

Rohengya Affairs

[Transcription of an article by Seit Twe Maung which appeared in English in the publication Rakhine Tanzaung Magazine Vol. 2 No. 9, 1960-61]

Recently we hear a lot about the so-called Rohengyas and their activities against Arakan statehood. So called Rohengya Students Association has published and circulated bulletins named "The Rohengya Times News" and so-called "United Rohengya Organisation" published and being distributed freely a booklet called "A Short History of Rohengyas". Moreover series of articles have appeared in the Guardian Magazine written by one Ba Tha about the so-called Rohengyas of Arakan. This Rohengya campaign is now directed against Arakan statehood by deliberately creating racial problems just to complicate the real issue. I have never heard of such a separate racial group who came from Arabia and settled in Arakan besides Arakanese. It is not so surprising to find out that certain students and a group of Muslims who are descendants of Chittagonians and who settled in Buthidaung and Maungdaw area are spearhead of this movement which is backed up by certain Burmese organisations and Press. Let me now refute certain historical facts misrepresented by Ba Tha in his article "The Rohangya in Arakan".

Ba Tha in his article "Rohengyas in Arakan" which appeared in Guardian Magazine vol. VII, no. 5 of May 1960, stated that early Muslims from Arabia and India entered Arakan firstly through its mountain passes and found Arakan a suitable land for many purposes. He also mentioned that even Ibn Battuta, the famous Arab traveller who visited Arakan. He went on saying that Mohammed Rarnif who fled from Arabia came to Arakan in 680 A.D. and later he and his followers settled in Maungdaw Township. Misquoting Burma Gazetteer (Akyab District) he wrote that in 788 during the reign of Shandra Kings several merchant ships were wrecked on Ramree Island and the crew said to have been Muslims called Arab or Moors were sent to Vesali and settled there. He said that they intermarried and intermixed with the indigenous races who changed their religion and became Muslims. They built mosques and started missionary works. He stated that Islam became powerful in Arakan since then. He said that the Arakanese Muslims of Arab descendants are called Rohengyas.

Let me now express my opinion about this. We cannot turn and twist historical events according to our whims and fancies. If we refer books such as "Arabia and the far East" by S.A. Huza yin of Fuad I University of Cairo, "Travel and Travellers of the Middle Ages" by A.P. Newton and "Voyages of Ibn Batoutsch", we are sure to find that Arab sailors and navigators had travelled far and wide as far as China. They travelled through two routes namely, one land route crossing the Central Asia the other route i.e. the sea route crossing Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean and China Sea. They touched Malabar Coast, Ceylon, Malaya and Java on their way to Canton in Southern China. However, they did not come over to Arakan and Bengal which were to them out of the way places. In fact Arakan was not on their routes. We could easily find out this in the charts enclosed in the books mentioned above. But we find that Hindu merchants and navigators travelled along the Arakan coast towards East. They touched Arakan Ports and even entered as far as Vesali the Capital City of Arakan in 9th century. About the dawn of the Christian Era onwards, a steady drift of people and

culture found its way from India to Island World of South East Asia including Arakan through this route. Therefore we can conclude that economically and culturally Arakan was linked with India during this period.

The area known as North Arakan had been for many years before the 8th century the seat of dynasties descended from the Royal family of Espila. Later local Kings who had blood relation with these Royal family continued to rule the Arakanese Kingdoms. Starting from the days of Sandasuriya Arakan became the land of Buddhists. In 788 A.D. a dynasty known as Chandras founded the city of Vesali. This city became a noted trade port to which as many as a thousand ships came annually as historical facts revealed the Chandras were upholder of Buddhists guarding and glorifying the Mahamuni shrine which sat on the Balargiri Hills the old City of Dannyawady.

During this period the territory of Arakan extended as far as north of Chittagong and thus came into contact with West Bengal which was then under Fala Kings who professed : Mahayana Buddhism. This contact made possible for Mahayana Buddhism to reach Vesali. One form of Hindu culture could be seen interwoven with this form of Buddhism. The remains of Vesali show that this form of Buddhism had made some impression upon the city. Morris Collis has written about this in his article captioned "Arakan's Place In The Civilisation of the Bay". It runs thus.

