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Understanding Violence, Strategising Protection
Perspectives from Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Northern Rakhine State in Myanmar is inhabited by a majority Arakanese Muslim population and a minority Rakhine Buddhist population, in a state that is largely Buddhist and authoritarian. The recent history of exclusionary citizenship policies and consequent military operations against Arakanese Muslims, often called Rohingyas, have led them to flee Myanmar and take shelter in Bangladesh. In this study, I examine and review the stereotypes of each of these groups, implicated in the exclusionary nationalist policies of the Myanmar state, and the general hostility expressed towards the refugees by the host community in Bangladesh, with a view to understanding the multi-layered spaces of violence in which they live. The aim of this study is to elucidate protection mechanisms against such violence from the perspectives of refugees themselves. This is done through practices and observations noted by the author while engendering participatory processes among Rohingya refugees as part of a project being implemented by the organisation, Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB).

Keywords

Rohingya – refugee – Bangladesh – Myanmar – migration – citizenship – democracy

Introduction

Violence in and among nation-states occurs as a result of exclusionary processes that differentiate and discriminate segments of populations on the basis of religion, race, ethnicity and caste, and enshrine such exclusions in the policies, practices and, often, the constitution of such nation-states. These trends and forces result in displacement of the "excluded" segments of the population from the polity itself, and may lead to a situation in which refugees are

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created.[1] Refugees, therefore, have implications for the nature of the democratic practice that many nation-states seek to uphold, and open up the likelihood of potential spaces of violence, especially in newly-created states, in societies in transition or in an otherwise unstable societies. It is these spaces of violence that I shall be looking at in this study, from the perspective of "protection", which is also considered to be a characteristic of the modern nation-state.

Nation-states need not be democratic *per se*, as the world realised with the rise of the fascist state in the 1920s, but a key characteristic of a democratic nation-state is the identification of a people with a national polity. One of the relationships this polity can be said to have with the controlling power of the state is embedded in the very notion of democracy—that it is literally ruled by the people.

But as has been noted above, the practice of democracy does not always take place on a level playing field, benefitting all segments of the population equally; vast inequalities of power and resources may separate the haves and have-nots. Therefore, systems and practices of democracy also vary. The pluralist version of democracy—where power is a result of open competition, there are equal winners and losers, and the public arena is free and equal—exists mostly in theory. The second form of democracy is the elitist version, what Marxists call "bourgeois democracy", where power is maintained through systemic discrimination and privilege, people need influence, bargaining skills and resources to reap benefits, and power is conflictual. Then, there is the ideological version, or majoritarianism, where power is maintained through ideological values (mostly of the majority), institutional barriers to inclusiveness remain—in both the public and private arena—and hegemony, which incorporates both consensus and repression, prevents conflicts from arising (Gaventa, 1998).

It is within these different concepts of democracy that we can also delineate the spaces of violence. In pluralist democracies, "free" societies are not necessarily equal or fair ones. Free competition means the survival of the fittest and, hence, society becomes divided into achievers and losers. The spaces of violence in such societies, therefore, lie in the absence of protective measures for the weak. The term "bourgeois democracy", used to describe the second version, emerges as a critique of the first. Inequality among classes is considered to be part of the societal structure; hence, the violence that takes place between the haves and have-nots is also structural and, thus, is inherent in such democra-

1 Partha Ghosh in his book, *Migrants, Refugees and the Stateless in South Asia*, makes a similar argument (Ghosh, 2016).

cies. Here, violence results when policies favour the majority and exclude the minority. These two versions of democracies indicate and implicate spaces of violence, which may affect citizenship for all as a result of exclusionary politics of the state. Taken to the extreme, this may lead to forced migration or flight from the home country (Rohmann, 1999).

Considering the relationship between democracy and citizenship is, therefore, crucial. Citizenship is the status of a person recognised by custom or law as being a member of a state. A person may have multiple citizenships and a person who does not have citizenship of any state is said to be stateless. But this is merely the outward aspect of citizenship. Citizenship can be passive, as in obeying the laws of the state in exchange for enjoying protection from it, or it can mean an active participation in public life and democratic processes. The first instance is often distinguished as the liberal, individual conception of democracy and the second as civic, participatory democracy. In modern-day democracies, "passive" citizenship is more common at the national level, where social contract theory is directly applicable, whilst at the local level—i.e., town councils, city corporations or rural governing bodies—"active" citizenship prevails. It is at the local level where one can say whether citizenship truly manifests itself or not, when it overrides or goes beyond bonds of kinship (reminiscent of feudal ties) to unite people with different social backgrounds (class, gender, religion, caste, race) into one, inclusive, body politic (Gaventa, 1998).

Thus, we see that citizenship need not automatically be a result of increased political spaces or opportunities. It may involve a proactive response of citizens in the formulation of the system's structures and rules. The denial of such spaces, to people whose voices are not yet articulated, but are likely to be heard in the future, may form the roots of violence, a violence that may manifest itself in exclusionary policies, racial profiling or discriminatory laws. This will be the analytical framework of this article, one that is embedded in the visions of participatory action research, the methodology through which a large part of this article evolved.

The Notional Aspects of Participatory Democracy

Theoretically, the context in which unarticulated voices can be heard, and have access to or can influence systemic structures and rules, with a view to overcoming exclusionary policies, racial profiling and discriminatory laws, is usually described as participatory democracy or governance. I will look at the notional aspects of participatory democracy, with a view to relating it to the

situation of refugees who may fall outside of citizenry as defined by a particular nation-state, but who can still claim the protection of that state by virtue of residence and humanitarian values. An underlying assumption of such a framework is to assess notions of participatory democratic practice as a way to counter spaces and processes of violence that refugees may be subject to in their daily lives. I begin with a definition of participatory democracy.

