

Islam in Arakan: An interpretation from the Indian perspective: History and the Present

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Introduction and Problematic: Reflections from Indian Perspectives

The history of Arakan or the Rakhine State of Myanmar is matchless due to various, partly, very complex, factors. The foremost among the factors which makes the history of Arakan so complex, at the same time, unique, is the region's close contact with the Indian civilization. Unless the pulse of the interaction between the Buddhist world of Arakan and the Hindu-Buddhist civilization of India (especially Eastern India) with Islam of India in between is not felt, Arakan remains unintelligible.

Further, to estimate the nature of Islam in Arakan in the medieval period, we have to place Arakan in the context of Bengal-Delhi (Bengal regionalism versus Mughal imperialism) tussle for power in the Bay of Bengal region. The epic Padmavati by poet Sayyid Alol has so far been read as a masterpiece of a romantic literature of A class; however, it has been studied mostly by literature experts from West Bengal, and discussed in the context of Bengali literary tradition only. It is often stated in the numerous books (all written by literature experts) that the Padmavati is unique since in this epic for the first time, the change of theme—from religious to secular (romance) - is directly visible. The theme of divine love between Ratnasena of Chitor and Padmavati of Simhala makes a landmark, besides all others, alone for the selection of the theme. Prior to that, Gods and Goddesses and religious matters made the bulk of the Bengali literature. According to my understanding, the story of Padmavati is only an occasion. The complex political background behind its translation in the Arakanese court, however never attracted any attention of scholars. In my earlier contribution " Myth and History of Bengali identity in Arakan " (Amsterdam 2002) I tried to discover the political implication behind this so-called Bengali Renaissance at the court of Arakan, under Arakanese patronage. It is strange that in India, the perception about the might of this kingdom is very vague. But, who can deny that in the 16th and 17th centuries it was only Arakan which had the courage and means to challenge the Mughals. I am happy that my humble research on Arakan has drawn some attention among experts whose knowledge on the Arakanese history is no match to my limited knowledge on this region.

Now coming back to the subject of flourishing of Bengali literature in Arakan, I have to tell that we should not miss the fact that Padmavati is a work of translation of a very important Hindusthani epic written by Malik Mohammed Jayasi— an eminent Chisthi Sufi poet from North India. Jayasi's name is always remembered in great respect since he was the first to have used Persian script for writing Hindusthani. This he did in Padumavat itself. We will go into the details of symbolism and syncretism drawn from the religious -cultural milieu of Indian tradition as reflected in this work. The same kind of symbolism is visible in the work Sati Mayna O Lor Chandrani written by Daulat Quazi, another court poet who enjoyed similiar patronage in the Arakanese court.. The later part of Sati Mayna O Lor Chandrani was written by Shah Alol. The scope of my contribution is wide, covering the medieval period, the British period and also the present crisis. I will argue that lack of knowledge about Bengal's contact with Arakan among the Myanmar scholars is responsible for all sorts of misunderstanding. The post colonial state's identity with a single religion is also a source of much confusion, though the history itself shows that in India as well as in Myanmar during the pre-colonial periods religious

identity was in a fluid stage. There was also no bar for a single person to worship at a time Gods and Goddesses from various beliefs. One nation, one identity, one state is a colonial gift, which has its both, good and bad, sides.

It is interesting to note that even as late as in early 1990s, quite often, Muslims of Arakan (northern Arakan) were described as "Indians". Occasionally they were described as "Bengalis", and from time to time as "Chittagongians". Further, the name, "Rohingya", is quite justifiably "rejected" by the Myanmar people and Government, as there exists no such minority in Myanmar. According to the same opinion though, Islam is one of the most important religions of Myanmar. Indeed, visitors of Myanmar among the erudite audience have seen that the Muslims in various parts of Myanmar enjoy equal rights and privileges with other religious and ethnic groups. Islam in Burma/Myanmar has never been perceived as a religion of alien origin. Kings of medieval Burma needed Muslims for not only wars, but also for peace and stability of the economy. A large number of inter marriages and social interactions are visible all around. Indeed, quite interestingly, it was the Hindus, who quite often felt isolated in Burma. After the formal separation of British Burma from British India in 1937, a large number of Hindus left Burma permanently and joined their relatives in India, whom they might have not seen over generations. This happened during 1940s, 1950s and again with the advent of military rule in Burma in 1962. While in the case of the Muslim population of Indian origin in Burma, in spite of the fact that they were (like in British India) not awarded any special status, they peacefully, were accepting their positions within the Union. Even then, in the case of Arakan, as we will see, things took a different turn.

