

## **Voices of the Burmese Rohingya Refugees: Everyday Politics of Survival in Refugee Camps in Bangladesh**

**Kazi Fahmida Farzana**

*School of International Studies, College of Law, Government and International Studies,  
Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Sintok, Kedah, Malaysia*

### **ABSTRACT**

Many of the displaced ethnic Rohingya minority from Myanmar living in Bangladesh for more than two decades are as documented and undocumented refugees. Those living in two registered refugee camps are documented refugees, located in secluded areas, maintaining a safe distance from the locals and monitored by the appointed authority. How is life like for the refugees at these camps? How do the young refugees envision their present and future within the given environment? This paper examines the young Rohingya refugees' everyday politics of survival at one of the registered refugee camps, i.e. Nayapara, located in the Teknaf sub-district of Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh, in an effort to understand their interactions with the host state local society and international agencies within the framework of state-imposed boundaries. The paper takes people's perspective and the agency's approach and frames the refugee society as a political community. The ethnographic data for this research came from 30 respondents using qualitative methods of in-depth interviews, group discussion and participant observation. The paper argues that the critical voices of camp-based refugees often articulate narratives of dispossession and marginalisation that can, in one way or another, be explained as the outcome or consequence of their forced migration; however, notwithstanding adversity, the refugees learn to live and find ways to make a life, within the given situation, navigating through a complex process of contestation, negotiation, adjustment and manipulation. Some of the activities such as taking on the role of brokers between agencies and refugees, and seasonal work outside the camp boundary indicate refugees' delicate negotiation with their situation and individuals' aspirations to defy the imagined boundary of camps. This paper shows the dynamics of contestation and collaboration within the camp situation and criticises encampment as a strategy of refugee protection.

#### **ARTICLE INFO**

*Article history:*

Received: 23 July 2014

Accepted: 3 August 2015

*E-mail address:*

fahmida@uum.edu.my (Kazi Fahmida Farzana)

*Keywords:* Rohingya voices, boundaries, camp life, youth perspective, Bangladesh

## INTRODUCTION

In the existing and rapidly growing literature on political refugees, refugee camps have been studied from various perspectives. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, one of the major contributors to this field, asserts that a refugee camp is a “state of exception” (1998, pp. 166-171; 2000, p. 37). The preliminary condition of such “state of exception” is a relationship that binds and, at the same time, abandons, the living being to law.<sup>1</sup> What he meant was that the refugee camp is created by the modern nation-state and has many hidden norms and regulations that apply exclusively to, or that indiscriminately exclude, refugees; theirs is a naked or “bare life”; it is a “form of life” which has been depoliticised and is quite different from the politicised life that clearly manifests in the lives of citizens. This argument suggests that, to maintain its sovereignty, the politics of the nation-state system choose to include and exclude certain forms of life; it creates the insider-outsider dichotomy and excludes those whose lives and *being* “threaten the sovereign’s jurisdiction over a particular land space ... conceptually and at times physically, from ‘the norm’” (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2004, p. 34).

This paper looks at the Nayapara refugee camp in Bangladesh, located in the southernmost part of the country bordering

Myanmar, which has been home to an estimated 18,378 Burmese refugees<sup>2</sup> who crossed the border into Bangladesh from November 1991 to June 1992, when the Burmese military disregarded the general election results and mounted military operations on the Rohingyas in the Northern Arakan. The total area of the Nayapara camp is 3.234 sq km. The refugees are under the surveillance of several agencies. The Bangladesh government is the primary agency with sovereign authority to control the camp. The representative of the government, the Camp-in-Charge (CIC), takes care of the day-to-day governing of the camp. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) gave financial assistance and protection to registered refugees from forced repatriation to their country of origin. Unlike other refugee camps, where the UNHCR and other relief agencies have authority to govern the camp; here, the refugees are to remain under stringent restrictions within the “temporary shelter area,” surviving on relief aid until voluntary repatriation takes place. The real-life interplay between these three agencies—of state, international organisation and refugees—makes this exceptional place an interesting research site in which to focus fundamental questions such as: Does this camp offer opportunities to the refugees “to explore the making and un-making of public authority” (Turner, 2006), or does this force the refugees to live only a “bare life” outside the boundary

<sup>1</sup> For more details on refugee camp, see Agamben,(1998), Part 3.

<sup>2</sup> The data is based on the Bangladesh government’s Quick Facts of Nayapara Refugee Camp (estimated as of July 2013).

of national citizens (Agamben, 1998, 2000, pp. 37-49)?

The article focuses on the young Rohingya refugees' experiences in their day-to-day life at the camps. The rationale of this focus is that, despite the fact that the Rohingya issues have been addressed in a number of major studies (Yegar, 1981; Yunus, 1994; Habibullah, 1995; Razzaq & Haque, 1995; Wong, 1996; Karim, 2000; Rahman, 2005; Berlie, 2008; Saltsman, 2009; Bahar, 2010), none has addressed the refugee's life-politics from *their* perspective. Moreover, reports done by various international agencies such as the Human Rights Watch (2000), Medecins sans Frontieres (2002) and Amnesty International (1997) have greatly contributed to document the deplorable living conditions of the Rohingyas in refugee camps, but the narrative reflects a one-sided presentation depicting the Rohingyas as helpless, passive recipients in need of food and shelter and other basic services. Such a narrative leaves out one very important element, i.e. the "other side's" perception: how the refugees themselves perceive their camp life. Unless this overlooked or neglected side is explored, our understanding of the Rohingya refugees' life and its various implications will remain incomplete. This paper analyses the refugees' everyday in-camp experience from the younger generation's perspective, viewed from their lens, on their interaction with the wider community. It explores the dynamic of contestation and collaboration within a camp situation.

