

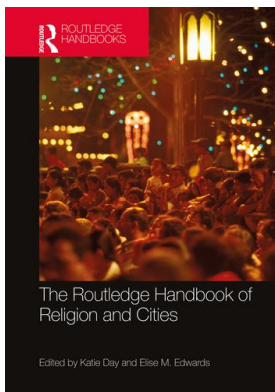
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Katie Day, Elise M. Edwards

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M Ala Uddin

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THE ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS

Religious identity as a source of expulsion, hospitality, and solidarity

M Ala Uddin

Introduction

The Rohingya have lived in Rakhine State of Myanmar¹ since the seventh or eighth centuries (Karim, 2016; Minahan, 2012; Rahman, 2012). However, they have faced discrimination and systematic persecution for decades. Given their faith in Islam, and identity as Rohingya, the majority people of Myanmar do not acknowledge them as countrymen; rather, they are often despised outright. Since the 1980s, the Rohingya have faced severe discrimination in the Buddhist-majority country, and considered to be “illegal emigrants” from neighboring Bangladesh. Although they have lived in Arakan for generations, in accordance with the 1982 Citizenship, they became *de jure* stateless in their own country (Ahmed, 2010). Since then, the Rohingya are no longer a native people of any country—a people without their own homeland. In effect, for decades, they have been widely known as a paradigmatic “stateless” people (Ahmed, 2010; Abrar, 2017). The fate of the hapless religious minority remained unchanged; rather, it has worsened over time. They are often described as one of “the world’s most persecuted minority” (Fortify Rights, 2014). The recurring sectarian violence and systematic persecutions have resulted in them frequently seeking safety in neighboring countries, mainly in Bangladesh. In the historical trajectories, whenever they faced severe persecutions in Rakhine, they fled to save their lives, and preferred to seek refuge in Cox’s Bazar, a coastal district located in the southeastern part of Bangladesh, which has been widely known as a tourist zone in Bangladesh.²

However, beginning in the early 1990s, this tourist hub has become a refugee harbor in 2017–2018, making it also an NGO-prone district in Bangladesh. By 2018 it had become home to many international NGOs as well. Now Cox’s Bazar witnesses more foreigners but they are not primarily tourists, most of them work in various international organizations to ease Rohingya’s sufferings through life-saving services. Now the tourist area has got a different look, with those not only from the foreigners working for international organizations, as well as hundreds of local researchers, government officials, and security forces, all working tirelessly to manage the Rohingya crisis. Many Bangladeshi and foreign scholars and researchers are doing research on Rohingya issues as well. Unlike before, luxurious hotels are now full of guests who do not come to see the beauty of the beach but are here mainly for Rohingya refugees, who are concentrated in two sub-districts (*upazila*) of Cox’s Bazar: namely, Ukhia, and Teknaf—that adjoin the Naf River dividing Bangladesh and Myanmar. In August 2017, popular and

state-supported violence against the Rohingya became so severe that more than 700,000 Rohingya had to flee on foot to Bangladesh. In response, despite their own economic struggles, local Bengali Muslims from Ukha and Teknaf came to offer shelter to the forced migrant Rohingyas in their homes and yards. The Rohingya belong to the same religion (i.e., Islam), and speak almost the same language (*Chittagonian* dialect). In regards to the suffering of the Rohingya displacees, the Bangladesh government immediately showed a humanitarian gesture of generosity. It has permitted Rohingya to settle in refugee camps in an economically and environmentally sensitive³ area of the country. What accounts for the difference in their displacement from Myanmar, and reception in Bangladesh?

Notwithstanding the humanitarian crisis of the Rohingya, which has continued for decades, the underlying factors in the displacement and accommodation, especially considering religion, have so far received very little research attention. Given this dearth of research, this paper attempts to offer a critical and constructive account of the roles of religion in the Rohingya refugee crisis, and provide insights into the dynamic relationship between religion and refugee affairs—both for the creation and response to the problem—in the ongoing sectarian conflict in Myanmar, and religious solidarity in Bangladesh.

In the wake of the recent global refugee crises, religion has garnered serious attention by diverse scholars as well as policymakers—in the making and resolving conflicts. This article explores the religious aspects of refugeehood in Bangladesh. However, religious factors in the accommodation of Rohingya in Bangladesh cannot be wholly understood without taking into account the religious dimensions in the production of the refugee crisis. In this paper, first I briefly explore the context of the study, reviewing relevant literature and conceptual frameworks. Thereupon, I discuss the background of the Rohingya and their persecution in Rakhine State, which has resulted largely from ethnoreligious differences. In the process I will discuss the Rohingya plight in refugee camps in Bangladesh, and analyze the impact of the refugee situation on host societies and how the Rohingya have been treated in Cox's Bazar. Besides the accommodation of the refugees in Cox's Bazar, I will show how Cox's Bazar has become a center of NGOs, researchers, and humanitarian agencies as byproducts. Subsequently, I explore how they have been integrated in the nearby port city of Chittagong since the 1980s.

Concept, objectives, and study methods

For a long, anthropologists have been studying diverse forms, and consequences of migration: displacement, forced migration, refugee situation, and diaspora. The strength of anthropological approach is that it analyzes the lived-experiences of migrants through the whole process. Its holistic perspective is unique in understanding the everyday experiences of migrants—whether forced or voluntary. While migrants travel through an uncertain process, they leave behind their past and often lose their belongings. Anthropologists try to understand the belongings that narrate the stories of individuals, collective identity, shared background, wider relationships, and the present-day consequences of the past events. With holistic approach, anthropologists view migration more broadly in the light of connected realities and social processes that cannot be understood fully isolating from the whole contexts within which the processes occur (see Rashid, 2016). Toward that end, the present paper tries to shed light on the tangled web in which the Rohingya find themselves in between state and statelessness. It considers human, as well as refugee rights, ethnicity, and nationalism as strong conceptual points of analysis. It analyzes these concepts with anthropological insights.

