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THE OPENING OF SIAM (THAILAND)

S.B. Singh & S.P. Singh*

The opening of Siam in the nineteenth century to western powers with extra-territorial rights is an interesting chapter in the history of South-east Asia. During the seventeenth century several efforts were made by the western powers to obtain special commercial privileges from the king of Siam. But they got only limited rights to trade as peaceful traders without any privilege detrimental to the interests of the Siamese people. The king was not agreeable to any treaty that was to grant rights of consulate to them. At first the Dutch were allowed to establish their factories at Patani and Ayutia. They were followed by the English, the Portuguese, the Japanese, and the French. This was not liked by the Dutch, who demanded additional commercial privileges. When those were rejected, a Dutch fleet blockaded the mouth of the Nenam river. This was the strong-arms policy of the Dutch. The king had no other alternative but to succumb. The Dutch were granted the virtual monopoly of the trade in hides as well as monopoly of sea-borne trade between Ayutia and China in 1664. This made the Siamese king very nervous. He began to look for a western ally to check the growing power of the Dutch in Siam. At last he decided to send an embassy to Louis XIV of France requesting a French ambassador with powers to conclude a treaty with Siam. Louis XIV agreed to send a French embassy with the double object of converting the King of Siam to Christianity and to conclude a political alliance with Siam. Accordingly a French garrison was to be stationed in Bangkok and at Merguin. The arrival of the French garrison infuriated the Siamese people so much that the French had to withdraw. The powerful upsurge of anti-foreign feelings swept the country. Henceforth, Siam was very wary of granting privileges to foreigners. Early in the eighteenth century more than one attempt was made to reopen the question of a naval repair station in Siam, but the Siamese king remained adamant in his opposition. As a matter of fact Siam has the unique distinction of being the only country in the Southeast Asia which had never been under foreign occupation. This is a matter of national pride for the Siamese people. But the situation in the nineteenth century made them revise their earlier stand. They opened the doors, no doubt, but never compromised on the point of national sovereignty.

The British occupation of Singapore in 1819 was an act of far-sighted statesmanship. Raffles's expectation that it would become an

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other Malta was fulfilled. Situated at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, it soon developed into a very important free-trade entrepot and the centre of British trade in the East. It established important trading connections with China, Siam, Indo-China, and the Philippines. Before the first Anglo-Burmese War, the attempts of the British Government in India to establish a settled commercial intercourse with Siam were not successful. Mr John Crawfurd was deputed in 1821 to negotiate a treaty with the King of Siam at Bangkok. He was received with respect, but the king and his ministers being themselves merchants and accustomed to monopolise the sale of almost every article of trade, the negotiation came to nothing.¹ Subsequently, in the year 1823, Mr Gilles of the house of Messrs Mayers Hunter & Co. of Singapore proceeded to Bangkok and was soon after followed by two other gentlemen of the same house, Robert Hunter and John Mallock, who obtained the permission of the King of Siam to remain at the capital and to carry on trade with that country. Messrs Robert Hunter and Mallock succeeded in disarming the jealousy of the Siamese officers and conciliating the good will of the Phrakhlung (Prince-minister) and of every class of inhabitants.² In August 1824, Robert Hunter commenced business as a general merchant resident at Bangkok and established a house of business there. The firm was known by the name of Messrs Hunter and Hayes & Co., and was the first British commercial establishment at Bangkok.³ At that time the Siamese were unwilling to commit themselves to an agreement in writing, but they were willing to permit individual traders to settle in their country for commercial purposes.

