

## Music and Artistic Artefacts: Symbols of Rohingya Identity and Everyday Resistance in Borderlands

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*This study looks at the creation of music and art by Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh as a symbol of social resistance and identity. Ethnographic research on the Rohingyas' use of music and art suggests that these non-conventional means play an important role in communicating their coherent identity and expressing their resistance to the discrimination and oppression experienced in their country of origin as well as in their exile in Bangladesh. This informal resistance is used to keep their memory alive, to transmit that history through verbal and visual expressions to the new generations, and to communicate information about themselves to outsiders. This article posits that these forms of expression, while suggestive of their identity and everyday resistance, occur mostly in an informal and indirect form, rather than in direct confrontation and protest. These informal means also reflect the Rohingyas' pragmatism and coping strategies for living in the borderlands.*

**Keywords:** Music; Art; Rohingya Refugees; Bangladesh; Burma/Myanmar

*Die vorliegende Studie untersucht die Bedeutung der Musik und Kunst der Rohingya-Flüchtlinge in Bangladesch als Symbole sozialen Widerstands und Ausdruck ihrer Identität. Ethnographische Forschungen zur Rohingya-Musik und -Kunst lassen darauf schließen, dass diese nicht-konventionellen Mittel eine wichtige Rolle bei der Vermittlung ihrer kohärenten Identität spielen und ihren Widerstand gegen Diskriminierung und Unterdrückung in ihrem Herkunftsland als auch im Exil in Bangladesch ausdrücken. Der informelle Widerstand wird dazu verwendet ihre Erinnerung lebendig zu halten, ihre Geschichte mittels verbaler und visueller Ausdrucksformen weiterzugeben sowie mit der jungen Generation und Außenstehenden Informationen über sich selbst zu teilen. Der Artikel postuliert, dass diese Ausdrucksformen – wenngleich suggestiv in ihrer Identität und im alltäglichen Widerstand – meist in informeller und indirekter Form auftreten und nicht mittels direkter Konfrontation und Protest. Die informellen Mittel spiegeln auch den Pragmatismus der Rohingyas und deren Bewältigungsstrategien für das Leben in der Grenzregion wider.*

**Schlagworte:** Musik; Kunst; Rohingya-Flüchtlinge; Bangladesch; Burma/Myanmar

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## ***Introduction***

Social science scholars have always been keenly interested in studying social movements and resistance movements by minorities and disadvantaged groups in society. The focus of such studies has mostly been on certain forms of action which lead to the organisation and active participation of individuals with their group interests in mind (Dunaway, 1996; Hughes, Mladjenovic, & Mrsevic, 1995; McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1984; Rubin, 1996; Rapone & Simpson, 1996; Robinson, 1995; Rupp & Taylor, 1987). However, some scholars have focused on the more informal and alternative forms of resistance (Adams 2002; Adas, 1981; Goldstone, 1991; Jasper, 1997; Kerkvliet, 1986; Luke, 1992; Scott, 1985; Staggenborg, Eder, & Sudderth, 1993-1994; Szombati-Fabian & Fabian, 1976). Disadvantaged groups have tended to use informal means such as music, the arts, and artefacts to express themselves and avoid direct confrontation with their oppressors. This non-conventional form of resistance is more humble, but distinct, in nature; this is especially powerful for disadvantaged groups such as displaced communities and refugees who would rarely be given an opportunity to express themselves. Therefore, it is important to understand this aspect of resistance from the perspective of ordinary individuals.

This article examines the Rohingyas' music and art, documenting their lives as a marginalised group of refugees living in Bangladesh by the Naff river, which flows through Myanmar (Burma)<sup>2</sup> on one side and Bangladesh on the other.<sup>3</sup> This border area is significant for several reasons. First, it is where two political regions – South Asia and South-East Asia – adjoin. Second, it has political significance for the neighbouring states, as it constitutes the boundary interlinked to national security for these states. Third, it has social significance to the people who live on both sides of the Naff river.

The Rohingya refugee problem has been a longstanding issue and involves the question of an ethnic minority's identity. The Rohingyas are an ethnic minority group in the northern Arakan (currently Rakhine) state of Myanmar. Commonly known as Muslim Arakanese, the Rohingyas trace their historical roots in the Arakan region

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2 The term 'Myanmar' and 'Burma' are used interchangeably in this article to indicate the same country. Most scholars still tend to refer to Myanmar as 'Burma'.

3 The two neighbouring countries share an international border of 270 km; the adjoining regional units are Cox's Bazar district, 150 km south of Chittagong city in Bangladesh, and the Arakan state, located on the western coast of Burma.

from the eleventh century to 1962 (Yegar, 1972, pp. 1-25). The Arakan was not always part of Myanmar. In the pre-colonial history, Arakan (or the Maruk-U kingdom) was once an independent kingdom, separated from the Burmese kingdoms in the Irrawaddy delta and central Burma as well as from Bengal and the Mogul empire to the west. Its land area, however, extended as far as Chittagong (including the Teknaf and Cox's Bazar areas), which is now part of Bangladesh. Geographically, the area is separated by a range of mountains, the Arakan Yoma, from central Burma (Oberoi, 2006, p. 172). There is no such physical barrier between Arakan and Chittagong. Therefore, Bengali influence in Arakan is obvious.<sup>4</sup>

During the colonial period, from 1886 to 1937, Burma was a province of British colonial India, and this stimulated intra-regional labour flows (Taylor, 2009, p. 156). The enduring legacies of this historic movement of people include millions of Chinese and Indian labourers in the region, many of whom stayed on in Burma even after the British had left. On this basis, the post-independent Burmese governments claimed that the Rohingya Muslims were more recent migrants who had come to the region from South India during the British colonial days. The military government's official stand on the issue is even more radical: it regards the Rohingyas as more recently arrived 'illegal immigrants' from Bangladesh. Therefore, the military government refused to grant the Rohingyas citizenship. It also declined to differentiate between the Arakanese Muslims who had been in the region for centuries – long before the arrival of the British – from the migrant Muslims who came only in the later part of Burma's colonial history. That was how the Rohingya community became stateless in their own country. Because of discriminatory policies and military operations, the whole community is affected, being either internally displaced or forced to become international refugees in the neighbouring countries. Currently, there are approximately 326,500 Rohingyas in various parts of Bangladesh, primarily in Teknaf, Ukhia, and Cox's Bazar, many of whom have been there for about two decades.

