

Rohingyas and India's Foreign Policy: Did the Media Set the Agenda? – A Content Analysis of 'The Hindu'

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Rohingyas and India's Foreign Policy: Did the Media Set the Agenda? – A Content Analysis of 'The Hindu'

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Abstract

India and Myanmar being neighbours have had close ties with each other and the bilateral relations between the countries is strong. Myanmar – had been on the headlines due to two main reasons – its struggle for democracy and its mismanagement of the Rohingyas. Ever since the escalation of the conflict, international news agencies have been reporting on it extensively. Indian media had been placing the migration plight on the headlines. Media not only plays the role of communicating information to the public, but it at times aids in framing the government policies through trial balloons. Occasionally, media sets certain agendas that will help the government in tweaking its existing policies or draft new ones. This paper tries to find out if the media aided in setting an agenda in formulating India's foreign policies - principally migration/refugee policy with respect to Myanmar and the Rohingyas.

Keywords: Rohingya, Foreign Policy, Conflict, Bilateral, Media

Introduction

The South East Asian country, Myanmar has a heterogeneous demography comprising of various ethnic groups, practicing various religions. Rakhine - the western province of Myanmar comprises of the Rohingyas who are a majority in Rakhine but a minority when the whole country is taken into consideration. As opposed to the commonly spoken Burmese language, they speak a dialect of Bengali and are Muslims. Myanmar does not recognize the Rohingyas as citizens as they are considered as migrants during colonial rule. A Rohingya is granted full citizenship, if he/she provides proof that his/her ancestors were residents in the country prior to 1823. If one of his/her parent is a citizen of Myanmar, the Rohingya is entitled 'associate citizen' according to the 1982 Burmese citizenship law. The Rohingyas are restricted to the Rakhine state and are denied civil rights. The Rohingyas were

subjected to persecution by the majority Buddhist in the state on a regular basis. There have been military and police crackdowns on the Rohingyas since the 1970s. In 1977, during Operation Dragon King, the Rohingyas are termed 'illegal' and this leads to forceful displacement. The 1989 military crackdown resulted in widespread violence and 250000 fled to Bangladesh (Doctors without Borders, 2020).

2012 and 2015 saw few incidents of rapes and village burnings. In August 2017, the crisis escalated due to a coordinated attack by the Muslim militant group ARSA - rakan Rohingya Salvation Army. The attack killed 71 people which includes one soldier, one immigration officer, ten policemen and 59 insurgents. 24 police stations and the 552nd Light Infantry Battalion army base were attacked by 150 insurgents of ARSA. ARSA claimed that the action was a counter attack on the military for raping and killing Rohingya civilians. This was followed by clearance operations by the Myanmar military to root out ARSA militants. Rohingya youth were the major targets for interrogation by the military. The counter offensive attacks by the military is considered a matter of debate as they were involved in crimes against humanity.

The target of the military were Rohingyas living both in villages and camps. In about a year after the escalation, nearly 400 villages were burnt down, several hundred women were raped and many were killed by the Myanmar military. The persecuted had to flee the country as the camps rendered no protection. The acts of the military was well strategized, organised and systematic according to Mission report of OHCHR released on October 2017 (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2017).

During the escalation period, the military followed few strategies which included arrest and arbitrary detainment of male Rohingyas between ages 15 – 40; arrest and arbitrary detainment of Rohingya leaders, opinion makers, religious and cultural leaders; deprivation of access to food, livelihood and other means of conducting daily activities and life. There were repeated acts of humiliation and violence, inciting hatred, violence and killings including by declaring Rohingyas as 'Bengalis' to drive out Rohingyas en masse. The military and its supporters tries to instill deep and widespread fear and trauma – physical, emotional and psychological, in the Rohingya victims via acts of brutality, namely killings, torture, disappearances, and rape and other forms of sexual violence.

August 2017 witnessed one of the largest exodus in human history. About one million Rohingya refugees fled from Myanmar to neighbouring countries. Most sought refuge in the neighbouring Bangladesh. By the end of 2017, there were 1.1 million Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs) in Bangladesh. Few escaped to India, Thailand, Malaysia and other South and South East Asian countries. According to the Government of India - Ministry of Home Affairs, there are approximately 40,000 Rohingyas living in India. They have reportedly reached India from Bangladesh

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through the land route over the years. The Rohingyas in India are considered as illegal immigrants who have infiltrated into the country and the ministry intends to deport them to Myanmar.

Review of Literature

Ullah, (2016) states that the physical, economical, and cultural distinction between the two major ethnic groups in Rakhine – the Rohingya (Muslims) and the Rakhine (Buddhists) is a major reason for the ethnic conflict. The Rohingya are a people with a distinct culture and civilization of their own. They trace their ancestry to Arabs, Moors, Pathans, Moguls, Bengali and some Indo-Mongoloid people (Ullah, 2016). The history of Rohingya persecution, according to many researchers, is not recent and was there for many years.

