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UNDERSTANDING THE ROHINGYA CRISIS

BISWAJIT MOHANTY*

Abstract

Bulk of the Asia's migration is constitutive of the expelled underclass. The phenomenon of undocumented underclass movement is the product of the internal politics of the sovereign states and their statelessness is a function of the dynamics of border and geopolitics at play. The Sovereign states internally create conditions where people are governed through calibrated management and/or through confinement of human movement without any rights within a given geographic space. Various geographic transversal forces enable purgation of the cultural community from their spatial habitations. The processes of purgation lead to the origination of stateless people who move across the borders and live in a state of precarity. They become both an analytical as well as a legal category. The rubric of explanations of refugee crisis can be explained through different generative factors -- nationalism, ethnic cleansing, human rights violation, and citizenship. But it is important to unravel the subterranean "systemic edges" for a better understanding of a crisis and suggest subsequent remedial courses of action. The paper taking the case study of Rohingyas is trying to understand the crisis in Myanmar.

Key words: Rohingya, Ma Ba Tha, 969 Movement, Tatmadaw, Ethnic Armed Organisations

I. Introduction

A top-level Myanmar government delegation visited a Rohingya camp at Cox's Bazar of Bangladesh on 29 July 2019 to persuade the Rohingya leaders to convince the refugees to return

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home (Gaynor, 2019). But no Rohingyas were willing to go back to their country voluntarily, fearing for their safety in the Arakan region which is their “home”, where they belonged.

#IBELONG is a campaign started in 2014 by the UNHCR to eradicate statelessness from the world. Five years have passed since its initiation but the statelessness has only increased worldwide. Refugees from Syria have been travelling to Europe and living under precarious conditions. The iconic image of a toddler from Turkey floating on the surface of the sea and collected by the Turkish police speaks volumes about the precarity of the stateless, who are fleeing from the war-torn countries or suffering from violence perpetrated on them. Rohingyas are a recent addition to the category of stateless people. The homes of the Rohingyas were destroyed in 2017 and more than 7,42,000 Rohingyas have fled Myanmar since the attacks began in late 1970s. They belong nowhere and have been forced to become stateless. There are several minorities residing in Myanmar but the UNHCR report states that the Rohingyas constitute the most persecuted minority in the world today. This begs the question-Why? Why are the Rohingyas the most persecuted minority when there are 135 other minorities residing in Myanmar? What is the history of the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar and the regions surrounding it? This short essay is an attempt to address these issues and analyse the generative factors of the crisis.

II. Who are the Rohingyas?

Naming is an integral part of any ascriptive as well as descriptive identity. It provides status to a community and builds, obliterates, debilitates, and rebuilds its history as well. It is an integral part of identity formation and is pivotal in representing the community. The same holds true for the term ‘Rohingya’, those who have by now become a symbol of oppression and denial of basic human rights.

Rohingyas are a Muslim minority group living mainly in the Rakhine state situated on the western part of Myanmar. It is an underdeveloped state sustained by agrarian economy, and borders Bangladesh. According to the World Bank estimate, 78% of people of the Rakhine state live below the poverty line. Of them, the Rohingyas live in abject poverty. There is no reliable data on their population either. But according to Nyi Nyi Kyaw, an anthropologist working on the subject of Muslims in Myanmar, the Rohingyas constitute around half of the total Muslim

population living in Myanmar. The total Muslim population, according to the 2014 demographic survey, is around two million (Kyaw, 2015: 51).

The Rohingyas have a contested history. According to M. A. Tahir Ba Tha, the first scholar to write a history of the Rohingyas, the word 'Rohingya' may have been derived from the term *rohais* or *roshangee*, which later came to be known as Rohingya. It is a term that denotes the Muslims of the old Arakan region; this was a corrupted form of the Arabic word 'Raham' or blessing. According to the author, when the Arabs first came to this area they were shipwrecked and reached the Arakan region of Myanmar. Thus they named it Raham Borri meaning the 'land of God's blessings' (Jillani, 2007).

The word 'Rohingya' may have also come from Rahama-Rahami-Rahmia-Rahingya to Rohingya, which denotes "honest, dutiful, pitiful or kind hearted to others". He also mentions that the 'Rohingya' may have been derived from the Magh language (*Rwa-haung-gya-kyia*), meaning "as brave as tiger". The Pathan army was led by General Wali Khan and General Sandi Khan, who had come to restore the throne of Naramekhia and were labelled by the Maghs as 'as brave as tigers'. The Arab and Pathan army had founded the 'original nucleus of the Rohingyas in Arakan, who arrived from Arab and Bengal Sultanate during the time of Arakanese kings' (Jillani, 2007).

