

## Persecutions of Rohingyas in Myanmar and the Resultant Influx to Bangladesh: A Historical Perspective

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**Abstract:** The Rohingya people are one of the most ill-treated and persecuted refugee groups in the world. They have been facing all kinds of state-sponsored oppressive policy in Myanmar which causes Rohingya's influx to Bangladesh. In this perspective, the paper is intended to focus on the various persecutions faced by the Rohingya people which led them to such influx to the neighboring country Bangladesh. The paper has two-fold objectives: firstly, to understand the persecutions of Rohingyas in Myanmar and secondly to address the historical context and the factors of Rohingya's influx to Bangladesh. For a better understanding of the crisis it is imperative to provide a proper context to the existing Rohingya refugee problem. To conduct the study, the data has been collected from the secondary and open sources like books, newspapers, international organizations reports, government reports, research articles and the data have been analyzed in a qualitative and descriptive manner. The paper takes cause and effect theory as theoretical tool of the study. The Research finds that since the Burman annexation of Arakan in 1785, the hostile relations of Burmese and Rohingyas and subsequently the demand of statehood for Arakanstate following the independence of Burma are the root causes of Rohingya's persecution. After the independence of Burma, various military operations following the issue of citizenship of the Rohingyas, militancy of some Rohingya radical groups have deepened Rohingya's persecution which led periodic influx to Bangladesh.

### Introduction

Myanmar is the largest country in Southeast Asia bordering the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal. Geo-strategically it is located among three regions- South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia. It shares border with Bangladesh, China, India, Laos and Thailand. It was a part of British India until 1937. It became independent from the British rule in January 1948 and followed parliamentary form of government which lasted for only 14 years (Maung23). The country is a land of ethnic and geographic diversity. There are 135 diverse ethnic groups like Burmans, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Rakhine, Mon, Shan, Kaman etc. Though the Rohingyas are one of them but they were not given citizenship rights by the Burmese Governments. It is mentionable that the first constitution of Myanmar recognized Rohingyas and they were provided identification and jobs in the various government sectors, but after the

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military coup in 1962, the situation began to change dramatically. The Burmese Army NeWin took different discriminatory policies like, Nagamin operation in 1977-78, 1982 Citizenship law through which the Rohingyas have been declared as stateless people. Afterwards all the Burmese rulers took same discriminatory policies towards Rohingyas through which the Rohingyas have been deprived of civil, political, economic and human rights. Recently following border post attacks by rebel group on 25 August 2017, the Myanmar military has launched an ethnic cleansing operation against the Rohingya muslims of Rakhine State including mass civilian killings, torture, rape, burning villages which is termed by the United Nations as “textbook example of ethnic cleansing.” In this context the paper is an attempt to understand the persecutions of the Rohingyas through the historical approach that causes Rohingyas influx to Bangladesh. The significance of the paper lies in the fact that the study will contribute to the existing Rohingya problem through exploring proper context of the Rohingya issue.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The study aims to discover the historical process of Rohingyas exclusion and the magnitude of influx to the neighboring country Bangladesh. The paper has two-fold objectives: Firstly, to understand the persecutions of Rohingyas in Myanmar; Secondly, to address the historical context of Rohingyas persecution that led to Rohingya’s influx to Bangladesh.

### **Research Methodology**

The study is qualitative in nature which is primarily based on Secondary data. Most of the data has been collected from the secondary sources like books, newspapers, e-journals, articles, thesis papers, international organizations reports, government reports. The data has been analyzed in a qualitative and descriptive manner. The Study takes cause and effect theory as theoretical tool of the study. The cause- effect relation touches all aspects of our lives. The cause and effect analysis provides the basis for making rational decision and solving problem. Causation lies in the fact that when we find that an event e.g. A is always followed by an event like B, then we can conclude that event A causes event B. In the paper, persecution is the cause of Rohingya’s influx to Bangladesh which is independent variable and Rohingya influx is dependent variable which depends on Persecutions of Rohingyas. When the Rohingyas had become the victims of persecution, they left Myanmar for the sake of their lives.

