



## Is Muslim population (Rohingya) in Arakan a relatively recent development?

*"The Muslims have entered Arakan mostly during the British times and after the independence of Burma -*

*Myth or Fact examine"*

*Abdus Samad, Australia*

### Introduction

We the Rohingyas of Arakan firmly believe that the arrival of the Rohingya in Arakan has predated the arrival of many people and races in Arakan and other parts of Burma and that the Rohingyas are natives of Arakan and constitute one of the many indigenous races of Burma. Our conviction is that we have our own history, culture, civilization, language and literature, settled territorial area and a sizeable population, we are distinct from other sectors of the society. We the Rohingyas are also determined not only to preserve and develop our ancestral history and our ethnic identity but also to transmit it to our future generations as the basis of our continued existence as a people in Arakan.

### Historical Points on Rohmgya's Ancestry

The area known as North Arakan had been for many years before the 8<sup>th</sup> century the seat of Hindu dynasties. In 788 AD a new dynasty, known as the Chandras, founded the city of Wesali; this city became a noted trade port to which as many as a thousand ships came annually; the Chandra kings were upholders of Buddhism, their territory extended as far north as Chitlagong, Wesali was an easterly kingdom of Bengal. Both government and people are Indian. In support of this D.G.E. Hall also mentions, "The Burmese do not seem to have settled in Arakan until possibly as late as 10<sup>th</sup> century AD. Hence earlier dynasties are thought to have been Indian, ruling over a population similar to that of Bengal. All the capitals known to history have been in the north near Akyab.<sup>1</sup>

The Arab Muslims first came into contact with Arakan through trade and commerce during the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. In the Arakanese chronicles it is recorded that during the reign of king Mahatyaing Chandra (780-810) several kula or foreign ships were wrecked upon the island of Rarnree, and the people who boarded on them were said to be Muslims. These ship wrecked Muslim sailors settled in the villages of Arakan as the Arakanese king ordered when they were taken before him.<sup>2</sup>

There are frequent references to the Arab-Muslim settlers in coastal regions of Arakan from the 8<sup>th</sup> century onward. To quote: "To the maritime Arabs and Persians the various ports of the land of Burma, and specifically the coastal regions of Arakan ...were well known. Naturally, therefore, when from the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Muslim traders and navigators were spreading over the eastern seas from Egypt and Madagascar to China, and forming settlements at points of vantage, the coastal regions of Arakan and Burma were not over looked."<sup>3</sup>

With the passing of time, the number of Muslims in Arakan began to increase. Gradually, these Muslims have established very good and cordial relations with the local people and inter-mixed by marrying local women. It was a long established custom that foreign residents and even visitors to Arakan and Burma, either by ship-wreck or for commercial reasons, were encouraged to form matrimonial alliances with the women of the country, but on the strict condition that when they left the country their wives and children might not be taken away with them. They differ but little from the Arakanese except in their religion and in the social customs which their religion directs; in writing they use Burmese, but amongst themselves employ colloquially the language of their ancestors.<sup>4</sup>

Muslim merchants from Arabia, Iraq, Persia and other regions of central Asia had started coming to Chittagong from the 9<sup>th</sup> century and some of them settled there for commercial purposes. Along with them Muslim preachers and saints, who penetrated deep into the country and proceeded down the coast to Arakan, which also had a Muslim settlement.<sup>5</sup> These sufi saints used to call the masses to the fold of Islam and their influence in this region is deep rooted. The spread of Mohamadanism which by 13 century had dotted the coast from Aassam to Malaya with curious mosques known as *Badr mokam* and other places of famous saints. The shrines of *Babazi Shah Monayam of Ambari* and *Badr Mokam* situated on the coast of the Bay of Bengal at Akyab bear evidence of the arrival of Muslim saints in Arakan in the early period of history.<sup>6</sup>

Even anterior to 1784 AD the Arakanese kings had been taking people captives from Bengal and hoarded them away to Arakan. Chittagong rose in rebellion once in 1128 AD. The Arakanese went there and put down the rebellion. Again in 1246 AD Chittagong rose in rebellion once more. This time the Arakanese going up to Lauchipura not only quelled the rebellion but also captured and carried 47500 peoples as captives to Arakan. Bengal became Muslim in 1203 and consequently all these captives were said to be Kulas or Muslims.<sup>7</sup>