Token (2014) contests the idea of the Rohingyas as a nation with a history dating back to seventh century AD. He mainly cites the Census data beginning with 1872 through 1941 to claim that the word 'Rohingya' does not appear in any of the reports. The basis of his claim is that the 1931 Census which had already identified 19 Muslim communities on the basis of their language does not mention Rohingya. He similarly cites regional Akayab Gazetteers of 1927 specifically to highlight that the Muslims living here had come from the Chittagong area of Bangladesh. Token thus concludes that the claim made by the Muslims identifying as Rohingyas has no empirical basis and one should be careful against 'the right to have self-identification'. According to Token (*ibid.*), 'Rohingya' as a 'myth' was created in 1946 with the sole political motive of bringing peace and to seek alliance with the Muslim communities that would help in restoring peace in the conflict-prone Arakan area.

A similar argument has been advanced by Leider (2014) in his article where he states that the term ‘Rohingya’ is a construction whose history can be traced back to as early as the 1950s. Prior to it the Muslims in Myanmar were known as Chitangongians or the Bengali Muslims. Since the early 1950s, one part of the Muslims in the Rakhine state started identifying themselves as culturally distinct and separate from the native population. They have self-identified as ‘Rohingya’. They have conflated, according to Leider, the history of all Muslims and have traced their origin to the history of the Arakan state. Klaus Fleischmann in his research on the 1977-78 refugee crises refers to the name ‘Rohingya’ only four times. In the 1990s, when the second phase of exodus of Muslims from Myanmar started, the name ‘Rohingya’ became very popular (Leider, 2014: 5). It is around this time that the Rohingyas were considered as linguistically distinct (Amnesty International, 1992: 4). From the evidence Leider concluded that ‘the Rohingyas are best defined as a political and militant movement’ with a motive of creating an autonomous zone within Myanmar (Leider, 2014: 3).

There are two problems in the argument that the term Rohingya is a recent political construct. By stating this position, Leider (2018) is obliterating the past of the Rohingyas by selectively interpreting history and historical evidences. For instance, the 1871 Census notes that there were 64,000 ‘Mussulmen’ in the Rakhine province who differed ‘from the Arakanese but little, except in their religion and social customs which their religion directs.’ (Ibrahim, 2016: 48). The second issue is that Leider fails to explain how and why these apparently ‘different’ kinds of Muslims living in the Arakan region, agreed to be referred to by the common term ‘Rohingya’.

The answer that Leider (2018) gives is that ‘Rohingya’ is a political movement that was aimed at the creation of an autonomous area within the Arakan state, with an intent to mobilise all Muslims under one fold. This begs the question of why the alienation of the Muslim communities from the mainstream population happened in the first place. The historical evidence shows that the communities were coexisting peacefully. For instance, Ba Tha in his writing has stated that the Rohingyas preferred to keep Muslim names while the others preferred Rakhine Magh names for newborns. Some loved to keep both the Muslim and Magh names: Saleh Tun Sein or Ahmed Maung Maung etc. (Jillani, 2007). If Ba Tha is right then why and when did this peaceful coexistence turn into ethnic violence? What are the generative causes for this? In other words, how do we understand the Rohingya crisis?

III. Chronicling the Rohingya Crisis

The history of the Rohingya crisis can be divided into five phases along with the political developments that have shaped Myanmar politics since 1947 when it achieved independence. These phases are arbitrary and have been drawn to highlight the changing status of the Rohingyas vis-à-vis political developments taking place in the country. That is why there is no uniform compartmentalisation of these phases. The phases are 1948-62, 1962-88, 1988-2007, 2008 - 2010 and 2011- 2015 and onwards.

According to Azeem Ibrahim (2016) the Arakan area was relatively peaceful from 1940 till 1961. The 1947 Constitution had formally acknowledged the inhabitants of the border areas as immigrants and that included Rohingyas as well. It was speculated that they would be given citizenship on the basis of a provision of the Constitution which stated that those who had resided in Myanmar for more than eight of the past ten years prior to the formation of the Constitution would become citizens. Article 11(iv) of the Constitution had provided provisions to award the National Registration Certificate with full voting rights to the Rohingyas. As a result four to five Rohingyas were representing the Arakan people during the above mentioned period. In 1959, the Rohingya Students' Association was very active in the Rangoon University (ibid.: 65). The radio station that was set up in the Rakhine province used to broadcast programmes in Rohingya language. They enjoyed the status of an ethnic group till 1962, which can be proved through two evidences: first, a military report of 1961 describes the Muslim population residing in the Mayu frontier bordering Bangladesh as Rohingyas; and, second, the 1961 Census states that 75% of population of the Mayu frontier region is inhabited by the Rohingyas. This district was formally shifted from the "frontier administrative districts to the Ministry of Home Affairs and incorporated into Rakhine province." (ibid.). This indicates that the relation between the ethnic Rohingyas and the state was normal. They were an integral part of the Burmese political and social system as well.

