

A Linguistic Anthropology to Rohingya Identity

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The history of civilization is replete with conquest, capture, expansion, defeat and contraction of territories. As the empires expand and collapse, so do the physical borders. When people move across the borders, we call them migrants; but when the border moves across the people, we do not call them so. Nonetheless, the erstwhile natives, when included into the new boundary, often have troubles with their identity.

In the past two thousand years, Arakan (now the Rakhine State of Myanmar) has been captured, ruled and expanded by rulers from multiple origin (Alam 6; Hossain 13). As they came, they added new culture, religion, ethnic identity and historical narratives to those existing. Amid the bewildering set of contending narratives, the historiographers today are divided into multiple schools, each with their own sets of assumptions and arguments (Leider 192-94). So much so, that one such school even questions the identity of the earliest inhabitants of the land who now constitute an inseparable part of the Rohingya identity. Ironically, the controversies surrounding the Rohingya identity have been generated by the pro-Rohingya scholars. To be more precise, selection of wrong identity markers and the consequent selection of the wrong reference points in history have generated this undesirable confusion.

Those who have attempted to circumscribe Rohingya identity using political markers suffered the worst. Critics challenged this as a reactive identity framed purposefully in the 1950s to claim an autonomous region for the Muslims in the Mayu Frontier District (Leider 200). Thus, the identity claim lost much of its assertive power in the pre-independence period. Those who followed an etymological approach had slightly better success in extending the claim as far back into the past as early fifteenth century when Mrohaung was the capital of the great Mrauk U Empire. The etymological origin of the word 'Rohingya' from 'Mrohaung', 'Rohang' or 'Rosang' confers a certain degree of credibility to the claim (Alam 5). However, this approach does not explain the

status of Rohingyas before fifteenth century. Those who used religion as the identity marker fared slightly better, back-tracking the claim of Rohingya existence in Arakan from the Seventh century when Arabs first arrived in this land (Leider192). Again, this narrative loses in its own ground when one seeks to trace the existence of Rohingys in Arakan prior to seventh century.

Scholars who attempt to use “ethnicity” as the identity marker face the critical challenge of defining Rohingya as a unique ethnic group from a singular geographic origin. As an ethnic group, the Rohingya people constitute a complex admixture of people from multiple geographic origins. One can trace their ancestry to Arabs, Moors, Pathans, Afghans, Tamils, Central Asians, Bengalis and some Indo-Mongoloid people (Alam 9). Consequently, identifying a single thread to constitute a well-knit ethnic fabric becomes a daunting task. Those who attempted to find the union in religion had, despite securing limited success of extending the claim a bit longer, the trouble of taking the non-Muslim Rohingyas on board.

On the contrary, the use of linguistic anthropology, archaeology and epigraphy promises better chances of establishing the well-deserved claim of Rohingyas being the earliest inhabitants of Arakan. While the specific word ‘Rohingya’ may not have appeared in the earliest traceable artifacts, the language used by Rohingya ancestors, and by others to define them, can be traced back to the second millennium BCE.

A good point of departure could be the name of the land itself – ‘Arakan’ or ‘Rakhine’. The word ‘Arakan’ has the closest similarity with the Arabic word ‘*Rukri*’ (Principle) or ‘*Arkaari*’ (Principles) attaching some credibility to the claim that the land might have been known, at least among some quarters, as ‘Arakan’ since the arrival of Arabs in Seventh century; much before it was known as ‘Rakhine’, a name conferred by the Rakhines who arrived in tenth century (Alam 5-7; Ibrahim 21). However, I prefer not to take this reference point in history as it limits the search for Rohingya narrative to the period after seventh century.

