**“A Burmese Wonderland: Race and Corporate Governmentality in British Burma, 1906-1930”**

By David Baillargeon

In April 1923, a delegation of British imperial officials and journalists descended on the mining settlements of Namtu and Bawdwin in the Northern Shan States of British Burma to celebrate the opening of new works at the mines. The guests discovered at the mines one of the largest silver-zinc-lead mines in the world, commodities critical to Britain’s place in the global economy.[[1]](#footnote-1) These visitors described a bustling and vibrant location, operated and developed by the Burma Corporation, where over 20,000 Asian and European employees labored side-by-side in the jungles of one of the more remote locations in British-administered Burma. According to a special correspondent from the leading Burmese newspaper, the *Rangoon Gazette,* the mines were a “Burmese Wonderland – a material wonderland – a wonderland of marvellous industry and organisation. It is a place unique in Burma’s vast interior, a centre of industry much larger than any other in the Province, the hub of a small universe where there is no cessation or prolonged halt in the operations carried on, a place where the hand of man is hourly bringing forth valuable ore from the earth – it is an area as much alive as the country for hundreds of miles around it is dead.” For Sir Harcourt Butler, the Governor of the Province who was on hand to open the new flue at the mine, “the opening up of a flourishing town in the middle of a jungle not only provides a large amount of well-paid employment, but is of great educational advantage to the countryside for many miles. It stimulates ideas, excites curiosity, and generally opens the mind.” This “contented community” symbolized for reporters the kinds of industrial progress and racial harmony that were absent in other colonies, as well as in Britain itself. Despite this, this vision was far from reality.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Journalists and officials promoted Namtu and Bawdwin as a symbol of European modernity, but this image obscures the diverse racial, ethnic, and national actors who owned, managed, and worked at these mines. In fact, Americans, Australians, Italians, and other non-Britons managed the Burma Corporation, and the labor force was primarily recruited from China, India, and Nepal. Namtu and Bawdwin were transitive spaces in which both management and labor passed through, but for the most part, did not reside in.[[3]](#footnote-3) Situated in British Burma’s remote Northern Shan States but still within the formal boundaries of the British Empire, I argue that these temporary residents were central to the creation of a new kind of transnational corporate empire during the early twentieth century. Critical to Burma’s political economy at the time, the Burma Corporation’s history demonstrates how multinational entities grew within and profited from imperial laws and existing racialized labor systems, while also serving as a tool of governance in the colonies. Although Britain was still allegedly a “Free Trade Nation,” the case of the Burma Corporation demonstrates how corporate power was growing during the early twentieth century, and in particular, how non-Britons – especially Americans - began to take on an increasingly important role in the operations of the colonial state.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The mines at Namtu and Bawdwin represent a unique space that nation-centered histories of empire cannot grapple with. This is, perhaps, why the Burma Corporation has virtually no historiographical footprint.[[5]](#footnote-5) But as some scholars have recently argued, empire was never a monolithic institution. Instead, empires should be seen “as a series of projects, of relationships with different peoples and polities.”[[6]](#footnote-6) In Burma, where development often hinged on the availability of outside capital, and where local officials constantly had to lobby both Indian and British statesmen to help fill the provincial coffers, the British colonial government was more apt to rely on outsiders for assistance.[[7]](#footnote-7) This was, of course, a liberal free trade empire. But as the story of the Burma Corporation demonstrates, globalized, multi-national corporations could themselves act as a state, or an extra-governmental organization, building infrastructure, schools, hospitals, and providing employment. The mines show how corporate governmentality, despite its autonomous existence in some everyday matters, could borrow existing colonial power structures and hierarchies in order to appease the state while maintaining an efficient development model that produced profit. At Namtu and Bawdwin, this was particularly true regarding theories of racial difference. Corporate leaders utilized a hierarchy of racial difference that simultaneously collapsed national and ideological differences among the “colonizer,” linking British officials with white non-British managers and overseers, while at the same time reinforcing a hierarchy of racialized workers among the “colonized,” much like the plantation system in India. In many ways, this racial organizational system became the primary category operating at the mines, where other boundaries – religious, cultural, and national – remained fluid. The essay will explore these themes, first with a brief history of the mines and then an analysis of how the Burma Corporation became an extension of the British colonial state. The essay will then discuss how race was critical to the power structures established at Namtu and Bawdwin, and ultimately, the development of an industrial “wonderland” at the edge of Britain’s empire.

**“A Burmese Wonderland”**

The mines at Bawdwin were located in a remote, mountainous area of Upper Burma known as the Northern Shan States, which was incorporated as part of the British Empire following the annexation of 1886.[[8]](#footnote-8) Similar to the “Princely States” in India, the Shan States, which the British divided into Northern and Southern administrative units, were ruled indirectly through the collaboration of local *Sawbwas*, or chiefs, who were expected to levy taxes and pay tribute to the provincial government in exchange for more independent control.[[9]](#footnote-9) British colonial officials nevertheless saw vast potential in the Shan States, particularly regarding mineral and agricultural development. To encourage overland trade between Burma and China, a railway was constructed in the Northern Shan States during the late nineteenth century.[[10]](#footnote-10) But owing to budget pitfalls as well as a lack of outside capital investment, vast areas of the Shan States remained entirely isolated from British knowledge and control. This included the lands around Bawdwin, which Chinese laborers had worked for centuries but that were situated in a dense jungle, miles away from the new railway.[[11]](#footnote-11) It would not be until the turn of the twentieth century that these ancient workings became fixtures in the modernizing colonial imagination.

