The physical geography of Myanmar has played great part in shaping its historical political process and influenced interactions among the various fragmented and heterogeneous ethnic groups in the country. A historical overview of evolution of Myanmar in pre-independent period, the relation of the state with the ruled with the broader social forces and segments, and the role played by the political leaders and institutions which lies at the nexus of state and society postulate a fundamentally important analysis. The British colonial rule, nationalist movement for independence and the legacies of such great epochs in the political history of Myanmar have to be examined. The three years of Japanese connection which held certain remarkable influences on the nature of politics in independent Myanmar was an important phase in her political development. It reversed the British attempts to establish a relatively opened political order in Myanmar. The colonial masters reinforced animosity among the several ethnic groups which had ramifications in the post-independent Myanmar.

The origin and the nature of the Myanmarese military called Tatmadaw deserved to be explained. We will see that the modern Tatmadaw had its origin in the Myanmarese national movement and that its orientations had been political in nature from the very beginning and it constituted a dominant force coloured with self-perceived historical right and responsibility to rule. The vast majority of population could not participate in the governance throughout the pre-independence period and that resulted in a legacy of negative relations or weak ties in between state and society and that became a part of the Myanmarese political tradition which continued for long time even after gaining independence from colonial rule. Myanmar lacks democratic political experiences in such situation and when the country became independent it largely shaped post-colonial political impasses.
Geographical Setting

Myanmar is situated in the westernmost part of the Southeast Asian region. It is the largest country in the mainland Southeast Asia and the fortieth largest country in the world. Approximately 6,77,000 sq. km in size stretching between latitudes 09 32°N and 28 31°N and longitudes 92 10°E and 101 11°E, east of Greenwich is the location of Myanmar in the globe. The north-south stretch of the country is about 2,051 km and the east-west length is about 936 km. On the map, Myanmar looks like a beautiful bird flying upward toward the north-west.

Myanmar has about 6,159 km long land border which is shared with countries such as India and China, which are the two most powerful neighbours, and other less formidable neighbours, such as Thailand, Laos, Malaysia and Bangladesh. A vast seacoast of about 1,930 km lies in the south and south-west facing Bay of Bengal to west of Yangon, the Andaman Sea to the south and the Gulf of Martaban between them. Myanmar shares land border with four Indian states viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. Myanmar offers a strategic challenge to India’s eastern frontier. To the north and northeast, Myanmar shares about 2,204 km long land border with China. China is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, and hence politically influential besides economically dominating in the region. For many centuries, these two great and growing powers have influenced Myanmar in terms of history, culture, economy and politics.

Thailand is located in the southeast direction of Myanmar and it shares about 2,107 km land border with Myanmar. Compared to India and China, Thailand is less influential in the region, but more influential in Myanmar than to India. Other less formidable neighbours of Myanmar are Bangladesh and Laos in its eastern-most and western-most points respectively. Bangladesh shares approximately 271 km land boundary with Myanmar, while Myanmar-Laos border stretches about 238 km. The vast land boundaries separating Myanmar from its neighbouring countries are poorly

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demarcated and protected and hence, they have always been ‘porous to local ethnic communities, traders, drug smugglers, insurgents and invading armies’ (Selth, 2001).

There are three basic physiographical regions in Myanmar: the coastal region in the south and southwest, upland and mountainous region of the north, northwest and north-eastern parts forming land borders with India, China, Thailand and Laos, and the central plain in the middle. Myanmar is surrounded on three sides viz. east, north and north-west by unbroken horseshoe of mountains covered with thick tropical forests and a wide sea in the south making it geographically self-contained and physically insulated from the outside world. The mountains with difficult terrains, generally less accessible and modestly administered, amount to almost half of the country’s land surface. The central parts consisting of tropical valleys which are flat, hot and fertile in characteristics are formed by the north-south flowing river systems of the Chindwin, Irrawady, Sittang and lower Salween. This region has the largest economic and political potentials in the country. History shows that the great kings of Myanmar like Anawratha, Bayinthaun and Alaunghphaya emerged from the geopolitically important central and lower Myanmar. From the pre-colonial times upto present this region have been marked as the seat of political authority. The Irrawady flows in the central part of the country and Chindwin flows in the north-west forming them the two main arteries of commerce and communications from long past in the country. The Salween River in the eastern side has little commercial value but it occupies greater political and military significance by forming an imposing natural barrier behind which many hill people, such as the Kokangs, Was, Akhas, Lahus, Karens and Mons have sheltered almost entirely free of external interference for most of the Myanmar’s recorded history (Tucker, 2001, p. 8). During the wet season, these great rivers often flood the central valley and degenerate it into marshlands along a series of north-south slanted mountains across which east-west travel is difficult. This north-south grain of the land also reflects the route of early immigration into the

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6 It was observed by Mya Maung (1990, pp. 605-6): “Burma’s natural physical conditions have always favoured isolation from the rest of the world, and this isolation from undesirable outside influences along with the geopolitical significance of the centre have continued with new vigor, and in different ways, under military rule”. As he points out, both the civil and military government knew the geopolitical significance of Myanmar and play cards accordingly to serve their national or political interests.
country and the direction of foreign invasions. In the past these geographical
difficulties was even more dominant.

Myanmar’s coastline defines the eastern shore of the Bay of Bengal, running
from Bangladesh border in the north to the Malay Peninsula and Thai territory in the
south-east. The sea-coast opening Myanmar to Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea
forms two narrow coastal strips; Arakan to the west in Bay of Bengal, and Tenasserim
to the south between the Andaman Sea and the mountains that separate Myanmar
from Thailand. While Myanmar is close to some Indian Ocean shipping lanes, it does
not dominate any major sea lines of communication (SLOC) in the region (Selth,
2001).

Myanmar is rich in natural resources and hence, as have been mentioned, it is
a potential country locating in a strategic region of a dynamic continent. The
extensive and underutilized natural resources of Myanmar including hydrocarbons,
tea and much variety of metals and minerals make Myanmar a potential country. The
hydroelectric potentials of the country remain to be exploited satisfactorily. The
eastern Shan state is considered a part of “Golden Triangle” which is notorious for the
manufacture and export of opium and heroin to the neighbouring countries. These
factors along with its location at the meeting point of South Asia, East Asia and
Southeast Asia and having access to international maritime trade-ways render modern
Myanmar occupying a geostrategic position of great economic and military
importance.

Myanmar has full of villages and may be termed as underdeveloped. Few big
cities and dozens of towns are built up in the country. Most of the cities are located in
the central and lower Myanmar. Most notably, there are four main cities in Myanmar
namely, Yangon (earlier Rangoon), Mandalay, Moulmein and the newly developed
Naypyitaw, the new capital of Myanmar. The two Myanmar’s principal cities,
Yangon and Mandalay, are situated along the Irrawaddy. Yangon is located in the
Irrawaddy delta of the lower Myanmar and it is the most populous city followed by
Mandalay on the banks of the Irrawaddy in the central Myanmar. These two cities
are the chief centre of higher education in Myanmar and the hub of both domestic and
international air as well as sea travel. Moulmein is less developed and less populated
than the two cities, Yangon and Mandalay. On 12 July 2006, the ruling military junta announced its decision to shift the capital of the country from the old colonial-inherited base of Yangon to Naypyitaw. Naypyitaw is a more reclusive place in the heart of the country and it is closer to the strategic peripheral areas away from the threat of the Myanmarese coast which is vulnerable to foreign influences.⁷

At present Myanmar is administratively divided into eight regions (earlier they were called as divisions), seven states and one Union Territory (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States and Regions (official name)</th>
<th>Capitals (official name)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ayeyarwady Region</td>
<td>Pathein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bago Region</td>
<td>Bago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chin State</td>
<td>Hakha</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kachin State</td>
<td>Myitkyina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayah State</td>
<td>Loikaw</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kayin State</td>
<td>Hpa-an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magwe Region</td>
<td>Magwe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandalay Region</td>
<td>Mandalay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon State</td>
<td>Mawlamyine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rakhine State</td>
<td>Sittwe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sagaing Region</td>
<td>Sagaing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shan State</td>
<td>Lashio</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taninthary Region</td>
<td>Dawei</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yangon Region</td>
<td>Yangon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naypyitaw Union Territory</td>
<td>Naypyitaw</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The eight regions are located in the central part of the country and they are predominantly inhabited by the ethnic Burman. The seven states geographically surround the eight divisions or regions thus forming peripheral areas of the country. These regions are ethnic minority areas, mostly isolated and superficially integrated to Myanmar as a nation. The constitution of 2008 has created five self-administered Zone and one self-administered division viz. Danu (Pindaya), Kokang (Laukkai),

⁷ Many explanations have been given for the decision of the State Peace and Development Council to shift the capital from Yangon to Naypyitaw. Apart from astronomical and cultural factors, there are strategic and political reasons as well. Unlike Yangon, Naypyitaw is geographically inland from sea and highly protected and thus it is less susceptible to foreign interferences and threats. It is also closer to peripheral areas which can give the central government greater control over border trade activities, underground militias and ethnic insurgent movements. The site for the new capital is also reclusive from the potential threats to power from the major cities of the country as well as from foreign embassies.
Naga (Lahe), Palaung (Namhsan), Pao-o (Hopong) and Wa self-administered Division (Hopang). The challenging geographical terrains have traditionally made it difficult for the administration at the central plain to access these ethnic minority states in the periphery. The states and divisions are sub-divided into districts and townships and again townships into urban wards and village tracts.

