

“Negotiating the Social Fabric”

A Case Study: How New Generations Urdu-Speaking Biharis
Redefine their Place in Bangladeshi Society

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh's history left disruptive scars on its people, with rising nationalism and polarisation along the lines of one's role in the Liberation War. Accordingly, the members of the—historically controversial—Urdu-speaking linguistic minority, often referred to as 'Biharis', find themselves on the receiving end of Bangladesh's cultural politics, facing discrimination in every aspect of their lives. In recent years, however, the community can be considered 'in transition', with the new generations fully recognising Bangladesh as their homeland. Through a combination of extensive literature review, thorough digital investigation, two online expert interviews and one focus group with Bihari camp residents, this thesis seeks to explore the contemporary (dis)connection between Bihari citizenship and their sense of belonging to Bangladesh. Moreover, it wishes to evaluate some crucial methods used by the communities to solve this disjunction. Overall, this paper provides a tentative account of how empowered new generations of the Urdu-speaking minority negotiate their place in the Bangladeshi social fabric, that is, how they reclaim *and* redefine their rightful place in Bangladesh society. Ultimately, it argues that, due to inaction by the government and lacking state-led rehabilitation efforts, the new generations of Biharis claim their substantive citizenship through assimilation on the one hand, and community-led development on the other.

KEYWORDS

Bangladesh, Bihari/Urdu-speaking linguistic minority, (substantive) citizenship, belonging, assimilation, community empowerment





PREFACE

This thesis is the result of three years of intellectually challenging myself and stepping outside the usual comfort zones. However, this was not a one-woman achievement. I would like to express the greatest gratitude to some people without whom this research would not have been possible. First, I want to thank my supervisor, prof. Dr. **Bert Suykens**, for his insights and enthusiasm for the topic. Further, I want to thank my **mother and brother**, who have both guided me through my—seemingly endless—academic career, each in their own peculiar ways. I would also like to thank my lovely friends, who have to endure my constant ranting about the world. I would like to thank two friends in particular; **Maza**, for going to Bangladesh with me and making this one of the greatest experiences of my life so far, and **Sana** for being the most relaxed study partner I could wish for.

A special thanks goes to everyone who participated in this research: **Immad, Saima and Masum**, and especially **Khalid**—who, as a Bihari himself, provided me with some highly valuable first hand perspectives, and the **young Biharis** who enlightened me with their experiences. Lastly, I will forever be grateful for the lovely **Pankaj**, for showing me Geneva Camp when I was in Dhaka and introducing me to the fate of the Urdu-Speaking community. The visit ended up being the first step toward this thesis and his stories have directed me toward a newfound interest in his beautiful country.

The past year or so has been testing all of us and has impacted this thesis in many ways. Moral dilemmas, hard-to-collect data and the casual moodswings COVID brought upon us, were only some of the pitfalls of writing a thesis during a pandemic. Or to use the melodious words of our rector: *Covid sucks*. Nevertheless, I am proud of the end result and despite the limits of this research, I hope that I have been able to capture the Bihari reality to some extent.

Enjoy the read!

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*I know, I know/where the light has vanished/the
sun will surely rise.*

Ahmed Ilias, Urdu Poet

INTRODUCTION

On the Social Fabric in Bangladesh

26 March 2021 marked the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's independence. An anniversary that is well-celebrated in the country, but also brings back sore memories of the bloody legacy of Bangladesh's birth and the struggle of the Bengali people to create their homeland. Fifty years post-independence, one particular community still seems to be bearing the brunt of history, however. The Urdu-speaking Biharis in Bangladesh are the often ignored victims of past and present. With their ancestors' roots in India, an attempt at a new life in 'United Pakistan' and a controversial and contested role in the 1971 War, the Urdu-speaking communities have been subjected to a powerful form of cultural politics. After 1971, the then so-called 'Stranded Pakistanis' were sentenced to a life of camp-dwelling, while awaiting repatriation to Urdu-speaking Pakistan. However, most of the community would never find their way to this 'promised land'. They would remain stuck in Bangladesh for over fifty years, where the new generations are now fully embracing this country as their homeland and defining themselves as Bangladeshi in heart and soul. Yet, Bangladesh remains reluctant on loving them back.

The case of the Urdu-speaking linguistic minority in Bangladesh presents a solid example of what happens when being excluded from the perceived 'Social Fabric' of a nation. The social fabric refers to how well members of a community interact with each other. The fabric can be seen as a metaphor for textiles, where the different threads are transferred into a useful fabric structure. One loose thread can affect the entire fabric. The social system of a community [or in this case an entire nation] can be compared to this fabric. The interaction between the different members of this social system 'weave the fabric' together. The stronger the interactions and general acceptance, the stronger the fabric. The looser the 'weave', the more likely it is for the fabric to tear; resulting in conflicts between groups, developing loose threads (e.g. increasing crime rates), and other suffering (English Language Learners, 2019). In other

words, it describes the coming together of people from different backgrounds in a specified geographic location, where these groups are knitted together in an effort to strengthen the general capacity of a community, country or region (ibid, 2019). A society thus flourishes when every part of the fabric is functioning properly. By granting Biharis citizenship but further ignoring, neglecting or even downright refusing their active contribution in the mainstream society, Bangladesh does not only miss out on enormous unfulfilled potential, but also seems to be halting its own national development. In this regard, the wise words of Maya Angelou (1997) spring to mind:

“If it is true that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, isn’t it also true a society is only as healthy as its sickest citizen and only as wealthy as its most deprived?”

OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to contribute to the broader field of citizenship and belonging, in the sense where citizenship does not necessarily guarantee membership of the social fabric (aka greater society). This paradox will be investigated through the case of the Urdu-speaking linguistic minority in Bangladesh, who despite gaining citizenship after thirty years of statelessness, still live largely excluded from mainstream society. Much has been written about the socio-economic status and identity crisis of the Biharis, mostly focusing on their grim reality. Therefore, in addition to developing a topical account, I will contribute to existing material by elaborating on a more positive narrative too, emphasizing Bihari agency. Further, the (questionable) connection between the rather theoretical approaches to the concept of citizenship and its practical implications on the sense of belonging has been undervalued in scholarship on the Bihari communities. Moreover, the body of literature on the community has steadily declined in recent years, making a recent analysis on the intergenerational shift an interesting approach, as these new generations - born on Bangladeshi soil - can be understood as a community in transition. In sum, this paper presents how young generations of Urdu-speaking Biharis negotiate their rightful place in the social fabrics of Bangladesh. In other words, it investigates **how young Biharis of Bangladesh attempt to redefine their position in society**, turning their formal citizenship in a substantive one.

In order to draft this analysis, the paper will focus on the following objectives:

- » How did the historical legacy of Bangladesh contribute to the “unmaking of the Urdu-speaking Biharis”?
- » What are the limits to citizenship faced by Biharis?
- » How do new generations of Biharis experience belonging?
- » Which efforts are taken by young Biharis to integrate into mainstream society?
- » How can we understand community empowerment in the Bihari context and how can this contribute to the disjunction of belonging/citizenship?

The overall aim of this paper is threefold: first, it wants to contribute to the acknowledgement of the largely neglected Bihari communities in Bangladesh, by underscoring the agency of the Biharis—which has thus far been largely neglected in scholarship. Second, this paper hopes to raise attention to the problematic paradox in which access to citizenship is often seen by popular opinion as basic requirement for a decent life, yet it does not necessarily offer access to basic human rights or full membership to a nation—especially in a context where discriminatory cultural politics are at work. Third, I argue that community empowerment can be a valuable contribution to the notion of belonging and the claiming of substantive citizenship for abandoned minority groups in society; by using the case of the Urdu-speaking linguistic minority as good practice.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Before continuing this paper, it is essential to clarify some key aspects of this thesis. When talking about the Urdu-speaking Bihari community, the body of literature available uses a plethora of labels to coin this community: Biharis, Urdu-speaking linguistic minority, Stranded Pakistanis, non-Bengalis, Muhajirs etc. For the sake of this research I will use the terms preferred by the community itself, as stated during the interviews: the Bihari Urdu-speaking communities, Urdu-speaking linguistic minority, or the shorter ‘Biharis’ for spatial reasons. The label of ‘Biharis’ needs some clarification as well. While it is the most common reference to the Urdu-speaking people in Bangladesh—hinting at their roots in India’s Bihar, it is not completely accurate, as these communities entail former refugees from other places in India

as well. The terms Stranded Pakistanis, non-Bengalis or Muhajirs¹ seem out of place in current debates on the community, as they no longer desire to be part of Pakistan and now identify themselves as Bangladeshi, nor does the refugee label still apply to them. Another element of this thesis that needs to be clarified is the 'new generation'. In the scope of this thesis, the new generation can be understood as the Urdu-speaking Biharis born on Bangladeshi soil, and thus with no direct ties to either past events or Pakistan.

1/ A person who emigrates from a country which is, or has become, ruled by non-Muslims. Specifically one of the Muslim emigrants who left India for Pakistan at or after the time of the Indian Partition in 1947; a descendant of these people (Lexico).

METHODOLOGY

On the research process

This dissertation wishes to explore the (dis)connection between citizenship and belonging by examining the case of the Urdu-speaking Bihari communities in Bangladesh. Moreover, it wishes to elaborate on efforts of ‘recreating Bangladeshi belonging’ undertaken by the new generations of Biharis. With these objectives in mind, I decided to opt for an exploratory case study, as recent data on the Bihari situation is scarce and the options for in-depth research limited within the scope of this thesis. Christopher Streb describes the exploratory case study as the investigation of a case characterized by the lack of detailed preliminary research. Exploratory research benefits most from cases that make the characteristic field issues under investigation easily apparent (2010). This kind of case study is often used as preliminary step toward further research on the topic. It is therefore still hypothetical, being one of the biggest limitations of this research. This paper does not wish to provide indisputable answers to the research questions. While certain careful considerations for generalisation can be made, it will require further in-depth research to develop a more irrefutable contribution to the larger field as to literature on the Biharis itself.

METHODS & LIMITATIONS

In order to examine the case of the Bihari Urdu-speaking community, literature on the link between citizenship and belonging was reviewed, more specifically on the dissonance between the two concepts. As the body of literature on citizenship is massive, the thesis will only review the relevant material for this research. It will mainly consider the limits of formal citizenship and its disjunction with the sense of belonging. Finally, it will briefly discuss the relevance of grassroots mobilisation in the context of ‘claiming citizenship’. The literature review will thus amplify the complex and fluid nature of citizenship. This way, insights from the actual research can be assessed properly. Further, the question of citizenship seems to be mostly understood in a European—or at best Western—context, expanding on the impact of

migration and globalisation on the modern nation-states in the western hemisphere (Arendt, 1951; Bueker, 2009; Kastoryano, 2002; Lister, 2008; Marshall, 1977; Soysal, 2002; Turner, 1993). However, as this paper will illustrate, the “Global South” offers highly valuable—and at times alternative—contributions to this field as well. After evaluating the state of the art on the theoretical framework, the Bihari case study will provide the reader with a deeper understanding of this abstract framework. The first part of the case study focusses on the historical legacy of Bangladesh, which plays an essential role in both the making of the cultural politics at work in the country, as in—what I refer to as—the ‘unmaking of the Biharis’. The second chapter then examines the present situation, assessed through the indicators established in the conceptual framework: participation, affection and recognition. This part thus builds further upon the dissonance between citizenship and belonging. The final chapter explores efforts aimed at claiming a place in the social fabric, through assimilation on the one hand and community-led development on the other. Moreover, this chapter presents a narrative of agency and growing aspirations.

The research findings for the case study were collected through mixed methods, combining extensive literature review on the Bihari case with empirical findings from digital ethnography and one introductory visit to Geneva Camp in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In 2019 I had the opportunity to visit Geneva Camp in Dhaka, as one of my Bengali guides wanted me to understand how certain groups of the population were completely left behind by his nation. Through this short visit and the few informal conversations in the camp, I was able to get a brief personal observation of the situation on the ground. This will not be too relevant for the scope of this research, however, it was valuable on the personal level to get better acquainted with the reality of this unfortunate community. It gave me the opportunity to at least try to capture the severity of the situation to some extent. Unfortunately, the planned return to Bangladesh in 2021 to conduct more invested research in the camps was no longer possible due to COVID-19.

With the current pandemic, the shift to remote fieldwork was a necessary measure for researchers worldwide. Thus, digital ethnography entered the stage. “Digital ethnography has its origins in traditional ethnography. It is a digital transformation of in-person ethnography that leverages the power of smartphones and computers to help researchers remotely generate

rich, contextual insights into human needs, behaviours, journeys and experiences” (Gleeson, 2021:single page). Digital ethnography thus combines the analysis of different digital sources. One of the components requires surveying the internet (Rogers, 2013, including search engines, (social) media and websites (e.g. blogs, archives, online forums). Another important element is small-scale ethnography, where direct presence of the respondents is replaced by mediated contact, through digital tracking of the respondents, inviting them to share their social media practice and introducing new techniques such as video, blogging or photography (Pink et al., 2016).

In the context of this research, the digital approach included the use of audiovisual sources (documentaries, YouTube videos, already available interviews), scouring through websites and blogs, engaging on online forums (such as Quora and comment sections) and conducting two semi-structured elite interviews² and one focus group through online platforms, such as Zoom or WhatsApp. By opting for both the elite interviews and the focus group, I was able to grasp a more comprehensive understanding of the case study, while being limited in time and resources. Respondents for the interviews were chosen because of their knowledge or lived expertise on the subject. In this regard, one of the ultimate pioneers of Bihari resistance was contacted, as well as one expert from Humanitarian Assistance Programme, who has worked extensively with the Bihari population. Due to the respondents’ thorough understanding of the situation, their insights have been an invaluable contribution to this paper and offered a multifaceted conception of the situation on the ground.