The first prospecting license at Bawdwin was granted to a Rangoon-based but European firm, the Sarkies Brothers, in 1902. However, the license was transferred to the Australian-owned Great Eastern Mining Company Limited in 1903. Progress to develop the mines was slow and in 1907 a new firm, the Burma Mines Railway and Smelting Company Limited, later simply the Burma Mines Limited, purchased the Australian company’s shares. It was this time that Herbert Hoover, the future President of the United States, became involved in the enterprise, chairing the Burma Mines Limited as well as a variety of other joint stock companies that financed the mines operations, including the Burma Corporation.[[12]](#footnote-12) Hoover, who had made his fortune working for the British engineering firm Bewick, Moreing and Company in Western Australia at the start of the century. He became convinced that the mines could become profitable after a Company representative visited Bawdwin in 1905.[[13]](#footnote-13) Hoover himself visited in 1907 with his family, including a newborn child, and a number of business associates.[[14]](#footnote-14) During the visit, Hoover contracted malaria and supposedly came face to face with a tiger, an event later immortalized in the naming of one of Bawdwin’s primary prospecting sites, the “Tiger Tunnel,” adding a touch of Orientalist colonial imaginary to the company’s operations.[[15]](#footnote-15) Hoover, his employer Bewick, Moreing and Company, and two other business associates, the Australian R. Tilden Smith and the British financier Francis Govett, were the primary shareholders of the Burma Mines Company. Hoover became the de-facto leader of the enterprise and “engineering nurse” (as he called himself) of what was becoming an economically troubled operation, bringing in his own team of engineers and managers from both the United States and Australia to work the mines, which at that point were still fully undeveloped.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In the early years, operations consistently posted a financial loss and investor patience grew thin. After eight years of prospecting, laborers finally broke through old Chinese workings at the site of what would become known as the “Chinaman Tunnel,” discovering a lode of ore that was over 600 feet long and fifty feet wide, one of the largest deposits of silver, lead, and zinc in the world.[[17]](#footnote-17) This was followed by an even larger discovery underneath the Tiger Tunnel. During this period, smelters located some distance away in Mandalay were re-located to the more convenient town of Namtu, which became the administrative center for operations as well as the primary “city” servicing the area.[[18]](#footnote-18) Hoover left the mining industry during World War One and liquidated the many shares he held in companies across the globe – instead focusing on his new role with the Belgian Relief Fund – but he held onto his shares in the Burma Corporation for as long as possible, leaving only once the British Government passed new restrictions on foreigners owning companies in the British Empire.[[19]](#footnote-19) Ultimately, Hoover cashed out his shares at an estimated 2.5 to 3.5 million dollars, which became the base of his fortune for years to come.[[20]](#footnote-20)

In Hoover’s term as chairman, the Burma Corporation’s mines grew into of the largest mining operations in the world. Between 1917 and 1922, the new chairman of the company, P.E. Marmion, reported that the amount of lead and silver produced by the mine went up 131 and 75 percent respectively, from around 17,000 tons of refined lead to about 40,000, and from around 1.5 million ounces of refined silver to over 4 million. For the year 1921, the Burma Corporation mines produced slightly more than one-fifth of the total lead and slightly less than one-sixth of the total silver produced within the British Empire. It also accounted for over one-thirteenth of the total value of the whole of the exports from Burma, or Rs. 2,55,41,879, a staggering number for a country known primarily for its rice economy.[[21]](#footnote-21) In total, the mining complex was said to have over 20,000 employees, most of whom had travelled from India, Nepal, and China generally as season labor during the cold period.[[22]](#footnote-22) By the time Harcourt Butler and members of the press visited Namtu and Bawdwin in 1923, the mines had their own railway, a large civil police force, a local court, a number of telegraph and post offices, living barracks and bungalows suited for both European and indigenous workers, three schools, as well as one of the largest hospitals in Upper Burma. For visitors, the scale of the mining operations was striking. In a letter to his mother, Burma’s Governor, Harcourt Butler, called the mines “one of the great silver [and] lead mines of the world,” adding that “one comes round the corner from the jungle [and] suddenly one finds a mining camp.”[[23]](#footnote-23) What in 1906 had been a remote jungle area had transformed into a small city, a revelation to colonial administrators whose efforts to develop resources and expand the economy were limited by budgetary constraints and the availability of outside capital. It was no wonder that journalists visiting the mines referred to the site as “another Burmese wonderland.”