**The People**

These administrative divisions reflect demographic setting in Myanmar. With a population of around 54,584,650 (July 2012) people, Myanmar is one of the least densely populated and most ethnically diverse countries in the Southeast Asian region. From the days of the monarchy, the Myanmarese society had been pluralistic with respect to social groups. The official figure of government of Myanmar (Census of 1983) talks of 135 indigenous ethnic groups inhabiting in Myanmar, which are bundled into eight major ethnic groupings: the Burman, the Shans, the Mons, the Karens or Kayins, the Arakanese or Rakhines, the Kayahs or Karenni, the Kachins and the Chins. Amongst the foreign ethnic residents, the most important are the Chinese and the Indians. The US Central Intelligence Agency gives the breakdown of population as the Burmans 68 percent, the Shan 9 percent, the Mon 2 percent, the Karen 7 percent, the Arakanese 4 percent, the Chinese 3 percent, the Indian 2 percent and other 5 percent (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Ethnic Composition of Myanmar**

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8 I had published a large part of this sub-chapter in my article. See appendix II.
The ethnic Burman constitutes about two-thirds of the population and historically, they mostly inhabit around the central geographic core of contemporary Myanmar. The non-Burman indigenous ethnic minorities, except few, are mostly concentrated in the remote, mountainous and strategically important border areas along with India, Bangladesh, China, Laos and Thailand. These ethnic minorities constitute only one-third of the population, but they occupy about forty per cent of the country.

An important aspect of the ethnic composition of Myanmar is that each major national races or ethnic group is not necessarily a homogenous entity, but has many tribal groups under them based on religion, dialect, political or family ties. The Karens, for instance, have four major tribal groups, namely, the Sgaw, the Pwo, the PaO and the Karenni or Kayah (Seekins, 2006, p. 247) and many other minor tribals groups under them, while the Chins consist of six major tribal groups: Asho, Cho or Sho, Khuami, Laimi, Mizo and Zomi (ibid. p. 146). The same is true with the Kachin and other groups (see Table 2).

![Table 2: Major Ethnic Groups and their Respective Compositions](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>8 Major National Races</th>
<th>Composition of 135 Ethnic Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kachin</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayah</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayin</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chin</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burman or Bamar</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rakhine</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shan</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


These ethnic minorities have their own languages and culture. This makes the ethnic composition in Myanmar very complicated. Many aspirations may exist side by side within the same ethnic group to protect their communities from domination by larger group of the same ethnic group. In term of religion, approximately 89 percent of the total population of Myanmar are followers of Buddhism, 4 percent Christian (Baptists 3 percent and Roman Catholic 1 percent), Islam 4 per cent, animist 1 per cent and other religions 2 per cent. Ethnically speaking, the overwhelming majority
Burmans, the Mons, the Shans as well as many Karens are adherents of Buddhism. The Buddhism in Myanmar is Theravada which entered Myanmar from Sri Lanka. This religion gives the country a culture and belief system which is being shared with its neighbours such as Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Next to Buddhism, Christianity is largely followed primarily amongst the tribal ethnic minority people, such as the Karens, the Chins and the Kachins due to extensive missionary activities during the colonial period. There is also a sizeable Muslim population in Myanmar. The Muslims are predominantly inhabited in Rakhine or Arakan state bordering Bangladesh in the west.\textsuperscript{10}

In the pre-British period, the various ethnic minority groups populated in the frontier areas were ruled by separate kingdoms and local tribal leaders. They maintained tributary relations with the Burman kingdom in the lowland without falling under their direct control. There existed a loose type of political alignment and social relations mostly based on patron-client relationship rather than ethnic or linguistic cleavage. The key to the fulfilment of the patron-client obligations was power and the various inter-penetrating centre of power were arranged by hierarchical and shifting relationship. Such interpenetrating, but often loose power relationship created substantial autonomy to the ethnic minorities at the periphery and at the same time, a feeling of distrust of authority or the dominant power. In most cases, it was directed to the Burma kings. The breakdown of the ethnic population since the country got independence from the British rule remained a central problem much older and viewed by many scholars as more of a concern than the better publicised struggle for democracy in Myanmar today.

The nature of relationship between various religious groups is a factor of animosity inside Myanmar. Though both the civilian or military governments had no claimed that religious intolerance or discrimination had no place in the country throughout its history, it cannot be denied that religion had been a point of difference among communities and between the government and those ethnic groups devoted to

\textsuperscript{10} The Arakan or Rakhine state is populated by Rohingyas or the Myanmarese Muslims. They have been living in the state since the 8th century but they have suffered a lot under the Myanmarese military government.
Christianity or the Myanmarese Muslims of the Arakan state. The violent clash between the Buddhists and the Muslim of Myanmar in 2012-2013 proves this fact. Another factor is the political activism of the monks, as evident during “Saffron Revolution” of September-October 2007. The civil or military rulers are mindful of the influences which the Buddhist Sangha or the monks exercise on the population and therefore, they endeavour to keep tight control over their unfavourable activities or manage their support for political interest.

There are grim humanitarian conditions for much of the population in Myanmar today. It is said that more than 30 percent of the children less than five year of age suffer from malnutrition and morbidity (Skidmore and Wilson, 2008, p. 5). The mortality rate for malaria and tuberculosis remain very high and HIV/AIDS epidemic spreads from high-risk groups into the general population affecting at least 1.3 percent of the adult population and claiming an estimated 37,000 lives in 2005 alone (ibid.).

As per the latest available Human Development Report (HDR) 2011 published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in terms of three basic capabilities, such as to live a long and healthy life, to be educated and knowledgeable and to enjoy a decent economic standard of living, the Human Development Index for Myanmar is 0.483 in 2011 with an overall global ranking of 149 out of 187 countries. A comparative study of Human Development Index of Myanmar with few selected countries is given below (see Table 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3 : Myanmar’s Position in Human Development 2011</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao People' Democratic Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low HDI</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In fact, food security and health are the urgent requirement in the country, but the government lacks capacity to improve the quality of life and standard of living of its vast people. Besides the five decades of military rule restricts foreign humanitarian access into the most in-need areas.

Another largely neglected area are education and skill development which are the keys to human development, new ideas and innovative thinking, and hence, a vehicle for socio-economic change and political development. While there is lack of both quantity and quality of education due to fragile and conflict-affected situation in the country, government allocation in military education, arms procurement, training and other military infrastructures remain high.

**British Colonial State**

The British colonialism and Panglong Agreement of 1947, where several ethnic minority groups came to an understanding to form a Union of Burma (Myanmar) and live together under one flag, formed the basis of the present-day geographical boundary of Myanmar. The modern state structure in Myanmar was largely developed under the British colonial rule, but the functioning of such political structure continued to be influenced by traditions of monarchical Myanmar. A brief overview of state in Myanmar before colonial subjugation and modification will not be irrelevant here. Before British imperialism had engulfed Myanmar through three stages,11 various kingdoms had existed in a feudalistic arrangement the nucleus of which was the kingdom of the Burman in the central plain. The Burman kingdom in the centre was geographically surrounded by Mon kingdom of the South, the Arakanese kingdom to the west, and the Shan kingdom in the north-east. The common image of these Myanmarese monarchies was characterised by internecine warfare for supremacy. In between these warring kingdoms, various tribal communities of Chin, Karen, Kachin, Palaung, PaO, Wa, Lahu etc. inter-spread

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11 The first Anglo-Myanmarese War of 1824-26 was a big blow to the Myanmarese sense of pride and invincibility. The British defeated the Burman king and forced to cede Assam, Manipur, Arakan and Tenasserim. The second Anglo-Myanmarese War of 1852-53 broke out thirty years later. The British annexed the province of Pegu or Lower Myanmar in the war. Finally the British fully absorbed Myanmar through a shorter and bloodless third Angle-Myanmarese war in 1886. Myanmar was made a province of British Indian Empire until 1935 when it was separated from India and ruled directly from Britain through its official.
between themselves or made themselves into alliance with one or the other way and waged wars against the Burman, the Shans or the Mons.