Instead, the popular Rakhine narrative better substantiates the claim of Rohingyas living in the land since antiquity. According to Rakhine chronicles supported by early Buddhist missionaries, the word ‘Rakhine’ has been derived from the Pali word *Rakkhapura* (*Raksapura* in Sanskrit) meaning the “Land of *Raksas* (Ogres)”. The Ramayana (500 BCE) and the Mahabharata (400 BCE) identified the land by that name describing its inhabitants as ‘*Raksas*’. These Hindu mythologies offer three descriptions of ‘*Raksas*’. Firstly, they are cannibals; secondly, the ‘*Raksasis*’ (female *Raksas*) having the magical power to take attractive female shape to seduce men into sexual intercourse to produce more ‘*Raksases*’; and finally, they are ‘*Kala Mukha*’ (black faces) (Singer 2).

The earliest recorded historical evidences provided by the Greek scholar Claudius Ptolemaeus (127-145 CE) show the presence of cannibals in the Andaman Islands including around the Gulf of Martaban but make no specific mention of their presence in Arakan (impassably separated from Gulf of Martaban by ArakanYoma). Thus, the assumption of the early inhabitants of Arakan being cannibals does not go uncontested (Singer 2). That leaves us with two other suppositions: the inhabitants of Arakan being black-faced or dark-skinned and their female folk seducing.

The Hindu mythologies were composed by fair-skinned Aryans who invaded Indian continent from the North-West in 1500 BCE pushing the dark-skinned Dravidians down south. Given the age-old trend of demonizing, vilifying and demeaning the opponents, there could be a distant possibility that the Aryans used all these derogatory titles to describe a people whom they did not want their men to associate with lest their white skin and superior blood loses purity. Not surprisingly, till today, the Burmese people in Myanmar address the Rohingyas as ‘*Kala*’ (dark-skinned), the demeaning title assigned to their ancestors by the Aryans (Crouch 14).

Some scholars are reluctant in accepting a mythological explanation due to the apparent reason that myths are unreal and lack hard evidences. Nonetheless, myths are composed by real people. The language they use represent the one practiced in their contemporary society; and the stories they frame represent the concurrent beliefs. Yet, I shall now offer some hard evidences about the identity of people living in Arakan in those ancient days.

Ptolemy’s map of ancient Arakan (127-145 CE) shows the name of two coastal cities as ‘*Sada*’ and ‘*Berabonna*’ (Singer 1). Noel F. Singer provides a convincing explanation about the evolution of the word ‘*Sada*’, thought to be the capital city at that time. In this part of the region, the written language for the ruling classes and pundits at that time was Sanskrit while the ordinary people used a more naturalized version – ‘Prakrit’ which later evolved into ‘Bangla’ (Bengali language). Ptolemy was informed that Arakan was ruled by the ‘*Chandra*’ (Lunar) Dynasty. The Sanskrit word ‘*Chandra*’ was pronounced as ‘*Chada*’ by his informants using the ordinary Prakrit (old Bengali) parallel. Due to linguistic difficulties, Ptolemy’s interpretation became ‘*Sada*’, which he also used for naming the capital (Singer 6).

The use of '*Berabonna*' looks more intriguing. As a Bengali phrase, *Berabonna* means 'knitted fence' (*Bera*: Fence + *Bonna*: Knitted), indicating that the city was physically protected using strong fences. The argument is validated by a location map prepared by Moore that shows numerous fortified habitation sites in ancient Arakan from possibly before 100 CE (Singer 3).

The existence of Bengali-speaking Rohingya ancestors in ancient Arakan is further validated through the recently deciphered Ananda Chandra Inscriptions. Now situated in the Shitthaung pagoda, this eleven feet high monolith is also known as the Shitthaung Pillar and the Mrohaung Inscription. This more than thousand years' old inscription commissioned by Ananda Chandra, the ruler of Vaishali, contains sixty-five verses in seventy-one and a half line inscribed in a Nagari script which is allied to those of North-Eastern India and Vanga (Bengal). Epigraphist Gutman validated that the inscription is similar to the type of script used in Bengal during the early sixth century (Singer 39-40). More revealingly, epigraphist Johnston identified several smaller inscriptions in Bengali characters on the north panel of the monolith (Singer 40).

