

## THE BIHARIS AND BANGLADESH

### 1. Who are the Biharis?

The disappearance of the Biharis as a refugee community has been subjected to a great deal of wishing but little analysis. The problem is simplistically divided into repatriation and assimilation with very little appreciation of the roots of this disaster.

The standard history of the Biharis begins with their "Muslim state option" at partition, continues with their communal lifestyle and identification with the West-Pakistan Urdu culture and finishes with their unfortunate "decision" to support Pakistan in the civil war. This view of history satisfactorily explains why the Biharis are presently rotting in the abysmal camps, but does little to explain the difficulties in getting them out.

The most serious error in our understanding of the Biharis is to consider them a 'group' with all the associated sociological dimensions. The common language, clustered urban living patterns and so forth are given as the usual evidence. The Biharis are in fact nothing more than the human flotsam washed to the Eastern and Western shores of the sub-continent by the great religious and social upheaval known as partition. The ones who washed ashore in either wing of Pakistan had the one common characteristic of the Muslim religion, but that does not constitute sociological solidarity in Asia. The refugees or immigrants to East Pakistan tended to come predominantly from the over populated North East of India including West Bengal, Bihar and Assam. The reasons for this are simple, these states had relatively high proportions of Muslims, but more important, these are among the poorest and most over crowded areas in India. The mass migration of Hindus and Muslims at partition must be seen as a social migration as much as a religiously motivated one. The Hindus were forced out of East Bengal because of resentment stemming from their powerful hold on the land and the major institutions. The Muslims in West Bengal and Bihar, on the other hand, tended to represent the disenfranchised and impoverished masses. The communal fighting forced many of these out of their homes and villages toward safety. Another large group came by choice. These were the wealthier and relatively more educated Muslims of Calcutta and other East Bengal centers.

The pattern of absorption or lack of it is a function of their social, economic and language heritage rather than a cultural basis. The immigrants to East Pakistan can be divided along one relatively simple dimension, whether or not they were Bangali. The immigrants from West Bengal and Assam melted into the rural landscape, by mixing with relatives, replaced the departing Hindus if they were professionals, or disappeared into the large group of landless, urban or rural, and lost any distinguishing signs. The non-Bangali group tended to be predominantly poor and landless, the rickshaw pullers and peasants of Bihar and other states. Those with more alternatives gravitated west to Lahore and Karachi where they enjoyed greater cultural simtlarity. There were no rural opportunities in East Pakistan for these people since they had no relatives and generally no farming skill. The urban areas did present a unique opportunity since the ebb and flow of people had left a vacuum in certain cities and professions. The control of industry and railroads had always

resided in Calcutta, and was essentially British and Hindu dominated. Employment had favored the more sophisticated Hindus and the Anglo-Indians, who left for India or Britain at Partition.

The final determinant in the recipe which produced the Biharis was the nature of the West Pakistanis. Although they shared in the mutual domination by the British, they were never subjected to the cultural and economic imperialism of a local group as were the Bengali Muslims by the Bengali Hindus. As a result the West Pakistani had a strong tradition of education, self-government, entrepreneurship and the pride and defiance unique to that area of Asia. The new political entity known as Pakistan was an unequal partnership from the beginning, but the greatest inequality was in experience and national character. The dominant West Pakistani cast around for familiar landmarks in the rural and primitive East. The flood of Urdu-speaking immigrants, somewhat oriented to urban life, was a natural fit. They filled the jobs vacated by the departing Anglo-Indians and were employed by the industrialists from the West replaced the Hindu and the foreign employers. The Bengali was not forced out of any position, but he was less suited to these opportunities in the rails and jute mills, and this was reinforced by an understandable tendency of the new rulers to surround themselves with persons who spoke their language.

