

Rohingyas Crisis in Myanmar: Implications for India

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Abstract

An issue known as the Rohingya crisis is a tragedy that was in the making for over several decades and concerns the plight of thousands of people belonging to the ethno religious minority of Arakan province of Myanmar. Despite emphatic pleas and gross human right violation, ethnic cleansing has been going on unabatedly. Definitely there is a lack of effective governance strategies to address this issue. The plight of the Rohingyas is vulnerable and the country's recent political transition from democratic form of government to the military junta has undone the comfortable space for the bilateral relations between the two countries. The present piece is a modest attempt to track the historicity of the Rohingya crises and the consequent mass exodus to India and Bangladesh. Will this crisis lead to strategic implications for India keeping into account the push towards India's look East policy.

Keywords: Rohingya, Crisis, Strategic, look East policy governance strategies.

Introduction

The Rohingyas community is believed to be the world's largest stateless ethnic groups numbering 1.2 million and searching for their lost identity. They have faced decades of systematic discrimination, deprivation, statelessness and sustained violence in the Rakhine or the Arakan province of Myanmar. Myanmar being a majority Buddhist nation is intolerant and discriminating towards the minority. Such persecution and denial has forced them to flee and seek refuge in the neighbouring countries. The Buddhist majority State has committed grave atrocities such as mass killings, persecution and deliberate deprivation of the benefits of a welfare State. Rohingya is an issue that is likely to define structure of violence and insurgencies in the years to come. In the days to come this crisis will definitely affect the relations not only between India and Myanmar but also between Bangladesh and India. An uncertainty looms on the status as to what sort of treatment will be meted out to the Rohingyas with democratic forces relegating to the background and the military junta taking the centre of power. (Sharma,1). These Rohingya refugees who have lost their homes frequently often find themselves in conflict with four aspects namely material, spatial, emotional and imaginative and struggle to re-establish their identities.

Objective of the Study

The paper titled Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar: Implications for India intends to trace the historicity of the Rohingya crisis, the imperatives/implications of Indian Foreign policy and the strategies to be adopted for mitigating problem of refugees.

There is no particular data which points out the exact number of Rohingyas in Myanmar, Bangladesh and India. According to different United Nations agencies more than 1,68,000 Rohingyas escaped from Myanmar alone. The data estimates of International organisation for migration points that between October 2016 and July 2017 about 87,000 fled to Bangladesh. Labelled as boat people facing unabated persecution and crackdowns they also land up in countries like Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates. (Amin,6). As per several reports and data (The Indian home ministry and Reuters) an estimated 40,000 Rohingyas have made India their home. In January 2019, UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner For Refugees) for India acknowledged the presence of 18,000 as registered refugees and asylum seekers. Majority of these illegal Rohingyas have settled in Jammu, Haryana (Mewat region), Uttar Pradesh, Hyderabad, Delhi NCR and Rajasthan.



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The crisis can be attributed to major political events during the pre colonial, colonial and postcolonial phases in Myanmar history. They have been denied citizenship and other basic rights despite having lived here for generations. The ethnic exclusion of Rohingyas in a true sense began with the citizenship Act of 1982. The conditions listed in this Act were far from being realised, which in turn made the Rohingyas stateless. In the nineteenth century when whole of the South Asia was colonised. Many Rohingyas sided the British during second world war. There is conclusive documented evidence of mass dislocations as well as proofs of women and children being killed by rampaging soldiers. The United Nations refers to the Rohingyas as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. The United Nations human rights agency has said that the abuses against the Rohingya can be classified as crime against humanity (Cherian, 61).

The level of persecution has not only varied over the past few years but has worsened now. They are labelled as 'Illegal Bengali Immigrants' who have infiltrated from Bangladesh particularly the Chhitagong Hill Tracts. They have been facing decades of systematic discrimination, Statelessness and targeted violence through various forms since Myanmar got independence. Such sustained persecution has forced Rohingya people to flee from their dwelling places to various parts particularly to Bangladesh and India. The brutal attack by the State on the Rohingyas followed by genocide, gang rape, systematic violence and mayhem speaks of the looming atrocities. This issue has now gained the global attention especially after the clash that took place in Myanmar 2017 resulting in the exodus of the Rohingya community. (Minz and Roshni Kujur, 76). Thus these Rohingyas risked everything against military offensive and managed to escape Myanmar unmindful of the future.