The aim of this study is to analyse Rohingya arts and artefacts as textual clues to how the refugee community continues to nurture their identity in the borderland, to see how the ordinary Rohingyas use these materials, under what circumstances, and for what reasons. The remaining part in the article is divided into three main sec-

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4 As Bhattacharya noted, "in history . . . the Arakanese king Basapyn occupied Chittagong in 1459 and we know that since then it was ordinarily in Arakanese hands till 1666. The influence of Bengal is, however, apparent till 1638 from the Mahomedan names and Persian and Nagri characters on the coins" (1927, p. 141).

tions: first, the methodology and data used in this research; second, an examination and analysis of the documentary records of music and artwork; and finally, a reflective analysis of arts and artefacts in refugee life. This article posits that music and the arts play a significant role in communicating the Rohingyas' coherent identity and expressing a more informal form of resistance against the discrimination and oppression they have experienced.

### ***Methodological Approach Adopted***

The data for this article is from fieldwork conducted in 2009 and 2010 as part of a larger study on the documented and undocumented Rohingya refugees in various parts of Teknaf,<sup>5</sup> in the south-eastern corner of Bangladesh adjacent to Burma. The primary data I used for this article are three songs and two drawings produced by the refugees.<sup>6</sup> Using these documents as a basis for reflecting and contemplating, I conducted in-depth interviews<sup>7</sup> with the refugees to ascertain their personal stories, thoughts, feelings, and interpretation of the meanings and processes in their country of origin as well as their current life in Bangladesh.<sup>8</sup>

While doing individual interviews, my primary attention was on the refugees' responses to my questions, but I found myself looking into issues I had not originally intended to examine. For example, the Rohingyas' behaviours, different symbols, communication systems, and so forth. Therefore, besides the interview method, I also included ethnographic participant observation as part of my data collection. This then opened the door to other 'non-conventional' aspects such as drawings and music in refugee life. I noticed that ordinary Rohingya refugees<sup>9</sup> frequently used visual means of communication which are particularly expressive and helpful in il-

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5 Teknaf is an Upazila (sub-district) of Cox's Bazar, bounded by Cox's Bazar district on the North, the Bay of Bengal on the South and West, and the Naff river and the Arakan region of Myanmar on the East. I chose Teknaf as my field site as it is one of two officially registered refugee camps and likely the main centre for undocumented migrants from Arakan.

6 For a more extensive project, I collected 15 drawings, seven poems, and 16 songs (*taranas*) produced by the refugees. Because of space constraints, I selected only a few representative works to discuss in this article.

7 Non-probability selection techniques of sampling were utilised for this study. Questions were mostly descriptive in nature. Questions were memorised and discussed with the respondents so as to make the interview sessions friendly and less formidable. I took a semi-structured, informal, and more open-ended approach.

8 Besides several fieldtrips to Teknaf, I continue to maintain constant communication with several refugee individuals and families via mobile phone to get their updates. I am very much indebted to the refugees for their selfless generosity in sharing their stories and information.

9 These songs and images were produced by ordinary refugees from every strata of life – both male and female, registered and unregistered, single mothers, rickshaw pullers, daily labourers, and beggars.

lustrating aspects of their collective sense of self and culture. Here, I worked on the premise that these are valuable data, and I present these unconventional documents as text, as an original, documentary record of a marginalised group's experiences in the form of visual productions as a powerful means of social resistance.

### ***The Context of Refugee Life***

The Rohingya refugee population live in Bangladesh as documented or undocumented individuals. The documented refugees, estimated at 26,500, live in two officially registered refugee camps, while the vast majority of undocumented refugees<sup>10</sup>, estimated to be between 200,000 and 300,000, live among the host population in scattered settlements in Teknaf, Ukhia, and Cox's Bazar. In Teknaf sub-district, the main areas are Jaliapara, Naitongpara, Mitha Panir Chora, Nayapara official UNHCR refugee camp (section I and II), Leda, Shamlapur, and Shah Porir Dip. In the Ukhia sub-district, they are more dispersed in the plains and hill villages, and in the Kutupalong official UNHCR refugee camp surrounded by makeshift camps. In Cox's Bazaar district, many live in semi-urban slums in Nazirartek, Samitipara (near the port and coast), and Gunarpara (in the hills near the town). The reason for selecting the Upazila-border in Teknaf is that ,the largest number of undocumented Rohingya refugees as well as the registered UNHCR refugee camp Nayapara are located within this area of Bangladesh.

The Nayapara registered refugee camp was established on 19 November 1992. The refugees living in this camp are those who had crossed the border into Bangladesh from November 1991 to June 1992. The total area of the Nayapara camp is 3.234 km<sup>2</sup>. The actual number of the refugee population is in dispute. According to the Bangladeshi government's 'Quick Facts of Nayapara Refugee Camp', the total refugee population (based on estimates as of 13 July 2009) was 14,287 individuals from 1,771 families.<sup>11</sup> However, the UNHCR (2008) suggests that the total refugee population in Nayapara camp in 2008 was 17,022.<sup>12</sup> Life in the refugee camp is strictly regulated

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10 Undocumented Rohingya refugees are those who are not registered with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

11 The camp has seven residential blocks with 474 tin sheds (203 new sheds and 271 old sheds), 875 latrines, 365 bathhouses, 24 garbage pits, and 45 points of water distribution.

12 UNHCR estimates suggest a total of 28,004 refugees living in two registered refugee camps – Nayapara and Kutupalong.

by multiple layers of security installations, which control entry, exit, and in-camp activities. The registered refugees live on allocated food rationing and are subject to restrictions on movement, behaviour, activities, and their relationship with the authorities. They live a miserable life, subject to the control and mercy of the authorities, alongside internal power politics of discrimination and exploitation.

