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The Advent of Theravada Buddhism in the Arakan Kingdom of Myanmar

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Introduction:

Arakan is an ancient and rich historical country of Myanmar. Though the historians are unable to provide proper evidence regarding when and how the region came into existence, they presume that Arakan had been existing since 3000 B.C. (Ushwezan, 2011.) Arakan traditional chronicles, however, assert that Arakanese had entered Myanmar from Majjhimadesa, a part of India before Buddha was born. They are indigenous to this country. In 1990, military government of Myanmar changed the name of Arakan as Rakhine state. Most Arakanese seem to prefer Rakhine than Arakan therefore they used the word “Rakhine” before independence of Myanmar.

The Origin of Arakan

The names of both Arakan and Rakhine descended from the ‘Pali’ word that is definition of guarding on race and morality. According to some ancient historical books, the word “Arakan” originated in the South India and they asserted that the connection between the two countries was ancient. The classical geographers initially referred to Southeast of India as the Golden land. There are many inscriptions, arts, coins, and old historical broken buildings as evidences. Among them, Shitthaung pillar serves as a strong evidence to historians and researchers. The Anandacandra inscription on the pagoda named the Shit-thaung, described lists of the ancestral monarchs and their constructed pagodas. Some historians pointed out that the king, Devacandra built Dhanyawadi city “which laughed with heavenly beauty” surrounded by walls and a moat in 370-425 AD. They recognized him as the founder of this city (Ushwezan, 2011).

The fragmentary on the north face of this pillar, written in the middle of 11 century, mentions Arakkhadesa, the land of Arakan, which was probably the name for Arakan at that time. Moreover, this region was called as Rakhine in an inscription that is in Pagan, upper of Myanmar (Gurman, 2013). This inscription is presumed from the 12th to the 15th centuries.

Some Arakanese have been living in northern parts of India, particularly in Tripura district. They are mentioned as “Magh” (Gan-Chaudhuri, Jagadis, 1980.) They are the descendants who originated from Arakan and moved due to political reasons. The word “Rakhine” used in the present day, is prominent than other names. It is actually used in Myanmar but the locals prefer the word of Arakan (Dr Sawmyaung, 2014).

The traditional histories of the country claim that the Arakanese people in the remote past came to this region on political grounds. According to ancient chronicles people of two communities who came from India laid the foundation stone of Arakan. The first community settled in Vesali and the second community led by Vasudeva and his brothers settled in Dharavadhi. The community living in Dharavadhi fought with each other and it began to move to Vesali in the northern part of Arakan. According to Arakan historians, the initial history of Arakanese people began from the early Vesali at about 6 century or over 6 B.C and then Danyavati period arose in Arakan. Three Dhanyavati periods of Arakan were as first, second and third periods according to the Arakanese historians. First period started in 3325 B.C, before the Buddha was born. The Dhanyavati was the most significant of them. The art and architecture are related to Buddhism (Usanshwebu, 1998).

There are four ages in Arakan- Dhamnyawadi, Vesali, Laymyo and Mouk Oo.(Ushwezan,2010.) The first of the four ages, Dhanyawadi, was a city typical of the earliest phase of urbanization in Southeast Asia during the first centuries of the Christian era. Most of the scholars and historians researching Arakan historical background presume that the beginning of Arakan was from Dhanyavadi period and its culture was introduced since 3325 BC. Some elements of its culture were similar with Arakan's features of art and culture. Historians confirm that the important elements of culture have been undoubtedly derived from India. This process can clearly be traced in Arakan, which received Indian culture. The culture and art of India also spread to many parts of Southeast Asia linked by the sea. According to Arakan chronicle, Dhanyavadi existed from 3325 BC to 327 AD and the remains of the old city are found even at the present time (Ya, 1995). Marayu was the founder of the first city named Dhanyavadi. He was recognized as the legendary hero-ancestor of the Arakanese. His ancestors descended originally from the northern part of India and established in the valley of Kalandan of Arakan. These histories point out the beginning of Arakan history was mingled with fables like other nationals. People of Arakan seemed to hold Buddhist culture since Gautama Buddha's time. Buddhist traditions play the most important role in the formation of Arakan's culture. Buddhism started in third Dhanyawadi period. Gotama Buddha, the founder of what came to be known as Buddhism, lived in Northern India in the 6th century B.C.

By the advent of the 4th century, other sources began to contribute to our interpretation of the history of the country and its relation to Buddhism. Most important things are the art and architecture which tell the story of the development of religious ideas and beliefs and help us to locate the origins of these through the analysis of their style. The political history is outlined in the inscriptions of the rulers, notably those of the Shit Thaug pillar, a great stone inscribed by kings from the 6th century and carried from capital to capital until it reached Mrauk-U in the 16th century (Santharaung,1979). The lists of kings, the inscriptions mentioned, have been verified by coins bearing their names and local histories, mostly written by Buddhist monks and local wise men by recounting stories of kings and shrines and drawing in part from an earlier oral tradition.

