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India-Burma (Myanmar) Relations under British India Administration prior to 1937 Separation: Influx of the Indians and awakening of Nationalist Movements in Burma

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Abstract

The paper focuses on India-Burma relations under British India's administration prior to the 1937 separation. As for data gathering, content analysis was adopted. The findings are analyzed through two perspectives: the influx of the Indians into Burma and the awakening of Burma's nationalist movements related to Mahatma Gandhi. The findings of this study demonstrate that the influx of the Indian immigrants had eventually gave rise to the Burmese nationalist movements and the separation of Burma from British India was influenced by the Indian nationalists as well as a thought by Mahatma Gandhi that Burma cannot be part of India.

Keywords: India; Burma (Myanmar); relations; 1937 separation

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1.0 Introduction

India has a long history with Burma (now Myanmar) since several centuries ago. The historical relationship engulfed in matters related to trade and commerce, religion, philosophy, culture, and civilization. India and Myanmar also share similar colonial history where the British was their colonial master since the 19th century, in which Myanmar was administered by the British through India as part of the Empire of British India until 1937. India-Burma ancient relations started since fifth century AD through trade activities between the Indians and the Burmese. The archaeological evidences of the presence of India elements were found in Burmese cities such as Rangoon (now Yangon) and Pagan. British India's connection with Burma started during the period where Burma was ruled by the Konbaung Dynasty in the middle of 18th century. There were many developments in the relationship between the British and the Konbaung kings where notable historical developments were the Anglo-Burmese Wars. Eventually, Burma came under British control in 1885 after the dissolution of the Konbaung Dynasty following the defeat of Burma by the British in the Third Anglo-Burmese War in the same year.

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India and Burma were combined as one entity under the British administration headquartered in India. British India was responsible for bringing millions of the Indian workers from India into Burma. They were brought in to help with the British administration of the country as well as to work in the British rice industry. At the same time, the Burmese in Burma were classified by the British as Indians. The Burmese and the Indians were allowed to migrate to both India and Burma. However, this arrangement was not well accepted by the Burmese. The Burmese looked at both the British and the Indian as foreigners in their land. The British India administration in Burma had awakened the nationalist movements. The Burmese nationalist movements were very much influenced by India's Bengalese nationalist movements and the British regarded them as terrorists (Kozicki, 1970; Pakem, 1990). The Tharrawaddy Revolt is one of the examples of the Burmese nationalist resistance against the British administration in Burma. Prior to the revolt, the Burmese nationalists were influenced by Mahatma Gandhi who had initiated a movement to free India from British colonization. However, in the context of Burma, Gandhi suggested that Burma should not remain as part of India due to many differences such as culture and ethnicity. The Burmese nationalist movements eventually gave rise to the anti-Indians sentiment. There were many occurrences of communal conflict in Burma between the Indian and the Burmese which paved the way for India-Burma separation in 1937. The objective of this paper is to study the India-Burma relations where the influx of the Indians to Burma and the rise of Burmese nationalist movements contributed to the 1937 separation of both countries by the British India Administration.

2.0 Literature Review

Among the previous research done on the topic related to the influx of Indian immigrants to Burma and the awakening of the Burmese nationalist movements during the British India administration before the 1937 separation are *Indian Immigrants and the Nationalist Movements in Burma (1919-1948)* by Sanjeev Kumar. The author contends that the annexation of Burma into the British India administration is unjust and unwise. The British annexed Burma in January 1886, and it was part of the British India Empire until 1937, politically and administratively. Mitra (2015), Guo (2019) and Rosser (2014) argue that there was a view that the mistake committed by British India in dealing with Burma was to merge it with the Indian Empire. India's anti-colonial movements inspired the Burmese nationalist movements, but the relationship between the Indians and the Burmese nationalists in Burma was not cordial (Kumar, 2006). As a result of this merger, many Indians were brought to Burma by the British to join the British military, police, and public services. Matthew J. Bowser, in the article entitled *Partners in Empire? Co-colonialism and the Rise of Anti-Indian Nationalism in Burma, 1930–1938* argues that the rapid, extensive, and non-assimilationist character of the Indian immigrants in Burma led to the anti-Indian sentiment, and this approach seemed to be more important to Burmese nationalists in the 1930s to free Burma from India rather than freeing Burma from the British Empire (Bowser, 2021). Bowser's argument is in line with authors such as Vankani in the article *British Era – When India and Burma Were Together* (2020) and Hobbs's work entitled *Nationalism in British Colonial Burma* (2011) who also contended that the large number of the Indian presence in Burma eventually gave rise to the Burmese nationalist movements against the British as well as the Indians in Burma. This is partly due to the history that the Indians were used by the British in large quantities as part of the British colonial troops in all three Anglo-Burmese Wars: 1824, 1852, and 1885. However, as both India and Burma shared the same nationalist sentiment against the British colonization, the Indians and the Burmese cooperated in their common fight for independence. Renaud Egreteau in *Burma (Myanmar) 1930-2007* published in 2009 and Wei Yan Aung's *Myanmar's Destroyed Heritage: Rangoon University Student Union* (2020) argued that the British colonialism and colonial repression paved the way for the awakening of Burmese nationalist movements. After the creation of the Rangoon University in 1920, Burmese students, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent independence struggle, initiated a broad anti-colonial movements, as argued by Dagmar Hellman-Rajanayagam in her work entitled *From Rangoon College to University of Yangon – 1876 to 1920* (2020). Ian Brown's *Law and Order, the Rule of Law, and the Legitimation of the Colonial Presence in Late British Burma* argues that the Burmese nationalist movements' violent activities were partly contributed to the soaring crime rates in Burma and eventually became one of the major factors that led to the British's decision to separate India from Burma (2022).

