

Rakhine



Population:
 2,123,500 (2000)
 2,397,200 (2010)
 2,706,600 (2020)
Countries: Myanmar, Bangladesh, India
Buddhism: Theravada
Christians: 19,100

Overview of the Rakhine

Other Names: Arakanese, Maghi, Morma, Yakan, Yakhang, Rakhain, Mogh, Magh, Marma, Mash, Mag, Maga, Mugg

Population Sources:
 1,900,000 in Myanmar (2002, Myanmar Faces and Places)
 200,000 in Bangladesh (2001, P Johnstone and J Mandryk)
 18,230 in India (1981 census)

Language: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Lolo-Burmese, Burmish, Southern

Dialects: 2 (Marma, Rakhine)

Professing Buddhists: 75%

Practising Buddhists: 50%

Christians: 0.9%

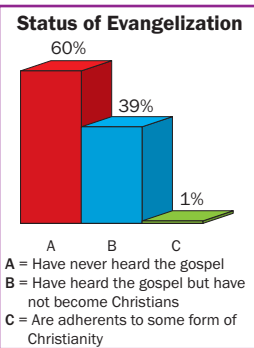
Scripture: Portions 1914

Jesus film: available

Gospel Recordings: Arakanese; Marma

Christian Broadcasting: none

ROPAL code: MHV



The majority of Rakhine (1.9 million) live in the state of Myanmar that bears their name—Rakhine State—which until recently was also known as Arakan State.¹ They are concentrated in ‘hilly, coastal areas, crisscrossed by multiple rivers, including the Lemro and Kaladan. It receives a great amount of rainfall and is largely covered by jungle. . . . The area is fairly sparsely populated, with very few large towns or cities. Sitwe [125,000] is by far the largest city in the area, and also the centre of trade. Other notable towns include Maungdaw, Buthidaung, Mrauk-U, Thandwe and Toung-

gok. Otherwise, the population is primarily rural, living in the hills, forests, or along the sea.² Visiting Rakhine State is like stepping back in time. Little has changed in the past 50 years. Motor vehicles are extremely rare, with ox carts and bicycles being the preferred way to get around. In the major city, Sittwe, electricity is only available for five hours (6 to 11 p.m.) every day. In Bangladesh, more than 200,000 Rakhine live in the Chittagong Hills area in the south-east part of the country. The two dialect groups of Rakhine live separately in Bangladesh. The speakers of the Marma dialect live in the hills, while the Rakhine speakers live along the coast.³ Approximately 20,000 Rakhine live in Tripura State of north-east India, where they are listed as the Mag Scheduled Tribe.⁴

The Rakhine live at the gateway between Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. They have ‘long been influenced by their proximity to India and have formed strong trading links with the sub-continent. They claim a long history of independence and ruled their own kingdom at Mrauk-U

until 1784 AD.⁵ Identifying the Rakhine is a topic of debate. One source asks, ‘Are the Rakhine actually Burmese with Indian blood, Indians with Burmese characteristics, or a separate race?’⁶

The Rakhine language is part of the Tibeto-Burman family. It has been described as ‘one of the better known varieties of non-standard Burmese with profound pronuncia-



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tion and vocabulary differences from the Burmese’.⁷ In Myanmar about 80 per cent of Rakhine are Buddhists, while the 1981 census

of India recorded 98.7 per cent of Rakhine in that country as Buddhists.⁸ Theravada Buddhism was reputedly established during the reign of King Chandra Surya in AD 146,⁹ as evidenced by their recorded historical books.¹⁰

Most of the remaining 20 per cent of Rakhine in Myanmar are Muslims, except for a small number of Christians and Hindus. The Muslim Rakhine have a long history of cultural clashes with their Buddhist brothers, often resulting in bloodshed. The most recent fighting took place in April 2001. There are also about 300,000 Rohingya Muslims in the north of Rakhine State, but they are related ethnolinguistically to the Bengalis of Bangladesh and India.

Missionaries translated portions of the Bible into Rakhine in 1914, but these are no longer in use. Less than one per cent of the Rakhine believe in Christ. Almost all of the believers are members of Catholic or Baptist churches. The Rakhine remain a sizeable people group largely forgotten by the Christian world.