The Liminality of Rohingyas and Challenges to their Repatriation: An Analysis in the Context of Bangladesh

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Abstract: As refugees go through a continuous transformation in their way of movement they have to face a wave of rapid social change and their identity is also challenged and formed throughout the departure from their own country of residence, the transit, the settlement and until they are repatriated. Rohingya refugees who have been bound to take refuge in Bangladesh including some other nearby countries from Myanmar are those conglomeration of people who have a disastrous violent cognitive memory resulted from long term economically and politically driven religious conflict in their own country. Theoretically and methodologically anthropology plays one of the leading roles in studying refugee. This paper following qualitative research methods based on secondary data attempts to focus on the historical background of 'Rohingya Refugee Crisis' and to explore the present condition of Rohingyas in Bangladesh. This paper sorts out the possibilities of Rohingya repatriation considering the challenges observed regarding the repatriation attempts taken till now. The result of the study shows that the Rohingya refugee is a very long term crisis the solution to which is prolonging day by day.

Keywords : *Rohingya, Refugee, Liminality, Repatriation.*

Introduction

The number of globally displaced people is increasing in a rapid speed and at the end of the year 2018, approximately 70.8 million people have been forcibly displaced due to different kinds of violence against them and the number is the highest in comparison to any previous record. Among the total forcibly displaced people 25.9 million are refugees. 67% of all refugees come from only five countries and among which Myanmar is placed fourth as an origin country. The common tendency among 4 out of every 5 refugees is to flee and take refuge in their neighbouring countries. Bangladesh receiving the highest number of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar is in the place of 8th as the host country of refugees (UNHCR Global Trends 2-16). Rohingyas an ethno linguistic and religious minority of Myanmar instead of living more than two centuries in Myanmar are now stateless and living in Bangladesh and other neighbouring countries as refugees and as illegal migrants.

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The several decades long history of Rohingya persecution in their own country and the instability and struggle for existence in the country of asylum have made the Rohingya refugee crisis as one of the most discussed as well as controversial issue in national and international arena. Bangladesh as the receiver of the highest number of Rohingya refugees, welcomed them from the very beginning. After the largest Rohingya influx in 2017, Bangladesh with the support of international aid continuing their shelter and services to the Rohingyas. But recently the gradual reduction of international aid support as well as the socio-economic, ecological and political impact of such huge number of refugees on the local and national level have made the situation worse. Due to the consecutive failure of Rohingya repatriation to their own country, they are passing a state of liminality, they are stateless, neither they belong to Myanmar nor they belong to Bangladesh or any other country.

Justifications of the Study

The Rohingya migration in Bangladesh was started in 1970 but due to state operated persecution and discrimination the mass flight took place in the year 1978 and later on 1991-1992. Across the years these migrated people were officially repatriated with the mediation of United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) though their situation was unchanged in Myanmar and many of them returned Bangladesh again. The 2012 riot between Rohingya and Buddhist in Rakhine pushed 50,000 Rohingyas to Bangladesh (Uddin 63). More recently from 25 August 2017 Bangladesh has experienced a huge influx of Rohingya refugees due to a Rohingya insurgent attack on police post in Myanmar and the resulting instant brutality against the Muslim minority through burning home, destroying properties, mass execution and rape (Beech par. 3) and according to ISCG Situation Report, September 2019 there are 914,998 Rohingya Refugees in Cox's Bazar among whom 905,822 refugees have been identified to stay in camps regarding the RRRC-UNHCR Registration Exercise including the 34,172 registered before 31 August 2017 and the 9,174 refugees are staying in host communities of Ukhiya/TeknafUpazillas (1). Bangladesh though not a signatory country of 1951 Refugee Convention has provided shelter to such a large number of refugees but the inertness and failure of repatriation is enlarging the crisis for both Rohingyas as a liminal community and Bangladesh as a host country with limited resources. Though there is a remarkable support from UNHCR and associated organizations, the long term socio-economic, political and ecological impact on the host community and the sufferings of the refugees cannot be ignored at all. The present paper will focus on these issues from an anthropological perspective through analyzing the background of Rohingya refugee crisis, their present situation and their future uncertainty regarding repatriation.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of the present paper is to analyse the current Rohingya refugee crisis with an emphasis on the future possibilities of solution focusing on the following specific objectives:

- To focus on the historical background of 'Rohingya Refugee Crisis',
- To explore the present condition of Rohingyas in Bangladesh as a liminal entity,
- To sort out the possibilities of Rohingya repatriation considering the challenges regarding the attempts taken till now.

