



## Research Article

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## Ethnic Conflict, Forced Exodus and its Security Implications: Understanding Security Dilemma of Bangladesh and India on Rohingya Influx

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**Abstract:** The article attempts to understand the stance of Bangladesh and India on one of the most underlining humanitarian crises of the world. The long-standing ethnic conflict in Myanmar has crossed the border causing humanitarian and security challenges, particularly for the South Asian countries. The conflict-leading Rohingya exodus has resulted in a security dilemma, particularly for Bangladesh and India, which share a long border with Myanmar through land and sea. The United Nations, including Western countries, consider the Rohingya issue more from a humanitarian perspective, whereas countries like Bangladesh and India face security challenges. Bangladesh is facing an extra burden on its economy and infrastructure due to the vast mass arrival of Rohingya. India is also facing the same challenges due to the influx of Rohingya within its territory. Both present governments have taken a calculative move and strategically convinced the international community that they are taking initiatives to assist the Rohingya. Thereby the study has focused on interrogating the nature of the dilemma observed by both Bangladesh and India solely in concern to the national and human security perspectives.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Conflict, Exodus, Rohingya, Security, Terrorism

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## INTRODUCTION

Ethnic conflict is one of the major threats to peace and security for the country of origin, significantly impacting its neighbouring. The Rohingya-targeted ethnic violence and state-sponsored systematic persecution have been enduring in the society of Myanmar since the 1970s. The contemporary plight of Rohingya, particularly post-2012, is well documented by human rights observers and experts, which gained the attention of the international community. Thus, episodes of violence and persecution of Rohingya, one of the ethnic minorities in Myanmar, have flooded the flow of refugees to its neighbouring countries, particularly Bangladesh and India. Such development in Myanmar has resulted in multidimensional security challenges for both Bangladesh and India, as both the country shares a long border with Myanmar. Both governments have expressed their concern for the injustice done to the Rohingya by their government. But at the same time, both countries are worried about the traditional and non-traditional security challenges that may arise due to the Rohingya crisis. In the contemporary period, many security studies scholars signify that most of the security threats emerge from non-traditional sources like ethnic conflict, terrorism, poverty, food insecurity, resource scarcity, climate change, endemic disease, transnational crimes, etc.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, the article makes an analysis of episodes of violence against Rohingya in post-2012 and its security implications for Bangladesh and India.

## Ethnic Conflict, Exodus and Security: A Conceptual Understanding

The term ethnicity derives from the Greek word *ethnos*, which can be translated as 'nation' 'people' or 'tribe'. It can be defined as 'an identification based on presumed shared characteristics, such as common ancestry, physical resemblance, language, religion, nationality, territory or historical experience'.<sup>2</sup> Over time, the etymology of the term *ethnic* in the English language is believed to be in Middle Ages. It designated the 'others'- those who were neither Christians nor Jews, those 'who were not us'. Today, in many Western societies, the word is often used to refer to non-white people in a euphemistic way. However, in the USA and the UK, 'ethnic' and 'ethnicity' also refer to whites' various ancestral or pre-migration backgrounds, while non-whites are often described in terms of race.<sup>3</sup>

In the present context, 'ethnic' is more commonly used as an adjective like ethnic group, ethnic food, ethnic conflict, etc., than a noun. When the term 'ethnic' is used before the conflict, it literally means a conflict between two or more ethnic groups for the same goal: notably, access to resources, power or territory.<sup>4</sup> Ethnic conflict primarily results in massive human rights violations like genocide and crime against humanity. It also causes a severely negative impact not only on the economy and environment of the state where the conflict occurred but also on its neighbouring countries. Further, it leads to tremendous human trafficking, human insecurity, exodus etc. The Rohingya conflict in

Myanmar is a burning example of ethnic conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Exodus usually refers to a sudden departure of people for a variety of reasons from one place to another, whether within or outside of the territorial boundary of a state. The origin of the term 'Exodus' can be traced from the 'Book of Exodus' in the Hebrew Bible, which expresses the tale of the liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt in the 13th century BCE, under the leadership of Prophet Moses.<sup>5</sup> Though exodus and migration look similar, both have a significant difference in their nature. Migration is both event and a phenomenon used to describe the arrival and departure of people in a region, which can be sudden or gradual. In contrast, the exodus tends to be an event of the sudden departure of people from a region. Most importantly, migration refers to both human movement and the movement in ecology, but the exodus reflects only the movement of the human population.

