

SLAVE RAIDS IN BENGAL or HEINS IN ARAKAN

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By U Ba Tha

I wrote about the Roewengyas, the descendants of Arabs, Pathans and the then immigrants from Bengal in a previous article entitled "Roewengyas in Arakan" which was published in this magazine's Vol: VII, No. 5 for May 1960. Now I take great pleasure in writing about the North Arakan people who descended from the captives of Bengal who were captured by the Portuguese and the Arakanese pirates.

Slave raids were made by the Arakanese Mughls and Portuguese. The Portuguese were crusaders, conquerors and traders. They came to eastern countries after Vasco da Gama had found the sea route to India. Vasco da Gama with 160 men in three small ships sailed to India on the 8th of July 1497, and at Melinde on the African coast he engaged an India pilot with whose assistance they crossed the Arabian Sea, and on the 20th May 1498 they arrived at Calicut, the port on the West Coast of India, and the capital of an independent Hindu Kingdom.

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The Muslims whose influence was very strong in Calicut heard of what had happened. They formed a deputation and waited on the mayor of Calicut. The mayor told the King that the Portuguese were fugitives and their intentions were piratical. The King summoned his ministers who though supporting the mayor's allegations, he (the King) sent for da Gama who, on his arrival, was permitted to load his ships with cargoes. Da Gama left the King. But he was arrested on his way to the wharf by the mayor's order. He was ordered to leave Calicut at once without cargoes and without compensation for the goods which had been landed. On the ship he consulted with his officers. They made up their mind to get in touch with the King who was unaware of the mayor's action. But their attempt was fruitless because the mayor was on the watch.

On reaching Portugal in 1499 Vasco da Gama advised the King that if a strong force were sent the Muslims could be driven off the sea and the trade diverted from the Persian Gulf to the Cape route. Though Calicut had its own Hindu rulers, Muslim influence was very strong. Muslim merchants controlled the maritime trade between the Persian Gulf and Indonesia, including Arakan. Goa was also in their possession. Their ships were in Calicut harbour and their storehouses on shore. King Emanuel accepted da Gama's advice. In the following years a series of expeditions were sent.

Suitable sites were seized and fortresses built on the Asiatic coast. Goa was captured by Albuquerque from the Muslim traders in 1510. He made Goa the centre and the greatest fortress of the Portuguese Asia. The Portuguese became the masters of the seaborne trade between East and West. They became very rich.

Dianga, opposite to Chittagong on the other side of the Karnaphuli River, was seized by the Arakanese king to the Portuguese private merchants as a port had long ceased to be such a place of normal trade. In 1601 Min Yaza Gyi alias Salim Shah I (1593-1612) appointed Philip de Brito, with whose assistance he invaded Pegu, to be the Governor of Syriam, then port of Pegu. Later de Brito united with the Portuguese in Syriam and, driving away the Arakanese from the port, made himself king of Hauthawaddy (Pegu).

On hearing this news Min Yaza Gyi sent a garrison under the command of his son Min Kha Maung who was taken captive by the Portuguese, but later was released on compensation. Min Yaza Gyi tied up in mock friendship with de Brito and asked him to send his son as ambassador at Mrohaung. It seemed that Min Yaza Gyi wanted to take reprisals. De Brito agreed and sent his son to Myauk-U (Mrohaung) where in 1607 he and his followers were executed, all his ships captured and the entire crew cut up. De Brito could do nothing because Anauk-phet-lun-min of Ava gave battle to him and he was killed. Five hundred Portuguese from Syriam were carried off and resettled in Shwebo district.

In Dianga also the Portuguese were killed. Some of them fled away. Gonsalves Tibao, one of the Dianga Portuguese, who turned into a pirate, made himself king of Sandwip, an island at the mouth of the Padma River. He became so bold that in 1616 he attempted a raid on Arakan, but was bitterly defeated by Min Kha Maung alias Hussain Shah (1612-1622), son of Min Yaza Gyi, with the help of the Dutch who hate the Portuguese. In this expedition a large number of slaves were brought to Arakan. At that time Moghul power of expansion over India had become stronger and stronger. Before Moghul administration was extended to Bengal, the Arakanese claimed a large part of Bengal. Moghul Emperors established themselves in western and central Bengal, and they confined the Arakanese to the province of Chittagong, the North-west frontier vice-royalty of the Arakanese king who got half the booty from piracy. The Portuguese were formidable fighters. So instead of destroying them the King of Arakan enlisted the Portuguese in his service as a force to guard his north-west frontier. They were granted estates. They had no subject control from Goa. They served the Arakanese king in holding Sandwip Island, Noakhali, Bakergunje, and the Sundarbans Delta; and they raided up to Dacca and even Murshidabad.

