



THE CRY OF THE STATELESS: REVISITING TO THE ROHINGYA ETHNIC CONFLICT IN MYANMAR

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ABSTRACT

Rohingyas, the stateless minority community of Rakhine state of Myanmar has always been a matter severe complexity and sensitivity in the domain of Myanmar politics over the last few years. There has been numbers of ethnic clashes in Myanmar since 1784. But the recent ethnic conflict of Myanmar has raised the eyebrows of the world community. The attack of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on 25th August, 2017 on 24 police posts and killing of twelve security forces of Myanmar has erupted massive human exodus in the history of Southeast Asia. The violence was so intense that created the Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar of Bangladesh as the largest as well as the most densely populated refugee camp of the world. India, being the neighbouring country of both Myanmar and Bangladesh would definitely have some adverse impacts of such massive ethnic conflict. Thus, the paper attempts to assess the genesis of the Rohingya ethnic conflict and its aftermath consequences and how the international community has responded to this humanitarian crisis. The paper also intends to focus on the India's strategy to deal with the Rohingya issue by keeping in mind her national interest and security agenda.



KEY WORDS: Rohingya, Violence, Ethnic, Conflict, Militant Group, Security Forces, Myanmar.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'Rohingya' itself is the most controversial and contested word in the political domain of Myanmar. There has been wide controversy regarding the origin of Rohingyas. Some scholars used to say that Rohingyas are the illegal immigrants mostly from neighbouring Bangladesh while others argues that Rohingyas are native to Arakan, and are descendents of the original Muslim converted on Ramree Island¹ A section of historians is of the opinions that Rohingyas are the indigenious race having profound historical links to the Arakan. According to them the origin of Muslim community in the Northern Rakhine state prior to the arrival of Rakhine dated around ninth to tenth centuries which indicates that they arrived prior to the Burman into Burma.² Many scholars view that Rohingyas are the descendant of pre-Rakhine indigenious group who have settled in Arakan three millennia prior to the arrival of Rakhine who later intermingle with the wave of Muslim migrants.³ According to Rohingya

¹ Mohajan, H. (2018). History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims. Chittagong, Bangladesh. Premier University. p.3

² Ware, A. & Laoutides, C. (2018). Myanmar's 'Rohingya' Conflict. New York. Oxford University. p.78

³ Ibrahim, A. (2016). The Rohingyas Insides Myanmar's Hidden Genocide. UK. C. Hurst & Co. Publishers. p. 6.

origin narratives the Muslim migration in the Arakan region was continued in four waves of migration. The first wave was in the form of Arab traders and settlers in the sixth to fourth centuries, the second wave was in the form of soldiers and courtiers from the founding of Mrauk-U in fifteen century, the third wave was in the form of slaves brought to Mrauk-U by Portuguese Corsairs in seventeen century and the fourth wave was through the Entourage of the Mughal Emperor's son Shah Shuja in the seventeen century.⁴

The doubt of nationality of Rohingyas is rooted in the wide range of controversy regarding the origin of the community. In fact, the root cause of contemporary problem of Rohingyas lies in the definition of citizenship of the Myanmar. The Citizenship Law, 1982 of Myanmar categorically denies the citizenship right to the Rohingyas. The 1982 Citizenship Law of Myanmar defines three categories of citizens i.e., (i) Full Citizenship: full citizenship is given to those people who belongs to 135 national race of the country who arrived in the land prior to 1823; (ii) Associate Citizenship: associate citizenship is granted to those individuals who applied for citizenship under the then citizenship law and their application was pending during the time of the new citizenship law was passed and (iii) Natural Citizenship: natural citizenship could only be allotted to those if they could furnish conclusive evidence of arrival and settlement before the independence of Burma in 1948, further they could able to speak one of the national languages and their children were born in Burma.⁵ The new 1982 Citizenship Law denies the citizenship right to the Rohingyas as they are not included in the 135 national races who were settled prior to 1823. However, before 1962 the Rohingyas had have government issued identity card and even the British had also issued ration card to them. While the 1982 Citizenship Law of Myanmar disqualified the Rohingyas to apply for national identity card and instead they are allowed to have foreign identity card which categorically deprived them full citizenship.⁶

OBJECTIVES:

The article intends to study the following objectives:

- 1) To review the roots of recent Rohingya ethnic conflict in Myanmar and its aftermath consequences.
- 2) To assess how the international community has responded to the Rohingya crisis.
- 3) To focus on the India's strategy to deal with the Rohingya issue by keeping in mind her national interest and security agenda.

Research Method: The article is followed by analytical cum descriptive method to meet the designed objectives. For the preparation of the research work secondary method of data collection have been adopted. The secondary data have been collected from various relevant books, research article, news papers and internet to make the research work more reliable.

