

AKYAB, THE CAPITAL OF ARAKAN

by
Tha Htu

AFTER spending five long years in the Shan and Kachin Hills I came down via the famous Ava bridge and after a tedious train journey, reached the metropolis of Rangoon. It was the time Rangoon had undertaken the 'cleaning campaign by people's sweat' when the care-taker Government under General Ne Win was in power. One admired the sudden changes and developments in our dirty and over-crowded capital city. For me, the drudgery of city life was always loathsome and I preferred to proceed to one of the isolated parts of Burma—I chose Akyab in the Arakan Division.

As I boarded an U.B.A. plane, I recollected everything about the pleasant peaceful sea side town of Akyab, where I had spent some time before. I flew over the Arakan Yoma which is one of the most important geographic boundaries between Burma proper and the Arakan Division. Hence, not only are the climate, people and the pattern of life in Arakan different from their Burmese counterparts, but also traditional occupations, political boundaries, the wishes of people and their custom.

The area of Akyab district is 5136 square miles in 92°-11' and 93°-58' East Longitude, and 19°-47' and 21°-27' North Latitudes. It lies between the Arakan Yoma and the Bay of Bengal. The district consists of 4 subdivisions and 9 townships with a population of over 6 lakhs according to 1931 census. Of this, 3,27,872 are Buddhists, 2,10,990 Indian Muslims, 49,745 Arakanese Muslims and Rawyan-kyas, and the remaining are Christians, Hindus and Animists. The present population, according to an authority, however, has increased to 75%. 50% of whom are Chittagonian (East Pakistani) in origin. Now the area to the west of the Kaladan River along the vicinity of Buthidaung, Moungdaw,

—now known as Mayu Range Frontier Administrative Area—is densely populated by them.

The district is a long stretch of hilly and alluvial land extending from south to north, from the Mayu Range up to Naff River which forms the border between Burma and Pakistan, guarded on the east by the stout rocks of the Arakan Hill Tracts, and on the west by the roaring waters of the Bay of Bengal. There is a vast panoramic scenery all round.

Akyab might be claimed as the most interesting, or at any rate the most curious town of Arakan. It is full of paradoxes—besides being a very delightful town to travel in.

The triangular shaped Akyab town is situated on the sea coast at the mouth of the Kaladan River on 20°-8' North and 92°-55' East. The town itself is 5 square miles in extent. Two sides of the triangle run in a southerly direction until they reach the Apex, known as "Point", where the river meets the sea. On the north of the triangle between the pier and the Cherokea creek, it is filled with native population and it is the northern boundary of the town proper. The rice mills are situated along both banks.

Although the origin of Akyab is not known, some authorities surmise that it has been derived from a corruption of the name of a Pagoda which was said to be the shrine of the relics (jaw-bone) of Lord Buddha, and was built by one of the Arakanese kings in the 16th century. This connects four small pagodas situated on the low, sandy ridge on the north-west of Akyab town with the famous *salagiri* tradition of Gotama. The ridge on which the pagodas stand is called "Akyat-kun-daw" or "Akyat-daw-kun". However, in this regard, there is a local belief that when the invading soldiers of General Morrosion's Force reached near the ridge of the pagoda in the vicinity of Akyab, an officer of the marching army enquired of the people regarding their present destination. As

the local people thought that the enquiry was made about the pagoda itself, they promptly answered that the name of the pagoda was Akyatdaw. Hence the name of Akyab has come to exist.

After the annexation of Arakan by the British East India Company in 1824, the capital was Myohoung. But due to unhealthy conditions of the place the British garrison was moved to Akyab and it was made the capital of Arakan in 1826.

The Arakanese name of the town is 'Sit-twe' or "Where War Began". However, the legend of its origin is untraceable.

Starting as an insignificant, small fishing village, Akyab now ranks as one of the chief ports of Burma. The trade of the district centres almost entirely in Akyab town. As the district is dependent on agriculture, all the other occupations are subsidiary to, or exist for, the maintenance of the agricultural population. Since Akyab has no manufactures of importance, the only factory industry is rice milling. The export trade has been re-knowned ever since the year 1850.

"It would have been ideal indeed if all foreigners in Burma in the past regarded themselves as the Ambassadors of their respective countries and behaved and conducted themselves accordingly. But as they came from different social stratas and were possessed of different qualifications, and moreover, entered the country from a gamut of motives that ranged from the purely philanthropic to the frankly mercenary, it was inevitable that some of their activities at least should have clashed with the interest of the people of the country,"—writes F. Haskings in his *Burma Yesterday and To-morrow*.

