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# Social Identity and Its Impact on the Camp Based Urdu Speaking Community in Bangladesh

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## Abstract

Human beings have a tendency to categorize themselves into groups while interacting with others in a social context. This is where social identity plays a crucial role. It not only helps to create an image of self but it also creates strong emotional bond with the same group members. Social identities are important because they help people to understand themselves, facilitate their development and their relation with others in the social context. For the camp based Urdu speaking community in Bangladesh, the impact of social identity is intense and undesirable. The social identity of these people which derived from their place of residence has played a vital role in terms of accessing many rights.

**Keywords** : Social identity, Stigmatized identity, Urdu speaking community, Human rights.

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***Introduction:***

The camp based Urdu speaking community in Bangladesh is generally known as 'Bihari' due to their past history of migration to this land. The word 'Bihari' literally means a person who belongs to the Indian state of Bihar. But in Bangladeshi context anyone who speaks Urdu is considered to be a Bihari whether he/she comes from Bihar or not. During the partition of British India in 1947, a large number of Urdu speaking Muslim minority people moved from Indian provinces of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and West Bengal to then East Pakistan which later became Bangladesh (Abrar, Redclift, Forthcoming). According to one report, when thousands of Muslims were killed in the state of Bihar in October- November 1946, there was a sheer fear which convinced the Muslims in that region that 'this land is not for us and we have to leave the place' (Ghosh, 2007). Their journey to East Pakistan was greatly motivated to avoid the communal bloodshed during that time. These Muslim refugees from India were granted Pakistani citizenship during the period of united Pakistan through the Pakistan Citizenship Act 1951 (Farzana, 2008). They were full-fledged citizens of Pakistan and were engaged in various types of works mostly in the non-agricultural sector.

Unfortunately, from the very beginning these Urdu speaking Muslims failed to integrate with the mainstream Bengali society due to the differences in language, tradition and culture. Although East Pakistan was a Muslim region but its nationalism was based on language. That is why, while for the Muslim migrants from West Bengal and Assam it was easier to integrate with the local people because of common language and cultural identity, it was equally challenging for the Urdu speaking Muslims to assimilate in the Bengali Muslim society (Ghosh, 2007). Eventually, these Urdu speaking people started associating with their West Pakistani counterparts. During the time of the liberation war of Bangladesh, a handful of Urdu speaking people assisted the Pakistan Army and joined the auxiliary forces like Razakar and Al-Shams. Due to their anti-independence role and yearlong isolation from the Bengali society, these Urdu speaking people were victims of political persecution during and aftermath of the liberation war. After the independence of Bangladesh, the situation got worse. Bangladesh scorned the Biharis for having supported the enemy and an anti- Bihari sentiment instigated political persecution and their homes and properties were taken over by the Bengalis. After the creation of Bangladesh, almost all Biharis were fired from their jobs on various pretenses. Bihari children were expelled from schools. Bihari pensions, bank accounts and investments were seized. Most Bihari homes and businesses were declared abandoned/enemy properties and therefore confiscated under cover of law. Several Government promulgations facilitated the dispossession of Bihari properties. As a result, by mid 1972 nearly one million Biharis found themselves in temporary camps set up around Bangladesh by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (Kumar, 2005).

In the mean time, Bangladesh Government announced the Presidential Order 149 in 1972- as a step to-

wards offering the Bangladeshi citizenship to these Bihari people. According the Government sources 70% of the Biharis who had been living in this area before 1971 war, i.e. 780,000 people opted to become citizens of Bangladesh. But at that time, a survey was conducted by the ICRC which found that 534,972 Biharis wanted to go back to Pakistan as it was their country of nationality (Ghosh, 2007). These people declared themselves as 'Stranded Pakistanis' and waited for repatriation as it was the only solution to their problem. Pakistan government was reluctant to take all these Urdu speaking people as her citizens and gave conditions for repatriation. Those who met the criteria were able to repatriate. The repatriation process started in 1974 and continued till 1993. According to one research, total 178,069 Urdu speaking people were repatriated during this time (Sen, 2000). The camp based Urdu speaking people who couldn't repatriate suddenly found themselves in a stateless situation. The stagnation of the repatriation process, lack of legal recognition from both Pakistan and Bangladesh turned them into a community who had no place to call a home. There were nearly 250000-300000 Urdu speaking people in 116 camps in 13 districts in Bangladesh (Abrar, Redclift, Forthcoming).

