

## **Rohingya Refugee Response Encircling South Asian Geo-politics: Debriefing India's Stance from Bangladesh Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to present a brief discussion on the geopolitical aspects of diplomatic divergences between India and Bangladesh regarding the Rohingya issue. Presently, more than a million people are living in 30 refugee camps in Bangladesh. In August 2017, the plight of Rohingya refugees broke all the previous record and had largely affected the Cox's Bazar region of Bangladesh when Bangladesh decided to provide shelter to the Rohingyas, identifying them as "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN). Due to geographical closeness and historical linkage with both Myanmar and Bangladesh, India, despite taking strict measures to avoid any cross-border opportunities for Rohingyas, could not escape the consequences. Myanmar, due to its strategic position and natural resources, has always been the epicentre of attention and investment of foreign powers. The crisis has all the elements in it to create political turbulence in South Asia and South East Asia. A peaceful environment based on mutual trust and cooperation is required for the continuing economic growth of the region. Considering the importance of in-depth research in this arena, the study pursued the qualitative method.

*Key Words: Rohingya, refugee, South Asia, India, Myanmar, Bangladesh*

### **Introduction**

Due to geographical proximity and shared historical past, India and Bangladesh have a lot in common, e.g., cultural and political differences; and the internal affairs of the one has a spillover effect on another. The relationship between these two neighbouring countries has stood along with the tests of time. Both countries have been able to resolve most of their political differences like demarcation of maritime boundary, exchange of enclaves peacefully etc. Bangladesh came out as a nation-state on the world map following a bloody liberation war with the assistance of India. This formed the basis of the neighbourly relationship. This relationship underwent some periodical disturbances on a number of factors.

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Bangladesh and India enjoyed a steady period of their relationship, but India's silence following the Rohingya influx in Cox's Bazar region of Bangladesh has created an uneasy atmosphere since late 2017. India's traditional approach towards refugees, as has been seen with Bangladeshi refugees in the 1970s or Sri Lankan refugees in the 1980s and aspiration to behold the leadership role in South Asian politics, it was expected that the country would come forward to resolve the crisis. On the contrary, India did not take any reasonable stance against Myanmar's atrocities rather strengthened economic partnership. On September 26, 2019, India abstained from voting on a resolution titled "Situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar" at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) (*UNHRC Vote on Rohingya*, 2019). The resolution was passed with 37 votes out of 47, but India's silence has exposed its diplomatic difference with Bangladesh. In this paper, the impacts of Rohingya refugee issues in South Asian geopolitics have been discussed based on the changing features of the India-Bangladesh bilateral relationship. Production of Rohingya Refugees: Debriefing India's Stance.

In May 2014, amid the speculation by the neighbouring countries, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership of Narendra Modi came to power in India. India's policy towards Bangladesh under his regime should be discussed under the broad framework of its foreign policy. Since the very beginning, there were different kinds of controversies regarding his election manifesto and foreign policy development. One group of academics and experts expected that under PM Narendra Modi, India would see some major shifts in foreign policy where others denied the speculation and predicted that India's foreign policy would focus more on continuity rather than change (Kashem & Islam, 2016). It was obvious that the Narendra Modi regime will focus more on domestic priorities along with increased regional connectivity and cooperation between BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal) countries (Chaudhury & Samaddar, 2018). India's 'Neighbourhood first policy' received serious attention from the inception of his tenure. Moreover, it provided a renewed opportunity to India for strengthening its relations with bordering countries. Remarkably, the invitation to all SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation) member countries leaders in the oath-taking ceremony of Narendra Modi, clearly sends the message of their importance to him. During this period, India's stance towards the Rohingya crisis has changed swiftly. Since the Indian subcontinent was partitioned in 1947 following the colonial regime, it has witnessed continuous transboundary and forced internal migration arising from ethnic violence, economic scrutiny and other factors. Due to geographical proximity, the governments of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar in the post-colonial period has failed to control illegal immigration.