In response to the relative absence of comprehensive research on the longstanding Rohingya crisis, I intermittently conducted empirical research between July 2014 and October 2019

(before and after the *en masse* exodus of 2017) at different refugee campsites in Cox's Bazar, where more than one million Rohingya currently live in horrendous conditions. Like in their country of origin, most Rohingya remain "stateless" in Bangladesh. Notwithstanding their sufferings and restricted lives, most of them prefer to stay in Bangladesh and survive mainly on the humanitarian aid rather than return back to Rakhine without basic rights. Under these circumstances, I conducted qualitative research largely among the Rohingya refugees. To understand local versions of the refugee crisis and the overwhelming effects on local lives, the host communities were also included in the study. Taking religion as a major mark, the paper addresses the following four major interrelated issues:

- Life-experiences of the Rohingya in Rakhine
- Living conditions of the Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar
- Role of religion both in the creation of and in the response to the crisis
- Accommodation and integration in Cox's Bazar and Chittagong

The paper draws upon qualitative data collected from 68 interviews among Rohingya refugees and 10 volunteers and assistance organizations at 7 refugee camps (i.e., Kutupalong, Balukhali, Burma Para, Hakim Para, Unchiprang, Mainnerghona, Leda, Nayapara) in two major sites: Ukhia, and Teknaf of Cox's Bazar district. These campsites were chosen because they represent both traditional (sites that have a long history of receiving refugees, e.g., Kutupalong, Nayapara) and emerging gateways (sites that have recently received refugees at a faster rate than the previous average, e.g., Balukhali, Burma Para). It is also important to compare traditional gateways to emerging ones, as the emerging gateways provide more recent and detailed experiences of the newly arrived refugees, while the old campsites provide life-experiences of the previously arrived refugees, as well as mixed reactions of the host communities. Rohingya people (N=15) living in Chittagong city were also included in the study. Moreover, I talked with several government officials, including a joint secretary associated with Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission (RRRC), deputy commissioner, police commissioner, three members of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), an Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO), and members of the host communities.

The research methodology included conducting a questionnaire survey and information gathered by observation, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Key-Informant Interviews (KIIs). The study also included some interesting case study-based analysis on two particular areas where, in spite of religious and linguistic similarities, Rohingya face severe threats; however, for these similarities, many got shelter and necessary support from local Bengalis. Individual and group interviews were conducted to understand the crisis more comprehensively. FGDs were set in places with adequate privacy for participants to express their views and opinions without fear of adverse consequences.

Given that the displaced Rohingya bring with them a wealth of information and memories which are crucial for understanding and comparing their ways of life, I also explored these issues through IDIs, KIIs, and FGDs. A set of questionnaires was developed, pretested, reviewed, and based on the pilot study data was collected and properly analyzed. Leading questions were formulated for each interest group such as 'old' waves and 'new' waves of Rohingya—aged, adolescents from both sexes, including some community leaders (*imams, moazzins, majhis*). To supplement primary data, secondary sources (e.g., scientific articles, research reports, newspaper reports and articles, etc.) were also consulted. The purposive sampling method was employed throughout the study.

Following the methodological procedures, this paper offers a critical and constructive account on the roles of religion in the longstanding Rohingya crisis. While religion has always been a

contextually based phenomenon, this paper particularly focuses on how the Muslim refugees have been accommodated in Cox's Bazar and Chittagong, and how they try to manage their survival in alien environments, populated predominantly by the Bengali Muslims. While different types and causes of migration to cities exist, the paper explores their impact across the areas of urban infrastructure and services, and elaborates on the broader role of the private sector, civil society, and international organizations in addressing the challenges the city faces to enable the long-term integration of the Rohingya migrants.

History of persecutions

The Rohingya are an ethnic,⁴ linguistic,⁵ and religious⁶ minority in Myanmar. They are a significant Muslim minority in a Buddhist-majority country. Numbering approximately 1,300,000, they were predominantly concentrated in the coastal Rakhine State, where they comprised about half of the total population of the State. The other half are largely the Buddhist Rakhine. However, now more than one million Rohingya live in Bangladesh who have fled decades of persecution and discrimination in Rakhine, with the few displaced Rohingya living in a number of internment camps in Rakhine.

Historically the Rakhine State finds itself at the crossroads of two worlds: South Asia and Southeast Asia, between Muslim–Hindu Asia and Buddhist Asia, and amid the Indo–Aryan and Mongoloid races. While the majority Burmese people are of Southeast Asian origin and Buddhists by religion, the Muslim Rohingya are oriented toward South Asia, Islam, and isolated from the rest of the Burmese people in terms of language, culture, politics and economy.

According to some historians, the Rohingya have been living in Arakan (along the Burmese border with Bangladesh) since the seventh or eighth century (Karim, 2016; Minahan, 2012; Rahman, 2012). With Muslim poets (such as the great poet Alaol), saints, and political ruling administrators, Arakan reached the pinnacle of its glory in the seventeenth century (Karim, 2016). It was an independent Muslim kingdom until 1784, when the Buddhist Burmese king Bodawphaya began to rule it. From that time onward, two distinct communities started living in Arakan. They were the Muslim Rohingya and the Buddhist Magh or Rakhine.

In one stage of historical trajectories, the British came to rule Burma in 1824. They identified a total of 135 distinct 'races' of Burma, but, mysteriously, the Rohingya were left out from the list as an indigenous ethnic group.

Historically speaking, prior to the emergence of independent Burma and Bangladesh, some Rohingya and Burmese people had settled in what is now Bangladesh (especially in the districts of Chittagong and Cox's Bazar); conversely, some Bengalis had settled in Burma (mainly in Arakan). Until then, migration from both countries (Bangladesh–Burma) went undetected since there was no border patrol.

In the wake of Partition of India in 1947, considering their historical connection, culture and religion, most of the Rohingya wanted to be part of Pakistan. But upon the independence of Burma from the United Kingdom, through the 1948 Citizenship Law, they were made *bona fide* citizens of Burma. Although, Rohingya were never formally recognized as an ethnic group, some Rohingyas served as parliamentary members, secretaries, and ministers throughout the democratic period.