Participatory democracy (sometimes termed *participatory governance*) refers to:

> Forms of governance in which citizens and other non-state actors are empowered (often through participatory action research or PAR) to influence and share control in processes of public decision-making that affect their lives. In traditional systems of representative democracy, citizens frequently lack access to information, have inadequate opportunities for meaningful dialogue and negotiation with public actors and are excluded from processes of public deliberation and decision-making.
>
> MALENA, 2014

It is reasonable to ask whether the above concept of democracy (and its implied citizenship) is relevant to a discussion about refugees. Technically, they may not be citizens of the country in which they have taken refuge, but in a protracted refugee situation they may at least have a claim on certain fundamental rights (e.g., to food, shelter, health and education), provided by humanitarian agencies, or the host government, which is responsible for not only its own nationals, but for all those who fall within its jurisdiction, including foreigners and stateless persons (Banerjee et al., 2005:8). This has happened previously, for example, in Bangladesh, where the government had to take responsibility for stranded Pakistanis (or *Biharis* as they are often called in common parlance) who had opted to go to Pakistan following Bangladeshi independence but were not repatriated and, hence, continue to live in Bangladesh as stateless persons.[2]

Refugees have, in most cases, been forcefully driven from their home country through a sustained and systemic process of exclusionary politics. In the host country, too, they may face similar forms of exclusionary politics, as outsiders in a country whose government fails to abide by international humanitarian principles. The rationale that governments tend to give for such a stance is that refugees pose a security risk for the host community (Rahman, 2010), a point

2 http://www.faqs.org/minorities/South-Asia/Biharis-of-Bangladesh.html (accessed on 25 May 2016).

of view that has been problematised by others (Lewa, 2001). Arguments of security risks are especially prevalent in cases of protracted refugee situations, like that of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, which I discuss here.

RIB's Approach to Democratic Practice in the Refugee Camps

In 2010, Research Initiative Bangladesh (RIB) was asked by the UNHCR in Bangladesh to undertake a research project among the Rohingya refugees in the camps, which would include refugee participation and perspectives. I was involved in the initial setting up of the project as a project coordinator, but later the task was delegated to a team of three, young, local colleagues. This article, therefore, is written from the perspective of "insider action research", i.e., by a member of the organisation, who undertakes research in that same organisation, with a view to change something in it.[3] In this article, I focus on the processes of democratic practice embedded in applying RIB's participatory action research approach to the refugee situation. RIB has adopted this approach to different marginalised communities across the country, for example, Dalits, who have been similarly excluded from enjoying the rights and benefits that are allotted to the mainstream society in Bangladesh.[4] Thus, almost as an extension of such ongoing work, RIB decided to take up the challenge of working with a refugee community, in turn adjusting the existing participatory tools to the new situation. The first task was to carry out preliminary research to define the problem areas among the refugees and those who worked with them, such as government officials and national and international NGOs. Among the sectors that were identified as needing the most intervention were women's health and education. These are not given the highest priority in normal practices of emergency relief, but were deemed essential for the refugees' survival in this specific situation—the case of the Rohingyas in Bangladesh. Since RIB is not a service-delivery organisation, it decided to engage in activities that generated a learning component. Using a community-based approach, RIB had already piloted a model of early childhood learning called the Kajoli Model among underprivileged households in over 150 centres, mostly in impoverished regions of northern Bangladesh. It was decided that an attempt would be made to replicate this model in the two official refugee camps.[5] Because

3 See David Coghlan (2014) "Inside Action Research", in David Coghlan and Mary Brydon-Miller (ed.) *The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research*. Vol. 2. London: Sage, pp. 443–445.

4 See www.rib-bangladesh.org (accessed on 25 May 2016).

5 For details of the different phases of the project, see Alam (2012).

the early childhood learning model in the camps entailed the participation of various groups of refugees, i.e., parents, teachers and managers, in a participatory process that used characteristics of self-management, RIB engaged in multifaceted ways that helped create a more enabling environment in an otherwise aid-dependent situation. Such engagement took the form of interactive theatre workshops, where the refugees were trained to identify and script their own problems, and enact them in a public forum. They also found new ways to express their feelings towards their homeland, or opinions about current problems in a newsletter published by RIB. Therefore, their participation was encouraged in ways that allowed expression of their emotions, as well as bringing out their perspectives on issues of importance to them.

From the ground-breaking stage until the end of RIB's involvement in the camps, a period that spanned three years, active participation of refugees was ensured—in the setting up, modification and the operation of 21 early childhood learning centres for 4–5-year-olds, and 27 crèches for 3–4-year-olds. The involvement of refugee women as teachers and crèche managers, alongside the role of animators who acted as agents for change in the community—as well as other measures, like engaging the community in participatory discussions for self-identification of their problems and strategising ways to solve them, and expressing their voices in quarterly RIB newsletters—gave them an agency that was lacking in many other governmental and non-governmental interventions. We at RIB took it upon ourselves to learn from such processes, and thus gain a better understanding of the refugees' perspectives. This study is a result of our immersion in such processes, which enabled us to gain intimate knowledge of the lives of the refugees and their future expectations. However, in the writing of this article, I have also reviewed secondary sources of literature, some of which are based on quantitative and qualitative data from the refugee situation being discussed here.

Although Rohingya refugees are currently described as stateless, or non-citizens of any particular state, they occupy a space that is essentially violent to their existence and, hence, look to change this state of affairs. Although notions of democracy may not be seen as relevant or bring any relief to their current predicament, the notion of "citizens", i.e., as makers and shapers of their own destiny may provide some encouragement. In the following sections, I will describe the current thinking about their situation of Rohingya refugees themselves, and the paths they are seeking to protect their lives and the existence of their communities. My understanding is that such thoughts and practices reflect a sense of responsibility to their families and communities, which is ordinarily expected from a citizenry within a democracy. Hopefully, the perspectives from our field work will also shed light on some practices

that might be taken up by national and international humanitarian organisations in democratic states and either emulated or adapted.