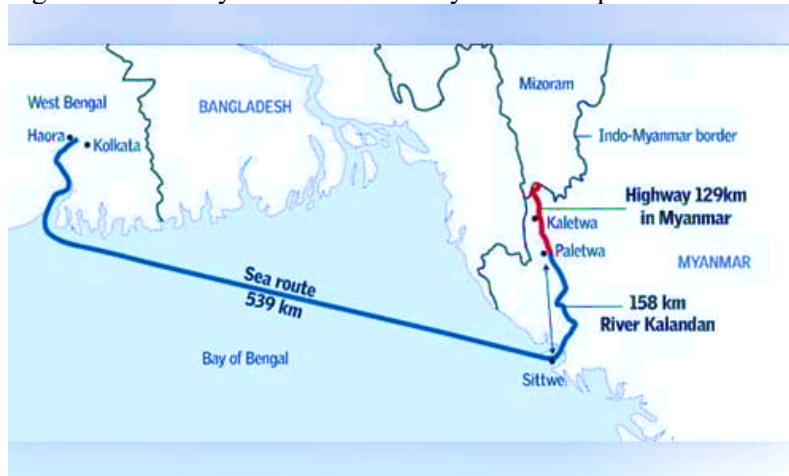
Since the 1970s, being subject to decades-old persecution, Rohingyas have continued to flee from Myanmar's Arakan state to neighbouring Bangladesh to find shelter. Bangladesh and UNHCR have kept them with certain restrictions in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar. In response to the 2012s exodus against Rohingya in Rakhine or the former Arakan state of Myanmar, Bangladesh took a strong stance to stop the inflow. At that time, Delhi considered the situation of Buddhist-Rohingya conflicts in Myanmar as their 'internal affair' while being sympathetic towards the Government of Myanmar (Home, n.d.). India allowed Rohingya refugees to enter its border without making it an issue in its domestic politics or in its bilateral relations with Myanmar. In December 2012, the then UNHCR and the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in his visit to India, highly appreciated India for its history of tolerance, understanding and policy of protecting and assisting refugees, as well as its strong adherence to the principle of non-refoulment and voluntary repatriation.

In 2015, the Rohingya crisis got a regional dimension when using their easy access to the high seas, they started their journey towards Malaysia, but before they could reach there, they were kidnapped and imprisoned in Thai border-detention camps. And many others got stranded in the high sea. Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia all turned away crowded boats carrying Rohingyas attempting to embark on their shores (Ullah & Chattoraj, 2018). This brought a serious humanitarian crisis, and the media called them 'Asia's boat people'. In 2015, India was hosting around 10,500 Rohingya refugees; by August 2017, it reached 40,000 despite their push back in borders. Geopolitics, security concerns, economic interests and humanitarian concerns worked as key factors to shape India's Rohingya response during this phase. India needs Myanmar to get access to Southeast Asian countries. Moreover, for the development of India's seven north-eastern states, connectivity and trade through Myanmar is important. India, hence, deliberately preferred to take the side of Myanmar to humanity as it was more concerned about its ties with its newly formed government rather than risking its inclination towards China.

India also has economic interests with its companies holding stakes in Shwe Gas field situated in the Rakhine State along with energy interests and plans to build cross-border pipelines. In order to connect the landlocked north-eastern region with other parts of India, to get access to the Bay of Bengal, link Kolkata under a joint project with Myanmar. According to the news reports of the India Times, India is investing in the construction of roads, development of Sittwe port, inland-waterway in the Kaladan River, Kaladan Multimodal Project in Sittwe, capital of Rakhine state (*India Myanmar: India All Set to Take over Ops in Myanmar's Sittwe Port after Chabahar - The Economic Times*, n.d.). India was more concerned that instability in the Rakhine State would have adverse effects on these interests. With growing security cooperation between the two countries, particularly in tackling cross-border ethnic

insurgency in their shared border regions, India carefully abstained from risking the development of bilateral relations between the two.