The King of Arakan encouraged them to make slave raids west-wards. The Arakanese, the Mughls and the Portuguese made slave raids upon delta villages of the Sundarbans. They made Sangar Island at the mouth of the Hooghly River uninhabitable. They sold the Bengalis (Hindus and Muslims), so kidnapped, at the Indian ports and to the Arakanese who used them in ploughing, reaping rice crop, earth-digging and in several hard works which could not be done by the Arakanese. They pierced the

hands of their slaves, and passed a strip of cane through the hole. They flung them under the deck strung together like hens. Sometimes the Mughls would sail back to the coast where they had captured their captives and wait till the villagers brought out sufficient gifts to get back their relations. This the Mughls called collecting revenue, and the Portuguese who were also among them would keep regular account books.

Sabistan Manrique, the Portuguese Friar, arrived at Hooghly, near the present Calcutta, after one month's voyage from Goa. After one and a quarter years of stay at Hooghly he was again ordered by the Friar of the monastery of Hooghly to go Dianga to relieve the Vicar of the town. On the 11th September 1629 Manrique embarked on a Portuguese galley which came from Dianga to sell slaves. In the next month he reached Dianga where he stayed nine months, after which he was again transferred to Myauk-U, the capital of Arakan. On the 5th July 1630 he came to Ramu where he was given a promise by the Arakanese Governor of the town that he would be guided to Arakan by 53 chained Bengali slaves who had been captured in the slave raids, together with a guard of 30 soldiers, as the mountain passes were full of tigers and other wild beasts. On the evening of the 7th July the captives arrived. They were manacled. They were fastened together with a chain which was attached to their iron collars. They were like bead-stones in a great iron chain. They were old and young innocent Bengalis (Hindus and Muslims) who were going to a disgraceful and perpetual slavery. A slave who was an old man became exhausted on the pass above Peroem, the town on the Mayu River. He could not walk. He was driven on by the cruel Mugh guards. But Manrique took pity on him and protested with the guards not to drive him on. He was unmanacled and given a seat on the elephant by the Friar.

About these slave raids we have an excellent description written by the Moghul historian Shahbuddin Talish, which is quoted by Maurice Collis, "The Arakan pirates, who were both Portuguese and natives, used constantly to come by water and plunder Bengal," he writes. "They carried off such Hindus and Muslims as they could seize, pierced the palms of their hands, passed thin slips of cane through the holes and shut them huddled together under the decks of their ships. Every morning they flung down some uncooked rice, as we do for fowl... Many noblemen and women of family had to undergo the disgrace of house eventually was left inhabited on either side of the rivers leading from Chittagong to Dacca."

From the above facts and figures it is no wonder that the early Kings of Bengal considered the Arakanese Mughls wild and cruel.

The descendants of these captives of Bengal are known as HEINS (ဝိန်ခေါင်း) which means a low caste. M.K.Rahman wrote that they were settled at the two villages of Dass Para (slave village) and Pebin-Yin Ywa of Mrohaung Township, where they are found to this day. And they are looked down upon by other people of Arakan who never intermarry and intermix, nor even interdine with them, saying that they are of low caste descent. As the distinctions of colour, caste, race, wealth and

poverty are unknown in the ranks of Islam it is not right to look down upon them. Muslims are all brothers and sisters. The Heins' ancestors consisted of many noblemen and women though once they had to undergo the disgrace of slavery. They also call themselves Roewengyas. As they had to work in the Arakanese houses and palaces, they imitated the Arakanese habit, such as ear-boring custom. They bored their ears. So they are also known as ear-boring Roewengyas. People say that it is in memory of their ancestors, whose hands were pierced by their slave raiders, that they now bore their ears. However, they are just as good Muslims as the Arakanese of the same faith, while the Hindus from among the Heins are now assimilated into the Mugh community.

Like the Roewengyas - the descendants of Arabs and Pathans – the Heins are also strict in their religious performances, and in every village there is at least one Mosque. In dress, in habit, and in the social customs they are not distinct from the other Arakanese except in their religious performances. They use Burmese as a written language just as the Roewengyas did with Urdu which, during the British rule, supplanted the ancestral literature of the latter. But, R.B. Smart wrote that among themselves the Heins use the colloquial language of their ancestors. Unlike their ancestors they are indolent and extravagant as the Arakanese because they have lived for centuries together with the latter. They are, therefore, dependent on the Chittagonian labourers who help them in their several hard works such as ploughing, reaping and earthwork. "Since 1879 immigration has taken place on a much larger scale and the descendants of the slaves are resident, for the most part, in the Kyauktaw and Myohaung townships," writes R. B. Smart. These immigrants were men who came down only for the working season from Eastern Bengal, but they were not bona-fide or permanent residents because they were not an indigenous race of the country. In the Second Great World War they sacrificed their lives and property, and fought with blood and sweat against their enemies for the freedom of Burma.

Note: For references, please see page 36 of the Guardian, Vol: VII, No. 5 for May 1960.

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The Arakan Division of Burma presents in itself all the multifarious peculiarities and problems of Burma proper--perhaps even more acute. To mention but a few, there are the border problems and raid, insurgents and parti-politics, numerous religions and racial groups and--minority problems. U Ba Tha in his articles deals with some of these topics.

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