

Calling the Rohingya “Kalar”: Dehumanization and Genocide of the Rohingya in Myanmar

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Abstract

This article traces the genealogy of the word “kala” and how it has acquired a racial and dehumanized connotation over time. It was usually used to denote the people of India (present-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), Sri Lanka and Nepal in the pre-colonial era. During the colonial era, it was also used, but later, it started getting a particular connotation to refer to the Indian migrants in the context of the rise of Burmese nationalism. Post-independence usage of the word “kala” or “kalar” bears racial and dehumanizing fervors. This dehumanized use of the word has been a part of the process of Rohingya genocide.

Keywords: Rohingya, Bangladesh, Myanmar, forced migration, repatriation, crisis management

Introduction

The Rohingya are facing genocide by the Myanmar military in Arakan¹ (currently known as Rakhine state) of Myanmar². This genocidal process started long back with the initiation of identifying them as “outsiders” and labelling them with derogatory terms such as “kala” or “kalar” just after the independence of the country in 1948. Academic scholarship rarely emphasizes understanding the implication of the use of the word “kala” or “kalar” in the Rohingya genocide. This article traces the genealogy of the word “kala” and how it has got a racial and dehumanized connotation over time. It does so by drawing data from the existing scholarship, news articles and reports from international

organizations on the Rohingya issue, along with open-source information on the word “kala” or “kalar” in the Burma/Myanmar context. This article also explains the political implication of the term in the Rohingya genocide.

Who are the Rohingya?

The Rohingya are a Muslim-majority ethnic community in Arakan of Myanmar, bordering Bangladesh. The Burmese³ military and the fundamentalists claim that the Rohingya are “outsiders,” although evidence suggests that the Rohingya have been living in Rakhine for hundreds of years (Eimer, 2019). Myanmar officials do not use the word Rohingya. The use of

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¹ The Rakhine state of Myanmar was previously known as Arakan. The government changed the name when it granted state status to the region in the 1990s. The word Rakhine state has been used to denote the state while citing sources that mention the name, otherwise, the name Arakan is used to prioritize the voices of the Rohingya who call their homeland Arakan.

² The military regime changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989 (Maung, 1990). The article uses the word Burma to indicate the country prior to, and Myanmar after, the name change. However, the word “Burma” is also used when citing Rohingya and other sources that still refer to the country as Burma.

³ The term “Burmese” has been used to denote the people of Burma/Myanmar irrespective of their ethnic identity. The word “Burman” refers to the ethnic Burman and “Rakhine” to denote the ethnic Rakhine people.

the Rohingya word is forbidden (Habiburahman, 2019). Myanmar government bodies, anti-Rohingya nationalist organizations and individuals label the Rohingya as “Bengali” to denote they are from present-day Bangladesh (Holt, 2019). By enacting the 1982 Citizenship Act, Burma/Myanmar has made the Rohingya stateless by stripping them off from citizenship rights and not recognizing them one of the “national races.” However, Myanmar allowed the Rohingya to vote and contest in elections till 2010, although it has been carrying out both legal and military means to make the Rohingya stateless. State-led and sponsored violence over the decades has forced thousands and thousands of Rohingya to flee to neighboring countries, including more than a million in Bangladesh. The 2017 genocidal military campaign by the Myanmar military killed some 10,000 men, women and children and forced nearly a million Rohingya to Bangladesh (United Nations, 2023).

What is the Meaning of “Kala”/ “Kalar”?

When the overloaded word “Bengali” is used to denote the Rohingya as outsiders, there are some racial and derogatory words that the Burmese in general and particularly the ethnic Burman and the Rakhine people use to identify or address the Rohingya. The word “kala” or “kalar” is one such slur. From its original form, “kula,” the present-day widely used word “kala” or “kalar” emerged. In its original Burmese meaning, “kula” refers to a foreigner.