The ethnic turbulence in Myanmar due to the Rohingya crisis involving the minority Muslim Rohingya and the majority Burmans has added an uncertain element with regard to the minorities. In the days to come this will have future geo political ramifications for both Bangladesh and India. Such upheavals apart from home insurgency will also set off a chain reaction of ethnic demands and counter demands among different ethnic groups in Myanmar. India needs to strike a balance between political consolidation in that country (democratic forces and military) but should be proactive in denying safe haven for political insurgents who may disturb the areas encompassing Chhitagong – Bandarban – Cox bazaar as well as Mizoram and Southern Assam in India (Sen,1). These particular areas are marked as the refuge for these communities. They have been moving for refuge or clandestinely hiding since the 1970's. The largest migrations took place in 2016 and 2017 due to the brutal suppression by the security forces of Myanmar. Majority of the Rohingyas are no doubt in several squalid camps in Bangladesh where conditions are too pathetic. DAJI (Development and

Justice Initiative) report specifically mentions that the violence and brutal campaigns and deliberate persecution on ethnic grounds forced the Rohingyas to migrate to Bangladesh primarily and later on through porous borders to India. The unsatisfactory conditions in Bangladesh plus the resource mobilisation crisis are definitely the push factor for migration to India. Several others drivers for refugee to India being the security, opportunity and identification with the Muslim populace in India (Brenner,1).

Lancet's report regarding the genocide of the Rohingyas has talked of the horrific images and account of destruction and desolation which is almost unbearable. The United Nations Security Council should accelerate its efforts to protect this persecuted community. Need of the hour is to undertake humanitarian measures as well as punish the perpetrators of the gross violation of human rights. The plight of these disenfranchised refugees is almost unimaginable. This crisis can be attributed to four broad causes firstly the deliberate denial of citizenship and the subsequent benefits of a modern welfare State, secondly the denial of right to protection by host governments, thirdly perception of threat to national security of host countries and fourthly any constructive and collaborative efforts to share responsibility. (Gaffar,114). The Rohingya issue in a nutshell is multidimensional- historical, legal, ethnic, political, strategic, international and humanitarian.

India and the Rohingya Crisis

Since the dawn of Indian Independence Vasudeva Katumbakam has been the guiding ethos of international relations. In the context of Indian foreign policy this principle is being followed in letter and spirit. All refugees facing persecution in the subcontinent were sheltered and given refuge- be it the Tamilians, the Tibetians, the Afgani, the Sindhis or the Chakmas. The principle of 'non-refoulment' is practised in spirit in spite of any legal codified law, keeping in mind that any country where there are chances of persecution on the basis of ethnic considerations the refugees are not to be sent back. India has never been drifted away from the 'non-refoulment' in the past but after 2017 there has been a change in India's stand. Apart from this India has been an adherent to the various covenants and protocols regarding human rights but the changing geo political realities and the demand for a sustainable peace India has to look beyond idealism. The need of the hour is to uphold the pleas of the human right agencies and uphold the international law and protect these vulnerable Rohingyas (Kamdar,1)

India's Stand on the Rohingya is marked by the complex dynamics of Myanmar politics which definitely revolves around ethnicity and legitimacy. Is it not easy to base foreign policy and national security on ethics, morality and social justice? Indian foreign policy makers need to balance between its security concerns and humanitarian concerns.

Sreemoy Talukdar, in his research essay emphatically puts the need that "We live in a world where nation states decide their policies based on

narrow narcissism. Woolly headed narcissism cannot guide geographical moves and strategic interests." India's Prime Minister Visit to Myanmar and his stand on Rohingya crisis is reflected in, [its] refusal to back the Bali declaration at World Parliament Forum; abstaining from the Security Council Resolution regarding Rohingyas and the attempt to deport Rohingya from the Indian soil is based on rational assessment of realpolitik and security interests.

