

# AN ACCOUNT OF ARAKAN

Written at Islaamabad (Chittagong)  
in June 1777

Communicated by Major R,E. Roberts

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In February last the Mugs, or Aaracaners, carried off from the most southern parts of Bengal, about 1800 men, women, and children; they arrived at Aracan (according to the Persian orthography, Rekheng) after a voyage often days. Upon their arrival they were conducted to the rajah; or sovereign of the country, who chose from among them for his slaves all the handicraftsmen and most use-ful persons, amounting to about one-fourth of the whole number; the rest he returned to the captors, who conducted them, by ropes about their necks, to a market, and there sold them from twenty to seventy rupees each, according to their strength, abilities, etc. The purchasers assigned them the cultivation of their lands, and other laborious employments, giving each person, for his monthly support, only fifteen seers<sup>1</sup> of rice.

When these people arrived at Rekheng, a man named Duppung Geree was the rajah, and one Kuddul Poree, his kutwal The rajah wanted to put the kutwal to death; but the latter, getting information of his design, made his escape to a village, and prevailed on the inhabitants to assist him in deposing the rajah. When the rebels made their intention suspected, by assembling in arms, the rajah ordered his son-in-law to go with a small army, and put the kutwal to death. A battle was fought between the two armies and the rajah's son-in-law was defeated and killed. After this battle the kutwal proceeded with his partizans to the rajah's fort; at his approach all the rajah's adherents not excepting his relations, fled and left him alone to the revenge of the kutwal. The rajah hid himself, but was soon discovered, and put to death. After Duppung Geree's death, Kuddul Poree proclaimed himself rajah, sent for all the former rajah's relations and servants, and such of them as did not make him handsome presents, were put to death.

Four days after this revolution, the tranquility of the country not yet being restored, twenty-five men and women, natives of Bengal (all of whom were of the number of those carried to Rekheng in Feb. last, except one man, named Buddul Khawn, of Backergunge, who was carried thither about thirteen years ago) took the opportunity to seize on a boat and to make their escape in it. They proceeded in the boat for one day, and then quitted it to travel by land. When they quitted the boat, they landed in a woody and uninhabited part of Rekheng, and continued their route on the banks of small rivers, to avoid wild beasts and impenetrable woods. They were seven days travelling from Rekheng\* to Islaamabad, and arrived here the 15th instant.

The produce of Rekheng, with respect to vegetables, is nearly by the same as Bengal, except that no part of it produces the mulberry-tree. With respect to animals, it neither produces sheep, horses, nor jackalls, but great plenty of geese, fowls, ducks, goats, kine, buffaloes, elephants, deer, hogs, dogs, and bees. As to its manufacturies, they make wood oil, and several kinds of coarse cloths. Their trade consists in exporting the said manufactures, elephant's teeth, and wax, and in importing fine cloths, and a few other Bengal articles.

The Rekheng merchants that come to Bengal, never plunder or carry away people from thence, but follow their trade peaceably as merchants should. The rajah of Rekheng, readily grants the merchants permission to trade to Bengal; but he will not permit any of his subjects to leave his country, to plunder and make slaves, until he has received from them a considerable sum of money. When these plunderer return to Rekheng, every thing they have made prize of is carried to the rajah. Of the goods it is his allowed privilege to take half, and of the prisoners one fourth; but he generally exacts the lion's share; for which reason the Mugs endeavour to secrete all the silver and gold that they collect in these expeditions, and to that end, when they make a rich prize, they put all the prisoners to death.

There is but one fort in Rekheng; the Rajah resides in it. It consists of three squares, one within the other; each square surrounded with walls made of brick and stone. The two inner walls are about fourteen feet high, the outer wall about twelve feet, the thickness of each of the walls is about eight feet. They are at this time much decayed, and may be easily demolished. The fort has no ditch to it, or any outwork to prevent the approach of an enemy; and is said to have been built merely to secure the rajah from the insurrections of the natives. It is said to be situated from the northern boundary of Rekheng, seven days journey; from the southern three days, from the eastern boundary one day, and the same distance from the western boundary, or the sea. A river runs from the sea very near the fort, where it is about twenty feet broad **2**. Large boats can go to the fort. The banks of the river are cultivated: there are about 1,000 pieces of