Furthermore, there is a close relationship between Ethnic conflict and exodus with the peace and security of one or more nation-states. History has witnessed that ethnic conflict leads to an exodus, and hence the destination countries face security challenges to an extended level. In the present context, the Rohingya conflicts in Myanmar have pushed thousands of Rohingya to cross the border, creating security challenges for its neighbouring countries. The concept of security can be broadly categorised into traditional or military and non-traditional or non-military aspects of security. Buzan rejects the traditionalist who restricts security within the parameter of military security only. Instead, he analyses the distinctive character and dynamics of security in five sectors, such as military, political, economic, environmental, and societal. There has been a race among different schools of security studies, as Smith (2002) defines security as 'an essentially contested concept'. In contrast, Buzan refers to security as ultimately a political process when an issue is presented as posing an existential threat to a designated referent object.<sup>6</sup>

The Rohingya crisis is seen through a different lens by different scholars. Muhammad Abdul Bari (2018), Ronan Lee (2021), Azeem Ibrahim (2017), Francis Wade (2017), Zezen Zaenal Mutaqin (2018), Malang Faye (2021), Michelle J. Lee (2021), Md. Shariful Islam (2017) broadly focuses on various issues like human rights violations, genocide, statelessness, citizenship exclusion and other related issues faced by Rohingya. However, the least researcher like Utpala Rahman (2010), Abdul Gaffar (2018), Mohammad Sajedur Rahman and Nurul Huda Sakib (2020) has made attempts to examine the Rohingya issue from a security perspective. Most importantly, there is a significant research gap on the security implications in India due to the influx of Rohingya.

### Who are Rohingya?

The name "Rohingya" has been in the headlines of news articles in the mainstream media for the last decade. The Rohingya community, with an estimated population of more than 1.4 million, is one of the ethnic minority communities primarily living in the Rakhine (erstwhile known as Arakan) state of Myanmar (erstwhile known as Burma).<sup>7</sup> As per the latest report estimate, only 600,000 Rohingya are living in Myanmar under severe restrictions.<sup>8</sup> The origin history of the Rohingya community has always been controversial, and it has a contrasting narrative, one from the Rohingya minority and another from the Buddhist government of Myanmar. Rohingya claim that they lived in the Rakhine region of Myanmar much before the arrival of Islam during the late 8th century. Their culture and language were dominant during the rule of the Mrauk U Dynasty from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century. Whereas the people of Myanmar, where Buddhists are in the majority, have a different perspective. They firmly believe that Buddhists were in the majority during Maruk U Dynasty and Islam had a very low representation. Moreover, they claim that the modern Rohingya are not the descendants of a small number of Muslims who lived in Rakhine before British colonisation. Rather, they are Bengali migrants who came after the Britishers conquered the Rakhine state.<sup>9</sup> There have been arguments among scholars regarding the origin of the Rohingya community based on facts, and interestingly, both narratives have pointed to support some of their claims. However, most scholars believe that Rohingya are an amalgamation of people.