## METHODOLOGY

The data for this article came from ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted as part of a large-scale research on the Rohingya refugees' identity perceptions and exile life in the south-eastern corner of Bangladesh adjacent to Myanmar over a period of six months between 2009 and 2010. The refugee experiences detailed in this article were from 30 selected respondents (14 female and 16 male) who are registered refugees in the UNHCR Nayapara camp located in Teknaf Upazila (sub-district) of Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh. As the lists of registered refugees were inaccessible, probability sampling was not possible; therefore, non-probability selection techniques of sampling were utilised instead. The respondents were all above 25 year old because they were primarily selected for the interviews based on their recollections and social memory of their past (in Myanmar) and present (in Bangladesh). In order to capture the refugees' experiences and their narratives, I used in-depth interviews, group discussion and participant observation methods, which were then systematically analysed for key themes, patterns and contradictions. In addition, the author also used her ethnographic diary and photo diary that were maintained during the fieldwork.

## RECAPTURING POLITICS

To situate the Rohingya's experience within a political and historical context, when the Rohingya refugees first entered the borders of Bangladesh in huge numbers (in 1977-78), they were sheltered in temporary camps.

At the time, it was intended to be a transitory arrangement; the Bangladesh government treated it as an internal and exclusive matter, and went about establishing camps to house the refugees. Official records suggest that in 1978, with the largest exodus of Rohingya refugees, the Bangladesh government was able to repatriate all the refugees back to Burma.<sup>3</sup> During the 1991-1992 exodus, which turned out to be the second largest wave of Rohingya refugees to Bangladesh, the Bangladesh government adopted a similar approach; however, this received wider international attention and quickly escalated into “the Rohingya issue” because forces outside of Bangladesh were highly critical of the alleged forced repatriation process, thus, ultimately slowing, and eventually, in 2005, stopping, the repatriation altogether. Some of these refugees have lived as registered refugees in camps since; but a vast number of other refugees remain undocumented, residing in various unofficial makeshift camps in Teknaf, Ukhiya, and Cox’s Bazaar of Bangladesh.<sup>4</sup> Sociopolitical conditions in Myanmar’s Arakan continue to remain unfavourable to the displaced Rohingyas, who have continued to illegally cross the border into Bangladesh, albeit on a much smaller scale, as the Bangladesh government

<sup>3</sup> For details on repatriation, see Chapter 4, Bangladesh section.

<sup>4</sup> An estimated 328,500 live in Bangladesh, a number of them since the early 1990s; of these 28,500 are listed as registered refugees in two camps, Kutupalong and Nayapara, located between Cox’s Bazar and Teknaf (UNHCR Annual Report, 2008).

maintains a very strict policy towards the new comers.<sup>5</sup>

The Bangladesh government has handled the refugee issue internally. The host government and its agencies have imposed and implemented a host of special rules, regulations and restrictions on the individuals living within the encampments. Bangladesh considers the refugees as extra-territorial *persona non grata*, and hence, a threat to the country; therefore, they are placed within restricted boundaries and controlled by specially designed rules and restrictions until official measures are taken to repatriate them. Bangladesh invited the UNHCR to provide humanitarian assistance to the refugees but did not allow the Commission to operate freely; it can only operate within the authority of the Bangladesh government. The humanitarian agencies prefer easier terms so as to provide solutions to refugees’ basic and immediate needs. This can be understood from a statement by Christopher Beng Cha Lee, the then-UNHCR Representative to Bangladesh, that “the government does not allow us to make arrangements for minimum standard houses for Rohingya refugees, education for their children, plantation in their camps and

<sup>5</sup> See “25 Rohingya Intruders Held in Teknaf” *The Daily Star*, February 1, 2007. More recent (post-June 2012) inter-communal violence in Arakan, between Buddhists and Muslims, has brought many more new refugees to Bangladesh. However, reports suggest that the Bangladesh government has tightened border controls and turned back refugees. For details, see The Equal Rights Trust, June 02, 2012.

teaching them Bangla language that they speak” (Shahid, 2005, p. 4).

It would be interesting to see if, and how, Agamben’s concepts of “exceptional space” and “bare life” can explain the context of Nayapara refugee camp in Bangladesh. In order to understand what goes on within the camp, it is necessary to look at the dynamics of the individuals’ everyday life from within.

### **CAMP LIFE: YOUTHS’ PERSPECTIVE**

This section highlights the experience of young Rohingya refugees. The first section focuses on the background of the youths. The subsequent section discusses the dynamic of contestation and collaboration in dealing with the wider community – camp officials, local villagers and international agencies. This is followed by an analysis of the means of entertainment in camp.

#### *Background of the Studied Rohingya Youth*

The first impression one gets of the Rohingya refugee camps is that of order and control ‘from above.’ There are no erected boundary demarcations or fences around the Nayapara refugee camps to indicate the camps are within protected and restricted areas; nevertheless, state manifestation of security boundaries such as tightly restricted access through gates, military and para-military checkpoints and registration of visitors at front offices are indicative of a perceived defined boundary of the camps. As Agamben (2000, p. 40) observed, “[T]he camp is the

structure in which the state of exception is permanently realized.” Outsiders require official permission to enter the camps. At the entrance, on a concrete structure (towards the camp), is a signboard (in Bengali language) that informs outsiders that this is, “Nayapara Refugee Camp: No Access without Permission” and on the other side of the structure (towards the main road) is another signboard directed at the refugees: “Attention: Refugees are not allowed to go outside the camp without the Exit Pass.” The formal security vigilance is rigorous. In order to get from the entrance to the refugees, one has to go through various checkpoints: the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB); (Bangladesh Rifles<sup>6</sup>) security post; followed by the camp-in-charge’s office; and only then is an outsider given access to the refugees’ blocks.

