

**The Livelihood Pattern and Plight of *Bihari* People: A Study on *Bihari* Camp
at *Khalishpur* in Khulna City, Bangladesh**

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Abstract

The living conditions of the *Bihari* camp dwellers of Bangladesh are an embarrassment to the country's social environment. An investigation was made about the socio-economic condition of the *Biharis* living in the *Khalishpur* camp in Khulna who are basically considered as one of the most vulnerable and socio-economically poor and are the victims of severe exploitation and discrimination. A comparison has been made between the *Biharis* and equivalent Bengali slum dwellers in *Khalishpur*. In my study, I collected my data through a field survey in *Bihari* community, incorporating FGD method. Findings suggest that they are dominated and discriminated by the local majority communities: businessmen. Poverty, landlessness, illiteracy and exploitation are their daily associates. Data analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively indicate that the *Biharis* are leading an extremely substandard life when food consumption, medical expenditure, schooling, income and employment pattern were considered. The condition as prevalent in the camp has led to a high rate of infectious diseases which is likely to aggregate creating environmental hazards. The country then may face serious social problems which should be prevented through gearing up the process of repatriation and through encouraging community participation in improving their economic and social environment. They do not have access to decision-making bodies and don't get justice. The *Bihari* do not have cognizable access to education and income generation activities. Some of them work as internally migrant laborers and often face harassment and discrimination. In most cases, they cannot meet their basic needs like food, clothing, shelter, education and health facilities. Thus they are considered as one of the poorest and the most vulnerable section of the population in our country.

Keywords: *Bihari*, Land Rights, Political Rights, Cultural Practices, and Khulna.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The *Biharis*, who are also referred to as the Stranded Pakistanis, are urban dwellers who reside in some 66 camps across 13 regions throughout Bangladesh. They have lived in these camps since the early 1970s after the Pakistani civil war led to the creation of Bangladesh. The *Biharis* share a common religion with the majority Muslim population. However, they speak multiple languages including Urdu and Bengali and have different social customs than the dominant Bengalis (Lexis, 1990-2006).

It has been almost three decades since the *Biharis* were first installed in the 66 camps throughout Bangladesh. They suffer from severe demographic stress. Conditions in the camps are dismal as public health facilities such as clean water and sanitation are very limited and restrictions on employment have led the *Biharis* to suffer from food shortages. Government policy ensures that they are not allowed to freely reside in other areas of the country. The *Biharis* are considered as stateless as most have neither Bangladeshi nor Pakistani citizenship. As a result, they are denied basic political rights such as the right to vote and recruitment to the civil service, police, military, and political office. These political restrictions severely limit the group's economic opportunities, as they are not allowed to own property or obtain healthcare, and continue to perpetuate their poverty and under representation (MRGI, 1991).

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own property or obtain healthcare, and continue to perpetuate their poverty and under representation (Franke, 1993).

In these circumstances, the study was designed to identify the overall socio-economic and living conditions of the *Biharis*, assessing a composite measure of different indices.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The study was conducted with some specific objectives that includes-

1. To explore the livelihood pattern of the Bihari people;
2. To investigate their social status in society;
3. To know the cultural believe system of them;
4. To know their pattern of occupation;
5. To clarify the right over political participation and their voting behavior.

Chapter Two: Methodology

2.1 Study Design

This study is qualitative in nature and the Focus Group Discussions were used to conduct the study. Data were collected from the respondents (*Bihari Peoples*), associated to the study purpose. To realize the objectives of the study, data about respective concepts were collected through incorporating relevant items (variable) in an informal semi-structured in-depth interview. Data, collected from the respondents, were explained following descriptive methods of explanation.