Despite their existence in this peaceful environment, there was an anti-Rohingya sentiment present among the Buddhists in Burma. They were discriminated against and were put in a special category compared to the other ethnic groups in Myanmar, immediately after achieving independence and adoption of the first Constitution. Apart from 135 small ethnic groups residing in Myanmar, the major ethnic groups are Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. Later,

special states were carved out and named after these ethnic groups where they constituted the majority of population. U Nu, the first prime minister of Myanmar, recognised the Rohingyas as an indigenous group but their name was not mentioned in the first Constitution of 1947. When there was a query on the status of the Rohingyas, U Nu in a public speech on 25 September 1954 stated, “The Rohingya has the equal status of nationality with Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Mon, Rakhine and Shan.” (Quoted in Ibrahim, 2016: 64). Despite all the promissory notes no special status was provided to the Rohingyas; things rather became adverse for them.

The second phase began in 1962 and lasted till 1988. Until 1965 everything seemed to work well for the Rohingyas. Then they gradually started losing their privilege to get the National Registration Certificates and became eligible only for the Foreign Registration Cards i.e. non-national cards. Article 145 of the 1974 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma redefined citizenship as ‘all persons born of parents both of who are nationals of the Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma are citizens of the Union’. This was the benchmark year for the Rohingyas as they lost their citizenship status. These constitutional changes with regard to citizenship facilitated state violence against them. In 1977, the military state started the Nagamin (Dragon King) campaign where the state was vested with power to identify citizens and foreigners. In the Arakan state, the campaign was interpreted by the army and the Buddhists as a license to attack, kill and drive away the Rohingyas. A spate of violence followed and by 1978 over two lakh Rohingyas had fled to Bangladesh (ibid.: 67). They were subsequently repatriated to Myanmar by Bangladesh.

The formal and legal exclusion of Rohingyas from citizenship came with the promulgation of the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law that created four kinds of citizens: citizen (*mwe-ya-pa naing-ngan-tha*), acquiring citizenship by birth as the descendant of the *taing-yintha*; associate citizen (*eh-naing-ngan-tha*), those have applied for citizenship under the Union Citizenship Act; naturalised citizen (*naing-ngan-tha pyu-kwin-ya-thu*), those allowed to be naturalised i.e. those who had been residing in Myanmar before 1948 and proved their residence; and foreigner (*naing-ngan-tha*), citizenship given to those who had become citizens in 1982.

On all counts, the Rohingyas remained foreigners as the conditions imposed in the Constitutions were very restrictive. For instance, it was mentioned in the Chapter II of the 1974 Constitution that those who had been residing in the country prior to 1823 would be declared as citizens. The Rohingyas do not fulfill the criteria despite several historical evidences provided by them. Similarly, to become naturalised citizens one has to have entered and settled in the state prior to 4 January 1948. They have to apply for the citizenship of their offspring with conclusive evidence of residence in Myanmar. Many a time, naturalised citizenship is linked to associated citizenship. The associated citizenship is to be conferred through the administrative decision provided that the concerned person applies for it through a prescribed form. There are stringent criteria to be fulfilled and as a result it becomes difficult for a community to get associated citizenship. Once associate citizenship is denied then it becomes difficult for the offspring to acquire the status of naturalised citizen. This is precisely what happened to the Rohingyas; they lost the ground on all accounts. The 1948 Constitution denied them legal citizenship status and the 1982 law made them completely stateless: denial of citizenship imposed restrictions on movement and acquiring private property on land. The first class of citizens became the most privileged ones whose citizenship could be rescinded only when they became citizens of any other country.

The authorities simultaneously devised a ‘competing’ nomenclature that was condescending towards the Rohingyas. Two major derogatory cultural concepts used by them to identify foreigners in general and Rohingyas in particular were *kalas* and *guests*. *Kala* as a term was used by the King of the Bagan dynasty to describe people, especially of Indian origin, who had entered the kingdom from the western side. It simply demarcated the Muslims and other non-indigenous people and did not carry any negative connotations. It was only during the colonial times that the term got a derogatory meaning attached to it, to be attributed to Indians and Muslims. ‘Colonial Indophobia held by Burmese, which later transformed to Islamphobia’, writes Kyaw (2015: 55). Muslims disliked the term *kala* as it harboured a sense of alienation among the Rohingya Muslims in particular and Muslims in general.

Similarly, another rhetorical and derogatory term used by the Buddhist leaders to address the Muslim community was ‘ungrateful guests’ (ibid.: 56). This term was used frequently during violent conflicts between the Buddhist and the Rohingya communities during 2012-14 within the

Rakhine state. The Buddhist in the state, through this term, propagated the idea that they were the owners of the land and the Rohingyas were the guests, who had come from outside to settle temporarily. It was through this concept that ‘the Rohingyas, had their cultural personhood defined as “alien”’ (ibid.: 57).

The third phase of the Rohingya crisis started roughly after the political unrest that began between 1988 and 2007 where people opposed military government and chose to transform the military rule to a democratic polity through an electoral process. In the 1990 elections, Aung San Suu Kyi’s party got majority but the election was annulled by the military junta. More and more forces were deployed in the Rakhine areas to control insurgency. There was a renewed attack on the Rohingyas and as many as 2,50,000 Rohingyas fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh and Malaysia during this time (Ibrahim, 2016). The villages were occupied by the Buddhists who took over the lands of Rohingyas. They were displaced from the villages; those forcibly repatriated from Bangladesh found it hard to cope with the changed circumstances.