Research Gap: Ethnic conflicts and refugee both are the popular topic of research in social sciences. There have been a substantial numbers of research works done in the field of ethnic conflict and Rohingya issues in Myanmar, Bangladesh and some other countries as well. Although, in India lots of research works have already been done on ethnic conflicts of different ethnic groups but there have been very few research works done in the field of Rohingya in general and on the current topic in particular. Therefore, the present research work intends to fulfill this existing research gap.

DISCUSSION:

⁴ Ware, A. & Laoutides, C. (2018). Myanmar's 'Rohingya' Conflict. New York. Oxford University. p.p.79-88.

⁵ Mohajan, H. (2018). History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims. Chittagong, Bangladesh. Premier University. p.6

⁶ Mohajan, H. (2018). History of Rakhine State and the Origin of the Rohingya Muslims. Chittagong, Bangladesh. Premier University. p.p. 6-7

Although the right to citizenship is a political right still it plays a very crucial role in ensuring a balance and secure life of an individual. Citizenship right is the right of accessing the other rights granted by the state. In other sense, citizenship right is the base of other rights. Unless a person becomes a citizen one cannot exercise the political and civil rights including the right to access public services, health, education etc. and thus absence of this right would definitely cause discrimination and injustice to the individual. Even the stateless person is not protected by the national law of the country and thus they don't have personal safety. It is almost similar to the case of Rohingyas of Myanmar. The new 1982 Citizenship Law of Myanmar denies the citizenship right to the Rohingyas which has categorically makes them stateless. Therefore, the denied of citizenship rights that curtails the basic rights and national protection becomes the key factor of Rohingya conflicts in Myanmar. In fact, the anger of prolong deprivation, discrimination and hatred against the Rohingyas has been taking the form of ethnic violence in Myanmar time to time. Sometimes it has been witnessed massive violence in the form of gun fights between the militant groups of Rohingyas and the Myanmar security forces. There have been series of ethnic conflicts in Myanmar in 1784, 1942, 1978, 1991-92, 2012, and 2016-2017. But the last 2016-2017 ethnic conflict in Myanmar was different than earlier in terms of severity of the conflict which was considered as the crime against humanity by the internationality community. The violence of 2016-17 was started with the action of attacking on Myanmar border station and killing of nine Burmese security forces by ragtag groups of militant on 9th October, 2016.⁷ In response to this militant attack on Myanmar security forces, the Myanmar Army undertook a 'clearance operation' under the leadership of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing that leads the situation into a conflict zone. The most severe ethnic conflict occurred only after the attack on the 24 police posts and killing of twelve security forces of Myanmar by an organized Rohingya militant organization called Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) on 25th August, 2017.⁸ Subsequently, the Myanmar military was backed by Buddhist mob that results the brutal killing, attacking and burning of Rohingya villages in the state of Rakhine of Myanmar. The consequence of this clash was so horrible that causes the biggest humanitarian crisis in the history of Southeast Asia.

CONSEQUENCES:

The Rohingya ethnic conflict of 2016-17 was a massive violence affected around 700000 Rohingyas.⁹ With the outbreak of the conflict a total of 671,500 Rohingya refugees have rushed to Bangladesh since 25th August, 2017.¹⁰ As per the Bangladeshi Immigration and Passports Department a total of 1,092,136 Rohingya refugees have migrated from northern Rakhine state and resided in Bangladesh¹¹. The intensity of the violence was so furious that created the Kutupalong camp in Cox's Bazar of Bangladesh as the largest and most densely populated refugee camp of the world. It is estimated that around 6,700 Rohingya were killed during the conflict.¹² The Human Rights Watch (2017c) claimed that the atrocities over the Rohingyas was brutal and even the military involved in the activities of raped and killing them systematically.¹³ Several Rohingya residing villages were burned and destroyed. The Human Rights Watch (2017a) claimed that at least 288 villages were totally or partially destroyed by October, 2017 and the number increased up to 354 till December, 2017.¹⁴ Thousand of Rohingyas were displaced and lost their livelihood. Several restrictions were imposed and were kept under strict surveillance to restrict their movement. Zeid bin Ra'ad al-Husseini, the United

⁷ Holt, C. John, (2019). Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis. USA. University of Hawai Press. p.12.

⁸ *ibid.* p.13.

⁹ Lintner, B. (2019). The Costliest Pearl Chain's Struggle for India's Ocean. UK. C. Hurst & Co. Publishers. p.55.

¹⁰ Holt, C. John, (2019). Myanmar's Buddhist-Muslim Crisis. USA. University of Hawai Press. p.5.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.5.

¹² *Ibid.* p.6.

¹³ *Ibid.* p.6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p.6.

Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights considered this violence as the 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing'.¹⁵ However, the conflict not only affected the Muslim population of Rakhine state but also the non-Muslim population of the affected areas as well. The Buddhist and Hindu communities of the conflict areas have also been suffered and subjected to attacked, destroyed and fled. Of course, the violence disproportionately affected the Rohingyas because of their higher population in the conflict zone than the others. The conflict not only violated the human rights but also make it impossible to lead a meaningful dignified life in the refugee camp. The conflict was so dangerous that they were forced to leave Myanmar and shelter in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government asylums them in Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazar of Bangladesh which becomes as the world largest as well as the most densely populated refugee camp in the contemporary period. The living condition of the Rohingya in the refugee camp is so pathetic. They live in a very congested room and very often face some acute problems like shortage basic needs, lack of hygiene, nutrition and even face natural disasters like monsoon weather, cyclone, and fluted land slide, shelter collapse which makes them more vulnerable to maintain hygienic and sustainable life in the camp. In short, it is almost impossible to have a dignified life in such a huge densely populated refugee camp.

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE ROHINGYA CRISIS

With the outbreak of the violence, Bangladesh became the first country to shoulder her responsibility to the trouble of Rohingyas. Bangladesh government exemplified the greatest humanitarian service to the Rohingyas by allowing them free flee to Bangladesh. Keeping aside the political differences, countries from across the globe condemned the atrocities and expressed their great concerns over the crime against humanism. Countries like Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, India, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Kuwait, South Korea, Philippine, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Switzerland, Turkey, USA, UK, AUE South Korea, and many more have donated financially as well as with kinds as humanitarian assistance to facilitate the basic amenities to the Rohingya refugees. Even countries like UK and Canada mobilized the international community to facilitate international supports and solidarity to the Rohingya crisis. The then Britain Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and Canada Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland urges the Commonwealth countries to stand with the Bangladesh for humanitarian assistance (Global Affairs Canada:2018). The heads of Commonwealth countries also called for restoration of normalcy, sustainable return of Rohingyas with safety, security and dignity. World Bank was one of the biggest international financial contributors to the crisis to avail dignified living condition of the Rohingyas and appeals other international communities to boost up the host country. In June the World Bank has announced another \$50 million to assist the existing health project for health, education, sanitation, disaster management, disease control and social protection and with that approved the World Bank has mobilized a total of \$480 million for Rohingya refugees.¹⁶ Similarly, Asian Development Bank also granted a total of \$200 to ensure water supply, sanitation, disaster risk management, energy and road.¹⁷ The Secretary General of UNO Mr. Antonio Guterres and the World Bank President Mr. Jim Yong Kim visited the Cox's Bazar refugee camp in July, 2018 to observe the overall condition of the community. Mr. Guterres viewed that Rohingyas are living in 'heartbreaking' situation. He also expressed his concerns that Rohingyas cannot become the 'forgotten victims' and hence he called for more international supports for Rohingyas. Moreover, UNO, through its refugee agency named United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR) has actively involved in

¹⁵ Ibid.p.7.

¹⁶ "World Bank Announces Support for Bangladesh to Help Rohingya", World Bank, 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/06/28/world-bank-announces-support-for-bangladesh-to-help-rohingya>

¹⁷ Gough, Kate & Huang, Cindy, Toward Medium-Term Solutions for Rohingya Refugees and Hosts in Bangladesh: Mapping Potential Responsibility Sharing Contributions, Centre for Global Development, Feb, 2019, p.9

providing some basic and emergency needs and also monitoring the entire situation and sharing the necessary information. Another UNO organization called UN International Organization for Migration (IOM) has also engaged in construction of roads, drains, sanitations, water, education, primary health services. However, the Security Council has not been taken any bold decision regarding the repatriation of Rohingyas. The Security Council seemed to spilt on the matter of Rohingya as USA, UK and France called for strong stance against Myanmar military to end of 'ethnic cleansing' on Rohingya while China and Russia supported the Southeast Asian country's government and urged to work with Myanmar authority instead of against them. However, on 6th June, 2018 a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding has been signed between UNHCR, UNDP and Government of Myanmar to develop peace and tranquility in the state of Rakhine that led to formation of a tripartite Technical Working Group and made a visit of delegation of UNHCR and UNDP on the mid of July of last year.¹⁸ This was a bold and positive international initiative in the line of repatriation of Rohingyas in the Rakhine state of Myanmar.

