

Gender and Diaspora: The Bihari Community in Bangladesh

Anisur Rahman Khan*

Abstract

The Urdu-speaking Biharis are descendants of Muslim refugees who migrated from India to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) after the partition of 1947, primarily fearing communal riots. During the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, the Biharis supported and acted in favour of the West Pakistan. After the independence of Bangladesh, they moved into refugee camps and continue to live in an extremely dilapidated situation without a clear identity and political status. The Biharis in Bangladesh belong to a typical diasporic community since they consider Pakistan as their homeland but live in Bangladesh. The repatriation issue of the Biharis remained as one of unresolved problems between Pakistan and Bangladesh for long which has added fuel to their diasporic feelings. Women are the worse sufferers in the case of diasporic situation. In this paper, through content analysis, a critical examination was made on the relationship between gender and diasporic identities of the Bihari community living in Bangladesh. The findings suggest that diaspora has a different modality for women of this community.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Pakistan, Bihari Community, Gender, Diaspora

* Faculty Member, Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre, Savar, Dhaka, BANGLADESH
E-mail: khannida2012@yahoo.com; khanpatc@gmail.com

เพศและการพลัดถิ่น: ชุมชนชาวพิหารในบังกลาเทศ

Anisur Rahman Khan*

บทคัดย่อ

ชาวพิหารที่พูดภาษาอูรดู สืบเชื้อสายมาจากผู้ลี้ภัยชาวมุสลิมที่อพยพจากอินเดียไปปากีสถานตะวันออก (ปัจจุบัน คือ บังกลาเทศ) หลังการแบ่งแยกประเทศ ในปี ค.ศ. 1947 โดยส่วนใหญ่ถูกกล่าวหาว่าจลาจลของชุมชนต่าง ๆ ระหว่างสงครามประกาศอิสรภาพของบังกลาเทศ ในปี ค.ศ. 1971 ชาวพิหารสนับสนุนและกระทำเพื่อประโยชน์ของปากีสถานตะวันตก หลังการได้รับอิสรภาพของบังกลาเทศ พวกเขาย้ายไปอยู่ในค่ายผู้ลี้ภัยและยังคงอาศัยอยู่ในสภาพที่ทรุดโทรมอย่างหนัก โดยไม่มีอัตลักษณ์และสถานะทางการเมืองอย่างชัดเจน ชาวพิหารในบังกลาเทศเป็นตัวอย่างของกลุ่มคนพลัดถิ่น เพราะพวกเขากล่าวว่าปากีสถานเป็นบ้านเกิดแต่กลับอาศัยอยู่ในบังกลาเทศ ประเด็นการส่งกลับประเทศเดิมของชาวพิหาร ยังคงเป็นหนึ่งในปัญหาที่แก้ไขไม่ได้ ระหว่างปากีสถานและบังกลาเทศเป็นเวลานานมาแล้ว ซึ่งเป็นการซ้ำเติมความรู้สึกของการพลัดถิ่นให้รุนแรงยิ่งขึ้น สตรีเป็นผู้ที่ทนทุกข์ทรมานที่สุดในสถานการณ์ผู้พลัดถิ่น ในรายงานนี้ โดยใช้วิธีการวิเคราะห์เนื้อหา ได้ทำการศึกษาอย่างละเอียดความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างเพศและอัตลักษณ์การพลัดถิ่นของชุมชนชาวพิหารที่อาศัยอยู่ในบังกลาเทศ ผลการศึกษาเสนอว่าการพลัดถิ่นควรมีวิธีที่แตกต่างสำหรับสตรีในชุมชนนี้

คำสำคัญ: บังกลาเทศ ปากีสถาน ชุมชนชาวพิหาร เพศ การพลัดถิ่น

* Faculty Member, Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre, Savar, Dhaka, BANGLADESH
E-mail: khannida2012@yahoo.com; khanpate@gmail.com

