

ROUNDTABLE ARTICLE

## Towards a Burma-inclusive South Asian Studies: A Roundtable

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### Abstract

Burma, or Myanmar as it was renamed in 1989, is largely ignored within the discipline of South Asian Studies, despite its cultural, religious, economic, and strategic significance for the wider worlds of Asia. Burma is often studied either in isolation or alongside Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia, despite its equally important historical and cultural connections to communities, states, and networks across what is now India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, or Nepal. In this Roundtable, four scholars of South Asia discuss Burma's erasure within the discipline, the origins and limitations of traditional area studies frameworks, and the possibilities afforded by Burma's inclusion within a more expansive conception of South Asia.

**Keywords:** Burma; South Asia; Area Studies; India; Buddhism

**CE:** Colonial scholarship on Burma, like nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European interest in Southeast Asia more broadly, with its strong Indological orientation, included Burma within the larger picture of India. With the demise of Orientalist India, Burma found its new home in Cold War Southeast Asia, and its historical and contemporary affiliations with the South Asia that replaced British India seem to have been largely lost in the transfer. For centuries, Burma and South Asia were connected through multiple networks of trade, commerce, pilgrimage, religious exchange, and textual exegesis, as new transnational and transregional scholarship has made clear. From 1885 to 1937, Burma was ruled as a province of British India, and yet

comparative scholarship on post-colonial South Asia is overwhelming focused on the turbulent relationship between India and Pakistan.

The author who has addressed the question of Burma in South Asia most recently and most forcefully is Jonathan Saha. For him, the question of whether Burma 'might usefully be thought as part of South Asia [...]' is most pertinent for studies of the colonial period.<sup>1</sup> This Roundtable brings together specialists working on a range of issues in Burmese Studies, from the early modern period up to the present day, who are, like Saha, interested in Burma's relationship with South Asia from the perspective of South Asian Studies. The goal of this Roundtable is not to 'reclaim' Burma from the field of Southeast Asian Studies, nor to essentialize South Asia as a unitary umbrella under which Burma can be neatly slotted, but rather to discuss how a South-Asia-and-Burma-sited scholarly approach can break down more effectively the compartmentalization of Asia into predetermined geographical categories and how a projected mobility of Burma-inclusive South Asian Studies may not only open new perspectives of enquiry but allow for different voices to be heard. It aims at exploring the degree to which locating Burma vis-à-vis South Asia is as important for Saha's 'colonial period' as it is for literary exchanges that predate and run parallel to the emerging colonial project, or for the mapping of 'the field' of South Asian Studies throughout the post- and neocolonial period. Equally important is to ask for the reasons why Burma has no place in South Asia; to query the impossibility of its location. More generally: how do we make it possible that the creative problem of Burma's precarious and shifting positionality is not tied to the long colonial 'moment' as a mere effect of colonial mapmaking, but remains an open question that may shed light on other contested periods as well? Most importantly: how can we from a South Asian Studies perspective problematize Burma's contested location sufficiently to allow for a critique of these localizing practices which have for so long prevented the colonized and those living in the post-colony to localize themselves on their own terms?

In order to begin the conversation, each participant is invited to briefly comment on which aspect of their work has led them to think about Burma's relation to the study of South Asia.

**JM:** I would like to begin by foregrounding two key themes in my ongoing research—one temporal, the other spatial. Through my previous work on the crafting, implementation, and circulation of colonial emergency laws in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I have drawn inspiration from Ann Laura Stoler's call to rethink the category of the 'post-colonial' as creating an artificial sense of distance from past to present.<sup>2</sup> Legal genealogies around the world are often shaped at least as much by continuities as by ruptures when we move chronologically from the 'colonial' to the 'post-colonial'

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Saha, 'Is it India? Colonial Burma as a Problem in South Asian History', *South Asian History and Culture*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2016, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 4–10.

period.<sup>3</sup> In the specific case of Burma, Chu May Paing and Than Toe Aung recently argued that the domination of Burma Studies by white scholars, as well as the ‘Burmanization’ of knowledge-production within Burma, constitute ongoing forms of external and internal colonialism, a point that will be important to touch on as our conversation progresses.<sup>4</sup>

In examining the post-colonial history of insurgency in the former territories of British colonial India, including Burma, I am interested in the extent to which these new nation-states simultaneously borrowed and repurposed older colonial counter-terrorism laws and discourses. This is especially true in the region that today comprises northeastern India and Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) and the northwest of Burma. One example is the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (or AFSPA), a direct legacy of colonial rule that originated as a response to the Quit India movement in 1942. Implemented during the British empire’s moment of wartime existential crisis, AFSPA broadened the remit of earlier laws that explicitly targeted anti-colonial ‘terrorists’, by encompassing a wider range of civil disturbances. The Act gave colonial soldiers exceptional wartime powers in managing civilian unrest, including the right to ‘use such force as may be necessary, even to the causing of death’ in cases where a suspect either ‘fails to halt when challenged by a sentry or attempts to (or indeed appears to attempt to) damage any property of any description whatsoever which it is the duty of such officer to protect’.<sup>5</sup> In 1958, AFSPA took on new life when the Nehru government introduced the law to the ‘disturbed areas’ of India’s northeast in response to separatist movements that contested the authority and legitimacy of the post-colonial nation-state.<sup>6</sup> Introduced as an emergency measure, AFSPA has proved resilient, persisting even throughout periods of relative tranquillity that would appear to make it unnecessary.<sup>7</sup> Across the border in Burma, military authorities from the 1960s to the present have drawn from an extensive repertoire of colonial-era emergency powers and restrictions to suppress dissent and stifle opposition. Most recently, after staging a coup against the democratically elected National League for Democracy leadership in February 2021, General Min Aung Hlain’s regime charged Aung San Suu Kyi under the Official Secrets Act, an emergency law first introduced by the British in 1923.<sup>8</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> Or, indeed, from the ‘pre-colonial’ to the ‘colonial’; see D. Christian Lammerts, *Buddhist Law in Burma: A History of Dhammasattha Texts and Jurisprudence, 1250–1850* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Chu May Paing and Than Toe Aung, ‘Talking Back to White Researchers in Burma Studies’, Conference Presentation, International Graduate Student Conference, University of Hawai’i at Manoa, 12 February 2021.

<sup>5</sup> *The Times of India*, 17 August 1942, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> The concept of ‘disturbed areas’ also has pre-colonial antecedents, a point for which I am grateful to Bhavani Raman.

<sup>7</sup> Sanjib Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation: India and its Northeast* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), pp. 155–76.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan McLaughlin, ‘The Sun Never Set on the British Empire’s Oppression’, *The Atlantic*, 15 April 2021, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/04/british-empire-myanmar-india-hong-kong/618583/>, [accessed 5 April 2022].

Act provides sweeping powers against the sharing of information deemed ‘prejudicial to the safety or interests of the State’,<sup>9</sup> and originally emerged during the reorganization of colonial security measures after the First World War that sought to quell political unrest and anticolonial ‘sedition’.<sup>10</sup> Examining these legal genealogies provides a reference point for understanding convergences and divergences in responses to various political challenges and separatist movements among the various nation-states that were once governed under Britain’s Indian Ocean empire.<sup>11</sup>

Equally significant for my research is the extent to which ethnic and linguistic minorities along the Indo-Burmese frontier have deployed ideas of nationhood, belonging, self-determination, and identity to throw into question the territorial logic of the modern nation-state and its roots in a deeper colonial past.<sup>12</sup> The case of the Naga insurgency in northeastern India is particularly instructive. Shortly before Indian independence, a self-constituted group of Naga politicians sent a request to British officials requesting a ten-year interim government after which they could choose to either pursue independence or join India. The failure of both the colonial and post-colonial governments to meet the demands of the more hardline Naga politicians led to the outbreak of insurgency in northeastern India, to which Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru responded by sending in the Indian Army in 1953. Throughout the course of the conflict, Naga rebels made use of the border with Burma to evade Indian security forces and to smuggle arms and ammunition into conflict zones. While officials within the Indian government sought to portray separatists through a familiar colonial lens of ‘backwardness’ and parochialism, Naga activists made consistent attempts to situate their struggle within the language of a global era of decolonization.<sup>13</sup> Proponents of an independent homeland called Nagalim, or ‘Greater Nagaland’, argue that the colonial-era boundary between India and Myanmar should be scrapped in favour of a new state that incorporates Nagas on both sides of the border.<sup>14</sup> Today, more than 100,000 Naga people continue to live across this porous

<sup>9</sup> ‘The Burma Official Secrets Act’, 2 April 1923, p. 2, available at [https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/docs6/OFFICIAL\\_SECRETS\\_ACT.pdf](https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/docs6/OFFICIAL_SECRETS_ACT.pdf), [accessed 5 April 2022].

<sup>10</sup> Rhys Thompson, ‘Securing the Colony: The Burma Police Special Branch (1896–1942)’, *Intelligence and National Security*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2020, pp. 35–53.

<sup>11</sup> I explore some of these in J. McQuade, *A Genealogy of Terrorism: Colonial Law and the Origins of an Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> Examples include Mikael Gravers, ‘The Karen Making of a Nation’, in *Asian Forms of the Nation*, (eds) Stein Tonneson and Hans Antlov (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 237–69; Jane Ferguson, *Repossessing Shanland: Myanmar, Thailand, and a Nation-State Deferred* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021); Mandy Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Lian H. Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity: A Study in Religion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Burma* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003); Elisabeth Leake, ‘At the Nation-State’s Edge: Centre-Periphery Relations in post-1947 South Asia’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2016, pp. 509–39.

<sup>13</sup> For example, A. Z. Phizo, *The Fate of the Naga People: An Appeal to the World* (London: A. Z. Phizo, 1960).

<sup>14</sup> For an excellent discussion of how colonial border-making shaped the divergent independence movements in India and Burma, see Bérénice Guyot-Réchard, ‘Tangled Lands: Burma and

border in northern Myanmar, and the region remains a key site of Indian counterinsurgency and paramilitary operations.

A strategy of 'surgical strikes' and cross-border cooperation cuts both ways. In 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi pledged support for Burmese counterinsurgency operations along the porous border, which are likely to rebut long-standing accusations by the Burmese government that India has historically provided support for Kachin insurgents, who have used India territory as a site of refuge and logistical support in the past. As with the Naga peoples of northeastern India, the history of the Kachin does not sit neatly within the supposedly rigid borders of the modern nation-state of Myanmar. In the nineteenth century, the collections of peoples now known as Kachin were called Singpho, and they played a key role in wider regional trade processes, particularly through the sale of jade to Chinese merchants. As Mandy Sadan has shown, the expansion of colonial authority under the East India Company and the encroachments of global capital fundamentally transformed Singpho social structures and their relationship to neighbouring polities in Assam and Burma, in a process that resonates with the history of the Naga on the other side of the Indian border.<sup>15</sup> As the British extended their reach into upper Burma at the end of the nineteenth century, their encounters with the Kachin solidified colonial stereotypes regarding the supposedly warlike and egalitarian nature of highland peoples in contrast to the effeminate 'Oriental despotism' of the Burmese lowlands. In creating a colonial framework for Burmese society, the British viewed the landed gentry of the Irrawady Delta, the *myothugyi*, as an anachronism that had been rendered irrelevant by the centralization of the Burmese state. By contrast, the *swabwa* of the highlands, despite playing a similar role to the *myothugyi*, were viewed as proto-democratic councils governing the affairs of the so-called 'noble savages' of the upland societies.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the long-running difficulties of the Burmese regime in pacifying the highland areas during the pre-colonial period, combined with the difficulty of counterinsurgency operations undertaken against the Kachin and the Shan, another upland ethnic group, convinced the British of the martial prowess of the highlanders, an idea that fitted with pre-existing colonial tropes of martial masculinity relating to the Gurkhas of Nepal and the Highland Scots.<sup>17</sup> Colonial recruitment policies that heavily favoured highland communities led to polarization between upland and lowland communities that escalated to bitter inter-ethnic clashes during and after the Second World War.<sup>18</sup> With a rebellion that began in 1961 as a response to Kachin fears of Burmanization and the suppression of Kachin

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India's Unfinished Separation, 1937–1948', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 80, no. 2, 2020, pp. 392–15.

<sup>15</sup> Sadan, *Being and Becoming Kachin*.

<sup>16</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 210–18.

<sup>17</sup> Heather Streets-Salter, *Martial Races: The Military, Race, and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2004).

culture, the Kachin Independence Army, or KIA, fought the Burmese military junta for decades, finally signing a ceasefire agreement in 1994, which has since broken down. Thousands of Kachin continue to live in northeast India to this day, with another 130,000 living in Yunnan province, China, where they are officially recognized as one of 56 ethnic groups by the Chinese government.<sup>19</sup>

The blurring of national boundaries facilitated by existing scholarship on the Indo-Burmese borderlands has consequences that are not only geographical, but also conceptual and methodological. The fluidity of these borderlands highlights the entangled histories of connection, transmission, and circulation that define Burma's relationship with South Asia and expose the limits of methodological nationalism as an epistemological default, a topic I hope to discuss further as the conversation progresses.

**SA:** I am a historian of modern South Asia and the Indian Ocean world. My research recovers the intimately connected histories of South Asia with other regions, particularly Africa and Southeast Asia, where large numbers of South Asians migrated in the mid-nineteenth century. My work also illuminates the centrality of these migrants to processes of nation-building and decolonization in the twentieth century. Decolonization was accompanied by violence against migrants from British India and state-led expulsions in Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Guiana, Sri Lanka, and Burma, among other places. Despite this spectacle of violence and displacement, for South Asianists, decolonization refers to the partition of British India and the birth of Pakistan in 1947. South Asia's bloodiest moment is considered *the* critical event of the twentieth century in South Asian historiography.<sup>20</sup> What is all but forgotten is that a *first* partition had occurred a decade earlier under similar violent circumstances when Burma separated from India in 1937. This exclusion elides a deeply entangled, shared history of labour and mobility, border making and crossing, and a Hindu-Buddhist sacred geography which underpins the contemporary anti-Muslim politics of religious majoritarianism in India and Myanmar that dates back almost a century. I am working on a book tentatively titled *The Partition of 1937: Recovering Burma's South Asian History* in which I use partition as a metaphor to reclaim and recover this shared history of Burma and India.

