

Stateless and Suspect: Rohingyas in Myanmar, Bangladesh and India

Madhura Chakraborty

Introduction

[T]he state-centred system of territories and boundaries largely defines how we understand and represent the world and how knowledge of the geography of the world is produced, organised and used in the reproduction of the nation-state system. The logic of this maintains that all individuals should belong to a nation and have a national identity and state citizenship and that the bordered state sovereignties are the fulfillment of a historical destiny. This view has become pivotal in defining not only our world-views but also human identities...National identity is only one of many, often coexisting and overlapping identities (religious, tribal, linguistic, class, gender, etc.) but it is perhaps the most fundamental in the modern world.

~Anssi Passi (1998)

The stateless people numbering 'at least upto 10 million' (UNHCR¹) represent a rupture in the very fabric of our imagined geography of a world neatly divided into bordered nation-states. Non-citizens, nowhere people yet in most cases, the stateless populations are 'subjected non-subjects' (Ryan, 2013): without rights, but not without the state's disciplinary interventions and discrimination. This paper tries to examine how nation-states treat the stateless population with particular reference to the Rohingyas in Myanmar, Bangladesh and India.

Native to Arakan or the Rakhine State of today's Myanmar, even the nomenclature 'Rohingya' denoting this minority Muslim community is currently the subject of controversy in the country. The Burman and Buddhist dominated leadership of the country has long treated them as illegal Bangladeshi infiltrators. Since the late 1970s, the Rohingyas have been present in large numbers in Bangladesh, particularly in the Cox's Bazar area across the Naff river separating the Rakhine State from Bangladesh, in refugee camps and elsewhere. Increasing hostility towards the Rohingya under the Awami League Government in Bangladesh and continuing discrimination and violence against them in Myanmar has meant that large numbers of Rohingya are now seeking shelter in India. A large number of the community are also taking to the seas in precarious journeys to reach countries of South East Asia particularly Malaysia.

¹ <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c26.html>

However, the treatment of the Rohingya in SE Asian countries like Thailand and Malaysia lie outside the scope of the present paper.

Methodology

I have relied mostly on secondary ethnographies, newspaper reports and theoretical writings for this paper. I have also conducted group interviews with seven Rohingya girls at a shelter for minors in Kolkata, India and an interview with a member of the Calicut based Relief and Charitable Foundation of India which is a Muslim charitable organisation working with Rohingyas.

In the following sections I argue that the history of this region, coupled with the post 9/11 regime of securitisation and the increasing currency of the discourse of terrorism and the concurrent rise of Islamophobia, have combined to make the plight of the Rohingyas precarious in ways that are difficult to redress.

Background

Myanmar, Bangladesh and India have a shared colonial past that has shaped their present borders and histories to a great extent. Looking at the colonial and post-colonial history of this region, starting with the Treaty of Peace between the British and the King of Ava in 1826 through the partition of 1947 and the post partition boundary making through acts such as the North East Reorganisation Act of 1971 (India), Ranabir Samaddar writes:

[W]hat is remarkable in this nearly two hundred years' history is that, with repeated boundary fixing in this huge region both as internal boundaries between different units of the country and as borders with outside regions/countries, and creation of different administrative-political units, we have in this region the incipient nations and nationalisms, territorialities and ethnicities, peoples and people-hood(s), which cannot live without the links of the past ages, yet cannot digest these links in light of their own emerging claims. They are in many ways therefore the "divided peoples" – divided across international and the various internal political-administrative borders that cut what they consider now to be their nation. In as much as they must now find out who they are in order to claim national status, they must to an equal degree demarcate who they are not in order to reinforce the claim.

In the following sections I will examine how the Rohingyas' claims upon citizenship and humanitarian assistance are repeatedly repudiated through the discourses of (il)legitimacy and security that reinforce the tenuous and often arbitrary borders between these three nation-states.