The self-settled, undocumented Rohingya refugees are even more vulnerable. They remain unprotected by the Bangladeshi government and international organisations. As in Myanmar, they are viewed by the Bangladeshi government as 'illegal immigrants'. Some of them live among the local community, while others hide in remote areas in the hills near the town. Their living conditions are varied. Some are so poor they have only an assortment of tree branches and plastic paper to cover and make tents for families of 8 to 10. For food, water, and work, they have to find their way to the nearest town. Many find themselves in low-skilled and menial work such as rubbish collection or cooking and selling fried food, dried fish, and so forth. As there is no protection afforded them, many find themselves in a cycle of abuse, exploitation, and arrest.

### ***Documentary Record of Music***

Music plays an important role in the life of a displaced community like the Rohingyas. An analysis of one form of their spoken arts known as *tarana* (poems/songs) suggests that these are highly significant for their collective memory. This section looks at their poetry and songs, especially those commonly available among the ordinary refugees (both documented as well as undocumented), telling of their experiences on both sides of the Naff river.

### ***The Concept of Despair***

The following tarana is from Aleya Banu, a 39-year-old housewife and mother of five, living in a shabby thatch, hiding with other Rohingya families at the hilltop close to Naitong *para* (village).<sup>13</sup> She had come with her family to Bangladesh from the

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<sup>13</sup> All names of the Rohingyas used in this study are pseudonyms.

Buthidaung township of Arakan in 1991. As she explains the song in her language:

*This song tells about what we encountered in Arakan. Our life . . . our memory about our homeland. We could not tolerate the persecution (jurm) any more. . . . We had to leave our place. This tarana is all about that feeling.*

Although the context of this song is about life in Arakan, it was later reproduced by their popular local singers to depict their displaced life in Bangladesh in a bid to keep their memories alive. To Aleya, this song reflects her own life in Arakan. Watching her sing, it was difficult to overlook the intensity of her facial expressions and emotional involvement with the song, magnifying her frustration and insecurity in life, and her resentment articulated as the song's lyrics.

The word *dor* (fear) is used eight times in this song, in nearly every stanza, to explain why they had to spend a lifetime crying in their own homeland. Specific sources of fear mentioned are the torture at the hands of the Burmese government, the military men, and

Rohingya Song 1	
ARKANI ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
<b><i>Kandi kandi din katailam</i></b>	<b><i>We spent our life crying</i></b>
<i>Kandi kandi din katailam Mog Bormar vitore Helom pori no parilam Hokumote dore</i>	<i>We spent our days crying Surrounded by the Mogs in Burma So we've left behind homeland Fearing torture of the government</i>
<i>Kani kandi buk vashailam Arkan nor vitore Helom pori no parilam Hokumote dore</i>	<i>We spent our life crying In a home called Arakan So we've left behind homeland Fearing torture of the government</i>
<i>Gura gura doodhor jadu Gura gura doodhor puain puashsha kene more Pori thori no parilam Hokumote dore</i>	<i>Tender babies and charming lovely kids Why should they starve to death? So we've left behind homeland Fearing torture of the government</i>
<i>Kandi kandi din katailam Mog Bormar vitore Helom pori no parilam Hokumote dore</i>	<i>We spent our life crying Surrounded by the Mogs in Burma So we've left behind homeland Fearing torture of the government</i>
<i>Mogor puain dui class pori chori dhori thake Valor puain BA pass hoile panor khili beche</i>	<i>Mogs attend elementary Yet they pick the stick to rule, But we get to sell betel leaves Even if we earn a BA*</i>
<i>Gura gura doodhor puain puashsha kene more Helom pori no parilam Arkan not dore Helom pori no parilo Biyaginer dore</i>	<i>Tender babies and charming lovely kids Why should they starve to death? So we've left behind Arakan So we've left due to fear of everyone</i>
<i>Gura gura doodhor puain Na khai kene more Helom pori no parilo Biyaginer dore Helom pori no parilam Militarir dore</i>	<i>Tender babies and charming lovely kids Why should they starve to death? So we've left due to fear of everyone So we've left due to fear of military men</i>
<i>Kandi kandi din katailam Mog Bormar vitore Helom pori no parilam Hokumote dore</i>	<i>We spent our life crying Surrounded by the Mogs in Burma So we've left behind homeland Fearing torture of the government</i>

*\*higher degree above school*

Source: Author's Field Research

the Mogs (Rakhines). It raised the issue of difficulty living in a land surrounded by Buddhist Rakhines who are entitled to all the economic, social, and political facilities in life, while the Muslim Rohingyas remained completely deprived. In particular, it raised the issue of hunger caused by poverty, especially when watching their babies starve to death. It also indicates their joblessness and poor economic condition in life due to discrimination in education and job opportunities between the Rakhine and Rohingya communities. All these indicators of discrimination painfully exemplify the hierarchical relationship between the powerful and the powerless in society.

The song is a perfect reflection of their stateless life. It illustrates the traumatic experience of why and how they were forced from their homeland. It clearly expresses their sorrows and frustrations in life, and certainly shows their resentment towards the Burmese government and its military as well as towards the local Rakhines. It challenges their domination, especially in asking the question “why”. This mode of articulation certainly shows that something went very wrong for them. It serves as a painful memory of their homeland and how their lives have changed. The song is targeted at refugees who share similar experiences.

### ***The Concept of Identity***

The following tarana came from an undocumented female refugee named Tonima, a 32-year-old housewife and mother of two living in a mountainous area close to Naitongpara in Teknaf with a family of eight. She came to Bangladesh with her parents in 1998 when she was 19. Her family tried to get a place in the UNHCR registered refugee camps but failed, so they moved to the fishing community of Jaliapara where many other undocumented refugees live.



