



Status and identity crisis of the Bihari diaspora in Bangladesh

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Accepted 25 April 2020
Online release 28 May 2020

Keyword

Biharis
Identity
Citizenship
Partition
Rehabilitation
Assimilation

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ABSTRACT

Urdu-speaking Bihari community was displaced from various regions of India initially after the partition and once again after the independence of Bangladesh. As they are considered Pakistani in a primordial sense, lots of attempts were made to send them back to Pakistan, their ideological home. But due to diplomatic failure and several other reasons, only a few people could repatriate, left majority behind. But they could never assimilate here. As a result, their identity crisis began. The government of Bangladesh, considering their despondent condition, declared them as citizens of Bangladesh. But still there remain difficulties in achieving full functioning citizenship status since they have not fully integrated into the society as a whole. This study aims to reveal the current condition of the Bihari identity crisis and the degree of assimilation to the Bengali society and culture. By adopting a qualitative approach, it took stratified sampling method to collect data. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. 20 people were being interviewed living inside the Geneva camp and outside. The analysis of data revealed that the citizenship status was given for the political purpose, not actually intended for their rehabilitation or well-being; that the citizenship status doesn't help to eradicate their fear of being treated as "others" or a minority group. Their assimilation to Bangladeshi society and culture, however, deepened very recently. A sense of communal harmony prevails between Bengalis and Biharis, except for a few exemptions. Besides, though both the issues are similar in type, the Bihari has never gained widespread attention like the Rohingya people usually get from the government as well as the international bodies.

INTRODUCTION

The despondent condition of the Urdu-speaking Community, mostly known as the 'Biharis', who are currently living in Bangladesh, has been a complex issue that has not gathered enough attention from both a local and international level than it actually values. During War of liberation in 1971, owing to the distinct cultural identity of the Urdu-speakers, which was different from the Bengalis and possibly a feeling that the division of Pakistan would strengthen India, they favored Pakistan and went against Bangladesh's struggle for independence. After Bangladesh became independent, the Supreme Court in 1972 ruled that the Urdu-speaking Community in the country were eligible for Bangladeshi citizenship. The Government of Bangladesh (GOB) declared Presidential Order 149 in 1972, offering citizenship to the Urdu-speaking community for the first time (Haider, 2018). However, many of them preferred repatriation, and thus attempted to migrate to Pakistan with little success; the majority

of them were unable to do this, as it was not met with positive support from Pakistan. As a consequence, the greater number of the Urdu-speakers could not go away from the country; rather they became stranded and were later relocated to settlements throughout Bangladesh. Until 2008, the legal status of the community was in question, but the Supreme Court of Bangladesh ultimately ruled that all the Urdu-speakers living in the country had the right to Bangladeshi citizenship (Muquim, 2017). But the fate of Biharis has never changed as they are still deprived of their basic rights and opportunities entitled to their citizenship.

In 1947, religion was the determining factor in separating two nations, two-nation theory promulgated this distinction. However, the two nations' theory was criticized by some intellectuals. Some argued that the two nations' theory was wrong and absurd and it was proved with the advent of Bangladesh in 1971 (Faruqui, 2005; Hossain, 2012).

Unlike the country's other major ethnic groups, Muhajirs (Biharis initially called themselves Muhajirs because of migrating from their homeland in order to save their lives in a hostile condition) are not 'people of the soil'. Their roots lie in areas that are outside of what today is Pakistan. A majority of them began arriving from cities and towns (especially from North Indian regions) after the division of India into two separate states in 1947 (Paracha, 2014). This Muhajirs subsequently called "Bihari" in Bangladesh.

Biharis migrated in Bangladesh assuming it as a part of Pakistan, home of Muslims. But the independence of Bangladesh displaced them again, as they were Pakistani in a primordial sense. Since the independence, many national and international organizations attempted to send them back to Pakistan strongly supported by GOB. But due to diplomatic failure and several other causes, only a few people could repatriate, left majority behind. Their difference of language and culture, along with unlike communal sense, Biharis could never assimilate here. As a result, their identity crisis began, neither are they accepted by Pakistan as a citizen nor are they recognized as a citizen of Bangladesh. The government of Bangladesh, considering their despondent condition, declared them as a citizen of Bangladesh. But there is still a difficulty for achieving full functioning citizenship status since they have not fully integrated into the society as a whole.

This study aims to reveal the current condition of the Bihari identity crisis and degree of assimilation to Bengali society and culture.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative method. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The semi structured interview method was adopted to get a detailed idea about the identity, cultural boundary and cultural practices of Bihari people. The qualitative method offers a broader view of any particular issue. It sought to tell the story of a particular group's experiences in their own words and is therefore focused on narrative, not on numbers like quantitative methods.

The stratified random sampling method was used. Among the respondents, 10 people were from the young generation, age ranges between 15 to 30 years, and rest 10 people were older people. The author has conducted all of the interviews in both camps. In-depth interviews included the current state of identity formation of Bihari people, factors influencing their identity formation, the role of different institutions etc. questions.