First, the paper articulates various narratives of the situation, so as to explain the different contexts, and parameters of debate and discussion that surrounds the Rohingya refugees in the borderlands of Bangladesh and Myanmar. Then, it focuses on protection strategies adopted in the official refugee camps, with a view to engaging with existing discursive practices, and extrapolating possible good protection practices—especially from the perspectives of the refugees themselves. Thirdly, I outline some case studies that illustrate exit strategies of refugees as the result of a failure of protection in their host countries. Finally, I articulate some lessons for the future, including existing good practices from European states.

The Struggle at the Frontier

> "We Rohingyas are like orchids," an 18-year-old Rohingya man called Shamsul once told me. "We are not able to grow any roots in the ground so we are left with only one way to stay alive and that is to cling on to others."
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> Cited by EMMA LARKIN, in Foreword to GREG CONSTANTINE'S, *Exiled to Nowhere: Burma's Rohingya*, a book of photography of Rohingya people (CONSTANTINE, 2012:10).

The extreme south-eastern tip of modern Bangladesh, and the river and land border with Myanmar (modern day Burma), has shared a history of violent conquests and cultural exchanges since pre-colonial times, a feature that, in recent times, has made the region more a cultural frontier than a border between two states.

The northern Rakhine state in Myanmar is inhabited by a majority Arakanese Muslim population and a minority Rakhine Buddhist population, in a state that is largely Buddhist and authoritarian. The south-eastern tip of the Chittagong district of Bangladesh, on the other hand, houses the minority populations of ethnic Rakhine Buddhists, as well as the more "integrated" *Barua* (Bengalicised) Buddhist communities, in an area dominated by majority Bengali Muslims.

Since 1962, Burma was ruled by a military dictatorship for nearly half a century, and had one of the worst human-rights records in the world. In that suppressive society, where the Burmese army fought against a number of ethnic insurgencies, the Rohingya—Muslim settlers in the northern part of Rakhine

State (formerly Arakan State), and who prefer to call themselves Arakanese Muslims—have been among the most persecuted. Following the 1982 Citizenship Law, passed under the rule of General Ne Win, Burmese Muslims were denied fundamental citizenship rights.

Such treatment by the Myanmar state has driven wave upon wave of Rohingyas into neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, where they have received only temporary shelter amidst hostility from local host communities. Support from the international community has also been fragile, limited to a coterie of humanitarian workers, journalists and academics. The Rohingya crisis has generated differing perspectives among international actors on the issues of citizenship and ethnicity. The situation has been well captured by Amal de Chickera in his article, "Stateless in Burma: Rohingya Word Wars" (de Chickera, 2012). His views, with some additions of my own, are elaborated on in the next section.

Citizenship and Ethnicity: Differing Perspectives

The perspectives that are discussed below stem from different actors who are related in some way to the Rohingya situation: (a) the Myanmar state narrative, (b) the host country (i.e., Bangladesh) narrative, (c) the local host community narrative, and (d) the international community narrative. These perspectives delineate the dominant discourses that contribute to the marginalisation of the Rohingya people, both in their home country and in the host country, and it is these dominant narratives that Rohingya refugees feel they are constantly up against. Thus, we need to familiarise ourselves with these narratives before looking into the refugee's own perspectives.

The Narrative of Myanmar

The narrative of mainstream Burmese towards Rohingyas or Arakanese Muslim population—sometimes defined as northern Rakhine Buddhist, sometimes "Burmans of the eastern part"—demonstrate a very negative attitude towards them (Leider, 2013). This attitude stems from a conflict that has a long history. However, more recently, the legacies of failed state-building, and an even weaker nation-building process in post-colonial Myanmar or Burma, led to intra-ethnic violence and the beginning of insurgencies by the Rohingyas between the years 1948 and 1958. As a consequence, military rule was established during 1958–1960 and 1962–1974. As a result of frequent military operations in areas close to the Myanmar border, the first Rohingya refugees starting fleeing into Bangladesh around 1978. This movement was exacerbated by the

enactment of the 1982 Citizenship Law, that focused on lineage and national races, and categorised people in Burma into three categories; citizens, associate citizens, and naturalised citizens. This law was denounced by the Rohingya for denying them citizenship and turning them into "resident foreigners" or "Bengalis", as they were not included in any of the three categories mentioned in the law.[6] Professor Mathew Walton, currently occupying the Aung San Suu Kyi Chair at Oxford University, is of the opinion that the law did *not* actually "strip" citizenship from the Rohingya, but that in *implementing* the law, many authorities refused to re-register "Bengalis", who submitted their documents, but instead had "white cards" issued to them, thereby allocating them a "non-citizen" identification (Walton, 2016).

In Myanmar, therefore, Rohingyas (a term that is not uttered in official circles) are regarded as illegal immigrants who historically came from Bengal and, in more recent times, as seasonal labourers, and are racially signified as darker-skinned than the average Burman. It is a narrative that is shared by many Burmese, including some leaders of the democratic movement. This same narrative has been used to justify acute discrimination, exclusion, abuse and violence against the Rohingya for decades. The implication of the "illegal migrant" narrative means that those who have fled from persecution in Burma cannot legally return. The key exclusion policies that have made Rohingyas alien to the state of Burma have, thus, consisted of:

> [the] restriction of free movement in 1962; the promulgation of the Emergency Immigration Act designed to prevent people entering from India, China and Bangladesh in 1974; the census program, Nagamin, to check identification cards and take action against illegal aliens in 1977; and the 1982 Citizenship Law following the 1978 exodus when many Rohingyas returned or attempted to return to Burma.
>
> D'COSTA, 2012

This narrative goes on to absolve the regime of any responsibility in their treatment towards Rohingyas. The fact that the Rohingyas are considered to be "illegal immigrants" from Bangladesh, according to Burmese official policy, is meant to justify the hatred against them, particularly by the Rakhine, on whose lands they have "encroached". Accordingly, the Burmese regime does not endorse the violence but, in the face of such strong sentiments, it has been rendered powerless to prevent it from happening. International actors may

6 https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/burma/burm005-02.htm (accessed on 26 March 2017).