In addition to the semi-structured elite interviews, the snowball method was used to arrange an online focus group interview, as one of the organisations (OBAT Helpers) got me in touch with five Bihari youngsters. During this focus group, I got the opportunity to discuss the topic with five teenagers from different camps around Bangladesh. Each of them is active in the local think tanks within their camp and thus functioned as representatives for their respective locations. The think tanks work to enhance local community empowerment and to increase the life standard of the camp-dwellers. This focus group was a welcome contribution

2/ Respondents for elite interviews are selected for their expertise relevant to your research question and are generally people with a prominent position in the respective group or organisation. Their contribution can be vital, as they are able to draft the overall image of a situation (Baarda, 2017).

to the research, as it offered a brief account of young Biharis' lived experiences. All of the respondents agreed on being quoted in this paper. In addition to the interviews, one question was asked, and many others reviewed, on online forum Quora, to get insights in more general sentiments. During the analysis of the data—both in recent material as in the empirical findings—some prominent themes emerged, including citizenship rights, 'belonging and identity', generational differences, community empowerment, assimilation and the need for rehabilitation. These topics have then been merged into the main argumentation of this thesis: "Since the state response is lacking in terms of substantive citizenship, the new generation Biharis redefine their position in mainstream society themselves, through a mixture of assimilation and community-led development."

Digital ethnography offers a valuable alternative for fieldwork in these challenging times, still, it does entail certain limitations that need to be addressed. The two main limits to this research were the lack of access to respondents and the limited amount of recent literature. As COVID hindered me in research options on the ground, I was heavily dependent on already available materials. The empirical methods offered some new insights, however, the research remains highly preliminary in this regard. Further, language was an important pitfall. It is very impractical to nearly impossible to decently analyse social media or watch videos only available in the local languages. Language barriers during the focus group were solved with the help of a translator, however, depending on external people might dwindle the objectivity to some extent, as certain information might get lost in translation or emphasis might be added without your knowledge. While it is not only harder to find access to certain people or groups for online interviews, the threshold to reject an invitation is also much lower. As a result, this paper only contains insights from a very limited amount of people, with less variety in background, making generalisations more difficult. Another prominent setback of the research includes the obvious technological limitations that the online approach entails: unstable internet connections and other technological deficits, conducting interviews through different time zones and less interaction between the interviewer and the respondent (or among the respondents in the case of the focus group). Moreover, there is less room for spontaneous interactions or informal conversations, while the scheduled conversations cannot dig as deep as they usual would.

ON REFLEXIVITY

When doing (qualitative) research it is essential to keep in mind your own positionality, as objectivity might be required yet not guaranteed. As a researcher, your personal background and moral framework might affect the research process and outcomes. As white woman born in a middle-class family in Western-Europe, it might be controversial to conduct research on post-conflict settings. Indeed, my own background makes it impossible for me to judge this situation properly. The moral objection is further reinforced through the aspect of doing digital ethnographic research, creating an even bigger distance between the researcher and the community under investigation. The COVID pandemic made this dilemma even stronger for obvious reasons. The moral dilemma was also apparent when choosing respondents. Did I feel comfortable enough disturbing them while realising this thesis will not bring about any significant change for them? In this case I decided that any kind of recognition for the Bihari Urdu-speaking communities would be a much welcomed contribution. As for the Bangladeshi testimonies, I did refrain from contacting my Bengali contacts due to moral hesitations. When in Bangladesh, I was welcomed with open arms and since I have no idea how my acquaintances feel about a situation that seems to be a delicate issue in the country, I did not want to bring this up in an online conversation. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of the 'Bengali voice' is deliberately left out of this paper; hindering a fully objective review.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

On Citizenship & Belonging

In its most classical perception, citizenship is defined as ‘membership in a political community’, where this political entity sets the outline for rights and duties which are embodied in the very notion of citizenship (Leca, 1992; Walzer, 1989). Holding legal citizenship is considered the gateway in society for many other aspects of political and social life, and consequently is viewed as most fundamental barrier to overcome on the pathway to full inclusion (Bueker, 2009). The prominence of citizenship is further coined into the iconic words of Arendt, who claimed that, in order to have rights, individuals must be more than mere human beings. They must be members of a political community. Since the right to be a citizen captures all necessary rights in theory, citizenship can be considered ‘the Right to have Rights’ (1977, in DeGooyer & Hunt 2018). Citizenship is indeed omnirelevant, according to Glenn (2010), affecting both public life in all its facets, and private life in terms of family and interpersonal relations. However, for some people the nation-based citizenship has proved to be insufficient to guarantee full political membership (Clarke et al. 2014).

CITIZENSHIP: THE ILLUSORY EQUALISER

There are multiple ways to understand the concept of citizenship, either by liberal, republican or communitarian tradition. The liberal approach stresses the access to equal rights for all citizens, with a focus on the individual relationship the citizen holds with the state (Björk et al. 2018; Lister, 2008; Turner, 1993; Yuval-Davis, 2007). In republican tradition, emphasis is on active participation in government affairs for the ‘promotion of the civic good’ (ibid). From a communitarian perspective, citizenship is viewed in connection to the notion of belonging (Björk et al. 2018), embracing the relevance of identity and communities in this approach (Walzer, 1994 & 2005; Etzioni, 1995 & Delanty, 2002; in Björk et al. 2018). According to this

theory, individuals are located in society on a relational basis, rather than being automatised conveyors of rights and duties (Kymlicka & Norman, in Prabhakar 2018).

Besides the three main approaches to citizenship, the concept becomes more complicated when looking at the different spheres of citizenship rights. Bueker states that the extension of legal citizenship by no means guarantees full membership. After all, while with no doubt being an important element of incorporation into society, it is merely one aspect (2009). For this, she builds further upon the notion of citizenship introduced by T.H. Marshall (1977), who was a pioneer in viewing the concept in its multifaceted and complex nature. Marshall argued that there are three components of citizenship: civil, political and social. The civil element entails the rights necessary for individual freedom, the political one implies the right to participate in the exercise of political power and the last element constitutes the social rights needed to “live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in society” (Bellamy, 2014:14). It is exactly the latter component that has been mainly pushed into the margins for too long: social rights were not woven into the classic fabric of citizenship. Social rights give access to, among others, education and social services. In the words of Bellamy & Kennedy-Macfoy (2014:61):

“The right to freedom of speech has little real substance if, from lack of education, you have nothing to say that is worth saying, and no means of making yourself heard if you say it. But these blatant inequalities are not due to defects in civil rights, but to lack of social rights.”

Social rights can thus be considered the pathway to full membership. As Bueker exclaims, by expanding social rights, a society can move toward more valid citizenship, including civil and political engagement in all its forms, for all residents—be it non-citizens, naturalised or native-born members (2009). Yet, as Marshall rightfully notes, social rights were too often viewed as ‘benefit of citizenship’. If by consequence of equal access to civil and political rights the social rights do not follow, this was an individual responsibility, rather than a state’s concern, or in other words: “citizenship has itself become, in certain aspects, the architect of legitimate social inequality” (in Bueker, 2009:425).

This brings us to the following distinction to be made, one between formal and substantive citizenship—with substantive citizenship being the primary focus of this paper. Formal citizenship can be understood as one's 'legal' citizenship (Elington, s.D.). Though creating the structures that establishes the granting of rights, it does not guarantee the exercise of these rights (Binghamton University, s.D.). Marshall's three-layered concept of citizenship underscores the fact that people can be citizens in some respects, but not in others. Substantive citizenship, then, considers local practices that recognise or deny standing to certain groups and individuals, no matter their formal standing (Glenn, 2010). In sum, substantive citizenship refers to the *actual* possession of civil, political and social rights; and herewith introduces the question of belonging. This kind of citizenship, however, is impacted by various factors, such as economic security, societal prejudice and mechanisms for enforcing citizenship rights (Binghamton University, s.D.). Substantive citizenship should further be viewed as a dynamic process, embedded in citizenship practices, rather than as 'formal status' (Bueker, 2009; Turner, 1993). Citizenship in its most theoretic form can thus be revoked as radical principle of equality (Turner, 1993), yet also destabilises egalitarian processes, as the concept in praxis does not fully live up to its potential. Moreover, it is essential to understand the concept of citizenship in a particular context, against local circumstances and underlying structural tendencies in which citizenship evolves. As Turner states, there is no unitary theory of citizenship (ibid.).

BELONGING: THE NOTION OF HOME

Substantive citizenship thus embraces the notion of belonging in an otherwise legal context. Yuval-Davis (2006:199) provides a solid starting definition of the concept,

“Belonging can be an act of self-identification or identification by others, in a stable, contested or transient way. Even in its most stable primordial forms, belonging is always a dynamic process, not a reified fixity, which is only a naturalised construction of a particular hegemonic form of power relations. [...] Social locations [gender, race, class, nation, kinship etc.] have at each historical moment particular implications vis-a-vis the grids of power relations in society [...] and are often fluid and contested.”

In its simplest conception, she states, the notion of belonging implies feeling at home and feeling safe (ibid.); it is about some ‘sense of rootedness’ (Antonisch, 2010). Further, the concept of belonging can be divided into three components: economic, social and universal. Economic belonging implies full participation in economy, whereas social belonging is understood as the everyday participation in social relations and exchanges. Universal belonging, in its turn, means that people draw on human rights to make claims for their presence. In this sense, the scope of belonging is much broader than that of formal citizenship (McNevin, 2006; Getrich, 2008). The concept of belonging is often closely linked to the notion of a homeland. Rouhana (in ‘Homeland and the Right to Belong’, 2021) notices,

“The concept of a homeland in the nationalist imaginary refers to a defined territory claimed to be a ‘national home’ by a group —whether defined ethically, culturally, politically or linguistically—to which they feel a sense of affectionate belonging, over which they have a sense of ownership and in which they feel entitled to determine and defend their own destiny.”

In a similar sense, we need to understand the conception of the homeland as the severe emotional connection of people to a place they call home (Nostrand & Estaville, 1993). This yearning for a particular place to be the homeland can be imagined, historical or mythical, nevertheless remains relevant due to its symbolic significance (Redclift, 2010). Part of this imaginary aspect of belonging is the notion of the ‘large group’, where belonging can be viewed in its relation to the collectivity of thousands, or millions, of individuals who share similar sentiments and a similar sense of belonging, even though most of the members of this large group will never cross paths personally (Volkan, s.d.). The conception of ‘a homeland’ thus does not merely entail belonging to a place. “It is the association of an individual within a homogenous group and the association of that group with a particular place”, implying that *the home* can either refer to a place or a community (Warner, 1994; in Kebede 2010:13). Hedetoft & Hjort argue that belonging has taken a more prominent, yet contested place in the political and cultural field, as it raises concerns of boundaries, citizenship, cultural hybridisation and other forms of mobility or displacement (2002). Indeed, belonging is a controversial concept,

as it is highly emotional yet easily politicised, as the ‘politics of belonging’ implies. People who might be formally entitled to *belonging to the nation*, but are constructed to be members of different ethnic, racial and national collectivities, might not ‘belong’ to the nation-state community (Duyvendack, 2021; Wekker, 2021; Yuval-Davis, 2007). Moreover, it is about dividing populations in the typical ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomies. In this regard, belonging becomes a weapon of social exclusion and privileged status for those who are able to define the conditions of belonging (Pratsinakis, 2017). Yuval-Davis (2007:11) describes this as the emotional dimension to belonging: “People love their people and country, they hate the enemy and they fear the invasion and pollution of their culture and tradition”. In this regard, the conception of ‘unhoming’ by Rouhana needs mentioning, where people are deprived of a home in their own homeland (2021).

BEYOND THE ROAD TO CITIZENSHIP

The disjunction between citizenship and belonging can most easily be conceived as the difference between *de jure* and *de facto* citizenship. Bueker reviews this as the failure of ‘the road to citizenship’, where we consider citizenship as final goal, without guaranteeing this legal status to be transformed into full, active citizenship (2009). By analysing the literature on this topic, three prominent indicators for belonging within the citizen context—by which we will also assess the Bihari case study—come to the foreground: affection, participation and recognition. This paper will argue that these three elements, when achieved properly, ultimately constitute the very concept of integration or incorporation into mainstream society, and correspondingly generates substantive citizenship.

Affection

The affectionate element is tied closely to the overall concept of belonging, referring to a highly emotional intrinsic attachment of an individual or group to the homeland. In this sense, legal status is by no means determinative of the sense of belonging to a country, or to identify as a subject of that country. After all, people might connect to a nation irrespective of their legal status (Prabhat, 2018). Moreover, it is important to notice that people who have a strong

sense of belonging are more likely to proceed to full citizenship (Varsanyi, 2005), marking the element of affection as ultimate motivation for incorporation. The feeling of belonging to a nation increases significantly when a person has a long-term relational presence within the territory (Prabhat, 2018). Furthermore, citizenship becomes a means for people to express a certain attachment or loyalty to either a national or ethnic community (Kastoryano, 2002).

Participation

In the classical concept of the *social contract*, introduced by Rousseau, citizenship implied active participation in public affairs. In the end, however, the term ‘citoyen’ was used much more broadly, referring to any inhabitant of a state, a nation or a city, no longer entailing a required active participation (Sewell, 1988). Sieyès makes a similar argument, noting the distinction between passive rights, guaranteed to all citizens (including protection of the person, property and liberty) and active rights (such as political participation), reserved for *citoyens actifs* only (1789). Active engagement by citizens is a proviso in examining one’s liberty, as an involved citizen is less likely to have their will subjected to the domination of others (Skinner, 1993; Kastoryano, 2002). Moreover, legal status and the ability to exercise full participation in society contributes to the development of a sense of real belonging (Mee, 2009). The lack of participation leads to large numbers of politically disenfranchised residents who remain a permanent member of the political underclass (Bueker, 2009). Kastoryano considers full—substantive—citizenship as a form of participation in public space, leading the way to political socialisation (2002). Maxwell, while elaborating on Arendt’s ‘Right to have Rights’, discusses how citizenship in its ideal form should imply the means to participate in staging, creating and sustaining a common political world, where all citizens, disregarding their standing, can claim and demand their rights (2017). Tully then contributes by stating that: “If members do not have a voice in the way in which political power is exercised, and thus power is exercised over them without their say, ‘behind their backs, then they are by definition ‘unfree’ – ‘subjects’ rather than free citizens” (2002:154).