INDIA AND ROHINGYA CRISIS

India has the proud tradition of providing shelter to the refugees now and then whenever humanism falls in crisis. We have enough examples of taking the responsibility of refugees as to the case of Tibetans in 1960s, East Pakistanis (Bangladeshis) in 1970s, Sri Lankans in 1980s and Afghans in 1990s. In the case of Rohingya crisis, India has already extended her helping hand to the Bangladesh government by donating fuel, baby foods and other needs such as rice, pulse, sugar, salt, cooking oil, tea, noodles, biscuits mosquito nets medicines etc. as a response to the humanitarian crisis. Further, the Indian Air Force launched 'Operation Insaniyat' (Humanism) for helping the Rohingya refugee in providing relief and aid of total 7000 metric tonnes to the Rohingya camp in Bangladesh.¹⁹ While dealing with the Rohingya crisis India seems to be equally concern about the diplomatic relation with Myanmar as well. In fact, both Bangladesh and Myanmar are good neighbours of India and both wants India's help and therefore, India hesitates to take any bold decision on Rohingya crisis as India does not want to deteriorate her foreign relations with both of them. However, at the same time India is in front foot to deport 40,000 Rohingyas who have been residing mainly in Hyderabad, Delhi, Rajasthan, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal since 2012. The government decision of deporting the Rohingyas is based on security point of view. Further, the government asserts that deporting the Rohingyas does not violate any international law since India is not the signatory of Refugee Convention, 1951 and the protocol of 1967. However, it will be not exaggerated to say that any member state of Refugee Convention shall not hesitate to breach such international obligations if the refugee themselves challenges the national sovereignty and national security.

Why is the Rohingya a matter of concern?

India, being the second highest populated country of the world has always been in the endeavour to control the high rate of population. In this backdrop, settling of Rohingya in India would definitely increase the burden of the country. After the violence in Myanmar it has been reported that Rohingyas also rushes to the different parts of India. They are spotted from northeastern states like Assam, Manipur, and Tripura and even in the South Indian state like Kerala and in some other pockets of the country. The most challenging issue is to identify them. It is because once they cross the border it becomes very difficult to identify and deport them. Another serious issue is that Rohingya may cause security threat to the country. The intelligence report shows that they have links with Pakistan's ISI, the

¹⁸ "UNHCR and UNDP urge tangible progress to improve conditions in Myanmar's Rakhine State", 2018.
https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/newscentre/news/2018/UNHCR_UNDP_urge_tangible_prgress_Myanmar.html.

¹⁹ "India starts 'Operation Insaniyat' to help Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh", 2017.
<https://www.google.com/amp/s/kalingatv.com/amp/state/india-starts-operation-insaniyat-to-help-rohingya-refugees-in-bangladesh/>

Islamic State and other extremist groups.²⁰ The central government even filed an affidavit in Supreme Court that there are enough intelligence inputs of Rohingyas who have links with terror networks which will be the 'serious security threat to the country'.²¹ Therefore, there is also strong possibility of sowing the seeds of extremist among the Rohingya youth living in India. At the same time it will be not wise to see all the Rohingya migrants have militant networks particularly the vulnerable section of the community viz., aged women, men and children who are struggling for their survival. Of course, there has not been any signal incident till date where Rohingya migrants are arrested with arms and ammunitions in India or in Bangladesh refugee camp. In an interview, Sunbul Rizvi, the UN's Senior Humanitarian Coordinator, Rohingya Refugee Response, said that 'I can tell you there is no sign of any such group inside the camps. Bangladesh is a responsible country and capable of taking measures to control such threat.'²²

CONCLUSION:

The ethnic conflict in Myanmar forges the humanitarian section of the world and raises the issue in international peak. In fact, the violence not only accelerates the spirit of segregation between the Rohingyas and the other people of Myanmar but it also scrutinizes the Myanmar by the world community. The ethnic clash in Myanmar has certainly raised the question of which should be prioritized- nationality or humanity. It is difficult to answer but can be said that both are right in their own angle. Nationalism is a territory oriented while humanism appears as universal without territory. Therefore, whenever humanism falls in crisis humanitarian fabric across the world come closer to response such crisis. At the same time the fear of national security is an obvious phenomenon. No country wants to drive its security in threat at any cost. Rohingya crisis is a suitable example of this dilemma. Rohingyas are still considering Rakhine as their homeland while Myanmar government is loud on verifying the citizenship first. Therefore, it will be worthless to repatriate them without ensuring the environment of security, safety and dignified life in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. Even the Bangladesh government is also not interested to grant them citizenship. Nevertheless, Bangladesh government has been rendering the world's greatest service to Rohingyas by keeping her international border open for Rohingyas and restricts them not to further migrate. It is also true that Bangladesh government despite of having supports from different corners of the world has failed to convince the superpowers to pressurize the Myanmar government to repatriate the Rohingyas.

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²⁰ "India: Rohingya have 'terror' ties", 18th Sep., 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/india-rohingya-muslims-terror-ties-170918134840406.html>

²¹Talukdar, Sreemoy, "India's stand on Rohingya crisis laudable: Three-pronged policy is covers security, humanitarian concerns", 2017, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/indias-stand-on-rohingya-crisis-laudable-three-pronged-policy-covers-both-security-and-humanitarian-concerns-4057029.html>

²² The Hindu, 2nd Sep., 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/no-evidence-of-radicalisation-at-rohingya-camps-in-bangladesh-says-un-official/article24849222.ece>

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