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LEFT BEHIND BY THE NATION:  
'STRANDED PAKISTANIS' IN BANGLADESH

Dina M. Siddiqi

ABSTRACT

*This paper draws on the figure of the 'stranded Pakistani' or 'Bihari' to interrogate the peculiar silence around the partition of British India in 1947 in the nationalist historiography of Bangladesh. The striking inability of nationalist accounts to accommodate partition, I contend, can be traced to the (apparent) incongruity of East Bengal's active embrace of the idea of Pakistan in 1947.*

*As the paper makes evident, there cannot be a single narrative of the partition of 1947. Its many contentious histories continue to shape community and nation making practices in South Asia. Tracking the trajectories of 'stranded Pakistanis' (a category that was meaningful only after 1971) allows us to map the ways older meanings of partition, and so of Pakistan, were disrupted, displaced or reconstituted by the 1971 war. Bangladesh's sovereignty ruptured the identity of Urdu-speaking migrants to the former East Pakistan. Those who had previously mediated belonging and citizenship through the idiom of sacrifice for Pakistan found themselves excluded by the terms through which the new nation was redefined in 1971.*

*If the singularity of Bengali nationalism cannot but disavow the moment of partition it is also the case that the histories of 1947 and 1971 cannot be understood apart, as separate and contradictory events. Indeed, I argue that 1947 remains critically important for understanding the cultural politics of citizenship, belonging and national identity in Bangladesh today.*

The consul banged on the table and said:  
'If you've got no passport, you're officially dead':  
But we are still alive, my dear, but we are still alive.  
W.H.Auden<sup>1</sup>

'We never left Pakistan, Pakistan has gone and left us.'  
Geneva Camp Resident

## INTRODUCTION

What does it mean for a nation to have 'left behind' citizens who remain rooted in place? How did legal citizens become 'officially' dead when the former East Pakistan became Bangladesh? What are the prospects of closure in the face of civil death and official erasure? In this essay, I raise these questions in relation to the quandaries of belonging and citizenship faced by so-called 'stranded Pakistanis' in contemporary Bangladesh. I use my reading of the latter's predicament to interrogate and complicate dominant understandings of the partition of British India in 1947 and its relationship to nationalist historiography in Bangladesh, which has tended to elide or erase partition altogether. I suggest that foundational narratives of the Bangladeshi nation cannot but disavow the moment of the 1947 partition, for any such acknowledgement fundamentally troubles the idea of a core/pre-existing Bengali secular identity. By extension, and more significantly, the recognition of the 1947 partition necessarily involves an interrogation of (East) Bengal's participation in what has been called 'the Pakistan experiment'.

By virtue of their collective categorization as collaborators during the 1971 War of Liberation, 'stranded Pakistanis' or Biharis (as Urdu-speaking refugees to East Pakistan/Bangladesh are popularly referred to) have been written out of Bangladeshi nationalist discourses.<sup>2</sup> The presence of those 'who never left Pakistan,' within Bangladesh's present day borders signals a history that has been rendered unspeakable because of its incongruity with the dominant national project. The erasure of the 1947 partition from official memory, then, represents an attempt to paper over the fissures and contradictions involved in the making of a secular unified Bengali nation-state. Nationalist desire for narrative permanence and fixity of territory/identity invariably comes into tension with the historical contingencies and complexities of identity/border making in practice (see, for instance, Ludden 2003). Arguably, such contradictions are characteristic of all nationalist-modernist projects, which in themselves are necessarily exclusionary since the quest for national purity calls for the assimilation, suppression or outright excision of difference.

By unpacking the cartographic anxieties and contradictions underlying the ethno-territorial project of Bengali/Bangladeshi nation making, my aim is not simply to foreground the limits of nationalist historiography. Rather, I argue that 1947 remains critically important for understanding the cultural politics of citizenship, belonging and national identity in Bangladesh today. Reading the history of 1971 without taking into account 1947 does not simply produce incomplete histories; such a move obscures the historically constitutive pro-

cesses through which categories of (national) Self and Other are produced and naturalized, and the dynamics that allow for the privileging of some narrative accounts and simultaneous displacement of others. Put differently, the inability of Bangladeshi nationalist historiography to come to terms with partition/Pakistan ensures the exclusion not just of 'Biharis' but of all other non-Bengali-speaking minorities from national belonging.

#### PARTITIONING HISTORIES

Scholarly and fictional accounts of the 1947 partition draw overwhelmingly on events and experiences in the Punjab province. Terror and displacement, the overnight morphing of friend into enemy, frenzied and sexualized 'mob' attacks, and state attempts to recover gendered bodies across newly formed borders constitute major themes in the existing literature. Questions of nationhood and citizenship are framed accordingly. Partition processes in Bengal, a province that offers a marked contrast – in temporality, scale and modalities of violence, as well as in modes of displacement and property expropriation – have received much less attention.<sup>3</sup> It may be stating the obvious but the 1947 partition did not unfold in a modular fashion; despite overt structural similarities, processes of displacement and identity formation in Bengal/East Pakistan operated on contextually specific and sometimes quite different registers from those in northern India/West Pakistan. Bengal's partition may be more productively understood as an open-ended, continuous process rather than as a set of discrete, temporally bounded and spectacular events, or 'a suspension of the ordinary'.<sup>4</sup>

The continual flow of Bengali-speaking Hindu citizens from East Pakistan/Bangladesh across the border into West Bengal, India may represent the most obvious example of this drawn out process. In a (predictable?) paradox of post-colonial nationalism, those who left East Bengal/East Pakistan after 1947 found themselves re-classified as refugees rather than as full-fledged citizens in newly independent India. Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gautam Ghosh and others have written about the critical work that constructions of loss, nostalgia and yearning for home/nation perform in the making of refugee imaginaries in West Bengal, India (see Chakrabarty 1998; Ghosh 2007). Curiously, few accounts exist of the experiences of Bengali-speaking Muslims who sought refuge in East Pakistan during or just after 1947. The muting of these voices and experiences warrants recognition and critical attention.

In this paper I turn to the figure of the 'stranded Pakistani', who represents a less visible but enduring instance of the continued weight and paradoxical ef-

fects of the 1947 partition. The trajectory of this population – from victims of communal violence, to citizens of newly formed Pakistan, and then to stateless persons – forms the core of this paper. Commonly known as Biharis (although many came from much further away than Bihar) these non-Bengali-speaking Muslims migrated to East Bengal either in the aftermath of communal riots in Bihar in 1946 or after partition in 1947. A heterogeneous group differentiated by class interests and regional distinctions, they were tied together primarily by their linguistic difference from the Bengali-speaking majority in East Pakistan.

It bears repeating that partition did not necessarily or exclusively signify loss, uprooting, or the horrors of communal violence for Muslims. Some scholars suggest that for the peasantry of East Bengal, Pakistan promised a 'Peasant Utopia' and a 'Land of Eternal Eid.'<sup>5</sup> In this view, the new nation was not so much a homeland for the subcontinent's Muslims as it was a new start, for Pakistan promised the dismantling of economic oppression as well as the end of religious and social discrimination. Though it has ceased to be a direct reference point in the discourses of Bengali/Bangladeshi nationalism, 1947 remains a significant marker in the reconstruction of the history of landownership in rural Bangladesh.<sup>6</sup> Partition provided an enormous opportunity for certain Muslim groups in Bengal to reconfigure socio-economic relations in a landscape dominated until then by upper caste Hindu landowners. For the predominantly Muslim peasantry, Pakistan held the promise of the establishment of a just and egalitarian society, a 'return' to a communitarian life. Urdu-speaking migrants could also stake a claim on such promises. Thus, unlike Hindu refugees to West Bengal, Muslims – Bengali speakers and non-Bengalis – saw East Pakistan as a legitimate destination, a place to which they had formal entitlement.

If the borders of Pakistan were theoretically open to all Muslims in 1947, the conditions for citizenship changed considerably by 1971. In the intervening years, the very idea of Pakistan had unraveled in East Pakistan; Bengalis of all classes found themselves culturally and economically marginalized by non-Bengalis. The latter were primarily bureaucrats, industrialists and military personnel, often Punjabi rather than Urdu-speakers. Within five years of Pakistan's emergence, language became a major site of political and cultural contestation between East and West Pakistan. Early on, Bengali politicians and students refused attempts by the federal government, based in West Pakistan, to impose Urdu as the official state language. Police firings on protesting students in 1952 became a foundational moment in an emergent nationalist struggle. By the 1960s calls for greater regional autonomy and more equitable resource distri-

bution came to be squarely situated within a movement for Bengali linguistic and cultural autonomy.

