

A Security Perspective of the Rohingya Refugees



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Abstract

Ethnic tensions all over the world have resulted in many countries to adopt nationalistic tendencies with the rise of xenophobia and right winged parties. The persecution and mistreatment of the Rohingya people over the years and more so in recent years have resulted in the exodus of thousands of people from Burma to the neighbouring countries. The Rohingya refugees who escaped their country due to an ethnic clash of identities between them and the Buddhist communities and other discriminatory policies against them had to take shelter in the bordering countries. Most of these people come from the Rakhine state of Burma which has been the most affected state of the country and the majority of them settled in the Teknaf region of Bangladesh. Although the consensus of the international community is to protect and to provide shelter to the Rohingyas, the majority of the countries of the region have been showing reluctant behaviour to accept them. While Bangladesh government stated that it cannot afford such a huge number of people, countries like India has been hesitant in giving them protection. This paper will look into the historical background of the crisis along with the reaction of the international community. It will then analyse how or whether the Rohingya crisis became a political as well as a security threat for the neighbouring countries of India and Bangladesh. It will further analyse the rising cases of nationalistic pride as well as the identity of one's own culture which has become important along with the mix of xenophobic feelings in recent years. The paper argues that such nationalistic feelings along with increased surveillance in the borders resulted in the failure of the international community to tackle such a humanitarian crisis.

Keywords: Rohingya, Refugee, Xenophobia, India, Bangladesh, Burma.

Introduction

Ethnic clashes, as well as ethnic violence, have increased all over the world in the recent past. The question of the identity of a person or a community seeks to change the current status by challenging the ruling authority and while doing it, violence is often the means to do so. This results in clashes which force the people to leave their homes "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted..." (Refugee Convention 1951). Millions are driven out from their homes because they belong to a particular identity. Ethnic clashes have increased over the years since the 80s when a large number of refugees were created due to the internal displacement of people during the Cold War period. The objectives of ethnic conflicts often change over the years because what usually starts as the protest against discrimination of a certain community becomes a demand for an autonomy or separation from the state (Stavenhagen 1998: 438). Among all the refugees of the present times, the region of South East Asia has generated the highest number of refugees. Ethnic clashes have always been present between the dominant Buddhist community and the Rohingya Muslim community. The Rohingya people have been persecuted and mistreated over the years and are still been doing so. They are living in a stateless condition and are not being considered as legal citizens under the Burma government. This has resulted in the exodus of around 300,000 people in the neighbouring countries of India and Bangladesh (Milton et al 2017: 1). The objective of the paper is to analyse how or whether the Rohingya crisis became a political as well as a security threat for the neighbouring countries of India and Bangladesh. It will further examine how identity and importance of culture has taken a negative note and resulted into the increase of xenophobic tendencies when it comes to acceptance of refugees. The paper is built on the hypothesis that nationalistic feelings

along with increased surveillance in the borders resulted in the failure of the international community to tackle such a humanitarian crisis.

Aim of the Study

The paper tries to answer the following questions:

1. How did the Rohingya refugees become a security threat for the countries like India and Bangladesh?
2. What has been the response of these countries in relation to the Rohingya refugees?
3. What has been the attitude of the local people towards the refugees?

The study adopts mainly qualitative technique as it is more of a narrative in nature. The research is mainly based on the data derived from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources such as the UN and regional organisations documents as well as government documents will be consulted. While the secondary source includes books, journals, reports of various think tanks, and internet sources will be used for the purpose of this research.

History of the Rohingya Refugees

The Rohingyas constitute one-third of the Burmese population who mostly lives in the Rakhine state areas of Maung Daw and Bu Thi Daung townships. The group has been living in the Arakan region (presently Rakhine state) since the 15th century. The region expanded during the rule of the British in the 19th century which resulted in significant number of migration of the Muslims into Myanmar. By 1942, the country was divided between the twin control of the Japanese and the British. It divided the people which led to ethnic tensions between the local Burmese and the migrant Muslims. These migrants came with the British to fill in the clerical posts of the government. This led to the increasing hatred between the two communities of the Buddhists and the Muslims. The Myanmar government after its independence has witnessed various clashes between the two groups. The government maintained that the Muslims are migrants who came with the British and are not the original inhabitants of the region (MCRG 2015: 2).

