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Text, Law, and Riot: The Coloniality of Religious Offense in Late Colonial Burma

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Abstract

This article investigates the 1938 Indo-Burman riots—an eruption of communal violence that occurred a decade before Burma's independence—through the prism of *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan*, a composite polemical text that became central to legal prosecution, political mobilization, and sectarian unrest. Rather than reducing the conflict to a simplistic narrative of "religious insult," the study reconstructs the book's multivocal authorship, multireligious composition, and its mediated circulation across pressrooms, monastic institutions, and colonial legal forums. The analysis foregrounds the coloniality of offence, examining how juridical categories such as "malicious intent" and "religious offence" were embedded within colonial legal frameworks, enabling the state to adjudicate symbolic injury while deflecting responsibility for structural violence. By tracing the trajectory from textual controversy to riot, trial, and legislative response, the article demonstrates how polemical disputes were instrumentalized to forge regulatory regimes that entrenched communal divisions. It concludes by exploring the afterlives of the text in contemporary Myanmar, where its memory continues to inform contentious debates around religion, identity, and legal governance..

Keywords: Burma, Colonial Law, Religious Offense, Blasphemy, and Intercommunal Violence.

Introduction

The 1938 Indo-Burman riots are often narrated as a sudden eruption of righteous anger at a blasphemous book. This article argues that such a framing is misleading. The violence that began in Rangoon in late July did not emerge from a single text read in common; it emerged from the interaction of a multivocal, polemical work with colonial law, nationalist mobilization, and a media apparatus skilled at translating doctrinal disputes into public grievances. To understand why a scarcely read book could acquire decisive force, we must situate it within an ecology of mediation and a legal architecture that rendered words actionable as offense (Asad, 1993; India, 1927).

At the center stands *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan*. Far from being a unitary attack on Buddhism, it was a composite work, comprising three sections authored in distinct voices,

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which drew on different repertoires of Islamic and Buddhist reasoning.[1] That internal plurality mattered. It enabled selective quotation and facilitated a downstream politics in which the most inflammatory lines could be excerpted, illustrated, and repeated until they defined the whole. In the late colonial public sphere, such fragments traveled quickly: serialized in newspapers, rehearsed in sermons, and refashioned as proof of existential threat. When officials later referred to the book as the "occasion of the trouble," they acknowledged the role of mediation, even as they narrowed their inquiry to a question of malicious intent (Riot Inquiry Committee, 1939a, 1939b).

Colonial law was not a neutral backdrop to this process; it was a constitutive force. Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code (introduced in 1927)[2] criminalized "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings," providing courts with a framework for individualizing blame and isolating the offense from its broader social context (India, 1927). Section 298 extended liability to wounding utterances. The Press and Registration of Books Act enabled bans and seizures. Together, these measures transformed a diffuse politics of injury—encompassing anxieties about women, migration, and economic competition—into a manageable series of prosecutions against authors, printers, and financiers. What crowds experienced as an assault on *amyo*, *batha*, *tharthana*[3] was recoded in the courtroom as a problem of *mens rea*[4] and offending words.

Space was equally constitutive. The decision to convene a mass assembly at Shwe Dagon Pagoda on July 26 was not an incidental spectacle; it was a deliberate choice that drew on the site's layered historical temporality. Under British rule, Shwe Dagon served as both a colonial monument and a stage for dissent; after independence, it continued to anchor Burmese Buddhist nationalism; in the present, it remains a locus where religious devotion and political protest can intersect. This palimpsest of meanings—accumulated, sedimented, and periodically reactivated—allowed the 1938 assembly to sacralize outrage and translate injury into resolutions with legislative ambition (Edwards, 2006). The site's layered time helped synchronize media amplification with monastic authority, producing a choreography in which a dense text could be made to speak loudly.

This article proceeds from the premise that the riots are best understood as an entanglement of text, law, and mobilization rather than a linear chain from insult to violence. It reconstructs the internal structure of *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan* to restore proportion to what has become a moralized memory. It then tracks the book's mediated circulation,

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[1] The work is tripartite: U Pan Nyo (Buddhist), U Sin/Abdullah (Muslim), and Maung Shwe Hpi (Muslim), as attested by the 1936 reprint (Pan Nyo, U., U Sin, & Maung Shwe Hpi, 1936).

[2] §295A was introduced in British India in 1927 to criminalize "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings," reshaping offence as a prosecutable intent (India, 1927; Hamilton, 1895).

[3] In colonial Burmese nationalist discourse, amyo denotes "lineage/people" and, by extension, "race" or "nation" (see the discussion of vamsa 'lineage' → amyo; and usages linking amyo with noble lineage). Batha can mean "religion" or "language," but in the Young Men Buddhist Association's formula amyo, batha, tharthana, pyinnyar, it refers explicitly to the Burmese language. Tharthana refers to the Buddhist sāsana (religion/tradition). (Phyo Win Latt, 2020)

[4] *Mens rea* (Latin: "guilty mind") is the mental element of a criminal offense—the state of mind (such as purpose, knowledge, recklessness, or, in some offenses, negligence) that must accompany the prohibited conduct (*actus reus*) for liability to attach. In offenses drafted with an explicit mental element—e.g., provisions requiring "deliberate and malicious" intent—the *mens rea* functions as a specific culpability threshold that the prosecution must prove. (See *A Dictionary of Law*, 10th ed.)

showing how newspapers and clerical networks staged a pedagogy of offense that made mass action appear both necessary and imminent. The government's response—police tracing, seizures, and prosecutions under §§295A and 298—reveals the coloniality of offense[5] as a modality of governance: a way of appearing impartial while transforming structural antagonisms into administrable cases (Asad, 1993; Pandey, 1990). The trial consolidated this narrowing, while the legislative aftermath—the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act (1939) and the Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement (1941)—broadened it again, institutionalizing gendered and demographic anxieties in statute.

The analysis also attends to afterlives. In post-independence history textbooks and official timelines, the Inquiry Committee's phrasing—"occasion of the trouble"—hardened into a causal verdict, eclipsing the book's composite authorship and the media's role in producing grievance. In the early twenty-first century, the memory of the book reentered public discourse around conversion, interfaith marriage, and demographic threat, helping to legitimize the 2015 "race and religion" laws. Across these shifts, the same legal grammar—protection of religion, safeguarding of women, regulation of intimacy—recurred, revealing the durability of colonial categories in postcolonial form (Walton, 2016).

The contribution of this study is twofold. Empirically, it recovers a primary source that has often been cited but seldom read, situating its three sections within the uneven literacies of interreligious polemic. Analytically, it reframes the 1938 crisis as an instance of the coloniality of offense, in which secular law disciplines religious discourse and makes injury governable. Rather than treating riots as the inevitable product of difference, it shows how governance and mediation co-produced the conditions under which offense could mobilize thousands (Chatterjee, 1993; Pandey, 1990).

The pages that follow move from text to circulation to law to memory. First, they reconstruct the composite book and its print history. Next, they demonstrate how excerpting and sacral staging at Shwe Dagon transformed a textual quarrel into a public resolution, averting street violence. They then examine the state's legal narrowing and the court's adjudication of malice, set against a transcolonial genealogy of offense law, before turning to the legislative codification of gendered and demographic anxieties. Finally, they trace the book's afterlives to explain why a work so rarely read could become a durable symbol in Myanmar's political imagination. The argument begins where the controversy began—in the

[5] In this article, "decolonial" does not refer simply to an anti-colonial political position or to the chronological aftermath of empire. It refers to an analytic approach that treats colonial rule as an enduring structure of knowledge, legality, and classification. Following work on the "coloniality of power," decolonial theory asks how colonial institutions produced categories through which peoples, religions, bodies, and injuries became legible to rule (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Methodologically, the article uses this approach by reading colonial legal records, press reports, inquiry proceedings, and nationalist narratives not as neutral repositories of fact but as archives that helped produce the very objects they claimed to describe: "religious offense," "malicious intent," "communal disorder," and "protection." This method also requires reading against the grain of both colonial and nationalist simplifications by restoring the composite authorship of *Mouhvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan*, tracing the media and monastic mediation of injury, and showing how offense was translated into court judgments, legislation, and later memory. In this sense, the article's decolonial method is not external to the historical material; it emerges from asking how colonial law and public discourse made certain injuries actionable while rendering their structural conditions invisible (Asad, 1993, 2003; Pandey, 1990; Smith, 2021).

text itself—by disentangling the three voices that later public memory compressed into a single insult.

The Three-in-One Book

The work that later public memory compressed into a single insult was, from the outset, a composite of multiple elements. *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan* comprises three distinct sections, each authored in a different voice and composed for overlapping but not identical publics. Read as a whole, it is less a monologue than a dossier of controversy—polemical, scholastic, and satirical—arranged so that the boundaries between interreligious disputation and intra-Buddhist critique blur and re-form across the page.

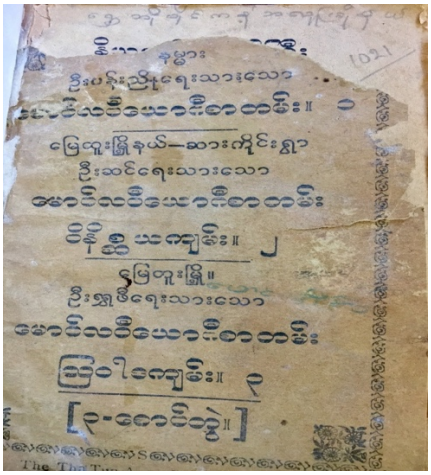
The first strand, *Moulvi Yogi Sadan* (The Essay on the Discussions Between a Moulvi[6] and a Yogi[7]), attributed to the Buddhist writer U Pan Nyo, takes the shape of a pointed inquiry. In a series of ten questions that move from metaphysics to ethics, the yogi probes the coherence of Islamic cosmology: How can a bodiless God converse through fire and sound? Why would a single creator produce such palpable inequalities among beings? Would endless creation burden even the divine? The rhetoric is caustic at moments—"the busiest of all gods"—yet its form is recognizable within a Burmese tradition of disputation in which blunt judgments (such as declaring an interlocutor's view *micc**ā** di**ṭṭ**hi*)[8] signal scholastic closure rather than programmatic hostility. As a standalone text, this section reads as a Buddhist critique of Islam; within the composite volume, it also establishes the framework for a response, inviting rebuttal on shared conceptual ground.