3.0 Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative research method. Data is obtained through interviews with subject matter experts and content analysis. There are three selected respondents for this study. The respondents are from the Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Foreign Policy Research Centre (FPRC), India, and Society for Indian Ocean Studies, India. All of them are the top experts in the subject matter of the study. The respondents' opinions and views are important as those views provide an explanation on this issue. Inputs from the respondents are significant in order to strengthen and authenticate the findings of the study. The respondents involved in the study are kept anonymous. The details are as follows:

- Respondent 1: R1, JNU Professor
- Respondent 2: R2, Director, Foreign Policy Research Centre
- Respondent 3: R3, Director, Society for Indian Ocean Studies

Qualitative research approach helps to explain India-Burma Relations prior to 1937 separation. The limitations of the study include (a) no data obtained from Burmese language sources (b) all respondents are from India, hence information obtained is from the Indian scholars' perspective.

4.0 Findings & Discussion

4.1 *Burmese as Indians*

Under the British administration, the Burmese were considered as Indians for administrative purposes, as well as for legal and political matters. The Burmese were also free to migrate to India and vice versa. The Indians went to Burma in a large number, as compared to the Burmese who migrated to India. The Indians migrated to Burma were from different groups, such as soldiers, traders, laborers, dock workers, contractors, doctors, lawyers, and civil servants in which a large number of them went to Burma with the British, as they were needed to facilitate the British administration in Burma. However, the majority of the Burmese didn't accept the fact that their territories were annexed into the British India Empire. To them, the British and the Indians who came to Burma were foreigners (Pakem, 1992). The influx of Indian immigrants, especially laborers in a large number, to Lower Burma was due to the rice industry and other economic activities. The rice industry in Lower Burma was a booming industry following the opening of Suez Canal in 1869, which shortened shipping routes from Europe to Asia. At first, the British had a policy to encourage the Burmese from Upper Burma to migrate to rice cultivation areas in Lower Burma but this policy was not attractive to the Burmese in Upper Burma. In order to make the rice industry successful, the British decided to bring in immigrants from India (R1, 2017). By 1931, the Indian population in Burma was 1,017,825 million people which constituted 6.9% of the total population in Burma at that time (Kozicki, 1970). It became a fact that for many years the Indian laborers and traders, including the Indian money lenders had become significant in the economic life of Burma.

4.2 *The Awakening of Nationalist Movements*

The India – Burma (Myanmar) relations during the British administration can also be analyzed through the awakening of nationalist movements in both countries. The British, in general, regarded the Indian and Burmese nationalists and activists as terrorists. This was due to the methods used by the activists, such as disrupting public communications and using violent means to resist the British occupation. In the history of early Indian nationalist movements, Bengal, in particular, had a close link with Burma. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Bengal revolutionaries used Burma as their base by using the Arakan-Chittagong route in their movements with the help of the Burmese. The Indian and the Burmese activists had jointly rejected the Simon Commission and its constitutional reforms. This rejection resulted in an increasing level of activism in Bengal and Burma. Two Indian nationalist movements in Bengal – Anushilan and Jaguntar- aimed to gain independence through force and armed uprisings against the British. Hindu and Buddhist temples in Rangoon became an essential place for the revolutionaries to coordinate their revolutionary activities, in which famous names among Burmese revolutionaries, such as U Ottama, U Soe Thein, and U Yar Gyaw (famously known as *Saya San*) became increasingly popular at that time (Mitra, 2015). The Burmese, too, wanted the British to leave Burma. The Tharrawaddy Revolt was one of many examples of the Burmese resistance against the British, with the help of their counterparts hiding in Burma (R1, 2017). The Governor of Burma at that time, Sir Charles Innes, described the Burmese as mild people who were corrupted by the Bengali revolutionaries operating in Burma. He regarded the situation as severe to the extent that an ordinance was proposed and passed in January 1931 to stop the Bengali revolutionaries from "poisoning the minds of the young Burmese" (Bhattacharya, 2007; Mazumder, 2013)).

