and vigour of its troops and the possible contamination of the 'superior' race by disease in general.¹⁸ But these were medical rather than moral issues. One further reason why the colonial administration paid little attention to the impact on Burmese society is that there were relatively few Burmese prostitutes. Most, certainly those who threatened British troops, were from Bengal and Madras. Moreover, it was largely felt that the administration had prostitution under control, through the use of asylums and hospitals.¹⁹

Prostitution was seen by many Burmese as a problem originating among other races, especially Indians, who occupied most of the lowest positions in the economy and society.²⁰ By rejecting prostitution as a social problem – moreover a social problem only of others – and seeing it simply as a medical concern, Burmese society was ill-prepared to

¹⁷ Nu portrayed his government as strong on corruption and he pledged to clean up with the help of Buddhism. *An Asian Speaks: A Collection of Speeches made by U Nu, Prime Minister of Burma, During a Visit to the United States of America. June 29–July 16, 1955*, p 16.

¹⁸ Kenneth Ballhatchet (1980), *Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793–1905*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London.

¹⁹ *Resolutions on Lock Hospital Reports, British Burma (For the Year 1873)*, OIOC, VI 24/2296, p 5.

²⁰ Some of Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay's novels exhibited the widespread antipathy the majority of Burmese felt towards Indians.

confront the issue after 1948. During the colonial period, the main concern of the government had been to register prostitutes and subject them to periodic examination. Prostitutes were seen as vectors of disease rather than as individuals failed by social and economic institutions.

Colonial administration could not solve the problem of prostitution in its colonies, most notably India. Nor could independent Burma provide solutions to this problem in post-colonial Burma. As Philippa Levine has argued, what constituted prostitution was a contentious issue, and that 'the prostitute is a woman' was the only agreed legal constitution.²¹ Even though individuals in colonial decision-making bodies could not conceptualize the framework of understanding prostitution, the meticulous record-keeping regime of the colonial administration provided them with a detailed racial landscape of prostitution. Demarcation of prostitution allowed the colonial government to guard the white prostitutes from the locals. In other words, affixing racial tags to prostitution enabled the colonial administration to construct a hierarchy in the sex trade, as one colonial official argued:

'... the white races are at the present time the dominant and governing races of the world and anything that would lower them in the sight of the subject races should, I think be carefully guarded against, and I do not think that there can be any doubt that the sight of European women prostituting themselves is most damaging to the prestige of the white races.'²²

Shielding white or European prostitutes from the gaze of local passers-by was achieved by the sophisticated racial categorization of prostitutes. The careful gradation of prostitutes also allowed the administration to scrutinize them in the order of cleanliness, and Burmese or Indians were often seen as the dirtiest and therefore necessarily subject to compulsory medical examination.²³ Whereas the colonial government used racial demarcation to protect white prostitutes and justify strict measures against local prostitutes, the independent government inherited this legacy of a binary system to separate Burmese from others, such as Madrasi. Statistics from the colonial records helped the Nu government to polarize the

²¹ Philippa Levine (1993), 'Public and private paradox: prostitution and the state', *Arena Journal*, as quoted in Philippa Levine (2002), 'Orientalist sociology and the creation of colonial sexualities', *Feminist Review*, Vol 65, pp 5–21.

²² Superintendent Shuttleworth, OIOC, 1917, as quoted in Levine, 2000, p 13.

²³ *Ibid*, p 9.

problem as ‘them *versus* us’ and, more importantly, in terms of modernity *versus* local culture. Prostitution was largely portrayed as a problem of the non-Burmese, and one whose roots lay in imported culture, even in cases involving Burmese prostitutes.

Prostitution during the Japanese Occupation

Many terms for ‘prostitute’ sprang up during the Japanese Occupation, reflecting the fact that during these years prostitution had become rife, particularly in the main urban centres. Terms included ‘ခိမ်မယ်’ [Zain Meh] ‘ဟ’ [Hpa] ‘ပခြံသယ်’ [Pa Choq Theh] ‘နတ်သမီး’ [Naq Tha Mi] and ‘ညှို့ငှက်’ [Nyé Ngaq], meaning, respectively, ‘comfort woman’, ‘traditional basket’, ‘traditional basket maker’, ‘angel’ and ‘night bird’. These terms were not as glamorous as the old term – jewel of the state. The term ‘angel’ appears to have reflected, not the kind heart of male myth-making, but a commercial connection. ‘Angel’ was a brand of matches and prostitutes were regarded as fuel for lust, available all seasons as Angel matches were advertised. ‘Basket’ and ‘basket maker’ were terms thought to have originated from itinerant women traders who sold baskets and boxes made of bamboo and palm leaves. These migrant traders might have taken ‘easy’ jobs while travelling from one village to another, since anonymity protected their identity and kept their occupation secret from parents and families.

It was a common occurrence that women moving to Rangoon to escape the war-torn countryside became prostitutes, both during and after the Japanese Occupation. In his popular book, *Lady Jeep*,²⁴ Thu Kha, a writer and film-maker, wrote about a woman called Sein Kyi. Although Burmese, she dressed like a Westerner and enjoyed going about town in American open-top jeeps.²⁵ Sein Kyi married the Japanese Yamamoto during the occupation and had enjoyed a lavish lifestyle with abundant supplies of *Padomma* fabrics (material made of nylon that became extremely popular after the war) and other items such as sugar and cigarettes. When her Japanese master fled the country, Sein Kyi was left pregnant, but lost the baby after a miscarriage.