**Inter-Imperial Collaboration and Corporate Governmentality**

Struggling after the war to maintain the fiction that Britain could build and manage an empire cheaply and trying to maintain their belief in free trade, journalists and British officials considered the Burma Corporation’s mines to be a tool of governance and imperial development. In 1923, during his speech to the workers and management of the Burma Corporation, Governor Harcourt Butler lauded the Corporation for “what you have done for the development of this part of the country and the province.” Butler applauded the corporation’s installation of electrical and industrial technologies as well as their public health initiatives.[[24]](#footnote-24) In 1928, Harcourt Butler’s successor, Charles Innes, visited the mines and noted “how intimately the prosperity of the Northern Shan States is linked up with the continued existence and prosperity of the mines,” adding his approval of the “happy, contented, well-cared for labour force.” Innes also acknowledged that if those in India who objected to the use of foreign capital to develop the country “could be with me here to-day and could see for themselves the benefits of the application of capital, whether foreign or otherwise, to the development of an Eastern country.” In having previously met with the new chairman of the Corporation, Sir Robert Horne, Innes had been struck by Horne’s “pride that the organisation had been built up mainly by men of his own race.” Innes agreed, adding that “those, gentlemen, are my feelings to-day.”[[25]](#footnote-25)

Innes and Horne’s comments allude to the importance of the Burma Corporation’s mines in the Northern Shan States to act as a governing institution for the province, along with the acknowledgement that it was foreigners, not Britons, who financed and developed the mines. Today, scholars would refer to this phenomenon as governmentality, a term that Michel Foucault crafted and popularized in his later years.[[26]](#footnote-26) Governmentality posits that citizens not only experience government merely through direct public policy, but that state power also exists and can be expressed through a variety of societal structures, including architecture, public health, prisons, or education. For colonial subjects, particularly in the more remote spaces of the globe, government may have never been experienced directly. In the Northern Shan States, which the British government only administered indirectly beginning with the annexation of 1886, locals may have never had contact with government officials nor with apparatuses of the state, including post offices, railways, or police. With the development of Namtu and Bawdwin, that would, of course, change.

Historians have explored how governmentality operated in the colonial world but few have emphasized how transnational this project really was. During a period of economic and social crisis at home in Britain and nationalist opposition in India and elsewhere within the Empire, British officials found it necessary to rely on their “allies,” and especially American capital, to help them maintain control and make their empire profitable. As some recent works have suggested, the Empire was always a transnational entity. David Arnold, for instance, has argued that foreigners – particularly foreign experts in science and technology - were intimately involved in the fashioning of empire in British India, providing scientific knowledge and manpower in areas that Britons were weak in themselves. These foreigners provided a complimentary role within the colonial state and affected its history. Deep and lasting connections existed among Britons, colonial settlers, and white Americans, who saw themselves connected through a shared white race, the English language, and a shared cultural heritage centered in Western Europe. We are beginning to see how this “British World” maintained links between London and those living in the settler empire – i.e. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the United States – but we know very little about how they operated within South and Southeast Asia.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Americans at the mines were capitalist agents in Burma but they also defended the Burma Corporation’s role in developing the region. After Hoover’s past was criticized in muckraking books during his time as President, with one critic alleging that “Chinese coolies were dropping dead at Hoover’s mines in Burma when a handful of rice would have saved them,” Republican partisans responded by arguing that these Chinese workers were simply fleeing from “war and famine in China” and searching for what they knew to be an “earthly paradise.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Hoover himself wrote in his memoirs that the Burmese mines “gave a living directly and indirectly to over 100,000 Chinese, Shans and Indians of many dialects – a better living than ever before in their lives, with some of the gadgets of mechanized civilization thrown in,” demonstrating that the Corporation’s commitment to constructing “houses, towns, hospitals, schools, and recreation grounds” was socially progressive for the colony.[[29]](#footnote-29) For E.P. Mathewson, a one time associate of Hoover who later became Director at the University of Arizona College of Mines, Hoover’s “constructive genius” and “humanity” was proven by the fact “that starting with absolute jungle amidst wholly uncivilized races Mr. Hoover built up with American methods and machinery a great industry wages were established which lifted standards of living five times above those which these people had lived before housing schools sanitation hospitals and other civilized influences were introduced to a people who had never participated or witnessed or heard of such institutions before.”[[30]](#footnote-30) For Hoover and his supporters, the Bawdwin mines promoted a healthier, more prosperous, more civilized population in Upper Burma, demonstrating the utopian potentials of industrial mining in the colonial world.

