Ethnicity and Conflict: Understanding Rohingya Issue in Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

The terms 'Ethnicity' and 'conflict' are often correlated when discussing the conflicts within any nation's boundaries. Most likely, the state of Myanmar and the conflict with the Rohingya are one of the recent examples. This study intends to investigate how the ethnic identity of the Rohingya people manifested itself as strife in Myanmar society. Two questions: Firstly, why has Rohingya ethnicity become a question of "belongingness"? Secondly, how is ethnic identity entwined with politics and becomes a cultural threat?

Key Words: Belongingness, Conflict, Ethnicity, Myanmar, Rohingya Issue.

1. INTRODUCTION

The article attempts to uncover relationships between ethnicity and ethnic conflict in various political contexts through historical events and geographical contexts. It discloses how ethnic conflict is intertwined with cultural contradiction and political polarisation in a country with a diverse ethnic nature. The essay's primary goal is to address the issue of "Ethnicity," another is "how ethnic identity became contextualized and polarized for the sake of goodwill of nation and son of soil's people as well." In the present circumstance of global culture, the Rohingya community is a burning illustration of the contextual narrative of ethnic violence. The phrase "Place," which, in general, people associate with geography, but which also has psychological implications, such as a sense of attachment, sharing stories and narratives that connect the social lives of individuals, and security in one's place in the world as "home." (Hussain & Ahamad,2021, p.4241). Conversely, "place" fosters an individual's sense or spirit of homeland, which grows through time into categories and traits with an identifiable identity. Identifiable identity is based on various variables such as racial identity, ethnicity, and linguistic distinction. In general, the border classification of people was based on their ethnicity and the acknowledgment of their distinct cultures' identities (Hussain & Ahamad,2021). In this context, the land of Myanmar is considered a fertile valley of people because of its diversified society and comprised of various origins, races, languages, and ethnic and religious beliefs. The fertile valley is comprised of the Austronesian, Mon-Khmer, Tibetan-Burman, Indian, Arabian, and Persian races, which were used to live in the land since the ancient period. Some of them came from China (Bulbul et.,2022) or Indian basins, while others migrated from Central Asia or the Middle East basins and grew up and intermingled with the Burmese inhabitants. If we investigate Burmese history, some of them indeed fell out of geographical boundaries because of the race of kings. That is why they sometimes act unilaterally; other times, they need joint ventures with other kingdoms or as a colonial party. The Rohingya ethnic group is one of the shining examples of Burmese history's levity.

The Rohingya problem generally represents a crisis of ethnic identity, the subjugation of a particular group or ethnic group, and a prime illustration of the majority's power over the minority in Myanmar society. Therefore, to understand the issue of Rohingya, we need to know their past legacy and racial identity. In this regard, it is essential to know that an ethnically diverse society raises the question of ethnic identity for a particular ethnic group. Along with the question mark on their ethnic identity, what are the problems they have faced in their daily life on social, political, economic, and cultural grounds, and how were they uprooted from their native land?

2. AIM OF THE STUDY

The study aims to find the relationship between Rohingya Ethnic identity and Ethnic violence in Myanmar through the lens of (i) a study of the past legacy of the Rohingya Community in Arakan and their Racial identity, (ii) On what ground Burmese society and a government questions on the Rohingya ethnic identity, and (iii) to understand intensity of Rohingya ethnic identity in creating antagonistic behavior among the Myanmar government & Burmese inhabitants and their reactions and activities.

3. METHODS

The research has been carried out using primary and secondary data. The primary sources include official government documents, statements of the head of state, the ministry, the government official, , speeches by the monks, policymakers, and political communication between the government and the Rohingya ethnic group. This document revisits the historical aspects of Rohingya identity to understand their conflict evolution. Thus, this paper qualitatively embodies analytical research on the Rohingya ethnicity crisis.

