

The Rohingyas: Searching the Root of Ethno-Political Problem and Migration Pattern

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Abstract: Burmese Citizenship Law-1982 has made the Muslim Rohingyas largest persecuted population groups in the world. Rohingya crisis in Myanmar is a contemporary and crucial issue not only in South and Southeast Asia but also in the world. The 'duration of stay' of Rohingyas in Myanmar is a matter of controversy raised by Rohingya literatures and Arakanese Buddhists literatures. The root of antagonism between Rohingya Muslim and Buddhist Arakanese is historical. Only the dimension and extension has been changed with the advancement of time. Massive Rohingya exodus has been occurred three times in independent Myanmar, in 1978, 1991-92 and 2017 due to military operation. Huge number of refugee outflow has strike mainly in neighbouring Bangladesh border, has made geopolitical imbalance in the South-East Asia. Myanmar Government and Rohingya leaders should review their policy against each other and should start dialoging for the permanent solution. The paper tries to draw out the origin of Rohingyas and their long history of conflict with Buddhist Arakanese as well as with Government. Refugee issue and migration pattern also included here. Statements are almost bias free as much as possible and have been made best on important historical/research document.

Keywords: Rohingya, Refugee, Arakanese, UNHCR, Muslim, Buddhist, Confrontation.

INTRODUCTION

From the September 2017 again Rohingya refugee issue distorted the geopolitical situation of South-East Asia.

Currently the issue did not limited within two neighbouring countries, Myanmar and Bangladesh but UN interference also highly involved with "swift action". At least 500,000 civilians have fled their homes from the Myanmar country's northern Rakhine state since late August and sought refuge mainly in Bangladesh. UN secretary general said "The situation has spiralled into the world's fastest developing refugee emergency and a humanitarian and human rights nightmare" [1]. Day by day the situation is going to be worse and out of control. Human trafficking, rape, women and child abuse, malnutrition are the general phenomena. MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) with Myanmar and Bangladesh with UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) [2] temporarily manage the situation to some extent. Government of Myanmar and Bangladesh both agreed with UNHCR proposal about supervising the refugees by the UN officials and NGOs in their own countries and able to issue 'Refugee Card'.

Presently the Rohingyas are the largest persecuted population groups in the world because; Ne Win government (1962-1988) denied the citizenship for

Rohingyas according to 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law [3]. The year 1823, was taken as a base year to differentiate the people residing Myanmar between "us" and "them". Based on the base year three types of citizenship was issued in Myanmar but unfortunately Rohingyas was excluded.

Rohingya Muslim community is mostly found in 'Rakhine' State of Myanmar. Though, the name of 'Rohingya' seems to be come out in early 1950s. But they reside since the beginning of the Mrauk-U dynasty (1430-1785) of the Arakan Kingdom or even before that. Another group of historians stated that Rohingyas are direct descendants of immigrants from the Chittagong District of East Bengal in the 19th century who was classified as "Chittagonians" by the British officials.

The history of antagonism and conflict between Rohingyas and Buddhist Arakanese is not a new issue. From the early British colonial period they were facing confrontation against each other and probably the British was sown the poison seeds among both ethnic communities during Burma military

aggression (1942-45). With the passage of time only dimension and extension has changed. Time to time refugee issue has made geopolitical imbalance in the South-East Asia.

In this paper effort has been given to draw out the origin of Rohingyas and their long history of conflict with Buddhist Arakanese as well as with Government. Refugee issue and migration pattern also included here. Statements are bias free as much as possible and have been made best on important historical/research document.

Occupance of Rohingya

Former 'Arakan', the westernmost state situated on western coast of Myanmar, is now officially known as the 'Rakhine' State is the home land of the Rohingya Muslim community. It is bordered by Chin State to the north, Magway Region, Bago Region and Ayeyarwady Region to the east, the Bay of Bengal to the west, and the Chittagong Division of Bangladesh to the northwest. Rakhine has four districts, seventeen townships and 3,871 villages, according to a government report of Myanmar, published in 2014. Rakhine is located approximately between latitudes 17°30' north and 21°30' north and longitudes of 92°10' east and 94°50' east. The Arakan Mountains, rising to 3,063 metres at Victoria Peak, separate Rakhine State from central Burma. Rakhine State has an area of 36,762 square kilometres and its capital is Sittwe. Off the coast of Rakhine State there are some fairly large islands. Rakhine is the tri-border junction with Bangladesh, India and Myanmar. The Rohingyas mainly reside in the lowlands and coastal lands of the state accounting 42.7 percent of the Rakhine state population. Concentrations of Rohingyas are fairly high in Bangladesh border region and coastal areas which is 80 to 96 percent in different locations. In this geographical region they are mainly settled agriculturist, agricultural others labour and fisherman.

