

“Factsheet on the Rohingya” by Maung Zarni

The “[Free Rohingya Coalition](#)”, a recently established lobby group to support the long suffering and victimised Arakan Muslim minority known as “Rohingya”, has published a “[Factsheet on the Rohingya](#)” which astonishingly makes no reference at all to the substantial migration during British rule to what was known as “The Arakan” of many tens of thousands of Bengali agricultural settlers from the Chittagong region.

The author, Maung Zarni, is critical of British colonial censuses conducted during the 19th Century which he claims “were based on the then prevailing pseudo-scientific European conceptions of ‘race’ and conducted for the sake of administrative convenience and control of the subjugated populations, did not record Rohingyas under their ethnic identity but instead used linguistic and religious markers such as ‘Bengali (speakers) or ‘Mohamedans’.....”

The deficiencies of these 19th Century records were recognised by the British authorities themselves. Annual censuses began in 1829 and the first decennial census was in 1872. Initially the vast majority of Arakan Muslims traced their ancestry back to before British rule. But their numbers for some decades remained relatively unimportant. In the [1862 Annual Census](#) only some 19,759 “Mahomedans of Burma” were recorded in Arakan and another 28,338 “Indians”, out of total population of 381,983. These 48,097 Arakan Muslims had risen to only 64,315 by the [1872 Decennial Census](#), out of total population of 484,363.

It was only with the influx of substantial numbers of new migrants from the Chittagong region to promote rice production and export after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 that the demography of The Arakan changed. By the [1911 Decennial Census](#) it was belatedly recognised that the method of tribal classification of Muslims from India made no sense at all in Burmese conditions. Accordingly in the [1921 Decennial Census](#) a new ethnic category of “Indo-Burman” was introduced for those whose ancestry was quasi-indigenous, while those of more recent migration were classified as “Indian”. This was further refined in the [1931 Decennial Census](#), which recorded that there were some 217,801 Muslims of post-1823 Chittagonian descent against only 57,952 pre-1823 of “Indo-Burman” descent.

The presence in Arakan of these British-era settlers is the subject of the entire Chapter VII of the [Report by James Baxter, released in 1941, on Indian Immigration](#). Ethnicity, language and religion had by now been accorded equal importance and status.

Maung Zarni tells us nothing about the wide range of 20th Century British archives which record in detail the arrival of “Chittagonians”. These reports are based on raw material collected by local enumerators and clerks who spoke the local language and were part of their community. The reports were not designed for nefarious colonialist purposes.

To dismiss the entire archive of these 20th Century records out of hand purely for ideological reasons would be absurd. I have no idea what Maung Zarni hopes to achieve in his unscholarly endeavour to convince us all that those of British-era Chittagonian descent who call themselves “Rohingya” are supposedly *taingyintha* or indigenous to Arakan.

This is insulting to the Rohingya who, like the rest of us, do not claim direct, unsullied descent from some pure master race. This obsession with *taingyintha* only damages the right of the Rohingya to the full citizenship of Myanmar to which they are entitled.

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