4. THE ROHINGYA COMMUNITY: HISTORY OF LEGACY

4.1 The Land of Arakan: A Historical Overview

Geographically, Myanmar is situated between the civilization basins of China and India (Bulbul & Khan, 2022). Arakan is one of them, a province with a long history of emperors and a rich cultural heritage. The Arakan historical land has been traced back to 3000 BC. It is familiar with many kinds of political regimes such as the Buddhist Kingdom of Dhannyawadi, Vesali Kingdom (Bulbul & Khan, 2022), Burmese Kingdom, Bengal Sultanate, British Colonial Rule, and independent sovereign Monarchy ruled by Hindus, Buddhist & Muslim periods (Tahir, 2007). Apart from this, from the early medieval to the British colonial period, Muslims of the Arakan region were influenced by the administration, Royal Court of King, and court poet and had much autonomy while subjected to the empires.

Arakan is the gateway to Islam in Burma, from which the Muslim community was born, grew up, and spread over the land of Burmese civilization over time. From the perspective of Muslim arrival in Arakan, some scholars argue such as M Siddique (2014), Ma Ba Tha Taher (2007), Farzana (2017), M R Akhando (2017), and M A Alam (2013) argue that the land of Arakan, the first Muslim believer was landed in the 7th century through Arab traders. Scholars contend that there was a minimal early connection between Islam and Buddhist Burma and that Arab traders and Islamic preachers moved across the Indian Ocean. Arakan is a halting place for Arab Traders for the next journey toward the South China Sea. Because traders are used as Arakan's place of Ship repair and wait for monsoon change, they spent more than 6 or 8 months in Arakan during this journey. As a result, many Islamic preachers are given 'Dawah' to the local people of Arakan, and local people also influence their daily life practices, morality, and culture. During this time, many traders married local women in Arakan.

In his paper, Mohammad Ashraf Alam distinguished between the Arakanese Buddhist and Arakanese Muslim majorities among the inhabitants of Arakan. Rakhine Rajawan claims that early Buddhist missionaries referred to Arakan as Rakkhapura and that Arakanese Buddhists are known as *"Rakhine."* The nation is called *"Roshango Desh,"* and Arakanese Muslims are referred to as *"Rohingya,"* according to Rohingya writers and poets of the Arkan Royal Court (Siddique, 2014). Arakan has been explained by scholars and poets, including Rennell, Tripura Chronicles Rajmala, Quazi Daulat, Mardan, Shamsher Ali, Qurashi Magan, Alaol, Ainuddin, Abdul Ghani and Bengali Hindu community using terminology like 'Rassawan,' 'Roshang,' 'Roshanga,' 'Roshango Shar', and 'Roshango Desh' (Siddique, 2014). In this regard, the terms "Roshanga" or "Roh" are denoting the Muslim people inhabiting who is popularly known as 'Rohingya' (Siddique, 2014).

Arakan, presently known as Rakhine state, is located on the Bay of Bengal coast, Bangladesh's southern boundary. Rakhine state is divided into seven parts: the long coastal era, relatively large flatland, Arakan Mountain, and Kaladan & Naf Rivers. Due to its geographic location, Rakhaine's region is one of the most significant regions of Myanmar in terms of geopolitics, the water network, the China Port Belt strategy, and maritime strategy in Southeast Asia and the South Asian region since ancient times.

