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Salience of Ethnicity among Burman Muslims: A Study in Identity Formation

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Abstract: Muslims, constituting about thirteen percent of the total population of Myanmar or Burma are not a monolithic group and are unable to provide a united front in their struggle to realize their just demands. They are divided into many groups and their relationship with each other is conflictual. As the cases of Indian and Bamar (Burman) Muslims show, they rely upon ethnicity, rather than religion, for identity formation and self-expression.

Burma, known as Myanmar since 1989, is the second largest country in ASEAN or South East Asia.[1] It stretches nearly 1500 miles from North to South. With an area of 678,500 square km and a population of about 48 million, it lies at the juncture of three regions of Southeast Asia, South Asia and East Asia. It is situated between two Asian giants, India and China, and shares borders with Bangladesh, Thailand and Laos. Burma is more significant than many other countries in the region as it is surrounded, in the southwest and south, by the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea. It lies, in the words of Huntington, across the fault lines of the Hindu, Buddhist and Confucian civilisations.[2]

Burma or Myanmar is a nation with many races and there are about 135 ethnic groups. Its population is nearly 50 million. The majority are Bamar, but the Shan, Kachin, Kayin, Chin, Mon, Rakhine, Burmese Muslims, Indian Muslims, Chinese Muslims and others are prominent minority groups in Burma. Although the origin of the

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term Burma is not known, the earlier Indian settlers called their host Burma, Bamar or Burman. According to some authors, the country was called Brahma because Buddhist sacred books call the first inhabitants of the world Brahmas, but Sinhalese (Sri Lankan) monks called the country Brahma-Desa.[3]

The Bamar, mostly Buddhist and strong believers of Theravada Buddhism, constitute more than seventy percent of the total population of Burma.[4] The Bamar are the descendants of Tibeto-Bamar who were pushed out of their homes from the northwest Chinese province of Kansu, by ethnic Chinese in the second millennium BC, from where they moved to Tibet before migrating to Burma. Initially, the inhabitants of Burma were believed to be animists but later they became Brahmans.[5] Subsequently, they were introduced to Buddhism brought by South Indian immigrants who attacked Brahmanism for its complexity, formalism, and for being unreal. They claimed that Brahmanism was just a system and not a religion.

It is said that both Theravada Southern Buddhism and Mahayana Northern Buddhism reached Burma through Indian merchants and traders in the early century of the Christian era, although Theravada Buddhism became firmly established in 1056 A.D.[6] Since then, Thaton, located southeast of the capital Rangoon, had become the center of Buddhism where the teachings of Lord Buddha were systemically studied.

Since the establishment of Buddhism in Burma, it has been the religion of all generations throughout Burmese history. The kings were regarded as the protector of the Buddhist belief and renegades were often punished in line with the general postulation that Bamar could not change beliefs. The monks (*hpoungyi*) assume the role of caretakers of Buddhism by keeping an eye on the people's spiritual well-beings. Consequently, according to many scholars, the British missionaries were not as successful as was expected, although the rulers of Burma did not intervene with their missionary work. The largest Christian ethnic minority in Burma are the Karens (Kayin in Burmese language). These Karens could have been Buddhists or Hindus, but *en masse* conversion to Christianity, brought by the conqueror British, was well accepted by those who were allegedly discriminated by the Bamar.[7]

According to both Burmese and non-Burmese sources, Islam reached the shores of Arakan, now called Rakhine State, of Burma as early as the seventh century A.D. through sea by trading merchants and Sufis. The conversion of local inhabitants into the newly brought Islam was more by choice rather than by coercion. This is true of all Southeast Asian nations, including Malaysia and Indonesia. However, Muslims formed a negligible portion of the total population of the Burman Empire. Historical records show that Muslims did not attempt to invade Burma from outside or proselytize from within. This is perhaps due to Burma's mountains that bordered its territory and presented a formidable resistance to overland intruders. Almost all invasions had been stopped once they reached the shores of Burma. The invasion of the Mongols and the conquests of the Manchus in China, the Turks and Mongols occupations of India halted when they reached Burma's borders before penetrating into Burmese jungles and hills. Furthermore, Islam did not make an explicit spillover into Burma since there was no vacuum as far as religion was concerned. Buddhism, as stated above, was already settled.[8]

Muslims make up approximately thirteen percent of the total population, although the Burmese official census of 1983 reported its Muslim population to be about four percent.[9] It is not unusual for non-Muslim countries to undercount their Muslim inhabitants in official documents for understandable reasons. For instance, Thai Muslims often complain of the Thai national census (1960) that recorded 1.5 million Muslims, while their number approaches five million.