The camp based Urdu speaking people were in a stateless situation until 2008. The young generation Urdu speakers who were born and brought up in Bangladesh had been seeking legal help to get Bangladeshi citizenship since 2003. 11 members of the Stranded Pakistanis Youth Rehabilitation Movement (SPYRM) put forward a petition in 2007 seeking High Court orders to register Urdu-speaking people living in camps across the country as voters. In May 2008, a High Court judgment reconfirmed the group's right to Bangladeshi citizenship and ordered Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) to register them as voters and provide National Identity (NID) cards (Southwick and Calabia, 2008). The Election Commission started registering the Urdu speakers in August 2008 and issued NID cards to any member of the Urdu-speaking community who applied for one and who met the legal and administrative requirements (UNHCR, 2009). This brought an end to the statelessness era and paved the way for the new journey as the citizens of Bangladesh.

After obtaining the citizenship of Bangladesh, these camp based Urdu speaking people were able to cast their vote in the national election in 2008 and got access to facilities related to NID cards. But there were complains of not getting equal opportunity like other members of the society. Urdu speaking people not getting the Bangladeshi passport with the NID cards was reported in the media (Hussain, 2009). In 2011, I conducted a survey on 200 Urdu speaking people and took extensive interview of 10 people living in six different camps in the Mohammadpur area of Dhaka city which provided an interesting result. (I also took interview of four civil society members who were actively engaged with this community.) It was found that after getting the legal recognition from the Bangladeshi government, these camp based people could exercise few rights like casting vote and get NID cards. But, the respondents claimed that their place of residence was creating obstacles in accessing important rights such as right to work or getting equal access to public services. Their social identity deriving from the camps was the primary reason behind accessing all the rights which hindered their socio-political inclusion in Bangladesh.

This paper is a humble attempt to identify the impact of social identity of the camp based Urdu speaking people on their lives. The experience of the camp based Urdu speaking people who were in statelessness situation for three decades will help us to think about the social identity and how this socially constructed categorization can have a far-fetched impact on peoples' lives. It will also shed a light on the fact that mere legal recognition may be not enough for accessing rights. In the following segment, the concept of social identity, Urdu speaking peoples' social identity will be discussed. This paper will also contain my survey findings conducted in 2011 which will help us to trace relationship between social identity of the camp dwellers and their access to rights.

### ***Social Identity:***

#### ***1. Definition:***

Social identity refers to those aspects of a person that are defined in terms of his/her group memberships (Deaux, 2001). We, as people tend to categorize ourselves into many groups in social life. We categorize ourselves and others depending on our gender, profession, place of birth, affiliation with prestigious school and so on. These groups give us a sense of belonging to a social world. It is very normal for an individual to have multiple social identities. For example, I can identify myself as a woman, as a Muslim, as a Bengali speaking South Asian, as a student and so on. Social identity is a way of categorizing, labeling a number of people based on some similar features. Through a process of social identification we categorize ourselves in the social context. To share a social identity with another person doesn't mean that we know or interact with every member of that group. It means that belonging to a particular group helps us to grow a sense of membership. So, social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership. In order to increase our self image (as these groups are important sources of pride and self-esteem) we try to enhance the status of the group we belong to. People also tend to increase their self image by discriminating and holding prejudice against the group that they don't belong to (McLeod, 2008). Therefore, people automatically create an environment divided into 'us' and 'them'; 'self' and 'other', 'in-group' and 'out-group'. The example can include the situation between the Hindus and the Muslims in South Asia, Hutu-Tutsi in Rwanda, Bosnians and Serbs in Yugoslavia. This in-group and out-group classification can be seen in all spheres of social life that may include gender based, political ideology based and many more groupings.

According to Social Identity Theory which was developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979 (Fearon, 1999), there are three mental processes that develop the sense of 'us' and 'them'. First, people categorize themselves and others in order to understand the social environment. Second, when the grouping is complete, people identify themselves with one or more than one groups. After the categorization, identification, people finally compare their group with other groups. Social Identity Theory states that the people in the in-groups

will discriminate against the out-groups to enhance their self-esteem. The in-groups members will also seek negative aspects of out-groups to increase their self image. The theory maintains that one's social identity strongly influences self-perception and consequently should be the central locus of evaluation. The strength and weakness of the self is largely determined from our status with our reference groups and how we assess out-group members (Trimble and Dickson, 2005).