During my ethnographic fieldwork at this camp, initially I was surprised to discover a seeming uniformity among residents’ reported experiences. They shared similar stories of their past and circumstances surrounding their immigration from Arakan. Their collective memory indicates violence, persecution, expropriations and exploitations by various authorities (state, military and local neighbours). On their (current) exile lives in refugee camps in Bangladesh, their stories suggest that where they are, within enforced boundaries of the camps, are not much better than the lives they left behind. As I chatted with individuals at their tent homes and in tea

<sup>6</sup> Until December 22, 2010, this was known as BDR.

stalls, time and again, I heard phrases such as, “Maybe the situation is a little better here, as the military is not coming to kill us, but here our life is like birds in a cage. They do not allow us to move freely. What future can we hold here, without work, and education for the children?” During my fieldwork, I found refugee families living in a 10 span by 10 span thatched-roof (Jupri) hut, which has a mud-floor with bamboo-sheet walls and a plastic-covered bamboo-sheet roof. Some families had up to 12 members living in these one-room huts. Refugees’ narratives indicate encounters with serious life-threatening dangers such as being killed by police firing squads, intimidation by camp security guards, rape and beating, torture by being tied with ropes, and many more. In this displacement, young refugees seem to be most disadvantaged; without education and skills training, their future is bleak. Yet, the longer I experienced life in the camp, I realised that within this perceived uniformity, there is heterogeneity of experiences, contentiousness, politics and diverse interests. In the midst of accurately-framed difficulties of exile life within the camp, they seemed to have transformed their experiences by giving it a semblance of simplified uniformity. I will explain these points as I go further.

The youths at Naypara camp<sup>7</sup> can be classified into three categories. The first, and most common, were the unemployed youths who spend their time playing cards or chatting with their friends at tea stalls.<sup>8</sup> During the day, they were allowed to gather in small groups; after dark, groups of five or six would be chased off or beaten up by security guards. Sitting around and chatting were a common scenario among young refugees, for whom there is no higher education beyond primary school, and they are not allowed to leave the camp for studies or work. These restrictions have vastly diminished their future, and they idle their time away. The second category of young refugees tries hard to fill their days with activities, and become involved with different kinds of work in the camp. During my fieldwork, I learned that many of them were aware and concerned about their gloomy future, and were keen to pursue

<sup>7</sup> Myanmar (Burma) and Bangladesh are neighbouring states that share a 270-km long international border. The source of the River Naff begins in the Arakan hills of Myanmar on the southeastern borders and flows into the Bay of Bengal. It is an elongated estuary in the southeast of Cox's Bazar district that separates the district from Arakan. The River Naff is 3.22 km wide; some parts of Arakan, especially the mountain ‘Arakan Yoma’ are visible from Teknaf.

<sup>8</sup> This research explores two groups of youth refugees; those who were between 25 and 35 years old at the time of the study and those who had crossed the border into Bangladesh when they were very young; and the second-generation refugees who were born in Bangladesh camps, and were teenagers and young adults (below 25 years old) at the time of the study.



further education and specialised training. I found the third category the most interesting, and was struck by the fact that some of them were seasonal workers, whereby for some months of the year, they go out to work, while the other months, they stay within the camp and depend on the food rations. My field data on 30 selected registered refugees (14 females and 16 males) at the Nayapara camp showed that they were involved in different occupations.

Fig.1 shows at least three categories of occupations. Those that are completely dependent on the food rations form the largest group, about 16, with more females (nine) than males (seven). The females were mostly housewives who took care of their families through various efforts. The second category—eight of 30 (five females and three males)—comprised small businesses within the camp. Men involved in small businesses tended to perform jobs such as camp committee members, school teacher,

religious teachers in the mosque, guards for the local NGO offices, or as vegetable sellers. The women were mostly involved in sewing clothes, weaving fishing nets, raising fowl (cows and goats are not allowed) and selling snacks. The third category involved jobs outside of the camp. This was the smallest group (six younger men), working as rickshaw-pullers, manual labourers (shovelling and carrying soil, uploading slat onto trucks for the salt industry), food servers at hotel restaurants, fishermen, working in the dry-fish business, and cutting and collecting firewood. I could not find any registered female refugees working in off-camp jobs, and this could likely be due to the risks involved in the entry-exit process, as well as the social stigma. It should be noted that off-camp activities were, in their context, illegal, but somehow they were able to make their way in and out without much difficulty.

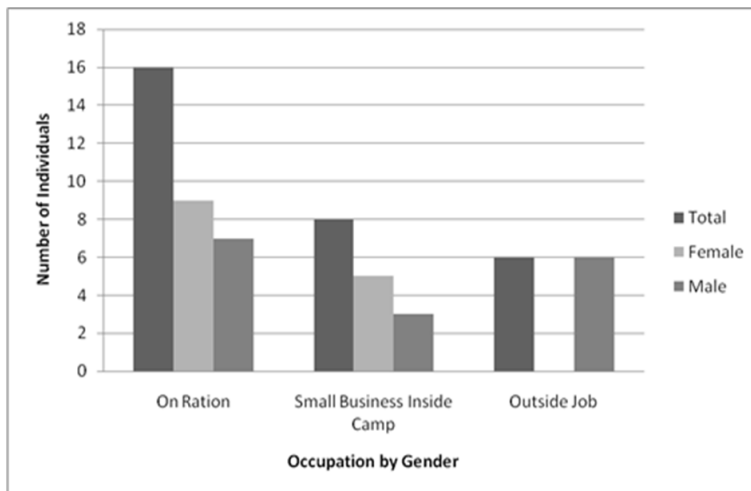


Fig.1: Nayapara Camp refugees’ occupations (by gender)

Many of the young, unemployed refugees are totally dependent on food rations, and some become depressed and desperate. There are many news reports of young refugees becoming involved in gambling, drinking, drug taking, and more.<sup>9</sup> They often created trouble inside the camp. In 2009, during one of my interviews with the previous camp-in-charge (CIC), he mentioned a drug-related incident that took place in Nayapara camp. Three refugees pretended to be severely sick and were given official permission to go to Cox's Bazaar hospital, and an ambulance was provided for the transport. Later, however, it was found that the whole episode was a plot by the group to transfer drugs. They knew they could not pass through the three checkpoints to get to Cox's Bazaar district had they gone on their own and thus pretended to be sick so that they could use official transport services for their illegal activities.

