



## ETYMOLOGY OF ARAKAN & ROHINGYA

Aman Ullah, 70 years old

There exists some controversy about the origin of the name 'Arakan' on which traditional and legendary sources differ. In fact, the name of Arakan is ancient. On the North face of the Anandachandra Stone inscription, the words 'arekadesa vijayam' appear in line 42; many think it is the name of the country that is Arakan. Although according to Gutman, it may be the name of the country in the 11th century, it could also be read as 'anekadesa'.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, according to Professor SH Hodivala, the prominent numismatic of India in the early 19th century, the modern form of Arakan was derived from the Arabic 'Al-Rakhang', in his book *Studies on History of Indian Muslims*. This book was a critical commentary on Elliot and Dowson's *History of India* as told by its own Historians.<sup>2</sup>

In *Ptolemy's Geografia* (150 AD) there is a country named 'Argyre'. Sir Yule identifies Arakan as the name being supposedly derived from silver mines existing there.<sup>3</sup> Sir Yule's assumption is supported by Mc Criddle and D.G.E Hall.<sup>4</sup> Early Buddhist missionaries called Arakan 'Rekkha Pura'.<sup>5</sup>

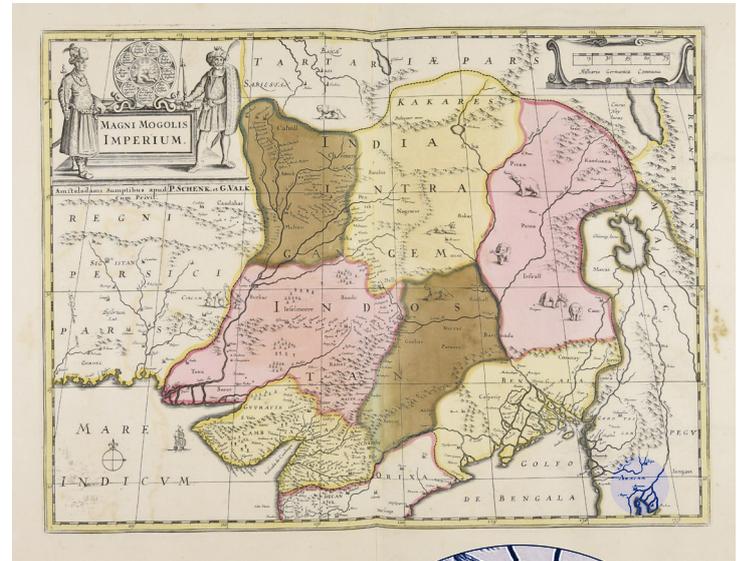
In the *Inscriptions of Pagan* dated 1299, it was 'Rakhuin'.<sup>6</sup> In the work of Rashidudin (c.1310), the Arab geographer, it appears as 'Rahan'.<sup>7</sup> Venetian Nicolo di Conti (1420-1430) wrote the name of the country as 'Rachani' and Sidhelobi, a Turkish navigator of the middle of 16th century writes it 'Rakanj'.<sup>8</sup> In the map of *Magni Mongolis Imperium* (The great Mughul Empire), drawn in 1650 —the earliest map of the Indian region— it was shown as 'Aracam'.<sup>9</sup> In *Ain-i-Akbari* of Abul Fazal (1551-1602) mentioned Arakan as 'Arkhang'. In the *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi*, Mirza Nathan mentioned the people as 'Rakangi' while the name of the county as 'Arkhang'.<sup>10</sup> In the *Fathiyya-i- Ibriyya*, Shahabuddin Talish also consistently spelled the name of the country as 'Rakhang'.<sup>11</sup>

In a *Latin Geography* (1597) by Peta Vino, the country was referred to as 'Aracan'. In the English version of Van Linschtoen's Map of 1598 it is 'Aracan'. Friar Manrique (1628-43) mentions the country as 'Aracan'.<sup>12</sup> The British Traveler, Relph Fitch (1586), referred to the name of Arakan as 'Rocon'.<sup>13</sup> In Rennell's map (1771) it is 'Rawssawn'.<sup>14</sup>