But the situation—Rohingya participation in politics and economy—began to change with the rule of General Ne Win, who overturned the democratic government in a military coup in 1962. To Ne Win, the prior ruling party had accepted Rohingya as citizens merely to get their support in the elections. Still, Rohingyas were allowed to vote and stand for office until 1980s. However, in an attempt to exclude the Rohingyas from the mainstream society, the military

ruler began to amend the citizenship law, and soon took away their citizenship rights making them *de jure* stateless in their own country since 1982 (Ahmed, 2010). Since then, Burmese officials refer to the Rohingya as “Bengali migrants,” “foreign Myanmar residents,” or “illegal emigrants from Bangladesh.” With these pejorative terminologies, they have been systematically deprived of fundamental rights in their ancestral land.

In the process, since the late 1970s, the Rohingya have faced severe discrimination in Arakan. The Burmese governments have restricted their travel within the country and required them to seek permission to get married. Failure to comply with the rule, Rohingyas must face long term jail sentences. In addition, the government stipulated that no married couple can have more than two children (Fortify Rights, 2014). Both the human rights experts and the Rohingya perceive these rules to be aimed at a “slow genocide” or “slow poisoning” toward “ethnic cleansing.” Under these discriminatory circumstances, dire living conditions have been a strong push factor for Rohingya to leave their home country. Since the 1990s, the Rohingya have faced persecution, in effect, recurrent exodus has become part of their life-struggle. Like the previous ones, in the latest persecution in 2017, the military forces and armed Buddhist Rakhine committed widespread killings, rape and gang-rape, and destruction of mosques.

The recurring sectarian violence and apartheid-like conditions in Myanmar have resulted in Rohingya frequently seeking safety in neighboring countries, mainly in Bangladesh. Apart from Bangladesh, a number of displaced Rohingya also live in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Thailand, Malaysia, Europe, North America, Arab Emirates, Australia, and New Zealand. However, wherever they live, they are “natives of nowhere” (Cower-Smith, 2019).

Whenever the Rohingya have faced severe persecutions (e.g., arbitrary arrest, torture, killing, burning, illegal expulsion, and forced internment) in Rakhine, they have fled to save their lives, often seeking refuge in Cox’s Bazar of Bangladesh. In 1978, for instance, more than 200,000 crossed the border into Bangladesh, while in 1992, around 250,000 Rohingya sought refuge in Cox’s Bazar in order to flee state terrorism and systematic persecutions in Rakhine (HRW, 2009). Rohingya further faced massive persecutions in 2012, causing a major influx into Cox’s Bazar.

The United Nations termed the 2017 atrocities, a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing” (UN, 2017). A UN fact-finding mission described the military campaign as having “genocidal intent” (2018), and the issue is currently under trial at the International Court of Justice in The Hague.⁷ In the wake of the crackdown of 2017, the long overlooked Rohingya crisis has garnered attention of the international organizations, ironically though.

The suppressive state policies against the Muslim Rohingya minority have political and humanitarian consequences, as well as psychological implications for Rohingya: 1) an identity crisis; and 2) a sense of insecurity. Denial of citizenship of Rohingya has made them stateless in their own country, where their ancestors have lived since the seventh century. The Rohingya are often referred to as ‘one of the world’s most persecuted minorities.’ Moreover, they have already become the largest stateless people in the world and perhaps the only one that has been almost completely displaced without any protection and substantial protest within Myanmar or beyond. In response to the persecutions, although several Rohingya armed groups were organized in the 1990s, they were short-lived (Ahmed, 2010). As stated by some key informants, the only option left for the Rohingya was to become Buddhist leaving their ethnoreligious identity, if they want to stay in Rakhine—which was unacceptable for the Muslim minority. Given the situation, according to many Rohingyas, the only alternative way to save their lives and identity was to flee from Arakan/Rakhine. Although they were aware of the perilous sufferings that certainly awaits them in exile, nevertheless, they sought shelter in Bangladesh’s impoverished district, Cox’s Bazar. Due to restricted lives in the camps, some of them however later have managed to leave Cox’s Bazar, and live elsewhere, such as in the nearby city, Chittagong.

Religiosity in Cox's Bazar

Whereas, back in Rakhine, religion had been a major cause of the persecution, in Cox's Bazar, religion takes on a different role, where religiosity has been seen as contributing to provision of shelter and solidarity through active involvement in negotiations at local, national, and transnational levels.

When the Rohingya sought refuge in neighboring countries, most of the countries have not been receptive. The Bangladesh government, which was initially reluctant to back the Rohingya refugees, changed its stance ahead of the "national parliamentary elections". As a matter of fact, the public opinion created a domestic political pressure on the government to act in favor of the distressed Rohingya. According to some political commentators, if the Rohingya were not Muslim, they would not have been received well in Cox's Bazar, since it is predominantly populated by Bengali Muslims (more than 90%). Neither the government nor the local Bengalis would have been so supportive of them. Nonetheless, many Bangladeshis consider the problem primarily as a humanitarian crisis. Apart from the overwhelming Muslim majority among the Rohingya refugees, there are some Hindu (444 families) and Christian (25 families) Rohingya in Cox's Bazar. They also fled Rakhine along with Muslim Rohingyas following the military campaign of August 2017. The Christian and Hindu Rohingya were relatively free of risk in Rakhine while the Muslims were the key target of the systematic persecutions. Although non-Muslim Rohingyas live in separate sites (such as UNHCR transit), they sometimes face threats or attacks by the Muslim Rohingyas as the latter feel more powerful in Cox's Bazar than they did in Rakhine.