The Rohingyas have been subjected to discrimination and ill-treatment for many generations. There is mistrust between the Rohingyas and the government of Burma. The state of Burma is divided into two blocs where one bloc is pro Rohingya bloc and the other is anti- Rohingya. The pro-Rohingya bloc believes that the Rohingyas are natives of Burma and have been living there since the 9th century and their pluralistic population consists of the races of Bengalis, Persians, Mughals, Turks and the Pathans. While the anti-Rohingya bloc believes that the Rohingyas are basically Chittagonian Bengalis who arrived in Burma illegally due to the British rule. During the World War -II, the Rohingyas have supported the British while the native Arakan people supported the Japanese. This has created a rift between the Rohingyas and the native people of Burma. Moreover, the Rohingyas are ethnically

Muslims which is different from the rest of the population of Burma who is mainly Buddhists (Ullah 2017: 2).

Civil strife has existed between the two groups since the colonial period. The first scale of conflict between the two groups took place in 1942 when natives of the Rakhine state slaughtered and killed around 5000 Rohingyas. The Rohingya Muslims started demanding for a separate identity since 1948 when Burma got independence from British rule. The independent government of Burma refused to give the Rohingyas any kind of rights including the right to citizenship. Although their identity was almost recognized under the leadership of Premier U Nu, the subsequent governments of Burma did not take any step in this regard. The government of Burma initiated the Citizenship Law of Burma in 1982 when the entire population of Burma were recognised under four colour codes-

1. Pink- for those who are recognised as full citizens (these people has their ancestors settled in Burma since 1823)
2. Blue- for those who are considered as associate citizens (these people had applied for citizenship under the 1948 law and their children. It is limited to these applicants of 1948 and their children as the government provided only one year till 1983 to apply for this category and as such the scope of this category is closed).
3. Green- for those who got their citizenship by naturalisation (this group includes the non-nationals who are not recognised as any of the indigenous groups and all stateless persons can apply for this category of citizenship).
4. White- for those who are foreigners (these are temporary registration cards which are issued temporarily and has a fixed validity period) (Arraiza and Vonk 2017: 6).

However, the Rohingyas were not considered under any of these colours and no cards were issued to them. The Rohingyas are also not recognised under the 135 ethnic groups recognised under this act of Burma (Ahmed 2015: 4).

Burma Socialist Party came to power in 1962 and it dismantled all political and social organizations which catered to the interests of the Rohingyas. The Rohingyas faced their first displacement in 1978. Anti Rohingya sentiments were on the rise which was started in military junta to purge out the Rohingya Muslims. This resulted in the flight of around 250,000 refugees from Burma. The following flight of Rohingya refugees was in 1991-92 when another group of 250,000 people had to flee their country because of another military crackdown upon the Rohingyas and the present crisis of 2015 when hundreds of people were murdered or raped and thousands of houses burned down and people were rendered homeless (Ranjan 2017: 4). Apart from statelessness and the crisis of identity, the Rohingyas under the present crisis are also forced to work as underpaid labourers where they are sexually harassed or denied the basic rights like the right to marry or to practice their own religion. They are confined to their own areas and

they are restricted to move in other parts of the country. Any land or property which was possessed by the Rohingyas has been confiscated and burned down. Women face sexual violence on a regular basis as rape has become a natural phenomenon of the Arakan Valley. Women are also forcibly taken and impregnated and minor girls are sexually tortured or molested (Majumder et al 2015: 7).