Understandingly, many refugees did not want to associate with this group as they did not want to bring more trouble to their lives. Mothers kept a watchful eye on their

<sup>9</sup> It is believed that there is a strong underground human trafficking racket actively working in the camps. A few cases have drawn wider attention from the news media. For instance, a three-member gang was arrested at Fakirer Pool in Dhaka on July 8, 2004 (*The Daily Star*, July 09, 2004, vol. 5, No 43); they were found with 18 Rohingyas, including eight children, mainly young girls, four women and six men. The victims said that they were from the Teknaf camps and had come to Bangladesh during the refugee exodus in 1991-1992, and had been living here since. They were about to be taken to Saudi Arabia when they were found with fake Bangladesh Passports.

children and their playmates and placed restrictions on their children's movements. However, it was not easy to maintain regular and continuous monitoring when children did not have to attend school and parents were themselves not equipped or qualified to teach them at home.

Out of desperation, one group of young refugees is very much interested in government-sponsored, third country resettlement programmes; for the Bangladesh government, this is a durable and legal alternative to repatriating the refugees to Burma where, they would quickly turn around and find ways to cross back into Bangladesh. The programme selects refugee families (comprising husband, wife and children) as well as young unmarried male refugees.<sup>10</sup> The process is very slow, as inter-governmental negotiation tends to be a long, drawn-out process. As of 2009, only 262 Rohingya refugees have been resettled in various developed countries. Meanwhile, many accept the restricted camp life in hopes that one day, they may be offered the chance to resettle in another country where they will have legal rights and be recognised and respected as citizens.

The issue of resettlement creates tension within the community, where rumours are rife, and it is very easy for news or gossips to spread within the community. For instance, in May 2011, there was unverified news that the Bangladesh government's third country resettlement programme might

<sup>10</sup> This is a government process and only those registered camp refugees are eligible for the resettlement programme. See also Palma (July 14, 2007).



be discontinued. Those whose names were on the third country resettlement list feared it was a false hope. Some refugees shared their resentment and anger over the selection process. As one young informant said, “This (third country resettlement) is another matter of sorrow among all the ordinary Rohingyas. Especially among those of us who have better qualifications than others. For example, we have primary education and some basic skills training. Instead of selecting young, enthusiastic, qualified people from the camp, they are selecting those who already have family members in a foreign country.” Like others, this refugee was alluding to allegations that those who had already been resettled in a third country would send bribe-money (reportedly between BDT 100,000 to 200,000)<sup>11</sup> to be paid to Bangladesh brokers who work for UNHCR and knew how to manipulate the process so that the sender’s family members would be selected.

Due to the uncertainties and limitations to the government process, some young refugees often sought out illegal and risky ways to get themselves to third countries. As a result, in May 2015, thousands of Rohingya migrants landed in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia (Farzana, 2015). This illegal process is commonly known as the “boat line” which refers to a risky sea route mode of transportation. Refugees are very aware of the risks and dangers to their lives but still do so out of desperation. One young refugee informant who was planning to get on a “boat line” in the near future,

said, “I know that the boat line is risky. They [the broker] say that they will take us to Malaysia, but we never know where we will end up. They might take us to Thailand, Indonesia, or even Burma. If God is kind on me, I will survive on this sea journey ... If I don’t take the risk now, I have to live in refugee camp my whole life!”

However, refugee parents do not encourage their sons to choose this option as they do not wish to lose them; they would rather wait for the official resettlement process that sends refugees to a third country. Nonetheless, many young people do not want to wait that long in uncertainty and secretly get their documents processed without discussing with their parents. Some parents are aware of their sons’ intentions, and do not try to stop them. They are inspired by the stories of refugees’ successful cases where they have made it illegally to a third country where they can earn and send money to their families. There seemed to be a correlation between the Bangladesh government’s repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar and a coinciding increase in the number of refugees getting on the “boat line” (Lewa, 2003), signifying their preference for a third destination over their homeland.

In this section, we have seen how people live their lives in the refugee camps. In their mundane and routine lives, the refugees are expected to behave in a prescribed way. Any form of political activities, negotiation on rights or attempts to influence the authorities, is prohibited. Without prior official permission, they are not allowed

<sup>11</sup> 1,200 to 2,400 USD equivalent.

to gather in groups of more than five. They are to stay within the camp vicinity as passive dwellers, and are expected to remain contented with their allotted food and shelter, and wait patiently for repatriation. However, within their everyday life, they also have interactions with the wider community, including camp officials, local villagers, as well as humanitarian organisations. These interactions indicate that refugee life in camp may not be as static as it appears. The following section looks at the nature of the interactions, with particular interest on the aspects of everyday life that is reproduced in the community.

### *Refugees' Interaction with the Wider Community*

#### **Interaction with the Camp Authorities**

Some young refugees choose to live their lives quietly within the camp, but were enthusiastic to do something good for others. Many are keen to return to Myanmar if they could be afforded equal rights to education and living. Some worked inside the camp, while others were able to obtain work outside of the camp, which raised questions as to how they were able to negotiate with the authorities. The following case study illustrates their everyday life negotiations with various authorities:

#### **Faruk Kabir: Manager in a hotel outside the camp**

Refugee Faruk Kabir lives in Nayapara camp; he is 21 years old and speaks Bengali reasonably well, along with some

ungrammatical English. Language skills are very important to refugees to enable them to communicate with the people outside of the camp such as the Bangladeshis and foreigners. With his language ability, Faruk enjoys many advantages over those who do not speak Bengali or English.

Faruk maintains social contact with people outside the camp. Through this network, in November 2010, he was offered a managerial position with a hotel in the popular tourist destination of St Martin's island<sup>12</sup> for three months, for a total of 5000 taka (approximately US\$65). This was not his first outside job. Every year, from November to January, he looks for work outside of the camp. His work is seasonal, available only during the winter months, when tourists visit this beautiful, exotic and rustic island, when tornadoes are absent, and the sea is comparatively calm. For the hotel's Bangladeshi owner, there is comparative advantage to hiring a Rohingya refugee as payment is far less than a Bangladeshi's asking rate of 10,000 (US\$130) to 15,000 taka (US\$195).