Actually, Arakan served to a large extent as a bridgehead for Muslim penetration to other parts of Burma since from 9<sup>th</sup> century AD although the Muslims never attained the same degree of importance as they did in Arakan.<sup>8</sup> Arabs gave Arakan its name, and their influence continued into the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They named rivers and islands - Kaladan, Kala-Pansi, Naaf, Ramree Island, Chaduba Island - and built a port city they called Akyab, the "place where a river meets the sea." Most important contribution to the Rohingyas' identity and extension in Arakan came as a consequence of the Burman invasion of Arakan in 1406. Naramaikhia, king of Arakan (1404-1434) was forced to flee the Burmese to Gaur, the capital of Bengal where he took refuge and stayed for 24 years. In 1429-1430 Sultan Nasiruddin Shah of Gaur sent 20,000 troops under Gen. Wali Khan to drive off the Burmans and the Mons and restored Naramaikhia. A year later, at the request of king Naramaikhia, the Gaur king dispatched another 30,000 troops, this time under Gen. Sandi Khan, to disarm Gen. Wall Khan. Naramaikhia succeeded in re-conquering Arakan, took the title of Solaiman Shah, founded a dynasty and built a new city, Mrohaung also called Mrauk-U which remained the capital until 1784- 85 when Arakan was conquered by Burma. For 100 years from 1430 -1530, Arakan paid tribute to Muslim Bengal and learned its history and politics. Contact with the people of Gaur had a significant impact on Rohingya life. The foundation of the Rohingyas' unique culture and traditions was laid. Rohingya writers and poets wrote their history in their own language. Muslim influence in Arakan, then, may be said to date from 1430, the year of Naramaikhia's return. As a result of the close land and sea ties between the two countries which continued to exist for a long time thereafter, the Muslims played a decisive role in the history of the Arakan kingdom.<sup>9</sup>

Arakanese kings introduced and adopted the system of coins bearing kalima as used in Bengal since the Muslim conquest of 1203. Arakan kings also adopted Muslim names and titles which they received from Bengal sultans. Nine kings received Muslim titles. Even after becoming independent of the Bengal sultan, the Arakan kings continued the custom of using the Muslim title in addition to the Burmese or Pali title. This was because they not only wished thought of as sultans in their own right, in imitation of the Moghuls, but also because there were Muslims in ever-large numbers among their subjects. Court ceremonies and administrative methods followed the customs of the Gaur and Delhi Sultanates. Muslims also held eminent posts despite the fact that the kingdom remained Buddhist.<sup>10</sup>

From early 17<sup>th</sup> to end of the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries there were regular Arakan-Portuguese raids and forays on Bengal and the capture and enslavement of prisoners was one of the most lucrative types of plunder. Half of the prisoners taken by the Portuguese and all the artisans among them were given to the king; the rest were sold on the market or forced to settle down in the villages near Mrohaung. In 1644 alone, the army of Narapatikri (1638-1645) brought about 60,000 Bengalis who were resettled in Arakan as royal service groups. Quite a big number of these captives were Muslims. The Muslim slaves retained their religion whereas the captive Hindus hastened to assimilate among the Buddhists of Arakan. Some of these captive slaves were settled in special areas guarded by Muslim soldiers. This captive Muslim population of the country alone form about 15% of the whole population. A. P. Phayre mentions, "the Mossalmans, are of an entirely different race being of Bengalee descent." <sup>11</sup>

In 1660-61 the Magul prince Shah Shuja fled to Arakan to take refuge. This event brought a new wave of Muslim immigrants to the kingdom of Arakan, which also gave rise to the influence, character and number of the Rohingya in the kingdom. When Shah Shuja was chased by Aurangzeb, he and his family and thousands of his soldier followers fled from Dacca to Chittagong. Sandathudama, king of Arakan, (1652-1687) granted him permission to continue to Mrohaung and gave a dwelling near the town. Shah Shuja was murdered and those of his followers who escape the massacre were later admitted into the king's special archers' unit. Writers and poets appeared amongst the Arakanese Muslims specially during the 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and there were even some Muslim court poets at the courts of the Arakanese kings. These poets and writers wrote in Persian, Arabic or in the mixed language, *Rohinga*, which they developed among themselves and was a mixture of Bengali, Persian, Urdu and Arakanese. These artists also developed the art of calligraphy. The Muslim who came to Arakan brought with them Arab, Magul and especially Bengalese music and musical instruments. Persian songs are sung by Arakanese Muslims to this day. That is how the Rohingyas preserved their own heritage from the impact of the Buddhist environment, not only as far as their religion is concerned but also in some aspect of their culture.<sup>12</sup>