Most of these Rohingyas have crossed the border to the nearest territory of Bangladesh owing to the persecution that started in the northwest Rakhine state. However, they have taken shelter in many of the South Asian countries. The following table shows the statistics of the Rohingyas in different countries:

Country	No of Rohingya Refugees Taken
Bangladesh	890000
Pakistan	350000
Saudi Arabia	200000
Malaysia	150000
India	40000
UAE	10000
Thailand	5000

Source: Amin, Mudasir (2018: 6)

Bangladesh has become the major destination for these refugees because both the countries are separated only by the Naf River. The attitude of the local people in Burma is also antagonistic to the Rohingyas. Because of this negative attitude and persecution that followed for generations, a militant group called Harakah al- Yaqin or "Faith Movement" exists which allegedly carried out attacks against the local Buddhists. This resulted in violence between the two groups repeatedly. The present persecution of the Rohingyas started when the Rohingya militants allegedly attacked the border posts. The Burmese government retorted back with the "clearance operation" when almost 10 villages of the Rohingya occupation were destroyed in the Rakhine state and hundreds of homes destroyed, countless women raped and forced to flee to Bangladesh (Haque 2017: 4).

Response of the International Community

The Rohingya crisis has caused public outrage in the international community. With the dominance of social media, countless images which depicted the horrors of the Rakhine state were posted and shared globally. A number of countries have condemned the violence and the leaders have been vocal about the discrimination that the Rohingya community has been going through. The United States which has been the strongest allies of Burma in the past has, however, taken a stronger stand and condemned the actions of the Burmese government. China has been the only state to support the Burmese government since the crisis began by openly stating that the Burmese government has every right to protect its country against violence and threats. China and Burma have shared a close relationship since the past and China has provided Burma with generous amounts of weapons and arms for its security (Siddiqui 2017: 6). A lot of other countries have been

demanding to revoke the Nobel Peace Prize that was awarded to Aung San Su Kyi in 1991. Canada has been demanding to revoke the honorary citizenship that was awarded to her in 2007 as the Canadian Prime Minister called the situation in Burma as "terrible" (Ranjan 2017: 7).

The United Nations has repeatedly criticised the policies of the Burmese government towards the Rohingya refugees and has asked the government to take actions in order to end the violence. The Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres has called on the Muslim population of the Rakhine valley to be granted the legal status of citizenship and urged the international community to take effective action in this regard to help the people who are trapped in statelessness due to the crisis (UN News Centre 2017). The UN Security Council has also called for re-establishing the law and order to end the violence in the Rakhine valley. Other organizations of the international community such as Human Rights Watch, International Criminal Court (ICC) subscribed to the Rome Statute according to which the ICC can exercise its juridical action on any country even if the country did not sign the Rome Statute. But every international action requires the support of all the member countries for a UN resolution to be successful. As such, the world community could not get support from all the permanent five members in this aspect as China continuously vetoed against it (Ullah 2017: 11).

However, the European Union (EU) managed to provide a significant fund for assisting the Rohingya refugees. Since the year of 2010, the EU had provided around € 76.5 million to the vulnerable people of the Rakhine state. The EU has also funded projects in Burma to address the basic needs which includes food, health, water and sanitation for the affected people who got displaced due to the violence. The European Commission has also allocated close to € 43 million for basic needs of the people who crossed the border to Bangladesh in 2017 through international NGOs and the UN (European Commission 2017).

Response of Bangladesh and India

The influx of Rohingya refugees from Burma has given rise to a critical situation in Bangladesh. The refugees are mainly settling in camps in the Cox Bazaar area which lies in the southern region of Bangladesh. The border between the two countries is very porous and is separated by hill tracts and the Naf River. Until 2017, around 1,008,431 Rohingya refugees have been living in the Teknaf region of Bangladesh (Bhattacharjee 2017: 1). The government of Bangladesh has been supportive of the Rohingya refugees in their country. Even the local people of Bangladesh has shown a positive attitude towards the Rohingya refugees and allowed them to settle there. Two camps have been provided by the Bangladesh government for the refugees namely Nayapara and Kutapalong. The Kutapalong camp is situated around 37 kilometres south of Cox Bazar and Nayapara is situated around 48 kilometres south of the Kutapalong camp and 5 kilometres from the Bangladesh-

