

**Research Article**

## **Social Exclusion of *Bihari Muslim* in Bangladesh**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to describe the social exclusion of Bihari Muslims of Moulavibazar district of Bangladesh who migrated from India. An attempt has been made to highlight their multidimensional aspects of vulnerability and day- to- day struggle for survival. Bihari Muslim people are among the migrants who came to Bangladesh in the period of partition in 1947. From that time they have been facing many difficulties, experiencing exclusion in the all spheres of their life and struggling hard for their survival. They are concentrated mostly in tea garden areas and struggling hard for their survival due to their impoverished economic condition and hostile social environment. They had to neglect every sphere of their life after coming to a new country where everyone dislikes them because they came from a Hindu originated country. Mainstream people always criticise them saying 'Jala Muslim'. They rebuke, neglect, exclude and deprive them from every step of the privileged space. Mainstream people think Bihari people as a mean creature of God. The social status of Bihari people is very low in context to the mainstream. They do not give food to Bihari people in their dishes. Even the local Hindus do not allow them to touch their water pitch. They treat Bihari people as untouchables. At earlier Bihari people were not allowed to enter into the Mosque for prayer. Moreover when tube well and sanitary ring were provided from the tea garden the mainstreams were first selected. Bihari Muslim people are also excluded in the employment, education and health care delivery system.

**Keywords:** Bihari Muslim, Mainstream, Exclusion, Struggle, Deprivation, Marginalized, Vulnerability

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The main cause on the concept of social exclusion in the region of its origin has been for poverty alleviation and thus for addressing unemployment, low income,

poor jobs, homelessness, poor health, low qualifications and leaving school early, gender inequalities, discrimination and racism, handicaps, old age, divorce, drug abuse and alcoholism and to be living in a deprived socio-economic area. Most of the debate has, therefore, surrounded the labor market (Ziyouddin and Kasi, 2009). Social exclusion, both in terms of its causes and, more particularly its consequences, is multi-dimensional. That is, social exclusion variously encompasses unemployment (where employment is sought), inadequate income, the experience of discrimination, lack of basic education, de-motivation and a lack of access to adequate levels of social protection and services (e.g., health, housing, education and legal services). Social exclusion is increasingly being viewed as encompassing the effective loss of or the incapacity to claim and exercise social and political rights (Ronayne, 2000). Sen (2000) discusses how vulnerability is caused by social and political exclusion within Bangladesh society and argues that the persistent explicit and hidden social and political inequalities, based on gender, caste, class, ethnicity, religion, and race, remain essentially unaddressed. These issues of social exclusion and discrimination are particularly severe for ethnic and religious minorities. This highlights significant inadequacies in human rights practice and governance.

Thorp *et al.* (2005) found that social exclusion occurs during the formation of economic and social support groups amongst the poor. They analysed the formation of groups in several different developing countries as a route out of chronic poverty in several developing countries, finding that, frequently, when poor people form groups with the potential to empower and raise their incomes, the chronically poor are excluded. This may be a significant factor in the chronic poor's inability to escape their poverty. Masset and White (2004) undertook a quantitative analysis of disadvantaged groups of the elderly, disabled and orphans in five developing countries, which are frequently identified as poor in participatory poverty assessments. Kothari (2002) suggests that among the poor there are those who are at the extreme margins of exclusion, who because of a combination of factors are the most socially excluded and are 'unable, unless forced, to choose migration as a way of mediating their excessive marginality'. Seeley *et al.* (2006) show in their small study of women migrants in Bangladesh, for some of the poorest, excluded, women, such as those who are abandoned or thrown out of their marital home, there is no choice but to migrate.

Bangladesh is a country of various kinds of people including different religions (Muslims, Hindu, Buddhists and Christians), different ethnic minority groups (Chakmas, Marmas, Garos, Monipuris, Kashia's) different indigenous, migrants, and so on. A number of research (Shafie and Kilb (2003), Roy (2002), Sarkar and Davey (2007)) show that these ethnic, religious minority, indigenous and migrant

groups are excluded groups in Bangladesh. Among migrant people of Bangladesh, Bihari Muslims are also one. There are >200,000 Muslim Biharis or Urdu speakers in Bangladesh today, many from the Indian state of Bihar, who moved to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) both during and after partition in 1947 (Wikipedia). However, some part of the Bihari Muslim lives in the Moulvibazar district.

Social exclusion is a universal phenomenon, which has existed over time and space. However, in India, social exclusion has been predominantly used in understanding caste-based discrimination. Islam (2011) found that in Bangladesh there are an estimated 5.5 million Dalits. In Dhaka, Dalit communities live in so-called colonies deprived and excluded from adequate housing, sanitation and employment. Working in the most menial jobs, they have difficulty accessing schools and hospitals. Dalit women experience gender disparities within their household and community, with patriarchal values and practices being pervasive and persistent amongst Dalit communities. This is compounded by the exclusion and deprivation from non-Dalits. Dalit women themselves have often been unwilling or unable to highlight or recognise the gendered inequalities that exist within their own community.