Participation can thus be seen as multileveled engagement, yet does not exclusively has to focus on engagement in the political realm of society—though this might be one of the most prominent prerequisites. However, many factors affect the political engagement of a person or group; social participation, access to education and the ability to access legal rights. The most pertinent one being economic participation, or better the lack thereof. Economic deprivation can lead to a kind of passivity. If a person cannot economically contribute to the nation because of his socio-economic status, that person can be barred from active citizenship (Sewell, 1988; Sieyès, 1789; Turner, 1993). When the socio-economic capital is lacking, a person consequently engages less in the political system at any level. Economic poverty thus translates into political poverty (Bueker, 2009), whereas economic success ensures a negotiating power to demand recognition within society (Kastoryano, 2002). Important to note is that all of the above features of participation are mutually reinforcing, either leading to greater achievement of citizenship— or dwindling it altogether.

Recognition

When there is an emotional attachment to the nation and socio-economic discrepancies are eliminated, the road to full active citizenship is, then, only hindered by the aspect of recognition by the mainstream population. Ultimately, claiming citizenship is really about seeking recognition and acceptance from others and about being able to exist in a stable manner in society (Kastoryano, 2002; Prabhat, 2018; Taylor, 1992). After all, citizenship is more than just a legal status. “It is a matter of belonging, which requires recognition by other members of the community” (Glenn, 2010:3). It are the ordinary people from the community, above all, that establish the boundaries to define who is entitled to civil, social and political rights by granting or withholding citizenship (*ibid.*). These people keep the exclusionary tale alive, by deciding who is part of their in-group, and routinely, who is not (Hedetoft & Hjort, 2002).

Prabhat then builds further upon the notion of recognition by stating that (ethnic) minorities seem forced to keep proving their loyalty to the country or to be “extra good to prove they

are not bad” (2018:58); a critique shared by other scholars on minority belonging as well. Duyvendack argues that minority groups have to show that they love their country, whereas the dominant members of society do not have to showcase this love as explicitly (2021). Wekker (in ‘When a country does not love you back’, 2021) contributes to this debate, drawing on her own experiences as woman of colour in a mainly white country:

“When you have a contested belonging, you first have to prove that you are a bona fide person and confess that you love the country. And I do love the country, but I also have to be critical of it, and I deserve to do both. I do not want to have to love as a condition to be critical.”

The demand for recognition, Kastoryano argues, comes from the burning desire to be part of a community with equal rights within the framework of the state (2002). In order to gain this kind of recognition, people will construct their identities, as it were, by behaving according to the ‘right impressions’ of by controlling information that people have about them (Kebede, 2010). In this sense, we can also understand the concept of (forced) assimilation to the language, culture, values and behaviour of the dominant group (Weedon, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Though controlling this assimilation to some extent, it is likely that certain pertinent features inherent to the individual or group will prevent full sameness and result in the exclusion from a complete sense of belonging, e.g. certain accents or cultural practices (Prabhat, 2018). A last quintessential element of recognition is the destructive power of labels. The way in which people are classified, labelled, problematised and constituted is never innocent and reflects a political act in itself (Isin, 2002; in Björk et al.). Allegiances to different ‘communities’ might raise suspicion within the dominant group (Kastoryano, 2002), which builds on fear resulting out of stigmatisation. New generations might be integrated into the nation, yet the way in which mainstream society perceives them may still be as an outsider, based on former or current labels (Kebede, 2010). It is almost as if one has been stamped for life (Kumsa, 2006). Despite the dangerous nature of labelling and its hindering effect on recognition, minority groups can in some case ‘reclaim’ the label of ‘undesirable’ and make it their own, desirable tag (Wekker, in ‘When a country does not love you back’, 2021).

BUILDING CITIZENSHIP

Despite the questionable citizenship status, people subjected to these kind of politics do not remain quiescent. Activist movements, community-led development and grassroots projects can lift individuals or groups up to the standard of active citizen and allow them to negotiate their position in the political and economic realm. Compensatory strategies, such as participating in civil society and community empowerment programmes, play a significant role in this context (Kastoryano, 2002). When grassroots movements replace formal institutions in paving the pathway for substantive citizenship, scholars also consider the concept of insurgent citizenship. Insurgent citizenship implies participation in movements or revolts in an effort to obtain whatever rights the members of the movement believe they are being denied (Ellington, s.D.). Insurgent citizens thus possess legal status, yet are being deprived of certain rights and therefore attempt to claim these rights through alternative approaches, outside the framework of the state. James Holston perceives this as “counter politics to the dominant historical formation” (in Glenn, 2010:9). In the words of Hedetoft & Hjort, we can understand community-led projects as efforts by minority groups, who from below tirelessly seek recognition of their status of rightful belonging (2002). According to the vision of community empowerment, people are their own assets. Through their own actions and by building on their own strengths, they build the capacity to achieve social and political change (WHO, s.D.). Or concluding by Kastoryano’s vision: “it is a matter of negotiating an identity with the state that, once duly recognised, legitimates the agents as citizens” (2002:124-125). This negotiating of a prominent place in the social fabric will, in turn, lead to tremendous progress for society as a whole.

PART I

SETTING THE SCENE

THE BIHARI CASE

That is how, as we know from the old-old stories, the newborn baby [India] was divided into three parts and everybody lived unhappily ever after.

Vishwajyoti Ghosh, on the Partition of India

VICTIMS & PERPETRATORS

On Historical Feuds

The bloody heritage of the Indian subcontinent's history continues to echo in its contemporary states. The birth of Bangladesh happened in two violent chapters: the Partition of India in 1947 and the Bengali Liberation War in 1971 (Sajjad, 2017). The influence of past atrocities on the contemporary reality of the Urdu-speaking communities in Bangladesh is particularly damaging. Anno 2021, these communities still live largely excluded from mainstream society. In this chapter, we will consider the historical feuds that have led to the precarious position of the Biharis, which is crucial to understand current citizenship issues. By using the words of Weinraub: "The Biharis are, in many ways, the bewildered victims of history" (1974: single page).

THE HORROR OF PARTITION

"It's the British! It's the British!" A bunch of children chase us as we are walking in the rural scenery of Sreemongol, Bangladesh. Seeing the colour of our skin, they immediately made a connection to the British colonisers of their homeland a few decades earlier. Indeed, to understand past and present in Bangladesh, it is vital to delve into the British rule over the Indian subcontinent, which—befitting a true colonial project—shaped the divisive and devastating turmoil that haunts the region to this date. In the 1500s, European colonial powers invaded the subcontinent. Before this colonisation, India was a patchwork of princely states, where Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians and more coexisted rather peacefully (Roy, 2021). When the British set foot on Indian territory by the mid-18th century, they used a well-developed strategy of divide and rule, stirring the multireligious pot to consolidate their own power. The Indians were since categorised by their religious identity, a gross simplification of the cultural reality in the region, exaggerating differences and sewing distrust among the different communities (ibid.). The Indians had thus

long been awaiting independence from British rule. The following decades would be marked by the emergence of anti-colonial movements and sparked large-scale protests. After the Second World War, the British finally caved for the call for independence, due to great financial losses and the consequential incapability to rule India much longer, still no date was given for the British departure (TRT World, 2020). With rumours of the upcoming independence, tensions grew between Hindus and Muslims in the country. The political powers at the time were concerned over what the future would look like. Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi, both part of the (Hindu) Congress Party called for a united secular state of India, whereas Muhammad Ali Jinnah wanted to create the independent Muslim state of Pakistan, due to the rifts created by colonisation that seemed too deep to repair (Roy, 2021). This two-nation theory introduced by Jinnah would later form the basis for the boundary-drawing of the newly independent Indian subcontinent.

In the build-up to independence, communal riots sprung up across India. In the region of Bengal, the already fragile relationship between Hindus and Muslims rapidly deteriorated due to the bloody communal violence in Kolkata and Bihar in 1946/1947 (Van Schendel, 2009). Britain steadily felt the net closing in on them, with the subcontinent on the verge of a civil war. The newly appointed viceroy, Mountbatten, thus announced Indian independence by August 1947 the latest and started preparing for it behind closed doors. The partition of India was no more than a geographical solution to a political fiasco (ibid.). Based on the two-nation theory, artificial borders were drawn—based on outdated maps and census reports (TRT World, 2020), partitioning Hindu majority India and Muslim homeland Pakistan. Pakistan however, constituted of two regions separated by 1,500 kilometres of Indian ground and which, except for a common religion, did not share any cultural features. The Partition unleashed one of the bloodiest, largest mass migrations in world's history. In the span of a few months, one million people lost their lives, another ten million were displaced and thousands died from contagious disease and malnutrition (Singh, 2015). People who found themselves on the wrong side of the border, were forced to flee their ancestral home, out of fear to be killed by local radicalised militias (TRT World, 2020). Punjab was among the deadliest crime scenes of this wave of violence, with women bearing the brunt—rape, abduction and mutilation were daily occurrences during this period of terror, leading to an estimate of 100,000 women victimised (Roy, 2021).

“Many women were mutilated and had their breasts cut off. Pregnant women attacked by mobs had their bellies cut out. Some were killed by their fathers or brothers so they would not be captured. Others committed suicide to avoid abduction.” (in ‘India-Pakistan Partition Explained’, 2020)

In the wake of the ongoing religious slaughtering, about a million of Indian Muslims sought refuge in newly-founded Pakistan, where they were acclaimed as Muhajirs (Rahaman et al., 2020). As the majority of the Muslims settling in East Pakistan came from the Indian state of Bihar, all of the Indian Muslim refugees in the Eastern part became collectively known as “Biharis”, even though they included refugees from Kolkata, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Gujarat and other parts of India as well (Hashmi, 1996). They relocated because their leaders, including Jinnah and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, convinced them that migration would be the only way to “escape the perpetual miseries of life in Hindu-dominated India” (Haider, 2018:29). And thus, the Muslim homeland experiment began.

FROM MUSLIM BROTHER TO CULTURAL ENEMY

Although the two-nation approach seemed like a clear-cut solution to end the communal bloodshed in the region, it was based solely on religious grounds, ignoring crucial differences such as language or culture (Rahaman et al., 2020). Language would indeed turn out to be a cause of constant controversy. Despite being welcomed at first by the Bengali population on the premise of religious comradeship, the Urdu-speaking communities shared a language with the ruling elite in West Pakistan, as well as cultural practices. Consequently, they were able to work in well-placed sectors, such as railroads, civil service, military and the jute mills. “In the eyes of marginalised Bengalis, the Urdu-speaking Biharis were living in their newly adopted home as a privileged class, with opportunities and social standing” (Nowhere People, s.d.: single page). In fact, the Bengalis were ironically the ones who were pushed into the margins at that point in history (Sajjad, 2017). The Pakistani elite, by granting occasional favours to the Urdu-speaking communities, successfully divided the East Pakistani communities. They alienated the ‘non-Bengalis’ from the host communities and exploited the

'Bihari loyalty' to Pakistan (Hashmi, 1996). This isolation triggered anti-Bengali attitudes, and combined with the sudden prosperity they gained through hard work and government patronage, they were rapidly turned into the "*most undesirable elements*" or "*parasites of East Bengal*" according to the mainstream Bengali (Hashmi, 1996:7). The relationship between the Bengalis and Urdu-speaking communities was thus sore from the beginning, aggravated by divisive tactics of the ruling West Pakistani elite, who encouraged the belief that Bengalis were not only socially inferior, but also lesser Muslims (Van Schendel, 2009). The friction would only continue to grow with more West Pakistani strategies mimicked from colonial playbooks. Let us not forget that the favouring of one group over the other—while systematically focusing on the inferiority of the latter—in order to better control a distant part of the empire was a popular method in colonialism, and as Mahmood Mamdani so illustratively underscored in his writings on Rwanda (2001), it can create the right amount of hatred among communities to be turned into mortal enemies, with the devastating results foretold.

One of the absolute turning points in the 'Pakistan Experiment' was the announcement by Muhammad Ali Jinnah that Urdu, and Urdu alone, would be the national language (Hashmi, 1996)—even though Bengal-speakers comprised the largest part of Pakistani population. This imposition of Urdu as national language was part of the greater mission to 'Islamise East Pakistan' (Van Schendel, 2009). Conflicts over language politics, combined with a deep frustration over political and economic inequalities, would ultimately lead to the Language Movement in 1952, which to this date holds a prominent place in Bengali collective memory. The Language Movement can definitely be understood as one of the very significant resistance movements to West Pakistan's hegemony leading up to the birth of Bangladesh. In many ways, it "marked a sharp psychological rupture. For many in East Pakistan, it signified the shattering of a dream of Pakistan and the beginning of a new political project, still hazy and fully supported by only a few: the search for an independent Bangladesh" (Van Schendel, 2009:114). Many of the Urdu-speaking Muslims in East Pakistan, fuelled by their exploited loyalty to the Western wing, opposed these resistance movements. The Bengali 'rebel' voice would only grow louder in the following years, the rifts between Bengalis and non-Bengalis would deepen and it was undeniably clear that the partition of Pakistan was near.

JAY BANGLA³

By the 1960s, West Pakistan completely dominated the political and economic life of Pakistan. Yet, the status quo would soon be shattered, as the pro-East Pakistan independence party, Awami League, won a national majority during the first democratic elections (Anderson, 2018), after years of campaigning by its leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for greater regional autonomy and a fair share of power and economic benefits for Bengalis (Bose, 2011). Despite the Bengali electoral victory, West Pakistan seemed reluctant to hand over power. Pakistan ruler, Yahya Khan, postponed the national assembly of 3 March 1970, which led to widespread militant revolts against non-Bengalis, including violent attacks on, and even butchering of, Biharis in a context of lawlessness (*ibid.*). Approximately 15,000 to 50,000 Biharis were killed in Chittagong alone, in the weeks prior to the Liberation War. The killings of Biharis during the rebellion were not merely acts of patriotism or nationalism, it was also the result of petty bourgeois social envy and the proletariat's tendency toward violence and anarchy (Hashmi, 1996).