For this study, both primary and secondary data has been used. Primary data were collected through in-depth interviews. Secondary data were collected from the academic journal, newspaper, video documentary, archives, etc. medium. All of the secondary data will be collected online from Google search and various journals and archives. Keeping in mind of the reliability issues, due care was given in selecting any contents. During the data collection, the author was able to record only a few interviews, due to not having permission. Other interviews were written shortly. After collecting the data, all the recorded data were transcribed and written in the Microsoft Word files. Other written interviews were re-written too. After writing all the interviews, focus was made on coding. All data were coded into few categories like identity, identity ambiguity, relation with Bengali, education facility, citizenship status etc. code. Then, those codes were used for analysis. Besides, the author was careful about ethical issues. No participant was forced or offered anything in exchange to participate in this study. The author took permission from camp offices before conducting fieldwork.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In his book "Identity" (2004), Zygmunt Bauman stated that Classical sociologists like Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel didn't write about the context of identity because they were busy writing major issues of their time (Bauman, 2004). The concept of identity was not at the center of sociology or other disciplines thoughts years ago, rather it was an object of philosophical meditation (Bauman, 2004). But the sociological works on identity founds in American sociology, mainly Chicago school's works on 'self'.

The study of identity came from psychology. Erik Erikson was one of the earliest scholars to talk about Identity and identity crisis. His study focused on the formation of one's identity in a socio-cultural setting. According to Erikson (1930), there are three interrelated dimensions of identity formation: the subjective/ psychological dimension, or ego identity qua a sense of temporal-spatial continuity and its concomitants; the personal dimension, or a behavioral and character repertoire that differentiates individuals; and the social dimension, or recognized roles within a community. For Erikson, these components need to come together during the identity stage, and when they do not, or as they are doing so, an identity crisis is evident. Such an identity crisis is characterized by a subjective sense of identity confusion, behavioral and character logical disarray, and a lack of commitment to recognized roles in a community. According to Erikson, an identity crisis is a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself. This stage of human life (Erikson, 1970). After Erikson, James Marcia (1908) worked on the Erikson's tradition. His study focuses on the twin concepts of exploration and commitment. The central idea is that any individual's sense of identity is determined in large part by the explorations and commitments that he or she makes regarding certain personal and social traits. It follows that the core of the research in this paradigm investigates the degrees to which a person has made certain explorations and the degree to which he or she displays a commitment to those explorations (Cote & Levine 2002).

The tradition of psychology is concerned with identity 'within' individual. This subjective route of identity often ends with 'finding oneself'. Sociological tradition of analyzing identity, however, took a separate path though sociologists were mostly influenced by the writing of Erik Erikson who contributes to introduce an interdisciplinary term (Weigert, Teitge, & Teitge, 1986).

Ruiz (1990), a psychological counselor, developed a theory out of his experience of counseling some ethnic groups living in the United States of America namely Hispanic, African, and Asian

who was facing an identity crisis. He talked about five (5) stages of an identity crisis:

At the first stage: Racism, ethnocentrism, and classism contribute to ethnic identity conflict (Ruiz, 1990:33). Other factors like parental messages or injunctions about ethnic identity can either affirm, ignore, negate or denigrate their child's ethnic identity.

At the second stage: three inaccurate beliefs related to ethnic identity emerge: 1. a relationship between group membership and prejudice is established. 2. Escape from prejudice and problems like poverty is possible only through assimilation. No other options like biculturalism, cultural democracy or acculturation (p. 37). 3. The success at this stage is possible through assimilation. Because this will create a socially acceptable image.

The third stage is a consequence stage. At this stage, the fragmentation of identity becomes more apparent. The aspect of ethnic identities such as skin color, name, language, cultural customs and others are rejected or perceived as inferior. Ethnic groups become shamed embarrassed and ashamed for their ethnic aspects (race, language, color, and accent). This leads to a lack of ethnic identification and estrangement from one's own group.

The fourth stage represents a working through the stage, where an ethnic group experience psychological distress. This is caused by an inability to cope with ethnic conflict and they realize that an alien identity no longer suffices.

The final stage represents a greater acceptance of culture, self and ethnicity. They can improve their condition and their identity is appraised.

Relating this theory to the case of Urdu speaking Biharis, they also experienced trauma in the first place after the independence of Bangladesh, as described by many writers. Their distinct identity and Urdu language made them unaccepted in Bangladesh. As time passes by, some attempts were made to repatriate them to Pakistan, Biharis developed prejudices like: we don't belong here, Pakistan is our original home. While some other Biharis assimilated in Bangladeshi society.