Buddhist Tradition in Arakan Region:

Buddhist traditions play the most important role in the formation of Arakan's culture. Arakan history asserts that Buddha reached the city of Dhanyawadi along with his five hundred disciples, and converted King Candasuriya. The Buddha consented to have his image carved for the future generation to revere and pay homage along with the royal family in commemoration of any event. This was the famous Mahamuni image, well known throughout the country. There are many proofs and great outstanding features in the history of Arakan regarding the accounts of Buddha's sojourn and of the casting of his image in the country.(Usanshwebu, 1998.) The story of his seven day's visit with five hundred Rahandas, his lengthy discourse pregnant with prophesy delivered on the top of the hill opposite the town of Kyauktaware important episodes of Buddhist history related to Arakan region. Arakan history confirms that Buddha visited Dhanyawadi at the request of the king, Candasurita. When the Buddha visited this land, people

gathered to welcome him by holding golden baskets overlaid with flowers and by wearing new and white clothes. People used to wear the white clothes when they participated in Buddhist activities because of this old tradition. When Gautam Buddha resided in Arakan, the different dances, music and songs were held for seven days and especially the five kinds of musical instruments sent forth their harmonious strain.

The Buddha's image was erected by Sakya, the master of Nats and Visagon with their natural power on the Siriguta hill situated to the north-east of the city of Dhanyavati. People receive this culture that was erected by the Sakya and other gods till at the present time. While celebrating Buddhist activities, the young are replicated like Sakya and gods because of this tradition. They believe that the Buddhist ceremony which includes the master, Sakha and gods, Nats who live in abode of celestial being, accomplish in their religious activity.

The Sirigutta hill was called as Siharājā due to being a stone figure of lion which it present the lion-king roaring and devouring its prey. On this Siriguta hill, the King Candasuriya erected the image of the Buddha in the 53th years of his reign (Pamela Gurman, 2013).

Now Arakanese do religious activities according to old Mahamuni tradition. The Mahamuni tradition is the oldest and most popular in Arakan (Sanshwebu, 1998).

This adorable tradition spreads throughout Myanmar and is considered as the most respected tradition related to Buddhism. Temples and monasteries are in every village and every town. They exist in even small villages which have nearly twenty houses. There are many things they have prioritized in their lives. Among them, donation in Buddhism is the first and foremost priority. They give offerings to monks or poor. With the abundance of pagodas, temples and monasteries, people are deeply devoted to religious career. They maintain the Mahamuni tradition which was the first replica of the real Buddha and many graceful art and magnified culture appear in Arakan based on it (Mungthahla, 2004). Mahamuni traditional ceremony that is performed in the month of May is an overjoyed and a fantastic event for Arakan. Before celebrating the event people collect their food and clothes for nearly one week because they have to visit the sacred place where the Mahamuni Buddha stands, in order to pay worship, pray, light candle and food. This tradition is old but is implicitly believed in till the present day and passed down from generations to generation successively. Kings of Arakan always recognized it as a sacred place and visited it soon after they were enthroned. According to royal successive inauguration of kings, a king who ascended the throne had to visit this pagoda for vowing loyalty to the people and country. Whenever he went to the battle he visited the place to pay his respect and seek blessings and then proceeded to war. Though some kings built their new city due to various reasons and shifted their capitals to various other places yet they always recognized it as a sacred duty to visit it from time to time and generally made great religious feasts there. This act was taken as a part of charity. In such cases they invariably left some offering, may be a small shrine or an image, as a memento of their distinguished visit.(Sanshwebu,1998.)

The 'Novice Ceremony', called 'Shinpyu', is the most important for Buddhist parents for boys under 20 years old. The Novitiate ceremony is when boys do their service to Buddhism and are entered into the order of the monks for a week or longer. The novitiate period is mostly between March and April before the water festival starts (Santhar aung,1979).

The parents have to serve this ceremony for their boys who spend sometime, usually a week or more in a monastery under the guidance of a revered monk to experience life of the monkhood. During staying in the monastery as monks they learn the religious literature. Arakan parents work hard for celebrating of this ceremony for their sons. Therefore they are proud to be Arakaness or Buddhists because of belonging such graceful culture and adorable heritage. (Troy)<https://www.travellifex.com/buddhist-novitiation-ceremony-in-myanmar/>

The Beginning of Theravada Buddhism

Two thousand five hundred years have passed since Gautama Buddha passed away. Since the introduction of Buddhism up to the present time, Arakan professed following Buddhism without break. The present-day Buddhism in Arakan is the Theravada Buddhism using the *Pali* canon of *Tripitaka* which are *Vinaya* (conduct), *Sutta* (discourses) and *Abhidhamma* (analytical teaching of body and mind) Pitakas (Dr. Sawmyaung, 2014).

The followers of Theravada Buddhism believe that virtuous deeds assist in getting a better life in the next birth. It follows them after they have passed away and help in getting prosperous life. Therefore they offered their belongings as much they can and people avoided vice as it brought bad affects in life. They believe in the act of the transfer of merit which is famously known as the cycle of Karma even in the present day. By making good deeds one can acquire religious merits and one can also transfer such merits to one's near and dear ones. According to Theravadh Buddhism, by performing meritorious deeds like offering alms, robe, temple and medicine to the Sanghas (monks) and giving charities to the poor and the needy, and doing good deeds personally, one gains merit and benefits in the present life and will go to 'deva's' abode after death. Arakanese follow Buddha's teachings which guide the individuals living in the darkness of the world.

