



# Fostering possibility within vulnerability: Rohingya's endeavour for adaptation in Nepal

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## Article Info

Received: 18 July 2024

Reviewed: 24 Apr. 2025

Revised Received: 21 May 2025

Accepted: 26 May 2025

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## Article DOI: In NepJOL

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## Abstract

Although the impact of the Rohingya refugee influx in Nepal is relatively minor compared to other host countries, a notable number of Rohingya have been unofficially residing in Nepal for over a decade. In the absence of formally arranged refugee camps or resettlement programs, they live in self-managed settlements under an unsorted legal status. This paper explores the decade-long journey of Rohingya adaptation in Nepal, tracing three major phases of transition in their efforts to integrate and sustain themselves. The findings reveal that, over time, the Rohingya commune has fostered a remarkable sense of collective agency in responding to contingencies with innovativeness and resilience. Thus, they have gradually moved from a condition of mere survival to one of basic sustenance. This paper, rather than portraying the Rohingya just as passive victims of structural constraints, highlights their resilience, collective agency, and adaptability.

## Keywords

Rohingya refugee, adaptation, structural constraints, collective agency

## Introduction

The Rohingya, an ethnic Muslim minority from Myanmar, are often cited as one of the world's most persecuted communities<sup>1</sup>. Only the very mention of the word just Rohingya instantly brings to mind the term “refugee,” as this term has become almost inseparable from their identity globally. The Rohingya refugee crisis, as we know it today, started with the 2012 Rakhine state riots<sup>2</sup>, which heightened the already brewing tension between the communities of the Buddhist majority and the Muslim Rohingya minority<sup>3</sup>. Acts of violence and vandalism were carried out by mobs from both communities during a cycle of attack and retaliation. Nevertheless, it was ultimately the Rohingya who suffered the most severe consequences in the communal conflict, as an ethnic and religious minority. Many were internally displaced, while others were compelled to seek refuge beyond the borders of their homeland (International Crisis Group, 2012; Szepe, 2013).

The conflict's trajectory escalated into a full-blown humanitarian crisis in 2017, following a brutal military crackdown in response to attacks carried out on state security personnel by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA)<sup>4</sup>, a Rohingya militant group. The military's prosecution, aided by civilian squads mostly comprising ethno-nationalist hardliners, was indiscriminate, disproportionately targeting the Rohingya civilian population, creating a massive flow of refugees and asylum seekers in the hundreds of thousands into neighbouring countries, primarily across the border into Bangladesh (Fortify Rights, 2018). This prompted the United Nations to characterize these actions as exhibiting “genocidal intent.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Rohingya are predominantly Indo-Aryan Muslims, though small Hindu and Christian minorities exist within the community, primarily residing in Myanmar's Rakhine State (International Crisis Group, 2014; Mohsin, 2019).

<sup>2</sup>After gang rape and killing of 27 year old Arakan Buddhist woman by alleged Rohingya men, in Rakhine state of Myanmar. (Lee-Winter, 2020).

<sup>3</sup>The Rohingya are widely regarded by Myanmar's Buddhist majority and state authorities as illegal Bangladeshi interloper, a view institutionalized by the 1982 Citizenship Law. However, the Rohingya claim longstanding indigenous roots in Rakhine, with historical presence predating colonial rule (Human Rights Watch, 2000; Leider, 2018).

<sup>4</sup>Myanmar officials refer to ARSA as a “terrorist organization,” whereas ARSA leadership claims to be an ethno-nationalist group- not jihadists- seeking to restore the status of the Rohingya as a recognized ethnic group in Myanmar. (ASIA TIMES, 2017).

<sup>5</sup>Myanmar's security forces were reported to have committed widespread atrocities, including rape, murder, and arson, which triggered a mass exodus of Rohingya civilians. (Albert and Maizland, 2020).

Soon, the spillover effect of the Rohingya crisis spread across the region, impacting its Southeast and South Asia neighbours as a whole, adding a new wave of humanitarian, socio-political and security complexity. Though the impact varies, no neighbouring country has remained completely unaffected. Bangladesh bears the heaviest burden, hosting the majority of Rohingya refugees in overcrowded, under-resourced camps. Additionally, countries like Malaysia and India have also received substantial numbers of inflow of Rohingya asylum seekers. In comparison, countries such as Nepal, Indonesia, and Thailand have been less affected by the refugee influx, though they still face sporadic arrivals and associated policy dilemmas in managing the situation (UNHCR, 2021).

Interestingly, none of these neighbouring host states<sup>6</sup> including Nepal are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol<sup>7</sup>. Hence, the survival of asylum seekers is largely dependent on the goodwill and humanitarian concern of these host nations, in addition to their economic standing and institutional capacity. The lack of a formal legal framework in this region to address the refugee situation has often left populations like the Rohingya living in deprived conditions and prolonged legal limbo. Stripped of citizenship and living a life of destitution, Rohingya currently represent one of the world's largest stateless populations.

This paper is divided into six main sections: Introduction, *Rohingya in Nepal*, Through the Lens of 'Adaptation' and 'Collective Agency', *Methodology*, *Trajectory of Rohingya's Adaptation in Nepal*, and *Conclusion*. The first two sections including 'Introduction' itself provide a brief overview of the Rohingya refugee crisis and contextualize the Rohingya presence in Nepal. The third and fourth sections discuss the key theoretical concepts and methodology employed in this study. The fifth section, titled *Trajectory of Rohingya's Adaptation in Nepal*, presents the main discussion and analysis. The sixth, final section offers a conclusion, summarizing the main findings and key insights.

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<sup>6</sup>Afghanistan is the only South Asian country that has ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. All other South Asian nations, including Bangladesh, the largest host of Rohingya refugees, have not signed these international treaties. This also includes Southeast Asian host countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. Refugee Law Initiative. (2024, March 6). Bangladesh and the 1951 Refugee Convention. *Refugee Law Initiative Blog*.

<sup>7</sup>They are the foundation of international refugee law, which defines the rights of refugees such as right to non-refoulement, housing, work, education, freedom of movement, access to courts and legal remedies and so on, and establishes legal obligations for states to protect them.(UNHR, 2011)

## Rohingya in Nepal

Nepal has been encountering sporadic arrivals of Rohingya refugees since the initial outbreak of violence in 2012, with numbers increasing significantly following the August 2017 military crackdown. This migration occurred clandestinely, under the radar of the state authorities, remaining mostly unknown to the Nepali public as the Rohingya took sanctuary in the country. Despite their prolonged presence<sup>8</sup>, the Nepalese government has not yet shown concern regarding formally addressing their situation, leaving them without official documentation or any clear policy. Consequently, the Rohingya in Nepal exist in a legal limbo, at risk of being labelled as “illegal migrants<sup>9</sup>” rather than refugees entitled to protection under international refugee law.

