'While a Refugee, One Must Live in a Camp': Transition of Life of Relocated Rohingya from Local Community to Camps in Bangladesh

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Introduction

The plight of refugee is an omnipresent global crisis. The total number of refugees reaches at 36 million (UNHCR, 2025). The two-third refugees of the world are originated as well as contained in the global South (Aleinikoff and Owen, 2022). Majority of them have been entangled in protracted refugee situation whichever no more considered as emergency, thus humanitarian organizations change their working modality accordingly (Milner & Loescher, 2011). Due to the failure of international refugee regime (IRR) to durable solutions, host country exercises their own refugee management technique simultaneously with the international organizations. And encampment is the widely practiced strategy of host country to manage refugees in low-income countries (Bakewell, 2014). Refugees can live only in the designated place and cannot move out from there, without permission of the camp authority. They receive food and other entitlement under the humanitarian provisions. On the other hand, less refugees are allowed in global North and follow different modality of management. Refugees even can live side by side with local community, with local sponsorship and in permanent structure (Hyndman, Payne, and Jimenez, 2017; Lanphier, 2003). In these cases, government of the host country offer jobs and allowances for their livelihood. Host countries in global South are overloaded of recurrent refugee influxes, and they are not provided residence among the host communities. Nevertheless, due to flexibilities and lack of capacities, a significant number of refugees live in the community in a de facto local integration (Crisp, 2004).

Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims fled to Bangladesh since 1978 in the face of brutal atrocities against them in Myanmar (Ahsan Ullah, 2016). They continued to escape from Myanmar notably in 1991-92, 2012, 2015-16, with the largest influx occurring in August 2017 though half of them repatriated to Myanmar from exodus in 1978 and 1991-92 respectively (Grundy-Warr and Wong, 1997). Rest of the refugees lived in Bangladesh in various statuses. Only some 30,000 refugees have (special) refugee status. There were more than 200,000 Rohingya people living in the makeshifts and within the local community (Kiragu et al. 2011) before 2017. They were not properly registered, though a government statistic revealed the total number as 300,000-500,000 (GoB, 2014; IOM, 2016). This group of Rohingya people was labelled as Undocumented Myanmar Nationals (UMNs) then. However, currently every Rohingya, other than those with special refugee status, are named as Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN) (Roy, 2021). They have been reshuffled in 32 camps with several model camps in Cox's Bazar (CXB). Simultaneously, the government of Bangladesh (GoB) decided to relocate Rohingyas in the camps from local community. Local administration and even the host community people supported the plan because local community do not tolerate

strain on local resources (Simon et al., 2021). Resultantly, thousands of Rohingya were forced to move into some designated camps in *Ukhiya-Kutupalong* range. Some of them were well settled in the host community with their own efforts of livelihood and other facilities. Many of them were reluctant to move in the camps while other accepted the government instructions for a chance of family reunification and peaceful life in the camps.

Whatever relocation happens voluntarily or involuntarily, authority provides some facilities for refugees to transfer from existing settlement to the new places (Islam & Siddika, 2021; Broadbent et al., 2007). But developing countries of the global South rarely can offer necessary support to the refugee. Nonetheless, refugees are obliged to move in places where the host country government wants, from their existing location. Such migration is justified by cultural challenges, security implications and economic reasons. Bowels (1998) illustrates the refugee life of Karen refugees in Thai-Burma border of Thailand who they were forcibly relocated to proper camps from temporary shelter. The study reported some attacks from Karen National Group in the temporary shelter, thus the Royal Thai Government moved the refugee in the camps for security reasons. Internal and voluntary displacement of refugees is common in African cases too. Refugees supposed to stay in camps but because of limited humanitarian support and livelihood crisis, a significant number of refugees moved in urban areas as they consider urban space as better places of the country. In other words, refugees shift from camps to host communities on many grounds (Betts et al., 2023) while nation-state perspective is highlighted too. But existing studies do not cover the voices of different context of refugeehood, in repeated forced displacement, for better understanding of their precarity and need for basic human rights. This article highlights the dynamics of refugeehood of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. This is an account of how consolidating of nation-state affects the everyday lived experience of Rohingya refugee in two contexts of host country Bangladesh. I demonstrate a scope to compare the perception of refugeehood between these two narratives of refugee in Bangladesh. Additionally, the discussion partly sheds light on how this experience support their transnational relations in various countries. Although, my research does not directly recommend any policy issues, the respective policymaker can consider my analysis during any policy action on refugees at large.

