



Review Paper

## Rohingya crisis: identity of Rohingya Muslim in Myanmar

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### Abstract

*Rohingya crisis is the top most recent crisis in the world based on the identity crisis and a part of the ethnic cleansing of the government of Myanmar. The main purpose of this study is to assess the identity of Rohingya Muslim in Myanmar. The study employs a historical approach and extensively depend on the secondary sources like books, journal articles, newspaper article and internet sources. This article reveals that Rohingyas are the legal citizen of Myanmar who has been originated thousands of years ago. It also explores that the claims of the political leaders and the government of Myanmar are not justified because it is evident that Rohingyas have been a part of long history of Burma. This study will contribute to the existing debate and will clarify the actual identity of Rohingya Muslim.*

**Keywords:** Identity crisis, Rohingya, citizenship, Myanmar, ethnic cleansing.

### Introduction

Myanmar is a country situated in Southeast Asia. It shares a border with India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Laos and China. Myanmar became an independent nation in 1948. Since then for sixty years there has been a civil war, turbulence and dispute. Myanmar has ethnical diversity the majority is Buddhist and rest are followers of other religion. There are 135 diverse ethnic groups, some are- Kachin, Kayah (Karenni), Karen, Chin, Burman, Mon, Rakhine, Shan, Kaman, or Zerbadee. Though Rohingyas are one of them, the government does not recognize their rights. They argue that Rohingya are the immigrants who came to live there during the British colonial era. Almost one million Rohingya used to live in the Rakhin State on the western coast of Myanmar. The Rohingyas are Muslim minority and populate in mostly three northernmost townships, Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and Rathedaung.

Rohingya means 'inhabitants of Rohang', people of the community who have been lived in Myanmar from thousands year ago<sup>1</sup>. The Rohang is actually a Bengali word used by Bengali Muslims in the 17<sup>th</sup> century for identifying the Kingdom of Arakan which is now known as Rakhine. The Kingdom was later occupied in 1785 by the Burmese. The predicament of the Rohingya Muslims has persisted over the last three decades, which brutally deteriorating in the last few years. In the time between 1948 and 1962, Rohingya is treated as citizen after the independence of Burma by three successive governments. Though the Rohingya are concentrated in the Arakan region, there is not much information about the original

people of Arakan. However, archeologists and researchers believe that the Rakhaine started living there in 3000 BCE. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Indian kingdoms Dhannawadi and Asali were built around Kaladan and Lemro river valley. These dynasties were racially non-mongoloid and followers of Hindu and Mahayana Buddhism. Arakan was the center for maritime trade and the Arabs used this region as trade routes. The dubious history of Rohingya started to take form during this time when Arab merchants began settling down in Arakan. They married local women; the people started converting to Islam. This conversion and intermarriage helped to increase the Arakan population. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the Rakhines began migrating in the Arakan. Near the Lemro river valley, they founded some cities.

This study aims to explore the identity of Rohingya Muslim in Myanmar. The study employs a historical approach and extensively depend on the secondary sources like books, journal articles, newspaper article and internet sources<sup>2</sup>. It explores the brief history of from the Mughal Period Arakan, post-colonial Myanmar and recent crisis.

### History of origin and development of the Rohingyas

**The Mughal period of Arakan:** Actually, in 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the first Muslim settlement is trace in Arakan which is the identification of the ethnic origin of Rohingyas in Myanmar<sup>1</sup>. In 1433, the king Min Saw Mon of Mrauk Kingdom regained the Arakanese throne. He had assistance from Bengali sultanate. In

1431, the Sultan Jalal Uddin Muhammad Shah helped King Min Saw Mon; his general Wali Khan led about 20,000 troops and restored Min Saw Mon to the throne of Arakan. However, Wali Khan aspired to become King himself. Therefore, the Sultan of Gaur Ghias-uddin Azam, who sheltered King Min Saw Mon earlier, sent another Army under Sandi Khan to restore the King. Both the earlier and the later Army from Bengal perhaps stayed back in Arakan, who were Afghan and central Asian (Rahman, 2015). From this time, Arakanese kings started using Mohamedan titles. They also forged coins and medallions bearing Arabic and Persian script in both sides.