The Rohingyas in Myanmar: Erasure of History and History of Oppression

The statelessness of the Rohingyas came about with the introduction of the Citizenship Law of 1982 in Myanmar. The three categories of citizenship under this law are entitled to people who are full citizens, associate citizens and naturalised citizens. As Chris Lewa points out in her article in the *Forced Migration Review* in 2009, this law was specifically designed to deprive citizenship to those of South Asian or Chinese origins (Lewa, 2009). The Rohingyas are not considered among the 135 legally recognised ethnic groups who lived in Myanmar prior to British colonisation in 1823. As researchers and activists have pointed out time and again, the first written reference about the Rohingyas and their language as native Muslim inhabitants of the Arakan appears as early as 1799 in Francis Buchanan's *A Comparative Vocabulary of Some of the Languages Spoken in the Burma Empire*. Penny Green in a 2013 article also mentions research from Australian National University that has dated stone monuments of the Rohingya community in Arakan back to the 8th century.

The rationale for denying the Rohingyas citizenship has been the official stance that they are illegal Bangladeshis. It must be remembered that the beginning of the conflict between the Buddhist Rakhine population and Muslim Rohingyas of Arakan is only as recent as the colonial period. Arakan was an independent kingdom till 1784 (Balazo, 2015) when it was conquered by Buddhist Burmans and most of the population fled to the nearby Chittagong. With the establishment of British rule, many of the Muslims who had fled Arakan to take shelter in the neighbouring Chittagong, came back--actively encouraged by the British to cultivate the land. The beginning of the Rakhine-Rohingya conflict can be traced to the colonial past to the period of World War II. The Rakhines were one of the few minorities to support the Burman led Burma Independence Army which sided with the Japanese against the British while the Rohingya remained loyal to the British (Gill, 2014). It is interesting to note that in the newly independent state of Myanmar, in 1948, the Rohingya were recognised as citizens of the country under prime minister U Nu (Balazo, 2015) and the Constitution guaranteed them full rights (Green, 2013).

Shortly after independence the Rohingyas started an armed insurgency movement and demanded an independent Muslim state (Gill and Ku, 2014). In this they were supported by the military regime in the neighbouring Bangladesh². General Ne Win's coup d'etat in 1962 was a game changer for all ethnic minorities fighting for their rights. The 1974 Emergency Immigration Act deprived the Rohingyas of their citizenship and was followed by the Operation Naga Min (Dragon King) in 1978 which unleashed a reign of terror on the Rohingyas. 200,000 fled to the neighbouring Bangladesh where 12,000 starved to death because the Bangladesh government refused food aid in a bid to force them back to Arakan (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Most of the Rohingyas were repatriated in 1979 through a treaty between the two countries and Chris

² <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/rohingya-muslims-rakhine-myanmar-bordering-bangladesh/1/259014.html>

Lewa (2009) posits that the 1982 Citizenship Act was a direct result of this to disempower the Rohingya population who had returned. In 1990 Operation Pyi Thaya (prosperous country) was launched and the persecution of Rohingyas led to a second wave of out-migration to Bangladesh. Chris Lewa writes (ibid):

Deprivation of citizenship has served as a key strategy to justify arbitrary treatment and discriminatory policies against the Rohingya. Severe restrictions on their movements are increasingly applied. They are banned from employment in the civil service, including in the education and health sectors. In 1994, the authorities stopped issuing Rohingya children with birth certificates. By the late 1990s, official marriage authorisations were made mandatory. Infringement of these stringent rules can result in long prison sentences. Other coercive measures such as forced labour, arbitrary taxation and confiscation of land, also practised elsewhere in Burma, are imposed on the Rohingya population in a disproportionate manner

Further, Lewa (2009) points out, that the Rohingyas were not issued the colour coded citizenship cards (pink for full citizens, blue for associate citizens and green for naturalised citizens) introduced in 1989. Due to aggressive campaigning from UNHCR, in 1995 the Burmese government issued them the white Temporary Registration Cards which do not mention place of birth and cannot be used to claim citizenship.