As the organization of the present seminar itself speaks for, the Muslims of Arakan makes a special case. In all the British sources, Arakan's historic link with Bengal, and Chittagong in particular, are upheld. Immigration in Arakan from Chittagong, Noakhali, Comilla always added to the rise of the population figure of Indian origin in British Burma. Even after the formal restriction of immigration by the Indians into Burma in early 1940s, Arakan had to be treated as a special case. It was decided to allow 20,000 Chittagongian labourers to reap the paddy of the fields of Arakan. What is known further is that, during the period of the Japanese occupation, a large number of Muslims of Arakan extended their support to the British with the hope of award of a kind "Arakanistan" (parallel to Pakistan), or, at least a "National Area" for the Muslims of northern Arakan. The story of this has been told by Moshe Yegar in his book *The Muslims of Burma* as well as by Klaus Fleischman in his book *Arakan Konfliktregion zwischen Birma und Bangladesh*. In the repeated exodus of people from Arakan to Bangladesh, Fleischman saw a formidable genesis of, whether or not, a largescale conflict in this area where South Asia meets Southeast Asia. True, such no conflict has broken out in last 25 years, but this entire region remains one of the most sensitive areas of South and Southeast Asia in terms of refugee generation, poverty, arms smuggle, trafficking of human beings and goods (rice in particular). Twice in recent past, in 1977-78 and again in 1992-96 the north Arakanese townships saw exodus of an unprecedented nature (S. Bhattacharya, 2002) Interestingly, the historical backdrop of such a spectacular reftigee problem has remained little studied, just like the origin of the Rohingya language and culture has also remained shrouded in mystery. In his otherwise very informative and well argued article " The Origin of the name Rohingya" , U Khin Maung Saw vehemently rejected the name. stating that Ba Tha is the only cultural advocate for this rather marginal group of people, who are actually in large part "illegal immigrants" from Bengal (now Bangladesh). U Khin Maung Saw is of the opinion that this name "Rohingya" was "founded" jointly by the Red Flag communists and the Mujahids. The Mujahids of northern Arakanese villages of Buthidaung, Maungdaw and partly Rathedaung, were fighting for their separate homeland and were getting support from the Red Flag communists. U Nu's Government of course was not in a position to show any mercy to these separatists. This piece of information became available to U Khin Maung Saw courtesy the eminent journalist, Kyemon U Thaug (U Khin Maung Saw in J. Lorenz & U Gaertner eds, 1996, 96). This journalist, Kyemon U Thaug worked for the famous newspaper *Bumakhit* in 1950s. The creation of a name connecting the northern Arakanese people in the historical experience of Arakan and Burma as a whole was a need of those days. The Muslims of Northern Arakan wanted to justify their fight for more autonomy and perhaps total independence from Burma(U Khin Maung Saw, 96).

In this writing I do not intend to support one view against the other, as every contribution that fell to my attention has some kind of truth and is helpful towards understanding of this remote region of Myanmar. The nations of South and Southeast Asia have come a long way in their struggle for survival as individual nation. Cultural plurality and religious diversity have made the foundation of all the nations, rich or poor, solid. No one wants to go back to the colonial past, nor any one wants to ignore the factor "peace" and "stability". The relations between the nations (though ASEAN may be seen more successful than the SAARC), is extremely cordial. No country wants to lose her integrity. As a result, the parallel existence of tensions and peace is perceived as more natural than unnatural. The periodic exodus of people from north Arakan to Bangladesh's Cox Bazar remains to me as a problem to be dealt by the Governments of Bangladesh and Myanmar bilaterally and if they want, with involvements of other countries and agencies. I am much more interested to deal with certain neglected facts of Indian history which are equally important for Bangladeshi and Myanmar historical researches. In recent years two scholars, Mujtava Razvi and Dr. Md. Akhtaruzzaman (Dr. Md. Akhtaruzzaman 2003 pub. in the proceedings of the Conference of UHRC, 2001) have shed some lights on Islam in Arakan and Burma as a whole. The present contribution aspires to uphold the importance of Bengali linguistic and religious traditions as experienced in Buddhist Arakan within the Indian context. The opinions of western scholars about the expansion of Bengali population in Arakan as a result of the slave trade, wars and occasional shipwrecks - are all well-founded and may be true. But, what remains to be stressed is that Bengali language and religion (Islam) spread to Arakan also in a most natural way. Bengal's highly syncretic and rich religious tradition turned to be an asset, the patronage of which enhanced the prestige of the Arakanese kingdom itself, at the height of their glory—a fact for which all the Rakhines of present Myanmar (no matter Muslims or Buddhists) can feel proud. On the other hand, the Indian people can also take pride on the fact that their Padumavat which sang the song of tolerance and love reached as an asset, worthy to be translated, by as remote a country as by Arakan. Modern people have only to look back to history to learn the message of tolerance. The Myanmar people can also feel proud of their liberal approach to life and eagerness to promote knowledge. After all, all the Indians living in medieval Arakan were not slaves; there were astrologers, singers, priests, poets, ministers and advisors, a milieu which made Rosanga (Mrohaung) was popular a destination. The present contribution drew a lot of inspiration from a wide number of Bangladeshi and Indian scholars. Many of them successfully located an intermediary stage between Hindu-Buddhist period and Islamic period. The fertile ground for such unique stage was made by Mahayana Buddhism, Vaishnavism and Nathasim. Bengal, the closest neighbour of Arakan, absorbed the best out of the Indian traditions. Orthodoxy in any religion had been and will continue to be "a man-made" trouble. And all the orthodox schools from all three religions. Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism, were challenged by their own co-religionists. Therefore the mantra of Reconciliation was found immediately, since over thousands of years, the people of Southern part of Asia have been living in peace and prosperity. Unless one hears this message, one will be searching for a black cat in a dark room only.

Bengal and Arakan: Past and the Present

In Bengal, various Sufi saints preached the message of their simple "love to the next" and "Finding of the universal soul within". Their wide acceptance made the religion Islam acceptable to a wide range of people in Bengal. The word "Sufi" is synonymous to "mystic", though the derivation is still debated. It is however widely accepted that the word comes from "Suf (wool)". The Muslim ascetics used to wear rough woolen cloth in imitation of Christian hermits. Apparently in the beginning there was no difference between the Sufis and the orthodox Mahomedans. However, the Sufis attached extra importance to the certain Koranic doctrines. Reynold A Nicholson, one of the leading authors on Sufism has stated that the "Before the Mohammedan conquest of India in the eleventh century, the teaching of Buddha exerted considerable influence in Eastern Persia and Transoxania. We hear of teaching of flourishing Buddhist monasteries in Balukh, the metropolis of ancient Bactria, a city famous for the number of Sufis who resided in it." (Nicholson, 1963, 16ff). Further Nicholson, referring to Professor Goidziher, called attention to the story of the Sufi ascetic Ibrahim Iba Adham who was described in a Muslim legend as the prince of Balukh, who, like Sidharta abandoned his throne and turned himself to be a wandering Dervish (Nicholson, 17). With this subject of "wandering Dervish" we come to the theme of the Bauls of Bengal. Bauls wearing yellow robes (Sufis were believed to be wearing the same,

which are also used by the Hindu Sadhus and Buddhist monks) sing the songs of a revolutionary religion, which reject all orthodoxies. In the songs of the Bauls of Bengal we find the typical Sufi concept of the soul within: "Maner Manush. One of the achievements of the Sufi sadhana is the passing away (fana) of individual self into universal Being. The identification or passing away of Jivatma with Paramatma is the essence of Indian philosophy, Vedanta. Nirvana, according to Nicholson is purely negative and therefore cannot be fully identified with fana, for fana is accompanied by baqa, another Sufi stage. Baqa means an active life in God. Even then, the origin of Sufism in the erstwhile Buddhist centres of Eastern Persian and Bactria remained a source of Nicholson's thesis of the Buddhist origin of the Sufis.

