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ORIGIN OF ROHINGYA MUSLIMS IN MYANMAR: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Abstract

This article explores the contested origin of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. One of the dominant views is that Rohingyas are illegal immigrants in Burma (now Myanmar) from Bengal during and after the British colonial period. Consequently, they have been denied many civil and political rights, grossly undermining their citizenship rights. Furthermore, several crackdowns on the Rohingyas in the Arakan region, renamed the Rakhine state in 1974, have forced them to flee to neighbouring countries, thus making them stateless. However, there has been a counter-narrative sympathetic to the Rohingyas, which argues that the Rohingyas are the genuine inhabitants of Myanmar, having a centuries-old history of habitation in the Arakan region, with their original settlement dating back to the pre-British colonial period. By addressing the polemics with the periodization of historical evidence, this article traces the origin of the Rohingyas in the Rakhine state. The paper uses the content analysis method and reviews extensive historical evidence. It argues that the Rohingyas have lived in the region for centuries since the pre-British colonial period, thus refuting their contested origin in Myanmar.

Keywords: Rohingya, Origin, Situation, Myanmar, Bangladesh

1.   Introduction

The Rohingyas, a Muslim community in Myanmar's Arakan region, are often described as one of the world's most persecuted minority groups. Following the conflict that broke out in the Rakhine state on 25 August 2017, the mass exodus of the Rohingyas from Myanmar to Bangladesh drew significant attention from the international media. To identify the underlying factors behind this conflict, it is pertinent to unravel the contested origin of the 'Rohingya' or 'Rohingya Muslims' in Myanmar. Many scholars concerned with the Rohingya issue have taken different positions about the origin of the Rohingyas in Myanmar, thereby generating several debates. For example, one of the views is that the Rohingyas have been living in Arakan since the eighth century—the pre-British colonial period. In contrast, other views that the

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Rohingya Muslims in the Rakhine state are mostly immigrants from Bengal (more specifically, United Bengal) of the then colonial British period (now constituting West Bengal of India and the independent state of Bangladesh). Many facets of the current Rohingya crisis, resulting in the denial of Rohingyas' rights to citizenship, could be solved by addressing the polemics. For example, one of the crucial issues: if Rohingyas' permanent residence is recognised from the date antecedent to 1823 (Burma had been colonized by the British in 1824), they would have gained citizenship in Myanmar according to the 1982 Burma Citizenship Law. In this background, this paper explores the historical evidence that clarifies whether the origin of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar dates back to a time earlier than the British colonial period or not? Besides, it looks into the following questions: What is the genesis of the Muslim presence in the Arakan region? Is the Rohingya crisis simply another example of ethno-religious conflict, or is it based on the politics of Buddhist nationalism? How does the claim of Muslim presence in the Arakan region contribute towards concluding the debate between these two opposing views?

The corpus of this paper is organized in seven successive sections logically and coherently. Following the introduction in this section, section two outlines the research method. Section three presents the historical interpretation of the formation of the original nucleus of the Muslims in the Arakan region during the pre-British period. Section four traces the identity of the Muslims dwelling in the Arakan region as the Rohingyas. Section five accounts for the Muslim people's exodus from the Arakan region and their en masse return from Bengal to their home in the Arakan region during the British period. This section also addresses the underlying factors that lead to the beginning of the Rohingya crisis; and whether these factors are ethnoreligious, political or economic or have their source in Buddhist nationalism. Section six looks into the current situation of the Rohingyas. This section deals with the fate of the Rohingyas' non-citizenship status following Burma's independence; the influx of the Rohingyas primarily to Bangladesh due to ethnic conflicts. Finally, in section seven, the conclusion, drawn from earlier sections, is presented with the findings that Rohingya Muslims have lived in Arakan for centuries, even before the British colonial period in Myanmar.

2.   Research Method

This study is primarily exploratory in nature. The exploration of the research query about the origin of the Rohingya Muslims in the Arakan region is mainly based on the content analysis method. Thus, it has primarily studied qualitative data. Secondary materials consist of books, journal articles,

newspapers, magazines, historical documents, research reports, and websites are studied in this research. This paper's main argument is proposed after a comprehensive analysis of historical evidence with periodization. This shows that Muslim people who call themselves 'Rohingya' have been living in the Arakan region for centuries, even before the British colonial period, and the history of the Muslims dwelling in the Arakan region is the same as the history of the Rohingya people. However, the Government of Myanmar (GoM) claims that the Rohingya emigrated to Myanmar's Rakhine state from Bengal during and after the British colonial period.[1] By addressing the polemics with the periodization of historical evidence, this paper unfolds the truths about the origin of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, as most of this conflict is deeply rooted in their disputed origin.

3.   Muslim Settlement in the Arakan Region during the Pre-British Colonial Period (Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries)

With historical evidence, this section presents the development of the original nucleus of Rohingya Muslims dwelling in the Arakan region for centuries, from the eighth to eighteenth century during the pre-British colonial period. Muslim settlements in the Arakan region took the following trends.