Amidst such bloody history internecine wars, Myanmar was unified by energetic Burman warrior-kings at different periods of history by conquering local kingdoms and expanding Burman military power to the neighbouring lands. Among the numerous kings in Myanmar’s history, the three most noted for uniting the people were king Anawratha in the eleventh century, king Bayinthaun in the sixteenth century and king Alaungphaya, founder of Konbaung, Myanmar’s last dynasty, in 1798 (McCarthy, 2006, p. 138). Under king Alaungphaya and his successors, Myanmar was at the epitome of its power and could manage to resist four separate Chinese invasions, while expanding into Thailand, Arakan, Manipur and Assam. In doing so, they threatened to encroach upon the British East India Company’s domination in the eastern region. Hostility ensued between the two sides by frequent irritating events which ultimately led to war. Finally the British disposed king Thibaw and ended the era of Myanmar monarchy. Thus Myanmar lost its independence in the hands of the British imperialism.

The political order of the Burman, the Mons, and the Arakanese kings in the heartland could be defined as relationship characterized by obligation to rulers and overlord rather than jurisdictional control over territory. The most powerful of these kingdoms was the kingdom of the Burman. It was based on the centralism where the power of the monarch was absolute and autocratic or despotic (Maung Maung Gyi 1983:21-24, 34-35). The king was the supreme head of all the people and owner of all lands. The king devoted much of his time in war and conquests. Yet he was also patron of Buddhists faith and devoted much of its resources to pagoda building and other religious activities. Political power was articulated in a highly personalistic and arbitrary way implying essentially lawlessness, because there was no law above the monarch except Buddhist moral precepts and exhortation (ibid., p. 22). A system of royal patronage determined officials of the state who were allocated districts to administer and from which they would receive revenue. At times the absolutism of the king was restricted by the influences of his ministers and advisors, yet these officials
and advisors were not independent outside the control of the king and often their influence was based on personal relations.

Religion, ethnicity and occupation were important determinants of social organisation. Ethnicity was the principle basis of social and cultural distinctiveness. Another equally important was the distinction between the hill people and valley civilisation. The most important hill people were the Kachins and Karens in the north and east, Chin in the west and other tribal groups populated in the adjoining hill areas. These hill people practised *taung-ye* agriculture involving crop rotation and slash-and-burn. The valley civilisation was represented by the Mons and the Burman who populated in the more densely populated central and lower plains of Myanmar. The Shans inhabited in the eastern plateau were also included in this group. These groups practised irrigated paddy cultivation. They developed more complex and sophisticated social and political systems. Their material and spiritual life were more advanced, built luxurious palaces and pagodas or temples which adorned their kingdom. Throughout the history of pre-colonial time, the *myothugyi* or hereditary village leaders played vital social and administrative role in the village level, such as, raising revenues, recruiting troops and supplying labour (Callahan, 2009, p. 31).

There was a belief that the capital was built at the cosmological centre of the universe and it was at the centre that the power of the king was mostly concentrated. Theoretically the Burman king claimed authority over all the people and their land. However beyond the centre, the organisation of power assumed a more dispersed character and could be of different patterns from the one prevailing at the centre. Many ethnic and tribal minorities in the peripheral areas followed traditional animistic belief system. They were militarily weak to defend themselves and their sovereignty which forced them to acknowledge suzerainty of great Burman kings in recognition that their cultural distinctiveness and internal autonomy would be preserved. This allowed them to remain as separate and distinct entities from the systems of the Burman monarch and could develop their own patterns of governance distinct from the one prevailing at the centre. This however did not prevent exchanges of cultural values between animism and Buddhism. At times such weak centre-peripheral relations troubled internal stability. When weak kings reign in the centre,
their authority was rejected by the tribal or ethnic rulers at the periphery. Conversely during the period of strong monarch at the centre his powers and authority were imposed on the periphery and the latter obeyed them. In fact in the peripheral areas state authority could only be imposed by coercive means.\(^{12}\)

Within the Burman kingdom, the king being autocratic, centralist and despotic governed his kingdom, in reality, according to his own will and caprice without any legal restraints or regularized mechanisms of popular control. The kingdom was minutely controlled by superfluity of regulations and bureaucratic officials to quell any internal and external challenges to the throne, yet the authority of the king was limited at the local level because a great deal of people’s time and ingenuity was devoted to avoiding the bureaucratic structures and requirements of the state (Taylor, 1987, p. 20). During that period it was common experience that contacts with the agencies of the state invariably involved imposition of some kind of burden, such as military conscription, force labour and taxation to fund the frequent wars or in some cases harsh punishment including death penalty which was often ruled at will or suspicion. These forced the ordinary subjects of the kingdom devote more to their social life and struggle for existence than to take interest or sought participation in the risky political affairs. The government became one of the five great evils of life. The political system was accepted as found and no speculation about such questions as the rule of law and what constituted good government were made (Silverstein, 1998, p. 13). The right of the king to rule and his power over life and death of the people were not questioned (ibid.). Nevertheless the authority of the king was not one that was always accepted or never challenged. External threats emanating from neighbouring kingdoms and internal rivalries and revolts from the princes and powerful officials within the kingdom often threatened reign of a monarch. The Myanmarese history tells that weak and unskilled kings who unable to avert such threats lost his life and kingdom. In the event of a king eliminated thus his reign ended but the system remained the same as it was during the reign of the previous king.

\(^{12}\) According to Silverstein (1998, p. 16), there existed a kind of feudal relationship between the Burman and non-Burman where many ethnic groups including many sub-tribes “in exchange for acknowledging the suzerainty, providing soldiers, and giving tribute…lived under their own rules, according to their own laws and traditions, practiced their own religions and cultures, and used their own languages”.
The British connection and influences began to have its impact felt on the institutional structures and processes of the Burman kingdom, particularly during the reign of King Mindon between 1853 and 1878. He was a reformist and more humane monarch who was even respected by the British. King Mindon’s reforms attempted administrative centralisation, bureaucratisation of royal agencies and construction of a completely new system of taxation in “efforts to rationalise government, to do away with vagueness, haphazardness and local variation, to construct clear lines of authority and more definite boundaries of jurisdiction” (Thant Myint-U, 2001, p. 115). The administrative and economic reformations of king Mindon did not worked properly, rather it disarrayed political and fiscal stability of the kingdom and eroded the authority of the king both in the eyes of the British as well as his subjects. For the British it set the stage for their colonial state and society to follow (ibid.)

The defeat of king Thibaw ended era of monarchy and many institutions and social arrangements associated with the old political system were abolished. The king along with his family was exiled to India. Evidently Myanmar was annexed into British colony, but instead of treating it as a separate colony, the newly occupied country was administered as part of British India for 37 years from 1886 to 1923. In 1937 Myanmar was separated from the British India colony and treated it as separate colony of the British.

The British annexation brought the immediate problem of countering the widespread anti-British insurgencies led by scattered remnants of the earlier authority structure which the British interpreted as the ‘scattered rebellion and dacoit’. As such the state of affairs immediately after the British had conquered Myanmar was violent and anarchic which had continued for long time. It took the British until 1891 to fully pacify the population and establish British authority. The pacification campaign was brutal which included measures such as burning of villages or forced relocation of villages, flogging, mass execution of rebels etc. A large number of British and Indian troops were deployed into the pacification campaign which made ‘the colonial state

13 The British conquest destroyed the old political system of the monarchical period and there occurred cultural conflicts between the Buddhists Burman who refused to accept principles of Christianity and the British culture based on Christianity. Yet as Selth (2001) asserts Myanmar’s strong Buddhist culture survived more or less intact, in spite of the fact that with the exit of monarchy destroyed many of the country’s traditional institutions and social arrangements.
born as a military occupation’ (ibid. p. 7). Gradually order was established, but in the process entrenched Myanmarese hatred for foreign power and people.