The discussion is organised around five sections. The first part briefly explains the context of the study. The second part provides a brief note on my research methodology – as the study aims to explore the perception of refugeehood in two contexts of Bangladeshi nation-state, it adopts qualitative methodology. The following section presents some findings of the study which participants described as their lived experience of refugeehood firstly in the host community spaces and then in the refugee camps. The section four discusses voices of displaced participants and underlying reasons of their migration to camps which are very much connected to narratives of nation-state. Finally, some concluding notes attempt to summarise the key argument of my study. That is, in short, the research comprehends that marginality of refugeehood of Rohingya refugee has increased due to the state-centric policy of Bangladesh whilst refugees apply multiple techniques to continue their previous network for survival and wellbeing.

A Note on Methodology

This study adopts an ethnographic approach of observation, in-depth interview, and informal hangout with targeted participants in the camps. The data were collected in the period of November 2022 to January 2023. During this fieldwork, all the participants were found in the camps and they have both experience of refugee life in the villages of local community in Bangladesh and in the camps in *Ukhiya upazila* (sub-district) of Cox's Bazar. The number of such category of refugees is not determined by the camp authority, but the informal talk and interviews with respondent found that thousands of refugees have moved in the camps from villages during 2010 to 2017. Now they live in several camps of total 32 Rohingya camps in *Ukhiya* and *Teknaf*. And this fieldwork resolved that Camp 4extension, Camp 1East, Camp 1West, Camp 2East and Camp 2West consist of good number of such refugees. It follows purposive, and snowball sampling. Purposively the participants were selected from camp 4extension, camp 1East, and camp 2East. A total of 24 refugees were interviewed in-depth for an average of one and half hours. Among them 10 respondents are from camp 4extension and the rest of the 14 participants from camp 1East and camp 2East equally. Most of them were senior members of the household. This setting of interview helped to obtain detailed information from the respondents without asking any leading questions rather it happened through opening them up for specialized and relevant information from a small sample size (Halperin & Heath, 2020). Interviews were conducted based on a checklist that consisted of two sections: life in the local community and life in the camps. Informed verbal consent and confidentiality were maintained strictly while data were only recorded in written form considering their vulnerability. However, some of them consented to audio recording, it was avoided for their safety and comfort during the interview. Culture, norms, values, and sociolinguistic issues (Briggs, 1986) of the refugee were strictly maintained during the data collection. Two steps translation were carried out before making a standard data set: first from field data to standard Bengali translation because raw data were collected in *Chittagonian* (local and mixed Bengali) language, then the Bengali transcription was translated into English. Findings have been presented in a thematic format wherever anonymity of research participants is maintained by putting their pseudo name.

Refugeehood in the Local Community: Life of a Human Being with Livelihood, Health, and Education

Most of the Rohingya refugees used to live independently in the makeshift or in the villages with host community until the 2017's influx. They had no regular provision of food ration and other means of livelihood in the makeshift. These Rohingya were occasionally provided some food and clothing from various organizations. In other words, they needed to manage their livelihood themselves. Refugees could travel all through the CXB and Chittagong; they could work in the host communities for livelihood, too. But those who lived in the local community of CXB and Chittagong, they could manage better jobs than the refugees living in the makeshift camps in *Ukhiya*. Muslem (43) from camp 4extension, living in the CXB before 2010 excitedly recalled that

> "I used to drive a CNG auto rickshaw initially on rental basis but after a years I bought one and worked hard every day. I purchased a piece of land in the outskirt of Cox's Bazar city and dreamt for a better life in Bangladesh. But the GoB introduced mandatory national identity card in 2007-08, and unfortunately I could not manage that card. Therefore, I was obliged to return to the formal camps in 2010". (Interview in December 2022).

