

The Forgotten Community: Camp Based Urdu Speaking People in Bangladesh

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Abstract:

State formation in South Asia has always been associated with large scale population movement and has an impact on the relationship of majority and minority. This paper focuses on the tragic saga of a small group of people who are victims of this state formation process. The Biharis or camp based Urdu speaking people are sometimes labeled as stateless, refugees or linguistic minorities. They are deprived of the basic human rights due to their undefined identity. Their plight has been ignored for a long time and it is causing immense problem to the community itself and to the socio-economical development of Bangladesh. It has been argued in this paper that granting citizenship and eventual rehabilitation and assimilation with larger population will provide durable solution to this problem.

Introduction:

A group of people do not fit in the standard definition of refugees of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Pakistan and Bangladesh—the countries they claim as their own, do not accept them as their citizens. They have been stateless for last thirty six years and they are the creation of the process of state formation in South Asia. These people who are presently staying in Bangladesh are commonly known as ‘Biharis’ or ‘Stranded Pakistanis. The most significant identification of this group is that they speak in Urdu. This group of people has been deprived of basic human rights for the last three decades due to their nebulous identity. There are around 250000-300000 Urdu speaking people living in different parts of Bangladesh. (Lynch, 2005). Recently, in September 2008, the inter-ministerial decision by the Caretaker Government of Bangladesh has decided to accept a portion of these people who were born after 1971 as the citizens of Bangladesh. (Lynch, 2007). As a result to this, the Election Commission of Bangladesh registered these people as voters and granted national ID cards. But there are still various issues which need to be pondered. In this paper an attempt will be made to disseminate the information of this humanitarian crisis that has been taking place in Bangladesh for long.

Background:

The word 'Bihari' literally means a person who belongs to the state of Bihar of India. In Bangladeshi context any one who speaks Urdu is considered to be a Bihari whether that person comes from Bihar or not. The history of this Urdu speaking community or popularly known as the Biharis in Bangladesh goes back to the partition of India in 1947. During the Partition of British-India, around one million Urdu speaking Muslims from the Indian provinces of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, West Bengal moved to East Pakistan, which later became Bangladesh. (Abrar, Redclift, Forthcoming) Their movement to East Pakistan was due to a desire to escape from communal bloodshed and to preserve their 'Islamic way of life'. In November 1946 thousands of Muslims were killed in the State of Bihar. The death-toll was so high that even Gandhi was greatly distressed and threatened to go on a fast unto death if the Hindus didn't end violence against the Muslims (SPBI, 2006). Reportedly up to 30,000 Muslims were killed during that period and this incident is known as the Great Bihar Killing (SPBI, 2006). Many of those Muslims from the upheaval in Bihar were accommodated in camps in West Bengal. Upon creation of Pakistan, all of these and thousands of other refugees moved to East Pakistan

Biharis came to East Pakistan in different phases. They were considered as citizens of Pakistan under the Pakistani Citizenship Act of 1951 (SPBI, 2006). During the period of United Pakistan this community's sacrifice was acknowledged by Mohammed Ali Jinnah who urged educated and skilled Biharis to relocate to East Pakistan and help in the construction of the new country (SPBI, 2006). While Bengalis were overwhelmingly employed in the agricultural sector, the Biharis, as full citizens of Pakistan, came to be involved in the industrial sector, small business, trade and commerce. Unfortunately from the very beginning, these Bihari Muslims failed to integrate with the Bengali society because of their cultural and linguistic differences. In their new country they felt alienated in terms of language, custom, tradition and culture. In fact they found themselves as linguistic minority in a Bengali speaking East Pakistan. Although, East Pakistan was a Muslim region but it's nationalism was based on language. That is why, while for the Muslim migrants from West Bengal and Assam it was easier to integrate with the local people because of common language and cultural identity, it was equally challenging for the Urdu speaking Muslims to assimilate in the Bengali Muslim society (Ghosh, 2007). Eventually, this Urdu speaking community started associating themselves with the fellow West Pakistanis and helped them take over the economic and political power in East Pakistan. Biharis used to identify with West Pakistani people and received greater privileges from the Central Government. The Pakistan Government kept them isolated from the mainstream of the urban society by building separate colonies and housing estates in the various cities and towns of the eastern province.

