

Association of Young Generation of Urdu Speaking Community

Individual Community based Submission By

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Inhuman Camp life of Bihari Urdu speaking linguistic minority of Bangladesh:

Patterns of inequality, discrimination, political and social marginalization of affected Bihari Urdu Speaking community in Bangladesh.

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Introduction

In this submission Association of Young Generation of Urdu Speaking Community (AYGUSC) provide brief information of 37 years long inhuman camp life and discrimination of Bihari Urdu speaking community in Bangladesh.

Key Facts

- Three historical events signify the partition of united India in 1947. It ended the two hundred years old British colonial rule, created two separate sovereign and independent states of Pakistan and India, and set in motion the great mass migration of the millions of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh minorities from one state to another. This influx continued until 1964. In 1965, Indo-Pak borders were closed when war broke out between these two countries.
- The 1947 partition did not reflect on any particular community alone, numerous communities were affected in various respects irrespective of their race, religion, language, culture, economic and social status. All faced the consequences of the social, cultural, economic, and political turmoil.
- The division created refugee problems in both countries and the legacy of communal clashes continued forcing the religious minorities of both countries to abandoned their original place of birth and migrate to a more secured place of their choice in India and Pakistan. In Pakistan, they became a socially, politically, and economically privileged community. Most of the Urdu speaking Muslim immigrants from Indian States of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Central India, and West Bengal came to the then East Pakistan. The Pakistan Government kept them isolated from the mainstream of the urban society by building separate colonies and housing estates in the various cities and towns of the eastern province.
- These immigrants were treated as citizens under the Pakistan Citizenship Act, 1951. Government servants from India were exempted from obtaining certificates of domicile. No application for registration as Pakistani citizen by such government servants was required. All the Urdu speaking immigrants were treated as *Mohajer* meaning refugee in religious term. This nomenclature was derived from the Arabic word '*Hijrat*' meaning migration. According to Islamic history, prophet of Islam (sm) had migrated from Mecca to Medina to take shelter and preach Islam. This is the basis of the Islamic calendar. The Indian Muslim immigrants gladly accepted this identity, which gave them a sense of a privileged class, a society charged with Islamic fervor, but sadly ignored the importance of having a social and secular guarantee in the society. With the patronization of the ruling class, they penetrated in the civil bureaucracy, trade, commerce and urban workforce. These *Mohajers* in former East Pakistan were collectively called as Biharis because majority of them had come from the Indian State of Bihar.
- From 1947 to 1971, the Biharis remained isolated from the mainstream Bengali society. The Bengali speaking Muslim immigrants, who had come from the neighboring Indian states of West Bengal and Assam, gradually integrated them with

the local Bengali populations within rural and urban majority. They did not face any problem for assimilation because of their language and similar culture.

- The Bihari immigrants, when arrived in former East Pakistan (present Bangladesh), had no idea about the land, language, culture, customs, and social traditions of Bengali Muslims. They found the social, cultural, and even political environment of their new home quite different from their original homeland. In East Pakistan, their identity as “*Mohajer*” with distinct language Urdu significantly became a major challenge for their social and political integration in the mainstream.
- According to the plan of urban development, the Government of Pakistan built separate colonies and satellite towns in the urban areas for the rehabilitation of the *Mohajer* under a policy to control the urban-based political unrests that were regularly taken place in East Pakistan by the local Bengali people.
- For long 24 years, the Bihari community remained in East Pakistan as *Mohajer* and enjoyed the benefits of a privileged community until the last day of Pakistani rule in East Pakistan.
- The Pakistan Army exploited the weak leaderships of the Bihari community during the war and sought their collaboration in defending the country against the liberation struggle of the Bengali *Mukti Bahini* (freedom fighters) and the Indian Army, which also was involved in the 1971 war of liberation. A section of the Bihari community joined the war against the Bengalis.
- In December 1971, Bangladesh won its independence after fighting the nine months war of liberation with the Pakistan Army. After the emergence of Bangladesh, about a million Biharis became victims of the changed political environment in Bangladesh because of the collaboration of a section of their community with Pakistan Army during the war and their support to the Government of Pakistan in its efforts to keep Pakistan integrated.
- During the period of turmoil, chaos, confusion, and disorder the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) took the responsibility of providing food, shelter, and health care to the uprooted and displaced Bihari community. The ICRC began to register the Bihari families who wanted to leave Bangladesh for their settlement in remaining part of Pakistan. The Urdu-speaking non-Bengalis in the face of Bengali reprisal decided to keep their cultural and linguistic identity preserved by registering with the ICRC for repatriation to Pakistan.
- According to the statement made by the permanent representative of Bangladesh in Geneva, “539,639 non-locals registered with the ICRC for their repatriation to Pakistan.”
- In 1973 and 1974, the three Governments of India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan signed agreements to resolve the humanitarian issues that the nine months of war had created. Accordingly, all the three countries agreed to take back their stranded nationals through repatriation under the supervision of the ICRC and UNHCR. Pakistan, however, put conditions that she would take back only “a substantial