Although the Rohingya reside undocumented, Nepal’s lack of formal action toward Rohingya cannot be interpreted solely as neglect or the absence of legal frameworks to address their presence. Instead, it reflects an implicit, although limited, humanitarian concern in adherence to the principle of ‘non-refoulement<sup>10</sup>.’ But at the same time, the absence of formal legal recognition by the Nepali State puts the Rohingya in a vulnerable position without legal protections. By maintaining this noncommittal stance, Nepal sidesteps obligations to international refugee protection frameworks (given that Nepal has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol), while retaining the authority to penalise or deport Rohingya under domestic jurisdiction. Therefore, even labelling Rohingya residing in Nepal as ‘refugees’ in Nepal’s context is not without conceptual challenge, on a technical ground they are basically ‘asylum seekers’ if not ‘undocumented immigrants.’ Considering the contested, ambiguous nature of their political-legal existence within Nepal. This paper intentionally addresses them just as Rohingya to simultaneously emphasise the political liminality of their status in Nepal and to acknowledge their collective identity as Rohingya.

Unlike Tibetan and Bhutanese refugees, who benefited from cultural, linguistic, and historical ties with Nepal and remain the only officially recognized refugees by the

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<sup>8</sup>Since the first cohort Rohingya arrived more than a decade ago.

<sup>9</sup>Under the 1992 Immigration Act, individuals, including asylum seekers, who enter Nepal without valid documentation become ‘illegal migrants,’ per the act automatically. (UNHCR, 2023, p.5)

<sup>10</sup>Non-refoulement is considered a customary norm, meaning all states are bound by it, even if they haven’t signed the Convention or the protocol. It obliges States not to expel or return (refouler), in any manner whatsoever, a person to territories where their life or freedom would be threatened. (UNHCR, 2025)

Nepali State (Hutt, 2003), the Rohingya lack such connections with Nepal's 'majority' population. On the contrary, their distinct socio-cultural practices, ethnicity, and language further set them apart, heightening the chances of marginalization, insecurity, and systemic exclusion. Although the Rohingya face these setbacks, they have fostered a unique existence in Nepal. Unlike typical scenarios that involve life in refugee camps or third-country resettlement, their experience differs noticeably from most conventional refugee narratives.

In Nepal Rohingya, now numbering over 400 individuals<sup>11</sup> since 2015, primarily reside in two informal settlements of Ram Mandir and Lasuntar<sup>12</sup> of Kapan, Buddhanilkantha municipality, which are self-established and self-managed by the Rohingya themselves. They sustain their livelihoods largely through self-reliance, without formal refugee rights, state protection, or meaningful institutional assistance. To date, neither sign of viable legal pathways for third-country resettlement nor any assurances of legal recognition in Nepal has emerged. Though this prolonged state of limbo pushes them into a precarious existence, reducing them to 'bare life'<sup>13</sup>, their resilience, manifested through communal solidarity and their contingent strategies to survive within a legal void, reflects a unique form of survival beyond conventional refugee frameworks.

### **Through the lens of 'adaptation' and 'collective agency'**

For analytical and explanatory purposes, this paper employs two concepts, 'adaptation' and 'collective agency', to explore the integration process of the Rohingya in the Nepali milieu. To begin with, Simonate (2010) mentions that in sociology, social adaptation is not synonymous with conformity because, as he says, adaptation to a milieu brings the notion of innovation or modification. He further states that sociological theories of adaptation and the sociological analysis of integration are complementary. (p. 5) This means, the sociological conception of adaptation can bring 'adaptation' which emphasize agency and creative adjustment and 'analyses of integration'- which focuses on structural inclusion together in one

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<sup>11</sup>Media sources speculate, over 600 to 3,000 Rohingya are living in Nepal. But, the Rohingya community representatives in Nepal state that their number is only over 450, referring to based on the UNHCR Kathmandu registration. Media Source: Mahat, P. (2020, January 1). The Rohingya in Nepal. *The Kathmandu Post*.

<sup>12</sup>At the outskirts of Kathmandu.

<sup>13</sup>Wheatley and Gomber-Muñoz (2016) note that undocumented individuals have been increasingly conceptualized as embodying "bare life"—a form of mere biological existence stripped of social and political recognition. The concept of bare life is originally propounded by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben.

framework. Hence, this paper employs the concept of ‘adaptation’ as a broader framework to outline the trajectory of integration of Rohingya refugees within the Nepali milieu, highlighting the exercise of their agency in due course.

Korac (2009), drawing on Long (2001), asserts that refugees, as social actors, continuously create ‘room for manoeuvre’ even within the context of severely limited options and constraints (p. 9). In a similar vein, this paper centers on the notion of collective agency<sup>14</sup> to highlight how the Rohingya, despite their precarious existence, employ innovative strategies to navigate through adversity, to adapt and integrate within the marginality<sup>15</sup> of the Nepali milieu. At the same time, it also acknowledges that although their collective agency is circumscribed if not hindered by surmounting structural constraints<sup>16</sup>, as demanded by situations, it has often proven a remarkable potentiality with both inventiveness and as a source of resilience.

In this paper, Rohingya adaptation is illustrated as a continuum- a dynamic, ongoing process composed of distinct yet interconnected modes of adaptation. These modes of adaptation are context-specific improvisation and strategies individually and collectively enacted by the Rohingya to mitigate and navigate through the challenges in the due course of their journey of survival and sustenance. These modes of adaptation can be characterized as prioritising immediate survival or fostering incremental socio-economic integration. This adaptation continuum highlights that adaptation is not just a linear trajectory toward integration but also engagement with the situation conditioned by the larger socio-economic and political context, marked by both barriers and opportunities and a continual process of adjustment and growth (survive and thrive).

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<sup>14</sup>The concept of ‘agency’ can be understood to mark the socially determined capability to act and to make a difference (Barker, 2004, p.4) Having said that, in this paper ‘collective agency’ is to be understood as the enhancement of potential in adaptive action, achieved through group endeavour or inherited social capital.