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\* That is to say, from the northern boundary of Rekheng.

cannon lying between, two of the fort walls; only five or six of them are mounted on carriages, and even those carriages are two [sic] much decayed to be serviceable. There are a very few small brass cannon: all the others are thought to be so much damaged, by having been, for a great length of time, exposed to the weather, that they cannot be used. Under different bamboo and straw sheds in the fort, are kept a great many cannon balls of different sizes; a large quantity of gunpowder in earthen pots; and several intatchlocks. The rajah also has seven Europe muskets, which are always carried in his train; but these, as well as the match-locks are become unserviceable. He has six small horses (tattoos) which, it is said, he got from Chittagong.

From all the accounts that I have been able to obtain of Rekheng, it appears, that the natives of that country are a dastardly race of people and have only courage to attack defenceless Bengal merchants and boatmen; that they depend more on the timidity of the persons they attack, and the strength of their oars, than on the goodness of their arms, or personal prowess.

One Tahes Mahmud **3**, a native of Bengal, was formerly the rajah's derrwan**4**, and afterwards became his dewan**5**. Having gained some riches in that part, the rajah was determined to deprive him of them, and for that purpose to put him to death. The dewan getting notice of this design, fled to Chittagong, with about 2,000 of his countrymen, and arrived here near two years ago**6**. The rajah has frequently demanded him of this government, and has sent several threatening and very insolent letters, because his demand was not complied with. But the persons who are since returned from Rckhng, say, that a report frequently becomes current there, that Tahes Mahmud is on his way thither, with an armed force belonging to the English; and that at such times the people residing about the fort, and even the rajah's relations and attendants, fly to the hills and woods, leaving him alone, till they find that the report is false. Tahes Mahmud is now a sherrickdar of the this province.

Almost three fourths of the inhabitants of Rekheng are said to be natives of Bengal, or descendants od such, who constantly pray that the English may send a force to deliver them from their slavery, and restore them to their country; in that case they have agree among themselves to assist their deliverers to the utmost of their power.

The hills that join Rekheng to the eastward are inhabited by a people called Kheng, which is also the name of the country. These people have a rooted enmity to the native inhabitants of Rekheng, and miss no opportunity of carrying them off to their own country for slaves; but they never assault or injure the Bengal inhabitants. It is said that the Kheng never made open war with the Mugs, but only assault them by surprise. The dress of Kheng consists only of a piece of coarse cloth, about the breadth of a hand,

which they wear round the middle; they wear no turbans, or ever shave the head, but tie all the hair together on the fore part, or crown of the head. They spot their faces with black paint, and they resemble the natives of Bengal in their features, shape, and stature<sup>7</sup>.

The Rekheng rajah governs this country in the most despotic manner: he is absolute over the lives and properties of his subjects. In his administration, his only guides are his own reason and passions. He is the sole judge of all causes, criminal and civil. The parties are brought before him; he hears what they have to say, and immediately gives judgment. Criminals are punished by flogging, dismembering, beheading and impaling. If flogging is the sentence, it is inflicted instantly before him; but if either of the other punishments, the criminal is conducted to a building at a little distance, where the sentence is immediately executed.

When the rajah goes abroad, he is carried on a kind of litter made with two bamboos, fastened together by rattans on which he sits, by four bearers, and is attended by men armed with long bills<sup>8</sup>, like swords, and with spears (the only arms used by the Mugs) and the seven Europe muskets before mentioned.

When the rajah administers justice, he sits on a mat, on a place elevated above the heads of the people,

An eunuch attends on him, to repeat the orders he gives. The eunuch stands with his hands on his knees; consequently his body is bent forward; a position expressive of respect and attention, which he is not suffered to vary during his continuance in the rajah's presence. All other persons, except the rajah's father and father-in-law, while in his presence, kneel, bend their bodies forward, turn one side of the head to him, and hold both hands to the car of that side. This, I think, at once signifies, that they salute him, are attentive to any order he may be pleased to give, and ready to execute it.

The sovereignty of Rekheng is neither hereditary nor elective; but is possessed by whoever is able and willing to take it, the people readily submitting to the conqueror.