## ***2. Aspects of Social Identity:***

Deaux in her article titled 'Social Identity' has mentioned three aspects of social identity. These are: cognitive, emotional-motivational and behavioural aspects. A brief description is mentioned below:

### ***i) Cognitive aspect:***

We categorize people as man, lesbians, lawyers, drug addict and we keep on creating categories. These categorizations help to create personal identity and the perception of identities of others. As social identity is defined in a social framework, the cognitive aspect can be wide ranging including personality traits, social attitudes, stereotype perception etc. These views, perceptions can vary in different parts of the world. For example, in some societies a common stereotype image of men include traits such as being masculine, not emotional and principle decision maker in the family. In some societies, people have stereotype views about Muslims being terrorists. All these socially constructed views help us to create self-awareness of belonging to a specific group and people from different groups also judge us based on these features.

### ***ii) Emotional-motivational aspect:***

Like any other identity, social identities often have an impact on the emotion of people. People feel emotionally connected with their same group members. Ethnic identity, national identity can be best example in this regard where people feel strong emotional bond with fellow group members based on ethnicity or nationality.

The motivational aspects may include:

- a) Social identity can serve as a means of self definition and/or self esteem. Social categorization or sense of belonging to group is seen as an affirmation of self esteem. To increase the self esteem people have to believe they are in the 'right' group which creates the need for a positive distinction from other groups.
- b) Social identification can be a process of communicating with people who share the same values and goals.
- c) Social identification also gives people the opportunity to compare with people who belong to a different group. People tend to be unique within a group identity and to be viewed positively when compared with others.

*iii) Behavioural aspect:*

Social identities also affect the behavior of people. The way people categorize themselves has an impact on the behaviours they enact for themselves and the way they interact with other group members. When people strongly identify themselves with a particular group, they tend to be more supportive towards that group. Their action can include volunteer services, participating in meetings-protests and even marrying from the same social group.

**3. Types of Social Identity:**

Social identity can take various forms depending on how people like to categorize themselves as member of a social group. When interacting in a social environment we usually define ourselves in more than one category. Depending on the situation, our self categorization may include various aspects of our social identities. It can include our ethnic identity, religious identity, political identity, gendered identity, vocation and avocation, personal relationship and stigmatized identity and so on (Deaux, 2001). It is interesting to note that part of our social identity (which is dominant) can be changed while interacting with different groups. For example, being a mother of a toddler and student at the same time, I find my 'student' identity dominant when I'm interacting with my colleagues at school and again at my child's nursery while interacting with other parents my 'mother' identity gets prominence. Each type of identity offers unique features that make one type different from other type. Some of these identities can be chosen by people by themselves and some are given at birth. Social identities may differ in terms of value or status attached to them. For example, we often use gender (usually man or woman) as a category to identify ourselves and others also use the same category to describe us. Gender is often treated as a fundamental category for social identification and other important issues such as physical characteristics, personality traits, role behaviours etc.

In the following paragraphs, an attempt will be made to illustrate the major types of social identities that are related to this paper:

*i) National identity:*

National identity, one of the many social identities that plays important role in creating national cohesion which is extremely crucial for the development of nation state. National identity serves as a unifying force to impart a sense of belonging as well as commitment towards cooperation and national development (David, McLellan, Meng and Tien, 2010). National identity can also describe that condition in which a mass of people have made the same identification with national symbols, have internalized the symbols of the nation-so that they may act as one psychological group when there is a threat to, or the possibility of enhancement of these symbols of national identity (Taras, 1998). National identity based on ethnic or civic aspects of identity can give us a hint about a state's image, tolerance towards minorities. Ethnicity and even citizenship can play a vital role in forming national identity.

*Ethnic identity* plays a crucial role in terms of defining our national identity. Identity based on ethnicity is an important category that people use for self identification and also to define others. Ethnic identification can be defined as the ‘psychological attachment to an ethnic group or heritage’ and this version of identification involves a distinction between ‘self’ and the ‘others’ (Trimble and Dickson, 2005). Categorization based on ethnicity may include identity based on language, religion, culture, ancestral home, sharing same past (memories of colonization or migration), symbolic factors like food, clothing, artifacts etc. According to psychologist John Phinney, ‘Ethnic identity is not a fixed categorization, but rather is a fluid and dynamic understanding of self and ethnic background. Ethnic identity is constructed and modified as individuals become aware of their ethnicity, with the large (sociocultural) setting’ (Trimble and Dickson, 2005). Therefore, ethnic group membership can develop a sense of social identity where people make categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’ based on ethnicity.