Despite living in the country for centuries, the Rohingya community doesn't have access to citizenship, making them live a life with no legal rights. The Myanmar government considers them "Illegally Bengali Immigrants" who have infiltrated Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.<sup>10</sup> The United Nations has levelled the Rohingyas as the "most persecuted minority in the world". However, the Rohingyas were not a stateless community throughout the history of this country: they were recognised as eligible for citizenship in the first citizenship law of 1948 after independence. They had voting rights, and Parliamentary members were elected from the community. After General Ne Win's military coup in 1962, the military junta started a series of military campaigns against people of Indian, Chinese and Pakistani origins that turned into a "nationwide immigration and residence check". This xenophobic drive changed the direction of the politics that accommodated ethnic groups in the country.<sup>11</sup>

In 1982, after the commencement of the New Citizenship Law, the Rohingyas were stripped of their citizenship rights. This law categorised Burmese citizens into full, associate, and naturalised citizens.<sup>12</sup> The 1982 law also spells out the criteria for each of the three categories of present-day Myanmar citizenship, with the key provisions based on ethnicity. Full citizenship rights in Myanmar are granted collectively to members of

ethnic groups believed to have been living within the boundaries of the country in 1823, before the first Anglo-Burma War, associate citizens are those born in the country after 1823, and there is a provision for citizenship by naturalisation. As with the 1974 Constitution, the 1982 law specifies eight major indigenous groups and clarifies those who are, 'Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Burman, Mon, Rakhine or Shan' are citizens." These are the groups that are widely understood in Myanmar as being *Taingyintha*. Importantly, the law states that this list is not exhaustive and empowers the Council of State to 'decide whether any ethnic group is national. In 1990, the Myanmar government published a closed list of 135 national races/ethnicities based on the provisions of Citizenship Law 1982.<sup>13</sup>

The Rohingya were not included in the list of 135 national races/ethnicities or any of the three categories of citizenship.<sup>14</sup> Instead of being issued a National Registration Certificate (NRC), which every Myanmar national over the age of 15 is supposed to carry, the Rohingya are given a Foreigner Registration Card (FRC). Importantly, if a person does not have an NRC, they have no right to serve in any office, they cannot be granted admission to any government school, college, or university, they are unable to receive treatment in any medical facility, and they are not permitted to buy a train ticket or travel to another part of the country. Such measures effectively confine all Rohingya to their current region, northwestern Rakhine. Nevertheless, some of the Rohingya might have had NRCs that allowed them to participate in the general election and receive education, while for the majority, this was indeed not the case.<sup>15</sup>

The entire Rohingya community has been facing the worst persecution and is subject to human rights violations endangering their lives, dignity, and property. As the majority of the Rohingya are followers of Islam, a Sunni Muslim community, more or less an anti-Islam mindset has been developed among the people of the Buddhist-majority state of Myanmar. Such feelings of hatred, followed by ethnic violence, atrocities and genocide against the Rohingya, seem to have been a common act in Myanmar, resulting in the exodus from their dwelling place to various parts of the world, particularly to Asian nations. As per the recent UNHCR report of January 2022, a number of 920,994 Rohingyas are living in almost 27 refugee camps in Bangladesh.<sup>16</sup> However, the Rohingya population living in India is not properly documented. The Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), a global network of Rohingya communities, claims that nearly 50,000 Rohingya live in India.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the Indian government has officially acknowledged some 10,500 Rohingya living in the country.<sup>18</sup> Whereas, according to the latest report of the United Nations, 16,000 registered Rohingya are living in Jammu and Kashmir, Andhra Pradesh (mainly in Hyderabad), Delhi, Haryana, West Bengal, Rajasthan,

Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Maharastra and Andaman and Nicobar Island of India.<sup>19</sup>

### **Ethnic Conflict and the Sequel of Rohingya Exodus**

The Rohingya community has been the victim of state-sponsored ethnic violence in the Buddhist majority of Myanmar, resulting in loss of life and property. The Myanmar government is always being accused of fueling the violence between Rohingya and Buddhist nationalists. A few years back, in August 2017, Myanmar's military executed a deadly crackdown in response to the fatal attack on more than 30 police posts by a militant group named Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). The villages of Rohingya Muslims in the Rakhine state of Myanmar were set on fire. The entire international community witnessed the exodus of Rohingya to protect their life. They risked everything to escape by sea or on foot, searching for a place to save themselves from genocide. The United Nations describes this offensive act of Myanmar's army as a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing".<sup>20</sup> It is estimated that after the violence outbreak of 2017, at least 742,000 Rohingyas entered Bangladesh; most of them were women and children under the age of 12 years.<sup>21</sup> The arriving Rohingya in Bangladesh revealed that they fled after troops, backed by local Buddhist mobs, burned their villages and killed many of them, including women and children. According to the United Nations estimate, approximately 750,000 Rohingya have been displaced, and they have been taken shelter in various countries since 25 August 2017.<sup>22</sup>

