

# **The History of Cox's Bazar is the History of Rohingya**

## **The Historical Nexus between Cox's Bazar and the Rohingya Refugees**

Md Mostafa Araf – 6 May 2024

While classical literature extensively documents the historical trajectory of Cox's Bazar, contemporary discourse often overlooks its intrinsic association with the Rohingya refugees. It is pertinent to acknowledge that the annals of Cox's Bazar are inherently intertwined with the Rohingya refugee narrative.

The incursion of Burmese forces into Arakan in 1784 precipitated a mass exodus of Rohingyas and Rakhine ethnic communities towards the Ramu region (present day Cox's Bazar), marking the inaugural instance of refugee influx into Cox's Bazar. Subsequently, in response to this humanitarian crisis, the British colonial administration dispatched Captain Hiram Cox to facilitate the settlement of displaced Rohingya and Rakhine ethnic people, in 1798. The eponymous nomenclature "Cox's Bazar" thus derives from Captain Hiram Cox, symbolizing the historical intervention undertaken to address the exigencies of displaced refugees. Prior to the year 1784, the geographical region presently identified as Cox's Bazar Sadar, inclusive of its municipal boundaries, alongside the Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts wherein contemporary refugee settlements are positioned, exhibited a notable absence of substantive human habitation. This area was characterized by sparse population density, with only a limited number of individuals inhabiting the territory corresponding to the current Ramu and Chakaria sub-district. It is to be noted that the territorial expanse comprising the entirety of the Chittagong Division, encompassing Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Rangamati, Bandarban, Khagrachhari, Feni, Lakshmipur, Comilla, Noakhali, Brahmanbaria, and Chandpur districts, along with the present-day Rakhine state, was historically under the jurisdiction of Arakan—an autonomous domain distinct from Myanmar and Bengal.

The settlement and agricultural development of the entire Cox's Bazar district and the present-day Rakhine state of Myanmar were undertaken by the antecedents of the Rohingya populace. The vast tracts of land in these regions were previously uncultivated and sparsely inhabited. Following the Anglo-Burmese war in 1824 and with the implementation of British legislation such as the Waste Land Rules of 1839, 1841, 1863, and 1865, a substantial influx of individuals migrated to these areas with the intention of establishing residence and cultivation. This phenomenon bears resemblance to the governmental policies of both Pakistan and Bangladesh, wherein efforts were made to settle Bengali populations in the hill tracts of Bangladesh.

It is imperative to acknowledge that the initial arrival of Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar was contemporaneous with the displacement of Rakhine ethnic groups, who were compelled to flee persecution stemming from the Burmese invasion. The vestiges of this historical displacement are discernible in the Burmese market locale within Cox's Bazar city, serving as a poignant testament to the shared heritage and collective tribulations endured by diverse communities in the region.

### **Rohingya Ethnogenesis**

The Rohingya populace residing in the Arakan region is discerned as a distinctive nation or ethnicity, emanating from the amalgamation of disparate cultures, races, and societal vicissitudes over an extensive historical continuum spanning millennia. The Rohingya ethnic identity is the product of a heterogeneous confluence of migratory movements and cultural amalgamations. This amalgamation encompasses the historical influx of Arab traders and religious emissaries during the 7th to 9th centuries, Bengali migrants in the 15th century, Indian settlers during the 17th and 19th centuries, in addition to subsequent waves of Bengali, Chittagonian, and individuals from Portuguese, Moorish, Persian, Mughal, and Pathan backgrounds at various junctures in history. The Rohingyas are recognized as indigenous owing to their possession of distinctive cultural mores, traditions, and values, which underpin their self-identification as a discrete socio-cultural entity. Despite their minority status within the national context, they persist as a coherent ethnic group within their domicile.

The Rohingya population is deemed **indigenous** based on their preservation of distinctive cultural traditions, customs, and values, which distinguishes them as a separate entity within their nation, thereby meeting the criteria for indigenous status within contemporary anthropological discourse.

