THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF BURMA

ALSO BY

THANT MYINT-U

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Where China Meets India:
Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia

The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma

The Making of Modern Burma

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"The best introduction yet available to the modern history of Burma. Sad and poignant, intelligent and thought-provoking." **William Dalrymple**

"Fascinating . . . [Thant] gives us both the savory details and the cruelties of colonialism, as well as a rare feel for palace intrigue. In the process, he suggests that isolation is in fact just what the military regime feeds on. It's in its blood." **Pico Iyer, *Time***

"Brilliant . . . *The River of Lost Footsteps* is a balanced, thorough, and serious history, but it is also a polemic, firm in its view that the current international campaign—pursuing 'this policy of isolating one of the most isolated countries in the world'—is moving in the wrong direction." ***New Yorker***

"Profiling 20th-century Burmese leaders such as Aung San, U Nu and Nobel Peace Prize–winning activist Aung San Suu Kyi, Thant Myint-U beautifully captures the complex identity of a little-understood country, concluding with a trenchant analysis of Burma's current predicament under an oppressive regime." ***Publishers Weekly***

THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF BURMA

RACE, CAPITALISM, AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

THANT MYINT-U

juggernaut

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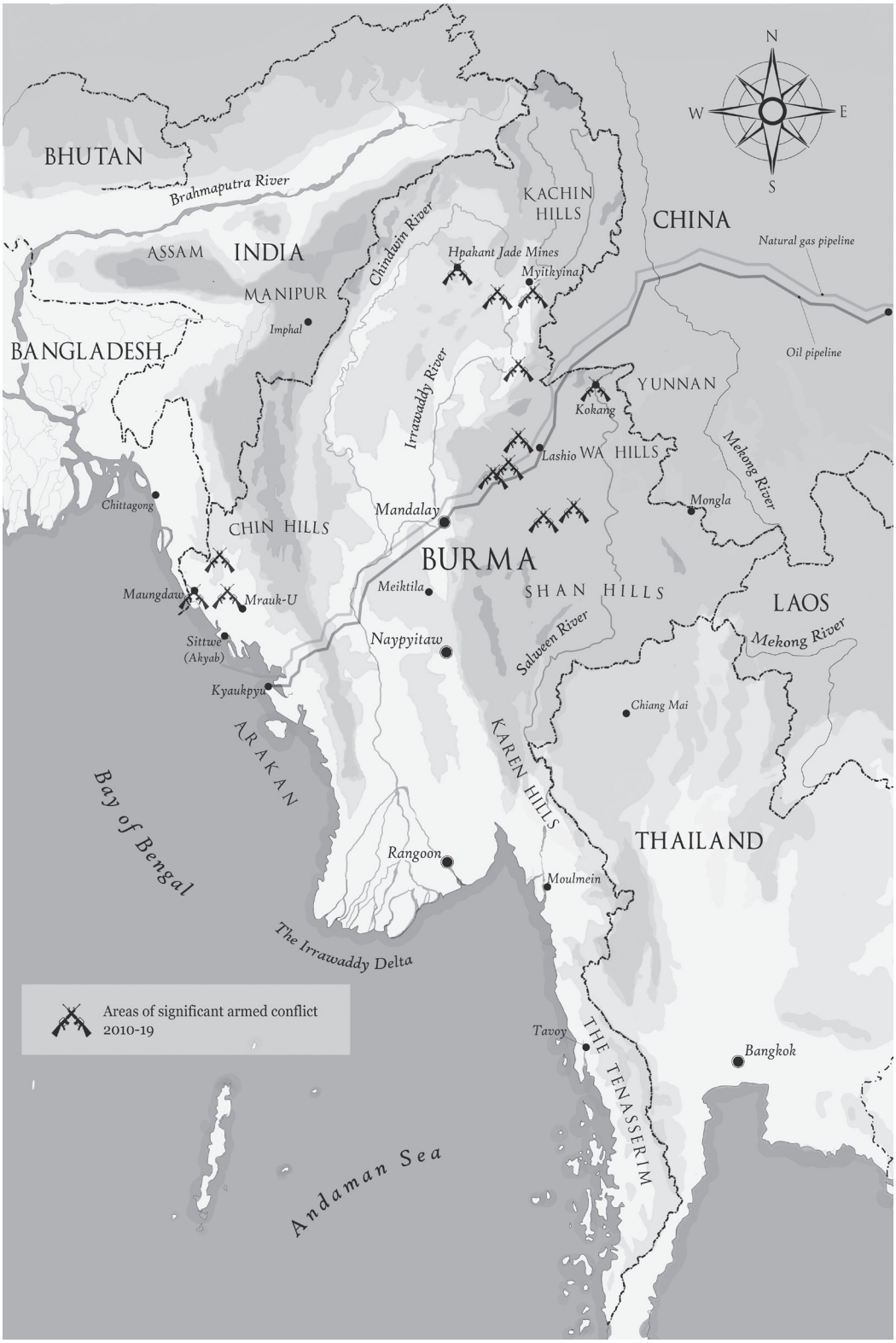