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Cockett, *Blood, Dreams and Gold: The Changing Face of Burma* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), pp. 109–30.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Joya Chatterjee, *Partition's Legacies* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black 2021); William Gould and Sarah Ansari (eds), *Boundaries of Belonging: Localities, Citizenship and Rights in India and Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Neeti Nair, *Changing Homelands: Hindu Politics and the Partition of India* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided (Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932–1937)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and standard textbooks on modern South Asia such as Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011) and Barbara Metcalf and Thomas Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

In his opening remarks, Christoph suggested that a 'Burma-inclusive South Asian Studies' could allow for different voices to be heard by opening up new perspectives of enquiry. My research locates these voices on the registers of politics, religion, and mobility. I'll take up the first two now, and return to the last in my next set of remarks.

The 1930s were a turbulent decade in Burma marked by three political moments around which much of the historiography of this period has coalesced, identifying a distinctly anti-Indian politics of mobilization in the Irrawaddy Delta: the Hsaya San rebellion of 1930, the separation of Burma from India in 1937, and Buddhist-Muslim riots in Rangoon in 1938. Considering these events together, scholarship on Burma and India treat the separation as inevitable, unremarkable, uncontested, and complete.<sup>21</sup> In my quest to recover Burma's South Asian history, I have been chasing the long archival shadow of an Arakanese Buddhist monk, U Ottama (~1879–1939), who spent more than 15 years in Calcutta. Historians have credited U Ottama as being among the first nationalists in Burma, whose staunchly anti-colonial politics engaged and mobilized Buddhist monks and voluntary associations across the country in the 1920s. He was imprisoned for several years for making 'seditious' speeches and went into exile in Calcutta days after the outbreak of the 1930 rebellion, seeking refuge in much the same way—and from the very same legal-security counterinsurgency apparatus—that Joseph mentioned in his remarks above.<sup>22</sup> A granular reading of U Ottama's politics, however, disrupts the historiographical consensus on separation as desirable and inevitable. Even as his anti-colonial nationalism is highlighted in histories of Burma, historians have glossed over what was arguably his most consistent and vociferously argued political position—building the case *against* separation. Burmese nationalists within the Legislative Council demanded separation, arguing that Burma was colonized twice over, by the British and by Indians. In contrast, for U Ottama, Burma's Indian connections enlivened rather than thwarted his nationalism that was deeply local but not rooted in a parochial mapping of race onto place.

Making a persuasive argument to decentre the nation as the main and only framework within which to place individuals and organizations, Alicia Turner has shown how microhistories—of people and moments—reveal a multiplicity of affiliations and identities of intellectuals, activists, and monks in Burma in the 1920s.<sup>23</sup> U Ottama embodied this affiliational multiplicity. His nationalism

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, U Maung Maung, *From Sangha to Laity: Nationalism Movements of Burma, 1920–1940* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1980); E. Michael Mendelson, *Sangha and State in Burma: A Study of Monastic Sectarianism and Leadership* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975); Robert Taylor, *The State in Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009); Michael W. Charney, *A History of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); E. Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (New York: Springer, 1965).

<sup>22</sup> U Ottama history sheet, Home, Political, 31/5, KW, 1931, National Archives of India (hereafter NAI). Government of Burma to Government of India, 21 January 1931, 18 February 1931, Home, Political, 31/5 KW, 1931, NAI.

<sup>23</sup> Alicia Turner, 'Narrative of Nation, Questions of Community: Examining Sources without the Lens of Nation', *Journal of Burma Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2011, pp. 263–82.



was tracked through an ‘insurgent geography’, to use Tim Harper’s phrase, that he traversed both in exile and at home.<sup>24</sup> His political, spiritual, and intellectual itineraries connected him to a large network of anticolonial revolution, Buddhist revival, and Pan-Asianism across South and East Asia. As student, teacher preacher, and revolutionary, U Ottama infused into his anticolonial politics a moral and spiritual ecumene that travelled across Rangoon, Mandalay, Akyab, Calcutta, Chandernagore, Tokyo, Shanghai, and Beijing. At an organizational level, this allowed him to simultaneously represent, from within, the Greater Council of Burmese Associations (GCBA), the All-India National Congress, and serve as president of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha. Strategically, it enabled him to give refuge to Bengali revolutionaries in Burma while advocating Gandhian *satyagraha* and non-cooperation. Beyond the realm of institutional politics, this placed him within what Gitanjali Surendran has termed the ‘cultural traffic’ of Buddhist revival across the Indian Ocean led by Angarika Dharmapala and his Mahabodhi Society.<sup>25</sup> Deeply entrenched within this Asian cosmopolitanism, Japan offered, to U Ottama, an alternative model of modernity that was not premised on colonial subjecthood. Impressed with Japan’s defeat of Russia in 1905, U Ottama published a book on Japan’s political revolution on his return to Burma in 1914.<sup>26</sup>

U Ottama’s project of Buddhist revival was a distinctly modern one, intimately entangled with political sovereignty as he urged the Greater Council of Sangha Samitis (GCSS) in Burma to mobilize against the colonial state. The sangha had hitherto been involved in creating and preserving a moral social community, as Turner’s work on Buddhist revival in Burma between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has shown.<sup>27</sup> Much like M. K. Gandhi’s aspiration to *swaraj* that was simultaneously political and ethical, U Ottama argued that the monkhood could not attain spiritual enlightenment, or nirvana, because the Burmese were ‘slaves’ and had no freedom. ‘Burmans have no king [of their own]’, U Ottama lamented, and this, he argued, was the root of their enslavement which the sangha must uproot.<sup>28</sup> In

<sup>24</sup> Tim Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021), p. xxviii.

<sup>25</sup> Gitanjali Surendran, ‘The Indian Discovery of Buddhism: Buddhist Revival in India’, PhD thesis, Harvard University, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> U Ottama History sheet, Home, Political, 31/5, KW, 1931, NAI. For more on U Ottama in Japan, see Zaw Linn Aung, ‘ITO Zirozaemon Suketami and Sayadaw U Ottama: Reconfiguring the Japan-Myanmar Relations Before World War II’, *Journal of Myanmar Academy of Arts and Science*, vol. XVIII, no. 7, 2020 and Cemil Aydin, ‘Japan’s Pan-Asianism and the Legitimacy of Imperial World Order, 1931–1945’, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2008. For more on Asian cosmopolitanism, see Su Lin Lewis, *Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Mark Ravinder Frost, ‘Globalization and Religious Revival in the Imperial Cities of the Indian Ocean Rim, 1870–1920’, PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2002; Mark Ravinder Frost, ‘Humanitarianism and the Overseas Aid Craze in Britain’s Colonial Straits Settlements, 1870–1920’, *Past and Present*, vol. 236, no. 1, 2017, pp. 169–205.

<sup>27</sup> Alicia Turner, *Saving Buddhism: The Impermanence of Religion in Colonial Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> U Ottama speeches at Sukalat, 4 February 1921; Tamatkaw, 5 February 1921; Dedaye, 2 February 1921, L/PJ/6/1748, file 2735, India Office Records (hereafter IOR).



this quest for spiritual and political sovereignty, India was a natural ally for Burma. Significantly, this anticolonial politics of proximity was more than just an instrumentalist move to present a united front against a common enemy. Rather, U Ottama cast India as Burma's spiritual homeland—the birthplace of Buddhism to which the foundation of Burmese Buddhism and, by extension, the moral community and civilization of Burma could be traced. Arguing against separation, U Ottama invoked 2,000 years of affinity when he proclaimed in 1922, 'Our great Buddha was an Indian. Our religion, our traditions, and many of our institutions are Indian in origin.'<sup>29</sup> As president of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha, U Ottama pointed to the 'cultural and spiritual affinity' of India and Burma in 1935 as embodied in 'Bhagwan Buddha'. Separation, he argued would be a 'menace to the ancient Aryan culture of India' which extended to Burma.<sup>30</sup>

Debates over the Indic origins of Buddhism and their significance to Burmese and Buddhist Studies is taken up by Christoph and Thibaut later in this Roundtable. I want to draw attention to how this Hindu-Buddhist civilizational discourse was deployed by monks like U Ottama in the mundane, political realm. U Ottama was successful in the 1920s in rallying both the GCBA led by Soe Thein, who had accompanied him to Japan, and a large number of monks to his cause.<sup>31</sup> In November 1932, elections were held where the question of separation was the key electoral issue, with urban, elite politicians campaigning to separate Burma from India. But the vote went in favour of the anti-separation candidates backed by monks in whose widely distributed pamphlets U Ottama's sacred geography reverberated. Take for example this ballad composed during the election campaign: 'India is the place where there are 900 "Bo" trees; and our Lord, who is the Sakya clan of India must not be forsaken by us as we are of the same clan. Unite with India where our Lord attained enlightenment. ...We will not separate from India which is as glorious as the second celestial abode.'<sup>32</sup>

For the most part, even as historians have noted that U Ottama was more representative of the 'Burmese people' than those in the Legislative Council, their teleological approach to the separation of 1937 necessitates that they gloss over his deliberate invocations of an Indo-Burmese spiritual homeland.<sup>33</sup> So what do we make of this archival anomaly? For me, U Ottama's politics demands that we revisit the separation and the 1932 election that was held

<sup>29</sup> U Ottama speech, Mandalay, *Rangoon Daily News*, 29 July 1922.

<sup>30</sup> *Leader*, 28 and 29 April 1935, 1 May 1935. Resolution no. 13 passed at 16th session of the Hindu Mahasabha, Kanpur, 20–22 April 1935, Ashutosh Lahiry Paper, pamphlets I, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML).

<sup>31</sup> For more on Soe Thein's time in Japan, see Aung, 'Suketami and Ottama'. See also Soe Thein GCBA, 'Burma's Protest against the Question of Immediate Separation of Burma for India and Simon Commission recommendations', November 1930, Home, Political, file 31-5, 1931, NAI; and U Ottama History sheet, Home, Political, 31/5, KW, 1931, NAI.

<sup>32</sup> A Ballad Composed to the Tune of 'Meza Taung Che' by Sinanni Sayadaw at the Request of U Siccita Pamphlet, M-1-1, IOR. Emphasis added.

<sup>33</sup> Maung, *Sangha to Laity*; Taylor, *State in Burma*, pp. 170–71, 184.

in the aftermath of the Hsaya San rebellion of 1930. The anti-separation vote came overwhelmingly from areas where Hsaya San had been most successful, and where the colonial state's counterinsurgency had been punitive and violent.<sup>34</sup> The 1930 uprising has been analysed from an economic and social perspective as a millenarian movement led by Hsaya San at a moment when the global economic depression reached deep into the countryside with the collapse of the price of paddy.<sup>35</sup> The Irrawaddy Delta had become one of the largest rice-producing regions in the world in the late nineteenth century. Chettiar bankers from Madras lent money to Burmese cultivators and seasonal migrant labour from India did the back-breaking work of harvesting the crop in the countryside. Economic distress resulting in a cycle of debt and land alienation to Chettiar firms brought rural farmers to Hsaya San's Galon army. The predatory practices of Chettiar lenders was identified by the colonial state and historians as one of the leading causes of the rebellion, and recruits targeted Tamil and Chittagonian settlements in the countryside across the Lower Delta.<sup>36</sup> Although it is tempting to assume that the violence against Indians during the rebellion indicated that there was support for separation in the countryside, Hsaya San himself was against the separation of Burma from India. Endorsing the GCBA's position against separation, much like U Ottama was doing, Hsaya San also positioned India and Burma in an intimate, close relationship: 'When the elder brother dances,' he noted, 'the younger brother should dance, and when the elder brother sits, the younger brother should sit too.'<sup>37</sup>

In an important revisionist study of the rebellion, Maitrii Aung-Thwin highlights the ways in which colonial assumptions about Burmese culture, crime, and superstition led to an almost exclusive focus on Hsaya San as leading a millenarian uprising. This, he argues, turned the historiographical gaze away from other archival sources, including official correspondence, that could open up other narratives to historicize and complicate the 1930 rebellion.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Deputy Commissioner, Tharrawaddy to Commissioner, Pegu, 16 November 1932 and other correspondence, M-1-1, IOR.

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, Report of the Burma Provincial Banking Enquiry Committee 1929-30, Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1931, 'The Origin and Causes of the Burma Rebellion 1930-32', Government of Burma, Rangoon, 1934, Home, Political, 77/34, NAI. Michael Adas, *Prophets of Rebellion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974); and James Scott, *Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>36</sup> 'The Origin and Causes of the Burma Rebellion 1930-32', Government of Burma, Rangoon, 1934, Home, Political, 77/34, NAI.

<sup>37</sup> Saya San to Executive Committee Soe Thein GCBA, 5 September 1929, Appendix D, Home, Political, 1931, 5/13, NAI. 'The Origin and Causes of the Burma Rebellion 1930-32', Government of Burma, Rangoon, 1934, Home, Political, 77/34, NAI.

<sup>38</sup> Maitrii Aung-Thwin, *Return of the Galon King: History, Law, and Rebellion in Colonial Burma* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2011), and Maitrii Aung-Thwin, 'Structuring Revolt: Communities of Interpretation in the Historiography of the Saya San Rebellion', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2008. See also R. Solomon, 'Saya San and the Burmese Rebellion', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 3, 1969.

