



Set against the backdrop of the Arakan Mountains, Mrauk U was home to a multiethnic population.

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The British period saw a different kind of mobility across today's Bangladesh-Myanmar border, which was more of a planned mobilisation of people from all over India, Bengalis from Chittagong, who were involved in professional, commercial and agricultural activities, being the majority.

This left the Commission with the only option of referring to the crisis in Rakhine from the vantage point of universal human rights, rather than the question of historical antecedents. Yet the request from Suu Kyi and the Commission's compliance to not mention the terms "Bengali" or "Rohingya" will stand against future measures to implement the Commission's recommendations for restoring citizenship to the Rohingyas.

This is because the question of the Rohingyas is not merely connected to human rights issues, but also to the issue of civil rights including the right to self-identification. The bone of contention for the Myanmar military and the country's State Council is that the Rohingyas are "Bengalis" from

Bangladesh who speak the Bangla language. How may we respond to this claim to bring stakeholders from Bangladesh, Myanmar and the international community closer for a durable solution to the crisis? Answers to this question abound in different phases of the region's history.

### Rakhine before decolonisation: From a cosmopolitan society to national space

The history of Rakhine is rich and greatly connected to the Arab-Persian cultural world since at least the early 8th century and with the Bengal/Bangladesh region from much earlier times. Muslim Sufis and traders had interactions with the coastal regions of what is today's Bangladesh and Rakhine and all the way to the Indian Ocean rim of wider Southeast Asia. Conversion to Islam took place in areas that fall within the current borders of both Myanmar and Bangladesh. In 1406, the Rakhine king Nara Meikhlha was dethroned by an invading Bamar/Burmese force and was driven to Bengal. He was later able to regain his throne with the help of 30,000 soldiers sent by the Bengal Sultan, Jalal al Din. Rakhine kings used to send tribute to Bengal Muslim Sultans for a considerable period of time. However, during the transition period between the decline of independent Muslim rulers of Bengal and the arrival of the Mughals from northern India, Bangladesh's port city Chittagong came under the Rakhine rulers for some time.

Despite these political changes, Rakhine developed a cosmopolitan culture that retained Buddhist as well as Muslim and Hindu pedigree. Rakhine kings issued coins that contained the imprint of the Buddha and the Kalema, the fundamental article of faith in Islam, until the early seventeenth century. Medieval forms of Bengali literature were patronised in this cosmopolitan atmosphere where Pali, Arabic and Persian were also in vogue. Poet Alaol from today's Bangladesh, who was kidnapped by Portuguese pirates and sold in Rakhine as a slave, ended up being a court poet in the capital of Rakhine, where he was patronised by many Muslim ministers of Buddhist kings. Alaol in his poems written in the mid-seventeenth century introduced Rosango, a variant of the term Rohango (Rohingya), as the capital city of Rakhine.

persecution of local Rakhine people by the Bamar forces, there was also the gradual realisation of the need of the support and engagement of local people, including the Muslims. One example was that before the British took over Burma in the early nineteenth century, the Burmese king had given charge of the Port of Rangoon (Yangon) to a Muslim merchant.

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Some Rohingya MPs in Burmese Parliament

Meanwhile, the Bamars kept knocking at the borders of Rakhine and finally captured its throne in 1784, leaving the Rakhine people, of both Buddhist and Muslim origin, to face unprecedented persecution in their ancestral land. Most of them fled to the Chittagong region across the Naf river. While some of them returned to Rakhine, some stayed behind, who are still known as Rakhine Buddhists, currently numbering more than 100,000. They are now Bangladeshi citizens and Bangladesh has never suggested they be ousted because of their ancestry in Myanmar.

It needs mentioning that despite initial

the Indians in Burma, most of whom had to return to India and Bengal under strenuous conditions. The few who stayed behind were clearly distinguished from the local Rohingya people.

### Postcolonial period: From citizen to stateless

The early postcolonial policy of the Burmese government towards the Rohingyas was consistent with the pluralistic cultural and religious heritage of Myanmar and inclusive national vision of Aung San, Suu Kyi's illustrious father.

The Muslims of Rakhine including the