[Indeed, Arakan is one of the most affected areas owing to foreign domination. Arakan was depopulated when the British first ceded the area. The population in Akyab district, however, increased to 5,29,943 in 1911 census. But this

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figure was taken when large numbers of coolies from Chittagong happened to be in the town. The permanent population was estimated not to exceed 25,000 only. Within the expanse of five decades till the post-independent period, there has been a large influx of Bengali population from Chittagong (East Pakistan).

Agriculture, and other subsidiary works like seasonal fishing etc., of the district are entirely dependent on hired labour and to meet the demand large numbers of coolies came from Chittagong (East Pakistan). These labourers arrived in the ploughing season, and, with the exception of a few who secured further employment, they returned to their home. And when the reaping season began they arrived again to handle both the reaping and milling of paddy. As the Arakanese themselves were unaccustomed to hard manual labour, the Chittagonian coolies served to help them over the most arduous of the district's vital operation. Thus, large numbers of East Pakistan immigrants have been encouraged to enter Akyab ever since 1879. This periodic influx has been stopped only after the promulgation of the Burma Immigration (Emergency Provisions) Act, 1947.

[According to "Burma Gazetteer Arakan District, Vol. A", the number of Mohamedans in 1872 was 58,255 and in 1911 it increased to 1,78,647. Many were men from Chittagong. When labour has to be engaged the Arakanese prefer to employ their own kind to Chittagonians. In 1879 it was recorded that those who were bonafide residents, though recruited by immigrants from Bengal, were, for the most part, descendants of slaves captured by the Arakanese kings in former times, had possessions all along the Bengal coastal area as far as Dacca, and many Mohamedans were sent to Arakan as slaves. Amongst themselves they employ colloquially the language of their ancestors. Long residence in this enervating climate and example, set them by the people among whom they have resided for generations, have had the effect of rendering this people almost as indolent and extravagant as the local Arakanese themselves. Locally those slave

NATURE'S LOVE SONG

by Marlene Munro

The wind crooned,
The trees swooned,
The leaves danced,
In delight, enchanted.

The green grass swayed,
And each slender blade
The Earth's warm breast
Lovingly caressed.

The flowers were wantonly reeling
With love's sweet, heady feeling;
Through land and sea was stealing
A love that was so revealing.

And You and I beneath the blue sky
In a tender embrace, we kiss and sigh,—
Nature's touch at our veins so sweet and strong
Our hearts join the music of her Love song.

—O—

Muslims are known as Royankya or Arakanese Muslims. The immigrants of the Chittagonian race find their way into the society of local Royankya and gradually they become absorbed within them. Eventually, they also claim to be Royankya, descendants of the Muslim slaves in Arakan. Consequently, the Arakanese are slowly but surely being ousted by the peaceful penetration of the Chittagonians in every walk of life.

[Akyab, after the war, was nothing but a grim picture of devastation. During 10 years of A.F.P.F.L. rule, Akyab was usually regarded as a sort of kitchen-garden for the Union of Burma. It was confined due to political differences. A section of the politicians have all the time been glued to the idea of achieving their ideology by means foul or fair. That is why some of the unsagacious politicians of Akyab indiscriminately go in for black-market, smuggling and harbouring or bringing illegal immigrants from East Pakistan to get into electoral rolls for the sake of their party. They are not in the least repentant for that.

Arakan with such a beautiful and important place like Akyab, cannot develop without one

common aim and one common programme. With unity, there will then be enthusiasm everywhere and confidence will fill every heart. Despair and bickering have advanced the march of death; unity and confidence shall bring the tide of life.

For the permanent rehabilitation of Akyab, and Arakan itself, entire attention and energy are to be harnessed to the task of developing industry and agriculture. Development of communication, strict Government control—that is, good and honest administrators to uproot the smuggling of rice etc., outside the country—all these have to be demanded and implemented.

The last war has seen an unprecedented devastation of Arakan's economy and society. Pre-war Akyab no longer exists and it will never come back. But a new Akyab may be born this time if we all together start the building of a new and congenial plan. To achieve this objective, no one party has been strong enough. If all unite to reach this goal, then this united strength can and must defeat all obstacles and all Arakanese problems on the way.

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