

## **Ethnic Community's Awareness on Political Rights in Bangladesh: A Study on the Rakhaine Community**

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**Abstract:** It is observed from this study that most of the members of the Rakhaine community are not aware of their political rights. However, those who have a minimum level of awareness are aware only of voting rights, political parties, meetings and processions. The causes of poor awareness are their backwardness, lack of mobility and dearth of education as well as the effects of demographic variables.

**Keywords:** Political awareness, Political rights, Ethnic community, Rakhaine community

### **Introduction**

The political right is an inalienable attribute in a democratic political system. The prime examples of political rights are voting, forming assembly, participating in the decision making process, expressing reactions to governmental activities and so on. Enjoyment of citizen's political rights is possibly correlated with proper state management. Conscious citizens tend to think that the state and the political authority are legitimate, and the political institutions are responsible for ensuring welfare of the citizens. Such feelings encourage them to associate with the existing political system. This paper discusses the extent of awareness of a small ethnic Rakhaine community in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, there are a number of small ethnic communities like Chakma, Marma, Orao, Tripuri, Tanchangya, Garo and Rakhaine. Among them, the Rakhaine community appears to be significant in number and contribution. The selected Rakhaine communities live in Patuakhali, Cox's Bazar, Barguna, Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. But most of them live at Kolapara in Patuakhali. They stand unique with their distinctive language, culture, rituals and festivals, and unlike most Rakhines, they are Buddhists. Although they are underprivileged in terms of education, occupation, achieving different civilian opportunities, engaging in public and private activities, participating in the decision making process, but are entitled to enjoying all kind of rights according to the constitution. But, how far are they conscious about their rights, specifically political rights? An attempt has been made on the basis of primary data to find out their level of awareness about the political rights.

### **Methodology**

This research work has been conducted by using questionnaire method. Mainly, the information from the primary sources has been used in this research. In addition, secondary sources have also been used to discuss many theories and theoretical bases. Data from published and unpublished research reports, many local and international

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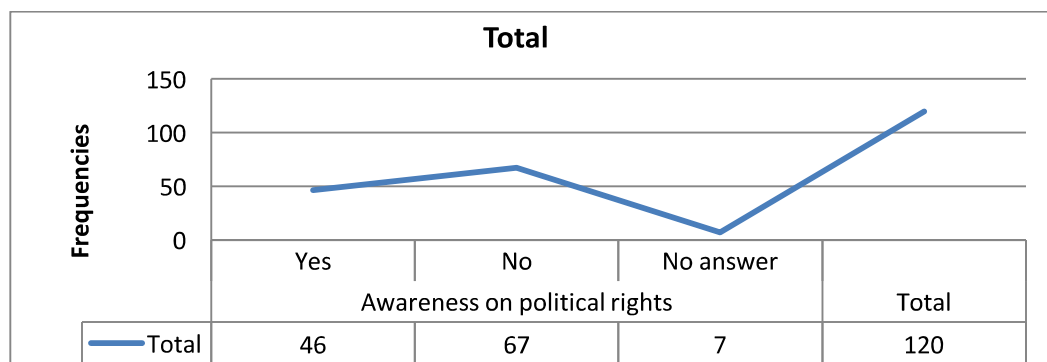
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books, essays, journals, newspapers and relevant websites have been used. First of all, the name, age, gender, marital status, education, religion, profession, monthly income of all the family members have been collected from preliminary survey. Data has also been collected by interviewing selected individuals. On the other hand, interviews have been conducted at a village namely Goraamkhola Para at Kalapara Upazila in Patuakhali. Specimens have been collected by Simple Random Sampling in this research. Population above eighteen years totaling 120 (26.91%) out of the 42 Rakhaine families from the 114 families in the village has been added as samples.