Different Muslim Groups

Generally, Muslims in Burma are categorised into four groups. The largest group is known as Rohingya of Rakhine (also known as Arakan) who number approximately one million throughout the country. Burmese converts to Islam are termed "Bamar Muslims" (or in English, Burman Muslims). They are followed by "Indian Muslims" born in Burma of two Indian Muslim parents. The fourth group is known as the "Zerbadees." They are the children of mixed marriages between Indian Muslim fathers and Burmese mothers.[10] However, there is a lot of affinity between Bamar Muslims and Zerbadees. Most Zerbadees claim to be Bamar Muslims for fear that

they might be categorised as Indian Muslims.These two communities, therefore, are considered as one entity since they try endlessly to distinguish themselves from Indian Muslims and Rohingyas. The above categorisation excludes other significant Muslim minority communities in Burma. In particular, one must take note of the Pantay, the Chinese Muslims, and the Malays.[11] Each group has very different relationships with the Buddhist majority and with the government of Burma.

Burmese call all Muslims of Burma "Kalar" irrespective of their backgrounds and races, which Muslims consider derogatory. The term "Kalar" comes presumably from Sanskrit "Kula" meaning "nationalities or ethnic groups."[12] The term is also used to describe natives of Indian subcontinent irrespective of their religions. By referring to them as "Kalar," the Burmese authorities try to equate all Muslims with the recent migrants of Indians under the British or even accuse them of being fresh illegal immigrants. It is also interesting to note that Bamar Muslims who claim to have lived in Burma for generations call themselves "Pati" in order to distinguish them from the Muslims of Indian descents or migrants who arrived to Burma during the colonial era.

Rohingyas

Rohingyas received Islam through Arab Muslim sailors who first reached the shores of Arakan in 712 A.D. Although many historians used the word "Burma" instead of Arakan in explaining the arrival of Islam, it is commonly understood that Burma at that time meant Arakan or Lower Burma.[13] The word Rohingya, also known as Rwangya, is derived from the word "Rohang" the ancient name of Arakan, while some believe that it is the corrupt form of an Arabic term "*Raham*" meaning "*sympathy*." It is said that an Arab ship was wrecked near the coasts of Arakan and the ill-fated people took refuge in Arakan by uttering the word "*Raham, Raham*" meaning "Compassion, compassion." The locals pronounced it as Rohang; since then the people living there are known as the Rohingyas. The word "Arakan" could also be derived from the Arabic word *Rukun* meaning pillar. The Rohingyas feel that they are completely different from the Indian or Bangladeshi stocks.[14] They refute many Rakhines' contention that they are the British era settlers and product of the

British colonial expansion into contemporary Burmese territory. They consider themselves to be the natives of the Arakan and nothing could make them not be the sons of the soil.

The Rohingyas maintain their consistent claim that they are no less indigenous than any other indigenous races of Burma by referring to the names of those kings who had ruled the Arakan kingdom by Muslim names. For instance, King Narameikhla (1430–1434) is called Sulaiman Shah and Men Khari @ Naranu (1434–1454) is remembered as Ali Khan.

Arakan had been an independent kingdom till it was annexed to the Burman Kingdom in 1785.[15] It remained the territory of the British from 1824 to 1948 when Burma was granted independence. During the Japanese occupation of Burma (1942–1945), Rohingyas remained loyal to the British and were seen as being on the opposite side of pro-independence Buddhist Rakhine. Rohingya leaders were unhappy that Arakan was to be included within Burma and approached the Governor-General, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, of the newly created Pakistan to incorporate northern Arakan into the East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1947. Jinnah rejected the request but Bamars became furious towards Rohingyas for they had threatened the territorial integrity of Burma. Since then, the Rohingyas became the object of mistrust and discrimination.

Rohingyas claim that various laws and regulations had been promulgated since 1962 that were aimed at harassing them. Since the 1970s, no Rohingya was accepted into the army. In 1974, all citizens were given National Identification Certificates, while the Rohingyas were offered Foreign Registration Cards (FRC). In 1977, the Burmese government conducted the Nagamin (Dragon King) Operation to flush out illegal immigrants, which Rohingyas claimed as an operation specially designed to drive them out of the country.

The Rohingya language has no orthography and the Bamar were blamed for destroying it. The disappearance of its writing system was, for many, the result of Burman invasion of Arakan. The language of Rohingyas is till today widely spoken in Burma, especially in Arakan. It is a mixture of Arabic, Urdu, Persian and even some Dutch words, although some argue that Rohingya language is akin to the Chittagong dialect of Bengali tongue.