### **The Terms Rohingya and Persecution of Rohingya**

The term ‘Rohingya’ has been derived from the word ‘Rohang’ which is the former name of the Arakan Province. It refers to a distinct ethnic group who lives in the Buthidaung and Maungdaw Townships of the northwestern part of the Arakan State, Burma. They speak Rohingya or Ruaingga, a dialect combining Arakanese language, Bengali and Urdu that is different from others in Myanmar. The majority of Rohingyas are Muslims and the rest are Hindus. The origin of the Rohingyas in Arakan has been developed through three phases of Muslim settlement.

1. The first Muslim settlement goes back to the early 7th century when the Arab merchants or the Muslim traders came to the area and started living in Rambee island of Arakan by taking permission of the king (Ahmed 13).
2. The second Muslim settlement was boosted in the 15th century during the rule of King Min Saw Mon of Maruk U Kingdom who regained the Arakanese throne with the help of Muslim Army of Bengal. From this time the Arakanese kings began to use Mohamedan titles (Chan 73).
3. The last Muslim settlement took place in Arakan in the 17th century when northern Arakan was taken under the control of Mughal administration by Shaistakhan (Ullah 286).

**Persecution-** The literal meaning of the word Persecution indicates hostility and ill-treatment based on race, religion, ethnicity and political identity.

The Rohingya persecution in Myanmar denotes all kinds of oppressive laws, policy and measures taken by the government of Myanmar which induces discriminations and mistreatment towards Rohingyas. It refers to the ongoing military crackdown by the Myanmar Army and police on Rohingyas including massive killings, gang rapes, arson and infanticides. It includes all kinds of historical mistreatments of the Rohingyalike restricted mobility, eviction from land and properties, lack of religious freedom etc. that induced severe sufferings to the Rohingya people.

#### **History of Rohingya's Persecutions and the Magnitude of Influx to Bangladesh**

The influx of Rohingyas because of persecution is not a new phenomenon. It goes back to the pre-colonial era when the Burmese king Bodawpaya conquered Arakan in 1784. During the four decades of Burmese rule (1784-1824), many Arakanese fled to British Bengal due to ruthless oppression of the Burmese king (Charney 265).

The history of Rohingyas persecutions and its resultant influx can be described in five phases-

- a) Pre-Colonial Period of Burma and Bengal (1784-1824)
- b) British Colonial Period (1825-1947)
- c) Independent Burma and the Pakistan period of East Bengal (1948-1962)
- d) Military Regimes of Burma and Independent Bangladesh (1962-2010)
- e) Military backed Civilian Regimes of Myanmar (2011-Present)

**Results and Discussion:** The collected data produces the following results which are discussed below in the following points.

#### **Pre-colonial Period of Burma and Bengal (1784-1824)**

The First Influx of Rohingya Refugees occurred in 1784 when the Burmese king Bodawpaya conquered Arakan. It is claimed that after the death of King Sri Chandrasudharma in 1684, the political situation of Arakan was not stable. From 1684 to 1784 the Arakanese Muslims had a great influence to oust and appoint the kings of Arakan (Hall 62). In 1784, a long guerilla war had been raised following the annexation of Arakan by the Burmese king Bodawpaya. In return the Burmese king committed massacres on the Arakanese. A large number of men were murdered

and women prisoners were sent to Burma. The king destroyed mosques, libraries and houses in the annexation of Arakan with a great deal of bloodshed. In 1791 and 1799 two unsuccessful attempts were made to oust the king which increased the atrocities of the Arakanese by the Burmese king. It is estimated that a total of about 200,000 Arakanese were murdered and two-thirds of the population of Arakan, mostly the Rohingyas and Heinsleft Arakan for the Chittagong area of Bengal (Charney 265). This marked the beginning of the periodic influxes of refugees from Arakan into Bengal.