The Border Guards of Bangladesh (BGB) and local citizens appear to have been personally moved by the humanitarian disaster and have been welcoming of the refugees. Before the Rohingya took shelter in refugee camps they got shelter in local homes and *madrasas* (Islamic schools). Despite their struggle to cope with the harsh environment in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Rohingyas feel that now they have some sense of security. In the camps, they can marry, give birth, and perform religious rituals of passage (e.g. birth, death, and marriage) that were very difficult in their own land. According to some Rohingyas,

We are relatively free here. We can marry off our children without permission from the authority. We do not need to get permission for child birth which was mandatory in Arakan, where a couple was not allowed to have more than two children.

(Interview, Cox's Bazar, July 2019)

Although they are not entirely satisfied with the facilities available in the camps, still they prefer to stay in Cox's Bazar.

As an impoverished and developing country, Bangladesh has been suffering from the refugee crisis for long, and governmental resources have been stretched to their limits. But its Muslim people have been very sympathetic to the fellow Rohingya Muslims, viewing them as victims of Buddhist oppression. Soon after they reached several entrance points in Ukhia and Teknaf since August 2017, locals came up with whatever they could provide for the Rohingya displacees, including shelter, food, and clothes. Later, 32 makeshift camps were built for their accommodation. Without help of the locals, Rohingya would have faced dire consequences, including starvation and death. There are some local Bengali Muslims who faced difficulties having two meals a day; but they supported the Muslim refugees for *sawāb* ("reward") in the afterlife. Many from different districts visited the Rohingya in different campsites with food, clothe and money. To them, "It is our duty to help the most destitute Muslims. They are our brothers. We have to support them with

whatever we have” (interview in Ukhia, 2018). As observed, many individuals, political parties, and organizations, as well as non-political organizations, have helped the Rohingya. They also raised money from others to donate the Rohingyas. I saw such banner in Dhaka (Maghbazar in 2018) where an organization (i.e. Anjuman E Mofidul Islam) was seeking money for the Rohingyas. A Bengali says in this regard, “As a Muslim we cannot avoid the situation. We are all Muslim. If we do not provide them with support, Allah will be dissatisfied. What will we respond to Him in the afterlife” (interview with a middle-aged man, Teknaf, September 18, 2019)

The Bengali were very positive at the very beginning of the influx. As it has become protracted and the impact has been overwhelming on the country, many have changed their views. There has been criticism of international aid organizations, including UN, for their inability to find out a durable solution to the crisis (i.e. repatriation). Given that Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country, some political leaders have tried to become popular through their “humanitarian activities,” while all political parties unusually have supported offering refuge to the Rohingya. In addition, various initiatives have been taken across the country by individual religious groups (e.g. Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians) to provide moral as well as essential supports to the refugees.

In the camps, religious institutions provide a safe and familiar place for refugees to seek compassion and support. As the Rohingya perceive that they have been ousted from Myanmar because they are Muslim, they consider Islam as their fundamental identity. Therefore, they emphasize on religion so that they can maintain an Islamic way of life. In the refugee camps they go to newly established mosques for prayer and Madrasas as Islamic learning centers for their children. As I observed in the camps, those mosques and Madrasas have been built in all the camps by several national and international Islamic organizations from Muslim countries (e.g., Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey). They also use these religious sites for communication, and can freely practice their rituals in camps without any fear. As stated by some Rohingya, “Despite many restrictions, we celebrated two *Eids* (largest religious festivals) in a foreign country (Bangladesh) with religious fervor, which we never did in Burma” (interview in Nayapara and Kutupalong camps in 2019).

A significant aspiration for education (both religious and general) has also been observed among the Rohingyas. Almost all Rohingya children go to *moktab* (morning religious school) in the early morning to learn Islamic *surah*, rules and Arabic language to read the Holy Quran and Hadith. Through schooling, some Rohingyas have become *hujur* or *mawlana* (Islamic educator). Eventually, they become leaders among the community. However, they have no access to formal/accredited education.

Beside Bangladesh, some Muslim-populated countries including Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Indonesia have been assisting the Rohingya by giving them shelters, humanitarian aid, and diplomatic support. Here we find another picture for the insignificant number of Hindu Rohingya. The Indian Embassy in Bangladesh has been looking after the Hindu Rohingyas. However, like other Rohingya, they also receive other forms of aid from humanitarian organizations, including the Bangladesh government.

Prudently, both the Bangladeshi government and the Bengali people have been cautious about potential radicalization among the Rohingya Muslims living in the camps. The government has continued strict surveillance on Rohingyas so that they are not influenced by any radical organization. Access to the camps has been heavily restricted for outsiders. The government authorities also banned activities and programs of some suspected organizations in Cox’s Bazar and refugee camps. Due to the caution and rigorous steps of the government, no evidence of radicalization at the camps has been observed so far.

Changing landscape in Cox's Bazar

Usually, refugee settlement requires a “temporary” arrangement. But in the case of Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, it has developed into a more permanent situation as they have been living in Cox's Bazar for about four decades. Since then, some international offices (such as World Food Program, United Nations High Commission for Refugees, Save the Children) have their set up in Cox's Bazar to run their programs in Ukhia and Teknaf. However, with the influx of 2017–2018, the rapid growth of Rohingyas has created the world's fastest-growing refugee emergency in Cox's Bazar.

In response, a number of local and international organizations paid attention to Cox's Bazar. From the very beginning of September 2017 many Bangladeshi people from various districts visited the campsites every day, bringing food, clothes, money or just sympathy from fellow Muslims. In addition, several international personalities and Goodwill ambassadors visited the sites that include: Secretary General of UN Antonio Guterres, President of the World Bank Group Jim Yong Kim, head of the Catholic church Pope Francis, Nobel Peace laureates, and others. They visited several camps and met distressed Rohingyas, and spoke against Myanmar's atrocities that forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims to flee. All these visits garnered international attention, moral support and global sympathy for the long-overlooked Muslim minority.

Eventually, since the late 2017 Cox's Bazar has become hot spot for NGOs. Immediately, the district witnessed an influx of aid, innovative ideas and programs to ease refugees' pain. Also, hundreds of foreign as well as local researchers have made this 'erstwhile' tourist spot a research hub. Hundreds of local and international professionals have been working in those NGOs. Now real tourists face difficulties in booking hotels in Cox's Bazar and Teknaf because some NGOs have already leased them as office space.