The text of the tarana reads:

Rohingya Song 2	
ARKANI ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
<b><i>Ara Hoilam Porbashi</i></b>	<b><i>We have become refugees</i></b>
<i>Oh Allah Gafure-rahim, Ara hoilam porbashi Ara hoilam refugee (II)</i>	<i>Oh God, forgiving and merciful We are in exile We have become refugees (II)</i>
<i>Ei murar vitore Allah ar koto kal rakbi Puker, juger horani ar hoto din hadabi (II)</i>	<i>For how long will you keep us in this mountain caves For how long will you make us eaten by insects (II)</i>
<i>Julumer doriyot pori roilam bashiya bashi Oo Khuda tui chaile paroj arar Arakanor Shanti, arar Mog Bormar shanti (II)</i>	<i>We remained adrift suffering from tortures Oh God make our country peaceful if you wish (II)</i>

Source: Author's Field Research

The song sounds almost like a prayer calling upon 'merciful' God and seeking his refuge and help. The song appears to be based on their stateless situation and the suffering experienced by having to hide in the jungles of Arakan and on the mountain in Teknaf, Bangladesh. The song is for the Rohingyas who face constant fear and persecution. This is reflected in the lyrics, "we remained adrift suffering from tortures". Their struggles and sufferings in life are also expressed in the plaintive, "for how long will you make us eaten by insects?" The song ends by wishing all a peaceful Arakan, if God is willing. It is amazing to note that they were able to cope despite their adverse situation in life and to keep their hopes alive. Perhaps a tarana works as a form of meditation for them, or, as Tonima noted, it was like their "normal everyday prayer". A song can entertain and satisfy their heart on that level.

The song is a medium for a non-literate community to keep alive their history, given that they are unable to notate or transcribe the music or lyrics. Oral transmission of feeling, sentiment, and emotion through songs is thus an excellent means of preserving identity and displaying passive resistance. It is passive because these people have no means to directly confront their oppressors. For them, tarana is a way out of that frustration as well as a means to express it.

### *The Memory of Home*

For the refugees, songs are used as a glue for community bonding. Besides singing individually, refugees in Nayapara occasionally camp out, once or twice a month, for small singing programmes, usually on a moonlit night, within their small boundary between huts and only with the consent of the Camp-in-Charge.<sup>14</sup> At these gatherings, they use their traditional instruments (*juri* and *tobla*) and sing country songs, religious or philosophical songs, and songs that represent their everyday issues in the camp. Although the group performances in camp are mostly by men, women are welcome as well. As these gatherings take place within the spaces between huts, the women can also enjoy it from inside their rooms. Such occasions not only provide them with entertainment: the impact is greater as they pronounce their frustrations together, recall their memories, transmit them to the new generation, and bond themselves together.

The next song was shared by a group of refugees as they express their love and longing for their 'home'. This extremely melodious and rhythmic song was popular with the crowd and drew much attention as refugees at that gathering stopped talking and some joined in the chorus.

Rohingya Song 3	
ARKANI ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
<b><i>Bangladeshot hijrot gorilam boyonda ghor feli</i></b>	<b><i>We migrated to Bangladesh leaving behind our beautiful homes</i></b>
<i>Chalot chaile choyer bora</i>	<i>On our rooftop there was dried food</i>
<i>Khetit chaile moricher hora</i>	<i>In our field we had fresh chillies</i>
<i>Ghoror dhuare khande kutta girich</i>	<i>we migrated to Bangladesh leaving everything behind thinking</i>
<i>Giya feli, Bangladeshot hijrot gorilam, jati vai boli!</i>	<i>that we are of the same (Muslim) brotherhood</i>
<i>Deha geli puber thinki,</i>	<i>Now when we look back to the East,</i>
<i>desher monot orer chinki</i>	<i>We remember many things of the past</i>
<i>Haire ma-bap hore geli?</i>	<i>O, where are my beloved parents?</i>
<i>Arare Bangladeshot hijtor gori</i>	<i>You sent us to Bangladesh</i>
<i>Hijrot gorilam Burma desh feli (II)</i>	<i>We migrated leaving behind the country Burma (II)</i>

Source: Author's Field Research

<sup>14</sup> The Camp-in-Charge of Nayapara is a representative of the Bangladeshi government, responsible for law and order as well as the daily operation of the camps. He is assisted by several camp officers.

It is all about their memory of 'home'. Here, the word 'home' has a dual meaning: their current home in the village as well as their home in the sense of their motherland, Arakan. This song does not talk about their reasons for migrating; rather, it is recalling and cherishing the thought that they had to migrate to Bangladesh "leaving behind ... our beautiful homes". A home is considered a peaceful place where everyday activities take place. Memories of dried food on the rooftop and, in the back yard or in the field, those fresh green chilli gardens are all symbolic of that concept of life, that stability or peacefulness in life, which the Rohingyas had lost at some point in the past. Now in exile, they do not have the chance to settle down, have their own place, and tend their gardens. Their life today is very different from anything they could have imagined before coming to Bangladesh. When they were forced to come to Bangladesh, leaving behind everything, the Rohingyas thought they would have a peaceful life in this new country; after all, they thought, they belong to the 'same religion'. But that did not work in reality. The politics of state superseded religious sympathy. Instead of accepting them as citizens, Bangladesh recognised only a few thousand refugees and labelled the rest of the undocumented refugees as 'illegal economic migrants'; this subjected the stateless community to constant exploitation and threat. So those memories of 'home', 'dried food', and 'fresh chillies' are now precious memories of a past that was peaceful but is lost now.

When the refugees look to the east from Bangladesh towards Arakan and the mountain range of Arakan Yoma, they 'remember many things of the past'. Many families were split up. Parents had sent their young children outside of Arakan to save their lives while they themselves chose to stay and die in their homeland. These are the painful memories the refugees hide as they go about their daily lives; they continue to cherish these memories in their minds and sustain them by composing songs. They still feel nostalgic for their homeland. Perhaps this tarana served as a constant reminder of their past.

Based on the above discussion of taranas, it is clear that, to a large extent, music has been used as an effective means in the Rohingyas' displaced life to keep alive their memories of the past. Being a non-literate community, the songs have become a medium for them to save their history and pass it on to the younger generations. It is a medium that allows them to avoid direct confrontation with their persecutors and oppressors while at the same time enables them to express their resentments

and frustrations. They are primarily doing this for themselves, but at the same time it can give outsiders an in-depth understanding into their life in exile, their identity, and their culture.