have contributed to such a stance. Sam Zarifi, the Asia-Pacific Regional Director of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), writes:

> UN Agencies stubbornly continue to endorse the Burmese characterisation of the violence as "communal", the US and EU lifted sanctions on Burma as if to imply that what happens in Rakhine State has no relevance to Burma's human rights obligations, and the International Crisis Group—an international NGO—went as far as to congratulate Thein Sein, the Burmese leader under whose watch this has all happened, by awarding him the "In Pursuit of Peace" award in April 2013.[7]
>
> ZARIFI, 2012

The Host Country Narrative

Bangladesh is the primary proponent of the host country narrative, although Malaysia, Thailand and other countries also follow it. It holds that the Rohingya are both victims and opportunists, and a burden and a security threat (Rahman, 2015; Murshid, 2013). This narrative recognises that the Rohingya face discrimination and even persecution inside Burma, but also labels those who have fled persecution as opportunistic, economic migrants, who impose undue pressures on job markets and social structures. This is a narrative of convenience, which empathises with the suffering of the Rohingya, as long as they remain inside Burma, but maligns those very same people when they seek refuge on their shores. This contradictory position has, thus, generated contradictory policies and practices. In Bangladesh, a small number of Rohingya (fewer than 30,000) are officially recognised as refugees, and a much larger group (over 300,000), who share the same characteristics, are viewed as "irregular", economic migrants. Both groups are seen as burdens to already stretched state resources, and as threats to national security. In Malaysia, for example, the UNHCR is allowed to register the Rohingya as refugees, but not to protect them.

This dichotomous portrayal of the Rohingya as both victims and "problem", creates a situation where they are refused the protection of international humanitarian law that they are entitled to. It also leads to attempts to jus-

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7 More recently, however, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a resolution, brought forward by the European Union, for investigating crimes against Rohingyas in Myanmar, and ensuring full accountability for perpetrators and justice for victims. This decision was taken in the context of a UN report that was issued in February 2017, based on interviewees with 220 Rohingyas among the 75,000 who had recently fled to Bangladesh after the military crackdown of 2016 (*Daily Star*, 25 March, 2017).

tify deliberate violations of human rights through aggressive, life-threatening acts. For example, Bangladesh oversaw the arrival of boatloads of Rohingya refugees in the aftermath of the June 2012 violence (UNHCR, 2013), as well as the more recent influx of 2016 and 2017 (*Dhaka Tribune*, January 2017). During these crises they attempted to close the border with the justification being that they could no longer bear the Rohingya burden alone. With similar arguments, Bangladesh has also refused to accept multi-million-dollar support to build infrastructure for Rohingya refugees, and third-country offers to resettle small numbers of Rohingya (Allchin, 2011). Thailand, too, pushed hundreds of Rohingya back out to sea in 2009 and 2010, due to the “security threat” they allegedly posed (UNHCR, 2015). More recently, in 2016, Bangladesh reportedly sent back Rohingyas from its borders (*Dhaka Tribune*, 26 December 2016)

The countries that espouse this narrative acknowledge that there is a problem but are locked in somewhat of a stalemate with regard to potential solutions. Each is unwilling to act first, out of fear of attracting still more Rohingya. They favour “holistic” or “regional” solution—which amounts to saying that Burma must address the issue at its root, and enable the return of all Rohingyas who have fled its territory.

The Local Host Community Narrative

The local host community narrative is important to take into account, especially in a protracted refugee situation such as the Rohingyas. It sometimes expresses itself in a radical manner as these host communities are the ones who face the brunt of the influx, and yet it also informs national narratives and policies, through an intricate body-politic that will be elaborated on later in this article. In this narrative, the host community too responds to the anomalous situation of the Rohingyas in an ambivalent way. On the one hand, they are swayed by humanitarian instincts and feel pity for the desperate condition of the Rohingyas, while on the other, they feel panic at the thought that Rohingyas have become drawn into extreme religious organisations, which might exploit the refugee’s presence and statelessness to recruit them for armed operations in the region (Rahman, 2015; Murshid, 2012). This recruitment occurred more in the 1980s and early 1990s, where organisations such as the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation were active in the larger Chittagong area. Currently, however, these organisations no longer have the same visibility, and although a few politically-motivated Rohingyas are in liaison with right-wing Islamic parties, such as the Jamaat e Islam, this is not a characteristic shared among the refugee population in general (Alam, 2012). What is feared by the local host community, more than radical political motivation, is the tendency of Rohingyas to align themselves with traffickers of illegal goods such as drugs (yaa baa), and

middle-men involved in bringing refugees who happen to be of both Bengali and Rohingya origin illegally across the border (Guhathakurta, 2016:43–47). It is also relevant that such activities are carried out under the panacea of politically important persons in the locality, a characteristic of borderland politics (personal communication with local media by the author, 2016–2017).

Included in this narrative is also the different ways in which the Rohingyas have acquired influence through political power, as well as in regional partisan politics, which is then used in electoral politics (many have obtained national identity cards—illegally—which allows them to vote) in particular, but more generally in strengthening the larger political base of different regimes. Such participation takes place not only according to ideological lines, i.e., with Islamic parties, but also along the lines of a patronage system, steeped in local power politics, such as those of the Union Councils, the lowest tier of elected representatives (Guhathakurta, 2016:51)

The International Community Narrative

Other countries, particularly those that do not have to deal with large numbers of Rohingya arriving unannounced on their shores, acknowledge that the Rohingya are victimised by Myanmar and also that the receiving countries fall short of their protection obligations. This narrative follows a line that is politically correct but hides perhaps the strongest argument- that many nations look after their own national and regional interests before intervening in the affairs of the involved state. Thus, the only space left for Rohingyas is that offered by international human rights and principles. According to Amal de Chickera:

> Human rights principles challenge us to act not out of self-interest, but out of a legal obligation to protect the most vulnerable. Importantly, this obligation arises not from a sense of charity, but from an understanding that by protecting the most vulnerable and creating the space for them to partake in society as equals we strengthen democracy, stabilise the economy and increase security.
>
> DE CHICKERA, 2012

If we are to convince states and other relevant stakeholders to see this position as realistic, then we must look more seriously at the arena of protection. So far, developmental paradigms have looked at protection only in terms of legal standards and principles, but have yet to translate these into actual policies that have meaning for relevant stakeholders, such as refugees or states. In this paper, I wish to look at protection strategies from the perspective of Rohingya refugees and the Bangladesh state, with the intention of impacting future protection

strategies and policies. These may serve as guidelines, for good practice for an inclusive democratic state that aspires to reduce the spaces of violence arising from majoritarian trends or exclusionary state policies and practices. Thus, in the local context, Rohingyas would be able to find both shelter and patronage, as well as be free from discrimination from the local host community.