Apart from the Rohingya refugees, Bangladeshi and foreigners have expanded the periphery of Cox's Bazar with their accommodation, camp-centric programs and mobility. The expansion of various businesses to serve outsiders has given a new look to Cox's Bazar. Professionalism has also reached in hotels, restaurants, transport sector and traffic management. Given the demand, some transport companies have increased their business in Cox's Bazar by withdrawing their buses and cars from Dhaka to Chittagong. Hundreds of cars, autos (CNG), and other vehicles ply on the road from Cox's Bazar to Ukhia/Teknaf every weekday from 6am to 7pm. Now it takes more than double time to reach a place, sometimes which takes 4/5 hours extra time if an uncertain traffic jam is created somewhere. I have faced such jam several times particularly while coming back to Cox's Bazar from camps.

In addition to transport vehicles, Cox's Bazar-Ukhia/Teknaf roads often witness camp bound hundreds of trucks to go bundled with goods, reliefs, and other supplies. Air connectivity of Cox's Bazar has also been increased with Dhaka and Chittagong. Now almost all the time aircraft is full of passengers—half of them are working in refugee camps. In this way, Cox's Bazar has become a busy city with incoming people from all sides—river (Naf), sky, and roads.

With the increase in population and diverse works, refugee camps have become busier than the Cox's Bazar town or the beach. In effect, there are no areas of services and infrastructure that have not reached in the camps (e.g., water supply, sanitation, solar panel, petroleum gas, health centers, sewerage, and waste management). And to accomplish the huge works, a number of employees are engaged in the management, who meet every week to assess their works and progress with the site management, run by the government. Considering the variety of works, the campsites are no longer an abandoned place in any way. A new congested environment has

developed in the heart of the empty mountains that require a different kind of management—temporary but in permanent shape.

The Rohingya refugees and their lives in camps have become commonplace in Bangladesh. Likewise, people from all parts of the country have become interested to engage in the Rohingya camps. Every day hundreds of visitors/NGO workers or researchers need to have lunch nearby the camps. To serve them, many restaurants have been opened in Ukhia and Teknaf. During my research I took lunch there, and talked to a restaurant owner in Ukhia, who hails from the capital city of Dhaka. Along with some staff, he started the restaurant business all the way from Dhaka to Ukhia mainly for selling lunch. Today, snacks, drinks and coffee are available in the shops even inside the camps. Betel leaf, biscuits, and coffee are the most common snacks to Rohingyas.

Among the stalls, jewelry and mobile shops are very common in camps. In addition to economic value, gold carries social and cultural importance to Rohingya families. While gold is an obvious element in any occasion, to meet the needs they have built many jewelry shops in almost every camp. Many mobile stores are also observed in most camps where mobiles are sold, repaired, charged and recharged. Most of the adults have mobile phones for talking, and listening to Burmese radios. Some use mobile phones to listening to Hindi songs and religious lectures. While passing a tea stall or a mobile shop, some idle Rohingyas are regularly seen watching Hindi cinema and gossiping—perhaps recalling their past. Inside the camp, children are attending schools (i.e. learning centers), playing, collecting drinking water from tube wells, girls are going to their 'safe space', learning handicrafts, adult men are hanging out in the shops, some are watching TV, while some are cutting their hair in barbershops.

In the recent past, visitors to Cox's Bazar used to enjoy the beauty of the beach and visit Saint Martin's Island. Now most of the outsiders are NGO workers who leave the town in the morning and come back in the evening. This is the daily picture of today's Cox's Bazar.

Changing relationship

As mentioned above, currently more than a million Rohingyas are living in Ukhia and Teknaf in 34 extremely congested camps (27 in Ukhia, and 7 in Teknaf) while locals in these two upazilas are about half a million. Thus, astonishingly though, with the recent influx, the Rohingya has disproportionately outnumbered the local population in both Ukhia and Teknaf. Among the Rohingyas, about 76% live in Ukhia, while in Teknaf they are about 26% (ACAPS, 2018). In addition to the existing camp areas, the government has provided some more lands to various international organizations, including the United Nations, to build service-oriented infrastructures for refugees and locals in different sites. Given the overwhelming impact of the protracted refugee situation, the humanitarian organizations are looking to provide essential support to the host community.

With the overwhelming impact of the protracted refugee situation, a city-like environment has grown at the cost of local tradition, culture, and environment. The refugees have cut down trees in the forest to build their homes and fuel for cooking. Here it is pertinent to mention that, given the vast impact, the relationship between the Rohingya refugees and host communities (Bengalis) has changed over the period. At the beginning, migrant Rohingyas were received warmly by local Bengalis for humanitarian reasons as a symbol of sympathy with religious solidarity for their neighbors. Competition over jobs, however, has strained the relation. Local working people have complained that Rohingyas have reduced the costs of labor, although the Rohingyas have a different analysis. They feel that many locals are misusing their helplessness, and are paying them less than usual. Rohingya influx has also been blamed for traffic jam, deforestation, rising commodity prices, and deteriorating law and order situation in the district.

Although perceived as safe, living condition of the Rohingyas in camps is still precarious. While efforts to normalize the lives of the refugees continue, overcrowded shelters, unhealthy environment and open drains are contributing to the spread of disease in the camps. Since the second failed attempt to repatriate the Rohingya to Myanmar in mid-August 2019, the government of Bangladesh has restricted mobile network and internet connection, and has already announced that it will install barbed wire fences, watch towers and surveillance cameras around the camps (Miko and Hammond, 2019).