### ***Documentary Record of Arts***

Arts, drawings, paintings and so on are strong means of history, social movements, and resistance. This section presents and analyses some drawings that came from individual refugees of Nayapara camp. Although the use of the visual arts is not so widespread among the Rohingyas, it is nevertheless noticeable. In my research, I found that the refugees were not doing these drawing intentionally or with the purpose of sending them on to the authorities as coded messages, as the Rohingyas did not socially construct this as resistance.<sup>15</sup> They are simply doing this to tell their stories to their children and to those outsiders interested in their case. This section, therefore, aims to reflect on the refugees' self-perception and possibly their perception of other people and institutions as depicted in their own amateur drawings. It argues that these artworks demonstrate the Rohingyas' identity and express a different form of everyday resistance without protest.

The first drawing (Drawing 1) was from Abdul Jobber, a 44-year-old documented refugee from Nayapara camp. He and his family came to Bangladesh in 1991 from Andang village of Maungdaw town but were originally from Paththor Killah of Akyab. As Abdul Jobber explains his picture:

*This is in Akyab, my birthplace. Not only mine, this is the birthplace of my father and grandfather. The military first destroyed our village (Paththor Killah), and forced us to move to another para [village] in the Maungdaw township. How can we not move ... everything happened at gunpoint! They literally hold the gun here on my forehead.*

*In Maungdaw, we were given small huts, row by row, to stay there. They have taken our farm land, but in return we were not given any land in Maungdaw. We were forced to stay in those small huts. We were given just one room for each family. There were no job opportunities for us. We used to cut bamboos, trees for the fuel. Sometimes we sold those to the Bazar. I was married then and I had a child. My wife was pregnant then. We rarely had two meals in a day.*

*The military put restrictions on our movement. We were not allowed to visit even the village next to our place. Rakhine villagers also beat us if they get a chance. Then security forces started to visit us according to their wish to the newly located area. They used bad words humiliating my wife in front of us. They*

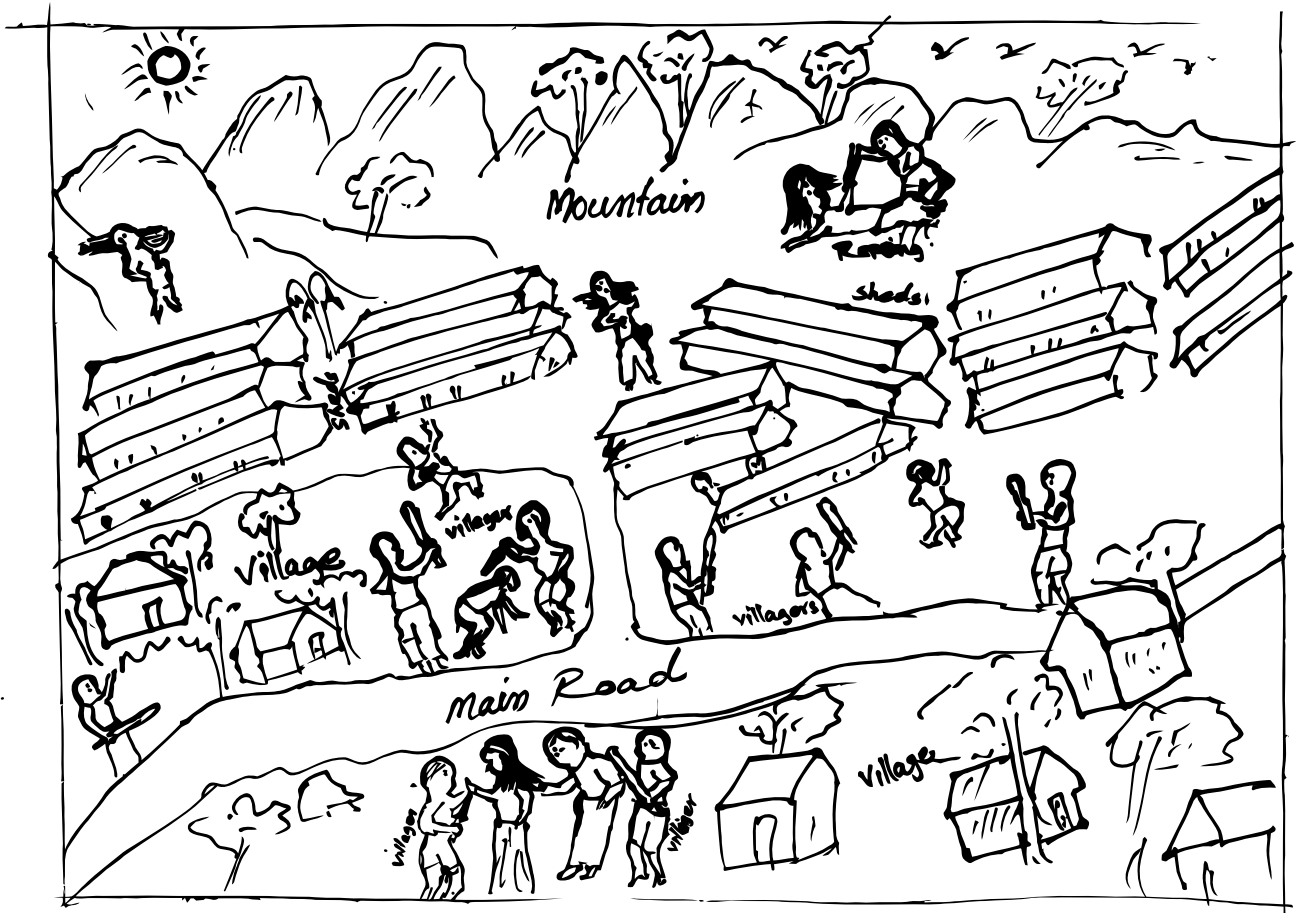
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15 Perhaps they will notice and realise after a considerable time has elapsed.

could humiliate anyone they wanted to. Families with young girls were often the target for them. And then one day, they announced in our para that we cannot stay there longer. We don't belong to Burma.

