

CHALLENGES OF ROHINGYA REFUGEES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Written by *Ravneet Kaur** & *Yavish Gupta***

* 2nd Year Public Policy Student, National Law School of India University, Bangalore, India

** 2nd Year Public Policy Student, National Law School of India University, Bangalore, India

ABSTRACT

Pandemic has widened the glaring inequalities but they are often overlooked in the case of refugees. Pertaining to the persecution faced, approximately 3.5 million Rohingyas have been dispersed from their home land, Rakhine state of Myanmar to various countries like Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia. Their conditions are starkly different in each country like Bangladesh than in India but face different challenges respectively. Rohingya, being the largest stateless community, face several challenges such as food security, identity crisis and risk to their lives, which have exacerbated during the pandemic. In the light of the pandemic, Rohingyas face layered vulnerability with loss of jobs, cramped spaces, limited access to WASH and devoid social distancing norms. Specifically in India, they became the victims of Islamophobia due to *Tablighi Jamaat* incident which politicised their cause. Further, provision of financial aids or supporting activities have been halted due to imposed lockdown. The role of international agencies like UNHCR and UNICEF are extremely constructive in building the lives of the Rohingya community. Studies have shown that the immigrants are perceived as strength to their host countries and this is the point from where we need to build our global foundations of community building for such vulnerable communities. The efforts from the host countries such as integration and identification are highly recommended.

Keywords: Rohingya, Pandemic, Refugees, Cox Bazaar, UNHCR

INTRODUCTION

Imagine the place you call 'home' is no longer your 'home', your 'home' is being burnt to ashes, your children are being slaughtered to death and you are being forced to leave the place you call 'home'. And you have no place to go because people back at your 'home' despise you and everywhere else you are uninvited. You have sleepless nights because of being starved, and if you sleep, it's not without nightmares of not seeing the sunlight again or not having leaking bamboo shelter over your head. Yet, the next day comes and you fight your way through survival with each drop of safe water or ounce of food. Imagine being them, Imagine being the Rohingyas.

This is how 3.5 million of dispersed Rohingyas feel who have survived violent riots in their 'home' land and fled to countries like Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesiaⁱ. Since 2017, approximately 720,000 Rohingya refugees have fled from Myanmar and majority of them reside in Bangladeshⁱⁱ. Rohingyas are stateless Muslim minority who have lived in Myanmar for many generations. There is evidence of Muslims living in Rakhine state since the 15th century Mrauk-U kingdomⁱⁱⁱ. The history of Rohingyas persecution goes back to 1977, King Dragon Operation of the Myanmar Army^{iv} but 1982 Burma Citizenship law changed the future of Rohingyas for eternal statelessness. Chris Lewa has written that in 1989, colour-coded citizens scrutiny cards (CRCs) were introduced: pink cards for full citizens, blue for associate citizens and green for naturalized citizens but the Rohingyas were not issued any cards^v. It was only in 1995, due to UN Refugee agency, UNHCR's intensive advocacy efforts to document the Rohingyas, the Burmese authorities started issuing them temporary registration cards (TRCs), a white card, pursuant to the 1949 Residents of Burma Registration Act. These cards are merely identification cards and not a proof of citizenship. The 1982 Citizenship Law is considered as the linchpin for a whole set of laws, policies and practices that discriminate against Rohingyas as non-citizens and leaves them extremely vulnerable to human rights abuses by government and non-government actors^{vi}. According to the United Nations (UN), they are the most persecuted community in the world^{vii}. In this globalised world, it's difficult to say that any country has been left just with its original inhabitants. India, for that matter, a country with rich diversity is a result of amalgamation of various cultures and religions. If every country starts identifying the original inhabitants and keep only 'true' citizens, then we fear that more than half of the world population will be homeless. It's similar to pushing them

into the flames in which their homeland is burning. This is not an empirically backed estimate but an extent to show the ties the world has built across borders and oceans over the years. Rohingyas, even in their host countries, fight for their survival amidst crunched shelters, limited rations, diseases and political interference. With the outbreak of COVID-19, a new set of challenges has been added to their misery.

ROLE OF INDIA AND BANGLADESH

Both India and Bangladesh are non-signatories to the 1951 refugee convention. Yet, Bangladesh has upheld its customary international law obligation to keep the border open to fleeing Rohingya refugees and acted to accommodate and meet the humanitarian needs of hundreds of thousands of desperate refugees fleeing crimes against humanity^{viii}. UNHCR Global Report of 2019 notes that UNHCR and the Government of Bangladesh jointly has completed the registration of some 855,000 Rohingya refugees and provided them with identity documents^{ix}. Being unregistered means being without shelter, food, basic amenities. Due to the pandemic, situation has worsened in Bangladesh Cox bazar's camps which have been declared a red zone by the Bangladesh government. Cramped up spaces, prevailing malnourishment with poor Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) infrastructure in place, the spread of virus in the community is just a matter of time. As per the projections by John Hopkins (in March) on Rohingya refugee camps, the virus will slowly pick up within three months of the infection with a rise in the infection rate and death rate for a year^x. As of 1 July, there have been 50 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 5 deaths among the refugees in Cox's Bazar^{xi}. The testing capacity has been ramped up from 200 to 700 tests a day, yet only 0.06% of the Rohingyas have been tested^{xii}.