In addition to the militant underground rebellion, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman announced the 'hartal', a general strike. This alleged 'non-violent, non-cooperation movement' of Mujib paralysed the East Pakistan administration and put him in *de facto* control of the province (Van Schendel, 2009). Mujib was somewhat dubious in his ambitions though, as he declared the struggle for independence while also seeking a solution within the framework of a 'united Pakistan' (*ibid.*). All of the following diplomatic roundtables led nowhere and left the region in a deadlock. While appeasing the Awami League with unfruitful talks, the Yahya regime prepared for a military solution to the political problem he faced (Bose, 2011). Yahya Khan hastily left the Eastern wing in the unfateful night of 25 March 1971, while ordering the Pakistan army to eliminate any resistance to the regime—under the codename 'Operation Searchlight'.

3/ "Jay Bangla" means "Victory to Bengal" in the Bengal language. It was one of the slogans used during student protests for the independence of Bangladesh (Hashmi, 1996).

The most prominent caption symbolising this ‘night of infamy’, was probably the attack on Dhaka University, during which the Pakistan Army aimed at crushing an alleged rebellious university (ibid.). The attack on the university has led to an estimate of 149 casualties. Other prominent targets of the military were the East Pakistan police and paramilitary, slums and lastly, the animo of the independence movement: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was arrested to prevent him from becoming a martyr (Van Schendel, 2009). Initially, the operation targeted intellectuals, students and Awami League members, but soon it shifted to summary killings of ordinary civilians and Hindus as well (Anderson, 2018). In one single night, Operation Searchlight led to the slaughter of at least 7,000 Bengali civilians, both Hindus and Muslims (Sajjad, 2012). Awakening from the bloody nightmare, Bangladesh independence was declared on 26 March 1971, commencing the even deadlier Liberation War. During a nine-month killing spree, one to three million Bengalis were killed by Pakistani forces. While being aware of the ongoing atrocities of the Pakistan army, the American leaders at that time chose not to intervene due to geopolitical interests, while the Pakistan troops continued to use American weaponry. “The main thing for us to do is to keep cool and not do anything. There is nothing in it for us either way” (Nixon to Kissinger, in Bose, 2011:206).

Some members of the Bihari communities, but by no means all of them, joined the Pakistan troops in their anti-Bengali campaign. These supporters, generally known as Razakars, were part of groups like Al-Badr and Al-Shams. Throughout the course of the Liberation War, the collaborating Biharis were complicit to the horrifying ethnic cleansing of Bengalis by the Pakistan army (Rahaman, 2019). Hashmi (1996:18) clarifies why some of these ‘non-Bengali’ sided with the military forces of the West wing:

“The main reason for their lack of commitment to Bangladesh, especially during the Liberation War of 1971, was because they were not sure of securing equal citizenship rights in the event of the emergence of Bangladesh. Already stigmatized as vicious, conspiring agents of exploitation long before the civil war started in March 1971 by different sections of the Bengali bourgeois and petty bourgeois classes,

the ‘Biharis’ were victims of wild rumours about their participation in the mass-killing of Bengalis and as co-conspirators of the Pakistani military junta.”

It is, however, important to elucidate that this was not a collective collaboration. Many Biharis did not join the Pakistan forces and even supported Bangladesh’s independence, just as there were also some Bengalis collaborating against this liberation. It goes to show that a story is never black and white. In the context of the Liberation War, it is essential to take into consideration the counternarratives to the dominant Bengali memory as well, as these shed a different light on past and present tendencies. By looking solely at the Bengali discourse, it seems like a schoolbook example of victims vs. perpetrators. However, in this case, nobody seems to be merely neither. Both Bengalis as Biharis have suffered tremendous tragedies by the hands of the other. The Bihari story, however, is one often untold. Anderson states that collective memory of mass atrocities is often shaped around a story of perpetrators and core victims (the in-group). The victimisation of the peripheral victims (or the out-group, in this case the Biharis) is then de-emphasised because it might challenge the hegemonic discourse of Bengali victimisation (2018). Indeed, after the Liberation War came to an end on 16 December 1971, following the Pakistan army surrender, the Urdu-speaking Bihari communities were brutalised during the post-war anarchy. Approximately 100,000 of them were killed by Bengali militias, who sought to avenge family members and friends (Rahaman, 2019). Saikia describes the state of lawlessness that continued even after the end of Liberation War, that offered many freedom fighters the power to carry out the summary executions of Biharis. Due to the rhetoric of war and perception of Biharis as enemy, she states, Bengali men were encouraged to commit outrageous acts, and vice versa (2004). One passage of her research (Saikia, 2004:284) illustrates the horror of Liberation War, which was unequivocally committed by both sides:

“[...] The Biharis in our railway colony were emboldened. We saw them walking around the place without fear and it made us very angry. I and

five other friends, who had joined the Mukti Bahini⁴, decided to punish them. We went to one of our Bihari neighbours' house. I used to call him 'uncle' and his daughter was my sister's friend. She used to refer to me as 'brother'. But that day all human ties were broken. We forcibly entered the house... grabbed the young girl and stripped her naked. She was struck with fear and shame. She ran out of the house and we ran after her. The crowd pursuing her grew in size. I had only one thought in my mind: I want to rape and destroy this girl. I want to destroy the Biharis, they are our enemies... [...] At that moment, I realized I had become a criminal. The gun they gave me was a tool to kill. They had taught me how to kill. [...] Nationalism is corrupting, I understand it only today."

Similarly to Anderson's observation of periphery victims, Saikia argues that the foregoing story has no place in Bangladesh, as it complicates the dominant narrative where the freedom fighters were only heroes. Yet, the perpetrators were many, the victims alike: Bihari and Bengali, all of which acted in the spirit of nationalism and nation-building (2012). The untold stories are definitely worth mentioning, as they might attempt to find common grounds in the shared history. If both Bengalis and Biharis have committed mass atrocities, then why should one of them keep being punished for it decades later? Anderson elaborates on this selective indignation, by stating that during post-independence, one's personal political legitimacy was constructed solely on their role in the Liberation War. The Bengali leaders and their followers who guided Bangladesh to independence gained a certain 'revolutionary legitimacy', irrespective of any crimes they might have committed. The Biharis, on the other hand, are left with the counterrevolutionary illegitimacy and are labelled traitors to the cause (2018). The Biharis in newborn Bangladesh were sentenced with the neglected tag of 'war criminals' (Rahaman & Hossain, 2020).

4/ The Mukti Bahini were the guerrilla-like Bengali Liberation Forces during the Liberation War in 1971 (Dowlah, 2016).

THE UNMAKING OF THE BIHARIS

“Perhaps no other class of people in the world today is as ruined, economically and socially, as smitten and smashed up as the community of the former Indian refugees in Bangladesh who are known here by the general term “Bihari”.... Today in Bangladesh, to be a Bihari is the worst crime...” (Hashmi, 1996:15).

In the period after the Independence War, the Bihari Urdu-speaking communities faced the heated agony of their Bengali counterparts. After all, against the backdrop of general impunity in the country, the only retaliation possible was to these communities that resided within Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2017). “The Bihari case [thus] presents deliberate strategies of targeted collective punishment and victimization of a particular minority group, in total disregard of the state’s law, let alone human rights principles” (Haider, 2018:26). For safety reasons, the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) set up 116 temporary refugee camps across the country. Further, it developed a list that gave people the option: stay in Bangladesh or be repatriated to Pakistan (Mokammel, 2007). Approximately half of the Biharis opted for the latter, while the other half decided to stay put. Many of the Biharis choosing repatriation simply wanted to protect themselves, however registration with the ICRC did not guarantee repatriation. Yet, in the eyes of Bengalis, the choice for Pakistan was nothing but another act of disloyalty to Bangladesh, justifying further discrimination (Haider, 2018) and paving the way for cultural politics with the Biharis on the receiving end. The people opting for Bangladesh assimilated into mainstream society right after independence. The ‘pro-Pakistan’ Biharis, however, remained stuck in the squalid camps due to the unwillingness of Pakistan to pursue repatriation efforts. Though the country did accept some of the Biharis, over 400,000 still live on Bangladesh soil today, rendered stateless and chronically labelled ‘Stranded Pakistanis’ (Mokammel, 2007; Shahid, 2017). As a result, the then ‘Stranded Pakistanis’ were expelled from their jobs, robbed of their lands and deprived of any social, economic or political status whatsoever (Rahaman et al., 2020). Moreover, violent attacks against the communities were commonplace (Nowhere people, s.s.).

Two landmark judgments by the Bangladeshi court tended to improve the situation of the Bihari camp dwellers; in 2001, a group of young Biharis petitioned the Supreme Court to access voting rights. Khalid Hussain and his comrades triumphed two years later, as the court decided they were rightful Bangladeshi citizens and thus qualified to be registered as voters (Hussain, 2016). This was an important step forward, yet in 2007 a change of government brought the Bihari citizenship question back to the foreground. Thus, another petition was filed in the Supreme Court, this time considering all Urdu-speakers with 'camp addresses' (ibid.). One year later, Urdu-speaking camp dwellers were *officially* recognised as Bangladeshi citizen, granting them national identity cards and voting rights. Though the Urdu-speakers are no longer stateless since the court ruling in 2008, they remain ostracised. "Citizenship recognition exposed the Biharis, [as it were], to the challenges of enjoying their rights as citizens" (Hussain, 2016: single page). The prospects for the communities have thus long been grim; "It's a community that neither Pakistan nor Bangladesh wanted or cared about. They will either quietly die off, or survive at the lowest level, or become violent" (Weinraub, 1974: single page). However, such accounts do not consider the resilient comeback of the new generations Urdu-speaking Biharis.

PART II

COMMUNITY IN TRANSITION

*Who am I? I have many names: Bihari, Muhajir,
Maura, Non-Bangalee, Marwari, Urdu-speaker,
Refugee, and Stranded Pakistani...
But I only want one: human.*

Young Bihari girl's poem, by Md. Saiful Islam

THE BIHARI COLONIES

On Camp Life

Now that we have established the causes and motives for the poor treatment of the Biharis in their new-born homeland, we ought to look to the limits of citizenship they encounter. Though being formally granted the status of citizen, *de facto* they are still lingering in limbo, unable to access crucial documents and subjected to high rates of poverty. As the socio-economic status of the communities has been studied profoundly by numerous scholars before, this chapter will only briefly discuss the current living situation of the Biharis today. It will, however, explore more deeply the (dis)connection between citizenship and belonging in the Bihari context, by elaborating on the aforementioned indicators: participation, affection and recognition.

CULTURAL POLITICS

In order to fully grasp the ambiguous notion of citizenship status that the Biharis hold, the phenomenon of cultural politics might offer some clearance. According to Newell, the concept of cultural politics implies the effect of culture—including people's attitudes, beliefs, opinions and perspectives, as well as media and arts—on the formation of society and political opinion, ultimately leading to social, economic and legal realities (2014). Cultural politics therefore bridges citizenship and belonging, as it illustrates so clearly the limits of formal citizenship shaped by a sense of 'othering'. Cultural politics can thus be an explanation for how people can hold legal citizenship, still are not able to exercise the rights entitled to it, due to discriminatory practices based solely on cultural differences. Indeed, the Urdu-speaking linguistic minorities have been subjected to a far-reaching stigmatisation based on historic grievances, leading to their unfortunate degradation to second-rate citizens, at best, despite holding formal citizenship status. Local practices determine whether or not someone can

realise or exercise their citizen rights (Glenn, 2010). Hence, the overall socio-economic and political reality of the Biharis is highly affected by continuing discrimination, government corruption on their part and the criminalisation of the communities by mainstream society, as the following sections will clarify.

IN THE GHETTO

The majority of the Biharis are still convicted to a life of camp dwelling in the slum-like ghettos set up fifty years ago. Living in the squalid camps leaves the community in dire straits and can to this date be considered one of the major obstacles on their road to full substantive citizenship. After all, many of the citizen's deficits the Urdu-speaking communities encounter stem from their status of camp dwellers. Khalid Hussain, resident of Mohammadpur Geneva Camp in Dhaka, paints a grim image of the living situation in the camps:

“The camps are overcrowded. People live in 10ft. to 10 ft. houses, with six or seven people. It feels as if we are refugees. Everything we own fits in one room. We do not have water in the houses and have to share the community toilets [approximately one working toilet for 200 people, dirty and often without doors]” (personal communication, 16 June 2021).

Earlier testimonies state that “access to water and poor sanitation are common phenomenons. [...] Most of the camps do not have gas connections. Unclean water infects children and urinary tract infections affect women and girls. Trash is disposed in informal piles down the streets” (2012, in ‘40 Years of Camp Life’). Electricity cuts have become warp and woof in the ‘ghettos’, with up to 8-10 hours of power cuts everyday (Rozario & Uttom, 2019). Other accounts describe the mental scenery: “Life has stood still and the decay of time can be seen in every corner of the camp, as well as on the faces of most of the older residents” (Nowhere People, s.d.: single page). Further, the camps are prone to fire and flooding. The hazardous conditions ultimately lead to poor health levels among the communities. COVID-19 worsened the situation, as the Biharis are often dependent on informal employment and live in unhygienic and overcrowded

circumstances, which makes measures such as social distancing, quarantining and access to sanitation quasi non-existent (Haque & Ahmed, 2020). Moreover, some hospitals have allegedly rejected Bihari COVID patients due to their ethnic background (AFP, 2020).

