

## The 'Rohingya' Identity - British experience in Arakan 1826-1948

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I only recently discovered the Digital Library of India. Like a child let loose in a sweetshop, I have been gorging myself on unrestricted historical candy. With the Census in Myanmar on its way to completion, I looked to see how the British in their time had handled the issue of the 'Rohingya' identity which is currently a matter of deep concern: there sadly appears to have been a last minute change of heart by the Myanmar Government not to allow self-identification by Muslims as 'Rohingya', under the threat by Buddhists in Rakhine State to boycott the census if that was permitted.

There is a very simple answer to the matter of British practice. There was no such identity as 'Rohingya' known to the British Governments of either India until 1937 or of Burma after the separation from India on 1 April of that year. In the 122 years between their conquest of Arakan in 1826 and Burmese independence in 1948, not a single reference to 'Rohingya' is to be found in any British official report, regional gazetteer, census, legislation, private correspondence or personal reminiscence. Even if such a self-identification had been made, the census enumerator would have written 'Chittagonian' as they were under instructions to do in both the 1921 and 1931 censuses if alternative identities were offered, such as 'Kawtaw', 'Barna', 'Babuji' or 'Magh'.

*"By means of that mysterious sympathy - the despair of the average European - which enables Asiatics of all kinds to communicate with one another with apparent freedom on the veriest minimum of a common vocabulary, the Burmese enumerator has, doubtless, despite his ignorance of the alien's tongue, generally succeeded in making his native of India understand that what he wished to ascertain was his 'Zat' or caste.....". Paragraph 157 - 1901 Burma Census Report edited by C C Lewis, Census Superintendent*

The presence of persons of Islamic faith in Arakan, and indeed in the whole of Burma, has been recorded by the British in considerable detail and has in any case been attested by writers and historians of all nationalities. It is not a matter of dispute.

One group which particularly attracted my attention in British records was what the 1901 Census described as the 'Arakan Muhammadans'. By the 1931 Census, now described as 'Arakan Mohamedans', their numbers totalled 51,615 compared to 252,152 'Chittagonians' and 65,211 'Bengalis', in addition to 'Arakan Kamans' and 'Myedus' also resident in Arakan.

The 'Arakan Mohamedans' comprised 26,153 males and 25,462 females, an even balance between the sexes as you would expect in a long-standing permanent community, while 'Chittagonian' males outnumbered females by two to one and 'Bengali' by three to one - a ratio, I would have thought, which might favour polyandry rather than polygamy. 'Chittagonian' is hardly a racial, rather a linguistic and geographical designation. "It might be argued that the figures for Chittagonians should be included in those for Bengalis", noted the 1931 Census Report, "but there is no harm done in giving separate figures for them." The language spoken though by both groups was listed simply as 'Bengali'. In the 2014 Census, the language spoken at home was not a question asked.

The 'Arakan Muslims', as I shall call them, mostly resided in Akyab (Sittwe) District, but they were also found further south in Kyaukphyu (1,597) and Sandoway [Thandwe] (1,658). In his report on Indian Immigration released in 1940, Financial Secretary James Baxter said that there was indeed "an Arakanese Muslim community settled so long in Akyab District that it has for all intents and purposes to be regarded as an indigenous race." Baxter noted that these Muslims commonly spoke the language of their ancestors among themselves, although they used Burmese in writing.

*"That the Arakanese are being pushed out of Arakan before the steady wave of Chittagonian immigration from the west is only too well known.....the Arakanese not having been accustomed to hard manual labour for generations cannot and will not do it now; it has to be brought home to him that if he will not do more for himself he must give way to the thrifty and hard-working Chittagonian and his only reply is to move on. " Page 89 - Akyab Gazetteer 1917 edited by Deputy Commissioner R B Smart.*

The 1901 Census report referred to a group of 'Arakan Muhammadans' who had been "fetched from Arakan" as prisoners when the Kingdom of Arakan fell to Burman forces in 1785. They were eventually granted lands and allowed to settle around Mandalay. Their descendants were to be found in the village of Bono (situated west of Meiktila) and also in Taungmyin (in Rakhine State, to which they had presumably returned). These would undoubtedly be the people whom the polymath Dr Francis Buchanan - medical practitioner, botanist, linguist, geographer, gazetteer and traveller - had interviewed when he accompanied a mission in 1785 to the Court of Ava, reporting in an article in 1799 on the languages of the Burma Empire in a learned journal 'Asiatick Researches' that these were Muslims who "have been long settled in Arakan, and who call themselves 'Rooinga', or natives of Arakan".

