

The Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (CRG), in collaboration with Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies (MAKAIAS), ICSSR and TAFT Foundation, organized a research workshop on Interrogating Forced Migration between 16th and 21st March, 2015.

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Stateless and Suspect: Rohingyas in Myanmar, Bangladesh and India

The stateless people numbering ‘at least upto 10 million’ (UNHCR¹) represent a rupture in the very fabric of our imagined geography of a world neatly divided into bordered nation-states. Non-citizens, nowhere people yet in most cases, the stateless populations are ‘subjected non-subjects’ (Ryan, 2013): without rights, but not without the state’s disciplinary interventions and discrimination. In my paper I will examine how nation-states treat the stateless population with particular reference to the Rohingyas in Myanmar, Bangladesh and India.

Native to Arakan or the Rakhine State of today’s Myanmar, even the nomenclature ‘Rohingya’ denoting this minority Muslim community is currently the subject of controversy in the country. The Burman and Buddhist dominated leadership of the country has long treated them as illegal Bangladeshi infiltrators. Since the late 1970s, the Rohingyas have been present in large numbers in Bangladesh, particularly in the Cox’s Bazar area across the Naff river separating the Rakhine State from Bangladesh, in refugee camps and elsewhere. Increasing hostility towards the Rohingya under the Awami League Government in Bangladesh and continuing discrimination and violence against them in Myanmar has meant that large numbers of Rohingya are now seeking shelter in India. A large number of the community are also taking to the seas in precarious journeys to reach countries of South East Asia particularly Malaysia. However, the treatment of the Rohingya in SE Asian countries like Thailand and Malaysia lie outside the scope of the present paper.

Myanmar, Bangladesh and India have a shared colonial past that has shaped their present borders and histories to a great extent. Looking at the colonial and post-colonial history of this region, starting with the Treaty of Peace between the British and the King of Ava in 1826 through the partition of 1947 and the post partition boundary making through acts such as the North East Reorganisation Act of 1971 (India), Ranabir Samaddar writes:

[W]hat is remarkable in this nearly two hundred years’ history is that, with repeated boundary fixing in this huge region both as internal boundaries...and as [international] borders ...we have in this region the incipient nations and nationalisms, territorialities and ethnicities, peoples and people-hood(s), which cannot live without the links of the past ages, yet cannot digest these links in light of their own emerging claims ...In as much as they must now find out who they are in order to claim national status, they must to an equal degree demarcate who they are not in order to reinforce the claim.

¹ <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c26.html>

I have relied mostly on secondary ethnographies, newspaper reports and theoretical writings for this paper. I have also conducted group interviews with seven Rohingya girls at a shelter for minors in Kolkata, India and an interview with a member of the Calicut based Relief and Charitable Foundation of India which is a Muslim charitable organisation working with Rohingyas.

In the following sections I argue that the history of this region, coupled with the post 9/11 regime of securitisation and the increasing currency of the discourse of terrorism and the concurrent rise of Islamophobia, have combined to make the plight of the Rohingyas precarious in ways that are difficult to redress. The Rohingyas' claims upon citizenship and humanitarian assistance are repeatedly repudiated through the discourses of (il)legitimacy and security that reinforce the tenuous and often arbitrary borders between these three nation-states. procedure in place.