

# Is there any end to the plight of Rohingyas?

## Modi-Suu Kyi on Rakhine situation

Highly disappointing

**S**UU Kyi's denial of the persecution of the Rohingyas as "fake information" and Modi's one-sided position on the matter have shocked us. This was not the outcome of the Modi-Suu Kyi meeting that we in Bangladesh were looking forward to. In fact, given the close and friendly ties between India and Bangladesh, we were hoping that Prime Minister Modi would be able to persuade Suu Kyi to temper her country's aggressive policy on the Rohingyas with a degree of sobriety and make her desist from the hostile treatment of a minority community. Their respective positions are a total abnegation of the reality on ground.

Suu Kyi has refused totally to acknowledge the truth and instead put the blame squarely on the so-called terrorists. Does she want the world to believe that the Muslim minority group in the Rakhine State has perpetrated violence on themselves and become refugees, a good 200,000 of them, on their own volition? What benefit do they get out of it? To embarrass her, or her government? What a mendacious logic!

As for Modi, we do not take issue with him when he affirms his concerns for Myanmar. But what about Bangladesh's concern? Are we to believe that he is unaware of the plight of the Rohingyas, or the burden that Bangladesh has been bearing as a consequence of Myanmar's aggressive policy? And this is not a recent development; the Muslims in Rakhine have been undergoing persecution in their own country for a very long time, but particularly so in the last four decades. Either that, which is difficult to believe because there are 40,000 Myanmar refugees in India as of now, or Bangladesh's point of view is unacceptable to Modi.

Bilateral and mutual interest notwithstanding, such a one-sided position is stunning and totally unbecoming of a country seeking a leadership role in the world. Instead of playing a mediator role, and helping to find a way out of the situation, Modi's position will, regrettably, only give a fillip to Myanmar to continue the persecution of the Rohingyas. A dangerous prospect!

## Ferry fiasco

Authorities must be prepared beforehand

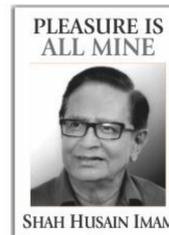
**F**OR thousands of people returning to Dhaka from 21 southern and south-western districts after having spent the Eid vacation, Tuesday midnight was nothing short of nightmarish. When they reached Kathalbari Ferry Ghat after a six-hour long bus journey to cross the Padma en route to Dhaka, they learned that most of the ferries were not operating because of lack of navigability due to siltation.

Instead of 21 regular ferries, authorities had to run five ferries that carried only lightweight vehicles and passengers. Even on a regular day, it would result in a mess. It goes without saying that Eid season is the worst time for such a fiasco to happen because during this period traffic activity in such Ferry terminals increases greatly. Unfortunately, according to the passengers, it happens every year.

Officials of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) said that they started dredging from September 2 but could not complete it due to strong currents, whereas disruption to ferry transportation had started from August 31. And as such the authorities should have conducted dredging beforehand to avoid such a situation.

Even after authorities had realised that they could not continue normal ferry operations, they did nothing to inform the passengers about it except issuing a press release. They could have easily contacted local road transport operators and companies and urged passengers through them to use alternative routes to reach Dhaka.

Over the years, going home to spend Eid vacation and then coming back to Dhaka has been hazardous, risky and, of course, inconvenient. The concerned authorities must be prepared and well-resourced to handle the increased flow of people during Eid vacations so that the journeys are made smoother.



PLEASURE IS ALL MINE  
SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

**B**ANGLADESH can feel that she is not alone in combating the stupendous pressure brought on her by an unprecedented Rohingya influx into her territory. The immediate

outpourings of sympathy and expressions of humanitarian concerns for the victims, messages of solidarity and support to Bangladesh and condemnations of the Myanmar regime can be seen from two angles: First, these are indicative of a certain arousal of international conscience; and secondly, the outburst is at an initial stage, to be developed into a package of actions ensuring the return of Rohingyas to the Rakhine State.

It won't be easy, but is attainable provided we pass a few reality checks in order to be pragmatic and reasonably fail-safe. The pivot around which we need to rebuild our case is that as per the 2014 census in Myanmar, the Rohingya Muslim population stood at 2.4 million. If that figure is not credible, a fresh count may be made in a normalised environment in due course. The point I wish to highlight is this: In spite of the waves of exodus into our territory, amounting to a large number, a substantial number of Rohingyas do remain in the Rakhine State or thereabouts on the unassailable grounds of continuous residency. So it will be a worthwhile, in fact a morally obligatory mission, to protect them from atrocities as we work to secure repatriation of the refugees encamped in Bangladesh.

