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**Rohingya/Bengali:
A Snapshot of Community in 1960s**

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Summary:

The underlying reasons for the use of the word “Rohingya” in 1950-60s by the AFPFL Government to describe Muslim Community of Northern Arakan is examined. A possible State-Military bilateral agreement in 1960s between Burma and Pakistan with regards to that Arakan Muslim community has been identified. Verified the consistent pattern that the Burmese Government since 1960 had agreed to take responsibility, i.e. providing the legal residency, for the Muslim Community of Northern Arakan.

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Rohingya/Bengali: A Snapshot of Community in 1960s

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In recent years, there has been disquiet between Burmese Government and international observers on the use of word, "Rohingya". In this note, the author examines the issues regarding with the use of word "Rohingya" by Burmese Government officials in the 1960s. On this question, this author had been largely assisted by the research work of All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF) in 1992¹. The ABSDF paper written in Burmese language is well-worth reading, which covered wide-ranging aspects of the political conflict and emerging humanitarian crisis at that time.

The ABSDF paper noted, at the onset of the humanitarian crisis for Rohingyas in 1991, the Burmese local media had been struggling to choose appropriate name for that community, which listed as Kula-Rakhine (ရခိုင် ကုလား), Arakan-Bengali (ရခိုင် ဘင်္ဂါလီ), Khawtaw Kula (ခေါ်တော ကုလား), Bengali (ဘင်္ဂါလီ), Bengali-Kula (ဘင်္ဂါလီ ကုလား), Chittagonian (စစ်တကောင်း သား), Rohingya (ရိုဟင်ဂျာ) or Rohingya-Muslim (ရိုဟင်ဂျာ မူဆလင်). This struggle for acceptable description of the Muslim Community of Northern Arakan², still persists until today. We would therefore rewind ourselves back to the 1950-1960s, so as to comprehend the political atmosphere.

Kala (Kula) and Bengali: Subjective and Objective usage

The Burmese people tend to use their language, perhaps, a lot more subtly than other nationalities. On raising any matter of interests, the skilful use of language with politeness is often critical. A flawless communication, with appropriate language, is important for any sensitive matter to become politically and socially acceptable.

The Burmese words can become more subtle when describing one's race. The same word can become carrying either subjective or objective meaning. For example, the word Kala/Kula (ကလား / ကုလား) can be both subjective and objective. However, the word Bengali (ဘင်္ဂါလီ) could be used only for objective purposes.

1. "Rohingya and Burma/Bangladesh border refugee Crisis (Burmese)", report by the Research Department of All Burma Student Democratic Front, 7 July 1992; <http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19920607-Rohingya-Crisis-by-ABSDF.pdf>

2. The Bengali Muslim immigrant community residing mainly in Northern Arakan, within districts of Buthidaung, Maungdaw and part of Rathedaung. This geographical area is often referred to as Mayu Frontier Area.

In Sanskrit words, Kala simply means 'black' and Kula means 'community' or 'family' or 'clan'. Other interpretation gives Kula as Ku-la (ကုး - လာ) [crossed (sea/boundary) + comer], which is to mean foreigners or settlers ³. Present day literal Burmese language usage, the Kala and Kula have been mixed and having the meaning of the foreigner coming from the Indian sub-continent. For example, Pathan-kala (ပထန် ကုလား), Pakistanis; Mogoul-kala (မဂိုလ် ကုလား), Iranian; Chulia-kala (ကျူလွာ ကုလား), Tamil Srilankan; Kala-white (ကုလား ခြူ), the British and Europeans; Kala (ကုလား), people of Indian descent in general. Too common is the pejorative use of word 'Kala' that one can rarely fend for the objective usage of it nowadays ⁴.

The word, Bengali (ဘင်္ဂါလီ), may still be used for objective purpose. However, there is an immediate attachment of 'alienation' or 'foreignness' to this word.

Bengali vs. Rohingya: The language of De-Indianization

With all above mentioned public acceptability in mind, we can rewind ourselves back to the years after independence. The years of 1948-1960 were the frustrating years for the Burman nationalists ⁵. The independence for Burma was achieved as British and the Chettyars for surely, had gone. However, to the Burman nationalists, the absence of British rule means little on the ground. Their pre-independence dream of "taken charge of our nation's destiny with our own hands" seems still remote. For political irritation, the country's large enterprises were still in foreigners' hand. As an eye sore for the nationalists, there were nearly 2 million foreigners, mainly Indian immigrants, still there for a country of mere 20 million population. In this atmosphere, the political participation of Bengali within national politics, in any shape or form, therefore, was un-imaginable.

