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Arakan



Composition of the Muslim Society in Arakan

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The building up of the Muslim society in Arakan is a long process of gradual growth. The composition of a society quite naturally changed also deferent from century to century. Two factors were mainly responsible for swelling the ranks of the Muslims in Arakan: (I) the immigration of the Muslims from various countries, and (II) merging of the local populace in the Muslim society after their conversion.

The people of many countries came into Arakan on several occasions. There came traders and businessmen in their commercial activities; there came Sayyids, Ulema, Sheiks and Saints in their religious and cultural pursuits; statesmen, administrators, and soldiers by invitation, and artisans and craftsmen in search of employment. There came Arabs, Persians and Truks; there came Afghans, Moors, central Asians and Northern Indians; there came Bengalis, Rajputees and other nationals.

They introduced new elements in the society. They came under banner of Islam, but they brought with them their particular ways of life, and as far as practicable, tried to keep homogeneity of their groups.

The first groups to leave its mark upon the culture of this area were the Arabs. R.B Smart stated that the Arabs traders were in close contact with the peoples of Arakan as early as 788 A.D, and that; they introduced the religion of Islam there, in as early as that time. (1) After the advent of Islam in Arabia, the Muslim followed the foot prints of their fore-fathers in trade and commerce. The Muslim Arab merchants made contact with Arakan. In those days the Arabs were very much active in sea-trade, they even monopolized trade and commerce in the East. As Dr. Rahim rightly remarks, "the eastern trade of the Arab merchants flourished so much so that the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal turned into Arab lakes. (2) They extended their trade from the Red sea to China. Many of these Arabs settled in Arakan.

Not all the Arabs settled in Arakan did so by choice; because of shipwrecks some were forced to seek refuge on the shore and remained there to settle; because of political vicissitudes and rivalries within the Islamic land some had to take shelters in countries far beyond the reach of their government. (3) The Arabs presence in Arakan continued in seventeenth century. Usually the Arabs did not bring their women and probably took local females as wives. The decedents of the mixed marriages between the local wives and the Arabs no doubt formed the original nucleus of the Rohingyas in Arakan.

The second most important contribution to Rohingyas' identity and extension in the Arakan region came as a consequence of the Burmese invasion of 1404. Naramaikhla (Soliaman Shah), the king of Arakan (1404-1434), was expelled from his kingdom by the Burmese; he found shelter in the court of the Muslim ruler of Gaur, and was reinstated on his throne by the armies send from Bengal. The armies of the Gaur accompanying Naramaikhla (Soliaman Shah) were mostly Turkish, Iranian and afghan origin. They settled in a village near Mrauk-U and, built the Sandi Khan Mosque in 1430. They introduced Persian Language in the court of Arakan.

In addition to those soldiers, there also came a large number of Muslims who held important posts in the court as well as in the field of trade and commerce, possessing a far superior culture and civilization. Two Persian inscriptions said to be engraved in 1494-95 A D refer to the names of a Muslim governor and his subordinate officials holding Persian titles thus testifying to the fact of the penetration of the Muslims into Arakan. (4) For the next hundred years from 1430 to 1531, Arakan remained feudatory

to Bengal, paid tribute, learned its history and politics. During this period Persian Language and Turko- Mughal court etiquette were dominant factors in the way of life of Arakan Society.

Muslims conquered Chittagong in 1338 and held under their sway till 1538, and Chittagong formed an integral part of Arakanese up to 1666. During these periods of more than three hundred years a large number of Muslims from Sonargaon, Gaur and other parts of Bengal spread themselves over the entire area from Chittagong to the Arakan court. Muslims gradually became predominant in the Arakan court and a cultural infinity was developed with the Muslims of Chittagong and Arakan ever since the Arabs had settled there. (5) "The end of the sixteenth and the first half of seventeenth century was a period of political instability and transition caused by break-up of the Afghan State in Bengal and the gradual advance of the Mughals.

One of the social and demographic efforts of this political change was the flight of a large number of Afghan nobles and other Muslims of rank and position towards the easternmost district of Bengal. Quite a few of these people found shelter at the court of Arakan where they filled up important positions in the government. Under the patronage of these men a number of such invited Muslim intellectuals continued the cultivation of Bengali literature." (6)

"The Pathan (Afghan) adventurers, warriors, fortune hunters, who came to Chittagong after its conquest did not return to upcountry after the breakdown of Pathans Power. The Mughals, the successors of the Pathans in the subcontinent were their arch enemies. Therefore, they preferred to remain in Chittagong rather than the risk of being killed or enslaved by the Mughals. With the conquest of Gaur by the Mughals many more Pathans took refuge in Chittagong. They offered their services to whoever held the possession of Chittagong. The Arakanese required their services in fighting out the enemies, the Mughals and the Portuguese all of whom were the enemies of the Pathans. Due to their martial vigor, they were appointed to responsible posts.(7)

Another important factor which helped increase the Bengali contribution to Muslim culture in Arakan came as a result of the Portuguese presence in the eastern seas of the Bay of Bengal in the seventeenth century at a time when there existed a weak government in Bengal. It was early in that century that the Portuguese reached the shores of Bengal and Arakan. They came in contact with the Maghs to establish piracy in civil-war-torn Bengal.