3.1   *Muslims Settlement by Foreign Traders and Shipwreck Survivors*

The Arakanese mainly were animists; Brahmanism, Buddhism and Islam influenced their religious beliefs over the centuries.[2] In Burma (renamed Myanmar in 1989), Islam was introduced in the middle of the eighth century by Muslim seamen who rapidly founded colonies on the shore.[3] As Myanmar was important for sea communication, its seaports were used as stopovers for many trading ships sailing from the Persian Gulf to China. The Muslims are believed to have had their origin in the arrival of Arab and Persian traders on the shores of Ramree Island.[4] The myth tells of several ships that arrived on the coast of Ramree Island in the eighth century and were wrecked on the Burmese shore. The survivors begged the local king for *Rahm* (meaning 'mercy'). The king allotted land to the survivors where they were first allowed to settle.

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[1] Haradhan Kumar Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," *IKAT: The Indonesian Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 30.
[2] Imtiaz Ahmed, *The Plight of the Stateless Rohingyas: Responses of the State, Society & the International Community (*Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2019), 56.
[3] Mihir Shekhar Bhonsale, "Evolution of the Arakan 'Problem' in Burma," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 76 (2015): 631.
[4] Bhonsale, "Evolution of the Arakan 'Problem' in Burma."

Over time, the word *Rahm* changed to *Rhohang* and finally to *Rohingya*.[5] It was a tradition in Burma and the Arakan region that the foreign populace (and even visitors), either there for commercial reasons or due to shipwreck, were encouraged to marry local women. However, the strict practice was that their families (wives and children) could not be taken away by them when they left the country. Thus, a community of Muslims gradually began to settle in the coastal areas of the Arakan region. The descendants of these Arab, Persian and Indian Muslim traders (and shipwreck survivors) formed the original nucleus of Burma's Muslim community; they were known as *Pathee* or *Kala* in the days of the Burmese Kingdom.[6] The Muslim traders' dominance over the Burmese coastal areas was constant until the beginning of the sixteenth century when the European sailors began controlling the region. However, Islam could not penetrate deep into Burma proper, and its influence remained limited to the coastal areas of lower Burma and the Arakan region.[7]

3.2   *Muslims' Migration from Bengal to Arakan Region during Mrauk-U-Dynasty (1430–1784)*

Bengal and the Arakan region of Myanmar have had a long history of socio-cultural and political interaction.[8] The primary grounds have been their location as geographical neighbours and their historical entanglements. On the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal, the Arakan region is cut off from Burma by the chain of nearly impassable Yoma Mountains. The northern part of the Arakan region, known as the Mayu Frontier District, by means of a narrow strip of land, was the point of connection with East Bengal. Islam in the Arakan region is said to have originated from Bengal,[9] with Islam having reached Bengal in 1203, signifying the extreme eastern limit of Islamic expansion. In the northern Arakan region, close overland ties were developed with East Bengal. The socio-cultural and political influence of Muslim had very significant consequences in the history of the Arakan region.[10] However, Bengal did not have a substantial impact on the Arakan region until 1430.[11]

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[5] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 26.
[6] M. Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1972), 6.
[7] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 2.
[8] H. U. Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis," *Dhaka Tribune*, July 27, 2019, https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/longform/2019/07/27/a-historical-overview-of-the-rohingya-crisis
[9] Bhonsale, "Evolution of the Arakan 'Problem' in Burma," 632.
[10] D. G. E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia (*London: Macmillan, 1958), 328.
[11] Bhonsale, "Evolution of the Arakan 'Problem' in Burma," 632.

In 1404, Narameikhla, the King of Arakan, was forced to flee from Burma to Gaur, the Bengal Sultanate's capital.[12] Ahmad Shah, Sultan of Gaur, welcomed Narameikhla who served as an officer in Ahmad Shah's army in the court of Gaur and fought in wars for his master. In 1430, Ahmad Shah's successor, Nadir Shah, granted Narameikhla's request for support to regain his throne and provided him with soldiers under the command of Wali Khan, a general of the army.[13] Although betrayed by Wali Khan, Narameikhla succeeded in reconquering Arakan later with the help of a second army general named Sindhi Khan, also employed by Nadir Shah. Following his return to Arakan, Narameikhla established a new city named Mrohaung (also called Mrauk-U); thus, he was the founder of the Mrauk-U-Dynasty.[14] From 1430 to 1784, Arakan was ruled by 48 Kings; among them, the eminent rulers were: Ali Khan, Mango Shah, Muhammad Shah, Shah Jalal, Hussain Shah and Salim Shah.[15] Mrohaung remained as the capital until the annexation of Arakan by Burma in 1785.[16] The Muslim soldiers who came with Narameikhla from Bengal settled in a village near Mrohaung. Hence, it can be said that the Muslim influence in the Arakan region dates from 1430, the year in which Narameikhla reconquered Arakan.[17] As a result of the adjacent overland and marine ties between the two neighbouring countries, which continued for a long time, the Muslim people played a crucial role in the history of the Arakan Kingdom.[18]

However, Narameikhla's sovereignty was granted after ceding specific territory to the Sultan of Bengal. As proof of his allegiance, in addition to the Arakanese titles, Narameikhla and his heirs adopted Muslim names despite being Buddhist. By adopting the Muslim name, Narameikhla became known as Solaiman Shah. However, Arakan was subject to Bengal's rule until 1531.[19] Even after becoming free from the Bengal Sultanate, the kings of Arakan maintained the tradition of adopting Muslim names in addition to their Pali or Burmese name. After the death of Narameikhla, his successors began expanding to the north, with several raids on Bengal. With the help of the Portuguese, these forays continued until the end of the eighteenth century, only terminating with the consolidation of British naval forces in the Bay of Bengal.[20] In the raids on

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[12] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 18.
[13] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 18.
[14] Bhonsale, "Evolution of the Arakan 'Problem' in Burma," 632.
[15] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 31.
[16] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 18.
[17] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 18.
[18] R. C. Majumdar, *Hindu Colonies in the Far East* (Calcutta: General Printers and Publishers, 1944), 202, 205–206.
[19] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 19.
[20] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 20.