[6] Moulvi" (also spelled maulvi) is a South Asian honorific for a learned Muslim religious scholar (ʿālim). In this article, "the Moulvi" refers to Moulvi Hassan Shah of Mandalay. In the late-colonial Burmese milieu—predominantly Sunni Hanafi—many clerics were influenced, directly or indirectly, by reformist currents centered on the Deoband seminary (est. 1866) and, from the 1920s, by the lay-preaching movement known as the Tablighi Jamaʿat. (See *Barbara D. Metcalf, Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900*; and standard reference entries on "Moulvi" and "Tablighi Jamaat.")

[7] In this context, *Yogi* does not denote a Hindu practitioner of yoga but a lay Buddhist meditator who observes the Uposatha discipline—typically undertaking eight or ten precepts on observance days—and practices meditation according to Buddhist teachings; here it refers specifically to Yogi U Pan Nyo of Namma Village. (Myanmar Language Commission, 2014, p. 383; Buswell & Lopez, 2014, s.v. "Uposatha"; Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2000.)

[8] "Fixed/wrong view" in Theravāda doxography; often linked to karmic consequences (Bodhi, 2012; Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2013).

Figure 1.
The 1936 reprint of the book



Source: The Department of Historical Research and National Library, Myanmar (Accession No. 1021)

The second strand, *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Vinnissaya Kyan* (A Critical Response on *Moulvi Yogi Sadan*), attributed to the Muslim author U Sin (Abdullah), answers that invitation. Written in Burmese yet rich in precise Pāli terminology, it presents a doctrinal defense of divine omnipotence and permanence. U Sin's method is notably scholastic: he mobilizes familiar proofs for God's existence and, more tellingly, articulates his critiques of Buddhism in the idiom of Buddhist categories. This is where the composite book reveals its most significant feature—an asymmetry in interreligious literacy.[9] Muslim participants demonstrate fluency in Buddhist vocabulary and debate conventions; Buddhist authors, on the other hand, engage with Islamic concepts more selectively and with less technical precision. That asymmetry matters for reception. It allowed U Sin to conduct his rebuttal on conceptual terrain legible to Buddhist readers while still pressing toward Islamic conclusions. It also meant that the book's cross-confessional argumentation did not require translation to become intelligible; the translation had already happened at the level of idiom.

The third strand, *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Kyan* (A Judgment on *Moulvi Yogi Sadan*), is attributed to Maung Shwe Hpi[10]It sets the tone that later came to represent the whole. Cast as a courtroom drama before a "King of Dhamma," it calls witnesses from Buddhism and Islam to testify, only to render a verdict that strips the Buddha of caste honor, caricatures Burmese as "barbarians," and vindicates Islam as the sole salvific path. The device is theatrical—trial as polemic—and the language is designed to bite. In the composite architecture, this section functions rhetorically as a coda that raises the temperature of the exchange and invites moral response. In a mediated public sphere, it supplied the lines most easily excerpted, illustrated, and recited. What made the book combustible in 1938 was not

[9] U Sin's section deploys Pāli/Theravāda vocabulary with precision; U Pan Nyo uses little Arabic/Urdu. (Buswell & Lopez, 2014; Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2000).

[10] Burma Studies scholar Uta Gaertner identifies Maung Shwe Hpi as a schoolteacher in Myedu village (Shwebo District), a predominantly Muslim community whose ancestors were reportedly deported from Thandwe (Rakhine) by a Burmese king in the mid-sixteenth century (as cited in Beyer, 2016).

that all readers encountered all three sections; it was that the third section's insults circulated as if they were the whole book itself.

The internal design of the volume compounds this effect. By yoking inquiry, rebuttal, and satirical judgment into a single artifact, the book invites selective reading. A sympathetic Buddhist reader might valorize the first section's questions and dismiss the rest; a sympathetic Muslim reader might celebrate the second section's fluency and cringe at the third's excesses; a polemicist, printer, or editor might fasten on the third section's epithets and ignore the rest entirely. The composite thus contains, by design or accident, the conditions for its own misreading: a structure in which the sharpest fragments are easiest to detach and redeploy.

Authorship and register intersect with language in ways that matter for how offense became legible. Across the three sections, the density of specialized religious vocabulary is striking—dozens upon dozens of Pāli doctrinal terms on the Buddhist side, a substantial range of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu terms on the Islamic side. Even if one does not insist on exact counts, the distribution is precise: the Muslim authors write through Buddhist categories with notable precision, while the lone Buddhist author engages Islamic terminology more loosely. This unevenness does not automatically determine who offends or who is offended. However, it shapes the interpretive economy in which offense acquires meaning: arguments are legible to Buddhist readers because they are made in a Buddhist idiom. Insults land because they violate an idiom felt as one's own.

The composite character also complicates legal attribution. When colonial prosecutors later charged "the book" under §§295A and 298, the composite disappeared into a singular object with detachable excerpts. In court, malice could be pinned on a named satirist; scholarly rebuttal could be distinguished and acquitted; financing a reprint could be construed as facilitation of insult irrespective of intention. The book's architecture made this possible: different intentions coexisted under one cover, allowing both law and press to individualize blame while generalizing harm.

Public memory flattened the complexity further. Mid-twentieth-century narratives often presented *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan* as if it were a straightforward Muslim attack on Buddhism, authored by a single provocateur and read as such. Even careful surveys tended to treat the volume primarily through the lens of its most inflammatory section, leaving the more dialogic and doctrinal strands in the background. The consequence was not only factual imprecision about authorship but analytic distortion about how polemics traveled: what circulated in 1938 were not balanced summaries, but highlighted shards calibrated for outrage.

The point is not to rehabilitate the text as harmless disputation. The third section is plainly injurious in its depictions of Buddhist personhood and Burmese identity, and contemporaries recognized it as such. Instead, the point is to restore proportion. A composite artifact, written in multiple registers for an unevenly literate public, was reconstituted by mediation into a univocal insult. That reconstitution is the precondition for the politics that followed: newspapers could print the most caustic lines above a cartoon; monks could cite them in sermons as proof of threat to the *sasana*; nationalist organizers could embed them in resolutions that reached beyond speech to marriage and migration. By

the time police seized copies and prosecutors assembled exhibits, "the book" was already an object made by quotation.

Attending to composite authorship also clarifies why the book serves as a valuable lens for examining the coloniality of offense. In a multivocal text, intention is plural and unstable. When courts insist on isolating a single malicious intent, they align with a broader administrative logic: disputes become legible when they can be broken into chargeable acts, assignable to discrete persons. The composite frustrates that desire, but only at the level of textual criticism; in practice, the law can select a section, a passage, a name, and craft the appearance of precision. What is lost in that precision is the ecology in which meaning was made—the interreligious literacy that enabled argument, the media that curated rage, the stage that sacralized it.

Finally, reading the book as a composite allows the analysis that follows to avoid the trap of treating "religious insult" as a monolithic cause. It highlights how polemics are produced and received within uneven fields of knowledge, how they are curated by institutions with stakes in amplification, and how they become legible to law through categories designed for objects and authors, rather than environments of meaning. The next step is therefore to trace how this composite artifact moved into print and circulation—who financed it, who printed it, who read it directly, and who "read" it through fragments—so that the link between textual structure and political effect becomes fully visible. With the voices disentangled inside the covers, we can now follow the book outward—into presses, reprints, and the mediated routes by which a composite work became a singular scandal.

Printings and Circulations of the Book

If authorship made *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan* multivocal, printing and circulation made it consequential. The book's journey from a low-visibility tract to a public scandal hinges on two pivotal moments—an early 1930s issue and a mid-1930s reprint—and on the mediating institutions that transformed pages into politics.

The earliest printing dates to the early 1930s, when *Moulvi Yogi Sadan* (the debate-style core of the composite) first circulated in Upper Burma. Contemporary testimonies link an initial issue to Mandalay presses and small-scale distribution among readers conversant with religious disputation. The print run was modest; copies were mainly distributed through personal networks rather than bookstores. In the same year, a combined edition was published, gathering the debate text with two further sections to form the "three-in-one" volume later known as *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan*. Commissioning and handling were local and practical—order, pay, collect, and deposit a legal copy—rather than overtly agitational. Under the Press and Registration of Books Act, a copy was duly submitted to the district office, where it entered bureaucratic custody without comment (India, 1867). In administrative terms, the book existed; in political terms, it scarcely registered.

The second printing altered the scale and, with it, the stakes. In 1936, a Rangoon financier—Mahomed Hashim Patil—underwrote a complete reprint at the Tha Htun Aung Press in Taikkyi, a shop better known for pamphlets than for long works. The run expanded dramatically to roughly 2,500 copies, all reportedly distributed for free. The edition carried a filial dedication, but its paratext did the book no favors: the name "Hashim Cassim Patail,"

also attached to a well-known firm, fostered the impression that a commercial enterprise stood behind the project. Within days of the book's notoriety, other shareholders publicly disavowed the reprint in *The Sun*, characterizing Patil's decision as personal and offering cooperation to Buddhist leaders in identifying those responsible for writing, printing, and financing (The Sun, July 27, 1938). The press thus became a venue not only for amplifying selected passages from the text but also for managing reputational fallout from the reprint itself.