In the fourth phase (2008 to 2010) the military junta announced a long-awaited constitutional referendum. In April 2008 the Constitution was adopted. A new law was imposed that stated that any resistance to the new Constitution would be met with serious punishment of three years’ imprisonment. It re-established the army rule and limited the role of political parties in political processes. A referendum was held in 2008 which was later labelled a sham because the military junta had rigged it to show that the referendum was a huge success and people were happy with the new Constitution. In May 2008, the cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar’s Irrawady Delta where 84,000 people perished and another 53,000 went missing. Despite severity of conditions faced by the people especially the Rohingyas, the military government did not allow any international aid to reach people. The international community was infuriated by Myanmar’s reluctance to allow aid workers to provide aid to the victims. As a result, France raised the “Responsibility to Protect” principle in the United Nations. A strong resolution was passed in the European Parliament that not only “condemned” the prevention of cyclone aid to reach victims but also warned the government to drag it to the International Criminal Court in the charge of crime against humanity (Human Rights Watch, 2009). The USA, Australia, Canada, and the European Union also unanimously imposed sanctions on Myanmar. But China, India, Thailand and Russia continued to maintain diplomatic ties with the government of Myanmar.

The fifth phase started in 2011 with the establishment of limited democracy. In 2010, the long-planned elections were held where the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)—created by the former members of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) party—won 80% of seats. This was a manipulated victory as unfair procedure was followed to prevent the Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party from contesting the elections. During the course of electoral processes the military attacked civilians in Arakan and other areas. According to the Human Rights Watch 2010 report there were 28,000 Rohingya refugees staying in official camps in Bangladesh and another 2,00,000 living in precarious conditions in makeshift camps around the border areas. 2011 was a politically-crucial year where monks and nuns responded positively to Myanmar's democratic transition. It supported the reform and political dynamics of Myanmar by espousing the message of peace.

In 2012, the civilian government completed one year. But the benefits of democracy eluded the minorities. In the same year horrifying sectarian violence erupted in the Arakan region between the Rohingyas and the ethnic Arakanese Buddhists. The army increasingly targeted the Rohingyas and they were killed, imprisoned and tortured. The humanitarian access to Rohingyas was denied by the state. Unknown number of deaths were reported by the Human Rights Watch report of 2013. The report also stated that entire Muslim villages were razed which resulted in the displacement of 35,000 persons. In 2015, the democratisation process that had previously slowed down in 2011 got expedited and the military regime called for elections in November. The National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Su Kyi achieved a landslide victory. The draconian Citizenship Law of 1982 and the nationwide repeal of white cards (temporary citizenship cards) enforced by the military regime, disenfranchised 8,00,000 people, the majority of whom were Rohingyas (Human Rights Watch, 2016). The 1982 law also prevented 50 Muslim candidates from contesting the elections.

Myanmar, during the fifth phase, also witnessed the intensification of an ultra-nationalist movement led by *Ma Ba Tha* (Association for the protection of Race and Religion) that not only threatened the minorities across the country but was also a major force behind displacing, torturing and killing Rohingyas. Upon *Ma Ba Tha*'s instigation the Thei Sein government passed four 'race and religion protection laws'. They were the Population Control Law, the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law, the Religious Conversion Law, and The Monogamy Law,

which were discriminatory not only for minorities but also for women of both the communities. The civil society actors who openly criticised the laws received death threats and were termed ‘traitors’ by *Ma Ba Tha* (Human Rights Watch, 2016). The NLD voted against the law in the parliament; other political parties supported these laws on grounds of protecting Myanmar from the Muslim threat.

Buddhist monks can be classified under three categories: those of the 969 movement, those of the *Ma Ba Tha* movement and small groups of old clerics who rejected anti-Muslim sentiments. The first two were influential groups who advocated violence and discriminatory practices against the Muslims, and their goal was to expel Muslims away from the country to protect Buddhism.

The 969 Movement has a history dating back to 1980 when the military government established the Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, where it appointed monks to serve and consolidate control over the segregated monastic order. Gradually, these monks started distancing themselves from the military regime and stepped up to fulfill government deficiencies in providing welfare policies like health, education and disaster relief to people. It established around 1500 schools to provide free secular as well as religious education to the poor village boys and girls. Community health clinics were set up in the monasteries to cater to the health needs in rural and backward areas (Walton and Hayward, 2014: 11). In 2008, the cyclone Nargis devastated the western coast resulting in the death of around 1,40,000 lives. The monasteries organised relief work and saved many lives. In 1988, the monks mobilised and protested against the military government. The saffron revolution came in 2007 when the monks and nuns came together to protest against the economic hardship faced by the country; some of the activist monks were arrested. The continued military repressions and arrests impacted the monks and nuns nationwide and they started congregating at Aung San Suu Kyi’s residence where she had been kept under house arrest; they refused to move or accept alms from the military personnel. It is difficult to estimate the casualties when this movement was brutally crushed.