The third stage of reflects the condition of Biharis ideally. Fragmentation of the Bihari identity happened as a result of continuous violence and hostile relationship with Bengali people. They were conceived as inferior for their language and customs. They felt embarrassed about their identity in this land as a result of continuous hostility. This leads to the estrangement of Biharis in 66 camps. At the final stage, the acceptance of culture and ethnicity happened to a limited extent. But my interview with some people suggests that they have a quit sound relationship with Bangladeshis. They are the victim of politics, not like Bangladeshi people didn't want to accept them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Political and legal status of Biharis in Bangladesh

There are arguments and counter-arguments over the status of the Bihari community in Bangladesh regarding whether these people are refugees, migrants, stateless people or minorities (Farzana, 2009). As Haider (2016) described, Biharis do not fall under the category of refugee. According to Article 1 A (2) of the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee needs to meet the following criteria: - owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (Refugee convention, 1951: cited in Haider, 2016; p-430).

Under the above definition, the Biharis are not refugees, because they have not fled the country of their residence. Rather, the territory of their residence has seceded from the mother country and became a separate, sovereign, and independent state (Haider, 2016).

Contrasting with some major theories of migration, Farzana (2009) stated that, Biharis are

not migrants as a whole. Only some of them fall under the category especially the railway workers from the provinces of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (UP). These people were encouraged to migrate to East Pakistan by the offer from the first Pakistan President, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, to give them the designation as Central Government employees (Farzana, 2009:224).

Here, another question could be raised about whether Biharis were stateless people. Though it's still a matter of debate the attitude of Pakistan was always positive. As Farzana (2009) said:

“It is certain that the government of Pakistan never treated them as stateless people. Rather they were considered as linguistic minority people among the Bengali-speaking majority in East Pakistan. And the government of Pakistan provided them with different kinds of facilities to encourage Muslims of India to migrate to Pakistan and asked the Pakistani people to accept them cordially.” (p. 225)

Ghosal (2018) called the Bihari community “Invisible refugees”. She said that, much has been written about the Hindu refugees to India, very less is known about the Muslim refugees to Pakistan (Ghosal, 2018: 59). She showed struggle of Muslim ‘returnees’ there settlement in East Pakistan, the hazards and discriminations they faced and policy of the new state of Pakistan in accepting them. It shows how the dream of ‘homecoming’ turned into disillusionment for them. Despite belonging to the same religion, the returnee refugees had confronted issues of differences on the basis of language, culture and region in a country, which was established on the basis of one Islamic identity.

As we know, Bihari people have been displaced two times in history. Firstly, during the India–Pakistan partition in 1947. Within the new environment in Pakistan, after leaving their country of origin, these people tried hard to adjust themselves through participating in economic and political activities. In addition, when the Pakistan government formally accepted them by the Pakistan Citizenship Act, in 1951, all confusion relating to them had ended. However, less than

two and a half decades later they were uprooted again for a second time, following the emergence of Bangladesh, as East Pakistan had separated from united Pakistan to form a new state. This development marked the starting of an identity crisis for the Biharis in Bangladesh, as neither Pakistan nor Bangladesh accepted them as citizens of their country. Even after all these years of independence, Bangladesh appears to be taking revenge on those people who did not support its independence movement (Farzana, 2009:225). However, the 1959 United Nations Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, states that every “Bihari is entitled to Bangladeshi citizenship and Bangladesh cannot deny it.”

The interview with Biharis in Mohammadpur Geneva camp gave us a more comprehensive view of the status of Biharis. While some Biharis take pride in calling themselves ‘Bangladeshi’ (not because they gained citizenship in between 2005-2008, rather the reason was more socio-cultural and political in other sense). A camp dweller (44) responded this way while being asked about what they think about their legal status in Bangladesh:

“I am Bangladeshi, this is my identity and it matters most to me. I never think of myself as Pakistani or Indian. I was born here so this is my home.”

It is often said that, though often considered as a rumor, some of the Bihari people are not satisfied with their life in the camp and they expect them to be repatriated to Pakistan. But the reality, as I have experienced, is quite different. From one of my respondents, I have known that Biharis no longer aspire to repatriate to Pakistan rather they are well off here than they would be in Pakistan if they could ever go.

“You would hardly find anyone who wishes to move to Pakistan. What we will do in Pakistan? We are not acquainted with Pakistani culture. We only speak Urdu, that doesn’t necessarily mean we are Pakistani.” (30)

Trajectory of citizenship

After independence, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman invoked general apology for all and

according to Presidential order, all of the Biharis were given citizenship. The ordinance of 1972 invoked that: Article 2 of the Bangladesh Citizenship (Temporary Provisions) Order (President Order 149 of 1972) provides:

‘Notwithstanding anything contained in any other law, on the commencement of this Order, every person shall be deemed to be a citizen of Bangladesh,

I. Who or whose father or grandfather was born in the territories now comprised in Bangladesh and who was a permanent resident of such territories on the 25th day of March, 1971, and continues to be so resident; or,

II. Who was a permanent resident of the territories now comprised in Bangladesh on the 25 days of March, 1971, and continues to be so resident and is not otherwise disqualified for being a citizen by or under any law for the time being in force”. A plain reading of these two sub-sections would confirm the entitlement of the Biharis to citizenship of Bangladesh” (Rahman, 2015).