Significantly, U Ottama, Soe Thein, and revolutionaries from Bengal closely associated with the monk loom large in this second set of official correspondence, placing Hsaya San within a prehistory of the rebellion and U Ottama and others squarely at the centre of one of the largest peasant uprisings of the twentieth century. Within days of the outbreak, the governor of Burma singled out U Ottama as ‘the most dangerous agitator’ in Burma who was the ‘inspiration for the rebellion’, issuing a warrant for his arrest. U Ottama slipped away to Calcutta via Akyab where he went into exile for the next several years.<sup>39</sup>

Researching U Ottama led me to my most unexpected archival find: the legal trial of another ‘gang’ leader who was found guilty for waging war against the emperor and sentenced to death by hanging.<sup>40</sup> Captured just a few months before Hsaya San, he had organized one of the largest groups of armed rebels in the Tharawaddy region. He was considered so important that in March 1931 his name appeared along with Hsaya San and San Htu in a public appeal made by the administration that offered a reward for their capture. His name was yet another archival anomaly—Krishna Mutu, a ‘half-caste Madrasi’. According to official government calculations, a total of 1,688 people were killed during the rebellion, 1,332 of whom were rebels, while 126 of the ‘most extreme’ rebels were executed.<sup>41</sup> Krishna Mutu was one of the few who received this death sentence. Yet he was wiped from the official record by the time the government published its final report on the rebellion because his Tamil ethnicity unsettled both the distinctly Burmese and anti-Indian framework within which this uprising was narrated.

We can certainly think of the historiographical erasure of U Ottama’s anti-separation campaign and Krishna Mutu’s leadership during the Hsaya San rebellion as two small, insignificant moments that are anomalies which appear in the archives. But this erasure, I argue, has occurred precisely because these small archival fragments disrupt two big moments of historical and historiographical significance—the inevitability and desirability of separating Burma from India in 1937 and the anti-Indian, millenarian rural uprising of 1930. To examine this disruption critically we need to take seriously the voices of the monks and rebels whose lyrical articulations on Burma and India were evocative of a shared spiritual and political homeland—indeed, a shared history. I will return to this point on rupture and erasure later in this Roundtable.

**TD:** My domain of research is the literary history of Bengal, and eastern South Asia more generally. I am particularly interested in the linguistic economy of the region, the study of vernacular poetics and literary practices, but also in

<sup>39</sup> Government of Burma to Government of India, 21 January 1931, 18 February 1931, Home, Political, 1931, 31/5, KW, NAI.

<sup>40</sup> Situation report, April 1931–March 1932, L/PJ/6/2020, IOR. Governor Innes note, 25 March 1931, Home, Political, 13/18/31, NAI. Burma rebellion, Trials and Appeals, special trial no. 3, September 1931, L/PJ/6/2022, IOR. Report on the Rebellion, 8 May 1931, Home, Political, 1931/5/33, NAI.

<sup>41</sup> Government of Burma to Government of India, n.d., Home, Political, 1934, 27/9, NAI.

the cultivation in the region of literary idioms that are associated with geographically widespread textual communities, such as Sanskrit and Persian.

The geography that I am interested in is thus indexed on the use of literary idioms, prosodic forms, genres, modes of performance, and the patronage of literary texts. Tracing these features in eastern South Asia leads to a redefinition of the boundaries of cultural areas and a departure from the narratives of modern nation-states regarding ‘cultural identity’ and ‘heritage’. In this schema, communal affiliations stand in the background and play varyingly important roles throughout history in shaping linguistic and literary practices. But, as I will mention in a second, in at least one of my projects ‘religion’ is central to the corpus of text that I am exploring.

My first Burma-related project is the study of Middle Bengali literature in the kingdom of Arakan during the Mrauk U period (1430–1784). I originally studied the making of the Bengali Muslim poetic tradition within the boundaries of the kingdom of Arakan in the seventeenth century, focusing on the figure of the prolific poet and translator Ālāol who was a court poet of the Muslim dignitaries of the Buddhist kings of Arakan, Śīrisudhammarājā and Candāsudhammarājā.

My second project looks at the place of Sanskrit literary culture in Burma and Southeast Asia, and the role of Bengal as a medium for the transmission of texts and expertise in Sanskrit. Again, my interest is more specifically oriented towards *belles lettres* and, to some extent, *nīti* or gnomic literature. Chronologically, I am trying to trace the transmission of such texts throughout the second millennium, with a special interest in the Konbaung period, which is one of the richest in terms of documented efforts to import Sanskrit texts in Burma.

My last Burma-related project looks at a collection of Persian manuscripts translated from the Arakanese and Pali in Chittagong and Calcutta in the late 1770s and 1780s. The translations were commissioned by a Scotsman named John Murray MacGregor who spent 30 years in Bengal working for the East India Company. When he retired in 1796, he brought back what constitutes one of the largest personal libraries of Persian manuscripts in Europe at the time. Among the 350 volumes of his library we find several texts dealing with Buddhism in Arakan, from reports and questionnaires to translations of *jātakas*, cosmological, medical, and legal texts. A remarkable feature of this archive is the fact that we also have some of the original Arakanese and Pali manuscripts that were used to produce the Persian translations.<sup>42</sup>

These three (admittedly very different) projects all address the question of the place of Burma in the study of South Asia, either as the locus of the cultivation of literary practices that originated in South Asia—such as the production and study of texts in Bengali and Sanskrit—or as the point of entry for

<sup>42</sup> Thibaut d’Hubert, ‘Bayān-i ‘ibādat-i mukh-hā ba-nām-i Takādībā’, in *Perso-Indica. An Analytical Survey of Persian Works on Indian Learned Traditions*, (eds) F. Speziale and C. W. Ernst, available at <http://www.perso-indica.net/work.faces?idw=111>, [accessed 5 April 2022]; Christian Lammerts, ‘The Murray Manuscripts and Buddhist Dhammasattha Literature Transmitted in Chittagong and Arakan’, *Journal of Burma Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2015, pp. 407–44.

attempts to define aspects of Theravāda Buddhism in late Mughal and early colonial Bengal.

**CE:** Trained as an Indologist and Buddhist Studies scholar in Germany, I work on Pali Buddhist texts, predominantly doctrinal ones, which I contextualize in a Burmese environment. I also work on Sanskrit Hindu and Buddhist sources, mostly ritual manuals, which I read from within a Nepalese environment. I am additionally and independently interested in the texts and contexts involved in the transfer of ritual practices between Nepal, Manipur, and Burma. Concretely, I work on sixteenth- to twenty-first century ritual literature from Nepal and Burma involving girl children and the multilingual interface of devotional fiction and poetry in roughly the same period. The following is an attempt to give a brief historical sketch of the fields in which I have found myself and out of which my thinking about the field character of 'South Asia' and 'Burma' has emerged.

My interest in where, in their relation to each other, one may find and place Burma and South Asia derives from my curiosity about where exactly I find and place myself in relationship to them when I do research, when I travel across those parts of Asia that, as my fields suggest, are distinct. What are my field's location and environment? As whom do people encounter me, and how does that shape our interaction and how we talk with each other? How has it prevented my interlocutors from talking back or speaking at all? Where and from where do I reach you, who are joining me in this Roundtable discussion? I encounter you, Joseph and Sana, as historians of South Asia, with your own specific histories and locations shaped by an Anglophone academia. And I encounter you, Thibaut, as someone with a very similar academic background and trajectory to my own, that of a European Indologist who transferred to a North American environment. How does my and your, Thibaut, environment change when we move from one academic culture to another or when our field changes due to a difference in academic cultures while, apart from learning to do new things, we still keep doing what we have been trained to do?

When I took up my current position and moved from Europe to North America in 2006, I not only traded places, but also moved from previously working in 'Indologie' (or 'Indology'), which in some places, such as Heidelberg from where I moved, and since the turn of the last century, had already begun to historically morph into 'Südasiestudien', with a focus on Buddhism ('Buddhismuskunde'), to joining both 'Asian Languages and Cultures' (University of Michigan) and 'Religious Studies' (University of Toronto) institutions and conversations. It is for this reason that, in contrast to the other three panel discussants, in my contributions to this conversation I would like to focus less on my immediate archive than on the categories that shape it, less on how my data problematize Burma for South Asia, and more on the history of the relation between South Asian Studies (the former Indology) and Burma Studies, from the position of my work. My intention is to show how some of the pernicious historical baggage dragged along by whoever has been working in these fields has created some of the problems we are facing today,

but also how the recurring creative shifts enabled by problematizing location have kept offering new opportunities to free our research partners and ourselves from some of that baggage and its crippling weight. I will be moving from the early European connection of Indology and Buddhist Studies and their implicit ideas of area coverage, via the ambiguous position of Germanophone Indology regarding the colony, and end with the diverging yet intersecting ways the British and the French imagined India and performed Indology in Burma and Southeast Asia.

Due to a long German history of research on Sanskrit and Pali sources, Buddhismskunde as a field has long been historically located within, or at least closely tied to, Indologie, even after it began, at the beginning of the twentieth century, expanding to cover Central Asian materials. Indologie remained the 'mother' field to a 'daughter' Buddhismskunde that took a while to come of age only by the eventual counterweight created by a comparatively recent inclusion of the study of East Asian Buddhism. The self-understanding of Indologie itself, rather than being defined by 'region' or 'area', has historically been a primarily linguistic-philological one connected to 'India' as a cultural idea with an accent on the premodern, similar to 'Greece', and if more extended in time, similar to the sense that 'China' has been used. It shares that feature with its 'sisters', the French 'Indologie' and the English 'Indology', to name only two of its European siblings. Germanophone Indology's linguistic core, just like that of its siblings, was shaped from early on by the study of Sanskrit, and the early attention to Vedic Sanskrit gave it its religious orientation towards the Brahmanical, even while its Indo-European linguistic interests allowed for ongoing, if weakening, ties to the world of Iranian Studies through Avesta and Persian. Its expansion into Middle Indic helped Buddhismskunde (as well as 'Jaina-Studien') to emerge. As Germanophone Indology remained institutionally dependent on the British colonial project, it also remained largely confined to the area of Hindu (and Jain) heritage retrieved on the territory of the British Raj, mostly North India. As national schools of Indology began distinguishing themselves from each other, it was mostly through the work done in the growing manuscript archives emerging in places like Berlin and Munich that Germanophone Indology achieved a greater independence from its colonial facilitator, relying for its growth beyond British North India on expeditions into Russian and Chinese Central Asia, further strengthening those fields within its orbit such as Buddhismskunde and Indo-European linguistics. French Indology, on the other hand, eventually expanded beyond its colonial possessions in South India into continental Southeast Asia east of Burma, creating with Indochine (similar to Dutch Indology and the idea of Nederlands-Indië) a much more inclusive idea of what all is, or was, part of 'India'.

Along the same lines as the British in its expanding South Asian empire, French Indology developed into, among other things, a tool for the colonial creation of new, modern national entities that would be connected to their 'Indian' past through a know-how that was produced by European scholars together with the employment of local experts. German Indological archives,

while profiting hardly at all from the moving frontier of French Indologie, however, did continue to partake in British acquisitions, including those of Burmese manuscripts, which the French too had been collecting from when the Burmese court was still open to shifting European alliances. Eugène Burnouf (1801–1852), one of the founding fathers of European Buddhist Studies, not only worked on the Nepalese manuscripts that Brian Hodgson in Kathmandu decided not to send to Calcutta, he worked on Burmese manuscripts as well. His work on Burmese commentarial literature ranks among the earliest in Europe, but is barely known and remains unpublished.<sup>43</sup> Had not British, but French colonialism dominated in Burma, French Indology may have more fully included an Indian Burma like it would with Indian Cambodia, along the lines of Georges Coedès' (1886–1969) paradigm of the '*états hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie*',<sup>44</sup> strikingly translated by Sue Brown Cowing as 'the Indianized States of Southeast Asia',<sup>45</sup> or Paul Mus's (1902–1969) idea of the *maṅḍala* as cultural model.<sup>46</sup> In the larger frame of the academic ideology of the time, Indianization was seen as a civilizing force which, after its decline, was now to be both recuperated, complemented, and modernized by the colonizing mission of France.

After the first eighteenth- and nineteenth-century non-academic 'accounts' of Burma by Symes, Sangermano, and Yule,<sup>47</sup> by the time of the complete inclusion of Burma into the British Raj, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European scholarship on Burma sported an strong international representation, featuring the pioneering Emmanuel Forchhammer (1851–1890)<sup>48</sup> and his successor Charles Duroiselle (1871–1951), the latter building on the work of Charles Blagden (1864–1949) on Mon inscriptions and later collaborating with the great epigraphist and scholar of Bagan, Gordon H. Luce (1898–1979). While Blagden started as a scholar of Malay and Luce had a background in Latin and Greek, all three major European, non-British early scholars of Burma—Burnouf, Forchhammer, and Duroiselle—to whom one should add the Russian Ivan P. Minayeff (1840–1890) and the internationally trained British scholar of Burmese literature Mabel Bode (1864–1922),<sup>49</sup> were

<sup>43</sup> Eugène Burnouf, *Introduction to the History of Buddhism*, (trans) Katia Buffetrille and Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2010), p. 13. For a small sample of that work, see M. Léon Feer (ed.), *Papiers d'Eugène Burnouf conservés à la Bibliothèque nationale* (Paris: H. Champion, Libraire, 1899), p. 81.

<sup>44</sup> Georges Coedès, *Les états hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie* (Paris: Editions E. de Boccard, 1964).

<sup>45</sup> Georges Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, (ed.) Walter F. Vella, (trans.) Susan Brown Cowing (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1968).