Figure 1: India-Myanmar Connectivity via Sittwe port



Source:  
*Countering CHINA. India all set to take over ops in Myanmar's Sittwe Port after Chabahar, Defence360 (January 10, 2019)*

Around 26 million Rohingya refugees reside in low-income and middle-income countries of the world with poor health systems (Cummings, 2020). Following decades of persecution and systemic violence in Myanmar, the Rohingya people, a stateless ethnic Muslim minority group, have sought sanctuary in the neighbouring coastal region of Bangladesh. In the wake of the 2012 riots in Rakhine, when the Rohingya Muslim community was targeted by extremist Buddhists, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) was formed with the aim of "defend, salvage and protect" the Rohingya against the systematic repression by the state "in line with the principle of self-defence". According to the media reports, the group had been under training since 2013, but their first attack was not until October 9, 2016, when they killed nine police officers. This attack led to a major military crackdown in the Rakhine state; the security forces got engaged in a mass shooting, torching houses, looting property, destroying food stocks, and raping women. This caused massive displacement of Rohingyas, and an estimated 87,000 Rohingya people fled to Bangladesh. During that period, India was wary of getting involved in the matter and overlooking the issue, following that India does not want to go back to the 1990s situation with Myanmar. The latest case of late 2017 indicates a similar pattern of events.

On August 25, as reported, ARSA launched a series of attacks on the police and military posts in northern Rakhine, which instigated subsequent security operations by the *Tatmadaw* (armed forces of Myanmar) and triggered violence across the

Rakhine region. Entire areas have been evacuated as terrified civilians have been fleeing from their inhabitants, villages being burned to the ashes, making it more difficult for people to return. Since then, more than 740,000 people from Myanmar have fled to Bangladesh; 55% of them are children (“Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh,” 2020). This is considered the largest mass refugee movement in the region in decades. Moreover, an unidentified number of Rohingya people remain stranded, displaced from their residence or were forced to move in other parts of the three northern townships of Rakhine state.

Myanmar did not provide any sufficient data on the number of internally displaced Rohingya people, and following the security operation in the next few months and their unwillingness to reveal the exact situation of Rakhine, it was not possible for the international community to track down the real scenario. Most of the Muslims who fled their homes were involved in a long and dangerous journey on foot over difficult terrain. The refugees arrived in Bangladesh, their nearest destination; exhausted, hungry and traumatized by the atrocity they faced. People arrived carrying infants, young children and elderly family members. The voyage was more horrifying for the people with disabilities, injured and pregnant women. Some reached Bangladesh with injuries caused by gunshots, fire and landmines. Many people paid whatever they had to pursue the risky coastal journey to cross the border from the southern part of Maungdaw Township in small boats. Media reports showed repeated incidents of capsizing over-crowded boats in rough waters, and many others had drowned in the middle of their journey.

In the next few days' pictures of bodies being washed up on the shores in different places had been published. There have been widespread allegations against Myanmar military of mass, arbitrary and brutal attacks on civilians, of threats and violence being used to uproot people from their residence, rape of women and of serious human rights violations including the killing of civilians, large-scale destruction of villages in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and Rathedaung townships of Rakhine state. On September 19, 2017, Human Rights Watch (HRW) an international human rights organization, published a report analyzing satellite images and identified 214 sites that were totally destroyed. Fires and looting continued to be reported in the affected area. Myanmar denied access to the UN fact-finding mission in the affected area, stating that it believes such a mission would not be helpful to mitigate the complex nature of challenges in Rakhine state. Following the atrocities, the US, EU and Canada also impose sanctions against the Myanmar military at different degrees (Wong,2018). In September, 2017, the UN slammed Myanmar that what happened in the Rakhine state is “textbook example of ethnic cleansing” (*UN Human Rights Chief Points to Textbook Example of Ethnic Cleansing in Myanmar*, 2017).

Traditionally, India has been a key international partner for Bangladesh, but following this catastrophe, Bangladesh has lacked India's support in countering the role of the Myanmar Government. Perhaps, India does not have the influence over Myanmar to push for a change in its Rohingya policy; still, for Bangladesh having India on its side has symbolic significance. Moreover, India has continued to extend its support towards Myanmar due to various strategic and economic factors. According to the literature, India is actually taking this crisis as an opportunity to develop close bonding with Myanmar and to counter China's expansion in the region (Iffat Idris, 2017). Moreover, India needs support from Myanmar to control insurgency in its north-eastern region, as the militants use Myanmar as its base. So, the Indian government was reluctant to address this crisis against Myanmar rather than expressed solidarity with its 'fight against terrorism on various occasions. Rather, India expresses its concern that the Rohingya refugees fleeing to Bangladesh could further travel to India and also said it would expel the estimated 40,000 Rohingya already living in the settlements of Delhi, Jammu and Hyderabad. According to the UN, only 15,000 of them are registered, whereas India wants to push back all of them. In September 2017, the government of India, in its response to a PIL (Public Interest Litigation) challenging the deportation of Rohingya filed by two Rohingyas in the Supreme Court, said that their presence is a threat to national security, and some of them have connections with Pakistan based terrorist groups ("Rohingyas Illegal Immigrants, a Threat to India, Says Government to Supreme Court," 2017). At the same time, under 'Operation Insaniyat' India extended its relief assistance for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh; claiming that India is ready to provide any assistance required by Bangladesh during the crisis period (*Operation Insaniyat - Humanitarian Assistance to Bangladesh on Account of Influx of Refugees*, n.d.). However, India's move following the crisis has been strongly condemned by the UN. Even human rights advocates have challenged that the Indian government's toughness against Rohingya people is contradictory to its constitutional values. In Spite of being a non-signatory to the international refugee laws, India has established hospitable situations for refugees through judicial intervention (Chaudhury & Samaddar, 2018).