However, Article 2B(1) of the Bangladesh Citizenship (Temporary Provisions) Amendment Ordinance 1978 (Ordinance number 7 of 1978) added that a person shall not qualify to be a citizen of Bangladesh if he owes, affirms or acknowledges, expressly or by conduct, allegiance to a foreign state. That Biharis opted to move to Pakistan some of them remain reluctant to stay in Bangladesh and entitled to citizenship.

Malik (2000) shows that Article 2B(1) of the Bangladesh Citizenship (Temporary Provisions) Amendment Ordinance 1978 included a disqualification clause which stated that a person shall not be qualified to be a citizen of Bangladesh if he or she ‘owes, affirms, or acknowledges, expressly or by conduct, allegiance to a foreign state’. Apparently, those who earlier opted for Pakistan, but were unable to relocate, are treated here as disqualified for Bangladeshi citizenship.

After that On April 17, 1973, India and Bangladesh took a major step forward to break the deadlock on the humanitarian issues by setting aside the political problem of recognition

(Bangladesh-India-Pakistan: Agreement On The Repatriation Of Prisoners Of War And Civilian Internees, 1974). UNHCR was involved in the Bihari issue at the request of the then Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The UNHCR's effort was referred to as a "repatriation program". The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also worked side by side with the UNHCR, registered the Biharis for their possible repatriation to Pakistan and kept them in camps for their safety. Subsequently, the two governments of Pakistan and India, with the concurrence of the government of Bangladesh, signed the New Delhi Agreement on 28 August 1973 and its accompanying memorandum. This agreement has clearly stated that:

1. [The Government of Pakistan] agrees initially to receive a substantial number of non-Bengalis (who are stated to have opted for repatriation to Pakistan) from Bangladesh.
2. [Pakistan and Bangladesh will] meet to decide what additional number of persons who may wish to migrate to Pakistan may be permitted to do so.

According to the accompanying Memorandum, Pakistan agreed to include provisions for the simultaneous repatriation of three primary groups, which were:

1. Persons who are domiciled in what was West Pakistan;
2. Employees of the Central Government (of Pakistan) and their families; and
3. Members of the divided families irrespective of their original domicile and thereafter 25,000 others who constitute hardship cases.

These three conditions cover, all those individuals having a permanent residence in West Pakistan (people who may have gone over to East Pakistan temporarily), all employees of the federal government and their families, and a small number of hardship cases (meaning orphans, widows, and others who had no immediate relatives in Bangladesh). However, it is noticeable that Pakistan treated the question of Bihari repatriation as 'hardship cases' rather than as a legal obligation and was slow in giving clearance. It indicated a clear failure of the Bangladesh Government to

come to a clear agreement with Pakistan for taking back the rest of the Biharis, who did not fall in the above three categories, but few cases were considered as hardship cases (Gosh, 2008). In 1974 Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto visited Bangladesh on the invitation by Bangabandhu. He did not much talk about the Bihari issue, so that issue remains unresolved. Pakistan was willing to take no more than 1, 15,000 out of 4, 00,000 who, according to Bangladesh, were eligible for Pakistani citizenship. The reason was economic and political. But as there were several attempts that took place regarding the repatriation of Biharis they created hope for return. Instead of accepting the citizenship of Bangladesh they now start calling themselves "stranded Pakistanis" stuck in Bangladesh and will go to Pakistan one day. These constant expectations made them preserve their identity as a loyal Pakistani and didn't lose their citizenship of Pakistanis. Though several attempts took place to repatriate them in the 1980s and late 1990s, only a small number of Biharis could repatriate to Pakistan and the rest of them still living in Bangladesh.

In her time, Benazir Bhutto, she visited Bangladesh. She refused to discuss Biharis and once she left Bangladesh, she made it clear that the Biharis were not Pakistani citizens. It was a frontal assault on the deal her father had agreed with Bangladesh in 1972 (Ahsan, 2012). As a result of continuous rejection from Pakistan, some Biharis wished to assimilate within Bengali culture mainly second-generation wished to receive citizenship.

Abid Khan VS Government of Bangladesh

In 2003, some 10 of Biharis applied for their citizenship in the High court of Bangladesh. Those petitioners of Bihari descent moved the court to declare in favor of their right to vote after they were not registered by the Election Commission on the ground that they were residents of the Bihari settlement known as Geneva Camp in Dhaka (Paulsen, 2006). The court applied for the Citizenship Order on the petitioners who were born before independence (first group) and held that "having been born in the territories now comprised in Bangladesh, they can very well claim citizenship under Article 2 clause (i) if they are not disqualified, under Article 2B. The High Court

judgment conveniently divided the ten petitioners, all of whom were born in Bangladesh (or East Pakistan as the case may be) into those who were born before and after the country's independence. After the evaluation from legal experts, the High court granted their citizenship (U.S. Committee for Refugees World Refugee Survey 2004 - Bangladesh). This was a landmark for Biharis becoming the citizen of Bangladesh. Subsequently, Biharis were given citizenship and voting rights in 2008 approved by High court. According to the rule of High court "those who are living in Bangladesh since 1971 and born after 1971 will be considered a citizen of Bangladesh (Reuters, 2008).

