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THE MEDIA TRIAL OF ROHINGYA MIGRANTS: APATHY OR EMPATHY?

Dr. Farzana Gulzar

Sr. Assistant Professor, Department of Management Studies, University of Kashmir, Email: farzanashahrukh@uok.edu.in

Aiman Fayaz

Research Scholar, Department of Management Studies, University of Kashmir, Email: aimanfayaz@kashmiruniversity.net

Dr. Bilal Ahmad

Research Fellow, Department of Management Studies, University of Kashmir

Shafiqa Gul

shafiqaaqul@gmail.com

Research Fellow, Department of Management Studies, University of Kashmir

Dr. Shabana Gulzar

Shabanashah2004@gmail.com

Assistant Professor, Department of Botany, Government College for Women, Kashmir

Article history:		Abstract:
Received: Accepted: Published:	January 7 th 2021 January 13 th 2021 February 5 th 2021	The current study discusses the role of media in portraying migration scenario with special reference to Rohingya migrants. It highlights the importance of media in influencing the attitudes of people thereby shaping public opinions. The study is based on primary as well as secondary data. For primary data articles from various online editions of newspapers from five different countries including US, UK, Malaysia, Israel and India have been analyzed. It talks about various issues being faced by Rohingyas after leaving their homes and therefore discusses their plights and highlights the way such issues have been portrayed by various media sources across the world.

Keywords: Migration, media, Rohingyas, public opinions

1.INTRODUCTION

Media plays an important role in building up public opinions. It is believed that the media can either lead or follow public opinion (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). Usually, media is the primary mode of information and acts as an 'educational source' for most of the population, therefore, it influences the attitudes and opinions of people regarding different issues (Estrada et al., 2016; Steinberg, 2004).

Migration is a global phenomenon which involves the movement of people from their native place to some other place due to many reasons. Such movement can be attributed to many reasons including better income opportunities, better living standard, demographic changes, and so on. Therefore, the reasons are sometimes linked to inequalities in developmental opportunities, income gaps, more attractive living opportunities (Castles & Miller, 2009). However, migration may not always be voluntary. Sometimes people are forced to move due to other reasons like political crisis, climate changes. Such kind of migration involves more difficulty in adjustment and psychological stress.

2.OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- > To understand the influence of media in shaping public opinions;
- > To study the role of media in portraying migration of Rohingyas;

3.METHODOLOGY

The study is based on primary as well as secondary data. Various research articles from books, journals, conference proceedings, reports, have been used for secondary data. However, for primary data articles from different online editions of newspapers from five countries including US, UK, Malaysia, Israel and India have been analyzed. This is done in order to find how media portrays the scenario of Migration (Rohingyas) leaving an impact on viewers minds. Qualitative analysis of the articles was done to draw results.

4.HOW MEDIA SHAPES OPINIONS?

Media in today's day and age is larger and wider than it ever has been. The influence media has on our lives, grows with every passing day, not only does it play a vital role in keeping the public informed, it has found a status of reliance with people hugely dependent on press, television and online portals to get news and updates on happenings. But with the deep impregnation in the layers of lives media has, it tends to possess the power to shape public opinion let it be over religion, climate or education.

Media's role ideally is to transmit factual information and at times uncover the reality of trans-folding events. Transforming and changing the ideology and perception of people and becoming a beacon of education is a pretty difficult task. The audience's response to media messages is very subjective and unique, the level of influence thus exerted is not uniform amongst audiences. Experiences, education, derivation of knowledge from alternative sources is what contributes to the degree of acceptance in the Audience. Thus magnifying the responsibility and emphasizing the power that Media holds. Whether it be by giving a factual representation of facts free from myths and stereotypes or by generalization and spread of misinformation/false news.

Lumen Learning LLC, a leading online educator, states "Two basic assumptions underlie most research on agenda-setting: One, that the press and the media do not reflect reality, they filter and shape it; and two, that media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues." This gives importance to the theory of agenda-setting which occurs through the cognitive process of accessibility. Accessibility simply suggests that the frequency of media covering an issue is directly proportional to the audience memorizing it, or the 'news' becoming more accessible in the audience's memory. This accessibility achieved through mass media coverage can potentially have a powerful impact on what and how individuals think.