Pantay and Malay

The origin of the term Pantay is unknown and could be the corrupted form of "Pathi" or Putee, referring to Chinese of the Islamic faith.[16] They prefer to be called Pantay in private and Burman Muslims in public in Burma. They are also of the same stock of people known as the Chin Ho in Thailand, the Islamised Chinese from Yunnan whose settlements date from the time of T'ang Dynasty, migrated to neighbouring countries of Laos and Thailand.[17] Moshe Yegar call them a "somewhat unusual group."[18] Some believe that the Pantay of Burma are the descendents of Kubalai Khan's army that invaded Pagan, ancient capital of Burma, in 1277 A.D under the command of Nassaruddin, the son of the governor of Yunan, Sayid Ajjal (Sai Tien Chih) of Bokhara.[19] In fact, Chinese (Muslims and non-Muslims alike) have been migrating from China to Burma for many reasons throughout history from time to time.[20] However, the majority of Pantay who reached Burma are believed to be traders, muleteers or refugees after the unsuccessful Pantay revolt between 1856–1873 A.D.

Although their exact number is not known, it could be assumed that they number around sixty thousand. The largest community of Pantays are found in Tan Yan, near Lashio town. The rest are scattered in all major cities of Burma, Kentung, Taunggyi, Mandalay, Mogok, Bamo and Rangoon.[21] They are known for setting up mosques and Islamic schools (*madarasas*) wherever they settle. Since prominent Pantay Islamic scholars are not readily available, Muslims of other races and origins, mostly of Indian descents, are employed in Pantay mosques and Madarasas. Since the Pantay Madarasas do not teach Chinese, their traditional mother tongue is steadily forgotten and is being replaced by Burmese. Yoshe predicted in 1972 that it is a matter of one generation or two when the Pantays would eventually cease to exist as a separate entity.[22]

Malays of Burma live along the shores of Tanintaryi Division of Burma and are known as "Pashu" among the Burmese. More than thirty villages of Malays could be found with approximately 10,000 families. They build houses by using bricks, bamboos and other forest products and are expert in navigation and boat building. A total of 3,804 houses along with 26 *surau*(s) could be found around Kaw Thaung town and 3,097 houses with thirteen *surau*(s) in Bot

Pyin town. Most Malays in Burma are fishermen and some are involved in farming. All are Muslims and uphold respective traditions. They are known for their love for knowledge and they study Arabic, Jawi and Burmese.[23]

Indians in Burma

Burma, being geographically the closest neighbour of India, was inevitably influenced by the Indian culture and traditions.[24] Indians have been traditional trading partners. In the ancient period, Burma used to import spices and export rice to India.[25] India has been the source of religion for Bamar, including Brahmanism and Buddhism. Indian and Burmese cultures are so intertwined in several aspects that it could hardly be possible to extricate one from another, such as eating beetle nuts and wearing longyi (wrapper).

The Indian Muslim population in Burma was not that significant prior to the arrival of the British. The annexation of Burma to the British Indian territory in 1824 and 1826 paved the way for the massive migration of Indians into Burma. Unregulated and uncontrolled immigration policy of the British in Burma attracted massive Indian migration, especially after 1852[26] and the migration volume increased soon after the opening of the Suez Canal and the development of the Burmese delta as one of the centres of rice export.[27] The increase in the Indian immigrants, especially coolies, was the ultimate result of the increase in, what Hall called "the culture of paddy for export by the Burmese cultivators."[28]

By the 1940s, there were about one million Indians with six million Burmese, with approximately one third of those immigrant Indians followed Islam as their faith. The Indian migration was sharply reduced since 1941 because of the Indo-Burman Immigration agreement, and totally stopped after Burma (Myanmar) gained independence in January 1948. Despite the fact that many Indians returned to India in the 1940s and 1960s, a sizable number of Indian Muslims were still living in various towns of Burma.[29] Guyot had noted that "Indian" as a unitary identification was fostered by both colonial British and Burmans who did not distinguish between Hindus and Muslims, among castes or among regions of origins. He added that the unity of Indians in Burma was self-evident in Burmese Delta that was impossible to achieve in India.[30]

These Indian migrants had technically taken control of almost all sectors of Burmese society: they were dock laborers, transport workers, municipal employees, rickshaw pullers[31] and were actively participating in trading, brokerage, services, banking, milling, contracting and shop keeping, communications, mining, oil, wholesale trading, medicine and money lending, with high interest rates.[32] It seemed that there was no business that was not under the control of any Indian or person of Indian descent. After the separation of Burma from India in 1937, Bamars began to compete with Indians and the hatred against Indians reached to an un-controllable and exlosive situation that resulted in the Bamar-Indian riots in 1930. Gravers wrote:

> Tensions between Indians and Burmans also appeared in the form of an unpleasant mixture of religious and racial/ethnic opposition. Newspapers expressed the fear that mixed marriages between Indian Hindu or Muslims and Burman women would lead to the (Burman) women being forced to renounce Buddhism. Such marriages came to be regarded as a threat to religion and racial identity. [33]

Bamar Muslims and Zerbadees

Muslims had been serving in Bamar palaces since the sixteenth century and many were once (Muslim) prisoners taken by the Burman to settle in upper Burma after the Arakan and Pegu coastal kingdoms were invaded by the Bamar kings.[34] They considered themselves as Pati and later known as Zerbadees, the term they dislike no less than the derogatory term "kalar." Hence, they prefer to be called Bamar Muslims.[35] The Burmese census taken in 1941 replaced the word "Mohammaden" with "Bamar Muslims" to differentiate Indians of the same faith.

Bamar Muslims consistently claim that they are no less Burmese than any Buddhist Burman for they are the same except for religion. They point out that many Burmese nationalists of pre-independence Burma were Muslims. Htun Sein, a Muslim, was the first President of Rangoon University Student Council. Bamar Muslims often recall with pride their active involvement in such events as the formation of Patriotic Burmese Forces, anti-Japanese movement, and the signing of Pin Lon Agreement that led to the formation of the Union of Burma. Mr. Abdul Razak, the then Minister of Education who

was assassinated along with Aung san in July 1947, manifests again the extent of their involvement in Burmese politics.

The Bamar Muslims have no Arabic (Muslim) names, unlike their Indian counterparts. Some have been vigorously fighting against the Indian way of Islam by adopting Burmese names and wearing Burmese costumes. Most of these Bamar Muslims' writings focus on Bamar Muslims' activities and it may not be wrong to say that Islam and Muslims of Rohingyas have been totally ignored which could be due to the fact that these Rohingyas have been taken off from the good book of the regime. Some have gone too extreme to differentiate themselves from Indian Muslims by saying there is no difference between Bamar Buddhists and Bamar Muslims, except that Bamar Muslims consume no pork.[36] It is interesting to note that the Bamar Muslims who claim to have lived in Burma for generations call themselves Pati in order to distinguish themselves from those of Indian descents or migrants who arrived to Burma during the colonial era.

Zerbadees are the children of mixed marriages between Indian fathers and Bamar Buddhist mothers. No one is certain about the origin of the word Zerbadee. Perhaps it is derived from Persian "Zer Bad" meaning "Below the wind" or against the wind referring to the land of the east, Malaya, Sumatera and Pegu.[37] The term was used for the first time in the census of 1891, referring to the children of Indian fathers and Bamar mothers. It is very common among Zerbadees to visit pagodas and celebrate Buddhist festivals and interpret Islam liberally. Some of the Zerbadees are apostates and some even become Buddhist monks. They, like Bamar Muslims, distance themselves from Indian Muslims and Rohingyas. More often than not, they claim to be Bamar Muslims by hiding their non-Bamar (Indian) parentage.

Intra-Muslim Animosity and Tension

The Bamar Muslims' perceptions of Islam practiced by the Muslims of Indian descents had been one of the major causes of rifts between these two communities of the same faith. Bamar Muslims believe that there are no differences between themselves and their counterparts, the Buddhist Bamars, except in religion. Their criticism against Islam practiced by the Indians ranged from the Indian's

tendency towards Mawlawi-ism (in which religion and religious affairs are unquestionably entrusted in the hand of a Mawlawi), using Urdu as a means of communication in their daily life and as a medium of instruction in Islamic schools, bringing Indian attitudes (albeit in a different approach) of soft caste system into casteless Burmese Muslim community to discriminate Muslim women as is practised in India. Mostly monogamous, the Bamars detested polygamous Indians as they are known for "washing legs whenever he finds a pond," (*Yae Ain Thwe Tine Chay Say*) which means getting a wife in every new place that they arrive. For Bamar Muslims, Indian Muslims are religious fanatics suffering from superiority complex and, hence, they seldom mix with the local (Buddhist) environment, unlike the Zerbadees, or Bamar Muslims.