Thus a distance with the Bengali speaking people of East Pakistan was taking place. The Bengalis also perceived this group as privileged because of their affinity with the ruling

society. Non-absorption into East Pakistan inclined Biharis to join the West Pakistani elite in opposing the Bengali reaction. For example, in different workplaces when the Bengali workers protested against West Pakistani owners, the Bihari workers did not join. In some cases they joined the anti-Bengali riots in Khulna, Narayanganj, Dhaka and Chittagong (Ghosh, 2007). They supported the adoption of Urdu as the official language in East Pakistan, where the language of the majority was Bengali and opposed the Bengalis' Language Movement in 1952 (Farzana, 2008). Further, in the 1954 provincial elections and in the 1970 general elections, they extended their support to the Muslim League, which symbolized and championed the domination of the West Pakistanis over the Bengalis. Their intension was to help the West Pakistani ruling elites to control East Pakistan politically and economically. The year-long isolation with the mainstream population and the fear of being discriminated as linguistic minority prompted them to take such actions which ultimately resulted in the growing mistrust between these two groups of people.

Before the outbreak of war in 1971, it is reported that thousands of Biharis were killed in Chittagong, Jessore, Khulna, Mymensingh, Rangpur and Saidpur (Ghosh, 2007). During the Liberation War of Bangladesh, a section Biharis collaborated with West Pakistani Army. They were actively involved in providing information on Bengali freedom fighters, the supporters and sympathizers of the war. They also helped the Pakistan Army to abduct, arrest and eventually kill many Bangladeshis. Violence against women was another heinous crime conducted by these collaborators. The most significant crime was systematic killing of Bengali intellectuals in the last days of the war. Due to their active 'anti-independence' role and previous alienation from mainstream Bengali society, this community was subject to political persecution during and aftermath of the Liberation War.

After the independence of Bangladesh, the Pakistani army evacuated and these Biharis were left behind. Bangladesh scorned the Biharis for having supported the enemy and an anti-Bihari sentiment instigated political persecution and their homes and properties were taken over by the Bengalis. After the creation of Bangladesh, almost all Biharis were fired from their jobs on various pretenses. Bihari children were expelled from schools. Bihari pensions, bank accounts and investments were seized. Most Bihari homes and businesses were declared abandoned/enemy properties and therefore confiscated under cover of law. Several Government promulgations facilitated the dispossession of Bihari properties. As a result, by mid 1972 nearly one million Biharis found themselves in temporary camps set up around the country by the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) (Kumar, 2005).

Bangladesh Government announced the Presidential Order 149 in 1972- as a step towards offering the Bangladeshi citizenship to these Bihari people. According the Government sources nearly 600000 Biharis accepted the offer (Kumar, 2005). Later, these people assimilated with the larger population and settled down properly. But at that time, a survey was conducted by the ICRC which found that 539669 Biharis wanted to go back to Pakistan as it was their country of nationality (Kumar, 2005). ICRC started registration for the repatriation of these people without any legal sanction from both the countries.

Later, Pakistan refused to recognize all these Urdu speaking people as her bona fide citizens who already declared themselves as Stranded Pakistanis by registering with the ICRC. Islamabad showed little interest in repatriation because to them they were basically Indian refugees. During the first year of post liberation period this community was quite confident that Pakistan would welcome them as their loyal citizens. From their side, all efforts were made through ICRC and other sources to influence the concerned authorities that the only solution to this problem was repatriation to Pakistan.

Islamabad was forced to look into this issue when Dhaka linked diplomatic relations with her for the repatriation of the Biharis who had opted for Pakistan. Under the 1973 Delhi Agreement and as well as Tripartite Agreement of 1974 Pakistan agreed to receive these people. By 1974, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) facilitated the return of 170000 Biharis (Farzana, 2008). After that UNHCR had to suspend the repatriation process for lack of fund. Bangladesh Government raised the issue several times but Islamabad was always least interested on this issue and their stand has always been ambiguous. Government of Pakistan has used every excuse imaginable; fear of ethnic strife, unavailability of resources, lack of funds and the list goes on and on.

One year after the independence of Bangladesh, the unmanageable situation of the Biharis led the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to bring the issue before the UN and requested the Secretary General Kurt Waldheim to extend his help to ensure the repatriation of the stranded people. But the Bhutto government, from the very beginning, was reluctant to repatriate the Urdu-speaking Biharis due to domestic resistance and political consideration. This issue was also discussed in the Commonwealth Conference of 1975. But all these diplomatic initiatives did not bring any positive result. In 1977, Pakistan's Foreign Secretary visited Dhaka and agreed to take 25,000 "hardship cases" through the international agencies. Subsequently, 4,790 people out of 25,000 were repatriated. But the whole process was stopped again because of Pakistan's internal political instability (Farzana, 2008). In 1982, an international conference took place in Geneva with the initiative of former British MP Lord Ennals. Different national and international organizations attended this conference. Consequently Lord Ennals established an international Resettlement Trust to finance the resettlement procedure of the Biharis.