The latest incidents of persecution, following the allegation of a few Rohingya men raping a Buddhist Rakhine girl resulted in another mass exodus following violent attacks on them. As Penny Green (2013) points out, these attacks are increasingly fuelled by Islamophobia that is not even sparing non-Rohingya Muslims of Myanmar. Kaman Muslims, for example, who are part of a recognised ethnic group with citizenship rights as well as Muslims in other regions such as Meiktila, Yamethin, Lashio, Zigon and Nattalin have been attacked (ibid). The 969 campaign which proposes to defeat Islamic expansionism in Buddhist Myanmar is a virulent, Islamophobic campaign led by extremist Buddhist monks. Bhikshu Wirathu, a 45 years old monk at the forefront of this movement has said:

We just targeted Bengalis who are terrorising ethnic Rakhine (Buddhists)...We are just preaching to prevent Bengalis entering the country and to stop them insulting our nationalities, language and religion³

Buddhism was made the state religion in 1960 and since the beginning of the military rule in 1962 Muslims have been associated with the colonial past and the country's exploitation at the hands of 'foreigners'. In fact Muslims have not been allowed to run for public offices or be civil servants. And over the years some Muslim cemeteries were destroyed, the number of mosques restricted and many madrassas closed (Green 2013). Green also points out from personal interviews how ingrained Buddhist nationalism is even among pro-democracy human rights activists who had until recently been imprisoned by the Junta.

Faced with the prospect of living their lives in crowded camps, having lost their properties, livelihoods and loved ones, increasingly the Rohingya are now taking to boats to escape

³ <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/afp/130331/religious-radicals-driving-myanmar-unrest-experts>

Myanmar trying to reach South East Asian countries like Malaysia.. A Reuters report⁴ from February 2015 documents how precarious their journeys out of Myanmar are. In Thae Chaung the camp for Rohingyas driven out of Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State, a bamboo hut with internet connection is the place where the community gathers to talk and negotiate with the traffickers and those relatives who have managed to escape to Malaysia. As the report points out, many Rohingyas are ferried to Thailand by the traffickers and then held for exorbitant ransoms ranging from USD 1200-1800 in remote border camps near the Thai-Malaysia border.

The Rohingyas are forced to take to the seas because of increasing hostilities towards them in Bangladesh. In fact, many take to the boats from Bangladesh itself. As Chris Lewa points out neither Myanmar nor Bangladesh have tried to prevent the smuggling of Rohingya people. In fact the Burmese government gave seven year jail sentences for trying to re-enter the country illegally to boats that landed up on the Burmese coast in 2008. She writes:

These maritime movements present a serious challenge in a region where protection mechanisms for asylum seekers are already weak and where there is an ever shrinking space for UNHCR to exercise its mandate. None of the concerned countries has ratified the Refugee Convention nor have they enacted any domestic legislation for the protection of refugees. They identify these movements as the smuggling of economic migrants and are not prepared to view the Rohingya boat people as asylum seekers and to allow UNHCR's involvement. There is no doubt that Rohingya boat people embark on these perilous journeys in order to escape systematic oppression, discrimination and human rights violations, and not only for economic reasons (Lewa 2008)

The borders of Rohingya lives are constantly shrinking in Myanmar--marked as outsiders, aliens, illegal, they have been constructed as the essence of 'Otherness' to Buddhist Myanmar. The Rakhines, an ethnic minority themselves, have now been absorbed into the narrative of the Buddhist and Burman nation state and mobilised against the Rohingyas. As Passi notes:

[N]arratives connected with the institutions of nation, state and territory...are of vital importance. These are typically linked with ontological narratives - stories that actors use to make sense of their lives as members of social collectives and to define who 'we' are. Boundaries between 'us' and 'others' are critical elements in establishing 'us' and excluding 'others'

The narrative of Muslim 'Others', out to destroy the Buddhist country has meant that mobility, reproduction and marriage of the Rohingyas and indeed every aspect of their lives have come to be regulated by the state. In a personal group interview with Rohingya children in a shelter home in Kolkata, I was informed by the girls that the use of mobile phones by the Rohingya in Arakan has to be extremely clandestine because if they are caught communing with the world outside they are immediately jailed and as the girls grimly informed me nobody comes out of the jails in their lifetime. It is as if in trying to define the legitimacy of the rightful citizen, the 'Others' need to be physically and territorially separated. In the words of Bhikshu Wirathu:

⁴ <http://in.reuters.com/article/2015/02/25/myanmar-rohingya-idINKBN0LT2EV20150225>

They will take girls...They will force them to convert religion. All children born to them will be a danger to the country. They will destroy the language as well as the religion

By physically separating and displacing the Rohingya, robbing them of all rights and promoting the Rakhines as the only legitimate citizens of Arakan, the state is mobilising the idea of religious sameness and deploying it to defeat the 'centrifugal otherness' (Passi) of the ethnic differences that has in the past threatened to create a separate Arakan nation.

