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ROHINGYA CRISIS – Rooted to its religio?ethnic Issues

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The Government's affidavit in Supreme Court that Militant elements among Rohingyas in India have links with ISI and IS and its determination to deport them is being widely debated in Indian media.

Rohingya Muslim refugees from Myanmar have already drawn the sympathetic attention of the Indian Islamists, 'secularist' political class, Muslim majority countries and also Human Right organisations all over the world. Unfortunately, without understanding the genesis of the problem they are criticising India for its stand to deport the Rohingya migrants in this country due to security reasons.

India is already flooded with Muslim infiltration from Bangladesh and therefore it is unfair to put pressure on it particularly when the government claims to have reports with supporting evidence and credible intelligence input that a sizeable Rohingya population were and are being radicalised by Pakistan based terror groups. It is ridiculous that Muslim countries are also critical of India's stand on this issue although they are not ready to accept them. It is better that Organisation of Islamic Co?operation ask its member?countries to rehabilitate the Rohingya refugees in their respective countries. They have space and the money but not the heart to spend on them.

To understand the genesis of Rohingya crisis one must look into the Muslim history of Burma that was renamed as Myanmar in 1989. Their problem started ever since the community emigrated from erstwhile East Bengal.

Myanmar is a multi?ethnic country in Southeast Asia bordering Thailand, Laos, China, India, Bangladesh and Andaman Sea. Buddhism, which is professed by about 89% of country's various ethnic groups like Burmans, Karen, Shan, Rakhine and Mon – has more or less not only become a part of their national identity but it is also the state religion. Various reports suggest that due to certain historical, social,

political and cultural problems, the Muslim minority remained alienated from the national mainstream which occasionally led to communal riots.

Historically, some reports suggest that there was a mass killing of Muslims in Arakan in 17th century, when Shah Shuja, the second son of Shajahan fled to this province by sea route. As Shuja failed to meet the demand of the then king of Burma asking for his daughter and the wealth he had carried with him, his companions were said to have been massacred.

The entry of Muslims into Burma was mainly from countries like Turkey, Persia, Arab, China and India particularly from East Bengal. They were mostly travellers, traders, sailors, pioneers, adventurers, and war prisoners. The current Muslim population in Burma is therefore the descendents of Arab, Persian, Turks, Moors, Pathans, Pakistanis, Chinese, Malays and Bangladeshis. The Muslim immigrants from China, who are small in number and mostly settled in Rangoon are termed as Panthay.

Although, their arrival in this land began even prior to the first Burmese Empire founded by king Anawrahata in 1055 AD, their main influx was from the eighteenth century onwards through the Arakan region. A widely believed theory suggests that Muslims from Bengal migrated to the coastal areas of Burma principally to Arakan are called Rohingyas, who form a prominent group of a Muslim minority in Burma. Wikipedia, also suggests that the Rohingyas are migrants from southern regions of Bangladesh.

Arakan extends nearly 550 km along the coastal areas of Bay of Bengal. Geographically, the region is a continuation of East Bengal and is intersected by a chain of hills. (Hindu Colonies in the Far East by R. C. Majumdar, 1944, page 202). It is a land of many ethnic groups with majority of Rakhines and therefore, this state is also known as Rakhine. Till 1784 an independent king, who ruled over this region – had exercised 'fluctuating sovereignty, over extensive part of Muslim majority East Bengal. This facilitated the immigration of Muslims to this region. The British annexed Burma in 1885 and made it a part of its Indian colony. This further increased the influx of Muslims and Hindus from Bengal and other parts of India respectively to Burma.