The Government of General Zia-ul- Haq was ready to take back these people if sufficient financial assistance could be managed. A repatriation and resettlement plan in Pakistan was set up with the help of an international NGO. Rabita-al- Alam-al Islami (RAAI), the charity set up by Saudi Arabia, took up the task of providing the money to move the Biharis to Pakistan. But as violence increased against the identity of these migrants in Sindh, Islamabad probably got RAAI to back off from the job. In 1986, RAAI announced it had \$270 million for the Biharis but in fact it was money collected by the London-based Resettlement Trust run by Lord Ennals. This could have the moment everyone was waiting for but at this stage Pakistan backed off, saying it will deal only with RAAI. In 1988 Lord Ennals got General Zia to agree to take 250,000 Biharis but the death of President Zia-ul Hauq stopped this process and Zia's successors didn't respect the commitment (Ghosh, 2007).

Benazir Bhutto, after becoming Prime Minister of Pakistan in 1988 soon faced some difficulties in resolving the issue of repatriation because of serious domestic challenges from her home province of Sindh, where Biharis were supposed to be repatriated. Though she promised to take immediate effective steps but that assurance proved ineffective. There were protests against the repatriation of these Bihari people in Sindh. To them repatriation programme was a threat to their ethnic and economic cohesion (Crossette, 1989). At the beginning of 1989, under the joint initiatives taken by the UNHCR and RAAI, the government of Pakistan agreed to repatriate the first batch of 500 Biharis from Bangladesh. But at the same time, the Foreign Ministry of Pakistan explained that the collected money under RAAI was not sufficient for the total repatriation programme (Farzana, 2008). To Ms. Bhutto's Government, the solution was permanent settlement of these people in Bangladesh and Pakistan's role was to help collecting the financial resources from Muslim world for the resettlement process. The Benazir government was under heavy pressure from various Sindhi nationalist organizations such as the Sindh National Alliance, the Awami National Party, the Sindh Student Federation and the Democratic Students' Federation to oppose the process of repatriation of Biharis. The opposition leader, the Chief Minister of Punjab, Nawaz Sharif took advantage of Benazir's dilemma. All these factors influenced the Benazir's government. So, during her Dhaka visit in 1989, she subtly avoided the stranded Pakistani issue by labeling it as a 'very complex problem.' Afterwards, domestic political development in the respective countries hampered the progress of repatriation (Farzana, 2008).

Despite domestic opposition, Nawaz Sharif speeded up the process of repatriation within a year of taking over power. In this line, the *Rabita Trust Board* (RTB), under the chairmanship of Nawaz Sharif established three committees on November 11, 1991 to accelerate the repatriation process. It agreed that initially a batch of 325 Biharis of 63 families would be repatriated to start the "symbolic repatriation" by December 31, 1992 and subsequently, repatriation would take place phase by phase as funds became available. However, because of the increasing domestic protests against the repatriation the government of Pakistan could not keep the word to start "symbolic repatriation" by December 13, 1992 (Farzana, 2008).

The process of repatriation further suffered a serious setback because of Mrs. Butto's hard-line attitude during her second term in office. From the unhappy experience of Mrs. Bhutto's earlier tenure, the stranded Bihari community became deeply suspicious about the sincerity of Pakistan over early repatriation. The issue remained undecided during the second term of Nawaz Sharif in office. President Pervez Musharraf showed interest in solving this issue on humanitarian ground but nothing concrete has happened. According to a report 175000 Bihari people have been repatriated from 1974 to 1994 (Kumar, 2005).

Current Socio-economical Situation:

In December 2008 general election in Bangladesh, a portion of these Bihari people who were born after 1971 were able to cast their vote for the first time as the citizens of Bangladesh. They are also registered for the National ID card which is associated with getting many benefits in social, economic and political life. In September 2008, Caretaker Government of Bangladesh took this laudable step to reduce their stateless situation.

But prior to this, the stranded Biharis in Bangladesh suffered from identity crisis. This was the root cause of their deprivation of basic human rights. For instance, in Bangladesh they are viewed as ‘foreigners’ (Pakistanis) that are stranded. They have been temporarily accommodated in refugee camps, but they are not regarded as ‘refugees’ in the conventional sense. According to the Article 6(A) (1) of the Statute of UNHCR and Article 1(A) (2) of the Refugee Convention 1951, a “refugee” is a person who belongs to the following three criteria:

- (a) the person is outside the country of his nationality, or in the case of stateless persons, outside the country of habitual residence;
- (b) the person lacks natural protection; and
- (c) the person fears persecution.