Bengal, among the most lucrative types of loot were the prisoners who were captured and enslaved. Many of these prisoners were Muslims, and they were forced to settle in the village near Mrohaung.[21] These formed another nucleus of Muslims inhabiting the Arakan region.[22] Along with these Muslim prisoners and enslaved people captured from Bengal and even from North India to the Arakan region, many more came to serve as mercenaries in the Arakanese army, commonly as the king's bodyguard.[23]

3.3 *Shah Shuja's Followers and Muslim Stay in the Arakan Kingdom*

Shah Shuja's flee to Arakan brought a new wave of Muslim immigration and political changes to the Kingdom of Arakan. Many historians have described the episode for which precise details are lacking, with some versions differing from others. However, early in 1639, Shah Shuja, the second son of the Mughal Emperor, Shah Jahan, was appointed as the deputy of the king of Bengal.[24] In 1657, the Mughal Emperor fell seriously ill, and it was rumoured that he had died. As a result, the struggle for his succession began between his sons.[25] Aurangzeb won the struggle, dethroning his father (Emperor Shah Jahan) in 1658 and declaring himself the successor to the Mughal throne.[26] Shah Shuja continued his fight with Aurangzeb but was finally defeated in 1660.[27] As he was not thriving in founding his rule in Bengal, he, together with his family and bodyguard, fled from Dhaka to Chattogram. Sandathudama, the then king of Arakan, allowed him permission to continue to Mrohaung on the condition that his followers surrendered their weapons. On 26 August 1660, Shah Shuja arrived in Mrohaung, where Sandathudama welcomed him and granted a dwelling near the town.[28]

Shah Shuja requested temporary asylum in Arakan and passage to Mecca. When the season became favourable for travel, he wished to proceed to Mecca before taking residence in Turkey or Persia. During Shah Shuja's asylum period, he was initially in favour of king Sandathudama. However, month after month passed, with the favourable season for travel nearly over, but no mention was made of the king's promise to passage them to Mecca. Instead, Sandathudama asked Shah Shuja for one of his daughters in marriage,

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[21] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 20.
[22] Bhonsale, "Evolution of the Arakan 'Problem' in Burma," 632.
[23] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 20.
[24] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 21.
[25] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 21.
[26] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 21.
[27] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 21.
[28] Hall, *A History of South-East Asia,* 338–339.

which the latter refused. Shah Shuja's refusal infuriated the king. Shah Shuja was blamed for intending to overthrow the king with a sudden attack, helped by local Muslims and around 300 odd soldiers who had arrived with him from Bengal.[29] However, it is said that Sandathudama crushed the rebellion after learning about the plan. The king massacred all Shah Shuja's family members, but many surviving soldiers stayed in the Arakanese territory, thus once again increasing the Muslim presence in the Arakanese Kingdom.[30] Those of Shah Shuja's soldiers who escaped the massacre were later recruited into Sandathudama's bodyguard unit as special archers known as *Kamans* or *Kamanci* (from the Persian words *Kaman* meaning 'bow' and *Kamanci* meaning 'bowman').[31]

On the other hand, after Sandathudama granted Shah Shuja temporary asylum in Arakan, Aurangzeb wanted the king to hand over the fleeing prince and his family so that he could have him murdered.[32] Aurangzeb was angered by the assumption that the king of Arakan would dare to harm a royal Mughal family member. He decided to use this as a pretext to end the Portuguese–Arakanese pirate raids on the coasts of East Bengal.[33] Notably, Chattogram was under almost uninterrupted Arakanese domination from 1575 to 1666.[34] During this period, Arakanese *Maghs* and Portuguese *Harmands* or *Firngis* frequently conducted joint piracies in various areas of Bengal, especially in coastal districts.[35] This hindered the socio-economic development of the people of Bengal.[36] Noteworthy, from 1665 to 1666, a large number of Mughal forces attacked the Portuguese and Arakanese, demolishing their settlement in Sandwip, wrecking their navies and capturing Chattogram and Ramu.[37] During the retreat of the Arakanese army units to Mrohaung, the local Muslim population settled in the Arakan Kingdom also attacked them. This defeat marked the end of the power of the Kingdom of Arakan.[38]

In 1684, Sandathudama died, marking the initiation of a period of anarchy and riots in the Kingdom. The Muslim *Kaman* units played a decisive role in throning and dethroning kings.[39] New Afghan mercenaries from North

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[29] Bhonsale, "Evolution of the Arakan 'Problem' in Burma," 632-633.
[30] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 29.
[31] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 24.
[32] Bhonsale, "Evolution of the Arakan 'Problem' in Burma," 633.
[33] Bhonsale, "Evolution of the Arakan 'Problem' in Burma," 633.
[34] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," p. 31.
[35] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."
[36] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."
[37] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 24.
[38] Bhonsale, "Evolution of the Arakan 'Problem' in Burma," 633.
[39] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 24.

