

THE EARLY HINDUS AND TIBETO-BURMANS IN ARAKAN*

(A brief study of Hindu civilization and the origin of the Arakanese race)

by

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THE Hindus of the early centuries AD migrated eastwards via Arakan, founding kingdoms as they went. The present Akyab district, being next door to Bengal, was necessarily the first kingdom they founded, and may date from before the first century AD. For a thousand years it was an Indian land, dynasty following dynasty." M. Collis 1

On the study of Arakanese history one can find that the Arakan country was one of the most important stopping places on the route from India to the Hindu colonial kingdoms on the Malay peninsula and beyond. For many years before the 10th century AD it had been the seat of Hindu dynasties. In the first century AD India had civilized her colonial peoples of the east. In Arakan she had poured her immigrants, alphabet, religions (Hinduism, Brahmanism and Buddhism) and her fine arts through Danyawaddi, Ramawaddi, Mayghawaddi, and Dwarawaddi. All these had been forgotten, but Arakan still retained its classical name of the four waddis.

Some twenty miles from Myohaung to the North-east there was Sirigutta Hill on which summit was a shrine where the image of the Buddha called the Mahamuni was. This site was older than Waithali and Myohaung. It was a sacred hill which went right back to the period of the Hindu migration. At that time an image of Lord Buddha was enshrined there by Sandathuria (146-198). This image is credible. There were bas-reliefs of Hindu deities around the foot of the image. But the style of the deities showed that they belonged to the period before AD 957 when Arakan was an Indian land, the inhabitants of

which were Hindus similar to those of Bengal 2. At the time of the Mongolian or Tibeto-Burman invasion of AD 957 the original Mahamuni image had been destroyed and had been rebuilt during the period when Arakan was feudatory of the Pagan kings of Burma 3.

Waithali the ruined city is still to be seen on the bank of a tidal creek about five miles north of Myohaung. It was founded by Maha Taing Sandra in AD 788. The dynasty of it was known as Sandra dynasty, the kings of which were supporters of Mahayana Buddhism glorifying the Mahamuni shrine though they were Hindus. At that time Chittagong province was in their territory 4. The people of Waithali were the followers of both Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism as in India before Islam came to Arakan. (Islam was propagated since 7th century AD in this part of the world by the Arabs who intermarried and intermixed with the early Hindus of Arakan. By such mixed-marriages Rohingyas came into being). Later India dispensed with Buddhism and Arakan dispensed with Hinduism.

Waithali was a famous trade port. Thousands of ships came to this port annually. The city was enclosed by brick walls within which there are very many mounds made for offensive and defensive purposes. The pieces of statuary, bas-reliefs and floral designs in stone and the inscriptions in the Nagari character of the 8th century AD are still to be found on these mounds. The plan of these remains are purely Hindu style. The Siva style is rougher than the best Hindu work. Near the walls of the city there is a large single stone block of Buddha known as Payagyi belonging

to the 8th century AD 5. Several Nagari inscriptions are to be found in the city even at the gate of Shitthaung Paya of Myohaung.

In India all the important States had at least a silver currency which had been evolved since the period of the Guptas (AD 320-455) 6. Arakan was an Indian land before AD 957. Waithali was a Hindu State in Arakan and as it was the first gate of Arakan to Bengal it got the inheritance of coinage from India. The Waithali kings struck the silver coins some of which are as large as modern *kyat* coin and others are a twenty-five *pya* bit in size. Stamped on them are the bell, Nandi, Siva's trident, vase of votive flowers and Nagari inscriptions. The coins of Waithali were in the Brahmanical tradition.

There was also another coinage which played an important part in the history of Arakan. It was designed on the model of the Muslim coinage which came to India in AD 1203. Muslim coinage has opposite characteristics. It is of an inscriptional design. It does not contain a portrait figure. The king's name, title, date and Kalima, the Muslim confession of faith, in Persian script are carefully inscribed. The coin's artistic genius depends on the calligraphy 8. When the Muslim coinage came from India to Arakan in the 15th century AD, while Arakan was the vassal of the Muslim Sultans (kings) of Gaur, the Arakanese kings had adopted these characteristics 9. Thus one can say that the coins found in Arakan to this day belonged to two categories—Hindu and Muslim. The coins of Waithali are Hindu and those of Myauk-U (Myohaung) are Muslim in form 10.

Sandra dynasty came to an end in AD 957 by a Tibeto-

2 D.G.E. Hall, *Burma*, p. 57.

3 Maurice Collis, *The Land of the Great Image*, p. 134.

4 The 50th Anniversary Publication No. 2 of the Burma Research Society Journal, p. 486.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 486.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 485.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 488.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 485.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 491.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 485.

*This is a chapter from M.A. Tahir Ba Tha's "The Loyal Rohingyas" which is awaiting publication.

1 Maurice Collis, *Into Hidden Burma*, p. 134

Burman or Mongolian invasion which changed the country from Indian to Arakanese. It destroyed the Waithali kingdom¹¹. They placed Amiathu as the first king of the Tibeto-Burmans on the throne killing Sula Sandra, the last king of the Sandra dynasty. They also put Pala dynasty of Bengal to an end. In Bengal the Hindus regained their kingdom in a few years. But in Arakan the Tibeto-Burmans increased their number by recruiting more of them from Burma Proper and the influx of Mongolian immigrants was decisive¹². They became more powerful and stronger than before. So the Hindus of Waithali failed to regain their ancestral kingdom.