The capture and enslavements of prisoners was one of the most lucrative types of plunder. Half of the prisoners taken by Portuguese and all the artisans were given to Arakanese king. The rest were sold on the market or forced to settle in Arakan. (8) Year after year they wadded and plundered the lowlands Bengal, carrying off the inhabitants as slaves. The fury of the raids continued almost unabated during the first half of the eighteenth century. Tallish described the widespread destruction caused by the Magh-Firingi plundering raids as an eye witness, '*As they (the pirates) for a long time continually practiced piracy, their country prospered, and their number increased, while Bengal daily became more and more desolate, less and less able to resist and fight them. Not a householder was left on the both sides of the rivers on their track from Dacca to Chittagong. The districts Bakla, a part of Bengal, lying in their usual part, was (formerly) full of cultivation and houses and yield every year a large amount to imperial government as a duty on its betel-nuts. They swept in with it broom of plunder and adduction, leaving none to inhabit a house or kindle a fire in all the tracts.*' (9) In the Rennell's map of 1771 the whole area of Sunderbans is shown as a tract depopulated by the Maghs.

The large number of captive Muslims brought by the Magh-Firigi pirates gave rise to the Muslim population of Arakan. According to Sir A.P. Phayer, they (the captive Muslims) formed about 15% of whole population. (10) According to Tallish, "*Many high-born persons and Sayyids, many pure and Sayyid born women were compelled to undergo the disgrace of slavery.*" (11)

One of the many other factors that contributed to the preponderance of Muslim population in Arakan was a large-scale conversion of non-Muslims. It brought the problem of composition and structure of the Muslim society. They hailed from different ranks in the society. The large majority came from the general mass, who, being attracted by the miracles and piety of the Muslim Saints. According to, U Kyi, a Burmese historian, that "*The Arabs merchants and mystics carried on missionary activities among the locals. The superior moral character and high missionary zeal of those devote followers attracted large number of people towards the Islam who embraced it en masse.*"(12) G.E. Harvey sated that, "*doubtless it is Mohammedan influence which led to women being more secluded in Arakan than Burma.*" (13) According to Dyniawadi Sayadaw U Nyanna, during the reign of Min Bin (Zabuk Shah 1531-1553) Muslims missionaries from Persia (Iran) and India came to Arakan to propagate Islam where considerable number of Buddhists confessed Islam. (14)

There were also the children of mixed mirages. According to D.G. Hall foreign residents and visitors to Burma and Arakan were encouraged to form temporary alliance with the women of the country. But in the case of Arakan, they were afraid of leaving behind their offspring through local wives for fear of the conversion to Islam. (15)

The next and perhaps last event which helped influence the Rohingya character and number in Arakan was in 1661 when Shah Shuja, the Maghul prince utterly defeated by Aurangzeb, was driven to seek refuge in Arakan. He and his family and followers were assured of welcome by the Arakanese king. But he and most of his followers were murdered on February 7, 1661. Descendants of Shah Shuja's followers still survive among the Rohingyas as sub-group with their special name, "Kaman."

Thus, the Muslim population of the kingdom of Arakan attained a sizeable quantity to form a society of their own. The immigrants and local converts together formed society distinct from that of the non-Muslims. There were diverse professions and groups. The existence of different categories of peoples in the society is also well attested by the contemporary Bengali literature. Poet Daulat Qazu while speaking his patron Ashrof Khan writes, "*Asrof Khan patronized many other Muslim immigrants, Sayyid, Sheiks, Maghuls and Pathans, besides others from among Brahmans, Kshatriyas and Sudras.*" (16) Another poet also contemporary to Daulat Qazi named Mardan states his birth place to be Kanchipuri in Arakan where there lived a number of "Ulema" and "Sheiks" together with Brahmans and Kyacthas who were engaged in literary activities. (17) Poet Abdul Karim Khandkar while speaking about a village named Bander in Roshang (Arakan) says, "*there lived in that village Qazis, Muftis, Ulema religious Faqirs and darwishe. Those high-ranking Muslims living there, used to converse with the king on equal and friendly terms.*" (18)

Sayyids were the descendants of Prophet, Ulema or Alims were those who were well versed in the Islamic science or theology. The Ulema received training in Muslim law, logic, Arabic letters and the religious literature like Hadiths, Tasfir and Kalam. The Shieks were Sufi- Saints, sometime non-worldly ascetics, who were known for their spiritual attainments. The Qazis were the Muslim judicial officers appointed to try the cases of the Muslim community of the kingdom. (19) Poet Alaol says that people from various countries and belonging to various groups came to Arakan to be under the Care of Arakanese king. He mentioned the people from Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Turkey, abbyssinia, Rum i(Turkish) Khurasan, Uzbekistan, Lahore, Multan, Sind, Kashmir, the Deccan, Hind (north Indian), Kamrup and Bengal, Karnal, Malayees, Achin, Cochin, and Kanartak country. The Poet also refers to the Sheiks, Sayyids, Mughals, Pathan, Rajputs, and people of Ava, Burma, Shyam(Indo-China), Tripura, Kukis; the Armenians, the Dutch, the Danish, the English, the French, the Spanish and the Portuguese were also found in Roshang. (20) The Muslim society of Arakan was, thus, a melting pot for centuries in which various foreign traditions imported by the immigrants as well as local influence were fused. They are not an ethnic group, which developed from one tribal group affiliation or single racial stock. Tides of people like Arabs, Persians, Turks, Afghan, Moors, Mughals, Bengalis and people from central Asia, came mostly as traders, warriors and saints through overland and sea-routes. Many settled in Arakan and mixing with the local people developed the present stock of people known as "Rohingya".

Thus, the history of Rohingyas reveals that they developed from different stocks of people who concentrated in a common geographical location. They have a more than 1300 years old tradition, culture, history and civilization of their own expressed in their shrines, cemeteries, sanctuaries, social and cultural institutions found scattered even today in every nook and corner of the land. By preserving their own heritages from the impact of the Buddhist environments, the Rohingyas formed their own society with a consolidated population in Arakan well before the Barman invasions of Arakan in 1784 AD.

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