How is Faruk able to leave and work for three months outside of the camp when we already know that this is prohibited? This is made possible by unwritten laws that coexist within the official laws and other "helping hands" that work for the Camp-in-Charge (CIC) as clerks, managers, gate-keepers, that create in-trade opportunities for the refugees

<sup>12</sup> This is a 7.3 km Bangladesh island, commonly referred to by the locals as Narikel Jinjira; it is located northeast of the Bay of Bengal, about 9 km south of the Teknaf peninsular tip of Cox's Bazar district.

to go out, out of which they demand their cut from wages earned. Faruk pays 800 taka (US\$10) bribe money to a manager who works closely with the CIC; in turn, he is given permission to submit a one-page written document stating his name, block number and description of his outside job. He said, "I know that manager for a long time. He knows me very well, too. I just need to give him my name for his own list. He would not give me trouble."

Within the camp, clerks, managers and gatekeepers play very important roles in managing and manipulating things in a very different way. Those who try to bypass the established but covert system are punished; their ration cards are confiscated and they are physically tortured, and so on. Therefore, the refugees bribe these agents, the amount to be paid depending on the nature and closeness of their relationship and the refugee's status within the community. Bribes can exceed 1,000 takas (US\$12) to 1,500 takas (US\$18). Sometimes, their ration books are held as collateral, which are returned only when the refugees go back to the camp and pay the agreed bribe to the manager. Sometimes, the managers use the collateral as a bargaining tool to ask for more. According to the refugees, the gatekeepers are the main "troublemakers" as the refugees are required to pay bribes to get in and out of the camp. Depending on the bargaining process, some gatekeepers are willing to accept 20 to 50 takas (US\$0.26 to US\$0.65) from ordinary refugees.

The above two case studies show that some young refugees are able to manage extraordinarily well with and work around the existing camp management authority's plans to extract bribes from displaced refugees. This is the "politics of survival" (Scott & Kerkvliet, 1973) that they gradually learn, after having, in some cases, lived more than two decades in the camps. Nevertheless, bribery is not a permanent solution as the rules could alter at any time; often when something negative occurs outside of the camp involving registered refugees, and security is tightened for those that remain. Those with outside work would then need to wait until the situation returns to normal before approaching the gatekeepers again with bribe offers in exchange for temporary outside "passes".

### **Interaction with the Local Villagers**

Economic resources are always contesting arenas in which people make competing claims; the relationship between camp dwellers and the surrounding local villagers is also affected by such contesting economic resources. Local villagers regard the refugees as lazy freeloaders because they receive free food and household items. According to Md. Ismail, a local villager, "these refugees in camps do not do any work. They just sit, eat and produce many children."<sup>13</sup> There is clearly a strained and contentious relationship between the refugees and the

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication with a local educated professional in Teknaf (December 29, 2010).

local villagers.<sup>14</sup> This is manifested in the number of local resistant movements that consider the Rohingyas a threat. One such movement, named Rohingya Hotao (Expel the Rohingyas), is based in Ukhiya, and maintains that the Rohingyas are creating all kinds of social problems and that criminal activities have increased because of their presence (Prothom Alo, January 10, 2010).

Ironically, the refugees have unofficially become part of the economic resources for the locals. Within the local community, the Rohingyas work in farming, fishing and other low-skill jobs—providing cheap labours to local villagers. In this sense, this has become a symbiotic relationship in that both groups depend on one another.

The following case study illustrates how interactions with the local villagers may go wrong.

**Jamila (aged 24).** Jamila's mother is ill. The camp clinic's doctor diagnosed possible breast cancer that would require immediate treatment. Jamila's two other sisters are married and live apart from

her family. Her father is old. This family of three is entirely dependent on the food rations. Jamila's fiancé was working in Saudi Arabia, and had sent her some gold jewellery, via his family, as a token of their formal engagement. Jamila's family is awaiting his return and the marriage ceremony will take place then.

Meanwhile, Jamila decided to sell the jewellery to pay for her mother's medical treatment and went with a younger male neighbour to a jewellery shop in Teknaf bazaar. Instead of buying the gold ornaments, the shop owner offered to pawn her jewellery for 20,000 taka (US\$258). Jamila could reclaim the ornaments a year later after repaying the capital and interest.

Jamila accepted the offer as she believed it was an opportunity for her to double her money. It was almost the end of the year (2010), and a neighbouring village was organising a New Year fair; the village chairman's son and his group promised to double any money invested in the fair, which would be paid immediately after the fair. Desperate for money, Jamila thought this would be a good opportunity for her to use her gold so she accepted the jeweller's offer and used the money to invest in the New Year fair. She expected that 40,000 taka (approximately US\$600) would be sufficient for her to repay the loan with interest, redeem her jewellery and pay for her mother's medical treatment.

Like Jamila, many others were deceived as well. Immediately after the fair, the Chairman's son disappeared from the village. The Chairman refused to be held responsible, claiming that he was not

<sup>14</sup> We experienced similar tension while working in Jalaipara. When we were preparing the household list for our study, some local villagers thought that relief materials would be given to those whose names were on the list. So the locals started coming to us to make sure their names were also on the list. We explained the purpose of work, but were not able to convince them. Some started shouting that they would not allow any relief distribution to the "Burmaiya" in the area unless they (the locals) were also included. The local villagers in the fishing community were very poor, and understandably upset that the international organizations do not provide them with financial aid.

involved in the deal. Several individuals who had helped his son organise the fair were still around and promised to return the money but had not done so yet. Jamila is at a loss. She is unable to redeem her jewellery as she has no money to repay the amount with interest. When she told me her story in April 2011, four months had already gone by and she had not made any monthly instalments. She is afraid that her fiancé will be upset if he came to know that she had done this without consulting him. If he found out, he could end his marriage proposal as the jewellery symbolises an engagement present. Jamila felt helpless, seeing her mother suffer.<sup>15</sup>

This case study shows that while young refugees are willing to take on challenges to improve their lives, in reality, their rights and means are extremely limited and success stories are few and far between.

In terms of intermarriages between registered refugees and local Bangladeshis, from my data, I found only two cases of refugee women married to Bangladeshi men, but I was told that the number is increasing. I thought it is interesting to note that it was always refugee girls marrying Bangladeshi men; but not vice versa<sup>16</sup>. This suggests that this kind of marriage may be a calculated move by refugee women to stay outside of the camp, with the possibility of becoming Bangladeshi citizens sometime

<sup>15</sup> Jamila's mother passed away in 2013, and she did not get her money back.