Survival and integration in Chittagong

Bangladesh does not recognize the Rohingya migrants as “refugee” as it is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or the UNHCR Statute. The Rohingya are officially registered as “Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs)” — a designation that denies their “refugee” status and any rights attached to that status. As a result, their lives remain at risk because they are deprived of the rights to education, work and free movement. Also, because of all kinds of disenfranchisement, they are always terrified of the law enforcement agencies. Although they are not officially “refugees” in Bangladesh, 29,435 received “refugee” recognition in 1992, but they have been treated like other Rohingya migrants. Since Bangladesh is a signatory to many international human rights treaties, logically and legally obliged to ensure the fundamental rights of all people living in the country including refugees or foreigners. Despite not signing the 1951 Convention, Bangladesh has continued to provide life-saving services to the Rohingya, with basic rights such as security. With the help of international partners, it has been providing shelter and necessary support to them. Significantly, it is the Bengali people who have been very supportive to the distressed Rohingya since the very beginning of their arrival.

It is important to recall that, in Myanmar the Rohingya are not regarded as one of the country’s 135 official ethnic groups, and are denied citizenship under Myanmar’s 1982 Citizenship Law, which effectively renders them “stateless.” The Myanmar officials refer to the group as “Bengalis” and insist they have emigrated illegally from Bangladesh. As stated by some Rohingyas in Cox’s Bazar, “In Myanmar they call us *kala* (migrants/foreigner), or illegal migrants or Bengali, as if we are from Bangladesh.” If we look back to 2016, the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan was asked by Myanmar’s *de facto* leader Aung San Suu Kyi not to use the term “Rohingya” while Kofi Annan was leading a investigation in Rakhine. As acknowledged by Kofi Annan in the report, “In line with the request of the State Counsellor, the Commission used neither the term ‘Bengali’ nor ‘Rohingya’, who are referred to as ‘Muslims’ or ‘the Muslim community in Rakhine’” (Annan Commission, 2017, p. 12).⁸

Given that fact, they have been confined within the camps in deplorable conditions, having no access to formal education, employment, health facilities and other basic rights. Over the time, some Rohingya however have managed to flee further from the confined camps to Chittagong city, seeking a higher level of safety, protection, shelter, and employment opportunity. There, more anonymity is possible. Using the ‘similar’ language, they try to hide their Rohingya identity.

Historically, migration in this region has been an ongoing phenomenon since the pre-colonial period—long before the independence of Bangladesh and Burma. There are some signs in Chittagong that are evidence of early Rohingya settlements (e.g., Arakan road, Arakan society, Arakan mosque, Burma colonies, Alaol Hall at Chittagong University, etc.). The Chittagonian Bengali and Rohingya still have relatives across the border. The Rohingya people, who had emigrated from Burma in the early 1960s, have already been integrated into Bengali society over the years. Now, they are no more Rohingya but Bengali, and, enjoy all rights and access

to facilities that other Bengalis do. However, the fate of the Rohingya who fled to Bangladesh recently is not the same.

As mentioned above, the Bengali Muslims received the Rohingya warmly at first, for humanitarian reasons as an expression of sympathy for their neighbors and feelings of Muslim solidarity. While religious identity of the Rohingya is the leading cause of persecutions in Myanmar, it is also foremost in the response to the problem in Bangladesh. We found the effect even in the port city of Chittagong which is 150 km away from Cox's Bazar. In the city, according to some Rohingya, the city dwellers were the first responders. So too were local authorities and several organizations which had been witnessing the incoming refugees for decades welcoming to the refugees. Rohingya who had settled in the 1970s (and were by now Bengali by citizenship), allowed them to squat on their lands and provided them with food and clothes. Likewise, many mosques and other religious organizations from different districts and cities raised money for the displaced Rohingya. I personally witnessed such an incident in Chittagong.

As we found, there are two categories of Rohingya in the city: 1) Old Rohingya (now Bengali living in several Burma colonies in Chittagong city); and 2) Rohingya refugees (the new migrants, who were scattered throughout the city). One of our informants was a 60-year-old woman, who migrated to Bangladesh before its independence (1971) with her father. She has two sons working in Saudi Arabia and Qatar, one as an Imam and the other as an Arabic and English tutor. They send remittances regularly. They have Bangladeshi citizenship and permanent property in Chittagong. Another Rohingya informant is an engineer, but his family members do not live in the Burma colony, or with other Rohingya. Many do not know about their original identity but are known as Chittagonian Bengali and maintain permanent addresses and assets in the city. Since these "old" Rohingya speak in the Chittagonian language, people from other districts cannot differentiate whether they are Chittagonian or Rohingya. We met a number of Madrasa students who are originally Rohingya, and are now live as residential students in some Madrasas in Chittagong. There are also a number of Rohingya imam and moazzin in several mosques in the city, who live in particular mosques. Other people do not know much about their past. Also, a number of madrasa graduates have already managed to migrate to some Gulf countries and are doing jobs in mosques as imam, moazzin, and Quran/Arabic tutors in Arab families and schools.

Given the similarities in physique, language, and religion, the Rohingya are relatively comfortable in the city; because they not only can hide their identity, but also can manage Bangladeshi citizenship through those city authorities who are sympathetic out of religious brotherhood. They also manage their citizenship through interethnic marriage, by marrying local women of the "old" Rohingya, a practice called "marriage migration" or "interethnic marriage". One Bengali Muslim explained, "It is our religious responsibility to help the helpless Rohingyas through marriage." In Islam, marrying helpless women is rewarding. "It is not just to help them for marriage but also save them from potential dangers such as sexual violence and trafficking," added another Bengali man (an erstwhile Rohingya). The Rohingya girls also employ marriage as a strategy for survival in Bangladesh with citizenship. Thus, both parties find benefits from interethnic marriage.

However, the government imposed a ban on interethnic marriage migration between Bangladeshi citizens and Rohingyas in 2014, citing the alarming trend of marriage and its abuses and misuses. One of the major reasons for the ban is that Rohingyas have used interethnic marriage as a ploy to gain Bangladeshi citizenship. Since both the Rohingya and Bengali are predominantly Muslims, there is no religious or legal restriction, except the 2014 ban, to get married to each other; hence, interethnic marriage has been one of the survival strategies of the Rohingya, which had been openly practiced until recently. However, Rohingya-Bengali marriage still occurs secretly, but at a limited number because of the ban.