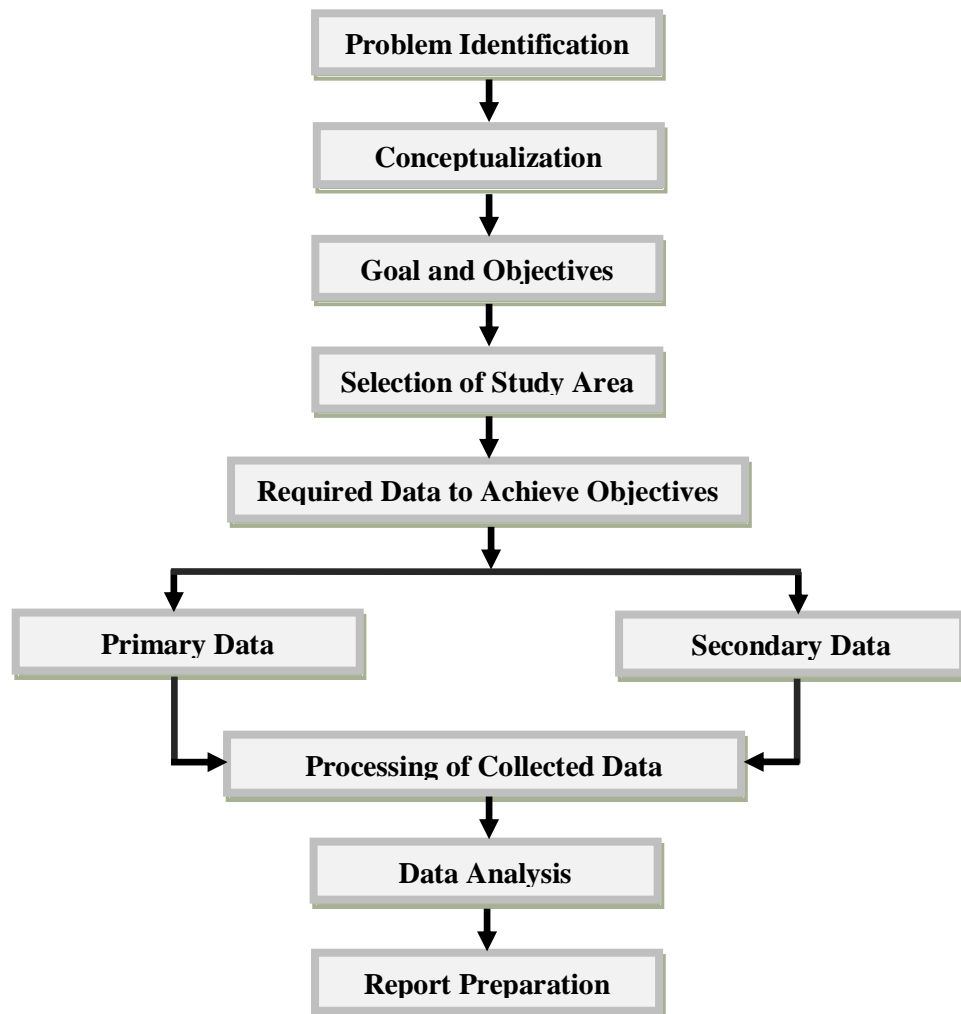


Fig.: Methodology of the study

2.2 Study Area

Bihari Camp in *Khalishpur* at *Khulna* was purposively chosen as the study area to conduct the study.

2.3 Unit of Analysis

Both male and female family members of *Bihari* Camp were selected as a unit of analysis.

2.4 Population of the Study

According to the criteria of the unit of analysis, those who were lived in *Bihari* Camp were considered as the population of the study.

2.5 Sampling Procedure

To conduct the FGDs, both primary and secondary data were collected. To collect primary data, total 20 samples were purposively selected from *Bihari* Camp. And then, the 20 samples were divided into two groups for conducting FGDs.

2.6 Sources of Data

To conduct the study, mainly primary data were collected by applying qualitative technique i.e., FGDs through in depth interview in the field. Two groups of population including working male in different sectors, considered as family head as well as female members were selected for the study. The members of each group of FGD were 10. Besides, its associated secondary data, collected from relevant books, journals, newspapers, various articles and so on, were used according to the study purpose.