Socio-Political Context of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

Refugees from northern Rakhine State (NRS) of Myanmar have been seeking asylum in Bangladesh for decades. From late 1991 to early 1992, approximately 250,000 Rohingya from NRS took refuge in south-east Bangladesh. A process of repatriation began in September 1992, and by mid-1997 about 230,000 refugees had returned to Myanmar, leaving a residual group of around 20,000 in Bangladesh. Repatriation numbers peaked again in 2003, but there has been no repatriation since 2005, and there is currently little willingness to repatriate among the Rohingya in Bangladesh, as Rohingya in Myanmar continue to suffer from discrimination, forced labour and persecution. The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) maintains that repatriation is the only permanent solution for the refugees, and is opposed to local integration (Abrar and Sikder, 2007).

Resettlement in Bangladesh as a potential option was made available to the refugees in 2006 and offered a solution for a limited number of applicants. However, the GoB withdrew the offer of resettlement at the end of 2010. As of October 2011, a total of 29,368 Rohingya refugees were living in the Kutupalong camp in Ukhiya Upazila, in Cox's Bazaar District, and in the Nayapara camp situated further south in Teknaf Upazila in the same district, both of which are registered with the UNHCR. Of this number, approximately 5,000 are not yet recognised as refugees by the GoB, which deprives them of access to general food distribution. In addition, approximately 20,000 unregistered refugees reside in the makeshift site next to Kutupalong camp, and almost 13,500 unregistered refugees reside at the Leda unofficial site, three kilometres north of Nayapara camp. Current estimates say that there are anywhere between 300,000 to 500,000 Undocumented Myanmar Nationals (UMNs), i.e., refugees with no official recognition or legal status, living within Cox's Bazaar, either in concentrated settlements or within local communities (GoB, 2014).

Protection Strategies: Different Perspectives, Differing Strategies

Whilst the above sections set the context in terms of the differing perspectives on the issue of Rohingya refugees, which impinge on various national and international strategies, and the policies adopted by different stakeholders, the following section will take a deeper look at the discussion and debates that surround protection strategies taken in the official refugee camps, with a view to revealing the perspectives of the refugees themselves. The issue of protection is not an unproblematic one and that is why I posit them as "debates"; in the first case between international standards and national interests, and in the second between the ideas of "charity" and "service", and self-enquiry and ownership. From these debates, I hope to unearth perspectives on protection of the refugees themselves, to what extent they consider themselves protected against the structural violence embedded in the differing narratives outlined above, and how far the failure of existing protection measures is responsible for them seeking an exit strategy that may or may not lead them to further violence.

International Standards vs. National Interests

The treatment of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh has been a subject of heated debate in both international and national circles. From the national perspective, the policy towards the Rohingyas has been like a roller-coaster ride, beginning in the 1970s and continuing until the present day. After the first Rohingya refugees, who arrived in the 1970s, were mostly successfully repatriated, a second influx came in the early 1990s. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), who was in power in 1992, spoke in favour of their Muslim brothers, who were being persecuted by the NaSaKa[8] troops in Myanmar, and at Friday prayer gatherings in Teknaf and Ukhiya districts local mosques blared welcome messages to arriving refugees (interview with local resident by the author). But although a repatriation process began, with the help of the UNHCR, in 1992, many remained, and new arrivals of refugees continued to make this one of the longest-running, most protracted refugee situations in the world (personal conversation with UNHCR staff by the author). One of the prime characteristics of such a protracted situation is that it often provokes some hostile reactions

8 NaSaKa was the local name for Burma's border security unit, who were active in Rakhine State in particular along the Bangladeshi border, and were involved in various acts of brutality. They were disbanded on 12 July 2013 by President Than Sein (www.blog.crisisgroup.org, 16 July 2013 [accessed on 26 March 2017]).

against the refugee population in the locality, and therefore affects local politics and power relationships, which in turn may affect national politics at certain times, and vice versa. The case of Rohingyas in Bangladesh has been an example of exactly this. The 1990s to the present has seen two main political parties govern the country, the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The philosophy of the BAL is based on linguistic nationalism, i.e., "Bangaliness", and that of the BNP on religious nationalism, i.e., "Muslimhood". Both ideological stances have had their impact on the issue of the Rohingya. The AL has been more intolerant of the Rohingyas, whom they accuse of siding with Islamic fronts and organisations in the area, while the BNP, whilst initially being more tolerant towards the Rohingyas, did so only to bolster their own vested interests in local politics.

Amidst the buffeting winds of change in national-level politics, it has been local politics that has held a more consistent view on the Rohingya issue, i.e., an overall negative one, and one which is becoming increasingly so. In the two districts that contain the majority of the Rohingya population in Bangladesh, Ukhiya and Teknaf, the former is currently led by BNP representatives and the latter by those of the AL. The region as a whole is relatively conservative, where religion plays an important role both in the lives of people and in the education system, i.e., *madrashas* [Islamic schools] are an important part of the social fabric of local communities. To a certain degree, the Rohingya issue did find sympathetic support among these schools, but on the other hand, the economic pressures on the local labour market, in which locals claimed that the cheap labour offered by the Rohingyas helped to depress labour wages, which often led to resistance towards and breakouts of violence against the Rohingya population. The stereotyping of Rohingya refugees as thieves, black marketers and traffickers, and their potential to be inducted into radical Islamic groups held sway as the dominant discourse of the local population. Although it is true that some Rohingyas were involved in such activities, the reality is that this being a border area and the hinterland of a port, such involvement was not so uncommon for many Bengalis either, who were driven to such devices due to the high levels of poverty (Guhathakurta, 2016).