Research Methodology

This paper is based on qualitative data collected from secondary sources. Relevant books and articles have been reviewed to make a basic idea of the research and newspapers, different websites and published reports have been used to get the up to date information.

Theoretical Framework

As the refugees go through a "well-founded fear" of persecution in their home countries and after facing this while they take the decision to escape and flight and after finally arriving in the camp they have to go through severe tension.Refugees have to undergo through a violent rite of separation from their country of origin and unless or until they can be incorporated or integrated into the host country or returned to their origin country, they pass transition period. Victor Turner's theory of 'liminality' and 'communitas' can be applied to analyse the situation of Rohingya refugees. Turner takes the symbolism of 'liminality' from Arnold Van Gennep who wrote 'the life of an individual is a series of passages from one age to another' (3). In his study 'The Rites of Passage' Gennep defined *rites de passage* as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" which was taken by Turner in his book 'The Ritual Process' in the analysis of symbolism of 'liminality'. The rites of passages are where all the rituals consists of three phases, rites of separation, the rite of transition and the rites of incorporation. Turner explains the second stage of liminality as an ambiguous situation where the person or group going through the liminal period belong neither here or neither there. They stay in a betwixt and between situation arranged by law, custom, convention and ceremonial. He compared the "liminality" asserting that "liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness and to an eclipse of the sun or moon" (95). He showed that the liminal entities or beings belonging to an ambiguous situation have no status, property or insignia. They have been reduced or ground down to a uniform condition and egalitarianism. Any distinction based on rank or status disappear which make them a homogenous group. Turner presented the idea of "communitas" as similar as the position of liminal entities. Showing a dualistic model of social life where in one side there is society which is 'structured, differentiated and often hierarchical system of politico legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of "more" or "less". The second which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentary structured and relatively undifferentiated "comitas", community or even communion of equal individuals.

Rohingya refugees who have been forcefully displaced from their own country and bound to leave their place of birth through a rite of separation, moved to neighboring countries to save their lives and going through a transition phase where their identity is very ambiguous as they are in a condition of uncertainty as stateless people whether they will be able to return to their homeland through a safe and dignified repatriation, or be incorporated into the first country of asylum or in a third country.

Literature Review

Schechter, Jim (2000) in the article "Anthropological Theory and Fieldwork: Problem Solving Tools for Forced Migration Issues" and Lewellen, Ted C. (2002) in the chapter nine titled as "Refugees: The Anthropology of Forced Migration" of his book "The Anthropology of Globalization: Cultural Anthropology Enters the 21st Century" show that the social scientific interest regarding displacement and relief programme was occurring since 1960 while the term 'refugee' was applied to French Protestants of the 17th century. Later on with the huge displacement of people during World War I and II, the idea of present refugee concept and the international policy and law to protect refugees was emerged. As anthropological interest was based on communities of well-defined cultural boundaries the nature of refugees as a liminal community without almost no social structure was not in anthropologists' interest. The establishment of the Committee on Refugees and Immigration (CORI) in 1988 by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) established the study of refugee as an anthropological sub-discipline. Both showed refugees as liminal entities. Through repatriation the liminality of the refugees can come to an end. Lewellen focused on the gender aspect of forced migration where men and women face different experiences as refugees, women become more victimized than men. Forced migration has a deep impact on family, kinship and gender roles due to the uncertainty and temporality of status.

