

History of Arakan

— Identities of the Rakhine Community —

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1. Introduction

The history of Arakan dates back to ancient times and involves a complex web of differing races, religions and kingdoms. The Arakan region is located on the Western side of what is now known as Myanmar (Burma) and although it is separated from the rest of Burma by a vast mountain range, it has felt the consequences of sharing close proximity with Burma, Thailand, China, India and Bangladesh.

During its long (as far back as 2666 B.C.) history Arakan is reputed to have had in excess of 145 kings divided up into a number of dynasties including the Chandra dynasty and the Mrauk-U dynasty.

2. History of Arakan

Throughout its long history as many as 8 capitals have been established with each capital hosting a succession of kings. Arakan was influenced by the Mongols, Burmese, British, Thai, Mons, Tibetans, Arabs, Moors, Turks, Pathans, Moghuls, Central Asians, Bengalees and many more. These peoples came to Arakan in the form of traders, invaders, pirates, captives, warriors and holy men and have had a significant role to play in the development of the Arakan people both culturally and racially. At one time the Arakan region became a significant trade port particularly by sea with hundreds and hundreds of ships mooring on her shores. This led to the region becoming synonymous with pirates and raiding and for hundreds of years those on the sea and in nearby lands would live in fear of the Arakan pirates.

As a region ravaged by war it became necessary for warriors to be trained specifically to protect the Kings from invading forces and from assassins sent to kill them. Some of the weapons used by the warriors would be spears, swords and daggers amongst many others. Many of the Arakan kings were also Battle Kings taking the fight directly to the enemy.



Source: Myanmar Embassy, Tokyo Web Side

The elite guard would protect the kings at all times. Within the castle walls they would blend themselves into the regular community so that would be assassins would not identify them as a threat. Even amongst the regular warriors not all of the elite guards' identities would be known, this helped to provide the king the maximum protection from betrayal. Many of the guards would be cooks, servants and other court aides to help conceal their presence. The elite guard would train as much as possible in an effort to defeat future enemies. Their intricate understanding of their techniques passed down from generation to generation made those formidable opponents.

Almost without exception a person would have to be born into the elite guard, only very rarely would an outsider be considered to join the ranks. For an outsider to join they would have to come to the attention of the elite as a babe and have a bloodline that met the harsh scrutiny of the warriors. Only then may an outsider be permitted to join.

As time marched forward many of the Arakan kings knew blood and death. Battles

would be followed by peace then again would come the battles. This would continue until Arakan came under the control of Burma. This saw an end to the Arakan kings. Arakan Martial Art has a direct lineage to the elite guards who fought to protect their kings and takes great honor in sharing these amazing skills with the present world.

3. Identities of the Rakhine Community

3. 1. Rakhine Community in Myanmar

The Rakhine people (formerly Arakanese), an ethnic group of Myanmar related to the Bamar, are today recognized as a national race by the Burmese military government, and they form the majority along Rakhine State's coastal regions. They possibly constitute 4% or more of Myanmar's population but no accurate census figures exist.

The Rakhine are culturally different from the Bamar. They speak a language related to but different from Burmese. One major variation is the language's retention of the /r/ sound, which is a /j/ sound in Burmese. In addition, the Rakhine language, although mutually intelligible with standard Burmese, has certain differences in vocabulary. The Rakhine are predominantly Buddhists. One major reason for the cultural differences between the dominant Bamar and the Rakhine is their geographical isolation due to the Arakan Yoma. The Rakhine have been influenced by Bengali (Bangla) culture, and traces of Bengali influence remain in many aspects of Rakhine culture, including its literature, music, and cuisine.

The people of Rakhine claim a history that they say began in 2666 B.C but archaeological evidence has not been found to support this claim. The first independent Arakan kingdom archaeologically identified was established in the early fourth century A.D. The country had been invaded several times, by the Mongols, Mon, Bamar and Portuguese and finally the Bamar in 1785 when the armies led by the crown prince who later became King Bagyidaw of the Konbaung dynasty of Burma marched across the western Yoma and annexed Arakan. The religious relics of the kingdom were stolen from Rakhine, most notably the Mahamuni Buddha image, and taken into central Burma where they remain today. The people of Arakan resisted the conquest of the kingdom for decades after. Fighting with the Rakhine resistance initially led by Nga Than De and finally by Chin Byan in border areas, created problems between British India and Burma. The year 1826 saw the defeat of the Bamar in the First Anglo-Burmese War and Arakan was ceded to Britain under the Treaty of Yandabo. Akyab (Sittwe) was then designated the new capital of Arakan. In 1852, Arakan was merged into Lower Burma as a territorial division.