The Bamar Muslims felt that the Indian Muslims have unconsciously brought a soft version of the Indian caste system into Burma, a land that had no knowledge of any caste system and whose family relations were not rigid, while the status of women was very high.[38] To Bamar Muslims, as observed by a senior Malaysian diplomat who had spent many years in Burma, this Indian caste system among Indian Muslims had created minorities within the minority Muslims by sub-dividing themselves into the Chulia, Pathan, Memon, Surti and the like.[39] This caste system is so rigid that it is almost impossible for a Chulia to marry a Surti girl for the Chulia are dark-skinned and hail from Malabar while Surtis are fairer and hail from different parts of India. This is an insult to Islam which aims at uniting mankind irrespective of one's culture and tribe.

Some innocuous complaints made against Islamic practices adopted by Indian Muslim by the Bamar Muslims include delivering Friday religious sermons (Khutbah) in Arabic, while Urdu is the means of communication on religious matters. Indian style shirt (kurta) worn in almost all Islamic schools (Madarasah) and the fez or topi (cap) used by Mawlawi of Indian descents are also vehemently criticised. Some Bamar Muslims, who claim to be knowledgeable in Islamic matters and call for liberating Islam from the manipulation of Mawlawi of Indian descent, refuse to put on the fez to differentiate themselves from Indian Muslims.

On the other hand, the Indian Muslims call the Bamar Muslim's clergies as "half-cooked" ʿUlamāʿ unable to comprehend the true

teachings of Islam. Bamar Muslims in general are considered as creatures with a "Muslim body and a Buddhist soul." They point to Bamar Muslims' acceptance of some Burmese Buddhist practices, such as fortune telling, astrology, and belief in Nafs (spirits), as indicators for relegating them to the status of second class believers of Islam.[40]

The Bamar Muslims prefer to speak Burmese and are proud to be able to do so, in order to authenticate that they are the true Bamar, besides being Muslims. In fact, Bamar Muslims had previously requested the majority Indian Muslims, who set up most of the Islamic schools in Burma, to teach in Burmese, but the proposal was rejected since most schools were under the control of Indians. They (Indian Muslims) were obsessed with Urdu and taught it in Islamic schools as the first language along with English, but left out mathematics and science subjects as they were considered worldly subjects.

Many Indian Muslims neither have any knowledge of Burmese language nor want to learn it. The Mawlawis are highly respected by the community of the Indian Muslims and they controlled the religion, like in India. The Bamar Muslims have been calling for liberating Islam from the hands of the manipulative Mawlawis who converse mostly in Urdu and are unable to communicate in Burmese. At the same time, these Indian Muslims had been accused of painting a new, but ugly image of Bamar Muslims with an ambiguous identity "turning them into fish at one time and frog at another" (making others unable to distinguish between a Bamar and an Indian due to one's faith). Furthermore, Indian Muslims had cooperated with the British and earned the hatred of the local Buddhist Bamars. Many Indians, especially businessmen, objected to Burma's separation from India. The Bamar Buddhists' hatred against anti-Indian Chettayars was instantly transformed into racial riots between Muslim migrants of Indian descents and Burmans where hundreds from both sides were killed.

The 1938 anti-Indian racial riot, also known as Barmar-Muslim riot, broke out due to a book titled "Mawlawi & Yogi Sadan" written by a Bamar Muslim U Shwe Phi on Buddhism which the Buddhists considered not only an insult against their religion but also an attack on Bamar race.[41] The book claims that Buddha believed in the

existence of God, and that he was originally a Hindu and became an outcast as soon as he became the Buddha. The Muslim organisations at once disowned the book but the conflict continued. The riot started in Mandalay and soon it spread to other places of Burma killing, according to official records, over 200 and injuring more than 1,000 people.[42] Interestingly, during the riots some Hindus of Burma had ostentatiously sided with their Buddhist counterparts by providing food to the Buddhist monks and joining Buddhist processions. They went to the extent of claiming blood ties between Hindus and Buddhists of Burma.[43] Bamars attacked every Muslim without differentiating Indian Muslims or Bamar Muslims. They thus denounced the prevalent practise of calling Bamar Muslims as Kalar so as not to be placed in the same rank with the Indian Muslims.