During the British colonial rule the unabated migration of Indians particularly Muslims from Bengal to Burma as labour and for other miscellaneous professions including petty business increased the population of Indian immigrants, which constituted about 7% of Burma population by 1931. Yangon (Rangoon) with two-third of immigrant population including 53% Indians emerged as an immigrant city. Muslims, the main immigrants from Bengal province of British India became synonymous to Indians and were identified as the main alien group that could weaken the cultural traditions of the Buddhist society of Burma

The inter-marriage of Muslims with different ethnic groups was never resisted by the free Buddhist society in that country. In fact inter-ethnic marriage had been a tradition of Burmese society but it was far less in case of marriage between the Muslim girls and the Burmese boys. Due to their strict social structure, the Muslims did not integrate into the mainstream of the egalitarian character of the indigenous ethnic

groups of Burma. More and more intermarriage between the Muslims and the Burmese women after their conversion followed by substantial rise to their progeny known as 'Zerabadis'.

The Burmese people always viewed the role of their fellow Muslims during independence movement suspicious as the latter were found more under the influence of the political movement in Bengal led by All India Muslim League than the national movement in Burma. The growing influence of All India Muslim League also ignited the separatist imagination of the Burmese Muslims. One Imanullah Khan even made an attempt to form a branch of the Muslim League in Burma.

Burmese Muslims, who were ignorant of the concept of separate Muslim nationalism, also developed communal consciousness under the inspiration of 1930 Muslim League Conference at Allahabad under the presidentship of Mohammad Iqbal. Accordingly, in their annual Muslim conference, which was hitherto confined to purely religious discourse they turned towards forming Muslim organisations. They also started opening of separate schools for Muslims and imparted Islamic education in Urdu language. One Ali Ahmad also formed a Gadar Party patterned after the one in India. These developments further widened the gap of mistrust between the Burmese Buddhists and the Muslims.

“According to 1931 census Buddhism was the professed religion of five-sixths of the total population of Burma”. Population of other religious groups included Muslims 4%, Hindus 3.9% and Christians 2.3%. (Modern Burma by John Leroy Christian – University of California Press, 1942, page 194). According to Burma Human Rights Year Book (2002?) the religion wise population of the country included Buddhists 89.3%, Christians 5.6%, Muslims 3.5%, Hindus 0.5% and Animists 0.2%. Contrary to the Government claim of Muslim population around 4%, the Muslim organisations maintain that their number is around 10%.

The above figures of religion wise population suggests that there was a decline in Buddhist population whereas the Muslim population was on the rise. The new generation of indigenous groups in Burma viewed this declining trend as danger to their cultural tradition and national identity and they also apprehended that it would weaken the Buddhist society. The larger majority of the Hindu immigrants returned to India particularly after Burma got independence from British colonial rule but the communal divide between the Buddhists and the Muslims, who did not return to the place of their origin continued and prevails even today.

In 1937 the British administration separated Burma from India. Just before Second World War General Aung San (Father of Aung Sang Suu Kyi, the leader of National League for Democracy) and U Nu formed Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) and launched the movement for freedom of Burma from colonial rule of the British. The Muslims of Burma instead of enrolling themselves as members of AFPFL formed a separate organisation called Burma Muslim Congress (BMC). They however joined the movement as a constituent of the AFPFL but maintained their independent identity. Although AFPFL leaders did not make it an issue for tactical reasons, they remained suspicious about the community. General Aung Sang San, while addressing a conference in 1946 “bluntly asserted that reliance on alien

support could only make Burma a prostitute nation". (Burma and Pakistan: A Comparative Study of Development by Mya Maung, 1971, page 77).

In 1938 a Muslim clergy had passed some derogatory remarks against the Buddhists which ignited communal riots. Police had to open fire in which two Buddhist monks died. The local media highlighted the news, which spread all over the country causing burning of Muslim houses, shops, properties and mosques. In fact the religious-political divide between Hindus and the Muslims in India also had its impact in Burma.

Some reports suggest that during Second World War the Muslims of Burma remained loyal to the British contrary to Buddhist majority support to the Japanese who invaded British ruled Burma. Since the British won the war, the relation between the Rohingyas and Buddhists started deteriorating. Like India, Buddhists of Burma had also launched their freedom movement against the British and expected that Japan would help them for achieving independence.