The natives of Rekheng are much given to excess in drinking and almost every man distils the arrack he uses. They never use tomtoms but at funerals. There are very few inhabitants on the sea-coast. Fresh water is both good and plenty, and rice also; as much of that grain may be bought for two puns<sup>9</sup> of cowries as will serve twenty men for a meal. A Rekheng rupee is equal to twelve annas<sup>10</sup> or in Rekheng to three, or forty-eight puns of cowries; so that if we allow twelve chattaks<sup>11</sup> of rice for each man's meal, twenty men will eat fifteen seers; the price of which being but two puns of cowries, one Rekheng rupee's worth of rice will be nine of our maunds, equal to twelve maunds<sup>12</sup> for a dussmassa rupee.

The rajah has a mint in his fort, and coins silver rupees.

His house, which is in the fort, is built with bamboos and straw, and his only upper apartments, at a considerable height from the ground. Very few persons besides the rajah's family live in the fort.

The land round it is level and cultivated, with a few houses here and there, and the country to it, from the sea, is mostly cultivated, all of it clear of jungle\* and the fort is of easy access, even to artillery, on that side.

About two years ago, above 2,000 persons, men, women, and children, (near a fourth of whom had, at different times, left this province to avoid the oppressions of the zemindars; the rest had been carried forcibly to Rekheng by the natives of that country, and there sold for slaves) escape from Rekheng, and came to a place called Rawmoo, in the most southern part of this province. From Rawmoo they sent four deputies to the chief, to inform him of their arrival, and to request him to assign them lands for their maintenance. The chief readily promised to comply with their request, and told them to look out for such uncultivated lands as they might chuse [sic] to reside on. They pitched upon land near Rawmoo Khurwan, and Chukurreah<sup>13</sup>, which, were granted them, on condition that they should pay no rent till the expiration of three years, and that they should then pay the customary rent. A short time after (two or three months), such of the men as had not been able to bring their wives and children away with them, to the number of about 800, returned to Rekheng, and have not since been heard of, but are supposed to have arrived save. The settling of them so near Rekheng, both by sea and land, as the place above mentioned, was certainly very impolitic, as was fully proved by the loss of so many useful subjects; for their return to this province again cannot be expected. The government of Rekheng will certainly take warning from its remissness, and use proper means to prevent a second escape. The loss of these people would have been effectually prevented, had they been settled inland in the northern parts of the province, from whence it could not have been so easy for them to go to Rekheng, nor would the rajah of that country have had it so much in his power to send his agents among them to entice them away, which is strongly suspected to have been partly the cause of their return.

We are traditionally informed, that the people of Rekheng have, from time Immemorial, plundered the southern parts of Bengal, and carried the inhabitants into slavery; that they have even been so hostile as to descend on the coast of Chittagong, proceed into the country, plunder and burn the villages, destroy what they could not carry away, and make slaves of the inhabitants. The vestiges of a fortification that once surrounded the town of Islaamabad still remain; and it is well known that this fortification was not

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\* Thick woods, or forests

only intended as a place of refuge to the inhabitants of the country, but also to secure the inhabitants of the town from being pillaged by these invaders, to such lengths did they then proceed.

Before this province was ceded to the Company, the government was at an immense expence to maintain a marine and land force to repel the Mugs; but the great extent of Chittagong coast made it impossible to prevent their landing on some part of it, and carrying off considerable booty, It is surprising that the government did not perceive, that the only effectual way to put a stop to these invasions, would have been to attack the invaders in their own country, which is both near, and of easy access. For some time, after the cession of this province to the Company, it was found necessary to keep a considerable force for its protection; but the government being at that time less supine than formerly, was not contented with barely repulsing the invaders, which was the case before, except in a very few instances, but followed them to sea, and soon made them desist from their invasions. Since that time till very lately, an interval of thirteen or fourteen years<sup>14</sup>, they have been pretty quiet; but as it is not said that we gave them any very remarkable defeat, and as it is certain we never invaded their country, I cannot attribute their peaceable behaviour, for so long a time, solely to their fear of the English force, but suppose it must have been partly owing to an invasion of their country by another nation, to a dearth or epidemic disease, or to change in their government; but to whatever cause it was owing, it is certain, as I said before, that they did not attack this province for a considerable time.