number of those “non-Bengalis” who are stated to have opted for their repatriation to Pakistan”. Subsequently, Pakistan took about 123,000 out of 539,669 Biharis in the first phase, who had registered them with the ICRC for their repatriation to Pakistan. Afterward; few thousand more were repatriated on humanitarian ground. This phase was closed in 1993. The remaining population of the Biharis has been languishing in relief camps as a linguistic minority community for the last 37 years, virtually as ‘stateless’ without being recognized as national of Pakistan or Bangladesh.

- Both Pakistan and Bangladesh took conflicting stand regarding the Bihari camp dwellers. Pakistan unofficially refused to take further camp people and officially termed them as ‘Bangladeshi Biharis’. Bangladesh government called these people as “stranded Pakistanis” and adopted a policy to provide relief to the camp dwellers instead of undertaking any policy and plan for their integration in the mainstream. Major causes of their sufferings include illiteracy, unemployment, lack of access to basic services like health, water and sanitation, education, and shelter. Status of “Statelessness” and lack of political will and absence of any rehabilitation policy by the state, contributed largely in their social and political exclusion that facilitated in increasing their poverty in the community.
- In 2003, the High Court in Bangladesh gave ruling in favor of the 10 petitioners declaring them Bangladeshi citizens and directed the Election Commission to enroll their names in the voters list. These petitioners were residents of Geneva Camp, the single largest concentration of the Biharis in Bangladesh. The Election Commission, though, did not issue any official instruction to its officials to register the Bihari camp dwellers as voters, but unofficially directed local officers of the Commission to visit the Bihari camps for enrollment of the eligible Biharis in the voters list.

Discrimination

Bihari Urdu speaking community is not recognizing by the government of Bangladesh as a Bangladeshi citizen and Minority group. In this regard Bihari camp dwellers are leaving under marginalization and plan discrimination. Camp dwellers are not including in national Poverty Reduction Strategic Paper (PRSP) even not including in Millennium Development Goal (MDG). Bihari camp dwellers passed their 37 years in inhuman life without justice.

Camp condition

The 116 ‘Bihari settlements’ are located largely in urban areas in thirteen districts across the country, all under conditions of severe overcrowding, poor sanitation, and lacking basic facilities. Following the departure of ICRC in 1973, the Bangladeshi Government took over management of the camps, transferring responsibility to the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation from 1975. Initially set up as temporary quarters, the last 37 years have seen the ‘slum-like’ conditions in these settlements worsen as the population has grown. Reside in a room ten feet by eight feet in size in every camps. With inadequate provision for clean water, waste disposal and sewage systems, chronic hygiene problems have been created. To make matters worse, in 2004, the already erratic monthly supply of wheat was discontinued. Land evictions, encroachment and from time to time the withdrawal of power supply have created further problems, while a severe lack of educational and healthcare facilities hamper community development.