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A NOTE ON BURMESE NAMES

Burma or Myanmar? Around a millennium ago, the word "Myanma" first appeared in inscriptions, apparently describing a people living in the valley of the Irrawaddy River and their language. Over the centuries, kings began referring to themselves as Myanma kings, and their kingdom as the *Myanma pyi* (the Myanma country) or *Myanma naing-ngan* (the Myanma conquered lands). By the 17th century, the word was colloquially pronounced "Bama." Both "Myanma" and "Bama" are adjectives.

Around the same time, the first Europeans arrived, and called the country some variant of "Burma": it was "Birmania" to the Portuguese, "Birmanie" to the French. These names are almost certainly derived from "Bama." Under British rule, "Burma" was the country's official English name. The name in Burmese remained *Myanma pyi*.

None of this caused much of a fuss until 1989, when the ruling army junta officially changed the name of the country in English to Myanmar (the final "r" was meant to lengthen the vowel, as it would when spoken in the southeast of England, and not be pronounced). The justification offered was that the name "Myanmar" incorporated all the country's indigenous

peoples. This was untrue. Few minorities, if any, would claim that the word historically applied to them. The real reason for the change was that the government of the time was moving in a nativist direction and looking for easy wins to burnish its ethno-nationalist credentials. An equivalent would be Germany insisting on being called "Deutschland" in English, or the Italians insisting on "Italia." Many in the West continued to use "Burma," either out of habit or to show disdain toward the junta dictatorship.

I use "Burma" throughout this book out of habit, because as a Burmese speaker it's awkward to refer to the country using an adjective, because I think "Burma" sounds far better in English, and because of the nativist underpinnings of the name change.

I use "Burmese" to refer either to the ethnic majority people, who speak the Burmese language and are overwhelmingly Buddhist, or to the state. There is no satisfactory term, at least not yet, for referring to all the peoples of the country. I also use older place names, such Arakan rather than Rakhine, for similar reasons.

Other identity-related words are equally, if not more, contentious, none perhaps more so than "Rohingya," a name for a Muslim minority in Arakan. The reasons for this are explored throughout this book.

Burmese personal names also merit some explanation. Most Burmese have only given names. These are traditionally chosen by parents on the advice of monks or astrologers, and often depend on which day of the week the child is born and the corresponding letters in the Burmese alphabet. For example, a child born on a Friday should properly have a name beginning with "th." These names are usually prefixed by a familiar term like "uncle" (U) or "aunt" (Daw). A person may have one name, with the appropriate prefix (U Thant), or several names (Daw Aung San Suu Kyi). None of these names are family or clan names. They are also not fixed: people may use different names in different situations or simply change their entire name whenever they want. It's not uncommon in an obituary to see

a list of many names ("Dr. Tun Maung a.k.a. U Ye Htut a.k.a. Johnny"). One former member of parliament styled himself U James Bond.