All these three criteria are apparently applicable to the Biharis in Bangladesh. However, according to the cessation clauses of the 1951 Convention and the UNHCR Statutes of 1950, a person shall stop being a refugee if, among others:

- (1) h/she has voluntarily re-established him/herself in the country which h/she left or outside which h/she remained owing to fear of persecution,

The case of the Bihari Muslims is converged by this clause. Because, firstly, they voluntarily migrated to East Pakistan in 1947 from India; and secondly, in Pakistan they enjoyed protection by the state and were full-fledged citizens after 1951 according to Section 3(d) of the Pakistan Citizenship Act, which reads:

“At the commencement of this Act every person shall be deemed to be a citizen of Pakistan who before the commencement of this Act migrated to the territories now included in Pakistan from any territory in the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent outside those territories with the intention of residing permanently in those territories.”

Therefore, the case of the Biharis was not considered a refugee situation after the partition of 1947 as they were rehabilitated and naturalized in their newly demarcated territories. After the independence of Bangladesh, all of a sudden these people became stateless as they identified themselves as Pakistanis. But on the one hand, they were not refugees as they were not displaced from their place of residence, and on the other hand, they were stranded outside of their country where their status remained unrecognized (Farzana, 2008).

The Bihari people have been in a stateless situation for the last 37 years. According to the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons defines a stateless person as “a person who is not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law.” These are individuals who may be registered as foreigners or non-national residents. They may be categorized as nationals of another state, even if the other state does not consider them as nationals. The camp based older population who wanted to go back to Pakistan has no hope for repatriation and views it as a closed chapter. On the other hand, the new generation Bihari population aged between 18 to 35 wants to have Bangladeshi citizenship (Abrar and Redclift, Forthcoming). Born in Bangladesh, they are already fluent in Bengali language and Bangladeshi culture. Pakistan is reluctant to take them back because Islamabad thinks that this might create ethno-geographical imbalance and Bangladesh still considers them as traitors. In June 2003 Supreme Court of Bangladesh granted citizenship to 10 Biharis (Born before and after 1971) but it does not address the larger problem. Bangladesh Governments in past did not take any worthwhile measure to absorb them politically, socially and economically. Following the departure of ICRC in 1973, the Bangladeshi government took over the management of the camps, transferring responsibility to the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation from 1975.

Today the number of Bihari population is estimated between 250000-300000. They live in 116 settlements which are located largely in urban areas in 13 districts around the country (Abrar and Redclift, Forthcoming). The living condition in these settlements or camps is dreadful both in terms of hygiene and economy. They are overcrowded with no proper sanitation system and lack basic facilities. Initially set up as temporary quarters, conditions in these settlements worsen as the population has grown. As many as 12 individuals are said to reside in a room ten feet by eight feet in size. Being frustrated with the camp life, sometimes the Bihari people escape from the camp and try to integrate themselves within the local community. Among them, very few are fortunate enough to survive and ultimately become able to give their children education. In most cases, they fail to survive by themselves and eventually return to the camps due to their inability to adjust to the social and economic conditions. The camp authorities are neither able nor serious to maintain a healthy sanitation facility. The drainage system is extremely poor, which causes water logging very easily. Therefore, contagious diseases especially diarrhea and dengue are very common. This condition exists in other camps throughout the country. According to a recent survey report of *Refugees International*, in Rangpur City (in the northwestern part of Bangladesh), there are only two working wells and ten latrines for the 5,000 residents of Camp Three (Farzana, 2008). The situation is even worse in Mirpur’s Millat Camp, where there is only one latrine for 6,000 people (Farzana, 2008). Moreover, there is an acute scarcity of safe drinking water in every camp. Deep tube well is the main source of water in camps, but there is also acute shortage of tube well in every camp. For example, in Hatikhana camp (Saidpur) there are only 9 tube wells for 400 families (Farzana, 2008). Most of the camps do not have a single medical clinic. As a result, infant mortality due to lack of medical care is quite common. Inaccessibility to proper medical facilities make women vulnerable to unsafe delivery, chronic diseases like polio, Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) and other health problems. A lot of women die every year without getting proper medical care. As these

people are very poor, they cannot afford to take medical facilities from other government and private institutions.

