

Myth and History of Bengali Identity in Arakan

Introduction

The present state of Rakhaing in Myanmar is the home of a large population of Muslims, who definitely outnumber their coreligionists in other parts of Myanmar (Yegar 1972). The history, culture, and language of these Muslims are topics virtually unknown to either Myanmar scholars or their international colleagues, although there are exceptions (Fleischmann 1981). My earlier work on the subject convinced me that the Muslims in this western corner of Myanmar deserve more academic engagement than they have received so far (Bhattacharya 1995a, 1995b). Rakhaing state has recently been in the headlines in Indian and Bangladeshi newspapers, recalling memories of a 'romantic Arakan' (Huq Chaudhury 1994). The reason for this renewed interest is the 1991-1992 exodus of a large number of refugees from northern Arakan townships, especially Buthidaung and Maungdaw, into the Cox's Bazaar district of Bangladesh. Most of them were repatriated in the period 1993-1997 after the partial mediation of international agencies. Another such exodus had also taken place in 1977-78 (Fleischmann 1981). Both these exoduses have evoked journalistic interest which has again underlined the need to study the origin of these people, whom some in Myanmar call Bengalis and who are so different from the Muslims in other parts of the country.

Early British reports of the area describe its population as being half-Bengali and half-Magh, but speaking a Maghi dialect (O' Malley 1908, 57), the latter being a strange mixture of Arakanese, Bengali, and Urdu (Yegar 1972, 25). This linguistic eclecticism is mirrored in the culture of the region in general which, according to Sen, is characterized by a remarkable fusion of ideas and interchanges of customs and usages (Sen 1954, 676). To some degree this may be explained by the recurrent flow of people moving in and out of the area. For example, after the British pacification and annexation of Lower Burma numerous Bengali immigrants, Muslims as well as Hindus, entered the Arakan area, partly because the British administrative machinery needed manpower to run the country and to work in the large agricultural sector of the area. Migration caused the British to categorize the Muslims of Arakan into 'Indians' and 'bonafide residents'. The British administrators adjudicated that those whom they had seen living in the region before they came to Arakan were bonafide residents. This is confirmed by the following statement announcing the mode of appearance of Muslim population in Arakan (Gazetteer of Burma 1983. Vol. 2. 16):

Those, who are bonafide residents, though recruited by immigrants from Bengal, are for the most part descendants of slaves captured by the Arakanese and Burmese in their wars with the neighbours. The Arakan kings in the former times had possessions all along the coast as far as Chittagong and Dacca and many Mahomedans were sent to Arakan as slaves. Large numbers are said to have been brought by Meng Radza-gyee after his first expedition to Sundeeep and the local histories relate in the ninth century several ships were wrecked on Ramree Island and the Mussulman crews sent to Arakan and placed in villages there. They differ but very little from the Arakanese except in their religion and in the social customs which their religion directs; in writing they use Burmese but among themselves employ colloquially the language of their ancestors.

As the title indicates, my specific concern in this paper is to investigate the identity of these bonafide Muslim residents and trace it to the pre-colonial period, i.e. to the time that the area was part of the Buddhist kingdom of Arakan. Although Arakan is now a forgotten name in the minds of most Bengalis, it played a crucial role in the cultivation of Bengali literature (Sen 1979, 137-146), giving rise to what may even be called a seventeenth century Bengal renaissance. The two greatest exponents of this literary renaissance were the Bengali poets Daulat Qazi and Sayyid Alaol. A considerable part of my sources has been taken from the various translations and literary adaptations produced by these authors. For example, during the period of the Arakanese King Sirisudhammaraja (1622-1638), Daulat Qazi wrote *Sati Mayna*, also known as *Lor Candrani*, which drew on north Indian folk literature. It was originally written in Gohar, a dialect of Hindustani. Although Daulat Qazi could not complete the work, it was rounded off by Alaol, who is well known for his Bengali translation of the epic *Padmavati*, originally written by Malik Muhammad Jayasi during the reign of Sher Shah Sur (1472-1545). Apart from Daulat Qazi and Alaol, we find other literary talents at the Arakanese court such as Magana Thakur who wrote the story of *Candravati*; its manuscript was only discovered as late as the 1930s in Chittagong (Huq and Karim, 1935, 29). I shall come back to all of them in the course of the present article. What it is most important to stress at this juncture is that the entire region of south-eastern Bengal – especially the districts of Chittagong, Sylhet, Noakhali, and Comilla including the Indian state of Tripura – appears to have been an important seed-bed of Bengali-Islamic culture. It was also deeply committed to already existing traditions of Yogic Sufism, Sahajiya Vaisnavism, and the Sufi cult of Badr or Pir Badr, the saint of seamen (Temple 1925, 15-33; Roy 1983, 241-5; Sharif 1992, 198). As we shall see later on, this eclectic, esoteric spirit left a deep imprint on Bengali poets like Daulat Qazi and Alaol.