In 2011 many monasteries played an important role in trying to establish peace in the conflict-prone Kachin as well as Rakhin areas where Christian and Muslim minorities were the majority. They also had a significant role in opposing the expansion of copper mining by Chinese

industries (ibid.: 12). Since 2012, monks have been playing a palpably negative role in supporting anti-Muslim mobilisation in the form of the 969 Movement.

The 969 is a numerical representation of Buddha's 'Triple Gems'. There are 9 qualities of the Buddha, 6 *dhamma* and 9 *sangha* of Buddhism. The logo of the 969 is a stone pillar with three lions to symbolise emperor Ashoka's association with Buddhism. It is imagined to be the counterpart of the numerical holy symbol of Islam, 786 (ibid.: 13-15). A group of monks and common people constitute the 969 movement whose leader is U Wirathu. The movement is about securing Buddhism from the onslaught of the Muslim culture; it is a manifestation of the resentment against the Muslims who dominate business in the Arakan area and elsewhere in Myanmar.

Ma Ba Tha has its origin in the 969 Movement. When the Myanmar government banned the Maha Nayak Committee in 2013 the movement changed to Ma Ba Tha with a centralised structure and focused goals and political strategies. Ma Ba Tha means Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (*A-myo Batha Thathana Saun Shaug Ye a-Pwe*). The very name indicates its close association with Buddhism: *a-myo* means ethnicity or race, *batha* indicates religion and *thathana* is the Myanmarese meaning for *sasan*, in Pali, understood as Buddhist tradition as a whole (ibid.:15). It acts within the system in close association with the political parties. Its form of nationalism is virulently anti-Muslim for a Buddhist nation. In 2013, as mentioned above, it brought regressive legislative policies on inter-religious marriages and religious conversion. They have been on the forefront to mobilise support for their cause. U Wirathu, a prominent leader, in an interview gave examples to highlight the fact that the strong Muslim presence in the construction sector is the evidence that they would gradually take over the society and the economy with the objective of "destroying the Buddhist race and religion" (Wirathu, 2013 quoted in Walton and Hayward, 2014: 17). He further stated that "if Buddhists don't do anything to stop it, the whole country will be like the Mayu region in Arakan state by 2100." (ibid.) This was in reference to the Rohingyas of the Arakan region.

According to scholars this is not pure fundamentalism, rather it is "syncretic fundamentalism" in which 'ethno-cultural or ethno-national features take precedence over religion or are inseparable' (Almond et al, 2003, quoted in Lehr, 2019: 182). Lehr thus concludes that 'when it comes to the

perspective of the militant monks participating in movements linked to this “syncretic” fundamentalism, the defence of Buddhism is inseparable with ethno-cultural, ethno-national, and even territorial (or ethno-territorial) aspects such as language and ethnicity that may well have had precedence for secular actors such as the leading politicians of the most relevant parties.” (Lehr, 2019: 182). It is thus clear that for the monks, for someone to be Myanmarese, one has to become a Buddhist as well.

The strange thing is that despite having no concept of nation, race, state or history in Buddhist literature there is still a notion of violence here. They derive this idea from the preaching and teachings of Buddhism which gives permission to self-defend whenever there is a threat to the Buddhist community (ibid: 184).

It would be naïve to say that the Buddhists of Myanmar have become ethno-nationalists. There are a majority of Theravada Buddhists who denounce violence against minorities in Myanmar. The best example is the ABMA (All Burma Monks’ Association) which is very active abroad but is still operating underground in Myanmar. In one of the appeals one monk writes, “I have not kept current on this website for a while, but that is because there has been a lot going on and very little time to write... The Interfaith Witness to Stop Genocide in Burma consists of Muslims, Christians, Jews and at least this one Buddhist. We will meet with and interview refugees, talk with representatives of supporting NGOs... I imagine this will be a difficult journey, but it is essential witness for those of us in the West, whose every religious tradition teaches compassion.” (Clear View Project, 2018).

A wave of democratisation started when the National League of Democracy party led by Aung San Suu Kyi swept the 2015 elections comprehensively and took over the office of the president in November 2016. Despite the presence of democratic structures in the form of a multi-party system and an electoral process and parliament, the Myanmar polity has been witnessing an “Illiberal Democracy” in practice. It is generally believed that democratic forces bring about ethnic harmony and peace. As Farid Zacharia (2007) argues, democracies bring about peace only when constitutional liberalism is in practice. Democracy introduced in a divided society would fall prey to ultra nationalism, ethnic conflict and war. India and Myanmar are exceptions to the

theory advanced by Zacharia. Despite having a written and a flexible Constitution India is falling into illiberal democracy recently. So is the case with Myanmar.