Walter Lippmann, the intellectual father of the 'agenda setting theory' starts his book, Public Opinion (1922), with the chapter titled '*The world outside and the pictures in our head'*. Here Lippman notes that the audience's opinions and behaviors are responses to pictures in our heads created by mass media and greatly devoid of factuality in the outside world.

This observation was also the basis of a study by McCombs & Shaw (1972) that re-introduced the theory of agenda setting. The media and news in particular is said to have a major influence on the focus of public attention, the issues, specifically regarded as a priority by the public. In addition to this influence, news media also directs focus to certain specific aspects of the issues as they happen.

Social scientists working on the agenda-setting influence of the media usually focus on issues that the public faces. The agenda of any media house is found in the pattern it follows to cover public issues over a period of time. During this period of time whether a week, a month or an entire year a few issues are laid emphasis on, some get moderate or light coverage and some are seldom mentioned. The agenda setting theory defines Salience as the prominent and perceived importance of news items. It must be mentioned here that agenda is used as being a neutral term in contrast to its literal meaning 'to have an agenda'. The word hence is purely descriptive and has no attached pejorative implication.

5.FACTORS AFFECTING MEDIA REPORTING:

Media reporting of different issues is influenced by a number of factors. Ornebig (2013) found that media reporting depends upon factors like advertisement, government, interest groups, involvement of the community, etc. However, these factors are external; there are some internal factors as well that influence media reporting. Internal factors usually include media owners, media managers, editors, and journalist's own preferences. Media ethics and legal policies also affect journalism (Sa, 2009). All such forces tend to impact the news being presented by media leading to bias.

Advertisers

Advertisers represent one of the most influential group that affect freedom of press. Revenue generated from advertising is the most important source of income for media, therefore, it acts as a 'news filter' (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Therefore, the news content is presented according to the preferences of advertisers distorting the original message.

Government

Government plays an important role in journalism. Different studies across the world have been conducted to analyze the role of government in media reporting of the events. Tella & Franceschelli (2011) in their study found that the government plays a significant role in deciding that capacity of newspapers to publish articles of interest. Similarly Gehlbach & Sonin (2014) also tried to analyze the role of government in controlling journalism and the results were statistically significant. FMd (2017) in his study also found the significant influence of government in the news coverage.

• Audience/ Readers

Some media reports are audience-oriented. Since the audience represent consumers of media reports, therefore, sometimes reports are prepared taking into consideration the interests of readers.

Politically Motivated Opinion

Politicians tend to maintain a good rapport with media as it influences opinions of consumers. Therefore, sometimes media messages reflect political stigma. In democratic countries, freedom of speech is one of the fundamental rights of citizens, however, politicizing issues destroys the true essence of media reporting and leads to controversies.

Ethnic background

Ethnic backgrounds influence media reporting to a large extent. It is often seen that some media agencies tend to be favourable towards some specific ethnic group, and therefore, reporting is done favouring thoughts of that particular group. This affects the credibility of such media reports and disturbs communal harmony. Often such reports highlight issues that result in ethnic conflict and promote hatred. Therefore, media at that time plays a negative role affecting public opinions.

6.ROLE OF MEDIA IN PORTRAYING MIGRATION SCENARIO

Media plays an important role in shaping public perceptions. Media builds frames helping people in interpreting things going around in the world (Conroy 2015). This applies to migration also. Migration involves a complex phenomenon wherein almost every aspect of life is involved. The process involves both native country as well as host country, therefore, different aspects need to be taken care of. Media plays an important role in bringing up the picture of migration across or within the nations. Whether a state accepts migrants or grants asylum to them often goes in accordance with the public opinion mainly influenced by media portrayal of the situation and political discourses (Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2017). Therefore, media portrayal and political ideology could control admission of migrants to any particular region.

Media coverage acts as a data source which helps in withdrawing inferences (Nesbitt-Larking, 2007). Media may either project a positive or negative image of a particular phenomenon. Such portrayals create an impact on the viewer's mind resulting in influencing perceptions. Research shows that portrayal of media has a direct relationship with viewer attitudes. Negative portrayal of migration phenomena influences consumer's attitudes in a negative manner (Gattino & Tartaglia, 2015).

7.MIGRATION OF ROHINGYAS AND GLOBAL MEDIA

Migration has become a hot topic for all media agencies. It has gained attention from all media agencies since it's a global phenomenon. Migration occurs due to different reasons, therefore, each type of migration requires specific attention and demands a particular way of reporting the events. Migration is a sensitive phenomenon; while dealing with forced migration, the job is even more challenging.