It is said, that the great extent of country, now called the Sunderbunds, was formerly populous and well cultivated; and that its present condition is solely owing to the Mugs, many of the inhabitants having been carried into slavery and that the remainder fled from it to avoid a like fate<sup>15</sup>.

To attempt to prove the dishonour and loss to our government by tamely suffering such depredations, would be superfluous; both are too evident even to need being pointed at. All that I shall say on this head at present is, that I am fully convinced that these violences may be easily prevented, a great number of very useful subjects restored to freedom and their country, and, perhaps, many other advantages that cannot now be perceived, may accrue to the Company at a trivial, or even no expense, by a well-conducted attack on Rekheng, A nest of pirates, enemies to mankind, and to the peace and commerce of Bengal, will be thereby destroyed. I think I may venture to predict, that the longer they continue unattacked, the more powerful and courageous they will become, till at last it will be found necessary for the immediate preservation of the southern parts of Bengal, to enter into an expensive, and perhaps a bloody war with them. It must be a very considerable armed force, acting only on the defensive, to defend even the coast of Chittagong from invasion. But how can the security of this

whole province protect the inhabitants of the islands, and other southern parts of Bengal?

When Mahabut Jung was subahdar<sup>16</sup> of Bengal, Sadacut Mchamud Khan was naib subahn<sup>17</sup> of all the southern parts, as far west as Hijli<sup>18</sup>. He planned an expedition against Rekheng, which being approved by the nabob, he raised an army of 12,000 men, consisting of 100 horsemen, 500 bildars (pioneers), 2,500 coolies; and the remaining number of infantry of different denominations, His artillery consisted often pieces of cannon. With this army he marched towards Rekheng; the bildars, and a certain number of coolies, preceded in one day's march, in order to clear the road. The ammunition and provisions were conveyed as far as Rawmoo, in 400 boats, and there landed, to be carried with the army. The boats then proceeded to the river Nawf, to assist the army in passing it. The army arrived at that river after nineteen days marching; and were on the point of passing it, when an order came from Mahabut Jung for the army to return as fast as possible, This ended an expedition that cost the government upwards of 80,000 rupees! The order was obtained by the influence of Sadacut Mohamud Khan's enemies at the durbar, who made the nabob believe that the naib subah intended to make himself independent by the conquest of Rekheng; and that he would so strengthen himself by that conquest, as to be able to support himself in the independent sovereignty of both that country and Chittagong. The road from Islaamabad to Rawmoo, which the army was eleven days marching, was very bad; but from thence to the river Nawf, it marched on the sea-beach, which was all the way, so level, that a one horse chaise might have gone on it. The Nawf is the limit of Chittagong, and divides it from Rekheng. It is so broad, that in the clearest weather nothing on the opposite side can be seen; but only the entrance of it is here meant, as it is not known that any one ever went up to it. It is thought to communicate with Pegue; but this is merely a conjecture of the natives of this province.

After the return of the army, some natives of Bengal, who had made their escape from Rekheng, reported, that when it was known there that the nabob's army was on its march to that country, the rajah and most of the inhabitants fled to the hills and woods; but that a small garrison was left in the fort, who were also soon struck with a panic, quarrelled amongst themselves, and at last deserted the fort.

Some time before Sadacut Mohamud Khan went on the expedition against Rekheng, he received advice that two fleets of Mug boats were seen going to the south of the islands; that one of them, consisting of fifty or sixty boats, appeared to be going to Luckipore, by the way of Deccan Shahbazpore<sup>19</sup>; and that the other fleet, of eighty or one hundred boats, was going towards the Sundcrbunds<sup>20</sup>. Soon after, farther intelligence came that the last-mentioned fleet was lying in Bengun Gunge Nullah, in the Sunderbunds; on which the naib subah went there, with seventy or eighty armed boats, and arrived at the entrance of the Nullah when it was low water, and the Mug boats

stranded. He attacked them, killed many of them, took fifty boats, and 2,200 prisoners, who were employed in the buildings at Mootejeel. What became of the other fleet of Mug boats is not certainly known; but it is thought they got intelligence of the defeat of their countrymen, and returned as fast as possible to Rekheng, It was in consequence of the appearance of these fleets, that the expedition against Rekheng was planned.