Introduction

The colonial era in the Indian subcontinent ended in 1947 by giving birth to two different independent states named India and Pakistan (East Pakistan and West Pakistan) on the basis of two major religious identities, historically known as ‘Two Nations Theory’ (Nair, 2003). The partition was both preceded and followed by a number of communal riots that forced many Muslims of India to migrate to Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan to India. According to the UNCHR, in 1947, around one million Muslims from the Indian state of Bihar migrated to East Pakistan (UNCHR, 2000). It is said that many of the migrated Biharis were the victims of the ‘Great Bihar Killing’ of 30,000 Muslims which took place during October-November in 1947 (Sen, 1999). They migrated to East Pakistan because they wanted to escape from the communal bloodshed and to preserve their religious identity (Haider, 2003 quoted in Farzana, 2009). On the other hand, a huge number of railway workers and technicians from Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh (UP) also migrated to East Pakistan and were designated as Central Government Employees. Apart from that, many Muslims from the surrounding Indian states also moved to East Pakistan during that time. They belonged to the Bengali linguistic group and shared the same culture with East Pakistani Bengali Muslims. As a result, they faced no problem to assimilate in the new state while the case with the Biharis remained very complex. They shared the Urdu linguistic heritage with the original inhabitants of West Pakistani people, felt a shared identity with them and enjoyed favour from the central government in all respects over the majority Bengalis in East Pakistan (Paulsen, 2006). In fact, they identified themselves more closely with West Pakistan, and received more privileges and advantages from the central government (Farzana, 2009).

The migrated Urdu-speaking Biharis were formally accorded with Pakistani citizenship in 1951 and accepted West Pakistani ruling elites as their patrons and protectors. During the long period of East Pakistan’s struggle for independence the Biharis sided with the West Pakistan and many of them joined Pakistani militias, auxiliary forces¹ and helped the army in the war against Bengalis in 1971 (UNCHR, 2000). However, the disintegration of Pakistan changed everything. Thousands of Biharis were forced to reside in camps in urban areas in appalling conditions (refugee-like) awaiting repatriation to Pakistan (Paulsen, 2006). Except for the initial few cases the process of repatriation was always very slow, and in fact, there was no

repatriation after 1993 (UNCHR, 2000). Those who could not repatriate are now on the horns of a dilemma since neither Pakistan nor Bangladesh is willing anymore to offer them citizenship and to shoulder the responsibility thereof. Pakistan fears that a mass influx of Biharis may destabilise the country, and Bangladesh scorns them for having supported the enemy country (Lynch & Cook, 2006). In the meantime, many of the Biharis have deserted their camps and managed to leave Bangladesh for unknown destinations (Begum, 2003a). Neither Pakistan nor Bangladesh has taken any significant steps to resolve the problem of the Bihari community (Farzana, 2009). Although there is a general understanding about the hardships that Biharis face, there is far less consensus about how to resolve the problems of the Biharis (Bashar, 2006).

Today, the Biharis are living in a diasporic situation in the camps where their life is ruled by uncertainty, hunger, poverty, disease and dejection. As a concept diaspora has been explained by many scholars. The fundamental features of their explanations include: i) dispersal from original centre to foreign land; ii) retention of collective memory, vision and myth about the home of origin; iii) the belief of non-inclusion/acceptance in the host country; iv) the thought of returning home when situation is normal; v) a commitment to the home country, and vi) the prevalence of strong ethnic group consciousness (Reis, 2004). In short, diaspora is a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreams of homeland, but lives in exile (Cohen, 1997). This definition is quite applicable to the Biharis, because they live in Bangladesh but most of them consider Pakistan their homeland. Therefore, they are also called the stranded Pakistanis, refugees, stateless persons, and so on. Diaspora, on the other hand, is a state of indeterminacy that is articulated under different social circumstances. Thus, it is a multidimensional construct. According to Avtar Brash (1996), diasporas are heterogeneous since these depend upon multiple modalities such as gender, race, class, religion, language and generation. Each of the modalities can stand as a reason to constitute diasporic experiences since people may become the victims of such modalities at any time and place. In this research, I examined how does gender as a modality add fuel to the diasporic experiences of the Bihari community in Bangladesh? In the process of developing the paper, I relied on secondary sources of information.