**Population movement in the British period:** During the 17<sup>th</sup> century Arakan was taking in slaves from Bengal, some of them were even Mughal. On 26 August 1660, after being defeated by Aurangzeb, Shah Suja came to Arakan along with his family. In December 1660 King Sanda Thudamma confiscated Suja's gold and the Arakanese may have killed his family while Suja managed to escape to Manipur. Royal army recruited his entourage. Arakan used to raid Bengali states more often with the help of Portuguese raiders. Shaista Khan was ordered by Aurangzeb to end Arakanese-Portuguese piracy. Up to the northern part of Arakan was taken under the Mughal administration by Shaista Khan. Northern Arakan became an area of Muslim people<sup>4</sup>. Besides few Bengali-states became king's vassal state like, Chittagong, Noakhali and Bakerganj and were occupied until 1666. Though the vassalage was short lived Bengali and Muslim culture influenced the Buddhist-Arakanese kings and priests.

The Kaladan River became the wall between Rohingya and Rakhine areas in 1760. In 1785 Konbaung Dynasty conquered Rakhine. As a result, in 1799 almost 35000 people fled to Chittagong<sup>5</sup>. The region was then under British Raj. The people who stayed were either executed or deported to central Burma by Bamar. A little portion of the population managed to survive in Rakhine, they called themselves Rooringa, "the natives of Arakan"<sup>6</sup>. During the reign of British Raj Bengali farm laborers, seasonal workers from Chittagong area settled in Arakan seeking work. The East India Company raised the Akyab town and facilitated agriculture and industry. Indians even Arakanese who left earlier continued returning. They mostly settled in the Mayu- Kaladan river valleys and around the Mrauk-U area where the British focused on paddy cultivation. They gradually mingled with the locals and the Rohingyas.

From 1885-1937 Burma especially Arakan was flooded with immigrants like, Tamil Telegu and other peoples from various parts of India. This gave rise to Burmese nationalism, racial tension. An anti-Indian idea was brewing among the locals. Soon this rising issue took the form of conflict, and the Muslims of northern Arakan were caught in the middle of animosity and communal fights<sup>7</sup>.

During the world war, there was already violence between the Muslims and Arakanese. The situation deteriorated when the Japanese force occupied the Buddhist majority areas while

Muslims of Arakan and people of Indian origin generally sided with the British. This racial segregation instead of healing led to permanent animosity<sup>8</sup>. The ongoing conflict compelled the Muslims to flee in northern Arakan. Now there is a predominantly Muslim north and a Buddhist centre and south.

**The situation in the post-British period and various refugee situations:** After the departure of British, non-Burmans sought to establish their rights, which led to a full-scale rebellion in Arakan. From 1947-48 the *Mujahideen* rebelled to have a frontier state with the Rakhine neighbors in one hand and the Burmese State in the other. The Rohingya appealed Prime Minister U Nu to fight the ongoing radicalization in the Mayu frontier area. After the independence of Burma in 1948, the first refugee situation occurred when 20,000 people took refuge in East Pakistan. In 1961, Prime Minister U Nu formed a Regional Council for the Mayu region.

### Clearance operation of the military junta of Myanmar

The Rohingya were recognized as indigenous people until 1962. The uprising of military Junta to power in 1962 was the beginning of a period of deprivation of the political rights for the Rohingya community. The oppression and racism of Burmese people resulted in Indians leaving Burma. Even the Rohingya people started fleeing because of the increasing discrimination and persecution of the Ne Win regime. In 1978, 200,000 Rohingya took shelter in Bangladesh for the first time<sup>9</sup>. Most of the refugees were returned after sixteen months with the help of UNHCR. Burma accepted almost the whole refugee people as "lawful residents of Burma" (Corr, 2016). However, in 1982 a law was enacted and named '1982 citizenship law', under this law the Rohingya people were not recognized among the 135 national races. They were held as stateless Bengali Muslims<sup>4</sup>. Rohingya became stranger to their homeland. In 1989, Burma was named Myanmar and in the 1990 Arakan was named Rakhine state by a military junta, making it a state of the Rakhines only. During the 1990s NDPHR political party was banned, the people of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung were persecuted<sup>10</sup>. The Myanmar army forced labor, confiscated house and properties, raped women and harassed religious priests. Almost 250,000 refugees fled to Bangladesh in 1991 and 1992. Military troops were assembled in the border by Bangladesh and Burma. Again, with the help of UNHCR a repatriation treaty was signed to send the refugees to Burma. In 1992-93, Myanmar agreed to resettle the residents in their own households and original places of residence so they are able to carry on their livelihood as citizens of Myanmar society. Nevertheless, the discriminatory behavior of the military junta continued to suppress the Rohingya people, which led to the uprising of riots and more oppression<sup>11</sup>.

