



# FROM RAKHINE TO THE BORDERLANDS: THE ROHINGYA CRISIS AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIA-MYANMAR RELATIONS

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**Abstract :** The refugee issue has had a huge influence on Indo-Myanmar relations. The crisis, which began in 2017, has caused the relocation of nearly 700,000 Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar to neighbouring countries, including India. The scenario has heightened tensions between the two countries, as India has been compelled to deal with the influx of refugees and the security dangers they may offer. To solve the situation, India has taken a multifaceted approach. First, it provided humanitarian aid to Rohingya refugees. Second, it has engaged in diplomatic measures to resolve the conflict, including attending international forums and holding conversations with Myanmar's authorities. Third, India has strengthened its border security to prevent a future influx of refugees. The essence of the argument is that the Rohingya refugee crisis has had a substantial influence on India-Myanmar relations, and India's response to the situation has helped minimise its effects. However, the crisis is far from ending, and additional efforts are required to find a long-term solution to the situation. The India-Myanmar relationship will continue to be shaped by the Rohingya refugee crisis and both countries must work together to find a solution that benefits both parties.

**Keywords –Refugee crisis, India-Myanmar relations, Rohingya Muslims, Diplomatic efforts, Border Security,**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Rohingya issue has emerged as a defining dilemma in contemporary geopolitics, casting a pall over Myanmar's domestic landscape while also having a substantial impact on regional dynamics, particularly in South and Southeast Asia. This study delves into the many facets of the Rohingya issue, with a particular emphasis on the security and humanitarian implications for India-Myanmar relations. The title, "From Rakhine to the Borderlands," captures the scope of the problem and highlights its far-reaching implications. Rakhine State in western Myanmar is the epicentre of the Rohingya minority, where decades of discrimination, marginalization, and violence have resulted in widespread displacement and horrific human rights violations. The name "borderlands" refers to the crises' strategic relevance for India, particularly its northeastern states, which share a porous border with Myanmar. The spillover consequences of the Rohingya exodus into Indian Territory, together with security concerns arising from radicalization and militant operations, highlight the importance of properly resolving this issue. The Rohingya crisis is rooted in a fundamental confrontation between national sovereignty values and the necessity to protect human rights. The 2017 military campaign, which resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees to neighboring Bangladesh, garnered international outrage and prompted cries for accountability and justice.

India is in a dilemma between maintaining stable relations with Myanmar and upholding humanitarian principles. The Rohingya crisis is causing instability and radicalization in northeastern regions, posing security risks. The influx of Rohingya migrants has sparked concerns about militant infiltration and community tensions. India's approach to the crisis is influenced by geopolitical factors like its strategic cooperation with Myanmar and rivalry with China for regional dominance. Despite supporting Bangladesh in providing humanitarian aid to Rohingya refugees, India has not publicly criticised Myanmar's leadership. The Rohingya crisis is a severe test for India-Myanmar ties, involving both security and humanitarian concerns that necessitate coordinated action and coordination. By conducting a thorough study of the crisis and its repercussions, this paper hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the complexity involved, as well as to inform policy discourse and decision-making processes to address this critical issue.

## II. INDIA-MYANMAR RELATION

India's foreign policy is a mix of idealistic goals and practical considerations. While its leaders usually emphasise moral and ideological principles, realpolitik has a substantial impact on policymaking. Interactions with Myanmar demonstrate this dynamic. India's diplomatic influence has increased dramatically through 2023, gaining interest from governments around the world seeking to strengthen economic and strategic ties with the South Asian nation. India's relations with Myanmar are multifaceted, with deep historical ties and strong bonds forged during both countries' anti-colonial campaigns against British rule, with many complexities since the 1950s. In the 1990s, New Delhi implemented the Look East policy (later Act East), which emphasised regional connectivity, developmental aid, and military assistance. In exchange, it demanded Myanmar's assistance on security matters on Indian territory. India and Burma had close connections in the first decade after their independence, and they signed a Treaty of Friendship in 1951, declaring "everlasting peace and unalterable friendship" between them. Both were part of the Non-Aligned Movement. Several agreements to strengthen bilateral cooperation have been struck between the two countries. Institutional structures for fostering regular interaction on a variety of bilaterally important issues have also been established. India's foreign ministry maintains distinct sections for 'Bangladesh Myanmar' and ASEAN, which means that the country's diplomats deal with issues concerning Myanmar as a neighbour separately from those concerning Myanmar as an ASEAN member. The two countries' security and defence relations are largely concerned with border security and counterterrorism. The first-ever India-Myanmar Bilateral Military Exercise (IMBAX-2017) was held over six days in November 2017 and focused on peacekeeping activities.