<sup>46</sup> Paul Mus, *Barabudur*. 2 vols (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1935; reprint; New York: Arno Press 1978).

<sup>47</sup> Michael Symes, *Account of an Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava sent by the Governor-General of India in the year 1795* (London: Bulmer and Co., 1800); Father [Vincentius] Sangermano, *A Description of the Burmese Empire, Compiled Chiefly from Burmese Documents*, 5th edn (London: Susil Gupta, 1966; originally Rome 1833); Henry Yule, *Narrative of the Mission to the Court of Ava in 1855, Together with the Journal of Arthur Phayre* (first published 1856; London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

<sup>48</sup> Anon., Obituary Emanuel Forchhammer, *Trübner's Record*, 1890, pp. 52–53.

<sup>49</sup> Mabel H. Bode, *The Pali Literature of Burma* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1909).



Indologists, who read Burma and Burmese from a Pali and Sanskrit background. A good example in contrast is the British civil servant Richard F. St. Andrew St. John (1839–1919), who taught at Oxford, prioritized Burmese language sources, not Pali, and developed teaching materials aimed at a classroom of future colonial administrators. The journalistic ethnography of James G. Scott ('Shway Yoe', 1851–1935), too, was written with a non-academic readership in mind, armchair travellers back in the metropole and hobby anthropologists in the colony.<sup>50</sup> The early British Indologically informed study of Buddhism initiated by T. W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922) and continued by the Pali Text Society focused on Sri Lanka, as their prioritization of the Sinhala manuscript tradition for their editorial work on the Pali scriptures demonstrates, giving Pali philology a history and a range that only tentatively included Burma or, at the very least, assigned it a secondary role in the British project of academically re-establishing the Theravāda canon.

More research needs to be done on the early history of the field, but two trends seem to be identifiable: British Burma Studies never seem to have been as heavily Indologized as French Indochina Studies, and early developments in that direction seem not to have been pursued further. On the contrary, in the early twentieth century, starting with the founding of the Burma Research Society in Rangoon in 1910, scholars like Luce and academic managers like John S. Furnivall (1878–1960) and Burmese scholars like Pe Maung Tin (1888–1973), Shwe Zan Aung (1871–1932), who participated in the Pali Text Society's project, and San Shwe Bu (1882–1942), in fact, developed a scholarly agenda that would prioritize unearthing a classical and Buddhist Burmese past at the expense of not only the Brahmanical or Muslim histories of Burma, but more generally the historical connections of Burma to 'India'. As Carol Ann Boshier has so brilliantly shown,<sup>51</sup> this agenda emerged as a joint project of Fabianist-inspired British modernization efforts and emerging elite Burmese nationalism whose interests converged, among other things, in their reaction against a perceived harmful economic domination of colonial Burma by 'Indian' elites, as you outline, Sana. The result was concerted efforts to extricate the study of Burma from its Indological embrace. Stressing the study of Buddhism as a key subfield of Burma Studies and as a powerful force that would help propel Burma towards political independence were instrumental in widening the envisaged divide vis-à-vis an India identified as Hindu and Muslim, and with its own ambitions towards nationhood. Thus, as you have already pointed out, Sana, religion became a key tool in this process of extraction. Additionally, while British and Burmese academic elites collaborated in removing Burma from 'India', they also decided not to compensate for this intellectual and institutional loss by opening up the field more vigorously towards Southeast Asia. To which degree and at which pace a 'de-Indianized' Burma Studies found their new home in Southeast Asian

<sup>50</sup> James G. Scott ('Shway Yoe'), *The Burman: His Life and Notions* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1882).

<sup>51</sup> Carol Ann Boshier, *Mapping Cultural Nationalism. The Scholars of the Burma Research Society, 1910–1935* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press, 2018).

Studies could be the topic of another Roundtable. The stress on Buddhism would indeed have allowed for a stronger reintegration of Burma into the field of Southeast Asian Studies. However, the combined dynamics of Burmese nationalism and French Indology, which retained its Indian vision for Indochine, to which one should add the Thai academic elites' own colonizing Orientalist project, which was mostly self-colonizing but temporarily included the study of Burma,<sup>52</sup> led to placing Burma Studies in a peculiar kind of limbo and prepared the ground for Burmese academic exceptionalism and the rise of the study of Burmese Buddhism as an isolating rather than a connecting force. Although post-Second World War scholarship did connect Burma more strongly with Southeast Asia, the preceding situation set the stage for developments well into the post-independence decades, both on the Burmese and international side, with the country self-isolating, scholars in Burma having to operate under the most paralyzing conditions, and international scholarly collaboration, also within Southeast Asia, all but grinding to a halt anyway after the 1962 military coup. From that period onwards, international Burma Studies moved at a dramatically slower pace, at least until 1988, and has seen a substantial return to greater participation in the larger academic array of fields only since the events of 2007 and neoliberal developments in the country over the last decade.<sup>53</sup> What the return to military rule in early 2021 will mean for the field remains unclear. Yet, the energy and resilience of the resistance movement, on the one hand, and the emergence of young Burmese scholars like Chu May Paing and Than Toe Aung<sup>54</sup> in the global academy in concert with the emerging attempts in Western academia to decolonize itself,<sup>55</sup> on the other, prefigure more dynamic and utopian forces, shared in part with current political experiences in South Asia, that will shape the field in the years ahead and promise to resist a return to past cycles of self-isolation.

My reflections make me wonder what correspondences there may be in South Asian historiographical writing to these shifts in the boundaries and orientations of the academic fields in question. Sana, do you think it would be useful for us to go back to the removal of Burma from British India in 1937 to ask both what that rupture and what the *forgetting* of that rupture means for the place of Burma in South Asian Studies? Although Burma was ruled as a province of British India for half a century, South Asian historiography is dominated by the partition of 1947 and the subsequent independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Why is Burma excluded from this field of scholarship?

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<sup>52</sup> For a document representative of Thai elite engagements with Burma in the 1930s, see HRH Prince Damrong Rajanubhab of Thailand, *Journey through Burma in 1936* (Bangkok: River Books, 1991).

<sup>53</sup> Andrew Selth, 'Modern Burma Studies: A Survey of the Field', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2010, pp. 401–40, specifically p. 413.

<sup>54</sup> Paing and Aung, 'Talking Back to White Researchers'.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Michael Charney, 'How Racist is your Engagement with Burma Studies', *Forsea*, 10 June 2021, available <https://forsea.co/how-racist-is-your-engagement-with-burma-studies/>, [accessed 4 April 2022].

**SA:** Sunil Amrith's work made visible the stunning scale of circulation across the Bay of Bengal in the high noon of colonialism. Approximately 15 million people travelled from India to Burma between 1840–1940.<sup>56</sup> The majority were sojourners who spent two to three years there before returning, making the 'Indian' presence in Burma both temporary and permanent. The scale and scope of this encounter alone suggest a deeply entangled, shared history of Burma and South Asia. Yet, as you rightly point out, Christoph, Burma is excluded from South Asian historiography. There are three interconnected issues relevant to the set of questions you raise about the historical rupture of 1937 and the historiographical erasure of Burma from South Asia that could help us think through this exclusion and forgetting. These are the myth of Burma's double colonization, the spectre of the unwelcome immigrant, and the afterlives of the separation of 1937. Let me take each by turn.

First is the enduring myth of double colonization. Jonathan Saha notes that although it was the colonial state that provincialized Burma to India at an administrative level, colonial officials, including J. S. Furnivall, framed this as Burma's 'double colonization' to argue that it created a rupture in Burmese society and polity.<sup>57</sup> This alleged rupture became the rallying point for nationalists who claimed Burma's nationhood as racially, historically, and religiously distinct to demand separation from India. This claim, as Thant Myint-U and others have shown, deployed a 'static and passive' account of Burma's past that is 'anachronistic and ahistorical'.<sup>58</sup> But the trope of Burma's—and Burmese—distinctiveness from India was a powerful one that Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore also animated. When urged by U Ottama to take up his anti-separation cause, Gandhi demurred, stating, 'Burma was not a part of India at all. This is not what we call Bharatvarsha.'<sup>59</sup> On a visit to Burma in 1916, noting the large numbers of Indians in Rangoon (who constituted more than half of the city's population), Tagore proclaimed that Rangoon had 'not grown like a tree from the soil of the country', but was standing 'in opposition to the entire country'.<sup>60</sup> So, one reason for the exclusion of Burma from South Asian historiography is the enduring myth of the former's double colonization, which asserts that Burma was never part of South Asia, and that the presence of Indians in Burma was an unwanted, colonial creation. As I commented earlier, this framing erases the voices of monks like U Ottama who considered the India-Burma question from an alternative lens, one that

<sup>56</sup> Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), pp. 28, 104.

<sup>57</sup> Saha, 'Is it India?'

<sup>58</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 9–10, and Saha, 'Is it India?', p. 25.

<sup>59</sup> *Young India*, 10 March 1927, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 33 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1958), pp. 153–54. Gandhi to U Ottama, 17 July 1927, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 34 (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1958), p. 185.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 109–10.

was deeply rooted in a shared sacred geography that predated colonial rule and offered a common path to spiritual and political sovereignty.

The second issue to consider is mobility and migrants. Here, too, Furnivall provided an enduring analytical framework which positions the anti-Indian politics of separation that spilled onto the streets in affrays and riots in the 1930s as anti-immigrant. In examining Burma's 'plural' society, Furnivall argued that interactions between a dizzying array of communities in Rangoon was limited to the marketplace, further reinforcing the trope of 'Burmese' and 'Indian' separateness.<sup>61</sup> The limits of this marketplace reached an apotheosis in 1938 with large-scale violence in Rangoon. In their work on the separation and riots of 1937–38, Matthew Bowser and Rajashree Mazumder have shown how the spectre of the immigrant was raised, politicized, and racialized by Burmese legislators and subaltern intellectuals as being the cause of all economic and social ills to produce a racially and religiously distinct nation both discursively and politically.<sup>62</sup> This nationalist project, Nyi Nyi Kyaw argues, was built on a myth of deracination that originated in the early 1920s. It centred on the loss of Burman Buddhist identity that relied on 'a simple but powerful casual account that incites people's emotions and stimulated their collective behavior'.<sup>63</sup> Migrants from India were the first to be identified as an existential threat to the nation, and herein lies the second reason for Burma's exclusion from South Asia. David Ludden has noted that 'modernity consigned human mobility to the dusty corners of archives that document the hegemonic space of national territorialism'.<sup>64</sup> This mapping of race onto place excluded migrants from histories of South Asia until the recent interventions of Sugata Bose, Thomas Metcalf, and Sunil Amrith whose work on the Indian Ocean de-territorialized our historiographical gaze to include histories of circulation and connection.<sup>65</sup> Building on this work, scholars are now examining the unfinished business of decolonization that is centred on migrants and mobility, highlighting the fuzziness of borderlands and contested citizenship in South Asia.<sup>66</sup> As Joseph elaborates

<sup>61</sup> J. S. Furnivall, *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and the Netherlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948).

<sup>62</sup> For details, see Rajashree Mazumder, 'Constructing the Indian Immigrant to Colonial Burma', PhD thesis, UCLA, 2013; Rajashree Mazumder, "'I Do Not Envy You": Mixed Marriages and Immigration Debates in 1920s and 1930s Rangoon, Burma', *Indian Economic and History Review*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2014; Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma* (Chiang Mai: Silksworm Books, 2012); and Matthew Bowser, "'Buddhism has been Insulted. Take Immediate Steps": Burmese Fascism and the Origins of Burmese Islamophobia, 1936–38', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2021, pp. 1112–50.

<sup>63</sup> See Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 'The Role of Myth in Anti-Muslim Buddhist Nationalism in Myanmar', in *Buddhist-Muslim Relations in a Theravada World*, (eds) I. Frydenlund and M. Jerryson (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2020), p. 205.

<sup>64</sup> David Ludden, 'Presidential Address: Maps in the Mind and the Mobility of Asia', *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2003.

<sup>65</sup> Bose, *Hundred Horizons*; Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal*; and Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean Arena 1860–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>66</sup> See, for instance, Guyot-Richard, 'Tangled Lands'; Kalyani Ramnath, 'Histories of Indian Citizenship in the Age of Decolonization', *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*, vol.

in his comments, South Asia's borderlands and the communities that inhabit them necessarily include Burma. The origin of these territorial delimitations and claims to citizenship date back to 1937 when a carceral border was created by the new cartographic line that separated Burma from India.

This brings me to the third and final issue to consider—the afterlives of separation. Separation promised to rid Burma of migrant labour. A year later, however, large-scale riots broke out in Rangoon in 1938 triggered by the re-publication of a Muslim text that was perceived by Buddhist monks and the vernacular press to be an insult to Buddhism.<sup>67</sup> Separation in 1937 had enabled the colonial and post-colonial state to control immigration and expel migrants, marking a victory for nationalists who had raised the spectre of the migrant to 'save' Burma. Yet the myth of deracination endured, showing tremendous historical transcendence by taking on, as Kyaw has put it, demographic, racial, and religious connotations.<sup>68</sup> There are two chronologies worth considering here. On the one hand, the riots can be considered the last convulsion of the anti-immigrant, pro-separation politics of the preceding decade. Although separation came into effect in 1937, the Indo-Burma immigration agreement was not worked out until 1941 which meant that the migrant presence in Rangoon outlasted the political resolution to the migrant 'problem'.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the most in-depth historiographical work on the riots—Bowser's and Mazumdar's works mentioned above—place the riots within a nationalist chronology of legislative manoeuvres that were a corollary to the main event, that is, the separation. On the other hand, the deeply gendered, distinctly anti-Muslim aspect of the 1938 riots has been highlighted in recent work by Chie Ikeya, Melissa Crouch, Kyaw, and Bowser who draw attention to the opposition to the marriages of Buddhist women and Muslim men that had built up over the 1930s and fuelled the riots of 1938.<sup>70</sup> This scholarship

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45, no. 1, 2021, pp. 152–73; and Rajashree Mazumder, 'Illegal Border Crossers and Unruly Citizens: Burma-Pakistan-Indian Borderlands from the Nineteenth to the Mid-Twentieth Centuries', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2019, pp. 1144–82.

