

**The Network
for
International Protection of Refugees**



**Rohingya/Bengali:
Migration After First Anglo-Burman War**

18 August 2014

URL: www.netipr.org/policy/node/39

Summary:

The claims made by pro-Rohingya campaigners that they are one of the indigenous ethnic group of Burma is examined. Contrasting view presented by Burmese Government's sources that the Rohingya/Bengali group had migrated to Arakan State after first Anglo-Burman war of 1824 has also been examined. Claims made by both sides are being tested against reliable reports of 1834-1844 by the Rev. Comstock. It is concluded that the majority of present day Rohingya/Bengali group had migrated after 1824; and also confirmed the existence of a small Bengali speaking indigenous community in Arakan prior to first Anglo-Burman War.

Contact:

E-mail: [uneoo \[AT\] netipr.org](mailto:uneoo@netipr.org)

Web: www.netipr.org/

Rohingya/Bengali: Migration After First Anglo-Burman War

by

Dr U Ne Oo
Coordinator

Network for International Protection of Refugees

www.netipr.org/policy/node/39

Dated: 18th August 2014

When we are looking at the Rohingya/Bengali migrations after 1824, one priority question is whether the Bengali ethnic group historically have had some form of settlement in Arakan. This is important because, Chin ethnic group, for example, has a counterpart Zomi ethnic group in Mizoram State across the India-Burma border since the time immemorial. So too is the Kachin, one of our indigenous ethnic groups, has a racial and linguistically related Jingpho/Jingphaw group just across Burma-China border. At present, the Rohingya/Bengali ethnic group at the Burma-Bangladesh border is much looking like the same as those two of the Burma's indigenous group just mentioned. We'll be questioning why the Rohingya/Bengali may not have merited the same as that of the indigenous Chin and Kachin ethnic groups of Burma.

On comparing notes, firstly we shall look this question at the Burmese Government's source, i.e. U Myint Thein's 2009 Paper.^α Then we will look at existing claims made by Rohingya writers. We can then verify their statements by comparing with other independent sources in order to draw some conclusions.

ROHINGYA/BENGALI MIGRATION

ACCORDING TO BURMESE GOVERNMENT SOURCE^α

1. Prior to the first Anglo-Burman War (1824), the Bengali-Muslim migration was only through Rakhine Kings under Mrauk-U dynasty. As early as 15th century, the Rakhine Kings had brought Muslim-Bengali slaves to work in Arakan. During the 17th century, the Rakhines and Portugese pirates brought Muslim-Bengali slaves to settle in Arakan (pp. 5).

2. On 1839, the British Administration had began commercially exploiting agricultural land in Arakan. The Bengali-Muslim workers from Chittagong area and Soortis from Madras had begun to enter Arakan. Further expansions on agricultural sector were made after the Suez Canal opened in 1869. Many more Bengali-Muslims from Chittagong area had entered Arakan following that period. The detail of population statistics for Maung Daw Township was given on page 6 of the report.^α

^α Muslim Immigration into Arakan and their Political Movements (2009) by U Myint Thein, Director, Historical Research Department. [www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/20090321-U-Myint-Thein-Arakan-Report.pdf]

^α Ibid, U Myint Thein (2009)

^α Ibid. U Myint Thein (2009)

3. Sittwe District alone was getting more populated. For example, a total of 58,235 Muslim in 1872 had increase to 178,642 in 1911. The Bengali migrants came initially as seasonal workers but began settling permanently in Arakan.

4. The dramatic increase in Bengali-Muslim settlement had occurred due to the Government of Burma Act of 1935. A moratorium on Indian immigration after 3 years of enacting Government Burma Act was discussed and signed by Galon U Saw (Parliamentarian who became Premier in late Colonial Burma) and Shankar ^λ. Witnesses reported then that many Bengalis had entered and tried to settle permanently in Arakan because of the fear of being unable to re-enter again.

5. The Burmese Government's report made no mention about the existing sizeable number of Bengali descendant slaves, also known as Heins, in Arakan prior to 1824.

THE MIGRATION ACCORDING TO ROHINGYA WRITERS

6. Many Rohingya writers claim their ethnic origin on Arab traders who have settled in Bengal and Arakan 785-957 AD. They claim that Rohingya ethnic ancestry is a mixture of those Arab traders and local population and the language is similar to Chittagonian dialect with a slight variation. For example, Dr Abid Bahar on his note: ^β

"785-957 Arab traders began to settle both in Arakan and Chittagong of present Bangladesh. Inter mixture with the local population led to the first Chandra-Rohingyas of Arakan. During this time, in both Arakan and Chittagong, the influence of Sanskrit, Pali, Arabic, Persi, Portuguese combined together eventually formed the Chandra-Rohingya dialect which is similar to the Chittagonian dialect with their slight variations."