Another indication of its highly mixed background, is the fact that this seventeenth century Bengal renaissance was patronized by the Buddhist kings of Arakan, albeit through an elite of urban Muslim immigrants from Chittagong and other parts of south-eastern Bengal. In this paper I will attempt to answer the question of why poets like Alaol were given the task of translating so many Hindustani and Persian works. For example, what intention did the Arakanese King Satuidhammaraja (1645-1652)

have in mind when he invited Alaol to translate the story of *Padmavati* into Bengali? I shall argue that Alaol's genius was 'used' by the Arakanese kings to propagate the idea that they were to go down in history as the unrivalled patrons of Bengali culture. This explanation ties in very neatly with the fact that in the previous two centuries Arakanese kings had already combined Muslim titles with Buddhist names (Leider 1998). The paper also argues that the Arakanese kings attempted to build on regional Bengali sentiments to counter further Mughal expansion in the region.

Much of the present paper builds on the earlier pioneering work of Bangladeshi scholars working on eastern Bengali literature. The tradition of literary criticism that was started by Satyendra Nath Ghoshal was continued by scholars like Sukumar Sen, Asit Bandyopadhyaya and, more recently, by Devanath Bandyopadhyaya (see Ghoshal 1972; Sen 1975, 281-304; Bandyopadhyaya 1980, 709-803; Bandyopadhyaya, 1984 & 1985). The most recent books on Alaol are by Amritlal Bala and Saiyyid Ali Ahsan (Bala, 1991; Ahsan, 1997). This new generation of Bangladeshi scholars faithfully acknowledges the contributions of Muhammad Enamul Huq, Ahmed Sharif, Abdul Karim Sahitya Visharad, and Shahidullah (Huq 1975; Sharif 1958 & 1977; Karim 1935; Shahidulla 1967). Indeed, Abdul Karim Sahitya Visharad devoted much of his time to searching for manuscripts by Chittagonian and Arakanese poets who flourished in the period from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Working with Muhammad Enamul Huq, he published *Arakan Rajasabhaya Bangla Sahitya* (Bengali Literature at the Court of Arakan) (Huq and Karim, 1935, 29).

Arakan in Bengali Myth

The name Arakan elicits different and mutually opposing visions in Bengali minds. It evokes a kind of romantic past, a past through which people want to wander in search of old Buddhist monuments among ethnic groups with a Hindu-Buddhist identity (Johnston 1944). Perhaps, it was this romantic vision of Bengali authors that inspired the composition of many creative works. For example, Harinarayan Chattopadhyaya wrote a book entitled *Arakan*, which is based on a story about an Arakanese boy, Lun Pe, whose urge to fight for Indian and Burmese freedom from the British yoke motivated him to leave his idyllic rural home for Rangoon (Chattopadhyaya 1935). Far less heroic, Arakan also recalls the dreadful memory of Luso-Arakanese piracy and slave raiding during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries (Harvey 1967, 143-144). Harvey says that Rennell's map of Bengal showed vast areas of south Bakarganj as 'deserted on account of the ravages of the Muggs' (Harvey 1967, 143). The latter term is synonymous with Arakanese and is still in vogue among native speakers of Bengali. Unfortunately, the concept of a Magh community is inextricably linked with the still current Bengali expression 'Mager Muluk', i.e. world of disorder. It can be pointed out that this single expression alone symbolizes the degree of social and political chaos prevailing in Lower Bengal during the time period specified.

Another version of the Arakanese myth is cryptically present in the romantic version of the Shah Shuja legend. The Mughal prince Shah Shuja landed in Arakan in

1660 and was given shelter there by Candasudhammaraja (1652-1684). The question of why and how Shuja was killed is still a mystery following the contradictory accounts of Bernier, Manucci, Bowrey, Hamilton, and Phayre (Khan 1966). Rabindranath Tagore used the legend of Shah Shuja's flight as the basis for one of his short stories named *Dalia* (Tagore 1988, 52-57). Tagore's Shah Shuja legend is of yet another kind. Being driven out by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, Shah Shuja took refuge in Arakan. The King of Arakan was attracted to one of the three beautiful daughters of Shah Shuja and ultimately proposed marriage to her. Shah Shuja turned down the king's proposal. Consequently, he was taken for a boat ride on a river and an attempt was made to sink the boat. Shah Shuja and his daughters jumped into the river from the sinking boat. Despite this effort to escape, the prince lost his life. A fisherman rescued one of his daughters, Amina. One of the Mughal employees of Shuja, Rahmat Ali, who also goes under the name of Rahmat Shaikh, rescued another daughter, Julikha. The third daughter remained untraceable. The two sisters, Amina and Julikha, were picked up by a local fisherman and given a home in his hut. The fisherman gave Amina an Arakanese name Tinni.