<sup>67</sup> For details, see 'Burma Riot Inquiry (Braund) Committee: Final report and appendices' (Rangoon, 1939), and Bowser, "'Buddhism has been Insulted'".

<sup>68</sup> Kyaw, 'Role of Myth', p. 207.

<sup>69</sup> Chettiar bankers and Tamil and Telugu labour remained in Burma long after separation in 1937. See Kalyani Ramnath, 'Intertwined Itineraries: Debt, Decolonization, International Law in Post-World War II South Asia', *Law and History Review*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2020; Kalyani Ramnath, 'Boats in a Storm: Law, Politics, Jurisdiction in Postwar South Asia', PhD thesis, Princeton University, 2018; and Emma Meyer, 'Resettling Burma's Displaced: Labor, Rehabilitation, and Citizenship in Visakhapatnam, India, 1937–1979', PhD thesis, Emory College of Arts and Sciences, 2020; and Tin Maung Maung Than, 'Some Aspects of Indians in Rangoon' and 'Indians in Burma: Problems of an Alien Subculture in a Highly Integrated Society', in *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, (eds) K. S. Sandhu and A. Mani (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993).

<sup>70</sup> For details, see Chie Ikeya, *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2012); Chie Ikeya, 'Colonial Intimacies in Comparative Perspective: Inter-marriage, Law, and Cultural Difference in British Burma', Special issue, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2013; Chie Ikeya, 'Belonging across Religion, Race, and Nation in Burma and Myanmar', in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Classification*, (eds)

is marked with an urgency that the contemporary Rohingya crisis demands. Looking back from today, the riots of 1938 were the start, rather than the end, of the violent process of expulsion that goes back almost a century, to the separation of 1937 and the first articulation of racial and religious majoritarianism that has now resurfaced in Myanmar.

In an important critique of Furnivall's analysis of colonial Burma as a marketplace, Turner, Ikeya, and others have shown that far from being a marketplace, Burma's plural society was constituted by an intimately entangled socio-religious geography that separation could not, and did not, disentangle.<sup>71</sup> These entanglements created spaces of connection, but also triggered moments of violent confrontation. The colonial legal record shows that from the late nineteenth century, Hindu and Muslim migrants from India married Burmese women who kept Buddhist shrines in their homes, even as they converted to Islam or performed Hindu rituals to sanction their marriages. Their children were given Burmese names, prayed at Hindu and Buddhist temples, and worshipped at mosques and pagodas.<sup>72</sup> The riots in 1938 pulled the veil off Buddhist anxieties over these Buddhist-Muslim marriages. While couched in the language of indigeneity and separation, what is striking is that, for the most part, middle-class Hindus who had opposed the separation and who continued to live in Burma were spared the discursive build-up to the riots and the post-mortem in their aftermath. Unlike Muslim-Buddhist intimacies, the marriages of Hindu men and Buddhist women triggered little comment or criticism in the aftermath of separation. In fact, Hindus and Buddhist monks came together to distance themselves from Muslims in Burma, invoking a politics of Hindu-Buddhist civilizational proximity that endured long after separation and U Ottama's political marginalization and death in the late 1930s. The Hindu Mahasabha, which by 1938 was invested in a similar project of religious majoritarianism in India under the presidency of V. D. Savarkar, vehemently condemned Muslims in Burma who 'attacked Lord Buddha wantonly' and denounced Muslim-Buddhist marriages as posing a 'danger' to 'our Buddhist co-religionists'. Savarkar warned of an 'alarming increase in the indigenous Moslem population' in Burma which had caused 'slow death in the cases of so many other Buddhist and non-Moslem nations in Asia'. These marriages, he went on to proclaim, created 'a schism in Muslim Burma and Buddhist Burma' by breaking up the 'racial, religious, and cultural homogeneity of the Burmese nation and divide it as has happened in the case of Hindustan'.<sup>73</sup>

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Z. L. Rocha and P. J. Aspinall (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Tin Tin Htun, 'Mixed Marriage in Colonial Burma: National Identity and Nationhood at Risk', in *Domestic Tensions, National Anxieties: Global Perspectives on Marriage, Crisis, and Nation*, (eds) Kristin Celello and Hanan Kholoussy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Bowser, "'Buddhism has been Insulted'"; Kyaw, 'Role of Myth'; and Melissa Crouch, 'Constructing Law by Religion in Myanmar', *Review of Faith and International Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2015, pp. 1–11.

<sup>71</sup> See Alicia Turner, 'Colonial Secularism Built in Brick: Religion in Rangoon', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2021, pp. 26–48; and Ikeya, 'Belonging across Religion'.

<sup>72</sup> For details, see Ikeya, 'Colonial Intimacies'.

<sup>73</sup> *Hindu Outlook*, 17 August 1938 and 18 January 1939.



By equating Buddhist-Muslim conflict in Burma with the Hindu-Muslim question in India, Savarkar evoked two partitions in South Asia—that of India and Pakistan which would occur a decade later, and the ongoing partition of India and Burma, albeit somewhat unwittingly. Partition, as a conceptual category, has enabled historians to interrogate the spectacle of violence and displacement, and memorialize the tragedy of partition. The partition of 1947 created post-colonial borders that historians wilfully trespass to emphasize the shared history of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.<sup>74</sup> In doing so, historians underscore the incompleteness of pogroms of expulsion and partition during which millions of ‘Indian’, ‘Pakistanis’, and ‘Bangladeshis’ were permanently dislocated. Burma, however, is excluded, placed within the purview of Southeast Asia. My research shows that it was in fact the separation of Burma in 1937 that was the first in South Asia to offer a ‘final solution’ for majoritarian politics in the guise of religious nationalism. Buddhist nationalists raised the spectre of the unwanted ‘Indian’ migrant through borders and expulsions, unleashing and foreshadowing the violence, displacement, and tragedy of *the* partition. This was the *first* of many partitions of the historical artefact—British India—that continues to convulse across South Asia long after its nullification.

In his comments below Joseph will draw out in more detail the implications for the current Rohingya crisis of the Hindu-Buddhist spiritual geography that produced religious majoritarianism in Burma and India. I want to end by noting that today, Hindu nationalism in India and Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar have resurrected several ghosts of a shared past—the migration of unskilled labour across colonial India, including Burma, in the mid-nineteenth century; the invocation of a Hindu-Buddhist sacred geography that accompanied the 1937 separation of Burma; and the communitarian violence of the partitions of British India in 1937 and 1947. The contemporary resonances of the unfinished business of separation demands that a South Asian history of Burma be written, and that Burma be considered seriously in the historiography of South Asia. And it is for this reason that I answer Jonathan Saha’s provocative question about the usefulness of thinking of Burma ‘as part of South Asia’ with an emphatic yes.<sup>75</sup>

**JM:** I would like to build on Sana’s point regarding the centrality of the nation in the early historiography of South Asia—a point certainly pertinent to the study of Burma, as Alicia Turner and Mikael Gravers have also shown—with a brief point about how this relates to the field of global history.<sup>76</sup> Rather

<sup>74</sup> On the long afterlives of partition and the making of refugees and citizens, see Vazira Zamindar, *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Udit Sen, *Citizen Refugee: Forging the Indian Nation after Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Antara Datta *Refugees and Borders in South Asia: The Great Exodus of 1971* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012); Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); and Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned Lives: Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947–65* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>75</sup> Saha, ‘Is it India?’, p. 24.

<sup>76</sup> Alicia Turner, ‘Narratives of Nation, Questions of Community: Examining Burmese Sources Without the Lens of Nation’, *The Journal of Burmese Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2011), pp. 263–82;



than a spatially oriented approach concerned with macro-scale transnational flows encompassing the entire world, global history is best understood as a way of thinking about the past that challenges the methodological nationalism of older historiography and questions its propensity to foreground the nation-state as its primary unit of analysis.<sup>77</sup> Assessing Burma's relationship to South Asia provides similar potential for situating Burmese history, religion, culture, and politics within an interconnected web of wider inter-Asian worlds.<sup>78</sup> As a brief aside, while Sana noted that major anti-colonial figures in India like Gandhi and Tagore regarded Burma as distinct from their imagined geography of 'India', this idea also had its detractors. Other figures, especially those drawing from revolutionary currents of thought and practice, like Rash Behari Bose, adopted a range of political imaginaries that did not always clearly differentiate 'Burma' and 'India' as separate categories. Describing his fugitive passage out of Calcutta on board the *Sanuki Maru* in 1915, Rash Behari Bose referred to the journey as his first time leaving India. It is almost as an afterthought that Bose mentions having previously visited Burma since, in his words: 'Burma did not seem to me to be outside India.'<sup>79</sup> Listening to Sana's discussion of U Ottama, I was struck by some similarities with Bose in the way that the two conceived of their respective national projects in terms of civilization, history, religion, and shared culture.<sup>80</sup>

All of this is not to say that the nation-state does not remain a durable or important category of analysis—unseating the nation as the primary or naturalized unit of analysis is not the same as scrapping it entirely.<sup>81</sup> The rapid spread of COVID-19 highlighted the interconnected nature of our global society but has also seemingly fuelled existing calls for national self-sufficiency, hard borders, and increasingly narrow visions of national belonging, pointing

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

<sup>77</sup> For a recent discussion, see 'Looking Back and Forward—Developments, Challenges, and Visions for the Future of Global History', *Toynbee Prize Foundation*, 2020, available <https://toynbee-prize.org/posts/ghi-conference/>, [accessed 4 April 2022]. See also Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Amitava Chowdhury, 'Diaspora as Global History', in *Between Dispersion and Belonging: Global Approaches to Diaspora in Practice*, (eds) Amitava Chowdhury and Donald H. Akenson (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), pp. 254–62. This is to say nothing of more recent 'planetary' visions of history that aim to step beyond the global to decentre not only nations, but humans themselves. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2009, pp. 197–222.

<sup>78</sup> Tim Harper and Sunil Amrith (eds), *Sites of Asian Interaction: Ideas, Networks, and Mobility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). For a discussion of these connections grounded in the urban development of Rangoon, see Michael Sugarman, 'Reclaiming Rangoon: (Post-) Imperial Urbanism and Poverty, 1920–62', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 6, 2018, pp. 1–32.

<sup>79</sup> Asitabha Das (ed.), *Rashbehari Bose Collected Works: Autobiography, Writing and Speeches* (Kolkata: Kishaloy Prakashan, 2006), p. 33.

<sup>80</sup> For more about the political imaginary of Rash Behari Bose and Pan-Asianism, see Joseph McQuade, 'The New Asia of Rash Behari Bose: India, Japan, and the Limits of the International, 1912–1945', *Journal of World History*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2016, pp. 641–67.

<sup>81</sup> Sophie-Jung Kim, Alastair McClure and Joseph McQuade 'Making and Unmaking the Nation in World History: Introduction', *History Compass*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2017.

towards the importance of understanding how nations and nationalisms continue to shape individual and collective identities in the third decade of the twenty-first century. To take up Christoph's remark, how we encounter our sites of study—and how we in turn are encountered by our interlocutors—will continue to be profoundly shaped by the social context of a post-pandemic world, especially one in which the effects of the crisis seem set to play out in such uneven ways. Some questions that have become especially salient—though certainly not new—include: who can cross borders and who cannot; how information is to be generated, distributed, or moderated in the age of social media; and the transnational solidarities, or lack thereof, of movements advocating for democracy, justice, and human rights.

As existing scholarship on South and Southeast Asian borderlands has made clear, the crescent of territory that encircles the northern reaches of the Bay of Bengal was a historically dynamic space that experienced significant transformation from the early modern period to the present.<sup>82</sup> Prior to the expansion of European colonialism in the nineteenth century and the creation of the post-colonial nation-states of India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Bhutan in the twentieth, the region was home to a diverse array of complex and entangled histories. Under the encroachments of imperialism and the spread of global capital, these histories gave way to what Sanghamitra Misra calls 'a fragmented zone of dependent and independent polities and bounded political units of the colonial state'.<sup>83</sup> Once a dynamic realm of exchange straddling the liminal space between the Mughal empire in the west, Qing China to the east, and smaller hubs of regional trade in Assam, Sikkim, and the Irrawaddy valley, this region became envisioned by the colonial state as an imperial periphery, with its inhabitants in turn reimagined as static, warlike tribes trapped in the 'waiting room of history' beyond the 'modernizing' reach of the state.<sup>84</sup> This Whiggish interpretation of history, which read global events through a linear framework of 'progress' and 'improvement', continues to inform how many think about Burmese society today, albeit now reframed in a language of 'development' and 'economic stagnation'.<sup>85</sup> As Sana has noted, such divisions are enhanced by underlying tensions between the modern categories of nation and migration, citizen and migrant, territoriality and mobility.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>82</sup> See, for example, James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>83</sup> Sanghamitra Misra, *Becoming a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Identity in Colonial Northeastern India* (New Delhi; New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 1.

<sup>84</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). See also Bérénice Guyot-Réchar, *Shadow States: India, China and the Himalayas, 1910-1962* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>85</sup> The most recent and compelling examination of how liberal ideas of history shaped and were shaped by British imperialism is provided by Priya Satia, *Time's Monster: How History Makes History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020).