The anti-Rohingya sentiment was, therefore, more related to the socio-economic conditions of the locality, but despite this it was fed into national politics by local Members of Parliament, the chairman of the Union Council, and local political and religious leaders. This influenced the protection strategies and policies of the national host government. The discontent of the local population, combined with consequent rumours regarding lavish investments in refugee camps at the expense of the local communities helped to generate anti-refugee feelings among policy makers, who started to defend their with-

drawal of support for protections in terms of pull–push factors. This meant that every investment in the protection of and provisions for refugees were interpreted as contributing to “pull” factors, encouraging the arrival of further refugees. For example, offering education above the fifth grade (the government has only very recently allowed Grade 6 to be taught in refugee camps) was thought of as attracting more Rohingyas from the Arakan. The result of the withdrawal of support for protection mechanisms for the Rohingya refugees also meant that resettlement in third countries was postponed, registration of the non-registered refugee population in Bangladesh was stopped, and a joint undertaking of UN agencies (UN Joint Initiatives) to carry out infrastructural development in the communities of the host population was halted under the same pretext in 2010 (Allchin, 2011).

The formally passive resistance to the protection measures became more active in June 2012, as well as in late 2016, amidst the wave of Myanmar military campaigns launched in Rakhine state, when the Bangladesh Government decided to take a stand against international pressures and advice, and prevent the further influx of refugees into Bangladesh. In 2012, the position of the GoB, along with its attempted clamp-down on certain NGOs working with refugees, resulted in bad press for Bangladesh worldwide, although it succeeded little in changing the policy of the GoB, who maintained their pull-factor argument. In 2016, the situation was qualitatively different, as the sheer brutality of the armed forces knew no bounds, as stated in UN reports.[9] This was noticeable even in the behaviour of the Bangladeshi Government, which although they had initially taken the same stance as in 2012, i.e., to close their border, relaxed the order after hearing of the brutal behaviour of the armed forces in Myanmar. Once inside the territory of Bangladesh, the refugees were given emergency provisions under the auspices of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the Red Crescent, coordinated by a task force that was set up by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as part of the National Strategy Paper on Myanmar Refugees and Undocumented Myanmar Nationals in Bangladesh (GoB, 2014). However, such practices at the local level were by no means indicative of more tolerant policies at the national level, exemplified by the recent reintroduction of a two-year-old policy that aims to relocate Rohingya refugee populations to Thengar Char,[10] a remote offshore island, which reports later found to be

9 http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56103#.WM0tKDuGPIU (accessed on 18 March 2017).

10 http://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/31/asia/myanmar-bangladesh-thengar-char/ (accessed on 18 March 2017).

practically unsuitable for human habitation. In the face of both international and national protests against the proposed policy, the government eventually backed down. What remained clearly apparent, however, was the dilemma of Bangladesh as a host country; being under explicit humanitarian pressure to respond to refugee crises, while also attempting to stave off further refugee influxes that could further problematise both the security and economic concerns of the local population (personal communication with members of the local community by the author in her capacity as a member of the National Human Rights Commission, 25 February 2017).

Charity and Service vs. Self-Enquiry and Ownership

From the political-contextual space we now move into the space occupied by the polemics of protection measures. The actors here include not only the state, but also international and national aid-giving agencies. The two official refugee camps are under the joint administration of the Government of Bangladesh and the UNHCR. They, in turn, have implementation partners consisting of both national and international agencies who provide services in the camps, such as health, sanitation and education. Protection, in terms of ensuring security, is usually implemented by the camp administration, led by a "Camp in Charge", who is accountable to the Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission (in common parlance, known as the RRRC) of the Government of Bangladesh. UNHCR has senior protection officials who supervise this process. Despite such elaborate arrangements, the security situation in the camps has not been without its problem, especially concerning particularly vulnerable people like women refugees without male family members, or adolescent women. A closer look reveals the differing perceptions of protection that prevail amongst various agencies, and the refugees in the camps.

When Research Initiatives Bangladesh first started implementing an early childhood learning education programme in the camps in 2011, it was told by the refugees that NGOs operating there were generally distrusted. The refugees said that initially, NGOs promised everything, but when their actions were criticised by the refugees, the NGOs tended to side with the camp authorities. For example, it was said that when a refugee criticised an NGO, the NGO then lodged a complaint against the individual with the camp authorities and they, in turn, blacklisted that individual. This meant that if the individual was then caught doing anything illegal, they would be thrown into prison, even though others who committed similar offences went unpunished.

NGOs who had been working in the camps long-term, tended to look at refugees as subjects of charity and, hence, perceived themselves more as relief

agencies than development ones. Thus, they did not allow for refugees to be given a certain degree of agency in the implementation of their programmes.

Here, it is interesting to note that the perception of "agency" may be different for different stakeholders. For example, UNHCR started the custom of holding meetings with BMCs (Block Management Committees). However, these did not entail inclusive management practices or programme management.

In their attempt to encourage refugee participation in their programs, RIB took the approach of participatory action research, whereby a process of self-enquiry among prospective mobilisers or facilitators (called animators) was started. This enabled RIB to reach out to deeper layers of leadership nascent in the community—school teachers, priests, elderly persons, youth leaders, etc. Technically, these people became the mobilisers and implementers of the RIB programme. The early childhood learning model (which went by the name of *Kajoli*) that RIB started with four-year-olds, became an entry point with which to engage refugees in decision-making at the programme level.