During the first Anglo-Burmese War, Siam remained suspiciously aloof and conscious of its clash of interests with the British in Malaya. The war impressed the Siamese with a high idea of British power and after that event Captain Burney experienced little difficulty in concluding a treaty with Siam on the 20th June, 1826. The relation of friendship was recognised as existing between the two countries and both parties mutually agreed to refrain from committing aggression on each others' territories. Freedom of trade was also established generally and supplementary articles were added to the treaty having special reference to the mode in which British merchants were allowed to trade with Bangkok. It was expressly provided that with exception of war-Like stores, paddy and rice, the British merchants at Bangkok were to buy and sell without the intervention of any other person. Thus there was a ban on exportation of rice and paddy from Siam. If British merchants coming to Bangkok imported firearms or gunpowder, they were prohibited from selling them to any party but to the

Government of Siam. Merchants coming to trade were to pay at once the whole of import duty consolidated according to the breadth of the vessel. An import duty of 1700 ticals on each Siamese fathom in breadth was fixed as chargeable on a vessel importing cargo, and 1500 ticals on each Siamese fathom in breadth on a vessel coming without a cargo. No import or export or other duty was afterwards to be levied upon the buyers from or sellers to British subjects.⁴ It was further provided that Siamese subjects visiting an English country must conduct themselves according to the establishing laws of that country in every particular. Similarly, English subjects visiting a Siamese country must conduct themselves according to the established laws of that country. Both British and Siamese merchants were to pay duties upon the commerce according to the custom of the place or country on either side.⁵ It is interesting to note that the treaty of 1826 was based on the principle of equality and reciprocity. The British Government at the time did not claim rights of extra-territorially for British subjects in Siam. Such claims were made by Europeans in countries of the Far East and Southeast Asia after the British victory in China. In 1826, the Siamese king did not even agree to the establishment of British consul at Bangkok. In 1818, he had received a Portuguese envoy, Carlos Manuel Silveira, who was permitted to supervise Portuguese trade in Siam under Siamese authority, but was not given the status of a foreign consul. In 1833, the U.S.A. also succeeded in concluding a commercial treaty with Siam, but failed to persuade the King to establish a consul at Bangkok.⁶ The Americans did all they could, yet failed to obtain better terms. The King of Siam told them that he conferred on them a great favour by allowing them to trade on the same footing as the English.⁷

Between 1826 and 1842 the trade of British merchants with Siam increased rapidly. In 1842 the number of square-rigged vessels that resorted to the river of Siam was no fewer than fifty-five, chiefly under British colours. Of them, nine were regular traders to the port of Bangkok and with the exception of three or four direct from Great Britain, most of them came from Bombay, Singapore and China.⁸ About a hundred junks annually resorted to Bangkok from the ports of China. They brought tea, earthenwares, and preserves, and took back sugar, pepper, gamboge, horns and hides. From Singapore, British vessels imported to Bangkok a variety of articles, but they took back chiefly sugar. The trade carried on by native craft between Bangkok and the islands of the Eastern archipelago was also considerable.⁹ In 1844, there were five permanent commercial establishments at Bangkok belonging to British subjects. Of these, the house of Messrs Hunter and Hayes was the only one in which British-born subjects

were interested. The other houses consisted of one native merchant from the Madras coast and three branch establishments of native houses at Bombay.¹⁰

The British trade with Siam had been mainly fostered by the temper, tact and judgement displayed by the house of Messers Hunter & Co. in their earlier dealings with the natives of that country. Mr Robert Hunter himself resided at Bangkok till 1842 in the full enjoyment of the king's countenance and favour, and at the same time retaining the confidence of the British Government. He rendered valuable services to captain H. Burney in negotiating the treaty of 1826. He was also fortunate enough to be useful to the Government of India on two subsequent occasions of Dr Richardson's overland journey from Moulmein to Bangkok in 1829 and in the negotiation for the restoration of the ex-Rajah of Kedah in 1842.¹¹ The British Government in India acknowledged his services and awarded him Rs.5,000.¹²