One day a person named Dalia came to the hut and this Arakanese fell in love with Julikha. In the meantime, Amina and Julikha were informed by Rahmat Shaikh that the Prince of Arakan had been told of their existence in the fisherman's hut. If Julikha wanted to take the revenge for her father's murder, there could be no better opportunity than to kill him when he came to them. Rahmat also informed Julikha that the prince was attracted to Amina and wanted to marry her. Hearing this message Amina and Julikha went to the court of Arakan, carrying with them a sharp sword. The last scene of the drama depicts Amina in the lap of Dalia, who was actually the Prince of Arakan. The last line of the short story in Bengali runs as follows: 'The sword peeped out from its scabbard and laughed at this interesting end'. One can see that Tagore moulded the Shah Shuja legend in his own way by not highlighting Shuja's enmity towards the Arakanese king. Indeed, he tended to ignore it. In his perception Arakan was so overshadowed by Bengal that Shuja's daughter Tinni barely felt that she was in an alien country. She could sense Bengal all round her. Tagore's Tinni and Dalia had a diametrically opposite kind of ending (comedy) compared to the prevalent versions of the Shuja legend. Perhaps, Tagore foresaw a seed of communal disharmony in those versions and realizing the necessity to eliminate the dangerous elements in the issue, he portrayed a romance between the two characters, Tinni and Dalia.

The popularity gained by Tagore's *Dalia* is evident from a work of the British author George Calderon who made a short translation of *Dalia* in the year 1915 (Calderon 1915). Calderon entitled his translation *The Maharani of Arakan*. Calderon included beautiful photographic illustrations, which made the book quite attractive. Calderon gave the fisherman an Arakanese name, Tung Loo, and the Julikha of Tagore has been changed into Roshenara. As far as the story itself is concerned, Calderon does not deviate from Tagore. In the 1950s the story was adapted to a drama to be staged by the Indian Art and Dramatic Society in London.

Dalia is just one of the literary works of Tagore that reveal his aim to propagate one single Bengali culture. This is evident, for example, in his appreciation of the

patriotism of the Arakanese kings and their subjects in his play *Mukut*, which plays on the relationship between Arakan and the so-called *barah bhuyan*, the autonomous chiefs of eastern Bengal (Tagore 1984, 588-604). This is reflected in the third scene of the drama where the Prince of Tripura, Rajadhar, meets the King of Arakan. In this encounter Rajadhar is asking for the crown – the Bengali word *mukut* meaning crown – whereupon the Arakan king says that it is ‘easier to give his own life than the crown of Arakan’ (Tagore 1984, 597). This utterance by the king, shows how perfectly Tagore appreciated the independence of mind shown by the Arakanese rulers. Similarly, the story of *Rajarshi* bears witness to Tagore’s interest in the history of Tripura, a region historically closely associated with Bengal. In all the three pieces, *Dalia*, *Mukut*, and *Rajarshi*, Tagore’s message is clear: Bengal, Arakan, and Tripura shared a common cultural identity.

The association of Arakan with Bengal is also very apparent in its manifestation in the ballad tradition of eastern Bengal. These ballads were sung for generations in the remotest villages of this area. One such ballad *Shuja Tanayar Vilapa* – i.e. lamentations of Shuja’s daughter – has been included in the benchmark work of Dinesh Chandra Sen (Sen 1930, 495-513). The theme of this ballad is the lamentation expressed by the people of rural Bengal because of the painful situation faced by Shuja’s daughter. As she was going to be married to the King of Arakan, she had to eat *ngapi*, a strong flavoured fish paste, which she apparently did not like (Sen 1930, 504-505). The word *vilapa*, i.e. lamentation, indicates that for generations the idea was nurtured among the folk masses of Bengal that Shuja’s daughter was forcibly married to the Arakanese prince. Interestingly, the mood of *vilapa* is just the opposite to what Tagore wanted to say in his *Dalia*. The omnipresence of words like Magh, Barma and so forth in Chittagong folk poems may be seen as another indication of the central role of Arakan in the construction of Bengali identity. These folk poems repeatedly tell us about those Chittagonian men who forgot their own parents once they had fallen in love with Arakanese women after their migration to Arakan (Alam 1985).