Life after citizenship

Even though Biharis were offered citizenship in 1972 by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, by President's Order 149 of 1972, roughly half a million Biharis actually opted to stay in Bangladesh and were immediately given citizenship in Bangladesh (Haider, 2018). But some of them denied that offer as they expected repatriation to Pakistan which consequently made them stateless. Pakistan later took a limited number of people to Pakistan and left most of them behind. Since then, the trouble with their national identity began. Though they were never stateless, as a result of continuous negotiation and dialogue with Pakistan & Bangladeshi government, they became marginalized and deprived of many human rights. They concentrated on limited land, their families continue to grow larger but the amount of land never increased because of their marginalized condition. As a Bihari, which is sometimes a perceived marginal status, they neither buy land nor could they afford a piece of land. This is because most of the Biharis lost their land, houses, jobs, and savings during the war of liberation and never got them back. This made them economically vulnerable, as they find it difficult to find a job with their identity as Bihari, living in Bihari camp.

Some of the respondents claimed that citizenship was given for a political purpose. Bihari voters, who obtained the ID card, claimed that candidates came to the only after they got the right to vote. They were used as a vote bank, again, they were

politicized by the political elites. Some candidates never visit the camp again after being elected. Political elites manipulated them, as they alleged: "They came to us, we're asking for votes. Once they got elected, they never came back to the camp. The ID cards were given for voting purposes. If the government approved our citizenship then why they termed us as Urdubashi in the ID card? We voted during the election of 2008, but the elected representatives never came to us again. They did nothing for us."

After all these arduous years, they finally got their citizenship when Abid Khan and associates appealed for their citizenship rights in 2003, as I mentioned earlier. Since then they got their long-expected "identity card", as described by a respondent from Kalshi Bihari camp:

"We got our ID card in 2005 that we had been expecting for a long time. We hoped for a better future when we got ID card" – (50)

But their hope deemed very soon. Haider (2018) stated that, despite legal assertion as a citizen of Bangladesh, Biharis has been facing discrimination in many sectors. Some of the major discrimination, as 15 respondents stated, they are not qualified for admitting in a public school, making passport, government job and purchasing land. Education is a major problem in the Bihari camp, in both Mohammadpur and Kalshi. Haider (2018) writes "In 2011, I found that Bihari children were still often refused access to public schools, as admission requirements include nationality documents, home addresses and details of parental occupations, which many Biharis do not have". The situation hasn't much changed in 2019. One of the respondents from Kalshi camp, 32 years old, stated:

"We have been facing many problems, some of them are apparent like our limited land and overcrowding. But the thing, I feel most necessary for us, is education. Most of the people here are illiterate not because they didn't want to study rather they didn't get the chance. We don't have access to any govt. school. There was a free school in the camp where our children could study with no fees. As you see, most of us can't afford the

cost education, we sent our children there. But it was closed a few days back.”

The problem behind mass illiteracy is extreme poverty and lack of availability of schools. One free school (primary) was the Bihari camp for a long time. But recently this was closed for an unknown reason. This triggers the problem of illiteracy of the children again.

A major problem, which most of the Biharis stated, they can't make a passport. This prevents them from pursuing work abroad and refrain them from many facilities. The reason behind not entitled to a passport was described by a respondent, 22 years old, from Mohammadpur Geneva camp:

“If we want to make a passport, we will need an electricity bill, gas bill, and a valid ID card. We don't use formal electricity in the camp, we don't have an electricity bill to show. Again, there is no gas connection in the camp. Further, we have our ID card but do you know it's not valid everywhere? They categorized us as *Urdu bashi* (Urdu speaker) and our address is this camp. So if you go for a job or making a passport, you would fail to do so. This ID card is not effective like Bengalis rather we are deprived despite having a valid ID card saying that we are a citizen of Bangladesh”.

Life after citizenship hasn't much changed for Biharis, as Haider (2018:34) stated, they are not entitled to basic human rights even after they have been officially declared citizens of Bangladesh by the courts. A respondent from Mohammadpur Geneva camp said that while being asked about their life after citizenship:

“There is no difference between life before and after citizenship regarding rights and facilities. We can't even make a passport. They rather excluded us with an ID card.”

The condition of the Geneva camp hasn't changed since the study of Haider (2018: 34), Muquim (2017), Farzana (2008: 4) & Siddiqui (2013). A visible condition, Haider contends, “In the Geneva camp, 30,000 people used 272 toilets, many of which were defunct, and only 36 bathrooms

existed in this camp”. Due to their crisis of identity, the Bihari people are deprived of both citizenship privileges as well as refugee benefits from the international community. The consequence is that they have to shoulder the impact of this unwanted and unresolved identity in their social, political and economic life (Farzana, 2008: 4)

