

Rohingya Muslims: Stranger in Motherland

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Abstract: *Rohingyacrises is one of the major concerning issues in Bangladesh. The Rohingya crisis was provoked by the fact that according to the Burmese Military Government, the Rohingyas were only Bengalis and they did not deserve to be Burmese citizens. The Rohingyas have become one of the most persecuted communities of Burma, facing severe human rights abuses and massive ill treatments by the military junta. The principle aim of my study is to generate a brief idea about historical background of Rohingya, and how they became stateless, and their causes of refugee movements in Bangladesh. And finally an attempt has been made to show their current situation in Bangladesh.*

Keywords: Rohingya, Refugee, Violence

1. Introduction

The Rohingya crisis is a long standing issue in Bangladesh. Many years have been passed and yet there is no solution. Rohingya crisis was created in the course of several historical routes. However before discussing about Rohingya crisis at first we have to identify the meaning of refugee. The word refugee mean, 'a person who flees to a foreign country or power to escape danger or persecution owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him or herself of the protection of that country.¹ The Rohingyas became stateless in their homeland and eventually they had to cuddle the status of refugee hood under conditions of persecution, discrimination and torture. The denial of citizenship rights, denial of freedom of movement, eviction campaigns, forced labor, expulsion from their lands and property, violence and physical torture contributed to make them stateless and refugees. Now the Rohingyas are living in a state of hardship as refugees in camp and non-camp areas of Bangladesh. During the 'Dragon operation', more than 2, 00,000 fled into Bangladesh as refugees in 1978. In 1992, 2, 50,877 refugees from Burma take shelter in Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh with the support from United Nations stood by their side despite its own socio-economic problems. Documented Rohingya refugees are living in 'Kutupalong' and 'Nayapara' camps in Ukhia and Teknaf Upazila. The real number of undocumented Rohingya is unknown and some estimate that it can be around 2, 00,000 to 5, 00,000. Everyday 5 to 10 families are trying to cross the border of Bangladesh. Undocumented refugees are living in the roadsides specially Teknaf and Cox's Bazar highway. The Government of Bangladesh maintains the camps with the help of UNHCR. The Government of Bangladesh is apparently responsible for ensuring safety and security of the refugees both inside and outside the camps. While living in camp or non-camp areas, the Rohingya refugees face miserable conditions marked by local hostility, violence, restrictive movements, lack of basic needs and various forms of discrimination.

2. The Rohingya Refugees Issue

The Rohingya refugee problem is a major issue directly affecting Bangladesh, Burma and the Rohingya people. The problem of Rohingya crisis was provoked by the fact that according to the Burmese Military Government, the Rohingyas were only Bengalis and they did not deserve to be Burmese citizens. It may be mentioned that Muslims make up 76 percent of the population of the northern Rakhaine state.² The Rohingyas have become one of the most persecuted communities of Burma, facing severe human rights abuses and massive ill treatments by the military junta.

Today approximately 8, 00,000 live in Bangladesh, 1,50,000 in Malaysia, 50,000 in Thailand, 3,50,000 in Pakistan, 40,000 in India, 10,00,00 in UAE, 2,00,000 in Saudi Arab, 1,000 in Indonesia and There are still another one and a half million Rohingyas living in Arakan under serious hardship and repression.³

The Rohingya crisis has been increasingly globalized through the involvement of several state and non-state actors. Besides, the dispersion of the Rohingyas to different countries of the world brings about a new dimension to this problem. In this context, identification of the Rohingyas as "Asia's new Palestinians" deserves much significance.⁴

Imtiaz Ahmed rightly captures the underlying issues behind the Rohingya crisis as he argues that the problem is a demonstration of protracted statelessness as well as protracted refugeehood.⁵

3. The Birth of the Stateless Rohingyas

Looking back at history, it is clear that the aftermath of the Burma's War of Independence from the British colonial rule in 1942-1948, ethnic minorities of Burma were being repressed and harassed and from that time the relations between the Muslims and Buddhists of Arakan began to worsen. The military regime of Burma labelled Muslims as foreigner residence and effectively reduced them to the status of stateless. However, prior to that, the Rakhines and the Rohingyas lived in harmony.⁶

Another issue is the geo-economic importance of the Arakan. The coast belt of Arakan is rich with natural resources like petroleum, possible uranium, iron, and coal.

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The soil of Arakan is very fertile. There are a number of rivers in Arakan which are rich in fish. It has a coastal water line of 300 miles long. Arakan is a place of military interest to the regime. It can be used as a buffer zone in case of any war or confrontation on South Asia.⁷

Historically, three phases of the birth of the stateless Rohingyas can be identified- Pre-colonial, Colonial and Post-colonial area.