Myanmar had devised and adopted three Constitutions—in 1947, 1974 and 2008. The 2008 Constitution was sought to be amended in 2012 but that could not happen because of the peculiar seat allocation in the parliament and the referendum process. According to the 2008 Constitution, 25% of the seats in the parliament would be reserved for the serving and the erstwhile army officers. It has been proposed in the Constitution that any amendment to the same would be initiated only when 75% of the both Houses of the Union would approve of it and that would be followed by a referendum. In the referendum at least 50% of the registered voters would vote for the change. This arrangement gave the army an upper hand over the civilian government.

This incomplete transformation made Myanmar an illiberal democracy, the signs of which had been manifesting since the last four years. The canaries of democracy—minorities, journalists and civil society actors—were all being targeted by the military. The voice of the media has been muzzled by the Telecommunication Law that prevents journalists from writing against the government. The hybrid form of the government has been a failure in pushing forward the democratic change and the minorities like Rohingyas have been attacked aggressively. In 2017, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army attacked the army personnel and in retaliation the military launched a violent counter insurgency. This resulted in 7,00,000 Rohingyas fleeing Myanmar to the neighbouring countries, especially Bangladesh.

The question still remains: Why are Rohingyas the targets of Buddhists monks in the Rakhine state?

IV. The Political Economy of the Rohingya Crisis

The analysis of any ethnic conflict is always complex. There are multiple generative factors of conflict. Chronicling of an incident does not necessarily provide an insight into the causal factors of ethnic violence. This section takes the political economy aspect and traces the causal factors

of ethnic violence against Rohingyas in the Arakan region. It argues that the build-up of ethnic violence has its roots in the political economic development in Myanmar during the colonial period and the subsequent development processes that the society was entrenched in after the country became an independent nation-state.

The root of animosity between the two communities in the Arakan area can be attributed to the spread of the British Empire from 1887 until 1937. Myanmar was ruled as one of the provinces of the colonial power operating from India. Between 1887 and 1937 the British introduced dual administration here. In some provinces the parliamentary form of government was introduced and in the others a traditional form was retained. Where the parliamentary form of government was introduced the traditional monarchy was destroyed. The British favoured many ethnic communities and made them collaborators in their expansive motives. This implanted the initial sense of deprivation and schism between the nationalist Myanmarese who wanted to drive away the British and the Muslim collaborators (Wade, 2017).

By 1920, the Muslims of Indian origin had become economically powerful. The land in the Arakan region is very productive, which led the British to develop commercialised agriculture. Muslims by this time had purchased large swathes of land in this area by collaborating with the British. The British government was also constructing a port in Akayab. For both the purposes labour from outside was brought into the region. This was perceived as a threat to the local Buddhists who lost out to the guest labours in the lucrative employment sector growing in this area (Wade, 2017: 27). Thus the changing political economy of the colonial period provided the initial impetus to antagonism between the two communities.

This antagonism became deeply entrenched when the Japanese army invaded Myanmar in 1942 and took the support of the leaders such as Aung San, the father of Aung San Su Kyi, to expel the British from Myanmar. It was during this time that the two communities got divided into two hostile camps. The Japanese instigated the Myanmarese army to attack Rohingyas who had been supporting the British; this culminated in communal violence. Muslims and Buddhists fought and killed each other. Most of the Muslims fled to the north of the country or to India. Despite subsequent attempts to establish peace between the two communities through various peace

committees, rapprochement could not be established (Leider, 2018). By 1947, some Rohingya leaders were negotiating with the erstwhile West-Pakistan for incorporating two areas namely, Maungdaw and Buthidaung of the northern Arakan region into Pakistan. The negotiation failed as Mohammed Ali Jinnah refused to entertain such demands. After Myanmar's independence in 1948, the Rohingyas petitioned before the Constituent Assembly for a cessation from Myanmar (ibid.). The persistence on cessation was considered by many Buddhists as disloyalty of the Rohingyas towards Myanmar. This idea was further reinforced when the Myanmar Communist Party attempted to overthrow the elected government in 1948 (Ibrahim, 2016).

Myanmar witnessed waves of civil war immediately after its independence. The conflict between the state and the EAOs (Ethnic Armed Organisations) broke out in Pa-O, Mon and Rakhine states. By the end of 1950, the Myanmar army, known as Tatmadaw, was embroiled in a series of civil wars. The border regions not only witnessed rebellions against the Myanmar authorities but also fought against each other for local dominance. This was the reason for the continuation of military dominance in Myanmar. The formal takeover of the military happened during the 1962 coup. The result was that the military failed to distinguish the enemy within and civilians living in the war-prone areas. As war escalated the tendency to become war-lords grew. In fact, as the military expanded its power, the officers' rank became rich and started controlling economy (ibid.: 51). Many EAOs during this period developed ambitions of controlling the local 'nationals' and resources as well as fighting the Tatmadaw.