RIB started its activities by demonstrating the model to all refugees, especially mothers and their children. Kajoli is an interactive model where teachers play a central role and the child is actively involved in learning (Rana and Alam, 2012:11–19). The active role played by the child, even on the demonstration day (e.g., by identifying pictures from an array of cards), roused the curiosity and interest of the mothers, and created an incentive to bring their children for further sessions. Mobassherul Alam, the regional coordinator for RIB, describes in detail the progress of the project from its inception (Alam, 2012). Alam describes how women teachers were recruited from the camps, and how refugees were organised into groups for participatory action research, trained in how to identify their problems or search for welfare support (which may or may not coincide with the mandate of the UNHCR and the GoB), and work out a strategy to attain it. Similarly, they met to discuss the issues faced in the setting up of Kajoli centres and guaranteeing the regular attendance of children, and sought ways to overcome them. All this gave them a sense of ownership.

The centres were housed in blocks, where the refugees who were teachers had given up their living spaces for that purpose. All the teachers were refugee women considered qualified and trained enough to teach young children; the mothers of the children got together monthly to discuss any problems related to the centres or their children, and to discuss parenting, welfare needs and their well-being in general. These discussions were led by animators along the lines of participatory action research, and they often resulted in actions from the mothers, such as repairing the roads to the centres, or giving voluntary assistance to teachers during feeding programmes.

Due to the success of the Kajoli model, which catered to four-year-olds, UNHCR also started crèches for three-year-olds, where the mothers took turns to be crèche monitors. Similar to Kajoli, the monitors devoted some of their living space in each block to these crèches. The fact that mothers became both mentors and managers, which also involved a financial component, gave them a sense of empowerment (Guhathakurta, 2013).

Refugee concerns were not only focused on problems mandated by the NGOs. When they came together they also deliberated on the issue of sacrifice during Eid al Adha. On this day, according to tradition, one celebrates by sacrificing animals, mostly cows and goats. But because the refugees did not have the means to provide their own animals, cows were purchased using UNHCR funds. But did that constitute sacrifice, they asked? They came to the conclusion that it did not, but it was also the case that they did not want to deprive their families—otherwise heavily under-nourished—of this one chance of enjoying a full meal. So they came up with a solution. Their answer was that the sacrificial meat would be distributed first and foremost to the most underprivileged in the camps, i.e., female-headed households or those with the most children, and then to others. This was only one of many decisions they took in order to have more control over their lives, and to protect the underprivileged in their community. Others initiatives to come out of these meetings included: patching up quarrels between families, which helped them to consolidate their strength as a community; cleaning up their own blocks; and repairing paths to Kajoli centres and crèches so that their children would be protected from health hazards. Such decisions remained mostly invisible to the development agencies.

Seeking an Exit Strategy

It remains a fact that despite the combined efforts to serve the basic needs of the refugee population, these are often not sufficient, and that the protection policies of the government are problematic as they do not reach the large numbers of the Rohingya population who reside outside the officially recognised camps or sites. It is not surprising, therefore, that many consider an exit strategy as the only way out of their miserable situation. It is these people we see taking the risky journey across the seas for a safe haven. The three case studies below give very different perspectives on such an exit strategy.

With the help of my colleague Mobassherul Alam, I reviewed several cases in Cox's Bazaar where young men and women had decided, with the help of traffickers, to take a boat and attempt sail to Malaysia, Indonesia or Australia. Some had succeeded, but many had also met tragic fates. Families were left to cope not only with the loss of those they loved, but also the loss of hard-earned

savings, which they had accumulated and invested in the venture. The names of those involved in the cases below have been changed.

Case 1

Mukarram had been trying to get to Malaysia for the last five years. He was fed up with his life in the Bangladeshi refugee camps. He had not had the chance to get education beyond Grade 6, as this was forbidden by the Bangladeshi Government. One day, after collecting firewood from the forests, he talked this over with his friends. But he needed 100,000 *taka* to pay the traffickers, and had only 5,000 *taka* in savings. He then urged his mother to sell her ornaments, utensils and the little belongings they had to raise about 25,000 *taka* more. He also borrowed from friends and neighbours, promising to pay them back after he got a job in Malaysia. The trafficking agents lived in the Teknaf region. One day he had lunch and, gathering together a bundle of his clothes, flat rice and molasses, left with a man.

First, he took a small boat that carried him to where he boarded a larger trawler anchored in mid-sea. He had barely boarded the trawler when it became stranded on an island off the coast of Thailand. Those on the boat had almost starved by the time a boat from the Malaysian immigration authorities came, picked up all the passengers, and put them in jail. Mukarram remained there for at least five months. After that, in response to his many pleas, he was released at the cost of 200,000 *takas*, which Mukarram had to pay back to his trafficking agents. Mukarram now lives in a remote area and is trying to tell his story through a contact in the UNHCR.

Case 2

Shamsul's mother was in tears when she told the sad story of her son. His friend had successfully made the journey to Malaysia and, he told his mother, he intended to follow. He had talked with some trafficking agents and agreed to give them an advance a sum of 25,000 *taka*, promising to deliver the rest when he reached Malaysia. But for Shamsul, luck seemed to be against him. His first try did not succeed due to inclement weather conditions; his second attempt failed because of extra surveillance by the coast guards; the third attempt failed because the small boat took too long to reach the larger vessel and the ship left; the fourth attempt failed because the boatman did not keep his word; and on the fifth attempt the boat was wrecked. Then, one day, while Shamsul was wandering around Shahporir deep (a town on the coast of Bangladesh), he saw three boats about to depart. He impulsively jumped on the middle one. The boats had only gone a few miles when a large ship hit all three and sank them. Those who could swim ashore survived, but Shamsul was not among

them. His dead body was cast ashore and was found by his parents who buried him near the camp in Nayapara.