Not only ethnic identity but *citizenship* plays a crucial role in defining our national identity. Citizenship is most often used to define the relationship between an individual and a nation-state. In the present nation states members of the society categorize themselves on the basis of their ethnic affiliation, their religious alliance and their views on personal morality etc. In this fragmented situation, people need some common basis or reference point from which their claims on the state can be judged. Citizenship is supposed to give this reference point (Miller, 2000). Citizenship gives a common identity to people who may share different identities to live together politically. Citizenship which depicts a legal connection between an individual and a state can be used to socially categorize people where the grouping can be between citizens and non-citizens, ‘us’ and ‘them’. It also denotes the notion of who belongs to the national community and who doesn’t. In this case, citizenship (a legal status) can be part of our social identity. Access to citizenship can play an important role in social identification specially in the modern nation state or in a multiethnic country or in a country where there is an influx of immigrants, refugees or stateless people.

### ***ii) Stigmatized identity:***

Social identity is the features and characteristics attributed to individuals as a means of categorizing people (Goffman, 1963). (Another type of social identity which is very crucial is stigmatized identity.) Sometimes, people use social stigma to categorize people. Social stigma is attached with prejudice and discrimination and these are often experienced by people who are not accepted as ‘normal’ by the society (Goffman, 1963). Stigma carries a moral judgment with it. It is not a desirable characteristic and people who carry stigmas are not desirable people in our culture. Goffman also described about two types of stigma- discredited and discreditable. Some stigmas are easily visible (skin colour, physical disability etc) and some are not (mental illness, sexual orientation etc). Social stigma creates boundary between the stigmatized group and the non-stigmatized group. Social stigma based categorization is prominent in many parts of the world. Social stigmas based on physical attributes, diseases, profession and other factors can be found in many countries. In some parts of

the world- people with diseases like leprosy, AIDS; people who are gays, lesbians, hermaphrodites (grouping based on sexual orientation), women who are prostitutes, people who are Dalits (untouchable caste)- are seen as stigmatized people. Social stigmas are linked with the negative, disgraceful labeling of people or community based on their features which are not always true.

#### ***4. Social Identity of the Camp Based Urdu Speaking People:***

Social identity of the camp based Urdu speaking community in Bangladesh is something very interesting, unique and obviously an undesirable one. There are few major factors that have been playing a crucial role when it comes to socially identify this group of people. The camps, their language Urdu and their past history before, during and aftermath of liberation war of Bangladesh are interconnected and have been the key elements in socially categorizing them. Their ‘otherness’ is strongly associated with the above mentioned key factors and this seems like a vicious circle.

##### ***i) Camps and the past:***

In the introductory segment we have seen the journey of these Urdu speaking people as refugees, citizens of Pakistan, stateless people and finally as the citizens of Bangladesh. It has been mentioned before that there are 116 camps in different cities of Bangladesh. The camps are associated with the history and the journey of this community in Bangladesh. These camps actually represent the ‘statelessness’ and ‘otherness’ of the Urdu speakers and play an important role in accessing their rights. Any person living in these camps is automatically linked with being a refugee, linguistically different group, ‘collaborators of enemy’ and even foreigners. In this segment, a quick flashback is given to connect the dots between the social circumstances and their categorization based on those situations which will help us to understand their social identity.

When it comes to the history of the Urdu speaking community in Bangladesh, it goes back to the partition of Indian sub-continent in 1947. The Urdu speaking community in Bangladesh migrated from different provinces of India as refugees. As a community they shared this common experience in their past which was quite different with people who were already living in this region. This community is known as ‘Mohajir’ which means refugees, people from the camps are also known as ‘Biharis’- (people from Bihar, an Indian province) which indicate a sense of ‘alienation’ from the local people. This is a major point in their ‘otherness’, that these people are not connected with Bangladesh.

Again, the camps and the inhabitants are closely linked with an image of a community, whose people speak a different language. Camp residents are categorized as a linguistically different group who speak Urdu (even though most of the young generation camp dwellers can speak in Bengali). It has been mentioned before that the Urdu speaking community in Bangladesh failed to merge with the mainstream Bengali population due to the difference in language and culture in the united Pakistan period. These people found themselves in an ‘alien’ land where only religion was the common aspect with the other fellow East Pakistanis. The yearlong isolation

from the Bengali speaking people had led them to lean towards the West Pakistani regime. Their anti- Bangladeshi activities (the reasons behind their actions vary according to different researchers) was prominent before the liberation war. For example, during the time of Language Movement in 1952 in Bangladesh, this community was prone towards selection of Urdu as the national language which was not received positively by the Bengali speaking people. In 1969, during the mass movement, a section of the Urdu speaking community sided with the West Pakistani regime. As a continuation of these events, it was seen that a section of this community was strongly involved in anti-liberation war activities in Bangladesh. This community was accused of helping the Pakistan Army with providing information about Bengali freedom fighters, committing violence against women, killing the intellectuals in Bangladesh and so on. They helped the Pakistan Army to win the war over Bangladeshis and they didn't want to see the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation-state. This anti-liberation war image earned them the title of 'Razakar'. Razakar is an Urdu word which means 'volunteer' but in Bangladesh Razakars are known as the members of paramilitary force that was organized by the Pakistan Army. It should be mentioned here that not only the Urdu speaking people but pro-Pakistani Bengalis were Razakars too. Although a handful of Urdu speakers were collaborators of Pakistan Army but this entire community has been labeled as 'Razakars' - a term to describe their collaboration with the 'enemy'. The social categorization thus takes a stigmatized view which is closely linked with negativity.