Dr.Than Htun former Professor of History, Rangoon University and member of the Burma Historical Research Commission wrote: The kings of Arakan had Muslim titles. The Muslim kings mentioned in the inscription might be Rohingya, from the Mayu River, the eastern part of the Naf River, who claimed over thousand of years of their existence. Their existence might be from the time

of 1202 CE when the Muslim conquered Bengal that is 800 years ago. In the Kyaukza or stone inscription of 1442, it was written that some Muslim kings of Arakan were the friends of king of Ava. They used to visit Ava.<sup>13</sup>

Bodowpaya's 40 years of rule over Arakan was marked with untold tyranny and cruelty. Two-thirds of the inhabitants of Arakan were said to have been deserted their native land. About half of the population of Arakan fled to Chittagong to escape Bunnan persecution. At the time of invasion the population was around 250,000 which steadily lost up to 50% as mentioned by both G.E. Harvey and H. Bumey. Mr. Robertson, the first British civil ruler of Arakan, reported Arakanese population in 1824 was around 100,000 out of which 60,000 Arakanese Buddhists, 30,000 Arakanese Muslims and 10,000 Burmans.<sup>14</sup>

The above historical facts are clearly revealing the fact that the present day Rohingyas in the Arakan state of Burma are the direct progeny of those early Muslim settlers as an indigenous ethnic race. They are the descendants of the Arabs, Persians, Turks, Mughals, Moors, Pathans, and Bengalis who came mostly as traders, saints, prisoners of wars, preachers, warriors, sailors, artisans, court poets, royal guards, and administrators through over-land and sea-route since from the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. Rohingyas (the word comes from Rohang, the old name of Arakan) were the kingmakers of Arakan for more than 350 years. There was the imperial power from which the Burmans (Bodowpaya) took over on December 28, 1784.<sup>15</sup>

Many words, usages and vocabularies found in Burmese transliteration of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Anandasanda Stone Pillar inscription in Mrauk-U are exactly the same or close to Rohingya words and vocabularies in one hand and on the other they have no similarity at all with Rakhine vocabularies and usages. This testifies the native indigenous status in Arakan of the Rohingyas. Besides, in the inscription the name of Arakan (country) was written "Arakandesh". (Dr. Saw Tun Aung: Shittaung Phara Stone Pillar's North side Inscription, *Rakhaine Welfare Association's 25 Anniversary Magazine*, pp 48-53) Arakandesh is simply a Rohingya word and usage and not the Rakhaine usage. They call it 'Rakhaing Pray'. Here one may reach to a conclusion that the Rohingya existence preceded the Rakhaine existence in Arakan and the word Arakanese attributed to the Rakhaine alone is contrary to evidence.<sup>16</sup>

We also read that the Rakhaing are of Mongoloid stock, sprung from the Tibeto-Burman group along with the Burmese and other proto-Burmese races who migrated from central Asia. D.G.E. Hall mentions, "the Burmese do not seem to have settled in Arakan until possibly as late as 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D." The Mongolian invasion of Vethali in 957 put an end to the Chandra dynasty in Arakan. The invasion brought a number of Tibeto-Burmans who created the Mongoloid stock known as the Rakhaing Arakanese. The date 957 may be said to mark the appearance of the Rakhaing in Arakan and the beginning of a fresh period. Whereas, in contrast one can trace the settlement in Arakan of the ancestors of Rohingyas during the reign of Arakanese king Mahatying Chandra (780-810) A.D.<sup>17</sup>

It is unclear from whence the terms 'Rohingya' and 'Rakhaine' were originally derived. Probably the terms were not mutually exclusive ethnonyms. Either one could have derived from the other. There is phonetic proximity between Rahan, Rohang, Rakan, Arakan and Rohingya and Rakhaing. But it is crystal clear that the term 'Rohingya' is not the creation of the colonial period. Francis Buchanan, who was, in 1795, attached as surgeon to the British Embassy in Ava, the capital of Burma wrote: "I shall now add three dialects, spoken in the Burma Empire. The first is that spoken by the Mohammadans, who have long been settled in Arakan and who call themselves Roainga or native of Arakan." Francis Buchanan, "The Languages of Burma", Asiatic Researches (Calcutta) vol.5, 1801.