Myanmar border. These camps are half the size of the standard UN recommended size of 45 square meters per person and are densely populated (Danish Immigration Service report 2011: 20-21). The government of Bangladesh is considering the option of settling the refugees in an uninhabited island called Thengar Char in the Noakhili district. But the island does not have basic agricultural conditions and the location is far away from the mainland of Bangladesh. This resettlement plan of the Bangladesh government has garnered criticism worldwide because it violates the principle of non-refoulement which states that the refugees cannot be located against their will. Another option of resettling the refugees that the government of Bangladesh has considered is to establish safe zones within Burma so that the refugees can return to that country. But this option has also resulted in criticism as safe zones are rarely successful. Moreover, this option will be dangerous as the Burmese government has never considered the Rohingyas as an ethnic group (Idris 2017: 6).

The influx of Rohingya refugees, however, has posed a number of security challenges in Bangladesh. The primary challenge among all these security challenges is food insecurity. It has resulted in serious food challenges and malnutrition amongst the refugees. The influx of refugees has contributed to an increase in food prices and health challenges. Contagious diseases which rely on human hosts have caused an epidemic in the refugee camps. Lack of clean water and sanitation contributed to the human security challenges in the refugee camps. Moreover, human trafficking and prostitution also increased the challenges for the Bangladesh government. The continuous atrocities upon the Rohingyas can also give rise to the problem of internal security as there is a strong feeling of resentment among the local people of Bangladesh towards the refugees. This may result in an ethnic backlash on the minority population of Bangladesh which also includes a sizeable number of Buddhists (Muniruzzaman 2017: 2).

The refugees have also weighed down the economy of Bangladesh because it has caused an upsurge in the consumption of daily goods. Being an underdeveloped country, Bangladesh is not being able to deal with the huge gap between the demand and supply of food, medicine and other medical facilities. Apart from hampering the economy and other human security challenges, the influx of the refugees had caused a major crisis in the demography of the country. The addition of thousands of people had made the job market competitive among both the groups. The refugees are mostly uneducated youths who fled their home due to persecution which makes the population vulnerable to smuggling of arms and drugs along with other terror-linked crimes. One of the main security challenges is the rise of transnational crimes and terrorism as more and more number of international terror groups look for recruiting people in the name of jihad. Several terror organizations like the Al Qaeda and Islamic State has expressed solidarity with the refugees. This can turn the entire region into a hotbed of terrorist

activities as the terror organizations are planning on expanding their operation in the East (Bhattacharjee 2017: 3).

Similarly, a number of Rohingya refugees have crossed the borders and settled in India since the 90s. India shares a 30km of the border with Burma which touches its southernmost point in the Andaman Sea. Around 40,000 of the refugees came to India and settled in different cities like Delhi, Hyderabad, Jammu and Chennai. Contrary to Bangladesh, the Indian people have shown a negative attitude to the Rohingya refugees. A number of slogans as well as pamphlets have been launched in different places with the sign "Rohingya Go Back". Moreover, India does not have a refugee framework of its own which often increases the dilemma of the refugees. Additionally, India is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol which is mainly because of security reasons. India shares extremely porous borders with its neighbours and with Bangladeshi illegal immigrants, India chose to not sign the Refugee Convention and the Protocol. Therefore, the Rohingyas have to go through a long process and still they are having difficulties in getting refugee cards from the office of UNHCR in Delhi (Majumder et al 2015: 28).

The Indian opinion about the Rohingya refugees is negative as it feels that it will increase the burden economically and that it will not be able to afford the burden of the Rohingyas. However, India has been providing economic assistance to the Rohingyas on humanitarian ground. But hosting refugees will be difficult on the part of India because apart from economic reasons, India has signed several developmental projects with Burma and therefore it cannot risk any unwelcoming decision against the Burmese government. Thus, the security interest of India plays a major role in this aspect.