After the Pakistan Army evacuated from Bangladesh, these Urdu speakers were victims of political persecution. Because of the grave situation, almost one million Urdu speakers took shelters in different camps set up by the ICRC. Nearly 600,000 Urdu speaking people opted for the Bangladeshi citizenship in 1972 and got out of those camps. The remaining Urdu speakers living in camps declared themselves as 'Stranded Pakistanis' and registered with ICRC for repatriation to Pakistan. The repatriation process (which included plenty of obstacles) started in 1974 and the last batch of repatriation took place in 1993. In these years, this community's image was 'foreigners' who were stranded and who were taking initiatives to leave Bangladesh. So, their 'otherness' is linked with being 'foreigners' and it does automatically create difference with the 'citizens'. Again, a notion of alienation is present in this categorization.

The camp based Urdu speakers were labeled as 'stateless' group too until 2008. Traditionally 'statelessness' defines a legal status only. But, in most cases 'statelessness' has significant social consequences that goes beyond the strict legal definition and gives a glimpse of the social scenario too. 'Statelessness' can be part of social identity where this 'legal status' is used to categorize people in legal terms. As mentioned before, the camp based Urdu speakers didn't opt for Bangladeshi citizenship in 1972 and Pakistan government declined to take all these Urdu speakers to Pakistan, repatriation process came to a halt and the lack of legal recognition from both the countries turned this community into a 'stateless' group. For the camp based Urdu speak-

ers the camps, ‘statelessness’ and the notion of ‘not citizen’-all three became synonymous. This community’s ‘otherness’ is closely associated with their ‘statelessness’ which defines not only the lack of legal recognition from a country but also their history of not being associated with local language and struggle of Bangladesh. For camp based Urdu speaking people ‘statelessness’ has created a different type of social identity which is stained, tainted and stigmatized.

### *ii) Camps and the present:*

The camps still play an important role in social categorization of these Urdu speaking people. These camps are not only associated with their past but the location of the camps and socio-economic situation of the camp dwellers also put them in a separate box while comparing with non-camp people.

Papiya Ghosh in her book titled ‘Partition and the South Asian Diaspora: Extending the Subcontinent’ which was published in 2007, mentioned that camps for the Urdu speakers were scattered in different parts of Bangladesh and these camps were like ‘a big grave’. The rooms were 4 feet by 6 feet and to some cases a bit bigger than it. During the field trip, I found that Ghosh’s description on the camps matched with all six camps in Mohammadpur area in Dhaka-the capital of Bangladesh even in 2011. All the camps were highly crowded and the environmental scenario was hazardous. There was inadequate supply of basic facilities like water, electricity and gas. According to UN-HABITAT slum housing is ‘households that lack decent water supply, adequate sanitation facilities, sufficient living area, decent structural quality and/or security of tenure’ (UN-HABITAT, 2003). Begum and Moinuddin in their article titled ‘Spatial Dimension of Social Exclusion: An Imperial Investigation into the Relationship of Housing and Social Exclusion in the Slums of Dhaka City’ published in 2010, explains that slums are the physical manifestation of poverty, inequality and social exclusion in all the urban areas of the developing world. This social exclusion may also be connected to problems like unemployment, low income, high crime environment, lack of adequate education, poor social network and lack of access to informal contacts linking to jobs. The writers further mentioned that social exclusion often leads to deprivation and/or inequality and slum dwellers being spatially segregated and often socially excluded have difficulties with ambiguous citizenship, unemployment, and powerlessness in decision making process.

Begum and Moinuddin’s work can be applied to the camps of the Urdu speakers. The camp residents are socially excluded due to their place of residence which is similar to slums. So, in terms of social categorization these camp dwellers are seen differently compared to those who don’t live in the camps. During the survey, the respondents shared their experiences in daily life where they faced problems due to their camp address. The general perception of these camps is ‘den of poor people and evil doers’ which often creates obstacle in socio-political inclusion of the Urdu speakers. In case of accessing the rights, their camp addresses put them in a vulnerable situation. Constant fear of eviction, difficulties in accessing important documents to improve livelihood options, lack of respect from non-camp dwellers- all these are linked with the fact that

they live in camps. Respondents from the six camps in Mohammadpur area argued that they were not treated as valuable members of the society. Thus, social stigma in terms of viewing this entire community negatively based on where they live plays a crucial role in social identification of this community.