In June 2012, a conflict aroused between the ethnic Rakhines and Rohingyas of northern Rakhine. On 28 May a young Buddhist woman was raped and murdered by three Muslim

youths, who were arrested without any delay. The local Rakhine activists blamed whole Muslim community of Myanmar for the incident and called for retribution. On June 3, three hundred Rakhine surrounded a passenger bus and killed ten Muslims by beating them to death. After five days the Muslims started protests, they torched houses of Rakhines, seven Rakhine were killed in the riots. In response, the Buddhists also reacted violently; they protested for the removal of Bengalis from Myanmar. The President Thein Sin declared a state of emergency in Rakhine and allowed a military administration. Hence, the unrest in Rakhine increased; in the conflict 650 Rohingyas were killed, 1,200 were missing and more than 80,000 were displaced. Even the police and parliamentary forces sided with the Rakhines; the military swiped the massive areas, Rohingya men and boys were arrested, women were raped by Rakhines and the military. The government refused to recognize 750000 Muslims of northern Rakhines as "Rohingya" and referred them "Bengalis". After the sectarian violence, more than 100,000 Rohingyas were confined to IDP camps. The IDP camps lacked food rations, water, clean, working latrines and medical care. The Myanmar Army and Rakhine citizens prevented humanitarian aid from reaching the camps. In 2015, thousands of Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh by boat via Malacca strait and the Andaman Sea. The international media called these migrants "the boat people". Almost 8000 refugees were rebuffed from Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. A boat of 300 migrants even vanished in the seas. Based on the attack on three Burmese borders in October 2016, the Myanmar military force showed a crackdown on the Rohingya people, named "clearance operation". They were killed, raped and oppressed their houses and businesses were burned down, unarmed women and children were not even spared. Later on, 17 October 2016, Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army took the responsibility of attacking Burmese borders. As a result, the Myanmar military detained more than 400 people and it included juveniles. In August, thousands of Rohingyas were killed by Myanmar military following an attack by Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). They were driven out of the country to Bangladesh while they burned their villages exposing degradation of humanity and a picture of ethnic cleansing<sup>12</sup>. Since then the military and Suu Kyi has been using such strategies to exterminate the Rakhine Muslims Areas, all the crimes done by the military has been denied by the authorities.

### **The Rohingya as a settled community in Arakan**

Charles Paton surveyed Arakan after the British conquest in 1825 and estimated 60,000 Rakhine Buddhists, 30,000 Muslims and 10,000 of other ethnic groups in its population. He identified a local aristocracy -the Mussalman Sirdars, who could speak the north Indian dialect, of Urdu and Hindi, and a variant of Bangla<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, he also found that the local peasantry-the Rohingyas-spoke a different language.

The Muslim population started growing as displaced Muslims and Arakanese started returning from the Chittagong area

immediately with peace returning to Arakan with the end of the Burmese occupation from 1785-1823.

### **The Loose of Citizenship**

After the Second World War, Myanmar started drafting the constitution. A person who lived in Myanmar for eight years was held eligible to be a permanent resident. According to this term Rohingya Muslims, as they were born in Rakhine, were permanent residents; hence, qualified for the citizenship of Myanmar<sup>13</sup>. They got the right to vote and the National Registration Certificates (NRCs) were granted to them. As the citizens of Burma, they participated in bureaucracy and Government Ministry equally like any other citizen. Such facilities were maintained 1948 Union Citizenship act also. In 1949, Buthidaung the Citizenship Election Officer of Burma determined that the Muslims were not eligible to apply for the Citizenship certificate, as they were not the natives of Burma. The Burmese higher Judiciary projected a relatable idea in the 1950s.

In 1954, Prime Minister U NU stated Rohingya as an indigenous race of Burma, like Kachin, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine and Shan they had the equal right of nationality. Soon Rohingya language was adopted with other ethnic languages in radio broadcasting. In 1961, a survey showed the Muslims of Maunagdaw, Buthidaung and Raheedaung in the Mayu region were recognized as "Rohongya". A separate administrative zone was established in this region for the Rohingya under the U Nu government. However, in 1962 when the General Ne Win came to power the zone was upturned. Their rights were infringed systematically and slowly. Two major acts were constitutionalized to refute the Rights of Rohingya, the first one in 1974 "the *Emergency Immigration Act*" and the second in 1982 "*Burmese Citizenship Law*".