5. ETHNICITY AND CONFLICT

The concept of "ethnicity" refers to a group of people who have shared interbreeding and consist of two core groups of identity, such as (a) ascriptive group of identity and (b) cultural identity. Ascriptive groups of ethnic identity have numerous forms, including race, language, creed, religion, tribe, caste, and diction. Cultural identities are preserved by participation in day-to-day activities like socializing with neighbors and taking part in celebrations together (festivals, holidays, ceremonies, and rituals) (Varshney,2002). When a subpopulation of individuals reveals, or is perceived to reveal, shared historical experiences as well as unique organizational, behavioral, and cultural characteristics, it exhibits ethnicity" (Cornell & Douglas,2006). A group sharing the same ethnicity is referred to as an "ethnie" by Smith and is defined by six key characteristics: a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more distinguishing elements of common culture, association with a particular "homeland", and a sense of solidarity for sizeable segments of the population. According to Horowitz , "ethnicity is a highly inclusive group identity based on some notion of common origin, recruited primarily through kinship, and typically manifesting some measure of cultural distinctiveness" (Vuckovic,2020,p. 8). The term "ethnic conflict" is defined as "the result of cultural incompatibility between groups, coupled with a sudden rise in awareness of one's identity vis-à-vis another ethnic group"

(Roessingh, 1996, p. 17). All ethnic conflict is based on ascribed and cultural group identities, while Horowitz's study places more emphasis on conflict based on ascribed group identities such as race, language, sect, or religion. Three ethnic distribution indices—the Gini-Greenberg index, planarization, and factualization compare the level of ethnic strife. This distribution calculates the correlations of conflict that are significant.

6. ETHNIC RECOGNITION POLICY OF BURMA

The majority of the people of Myanmar, which is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world and is mostly Burman and Buddhist, reside on the central plateau and valley (Kramer, 2015). In the Context of Burma, Ethnic groups are physically separated in far-off locations and split according to factors such as religion, language, power, and philosophy. Tensions between Shans and Wa-s, Karens and Shans, and Kachins and Shans are also a result of differences among the tribes. There had been fierce conflict between the Christian Karens and the Buddhist Karens (DKBA) in the Karen state (KNU) (Kuppuswamy, 2013). Therefore, the ethnic minorities in Myanmar have long felt marginalized and discriminated against, leading a vast number of ethnic opposition organizations to battle the central government - which is dominated by the ethnic Burman majority - for ethnic rights (Kramer, 2015). At present, Rohingya Muslims are the most vulgar expression of the Ethnic recognition policy of Burma. They suffered greatly because of their distinction in historical legacy, belief, and cultural, racial, and ethnic identity.

One of the most contentious census questions was the one on ethnic identity. The use of colonial-era faulty countries and disregard for how complicated the current political climate in Myanmar is contributed to the escalation of ethnic tensions at a time when peace negotiations were meant to be centered on fostering trust, and community tensions were at their peak. Many communities have come together, intermarried, conquered, and subjugated. Religion has become more complicated because of migration, conquest, trade, and proselytization (Walton, 2013). It was more challenging for colonial officials in charge of conducting censuses to identify a formal foundation for classifying people by ethnicity. Language became the favored base when attempts at a physiognomic approach were determined to be insufficient. As a result, the 1931 colonial census, the last of its kind, recognized around 135 distinct groups, most of which were based on language. Language and race are frequently seen as separate concepts and occasionally as the same thing in the 1931 census conclusions. In 1941, the colonial government carried out another census. According to Edmund Leach, "the contrasts of culture and language which have led to the conventional classification of 'tribes and peoples of Burma' have no intrinsic permanence. Any in dividable can start as a member of one category and end up in another" (Leech, 2009, p.52). The slogan of the Burmese independence movement is "Burma for the Burmans" (in the sense of "all the indigenous peoples of Burma," not just the country's dominant ethnic Burman group). This phrase was inspired by the line from a well-known song, "exploiting our economic resources and seizing our women" (Asia Report, 2020, p.45).