Manchanda (2010) writing in context of minorities within the nation states of South Asia says that minorities in each nation are treated as proxy-citizens of a neighbouring country and therefore their legitimacy upon claims of citizenship are suspect. The Burman military leadership of Myanmar has successfully established the myth of Rohingyas as illegal Bangladeshi infiltrators thereby robbing them of all entitlements upon the state.

Rohingyas in Bangladesh: Insecure and a Threat to National Security

About 28,000 Rohingyas live in the two UNHCR camps at Kutupalong and Nayapara in Cox's Bazar. An estimated 300,000 live outside the camps in villages or makeshift camps and are unregistered by the Government of Bangladesh or UNHCR. Both the UNHCR and the Government of Bangladesh have stopped registering Rohingyas since 1992. There is increased insecurity and vulnerability of the unregistered Rohingyas following the voters registration verification process in 2007-08 where many unregistered Rohingyas, living in the villages in the Cox's Bazar district had their names struck off the voters list.

In an interview with Barnaby Phillips of Al Jazeera on 27th July 2012, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina repeatedly asserts that it is not the country's problem to deal with the Rohingyas and she cannot intervene because it is unwise to meddle in the internal affairs of another country. She also says that the international community should insist on Myanmar taking back the Rohingyas and not point an accusing finger at Bangladesh. Responding to accusations that the fleeing Rohingyas are forced back by the Bangladeshi border guards she responds that the guards have responded in a humanitarian way and offered money, medicine and food the Rohingyas and the 'persuaded' them to go back. As journalist Subir Bhaumik⁵ points out :

⁵ <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/rohingya-muslims-rakhine-myanmar-bordering-bangladesh/1/259014.html>

Today, Bangladesh's Awami League government sees them as Islamist extremists closer to their arch-rivals, the Jamaat-e-Islami. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has been asked to shut down Rohingya refugee camps in southern Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is becoming increasingly inhospitable to the Rohingyas living there. In July 2014 the Law Minister Syed Anisul Haque announced that Rohingya marriages could no longer be solemnised in the country. This applied to marriage within the community as well as marriage between a Rohingya and a Bangladeshi national--the latter being used by Rohingyas to escape camp life and gain some legitimacy as citizens.

In November 2014 Nigel O Connor of Al Jazeera⁶ reported about the plans of the Government of Bangladesh to intern and repatriate 270,000 undocumented Rohingyas. Al Jazeera also included the 5 pages long Foreign Ministry document dated March 31, 2014, which says 'It has been suggested that a survey/listing of undocumented Myanmar nationals in Bangladesh would be carried out in order to identify them and determine their actual number and location...The listed individuals would be housed in temporary shelters in different suitable locations pending their repatriation to Myanmar through regular diplomatic/consular channels'. As the report points out, there is no indication in the document about what rights the interned Rohingyas would have.

At the same time the Rohingya form a cheap labour source in the region. According to a comprehensive report by the Danish Immigration Services (2011), the Rohingyas in the camps (as well as the unregistered Rohingyas outside the camps) are not allowed to work but they do participate in the informal labour market. In 2009-2010 a number of Rohingyas were arrested and ultimately they were released through the intervention of their employers. In fact, as Al Jazeera reports, this has further alienated the Rohingya from the local population because the Rohingya sell their labour for cheaper.

The Danish Immigration Services(2011) document Government officials constantly harping on 'push' and 'pull' factors that attract Rohingyas to Bangladesh. The District Commissioner of Cox's Bazar is quoted as having said that the opportunity to travel to other countries from Bangladesh is a major factor in drawing the Rohingya to Bangladesh. Inherent in this statement is a denial that the Rohingyas are political asylum seekers and not migrating only due to economic impoverishment. In fact, their political disempowerment in Myanmar is directly linked to their economic impoverishment. The report further quotes various officials of international non governmental organisations who posit that the Government of Bangladesh suspended the policy of resettling the Rohingyas to countries abroad through the UNHCR because they regarded it as a major reason 'attracting' Rohingyas to the country. The Al Jazeera report (2014) also points out that by neglecting the Rohingyas in Bangladesh in order to discourage more refugee influx from Myanmar the government themselves have created a population without access to healthcare, education, employment and basic means of survival.

