

# A Study of Etymology of Arakan, Rohingya and Rakhine



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## INTRODUCTION

**ARAKAN** is the modern name, in the ancient times the country was known as Arakan Desh <sup>1</sup> or Rakkhapura <sup>2</sup> or Roshango Desh.<sup>3</sup> According to northern face of the Ananda Chandra stone pillar of Chandra dynasty (8th Century) at Shitthaung Pagoda in Mrauk-U, the name of the country is mentioned as Arakandesh since the inscription was written in Photo Bengali ( *Shay-bray Bengali Sabay*). The people of Arakan is known as Arakanese and again they are sub-divided as Arakanese Buddhist and Arakanese Muslim. According to the Rakhine Rajawan, early Buddhist missionaries called Arakan as Rakkhapura and the Arakanese Buddhist is known as Rakhine. According to Rohingya writers and poets of Arakan Royal Court, the country is known as Roshango Desh and Arakanese Muslim is known as Rohingya. Due to geographical location of Arakan, the western most province of Burma (Myanmar), for most part of its history was an independent kingdom. In this article, we are going to discuss first the location, population and people of Arakan and then the etymology of Arakan, Rohang, Rohingya, Rakhine and the Magh. In conclusion, we will discuss some observations on the Rohingya Muslims of Arakan.



## LOCATION OF ARAKAN

Arakan State is located between latitudes 17°15' north and 21°17' north and east longitudes 92°11' east and 94°55' east. The total area of Arakan during British period was about 20,000 sq. miles which has been reduced to 14,200 sq. miles in 1974. Bordering Chin State in the north and Magway Division, Bago Division and Ayeyawady Division in the east and facing Bay of Bengal and Bangladesh in the west. The state is formed with four districts. The districts are Sittway (Akyab), Maungdaw, Kyaukpyu and Thandwe. These districts are formed with 17 townships and 1,164 village-tracts. Sittway (Akyab) is the capital city of the state. <sup>4</sup>

## POPULATION AND PEOPLE OF ARAKAN

Mr. Paton, the British ruler of Arakan, in his report of 1825 stated that the total population of Arakan was:- Maghs 60,000, Muslims 30,000 and Burman 10,000.<sup>5</sup> According to the report of British official, in 1825 the total population of Arakan was only one lakh, of which 30 thousand i.e. 30% were Muslims. As per Census of 1831, the total population of Arakan was 1,50,090. District-wise population are : Akyab District ( 95,090 ), Thandwe District (20,000) and Kyaukpyu District ( 35,000).<sup>6</sup>



## THE ETYMOLOGY OF ARAKAN

The earliest inhabitants of Arakan belong to the Negrito group. They are mentioned in the Arakanese Chronicle as Rakkhasas or bilus (cannibals). They appear to be Neolithic descendants of the people of Arakan but no trace of them has yet been discovered in Arakan. The word Arakan is definitely of Arabic or Persian origin having the same meaning in both these languages. It is the corruption of the word Arkan plural of the word Al-Rukun. But Ibn Batuta wrote the name of Arakan as Arkan, derived from the Arabic word Al-Rukum. There exists some controversy about the origin of the name of 'Arakan' on which traditional and legendary sources differ. In fact, the name of Arakan is of much antiquity. In Ptolemy's Geografia (150 AD) it was named 'Argyre'. Sir H. Yule want to identify with Arakan the name being supposed to be derived from silver mines existing there. **14** Sir H. Yule assumption is supported by Mc Cridle and D.G.E. Hall. **15** In the Ananda Chandra stone pillar of Chandra dynasty (8th Century) at Shitthaung Pagoda in Mrauk-U the name of Arakan was engraved as "Arakandesh". **16**

In the Map of Magni Mogolis Imperium (The great Mughal Empire), drawn in 1650, which is the earliest maps of the Indian region, it was being shown as Aracam. **17** In the Ain-I-Akbari of Abul Fazal (1551-1602) mentioned Arakan as Arkhang. In the Baharistan-I-Ghaib, Mirza Nathan mentioned the people of Arakan as Rakangi while the name of the country as Arkhang. **18** In a Latin Geography (1597 AD) by Peta Vino, the country was referred to as 'Aracan'. In English version of Van Linschtoen's Map of 1598 A.D., it is Aracan. Friar Manrique (1628-43 AD) mentions the country as 'Aracan'. **19** Hindus in his map (1612 A.D.), has been induced to make the country name Aracam. **20**