How did the reprint come about? Witnesses later testified that Patil had acquired a few dozen copies of the earlier issue from a Mandalay moulvi. When these were exhausted, the Taikkyi printer suggested a complete reprint. Crucially, the 1936 edition proceeded without the explicit permission of the surviving authors beyond the materials already in hand; both U Sin and Maung Shwe Hpi told the court they had not authorized the new issue. In legal terms, this gray zone of consent mattered less than the fact of multiplication: the reprint created the stock from which newspapers and organizers could draw.

Speculation about motive followed quickly. In the Legislative Council, one member linked the episode to rising economic tensions, suggesting that Burmese boycotts and sartorial campaigns—most notably drives to favor *pinni* and other locally woven cloth—had depressed sales of imported fabrics and lace, a trade associated in the public mind with Indian and Zerbadi merchants. Read against that backdrop, sponsoring a reprint could be perceived, by opponents, as a retaliatory provocation rather than a gesture of piety (Burma Legislature, 1938). Whether or not this inference was fair, it reveals the political economy into which the book reentered circulation: a field in which religious polemic, retail competition, and nationalist consumerism were already entangled.

Distribution patterns after the reprint reveal that mediation has overtaken reading. By early 1938, relatively few people had handled the entire book; far more encountered it as an excerpt, a paraphrase, or an image. Editors lifted sentences from the most satirical section, set them in boldface or in cartoon frames, and supplied headlines that fused insult to identity—*amyo, batha, tharthana* under attack (The Sun, July 15, 1938). Monastic networks incorporated these passages into sermons, where rhythm and repetition often took precedence over textual nuance. In this economy of fragments, the composite volume became, effectively, a one-section book, and that one section became a handful of lines.

Officialdom's posture remained procedural until after the riots began. The deposit copy required by the Press Act had not, by itself, triggered review; the object existed within a registry, not a risk calculus (India, 1867). Only once violence spread did the police trace the print trail—who ordered, who paid, who printed, who stored, and who carried the bundles between districts. The forensic timeline that emerges in inquiry reports is thus backward-facing: from the riot to the reprint to the initial issue. The sequence reveals an administrative habit characteristic of the coloniality of offense: assignable responsibility is sought where the law already has hooks—authors, printers, financiers—while the enabling work of excerpting and amplification remains sociological background (Riot Inquiry Committee, 1939a).

For historians, the printing history serves two clarifying functions. First, it explains how a little-read book can acquire a large audience: multiplication through reprinting; magnification through the press. Second, it helps account for later simplifications. When

mid-century narratives treat the book as a self-evident provocation, they implicitly read back the effects of mediated fragments into the artifact itself, overlooking how the 1936 edition created the supply that made such mediation possible. The "offensive book" thus stands less for a stable textual object than for a composite volume whose circulation was curated into scandal.

This matters for the argument that follows. If a reprint and a newspaper can transform a multivocal tract into a monolithic insult, then "religious offense" is not a property inherent in words alone; it is an outcome of how words are selected, framed, and moved. Printing is part of that movement. So are illustrations, headlines, and the ritual settings in which quotations are recited. The 1936 edition provided the pages; 1938 provided the stage. With the reprint's pathways mapped, the analysis now turns from the pressroom to the public square, tracing how excerpts leaped from columns to sermons to the Shwe Dagon assembly and set the cadence for collective action.

Inside the Text: Argument, Rebuttal, and Verdict

Read on its own terms, *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan* unfolds in three movements—argument, rebuttal, and verdict—each written in a distinct register and aimed at different literate publics. Taken together, they map a polemical field in which inquiry, scholastic defense, and satirical judgment coexist uneasily under one cover.

The first movement, attributed to the Buddhist writer U Pan Nyo, presents a dialogic "essay" on a debate between a yogi and a moulvi. Its tone is inquisitive and pointed rather than incendiary. The yogi poses a chain of questions that press on the coherence of Islamic theism: how a bodiless God could speak through fire and sound; why a single creator would produce such apparent disparities in human capacity and fortune; whether a deity engaged in ceaseless creation might not be, as the text quips, "the busiest of all gods." The conclusion, which labels the moulvi's view *as micc**ā** di**ṭṭ**hi (a wrong view), reads harshly to contemporary eyes.* Nevertheless, within Burmese polemical convention, it functions as a recognizable scholastic closure rather than a call to action. The argument operates within Buddhist categories and assumes a readership familiar with doctrinal disputation; its barbs are rhetorical jabs in a genre of adversarial reasoning, not a sustained campaign of vilification.

The second movement, attributed to the Muslim author U Sin (Abdullah), reverses the direction of critique and elevates the register. Written in Burmese but rich in accurate Pāli terms, it presents a defense of God's omnipotence and permanence through a tightly structured scholastic method. U Sin mobilizes familiar proofs for divine existence and then calibrates his critique of Buddhism in Buddhist idiom. This fluency is striking. It signals not merely respect for an interlocutor's language, but also an asymmetry in interreligious literacy: here, a Muslim author can argue within Buddhist categories with precision, while the earlier Buddhist author relied on a more generalized representation of Islamic concepts. For Buddhist readers, that familiarity renders the rebuttal legible and therefore more discomfiting; it answers questions they recognize in terms they use, yet steers toward Islamic conclusions. For later courts and commentators, this movement would provide the foothold for distinguishing between scholastic argument (acquittable) and malicious insult (punishable).

The third movement, attributed to Maung Shwe Hpi, completely changes the genre. It stages a theatrical trial before a "King of Dhamma," summons objects and scriptures as witnesses, and delivers a verdict that denies the Buddha caste honor, caricatures Burmese as "barbarians," and affirms Islam as uniquely salvific. The device is clever in its polemical nature, but it is also plainly injurious. Where the first movement probes and the second reasons, this third pronounces in a satirical tone calibrated to offend. It is the portion that 1938 editors excerpted most frequently, the portion monks cited in sermons as proof of contempt, and the portion that most readily detached from the composite volume to travel as a self-standing insult.

These movements are not equal in tone or intent, and that asymmetry is the point. The composite design allows different readers to access various texts within the same covers. A Buddhist reader might dwell on the first movement's questions and set the rest aside; a Muslim reader might value the second movement's scholastic rigor and deplore the third's excess; a polemicist or editor, keyed to provocation and speed, might extract only the third's barbed lines and build headlines around them. By yoking all three into a single artifact, the book inadvertently supplies the conditions for both selective reading and misreading.

Language density intensifies the effect. Across the three movements, specialized vocabulary proliferates: Pāli doctrinal terms on the Buddhist side; Arabic, Persian, and Urdu terms on the Islamic side. The distribution is uneven. U Sin's movement uses Pāli with notable accuracy, inviting Buddhist readers onto familiar conceptual ground. U Pan Nyo's movement engages Islamic terms more broadly, with fewer technical anchors. The result is an interpretive economy in which arguments and insults alike land "at home": Buddhist categories are the medium, and thus the wound, of much of the exchange. When phrases from the third movement are lifted into newspaper columns or speeches, they perforate not as foreign speech but as an affront within a Buddhist idiom, which helps explain the velocity with which injury was taught and learned.

This internal architecture also shaped what could later be seen in law. Once the book became an exhibit rather than a book, malice could be pinned on an identifiable satirist; scholastic rebuttal could be recognized and acquitted; financing a reprint could be rendered culpable irrespective of authorial intent. The composite made those legal separations thinkable: different intentions coexisted in one volume, allowing a court to individualize blame while leaving generalized harm intact. In archive and memory, however, the composite tended to collapse. Mid-century accounts regularly treated the volume as a straightforward Muslim attack on Buddhism, authored by a single provocateur and read as such. Even careful syntheses typically followed the logic of 1938 publicity by foregrounding the third movement's invective and leaving the earlier two movements in the background.

Restoring the choreography of argument, rebuttal, and verdict does not redeem the book; it restores proportion. The first two movements show how interreligious polemic could proceed within shared conceptual repertoires, sometimes abrasively but with recognizable rules. The third shows how those repertoires could be weaponized satirically to produce affront. What matters for the story of 1938 is how the third's fragments outran the book: editors found in them a ready-made script for offense, monks found in them a teachable object for sermons about the vulnerability of the *sasana*, and organizers found in

them the quotable lines that could anchor resolutions whose ambitions reached well beyond speech to marriage and migration.

Seen from this angle, the text's internal sequence—question, rebuttal, judgment—prefigures the external sequence that followed—excerpt, assembly, riot. The conditions of possibility are continuous: a dense, multivocal artifact that can be sliced into shards, a media environment that practices turning shards into headlines and images, and religious institutions ready to sacralize injury as a public duty. By the time police seized copies and prosecutors invoked §§295A and 298, the book had already become something else in public life: not a conversation with three voices but a symbol with one. With the inner choreography of the book in view, the analysis now turns outward to the pages and platforms that taught its most caustic lines to speak loudly—newspaper offices, monastic halls, and, above all, the Shwe Dagon grounds where offense was staged as collective duty.

From Press Agitation to Public Demonstration

By mid-July, the book had already become an object made by quotation. Newspapers lifted a handful of satirical lines from the third section of *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan*, boxed them in bold, and paired them with cartoons and headlines that fused insult to identity. One *The Sun* advertisement ran with the provocation that "someone said Burmans are savages," tying the affront explicitly to *amyo, batha, tharthana*—race, language, and religion (The Sun, July 15, 1938). Editors did not ask readers to parse a dense composite text; they asked them to recognize a wound. In the same week, Ledi U Withuda Sara's column, "Buddhism insulted," enumerated the most incendiary claims—about caste, pork, and Burmese "barbarity"—as a checklist of injury, turning doctrinal taunts into a liturgy of grievance for lay readers and monks alike (Ledi U Withuda Sara, 1938). The pedagogy was simple and effective: repetition of fragments until they stood for the whole.