In 1974, an ethnicity-based identity card system 'the National Registration Certificate' (NRCs) was introduced. This system excluded Rohingyas from the ethnic races of Myanmar. The Emergency Immigration Act of 1974 discriminated them by making them eligible only for Foreign Registration cards; many schools and institutions did not recognize these NRCs so the Rohingyas were left out of education and job opportunities. Citizenship was limited to those having both parents a national of Burma in the 1974 Constitution. Still some Rohingyas gained the eligibility to get NRCs. The infamous Citizenship Law of 1982, which created three tiers of citizenship, permanently denied the Rohingya their right to citizenship as they were excluded from all the three categories. The lack of legitimacy marginalized them by cancelling the NRCs, because they do not speak Myanmar's national languages and lack proof of their family's historical background<sup>14</sup>. A type of white card was issued but it could not prove them as the legitimate citizens of Burma. Finally, even these cards were removed. They lost economic opportunities, education and even property ownership. In 2015, the Rohingyas lost their voting rights and rendered stateless.

## Bangladesh and the refugee issues

Rohingya crisis is not only a problem for the community itself but also top challenges for the public agencies of Bangladesh<sup>15</sup>. Because it takes extra measures for managing these huge population. Not only that it requires special attention for security measures especially for human trafficking, illegal narcotic product business, sexual harassment of Rohingya women and so on<sup>16</sup>. Since 1942, Bangladesh has been experiencing the Rohingya refugee problem. The refugees are coming from Myanmar and taking shelter in the southeast district of Cox's Bazaar. The first large wave of refugees came in May 1978. From 200,000 to 250,000 Muslims took shelter in Bangladesh<sup>17</sup>.

The second influx was between April 1991 and May 1992 to flee from the systematic genocidal and ethnic cleansing program; approximately 250,000 refugees came from Myanmar and started living here. For over 30 years, Bandarban and its adjacent area have been sheltering for the refugees. Bangladesh initially welcomed the Rohingyas as fellow Muslims. The UNHCR, the Red Cross and various other international agencies were invited to assist the refugees. This influx has continued unabated and has become an alarming issue for Bangladesh. Though Bangladesh has opened its border to the refugees, it is true that the country cannot afford the economic and political comfort<sup>18</sup> to these Rohingya people with Bangladeshi economy and scant resources<sup>19</sup>. Moreover, the Rohingyas are ruining the image of Bangladesh in the international arena. In 2005, the government of Bangladesh decided to close the refugee camps due to the obstructions created by the Rohingyas. But Bangladesh could not take such decision due to humanity against the vulnerable Rohingya Muslims<sup>20</sup>.

As the oppression of the Rohingyas in the soil of Myanmar increased by the military along with help from civilians, there was another huge wave of influxes. On June 10, 2012, Myanmar declared a state of emergency in the western state of Rakhine. On June 20, more than 90,000 Rohingya refugees fled Myanmar to the Bangladeshi border but they were denied access. In June 2012, Bangladesh for the first time turned back 16 boats carrying almost 660 Rohingya people from entering Bangladesh. The refusal was for the national security and because the country was over burdened with refugees staying here for more than 20 years. These refugees had already become a serious threat to the security, stability, prosperity, welfare and image of the country. As they were involved in serious crimes including drug and human trafficking, smuggling, robbery and other organized crimes. The number of refugees increased in 2017. Bangladesh provides them shelter and urged the international organization to food, health services with other basic services. They are fallen into poverty trap and food insecurity<sup>21</sup> due to unavailability of employment<sup>22</sup>. The solution to the Rohingya crisis has been an important task for Bangladesh as the refugee situation has a negative impact on the economy, security environment, ecology and bio-diversity, of the country.

## Conclusion

Rohingya Muslims are the ethnic minority in Myanmar. The identity issues mainly raise in Burma from the British colonial period. This article reveals that Rohingyas are the legal citizen of Myanmar who has been originated thousands of years ago. It also explores that the claims of the political leaders and the government of Myanmar are not justified because it is evident that Rohingyas have been a part of long history of Burma. This study will contribute to the existing debate and will clarify the actual identity of Rohingya Muslim. Now Rohingyas are living mostly (around 13,00,000) in Bangladesh. Some parts of this community are living in Thailand, Malaysia and other countries. The blatant harassment of Rohingyas by the government of Myanmar is now a well-known fact. Despite the voices of the international community, the government of Myanmar is not inclined to acknowledge the community. This injustice should be removed by implementing a strong policy governed by the Myanmar government and international humanitarian organizations for early recovery of the Rohingya Muslim community to their owned place.

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