Some of Burma's minority cultures, such as the Kachin, do have family or clan names, which are placed before their given names, as in the name Maran Brang Seng, where "Maran" is the name of a clan.

Personal names, places names, ethnonyms, even the name of the country, have changed or are changing. Burma is a place where identities are unstable. Much more will be said on issues of identity and its relationship to the country's singular politics and even more bizarre economy in the pages that follow.

THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF BURMA

INTRODUCTION

In the early 2010s, Burma was the toast of the world. As the generals appeared to be giving up power, everybody, at least in the West, began to believe that the country was in the midst of an astonishing transformation, from the darkest of dictatorships to a peaceful and prosperous democracy.

Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, Tony Blair, and dozens of other world leaders, past and present, came in quick succession to be part of the celebrated change. Trade embargos were rolled back and billions of dollars in aid promised to make up for lost time. Top businessmen followed, with George Soros at the head of the flock, their private jets crowding Rangoon's little airport, keen to invest in Asia's next frontier market. By 2016, Angelina Jolie, Jackie Chan and other celebrities were added to the mix, as tourism boomed and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, freshly released from long years under house arrest, appeared set to finally lead her country.

But by 2018, the mood had turned deathly grim. A new militant outfit, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, had attacked dozens of security posts in the far west of the country, and this had been followed by a fierce

Burmese army response. In the wake of the violence, hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children, nearly all from the Muslim Rohingya minority, fled to neighboring Bangladesh, bringing with them horrific accounts of rape and massacre. Burma now stood accused of genocide and crimes against humanity.

In September 2018, the United Nations Security Council met in New York to discuss possible responses and listened to an impassioned address by the actress Cate Blanchett, who had visited the sprawling Rohingya refugee camps and who became the first film star to speak to the world's highest security organ. New American and European sanctions were imposed, barely two years after the last were lifted, and Aung San Suu Kyi herself came under blistering criticism from once staunch allies in the human rights community for not doing more for the Rohingya. Erstwhile friends, from Bob Geldof to the Dalai Lama and Bishop Desmond Tutu, expressed disappointment at her inaction, and St. Hugh's College, Oxford, which she'd attended, removed her portrait from public display and placed it in storage. The Canadian Museum for Human Rights, not wanting to go that far, kept her portrait in their "Gallery of Honorary Canadians" but dimmed the lights.

Other news was also not good. Peace talks that had since 2012 been a centerpiece of Burma's feted reform process ground nearly to a halt and fighting flared in the northern hills. The economy, in 2014 the fastest-growing in the world, faced worrying headwinds. Investment plunged, business confidence sank, and fears mounted that a banking crisis might be around the corner. In 2016, Burma was on Fodor Guides' list of the world's hottest destinations. By 2018, it was on Fodor's list of top ten places to avoid.

What happened? For decades the story of Burma had been portrayed as a Manichean struggle between the ruling generals and a movement for human rights and a liberal democracy. But the old story and recent developments just didn't add up. Had the world been misreading Burma completely?

Not long ago, few believed that anything in Burma would ever change. The country seemed to be stuck in a time warp, ruled by a thuggish junta that would stay on forever. Then things did change, with political prisoners released, media censorship ended, and Internet restrictions lifted. Opinions pivoted 180 degrees, and many in the West as well as in Asia were quick to embrace the "transition" that seemed to be underway. In 2012, Aung San Suu Kyi became a member of parliament, then in 2015 led her party to a sweeping victory in the country's first free and fair elections in a generation. The word "miracle" was often used to describe what was happening. Whereas before, any idea of progress in Burma had been summarily dismissed, observers now assumed that further progress was inevitable. When discordant news got in the way—a communal riot here, a clash between the army and insurgents there—it was easily swept aside as peripheral to the main story. The story was too good, a much needed tonic at a time when the Arab Spring was giving way to extreme violence. Burma, at least, was a morality tale that seemed to be nearing its rightful conclusion.