1982 was a dark year for the Rohingyas as it was the start of a never ending struggle for citizenship. Rohingyas are not recognized as citizens of Myanmar or other countries. Rahman, M. M., and Mohajan, H. K. (2019) argue that the statelessness of the Rohingyas is pushing them to become a lost generation. There are more Rohingyas living in camps outside Myanmar than inside Myanmar. Without education and lack of other facilities, this ethnic community is now a lost generation (Rahman & Mohajan, 2019). Bernard- Henri Levy (2017) describes in *The Rohingya Alarm, Testimony of Sixty* that now the Rohingyas have been transferred from the realm of sub-humans to the haunted animals, smoked out of the villages where they had been confined, driven out on the roads, shot at, tortured and raped (Bernard-Henri Levy, 2017).

Methodology and Objective

The methodology used for the study is content analysis. Memorandum of understandings and bilateral agreements from India's Ministry of External Affairs were the primary sources used for the study. 'The Hindu' – an Indian daily was analysed as the secondary source. Online magazines, books, journals, websites, research reports, and other scholarly publications are other secondary sources for the study.

The following objectives are discussed in the study - to provide the media perception of the escalation of Rohingya crisis in 2017, to analyse the Indian daily – *The Hindu* during the escalation period, to analyse India's Foreign policy in relation to Myanmar.

The Global Perception of the Conflict

The international community perceived the issue in a humanitarian perspective. United States of America expressed its concerns about the issue. Vice President, Mike Pence called the expulsion a "historic exodus" and a "great tragedy unfolding." In September 2017, the US State Department issued a statement condemning the human rights abuses by the Myanmar government. The United Kingdom

Parliament registered its dissatisfaction on Suu Kyi for not acting to curb the violence. The Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson stated that “The plight of the Rohingya and the suffering they have had to endure is one of the most shocking humanitarian disasters of our time. This is a man-made tragedy that could be resolved with the right political will, tolerance and cooperation from all those involved” (The Daily Star, 2018).

China preferred to play the mediatory role between Myanmar and Bangladesh. It also supported Myanmar in the UN Security Council and used its veto power to stop UN intervention in Myanmar (The Guardian , 2017). On 11 September 2017, the United Nations described the actions in Myanmar as a textbook example of “ethnic cleansing” (Reuters, 2017). India did not voice in support of the Rohingyas, rather a statement in September 2017 during the visit of the Prime minister to Myanmar read “We hope that all stakeholders together can find a way out in which unity and territorial integrity of Myanmar is respected.” (Hindustan Times, 2017). The Prime Minister refrained from using the term ‘Rohingya’.

The Media Perception of the Conflict

It is very important to analyse the media perception of any issue as media functions as the fourth pillar of democracy. It never fails to express the harsh realities to the public that at times are not expressed by governments for political reasons. It influences governments and at time helps set the agenda for policy making. Agenda setting in simple terms is building, asserting, pushing or imposing certain narratives built around certain influence, which may be innate, borrowed or envisioned. Agenda setting by the media can be best understood through the 2012 Nirbhaya case in India. The brutal gang rape of a medical student resulted in immense and repeated media attention and the government had to tweak existing laws, and initiate new policies to bring an end to the issue. The government of India amended the rape law in 2013, replaced the Juvenile Justice Act 2000 in 15th January 2016, initiated the Nirbhaya fund scheme to ensure women’s safety.

Though access to Rakhine had been denied to journalists, international media had been reporting the issue tirelessly. The media perceived the issue in a human rights, refugee crisis perspective. Since access and data was denied from Myanmar government, journalist travelled to Bangladesh to collect data and information. The global media has portrayed Rohingyas as ‘victims’ and ‘refugees’

Data Analysis and Interpretation

To get a better picture of the Indian media perception, an Indian daily ‘The Hindu’ – the second highest circulated newspaper in India (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2018). and the highest in Tamil Nadu was selected for this research. This study focusses on newspaper articles from ‘The Hindu’ which were collected from their website archive. The time frame of the study is three months from August 25 to

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November 29 and the samples were selected based on composite week sampling. The keywords used for the search were 'Rohingya', 'Myanmar', 'Bangladesh', 'ethnic conflict', 'violence'. The unit of analysis is individual news article. A total of fourteen news items were published during the period of escalation and the average was one news item per day. All the news items were published under the 'international' news column. There were no news items where any Indian diplomat had made a comment on the conflict or the escalation during the period under study. One news item titled '*Dhaka plans to initiate dialogue with Myanmar on Rohingya*' authored by Soumya Das has a mention by the State Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh, Mohammed Shahriar Alam about India's assurance of support on the Rohingya issue through the Foreign Affairs Secretary of India's Ministry of External Affairs. Based on the choice of words used, it is found that the framing of the news was mainly 'victim' (3), 'intruder'(1) or 'administrative' frame (5).