Initially it was conditioned predominantly by its security concerns. India had warned of the probability of an attack by the ARSA (Arakan Salvation Army) and which in the days to come proved to be trigger of the Rohingya crisis. India is also apprehensive and even warned of the liaisoning of Islamic fundamentalist groups like Lashkar-e Toiba, The Jamait –i – Islami exploiting the Rohingya sentiments. Even the groups like the RSO (Rohingya student organisation) were linked to Hizb-i _islami of Afganistan. Investigations from the NIA (National intelligence agency) pointed out that few Rohingyas as part of Indian Mujahidhin were involved in Bodh Gaya blast in 2013 which has definitely made the issue more sensitive. (Goswami) Thus Indian stand on Rohingyas can be described as mutual concern in combating extremist violence. ICG (International Crisis Group) has also mentioned that the Rohingyas are receiving assistance from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. As the refugee and humanitarian crisis unfounded in the month of September with Bangladesh bearing the economic and physical burden of more than 6 lakh refugees. Ghoshal in his research article emphasized this fact that "Dhaka's diplomatic overdrive modified India's stand on Rohingya crisis [due to which] Indian govt had to acknowledge that there is a refugee crisis. India also urged the Myanmar government to exercise restraint and maturity and stressed the need for civilian welfare."

There is a persistent call in India and abroad to play a proactive role in the crisis as India has the long history of providing humanitarian assistance to its neighbours. India has strong influence in Myanmar and Bangladesh, and could make a real difference. However Indian stance to deport Rohingyas, instructions to the State government to identify them so as to label them as illegal immigrants and repatriate them to Myanmar. Even in response to the Supreme Court petition government labelled them as a threat to national security. After Bangladesh displeasure India in its face saving mode launched the 'Operation Insaniyat for the Rohingyas in Bangladesh (majority Rohingyas have sought in Bangladesh). Three factors have driven the governments controversial stand. Firstly the growing security concerns over global jihadi groups such as ISIS, al-Qaida, and the ISI and their commitments and support to arm the Rohingyas has made the Government sceptical of the insurgents. This perception has definitely turned India towards Myanmar. Secondly Myanmar remains India's gateway to SouthEast Asia, so its cooperation is crucial for its broader regional objectives. Thirdly China's overwhelming presence in Myanmar

continues to guide India's dealings with the Myanmar authorities. Thus New Delhi response has been guided by cold cost benefit calculation concerning trade with Myanmar, maintaining leverage viz a viz China and cooperation on counter insurgency operations in the North East. There is no denying the fact that India has accommodated those in need even the Rohingyas were sheltered in 2012 . But the U turn in the present government stance is in consonance to the hostile stand on minorities (Sahoo,1)

The visit by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in September 2017 was an attempt to strengthen the bilateral relationship between India and Myanmar. Both the nations reaffirmed their commitment towards political, economic and cultural relations and to strengthen peace, prosperity and development of the regions. Prime Minister Modi reiterated that a stable and peaceful Myanmar is the priority of India and apprehended Myanmar govt's fight against terrorism and violence. Both condemned terrorist activities in their areas. In diplomatic circles the visit was recognised as a silent Indian support to the Myanmar government which was facing global heat and accusation of ethnic cleansing of Rohingyas. It was agreed that the Rohingyas problem was a development problem rather than political. India offered Myanmar to assist in the 'Rakhine state development program'. (Agrahari, 20)

India one of the prominent powers of South Asia is siding with Myanmar on Rohingya. India has a distinction of giving refuge and shelter to the persecuted minorities. Her role is prominent as far as the liberation of Bangladesh is concerned. Soon after insurgency in 2017 Modi's maiden visit to Myanmar stood for denouncing terrorist attacks. The word 'Rohingya' was avoided with a statement by Ministry Of External Affairs 'back Myanmar in fight against terrorism' this realist stand is justified on account of several conditions and determinants . Myanmar being a land locked country shares a land border of 1,643kms with four north eastern states by corridor at Siliguri in West Bengal. (Islam, 116) Thus to contain separatist an insurgency movements in North East Myanmar help is indispensable. Any sort of criticism can badly be counter productive as far as the borders of North east are concerned. In normal times too the ethno religious balance in North East is brittle. The euphoria for cementing the ties with ASEAN nations acknowledges the geopolitical value of Myanmar for Indian national interests. The Act East Policy reflects India's realistic priorities which aim to encircle two major facets of multilateral relations, development and security with its Eastern neighbours. The Act East Policy focuses on extending regional cooperation, trade and commerce as well as connectivity so as to withhold China. To accomplish Act East Policy Utmost restraint is to be observed regarding Rohingyas. (Agrahari 19).