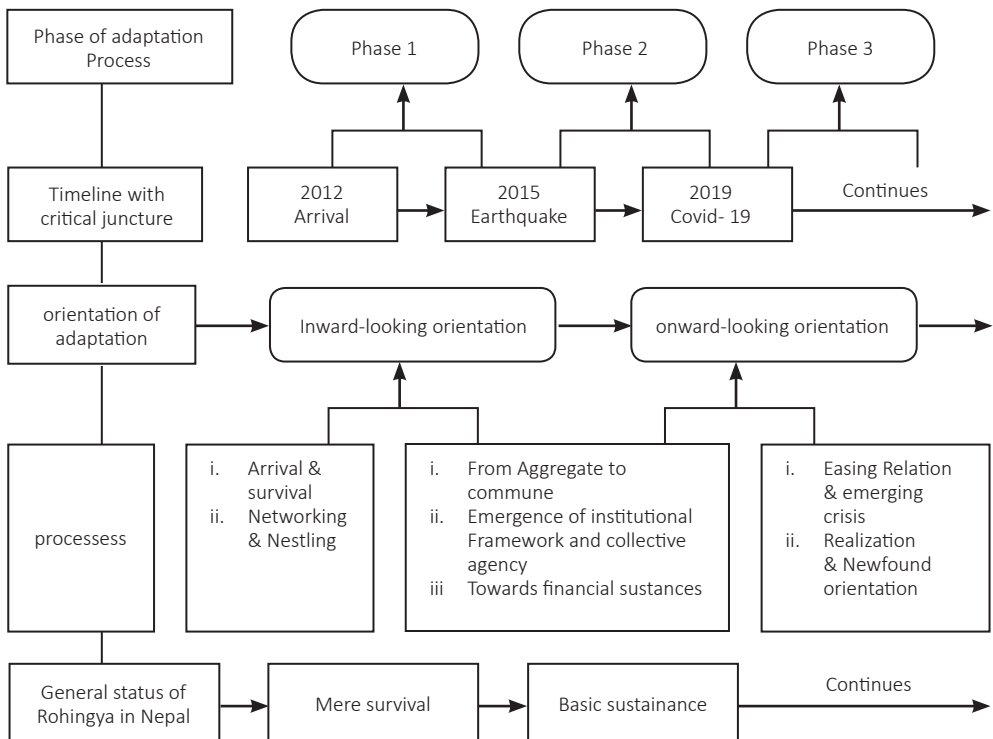
<sup>15</sup>In this paper denotes a position at the peripheries of mainstream Nepali society

<sup>16</sup>In sociology, ‘structural constraints’ refer to the political, economic, social, and cultural factors that limit an individual’s ability to make decisions. These constraints are often contrasted with human agency, which is defined as the capacity of individuals to act independently and make choices within a given structure. (“Editorial,” 2016) in Structural systemics and individual choices.

## Methodology

This paper is primarily based on field research conducted in 2021, including additional field visits in 2023 and 2025. For the purpose of the study, it follows multi-method qualitative approach. This includes 20 in-depth interviews with Rohingya residents (15 male, 5 female<sup>17</sup>) from the Ram Mandir and Lasuntar settlements in Kapan, Buddhanilkantha, along with interviews with six key informants (KIs), non-participant observation, and analysis of secondary sources. Rohingya interviewees were selected through purposive sampling, and selection criteria included their duration of residency in Nepal, willingness to participate and age-sex diversity. Data were thematically analyzed, and methodological triangulation was employed to strengthen the validity of the findings.

**Figure 1**  
*Outline of trajectory of Rohingya's adaptation in Nepal*



<sup>17</sup>The underrepresentation of female participants in this study was partly due to cultural practices that limited the male researcher's access to interview female participants in person. Hence, a separate female interviewer was arranged to conduct the interviews with female participants.

## Trajectory of Rohingya's adaptation in Nepal

Rohingya's adaptation trajectory in Nepal is outlined into three distinct phases chronologically<sup>18</sup>, each marked by evolving strategies and shifting, if not expanding priorities. Spanning over a decade, these phases reflect transitions in their modes of adaptation: Phase 1 (2012-2015): The initial phase centered on immediate survival and establishing a foothold in a new, unfamiliar milieu. Phase 2 (2015-2020): This is a period of emplacement and reconstruction of both social life and livelihood strategies. Phase 3 (2020-Present): This ongoing phase is a continuous and focused struggle to secure a more stable future, centered on efforts to gain formal refugee recognition, refugee rights and rights-based protection in Nepal.

### Phase 1: (2012–2015)

The journey of Rohingya adaptation in Nepal began with the arrival of the first cohort<sup>19</sup> of Rohingya in Kathmandu in the autumn of 2012 after relocating from India, where they had previously sought refuge. They arrived in Kathmandu with minimal knowledge about the country, relying on whatever little knowledge they had from Nepali coworkers they had befriended during their time in India. Upon arrival, they basically relied on two institutions: the UNHCR and the Nepali Muslim community they met in *Nepali Jame Masjid*, a *mosque* central to Kathmandu. In those early days, besides UNHCR being the primary support system Nepali Muslim community played a vital part in aiding their survival in Kathmandu. The community, the mosque, not only provided moral support but also practical assistance, providing them with temporary shelter and basic provisions. Besides contacting and garnering aid and support from muslim as well as non-muslim sympathizers in times of dire need. Likewise, the UNHCR office in Kathmandu, by 2013, documented Rohingya present in Nepal by issuing refugee identification cards, hence putting them into the category of 'mandate refugee'<sup>20</sup>. Granting each family of Rohingya a monthly allowance, though it was modest, became a critical lifeline during their perilous early years in Kathmandu.

### Arrival and Survival

Having only limited support from the UNHCR and the Nepali Muslim community, the Rohingya soon began venturing out independently to secure livelihoods to survive.

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<sup>18</sup>These are tentative timelines structured primarily for analytical clarity.

<sup>19</sup>The first group to arrive in Kathmandu comprised three families totaling 13 individuals. However, the first known person to arrive individually was a man named Hassan, who has since left Nepal. The narrative of first arrivals may vary slightly from person to person, most fact remains the same.

<sup>20</sup>As they are registered under UNHCR's mandate unilaterally, without formal recognition by the Government of Nepal.



However, their lack of legal status, unfamiliarity with the city, and severe language barriers left them visibly vulnerable to exploitation in informal labour sectors, which they depended on. Almost all Rohingya worked as daily wage labourers, where they were often cheated or underpaid by both Nepali and Indian *thekedars*<sup>21</sup> (contractors) and employers, exploiting their vulnerable position.