The SLORC/ SPDC governments bring forth the issue of 135 indigenous races in Burma, some of whom consists of only a few hundred people. Kuki-Chin, Naga in the west, Myaung Ze, Lisu, Ging Paw in the north, Wa, Kokang in the east despite their ethnic majority across the borders, have been designated as indigenous. Even in Arakan Barua (Marma), and Chakma who are similar in every respect with their ethnic majority across the border are designated as indigenous. This logic or norm is not applied to the Rohingyas in spite of their long history in Arakan.

Let me touch on the subject of the British era settlers. As we know Arakan, Bengal and Burma were three different sovereign countries which were colonized by the same master the British. There were no political borders at all between them under the colonial rule. This situation enabled the migration of tens of thousands of Burmans/Burmese from Burma into Arakan as well as the Chittagonians from Bengal. It is observed that the Burman/ Burmese migrants into Arakan of the colonial era have been well received and absorbed by the main stream population of Arakan with no objection or any difficulty. Keeping this precedence in view, I may argue that the Chittagonian migrants into Arakan of the colonial period may also be received and absorbed by the main stream population of Arakan. After all, it was not us who took them in; our master the Britishers brought them in.

We may find many contradictions to this SLORC/SPDC propaganda gimmick against the Rohingyas. Even some of their administrative agency reports and records prove that this propaganda gimmick is a myth. For example, ARAKAN DIVISIONAL SECURITY AND ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE'S BRIEF HISTORY 1974 page 40: recorded that there were 1192 foreigners in

Arakan in 1972. Again, in ARAKAN STATE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL 2<sup>ND</sup> THREE MONTHLY REPORT 1975-76 the number of foreigners in Arakan was reported 1037 person only. If the SLORC/SPDC postulate is not a myth their local administration agency would have found tens of thousands of foreigners in Arakan state. Why around a thousand only? Again, if that postulate is true, why the successive military governments took back more than two hundred thousand refugees each time in 1978 and 1992 Rohingya exodus? The repatriation of these refugees by the SLORC/SPDC governments manifests the Muslim population, Rohingya, are age long old native residents in Arakan and bonafide citizens of Burma. Otherwise, what else could be the reasons for their repatriation by the same government which denied them and drove them out in the first place?

### **The Distinct Ethnic Features of Rohingyas Differing from Bengalis**

"The Musulman Arakanese generally known as Bengalis or Chittagonians, quite incorrectly...To look at, they are quite unlike any other product of India or Burma that I have seen. They resemble the Arab in name, in dress and in habit. The women and more particularly the young girls, have distinctive Arab touch about them... As a race they have been here over two hundred years." Anthony Irwin, *Burmese Outpost* (London: Collins, 1945) p.22.

"The Rohingyas preserved their own heritage from the impact of the Buddhist environment not only as far as their religion is concerned but also in some aspect of their culture." Moshe Yegar, *The Muslim of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, p.25

"There is after all, very little in common - except common religion - between the Rohingya of Arakan and the Indian Muslims of Rangoon or Burmese Muslim of the Shwabo district. These are different groups that do not identify with each other, do not share the same goal and aspiration." Moshe Yegar, *op. cit.* p. 111

"They (Muslims) differ but little from the Arakanese except in their religion and in the social customs which their religion directs, in writing they use Burmese, but amongst themselves employ colloquially the language of their ancestors." R.B. Smart, *Burma Gazetteer-Akyab District Vol. A. 1957*

The Burmese famous writer of our time U Thein Hpei Myint too has mentioned the difference between Bengalis and Rohingyas. He describes: "He is by age round about 25... As he converses with Ko Htun Win in Rakhaine dialect I could not understand. When I ask about him, U Htun Win says, "he is our Rakhaine Muslim Rohingya." Almost all Bangalis grow moustaches, Rohingyas do not keep moustaches. Wedding programs, marriage arrangements, feeding customs, foods and drinks are all differed. Instrumental music, musical instruments, and music etc. are differed. Hereditary festivities of boat-racing, paddy transplant competition, wrestling, riddles, bullfight, buffalo-fight, etc. are held as Rohingya own traditional festivities. The culture of 'collective labour volunteering' exists among the Rohingya till today. Difference is more vivid in trade and profession. Haircutting, blacksmith, goldsmith, silversmith, laundry and shoe-making are very rare among the Rohingyas as they conceive these are lowly and inglorious professions." Thein Hpei Myint, *"From Myohaung to Paletwa"*, 1978 Ahte'tan Pinjin Zagabjei Le'jwei:zin (A High School Burmese Textbook)