India continually reinforced the *Kaman* units. From 1666 to 1710, the political rule of Arakan was in their hands.[40] They murdered ten kings.[41] However, in 1710, king Sandawizaya managed to get the upper hand among the *Kamans* exiled to Ramree. The descendants of these *Kamans*, still bearing the same name, are today living in Ramree and a few villages near Akyab. Their language is Arakanese, and their customs are similar to Arakan customs, except for Islam being their religion. These people number about 300,000.[42]

4.   Identity of the Muslims Dwelling in the Arakan Region as the Rohingyas

The prominent author Moshe Yegar in his book entitled *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group* noted that today it is difficult to distinguish between the various Muslim groups or between them and the Buddhist Arakanese among whom they live. In the book, he mentioned that the Muslims currently living in the Arakan region call themselves 'Rohingya' or 'Roewengyah'.[43] It means 'the dear ones' or 'the compassionate ones', with some believing this term to be a mutilation of the words *rwahaunggakyar* (meaning 'tiger from the ancient village' or 'brave'), a name given to the Muslim soldiers who settled in Arakan.[44] Most of the Muslims in North Arakan (the Mayu region) are known as Rohingya, where most (approximately 300,000) are concentrated, than among those living near Akhyab.[45] Writers and poets flourished among the Arakanese Muslims, particularly in the period between the fifteenth century and eighteenth century. They mostly wrote in Persian, Arabic or the mixed language, e.g., the Rohingya language. They developed this Rohingya language among themselves with a mix of the Bengali, Urdu and Arakanese languages.[46] The use of the Rohingya language today is not as extensive as it was in the past, with the language mostly replaced by Arakanese or Burmese. However, many Muslims who arrived in the Arakan region brought Arab, Bengalese and Indian cultures, for example, the art of calligraphy, manuscripts, miniature paintings, music and musical instruments. For instance, Persian songs are still sung by Arakanese Muslims. Thus, the Rohingya people continued their traditions in the realm of religion and in other features of their culture.

Ahmed noted that Arab merchants first introduced Islam in Arakan.[47] He referred to the views of some historians that the Rohingyas are descendants of

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[40] Bhonsale, "Evolution of the Arakan 'Problem' in Burma," 633.
[41] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 24.
[42] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 29.
[43] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 25.
[44] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 24.
[45] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 24.
[46] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 24.
[47] Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, 24.

Arab, Moorish and Persian traders, including Mughul, Turk, Bengali and Pathan warriors cum migrants, who arrived between the ninth century and fifteenth century, married local women and settled in Arakan.[48] He also mentioned the constant influx of Muslim people from Persia, Turkey, Afghanistan and North India, and the Arabian Peninsula. They integrated with the Muslim people already settled in Arakan and became the Rohingyas.[49] According to these historians, Rohingya Muslims did not originate from just one ethnic group but were a mixed group of people with different ethnic or racial relationships. A study by these historians clarifies that the Muslim presence in Northern Arakan already existed even before Islam arose in Bengal in the thirteenth century.[50] Moreover, as noted by Gaetanol, Rohingya Muslims had lived in western Myanmar before British India occupied the province.[51]

5. Root of the Crisis: British Period (Eighteenth to Twentieth Centuries)

This section outlines the Rohingya Muslims' situation during the British period in Myanmar and is organized into the following sub-sections.

5.1 *British East India Company's Dominance and Exodus of the Arakanese Muslims*

In 1760, the British East India Company gained the right from Nawab Mir Qasim to extract revenue from Chattogram, Medinipur, Bardhaman, etc., where the company struggled to exert its influence.[52] Among other policies, the company administrators allowed Arakanese settlements on the southern coast of Chattogram. The purpose was to put in place obstruction of piracy raids by the *Maghs* and cultivation of the southern areas.[53] On the other hand, anarchy and disorder were widespread in the Arakan Kingdom. However, in 1785, the Burmese king Baudapaya conquered Arakan.[54] A Muslim unit, known as *Myedu*, in the Burmese standing army was posted to the Sandoway district. Although a few still live there, their descendants can only be differentiated

[48] Ahmed, *The Plight of the Stateless Rohingyas: Responses of the State, Society & the International Community,* 56.
[49] Ahmed, *The Plight of the Stateless Rohingyas: Responses of the State, Society & the International Community,* 57.
[50] Ahmed, *The Plight of the Stateless Rohingyas: Responses of the State, Society & the International Community,* 56–57.
[51] Ismail Suardi Wekke, Hasbi Hasbi, M Mawardin, Suyatno Ladiqi and Mohd Afandi Salleh, "Muslim Minority in Myanmar: A Case Study of Myanmar Government and Rohingya Muslims," *Walisongo: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan* 25, no. 2 (2017): 308.
[52] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."
[53] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."
[54] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."

from their Arakanese and Burmese neighbours by their religion or religious practices.[55] These events in Arakan initiated specific eastward population movements. Among these, there were also Muslims who originated from those serving the kings of the Ava Kingdom in Burma.