In reply to a question “what does ‘kalar’ mean in Myanmar?” to the online Q&A platform Quora, Phyoe Kyaw, who identifies himself as a former managing director of Success Technology, Myanmar, wrote that the word “kala” was derived from the Pali word “kula,” which means family or relatives (Quora, n.d.). It is assumed that the Burmese thought the Indians were from the land of Buddha, and they used the word “kula” to refer to the Indians as their relatives. Similarly, the Sri Lankans were also called “kula.” In response to the same question, Andre Muller, who identifies himself as having a PhD in the languages of Burma, provides a similar interpretation. Muller

(Quora, n.d.), in agreement with Phyoe Kyaw, states that the original Pali word “kula” means “family, clan, caste”. According to him, from “kula,” it turned to “kala” in the Burmese language and is now mostly used as “kala” or “kalar” in its Latinized version. He states that the Burmese term “kala” was used to refer to the “descendants of the people of present-day India, Bangladesh and Nepal living in modern-day Burma (Quora, n.d.). Wai Hnin Pwint Thon (2020, para.3) a Campaign Officer at Burma Campaign UK, writes that the term “kalar” is used “to distinguish people of South Asian descent from the so-called national races of Myanmar.” According to Burmese historian Thant Myint-U, the term kala has been in use for at least 900 years to refer to not only to the people of the sub-Continent but also Persians, Arabs, and Europeans including the English (“Facebook ban on...,” 2017).

Colonial documents suggest that before the colonial period, the word “kula” was used to refer to the people from Indian territory (present-day India, Bangladesh and Pakistan) and Europe. British colonial officer Arthur Phayre (1867, p.37) informs that until the first Anglo-Burmese war during 1824-1826, the Burmese used the common appellation “kula” to refer to the Indian, British and other Europeans. Phayre used “western foreigners” to translate the word “kula.” As India is geographically situated to the west of Burma, the Burmese might have referred to the Indians as “kula.” If so, then the meaning of the word “kula” had a geographical reference rather than a religious connection in referring to the Indians. Another variant of writing “kula” appeared in British historian H.G. Bell’s writing as “kulaw.” Bell (1852, p.66) informs that “the Hindoos of Bengal” who “have settled in great numbers in Arracan [Arakan], are denominated by the original inhabitants Kulaw Yekein, or unnaturalized Arracaners [Arakanese]” and the Muslims of Arakan used to call them “Rooinga” (p.66).

By the 1910s, the word “kula” had already acquired a racial overtone. Colonial official Robert Smart, in his Gazetteer on Akyab District,

compared the life of the Arakanese with that of the Chittagonian and wrote that the Arakanese “lived better and worked less than the despicable *“kula”* (cited in Tonkin, 2019, p.20). In the previous sentence, Smart introduced the Chittagonian as “hard-working.” The use of the word “despicable” explicitly suggests the poor condition of living of the “Chittagonian” agricultural laborers, boatmen and mill workers in rural Arakan [present-day Rakhine state]. All the Indian migrants had not lived a similar life to the “Chittagonian” laborers. Although the relations of the local Arakanese had been amicable with the Indian migrants in the rural areas (Tonkin, 2019), the deterioration of relations started in the 1930s. Bowser (2020) claims that the Muslims became the scapegoats of the rise of the nationalist anti-Indian sentiments among the Burmese. The terrible confrontation or the revenge killings between the Arakanese Buddhists and the Muslims during WWII had permanently sown the seed of hatred (Tonkin, 2019).

Steven Kiersons (2013) writes that the most popular hate-speech terms used against Rohingya in Burma are “*kalar*” and “*Bengali*”. He notes that both have roots in the colonial period of British rule from 1824 to 1948 (Kiersons, 2013). Kiersons (2013) contends that the Burmese during the anti-Indian immigrants, particularly anti-Muslim violence in the 1930s, used the word “*kalar*,” referring to “anyone with a darker, Indian-like complexion”, which, Kiersons (2013) thinks, is “roughly equivalent to” nigger. Holt also infers that the word “*kala*” “is analogous to the old and now universally condemned use of the pejorative term “nigger.”