2.7 Techniques of Data Collection

An informal semi-structured, checklist in English was prepared and then the data were collected by the interviewer by taking 10 family members view as a group through face to face interaction, ranging in length from one hour to two hours and were not tape-recorded.

2.8 Field Work (Duration and Interviewer)

The primary data, *i.e.* focus group discussions (FGDs), were collected from 22th April in 2012 and two moderators and three facilitators collected the data through checklist in face-to-face situation.

2.9 Processing, Analysis and Interpretation of Data

The collected data, found from the field, were processed and analyzed by using descriptive methods of explanation by using MS Word only. Following the analysis, the focus group discussions were revised by the researchers and then submitted to the authority.

2.10 Limitation of the Study

This study may have some limitations. The limitations of this study are mentioned below:

- i. Financial support is essential to conduct a comprehensive study, and as a student I didn't have that financial capability to conduct the study in large scale.
- ii. For an all-inclusive study, the time was relatively limited.
- iv. Another problem may be the limitation of personnel. To collect data from the field survey needs more personnel.
- vi. Lack of experience may another problem that may hinder to complete the study.
- v. Limitations of study area may indicate the complexities to find out the information from all houses may have illiteracy, lack of interest etc.

Besides, while writing of the statement of the problems about the related aspect, inconsistent data often fumbled the researcher about the reliability of the same data.

Chapter Three: Findings and Discussion

Results

FGD-1

The FGD was conducted on the group of 10 family members who were the head of their family of *Bihari* Camp. Their average age was 40 years. They shared the following characteristics: the vulnerability of their economic condition; low standard of living; low level of social support; their main source of earning as business. It was conducted to observe their socio-economic condition and their relation with other common people.

Family Pattern: The family head, who participated in the FGD mainly lived in nuclear family, but share the common boundaries with the close relatives. The members of the family were bound to obey the head of the family. Here, women can hardly take the decision regarding family affairs. The girls are not asked for getting their any view for their marriage. The decision of the education of the children mainly depended on the family head.

Language: The people of *Bihari* Camp mainly speak in *Urdu* as language. The family head, who participated in this FGD, six (6) among them were speaking *Urdu* as they hardly used *Bangla*. But another four (4) members were speaking in *Bangla* which was not so clear. Johir Abbas, 35 years old, said “*As their Ancestor lived in Pakistan, they had got this language inheritably. They usually use Urdu in the camp whereby, outside the camp, they hardly used Bangla.*” But now-a-days, their children are learning *Bangla* from the school of this camp. These children can speak both *Urdu* and *Bangla*.

Education: The members participated in this FGD were not so educated. They can understand *Bangla* but cannot write the *Bangla* letter frequently. Only three among them, had completed their primary level of education and the rest, have never attended to the school. The *Bihari* camps have almost no educational facilities. And even if there are schools, the poor people cannot afford to send their children to the school. In many cases, if *Bihari* families want to send their children to school outside the camps, they fail to enroll because of some technical requirements such as nationality, home address or parents’ occupation. Though some of them can manage to get enrolled, they find it very

difficult to continue hiding these facts. In some cases, when the school authority comes to know that the student came from the camp, that student will be immediately dismissed. In a few cases, those who are studying outside their community school are basically continuing to hide their *Bihari* identity.

The schooling facility inside the camps is extremely inadequate. There are a total of 55 thousand families in various camps throughout the country. This means that average number of members in a family is five. The current number of schools in the camps across the country is 500. It is reported that only one per cent of the *Bihari* children attends school, which reflects the high rate of illiteracy in the camps. These people are not getting any kind of assistance from the government for their children to get education. It is totally dependent upon the parents' ability. But as the people are very poor in terms of economic condition, they are not able to afford that.