Besides the obvious physical shortcomings of the camps, there are also some social aspects to be considered. The camps are often viewed as crime hubs in the cities, where insecurity, crime, violence and drug trafficking are given free reign (Khan & Samadder, 2008). Immad Ahmed, who has worked in the camps for several years, argues that this stigma of criminal centre is mostly due to a lack of restriction, with authorities avoiding the camps (personal communication, 25 June 2021). Further, it is important to note that Bengali 'delinquents' find their way to the camps as well because of this lack of control, herewith contributing to the presupposed bad reputation of the Biharis (Khan, 2008). Another social element under investigation is the isolation of the people inside. Especially older generations tend to stay inside the camps, building a rather conservative and restrictive socially controlled space, which particularly affects women's lives in the camps (Redclift, 2010). In addition, the government's response to the camps seems indifferent; "a conspiracy of silence on behalf of the authorities regarding its residents" (Abrar in Jorgensen, 2014: single page). In sum, the precarious conditions of the camps "signify Bihari inferiority to other Bangladeshis" (IRI, 2020:6). Therefore, dwelling the camps is probably the primary hardship for the Urdu-speaking communities, generating many of the other hurdles—education, employment, political participation, discrimination and an ongoing identity crisis, among others.

THE IN-BETWEEN PEOPLE

On Participation

The cultural politics at work in the Bihari context become particularly explicit when reviewing participation opportunities, considering that government corruption, camp segregation and discriminatory practices in daily life all lead to a reality where the Urdu-speaking communities are citizens in name only (Al Amin, 2019), with virtually no means of survival in society - socially, culturally and economically (Hussain, 2009). The participatory capacity of the communities currently depends largely on their socio-economic conditions. The element of economic participation thus prevails in this context, dwindling every other potential capital of the Biharis too; be it political, social or legal. According to Farzana, the risks of such state-discrimination, where the Urdu-speaking minority does not get access to basic and necessary state services and resources, might ultimately lead to the destabilisation of the country itself (2009). The social fabric crumbles, as it were, as long as the future generations of Biharis stay on the brink of destruction and the state does not respond accurately.

BIHARI SLUMS

As mentioned in the previous section, there is a litany of ways in which the dire circumstances of camp dwelling affects Bihari lives. The housing situation is undeniably one of the major malefactors in their socio-economic nightmare. The camp address remains highly problematic, paving the way for discriminatory practices in every aspect of political, economic and social life. Leaving the camps seems like the obvious solution, yet this, more often than not, entails a mere utopia.

“Nobody wants to stay in the camp. It is inhuman. Everyone wishes to live outside in the good environment, but they cannot start this new life. It depends on your economy and most are poor. There are no legal barriers anymore to leave the camp, only your economic situation.”

(Khalid, personal communication, 16 June 2021)

In an earlier testimony, Khalid described another obstacle to move outside the camps, namely the blatant discrimination during the rental application: “When I went to talk with the landowner and he understood that I am Bihari and live in the camps, he said that he could not give me a place in the building. [...] He said the rest of the family would feel disturbed and would not tolerate me” (Hussain, 2009:2). Further, for the camp dwellers that are actually capable of leaving the camp, rent increases in ‘the outside world’ can bring them back on the verge of poverty. Khalid does mention that due to higher education levels, a rising number of people find their way out of the camps lately (personal communication, 16 June 2021).

BIHARI RED TAPE

Despite having the legal backing through which the Urdu-speaking communities might be entitled to apply for administrative and judicial remedies, the state violates the fundamental rights of the Biharis on a regular basis (Goodwin & Hussain, 2018). Due to the camp address and the lack of any proof of bills, Biharis cannot access necessary documents of all sorts. They are restricted from obtaining passports, trade licenses, bank loans and even birth certificates (Goodwin & Hussain, 2018; Rahaman, 2019). In order to obtain these documents, Biharis need a permanent address, which the camps do not qualify for. “It’s like we have Geneva Camp stamped on our foreheads!” (in ‘40 Years of Camp Life’, 2012). The unattainable documents are highly desired though, as they are the key to unlock poverty in terms of education and employment.

BIHARI (IL)LITERACY

Many Biharis seem to acknowledge that education is the way out of poverty (Garcia, Sholder &

Veronesi, 2020). Still, education also remains one of the major issues for the communities. An estimated 1-8% of the Urdu-speaking children go to school, leaving the majority of the children in the camps illiterate (Bhattacharjee, 2015). The small number of school-going youth is not due to an unwillingness among the Biharis to educate themselves, it is due to socio-economic deficits and the inability to acquire nationality documents, which include home addresses, birth certificates and details of parental occupations (Goodwin & Hussain, 2018; Rahaman, 2019). Bihari admission to public schools seems rather arbitrary nowadays, largely depending on the particular institutions or the individuals in charge (Goodwin & Hussain, 2018). When being rejected in public school, the other option would be to go to private schools, which are too expensive for most of the camp dwellers. Many children thus drop out of school due to rejection or high costs. The Bihari youngsters that are able to enroll in the programmes often face discrimination - more likely by teachers than by students lately (Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021). The children are often marginalised in their classrooms; they have to sit in a separate row and endure insults, such as 'Sons of Bihari!' (Hussain, 2009). Moreover, the Urdu-speaking minority cannot fall back on quota systems, which do exist for other minorities (Goodwin & Hussain, 2018).

Though access remains somewhat restricted, education levels are rising within the communities. Khalid declares that a good number of them is now going to universities and colleges (personal communication, 16 June 2021). In addition, the Bihari youth is educating themselves, through community-led projects. After all, they understand the importance of a decent education to improve their livelihood and opportunities in life:

“Young generations focus on education, on learning handicraft and gaining knowledge. We are using digital computers as an opportunity to learn and to teach our own families. At first, I was not taking advantage of the opportunity to learn, but when I saw that people were improving way more than me, I also took education. We have to take our Bihari generation forward.” (Ashik, personal communication, 29 June 2021)

BIHARI JOB MARKET

The extent to which someone enjoyed education frequently indicates the job opportunities they will have. After all, education provides them with the necessary skills and credentials needed to land a job, or in the words of Ashik; “proper education is the backbone of any nation” (personal communication, 29 June 2021). However, many more aspects play a part in the (un)employment of a person, such as illiteracy and their ineffective citizenship. Employers often require documentation proving the applicant’s legal status, based on a local commissioner’s certificate, a character reference from a local representative and proof of a permanent address. Yet these ‘papers of citizenship’ (Hussain, 2009) are largely unattainable and leave the camp dwellers convicted to labour-intensive jobs in the menial sector, such as rickshaw pulling, driving taxis, mechanics or craft work (Haider, 2016). Employment in public or private services, such as government jobs, are completely inaccessible for the Urdu-speaking minorities (Hussain, 2012). Pushed into the informal sector due to their questionable citizenship status, many Biharis are occupied with harmful and hazardous work, leading to physical and mental discomfort. By excluding these people from the competitive job market, they, then, become a burden on their families and society as a whole (Haider, 2016). In addition, Biharis face many forms of wage discrimination. Many employers demand bribes from applicants, whether Bangladeshi or Bihari. The bribes for Bihari people are significantly higher though. Due to ineffective citizenship, the communities at work cannot bargain for their wages (ibid.). As a result of the scarce job opportunities, many Urdu-speakers do not send their children to school, as they have to help raising the family income (Haider, 2016; IRI, 2020). Child labour is commonplace among Bihari children. “Children often don’t go to school and work very hard to make their situation better. They work in mechanical sector, repairing motorcycles, or as shopkeepers” (Saima, personal communication, 29 June 2021). Haider further declares that increasing child marriage and prostitution arises from the grim employment perspectives (2016).

Despite bleak notions of employment among the communities, and the consequential complications it brings about, the situation is slightly improving. Progress is notable and

the best way to assess this is by looking at the young generation's aspirational goals (Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021). The current youth, he states, "is on top of their game". Because of the rising levels of education, many Bihari youngsters are aspiring to become 'doctors and cure cancer', among others (ibid.), or famous cricket players, representing Bangladeshi triumph (Quora, personal communication, 18 July 2021). Ranjan, Ashik and Shanto notice this progress too in their respective camps, mentioning that there is a whole generation of doctors, lawyers, teachers and engineers now (personal communication, 29 June 2021). Despite ongoing discrimination and the usual difficulties with accessing necessary documents due to the camp address, the Biharis can fortunately dream again. Another young Bihari resident captioned the generation's ambitions in her own goals as well:

"I want to be a teacher, so I can teach others and they can develop and become good citizens. So people say our Bangladesh is a country of enlightened people." (in 'Swapnabhumi', 2007)

BIHARI REPRESENTATION

However the socio-economic status has replaced the political realm as major concern among the communities, all of the aforementioned indicators ultimately affect the overall political participation of the Urdu-speakers. Bihari political participation —real participation— remains but a dream so far. Prabhat argued that voting rights are often a key reason to apply for citizenship (2018), yet voting does not necessarily lead to political participation on a more wholesome level. Local politicians consider the communities as wieldy votebank, easily politicised and used as pawns for their political agenda (Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021). The political elite will come to the camps during elections, making promises and then never looking back when the vote has been cast. Research by IRI disclaimed that politicians even blame the Bihari communities if the results are not satisfactory (IRI, 2020). The political sphere thus changes very little for the Biharis, leaving them behind rather than accomodating them. Khalid argues that, while younger generations are increasingly participating in mainstream politics, they are bound to engage at the lower levels. Biharis can join any party now, however, participation in the upper-level political realm is not yet

possible for the communities (Hussain, personal communication, 3 July 2021). Similar voices were raised by IRI, highlighting discrimination in this regard; “Is this why we liberated our country, to elect a Bihari?” (IRI, 2020:6), or the fact that Biharis find themselves in such an unprivileged position that they cannot possibly think about doing politics as long as they are struggling to overcome other hurdles: “If we get involved with politics, we will starve” (IRI, 2020:6).

The overall participation opportunities of the Biharis in Bangladesh are thus ambiguous at best. Their ‘bare citizenship’ (Chatterji, 2012) makes it impossible for them to mobilise and engage actively in mainstream society, though slight positive changes are noticeable in recent years. It is essential that, after so many generations have already suffered dearly, the future ones can “live a life of dignity, with the same socio-economic opportunities afforded to them as their co-citizens” (Wasty, in Shahid 2017:single page). This is a matter of political and private goodwill to accept the Biharis as full-fledged member of the nation (Malik, 2000), and ultimately turn them into effective citizens (Haider, 2016).

AMAR SONAR BANGLA⁵

On Affection

One should not underestimate the power of nationalism in Bangladesh, and the South Asian region for that matter. It led to the Partition in 1947, the language movement in 1952 and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. It also functioned as ultimate catalyst for the unmaking of the Urdu-speaking linguistic minorities in Bangladesh. Nationalism in the Bengali context, after all, is determined largely – if not solely – by the sharing of a common language, Bengali. Conversely, the Urdu-speakers of Bangladesh were left behind by this kind of nationalism, hindering any sense of belonging to the country. In recent years, however, the communities can be considered ‘in transition’, claiming a place in the Bangladesh fabric and ultimately making sense of a *Bangladeshi* nationalism. One that transcends the linguistic counterpart and is accessible for everyone born on Bangladesh soil, including the camp-dwelling Biharis. With their minds and hearts set on this Bangladeshi homeland, the young generations of Biharis do no longer wish to be repatriated to Pakistan, an estranged land they never set foot on before. Moreover, they do not only wish to become effective citizens, as mentioned earlier, but are also gradually becoming *affective* citizens.

“I am a Bangladeshi. No one has to tell me that I’m a Bihari, I know my identity.” (Akash, personal communication, 29 June 2021)

“New generations do not want to go to Pakistan. They are born in Bangladesh and want to be part of mainstream society. I see it in the eyes of the new generations of Bihari children.” (Masum, personal communication, 29 June 2021)

5/ Bengali for ‘My Golden Bengal’, which is the national anthem of Bangladesh.

Khalid Hussain also underscored this sense of Bangladeshi belonging: “All generations after 2008 forgot about repatriation. 99% wants to be rehabilitated in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is the only land where we can feel home” (personal communication, 16 June 2021). Similarly, Immad assured that Bangladesh is the only homeland for the new generations. Though they might understand the historical significance of their ethnicity, they are Bangladeshi. Period. (personal communication, 25 June 2021). Contemporary research on the communities all emphasise the strong sense of belonging to Bangladesh among the young Biharis. Babubhai, a local political candidate in Seydpur, testified:

“We’re suffering from a disease called ‘identity crisis’. We want to forget the past, forget the repeated insult of being called ‘razakar’. These bring tears to our eyes. Our forefathers may have been at fault but I want to say with my head held high that I’m a Bangladeshi, I want to live here and I want to die here amongst my Bangladeshi friends and brethren” (in *Bangla Stories*, s.d.: single page)

An in-depth field research by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in 2020 further offers some valuable testimonies as well:

“I was born in this country and I am a citizen. I love this country dearly. If we were in Bangladesh back then, we too would have fought for this country in the war. We too respect those who sacrificed their lives for this country. We love the language martyrs as well...” (IRI, 2020:4)

This is a particularly interesting statement, as it sheds a light on the glaring differences between the various generations of Biharis. Whereas the younger generations are committed to the new motherland, the older generations seem to be trapped in nostalgia and a fading dream of Pakistan (Mokammel, 2007). Though even the majority of the older generations has forgot about repatriation, they remain reluctant on accepting Bangladesh —more specifically Bangladeshi culture. Rahaman states that the Urdu-speaking communities have been trying to protect their Bihari roots until the third generation. From then onwards, assimilation

becomes more frequent and the Urdu culture devaluates within the community (2019). In an attempt to harness their ancestors' culture, some of them develop an aggressive conservatism, while hesitant to love Bangladesh (Khalid, personal communication, 16 June 2021). This lack of a sense of belonging to Bangladesh and the tenacious holding onto past memories, lead to less engagement in society, less interaction with the mainstream and an overall decline in realising Bangladeshi citizenship among older generations. "Older generations did not take initiatives to get an education here; they had no plans" (Ashik, personal communication, 29 June 2021). The emotional distinction is also voiced by the blog 'Nowhere People' (s.d.: single page):

"There is a bitterness inside the older generation and a feeling of betrayal and loss that this generation will always carry with them. Although they wake up each day denied their rightful place in the country of birth, the younger Bihari do not let the bitterness of the older generation infect them."