The account of Ramzan (38, male) illustrates the exploitation faced by Rohingya in their early years in Nepal. Recalling his work experience in 2013, shared:

*... I was severely underpaid compared to Nepali and Indian co-workers for the same work we did. I was barely surviving on that amount... Even though I was aware that I was being exploited, my circumstances forced me to continue working. I chose to be fed rather than worry about being exploited. (Personal communication, 2021)*

He also reflected that what kept him going then, despite dire living conditions, was gratitude for still being alive, unlike his kin and neighbours who died in the riot. Their survival tactic then was basically scavenging for menial work wherever any chance of work appeared, often approaching construction sites to ask for work. They sustained themselves on poorly paid, irregular jobs and lived temporarily wherever these jobs were available, living with constant uncertainty and insecurity as a part of their day-to-day life.

On the other hand, for Rohingya women in Kathmandu, the struggle for survival extended beyond material deprivation. Confined to small rented rooms, even mundane daily tasks, like buying groceries, or exploring markets, became sources of considerable stress for them. While they could manage to converse in basic Hindi with shopkeepers, they rarely spoke to Nepali neighbours or others, leaving them isolated. The bustling city, with its unfamiliar language and busy streets, felt nerve-racking and alien; for them, Kathmandu was chaos beyond comprehension.

Salma(29, female) recalls her early days in Kathmandu as:

*My husband was away most of the time for work, and I remember feeling lonely and afraid while caring for our children alone. Unlike back in my village in Myanmar, I had no one to talk to or share my feelings with. I felt isolated,*

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<sup>21</sup>A person whose job is to provide the workers or materials needed to do a piece of work. Oxford University Press. (n.d.). *Thekedar*. In *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*. <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/thekedar>

*as the people around me seemed more like strangers than neighbours, aloof in their own world. (personal communication, 2021)*

This narrative highlights the vulnerability of the early Rohingya arrivals in Kathmandu. In exile and within an unfamiliar milieu, they experienced not only material deprivation but also a deep sense of loss and disorientation.

### *Networking and nestling*

As the Rohingya grew more accustomed to Kathmandu and gradually settled, many resorted to social media and cell phones to search for and reconnect with relatives and friends scattered across different parts of India and Bangladesh. For some separated kin eager to reunite, Nepal became their preferred safe haven<sup>22</sup>. Despite legal challenges, some managed to cross borders to join their dear and near ones in Kathmandu, as the Nepali state was not particularly vigilant along its open borders with India. As a result, these early arrivals served as a bridgehead, facilitating the migration of their relatives and friends by providing not only information but, at times, also needed support. Besides that, many other Rohingya arrived in Kathmandu as drifters in search of a safe haven from India<sup>23</sup>.

As more Rohingya gathered in Kathmandu and as their social network<sup>24</sup> fostered, they gravitated toward one another both emotionally and spatially. During this period, the UNHCR office and mosques in Kathmandu served as meeting points to connect with fellow Rohingya, as well as with Nepali well-wishers and benefactors. Subsequently, as their bonds grew stronger, many chose to live in close proximity by renting rooms in the same neighbourhood. This clustering enabled the formation of a localized support system, fostering a strong sense of psychosocial security, unity, and fellowship. Over time, this dynamic motivated them to organise an informal ad-hoc Rohingya committee in 2014 to address the needs of the Rohingya in Nepal. Apart from that, the formation of a committee is also a deliberate act of unifying to pursue collective goals and strengthen their voice.

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<sup>22</sup>Nepal's open borders facilitate easier entry for asylum seekers, making it comparatively more accessible. In contrast to neighboring countries that have tightened border controls and cracked down on asylum seekers. Moreover, the government has been generous in offering humanitarian aid to persons of concern (PoCs). (UNHCR, 2023, p.44 )

<sup>23</sup>Since for the Rohingya in Nepal, intimidation by police and state officials, as well as a culture of fear and xenophobia, was less pronounced than in Bangladesh and India. Akhil, K. (2023, March 31). Life for Rohingya refugees in Nepal is better than in India and Bangladesh – but only marginally. *The Wire*.

<sup>24</sup>social network refers to the set of actors and the ties among them. (Wasserman & Faust, 1994, p. 9)

Ahmad (40, male) shared his heartfelt experience of meeting other Rohingya in Kathmandu:

*When I met other fellow Rohingyas, we talked and shared our past stories and our current conditions. We found our circumstances deeply relatable... it made me realize I was not the only one going through hardship, ... our common experience aided us in bonding more strongly. (Personal communication, 2021)*

This, as he said, gave him a sense of companionship, security, and hope to continue life in Kathmandu.

This all shows that in the initial phase, their early adjustment to the unfamiliar Nepali milieu occurred largely in an individualised manner. Although institutions such as UNHCR, the Nepali Muslim community, and some Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), benefactors, gradually provided them with assistance, the Rohingya primarily relied mostly on their individual self-competency for survival in the earliest stage. Over time, however, the gradual formation of social networks fostered a nascent sense of collectivity and mutual support among them<sup>25</sup>.

## **Phase 2: (2015-2020)**

This phase has been the most crucial point in the trajectory of the Rohingya's adaptation in Nepal, considering a transformative shift in Rohingya adaptation—from a much-individualized manner of survival to collective emplacement and organized agency. Triggered by the 2015 earthquake, this shift prompted previously scattered Rohingya families, living in rented rooms, to consolidate into informal settlements at Ram Mandir and Lasuntar in Kapan, within Budhanilkantha Municipality.

Following the magnitude 7.8 earthquake in 2015 that devastated Nepal, widespread destruction and the fear of aftershocks forced Rohingya in Kapan and their neighbours into temporary makeshift structures, in tents and 'tahara'<sup>26</sup> on vacant lots and fallow lands<sup>27</sup>. During this chaos, some Rohingya found work constructing such tahara huts for locals in the neighbourhood. Observing locals, this encouraged

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<sup>25</sup>Portes(1998) opines that social networks do not form on their own; they must be actively built with deliberation to institutionalize group relations, to gain reliable support.(p.3)

<sup>26</sup>Hut usually made of bamboo and *jasta pata* (metal sheet made of tin or other materials).

<sup>27</sup>This was a common phenomenon, driven by sheer fear of aftershocks and safety concerns. Additionally, many had their houses either destroyed or damaged

them to construct their own communal settlements in two vacant lots at Ram Mandir and Lasuntar. They thought it would make their housing more affordable while also letting them live together as neighbours side by side. Jaffar, a member of the Rohingya committee (personal communication, 2021), stated, “Before moving in (Ram Mandir settlement), we were paying almost the same amount each month in rent as we later contributed annually for the land lease of the settlement.”