Prime Minister U Nu and AFPFL Government, in those days, also had to struggle for their own political survival. For some reasons, in Burma parliament there had been an alien block of parliament members with [East] Pakistani connection being included ⁶. Prime Minister U Nu, a moderate

3. *"Indian and Burma"* by W.S. Desai (1954); Desai appears to be the first to have recorded on this interpretation. (Quoted in from paper by U Khin Maung Saw, footnote 4.)

4. *"Burmese Response to Indian Immigration"* by U Khin Maung Saw, Berlin (1994); <http://docslide.us/documents/burmese-responses-to-indian-immigration-waves-during-the-british-colonial-era.html>

5. *"The Politics of Ethnicity in Myanmar"* by Robert Taylor, 2nd March 2015, Institute of South East Asian Studies, Perspective, Singapore.

6. Following signing of historic Aung San-Attlee agreement in January 1947, the AFPFL organized elections for a Constituent Assembly in April - which held outside the framework of the Government of Burma Act 1935. [see detail: Pp 53-55, U Nu of Burma by Richard Butwell (1969)]; M.A. Gaffer and Sultan Ahmed, who were not part of the elections of April 1947 Constituent Assembly, had nevertheless been allowed to participate in Burma Parliament, representing the Muslim Community of Northern Arakan. [see detail: Chapter VII, A Short History of Arakan by Dr Mohammed Yunus (1994)]

nationalist, in 1954 reported to have mentioned this community as "Rohingyas" ⁷. One needs to be aware the use of "Bengali" was politically unacceptable. For any measure of political integration, the use of word "Chittagonian" was also off the limit, as it had been rejected the community leaders. Historically unknown and never-before used word "Rohingya" was for the first time suggested by community leaders in 1948 ⁸. The Burmese Officialdom of 1950-60, therefore, used the word "Rohingya" to describe the Muslim Community of Northern Arakan so as to de-Indianize and, also, to be politically correct.

Burma-Pakistan Cooperation

In the early years after independence, there had been an exemplary friendship and a very close bilateral cooperation existed between Burma and Pakistan ⁹. No doubt, such mutual cooperation had resulted in the bulk of Mujahid rebellion under control by 1955 ¹⁰. As regards the Muslim Community of Northern Arakan, there were up to 173,000 persons who opted for Pakistani citizenship from the total of 300,000 ¹¹. By the end of 1960, it is plausible that the regimes of U Nu-Ne Win and Ayub Khan had already decided about the future of the community, of which Burma agreed to take responsibility for them ¹². Any such agreement made at top level, however, was not descend downward well upon the community. The central authorities, especially immigration department, was not making initiatives to integrate the community. On the ground, also, there were the splintered groups of Mujahid rebels still remained until 1960s.

7. On 8AM, 25-September-1954, in the speech of Prime Minister U Nu, broadcasted by Burmese radio which describe the people living in Buthidaung and Maungdaw districts are known as Muslim Rohingyas. Press release by The Bangladesh Foreign Ministry, 12 March 1992. (Quoted source: ABSDF Report, 1992)

8. *"The Address by Jamiatul-Ulema to the Prime Minister of Burma"*, 7th December 1948. The name "Ruwangas" or "Rushangyas" for the community was, for the first time, suggested by Jamiatul-Ulema.

[Http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19481207_jamiatul-ulema.pdf](http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19481207_jamiatul-ulema.pdf)

9. *"Pakistan and its Neighbour Burma"* by Hafeez-ur-Rahman Khan, Pakistan Horizon, Vol 14, No.4 (1961). http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19610101_pakistan-and-burma-by-hafeez-ur-rahman-khan.pdf

10. Ibid. *"Pakistan and its Neighbour Burma"*; The Mujahid rebel leader Kassim (Quassim) was detained in East Pakistan in June 1954.