4. Pre-colonial Era

The Rohingyas have been living in Arakan for about thousand years. They have their own language, culture and heritage. Prior to its becoming part of Burma in 1785, Arakan had been an independent kingdom for 2000 years. For the first few hundred years, Arakan was divided into two kingdoms, South Arakan of Sandoway and North Arakan of Arakan proper. The two parts were united into one in the last part of the 13th century and this status of Arakan lasted till 1785 A.D. when the kingdom was merged with Burma (Myanmar).⁸

In the fifteenth century they had established a great Arakanese Empire known as Maruk-U Empire. At that time, Mrohaung was the capital city of Arakan for about 400 hundred years. In 1784, Burmese king BadawPaya invaded Arakan. Then Arakan was annexed to the British India in 1825 after the first Anglo-Burmese war.

The pre-colonial phase of the history of the Rohingya is marked by the infiltration of the Muslims in Arakan. The first Muslim infiltration into Arakan took place during the reign of MahatoingTsandaya (788-810 AD.), when several Arab ships wrecked off the Coast of Rambi Island. The Muslim sailors somehow escaped and started to live in Rambi Island of Arakan by taking permission of the king.⁹ They are called Kulas or foreigners in the Arakanese history.

The Second Muslim infiltration into Arakan took place in the fifteenth century. This century is very important for the history of Arakan, because most of the Muslims who entered Arakan during this time were the Bengalis and these Bengalis went there by invitation of the ruling princes for a political cause. In 1406 the Arakanese king Min-Saw-Mun attacked some areas of Burma but failed. When the Burmese king expelled Min-Saw-Mun from his kingdom, he came to Gaure, the capital of Bengal and took asylum in the kingdom of Sultan Gias Uddin Azam Shah.

The third infiltration of Muslims from Bengal into Arakan took place in the middle of the 17th century. There is evidence of the presence of Bengali Muslim poets and authors in this period. Bengali poets like DulatKazi, Alaol and MagonThagor create the Golden era of Bengali culture and literature in Rosang.¹⁰

The last Muslim infiltration into Arakan took place in 1660, when the Mughal Emperor Shah Shuza took shelter in Arakan although he was later murdered along with his family by the order of the king of Arakan.¹¹

After the conquest of Arakan, the Rakhines began to call the subjugated people of the newly conquered Arakan comprised of Hindus and Muslims as the 'kulas' meaning the dark skinned aboriginals. Even today Moghs call the Rohingyas as 'kulas'. In Arakan, Mongolian invasion from the south led Rohingyas to migrate towards the north to what is known today as 'Northern Arakan'. The dark skinned aboriginal Hindus and Muslims began to flee toward north and the Moghs remained largely in the south, joined by the invaders from Burma. Thus started the history of Arakan with two people- the Rakhianies and the Rohingyas. The Arakan history shows that the Rakhianies and the Rohingyas lived in peace for centuries.¹²

5. Colonial Era

The pre-colonial peace and harmony between the Rakhianies and the Rohingyas in Arakan turned into ethnic animosity and suppression in the colonial era. In 1784, Burmese king BadowPaya invaded and seized Arakan. BadowPaya was not a successful ruler, although he ruled about 40 years. In fact, his period was marked by anarchy and collapse of the Arakanese.¹³

The Burmese rule came to an end when Arakan was annexed by the British in 1825 after the first Anglo-Burmese war. During the Second World War Japan occupied Burma and British troops withdraw from Arakan, which created a serious crisis. The Rohingyas were supported the British. The Rakhaine communalist with Burma Independence Army (BIA) killed 1, 00,000 Rohingyas and drove out 50,000 across the border to East Bengal in order to depopulate the area of Muslims.¹⁴

Relations between the two communities worsened. Rohingyas were kept away from all negotiation with the British during independence of Burma in 1948. Aung San and leaders of other nationalities signed the historic Union Treaty on 12 February, 1947, by which the Union of Burma was formed. The agreement was adopted and included in the Union's constitution under the heading 'Right of Secession'. There was no Rohingya representative from Arakan to attend the convention. The Rohingyas had been left out of Union treaty; they had no constitutional guarantee of their rights and freedom from independence of Burma. During this time, it appears that Rohingyas are victims of Burmese extremist nationalism based on race and religion, and the rise of Buddhist fundamentalist extremism during 1940 and 1947 in Arakan.¹⁵

6. Post-colonial Era

Since 1962 Burmese Army General Ne Win ruled the country until 1988. It was a reign of great misery and terror for the Rohingya Muslims of Arakan. He and his revolutionary council and Burmese Socialist Program Party made the Rohingya Muslims out of the country and banned all Rohingya socio-cultural organizations and activities. In 1978 the 'Dragon Operation' launched by General Ne Win forced at least 3, 00,000 Rohingyas to enter into Bangladesh causing tremendous political and economic problems on her.¹⁶

Most of the Rohingyas went back to Burma in 1979 under an agreement between the two countries. In 1982 the Government of General Ne Win declared Rohingyas as stateless people through promulgation of an Act, the 1982 Burma Citizenship Law.¹⁷

There are certain sections in that law directly prohibit the Rohingyas to be eligible to apply for any kind of citizenship status of Burma. They are not eligible to have Burmese nationality because Section (2) and Section (3) of the 1982 Burma Citizenship Law.¹⁸