However, between 1785 and 1794, more than two-thirds of the Arakanese people, including Rohingya Muslims and Buddhist *Maghs* fled from Arakan to save their lives due to repression by the Burmese king.[56] They primarily sheltered in present-day Cox's Bazar and Bandarban districts of Bangladesh. The extensive history and practices of the Arakanese people who took shelter as refugees in Chattogram (or its surroundings) prove that they were evicted by brutal Burmese soldiers, with the brutality continuing today.[57] For example, from 1797 to1798, as many as 40,000 Arakanese people arrived at Chattogram as refugees.[58] The British rulers appointed Captain Hiram Cox as a commissioner and superintendent to arrange the refugee settlements. He was allowed to settle these refugees in different areas of Chattogram and Chattogram Hill Tracts. Today's Cox's Bazar district continues to carry the name of this eminent British representative. The British East India Company's main intention was to raise its revenue and output by settling these refugees from Arakan in various uncultivated lands, for example, Chattogram, Bandarban, Patuakhali and Barisal.[59] Despite their different cultural origins, the refugees gradually adopted Bangladeshi culture.

5.2 *Return of the Arakanese Refugees during the British Colonial Period*

Burma was colonized by the British in 1824 in a series of attempts.[60] The plight of the Arakanese refugees was improving in the Arakan region, and the Tenaserim range was annexed by the British under the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 following the first Anglo–Burmese war (1824–1826).[61] Burma's lower areas were occupied by the British East India Company after the second Anglo–Burmese war from 1852 to 1853. The British annexed the whole of Burma at the end of the third Anglo–Burmese war from 1885 to1887. The political changes that followed colonization considerably impacted people's

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[55] W. B. Tydd, *Sandoway District Gazetteer,* (Rangoon, 1912), 19.
[56] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."
[57] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."
[58] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."
[59] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."
[60] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 25.
[61] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."

movements and migration in the region. Following the British annexation, the Arakanese refugees who departed from Arakan at the end of the eighteenth century began to return from Bengal and India.[62] The British framed supportive laws that facilitated the refugees' rehabilitation process from Chattogram to the Arakan region with many opportunities, for example, by distributing fallow lands.[63] In several ways, the British encouraged their migration to the Arakan region. They mostly returned voluntarily.[64] The Bengali inhabitants were also inspired by the British to settle in the fertile valleys in the Arakan region as agriculturalists. Migration to the Arakan region was further encouraged by the British policy of extending the administration of Bengal to the Arakan region.[65]

Many Arakanese people living in the Chattogram region opened businesses in the Arakan region owing to the unhindered trade and commerce opportunities provided by the British in their controlled areas.[66] Furthermore, amid the background of unemployment and economic difficulties faced by the Chattogram area, the better facilities and higher wages in the Arakan region that arose after enduring the breakdown of labour during its rule by Burma were also responsible for the return en masse of Arakanese refugees to their land.[67] Besides, the opening of the Suez Canal and the commencement of steamship transportation in the mid-nineteenth century further strengthened contact between Europe and Burma. Owing to the feasibility and profitability of commercial paddy rice production, Burma was keen to engage with Europe. With many other facilities included, remarkable opportunities were created for cultivators to encourage their migration to Burma. Following the 1880s, a massive number of people commenced their migration from Bengal to Burma; this was mainly spontaneous and partially encouraged by the British Indian Government.[68] The British inspired the free movement of these workers to cultivate fallow lands for paddy rice production, reduce population density in Bengal, solve its unemployment and economic difficulties.[69] Labourers were also tempted to migrate due to the possibility of being officially granted land.

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[62] Bhonsale, "Evolution of the Arakan 'Problem' in Burma," 634.
[63] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."
[64] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."
[65] Bhonsale, "Evolution of the Arakan 'Problem' in Burma," 634.
[66] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."
[67] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."
[68] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."
[69] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."

5.3   *Ethno-Religious Conflicts*

The Rohingya crisis is not solely a result of ethno-religious tension; it is also based on political and economic interests.[70] Burmese Buddhists claim that just as the Rohingya people are economically developed, so Buddhist culture is under siege. As noted by Mohajan, "Buddhist nationalism began to emerge in response to British colonial rule, and saw Buddhists identifying with Burmese culture and history."[71] In Myanmar, the Rohingyas are confronted with a deep-rooted Islamophobia of the Buddhist Rakhine.[72] It is thought that the Muslim people of Myanmar might have a close connection with the people of adjacent Islamic countries, for example, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia. The majority of Buddhists in Myanmar believe that: if any Islamic state invaded Myanmar, the Rohingyas would fight against Myanmar.[73] Consequently, the Rohingyas are socio-culturally discriminated against, economically exploited and politically alienated by the Government of Myanmar (GoM).[74]