We should leave for Bangladesh.

Drawing 1: Eviction from Villages and Torture in the 'Model Village' Area



This artwork illustrates what many refugees complained about, i.e. forceful eviction from their villages and serious persecution in those relocated 'model villages'. As the drawing shows, the villages are becoming empty as the Mogs (local Rakhines) beat the Rohingyas using long sticks, humiliating their females by dragging and physically hurting them in front of their families, and chasing them towards the 'model villages'. Moreover, there were military operations, as Abdul Jobber mentioned in his narrative, which ultimately evicted and displaced thousands of Rohingya families from their villages and forced many to relocate to those 'model village' areas in Mangdaw and Buthidaw. Life in those slum-like areas was basically like in prison. In the picture, the shades in rows represent those areas. It also demonstrates that those areas were

heavily surrounded by the Burmese security forces as they carry weapons. Having no legal rights, these stateless Rohingyas again were subjected to torture, humiliation, beating, killing, and rape within their own country.

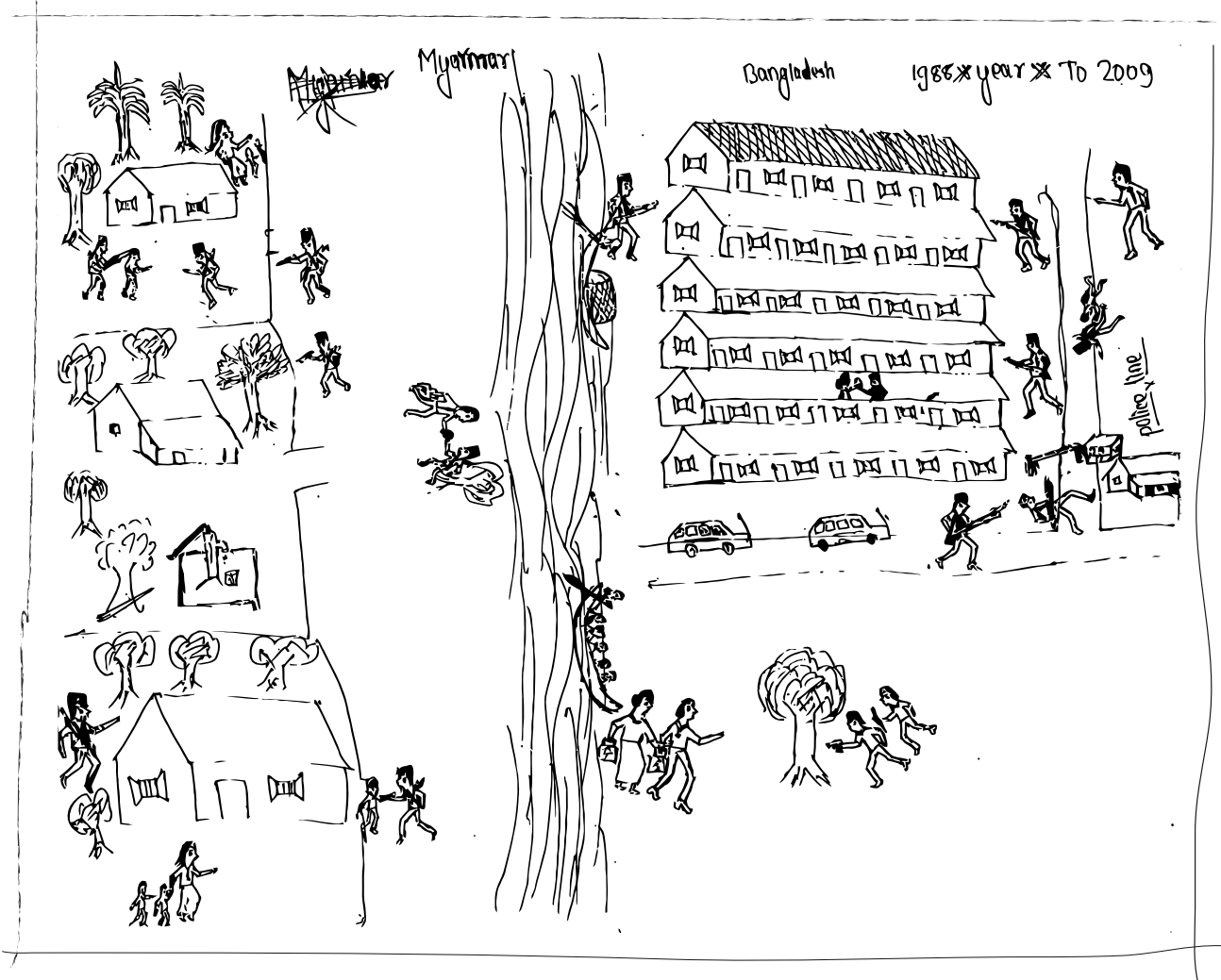
Examples of the eviction of minorities and their forceful relocation to 'model village' areas can also be found in other parts of South Asia and South-East Asia. As Roxana Waterson noted, in the case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladeshi government also evicted indigenous people from their lands by moving 400,000 Muslim settlers to the areas. Many indigenous people were also forcefully relocated into 'cluster villages' where military and paramilitary forces were involved in various human rights violations (1993, p. 14). In Cambodia, under Pol Pot's regime, hundreds of thousands of ethnic minorities became victims of genocide, relocation, and displacement.

The Burmese army's brutal military operations against the Arakanese Rohingya Muslims, their forceful resettlement into new satellite towns, the demolition of their religious sites, and the confiscation of their lands were reported by many UN and humanitarian organisations. By explaining the origins of such injustice, this above artwork was effectively exposing a system of domination as well as subordination. It illustrates that although the ruling power enjoys the control of material resources and puts constraints onto the lives of the subordinates, it could not extend its domination into their culture and ideology. That is why they can present their struggle through these drawings, which allows them to escape fully from the sphere of control of the dominant.

