

Azeem Ibrahim, *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide*, (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2017), Price: Rs 600.00, Pages: 235.

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The 2017 version of *The Rohingyas: Inside Myanmar's Hidden Genocide* by Azeem Ibrahim is a comprehensive and compelling account of the centuries long travesties and crimes committed against the ethnic groups in the Burmese region, mainly focusing on the ethno-religious group that are identified as the Rohingyas.

The Rohingya crisis came into the global spotlight due to the mass exodus that occurred in the Rakhine State of Myanmar in 2012, due to the hate crimes being committed against this ethnic group. Villages being pillaged, houses being burned down, unrelenting and irrevocable bloodshed, violence and death is the omnipresent environment in the region since the advent of this decade, which has raised three principal questions that the book cogently attempts to answer: Who are the Rohingyas? What are the reasons behind such inhumane treatment and operations against them? What can be and has been done to rectify or make amends for this dreadful situation? Ibrahim tries to break down the book into three parts, where he covers the history of Myanmar, and traces the Rohingya presence in it, the current political climate, and the international mechanisms that can help relieve, if not solve, this crisis.

The Myanmar government has established a rhetoric around the Rohingyas; of being aliens, stating that they are originally immigrants from India, and now Bangladesh, who were brought in during the colonial period by the British to aid with trade and labor and the government has actually termed them as 'Bengalis,' thereby refusing to even acknowledge their ethnic identity. The Myanmar nation-state wishes to be constituted by ethno-religious groups that

have been present in the region before colonial times; organically and naturally. This book delves into the history of the region and scrutinizes the false accounts presented by the Myanmar government, by providing a compelling and well researched account on the the presence of the Rohingyas in the Rakhine region, that was previously known as ‘Arakan’.

The book delves into early colonial records, showing viceroys noting the presence of ethnic groups similar to the Rohingyas, far before the advent of the Buddhist population that is now in power in the State. Furthermore, it objectively fills in the gaps in the historical timeline about the physical presence of the Rohingyas, and provides a cogent reasoning as to why they had been disconnected with the rest of world during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. Whilst tracing their history, Ibrahim actively tries to show how the Rohingyas have been a part of the fabric of the Burmese nation-state right from the times of kings and kingdoms, and only due to sheer geopolitical events and circumstances have been alienated from this fabric; torn apart from their cultural and historical roots, therefore being left without any identity, or a socio-cultural base. The book does an exceptional job in setting up a chronological series of events and eras that clearly place the Rohingyas in the Burmese nation long before the colonial period, therefore putting forth strong contradictions to the rhetoric of the Myanmar government about the Rohingyas’ xenogeny.

After creating a fundamental base supporting the original history of the Rohingyas, the book progresses by eruditely juxtaposing the established, static facts in history and the treatment dealt out to them based on false pre-suppositions, personalized and ideologically driven agendas, and that too, largely in the interest of populism and religious majorities. The book objectively analyses the current political scenario from a perspective different from the one picked up by mass media; it delves into the rationalism and ideology held by the governing forces in the State. The book makes note of the Buddhist homogeneity that the State apparatus has tried to achieve under the influence of the ‘Theravada’ Buddhist philosophy. With the overt narrative of the government; about the origins of the Rohingyas, broken down with the primary part of the book, this part looks to investigate into the crimes committed against the Rohingyas in recent times whilst addressing the utter possibility of more malicious, generalized, and anachronistic motives lying underneath such State practice.

The book analyzes all governments – both, dictatorial and democratic under the same lens, and finds them at fault on similar grounds – populism. Religious populism has always been and is the principal driving force in the politics of Myanmar, and all the parties in the current political environment continue to

exploit this narrow perspective of the masses, at the cost of the basic human rights of the Rohingyas being violated. The travesties and the systematic persecution, that the Rohingyas have been privy to has led to families and communities being torn apart, long cultural settings being uprooted, and an entire nation being forced out of their own ancestral land, all of which, Ibrahim argues, based on the grounds of misconceived facts, intentional negligence and State-wide populist propaganda. It can safely be assumed that while addressing such a heart wrenching and tragic crisis, an element of hubris, and idealism would have naturally surfaced. The objectivity shown by Ibrahim in this part of the book is fairly commendable. He continuously navigates around his hubris, and presents a stark account of why these operations are not only misplaced and unjustified, but also how the Rohingyas are being subjected to an unnecessarily obtuse, and anachronistic ideology that continues to be omnipotent through State-governed institutions.

The objectivity shown by Ibrahim for the previous two parts of the book starts to dwindle once he addresses international reactions and international laws pertaining to this crisis. The objectivity and realism that is clearly on display in the first two parts, is awkwardly transformed into basic idealism while talking about international law and criticizing the stance and positions that other States have taken. Presenting the impact that neighbouring States have faced due to a mass influx of fleeing refugees, he goes on to equally compliment and criticize, how other States have reacted to the situation. Countries like Thailand and Australia have faced the brunt of his criticism due to their nationalist and protective policies of turning away any incoming refugees, whereas he wholeheartedly acknowledges the work and input of States like Bangladesh and Malaysia, who have been sympathetic to the plight of the Rohingyas.

Ibrahim also speaks of Myanmar's political and economic relations with States like India, and how these relations could be used to curtail these heinous acts in the Rakhine state and reel back the crisis. The most prominent gaping hole that is present in the book is while addressing international laws pertaining to this crisis, mainly that of genocide, crimes against humanity, and non-refoulement. Ibrahim's two-chapter long tirade on international law is devoid of the serious considerations and nuances in international law that deal with such sensitive crimes. There is a very fine, but established line between what kinds of acts are to be deemed as genocide and as crimes against humanity. A 7-point metric on which different heinous acts are established and if any one such act is undertaken against a particular group in the sole interest of destroying and eliminating the said group, it is deemed as an act of genocide.

This metric has been established by the UN Convention on Genocide, and has been acknowledged multiple times by the International Court of Justice, and other international legislative bodies. The author mentions this metric, but in a very skewed and biased manner placing his arguments to fit the necessary criterion for these acts to be deemed as genocide, whilst ignoring the fundamental necessities and interpretations that have been observed in past cases dealing with similar crimes. There is an obvious and clear gap in the understanding about the mechanisms that work in international law, and the observations that have been established in precedence, that astutely articulate which specific incidents can be termed and claimed as genocide. Ibrahim vehemently tries to justify the title of his book from various angles-political, social and legal. Even though he makes a very convincing argument in favor of the first two, he fails to satisfactorily communicate an adroit account of legal provisions and arguments that can prove that the acts committed in Myanmar, against the Rohingyas, do paramount to acts of genocide.

This attempt to show to the world the serious depravity that has ensued in the Rakhine state is highly commendable, and even though this is not an absolutely consummate work of political investigation due to its flaws in the latter end of his project, Ibrahim has presented a comprehensive exposition on the crimes against the Rohingyas, irrespective of it being classified as genocide or not.