These are the social, economic, and political conditions which gave rise to identifiable concentrations of Urdu-speaking non-Bengalis active in the railroads and jute mills and late in trade and business. The immigrants now known as Biharis did not constitute a cultural or social group in 1948, but a situation existed where the Urdu-speaking immigrants could get urban jobs in very concentrated industries whereas the rest of the immigrants melted into the countryside. Although there are religious differences, with the Bihari being largely Shia and the Bengali Sunni, the major schism in Islam, this division had little to do with their pattern of settlement. Thus a certain portion of the immigrants from India came to constitute an identifiable grouping through social, economic and political circumstance, although it should be clearly understood that they did not consider themselves an ethnic community separate from the West Pakistani Urdu-speaking group who dominated urban life in East Pakistan.

The second major influence was the nature of urban settlement in East Pakistan and the economic and political climate from partition to 1971. East Pakistan was essentially rural with minor urban concentrations composed of Bengalis with their psychological roots in their village, and West Pakistanis with their roots in the other half of Pakistan. The Urdu-speaking immigrants constituted the only large urban group who were genuine residents of their cities. This period also saw a shift in the East as industry was developed to replace the former dependence on Calcutta; Chittagong and Khulna gained in importance as port and industrial cities, Saidpur became the railroad centre and Dacca-Narayanganj became a new administrative/educational/industrial centre. The increasing urbanization led to an expansion of the cities. Jute mills, railroads and government tend to provide employee housing, and the concentration of Urdu-speaking immigrants in these sectors led to a similar residential concentration. The further development of new housing estates around the cities tended to be dominated by West Pakistanis and the new Biharis traders and businessmen who moved to the new estates because they had no roots in the established areas of cities as the Bengalis did. These trends were reinforced by the tendency of the people of this part of the world to group themselves in families and communities because of family ties, the mosque (shias), language, and the practice of purdah for the women. This series of development did not create a 'Biharis' community as such, but it created a

set of conditions which permitted this group of people to become prosperous, established and influential without being forced to assimilate culturally with the mainstream of East Pakistan culture.

This pattern of urban settlement had the seeds of trouble, but it would not have led to the present crisis without the East-West tensions. The apparent neglect of the East can be partially attributed to policy, but the real differences in progress are the result of a different national mentality reinforced by a more advantageous geographic and resource situation in the West. The continuing habit of Bangladesh to explain their failures in terms of historic devils in contrast to the rapid economic recovery in the West is merely a recent manifestation of this basic difference. This differential in development and potential, assisted by a fair amount of insensitivity with regard to language and other cultural issues, led to deterioration in the spirit of national unity. The West responded with authoritarian measures, catalyzing the various economic, political, social and religious complaints into an over-riding East-West issue. The 'Bihari' community, fully aware of the reasons for its rapid ascendancy and prosperity, were willing pawns in the strategy of the west to maintain its power base. Unfortunately, their pattern of settlement and their retention of the Urdu language moved them clearly to one side as the lines of division sharpened.

A third factor which has influenced the shape of the present problem can be summed up in the words employment and education. The kind of jobs held by the Biharis, are very unique in the sub-continent. It is a practice of the large employers such as civil service, railroad and major industries to provide very strong job security and a much higher level of social services than are available to the population at large. In a society where more people are unemployed than at work, this type of employment is of great value to a family. The availability of housing, health facilities and free or better schools, combined with a secure income, enables these workers to educate their sons and daughters toward much better professional and other positions. This tendency, combined with the generally greater availability of educational opportunity in the cities, compared to the village where there is correspondingly less need of it for the son of a farmer, progressively propelled the Bihari immigrants into an urban elite. Their high populations in major cities, proportionately large representation in schools and government, all protected by the West Pakistani umbrella which gave Urdu official status, tended to blind them to their real situation in East Pakistan. The Bihari community has been accused of many things, but never humility or wisdom. Whereas the situation called for a more circumspect profile, arrogance was the response. When the Bengalis revolted against the rulers from the West, they made no distinction between those of Indian or West Pakistani origin, since these Indian immigrants had fused their destiny to the star of greater Pakistan rather than the fortunes and culture of the East Wing.