The first census of Burma was taken in August 1872 under British rule when out of total Muslim population in Myanmar (Burma) 65 percent was reside in Arakan state (presently Rakhine) alone and they were categorised as Indian and Burman Muslim. Muslim people were divided different sub groups like Arakanis, Panthays, Shan Muslims, Turks, Arabs and Choulias. The sharp identity of the Rohingya did not exist that time. Presently about ten lakh Rohingyas are found in Rakhine or migrated from Rakhine.

Origin of Rohingyas

The name of 'Rohingya' seems to be come out in early 1950s. The history of occupancy of Muslims is age old. They reside since the beginning of the Mrauk-U dynasty (1430-1785) of the Arakan Kingdom and even before that. The exact date of the naming is unknown, but one of the first uses of 'Rohingya' can be

found in the official address presented by a group called the "Rohingya Elders of North Arakan" to the prime Minister U Nu on his visit to Maungdaw on 10 March, 1950 [4]. Another example is found in an article written by Abdul Gaffar, a Rohingya MP elected from Akyab North Constituency, which appeared in an English paper in Burma, the Guardian Daily, on August 20, 1951 [5]. It was noticed that all Muslims in Arakan did not agree with to be called Rohingya, such as the Kamans [6]. The Rohingya historians demand that the term related with the name of capital of ancient Mrauk-U Arakan Kingdom, The names have changed to "Roshangee" and finally to "Rohingya" [4]. It is an interesting explanation but did not find enough historical or linguistic proofs for this argument [6].

Three types of writings and literatures are available regarding the origin of Rohingyas. These are some writings published by Rohingyas, some from Buddhist and some of the written by other foreigners. It is very difficult to make a clear-cut conclusion about the occupancy history of Rohingyas in Rakhine. So citation from different literature would be helpful to understand the matter. At first I will present some contrasting view published by Rohingyas and Arakanese Buddhists.

In AFK Jilani's book '*The Rohingyas of Arakan: Their quest for justice*', which was published in 1999, it has come to know that the Rohingyas are not the British Era settlers. They were resided since 788 A.D. Rohingya language was the original lingua franca in Arakan used by both the Rohingyas and the Buddhist Arakanese. From the early eighth century Arakan was Muslim dominated region. The Kingdom of Arakan (the Mrauk-U dynasty, 1430-1785) was a Muslim dynasty.

Zaw Min Htut, president of the Burmese Rohingya Association in Japan (BRAJ), wrote the book (in Burmese) titled '*The Union of Burma and Ethnic Rohingyas*' [7].consists of mostly the same discourse which Jilani mentioned in his aforesaid book '*The Rohingyas of Arakan*' [6].

Arakanese Buddhists writers and historians strongly opposed the view of Rohinyas in their several printing and books. The book '*Criticizing the Falsification of the History written by the Bengali Immigrants who were the Descendant of the Chittagonians using the name "Rohingya" under a False Name of Human Rights*' [8], published by Arakan National Association (Japan) in 2003 is specially famous for opposing the view of Ahmed Jilani and Zaw Min Htut.

The counter argument of the Buddhist Arakanese writings are:

The Rohingyas are not an indigenous ethnic group of Burma. They are direct descendants of

immigrants from the Chittagong District of East Bengal in the 19th century who was classified as "Chittagonians" by the British officials.

There are no any historical evidences in favour of Muslim settlers in Arakan since before 9th century. The Muslims under the Arakan Kingdom (Mrauk-U dynasty) were minorities. They consisted of mercenaries, itinerant merchants from Persia and Golkonda, and some Bengali captives.