Case 3

The story of Nazreen, the daughter of Farmiga Begum, speaks volumes about how Rohingya refugees perceive their needs and interests in life. Nazreen was the doting wife of 26-year-old Abdul, who, after having taken the long boat journey through Malaysia, now lives in Australia. Nazreen used to think that her husband would send her a plane ticket, and that she would join him in Australia. She did not seem to grasp the fact that her husband had no legal status in Australia, whereby he might be able to buy her a plane ticket, and that she too had no legal status in Bangladesh that would enable her to fly from there to Australia. Nazreen had two children and she wanted the best for them. After her husband left, she refused to live next to her in-laws and moved down to Nayapara camp with her two children. From there, she contacted agents and arranged for the remaining family members (including the two children) to be taken to Malaysia. She got the money to pay the traffickers through her relatives who lived abroad. The in-laws learned that she had managed to travel to Malaysia in early February 2013. She then tried her best to convince her husband that she and the children intended to travel onward to Australia, but her husband did not give permission for her to take such a risk. So she asked her husband for money for a different reason, and used it to take a boat with the children, this time ending up in Indonesia. She called her husband from Indonesia, and again her husband scolded her for taking such a risk. Determined, she and her children got on a boat they were promised would take them to Australia. After the boat had travelled some miles, the conditions at sea became worse. She managed to call her husband from the boat in mid-sea once, but after that he lost contact with her, and also the boat's captain, and never heard from either of them again. Her in-laws could do nothing but organise a reading of the Quran, and their son now wanders around lost in Australia.

During one of the RIB-supported "interactive theatre" programmes in the camps (a tool where refugees document, script, and enact their own problems into a play, which provides them with a space for catharsis, and a forum to air their grievances) (Guhathakurta, 2008), some of the above stories and themes found their way into the performances. This, in itself, was a challenging task, given the surveillance by camp authorities and agencies. After the performance of one play, which described the violence faced by refugees in Myanmar, and outlined their reasons for coming to Bangladesh, the camp authorities hinted

that in the future such themes should be avoided. Rather, we were to focus on themes such as domestic violence in the camps, or the early marriage of young girls.

Thus, for refugees—legal or illegal, with or without citizenship, within the confines of a camp or outside, living incognito—the borderland is a highly insecure and violent space where people confront institutions, policies, and practices that are inherently inimical to their existence.

Lessons for the Future

Despite the tragedies depicted by the cases above, the agency that refugees retain in a situation that is highly controlled by others—such as state, government, local political actors and humanitarian agencies—becomes evident. This is an important lesson that international and national humanitarian regimes can learn from. Prevention of risky behaviour is no doubt a good strategy for such agencies to follow, but more important is the empowerment of refugees, in order that they may learn the skills necessary to take control of their own destiny, so that in the long run—i.e., in the event of a durable solution, whether it be return or resettlement—these very same skills can prepare them, and provide them with the capacity to transform their lives from those of non-citizens, to proactive citizens who can demand protection from the state they inhabit. Official refugees still have some support from national and international humanitarian regimes. But what about the hundreds of thousands of undocumented refugees who live a precarious existence among the host communities? Who will be responsible for providing capacity-building and support during this transition time?

There are many good practices around the world that one can pick from, but one that comes to my mind is a women's organisation in the Netherlands, which goes by the name Steungroep Vrouwen zonder Verblijfsvergunning [SVZV—Women without Residence Permit Support Group]. Since the 1990s, the rights of immigrants without residence permits have been rapidly declining. This problem affects women in many specific areas, in particular healthcare, pregnancy, caring for children, (sexual) violence, work and legal status. The SVZV Support Group wants to address these issues, while at the same time providing support to women to help them expand their options.

Women without residence permits in the Netherlands can come from many different backgrounds. Some women come to look for work, others come to join their parents or partner, others come to escape from war, violence or natural disasters. Some women are victims of human trafficking or have been abused

by their partner or family. Other women have sought asylum or are awaiting the results of one or more legal proceedings to obtain legal residency. Some women live here alone, others have children and/or a partner. The website of the SVZV declares that:

> The one thing all these women have in common is the disadvantaged situation they are currently in. They are excluded from practically all government services in the Netherlands due to the government's repressive immigration policy. This goes against the meaning of justice in our eyes. The SVZV Support Group opposes the stigma held against people without a residence permit. There are no illegal people, only inhumane laws!
>
> SVZV, 2014

SVZV is a good example of an organisation that is not only idealistic in its intent, but also grounded in its analysis of the position of women in relation to citizenship and democracy. It shows us how democratic structures reflecting peoples' voices can actually reach out to distressed non-citizens and employ international standards of humanitarianism within a national context, a valuable lesson that is becoming increasingly rare in the contemporary world of politics.

Conclusion

This paper relates experiences of how different stereotypical positions taken by different communities at various junctures of history and politics create structures of violence for Rohingyas, structures that deprive them of agency, of opportunities, of reclaiming selfhood and dignity. This results in actual acts of violence—by authorities, by countries of origin, by host communities and by international and national agencies who work with them—and, last but not least, violent behaviour emanating from Rohingyas themselves, such as domestic violence or the abuse of children. One may also speak of the inadequacies of protection strategies, which fail to lead to a permanent solution for refugees and that also fail to meet the Rohingya's own perceptions and interests.

Within this context, instances and practices exist where refugees find their own agency and identify confidence-building processes with which they can take the necessary action to combat the roots of the violence they face in their daily lives. But such spaces for counteracting violence, both in their immediate lives and in their foreseeable future, must be enabled by the democratic institutions that surround them, i.e., by the states, institutions and practices

that affect their existence, and must incorporate and inculcate the duties and practice of humanitarianism and protection for all citizens, and extend them to non-citizen. How far must we stretch our imagination so that we can see this happening in the near future?

In our work with the refugees, they told us of some of their imaginations, and one of them appeared as a poem in RIB's internal newsletter.

Free Bird

Free bird
Free bird
What good luck
You have

What good chance
That it is your right
To fly freely

With no document
With no passport
To pass through
All over the world

Beach of Cox's Bazar to
Myanmar
As you like
Day and night
Having amazing song
Sung in sunlight
To take recreation

Free Bird
What good luck
You have.

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