Burma has struggled to incorporate ethnic nationalities due to its colonial legacy. In 1947, the Panglong summit, which intended to assure a shared destiny for ministerial Burma (i.e., Central Burma, which had a Buddhist majority), only comprised the three ethnic groups of Shan, Kachin, and Chin (Amin, 2018). The Mon, Wa, Naga, and Arakanese (Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims) were among the several other communities who were left out. According to the 1948 Union Citizenship Act, one might get naturalized after five years of residency in Myanmar, three years of military service, or (for women) after being married to a citizen. According to 1948 citizenship laws, "A kid born in Myanmar, with both parents both born there and with grandparents who were permanent residents automatically earned citizenship" (Hlaing and Brett, 2020, p.2) Since 1962, Ne Win's Burmese Socialist Programme Party had been in charge. It had adopted an isolationist stance, which had led to very little interstate and inter-population communication. The introduction of several citizenship categories and the restriction of the grounds for obtaining citizenship were two significant developments made by the 1982 Citizenship Law. Citizens, Associate Citizens, and Naturalized Citizens are the three types of citizens that are defined under the 1982 Citizenship Law. "Citizens" are further separated into "others" and "citizens by birth. "These groups are interpreted internally regarding citizenship transmission to descendants and grounds for citizenship loss.

Moreover, the government is expressly permitted to restrict the rights of "naturalized citizens" and "associate citizens" (Hlaing and Brett, 2020, p.2) .Alongside and in support of these divisions, a new documentation system was established; nevertheless, it wasn't put into practice until the late 1980s. New citizenship cards, which are color-coded to show the category of citizenship, have replaced the National Registration Card, the former identifying document that people frequently carried(Hlaing & Brett, 2020). The 1947 Constitution's citizenship is upheld by the 1948 Act, while the 1982 Law asserts taing-yin-tha identity as a permanent foundation for citizenship recognition. This provides citizenship as a basis for race greater significance. Widespread and justifiable criticism of Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law has been leveled against it for leading to statelessness and developing a discriminatory citizenship system (Hlaing & Brett, 2020). Also, it's been asserted that it targeted Muslims in northern Rakhine State, many of whom identify as Rohingya, with deliberate discrimination and as part of a genocidal strategy.

6.1 The Problem with the Rohingya Citizenship

During the independence of Burma (1948), the crisis of Rohingya emerged through the selective discrimination (Citizenship & enlisting of ethnic groups) of Rohingya people during the civilian govt. The civilian government adopted & developed the spirit of British colonial rule policy and Japanese fascism. Therefore, U Nu's government started to exclude the Rohingya people from their official list of 135 ethnic groups and denied them the right to the citizenship status of the Myanmar government. Nevertheless, with the Citizenship Law of 1948, Rohingya enjoying their citizenship rights who settled before the independence in 1948.

However, the Burmese government does not recognize their ethnic group and citizenship rights, even those with legal documents before/after 1823, ration cards, and ID cards issued by the British govt. PM U Nu's government designed a policy of a single national identity Card and separated Rohingya people. In 1978, the government distinguished citizenship through demography into three likes, citizens, foreigners, and illegal foreigners. As a result, the government declared that Rohingyas were illegal foreigners.

According to the citizenship act of 1982, Rohingya people can apply for citizenship but still do not get full citizenship because of illegal foreigner status. As a result, Rohingyas were officially declared illegal people through 'the citizenship act of 1982' 1982.

7. ROHINGYA ETHNICITY: POLITICISED & CONFLICT

The crisis is not spasmodic but the outcome of multiple recurring historical trajectories. Some researchers have linked the dispute to the Buddhist king's slosh on specific Muslim practices. On the other hand, most of the research has discovered conflict evidence that dates back to British colonial authority. Further, the crisis usually grows fertile through the "Divide and Rule" British colonial policy. Muslim and Migrant Indians have been tinted as exploitative actors (Akhando, 2017) and threats to Burmese society.