It was reported that at least 288 villages of Rohingya were fully or partly destroyed by fire in northern Rakhine after the 2017 violence outbreak. According to a Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) report, the post-violence genocide took the lives of more than 6,700 Rohingya, including at least 730 children under the age of five years, within a month. Amnesty International also claims the Myanmar military's abuse and rape of Rohingya women and girls.<sup>23</sup> Despite producing several pieces of evidence and proof, the Myanmar government has been in denial mode to the action of atrocity made by their army. The Gambia, a small West African country, filed a case on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Myanmar on 11 November 2019 for Myanmar's brutal military campaign against the Rohingya in August 2017 and violating the 1948 Genocide Convention.<sup>24</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize winner who spent over a decade fighting against the Burmese military, was defending the country and had asked the court to drop the genocide case against Myanmar. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) on 23 January 2020 ordered Myanmar to "take all measures within its power" to prevent the genocide and protect the Rohingya Muslim minority. The court also indicated four specific "provisional measures" in this regard and ordered Myanmar to report regularly to the tribunal about its progress.<sup>25</sup>

The recent violence against Rohingya of 2017 is neither the first nor expected to be the last tragedy. Instead, it reflects the systematic persecution of a particular minority ethnic community in Myanmar by denying them citizenship, as the 1947 constitution of Myanmar did not formally recognise them as citizens. Even the Citizenship Law of 1982, which provides a three-tiered hierarchy of citizenship, deprives the Rohingya community. Such systematic social and political persecution of the Rohingya community has led to significant spikes of violent attacks on Rohingya in 1978, 1991-1992, 2012, 2016 and most recently in 2017.<sup>26</sup> The first wave of systematic persecution started on 6 February 1978, when immigration and military authorities started an operation called *Nagamin* or *Dragon King* to register citizens and screen out foreigners. This process was so vicious that over 200,000 Rohingya crossed the river Naf and arrived at Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh within a span of three months.<sup>27</sup> Later on, with the help of the United Nations, both the Myanmar and Bangladesh government made an agreement on the repatriation of Rohingya, and some Rohingya also returned to start a new beginning in Rakhine. However, the discrimination and violence against Rohingya by the Myanmar government and its people continued unabated and often became exceedingly disproportionate in terms of ferocity.<sup>28</sup>

Another wave of persecution against the Rohingya occurred in 1991-92, driving over 250,000 Rohingya to Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar. However, the Bangladesh authority somehow succeeded in negotiating with the Burma government for the repatriation of the Rohingya. It resulted in the return of some 230,000 Rohingya to Arakan between 1993 to 1997. Indeed, as surveyed by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the repatriation was more coercive than voluntary. The UNHCR further stated that less than 30 per cent of Rohingya only wished to repatriate. Yet, the Bangladesh government insisted that the Rohingya must return to Arakan by gradually withdrawing humanitarian aid like food.<sup>29</sup> The first organised violence against Rohingya in Rakhine was reported in early June 2012 after a piece of widespread news that three Muslim men allegedly raped and murdered a Buddhist woman in the town of Ramri.