However, during the British colonial regime, a 'divide and rule policy' was evident, creating division between the Burmans (i.e. the majority ethnic group) and minority ethnic groups in Myanmar. During the Second World War (1939–1945), the Burmans supported the Japanese, while some minority ethnic groups, for example, Rohingya, Kachin and Karen, supported the British. During the Japanese colonial era, the Imperial Japanese military supported and trained the Burmese military (the *Tatmadaw*) and the founders of several army factions, together with Aung San, to defeat the British and allied forces in Burma. When the connection between the Rohingya and the British was revealed in 1942, the Burmese nationalist forces, along with Japanese troops, moved into the Arakan region and perpetrated widespread killings, known as the '1942 massacre'.[75] During this crisis, about 100,000 Rohingya people were killed, and 500,000 took shelter as refugees in British-controlled India, including in Chattogram and other countries, such as Malay, Iran and Saudi Arabia.[76] When the British retreated in 1942, Burma was divided along religious and ethnic lines.[77]

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[70] Stefan Bepler, "The Rohingya conflict: Genesis, current situation and geopolitical aspects," *Pacific Geographies,* no. 50 (2018): 8.
[71] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 20.
[72] Bepler, "The Rohingya conflict: Genesis, current situation and geopolitical aspects,"10.
[73] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 20.
[74] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 20-21.
[75] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."
[76] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."
[77] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 31.

6.   Current Situation of the Rohingyas (Twentieth Century to Date)

This section addresses the issues of the non-citizenship status, the mass exodus of the Rohingyas, and the view that Rohingyas are Bengali immigrants.

6.1   *Non-Citizenship Status of the Rohingyas*

In the first Constitution of Burma in 1947, people dwelling at that time in 'Frontier Areas' and desired to settle permanently were considered citizens and accepted as 'The People of Burma'.[78] Burma got independence from the British Raj on 04 January 1948. The newly formed government continued discrimination against the Muslim community.[79] For example, the government passed the 1948 Union Citizenship Act recognizing 135 official ethnic groups, except Rohingyas. However, among much other political turmoil, in 1954, Prime Minister U Nu granted Rohingyas' citizenship in Burma.[80] During the parliamentary period, many Rohingyas became parliament members, cabinet ministers and parliamentary secretaries.[81] The Rohingya had British-issued ration cards and possessed Burmese government-issued identity cards, which confirmed they were citizens of Burma until 1962.[82] In that year, to reject the legal identity of the Rohingya people, Burmese authorities forcibly took their identity cards on the pretext of checking them.[83] After the 1962 coup General Ne Win and the Burmese Socialist Party seized power, the Rohingyas were deprived of all constitutional rights, and their citizenship was annulled.[84] The 1982 Burma Citizenship Law officially recognized 135 ethnic nationalities, including numerous subgroups in Burma. However, the Rohingyas were not included. Article 3 of the 1982 Burma Citizenship Law defined 'ethnic nationalities' as, "Nationals such as the Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Burman, Mon, Rakhine or Shan and ethnic groups as have settled in any of the territories included within the State as their permanent home from a period anterior to 1185 B.E., 1823 A.D. are Burma citizens."[85] According to this clause, Rohingyas' citizenship is denied as their permanent residency is not recognized anterior

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[78] Stefan Bepler, "The Rohingya conflict: Genesis, current situation and geopolitical aspects," 5.

[79] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."

[80] Afroza Anwary, "Atrocities against the Rohingya Community of Myanmar," *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 31, no. 1/2 (2018): 92.

[81] Nay San Lwin, "Making Rohingya Statelessness," *New Mandala*, October 29, 2012, https://www.newmandala.org/making-rohingya-statelessness/

[82] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 24.

[83] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 24.

[84] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."

[85] Burma Citizenship Law [This is an unofficial translation of the Act, the Pyithu Hluttaw Law No. 4 of 1982], October 15, 1982,

to 1823—the immediate prior year from when British colonized following the first Anglo–Burmese war (1824–1826). This is identical with the view that the Rohingyas are immigrants from Bengal during and after the British colonial period.

6.2   *Influx of Rohingyas Mostly to Bangladesh due to Ethnic Conflicts*

Persecution of the Rohingyas by the Burmese government and the Rakhine Buddhist groups continued to grow.[86] For instance, the Rohingyas faced brutal experiences under the military rule of Burmese Army General Ne Win from 1966 to 1988.[87] In 1978, the military junta launched an extensive census operation known as *Naga Min* (King Dragon), supposedly with the plan of clearing out illegal immigrants. In 1978, brutal actions perpetrated by the Burmese government targeted the Rohingya Muslims submitting them to violence, rape, starvation and the killing of 50 Rohingya people, thus forcing the exodus of over 200,000 Rohingyas from the northern Arakan region to Bangladesh.[88] After one year, a bilateral agreement was signed between Bangladesh and Burma, which led to the repatriation of 180,000 Rohingya people.[89] Since the late 1970s, the Burmese government's discriminatory policies have compelled hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims in the Rakhine state to flee, mainly to neighbouring Bangladesh and then to Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries.[90]

In 1991-92, another exodus of over 250,000 Rohingya people fled to bordering Bangladesh due to outrages committed by the *Tatmadaw*, the military of Myanmar.[91] Although a bilateral agreement was signed between the governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar on 28 April 1992 for their repatriation, its enactment progressed slowly. In June 2012, as had occurred previously, severe violence broke out in the Rakhine state between the Rakhine Buddhists and the Rohingya Muslims. The violence took 200 Rohingyas' lives, and more than 110,000 Rohingyas fled their homes to Bangladesh.[92] According to a report of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), over 143,500 Rohingyas remained internally displaced