The Rohingya crisis being contentious issue of recent times not confined solely to Myanmar but the surrounding subregions too witnessed commotion elsewhere also. The displaced people have been migrating within the sub regions. The little subregion like the Bay of Bengal is ill equipped to deal with the

unabated movements of the Rohingyas from one Member State to another. The sub regional initiative of BIMSTEC (Bay Of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) may be influenced by any sort of diplomatic rows. Thus India intends to ensure the prosperity and development of the Rakhine State so that deportation of Rohingyas is economically and reasonably viable. (Banerjee,1).

There is no denying the fact migrant and refugee are different terms. Even though India is not a signatory to the 1951 refugee convention but she has accepted the Stateless displaced people on humanitarian grounds. There has been a steady influx of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh through the porous borders of North East. However India's status regarding has remained unclear, on one hand India is unable to deport them back to Myanmar and on the other hand she is unwilling to accept them. India is firm in its stand that the Rohingyas need to have a valid visa and refugee card while claiming social securities and basic facilities from Government of India, but she will not accept them.

There has been a lack of consistency in the policies as far as far the stand of NDA government of Narendra Modi is concerned. There has been a lack of continuity in the policies. The position of government that the Rohingyas are a threat to India's national security has a dual purpose, firstly to appease the military regime in Naypyitaw so as to outsmart China and secondly to excite mass anxieties domestically. (Nandy,1).

In one of the reports it has been categorically stated that the dealing with the Rohingyas refugees juxtaposes its political and humanitarian aspects. The report lays how the Bhartiya Janta Party led National Democratic alliance (NDA) government's approach towards refugees is in keeping with its Hindu nationalist agenda ,with religion dictating State policy. It is her strategic compulsion to deport these refugees to their homeland. A large number of measures have been taken which depicts Rohingyas as a threat to Indian national security. Keeping in mind the growing Islamophobia, Hindu majoritarianism is gaining ground. These Rohingyas are labelled as terrorists. Government has been harsh with bureaucratic procedures, surveillance and border control at times violence has been resorted against those seeking refuge. The report also throws light on the fact that on the one hand government is insensitive to the pathetic and deplorable dwelling conditions of these refugees in India and on the other side Indian stand in aiding the development plan for Rakhine (Amin,58).

India's current non political or neutral approach to the Rohingya crisis-which entails sending generous humanitarian and development aid to Myanmar and vaguely hoping for "early stabilisation" of the situation-does little to actually resolve the situation on the ground. There is an inbuilt contradiction as far as the humanitarian assistance is concerned. The conspicuous absence of touching Rohingya's lives and aid for Rakhine Development generates an inclination towards the Myanmar establishment at the cost of the needy Rohingyas. The crisis is likely to simmer unless and until suitable

guarantees are not ensured in the political system particularly constitutional guarantees for the vulnerable Rohingyas. There is a need to revise the nationality laws clearly and publicly and full cooperation with the stake holders in averting the crisis. It is high time for the policy makers in India to look beyond the realistic Foreign policy imperatives to holistic, sustainable and norms based international order.(Choudhary,1) India's restraint on the Rohingya refugee crisis undermines its democracy and global standing. A large number of countries are being a part of crisis mitigation strategies like Japan, China and Sweden, Germany and the European Union. But Indian stand has been silent and soft footed which definitely has ceded space for the other countries to take a lead in Rohingya crisis (Haider,1)