Rise of Xenophobia

The world in the past twenty years has seen the rise of increased movement between borders with the advent of globalization. This has resulted in exchange of the ethnicity and racial diversity among different borders. Addressing the mix of numerous identities has also resulted in fear amongst people of losing their own identity. Xenophobia, in turn, has resulted in discrimination and exclusion of a certain identity which often turns into violence against the community. Xenophobia and other racial discrimination are very common against the refugees because they are a vulnerable group who does not have a legal identity. The tension amongst the refugees and the local group of people often results in the inequality between the two groups because neither party can integrate with the other culture (United Nations 2001: 10).

For any refugee crisis, integrating with the local people and securing equal treatment remains the major problem. The local population resist the intake of refugees because of the economic implications. This results in the increase of border controls and surveillance in the host country. The Rohingya refugees chose their destination countries

in Bangladesh and India. Both countries have increased their controls in borders to curb the intake of Rohingya refugees. Although the attitude of the Bangladeshi government seems positive, it has confined the movement of the refugees in one particular region. Despite welcoming thousands of refugees to its territory, Bangladesh stated that it cannot afford the burden of all the refugees. The rise of xenophobia all over the world has resulted in an increase of the right winged parties. This has resulted in the importance of state sovereignty and increase of nationalistic tendencies. Moreover, terror activities all over the world have also resulted in the increase of Islamophobia and discrimination against the Muslims has increased worldwide. The Rohingya refugees, being a Muslim community are facing this discrimination in India. The increase of xenophobia and Islamophobia resulted in the increased restrictions and intolerance against the refugees (Achiume 2017: 5).

The future of the Crisis as such looks bleak. The Rohingyas cannot go back to Burma because they cannot match the strength of the military forces of the Burmese government. The international community cannot help the refugees if the countries are not united in their support. The prospects of them living in India and Bangladesh with all the facilities are also unlikely. Thus the international community failed to tackle the Rohingya crisis because of the increase of the rise of nationalistic tendencies among the people of both Bangladesh and India which in turn has increased the control of surveillance in the borders. The only option that the Rohingya refugees have is to hope that the Burmese government stops the violent outbreak that started against the Rohingyas. With a unanimous decision by the international community against the Burmese government, the Rohingyas can dream of going back home.

Conclusion

Ethnic violence along with discrimination against a community has become very common in the world. One of such persecuted communities in the world is the Rohingya community. The Rohingyas have been discriminated and mistreated for generations because they are allegedly from Bangladesh. The recent clash of identities between the Rohingyas and the native Burmese Buddhists have resulted in the exodus of the Rohingyas to the neighbouring countries of India and Bangladesh. The Rohingyas are Muslims and are culturally different from the native Burmese people who are Buddhists. The Rohingyas as such could never get integrated into the larger society of Burma and are not even identified as a legal ethnic community by the Burmese government. They have been discriminated in their own country for generations and even their movements were restricted to a certain region.

The present Rohingya crisis has captured attention worldwide. However, the international community could not garner positive and unanimous support from all the countries. While international organizations like the European Union has provided

with economic assistance to the refugees, countries like China have been in favour of the discriminatory behaviour of the Burmese government. The Rohingyas after fleeing their country settled in the Southern region of Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government has shown a very welcoming attitude to the refugees and accepted thousands of them to stay in the Cox Bazaar region. However, the government has been neglecting the refugee camps there and the refugees have to bear the unfavourable living conditions there. The presence of Rohingya refugees has however resulted in multiple security challenges in Bangladesh including food security, health security and economic crisis apart from bigger issues transnational terror and smuggling of arms and drugs.

Contrary to Bangladesh, the Rohingya refugees in India had to face negative and unfavourable attitude from the government as well as the local people. The Indian government stated that it cannot take the burden of such a huge population. Moreover, India has been sharing several projects with Burma and is not ready to jeopardize its relationship with it. Hence the refugees are facing discriminatory behaviour in India. However; this can also be the factor of xenophobia and Islamophobia which is playing its role behind this restraining attitude in both the countries. The international community could not gather the support to tackle the crisis and increasing nationalistic tendencies, as well as increased control of borders, led to the failure of the international community to tackle the crisis.

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