Rohingyas are mostly a Muslim ethnic minority in Myanmar and have been termed the "World's most persecuted Minority". The crisis started when the government of Myanmar refused their citizenship in 2014 and excluded them from the 2014 census. Due to communal violence they started to flee their homes, but their mass exodus started in 2017 when they suffered due to armed atrocities. The National Geographic reports that at least 500,000 Rohingas fled the country to find asylum in the neighbouring Bangladesh during the August-September period of 2017. Although recent events have shed light and seen an intensified crisis, the Rohingyas are not new to persecution.

Myanmar's government does not recognize Rohingyas as lawful citizens. The government has always maintained that they were brought to Rakhine, a state in Myanmar, by the British when it was a colony, from Bangladesh and they have been staying there illegally. Rohingyas on the other hand claim that their presence in the region can be traced to as early as the eighth century.

The attacks on the Rohingyas have been widespread and have been carried out at the hands of Myanmar's army and police, this prompted the UN High commissioner for human rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein to call the crisis a "textbook example of Ethnic Cleansing". The country has repeatedly refused to allow the UN or outside journalists and agencies to conduct independent investigations into the systematic violence carried out against the Rohingyas. Most of the information about the impending crisis comes from interviews carried out at the Bangladesh border from the fortunate few who are able to cross it. The UNHRC in 2016 published a report where refugees recorded gruesome stories of mass murders, beatings and gang-rapes by the army. The women who were interviewed reported that more than half of them were subject to Sexual Violence. Satellite Images seem to have confirmed the burning of villages as reported by the Refugees.

40,000 Rohingyas Refugees have also found asylum in India, out of these, 16,000 have obtained official documentation. The areas Rohingyas have been made to settle in, are prone to floods making living conditions in the Refugee camps worse and even led to an outbreak of cholera, shortage of drinking water and malnutrition of kids.

Quiet recently there was a glimmer of hope as Rohingyas sought some respite in the election of the Nobel Laureate Ang Suu Kyi as her campaign promised a legal discourse for the Rohingyas to obtain citizenship. These hopes were shattered as her election bought no significant change to the conditions and mistreatment of Rohingyas. Although there has been an increase in aid from the UN and Red Cross towards supporting the Rohingya refugees and to Bangladesh, the plight and struggle through misery has become synonymous with the word Rohingya.

The study presents various media reports that have been collected from online editions of newspapers from five different countries to understand how media portrays the migration scenario like that of Rohingyas.

8.MEDIA REPORTS FROM THE UNITED STATES

The Telegraph, well reputed news website of US calls Rohingyas as one of the most persecuted minorities, who have been considered unwanted and stateless. The article states that this group is being denied citizenship by almost every country rendering them stateless although their roots can be traced back from 18th century belonging to Arakan. The article highlights that Rohingyas have been ill-treated by Burmese authorities since World War II. They have been labelled as "interloping Bengalis". It further discusses their sufferings in terms of being unable to move freely and denial of state education. It discusses the atrocities on them as act of 'ethnic cleansing' by government authorities unfolding genocide. It also highlights that Myanmar authorities have been blocking UN agencies from sending relief in the form of water, food and medicines to Rohingyas resulting in more deaths. The article also describes the report of Burma Human Rights Network highlighting abuses on Myanmar muslims since 2012 including denial of identity cards, banning Islamic holidays and creation of Muslim-free zones (Smith & Krol, 2017).

The CNN, an American news media network owned by Warner Media in an article from 2018, highlights the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission's presentation of its findings to the Human Rights Council. The article highlights and reaffirms that the mission's findings are in line to visits carried out by CNN's representatives' visit to refugee camps of Kutapalong and Thyankhali in Bangladesh. The report gives an insight into the gross human rights violations of the Burmese Government, mass-murders, imprisonments, enforced disappearances, torture, rape and sexual slavery. The Article even goes out to call out the international community to drag Myanmar in the hallways of the ICJ and be accountable for its actions.

"The international community must now do its part and refer Myanmar authorities to the International Criminal Court. During our visit in Bangladesh, we met with over 100 women who had survived persecution in Myanmar. Some could barely walk due to their injuries, and had to be carried by others. Others had watched their entire families massacred before their eyes."