The three other factors we have to bear in mind as we embark on a decisively remedial approach are: One, the humanitarian concerns, however eloquently expressed for the weak and vulnerable, have scarcely, if ever, overridden geopolitical considerations including trade and investment priorities of the big powers. We have a considerable potential geo-political clout ourselves; we only need to play our cards to work our way on to the right side of the equations.

Secondly, an ethnic minority with an Islamic identity is liable to be suspected of militant inclination, especially when a step-motherly treatment has been meted out to them by a government.

Thirdly, and importantly, Aung San Suu Kyi, as the foreign minister and state counselor of her country is not in the driving seat. She cannot apparently



A newly arrived family stood in the mud at the overcrowded Kutupalong refugee camp, as thousands search for somewhere to stay.

PHOTO: UNHCR/VIVIAN TAN

overrule the military which is in charge of ethnic minorities. Besides, the army maintains control over the heartland by extracting from the largesse of mineral wealth of Myanmar and sharing it with the powerful countries.

On a side note, earlier this year, U Ko Ni, a prominent Muslim personality and legal advisor to Daw Suu was shot and killed at Yangon airport. He was purportedly working on an amendment to the 2006 constitution that would have clipped some of the powers of the military.

We expected that India being the nearest and professedly most friendly neighbour to Bangladesh would be sensitive to our present plight—a huge Rohingya refugee influx even as we reel from the effects of a devastating flood. Well, that expectation seems to have been belied.

The *Times of India* in a report on September 6, 2017 gave the highlights of the Modi-Suu Kyi meeting in Yangon in the following, rather one-sided terms:

- a) "India shares Myanmar's concern over the violence in the Rakhine state."
- b) "Suu Kyi thanked India for taking a strong stand on the terror threat that Myanmar faced recently."

In his 35-minute address to the Indian Diaspora, Prime Minister Modi "did not allude to the Rohingya Muslim crisis," even though Myanmar is facing

international censure and its repercussions spill over to India in the shape of "illegal immigrants".

The *Times of India* noted that Modi's observations came at a time when Bangladesh was facing refugees pouring across the border two weeks after Myanmar's military crackdown in the Rakhine State. The *Hindustan Times* also reported that Modi was silent on the Rohingya issue.

We think, the Indian prime minister has lost an opportunity to play an honest broker here. Given the prestige India enjoys with the Myanmar establishment—Suu Kyi saying "Myanmar looked up to India for (guidance) and support"—and Bangladesh's close ties with India, a process of engagement could be initiated by Modi.

China has remained equally silent over the imperilled Rohingyas. She has an important vision of a corridor girdling Myanmar and Sri Lanka. But having regard to her traditional clout with Myanmar topped up by infrastructural investments and a sliver of ethnic connectivity, China can persuade Myanmar to see reason to make up with Dhaka. Doesn't Bangladesh have a claim to it as a friend of China?

In these days of distracting global issues with newer complexities amid

"post-modern confusions" it is difficult to stick by any line of distinction between friend and foe. In such a context it's imperative for Bangladesh to craft her own policy package and implement it with selective but effective international assistance.

The components of such a policy can be various forms of diplomatic pressure on Myanmar if it continues to be defiant of the Human Rights Charter of the UN; reinstatement of citizenship rights that were divested of them in 1982. Interestingly, cards were given to them to participate in the 1990 election and they won some parliamentary seats as well. While annulling the results of the 1990 election, the military didn't only throw the winner Suu Kyi in jail but also dubbed the cards the Rohingyas used as "fake".

The immediate task is two-fold: Take the refugees under the wings to provide emergency medical attention, food and shelter. Secondly, we must take up repatriation of the refugees with the Myanmar government, spearheaded by the UNHCR. Their orderly return to their homeland and resettlement will have to be ensured under the UN auspices, if necessary, buttressed by an appropriate UN resolution.

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## INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY 2017

# Where do we stand when it comes to literacy skills?



MEHER NIGAR JERIN

**R**AWSHON Ara Akter teaches at a government primary school in Saturia Upazila of Manikganj. According to her, many third-grade students in her school struggle while reading a

simple passage in Bangla. And yet those students are getting good grades. Mahmuda Akhter, a teacher from another school, has a similar observation: "Once, while teaching an eighth-grade class, I asked a student to read a passage from her Bangla textbook. Sadly, she started crying silently in shame instead of reading out loud."