However, India's stance has been starkly different given its changing political character. As per the official estimates of the Indian government, around forty thousand Rohingya are living in scattered settlements in various parts of the country, out of which the UNHCR, has issued about 16,500 Rohingyas identification cards^{xiii}. Such large numbers are vulnerable to atrocities, not only of people but of nature as well. During the strict lockdown conditions during the pandemic, they have lost jobs as the majority of them were part of the informal sector depriving them of sources of income. Adding another layer of hardship, social protection packages

announced by the government of India include daily wages and migrant workers but India does not recognise them as ‘refugees’ rather, are considered as ‘illegal immigrants’. This devoids them from assistance in the form of schemes. For example, Delhi government’s alternative livelihood assistance of Rs 5,000 for migrant workers does not include the Rohingya^{xiv}. In addition to this, volunteers and assistance such as food and essential items are unable to reach the camps because of severe lockdown.

Mohd. Javed, a rohingya refugee in Delhi, fears that their children will die from hunger, thirst, distress and not from coronavirus^{xv}.

Due to limited food resources and stable income, malnourishment prevails in the Rohingya refugees, and this pandemic has aggravated that. Also, the testing of COVID-19 infection has been very limited. Recently, testing centres have begun requesting proof of address for the purposes of contact tracing – something that most refugees without formal rental agreements lack^{xvi}. In India, they are facing a trinity of vulnerability: coronavirus, loss of employment and starvation which is hitting them hard. India as a welfare-oriented country believes in the notion of ‘*VasudhaivaKutumbakam*’ (The World is One Family). It is imperative for it to think on ethical lines. This is a question for all of us, what matters more- humanity or nationality? Considering they are not ‘citizens’ of the country, special policies have to be formulated for the upliftment of the Rohingya community. Each life matters.

COVID AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

In one of the recent incident, religious congregation of *Tablighi Jamaat*, the entire Muslim community became a victim of Islamophobia and of this, Rohingya refugees formed a small part of it as well. Diagram 1 explains the vicious circle which is being created due to this, leading to disruption in social harmony and secular fabric of the country.

The extent of fake news after this congregation was experienced by the authors as well. While buying fruits, one of the passersby asked us not to buy watermelons and muskmelons as the majority of them are grown and sold by Muslims (in Rajasthan), who are spitting on them to spread coronavirus in the country.

This is the ground reality which is diverting the society on communal angle to spread hate against a minority community in India. Politicization of such matters have held the grip and has been used as vote bank politics. Here, the media plays a crucial role in deciding the image which will be perceived by the society. Though, they haven't played a very ethical role during these tough times. However, the role of society must take a lead to stop this cycle.

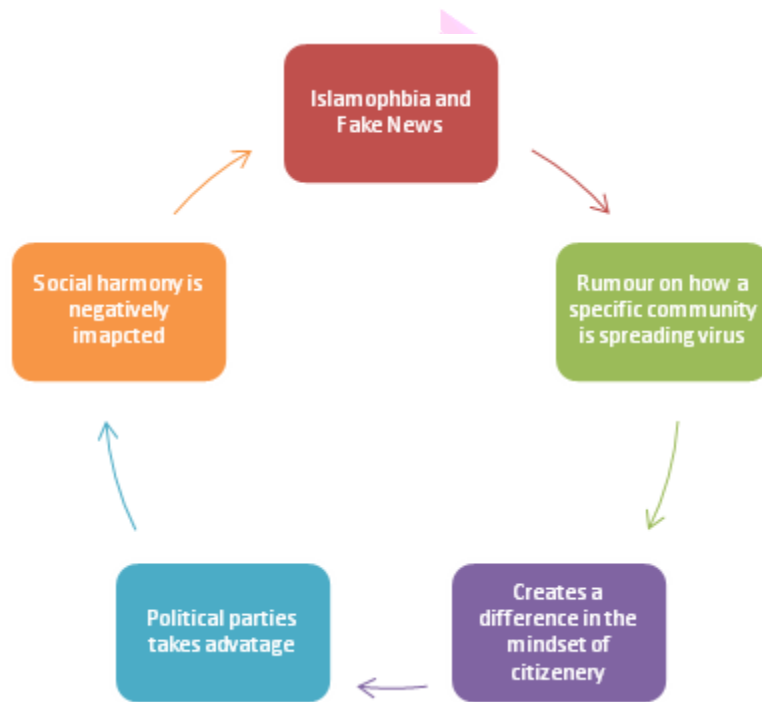


Diagram 1: Vicious circle of vulnerability (prepared by authors)

Times like these calls for bold actions and policies especially when it comes to vulnerable stateless communities like Rohingya which is suffering from multitude of problems. These camps are a ray of hope for these stateless, ethnically threatened minorities and with COVID-19 spreading like fire, many volunteers will be cut back to maintain social distancing norms. This will put immense pressure on the living outcomes of the community. It's an unsolved challenge so far but an untapped opportunity for national governments to look into their ethical duties towards humanity which calls for a more dignified life of these stateless minorities.