Challenges and Future Strategies

Keeping into account the historicity and events of the Rohingya crisis it is pertinent to point out that the basic problem is of political inclusion. This community is being facing the crisis of identity and resource mobilisation, marginalisation and politicisation. No concrete roadmap till now has emerged to ameliorate their sufferings. At the national level India must see that only then the deportation is facilitated when conditions are conducive, any forceful deportation can complicate the dialogue process. Both ASEAN and BIMSTEC forums should be used for bilateral and regional engagements so that tangible outcomes are generated. A sort of pragmatism need to be adopted as a large number of stakeholders are involved.(Y Home,1)

There is a need to strike a balance between national security and humanitarian concerns. Confidence building measures along with good offices need to be used. Myanmar must deal urgently with the Rohingya crisis on two fronts: addressing the plight of impoverished Rohingya minority as they struggle to fulfil their basic needs and livelihood and secondly proper statutory provisions for their inclusion in the political systems. On the part of India, wait and watch policy should be observed as the Myanmar government till now has not shown any inclination towards restoring citizenship and other rights. The Rohingya crisis calls for a responsible state action from India as these communities face the brunt of trauma, deprivation and fear. A regional definition of Rohingyas refugees and asylum seekers should be developed.

A properly managed resettlement programme can avoid or mitigate any risks of pull factor or fraud and is routine work for UNHCR and IOM. It can be expected any initial resettlement from Bangladesh would be modest in numbers and prioritize individuals with urgent protection needs such as women victims of violence, the medically at risk and separated family members. Permitting third country resettlement is a policy decision the Bangladesh government may wish to reconsider.(Gorlick,22) The rights of asylum seekers should be clearly stipulated to differentiate them from economic migrants. A common coordination policy should be adopted and followed to prevent refugee

from becoming locked into a long term cycle of exclusion and dependency. Regional coordination among the neighbouring countries should be developed. Proper mechanisms should be developed for sharing information among the regional players. A common coordination policy should be adopted and followed to prevent refugee from becoming locked into a long term cycle of exclusion and dependency. Regional coordination among the neighbouring countries should be developed. Proper mechanisms should be developed for sharing information among the regional players. Necessary administrative structures should be developed to facilitate assistance, protection, registration, resettlement, voluntary repatriation and local integration (Amin ,99)

Conclusion

The Rohingya crisis is a challenge not only to the security, stability and status of India but for the whole international community. It is high time that all the stakeholders should come together as a single international community and look for a permanent and a durable solution to the Rohingya crisis. Deprivation, denial and resource mobilisation crisis has been due to the lack of a definite refugee law.(Minz and Kajru).The decision to treat a person or a group of persons as refugee or not is taken on merit or circumstances of the cases shadowed by political considerations. In India few refugee communities have been treated reasonably well but a well-defined refugee law is lacking. There is definitely an absence of statutory standards and inconsistent government policies. (Bhattacharjee,1)

A former UNHCR head Sudako Ogata rightly stated "There are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian crisis only political solutions". No doubt the political solutions may not prove sufficient thus there is a need to promote and implement protection and rights based solutions. Need of the hour is sound leadership, wilful acceptance, assimilation, strategic planning, creative diplomacy and a degree of political good luck. Collective political goodwill with sustained international pressure can definitely resolve the issue. Despite the various problems and the unforeseeable Rohingya crisis there is lot that raises hope for the future. The common understanding of vital problems and common security issues push both nations to explore common solutions through cooperation. Both India and Myanmar recognise the importance of each other in their national interest. Both the neighbours are vulnerable to shrewd policies of expansionist China and to counter the threat both are needed to build a strong bond. The current century is regarded as the century of Asia which will determine the pace of the world. The changing geopolitics and geo economic situations are ready to reshape the previous world order.

As the recent events depicts, the long lingering power struggle in Naypyitaw has come in favour of military junta and relegated the so called democratic forces to the background. All the hopes for a truly democratic Myanmar have been dashed with uncertain future. The power struggle between two Asian giants will definitely impact the region geopolitics. It is to be seen whether succour will be

provided by the military junta. Unless the military decides to engage in a peace process to gain some brownie points for itself, the Rohingya question is likely to be pushed aside with a campaign against them continuing relentlessly. The inability of the states in the region to address the legitimate concerns of the Rohingyas or human right violations could lead to extremism which in the days to come will not be in the interest of India. Indian government must maintain friendly with the government in power along with nurturing its look East policy.

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