The Myanmar state under British colonialism was to extract material benefits from Myanmar through trade and commercial venture and as means of establishing political control, bringing peace and maintaining law and order became necessary. Ideologically the colonial state was based on liberal police state system maintaining peace and security to pursue trade and commercial benefits. The colonial state brought far-reaching and reformative changes in many fields of the Myanmarese socio-political and economic system.

The establishment of British colonial rule in Myanmar brought about transformation in the monarchical system characterized by personal rule and patronage system. Under the British rule, administration was carried on around territorial jurisdiction, and its functioning became more rational and systematic. The colonial state system introduced foreign institutions and practices that were alien to the rural life which many were accustomed to. Formalism and institutionalism replacing customary arrangement of the pre-colonial system astonished and confused the people. With the influx of many foreigners as traders, administrators, clerks, police, tourists etc., Myanmar became a plural and complex society with respects to the racial and occupational groups where the upper stratum of the social structure was the domain of the foreigners mostly the European, the Indians and the Chinese. Socially a more plural society emerged and the correlative political feature of the colonial Myanmarese society was equally stratified both vertically and horizontally. Political and economic powers were concentrated into the hands of the foreigners occupying the cities and towns of central and lower Myanmar with only few natives given a share in lower level of authority structure or petty business activities. For the subservient simple folks in the periphery or villages occupied by them the new socio-political system continued to be as much isolated as it was during the times of monarchy.

As part of the pacification process, a more rational system of administration was imposed on central and lower Myanmar through the 1887 Village Act (Callahan, 2009, p. 35)
Myanmar gained modernisation and rationalisation of state structure, governance and politics, but these were designed for the convenience of the colonial rule and to pursue economic benefits. With the downfall of the monarchy, the village headman or *myothugyi* was transformed into an agent who relied solely on the British authority for his status, income and property rights and owed his responsibilities to the colonial state alone (Charney, 2009, p. 7). New administrative divisions were constructed purely based on geographical considerations and new district collectors or administrators who were mostly Indians were installed in place of the customary local chiefs to the functions of policing and taxation. In other words, the aged-old customs, authority structure and system of social regulation were razed with the influx of the British colonialism and the consequent establishment of new socio-political and economic values which were largely alien to the people of Myanmar. All these paved the way for dismantling social cohesion and stability.

In pursuance of the primary goal of securing commercial and other economic benefits, the colonial state built necessary infrastructures such as roads, railways and other institutions, but the British found difficulties in exercising the basic role of maintaining law and order and providing a stable political order. As such the colonial system organised the state around coercion and punitive forces. This maintained the popular notion of state authority as adversaries and there continued the foundation of state to be based on force, coercion, intimidation and fear which in the words of Callahan (1996), implies ‘institutionalizing the primacy of armed coercion in the state-society relations’. Such emphasis on coercive social control over welfare measures never allowed colonial state to gain performance legitimacy. The British and all its numerous institutions and practices continued to be alien in Myanmar. The people of Myanmar never accepted the British rule. This makes Taylor (1987, p. 115) comments that the ‘greatest weakness of the colonial state was its inability to sustain support from the indigenous population’.

After the World War II like in British India, the British began to think about political reorganisation, more responsible institutions and procedures in Myanmar in line to the western democratic values and practices. The British were unwilling to do so, but they were under compulsion to initiate the reform measures so that it could
pacify the growing social, political and economic upheavals in Myanmar. Ironically Myanmar was initially excluded from the constitutional reforms proposed under the Government of India Act of 1919 stating that the situation in Myanmar was different from India and its people were not politically advanced enough for the reforms. It was only after great pressures from the people of Myanmar that the act was applied in the country as well in 1923. However the act was modified in its application to Myanmar. This step marked installation of a rudimentary parliamentary democracy on the British model in Myanmar towards the progressive realisation of responsible self-government in Myanmar. The diarchy reforms remained operative till the British parliament passed the Government of India Act of 1935 which separated Myanmar from India. Under the act Myanmar’s constitutional position improved as it became a British Crown’s colony to be ruled directly by her representatives. The reforms of 1935 granted a new constitution for Myanmar and some measures of self-government. Between 1937 and 1942, Myanmar had the experiences of working four ministries. The four ministries were headed by Dr. Ba Maw (April 1937-February 1939), U Pu (February 1939-September 1940), U Saw (September 1940-January 1942) and U Saw who was succeeded by Sir Paw Tun. These ministries were not based on parliamentary majority, rather they acted as agency of the British colonial rule. The reformed structure continued to be paternalistic, authoritarian and quite autonomous from the society and people. The colonial state continued to be foreign-imposed and ultimately responsible to London. The Japanese interruption during the World War II doomed further development of the British political reform process in Myanmar.

The impact of colonialism was most significant in the economic field. The British drew the isolated and self-sustaining economy of Myanmar basically based on paddy cultivation and teak logging into the whirlpool of world market. Soon Myanmar became one of the principal rice exporting area of the world. Consequently Myanmar became one of the important focus of trade and commercial venture for the British in Southeast Asia. The period from complete annexation of Myanmar in 1885 to the beginning of the World War I witnessed high tide of British commercial and agricultural expansion in Myanmar which correspondingly led to fashioning an administrative policy conducive to serve the growing economic needs (Desai, 1954, pp. 125-26). The colonial state transformed the agricultural and subsistence economy
of Myanmar based largely on agriculture and barter system into a new economic system grounded on the liberal economic doctrine of *laissez faire*. The British also encouraged those changes which it saw economically profitable and politically desirable. Thus the British built many social and economic infrastructures such as dockyards, roads, rail-lines, bridges, hospitals, schools and so on, which in turn brought new lands under cultivations, vitalized trade and commerce, spurred private and foreign investments especially in primary industries and agricultural sector which ultimately benefitted the colonial economic exploitation.

The infrastructural development apart, the operation of the new economic system was however unfavourable to the Myanmarese. This was especially so because the Myanmarese did neither have any opportunity to participate nor have share in the increasing economic activities in the country (Bandyopadhyaya, 1983, p. 6). After 1920 economic discontents in Lower Myanmar, where colonial economic activities largely concentrated, grew tense. In 1930s, the global economic crisis of Great Depression hit hard rice export-oriented commercialised economy of Myanmar and consequently social and political upheavals erupted in Myanmar. Ne Win, a twenty years old dropout then, learnt a bitter lesson during this shaky period of Myanmarese economy which certainly had great part in shaping his xenophobic and isolationist personality in later years. Ne Win looked for a job around the time Myanmar’s economy had been badly affected by the global economic crisis. He found selling coal a profitable trade and working hard he began a little business. Soon he was forced to cut down his business by the competition at the hands of the Indian merchants. The first economic effort of the man who later ruled Myanmar for 26 years was a failure due to foreigners’ tight grip over the economy including retail trade. This was a bitter lesson for him (Thant Myint-U, 2007, pp. 294-95).

The commercial priority of the British and subsequent penetration of capitalist economic realities and development of modern physical infrastructures, as by product, transformed the country that over time, society, besides politics, became more complex and diverse in structure and composition. The vivid transformation was that a complex society developed due to influx of several foreigners in different capacities. In such a society, it was foreigners who owned and managed all productive
enterprises, whereas the purely agricultural activities, mainly the cultivation of rice, were left to the native Myanmarese (Bandyopadhyaya, 1983, p. 7). Myanmarese were mostly excluded from higher social and economic positions, instead they were pushed into indebtedness and landlessness by the Indian moneylenders called the chatteyars.

In other words, the social structure became increasingly polarised where native population was pushed to the bottom of the social ladder. Social cohesion was limited for the diverse people, constituting the plural society, that is, though mixed within the same political units, they did not actually combine. The modern Myanmarese elites who were the product of western connection were drawn into the state elite and colonial civil services, but the less educated and more nationalistic and individualistic Myanmarese saw them as colonial collaborators. Such emerging political, economic and social practices under colonialism did not cultivate indigenous identification with the state practices. Moreover, the entire economic activities were never directed to fulfil needs and demands of the Myanmarese. The economic and political discontents as outcomes contributed to the growth of anti-colonial feelings and rise of nationalism in Myanmar.