The cultural parameters of this political struggle rendered Urdu-speakers in East Pakistan the Other in 'their own land,' at least in the eyes of the Bengali-speaking majority. The latter saw non-Bengali migrants as a privileged comprador class. The production of a monolithic non-Bengali Cultural Other in the Bengali imaginary left little space for distinctions among 'Urdu-speakers,' the most powerful of whom were ethnically Punjabi.

Prominent sections of this Urdu-speaking population – *though by no means all* – sided with West Pakistan during the regional autonomy movement in the 1960s and the Liberation war in 1971. The open collaboration of some Urdu-speakers with the Pakistani army in the latter's brutal suppression of and genocidal war on Bengalis in 1971 rendered *all* 'Biharis' into permanent national pariahs. At the end of the war, leaders on behalf of the Urdu-speaking 'community' formally opted for Pakistani citizenship, thereby renouncing all claims on the newly formed nation of Bangladesh. Pakistan accepted only a handful of Urdu-speakers, primarily those who had actively collaborated with the Pakistani Army during the war. The remaining population was cordoned off in camps in the capital and other cities awaiting resettlement in Pakistan. Unable to claim United Nations refugee status due to a number of technicalities, this ethnic and linguistic minority was legally stateless, 'officially dead,' in the words of the first epigraph until very recently. As my second epigraph underlines, with the establishment of Bangladesh, the Pakistani nation left its Urdu-speakers 'behind,' without the latter actually leaving the space of the nation.

Successive Pakistani governments have refused to take 'back' these people, most of whom have never been to (West) Pakistan. Many of the younger generations have lived their entire lives within the cramped perimeters of make-shift camps scattered across Bangladesh. The Geneva Camp in Mohammadpur, Dhaka, is iconic in this respect. Located in the heart of the capital city, the Camp constitutes a no-man's land, a site that most Bangladeshis barely acknowledge even though its borders bleed into neighboring areas. This spatial ambivalence characterises the place of Biharis in the nation. On the one hand, Biharis constitute an invisible minority, erased from the historical, cultural and national landscape.<sup>7</sup> On the other, they are subject to significant nationalist hostility; indeed, the term Bihari continues to be synonymous with *dalal* or wartime collaborator.

In retrospect, it is not difficult to understand why Urdu-speakers would have felt little allegiance to the Bengali nationalist movement. As we shall see, the loyalties of Urdu-speakers may not have been with the Pakistani regime *per se* but their identities and interests were deeply entangled in the idea of Pakistan. In an insightful and provocative review essay, Irfan Ahmed observes that '[i]f India's Partition resulted in the birth of Muslims camps in Delhi and Hindu camps in Lahore in the mid twentieth century, its sordid trail continues well into the twenty first century in places such as Dhaka's Geneva Camp' (Irfan Ahmed 2012: 494). Indeed, the pre-histories of 1971 continue to haunt the Bangladeshi nation today, not least in relation to 'stranded Pakistanis'.

#### PARTITION'S GHOSTS AND CRACKS IN THE NATIONAL STORY

If the formal erasure of partition represents an attempt to gloss over events that threaten to disrupt the official narrative of Bengali secular unity, its excision from collective memory inevitably haunts and fractures the national project. Always in danger of escaping through cracks in the official national script, in moments of crisis other stories and voices often cannot be contained. It may well be that the periodic emergence of partition's ghosts constitutes a central feature of Bengali/Bangladeshi nationalism. Much of the ambivalence around nationhood and identity in Bangladesh, I suggest, can be traced to ambiguities over the meaning of Pakistan for Bengal's Muslims when it was created. For even if partition was a time of high expectations for some; what it meant to be a Pakistani was neither transparent nor given. No one really knew what it would mean in his or her own lives. Certainly, no one had actually voted to have a Pakistan. In a broader context, one historian remarks, 'most Muslims neither understood nor approved of Pakistan, except as a remote place where they would go, as on a pilgrimage. [...] In other words, most people were indifferent to the newly created geographical entities and were committed neither to a Hindu homeland nor to an imaginary world of Islam' (Hasan 1997: 5).<sup>8</sup> For Bengali-speaking Muslims – who were not quite Bengali enough for Hindu Bengali speakers and not quite Muslim enough for North Indian Muslims – the situation was especially fraught (see Siddiqi 2007). The fragility of national identity was underscored for a generation born as British Indians, who became Pakistani and who were 'liberated' as Bangladeshi/Bengalis.

As a sovereign state with a dominant Muslim population, Bangladesh in 1971 faced the double burden of distinguishing itself from both Bengalis in neighboring India and from Muslims in Pakistan. No wonder the relation between the terms Bengali, Muslim and Hindu has preoccupied the historiography of the territory that is now Bangladesh. Contentious discussions on the consti-

tution of the Bengali/Bangladeshi nation still hold center stage in nationalist discourse (Hasan 1997: 5). Such discussions, centered on the putative opposition of Bengali/Muslim and the conflation of Hindu/Bengali, exclude many groups whose histories are tied into the making of Bangladesh.

The active forgetting of the fractious histories of partition renders the historiography of Bangladesh slightly askew of the rest of the subcontinent, at least in relation to the recalling of partition. In India and Pakistan, dominant historical narratives culminate in the story of 'Freedom at Midnight' in 1947. This celebration of 1947 is notably absent in Bangladesh. In the weeks leading up to the 50th anniversary of Indian and Pakistani Independence, BBC World and CNN International, both cable channels available to Bangladeshi audiences, devoted extensive coverage to related events. In contrast, Bangladeshi newspapers and other media exhibited a muted interest in the anniversary or ignored it altogether. That the 1947 partition/Independence appears to have become a non-event in a state that was once part of Pakistan is a feature of Bangladeshi historiography worth revisiting.

I suggest that from the perspective of the national story, 1947 does not merit remembrance, let alone celebration, for it disrupts a carefully constructed teleology of a secular Bengali nation waiting to come into formation. Within this framework, 1947 cannot constitute *true* independence. Rather, it denotes one more moment in the continuing history of Bengal's colonial domination, marking the transfer of power from the British to the West Pakistanis. Thus Bangladeshi historians routinely refer to the double cloak of colonialism when discussing the period between 1947 and 1971. The official timeline of the nation nods to 1905 – the 'first' partition of Bengal (and Assam) province – and moves on to 1952 (the inauguration of the language movement) as foundational moments.

This version of the national story cannot accommodate the Bengali-speaking peasantry's enthusiasm for Pakistan as documented by Ahmed Kamal and others. Nor can it absorb more complicated interpretations of the so-called double cloak of colonialism. For instance, some Bangladeshis refer to 1947 as the *first* independence, meaning that Bengali Muslims had to first separate from Hindu dominance, hence the need for a break in 1947, before they could be independent (Gautam Ghosh, personal communication).

The date, August 15th, has become something of a shifting signifier, its multiple and shifting valences easily eclipse other submerged meanings of the year 1947. Events in 1975 complicated matters further, and more tragically, so that since



then August 15th has taken on an entirely different set of associations within the Bangladeshi polity. Early that morning, the 'Father of the Nation,' the Awami League's leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, along with most of his family, was assassinated in a brutal army coup ushering in 15 years of military rule. For the national intelligentsia, Mujib was iconic of the secular Bengali state for which so much blood had been shed in 1971. It would have been awkward, at the least, to commemorate independence from British rule and acknowledge the tragedy of Mujib's murder on the same day. When the Awami League returned to power in 1996, the government led by Mujib's surviving daughter, Sheikh Hasina, declared August 15th a day of mourning and a national holiday. In a somewhat confounding – some would argue spiteful – gesture, Hasina's arch rival Khaleda Zia, upon coming to power, declared August 15th to be her official birthday. By decree, the official meaning of August 15th changed overnight. From a day of national mourning, it became one of celebration marked by elaborate public rituals of cake-cutting and congratulatory messages. In its most recent incarnation, with the re-instatement of an Awami League government, August 15th is once more a national day of mourning.