On the other hand, on 3 June, a large group of Arakan villagers stopped a bus and brutally killed ten Muslims in apparent retaliation. Myanmar was deployed to quell the riot, despite the fact that on-ground observer claims that systematic violence was unleashed against Muslim Rohingya only since then.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Myanmar's security forces committed killings, rape, and mass arrests against Rohingya Muslims after failing to protect both Rohingya and Arakan Buddhists during deadly sectarian violence in western Myanmar.<sup>31</sup> In July 2012, Thein Sein, the then president of Myanmar, proposed that the Rohingya remain in camps within the country, under the

supervision of the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) or be deported to third countries.<sup>32</sup> By the end of June, 200 people had been killed, and at least 125,000 Rohingyas and other Muslims were displaced to the Internally Displaced Camps (IDP).<sup>33</sup> Since the formation of independent Myanmar in 1948, the stateless Rohingya have been fleeing to different parts of the world, primarily to neighbouring Bangladesh, to escape killings, arson, and other mass atrocities.

### **Rohingya Influx from Human Security Perspective**

Once called the "basket case" nation, Bangladesh has now achieved economic growth of 6.7 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) per year on average. The country was officially promoted to the status of a lower-middle-income country in July 2015, with a gross national income (GNI) per capita of US\$1,046.<sup>34</sup> The country has recorded a 3.5 per cent of GDP growth rate and an inflation rate of 5.7 per cent in 2020 amidst the covid-19 pandemic.<sup>35</sup> Further, the country has also achieved remarkable success in poverty reduction, from 43.5 per cent in 1991 to 14.3 per cent in 2016, based on the international poverty line of \$1.90 a day.<sup>36</sup> Though Bangladesh has achieved significant economic growth over the years, the country has a long way to go compared to other countries situated in South Asia. It's a fact that many of the Bangladeshi population are below the poverty line, struggling to meet the basic need of life. In this context, when the country is already flooded with a number of human security issues, the country has to bear the extra burden of over a million Rohingya refugees.

Undoubtedly, the Bangladesh government is receiving funds from international organisations to maintain humanitarian support for Rohingya. But, a remarkable decline in funds from the donor has been observed in the last few years. In 2019, only US\$302 million was received for the Joint Response Plan (JRP), even though the requested amount was US\$920.5 million. The arrival of the Rohingya has increased the burden of the ongoing poverty situation in an already poverty-prone area. It is observed that the Rohingya influx in Cox's Bazar caused a decrease in wages of the labourers by 14.3 per cent and an increase in prices of daily essentials because there was a sudden rise in the supply of labourers and high demand for daily requirements. In addition, the influx has also impacted the environment in Cox's Bazar area. It is estimated that an area of 5500 acres of reserved forests and 1500 hectares of wildlife habitat has been destroyed due to the arrival of such a huge population of Rohingya refugees.<sup>37</sup> In short, the crisis has significantly impacted the resources of Bangladesh, which are already insufficient for the citizens of Bangladesh.

Moreover, the influx of Rohingya refugees could be a threat to internal security and social harmony in the country. The Bangladeshi authority has great

concern citing the involvement of Rohingyas in different criminal activities. It is reported that there are ten Rohingya gangs active in the camps, involved in various criminal activities like extortion, trafficking, kidnapping, murder, etc.<sup>38</sup> At least 1,366 cases of ten different natures of crimes, including murder, rape, robbery, arms and drugs, human trafficking, attacking police and defying the Foreigners Act, were registered against 2,348 Rohingyas from 25 August 2017 to 30 September 2021. These cases were registered from Teknaf and Ukhiya police stations only, which cover 23 Rohingya camps. The police have registered 687 drug-related cases from January 2018 to August 2021 and 70 arms-related cases from January 2018 to September 2021 in Teknaf and Ukhiya police stations.<sup>39</sup> Asaduzzaman Khan, the present Minister of Home Affairs, states that arms are supplied from Myanmar to create instability in the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the Bangladeshi authority has been much concerned about maintaining the law and order situation in the Chittagong region.

The government of India also has the same concern as Bangladesh for its citizens' human security. Undoubtedly, India is the fastest growing economy, yet, a large section of people are still below the poverty line. History has witnessed that India has been a shelter for people in need. Right from 1959, when the Dalai Lama (the spiritual leader) along with thousands of Tibetans, came to India, it has been a home to the asylum seekers. But, at the present time, such policy in India has changed. The Rohingya community in India is considered an indirect threat to India. Their influx in the Northeastern states has led to economic and social insecurity in the region. With a lack of economic opportunities and the prevailing sense of insecurity in the local population, there are higher chances of instability arising out of fear. Poverty and deprivation can lead to crimes in desperate circumstances.