11. *"Profile of Community 1931-1961"* by NetIPR. <http://www.netipr.org/policy/node/46>

12. *"Pakistan and its Neighbour Burma"*. pp 316, 310. In October 1959, General Ne Win, in his capacity as Prime Minister of care taker Government, paid a state visit to Pakistan. In return, the President Ayub Khan visited Burma in December 1960; commented Burma should accept [the Arakan Muslim] community on humanitarian grounds. From those high-level exchanges, certain bilateral state-military agreement appears to have concluded with regards to the Muslim Community of Northern Arakan.

General Aung Gyi's Dilemma

The end of that remaining rebellion had been a significant milestone for both the government and the community. The Brigadier-General Aung Gyi, second-in-charge of Burma military, was faced with the dilemma addressing the community at the rebels' surrender ceremony on 4 July 1961. The retired General Aung Gyi recounted in his Newsletter on February 1992 that he overcame the dilemma by consulting with the community ¹³ :

".... In those days(1960s), the Central Command had to taken care of the situation in Buthidaung and Maungdaw, like present day Thai/Burmese border. Finally, the Mujahid rebels had surrendered. At that ceremony for their surrender, the rebels requested to us that we should not address their community as "Khawtaw" or "Chittagonians". They (rebels) do not like the name, Arakan-Muslim either. They would like to be known as Rohingya, which means the easterner in Arabic language."

Brigadier-General Aung Gyi did deliver his speech to the surrendering Mujahid rebels, describing them as Rohingyas ¹⁴ . His use of word "Rohingya" was a conciliatory gesture as well as politically correct one. Apart from that public speech, there appeared to be no formal records on signed peace agreement between the Government and rebels. It is, however, significant to note that General Aung Gyi gave promise of citizenship, or at least legal residency status, to the community as (page 10) ¹⁵ :

".. The Burmese did not consider the people here as of their nationality. So too, some people here set their selves one foot on [East] Pakistan. We all got it wrong. People in Burma proper got it wrong and the people here also got it wrong. I would therefore say definitely that, from now on, we will consider the people in Mayu District as one of our minority races..... From now on, you, the people in this Mayu area, must consider yourselves as the nationals of Burma; who are one of the minority races of Burma and prepare to lend your allegiance to Burma."

We can recall that there were an estimated 173,000 persons, who opted for Pakistani citizenship during 1953-55 Census within Mayu Frontier Area [#11]. The Burmese military making the promise of citizenship to this community, no doubt, had been in consistent with the earlier agreement made by U Nu-Ne Win and Ayub Khan.

The AFPFL Government, therefore, used the word "Rohingya" in the stead of "Bengali" as a measure to de-Indianize and to be politically correct. Following the government's line, the officials and publications of 1950 & 1960s were making use of this word "Rohingya" to describe the Muslim Community of Northern Arakan ¹⁶ .

13. *"The Rohingya problem I encountered in Buthidaung and Maungdaw Areas"*, February 1992, Newsletter by late General Aung Gyi (Fn. 7; as quoted by ABSDF report 1992).

14. *"Khityay Journal (Burmese)"*, Vol 12. No 6. 4th July 1961, General Aung Gyi's Speech; <http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19610708-Aung-Gyi-Arakan.pdf>

15. Ibid. Aung Gyi's speech, 4th Jul 1961.

16. *"Letter to Burma Human Rights Commission"* by two Rohingya MPs, 10-Feb-2012; The letter listed the publications and official records using the word "Rohingya". Http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/20120210_RohingyaMPs_to_Commission.pdf

The Community's Evolving Priority: Indigenization

The struggle for Burma's independence wasn't built entirely on ethno-centric nationalist movement. The movement was broadly built on the supports of anti-imperialist, pro-Marxist liberationists along with anti-foreigner nationalists¹⁷. Burma's struggle for independence also run in parallel with that of India and there had been always contact between the leadership of two anti-imperialist movements. Those Indians who born and bread in Burma, along with other indigenous races, were being part of Burma's independence movement.

As for the Muslim Community of Northern Arakan, the leadership surly had made a wrong move in May 1946 to annex the region to East Pakistan. A decade later in 1960s, however, the younger generation of leadership within the Community saw differently about the situation. Whilst the Burmese military had completed ceasefires and initiated conciliation at their front, the younger leadership within the community seemed to adopt the situation at political front.