To the Medieval Portuguese and other European travellers and chroniclers, it is Arracam, Aracao, Orrakam. **21** The Portuguese traveller Barros in 1516 A.D. is said to be first man who referred Aracan which is the nearest to the modern name, in his Decadar. **22** But according to Professor S.H. Hodivala, the modern form Arakan is said to be driven from the Arabic word Al-Rakhang. **23** According to eminent numismatists like Lanepole, Rodgers and Wright, Bengal king Sultan Muhammad Khan Sur struck coins bearing the date 962 A.H.(1554-55 A.D.) styling himself Sultan Shamsuddin Muhammad Shah Ghazi, the name of mint is read as Arakan. **24** A few of these coins are preserved in the London British Museum. The coins are similar to those published by Marsden, Lane Pole and Wright. **25**

## THE ETYMOLOGY OF ROHANG AND ROHINGYA

The name Roshango Desh/Raham/Rohang is the old name of Arakan. It is of much antiquity. It is probably the corruption of Arabic term Raham/Raham Bori meaning God Blessed Land. In the work of Arab geographer Rashiduddin (1310 AD) it appears as Rahan or Raham. **26** The Trukish navigator belonging to the middle of 16th century wrote the name of Arakan as Rakanj. **27** The British travellers Relph Fitch (1586 AD) referred the name of Arakan as 'Rocon'. **28** In the Rennell's map (1771 AD), it is 'Rassawn'. **29** Tripura Chronicle Rajmala mentions the name of Arakan as 'Roshang'. **30**

In the medieval works of the poets of Arakan and Chittagong, like Quazi Daulat, Mardan, Shams Ali, Quraishi Magan, Alaol, Ainuddin, Abdul Ghani and others, they frequently referred to Arakan as 'Roshang', 'Roshanga', 'Roshango Shar', and 'Roshango Desh'. **31** Famous European traveller Francis Buchanam (1762-1829 AD) in his accounts mentioned Arakan as "Reng, ROUNG, Rossawn, Russawn, Rung". **32** In one of his accounts, "A Comparative Vocabulary of some of the languages spoken in the Burman Empire" it was stated that, " the native Mugs of Arakan called themselves 'Yakin', which name is also commonly given to them by the Burmese. The people of Pegu are named 'Taling'. By the Bengal Hindus, at least by such of them as have been settled in

Arakan, the country is called Rossawn. The Mahammedans who have long settled at Arakan call the country 'Rovingaw' and called themselves 'Rohinga' or native of Arakan.<sup>33</sup> The Persians called it Rkon."<sup>34</sup> The Chakmas and Saks of 18th century called it 'Roang'.<sup>35</sup>

The term Rohingya is derived from the word Rohai or Rohshangee, a terminology perverted to Rohingya. Rohai and Roshangee are terms denoting the Muslim people inhabiting in the old Arakan or Rohang or Roshang. The ancient capital of Arakan was Mrauk-U. The Rakhine Buddhists called it Maruk-Oo and the Rohingya Muslims and Europeans called it Maruk-U. After the annexation of Arakan by the British in 1826 A.D., the capital was shifted to Akyab, since that time Mrauk-U was being known by the people of Arakan as Mrohang ( Old City ).<sup>36</sup> Some Bengali writers of present days think that Rohang was derived from the word Mrohang. That is Mrohang > Roang > Rohang > Roshang.<sup>37</sup>

But the Rohingyas of Arakan do not accept it because the name Mrohang was known in Arakan after British annexation of Arakan in 1826 A.D. Where as the great poets of Arakan during Mrauk-U period such as Dulat Kazi, Mardan, Shah Alowal, and other writers of Arakan Royal Court wrote the name of Arakan as Rohang or Roshang in 1622-30 A.D., 1631-38 A.D., and 1651-1673 A.D. respectively. The Rohai of Chittagong region are those Muslim people who fled Arakan or Rohang as a result of Burman atrocities after the country was occupied in 1784 A.D. by Burman king Bodaw Paya. During 40 years of Burmese rule (1784-1824 A.D.) two third or two hundred thousands ( 2,00,000 ) of the inhabitants (Rohingyas and Rakhines) of Arakan fled to Bengal (India).<sup>38</sup> As many as 50% of the total population of Chittagong region are Rohai who trace their ancestral origin to Arakan.<sup>39</sup> Today the Muslims of Arakan call the country 'Rohang' or 'Arakan' and call themselves 'Rohingya' or native of Rohang.<sup>40</sup>