Bengali Religious Traditions

Before taking a closer look at the seventeenth century Arakanese court itself, it would be useful to elaborate on the religious and cultural traditions of the region. A thorough observation on the impact of Vaisnavism, mystic (yogic) Islam, and Nathism on the Bengali society of Arakan would lead us to conclude that there was virtually no bar to the practising of the rituals of one religion by the followers of another. The Vaisnava movement, which brought a social revolution in late medieval Bengal, found fertile soil in Arakan for various reasons. Firstly, there is of course the close geographical proximity between Bengal and Arakan. Secondly, there was the liberal policy of the Arakanese kings that made the capital, Mrauk U, what it was. This liberal policy became, as I understand it, the pillar of the political and commercial strength of Mrauk U, also known as Rosanga. In the *Padmavati* the chapter on ‘Rosanga Varnana’ – i.e. description of Rosanga – brilliantly draws the picture of a cosmopolitan city (Bandyopadhyaya, 1985, 10-14; Chattopadhyaya 1935). Who did

not come to Rosanga? 'Arabi, Rumi, Ujbeki, Lahuri, Multani, Sindhi, Kashmiri, Dakhini, Hindi, Kamrupi, Bangladeshi, Karnatakavasi, Mughal, Pathan, Rajput, Hindu, Siam, Tripura and Kuki' (Bandyopadhyaya 1985, 13). After the political defeat of the Sena kings of Bengal at the beginning of the thirteenth century, Vaisnavas sought religious asylum. They found it in Arakan, the nearest Buddhist state where the Buddhism followed was not the orthodox Theravada school. The Buddhism of Arakan, which was highly diluted by Mahayana thoughts, allowed in its domain worship of Hindu gods and goddesses (Bhattacharaya 1997). Therefore, Arakan could offer the religious refugees a home, not found elsewhere in India.

Now let me come back to the point where Vaisnavism and Sufism accommodated each other in the easiest possible way. Any barriers between the two were removed because the Vaisnavas believed in a god who was an *avatara* (incarnation) of Visnu and that god was Krisna, not Siva, or any other classical Hindu god. Nor was this Krisna, the Krisna of the *Bhagavadgita*. He was the god of love because He was the lover of Radha. This worldly face of the god appealed to the Bengali Muslims in an unprecedented way, which explains the frequent selection of the theme by Muslim Bengali poets, predominantly from south-eastern Bengal, to name but a few from the long list: Akbar Ali, Abdul Malik, Abul Huchan, Alaol, Ali Mian, Ali Raja, Ashraf Ali, Kamar Ali, and Badiuddin (Bhattacharya 1962, 107-132). The supreme symbol of human life, that is the love between a man and a woman, has also been expressed in the works of these Muslim Vaisnava poets. For example, when the Sufi poets composed their works they preferred to embrace the story of Radha and Krisna than the story of Layla and Majnun and Farhad and Shirin. It can be imagined that a large number of them also went to Arakan. In fact, we have poets, for example Maradan, Donagazi and others, who most certainly had close links with Arakan. Pertinently, Alaol's style followed in his book *Padmavati* was a Vaisnava style of writing. He also used Brajabuli, a language of Vaisnava literature (Qanungo 1958, 48). The influence of Kavi Jayadeva, the leading exponent of Bengal Vaisnavism, is also prominent in Alaol's writing. Indeed, all the Bengali scholars, whose works I have mentioned so far, have laid stress on the Vaishnava style of Alaol and Daulat Qazi (Bhattacharaya 1962; Bandyopadhyaya 1984 and 1985; Bandyopadhyaya 1980). Shashi Bhusan Dasgupta saw in Daulat Qazi a clear reflection of the Vaisnava poets of Bengal: Jayadeva, Vidyapati, and Candidasa (Bhattacharaya 1962, 155-56). Shashi Bhusan Dasgupta has quoted verses from Daulat Qazi in which this clear Vaisnava style has been followed. Both Daulat Qazi and Alaol seem to have been especially influenced by Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda*.

There seems little doubt that the south-eastern part of Bengal was politically and culturally more stable than its northern part (Bhattacharya 1985). This stability was actually provided by Bengal's eastern neighbour, Arakan, which developed Buddhism as state religion at a very early period (Johnston 1944, 357-385). The Candras of Arakan and the Candras of Vikrampura were undoubtedly related to each other. The position of Rohitagiri, from where the Candras of Bengal hailed, has been quite rightly identified within the boundaries of Arakan. For example M. Tarafdar has legitimately argued that Mrauk U was earlier the Rohitagiri of the Candras of Bengal (Tarafdar 1981, 17, fn. 11). The kingdom, like Patikkara in which worship of Tantric

goddesses like Cunda and Durgottara became popular, took an effective part in shaping the kind of Buddhism that Arakan professed in the medieval period (Ali 1961; Bhattacharaya 1997, 59). In his *History of Buddhism*, Taranatha testifies that Koki land, which included Pagan, Arakan, and Hamsawati (Pegu) in its geographical limit, practised Mahayana Buddhism. Drawing heavily on Duroiselle's theory on Tantric Buddhism, I have analysed this phenomenon in my paper on the Ari cult of Myanmar (Bhattacharaya 1997, 59). When Bengal came under the influence of Islam, where did these Tantric-minded worshippers, the Yogis and Nathagurus, go? The answer is of course nowhere: they resorted to mutual accommodation. This is the story which has been so boldly drawn by Enamul Huq in his path-breaking work *The History of Sufism in Bengal*. Sufi saints incorporated pre-Islamic Tantric and Yogic practices into the fold of Islam, which showed its maximum adaptability in Bengal.