During the Second World War, Arakan was given autonomy under the Japanese occupation and was even granted its own army known as the Arakan Defense Force. The Arakan Defense Force went over to the allies and turned against the Japanese in early 1945. After the war, Arakan was the center of multiple insurgencies which fought against British rule, notably led by the monks U Ottama and U Seikenda.

In 1948, Arakan became independent as a division within the Union of Burma. Shortly after, violence broke out along religious lines between Buddhists and Muslims. Later there were calls for secession by the Rakhine, but such attempts were subdued. In 1974, the Ne Win government's new constitution granted Rakhine Division "state" status but the gesture was largely seen as meaningless since the military junta held all power in the country and in Rakhine. In 1989, the name of Arakan State was changed to "Rakhine" by the military junta.

3. 2. Rakhine Community in Bangladesh

The Rakhine community of Bangladesh is one of the indigenous peoples living widely scattered in the districts of Cox's Bazar, Chittagong, Khagrachari, Rangamati, Bandarban, Patuakhali & Burguna, The total population is over two hundred thousand and they follow Theravāda Buddhism. The Rakhine race is a mixture of Aryan and Mongolian and their language is very close to the present day Burmese. In fact, some regard it as archaic Burmese. The Bengali refers to them by the name Magh and European call them as Arakanese.

Many Rakhine historians while referring to the old treatises advocate that Buddhism was introduced into Rakhine-Pray during the life-time of Lord Buddha, who at the age of 55 is said to have visited Rakhine-Pray in 554 BC during the reign of King Chanda Thuriya (580BC-528BC).⁽¹⁾

3. 3. Area of Rakhine-Pray and their Kingdom

From time immemorial the Rakhine has lived independently in Rakhine-Pray or Arakan along the coastline from Chittagong to the feet of the Rama Ranges of Lower Burma (now Myanmar). The local Rakhine chronicles record some six dynastic lists of kings dated from 3325 BC which are as follows:

1st Dhanyavati Dynasty (1st Era) 3325 BC to 1507 BC ruled by 57 kings.

2nd Dhanyavati Dynasty (2nd Era) 1507 BC to 580 BC ruled by 28 kings.⁽²⁾

3rd Dhanyavati Dynasty (3rd Era) 580 BC to 320 AD ruled by 25 kings.

4th Vesali Dynasty 320 AD to 1018 AD ruled by 12 kings.⁽³⁾

5th Laymyr Dynasty 1018 AD to 1406 AD ruled by 61 kings.

6th Mrauk-U Dyanasty 1430 AD to 1784 AD ruled by 41 kings.

The early history of Chittagong and Cox's Bazar, unlike other parts of Bengal, is not so distinct in the Bengali history. But there are ample testimony in Rakhine history that Chittagong and Cox's Bazar was long in possession of the Rakhine kings and considered a part of Rakhine-land. The first discernible history found today records a series of Buddhist kings mostly coming from the neighboring Arakan.⁽⁴⁾

There are many fine examples of Rakhine Literature by famous courtiers such as "Saw pree Nyo Radu" (7th century AD)⁽⁵⁾, "Tsaindrah Bweh" (8th century AD)⁽⁶⁾, "Rakhine Munthameen Aye khrun (15th century AD)⁽⁷⁾, and U-Ka Byan Radhu" (17th century)⁽⁸⁾. Radu, Bweh and Aye khrun are lyrical poems meant to be sung the subject matter usually consists of historical background that instills a sense of patriotism into the listener. There is also a famous legal precedents called "Maha Pinnya Kyaw Shouk Thoon" written in the 16th century AD.⁽⁹⁾

It was during the Vesali Dyansty that one Rakhine king, Sula Taing Chandra (951-957 AD) conquered Chittagong and Noakhali.⁽¹⁰⁾ (And in memory of the victory he erected a monument with the words "Tsit-ta-goung" (Tsit-ta means army, goung means head so Tsit-ta-goung means Army Head Quarter - where they encamped after victory) inscribed on it. It is said that this monument was erected on the south bank of Kauniachara near Kumira, Chittagong. Most scholars believed that the name of Chittagong has been derived from that inscription on the monument.⁽¹¹⁾ Prior to the conquest of Chittagong, Ramu (15 Km. east present Cox's Bazar town) was under the sway of Rakhine kingdom. Some of the Rakhine people living today in these regions are the descendants of those people.