In the next segment, we will look into the changes in accessing rights by these camp based Urdu speaking people and the existing problems faced by them due to their social identity which derives from the camps.

### ***Urdu Speaking Community's Social Identity and Its Impact on Their Lives:***

In this segment, the findings from the survey and interviews conducted from October to December 2011 in six camps of Mohammadpur area in Dhaka will be discussed. The names of the camps are: Geneva camp, Centre Community camp, Staff Quarter camp, Town Hall camp, C.R.O camp and Market camp. The survey was done on 200 people both male and female residents of camps. 10 Urdu speakers from the camps and 4 civil society members who were actively involved with this community participated in the extensive interview. The survey included 39 questions which dealt with their human rights situation and the interview focused on the changes since 2008 and the reasons behind their difficulties in accessing rights.

#### ***1. Positive Trends with New Social Identity as Citizens:***

The respondents' social identity as 'stateless people' indicated the lack of legal recognition from Bangladesh (or any other state). After being legally recognized by Bangladesh government as citizens in 2008, these Urdu speaking people got a new common social identity as 'citizen' on the basis of legal status. Their 'non-citizen' social identity was overcasted by the new social identity as 'citizens'. This new status officially brought them to the equal footing with any other Bangladeshis in terms of exercising rights. In the extensive interview total ten respondents from all six camps were asked about the positive changes that took place since 2008, after getting the citizenship of Bangladesh. They shared their opinion on the positive developments (not all are related to accessing to rights) and these are mentioned below:

##### ***i) Access to National Identity (NID) cards and registration of birth:***

Getting NID cards was a major breakthrough according to these Urdu speaking interviewees. They mentioned that the ID cards were official proof that they belonged to this country and there should not be any confusion regarding their identity as citizens. These cards were important document to practice their voting rights and as well as their access to get many social services. They also stated that Urdu speaking people living in the camps were able to do 'Birth Registration' for their children (from newborn to those who were under 18 years old) after 2008. This was another important document that proved that these children were born in Bangladesh and they were Bangladeshis. It was a big step forward in merging with the larger society. They expressed that this would help their children in the future to enjoy the basic facilities like any other citizens of

the country. Both these developments fulfilled their right to nationality which they had been lacking for more than three decades.

***ii) Access to voting rights and access to public services:***

Interviewees from the camps mentioned about practicing voting rights and being able to get public services-as major trends since 2008. During the interview they mentioned that exercising their voting rights was the most important development that occurred since 2008 for the camp residents. They further explained that they including their fellow camp dwellers (who voted in national election) felt like citizens for the first time and were happy to choose their own candidate in the election. When the political leaders visited the camps and asked their support through vote, they felt very proud to have a role in state's decision making process. They expressed that casting vote was about meeting political rights and a major step towards integration after the long period of alienation from the mainstream society. They felt they belonged to Bangladesh. It boosted up their confidence level and they hoped this step would eventually help them to be more aware of their other rights.

Dr. C.R. Abrar, Dhaka University professor and a leading researcher on this community, in his interview explained that there had been confusion among the government agencies whether to treat these Urdu speakers as Bangladeshis or not. According to him the historical High Court decision in 2008 and the participation of these Urdu speakers in national election as voters ended that confusion and made it clear that these Urdu speaking people were Bangladeshis with the right to all social services. He further stated that by practicing their political rights, these Urdu speakers became more confident about claiming their economic and social rights. This process started a positive trend towards integration with the mainstream society.

Mr. Mohammad Hasan, a Project Cordinator of an NGO working for this community in his interview shared few examples which proved that voting rights paved new gateways to practice other rights for his community. He stated that 5 camp residents in Mymensingh camp got VGF cards (Vulnerable Group Feeding cards) from the government. He claimed that although the number was very small but this was a positive beginning towards integration, access to government subsidies and a sign of recognition from the government that these Urdu speakers were Bangladeshis. He further mentioned that a certain amount of money was allocated in the budget of 2011 to rehabilitate these Urdu speaking people. He further added that there was an initiative between Bangladesh government and Malaysian government regarding the rehabilitation of these Urdu speakers. The agreement was supposed to include establishment of housing projects in Geneva and Mirpur camp in Dhaka city. He claimed that this was an example that Urdu speaking community's well being was a national issue and government was aware of these peoples' sufferings. He also mentioned that the local MP from the Mohammadpur area was the State Minister for LGRD (Local Government and Rural Development), who gave recommendation letters to three young Urdu speakers that helped them to get government jobs. According to Mr. Hasan, this little step showed that political leader's concern for the people from their

own constituency and this was an encouraging example for the camp residents.