The bilateral relations between India and Myanmar during the period under study is essential to interpret if there were changes in India's foreign policy with regards to Myanmar after the escalation of the conflict. Bilateral agreement in 2016 and 2017 have been juxtaposed for clarity.

India's foreign policy had been for a long time promotion of peace and security especially in its neighbourhood, disarmament, mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression and non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence (Panchsheel). The 'Look East Policy' initiated by Prime Minister Narasimha Rao has evolved pragmatically to 'Act East Policy'. The term 'Act East Policy' was used by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in November 2014 during his visit to Myanmar for the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN + India Summit. Even though India and Myanmar are part of ASEAN, BIMSTEC, Ganga-Mekong Cooperation (GMC), East Asia Summit (EAS) for a long time, ties strengthened after 2014 when the NDA government realized Myanmar's strategic importance as a bridge that connects South East Asia to India.

In 2016, a total of seven MoUs were signed– four in August and three in October in the area of infrastructure, energy, power, banking, and medicine. H.E. U Htin Kyaw, President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar invited Prime Minister Narendra Modi as part of bilateral visit. During the visit, from 5-7 September, 2017 to Nay Pyi Taw, Yangon and Bagan, eleven MoUs/ Agreements including the MoU on Maritime Security was signed. Memorandums were signed by the diplomats of both the countries in the areas of Maritime security, Cultural exchange, training, naval information sharing, coastal surveillance system, press, medicine, and sports. It is evident that the bilateral relationship between the two countries were unaffected due to the Rohingya crisis.

Findings

The Rohingya crisis had been covered extensively by 'The Hindu' during the period under study - August 2017 to October 2017. It is found that India's relationship with Myanmar has not been affected after the escalation of the Rohingya conflict. The bilateral agreements between the countries have strengthened even after the escalation in Rakhine. India understands the need of Myanmar as a strategic partner and Myanmar needs India for its development and therefore the Rohingya escalation has been dealt very diplomatically from the Indian and Myanmar's side. Three years down the line, the bilateral relationship between India and Myanmar has in fact strengthened. In February 2020, during a visit to India by the President of Myanmar U Win Myint, India promised its commitment to support Myanmar's Rakhine State Development Programme. India was appreciated by Myanmar for providing northern Rakhine, infrastructure facilities for displaced persons in 2019. Both the countries agreed to continue the second phase of the Rakhine State Development Programme and implement 12 projects under the programme. India expressed its support for the bilateral agreements signed between Myanmar and Bangladesh (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020).

Conclusion

The 2014 BJP election manifesto clearly indicated that illegal immigration in the eastern borders had crippled the nation and that punitive measures to check illegal immigration will be undertaken by the government. It also stated that India shall remain a natural home for persecuted Hindus and they shall be welcome to seek refuge in India (BJP, 2014). The Rohingya escalation occurred during BJP's first tenure and in 2017 the government filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court to deport the Rohingya refugees. In the case *Mohammad Salimullah vs Union of India* (Livelaw, 2019), the petitioner seeks to defend India's decision to deport the Rohingyas. The case is pending for its hearing in March 2021. The government defends the case on the basis of 'national security' but the motives seem to be based on ideology. The number of Rohingyas in India as per an affidavit submitted to the Supreme Court of India is 43,000 which is higher than the records of UNHCR. UNHCR India has recorded 17,500 Rohingyas in India in different States. The reason for projecting high numbers could be to increase a fear of infiltration among the India citizens and to emphasize 'national security' concerns. India had provided asylum to Tibetan refugees in 1959, Bangladeshi refugees in 1971 during the East Pakistan war, Sri Lankan refugees in 1983 during the Sri Lankan civil war but has not considered the crisis in Myanmar which is one of its neighbours. In BJP's 2019 manifesto, the party plans to implement National Register of Citizens process in areas on priority which is the North Eastern borders. Whereas, it plans to give Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs escaping persecution from India's neighbouring countries citizenship in India. Evidently, the government has taken a new stand where it treats similar immigrants differently and the Rohingyas unfairly. Coming to the Foreign policy standpoint, the government of India was keen on policies to be based on national interest. And thus the bilateral relations with

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Myanmar never deteriorated after the Rohingya crisis escalation. Though the reporting of the Rohingya crisis by the media was extensive, the agenda of the media did not result in tweaking or formulation of new immigrant or refugee policies rather the ruling party had its own agenda with respect to immigrants and refugees which have been strongly implemented.

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