Yogic and Tantric philosophy connote the need for a searching of the soul hidden in the human body. Very often this soul is described as a bird. The readers of *Padmavati* can compare this analogy with the role of *Shuka*, the parrot, which acted as messenger between Padmavati and Ratnasena. Different physical practices are prescribed to discover that hidden soul, the finding of which ultimately leads to eternal bliss. Buddhists describe this spiritual attainment as *nirvana* whereas Tantric Siddhyacaryas called it *mahasukha*. Both are commensurate to uniting with Allah. The greatness of this Allah, and not the Allah of north Indian Muslims, has been sung in various ways in Alaol's works, especially in his *Tuhfa* and *Sikandarnama*. It is important to note that the chapter 'Allahar sristhi vaicitra' (The wonder Allah's creation) is an addition to the *Sikandarnama*. In the original version there is no such chapter (Sharif 1977, 329). Shashi Bhusan Dasgupta, on the other hand, has quite impressively shown the identification of Prajna with Upaya, Sakti with Siva, and female with male, which were demonstrated in the Buddhist Tantras. The 'human organism is but an epitome of the universe and that all truth is within the body, the Tantric Buddhists had to locate all the philosophical truths within this physical organism' (Dasgupta 1969, 29). But this human body is mortal also; only the soul is immortal. The entire philosophy that has been described above has found its expression in all of Alaol's works. The dichotomy between mortal and immortal is echoed in the story of Padmavati. For example, the love of Ratnasena for Padmavati is moral and immortal but Alauddin's love for Padmavati is immoral and is therefore unacceptable.

As he had done in his *Sikandarnama*, Alaol incorporated his own contribution into his *Padmavati*. Most important in this respect is the chapter 'Ratnasena Padmavati Bibaha khanda' in which the marriage of Padmavati and Ratnasena is described. This chapter gives in detail all the rites and rituals of a Bengali marriage, which are still followed by the Bengalis in both Bangladesh and West Bengal. Also in the *Sikandarnama*, the description of marriage between Rausanak and Sikandar reminds the reader more of a Hindu Indian marriage than an orthodox Muslim marriage (Bala 1991, 257). Furthermore, in the chapter called 'Premakhanda', a chapter on love, Alaol introduces the concept of two nerves that symbolise the moon and the sun. This shows his knowledge of the Yoga sastra (Bandyopadhyaya 1985, 81). In the story of *Sati Mayna* of Daulat Qazi we find the introduction of Yogis exerting a prominent

influence in the Arakanese society. When Candrani was bitten by a snake, a Yogi rescued him. Again, in the temple where Candrani met Lor, Lor was disguised as a Yogi. As we know, the Yogis were numerous in southern Bengal and in Tripura. Even as late as 1910 there were 68,000 Yogis in this area (Wise 1883, 290). Wise also testifies to the existence of numerous Yogis in Tripura and Noakhali, both geographically close to Arakan.

Bengal Renaissance at the Arakanese Court

The works of scholars like Jacques Leider (Leider 1998, 189-215), Michael Charney (Charney 1998, 1-27), and Pamela Gutman (Gutman 1998, 103-110) definitely deserve the credit for raising the mystic veil over medieval Arakan. Similar works dealing with the relationship between medieval Bengal, Tripura, and Arakan are still in great demand. Looking at Arakan from the Bengal point of view can answer many questions which are of significance for the history of the subcontinent as well as for that of Myanmar. The absence of such works has made my present venture extremely difficult. However, works written by Shashi Bhushan Dasgupta (Dasgupta 1969), Enamul Huq (Huq 1975), and recently by R. Eaton (Eaton 1997) have provided me with the necessary theoretical support to place the Muslims of east Bengali origin in Arakan in their proper perspective. In this section my major concern is to look into some of the hitherto untouched aspects of the Bengal-Arakan relationship in the seventeenth century. The reason for my interest in this period lies in the fact that all the works by Alaol were written in this century. And it was during this time period that Arakan was actually going through a phase of political turmoil.