Editorial selection was mirrored by literary opportunism. Novelist and night editor Maung Htin Baw appended translated excerpts as an appendix to a volume of his ongoing serial, advertising the inclusion as a public service and a patriotic duty. The gesture was savvy on every register: it converted scandal into sales, integrated polemic into popular culture. It made *The Sun*'s front-page outrage portable to readers who might never buy a tract or attend a sermon. Within days, monastic networks requested copies, and where copies were not forthcoming, the same excerpts circulated in paraphrase at monastery halls and neighborhood talks. The mediated chain—book to column, column to pamphlet, pamphlet to pulpit—tightened until the text's most barbed lines seemed ubiquitous, audible even where the book itself was absent (The Sun, July 23, 1938; The Sun, July 27, 1938).

This crescendo in print primed the choice of stage. When the Thathana Mamaka Young Sanghas' Association called a citywide assembly at the Shwe Dagon Pagoda for late July, it chose a site whose authority derives from layered historical temporality. Under British rule, Shwe Dagon functioned simultaneously as a colonial spectacle and a platform for resistance; after independence, it was claimed as a core of Burmese Buddhist nationalism; in the present, it remains a place where religious devotion and dissent can coincide (Edwards, 2006). That palimpsest made it possible for a media-driven grievance to be sacralized as duty. To gather at Shwe Dagon was to translate a printed offense into collective defense, to place

the protection of the *sasana* within a landscape already saturated with the memory of political theater.

On the morning of the twenty-sixth, thousands converged on the pagoda terraces—contemporary estimates ran to roughly fifteen thousand in attendance, including more than one thousand monks. The mood oscillated between solemnity and expectancy. Monks opened with protective chants; lay speakers rehearsed the familiar list of insults; organizers then presented resolutions that moved beyond speech to matters of law and social regulation. Four demands stood out. First, legal action should be taken against the authors, printers, and financiers of the book. Second, strict enforcement of the ban on shoes in pagoda precincts serves as a long-standing index of colonial disrespect and a reliable rallying point. Third, expedited passage of the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Bill, framed as essential to protect women from "subordination under alien religions." Fourth, the creation of a standing committee to pursue these goals in concert. Each resolution mapped outrage over words onto an actionable field: criminal prosecution, ritual enforcement, gendered governance, and organizational infrastructure.

Figure 2.

The image depicts a cartoon illustration featuring a hand inscribed with the phrase "*Muslim Nga Shwe Hpi*".[11] The scene depicts a figure throwing a book towards a Buddhist man dressed in a Yogi outfit. The book strikes the man's head, causing him to fall to the ground. In the background, a police officer is present, observing the scene, unperturbed.



Source: The Sun, 23/07/1938 (Universities' Central Library, Myanmar)

Speakers did not merely list measures; they modeled how to read the moment. The lines from the book were presented as symptoms of a wider condition: the *sasana* under siege,

[11] In Burmese usage, the prefix *Nga* placed before a man's name is a demeaning form of address that marks inferiority or contempt. Where adults would ordinarily be styled *U* or *Maung* (e.g., *U Shwe Hpi*, *Maung Shwe Hpi*), press and officials sometimes labeled defendants and social inferiors with *Nga*—hence *Nga Shwe Hpi*. British colonial administrations retained and normalized this register in legal and bureaucratic writing, while reserving honorifics for authorities: officials were addressed as *Thakhin* ("master") and rulers or senior dignitaries as *Phaya*. The effect was to encode hierarchy—and, in criminal contexts, censure—directly into forms of address.

Burmese women at risk, livelihoods threatened by outsiders. The triad of *amyo, batha, tharthana*—repeated in serial rhythm—connected insult, identity, and duty. In this public pedagogy, "religious offense" was not the endpoint of interpretation but its starting point. The task was to extend offense into a platform: protect Buddhism, regulate intimacy, discipline space. The setting mattered. At Shwe Dagon, where sacred time and political memory are already entwined, the rhetorical move from text to law, from affront to resolution, felt less like escalation than like continuity (Edwards, 2006).

When the meeting adjourned in mid-afternoon, the collective momentum sought an outlet. Accounts converge on the figure of U Kumara of Thayettaw Monastery, urging a march toward Soortee Bara Bazaar, a commercial district associated with Indian merchants. The call drew a straight line from the morning's resolutions to the afternoon's targets: the book's financier; Indian shopkeepers perceived as exploiting Burmese consumers; Burmese women who married across religious lines. As the column moved downhill from the terraces, chants shifted from the abstract to the imperative—punish the financiers; punish the traitors; cleanse the market. What followed was an escalating cascade of assaults and looting that spread across central Rangoon. Police detachments were deployed, but too thin to prevent the crowd's fragmentation into smaller groups, each acting on the pedagogy it had been taught: that defense of Buddhism could be enacted against bodies and shops.

In the hours and days that followed, the newspaper narratives and police summaries diverged in emphasis but not in sequence. Reportage highlighted the affront and the resolutions; police reports tallied crowd size, arrests, and property damage. Both ways of seeing shared a premise: that an insulted community had moved from assembly to action. However, a closer look at the preconditions shows how carefully orchestrated that move was. The press had already curated the book into a handful of lines; monastic authorities had already sacralized those lines as emblematic of existential threat; the choice of Shwe Dagon had already yoked sacred place to political program. The march's targets—financiers, interfaith marriage, Indian merchants—had already been named in resolution form. In this sense, the riot was not an interruption of order but the performance of a script, with each institution—editorial room, monastery hall, assembly committee—writing a scene.

The Riot Inquiry Committee would later sanitize this choreography as a sequence of "public excitement," "agitation," and failures of crowd control (Riot Inquiry Committee, 1939a, 1939b). That phrasing acknowledged the temperature without naming the source of the heat. What made the outrage legible and mobilizing were the institutions that taught it: newspapers that transformed composite polemics into emblematic insults; monks who translated insults into duty; and organizers who codified duty into resolutions with legislative reach. The layered temporality of Shwe Dagon did the rest, lending the scene an authority that could bridge doctrinal grievance and nationalist ambition (Edwards, 2006).

Two additional features of this passage from page to street deserve emphasis. First, the circulation was overwhelmingly indirect. Few in the crowd had read the whole book. Fewer still had weighed its internal asymmetries—the inquisitive first section, the scholastic second, the satirical third. The crowd acted on shards, and the shards acted because they had been made to carry the weight of identity. Second, the resolutions already contained the seeds of the legal future: "protection" as the master idiom in which colonial administrators and

monastic nationalists could converge, even if for different ends. The idiom would reappear in the courtroom as a way to criminalize malice and in the legislature as a way to regulate marriage and migration. The assembly thus functioned as a hinge, transforming a media-produced injury into a program with legal horizons.

Contemporaneous press commentary inside Burma reinforced the hinge function. Anniversary pieces in *The New Light of Burma* later rehearsed the arc from newspaper outrage to Shwe Dagon to the march, often treating the meeting's resolutions as the rightful moment when "the people" took their stand (The New Light of Burma, October 17, 1938). The pattern of narration was strikingly consistent: a short preface about the book, a longer body about the assembly, and a closing turn to "necessary action." That consistency is itself evidence of pedagogy. A generation learned not only what had happened but also how to interpret it—how to fit texts, chants, and laws into a single moral framework.

In the immediate aftermath, those stories provided cover for administrative narrowing. If the public narrative placed a book at the origin of the chain, officials could credibly declare the book the "occasion" and seek defendants who could be charged with malice. If the public narrative framed the assembly's resolutions as a defense of women and religion, legislators could later translate that defense into statutes on interfaith marriage and immigration. The sequence did not require a conspiracy of intention; it required institutions that shared a grammar. That grammar was already visible at Shwe Dagon: protection of Buddhism, protection of women, and protection of the city's moral order.

None of this diminishes the reality of fear and fury in the streets. It situates that reality inside an environment of meaning that made fury intelligible as duty and fear actionable as law. Media repetition and sacral staging are not ancillary to crowd behavior; they are constitutive of it. In late colonial Rangoon, a composite polemical text could catalyze violence because institutions stood ready to convert insults into programs and programs into marches. The march, in turn, made it easy for the state to convert the program into a prosecution. Having tracked how excerpts and staging produced collective action, the analysis now turns to the state's entrance—how officials translated the crisis into administrable offenses through bans, seizures, and prosecutions under §§295A and 298.

Figure 3.

A crowd of demonstrators leaves the Shwe Dagon Pagoda grounds and moves along the tram line toward the city's commercial quarter after the mass meeting.



Source: The Sun, 27/07/1938 (Universities' Central Library, Myanmar)

The Government's Response

The colonial state entered late and spoke a different language. Where newspapers and monks framed the moment as an injury and defense of the *sasana*, officials translated it into public order and administrable offenses. That translation narrowed a layered crisis—intertwining press pedagogy, monastic mobilization, gendered anxiety, and economic grievance—into a sequence of actionable steps against a text and named individuals.

The first moves were procedural. Police traced print trails, seized copies, and interviewed printers, carriers, and financiers. Prosecutors prepared charges under sections 295A and 298 of the Indian Penal Code, provisions tailored to punish deliberate insults to religious feelings and utterances that wound religious feelings (India, 1860; India, 1927). Simultaneously, the administration invoked the Press and Registration of Books Act to ban the work and authorize forfeiture and seizure—legal machinery designed to govern documents rather than to reconcile communities (India, 1867). To a public primed by weeks of sermons and headlines, the response seemed belated and oddly narrow. In administrative terms, narrowness was the point: it permitted the state to appear even-handed and secular—charging malice, seizing objects—while leaving untouched the conditions that had made insult into a platform for mass action (Asad, 1993; Pandey, 1990).