Even without reference to Mujib, the logic of partition contradicts the nationalist logic of Bangladesh's creation. By virtue of the conditions of its emergence, conventional nationalist historiography is trapped – it cannot accommodate the awkwardness of histories of partition, especially histories of communal tensions and class fractions. This is because dominant readings of partition, even when they are critical of the carving up of the subcontinent, tend to share certain assumptions with the two-nation theory. In the latter imaginary, Hindus and Muslims are understood to be *already* constituted and separate communities. Religion is foundational to the identity of community members. Class, region, caste and other distinctions are subordinated or irrelevant.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the ideological moorings of Bangladesh's nationalism are grounded in the existence of a pre-existing and *secular* Bengali identity, one that underplays or blurs religious distinctions. Against this backdrop, the specter of partition can be construed as betraying the cause of secular nationhood. Overt engagement with partition's violence entails the existence of sectarian identities and by extension the 'disunity' of Bengali national identity, thereby destabilising the grounds for the nations coming into being. This may be why public recognition of 1947 in narratives of the Bengali nation has been muted at best. It may explain why, for instance, the Asiatic Society's three-volume history of Bangladesh skirts around the events and debates surrounding partition, without actually *naming* or classifying the latter as such (Islam 1992).

The irony of course is that the conditions of possibility for Bangladesh's emer-

gence lay in the creation of Pakistan, in partition. If only in an invisible manner, the politics of partition continues to inflect major trends in Bangladeshi nationalism today.

#### THE MAKING OF MUHAJIRS

The partition of Punjab and Bengal led to the displacement of anywhere from 11 to 18 million people. The actual figure may be much higher but exact figures from this period are notoriously difficult to compile. The number of incoming refugees between 1947–51, as reported in the Indian and Pakistani census of 1951, is 7.29 and 7.22 million respectively (Kudaisya 1995: 73). Of the 7.22 million Muslims coming into Pakistan, only 699,000 were enumerated in East Pakistan in the 1951 census, constituting only 1.7% of the total population (Government of Pakistan 1953: ii). In contrast, the 1951 Indian census enumerates 2.55 million refugees coming in from East Bengal. Some writers have equated the term Muhajir with non-Bengali, counting all of the 700,000 migrants as 'Biharis'. However the 1951 census enumerated a total of 118,181 'Urdu-speaking' refugees in East Pakistan. The vast majority of these, 97,349, were from Bihar. Of the remainder, 18,819 were from Uttar Pradesh and 2,002 from Punjab or Delhi (Kamaluddin 1985: 224).<sup>10</sup> Vicious riots in Bihar in the aftermath of Direct Action Day and the massacre of Hindus in Noakhali in 1946 were instrumental in the uprooting and relocation of Muslims from Bihar into Bengal. In almost one week of rioting, 7 out of 16 districts and 750 out of 18,696 villages in Bihar were affected (P. Ghosh 1991: 275). The number of Muslim casualties was a source of controversy at the time. The Congress maintained that a total of 5,400 deaths occurred, while the Muslim League insisted the figure was more in the range of 30,000 to 50,000. Prominent Congress leaders, including Nehru and Gandhi toured the area afterwards. An official inquiry was launched but like most such inquiries, its results were never made public.

For the most part, the Bihar riots disrupted the lives of the rural populace. Muslims in rural Bihar lived in relatively small and isolated groups making them easy targets for 'roving mobs'. Survivors took refuge in camps in Patna and other big towns, while rumors of more attacks compelled many Muslims who had not been affected by the riots to seek shelter elsewhere. Local Muslim League leaders apparently urged Muslims to leave, and there was even a plan to divide Bihar into two parts. Migration began in earnest in November 1946.

Papiya Ghosh (1991: 282) estimates that around 60,000 Muslims moved to Bengal between the third week of November and the end of December 1946. Of this number, around 101,500, - almost 15% - came from UP and Bihar. By Jan-

uary the flight of people slowed down and some people even returned home. It should be noted that refugees from Bihar migrated to the Sindh and Punjab as well as to Bengal. Migration to Dhaka started for the most part after partition, continuing into the 1950s. At the same time, migration after August 1947 also took place 'for economic reasons and because of the acute food shortage in North Bihar, which had a common frontier with East Pakistan. Migrants totaled 4–500,000, although some returned to their homes during 1950–51' (Hasan 1997: 8).

The influx of refugees continued long after partition, increasing during moments of tension across borders: the 1950 riots in Calcutta, and anti-immigrant agitation in Assam; outbreaks of violence in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh in 1961; scattered incidents in Assam and West Bengal in 1962 and all over eastern India during the Hazratbal episode in Kashmir (see Feldman 1969: 148). According to one source at least 800,000 Indian Muslims, mainly from West Bengal, entered East Pakistan during the 1964 riots. These figures constitute only those who were registered in camps (Kamaluddin 1985: 222). By December 1967, another 540,000 from the border states of Tripura, Assam and West Bengal mainly, entered East Pakistan. The 1961 census puts the number of Urdu-speaking people in East Pakistan at 640,000, an increase of almost 500,000 from the 1951 census. As mentioned earlier, these numbers should be taken as rough estimates only. They give us the general idea of the demographic composition.

Theodore Wright remarked, 'it is clearly a matter of propinquity that the main outflow was to the east, particularly for those who could not afford the journey to West Pakistan' (cited in Ghosh 1991: 283). Given differences in language and ethnicity, this makes sense. It is worth recalling, however, that the national borders between India and Pakistan cut through much older routes of travel. Many Bihari Muslims journeyed on already familiar, if circular, corridors of migration (see Rahman and van Schendel 2003). The borders between regions were fairly porous and there had been, over many years, considerable emigration from Bihar for employment purposes (Chattapadhyaya 1987). Net lifetime migration from the Bihar to Bengal region was over 300,000 according to one estimate (Elahi and Sultana 1985: 181. See especially figure 2.1). Until the introduction of a passport and visa scheme and the imposition of fixed national identities, there were no real barriers to labour mobility. The imposition of passport and visa schemes in 1952 and attendant consequences of the 'fixing' of national identity significantly increased barriers to labour mobility. Refugee movements produced by partition disrupted or overrode earlier patterns of migration.<sup>11</sup> After 1947, many Muslim farmers who had settled in the Brahma-

putra valley in Assam in earlier decades were also compelled to migrate back to East Bengal – which had become, or would shortly become, East Pakistan.

Given the profile of the Muhajirs who came to East Bengal, it is not unreasonable to assume that, for some at least, the journey from Bihar to Bengal retraced familiar paths. The 1951 census of Pakistan contains a set of tables dealing exclusively with Muhajirs, ‘in view of the special problems involved in the resettlement of Muhajirs (Refugees from India)’ (Government of Pakistan 1953, p.ii). The census tells us that the Muhajirs contained a higher proportion of working men than was found in the rest of the population and that the ‘deficiency’ of females in the Muhajir population was generally above the average (Government of Pakistan 1953, statement A, p.ii). The census suggested the ‘shortage’ of children in the Muhajir population might have been due to ‘children born in Pakistan to Muhajir families not being defined as Muhajirs’. At the same time, Muhajirs had a larger proportion of adult dependents than non-Muhajirs. The generally urban nature of Biharis who had migrated is indicated by the fact that Muhajirs took up non-agricultural occupations to a larger extent than was the norm in general (see Table 19-c, p.6).

For many Urdu-speakers, Pakistan came to be visualized as the embodiment of the sacrifice of the Bihar Muslims in the riots of 1946 (Ghosh 1991). Yet, regardless of their sense of sacrifice and right to belong to Pakistan, the non-Bengalis were awkwardly poised between the predominantly Bengali population and the Punjabi authorities. As we shall see, they remained ostensibly privileged Outsiders in the Bengali imagination.

#### STRANGERS IN THE HOMELAND: THE DANGEROUS & DISLOYAL MUHAJIR

I am originally from Lucknow. I came to the then East Pakistan because we were guided by revolutionary emotions.’

Resident of Geneva Camp

‘Cigarettes between fingers and betel leaves in the mouth, we will fight and win Pakistan’ – who knew the chant would lead to this [predicament]?’

