

There is a Rohingya in all of us

The timing could not have been more immaculately disastrous. At a time when Rohingyas are [being forced to flee the violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state](#), in the Supreme Court this week the Centre refused to revise its stand on deporting Rohingya immigrants in India. It was in effect [adhering to its position taken on August 9](#), when the Minister of State for Home Affairs informed Parliament that 40,000 Rohingyas were to be deported. With that, the idea of India, the India of democracy and hospitality disappeared in a single stroke. A dream of India disappeared in a single moment. The marginal life of the Rohingya became a greater nightmare. The Government of India has returned to an idea of hard state, dropping its dreams of compassion, care and civility. Behind the tragedy of the decision will be a nit-picking bureaucracy and the security think tanks, convinced that an aspirational India does not need a defeated people like the Rohingyas.

In many ways, the Rohingyas represent "the last man" of international society that Gandhi talked about. They are the world's most persecuted minority. They are Muslims, belonging to the Sunni sect, scattered mainly over the Rakhine state of Myanmar. Harassed by the Myanmar Army and forced to serve as slave labour, they have also been systematically persecuted by the Buddhist majority. The persecution of the Rohingyas also highlights the silence of Aung San Suu Kyi, destroying another myth of ethics and human rights. A woman whose campaign for human rights won her the Peace Nobel now stands embarrassingly silent in case her broader political strategies are affected. The dispensability of the Rohingyas is clear and so is the callousness of the nation state. India can no longer criticise the West for being hostile to Syrian and Sudanese refugees.

One thing is clear. No Nehruvian state, or even regime of Indira Gandhi, would have made such a decision. Both upheld the principle of hospitality, of the openness of borders. Jawaharlal Nehru was open to Tibet and courageously invited the Dalai Lama to make a home here, and Indira Gandhi played host to refugees from the then East Pakistan, ignoring the threats of tough people such as Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon.

The Rohingya situation has been bleak for years. The turning point was the attitude of the Burmese military junta which cracked down on them in 1982, contending that Rohingyas as late comers were not part of the original ancestors of Burmese society. Denied an autonomous cultural status, they lost all claims to the entitlements of citizenship. They were denied not only access to health, education but also any claim to the idea of citizenship.

Persecuted by the army and the Buddhist majority, they began a slow exodus over India, Bangladesh, spreading to States such as Rajasthan, Jammu and Kashmir, moving as far as Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Their exodus has once again a cynical side to it as agents arranged for their travel. These touts of international suffering arranged for their travel at exorbitant rates. The Rohingyas became temporary boat people as Bangladesh shut its borders on them piously condemning them as drug peddlers. The Rohingyas then attempted to cross into Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia only to realise that fellow Islamic nations had little sympathy for them. The no-welcome sign was clear and categorical. Each state would react piously, claiming to have fulfilled its humanitarian quota. It was also realistically clear that unlike the Syrians, the Rohingyas, as a tiny speck of the refugee population would hardly be front page news for a sufficient length of time. At the most their memories would survive in a few PhD theses in international relations. The refugee has always been an enticing topic for PhDs.

In fact, Pope Francis's statement that the "campaign of terror" against the Rohingyas must cease fell on deaf ears. Sadly, India missed the leadership and compassion of a Mother Teresa. She would have stepped out and offered some care and relief to them, stirring the Indian middle class into some acts of caring.

The odd thing is that the genocide, the vulnerability of such a people is often lost in bureaucratic issues of legal and political status. It is not clear whether Rohingya are refugees or illegal migrants. As refugees they are entitled to some care; as illegal migrants they become subject to harassment and exploitation. Refugees become a target for an informal economy of bonded labour.

Union Home Minister Kiren Rijiju already sounded the warning signals in response to a question in the Rajya Sabha. He was clear that the Rohingya were illegal migrants. He was cited as claiming in an interview that the Rohingya “have no basis to live here. Anybody who is an illegal migrant will be deported.” Yet one wonders whether in terms of humanitarian law and the conventions of the UN, Mr. Rijiju is right. This is a group that is threatened with continuous persecution, whose homes are unsafe, whose livelihoods have been destroyed. To be forced to return to Myanmar would only subject them to harassment, ethnic persecution and a genocidal future.

One is grateful that the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), which often plays the Rip Van Winkle of human rights, responded quickly. On August 18, it issued a notice to the government over its plan to deport Rohingya staying illegally in India, asking the government to report in four weeks.

The Commission added hopefully that the Supreme Court had declared that fundamental rights are applicable to all regardless of whether they are citizens of India. Yet such appeals to rights and humanitarianism cut little ice in today’s bureaucracy which is obsessed with security issues and content to raise the bogey of terrorism and law and order when it comes to such a helpless people. The NHRC came up with a memorable line that Rohingya refugees “are no doubt foreign nationals but they are human beings.”

It is clear that the everydayness of Rohingya life must be miserable. They face the challenge of survival and the prospect of persecution if they return to Myanmar. One need not hide under legal excuses. What India confronts is a case of ethics, a challenge to its understanding of citizenship and freedom. If we abandon the Rohingya, we abandon the idea of India as a home of refugees and hospitality. A country which offered a home to the Parsis, the Tibetans, the Afghans and the Jews cannot turn a little minority of helpless people back. One hopes civil society protests, challenging the indifference of the state. It is not just a question of saving a beleaguered people, it is question of saving the soul of India. The idea of India is being threatened today. Should civil society remain mute and indifferent? There is a Rohingya in all of us.

Shiv Visvanathan is Professor, Jindal Global Law School and Director, Centre for Study of Knowledge Systems, O.P. Jindal Global University

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