Selectivity showed in what the law chose to see and who it chose to name. Maung Shwe Hpi, author of the satirical third section, fit the statute's emphasis on intent: his words could be detached from the composite book and recoded as malice. U Sin's doctrinal rebuttal—fluent in Pāli, calibrated to argument rather than invective—could be folded into "the book" when outrage was narrated and peeled away when acquittal would signal neutrality. Financing a reprint became an actionable form of facilitation; printers and backers were liable to the law in ways that editors, sermonizers, and assembly organizers were not. The pedagogy of injury that had unfolded in monastic halls and editorial rooms—the reiterated lists of insult, the cartoons and headlines, the resolutions that mapped speech to marriage and migration—remained a sociological backdrop rather than a legal object.

The choice of legal instruments reinforced this narrowing. Section 295A, legislated in 1927 after pamphlet controversies in India, shifted attention from effects to *mens rea*—from riots to intention. It thus enabled courts to declare that communal violence had a juridical origin in a defendant's "deliberate and malicious" words (India, 1927; Hamilton, 1895). Section 298 extended reach to spoken wounds. The Press Act and criminal procedure forfeiture provisions supplied the textual levers: a title could be named, prohibited, and confiscated (India, 1867). Within this frame, the composite structure of *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan*—argument, rebuttal, verdict—disappeared into an exhibit labeled "offensive book." Individuals could be sentenced; the environment that had made their words actionable would not be adjudicated.

The Riot Inquiry Committee later codified the same vision in superb prose. It acknowledged that passages in the book were "widely regarded as offensive" and that press extraction and speeches "contributed to excitement," then insisted on a careful distinction between "occasion" and "cause." In the reports' reconstruction, unrest unfolds as a problem of crowd size, timing, and police deployment; the layered choreography that linked

pressrooms, monastery halls, and Shwe Dagon's terraces recedes into context (Riot Inquiry Committee, 1939a, 1939b). The resulting narrative is administratively tidy: an object provoked excitement, excitement overwhelmed order, and order was restored. It is also precisely what a decolonial reading flags as the coloniality of offense: the state recognizes injury when it can be juridified, and it governs that injury through charges, seizures, and bans that individualize blame and generalize harm (Asad, 1993; Pandey, 1990).

Gendered and economic stakes were the clearest casualties of this narrowing. At the Shwe Dagon assembly, speakers elevated the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Bill to a central resolution, casting the regulation of interfaith marriage as essential to the defense of the *sasana*. In police summaries and charge sheets, that demand evaporated; the case became an index of defendants, exhibits, and penal sections. However, within a year, the same state would translate those gendered anxieties into statute in the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act (Burma, Legislative Department, 1940). Likewise, the march's economic targets—Indian merchants and shops in Soortee Bara Bazaar—were recounted as looting and assault rather than situated in colonial political economy; two years later, the Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement would address migration through quotas and permits, not as a feature of imperial labor markets (Indian Overseas Central Association, 1941; Baxter, 1941). The pattern is consistent: criminal law disavows structural stakes in the moment; legislation institutionalizes them later.

The media's role illustrates the same selectivity. In popular narration, editors, novelists, and columnists had taught the public how to read the book as an emblematic insult and existential threat. In legal narration, the press appears as weather: "agitation," "excitement," "inflamed sentiment." No prominent editor became the kind of central defendant the statute could easily fashion from an author or financier. The law is comfortable with objects and owners, less so with ecologies of meaning.

None of this implies that officials acted in bad faith. It suggests that the tools at hand—sections 295A and 298, the Press Act's forfeiture regime, the inquiry's procedural empiricism—were designed to convert complex disputes into administrable files. Those tools make administrative sense and political sense: they promise control, deliver sentences and bans, and perform neutrality. They also shape the historical record downstream. Later narratives that begin with "an offensive book" and proceed to riots and prosecutions often reproduce the aperture the law created. Repairing that record requires returning to the composite text and to the institutions that made the offense legible and mobilizing.

In Rangoon in 1938, the state's entry had two immediate consequences. First, it consecrated "offense" as a legal category around which narrative could be organized: a book, a malicious author, a facilitating printer or financier. Second, it cleared institutional ground for the next act. Once the courts had weighed malice and pronounced sentences, lawmakers could step in to codify the "protections" demanded at Shwe Dagon—regulating intimacy and migration in the measured idiom of statute. In this way, the government's response did not so much resolve the crisis as reframe it, moving the scene from street and terrace to courtroom and chamber while preserving the idiom of protection that allowed colonial administrators and monastic nationalists to converge for different ends (Burma, Legislative Department, 1940; Indian Overseas Central Association, 1941). With the state's narrowing

in view, the analysis now enters the courtroom, where §§295A and 298, confiscated copies, and composite authorship meet in testimony, verdicts, and sentences—and where offense is domesticated as judicial fact.

The Trial

The courtroom offered a new script for the same controversy. On fifteen September 1938, proceedings opened in the Rangoon District Court with three defendants: Maung Shwe Hpi, author of the satirical third section; U Sin (Abdullah), whose doctrinal rebuttal had argued inside Buddhist categories; and Mahomed Hashim Patil, the businessman who financed the 1936 reprint. Each was charged under sections 295A and 298 of the Indian Penal Code—the first criminalizing "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings," the second targeting utterances made with intent to wound such feelings (India, 1860; India, 1927). Copies of the reprint were produced as exhibits; monks, lay readers, and officials testified to the passages they considered most offensive.

Figure 4.

Portraits of U Shwe Hpi (left) and U Sin (right) appeared in the 28 October issue of *The Sun*



Source: The Sun, 28/10/1938 (Universities' Central Library, Myanmar)

Inside the courtroom, the composite book was disassembled into elements that law could handle: words, intentions, acts of printing, and financing. The prosecution's case joined three claims. First, the specific passages attributed to Shwe Hpi crossed the line from a polemical dispute into a calculated insult—regarding the Buddha's caste status, pork and purity, and Burmese identity. Second, the book's circulation, whether by sale or free distribution, had been facilitated by Patil's funding of the reprint. Third, the book as a whole functioned to outrage religious feelings, making each contributor and facilitator culpable.

Defense counsel responded by reassembling the book as a composite artifact. For Shwe Hpi, they framed his performance as satire within a recognized polemical genre, arguing that ridicule of religious claims has its own rhetorical tradition and cannot be equated with malicious intent. For U Sin, they emphasized the scholastic tone and precise Pāli vocabulary of his section, arguing that a reasoned rebuttal—whatever its conclusions—lacked the *mens rea* the statute required. For Patil, they argued that the absence of knowledge

and purpose: financing a reprint without authorial review is not the same as willfully causing harm. Cross-examination exposed the gap between the text and the tumult: several witnesses conceded that they had not read the book in full before the riots; they were familiar with its contents through newspaper excerpts and public sermons. The defense treated this concession as a decisive victory. If the violence was transmitted through mediated fragments, then the book's authors could not be held strictly responsible for the uses to which editors and speakers had put their lines.

The court answered with a familiar doctrinal move: to isolate the actors whose intentions the law could see. On 5 October 1938, it convicted Maung Shwe Hpi under both sections 295A and 298 and sentenced him to two years' rigorous imprisonment(Riot Inquiry Committee, 1939a; Rangoon Law Reports, 1939). It convicted Mahomed Hashim Patil under section 295A and sentenced him to six months' imprisonment. It acquitted U Sin, finding that his section lacked the malice required by the statute. On paper, the judgment acknowledged the book's composite character; in practice, it individualized liability in precisely the pattern the law facilitates—punish satirical invective and the facilitation of circulation; distinguish scholastic rebuttal.

The trial's evidentiary logic mirrored the government's earlier narrowing. What the court saw clearly were elements it could juridify: passages marked as insulting, printer's ledgers, testimony from readers and monks, and the financial arrangements for the reprint. What it did not adjudicate were the conditions that made those passages combustible—weeks of editorial repetition, monastic pedagogy that sacralized injury as duty, the choice of Shwe Dagon as a stage of layered temporality, and the assembly's resolutions that linked insult to marriage, ritual space, and migration (Edwards, 2006). In this sense, the courtroom did not determine whether "religious offense" existed; it determined who could be held to have willed it (Asad, 1993; Pandey, 1990).

The pattern of outcomes is telling. The acquittal of U Sin preserved the appearance of even-handed secular adjudication: courts could distinguish argument from malice. The conviction of Shwe Hpi declared that a satirical insult was punishable as an intentional offense. The sentence of Patil signaled that financing reproduction could be treated as a form of willing insult, regardless of authorial control. Together, the outcomes confirmed the Riot Inquiry Committee's formulation that the book was the "occasion" of the trouble, even as they left intact the social machinery that had made the "occasion" legible and mobilizing (Riot Inquiry Committee, 1939a, 1939b).

Gender and economy, so visible at Shwe Dagon, scarcely figured in the courtroom narrative. The Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Bill, elevated in the assembly's resolutions as a demand of communal protection, appeared nowhere in indictments or exhibits. Nor did the colonial political economy of urban retail—central to the march on Soortee Bara Bazaar—enter testimony except as descriptions of looting and damage. Those silences were not accidental; they reflect the selective vision of sections 295A and 298, as well as the Press and Registration of Books Act. These instruments focus the eye on speech, books, and intent (India, 1867). Structural grievances are not acquittable or convictable; they are, from the law's vantage, context.

The trial also helped fix a narrative template that later historians would sometimes echo: a provocative book, public outrage, a riot, and a legal reckoning. That template is not false; it is incomplete. It backgrounds the mediated life of the text, the composite nature of its authorship, and the institutional choreography that turned excerpts into resolutions and resolutions into street action. It also underplays what the trial made possible next: a turn to statute in which the idiom of "protection"—first shouted on the terraces, then narrowed in the courtroom—could be redeployed to regulate intimacy and migration in calm administrative prose.