"The remains of Vesali can be seen even today. Within the walls are numerous mounds and lying on them are pieces of stone statuary, bas-reliefs, capitals, floral designs in stone and inscriptions in the Nagari character of the 8th century. The figure represents deities. On the capitals is the sacred bull of Siva. Close by the wall is large stone monolith of Buddha belonging to the same date. This is the image now shown as Paragari, praying at which Fra Maurique found King Thiri-thu-dhamma eight centuries later. Various Nagari inscriptions, still undeciphered, have been found in the vicinity of the city; and at Mahamuni 15 miles N.W., are to be seen surrounding the mound on which once sat the Great Image of the Buddha, which is now in Mandalay, a number of statues and bas-reliefs of the Hindu Pantheon. Incomplete and insufficiently worked out as is this archaeological evidence, it suggests that in the city of Vesali were practised both the Hindu and Buddhist religions or that it was a Mahayanist city."

In this connection let me stress my views. As far as our local historical manuscripts reveal Vesali was a Buddhist city. Chandra Kings were devout Buddhists and Hinayana form [of] Buddhism predominate all other forms in the city. However, we have to admit that the culture which derived from Mahayana form was also present in the city. But one thing is sure and certain. Muslim and its culture did not exist in the city during this period. No local history has ever revealed about the Muslim ships wrecked on Ramree island and those sailors were brought in and given places in Vesali. Moreover, the story of Hanif and his followers who were supposed to have settled in Maungdaw Township is only a fabrication. It is also impossible to state that Muslims migrated from India during this period because in Bengal which is the vicinity of Arakan, the Mohamadans were not to have arrived till 1205.

Arakan from 957 A.D. to 1433 A.D. became a Holy land for the Buddhists although it had no political importance during this period. It was place of pilgrimage for the Buddhists world. Though Bengal was absorbed by Muslim in 1203 A.D. it never passed into Indo-China, including Arakan and its influence from its arrival in 1203 till 1430 was negligible upon Arakan. Bengal was extreme eastern limit for Muslim.

Ba Tha again stated that after Nara Meik Hla was put on the throne of Arakan by the Sultan of Gaur (Bengal) in 1403 A.D. Muslim influence became more powerful than before and it became a living force in Arakan and Muslim had been appointed as Prime Ministers and Commanders of Army and Navy of Arakan. He said that Arakanese Kings apparently used Muslim titles in addition to their own and medallions and coins were struck bearing Kalima in Persian script and these were conditions promised to undertake by Nara Meik Hla for the help given to him to regain Arakan throne by Namar Shah, the Sultan of Gaur in Bengal.

Sandikhan

Now let me stress that none of the Arakanese Kings had ever accepted Islam as a state religion and it was not a living force at any period in our history. We cannot conclude that because of Min Saw Mwan sent to seek help from Sultan of Gaur he brought Islam with him to be introduced in Arakan. The circumstances which made Arakan turn from East to west to the Muslim States were political. The heir apparent to the throne of Ava invade Arakan in 1406. Nara Meik Hla (Min Saw Mwan) left the country taking refuge at Gaur, the capital of the Sultan of Bengal, Min Saw Mwan remained there for twenty four years. While in exile he had to place his 12 towns of Bengal under temporary control of the Sultan of Gaur, Min Saw Mwan helped the Sultan in fighting against the invasion of Sultan Ibrahim of Janipur and it was won. Ahmed Shah of Gaur loved Min Saw Mwan very much and they were very friendly. And as the result the Sultan helped Min Saw Mwan to regain his throne in Arakan. Moreover, in 1430, Min Saw Mwan allowed Sultan's soldiers who helped him, to build a mosque for them and it is known as Sandikhan Mosque which Ba Tha had said a lot. But I must admit that Mohamedanism began to spread to Arakan during this period but failed to make such impression upon its Buddhism.

Mrohaung had its Sandikhan mosque and its Kings assumed Mohamedan titles but the predominance of Buddhism was never shaken.