This word 'Rooinga' would appear to mean no more than 'Arakaner' - a geographic locator rather than an ethnic designation. It would seem to be derived from one of the many Bengali names used to describe Arakan. As Buchanan put it in his 1798 "Account of a Journey in South East Bengal": "Various parts of the hills are inhabited by Mugs [Rakhine] from Rossawn, Rohhawn, Roang, Reng or Rung, for by all these name is Arakan called by the Bengalese". Buchanan went on to say: "These people left their country on its conquest by the Burmas [i.e. Burmans], and subsist by fishing, Boat building, a little cultivation, and by the Cloth made by their Women. They also build houses for the Mohammedan refugees, of whom many came from Arakan on the same occasion, and settling among men of their own Sect, are now much better off than their former Masters [the 'Mugs']".

In his voluminous writings for scholarly journals and independently, both before and after his visit to the Court of Ava in 1785, not once did Buchanan refer a second time to Arakan Muslims as 'Rooingas' which he would assuredly have done if the designation had any currency in the region at the time, or found any favour with him personally.

In the absence of any British archival documentation over the 122 years of their stewardship of Arakan, I can only conclude that 'Rohingya' is a designation which came into existence and usage after the Second World War, although it cannot be totally excluded that it might be connected to folkloric tradition unknown to the British. It is however most important to note that it was a designation which the Myanmar Government itself quietly acknowledged and even on occasions used, though only infrequently, in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

These occasions, which included permission for radio broadcasts in the local dialect, are not in dispute and have been well documented.

We might ask whether the Arakan Muslims of yesteryear in Akyab were indeed the descendants of the original Muslim residents of Arakan. This seems very likely. But where are they today, after the vicious sectarian fighting which followed the Japanese invasion in 1942, the disruptions of the Second World War, the Jihadist Uprising which lasted from 1948 to 1961 and the massive exodus to Bangladesh first in 1978 and then in 1991, and eventual repatriation? Are there any Muslim residents who can today provide historical documentation and assert, in the style of President Kennedy: "Ich bin ein Arakaner"?

*"Eight Arakanese witnesses, seven of whom were members of the Legislature, maintained that Chittagonian penetration in Arakan is steadily continuing and is resented not only by the Arakanese proper but also by the settled Chittagonians.....The view was expressed that it was inadvisable to let Chittagonian immigration go unchecked as it contained the seeds of future communal troubles. All the witnesses agreed that immigration from Chittagong should be restricted." Paragraph 69 - Report on Indian Immigration 1940 presented by Financial Secretary James Baxter.*

The international campaign to support the 'Rohingyas', as many but by no means all Muslims in Rakhine State now style themselves, has been so successful that it has become confrontational and thus counterproductive to any solution. Not for one moment do I begrudge the Muslims of Arakan their right to choose their own self-identity and to register this in any Census. This would in any case seem to be their right under generally accepted international practice. But it becomes counterproductive when supporters claim that these indigenous Muslims of Arakan have always called themselves 'Rohingya', for which there is simply no credible historical evidence.

It is uncontested, and should in any case be self-evident to us all, that some Muslim residents of Arakan could, if only they had the documentation, trace their ancestry back several centuries, while most others, even if 'Chittagonian', have been in Myanmar for four or more generations and so qualify in principle for citizenship, even under the much criticised 1982 Act. Unfortunately the debate, under external pressures, has descended into a sterile confrontation in which 'Rohingya' insist that their designation is proof that they are an indigenous race, while the Government for its part insists that this not the case. This debate over the origins and relevance of the designation 'Rohingya' conceals the much more important reality of the long historical presence of Muslim residents in Arakan.

Can there be any compromise between these two apparently irreconcilable positions, as clearly neither side is likely to give way? The 'Rohingya' surely cannot hope to convert a post-Second World War political label into an ethnic designation acceptable to the Government. But equally might not the Government be persuaded to recognise that they have in the past referred to particular Muslim residents of Rakhine State as 'Rohingya', notably in the military administration of the Mayu Frontier District in northern Arakan which existed between 1961 and 1964? Might not the Government be willing in the right circumstances to accept the limited use once more of this previously acknowledged geo-political designation?

If 'Rohingya' were felt to be a step too far, why not seek to modernise the 'Arakan Muhammadan' of 1901?

A way out of the impasse needs to be negotiated. Rakhine politicians should be brought to accept the historical reality about the continuous presence of Muslims in Arakan for a very long time. An end should be brought to the nonsensical assertions of their supporters that the 'Rohingya' are all illegal immigrants from Bengal.

But supporters of Rakhine Muslims overseas should at the same time acknowledge that the particular designation 'Rohingya' had no serious historical validity prior to independence in 1948.

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