In view of the above discussion our present engagement with Buddhist Bengal and Buddhist Arakan get a special dimension. The Bauls are an unique descendents of the mixed Bengali tradition, to which I had already stated my opinion above. When Islam first appeared in Bengal in the 13th -14th centuries, it could meet Hinduism (Vaishnavism and Saiva-Sakta Nath traditions) and Buddhism (Mahayanism) in the fertile ground of Buddhist Arakan. One may also argue it other way around, which is perhaps more appropriate: Hinduism and Islam met most successfully on the borderland of unorthodox popular cults arising out of the ghost of late Buddhism, Tantricism, Mahayanism and such other liberal lines, which were not only preached and practiced in Bengal, but also in Arakan. Scholars like Enarnul Huq and Kalika Ranjan (Enarnul Huq 1972, K.RQuannungo, 1968,) argue in more or less same way. Had there been a very orthodox thinking and priesthood controlling all social and economic orders, there would never have been such creative traditions as Arakan patronized in the 16th -17th century. In the recent years Pamela Gutman's works have established it before the entire scholarly world that Arakan cannot be understood unless the region's close contact with Indian civilization is properly followed. Arakan's importance within the realm of the Indian Civilization-influenced Bay of Bengal region has also been taken note of by scholars like Michael Chamey, Jacque Leider, Katherin Remond and Don Stadtner. Among the scholars of Bangladesh, whose writings I have consulted in the past, I must mention the names of Dr. Enarnul Huq, Abdul Karim, Sahitya Visharad, M. Islam, Dulal Chaudhuri, Arnritalal Bala, Abdul Mabud Khan, Ali Ahasan and Abdul Huq Chauduri.

In this part of Bengal (West Bengal, India), Arkan has been lost in the memories of the people. It is brought to the notice of the Indian people only in recent years when there was coverage in the newspapers about the "Rohingya Refugees" or "Rohingya Separatists". The general public in India who have very little knowledge about Myanmar in general are informed that there is a religious/linguistic minority with the name "Rohingya" who for some political and economic reasons crossed over to Bangladesh and occasionally extremists sneaked or tried into India. No one comes to the idea of tracing the origin of these people back in the Indian history though they know that in the Bengali Padmavati Rosaga (Mrohaung) was praised for its cultural liberalism and tolerance. The scholarly public in West Bengal is much more occupied to study Islam in mainland India, the story of communal hatred between the Hindus and the Muslims than such a "minor" story from a fringe and remote land, i.e., Arakan of Burma.

Least known is the fact that the Bengali Vaishnavas migrated from orthodox Vaishnav centers like Navadvipa, to Arakan, not only driven by the Islam invaders, but with genuine impulse. Nevertheless, we should not forget that once widely read Bengali journals like Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Patrika and Pravasi and Bengal Past and Present published articles on the Bengali influence in Arakan. However, for me Arakan has been immortalized through poet and philosopher (Nobel Laurate in 1913) Rabindrariath Tagore through his writings, especially, the short story, Dalia. Of all the Indians, it was Tagore who saw in the history and civilization of Arakan a tremendous potentiality for unifying the three religions, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Who else could otherwise it be? After all, it was Tagore who heard the core of Bengal and felt the pulse of Bengal and India as a whole in the songs of Bauls of Bengal, the only surviving school of Bengali religious traditions, which successfully crashed the futility of Hindu-Muslim chasm. No one else in this world has understood Islam in the context of Buddhism and Indian traditions of Vaishnavism and a numerous Sahajiya faiths, better than Tagore. In my earlier writing on Arakan 'Myth and History of Bengali Identity of Arakan' I have stated very clearly that the history of Arakan offered Tagore the necessary inspiration to understand strong regionalism of Bengal within the Indian context. One of the objectives of my present contribution is to uphold the spirit in which

Tagore looked at Arakan, especially its religious traditions. It would however be wrong on my part if I do not state here that a number of Bengali writers, both from East (Bangladesh) and West (Indian State of West Bengal) have estimated the civilization of Arakan in the same way. These researches, details into which I will come later, should be taken up as complementary to what historian Tagore had to say about Arkan. In Tagore's yet another work Mukut (Crown) the strong message of the Arakanese pride has been upheld.