Under the British rule, Myanmar was also subjected to substantial cultural impositions and changes. Many western traditions based on Christianity and liberal social values which were alien to the Myanmarese came with the British and they were imposed in Myanmar causing widespread cultural conflicts. Though many hill peoples, such as the Karen, the Kachin, the Chin and others were converted to Christianity the western cultural values represented by the British were highly resented by the majority ethnic group Buddhists Burman. One example was the “shoe question”. It had been a tradition in Myanmar to remove shoes while entering sacred places and on ceremonial occasions. Quite contrary, the British preferred to remain correctly shoed on such occasions. Such Anglo-Myanmarese cultural conflicts were vividly encountered thousand times during the period of colonial rule.\footnote{Trager (1966, p. 42) presents a vivid picture of such cultural inconsistency. He quotes: “Your and our customs are so completely opposite in so many points. You write on white, we on black paper \textit{parabeiks}. You stand up, we sit down [knee or bend down]; you uncover your head, we our feet [no shoes] in token of respect”.} No doubt, it was in the cultural sphere that nationalism in Myanmar first developed in the early twentieth century.
The growth of nationalism was the main threat to the British motive of maintaining status quo in Myanmar. The political and economic considerations were nicely mingled by the British by employing ethnic division of the country into two distinct zones. The traditional Burman areas consisting of the maritime regions, the central part and the Irrawaddy delta, which had the largest political and economic potentials, were classified as ‘Ministerial Burma/Myanmar’ or ‘Burma/Myanmar Proper’. The surrounding peripheral areas which were formerly tributary areas of the Burman kings, and where most of the ethnic minority groups lived were designated as the ‘Frontier’ or ‘Excluded Areas’. The Burma/Myanmar Proper region was governed directly by the employees of the colonial state, but the less accessible frontier lands were left more or less alone, with local chiefs or princes in charge under British supervision. Politically, such arrangement allowed the frontier areas to retain the traditional ruling structure and functions with some degree of autonomy. Another important consequence was that the forces of nationalism were weaken due to keeping the indigenous people divided throughout the period of Myanmar’s history. The politico-administrative factors apart, such arrangements were also guided by concrete economic factors. The peripheral areas were characterised by difficult hilly terrain and low density of population which made the cost of administration far more exceed the revenue it could accrued to the colonial exchequer. The resources of the area were not easily exploitable and establishing direct rule in those areas would harm the British’s commercial interest than it could benefit the colonial masters. The situation was quit contrary in the central and lower Myanmar where population was dense. It constituted a budding rice production region which was facilitated more by easy and cheap transport and communication system provided by river system of the region. Consequently the region was ruled directly, it was more developed but more exploited. Hence this region was the seat of colonial unrest.

Such politico-administrative and economic arrangement could save the British colonial rule for many years and at the same time, its economic and commercial advantages broadened. For the native people, such arrangement had the consequence

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16 According to Khosla (1998, p. 1641), one of the instruments the British developed to meet the threat of nationalism to their rule in Myanmar was to impose their version of two Myanmar onto the history of the country and the political-administrative landscape of the country to undermine the legitimacy of Myanmar as a unified state.
of keeping the political and economic development of the mountainous areas behind the rest of the country (Smith, 1991, pp. 41-2). Moreover the differentiated arrangement reinforced ethnic split and animosity to become Myanmar a country of extremely politicised multi-ethnicity, the impact of which was badly felt in the post-independent period (Kharaijam, 2011, p. 315). Such division made nationalism and national movement non-inclusive as many ethnic minorities did not side with the Burmans, instead collaborated with the British (ibid. p. 314). The Burmans on the other hand were overtly marginalised in the military recruitment, administration, political and economic system under the British colonialism. Though they were the majority community most of the decisions affecting their live and economy was monopoly of the British. This process of alienation created sense of deep resentment among the Burmans which was directed not only against the foreigners but also against the ethnic minority groups as well.17

**Emergence of Nationalism and Japanese Connection**

In course of time the conditions created by the British colonial state produced challenges to the British rule itself. Besides discontentment over the socio-cultural disintegration and economic backwardness of the indigenous people, other important factors which profoundly influenced and strengthened nationalist awakening in Myanmar included Japanese victory over Russia in 1904-05, the independence of neighbouring Buddhist kingdom of Siam (modern Thailand), the freedom movement of India and the ideas of national self-determination current during the World War I (Bandyopadhyaya, 1983, p. 19).

The Myanmarese nationalism started as socio-religious movement in the beginning of the twentieth century. After the World War I, the Myanmarese nationalism took political character. The first organisation that spearheaded the anti-colonial sentiments in the modern sense in Myanmar was the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA) established in 1906. The Young Men’s Buddhist Association

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17 According to Tucker (2001, p, 33) there were great inversion of natural order for the Burman under colonial rule affecting their political, economic, cultural life as well as their sense of superiority. For long, apart from despising the other indigenous races as their cultural, educational and religious inferiors, many Burmans also despised the Indians for their darker skins (ibid.). The Burman felt the British policy to be cynical, exploitative and partisan (ibid.).
was not a purely political organisation. During the early days, this pro-religious association did not contemplate any overt political objective, it was largely religious and civic body. As such this first organised nationalist reaction to British rule did not meet with objection from the British authority. Later the pro-religious and social service programmes apart, the association started expressing its concern on political affairs of the country and consequently it became a ‘medium for channelling patriotic and nationalistic sentiments (Sardesai, 1983, p.279). It provided a nation-wide organisational set up to stimulate political awakening.

The Young Men’s Buddhist Association was later developed into the more political body known as the General Council of Burmese Association (GCBA) in 1917. The General Council of Burmese Association marked a shift from Buddhist sentiments to national awakening and political independence. The core of the General Council of Burmese Association leadership was provided by lawyers, businessmen, landowners and journalists.

The Myanmarese nationalists were initially inspired by the Indian National Congress (INC), the most important and powerful political organisation that spearheaded India’s freedom struggle against the British. The General Council of Burmese Association throughout 1920s organised mass movements in Myanmar on the line of the Indian National Congress (Singh, 1989, p. 22). With the opening of the new University of Rangoon in December 1920, the students were also brought into the realm of national political awakening (ibid.). The students’ activism was evident in the form of nationwide strike in protest against the education plan concerned with a new university. The strike which was a great success was supported by the General Council of Burmese Association. Meanwhile in 1923 correcting its earlier stand of not including Myanmar in the scope of Government of India Act of 1919 the British attempted to appease the growing nationalist aspirations of the Myanmarese particularly by reorganising political power under vague objective towards ‘the progressive realisation of responsible self-government’ which set the stage for ‘a race between constitutionalism and nationalism’ (Maung Maung Gyı, 1983, p. 87). The

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18 The nationalistic sentiments of the people of Myanmar were very high during that time. They not only despised the colonial rule, but equally disliked foreigners and their influences in the country, As Maung Maung Gyı (1983, p. 78) mentions that “had Burma been given independence in the early
conflict of nationalism and constitutionalism was also evident among the Myanmarese nationalists. The English educated lawyer-bureaucrat and more seasoned nationalists obtained position in the colonial representative institutions. Yet such reforms were not of much meaningful, and therefore, less interested to the young patriots and more radical nationalists who considered the representative institutions as ‘ruses to quit Burmese agitations and nothing more’ (ibid.).

The nationalistic sentiments of the Myanmarese further strengthened by the accidents of 1930s and it stirred anti-foreign feelings in Myanmar. In May 1930, Indo-Myanmarese labour riots broke out in Rangoon which was followed by Sino-Myanmarese riot in December 1930. In 1938 Indian Muslims in Myanmar were attacked. The nationalistic and anti-foreign sentiments spread wide and the Burmans were urged to rise and defend their national honour beyond speech-making and grabbing office to larger sacrifices and holder deeds (Maung Maung, 1969, p. 30)

The events of 1930s stirred several angry young and radical nationalists on the political platform. Moreover the global economic crisis of Great Depression reinforced the Myanmarese economic discontents and consequently it exploded in the form of the anti-British “Tharrawaddy Rebellion” under the leadership of Saya San in December 1930. The rebels undertook violent attacks on police stations, other governmental institutions and on people who were found to be helping the government (Singh, 1989, p. 25). It was a determined effort to overthrow the British rule, though it ended with violent subdue and Saya San was hanged. The British predominantly employed Karen troops in the bloody suppression of the rebellion. After the revolt, the Myanmarese nationalist movement became more urbanite, elitist, more radical, but less populace in character. It was an important turning point in Myanmar’s resistance to colonial rule.