Arakanese used Muslim title from the time of Min Saw Mwan because as it was a fashion to imitate Moghuls who were regarded as the most modernized people in Asia and certain part of Europe during this period. They used such titles after Min Ba Gyi who reoccupied East Bengal which originally belonged to Arakan, because they were master of East Bengal. Although Min Saw Mwan allowed to build Sandikhan mosque for his Muslim subjects, he was great upholder of Buddhism and builder of several famous Pagodas. It was also found that Arakanese Kings gave religious toleration to their subjects. Hindu Temples and Christian Churches were also allowed to be built near Myohaung and the remains of such institutions can be seen even today. Min Ba Gyi built Shit Thaug Pagoda

with the help of Hindu architects and masons. Hindu Architecture in this famous pagoda can prominently be seen even today. Therefore, use of Muslim title and construction of Sandikhan mosque are just an ordinary things.

Morris Collis has something to say about architecture of the period.

“Minbin embellished Mrauk U with its greatest temples and pagodas. But the architecture of the form is neither Mohamedan nor Buddhist. It is Hindu. But of so unique a design as almost to constitute a particular style.

This architecture was the work of Indian builders employed by Minbin and working to his general specifications. It illustrates the cosmopolitan origins of the state of Mrauk U, which derived from the Hindu and the Buddhists as well as from Portuguese and the Muslim. But it also indicates how Minbin was able to fuse diverse elements into a particular and separate style.”

It is true that King of Mrauk U dynasty struck coins on the same line as Mughal coins. There is nothing extra-ordinary about it. The Chandra Kings of Vesali had also struck coins imitating Hindu coins which are regarded as model in those days. Morris Collis has something to say about it. Here it is:-

“In Mr. Htun Aung Gyaw’s collection is one Minbin’s coin. It presents a succinct commentary on the sudden rise of Arakan to Importance in the bay. On one side of it is inscribed the word “Minbin” in the Burmese character. On the reverse in Nagari is his Moslem title, Zabauk Shah. So Arakan had turned into a Sultanate. The Court was shape on Gaur and Delhi, there were the eunuchs and seraglio, the slaves and the executioners. But it remained Hinayana Buddhist Mahamuni was still there, still fervently worshipped.”

“The style of their coinage is essentially that of the Sultanates convenient clear, but conveying no impression of art. In fact Moghul Delhi never influenced Mrauk-U.”

It is a fact that Arakanese Kings used scripts and languages such as Persian, Nagari and Bengali in their Court, besides Arakanese. This was because Arakan had been connected with Bengal and other Indian Provinces commercially. Besides Arakanese Kings encouraged foreign languages to people his subjects of Bengal. Naturally some Bengali Poets became prominent with their literary works during these days.

Arakanese Kings never appointed Moslem as Prime Ministers or Ministers and Commander of their Army and Navy, although certain Moslem were employed in the Arakanese forces. Since Minban period all Prime Ministers were descendants of Maha Pyinnya Kyaw. Muslims had no place in these spheres. However, Portuguese were employed as instructors of the Arakanese Army and Navy at one time. It is a fact that Arakanese King had mercenary troops composed of Burmese, Talaing, Japanese and Muslims (not Chittagonians), besides Arakanese.

Another batch of Muslims arrived Arakan along with Shah Shuja in 1660. Shah Shuja was a Moghul prince who fled to Arakan and took exile under Arakanese King Sanda Thu Damma due to family troubles at home. Shah Shuja and his followers were looked after by the King in befitted manner, but trouble broke out between King and Shah Shuja who tried to interfere in the internal affairs of the country. King had to take appropriate action and Shuja himself was escaped and vanished from the scene. But his followers were retained as archers of the Guard. In 1692 they burnt the palace tried to make troubles in the country. In 1710-31 Sandawizaya deported them to Akyab Island and Ramree. Their descendants are still to be seen in the villages of Thinganet and Thayagone in Akyab Township and Kyauknimaw and Ramree in Ramree Island. They are called "Kamans". They are treated by Arakanese as Arakanese Muslims. They differ from Chittagonians.