The above discussion suggests that although the word used in its original meaning refers to identifying the Indian people as part of the family or relatives, during the colonial period, it became a word indicating a border of difference between the Burmese people and the Indian migrants based on their geographical origin, denoting the Indian/South Asian migrants and their descendants are “not from Burma”. As the antagonism between the Indian migrants and the

locals turned to violent manifestation with the outbreak of riots in the 1930s, combined with the renewed anti-Indian sentiments during the initial years of independence, it took on a meaning referring to the Indian Muslim migrants and their descendants less than human beings. Since the 1960s, the Rohingya has been singled out and identified as “*kala*” or “*kalar*.”

Dehumanization and Genocide against the Rohingya

Burmese people do not find using the word demeaning as it is a common parlance for them. They support their stance by saying that “it is an everyday term” and it is not “hateful” (“Facebook ban of...,” 2017, para.13). While the term “*kalar*” was once socially and culturally acceptable when addressing Indian-origin individuals in Burma/Myanmar, it is no longer used to address people without negative connotations. Post-independence, the word “*kalar*” is now solely used to refer to the Rohingya. The term now is heavily charged. It reflects abhorrence, vile hatred and dehumanized attitude of the ethnic fundamentalist Burmese, particularly the Rakhine, towards the Rohingya. As the Rohingya are a Muslim majority community, the word “*kala*” carries religious hatred. The word reached such a level of hateful and dehumanizing tone that Facebook banned the use of the word “*kala*” in Myanmar in 2017 (“Facebook ban of...,” 2017).

Habiburahman (with Ansel 2019; p.02), whose family was displaced when he was a minor and he left Myanmar in 2018, in his autobiography, writes, “They call us kalars, a pejorative term expressing scorn and disgust for dark-skinned ethnic groups. In a different time and place, under different circumstances, *kalar* would have meant wog or nigger. The word is like a slap in the face; it undermines us more with each passing day.” During colonialism, the African slaves used to be termed by colonial officials and the white people as “nigger” or “negro”, referring to Africans “who assumed inferiority and a lack of social, intellectual, and cultural advancement” (Jiang, 2023) or they were not considered as “human beings” (Wilson, 2020). During the slave-trading

era, African slaves were treated as less than human beings and stripped of their rights as human beings. In the post-colonial context, some people still use the N-word to refer to the same meaning. However, it is also now censored in many societies and countries. Equating human beings with animals or not treating them with respect leads to depriving people of their rights and receiving exclusionary treatment. Habiburrahman points out the current meaning of the word “*kalar*” and equates it with racial slurs such as “wog” and “nigger”. He sees that they are abused verbally and undermined as human beings. Habiburrahman (with Ansel 2019; p.14) writes, “I hate it when they shout this name, as if they were spitting into our faces.” Rohingya activists started a social media-based campaign “Don’t call me *Kalar*” in 2020 (Thon, 2020).

The original meaning and the meaning developed in colonial and post-colonial times of the word “*kala*” or “*kalar*” have been socio-culturally produced and have implicated treating the Rohingya as outsiders and lesser than human beings. This has been happening for many decades, but there has been noticeably increasing anti-Islamic propaganda since 2012; the dehumanization of the Rohingya has picked up pace. Since 2012, the Rohingya have fled on several occasions to the neighboring countries, notably in 2016 and 2017. As the Myanmar regime is anti-Rohingya, the fundamental Buddhist groups, notably the 969 movement, and also academics and civil society organizations have free reign in spreading hatred against the Rohingya. They rarely face legal action for their anti-Rohingya propaganda and dehumanization (Zarni, 2019a). Both state media and the fundamentalist private media have propagated hatred against the Rohingya (Kironka & Peng, 2021; Khatun, 2024). Social media platforms such as Facebook have been complicit in spreading hatred towards the Rohingya in Myanmar (Wiessmann, 2024). The xenophobia, Islamophobia and racial prejudice have created a situation in which the Rohingya community is treated as less than human beings. Even Win Mra, the head of the Myanmar Human Rights