### *From aggregate to commune*

Although their main motivation for building the settlement was financial necessity, this drew them together to live within their own enclosure: a prospect for them to live their life on their terms, even if it meant only within the confines of their settlement. This also meant they could practise their religion and customs without apprehension of societal contempt. Nearly all adult Rohingya interviewed mentioned the experience of systemic oppression under Myanmar’s military regime: restricted movement, banned religious practices, and state-sanctioned discrimination. And they also remarked that in Nepal, despite facing economic hardship, they enjoy far greater cultural and religious freedom than they did in Myanmar.

Noor (29, male), reflecting on Nepal’s tolerant culture, stated:

*...In Nepal, people are carefree and nice. They do not discriminate based on religion. Nepal is not a military junta like Myanmar; it is a democratic nation. We feel much safer and more at ease celebrating our culture and religion here. (Personal communication, 2021)*

Hence, this notion has given them the confidence to rejuvenate their cultural and religious practice in Nepal; therefore, the establishment of *masjids*<sup>28</sup> and later *madrasas*<sup>29</sup> at their settlements has been part of this undertaking.<sup>30</sup> *Masjid* has become the site of religious and socio-cultural celebrations- a hub for fostering communal brotherhood and preserving traditions. Similarly, at *madrasa*, children are taught Koran and Arabic, or in general, Islamic values and practices;

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<sup>28</sup>Arabic masjid or jāmi, any house or open area of prayer in Islam. The Arabic word masjid means “a place of prostration” to God, and the same word is used in Persian, Urdu, and Turkish. Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). Mosque. In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved April 22, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/mosque>

<sup>29</sup>A madrasa is an Islamic religious school.

<sup>30</sup>Each settlement has its own masjid and madrasa, which together function as the communal religious and educational centers for the Rohingya.

to inspire the younger generation to embrace the Islamic way of life as Rohingya, thereby ensuring the intergenerational continuity of their faith and Rohingya identity.

Salman (32, male), a Rohingya *thekedar*-subcontractor, conveyed the notion that displacement should not come at the cost of their social identity. As he mentioned:

*... although I could afford to live in better places with my family, I continue to live in this settlement because if we leave, my children will be deprived of madrassa education and will lose touch with our culture and traditions, forgetting who we Rohingya are. (personal communication, 2021).*

Having their own *Masjid* and *Madrasa*, celebrating their religious and cultural life, basically has rejuvenated a sense of the socio-cultural aspect in their life, which focuses on religious ideals and leading a pious life. Their displacement from their homeland and loss of their indigenous way of life had severely hampered their 'sense of being'<sup>31</sup> their selfhood, creating a deep void within; to which, the settlement in only a few ropanis of land has become the site of cultural recreation, providing them with a sense of Rohingya way of life as if transplanting a Rohingya 'lifeworld'<sup>32</sup> in exile. These developments, in subtle ways, have helped in restoring a sense of meaning to their disoriented lives.

As Rohingya they have upheld internal cohesion within the enclosure of their settlement. At the same time, they have maintained cordial but distant relations outside their commune, including Nepali neighbours. It appears this self-seclusionist orientation stems from the insecurity of their undefined legal status in Nepal and a deliberate effort to minimize potential<sup>33</sup> cultural clashes or even to avoid assimilation

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<sup>31</sup>Concern with living meaningful and fulfilling life. Which include "Being," (inner peace and self-acceptance) "Belonging" (social belongingness), "Believing" (values and principles) and "Benevolence" (altruism). (Levine, 2019)

<sup>32</sup>"Life-world", German *Lebenswelt*, in Phenomenology, the world as immediately or directly experienced in the subjectivity of everyday life, as sharply distinguished from the objective "worlds" of the sciences. The life-world includes individual, social, perceptual, and practical experiences. Encyclopaedia Britannica. (n.d.). Life-world. In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved April 22, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/life-world>

<sup>33</sup>As the trauma of their past communal conflict in Myanmar still lingers in their collective memory.

into Nepali society. Despite occasional squabbles, interviews revealed that Nepali neighbours, while expressing subtle prejudices, have generally displayed a degree of acceptance, if not tolerance, toward the Rohingya's presence in their vicinity.

Kuwar (50, male), Local Resident of Ram Mandir, regarding the Rohingya in the neighbourhood, mentioned:

*Since the Rohingya live mostly within their own settlement, ...they don't drink or cause trouble in the neighborhood. We're fine sharing a neighbourhood with them. I've noticed there have been a few conflicts among themselves over aid distribution, but they resolved those issues internally. ...we don't pay much attention to their affairs in their settlement, and they don't invite us into theirs either. (Personal communication, 2021)*

Overall, in this phase, the Rohingya evolved from a mere aggregate of people to a 'commune', by reclaiming their distinct 'social identity'<sup>34</sup> and a well-defined 'social boundary.'<sup>35</sup> By doing so, they managed to accommodate their distinct little commune into the broader mosaic of Nepalese society, asserting their identity in exile without rejecting the host society entirely.

### *Emergence of Institutional Framework and Collective Agency*

In this paper, the findings show that the masjid, madrasa, and the Rohingya committee as three crucial institutions for the Rohingya commune in Nepal, functioning as key sources of their "collective agency." In this context, 'collective agency' in this paper refers to the enhanced potential for adaptive action achieved through group endeavour and the shared social capital inherited and sustained by the commune. Here, social capital in simplest terms can be understood as "the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures" (Portes, 1998, p. 6). Bourdieu elaborates it as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248).

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<sup>34</sup>Aspects of the self-concept that derive from relationships and memberships in groups; in particular, those qualities that are held in common by two or more people who recognize that they are members of the same group or social category. (Forsyth, 2009)

<sup>35</sup>Social boundaries separate us from them. (Tilly, 2004, p. 211)

Having previously discussed the roles of the masjid and madrasa, this section elaborates on the significance of the Rohingya committee<sup>36</sup>. The Rohingya committee plays a dual role: outside its commune, it serves as a representative and advocate for the Rohingya community of Nepal, negotiating with state authorities and NGOs, while within the commune, it takes on the function of regulating communal norms, fostering consensus, and materializing common goals and decisions. Since most Rohingya lack language proficiency and formal education, more importantly, they are unaccustomed to the environments beyond their commune and workplace; this has increased the commune's reliance on the Rohingya committee, composed of members who are comparatively well-versed in engaging within broader contexts. Hence, the committee also functions as a bridge between the commune and the outside world.