A DYING CULTURE

The determined yearning of the older generations to maintain their cultural heritage hinders them in absorbing features of Bengali culture, leading to both frictions with Bengali mainstream, as within the communities themselves. Immad notices a meaningful distinction in the networks of the various generations, where the older Biharis retain their networks inside the camps, while the younger ones are building a live outside the camps as much as possible (personal communication, 25 June 2021). Further, the generational differences can turn into some sort of cultural divide between young and old; the lack of engagement in Bangladeshi society may fracture families by separating the members that do have standing in mainstream culture from the ones who do not. Immad clarifies this with the example of a Bihari man who was left behind in the camp with his disabled son, as his other children got educated and found a job, a family and a life outside the camp (personal communication, 25 June 2021). When discussing culture, Redclift argues that there currently does not seem to be such thing as true Bihari culture. She asserts that the Urdu-speaking communities

are divided along cultural, political, linguistic, generational and socio-economic lines. As linguistic community, they do not longer all share a common language. Culture is exercised in different ways and there are social divisions of class, money and status. Politically, there is a great distinction in participation and there is no such thing as a Bihari political entity. The differences within the community vary over generations, but also between the camp dwellers and the ‘outside Biharis’ (2010). This lack of cultural unity might contribute to the deterioration of Urdu culture among younger generations, who have come to create their own culture — which befitting the South Asian region, is a hodgepodge of different cultures and languages, be it Urdu, Bengali or Hindi (Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021). Overall, Bengali and Bihari culture know many similarities these days. “Your Allah is my Allah too. We all eat the same food. There is no difference: some are rich and some poor, some educated and some not” (IRI, 2020:8). Indeed, many of the young generation Biharis have come to embrace Bengali culture, sharing food preferences, dress codes, popular media and a love for cricket. Even some of the cultural peculiarities are mimicked in the camps; “If someone touches your feet, that shows disrespect—in mainstream society and the camps alike” (Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021).

Two main differences remain to exist: language and religion. Though both of the communities are Muslim, the practice of religion is understood slightly differently. The Biharis are often accused of ‘practicing religion in the wrong way’, with the festival of Muharram as standard example (Redcift, 2010). The Urdu-speaking communities tend to celebrate this holy month in a more festive way—beating the drums, making a lot of fuzz about it—whereas the Bengalis see this as an individual celebration (ibid). The more distinctive feature remains, however, language. Although older generations are determined to maintain Urdu language in Bangladesh, it falls on deaf ears.

“When we started our citizenship fight, we claimed ourselves as Urdu-speaking linguistic minority and wanted to establish our language and culture; and thus grow as minority group in Bangladesh. But the young generations do not want to claim this, they don’t want to practice Urdu

and the culture. Their thinking is: if I claim myself as Urdu-speaking, I'm a minority. If I forget my culture, I can start living in mainstream. There is no benefit to claim ourselves as minority." (Khalid Hussain, personal communication, 27 June 2021)

Similarly, Namati observes that by passing as Bengali to gain access to mainstream society, it means that Biharis will have to abandon their culture to some extent (2014). Nevertheless, the downturn of the Urdu language is a sad story for the Bihari communities. Urdu language has no future in Bangladesh, despite some people trying their best to keep it alive (Mokammel, 2007). There is no journal, no newspaper or no education in Urdu. The mainstream does not want the language to exist further; even today, the historical affiliations cut deep (ibid.). As for the reluctance on the part of the Urdu-speaking communities themselves, this stems from socio-economic motives. Discrimination and economic factors cause many young Biharis to opt for Bengali language rather than their mother tongue. Within fifteen years, the Bihari people will probably be invisible, as they will have merged into Bangladeshi nationalism, having adopted Bangladeshi culture and Bengali language (Khalid Hussain, personal communication, 3 July 2021). Among the 'outside Biharis', some of them do revere their native language and judge the camp dwellers for bastardising the Urdu language (Redclift, 2010). However, a remark has to be made here: the ability for outside Biharis to maintain their cultural linkages and even nurture it, stems from their privileged position in mainstream society. Camp dwellers, at risk of constant discrimination and already poor living standards, cannot afford to 'show their Urdu colours' and thus are bound to assimilate to the mainstream. Today, the Urdu language is being revered mostly through poets and literary icons, though they also raise concerns over the decline of the language. With their demise, the language will probably die too (Ashrafi, 2021). Some of the poets, however, does not necessarily see this as an issue: "I am proud to be considered an Urdu poet, but I know that after me, there won't be anybody carrying on the legacy. This is a historical process and one shouldn't get saddened by it. Maybe amongst my children, amongst future generations of Biharis, one will emerge as one of the greatest Bengali poets" (Ilias, s.d.:single page).

THE BONA FIDE BIHARI

On Recognition

Dhaka, September 2019. We are making our way down the partially flooded streets of a neighbourhood near Old Dhaka. As he leads us toward a large slum-like camp, with a sign stating that it is the home of the ‘Stranded Pakistanis’, our Bengali guide Pankaj seems a bit dejected.

“It is a sore issue at times here in Bangladesh, you know. Our history has left major scars and we haven’t fully recovered from it yet... But, I mean.. These people are victims too. They are part of our country and it’s insane that they have to live like this, while most had nothing to do with what happened. The government should help these people, urgently. People should know about the Biharis, they should know and care. But the world never really cared that much about Bangladesh, I guess...” (informal conversation [slightly rephrased in summarising], Geneva Camp, 9 September 2019)

As mentioned earlier in this paper, it are the ordinary people that define who is entitled to civil, social and political rights, by keeping the exclusionary tale alive (Glenn, 2010). It is indeed the notion of recognition by the large group, more than any other factor, that will ultimately establish the standing of a certain individual or group in society. The acceptance of the Urdu-speaking communities among mainstream Bangladeshis is to this date a controversial matter of debate.

A VIRUS CALLED INTOLERANCE

Research has shown that intolerance toward the Urdu communities remains one of the main concerns (personal communication, June 2021; Garcia et al. 2020; Rahaman, 2019, IRI, 2020).

Discrimination against the Biharis trickles down into everyday life and paralyses both the minority as host community. In 2009, Khalid declared that Biharis are discriminated against by the government and the large public, which halted any possibility for integration (Hussain, 2009). Twelve years later, the situation seems to have improved to some extent, yet is still far from ideal. The citizenship status has done little to eradicate the fear of being treated as ‘others’ (Rahaman, 2019). In many cases, there is still a superior-inferior relationship between the two communities, stemming largely from economic and political factors (ibid.). Overall, Biharis still encounter social alienation, harrassment and discrimination because of their ancestry (IRI, 2020). It is important to note here that the levels of discrimination depend on one’s geographic location as well, as Saima from Saidpur illustrates. Saidpur is indeed known for its greater tolerance toward the Bihari communities, whereas Urdu-speakers in Dhaka are particularly vulnerable for discrimination and stigmatisation.

“In my area there is no one that will treat me differently. But in other areas, it happens that people treat you as if your voice is not important because you are Bihari. In these areas, they don’t respect you, they don’t want to be your friend or sit with you, because you are different.”
(Saima, personal communication, 29 June 2021)

‘SON OF A BI-HARI’

In the context of recognition, it is paramount to take into account the destructive capacity of labelling and stigmatisation (Hussain & Ahmed, personal communication, June 2021). “Stigmatisation is rooted in the faulty, problematic spirit of ‘othering’. This ignorant act seeks to brush aside facts and rests in distorted fiction” (Ashrafi, 2021:single page). The entrenched stigmatisation of the Biharis evolves largely around their controversial part in Bangladeshi history. “Teachers would say... You’re from the camps, you killed our forefathers in ‘71. [...] I didn’t say anything, but I cried all the time” (Parvin, 2019:single page). Recurring insults imply that the notions of ‘collaborator’, ‘war criminal’ and ‘Stranded Pakistani enemy’ are far from dormant within society (Haider, 2018; Hussain, 2009; IRI, 2020). “We are branded Pakistanis first and then human beings” (in ‘Swapnabhumi’, 2007). In addition, a nationalistic

political agenda maintains such sentiments. “Bangladesh’s history is painful”, Immad declares, “people lost people on both sides, and these people are attached to the past. The political scene keeps bringing up Liberation and the monuments and national holidays are frequent reminders of it, keeping the memories alive...” (personal communication, 25 June 2021). Moreover, prejudices are nurtured through the conception of the camps as *dirty crime hubs* (Khalid, personal communication, 16 June 2021). Redclift, correspondingly, argues that the Urdu-speaking camp dwellers are considered a community precisely because they are camp dwellers. “What unites the camp community is not language or historical heritage...It’s the camp. And this camp identity is stronger than anything else” (2010:323). It is this camp identity which engenders malicious labelling. Even the ‘outside Biharis’ reflect poorly on the camp dwellers, referring to them as ‘Moawra’⁶ (ibid.), despite sharing a common ancestry.

There are two common ways through which the Urdu-speaking Biharis are trying to gain recognition from the mainstream society. One of which is trying to assimilate, by hiding their Bihari identity (Hussain, personal communication, 16 June 2021; Redclift, 2013), and thus abandoning part of their cultural roots. This widespread phenomenon will further be explored in the next part of this paper. Another, dubious, way to escape rampant discrimination is to ‘prove their Bangladeshiness’ and prove that they are ‘good, if not perfect, citizens’ (Mokammel, 2007; Prabhat, 2018; Rahaman et al., 2020). In the words of Arendt, “to rise from an unrecognised anomaly to the status of unrecognised exception would be to become a genius. [...] It is true that the chances of the famous refugee are improved” (1951:375). This highly problematic conception of minority belonging is underscored by testimonies of many Biharis:

“There is a solution to the identity problem: if you are successful, no one tells you you’re a Bihari. A guy I know started school and was bullied for being Bihari. Now he is one of the top students and no one called

6/ A term of abuse used only to refer to the camp dwellers.

him that ever again. If you're successful, no one tells you about your personal identity, but if you're just a normal person, you're a Bihari." (Akash, personal communication, 29 June 2021)

"If we make our youth perfect in the future, time will come that people will forget our past." (Ranjan, personal communication, 29 June 2021)

"When we make progress in class we are in a position were the Bengali students will behave with us." (Shanto, personal communication, 29 June 2021)

THE MAINSTREAM MINDSET

Curious of what lives in the minds of the mainstream, various forums and social media comment sections were explored to get a preliminary sense of the current debate. The general opinion voiced on these platforms presents a mixed feeling among the average population. Of course, this conclusion can only be made within the limits of these platforms. Social media platforms attract the 'loudest voices in society', which are not necessarily representative of the large group. Therefore, this part is highly preliminary and in no way offers an objective, conclusive account of the mainstream tolerance toward Biharis nowadays. Still, some recurring themes could be defined to indicate a tentative account of the current standing of Biharis in society. For a complete overview of the data collected, consult the annexes at the end of this thesis.

On the opponents' side recurring themes included: labelling as war criminals, historical grievances, suspicion and fear of Pakistani ties and an overall nervousity about Bangladesh's already scarce resources to take care of 'its own people'. On the side of Bihari advocates, the main points raised were on principles of humanity, Muslim solidarity, the fact that new generations should not pay for the 'sins of the father' and the consideration that Bihari integration would benefit Bangladeshi society and progress as a whole. The comments also indicate that some Bangladeshis do not necessarily have an issue with *all* Biharis, but mainly with the camp dwellers, whom they consider freeloaders seeking for benefits, and whom they do not trust due to the alleged affiliation with Pakistan. However, it should be understood that

camp life is not a choice. People do not *want* to live in the camps, they are merely convicted to that dire lifestyle. The affiliation with Pakistan is also basically non-existent these days, so this popular fallacy stems probably from ignorance and a lack of inter-communal interaction. Below review a selection of the comments, made anonymous for privacy reasons:

“It is important as a Bengali we can not unjust to any minority within our country. I think Bangladeshi have done so much to them last 40 years: no education, no recognition, no job. This is completely wrong as human, as muslim, as brother. [...] Bangladeshi government should start a project immediately which would help this minority Bengali to come upto standard of main stream society, otherwise, history will not forgive us. Someone has done wrong, does not means we will do the similar mistake; if this is the case, then we also will have to pay same as this minority paid for the last 40 years.” (2013)

“It makes me cry. I am a Bangladeshi tortured by Pakistani army in 1971. Biharis helped to arrest me that time. [...] But we are human beings. What happened 48 years ago, these people can not go for it. These children are not to blame at all.” (2019)

“Considering the new generation of bihari people and their nationality, there comes a solution. They were born here. They have lived their entire lives here on Bangladesh. What we can do is make them a part of our nation. Yes, I know we are overpopulated already, but remember, illegitimate population can cause more problems than legitimate ones.” (2015)

“At the very end, above all the casts and creeds, above all cultural dissimilarities, above all nasty historical feuds, and above everything, they are the same human beings we all are.” (2018)

“You cannot punish the innocent mass people just because of the evil

doing of some wicked policy makers. In fact, it is not what history teaches us, too. Watering the plants of racial disputes for centuries is just like giving nutrition to cancer cells so that they can spread more.” (2016)

“Bangladesh have nothing to do with these pests, they’re Pakistan’s problem.” (2019)

“It’s not at all possible to trust them for their Past linkage... Given the chance they will in support of PAKISTAN openly again.” (2012)

“Majority Biharis took side PK and took part in (directly and indirectly) of violence that happened to Bengalis. I’m surprised they are even allowed to live in Bangladesh.” (2021)

“These people were involved in slaughtering looting of Bengali people in 1971. I know new generation was not there, but still they cannot be forgiven.” (2019)

“[...] There is a small number of Biharis that live in camps, they really do that to take advantage of the benefits like subsidised rations, free rent. They get that from Red Cross or Crescent and some other NGO’s. They want to go to Pakistan, but Pakistan doesn’t want them. That is only a small number of people. They want to create sympathy for some benefit.” (2019)

“Traitors do not get rights. They deserve to live beneath Bengali.” (2021)

Overall, the Urdu-speaking communities do notice a shift in tolerance. People from the mainstream tend to accept them more easily than in previous decades (Pankaj, personal communication, 9 September 2019). According to Immad, this is mostly a generational process, with most of the new generations of Bengalis not viewing the Biharis as ‘stranded

Pakistanis' anymore. They do not have the same attachment to the past tragedies, thus once the people that directly experienced the war are gone, the process will probably gain more momentum (Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021). Masum adds that while some people surely still resist Bihari integration, many of them do not want to divide the country and therefore accept them as integral part of the nation. Further, he notes, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh has already referred to the Biharis as 'our people' on several occasions (Masum, personal communication, 29 June 2021). Khalid makes a similar point: "The people from the mainstream are now often referring to Biharis as Bangladeshis" (personal communication, 3 July 2021). Hence, the progress of recognition has already begun. Yet, it will probably take another ten to twenty years for Biharis to be completely integrated (Immad, Hussain, personal communication, June 2021). One major external development definitely plays to the advantage of the Biharis nowadays: Bangladeshi people are now much more anxious about the large influxes of Rohiyngyas coming into their homeland and thus less preoccupied with the Urdu-speakers already within their borders (Ahmed, personal communication, 25 June 2021).