ROLE OF UNHCR AND SUGGESTIVE MEASURES

To walk our way through this ensuring COVID-19 does not engulf these heavily cramped camps, social distancing norms need to be maintained. However, this is a logistical challenge. Government needs to strategize a quarantine facility for them, for example, two flat towers from the housing board should be allocated, one for those infected with COVID-19 virus and other for the uninfected. Hospitals near to such camps should have immediate facilities in case a positive case is found. But the approach shouldn't be limited to the times of COVID-19 rather lead to a bigger picture with a dignified life. Utilising the man power that resides in these camps holds the potential of solving various issues with one arrow. Focus should be, to provide them with education or skills that can enable them to contribute to the economic growth of the country as well. The Global Education Monitoring report by [UNESCO](#) suggests that even though conflict is taking a huge toll on education systems, it is only equal and inclusive education which can act as a powerful tool and antidote to conflict^{xvii}. Of the six million primary and secondary school-age refugees under UNHCR's mandate, 3.7 million have no school to go to^{xviii}. Transformational role of education in the lives of displaced communities cannot be undermined. [UNICEF](#) currently provides informal education opportunities to 220,000 Rohingya children aged 4 to 14 years based on a tailor-made curriculum and learning opportunities for older groups, with over 18,000 Rohingya adolescents aged 15 to 18 years receiving literacy, numeracy, life-skills and vocational skills training^{xix}. Providing them with such skills ensures less vulnerability to an uncertain future and more confidence in oneself. Nearly 80% of Rohingya refugees are women and children which adds more challenges^{xx}. Inside the camps, women and girls feel relatively safe in accessing WASH facilities, however protection issues have been noted including the lack of child friendly spaces, lack of privacy, overcrowding, reported child marriage and child exploitation, and human trafficking^{xxi}. [UNHCR](#) ensures that safe learning spaces remain a vital element of child protection work, especially given the sizable refugee child population in Cox's Bazar. With lockdown being imposed, increase in gender based violence is anticipated but [UNICEF](#) continues to monitor a number of protection issues affecting Rohingya and Bangladeshi women and girls. But, this couldn't have been possible without the support and cooperation of the Bangladesh government. With COVID-19 further exposing ethical fault lines in governance, this model of empowerment be extended to other host nations.

The role of UNHCR has been exemplary in fighting for a dignified life of refugees and enabling them to make choices. We must understand, Right to Choice is one of the small, yet impactful way of refugee community to feel empowered. It is not only to choose where they wish to live or leave but also to get education, employment, security and for this, to give them not a night but nights of safe sleep UNHCR has worked tirelessly. Hesitation by India to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention goes beyond political influence to geographical issues like porous borders coupled with limited administrative and military capacity. This puts a strain on local infrastructure and resources in countries that are poorly equipped to deal with sudden spikes in population^{xxiii}. UNHCR in its report *Protecting Refugees* has suggested solutions for the refugee crisis being faced by the world but given the scenario in India, its implementation is complex^{xxiii}. First, *voluntary repatriation* which in the present scenario seems distant as hate filled environment still prevail in Myanmar. Second, *local integration* of Rohingyas by assimilating them within the societal structure becomes complex without citizenship as many host countries are not willing to grant citizenship. Third, for *resettlement* it comes down to being signatories to refugees' convention and International cooperation among nations which are willing to grant them asylums. These last two solutions are difficult to adopt for a country like India, which needs to move forward on the line on accepting the migrants from other countries. These underlying issues have made their survival more complex during the pandemic as they have limited access to basic amenities, loss of employment and victim of information asymmetry. When we look at these solutions through the lens of the Rohingya crisis, we realise the importance of tailored-made solutions.

WAY FORWARD

While solving humanity crises such as these, we mustn't have myopic view and look at a greater picture. Study by Pew Research Centre has shown that the world perceives immigrants as strength and not burden^{xxiv}. In their study Japan was the only Asian country having most of the migrants. Japan's case has shown a positive picture of migration from which other South Asian countries should take a cue. Host countries need to maintain a certain standard of living for illegal immigrants and in this lies the future course of the countries and migrants. It is in our value systems to ensure vulnerable are not left behind but we need to convert it in our

actions, as citizens, as humans and as enablers for which the time is ripe. Inclusive growth will be achieved in its truest form when each section of the society is empowered to grow. As a planet we have to save the lives of each other on that pretext we need to cooperate ourselves i.e. India with all other countries and vice-versa to handle any crisis. When refugees die, it's not the death of an individual belonging to a specific religion, it is the death of humanity which silently witnesses it. We need to unshackle ourselves from the chains of privilege, religion and other bonding to ensure a dignified life for all vulnerable refugees.

ENDNOTES

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