Then the morality tale came crashing down.

Burma is a country of about 55 million people, squeezed between China and India but larger than France and Britain combined. More than a dozen rebel armies hold sway over large patches of the eastern uplands, together with hundreds more militias, all fighting the world's oldest civil war. Burma is one of the poorest countries in Asia, with one of the biggest illicit narcotics industries in the world. It is prone to devastating natural disasters (over 120,000 people died in a single day due to a cyclone in 2008) and is predicted to be one of the five nations most negatively impacted by climate change. It's a place where education and health care systems have been starved of funds for decades, a country which isolated itself from the world for a quarter century and then for a generation came under US- and UK-led economic sanctions that were, at the time, the harshest against any country anywhere on the planet (including North Korea).

In a way, Burma resembles parts of Europe and North America in the 19th century, a febrile mix of new freedoms and new nationalisms, unencumbered capitalism, new money and new poverty, fast-growing cities and urban slums, elected governments, excluded peoples, and brutal frontier wars—a mirror of the past, but one turbocharged by Facebook and by a fast-industrializing China next door.

Burma is also a devoutly religious society in which over 85 percent of the population follow neoconservative Theravada Buddhism, a philosophy which could be described as Epicurean but which has, in Burma, created a society whose values are more Stoic. The mother tongue of the majority, Burmese, is as dissimilar to English (or to any other Indo-European language) as possible; it is a language in which words like "national," "ethnic," and "human rights," have unexpected connotations.

On this distant and fragile stage, a twisted drama is being played which features some of the most pressing issues of our day, from exploding inequality, rising ethno-nationalism, and mutating views on race and identity to migration, environmental degradation, and climate change.

Burma was, for the United Nations and the West, the signature democracy project of the 1990s and 2000s. The question of whether democracy (in the sense most in the West would recognize, with competing political parties, a free media, and free elections) was ever really fit for the purpose was never asked, in part because democracy was what "the people" in Burma were demanding and in part because it was the obvious exit from a tyranny that no one could reasonably defend. In the early 2010s, the more the forms of democracy seemed to be taking shape, the more an assumption of progress took hold.

As the path to liberal democracy looked increasingly secure, an additional assumption grew that free markets would soon also take hold, opening the door to global capitalism. But then, as multinational companies queued up to have a look at what they hoped would be a lucrative new

market, they saw in Burma a breed of capitalism already in place, well entrenched and intimately tied to China.

It's not impossible that democratic institutions will one day flourish in Burma. And it's far from impossible that global capitalism will defeat its rivals. It may even deliver the goods: growing the Burmese economy by leaps and bounds and reshaping Burma in the image of other Asian societies.

But is the life of the 21st-century Asian consumer really desirable or sustainable? Visiting the air-conditioned new shopping malls of Rangoon, it's clear that there's a desire for a new way of life. It's less clear that the Burmese—as they pose for selfies in front of the escalators and water fountains—are as yet very good at buying things they might not really need. And as Burma, which ranks consistently as one of the most generous countries on earth, integrates itself into the world of the mid-21st century, what is it exactly about this long quarantined nation, with its unique cultures, that needs to be changed, and what should instead be embraced? In an age of reform, few have thought about what it is important to protect.

Burma's story takes place under the long shadow of a particularly brutal and destructive British colonialism, one which first established the modern state as a racial hierarchy. It is a story that has consistently left ordinary Burmese people at the bottom of the heap, as development so far has meant disappearing forests, polluted rivers, contaminated food, rising debt, land confiscation, and most recently the cheap smartphones, Internet access, and Facebook pages on which they see for themselves, and for endless hours a day, the lives they will never have.