### **British Colonial Period (1825-1947)**

Burmese King BodawPaya ruled the country for about 40 years and his regime was marked by uprising and disintegration of the Arakanese (Razzak and Haque 15). The Burmese rule came to end in Arakan due to the annexation of Arakan by the British through the First Anglo-Burmese war (1824-1826). British occupation ended Bhamo domination and gave an opportunity to smaller ethnic groups to revive their social, cultural, educational and economic institutions. But the British followed divide and rule policy which divided Burma into-Burma proper and Frontier areas (Dautremer111). The British followed direct rule in the Burma proper where the majority Mon and Burmese speakers lived whereas in the Frontiers areas they followed the common "British colonial model of indirect rule" by local traditional rulers (South 10). Many historians claim that this Divide and rule policy of the British is responsible for today's mistrust among the Burmese and the minorities of Burma (Steinberg20). Besides, the British policy was to encourage the Bengali inhabitants from the adjacent areas to migrate into fertile valleys in Arakan as agriculturalists. During the colonial period (1825-1937) Burma especially Arakan was occupied with immigrants like Tamil, Telegu and other Bengali peoples from various parts of India. The new immigrants settled in the Mayu-Kaladan river valleys and near the Mrauk-U area where the British facilitated agriculture especially paddy cultivation. And due to the increased number of settlers, an anti-Indian idea developed among the locals which led to racial tension. Moshe Yegar states that during the colonial period the anti-Indian riots broke out in Burma because of the resentment against unhindered Indian settlements particularly in Arakan, Tenasserim and Lower Burma (Yegar 29-31). In 1930, anti-Indian riots spread throughout Burma, targeting Indians and Muslims following labour issue. The Burmese workers blamed Indian workers for losing their jobs. In 1938, again anti-Muslim riots broke out in Burma for anti-British and nationalistic sentiments. About 204 Muslims were killed with more than 1,000 were injured (Yegar35).

Furthermore, the ethnic violence between Arakanese Buddhists and Muslims brought a great deal of bloodshed to Arakan during the World War II. At the time, the Arakanese communities were divided in their loyalties - the Rohingyas were loyal to the British whereas the Rakhine Buddhists took the side of the Japanese. As a result, the Japanese occupation of Arakan led to the exodus of thousands of Indians from Burma and especially Muslims from Arakan. It is estimated that some 22,000 Rohingyas were forced to take refuge in adjoining British Indian territories, i.e. Cox's Bazar, Teknaf, Ukha and Ramu following communal riots between the communities (Yegar 95).

### **Independent Burma and the Pakistan period of East Bengal (1948-1962)**

After the World War II, both the Arakanese and Bengali Muslims in the Mayu Frontier started looking at each other with distrust. The ethnic conflict in the rural areas of the Mayu frontier revived soon after celebrating the independence of Burma on 4 January 1948. Although the British promised the Arakanese Muslims regarding autonomy in a Muslim National Area comprising Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and the part of Rathedaung bordering East Bengal, the British did not uphold his later (Yegar 96). When the Burmese administration took control over the Arakan the Muslim's sense of disaffection and disloyalty raised. The Arakanese Muslims planned to form the North Arakan Muslim League in Akyab taking Mr. Jinnah's support. But Mr. Jinnah did not support the plan. In return, in 1948 an armed rebellion took place, known as Mujahid rebellion with the aim of creating an independent Muslim state between the rivers Kaladan and Mayu. This Muslim militancy raised suspicion among the Burmese rulers. Consequently, the Muslim civil servants, policemen and headmen were barred from military service and replaced by Rakhines. Arbitrary arrests, extortion of money by law enforcing agencies and members of the civil administration were rampant. The educational and economic development programmes for the Arakanese Muslim community were neglected. Restrictions were imposed on the movements of Muslims from Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung to Akyab. Muslim returnees were not settled in their original residence and the Properties and land of returnees were seized. Besides, the Muslim returnees were termed as illegal Pakistani immigrants. Thus there were reprisals and counter-reprisals of the government army units and the Mujahids. In 1954, the government succeeded in abolishing rebel centers and killing rebel leaders through launching a major invasive operation named Operation Monsoon. After that in the same year Prime Minister U Nu identified Rohingya as a native race of Burma, like Kachin, Kayah, Mon, Rakhine and Shan. In 1961, a survey presented the Muslims of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung in the Mayu region as 'Rohingya'. A separate administrative zone was established named the Mayu Frontier Administration covering the provinces of Maungdaw, Buthidaung and the western portion of Rathedaung under the U Nu government. But the zone was suspended by General Ne Win who took power in a coup d'état in 1962.

### **Military regimes of Burma and Independent Bangladesh (1962-2010)**

After assuming power by General Ne Win, the military ruler dissolved the Mayu Frontier Administration in 1964 by the Military Council and it is incorporated into the Arakanese administration. The Rohingya militancy was revived following the dissolution of the Mayu Frontier which led to the formation of a new association, the Rohingya Patriotic Front.