Hoover’s time in Burma is well known because of his subsequent political career, but he was not the only American involved in the business. One whimsical journalist who visited the mines in 1918 likened himself to Gulliver visiting Brobdingnag, where he saw amid drilling and blasting “great gaunt Americans, seven feet high,” and where hospitality is American “so your leg muscles are continuously being exercised.”[[31]](#footnote-31) In 1921, another visiting journalist noted his surprise that “geographically few of them are Europeans; they are mostly men from Broken Hill and the mines and manufactories of America.”[[32]](#footnote-32) The archival record supports such views. Arthur Oberlander, for instance, was an American who lived in Burma as early as 1912.[[33]](#footnote-33) In the 1930s, when the Corporation attempted to expand their operations in the rugged and remote Wa States near China, Oberlander acted as an agent of the British Government to negotiate with local chiefs in the region. Government geologists ultimately determined that mining prospects in the region were poor, but Oberlander’s story shows the line between corporation and government, and by extension white foreigners and British officials, remained thin during the late colonial period.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Americans remained intimately involved in the day-to-day operations at the mines long after Hoover’s resignation as chairman of the company, but Burma itself had long been a site where Americans and Britons worked together to benefit their own causes as well as those of the province. According to the *Rangoon Gazette*, close relations between Britain and the United States at the start of the twentieth century was not only the result of “a common race and language, and to a great extent, a common law and common political institutions,” but also “greater intercommunication and incessant interchange of ideas.”[[35]](#footnote-35) As early as 1817, American Baptists had arrived in Burma to educate and convert local Burman and indigenous groups, and they remained in the country until well after the colonial period.[[36]](#footnote-36) Americans could be found prospecting at the oil fields in Yenangyaung, a location that also piqued the interest of Standard Oil executives at the turn of the century.[[37]](#footnote-37) And to get to Namtu and Bawdwin in the first place, a traveler was required to pass over the famous Gokteik Viadcut, the tallest bridge in the world at the time, built by and using components from the Pennsylvania Steel Company.[[38]](#footnote-38) To pass over the bridge, one also likely needed to travel on a locomotive imported from America.[[39]](#footnote-39)

While scholars need to know more about the work of US nationals throughout the British Empire, the fact that Burma was a frontier zone may have particularly encouraged their involvement. This concept was widely discussed during the early twentieth century. According to Lord Curzon, in his 1907 Romanes Lectures at Oxford, “Frontiers are the chief anxiety of nearly every Foreign Office in the civilized world,” and provide “laborious and incessant employment for the keenest intellects and the most virile energies of the Anglo-Saxon race.”[[40]](#footnote-40) This colonial frontier, more often discussed in the United States in relation to Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis,” was just as crucial an imperial discursive construct in the British context during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For historian Bill Schwarz, the metropolitan celebration of frontier life, as demonstrated in Curzon’s lectures as well as in British popular culture at the time, demonstrates how the frontier was encoded in both masculine and racial terms: the empire was a place where white men could expend their “virile energies.” But as Schwarz has pointed out, the frontier was also a place where “race was both most actively played out and where it was at its most ambivalent.” The colonial encounter on the frontier was an intimate encounter, where in order to “master the native,” colonial agents were placed in a compromised position that hinged on the flexibility of identity. In order to maintain power but not “go native,” colonizers had to both identify with their native subjects while simultaneously preserving an absolute, white racial identity. Theories of difference were crucial to the construction and elaboration of power structures in the colonies, but on the local level, could never be stable.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Archival records of one-on-one interactions at the Namtu and Bawdwin mines are rare but in those that do exist it is clear that intimacy at the mines was based on the same gendered and racial overtones that defined the colonial encounter in other more official contexts. In 1912, for instance, the mine manager at the time, Gerard Lovell, sent a lengthy letter to one of Hoover’s longtime American collaborators, W.J. Loring, about life at the mines. For Lovell, the mines were a “most interesting proposition” but “£1500 a year in Australia is worth more than even £2500 a year in this country and I shall be very glad to get away as soon as ever you will let me.” The letter also offers a candid account of the presumed dangers and drawbacks for white men but it especially reveals the classic orientalist position that the empire was no place for European white women and children. Lovell noted how “in spite of the many attractions of the local beauties which seem quite irresistible to most of the men here – married or otherwise,” he was “horribly old-fashioned” and missed his wife. The letter concluded that the Northern Shan States were “an impossible place in which to bring up a white family,” making it unbearable for him to remain in Burma for much longer.[[42]](#footnote-42) Lovell’s comments demonstrate how gender, heterosexuality, and race structured the intimate colonial encounter, and created imperial power structures.[[43]](#footnote-43) While it is uncertain whether or not Lovell ever had relations with nonwhite women, in his letter Lovell was trying to assert racial difference and maintain the sense that the empire is governed by white men, whether from US, Australia, or Britain.

When Charles Innes and Robert Horne remarked that they were proud of the Burma Corporation because it had been “built up by men of [their] own race,” the two British officials were likely not exaggerating.[[44]](#footnote-44) Racial concerns were crucial to the bridging of American and British interests in Burma, particularly at a time when nationalism was rampant and when British and Americans were especially critical of each other’s national ideology.[[45]](#footnote-45) At the same time Harcourt Butler lauded the Burma Corporation for its actions, for instance, he was privately excoriating American foreign policy in the post World War One years[[46]](#footnote-46). But Americans and Britons were not the only foreigners who impacted Bawdwin’s development; in fact, Europeans, or Americans, were very much a minority at the Burma Corporation’s mines. The next section will explore how Indian, Chinese, Shan, and Nepalese workers were involved in the development of Namtu and Bawdwin, as well as how racial difference could be both heightened and compressed at the edge of Britain’s empire.