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[86] Wekke et al., "Muslim Minority in Myanmar: A Case Study of Myanmar Government and Rohingya Muslims," 311.
[87] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 32.
[88] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 32.
[89] M. Cutts, *The State of the World's Refugees, 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 75.
[90] E. Albert and L. Maizland, "The Rohingya Crisis," *Council on Foreign Relations,* Last modified March 20, 2020, www.cfr.org/backgrounder/rohingya-crisis
[91] Bepler, "The Rohingya conflict: Genesis, current situation and geopolitical aspects," 6.
[92] Ahmed, "A Historical Overview of the Rohingya Crisis."

in the Rakhine state as of August 2015.[93] However, in October 2016, the rebel group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) (founded in 2016 in exile in Saudi Arabia) attacked checkpoints and killed many police officers.[94] The Myanmar security forces responded with a high level of severity, with both sides blaming each other for the destruction, burning of villages and mass killings.

Another mass exodus of the Rohingyas took place following the ARSA's attacks on 30 outposts along the Bangladesh border on 25 August 2017, in which over a dozen of Myanmar police officers and at least one *Tatmadaw* soldier were killed.[95] In response, the *Tatmadaw* violently attacked the Rohingya insurgents. According to human rights groups, mass destruction ensued, including arbitrary killings, systematic rape, villages burnt to ashes and forced evictions.[96] What the GoM claimed to be 'cleansing actions' against terrorists, the UN later termed a 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing'.[97] At least 1,000 Rohingya people, including children and infants, were killed in 2017.[98] As of 31 July 2019, over 742,000 Rohingya Muslims had fled to Bangladesh.[99] Currently, around 1.15 million registered Rohingya are living in 34 congested camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf *upazilas* (formerly known as *thana*, which literally means 'police station') in the Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh.[100] Of these camps, the Kutupalong–Balukhali settlement is the largest single-site, hosting approximately 626,500 Rohingya.[101]

6.3   *Rohingyas are Viewed as 'Bengali Immigrants'*

GoM and Burmese historians view Rohingya in the Arakan region as the descendants of Bengali Muslims.[102] They even avoid the term 'Rohingya', and using the word 'Bengalis' to refer them.[103] As noted by Smith, during the

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[93] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 33.

[94] Bepler, "The Rohingya conflict: Genesis, current situation and geopolitical aspects," 7.

[95] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 36.

[96] Bepler, "The Rohingya conflict: Genesis, current situation and geopolitical aspects," 7.

[97] "Myanmar Rohingya: What you need to know about the crisis," *BBC News*, January 23, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41566561.

[98] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 36–37.

[99] "Rohingya Emergency," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, accessed April 06, 2020, www.unhcr.org/rohingya-emergency.html

[100] "Attempts of Rohingya entrance from Panic of Corona," *Prothom Alo,* April 11, 2020; "Rohingya Refugee Crisis*,*" United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, accessed April 06, 2020, www.unocha.org/rohingya-refugee-crisis

[101] "Rohingya Refugee Crisis."

[102] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 30.

[103] Bepler, "The Rohingya conflict: Genesis, current situation and geopolitical aspects," 5.

harvest season, many Muslim people from Chattogram in Bangladesh and India migrated to Myanmar as labourers, traders or administrators to help wealthy landowners.[104] Based on their posture and language, these people tend to have a common physical appearance and linguistic harmony with the Chittagonian people of Bangladesh. The Rohingya Muslims speak in Rohingya (or Ruaingga), which is similar to the Chittagonian language (dialect), used mainly by people living in the southern border region of Bangladesh. This language is distinct from the other languages spoken in the Rakhine state and Myanmar. The Rohingya language is not only mixed predominantly with words from the Arabic, Bengali, Urdu and Hindi languages but also the Bama and English languages.[105] Many Rohingya people are illiterate as the language of the Rohingya is verbal and without script, and is not a written one.

Burmese historians claim that the term 'Rohingya' has only been known since the 1950s.[106] Likewise, Jilani noted that the first acknowledgement of the ethnonym 'Rohingya' was officially used by a group of seniors from the north Arakan region to Prime Minister U Nu on his visit to Maungdaw on 10 March 1950.[107] The Rohingyas have always been alleged to be foreigners seeking asylum in Myanmar. The GoM has urged that the Rohingyas be deemed as having non-citizen status: "Rohingya minority group, classified as stateless Bengali Muslims from Bangladesh since 1982."[108] Moreover, Rohingya are similar to the Bengalis in their facial appearance, skin colour and dialect; this explains why the GoM may believe that the Rohingyas are from the Bengali ethnic group directly adjoining regions of Bangladesh.[109] Thus, the GoM continues to regard the Rohingya as illegal 'Bengali Muslims' immigrants.[110] Notably, nearly all Rohingyas residing in the Arakan region—which borders Bangladesh and the western coastal state of Rakhine in Myanmar—are not permitted free movement without the permission of the Government of Myanmar (GoM).[111]

According to Aye Chan, one of the leading Burmese historians (also, scholar), the term 'Rohingya' was first derived in the 1950s by educated Bengali

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[104] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 30–31.

[105] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 30.

