

THE ROHANG (ARAKAN)

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INTRODUCTION

The Rohingya Problem has of late become a matter of great concern to the government and to the people of Bangladesh as well as Muslim Ummah. Several lakhs of uprooted Rohingyas, men, women, and children, have been forced to leave their homeland Arakan and took shelter in Bangladesh. This is happened not once but twice, in 1978-79 and 1991-92; the problem is not yet over. This is a man-made problem, created by the ruling Burmese military junta. It is not due to the fault of the Rohingyas themselves and the reason is political and coercive policy of Burmese Junta. In Arakan, Rohingyas form a solid group, which is an eyesore to the Burmese government.¹ The Rohingya have been settling in Arakan from long before the British occupation of the country. In fact the forefathers of Rohingyas had entered into Arakan from time immemorial. The Burmese ruling junta do not know, or pretend not to know that the Rohingyas have a long history, a language, a heritage, a culture and a tradition of their own that they had built up in Arakan by their long and historic settlements. In fact the Rohingya have been settling in Arakan for more than a thousand year.² In order to know and understand the full context of the Rohingya problems, it is necessary to know the geographical location, the population, the historical background and culture, ethnic origin, chronology of activities of Rohingya nation.

ARAKAN once a sovereign and independent State, is now one of the states of the Union of Burma.³ Under different periods of history Arakan had been an independent sovereign monarchy ruled by Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims. After Bengal became Muslim in 1203 AD, Islamic influence grew in Arakan to the extent of establishing Muslim vassal state beginning in 1430 AD. Muslim's rule and influence in Arakan lasted for more than 350 years until it was invaded and occupied by Burman king Boddaw Paya on 28 December (Saturday) 1784 AD.⁴ The First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) was ended on 24 February 1826 when Burmese ratified the Treaty of Yandabo and Burmese ceded Arakan and Tenasserim to British India. Then under the Government of India Act of 1935, Burma was separated from British India on 1 April 1937. Arakan was made a part of British Burma against the wishes of its people and thus finally Arakan became a province of independent Burma in 1948.⁵

GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES OF ARAKAN

No one will deny, however firmly he may believe in free will, that the destinies of men are to a large extent determined by environment. Among the many influences covered by this term, the most powerful are geographical.

Geographical facts influence the course of history. Climate determines man's food and other wants. The physical features of the earth, sea and mountains fixed the occupation of the people inhabiting a particular area. It is a fact of history that geography plays a great part in shaping the political life of a country and moulding the socio-cultural pattern of its people. The physical features and natural peculiarities indeed reflect the life and culture of the land. The history of a country cannot be appreciated without the knowledge of its geography. Hence, ideas of natural peculiarities form an essential preliminary to the study of its history and culture.⁶

The geographical peculiarities of Arakan had a tremendous influence on the political, social, spiritual, economic and cultural of its people. The natural feature of this land, which were, and even now are, peculiar to itself, left distinctive marks on the socio-cultural institutions, mental outlook, way of life, education, food, dress and manner and customs of its people.⁷

THE LOCATION AND AREA OF ARAKAN

The present day Arakan State is situated between North Latitude 17°-15' and 21°-17' and East Longitude 92°-11' and 94°-55'. The total area of Arakan during British period was about 20,000 sq. miles which has been reduced to 14,200 sq. miles in 1974. It is situated between Burma proper on the east and south (to the east Magwe Division and Pegu Division; to the south Irrawadi Division); and Bay of Bengal and People's Republic of Bangladesh on the west; and on the north Bangladesh and Chin State.⁸ The Arakan Hill-tracts district (5235 sq. miles) bordering India and southern most part of Arakan from Kyauk Chaung river to cape Negaris have been partitioned from Arakan mainland without the native people's consent. It is a narrow mountainous coastal strip of land with 443 miles coastal belt from the Naf River to Cape Negaris. It is wider in the Muslim north, which is about 100 miles in breadth and tapers down gradually to the south where it is at least 25 miles wide.⁹

THE HILLS OF ARAKAN

The Western Mountain Belt of Burma, also known as Arakan Yoma Mountains, is a series of ridges that originate in the northern mountains and extend southward to the south-western corner. The Arakan Coastal Strip is a narrow, predominantly alluvial belt lying between the Arakan Yoma Mountains and the Bay of Bengal. In some places the strip disappears as the mountain spurs reach the sea. To the south of Akyab district are the Barongas, three detached ranges of low hills running southwest into the sea. 10