A Transcolonial Aside: *Rangila Rasul* and the Making of Section 295A

The legal architecture on which the Rangoon trial rested had been assembled a decade earlier in British India. In the early 1920s, a Punjabi pamphlet titled *Rangila Rasul* satirized the Prophet Muhammad's marriages. Widely denounced as scurrilous, it provoked protests and prosecutions. When the case reached the Lahore High Court, the publisher, Rajpal, was acquitted in 1927 because the penal code, as then drafted, criminalized insults to religion only when they threatened the sanctity of places of worship or disrupted religious assemblies. Insults to beliefs, doctrines, or revered figures—however offensive—were not plainly punishable. The acquittal, followed by Rajpal's assassination in 1929, revealed a gap between colonial legal categories and communal politics (*Raj Paul v. Emperor*, 1927; Adcock, 2016; Stephens, 2014).

The British government in India moved quickly to fill that gap. Later in 1927, the Indian Penal Code (Amendment) Act introduced Section 295A, which criminalized "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings" (India, 1927; Adcock, 2016; Stephens, 2018). The statute shifted attention from effects to intention and from spaces to speech: the state could now punish the will to insult even without a demonstrated threat to worship (India, 1927). Across the next decade, §295A spread through colonial prosecutions of pamphleteers, editors, and preachers. It offered courts a way to individualize blame and to perform secular impartiality—punishing unedifying polemic across communities—while leaving intact the structural tensions that made offense politically explosive.

When prosecutors in Rangoon charged *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan* under §§295A and 298, they were working from that Indian template. Like Rajpal in Lahore, Shwe Hpi became the figure through whom malice could be seen. Like the Punjab cases, the trial individualized responsibility for words and their reproduction and bracketed the environment that rendered those words mobilizing. The link is not incidental; it is transcolonial. Section 295A migrated with imperial jurisprudence, carrying with it a way of governing offenses that Burma would adopt in 1938 and that would reverberate in its own legislative aftermath.

With the trial's judgments delivered and the legal template clarified, the narrative turns to the legislature, where the idiom of protection was expanded from speech to intimacy and migration in the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act of 1939 and the Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement of 1941.

Legislative Aftermath

The anxieties rehearsed at Shwe Dagon and narrowed in the Rangoon courtroom did not end with sentences and a ban; they were recast as rules for living. That recasting formed a long arc that would be revived in the twenty-first century by the so-called "race and religion" laws on conversion, interfaith marriage, reproductive policy, and monogamy (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d; Crouch, 2015; Walton, McKay, & Kyi, 2015). Its first decisive hinge, however, came within three years of the riot: the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act of 1939 and the Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement of 1941 (Burma. Legislative Department, 1940; Indian Overseas Central Association, 1941; Baxter, 1941). Naming these measures together clarifies the logic that linked them: outrage over words became procedure over people—especially women and migrants—under an idiom of protection shared, if differently motivated, by colonial officials and monastic nationalists (Ikeya, 2011, 2024; Chakravarti, 1971; Walton, 2016).

The Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act (1939)

The Legislative Council debate in November 1939 opened in tones that would have been familiar to anyone who had stood on the pagoda terrace in July the previous year. In paraphrase, supporters warned that "the women of the Buddhist community must be safeguarded" lest they be "subordinated under alien religions," and they pressed for "legal clarity so that a daughter's property does not pass into non-Buddhist hands." The rhetoric translated mass meeting resolutions into chamber speech. Where monks on the terrace framed the issue as defense of the *sasana*, officials at the benches framed it as consent, registration, succession, and order. The register differed; the idiom—protection was the same (Burma. Legislative Department, 1940; Mendelson, 1975; Ikeya, 2011; Ikeya, 2024; Walton, 2016).

The Act, passed on November 16, 1939, conditioned marriages between Buddhist women and non-Buddhist men on heightened procedures. Proof of informed consent was required, and, in many jurisdictions, formal registration was also required before local authorities. It also established default inheritance rules designed to keep property within Buddhist familial lines. In administrative prose, these provisions appeared to be safeguards. In social practice, they functioned as instruments of control: fathers, brothers, and local officials became gatekeepers of intimate choice; "consent" became a document an official could validate or withhold; property norms aligned kin interest with communal policing (Burma, Legislative Department, 1940).

Two features of the Act's design are revealing. First, the law located female agency in procedure rather than in voice. The woman to be "protected" rarely appears as a speaking subject in debate records; her will is asserted on her behalf by male legislators, monks, and administrators. Second, the law bound moral claims to administrative tools—forms, registers, attestations—that made protection legible to the state and enforceable by local elites. The effect was to convert the riot's gendered rhetoric into everyday paperwork. What had been shouted in resolutions became an office counter and a ledger line.

The timing of the Act confirms that this was not an incidental alignment. In the courtroom weeks earlier, gendered demands had been absent by design: sections 295A and

298 of the Indian Penal Code individualize insult and are blind to the politics of intimacy (India, 1860; India, 1927). Within a year, those same demands were returned in statute, now insulated from adversarial trial and incorporated into administrative routine. This is how colonial selectivity works at scale: criminal law disavows structural stakes in the moment; legislation institutionalizes them later. The idiom of "protection" allowed colonial administrators and monastic nationalists to converge without agreement on ends—one saw order, procedure, and legibility; the other saw defense of Buddhism and communal boundaries (Mendelson, 1975; Walton, 2016).

Implementation sharpened these stakes. In towns where mixed marriages were common, registrars became arbiters not only of paperwork but of propriety. Disputes over whether a woman's consent was "informed" could be leveraged by families to delay or derail unions. Succession provisions encouraged relatives to contest bequests that crossed communal lines. Even where officials applied rules neutrally, the mere existence of a special procedure singled out certain marriages as suspect by default, encouraging surveillance by neighbors and mobilization by local monks. The Act thus extended the Shwe Dagon pedagogy of injury—"protect Buddhist women"—into the mundane routines of filing, stamping, and sealing (Ikeya, 2008; Ikeya, 2011; Walton, 2016).

The Act also contributed to the nationalist narrative. Once codified, "protection" could be presented as the moral consensus of a polity rather than as a campaign achieved in a moment of crisis. That retrospective gloss mattered for memory: later accounts could describe the 1939 measure as the natural sequel to righteous indignation, thereby reinforcing a storyline in which a text's insults correctly resulted in regulation of marriage and property. In that storyline, the composite character of *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan*, the press's curation of its most inflammatory lines, and the layered temporality of Shwe Dagon as a sacred-political stage recede; what remains is an emblematic injury and a law that "protected" against it (Edwards, 2006).

The Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement (1941)

By early 1941, attention shifted from gender to demography. In the Legislative Council, speakers framed migration as an administrative problem: numbers to be counted, flows to be regulated, permits to be issued. "Unchecked migration," one legislator warned in paraphrase, "threatens economic stability and social harmony"; another insisted that "Numbers must not swamp Burma, our markets cannot sustain." The phrasing echoed years of agitation linking Indian traders and laborers to Burmese economic precarity and moral decline. The Agreement concluded on 15 February 1941 with the Government of India formalized quotas and documentation regimes, and empowered authorities to monitor recruitment and settlement (Indian Overseas Central Association, 1941; Baxter, 1941; Chakravarti, 1971).

As with the marriage statute, the Agreement's administrative language masked a political translation. Colonial officials described it as a pragmatic response to labor market pressures and urban overcrowding; nationalist monks and politicians, on the other hand, embraced it as a communal safeguard against Indian predominance in commerce and numbers. The idiom of "protection" again provided convergence, as it permitted very

different projects—imperial labor management and Buddhist communal defense—to converge in a single instrument. Quotas, permits, and registers served as proxies for more complex conversations about taxation, land tenure, and imperial mobility, which determined who moved, why, and with what consequences (Pearn, 1971 [1939]; Cady, 1978; Charney, 2009).

The Agreement also sorted grievances that had animated the march from Shwe Dagon to Soortee Bara Bazaar. In July 1938, Indian shops symbolized a perceived economic asymmetry; looting translated that symbol into violence. In 1941, the same asymmetry was addressed through changes in recruitment rules and numerical caps. Violent energy was deflected into bureaucratic channels without being conceptually challenged. "Protection" through immigration control legitimized suspicion of Indian presence as a principle of governance. That legitimation endured, shaping administrative attitudes and public rhetoric into the post-independence era (Chakravarti, 1971; Seekins, 2017).

Finally, like the marriage statute, the Agreement's design relied on local officials to enact policy. Permits had to be checked, quotas applied, and exceptions adjudicated. That reliance increased the discretionary power of district officers and police over Indian laborers and traders, and with it opportunities for petty exclusion. A familiar pattern reappeared: a crisis narrated as a communal injury yields an instrument that enhances the state's everyday reach over marginalized bodies.

Convergence, Selectivity, and the Idiom of Protection

Read together, the 1939 Act and the 1941 Agreement reveal how colonial administration and monastic nationalism shared a common language, even when they did not share a common goal. Each took a resolution voiced at Shwe Dagon—protecting Buddhist women and curbing Indian migration—and translated it into statute or treaty. Each treated "protection" as a neutral virtue, even as it subordinated women's agency to procedure and recoded complex labor geographies into quotas. Each left other drivers of crisis offstage: the press's pedagogy of offense, the layered historical temporality of the Shwe Dagon stage that endowed arguments with sacral authority, and the political economy of colonial Rangoon that made bazaar targets legible as enemies (Edwards, 2006).

This selective vision aligns with the courtroom's earlier narrowing. Sections 295A and 298 individualize malice; the Press Act permits seizure of offending texts (India, 1927; India, 1867; Hamilton, 1895). The legislature, in turn, expands the field from words to persons, but maintains the same optic: a class of suspect marriages and a class of suspect migrants. In both venues, the state's authority is performed as neutrality—protecting order, securing consent, rationalizing flows—even as its categories fix communal difference in law. Protection becomes governance; governance becomes memory.