Uddin, Nasir (2015) in his research article entitled "State of Stateless People: The Plight of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh" has focused on the history of the Rohingyas status shift. The Rohingyas who are 25% of the total population of Myanmar inhibiting in the Rakhine state (Arakan) went through many ups and downs. This article shows that instead of tracing their citizenship to Myanmar, the Rohingyas are now belonging to no state. Due to various political incidences Rohingyas have become stateless and they have bound to take refuge hood after experiencing brutality in Myanmar and forcefully migrated to Bangladesh and inspite of not being a signatory of 1951 Refugee Convention Bangladesh state provided them basic human needs facilities. But such a large number of population and their long term stay in Bangladesh where resources are scarce it is challenging to meet their basic needs. Besides there is a big impact on local people and resources, negative impact on environment. There is also incidence of criminal activities by Rohingyas. This article is a good analysis on the relation between forcefully migrated Rohingya refugees, the Bangladesh state as a host country and the local people of

those areas where the Rohingya camps have been established. As the research is based on the fieldwork till 2012, further study of recent years can enrich and update the plight of stateless Rohingya people.

Wolf, Dr. Siegfried O. (2017) in his paper entitled "Genocide, exodus and exploitation for jihad: The urgent need to address the Rohingya crisis" shows Rohingya crisis as the largest mass forced migration in the South-East Asia region which was resulted from the long historical trajectories of conflict in Myanmar which was mainly religious but driven by political and economic interest. Providing a historical background on the Rohingya issue this paper argues that it is threatening the regional peace, stability and internal security. As the crisis has a strong religious background the Rohingya refugees are getting engaged with terrorism and also they are being used by the terrorist groups for their own interest.

The literature discussed here have focused on the theoretical perspective of the anthropological view on the refugee as well as specifically the Rohingya refugees situation in Bangladesh till the year 2017. As the largest Rohingya influx in Bangladesh was occurred after 25th August 2017, the present study could be a unique one focusing on the more contemporary issues regarding the current situation of Rohingyas in Bangladesh and the possibilities and challenges to their repatriation.

The Tragic World of Rohingya Refugees in a State of Liminality

Lewellen opines that the understanding of refugees will be misleading if they have been viewed as having once a stable position in a society and culture which has been suddenly disturbed but will be solved soon. The reality is refugees have to experience the unstable situation for several times even in-country displacement before they have finally become cross border refugees and take shelter into refugee camps and throughout this process they have to see themselves in new identity formation and situation regarding legal, cultural and material context (174). The situation of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is nothing different than that. Their contested ethnic identity was resulted from a historical trajectories where the British colonial rule, then the incidence of World War II, the military regime and their cultural policy of 'Burmanisation', Buddhist fundamentalism, economic conflict over resources and opportunities and to some extent biased reporting by international media made the Rohingyas stateless after a decade of their sufferings in their own country. The cruelties against Rohingyas was often termed as 'ethnic cleansing' and 'genocide' (Wolf 2-3).

Forced Displacement and the Stateless Rohingya

The UNHCR Global Trends 2018 shows that in the year 2018, 25 people were forced to flee in each minute worldwide among which there are refugees, those who are internally displaced or returned to their home, people seeking asylum and people who have become stateless. This report also shows that the number of people forcibly displaced are almost 70.8 million at the end of the year 2018 which is the highest in comparison to previous all years. The reasons behind this displacement are various

such as persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations. Among all the displaced people (70.8 million), 25.9 million are refugees and the number of refugees has become almost double that of 2012 and 67% of all the refugees are coming from only five countries and these are Syrian Arab Republic (6.7 million), Afganistan (2.7 million), Myanmar (1.1 million) and Somalia (0.9 million). A common tendency among the forcibly displaced people is to flee to the nearby areas/region/country and in the case of Rohingya refugees of Myanmar (the fourth largest group by country of origin) there is no exception. As the nearby areas most of the Rohingyas have taken refuge to the following countries:

Origin Country	Host Country	Number of Hosted Refugees
Myanmar	Bangladesh	9,06,600
	Malaysia	1,14,200
	Thailand	97,600
	India	18,800

Source: UNHCR Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018 (2-15)

Bangladesh though not a signatory of 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, hosting such a large number of refugees for a long time.