⁶<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/11/26/bangladesh-proposesinterningrepatriatingupto270krohingyatomyanma.html>

Many academic articles by Bangladeshi scholars on the Rohingya 'problem' looks at the situation from an internal security perspective. Utpala Rahman (2010) mentions the proximity of the Rohingyas to various Islamist organisations and indicates that the group is prone to radicalisation:

The Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar District are fertile ground for recruitment by Islamic militants.

Further, the Rohingyas are involved in drugs and arms smuggling from Myanmar. Rohingyas are characterised as threatening the moral and economic fibre of Bangladeshi society:

[A]ntisocial activities are increasing among the unregistered Rohingya refugee community. The social vices in the Rohingya community: commercial sexual exploitation, fake marriages, fake proposal of work, and the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (STI) threaten the local social life and damage the stability of the Bangladesh-Myanmar border region...Undocumented Rohingya refugees use Bangladesh passport to travel abroad...Because Bangladesh depends on overseas remittance for its foreign currency reserve, the decline of the labor market could damage the country's economic stability

Thus, Rohingyas become characterised as a 'problem', a figurative and metaphorical disease carrier that literally infects Bangladesh (with sexually transmitted disease, for instance) and metaphorically infects the country by strengthening the cause of Islamist fundamentalism. Meghna Guhathakurta (2007) writes:

A new security era has emerged in the world after 9/11 and one in which the southern states[such as Bangladesh] have been caught up as pawns in the war against terrorism. Much of the dominant security concerns of these states centre around following policies of counter-terrorism, which entail adopting strong vigilante technologies and techniques that bolster and reinvent dominant cartographic anxieties of the state. Needless to mention these technologies, sometimes derived directly for western economies fail to combat actual acts of terrorism and only manages to strengthen a xenophobia that ushers in a new security regime. Thus in a period of fluid population movements, states are compelled to engage with reinvented phobias of the cold-war instead of taking up creative policies of engagement.

Bangladeshi scholars like Rahman (2010), Azad and Jasmin (2013) and Parnini (2013) focus on how the Rohingyas are a threat to security and national interest of Bangladesh and also how the influx of Rohingyas is damaging strategic bi-lateral relations with Myanmar. In fact, Rahman recommends ensuring better educational and socio-economic opportunities for the Rohingyas-- not because they are political asylum seekers or facing a humanitarian crisis, but precisely because their impoverishment is seen as the destabilising factor in the border region:

If the situation of Rohingya Muslims is not addressed quickly, with an emphasis on justice and rights, the refugee camps can easily become a thriving breeding ground for terrorism and bring trouble for Bangladesh and the region.

There does not seem to be a will to improve the lot of the Rohingyas in any way from the Government of Bangladesh, however. As a Guardian report from 2012⁷ points out, the NGO Affairs Bureau in Dhaka has a policy of not approving plans for educational and health facility in the Cox's Bazar district,, even when it benefits local, non-refugee population. In fact, in 2011 the government rejected a \$33 million joint initiative with UN to develop the region with special focus on health and education.

Ethnographic researches conducted with the Rohingyas, open up a new way of looking at their problems beyond 'security' and 'protracted refugee problem' which have seemingly become buzzwords while referring to the Rohingya in Bangladesh. Kazi Fehmida Farzana's 2011 article describes and analyses the 'cultural artifacts' namely songs and paintings used by the Rohingyas residing in Teknaf. Farzana argues that these both help create a sense of community, and maintaining a collective memory of 'home' and are also a way of resisting dominant codes rewriting the Rohingyas as disempowered, impoverished nowhere people. Following Scott's 1985 work *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Farzana argues that these songs and paintings are a way of registering protest against the mistreatment and oppression that they have faced in both Myanmar and Bangladesh and in a context where other means of resisting is impossible.

Rohingyas in India: Victims or Terrorists?