### THE ETYMOLOGY OF RAKHINE AND MAGH

According to the Rakhine Rajawan, the ancient name of Arakan is Rakhine Pray. Its origin goes back to remote past. According to Sir Arthur Phayre, the word Rakhine is a corruption of the Pali word Rakkhasa (Sanskrit word Rakshasa) meaning Ogre (in Burmese Bilue) and signifying monster or demon.<sup>41</sup> Before the spread of Buddhism in Arakan, most of the people were the worshiper of nature. Hence the term Rakhine was applied to them by the people the Indo-Aryan stock. Subsequently, the Arakanese adopted the word as their identity designation, and instead of hesitation, they rather with pride, introduced themselves as Rakhine and their father-land as Rakhine Pray. Pray is an Arakanese word meaning the country. Early Buddhist missionaries called Arakan as 'Rekkha Pura'.<sup>42</sup>

The word Magh is undoubtedly of Bengali origin, but the exact significance of the word and the ultimate derivation are not clear. As to the generic nomenclature Magh, which is of uncertain origin, it is to be noted that it applied to the Buddhists of Arakan and those residing in the eastern parts of Bangladesh. According to A. Phayre, the name Magh originated from the ruling race of Magadha (Bihar) and relying on a Burmese oral tradition, he says that they were originally a Kshatriya tribe of the north India and migrated from Magadha to Burma through eastern Bengal. Subsequently they spread over Arakan from Burma.<sup>43</sup>

The derivation would probably be Magadhi, the adjective form of the proper name, Maghi-Magai-Magi-Mog or Magh. The New English Dictionary states that the word Mag, Mogen, Mogue appear as names of Arakan and the people in 15-16th centuries.<sup>44</sup> Among the old testimonies regarding Arakan association with Magadha is that of Daulat Kazi (1622-38), a well-known poet of Arakan, according to him, the rulers of Rosango (Arakan) belong to the Magadha dynasty and were Buddhists by faith. The poet in his Sati Mayna frequently uses the term Magadher pati and Magadha Raja to signify the kings and the Kingdom of Arakan respectively.<sup>45</sup> The Ralph Fitch the



16th century English traveller, identified Arakan as the country of Mogen. Today both the Maghs of Arakan and Bangladesh disowned this name and claim that this is the coinage of the Englishmen just as they have coined words of similar type. The Maghs call themselves 'Rakhine' and the country 'Rakhine Pye' or country of Rakhine.<sup>46</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Burmese ruling junta and some Burmese and Rakhine scholars claim that historically there are no names like Rohang or Rohingya in Burma and Rohingas are not national of Burma. If any one want to discuss the history of Arakan, he must consult the History books, documents, literatures of Bengal, India and other western writers' books to arrive true picture of Arakan History. Specially, without discussing the history and literature books of Bangal and India you could not say historically there are no names like Rohang or Rohingya in Arakan, Burma. In the above writing, we came across hundreds of records in the history and literature books which mentioned the names Roshango Desh, Rohang and Rohingyas.

From the above Census data, there is no abnormal population growth in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships as accused by the SPDC Govt. and some Burmese & Rakhine scholars. The abnormal and highest growth is recorded at Punnagun and Maybon townships. Therefore, as per Census of 2008, today we assume that the total population of Arakan State is 3.8 million and Rakhine Buddhist 55%, Rohingya Muslim 35% and Burman Buddhist and other Hill tribes are 10% of total population.

Another accusation is that Rohingya always tried to separate Northern Arakan from Burma and want to annex it with a neighbouring country. Before and after independent of Burma, the Mujahid Party and political parties of Rohingya except Northern Arakan Muslim League always demand to declare Northern Arakan as a Muslim Autonomous State within Union of Burma and not an independent state as alleged by some Burmese and Rakhine people. As per demands of Mujahid Party and Rohingya people, the post elected Democratic Govt. of Union Burma led by U Nu declared and constitute the Mayu Frontier District on May 01, 1961 instead of Muslim Autonomous State <sup>47</sup> and constituted Mayu Ray (Mayu Police) instead of Rohingya Muslim Regiment.

It was Rakhine community who always demand an Independent Arakan State outside Burma Union. As per official records of Burma, on May 16, 1947 under the leadership Barrister U Hla Tun Pru, who later became the member of State Council Ne Win Govt., and others Rakhine leaders demanded to declare Arakan as independent State of **Arakanistan**. On June 8, 1947, Rakhine leaders formed Arakan Freedom League Committee and it was led by Achin U Seinda and Bompuk Tha Gyaw to organize Right of Self-determination of Rakhine people and for independent Rakhine State outside Union of Burma. <sup>48</sup>

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