Muslim sailors were called Arab or Muslim. The earliest Muslim settlers in Arakan were some Bengali retainers of King Saw Mun in the 15th century and their numbers were not many. They have been living in Arakan since the early 17th century, speaking Arakanese dialect, and never claim themselves being Rohingyas. They are not Rohingyas but Arakanese Muslims [6].

Today the vital most issue of confrontation between the Rohingyas and Buddhist Arakanese is based on the 'period of residence in Myanmar'. The Rohingyas demand their age old history, more than thousand years in Arakan but it is impossible to prove historically. Muslim in Arakan since the period of Mrauk-U dynasty or before that is equivalent to present Rohingya? Question raised by another group and by the Government of Myanmar. The Rohingyas believe that the early settlers Muslims are their ancestors but Government and Buddhist Arakanese denied. On the otherhand Buddhist Arakanese and Government identified the Rohingyas as immigrants came from Chittagong area under British rule, after 1826.

The year 1823, a year before when the First Anglo-Burmese War began is understood a meaningful criterion to differentiate the people residing in Burma between "us" and "them", which is the same standard shown in the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law [6].

From the writing of foreign historian or intellectuals it may be summarise that the concentration of Muslim population by immigration followed by three phases. The first phase marked when Arakan was under the rule of Mrauk-U dynasty. Muslims came from various places of Mughal Kingdom (1526-1857) of India (especially from Bengal). Second phase was in 19th century when British rule was in Myanmar. Migration current was flow from Chittagong and third phase also from same source region after World War II.

Moshe Yegar, an Israeli intellectual, in his book titled '*Between Integration and Secession: The Muslim Communities of the Southern Philippines, Southern Thailand, and Western Burma/Myanmar*' (published in 2002) [9] possess same view and realized the Muslim of Mrauk-U dynasty may be the origin of 'Rahingya'

Long root of conflict between Rohingyas and Buddhist Arakanese.

Though the great conflict has occurred after 1982 when military government (the State Peace and Development Council: SPDC) authorises altogether 135 ethnic groups as Burmese nationals excluding the Rohingyas. According to 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law of Ne Win government (1962-1988) Rohingyas became state less population in Myanmar. But it is interesting to note that, before the implementation of the said citizenship law in 1982 Rohingyas was the citizen of Myanmar. Identifying the endogenous ethnic people Ne Win government select the base year of 1823. Burmese Citizenship Law declared three types of Citizen in the country.

- *First category citizen or Genuine citizen* - Those people reside who reside before 1883. Eight ethnic groups are in this category namely Burmans, Shans, Karens, Arakans (Buddhist Arakanese), Kachins, Chins, Kayas and Mons.
- *The second category is Associate citizens* - Those people obtained citizenship according to Union Citizenship Act – 1948, was in force for only two years (1948-50). These people originated from mainly by mixed marriage with immigrants and indigenous Burmese after 1823.
- *The third category is Naturalised citizens* – Those people who have been naturalized after the suspension of the 1948 Union Citizenship Act. Among these three types, Associate and Naturalized citizens are does not enjoy full legal rights.

Unfortunately the Rohingyas excluded from every category and treated as 'illegal immigrants' during British colonial rule. Government also strictly declared that Rhingaya should take Foreign Registration Certificates (FRC) instead of National Registration Certificate (NRC) for citizen of Myanmar. Almost Rohingyas refused to take this certificate and violent movement came in front in 1988. Townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw massacred robbery, rape, murder against the Muslims and the burning of mosques [10, 9]. Probably the root of antagonism between Rohingya Muslim and Buddhist Arakanese is historical. At the time of Japanese war period (1942-45) when Japan armed the Buddhist Arakanese fight against the British. Similarly British used Muslim forces against Buddhist resulted in serious Muslim/Buddhist clashes and both communities experienced heavy damage [6]. Even before that, during first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) there are some documents of confrontation is found between Buddhists Chittagonians Muslims. These Muslims are recent immigrants and resided in northwest Arakan mostly encouraged by British. Unfortunately the situation did not change even after independence of Burma in 1948. Several efforts took place for peaceful coexistence of both community but it

was permanently disappeared after 1962 when Ne Win's Army ruled over Burma.