The rift between Indian and Bamar Muslims were so deep and serious that they could not unite even when U Nu, the then elected Prime Minister of Burma, after serving a six week period as a monk, announced Buddhism as the state's official religion in September 1960.[44] Most Indian Muslims had opposed it except U San Shar, the President of All Burma Mawlawi Association, who argued that to do otherwise would attract more attacks and violent hostility from more radical and fanatical monks towards Muslim communities.[45]

Bamarisation: The Institutional Tussle

The rift between Indian and Bamar Muslims had led to the formation of the "Burma (Bamar) Muslim Society" (BMS) on December 12, 1909 by the Bamar Muslims and Zerbadees. Although the BMS wanted to open many branches throughout Burma, it was unable to do so till 1930s. Most of its financial assistance came from a Bamar Muslim, U Ba Oh, who was chosen to be its president for life. It acted as a representative and authorised body for Muslims of Burma by submitting petitions and memoranda to the British on matters related to Muslims. It organised a protest campaign when the Committee for drawing up the Constitution of Burma in 1935 omitted the rights of Bamar Muslims and demanded that Bamar Muslim be mentioned in the Constitution of Burma. However, the society became dormant after Japan invaded Burma.

Another organisation called the General Council of Burma Muslim Association (GCBMA), in response to the General Council of

Buddhist Association (GCBA), was established in 1936. It was established by the Bamar Muslims who felt melancholic for being included in the Zerbadees category in the population census, which included all groups of Muslims including Arakanese from western Burma and Muslim prisoners from Manipura.

They also established the Muslim Students' Society which in turn created the Muslim Free Hospital and Medical Relief Society in 1937. Muslims began to be active again after World War II. Soon after the independence, the un-negotiable cracks appeared between Myanmar local Muslims and Muslims with Indian descents. The General Council of Burma Muslim Association (GCBMA) called for Burmese as an official language of Burma and demanded that its President be a Bamar or at least one of his/her parents must be a Burmese native. The same regulation applied to the Vice President and all executive council members.

The Process of Identity Formation

Since 1905, the Burmese Muslims have been organising an annual All Burma Muslim Educational Conference similar to the "All India Educational Conference," in which both Bamar Muslims and Indian Muslims attended. Indian Muslims were more influential for they were wealthier and more active in the field. Bamar Muslims had since 1915 called for introducing the Burmese language in all Muslim schools where Urdu had been the compulsory language of instruction.

After renewing the same request annually, the same official request was made at the All Burma Muslim Education Conference held in Pegu (Bago) as early as December 1929. Bamar Muslims were estranged by the statements made by the chairman of the then Burmese Mawlawi Association, Mawlana Ismail Ibnu Mohammed Bismillah demanding Urdu (language) to be maintained as the medium of instruction in Islamic schools. Mawlana Ismail gave the following reasons in justification for his demand.[46]

1. If Urdu is replaced by Burmese (the language forbidden by Allah the Almighty) then it would stagnate the developing religious activities of Islam in Burma.
2. Urdu has been the language of Islam in India.

3. All Urdu schools in Burma have the responsibility to teach the Holy Qur'an and religious subjects. There is a great possibility that the Islamic religious knowledge would eventually become extinct or even face death if Urdu (language) is replaced by the Burmese language.

Many pro-Urdu Mawlawis in Burma argued that adopting Burmese as a medium of instruction in Islamic teaching in Burma would destroy the Muslim unity. Panjabis would demand the Panjabi language and Bengalis would insist on using the Bengali language for people living in Bengal. This would undermine the interest of Muslims and Islam.

The Bamar Muslims insisted that Burmese be taught in Islamic schools in Burma for it has been a national language or else Muslims will be the losers in future. They advanced the following reasons in support of their demand.

1. There is no Mawlawi who speak fluent Burmese.
2. Many Muslims are unable to understand what Indian Mawlawis preach.
3. The preaching method adopted by Mawlawis are difficult to follow such that many would convert to other religions that are relatively less difficult.
4. Emphasizing Urdu and Arabic at the expense of modern languages such as Burmese and English would marginalise Muslims in future.

As a result, Bamar Muslims passed the resolution in favour of Burmese as the medium of instruction in the same conference, attended by more than two hundred delegates, held in Ya Mae Tin on December 28 – 29, 1930. The delegates also proposed that Bamar Muslims need to have at least one Mawlawi who could lecture in Burmese in every town and fund should be provided to selected young Bamar Muslims to study "Mawlawi" in Burmese and English and not in Urdu and Arabic. In February-March 1937, Burmans mounted a strong movement to make Burmese the major language of the House. They succeeded in their struggle despite protests from European and Indian Members of the House.[47]

Soon thereafter, Bamar Muslims formed "Burma Muslim Independent Organization" and adopted the following slogan:

Bamar Race	Our Race
Bamar Language	Our Language
Bamar writings	Our writings
Bamar Nation	Our Nation
Independence	Our religion
Peace	Our Discipline
Capitalism	(We) Don't need
Mawlawi-ism	(We) Don't need

The Aftermath

The Bamar Muslims have tirelessly fought for their deteriorating identity by re-self-positioning themselves in the Buddhist Bamar dominated Burmese community. Today, Indian Muslims have, with much effort, relatively assimilated into the Burmese society, by adopting Burmese names and sending their Muslim offsprings to national schools that use Burmese as a medium of instruction. Most Indian women, unless extremely conservative, dress as Bamar women and almost no Muslim of either Bamar or Indian descent wear headscarfs in public - public opinion is against this, too, especially after the September 11, 2001 incidence in New York.