"We cannot dream of living. Survival is our only tool and we will cling to it - even if we have to cross borders,"⁸

Subir Bhaumik⁹ points out that the spotlight on Rohingyas and their plight came to into sharp focus for the India when the coast guards rescued a boatload of 109 Rohingyas in Northern Andaman in March 2013. Following the new wave of persecution on Rohingyas from 2012 in Arakan, more and more of them tried to take the boat out to the open seas in search of a better future in South East Asia. The Thai authorities are particularly hostile towards these boat people going as far as taking out the engines of intercepted boats and pushing them out to the open seas without food or water supplies.

In March 2014, *Anandabazar Patrika*--a widely circulated Bengali daily--published a report on the increasing numbers of Rohingyas in jails in West Bengal. The report quotes sources in the Home Ministry who have expressed concern at the large numbers of 'illegal infiltrators' from the Rohingya community. A similar report from the same month from *The Hindu* claims that there

⁷ <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2012/jun/29/burma-rohingya-refugees-bangladesh>

⁸ <http://indiatgether.org/rohingya-human-rights>

⁹ <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/rohingya-muslims-rakhine-myanmar-bordering-bangladesh/1/259014.html>

are over 1000 Rohingya prisoners in the jails of West Bengal. Both the reports express concern that these numbers are an indication of the numbers of Rohingyas who are managing to cross border without getting caught and that this has serious implications for the internal security of the country. The *Anandabazar* report ends by reminding the readers of the Bodh Gaya blasts and the 'Rohingya connection' to the blasts.

In fact since 2014, apart from three editorials criticising the violence unleashed upon the Rohingya by the Buddhists¹⁰, the promise of granting citizenship to the Rohingyas¹¹ and the unlikelihood of the situation being favourable for the Rohingyas under the present President Thein Sein¹², the reports from *Anandabazar* that mention Rohingyas have only highlighted the Rohingya issue being a cause of the blasts as Bodh Gaya, their large scale infiltration across the border and since November 2014, have exclusively centred around the Khagragarh blast in Bardhaman and Rohingya mastermind allegedly behind it.

The discourse on Rohingyas in India, following the Burdwan blast in November 2014, has followed the predictable course of 'Muslim infiltrators' destroying Hindu nation in the steps of the earlier discourse of Bangladeshi infiltrators destroying national integrity. At the same time there has been many articles in both Indian media and the international press on Rohingyas living in settlements in Delhi, Jammu and Hyderabad, mostly sympathetically portraying these beleaguered people. In Hyderabad Islamic charitable organisations and philanthropic individuals, including a local MLA have come forward to help the Rohingyas. A report from *Indiatogether* states that in 2012 during Ramzan a lot of donations had poured in. A hefty amount of money had also come from Iranian government. In Delhi, as in Hyderabad, the land where the Rohingya have been allowed to settle belong to Muslim charitable organisations-- Zakat Foundation near Madanpur Khadar (Sanlaap)--or Muslim individuals¹³ as in the case of Hyderabad. This can further fuel the paranoia about Muslim 'others' out to destroy the Hindu nationhood.

Following the Burdwan blast, Hyderabad Rohingya encampments have experienced increased surveillance from the police and harassment as report in *DNA*¹⁴ and *Times of India*¹⁵ reveal. Passi (1998) points out that 'the state-centred naturalization of space is produced and reproduced, and how the exclusions and inclusions between "We" and "Them" that it implies are

¹⁰<http://www.anandabazar.com/editorial/%E0%A6%B8-%E0%A6%96-%E0%A6%AF-%E0%A6%97-%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%A6-%E0%A6%AA%E0%A6%9F-1.43751>

¹¹ <http://www.anandabazar.com/editorial/%E0%A6%B8-%E0%A6%9A%E0%A6%A8-1.71907>

¹²<http://www.anandabazar.com/editorial/%E0%A6%B8-%E0%A6%AC-%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%A4%E0%A6%A8-%E0%A6%A4-%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%AB-%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%AC-%E0%A6%95-1.48508>

¹³<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/01/rohingya-exiles-struggle-survive-india-201416143243337187.html>

¹⁴<http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-rohingya-muslim-refugees-in-hyderabad-are-under-surveillance-say-police-2047456>