**Race and Labor in the Northern Shan States**

The confluence of American and British agents in British Burma opens up a variety of insights about the nature of empire during the early twentieth century. The Burma Corporation’s holdings highlight the role that white foreigners played in the development and management of large industrial enterprises in the British Empire, although it is also possible that Americans were far more involved in the British Empire than historians have thus far shown. In a free trade environment, American capitalists and experts made the most of their opportunities in British Burma, taking on roles within and eventually becoming subsumed by the British state. Foreshadowing the rise of development as an international concern, as well as indicative of a new globalized world during the early twentieth century, the Burma Corporation’s story provides an interesting counterpoint to studies that assume Britain’s empire was strictly “British.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Non-Britons may not have “made” Britain’s empire, but they most certainly impacted it.

But while the Burma Corporation’s story may appear unique, the intellectual currents and economic and political structures that legitimized foreign investment in Upper Burma were not. The early twentieth century saw a widespread acceptance in Anglo-American circles of a theory of racial hierarchy and difference, which had been fashioned and transformed over the previous century. White Anglo-Saxons, these theories surmised, were considered the most advanced and civilized race in the world while other races and cultures lagged behind on a scale of civilization. Ethnography, which emerged in the late nineteenth century as a new field of study, became crucial to the colonial project. In cataloging, codifying, and essentializing foreign cultures, ethnographers produced knowledge that, for those in power, legitimized colonial rule and created a racial hierarchy used to divide and better manage colonized populations.[[48]](#footnote-48) At the Indian tea plantations, this could mean employing particular ethnic groups for particular tasks, based exclusively on what was seen as the engrained racial characteristics of the group in question.[[49]](#footnote-49) In Burma, these ideas were widespread. Convinced that ethnic majority Burmans were less developed than Indians, British officials provided Indian migrants with better opportunities in the colony, including work as money lenders, police officers, and low level bureaucrats. Burmans, on the other hand, were primarily seen as agriculturalists. Over time, this division of labor based on race would have grave consequences for the colony, erupting into racial tensions and violence during the early twentieth century.[[50]](#footnote-50)

J.S. Furnivall, a former colonial official in Burma and perhaps its most formidable mid-century historian, argued that Burma contained what he referred to as a “plural society.” Furnivall’s plural society, most memorably discussed in his 1948 work *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*, posited that Burma, similar to other “tropical” colonies like Java and Malaya, had a “medley of peoples” who “mix but do not combine.” For Furnivall, these disparate populations hold “by [their] own religion, [their] own culture and language, and [their] own ideas and ways,” only meeting in the marketplace to buy and sell goods. Primarily an economic arrangement, these racial divisions impacted the economic sphere, where Furnivall saw that “there is a division of labour along racial lines,” with “natives,” Chinese, Indians, and Europeans all having “different functions” and “particular occupations.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Furnivall, a committed Fabian socialist, thought these racial and ethnic divisions defined Burma during the colonial period, causing irreparable harm to the country.

At the mines in Namtu and Bawdwin, American and British managers utilized this labor hierarchy to organize mining operations. The mines functioned with a hierarchy that positioned white, European overseers – most often actually American and Australian –in charge of operations, followed by mixed race Anglo-Indian shift bosses, followed by Indian supervisors, while contracted laborers from places like Nepal and China provided the bulk of manual labor. According to a company representative interviewed by the 1930 Royal Commission on Labour, “the principal areas from which our labour comes are the contiguous Chinese province of Yunnan and, in India, the districts of Gharwal and Orissa, while there are many employees who come from such widely separated areas as the Chinese Shan States, the Punjab and the Madras Presidency.” The Commission added that “comparatively few Burmans have offered themselves for employment outside the Forest areas.” In fact, in 1930, Burmans only represented 7.3% of the workforce, as compared to 67.2% Indian and Nepalese, 7.25% Shan, and 14.4% Chinese. Herbert Hoover would also later ruminate on the ideas that governed this hierarchy in his memoirs, arguing that the Chinese were a “peaceful commercial people” but “temperamentally ill-adapted to compete with militaristic races,” that the Shan could accomplish hard work but were limited because of local religious superstitions, that the Burmese were “the only truly happy and cheerful race in all of Asia,” and that whites should manage because “our inventions and machinery came out of our racial instincts and qualities.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Race mattered to how Namtu and Bawdwin functioned, an idea that enjoyed widespread currency among both Americans and Britons involved with the mines.

