

## Rohingyaphobia and Unheard Voices of Refugees During COVID-19

**By Sajaudeen Chapparban**

I argued in the editorial of the New York based magazine *Café Dissensus* that the Rohingyas are neither the ‘most persecuted minority’ nor the ‘stateless’ rather they are victim of systematic social and legal engineering which reduced them to the conditions in which they live in today”. The roots of violence against Rohingyas are deeply ingrained in the historical traits of hatred towards Muslims in Myanmar which can be traced back to the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. The exclusionary processes of cultural nationalism accentuated the making of Buddhism as national religion which resulted in the discrimination, elimination, and construction of minorities as ‘others’ and ‘outsiders’ within the Buddhist majoritarian nationalist imaginaries. The Socialist period (1970-early 90s) did not encourage Buddhism as a state religion vehemently but with the rise of the Junta military power (from late 1990s to early 2010s) the othering, discriminating, torturing, and killing of Muslims became pugnaciously visible. The construction of images and stereotypes of the Rohingyas as extremist, terrorist, Islamists, fundamentalists, radicals, etc. led the masses to be more ferocious towards Rohingyas and media to justice the gross violation of human rights against this most deprived community. I tried to encapsulate the construction of stereotypes, hatred, unwanted fear, and violence against this community into the term Rohingyaphobia.

This phobia has old topographies of what is today vividly called Islamophobia. One of the most palpable reasons for the persecution of this community is their Muslim identity. The Burmese Citizenship Law (1982) legally discriminated and deprived the Rohingyas from the citizenship by excluding them from the “national races”. Their religious identity is one of the major reasons that they are not included in the “national races”. The present-day violence has its genesis in the anti-Islamic feelings among the right-wing Buddhists and their desire to culturally homogenize the Burmese identities by persecuting the ‘constructed other’. They are judged through the Buddhist communal monocultural modernity which was nurtured over a period of time. Those who are culturally ‘other’ are forced to adapt or leave and Rohingya Muslims are the victim of this not just because they are ‘other’ but the ‘obvious other’. The construction of their identity in association with extremism, terrorism, militant, Islamist, etc. has also coincided with the global rhetoric of “war on terror” in the recent past. The common images of Muslim as terrorist and Islam as terrorism has been always already provided a framework to suspect the Muslims since 9/11 and target them in the name of “homeland security”. Thus, the construction and projection of Rohingya identity in this lexicon have paved ways to channelize the anti-Rohingya sentiments in Myanmar and also substantial validation to the gross violation of human rights till today. The images and stereotypes continued to migrate with the Rohingyas in exile too wherein in countries like India and Bangladesh they are suspected and their rights of being refugees also violated and added new layers of vulnerability to their existence.

The anti-Muslim sentiments continued in the pre-colonial and during the colonial British Burma and more violently in the past few decades due to the growing currents of Islamophobia in South Asia. There are numerous examples of anti-Muslim violence in this country, starting from the killing of two sons of Byat Ta (aka Sywe Byin brothers) in 1050 AD [they were killed only because they were Muslims (Pe Maung Tin et al.1960)] to the recent genocides under the Army rule in 2017. Since, the fresh waves of the anti-Muslim riots of 2017, around 1 million Rohingya women, children, men fled their home out of persecution, confiscation of property and lands, rape, killing, arson, loot, harassment, sexual abuse, slavery, restriction on mobility, marriages, education, freedom, etc. what has become, the U.N. referred it as, a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing”. These atrocities are also being identified by the UN investigation team as “crimes against humanity” and “genocide”.

The violence against Muslims in Burma became visible since the 1940s’ anti-Muslim riots. (Yegar:1972). The 1997's Mandalay riots are the open example for the killing of Muslims, rapes, looting, arson, burning of religious places including the Qurans, demolishing mosques and turning them into military barracks, etc. The University of Maryland’s research titled *Minorities at Risk: ‘Chronology for Rohingya (Arakanese) in Burma’* documents, “In Mandalay alone, 18 mosques were destroyed, and Muslim-owned businesses and property vandalized. Copies of the Koran were burnt”.

The ultra-right Buddhist organizations like *Ma Ba Tha*, (a Burmese abbreviated name for the ‘Association for the Protection of Race and Religion and Committee for the Protection of Nationality and Religion’) and the ‘Burmese 969 Movement’ led by the anti-Muslim monk Ashin Wirathu resembled the *KKK*, *PEGIDA*, and *Act America!* of the western counterpart, which fosters the anti-Islamic sentiments and propagates hatred against the Muslim. Although the *Ma Ba Tha* and affiliated organizations were constantly criticized by some progressive Buddhist monks like Kar Wi Ya in and outside of Myanmar, it continues to have its devastating influence on the Burmese masses to infuse communal sentiments and instigate to persecute this community.

