

IRIS – Post Research Summery -2025

Project Title: On the Eve of Independence: Religious and Ethnic Minorities in British Burma: 1850–1947

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Location: India and United States

This report presents the outcomes of research conducted under the IRIS Fellowship.

The IRIS Fellowship enabled me to conduct research in both India and the United States. In India, I spent approximately two months in Delhi, where I worked extensively at the National Archives of India, the Central Secretariat Library, and the Prime Minister's Museum and Library. In the United States, I carried out research at the Asian Division of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., where I accessed rare books, archival records, and private papers that are invaluable to my research. Bordely, my master's papers focus on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century roots of remarkably under-researched inter-religious riots, violence, and instability in Burma, communal conflict that is both staggering in terms of loss of life and property and mass displacement of people across the newly created borders, and after the British-India partition and demand for greater efforts at comprehension.

As I began to question the intricacy of Burmese society, both before and during colonization, I realized that it was often overlooked by the British, even as colonial dynamics transformed that society and exacerbated tensions within it. Too often, British officials preferred to minimize the social tensions in Burma, fancying the society itself to be essentially static. However, the archival sources I have gathered from the National Archives, including census reports, gazetteers, and reports of inquiry committees, have uncovered the complex and often opposing orientations of ethnic minorities, not only in terms of their religious affiliations but also in terms of their positions within the division of labor. These sources include a great deal. I uncovered how the British administration failed to recognize at that time, and read against the grain, not only can reveal the native voice within them (they're multivocal), but data is embedded there that was often unremarked upon at the time.

Further it's evident in the sources so far that I have collected from Prime Minister Museum and Library including Baxter commission report, Burma Crime Enquiry Report, and the Riot Enquiry Committee Report (1938), that the violence committed by the Buddhist majority against Indians and Chinese in Burma during 1930, 1938, and 1940 was no mere matter of policing traditional community boundaries; rather, it helped to reconfigure those boundaries, bequeathing to independent Burma demographic pockets of social isolation, and subjugated ethnic minorities. It also broadens my understanding where I was able ask some new questions including what it meant to be Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Burmese, Indian or Chinese came to be imbued with a distinctly modern mass democratic content, despite (and, in part, because of) those identities emergence in an illiberal, undemocratic, and on the eve of independence war-torn colonial context.

In the final weeks of the summer, I travelled to Washington, D.C., where I spent several days at the Library of Congress (Asian Division). The collections that I have consulted there proved highly valuable for my master's thesis. In particular, the rare book collection and World War II records offered important insights into Burma's colonial and wartime context. I was also able to photograph key materials and access microfilm records, which will serve as essential primary sources for my ongoing research. These sources are indeed invaluable for my Master's thesis. In the larger context, it helps me to further question in what way state policies and different constitutional provisions create or harness divisions between ethnic minorities. How do government regulations affect minorities' sense of identity, and to what extent are their organizational lives and religious and cultural activities affected? My master's research seeks answers to these questions.

The IRIS Fellowship has been instrumental in advancing my master's thesis. The research not only deepened my understanding of communal violence in Burma but also allowed me to frame new questions about the interaction of state policies, ethnic identities, and colonial legacies.

I remain deeply grateful to IRIS for its generous support, which made this research possible, and I look forward to continuing my association with IRIS.