A racialized labor hierarchy along with a perceived shortage of labor caused a variety of problems at the mines that sometimes affected the colony as a whole. In 1914-15, government officials complained that the mines “offer payment greatly in excess of that offered by a Government or Railway Department and the effect of the competition on the discipline of labour is bad.” Unskilled laborers were said to receive up to 2 rupees per day, which greatly exceeded that of other unskilled occupations in the country. This issue created problems for the Public Works Department, causing “Uriya coolies” to ask much more for their services than government officials thought they should, but it also meant problems maintaining racial stratification at the mines. Indian police officers, key to maintaining peace at the rapidly developing mines, became difficult to recruit, owing to the fact that “the policeman is at a disadvantage as compared with other people of his own class of life.”[[53]](#footnote-53) In 1915-1916, for instance, three new police officers, all pensioned sepoys of the Indian Army, left the force because the “high rate of wages prevailing at Namtu” caused them to be dissatisfied.[[54]](#footnote-54) With unskilled laborers from China making the same wages as policemen from India, racial and class harmony would remain fraught at the mines. Because of this, government and company officials both thought that fixing the labor scarcity issue was critical to the development of mining operations.

Throughout the history of its operations, the company continually complained about a scarcity of labor and yet felt that local people’s race made them unsuitable for work at the mines. In 1921, R.G. Hall, the mines engineer in charge, reported to *Mining Magazine* that “there is no suitable local labour,” because Chinese workers could not be induced to stay during the rainy season. To combat this issue, the company sought to hire “tribal” people from the border regions of the Shan States and Yunnan. Although it was known that these tribes were previously not “amenable to discipline,” recruiting success made company representatives “gratif[ied] to find now that these races are showing signs of being desirous of settling down to industrial life.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Company managers, though, did not consider Burmans to be racially and culturally equipped to work in the mines. According to Arthur Oberlander, the American who had helped manage the mines since the days of Hoover, “the number of Burmans who are employed in occupations that entail hard work is negligible because the Burman does not generally take to that type of work.”[[56]](#footnote-56) These views were echoed in official parlance. For Harcourt Butler, reflecting on his time as Governor during the previous two decades, “the Burmans have as yet shown no industrial capacity,” and because of that, wealth in Burma remained in the hands of the British, Indians, and Chinese.[[57]](#footnote-57) For company and government officials alike, the Burman was simply not suited for the kinds of work that existed at Namtu and Bawdwin.

Some records suggest, however, that labor scarcity may have been leaving because working conditions at the mines were poor. In 1922, E.P. Matthewson, an American engineer who visited the mines, admitted that “treatment of the coolies has not been ideal.” Burma Corporation managers claimed that the problem was that “shift-bosses under whom they work rarely know the languages of the coolies, and do not understand their accustomed requirements as regards food and amusements.”[[58]](#footnote-58) Government reports, though, provide an even more complicated picture. While accidental deaths at the mines waned in later years with increased governmental regulation, they remained common at the mines through the 1920s.[[59]](#footnote-59) Disease was also prevalent. In 1912, a cholera epidemic broke out at the mines that caused at least fifty deaths in Namtu alone. Official reports noted that the death toll was likely even higher, with bodies “found and buried in the jungle which were not entered in the official returns.”[[60]](#footnote-60) Cholera was accompanied by the presence of malaria and lead poisoning as well.[[61]](#footnote-61) Coupled with the widespread local belief that Namtu and Bawdwin contained a “heterogeneous collection of bad characters” and criminals looking to profit from chaotic conditions, it is clear that the mines were not always the “contented community” that observers described.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Despite these problems, company and government officials as well as journalists publically claimed that there were no racial or labor issues at the mines. For example, when Charles Innes visited in 1928, the “Asiatic Employees” of the Corporation provided a welcoming speech translated into a variety of local languages saying that “against the diversity of caste, colour and creed of the constituents of this cosmopolitan population stands in bold relief, the unity of their interests with the Burma Corporation, and in striking contrast with the din and disturbance of the clang and whirl of machinery of this great industrial camp, there abides the peace and harmony of these people – a peace uninterrupted by party factions and unmarred by political agitations.” For the *Rangoon Gazette*, “the coolie’s life at Namtu is a happy one,” proven by the fact that “that they return year after year.” With European-style barracks for workers, modern sanitation, and high wages, it was thought that the company’s exertions would in time encourage laborers to settle permanently in the area to work. Through solving the labor issue, the company would expand the productive capacities of its mines as well as the efficiency of its workforce.[[63]](#footnote-63) In the Northern Shan States, where the reach of government remained provisional, it was the company’s duty to inspire these changes. Good governance relied on good corporate policy. And for company officials, good governance meant higher profits.

**Conclusion**

The “Commonwealth of Namtu,” as one eyewitness described it, provides a unique glimpse into the diversity of colonialism during the early twentieth century.[[64]](#footnote-64) In a free trade empire, foreign capital and expertise was crucial to colonial development, a point that Burma Corporation officials reiterated throughout its early years. But while the development of Namtu and Bawdwin was predicated on producing profit, as well as to bolster the esteem of colonial governors intent on proving Burma’s worth, it was also, in many ways, a state within a state. As Namtu became a veritable city in the jungle, and as the mining operations at Bawdwin expanded, white capitalists from various nations exploited diverse non-white foreign laborers at the edge of the British Empire. Race became the defining category that organized difference at the mines, linking and dividing the networks of people who occupied that space. Multinational corporate capitalism grew within such spaces, transforming a British colonial state into a corporate territory, an idea embraced by those in government as well as from within the company. Visiting in 1934, Burma’s Governor Hugh Landsdowne Stephenson would say that while it was a great achievement that “to have brought men from all nations to this remote end of the world” to “win from the ground the earth’s treasure for the benefit of man-kind,” that was not all the Corporation had accomplished. Instead, it was “an even greater achievement to have created in these beautiful surroundings a wonderful city of contented and happy workers.”[[65]](#footnote-65) More than just a company, the Burma Corporation was critical to both the economic fortune and good governance of the colony.