In 1842, the king of Siam issued an order that sugar should be sold exclusively by one of his own officials at the royal store. Messers Hunter & Co. had previously contracted with various dealers for about 3,000 peculs at 7 to 7 1/2 ticals per pecul. The effect of the order was that the whole of sugar was carried off to the royal store and was supplied to traders at 9 1/2 ticals per pecul.¹³ The same monopoly was continued in the subsequent year. But the crop being large that year the house of Messers Hunter & Co. was able to obtain a supply from the king's store at the rate of 8 3/4 ticals per pecul, which could have been had direct from dealers as low as 7 1/2 ticals per pecul. In 1844, the Siamese king claimed not to monopolise the trade in sugar, but he granted the exclusive right of dealing in that article to the two head China traders, who paid him for the privilege 2 ticals per pecul and an extra 1/2 tical under the name of duty.¹⁴ The result was that the British traders were subjected to the alternative of sending their ships empty or paying 9 ticals per pecul for what would otherwise have been procured at 7 or 7 1/2 ticals per pecul at the utmost. Taking the average annual export to be 1,00,00 peculs of sugar, the loss of the exporters on this article arising from the monopoly was about 2,75,000 ticals or Company's rupees 3,43,750, most of which fell on British subjects. Mr Robert Hunter represented that the monopoly in question, whether directly by the Siamese king and his officers or indirectly by exclusive grant to the Chinese traders, was a manifest infringement of the treaties of 1826. He himself went to Calcutta in the steamer "Express" to claim from the Supreme Government not only that protection to person and property to which British traders were entitled by terms of the treaties of 1826, but also to seek redress for the manifest breach of

those terms guaranteeing direct commerce between British subjects and the subjects of Siam without intervention of the state or its agents in consideration of measurement duty on their vessels entering the port of Siam.¹⁵ He suggested three modes for redress of grievances of British subjects trading with Siam. Firstly he pleaded that a British consul should be stationed at Bangkok to watch over the performance of treaties and to safeguard the interests of British subjects. Secondly, a British frigate or a ship of war should make casual appearance on the coast of Siam to show that Great Britain was awake to interests of her subjects in that quarter. Thirdly, he suggested that on the first opportunity of explanation or discussion with the Siamese Government a proposal for the modification of the form of import duty should be made. The import duty by measurement of ships' fathom was particularly galling to the British merchants, who wanted the duty to be levied on the value of imported cargoes. Finally, he appealed to the Governor-General of India to enforce the observance of the creation of 1826 either by interference of the Supreme Government or by setting in motion the naval force of Great Britain stationed in the China seas for the protection of British rights and interests.¹⁶

As a matter of fact Mr Hunter's differences with the King of Siam appeared to have originated not so much from the sugar monopoly, which had been going on without complaint since 1842, but on account of differences over the price of the steamer "Express". When the British were engaged in war with China, the Siamese king thought that the British ships would pay a visit to Siam after affairs with China would be settled and every preparation was made to effect a show of resistance. The fortifications and the entrance of the main river were repaired. China cables were stretched across that river and an order for the supply of guns and the steamer "Express" had been placed through Messers Hunter & Co.¹⁷ The peaceful return of the British troops in India on the conclusion of the peace with China, entirely changed the king's views and the whole of his attention was devoted to the accumulation of wealth. He, therefore, galdly availed himself of any excuse for the non-fulfilment of his engagement with Mr Robert Hunter for the supply of ordnance and the steamer "Express". The immediate outbreak against Mr Hunter and the subsequent animosity which had been shown to that gentlemen, originated in his saying that if the king would not give the price agreed on for the steamer, she would be sold to the Cochin-Chinese with whom the Siamese were on hostile terms. This impolitic speech infuriated the king, who immediately ordered him to leave the country with his steamer. Subsequently, Mr Hunter sold the steamer to the Cochin-Chinese at Singapore for 53,000 spanish dollars. Mr Robert Hunter had to withdraw from Bang-

behind his assistant Mr Harvey to collect his property worth about 3 lakhs of rupees. Later on, Mr Hunter himself came back to Bangkok in a chartered vessel 'Gunga' to collect his property. The Siamese authorities did not object to his landing, but they refused to give him any assistance whatever in collecting his outstanding debts. Ultimately Mr Robert Hunter left Siam on the 29th December, 1844, after breaking up his establishment there.