The Rangoon University

Arakan Muslim Association, 1958



Rangoon University Arakan Muslim Association in 1958.

Mr. M.A. Rashid (back row, center); Tahir Ba Tha (front row, 3rd from left)

On such example is the Arakan Muslim Association of Rangoon University in 1958. It was formed by the Muslim youths of Akyab, Buthidaung & Maungdaw, with the support of M.A. Rashid, a Burma domiciled Indian immigrant and well respected Cabinet Minister. Their intellectual input towards integration of the community were to be seen in the years that followed. For example, Tahir Ba Tha of the Association had written voluminous essays about the Rohingyas, and tried to make connection with ancient Islamic Communities of Arakan with the existing one¹⁸. In all his writings, the historically unknown

17. *"U Nu of Burma"* by Richard Butwell, Stanford University Press (1969).

18. Tahir Ba Tha's essays on Rohingya:

"Muslim in Arakan, A brief Study of Rohingyas", Islamic Review, April 1966.

and never existed word "Rohingya" was being incorporated ¹⁹ .

In Ba Tha's writings, understandably, never had mentioned a word about Chittagonian/Bengali labour migrations under British rule. These writings are not to be charged exactly as the hoax about Rohingya nor the fictitious stories about Muslims in Arakan. But these writings are to be understood as making political catch-up with evolving situation. The writings by Ba Tha, just like those of Abdul Gaffer and Sultan Ahmed decade earlier, therefore, are not historical evidence for the existence of Rohingya. These writings are politically charged documents so as to claim Rohingya indigenous status, in order to integrate into Burma's political system.

On evaluating the community's endeavour to integrate into Burma's political system, it had achieved nearly every of humanly-possible objectives by 1960 ²⁰ : (1) the increase of representatives in the Parliament and (2) receiving a separate administrative status for the Mayu frontier region ²¹ . The only thing the community have not achieved was the recognition of indigenous status. Unfortunately, these political achievements, along with all community aspirations, have come to an end with the General Ne Win's military coup in 1962.

Burma's Anti-Foreigner Campaign in 1964

The Second World War presents enormous disaster to the Indian immigrant community and disruption to their thriving businesses operating within Burma ²² . With the Japanese military advances, the British had abandoned Burma and the evacuating Indian immigrants faced traumatic experiences ²³ . But these Indian immigrants cannot forget about their prosperous times in Burma. As soon as British reoccupy the country in 1945, all pre-war businesses along with evacuated workers from India were coming back to Burma ²⁴ .

http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19660401_islamic-review-ba-tha.pdf

"Roewengyas in Arakan", The Guardian Rangoon Vol VII, No. 5, May 1960.

http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19600501_roewengyas-in-arakan-by-ba-tha.pdf

"Slave Raids in Bengal", The Guardian Rangoon, Vol. VII, No. 10, October 1960.

http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19601001_slave-raids-in-arakan-by-ba-tha.pdf

19. A lively discussion on inconsistent use of the word "Rohingya" by Network Myanmar. <http://www.netipr.org/policy/node/34>

20. "The address by Jamiatul-Ulema to the Prime Minister U Nu". 7th December 1948. The community's agenda was set by Jamaitul-Ulema. [Http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19481207_jamiatul-ulema.pdf](http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19481207_jamiatul-ulema.pdf)

21. Objection was made to Arakan statehood and the central government to administer the community separately. The Guardian, Rangoon, 1960. http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19600000_guardian-rangoon.pdf

22. "Pakistan and its Neighbour Burma", pp. 305. As of Second World War, the Indian enterprises own 30% of Burma's agricultural land, 70% of buildings and 50% of cinemas in Rangoon.

23. "A Forgotten Long March: The Indian Exodus from Burma, 1942" by Hugh Tinker, Journal of South East Asian Studies, Vol.6. No.1 (1975).

24. "Immigration policy of Burma in relation to India" by Radha Mohan, Indian Journal of

During U Nu's AFPFL Government era, some observers were doubting whether the Government had any policy or capacity to manage the foreigner population ²⁵. However, the Burman nationalists' plan for foreign enterprises and immigrant workers were revealed in 1963. Under Burmese Government's "Enterprise Nationalization Law", all major industries were nationalized on June 1, 1963. Although, Burmese government was targeting all foreign own enterprises and workers, the government's nationalization policy had largest impact upon Indian immigrant workers. The Indian immigrant workers had been economically 'squeezed out' and, by September 1964, approximately 100,000 destitute Indian nationals had been repatriated by air and sea ²⁶.