1. E.J. Cocks and B. Walters, *A History of the Zinc Smelting Industry in Britain* (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rangoon Gazette, 30 April 1923. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For most mining operations in the British World, race played a critical role in establishing power hierarchies. Unlike Burma, though, these mines often had a mix between settler communities, local indigenous labor, and migrant workers. For a few studies that explore race, labor, and settlerism in some of the world’s most important mines during the early twentieth century, see Rachel K. Bright, *Chinese Labour in South Africa, 1902-10: Race, Violence, and Global Spectacle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America’s Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008); Brian Kennedy, *A Tale of Two Mining Cities: Johannesburg and Broken Hill 1885-1925* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a history that explores the entanglement between metropolitan free trade culture and Britain’s empire, see Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Burma Corporation is rarely, if ever, mentioned in histories of Burma. For example, J.S. Furnivall, a former colonial official in Burma as well as the country’s leading historian during the twentieth century, only briefly mentions the Corporation in his famous work of political economy, *Colonial Policy and Practice*. In doing so, he wrongly notes that the company began its work in 1920. See J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (New York: New York University Press, 1948), 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan, “Introduction: Refiguring Imperial Terrains,” in *Imperial Formations*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler, Carole McGranahan, and Peter C. Perdue (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007), 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Harcourt Butler, in his speech at the mines in 1923, echoed this by saying that “the great need of Burma as of India is to attract capital for its development.” Rangoon Gazette, 30 April 1923. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Britain annexed portions of Burma piecemeal over the nineteenth century following wars in the 1820s, 1850s, and 1880s. In 1885, British forces conquered Mandalay, abolished the office of the King, and integrated Burma as a province of British India under direct rule. For two general histories of Burma, see John F. Cady, *A History of Modern Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958); Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a history of the Shan States during the pre-colonial and colonial period, see Sai Aung Tun, *History of the Shan State: From its Origins to 1962* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009); Sao Saimong Mangrai, *The Shan States and the British Annexation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1965). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Some officials and businessmen associated with Burma during the late nineteenth century, particularly Holt Hallett and Archibald Colquhoun, argued that an overland route to China from Burma was paramount to British economic and geopolitical interests in the region. Although various China-Burma railway schemes promoted at the time were never realized, the Northern Shan States Railway was completed in 1898, linking Mandalay with Bhamo, which lay close to the Chinese border. For a history of railways in Burma, see Maung Shein, *Burma’s Transport and Foreign Trade (1885-1914)* (Rangoon: Department of Economics, University of Rangoon, 1964). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. According to the company’s unpublished “history” of the mines, written by Malcolm Maclaren in 1913, Chinese miners began work at Bawdwin in 1412. Maclaren notes that the mines remained productive until they were abandoned in the 1860s as a result of a rebellion in neighboring Yunnan, China. See report by Malcolm Maclaren, April 1913, in Pre Commerce Subject File, “Burma Mines Reports,” box 50, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa (hereafter HHPL). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Rangoon Gazette, 15 April 1918, 25. For a detailed history of Hoover’s early interests in Burma, see George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: The Engineer, 1874-1914* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1983), 412-425. For another account from this period that questions Hoover’s business ethics in Burma, see John Hamill, *The Strange Career of Mr. Hoover Under Two Flags* (New York: William Faro Inc., 1931), 258-279. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: The Engineer*, 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Photographs from this trip exist in Hoover Scrapbooks, Photostatic Copies 1905-1906, Box 3, HHPL. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Herbert Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover: Years of Adventure, 1874-1920* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1951), 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid, 101. For a profile of the investment and debenture holdings of the Burma Mines Limited and the Burma Corporation, as well as the contested business dealings between Hoover, Smith, and Govett, see Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: The Engineer,* 412-425; George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: Master of Emergencies, 1917-1918* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 433-444. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: The Engineer*, 420. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Mandalay was located 179 miles away from Bawdwin while Namtu was only 13 miles distant. The company-financed construction of a 2-gauge railway from Namtu and Bawdwin to Manpwe, a town located on the Northern Shan States railway some 51 miles away, made this switch possible. *The Mining World,* 13 November 1915. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. During World War One, the British government placed regulations on the foreign ownership of businesses within the empire and at home. These new regulations forced Hoover, the majority shareholder, to sell his shares. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: Master of Emergencies,* 432-439. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid, 439. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For a study that examines the scale and impact of Burma’s rice economy, see Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852-1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The Rangoon Gazette provided these statistics in 1923. A full analysis regarding the number of employees at the mines does not exist until the Royal Commission on Labour’s report of 1930, which demonstrates that employment numbers fluctuated a great deal depending on the year and the season. For instance, in January 1930 there were 19,844 employees while in September 1930 there were 16,064. For the year 1925, the only other year that is referenced in the report, there were a total of 12,183 employees at the mines. This makes the conclusion that there were 20,000 employees at the mines suspect and likely an exaggeration. See Royal Commission on Labour in India. Evidence. Vol. X. Burma.1931. IOR/V/26/670/25, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Butler letter to his mother, 27 April 1923, in Sir Harcourt Butler Papers, MSS EUR F116/14, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Rangoon Gazette, 30 April 1923. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Rangoon Gazette, 2 April 1928. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (eds.), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality with Two Lectures by and an Interview with Michel Foucault* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For the first major work that explored the British World phenomenon, see Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich (eds.), *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity* (London: Frank Cass, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Herbert Corey, *The Truth About Hoover* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932), 135. For a recent history that discusses these books and paints a more revisionist account of Hoover and his mining career, see Jeremy Mouat and Ian Phimister, “The Engineering of Herbert Hoover,” in *Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 77 no. 4 (2008), 553-584. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover*, 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Western Union from EP Mathewson to Edgar Rickard, 10 October 1928, in Misrepresentations Subject File, Box 4, “Campaigns of 1928 Hoover and Chinese Labor,” HHPL. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Rangoon Gazette, 9 September 1918. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Rangoon Gazette, 7 November 1921. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Oberlander’s name is first referenced in the archival record in a letter sent from Gerard Lovell to W.J. Loring on 19 September 1912. W.J. Loring Papers, Box 2, Accession No. 97077-Vault, Hoover Institution Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See Coll 9/10 Wa States: Burma Corporation Expedition, in Political and Secret Department Records, IOR/L/PS/12/2240, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Rangoon Gazette, 2 May 1904. For a study that discusses the transmission of ideas between Britain and the United States during this period, see Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1998). For a study that discusses the idea of a “Greater Britain,” see Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. For a short history of these missionaries, see Edmund F. Merriam, *A History of American Baptist Missions* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1900). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Rangoon Gazette, 17 November 1902. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *From Steelton to Mandalay* (Steelton, PA: The Pennsylvania Steel Company, 1902). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Rangoon Gazette, 22 July 1901. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Lord Curzon, *Frontiers: The Romanes Lecture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4; 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Bill Schwarz, *Memories of Empire, Volume 1: A White Man’s World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Gerard Lovell to W.J. Loring, 19 September 1912. W.J. Loring Papers, Box 2, Accession No. 97077-Vault, Hoover Institution Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. The intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality has been explored in many colonial histories. For an excellent early example of this literature that is focused on British India, see Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793-1905* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Rangoon Gazette, 2 April 1928. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. For a history that explores the unstable Anglo-American relationship during this period, see David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1991).  [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. In a letter to Sir Henry Erle Richards, for example, Butler called Woodrow Wilson an “impudent fraud.” 23 March 1920. Papers of Sir Harcourt Butler Papers, MSS EUR F116/21, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. For one of the few intellectual histories that explores the early roots of development theory, see M.P. Cowen and R.W. Shenton, *Doctrines of Development* (London: Routledge, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Many studies explore the rise of a developmental racial hierarchy during this period as well as the importance of the ethnographic project to colonialism. For an intellectual history that contextualizes Anglo-American racial thinking during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Peter Bowler, *Evolution: The History of an Idea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). For a history of anthropology and the ethnological project, see George H. Stocking, *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology, 1888-1951* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995). For a study that situates the ethnographical project in relation to knowledge and power in India, see Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Jayeeta Sharma, *Empire’s Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 205-233. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. The importance of these racial tropes is analyzed in Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta*. See also J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, 116-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. J.S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice*, 304-306. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Hoover, *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover*, 67; 95; 91; 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Report on the Administration of the Shan and Karenni States, for the year ended the 30th June 1915, IOR/V/10/532, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Report on the Administration of the Shan and Karenni States, for the year ended the 30th June 1916, IOR/V/10/532, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Mining Magazine, December 1921, 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Royal Commission on Labour in India. Evidence. Vol. X. Burma.1931. IOR/V/26/670/25, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Harcourt Butler, “Burma and Its Problems,” *Foreign Affairs,* vol. 10 no. 4 (July 1932), 654. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Mining Magazine, April 1922, 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. These statistics can be found annually in the Annual Reports of the Working of the Indian Factories Act; 1911 in Burma. IOR/V/24/1655, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Report on the Administration of the Shan and Karenni States, for the year ended the 30th June 1913, IOR/V/10/532, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Report on the Administration of the Shan and Karenni States, for the year ended the 30th June 1917, IOR/V/10/533, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Report on the Administration of the Shan and Karenni States, for the year ended the 30th June 1915, IOR/V/10/532, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Rangoon Gazette, 07 May 1923. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Rangoon Gazette, 7 November 1921. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Rangoon Gazette, 26 march 1934. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)