Everyday Effects and After-Effects

The everyday life of these measures mattered. In registry offices, a Buddhist woman's choice could trigger scrutiny that a Buddhist man's marriage did not; in inheritance disputes, relatives could invoke statutory defaults to contest wills, or property claims that crossed communal lines (Burma, Legislative Department, 1940; Crouch, 2015; Ikeya, 2011, 2024). In

labor recruitment, Indian men faced new documentary hurdles and new forms of local discretion under the regulatory framework surrounding the Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement (Indian Overseas Central Association, 1941; Baxter, 1941; Chakravarti, 1971). None of these practices required malice from officials; they only needed the conscientious application of rules whose premise was communal risk.

Those practices also fed back into the narrative. Refused permits and contested registrations could be seen as confirmation that the danger was real and that vigilance was justified. Over time, "protection" congealed as common sense—less a position to be argued than a background assumption about how intimacy and migration should be managed. That congealing made later revivals easier. When parliamentarians in 2015 revived legislation on conversion, marriage, reproduction, and monogamy, they could speak as if they were completing a long-standing project rather than inaugurating a new one (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d; Crouch, 2015; Walton, McKay, & Kyi, 2015; Walton, 2016).

Historiographical Aside

Later accounts often under-register this legislative codification. Mid-century syntheses portrayed the riots primarily as an eruption precipitated by a provocative text and resolved by a legal reckoning, with the 1939 and 1941 measures relegated to context or aftermath (Cady, 1978). Pioneering work on Muslims in Burma noted the legal moves but foregrounded the book as a singular provocation, obscuring how gender and migration were translated into durable regulatory regimes (Yegar, 1972). More recent political histories have sharpened chronology, yet they tend to reiterate the text → outrage → riot arc, leaving the statute book in footnotes (Charney, 2009). The result is a memory structure in which injury is remembered and rules are forgotten, even though it is the rules that made injury governable.

Foregrounding the Act and the Agreement repairs that imbalance. It shows that the "occasion" the Riot Inquiry Committee named was not merely a pretext for crowd anger; it was the gateway for legal architectures that normalized communal management through intimate and demographic regulation (Riot Inquiry Committee, 1939a; 1939b). It also clarifies continuity: the protective grammar articulated at Shwe Dagon and in the 19th-century chamber returns, almost verbatim, in the twenty-first century. Continuity here does not mean unchanging content; it means a stable repertoire—textual offense as trigger, protection as response, law as the vessel—available to different regimes.

Bridge to "Afterlives of the Book"

These measures also help explain why the book's memory could overshadow its pages. Once "protection" was written into marriage and migration law, later commemorations did not need to rehearse the composite authorship of *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan* or the mechanics of press pedagogy. A condensed story sufficed: a book insulted Buddhism; the people defended it; laws ensured it would not happen again. In school history textbooks and in the narratives of the anti Muslim hate speeches, that story persisted; in administrative files and registries, its consequences did too. The Afterlives that followed, therefore, belong as much to statute and memory as to text. To trace them is to see how a polemical volume became a

symbol, and how that symbol helped mask—and legitimate—the regulatory work done in its name.

Afterlives of the Book

Although *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan* was formally banned in August 1938, it never vanished. Scarce copies continued to circulate in private hands and institutional stacks, acquiring value precisely because they were forbidden. The prohibition reshaped the book's social life: a dense, composite polemic—rarely read cover to cover—hardened into a symbol invoked more often than consulted. Over time, remembered insult eclipsed textual complexity; what people "knew" about the book traveled as a handful of lines and a settled moral of grievance rather than as a record of argument among differently situated authors (Riot Inquiry Committee, 1939a; 1939b).

Most studies of the 1938 riots in both English and Burmese still treat Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan as a single-authored tract by Maung Shwe Hpi launching an unprovoked assault on Buddhism (Ba Than, 1951; Cady, 1958; Chakravarti, 1971; Charney, 2009; Department of Historical Research, 2016; Mahajani, 1960; Singh, 1980). Only a few works—two Burmese-language studies (Lay Maung, 2012; Arman Tun, 2012) and Moshe Yegar's *The Muslims of Burma*—correctly identify the book's composite form: three discrete sections by a Buddhist writer and two Muslim writers, with Shwe Hpi's contribution coming last. After independence, this flattening of authorship was reinforced through public pedagogy. History textbooks and anniversary journalism repeatedly echoed the Riot Inquiry Committee's phrase "occasion of the trouble"—a term the Committee had initially used to distinguish occasion from cause in administrative prose—until, in classrooms and commemorations alike, the distinction dissolved. The result was a durable shorthand in which a multivocal, unevenly read text became a single offending book that "triggered" the riots, obscuring both its composite structure and the mediations that amplified its most inflammatory lines. The phrase circulated as a verdict: a book insulted Buddhism; the community reacted. Each retelling tightened the causal chain by trimming context—the book's multivocal authorship, the press's curatorial role, and the assembly's layered resolutions receded behind a single declarative memory (Ba Than, 1964; The Department of Historical Research and National Library, 2016).

Outside this selective remembering, the archives tell a different story. In catalogs and private holdings, surviving copies still attest to a tripartite structure: a Buddhist critique, a Muslim rebuttal articulated in Buddhist terms, and a satiric judgment that most contemporaries found intolerable. Librarians' notes and private collectors' annotations sometimes preserve provenance trails—how copies moved from press to backroom, from seizure to shelf. That archival legibility underscores the paradox at the heart of the book's afterlife: the closer one gets to the object, the more composite it appears; the farther one moves into public memory, the more monolithic it becomes (Pan Nyo, U., U Sin, & Maung Shwe Hpi, 1936).

From the 1960s onward, this public-memory template proved durable because it provided a concise explanation for a complex event. It reduced the riot to an affective trigger and cast collective violence as the predictable outcome of wounded feelings. That portability

mattered in local struggles over marriage, conversion, and urban economies. When debates over interfaith marriage resurfaced, the shorthand "1938" could be invoked as evidence that unregulated intimacy endangered the *sasana*. When anxieties about migration intensified, the same shorthand suggested that demographic imbalance had long been the hidden cause of communal strain. In each case, the symbol of the book was made to carry the weight of disputes it had not authored, offering a ready-made moral that could be detached from textual specificity and attached to contemporary agendas (Burma, Legislative Department, 1940; Indian Overseas Central Association, 1941).

The book's symbolic utility grew in the 2000s as nationalist clerical networks expanded their media reach. Sermons, pamphlets, and community talks referenced the work as "the book that insulted race and religion," often paraphrasing a small set of inflammatory lines. The rhetoric was familiar: protection of Buddhist women, vigilance against conversion, and suspicion of Indian and Muslim economic predominance. What changed was the medium. Where 1938 relied on newspaper advertisements and serialized fiction to seed outrage, later decades mobilized pamphlet chains, recorded talks, and online posts. The logic of circulation, however, remained stable: fragments stood in for the whole; accumulated paraphrase displaced reading; moral certainty traveled faster than textual nuance (Walton, 2016).

Digital forums amplified the process. Posts and comment threads rehearsed the same lines—Buddha as "outcaste," Burmese as "snake-eaters"—with each iteration presented as proof of perennial contempt. Screenshots of 1938 headlines or later anniversary pieces supplied a veneer of documentary authority. In this way, a polemic printed in two runs became a bottomless reservoir of grievance: endlessly quotable without being revisitable, endlessly useful because it could be recalled as already judged. The book's scarcity intensified this dynamic; few could verify the quotations against the original text, and scarcity itself became evidence that "they" had tried to hide "the truth." The economy of outrage rewarded the fragment, not the page (The Sun, July 15, 1938; The Sun, July 23, 1938; Ledi U Withuda Sara, 1938).

At the same time, the legal pathway laid down in the late colonial years remained quietly influential. The Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act of 1939 and the Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement of 1941 did not figure prominently in popular commemorations of the riot; however, they did frame how officials and communities approached interfaith unions and migration for decades. Registrars learned to treat certain marriages as exceptional by default. District officers exercised expanded discretion over Indian labor. Families leveraged succession defaults to contest bequests that crossed communal lines. These administrative routines made "protection" ordinary—so ordinary that later parliaments could invoke the same idiom without feeling the need to revisit its origins (Burma, Legislative Department, 1940; Baxter, 1941; Chakravarti, 1971).

This is where the book's afterlife meets law's afterlife. By the time lawmakers debated the "race and religion" package in 2015, they could present conversion oversight, special marriage registration, reproductive policy, and monogamy enforcement as instruments of continuity. Parliamentary speeches echoed terrace resolutions from Shwe Dagon—defense of the *sasana*, safeguarding of women, preservation of national identity—while reframing

them in the vocabulary of postcolonial sovereignty and electoral mandate. The grammar persisted: offense or vulnerability warrants protection; protection requires a procedure; and the procedure remakes intimate life and demographic flows in the image of communal security (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d; Walton, 2016).

The site that first hosted the mass assembly—Shwe Dagon—likewise sustained layered meanings across eras. Under the British, it functioned as both a colonial spectacle and a theater of resistance. In the late colonial moment, it sacralized assembly, translating print agitation into embodied unanimity. In later decades, it remained a stage where religious devotion and nationalist performance could fold into one another (Edwards, 2006). That palimpsest mattered for memory: to invoke "Shwe Dagon in 1938" was to summon a place where claims to protect Buddhism could be fused to claims about race and nation, and where resolutions about books could naturally extend to regulations about women and migrants. The site endowed arguments with temporal depth; it made old idioms always feel timely.

The historiographical strand of this afterlife has remained mostly implicit in public discourse. Mid-century syntheses, in both English and Burmese, often reproduced the legal aperture—text, outrage, riot, without dwelling on the statutes that followed (Cady, 1978; Yegar, 1972; Charney, 2009). Popular histories repeated the Inquiry Committee's phrasing while omitting the committee's own hedges and the press's role in manufacturing urgency. That elision matters because it keeps attention focused on the emblem ("the book") and away from the administrative architectures that made the symbol actionable and durable. When contemporary actors invoke 1938 as precedent, they are often drawing on a historiography that has already streamlined the event into a morality tale.

