

MUSLIMS IN THE RAKHINE REGION

Marlar Than Aung

Whenever the power of Myanmar Empire was apparently growth, Myanmar kings enlarged his Empire by conquering the neighboring kingdoms and did subordinate states of Myanmar.

In 1404, Naramaikhla who ruled the Arakan or Rakhine region was forced to flee from the Myanmar to Gaur, capital of Bengal Sultanate. He was welcomed by Bengal Sultan Ahmed Shah, served as an officer in king's army. In 1430 Naramaikhla requested to Nadir Shah who succeeded to Ahmed Shah to help to regain his throne. Nadir Shah granted an army under the command of a general Veli Khan and conquered back the throne.

Then Naramaikhla founded a new capital at Mrohaung or Mrauk U, Myauk U of today. As return, Muslims soldiers who came with Naramaikhla from Bengal were granted to settle in a village near Myauk U and built the Sandikhan mosque which still exists today. Started from 1430, Rakhine was influenced by Muslims and Muslims played a decisive role in the history of Rakhine kingdom. The Rakhine kingdom was closely connected with the Muslim territories to the west. After the death of Naramaikhla, Rakhine started expanding northward and regularly raid to Bengal.

Administrative method and Court ceremonies of Rakhine Kingdom followed the custom of Gaur and Delhi Sultanates. There are a lot of outstanding posts held by Muslims although the kingdom was Buddhist.

In 16th century, Portuguese helped the Rakhine kingdom to raid on Bengal and captured the Muslims as captives. Then they had to serve in the Rakhine army, usually as the king's bodyguard. In 1658, The Mogul prince, elder son of Mogul Emperor Shah Jahan, dethroned his father and declared himself Emperor. The second son of Shah Jahan named Shah Shuja was defeated and fled together with his family and followers to the Rakhine. King of Rakhine welcomed them and permitted to live near Myauk U with the condition of surrender their weapons. Shah Shuja and his followers were soon murdered by Rakhine King but no one knows the true cause.

Then, his soldiers who escaped from massacre were later admitted to the king's bodyguard as a special archers unit called Kaman or Kamanci. When the king of Mogul Empire, the elder brother of Shah Shuja heard the death of his brother and royal family, became angry and put to an end to the Portuguese- Rakhine pirate on the east Bengal coast, their navies and settlement on the Bengal land. Rakhine army units were also attacked by the local Muslims, descendants of the Muslim slaves who had been settled on the land.

As a result the Rakhine kingdom was put up to the end. In 1684, the Rakhine king died and marked as the beginning of the kingdom which Muslim Kaman units took part in the conclusive roles. They were being reinforced by the Afghan mercenaries from northern India. The political rule of Rakhine kingdom was totally in their hands from 1666 until 1710. In 1710, the Arakanese King who succeeded to the former king took over the power over them and most of them exiled to Ramaree and settled there and villages near Akyab, nowadays of Sittwe and still bear the name as Kaman. In 1785, Rakhine was conquered by the Myanmar king and was annexed to Myanmar Empire. Myanmar army was formed by Muslims called "Myedu" and they were posted to Sandoway, Thandwai of today, as Myanmar standing army. Their descendants are still living there and cannot be differentiated with Rakhine and Myanmar except by their religions. Today Muslims in Rakhine region, who are descendants of Kaman and Myaedu, called themselves Rohingya or Rohinja.