When allied troops arrived in Rangoon in May 1945 Sein Kyi adopted the name of Margaret, polished up her English and befriended new soldiers by visiting their barracks. Soldiers visited her house as well, bringing with them condensed milk, canned fish, cheese, sausages, butter and jam. ‘Opportunist’ was probably the most fitting term for Sein Kyi, but

²⁴ Thu Kha (nd), *Lady Jeep*, Chan Tha, Rangoon.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 1–9.

she was depicted as a high-class prostitute by Thu Kha.²⁶ Despite the vilification of ‘modern’ women such as Sein Kyi, she can also be seen as a victim. Clearly she brought shame on her culture, religion, and race. But she was also a victim of consumerism and modernism, which nationalists saw as products of a colonialism that had brought out the innate ‘corrupt’ nature of women.²⁷ Thu Kha, like many writers, had an ambivalent view of girls like Sein Kyi. Even though he condemned her choice of ‘profession’, he acknowledged that men, and not only foreign men, were also responsible for their occupation.

However, the common view of women such as Sein Kyi is best caught in the following popular verse:

စိန်ကြည်နော် စိန်ကြည် [Sein Kyi Naw Sein Kyi]
 လင်ယူပက်စက်သည်။ [Lin Yu Paq Saq Thi]
 မာစတာနော် တိုကျိုပြန် [Masada Naw Tokyo Pyan]
 ဗိုက်တလုံးနဲ့ကျန်။ [Baiq Ta Louh Né Kyan]²⁸

The verse can be translated as: ‘Miss Sein Kyi, Sein Kyi, how unconscionable you are in taking up a husband. When the master went back to Japan, [here you are] left with a [rotund] belly.’ The verse sought not to emphasize the cruelty of the master who left Sein Kyi with his unborn child, but the ruthlessness and insensibility of Sein Kyi herself.

There is another verse, not as popular as Sein Kyi’s, but still more damaging to the image of such women:

တရုပ်လာလဲ--ငါတွဲလိုက်မှာ၊ [Tayok La Lé Nga Twe Laiq Hma]
 ကုလားလာစ--ငါကကြိုက်တာ၊ [Kalà La Sa Nga Ga Caiq Da]
 ဂျပန်လာတော့--ငါနော့ချင်ရှာ၊ [Japan La Dó Nga Naw Jin Sha]
 ယော်ရောရှို-ဝိုဝ-ဝိုဝပါ။ [Yawrawshí Gwísí Gwísí Ba]

Here we have the picture of a woman who does not discriminate between men but welcomes all, be they Chinese, Indians or Japanese.²⁹

²⁶ Than Htut (1969), ‘စစ်ပြီးစတာပေလျှင်ရှားမှု’ [Siq Pyè Za Sa Pay Hlouq Shà Hmú, Literary movement after the war], in Upper Burma Writers’ Club, *ကဗျာအကြောင်း စာအကြောင်း* [Gabya Acauñ Sa Acauñ, *On Poems and Literature*], Kyi Pwà Yè, Mandalay, pp 445–473.

²⁷ Mg Si Thu (1954), *ကျွန်တို့တတွေ* [Kyok Dó Da Dwe, We], *Shumawa*, 8:91, pp 64–67. *မဂ္ဂဇင်း*, 7 September 1952.

²⁸ Possibly first published in Zawana (1945), *မြို့လုံးပတ်လည်* [Myó Louh Paq Le, *Around the Town*], Tain Pyu Pyi Pyu Publishing House, Rangoon, p 3.

²⁹ Than Htut, *supra* note 26, at p 453.



Figure 1. The cover illustration of Thu Kha's *Lady Jeep*. Sein Kyi is seen in sheer blouse, with curly hair and a hat – Western-style clothing and accessories. She is trying to put a cigarette into the mouth of a topless foreign soldier.

Source: Thu Kha (no date), *Lady Jeep*, Chan Tha, Rangoon.

This verse, by another popular male writer, Zawana, and the *Lady Jeep* novel, were a vilification of Burmese women – especially of urban, upper-class and middle-class women, demonstrating a clear contradiction between their attitude towards urban elites and the government, who tended to see elites as moral guardians of the ‘fallen’ women. These writers’ attitude towards poor women from the countryside was rather mild. Poverty seemed to have validated them as victims who were worthy of sympathy, whereas urban prostitutes like Sein Kyi were to be rejected, since they were prompted by greed for a luxurious lifestyle, rather than poverty.


Lady Jeep and these popular verses identified prostitution as a moral corruption of native women, especially urban, modern women. They strongly suggested that prostitution was a foreign import. It was estimated that, after the Japanese Occupation, as many as 6,000 Burmese women were left either pregnant or with children by Japanese soldiers.³⁰ *Lady Jeep* brought to the public eye a lasting image of Sein Kyi playing around with foreign men – a gullible but greedy young woman, exploited by foreigners (see Figure 1).

Popular attitudes towards prostitution after independence

After independence, prostitution was no longer viewed as a medical issue but instead as a moral flaw inflicted by the enemy without: that is, by colonization and modernity.³¹ As Jeffrey argues in the case of Thailand, ‘westernization was read in very gendered terms’³² and women’s behaviour was regarded as a reflection of national morality and identity. Rachel Harrison also highlights the fact that prostitutes have been viewed by Thai writers ‘as an object of pity and a symbol of social/cultural decline’.³³ That prostitutes were seen as an object of pity is also a common theme in the Burmese literary sphere. Attention to the problem by the state as well as media often focused on challenging modernity and capitalism (but specifically the foreign men who were exploiting Burmese women), which were said to be corrupting Burmese culture. The cartoon shown in Figure 2, although from an earlier era, is indicative of such attitudes.