However, there are specific attempts by Rohingya writers of past and present to broaden above ethnic identity definition to include Karmans, Heins-slaves and, even to a point that, any historic ethnic identity which may be of Islamic Faith and that known to have resided in Arakan are of being the "Rohingya" (see NDPHR report quoted below;)

7. The Rohingya campaigners have been putting forward the claim that the Bengali-Muslim migrants entered Arakan after 1824 are indeed that of the refugees returning their home land who in earlier periods had fled to Chittagong area from violent and oppressive Burmese rules. For example, NDPHR's paper (pp.23): ^γ

"... After British conquest of Arakan, there were 60,000 Arakanese and 30,000 Muslims. The ratios of Arakanese vs. Muslim is 2 to 1. The Muslim population (ratio) was small because there were those who fled to Bengal and Central Burma because of the fighting. (translation)"

^λ Indian Delegation headed by Sir Girja Shankar Bajpai, 29/6/1941.

^β The Timeline of Rohingya History in Arakan by Dr Abid Bahar, www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/20100101_timeline-of-rohingya-history.pdf

^γ Short History of Arakan (Burmese, 1989) published by National Democratic Party for Human Rights, www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19890101_Short-History-Of-Arakan-NDPHR.pdf

Dr. Habib Siddiqui also quoted the same figure in his report (pp 13): ^δ

"... soon after the annexation of Arakan by the East India Company in 1826, Mr. Paton, prepared report... the total population of Arakan did not exceed 100,000 of which 60,000 were Maghs (Arakanese Buddhists) and 30,000 (Rohingya) Muslims."

Dr. Mohammad Yunus also make his point as (pp. 52): ^ε

"It is totally misleading and ill-motivated to allege that bulk of the Muslims entered Arakan during British era. The fact is that many Muslim families, who had earlier been driven out by the Burmans, have returned to their homes in Arakan when peace prevailed there as explained by Phayre."

8. Rohingya campaigners are, in fact, also denying that majority of Rohingya/Bengali are migrants. Despite evidences from various British censuses, they keep insisting no large scale settlement of Bengali-Muslims into Arakan. For example, on a note by U Kyaw Min: ^ζ

"Para 15. Those Muslims who living in Arakan are not illegal immigrants from India(Bangladesh). Unlike those Indian(Bangladeshi) who go to Burma proper, who usually are traders and civil-servants, those who entered Arakan are seasonal workers. Because their native land is so close, they usually return home at the end of working season. It might be called as floating population."

Quoting from Baxter's report, the same claims of seasonal Bengali workers returning is repeated in the report by Dr Habib Siddiqui: ^η

"Unlike immigrants in general in other parts of Burma who commonly spend periods of three years or thereabouts in the country without returning home, the bulk of the Chittagonian immigrants in Arakan who come to reap the paddy crop go back to Chittagong when the harvesting operations are over. The nearness of their homes and the small amount of money required for the journey make this possible."

ON CLAIM OF RETURNING INHABITANTS AFTER 1824 WAR

The situation in Arakan prior to the First Anglo-Burman war has been described by Rohingya writers as fairly de-populated and both Rakhine and Muslims had to fled to Chittagong area to avoid Burmese rule (see Dr Yunus

^δ Muslim Identity and Demography in the Arakan State of Burma by Dr Habib Siddiqui, www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/20111029_analysis-of-demography-in-araka...

^ε A History of Arakan by Dr.Mohammed Yunus (1994) www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19940101_Dr-Yunus-History-Of-Arakan.pdf

^ζ Who is Rohingya by U Kyaw Min (Burmese, 2012) , www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/20120809_who-is-rohingya-by-u-kyaw-min.pdf

^η Dr Habib Siddiqui, <http://newsfrombangladesh.net/new/highlights/5196-the-rohingya-question>

thesis, Chapter V). Other independent sources confirmed that such claim of fairly depopulated Rakhine State before the war. ^μ

Whilst we can probably view with some sympathy about such argument, it is not possible that such returning population would exist until 1872 or 1911. Any Burmese war-machine of past or present can surely be savage in their operations, though the First Anglo-Burman war had lasted only for 2 years. Neither should we take into account heavily on the words of Arthur Phayre, who was on his first assignment to Arakan and employee of H.M.G and East Indian Company. On this question of returning population, we should consult with an independent source provided by JSTOR on Notes On Arakan by the Revd. Comstock. ^θ

The Revd. Comstock was on the mission to Arakan from 1834 to 1844. This report deserves our special attention because it has the detailed description about the landscape and its inhabitants, also of the society and religion of early Arakan. The population statistics quoted there in was that of 1842, which is one of the earliest known. On Page 224, describing the numbers of inhabitants:

"The population of Arakan at the present time (1842) is estimated at about 250,000. Of these, about 167,000 are Mugs, 40,000 are Burmese, 20,000 are Mussulmans, 10,000 are Kyens, 5,000 are Bengalese, 3,000 are Tougmgroos, 2,000 are Kemees, 1,250 are Karens, and the remainder are of various races, in smaller number."