The downfall of Arakan

After introducing Buddhism in Arakan, history records pointed out that Arakanese have been following Buddhism as their sacred religion. The rulers throughout history had maintained it as the national responsibility and strengthened it by rebuilding the pagodas erected by the old kings.

Arakan: As a Colonized Region

Some bronze statues were moved to Britain for the purpose that it was to be used for the weapons during the colonial period. But main statues were maintained due to the great efforts of Arakanese. The protection of this has continued to be the main policy of the citizens who struggled to save these statues. They made it as the national duty of the Arakan Buddhists to safeguard the statues. They took a leading role in nationalist movements for their freedom. Downfall of Arakan independence suffered a great loss and some pagodas were destroyed in other colonized nation. And it was an undeniable truth of history: the victors destroyed symbols of ancient civilization in Arakan to stamp their future conquests (Maungthahla, 2004). Since 1785 onwards people of Arakan suffered the painful legacy of colonial rule and their great royal and religious buildings were destroyed. Moreover thousands of Arakan's historical statues and precious artifacts had been lost in the past. Whenever they think about the past, great miseries reach them. It always threatens them as a dreadful event.

Among them, the loss of Mahamuni was the greatest bitterness to the Arakanese than the loss of their independence, as the Arakanese themselves resolutely regarded that their devoted life and the Mahamuni were inseparable by any mean. The Arakanese felt that Britisher may take the Mahamuni and recognize their devoted thing as booty in the name of conquest but they can never break the spirit of Arakanese and they can never win their heart. There is not matter not to have anything in their lives but Mahamuni is immortal legacy of Arakan given by Buddha which is traditionally unquestionable. The sentimental attachment of Buddhism and the adoration of Mahamuni could not be erased from their mind and replaced by one another.

Conclusion

The whole Arakan cherishes ‘Theravada Buddhism’ that guides and illustrates ways to lead a life free from suffering and achieve happiness and peace in the present world as well as future worlds. They celebrate Buddhist ceremonies almost every month than other countries because they believe that Buddhism is life for them.

“ Thazon pan khaing ta mraing mraing

Rakhine phara paung” (Santhaaung, 1979).

Not only Arakan is rich in natural resources, but it is also rich in Buddhist improvements. The establishment of the Buddhist monasteries, pagodas can be seen in many parts of the country. The golden pagodas on the hill of mountain are magnificent and attractive to visitors. Many pagodas are similar to ancient pagodas. The development of Arakan’s culture and civilization based on creative role, have been offering enormous influence on other cultures and excessive enthusiasm. It was attractive to many artists, and archaeologists due to its incredible architect. The number of Buddhist landmarks erected by the Arakan kings, their followers, and citizens are still found and some are under the earth. In the city of golden Mrauk Oo there are scattering innumerable temples and pagodas which expressed how the country improved Buddhism and economic and how the religion was great influence on spiritual life of the people.

Arakanese chronicle records that more than six million shrines and pagodas flourished in Arakan. There are over million in only Mrauk Oo. In fact, they formed the pride of golden Mrauk Oo. Buddhist arts both in the field of architecture and Buddha-images constructions are on the same line of flourishing. The temples of Chittaung pagoda and colossal Dukekanthein temple established in Mrauk Oo, illustrate the example architectures which were proficiency and accomplishment of Arakanese. This land had associated with the prevailing scholarly and popular literature with a Buddhist identity (Sanshwebu,1998).

The Arakanese are only ‘Theravada Buddhists’ who have embraced Gautama Buddha’s teachings: to do good thing, avoid the evil and maintain a purified mind. They do not accept any other religion but Buddhism.

Buddhist culture has been influencing them and they do social activities according to it.

Arakan’s rich legacy can achieve a great success in Asia due to its value of proficiency in ancient art and culture. Although it was under the control of Burma and British, they have maintained their culture and traditional legacies. Even at the present time, their cultural heritage sources are thriving legacies of sacred symbols of Buddhism. Arakanese accept the conscience that everyone has to protect his land and restore the pagodas, temples and monasteries erected by their ancestors in the past. At present, they are moving towards the growth and development of their culture, literature and spiritual heritage.

According to the influence of ‘Theravada Buddhism’ in Arakan, their mannerism and their action express their Buddhist culture. All aspects of this land are dominated profoundly by Buddhist ideologies. The influence of religion can be seen in Arakanese life- style, tradition, character, art, architecture, language. Religion that inspires them to achieve higher goals provides unity and strength to Arakanese and how Arakanese had decisively upheld Buddhism and how they were impressed by Buddha’s teaching. Arakan, to be very truly, is the land of the great image, deserving its blessed legacy of Buddha. Buddhism profoundly is pervading in Arakan society. The golden pagodas on the hillsides, the saffron robed monks, and the innumerable monasteries proclaim the strength and depth of Buddhist belief and practice in Arakan.

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