Resident of Geneva Camp

The term Muhajir was part of Pakistan’s political vocabulary from the outset. Its application to refugees from India marked a conscious effort to rally support among those already living in what had become Pakistan, to the task of welcoming and then looking after the large numbers of people pouring in

from across the border (Ansari 1995: 95). However, the category was ethnicised rapidly, and came to index Urdu-speaking Pakistanis.

Migrants from East Punjab, from being the epitome of those who constituted a 'refugee', gradually came to be seen as Punjabis. Muhajir was a category reserved more and more for refugees coming from Northern India. Sarah Ansari notes, 'refugees caught up in large scale, often involuntary migration as a result of political conflicts in the 20th century, have been forced to move to places over which they have little if any personal claim. In contrast, Muslims leaving India for Pakistan at Partition perceived themselves to be migrating to a place of refuge which *'belonged'* to them as 'Pakistanis' just as much as it did to the Muslims whom they found living there. This naturally complicated the whole issue of their resettlement. They presumed themselves to be there not by kind invitation but *by right*' (ibid 96, emphasis added).

This is in direct contrast to the sense of entitlement to 'Bengal' evinced by Bengali *bhadralok* migrants to West Bengal (G. Ghosh 2007). Ansari goes on to suggest that for many uprooted Muslims, the support they received from fellow Muslims formed a vital part of their understanding of their predicament, influencing the way they put down new roots. Since partition occurred during the month of Ramadan, it allowed many refugees to draw parallels between themselves and the original Muhajirs. Those people already living in Pakistan could then be seen as *ansars*, modern equivalents of the people of Medina who gave refuge to Mohammed and his followers.

The politicization of the refugees/Muhajirs proceeded along two quite distinct registers in the two wings of Pakistan. Muhajirs in West Pakistan eventually formed their own political party, the Muhajir Quami Movement (MQM),<sup>12</sup> which became an influential oppositional movement *within* the ethnic politics of Pakistan. This did not happen in the eastern wing of Pakistan. Urdu-speakers were poised outside the emergent political formation; they did not readily empathize with the aspirations of the emergent Bengali bourgeoisie in the 1950s and 60s. The movement and emergence of Bangladesh negated and devalued the very meaning of the sacrifices they felt they had made to establish Pakistan.

In contrast, Bengali-speaking Muslims from West Bengal merged into local communities with relative ease in the newly formed East Pakistan. Many already had relatives and socio-linguistic ties to East Bengal. Anxieties over assimilation or acceptance in a new homeland do not appear to have been serious considerations for Bengalis. At the same time, most of the Urdu-speaking

educated upper and middle classes who had sought refuge in East Pakistan moved to West Pakistan, which afforded better economic and social prospects for those with social capital and connections. Non-Bengali Muslims who stayed on in East Pakistan tended to be refugees with little formal education and even less in the way of capital and connections.

Proximity to the Indian border and the availability of urban/industrial employment shaped (Urdu-speaking) refugee resettlement patterns in East Pakistan. Many of the railwaymen, technicians, foremen and clerks who made up the refugee population relocated to northern districts, west of the Jamuna river. The industrial and railway townships of Dinajpur and Rangpur in particular offered employment and housing options not available elsewhere. Other refugees, including farmers, artisans and petty merchants, were drawn to Dhaka and Chittagong, the largest urban centers of the country.<sup>13</sup> Apart from a handful of affluent families, the majority of Biharis in Dhaka lived in colonies; Mirpur and Mohammadpur were known as Bihari enclaves.

In contrast to Bengali refugees, and despite their robust sense of sacrifice and right to belong in (East) Pakistan, Urdu-speakers found themselves inhabiting a decidedly ambivalent national space. To most Bengalis, Urdu-speakers constituted a single community that had constructed self-contained ethnic enclaves, thereby proclaiming and reproducing their ostensible superiority and cultural distance from the majority population. The structural and linguistic constraints that confronted Urdu-speakers were recast as a racialized lack of desire to associate with 'locals'. This view was enabled in part by the Pakistani state's preferential treatment of some Urdu-speakers/non-Bengalis, mainly industrialists, which came to stand for a generalized condition of privilege of all 'Biharis'. Significantly, the government actively discouraged assimilation. Pakistani authorities found Urdu-speakers useful in much the same way that 'Eurasians and immigrant minorities had served European rulers of Asian and African colonies' (Feith 1972: 22). It was taken for granted that the community would be an ally in the face of Bengali agitation. Resented as privileged outsiders, the majority of Urdu-speaking 'non-locals' were in fact greatly disillusioned with their situation in East Pakistan. Unemployment rates were very high, with a preponderance of temporary or underemployment. Education, especially higher education, came to be a particular source of dissatisfaction, because of language problems.

Given their structural position, it is no surprise that Biharis did not readily empathize with the aspirations of the emergent Bengali bourgeoisie. Few Urdu-speakers openly embraced the demand for a secular Bengali state when

war broke out in 1971. Some actively sided with the Pakistani army (as did a number of Bengali Muslims). Regardless of actual political inclinations, all Urdu-speakers found themselves identified with the Pakistani cause. More significantly, Biharis came to be inextricably linked in national memory with Pakistani army brutality. The notorious paramilitary formed by the Pakistani army – *al Badr*, *al Shams* and their volunteer members, the *razakars* – were responsible for some of the worst abuses of the war. The extent to which Biharis were involved in *al Badr* and *al Shams* remains a matter of dispute. Leaders of the 'stranded Pakistanis' vehemently deny any involvement; they point out that the army recruited Urdu-speakers to a separate force, the East Pakistan Civil Armed Forces (EPCAF) that was posted mainly in border regions, tasked with policing national borders. Few Bengalis have ever heard of EPCAF. *Razakar*, however, is a household word denoting wartime collaboration and generalized treachery. It is a great irony of history that in 1971 the Pakistani Army turned on their heads the allusions to Islamic history invoked in 1947. Arabic and Persian words once held to be sacred came to carry, by the end of the war, a radically profane and negative set of meanings. Permanently linked to Bihari (and Bengali) collaboration/betrayal, these terms still evoke fear and disgust rather than respect and pride.

As a result, the identity between Bihari/Razakar and West Pakistani (therefore of dangerous and disloyal non-citizen) has been naturalized. In national collective memory all Biharis are closely associated with Pakistani army atrocities. It is, for instance, 'common knowledge' that heavily fortified bunkers and caches of buried arms were discovered in the Bihari enclaves of Mohammadpur and Mirpur, the latter being one of the major sites of massacre by the Pakistan Army.

#### NEITHER CITIZENS NOR REFUGEES

'We have no moral right to stay here as we failed to protect our dear Pakistan from breaking up... This is why we want to go to our *opted* land.'

Nasim Khan, Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (FEER 1989: 28).

In the immediate aftermath of the war thousands were rounded up by virtue of their ethnicity and arrested as collaborators. Bihari homes and property were looted and destroyed. Sporadic clashes in Dhaka gave way to the premeditated killing of non-Bengalis in makeshift camps at Saidpur and Khalishpur, Khulna, although the large-scale massacre predicted by many outside observers did

not occur (Feith). The camps had been set up as temporary shelters to protect Biharis from harassment; many families, uprooted from their homes and with no prospect of employment in the near future, were forced to sell household possessions to survive. Conditions were poor enough for residents in several camps to hold up placards to visitors that said, 'Give us poison'.

Around 900,000 Urdu-speakers were estimated to be in Bangladesh at the end of the war (Feith: 22). Initially, the Pakistani state only repatriated members of EPCAF and the military. Most affluent Biharis left newly independent Bangladesh to settle abroad, some heading for India. As in 1947 those who remained were those without cultural or financial capital. Of the nearly 600,000 persons who had registered for 'repatriation' with the International Committee for the Red Cross, 178,069 were 'repatriated' between 1973 and 1993 (UNHCR 2009). Of those who remain over 150,000 reside in 116 open camps and settlements across Bangladesh.

This population has many names but, until 2003, had no national identity or citizenship papers. For all intents and purposes, they were civilly dead. Labeled as non-locals by some, government offices refer to them as non-Bengalis.<sup>14</sup> The Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC), which has its head office in Geneva Camp, Mohammadpur Dhaka declared, 'We are Pakistanis stranded in Bangladesh. [...]. We are Pakistanis by all canons of international law and ethical norms. We deserve immediate repatriation to Pakistan, our homeland. We fully come under the purview of the definition of the refugees as contained in the UNHCR's statutes adopted by the General Assembly of 14 December 1950 and amended in 1954, and also in the main international legal instrument such as the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol relating to the statute of refugees. Let it be known that most of our problems – social, cultural, political, racial, educational, linguistic and economic can find solution in Pakistan and Pakistan alone' (SPGRC 1979).