Consequently, it developed a skeptical and antagonistic mentality among the Burmese people against Muslims and Migrant Indians. This antagonism sowed the seeds of nationalism among the indigenous people. It flourished when the DOHBAME ASIAYONE (Our Burma Association) and the Burma Independence Army (BIA) (Akhando, 2017) were established. These two groups were created with two different motives. Firstly, THAKIN Party, formally known as Our Burma Association, was working on the issue of Anti-Muslim Propaganda and chauvinism policy in the Magh community. The second one, Burma Independence Army (BIA) was working on the Burmese Independence struggle through the holding hand of National Leader Aung San. This two-pronged nationalist movement has become very popular in Burmese society. In a short while, the leaders of Burmese nationalism were leaning over the Japanese fascist government. As a result, the attitude of the nationalist movement has taken the shape of fascist nature. This fascist attitude weighed heavily on the Rohingya Community, which was out of breath, such as the 1938 violence and the 1942 massacre (Akhando,2017). In 1947, the Panglong summit, which was intended to assure a shared destiny for ministerial Burma (i.e., Central Burma, which had a Buddhist majority), only comprised the three ethnic groups of Shan, Kachin, and Chin (Akhando, 2017) The Mon, Wa, Naga, and Arakanese (Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims) were among the several other communities who were left out. As a result, the Rohingya community voiced a desire to join East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) (Amin, 2018). After that, the Burmese government adopted a hostile attitude and austere policy, which was noticed in Citizenship Law (Farzana, 2017) and the ethnic group recognition policy (Oliver Vonk, 2017) . The Myanmar government has also intentionally labeled them "illegal citizens" or "foreigners." Rohingya as Illegal citizens, the government has implemented several restrictive measures against them, such as restrictions on their access to communal rights, forced labor, forced eviction, confiscation of their land, prohibitions on childbirth, restriction of religious rituals, and financial retraction of marriage. Even government also banned various Rohingya community-related organizations (Amin,2018).

In connection with religious nationalism, the Rohingya refugee crisis is one of the most vulgar expressions of religious fundamentalism. It is the extreme outcome of the global Islamophobia environment and Nationalism adherent influence by conservative Buddhist Monk minds. Therefore, this phenomenon created a psychological imbalance among the Buddhist people. This imbalanced environment among them is threatened as well. To combat the threat posed by Muslims, Buddhist people initiated their work in two streams. Firstly, Buddhist people have an affinity for their interests, such as preserving their religious fanaticism, culture, language, and communitarian interests, which leads to Buddhist nationalism. Secondly, this religious complexity and religious nationalism led to the setting up of various religious organizations. The main work of these organizations was polarized and popularized anti-Muslim propaganda and created various narratives against Muslims and Islam. After specific periods, these religious organizations, along with their provocations, religion-based nationalism, and power-hungry monks, have come together to produce a new temperament of nationalism which is known as "Reverse Religious Nationalism" or 'Ultra Religious Nationalism'. The central goal of the Ultra Religious Nationalism is to build a "Mono-religious Nation" (Ullah, 2021, p. 46)) where no place for the Muslim community. Therefore, Myanmar is a country of ethnic peoples, where the 'Mono-religious

Nations' sentiment has created a duality among the ethnic society. As a negative effect of this sentiment, a few ethnic groups like, like Rohingyas, Chakma, Chin, etc., have suffered. Unfortunately, the Rohingya are one of those who are the lethal victims. Numerous military operations, including killing, cruelty, assault, torture, and cruel treatment for long periods, have victimized them.

7. CONCLUSION

This study leads us to the conclusion that ethnicity did play a significant part in the ethnic strife in Myanmar society. Ethnicity has been a significant problem for the state since its foundation or nation-building process. The military dictatorship suppressed the varied ethnic identities of the communities. This attitude leads in shaping furious expression as counter-position from several ethnic groups including Rohingyas. It is impossible to deny the political elites' responsibility for expressing these identities and highlighting and politicizing their disparities for personal gain. All the symbolic power that ethnicity can offer was used to fan the embers of the ethnic war in Myanmar, allowing an aggressive ethnonationalism to develop as a force that ultimately brought about disaster. Political elites politicked ethnicity, which sparked the rise of nationalism and ethnic strife in Burmese society. The ability of ethnicity is to form organizations, influence society's underlying structure and inspire fervor and loyalty. Unfortunately, it has reversed in the case of Rohingya in Myanmar.

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