[106] Wekke et al., "Muslim Minority in Myanmar: A Case Study of Myanmar Government and Rohingya Muslims," 309.

[107] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 27.

[108] Wekke et al., "Muslim Minority in Myanmar: A Case Study of Myanmar Government and Rohingya Muslims," 312.

[109] Wekke et al., "Muslim Minority in Myanmar: A Case Study of Myanmar Government and Rohingya Muslims," 317.

[110] Bepler, "The Rohingya conflict: Genesis, current situation and geopolitical aspects," 7.

[111] Mohajan, "History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims," 30.

Muslim residents to identify themselves as being from the Mayu Frontier Area (today, the Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships) of the north-western part of the Arakan region.[112] Chan also noted that the term 'Rohingya' was first used by Mr Abdul Gaffar, a Member of Parliament (MP) from Buthidaung, in his article entitled 'The Sudeten Muslims', published in the *Guardian Daily* on 20 August 1951.[113] He also claimed that no historical evidence proved that the term had been used in any language earlier than that date. He indicated that the inventors of that term might have been from the second or third generation of Bengali immigrants from the Chattogram district of East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh). Chan also argued that these Bengalis migrated into the Arakan region when the province was invaded by British Indian rule as per the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 following the First Anglo–Burmese War (1824–1826).[114] Most immigrants settled in the Mayu Frontier Area near what is now Myanmar's border with today's Bangladesh. According to Chan, these immigrants were called 'Chittagonians' in British colonial records. However, Chan could not afford to oversee that the Muslim community was present in the Arakan region before British India annexed the state.

However, Chan categorized the Muslims residing in the Arakan region into four different groups: (a) the Chittagonian Bengalis living in the Mayu Frontier Area; (b) the descendants of the Muslim community of the Arakan region during the MraukU period (1430–1784), currently residing in the MraukU and Kyauktaw townships; (c) the descendants of the Muslim mercenaries on Ramree Island identified by the Arakanese as Kaman; and (d) the Muslims from the Myedu area of central Burma who remained in the Sandoway district of the Arakan region following the Burmese conquest in 1784.[115]

7. Conclusion

The paper argues that the polemics about the origin of Rohingya are enveloping the period of Muslim arrival in the Arakan region in either the pre-British colonial period or not. The debate seems to hinge on the identification or recognition of these people as Rohingyas. As discussed in sections three and four, Muslims from Arab, Persia, the Mughal Empire, Bengal, Turk, North India, the Arabian Peninsula, etc., have emigrated to the Arakan region from the eighth century to the eighteenth century. According to the Arakanese Muslims who call

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[112] A. Chan, "The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar)," *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 3, no. 2 (2005): 397.

[113] A. Chan, "The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar)," [412].

[114] A. Chan, "The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar)," [397].

[115] A. Chan, "The Development of a Muslim Enclave in Arakan (Rakhine) State of Burma (Myanmar)."

themselves 'Rohingya', the history of Muslims residing in the Arakan region is the same as the history of the Rohingyas (this was mostly argued in Section four). Thus, it has been evident that the Rohingya Muslims have lived in the Arakan region for hundreds of years, even before the pre-British colonial period.

Chan, the Burmese historian, though disagreed with the period of Rohingyas' dwelling in Myanmar during the pre-British period; at one point, he agreed with the fact that the Muslim community was settled in Arakan even before British India annexed the region. This is one of the turning points that verifies the Muslim residence in the Arakan region even before Burmese colonization by the British. On the contrary, those who believe Rohingyas are Myanmar inhabitants argued that the history of Muslims dwelling in the Arakan region is the same as the history of the Rohingya. Thus, they argued that Muslims of the Arakan region, mostly known as the Rohingya, have lived in this region for centuries, with the original nucleus dating back to the eighth century. Thus, two opposite views agree that Muslims were living in the Arakan region even before its annexation by British India. Moreover, as noted in subsection 5.1, during the British East India Company's supremacy in Bengal, many Arakanese people (both Muslims and Buddhists) took shelter as refugees in Chattogram following the conquering of the Arakan region by the Burmese King Baudapaya. Then, upon the foundation of the British colonial period in 1824, the Arakanese refugees who had left the Arakan region at the end of the eighteenth century began to return en masse to their land from Bengal. This historical evidence reveals the Muslims' presence in the Arakan region before British dominance.

Although many Muslims immigrated to Arakan during and after the British colonial period, most migrated to their land. Thus, the opposite view that the Rohingya Muslims arrived in the Arakan region following British annexation is not justified. Moreover, as discussed in subsection 6.2, after Burma's independence, owing to their marginalization, a considerable number of Muslims fled from the Arakan region, taking shelter as refugees in neighbouring and nearby countries, e.g., Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries. Thus, it can be said that if the inhabitants of one country are denied citizenship and forced to take shelter in another country and then return to their own country, they deserve to be treated as citizens of that country. However, the 1982 Burma Citizenship Law could recognize Rohingyas' citizenship as the historical evidence unravel that the Rohingya Muslims have lived in the Arakan region from the date antecedent to 1823. This also illustrates the residency of Rohingya Muslims even before the British occupation of Burma. Thus, the Rohingyas have a history of dwelling in the Arakan region for centuries.