<sup>86</sup> For a critique of global histories that prioritize mobility at the expense of place, see Shruti Kapila, 'Global Intellectual History', in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, (eds) Samuel Moyn and Darrin McMahon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 253–74.

Ignoring these entangled histories in favour of the more rigid methodological nationalism of older historiography ultimately serves the ends of the modern state, sometimes with dire consequences. Crushed under the weight of decades of repressive policies that denied the predominantly Muslim Rohingya of Rakhine state any right to citizenship or legal recognition, insurgents of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked Rakhine police outposts on 9 October 2016, providing the pretext for a brutal crackdown by the Burmese military, aided by paramilitaries and local Buddhist vigilantes.<sup>87</sup> Labelled by Amnesty International as ‘the most persecuted minority in the world’, the Rohingya have suffered from particularly egregious persecution in recent years at the hands of both the Burmese government and local Rakhine Buddhists. Despite a long history in the region (with references to a ‘Roonga’ population as early as the late eighteenth century), the Rohingya are increasingly labelled as terrorists, separatists, and illegal immigrants from the Chittagong region of modern-day Bangladesh.<sup>88</sup>

As Thibaut has demonstrated elsewhere, it is not easy to draw a clear line of demarcation between, for example, Chittagong and Arakan in terms of long-term cultural and literary history.<sup>89</sup> Yet the distinction between Arakanese (now Rakhine) and Chittagonian identity remains of crucial political importance in the area that now comprises the state of Rakhine, and this has been the case ever since the creation of the modern Burmese nation-state. In an address to Prime Minister U Nu in 1948, a political organization called the Jamiat Ul Ulema of North Arakan sought to clearly present their credentials as ‘Loyal Citizens’ of the Union of Burma with roots dating back to the intermarriage of Arab Muslims with local Arakanese as early as 788 CE. In this address, the Jamiat sought to make a clear distinction between themselves, as Arakanese with ancestry dating back over a thousand years, and the Bengali-speaking Chittagonian Muslims with whom they were often conflated.<sup>90</sup> These Chittagonian Muslims migrated into the Arakan region in huge numbers due to colonial labour needs during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, along with other Indian migrants, including the Chettiar merchants and bankers mentioned by Sana in this discussion. In Arakan, incoming Chittagonian Muslims mixed with the local Arakanese Muslim population over the course of several generations, making it increasingly difficult to

<sup>87</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2020), pp. 232–33.

<sup>88</sup> Azeem Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* (London: Hurst and Co., 2016), pp. 24–26.

<sup>89</sup> Thibaut D'Hubert, *In the Shade of the Golden Palace: Alaol and Middle Bengali Poetics in Arakan* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). For colonial and counter-colonial entanglements across the Arakan-Chittagong region, see also D. Mitra Barua, ‘Thrice-Honored Sangharaja Saramedha (1801–1882): Arakan Chittagong Buddhism across Colonial and Counter-Colonial Power’, *The Journal of Burma Studies*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2019, pp. 37–85.

<sup>90</sup> ‘Address Presented by Jamiat Ul Ulema on Behalf of the People of North Arakan to the Hon'ble Prime Minister of the Union of Burma’, 25 October 1948, Government of the Union of Burma, Foreign Office, available at <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/J-U-25-October-1948.pdf>, [accessed 21 April 2022].

differentiate between the two groups. This intermixing also came at a time of growing resentment towards Indian immigrants more broadly, who became targets of nationalist rhetoric and violence, especially from the 1930s on. As Burmese nationalists came to resent the presence of Indian merchants, landlords, and moneylenders, the original Arakanese Muslims began to be lumped together with the more recent Muslim immigrants from Bengal. While the distinction between these communities is in fact quite malleable in practice, it is very important to note that the same holds true of the majoritarian Bamar or Burman people themselves, whose own identity as a distinct and coherent 'Burmese' ethnic group similarly appears to have its roots in the eighteenth century, a point Sana raised earlier.<sup>91</sup>

That being said, it is also essential to recognize the cultural distinctiveness of Rohingya Muslims in the Arakan region as a way of pushing back against the rhetoric of Burmese nationalists and Rakhine Buddhists, who brand them as Bengali immigrants with no claim to citizenship or even basic human rights. The Rohingya language, while sharing similarities with the Chittagonian dialect across the border, is its own distinct language, not mutually intelligible with Bengali. Initiatives such as the development of a unique script by the Rohingya scholar Mohammad Hanif in the 1980s, as well as more recent efforts to digitize the script and ensure transmission to younger generations are all important ways of conveying this distinctiveness.<sup>92</sup> At the same time, it is important to untangle how it is that the idea of 'Bengali' identity came to be identified as an inherently foreign imposition within Burmese territory, given the rich history of cultural interaction between these regions. Drawing on older discourses of 'religious protection', some Buddhist monks like the fire-brand U Wirathu construct a deeply exclusionary version of national identity that defines religious minorities like the Rohingya as inherently dangerous presences that risk overwhelming the Buddhist identity of modern-day Myanmar.<sup>93</sup> This 'othering' has extended beyond the Rohingya community to Burmese Muslims more generally, even those (like the Kaman as well as Burman and Kachin Muslims) whose ethnicity as indigenous to the Burmese nation-state is not disputed even by their detractors.<sup>94</sup>

While the Rohingya are marginalized within Myanmar due to their supposed South Asian provenance, Rohingya refugees are likewise viewed as outsiders within the South Asian countries of India and Bangladesh. In response to the humanitarian crisis that began in 2016, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi blamed Muslim extremists for the violence being experienced by Myanmar's Rohingya and referred to Rohingya refugees in India as a 'security threat'. Although as many as 100,000 Rohingya live in India today, the conditions

<sup>91</sup> Myint-U, *Making of Modern Burma*, pp. 83–84.

<sup>92</sup> 'Language of Rohingya to be Digitized: "It Legitimizes the Struggle"', *The Guardian*, 19 December 2017, available <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/19/language-rohingya-digitised-legitimises-struggle-emails>, [accessed 4 April 2022].

<sup>93</sup> Matthew J. Walton, *Buddhism, Politics and Political Thought in Myanmar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 144.

<sup>94</sup> Francis Wade, *Myanmar's Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim 'Other'* (London: Zed Books, 2017).

they face are deplorable, with many confined to slums or unauthorized communities. The Indian media regularly adopts the language of the Burmese government, referring to Rohingya as Bangladeshi refugees.<sup>95</sup> This process of 'othering' has its own historical and political dimensions tied to xenophobia against Bangladeshi refugees and immigrants in India's northeast. In the state of Assam, fears of being 'overrun' by immigrants from Bangladesh (and from East Pakistan in earlier decades) have been a recurrent thread within local attempts to define citizenship, and the 2014 national electoral success of the BJP has added further fuel to an anti-Muslim politics of exclusion. More recently, the BJP has sought to resolve the tension between its advocacy for partition refugees and its anti-Muslim immigration stance by excluding Muslims from its list of potential persecuted minorities from neighbouring countries.<sup>96</sup>

By contrast, the Awami League government in Bangladesh sees the Rohingya as an internal problem for Myanmar to deal with, and rejects responsibility for the plight of Rohingya refugees, seeking only to repatriate them to Myanmar as soon as possible. While Bangladesh, a country that faces its own economic, political, and sectarian issues, currently hosts the largest number of Rohingya refugees in the world outside of Myanmar, the government recently signed a deal with Myanmar to repatriate some of the refugees back to Rakhine state. Plans are under way to send as many as 100,000 of the remaining Rohingya to a purpose-built barracks-style facility called Bhasan Char, which translates as 'floating island'. UN officials and human rights groups say the cyclone-prone island could become a death sentence of a different kind for Rohingya refugees as sea levels continue to rise. So far, at least two groups of Rohingya have already been relocated in a process that officials in Bangladesh say is voluntary but critics say is fraught with coercion.<sup>97</sup> Activists like Wai Wai Nu have drawn attention to the fact that while dozens of Rohingya are drowning trying to escape Bhasan Char, the international community is failing to listen to the voices of survivors.<sup>98</sup> Displaced from their traditional homes and denied access to citizenship, the Rohingya are being transformed into a stateless people, at significant risk of being erased from the interstices between South and Southeast Asia through ongoing processes of displacement and genocide.<sup>99</sup>

In researching the recent crisis or its historical antecedents, scholars operating in North American and European universities have a responsibility not to instrumentalize members of the Rohingya community as supposedly passive

<sup>95</sup> Ranabira Samddara and Sabyasachi Basu Ray Chaudhury (eds), *The Rohingya in South Asia: People without a State* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>96</sup> For a thorough discussion, see Baruah, *In the Name of the Nation*, pp. 47–75.

<sup>97</sup> 'Bangladesh Moves Nearly 2,000 Rohingya Refugees to Remote Island', *Al Jazeera*, 29 December 2020, available <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/29/new-group-of-rohingya-refugees-moved-to-bangladesh-remote-island>, [accessed 4 April 2022].

<sup>98</sup> Wai Wai Nu, 'What crimes did they commit to be sent to die? Where is protection for these #genocide survivors and refugees?' (tweet), Twitter, 15 August 2021, available at <https://twitter.com/waiwainu/status/1426997948706066435>, [accessed 4 April 2022].

<sup>99</sup> For the history of statelessness as a category of international law, see Mira L. Siegelberg, *Statelessness: A Modern History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019).

research subjects or mere data points.<sup>100</sup> In a rush to document the atrocities committed against Rohingya refugees in 2017, some foreign researchers retraumatized members of the community by forcing some survivors of sexual violence to recount their ordeal as many as 70 times.<sup>101</sup> I agree with Christoph that the impacts of recent events on the field of Burmese Studies have yet to reveal themselves, but it seems likely that ‘vaccine passports’, travel restrictions, and access to information may all serve to widen existing inequalities and exacerbate obstacles for the communities most impacted by this research. These changing dynamics make it especially important to give space to local voices when possible and to foreground questions of research ethics in our approaches, especially as these pertain to the safety and mental well-being of those for whom the consequences of this participation can quite literally be a matter of life and death.

**CE:** I would like to turn your question, Sana, on how Burma fell out of South Asia or, from the perspective I am taking in this discussion, how the study of Burma fell out of South Asian Studies, on its head and address it by, inversely, looking at late twentieth-century attempts to again include it. These trends, dating back to one academic generation ago, may or may not be seen as precursors to the current discussion and the renewed South Asian Studies interest in Burma. They may also allow us to reflect on what motivates field and area shifting, who the agents of these shifts are, and who is forgotten in all that shifting. It will also take us back to the role of the study of religion, which you addressed, Sana, in making or breaking regional and field boundaries.

The 1960s in West Germany saw a unique, if tentative and small-scale, re-efflorescence of an Indologically oriented interest in Burma, on the one hand, and of attempts to reconfigure Burma vis-à-vis South Asian Studies, on the other, both through Buddhist Studies. The former was tied to the initiative of one person, Indologist and Buddhist Studies scholar Heinz Bechert (1932–2005), whose work on Turfan, Sri Lanka, and Buddhism predisposed him towards literatures and, eventually, social history situated in areas on the periphery of classical Indology. The enduring connections between Sri Lanka and Burma and its shared Buddhist history—a subfield that goes back to Minayeff’s work on the *Gandhavaṃsa* (‘The Chronicle of Books’),<sup>102</sup> a literary history of Pali literature in Sri Lanka and Burma—has been one of the most enduring locations of scholarship tying Burma to what came to be defined as South Asia or, at the same time and from the perspective of Sri Lanka Studies, shifting Sri Lanka into what came to be defined as Southeast Asian Studies, if almost exclusively from a Buddhist Studies angle. Sri Lanka is, in

<sup>100</sup> Michael Charney has pointed this out in the context of the larger divide between white and non-white scholarship, but the ethnic diversity and power imbalances within Myanmar necessitate a more nuanced attention to which voices we are hearing and not hearing, even when these voices are ‘Burmese’. See Charney, ‘How Racist is your Engagement with Burma Studies’.

<sup>101</sup> Jacob Goldberg, ‘When the Story Comes before the Survivor’, *Columbia Journalism Review*, 21 February 2019, available <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/rohingya-interviews.php>, [accessed 4 April 2022].

<sup>102</sup> Mabel H. Bode, *The Pali Literature of Burma* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1909), p. x.



fact, another interesting example of regional ambiguity, which may be productively configured with Burma. As in Burma, Buddhism was modernistically and nationalistically deployed to distance itself from Hindu India and, with the Tamil conflict, from the perceived 'India' within. Even more so than for Burma, Buddhism was able to supply to twentieth-century Sinhalese elites both a sense of historical, lineage-based superiority regarding the Buddhism of continental Southeast Asia. It also allowed them to invoke a shared history of sponsorship and religious reform that have flowed back from Burma and Thailand to Sri Lanka throughout the centuries,<sup>103</sup> from the Burmese Kalyāṇī Inscription to the role of the Siyam and Amarapura Nikāyas in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries. These are just three prominent examples, suggesting that in certain crucial ways Colombo and Kandy are much closer to, say, Mandalay and Bangkok than to Madras or Kochin. Late twentieth-century European attempts to academically rethink the region were based on the study of these developments.

