



A word from us...

Welcome to Rohingya Stories Volume 3! In April, in spite of the grinding poverty, joblessness and the news of the airstrike in Myanmar that killed an estimated 100 Burmese, the refugee camps in India were abuzz with Ramadan and Eid-al-fitr. This is the time they buy new clothes – which means lots of business for tailors like **Hayas Bibi** and **Sabira**. Enabling more such home businesses is a good solution to empower refugee women. As Hayas says, “it's a great feeling to be able to earn my own money!”

As we approach the International Day of Families on May 15, we highlight two homegrown efforts to restore normalcy in refugee lives – a camp school that bridges the gaps in learning created by displacement and other circumstances, and a grocery store run by **Ziabul Alam** that keeps low priced Burmese snacks that give customers a taste of a long lost home. The school is enabling dropouts, mostly women, to resume studies. **Miksalmina Begum**, 22, is one of them. She dropped out in class seven to get married, and four years and three children later, is back to her books. Her dream? To become a human rights lawyer campaigning for Rohingya rights... She will have her work cut out, and probably find many potential clients in the Rohingya camp in Faridabad. Although people here engage in hazardous **waste picking** and sorting, they are performing a critical service to the affluent high rises they live behind. A visit to the camp highlights this, and the need to standardise waste sorting and disposal services in India.

As always, what shines through all this hardship and deprivation is the innate resilience and entrepreneurial skill of the Rohingya...and their potential to enrich their host country, as entrepreneurs, humanitarians and role models.

Rohingya Stories is a monthly newsletter from the Rohingya Human Rights Initiative. It aims to showcase our people's resilience, and great potential to become economically, socially and culturally productive members of our host country, India. Rohingya Stories will humanize the Rohingya to a world that has seen them as nameless victims for too long.

YOU CAN HELP!!

Friends in the media, please help us amplify these inspirational faces, voices and stories.

We can help you **access** the camps, **interview** respondents and share our **photos** too!

Contact us
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The waste pickers camp in Faridabad and Syed Hussain. Pix courtesy R4R Stories

The Invisible Recyclers of the City's Waste

In the shimmering heat of April, Syed Hussain sorts a mountain of waste as his two sons, both under five, play nearby. With his bare hands he sorts through garbage, and separates it into piles of plastic, glass, cardboard, electric bulbs and wet waste. “People like them just throw without thinking,” he says, gesturing towards the slew of expensive high rise condos behind which the Rohingya camp is located. “And people like us make a living going through their refuse...”

His camp, little more than group of shanties behind a series of expensive condos in Faridabad, is home to 35 families. It has no water, no sanitation, no infrastructure. “Everyone in our camp collects waste,” he says. They segregate it into cardboard, which sell for Rs 10 a kilo, plastic bottles which go for anything between Rs 20 and 25, plastic bags for Rs 4 and electric bulbs for Rs 1 per piece. “Sometimes people even throw large items like coolers and old refrigerators,” he says. The work is “dirty,” he says, gesturing to another pile of used diapers and festering kitchen waste. “But I’m grateful it enables me to feed my family.”

At a time when growing landfills in cities are motivating urban planners to find innovative ways to reduce, reuse and recycle waste, this Rohingya camp is giving a critical, but invisible, service to the high rises of Faridabad. Globally, waste pickers are estimated to collect and send for recycling, up to 60% of all plastics. Several projects have successfully accorded informal waste workers their due. For example, MNCs that

Economic benefits of waste picking

*Crucial income for people and households. In Belo Horizonte, Brazil, waste pickers said their cooperatives create opportunities for people, sometimes “taking them off the streets.”

*Reusable materials to other enterprises. In Belo Horizonte, Brazil and Nakuru, Kenya, material is sold to artists and groups to work with.

*Others – users of recycled materials, transport companies etc – profit from waste pickers’ work.

generate a lot of plastic packaging, including Coca-Cola, Pepsico, Unilever and Nestlé, have recently signed up to the **Fair Circularity Initiative** which advocates for the rights of people in the informal waste sector. Waste pickers are also helping devise the **global treaty to curb plastic pollution**. A delegation from the International Alliance of Waste pickers (IAW) is attending the negotiations to influence the treaty as it takes shape.

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Hayas Bibi and Sabira Begum. Pix courtesy R4R Stories

Stitching the Feel of 'Home'

Hayas Bibi, 24, dresses her 4-year-old daughter Jannat in a pretty salwar kurta she has repurposed from her old gown. From burkas with layered veils, tops with fan-like sleeves and even the Indian-style salwar kameez, she stitches them all. On the first floor of her shanty which is built of bamboo and wood, her machine whirs as she works on an asymmetrical hemline, softly humming to herself.

A few doors away, in a dark shanty, 28 year old Sabira adds final touches to a woman's top she has stitched. "I used to be a tailor in Burma and when I came to India in 2012, one of the few things I had was my machine," she says. "Alas it was destroyed in the fire that leveled our camp in 2018." She resumed her business by using her neighbor's machine.

Both women stitch all sorts of clothes, but say that they derive the most joy when they stitch their traditional dress, the cotton lungi and top that is called *thai*. "I feel most comfortable when I'm wearing it, and am happy to make it for others," Sabira says. She stitches about 15 garments a month, but this doubles during Ramadan. Hayas spends at least three hours stitching every day. "When I'm stitching our traditional clothes, I feel closer to home..." she says. "And it's a great feeling to be able to earn my own money!"