In this cartoon prostitution was portrayed as an outcome of economic injustice, with the rich exploiting the poor. Capitalism was culpable, and foreigners compounded the misery of poor women. The issue of prostitution was a propaganda tool in nationalist campaigns, maintained throughout the independence movement and into the Nu era. Seeking to control prostitution in Rangoon in 1961,³⁴ the *Htun Daily* newspaper proposed the deportation of foreigners who were trafficking Burmese women to India. In 1955 *Bamakhit* pointed out that one objectionable

³⁰ Tin Kha (nd), *Oh My God!*, Ma Tin Tin, Rangoon, p 28.

³¹  [Mandain] 7 September 1952, p 7.

³² Jeffrey, *supra* note 8, at p 22.

³³ Rachel Harrison (1999), ‘The Madonna and the whore: self/“other” tensions in the characterization of the prostitution by Thai female authors’, in Peter A. Jackson, and Nerida M. Cook, eds, *Genders and Sexualities in Modern Thailand*, Silkworm Books, Bangkok, pp 169–190.

³⁴ *Htun Daily*, 22 August 1961, p 3.

ဆင်းရဲသော အမျိုးသမီးကလေးများ၏ဒုက္ခ



Figure 2. Caption reads: 'Wealthy Burmese snared poor women with money. Since the rich left the poor women ruthlessly once they were satisfied, [poor women] got into the hands of Chinese and Indians. Once they were satisfied, they then again kicked these women out maliciously and without any consideration. [Poor women] fell into disgraceful lives.'

Source: *Deedok*, 1 February 1930, p 2.

aspect of prostitution was the influence it implied of foreign cultures on Burmese culture. The editor argued that, if Burma adhered to its own national culture, literature and customs, society would not face such a major problem with prostitution. The editor further argued that prostitution was the result of Burma being forced to interact with foreigners; in other words, it was the result of colonialism.³⁵

Elsewhere in Thailand too, prostitution was seen, mostly by nationalist camps, as the result of the breakdown of national culture and the

³⁵ *Bamakhit*, 5 December 1955, p 3. Critiques of the bourgeoisie's attitudes could be seen in Ludu Daw Amar (1973), *အပြိုင်*, [Anyaiñ, Dance Theatre], Vol 1, Ludu, Mandalay.

economy. The state, on the other hand, was pressured by the international community to adopt Western standards of sexual behaviour in order to help control prostitution.³⁶ Unlike prostitution in Thailand, the problem of prostitution in Burma did not attract international attention, and the Nu government was not caught between the nationalists, who blamed modernity and Westernization for the problem and the international community, who adopted Western sexual behaviour and marriage laws to tackle the problem.

Some leftist writers in Burma saw the problem of prostitution in terms of a class struggle. Daw Amar argued that the rich enjoyed luxury imported goods, and thereby set a bad example for the poor.³⁷ Not only foreign goods but also foreign ideologies fuelled lavish lifestyles, disrupting traditional social values.³⁸ There are echoes here of Furnivall's earlier observation that colonial officials set 'an example of lavish personal expenditure and the import policy encouraged the mass of the people to emulate them.'³⁹ All this suggested that the blame lay not within Burma but that the problem had had been brought into the country by outsiders. Public attention was directed towards modernity and those individual women who were discontented with their lives, pursuing luxurious lifestyles that were incompatible with Buddhist teachings. In contrast, the communist party mouthpiece *Pyithu Arnar* [People's Power] argued that prostitution was a consequence of the government's dysfunctional economic system.⁴⁰

High regard for Burmese culture and Buddhism compelled the editor of *Bamakhit* to exclude the view that prostitution could be part of Burmese culture and indeed had been a social and political tool widely used by Burmese kings.⁴¹ Even though *Ludu Pyinyaya*, a government propaganda journal during the Nu era, used the tale of a prostitute positively to encourage readers to adopt good moral behaviour,⁴² it was far more common to argue that prostitution did not have a place in Burmese high culture.

A quite different approach was taken by the *Rangoon Daily*. This newspaper explained the prevalence of prostitution in terms of poverty,

³⁶ Jeffrey, *supra* note 8, at p 28.

³⁷ Ludu Daw Amar, *supra* note 35.

³⁸ *Bamakhit*, 5 December 1955, p 3.

³⁹ J.S. Furnivall (1949), 'Twilight in Burma: reconquest and crisis', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol 22, No 1, pp 3–20.

⁴⁰ *Pyithu Journal*, 15 April 1956, p 15.

⁴¹ *Ludu Phyinyaya*, 8:11, July 1958, pp 4–5.