Against that streamlining, a return to the object and its mediations restores proportion. The composite authorship raises questions about the habit of attributing a singular intent; the multilingual register reveals uneven literacy across communities; the book's circulation history underscores that most readers encountered it as an excerpt and rumor, rather than as a complete text. These particulars do not excuse the third section's insults; they demonstrate how specific insults became general instruments. A fragment was taught to stand for the whole, then used to authorize rules that would outlast the fragment's newspaper life.

The afterlives also show how memory can work as a method. To remember selectively—to lift a handful of lines and forget the rest, to quote "occasion of the trouble" and ignore its administrative caution—is to enact a politics of abstraction. That politics simplifies history to mobilize the present. It fuses pain to policy by smoothing complexity and elevating emblem. It is effective precisely because it feels like common sense. In this sense, the book's most extended afterlife is not in libraries but in templates: an available script for understanding injury and for licensing governance.

There is another, quieter afterlife in the archive and in scholarship that reads against the grain. Rare copies, marginalia, and court records make it possible to re-encounter the text as an argumentative space rather than as a talisman. Reportage, cartoons, and serialized fiction trace how editors taught their readers to feel and what to demand. Legislative minutes are compiled to form resolutions and administrative procedures. These materials reopen the

routes by which argument became outrage, and outrage became order. They also suggest a way to disengage the emblem from the edifice it helped legitimate.

Framed this way, the book's trajectory from object to symbol helps explain why later legislative revivals could be narrated as continuity rather than rupture. The path from page to pulpit to street to statute formed an itinerary that could be walked again whenever "protection" was called for. The itinerary does not explain every episode of post-independence communal politics in Myanmar; it explains why certain moves remain intelligible, persuasive, and repeatable. A text that few read became a story that many told, and the story became a set of rules that many lived under.

To foreground these afterlives is not to displace moral judgment about the violence of 1938; it is to situate that judgment within the institutional logics that made "offense" a workable category of governance and a durable resource for mobilization. The work of repair begins by refusing the easy substitution of symbol for structure. It continues by tracking how symbols authorize rules and how rules instruct memory on what to retain and what to discard.

The argument that follows returns to first principles: that the riot's explanatory power lies less in an incendiary text than in the colonial apparatus that translated injury into administration. By tracing how offense was codified, circulated, and remembered, the conclusion rearticulates the entanglement of text, law, and riot, clarifying how the coloniality of offense continues to organize both historiography and contemporary politics in Myanmar.

Conclusion

The 1938 Indo-Burman riots resist explanation as a simple eruption of injured feelings over a book. Read closely, they are best understood as the outcome of an apparatus that translated polemical speech into legal injury and then into regulatory order. Reconstructing the composite authorship of *Moulvi-hnint-Yogi Awada Sadan* and following its trajectory through pressrooms, monastic networks, police files, courtrooms, and the legislature shows how a dense, unevenly read text became a catalyst for violence and a template for governance. The itinerary—from page to pulpit to street, and from courtroom to statute—was not incidental. It was the operational logic by which "offense" moved from words to rules.

At the center of this logic sits the coloniality of offense. Categories such as "malicious intent" and "religious offense" appear neutral, but they are techniques of rule. They render disputes administratively legible while deflecting attention from the structural conditions that make those disputes compelling: economic asymmetries in bazaar and dock, the gendered politics of intimacy and inheritance, and the governance of migration under imperial labor markets. In Rangoon, sections 295A and 298 of the Indian Penal Code narrowed the crisis to individual *mens rea* and discrete passages on the page, permitting the state to adjudicate a recognizable wrong while leaving unexamined the social machinery that had turned fragments into mobilizing injury (India, 1860; India, 1927; Asad, 1993; Pandey, 1990).

The trial's outcomes disclose how this narrowing works in practice. Maung Shwe Hpi's satirical invective and Mahomed Hashim Patil's financing could be individualized as malice and facilitation; U Sin's scholastic rebuttal could be legally distinguished for lack of intent. The composite book was disassembled into actors, intentions, and acts that law can

see. The Riot Inquiry Committee's careful phrase—"occasion of the trouble"—helped stabilize this transformation, acknowledging injury while displacing causality to safer administrative ground (Riot Inquiry Committee, 1939a; 1939b). The law did not decide whether an offense existed; it decided whose will could be blamed for it.

In the legislature, the optic broadened from speech to persons, but the idiom of "protection" preserved the apparatus. The Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act of 1939 and the Indo-Burma Immigration Agreement of 1941 translated terrace resolutions into administrative routines—consent forms, registries, quotas, and permits. For colonial administrators, protection meant procedure and order; for monastic nationalists, it meant defense of the *sasana* and Burmese identity. Different projects converged in a shared grammar. In the process, women and migrants became the objects of regulation through which communal security would be produced, with local officials as everyday arbiters of intimate choice and cross-border movement (Burma, Legislative Department, 1940; Indian Overseas Central Association, 1941; Baxter, 1941; Ikeya, 2011; Walton, 2016).

This convergence illuminates how quickly the riot's moral energy could be domesticated. What the courtroom could not address—gendered vulnerability and demographic anxiety—returned as statute within a year. Criminal law's disavowal of structure was followed by the institutionalization of structure through legislation. The result was a durable architecture of regulation that normalized suspicion at the point of marriage and the point of entry. The idiom of "protection" thus naturalized a politics of communal management without appearing to abandon neutrality.

The book's later life reveals how governance and memory are inextricably intertwined. In post-independence primers, official timelines, and anniversary journalism, the committee's language of "occasion" hardened into causal doctrine; the composite character of the text and the mediating role of the press receded; and the riot became a morality tale of insult and righteous defense (Ba Than, 1964; The Department of Historical Research and National Library, 2016). That condensation proved helpful. It allowed subsequent actors to recall 1938 as a precedent without reopening the evidentiary record: a handful of lines from the third section could serve as a substitute for the whole; a phrase from an administrative report could stand in for history. What had once been a book became, through repetition, a symbol; and the emblem helped mask the legal work done in its name.

The site that sacralized the first mass meeting—Shwe Dagon—also carried the memory forward. As a space of layered temporality, it bound colonial spectacle and anticolonial resistance, devotional practice and nationalist theater, into a single stage (Edwards, 2006). To summon "Shwe Dagon in 1938" in later decades was to access that palimpsest: an inherited form in which claims about the sanctity of Buddhism could be fused to claims about marriage, language, and nation. The stage lent arguments depth and inevitability. It made old idioms feel evergreen.

A decolonial historiography requires undoing these inherited simplifications. That means returning to the object: to the book's tripartite structure, its multireligious register, and the asymmetries of interreligious literacy that shaped its argumentative terrain. It means tracking the press's pedagogy of offense: how editors excerpted, illustrated, and serialized a

handful of insults into a public script. It means reading legal files against their own grain: seeing how the categories that stage neutrality also shape what counts as legible injury. Furthermore, it means taking the legislature seriously as a site where riot energy is converted into institutional form, with consequences that outlast commemorative headlines.

Placed alongside cognate episodes within the empire—most famously the *Rangila Rasul* affair and the introduction of section 295A in British India—the Burmese case comes into sharper relief. The juridical template that individualized malice in Lahore was adopted in Rangoon and served a similar function, providing colonial courts with a means to appear impartial while sidestepping established structures. The difference in Burma lay in how quickly the idiom of protection shifted from court to chamber to everyday administrative routine, and in how firmly it became attached to the management of women and migrants as the hinges of communal security (India, 1927; Chakravarti, 1971; Pearn, 1971 [1939]).

The longue durée of this apparatus is visible in the so-called "race and religion" protection laws of 2015. Enacted in a postcolonial, electoral context, these measures reprise a familiar grammar: regulating conversion, overseeing interfaith marriage, managing reproduction, and enforcing monogamy in the name of protecting Buddhism and the nation (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d; Walton, 2016). Their plausibility rests on a memory regime first stabilized in 1938 and reinforced in statute by 1941. Continuity here is not an empty slogan; it is a repertoire—a learned sequence in which textual offense is translated into protective law.

What, then, does the 1938 episode tell us beyond its own moment? First, that communal violence is not best explained by the temperature of belief alone. It must be situated in the institutional translations that make belief actionable: media practices that teach readers to feel and demand, legal categories that sort injury into chargeable offenses, and administrative instruments that turn outrage into routine. Second, that the state's performance of neutrality—its language of intent, order, and protection—is not merely descriptive; it is constitutive. By fixing the terms of legibility, the state shapes how communities can quarrel and on what grounds they can be governed. Third, that sacred places with layered temporalities do not merely host politics; they alter their tempo and authority, binding present claims to past forms of meaning (Edwards, 2006).

The contribution of this study is to reframe the late colonial Burma case through that analytic lens. By tracing the entanglement of text, law, and riot, it clarifies how offense functioned as a political technology—at once a sentiment circulated by newspapers and sermons and a category stabilized by courts and statutes. It also shows how the resulting legal architectures—on marriage and migration in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and on conversion and reproduction in the twenty-first century—owe their plausibility to that entanglement.

A more precise history is not a luxury. It is the condition for interrupting a repertoire in which fragments stand in for wholes, symbols stand in for structures, and protection stands in for equality. Recovering the composite text, the mediations that made it combustible, and the layered stage that sacralized its politics allows us to see how offense is manufactured, governed, and remembered. Witnessing that process clearly is the first step

toward imagining legal and media practices that do not turn selective outrage into a lasting hierarchy.

A straightforward formulation follows: riots are not inevitable effects of religious insult; they are the products of institutional translations that make insult actionable (Walton, 2016). In 1938, Burma's translations linked text to law and law to lasting regulation. In Myanmar today, their legacies remain visible. Any scholarship or policy that aims to reduce communal harm must therefore address—not only the words that injure—but the media, legal, and administrative forms that convert words into rules.

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