### **Awareness on Political Rights of Rakhaine Community**

Right means something “which is morally correct, justified, or acceptable”<sup>i</sup> to the society and the state. To further explain, rights are the fundamental normative rules about what is allowed for people or owed to people, according to some legal system, social convention, or ethical theory.<sup>ii</sup> According to Laski, “Rights define those states in social lives without which man can’t enjoy his own personality.”<sup>iii</sup> So, rights are such basic needs that are must for everyone. There are different types right, and political right is one of them. The political life of an individual revolves around the bases of political rights because political rights let the people to participate in the political process. The question then arises on what political rights are. Political rights are a class of rights that protect an individual’s freedom from infringement by governments, social organizations and private individuals, and which also ensures one’s ability to participate in the civil and political life of the society and state without discrimination or repression.<sup>iv</sup> These political rights are recognized in the democratic system of governance. As is a democratic state, Bangladesh constitution has recognized political rights of its citizens. This is mentioned through the articles of 26 to 47 of the constitution of Bangladesh. Its article number 29, 33, 37, 38, 39 and 43 include the existence of political rights. It has been said in article 37 that every citizen shall have the right to assemble and to participate in public meetings and processions peacefully and without arms, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interests of public order or public health.<sup>v</sup> In this manner, the right to vote, right to procession, right to form political parties, right to be the member of any political party, right to get government jobs, right to apply, right to criticize the government, right to protest and right to unite have been recognized by the constitution. But, before enjoying those political rights, it is important to become aware of them. To find out the awareness on political rights of Rakhaine people recognized by the constitution, a simple question was asked to the research participants- Are you conscious about your political rights? And, if the answer is ‘yes’, what are those rights? In this discussion, the data generated through the questionnaire has been analyzed.

**Chart 1.1 Awareness on political rights**



Source: Collected and prepared by researcher

First of all, it is interesting to note that in case of ethnic community's awareness on political rights 46 (33.3%) respondents told that they are aware of their political rights and 7 (5.8%) respondents are refrained from answering whereas maximum 67 (55.8%) respondents are unconscious of their political rights. Here, it could be concluded that as a backward community, majority of Rakhaine people remain in dark of their political rights. Those who are conscious are mostly aware of only two to three political rights like voting right, right to procession and right to form party. Now, the discussion will be given on the awareness of different political rights of Rakhaine community.

**Table 1.1: Awareness on different political rights in relation to age**

Age (year)	Awareness on political rights					
	Right to vote		Right to procession		Right to form parties	
	Yes	no	Yes	no	Yes	no
18-25	14	10	5	19	0	24
26-35	9	16	1	24	0	25
36-45	7	17	4	20	1	23
46-55	9	17	4	22	2	24
56-65	4	5	2	7	0	9
66+	2	10	1	11	0	12
Total	45	75	17	103	3	117
	120		120		120	

Source: Collected and prepared by researcher

It appears from table 1.1, (among the various political rights, people of Rakhaine community are aware of only three political rights. Some of them are aware of one, some are of two or three. So, here is the total number of conscious people would be more or less than the previous chart) coherent with the age out of the age group 18-25, 14 (58.3%) identified the right to vote as political rights, 9 (36.0%) from the 26-35 age group, 7 (58.3%) from the 36-45 age group, 9 (36.0%) from the 46-55, 4 (44.4%) from the 56-65 and 2 (16.7%) from the group of over 65 years old. Here, it could be seen that 45 (37.5%) respondents are aware of the voting rights and 76 (62.5%) respondents are in dark. 'Political rights' has been defined as holding processions and meetings by 5

(20.8%) from the age group of 18-25, 1 (4.0%) from the age group of 26-35, 4 (16.7%) from the 36-45, 4 (18.2%) from 46-55, 2 (22. 2%) from 56-65 and 1 (8.3%) from 65. Here, it is noticed that 45 (37.5%) are aware of voting rights, 17 (14.2%) on the right to hold meetings and processions and 3 (2.5%) are conscious about the right to form parties. Interestingly, it is shown in the chart that the youth know more about the voting rights in comparison to the older ones. About the right to hold meeting and procession, it is observed that people from all ages bear quite the same amount of knowledge. On the other hand, only the middle-aged seem to know the right to form parties. After an overview, it is learnt that the awareness of political rights has not changed much in consistency with the age. So, age does not have any significance for the awareness of the political rights.