The EAOs had complex relations with the army and with each other depending on the local dynamics. They would be in alliance with a particular group but would fight with the same group in some other region. The EAOs by now have fragmented with time. The army has taken advantage of this and established relations with splintered groups to counter the main EAOs. Tatmadaw also has its own militia; they are accountable to the Tatmadaw but have their own economic and political ambitions. The main objectives of the Tatmadaw and the EAOs, according to Burke et al (2018), are three-fold. The foremost objective is to gain control over the local population to receive 'crucial revenues and strategic and tactical benefits'. The second objective is to have territorial control that would enable them to strengthen their respective

military positions and consolidate authority over local population. The EAOs could then raise funds and expand influence over the territory and people so that they could facilitate border crossing, defend economic assets like roads, power lines and control hilltops for strategic significance. The third overlapping objective is to have access to local natural resources. Control over natural resources and trade routes would generate financial resources to sustain the army and the local EAOs. There are companies associated with Tatmadaw with the ability to generate hefty profits and they in collusion with the local-level EAOs have been engaged in drug production and trafficking. This has become ‘an end in itself’ for the two groups (Burke, 2018:22).

Ethnic armed conflict continued well into the 21st century because of the dispute over the degree of centralisation of political and economic power. On the one hand, the military has hardened its stance over warfare and is reluctant to decentralise power too quickly on the grounds of existence of militancy and EAOs. In the 1960s, the military followed the infamous ‘four cuts’ policy, that is, severing four main links between the ethnic communities and the army: food, funds, intelligence and recruits (Stokke et al., 2018: 46). On the other hand, the EAOs are justifying their presence on the grounds of opposing Tatmadaw’s persistent aggression and its deep desire for centralisation of political and economic power (Burke et al., 2017: 19). The Arakan region is no exception to this. The Arakan Liberation Party and the Arakan Liberation Army was formed in 1967 and 1968 respectively and continues to be active. It is very hostile to the Rohingya communities. Violence in the Rakhine state follows the same pattern of ethnic violence in Myanmar as a whole.

The 1990 was an important landmark for the Arakan region. It witnessed a series of unrests and violent attacks on the Rohingyas. The political unrest in the Rakhine state forced the military to send more troupes. The army grabbed land and reconstructed the villages for their stay through the forced labour of the Rohingyas. The villages were subsequently distributed to the Buddhists to establish their settlements. Behind the violence in the Rakhine state lay the motive of sub-national claims of the EAOs to control territory and challenge the authority of the Tatmadaw. For the Buddhist political leaders the Muslims are the roadblock to greater autonomy. It is the Rohingyas’ demands for special status and a separate state that the center is reluctant to grant.

This became a constant alibi for the military to deny the Rakhine state the desired autonomy. The local leaders wanted to dislocate the Rohingyas from this area so as to achieve their desired autonomy (Stokke et al., 2018).

During the same period, the Myanmar government made macro policy changes which liberalised the economy partially. The main objective of the introduction of economic policies was to achieve peace through development intervention which could be made possible through two means. The first method involved embarking on the path of state-building process, that is, to build democratic state institutions and vibrant civil society groups to manage violence – initially to reduce and finally to end it. The second method of addressing state and community violence was to build peace through economic growth. Improvement in economic standards would reduce the incentive to join armed groups and could address the problems of underdevelopment. Both these means proved to be ineffective in Myanmar. As has been mentioned above, the state-building process was very slow and limited. In addition to it the EAOs were reluctant to accept state expansion that would shrivel their existence and hamper their dreams of greater autonomy. Hence, the peace building processes failed. As evidence from the South Asian regions reveals, the two processes are not linked. Myanmar has high incidence of poverty, and low living standards. Economic progress and improved social services should have become top priority for the Myanmar government. But instead of catering to the whole population, it specifically targeted the conflict-prone areas. This led to wide spread cynicism among local people and business persons regarding lopsided development. A business person stated:

“Development must be designed by respecting the collective interests of society. Development projects that only benefit certain communities will increase the volume of conflict – nothing else” (Quoted in Miklian, 2019: 63). Economic liberalisation did not help the Rakhine nationalists as they blamed their plight and continued violence on the International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) who had been helping the Rohingyas:

“INGOs have little care for other ethnic minorities of Rakhine State although there are many underprivileged people, poorer households and malnourished children in ethnic villages [...] The Bengali children (Rohingya) who benefitted from WFP and INGO

nutrition programmes 18-20 years ago are the main rekindling force of the recent violent conflict and terrorist acts [...] Now it is time for all the patriotic people of Myanmar to be [...] vigilant what these INGOs and UNHCR have been doing in this part of Rakhine State to carry out their evil motives and how they are instigating the Bengali Muslim or the so called Rohingya against the Rakhine people of Myanmar.” (Quoted in *ibid.*)

Efforts were made to negotiate a ceasefire between the EAOs and the army, which to some extent was successful. But it was followed by ‘ceasefire capitalism’ (Stokke et al., 2018: 4; also see Burke, 2018). It has been observed by authors that there was a growing interest among the military commanders as well as their allied EAOs to exploit natural resources concentrated in the conflict-prone areas. This could not have been possible without having peace established between the Tatmadaw and the rebels living in Rakhine areas. There were at least 40 major agreements signed among various EAOs across Myanmar during this time with the provision that the armed groups would be allowed to keep their weapons. Companies that were close to the army personnel benefitted out of liberalised economy. In fact, ‘the military commanders, business tycoons and armed organisations engage in extraction, trade and taxation of natural resources’ (Stokke et al., 2018: 4).