The departure of the genuine West Pakistanis in 1971 and the change to a nationalistic Bengali culture left the Urdu-speaking Indian immigrants as a visible community where previously they had been blurred as part of a much more complex ethnic and cultural picture. They became a group by default, and this is the heart of today's problem. The 'Biharis' or the more appropriate term 'non-Bengalis' in the camps were not a group or community who share a common origin or history, but a collection of people with certain distinctive similarities who acted and lived in a parallel pattern shaped by the unique economic, social and political circumstances described earlier. They share a common misery and a mutual bitterness, but the concentration in certain cities or industries does not constitute sociological solidarity. They have no heritage to draw on for strength and no pattern of community leadership to handle their affairs and to enable them to speak as one

voice. The pattern of corruption by camp leaders, community activities, the total lack of concern for the widows, and other totally helpless members of the camps has appalled the onlooker. Yet a large part of the answer lies in our expectation that they function as a community whereas they are a collection of individuals that lost their roots a generation ago, saw their tentatively forming roots forcibly pulled from the soil in 1971 and are now a totally frustrated and disenchanting mob. If the outsider intends to speak to the problem, it should be with a full understanding of this background.

## 2. History of the Bihari Relief Effort

A great deal could be written about the role of the Biharis during the nine months of civil war, relating the claims and counter-claims to little advantage. There was never a conscious decision for the group to take one or the other side, since they never viewed themselves self-consciously as a group, rather individually associated with the larger Urdu-West Pakistani culture.

The initial turmoil caused by the rising Bengali nationalism resulted in attacks upon all non-Bengalis, forcing those living in smaller centers to congregate in the major towns or near Urdu-speaking concentrations. The end of the war found the army in Indian prisons, the majority of West Pakistanis safely back in Karachi and the Biharis stripped not only of their protection, but their assets and citizenship as well, for those fortunate enough to be still alive. Harassed by neighbours with bitter memories and by roving bands of patriots with guns they withdrew into tight defensive ghettos for survival. In the larger context of sub-continental activity they were largely forgotten until the river of bodies south of Khulna in March 1972 jolted the world to attention.

The ICRC stepped in to provide an international umbrella of security and found itself sucked into the morass of providing food, shelter and medical care as reserves ran out and disease took its toll. The ICRC never analyzed the problem in terms of its socio-economic context, but viewed the problem in a legalistic political manner, successfully keeping the people alive but failing to deal with the substantive issues which made them refugees. One should not attribute attitudes on speculation, but the approach taken by the ICRC and other related officials to organize the Biharis along lines of self-government for internal affairs suggest that they viewed the group as a community with a certain amount of social cohesion. Most leaders used their positions as stepping stones to their own escape from this nightmare while the rest of the group responded to this example by psychologically sinking into lethargy and physically into their own excretion by refusing to work at tasks for the community at large. The world community concentrated its efforts on shifting 150,000 of these unfortunates from refugee camps in the outskirts of Dacca to camps even further outside of Karachi and are congratulating themselves on their generosity and organizational competence. Meanwhile the remaining 300,000 or so stripped of their professionals, doctors, leaders, and able bodied young men rot under even more hopeless conditions in Bangladesh.

The religious, voluntary and other international agencies rushed onto the scene with a haste which would have been scandalous in the days of clipper ships, timidly sticking their humanitarian paw into the gray. The unfortunate stress by the ICRC that they were the only legally constituted agency to deal with the problem was eagerly seized by many agencies as an excuse to remain clear of potential bureaucratic disapproval. The few agencies who did eventually venture into the arena performed some very valuable humanitarian services but failed to come up with any solutions to the dissolution of the

refugee concentrations. The administration within the camps stressed the two roles of food distribution and registration for "expatriation" to Pakistan, the former provided an opportunity for patronage and worse, and the latter guaranteed seats for family and friends. Whereas the majority of Biharis in places such as Saidpur had initially opted for Bangladesh, the complete lack of progress toward normalization resulted in increasing polarization to the extent that virtually every Bihari now wants to be repatriated.