At an international conference on Biharis held in Geneva Camp, in December 1982, 'non-Bangladeshis who opt to go to Pakistan' replaced the term 'stranded Pakistani'. The language of choice, the act of 'opting' recalls the discourse of partition, especially in relation to government employees.<sup>15</sup> Yet the agency implied by this vocabulary hardly exists in practice. A UNHCR official in Dhaka soon made it clear that non-Bengalis could not have refugee status under the UNHCR's mandate, because they did not fit definitions of being nationals of one country with a well-founded fear of persecution from the authorities of that country.<sup>16</sup> Standard definitions of refugees are intent on protecting states, on separating refugee from migrant. There is no category for Urdu-speaking



migrants to Bengal, caught in a double bind since 1971.

#### WAITING FOR PAKISTAN/CIVIL DEATH

In 1973, Mujib declared, '[t]he non-Bengalis who were citizens of Pakistan and residents in the then East Pakistan will be treated as equal citizens *if* they declare allegiance to the government of Bangladesh.'<sup>17</sup> This ostensibly inclusive proclamation automatically rendered non-Bengali citizens who had in the interim applied for repatriation to Pakistan (through the International Committee of the Red Cross) non-citizens. By its terms, the *act* of seeking Pakistani citizenship stripped applicants of their Bangladeshi citizenship. Paradoxically, declaring these people Pakistanis, as the government did, carried no legal validity, for Pakistan was not bound and still is not legally bound to accept them. After all, they were not born on what is *now* Pakistani soil.

From the perspective of Urdu-speakers, the nation of Pakistan (along with its citizenship conferring state apparatus) had abandoned part of the territory and people of which it had once been an integral part, leaving the former in a liminal zone. Neither citizen, nor refugee, Urdu-speakers were condemned to a form of civil death. I use the term civil death somewhat differently from way it has been articulated by scholars such as Gauri Viswanathan (see Viswanathan 1995). Civil death here does not refer to a condition of exile from a particular community and its laws but to invisibility from the nation-state and secular citizenship it offers.



The 'legal fiction' of civil death has been challenged successfully in the intervening years. In 1984, the case of Muktar Ahmed, 34 DLR (1984) 29, the High Court Division of the Supreme Court, presided over by Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and Justice Rafiqur Rahman, declared:

'...The mere fact that he filed an application for going over to Pakistan cannot take away his citizenship. The Bangladesh Citizenship Order, P.O.149/72, has enumerated different situations in which a person shall be deemed to be a citizen of Bangladesh, but it has not discriminated among its citizens no matter in which way they have become citizens of this country. So, the petitioner is on the same footing as any other citizen. His citizenship, therefore, clings to him.'  
(Nahar 1997:7).

Civil death can be a condition from which a non-legal exit is possible, through accommodation to majoritarian cultural norms. Thus, non-Bengalis are often

exhorted to amend their supposed mistakes of the past and to undertake full-scale cultural conversion. The precondition for belonging to the nation, and proof of loyalty, calls for the complete suppression of linguistic and ethnic differences. Thus, in 1981, one of the few Urdu-speaking advocates in Bangladesh's Supreme Court founded an NGO called *al-Falah*,<sup>18</sup> the aim of which was to help the younger generation of non-Bengalis, especially those in the Geneva Camp to adapt better to the mainstream (read dominant/hegemonic) culture. The NGO promotes contests in essay writing in Bengali and 'adaptation to Bengali customs and cultures, urging them to become better Bengalis in manner, behavior and attitude – instilling in them the desire to integrate into the mainstream of Bengali nationalism' (pamphlet, no date).

While these battles were being fought, a new generation of Biharis has come up, knowing no home other than the camps in which they were born. This generation has no direct memory of partition or, in the case of some people, of 1971. Most speak Bengali fluently and do not have attachments to places outside Bangladesh. Acutely aware of their marginalization, younger Urdu-speakers have invested much energy in 'becoming' Bangladeshi. The Stranded Pakistanis Youth Rehabilitation Movement was at the forefront of legal initiatives that culminated in a 2008 High Court ruling directing the government to recognize Urdu-speakers as Bangladeshi nationals.<sup>19</sup> In response to the ruling Sadakat Khan, president of the movement declared, 'this is a historic achievement. We had been waiting for decades, while living an inhuman life in the camps. Why we should go to Pakistan? We don't belong to Pakistan. We don't want to go to Pakistan' (Majumdar 2008).

Bangladeshi citizenship and all that it offered – including escape from civil death – was not enough for many older Urdu-speakers. Speaking on behalf of the SPGRC, Shoukat Ali remarked: 'We have full respect for the court but we reject its ruling. Pakistan is our home and we want to exercise our citizen rights only after going there' (Majumdar 2008).



#### YEARNING FOR AN ELUSIVE PAKISTAN

In the immediate post-war period, Pakistan agreed to take back the 'refugees' under two separate agreements; the 1973 New Delhi Agreement and the Tripartite Agreement signed by India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1974. Pakistan agreed to repatriate only those who were domiciled earlier in former West Pakistan, employees of the former central government and members of divided families, irrespective of original place of domicile. Of the 147,000 people initially cleared by Pakistan, 122,000 had been repatriated by 1982. Many

others did not fall within the bounds of those Pakistan was willing to accept. Successive regimes have had slightly different perspectives on the issue. For instance, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto maintained an extremely antagonistic and evasive attitude toward Bangladesh while Mujib was alive. Bhutto's primary objective was to secure the release of Prisoners of War. Once this was achieved, Bhutto proved intransigent on the issue of asset redistribution and population transfer. During a visit to London in July 1973, Bhutto stated that Pakistan could not accept the non-Bengalis Mujib wanted repatriated (Kau-shik 1988:157). During his visit to Bangladesh in June 1974, Bhutto remained evasive about the non-Bengali Muslims who had opted to go 'back' to Pakistan, claiming he needed to consult with the National Assembly before making any commitments. Bhutto's approach toward Bangladesh shifted after Mujib's assassination. By January 1976, the two nations had established diplomatic and trade relations. As the governments of Bangladesh and India became increasingly estranged, the former's relations with Pakistan continued to improve. This trend was consolidated during Ziaul Haq's rule, when the military regimes in each nation had many interests in common. (The Bangladesh government maintained a calculated silence over Bhutto's execution, for instance). Following Ziaur Rahman's visit to Pakistan in December 1977, a series of trade and commercial agreements were signed.

The SPGRC issued an appeal on 22 April 1985 to the Organization of Islamic Countries to facilitate 'early' repatriation. In the interim, General Ziaul Haq had promulgated an ordinance banning further repatriation (*FEER* 25 June 1992: 23). Haq eventually capitulated to pressure from the OIC, and recognised Biharis as Pakistani nationals who *should* be taken back. Notably, this recognition did not guarantee repatriation. On 9 July 1988, Pakistan signed an agreement with a Saudi Arabian organization, Rabita-al Alam-al Islami, to take over the responsibility of repatriation and rehabilitation (*FEER* 19 October 1989). The Rabita trust estimated that the migration/repatriation would cost US\$400–500 million.

Since Zia's death in 1988, the repatriation issue has continued to turn on the strategic interests of successive Pakistani governments. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) was, and still is, categorically opposed to the 'return' of Urdu-speakers. This is not surprising given that an earlier set of Urdu-speaking migrants to the Sindh Province formed the Muhajir Quami Movement (MQM), the main opposition to the Sindh-dominated PPP. For some time, repatriation was a major demand of the MQM, one time ally of Nawaz Sharif's. This has not worked to the advantage of 'stranded Pakistanis' in the long run as the MQM has come to be seen as a serious political threat by many in Pakistan. The PPP

fears that 'Biharis' from Bangladesh will eventually join forces with the MQM, causing further 'destabilization.'