The usage of the terms Ruai/Roi/Rohingya, alongside the ethnogenetic development of the community i.e. **Rohingya ethnogenesis**, traces back centuries, antedating the Burmese invasion of Arakan. Following the Burmese invasion in 1784, the individuals who sought refuge in what is now Cox's Bazar and the Chittagong area were commonly known as Ruai/Roi/Rohingya (with Ruai/Roi serving as colloquial abbreviations for Rohingya), while a minority preferred the designation 'Arakani'. It's worth noting that during that period, Chittagong and Cox's Bazar were part of the Arakan region. The local inhabitants who hosted these refugees were referred to as Chati/ Chatigrai/ Chittagonian (Chati/Chatigrai is a condensed form of Chittagonian). The refugees were identified as Ruai/Roi/Rohingya due to their origin from the Mrohang/Rohang/Roshang/Roang area of Arakan and its surroundings, from where they were displaced and migrated. Although these two groups (Roi and Chati or refugee and host) initially maintained

separate identities, over time, there has been integration between the refugee communities and their hosts. This situation is reminiscent of other ethnic groups like the Kuki, Chin, Zo, and Bawm, who have different names but share similar ethnicities. Following the establishment of Burma in 1948, when Rohingya refugees sought shelter in Bangladesh (previously East Pakistan) from Burma, they came to be known as Burmaiya due to their origins in Burma. And the term Rohingya/Roai gained prominence following their migration in 1784.

### **People of Chittagong and Cox's Bazar**

It is of scholarly interest to highlight those elderly inhabitants, specially who are aged 70 years and older, within the regions of Cox's Bazar and Chittagong, exhibit a tendency to eschew the usage of the term "Rohingya" when referring to Rohingya refugees, preferring instead to employ the appellation "Burmaiya," signifying individuals originating from Burma/Myanmar. One of the inclinations of this is that the senior citizens of Cox's Bazar deemed themselves as Rohingya i.e., Rohingya citizen of Bangladesh and the refugees as the Rohingya citizen of Myanmar. It implies that the ethnicity is the same while their citizenships are different. One might argue, but there are some differences when it comes about the language and culture. As we all know, language and culture evolve over the period of time. We don't speak the same as we spoke e.g., twenty years ago. Many of the terminologies have incorporated in our culture due to cultural intermingling.

As someone rooted in rural life of Cox's Bazar and Chittagong and exposed to various societal strata through familial and professional connections, I've observed striking parallels between the linguistic and cultural norms of marginalized communities in our villages and those of the Rohingya populace. While we've had opportunities for linguistic and cultural development, Rohingyas have faced constraints in this regard. The linguistic discourse prevalent among marginalized communities and rural agrarians in our villages three decades prior bears remarkable resemblance to the contemporary linguistic vernacular of the Rohingya populace, while the cultural paradigms embraced by the Rohingya community conspicuously parallel to those espoused within our societal milieu of three decades past. While we've had the opportunity to develop our language and culture over time, through education, exposure to media like Bollywood and Hollywood, and the incorporation of new words and cultures, the Rohingyas have not had the same chances. That's the fundamental difference I've noticed.

Historically, all countries in the world have borders with the same ethnic groups living on both sides of the border and Rohingya is no exception. Only difference is some Rohingyas are Burmese by nationality, and some are Bangladeshi. The indigenous population of the Naga community residing within the territorial confines of India is recognized as Kachin within the borders of

Myanmar, whereas the Indian Mijo ethnic group is designated as Chin within the corresponding geographical domain of Myanmar. Similarly, the autochthonous Shaan populace of Myanmar is denominated as Thai within the boundaries of Thailand. Those individuals acknowledged as Rakhine within the Rakhine state are identified by the appellations Mogh within the regions of Cox's Bazar and Chittagong, and alternatively referred to as Marma within the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Although the Durand Line delineates the demarcation between Pakistan and Afghanistan, it fails to segregate the Pashtun ethnicity across both nations, thereby preserving their ethnic identity notwithstanding the divergence in citizenship status. While national borders may be imposed to define the territorial sovereignty of individual states, the intrinsic ethnicity, along with its consequent ethnic affiliations and interrelations, persist beyond such delineations.

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<sup>1</sup> It is commonplace for individuals to adopt varied appellations to delineate their self-identification. For example, I sometimes call myself Shikder because my ancestors were landlords or Zamindars, and 'Shikder' was a title for such a position. Alternatively, I might introduce myself as Pukurian because I'm from the village of Pukuria, or as Banshkhaila because I'm from the sub-district called 'Banshkhali.' Sometimes, I see myself as a Chittagonian because I'm from the district of Chittagong. Also, I identify as Bangladeshi because I'm a citizen of Bangladesh. What I'm trying to illustrate is that people use different identities to express their ethnic and other affiliations. Similarly, some might prefer to be called Rohingya, Ruai, Chati, or Arakani contingent upon contextual considerations within diverse spheres of life. **And the term Rohingya/Roai gained prominence following their migration in 1784.**