Occupation: The *Bihari* people haven't any access to Govt. job since they were illiterate. Moreover, in Bangladesh, they don't have such access to get official job according to our constitution although they were educated. So, they had only option to business. Basically, this sector of job had ascribed in nature. Khalil Hashan said, "*They were having the business of their father who had been inherited by his ancestors and they had no option to switch the job.*"

Household Income: The family head mainly earned to effort the whole family. They didn't have any fixed income. Income also depended on the conducting of business. They didn't expose their actual income. The conditions of their appearance were telling about their income and it was not sufficient to run a family.

Food Habit: Like common people of Bangladesh, they enjoyed the same dishes of meal. They basically took three types of food for three times in a day. Among which rice is the main source of their substances. In addition, they ate beef like other Muslims but avoided pig and other prohibited food in the view of Islam. The food in Bihar is usually typically north Indian with an inclination towards vegetarianism. Rice forms the staple diet along with lentils and fresh vegetables. Along the banks of the states many rivers, fresh fish is a highly prized delicacy and in the tribal belt, wild boar, game birds and sometimes venison is eaten by the locals. In the cities, food has become more cosmopolitan with a variety of cuisines served in the cafes and restaurants.

Marital Status: Basically, as they were married, they celebrated the marriage ceremony within their community. They hardly married their son or daughter beyond the community except affine relation which is much rare.

Religious Affiliation: They celebrate *Eid-ul-Fitr* and *Eid-ul-Azha* within their community mosque. They shared greetings and behalf politely with younger and elder. They celebrate *Fathah* very entrustically which was not seen within the common people of Bangladesh.

Political Participation and their Voting Right: The political life of the stranded *Bihari* people split apart by internal political argument and factionalism. The political disturbance of the *Biharis* is as a result of divided loyalties of either supporting or opposing the view of becoming Bangladeshi citizens or going back to Pakistan. The older generation that held the view of returning to Pakistan still dominates the community and tries to persuade the community to support their view. It is now evident that some *Bihari* people have established a new frontier, The Committee for Rehabilitation of Non-Bengalis with different objectives. The main supporters of this group are basically young people who considered themselves as Bangladeshis though they are poor and passing a very inhuman life in camps (**The Daily Manabjomin, 2000**).

Decision Making: As male members were the main source of income, most often they took all the decision regarding their family life. Whereby, the female haven't any chance to give any kinds of decision on their family affair. Actually, their family pattern was male dominated.

Land Ownership: In the *Bihari* community, most often the land was in the name of male members. Thereby, female had no authority over the land.

Cultural Practices: *Bihari* Muslims have a rich culture representing a syncretisation between Arab and local Hindu *Bihari* traditions. *Shab-e-Baraat* and *Milad-un-Nabi* is widely celebrated by *Bihari* Muslims, as are festivals such as *Eid-ul-Fitr* and *Eid-ul-Adha*. The majority of *Bihari* Muslims follow the *Barelwi* movement of Sunni Islam, although a large *Deobandi* and *Ahle Hadees* minority exists especially in the northern districts. Sectarian conflict among *Bihari* Muslims is very rare and all the different sects live in peace and harmony. The differences in matters of *Aqeedah* are confined to the

Mosque and rarely boil over into public life. The major differences are between *Ashraf* and *Afjal* Muslims.

Future Hope: Everybody had a distinct future hope through which they would like to develop later. Every young wanted to change his occupation and to join in the mainstream job of the country.

FGD-2

This Focus Group Discussion was conducted on one group within which there were five young and five married women in the community. The average age of five married women were 25 years and the rest, were 20 years. They shared the following characteristics: vulnerability of their health; low standard of living and social insecurity; and unconstructed future hope.

Marital Status and Family Pattern: Basically, there was inter-societal marriage system which was practiced by these community members. They hardly married their son or daughter beyond the community except affine relation which is much rare. Most of the time, the family pattern of them were in extended form as they believe in a community feelings sentiment.