⁴² *Ibid.*

the absence of strict control and the influence of foreign culture. The *Rangoon Daily* echoed the concerns of the Burmese Women Association and the Burmese Women's Protection Group, which always claimed that prostitution mirrored current economic circumstances. The failure of the government to create sufficient jobs was the core cause, though the women's groups admitted that middle-class and upper-class prostitutes were drawn into the profession by their corrupt morality rather than through poverty.⁴³

Thein Pe, a politician and the author of a book on prostitution entitled *Modern Era Devil* or တက်ခေတ်နတ်ဆိုး [Taq Hkiq Naq Sò],⁴⁴ argued that during the Japanese Occupation, many women stepped outside their traditional world to seize the opportunities created by the chaos of the time. A woman trader in Rangoon bribed the Japanese station master by agreeing to have sex with him, with the consent of her husband, in return for exclusive rights in transporting her goods by train. Small traders from other towns made small fortunes by similar methods. If 'normal' practices would not put food on the table, and when all other opportunities were exhausted, perhaps these women and their families had little choice.⁴⁵ His estimate of prostitutes in Rangoon right before the Second World War was 43% of the population,⁴⁶ which seems very high. There are, however, no other reliable statistics to evaluate whether his figure reflects the reality.

In another story, ငွေစိန်လှေလှော်ရင်းတက်ကျိုးခြင်း [New Sein Hle Hlaw Yiñ Taq Co Jiñ], meaning literally 'Ngwe Sein broke the oar while rowing' but metaphorically 'Ngwe Sein lost all means of survival while trying very hard to make ends meet', Thein Pe Myint narrated the life of Ngwe Sein. She made a living as a street vendor with the help of her husband, but lost her shop as well as her husband who was locked in the police cells for not having a business licence. In her attempt to get him bail, Ngwe Sein slept with the policemen.⁴⁷ Thein Pe Myint's stories reflected the sacrifices made by women during and after the war: some became prostitutes to prevent their families from starving to death. The views

⁴³ *Rangoon Daily*, 29 May 1955, p 2.

⁴⁴ Thein Pe Myint (2004), တက်ခေတ်နတ်ဆိုး [Taq Hkiq Naq Sò, *Modern Era Devil*], 7 ed, Stylus, Rangoon.

⁴⁵ Thein Pe Myint (2001), စစ်အတွင်းခရီးသည် ။ မဟာမိတ်နှင့် မြန်မာ့တပ်မတော် [Sìq Atwiñ Hkayè The 2, *Mahameiq Hné Myanmà Taman, Traveller During the War, Allies and Burmese Messenger*], 4 ed, Saoaq Zè, Rangoon.

⁴⁶ Thein Pe Myint, *supra* note 44, at p 121.

⁴⁷ Thein Pe Myint (1962), ငွေစိန်လှေလှော်ရင်းတက်ကျိုးခြင်း [Ngwe Sein Hle Hlaw Yiñ Taq Cò Jiñ, *Ngwe Sein Broke the Oar While Rowing*], 2 ed, Sarpay Pauñ Kù, Rangoon.



Figure 3. Four different types of prostitute.
 Source: *Bamakhit*, 23 January 1955, p 1.

of both *Thein Pe Myint* and the *Rangoon Daily* on prostitution were reflected in a cartoon by Ba Gyan (Figure 3).

Here, the cartoonist places prostitutes into four categories: (1) those who became prostitutes after their means of living had been destroyed; (2) those who joined the profession because their families became destitute – a woman with a crying, hungry child in the cartoon; (4) those who were lured into the trade by ‘bad’ friends; and (4) women who could not restrain their lust and became prostitutes – the woman behind bars harassing a policeman. The cartoonist claimed that it was easy to rescue the first three types of woman, but rescuing the fourth type was

difficult. Ba Gyan's categories resembled an analysis in the *Rangoon Daily*, in which the editor laid out the attributes of prostitution: the willingness of the woman, poverty, and being lured into the trade.⁴⁸ Neither Ba Gyan nor the *Rangoon Daily* saw modernity as one of the causes of prostitution, as claimed by *Bamakhit*. Ba Gyan saw lust as a possible reason for prostitution – a comment rarely made in public. Even though lust was often discussed, women's indulgence and lust were considered taboo subjects in Burmese society. Such a description of lust and indulgence was perhaps the closest to account for women as willing agents in prostitution, away from arguments highlighting prostitutes as victims and, therefore, objects of pity.

Ludu U Hla, writer, editor and publisher, recorded the lives of prison inmates when he himself was imprisoned by the Nu AFPFL government for libel. According to his *Prison Gate After the War*, a destitute woman whose mother died from lack of medicine and food, left her village for Pegu, a city 50 miles north of Rangoon, in the hope of making a better life. But the house in which she spent one night turned out to be a brothel and she was forced to learn the trade. The fact that a lodging house turned out to be a brothel highlighted the scale of the problem.⁴⁹ The *Myama Alin* newspaper also reported that young women from the countryside in southern Burma took refuge from the civil war in Moulmein, but found themselves working as prostitutes to make ends meet.⁵⁰ Such reports suggested that the main cause of prostitution was poverty and the failure to provide for the welfare of poor women. The president of the Women's Association, Daw Khin Hla, also argued that the government was not providing sufficient employment for women, nor introducing strict measures to control prostitution. This, together with the damaging influence of foreign culture, was held as an explanation for the continuing presence of prostitution in Burma.⁵¹

On the other hand, the communist *Pyithu Journal* [People's Journal] believed that prostitution existed mainly because of rampant poverty. In 1956, the female writer Pegu Ma Khin Lay argued in the *Pyithu Journal* that the government was solely responsible for the rise in the number of prostitutes after independence. The mainstream communist view, that the government had failed to create an egalitarian society

⁴⁸ *Rangoon Daily*, 31 May 1955, p 17.