Since its inception in 2014, the Rohingya committee has been committed to advancing collective will on behalf of the commune. Its first breakthrough was when the Rohingya committee in 2015 played an instrumental role in negotiating and acquiring informal land lease agreements for settlement plots with the landowners, enabling the establishment of their own communal living spaces. Following the construction of the settlements' quarters and their allocation to the families, the committee assumed the function of managing facilities such as power, water, internet, and so on. As the settlements grew, the committee became indispensable in managing day-to-day affairs, conflict resolution, and welfare coordination of the commune. Beyond internal functions, the committee serves as a liaison between the Rohingya commune and their benefactors and sympathizers, such as INGOs, NGOs, donors, philanthropists, and so on. They are vital in fortifying these links, in ensuring sustaining their support, concern, and assistance to the commune.

It also appears that Rohingya prioritize autonomy and self-governance within the commune, wanting to remain free from external interference, especially when they regard it as their internal matters that need to be sorted out by the commune itself. Likewise, this orientation necessitates a strong sense of in-group solidarity as well as governance from within. Consequently, reliance on institutions like the Rohingya committee, masjid, and madrasa has grown to manage and regulate the commune from within. Eventually, this has instilled a sense of conformity towards the authority of these institutions, granting them a form of *de facto* legitimacy

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<sup>36</sup>Each settlement has its own committee responsible for managing settlements affairs. Collectively, these committees function and represent as the 'Rohingya Committee.'

through what resembles to 'social contract.'<sup>37</sup>

The ward's Chief of Budhanilkantha Municipality, Ward No. 11<sup>38</sup> then, expressed:

*We (the local authorities), handle the majority of Rohingya issues through their committee, and vice versa. Apart from their committee members, we (local officials) hardly interact with other Rohingya.*

*... only in rare cases do the Rohingya approach the authorities to resolve their matters, such as conflicts between husband and wife and other domestic disputes are usually handled by the Rohingya Committee itself. We haven't felt the need to intervene in their internal affairs. (Personal communication, 2021).*

It implies that when it comes to minor disputes within the Rohingya commune, matters are typically left to the Rohingya committee to be resolved, with limited involvement from external authorities. As such, most internal disputes and conflicts are managed by the Committee, besides ensuring the commune's norms and oversight of its communal affairs. Although some community members hold reservations and grievances, particularly regarding alleged favouritism in the administration and distribution of aid, by and large, they adhere to the authority of the Committee's decisions.

Overall, Rohingya institutions play a central role in establishing and enforcing communal norms, managing collective welfare, and advancing shared agendas. While the masjid and madrasa primarily function to rebuild and reinforce the community's religious and social fabric, the Rohingya committee is chiefly responsible for actualizing the collective will and managing day-to-day affairs within the commune. However, it is important to note that women remain largely underrepresented in the committee and don't have much say in decision-making. This token representation highlights underlying challenges in gender inclusivity.

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<sup>37</sup>Social contract theory, is the view that persons' moral and/or political obligations are dependent upon a contract or agreement among them to form the society in which they live. Social contract theory. (n.d.). *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved April 22, 2022, <https://iep.utm.edu/soc-cont/>

<sup>38</sup>Ram Mandir and Lasuntar Settlement is located in Budhanilkantha Municipality, Ward No. 11.



## Towards financial sustainance

The majority of Rohingya now in Nepal were previously engaged in farming or fishing in Myanmar, livelihoods that are not viable in Kathmandu's urban context. Due to their unresolved legal status, limited education, and lack of financial capital, most Rohingya in Nepal work as daily wage labourers, primarily in informal sectors.

Early Rohingya arrivals, working in informal sectors with various *thekedars* (labour contractors), have acquired technical skills (e.g., construction, masonry) and social skills tailored to Kathmandu's labour market demands. Their diligence and willingness to accept lower wages made them preferred workers among *thekedars* and their clients. Over time, these men have built modest labour market networks, enabling them to secure jobs not only for themselves but also for later arrivals of the commune. Given their relatively small numbers compared to the size of the labour market in the Kathmandu Valley, and their niche as low-wage workers. This has allowed them to integrate into the informal economy without much difficulty.

Rahman (21, male), brother-in-law of one of the Rohingya *thekedar*-subcontractors, shared:

*Since arriving in Nepal in 2017, I've worked in labour jobs under my brother-in-law. During the busy season, earnings are sufficient to support myself and even send money to relatives in Bangladesh. During slow times, income drops, but it's better than relying on and surviving on aid. (personal communication, 2021)*

Remarkably, some senior Rohingya men, being well-versed in the labour market and drawing on the available manpower within the commune, have managed to function as *thekedar*-subcontractors<sup>39</sup> themselves. Through years of engagement in the informal sector, these Rohingya *thekedar*-subcontractors have garnered a commendable level of contacts and network in the labour market. This has enabled them to secure work contracts not only for themselves but also for other members of the commune, hence fostering interdependence between the Rohingya *thekedar*-subcontractor and workers, prioritising communal social

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<sup>39</sup>Here, *thekedar*-subcontractor means a person who takes on part of a larger job under an informal agreement, often acting like a foreman or group leader by organizing and supervising a small team to complete specific tasks.

capital and internal resources. This has also expanded Rohingya workers' freedom to choose not to work, particularly with those exploitative Nepali or Indian *thekedars*.

Many Rohingya have transitioned from depending on dwindling humanitarian assistance to sustaining livelihoods through informal labour work, thus sustaining the commune's subsistence through internally sourced employment and minimizing reliance on outside aid. Subsequently, some have managed to invest in their children's education, aiming to provide them with quality education and a hopeful future. Hence, through this collective endeavour and mutual assistance, they were able to elevate their status from mere survival to basic sustenance.

Yet, this progress remains not without loopholes. The situation for single-mother households remains dire since social norms do not encourage women to work outside the commune. Hence, these women are compelled to rely on the assistance of their kin and commune, who are themselves economically constrained, besides continual reliance on external aid. Few families were quite large, with only one male income earner supporting multiple dependent children. This situation has exacerbated financial hardship and limited their potential for economic mobility. Furthermore, this affects the future of their children in areas such as education and nutrition, particularly.

### **Phase 3: (2020 onward)**

The period following the initial COVID-19 lockdowns marks the beginning of an ongoing Phase 3 in the Rohingya adaptation process in Nepal, based on the analysis in this paper. This phase is characterized by a gradual shift in Rohingya perceptions, shaped by exposure to diverse circumstances and growing realization. This marks a transition from a previously 'inward-looking' stance, focused on survival and sustenance through fostering mutual support and internal communal engagement (Phases 1 and 2), to a more 'outward-looking' orientation, characterised by proactive engagement with systemic structures<sup>40</sup> (Phase 3), with an increased focus towards securing a dignified, stable future.

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<sup>40</sup>Systemic structures here refer to the organized and institutional frameworks that influence or regulate the social, political, and economic aspects of life. These include government bodies and bureaucracies, legal and policy frameworks, and so on.