India also participates in Myanmar's internal peace process, having signed as a witness to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement ceremonies in February 2018 and October 2015. Maritime cooperation between the two nations has also grown, with the Indian and Myanmar fleets holding their first bilateral naval exercise, IMNEX-18, in March in the Bay of Bengal. In early March, the Myanmar Navy took part in the biennial multilateral Milan naval exercise off the coast of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

### i. BILATERAL SECURITY RELATIONS

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### ii. BILATERAL COOPERATION

In addition to adding a regional and sub-regional element to bilateral relations, Myanmar's membership in BIMSTEC, ASEAN, and the Mekong Ganga Cooperation has also given our "Act East" agenda greater significance.

In July 1997, Myanmar joined **ASEAN**. Myanmar serves as a bridge between India and ASEAN because it is the only ASEAN country having a land border. A few cooperation suggestions have been implemented, and others are currently being discussed with Myanmar as part of ASEAN's IAI project. In December 1997, Myanmar became a member of the **BIMSTEC**. Myanmar is a party to the BIMSTEC Free Trade Agreement. Myanmar leads the energy sector. Myanmar's main BIMSTEC trade partners are Thailand and India. Myanmar's principal exports to India include agricultural items such as beans, pulses, and maize, as well as forest products like as teak and hardwoods. Chemicals, pharmaceuticals, electrical appliances, and transportation equipment are among the items it imports from India. Myanmar has been a member of the **Mekong Ganga Cooperation (MGC)** since it was formed in November 2000. MGC is a cooperation project launched by six countries - India and five ASEAN members - in the domains of tourism, education, culture, transportation, and communication. Aside from the aforementioned, India and Myanmar interact in a variety of fields. India has provided considerable development support. India has agreed to provide grant-in-aid assistance of around Rs 4000 crore. These include support for the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project, the Trilateral Highway Project, which is an East-West corridor connecting our Northeast with Myanmar and Thailand, India-Myanmar Industrial Training Centres; and assistance in public health by supporting the upgrading of Sittwe General Hospital etc.

The Indian population in Myanmar dates back to the mid-nineteenth century when British control over Lower Burma began in 1852. During the British administration, Indians dominated the civil offices, education, trade, and commerce in the two cities of Yangon and Mandalay. There are 1.5-2.5 million individuals of Indian heritage living and working in Myanmar's various regions.

Following the Rohingya refugee crisis, a considerable number of Rohingya moved to India for protection. However, the Hindu nationalist administration considers the Rohingya to be illegal immigrants and has attempted to repatriate them. Since late 2018, India has reportedly repatriated dozens of refugees to Myanmar, drawing criticism from the United Nations and human rights organisations.

### III. UNDERSTANDING THE ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS

The Rohingya are an ethnic Muslim minority who practise a Sufi-influenced Sunni Islam. There are an estimated 3.5 million Rohingya distributed over the world. Before August 2017, the bulk of Myanmar's estimated one million Rohingya lived in Rakhine State, accounting for approximately one-third of the population. They differ from Myanmar's predominant Buddhist groups. Rakhine State is Myanmar's least developed state, with a poverty rate of 78%. This tension is exacerbated by religious differences, which have occasionally led to war.

Myanmar was conquered by the British in 1886 when the country was dominated by Burman Buddhists and different ethnic minorities. The British staffed several government jobs with Indians who had moved to Myanmar. A large influx of Indian migrants to Myanmar occurred, and Indian immigrants began to dominate significant areas of the economy, causing tensions between Burmese Buddhists and Indian immigrants. Burma declared itself an independent nation in January 1948. In 1989, the military leadership changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar. In 1962, the military administration established a unitary state and imposed Burman Buddhist majority control over all ethnic minorities. Rakhines are one of Myanmar's most marginalised ethnic groups. Rakhines seek greater control over their resources, whereas Buddhists see Rohingyas as a burden on Rakhines. The concentration of Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine has caused many Rakhines to fear that the country may devolve from a Buddhist to a non-Buddhist state.