Relationship between Bengalis and Biharis

When they first arrived in East Bengal, Urdu-speaking migrants were respected as ‘Muhajirs’, religious refugees who had migrated in the search of an Islamic ‘homeland.’ On the surface, religion was the very thing ‘Urdu speakers’ shared with their Bengali hosts (Redclift, 2010; Hashmi, 1998). They were even considered as superior to Bengali people. Pakistani government recognized them as Pakistani in accordance with Ordinance of 1952 (temporary provision), offered them jobs settlement. They were happy here at first started to settle here by purchasing lands, building houses and marrying Bengalis. But their happy times end soon after the riot began in East Pakistan. Siddiqui (2013) stated that some upper class could cope up with the situation at first but for the middle and lower class, it was challenging because of them being radical. The association with the locals, however, was constrained by their linguistic differences (Siddiqui, 2013). The cultural differences between Biharis and Bengalis prevented Bihari peoples from being assimilated here. However, the differences were triggered by the factor that Biharis used to categories them as better Muslims than Bengali Muslims. Biharis openly supported West Pakistani elites. Pakistani elites guided them with providing job opportunities in local industries which made Biharis feel racially superior over Bengali people.

The problem began when Bengali people opposed Jinnah after he openly dictated “Urdu and Urdu alone shall be the state language of Pakistan”. This was eye-opening for Bengali people, they realized non-Bengalis were empowered with few favors over them (Hashmi, 1998).

During the time of war of liberation, some Biharis openly supported West Pakistani rule and joined the forces of an anti-Bengali campaign like Al

Badr and Al-Shams. As discussed earlier, Biharis migrated to East Pakistan, assumed it is a province of Pakistan. Later when the riot began between East and West Pakistan, as an expression of patriotism, they supported the West Pakistani army. Some Biharis were alleged to join the killing mission of the West Pakistani army and killed many people. After the war of liberation ended on December 16, 1971, by the surrender of the Pakistani army, the anger of East Bengali people broke out. Biharis were brutalized by the Bengali militant after December. The action was bolstered by the young movement which was led by University students. Biharis were robbed, attacked, and killed by Bengali militant as an expression of communal frenzy which was supported by petty bourgeoisie and lumpen proletariats (Hashmi, 1998). Sunday Times of London reported that some of 100,000 were killed during post-war anarchy.

However, those events facilitated the detestable identity of Bihari people in Bangladesh. This detestable identity further made the way to the social exclusion of Biharis in Bangladesh which has been lasting for around 50 years. As an attempt to secure their lives in Bangladesh, ICRC established several camps in Dhaka and other districts. After so many years, the condition of Bihari people in this land and their relationship with Bengali people are needed to explore.

Despite living here for more than 50 years, a distinct cultural identity still persists in the camp. Some of the Biharis have protected their cultural identity for a long time in the face of continuous Bengali cultural intervention in the camp. I have talked with some younger and older people for understanding the difference in the thought process. Some young people talked about their loose connection with the family and preference of Bengali culture instead. A 28 years old inhabitant of Mohammadpur Geneva camp said that:

“My family is conservative. They used to maintain their ancestors' culture but I don't. I am Bangladeshi, I don't want to follow other culture.”

The situation is somewhat different among the older generation. They tend to preserve their

ancestor's culture here. It was found that Biharis tried to protect their identity until the third generation. After that, they started losing their uniqueness and assimilation occurs. The reason behind losing the uniqueness of the culture and assimilation is continuous interaction, association and contiguity. Inter-marriage between two distinct cultural groups, however, influences the assimilation. We have seen cultural integration among many cultures due to inter-marriage. One of the most vibrant examples of this is the case of the United States of America where inter-marriage is common among various ethnic, racial, linguistic, and nationalist groups. This inter-marriage contributed to cultural intermixing- the new cultural order in society. Returning to the case of Biharis, inter-marriage between Bengali and Biharis is common and apparent. Zilani Sarder, president of BBRA (Bangladesh Bihari Rehabilitation Association) stated that:

“My two daughters are married to two Bengali men and my son married a Bengali girl. Besides that, there are many people who got their boy married to Bengali girl and their daughter married Bengali boy. It is common in the camp and we don't assume it as strange in any sense.”

Inter-marriage has become so common that people don't bother about it anymore. Religion plays an important role here. Another respondent, 50 years old Kalshi camp dweller said in this regard:

“I saw many Bihari people marrying Bengali people and many Bengali marrying our girls. The situation was different at the beginning, but it has completely changed now. Some Bengali may assume we are bad people out of misconception, still, inter-marriage is happening.”

This two example shows that the case of inter-marriage is common among the Bengalis and Biharis. In regard to cultural intermixing, most of the respondents stated that the mixing is happening and they are happy because it will further contribute to gain legitimacy in this land. A respondent (44) in this regard stated:

“We are here for more than 50 years. Lots of things happened in all these years. So we can't say we haven't influenced by the Bengali culture. Yes,

lots of our activities like food habits, dress up, and lifestyle too influenced by Bengali culture. I feel myself as Bengali people so I'm open to it."

But a respondent (30) raised a point about being accepted by Bangladeshi people. He thinks that there is a superior-inferior relationship between them and Bangladeshis for them being poor. The level of acceptance depends on the economic wellbeing and social status; as he said:

"We accepted that we are living inside the camp for our fate and we also accepted the citizenship of Bangladesh. But we are poor, who cares about our opinion. The real question is: did Bangladeshi people accept us? As they are the upper class, their opinion matters most in this regard."