One major contribution towards having Southeast Asia reach right into South Asia, so to speak, was Bechert's magnum opus on Buddhism, state, and society in the countries of Theravāda Buddhism,<sup>104</sup> which, in a departure from traditional German Indology, redraws the map between South and Southeast Asia along the lines of the Theravāda world from the perspective of twentieth-century Buddhism.<sup>105</sup> This is a Buddhismskunde informed but not constrained by its Indological heritage and whose scope extended beyond Burma and brought back together what had disintegrated with the fall of the paradigm of the 'indianized states' of Francophone Indology. It prefigures projects independently pursued by Anglophone Buddhist Studies scholars in the decades to come. Authors like Donald Swearer ('the Buddhist world of Southeast Asia'),<sup>106</sup> who leaves out Sri Lanka; John Holt ('Buddhist ritual cultures in contemporary Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka'),<sup>107</sup> who adds it on; or Stephen Berkwitz ('South Asian Buddhism'),<sup>108</sup> who includes Bhutan and Bangladesh, but not Burma or Tibet and whose South Asia ends in Gandhāra, all painstakingly respect the political post-Second World War area boundaries, while Anne Blackburn ('Pali-land')<sup>109</sup> and Kate Crosby

<sup>103</sup> Anne Blackburn, *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-Century Lankan Monastic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Alexey Kirichenko, 'The Itineraries of "Sīhaḷa Monk" Sāralaṅka: Buddhist Interactions in Eighteenth-Century Southern Asia', in *Buddhist and Islamic Orders in Southern Asia. Comparative Perspectives*, (eds) R. Michael Feener and Anne M. Blackburn (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), pp. 48–74.

<sup>104</sup> Heinz Bechert, *Buddhismus, Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravāda-Buddhismus* (Frankfurt/M.: Alfred Metzner Verlag, 1966).

<sup>105</sup> Jens-Uwe Hartmann, 'Heinz Bechert (1932–2005)', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, vol. 158, 2008, pp. 1–7; see especially p. 4. See also Oskar von Hinüber, 'Heinz Bechert 1932–2005: Obituary', *Indologica Taurinensia*, vol. 32, 2006, pp. 197–202.

<sup>106</sup> Donald K. Swearer, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

<sup>107</sup> John C. Holt, *Theravada Traditions. Buddhist Ritual Cultures in Contemporary Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka* (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2017).

<sup>108</sup> Stephen C. Berkwitz, *South Asian Buddhism. A Survey* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>109</sup> Anne M. Blackburn, 'Textual After-Lives of Scholar Monks in Later Medieval Pali-land', I. B. Horner Lecture, September 2011.



(‘Theravada Buddhism’)<sup>110</sup> preferred to move across them by prioritizing religio-linguistic categories.<sup>111</sup>

What is telling about the way Bechert worked towards an Indology of the region that sat uncomfortably with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism was that instead of stressing Sinhala Buddhism’s Pali identity, he explored the role of Sanskrit in the emergence of a Sri Lankan regional literature,<sup>112</sup> suggesting that rethinking a field involves showing that boundaries may not lie where we may think they do. In this context, I should also point out Bechert’s pioneering inclusion of modern religious movements in Bangladesh and Indonesia into the study of Buddhism,<sup>113</sup> which has attracted little prior attention. On the more traditionally Indological side, Bechert revisited the boundaries of his field by including Burmese manuscripts in the massive ‘Katalogisierung der orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland’ (KOHD) project, in addition to Central Asian and Singhalese ones, an effort continued by my teacher of literary Burmese Heinz Braun (1936–2016) and Anne Peters, setting new, Indologically oriented standards for the systematic academic presentation of Burmese manuscripts.<sup>114</sup> The project, which prominently implemented an Indologically informed transliteration for Burmese, acknowledged the linguistic and disciplinary continuity of the transmission and representation of texts within a Pāli scholarly environment across Burma, Europe, and South Asia.

The place Bechert envisaged for an Indologically informed study of Burma was formulated programmatically in the second edition of his introduction to Indology, co-edited with Georg von Simson.<sup>115</sup> While Central and Southeast Asia as a whole, comprising sections on Tibet and Burma, are included in Chapter XI, titled ‘India’s cultural ties’, Bechert dedicates the whole of Chapter XII to Burma—nine pages summarizing scholarship on the country from an Indological perspective and, as far as I am aware, an entirely unique decision regarding the boundaries of the field. As the science manager that he was, this must have been a conscious decision on Bechert’s part, reflected in the secondary title of the handbook, which includes ‘Aufgaben’ (‘tasks’), and in light of his efforts regarding the KOHD’s Burma volumes. With Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Turfan firmly established as bona fide Indological domains, the

<sup>110</sup> Kate Crosby, *Theravada Buddhism. Continuity, Diversity, and Identity* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014).

<sup>111</sup> Heinz Bechert, *Der Buddhismus in Süd- und Südostasien. Geschichte und Gegenwart*, (ed.) Ernst Steinkellner (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2013), published posthumously on the basis of a lecture series, moves in the same direction.

<sup>112</sup> Heinz Bechert, *Eine regionale hochsprachliche Tradition in Südasiens: Sanskrit-Literatur bei den buddhistischen Singhalesen* (Wien: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2005) is a reworked version of his *Habilitationsschrift* from 1964.

<sup>113</sup> Heinz Bechert, ‘Contemporary Buddhism in Bengal and Tripura’, *Educational Miscellany*, vol. 4, 1967/68, pp. 1–25; Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich (eds), *The World of Buddhism* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1984), pp. 278–79.

<sup>114</sup> Heinz Bechert, Daw Khin Khin Su and Daw Tin Tin Myint, Heinz Braun and Anne Peters (comps), *Burmese Manuscripts*, 8 vols (Wiesbaden; Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1979–2014).

<sup>115</sup> Heinz Bechert and Georg von Simson (eds), *Einführung in die Indologie. Stand—Methoden—Aufgaben*, 2nd edn (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, [1979] 1993).

highlighting of Burma in a handbook of Indology was certainly an attempt to expand the field and establish a new subfield that would help redraw the map. This needs to be seen in the light of Bechert's exclusion of Tibet, which features merely under 'cultural ties', and of 'Tibetologie', a separate introduction to which was announced by the publisher in the same series, but never materialized. The relation between Tibetan Studies and Indology has been ambiguous, with Indologists traditionally conducting Tibetology as an 'ancillary science' ('Hilfswissenschaft') aimed at reaching a better understanding of mostly Buddhist literature in Sanskrit, either very old or lost in Sanskrit or both. This is comparable to the utilization of Chinese in the study of South Asian Buddhist sources, with much of Tibetan Buddhism lying far beyond the domain of Indology.

As a specialist of Sri Lankan literature, Bechert would have been well aware of the fact that there was no way of having Burmese play the same 'archaeological' role for the older Pali literature that he was familiar with for Tibetan or Chinese for Sanskrit or northwestern Prakrit Buddhism. Burmese Studies would be no *Hilfswissenschaft*. What Bechert did not pursue, as his interests lay elsewhere, was what Burnouf had remarked on a hundred years earlier—that Burmese and Tibetan scribes and translators share the same meticulousness regarding their Pali or Sanskrit sources,<sup>116</sup> and that Burmese recensions of Pali texts, largely ignored by early British Pali philology, may indeed allow us to develop a more differentiated and accurate picture of the textual transmission, possibly reaching back to, or even beyond, the extant Sri Lankan recensions, and be critical for the study of the Buddhist past west of Burma. This is a role that Pali Studies have been assigning to Burma more strongly recently, in growing collaborations between Thai and Burmese editorial enterprises.<sup>117</sup> The promise that an Indological Burma seems to have held for Bechert instead was to allow for the exploration not of the ancient, but of the medieval and early modern with its relevance for the contemporary, as well as for the exploration of a regional literature that would expand Indology, not for the sake of a 'Greater India', but for a field that would prioritize the regions as semi-autonomous domains of research. It would allow one to stay true to the Indological project, while shedding more and new light on 'India' conceived of as the interface between old and transregional languages and literatures with younger, regional ones. Finally, it is crucial to see that a rethinking of area and field boundaries involved, in Bechert's case, an opening of the field towards contemporary Asian movements and, indeed, subaltern and minoritarian forms of Buddhism, like Dalit Buddhism or Buddhism in Bangladesh and Nepal, with strong and enduring ties to Burma. In the opening-up of such opportunities not only for study but for making previously unheard voices heard, which have the power to question the validity of an academic

<sup>116</sup> Eugène Burnouf, *Introduction to the History of Buddhism*, (trans) Katia Buffetrille and Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2010), p. 74.

<sup>117</sup> Alexander Wynne, 'A Preliminary Report on the Critical Edition of the Pāli Canon Being Prepared at Wat Phra Dhammakāya', *Thai International Journal of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 4, 2013, pp. 135–70.

tradition that has become questionable, lies the affinity of that moment to our current interest in the questions: 'What happened to Burma in South Asia?' Bechert's Indological embrace of Burma did not take off. No event captures this grandiose failure better than his doomed trip to Rangoon in the late 1960s to explore the ground for a projected major microfilming project of Burmese manuscripts. Nothing came of it and energies were instead redirected towards the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project (the NGMPP),<sup>118</sup> one of the largest Indological efforts of the late twentieth century. Burma Studies and Indology might have looked different today if the project had happened not in 1970s Kathmandu, but in Rangoon.

Apart from Bechert's initiatives at the University of Göttingen, the other strong move towards Burma in a West German academic institution was made by the political scientist Emanuel Sarkisyanz (1923–2015), a Baku-born Armenian-USSR scholar from Iran, at the University of Heidelberg's South Asia Institute (SAI). Founded in 1963 with a name that represented a turn away from the Indological paradigm while retaining Indology, the SAI's departmental structure was innovatively separated into 'classical' and 'modern' sections. Known for his work on Marxism and Buddhism in Burma,<sup>119</sup> Sarkisyanz shared with Bechert not only an interest in modern political Buddhism, but also in the historical moment of the emergence of South Asian Studies, eventually supplanting classical Indology. In an unusual move for a political scientist, Sarkisyanz brought expertise in premodern Burma to Heidelberg by appointing Gordon H. Luce's student, epigraphist U Tin Htway (1930–2015) as a lecturer in Burmese. Between 1968 and 1995, beginning in a period when South Asian Studies had yet to invent itself in Germany, the two scholars jointly succeeded in a rare attempt to create a space for Burma Studies within that emerging field.<sup>120</sup> Though lasting just under three decades and accompanied by the work of Heidelberg South Asian historians Dietmar Rothermund (1933–2020) and Hermann Kulke, the latter a scholar of both Odisha and Chola expansion into Southeast Asia, Burma's integration into the emerging field of South Asian Studies at the SAI remained an episode and, like Bechert's attempt in Göttingen, its end coincided with the retirement of its local champions. The historians of Burma, Tilman Frasch, now at Manchester Metropolitan University, and Jörg Schendel received their training from that school, with Frasch and his work on Bagan remaining the more Indologically informed.

The economic history orientation of the SAI at that time, however, also prefigured the more recent shift in South Asian Studies, as well as in Southeast Asian Studies, towards the Indian Ocean as a new paradigm reorienting and reorganizing both fields. It took over the role that India had for so long played for Indology, most directly by orienting South and select regions of Southeast

<sup>118</sup> Personal communication with Michael Witzel, Cambridge, MA, 18 November 2017.

<sup>119</sup> Emanuel Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965).

<sup>120</sup> Uta Gärtner, 'Myanmar-Studien. Ein Überblick', *Asia*, vol. 71, no. 1, 2017, pp. 377–87, specifically p. 382.

Asia towards each other, apart from a renewed openness towards southern West Asia. The novel term 'Southern Asia' is closely linked to the very idea of the ocean as organizing principle and holds the promise of loosening, among other things, old and new links between regional territories and religious identities.<sup>121</sup> The work of Dominic Goodall and Arlo Griffiths, spanning the Bay of Bengal into continental Southeast Asia and beyond, continues much of what French Indology set into motion. It operates with a keen sensibility towards the importance of smaller regions and their historical connections, and with a stronger awareness of regions again relativizing the notion of a unitary and overstretched India, while resisting an either isolated, annexed, or disintegrated Southeast Asia on the basis of Indologically informed studies.

The historiographically oriented work of Patrick Pranke, and that of Christian Lammerts on the history of legal writing, exemplifies this shift well for more recent American writing on Buddhist Burma. On the French Indological side, William Pruitt's work on Burmese commentarial literature (*nissaya*)<sup>122</sup> and his role in the recent important initiatives of the Pali Text Society in Burma,<sup>123</sup> already begun by Bechert and Braun,<sup>124</sup> is a good example of how work that would have been called Indological more than half a century ago is strengthening Burma's place in a conversation in which methodology undercuts area boundaries. The more recent resurgence of work on Persianate history, Persian as a transregional language, and Islam in areas either ignored by classical Indology or, for the reasons I give above, traditionally associated with Buddhism and Hinduism, have allowed for work on Burma like yours, Thibaut. To it I would like to add that of Jacques Leider, grounded in the Francophone philological tradition combining 'Persian Studies', 'Middle Bengali Studies', and what in Germany has been termed '*neusprachliche*' or 'modern language' Indologie, to redraw the map in a way consistent with earlier Indological projects.

The Pollockian 'Sanskrit cosmopolis'<sup>125</sup> was an attempt to do that for the premodern, similar to the effects that the Pali or the Persianate cosmopolis (regionally entwined with the Sanskrit one and more sensitive to the power of younger languages) have achieved for the early modern in bypassing old area fault lines and allowing previously understudied authors' voices to be heard. I may close my intervention by referring to a small but telling example of the inherited need of a linguistically and textually oriented approach towards a common space of shared historical substrata represented by the

<sup>121</sup> Feener and Blackburn, *Buddhist and Islamic Orders in Southern Asia*.

<sup>122</sup> William Pruitt, *Étude linguistique de nissaya birmanes. Traduction commentée de textes bouddhiques* (Paris: Presses de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1994).

<sup>123</sup> William Pruitt, Yumi Ousaka and Sunao Kasamatsu (eds), *The Catalogue of Manuscripts in the U Pho Thi Library, Thaton, Myanmar* (Bristol: The Pali Text Society, 2019). See also Peter Nyunt (trans.), *Catalogue of the Piṭaka and Other Texts in Pāli, Pāli-Burmese, and Burmese (Piṭakat-tō-sa-muii)* (Bristol: The Pali Text Society, 2012).