#### **Rohingya Influx from National Security Perspective**

Bangladesh shares a long borderland with India from all three sides and shares only 271 km of border with Myanmar. Similarly, India shares a long border with Bangladesh and Myanmar from the northeastern states. In a geopolitical context, Bangladesh has been promoting peace and friendly relationship with its neighbouring countries, which is well reflected in its foreign policy. Bangladesh's relationship with Myanmar has a long history of conflict and clashes like exchanging gunfire along the border. In January 2011, tension arose in the Bangladesh-Myanmar borderland, followed by exchanges of fire over a controversial dam project on the Naaf River. However, no casualties were reported.<sup>41</sup> In 2016, Bangladesh purchased two submarines from China at US\$203 million, and, in response, Myanmar bought torpedoes from India.<sup>42</sup> In the recent past, both countries have somehow come together to build a new relationship through trade and commerce. Moreover, owing to the isolation policy, no normal regular communication

existed between the two nations. They only had a ceremonial, diplomatic relationship.

The Rohingya crisis has now emerged as a new security threat for Bangladesh in terms of generating militancy across the country, especially in its border areas. No doubt the country has till now successfully combated militancy, yet there is much possibility of getting a high level of terrorism within its territory. According to South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP), nine proscribed terrorist groups, including Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), who was responsible for nearly 460 bomb explosions within a period of 30 minutes on 17 August 2005 at 300 locations in 63 districts of Bangladesh.<sup>43</sup> Since 2015, two Islamic terrorist groups- Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Ansarul Islam (hereafter Ansar)- have become dominant and active in executing terrorist activities.<sup>44</sup> The Rohingya, already living in miserable conditions with limited rights, could be easily motivated to join extremist groups. Further, the global network of Islamic militancy could use Rohingya's sentiment and distress as a tool to fulfil their ill purpose. It is alleged that al-Qaeda-backed organisations and the banned outfit, the Harkat-ul-Jihadi- Islami (HuJI) are already active in Rohingya refugee's settlement areas. In 2018, a report was published in the media that Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) had allegedly recruited 40 Rohingyas to execute targeted killings and terror attacks during the 31 December New Year celebration in Cox's Bazar.<sup>45</sup> So all these developments indicate that the Rohingya crisis could instigate multidimensional threats and give rise to militancy in Bangladesh from a traditional security point of view.

India shares its border with China, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Clashes are common on China and Pakistan border. Besides, Islamic terrorism is one of the major threats to the national security of India. The country has been the victim of a series of Islamic terrorism within its boundary. The Rohingya people are often linked to the global network of Islamic terrorism. The National Security Advisor stated that there were cases of Rohingya migrants being used by the terror outfits like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed in Jammu and Kashmir.<sup>46</sup> Even though such cases are less in number, it cannot be denied that economically and socially unsecured Rohingya can easily be infiltrated and used for terrorism.

## **CONCLUSION**

The root cause of ethnic cleansing and forced exodus of Rohingya is making them stateless by denial of citizenship by their country of origin. The ethnic conflict in Myanmar has resulted in a forced exodus and then security challenges for the countries like Bangladesh and India. The Rohingya issue can't be solved by any single country, rather, it needs a joint effort of the nation-states. The Rohingya refugee crisis is

described as “a time bomb” waiting to explode, which will affect not only Bangladesh and India but the whole region in terms of security concerns.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, Bangladesh and India have to take the initiative and make the issue more global. So that a roadmap can be made to look for a durable solution to solve the Rohingya crisis, as it highly impacts the security concerns of both

countries. Moreover, there is a high need for interventions of intergovernmental organisations like the United Nations (UN), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) etc., to find the solution to one of the most humanitarian crises of the world.

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