Burma is also a warning. Exactly a hundred years ago, modern politics in Burma was born as what we might today call an anti-immigration, anti-globalization movement. The country was gripped by a kind of identity politics. Under British rule, millions of people from the Indian subcontinent settled in the country. Global companies like Burmah Oil (later British Petroleum) extracted enormous sums in profit, paying little in

taxes. Populist parties flirted with Fascism and Communism. Then came a long slide into nativism and self-imposed isolation. It was an understandable reaction. But decades on, the cost of withdrawal from the world has been a material and intellectual impoverishment on a scale unmatched in Asia. That cost has included hundreds of thousands of refugees (long before the Rohingya crisis), millions more internally displaced, millions more lives destroyed.

And in today's more open political space, the challenges of inequality and climate change are being met with a cocktail of ethno-nationalism and neoliberalism.

Can the future be different? Is a sharp turn in a fresh direction possible? Or is the recent violence a sign of even worse things to come?

Burma has been molded by big forces and big issues. Its story, the one that will be told in this book, is a story about race, capitalism, and an attempt at democracy. It features people who have plotted, pushed, and pulled to end half a century of army rule and who have been struggling ever since with the deep scars revealed and the energies unleashed. It includes as well the Burmese far from the corridors of power who have borne the brunt of the country's woes, and who have suffered and schemed to improve their lives against impossible odds. And it's about the foreign governments that have also shaped Burma's trajectory, usually in good faith, and sometimes with disastrous consequences. The heroes and villains have not always been whom they seem to be.

This book is mainly about the last fifteen years, from the height of the dictatorship, around the turn of the millennium, to the present day. But the echoes of the more distant past are, if anything, growing stronger. So we start at the beginning.

ONE

NEW WORLD

Burma is shaped like a kite and extends north to south over 1,300 miles, from icy pine-forested mountains on the marches of Tibet, the highest peaks nearly 20,000 feet high, to scorching hot beaches and little islands in the Andaman Sea. At its center is the Irrawaddy River, brown and muddy, which snakes through teak jungles and sun-baked scrublands before fanning out into a vast, steamy delta and emptying into the Bay of Bengal. To the west and east are uplands of little valleys and increasingly higher hills.

Burma has been home to modern humans since the first migrations out of Africa. There were others before: *Homo erectus* certainly, and probably Denisovans too, eastern cousins of the Neanderthals. Recent discoveries in genetic science are uncovering a fascinating past, with the Irrawaddy basin a hub of Pleistocene settlement, population expansion, and emigration over tens of thousands of years, to places as far afield as Australia and the Americas. Three to four thousand years ago, hunter-gatherer populations gave way to the first farmers, related genetically to the peoples who inhabited what is now southwest China. Two thousand years later, dur-

ing the Bronze and Iron Ages, fresh migrations from the north brought tongues akin to Tibetan and ancestral to Burmese.

By the first millennium AD Burma was also home to peoples speaking languages related to modern Khmer, Vietnamese, and Mon (a language spoken in southern Burma), whose ancestors may have been the first to grow rice, and who lived along the Yangtze River before spreading across mainland Southeast Asia and into India. There were also people speaking languages similar to modern Thai and Lao. As it is today, Burma was likely always a hodgepodge of very different cultures and communities.

In the valleys, kingdoms came and went. Their people were literate and Buddhist, increasingly of a neoconservative variety. They looked to classical Indian culture for inspiration. In the highlands, on the other hand, there was an array of societies that ruled themselves, practiced animism, and spoke languages that were not written down. Like the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Himalayan foothills, what's now Burma was a place of many nearly isolated communities, each with its own dialect and way of life, as well as grand civilizations with connections in every direction.

During the middle years of the 18th century, a new dynasty of Burmese-speaking warrior kings emerged from the arid interior, marched south toward the sea, defeated their French-backed and Mon-speaking rivals, and united the valley of the Irrawaddy River. Along the conquered coast they founded a new port and named it Rangoon, meaning "the enemy is vanquished." The elephant-mounted kings then pushed east into the adjacent uplands before taking nearly all of present-day Laos and Thailand, utterly destroying the Siamese capital of Ayutthaya in 1767. Over the next decade their armies repelled no fewer than four Manchu Chinese invasions from the north, defeating elite divisions of Manchu and Mongol cavalry drawn from the distant Russian frontier.