Occupational Status: In most of the cases, women had a restriction over the outsider activities as they believed in their Ancestors way of life. Meanwhile, due to lack of social support, they hardly engaged themselves with outside workings. So, they would have to constraint by doing the household activities of their own.

Health Care-seeking Behavior:

Likewise, inaccessibility to proper medical facilities make women vulnerable to unsafe delivery, chronic diseases like polio, Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) and other health problems. A lot of women die every year without getting proper medical care. As these people are very poor, they cannot afford to take medical facilities from other government and private institutions. Here, Majority of the people are not aware of family planning. The contraceptive prevalence has been found to be very low in them.

Living Condition: The living condition of the women was not congenial to their health. The women who participated in the way of conception were belonged to the house having one living room. Whereby, husband and wife spent their night with other family members in the same room due to the constraints of the room. They enjoy the low level of lighting facilities where, the house was very old.

Bathing Place: There was no fixed place for bath room. Both male and female have bath at the open space. The system of sewerage was not well. It was not possible to pass away the waste through the drain. Then congestion of waste produces mosquitoes and insects that bear the germ of many communicable diseases.

Health and Sanitation: The living environment of the camps is very deplorable. It is unhealthy, dirty, damp and un-hygienic. The camp authorities are neither able nor serious to maintain a healthy sanitation facility. The drainage system is extremely poor, which causes water logging very easily. Therefore, contagious diseases especially diarrhea and dengue are very common. This condition exists in other camps throughout the country. The municipalities/City Corporation cleaners never enter the camps to clear the garbage. It is only when the camp-dwellers drop their garbage in the dustbins outside the camp that the City Corporation cleaners will take them out. In addition, the entire camp people share a few common bathrooms and toilets, which are very few compared to the number of people

Women's Participation in Decision Making: More or less the women were deprived from their right to participate in the decision of conception of child. In such cases, the family head took the decision. In the way of marriage of their son or daughter, they didn't get priority in the decision of their marriage.

Social Security: Social insecurity was an penetrating matter that occurred due to illiteracy, lack of job opportunities and so on. Teasing and sexual harassment were found to be most common cases of insecurity experienced by women outside the camp.

Future Hope: Every woman had a definite hope for future. They liked to change their living condition and desired sound health. All of them liked to break the casement system of living and wanted to enter into the open society for the well being of their children.

Chapter Four: Summary, Recommendation and Conclusion

4.1 Key Findings

The *Biharis* are considered as stateless as most have neither Bangladeshi nor Pakistani citizenship. As a result, they are denied basic political rights such as the right to vote and recruitment to the civil service, police, military, and political office. These political restrictions severely limit the group's economic opportunities and continue to perpetuate their poverty and underrepresentation.

Most *Biharis* are still seeking repatriation to Pakistan but there is a growing minority that has resigned itself to living in Bangladesh and is thus seeking Bangladeshi citizenship. Economic concerns are also a major issue as their lack of citizenship restricts the types of employment they are able to obtain.

The *Bihari* camps have almost no educational facilities. And even if there are schools, the poor people cannot afford to send their children to the school. In many cases, if *Bihari* families want to send their children to school outside the camps, they fail to enroll because of some technical requirements such as nationality, home address or parents' occupation. Though some of them can manage to get enrolled, they find it very difficult to continue hiding these facts. In some cases, when the school authority comes to know that the student came from the camp, that student will be immediately dismissed. In a few cases, those who are studying outside their community school are basically continuing to hide their *Bihari* identity.

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The economic condition of the *Bihari* people is extremely deprived because of financial insecurity. During the early years they were mainly dependent on the relief economy, but over the years the amount of relief has decreased significantly. It is reported that the Bangladesh government used to spend about US\$ 250,000 a month to provide basic needs for them which is very inadequate. However, recently this support is significantly reduced and in some cases stopped. In addition, nongovernmental organizations also provide food aid. For instance, the Bangladesh Red Crescent gives a small amount of food aid to each family. Yet, it is reported that this food aid is inadequate against the demand.