⁴⁹ Ludu U Hla (1968), စစ်ပြီးစာ ဝေဠာဝတ်ခါး [Sìq Pyì Sa Ga Htaun Dagà, *Prison Gate After the War*], Kyi Pwà Yè, Mandalay, pp 90–91.

⁵⁰ *Myanma Alin*, 8 April 1957.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p 2.

free of exploitative bourgeoisie and capitalists, was reflected in her analysis that the circumstances of women had worsened under the AFPFL government. She also argued that, unless the system were changed and women were incorporated into the nation's industrial sector, women would not be free.⁵²

But the *Myanma Alin* newspaper argued that since, according to the Jataka tales, only women of good birth were appointed prostitutes by the kings, it was clear that prostitution in Burma was not always related to poverty. While many women's groups and newspapers, especially anti-government ones, agreed that poverty and the civil war were mainly responsible for prostitution, they also held modernity and colonialism to be the cause. Both rich and poor countries around the world had prostitutes, the editor argued, and thus it was evident that prostitution was not caused by poverty alone.⁵³ But the editor's quest in *Myanma Alin* to highlight prostitutes as agencies responsible for controlling their own living was overshadowed by other newspapers, such as *Bamakhit* and *Pyithu Journal*, which portrayed women as victims. In all cases, prostitutes were spoken for and argued about, and were not given a voice to present their own case, either to the media or to government bodies.

A government commission on prostitution, led by a senior civil servant and judge U Aung Tha Gyaw, was formed in 1955. The commission was to investigate whether prostitution should be stamped out or institutionalized, and it asked reporters and the public for their views.⁵⁴ Again, the opinion of prostitutes was not sought and they continued to be objectified and referred to indirectly. Four months later, the commission reported that literacy, morality, modernity, nationalism, the legacy of colonialism and poverty each played a part in explaining why women became prostitutes.⁵⁵ But there is no evidence that the commission submitted a final report to the government other than these preliminary findings.

The proposal that prostitution might be institutionalized angered some newspapers, which saw prostitution as a slight on Burmese culture. But Thein Pe Myint, in his *Modern Era Devil*, also outlined in 1940 a list of recommendations, which included issuing licences to prostitutes, registering brothels in a special zone, taxing prostitutes, compulsory screenings and increasing the state budget for centres for STDs.⁵⁶ Such

⁵² *Pyithu Journal*, 15 September 1956, p 15.

⁵³ *Myanma Alin*, 15 June 1956, p 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Mandain*, 20 January 1955, p 3.

⁵⁶ Thein Pe Myint, *supra* note 44, at pp 177–179.

measures were indeed progressive. In reality, however, the government commission does not seem to have been able to finish its investigation due to a lack of funding from the government – let alone the government acting on the commission's recommendations. Perhaps, too, government priorities shifted to other issues. When this government-sponsored investigation was terminated, the prospect of government action faded. However, newspapers and magazines continued to discuss the problem.

There was a range of views. *Bamakhit* largely blamed women for their inherently vile nature, which led them to become prostitutes by choice. In other words, *Bamakhit* reinforced the long-held view of male editors and writers that women, the untrustworthy sex, were capable of disgraceful behaviour. At the opposite end of the range was the Burma Communist Party's *Pyithu Journal*, which claimed that inequality and the few opportunities for women under the AFPFL government were responsible for the destitution of women, and their consequent decline into prostitution. In the middle were *Myanma Alin*, the *Rangoon Daily* and the women's groups, which, with varying emphases, offered explanations for prostitution that embraced many factors. *Bamakhit* was concerned mainly with moral reform. Other voices sought improved welfare provision to protect vulnerable, poor women.

Religion: the magic bullet?

One of the most vehement critics of the government's attitude to prostitution was U Htun Pe, founder of the *Htun Daily* newspaper and the Servants of the People Organization (Burma), Minister of the Press from 1948 to 1951, and Minister of Culture from 1952 to 1953. He left the cabinet in 1953 after challenging the leadership of Nu.⁵⁷ In his *Htun Daily* in August 1961, U Htun Pe criticized the government, arguing that it could not pretend that everything was normal and peaceful simply by saying that the sounds of prayer permeated the air. He argued that, unless the government tackled economic problems, prostitution could not be controlled.⁵⁸ In other words, he was pressing the govern-

⁵⁷ Chitkyiyay Kyi Nyunt (1971), *သတင်းစာဆရာကြီးများ၏ သူတို့ဘဝသတို့ အတွေ့အကြုံ* [*Thadiṅsa Hsaya Gyí Myà é Thudó Bawa Thudó Atwe Acoun, Journalists, Their Lives and Their Experiences*], Tantaya Sarpay, Rangoon, pp 33–39.

⁵⁸ *Htun Daily*, 22 August 1961, p 3. U Htun Pe was sent to jail for one-and-a-half months in October 1961 by Nu's government for allegedly threatening national security. Three months later, he was imprisoned again, but this time by the Revolutionary Council led by Ne Win.

ment to acknowledge that prostitution was a consequence of economic failure, and to recognize that it would be brought under control through economic reform rather than by enforcing religiosity. U Htun Pe, a former cabinet member in the AFPFL government, was thus rejecting the Nu approach, which saw religion as a magic bullet for social ills.