Employment

Equal access to employment was cited most frequently as the right the community currently cannot access. Not only are they denied all government positions but due to their camp address and undefined status, wider discrimination in the job market remains a prime concern. Camp residents are not in a position to produce the kinds of documentation that employers require to prove potential employees' legal status (these may take the form of a 'local commissioner's certificate' or character reference from a local representative). Without these 'papers of citizenship', much of the market is inaccessible. Indeed, those who do find formal employment often face wage discrimination and inequality of treatment. As a result the vast majority are pushed into the formal sector, working as rickshaw-pullers, drivers, butchers, barbers, and mechanics and craft workers, earning meager wages.

Education

Although no formal restriction prevents access to government schools, camp addresses do cause problems for 'Bihari' children seeking admission. Although this appears to be changing, rules vary between institutions, and access is dependent on the attitudes of individuals in charge. More significantly, rampant discrimination within mainstream society as a whole, and continued bullying on the part of teachers and classmates alike continues to discourage attendance. Together with the lack of resources for school fees or materials, educational facilities thus remain inaccessible to the majority.

Language and Culture

Urdu language and culture are forgotten in Bangladesh. No access to learn language and practices Urdu culture due to constitutional barrier. The constitution of Bangladesh says in article 28(!)

"The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, sex, caste, or place of birth."

The significant missing word in the above Article is "*language*." so Urdu speaking linguist minority are not recognize by the constitution of Bangladesh.

Healthcare

Problems experienced with regard to healthcare also revolve around social discrimination. Camp residents report Bengalis being given priority in hospital waiting lines or 'Biharis' being made to pay 'speed money' in government clinics. The majority find themselves dependent on under-funded NGO services, most of which have been discontinued in recent years. Due to unsanitary living conditions, and with very little education in relation to healthcare among the community, there is an urgent need to provide medical facilities.

Property Rental/Bank Accounts/Passports

A number of respondents reported difficulties in trying to access or rent offices or living space in attempts to leave the camps and be assimilated in the wider society. Access to

bank accounts is also denied on account of their lacking a permanent address. Camp-dwellers also desire passports, and the opportunities associated with labor migration, but these too are inaccessible given their camp status.

Security

Issues of insecurity in the camps were also regularly reported by the community. In Dhaka, insecurity took the form of camp gangs, drugs and a lack of police protection, while in Saidpur security issues related to encroachments onto camp land by Bengalis, and the camp residents' inability to complain, appeal or fight against the dominant community. Without legal support the Urdu-speaking community remains vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Constant Threat of Eviction

Despite the overwhelming desire for Bangladeshi citizenship, fear of eviction from the camp if citizenship is formally announced is a very real concern among many residents, and an issue that generates a good deal of confusion among the community. The recent crackdown on illegal property by the Caretaker Government had generated a news set of concerns as many slum-dwellers and some 'Bihari' communities around the country have already felt the brunt of these efforts, posing a new challenge for integration with dignity.

Mainstream Civil Society

Neglect on the part of mainstream civil society has increased the widespread ignorance of the plight of this disenfranchised group. There has been very little interest amongst the mainstream human rights organizations, legal aid bodies, or women's and children's organizations in the 'Bihari' issue. Voices need to be raised and wider society informed if sufficient pressure is to finally force the government to address the issue.

Achievement and God practice

Recently the election commission has announced that all camp dwellers are Bangladeshi according to the High court verdict and they will enlist in national ID card and voter scheme. Now most of camp dwellers are including in national ID card and voter listing process. However voter enrollment is not sufficient for camp dwellers. They need proper rehabilitation with decorum.

Recommendations

- Official recognition as an Urdu speaking linguist Bangladeshi and minority.
- Reintegration with Dignity is the only way forward for this community's future success. Te-integration within the Bengali mainstream has therefore to be understood as the primary goal. Overcoming longstanding tensions and ignorance still represents a challenge, but some positive steps have already been taken and many more are within sight.
- Take major afford to protect Urdu language and Culture.
- National, International and UN involvement is most important to rehabilitation for Bihari Urdu speaking Camp dwellers.