The first step of Ne Win's Burmese Way to Socialism which involved economic isolation and strengthening the military was the nationalization of the private enterprises in 1964. Due to the policy of nationalization of private enterprises, most of the Indian and Pakistani business people left Burma. It is estimated that in 1965, a total of about 300,000 Indians had left Burma following the nationalization of private businesses by General Ne Win (Leider 218). But the Muslim agriculturists from Northern Arakan, holding the National Registration Cards (NRC) issued by the

Department of National Registration in the post-war decade remained in the frontier areas. In 1973, Ne Win's Revolutionary Council sought public opinion for drafting a new constitution. The Muslims from the Mayu Frontier submitted a proposal to the Constitution Commission demanding separate Muslim state or a division for them. Their proposal was again turned down in the 1973 constitution which was approved in a referendum (Taylor 269). Moreover, the Bengali Muslims from the Mayu Frontier Area were denied the right to elect their representatives to the 'Pyithu Hlut-taw' (People's Congress) in the 1974 Burmese general election. Afterwards two major acts were executed to refute the rights of Rohingyas-

- a) The 1974 Emergency Immigration Act and
- b) The 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law.

The 1974 Emergency Immigration Act required all citizens to carry an identity card called National Registration Certificate. The Rohingyas were not eligible for the cards. They were provided Foreign Registration Card which rendered them as foreigners. Furthermore, in 1977, the central government of Burma launched a campaign to inspect separately the population in the State and to label residents and outsiders in accordance with the Act. Following that at the beginning of 1978, a brutal military operation called 'Nagamin Operation' or 'Dragon King Operation' was conducted by the armed forces and immigration officials of then Burma in the Kachin and Arakan states, to register citizens in the States and to oust alleged immigrants from the area before national census. As a result, in the years 1977-1978, a large number of Rohingyas entered Bangladesh to escape arbitrary arrest which was the first exodus of Rohingyas in independent Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government claimed that more than 200,000 persons took refuge in Bangladesh, whereas the government of Myanmar stated that 143,900 persons 'absconded to Bangladesh in order to escape the Nagmin Project (Ahmed 99). In July 1978, through the repatriation agreement between Bangladesh and Myanmar, the Rohingyas were returned to their homes. But the situation of the Rohingyas in Burma had not improved. However, the Rohingyas enjoyed certain rights with discrimination until 1982. But the 1982 Burmese Citizenship Law stripped the Rohingyas of their nationality. The law created three tiers of citizenship- Ordinary, Associate and Naturalized Citizenship.<sup>1</sup> The Rohingyas were excluded from all three tiers and they were not included in the nation's 135 official ethnic groups. The 1982 Citizenship Law that allowed those ethnic groups as the citizens of the country who had lived in Burma before the First Anglo-Burmese War began in 1824. In 1988, following the popular pro-democracy protests which is known as the 8-8-88 Uprisings, Ne Win resigned in July 1988 and appointed General Sein Lwin to lead the Government. On 18 September, General Saw took the power of the country through another military

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<sup>1</sup>The first category- Ordinary citizens belong to such ethnic groups who were present in Burma before 1823. The second category- Associate citizen belongs to the people who obtained the Burmese citizenship according to the 1948 Union Citizenship Act, which was effective for only two years (1948-50). The third category-Naturalized citizens belong to those people who have been naturalized after the suspension of the 1948 Union Citizenship Act. (Razzaq and Haque 196-208).

coup who annulled the 1974 Constitution and established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). During the crisis, Aung San Suu Kyi emerged as a national icon who achieved 392 seats out of 492 in the general election of 1990 (South 206). The Military ruler refused the election and continued the ruling until 2011. The military government increased the Army's presence in northwestern Arakan and started to settle the Buddhist Arakans into the Townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw. Unavoidably, conflicts arose between the Muslims and the Buddhists communities in those townships and the Burmese Army supported the Buddhists by committing robbery, rape, killing against the Muslims and the burning of mosques which induced Rohingya exodus between April 1991 and May 1992. At this time around 250,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh to escape military atrocities (Yegar63).

### **Military Backed Civilian Regime of Myanmar (2011-Present)**

In June 2012, following a rape and murdered case of a young Buddhist women communal violence between the Rohingyas and Rakhine Buddhist took place across the country of Myanmar. President Thein Sein declared a state of emergency in Rakhine and allowed military administration which increased the unrest in Rakhine. In the conflict 650 Rohingyas were killed with more than 80,000 were displaced (Rahman et al. 18). It is reported that after this sectarian violence, more than 100,000 Rohingyas were confined to IDP camps which lacked food, water, sanitation and medical care (Ibid). The military swiped the massive areas, Rohingya men were arrested and women were raped by the military and the Rakhines.