Some of the Bihari people still afraid about the fact that how Bengalese sees them. Intermarriage helped them to eradicate their fear of interacting with Bengalese. The relation establishes through marriage is not like an ordinary relation. It inaugurates a strong bonding for life, which reflects in the case of Bihari people.

The above discussion might indicate a positive relationship between Bengalis and Biharis. But in some cases that relationship is different and some conflicting matters played a dominant role to break the harmony and bring about conflict between them here some conflicting matters will be discussed

Land encroachment

As Hashmi (1998) said, militant Bengali started possessing the land of Biharis as they ran away during the post-war period in the face of continuous life threats. Most of the Biharis lost their belongings, houses and lands. Their lands and houses couldn't be recaptured after the war as those were dictated as "property of the enemy". ZilaniSarder stated that:

"We had our houses in Mirpur. We lost our property during the war which made us landless. In the camp, we have limited access to land, allotted for a family to a very limited extent."

Issue of land neither solved nor could they claim that back. All the lands were possessed by the people as the land of the enemy. Another respondent (50) said that:

"We had two houses in old Dhaka (now). We ran away under the threat of the Bengali militant group and ended up in this camp. We never get them back."

Most of the Biharis migrated in 1947 partition were non-agricultural people, settled in the urban area. Some lower class of people settled in the rural areas. Some of the urban dwellers Biharis were professional and well-off economically. They bought land and build houses with the help of West Pakistani elites. But the war of liberation made their lives miserable and in the postwar period, they were very vulnerable to lose their lives by the Bengali militant.

However, the possession still continues in some portion of the camp in Kalshi. Some Bengali powerful people still trying to possess the allotted land of the Biharis. One of the respondents (50) alleged Bengalis for taking over their land and made buildings:

"Here, you can see the building, used to be our land back then. But we poor people couldn't protect our lands. Our lands were taken over by over by the Bengali people by force."

Some of the Biharis even alleged the government officials for taking over their lands.

Electricity issue

Very recently in October 2019, a clash between police and Bihari people happened for electricity issues, reported by Dhaka tribune. The incident occurred due to their protest against continuous power cuts. The mob then was taken under controlled by the police. The authority alleged that Biharis are now a citizen of Bangladesh so they have to pay the bills like everyone else. Earlier the bills were paid by the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (Dhaka Tribune, October 15, 2019). This is one of the cases that indicate the cold relationship between Bengalis and Biharis

which can break out at any time. In regard to this, Kalshi camp dweller (30) stated that:

“We are still living like refugees. We are deprived of many opportunities. There is no way we can afford the electricity bills. We know that the electricity bills are paid by the Bihari funds that were created by IFRC but recently governments want us to pay the bills. But we don’t have the condition to pay the bills as you see.”

Besides electricity, Biharis don’t have access to Gas. They have limited access to water from WASA which they think not sufficient for them. Several water tapes are situated inside the camps both in Mohammadpur and Kalshi which maybe not sufficient for this huge amount of people. They have a good relationship with some lower-class Bengali families. Through them, they could access Gas and other facilities. The unequal distribution of facilities, however, affects the relationship between Bengalis and Biharis.

Drug dealings and conflict

Khan and Samaddar (2007) stated the Bihari camps as the center of insecurity, crime, violence and conflict. This is true in some cases. The over-concentration of people in a very limited area made it vulnerable to many crimes and violence. The Daily Star, the popular daily newspaper of Bangladesh, reported that 27 peoples were arrested due to having a connection with drug dealings (The daily star, 2June 2018). Another report by Dhaka tribune on 27March 2018 asserted that Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) recovered a massive amount of Yabba and Marijuana from the Geneva camp, Mohammadpur. Over 100 peoples from the camps were detained. For this reason, some Bengali people assume Bihari camp as a center of drugs and crimes. As one Bengali from Mohammadpur said:

“Camp is the center of crime and drugs. You can find several types of drugs in the camp very easily. I don’t hate Bihari people but these drug dealings obviously make me hate some of them.” (25).

The reason behind some of the Biharis involvement in the drug dealings is their destitute condition. Some of them may not prefer to do drug

dealings but the situation made them do that. They are not entitled to citizenship rights and rehabilitation, this in result triggers the crime in the camp, as respondents indicated.

The attitude of Bengali people toward Biharis

As pointed out earlier that the negative discernment about Bihari and Bihari camp prevailed among the Bangladeshis (At least among a number of Bangladeshis). Negative discernment toward the Biharis came from the conception that they are sort of war criminals and collaborated with the Pakistani occupation army (Hashmi, 1998). The difference between two cultures, nonetheless, triggered the perception of Bengalis toward Urdu speaking Biharis at the beginning, marked them as ‘other’ at some points. Sen (1999) stated that: “The culture of the Bihari refugees contributed to the definition of the ethnic boundary between them and the majority Bengali residents” (Sen, 1999).