3. 4. Influence of Bengali Culture in Rakhine Kingdom

Because of its geographical position, Bengal has played a role in the history and civilization of Rakhine kingdom. In the fifteenth century, Bengal helped Rakhine to resist the rise of the Burma kings of Ava. From 15th to 17th century the kings of Arakan used Islamic titles, although they and the majority of their subjects remained Buddhist.⁽¹²⁾ While describing this period Professor Alamgir Mohammed Sirrajuddin has aptly said, "it is difficult to accept the view that assumption of Muslim names was the manifestation of Muslim influence in Arakan. Among other things, it does not explain why only 9 out of 48 rulers were won over by the Muslim culture. Again, Muslim influences rose to its height during the long and prosperous reign of king Chanda Thudhamma (1652-1684). Yet, he did not take Muslim name and title and was content with his Arakanese name and coin. In reassessing the significance of Muslim names and titles we must not

lose sight of the fact that the rulers who assumed Muslim names had Chittagong under their possession."⁽¹³⁾ He further adds by quoting A.P. Phayre that, it is no coincidence that only those rulers who had Chittagong under their possession at the time of accession to the throne assumed Muslim names and titles and struck coins in Arabic and Bengali Script bearing these names and titles. Coins are a symbol of sovereignty and these rulers issued the Bengal coin types to assert their sovereignty over Chittagong.⁽¹⁴⁾

This fact is further accentuated by the abundance of the Buddhist stone temples, pagodas, pitaka libraries against only two mosques of that period. It is expected of any Muslim ruler not to erect non Muslim (infidel) temples since they house images which they consider as idolatry. Most of the temples of Mrauk-U were made by all the Buddhist kings who adopted Muslim names.

By the end of 1666 Chittagong was annexed by the Mughols and the Rakhine retreated to Ramu some fled to the neighboring Chittagong Hill Tracts.⁽¹⁵⁾ The Mughols imposed Magher-kar (Rakhine tax) upon the Rakhine people in their domain with the aim in driving out Rakhine subjects and encouraged Muslim settlement in its place. Since the Mughols could not occupy Ramu, the Rakhine having retreated from Chittagong settled in Ramu and continued to live practicing their humble vocation of life.⁽¹⁶⁾

The Northern Chittagong which remained under the possession of the Mughols until 1760 went under East India Company when Md. Reza Khan handed over the control of Chittagong to Mr. Harry Vereist, a representative of East India Company on Jan 5, 1761.⁽¹⁷⁾ As the House of Mrauk-U⁽¹⁸⁾ had been rendered confused under internal strife, the East India Company extended its territory up to Naf river including Ramu. The East India Company brought with them a large number of Bengali speaking laborers to the Southern part of Chittagong for cultivation because at that time the region was thinly populated.

The Burmans also taking opportunity of Rakhine weakness annexed Rakhine-pray (Arakan) in 1784 which was followed by a wholesale genocide of the Rakhines⁽¹⁹⁾. As a result countless Rakhine fled into the neighboring places controlled by then East India Company and thus augmented the population of Rakhine in Cox's Bazar, Chittagong, Bandarban, Rangamati, Khagrachari, Patuakhali and Barguna Districts. They were allowed by the East India Company to settle on the extensive tracts and waste land then untenanted.⁽²⁰⁾ Captain Hiram Cox, who had left his name to the neighborhood of the Baghkhali river, now called Cox's Bazar town was the first officer appointed to superintend the Rakhine settlement in July 1799.⁽²¹⁾

The national struggle of Rakhine people from 1784 to 1824 was hardly marching and sandwiched between the two aggressors⁽²²⁾, the Burma feudalist controlled up to the eastern bank of the Naf river and the British up to the western side of it. Both the aggressors had a common interest of keeping Rakhine under their respective colonies. The

Burma controlled Rakhine-pray along with Assam, Manipur and Tanasserem were annexed to the British empire after the 1st Anglo Burmese War in 1825 and the remaining of upper Burma was also annexed in 1886.

4. Conclusion

The story of Rakhine is the story of how a free people are threatened by extinction because of aggression, treachery, forced distortion of history and repression by alien vested quarters and colonists. Today they are even confronted by an international conspiracy that with the help of shameful lies project their homeland as belonging to an alien race introduced by colonial forces.

Further the people of both sides of the Naf river experienced the British rule for over six decades until 14th August 1947 when the people living in the western side saw a birth of a new nation called East Pakistan and the subjects thereon was labeled as East Pakistani. On the other hand the same stock of people living on the east of Naf river saw a birth of another national called Union of Burma and their subject as Burmese irrespective of race, religion, culture, language, etc. Again all the people of East Pakistan were labeled as Bangali after the emergence of the peoples Republic of Bangladesh in 1971 and once again they are called Bangladeshi since mid seventies.

At present whenever they are asked to give their identity they simply reply as "Bangladeshi Rakhine." They are proud of being Bangladeshi because they took to the streets and shed blood during the struggle for liberation in 1971 and they are also proud of being Rakhine as they do have testimony to a stormy period living on this very soil under the rule of their own kings. The Bangladeshi Rakhine, exiles in its own land; have up to now preserved the culture, linguistic, religion and traditional inheritance of their forefathers.