The history of Arakanese expansion covers the period 1430-1630 as Leider in his contribution to this volume correctly points out. There is plenty of data to indicate a strong provincial government in Chittagong which functioned smoothly under the administration of Arakanese governors. They used the title *anauk-bhuran* – meaning ‘King of the West’ on their trilingual coins (Chowdhury 1997, 150). The use of Bengali, alongside Persian and Arakanese, indicates the importance of the Bengali language and was recognized by the Arakanese governors posted in Chittagong. But, let me concentrate on the two main agents of Bengali culture in Arakan: Daulat Qazi and Sayyid Alaol.

Daulat Qazi was a contemporary of the Arakanese King Sirisudhammaraja (1622-1638). Daulat Qazi composed *Sati Mayna*, otherwise known as *Lor Candrani*, at the request of Ashraf Khan, the *lashkar wazir* of the king. This was a period in which the Arakanese domination over Chittagong was waning but Arakanese endeavours to encourage court poets of Chittagonian origin were in full swing. The name of Daulat Qazi’s patron implies his urban, *ashrafi* origin. Eaton quite legitimately ascribes the status of foreigner to the *ashrafi* Muslims. In doing so, he quotes Manrique who visited Lower Bengal in 1629. Manrique divides the population of Bengal into three groups: ‘the Portuguese, the Moors and the natives of the country’ (Eaton 1997, 171). The *ashrafi* were socially distinct from the natives as they came from the west. In their eyes, the indigenous Bengali Muslims were native fish-eaters and therefore they felt themselves a cut above this category. Despite such feelings of

group superiority, it is told that Ashraf Khan's tolerance knew scarcely any bounds as Sayyids, Shaikhs, Mughals and Pathans felt perfectly at home at his court (Sen 1975, 283). No matter whether indigenous or foreigner, everyone was dear to him (*paradeshi swadeshi nahika atmapara*). Even Hindus belonging to all castes – Brahmans, Ksatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras – sat in a row side by side. Amidst them Ashraf Khan, who was well versed in Niti Vidya and Kavya sastra, was 'like a moon' (Sen 1975, 283). In fact, Ashraf Khan became the *de facto* ruler in Arakan, a position which was considerably bolstered because Sirisudhammaraja refused to be crowned as he had been unnerved by a warning from an astrologer (Qadir 1984, 53). Ashraf Khan was known to be fond of listening to different folktales of Gohari origin. Having heard the story of Lor and Candrani, which appealed to him, he ordered Magana Thakur to translate it into Bengali *pancali* form. This was a particular style of Bengali oral tradition that emerged as a result of Vaisnava influence. It became so popular that later on hymns in praise of Laksmi, Satya Narayan, Satya Pir and such other local gods and goddesses were written in this form. I quote the relevant portion from Sukumar Sen's *Bangla Sahityer Itihasa* (Sen 1975, 284):

*Thetha caupaiya Doha kohila sadhane
Na bhujhe gohari bhasa kono kono jane
Deshi bhashe kaha taka pancalir chanda
Sakale shuniya jena bujhaye sananda.*

[Thetha caupaiya Doha has been used, but Gohari is not understood by some. So please give a *pancali* form of the story in indigenous language, so that many people enjoy the story.]

The term 'Deshi Bhashe', i.e. indigenous language, was used to impress upon the Bengali inhabitants. It shows how greatly the Arakanese ruler esteemed the Bengali native speakers of Arakan.

Like Ashraf Khan, Magana Thakur, the author of these lines, was a minister at the Arakanese court as well as the chief patron of Alaol at the Arakanese court. In the chapter 'Magan Prashasti', i.e. Eulogy for Magana, in Alaol's *Padmavati*, we come across some important information about Magana Thakur's identity. It appears that Magana Thakur was entrusted with the task of caring for the only daughter of Narapati. The princess was married to one of the latter's brothers, Satuidhammaraja. After the death of the king and after Satuidhammaraja and the princess had ascended to the throne of Arakan, Magana Thakur became the chief advisor to the king. His openness to outsiders is comparable to that of Ashraf Khan, as he is reported to have patronized all kinds of 'foreigners, such as *ulama*, Sayyids and Shaikhs'. When people were dispersed because of the king's anger, all came to none other than Magana and he alone – such was the power of Magana's magnetic personality (Bandyopadhyaya 1985, 18).

As we have already seen, Magana Thakur himself appears to have had a literary talent as he produced the *Candravati*. But here I should note not all the confusion about his identity has been dispersed. For example, we are not in a position to know whether Magana Thakur was a Hindu or a Muslim. Leading scholars, such as Enamul Huq and

Abdul Karim, strongly represent the view that Quraishi Magana and Magana Thakur are the same person and that he was a Muslim (Huq and Karim 1935, 91). The renowned Calcutta scholar of medieval Bengali literature, Sukumar Sen, is of the opinion that Magana Thakur – as the title Thakur indicates – must have been a non-Muslim, Arakanese prince (Sen 1975, 298). Leaving aside the debate about whether Magana Thakur was a Muslim, a Hindu, or perhaps a Buddhist, it is important to stress the cosmopolitan character of Thakur Magana who was well versed in different sastras and languages like Persian, Arabic, Bengali and Burmese, as well as being acquainted with the arts of music, drama, *kavya*, *alamkara*, medicine and other practical sciences.