Micro Businesses, Macro Gains!

US-based **Mercy Beyond Borders** provided basic business training and \$200 loans to 100 South Sudanese refugee women. Many of them were non-literate and depended on their children to count and record their expenses and profits. They created bakeries, butcheries, grocery kiosks... even imported dried fish, exported embroidered linens and many other business ventures!

A survey to assess the impact of the project on these refugee women entrepreneurs found:

*A 600% average increase in household income.

*70% reported being "usually or always happy" after starting their own business, compared to only 6% when the program began.

Their takeaway? Enabling women to develop micro-businesses with hyperlocal markets in refugee camps can reap rich dividends!

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The Rohingya School in Mewat, pix courtesy R4R Stories

Textbooks and Hope in this Camp School

In the Rohingya camp in Nangli 2 in Mewat, Haryana, a young woman practises Hindi writing, her infant sleeping peacefully in her lap, in bamboo and cane school with bright educational posters on the walls. Outside, a group of children play after completing their Maths lesson. This is a bridge school established by brothers **Jafarullah** and **Abdullah Qureshi**, where over 50 students of all ages try to mend the gaping holes that their displacement and circumstances have left in their education. The younger students need help with English and Maths, to supplement the education they receive in government schools. The women come to resume the schooling that marriage and motherhood has interrupted. Adults who have not been to school at all, attend basic numeracy and literacy classes here.

The school has three teachers, charges no fees and is funded and managed by the Qureshi brothers. “My brother and I feel there is a huge need for education among our Rohingya community,” Abdullah says. “Today the world only listens to those who can articulate their own problems, and without good education, we see that few among the Rohingya community are educated enough to do this.”

Community-run schools in refugee camps are crucial solutions for better access to education for residents. They not only bridge learning gaps in a supportive and

“Initially, when I started teaching here, I was nervous. What would these refugees be like? Would we be able to understand each other? But on coming here, I’ve found the students to be very friendly. They have a huge will to learn, which is not something I’ve seen in my seven years as a teacher in other schools in Haryana.”

Mamta Sahu, teacher in the Rohingya school since January 2023

inclusive environment which is conveniently located next door – they also empower refugees through education and training. Most students aspire to rejoin mainstream schools.

Miksalmina Begum, 22, is one of them. “I completed class seven when I was married and when our three children arrived in quick succession, studies took a back seat,” she says. “Now I bring my infant to class and want to not only complete my schooling but become a human rights lawyer to work for my community!”



Ziaatul Alam and his grocery shop, pix courtesy: R4R Stories

A Cup of Happy in a Rohingya Camp

At the Rohingya camp in ward number 7, Nuh (Haryana), a group of men gather at the local shop.

“Give me a cup of *Happy*,” says one.
“I’ll take a *Super Sundae*,” says another.
The third asks for *Mikko*.

Happy, *Super Sundae* and *Mikko* are instant premixes from Burma, the first a tea; the second, a white coffee and the third, a malted drink. These are some of the many products from home that shopkeeper Ziaatul Alam stocks. From dried fruit to energy mixes, his little bamboo and cane grocery shop has a range of imports from Myanmar that the refugees in the camp love. He hands over steaming cups of these beverages to his customers, saying, “For merely Rs 15, these drinks and snacks offer us a taste of a long lost home...”

Refugee businesses selling products from their homeland in camps are not just a viable livelihood option, they provide residents with a sense of familiarity and connection to their culture and homeland. Alam's shop is, consequently, more than just a shop -- it is a place where people come to share and relive their experiences. Alam buys these products from a wholesale importer in Delhi. “I keep the prices low – between Rs 10 and 15,” he says. “My customers prefer them to Indian products and say they bring back bittersweet memories!”

“I love local Burmese cheroots... their aroma just immediately takes me home! But I smoke them only rarely as they’re too expensive here...”

Faiyazul Rahman, bamboo mason
“There’s nothing as good as Burmese coffee!” Ziaatul Alam

“I don’t know why we find our childhood treats so irresistible?”
Mohd Saleem.

Other than his wife and children, Alam has no family in India. “My parents and siblings are in the refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh,” he says. “I came to India alone in 2012 for better prospects.” Ziaatul says that sometimes he misses his homeland so much that he does not know what to do. He still keeps a Burmese currency note folded carefully inside his mobile cover. “I know it is useless here, but every now and then, I take it out to remind myself of my origins...” he says. And when the homesickness gets too much, he can always just have a cup of *Happy*...

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Pitch them to your editors! We know refugee stories are often hard to research as their camps are not easily accessed, but we've got you covered with contact details of respondents, a lovely photo bank (free to use with attributions) and even a list of subject matter experts. Contact us on r4rstories@gmail.com for details...

Write and tell us what you'd like to know more about the Rohingya. We'd love for this to be a conversation!

Check out our bank of story ideas from Rohingya camps in India.

Join our media broadcast group on Whatsapp if you're not already on it, and recommend it to your journo friends. Email us with your number and we'll add you.

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And definitely follow **Solutions Journalism Network**, the amazing independent non-profit that advocates a more nuanced, evidence-based mode of reporting on the responses to social problems. This newsletter has been made possible because of their generous LEDE FELLOWSHIP 2023!

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