During an official visit to Bangladesh in 1989, Benazir Bhutto refused to meet with or accept a memorandum from a delegation of Bihari leaders. She suggested Muslim clergy in general should help solve this problem. In contrast, Nawaz Sharif has at times been enthusiastic about resettling Biharis in his home province of Punjab. The idea was to consolidate Sharif's political base by creating a dependable vote bank in marginal constituencies. By 1992, nine districts in Punjab had been selected for resettlement. At Sharif's behest, the Rabita Trust began a head count in the 66 camps. The most pressing problem was a dearth of funds. Initially, there were rumors that Saudi Arabia would donate US\$40 million, with contributions by Libya, the UAE and Kuwait as well. This money, though promised, never materialized. By June 1992, Pakistan had contributed US\$10 million to the Trust, which had only been able to raise US\$2 million on its own. Bangladesh had, by 1992, spent US\$54 million on maintaining the camps, and is unlikely to donate more. Pakistan continues to claim that it is not in a position to incur any expenditure for its 'nationals' in Bangladesh. Thus, the ostensible argument against repatriation is financial.

#### REMAAPPING MEMORIES

It is instructive to trace the points of intersection and disjunction between personal and official narratives of the nation. Javed Hasan (a pseudonym) was born in Bihar in 1944. He is a resident of a camp in Khulna, although he spends most of his time in Dhaka. He says he has no profession or employment, his profession is to protest or demonstrate (*andolon kora*).<sup>20</sup> He obviously has no recollection of the partition but has heard stories from his father and other senior males in the family, and no doubt from SPGRS leaders. His narrative is emblematic in this respect, representative of an older generation's official collective memory:

There were riots in '46. Then, once Pakistan was born, all the British employees went to Britain; the Muslim League high command secretly rounded up all the Muslim government employees and told them Pakistan had become a Muslim country and that they *must go there to help build the country*. They printed special forms – one for those who wanted to go temporarily and others who wanted to move permanently. This was a directive especially for government employees. My uncles who stayed behind didn't work for the government. *They didn't have to leave*. They had their land and their

business. *At the time, there was nothing here [East Bengal/Dhaka]. Only swamps and canals. No establishment or administration was here [to deal with the refugees].* Many people were shifted from one district to another. Although my father applied, because there wasn't enough space, he was made surplus.

My father used to be stationmaster at Shialdah Railway Station but didn't return to his job in the Railway, he became the headmaster of Quaid-e-Azam High School in Saidpur [then part of Rangpur district in East Bengal]. My father came first, then he sent for us. At the time, very few men came with their 'full family'. A lot of people couldn't adjust here, they eventually left [returned to India].

Javed Hasan's sense of belonging to (East) Pakistan is not as strong as one might have expected. Hasan has grown up with nostalgia for a life left behind in India where, according to him, Urdu-speakers/Biharis had social standing and clout. He returns to this topic later in his account. As he represents it, the decision to migrate to East Bengal/East Pakistan – a land of 'only swamps and canals' – was more of a compulsion than a choice for his father. Coming to the East was a sacrifice that Muslims were called on to make, to help build the new nation. The theme of sacrifice is central to his construction of community and national identity.

Many people died in the riots of Bihar. Of those who survived, many went to East or West Pakistan. Our car [railway carriage] was going towards Punjab but there was so much killing and violence – the Sikhs were stopping trains to murder the passengers. So the government turned the train around and made us return to Calcutta, then pushed us into East Pakistan. The Sikhs, you know, have done very well for themselves, I mean politically, in the Punjab. Quaid-e-Azam [Jinnah] tried at one time to avoid the division of Punjab – he urged the Sikhs to stay, promised their leaders they would have full rights but Nehru and Gandhi lured them away with talk of religion and what not. Got them all riled up. Some Muslims were killed. The record has underestimated the numbers killed in all. I would say around 60 lakhs (6 million) died. *The most deaths were in Bihar. Without the deaths, Pakistan could not have been created.*

The passage above is notable for several reasons. Here Sikhs, rather than Hindus are invoked as the Other. In a reversal of 'commonsense' partition narratives, Nehru and Gandhi are held responsible for the division of the Pun-

jab and for instigating communal violence. Most striking, for Javed Hasan the sacrifice of Muslim blood is fundamental to the emergence of Pakistan. (Notably, Muslims in Bihar are situated at the forefront of this sacrifice). The statement that Pakistan could not have been created without the deaths of Muslims forces a recalibration of the meaning of communal violence during partition. What could be seen as senseless horror and loss is here transposed into meaningful sacrifice for the future. (This resonates with the idea of the 'first' independence noted earlier).

Javed Hasan goes on to reflect on post-partition life in India for the Muslim minority. Curiously, India is here represented as a place where Muslims still hold sway, in implicit comparison to Muslim majority Bangladesh.<sup>21</sup>

I lived in Saidpur until 1974, when I moved to Khulna. There I'm a leader of the party [SPGRC], which has a wing in Khulna. I have to stay in Dhaka most of the time since all the embassies, political parties, NGOs and journalists are based here.

Although we were a minority in India, by that measure, *we* aren't doing so badly there. Even today, in UP, CP and Bihar, Hindus never challenge the word of Muslims. All the *bichar* [informal village mediation] is done by Muslims, Hindus accept this *bichar*. India has Muslims in many high posts. It's had two Muslim Presidents. When the foreign minister came, his secretary was Muslim. Have you heard of Hamid Khan? All the most famous Indian film stars are Muslim. No one has been able to beat the voice of Nurjahan in singing. Even though Lata is around, thousands of Nurjahan's songs are popular in India. It's because of *our* heritage – places like the Deoband Madrasa, Aligarh University, the Red Fort and other big mosques and shrines, it's because Muslims were in power that they were able to accomplish so much. It's our good fortune that Muslims still have some influence in Bihar. [At this point he launches into a long story about the *rewaj*, i.e., the customary practice of hierarchy and propriety among status groups that he claims is still maintained in Bihar.]

Clearly the speaker feels a strong sense of identity with Muslims across India, not just Bihar, as evinced by his use of the pronoun 'we'. The slippage between Biharis and Muslims, between Urdu-speaking Muslims in Bangladesh and Muslims in India, and between an imagined Muslim community and the glories of its cultural heritage in the golden age of Muslims (the Pakistani singer

Nurjahan, Moghul era Red Fort, and the British established Aligarh University), are instructive. By implication, neither Bangladesh, nor Bengali-speaking Muslims, fall within his definition of Muslim community.

The location of Pakistan and the meaning of East Pakistan after 1971 shift in his narrative accordingly.

*I've never been to Pakistan, nor has my father.* I haven't been to Bihar in 50 years although we still have a share in the land. It's only since we came here that we've been divided. In Pakistan, we are called Muhajir. Here, we have been given 4 names – refugee, non-Bengali, Bihari and Stranded Pakistanis. Bhutto was only interested in taking back the Punjabis, he knew he needed Punjabi support to remain Pakistan's President.

For someone born in 1944, to claim that neither he nor his father had ever been to Pakistan says something very specific about the shifting meaning and territoriality of Pakistan. Javed Hasan's time in what was East Pakistan between 1947 and 1971 no longer counts as ever having been in Pakistan. It is as though the emergence of Bangladesh erases its past meaning as East Pakistan (a line of thinking that is consistent with Bengalis nationalist ideology, it should be noted). At the same time, when Javed Hasan speaks of Bengalis, implicitly he equates them with Hindus, echoing older colonial and Hindu nationalist discourse. So below, when he talks about 'we Muslims' no longer being safe, he clearly does not include Bengali-speaking Muslims. He reconstitutes the putative opposition between Muslim and Bengali, constructing boundaries around Muslim identity that are given content elsewhere, outside the territory that is now Bangladesh.

Once the tripartite agreement was drawn up, *we Muslims* were no longer safe. The Bengalis knew they had their homeland; there was much torture, looting and destruction. People died. We had to abandon our homes, find some place of refuge. The Red Cross camps here and there were places of protection. We fought for Pakistan, we made Pakistan, after creating Pakistan, and we wanted to stay in Pakistan.

The UNHCR secretary tells us that we can't be listed as refugees because we're still on the soil we lived on before. (*apnara je matitay chhilen, she matitay achhen*). *We say yes, we are still on the same soil, but our country (desh) has left us behind. People leave their desh but*

*now we find that our desh has left us.*

Paradoxically, for Urdu-speakers to regain rights to the nation, they needed to embrace the identity of the refugee, the stigma of which the *bhadralok* sought to cast off.