### **Points attributed to recognition of Rohingya as an ethnic indigenous minority by the Burmese Governments**

1. There was a mass massacre of Rohingyas by Buddhist Maghs in 1942 when British forces withdrew from Burma to India. As a result, more than 100000 Rohingyas had to take refuge in Rangpur Refugee Camp in Bengal. Bogyoke Aung San, who then became Prime Minister in 1946 repatriated these refugees, which was the first acceptance of Rohingyas' entity by Burmese Government.
2. The former Prime Minister of Burma, U Nu, in a speech over Radio Rangoon at 8.00 pm on 25 September 1954 amongst other things stated that: "The Arakan Division is situated towards the south-west of the Union. Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships are included in the Akyab District of the Arakan Division. These two townships are bordering East Pakistan. The majority of the people in these two townships are Rohingyas who profess the Islamic faith."
3. Again, the Burmese Defense Minister and Prime Minister U Ba Swe at mass rallies for the people of Buthidaung and Maungdaw on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> November 1959 said: "The Rohingyas are equal in every way with other minority races like the Shan, Chin, Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, Mon, and Rakhaine. They have lived in Myanmar Naing Ngan for ages, accordingly to historical facts. They are of the Islamic faith. There is historical evidence that they have lived faithfully and harmoniously with other races of the Union."
4. On September 25, 1960 Prime Minister of Burma U Nu announced on national radio that the Rohingyas of Arakan are one of the ethnic races of Burma.
5. The permission to form 'University Rohingya Students Association' by Dean of Students, University of Rangoon in 1959-60 and 1960-61 academic years respectively. (Foreign students are not allowed to form association under Burmese Universities Act.)
6. The speech of Deputy Chief of Army Brigadier General Aung Gyi, *The New Light of Myanmar Daily*, July 8, 1961.
7. *Khit Yee Journal*, Vol.12, No.6, July 18, 1961 published by Defence Ministry of Burma.

8. Rohingya language program, along with other indigenous races, was allowed to broadcast from Burma Broadcasting Service from May 1961 to March 1965.
9. An article on Rohingya in Burmese Encyclopedia, 1964, Vol. 9 page 89 published by General Ne Win Government.
10. Rohingya representations along with other indigenous races in the annual Union Day celebrations, which are still to be found in Union Day Exhibition Hall (Envoy Hall) on U Wisara Road, Rangoon.
11. The High School Geography of Burma, Ministry of Education 1978, indicating the settlement of minorities in a map where North Arakan was shown as Rohingya area.
12. From 1948 to 1990 in all organs i.e. executive, legislature and judiciary of the state Rohingyas have been allowed to represent. For Example: Mr. Sultan Mahmud from constituency one, Buthidaung, Arakan was Health Minister in 1961 in Pa Ta Sa Government. Mr. Abul Basher from constituency two, Buthidaung, was Parliamentary Secretary. In Pa Sa Pa La Government i.e. U Nu's post-independence government, Mr. Abdul Gaffar from Buthidaung and Mr. Sultan Ahmed from Maungdaw enjoyed the posts of parliamentary secretaries. Daw Aye Nyunt (Zohra Begum) was a Member of Parliament from Maungdaw and Mr. Subhan was from Akyab-north. Haji Abul Khair was also a Member of Parliament from Maungdaw on nomination of AFPFL. In the time of U Ne Win's Ma Sa La (Socialist) regime, Dr. Abdul Rahim and Mr. Abdul Hai alias U Tun Aung Kyaw from Maungdaw constituency and Mr. Abul Hussein from Buthidaung constituency were also *Pyithu Hlutaw* (parliament) members.
13. The SLORC Government allowed the Rohingyas to elect and to be elected in their multi-party democracy parliamentary election held in 1990. Five Rohingya members from northern Arakan got elected to the uncalled Parliament of Myanmar (Burma). They were U Kyaw Min, constituency 1, Buthidaung; Mr. Fazal Ahmed, constituency 2, Maungdaw; U Tin Maung @ Mr. Noor Ahmed, constituency 2, Buthidaung; U Chit Lwin, constituency 1, Maungdaw and U Shwe Ya, constituency 1, Akyab.
14. Under 1949 Burma Population Registration Act and its 1950 Burma Population Registration Rules, Rohingyas were issued National Registration Cards (NRCs) which itself is a proof of their genuine nationality because section 30 of the above rule excluded foreigners from being registered under the rules.
15. On July 4, 1960 the Burmese Government created Mayu Frontier District to assist Rohingya development which was abolished by Ne Win Government on Feb. 1. 1964.

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