



## Elite Formation in Myanmar's Borderlands through Militarized Na Ta La Schools

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### Abstract

This empirical study examines the *National Races Youth Development Training Programs*, locally known as the *Na Ta La Schools*, a specialized boarding school system established by the Myanmar military. Operating for over six decades, the program has received limited scholarly attention, often obscured by portrayals of educational benevolence. Using ethnographic methodology, the study draws on field observations and in-depth interviews, this research analyzes how the military leverages Na Ta La Schools to cultivate loyal bureaucratic elites in Myanmar's borderlands as part of nation-building efforts. Myanmar military employs these schools to reinforce its authority and extend control over border regions. Administered by the Ministry of Border Affairs (MoBA), one of the three ministries reserved exclusively for the military under the 2008 Constitution, the program targets ethnic and religious minorities, offering fully funded education at the expense of indoctrination and mandatory conversion to Buddhism. Graduates of the Na Ta La Schools are rapidly fast-tracked into key bureaucratic positions, forming a cadre of loyal elites who extend state influence into peripheral areas. These elites serve as ideological agents, promoting state narratives and propaganda. Through this mechanism, the military fosters a "union spirit" that removes indigenous loyalties with allegiance to the military-led central government. Thus, Na Ta La Schools act as a nation-building tool, commonly termed "Burmanization," aimed at securing control over diverse ethnic groups in borderlands through systematic indoctrination of future generations. The analysis covers the institution networks, recruitment practices, curriculum, instructor selection within a closed ideological circle, and the military's rationale for involvement. Ultimately, the study illustrates how targeted education serves as a strategic instrument for nation-building and political dominance.

**Keywords:** *Na Ta La Schools, borderlands, militarization, ethnic minorities, nation-building, elite formation*

### 1. Introduction

Myanmar's nation-building efforts encounter substantial obstacles in forging a unified national identity among its ethnically diverse populations, as conceptualized by Benedict Anderson as a "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983). Over time, these diversities have fueled complex identity politics, shaping the relationship between the state and ethnic groups. Such relationships highlight ongoing negotiations in nation-building. The exclusion of ethnic aspiration from this process constitutes the main root cause of Myanmar's protracted conflicts. Since independence in 1948, successive regimes have pursued diverse strategies to foster a united national identity by homogenizing ethnic and political identities.

A core strategy involves education to assimilate and indoctrinate ethnic minorities into this imagined community. Following the 1962 military coup d'état, General Ne Win nationalized the education system as part of the "Burmese Way to Socialism," a heavily centralized approach. Smith (1992) observes that in 1964, Ne Win's regime founded the Academy for the Development of National Groups (ADNG), a residential academy to spread socialist ideals in minority regions. This was elevated to full-fledged university status in 1991 by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). As an extension, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) launched the National Races Youth Development Training Program, colloquially Na Ta La Schools, in 1999 under the Department of Education and Training, Ministry of Border Affairs (MoBA). The program was further refined and systematized to target the needs of ethnic minorities from the borderlands, particularly Christians.

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This article explores Na Ta La Schools as a pivotal institution for military control in borderlands. While human rights organizations have reported the program for religious freedom violations, its roles in political processes remain under-researched. Unlike the standard civilian education system under the Ministry of Education (MoE), Na Ta La operates independently under MoBA, a military-exclusive portfolio per the 2008 Constitution. The study addresses how the military uses Na Ta La Schools to develop loyal ethnic elites within the bureaucracy, thereby extending state authority and administrative apparatuses in borderlands.

### 1.1 Background

Since the sixteenth century, Myanmar's education has involved parallel systems from various providers. Traditionally, Buddhist monasteries were responsible for teaching literacy, primarily in Pali, but also in Burmese, Mon, Shan, Rakhine, and possibly other languages. Catholic missionaries began establishing missionary schools in the central and southern regions of Myanmar. Jolliffe & Mears (2026) indicate that following the Second Anglo-Burmese War in 1852, the space for Christian missionaries to provide education increased significantly, leading to a particularly sharp rise in American Baptist Schools in the English-medium. However, after the 1962 coup d'état, Ne Win imposed centralized education, nationalizing all religious and private schools in 1964 and 1965, and imposing a uniform national curriculum under central oversight.