Arakan is separated from the Chittagong region of Bangladesh by the river Naf. The northern part of Arakan is covered with hills, and from this region three low ranges run southward. In the west, between the Naf and Mayu rivers and terminating near the mouth of the latter, is the steep Mayu range, the southern portion of which lies parallel with and not far from the coast. The western spurs of the Arakan Yoma Range cover the broken country east of the Lemro River. Between the Kaladan and the Mayu rivers two ridges run parallel to each other to within 20 miles of Akyab on the coast, throwing out spurs into the Mayu valley and Ponnagyun township but with steep sides on the Kaladan side. 11

THE RIVERS AND ISLANDS OF ARAKAN

Arakan is blessed with geographical diversities. The rivers of Arakan generally flow from north to south being separated from each other by abrupt high watershed. Arakan is a land of creeks and chaungs. There are a number of rivers and streams (chaungs) that flow in the Arakan into the Bay of Bengal. In all, there are seven rivers in Arakan. They are the Naf, the Mayu, the Kaladan, the Lemro, the Ann, the Taungup and the Sandoway. The four major navigable rivers are the Naf, Mayu, Kaladan and Lemro and all they are situated in the northern Arakan. All these four rivers are tidal and easily navigable all the year round. There are hundreds of off-shore islands in Arakan of which Rambree and Cheduba are the largest. Rambree Island is the biggest of the offshore Island in Arakan comprising an area of 2,310 square miles being east to west 22 miles and north to south 105 miles. It lies between 180-55° and 190-32° North Latitude and between 930-30° and 930-58° East Longitude. Along the western coast line of the Island rises a range of low hills but the coast to the east and south is low-lying tract, ringed by mangrove jungle. The second biggest is Cheduba Island situated off the coast between 180-45° and 180-50° North Latitude and between 930-30° and 930-45°. It has an area of about 200 square miles, being east to west 20 miles and north to south 10 miles. In this island there is a Red Mountain and in its western parts there grow a kind of sweet smell grass. Other notable islands are Boronga Islands, Savage Island, Kyun Thaya, Sagu Kyun, Ganga Kyun, Ye Kyun and Kyun Zin and many of, which are cultivated. 12

CLIMATE OF ARAKAN

Arakan State is situated in the tropical zone and as such it is subject to tropical climate. But its situation with a sea to the west and ranges of hills to the east has neutralised the extremes of the climate to a considerable extent. So, the Climate of Arakan in general is not extreme. It is mild and salubrious in the south. There are only three seasons: summer, rainy and winter season. In the northern part of Arakan the climate is unhealthy due to the existence of vast tract of un-cleared jungles in the valleys. Temperature seasonally varies from 460 to 710 F and the weather is humid except during the month of April and May. The summer season is from March to May and the rainy season is from June to October. The winter/cool season, from November to February, is cool and pleasant. The average maximum temperature of the Arakan State for the whole year is 78.19 degrees and the average minimum 77.96 degrees, the average mean being 78.08 degrees. The average rainfall of Arakan for the past 10 years (1970-80) has been a little less than 200 (193.56) inches. The rainfall varies from an average of 221.05 inches in Akyab to 158.97 inches at Kyaukpru and 200.66 inches at Sandoway. The southern part of Arakan frequently visited by cyclones, which cause damages to life and property. 13

THE TOWNS AND TOWNSHIPS OF ARAKAN STATE

The Arakan State has acquired its present dimensions through several changes in its jurisdiction from time to time. Originally, the Treaty of Yandabo ceded Arakan to the British India on 24 February 1826. After annexation of Arakan in 1826, Akyab was made the capital of new province, and has since ranked as its chief port. It was found that the Burmese king had divided the country into four Governorships of Maruk-U, Rambree, Sandoway and Ann. At first the British Government retained these divisions, and placed each in charge of a district officer; these officers were subordinate to one special and two local Commissioners. In 1858 Arakan had its own Divisional Commissioner. The Ann district was abolished for a short time, one portion of it being added to the Akyab district and another to the Sandoway district. Ann was made a separate district again in 1833 and was composed of 17 circles taken from the districts of Akyab, Rambree and Sandoway. In 1852 the Ann and Rambree districts, were amalgamated and headquarters established at Kyaukpyu. In those days Akyab district included the Arakan Hill Tracts and in 1865 they were detached from Akyab district and made into a separate district. Arakan Division was divided into four districts. They are Akyab district, Mayu district, Kyaukpyu District and Sandoway district. In 1974 the BSPP government of Ne Win constituted Rakhine State from Arakan Division. The present Arakan State is divided into 17 townships and they are the Akyab, Maungdaw, Buthidaung,