It is believed that many Bengali architects and artisans formed part of Rohingya ancestry. The early rulers of Chandra Dynasty, who founded the Vaishali Kingdom in Arakan, fled from Vaishali, Bihar down the Ganges valley to Arakan following the ascendancy of the Imperial Guptas to the throne of Bihar (Ibrahim 20, Singer 8). It is no surprise that they picked up many *sthapati* (architects), well-versed in the *Sthapatya vidya* (science of architecture), to help them build the new kingdom. Gutman's research finding validates this line of argument. She refers to a beautifully cast-iron plummet left behind at the Mahamuni Shrine in Arakan which has close similarity with another piece displayed at the British Museum datable to the sixth century CE which was excavated from the Surma riverbed in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) (Singer 81).

There are plenty of other evidences suggesting that the cultural and linguistic identity of Rohingya ancestors had been remarkably shaped by Bengalis. None of the kings of Mrauk U Kingdom could ever deny the valuable support they received from the Sultans of Bengal in regaining their independence from the Burmese Court of Ava. The subsequent administrative, legal, economic and literary influence of Bengal on the Mrauk U Kingdom is also well documented (Alam 12). However, I prefer not to delve into the later periods of history when the evidences from the ancient artifacts adequately prove the case.

Should the foregoing arguments lead us to the conclusion that the Rohingyas are in fact 'Bengalis' as claimed by the Burmese and Rakhine counter-narratives? The answer could be both 'yes' and 'no' based on which identity-marker we are using and which reference point in history we are referring to. Aside from the specific dialect spoken by Rohingyas, linguistically they are as much Bengalis as are the Bengalis of West Bengal in India. However, politically the Rohingyas are the people of Myanmar as the Bengalis of West Bengal are Indians. Using the same argument, one may even suppose that people of present-day Chittagong were Rohingyas, at least for a century (1575-1666 CE), when this region was under absolute political control of the Mrauk U Kingdom with its capital at Mrohaung (Alam 14). This reinforces my introductory comments that political identity faces trouble with the expansion and collapse of empires and dynasties.

Problems occur when Burmese scholars and politicians attach the label of 'illegal Bengali immigrants' to the Rohingya identity and associate their eligibility for citizenship with the demand for proofs that their predecessors lived in Myanmar prior to 1823 (Zöllner 16). I hope my arguments based on archaeological and epigraphic evidences should convince them that the Rohingya ancestors lived in Arakan almost two thousand years before the Burmese king Badawpaya entered this territory. About using the specific term 'Rohingya', Francis Buchanan's 1799 testimony showing the presence of 'Rooinga' in Arakan should suffice (Ibrahim 24).

Myanmar law-makers refer to 1823 as the landmark for claiming citizenship based on the assumption that people of Indian origin (including from Bengal region) came to work in Arakan as agricultural laborers following the British victory in first Anglo-Burmese war of 1824. Rachel M. Safman's historical inquiry suggests that Rakhines, the erstwhile inhabitants of the lowland plains of central Burma, were already used to wet-rice cultivation (52). Consequently, there appears to have been no need to borrow Bengali farmers to boost the rice economy of Arakan. It is also worth-noting that the Chittagonians with whom the Burmese often tend to associate the Rohingyas did not have much expertise in wet-rice cultivation. The hilly landscape of Chittagong hardly offers much cultivable lands to produce rice.

It was rather in Irrawaddy Delta where the British undertook massive projects of dyke and dam construction requiring large number of construction workers including some farmers to work in the sugarcane and cotton plantations (Taylor 73). Therefore, if someone is looking for guest workers in British controlled Myanmar, central Burma or Yangon, a 'sleepy fishing village' rapidly transforming into an international port under British initiative (Taylor 73), should be the ideal places to search, not Arakan.

Rohingyas have an identity of their own. It would be an unscholarly practice to challenge that identity using irrelevant markers. It would be equally unwise to claim that their identity has mutated through the incorporation of people from multiple origins. Rather their age-old identity has only matured through the addition of multiple cultural layers.

Photo: Hindustan Times

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