[Post-scriptum]

Islaamabad, June 1777

Since writing the above, the persons who were lately sent to Rekheng with a letter are returned. They report, that on their arrival, Kuddul Poree, the rajah, ordered them to be confined till he returned from subduing a rebellion raised by one of his zemindars<sup>21</sup>; and he, at the same time, promised to give them an answer to their letter. Soon after the rajah was killed by the zemindar, who seized on the government and ordered them to be put to death as spies; but that by paying twenty-five rupees, they were permitted to escape, They farther say, that the people of Rekheng were in expectation of an English force coming against it, and that the native inhabitants were in great fear.

When these messengers, in going to Rekheng, arrived at the Nawf, they travelled for some time along its banks to the eastward, and very soon came to a part of it that is not broader than the .Chittagong river, near the town; over which they crossed with ease.

## Notes

1. Terme anglo-indien qui design e une unite de mesure de poids ou de capacite largement repandue en Inde. D'aprce les indications du Hobscm-Jobson, la valeur du seer variait selon les regions entre 226 et 1400 grammes. La regulation de 1833 le donne comme pesant 1 135 g, Le seer etait divise en 16 chhitak.
2. Il s'agit de la riviere Aungdat.
3. LI pourrail s'agir d'un certain Taj Muhammad dont la presence dans le district de Chittagong est signale par Serrajuddin en 1782, Il s'agissait d'un refuge qui avait beneficie d'unc donation de terres.
4. D'apres le Hobson-Jobson, ce tenme d6signe un ponier ou concierge.

5. Ce terme recouvrait des fonctions assez diverse en Inde qui vont du Premier ministre à l'administrateur local. Au Bengale, il désignait un serviteur chargé des affaires domestiques d'une grande maison ou d'un commerce. C'est le sens qui nous paraît le plus probable ici.
6. 1775. Nous n'avons rien trouvé dans les sources arakanaises sur ces événements,
7. Cette brève notice ethnographique sur les montagnards Chin est peut-être la première information que nous ayons sur cette population. Ces deportations sont aussi documentées dans les sources arakanaises.
8. Couteau avec un manche long et une lame incurvée utilisé pour couper des branches d'arbres.
9. Un pun est l'équivalent d'une livre. Si on admet qu'il s'agit ici d'une livre à 16 onces, un pun correspondait à 453,6 g,
10. Une roupie indienne équivalait à 16 annas.
11. Si l'on prend en compte les valeurs minimale et maximale du maund et du seer, un repas peut être estimé entre 638 et 852 g.
12. Le maund était une mesure de poids extrêmement variable suivant les régions de l'Inde, allant de 2 à 160 livres. Nous admettons qu'il faut prendre en considération le maund du Bengale qui valait, suivant une citation de 1760 figurant dans Hobson-Jobson (p. 565), 75 livres, c'est-à-dire environ 34 kilos,
13. Chocoria; localité au nord de Ramu, connue depuis le XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle.
14. C'est-à-dire entre 1763 et 1777,
15. Les voyageurs européens du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle comme Bemier, Schouten ou Manrique y font référence, notamment en rapport avec les Portugais qui prenaient part à ces activités,
16. Gouverneur mogol.
17. Un naib (gouverneur adjoint ou délégué) Sadaqat Muhammad Khant fils de Agha Baqer Khan, figure sur une liste d'officiers mogols tirée du Tarikh-i-Chatgaon de Maulvi Hamidullah Khan (voir Qanungo 1986, 456),
18. Voir Manrique 1927, 13 n, 1 et 438. Cette localité au Nord-Ouest de la baie du Bengale n'existe plus maintenant,
19. Cette île se trouve à l'embouchure du Gange et de la Meghna.
20. C'est-à-dire qu'elle s'orientait plus vers l'Ouest,
21. Nous supposons qu'il s'agit de l'affrontement avec le général On Cun, fin mai 1777 (Candamalankara 1931 (vol. 2), 284).