Gender and the Bihari Diaspora

The Bihari issue is one of the long lasting unresolved refugee/settlement issues in the world. The possibility for a concrete solution to the problem has been faded with time and it cannot attract significant attention from the international community now-a-days. Even in the political, social, cultural discourses and policy discussions this forgotten community gets little focus. Keeping such reality in mind, this study analyzes how gender or the relationship between men and women, as an important social modality, impacts on the Biharis' diasporic experiences. In fact, in refugee and statelessness analyses the issues related to gender relations are discussed less. The problems of men and women are seldom viewed separately and expected to be solved through a political or legal dialogue. This is also a case with the Bihari diaspora. In the available leading documents, writings and publications the Bihari issue is addressed predominantly in historical, political and legal rims. These are firstly on Hindu–Muslim migration during and after the partition in 1947 where Biharis are viewed as a group who under certain circumstances migrated to East Pakistan; and secondly, on their role in the liberation war of Bangladesh and debates related to statelessness and repatriation. There are some situational portraits of the camps too in the literature, but these are rather descriptive with a very limited distinction of the experiences of men and women in their respective positions.

As it is found in any third world poor country women are the most vulnerable group who have to constantly fight to find their feet. In addition, the condition of women aggravates if supplemented by diasporic notions like statelessness, displaced, migrated and refugee identity. Such notions might limit their chances of exposure to other ways of being and doing (Sweetman, 1998). It is said human displacement not only underlines unequal relations between men and women but also places women and girls in extreme danger since they have less access to resources (Marfleet, 2006). Therefore, men's and women's diasporic experiences deserved to be addressed and analysed separately and specifically so that pragmatic measures might be taken to find out the ways and means to alleviate the situation.

However, the Biharis have a gender culture too but it is very complex in nature. In that culture, women's position is very much peripheral. Refugee

International estimates 250,000 to 300,000 Biharis live in some 66 camps across Bangladesh (Lynch & Cook, 2006). These camps are congested and densely accommodated, and are never places where people can live with human dignity by maintaining privacy. People living in the camps are deprived of all rights and amenities. Human dignity of the Biharis is being undermined and undervalued, and they are being constantly intimidated and humiliated in all aspects of their life (Andaleeb, Haider, Khan, and Hayet, 2003). In the camps living conditions are unhygienic, water and sanitation systems are inadequate. Roads, drainage, water and sanitary systems are bad and never taken proper care of to improve the condition. Government social security benefits are also absent. Life in the camps is alarmingly unsafe and vulnerable (Khan & Samadder, 2011). On the other hand, inadequate medical facility is quite phenomenal in the camps. A survey on a camp revealed that 60% infants die before they reach their childhood. Due to lack of medical facilities women are extremely vulnerable to unsafe delivery, chronic and sexually transmitted diseases and other health-related problems, and lot of women die every year without getting proper medical care (Farzana, 2008). In fact, the Bihari women are mostly unaware and uninformed about the fundamental maternity rights and needs (Haider, Hayet, Adaleeb & Khan, 2003). Then again, lack of work opportunities have pushed many women into degrading livelihood options (Khan & Samadder, 2011). Many girls and women in the camps work as maid servants in rich families outside the camps. Even women and girls who are engaged in other jobs are also being terribly exploited (Haider, Hayet, Adaleeb & Khan, 2003).

Brief Cases on Bihari Women's Diasporic Experiences

The tale of a Bihari woman named *Jainab bibi*² is presented here regarding it as a good example of gender-based diasporic example in the community. This 65 years old lady used to live in an extended family with her husband, five sons, brother-in-law along with his wife resided with them in a district of Bangladesh named Dinajpur with harmony and peace until the liberation war in 1971. Her husband possessed a huge property including homestead and agricultural land. In 1971, she lost all the male members of her family in the hands of Bengalis. Two females (*Jainab Bibi* and her sister-in-law), then, were dispossessed from their home and agricultural land and could somehow manage a dwelling place in a camp.

She found no shelter over her head, no source of income, no relatives to stand by and she sleeps in a small room which has no lavatory. She became compelled to beg from door to door for the sake of survival. Boundless misery is her only company in her dark tiny room.