The Report speaks of the innumerable horrors and abuses that the Diasporas spoke of and the extreme hostile conditions they were subjected to in countries like Bangladesh (Ebadi & Karman, 2018).

Fox News, the news corporation owned by Ruport Murdoch, generally perceived to be inclined towards Republicans in article from 2018 highlights the numerous atrocities Rohingyas have to face in Refugee camps in Bangladesh. The reporter in her memoir describes some stories she came across while interviewing surviving Rohingyas who were successful to reach refugee-camps in Bangladesh.

The stories include that of a 13 year old girl, who was raped repeatedly alongside her mother, both of whom are being treated for STDs, the reporter also came across a woman whose children were killed brutally right in front of her. The journalist also reported meeting a group where 52% of women were raped (Ambrose, 2018). The journalist also reported meeting a group where 52% of women were raped (Ambrose, 2018).

To quote the reporter,

"I ask the world community: if our nations called for an end to genocide and crimes against humanity after World War II, how is this genocide occurring today in Myanmar?"

Boston Herald, a paper based out of Boston, Massachusetts in an article from 2017 calls the Rohingya problem an evil brewing in Myanmar. The article criticizes the role that the U.S government has played in taking a stand against the atrocities that the Rohingyas have had to face. The editorial highlights the causal factor of the Militant group of Rohingyas being the 'Two decade old' oppression from the Myanmar government. The article also questions the Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi for not being bold enough and realise the power of speaking out against her own country's military (Boston Herald, 2017). To quote the reporter'

"Now that the world is watching in horror, what will our leaders do — beyond issuing press releases?"

9.MEDIA REPORTS FROM ISRAEL

Quoting US Media, The Israeli newspaper mentioned about Rohingyas and the atrocities on them stating, "Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fled, without shelter, food or water. They walked for days or weeks through forests and over mountains. People died on the way, some succumbing to injuries sustained during the attacks. Women gave birth; some babies and infants died. An unknown number of people drowned from capsized boats, or crossing rivers."

The report also states that such atrocities were encouraged by the government itself and were justified giving Hitler's reference which encourages inhumane practices to 'maintain a race'. (Freedman, 2018).

Hareetz, one of the most well-received media houses from Israel, discusses the plights of Rohingyas and calls it one of the greatest human rights disasters of the past century. The paper calls out to the international indifference as one of the reasons human trafficking thrives in the country. It is interesting to note that this Israeli paper also compares the situation to the holocaust period and references the SS St. Louis disaster where around 1000 Jews were refused safe haven and were routed back to Germany, where they died in concentration camps. In a similar way, Rohingyas are denied shelter in the neighbouring countries and sometimes kept at halt unless they pay a ransom (Samuels, 2015). Jerusalem Post, another one of the most internationally recognised Israeli media houses, reports a story from January, 2020 where it reports the ICJ's decision to order Myanmar to take measures to protect Rohingyas. It doesn't shy away to invoke Myanmar's past and quote the ICJ to say that genocide is something that Rohingyas stay at risk of (Reuters, 2020).

10.MEDIA REPORTS FROM MALAYSIA

An article from Malaysia Today, discusses the tough time faced by Rohingyas throughout their journey from Myanmar to Malaysia. The journalist narrates a story about a family while speaking to a 10 year old girl, who discusses their turbulent journey and the way they managed to escape from Myanmar crawling through waters and forests. The family hoped that the things will be better once they reach Malaysia but their hope turned to depths of despair when they were detained by the authorities and her father arrested. The family is now looked upon by her mother who hardly makes two ends meet. The article ends with some emotional lines by the reporter, who visited the family on his own and writes,

"I am not a politician and I may not know much about politics, but I know for a fact that these people we call refugees are not coming to our country to steal our wealth or disrupt our peace. They just want to survive – not even live, just survive." (Webmaster, 2015)

The Star, another Malaysian Media in an article from 2015, the year Rohingya Crisis was on peak on the loss of life from the South-Asian country. It recognises the displacement, gross human rights violations and takes interviews of many Rohingyas into account in their report. The report is devoid of opinions and does not seem to choose a side or be empathetic on either ends of the spectrum. The article also expresses displeasure over ANP's lack of enthusiasm and Suu Ki's lack of empathy by never once visiting the Rohingya Camps. The article also highlights the acquisitions that NLD, the main opposition has been inciting violence against Rohingyas (Mclaughlin, 2015).