Commission in 2015, was said to have commented, “As human beings...we have the right to food, health and other human rights, but when you claim yourself as a Rohingya, that’s a different issue” (Green et al., 2015, p.53). Rohingya activist Nurul Islam (2022, p.112) writes, “They [Buddhist extremists] say that Islam and Muslims are foreign to Burma. In their view, Muslims are a people fit to be exterminated and kicked out of the country.” The vile hatred of the extremists Burmese can be discerned from a comment made by a local politician on the allegations against the Burmese soldiers of raping the Rohingya women. Aung Win, a local politician and chairman of a state investigation into the border posts attack in October 2016, said in a record with a BBC interview, “They [Rohingya women] are very dirty... They have a very low standard of living and poor hygiene...So neither the local Buddhist men or the soldiers are interested in [raping] them” (Kumar, 2016, para.20). Fundamental Burmese do not even shy away calling the Rohingya “ugly as ogres” with “dark brown skin” (Bengali, 2017, para, 30). Ashin Wirathu, known as “Buddhist Bin Laden” and “the face of Buddhist terror” described by Time magazine (Sumon, 2019), equated Muslims with “mad dogs” and labelled them as “rapists” (Fisher, 2017, para. 12). He publicly supported the military persecution of the Rohingya in 2017 (Sumon, 2019). Burmese people also use dehumanizing words such as “monkey-like blackies or niggers” to refer to the Rohingya (Holt, 2019, p.158).

This process of dehumanization of the Rohingya has been continuing in parallel with inflicting physical violence against them since the independence of Burma, particularly since the 1970s. Some countries and international organizations now recognize state-sponsored and orchestrated violence and military actions against the Rohingya in Myanmar as “genocide.” Maung Zarni (2019b), a dissident Burmese scholar, claims that the “institutionalized racism” against the Rohingya led to genocide. Daniel Feierstein (Green et al., 2015) identifies stigmatization and dehumanization as the first step among the six stages of genocide pointed out by him, while G H

Stanton (1996) locates dehumanization in stage four of the 10 stages of genocide identified by him. As the Myanmar military cannot kill all the Rohingya, an intention that Zarni (2019b) informs about by citing a military officer's discussion with him, it has been creating conditions that have made over a million Rohingya refugees, particularly to Bangladesh and some live a hidden life within Myanmar. David Eimer (2019, p.215) writes, "Hidden away, or forced into exile, the Rohingya are being erased from the landscape as if they were never here, their history and that of Rakhine State rewritten without recourse to facts or pity."

Conclusion

This article explains in what context the meaning of the once socially and culturally widely used word "kala" or "kalar" has changed over time in Burma/Myanmar. In the pre-colonial era, the word was used to refer to the people of present-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. It was also used to refer to the Europeans, including the British, as Phayre (1867) commented. When in its original meaning, the term referred to the people from India, which the Burmese thought was a place related to Buddha, to refer as "relatives" or "family members," indicating a religious aspect of naming. However, when it was used to refer to Indian migrants and Europeans in the colonial period, it had a geographical connotation, referring to them as "outsiders." The socio-culturally produced meaning of "kala" or "kalar" started getting a particular connotation to refer to the Indian migrants in the context of the rise of Burmese nationalism during colonial rule. With the baggage of the animosity with the Indian migrants, particularly with the Indian Muslim migrants, the Burmese, in the post-colonial context, started to use the word particularly to refer to the Rohingya Muslims, whom they believe are from present-day Bangladesh. Post-independence usage of the word "kala" or "kalar" bears racial and dehumanizing fervors. Fundamental Burmese individuals, military officials, government bodies and even civil society organizations use the term to denote

Rohingya as less than human beings. This dehumanized use of the word has been a part of the process of the Rohingya genocide. The dehumanization of the Rohingya needs to stop as a step to stop the Rohingya genocide. Calling the Rohingya "kala" or "kalar" has to be considered a pejorative term by the international community. Censoring the use of this K-word will be a step towards sympathizing with the Rohingya and solidarity of their movement "Don't Call me Kalar" (Thon, 2020, para.17).

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