Secondly, people in the camps are confined to the camp boundary and do not own any land outside the camps. As the economy of the country is basically agro-based, land ownership is very important. But the *Bihari* people have no ownership of fixed properties such as land and ponds. The economic condition of the camps located outside Khulna area is particularly adverse because the opportunity of getting employed in agricultural activities is limited. People in those camps are involved in various activities within the camp boundary. Besides, the anti-social elements such as rent-seekers from the Bengali community as well as *Bihari* community often harass them for economic reasons.

There is little economic opportunity for the *Biharis* in or outside the camps. Jobs in Bangladesh are scarce, and loans for small business supplies like looms and cloth are virtually nonexistent. Those who manage to start business must combat the rampant crime in the camps, both at the hands of fellow *Biharis* and local Bengalis, who resent the *Biharis* for ethnic and political reasons. Arson is a weapon of choice of those targeting the camps, and fires spread like monsoon floods devouring homes and lives.

The political life of the stranded *Bihari* people split apart by internal political argument and factionalism. The political disturbance of the *Biharis* is as a result of divided loyalties of either supporting or opposing the view of becoming Bangladeshi citizens or going back to Pakistan. The older generation that held the view of returning to Pakistan still dominates the community and tries to persuade the community to support their view.

4.2 Recommendations

Bihari community is one of the deprived and backward groups among the all the minorities community of our country. So some recommendations are given below for the development of over all conditions the *Bihari* community.

- The Government has to ensure all kinds of fundamental rights such as political and legal land rights for the *Bihari* community people.
- Safe Drinking Water, Clean Sanitary Latrine and Medical facility will have to provide.
- The Government has to sanction special budget for the development of infrastructure of *Bihari* community.
- Different kinds of Governmental facilities as like VGF, Old Pension, Widow Pension, Food for Work (Kabikha) and Social Safety Network will have provide for the people of *Bihari* community.
- We have to take initiative to save their culture.
- Developing consciousness among the people of the *Bihari* community, due to the eradication of racial discrimination on them.
- The government has to take the responsibility of the development of *Bihari* community people.

4.3 Conclusion

This paper examined the status of the stranded *Bihari* people in Bangladesh, highlighted the impact of the stranded status of the *Biharis* with regards to their socioeconomic and political life, and analyzed diplomatic disputes over their repatriation to Pakistan. Through the analysis it is obvious that the stranded *Bihari* community in Bangladesh falls under no conventional identity, or category of international standard. They cannot be called refugees because they were not displaced from their homeland in the first place during 1971 war of independence for Bangladesh. They cannot be regarded as minority because they do not constitute a part of the Bangladeshi nation. Yet, they are outside their country, Pakistan, and they are relatively small in number with a distinct identity in Bangladesh. Their peculiar status proves that the conventional definitions of the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘minority’ have limitations in describing the *Biharis* in Bangladesh. In such precarious situations international laws or international bodies proved to be ineffective either in extending humanitarian assistance or in the mediation efforts to solve the problem. This paper argued that the issue being exclusively bilateral between Bangladesh and Pakistan, and the ways both the countries have dealt with it, the *Biharis* have taken on an identity, which might be termed as “artificial minority.” Evidently, conditions of the stranded *Bihari* people are due to the domestic sensitivities of both Bangladesh and Pakistan which are hindering either their naturalization in Bangladesh or repatriation to Pakistan. The socioeconomic and political impact of the *Biharis*, stranded for a long period of time, is certainly enormous. It makes the future of these population uncertain, creates economic pressure, social insecurity and political sensitivities in the host country. The situation calls for an immediate attention of the two concerned countries as well as of international communities to find out practical solutions to the problem.

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