

KHALID HUSSAIN'S VOICE

"My name is Khalid Hussain and I am a Bihari from Bangladesh. The Bihari community of Bangladesh was originally composed of Indian immigrants sympathetic to the creation of Pakistan in 1947. Their distinct language, culture and traditions set them apart from the Bengalis and they were never properly integrated into the local population. Since the partition of the East and West components of Pakistan in 1971, over 300,000 Bihari people have been living in 116 makeshift inhuman camps situated all over Bangladesh.

Our problems include inequality, discrimination, and political and social marginalization of the affected Bihari Urdu Speaking community in Bangladesh. Biharis are the most disadvantaged people in Bangladesh as we are not recognized citizens of this country, which we consider our home. We are marginalized and virtually stateless people. For the last 37 years, we have been suffering from racial discrimination, discrimination due to our language, intolerances, frustration and depression. As Biharis we have no access to any means of survival in society, socially, culturally, and economically.

In the fundamental rights of the constitution of Bangladesh it says that "*No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth be subjected to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to any place of public entertainment or resort or admission to any educational institution*".

The camp where I live is called Geneva camp. I remember that when my friends and I, some of the young students living in the camps, completed our primary education from the Geneva camp school, we needed to get admission to go to high school. The high schools are located outside of the camp and so 15 of us Bihari students went together to the public school to get admission for the first time. However the school administration said that "you guys are Bihari, non Bengali. you are just stranded Pakistanis here. This is a government school and our budget is only for Bengali student so you can't get admission in this school." After that rejection from the government school we had no option but to go to a private school, which was very costly for us and we could hardly afford. Due to the cost of private school at that time half of the Bihari students had to dropout of their education. Then when we got admission in private school we suffered from discrimination. Still I remember my first day of school. All the Bengali students were looking at us as if we were strangers and they were whispering to each other that we are Bihari and that we live in dirty camps. They even said that Bihari are war criminal and said that we are very dangerous people. Not only that, other

students didn't want to sit with us. We were marginalized in the classroom and we had to sit in a separate row. When we try to speak Bangla, which is not our native language and we read the textbook they were making fun of us due to the way we speak and our difficulty. They called us "sons of Bihari" and we had to face constant intolerant attitudes. Due to the intolerance of the Bengali students and the cost of attending the school, again some of our friends were forced to drop out of their education. Now they have no proper education and are only able to work as day laborers living under the poverty line.

As Biharis we are discriminated against by the government as well as the civil society. We want to be a full part of society with the opportunities available to others. By even though we want to integrate into mainstream society there is no possibility for us to do so because the mainstream Bengali people have no tolerance for the Bihari community. We are facing intolerant attitudes every day of our lives. Intolerant attitudes and social marginalization are a major barrier to our integration in mainstream society. Two or three months ago I wanted the chance to better integrate myself in the mainstream Bangladeshi society. I wanted to leave the camp and to get a rented house outside. However, when I went to talk with the landowner he understood that I am Bihari and that I come from the Bihari camps. The land owner said that no I can't give you a place in our Building or flat because you are Bihari people and you will speak your own language and practice your own culture. He said that the rest of the family will feel disturbed and will not tolerate you.

In the fundamental rights of the constitution of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh it says "*There shall be equality of opportunity for all citizens in respect of employment or office in the service of the republic*". But I don't feel that this is true if you are Bihari.

People from my community face discrimination in access to employment. Many of my community members have personal stories of discrimination, and the right to employment is one right the community currently cannot access. Not only are we denied all government positions but also due to our addresses in the camps and our "undefined" legal status, wider discrimination in the job market remains a prime concern of Biharis. Camp residents are not in a position to produce the kinds of documentation that employers require to prove potential employees' legal status (these may take the form of a 'local commissioner's certificate' or character reference from a local representative). Without these 'papers of citizenship', much of the market is inaccessible to us and many of our rights are restricted. Indeed, even those who do find formal employment often face wage discrimination and inequality of treatment. As a result the vast majority of Biharis are pushed into the informal sector, working as rickshaw-pullers, drivers, butchers, barbers, and mechanics and craft workers, earning meager wages and living in poverty.

One of my friends "Imam Uddin" a Bihari Graduate in Khulna passed the examination for the post of Accountant in the Bangladesh Forest Department. But he was denied a job, despite his qualification, because he is Bihari and living in the Camps.

Like Imam Uddin many Urdu-Speakers do not have a chance to get jobs in the public or private services because they are living in camps. As a result the poverty rate among the camp dwellers increases and children are forced to get jobs in the garage shop or Handicrafts shops. Some end up doing harmful and hazardous work, which causes them physical and mental damage. They then become a burden in the family and society

A girl child who lost her father needed to get admission to an orphanage because her mother needed to go to work in the garment factory to earn her livelihood and could not look after her. The regulation of the orphanage is that the parents or the guardian should enclose a Ward Commissioner certificate declaring or confirming that he/she is orphan. But the Ward Commissioner will not issue any kind of certificate for the camp dwellers, as they are not Bangladeshi. That girl wasn't able to get admitted to the orphanage and as a result her mother gave her in marriage at an early age.

We are facing discrimination in every walk of life. We don't have any access to get public services, getting admission in public schools and universities. Now 80% of Bihari camp dwellers can vote and we have National ID cards. But after being granted our ID some of the youths tried to get national Passports to go aboard as migrant workers in the Middle East. But we don't have any access to get a Bangladeshi passport. Mustakin, (My neighbor) and a resident of Geneva camp explained, "Last September, I paid 2000 Taka (USD 30) for a passport but I wasn't given it, even after showing my National ID card to the director general of the department of immigration and passports. He said that his department didn't receive any instruction from the home ministry and relevant authorities on issuing passports to Biharis.

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

Now the time has come to formally recognize that Urdu speaking Biharis are also Bangladeshi and that they have equal rights in Bangladesh. We need to regain our dignity, which is the only way forward for this community's future success. A tolerant attitude is one of the most important elements to reduce the discrimination against the Bihari community. I trust that one day we will see a world free of racism, racial discrimination and intolerance."