Historical Background of 'Rohingya Refugee Crisis

The history of Rohingya identity is very contested. The arrival of Islam in Myanmar during seventh century and the intermingling of the immigrants with local people, the arrival of migrants from Indian sub-continent specially from Bengal during British colonial rule contributed to the rapid increase of Muslim in Arakan. Across time the relation between the Rakhine Buddhists and Arakanese Muslims was started to change and in 1940 they observed some violent conflict, during World War II, the Imperial Japanese Army took the side of Arakan Buddhists while the Rohingyas with the British fought against the Japanese and also acted some massacres against the Buddhists which presented the Rohingyas as anti-national. This incidence provided a long lasting impact on the Muslim-Buddhist relationship as well as state policies. Off course after the independence of Myanmar in 1948 and before the military regime of Ne Win in 1962 the Rohingyas received National Registration Cards and voting power and their situation was improved (Wolf 7-8).

But in 1962 with the military regime of Ne Win all Rohingya Muslims' were banned from all socio-cultural and economic posts, activities and opportunities and they were suppressed and bound to leave Myanmar finally as a result of "Operation Dragon" in 1978. Approximately 300,000 Rohingyas forcefully migrated to Bangladesh who later on returned to Myanmar in 1979 but then were identified as outsiders. The 1982's Myanmar Citizenship Law finally declared theRohingyas as stateless conferring the citizenship of Government of Myanmar enlisted 135 nationalities except the Rohingyas. The denial of citizenship with terrible living conditions, forced labour, appropriation of land and property, social, economic and cultural

discrimination and repression, communal riot compelled the Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh specifically the Chattogram region where they found linguistic and religious similarity. In the year 1991-1992 another 250,000 Rohingyas again migrated to Bangladesh. Though UNHCR mediation arranged repatriation and many Rohingyas retuned to Myanmar but returned to Bangladesh again due to unchanged living condition in Myanmar. The 2012 riot drove 50,000 Rohingyas to migrate to Bangladesh again (Uddin 63-67).

The latest influx of Rohingyas on 25 August 2017 has crossed all the previous record of migration and as of September 2019 a total number of 914,998 Rohingya refugees are residing in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (ISCG Situation Report, pp. 1).

Present Situation of Rohingya Refugees

As stateless people the Rohingya refugees are going through a liminal state where they have no citizenship right in Myanmar and in Bangladesh. They have to stay in refugee camps which are administered by strict surveillance. A refugee camp can never provide the same feeling of being in home while the possibility of returning home in Myanmar is a far reaching dream. In such a condition the only expectation of the Rohingya refugees is to receive the basic necessities as well as safety and security in the camp. According to Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG)'s report on September 2019 there are 914,998 Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh at present among whom 905,822 refugees are staying in different camps reported by RRRC-UNHCR Registration Exercise and the other 9,176 refugees are living within the host communities of Teknaf/UkhiyaUpazillas according to UNHCR. The Joint Response Plan 2019 estimated an amount of USD 920.5M to meet the need of food security, protection, education, nutrition, shelter and NFI, health, WASH, CwC, site management, logistics and ETS among which they have received USD 488M which is only 53% of the total amount required (1).

The proper management of such a large influx of refugees is challenging not only for the refugees but also it has a deep impact on the host community. The Rohingya refugee situation are affecting the local host community from social, cultural, economic and legal perspectives as well as the continuous failure of repatriation putting unprecedented impact on existing services and facilities. Different media reports show that instead of huge national and international that was provided till now, recently the amount has been started to decrease. The refugee people are creating pressure on local job market through providing services in a very lower wage, getting involved in many anti-social activities and disputes with local people, refugees are becoming victims of trafficking, smuggling and also they have been used for economic and political gain.