The tragedy of the situation is that the extensive reservoir of goodwill and the desire to remain in Bangladesh which existed shortly after the civil war has now been completely dissipated. The group has been divided virtually family by family and the educated and the potential leaders have gone. Whatever raw material there was for reintegration with the Bengali mainstream has now been largely destroyed. The political agencies treated the problem as a political one and the humanitarian agencies treated it as a humanitarian problem. Nobody seems to recognize that the Bihari problem is the tip of a gruesome iceberg whose essence is over population and whose evidence is the socioeconomic death-struggle for inadequate "Lebensraum".

### 3. Is there a Final Solution?

The term brings to mind grim memories of the same expression applied to Jews in the days of Hitler. Every Bengali will relate sincere examples of personal friendship with Biharis, in fact, of specific instances of assistance on his part, yet he tragically shakes his head and concludes that they have forfeited their right to live in East Pakistan. We can scarcely comprehend a situation where several hundred university graduates will apply to fill a single typing job, or where final university examinations are delayed over a year to preserve more qualified job applicants from the disappointment of being officially unemployed.

The centrifuge of social dynamics has thrown a formerly privileged group out of competition and nobody is prepared to step aside to permit re-entry. The politicization of the issue was assisted by the role of the ICRC and the involvement of other foreigners. To the delay and the disintegration of the Biharis as a meaningful entity has now been added the momentum of accumulating history to insure their permanent ostracism.

The major error on the part of the world community is that they passively stood back and permitted the total isolation and ostracism of one segment of society under the pretext of communal hatred and guilt. If this official ostracism had not occurred, and the Biharis had retained at least a fraction of their employment opportunities and a modicum of self-respect, the polarization may not have occurred and the community could have been largely self-sufficient, albeit poor, by this time. The major donors had the power of persuasion in 1972 and 1973 but through lack of concern or information pretended that they had nothing to offer. The Scottish enclosures and the expulsion of Asians from East Africa appear to be isolated historic precedents, but the Bihari situation tears the shroud of diplomatic civility from the action and exposes the underlying barbaric passions.

### 4. An Outline of Further Action

The historic analysis suggests that the Biharis became a group by default or by a policy of elimination. The repatriation of their most capable leadership combined with

the history of lack of community cohesion in the management of their own affairs indicates that it is of no value to think of a future for the Biharis as an identifiable group within Bangladesh.

The first and paramount requirement is for the Government of Bangladesh to dismantle its official policy of considering the Biharis ineligible for citizenship. Since the Biharis have no real culture of their own, this would permit those who wanted to ignore their past to assimilate and disappear from view. Others may wish to maintain their pretense of West Pakistani citizenship and should be left in the camps with services progressively being reduced. A third segment such as widows, children and aged will have no alternative and these should be isolated for attention by the humanitarian agencies. This would not of itself end the problem but it would create the potential for the gradual reduction of the problem through assimilation and individual repatriation. The breakdown of talks with West Pakistan, suggest that there is no further political capital in Bangladesh's official attitude. A strong nudge will be required from some influential sources, provided they place ethics above Realpolitik for a change.

Given the accomplishment of the first action, an effort should be made to physically separate the community into groups which accept Bangladesh citizenship and those who refuse it. A history of leadership oriented toward repatriation and instances of community pressure to reject conciliatory advances by the government or the Bengali community have been of little help. The isolation of those opting for Pakistan would enable the rest of the community to respond to positive measures. This may require a major effort and expenditure, but if the world community is so willing to spend \$14,000,000 on the repatriation procedure, why not follow through with a fraction of that amount towards a solution within Bangladesh?

Given a legal basis for positive action and some measure of identification of those families willing to be assimilated and those without the capacity for self-support, some meaningful programs could be organized. The program which should receive the greatest effort is employment. Most programs have tended to revolve around sub-sistence 'ghetto-jobs' rather than re-integration into permanent jobs. With the extended family system, each job could remove approximately ten people from the relief rolls. Since most urban jobs are in government controlled sectors (eg. Railroad and jute- mills), and since both of these sectors are suffering in efficiency because of the lack of Bihari skills, there is at least some scope for discussion.