The 1930s was significant as it marked the establishment of a radical political club and creed known as the Dobama Asi-ayone (We Burman Association) in Myanmar. Many important future leaders of Myanmar like Aung San, U Nu, Ne Win

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1920s, a reversal to monarchical system, pure and simple, would not have been unlikely. Memories of the old Burmese kings were still keen and sharp among the leading Burmese politicians”.
etc aroused from this creed. Ideologically the leaders of the body were leftist, traditionalist, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist. Amongst its leaders, Aung San, U Nu, Ba Swe Kyaw Nyein etc. were moderate socialists. It also included staunch communists like Thakin Soe and Than Tun. Yet the common aim of these leaders was to achieve complete independence of Myanmar without thinking on the path of representative institutions.

The member of the Dobama Asi-ayone called themselves “Thakin” or Master, a grand gesture of ‘master mentality’ and giving direction to their movement. The birth of Thakin movement was conditioned by the growing socio-cultural and political unrest in Myanmar after the World War I, and it demonstrated the rising nationalist impatience with the foreign rule. Thus the Thakins’ core concern was challenging colonial rule and their economic exploitations claiming that the Myanmarese were the master in their own country. The nationalists associated with the Thakin movement were inspired by Saya San, by ‘glorious past’ of Myanmar and intense nationalism and leftist political thought. Many of the Thakin leaders entered early manhood during the period of economic recession in Myanmar resulting from the Great Depression. Their political thoughts were characterized by fusion of various degrees of nationalistic, socialistic and Buddhist thinking. Under their leadership, Myanmar’s independence movement took leftist orientation to become anti-capitalist and anti-foreign sentiments as strong as nationalist one.

The British proceeded with its path of providing representative institutions with limited powers under the Government of India Act. 1935 as well. The new Act separated Myanmar from British India. A new constitution came into operation and the scheme of self-governance was broadened for Myanmar. Meanwhile the Thakin movement was gaining momentum. During the Rangoon University Student’s Union strike in 1936, Thakin U Nu and Aung San (who were then President and Secretary of the Student’s Union), took a leading part. U Tin and U Chit Maung were great supporter of the young Thakins through the medium of their newspaper (Maung, 1969, p. 62). Around this time, the Thakin nationalists became more radical and impatient against the colonial rule so much so that they prepared for armed conflict if necessary. Initially they were inspired by the Indian National Congress and their
method of struggle, such as strike and protests. Their leftist leaning also made them hopeful of China’s support. At this juncture, the World War II broke out. Myanmar saw an opportunity and helping hand from Japan.

The main creed and social base of the Myanmarese nationalist movement have significant implications to future political development in Myanmar. As have been discussed, nationalism in Myanmar emerged from cultural and religious sensitivities of the Myanmarese. It was the politically conscious monks who spearheaded political awakening in Myanmar. In fact politics in Myanmar had inseparable relationship with religion and the British attempt to disrupt this established pattern caused instability in social order. The nationalist movement was also characterised by intense nationalism and anti-foreign sentiments. It not only aimed at political freedom from Britain, but also freedom from all kind of domination by the foreigners in their life and economy. It was also outburst of racial xenophobia against the Indian and the Chinese who were pushing native Myanmarese out of economic opportunities that caused racial riots in 1930s. When agrarian unrests overshadowed cultural-religious discontentment, nationalist movement became more secular but still rural in character. In keeping with the modernity of state enterprises following gradual shifts in Myanmar’s politico-administrative structure under British reforms, the base of the Myanmarese nationalism became more unban-based with new intellectuals educated in western educational institutions, including students, lawyers and lower bureaucrats became more potent political forces. The involvement of the larger populace in the national movement was not contemplated and the mass mobilisation gradually declined. The more moderate section amongst such nationalists took the path of self-government through participation in political institutions, whereas the more radical and impatient nationalists of Dobama creed became more pro-leftist, anti-British, anti-foreigner and consequently, anti-capitalist, not ready to accept anything less than complete independence. It was this section of nationalists who became Thakins of the Dobama group. As nationalist movement progress it became more extremist, militant and armed in its struggle against the British domination in their country.
Nevertheless unlike in India, the Myanmarese nationalist movement never had profound degree of inclusiveness and it lacked mass participation. The nationalists pursuing constitutional paths were products of the British administrative institutions and education. They had limited ties with the rural society where mass base of an inclusive and self-reliant national movement concentrated. The various ethnic groups residing in the peripheral areas were not attracted to nationalist surge partly due to British policy of ‘divide and rule’ and partly due to lack of mobilisation. The most important political actors in the struggle for Myanmar’s independence before and after World War II were ethnic Burman. The impact of colonialism was most unfavourable to their socio-political, cultural and economic life. Perhaps they made the greatest sacrifice for the independence of the country and some sections of the Burman became chauvinistic. However, as Thakin movement gained in strength, party conflicts and personal rivalries based on struggle for power grew bolder.

By the outbreak of the World War II, Aung San and other Thakin leaders of Dobama creed realised that the forces of Myanmarese struggle for independence was not strong enough to defeat the British on their own. They had kept faith in non-violent and semi-violent acts of civil disobedience on the pattern of Indian freedom struggle, but the outcome was unsatisfactory. Influenced by Mahatama Gandhi and Indian National Congress, strikes and protests were instruments in the early stage of Myanmar’s struggle for independence. In 1939, an alliance of Dobama Asi-ayone, monks, students and other nationalists formed an anti-colonial front called the ‘Freedom Bloc’. Aung San was General Secretary of the body until he went underground. The organisation issued condition of immediate independence for Myanmar as the prize of support to Britain in the World War II. The British, however, responded with mass arrest and brutal repression. Having disgusted with moderate method of struggle, the radical young Thakin nationalists later decided that armed action was the only avenue left open to them if Myanmar was to achieve independence (Selth, 1986, p. 489). Thus a means was set to the goal, and they saw the opportunity to realise it through Japanese help. When the World War II broke out, the Thakins collaborated with the Japanese against the British.

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19 As Singh (1989, p. 28) says the ‘Freedom Bloc’ was an ultra-nationalist organization. It derived its name from the India “Forward Bloc” led by Subash Chandra Bose.
However, Japan was not the first choice for the young Thakins. Largely influenced by socialist orientations and also by global anti-colonial discourse which moved sharply left by that time, the Chinese communist was the first choice to the young nationalists. They looked for Chinese help. Aung San secretly moved out of the country to make contact with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to enlist their support for the cause of Myanmar’s independence. Instead it was the Japanese secret police, *Kempeitai*, who contacted Aung San in Amoy and offered to help free Myanmar. In 1940, Japanese agent colonel Suzuki contacted Aung San offering Myanmar military help if they would agree to side with the Japanese in the World War II (Sardesai, 1983, P. 283). The young Thakins agreed.

The Japanese had certain aspirations or objectives behind contacting Aung San. Numerous slogans like a ‘New Order in Asia’, ‘Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere’ and ‘Asia for the Asiatics’ reflected Japan’s contemplation to construct an Asia Pacific Empire by the late 1930s (Singh, 1989, p. 35). More specifically, Myanmar’s strategic location and resources of vital minerals could be of value to Japan (Hendershot, 1942, p. 176-78). Aung San, who now had faith in armed struggle as the only viable method for achieving independence from the British rule, agreed to cooperate with colonel Suzuki when the later assured prospect of independence in return. The communist-oriented Thakins, such as Thakin Soe, Ba Hein, Thein Pe Myint and Aung San’s brother-in-law Than Tun Saw were not appealing by the plan. Instead they felt safer contesting the Japanese and saw in the Japanese threat an opportunity to press their demands for independence (Tucker, 2001, p. 39). The communist Thakins saw in the Japanese slogan of ‘Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere’ a euphemism for continued foreign rule under new master and believed in supporting the Britain in its effort to defeat the Fascists (ibid).