The phobias about Rohingya prevailed not only in Burma but also in other countries like Bangladesh and India where they have taken refuge, but this phobia has different versions in these countries. In India, Rohingyas face multifarious challenges and discriminations. One of the obvious reasons for the discrimination is their religious identity and being stereotyped and projected as a terrorist, extremists, and militant. Countries like Bangladesh also suspect Rohingyas due to the latter reason. The most disturbing experience of Rohingyas is not that they are being persecuted because of their religious identities in their motherland but also, they are discriminated against in the countries of refuge in South Asia. The lack of legal framework is also one of the major reasons for the exploitation of refugees not only in India but in the entire subcontinent, except Afghanistan. In the countries like India, they are discriminated against legally because of their religious identity through reprehensible laws like the recent Citizenship Amendment Act 2019. (It is an amendment of the Citizenship Act of the Indian Constitution to grant citizenship to the refugees based on religion. It selectively grants Indian citizenship to almost all persecuted refugees from the South Asian countries to India except Muslims. This has

erupted a huge criticism and protests across the country and world for being communalizing the character of citizenship of the world's largest democratic republic). The debate over the Rohingya refugees in India continues and many people took rallies in favor and opposition to Rohingya refugees in India. Although Rohingya refugees in India constitute a very small number (17000 according to the UNHCR 2019 *The Hindustan Times*), they are projected and considered as a burden to the economy and a threat to national security. But at the same time, India did accommodate a large number of refugees from neighboring countries like Sri Lanka, Tibet, Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Pakistan, etc. Earlier it was based on humanity but the recent amendment in the citizenship law incongruously justified the process of granting citizenship based on the mere religion of refugees. What is most perilous here is the changing political and communal dynamics of citizenship that hints towards the growing communalism in South Asia and also Islamophobia which is not sparing the most vulnerable communities like refugees.



Due to growing communalism, a Rohingya refugee camp in New Delhi was burned to ashes in April 2018 and that was the fourth conflagration to camp in the last six years. Ironically, a leader from the right-wing organization claimed proudly that he burned the camp. *The Times of India* newspaper covered the incident and notes, "A criminal complaint was filed against BJP youth wing leader Manish Chandela for allegedly admitting on social media to burning down a Rohingya refugee camp in the national capital last Sunday" (TOI).

*Photo of Rohingya Camp which was set ablaze in the capital of India, Delhi. Photo Credit: Abhishek Dey (Scroll.in)*

Rohingya refugees did not let to live in peace amidst the worldwide lockdown due to COVID-19. As in other times, they were the victim of discrimination, and suspicion amidst the global crisis due to novel coronavirus. The rise of Islamophobia in India amidst the COVID crisis suspected Muslims of spreading the coronavirus in the country. The whole media campaign constructed Muslims as a virus by using provocative phraseologies like "corona bomb", "corona jihad", "bio jihad" etc. The Tablighi Jamaat, one of the Muslim sects, headquartered in New Delhi, organized a regular congregation before the lockdown in early March 2020, this was projected as a deliberate attempt to spread the Coronavirus through the chain of human transmission by Islamophobic media. People who were associated with this

event were suspected and arrested including a University professor. Some of the Rohingya refugees were also allegedly suspected of being part of that congregation and traced down. Media added fuel to the ongoing fire of Islamophobia and Rohingyaaphobia. The Home Ministry issued notices to all states to COVID-19 check to the Rohingyas who attended this congregation.

There were also incidents of discrimination against this community amidst the COVID lockdown. Mohammed Shakir, the 27-year-old, one of the respondents in an interview with Pooja Singh reported that “The moment they [employers] learn I am a Rohingya, they say I’m a ‘corona bomb’ and refuse to give me work”. One of the Rohingya refugees says, “There is a private clinic near one of the Rohingya settlements in Delhi, but once the doctor there found out that we were Rohingyas, he refused to treat us since we were not Indian citizens”. (Amnesty International – India). The Rohingya refugees struggle to get work, food, and other essentials like sanitizers and masks during the lockdown. Not much attention was given to them because they were refugees, Muslims, and Rohingya at the same time.

Thus, they fight and struggle against hunger, hate, phobia, and virus at a time during the COVID-19 lockdown. Jaffar Ullah tells *Al Jazeera*, “Only a few families have soaps in our slum, while most of them can’t afford to buy one” (*Al Jazeera*). Other participants said that the hunger will keep Rohingya first before they die of coronavirus. Sayed Ullah from Bangladesh's refugee camp said, “Most of us don’t know what this disease is about. People have only heard it has killed a lot of people. We don’t have the internet to know what is happening,” “We are relying on the mercy of Allah” (Naik n.p.).

In Bangladesh, there are around one million Rohingya refugees mostly in Cox's Bazar living under the shadow of utter hunger, poverty, malnutrition, stunting, suspicion, and surveillance. Extreme poverty leading a few of them to opt for illegal means of livelihood including drug dealing and trafficking. They are also suspected of being involved in terrorist and extremist activities because a small chunk was involved in militant activities in Rakhine, in Myanmar. The images and stereotypes of Rohingyas as violent, separatists, extremists, terrorists, militants, etc. continue to reside with this community in the country of refuge too.

In a nutshell, Rohingyas are targeted because of their cultural and religious identity and the constructed identity of being extremist and terrorist not only in their motherland but also in host countries. Thus, Rohingyaaphobia is a result of both Islamophobia and terror phobia, a new episode in the textbook of crime and hate against fellow human beings.

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