

IMPORTANT HISTORY OF ARAKAN TO KNOW AND THINK ABOUT - AND TO USE WISELY

By Rick Heizman, May 20, 2018, San Francisco

Let's view the area about 5 centuries ago. The biggest, most powerful Kingdom of the Bay of Bengal (the more modern geographical name) was the Buddhist Kingdom of Arakan, with its capital of Mrauk-U. Nowadays, the ruins of Mrauk-U make up one of the worlds largest collection of ruins, extremely impressive. At the time in the 1500s, and 1600s the Portuguese were the first of the European countries to trade, explore, ally with or fight against, and colonize. The early Portuguese colonies were legendary - Nagasaki, the Spice islands of Indonesia, Malacca, Goa, and Arakan. The Portuguese also were technologically ahead of all other seafaring peoples - their various types of ships were the best, the fastest, and the most feared, at times. The Portuguese allied with Arakan for centuries - and therefore the Arakanese had the best and fastest, various types of boats - for Empire to Empire trading, or up and down the many rivers of Arakan. Also, the Portuguese had the best weapons of the day, which the Arakanese obtains - various types of cannon and muskets. Across, the sea from Arakan was Bengal - a legendary land populated by Bengali speaking people.

Historically, the land that is now called **BANGLADESH** was Vedic, Hindu, and Buddhist kingdoms for nearly 2000 years. The great Buddhist **Pala Empire**, centered in Bengal, ruled a very large area from the 8th to the 12th centuries. The Pala period is considered as the golden era of Bengal, with stability, prosperity, colossal temples and exquisite works of art. This remarkable Buddhist Empire eventually disintegrated in the 12th century, most drastically with the invasion of Muslim armies that swept through India, killing or pushing Buddhists to the edges of their rule. In the 1500 1600 and 1700s the population of Muslims was growing across the sea, as more and more Bengali Hindus and Bengali Buddhists converted, most often at the point of a sword. As well, there were military invasions both ways, but largely the Buddhist Kingdom of Arakan prevailed, and ruled much of present day Bangladesh, which in those time had many many more indigenous Buddhists, as well as Muslims and Hindus. There was time when Afghan warriors who had conquered Delhi were then driven out, in the opposite direction, ended up in the Sultanate of Bengal, and were employed to use their very fierce fighting skills on the Arakanese Buddhists, who did prevail over them.

At this point let me make some observations, and then you will (I hope) better understand the very deep dynamics of this conflict.

- 1) This conflict is not new. It did not start in 2017, or 2016, or 2012, or even 1948, or 1942, or the 1800s, or the 1700s.
- 2) The spread of Islam through Asia was one of constant conquest. Buddhism (which started 1200 years before Islam had spread to nearly every corner of Asia, as Islam

started in the 600s AD. Buddhism had even spread into parts of Persia (present day Iran) and there actually are historical areas and eras in which Buddhist rulers ruled Persians and there are (now destroyed completely) Buddhist ruins in Iran. (google Buddhism in Persia)

- 3) Islam entered India on the western side, gradually expanding up, down, and to the east (many many stories of conquest and destruction, Nalanda University is one of many). India was largely ruled by Muslims for 800 years, and Indian historians estimate that about 80 million Hindu and Buddhist Indians were killed by the Muslims over the course of those 8 centuries.
- 4) The growing Muslim population in Bengal was an edge of the Muslim world, and that division between the Muslim world and the Buddhist world was, and is, the border between present day Rakhine State (Arakan) and Bangladesh (Sultanate of Bengal).
- 5) The Buddhist people there know the history of the ground they walk. The world doesn't know that. The world doesn't know that they know that. The world doesn't even know that it doesn't know that. Read number 5 a few times until you understand what it is saying.
- 6) Muslims have been pushing, land-grabbing, attacking, and conquering Arakan for 5 centuries. The people inherently know the consequences, and are royally piss-offed that the world is actually assisting that effort against them. The Arakanese have no other homeland. The Bengalis do - it is now called Bangladesh.

THE LAST ROYAL BUDDHIST CAPITAL - MRAUK-U

The ancient capital, Mrauk-U, with its many temples and structures spread over a very large area constitute one of the largest ruined Buddhist cities in the world, and is the heart and soul of the Rakhine Buddhist majority. Dutch, British, and Portuguese writers complimented Mrauk-U as a city comparable and even greater than Amsterdam, London, and Venice at that time.

The Portuguese Jesuit, Father A. Farrinha, SJ, who travelled to Mrauk-U in 1639, wrote:

“Arakan is a second Venice; its streets are rivers; its gardens, valleys; its ramparts, mountains.

For, as the natives of the country are naturally weak and timid, they have chosen for their city a site fortified by nature, and impregnable by force of arms.”

The Dutch traveller Gamier Schouren who visited Arakan in 1660 wrote:

“As we ascended sufficiently high up the mountain we could descry the city of Aracan and the golden roofs of the palace, which shone magnificently in the rays of the sun. Here and there, both on the mountain and in the valleys the eye fell on many (Buddhist) pagodas, which made the view most enchanting...indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a more entrancing landscape.”

The Augustinian Friar Sebastian Manrique, who lived in Arakan from 1629 - 1637, described the city and royal palace in Mrauk-U:

“ . . . the city of Arracan according to general opinion must have contained one hundred and sixty thousand inhabitants, excluding foreign merchants, of whom there was a great influx owing to the large number of ships trading with this port from Bengala, Masulipatt, Tenasserim, Martaban, Achem and Jacatara. There were some other foreigners, too, some being merchants and some soldiers, the latter being enlisted on salaries, and were, as I have said, Portuguese, Pegus, Burmese and Mogors. Besides these there were many Christians of Japanese, Bengal and other nationalities.”

PORT CITIES AND MINORITIES

Port cities, anywhere in the world, have minorities of people who are there because of trade, seas and ships. Mrauk-U did also, as described by Manrique above. There was a small Muslim minority - among many other minorities. There were, and still are minorities of Buddhists in every surrounding country.

ONE OF MANY MINORITIES

This brings me to another point, while I'm here, this notion that the Bengali Muslims have this sacred right to demand the land for themselves because a very small minority of them have been there for generations - if you study the history of Mrauk-U the last royal capital of the Buddhist Arakan Kingdom, which was a major southeast Asian Kingdom at that time - very big and powerful and very Buddhist - Mrauk-U, a port city, was like port cities of any sea-trading nation on earth, in that there were always some various minorities of people because of ships, traders, and explorers. So, concerning Mrauk-U, there's plenty of evidence, written evidence, by Portuguese and Dutch, etc, that talks about the minorities of Mrauk-U - they say there were minorities that were Ceylonese, Javanese, Achenese, Siamese, Portuguese, Dutch, British, Burmese, Chinese, Hindu Indians, and Muslims. The Muslims were one of many minorities. In fact, there probably more Portuguese there than Muslims. The great Buddhist Kingdom of Arakan would've been the same whether or not the Muslim minority from Bengal existed or never existed. I am not disparaging the Bengalis by saying that - all major entities worldwide have minorities, and I am saying that, for example, the legacy of Chinese history would hardly be different with or without the Uyghur people, or the Ottoman empire with or without the Berbers. There were Portuguese churches in Mrauk-U, there was a Muslim mosque, a Hindu temple, a Chinese temple, this, that and the other.

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