Aung San however proceeded with his plan. He formed a group of some like-minded youths drawn from a socialist-oriented secret sub-group of *Dabama Asi-ayone* known as the Burma Revolutionary Party. They went to Japan and received wide-ranging military training on Hainan Island under Japanese supervision together with Aung San himself. This group, popularly known as “The Thirty Comrades” who were drawn from a secret sub-group of *Dabama Asi-ayone* ethnically consisted two Shans
and the remaining were ethnic Burmans (Selth, 1986, p. 490). They formed Burma Independence Army (BIA) under the aegis of the Japanese with Aung San as commander. When the Japanese military campaign advanced into Myanmar, Burma Independence Army backed them. As the impending force marched into Myanmar behind the Japanese army, it went on recruiting new men. The British were shocked and feared by the lightening advance of the Japanese- Burma Independence Army forces, and retreated to the west. By the end of May 1942, the Japanese were in complete occupation of Myanmar.

Under the Japanese, a military administration was established to fill up the governance temporarily. Later an independent Myanmarese government was installed on 1 August 1943 with Ba Maw as Head of the State or Adipati. The cabinet of Ba Maw’s government included Aung San as Defence Minister, and U Nu as Foreign Minister. Ne Win became the military commander of Burma Independence Army now renamed as the Burma National Army (BNA). The government of Ba Maw was a puppet regime with the semblance of independence and in any case, the ‘real control was in the hands of Dr. Gotara Ozawa, formerly a cabinet minister in Tokyo, who became Supreme Advisor to Burmese government’ (Hall, 1967, p. 863). The government of Ba Maw was ethnically non-inclusive in the sense that most of the ethnic groups at the periphery did not participate and distrusted the new regime. It can be mentioned here that whilst the Thakin nationalists were co-operating with the Japanese in the hope of getting independence, most of the ethnic groups were proving their loyalty to the British and took an active part in the British’s resistance movement against Japan. The Chin, the Karen, the Shan and the Karen were mobilised as allies of the British and the United States against the Japanese force.

The warmth the Myanmarese held for the Japanese soon dissipated. The Thakin leaders came to know that the Japanese had no sincere intention to liberate and grand genuine independence to Myanmar. Political disillusion apart, several flawed and provocative acts of the Japanese, such as slapping of village notables, forced labour, mandatory and uncompensated requisitions for cattle and rice and strangely enough for fellow-Buddhists and the use of Pagodas as latrine and burning of Buddhist scriptures were intolerable to the Myanmarese (Sardesai, 1983, p. 284). In
fact the Japanese threatened Myanmar as their colony. Soon the Myanmarese patriots began to know this. Moreover, economic disarray and mounting health crisis caused serious doubt over Japanese occupation.

Nevertheless, the three years of Japanese occupation of Myanmar (1942-1945) have significant influence in Myanmar’s political development. The war and Japanese connection thoroughly swept away pro-western social and political evolution envisioned for Myanmar. It completely disrupted the normal process of political evolution in Myanmar and gave a shock to the British prestige. The destruction of British colonial order displaced the men and leaders who had begun to acquire rudimentary skills in the working of the British-sponsored political institutions put in place in the 1920s and 1930s. The war-time experiences also profoundly changed the attitude, outlook and position of many Myanmarese Thakin leaders. The events of war and Japanese occupation delivered into the hands of the Thakins who had not much respect for western bourgeois concepts and values considerable political foothold. They consolidated their position further. They constituted the principal power in the war-devastated country when the British force reoccupied Myanmar following Japanese defeat. The old nationalists who were the product of the British experiments were discredited from the people, and they were considered as pro-British, not trusted by the Thakin leaders (Ram, 2000, p. 62).

With Japan’s assistance the nationalist struggle against the British colonialism gave birth to Burma Independence Army to which the genealogy of the present day Tatmadaw can be traced back. The leaders of the Burma Independence Army were first and foremost the nationalist with socialist and anti-west orientations. The Tatmadaw was formed with former politicians as its leaders. It was during Japanese occupation that the Tatmadaw gained first-hand experiences in the administration of the country. Aung San and the Tatmadaw, then called Burma National Army, turned against the Japanese when they were disillusioned with the Japanese and helped liberate Myanmar in collaboration with the British. The participation of Burma National Army in the liberation movement subsequently formed the basis for claim
by military leaders that the army liberated Myanmar and remains nation’s the natural
 guardian, with a right and duty to lead its affairs, political and otherwise’.\textsuperscript{20}

The Japanese connection during the World War II and the defeat and withdrawal of the British from Myanmar had shattered the illusion of western and British invincibility which boosted further the rise of nationalism in Myanmar. A long lasting benefit in the form of a bond between the Myanmar and Japan was also established which was again compounded by sadness of great loses the Japanese suffered in Myanmar (Steinberg, 2010, p. 36). Such feelings of mutuality later made Japan become one of the largest donors of reparations and economic assistance in the 1950s and even today (ibid.).

Another long lasting but undesirable legacy was that the Japanese conquest exacerbated the growth of ethno-nationalism. It can be mentioned here that after the complete annexation of the country in 1885, the British followed several policies which had deleterious effects on the prospects for ethnic integration in Myanmar. Militarily, the British initiated the practice of recruiting soldiers from the Chin, the Kachin and the Karens, isolating the majority Burman from the military set up. The British employed these forces against the Burman movement for national independence. For instance, the Karen troops were employed to subdue Saya San rebellion in 1930s. During the World War II while most Myanmarese nationalists sided with the Japanese, many ethnic groups, notably the Karen and the Kachin, besides the Chin and the Shan, formed guerrilla units, which fought alongside the Allies against the Burman-Japanese force (Lintner, 2003, p. 181). These ethnic people gave every possible support to the retreating British force during World War II and for their loyalty to the British, the Karens, in particular, suffered much in the hands of the Burmans. According to Tucker (2001, p. 47), the ‘loyalty to the British was a matter of pride for them and the Burman behaviour, moreover, had intensified their loathing of nationalist.’ Ba Maw’s government, in an attempt to forge a unified country took an official slogan, ‘one blood, one voice and one leader’ which was

perceived by the ethnic minorities that ‘one voice’ would speak in Burmese and the ‘one leader’, be a Burman. The Burman on the other hand saw the ethnic minorities as instrument of their exploitation and such mistrust continued for long in the history of Myanmar. When the country became independent, there was great misunderstanding and mistrusts between the Burmans and other ethnic groups.\(^{21}\) Ironically ethnic movement erupted demanding autonomy or independence. Till today Myanmar is yet to come out with a solution to resolve and to manage its ethnic problems.

**Birth of an Independent Country**

Apparently the independence which had been granted to Myanmar by the Japanese was not the kind which Myanmar had desired. The Japanese did not show any interest to the question of Myanmar’s independence. Her independence under the Japanese support was thus a sham. According to Singh (1989, p. 55), the ‘Burmans welcomed the Japanese as liberators but they were rightly surprised and disappointed to find them behaving likes conquerors’. Meanwhile the Allied Force had turned the tide of World War II against the imperial Japan. The Myanmarese nationalist had disillusioned by the Japanese and also doubting if they had backed an oppressor and loser, began to think of shifting side. Aung San made secret contacts with other local political movements and a loose coalition with the protagonist of Myanmar’s independence formed Anti-Fascist Organisation (AFO), which was later renamed as Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL). It was not formed on the basis of a common political ideology, but on the common goal of ending the exploitative Japanese rule. The united nationalists’ front was a formidable political force of war of resistance. During the anti-Japanese resistance movement the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League acted like a political wing of the Burma National Army.

\(^{21}\) According to Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2007, pp. 154-55), the “Union of Myanmar did not emerged out of mutual trusts and love between the Burmans and the ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities joined the predominantly Burman Union with the expectation that they would be considerably better off as a part of the Union than if they were independent from it. For the ethnic minorities, especially the ethnic elites and nationalists, keeping their own ethnic identity was more important than becoming “Myanmar”. The central government, on the other hand, wanted all citizens of Myanmar, regardless of ethnicity, to use Burmese as the lingua franca. This fundamental difference between minority nationalist leaders and Burman political leaders was to have a long-term impact on the nation-building process in post-colonial Myanmar”. 
Throughout 1944, the Anti-Fascist Organisation made secret contacts with the Allies, primarily through the Myanmarese communists. Lord Louis Mountbatten who was the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces recognised the Anti-Fascist Organisation (later Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League) as the most powerful and more representative group in the country and thus allied with it in driving Japanese out of Myanmar. Aung San was however a controversial figure for the British. Mountbatten’s recognition of Aung San was thus opposed by the British cabinet in London and many of his colleagues regarded Aung San as an opportunist Myanmarese nationalist, a treacherous figure, and indeed a war criminal (Ashton, 2005, p. 77-92). Their arguments could not hold Mountbatten as he went ahead on his own understanding. He created a new military force known as Patriotic Burmese Force (PBF) in which he absorbed men from Burma National Army (aftermath dissolved) and ethnic minority forces. Thousands of displaced Burma National Army men who were not inducted into the new military force were recruited into a paramilitary wing of the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League known as the People’s Volunteer Organisation (PVO) (ibid. p. 80).