TRT World news shows that according to the Global Report on Food Security both the Rohingya refugees and the host community are suffering from food scarcity. The host community's cropland was occupied by the refugees while due to food scarcity many refugees are forced in crimes to manage food (par. 6-13).

Victoria Milko presenting the scenario of Rohingya camps as a very densely populated area where access to services, basic necessities are limited. The failure of repatriation process is increasing the problem. As the camps are treated as a temporary shelter sanctioning the opportunity to education, security, refugee status, better access to secondary healthcare and employment all are considered on a short term basis. The children are not getting proper education, children and women are becoming the victims of trafficking, there is limited access to dispute resolution system. The local and international NGOs are working but the proper communication with the refugees are not very satisfactory which are creating growing frustration among them (par. 6-33). On the other hand many NGO's working in Rohingya camps were accused of misdeeds and financing and instigating anti-repatriation campaign and they were banned from doing any further activities (The Daily Star, par. 1 & Dhaka Tribune, par. 1)

The unplanned Rohingya settlement is threatening the ecological balance of Cox's Bazar. Rohingyas are clearing the forest and cutting the hills and establishing settlement there which is destroying the natural equilibrium (The Daily Star, par. 1, 2). As a result Bangladesh Government was planning to shift a portion of Rohingya refugees to Bashan Char Island. Though it was appreciated by United Nations stating that a voluntary relocation on Bashan Char will decrease an extra pressure on the overcrowded camps in Cox's Bazar (UNHCR Operational Update 2019, 2). But the Rohingyas are not interested to go there.

The historical trajectories of Rohingya crisis showed that the Rohingya refugees have gone through a subsequent events of trauma and its impact is continuing till now. As the latest crisis of vast Rohingya migration was resulted from such events which can be identified as ethnic cleansing which have bound to move the Rohingyas to neighboring countries such as Bangladesh, Malaysia, India and Thailand, the Rohingya crisis has been turned to a security issue for the regional government as well as for the local communities of the countries involved here. Different continuing security issues arising regarding the internal security and also to international relations, Rohingya refugees has been identified as a so-called 'non-traditional security threat' (Wolf 14).

At the 74th General Assembly of United Nations held in New York, just after the second anniversary of latest flow of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, Prime minister of Bangladesh, expressing her deep concern warned and requested the international community to realize that the Rohingya crisis has become un-tenable in its third year and instead of all efforts the crisis has been turned to a regional threat going beyond the Rohingya camps (bdnews24.com, par. 2, 5). The Prime minister also discussed regarding the risk of regional stability and peace due to forced displacement of Rohingyas from Myanmar in an official talk between Bangladesh and South Korea and urged South Korea to work for a peaceful and early solution to Rohingya refugee crisis (The Daily Star, par. 1, 2).

Repatriation of Rohingya Refugees

According to UNHCR definition, if 25,000 or more refugees identified or originated as or from the same nationality have to stay in exile hosted by a country for consecutive five years or more, such situation can be defined as a protracted refugee situation. Though such kind of definition is contested due to constantly changing refugee situation. At the end of the year 2018, 78% of all the refugees were observed to be in a protracted refugee situation (UNHCR Global Trends 22).

The Rohingya refugees' arrival history in Bangladesh described above reflects that though the main Rohingya influx in Bangladesh was started in August 2017, from the previous 40 years, a large number of Rohingyas have been residing in Bangladesh either in camp or in other accommodation. So, undoubtedly the Rohingya situation in Bangladesh can be defined as a protracted refugee situation.

In such a protracted refugee situation implementation of repatriation as a durable solution becomes more challenging.

One of the central tasks of UNHCR is to ensure the re-establishment of the refugees' lives with dignity and safety through formal agreements between UNHCR, governments (of host and/or home country) and other organizations. UNHCR works for the purpose of achieving any one among the following three solutions regarding the refugee crisis:

1. First and foremost UNHCR attempts to ensure voluntary repatriation to the home country;

2. Secondly arranging integration of the refugees in the country of first asylum (host country);

3. And finally when both first and second attempt fail to achieve UNHCR works to relocate the refugees in a third country of asylum.