Notes & References :

- (1) Tun Shwe Khaing: Rakhine Mahamuni I'hara Tha-hmaing (in Rakhine), p-14, ed 1 3d-1991, Rangoon, Burma.
- (2) Tun Shwe Khaing: Rakhine Nansak Morsak Tha-hmaing (in Rakhine), p-8, ed 1970, Rangoon, Burma.
- (3) Abdul Hoq Chowdhury: Prashanga-Prachin Arakan O Chattagram (in Bengali) Bangla Academy Patrika, 32nd year, 3rd Vol, 1988.
- (4) Chittagong Guide- edited by Mahabubul Hoque, p-7, 1981, Barnarekha, Chittagong, Bangladesh.
- (5) Tun Shwe Khaing: Rakhine Tsa-so-daw M, vah (in Rakhine), p-1 to 4, Saikthudaw Tsabay, 1991, Rangoon, Burma. "Saw Pree Nyo Radu" was written by a Rakhine Author in 619 AD. Saw Pree Nyo was the wife of Prince Thinga Chandra who was the son of king Chandra (595-667 AD).
- (6) Tun Shwe Khaing: op. cit., p-5 to 22. "Tsaindra Bweh" was Written by Chief Minister

- Dhama Za-yah. During the reign of king Sula Chandra (733-769 AD).
- (7) Tun Swhe Khaing: op. cit., p-33 to 35. "Rakhine Munthameen Aye Khrun" was written by poet Phadu Mun Nyo. It is a lullaby, Sung for Princess Saw Shwe Kra alias Mouk Taw l'hwee when she was a baby, the daughter of king Ba Saw Pru (1459-1482 AD.). Also see Ranbray Tharak Choung Parabaik (copper plate inscription).
 - (8) Tun Shwe Khaing: op. cit., p-69 to 81 "U-Ka Byan Radu" Was written by U-Ka Byan, Viceroy of Saitan between 1599 and 1607 when he was an advisor to prince Mun Kha Moungh who later ruled the Rakhine and kingdom from 1612 to 1622. Also see "Dhaywady Ah-ray-daw poon~" written by Gaweethara-be-theere-pawara Agga Maha Dhamma Razadheeraza Guru, a palm leaf manuscript written in 1787 and was first printed in 1881 by Burma Herald Steam Press, Rangoon, Burma, p-162 to 167.
 - (9) Raza Gura Gweethara Mathay: Maha Panna Kyaw Shouk l'hoon (in Rakhine), a palm leaf manuscript of 1787 and later printed & published by The Hanthawady Press, Rangoon, Burma, 1986. Maha Panna Kyaw served as the Viceroy of Chittagong, advisor and minister to six successive kings of Rakhine-pray- i. Mun Ba Gree (1531-1552), ii. Mun Tai Kkha (1553-1554), iii. space one Mun Saw Hla (1555-1563), iv. Sakrawaday (1564-1570), V. Mun Pha Loung (1571-1592) and vi. Mun Raza Gree (1593-1611). Maha Panna Kyaw accompanied Mun Raza Gree as Leader of the house of Lords during pegu expedition in 1599 and he died of old age on their way back after the victory;
 - (10) Ashung pandita Lankara: Dhanyawadi Razawon Thaik Kvan (a Rakhine palm leaf inscription), leaf No. back page, line 2 to 7, written in 1911, pegu, Burma.
 - (11) Bangladesh District Gazetteers- Chittagong, p-60, Ed-1975.
 - (12) Aung San Suu Kyi: Freedom From Fear. p-63, 1991, Penguin Books India.
 - (13) Alamgir M. Sirajuddin: Muslim Influence in Arakan and the Muslim Names of Arakanese Kings-a Reassessment. JASB, No.-1, June 1986 p-19 & 20.
 - (14) Alamgir M. Sirajuddin op. cit., See A.P. Phayre's "The Coins of Arakan-The Historical Coins". JASB, Vol-xv, 1846. p-234 to 237. For coins minted in Arakan before the 4th century see San Tha Aung's "Rakhine Danga Mvah" (in Burmese), 1979, Rangoon, Burma. For symbolical coins of Arakan see Thomas Letter's The Coins of Arakan-The Symbolical Coins", JASB, Vol-xv, 1846, p-238 to 240. Also see G.E. Harvey's "History of Burma". London, 1925.
 - (15) Eastern Bengal District Gazetteers. Ed-1908.
 - (16) Bangladesh District Gazetteers-Chittagong, p-115, Ed-1975.
 - (17) Bangladesh District Gazetteers- Chittagong, p-87, Ed-1975.
 - (18) The House of Mrauk-U"-Mrauk-U palace of Rakhine kingdom.
 - (19) Saw Tun Oo: Thongran and Rakhine Culture, The Voice of Rakhine, p-6, 2nd Vol, 1989.
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