## Easing relations and emerging crisis

During the COVID-19 lockdown of 2020, local authorities were specifically tasked with ensuring people followed the lockdown protocols. Subsequently, local authority (including ward office, and police) intensified their surveillance to contain the spread of the virus. This policy also subjected the Rohingya community and the humanitarian aid they received to the local authorities' concern. The Ward Office mandated the Rohingya committee to ensure that their aid undergoes clearance through the Ward Office, imposing local administration oversight. Simultaneously, police and the Ward office began officially documenting Rohingya residents, acknowledging their residence in the vicinity.

Through these repeated interactions, the Rohingya community gradually became more accustomed to engaging with authorities, easing the Rohingya's discomfort or apprehension towards authority, which they had harboured due to their unresolved legal status. On the other hand, local authorities shifted their stance from ignoring the Rohingya to providing basic but essential services (including health checkups and vaccines at public health posts). These developments fostered more cordial relations, as authorities increasingly approached the Rohingya from a humanitarian perspective rather than solely through the legal lens, as the community had previously anticipated.

Then the ward's Chief of Budhanilkantha Municipality, Ward No. 11, also confirmed:

*Prior to the lockdown, there was almost no interaction between the ward office and the Rohingya community. However, recently, the ward office has significantly increased its engagement and started providing services such as free health check-ups, vaccines, and occasional government aid to the Rohingya. (personal communication, 2021).*

However, just as the Rohingya's relationship with local authorities was beginning to improve, a new set of crisis emerged, destabilizing their growing sense of security. The crisis took en route as the lease term for their Ram Mandir plot approached its expiration. Despite their constant efforts over an extended period, they were unable to renew the agreement or secure an alternative location for relocation. In some cases, local opposition blocked their settlement<sup>41</sup>; in others, landowners were

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<sup>41</sup>For eg. With the funds provided by donors, they had commenced the construction of a new settlement at Mulpani. However, they were forced to abandon their undertaking due to protests from the local community.

unwilling to lease property to Rohingya due to their lack of formal legal recognition<sup>42</sup>, agreeing only if organizations like UNHCR-Nepal provided formal guarantees on their behalf. Regarding these complications, the Rohingya committee sought assistance from UNHCR-Nepal. However, UNHCR-Nepal was unable to support them in this matter due to legal and technical constraints, which left the Rohingya community in despair and growing grievances.<sup>43</sup>

## Realization and newfound orientation

The advent of the crisis brought sudden turbulence that forced the Rohingya to critically reevaluate their accustomed way of life, highlighting vulnerabilities they had previously downplayed in their struggle for survival. This realization significantly heightened their concerns for the future. In particular, the land lease crisis<sup>44</sup> and occasional workplace exploitation exposed the Rohingya to their persistent vulnerability but also challenged the sense of dignity they had recently managed to garner. One of the committee members and a *thekedar*-subcontractor shared his experience taking on a construction project in the near vicinity of Kathmandu Valley:

*Though my colleagues (Rohingya) and I completed the work as agreed, we were not fully paid. When we followed up with the Nepali thekedar to request the remaining payment, we were threatened. ...because we don't have a work permit, we couldn't seek justice through legal channels. ...I don't think we'll get paid. (personal communication, 2021)*

All these experiences made them conclude that livelihood sustenance, without state-mandated legitimacy, is fraught with uncertainties, offering little hope for the future. Leading them to consider mitigating the structural root cause of their vulnerability as well as a sense of urgency in seeking long-term resolutions to their problems, rather than settling for mere band-aid solutions.

This realization emerged not only from their sudden exposure to vulnerability but also evolved gradually with sustained engagement with Nepali society, state authorities,

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<sup>42</sup>Because Rohingya cannot make the contract on their behalf (because of the legality) besides that landowners are reluctant to engage with the Rohingya, viewing them as illegally residing individuals in Nepal.

<sup>43</sup>In addition, UNHCR (Nepal) has also reduced the financial allowances provided to the Rohingya.

<sup>44</sup>The issue was finally resolved after the Rohingya agreed to pay the increased land lease price. By 2024, the land lease price of Ram Mandir settlement have tripled compared to 2015.

and institutions over time, in a decade-long residence in Nepal. Additionally, their interactions with social workers, human rights activists, organisations, NGOs, and international agencies like the UNHCR-Nepal complemented by growing digital literacy, have further sensitized them to systemic barriers and enhanced their ability to critically reflect on these vulnerabilities.

Shabana (30, female), one of the rare few Rohingya women to have worked with a Nepali NGO dedicated to women's issues, expressed concern for her children's future, a sentiment which was commonly shared by other Rohingya parents as well:

*...our life has become a mess, but I don't want my children to go through the same ordeal, ...we want our children to achieve something in life. ...and unless we have legal protection in Nepal, we can neither have a regular life nor a sigh of relief (personal communication, 2021).*

As they have increasingly realized, their ongoing misfortune is not due to personal incapacity or even socio-economic marginalization, but is primarily rooted in political-legal limbo, the major structural constraint. This realization has led them to prioritize rights-based advocacy, appealing to both the Nepali government and the UNHCR for state-mandated legal status and protections, rather than relying on temporary humanitarian measures. Because, as of now, their political-legal status in Nepal is only conferred by the 'refugee card' unilaterally issued by the UNHCR office in Kathmandu, which does not ensure full-fledged refugee rights in the national context.

One of the committee members pointed out that their recent demands have been:

*... First and foremost, we want UNHCR to come forward and make arrangements for our settlement or at least stand surety for a land lease contract... or for the Nepal government to officially recognize us as refugees and provide land to live on; if not it at least provision for a work permit, so we can work and survive on our own. If not all these, then we prefer third-country resettlement (Personal Communication, 2021).*

For the remaining Bhutanese refugees who chose to remain in Nepal instead of resettling abroad, their formal refugee camps in Beldangi (Jhapa) and Sanischare (Morang) have been converted into permanent settlements, through a

collaborative<sup>45</sup> initiative aimed at fostering inclusion and self-reliance of Bhutanese refugees within host communities. (UNHCR, 2023) Rohingya in Nepal now aspire for a similar provision to secure their foothold in Nepal.