The emergence of nation states with their boundaries is a modern phenomenon. The river Naaf which separates Arakan from Chittagong is seen only as a formal boundary between two nations. Such standoffish boundaries were crossed several times in the past not only by the British colonial compulsions of laissez faire, but also by human emotions. One only has to turn the pages of ballads and folk literature of Bengal. Ohidul Alam in his book Chattagramer Loksahitya (Ohidul Alam, 1985) quotes how the young boys from Chattagram seeing the beautiful Burmese and Arakanese women used to forget their partners at home. The hymns he quotes say that the mothers of Chittgaongian youth were discouraging their sons to go to Rangon and Arakan. Obviously for the mother, the separation was as painful as it was for the newly married wives. The Burmese women knew the art of attracting the youth, and, thus come the lamentation (Ohidul Alam, 8-9). The association of Arakan with Bengal is also very apparent in the Ballad tradition of Eastern Bengal. For generations these ballads were sung in the remotest villages of Eastern Bengal. One such ballad Suja Tanayar Vilapa - i.e. lamentations of Suja's daughter - has been included in the benchmark work of Dinesh Chandra Sen (D.C Sen, 1930, 495-513). The daughter of the Mughal Prince Shah Suja who was apparently forcefully married to the king of Arakan, had to eat ngapi, a strong flavoured fish paste, which she apparently did not like (Sen, 1930, 504-505). It sounds that the idea of forcible marriage of Suja's daughter and therefore lamentation by the people of Bengal was widely spread among the rural population of present Bangladesh. The omnipresence of words like Magh and Barma and so forth in Chittagong folk poems, and indeed across entire Bengal, may be seen as another indication of the central role of Arakan in the construction of Bengali identity. Interestingly, the mood of Vilapa is just the opposite to what Tagore wanted to say in his Dalia. Instead of interpreting the usual story that Suja was murdered by the Arakanese king, Tagore drew a love story of an unprecedented character the prince of Arakan and the daughter of Suja, who actually wanted to take revenge of her father's death. Those who are interested to know the details of this short story can refer to my earlier contribution. Suffice to say that the spiritual atrophy in Bengal and India in general so deeply disturbed Tagore that he shaped his own way the Shah Suja legend where he drew a love story between Dalia (his given name to the prince of Arakan) and Tinni (his given name to one of the two daughters of Shah Suja Ameena or Julekha). Here one sees that Buddhist Arakan gave him the mantra of solution of ever growing Hindu-Muslim schism in colonial India. I mention here that Tagore was a deeply committed Buddhist who wrote a number of drams, short stories songs and poems spreading the message of Buddhism. One of the intensions of his visits to countries like Siam, Burma , Island Southeast Asia, Japan and China was to bind those countries deeper with India where Buddhism could be the torchbearer.

During 1950s there was a resurgence in the consciousness about Arakan in India, where people of our country after reaching a point of political and social stability, looked back at their history, perhaps with a feeling of detachment, and also lamentation for the partition, for the religious discords among Hindus and Muslims, for mental separation between India and Burma (large scale exodus of people of Indian origin from Burma) and for all other wrongs of history for which they alone could not be made responsible. In those days, again Dalia was played to remind the people of India that both. Buddhism as well as Islam are religions of India and that the Indian civilization does not recognize any boundary. Back in 1915, a British author George Calderon had already made a translation of Dalia and gave the title The Maharant of Arakan. In the 1950s the Indian Art and Dramatic Society in London staged that drama even in the soil of London.

Glimpses into Bengali religion and political lives placing Arakan in the middle

As I have repeatedly stressed, Islam in Arakan, no matter how little influence it has within the Buddhist dominated Arakan, has to be interpreted within the larger context of Indian civilization. It hardly needs to be stressed that towards achievement of that goal. North Arakan has to be placed within the historical orbit of

Bengal. Bengal's religious tradition has always been unorthodox. Neither good quality Buddhism, nor first quality Islam, nor pure Hinduism could set its foot upon Bengal. The reason was obviously political, topographical, social and economic. The dynastic rulers' political boundary was interrupted by numerous rivers. The political centers had to be shifted frequently due to constant threat of invasion from various from various parts of India. Through my earlier work on the classical Hindu-Buddhist period *Landschenkungen und Staatliche Entwicklungen in mittelalettrichen Bengalen 5-12 Jh. N. Chr.* (S. Bhattacharya 1985) I have shown that the political structure of the great Buddhist Pala kingdom was so fragile that the capitals of the Palas had to be shifted from one corner to the other. Though preaching and teaching Buddhism, the monasteries across Bihar and Bengal allowed liberal practices, highly esoteric in nature, to grow relentlessly. The Buddhism could not be confined within the yellow robes of the Theravada monks. It had to cross the boundary of the orthodoxy.. Was the penetrating influence of Islam as a political force in other parts of India also a factor? The answer can only be hypothetical.

The bearers of such traditions of esoteric Buddhism were the Siddhacaryas. All the Gurus had the title pa, indicating Tibeto-Burmese origin of these Gurus. The Charyapadas, the hymns written by them are regarded as the oldest specimens of the Bengali language. The discovery of these manuscripts go back to 1915 when the famous Buddhist scholar Mahamahopadhyay Haraprasad Shastri discovered the manuscripts from the Darbar library of Nepal. These Buddhist Gurus or Enlightened leaders were ready to accommodate their philosophies along the line in direction of which the religious mood of the then Bengali people was blowing. In the Bengali scholarship the word "Sahajiya" is used to denote the temper of this period, which I have already described above as an intermediary period. One would think that the period should be starting in 13th century when Buddhism declined in Bengal. But, interestingly the period of writing of such Buddhist hymns were covering the entire range from 9th to 14th centuries. This includes the Pala period substantiating thereby that the Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism existed side by side in eastern India. We have to shift ourselves from the conventional ideas of step by step progress (or retrograde?) of Theravada, then Mahayana , decadent Tantric schools and then advent of Islam. Rather, we have to appreciate that various ideas existed at a time. No other Bengali word than Sahajiya can express this liberal tradition of Bengal.

The word Sahajiya comes from Sahaja, meaning simple, and thus the work Sahajiya connotes "of simple nature". A large majority of the names of these Sahajiya sects (Charyagurus) are seen as of Tibeto-Burmese origin. They are described to be in union with women from lower castes of Bengali society. According to Huq Chaudhuri a large number of the words of the Charyapadas are also found in the Chittagongian dialect a sign, attesting to the unrestricted movements of the Siddhacaryas across Bengal. The Chittagong area itself harboured a large number of Vaishnavas and other liberal schools of thoughts within Hindu fold and thus become a confluence of ideas. These mixed character of Chittagongian culture has been reflected in the social lives, numerous customs and beliefs.