To prepare the voter list for 1989 general elections, the authority initiated scrutiny through issuing the National Registration Certificate (NRC) and Foreigner's Registration Certificate (FRC) in Rakhaine state. The Rohingya Muslims were then put through harassment as the Burmese immigration authorities insisted on categorizing the Muslim inhabitants as 'Bengali Burmese'.¹⁹

The immigration authorities were refused to accept the citizenship application from Muslim population and large number of Rohingya Muslims excluded from the voter list.²⁰

In 1988 the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) decided to set up a number of new military cantonments in Rakhaine state, particularly in the North, where the Muslims were a majority. They took the lands without any compensations and the Muslims were becoming homeless from their stateless conditions. The SLORC took an attempt to change the ethno-demographic pattern of the area by giving surplus lands to Rakhine convicts and retired Army personnel.²¹

The Burmese military authorities have destroyed many Mosques, looted their properties, and killed the inhabitants and raped their women. The Rohingyas are facing many restrictions in their daily life: banned from travelling without authorization and prohibited from working outside their villages, they cannot marry without permission and due to movement restrictions, they lack sufficient access to livelihood opportunities, medical care and education.²² Recently a new law has been passed in the Rakhaine state, in which Rohingyas have been specifically prohibited from having more than two children. Even they have been barred them from fishing, which is their main source of income.

7. Main Causes of Rohingya Refugee Movement

- Deprivation of citizenship.
- Forced Labor.
- Forced eviction and relocation.
- Deprivation of right to education.
- Massive killing.
- Sexual harassment.
- Looting of properties.
- Breaking Mosques.
- Lack of religious freedom.²³

8. Their Current Situation in Bangladesh

While Rohingya refugees were came to Bangladesh from Burma, the Bangladeshi people were sympathetic for them. They provide them food, water, cloths and even Shelter. But day by day the situation has changed. The Rohingyas are often involved with local people in many disputes and it creates conflict among them. The local people argue that the Rohingyas laborers are low paid compared to Bangladeshis. So, the opportunities of works of local people have been decreasing day by day. They also think that the Rohingyas has caused increasing the price of essential commodities.

The Rohingyas are live in an unbearable condition in the camps due to lack of access to basic needs, the abuse and intimidation at the hands of Bangladeshi local authorities and boat men or camp volunteers. They are living in miserable condition in camp and non-camp areas of Bangladesh.

9. Recommendation

- The Government of Bangladesh should engage in bilateral diplomacy with international donor community to expand services and remove barriers to self-reliance for both the 'documented' and 'undocumented' refugees coming into Bangladesh.
- It is imperative that the government should continue to support the refugees for their livelihood development.
- Government should pursue fast track diplomacy for repatriation involving various stakeholders, like China, India, UN and other international organizations.
- Government should facilitate more active involvement of civil society and NGO at the local and international level into refugee repatriation process.
- Major Powers in international politics or regional organizations like SAARC or ASEAN should come forward as a third party mediator to solve this problem.
- Encourage ASEAN in its leadership role in responding the crisis.
- Increase international pressure on Burma to end violence.
- Myanmar's government must amend the citizenship law in order to provide the Rohingya Muslims their right to citizenship.

10. Conclusion

Bangladesh is one of the major countries facing the problems of refugees, migration and displacement. In recent time, more than 8, 00,000 refugees take shelter in Bangladesh. It is important to get humanitarian aid to the suffering community and create international pressure on Myanmar to end violence against Rohingya. But major powers are silent about Rohingya issue. Burma plays a key role in China's planned 'One Belt One Road' initiatives with billions of dollars of investments in energy and infrastructure projects. Russia has remained a persistent supporter of the regime. In December last year, both China and Russia voted against the UN Security Council motion to censure Burma. In the wake of the

present crisis, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has protracted unequivocal support to the Burma Government while making an official trip and the Indian Government has threatened to deport 40,000 Rohingya refugees from the country. Despite an embargo on weapons sale to Burma, Israel has supplied weapons to the country. The United States, which began a new era of engagement with Burma when the country moved towards democracy in 2014, and is paying little attention elsewhere.

However, European countries are vocal critics of Burma at the UN Human Rights Council.

A few Muslim-majority countries, especially Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia expressed serious concerns and tried to rally support. Turkey holds the Presidency of the OIC and Recep Tayyip Erdogan is trying to use the office to bolster his standing among Muslim-majority countries. One understands that the Turkish initiative is more a political maneuvering than a humanitarian gesture. These do not provide an optimistic picture regarding pressure on Burma.

It is incumbent on Bangladesh to take the lead as the most affected country. The national interest of the country demands strong action. It cannot look at other countries and follow their footsteps.

The decision of the Government to allow media access and to withdraw restrictions on international agencies to visit the border are positive actions. This would allow the world to see the picture and perhaps create support. The diplomatic initiative is a welcome development, but to achieve a real result, it must be done with great urgency and with a clear strategy, keeping in mind that no one will do the bidding for Bangladesh.

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