After two years in Bangladesh it has become obvious that the bureaucracy does not respond to reason but does understand a good kick. A carefully designed program of what could be politely designated 'financial inducements' by major donors to support special efforts, possibly job-creating, in the railroad and jute-mill sector, based directly on the incremental increase in employment in these sectors, may have some chance of success. To continue grants to these sectors in the face of the barbaric elimination of the majority of its employees is an unconscionable act on the part of Western donors. Considering the dismal record of development projects in Bangladesh, if the project fails, at least a job and a family has been ransomed!

Relief will be needed for some time by certain sectors of the group. The problem is to identify the totally helpless portion and design separate programs for them, while encouraging those families with able-bodied men to become self-supporting. The milk

feeding centres provide a reasonable nucleus for this kind of program, and the services could be broadened somewhat but to a much more selected group of hardship cases. If the jute handicraft export program or other suitable programs succeed, these would be ideal for making these families at least partially able to maintain themselves.

The above suggestions completely ignore the abysmal living conditions, lack of health care and so forth. The danger of creating permanent ghettos of a terrible kind are so great that a tremendous effort must be made to create some avenues for escape from the community, as well as the desire to leave areas like Muhammadpur.

The answer to the Bihari problem is not to make the camp more comfortable, but to create some lifelines to escape, and to work inside the camp to blur the barriers and distinctions which have created the isolation.

Education is a key toward the long term dissipation of the Urdu-speaking community. A certain portion of the group will always reject assimilation and will contribute to a probable endless stream of migration to the West. However, many will remain, and they must be helped to bridge the gaps which separate them from mainstream Bengali life. Since the Biharis are destined to remain urban, their future lies in industry, trade, government and other urban skills. They will require knowledge of the Bengali language and a level of education which is above the national average.

This may seem like advocating discrimination, but it isn't. The rural Bengali does not need much education to farm his land, but he does if he wished to compete in urban centres. If the Bihari is to participate meaningfully in urban life he must have the skills similar to the educated Bengalis attracted by the city. Although the Biharis were interested in education, the young generation is being lost through the complete absence of schooling or the very minimal efforts of mosque and relief agencies. A five- ten year special effort to provide quality Bengali education to the young Bihari generation would do a great deal to ensure the disappearance of the community. This would again be a worthwhile endeavour for a foreign donor.

## Conclusions

The frustrating nature of the Bihari question creates a search for historical precedent, but relevant precedents are difficult to find. The less than admirable actions and characteristics of the Biharis also blur the real issues. The Biharis are like the Dreyfus Affair in France, where the man was well below the issues he represented. Bangladesh is often looked on as an anachronism in a world of progress. In fact it should be viewed as a harbinger of the future, since it is far ahead of the rest of the world on the Malthusian curves and the degeneration equations of the Club of Rome. Although people have been slaughtered, defeated, mistreated at many points in history, there is a subtle difference between the underlying causes in the 'Bihari' problem and the 'East Africa problem', 'Palestinian problem' or the earlier 'Jewish problem'. The reaction of rats under conditions of perpetually increasing population pressure may be a more applicable and more portentous precedent.

The Biharis are not a particularly deserving group of people, but as with Dreyfus, the basic human issues they represent mean that the world community cannot condone

this reaction to the looming problems of over-population. For this reason substantial weight has been given to end the official ostracism, although this may not make much direct difference to the remaining Biharis. However, it will mean a rejection by the Government of this kind of inhuman approach. The further role of the world community and the humanitarian agencies is to blur the distinctions which will prevent future programs. The suggestion to eliminate the Biharis as a cultural entity should not be interpreted as a disregard for the legitimate rights of minorities. The culture which they attached themselves to is that of the West Pakistani, and continuing emigration should be one option. However, there is not adequate history prior to liberation or since liberation to give credence to any claims that they represent a distinct cultural entity.

The problems are large but the issues are even larger. Hopefully the interpreters of the events and the participants will recognize the substantial issues of the Bihari situation and set the course of events in a direction which is more humane.

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