The political history of Hindu-Buddhist Bengal came to an end when the last Hindu king Lakshman Sena of the Sena dynasty of Bengal surrendered to the invading army of the Turkish ruler Baktiar Khilji. It was a very easy and spontaneous event; Bengal's political defeat to the Muslim conquerors however did not indicate end of social interactions between various people who came to Bengal. As Richard Baton has described in his book *Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, spread of Islam was a very smooth and natural process; certainly transfer of ownership of land and emergence of local Muslim gentry gave the fillip. Initiatives were then taken to clear jungles, built mosques, and to establish Trustees. Introduction of money into the Bengali economy additionally brought necessary social movements. According to Eaton (Baton, 252), there were "three means by which the religious gentry acquired their land rights: donation, purchase, and pioneering". The title of these gentry classes were Chaudhuri, Sardar and Zamindars. Quite often Hindus patronized mosque building while Muslims patronized temple building. As Eaton states, quite often gentry class emerged out of the remained Mughal troopers who came to Bengal whenever sent by the respective Mughal rulers. A turning point in the history of Bengal is the conquer of Chittagong by the Mughals in 1666. In the context of Bengal's relation with Arakan, it meant a deep movement downward for the proud Arakanese, so far their relation with Bengal was concerned. It

is quite natural that north Arakan which is an extension of Bengal from geographical point of view, received the impact of this social transformation.

In my earlier work I raised a point regarding the justification of patronization of the Bengali talents in the court of the Arakanese kings. The Arakanese kings wooed the Bengali regional sentiments to counter the Mughal expansion in Bengal. The bearing of Islamic names and using of Kalima in their coins by the Arakanese kings had already been in practice. The dimension of this regional Bengali sentiment can only be appreciated if we turn to the event of translating the Padumavat of Malik Mohammed Jayasi by Shah Alaol into Bengali Padmavati. Have we ever thought under whose patronage Jayasi wrote Padumavat? It was Sher Shah Sur (1472-1545) who not only ousted the Mughal Emperor Humayun from Bengal, but dared to capture the throne of Delhi, causing a break in the continuity of the Mughal rule in North India. Sher Shah, rose from a local ruler to the emperor of India. Sher Shah was of Afghan origin and showed his sympathy to the Hindus, who occasionally felt suppressed by Mughal supremacy. It was the decision of the Arakanese court which Kavya or Mahakavya should be translated into Bengali for the resident Bengali population of Arakan. The writing of court poetry had a long tradition in India, where the author had to sing the glory of his patron and had to act as one of the agents of fulfilling of the political ambitions of the ruler-patron. This was no exception in Arakan. We should not try to identify those Bengalis for whom Hindustani literatures were translated, by their religious affiliations. Rather we should try to stress the linguistic identity, (i.e., the speakers of Bengali language) of the target population for which such translations were made. After all, Bengal's most valuable cultural asset is its language, which of course bears the evidence of the mixed religious traditions of Bengal. I may mention here that when former East Pakistan was fighting for her autonomy from west Pakistan, it was the language (Bangla) which became the real weapon for the Bengali/Bangladeshi nationalism. The king Ratnasena of Chitor symbolized the Hindu rule, while Padmavati, Princess of Sri Lanka, symbolizes the Buddhist rule, while the story itself is full of Indian (Sufistic , Hindu and Buddhist) thoughts, legends from Mahabharat, Ramayan, and Purana. Actually it champions the cause of love between a Hindu prince and princess from Buddhist land. The siege of Chitor by Alauddin and the downfall of the Hindu kingdom are very symbolically projected in the work of Jayasi. One of the last verses of Jayasi's Padumavat is:

*Jauhar bhaim saba istiripurusha bha e samgrama
Badsah gara cura chitour bha Islam*

Women did Jaharbrato, men fought the wars,
Badshah destroyed the fort and Chitor became an Islamic State.

Scholars have rightly said that Arakan saw waves of Muslim immigration from an early period. For example it is said that the Kaman Muslims of present Arakan are descendants of those archers (soldiers) who accompanied Shah Suja in his flight to Arakan. It is no wonder that the prudence of the Arakanese kings led them to woo the Bengali Muslims against perhaps Muslims of north Indian origin living in Arakan.

We have just to connect the oft quoted imprisonment of Alol in the hands of the Arakanese king, the reason for which was alleged involvement of Alol in an apparent conspiracy to dethrone the king. Suja legend has so much of versions that it is better not to enter in to it; nevertheless it has to be accepted that Arakan had a wide number of population of ethnic Bengalis, no matter we call them Muslims or Hindus or of a intermediary stage who believed in all sorts of Yogic and eclectic practices, indulged in various psycho-physical practices and magic. We encounter in both, Padamavati, as well as in Sati Mayna, on several occasions the word Yogi. In fact Ratnasena took the appearance of a Yogi, left Chitor to find out Padmavati. In similar way Lor also took the Yogi dress and aimed at uniting with Chandrani. In both the works the constant struggle between Bhoga (enjoyment) and Tyaga (sacrifice) went on, ultimately however the message of Tyga, though in an unique way exceeded.

Daulat Quazi was a contemporary of the Arakanese king Sirisudhammaraja (1622-1638). Daulat Quazi composed Sati Mayna otherwise known as Lor Candrani, at the request of Asharaf Khan, the lashkar Wazir of

the king. This was a period in which the Arakanese dominance over Chittagong was waning, but Arakanese endeavours to encourage court poets of Chittagongian origin were in full swing. Ashrafs were a class by themselves. Noted Indian anthropologist Nirmal Bose is of the opinion that Ashrafs were high caste Brahmins who were converted to Islam "One wonders whether these upstart Ashrafs of Bengal are not really descendants of the Brahmins! (N. Bose, 1994, 166). Ashraf Muslims' attitude towards the fish-eating rural masses of Bengali Muslims strengthens Bose's theory about the origin of Ashraf Muslims. It is believed that the Muslim converts in Bengal were recruited from the poor masses of the low caste Hindu society. Ashraf Khan however was extremely tolerant towards all the communities who flocked to Arakan: Sayyids, Shaikhs, Mughals and Pathans (Sukumar Sen, 1975, 283). Ashraf Khan was described to be well acquainted with Niti Vidya (Hindu Science in Polity) and Kavya Shastra (Classical Science of Literature). Even, low caste Hindus were welcome in the court of Arakan. All castes and classes sat side by side.