Since 1962, the Myanmar military has dominated nation-building through political or military means. From the 1990s, Na Ta La Schools have functioned as a military instrument to mobilize loyal bureaucratic elites and reshape ethnic-state relations in nation-building efforts. Notably, the program retained military oversight, increased funding, and infrastructure enhancements even during the quasi-democratic period (2010-2020), despite human rights organizations' critiques.

The MoBA, alongside the Ministry of Home Affairs and Defense, is reserved for the military under the 2008 Myanmar Constitution, granting direct control over Na Ta La Schools. This separation distinguishes the program from MoE offerings. The motto, "***Must Be Outstanding Human Resources of Nationalities Youth from Border Area,***" underscores its focus on border demographics. Na Ta La Schools fully fund students from grade five through the postgraduate level, with full MoBA funding.

According to the MoBA, the program objective is to "promote and teach basic and higher educational subjects to the nationalities youths from border areas, train and nurture them [ethnic minorities] to be intellectuals and intelligentsia who can serve for the development of their regions and provide vocational domestic science courses for young women from border areas." A Na Ta La staff member (Informant H, 2022) explained that recruitment prioritizes the most marginalized children from impoverished border regions, especially targeting three categories: orphans, children with single parents with economically disadvantaged status, and children of extremely poor parents. For such youth, Na Ta La offers transformative opportunities, fostering dependency. (Informant C, 2022) stated, "I have no parents or family members, so technically I was adopted by the school [Na Ta La School], and this is my home now." Thus, the schools provide not only education but also emotional and professional ties that persist post-graduation.

### 1.2. Research Question

- 1) How does targeted militarized schooling in Myanmar function as an instrument to mobilize loyalist bureaucratic elites and their role in expanding state authorities and apparatuses in the borderlands?

## 2. Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

- 1) To identify and examine how the military operates the Na Ta La Schools.
- 2) To examine how Na Ta La Schools transformed their students into loyalist bureaucratic elites and their roles in Myanmar's nation-building process.

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### 3. Materials and Methods

This ethnographic study was conducted in the Naga Self-Administered Zone, Sagaing Region, and Tanai Township, Kachin State, Myanmar. It draws from fieldwork spanning 2016 to 2026, as part of a graduate thesis at Chiang Mai University's Faculty of Social Science. In-depth interviews involved six participants: one Na Ta La graduate, two school staff, one student parent, one government official, and one current. The secondary sources included literature on Myanmar's education system, the state's policies toward ethnic minorities in the nation-building, and human rights reports, which framed the inquiry. Given the lack of Na Ta La Schools-specific studies, the analysis builds on broader educational research to illuminate trends in military-driven assimilation and centralization. Questionnaires, informed by the review, guided interviews, and field observations. Qualitative data underwent an inductive, interpretive, contextual, and thematic analysis to address the research question.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 Results

Participants from the Naga Self-Administered Zone and Kachin State, including current and former students, teachers, parents, and officials, acknowledged systematic indoctrination, religious conversion, and military control in Na Ta La Schools. Enrollment decisions by parents and students in most cases were voluntary, with competition for spots. All interviewed current students and alumni reported that Na Ta La Schools provided benefits unavailable from parents or MoE, such as full funding, guaranteed government employment, fast-track promotion, elevated social status, and financial security. Consequently, the schools are pathway to better future comparing to available options in borderland.