THE CITIZEN'S CURSE

On Rehabilitation

Bihari citizenship presents itself as a poisoned gift to the communities. Though their citizenship status lacks substantive standing and has not yet changed their situation accordingly, the Bangladeshi state considers them citizens, and thus bestows the same responsibilities upon them as on their Bengali co-citizens. The government thus expects this community to fulfil certain duties, while not guaranteeing them the rights to realise this. Hence, the curse of citizenship.

A POISONED GIFT

By granting the Biharis official citizenship, they lose the legal 'protection' that their status as stateless, internally displaced community offered. The communities were allowed to stay in the camps *because* of their precarious position in the country (Garcia, Sholder & Veronesi, 2020; Tariq, 2021). However, now they are legal citizens the camp dwellers fear a constant threat of eviction. Despite numerous petitions to stop these immoral evictions and consequential High Court verdicts to formally put an end to it, many camps are still prone to dispossession. In 2017, several camps in Mirpur were evicted, leaving the residents surrendered to the mercy of the open sky (Goodwin & Hussain, 2018). Immad underscores the high value of the land in Dhaka, leading to the gradual breaking down of the camps by the state—basically the only state response there is to the Bihari 'problem' (Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021). The lacking state response is obvious in the following testimony as well: "The Dhaka City Corporation doesn't check on who lives there and whether the water supply or sewage works, or whether the garbage is removed. The city corporation does only one thing: sometimes they come to bulldoze houses" (in 'Swapnabhumi', 2007).

Shanto adds that “people in the camps are at risk of living in Bangladesh without a home” (personal communication, 29 June 2021). After eviction, the ejected Biharis do not have the opportunity to settle somewhere else and will thus be rendered homeless. Although the aspect of land is the most prominent challenge, the citizen’s curse comes with some other features as well. Recently, the Bihari camps face incessant power cuts. Before citizenship, the camps were equipped with free water and electricity. After the issuance of Bangladeshi nationality, this right to free utilities was withdrawn (Rozario & Uttom, 2019). “They are not refugees anymore, but citizens of the country. They can enjoy citizen rights and pay bills like any citizen unless we have a special order for them”, says Shah Kamal, secretary of the Disaster Management and Relief Ministry in Rozario & Uttom (2019:single page). For the Biharis, who are deprived of decent living standards, paying electricity bills is unaffordable (Rahaman, 2019). “We will gladly pay all the utility bills including gas, water, and electricity, if government gives us full citizenship rights instead of using us as a vote bank” (Al Amin, 2019: single page).

THE FINAL DESTINATION

No eviction without rehabilitation, a common understanding within the Urdu-speaking communities. Though escaping the grim conditions of the camps is the ultimate desire for the Biharis, without proper rehabilitation this remains but a yearning out of their reach.

“The final destination for the Biharis is to finish the camp life. Camp life is not permanent life. Camp dwellers don’t have hope to improve their life when they live in the camp. Once the camp life is finished and they start their life outside, they can think about their future, education and everything. So final solution is the rehabilitation of Biharis. And before this is taken care of, they have the right to live their life in a decent way, like as a human being. The necessity is thus to fulfil their daily life necessities, like water sanitation systems, electricity and toilets.” (Hussain, personal communication, 3 July 2021)

Indeed, true rehabilitation would solve most of the abovementioned citizen's deficits currently experienced by the community. It will offer opportunities for livelihood, thus eradicating socio-economic disadvantages; it will engender integration, as most of the discrimination stems from the situation of camp dwelling and it will enhance an overall feeling of belonging.

“Integration should be rehabilitation. Once Biharis will be rehabilitated, they will integrate. Due to living in the camps, they are completely trademarked as Bihari and linguistic minority. Outside they cannot be traced as Bihari. [...] Once the camps are finished, the people will get adequate housing and a decent life. Only then they will be merged with Bangladeshi community.” (Khalid, personal communication, 3 July 2021)

Rehabilitation in the Bihari context implies a government project that ensures decent housing opportunities outside the camps, but preferably not too far from it, so people can maintain their jobs. However, the plots assigned for Bihari rehabilitation should in no way be separated from mainstream society. Biharis want to merge with their Bengali neighbours (Dey, 2019; IRI, 2020). When the camps are no longer considered Bihari colonies, they will not stop to exist, though. They will gradually turn into slums, with low-income Bangladeshis of all backgrounds moving in (Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021). Overall, the rehabilitation project should guarantee proper education, health rights and income generation for the community (Abrar, 2013). In addition to proper housing, the government should therefore introduce quota systems in educational institutions and the public service sector (Dey, 2019). Further, the issuance of legal documents should be provided in the same way as to other Bangladeshis, “without any hassle of investigation officials” (Goodwin & Hussain, 2018:9). Only when rehabilitation is fully achieved will the Biharis of Bangladesh be able to exercise their full membership of the nation. Yet, the government seems reluctant to start this process. Ergo, the community must come up with their own solution.

PART III

NEGOTIATING THE SOCIAL FABRIC

*And when old words die out on the tongue,
new melodies break forth from the heart;
and where the old tracks are lost,
a new country is revealed with its wonders.*

Rabindranath Tagore

THE HIDDEN BIHARIS

On Assimilation

When the state upholds the incriminating system of cultural politics, herewith systematically denying or ignoring societal standing of a minority group, there is a plethora of ways through which these minorities can reposition themselves within the mainstream. In this regard, the communities become the creator of their own opportunities, paving the way to their full substantive citizenship against the backdrop of the state's reticence. In the context of the Biharis, this 'citizenship building' entails two different notions: assimilation on the one hand, community empowerment on the other.

According to Holohan, assimilation implies the contested adoption of the host community's culture, values and social behaviour by immigrant groups through social and cultural practices and political machinations, in order to benefit from full citizenship status. Along these lines, assimilation often leads to the eventual sacrifice of one's own culture. Cultural assimilation, whereby ethnic groups take on the cultural signifiers of the host community, is the most infamous conception (2012). Through language, appearance and absorption into the local cultural and employment community, the ethnic groups merge with the mainstream. Holohan concludes that assimilation becomes substantially easier for the next generations, who have been socialised in the dominant culture from a young age (ibid).

I AM BENGALI

In the Bihari context, assimilation refers mainly to hiding one's identity and cultural background. The lion's share of research on the Urdu-speaking communities mentions the widespread phenomenon of hiding the Bihari identity (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Farzana 2008;

Rahaman et al., 2020; Rashid, 2020; Redclift, 2010 & 2013). An estimate of 95 percent of the Biharis has hidden their identity at one point in life (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The reasons for ‘passing as Bengali’ are manifold, yet all tied to the flawed notion of citizenship. Though formal citizenship may not be granted on terms of assimilation, effective citizenship certainly is affected by it. Therefore, the widespread occurrence of assimilation among the Urdu-speaking communities hardly comes as a surprise (Redclift, 2013). The Bihari identity generates discrimination at many levels. As mentioned earlier, Urdu-speakers often do not get admitted to educational institutions, face higher rejection rates in the job market —or are subjected to wage discrimination (ibid.). Further, they are not receiving proper treatment at healthcare facilities, are not able to obtain necessary legal documents and struggle to find landlords willing to rent them a place, due to the persistent stigma of the camps being ‘dirty’ and the people ‘up to no good’ (Khalid, personal communication, 27 June 2021). Young Biharis do not want to claim themselves as Urdu-speaking linguistic minority, as their community is largely neglected in society (Khalid, personal communication, 16 June 2021). By adopting the Bengali *lifestyle* and thereby ‘Bengalising’ themselves, the Urdu-speaking communities become ‘normal, average, ordinary’ and thus accepted (Redclift, 2013). When they are successful in concealing their roots, they discard their stigmatised identity. “To be one of us, ultimately means to be white”. Gloria Wekker (in ‘When a country does not love you back’, 2021) described her own experiences as black woman in a dominantly white society while phrasing this, still the Bihari situation entails a similar development. In order to be accepted as part of the country, they seem obliged to become Bengali —or at least walk and talk like one.

The combination of the camp address and the Urdu language identify the communities as Biharis, and therefore detachment is required with both (Redclift, 2013). In order to enroll in schools, apply for jobs or get passports, the communities give up fake addresses (Rahaman, 2020; Rashid, 2020). This is the ‘easy’ component of hiding one’s identity, Redclift argues. The harder part is acquiring the linguistic skills and cultural capital to pass as Bengali (2013). Indeed, while most of the young Biharis have become fluent in the Bengali language, sometimes accents give them away. Hiding the Bihari identity outside the camps undeniably contributes

to the deterioration of the Urdu culture; “when a person leaves the camp, he leaves his culture there” (testimony in Redclift, 2010:321). Hiding identity is a tricky endeavour, as the Biharis face a constant risk of having their true identity disclosed and thereby being dismissed from previously attained benefits, or being subjected to new waves of discrimination (Dawn, 2001; Farzana, 2008). In some cases, Bihari camp dwellers do not have the cultural capital to pass as Bengali. For these people, Redclift argues, passing as Hindi might do the trick too. Hindi is highly influential in Bangladesh, and bears no historical complications in contrast to Urdu. Therefore, some people will reclaim their Indian roots, rather than Pakistani ties (2013). “For young people in Bangladesh, India is aspirational; a world power representative of global fashion, media and modernity in all its forms” (in Redclift, 2010:317), and thus, she argues, young Biharis appear to make an identity for themselves, evolving around an Indian heritage. However, Khalid counters this statement slightly. Indian culture might be influential within Bangladeshi borders, it does not necessarily help to protect Bihari identity, which remains an important crisis (personal communication, 3 July 2021).

Having to hide one’s identity can be considered one of the major indicators of social exclusion. In this way, Bhattacharjee proclaims, they become excluded from their own social being or from their biological entity (2012). However, as most of the young Biharis have come to embrace Bangladeshi culture as their own, they do not necessarily perceive this as a predominantly bad development. Let us take into account the fact that Biharis are not mere passive subjects of societal debates in Bangladesh. They often choose to adapt, within the limits of their cultural freedom, of course. For them, assimilating to Bangladeshi mainstream, then, is a valid way of escaping the systematic discrimination they have to endure. After all, Redclift also proclaimed, when the overall benefits of inclusion are so high, the loss of a language and culture to which the new generations are no longer attached to anyway, seems like a price worth paying (2013). Parenthetically, with an increasingly empowered generation, the young Biharis become more confident in defining, and owning, their identity (Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021) and thus do not always feel the need anymore to hide their ancestry or camp address. However, “some people are born to judge and will not appreciate your talents. In that case, we have to hide where we come from” (Ranjan, personal communication, 29 June 2021).

IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

A logical snowballing of rising incorporation in the mainstream is that intermarriages and other relationships between Bengalis and Biharis have become increasingly common, yet not unchallenged. Many young Biharis are successfully merging with their Bengali classmates or neighbours. Yet, they remain reluctant on showing their 'Bihari colours'. A testimony in Redclift, 2013, by a Bihari girl illustrates this dissonance; while her Bengali friends are aware of her background, their parents believe she is Bengali. Similarly, interactions with colleagues often remain quite superficial in order to maintain the Bengali disguise, mainly meeting in the office or elsewhere in town, but preferably not at home in the camp (ibid). Still, intermarriage is quite common now, with a good number of young Biharis engaging with Bengali people (Khalid, personal communication, 27 June 2021; Rahaman et al., 2020). An essential distinction has to be made here, though. 'Outside Biharis' often build new lives, in the desired Bangladeshi society, with Bengali significant others. They are able to incorporate into the mainstream completely, basically wiping out the traces to their ancestry. However, for Biharis that find themselves confined within the borders of the camps, the story often goes the other way around. Their Bengali spouses then move into the camps, ultimately subsumed by the same stigmas that haunt the Urdu-speaking communities (Redclift, 2013). Approximately 25 percent of camp residents are now of Bengali descent, adding to the conception that, eventually, the camps will likely be turned into 'regular' slums for low-income families (Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021). Marrying into a 'good' Bengali family as camp dweller often requires the further hiding of their identity, as many Bengali parents still resist this trend due to stigmatisation and socio-economic differences (IRI, 2020; Redclift, 2013). For the Bihari counterparts, on the other hand, intermarriage suggests a sense of security and improved integration: "When we do crossmarriage, the next generation wouldn't have any special name like 'Bihari'. As we are living here as a minority, every minority community needs majority's support. Having better relations with Bengalis helps us to get this security" (testimony in Redclift, 2013:160).

THE SELF-HELP APPROACH

On Community Empowerment

With the continuous lacking response of the Bangladeshi government, a strong civil society plays a pivotal role in overcoming barriers to effective citizenship. For the Biharis, this encompasses the empowerment of the camp-dwelling communities—by themselves and for themselves. Community empowerment refers to a process of social, economic and legal action, through which individuals and groups are enabled to script their own development to achieve social and political change (Bernstein & Wallerstein, 1994). It underscores the agency of the people, rendering them active actors in their own history and future. In sum, community empowerment can be understood as increasing the individual and collective assets of the community members, in order to gain control over their lives (WHO, s.d.)— in a context where they are otherwise abandoned in their survival by the state and the public. Community empowerment in the Bihari case, then, entails the resilient answer to decades of semi-statelessness or flawed citizenship. Or, in the dulcet words of local community facilitators, “If you can’t get it out with a straight finger, then bend the finger” (in ‘40 Years of Camp Life’, 2012).