The Mongolians looked East and they cut Arakan away from India. They inter-married and intermixed with the Hindus who were assimilated by them in the first or second generations, creating the Arakanese race. The history of Arakan in connection with the Arakanese began since then and lasted eight centuries until 1784,¹³ when the country was annexed by Bodawpaya (1782-1819).

In AD 994 Tabingaton, the last king of the Mongolians of the Waithali dynasty, moved the capital from Waithali to Lemyo River fifteen miles south-east so that he could make relations easier with Burma Proper. There many dynasties ruled, each with its own city but in the same locality. There was no coinage. During this period from the 10th to the 15th century Arakan had dealings with Pagan in Burma Proper, and the Arakanese became more similar to the Burmese and less like Indians. Later Arakan became feudatory to Pagan, but maintained its own kings paying tribute. There was a road known as "Bu-ywet-ma-hnyoe" connecting the Lemyo with Pagan, along which Burmese ideas had come to Arakan¹⁴.

Burmese writing came to Arakan in the 12th century AD before which no inscriptions in Burmese script are found in Arakan, all are in Nagari script. The language

today used by the Arakanese is an early form of Burmese¹⁵. In respect of the Arakanese language we have an excellent description written by Sir Arthur Phayre: "They no doubt are the descendants from ancestors belonging to Mongoloid tribes, closely akin to those from whom sprung the Burmese of the Upper Irrawadi. Their language is the same, with a few dialectical differences, though the pronunciation as spoken frequently renders it unintelligible to a modern Burmese"¹⁶. From Pagan they had received the Hinayana form of Buddhism and the Burmese alphabet with the exception of which the Burmese had nothing to teach the Arakanese.

During these five hundred years (10th—15th century) Arakan became a Holy Land. It had no important political events and it became a place of pilgrimage for Buddhists. It did not make commercial developments like the kingdom of Waithali, but it developed only the racial and religious characteristics.

During Myauk-U dynasty, though the Arakanese were at the zenith of their fame they could not forget the Hindu architectural designs which are still to be found in Arakan. About half a mile north of the palace of Myohaung there is a temple called Shitthaung Paya, and about 120 yards to the north-west of the Shitthaung Paya there is also a temple known as Dukkhathein Paya. They were built by King Min Bin or Zabeek Shah (1531-53) during whose reign the religion and monastic establishments had long been exclusively Buddhist. They were used as fortresses when the city was attacked by the enemies and also used as temples to which members of the Order could retire¹⁷. The

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 489.

¹⁶ Sir Arthur Phayre, *History of Burma*, p. 42.

¹⁷ *The Land of the Great Image*, p. 222.

passages of these temples were lined with bas-reliefs representing both the Buddhist and the Hindu mythologies. The mixture of these mythologies remains unexplained, but it is doubtless to say that Arakan was a Hindu State before AD 957¹⁸. The architecture of these temples is neither Islamic nor Buddhist, but it is Hindu or Brahmanic because the architects employed were Hindus¹⁹ whom King Min Bin brought back with him from Eastern Bengal after the termination of the victorious campaign which gave Chittagong to Arakan. The illustrations are of cosmopolitan origins derived from the Hindus, Buddhists, Portuguese and Muslims, which show that Min Bin was able to join different elements into a particular and separate style.

In conclusion, though after the 10th century AD Arakan was predominantly or professedly a Buddhist country, Islam was strong there with a fairly strong admixture of Rohingyas as a result of intermarriages with Muslims²⁰. Islam became a living force in Arakan during the early period of the Myauk-U dynasty and many Arakanese became Muslims,²¹ and the Arakanese kings kept Muslim titles in addition to their own names, and they even issued coins and medallions bearing the Kalima, the Muslim confession of faith in Persian script²².

¹⁸ *Into Hidden Burma*, p. 137.

¹⁹ *The Land of the Great Image*, p. 222.

²⁰ D. G. E. Hall, *A History of South-East Asia*, p. 185.

²¹ U Kyi, *Essentials of Burmese History*, p. 130.

²² G. E. Harvey, *History of Burma*, p. 139 and 140.

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¹¹ Ibid, p. 488.

¹² Ibid p. 488.

¹³ *Into Hidden Burma*, p. 134.

¹⁴ *The 50th Anniversary Publication No. 2 of BRSJ*, p. 489.

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Cover Picture Shows:

The Sule Pagoda which serves to mark the exact centre of the City of Rangoon was built about 2,255 years ago during a Mon dynasty. It enshrines Buddha's Relics brought over in ancient times by two Buddhist missionaries from India. The Pagoda is about 157 feet in height and is seven feet higher than the Independence Monument in the Bandoolla Square close by. The Sule Pagoda by twilight.

Photo. by Kyaw Oo, Rangoon.

Twelfth Year

The Fullmoon of Tazaungmon, another Festival of Lights, falls on Thursday, November 19, and the 44th anniversary of our National Day this year falls on Sunday, the tenth waning of Tazaungmon, 1326 Burmese Era (November 29). We send hearty greetings and best wishes to all our readers on these auspicious occasions.

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With this issue, the *Guardian Magazine* commences its twelfth year of publication, having commenced publication in November 1953. Volume XI has one more number to run because Volume III was made a giant tome of 14 numbers to catch up with the calendar year.

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Pressure of work and temporary ill-health explain the long silence of our contributor, Maung Lu Pain. We will be publishing his poem entitled "Transition to Maturity" in December 1964 as it reaches us too late for publication in this issue.