After Myanmar gained independence in 1948, Rohingya separatists desired an Islamic state for the Rohingyas in northern Rakhine. In 1962, the military junta subdued the rebels. Myanmar's 1948 citizenship law discriminated against Rohingyas who fled Myanmar after WWII since it prevented them from returning. Those who returned were deemed unlawful immigrants. Many Rohingya armed rebel groups emerged, claiming autonomy for the Rohingya. In 1948, rebels assaulted Buddhist villages in northern Rakhine. The revolt in Rakhine resulted in extreme violence, escalating tensions between Rakhines and Rohingya. The Myanmar military gained control of the conflict in 1954. The 1982 citizenship law permitted Rohingyas to petition for citizenship provided they spoke one of Myanmar's official languages. They were needed to present proof that their families lived in Myanmar before the country's independence in 1948. The Rohingya language was not recognised as an official language. The Rohingyas believed that their forefathers came to Myanmar during the Arakan dynasty and British control. However, the majority of Rohingyas failed to offer

evidence. When Myanmar was a part of British India, the British transported them there as labourers. Most Rohingyas who could not present the aforementioned evidence lost their citizenship. All consecutive governments denied that the Rohingyas were one of the country's 135 ethnic groups eligible to claim citizenship. Tensions between Buddhists and Rohingyas heightened. In 1982, the military and Buddhists massacred Rohingyas in large numbers. Troops exploited Rohingyas as forced labourers. In 1992, atrocities caused 250,000 Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh. In 1951, the government introduced the White Card. The White Card permitted cardholders over the age of 18 to stay in Myanmar temporarily. The most frequently recognised idea is that Rohang comes from the word "Arakan" in the Rohingya dialect, where ga or gya indicates "from." According to Chris Lewa, director of the Arakan Project, an advocacy group located in Thailand, identifying as Rohingya underlines the ethnic Muslim minority's ties to the area originally controlled by the Arakan Kingdom.

In 1998, the Arakan Rohingya National Organisation was established. Various Rohingya rebel groups continued to clash with the Myanmar authorities. Violence against Rohingyas ensued. Approximately 70,000 Rohingyas fled to Bangladesh following allegations of abuse by Myanmar authorities and Buddhists. They were not permitted to return to Myanmar, and those who did were classified as illegal immigrants. Rakhines and Rohingyas continued to engage in intermittent violence. In 2012, President Thein Sein criticized the Rohingyas as a threat to Myanmar's stability and suggested they could be placed in UNHCR refugee camps or transported to another nation. This fueled the belief that Rohingyas did not belong in Myanmar and condoned violence against them. Following the killings, the government and military ordered Rakhines to expel Rohingyas, leading to the displacement of 140,000 people. In 2013, serious violence against Rohingyas continued, with Buddhist nationalists advocating for legislation to defend their race and religion.

The Rohingyas, a group of people who have been displaced by Bangladesh, have faced increasing violence and persecution since the first census in 2014. The term "Rohingyas" was controversial in 2014, leading to the government requiring Rohingyas to register as Bengalis. The UN Secretary-General used the term in 2014, sparking protests by Buddhist monks and residents. The Buddhist hardline nationalist movement, which used anti-Muslim rhetoric, closed several mosques and feared that the Rohingyas' rapid population increase and migration from Bangladesh would change Myanmar from a Buddhist to a non-Buddhist country. In 2016, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) was created to rally Rohingya locals, but it is inadequately equipped to face Myanmar's military and security forces. The military reported roughly ninety-three battles with "extremist Bengalis" between August 25 and September 15, 2017. According to the military, the radical Bengalis sought to be recognised as Rohingya. The authorities compelled Rohingyas to relocate to internally displaced persons (IDP) concentration camps near Myanmar and Bangladesh borders. Rohingyas are denied their human rights in IDP camps.

The military chief urged Myanmar nationals to band together against the Rohingyas' desire to be recognised as one of Myanmar's ethnic groups. Suu Kyi denied that Muslims in northern Rakhine were being subjected to "genocide" and said that Muslims were violent towards Buddhists. The 2017 riots killed and displaced thousands of small landholders in Rakhine. According to a study by the advocacy group Fortify Rights, the government has recently ordered Rohingyas to begin carrying national identification cards, which effectively identify them as foreigners and do not offer them citizenship. Myanmar officials have stated that the cards are the first step towards citizenship. Nonetheless, critics believe that they negate Rohingya identity and may enable the government to further oppress their rights.

The Rohingya migrated to India from nearby countries in search of safety and to flee the atrocities they faced in Myanmar. However, the Rohingya refugees were viewed as a threat to India's national security, and in late 2018, India reportedly returned scores of refugees to Myanmar, prompting criticism from the United Nations and human rights organisations.