*Shamim Akhtar*³, a pregnant woman of nine months gave birth to a baby girl on December 23, 1971 just a few days after the independence of Bangladesh. No midwife was available and her husband helped her at childbirth. Late at night, a gang of armed Bengalis raided their house, grabbed her husband, trucked him away, and murdered him. After five days, they returned and ordered her and her children to vacate the house as they claimed that it was now their property. In the own words of Shamima Akhtar:

On December 17, 1971, the Mukti Bahini cut off the water supply to our homes. We used to get water from a nearby pond; it was polluted and had a bad odour. I was nine months pregnant. On December 23, 1971, I gave birth to a baby girl. No midwife was available and my husband helped me at child birth. Late at night, a gang of armed Bengalis raided our house, grabbed my husband and trucked him away. I begged them in the name of God to spare him as I could not even walk and my children were too small. The killers were heartless and I learnt that they murdered my husband. After five days, they returned and ordered me and my children to vacate the house as they claimed that it was now their property.

Today, there are thousands of *Jainab Bibi* and *Shamim Akhtar* in the Bihari ghettos who are the worse victims of armed conflict. In a typical patriarchal society, women have no resort without their husbands since they are not learned to sustain without the help of men.

In fact, when women live in extreme diasporic situation they long for a base, and in such cases most of them consider marriage or husband as a base which will give them social security. Sometimes the cost of such security becomes too much for them. However, for the sake of social security through marriage, women in the Bihari camps surrender themselves to the fake assurance of love, help and escape in life. Foreign businessmen, mostly coming from Pakistan and the Middle East, find a way to secure clean and decent girls; marry them, pass their time and walk out on them

(Mirza, 1998). This is like a pleasure trip in Bangladesh. The sad tale of *Shakila*⁴ is something like it. A so-called Pakistani widower doctor named *Rana* according to his statement came to Bangladesh to handle a legal matter, but seeing the camp he decided to marry through a broker to help a girl and her family! He chose *Shakila* as a scapegoat, passed time with her in a Bangladeshi hotel, left her in the hotel without paying the huge bill with the false promise that he would be coming back within three days and take her to Pakistan. If one kind person had not been there on that day in the hotel she would have been forced to prostitution to avoid arrest from the hotel. Even after such cheating *Shakila* refused to believe that *Rana* would not return. The above example of *Shakila* indicates how men toy with diasporic women's weakness, simplicity and with their desire of escape.

The Bihari camps in Bangladesh may be compared with the hell where people live just because they have no place to live in. In a field investigation in a camp it was found by Refugee International there were only ten latrines for 5,000 people (Lynch & Cook, 2006). In such a situation women need to wait in a cue with men in nature's calls, and in extreme circumstances they have to sit here and there which undoubtedly a merciless situation since women's privacy in any culture is one of the top priorities in life. Another study reveals that men were getting inside the bathrooms where women were bathing to respond nature's call (Ahmad, 2004). In the camps, each family was allotted a small eight feet by eight feet or eight feet by ten feet room. Various reports confirm that though the size of the each Bihari family has increased but the size of the room has not been changed, and often people have to live jointly even with domestic animals in that small room. Such dwelling is a serious threat to human dignity and individual's privacy of any gender; but woman in particular. The struggle of *Rasulan Bibi*⁵ to maintain her daughters' privacy is a unique example of inhuman life-style of diasporic people. After the birth of Bangladesh she had to move to a camp with her only son and seven unmarried daughters. She could manage to marry her daughters at the cost of giving a dowry of Taka 9,000 each. Three of her daughters left for Pakistan. Now she is living with her son and four daughters with their husbands in a single eight feet by eight feet room. She tries to ensure conjugal privacy of her daughters by making partitions with saris. She condemns herself in the sense that her presence is an intrusion into her daughters' private life.