The anti-Japanese resistance campaign took place resulting in the British regaining control of Myanmar. During the campaign, in a significant development the ethnic minorities and the Burman forces fought together against the Japanese on the side of the British to gain Myanmar’s independence. Luckily after the World War II the British had lost interest of staying in Myanmar for long. Due to factor, such as Britain’s weak post-war conditions, the coming of Labour government in Britain and the new government’s decision to quit India and besides the little incentives to bear the cost of Myanmar’s reconstruction of ruins of the war, the British began to plan to leave Myanmar. By the end of 1946 there was an understanding to both the British and the Myanmarese patriots that Myanmar would be granted freedom in near future. Winston Churchill, the then Prime Minister of Britain and other were critical to the power transferring negotiations with Aung San. To them the idea of accommodating Aung San and his Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League, whom they thought would oppress the all-time ally minorities, was ridiculous. Still Aung San was the first

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22 Winston Churchill was quoted saying: “I certainly do not expect to see Aung San, whose hands were dyed with British blood and loyal Burmese bloods marching up the steps of Buckingham palace as the plenipotentiary of the Burmese government” (quoted in Tarling 1987:329).
choice for the British for negotiation of transfer of power because of his personality and leadership skill as well as his being an asset for the British against communist takeover. The British worked with Aung San and his party Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League for peaceful transfer of power. This paved the way for Aung San-Atlee Agreement of 27 January 1947 calling for independence within one year. In order to protect the interest of their old-time ally, the British called Aung San to bring together the several ethnic groups into a democratic framework with their free consent and based on mutual respect and understanding in an independent Myanmar. Aung San and 23 representatives from different ethnic minority groups, such as the Shans, the Kachin and the Chins signed the historic Panglong Agreement on 12 February 1947. The agreement at Panglong formed the basis for post-independent relations between the frontier people and the central government in Myanmar. It can be mentioned that Aung San was undisputed symbol of Myanmarese nationalism. He was the main protagonist striving for Myanmar’s independence movement. He still is as it was the national hero, revered by both the military regime and its opposition. It was through the reputation of her father coupled with her charisma and love of people that his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi roused to become icon of democracy in Myanmar.

The demand for unity among the Myanmarese was indeed difficult task. Aung San attempted a form of federalism having unity in diversity under one Union. Hardly his work was completed, Aung San was assassinated together with six other top leaders in July 1947. He was believed to be assassinated at the instance of U Saw who was a defector from the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League due to ideological incompatibility and personal rivalry with Aung San and others. He was later tried in a Myanmar court, found guilty and hanged till death. The death of Aung San left the country without the one man who could have held it together. After the death of Aung San, political rivalry, ideological rifts and faulty tactics of gaining influence in politics became paramount. A radical section of the communists led by Thakin Soe went underground and led armed struggle in cause of their interests. U Nu became the new leader of the Anti-Fascist People Freedom League and he led Myanmar to complete independence in 1948 by signing U Nu-Atlee Agreement. U Nu became the first

23 The day on which the agreement was signed is still celebrated officially every year as Union Day (a national holiday) in Myanmar.
Prime Minister of independent Myanmar, while Soa Shwe Thaike, a senior Shan prince was appointed the first President of the Union. A British trained Karen Christian General Smith Dun became the first Chief of Army Staff.

The above analyses show that Myanmar is surrounded on three sides by a protective horse-shoe of mountains with thick tropical forests and on the fourth side, it was encircled by sea. The geographical composition of independent Myanmar was largely shaped by the British colonialism and the Myanmar nationalists’ adjustment to the necessity of gaining political independence. The territory of the present day Myanmar was never unified as it was today before the British colonialism. Within a compact geographical structure, the central part of Myanmar flourished as the Burman historical centre and the surrounding mountains and peripheral areas nurtured several ethnic minorities and tribal groups forming a buffer between the Burman kingdom in the centre and the rest of Asia. The difficult geographical terrains played a great role in shaping its external outlook and interactions within the country. Geographically Myanmar took shape to be more nostalgic and isolated. Such geographical conditions evidently affect the country’s internal political setting and external relations policies throughout history. The challenging geographical terrains have traditionally made it difficult for the administration at the central plain to access the ethnic minority states in the periphery.

Before the British annexation, several ethnic groups have resided within such boundary with the relationship among them structured around patron-client relationship which, in political parlance, implies powerful and influential dominating the less powerful. Myanmar experienced long history of arbitrary rule and bloody internecine warfare for dominance. The dominating power controlled the resources and population by coercion and punitive forces. Buddhism and sangha have been employed by the ruling monarch to gain legitimacy. From the perspective of the ruled, politics and contact with the government and its agents was believed to bring troubles in one way or other. Hence it was considered an evil to be faced and endured, and if provided, largely avoided. It was because the authority of such exploitative system was limited by factor such as religion, geographical and communication difficulties, political apathy etc. that the system was not totally intolerable for the masses.
Such system continued until the British had brought drastic socio-economic and political changes. The British broke the Myanmarese isolation and brought the entire Myanmar under their control. The British introduced elements of constitutionalism and politics of representative government in Myanmar, but its primary goal remained to be extracting commercial benefit through political supremacy. The British rule was hated and it never got legitimacy. The ruling echelon had to rely on force, coercion and intimidation. This maintained the popular notion of state authority as adversaries founded on force, coercion and intimidation. The British rule disrupted the evolution of socio-political and economic order, and in its place, it introduced new system of governing institutions and practices that proved too fast and abrupt to absorb and accepted by the people. Those leaders who participated in the system of governance introduced by the British were nationalists whose ultimate objective was independence from the colonial rule. The British rule, thus, never gained legitimacy or the people never accepted the British rule.

Under the British rule, a system of competitive market economy was also introduced in Myanmar. Myanmar made great economic modernisation, but the fruits of the economic progress were accumulated in the foreign hands. There were alienations in the Marxian sense. Participation in the market economy and profiteering by competition were very difficult for the Myanmarese people because they lacked capital as well as expertise. It was the foreign entrepreneurs, especially the Europeans, the Indian, and the Chinese who profited most from the system. Socially Myanmar became plural, more complex and divided where the native people were pushed to the lowest stratum of structure of power.

Administratively the differentiated administrative arrangement brought the centre and periphery under different stage of political and economic development. Discouragement of the native people from participation and accumulating benefits of economic advantages by the foreigners and the onset of cultural decline and social disintegration evaporated any charm for foreign rule and institutions, liberal norms and practices. Conversely traditionalism and Dobama creed gained greater appeal. This sentiment dominated the nationalist activities particularly since 1930s. The British colonial rule also exploited the ethnic divides and competition to undermine
and weaken the nationalist uprisings and to maintain status quo. The divide and rule policy of the colonial masters reinforced ethnic split, animosity and conflict to become Myanmar a country in a shambles, the impact of which was badly felt in the post-independent period.

The World War II and the Japanese connection put a set back to the pro-western political and social evolution in Myanmar. After the war the anti-foreign, anti-capitalist and pro-traditionalist Thakin nationalist of Dobama creed became the most powerful leaders of the country. Yet as Thakin movement gained in strength, party conflicts, personal rivalries and factionalism based on competition for power grew bolder.

Another significant development was the birth of modern military of Myanmar and the role it played in the country’s independence movement. The country’s national heroes were first and foremost military men, who were disillusioned by colonialism and politics of representative institutions. They became the most important political leaders in post-independent period. It was through military means that Myanmar sought to gain independence. In other words, the question of mass civil movement as political strategy to gain independence was absent in the advanced stage of national movement in Myanmar. The movement for independence was never inclusive and lack popular participation. In a sense, it was elitist in character. It was also as much anti-foreign and xenophobic as nationalistic. Most significantly, the predominance of military role during the struggle for freedom bears important legacy in independent Myanmar. The military’s dominant role in the liberation movement subsequently formed the basis for claim by military leaders that the army liberated Myanmar and it was the natural guardian of the people with historical rights to rule and enjoy compliance.