These beg the question: where do we stand when it comes to literacy skills? A question that comes with a troubling answer. Even though Bangladesh has made praiseworthy strides in improving access to basic education, there are many children who are left behind in the development expedition of Bangladesh just because they lack Bangla literacy skills. Now on the threshold of becoming a middle-income country, Bangladesh must consider setting new targets to improve its education status, especially in terms of primary education. It has become crucial to think beyond the high enrolment rate and take a critical look at the sector to generate more effective solutions.

Each year, we see students passing their Primary School Certificate (PSC) exams with flying colours. But underneath the rosy picture is a reality that's quite troubling. According to the National Student Assessment 2013, 25 percent of students in grade III cannot read simple texts, interpret clearly stated information, identify the meaning and correct spelling of high-frequency words, and recognise correct use of punctuation. The Education Watch 2016 report states that "...from 2002 to 2016, literacy skills improved somewhat at different grade levels, but it still remains unsatisfactory

for primary grade completers."

The Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) paints a worrisome picture of what those 25 percent of students from grade III (who failed to achieve their grade level of competencies) will face in the secondary level. The bureau's report titled Bangladesh Education Statistics-2016 mentioned that a total of 38.3 percent of students in secondary level have dropped out in 2016.

Working with the aid and social

day they will wonder, what is the point of sending children to school if it does not make them competent in their native language Bangla and open up opportunities?

Most experts in the education sector claim that poverty is the most reasonable cause behind dropouts in primary education. But we have to consider the reality that failing to achieve expected literacy skills in Bangla fortifies the fear of learning early in life. And this fear can make any student drop out,

which the duration of "Bangla class" is only 40 minutes. This short period is not enough to help most children improve their Bangla literacy skills.

However, several organisations have been working closely with the government at the local and national levels to look at how best practices could be scaled up. Efforts are being made to address the issue of insufficient time allocation for the subjects like Bangla in primary school and make an effective use of after-school hours. And some of these efforts have been amazingly successful.

In my view, a combination of leveraging inside-school initiatives and catalysing out-of-school activities like Community Reading Camp, under the READ project of Save the Children Bangladesh, can have a sustainable impact on children's literacy skills. By creating spaces where children can participate in fun and innovative literacy activities outside the school, especially for the children of grade I-II who encounter difficulties in learning, literacy skills have been seen to improve significantly. But what I find remarkable is that some of these spaces have been engaging young people in the community to facilitate after-school activities with very positive results.

Once a child achieves literacy skills, it becomes easy for her/him to continue formal education and make the best use of her/his academic results in future. There is no alternative to being creative and interactive in our approach to education, while simultaneously not compromising practical learning outcomes. For Bangladesh, which is among the most densely populated countries in the world, the strength of its rural community has so far been untapped. The power of the people, if correctly leveraged, carries great potential for enhancing its future generation's literacy skills.

This is the least we can do to unleash the endless potential of our children to make a better Bangladesh.



COURTESY: SAVE THE CHILDREN

development sector in Bangladesh has taken me to places where most of the people subsist on fishing or agriculture, surrounded as they are by the mighty rivers. Their children's enrolment in primary schools does not give them hope, because they know that their children cannot read and write properly. They know that stipends, free textbooks, benefits of school feeding programmes will help them for a short term, but these will not change their fate as long as their literacy skills do not improve. And one

irrespective of their parents' financial condition.

Reading is a foundational skill that is the bedrock not just of education but also of life-wide learning. The early years of school are very important because this is when this bedrock is built. And primary school is the place where children can achieve their literacy skills.

If we look at the primary schools, we will find that three hours are usually allocated for each shift in a school, of

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### UN must act urgently

The Myanmar army has been committing crimes against humanity. Their brutality has crossed all limits. They have been mercilessly torturing and killing innocent Rohingyas, setting fire to their houses and looting their belongings.

Bangladesh is doing her best to help the Rohingya refugees who have entered our country just to save their lives from the brutality of the Myanmar forces. The world must condemn these evil acts and create pressure on Myanmar government to stop the genocide.

It's time the UN took stern action against Myanmar. I strongly feel that it should send peacekeeping forces to the country in order to protect the Rohingya people, thereby restoring peace in the Rakhine state.

Professor M Zahidul Haque  
Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, Dhaka

### Ban on hydraulic horn

It is heartening to know that the Hon'ble High Court has banned the use of hydraulic horn. Sound pollution is a major problem in Dhaka. So if this ban is implemented, the residents of the capital will be largely benefited as it will reduce the level of sound pollution in the city.

Syed Badrul Haque  
Lalmatia, Dhaka

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