The economic condition of the Bihari people is equally appalling due to the financial insecurity. During the initial years they were mainly dependent on the relief economy, but over the years the amount of relief has decreased significantly. The community cannot get access to any government service due to their camp address and undefined status. Moreover, the Bihari people have no ownership of fixed properties such as land and ponds. The economic condition of the camps located outside Dhaka area is particularly adverse because the opportunity of getting employed in agricultural activities is limited. People in those camps are involved in various activities within the camp boundaries. Whereas the camp inhabitants in Dhaka city can sometimes get work on daily basis such as rickshaw pullers and construction workers though they often face discrimination and harassment. Those who are involved in different economic activities also discriminated in the job market because of the lack of 'papers of citizenship' (Abrar and Redclift, Forthcoming). They also face difficulties in trying to access or rent offices or living space in attempts to leave the camps and be assimilated in the wider society. A good number of old people have turned to begging and an estimated 20,000 unmarried girls are vulnerable to human trafficking and forced prostitution for living (Farzana, 2008). The camp areas serve as safe hideouts for criminals, and as a consequence many camp inhabitants are directly involved in various criminal activities to earn their livelihood.

The Bihari camps have almost no educational facilities. And even if there are schools, the poor people cannot afford to send their children to the school. In many cases, if Bihari families want to send their children to school outside the camps, they fail to enroll because of some technical requirements such as nationality, home address or parents' occupation. The current number of schools in the camps across the country is only 500 (Farzana, 2008). It is reported that only one percent of the Bihari children attend school, which reflects the high rate of illiteracy in the camps.

There is lack of police protection in these camps and they are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Life in these camps is also insecure as these settlements have turned into centers of criminal activities and lawlessness. Outsiders have easy access to these camps and they indulge in criminal activities like selling drugs and illegal weapons. Land evictions, encroachment and from time to time the withdrawal of power supply have created further problems.

Urdu speakers who live outside the camps have largely gained access to voting rights. Camp residents, however, have been denied the same opportunity for last three decades. As mention earlier, a decision was taken by the Bangladeshi government to grant Biharis or Urdu-speaking people born after the time of independence and those who were minors during the time of liberation the right to be registered as voters and to receive national identity cards (Lynch, 2007). Through this measure, almost half of the stateless Biharis,

hosted by Bangladesh for 36 years, have found a remedy to their lack of an effective nationality.

Facilitating Future Progress:

As these people are deprived of the basic human rights for along time, granting citizenship and eventually rehabilitation outside the camp and integration are the best possible solutions to this humanitarian crisis. It should be mentioned that these camps are the centers of many illegal activities like trafficking of small arms and prostitutions, hence creating many social problems. At the same Bangladesh is also not in a position to utilize this workforce properly. Therefore, Bangladesh government's decision of granting them citizenship is indeed an eminent step to eradicate the humanitarian problem. As Bangladesh itself is a developing country, this huge task cannot be done solely by the Bangladeshi government. In this regard, government of Pakistan can provide meaningful assistance. They can give financial support to our government for the resettlement and rehabilitation programme. And can mobilize international organizations to help these two governments for practical solution to this problem. Further research needs to be done to identify the practical solution of resettling this group of people. At the same time, even though young generation Biharis have already obtained a national ID card, we need to observe whether they will be benefitted from this in near future. The expectation of these people as well as the support of mainstream Bengali population should be carefully combined. In the mean time, Bangladesh government can restore relief for immediate needs and can take help from the national and international NGOs to make basic amenities available to the camp dwellers including clean drinking water, toilets, medical clinics and schools. Rehabilitation programme will also need financial support from international organizations and moral support from the public at large. At the same time community mobilizing and awareness building should be taken care of. Young generation Bihari people have organizations of their own. Through these organizations they have already shown keen interest to become citizens of Bangladesh. Organizations like Al-Falah conducts education programme, computer training programme to help the young Biharis become more efficient workforce. Not only the state but also mainstream population should support these initiatives. In this regard, media, civil society, research organizations can play an important role in mobilizing public opinion. International organizations like UNHCR can take a proactive role to provide relief consistent with its mandate to address stateless people in the same manner as refugees and can play an important role by arranging financial aide to ease the workload of Bangladesh government.

Conclusion:

It is argued in this paper that the camp based Urdu speaking people or the 'Biharis' are the unique example of statelessness and could not get access to many basic rights due to their undefined identity. They are living in miserable condition which is also creating various social problems in the country. Bangladesh and Pakistan both are signatories of

many UN Conventions; it is high time that a practical solution to this problem should be taken. The new government of Pakistan should look into the issue and facilitate the return of old generation of Bihari people to Pakistan, who wishes to reunite with their family. However, the recent past has shown quite clearly that Pakistan government is reluctant in helping Bangladesh on this issue. So for the benefit of the humanitarian crisis and overall social imbalance created in Bangladesh due to a political aftermath (of which Bangladesh is least to blame), the intervention of other Muslim (or non Muslim) communities is needed to help the Bihari people assimilate with larger society as the rightful citizens of Bangladesh.

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