Fundamental to all the attempts mentioned above is the guarantee of having the right of not being forced to return to the escaped country or any new country of asylum (Lewellen 176, UNHCR Global Trends 27).

So the only possible way of starting Rohingya repatriation to Myanmar is ensuring a conducive environment (dignity with proper safety and security and ensuring their land and property rights with the guaranty of their citizenship in Myanmar) there for the returnee refugees in Rakhine. But the consecutive failure of repatriation attempt starting from the January, 2018, then 15 November 2018 and the latest attempt of 22August 2019 show no hope of a successful Rohingya repatriation. Even the UN team has expressed their fear that Myanmar has failed to ensure the conducive environment for Rohingyas which has made the possibility of repatriation far away.

Media reports on Rohingya repatriation show that regarding the dialogue between Myanmar and Bangladesh in mediation of UN and other organizations there was created a possibility of repatriation on 23 January and second time on November 2018, none of which found light. Victoria Milko shows that 22 August 2019 was

declared as the third probable date for Rohingya repatriation by Myanmar where approximately 3,540Rohingyas were expected to return to their home country. But finally this attempt was also went in vein as the Rohingyas expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the conditions set by Myanmar government specially on their identity verification process and their doubt on the assurance of safety, security and getting back their lost land and property (par.38-41). At gun point the Rohingyas are forced to accept NVC (National Verification Card) which will categorize them as foreigners. This process is nothing but an attempt to destroy the Rohingya identity stripping them of being citizen of Myanmar and receiving the basic rights Naing, par. 1-3)

Importance and Results

Myanmar is the fourth as source country of refugee and Bangladesh is eighth as host country (UNHCR Global Trends 15). The Rohingyarefugee crisis is one of the most important issue both nationally and internationally which requires a speedy durable solution. The current situation affecting not only the Rohingyas but also Bangladesh as well the regional peace and stability.Analysing the information provided above the following results can be drawn:

- The Rohingya crisis is a very long term crisis which is prolonging day by day.

- Bangladesh as a country with dense population and scarce resources provided a remarkable service through giving shelter and other basic human needs to the Rohingya refugees on the ground of humanitarian viewinspite of not being a signatory country of 1951 Refugee Convention.

- In such a condition, the only durable solution of Rohingya crisis is Myanmar to be agreed to return back the Rohingyas with dignity and off course ensuring their safety and security.

- Repatriation to third country is more challenging as from the beginning of the Rohingya inflow, except Bangladesh and in a very limited way Malaysia, Thailand, India, no other countries showed their interest to provide shelter to the forcedly displaced Rohingya population.

- The repetitive failure of repatriation attempts shows no light of hope of a quick repatriation. The global and regional economic and political interest is hindering directly and indirectly to make a strong pressure on Myanmar to start the repatriation where the Rohingya refugees can find reliance of returning back their lost land and property and the assurance of not further being tortured.

- Already Bangladesh has started to observe the negative impacts of giving shelter to such a large number of population which is very evident on its society, economy and environment.

Conclusion

The pace of problems arising regarding the long-term Rohingya refugee crisis requires a very quick but sustainable solution. The first and foremost concern is the interest of the Rohingya people as they have been living a terrible life as stateless people for a long time. They have no identity which have made them dependent on the favor of Bangladesh and different aid agencies while logically they belong to Myanmar. On the other hand supporting such a large number of refugee influx is becoming a burden for Bangladesh which is putting negative impacts on its society and economy, the local who once warmly welcome the Rohingyas now becoming agitated. The conditions set for repatriation by the Myanmar government is making the situation worse which is evident in the repetitive failure of repatriation attempt. Besides the assurance of safety, dignity and getting back the lost land and property is a big concern. As the repatriation must have to be voluntary, until the refugees will not get the assurance of their citizenship and a conducive environment in Myanmar there is strong possibility that the repatriation and the sufferings of Rohingya refugees as a stateless liminal community will be prolonged.

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