

Voicing the Unheard and Overlooked Narratives of Rohingya Children from the Indian Sub-continent

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“We had come here to live peacefully and wanted our children to be safe from what we faced back in Myanmar. But we are unlucky. Even moving away from Myanmar has not helped us and our children,” says Zahoor Begum, a refugee in a camp near Kinara Talab, Jammu. Rohingya children are seen playing together outside their hut in the camp, quitting their school, fearing detention and a non-inclusive environment in the local community.

The Rohingya community has been based in Rakhine State, Myanmar, for centuries. They began encountering political and ethnic issues in their State in about 2012. The community of Rohingya follows the Islam religion; hence, they have been the minority-ethnic minority community in the State of Myanmar, which has the majority of the population that follows Buddhism. The internal political crisis in Myanmar between the majority and minority communities - Buddhists and Rohingyas- drew the world's attention around the year 2012 with the news of mass atrocities and systemic large-scale public hostility, and as the United Nations considers it, a genocidal massacre against Rohingyas in their homeland. The crackdown by the ethnic majority group was systematically executed on the minority Muslims in the form of mass public violence, widespread sexual assaults on Rohingya women, and discriminatory persecution against the men, women, and children by the army and police forces of the nation. The world was taken aback when the protectors became the assailants in Myanmar. The developed countries have reportedly recognized this violence as ‘ethnic cleansing in Myanmar. International organizations such as various UN agencies, the International Court of Justice, and other human rights organizations worldwide have criticized Myanmar extensively. In addition, the renowned Burmese leader and Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi were highly criticized for her silence and inaction in response to such widespread public heinous crimes against the ethnic and religious minority journalists reporting the crime. Since then, the mass migration of the Rohingyas to nearby countries such as India, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, and other regions in Asia and South East Asia to save their lives began.

Academic scholars, social activists, diaspora writers, political writers, and columnists have extensively been writing about the issues of migration, uprootedness, loss of identity, and homeland and identity in general since the 20th century. Such stories published regularly of sameness and differences among the refugees have discussed diversity issues at multiple levels in literature, cultural, and media discourses. Thus, Migration literature has recently become a growing critical interest at the international level. However, amid the extensive write-ups published at multiple levels to understand, recognize, and manage one of the most contemporary burning issues across the world, such as forced migration, international emergencies, natural calamities, and so on, the issue of the Rohingya refugees, particularly about Rohingya women and children hasn't received the due attention.

In acute societal, political, and humanitarian crises, women and children have always been the first to receive the blow yet remain intentionally unheard and overlooked in the larger discourse. Similar has been the case with Rohingya women and children, who have barely been heard or paid attention to despite being highly affected by being at the receiving end. Therefore,

the essay attempts to give voice to the narratives of unheard and overlooked voices of Rohingya women and children, especially about their experiences in the Indian sub-continent.

The World Bank (The World Bank 2019) estimated the population of about 54 million citizens in the State of Myanmar in 2019; among them, about 1.3 million are Rohingya. It has been recorded in the reports published by the Indian Home Ministry and Reuters that about 40,000 refugees fled to India (Quadir, 2019; The Hindu, 2017), out of which the UNHCR India officially acknowledged only 18,000 Rohingya refugee population in January 2019 with maximum populace settled around Jammu, Assam, and Delhi. It means that more than half of the Rohingya populace still lives in India as stateless, statusless refugees in extremely underprivileged conditions. The stateless and abandoned Rohingya refugees, precisely women and children, had another challenging fate awaiting them in India. The victims who fled the State violence managed to stay alive and migrated to India had once again found themselves in the equally troubled situation awaiting them. They do menial jobs as financial support and live in dilapidated shack settlements across India.

Rohingya women and children are the most vulnerable group among the refugees. About one million refugees have fled Myanmar since 2017; the data says more than half of them were children. They have barely been heard or given a voice or visibility amid the chaos. They are prone to get affected by diseases, trafficked, displaced, or go missing. The chances of getting infected by the disease stand higher for them in the absence of regular sanitation, hygiene, and nutritious food availability. They continue to survive in utter uncertainty. Refugee camps aren't considered safe places for children, considering their physical and mental well-being. Children reach the refugee camps in a severely traumatized situation where many may have witnessed the brutal killings of their parent(s), friends, or relatives. Yet, they don't have any access to psychological counseling or provided any healthy and uplifting environment that can help them deal with the past trauma in the host nation. In addition, children barely have direct access to education and other essential services for healthy survival in the refugee camps. Children are, on the other hand, at the risk of violence, child labor, abuse, child marriage, and exploitation of varied types in refugee camps. Onno van Manen, Save the Children's Country Director put straight that “, despite the relentless efforts of humanitarian communities, a refugee camp is no place for a child to grow up.” Manen added that “children stuck in the camps in Cox's Bazar (largest refugee camps based in Bangladesh) face a bleak future with little freedom of movement, inadequate access to education, poverty, serious protection risks and abuse including child marriage.” Subsequently, older children and adolescents stand a higher chance of becoming the 'lost generation' in the absence of real opportunities for education and making a decent living by becoming part of a civilized society. Hence, it may become easy prey to the traffickers and end up in legal custody.

In addition, children encounter discrimination in the host country that stops them from going out, making friends, and living a normal child life. An article published in The Diplomat, dated June 28, 2022, describes the agony of a father aged 60 who still dreams of providing a safer, better, secure future for his children. A refugee named Noor Alam is based in the camp near Jammu and has a family of seven. He dreams of leaving India and moving to another country to provide a safe future for his children but can't afford the cost of that estimated 20,000 INR per person since he used to beg to feed the family. He has been daydreaming of that day when he will move to a better place where his children will get equal opportunities for

education and living standards. He said, “nobody wants their children to suffer, nobody wants their children to be targeted for their identity . . . whenever our children go out of slum to play, they are chased away by other children. They are teased for being refugees, and nobody plays with them. My children often ask me why we are treated like criminals. What is our fault?. . I sometimes feel that our children live the life of prisoners where they don’t have the liberty to move out freely. They spend the whole day playing but only in a slum area and do not move out of it due to fear of being teased and detailed.”

Therefore, the article bring to the fore the pressing issues of the refugee children that have barely been paid attention to or have been left voiceless. The children and women are generally considered the most vulnerable group of victims. Precisely, the civilization flourish or see the better future if its generation is well-educated, well-nurtured and well-informed. The environment children grow up in impacts their not only present but also the future. Therefore, it is important to provide safe, secure and healthy environment for the children to grow up, precisely, refugee children who are struggling to survive, do menial jobs and while doing so, see their childhood slip by.

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