#### **IV. INDIA'S ROLE AND PERSPECTIVE IN THE ROHINGYA CRISIS**

The Rohingya crisis, stemming from decades of persecution in Myanmar, has led to a significant influx of Rohingya refugees into neighbouring countries, including India. While India has historically been a destination for refugees from various regions, the Rohingya migration presents unique security challenges due to its scale, socio-political context, and geopolitical ramifications.

## i. INDIA'S RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

The Rohingya problem, which stems from decades of persecution in Myanmar, has resulted in a large influx of Rohingya refugees into surrounding countries, including India. While India has previously welcomed migrants from other locations, the Rohingya influx poses unique security problems due to its size, sociopolitical context, and geopolitical implications. India is also interested in connecting its landlocked northeastern region to the Bay of Bengal via Rakhine State as part of a joint project with Myanmar that includes the development of a port in Sittwe, an inland waterway in the Kaladan River, and road construction to connect it to India's northeast. Delhi was concerned that the unrest in Rakhine State might jeopardise its interests. With rising security cooperation between the two nations, notably in combating cross-border ethnic conflict in their shared border regions, India was cautious not to disturb the Myanmar administration. India's provision of relief assistance was both a show of solidarity for the Myanmar administration and a response to humanitarian concerns in a neighbouring nation. Thus, geopolitical, security and economic interests, as well as humanitarian considerations, shaped India's attitude toward the Rohingya throughout this time.

The second phase of India's Rohingya policy began in mid-2017, with the announcement of the government's plans to deport Rohingyas who had settled in various regions of India. On September 14, 2017, India began "Operation Insaniyat" to deliver relief aid to refugee camps in 20 Bangladesh. Delhi's decision to assist is consistent with its intention to de-incentivize Rohingya migrants into India. Aside from geopolitics, humanitarian considerations, and noninterference in internal affairs, two other elements appeared to have guided India's stance in the second phase: increased security worries and the necessity for diplomatic balance between Bangladesh and Myanmar. Delhi's evaluation allowed it to establish three principles that formed the 23 foundation to drive its Rohingya approach: The first is the conclusion that "normalcy" can be restored "only with the return of the displaced persons to Rakhine state." This mindset implied that if Rohingyas returned to Myanmar from Bangladesh or elsewhere, they would also return to India. Officially, Delhi refers to Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh as "displaced persons," while those in India are considered "illegal immigrants." The second argument refers to Delhi's appraisal of the issue, which states that socioeconomic development in Rakhine State is "the only long-term solution." As a result, the necessity for independent support and mobilisation of development resources, as well as appealing to the international community to aid Rakhine's development efforts, has been highlighted. The third point refers to Delhi's position that it will retain constructive engagement with both Myanmar and Bangladesh and that the international community must "handle the situation with restraint, considering the well-being of the population."

Delhi's attitude in the third phase was most likely motivated by a desire to play a role in resolving the issue through stronger quiet diplomacy. The phase began shortly after China intervened with its 25 "three-step solution" to the Rohingya problem, and the following signing of the repatriation deal between Bangladesh and Myanmar on November 23, 2017. On December 20, 2017, Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar visited Myanmar and signed an MoU on the Rakhine State Development Programme with Myanmar's Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement. The agreement was targeted at "socio-economic development and livelihood initiatives in Rakhine State," as well as "a project to build prefabricated housing in Rakhine State to meet the immediate needs of returning people." According to the MoU, India has provided US\$25 million for a five-year development initiative in Rakhine State. India joined the UN Security Council team that visited Myanmar in early May 2018 at the request of the Myanmar government, along with three other 28 neighbours, China, Laos, and Thailand.

## ii. EXPLAINING INDIA'S PERSPECTIVE

There are two schools of thought that explain India's response to the Rohingya. The first school believes that the present Rohingya approach has some continuity since it is "consistent with [India's] traditional hesitation about automatically designating asylum seekers as refugees." According to this viewpoint, India has traditionally "created disincentives" for refugees to "stay on in India permanently," citing the instance of refugees from Bangladesh (East Pakistan at the time) during the 1971 war. This school of thought may not be entirely incorrect when it claims that India discourages permanent settlement of refugees and that the lack of a national refugee policy hindered Delhi's response to the Rohingya issue. However, there appears to be a significant contrast between the BJP-led government's Rohingya attitude and previous methods of managing refugees. The administration refused to accept the Rohingyas, even though India has consistently accepted

refugees in the past. Furthermore, no refugees have hitherto been viewed as constituting a "terrorist threat," yet the government's main reason in the case of the Rohingyas is security concerns.