In 2011 the military junta brought about political reforms that tried to decentralise the political power. Economic opportunities and political openness had their share of fortune and misfortunes in the Rakhine state. Two important laws were revised in the lower and upper Houses of the parliament in 2012—the Farmland Law and the Vacant Land Law. Another old law, the Peasant Law of 1963, was also annulled. These laws had empowered the local small landholders and gave the tiller the rights. Once annulled it displaced millions of small landholders majority of whom were Buddhists (Sassen, 2017). The 2012 law empowered the foreign investors and displaced the small landholders. The land deals that happened after the implementation of the 2012 law had their own set of regional dynamics. The non-state actors and regional military commanders had control over land development. There was intense competition over the ownership of land. The economic reform attracted bigger companies, especially from China, that exploited natural gas near the Rakhine offshore areas. It has become a major source of revenue generation for the national as well as the local government. The pipeline taking gas directly to

China under long term concessions did not benefit local businesses. They showed no confidence in the industrial development taking place in the Rakhine area. Even if the companies came there, the local businesses felt that it would not benefit them (Burke, 2016).

This raised the question of *who* had the right to manage the land. The foreign firms moved into the land market; land grabs increased and the small land holders lost ground. This development had a two-fold impact on the Rohingyas. Expelling them from land that they held would free the land for redistribution among the Buddhists, and burning their homes and villages would make the process irreversible as they would be afraid to revisit their home. Secondly, mobilising ethnic Buddhists on the grounds of religion diverted the pressure on the government to provide land to the Buddhist landless people (Sassen, 2017). It is in this context that the concept of “guest” mentioned above acquires significance. The Rohingyas were addressed as guests; this provided the moral basis of taking away their lands by the ethnic Buddhists and local non-state actors.

This dynamics had an impact on other sectoral relations also. Agriculture has been stagnating. Its capacity to generate employment has been shrinking. The rising wages in central Myanmar have adversely affected the local rice farmers and wholesalers. The increasing cost of production and transportation is taking a toll on the farmers as they are not in a position to compete with the big farms coming into the country. Fishing is an important source of livelihood for the Rakhine people; both the Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingyas are involved in this sector. The local fishermen would constantly complain about the infringement of informal agreements by the Rohingyas (Burke, 2016: 267). The local political and economic conditions have only led to frustration and anger. The fear to lose out to the local Muslims economically has contributed to the animosity between the two communities leading to violent clashes recently.

In 2015, the NLD party came to power. But the violence against the Rohingyas remained unabated. The reason for this is the following. The military has long been associated with land-grabbing. But the newly elected government has allocated 17,000 acres of rural land for ‘economic development’. In 2016, the Aung San Su Kyi government added another 3 million acres of land in the central list to facilitate the Chinese investment plan to develop a 7.3 billion sea port at Kyaukpyu on the coast of Rakhine and a 3.2 billion industrial park near this area

(Sassen, 2017: 1). This would enable the Chinese government to facilitate the Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing is investing 3.6 billion dollar in the Myitsone Dam project. China is an important player in Myanmar's timber industry. The expulsion of Rohingyas seems to facilitate the Chinese projects. What is new in this area regarding Rohingya is that unlike the earlier attacks the recent attacks were to 'radically expel' them from the area.

V. Conclusion

The Rohingya crisis cannot be analysed as just another ethnic conflict arising out of the majority Buddhist domination. Nor can it be analysed through a simple historical perspective by narrativising events. Since the conflict has multiple generative conditions, it has to be understood through a nuanced political economy perspective. The political economy approach takes the system as a whole and analyses macro- and micro-relationships to reach at the root cause of the problem. The article argues that the political economic conditions that started during the British and the subsequent periods have shaped the anti-Rohingya sentiments in Myanmar. The economic development and concomitant political changes that were brought about in Myanmar generated center-periphery tension, unjust distribution of wealth, and spread of foreign capital into the interior hinterland. The local elites and marginalised sections lost out to the national and foreign capital and finally, fell back on ethnic violence to demand autonomy from the center. The only way to establish domination over the local population and draw the center's attention was through ethnic violence. This had a limited success. The major loss accrued was to the Rohingyas, who were killed and driven out of their homes. Now, they are living in liminal spaces and precarious conditions in camps within and outside the country.

¹ For details on citizenship and law refer to the 1982 Constitution, especially the section which provides information on different types of citizenship and its qualifications.

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