<sup>16</sup> Intermarriages between undocumented Rohingyas and local Bangladeshis are quite common and they live scattered within the local Bangladesh community.

in the future as she would bear children for her Bangladeshi husband and live with his family, and thus fulfilling many of her basic needs. Moreover, external connections through such marriages are expected to bring added advantages to the refugee family in terms of access to the local social security.

### **Interaction with Humanitarian Organisations**

With permission from the Bangladesh government, there are few humanitarian organisations that support the refugees through various initiatives to improve their lives.<sup>17</sup> That interaction with refugees manifests through providing them with basic skills training occasionally brings entertainment opportunities. Some of the NGO-initiated training programmes are intended to make refugees self-reliant such as teaching women how to make soaps, dresses, handicrafts and knitting. However, these are small-scale income generating projects and involve only a few hundred women (Khan & Sharfuddin, 1996). Unfortunately, there is no single women's organisation that represents refugee women's needs and rights.

<sup>17</sup> In 2014, the UN agencies involved in the camp are UNHCR, UNICEF, and WFP. Other major NGOs involved in the camps are Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS); Technical Assistance Inc. (TAI); Research, Training and Management (RTM) International; and Action Against Hunger (ACF), Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB), and BRAC Bangladesh, Handicap International.

Many of these training programmes target the young refugees. Some progressive-minded refugees who dream of a better future are trying their best to utilise resources provided by the NGOs, through which they learn about maternity safety, hygiene and helping the disabled. The broader purpose of this is to train refugees who can then be useful within their own community.

However, not all training is meaningful for the refugees. For instance, the male and female refugees were offered a three-month course to teach them computer skills. During my field trip, I talked to several who had attended the course. They did not appear confident at all about using computer. It is important to understand the refugees' needs from their perspective. They would like to receive training for skills they can put into use immediately to earn some money. To them, computer training is not relevant as they do not have access to computers nor are there opportunities for outside employment. As they are semi-literate and their basic needs in life are not met, providing computer training simply does not help their situation. Policies on the refugees' situation should take into consideration their immediate needs and accessibility to employment opportunities.

#### *Entertainment in the Camp*

Within the refugee camp, the means of entertainment is rather very limited. There are only two football and volleyball courts that the boys can use, and one community centre that all refugees of Nayapara camp

can use to organise functions with prior permission from the camp-in-charge. Having a centralised community centre may have two different implications. Firstly, it can be used as a common ground where refugees can gather and enjoy performances with other fellow refugees. It may help to improve their interpersonal relationships and provide them with more opportunities to communicate with each other. Secondly, it comes with a prohibition on programmes outside the centre; this suppresses their natural expressive values that are deeply rooted within their cultural traits and norms. Moreover, trying to put together a cultural show in the community centre comes with attendant prerequisites such as finding the right NGO(s) to help them organise the programme(s), getting help from refugee leaders and obtaining permission from the camp authority. The requirements would mean fewer functions being organised and less freedom for the refugees. These formalities and restrictions affect the female refugees most, as coming from conservative families, they prefer not to draw attention to themselves by mingling with the crowd to enjoy songs and drama. Thus, in the camps, the little entertainment they had in their traditional way of performing is no longer available to them.

Another important feature of their cultural life is drama performance. Previously, performances were at a football field inside the camp, but now, it can only be staged in the community centre. Performances revolve around real-life social



issues such as dowry and rape; these help spread moral messages to create awareness among refugees through entertainment and also strengthen community bonds. Nonetheless, restricting the refugees' ability to perform other than at the community centre confines their creativity. Like many traditional cultures, the Rohingya refugees also have abstract needs such as entertainment, but these needs are not articulated or fulfilled except as allowed by authority. The legitimate question that arises is: should the refugees have a right to decide on those needs?

During my ethnographic fieldwork, I was made aware of some of the artistic expressions common in the Rohingya culture; for this marginalised population, songs (taranas) and drawings are one of the last vestiges of a lost lifestyle (Farzana, 2011). The refugees use these songs and drawings to document their reflections on their lives, their beliefs and visions of the past, present and future. These help keep their memories alive - to be passed over to the next generation. The major themes of their taranas are of love, patriotism (memories of Arakan), Rohingya identity and solidarity, reminders to stay united within the Rohingya community and not to fight with each other. They use songs to vent their frustrations and to pass over their message to others, particularly when played at community functions. Thankfully, their production and themes used in the art forms have not resulted in altercations with the authorities (Edelman, 1995), which could have dangerous and costly consequences for

them.<sup>18</sup> For now, it remains at the stage of raising their consciousness (Denisoff, 1983; Qualter, 1963). Yet, such drawings evidently illustrate the power of visual symbols, as they recount from their perspective, the situation in Arakan and in Bangladesh, as well as the anguish and frustrations of finding themselves caught between the politics of two sovereign states, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Therefore, the music (poems and songs) and the art portray a poignant narrative of everyday refugee life and resistance in the camps in which both the real and imagined sense of displacements are revealed through music, poetry and art.

The above discussion on the refugees' interaction in camp clearly demonstrates how a refugee community has grown over the years at the site of this exceptional space. It has all the characteristics of a community in that it consists of all types of individuals, its intra-community relationships and its relationship with various agencies and the outsiders. The internal power play in the camps is ubiquitous and complex. The features of power politics in the camps reinforce the nexus between the various stakeholders. Those profiteering agents try constantly to keep their power unchallenged through social negotiation and renegotiation, tacit understanding, compromise and off-

<sup>18</sup> Kerkvilet in his study on *Everyday Resistance to Injustice in a Philippine Village* shows that in everyday form of resistance, the target may not necessarily be aware of it. As he noted: "The target may eventually discover what the resister has done but that need not be the intention of the ones resisting. Indeed, those resisting, often perceiving themselves to be extremely vulnerable," (1986a, p. 109).

the-stage social contracts. In this continuous process of contestation, the UNHCR remains the dominant player whose rules are uncontested by ordinary refugees, but are manipulated by unscrupulous community leaders for their own ends. However, there were also indications, reported by the respondents, that the landscape of internal power relations is fast changing, with the rise of young middlemen who are producing alternative power blocs and interest groups. Some of them are reportedly even more skilled in social negotiation. What emerges from the political power play in the camps is that the refugees are not a homogenous category with the same problems and risks. There are power blocs and interest groups among them who claim authority and legitimacy to represent the refugee population.