4.3 *The Influence of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi)*

Earlier to the Tharrawaddy Revolt, the Burmese had already been influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's freedom struggle against the British in India. Since his first visit to Burma in 1905 and later in 1915, Gandhi had been invited by the Burmese leaders and intellectuals to share his experience of the freedom struggle against the British in India (R2, 2017; Aung, 2019). During his visit to Burma again in 1929, he received a massive welcome in Rangoon by the Burmese, in which a public meeting was organized and attended by 50,000 people (Rajshekhhar, 2006; Bhattacharya, 2007). The Burmese monks, too, welcomed him with the impression and belief that Gandhi was a fine example of "a noble son of great India" (Rajshekhhar, 2006). And because of Gandhi's exemplary role in India's freedom struggle, India as a nation-state was also given credit by the monks as a country that brought to them the Burmese religion and culture. Gandhi was also warmly welcomed in all Burma's cities he visited in 1929, from Moulmein to Mandalay, where around 5,000 Burmese had gathered to listen to his address. His 1929 visit to Burma ignited the sentiment of nationalism among the Burmese (Mitra, 2015). Another notable matter in discussing Gandhi's influence upon the Burmese nationalist's freedom struggle was that before he visited Burma in 1929, Gandhi had expressed clearly his opinion that Burma should be free independently from India and that Burma should become an independent country. In *Young India* Volume 9 Issue 10, dated Thursday, March 10, 1927, Gandhi wrote in expressing his mind about Burma that Burma could not become part of India because India had its limits in terms of geography, ethnicity and culture (R2, 2017). Burma, according to him, was a country with different races and cultures, and therefore, must be recognized in its plight for its complete independence (Gandhi, 1927; Pillalamarri, 2017). In Gandhi's own words, he stressed that "Burma cannot form part of India under *Swaraaj*" (India's self or home rule).

4.4 *The Separation*

Simon Commission in 1928 – 1929 officially "pushed" Burma to be separated from India, although the Montagu-Chelmsford Report 1918 had also suggested this separation. The Simon Commission gave this recommendation after hearing from the Burmese, especially the separationist groups. The Burmese nationalism around this time, in which at the earlier stages of its development was influenced and helped by the Indian nationalists and revolutionaries, had now developed into the sentiments of anti-British and anti-Indians. This development was a reaction to the British administrative policies in Burma as well as the Burmese fear of the increasing numbers of Indian immigrants pouring into their country as a result of the British policies in Burma (R3, 2017). Violent communal conflicts had

already erupted in several places in Burma, starting with Rangoon in 1930 – 1931. One of the significant reasons the Simon Commission gave for the recommendation of Burma to be separated from India was that "Burma was not India " (Online Burma Library, 2022). In January 1932, the British Government in London announced that a decision would be made on the issue of Burma's separation from India after Burma's general elections were held. The elections were held in late 1932 for the Burma Legislative Council (BLC), in which the Burmese anti-separation group had won. The result of the polls gave a signal to the British Government that the Burmese were indecisive on the issue of Burma's separation from India. It later announced that the British Government would decide on Burma's future policies concerning the separation issue. Many developments occurred after the general elections, and finally, the British Government announced that Burma was separated from India on April 1, 1937.

5.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

In 1885, British India started to administer Burma as part of India. The British brought in a large number of Indian workers into Burma. The British also classified the Burmese in Burma as Indians for administrative, legal, and political purposes. The influx of Indians into Burma contributed to the success of the British rice industry. Apart from the influx of millions of Indians into Burma, British India's administration in Burma was marked with the rise of nationalist movements in which the British regarded the movements as terrorists. The Indian nationalists and Burmese counterparts worked together in their cause, especially in Bengal. From the British perspective, the Burmese nationalists were heavily influenced by the Bengalese nationalists, and an ordinance was enacted to stop these revolutionary activities in 1931. Mahatma Gandhi contributed to the rise of Burmese revolutionary activities, as they were influenced by his struggle for freedom against British rule in India. However, Gandhi penned his thought that Burma could not be part of India due to differences in several aspects, especially in ethnicity and culture. The presence of too many Indians in Burma brought in by the British eventually created a sentiment of anti-Indians in the country. Due to the occurrence of many violent communal conflicts derived from the anti-Indian sentiment in Burma, British India decided that Burma should be separated from India in 1937. It is recommended that future researchers further extend this study by looking into the perspectives of which type of crimes attributed to the Burmese nationalist movements in the 1930s and the role played by Burmese students in pushing for Burma's separation from India.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper contributes to enhancing the understanding of India-Burma (Myanmar) relations prior to their separation in 1937 where anti-Indians and anti-British sentiment and nationalist movements had led British India to push for the India-Burma separation.

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