Rathedaung, Kyauktaw, Mrohaung (Maruk-U), Ponnagyunt, Minbya, Pauktaw, Maybon, Kyaukpyu, Rambree, Manaung, Ann, Taunggup, Sandoway and Gowa townships. 14

OCCUPATION

Over eighty percent of the populations of Arakan are farmers. Over eighty percent farmers of Arakan are Rohingyas. One hundred percent of the skilled labourers plying river crafts and fishing high sea vessels are Rohingya too. Rohingyas, who once were the backbone of the economy of Arakan, are today found wandering across the world jobless and homeless. As a result, presently, more than one fourth of the total acreage of arable land is reduced to vast tracts of jungles. The government has started a massive reclamation of these lands and newly confiscated Muslim lands for settlement of Rakhine Buddhists from both inside and outside Arakan. Constructing pagodas and monasteries, particularly on the site of demolished Islamic structures with a view to changing the face of Arakan and give it a Buddhist appearance is also taking place for example, Tharaykunbung and Waladaung mosques of Maungdaw Township. In addition to farmers, mariners and sailors, there are also fishermen, traders, woodsmen, weavers, artisans, artists, craftsmen, carpenters, government servants, labourers, goldsmiths, black-smiths, potters etc.15

UNEXPLORED NATURAL RESOURCES OF ARAKAN

Arakan has many unexplored natural resources. They are oil, natural gas, coal, lime, iron ore, surplus agricultural products, timber and forest products, and inexhaustible marine wealth. Arakan is also substantial rich in mineral resources, although its petrol, coal and oil are of inferior quality. Tradition speaks of the existence of gold and silver mines, but they have not yet been excavated for utilization due to the lack of technical skill of the Arakanese.16

THE SEA PORTS AND RIVERINE PORTS OF ARAKAN

The principal sea-port of Arakan is Akyab. Other important sea-ports are Kyaukprou, Sandoway and Maungdaw. The interior riverine ports of Arakan are Kyauktaw, Myebon, Minbya, Pauktaw, Buthidaung, Rathedaung and Ponnagyun. These all ports are situated in North Arakan. Other ports in the Southern Arakan are Ann, Taunggup and Gwa.17

SEA BEACHES OF ARAKAN

It is a narrow mountainous coastal strip of land with 443 miles coastal belt from the Naf River to Cape Negaris. From the mouth of Naf River (Maungdaw) to south of Cape Negaris the coastline of Arakan is 443 miles long with beautiful sea-beaches. As the region is very hilly beyond the alluvium the beaches of Arakan are rocky and sandy. They are composed of shale and sand stones intersected by bands of limestone. Some notable sea-beaches are Ali-Sankyaw sea-beach of Maungdaw, Kyukprou sea-beach and Nagpeli sea-beach of Sandoway.18

FLORA OF ARAKAN

The general aspect of the topography of the Arakan State is a mass of hills, rivers and cliffs covered with dense bamboo breaks tall trees and creeper jungles. The valleys are covered with thick virgin forest interspersed with small watercourses and swamps of all sizes and descriptions. The forest of Arakan can be divided into three categories. The evergreen forest, the monsoon forest and the tidal forest. The main features of the vegetation is semi-evergreen to tropical evergreen dominated by tall trees belonging to Teak (Segun), Pyinkado (Hori), Kanyin (Garjan), Kamoung (Jarul), Eugenia (Jam), Teinee (Chaplish), and etc. 19

Since the rainfall of Arakan is more than 200 inches, it has evergreen forest and there are groves of wild plantains. All the rivers of the Arakan State falling into the Bay of Bengal are tidal up to a considerable length inland. The tidal mangrove swamps are most extensive at the mouth of the Kaladan River, Naf River, Mayu River and Lembro River and near Rambree and Cheduba islands. Arakan has also tidal forests and there are mangroves, sundari (*Haritiera minor*) and other species of typical swamps. 20

ANIMALS, BIRDS, AND FISHES OF ARAKAN

Animals : In Arakan cattle, sheep and goats are bred. Cattle and buffaloes are numerous and are largely used for cultivation. The deep forest of Arakan abounds in tigers, bears, leopards, deer, wild dogs, wild pigs and wild elephants. But the jungles of Arakan Yoma have a greater number of elephants, rhinoceroses, bison, Gauyals (gaur), Taunggrus (wild ox) Malay deer, Himalayan black bears, antelopes, barking deer, the wild goats and Taw myin, sambhur deer, brow antlered deer, wild cats, jackals and monkeys are also of common sight throughout Arakan. 21