Practicing voting rights and step-by step access to public services- met their political rights and also reduced the scope of social exclusion due to their previous ‘stateless’/‘non-citizen’ identity.

***iii) Physical developments in the camps:***

Regarding the physical developments inside the camps, (which was closely related to the improvement of standard of living) most noticeable developments took place only in Geneva camp after 2008. Mr. Hasan mentioned in his interview that after 2008 a project was taken to provide clean water to Geneva camp and now people could drink water which was relatively clean without any bad smell. Approximately 30 to 40 new toilets were also built with water and electricity connection. These toilets were separated for both male and female residents of the camps. Twenty new rooms were built after a fire incident took place in the Geneva camp. It should be mentioned that these steps were taken by the local MP and Ward Commissioner of Mohammadpur area.

In Centre Community camp roads were renovated. The roads were constructed with cement, so there were more permanent in nature and more convenient to use. In Staff Quarter camp toilets were renovated. Asian style commodes were installed and tiles were used inside the toilets. One male respondent claimed that physical developments inside the camps were initiated by the community people with help of some NGOs. Government did not play any role at all.

***iv) Enhancement of confidence level of Urdu speakers:***

Interviewees talked about the psychological changes among the Urdu speakers. They noticed that the moral strength of the Urdu speakers in the camps had increased after 2008. Young generation people were able to stand up for their rights, could argue on their defense about sensitive issues like this community’s role in 1971 etc. One female Urdu speaker mentioned that the Court’s decision helped them to be more aware of their rights and gave strong ground as citizens to claim for these rights too.

***v) Change of view among general Bengali speaking people towards them:***

Interviewees noticed changes in the people who were living outside the camps. According to them a very important change had occurred in the attitude of the general Bengali speaking people. The verbal abuse by the Bengali speaking people in public life had reduced since 2008. To some interviewees, almost 90 percent Bengali speaking people didn’t humiliate them intentionally but the rest 10 percent was still vindictive or harsh towards them. Mr. M. A Karim, the ‘camp in charge’ of C.R.O camp also shared the same opinion during his interview. He found that the negative attitude among the Bengali speaking people had reduced since last three years.

***vi) Steps taken by the government:***

In his interview Mr. Iqramul Huq a government official from ‘Department of Disaster Management and Rehabilitation’ responsible for looking after these camps, mentioned that the present government was very considerate about these people. He said that there were total 7721 families living in Mohammadpur camps

and government had been paying the water and electricity bills for these people even after they were declared as Bangladeshi citizens. He claimed that this type of assistance was not provided to any other Bangladeshi groups.

All these initiatives which were mentioned by the interviewees, civil society members showed that positive changes were taking place in the lives of the camp dwellers. Although some of the steps were small in scale but it showed there was new aura of hope waiting for this community as Bangladeshi citizens.

## ***2. Social Identity and Difficulties in Accessing Rights Even after Becoming the Citizens of Bangladesh :***

In this segment a brief summary will be provided on the existing problems faced by the camp based Urdu speaking community while accessing their various rights. During the survey 200 respondents shared their experiences of difficulties in accessing rights. Majority of the problems in accessing rights derived from the camp address or camp location which played an important part in constructing the social identity of these Urdu speakers. The ‘slum-like’ camps and their filthy environment was a major havoc in camp-dwellers’ lives which was an obstacle to the right of standard of living, having a sound physical and mental health. The camp addresses created problems in accessing public services like police assistance, receiving financial support from institutions which greatly affected the respondents’ political rights. In case of their right to work, the camp addresses often put them in vulnerable position. Hassle in getting passports, bank books, trade licenses disrupted their right to earn a living. Theoretically after obtaining the citizenship of Bangladesh, these Urdu speakers were entitled to every rights and public services without any obstacle. But in real life it was seen that their social identity deriving from the camp addresses prevented them from accessing rights. Their social identity deriving from ‘camps’ is much stronger than the legal status they possessed.