The second explanation regards the current approach as a departure from the past and examines its potential ramifications for India. This school contends that framing the Rohingya situation through a security perspective is shortsighted because it may create additional security challenges for India, including "greater radicalisation" of an oppressed group, which might have major "spillover" implications on India. According to this school of thought, the government's Rohingya policy has jeopardised the lives of thousands of Indian diaspora populations in 34 countries, including Myanmar. Furthermore, the strategy has harmed India's long-standing reputation as an "open" and "democratic" state that has always had its 36 doors open to refugees.

Three difficulties arise from the above consideration of the two perspectives on India's Rohingya policy. First, India's handling of the Rohingya situation has generated concerns about its democratic credentials. Second, India's qualms about taking the lead may have already weakened its regional and global leadership ambitions. Third, while the method may have served short-term security needs, the concentration of thousands of desperate people in the neighbourhood could provide a rich breeding ground for radicalization. Taking a strong stance on Rohingya refugees makes India a possible target for extreme groups.

## V. THE WAY FORWARD

Delhi has preferred quiet diplomacy over loudhailer diplomacy. The challenge is how India can make its strategy more effective in preventing new conflicts in Rakhine, facilitating the safe repatriation of refugees to Myanmar, and mitigating any potential terrorist activity involving Rohingya refugees. An active and effective involvement in these areas can help Delhi reestablish itself as a leader in finding long-term solutions to the situation.

At the national level, India must ensure that no Rohingya refugees are repatriated to Myanmar until it is safe to do so. At the bilateral level, Delhi has been able to convince Myanmar authorities that the only way to resolve the Rohingya situation is for the refugees to return safely to Myanmar. As Delhi continues to provide relief aid to Dhaka for refugee camps in Bangladesh, an immediate need is to deal with the effects of the current monsoon rains. India has been collaborating closely with Myanmar and Bangladesh in the security sector. Sharing intelligence is a critical component of security cooperation in preventing terrorist groups from radicalising Rohingyas in refugee camps.

Given the nature of the Rohingya situation, some have urged for a "regional approach". The issue's size and complexity necessitate coordination and cooperation among regional governments. Even as ASEAN and its member states provide humanitarian assistance, there is growing disagreement about how ASEAN should do more. Some have argued that ASEAN should perform a "bridging role" between the Myanmar administration and the international community. As ASEAN reviews its role, Delhi may find it mutually beneficial to collaborate with ASEAN, while also engaging Myanmar and Bangladesh. In many ways, India and ASEAN hold similar perspectives on the Rohingya issue. Both India and ASEAN look at the issue through the lens of sovereignty. Both have promoted socioeconomic development in Rakhine State. Both feel that constructive interaction is more useful in finding a solution than loudhailer diplomacy. Aside from their similar methods, the stakes are enormous for both India and ASEAN. As both India and ASEAN develop their objectives, there are numerous areas where the two may collaborate. Some of the important topics are policy coordination in international venues such as the United Nations and its agencies. Both can help to boost Rakhine State's socio-economic development efforts. Another area where security cooperation may be improved is the sharing of information on terrorist operations involving the Rohingyas with Bangladesh and Myanmar. These efforts can be combined with pressure on the Myanmar government to expedite the repatriation process, ensuring that conflict in Rakhine does not reoccur, and execute the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State's recommendations as soon as possible.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Myanmar's internal political conflict between the military dictatorship and pro-democracy protesters has long split the international community. The West, led by the United States, pursued isolation and sanctions on Myanmar, but its neighbours, especially India and ASEAN, maintained positive engagement. The military regime's determination to democratise and hold its first elections in 20 years has sparked academic discussion about the efficacy of isolationist or constructive methods. The United States has become increasingly critical of Myanmar's government over the Rohingya issue, while Myanmar's neighbours, especially India and ASEAN, have maintained positive engagement. The worldwide divide may result in claims and counter-claims over which technique was most effective. The Indian response to the Rohingya crisis has been interpreted as contradicting its conventional stance on refugees. As a developing state with global ambitions and a long history of dealing with refugees, India is obligated to be an active participant in resolving the situation. Finally, India may be in a stronger position to form regional and global discourses on rising global governance concerns, such as refugees.

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