Although refugee camps are considered exceptional space, there are several observed activities in the Nayapara camp that can conceivably undermine the concept of the “state of exception.” Those who regularly commute between the camp and its outside world through negotiated terms highlight the fact that they can defy the authority and any imposed restrictions on their movement. The second type of activity is the intermarriage between Bengali and Rohingyas, which extends the Rohingya family into the Bangladeshi community. Therefore, even if the Rohingyas from the camp are repatriated, they still have family members living in Bangladesh. Many refugees are now learning the Bangla language as part of their intended hidden integration process.

These tendencies undermine the concept of exclusivity of the camps and their perceived notion of “exception.”

### **A REFUGEE COMMUNITY UNDER TRANSFORMATION**

The camp life from the young generation’s perspective provides an understanding into the Nayapara refugees’ everyday life. Refugees’ interaction with the wider community shows the aspects that can or cannot be reproduced on a day-to-day basis under such constraints. Their social relations and ordinary experiences of refugee life show various dimensions of refugee life that are neither monolithic nor static. Some of these experiences may be relevant to an understanding of refugees from other parts of the world such as Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Bhutanese refugees in Nepal, where people face hardships under protracted situations (Weiner, 1993).

The discussion presented in the preceding sections makes a number of points clear. Firstly, the situation in Nayapara camp indicates that, over time, various power-blocs have emerged to maintain and protect special interests, and it is nearly impossible for camps to remain as non-political spaces. As such, refugee camps become highly contested political spaces where multiple authorities of varying degrees interact with each other. According to the respondents, the most obvious power-bloc is the Rohingya leaders/representative groups that mediate between ordinary refugees and other agencies. Some of the Block Committee heads and the

Camp Management Committee members reportedly maintain close relationships with the previous leaders. These leaders are reportedly corrupt and take advantage of their leadership positions by creating a relationship of mistrust and suspicion between the leaders and the ordinary refugees. The space is not just about the distribution of relief materials to refugees that are content with the supply of basic needs; it is a complete political society with its own peculiarities.

Secondly, over time, the camp dwellers stop being passive recipients of supplied subsistence and turn into active adventurers looking for ways and means to meet their strategic and practical needs. The refugees are discontent with the limited supply of basic needs and initiate economic endeavours such as a revolving fund or petty businesses to meet their immediate practical needs of everyday life. Simultaneously, they venture out, if capable, to seek better or more permanent solutions to their strategic needs and try to end their refuge lives by escaping the imposed authority. Assimilation with the local economic forces or making inroads to a third destination is foremost on their minds as they plan their escape routes. To get to their desired ends, the refugees learn to employ skills of negotiation, deception, persuasion and reward. Gradually, they come to notice that the authorities are sometimes negotiable, at least in exchange for money, and thus, they learn to actively exploit the situation, both inside and outside the camp. Due to this rent-seeking facility, the camp leaders certainly favour maintaining the

status quo of the camps and refugee lifestyle. This means that only a handful of the camp leaders may work as preventive agents to devise any permanent solutions to the refugee problems. That is “the politics of survival” (Scott & Kerkvliet, 1973), through which the marginalised community secures its economic and physical well-being against the claims and threats of either the state or local elites.

Thirdly, case studies in this paper suggest that the younger generation is picking up various survival skills. They learn to speak the official languages of Bengali as well as some English so that they can communicate with officials from UNHCR and the Bangladesh government. By using these skills and applying other connections such as knowing those in position or knowing who to bribe to make things work, these refugees are able to work the system. Such dynamics also challenge the system, which purposefully puts the refugees in camps and excluded them from local citizens who regard them as threats. When refugees and villagers depend on each other, and when refugees create networks and channels they can utilise to advantage, it indirectly challenges the whole system and the authority. At that point, the distinction between a “politicised life” (the citizens) and “bare life” (the refugees) becomes blurred. Many of the young refugees I talked to showed their keen awareness that their lives had drastically changed when they became refugees and that their future is uncertain. Many identified illiteracy and inability to find suitable jobs as important

issues among the younger generation who are afraid of facing their future.

Rajaram and Grundy-Warr criticised Agamben's attempts to politicise the concept of "bare life", suggesting that "[A]gamben's work can demonstrate that the detention of refugees may be linked to ongoing processes of the constitution of politics and the borders of the national community" (2004, p. 40). This perspective allows one to approach the refugee historically. This is a genealogical understanding that takes note of the production of meaning for refugees. In so doing, it provides a counter to the simple paeans about the eternal condition of abjection and loss that the refugees have to somehow come to terms with (Malkki, 1995). Furthermore, it distorts the simplistic sense of the refugees as the ones "forgotten" by the international community of nations; rather, the refugees are integrally tied into the practices of excluding and including that constitute and maintain the faceted "system of the nation-state" (pp. 38-39). Moreover, they suggest that the boundary between the inside and outside is not always distinct, especially when inside (the citizens) relies on outside (the migrant workers or illegal economic immigrants). The authors have taken the rights-oriented perspective in the case of irregular migrants and refugees in detention camps in Australia, Malaysia and Thailand (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2004).

Finally, despite being an exception to the "state of exception" of Agamben, camp life officially remains an exception. The public transcript of the narrative is that the camps are to remain in a secluded space,

maintaining safe distance from the locality and monitored by the appointed authority. Indeed, such features of the camps are indisputable in the case of Nayapara camps. At the same time, however the "naked life" is not that naked, if we really see how the refugees negotiate with the situation on the ground and aspire to defy the imagined boundary of camps. They cope with the enforced circumstances and live through it, moving on with what they have. There are restrictions. There are security officials and other officials who misuse their power; yet within this, we have seen people making their lives work and finding alternatives in the process.