Under the Nu government, Buddhism was pushed centre-stage. For example, to help curb soaring crime in Rangoon the *Myoma* or the president of the central police force, U Hla and his chairman decided that every police station should gather on the waxing and waning days of the moon to recite Buddhist *sutras* to warn off demons and unforeseen dangers.⁵⁹ When drafting an ideological statement on communism and socialism for the armed forces in 1956, former communists and socialists were asked to prepare their draft within the context of a Buddhist society.⁶⁰ Also, to inspire Buddhist culture in young women, the committee for promoting religion and morality held *Dhamma* pageants, in which the women who scored the highest in reciting *sutras* were awarded the title of Miss *Dhamma*, and their pictures were published on the front pages of newspapers.⁶¹

The marriage laws were amended in 1954 to protect Buddhist Burmese women who had married men of a different religion. Buddhist nuns rather than schoolteachers were viewed by public reformers such as Saw Monyin as being more able to reach out and shape young women to become model citizens.⁶² Newspaper editors, especially the *Bamakhit* editor, encouraged the public to adopt ideologies based only on Buddhism and Burmese culture so as not to feel morally inferior.⁶³ Attempts by the print media to solve social problems by means of faith were best summed up in Furnivall's observation on post-independent Burma: 'Hampered by the limitations of their education and environment, men had to find a speedy solution for a wide range of problems of which many seemed almost insoluble.'⁶⁴

Of all the impromptu attempts to fix the nation's manifold problems, making Buddhism a state religion was the boldest, and it was not without its supporters. Newspapers such as *Bamakhit* helped the government

⁵⁹ *Hanthawaddy*, 1 August 1951.

⁶⁰ Callahan, Mary P. (2003), *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, p 184.

⁶¹ *Hanthawaddy*, 23 July 1951.

⁶² *Bamakhit*, 21 February 1955, p 3.

⁶³ *Bamakhit*, 13 July 1955, p 3.

⁶⁴ J.S. Furnivall (1949), 'Twilight in Burma: independence and after', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol 22, No 2, p 163.

disseminate an important message that only Buddhism had the answer to a moral problem such as prostitution. Prostitution became an area in which religion and politics were intertwined, much to the annoyance of anti-government opinion, most notably the *Htun Daily* newspaper, the communists, and non-Buddhist groups. To them, *Bamakhit*, on behalf of the government, was misleading the public into believing that prostitutes were the perpetrators of moral crimes rather than the victims of incompetent government.

One female writer, Dagon Khin Lay Nwe, supported the view that women were the ones to blame for prostitution.⁶⁵ *Bamakhit* played an important role in helping the government pursue its agenda of purifying the nation by declaring Buddhism the state religion. The newspaper's stance on moral issues reflected the attitude not only of the editor, U Ohn Khin, but also that of his close friend, Prime Minister Nu. *Bamakhit*, which was printed on yellow pages, the campaign colour of Nu at the 1960 election, gave substantial space to prostitution issues.

Furthermore, through the issue of prostitution, the government drew the nation's attention to the economy, in which foreigners still held a large stake.⁶⁶ *Bamakhit* stated that, since Chinese and Indian businessmen monopolized the nation's economy, Burmans had slipped to become beggars at best and prostitutes at worst, and the country would become a 'prostitute' country, as Aung San had predicted.⁶⁷ Apart from blaming external factors such as foreigners and modernity, little practical action was taken to tackle prostitution, even though the problem was threatening the health of the people of Rangoon. Prostitutes were clearly visible at the major landmarks of the city. The writer Aung Bala, noted that visitors coming out of the central railway station could see prostitutes soliciting men on and under the footbridge nearby.⁶⁸

It was reported in the *Rangoon Daily* in the late 1950s that as many as 15% of civil servants screened for venereal disease had tested positive.⁶⁹ Among the general population, the figure was 20%.⁷⁰ As many as

⁶⁵ Tin Kha, *supra* note 30, at p 31.

⁶⁶ *Bamakhit*, 5 December 1955, p 3; *Rangoon Daily*, 19 May 1955, p 1; and Myint Kyi (1967), မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ လူမှုရေးကဏ္ဍမှ စာရိတ္တပိုင်းဆိုင်ရာလေ့လာချက် [Myanmar Naingan Luhmúyè Ganda Hmà Sayaiqtapaih Sainya Lélachaq, Study of morality in Burmese society], *Padaeta*, Vol 13, No 3, p 66.

⁶⁷ *Bamakhit*, 2 October 1953, p 4.

⁶⁸ Aung Bala (nd), မိန်းမပိုင်ခြင်း [Maihna Ponpyin, *Story of Women*], p 25.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Hanthawaddy*, 9 June 1960.

18% of the Rangoon police force tested positive, which caused police officers to stage a protest against blood tests!⁷¹ The *Rangoon Daily* estimated that immediately after the Second World War the incidence of venereal disease had soared, mainly through the presence of foreign troops.⁷² Screening centres were set up in various locations in Rangoon and in other major cities throughout the country, from Myitkyina in the north to Moulmein in the south. After malaria, venereal diseases posed the greatest challenge to the nation's health. The government estimated that as many as one in four people could contract venereal disease in the cities, whereas in the countryside the number was one in ten.⁷³ Even though the government set aside Rs 35 lakhs⁷⁴ to fight these diseases in the early 1950s,⁷⁵ there are no reports that the money was actually spent.