These conceptions might change after all these years, but the adverse attitude hasn’t had gone. Bengalis, generally, assume that Biharis do not belong here, they just stuck here. Some even find some differences between Bengalese and Biharis:

“They are a bit more aggressive than us. They speak a language that blurs their identity as Pakistani or Bengali. We fought for language right and to wipe out Urdu from our land. In such a situation, speaking Urdu might represent something else to us.” (24).

Bangladeshi people are also aware of the fact that GOB accepted the citizenship of the Urdu speaking community and their living in slum-like camp should be coming to an end. But Bangladeshis still question their loyalty to this country, as they can’t get over the fact that they supported Pakistan during the war of liberation. As one of the respondents (30) said:

“I know the kind of situation they are in right now. They should be received rehabilitation from the government. But I am not sure whether they deserve it or not, as per I assume they still cherish for Pakistan. I saw some of the Biharis still keeping the photos of Jinnah as their father of the

nation. Can it be considered as loyalty? No. They should be more loyal to Bangladesh if they want privileges.”

Most of the Bengali respondents revealed that they often visit the Geneva camp for eating purposes. There are several reputed chaps and Biryani shops inside the camp which encourage them to come here. This is also found that Bengalis go there only for visiting Biryani and Kebab shops. One of the respondents, who lives very close to Bihari camp, exposed that he visited the camp only for 4 or 5 times despite living here for 20 years:

“I have been living here for more than 20 years, but I rarely go inside the camp. The camp is very nasty (apparently) place and congested too. I used to go there for buying meat and vegetable earlier, but I hardly go now.” (24).

Some Bengalis also hold a view that third-generation Biharis could accept Bangladesh as their homeland. They are now going to Universities, doing jobs and business and participating in the sports. One of the respondents (23) revealed that:

“I have many Bihari friends, with whom, I play cricket regularly. They are just like us. Their parents might not behave in the way they do, but they are Bangladeshi now.”

CONCLUSION

The condition of the Bihari community remains destitute and indigent. Abject poverty, illiteracy, living in a congested place, social exclusion and deprivation of basic rights made their condition miserable. The ostensible lack of fundamental rights, poverty, and the deficiency in education and other indicators have become serious problems (Muquim, 2017). Though they were ratified as the citizen of Bangladesh since 2008, after a case filed by Abid Khan, the promise of citizenship never see the light. Since 1971, the Bihari community passes through many ups and downs. They have become a politicized population throughout much of the history of Bangladesh, and currently occupy a space that makes many motivated to live in the country, while a few want

to opt-out of their situation by moving elsewhere (Muquim, 2017: 189).

However, most of the people from the Bihari community don't want to go elsewhere than the camp, rather want rehabilitation from the government. Bangladeshis have a good relationship with the Bihari community as I discussed, except a few issues, which made them separated. Biharis now prefer to call them as Bangladeshi Muslim. Their yearning for “home” has been fading away. Most of the Biharis don't consider any differences between Bengali and Biharis without language. Biharis speak both Bengali and Urdu simultaneously which in consequence leads them to integrate into society. Some of them claimed that they don't expose their identity in public, considering public shame, tries to assimilate in Bangladeshi society. Many claimed, they hide their identity as Bihari when they went for making a passport or taking rent. Those who could afford to live outside the camp usually don't identify them as Biharis, as a revealing identity means deprivation from several rights.

The solution for the Bihari community to exterminate their problem of identity could be assimilating to Bangladeshi society. Like the Saidpur Bihari community revealed by Muquim (2017:190). Saidpur Bihari community has mostly integrated into Bangladeshi society. Among the Community, they have become self-reliant by coming out of poverty, and now have a collective identity as a majority, and some members have even been engaged in local politics.

But the situation is complicated, more than it seems, as Haider (2016) said: the majority of the Biharis consider the integration of the Biharis as a challenging task, but not impossible for the GOB. They assume that socially how the Bengalis accept the Biharis against their questionable track records is an important issue. Economically, it is a great challenge for the GOB to rehabilitate them, where millions of Bengalis are living in poverty. Culturally, the Biharis' separation from the mainstream Bengalis is seen by many Bengalis as an element of alienation rather than assimilation. Biharis' attitude towards repatriation has changed radically. Now, most of them want to live in

Bangladesh and don't even consider Pakistan as idealized home.

In conclusion, Biharis' integration in Bangladesh is possible only through securing basic human rights and rights entitled to citizenship. Chowdhury (2002) suggested an understanding of ethno-nationalism through the state's administrative practices and policies which lead to creating a favorable condition for various social groups to organize themselves, in regard to the Jhumma nationalist identity in CHT which is relevant to the case of Biharis too. Government benevolence toward this scattered population can be a turning point. Now, they don't want to go back to Pakistan as they once asked for. They want a wider acceptance and rehabilitation program. If GOB can provide them with such privileges, researcher assumes they would be assimilated into Bangladeshi society.

Competing Interest

The author declares no competing interest.

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