## CONCLUSION

This study has argued that the refugee camps are contested spaces where ambiguity and exceptionality are commonplace. As these individuals have been living together for such a long time, a social arrangement has gradually emerged, which is at the same time conflicting and multi-dimensional. There are various layers within the society: ordinary refugees, leaders, followers, Camp-in-Charge (CIC), CIC officials, camp police, international organisations and local NGOs. Each layer is complexly intertwined with the others. On the vertical level is the conflict between state official and refugees; and on the horizontal level, it is among refugees, refugee leaders, as well as neighbouring villagers. In their internal power politics inside the camp, the refugees are constantly involved in fights and struggles to establish their rights. In

this process, they constantly negotiate with various agencies and authorities that exist surrounding them. Often, they fail, but their endeavour never stops. It has become part of their everyday lives. Moreover, the clearer picture that emerges from this everyday experience of camp life is the systematic and constant reminder that the refugees are outsiders and foreign in origin. Therefore, in the course of everyday life, their identity of “otherness” is constantly reproduced.

## REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. (2000). *Means without end: Notes on politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Amnesty International [AI]. (1997). *Bangladesh: Myanmar/Bangladesh Rohingyas – The search for safety* [Document]. Retrieved from <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA13/007/1997/en/e656b821-e9dd-11dd-90b2-a9da8ab8e550/asa130071997en.html>
- Bahar, A. (2010). *Burma's missing dots: The emerging face of genocide*. Chicago, IL: Xlibris Corporation.
- Berlie, J. A. (2008). *The Burmanization of Myanmar's Muslims*. Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus Press.
- Denisoff, R. S. (1983). *Sing a song of social significance*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
- Edelman, M. (1995). *From art to politics: How artistic creations shape political conceptions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Farzana, K. F. (2011). Music and Artistic Artefacts: Symbols of Rohingya Identity and Everyday Resistance in Borderlands. *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 4(2), 215-236.
- Farzana, K. F. (2015). *Migration Crisis on Southeast Asian Shores: Individual or Regional Responsibility?* Asia Pacific Memo #338. Retrieved from <http://www.asiapacificmemo.ca/migration-crisis-southeast-asia>
- Habibullah, N. M. (1995). *Rohingya jatir itihash (History of the Rohingyas)*. Dhaka, Bangladesh: Bangladesh Co-Operative Book Society Ltd.
- Human Rights Watch [HRW]. (2000, May). *Burmese refugees in Bangladesh: Still no durable solution*. Retrieved from <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/05/01/burmese-refugees-bangladesh-0>
- Scott, J., & Kerkvliet, B. (1973). The Politics of Survival: Peasant Response to ‘Progress’ in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 4(2), 241-268.
- Karim, A. (2000). *The Rohingyas: A short account of their history and culture*. Chittagong, Bangladesh: Arakan Historical Society.
- Khan, K. S., & Sharfuddin, A. K. M. (1996, August). *Participatory learning on increased involvement of refugee women in collecting the food rations*. United Nations World Food Programme.
- Lewa, C. (2007). (2003a). *Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are facing a new drive of involuntary repatriation*. Bangkok, Thailand: Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development [Forum Asia].
- Medecins Sans Frontiers [MSF]. (2002, March). *10 years for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh: Past, present and future*. Retrieved from [http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/reports/2002/rohingya\\_report.pdf](http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/reports/2002/rohingya_report.pdf)
- Palma, P. (2007, July 14). Canada to take 79 more refugees in Bangladesh. *The Daily Star*.

- Quick Facts of Nayapara Refugee Camp [Government document]. (2009). *Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*. Office of the Camp-in-Charge, Nayapara Refugee Camp, Teknaf, Cox's Bazar.
- Qualter, T. H. (1963). *Propaganda and psychological warfare*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Rajaram, P. K., & Grundy-Warr, C. (2004). The irregular migrant as Homo Sacer: Migration and detention in Australia, Malaysia, and Thailand. *International Migration*, 42(1), 33-63.
- Rahman, A. A. N. M. (2005). *Rohingya shamassa: Bangladesher dristibhangi (Rohingya problems: Attitude of Bangladesh)*. Dhaka, Bangladesh: Islamic Foundation Press.
- Razzaq, A., & Haque, M. (1995). *A tale of refugees: Rohingyas in Bangladesh*. Dhaka, Bangladesh: The Centre for Human Rights.
- Saltsman, A. (2009). *Contested rights: Subjugation and struggle among Burmese forced migrants in exile*. Master thesis, Department of Sociology, The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Boston College, USA.
- Shahid, S. (2005, September 3). Enact national legislation for protecting refugees. *The Daily Star*. Retrieved from <http://www.thedailystar.net/law/2005/09/01/event.htm>
- The Equal Rights Trust. (June 02, 2012). *Burning Homes, Sinking Lives: A Situation Report on Violence against Stateless Rohingya in Myanmar and Their Refoulement from Bangladesh*. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/11f91xq>.
- Turner, S. (2006). Negotiating authority between UNHCR and 'The People'. *Development and Changes*, 37(4), 759-778.
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Retrieved 28 February 2014, from <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/pdf/crc.pdf>
- UNHCR Annual Report. (2008). *2008 Global trends: Refugees, asylum-seekers, returnees, internally displaced and stateless persons*. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/4a375c426.html>
- Weiner, M. (1998). Rejected Peoples and Unwanted Migrants in South Asia. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28(34), 1737-1746.
- Wong, E. S. Y. (1996). *Comparative political geography of ethnic minorities across borders: The Muslim minorities in Arakan and Pattani*. B.A. (Hons) thesis, Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, Singapore.
- Yegar, M. (1972 [1981]). *The Muslim of Burma: A study of minority groups*. Jerusalem, Israel: Hebrew University Press.
- Yunus, M. (1994). *A history of Arakan: Past and present*. Dammad, KSA: World Assembly of Muslim Youth [WAMY].