Apart from Alaol's relationship with Magana Thakur, it is important to note Alaol's early association with Majlis Qutb, one of the *barah bhuyan* of Bengal, a fact that has escaped the attention of most other scholars. Alaol's father was Majlis Qutb's minister (Qadir 1984, 60). At the time Islam Khan was the Mughal governor of Bengal, Majlis Qutb became the raja of Fatehabad (Maniruzzaman 1960, 6). Majlis Qutb's minister, the father of Alaol, was defeated and killed by the Portuguese. Alaol narrated the horrowing journey by sea during which the harmads, i.e. the Portuguese freebooters, attacked him (Qadir 1984, 61). Having lost his father he then landed in Arakan or Rosanga as it is called in his account. In his *Baharistan-i Ghaybi*, the Mughal general Mirza Nathan speaks of Majlis Qutb as one of the twelve *barah bhuyan* of Bengal (Mirza Nathan 1936, 2: 799-800). These landlords were constantly wooed by the Arakanese kings for the simple reason that those twelve lords dared to oppose the Mughal, the arch-enemy of the Arakanese (Hosten 1913). Although opinions vary regarding the original identity of Alaol, I cannot but agree with the view that proclaims his east Bengali origin. In the chapter 'Atmaparicay', i.e. self-introduction, Alaol himself has narrated that he came from Fatehabad. Let me quote from the *Padmavati* (Bandyopadhyaya 1985, 20):

*Muluk Fatehabad gaureta pradhana.
Tathata Jalalpura Punyavanta sthana
Bahu gunavanta vaise khalifa olama
Kathek kahimu sai desher mahima
Majlis Qutb jana tata adhipati
Mui dina hina tana amatya santati.
Karyagati jaite pantha vidhira ghatana
Harmader nauka sange haila darasana
Bahujuddha achila sahid haila tata
Ranakshete bhogayoge ailum ehato.*

[Fatehabad was the most important city of Gaur. There lived a number of talented people, khalifas and ulamas. Words fail me in describing the glory of Fatehabad. Majlis Qutb was the ruler of that country (Fatehabad). I, poor soul that I am, am his son. On the way a disaster befell us. We were challenged by boats of the Harmadas (Portuguese freebooters). Fighting broke out and my father became a martyr. Fortune has brought me from the battleground to this palace]

Abdul Huq Choudhury is of the opinion that the name Fatehabad was actually given to Chittagong in the year 1519-1532 when the sultan of Gaur, Nusrat Shah, was crown prince of Bengal and conquered Chittagong (Huq Choudhury 1988, 5). In contrast, the editor of *Padmavati*, Bandopadhyaya, describes Fatehabad as being located in Faridpur district. It should be mentioned that Alaol was under the patronage and protection of the Arakanese kings Satuidhammaraja (1645-1652) and Candasudhammaraja (1652-1684). Therefore, he was bound to tell the true story of his adventure and the subsequent asylum given by the Arakanese kings.

Although no date has been mentioned for his arrival in Arakan, scholars like Mayaharul Islam and Dulal Choudhury assume that Alaol came to Arakan at the age of sixteen or seventeen (Islam and Choudhury 1980, 8). It was exactly in these years, 1612-13, that tension was reaching breaking-point between the Mughals and the Arakanese. According to A.B.M. Habibullah, the first Arakanese invasion of Bhalwa took place during Islam Khan's governorship (1606-1613) (Habibullah 1945, 33-38). The hostilities launched by the Mughals against the Arakanese roughly coincided with the final destruction of the *bhuyan* of Bhati, particularly those of Sripur, Bakla and Bhusna. From the determined and persistent nature of the subsequent attacks made by the Arakanese on Bengal it seems that the Arakanese, to quote the words of Habibullah, 'had inherited from the Afghan and then from the Bhuiyas, the hostility from the Mughals. The final conquest of Chittagong in 1666 may thus be regarded as the conclusion of the operations which commenced with Daud Karrani's final defeat near Rajamahar' (Habibullah 1945, 33).