It is stated that the necessity of translating the Indian folk tales into Bengali was created by the fact that a large number of indigenous people wanted to hear the romantic love stories in the Desibhasa and also in the Panchali form. Ashraf Khan, for example, having heard the story of Lor and Chandrani written in Gohari, ordered Magan Thakur to translate it into Bengali Panchali style so that it could reach the lowest strata of the resident Bengali society in Arakan. I quote Sukumar Sen from his Bengali Sahityer Itihasa (Sen, 1975, 284):

*Thetha caupaiycl doha kohila sadhane
No bhujhe gohari bhasa kono konoJane
Deshi Bhase kaha takapanchaUr chanda
Sakale shuniyajena bujhaye sananda*

(Thetha caupaiya Doha has been sued,
but Gohari is not understood by some.

So please give a pancali form of the story in indigeneous language,
so that many people enjoy the story).

This particular style made a deep impact on the Bengali society, no matter, Hindu or Muslim, to maintain the rich oral tradition by generations. It was a style developed as a result of the Vaishnava influence in Bengal. Vaishnavaism flourished in Bengal during the period of the independent Sultanat of Bengal (14th_16th century). For example, Sree Chaitanya (1486-1533) enjoyed the patronage of Sultan Hussain Shah. Vijaya Gupta wrote Mansha Mongol during the same period. Hymns in praise of Lakshmi (Goddess of wealth), Satya Narayan, Satya Pir and such other Gods and Goddesses were written in this form. The Panchali in praise of Satya Pir is still read by Muslims and Hindus alike, even today.

So, Bengali was widely spoken in Arakan in the 16th and 17th centuries. This corroborates the view of S. Subramaniam when he states "Whether or not the early Mrauk U rulers brought back Muslim troops from Bengal to aid them, it is certain that the spread of Firdausi and Qadifi sufi practices in the coastal regions of Arakan can be witnessed from the fifteenth century"(Subramaniam, in J. Gommen & J. Leider eds, 2002, 11). However, the Bengali milieu in Arakan should not be seen restricted to orthodox Muslims. A large number of Deole believed in a "religion" which was highly mixed in characters. This particular Islamic culture was deeply committed to Yogic Sufism and Vaishnavism. Enarnul Haque explains this mixed character of Islam in his book History of Sufism in Bengal. For example he mentions about a work called Yoga kalandar (Yoga of the Sufis). The author of this Muslim Yoga is Sayyid Martaza. One Sayyid Murataza was also the composer of many lyrics on vaishnava themes. Murtaza was an inhabitant of Chittagong (Huq, 1975, 374).

As Subraminam like my other scholars, rightly pointed out, the most visible sign of a mixed religious culture along the coastal regions is the building of numerous symbolic tombs (Badr Maqam) from Assam to Mergui. Richard Temple's article on Badr cult published in the JBRS is as usual referred by this eminent Bay of Bengal scholar. In various parts of Bengal, the Pir Badr is known by various names. Pandits differ about whether they all indicate the same person or they were different persons. However, suffice to add that the wide range isms

that developed during the period between the fall of Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms in Bengal and consolidation of Islam show remarkable similarities in ideas. A person is believed to be the envoy or ambassador of the God - no matter Allah, Lord Buddha or Vishnu.

Quite often we ignore the fact that the religious plurality opened the door for linguistic interactions between various people, giving rise to birth of mixed languages, like the Rohingya Bengala. Existence of three languages, Bengali, Persian and Arakanese is not a new phenomenon in the region of Chittagong-Arakan. All three languages were used in the coins of the provincial Governors of Chittagong functioning under the administration of Arakanese governors. They used the title *anauk-bhuran* meaning 'king of the west' on their trilingual coins (Chaudhury 1997,150). Using of Bengali, besides Arakanese and Persian, indicates the importance of the Bengali language (Bhattacharya, 2002). About this language Ba Tha wrote in as early as in 1960s that it is lost language. Ba Tha, to whom I had mentioned before, referred to a book with the title Keyamatnama. He said that he had received it from his father. Ba Tha printed a page from this book in his article Rohingya Fine Arts. (The Guardian, Rangoon, February 1961, vol. 8, 20-22), The script shows the popularity of Nask stile. Ba Tha deplors that the Rohingyas lost their language, their art, their music and many other elements of their cultural life.

We have to understand the writing of the Bengali literature by Alaol, Magan or Daulat Quazi in the context of the Mughal quest for subduing Bengal and Arakan's hold over the Twelve landlords (Baro Bhuiyas) of Bengal. After all, it was these Twelve Lords who dared to oppose the Mughals. Alol's landing at Arakan was also the same tragedy as that of Suja's. Alol's father was a Minister of Majlis Qutb, one of the Baray Bhuyans of Bengal (Mirza Nathan, 1936, 2: 799-800). He was ruling in Fatehabad which is described as a city of Gaur. When Islam Khan was the Mughal Governor in Bengal, Alol's father was defeated and killed by the Portuguese freebooters. Alol also translated Sikandernama. It is a translation of Nizami's Iskandarnama. Nizamai's another work Sapta Paykar was also translated by Alaol. The Bengali title became Sapta Paykar. Five years later Tuhfa-i-Nasa'ih of the Indo-Iranian poet Yusuf Goda was translated into Bengali. Goda wrote this on the Islamic social and religious norms in the year 1393-94 (Ahmed Sherifs translation of Tuhfa 1977). Tuhfa is the only work on Islamic social norms. It was one Sayyid Musa from Arakan who inspired Alol to translate Tuhfa as well as the incomplete part of Daulat Quazi's Sati Mayna. Sayful Muluk Baduizzaman and Ragatalanama, in two more works of Alol, Alol praised the Muslims of Rosanga as seekers of knowledge and trainers in the arts. Alol said that he trained sons of many elite families of Rosanga.