THE LEADERSHIP GENERATION

The self-help approach of the Urdu-speaking minorities combines a myriad initiatives, with a primary focus on building creative confidence to make the members the stewards of solving their own problems. By utilising the enormous and untapped potential of the Bihari next generations, the collective voice of the community is raised. By developing necessary skills and acquiring a problem-solving way of thinking as early as possible, these new generations should be able to solve any problem coming their way. Once they have amassed

the tools to understand and investigate, and in turn name, their problems, for which they then prototype and implement solutions, they are gearing up to get the communities out of a cycle of poverty and marginalisation once and for all (Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021). They develop the credentials to design the pathways toward their vision and achieve durable, systematic transformations that will benefit the community as a whole, in every realm of their daily lives (MCLD, s.d.). Organisations working closely with local catalysts function as facilitator for these community-led projects, supporting them with resources and tools necessary to achieve their goals, such as scholarships and digital means. These resources do not come without a price, albeit one the members seem very much willing to pay: *empowered* members are encouraged to use their newly developed skills and capacities to build up the community (Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021; Al Falah, s.d.; OBAT Helpers, s.d.). Anwar Khan, founder of OBAT Helpers, which is one of the leading organisations working on the Bihari question, succinctly captioned the ambition of Bihari empowerment: “Do not make [the Biharis] a community that asks for handouts. Make it a community that gives support to other people” (quoted by Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021).

Immad emphasises the essential, yet often underestimated, generational aspect to this kind of holistic development. Indeed, by working toward the betterment of the youth, an entire new generation is now becoming civically engaged, to ultimately mobilise their entire families. Nonetheless, if parents or the larger community are not empowered with them, the young Biharis will find themselves beating their heads against a stone wall. While the initial focus of Bihari empowerment is on the children, adults are now gradually changing their behaviour as well. They have come to understand the importance of supporting their children and are in turn advancing their own capacities too (personal communication, 25 June 2021). Herewith, the Biharis have created a formula for success in terms of holistic community-level development, which in turn can be used to empower other minority groups as well, such as the Rohingyas (ibid).

The major tool to develop creative confidence is education. Education, after all, might be the only key to social, cultural and economic development of these young generations (Al Falah, s.d.). As a large number of the community remains illiterate, 'pop-up' schools have been set up around the camps, providing elementary training. These schools work on the basis of a 'DIY' (i.e. do it yourself) approach, with members of the community enrolled in vocational studies volunteering as primary tutors (Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021; Al Falah, s.d.; Muddit, 2010). Moreover, in the Dhaka camps, the communities have raised the materials and resources for their own library, providing children with an extra opportunity to learn (OBAT Helpers, s.d.). Local think tanks and other groups operational in the camps have been fundamental in organising other prominent initiatives as well, including clean-up actions and health care improvement, e.g. by setting up medical check-ups and awareness camps, and by mapping and enlisting autistic individuals and informing them about government facilities available for them (OBAT Helpers, s.d.).

THE LEGAL REVOLT

There is one very specific and crucial feature of the community-led development activities within the camps. As many of the major challenges of being an Urdu-speaker in Bangladesh emanate from the inaccessible legal machinery, paralegal assistance programmes have been set up among various camps by Council of Minorities (the NGO founded by Khalid Hussain, a lawyer himself, ed.). The paralegal programmes emerged out of the realisation that, while being citizens of Bangladesh, the Biharis did not enjoy their fundamental rights accordingly. In order to claim citizenship, Khalid argues, one needs access to civil documentation (personal communication, 3 July 2021). Due to excessive discrimination, many of the Urdu-speaking Biharis had to use the services of brokers, and thus pay high bribes, to obtain any legal documents. Therefore, Khalid explains, ten paralegals—all of which are residents of Bihari camps, joined forces and started five paralegal centres in five different places. These paralegals are trained in national laws and civil documentation issues, as well as in broader human rights aspects. The working method of the assistance programme is straightforward: the paralegals do daily door-to-door

outreach, disseminating the 2008 High Court judgement and the importance of issuing civil documentation. They provide support in applying for birth certificates, passports, bank loans, trade licenses and land ownership documents—which are all grounded in the 2008 judgement (ibid.).

“The camp dwellers are not aware of their citizenship. They are citizen and they have their national ID, but they don’t know how to *become* citizen. When the message is spread, they gain confidence and are willing to raise their voice and fight for their rights.” (Khalid, personal communication, 3 July 2021)

The importance of a similar project is marked by the high number of camp dwellers that have used the services of the paralegals so far. Due to excessive negotiating and lobbying with governmental authorities, the constant outreach to the camp dwellers and progressive training opportunities for the community, the project has offered great possibilities for many Urdu-speakers in Bangladesh, who have been able to start businesses, find jobs or maintain land and, overall, finally become able to access certain fundamental rights (Hussain, 2019). Moreover, the programme is committed to build people’s capacities to deal with justice-related issues in the future themselves (COM, s.d.), herewith contributing to the holistic approach previously described by Immad.

Table 1. Summary of Activities (June - November 2018)

Center	Birth Certificate	Councillor Certificate	NID Card		Passport		Trade License		General Daily	Bank Account	Death Certificate	Old age allowance	Disabled person Allowance	Total
			New	Renewal	New	Renewal	New	Renewal						
Chittagong	1,645	132	34	24	3	-	4	-	15	1	4	1	1	1,884
Khulna	589	293	47	5	24	-	15	5	11	53	5	-	-	1,047
Mdpur	2,982	53	11	28	21	3	3	1	24	9	-	177	34	3,346
Mirpur	2,032	47	104	66	50	7	3	-	136	18	1	1	-	2,465
Mym	499	244	42	70	3	1	6	8	23	2	2	-	-	900
Syedpur	1,508	37	-	5	7	-	1	-	57	19	1	-	-	1,635
Total	9,255	806	238	198	108	11	32	14	266	102	13	179	35	11,257

Overview of documentation support provided by paralegals. Source: Hussain, 2019

THE FEMINIST PROJECT

The community empowerment projects further reconfigure the hitherto questionable position of women in the camps and in larger society. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, isolated communities tend to become more conservative and thus more protective over their female members (Al Falah, s.d.). Girls are extra vulnerable due to this isolation, with less opportunities for education and more at risk of insecurity, illiteracy and economic deprivation (Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021). While women often encountered more dramatic consequences of being convicted to a life of camp dwelling, many of the bottom-up approaches see female empowerment as partial focal point of their actions. Saima illustrates the importance of female empowerment to deal with such gendered discrimination:

“Most of the times they [the community and society] don’t support you for high school education, because I’m a girl. Many have dropped their education because they say it’s not for girls and because of the discrimination. I deal with discrimination by my confidence.”
(Saima, personal communication, 29 June 2021)

THE GOOD BIHARI, THE GOOD BENGALI

Overall, the community-led projects have had an impressive transformational effect on the incorporation of Biharis into the mainstream society. They do not only enable better livelihood opportunities, a greater effective citizenship and a monumental personal development for the communities, the initiatives also reinforce intercultural relations with the Bengali population. By including members of the host community in the development process, empowerment is achieved in a more integrated manner and the first steps of rehabilitation are suddenly within reach (Immad, personal communication, 25 June 2021). Akash, who is part of a local think tank in his respective camp, underscores the profound impact of the projects on relation-building.

“Good Biharis and good Bengalis work together in and outside the camps. We work together with the mainstream, volunteering as cleaners, working on plantations or supporting in disaster relief. The Bihari schools in the camps are also for the underprivileged Bengalis from mainstream society. Through volunteering and education, the mainstream is getting closer to us. They now see: Bihari are our people, they are like us.” (Akash, personal communication, 29 June 2021)

This chapter gave emphasis to the awe-inspiring agency of the Urdu-speaking linguistic minorities against the backdrop of persistent inaction on the part of the government. It outlined the major ways of how, mostly young, Biharis have started claiming their rightful place in a still rather hesitant Bangladeshi society, and how they are being increasingly successful in their attempts. After all, the new generations are eager to be a part of their *Golden Bengal* and are certainly done just waiting for things to come around.

“For the past 40 years, we have been twiddling our thumbs. For 40 years, we have been tolerating all of this. We will first try peacefully to get our rights, but if we fail then we will use all possible tactics to restore our rights at any cost. We have to either get it from outside or bring it from the inside.” (in ‘40 Years of Camp Life, 2012)

CONCLUSION

On A Lesson Learned

As this paper is merely explorative, this section does not offer an established conclusion, rather it outlines some tentative observations. The aim of this dissertation was to explore how new generations of Biharis experience a (dis)connection between citizenship and belonging, and how they counter their flawed citizenship. In sum, it wished to review how these new generations of the Urdu-speaking linguistic minority redefine their position in the ‘social fabric’ of Bangladesh.

When it comes to the Urdu-speaking communities in Bangladesh, one needs to carefully consider the bloody legacy of the country, as it continues to echo in the minds and hearts of its people. Bangladesh’s history was painful, traumatic and divisive. To this date, it is a quintessential factor to categorise the population: the ones that supported Bangladesh’s independence, and the ones who did not. The Biharis, therefore, still suffer from the past fifty years post-independence. Despite gaining citizenship in 2008, a whole slew of the community remains confined within the squalid camps, with the corresponding detrimental effects on their socio-economic and political position in the mainstream. Anno 2021, the cultural politics at work in Bangladesh, grounded in a nostalgic yearning for Bengali nationalism, still brands the Biharis with the undesirable label of ‘war criminal’, and therefore ‘the other, the reject’. Accordingly, the communities face discrimination in their everyday lives, ranging from the issuance of legal documentation, renting apartments or finding a job, to teasing and bullying within the presupposed safe walls of the school environment. Still, the situation might seem bleak at first sight—and of course is, in many ways—the attentive beholder is able to observe a significant shift in recent years.

With new generations taking over the leadership roles in the camps, thereby degrading the previous generations who seem to be stuck in a fading desire of the Pakistani *Swapnabhumi*⁷, the communities have come to embrace Bangladesh as their motherland. The young generations speak fluent Bengali, often even more fluid than their native Urdu language. They adopted the cultural features of mainstream Bangladeshis and proclaim loyalty to their country of birth, thereby ridding themselves of the ‘stranded Pakistani’ tag. This changing mindset can thus only contribute to the notion of the Biharis as ‘community in transition’. While the Bengali mainstream seems undecided still, respondents in this research believe the Bihari integration will be completed within ten to twenty years—which is notably a long time, considering the integration efforts should have started roughly fifty years ago, still it depicts a more positive view for the near future as well. Feelings of belonging and mainstream recognition might have altered, the government response is to this date fairly non-existent. Therefore, the inaction regarding the rehabilitation of the Biharis hinders any meaningful integration. Fortunately, the newly established Biharis—or Bangladeshis if we will—do not accept this radio silence by the state and keep negotiating their place in Bangladeshi society.

Concluding this thesis, the avenues for resisting the dire conditions of the Urdu-speaking camp dwellers might be limited, yet seem to be effective. Assimilation narrows the gap between the Biharis and the host community and the benefits derived from community empowerment are countless and the vital importance undeniable. The lacking state response and overall indifference of the mainstream population, once again, makes it painfully clear how the minimum living standard of minorities apparently should not be the same as anyone else’s. Therefore, the Urdu-speaking communities have no other option than to become the masters of their own fate. This paper, then, offers a buoyant future perspective; the new generations will be the ones turning things topsy-turvy and defining, once and for all, the rightful position of Biharis within mainstream Bangladesh,

7/ Swapnabhumi means ‘Promised Land’ in Bengal. Source: Mokammel, 2007, *Swapnabhumi*

despite —or in spite of—cultural differences and neglected historical tags. The holistic ‘Bihari approach’ should not be underestimated. Minority groups and generations of refugees often find their hands tied, unable to escape their grim reality due to intolerance or indifference. Nonetheless, the Biharis have been defying all odds, delivering new generations who dare to dream again. New generations that aspire to make these dreams come true, no matter the obstacles.

In many ways, the case of the Biharis can be seen as a two-folded lesson learned. A lesson on what happens when a nation completely abandons an entire community for half a century, and a lesson on the inconceivable strength and resilience of the people. Or how a nation can deconstruct citizenship and a community can reform it.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Many topics have come to mind during the research process of this paper. The Bihari question is one with many more angles to be investigated and one which deserves greater (inter)national recognition. Due to the limits of online fieldwork, the possibilities were limited, yet, this paper hopefully opens up opportunities for further debates. Given the preliminary conclusions of this paper, in-depth field research would be a great asset to the current status quaestionis outlined in this thesis. Questions on affection and belonging, as well as the substantive effects of assimilation and community-led development, can only be examined fully through thorough observation and surveying on the ground. Along these lines, the average Bengali sentiment provides an interesting angle, too. Further research could be carried out on government action in relation to rehabilitation. Council of Minorities is currently working on a ‘roadmap’ research, to identify the main requirements of rehabilitation according to Biharis. Once this is completed, it would thus be particularly interesting to look into the state response to this research and their future endeavours.

As the role of history is so prominent in the country, it might also be interesting to do a more ‘hypothetical’ research on the politics of grievance in Bangladesh, particularly how these grievance politics have paralysed the population and the country’s progress for a long time. Accordingly, it would be interesting to look into how—effective—transitional justice might contribute to the sense of belonging. Finally, as the identity crisis remains one of the major challenges for the Urdu-speaking communities, it might be thought-provoking to look at this crisis within extra-marginalised populations, as the ‘margins of the margins’ in the camps, e.g. women, LGBTQI+, atheists etc., will find themselves struggling with two identity crises at once.

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