Today, it is almost impossible for the Bamar Muslims (or who claim to be one) not to have a Bamar (Burmese) name in public life, while Muslim (Arabic) names are maintained for private use. This trend can be seen among all Muslims of Burma, irrespective of their backgrounds whether they are Ronhingyas or Indians. More Bamar Muslim intellectuals are becoming active in Islamic activities to some extent, with the blessings of the regime. Yet, the Indian Muslims see themselves as the early receivers of the religion of Islam and position themselves as the elder brothers of Bamar Muslims in religion. Bamar Muslims, in turn, ridicule Indian Muslims for being immigrants claiming themselves to be the sons of the soil.

Conclusion

Muslims in Burma constitute a significant minority accounting for about thirteen percent of the Buddhist-dominated country. The

diversity in the Burmese Muslim population has its effect in their respective dealings with the Buddhist majority. Each group has very different relationships with the Buddhist majority and with each other. In general, the intra-Muslim relationship is characterised by internecine conflicts.

The conflict between Indian and Burman Muslims has been rather tense and has been expressed in ethnic rather than religious terms. Bamar Muslims claim more affinity with the Buddhist Bamars than with Indian Muslims. They detest polygamous Indians who are branded as fanatic Muslims preferring Urdu as a means of communication in their daily life and as a medium of instruction in Islamic schools. Indians are accused of bringing Indian attitudes of soft caste system into casteless Burmese Muslim community.

The salience of ethnicity among the Burman Muslims led to the formation of separate Burman institutions that regulate their life. They use Burmese language and have adopted Bamar names for use in public life. Religion has been relegated to purely personal, private affairs. The Indian Muslims, though softened their attitude towards Burmans, nevertheless retain their superiority complex and maintain a safe distance with their co-religionists.

Notes

1. In this paper, Burma is used to refer to Myanmar and Rangoon for Yangon for ease of recognition. The Myanmar consists of two words, Myan (Quick) and Mar (Hardy), has been used by Bamar for generations to refer to their own sense of collective identity. See Bruce Matthews, *Ethnic and Religious Diversity: Myanmar's Unfolding Nemesis* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2001), 2.

2. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and Remarking of Word Order* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1996), quoted in *Burma's Muslims: Terrorists or Terrorized?* by Andrew Selth (Australia: Strategic and Defence Studies Center, Natioanl University Australia, 2003), 1.

3. Rajan Prakashan & Sudhansu Bimal Mookherji, *Burma and the West* (Agra: Educational Publication, 1975), 20.

4. There is no consensus among scholars on the terms Burman and Burmese. However, Burman refers to the major ethnic group of Burma, Bamar and Burmese means "people of Burma" irrespective of their ethnicity.

5. Grant Co J., *New Burma* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 100.

6. Maung Htin Aung, *The Stricken Peacock: Anglo-Burmese Relations 1757 - 1948* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff , 1965), 6.

7. G.E. Harvey, *British Rule in Burma 1824 – 1942* (London: Faber and Faber), Prior to the Japanese invasion of Burma in 1942, there were only 350,000 Christians and eighty percent were from indigenous races such as Karen, Kachin and Chin. Today, Christians account for about 1.6 million of the population, one million Baptist, 400,000 Roman Catholics, 48,000 Anglicans, 18,000 Methodists, 30,000 Presbyterians along with 68,000 independent Christian denominations mostly associated with certain ethnic communities.

8. Moshe Yegar, *The Crescent in the East: Islam in Asia Major* (Jerusalem: Curzon Press, 1972), 105.

9. Some scholars believe that Muslims constitute sixteen percent or eight million of the total population. In any case, most statistics on Burma are unreliable. See Andrew Selth, *Burma's Muslims: Terrorists or Terrorized*?, 5; Bruce Matthews, *Ethnic and Religious Diversity: Myanmar's Unfolding Nemesis,* 5.

10. Bruce Matthews, *Ethnic and Religious Diversity: Myanmar's Unfolding Nemesis*, 5.

11. Andrew Selth, *Burma's Muslims: Terrorists or Terrorized*?, 5-6.

12. Khin Maung Kyi, "Indians in Burma: Problems of an Alien Subculture in a Highly Integrated Society" in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia,* K.S Sandhu & A. Mani eds., (Singapore: ISEAS, 1993), 640.

13. Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972), 2.

14. Robert Taylor, "The Legal Status of Indians in Contemporary Burma" in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, 666-667.

15. Clive J. Christie, *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: Decolonization, Nationalism and Separatism*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 1996), 163.

16. Andrew Selth, *Burma's Muslims: Terrorists or Terrorized*?, 6.

17. Andrew D.W. Forbes, "The Cin Ho (Yunanese Chinese) Muslims of North Thailand," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs,* 7, no. 2 (January 1986): 173.

18. See Moshe Yegar, "The Muslims of Burma" in *The Crescent in the East: Islam in Asia Major*, Raphael Israeli ed. (Jerusalem: Curzon Press, 1972).

19. "Muslims in China: A Brief History" [Online] available from http://www.geocities.com/khyber007/china, accessed April 26, 2004.

20. Mya Than, "Ethnic Chinese in Myanmar and their Identity" in *Ethnic Chinese as Southeast Asians*, Leo Suryadinata ed. (Singapore: ISEAS, 1997), 115.

21. Moshe Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma,* 46.

22. Ibid., 47.

23. Maung Maung Gyi (Man), "Pashu: Muslims of South Burma," *Islam Tuta Sar Saung* (Burmese magazine), November 1991.

24. D.R. SarDeasai, *Southeast Asia Past and Present* (London: Westview Press, 1989), 29.

25. Mya Than, *Myanmar's External Trade: An Overview in the Southeast Asian Context* (Singapore: ISEAS 1992), 7.

26. R. Hatley, "The Overseas Indian in Southeast Asia: Burma, Malaysia, and Singapore" in *Man, State, and Society in Contemporary Southeast Asia*, R.O. Tilman ed. (New York: Praeger, 1969), 450-466.

27. Khin Maung Kyi, "Indians in Burma: Problems of an Alien Subculture in a Highly Integrated Society" in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, 627.

28. Ibid., 638; D.G.E. Hall, *A History of Southeast Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1959), 275.

29. Andrew Selth *Burma's Muslims: Terrorists or Terrorized*?, 6-7.

30. Dorothy Hess Guyot, "Communal Conflict in the Burma Delta" in *Southeast Asian Transitions: Approaches Through Social History*, Ruth T. McVey, ed. (Yale: Yale University Press, 1978), 195.

31. Tin Maung Maung Than, "Some Aspects of Indians in Rangoon," in "*Indian Communities in Southeast Asia,*" 589.

32. Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power* (Jerusalem: Curzon, 1999), 28.

33. Ibid., 27.

34. Andrew Selth, *Burma's Muslims: Terrorists or Terrorized*?, 7.

35. Khin Maung Kyi, "Indians in Burma: Problems of an Alien Subculture in a Highly Integrated Society," 650.

36. See Sayar Chaye, *Some Things Good to Know About Myself* (In Burmese) (Rangoon: Amar Chit Press, November 1986).

37. See Moshe Yegar, *The Crescent in the East: Islam in Asia Major*, 1972.

38. Khin Maung Kyi, "Indians in Burma: Problems of an Alien Subculture in a Highly Integrated Society,"626.

39. Interview with the author on the 20th of May, 2004 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

40. Moshe Yegar, "The Muslims of Burma Since Independence," *African and Asian Studies Journal*, Vol. 2 (1966): 168.

41. Nalini Ranjan Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Delince of an Immigrant Community,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971),157; John F. Cady, *Southeast Asia: Its Historical Development* (London: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1964), 524.

42. Nalini Ranjan Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 158.

43. Virginia Thomson and Richard Adloft, "*Minority Problems in Southeast Asia*", (U.S.A: Rusell and Rusell, 1970), 70.

44. Richard Butwell and Fred von der Mehden, "The 1960 Election in Burma," *Pacific Affairs,* 33 no. 2 (June 1960): 153.

45. Trevor O. Ling, "Religious Minority in Burma in the Contemporary Period," in *Ethnic Conflicts in Buddhist Society: Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma*, K.M. De Silva, Duke Pensri, and S. Ellens eds. (Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), 182.

46. "Speech by Mawlana Ismail Ibnu Mohammed Bismillah, delivered at Bamar Muslim Education Conference held in Pegu in December 1929" (Unpublished manuscript in author's possession).

47. Nalini Ranjan Chakravarti, *The Indian Minority in Burma: The Rise and Decline of an Immigrant Community*, 156.