**Table: 1.2: Awareness on different political rights in relation to gender**

Gender	Awareness on political rights					
	Right to vote		Right to procession		Right to form parties	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Male	29	35	13	51	3	61
Female	16	40	4	52	0	56
Total	45	75	17	103	3	117
	120		120		120	

Source: Collected and prepared by researcher

Awareness on political rights in relation to gender demonstrates that on the question of right to vote maximum 29 (45.3%) of male respondents are aware whereas only 16 (28.6%) respondents of female people are aware on it. On the question of right to procession only 13 (20.3%) respondents are aware of it, whereas 4 (7.1%) of the female respondents are conscious about their rights. While only 3 (4.7%) of the male respondents affirmatively of their rights to form parties whereas all the female respondents remain in the dark. In the above table, it has been seen that male member of the Rakhaine peoples are much more aware than female. Here, gender is an important variable in a given ethnic social situation.

**Table: 1.3: Awareness on diverse political rights in relation to education**

Education	Awareness on political rights					
	Right to vote		Right to procession		Right to form parties	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Illiterate	0	21	0	21	0	21
Primary/Kyang	9	38	2	45	0	47
Lower secondary	6	14	2	18	1	19
S.S.C/ H.S.C	23	1	10	14	2	22
Graduate and above	7	1	3	5	0	8
Total	45	75	17	103	3	117
	120		120		120	

Source: Collected and prepared by researcher

Education is a significant demography in analyzing the awareness on political rights of small ethnic Rakhaine community. It makes them conscious and responsive to their political rights and the table 1.4 also demonstrates that. It can be seen that not a single respondents of illiterate people are aware of their political rights. 9 (19.1%) out of the 47 from primary/kyiang are aware of the right to vote and 2 (4.3%) respondents are conscious to the right to hold meetings and processions. 6 (33.3%) from 20 of the lower secondary are sensible of the right to vote, 2(10.0%) respondents are aware of the right to hold meetings and processions and 1 (5.0%) is conscious to the right to form parties. In terms of the S.S.C and H.S.C level, it has been found that one respondent was aware of multiple rights, and therefore, the numbers of informants have increased. On this, 23 (95.8%) respondents are sensible to the right to vote out of the 24, 10 (7.1%) respondents are aware of the right to hold meetings and processions and 2 (8.3%) know about the right to form parties. Those with a degree in graduate and above, 7 (87.5%) from 8 aware of the right to vote and 3 (37.5%) respondents are aware of the right to hold meetings. Here, it is seen that none from the illiterate class know about the rights. On the other hand, with the increase of education the level of awareness on political rights increased as well. So, education has influenced the field of awareness on political rights.

**Table 1.4: Awareness on political rights in relation to occupation**

Occupation	Awareness on political rights					
	Right to vote		Right to procession		Right to form parties	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Employee	4	4	2	6	1	7
Businessman	6	1	2	5	0	8
Farmer	9	14	4	19	1	22
Housewife	9	12	0	21	0	21
Labor	4	41	3	43	1	44
Student	11	10	4	17	0	21
Unemployed	1	11	1	11	0	12
Others	1	2	1	2	0	3
Total	45	75	17	103	3	117
	120		120		120	

Source: Collected and prepared by researcher

Next are the issues of occupation and awareness. It appears that 4 (50.0%) employees, 6 (85.7%) businessmen, 9 (39.1%) farmer, 9 (42.9%) housewives, 4 (8.9%) labors, 11 (52.4%) students, 1 (8.3%) unemployed and 1 (50.0) unemployed individual are aware of the right to vote. 2 (25.0%), 2 (28.6%), 4(17.4%) farmers, 3 (6.5%) labors, 4 (1.9%) labors, 1 (8.3%) unemployed and 1 (50.0%) from the rest aware of the right to hold meetings and processions. 1 (12.5%) employee, 1 (4.3%) farmer and a labor 1 (2. 2%) are sensible of the right to form parties. Here, we can see that almost all the occupations are aware of the right to vote. Apart from the housewives people from all professions are conscious to the right to hold meetings and processions. Only the job holders and the farmers are aware of the right to form parties. However, an observation suggests that they are aware of these because of them being educated. If the overview is taken under consideration, the conclusion would be reached that the occupation has not mattered much for their awareness of political rights.

