Myanmar: The Rohingya Crisis Is Another Colonial Legacy

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The Second World War and wartime policies adopted by the British administration ruptured the Arakan region's social fabric.

On March 18, 1944, with 'Delhi Chalo!' as their battle cry, the Azad Hind Fauj along their Japanese allies crossed the Indo-Burma border and advanced towards Kohima and Imphal. Seventy-five years since those historic engagements, the Second World War and its remembrance has mostly become a Euro-American affair along with muted commemorations in Japan. In India, the simultaneous Battles of Kohima and Imphal are reminisced as lost opportunities in the saga of India's independence movement.

What is perhaps even less known is that on February 4, 1944, even before the Kohima and Imphal engagements, one Bahadur group of the Indian National Army led by Major L.S. Misra had engaged the enemy in Arakan, today's Rakhine state in Myanmar. Throughout the Burma Campaign of the Second World War, Arakan was a fiercely contested front changing hands repeatedly. The consequences of some of the policies adopted in these engagements by both the British and the Japanese have not only outlasted the war, but metamorphosised into Asia's largest humanitarian crisis.

The Rohingya crisis should, in fact, be described as a series of crises since Myanmar achieved its independence in 1948. To understand the current predicament, it is important to historically contextualise the issue. Arakan became a part of the Kingdom of Ava only in 1784-85, but this directly led to a clash with the expanding English East India Company in India. Arakan became the first region to be separated from the larger Burman area once again when it was annexed to the domains controlled by the East India Company after the First Anglo-Burmese War in 1826.

Therefore, Arakan as a region was under direct Burmese control for less than half a century. Even in the early 1940s, Arakan still maintained its distinct demography of Arakanese Muslims who increasingly identified themselves as Rohingya and Buddhist Rakhines. It is at this juncture the Second World War and wartime policies adopted by the British administration created serious ruptures to the social fabric of the region. The Japanese, along with the Burmese Independence Army, had advanced into Arakan in 1942 and was successful in dislodging the British in these early days of the Burma Campaign.

The British retreat from Burma was haphazard and in places, the administration deliberately armed the 'loyal' civilian population and left vital supplies so that they could act as a buffer against the advancing Japanese troops. Those civilians armed by the British were disproportionately from the minority ethnicities of Burma such as the Karens, Kachins, Chins, and the Muslim Arakanese. The Buddhist-majority Burmese and Rakhines were seen as Japanese collaborators.

For instance, in a letter dated April 4, 1944, Capt. S de Glanville, the civil affairs officer in charge of

the Arakan Hill Tracts admitted to Brigadier R.S. Wilkie of the Fourteenth British Army that when the British forces retreated, he had himself encouraged the civilians to take over the stores. Now that the British were back, he found it difficult to recover the 'more valuable articles,' evidently a euphemism for arms and ammunitions.

Even as the British colonial administration collapsed in Burma in 1942, they set up clandestine operation groups among the 'loyal' ethnic minorities to fight rear-guard actions. Under the aegis of the Fourteenth British Army, Force 136 was established. It conducted clandestine operations in all Japanese occupied British territories in Southeast Asia. 'V Force' on the other hand was raised in 1942 with a group of British officers who guided and lent support to 'loyal' Burmese Hill Tribes who fought guerilla action behind Japanese lines. The 'V Force' included local interpreters as the British officers were often unfamiliar with the local language. The 'Z Force', which came into operation from the latter half of 1942, also functioned under the Fourteenth Army, but it mostly helped in reconnaissance behind Japanese lines in Burma. The 'V' and 'Z' Forces were amalgamated in May 1945.

The consequence of these clandestine operations and arming of the 'loyal' civilian populations was devastating, more so in Arakan than anywhere in Burma. As the Japanese, aided by the Burmese Independence Army, and the Rakhines moved into Arakan in 1942, the Arakanese Muslims were massacred by rogue elements within the BIA and the Rakhines. Many of them became refugees. In retaliation, as the British advanced to retake Arakan in the latter half of 1942 and 1943, the Arakanese Muslims looted and exacted revenge from the Buddhists. Although the British were concerned about these developments, they certainly did not do enough to stop these cyclical massacres in Arakan.

By 1943, the scale of the massacres had reached such proportions that certain areas within Arakan came to be dominated exclusively by particular communities. These were categorised as either 'Muslim Area' or 'Buddhist Area' by the British.

The conduct of the British colonial administration, particularly in the closing days of the last Arakan Campaign in August 1944, continues to be a chequered one. Burmese independence in 1948, brought forth the deep divisions created in this period into the open. The Arakanese Muslims, for the first time facing direct Burmese rule once again, revolted and formed militant groups dubbed as 'mujahid bands'. They used arms and ammunition left behind by the British to take on the Burmese Army while the rest of Burma too flared up along ethnic lines. The British legacy today in Myanmar is perhaps the longest-running civil war in the world and a humanitarian crisis of gigantic proportions.

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