Now the question of why Alaol began translating great Persian and Hindustani works after having lived for almost forty years in Arakan deserves some consideration. The information that Alaol was engaged in royal service gives us a clue in the search for an answer to the question. The translation of the *Padmavati*, his first work, was completed in the year 1651. The original was written by Malik Muhammad Jayasi who had dedicated the work to the Afghan emperor, Sher Shah Sur. Jayasi, a Sufi by faith, was affiliated with the Chishti sect. One of the leaders of this sect, Muhiuddin, had been Jayasi's guru. There is much heresy about Jayasi's life, details of which are beyond the scope of the present paper. Nevertheless, it should be noted that both Jayasi and Alaol were typical representatives of the court poets of medieval India. Court poets had to fulfill certain obligations to their patrons. First of all, they had to obey the instruction of their masters regarding the choice of their literary themes. Malik Muhammad Jayasi had to choose the theme of *Padmavati*, a story that glorified the sacrifice of the Rajputs against north Indian Muslim domination. In the story King Ratnasena of Chitor symbolises Hindu rule, whereas Sultan Alauddin represents the rule of Islam. The princess Padmini from Simhala symbolizes the Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka. One of the last verses of Jayasi's *Padmavati* says, and I quote (Bandopadhyaya 1984, 345):

*Jauhar bhaim saba istiri purusha bha e samgrama
Badsah gara cura chitour bha Islam.*

[Women did Jaharbrata, men fought the wars, Badsah destroyed the fort and Chitor became an Islamic State]

The last line of Jayasi's *Padmavati* is very significant, for it carries the implication that if the Hindus do not step up their resistance, any state will be liable to suffer the fate of Chitor. Jayasi's *Padmavati* very clearly warns people against Shariati Islam and north Indian hegemony. Most probably, it was these two aspects of Jayasi's works which appealed strongly to the Arakanese rulers and their anti-Mughal Bengali ministers. It also must have stimulated the cohesion among the resident Chittagonian Bengalis in Arakan.

The *Padmavati* was not the only work Alaol translated. For example, his *Sikandarnama* is a Bengali translation of Nizami's *Iskandarnama*. This work was undertaken at the instigation of a minister called *majlis*, with the title of Navaraj. In 1660 Alaol made a translation of another work by Nizami, the *Haft Paykar*, which became the *Sapta Payakar* in Bengali, to be followed five years later by the *Tuhfa-i Nasa'ih* of the Indo-Iranian poet Yusuf Gada who wrote this religious text on Islamic social and religious norms in the year 1393-94. This, which is the only purely Islamic work by Alaol, deals with all the details of the Islamic way of life. Ahmed Sharif, a pioneer in Islamic Bengali literature, took the trouble to edit the manuscript of the *Tuhfa* (Sharif 1958). It was one Sayyid Musa who gave Alaol the inspiration to translate the *Tuhfa*, and the patronage which enabled him to complete the work of Daulat Qazi's *Sati Mayna* came from one Sulaiman. Other works translated by Alaol were the *Sayful Muluk Badiuzzaman* and the *Padavalis* (Sharif 1977). From Alaol's works it appears that the Muslim intellectuals of Arakan played an important role as purveyors of a Bengali-Islamic culture that appealed to the local elite. In more than one work, say for example in the *Sayful Muluk Baduizzaman* as well as in the *Ragatalanama*, it is said by Alaol that (Sharif 1958, 111):

*Rosangeta musulmana yatheka achanata
Talim alim bali adar karanta
Bahu mohanter putra maha maha nara
Patha gita sangita Sikhailum bahutara.*

[The Muslims of Rosanga were patronized as seekers of knowledge and as trainers in the arts. I (Alaol) have educated sons of many elite families of Rosanga]

This passage from the *Ragatalanama* testifies that Alaol served as a kind of house tutor to different upper class urban inhabitants of Arakan. For example, he was well versed in the theory of music. The word *talim*, i.e. training, is still used in Bengali language for musical training. All in all, it appears that both Daulat Qazi and Alaol took advantage of an increasingly assertive urban elite of Arakanese Muslims who were eagerly looking for means to patronize and construct a culture of their own.

Conclusion

The physical isolation of Arakan from mainland Burma and its close proximity to Bengal, especially Chittagong, were two major factors contributing to constant immigration of Bengali population to Arakan. But the patronage of court poets from

across the border, an act dear to the hearts of the Arakanese kings, had a different motivation. It was a very well-designed move to bring talents from Chittagong to give the Bengali population of the entire region Chittagong-Arakan a feeling of solidarity which they needed to survive in the face of internal and external threats. The rulers in Mrauk U wanted to give the Chittagonian urban elite the feeling that they were always welcome. The poets, the ministers and others accordingly felt overwhelmed by this graciousness. Wooing a strong Bengali regional feeling irrespective of religious boundaries was always a common strategy right from the fifteenth century. Therefore, the literature that they patronized neither sang the song of Shariati Islam nor the song of orthodox Hinduism nor that of orthodox Buddhism. Rather it sang the song of a regional culture, the song of a highly cosmopolitan but also more autonomous Bengal!

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