Another article from one of the most circulated newspapers in Malaysia, The Star, in an opinion essay from 2020, presents the plight of Rohingyas in an empathic way. He tries to picture a counter argument wherein the general notion that Refugees put a strain on Malaysia's resources is heavily contested. The article goes on to report that "Rohingyas despite the challenges they face in Malaysia, have been taking care of their communities, aided by NGOs so as to not burden the Government and Malaysians." (Bedi, 2020).

An Article by the News agency Straits Times published in 2017, talks about the geo-political position Malaysia has found itself after being amidst the Rohingya Crisis. The article makes various suggestions as to how the Malaysian Government can avert and manage the crisis in a better way. The article speaks of a long term strategy that must be put in place to place Rohingyas as refugees and a necessary need of acknowledgement of the crisis. It talks about a legal recognition of their status which may avert the national resentment of Rohingyas. The article also suggests the elimination of Human rights abuses against the Rohingya Diaspora and some inclusion in the society by providing them employment, it also suggests that the current measures taken are not effective and need to be put in place in an efficient way (Ying, 2017).

11.MEDIA REPORTS FROM THE UNITED KINGDOM

The Independent, expressed concern over discrimination and violence being faced by Muslim ethnic minority of Myanmar. The article talks about plight of Rohingyas being unnoticed by the entire world. It also mentions about denial of Bangladesh to recognise Rohingyas as their citizens. It discusses the claims by Human Rights Watch which talks about 1,250 houses being fire gutted including other structures as shown by satellite imagery. It also mentions about 2012 crisis when 140,000 Rohingyas had to flee their homes resulting in their internal displacement. The article criticizes the role of political party led by Aung San Suu Kyi, who failed to provide justice to this section of the society despite being known for her role in human rights justice (Peck, 2016).

An interesting article from Wires, brings forth an important issue which discusses how Myanmar authorities make money by helping the minority group of Rohingyas in fleeing. Authorities expedite the process of their exodus and for the same extract money from them. It brings forth the fact that Myanmar authorities, on one side are making the life of Rohingyas difficult and on the other side make profits from their induced exodus. The article further discusses the acts of cruelty on Rohingyas who are not even allowed to move to their neighbouring villages or repair their own houses without bribes and permissions. The article highlights the Fortify Rights reports claiming that the authorities are involved in human trafficking practices, enslavement and exploitation of Rohingyas, who however deny such allegations (Associated Press, 2014).

An article from Irish Times, talks about the failure of Myanmar government in providing justice to Rohingyas. It turns the spotlight to Myanmar's seat councillor who despite being a fighter for human rights has been found to defend Myanmar military against the charges of genocide. The writer discusses his previous experience while questioning himself that why do people like Rohingyas come to Bangladesh being a poor country, however, the best answer he could find was that the condition of Rohingyas in Myanmar being absolutely terrible. The article shows concern about the endless sufferings of Rohingyas because of their statelessness and persecution (O'Brien, 2019).

In an article from the BBC, published in 2017, the author reports the plights of the Rohingyas and the extremely hostile circumstances they're in. The article points out that many journalists and media reports speak of the war crimes and genocidal killings of Rohingyas but the conditions Rohingyas live in is less spoken about. The article goes on to say that People in Myanmar do not want to talk about the issue and suggest there are "other issues in the country" that needed to be talked about. The article also goes on to the depth of the politicization of the word "Rohingya" and that Burmese people would rather refer to the Diaspora as "bengalis". Through various interviews conducted by the reporter, the article reports on the tone that the general population of Myanmar has regarding the issue. Some calling the persecuted "terrorists", while some finding flaws with the narrative placed by the International media (Ethirajan, 2017).

In a small opinion piece published on the Scottish Newspaper 'The Herald' on 30th November 2018, the writer expresses strong empathy towards the Rohingya Diaspora. The article also expresses the strong need for the Scottish Government to accept Rohingyas on moral and humanitarian grounds. The article goes on to suggest the intimidation and fear that Rohingyas settled in Bangladesh express when they are spoken to. The author even goes on to pen a request to the Government suggesting them to be more empathetic towards the cries and sufferings of the Rohingya Diaspora. Some heart touching lines in the article state,

"They would rather die in Bangladesh than go back to the places where they experienced such appalling atrocities." (Dutton, 2018)

12.MEDIA REPORTS FROM INDIA

News 18, one of the media houses of India highlights the issues in camps where Rohingyas are settled. It talks about poor sanitation system, shortage of toilets, supply of dirty water, leading to serious health disasters. It mentions about the likelihood of an epidemic due to water borne diseases. It also talks about the shortage of resources and such resources being shared by large number of people. The media thus tries to highlight the sufferings of Rohingyas and depicts issues concerning their health (News 18, 2017).