Movements and outmigration of state less Rohingyas

The situation of Rohingyas gradually became worse in the regime of Ne Win after 1962. Huge emigration occurred three times.

First time occurred in 1978 after the enforcement of the 1974 Emergency Immigration Act. It was an unusual census operation, known as *Naga Min* or King Dragon, to check identity papers in the border region for the first time. Parallel military operation was done against the 'Muslim extremist' or 'armed bands of Bengalis'. As a result about 200,000 Muslims took refuge elsewhere in fear of their lives [11]. Although Burmese government in May 1978 declared that 35,590 people, all Bengali, fled leaving 6,294 empty houses behind them, the results of the *Naga Min* operation in Arakan in actual led to 200,000 to 250,000 Muslims refugees fleeing into Bangladesh [10]. After long dialoging between both countries finally, on 9 July 1979, under the strong influence of the United Nations (UN), Governments of Saudi Arabia and India, and the World Muslim League, bilateral agreements were made between the two governments, which agreed to the repatriation of 200,000 refugees to Arakan [6].

Burmese Citizenship Law-1982, was the anti Muslim policy of Ne Win government. In fact, this turned into a long-term government plan to drive Muslims out of Burma. As a result, Rohingyas of Arakan left their home and steered out of Arakan to countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and other parts of the Muslim world. Slow but continues migration streams observed during whole decade of 80s.

Second important out flow of Rohingayas observed in April 1991 and May 1992 due to operation against Rohingya freedom movement. In this time more than 250000 Rohingya refugees took shelter in Bangladesh. This time Bangladesh Border forces pushed the refugees but due to intervention of UNHCR it was stopped. In May 1993 one MOU was signed with Bangladesh Government and Another MOU was signed between UNHCR and the Government of Burma, allowing the UNHCR access to the returnees, the issuing of identity cards, and freedom of movement for the Rohingyas [10, 12]. About 60,000 refugees went back to their home by 1994 and approximately 200,000 people returned to the Mayu region by the end of 1996 [9].

Third important Rohingya exodus has been seen in after 25 August 2017 when 30 police posts were attacked by the Rohingya extremist group. And they claimed different extremist Muslim organization of West Asia including Pakistan active in the Rakhine

province. Ultimately military and para-military operation was started. Due to the fear of life more than 500,000 Rohingyas left their home and again entered into Bangladesh. In this regard Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina told in UN General Assembly on 21 September 2017 that the "Bangladesh was sheltering more than 800,000 of whom 4,30,000 had arrived in past three weeks". Some of them took shelter in India also.

Migration streams of Rohingyas followed by both routes, maritime and land. More than three decades Rohingyas has migrate through Bay of Bengal and reached mainly in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. On the otherhand, Bangladesh border migration is the second type. But Rohingayas are few numbers in other countries except Bangladesh due to strict border policy but UNHCR issues Rohingyas refugee cards in Malaysia and they are not arrested there. So Malaysia being a dream destination increasingly prompts Rohingyas to migrate there [13].

CONCLUSION

Though, the 'duration of stay' of Rohingayas in Myanmar is a matter of controversy but adaptation of the base year for citizenship, 1823 in '1982 Burmese Citizenship Law' is another point of conflict. Different nations and UNO also raised the important question-How far it is logically justified. Because the Rohingyas at least one and half century old resident in Myanmar. Initiatives of UN, UNHCR is praiseworthy but insufficient to manage the bulk of refugee. Myanmar Government should review their policy to combat Rohingya terrorism because large number of Rohingyas including old, child and women are not terrorist. On the otherhand, Rohingya militant organizations like Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), Rohingya National Army (RNA), Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) etc. should surrendered the weapons and start dialoging with the Government. The Rohingya terrorism is not only the internal threat in Myanmar but also disturbing the neighbouring South-East Asian nations involving different international terrorist organization. Learns from the history of civilization everyone knows politics of religion, caste, ethnicity etc. set a direction towards underdevelopment.

The Rohingya women and children are the most vulnerable and are a target of sexual violence and huge human trafficking documented in land and sea routes. So observing the situation every nation, local authorities, particularly the police and paramilitary personnel, should be sensitized about the refugees carrying UNHCR issued refugee identity cards. We will look forward to a peaceful word.

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