

What the recent deportation of seven Rohingya refugees reveals about today's India

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In early October this year, India deported seven Rohingya youth to neighbouring Myanmar, despite the fact that the latter has systematically persecuted and repressed this Muslim minority community within the country for several decades now. According to a UN fact-finding mission in 2018, the “acts with genocidal intent against the Rohingya in northern Rakhine” conducted by the Myanmar military since August 2017 had “ultimately led to the expulsion of more than 800,000 Rohingya men, women and children to neighbouring Bangladesh, triggering one of the worst humanitarian crises in modern history.”

The deportation has only made the Rohingya community in India – said to number 40,000, according to government sources and living in the most precarious conditions in under-serviced ghettos and camps in various pockets of the country – even more insecure. What is more, it runs counter to the country's legacy of accommodating refugee communities over the years and which has historically afforded it a great deal of international good will, right from the days when the Zoroastrians, facing persecution in Iran, were allowed to settle in India between the seventh and 13th centuries. More recent accommodations include the hospitality accorded to the over 80,000 Tibetans, who followed the Dalai Lama into India in the wake of the 1959 Tibetan uprising in China; the mass exodus of tens of millions from former East Pakistan during the political cataclysm that saw the birth of Bangladesh; and the wave upon wave of Sri Lankan Tamils from 1983 onwards who fled from the military repression in their country to the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

The recent Rohingya deportation is important therefore because it does not just mark a formal rupture with that legacy of accommodation, it could well prove to be the beginning of several such interventions by India to expel all those it deems as “infiltrators” and posing a “security threat” to the country. Military terminology of this kind has been routinely used to frame and stigmatise refugees and migrants, who have entered India from neighbouring countries over a period of time, either to flee from the repression they faced or in search of a better life.

Any narrative of the refugee/migrant crisis in South Asia would necessarily have to bring India into the picture, given its dominance in terms of presence – the country accounts for around 72 per cent of the South Asian land mass. More importantly, it was the policies of the British Raj, with its locus in New Delhi and London, that had triggered the region's largest mass displacement— the partition of the sub-continent which resulted in an estimated 14 million people being rendered refugees amidst violence, death and devastation on a scale unprecedented. Partition was conducted on the basis of the two-nation theory resulting in a largely Muslim Pakistan and a largely Hindu India. The toxic sectarian legacy of such a division shaped the politics and society of both countries and continues to do so to this day. It is unsurprisingly therefore that it is the Muslim refugee/immigrant who is accorded the worst treatment by the Indian state.

The present ruling party of the country - the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) - came to power in 2014 on a specifically Hindu majoritarian agenda. One of the election promises made by the present prime minister, Narendra Modi, was in fact to expel "Bangladeshis" staying in the country "illegally". Significantly, however, he made a distinction between Hindu and Muslim refugees/migrants, promising to accommodate "Hindus who are harassed and suffer in other countries". In 2016, the BJP government introduced a new bill - the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016 - that considers only non-Muslim asylum seekers as eligible for Indian citizenship. Muslims, even if they have faced repression in their countries of origin, like Shias and Ahmadiyyas in Pakistan, or indeed the Rohingya, will be ineligible. In other words, the Indian state is prepared to offer refuge and asylum on the basis of ethnicity, not humanitarian need.

For the BJP and Prime Minister Modi, the political calculation is that any policy that targets the Muslim, and especially the Muslim "outsider", will prove popular with their core Hindu majoritarian constituency and thus shore up their political base.

Such an effort becomes even more important as the next general election looms over the horizon - it is expected to take place in the first half of 2019. Among the tropes that will certainly mark the BJP's electioneering will be the attempt to whip up popular hatred against Muslims generally and the Muslim immigrant in particular. The president of the BJP, Amit Shah, has already indicated how far he is prepared to go down this road, when he publicly referred to immigrants as "termites" before promising that his government will "pick out each and every infiltrator and strike them off electoral rolls."

Shah is only feeding off and feeding into the feelings of hatred for the Muslim Other that has been systematically cultivated in the four and a half years of Narendra Modi's rule. Deporting a community like the Rohingya from Indian soil is an intrinsic part of the larger project. Since 2016, extremist Hindu outfits in the region of Jammu, where some Rohingya camps have come up, had been demanding that they be evicted from the state, claiming that they were "terrorists". There have even been targetted arson attacks on Rohingya dwellings by vigilante groups. Meanwhile, the Union home minister, Rajnath Singh, who has ordered that the biometric data of all the Rohingya population - he terms them as "illegal immigrants" - be gathered as a first step towards sending back with the cooperation of the Myanmar government. The point to note here is that even if the Myanmar government does take back these people, there is no guarantee that they will be safe and allowed to live lives free of fear and repression.

What they have undergone is what one human rights official termed a "textbook example" of ethnic cleansing. Given this reality, India's deportation of the Rohingya is a clear violation of Article 3 of the international Convention against Torture which it has signed, if not ratified, and which prohibits actions to "expel, return (refouler) or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that s/he would be in a danger of being subjected to torture."

For India to pretend that it is doing the right thing and for sections of Indian society to actually applaud these deportations, is just another example of the utterly cynical nature of the politics of Hindu majoritarianism and the general coarsening of public attitudes in the country.

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P.S.

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