### **Causes of Poor Awareness**

It is observed from the earlier analysis that majority of the Rakhaine people are not aware of their political rights. Again, those who are conscious are mostly aware of only two to three political rights. Further analysis shows that backwardness is the core reason behind their lack of political awareness. In most cases, they are reluctant to get acquainted with the central state politics. Another vital cause of poor awareness is dearth of mobility. Majority of them would not like to go outside of their community. Not only that but also they usually would not like to talk with Bengali people. Even if they engage in group conversations with the Bengali speakers, they would like to speak their own language to the people of their own community despite being in the group. That brings negative results. Again, low percentage of literacy is also seen to be the reason behind the lack of awareness. But hesitation towards involvement into politics has also been noticed among the educated. The main reason of which is political aversion. Though in mass media like- Newspapers, radio, television in modern days play important role in creating awareness of political rights, the Rakhaine community could not enter the grounds of mass media. It has been observed that only 15 out of 120 respondents watch television regularly. Those who watch television are mostly habituated with watching entertainment programs rather than political issues. Further observations show that only 5 of them are associated with the national newspapers. It is to be noted here that, only the *Morol*, village leader, listens to BBC Bangla news regularly. On one hand, as the Rakhaine are aloof from national politics, the activities of the national political parties here are also likewise limited.

In other cases, among those who are conscious of political rights include one fourth of them from families, to a large extend from religious institutions, little number of them from political parties, educational institutions, mass media, neighbors and village leaders. It is to be noticed that, the role of mass media, political parties and educational institutions are very minimal to become aware of their political rights.

So it can be said that backwardness, lack of mobility, aloof from mass media, lack of education, political apathy and insufficient activities of the political parties are as the main reasons for the lack of political awareness of the Rakhaine community.

### **Conclusion**

After analyzing the awareness on political rights, it is seen that one-third of the Rakhaine people are aware of their political rights. Majority of them are conscious to their voting right, one third of them are aware of the right to form parties and little number of them are aware of their right to hold meetings and processions. By analyzing the causes of poor awareness on political rights, it is seen that aloof from modern technology, lack of education, political alienation and minimum activities of the political organizations can be seen as the main reasons for the lack of political awareness of the Rakhaine community. Again, the effects of demographic variable of awareness on political rights are noticeable. In this regard, the younger people are much aware and this increase in subordination with age. Again, in term of age, people who are younger in comparison, learnt from educational institutions and media but no significant distinction has been noticed in case of others. On the other hand, throwing education in contrast, highly

educated people keep complete awareness in this topic, where the margin of awareness decreases to zero along the degradation of education. So, education has far reaching effects on the awareness of political rights. Again considering the professions, it is observed that occupation is the catalyst in creating awareness of political rights.

Finally, based on the analysis found on this research, it is exciting to reach the conclusion that most of the Rakhaine population is not aware of their political rights. And the causes of poor awareness on political rights are mainly backwardness, lack of mobility, aloof from mass media, dearth of education, political apathy and insufficient activities of the political parties. Overall, the effect of demography is notable in this regard as well.

#### **End Notes:**

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- <sup>i</sup> en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/right (Retrieved on 03.12.15.)
- <sup>ii</sup> *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University. July 9, 2007. (Retrieved on 03.12.15.)
- <sup>iii</sup> Laski, J. Harold, *A Grammar of Politics*, London, George Allen & Union Ltd., 1967, p. 91.
- <sup>iv</sup> Sieghart, Paul, *The Lawful Rights of Mankind: An Introduction to the International Legal Code of Human Rights*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985.p. 75.
- <sup>v</sup> *The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*, Dhaka, Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2011, p. 11.