More details about the inhabitants was given on Page 228, it reads:

"Most of the Burmese probably, came into the country while it was a dependency of Ava, although many have immigrated since. The Mussulmans are supposed to be the descendants of Bengalee slaves, imported when the kings of Ava held Chittagong and Tippera. They have retained for the most part the language and customs of their forefathers; but have partially adopted the dress of the country. Within a few years past, many Bengalee Mussulmans have immigrated to Arakan, to get higher wages and better living, than they could procure in Chittagong: these constitute the five thousand Bengalees mentioned in enumerating the population of the province. A part of the Mussulman population, one thousand or more, residing principally in Ramree, are the descendants of some people, who came from Delhi, in company with one of the Mogul princes, who having failed in an attempt upon the throne, fled for refuge to the court of Arakan. They were his guard, and as their weapon was a bow, were called Kamonthas, or bowmen, which name their descendants still retain. They have adopted the language and dress of the Mugs, and a part of them have become Boodhists."

^μ see Reports by C. Abrar, Peter Nicolaus featured in Rohingya: Essential E-documents, netipr.org/policy/node/19.

^θ Reverend G. S. Comstock, Notes on Arakan, www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/18470101-JSTOR-notes-on-arakan.pdf

First point to note here is the ratio of native-Rakhine to Bengali-slaves is 8 to 1, as opposed to many Rohingya writers claiming of 2 to 1 (see #7 above) just after First Anglo-Burman war.

Second important point to note is, apart from that 20,000 Bengali-slaves, who apparently speak Bengali dialect, the report had also identified a group of 5,000 Bengali migrants recently settled.

From this, we can draw a conclusion that there has already been Bengali labour migration even prior to 1842, as has been asserted by Burmese side of the report (#2) . Furthermore, given the piracy and slave taking practice of local Rakhines, together with oppressive nature of Burmese military kings' rulings, there was unlikely that a racially and linguistically connected Bengali/Rohingya community across Burma-India(Bangladesh) frontiers during that period. Then, we must ask when such connected Bengali/Rohingya community across that frontier was formed.

IMPACT OF THE GOVERNMENT OF BURMA ACT 1935 ON INDIAN IMMIGRATION

**Table: ^κ
Indian Immigration Statistics (see U Thein Pe Myint's Paper)**

Year	Immigration	Emigration	Nett migration
1928;	324,000;	278,000;	+46,000;
1929;	307,000;	398,000;	-92,000;
1930;	273,000;	365,000;	-92,000;
1931;	252,000;	205,000;	+47,000;
1932;	240,000;	225,000;	+15,000;
1933;	220,000;	200,000;	+20,000;
1934;	299,000;	185,000;	+114,000;
1935;	216,000;	188,000;	+28,000;
1936;	219,000;	184,000;	+35,000;
1937;	199,000;	195,000;	+4,000;

As stated by Rohingya writers, the Bengali seasonal workers in Arakan were to be considered as a "floating population". However, the statistics showed significant increase of Bengali-Muslims in Maung Daw area under British rule. This indicates that, whilst some seasonal workers returned, few other would have chosen to be remained in Arakan.

A statistical table provided in Dr Habib Siddiqui's paper (pp 13), the number of Bengali-Muslim is 58,255 in 1872, which is more than 30,000 increase from that of 1842, which indicates there was large number of Bengali settlement even before 1872.

^κ Indo-Burma Conflict (Burmese, 1954) by U Thein Pe Myint, featured in "Rohingya: Essential E-Documents", www.netipr.org/policy/node/19

The dramatic increase in Bengali settlers may have taken place, as witnesses reported on (#4), as a result of Government of Burma Act 1935. On examining the pattern of Indian immigrant/emigrant from above Table in 1921 to 1937, there is a surge in 1934 by Indian immigrants who had opted to remain in Burma. Whilst this table referred to the whole of Burma, the pattern given here is indicative of high number of Bengali seasonal workers likely to be remained in Arakan during that time.

In any case, it is observed that, just before the outbreak of Second World War, there were numerous Bengali seasonal workers in Chittagong Area who already had had the experience of living and working in Arakan. On the one hand, there had already been an established Bengali-Muslim community across the border. This has created a potential for migration or otherwise known as an immigration 'pull factor'. In conclusion, a connected Rohingya/Bengali community we've seen today had already shaping up as of 1942.

END OF REPORT.