Debates arose as to whether prostitutes should be confined to separate wards or zones. The seclusion camp argued that they brought shame and disgrace to ordinary people, and that they should therefore be excluded from residential areas. Also, seclusion would allow for better facilities and easier control. But others argued that establishing a 'red light' district would bring unwelcome attention to the existence of prostitution. It could well encourage the trade.⁷⁶ At one point the *Rangoon Daily* proposed that sexual frustration could be leading married women into prostitution, in which case the solution would be to provide assistance to these women for their sexual difficulties.⁷⁷ Harsher punishments for pimps as well as prostitutes were favoured over providing greater welfare support for women.⁷⁸ Welfare was rarely seen as part of the solution.

In terms of legal action, only 72 prostitutes were imprisoned in 1951, 32 in 1952 and 26 in 1953. In 1956, the 1949 prostitution act was amended to allow for a maximum sentence for prostitution of three years, served in rehabilitation centres instead of prisons; the abolition of fines for prostitution; and the introduction of a requirement that a man found with a prostitute would be sent for a blood test. The welfare minister argued that these amendments reflected concern for the welfare of the

⁷¹ *Bamakhit*, 11 July 1960, p 3.

⁷² *Rangoon Daily*, 23 April 1955, p 3.

⁷³ This number was as high as Thein Pe Myint estimated in his novel *Modern Era Devil*, in which he gave the estimate as 43% of the entire population.

⁷⁴ 'Lakh' is a Hindi word for 100,000.

⁷⁵ *Bamakhit*, 18 August 1952, p 1.

⁷⁶ *Rangoon Daily*, 25 April 1955.

⁷⁷ *Rangoon Daily*, 23 April 1955, p 3.

⁷⁸ *Mandain*, 14 June 1956.



Figure 4. ‘What can you do to help us, Sir?’
 Source: U Phyauck Sate, ‘Overtime’, *Bamakhit*, 18 August 1952, p 1.

women, but a woman MP, Dr Daw Mya Si, argued that women were being forced into prostitution not by poverty but by exploitative men. She wanted men found with prostitutes to receive prison terms of between one and three years.⁷⁹ The chief judge, Dr E Maung, and others argued, however, that stiffer sentences would not solve the problem.⁸⁰

Who should be prosecuted had long been debated in the media. As early as 1935, the *Deedok* journal had published letters from male readers suggesting that prostitutes should be spared prosecution but that their pimps should be severely punished. It was argued that the pimps were responsible for luring poor women into the trade.⁸¹ The *Kyemon* newspaper published a letter by a female reader who argued that the failure of women’s organizations to tackle prostitution was largely explained by the protection provided by corrupt policemen to the pimps. It was impossible to prosecute pimps because they bailed each other out, on the recommendations of the police, who also tipped off the pimps when raids were to occur.⁸²

The cartoon in Figure 4 depicts the failures of the system. The first policeman says, ‘Sir, I arrested these two prostitutes from the hotel,’ and the second policeman replies, ‘You were arrested just the other day and the court fined you Rs 30 each, did it not? Why today again?’ To this question one of the prostitutes replies, ‘Brother, we had to pay the fine with the money borrowed from somebody. So to pay that money back, we had to work overtime. If we don’t get the money, are you

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*
⁸⁰ *Rangoon Daily*, 14 June 1956, p 19.
⁸¹ *Deedok*, XII, 10 (1935), p 12.
⁸² *Kyemon*, 16 September 1957, p 8.



Figure 5. 'Measures have been taken!'
Source: *Hanthawaddy*, 11 December 1951.

going to pay us out of your own pocket?' The cartoon also broke free from the vilification of prostitutes and, while mocking the failed government measures against prostitution, the cartoonist gave voice to the prostitutes, portraying them as people in control of their trade and bodies as opposed to the powerless objects of the state policing of their bodies.

The cartoon in Figure 5 offers another cynical view of the failure of measures against prostitution. A young man is giving a tour to an old man visiting his country. The young man tells the visitor that measures have been put in place to tackle venereal diseases, pointing out the policemen bringing in two arrested prostitutes, who seem nonchalant even

under arrest, and young men who had contracted venereal disease being given shots. But the visitor sees a man handing out receipts and asks his host why. The host replies, 'He is the pimp. He is informing the customers that new prostitutes have arrived and is taking advance payments.' The cartoon is saying that arrests and medical interventions have failed. This may explain the emphasis on religious campaigns against moral corruption. Nothing else had worked.

The view that prostitution was a moral corruption brought on by foreign ideologies and modernity was strongly used by the government in its campaign against prostitution. The government and leading print media such as *Bamakhit* fuelled each other's standpoints. *Bamakhit* argued that the nation's morality was under threat after long decades of colonialism.⁸³ The government responded with the view that Buddhism and Burmese culture were the foundations for action to tackle social problems, including prostitution. *Bamakhit* won the support and the trust of the government while the *Rangoon Daily* and *Mirror* were shut down by it when they published anti-government views.⁸⁴ Instead of investing resources in tackling prostitution, the government emphasized religion as a panacea for social ills. Those who attacked this approach could be branded as traitors. *Myawadi* published articles every month in the late 1950s arguing that communists were a threat to Buddhism and thus to the nation.