New migrants in Chittagong

Historically the Chittagong city is known to the new Rohingya migrants, even to those who never visited it before. The dialect of the people of Chittagong region (Chittagonian) is very similar to that of the Rohingya. Physically there is similarity (Indo-Aryan/South Asian look, brown or black color) as well as having a common religion (Islam). Although as a city, Chittagong is not as welcoming to the new migrant Rohingya as Cox's Bazar. It offers no space or facilities for the refugees; but, given the historical link and cultural resemblance, the displaced Rohingya find the city a place where they can move relatively freely compared to the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Since their real identity is not apparent, they are like Chittagonian Bengali.

Notwithstanding the government provided shelter and food in Cox's Bazar, the Chittagong city authorities have never been positive toward integration of the Rohingya migrants. Here, again, it is the local people who provided for their basic human needs. The old Rohingya who had already got citizenship as Bangladeshis collaborated with the new Rohingya migrants. Newly arrived Rohingya were able to shelter at their ancestors/predecessor's houses in a Burma colony in Chittagong.

Survival strategies in the city

Given that neither the Bangladesh government nor the city authority allows Rohingyas to be integrated into the society or recognizes them as refugees, they try to integrate into the urban context through managing Bangladeshi citizenship and national ID cards 'illegally'. Some have managed citizenship through interethnic migration, but these situations often involved polygamy, child marriage, or abandonment. Despite being ruled 'illegal', both sides find potential advantages from such marriages. The Rohingya families accept a polygamous arrangement or marry off their daughters to older Bengali men or 'old' Rohingya men, because they believe that marriages will ensure their survival in Bangladesh (RFA, 2017). Hiding identity is another strategy for the Rohingya migrants, which cultural resemblance enables them to do. However, this creates other problems. Although they can hide their identity by the agency of physical appearance and language, they have no knowledge in Bengali, cannot get education, and have no chance to get permanent jobs or health facilities. Unlike in the refugee camps, they do not get aid from international organizations in the city.

Means of livelihoods

As mentioned above, Chittagong city does not offer support and resources for the refugees. They themselves manage their livelihoods facing several forms of discrimination in the city. Most of the Rohingya migrants are engaged in street vending—as they are not allowed to have permanent jobs, and they do not want to be identified as Rohingya, they choose a mobile business. They might work in small shops or factories, as security guards, day laborers, rickshaw pullers, housemaids, sweepers, transport workers, teaboy, and *tokai* (street children)—livelihoods that do not require formal office or authority. Women and girls are engaged mainly in garment manufacturing and street vending. Some women and girls work as domestic maids; some eventually become wives in Bengali families. The new migrants live with the fear of being arrested by the city police and sent to jail or refugee camps. But they want to live in the city where they can have an unrestricted life. To them, “nationalism or identity is secondary, our primary concern is survival”—“safe and security of life” (group interviews, October, 2019)

Conclusion

The current refugee crises across the world have brought to the fore claims of difference in ethnicity and religious identity. Religious identities play significant roles in the ongoing crises while religion has become the primary characteristic by which refugees are identified, imagined and understood in Asian countries. It is often a factor in the root of forced migrations of Rohingyas as thoroughly observed in Rakhine State of Myanmar. Nevertheless, religion can play its spirited roles in instigating conflict as well as social cohesion, and solidarity in humanitarian crises. Yet, religious bases of conflict, consequences, as well as religious interventions to crises have received little attention from scholars, policymakers and other stakeholders.

Notwithstanding the longstanding ethnoreligious crisis of the Rohingya, this issue has so far received less research attention.

Since the 1980s, the Rohingya have been an unfortunate ethnoreligious minority that has been considered a “problem,” as well as “outsiders” in both home and host countries. Decades-long persecutions and ethnoreligious tensions reached a critical level in Rakhine in 2017. On the other hand, the Rohingya refugees have been supported as “distressed brothers” in Bangladesh. Religion both drove the Rohingya out of, but has also been an important factor in their survival in Bangladesh.

Although most of the Rohingya currently enjoy refuge in Bangladesh, it does not provide them citizenship. In such a situation, a group of people cannot survive long. With limited resources and facilities, Bangladesh is unable to grant them human rights properly. As a result of the overwhelming effect of the protracted refugee situation, local Bengalis lost their jobs, and the surrounding environment is losing its natural resources. The bordering areas (e.g. Ukhiya and Teknaf) have become unsafe. In addition, the spread of harmful drugs, including Yaba tablets, has led to various social problems in this coastal zone.

However, with the influx of Rohingya, host cities are being reshaped over time. But the Bengali Muslims, religious infrastructure, sympathy and solidarity, Bangladeshi culture and customs as well as assistance, have all eased Rohingya’s access and shelter in Cox’s Bazar and Chittagong. Here religion supported them over their identity though they have had a historical tie with the Bangladeshis.

It should be kept in mind that this longstanding crisis cannot be analyzed by a single factor alone and as a result, it cannot be resolved through a single line. In addition to the ethnoreligious factors, to fully understand and resolve the crisis, it is imperative to explore it in the context of rapidly evolving geopolitics in Rakhine State, in particular. There is a need for a comprehensive peace process, which recognizes the ethnic and religious diversity within Myanmar. Reasonably, religion is not simply responsible for the crisis but has an important role to play in responding to the crisis as well. Nevertheless, geopolitics and political economy are of significant concern behind the transnational crisis across the borders.