¹⁵<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Khalids-arrest-sparks-off-debate-on-Rohingyas-in-India/articleshow/45220794.cms>

historically constructed and shaped in relation to power, various events, episodes and struggles'. The partition of 1947 and the logic of minorities being proxy citizens of neighbouring countries have constructed economic migrants as well as political asylum seekers crossing the eastern borders of India-Bangladesh as suspect and a threat to security. Their insecurity is subsumed within the overarching framework of national security. A *Reuters*¹⁶ report from September 2014 states:

New Delhi has twice blocked draft laws on refugee recognition. Because of its porous borders, often hostile neighbors and external militancy, it wants a free hand to regulate the entry of foreigners without being tied down by any legal obligation, analysts said.

India's porous border with Nepal and the need for strict policing across the Bangladesh also reveals that the subject of state scrutiny are Muslim aliens. With the discourse of securitisation the threat of illegal Muslim infiltrator increasingly looms large on the nation's psyche. *The Hindu*¹⁷ reports that on 17 December, 2014 the Supreme Court of India expressed concern over the insecure border with Bangladesh:

'We are at a loss to understand why 67 years after independence the eastern border is left porous. We have been reliably informed that the entire western border with Pakistan, 3300 km long, is not only properly fenced, but properly manned as well, and is not porous at any point,' a Bench of Justices Ranjan Gogoi and Rohinton F. Nariman said in a 70-page judgment.

Expressing concern at the large influx of illegal migrants from Bangladesh, Justice Nariman noted that the 'porous border,' with not even a proper fencing, risks the lives of citizens of the border States, including Assam.

Sanlaap, an NGO working with trafficked women and children, reports that Rohingya children started coming into their shelter homes in large numbers since 2012 and at one point they were providing shelter to over 40 children, most of them girls. The girls come to Sanlaap through the state Child Welfare Committee. Usually large groups of Rohingya, being smuggled across the borders are captured and sent to Correctional Homes under the Foreigners Act of India. Men, women and children are separated and the children end up in shelter homes. Sanlaap conducted a study in the Rohingya settlements in Jammu and Delhi as more and more relatives came to the shelter from settlements in these two states, claiming the children as their wards. Their reports from the settlements talk about a different kind of insecurity for the Rohingya, particularly the children going back from the shelter to be reunited with their families--the unsanitary condition of the camps, along with the lack of access to basic health care, sanitation, clean water besides education and means of employment, means that the children face malnourishment, all kinds of physical unsafety and, especially the girls are prone to early marriage and in some cases trafficking.

¹⁶<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/15/us-foundation-stateless-india-rohingya-idUSKBN0HA07F20140915>

¹⁷ <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/sc-why-is-eastern-border-still-porous/article6702655.ece>