It has been argued that camps created a very unique form of social identity for these people. This community’s past as a migratory group, their linguistic difference, their anti-independence role in 1971, their ‘statelessness’ and social exclusion as ‘slum-dwellers’- all these are interconnected and these people are perceived negatively as a ‘stigmatized group’ by general people. In this segment, the opinion of the interviewees will be discussed who also believed that their social identity, closely linked with camps was primary reason for their difficulty in accessing rights even after obtaining citizenship. “It’s a curse that I’m a Bihari in Bangladesh”- that was how one young man said in resentment during the interview. According to him, only able to practice the voting rights was not enough for him to feel good about the present situation. Like him, other interviewees claimed that accessing few rights were difficult even after getting the citizenship because of their social identity. The interviewees pointed out few important features that were associated with their identity as ‘camp dwellers’.

*i) Camps, haunting past and linguistic difference:*

Interviewees explained their social identity was associated with their language Urdu, their past as a migratory group and their involvement in Bangladesh liberation war. They stated that all the factors were playing a role in constructing their social identity which was negative in nature.

The fact that these people migrated from different Indian provinces during the partition of Indian subcontinent, made this community people known as 'Mohajir' which meant refugees. Mr. Hasan in his interview explained that terms like 'Mohajir' or 'Stranded Pakistani', automatically created a connection with a foreign country and tried to denote that these people didn't belong to Bangladesh. This labeling had a negative impact on this community's image. Like, one male interviewee mentioned that people treated the camp dwellers as 'Stranded Pakistanis' even in 2011. He mentioned that he was born and brought up here in Bangladesh and even after the declaration from the government in 2008 didn't help to eradicate his past.

The interviewees also mentioned that their identity was categorized on the basis of social stigma. Some of the interviewees mentioned that the history of Urdu speaking community's role during the liberation war of Bangladesh led to labeling of the community people as 'Razakars' (associates of enemy) and it was still playing an important role in alienating the community from the main stream population and as well as stigmatization. The interviewees claimed that mistrust; hatred based on 1971 experience still existed among these two groups in a subtle manner and it dominated the attitude of the Bengali speaking people towards them. Mr. Hasan also mentioned in his interview that that the role during 1971 was a crucial factor which constructed the negative perception of general people about this community.

Interviewees also claimed that as they spoke a different language, it had caused a distance with other Bengali speaking people and was playing an important role behind the present inequities. Mr. Hasan, the activist from this community also pointed out in his interview that the main reason behind the existing discrimination against the Urdu speakers was their identity as a linguistically different community. He claimed that as these camp residents spoke a different language, they faced negative experiences in different spheres of lives. He stated that according to Bangladeshi Constitution people should not be discriminated on the basis of religion, nationality, caste, sex or place of birth but it did not say anything about language. Therefore, it was difficult for these people who were discriminated on linguistic reason to get legal support on this ground. Professor Abrar on the other hand thought difference in language was second most important factor responsible for ongoing problems for these Urdu speakers. Professor Abrar explained that as Bangladeshi nationalism was based on Bengali language, the linguistic difference was the main reason for their 'otherness' and thus created obstacles for further development of this community.

*ii) Camp location and social exclusion:*

Mr. Hasan claimed that the location of these camps, the socio-economic situation of the camps created a negative attitude towards these Urdu speakers. He mentioned that there were many 'Dalit Sweeper' colonies

in Dhaka and general people had a negative view (social stigma) like those places were dirty including the people living in those colonies. The same attitude worked when it came to the camps of Urdu speakers. According to Mr. Hasan, general people viewed these camps as ‘den of evil things’ and the camp residents were also perceived as wrong doers. The camp residents were seen differently by the people who didn’t live in those camps. Thus, an improper categorization on the basis of place of residence was created for the camp residents. One 37 years old male interviewee said “I still hesitate to disclose my identity because I think people won’t treat me with respect if they know I’m from a camp.”

The respondents were able to enjoy some of rights like voting rights, right to nationality for the very first time since they obtained Bangladeshi citizenship. With their changed identity from ‘stateless group’ to ‘citizens’- had an impact on accessing few rights. At the same time the ‘social stigma’ attached to their identity which was closely linked with the ‘camps’- was also playing damaging role in accessing further rights. Thus it could be said that the camp based Urdu speaking community’s social identity had been playing the fundamental role in terms of their access to rights.

### ***Conclusion:***

This paper dealt with a small stateless group in Bangladesh and how their social identity had an impact on their lives specially in terms of accessing rights. Social categorization based on legal recognition and place of residence had both positive and negative impacts on their lives. Their experiences will give an idea that how identity can influence peoples’ participation in the society and make opportunity or obstacles in enjoying rights. The camp based Urdu speaking community can be a learning example for the countries which have stateless community within their boundary and also for the aid organizations so that they can make necessary changes in their policies to address this kind of problem that are affecting the lives of millions of people around the world.

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