During the interview, the young man (24, male) mentioned:

*If we just had a place to settle and a work permit, that would be enough to build a self-reliant life. Now, (with no formal legal status), we can't even open a bank account. How can we hope to achieve progress in life? Young people here cannot aspire to pursue higher studies despite being immensely talented. (personal communication, 2023)*

Having moved beyond mere survival to the status of basic sustenance, the Rohingya in Nepal aspire to consolidate their foothold now. Accordingly, they have channeled their efforts toward securing legal status in Nepal, by making rights-based claims advocating for such as formal refugee status, work permits, and a place for resettlement. Directing demands toward UNHCR-Nepal and Nepal's government, they seek to ameliorate the condition of their perpetual limbo, fraught with uncertainties. These recent efforts show a clear shift in the focus and orientation of their efforts from 'inward-looking' to 'outward-looking.' This does not suggest that they previously ignored such issues, but rather that their prioritization has heightened, as they have reached a level of basic sustenance and now aspire for a secure future.

### **Challenges and limitations to later 'outward-looking' endeavour**

Though the Rohingya have recently increased their efforts in lobbying both the UNHCR-Nepal and the Government of Nepal for formal refugee status in Nepal, this endeavour is plagued with significant challenges. The primary obstacle lies in the absence of a domestic legal framework or policy on refugees in Nepal. Furthermore, Nepal is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. This policy and legal void severely limits the scope of rights-based advocacy, as Nepal is under no binding obligation, national or international, to protect or integrate refugees, except in terms of humanitarian consideration.

In addition, the role, as well as, the budget of the UNHC-Nepal have contracted following the completion of the resettlement mission for Bhutanese refugees in

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<sup>45</sup>Government of Nepal and UNHCR in coordination with Bhutanese refugee community-based organizations and other UNHCR partners. (UNHCR, 2023, p. 69)

2016. With no particular mandate and diminished resources, the UNHCR-Nepal is unable to substantially support the Rohingya community, providing only limited support in areas such as education and health. (UNHCR, 2023) Meanwhile, the Government of Nepal, which itself relies heavily on the remittance economy, lacks the political will, economic standing and institutional capacity to address the plight of the Rohingya. As a result, both the Nepali state and UNHCR-Nepal are currently in no position to assume substantial responsibility for the Rohingya in Nepal.

In addition to legal and institutional barriers, the Rohingya leadership faces significant challenges when it comes to effective advocacy, which demands such as strategic planning, clear communication with stakeholders, lobbying decision-makers, mobilising public support, sustained institutional partnerships, and so on. (UNICEF, 2010; Oxfam GB, 2018) However, the members of the Rohingya community, including key committee leaders, possess only a modest formal education and legal or technical expertise and are themselves deprived, having limited access and resources. This situation requires not only community-driven initiatives but also strong institutional partnerships that can address their capacity limitations and strengthen their influence or lobbying in decision-making processes, which appears largely missing in their current grassroots, limited efforts.

Furthermore, in recent times, media portrayals of the Rohingya have been quite negative, often portraying them as a security threat in many cases to sensationalize the news coverage. These portrayals tend to emphasize concerns about their increasing numbers, alleged involvement in illegal activities, perceived associations with fundamentalist networks and so on. These narratives, often lacking in substantial evidence, are shaping negative public perceptions. Hence, risking the chance of reinforcing stereotypes rather than empathy. This sort of stigmatization can significantly hamper the Rohingya in gaining broader acceptance and support from their host community, hindering their endeavour for legal recognition and integration.

Hence, considering their position within the broader socio-political context and the structural constraints they face, their pursuit of formal legal status in Nepal appears unlikely to be realized anytime soon.

## **Conclusion**

The Rohingya's adaptation in Nepal can be seen as a continuous process of negotiation between their precarious position and collective agency. While structural constraints and legal limbo reveal Rohingya's liminal existence fraught with vulnerability and uncertainty, on the other hand, their innovative adaptive

strategies exercised through collective agency demonstrate resilience, exposing both the fragility of their position and the strength of their collective efforts in surviving through adversity.

Despite Rohingya existence being often fraught with contingent circumstances, they have made a remarkable journey adapting to the unpredictable nature of their existence with context-specific, improvised strategies- to mitigate challenges and ameliorate their vulnerability. Through their collective effort, they transformed themselves from fragmented mere aggregates into communes, revived the socio-cultural aspect of their life and secured economic sustenance, creating a space of belonging within the mosaic of the Nepali milieu. Through these collective efforts, they have overall uplifted themselves from the state of mere survival toward socio-economic sustenance, even in the near absence of substantial institutional support and protection.

Beyond material survival, their resilience is engrained in the reclamation of selfhood. While the label 'refugee' has almost become synonymous with their identity and has been instrumental in their survival, still Rohingya refuse to let it define them entirely. Even if it means within the confines of their commune, they choose to celebrate their selfhood as Rohingya. This act of cultural rejuvenation is not merely a pursuit of meaning, dignity and selfhood but also a defiance of being reduced to mere reductive categories imposed by political-legal conditionality. This has been an assertion of their autonomy and agency: not being just passive victims or beneficiaries.

Yet, despite their remarkable display of resilience, innovativeness and collective agency, these qualities do not resolve or compensate for the systemic precarity, hence making their achievements still fragile and contingent. They do not suffice to guarantee a stable livelihood, promising future, or dignified life for the people until their political-legal limbo is resolved. Therefore, the Rohingya journey highlights not only their remarkable resilience but also the pressing need for formal legal status in Nepal to have a stable, dignified life.

To conclude, Rohingya's trajectory of adaptation in Nepal is not only a perilous journey but also an enduring act of resilience- asserting and envisioning 'possibility' within 'vulnerability' in the pursuit of meaning and a dignified life in exile.



## Revisit

Since the Rohingya first settled in Ram Mandir and Lasuntar in 2015, these areas have transformed significantly. Once fallow lands have turned into a site for housing development, driving up land as well as lease prices and displacing many Rohingya families. This has led to the commune's dispersion across five settlements by the end of 2024: Ram Mandir, Lasuntar, and Chunikhel (all in Kapan), Sunakothi (Lalitpur), and Shankhu (Dhulikhel).

Besides these dispersions, a new convergence is coalescing in the Chunikhel settlement lately. Despite being further urban periphery, it offers cheaper leases and has availability of land for expansion to accommodate further households. Many families from Ram Mandir and Lasuntar have already relocated there, and new makeshift shelters are being built to accommodate more arrivals.

In May of 2025, local authorities relocated the Rohingya from Dhulikhel to Kathmandu, many of whom are most probably expected to join the Chunikhel settlement, if not Ram Mandir for the time being.

(Note: To maintain respondents' confidentiality, all names used are pseudonyms.)

## Acknowledgements

I'm truly grateful to all my respondents, especially the Rohingya community in Nepal, for their generous support and cooperation throughout my research. A big thanks also to my friend and research buddy, Robin Angbhuhang, for his constant help and great company during the field visits.

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