Education is a long-cherished dream of Rohingya Muslims both in Burma and Bangladesh. They wish for better education, but they are deprived of education and human rights since generation. Rohingya people were rarely allowed in Burma to study in the school and colleges; religious education was their only resort for education. After their sanctuary in Bangladesh, they could study in the Bangladeshi school and Islamic institutions like a Bangladeshi national until 2010. And many of them studied in the schools until their public exams. Their children could not appear at the public exam because of requirements of identity documents. This minimum scope of education for Rohingya in Bangladesh comes to end after the influx in 2017. The GoB ordered the respective authority to find out Rohingya children and cancel their studentship immediately. They were not only ousted from the school but also evicted from the host community.

Rohingya refugees had better access to host community health facilities too before 2017. Due to cultural affinity with local population, they could avail every health services nearby just paying the certain amount of fees and charges. A refugee (Rois-51) from camp 2East shared his golden time in Bangladesh in the following

> "while I was living in an *upazilla* of Chittagong, my eleven years old son got an severe road accident. He admitted in Chittagong Medical College Hospital for treatment. He received one-month free treatment to fix his broken leg. Now my son is physically fine and adult but heavily upset in camp life". (Interview in December 2022).

Illegal, But Not Criminal

Rohingyas are illegal outside the camps in Bangladesh particularly under the Foreigner Act, 1946. Refugees living in the host community knew their legal status, but they did not care about that legal position. Considering the vulnerability of Rohingya people, local administration also ignored their legal status, and could live well in the host community until 2017. There is no shortcut sign to differentiate the Rohingya from Bangladeshi while in the host community areas. They could avail almost all the facilities available in the community. Rohingya people have wide kith and keen relationship with local people, through which they managed to migrate in many Middle East countries as well. They visited each other's place. But they could not demand their rights and facilities equally of the host community people. Moreover, Rohingya

people are paid less than the local people for daily labour. Some of the Rohingya refugee, though, lost their properties to local influential, did not complain to police because of their illegal existence in the country (Informal hangout, December 2022). They had a discriminatory feeling in the host community.

Issues Surrounding Moving from Local Community to Camps

Prior to the influx in 2017, Rohingya refugee, except the registered refugees, used to live in their own makeshifts and local community areas. There were many reasons of moving in the camps, but the refugees highlighted three issues: illegality, family unification, and possibility of repatriation. The GoB began the National Identity (NID) card project in 2006. Every adult citizen of the country was provided NID in 2007-08. However, some of the Rohingya refugee managed NID illegally, most of them were identified as illegal in Bangladesh at that time. Afterward they were ordered to move in the camps; refugees cannot stay outside of the camps in any way. One of the dwellers Nurul (52) from camp 4Extension told that:

> "after launching of NID card for Bangladeshi nationals, we were in more vulnerable conditions, local administration and the landlord order us to migrate in the camps. We were told, while you are a refugee you must have to live in the camps. We must face legal action in case of stay in the host community further" (Interview December 2022).

Local community people also conveyed the government order and forced the Rohingya people to clear their lands and properties. Nevertheless, a significant number of refugee were living in the host community by managing landlord and avoiding local administration until 2017's influx. The newcomer in 2017 took shelter in different makeshifts camps in *Ukhiya* and *Teknaf*. Many of them were capable to connect each other from previous exoduses irrespective of their location: inside the camps and outside the camps. And most of them preferred to live together in the camps. It was shocking initially for the Rohingya people in Bangladesh knowing the torture of the Burmese military. Eventually they convinced them as it an opportunity to live together in Bangladesh. Moreover, they were optimistic about the repatriation too. At least Myanmar signed a MoU with GoB on their repatriation (Kapor, 2018). Such steps of repatriation inspired the refugees from previous flight to move into camps with their family and relatives. Kolim (35), a refugee from *Kutupalong* area shared that

> "I had good opportunity in the host community in *Ukhiya*. I could work and move freely there. But while the largest influx occurred in 2017, my parents were also in that flight, and they asked me to stay together in the camp. Since then, I am in the camp" Interview in Camp 2East, November 2022).