Na Ta La Schools strategy succeeds by addressing borderland needs, which it partly created by the state. Ethnic minorities endure structural discrimination and marginalization, severely limiting educational access. The military exploits this to maintain control via militarized education that perpetuates its influence. The 2021 coup d'état and COVID-19 pandemic intensified these constrains. The Institute for Strategy and Policy (2025) reported that access to basic education declined significantly, with school enrollment rates dropping to just 6.1 million in the 2025-2026 academic year from more than 9.7 million enrolment in the 2019-2020 academic year. The borderlands are hardest hit by the crisis. Rather than improving public education, the military expanded Na Ta La Schools. Fleming (2016) documented 33 Na Ta La schools by 2016, with more than half located in impoverished ethnic borderlands; MoBA reported 45 in 2026, indicating growth. Fleming (2016) highlighted four key areas of exploitations: abject poverty, lack of education facilities, the need and desire for education, and the population who face barriers to secure a better position because of the institutionalized discrimination. The list of Na Ta La School locations in *Table 1* underscore targeted priority is given to ethnic areas.

**Table 1** Location and Number of Na Ta La Schools

Locations	Number
Ayeyawady Region	2
Chin State	10
Danu Self-Administered Zone	1
Kachin State	5
Kayah State	2
Kayin State	2
Kokang Self-Administered Zone	1
Magway Region	2
Mon State	2
Naga Self-Administered Zone	3
Pa'Oh Self-Administered Zone	2
Palaung Self-Administered Zone	1

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Rakhine State	3
Sagaing Region	3
Shan State	6
Total	45

(Source: 2023-2024 Annual Report, Ministry of Border Affairs)

Paglayan (2024) posits that mass education emerged as a crucial state-building strategy designed to accomplish the state's main function of promoting social order by indoctrinating future citizens to obey the state and its laws. In Myanmar, the military positions as the union's guardian, using education to propagate this role. The borderlands are depicted as underdeveloped due to ethnic subversion, justifying military intervention. In practice, this sustains military dominance. Long-term control requires instruments and apparatuses, which Na Ta La School provides.

Fostering national unity and union spirit is the core propaganda of Na Ta La Schools. An alumna defined it as citizens whose loyalty and submission to the state authority, supporting nation-building even if it contradicts with ethnic cultures and aspirations. Informant B (2022) emphasized nurturing and cultivating 'union spirit' and gratitude for educational privileges while upholding the three national causes: non-disintegration of the union; non-disintegration of national solidarity; and perpetuation of sovereignty. Despite indoctrinate with state-centric ideologies, students navigate to balance ethnic heritage and state-imposed identity. Informant H (2023) described this as "one can be a fully ethnic person and fully Myanmar at the same time when the union spirit is being upheld," capturing the core program's aim.

**Table 2** List of Na Ta La Establishments in 2026

No	Institution Types	Number	Program Offering
1	University for the Development of the National Races of the Union	1	Undergraduate to Postgraduate
2	Nationalities Youth Resource Development Degree College	2	Undergraduate and Graduate
3	Central Training School	1	Vocational
4	Training Schools for Development of Nationalities Youths from Border Areas	45	Basic Education
5	Technical School for Nationalities Youths from Border Area	9	Engineering
6	Vocational Training School	45	Vocational

(Source: 2023-2024 Annual Report, Ministry of Border Affairs)

Military oversight of Na Ta La Schools persists across regimes, from Ne Win to Than Shwe and Aung San Suu Kyi, amid centralized, Bamar-dominated education or Burmanization. Informant A (2022) noted the military has disproportionate influence over the borderlands through force and national endorsement. Placing Na Ta La Schools under military control strategically underscores its national-building role, military atrocity against ethnic minorities, and legitimized military rule. This militarization frames ethnic minorities political struggles as threats to the Union.

Informant B (2022), a staff member of MoBA, confirmed recruitment targets borderland ethnic and religious minorities. An investigative news agency, Myanmar Now (2019) reported disqualifying 44 Bamar Buddhist applicants in 2019, affirming focus on non-Bamar, non-Buddhists. Key Informant Interviews informed that the recruitment strategy is well defined to target only ethnic minorities. This targeted recruitment appears to be discriminatory toward Bamar and Buddhists applicants, but it's military strategy to execute Burmanization policy as laid out by Ne Win in 1962, which focused on three pillars: Buddhism principles, centralization of authorities under the dominant Bamar, and military as the guardian of the state (Htoo & Waters, 2025). The core recruitment criteria include: 1) must be ethnic minority (non-Bamar) from the borderlands, 2) Christian and willing to convert into Buddhism, 3) orphans or extreme impoverished

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family, 4) completion of primary school (grade four), and 5) committed to civil service upon graduation (Informant B, 2022). The recruitment criteria highlight targeting specific ethnic and socio-economic status.