The example of *Rasulan Bibi* not only reveals the indigent condition of men's and women's privacy but also indicates some of the chronic gender issues such as the prevalence of dowry in marriage, the extra economic burden on women since in the above case sons-in-laws are living in mother-in-law's house. In a patriarchal society it is not a normal phenomenon unless the son-in-law is unemployed or helpless. It also indicates that marriage is a problem for both the genders in the camps. Unemployed males may be accepted as desired husbands. On the other hand, the young Bihari males find it extremely difficult to find the space and income needed to marry and lead traditional lives. That is why thousands of unmarried girls living in the camps who are the easy targets for sex traffickers. For many girls, any life seems more promising than one in the camps (Anonymous, 2004). The fate of *Parvin*⁶ is an example of women trafficking. *Parvin* was taken to Pakistan by some men but she had never been handed over to her relatives there. Her relatives in both the countries even after 10 years of her departure could not trace her whereabouts. She was undoubtedly a worse victim of women trafficking as she never reached to her destination. The demand of dowry also creates avenues for women trafficking. Since these Urdu speaking girls do not have education they cannot find job and earn to live and to manage the dowry (Ahmad, 2004). In women trafficking men play the dominant role, and sometimes use women against women to make the trap a success. Hence, from the above examples it is clear that gender relations impact on existing Bihari diaspora from different angles and dimensions. In the diasporic situation women become the worse sufferers, devalued and oppressed by the situation.

The liberation war of Bangladesh was costly for the women from Bangladeshi women as well as Bihari women. Many Bangladeshi and Bihari women lost their husbands, fathers, brothers or other breadwinners in the war, and losing husbands or breadwinners in a patriarchal society is like losing everything in life. These women suddenly became deserted and helpless. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, these camps were set up on public lands which were overcrowded instantly with new arrivals of refugees and disposed families, particularly with widows. Since so many male members of the community were crushed to death as alleged active collaborators with Pakistan during the liberation war these camps, these camps hold a large number of widows after the independence of Bangladesh (Whitker, 1972). The loss of male members instantly made the families,

particularly women, more vulnerable in terms of economic, social and psychological security.

On the other hand, during any armed conflict women become the targeted objects for sexual abuses including rapes. It is estimated that about two hundred thousand women and girls were raped by the Pakistani forces and many of them were burdened with war babies (Begum, 2003b). Eminent journalist Anthony Mascarenhas (1971, quoted in Sen, 1999) reported that not only were Bangladeshi women raped or sexually abused in the war, many Bihari women were also raped. Such sexual oppressions have made them socially excluded for rest of the life. It is men who are liable for the situation because men create war and do war, but it is women who suffer mostly in the war. War inevitably invites diasporas.

Conclusion

It is a matter of regret that for over forty years a community has been living without a definite statutory identity, and such identity crisis is making cumulative impacts upon their diasporic experiences. The condition of the Bihari people offers a classical example of human diaspora since the host country is indifferent to understand their demands, needs and the rights *vis a vis* the country whom they consider as their homeland. This country is also showing an ambiguous attitude to them. It is time to take necessary steps to stop any further violation of human rights. The Biharis have suffered a lot by the sharp edge of politics. On the other hand, the Bihari issue has never been looked at in terms of gender specifically, it was always an issue of citizenship and was completely gender-blind. In the meantime, chronic gender elements have pierced their diasporic experiences from different angles and directions. As a result, women are in the state of losing their spirit, determination and vivacity of life.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Razakar, Al Badar, Al Shams are the auxiliary forces formed during the liberation war to assist the Pakistani Army. Many Biharis and Bengalis who were in favour of the integration of Pakistan were the members of such voluntary forces, acted against the independence of Bangladesh.
- ² Summarised from an anecdote titled, 'Tale of Jainab Bibi' in '*A Community in Transition: The Biharis in Bangladesh*' (2003).
- ³ The case was summarised from a book titled '*Blood and Tears*' (1974).
- ⁴ Summarised from an anecdote titled, 'Honeymoon in Bangladesh' in '*The Internment Camps of Bangladesh*' (1988).
- ⁵ Summarised from an anecdote titled, 'Unique Displacement' in '*A Community in Transition –The Biharis in Bangladesh*' (2003).
- ⁶ Source: *A Community in Transition –The Biharis in Bangladesh* (2003).