The second drawing was by Mohammad Ismail Hossain, 37, who had come to Bangladesh in 1991. During his exile in Bangladesh, he married a Rohingya woman and became a father of six. His father had died of natural causes in the camp in 2005. His elderly mother is currently staying with him, and nine other siblings live in the huts next to his in the same Nayapara camp. He explains his drawing thus:

*This picture shows that Julum became severe during 1988. That was the time when we were evicted from our own land. Military came and announced in our village that we got to leave this area in seven days. How could we just leave everything? Then one day the military attacked our village. They came to our house. The top left of the picture shows women and children running away on seeing the military. They beat the men and women, disgraced our women and forcefully evicted us from our homes. To escape this Julum, and to save our lives, we crossed the Naff river, and came here [Bangladesh]. Immediately after reaching here, we faced Bangladeshi military! They put us in one place [refugee camps]. And the picture on the right side shows those camps. Many police and military are always guarding this area. Here again we suffer Julum and humiliation.*

Drawing 2: Life on Both Sides of the Border: The Naff River



This piece of art illustrates their life from 1988 to 2009 (as written on top of the picture). It shows that their well-ordered lifestyle, with houses surrounded by trees, with a garden and a tube well, was disrupted by the presence of Burmese military and security forces (NaSaKa), whose identity is distinct in the picture as they wear military uniforms and carry heavy guns. They entered those personal premises and forced the Rohingyas from their homes. During and after the 1990s election, persecution in the form of physical and mental torture such as beatings as well as killings, abduction and rape, economic exclusion, and restrictions on physical movement threatened their livelihood security and physical security to the extent that it forcefully displaced thousands.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, there is a thin river line that offers an easy bor-

<sup>16</sup> All the people I talked to, documented and undocumented, complained about persecution, fear, and insecurity in

der crossing facility creating an escape route for the Rohingya people from Myanmar. This generated hopes in their minds while they were still in their homeland about an imagined safe life across the river. However, once they crossed the border, they encountered the crude reality of harsh security forces and camp life which bring them to see the reality of their exile life. As shown in this drawing, the living space on the Bangladesh side consists of congested tin-sheds and is surrounded by heavily armed security forces. The security forces not only confine the living space of the refugees but also control the entry-exit flows. While living in exceptional places like refugee camps or in scattered settlements, the refugees encounter serious life-threatening dangers such as getting killed by police firing on them, beatings and rape, torture, being tied up with ropes, and so forth.<sup>17</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the Rohingyas' production of art forms has not yet reached the level of altercation with the authorities because it would be more dangerous and costly for them.<sup>18</sup> Therefore it remains at the stage of raising their consciousness (Denisoff, 1983, p. 5; Qualter, 1963, p. 99). Yet, such drawings evidently show the power of the visual symbols, as they successfully explain that the Arakani Rohingyas are caught between the politics of two sovereign states – Myanmar and Bangladesh. Their right to exist in their homeland was not accepted by Myanmar, and their right to stay in the borderland was also never accepted by Bangladesh. They have been forcibly displaced from their homes and many have crossed the border several times. Such forcible relocation and involuntary movements have been driven by systematic acts of violence and/or coercion, which have made the community fearful for their existence and which have affected their socio-economic security.

After talking to the refugees and observing their verbal expressions, body language, and opinions, it was clear that, while living in the borderlands, the refugees maintained a psychology of strong attachment to their homeland. Although they were forced to flee in fear for their lives, the homeland across the river remains visible in their mind's eye. Drawing 1 shows a sun that is hidden behind the hill (signify-

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Arakan/Rakhine. A displaced person, who arrived in Nayapara Refugee Camp I in 1990, noted: "Continuous harassment and economic hardships makes life impossible to live in Arakan. It is just like a jail for us."

17 Having no rights before the law, they are not entitled to education, health care, or even to seek help regarding any injustice and violence they suffer.

18 Kerkvilet, in his study on *Everyday Resistance to Injustice in a Philippine Village*, shows that with everyday forms of resistance the target might not necessarily be aware of it. As he mentions: "The target may eventually discover what the resister has done but that need not be the intention of the ones resisting. Indeed, those resisting, often perceiving themselves to be extremely vulnerable [sic]" (Kerkvilet, 1986, p. 109).



ing their past). The sun is shining brightly. The river is seen as the pathway between their past and their present, and the fact that the past (sun) seems so close makes the pain (of their memories) even more poignant. This makes them even more homesick for their homeland.

Their drawings tell powerful stories of their struggles and sufferings and explain their frustration with the authority, who continue to torment them. In their displaced state, they feel both attached to and yet alienated from their homeland and their past. Without a sense of identity in the present, they seek to find identity in (and through) their music and drawings. The music and drawings also play another role: to depict the crimes they have encountered (abuse, etc.) at the hands of the authorities.

### ***Music and Art as Symbols of Resistance and Identity***

Resentment and resistance are not always necessarily violent and physical. They can be intellectual and expressed in artworks such as music, the visual arts, and songs. This ethnographic research on the Rohingyas' musical (verbal) expression and artistic (visual) expression suggests that these texts are highly meaningful. They raise the concept of emotion in people's minds and are able to transmit messages which are central to their displaced life. Two things are common in all these documentary records: one is the domination by the powerful, who have power and influence; and the other is the subordination of the less powerful group. Here, these documents assert the Rohingyas' own perceptions about their situation and experiences. It serves to make the suffering of a stateless life in Arakan as well as in Bangladesh very real and alive. These also serve to inspire a feeling of connectedness with the displaced community in a way more effective than any printed statistics could. In this way, these documents can convince outsiders that the conditions of life in Arakan were intolerable, and being stateless, the situation in Bangladesh is also not much different. Therefore, something must be done. A number of points and arguments can be made using the data presented in the preceding sections.