In an interview with seven minor girls residing in the Sanlaap Shelter Home in Kolkata, the ideas of security and insecurity are thrown in sharp contrast. On the one hand, in their imagination their native villages in Arakan are the idyllic places where they had freedom to roam, swam in lakes, took the buffaloes to the field and where the food is without compare to the stuff that gets dished up here. On the other hand the idea of Jammu--this mythical place where everything will become alright--has also taken a hold of them. In her 1943 essay 'We Refugees' Hannah Arendt writes about the ubiquitous Mr Cohn, the prototype of a stateless German Jew in Europe who tries to adapt to every new country by becoming the model, patriotic citizen but is suspect everywhere and denied citizenship because of his Jewishness which he tries so much to hide. The Rohingya girls, with their slightly accented Bangla and refusal, at least initially to talk in their mother tongue and constantly trying to fit in with what they imagined to be my narrative as an Indian reminded me strongly of Mr. Cohn. They refuse to criticise their Indian shelter mates instead choosing to focus on the Bangladeshi girls who make their lives miserable and treat them as outcasts. When I ask about the choice of their destination as they fled with their families and neighbours from Arakan and ask them if their families ever considered going to Pakistan, one of the girls responds uncertainly: 'But isn't Pakistan an enemy of Hindustan'? In course of the three hours long interview the girls begin to open up to me, teaching me words in the Rohingya language and then singing songs for me. I was recording their conversation in a voice recorder and eager to listen to themselves they started by first displaying their knowledge of English and Bangla nursery rhymes that they have learnt in course of their classes at the shelter and eventually a Rohingya love song followed by a song which called for Rohingya brothers to come together across nations. As they exhausted their repertoires they turned towards reciting Koranic verses learnt at madrasas that they attended in Arakan. After reciting a verse from the Koran--whose meaning they could not recall--one of the girls asked me whether I was Muslim. She looks crestfallen when I said that I was not. Perhaps having the relative freedom of being able to express themselves freely without being ridiculed about their strange language and customs, they had tried to find in me a kindred soul and the closest approximation that they could imagine would be a sympathetic Muslim. In a world where they have only faced rejection as Rohingyas, as girls brought up in conservative social environments where boys are allowed to venture out and watch Bollywood films but not girls, as illegal trespassers in a country, as alien by the girls in their shelter homes, it must be difficult for them to imagine kindness outside the family. Living in a shelter forcibly separated from their families in jails, they only dreamt of Jammu where they would be reunited with their families. The better health, education, clothing and shelter that the staff at Sanlaap rued were conspicuously absent in the Rohingya settlements did not at the moment hold any attraction for them. I asked them about their leisure and they all named their favourite television serials, their favourite actors and so on. This conversation followed closely on the heels of the revelation that it was 'gunah' for girls to wear make-up, or watch Bollywood films back in Arakan. I asked them if they will not miss this when they went to Jammu. They uniformly replied that they would not and they knew it was gunah but it was okay to watch television at the shelter because they are suffering so much right now. They will never miss any such worldly entertainments once back with their families in Jammu. While these assertions were partly performed for my benefit to show their loyalty to their families, it is also true that these girls viewed their families as their only refuge and shelter. Being together as a family in a world which only displayed hatred and indifference towards them

seemed important beyond anything. It remains to be seen how they cope with the harsh realities of life in the settlement camps of Jammu.

Conclusion

Among the most well known writings on statelessness are Hannah Arendt's works written in context of the statelessness and displacement of the German Jews. In her 1943 essay 'We Refugees' she writes:

We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings. We left our relatives in Polish ghettos and our best friends have been killed in concentration camps, and that means the rupture of our private lives.

The words still ring true, applicable to persecuted, stateless people across the world. Efforts to curb statelessness in the post World War II period by international covenants have failed as the population of stateless and insecure continue to grow. Arendt writes that ultimately the life of a stateless non-citizen is reduced to the 'abstract nakedness of being human' (Arendt 1951) or what Agamben (1998) calls the 'bare life'. The thesis behind the reduction to just biological bare life is that the political voice and opinion of the people are taken away. Interpreting Arendt's work in context of asylum seekers to Netherlands, Borren (2008) writes that citizenship is the basis on which we are granted human rights and it is almost impossible for a sovereign nation-state to grant the human rights to a non-citizen. Civil and political rights in today's world of nation states are premised on citizenship, nationality and nativity (ibid). Butler in her essay on 'Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation' writes:

[E]veryone is precarious, and this follows from our social existence as bodily beings who depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance and who, therefore, are at risk of statelessness, homelessness, and destitution under unjust and unequal political conditions...Whether explicitly stated or not, every political effort to manage populations involves a tactical distribution of precarity, more often than not articulated through an unequal distribution of precarity, one that depends on dominant norms regarding whose life is grievable and worth protecting and whose life is ungrievable, or marginally or episodically grievable...and thus less worthy of protection and sustenance

Interpreting Arendt's work, particularly in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Butler expounds that our precarity as humans leads to interdependency and the only way to avoid genocide is to not choose who we cohabit in this world with:

We might think that interdependency is a happy or promising notion, but it is often the condition for territorial wars and forms of state violence...[U]nwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation are preconditions of our political existence, the basis of [Arendt's] critique of nationalism...[F]rom unchosen

cohabitation, Arendt derives notions of universality and equality that commit us to institutions that seek to sustain human lives without regarding some part of the population as socially dead, as redundant, or as intrinsically unworthy of life and therefore ungrievable.

To translate such a philosophy into a viable policy to reverse genocidal violence in Arakan, and the rest of the world, is a challenge facing us all.

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