Rosangete Musalmanayatheka achanata
Talim alim bali adar karanta
Bahu mohanter putra maha maha nara
Patha gita sangita suikhailam bahutara

(Muslims of Rosanga were patronized as seekers of knowledge and as trainers in the arts.

I (Alol) have educated sons of many elite families of Rosanga (Sarif 1958, 1958, 111).

One of the leaders of this sect, Muhiuddin, had been Jayasi's Guru.

The popularity of this Guru of the Chisthi sects among the Bengali Muslims can be witnessed even today.

British and the Muslim of Arakan

When the British occupied Arakan they divided the people of Arkan into four categories. Muslims. Hindus, Buddhists and Hill Tribes. The Hindus were described as the descendants of the Brahmans and astrologers who were brought by the Arakanese kings. Their origin was traced in Indian state of Manipur while other Brahman descendants in Arakan are said to be the descendants of the "colonists" from Bengal. The *Doms* (one of the lowest castes among the Hindus) were brought from Bengal to act as *Phra Kyvon* (Phoora Kywon) or Pagoda slaves. Later, the British administrators released them from their perpetual servitude and were then employed as cultivators (Gazetteer, vol. 2, 16-17). As for the Muslims or Mahomedans, there had always been an attempt

to create a loyal class from among the Muslims of Arakan. The Gazetteer, vol. 2 says that out of the 58,255 Mahomedans many are seasonal workers who came down from Chittagong, only to work for a limited period. Though they are included in the Census return, but are truly speaking not "inhabitants of the country". Those who are bonafide residents are actually descendants of the slaves who were captured by the Arakanese and Burmese kings. Further, the same Gazetteer states that a large number is believed to be brought by Meng Radza-gyee in course of his expedition to Sundeep Island. There existed still another story of immigration of Muslims: it is believed that several ships were wrecked on the Rarnree Island and the Mussulman crews landed in Arakan and started living there permanently. In making a dividing line between the Arakanese and these Muslims, the Gazetteer states that the latter's integration with the Arakanese Buddhist society was so perfect that though Muslims by their religious conviction, they differed but very little from the Arakanese. They could write and speak Burmese, but "amongst themselves employ colloquially the language of their ancestors" (Gazetteer, vol. II, p.16). Now the question arises what this language was? Was it the Chittagongian dialect, or Rohingya Bengala? Or, any other mixed dialect having words from Bengali, Persian and Burmese in their fold? We do not know whether mixing of languages and word borrowing are distinct features of this region. The Buddhist Chakmas have also taken a wide number of words from Burmese, Persian and Bengali languages while their script has directly been derived from Burmese script.

The Indian population in Arakan, a large part of which were Muslims from South-eastern Bengal, saw a steady rise, as is evidenced in the works of many scholars. Nalini Ranjan Chakravarty is one of them. The following table taken from his book indicates the usual trend in rise. In 1911, the Indian population of Akyab town was 63.6% of the total of 37, 893. In Rathedaung it was 18.9% of a total of 56,789. Remarkably high was the figure 53.2% in Buthidaung out of 63,673 and in Maungdaw 77% out of 101,134. In 1917, Smart was describing the situation in Maungdaw as having 77 percent of the population as Chittagongians. He warned, if the immigration of Muslims continued, then the whole of Akyab would be in the hands of the Chittagongians as it happened in the case of Mungdaw Township (Fleishmann, 1981, 41). In some of the villages in Maungdaw, the population was exclusively Indians, more precisely Chittagongians. The indigenous Arakanese population felt cornered by the ever increasing number of such immigrants. Mr. S.G. Grantham in his Census Report of 1921 stated "Actually of the 201,000 Indians shown against Akyab, 78,000 males and 76,000 females were born in the district: the phenomenon is as much an annexation of part of India by Burma as an invasion of Akyab by Indians (as found in N.R. Chakravarty, 17-180).

Mr. J. J. Benison in his Census report of 1931 said that in parts of Akyab District Indians were so numerous that they should perhaps be regarded as indigenous (N.R. Chakravarty, p. 18). By the term "Indian" Bennison meant Moslem residents of the bordering areas. The Baxter report of 1941 gives the following detailed picture of Indian population in Arakan (U. Mahajani, 9) : Chittagongian, Bengalis, Hindusthanis and Tamils. Whereas the Chittagongian unskilled labour was 12, 877, in the same year, the Chittagongian unskilled labour was 29,684. According to Baxter Commission recommendation, the Government of India sent Girija Shankar Bajpai as its sole delegate. The Burmese government wanted a termination of Indian labour migration to Burma, but in the case of Arakan, Burma showed its interest in having 20,000 Indian Chittagongian labourers to reap paddy during harvest time. This arrangement appeared to be necessary as Burmese peasants were unwilling to move into remote areas bordering East Bengal.

The 1940s makes a sad chapter for Arakanese history. A region of Burma which in her history demonstrated the highest degree of tolerance in adapting streams of ideas and customs, became a place of horror and massacre. We may mention here that from mid 1930s there appeared to be a succinct polarization between Buddhists and Muslims of Burma, which left its repercussion on Arakan. The Indian Muslims' demand for a separate state left its dark shadow on the political atmosphere of Burma. The Burmese nationalists (neither the Pongyis, nor the Thakins or any other group) and the Burmese people never accepted the idea of a 'nation within nation". The Dobama movement gave a concrete shape to Burmese national identity which did not accept any divisions along any line, ethnic, religious or otherwise. On the other hand, the rise of Muslim demand gave rise to Hindu nationalism which in certain platforms joined hands with Buddhist nationalists from Burma. For example U Ottama, the leading Pongyi activist and friend of India who led the entire Pongyi movement during 1920s,

became twice the President of Hindu Mahasabha in 1930s. We should however restrain ourselves to stamp out this revolutionary monk as orthodox and anti-Muslim. But in the eve of rising Muslim demands for a separate state this Pongyi saw the need for reforms within Hinduism, and closer cooperation between Hindus and Buddhists. We know that he came from Arakan.