As residential schooling programs, Na Ta La Schools follow a dual curriculum: MoE standards plus MoBA-designed content emphasizing nation-building ideology. Informants B, C, E, and F, (2022) identified four additional subjects: 1) Union Spirit, 2) Buddhist Theology, 3) Moral Education, and 4) Military Training. Informant B (2022) claimed these foster discipline, but they indoctrinate loyalty, enforce conversion, and instill nationalism Fleming (2016) described Na Ta La Schools ostensibly operate as boarding schools and are systematically prevented from practicing Christianity while at the schools and effectively required to convert to Buddhism. Informant B (2022) noted mandatory Monkhood and Nunhood entry for new students, though requirement is removed since 2015. Lall (2020) noted that Myanmar's education system is to cement the Burman (Bamar) culture and language as central to the nation's unity – a process often referred to as 'Burmanization'; Na Ta La Schools intensifies this unity focus.

Instructors are sourced from a closed ideological loop: 1) military academic, 2) retired military or university professors with military ties, and 3) Na Ta La Schools graduates (Informant E, 2022). This militarizes teaching, preventing external influences. Phattharathanasut & Brehm (2025) describe the military controlled the education system as a strategic tool for state-building, political indoctrination, and the consolidation of Bamar-centric nation-building. The Na Ta La Schools prepares the students to internalize and align with state-centric ideologies.

At the graduation of Na Ta La Schools, graduates submit three departmental preferences; although the MoBA decide assignment. Notably, graduates are positioned to mid-ranking officer levels and posted them in the borderlands where they are held. Informant F (2022) was appointed Deputy Staff Officer at age of 22, and Gazetted Staff Officer at the age of 24. Informant F (2022) noted similar promotion among classmates. Informants D and F, (2022) noted that such positions required at least 15 to 20 years of service for ordinary staff members. Fleming (2016) also reported the same patterns in Chin State, provided that they converted to Buddhism during their time in the schools, including by changing their religion on their National Registration Cards. The Na Ta La Schools graduates were also given an elite opportunity to continue graduate and postgraduate studies under the Na Ta La Schools, on full salary.

The state portrays and promotes Na Ta La Schools graduates as the face of the borderland and exemplars, transformed through loyalty to the state. Indeed, the transformation at the expense of abandoning their faith, ethnic and religious allegiance. From orphaned or impoverished origins, they ascend to ruling-class status, embodying state authority.

#### 4.1 Discussion

The findings position Na Ta La Schools as enduring nation-building instrument, echoing colonial models. Anderson (1983) describes in the colonial territories, the state established schools to produce subordinate cadres, for instance, in the United States of America, Indians in blood and colour but English in taste. The educational system is mainly used to assimilate diverse populations into a single national mould. Equivalently, one can argue that the Na Ta La Schools students are ethnic minorities in blood and colour but Bamar in taste – under the military's patronage. In contrast, others may also argue that the Na Ta La Schools are good opportunity for the advancement of employment in the government sector, which is historically discriminatory toward ethnic minorities. Similarly, one way of legitimizing ethnic identities through incorporation into the governmental systems, especially in the context of minority ethnic groups who are persistently seeking the state's recognition. As Eriksen (2021) argued that mass education can be an efficient aid and an extremely powerful machine in the establishment of standardizing reification of culture, which is essential in the legitimation of ethnic identities. This juxtaposed competing arguments, which requires further investigation on whether it contributes to development of the borderlands. And how these influential bureaucratic elites from the borderlands bridge the center-ethnic minorities divides.

