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India's Rohingya Dilemma: Crisis and Resolution

Prasanta Sahoo^{1,*}

¹Associate Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University

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* Corresponding author.

Prasanta Sahoo

prasantasahoo12@yahoo.co.in

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ABSTRACT

While the Rohingya issue has become a grave socio-economic and security concern with cross-regional implications, India has not been able to make its stance clear yet. India is facing a very unique situation where most of the political parties, particularly the opposition parties are not unanimous with the ruling party on the Rohingya issue. Rohingyas becoming a serious threat to India's society, economy and environment. In a short period, the issue of a humanitarian crisis has become a grave security threat for India. Though the issue is so sensitive from the point of security view, there is no unanimity among political parties, civil society groups, think tanks, and decision-making circles. Even after the Supreme Court of India rejected the plea of Rohingyas and their supporters to lobby against repatriation the government is unable to send back Rohingyas to their place of origin in Myanmar. The recent Intel reports are warning about Rohingyas cross border links with several subversive groups across the region. Terrorist groups have now started exploiting their plights. The paper tries to discuss and evaluate critically New Delhi's approaches towards Rohingyas. The paper will also understand how, being a mature democracy, champion of human rights, and love for diversity, India addresses the situation delicately in a time-bound manner before it goes out of hand.

Keywords: Rohingya; Security; Threat; Myanmar; Rakhine; Terrorism; Refugees

INTRODUCTION

While the Rohingya issue has become a grave socio-economic and security concern with cross-regional implications, India has not been able to make its stance clear yet. The 8th April 2021 order by the Supreme Court (SC) of India's on the Rohingya deportation has started a fresh debate among common citizens, civil society groups, and political parties in India¹. It has put the government in a state of huge dilemma in addressing the issue. The order states that the government can deport Rohingya immigrants to Myanmar only after following prescribed procedures for ensuring the safety and chances of survival in their place of origin². While the government wants to deport the illegal migrants to their home country with dignity, certain groups of Indian intellectuals and political parties strongly oppose the deportation on humanitarian grounds and appeasement per se. The situation has put India in an awkward position

because the country is not unanimous on such a serious matter³.

ISSUES AND CONCERNS

The issue is connected with Myanmar and Bangladesh, two vital neighbours of India on the one hand and the UN on the other⁴. Amid bearing the burden of 20 million illegal Bangladeshis⁵, the Home Ministry of India has reported in the Indian Parliament (December 2017) that more than 40,000 Rohingya are staying illegally in India, which differs from the private estimate of many more⁶. But the most important thing is that there are 7 million more Rohingyas detained in the refugee camps in Bangladesh and waiting to cross over to India, while many more are coming directly from Myanmar⁷.

Due to a series of conflicts between Buddhists and Rohingyas since historical times, particularly in the wake of



the 2017 debacle, nearly 10 million Rohingyas have fled to other countries, mostly Bangladesh, Thailand, and Malaysia⁸. Also, a sizeable number has come to India and settled in various parts of the country. The worry is their fast-rising number⁹. The situation has attracted many socio-economic, political, and security problems in the hosting countries. Their plight has been exploited by many subversive groups with the help of some regional and extra-regional powers¹⁰.

The socio-political and economic security situation in India is becoming aggravated day by day. It has become a complex challenge for India as a democratic country with a strong commitment to secularism, equality, and human rights¹¹. There has been strong opposition, for the sake of political appeasement, to any measure taken by the government to manage these illegal immigrants in India¹². In addition, besides political and security, these illegal migrants are slowly becoming an economic burden for the country¹³. The politico-security implications of Rohingyas are clearly visible in Jammu and Kashmir, West Bengal, and Kerala. Their number is rising faster in other states, including national and state capitals¹⁴.

While the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has strictly instructed Myanmar to take all the necessary measures to protect the lives and properties of Rohingyas¹⁵, the SC in India expects the government to ensure their safe return and survival chances in the home country before the deportation¹⁶. However, in the meantime, the administration in Myanmar has changed again¹⁷.