Our predicament is that we cannot be listed as refugees. The UN people tell us that a refugee is someone who has left their home. But we left behind places [uses the Bengali word *jaiga* meaning place, rather than *bari* or *desh* meaning home]. We came from Khulna, from Saidpur, from Mymensingh. It's our great sorrow that the UN runs around trying to conserve snakes, tigers and other wild animals, pours *crores* of dollars into fish breeding, but nothing for this human being, this Mussulman. No one counts us as human; other Muslims don't count us as Muslim, in Bihar Hindus don't think of us as Bihari, Bengalis don't think of us as Bengalis and the UN won't recognize us as refugees.

Bengalis are always telling us to become Bengali but what does it take? I mean, here I am talking to you in Bangla. Tell me the *kalma* [formal declaration of faith for Muslims/here something like a magic charm] that will make me Bengali, so I will no longer be called a Pakistani, Bihari or a refugee.

Pakistan says we're not Pakistani but if those of us from UP, CP and Bihar had not taken the Muslim League initiative to heart would Quaid-e-Azam have been able to come from Punjab to build up Pakistan by himself? Would A. K. Fazlul Haq have been able to create Pakistan from Bengal alone?

Here, Javed Hasan elaborates on the idiom of sacrifice that runs through his narrative. For him, it is Muslims like him, from North India rather than from Punjab or Bengal, who are the *true* nationalists (a move that displaced Hindu *bhadralok*, see G. Ghosh 2007). Hasan then goes on to reinscribe the opposition between Bengali and Muslim, with high caste Hindu landowners as oppressors from whom Muslims in Bengal were liberated through the exertions and sacrifices of North Indian Muslims.

Would they have been able to withstand Hindu conspiracies? In Bengal, a Muslim didn't have the right to even walk past a *jomidar* [high status, large landowners who wielded enormous authority



over local populations. The majority in Bengal were Hindu] house with his umbrella open [to do so was considered disrespectful]. No matter what great positions they are in now, at the time, they didn't have the power to stand in front of the Chatterjees, Bannerjees and Mukherjees [high caste Hindu lineages]. Even after Pakistan was created, Muslims couldn't slaughter during *qurbani* openly for a while. In Khulna, I saw how they had to pay Raja Suresh Ghosh 50 Taka for each cow.

So three generations have grown up crippled – lacking in proper education, assistance, even medical care. Today, there are so many initiatives being taken worldwide to improve the status of women. But no NGO, Islamic organization or UN body gives us a second look. All because we're not officially refugees.

My paternal grandfather had two wives. My father was one of 6 brothers. He had three stepbrothers. These three uncles didn't leave [India]. Of the six brothers, three left for Karachi, two came to Saidpur and one stayed back in Bihar. At first, all three of my mother's brothers and one sister also stayed back. Later, one of my uncles joined us here. The other two remained in Bihar, with full family. They're doing quite well, actually. They're happy. What could possibly happen? There are at least 22 *crore* Muslims in India.

We had a lot of influence in 1971. Now, people *still* torture us. No one can bring back that power. I was in Saidpur during the nine months of the war. I lived there until 1974. I never faced any harassment. Nothing happened in Saidpur town – it was a calm and safe place. *No Bengali ever died there, no military operations ever took place, no mukti bahini [Bengali guerrilla army during the 1971 war] ever walked down the street and called out to me 'hey you, you shala – come here'.* What happened in Saidpur is that we maintained control – you understand we were young men then. It was decided that no one would be harassed in Saidpur. There was an attack on Saidpur but it was by outsiders and Pakistanis. There were no mass killings in Saidpur after liberation, it was normal.

Here Javed Hasan resorts to the common rhetorical device of blaming unnamed outsiders for violence, thereby muting potential tensions between Bengali and Bihari communities that the telling of this story and the acknowledgment of violence opens up. He also distances Biharis from any violence in-

flicted on Bengalis by insisting that the *Razakars* (collaborators) were Bengali, not Urdu-speakers.<sup>22</sup>

The main thing that keeps us apart from the mainstream Bengali population today is the celebration around December 16th, February 21st and March 26th. During these three months, all the plays, songs, lectures and cultural functions, in all of them the role of the enemy is shown by using Urdu, and they show some Bihari *Razakars*. *There were no Bihari Razakars, I must make this clear, the Razakars were not Bihari – the Razakars were Bengalis from here. All these Razakars – they were your people and the Muslim League here certified them.* Biharis stayed in their own towns. Yes, the government did set up the East Pakistan Civil Army Force but they only fought in the front, that doesn't mean at the same time, they were raiding and destroying villages. They only fought the Indian army at the border, never any Bangladeshis. Using Urdu just makes the locals furious with us. The friendships we build up so carefully in nine months is destroyed in three [during Independence celebrations between December and March].

All we want is to live honestly. Give me a factory; give me an agreement and proper rates and I will give you the goods on time. All I ask is for you to give me a factory....

#### BEYOND THE QUANDARIES OF NATIONAL BELONGING

UNHCR's logic for Bihari ineligibility for refugee status, as mediated by Javed Hasan's experiences, foregrounds the paradoxes of national identity produced by the 1947 partition. Much like the Hindu Bengali migrants tracked by Gautam Ghosh, Biharis did not leave the nation, but the nation seems to have left them. Of the former, Ghosh writes in 'Outsiders': 'One might say that, with the Partition, the Indian nationalism which they had constructed suddenly left them behind, abandoned, and they then 'followed' it to India seeking to preserve their central role within it.'

Pakistani nationalism too abandoned Urdu-speakers in East Pakistan/Bangladesh. The difference is that 'stranded Pakistanis' could not follow this nationalism or, after 1971, even claim a rightful place in the nation for which they felt they had sacrificed so much. The proper homeland – the one that could not have been created without their struggle – had vanished literally under their feet, even though they had not moved, they were still literally on the same soil.

The same reasoning that denied them refugee status undid their claims to both Pakistan and Bangladesh.<sup>23</sup>

The still unfolding trajectory of Biharis in Bangladesh challenges the singularity of conventional partition narratives. It is a reminder that nation-making processes in South Asia are shot through with fractious histories of 1947 that continue to jostle for recognition within unequal fields of power. Entering the predicament of the 'stranded Pakistanis' through the story of partition allows us to pose 1947 and 1971 as two interrelated (and mutually constitutive) moments rather than as separate and contradictory events. This move also throws into sharp relief the ways in which older meanings of partition (and of Pakistan) were disrupted, displaced or reconstituted by the 1971 war.<sup>24</sup>

The experience of partition for Muslims in East Pakistan was not homogeneous – distinctions arose not only between those who were refugees/migrants and those who never left East Bengal but also within the category of refugee itself. Further, those who celebrated the coming of independence did not share one uncomplicated strand of feeling. The 'festival of freedom', and euphoria at partition documented by historians of East Bengal was not uniformly shared (see Hashmi 1994 and Kamal 1989). Ahmad Kamal notes that the word 'euphoria' both reveals and hides the contradictory expectations embedded in the idea of Pakistan (Kamal 1989: 58). Indeed, the vagueness and imprecision of what constituted Pakistan exacerbated the tensions between different communities.<sup>25</sup> For most non-Bengali speakers, East Pakistan would remain an alien space in which they had to constantly re-negotiate their identities, precisely because their vision of Pakistan was ultimately different from that of most Bengalis. After 1971, Pakistan was no longer theirs to claim.

Thus, Bangladesh's sovereignty created a permanent rupture in identity – a civil death – for Urdu-speakers in East Pakistan. Those who had previously mediated belonging and citizenship through the idiom of sacrifice to the Muslim nation found themselves excluded by the terms through which the Pakistani nation was redefined in 1971. Urdu-speakers became the new Bengali state's enemy Other, at the moment the Pakistan they knew quite literally ceased to exist under their feet. The nation left them, even though they were still on the same soil. They could not follow. This paradoxical condition was rooted in the shifting relationships between national and territorial identities generated by partition. Ambivalence and tensions around partition were not only productive of identities; on occasion they erased claims to belonging altogether. For those in danger of permanent civil death, recourse to the idiom of sacrifice no longer sufficed. Both refugee and citizen at the moment of partition, Urdu-

speakers in East Pakistan were rendered non-citizens and non-refugees in independent Bangladesh.