First, these artistic expressions used a certain kind of language. For example, the particular words in their songs such as *Jala*, *Julum*, *Dukh*, *koshto*, or *Nirjato* are indicators of oppressions. When a refugee says "*Ara kichu korti no pari, biyagin shojjo*

*goron poribo* (“we cannot do anything, everything has to be accepted”), this refers to their subordinate status and their frustration at all the oppression they suffer. In this regard, James C. Scott in his book, *Weapons of the Weak*, brought to light the importance of everyday resistance by looking at various signs and symbols, and examining the vocabulary of exploitation. According to him, such everyday forms of resistance occur in the form of “footdragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so forth” (1985, p. 292).

When a refugee said, “We [the Rohingyas] are like people without knees”, he was referring to their powerless condition in which they are not able to say or do anything against those who have displaced them from their homes and made their lives miserable. Indeed, these musical items and drawings are actual living stories of the Rohingyas’ struggle and social experience, of their agony and hatred towards those who cause them to suffer. What these documents convey is resistance, not only to their socio-economic and political conditions, but also resistance to the attributed identity that has been imposed on them from above, making them subjects without protection and outside the law.<sup>19</sup>

Second, the songs, artworks, and poems have a certain spirit that helps sustain the Rohingyas for many years in a foreign land. The refugees produce and memorise them as they typically find them reflections of their own experience. They can also send emotional messages through these songs and artworks which are able to work as a communication bridge among the Rohingyas. Their resources or opportunities to resist openly are less than minimal, but their spirit remains alive and is expressed through these artistic creations. Without these media, it would have been difficult for an illiterate community to keep their memory, identity, and history alive. By engaging in these media, they are also able to communicate with the outside.

Third, this medium of expression shows some kind of action that keeps these people active. These simple things of everyday life, such as music and art, are tools that have been used by the ordinary Rohingyas to show consciousness and awareness about their situation. Simultaneously, they clearly express negation of the system of domination. Weitz (2001, p. 670) referred to these as “actions that not only reject subordination but do so by challenging the ideologies that support that subordination”.

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19 Hanna Arendt defined statelessness as a situation when people “left their homeland they remained homeless, once they had left their state they became stateless, and once they had been deprived of their human rights they were rightless” (Arendt, 1966, p. 267).

Moreover, it is these people who have complete authority over these artistic productions, and no one else can control or subjugate their songs and artworks (Brodsky, 1992, p. 220).

Fourth, these artworks especially break the complicity of silence. It shows one form of psychological warfare against domination as it provides a sense of opposition (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004, p. 538; Hughes et al., 1995). We have seen that refugees are raising questions through their songs about the discrimination towards them in jobs, educational opportunities, and power sharing. Another example was in Drawing 1, where the word 'raping' depicts a military man raping a female at gunpoint. These drawings are more expressive than words. These are certainly observable as expressions of resistance, yet not necessarily recognised by the target (the powerful dominants). The intention here is to negate that domination, talk about the persecution, and effectively expose the songs and drawings to shame the oppressors. This is the voice of the oppressed. It is their form of resistance, and that makes it very significant.

Fifth, these documents exhibit a non-conventional form of resistance which is covert in nature. Similar to Scott's analysis of resistance that is accomplished through symbolic behaviour, the ordinary Rohingyas use music and artworks as symbols of their form of resistance. When a refugee sings "where should I go", not only is it referring to their uncertain destination as a stateless being, it also serves as tools of opposition asking for a social change. According to Brodsky (1992, p. 221), "Art is a form of resistance to the imperfection of reality, as well as an attempt to create an alternative reality, an alternative that one hopes will possess the hallmarks of a conceivable, if not an achievable, perfection".

Sixth, it allows the refugees to escape for a while from the sense of despair by overcoming it not so much through political efforts but through music and art. This modest form of struggle is neither a collective defiance nor rebellion, rather, these should be seen as individual acts of resistance. This form of resistance does not wait for recognition (McCann & March, 1996; Scott, 1985). Because these are people "who have experienced tragedy [but who] do not see themselves as protagonists and do not really care about the means by which tragedy is expressed, being themselves their embodiment" (Brodsky, 1992, p. 221). The Rohingyas are primarily performing these music and artworks for themselves. Although their music and arts are oppositional,

they are deliberately hidden from public view because it could be dangerous for their safety and security. They avoid direct confrontation to stop escalating further persecution. They are opportunistic and accommodate things that suit their situation best.

Therefore, it can be argued that the Rohingya refugees' use of texts in the form of music and art clearly exhibits resistance to the reality they have experienced. The logical question that arises out of this is: Can this form of resistance bring any positive change to the life of the refugees? This covert form of resistance may not bring any revolutionary change in the life of the Rohingyas, yet these are valuable documents, because these have a certain spirit that helps sustain the people who create them: these are expressions of their consciousness of their situation and also expressions of negation of the system of domination, and this allows them to escape from the sense of despair, at least for a few moments, and this is what makes such informal resistance effective and significant. As mentioned before, the refugees create these works for themselves, to vent their frustration, to show their coherent identity, to keep their memory alive, to break the complicity of silence, and to speak out against the injustices that have happened and are still happening to them. Such a humble form of resistance, according to Scott, is perhaps the only "spirit and practice that prevents the worst and promises something better" (1987, p. 452). The real intention of this form of resistance has always been "the hope for survival and persistence" for ordinary people.

### ***Conclusion***

Non-conventional resistance using arts and artefacts is increasingly visible in social research on social movements. The article has provided an in-depth understanding about how a displaced community uses music and art to express their resistance. Ethnographic research on the use of music and art by the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh suggests that it plays a very important role in communicating their coherent identity and displaying an unconventional form of resistance to discrimination and oppression. They use music and art to keep their memory alive, to transmit that history to the new generations, and to communicate information about themselves to outsiders. This might be a different approach to protest, but it is their everyday form of local resistance and is central to Rohingyas' life. This approach is important to

consider – not only to understand the weaker groups and their activities, but more importantly to recognise the fact that arts and music are the only way they can resist. Examining these then not only gives us a better understanding of the complex reality of their lives but also suggests a need for reformulation of the concept of resistance, so that it recognises the importance of non-conventional forms of resistance.

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