

WOMEN OF BURMA

Women and the Home

"MOON Over Burma" isn't just another Hollywood caption, according to Miss Delight Lynn, general secretary of the New Zealand Y.W.C.A., who has recently returned to this country after four years' work in Rangoon.

"I shall always remember the Burmese moon," said Miss Lynn. "The Burmans hold many of their most important religious festivals at the time of the full moon. One of them, the Festival of Lights, comes at the end of the rainy season, and is a time of universal rejoicing at the coming of the fine weather. All the houses and streets are festooned with coloured lights and above them all shines the Burmese moon. I thought I had struck fairyland."

"The Burmans love festivals. They are an attractive people, naturally inclined to laughter and gaiety. There are two main races in Burma, the Karens and the Burmans, both of Mongolian stock, so that the people of Burma are much more akin to the Chinese than to the Indian peoples."

"When you think of Burma you usually think of jungle and elephants and teak and rubber, but I did not see a great deal of this side of Burma. My work was mostly in Rangoon itself, organising various activities among the young women of the city."

Not Like Indian Women

"On the whole, the women of Rangoon are English-speaking, for the majority have had a high school education and many of them go on to University. They have quite a different outlook and upbringing from the women of India. There is no such thing as a purdah system, and caste is practically unknown. From childhood the girls of Burma enjoy the same advantages as the boys. In addition the mother of the family is a highly respected person and wields a great deal of power."

"The girls are very attractive. They wear a loose white muslin jacket over a brightly-coloured skirt, usually of hand-woven and beautifully embroidered material, and decorate their hair with flowers. Unlike most women of the East the Burmese women do their own housework, but as the houses are fairly simple—bamboo matting walls and a wooden floor on piles—they have plenty of time to enjoy themselves socially."

"Burmese women have not yet learnt the cigarette habit—but most of them smoke cheroots of home-grown tobacco. Even small children puff manfully at their cheerots, but it doesn't seem to do them any harm as the tobacco is freshly dried and contains no narcotic of any kind."

A Difficult Task

"The Y.W.C.A. was started in Rangoon forty years ago, with the object of looking after children of mixed European and Asiatic parentage—Eurasians they used to be called. However, since then it has naturally widened its

activities, and we were concerned principally with trying to bridge the differences of race and religion which keep the people apart. We had a very difficult task ahead of us. Only two per cent. of the people of Burma are Christians, and we did not want to confine our work to



Above: A study circle at a Y.W.C.A. Vernacular Camp in Rangoon

Left: A Burmese beauty

the war. However, from my experience, most of the Burmans are not unduly worried about this, as they realise that the country is not yet ready for full self-government, and that if the people of Burma had complete control of their own defence, they would fall an easy prey to a foreign power. At the moment, they are very conscious that Japan's next move may not be an honourable one.

An Easy-Going People

"There is no overwhelmingly strong national spirit in Burma as there is in India. But I feel that it will come. The Burmans are naturally a happy-go-lucky people. When I was working with them I sometimes wished they weren't quite so happy-go-lucky. I wished I hadn't been so concerned with organising and hustling things along, but that I had had time to play with them and make friends with them."

"Because of their easy-going temperament, the Burmans are not very successful in the business world. Sixty per cent of the population of Rangoon is Indian, and the British and the Indians between them have control of most of Burma's trade. The Burmese are only just becoming aware of the fact. The Indians, moreover, have a monopoly of the money-lending business. The Burmans are much better at spending money than making it, and have therefore come into the clutches of these Indian usurers, who in many cases have seized the land once belonging to the Burmese."

Very Little Poverty

"The Burmese are waking up to the fact that they are being left behind economically in their own country, while British and Indian merchants are growing fat at their expense. Burma is a lovely country, richly endowed, and

with never failing rain. The general attitude of the Burman is 'We're all right as we are. Why can't all the foreigners get out and leave us to enjoy ourselves in our own simple way?'

"The standard of living in Burma is much higher than it is in India or China. There is very little poverty. The strong family system makes it unnecessary for the State to make provision for the old or the orphaned. The Burmese, therefore, feel that interference from outside is unnecessary."

"However, the movement for independence for Burma is not likely to make headway till after the war, for the Burmans realise that without foreign help, they may fall victims to Japan. And their common fear is making them draw much closer to their Chinese kinsmen. In particular the women of Burma are drawing inspiration from the work being done to-day by China's women."



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