In 1783, at the apex of this newly minted empire, King Bodawpaya, who boasted fifty-three (official) queens and concubines and more than 120 children, founded a new capital, Amarapura, or "the Immortal City."

He and the rest of his dynasty saw themselves as at the head of an all-vanquishing race. They called themselves *Myanma*.

A YEAR LATER, these same Burmese kings conquered the kingdom of Arakan. Arakan is part of a long Indian Ocean coastline, separated from the Irrawaddy valley by a range of low mountains, an incredibly fertile place that's also one of the least hospitable on the planet, prone to earthquakes and devastating cyclones and deluged by up to three feet a month of torrential rain. Arakan today—the state of Rakhine—is the southern two-thirds of this coastline. The northern third, across the Naf River, is today part of Bangladesh.

The area's earliest farmers, perhaps just a handful of people here and there, likely spoke Austroasiatic languages related to Munda (which is now spoken in pockets of central and eastern India). But over the last two thousand years, what's now eastern Bangladesh and Arakan became a kind of frontier. For ancient Indians, speaking an Indo-Aryan tongue, the lands beyond the Meghna River (now in Bangladesh) were a *pandava barjita desh*, a place of utter barbarism where no self-respecting Hindu would go. By medieval times, the Buddhist, Hindu, and later Muslim kingdoms of Bengal had reached the upper end of the coastline. And in the centuries that followed, both Islam and Indo-Aryan languages moved gradually south. These languages are ancestral both to the Bengali of modern Calcutta and Dacca and to the similar dialects of present-day Chittagong and the people who have come to be known as the Rohingya.[1]

Also over the past two millennia, people speaking entirely different Tibeto-Burman languages, some ancestral to both modern Burmese and Arakanese dialects, arrived from the other direction. Burmese chronicles relate long-ago encounters in the region between humans and *bilus*, or ogres.

The region was a frontier between Bengali and Burmese cultures and

polities. It was also a civilizational center in its own right. The earliest inscriptions, dating from the first millennium AD, are written in Indo-Aryan Pali and Sanskrit. But by the 15th century, there had developed at Mrauk-U, near today's Sittwe, an impressive kingdom that not only dominated this entire coastline but threatened both their Mughal neighbors to the north and the Burmese to the east.

The kings of this Arakan kingdom spoke an archaic form of Burmese and were Buddhists, but were also cosmopolitans who saw themselves as part of a dynamic Indian Ocean world, taking Bengali–Muslim as well as Burmese–Pali titles, welcoming traders from Lisbon and Amsterdam, recruiting Afghan archers and renegade *ronin* samurai from Nagasaki as their bodyguards, and patronizing at court some of the finest Bengali and Persian poets. They were slavers, too, and together with the Dutch East India Company and Portuguese pirates terrorized the Ganges delta in the 16th and 17th centuries. Many slaves, including Muslims from Bengal, were settled in what is today northern Arakan.

In 1666, invading Mughal armies captured Chittagong, seizing the coastline as far as the Naf River. The British took this territory from the Mughals in 1767.

In 1785, Burmese armies coming from the Irrawaddy valley finished off the rest of this kingdom, setting fire to the capital and carting away the great Mahamuni image, which was believed by the Arakanese to be the most sacred Buddha image of all and a symbol of their sovereignty. Arakan was annexed outright, its centuries-old monarchy destroyed. It had been a cosmopolitan hub. It became Burma's *anauk-taga*, its "western gate."

With this annexation of Arakan, the Burmese empire had taken a step toward the Ganges basin—what the Burmese called *Mizzima-desa*, the "Middle Country," the holy land and birthplace of Buddhism. For millennia other parts of modern India, especially Bengal, Orissa, and