Willem van Schendel has long advocated the writing of *post-nationalist* histories of Bangladesh, histories that go beyond 'getting Bengali nationalism right.' (Van Schendel 2001: 134). Noting that contemporary political disputes in Bangladesh are fundamentally conflicted about what constitutes the *common history* and *common destiny* of the inhabitants of the country, van Schendel reminds us that the study of history is always a study in power relations and that debates over the definitions of Bengali/Muslim/Hindu obscure underlying bids for power. Van Schendel argues for a 'pluralist' critique of national narratives, one that would confront the exclusionary and inegalitarian aspects of such narratives as they have developed since 1971. Such a project could help in defining 'new, more pluralistic, inclusive and democratic notions of what it could mean to be Bangladeshi citizen in the twenty-first century' (Van Schendel 2001: 134).

This essay is written in a similar spirit although it goes beyond arguing for pluralist critiques of the national narrative. It is a call to *denationalize* the writing of history, that is, to move away from statist and teleological versions of history in order to address the incongruous and that which has been rendered 'unspeakable' through nationalist myth making. By unspeakable I refer not only to the subaltern's inability to speak/be heard/have a voice. The precondition for subaltern speech to be heard (and not automatically marked as being *against* the nation) lies in revisiting the processes through which categories such as Bihari and Bengali are produced and naturalized and of the silencing, erasure and displacement of some histories and the privileging of others. Only then can we begin to re-imagine more inclusive and just forms of belonging and citizenship.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Lisa Malkii 1995, p. 495.

- 2 For ease of reading, in the rest of this essay I use the term Bihari without scare quotes to refer to a relatively heterogeneous population of Urdu-speakers. The demographic composition and historical roots of this group are provided later in the text.
- 3 For an early intervention challenging the dominant geography of the 1947 partition, see Shelley Feldman 'Feminist Interruptions: The Silence of East Bengal in the Story of Partition.'
- 4 I do not mean to suggest that Partition in North India/West Pakistan did not involve long-term processes. My aim is to trouble dominant framings and understandings, and their easy transposition to East Bengal/East Pakistan. For a sophisticated analysis that avoids such pitfalls, see Vazira Zamindar *The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries and Histories*.
- 5 See, for instance, Taj ul-Islam Hashmi *Peasant Utopia: the Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920-47* and Ahmed Kamal 'A Land of Eternal Eid: Independence, People and Politics in East Bengal.'
- 6 I am indebted to David Ludden for bringing this important point to my attention.
- 7 It is only in the last decade or so that the subject of Bihari (non) citizenship has entered mainstream cultural discourse. Filmmaker Tanvir Mokammel produced the documentary *Promised Land* in 2007 to critical acclaim and some criticism. Short story writer Mahmud Rahman has also dealt with the topic. Earlier, in 1994, an English language novel featured a protagonist who cites the 'indiscriminate slaughter of the Biharis by Bangladeshis after 1971' for his leaving Bangladesh in disillusionment after the Liberation War. The author, Adib Khan does not record any specific incidents of violence. See Adib Khan *Seasonal Adjustments*.
- 8 See also Feldman (2003).
- 9 For an excellent account of the production of absolutist communal identities, see Gyan Pandey *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial India*.
- 10 In a 1991 essay, Papiya Ghosh states that 14.5%, i.e., 101,500 of the East Pakistan immigrants were from UP and Bihar. She does not mention a source. P Ghosh 'The 1946 Riot and the Exodus of Bihari Muslims to Dhaka' p.275.

- 11 Willem van Schendel notes, 'Up-country labourers' or 'Biharis': people from Bihar, Orissa and the United Provinces traveled to Bengal during the winter months and returned home in the spring or early summer. They often travelled in groups and could be found all over Bengal, but especially in the northern and western districts. [...] in East Bengal Partition brought a sudden halt to this migration.' See van Schendel (1992) 'Economy of the Working Classes'
- 12 For a history of the MQM, see Oscar Verkaik (2004) *Migrants and Militants: Fun and Urban Violence in Pakistan*.
- 13 A large-scale interstate exchange of government employees characterized the 'exchange of populations' in Bengal. Under the agreement provided by the railways administration, 39,500 'opting' for Pakistan reported to the Eastern Bengal Railway, while 22,000 left to join the Indian Railways. Not only was there a considerable surplus of staff, apparently this transfer was not of identical skill or training. Consequently, problems of efficiency and integration plagued the new railway systems and exacerbated many other socio-economic problems in the railway townships. See Kamaluddin op. cit. p. 225.
- 14 The issue of citizenship for the Bihari community in Bangladesh became critical when the government took the initiative to revise voters' rolls and introduce national identity cards. Most Biharis are not registered to vote and so risk being excluded from the identity scheme. The national identity card scheme will give citizens access to a wide range of services including getting a passport, opening a bank account or securing a loan, getting utility connections, registration for public examinations, applying for public services, marriage registration, applying for government subsidies, selling and buying land and vehicles, admissions to schools and lodging petitions and appeals in court. <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/What-we-do/Research-and-evidence/case-studies/research-case-studies/2008/Camp-dwelling/>
- 15 This language of opting, implying choice and agency, poignantly recalls the vocabulary of partition and the false hope it usually offered. Thanks to Gautam Ghosh for bringing this point to my attention.
- 16 *Far Eastern Economic Review* 26 January, 1989. p. 28. The 1951 Refugee Convention of the United Nations defines a refugee as someone who 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/>

pages/49c3646c125.html.

- 17 *Far Eastern Economic Review* 26 January, 1989.
- 18 *Far Eastern Economic Review* 26 January, 1989. *Al-Falah* is a word that appears often in the Qur'an. Its meaning is true success, implying that real success comes not from material wealth or power, but rather from good deeds and spiritual salvation.
- 19 In 2003, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh (High Court Division) ruled on a petition submitted by ten Urdu-speakers, born both before and after 1971. In a landmark decision, the Court declared that all ten were Bangladeshi citizens with the right to vote and directed the government to register them as voters. The 2003 decision was limited to the original ten petitioners. Five years later, in May 2008, in response to another petition, the High Court ruled that Urdu-speakers were to be considered Bangladeshi nationals, regardless of whether or not they had opted to be 'repatriated' to Pakistan. See UN High Commissioner for Refugees *Note on the Nationality status of the Urdu-speaking Community of Bangladesh* 17 December 2009. Retrieved from [www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b2b90c32.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b2b90c32.html)
- 20 The stylized nature of his prose probably reflects his self-positioning as a 'professional agitator' for the SPGRC.
- 21 Papiya Ghosh also notes the 'glowing recall of the Bihari homeland' in the SPGRC's reconstruction of partition in the 1980's. See Papiya Ghosh *Partition and the South Asian Diaspora: Extending the Subcontinent*. p.61. My interviews were taken several years before the 2002 Godhra pogroms in Gujarat, India. Such a rosy view of the high status of Muslims in Bihar may no longer exist.
- 22 In one of several parallels and ironies that bind the stories of Muslim Biharis and Hindu *bhadralok*, the latter blame Bihari migrants, not Bengali Muslims, for instigating Hindu –Muslim strife in Bengal during Partition. See G. Ghosh, 2007.
- 23 In this sense, their experience was the obverse of that of the *bhadralok*'s. 'The contradiction, for these *bhadralok*, is that the Indian nation-state for which they had struggled came into existence. Yet at the exact same time, the Indian nation-state for which they had struggled disappeared. They now reside within a liberated, national homeland, the indignity of colonial rule finally cast off. Yet they have lost their homes and still feel the sting of being a 'refugee'. But as 'refugees' can they return to their proper homeland? No, for that homeland, the Indian

nation-state already exists, and they are already there.' Quoted in G. Ghosh 2007, p.7.

- 24 G. Ghosh discusses the reconstitution of the relation between 1947 and 1971 by Hindu migrants to India for whom the memory and loss of partition continue to resonate strongly. 'Outsiders at Home? The South Asian Diaspora in South Asia,' in Mines and Lamb (Eds.), *Everyday Life in South Asia*. Indiana University Press 2002, pp.326–336.

- 25 For a broader discussion of such tensions, see Arjun Appadurai 1998.

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