The Anxiety in Pakistan

Burma's anti-foreigner drive had caused alarm in Pakistan regarding with the Muslim Community of Northern Arakan. Therefore, on January 1964 the Government of Pakistan sent its Minister for External Affairs, Mr. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto to Rangoon. The Government of Pakistan's main fear was that Burma's anti-foreigner campaign may induce the Muslims of Northern Arakan, who normally considered as Pakistani origins, fleeing into East Pakistan. Mr. Bhutto's delegation was well received by the Burmese Government. The joint communiqué issued by the two foreign ministers stated ²⁷:

"The position of Muslims in Arakan was also a subject of discussion between two Foreign Ministers. The Pakistan Foreign Minister expressed his belief that the Burmese Government would solve the question of Muslims in Arakan with sympathetic considerations and assured The Burmese Foreign Minister recalled the assurance given in 1961 and said that the question had been largely resolved. It would, however, continue to receive sympathetic consideration."

It is, therefore, certain that the regimes of U Nu-Ne Win and Ayub Khan had already decided the future of Muslim Community of Northern Arakan in 1960. No unusual influx of Arakan Muslims were being reported during Burma's 1964 anti-foreigner campaign.

The January 1964 visit of Mr. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto appears further cemented the earlier bilateral agreement of U Nu, Ne Win and Ayub Khan regarding with the Muslim Community of Northern Arakan. During May 1964, General Ne Win and entourage had paid a state visit to Pakistan, received by President Ayub Khan and reportedly signed the border agreement.

Political Science, April 1955. http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19550401_burma-immigration-policy-by-radha-mohan.pdf

25. British Embassy report on situation of immigrants in Burma, 21st Jan 1958. http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19580121_uk-emb-on-burma-immi.pdf

26. "Politics of Burmanization" by Robert A. Holmes, Asian Survey, Mar. 1967. Anti-Indian sentiment by Ne Win government was reflected by the fact that after visit of Indian Foreign Minister in September 1964, even more Indians per month reported left Burma. [Http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19670301_politics-of-burmanization-by-robert-holmes.pdf](http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19670301_politics-of-burmanization-by-robert-holmes.pdf)

27. British Embassy report on Bhutto visit and Joint Communique, 21st Jan 1964. http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19640121_bhutto-burma-visit.pdf

General Ne Win's Unusual Decision in 1978

Further indication emerged in 1978 about the Burmese State, since 1960s, had agreed to take responsibility for the Muslim Community of Northern Arakan. In the aftermath of Operation Dragon King in 1978, General Ne Win allowed -- ostensibly without international pressures -- repatriation for all Rohingya/Bengali refugees who showed the proof of prior residency in Arakan. The diplomats were quite baffled as to why General Ne Win made such decision which considered benevolent and humanitarian. The British Embassy commented in 1979 as ²⁸ :

"17. The most interesting question is why Ne Win, always suspicious of foreigners, decided that the refugees should be allowed to return. The bad press Burma got at...may have had a part.... though I suspect only marginally. (Foreign criticism did not deter the Burmese from expelling the Indian community in large numbers in 1963 and 1964 or from harassing the Chinese community in 1967)..... Whatever the motives the man [Ne Win] as imaginative and magnanimous, adjectives seldom if ever applied to him during the decades of his rule."

By 1978, the Pakistani President General Muhammad Ayub Khan had already passed away and East Pakistan had become a new nation, Bangladesh. However, General Ne Win did not renege on the agreement he made with Pakistan in 1960 regarding the Muslim Community of Northern Arakan. General Ne Win's careful approach with regards to enactment of 1982 Burma Citizenship Law, also indicated his faithfulness to the agreement of U Nu-Ne Win and Ayub Khan ²⁹ .

END OF REPORT:

28. British Embassy cable to Lord Carrington, 3rd July 1979.
http://www.netipr.org/policy/downloads/19790703_uk-embassy.pdf

29. "Roots of the Stateless: General Ne Win's speech on 1982 Citizenship Law".
<Http://www.netipr.org/policy/node/37>