W.T. Butterworth, Governor of the P.W. Island, Singapore and Malacca, was of opinion that all the ungracious conduct displayed towards Mr Robert Hunter had proceeded from personal animosity against him consequent on his threat and the subsequent fulfilment thereof, to sell the steamer "Express" to the Cochin-Chinese and the use of other strong language rather than from any systematic violation of the 6th article of the treaty of 1826.¹⁸ Mr W. Edwards, the Under Secretary to the Government of India, in a memorandum on the representation observed:

"The spirit of several treaties seem to be that laws and customs of Siam should be rigidly conformed to. No specification of these laws or customs is made and if the monopoly of sugar be Legalized by the king, then our traders would seem bound to conform to it and it would not appear that we would be justified in forcing the king to sell that product without any restriction".¹⁹

The governor-general in agreed with the view expressed by Edwards and saw no necessity of interfering on behalf of Robert Hunter. The export trade of Siam was injured, no doubt, by the monopoly of sugar, but the merchants still found it profitable to export sugar. It was still very cheap at 8 or 9 ticals (i.e. Rs. 10 or 11 for 129 lbs.). As a matter of fact the export of sugar from Siam to all parts had increased greatly and progressively since 1835. The British trade with Siam was, on the whole, on a satisfactory basis, despite the vexatious import duty on the measurements of ships. British manufactured goods in considerable quantity found their way every year into that country. Thus, the governor-general observed in a resolution:

"It does not appear that anything has occurred to suggest the propriety of seeking a revision of the commercial treaty with Siam. The import duties were doubtless very high and the mode of levying them makes them very unequal, but what can be expected from a "Semi-barbarous nation".²⁰

In the context of rights of extra-territoriality secured by the Europeans in China by the treaties of 1844, Great Britain thought it desirable to seek revision of the 6th article of the Anglo-Siamese treaty of 1826, which placed British subjects under Siamese laws. In 1850 Sir

James Brooke was deputed to Siam armed with plenipotentiary powers to negotiate a satisfactory treaty which would remove the grievances of the British merchants. As a matter of fact, the British were disappointed with the result of the Treaty of 1826. They complained of royal monopolies, especially in sugar, and of the prohibition of the teak trade. But efforts of Sir James Brooke to secure better terms for British subjects in Siam proved vain. Subsequently an American envoy also came to Siam with the same purposes, but failed in his mission. Hence both the British and American envoys advised their governments to stage a warlike demonstration in order to bring the Siamese king to his senses.

Meanwhile, the British annexation of Pegu in 1852 made the king realise the reality of the situation. Sardar K.M. Pannikar rightly observed — “The British annexation of a part of Burma had also rendered the Siamese Government nervous of the frightening presence of the leviathan on its borders”.²¹ In 1855, however, a treaty of friendship and commerce between Great Britain and Siam was negotiated by Sir John Bowring. By this treaty the British subjects got the right of extra-territoriality in Siam. A British consul was stationed at Bangkok to watch over the interests of British subjects, who were permitted to trade freely in all the seaports of Siam. But they were to reside permanently at Bangkok. The mode of import duty was also changed. British shipping was henceforth to be subjected to the payment of import or export duties on the value of the goods landed or shipped. On all articles of import, the duty was to be 3% on the market value of goods. Articles of export were to pay only one tax, whether to be levied under the name of inland tax, transit duty or duty on exportation. British merchants were to be allowed to purchase directly from producers and in like manner to sell their goods directly to the parties. Provision was also made for importation of opium free of duty in Siam.²² This shows the interests of the British government in the sale of opium in Southeast Asia and neighbouring countries.

Thus, the treaty of 1855 clearly bears the impress of British superiority in Asia. The treaty of 1826 was based on the principle of equality, but that of 1855 was based on inequality. British subjects got the right of extra-territoriality in Siam, but similar rights were not given to the Siamese subjects in Great Britain or in the British Empire. This treaty soon attracted the attention of other European powers, who concluded similar treaties with Siam within a few years. It proved a boon to British trade, which reaped the richest harvest from this revolutionary change in Siamese policy. Thus the Siamese king had to bow down before the European dominance in Asia.

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