Times of India, the highest circulated News Daily in India, gives a very empathetic view of the plight of Rohingyas and how they have found Solace in India as a land of cultures. The piece through various interviews chalks out an image where Rohingyas see India as a place where they belong but are in a constant state of fear over the scare of deportation. The article also points out that the fear has gained more weight and momentum after the discussion over CAA started (Times of India, 2019).

An Article from Zee News, one of the India's well known media houses discusses the intelligence report claiming that various organisations are allegedly involved in illegally settling down Rohingyas and are collecting money for this purpose from people all over the country. It is also claimed that people in nearby villages are asked to donate land for permanent settlement of Rohingyas in West Bengal. It is worth mentioning that the media report highlights the Centre's claim in Supreme Court about Rohingya Muslims being a source of serious threat to national security because of their links to terror outfits resulting in communal disharmony (Zee Media Bureau, 2018).

Hindustan Times, another widely circulated daily presents a legal picture, where it contrasts the Refugee intake of India from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and even Pakistan with that of the settled Rohingya diaspora. The written piece also invokes the Article 21 of the Indian Constitution which guarantees the right to life for every person regardless of their nationality. The article also goes far to say that Rohingyas deserve dignity and a 'girl living in muds can grow up to be the PM of India'. The Article sheds light on the apprehensive terror/radicalization fears and waters it down by suggesting it is a direct result of how a diaspora is treated by the Host Country (Gonsalves, 2017).

An excerpt from Republic TV's news debate calls Rohingyas terrorists and those supporting their human rights a lobby that works against the national interests of India. It also expresses dissent over their asylum and expresses a strong will to erradicate them by 'throwing every rohingya out of India'. The anchor's hard-lined approach even goes out to say that the picture painted by the world is a false one created for the world to empathise with 'terrorists'.

13.FINDINGS:

After analyzing different articles from various media sources belonging to five different countries, it is clear that media performs the role of highlighting various issues related to Rohingyas and has presented a clear picture of the entire story. Various issues that have been highlighted include:

- > The articles discuss about how Rohingyas are being deprived of their Right to Life by means of extreme atrocities at the hands of Myanmar authorities;
- > The articles highlight the failure of the Government of Myanmar in providing justice to this ethnic minority group which has been suffering over a long period of time due to statelessness and deprival of basic rights;
- > An article from US Media discusses how government encourages inhumane practices and atrocities by justifying such acts giving Hitler's reference;
- The articles also highlight the difficult conditions in which Rohingyas are living in various camps. Their concerns regarding poor living conditions, improper sanitation, lack of resources, and threat of epidemic due to water borne diseases have also been highlighted;
- > Some articles have also brought forth the fact that Myanmar authorities have already made Rohingyas to leave their homes and are now making money by expediting the process of their exodus, leaving them in more difficult conditions by way of draining their wealth;
- > There have been some reports of linking this minority group to certain 'militant outfits' resulting in promoting communal disharmony;
- > Some articles also discuss about the inhumane practices like torture, rape, imprisonment, murders, slavery, being used on Rohingyas adding to their agonies.
- ➤ It is also important to mention that some articles provide views that go against the general views of other media houses and express their will to throw Rohingyas out of India calling them 'terrorists'. However, such reports could be considered biased promoting communal hatred.

14.CONCLUSION

The study discusses the role of media in highlighting the plights of Rohingyas. It talks about various issues being faced by them in terms of leaving their homes, statelessness, atrocities like torture, imprisonment, slavery, etc. It also discusses the failure of government in providing justice to the minority group of Rohingyas and justifying the atrocities by giving pity excuses.

The study can be further improved by way of using comprehensive tools for qualitative data analysis which can yield more details findings. Future studies can use more articles and media reports to provide generalised results. There is also a scope for including more countries in the study to provide a clear picture of how Rohingya crisis are being portrayed across the world.

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