DOUBLE WORRY

India is equally concerned about Bangladesh's difficulty detaining millions of Rohingyas, seriously threatening its economy and environment¹⁸. Although Bangladesh has managed it so far, it won't be able to do so for a long time. Therefore, India worries about how far Bangladesh can hold these Rohingyas in refugee camps¹⁹. Although the relationship between India and Bangladesh has been cordial, the situation has reached its threshold. There is a strong chance that Bangladesh could unleash many of these refugees under the pressure of radicals and the country's economic stress. And possibly, they would sneak into India²⁰. This is also true that Bangladesh has never accepted the illegal presence of its citizens in India²¹.

While no Muslim country, including the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), has not come forward with a robust strategy to resolve the crisis, Bangladesh has requested India's assistance to resolve the issue and help find a permanent solution²². Through regular deliberations, India also trusts Bangladesh to maintain its statuesque till a permanent solution is made. But the truth is that a country (Bangladesh) already facing difficulties feeding its citizens wouldn't be able to manage 7 million refugees²³.

SECURITY CONCERNS

Another reality is the spreading of terror networks in the region emerging from this crisis²⁴. The situation in Rakhine has been exploited by the terrorist-jihadist groups based in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan²⁵. The Aqa-Mul-Mujahideen linked with Pakistan-based Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami Arakan and Inter-service Intelligence (ISI) are mainly responsible for instigating the Rohingya Muslims against Buddhists in Myanmar²⁶, though Rohingya Solidarity Organization, The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, and Arakan Army, etc. For geostrategic, geoeconomic, and geopolitical reasons, China has been helping/supplying these militant groups with high-quality, sophisticated weapons and missiles²⁷. Intel reports have also verified that some new jihadist/terror/insurgent groups have come up along the Myanmar borders with India and Bangladesh, viz., Lungi-clad, Kuki-Chin, and the Kachin Independence Army²⁸. India has been trying hard to ensure that the radicalisation of the Arakan corridor does not emerge as the new terror-jihadi flashpoint that can directly impact its maritime security in the Bay of Bengal and the venerable northeastern region²⁹.

Intel reports that many Rohingyas were found involved in anti-national activities in India, and they have links with terror and other extremist groups such as ISI and Islamic States³⁰. Similar information was submitted to the SC in 2017 by the Government of India. There are also allegations that the anti-Hindu violence in the post-2021 state elections in West Bengal and communal riots in the National Capital, in the last few years, found Rohingyas and Bangladeshis were involved³¹. Allegedly, in a fraction of time, the Rohingya problem, from a humanitarian crisis, has become a grave security issue for India.

INDIA'S DILEMMA

In the meantime, the government of India faces a unique situation of pressure from the judiciary, opposition parties, a faction of civil society groups, and the international community in various ways³². While the SC and ICJ have advised taking appropriate and humanitarian approaches in the Rohingyas matter, some political parties and civil society groups in India are pressurising the government to maintain the status quo. Due to differences in opinion, the issue has become more complex. Therefore, a minor error or political miscalculation would cost the government much, particularly in a critical situation where national and state elections are around the corner.

To solve the problem, India needs to understand the behaviour of all the stakeholders and the strategy under which they are acting. To reach out for a permanent political solution, India needs to take the concerns and compulsions of Bangladesh and Myanmar into confidence³³. Both countries also play a vital role in India's strategic calculations³⁴. The geostrategic and geoeconomic importance of both



countries can affect India's national, regional, and broader Indo-Pacific strategy. Both countries hold great potential for peace and prosperity in India's northeast region.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Nevertheless, being one of the most powerful countries in the region and an aspiring global power, India has a moral responsibility to facilitate a permanent solution in this regard³⁵. Besides the best diplomatic channels, India should use its good relationship with Myanmar and facilitate the return of the displaced people to their homeland³⁶. Myanmar also understands India's strategic and economic importance in the post-COVID-19 world³⁷. When, for strategic reasons, China is trying hard to mediate the crisis, Myanmar realises India, being a mature democracy, could be the best peace-maker³⁸. India has already provided huge developmental aid (US \$25 million) and financial assistance for Myanmar (Rakhine) and Bangladesh³⁹.

However, the government of India needs to take an appropriate and time-bound action plan taking all the stakeholders, domestic, regional, and international, on board⁴⁰. India must use its best diplomatic tactics to address the situation before it goes out of its hands. The strategy should aim to comply with India's security imperatives and respect the concerns of crucial allies while guaranteeing the survival and dignity of the homeless.

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