Whereas the colonial government had blamed the local prostitutes for destroying the health and vigour of British soldiers and threatening British racial supremacy and prestige, the Burmese government held modernity or foreignness responsible for this moral corruption. Since the cause was the enemy without and could not be attacked directly, the government sought to uplift Burmese morality by means of religion. While the colonial government had treated prostitutes as impurities and had tried to cleanse them by means of medical intervention, the independent Burmese government sought to purify their corrupt morality by means of religious intervention. Prostitutes may have been a threat to the British in terms of health and racial supremacy, as argued by Ballhatchet,⁸⁵ but for the Burmese they represented a threat to morality. In both cases rescuing women and rehabilitating them was not the priority. The image of the British Empire and Buddhist Burma took precedence over the welfare of prostitutes.

⁸³ *Bamakhit*, 5 December 1955, p 3.

⁸⁴ Aung Than, *supra* note 2, at p 141.

⁸⁵ Ballhatchet, *supra* note 18.

The emphasis on constructing stronger moral defences against undesirable social ills such as prostitution suggested two things – that Burmese women were seen as central to the problem, rather than the institutional context such as poverty, and therefore that the solution to this social ill would lie in changing the perspectives and behaviour of women; and that there was little faith in the ability of the AFPFL government to take practical measures to control prostitution. The emphasis on simplistic moral solutions, the belief in the magic bullet of religion, also reflected the paucity of well-informed readers who could debate the issues clearly and rationally.

The year 1955 was a turning point in the Nu administration's view towards prostitution and other pressing issues. A new party – the Republican Party – emerged in Burma's politics. One of its founders was Thakin Ba Thaug, founder of the Dobama Asiayone or the We Burman Association. The party endorsed Buddhism as the state religion: there were also calls by monks after the Sixth Theravada Buddhist Council to make a similar endorsement,⁸⁶ but Nu argued that such an endorsement could jeopardize national unity and invite intervention from foreign countries with different faiths.⁸⁷ However, Nu finally agreed to make Buddhism the state religion. In 1958, the AFPFL split into the Nu-Tin led Clean Party and the Swe-Nyein led Stable Party. The latter was more socialist-inclined. In the same year, the Buddhist Democratic Party was founded by some senior politicians, one of whom was Burma's second premier, U Pu. The new party pledged to listen to the leading monks and make Buddhism the state religion. Following this commitment, the Union Head Monks Association demanded to know from the AFPFL why there had been no action in making Buddhism the state religion.⁸⁸ Nu promised six months before the 1960 election that his party would make Buddhism the state religion, if elected.

One event might suggest why Nu finally agreed to establish Buddhism as the state religion. In Mandalay, dissatisfied with the government's inaction on prostitution, monks had caned prostitutes and pimps. This horrified the Buddhist nation.⁸⁹ Monks, expected to disengage

⁸⁶ *Htun Daily*, 30 May 1963. Nu convened this council in the year that marked the 2,500 years after the death of Buddha in an attempt to portray himself as the champion of Buddhism: but the official objective was to cleanse Buddhism by reciting and re-evaluating the discourses on Buddhism.

⁸⁷ *The Nation*, 15 October 1955, in U Kyaw Win (ed) (1992), *Burma Politics: 1958–1962, Vol 3*, Universities Publishing House, Rangoon, p 87.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p 91.

⁸⁹ *Bamakhit*, 24 January 1955, p 3.

themselves from secular affairs, had acted in an entirely un-Buddhist manner – but monks interfering with secular affairs was not new to Burma. During the independence movement, young monks had attempted to tear the ladies' sheer blouses off with scissors and hooks, attracting the nation's attention to what they perceived as unethical and unpatriotic behaviour.⁹⁰ Through monks' actions, prostitution was now brought fully to public attention and the government pledged to act to cleanse the nation. The government could not afford to ignore the cause of the monks' action, while perhaps being shocked by the action itself, and, by proposing a moral regeneration through Buddhism, further placated the monks. Nu's Clean Party enjoyed a landslide victory in 1960, with its Buddhism campaign a vital competitive advantage over the less religious rivals. But the problem of prostitution had been caught between politics and religion, and it had never been tackled in a practical manner. It had become simply an issue to fuel campaigns against foreign influences and modernity and for the reconstruction of Burmese morality through Buddhism.

In summary, unlike neighbouring Thailand, prostitution in Burma was rarely the focus of sustained media debate, scholarly discussion or parliamentary motion. During the short period in the 1950s when prostitution was investigated by the national commission, though the commission did not finish its mission, the problem was debated in the parliament and the issue caught the nation's attention, especially after monks took the law into their own hands by caning prostitutes and pimps. Independent Burma did not have the access to the rich data once compiled by the British administration and lack of statistics did not help the stakeholders and the public to understand the extent of the problem clearly. Furthermore, attempts were made by the government and government-influenced print media, such as *Bamakhit*, to convince the public that prostitution was symptomatic of cultural decline and female moral corruption, portraying it as a difficult social problem for which religion alone had an answer. Once regarded as state jewels, prostitutes came to be portrayed as morally corrupt and therefore unworthy of national budget and resources. Seen as a threat to the British troops, prostitutes were subject to controversial medical screenings; yet, seen as victims of modernity, they were often left on their own to 'resurrect' their morality. In the context of debates in print media on prostitution, prostitutes could best be understood as objects of pity, and only cartoonists seemed to view them as active agents in charge of their bodies and lives.

⁹⁰ Ikeya, *supra* note 11, at p 1278.

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Newspapers and magazines

ကြေးမုံ (*Kyemon*)

ဒီးဒုတ် (*Deedok*)

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