Salem-Gervais & Metro (2012) trace Myanmar's military education strategy that is built on the ideological groundwork laid in the dynastic, colonial, and independence eras, and developed innovative new



strategies to convince citizens to overlook what divides them and prioritize what they have in common. The authors also argued that Myanmar's education system is transmitting the ideology to serve the interests of the state and its elites. Na Ta La Schools exemplifies this, promoting 'union spirit' as a core objective is intended to minimize the depth of ethnic differences by homogenizing with the dominant culture. It posits that the Na Ta La Schools as an extension of the military's power, mobilizing loyalists in the borderlands that serve to perpetuate the state's authority and interest of the military and the state.

Paglayan (2024) also frames mass education emerged as a crucial state-building strategy designed to accomplish the state's main function of promoting social order by indoctrinating future citizens to obey the state and its laws. In Myanmar, education has been used as a primary tool for assimilation and indoctrination, a process frequently referred to as 'Burmanization'. This educational strategy aims to consolidate political and national identity by suppressing the identities of ethnic minorities in favour of a single national identity grounded in the Bamar language, culture, and Buddhist religion (Htoo & Waters, 2025). The Na Ta La Schools condone this strategy and operationalizes this to produce loyalist bureaucratic elites as proselytizers to expand the state's power.

## 5. Conclusion

The Na Ta La Schools serves as a military mechanism for exerting political control in Myanmar's borderlands. It is established to target minorities within minorities from ethnic and religious minorities backgrounds (especially Christians) by providing incentives for advancement into ruling-class elites. The studies identified six key elements: 1) targeted exploitation of socio-economic vulnerability, 2) militarized curriculum, 3) religious conversion, 4) institutional military control, 5) royalist elite class formation, and 6) Burmanization as assimilation.

Na Ta La Schools strategically exploits abject poverty, a lack of educational facilities, and institutionalized discrimination in the borderlands to recruit students. The recruitment explicitly targets the most marginalized children within marginalized groups, especially orphans, children with single parents, and those from extremely impoverished families. This creates a state of dependency, emotional and professional ties.

Unlike regular schools under the Ministry of Education, Na Ta La Schools imposed a mandatory, militarized curriculum designed to indoctrinate students and create loyalty to the state. The curriculum include: 1) Union Spirit, 2) Buddhist Theology, 3) Moral Education, and 4) Militia Training. These subjects are systematically designed to indoctrinate the students to be loyal and submissive to the Union and state authorities, even if it contradicts with ethnic identity and values.

Na Ta La Schools systematically pressures students, predominantly with Christian backgrounds, to convert to Buddhism and to set this as a criterion for recruitment. This is a part of long-term strategy of consolidating unified national identity by converting minorities to Buddhism. Once recruited, they're taught Buddhist Theology and Bamar culture. They are required to Monkhood and Nunhood entry. Additionally, students must change their religion on their National Registration Cards to Buddhism.

Na Ta La Schools operate separately from the Ministry of Education (MoE). It is placed under the Ministry of Border Affairs (MoBA), which is one of the three ministries reserved exclusively for the military under the 2008 Constitution. Furthermore, sourced instructors exclusively from military academic services, retired military personnel, and Na Ta La Schools graduates to ensure ideological alignment.

Na Ta La Schools are one of the pathways that creates a new ruling-class of bureaucratic. Graduates are appointed to mid-ranking civil services positions as early as age 22, a level of seniority that typically takes ordinary civil servants 15 to 20 years to achieve. These freshly graduates as well as young officers are often positioned back to their homeland as loyalty reward, forming new bureaucratic elites.

Ultimately, Na Ta La Schools serve as a tool for assimilation and indoctrination, often referred to as 'Burmanization', a process that attempt to homogenize diverse ethnic identities into a single national mould based on Bamar language, culture, and Buddhism. This multilayered militarization sustains military dominance over six decades, embedding control in borderland social dynamics.

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## 6. Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude to all the informants who participated at great personal risk.

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