“It is easy to be xenophobic, it is harder to be humanitarian” – Dr Meghna Guhathakurta

Following her panel presentation on minorities during the LSE-UC Berkeley Bangladesh Summit, ***Dr Meghna Guhathakurta*** *spoke with* ***Laraib Niaz*** *on the Rohingya crisis, radicalisation and the challenges facing minority women.*

LN: You have been working with Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB),to assist the Rohingya refugees, since 2011. Could you elaborate on how the work is helping refugees in their integration in the local community and how effective the approach of participatory action research has been, in this specific instance?

MG: Since 2011, RIB has worked in the official refugee camps with over 30000 refugees, with UNHCR as our implementing partners. Our participatory action required a scoping exercise, which illustrated the dire need of education in the community. Interestingly, the local imam also emphasised how education was needed for children, even with the existence of madrassas, as the refugee children required coping mechanisms to deal with reality. It was conversations like these that really fired us all up.

We already had a model for early childhood learning called Kajoli innovated by our Chaiman Dr. Shamsul Bari that was being employed in 200 centres within Bangladesh. For the early childhood learning centres, there were around 30 children in playgroups. Before the programme, these children were not attending schools, were instead playing around in the mud and were highly susceptible to diseases. After the programme, they started reciting poems to their parents in Bangla, English and the official language of Myanmar, the parents stating that these children were now finally healing. We also got a wonderful feedback from Rohingya refugees by making them more proactive in thinking about their own issues and how they were agents for their own change.

During the panel, you mentioned how radicalisation was not an emerging threat, in the case of Rohingya refugees. Yet, undeniably, research has shown how disenfranchised communities are more likely to align with right-wing groups. With the presence of Jamaat-e-Islami and other right wing Islamic groups in Bangladesh, do you think it is prudent to discount the possibility of Islamic radicalisation?

The field is definitely ripe for radicalisation. However, the situation has been controlled, as of now, due to the existence of a strong army presence as well as strong watchout in terms of administration. It is imperative to note that Rohingyas need shelter and all they want is to let stability come in. Children, especially require stability and care. You do not need explosives when every child is an explosive given their traumatic history; so there exists a potentiality in them for radicalisation. The healing process becomes important here.

I will give you an example. Priyanka Chopra came to visit the refugee camps as an ambassador for UNICEF. When she asked a child to draw a picture for her, she was met with a picture of gunfire. However, three months afterwards, she asked the same child to draw a picture, and this time the child drew green fields and the sun. The implication being that some sort of healing is now taking place, which in turn requires stability.

Nevertheless, it is not only radicalisation on the basis of religion that is a cause for concern, but also on the basis of nationalism. If there exists continuous and greater discrimination against the refugee groups in the Rakhine as well as in Bangladesh, then this situation could turn into another Palestine.

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Rohingya children carrying wood at a refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar. Photo credit: UN Women, Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

I read up on your inspirational work on gender in Bangladesh, especially pertaining to the indigenous women in Chittagong hill tracts (CHT). Having conducted field research in cox bazaar and other refugee camps as well, could you describe the situation of Rohingya women specifically?

See, over 50% of refugees are women, and that too, single women. A large proportion of these women have been raped or assaulted, or have lost their husbands and families. Almost all of the women, while speaking to us about repatriation, related their wish to go to their homes but not interned in camps. Women want more stability because their day-to-day lives are anything but stable. While asking them about what they treasured about their stay in Rakhine state, one woman for instance, started describing how she came from a fishing village and started crying, because it reminded her of a time of peace and stability. This is what majority women want in the refugee camps: a stable household, a stable living, something that they can envisage if they are ensured citizenship.

What is your general opinion on the future rehabilitation of Rohingya refugees, considering more of them are coming in from Myanmar where the conditions are still not conducive to their stay?

I see three possible scenarios likely to happen. Everyone realises that Rohingyas are not leaving immediately even if theMyanmar government is showing some overtures about receiving them. It is going to be another protracted procedure. On the other hand, the refugees are also facing hostility from the local community. Some of them are thinking of returning and waiting for the right time to return. Consequently, in the near future a few will return and some will be relocated, which will be voluntary and not forced. By nature they are fisherman, so they will possibly be relocated in coastal areas. Alternatively, Canada has given some indication that some of the Rohingyas may go there. There are, therefore, three possibilities. Some refugees will return to Myanmar, some will be locally integrated, and some will be reintegrated internationally.

Since you have, over the years, liaised with both national and international humanitarian organisations, what do you think is the most important lesson that you learnt and these organisations can, perhaps, benefit from? How would you suggest putting humanity in humanitarianism?

I feel these organisations are doing lip service to humanitarian causes and not adequately addressing the gap between the local community and the disenfranchised community. For example, in the case of the Rohingya crisis, the refugee community has sometimes outnumbered the number of locals in that region. If we Bangladeshis weren’t a nation of 160 million, we would have been terrified; but because we are a populous country ourselves, the presence of Rohingya refugees is, at most, a source of discomfort.

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Hence, the internal legacies, processes and cultural codes, which make people welcome, which makes people treat other people in a more humanitarian way need to be taken into consideration. Humanitarianism cannot be imposed and sometimes it does not come from the west but rather from the culture of the local community. That is a factor the international community should learn and they should modify their programmes, accordingly, to consider the health of the local community, and integrate that into their programmes. It is easy to be xenophobic, it is harder to be humanitarian, but we must learn the hard lessons.

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About the Authors

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