In respect of Article 14 (Equality before the law or equal protection of the laws within the territory of India) and Articles 21 (defence of life or personal liberty) of the Indian Constitution, the Supreme Court has declared that these (apart from other constitutional rights) apply to everyone residing in India, and not only to citizens (Chaudhury & Samaddar, 2018). In February 2019, Bangladesh urged for India's assistance in the Rohingya repatriation process which was earlier bilaterally agreed between Bangladesh and Myanmar (*Rohingya Crisis: Bangladesh Requests India to Help with Early Repatriation of Refugees to Myanmar*, n.d.). On the contrary, during late 2019, the Indian parliament passed a controversial citizenship amendment act, under which, for the first time, it undertook the decision of providing citizenship on

the basis of religion. Many criticize the act that India while claiming to be a protectorate of minorities, completely overlooked the persecution of Muslim Rohingyas. Bangladesh has expressed their concern that India is walking in the footsteps of Myanmar. In addition, many foreign policy experts have argued that India's deliberate attempt to confine the Rohingya crisis only to security perspectives is not a visionary decision, and it may further radicalize the suppressed community. If we analyze India's stance following the mass Rohingya influx since mid-2017 from an unorthodox view, India's failure to create its leadership image during this crucial hour and its reluctance to criticize Myanmar's role has raised questions about its role to uphold democracy and credibility to solve regional crises.

### **Conclusion**

Arguably, India has completely overlooked the adverse effect of the crisis in South Asia, especially in Bangladesh to gain its strategic goals to be achieved from Myanmar. Bangladesh is crossing a rough patch following emerging security threats arising from the refugee camps and tremendous political pressure at the national level to resolve the Rohingya crisis (ICG, 2019). It is also stressed by the lack of progress in the repatriating process of Rohingyas who left Rakhine post-October 2016, which was agreed by a Bangladesh-Myanmar bilateral arrangement in 2017. The politics encircling the Rohingya influx has created slight bitterness in the India-Bangladesh relationship. More than one million Rohingya people have crossed the border from Myanmar's Rakhine state into Bangladesh. Myanmar has declared a military crackdown to uproot Rohingyas following Rohingya militants attacking police posts, killing 12 members of the security forces in August 2017. Undoubtedly, the Modi government, since its inception, has expressed its prime concern towards regional cooperation. However, Bangladesh expected India to address the persecution of the Rohingya Muslim community and undertake a leadership role to accelerate the repatriation process of Rohingya people within a reasonable period. In 2017, China took the leadership role and proposed a three-stage path for Rohingya repatriation (*China Draws Three-Stage Path for Myanmar, Bangladesh to Resolve Rohingya Crisis*, n.d.). Myanmar is indeed India's gateway to Southeast Asia, which might explain India's silence on the Rohingya issue. India has been investing in connecting northeast Indian states to Sittwe port, Rakhine state of Myanmar. Besides, Myanmar's growing bond and trade partnership with China creates discomfort for India. India's stance towards handling the Rohingya crisis did not convey any good message to Bangladeshi policymakers. India's approach towards the Rohingya refugees has destroyed its previous image as protectors of refugees. However, as the Rohingya crisis is gaining new dimensions, following Myanmar's reluctance to take them back and emerging regional security concerns, India has a lot more to offer to guarantee regional safety by upholding human rights and international laws.

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