In recent years following border post attacks on 25 August 2017, the Myanmar's army had launched clearance operations against the Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State including killing, raping, burning the villages which were termed by the United Nations as 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing'. It is estimated that since 25 August 2017, a total of about 700,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh following the brutal military campaign of Myanmar and at present about 1.1 million Rohingyas are living in Bangladesh including 300,000 other Rohingyas who entered Bangladesh in the previous years<sup>2</sup> (*The Daily Star*, 2018, February 17, p.12).

**Table-1 Brief Overview on Major Factors of Rohingyas Persecutions and its Effects**

Timeline	Factors	Sufferings/ Effects	Perpetrators
Pre-colonial period (1784-1824)	Conquering Arakan by the Burmese king Bodawpayawhich induced long guerilla war	About 200,000 Arakanese were murdered and two-thirds of the population of Arakan, mostly the Rohingyas and Heins left Arakan for the Chittagong area of Bengal (Charney 265).	King Bodawpaya

<sup>2</sup>The Prime Minister of Bangladesh has addressed the number in her speech during the 73<sup>rd</sup> UN General Assembly on 27 September 2018 which was quoted in the *The Daily Star*, 29 September 2018, p. 2.

British colonial period (1825-1947)	Communal riots following anti-British and nationalistic sentiments	About 22,000 Rohingyas were forced to take refuge in adjoining British Indian territories (Yegar 35).	Ethnic Community
Post-independent period (1948-1961)	Mujahid rebellion with the aim of creating an independent Muslim States	The Muslim civil servants, policemen and headmen were barred from military service and replaced by Rakhines. Restrictions were imposed on the movements of Muslims from Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung to Akyab. Operation Monsoon was conducted to abolish rebel centers. It is estimated that about 20,000 people took refuge in East Pakistan (Rahman et al. 13).	Ba U and Win Maung government
Military regime (1962-2010)	Illegal Immigration Check (Operation Nagamin), Enacting Citizenship law, post electoral violence in 1991-1992	In 1978, about 200,000 Rohingyas took shelter in Bangladesh following Nagamin operation (Parnini 290). In 1991-1992, around 250,000 Rohingyas again fled to Bangladesh to escape military atrocities (Parnini 291).	New military government, the military government of General Saw Maung and later than Shwe
Military backed civilian regime (2011-present)	Communal violence, The census of 2014, Border post attack in 2016 and 25 August 2017	650 Rohingyas were killed with more than 80,000 were displaced following communal violence (Rahman et al.14). The census removed the Rohingyas from the electoral process. More than 700,000 Rohingyas fled Myanmar following military crackdown ( <i>The Daily Star</i> , 2018, February 17, p.12).	The armed forces of Myanmar (Tatmadaw)

Source: Prepared by the Author



### Conclusion

The paper is an attempt to discover the historical process of Rohingyas exclusion that causes influx to the neighboring country Bangladesh. The Research finds that in 1785, the annexation of Arakan by the Burmese King induced Rohingyas persecution which led to the first influx of the Muslim community in Bengal. After that the British annexation of Arakan through the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826) increased the hostile relations between Burmese nationals and the ethnic minority of Rohingya. Subsequently, the demand of statehood for Arakan state following the independence of Burma has twisted Rohingya's persecution. After the independence of Burma, various military operations following the issue of citizenship of the Rohingyas, militancy of some Rohingya radical groups have intensified Rohingyas persecution which led periodic influx to Bangladesh since 1978.

The study concludes with this policy recommendation that Rohingya crisis is not only a problem for the community and Myanmar; it has become a global issue. Because, a large number of Rohingyas have entered Bangladesh to escape persecution which is posing challenges to the national security of Bangladesh. Though both Bangladesh and Myanmar have negotiated three bilateral deals for Rohingya repatriation but the repatriation is not yet launched. In the respect the international community should create pressure on Myanmar to amend the citizenship Act of Myanmar and to uphold the suggestions of Anan Commission for the peaceful solution of the crisis. Besides, Bangladesh should continue all kinds of diplomatic efforts to persuade the government of Myanmar to accept the Rohingyas as their national community.

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