Birds : Of the birds, fowl, imperial pigeon. Green pigeon of different types are seen everywhere. There are varieties of pea-fowls and geese, teals, quails and ducks are also met with in the marshy land and on the long stretches of swamps. Guest birds like Siberian and Russian ducks visit around the Akyab during the winter season. Peafowl are found in Taungup and Ann. There are also a large number of hawks, eagles, kites, cranes, paddy-birds and owls.22

Reptiles : Poisonous snakes like cobra and different types of hamadryad are uncommon and deaths by snake-bite are frequent, Varieties of crocodiles are found in the tidal waters and estuaries in the south and western part of Arakan. Fishes are abundance in the Bay of Bengal and in the waters of the rivers and in their tributaries and creeks.23

Fishes : Arakan is blessed with many varieties of salt-water fish and fresh-water fish. Arakan's 443 miles long coast is rich in fish. However, lack system of well-equipped fishing trawlers and restrictions and heavy taxation imposed on Muslims make annual catch much lower than that of Bangladesh. Arakan coastal areas are ideal for breeding shrimp, which fetches hard currency in the international market. Tiger shrimp culture along the sides of the Naf-River produces one of the best quality shrimp in the world. 24

The Bay of Bengal teems with fish of many varieties, as do the great rivers of Arakan, the Naf, Mayu, Kaladan, Lemro, Ann, Taungup and the Sandoway, with their many tributaries and connecting creeks. Amongst the fish for which Akyab is famous are the Pomfret (Rupchana) and the Hilsa. Oysters in plenty are to be had at Oyster Island near Akyab. Besides the sea, rivers and creeks, fish make their way into inland tanks, ins, watercourses and even paddy field, during the wet months of the year. 25

Fish forms the main food of the people of Arakan both in its fresh and preserved state. Commonly called, as Nga-pi is fish paste, which is generally used by the Buddhist community of Arakan and Burma. Fish is also sun-dried or smoked. Tons of dry-fish, salted fish and dehydrated fish of Arakan are sent to Rangoon and Bangladesh via-border-trade from Maungdaw. 26

AGRICULTURE

The Economy of Arakan depends mainly on Agriculture. The land is fertile and out of 954,257 acres of arable land only 854,824 acres are under cultivation every year. It is single cropping though neighbouring Bangladesh practices 3 to 4 crops a year. Despite the fall of production in 1980s, the region produces a vast surplus of some 200,000 tones annually. Arakan produced 450,000 tones of surplus rice during 1950s. It was historically known as Dhanavati (the land of wealth) which exported surplus rice to many countries of the world. Production gradually fell down as many Muslim farmers have been driven out from their motherland. 27

LIVESTOCK AND ANIMAL HUSBANDRY

Although there are no commercial and government initiative for livestock and animal husbandry project in Arakan all farmers breed cattle, buffalo, duck, goat, fowl, geese and pigeon. The breeding of cattle is in progress at Kyaukpru, Cheduba, Rambree and Taungup. About 5 to 10 thousand cattle heads are sold to other places. 28

MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

For obvious reason Arakan is kept abandoned and under-developed region of Burma. The motorable roads are those built during British era. However, the SPDC have been making infrastructure development by conscription of forced labor and levying taxes for the purpose. There is no railway now, but the one existed was serviceable during British period between Chittagong and Buthidaung through Maungdaw. Sea and air mainly do communication with Burma proper. 29

INDUSTRY AND OTHER ECONOMY OF ARAKAN

In an area of 20,000 sq. miles or 15,000 sq. miles there is not a single modern industry or mill or factory though raw material is abundant. The people of Arakan are the best tax-payers of Burma, especially, from Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung, where Rohingyas are in majority. There are about 30 old rice mills in Arakan state. The government had set up some saw mills in different townships. In some towns there are at least one ice-factory and an aerated-water factory. A small sugar-mill attached with a wine factory is established by the government at Kyauktaw township. There is a chaff oil mill at Akyab. The oil is refined from the chaff produced by the 13 rice mills of Akyab. There is a marble factory near Taungup township which can be converted into a fine marble factory. There are small size rope factories in Sandoway, Gwa and Manaung (Cheduba). A small size cotton yarn factory is at Akyab where raw cottons from Buthidaung and Paletwa are refined only. A soap factory, a leather factory and a rope factory are also under construction at Akyab. 30

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