<sup>124</sup> Heinz Bechert and Heinz Braun (eds), *Pāli Nīti Texts of Burma. Dhammanīti, Lokanīti, Mahārahanīti, Rājanīti* (London: The Pali Text Society, 1981).

<sup>125</sup> Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men. Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

new transliteration scheme for Burmese proposed by Lammerts and Griffiths.<sup>126</sup> Similar in its Indological orientation to the system proposed by Bechert's and Braun's KOHD, and in many ways a major improvement on it, as well as on the still dominant Library of Congress transliteration, its greatest strength lies in its broad compatibility with transliteration conventions for other South and Southeast Asian languages. Cross-linguistic consistency in transliterations is particularly important for documents composed in times when old prestige languages travelled widely and frequent code switching within one text was the rule.

**JM:** Thank you, Christoph. Since religion, and particularly Buddhism, figured prominently in your reply—and has come up several times already—I wanted to ask whether you feel that religion provides a particularly useful lens through which to assess Burma's relationship to South Asia? I would also invite Thibaut to give his thoughts on this as well.

**CE:** I would like to pass the specifically historical part of the question, particularly regarding Buddhism, to Thibaut and would only like to point at efforts in our fields at problematizing the concept of religion, not only more widely, but specifically in Burma and beyond Buddhism. Two of the most important interventions, in my view, come from Gustaaf Houtman<sup>127</sup> and Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière,<sup>128</sup> supplemented by the more recent contribution by Michael Edwards.<sup>129</sup> Houtman was the first to problematize how colonial translation practices from English contributed to Burmese Buddhists understanding themselves to be part of something that came to be called 'Buddhism' (*buddhabhāsā*) or 'religion' (*bhāsā*) in Burmese in the same way that Anglophone colonizers, mostly missionaries, would speak of 'Judaism' or 'Hinduism', relying on the term 'Christianity' as a model. This not only references colonial knowledge systems that link Burma with discussions of religion in British India, particularly in those around 'unifying Hinduism',<sup>130</sup> but also helped to create a new awareness of a unity of Burmese with Buddhists across South Asia, from Sri Lanka to Nepal, different from much older connections of lineage, patronage, and pilgrimage across the Bay of Bengal. Brac de la Perrière complicated the discussion by stressing the complementarity of *nat* or spirit worship, which she labels a 'cult', on the one hand, and Buddhism understood, as she calls it, as an 'institutional religion', on the other. This move towards Burmese

<sup>126</sup> Christian Lammerts, 'Review of Anne Peters, *Birmanische Handschriften, Teil 8* (Stuttgart 2014)', *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, vol. 165, no. 2, 2015, pp. 513–16.

<sup>127</sup> Gustaaf Houtman, 'How a Foreigner Invented "Buddhendom" in Burmese: From Tha-tha-na to Bok-da Ba-tha', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1990, pp. 113–28.

<sup>128</sup> Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière, 'An Overview of the Field of Religion in Burmese Studies', *Asian Ethnology*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2009, pp. 185–210.

<sup>129</sup> Michael Edwards, 'People Are Obsessed with Religion: The Definitional Dissonance of Evangelical Encounters in Myanmar', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2021, pp. 49–66.

<sup>130</sup> Andrew Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism. Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2021).

specificities set aside the transregional bonds Buddhist institutions invoke. The more recent problematization of the term 'religion' prompts us to ask whether its very distinction from the term 'cult' is any longer tenable. There can, however, be no doubt that the increased attention given to spirit worship as a powerful religious force in Burma in the last decades has led to research connecting Burma more to comparable traditions in continental Southeast Asia rather than South Asia.<sup>131</sup> The discussion comes full circle in Edwards' reflection on Pentecostals in Burma who claim not to be in the business of 'religion' (*bhāsā*) but in that of 'belief' (*yum kraññ*). This recalls trends in *vipassanā* meditation, which, in its modernist form originating in Burma, has long gone global and views itself as an 'art of living', not a religion.<sup>132</sup> Here in turn, there may be productive avenues along which to engage with Pentecostalist advances in the Indian northwest but equally so to give more voice to Burmese, who may or may not self-identify as Buddhists, in a global conversation on neoliberal missionarizing, *vipassana* meditation, and the postsecular.

**TD:** To address this question of the place of religion in the Burma-India relationship, I first want to just say a few words on the question of the category of religion and the definition of religious identity as a monolithic and easily identifiable thing, which historically is always very problematic. In this sense, your question prompts two further questions: How do we define religion in this context? And what Buddhism are we actually talking about?

These are not rhetorical questions to escape having to provide a precise answer. Both questions have been raised and partly answered over the last few years by scholars such as Steven Collins, Judith Snodgrass, Peter Skilling, or Alexey Kirichenko.

Certainly, because I am not competent to address such a topic, I will not dwell on the conceptual problem posed by the term 'religion' and instead turn to the historical treatment of our understanding of 'Buddhism'.

First, problematizing the definition of Buddhism invites us to pay attention to the variety of what falls under the umbrella of the religious landscape of Theravāda Buddhism. There are many ways one can 'deconstruct' the term Theravāda as synonymous with Southeast Asian Buddhism. In his publications, and in one article in particular in which he addressed the topic of the place of Southeast Asia in Buddhist Studies, Peter Skilling emphasized the need to pay further attention to the diverse ways in which the Pali canon was realized in the form of an actual collection of texts and studied within specific curricular frameworks, but also to local forms of literacy, codicology, rituals, and modes of patronage.<sup>133</sup>

In an article published in 2009 Alexey Kirichenko traced the terminology used in Burmese and Pali sources of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

<sup>131</sup> For example, Peter A. Jackson and Benjamin Baumann (eds), *Deities and Divas. Queer Ritual Specialists in Myanmar, Thailand and Beyond* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2022).

<sup>132</sup> Lauren Leve, *The Buddhist Art of Living in Nepal* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>133</sup> Peter Skilling, 'The Place of South-East Asia in Buddhist Studies', in *Buddhism and Buddhist Literature of South-East Asia*, (ed.) Claudio Ciczuzza (Lumbini and Bangkok: Fragile Palmleaf Foundation; Lumbini International Research Institute, 2009), pp. 46–68.



to talk about what falls under the term ‘religion’ in European scholarship.<sup>134</sup> As others before him, he stressed the fact that the discourses and debates of the time were more concerned with definitions of communal boundaries in terms of ritual and social order, rather with than points of doctrine and speculative discourses. The absence of doxographical works and clear acknowledgement of the presence of multiple religions in Burma until the colonial period are also in striking contrast with the South Asian religious landscapes.

Kirichenko mentioned the matter in the case of Central Burma on the eve of the colonial period, but the same observation could be made regarding Arakan. The sources of the Mrauk U period, whether in Middle Bengali or Arakanese, are surprisingly silent when it comes to acknowledging the presence of other religions than that of the author. Muslim poets who wrote in Bengali, although they lavishly praise the king of Arakan in the prologue of their poems, hardly say anything about the fact that he is a ‘*dhammarājā*’ (actually, the title is not even preserved in its distinctly Buddhist form when it is adapted in Sanskritized MB: for example, *Candasudhammarājā* becomes *Candrasudharma*). Similarly, Arakanese chronicles provide very little information about the Muslim dignitaries whose importance as political actors is otherwise well known from Bengali, Dutch, Portuguese, and, to a lesser extent, Persian sources.<sup>135</sup>

Persian accounts on Arakan and Pegu evince a similar uneasiness when it comes to reading the religious identity of the inhabitants of these kingdoms. Strangely enough, more than Pegu or Ava, it is Arakan that seems to resist all clear-cut categorization. In Mughal sources from the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the religion current in Arakan is perceived as a form of Hinduism.<sup>136</sup> In the late eighteenth century, things were not clearer, and John Murray’s *munshī*—he worked with both Hindu and Muslim *munshīs*—had a hard time defining what distinguishes a ‘Magh’ from a Hindu, especially considering the importance given to Brahmins (*zunārdārs*) in their scriptures. In this archive, it is also striking to see that although ‘Budho thākur’—as he is called in the Persian text—features prominently, there is no term that would equate with that of ‘Buddhism’. In a report compiled by Murray’s Hindu *munshī* Jagannāth Sāhā, when describing the rituals of initiations that take place around the age of 13, the integration within the religious community is equated with becoming a ‘Magh’ (*wa qawm-i magh gufta mīshawad*).

To conclude, I would say that yes, religion is an important way to think about Burma relative to South Asia, and I do think that there are some important shifts that occur in the way religion is conceived of as crossing the frontier

<sup>134</sup> Alexey Kirichenko, ‘From *Thathanadaw* to Theravāda Buddhism: Constructions of Religion and Religious Identity in Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Myanmar’, in *Casting Faiths*, (ed.) T. D. DuBois (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 23–45, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230235458\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230235458_2).

<sup>135</sup> Thibaut d’Hubert and Jacques P. Leider, ‘Traders and Poets at the Mrauk U Court: On Commerce and Cultural Links in Seventeenth-Century Arakan’, in *Pelagic Passageways: Dynamic Flows in the Northern Bay of Bengal World before the Appearance of Nation States*, (ed.) Rila Mukherjee (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2011), pp. 345–79.

<sup>136</sup> Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘Southeast Asia as Seen from Mughal India: Tahir Muhammad’s “Immaculate Garden” (ca. 1600)’, *Archipel*, vol. 70, no. 1, 2005, pp. 209–37.



regions of Chittagong, Tripura, Manipur, and Assam. But, in order to better understand how this epistemic gap was created, we need to learn more about the history or religious institutions and practices in these frontier areas, whose inhabitants often played the roles of cultural brokers between Brahmanical and Muslim South Asia and the Burmese kingdoms.

**CE:** I would like to thank you all for an intense and rich conversation. Two concrete issues have become clear to me through our conversation. The first is the tendency in all of our contributions to complicate the assumption that the uneasy relation between Burma and South Asia in South Asian Studies is something that concerns primarily British India and British colonialism. The continuing dominance of the study of India in South Asian Studies makes it all too easy to take that assumption for granted. Persianate and Buddhist Studies, Bengali literary culture, and non-Anglophone academic map-making both complicate and extend that picture. The same holds true for the recovery of an earlier forgotten partition displaced by those other, more visible partitions in which India in its conflicts with the other parts of the former Raj clearly remains foregrounded. Exploring 'the other partitions', including the historical status of Sri Lanka, in the history of South Asia and their repercussions may also allow us to address the fact that these events may have been of different importance to different parts of South Asia other than primarily North India, most directly affected by the 1947 partition. It is also the attention to minorities, the marginalized, and the subversive in their ongoing fight for a place in South Asia, which also both pre- and post-dates the British and affects the region more than ever, that has made us reconsider the relevance of India in the question about Burma in the title of Saha's article, 'Is it India?'. Just to stay with the east and the south, 'Where is the Indian Northeast, where are Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, where are Nepal and Sikkim, where is Tamil Sri Lanka in South Asia, and not necessarily in relation to India?' are questions that are as urgent for the field as to ask about the place of Burma in Sri Lanka, Nepal, or Bangla Studies. Decolonizing South Asian and Burma Studies may also be about trying to resist the assumption that what is most crucial about what has been going on in South Asia is indeed primarily about North India.

The second is the impression that you, Joseph and Sana, on the one hand, and we, Thibaut and myself, on the other, may be indeed coming from rather distinct academic backgrounds in which the questions we discussed are addressed very differently: you from an Anglophone South Asian Studies context with a strong historiographical and political inflection, we from a continental European Indological context (to, for once, lump Francophone and Germanophone together) where the study of language, literature, and religion looms large. From the perspective of my reflections on the field aspect of our question and without wanting to draw too stark a line, I would venture to say that questions of political mapping are naturally more pressing for Anglophone South Asian Studies due to its sensitivity to geography and power, while continental Indology, or whatever its current heir may be,

tends to follow linguistic, textual, and ritual lines of transmission that undercut and loosen the grasp of empires, nations, region, and locality, and feel at home very easily on both sides of borders but also have a much harder time remaining aware of their political implications. While Anglophone South Asian Studies may feel the responsibility to address the dropping of Burma, so as to critically assess the reasons and consequences of that development, and the urge to redress this imbalance, continental Indologists may be surprised at, and indeed delighted by, the fact that their paths led them into a territory that from the perspective of field discipline may be regarded as off limits or irrelevant, but which may indeed revitalize and diversify the field. My own, but also your, Thibaut, professional move into North American South Asian Studies has certainly made me more aware that these two approaches are increasingly coming together, and our conversation today, if on a very small scale, may have shown that.

Our discussion has also shown that when talking about fields and strategies we ourselves are always implicated from within the field-making and strategizing we are trying to talk about, just like all our intellectual moves have implications for those whom we are claiming to speak about or, more seriously so, to speak for. How we as South Asianists engage with Burma will critically depend on what criteria for field-making we are currently endorsing and, even more fundamentally, what our attitude is towards the field as such and towards those who inhabit it. Most of all, it depends on what we want Burma as a field, and as an idea organizing that field, to mean for whoever is engaging with it or is forced to do so along somebody else's parameters. All these insights should make us wary, I believe, of speaking of Burma as something that can be shoved around, generously allowed to be included, or be deployed, particularly by those who do not inhabit it. If Burma has a time and a place, it also takes place where and when we talk about it with each other. In that conversation, we should make sure that those for whom there is the most at stake, those who live in Burma or are no longer able to live there, those who potentially and actually suffer the most under the possible implications of where Burma is and who did not get to speak in our conversation today, become at least as audible as those who have been allowed to speak for them for far too long.