Refugeehood in the Camps: A Life, But Without Quality of Life

Since 2017, Rohingya refugees live in the camps under humanitarian provision. They are provided with food ration, shelter, health, education and protection from government and international organization led by UNHCR. Refugees receive these benefits as per the resource flow, without some exception. Some refugees are engaged in humanitarian activities, but most of the refugee spend time idle. There is no scope of self-reliance, thus it is difficult to meet up their basic needs. Humanitarian organizations do not distribute essential non-food items regularly; even they do not have money to buy from market. Amin (38) from camp 1East expressed almost crying

> "our cattle in Burma used to live in bigger and better place than we live here with many people in a small shelter. Humanitarian services cannot meet up our minimum needs, no body respect us. We are mean than animal" (Interview in November 2022).

Refugees live in a crammed and unhygienic condition of the camps. Most of the Rohingya people are affected by chronic diseases but they do not receive proper treatment in the health posts. Whatever the infrastructure, there are limited number of medicine supply and surgery facilities. Service providers claim of funding and resource scarcity. Refugees are not referred timely and in full scale into the host community hospitals. Even if some of the refugees trespass the camps for treatment, government hospitals do not admit Rohingya patient without permission of camp authority. Very few of them can bear the expenses of private medical facilities other than legal restrictions.

There is arrangement of learning (education) in the camps for Rohingya children. But neither the GoB nor the Rohingya people call that formal education. It is kind of learning life skill. Despite having learning centre almost in every block of a camps with teacher and other facilities, that does not serve for their future. Rohingya parents are reluctant to send their children in the learning centre. One of the guardians from camp 4Extension sadly opined that

> "there is no education in the learning centres. They only offer biscuits and some sports opportunity there. Teachers pay no interest of teaching the children either. There is no class system and exams. It is just holding the children in the learning centre anyway" (Interview with Gaffar (47), December 2022).

Apparently, there is no cultural and corporeal differences among the Rohingya and Bangladeshi nationals of *Chittagong* region. They follow the same religion- Islam. Thus, while they used to live in the host community, nobody could identify them as Rohingya- except their close neighbour. Even if they are identified as Rohingya, there was no enmity among them. Rohingya and Bangladeshi had brotherly relations. Since Rohingya refugee had no documents and educational qualification, they used to work in informal jobs. They almost forgot about their

bitter past and refugeehood. After moving into the camps, Rohingya refugees normally do not have chances of interaction with host community people. Nevertheless, a significant number of refugees from the said camps have been found moving out from the camps and working outside the camps with connection to their previous relationship. They connected in many ways but not limited to family relationship, working relationship and business connection. Thus, a significant number of refugees maintain their networks and movement by exercising their relationship with host community people. Bangladeshi nationals in their networks work as bridge for further transnational movement of Rohingya refugee from Bangladesh. During the fieldwork it was noticed that hundreds of Rohingya people have been traveling to nearby host areas, even in *Chittagong* to join religious events and it was tolerated by security personnel (Observation and Informal Hangout, January 2023). Furthermore, they maintain and exchange whereabouts over mobile phone and online media widely.

Camps are apparently a haven for refugee. It has regular police patrolling, restrictions on moving in and out of the camps. There are active watch towers around the barbed wire fence. They face difficulties in moving in between the camps because of security issues and transport restrictions too. No one can pass out legally from the camps without valid reasons and documents. Refugees consider this as the most secured place like a 'prison'. They are always under surveillance. They are deprived of human rights in the camps, rather than discriminatory feelings while they were in local community of CXB. Moreover, camps are getting hotspot of factional conflicts; everyone is in life risk because of frequent clash among the criminal and armed groups in the camps. They abduct refugees or make hostage in the camps for money. Anyone can be killed from crossfire now and then.

Community (un)Feeling

It is likely to have strong community feeling among the Rohingya refugees in the camps. They live together, meet every day, spend days in idle (Observation in November 2022). Other than community feelings in particular camps and blocks of the camps, some of the refugees have managed to live as neighbour in the camp as were in Rakhine, Burma. They interact more effectively than others. Many Rohingya volunteers work in humanitarian organizations, even in weekend and off-times. Rohingya volunteers love to support their fellow men in the hour of need. But many of the refugees do not agree to this role of volunteers and opine that volunteers can do impactful something rarely. They work for the NGOs sincerely but there is no future of their efforts and experience. Initially, senior refugees and refugees settling from villages attempted to inform them about life in Bangladesh, Bangladeshi law, and regulations. But most of the time they face challenges because they cannot direct youth anywhere about their future. Eventually, Rohingya refugee cannot show up strong we-feelings, some cases it is decaying exponentially [Nobi Hosen (55), Camp-1East, December 2022].