Hindus in his 1612 map, has been induced to make the country name 'Aracam'.<sup>15</sup> To the Medieval Portuguese and other European travellers and chroniclers, it is 'Rocan', 'Rakan', 'Arracam', 'Aracao', 'Orrakam'.<sup>16</sup> João de Barros, the Portuguese traveller, is said to be the first man who referred in 1516 to 'Aracan' in *Décadas da Ásia*<sup>17</sup> (Decades of Asia), which is the nearest denomination to the modern name.

According to eminent numismatists like Lanepole, Rodgers, and Wright; the Bengal king, Sultan Muhammad Khan Sur, struck coins bearing the date 962 AH (1554) styling himself Sultan Shamshuddin Muhammad Shah Ghazi, the name of the mint is read as 'Arakan'.<sup>18</sup> A few of these coins are preserved in the London British Museum. One coin of Shams al Din Muhammad Shah Ghazi (Sl.199), is also preserved in the Indian Museum, and bears the date 962 AH and the mint name of 'Arakan'. The coin is similar to those published by Marsden, Lanepole, and Wright.<sup>19</sup>

In the *Tripura Chronicle*, Rajmala mentions the name of Arakan as 'Roshang'.<sup>20</sup> In the medieval works of the poets of Arakan and Chittagong, like Quazi Daulat, Mardan, Shamsar Ali, Quraishi Magan, Alaol, Ainuddin, Abdul Ghani, and others; they frequently referred to Arakan as 'Roshang', 'Roshanga', 'Roshango Shar', and 'Roshango Des'.<sup>21</sup> Famous European traveller Francis Buchanan (1762-1829) in his accounts mentioned Arakan as 'Reng, Roung, Rossawn, Russawn, Rung'. In one of his accounts, *A Comparative Vocabulary of some of the languages spoken in the Burman Empire* it was stated that, the native Mugs of Arakan called themselves 'Yakin', which name is also commonly given to them by the Burmese. By the people



*Magni Mogolis imperium* (Moghul Empire). Published in Amsterdam by Peter Schenk and Gerald Valk between 1686 and 1719. This map (364x485 mm) is part of the cartographic archive of the Municipal Library of Trento with no. 6617778 and available for use on the public domain.



of Pegu, they are named 'Taling'. By the Bengal Hindus, at least by those that have been settled in Arakan, the country is called 'Rossawn'. From whence, Mr. Rennell was probably induced to make a country named 'Rossawn' occupy part of his map, not conceiving that it would be Arakan, kingdom of Mugs, as we often called it. The Mahammedans who have long settled at Arakan call the country 'Rovingaw' and called themselves 'Rohinga' or native of Arakan. The Persians called it 'Rekon'.<sup>22</sup> The Chakmas and Saks of the 18th century called it 'Roang'.<sup>23</sup> Muslims and Mugs of some parts of southern Chittagong, who are descendants of Arakan origin, are called 'Rohang Muslim' and 'Rohang Magh' by the Chittagongian.

Today, the Muslims of Arakan called their country, in their own language, 'Rohang' or 'Roang' and called themselves *Rohangya* (Rohang+ya) or *Roangya* (Roang+ya) which means native of *Rohang* or *Roang*. In Burmese it is ရိုဟင်ဂျာ, which in Rakhine's pronunciation reads as 'Rohongya', but in Burmese pronunciation it became 'Rohingya' and now it's established as 'Rohingya'. The Mugs call themselves 'Rakine' and call the country 'Rakhine Prey' or country of Rakhine.

The term 'Rohingya' is widely used by the international community to identify a group of Muslims of Arakan. According to Dr. Ganganath Jha of Jawaharlal Nehru University of India, the term Rohingya is derived from Rohang, the ancient name of Arakan.

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7. Elliot HM and Dowson J, 'History of India as told by its own historians' p. 73
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