The year 1942, when the British withdrew from Burma, there was total chaos in Arakan. The Muslim-Buddhist polarization had reached such a point of nadir that Muslims in large numbers had to leave Arakan. Japanese took control of Buthidaung and half of Maungdaw. The Muslims of Northern Arakan formed peace committees with the help of the Japanese (Bhattacharya, 1995, 545). Field Marshall Viscount Slim gave a very grim picture of Arakan in which he said that it was only total chaos that reigned in Arakan. This was also the time when Indians in thousands were living Burma apprehending the outbreak of the War, and Arakan and Manipur were the only two routes. With the Japanese occupation and entering of the British into Arakan, the Magh-Muslim hatred had taken a clear communal shape. Arakan was divided into Buddhist South and Muslim North. After 1942 massacre the Muslims had to turn to Eastern Bengal. But, later went back. They found their land occupied by the Arakanese. When the British reoccupied Arakan, they got extreme support from the northern districts of Buthidaung and Maungdaw. Muslims of northern Arakan had already started dreaming of their Homeland.

Antony Irwin went to Arakan in 1944 and praised the Arakanese Muslims as the most loyal people who "fought and died with the British". Thus he justified his recruitment of "boys", "scouts" and "guides" from such loyal and obedient people (Antony Irwin 22). In his book *Burmese Outpost* Antony Irwin published two letters from one Oaji Ullah Arakani who sent the letters from Calcutta in June 1945. Arakani praised the British for the help they extended to the Arakanese Muslims. During those days of 1940s there was also an attempt to free Arakan by monks like U Sein Da. He was leading an anti-Japanese guerilla partisan movement. He possessed documents showing the evidence of cooperation between the Muslims and Buddhists of Arakan (Cady, p. 543, F.N. 16). Thus, Arakanese regionalism made the ground fertile for Muslims of Arakan for their struggle. Both the scholars, Moshe Yegar and K. Fleischmann gave examples of how in the penultimate phase of the Burmese nationalist movement, Aung San and Mohammed Ali Jinnah came to an understanding that they would ignore the demand of the north Arakanese Muslims for any kind of autonomy, let alone independence!

If we look at the process of emergence of nation states and the positions of Muslims in the 20th century, we find that it is only in south Asia that the Muslims have succeeded in recording successfully their claim that as a minority community they must have their own state to fulfil their political, social, cultural aspirations. The *Encyclopaedia of Religion* (Macmillan, 1987, . 391) notes that this is a contribution of the South Asian Muslims to world Islam. However, this opinion can be a subject of debate. In the case of Burma, though it was part of the British Empire of India until 1937, development never showed any such trends, though a large number of Muslims had been living in Burma before the British came. In mainland Burmese politics during the British period, neither have the Muslims demanded any special right nor have the colonial rulers favoured the Muslims with any special right as they did in the case of India (M. Hasan, 1994, P. Hardy, 1972). The Muslims of Burma lived as an integral part of the society. Marriages between Muslim men and Burmese women was seen more as a rule than as an exception. The Burmese society is a genuine liberal society.

Moshe Yegar in his book *Muslims of Burma* has mentioned about his interview with a Rohingya leader whom he met while in Burma. This Rohingya leader stated that the British promised a "National Area" to the Muslims of Arakan. The idea of national area is not altogether unknown among the AFPFL circle (Maung Maung, *Constitution of Burma*, 167,): Union State, Autonomous State and National Area. The National Area should have its own territorial limit and also linguistic identity. Certainly, a tiny part of Arakan did not have that.

The post colonial period saw in Burma (1948-1951) a formidable civil war and separatist movements across the country. Those who posed the most formidable challenge were the Karens. But it is also known that the Mujahids of North Arakan wanted to separate Buthidaung and Maungdaw from Burma. A person called Kassern gave leadership to this movement. With Kassern's death in Chittagong the movement experienced a jolt.

However, that the relation between Pakistan and Burma was put to a very sharp test over these years is known to us from the works of Mujtaba Razvi (Razvi in Grover, 2000). Sporadic exodus of fugitives from Northern Arakan over the decades of 1940s and 1950s continued to be a baulk in the relation between Burma and Pakistan. These unsatisfied lot also showed sympathy to those Pakistanis (then East Pakistani) who did not accept the aspiration of Bengal nationalism and birth of Bangladesh. Therefore those who were against the *Makti juddha* (Liberation Movement) found asylums in north Arakan.

These and many other developments made Arakan an extremely difficult state. The Prime Minister of Burma U Nu had lot of trouble with Arakan and had to postpone the demand for separate statehood. Like in India or any other country of South Asia, the ethnic and religious upsurge gets fragmented by its own weakness. So was the case with the Muslims of Arakan. Suddenly there appeared a schism between the bona fide residents (Rohingyas) and the Chittagongian immigrants. The Mayu Frontier Administrative area had to be created so that the bona fide residents felt protected by the Rangoon Government and not swamped over by the immigrant Chittagongians. The Rohingya leaders pleaded for such an arrangement (M. Yegar, 105). When the military Government took charge in 1962 the Mayu district was a part of the central administration. The statehood of Arakan was also delayed again. In one of the recent books on Southeast Asia, the author Beeson sees a formidable potential for a large-scale conflict in this region. We can only hope that the Muslims of Arakan will learn from their past and discard the path of confrontation and conflict.

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