Concluding Remarks

Malkki (1992) notes refugees break the order of nation-state, and Agamben (1998) stated that refugees are "bare life" in host country and remain excluded from the nationals. However, these labelling of forcibly displaced population are subjective and refugees also can contribute a lot to the host country. Rohingya refugee those who fled Myanmar before 2017 used to live independently in villages and makeshift camps in Cox's Bazar. They used to live in de-facto integration with their own accommodation, livelihood, schooling and so on. While ordering nationals with identity card, the GoB labelled Rohingya people illegal in different places of CXB and Chittagong. It cracked down legal actions against the "illegal people"- Rohingya. Since a significant number of them lived in rented houses or places, local administration became strict on the landlord too. They were mobilized that Rohingya are not *Bangali* and Bangladeshi, they have no right to live outside the camps. They are refugees and have 'no rights to have rights' (Arendt, 1979). Once they took shelter in a country, they turned into an object of various kinds of experiment and policy decision in which they do not have any participation. However, IRR has strong legal framework and logistic capacities they cannot save the refugees at large (Roy, 2021). Eventually, it becomes the host country's responsibility about the facilities for refugees; host country at best refrain from refoulment other than rights in global South (Kagan, 2012). Resultantly, refugees are obliged to comply with the host country policy. Refugees must have to be 'good refugee' to stay in the refuge (Omata, 2017).

Rohingyas have transborder movements in the region for decades (Uddin, 2019); they have spread out transnational networks accordingly. Refugees were supposed not to move out from the camps but some of them continue their previous work in restaurants, hatcheries, farming, and many daily labour jobs. Oftentimes Rohingya people avoid the formal route of their movement rather follow unfamiliar and risky ways to get in their desired places. Sometimes they take the risk of being honest and justify their need for livelihood or other medical issues to police, and most of the time they are fortunate to pass the security posts (Observation in camp 1E & 2E, January 2023). They still live in-between camps and host communities. Most importantly, Rohingya refugee avoid the planned and better relocation project in *Bhasan Char* which is located in a remote island because of difficulty to maintain those connections from the island (Islam et al., 2022). Relocating refugees from local areas to camp could not keep the refugees away from host community areas. Relocated refugees exchange their lived experiences with the newcomers and navigate their survival strategies everyday. The aged refugees connect the young with host community networks and maintain the same cycle of relations. Thus, relocation helped to inculcate local community activities in the camps. They mediate community problems, interact with police and camp administration, and work for the betterment of their community. Contrarily, some of such refugees exercise their power and agency for their ill purpose too. They extort fellowmen, engaged in illegal drug peddling, and other criminal activities. Almost every Rohingya Muslim in Bangladesh has a history of well-founded fear in Burma and is supposed to have refugee status. However, they have no refugee status in Bangladesh, they consider themselves more than a refugee from their everyday lived experience. Also, the extent of refugeehood differs significantly while they were with the local community and now in the camps.

Thus the study illustrated the perception of refugeehood of Rohingya refugees in the two contexts of living in the local community areas and the camps in Cox's Bazar of Bangladesh. They were forced to relocate, however, the transfer was not completely handled by the government. There was no substantive security risk from Rohingya in the host community. Nevertheless, they faced again the uncertainty and trauma of forced displacement in the refuge country. Rohingyas are 'others' in Bangladeshi nation-state and thus were excluded from the local community; they were included through exclusion in the form of refugee camps where refugees cannot claim their rights from host country. On the other hand, when they lived in between existence and non-existence in the local villages, they had scope to live almost a proper life. They quite forgot the persecution in Burma then. Once they were displaced again to move into the camps, it reminded well that this was not their land, they must return to their country of origin- Myanmar which also does not include them. Rohingyas are segregated from the Bangladeshi people. Having failed to repatriate, many Rohingya continue to maintain connections with the local community for survival, manoeuvre for opportunities in multiple forms. Meaning that, nation-state however impose restrictions on non-nationals, it cannot stop the basic human rights anyway.

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