Analyzing the findings of the study, I considered the sources of expulsion and integration of the Rohingya. Given the underlying factors that forced the Rohingya to flee from Myanmar to Bangladesh, I suggest that religious dissimilarity has been a leading cause of persecution in Myanmar, while religious similarity encouraged their flight to Bangladesh in particular, and their integration into the host cities. Given the role of religion in the Rohingya’s persecution, I argue that religion is a possible resource to facilitate negotiations (e.g. inter-faith dialogue, religious insights and spirituality) toward a sustainable solution to the humanitarian crisis. In this situation, combining religious tolerance with human rights can lead to a lasting solution to the crisis that will be able to free the Rohingya from statelessness and refugee guilt, while at the same time freeing them from being dependent on humanitarian aid. Likewise, religious groups

can create a unique path to the welfare of the human being and can make a real contribution. In virtue of religious ideology, morals and ethical standpoints, they can do betterment of all people—irrespective of race, language and religion—whether known, unknown, believers of own religion or people of other religions.

This study endorses the role of religion in the current refugee crisis by suggesting that civil and not-so-civil theologies have taken over the public spheres (Bellah, 1967; Schmiedel and Smith, 2018). Interreligious initiatives could help in preventing potential conflict among different religious groups. The dialogue might allow a better understanding among the Rohingyas toward resolving the problem. Informal meetings of ordinary people, as well as with political or military personnel from both the Rohingya and Rakhine in both Arakan\Rakhine State and Cox's Bazar might be effective in understanding each other's grievances, and eventually finding ways to solve the existing misunderstandings, and move toward a peaceful life like they had in the past. While people of different creeds share their common past (childhood memory), social gatherings, and their hopes for a bright future, this eventually may pave the way toward communal harmony and peaceful coexistence.

It is widely recognized that, being a developing and densely populated country, Bangladesh is doing its best to support the refugees in the camps, but it has to do more in order to maximize the benefits from the migrants by providing them with basic rights such as access to education, permit to works, health services and other facilities they need to acclimate well in Cox's Bazar and Chittagong. This eventually will ease the tension between the Bengali and Rohingya Muslims caused from the protracted refugee situation in Bangladesh. Although cities face challenges in integrating migrants and providing them basic services, employing proper management cities can also reap the maximum benefits of mobile talents.

Toward that end, a change in policies and mindset is needed to take advantage of the full potential of migration. Given the huge number of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, the government should have clear position on the refugee issue because it has already become a permanent reality. Therefore, I urge for inclusion of the refugee issues in city planning, which will involve a much greater focus on city environment—both on permanent city dwellers and new migrants. In consequence, the Rohingya refugees will be a resource, rather than a burden.

Religion and religious actors have important roles to play in the integration processes. Religious communities can make a real contribution to make the preferred cities livable for the forced migrants like the Rohingya. Not just praying for peace and shelter, religious organizations should speak out together against the oppressors, and of course, in favor of the persecuted people irrespective of class, race, language, and religion. In addition to the humanitarian aid for life-saving services, religious morals should be echoed so that the displaced migrants can survive well in cities. Together with humanitarian organizations, religious bodies can create a distinct and moral platform against systematic persecution and genocide against the Rohingya. Thence, the study urges for a moral insight of the religious groups employing interreligious contact and connection toward the crisis that will ensure mutual benefits for both forced migrants and cities.

Notes

- 1 Myanmar was renamed from Burma in 1989 by the then military government. Similarly, Arakan was officially renamed Rakhine State to emphasize the preeminence of the Rakhine Buddhists in this region disconnecting its past Islamic rules and its indigenous people Rohingya. Throughout the chapter, I alternatively use both official names of the region for two reasons. First, many still do not subscribe to the communal idea of the region religiously. Second, this study covers the people that still call the state Arakan.

- 2 Cox's Bazar is famous for its long natural sandy sea beach, which has the world's largest unbroken sea beach that stretches more than 120 km. A nearby island called St. Martin's Island is located in the north-eastern part of the Bay of Bengal, about 9 km south of the tip of the Cox's Bazar–Teknaf peninsula. These make Cox's Bazar one of the most visited tourist destinations in Bangladesh.
- 3 Cox's Bazar is 1 of 20 (out of 64) identified "lagging districts" of Bangladesh, and the Ukha and Teknaf upazilas are among the 50 most socially deprived upazilas (out of 509). Difficult terrain, bad roads, and insufficient infrastructure contribute to poor living conditions. It is also considered as an Ecologically Critical Area (ECA). Biodiversity in Cox's Bazar ECAs is under severe threat as a result of rapid and unplanned commercialization and tourism development. While Bangladesh is subject to serious climate change, this region faces the worst in terms of flood and storm damage, undermining the local population's resilience and livelihoods. The region is under threat as settlements have been established there for Rohingyas, clearing hills and forests. Rohingya camps are situated near the Protected Areas (PA) of Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary (TWS) and other National Parks in Inani and Himchari. These areas have already suffered degradation, and expansion of the camps is likely to result in significant ecological impact as forest and agricultural land is converted to establish housing, schools, water supply, and sanitation facilities.
- 4 The Rohingyas are an ethnic mix of Bengali, Persian, Mughal, Turk, and Pathan, whereas the majority of Burmese citizens are of Mongoloid origin and Buddhist (88%).
- 5 Rohingyas speak an Indo-Aryan language belonging to the Bengali-Assamese subgroup, particularly the Chittagonian language spoken in southeastern Bangladesh (Chittagong–Cox's Bazar region), with sprinklings of Urdu, Hindi, and Arabic words. Most residents of Myanmar speak in Burmese language—a Sino-Tibetan language, which is an official language and the language of the Bamar people, the country's principal ethnic group.
- 6 Rohingyas are overwhelmingly Muslims, mostly belonging to the Sunni Sect. There is also an insignificant number of Hindus and Christian Rohingyas (less than 1%).
- 7 The Gambia, an African Muslim country has taken Myanmar to the court in The Hague as the first attempt to accuse it of breaching the 1948 UN Genocide convention and seeking emergency measures to protect the Rohingya.
- 8 In September 2016, following a request from Aung San Suu Kyi, the Kofi Annan Foundation and the Office of the State Counsellor established an Advisory Commission on Rakhine State. The Commission submitted their report on August 23, 2017 to the Myanmar government just two days before the atrocities took place against the Rohingya.

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