On April 4, 1948 Burma got independence from British colonial rule and a democratic government with U Nu as Prime Minister was formed. The new government, while counting the Muslims settled in Arakan as Indians (The Role of Indian Minorities in Burma and Malaya by Mahajani, 1966) asked the BMC leaders to resign from the AFPFL. BMC leaders however assured the new government that they would discontinue the religious-political activities of the organisation and subsequently got two berths in U Nu's cabinet. But in 1956 U Nu removed the BMC from the League and in 1958 declared Buddhism as state religion, which antagonized the Muslims and the Christians. (Burma and Indonesia by Kalyan Bandyopadhyay, South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 1983, page 34).

Ever since the independence of Burma, Rohingyas were fighting for a separate statehood and had even made an unsuccessful attempt for making Arakan a separate independent country. This created an adverse impact in the minds of Burmese Buddhists against them. Although, the U Nu Government remained indifferent towards them, the subsequent military regime headed by General Ne win took them seriously for their alleged Islamist activities. The new regime declared Rohingyas as illegal immigrants on the plea that they had settled in Burma during British rule. They however, recognized the Kachins, who are mostly Christians as indigenous ethnic group of the country. It also formed its own party namely Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP).

In 1974 the military regime framed a new constitution and named the country as Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma. Its main focus was on Burmese culture, language, tradition and religion. Accordingly it completely removed the nationality of Rohingyas, declared them as foreigners, denied their citizenship rights, removed them from various government jobs and also confiscated their properties. They also put travel restrictions on them by introducing special identity papers for their movement. In 1978 the army launched repressive measures against them for their alleged Islamist activities and alleged links with terrorist organizations. This forced a large number of Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh, where they were settled in various refugee camps in Cox Bazar area. The Islamist organizations in Bangladesh took advantage

of the situation and sent a sizeable number of them to Afghanistan to fight against the Russian army. After the withdrawal of Russian Army from Afghanistan in 1989 most of the war trained Rohingyas returned to Bangladesh and also re-entered Burma to fight against the Burmese army.

After the end of Afghan war the Ne Win government intent on removing all anti-Burmese elements again targeted the Muslims settled in its western region bordering Bangladesh. The repressive measure against them was for their alleged link with international Islamist terrorist organisation like Al Qaeda and Taliban. Therefore, in 1991-92 again a large number of Rohingyas fled from Burma to Bangladesh.

Even though there is no written law or regulation mandating customary discriminatory practices against the Muslims, the latter have suffered from ethnic and religious discrimination in Burma for long. The rigid socio-religious character of the community which generated anti-Muslim feelings among the Buddhist majority was the main reason behind the developments.

During pro-democracy movement against the military regime since August 19, 2007 its leaders had accepted the Rohingyas as indigenous population and had even blamed the then regime for diverting the attention of the people from the real issue as to why the democratic government led by U Nu declared Buddhism as state religion had dropped Muslim members from his cabinet. Even Aung San, the main leader of freedom movement and National Martyr had assertively expressed his reservation against the Muslims. His daughter Ms Aung San Suu who led her party National League for Democracy to a majority win in November 2015 election could not become the president of the country as Myanmar constitution forbids her for this post because she has children of foreign origin. After her prolonged silence on the present crisis she opened up for the first time on September 19 saying that her government “does not fear international scrutiny” and is restoring peace and normalcy in the country. Her statement also suggests that like her father she too has reservations on the Muslims.

It appears that the Buddhist population of Myanmar who are in overwhelming majority do not want Rohingyas particularly after the attack of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army on some of the police and army posts which led to the death of many security personnel. In view of the no-compromise attitude of the majority of native population with the radicalised Rohingyas, India too cannot take the risk of allowing them at the cost of national security.

As many voices in media are also supporting the view that Islamic countries should come forward to rehabilitate the Rohingya refugees in their respective countries, the UN should take the initiative in this direction instead of putting pressure on India.

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