Ba Tha said that Moslems of Arab descendants were called Rowanhnyas. Later on immigrants from Bengal began to settle in Arakan and intermarried and intermixed with these Roewanyas. He stated that by such marriages Rohingyas formed a separate indigenous race in Arakan. He further stated that this Rohingyas is a name corrupted from Arakanese original word "Rwa-haung-ga-kyar". As I have already mentioned as there had been no Arab migration at any time in the History of Arakan this so-called Roewanhnyas or Rohingya were never in existence on the soil of Arakan. Of course there were some Muslim settlements in Arakan since the days of Min Saw Mwan but they were negligible. These Muslem were brought down by the Arakanese Kings to work in the fields. Among these people we might find some artisans as well. Arakanese never named these Muslims as Rohingyas or Rwa haung ga kyar. Arakanese Moslems who stayed among us for generations and regarded by the Arakanese people as their own people and they dressed and speak just like Arakanese. Whereas the Muslim settlers of Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships are mostly descendants of Chittagonians. These Chittagonians migrated to this area since early British rule. There were no immigration laws and open door policy of the British, hardship in their own lands, vicinity, accessibility, fertility of the new place were impetus that drive these Chittagonians to come over this area. This Chittagonians influx is still going on in full swing. It is quite clear that why Ba Tha and his comrades are trying to create these Chittagonian settlers as an indigenous separate race. Attempts also had been made during the Second World War when Moslems of Buthidaung and Maungdaw area sided with retreating British to create this area a part of Chittagong District. Certain Chittagonians have already started a movement to turn this area into their own just like a Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia which at the beginning of World War II became a part of Germany. Chittagonian penetration into this area has been deliberate and planned. Arakanese are being driven out forcibly by these Chittagonians from this area.

Now I like to put forward certain extracts taken from Burma Gazetteer (Akyab District) which was written in 1917. It will give idea about Muslims who had settled in Akyab District and how Chittagonians have overrun Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships of Arakan.

"The Mahomedans, who in 1872 numbered 58,255, had by the year 1911 risen to 178,647. Many are men who come down for the working season only from Chittagong and are included in the census returns, but are not, properly speaking, inhabitants of the country. In 1879 it was

recorded that those who were bona-fide residents, though recruited by immigrants from Bengal, were, for the most part, descendants of slaves captured by the Arakanese and Burmese in their wars with their neighbours. The Arakan kings in former times had possessions all along the coast as far as Chittagong and Dacca, and many Mahomedans were sent to Arakan as slaves. Large numbers are said to have been brought by Min Raja-gyi after his first expedition to Sundeep, and the local histories relate that in the ninth century several ships were wrecked on Ramree Island and the Mussalman crews sent to Arakan and placed in villages there. 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. Long residence in this enervating climate and the example set them by the people among whom they have resided for generations have had the effect of rendering these people almost as indolent and extravagant as the Arakanese themselves. They have so got out of the habit of doing hard manual labour that they are now absolutely dependent on the Chittagonian coolies to help them over the most arduous of their agricultural operations, ploughing, reaping and earthwork. Since 1879 immigration has taken place on a much larger scale and the descendants of the slaves are resident, for the most part, in the Kyauktaw and Myohaung townships. Maungdaw township has been overrun by Chittagonian immigrants. Buthidaung is not far behind and new arrivals will be found in almost every part of the district."

"This is the eastern townships of the Buthidaung Sub-division, separated from the Maungdaw township by the Mayu range of hills. It has an area of 796 square mile no less than 33,850 or 53 per cent of the population are Chittagonians."

"Of the total population no less than 77 per cent are Chittagonians as still continuing gradually driving the natives of Arakan further east. The indolent Arakanese cannot hold out against those hard working and thrifty people and of the former continue in their idle extravagant ways it will not be long before the whole Akyab District will be in the hands of the Chittagonians as in the case at present in the Maungdaw Township."

In conclusion let me stress that I am not against those Arakan Muslims who have stayed among us for generation. We will continue to regard them our kinsmen and our brethren.

However, we cannot accept those so-called Rohingyas who are trying to create discord among our people. We will not recognize them as separate indigenous race, but if they prefer they can remain as foreigners the Chittagonians. Appropriate action will have to be taken if they continue to interfere in our political affairs. So let me appeal to these Muslim of Buthidaung and Maungdaw not to meddle in this so-called Rohingya affairs as instigated by certain mischievous persons of Chittagonian descents, who besides trying to create Chittagonian Sudetenland, trying to make our rightful Statehood movement by creating and igniting racial problems.

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