Shafie and Kilby (2003) discuss the processes of discrimination and exploitation that have led to the exclusion and marginalisation of indigenous communities (*Adibashi*) in Northwest Bangladesh. They find that ethnic identities in the region are hierarchically ranked, creating barriers to indigenous people's inclusion in wider social networks. Cultural/social exclusion derives from the majorities' (Bengali) insistence on certain value preferences, which are different to the *Adibashis*. Moreover, the enforcement of the notion of national unity 'seems to aim to eliminate the particular cultural and political values of indigenous people'. The result is that *Adibashis* are socially isolated, with little access to mainstream economic and political spheres. Roy (2002) discusses the historical evolution of the semi-autonomous status of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region, where indigenous people from different ethno-linguistic backgrounds form the majority. Their autonomy is seen to be eroded by the denial of land rights and transmigration of Bengali settlers into the region. The paper argues that these indigenous people are neglected and oppressed in much the same way as indigenous people in the lowland regions of Bangladesh.

Sarker and Davey (2007) reported in their study that although education provision has recently improved in Bangladesh, low priority has been given to the education of indigenous children. This research surveyed indigenous children's primary school attendance and dropout rates in North-western Bangladesh during 2004. It is likely that a large percentage of indigenous children never experience or complete primary education, and probably do not attain even basic literacy skills. The

indigenous people are poor and rural-based, and education is not their first priority. Children are often required to find employment, or take care of siblings whilst their parents work, and therefore cannot attend school. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that indigenous people live in dispersed remote villages and small hamlets where there are no educational facilities. In addition, discrimination against indigenous people extends into the classroom environment, where indigenous children sit separately from children from the dominant groups.

Goswami (2004) analyses the discrimination experienced by the Hindu religious minority in Bangladesh in their everyday interactions with the Muslim religious majority. The analysis is focused on the concept of power and how power affects intergroup relations. The article notes that previous studies on discrimination against religious minorities in Bangladesh have focused mainly on the institutional aspects of discrimination. It discusses the historical context for relationships between religious groups in Bangladesh. The main discriminatory patterns identified through the study are: criticism of rituals and practices; verbal harassment; offering poor services; exploitation of labor and money; verbal threats; physical attack; obstructing the celebration of festivals and land dispossession. Ahmed (2010) found that Bangladesh is a culturally diverse country and home to a large number of indigenous people, who are often among the most marginalised and vulnerable groups in society. Khasis are one of the disadvantaged indigenous groups living in the Sylhet region of Bangladesh. The Khasis of Bangladesh are experiencing exclusion, negligence and human rights violation. He found that indigenous people remain among the most disadvantaged groups in Bangladesh. Their land, culture, values and traditions are threatened by the mainstream society. The Khasis are not exception. The status of this indigenous group in Bangladesh tends to be subordinated, effectively marginalised, isolated and minorities, in comparison to majority population of the state as a whole.

Hashmi (1996) said that the so-called Biharis are Muslims who originated from different ethno-linguistic groups in Bihar and neighboring States of British India. Following communal riots 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 under representation. Foley and Chowdhury (2007) explores that how people labeled with disabilities in Chuadanga, Bangladesh, are denied equitable access to social support networks and formal services as a result of the stigma that is culturally ascribed to disability. Social networks are essential community-based systems of support in situations where formal state services are lacking. Exclusion from these

networks, and from the social solidarity they provide, deprives people labeled with disabilities (and their families) of moral well-being.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The aim of the study is to explore the social exclusion patterns of Bihari Muslim in Bangladesh. The case study method was applied in order to elicit necessary information. As the Bihari Muslim community lives in an isolation place from mainstream society and have a different culture, so it would be difficult to get quick and easy access to the community and collect data from them. The Bihari Muslim community is concentrated mainly at the last border of Karimpur tea garden of Moulovibazar district of Bangladesh. The Bihari Muslims of the said tea garden who belong to 18 years and above were considered as population of the study. They are also considered as unit of analysis. The study included all the household heads as population. After that 10 households had been purposively selected as they were willing to share and articulate reliable data in detail. The data for this study have been collected directly from the respondents. Data collection techniques of the study were interview guide and focus group discussion. Interview guide has been used as instrument for data collection from the respondent. Besides two focus group discussions were conducted with both Bihari Muslim (age 18–25) and mainstream (age 40–60) to understand the overall nature and extent of social exclusion. A checklist is developed to gather data from focus group discussions. Extensive field notes were recorded in a diary at regular basis so that it can document all the information minutely. Then the data has been coded in order to classify the data into meaningful categories to bring out their essential pattern. The whole coding process has been conducted through three steps, that is, reviewing the data; working carefully either identified concepts and themes and find out the dimensions, categories and sub-categories through carefully re-examining the data and looking for misunderstanding, incomplete understanding and deeper meaning considering the objectives; and at last working with the core categories analysing and interpreting the meaning in a descriptive manner that reflects the scenery of social exclusion of Bihari people.

### **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

#### **Demographic Profile**

The most of the Bihari Muslims except few came from the Bihar state of India. The maximum of them who were aged between 50 and 70 years came to Bangladesh before their birth. They were migrated to Bangladesh due to many reasons such as their relatives had already been in Bangladesh, thinking about their children's better future, and so on. Every individual has his/her own capacity, strategy and coping mechanism to deal with any situation, problem and things.

This differs from man to man. But in the case of Bihari Muslim, they have some negative and miserable experiences and some of them have some different experiences from the mainstream people after coming to a new country. In their occupation, out of 10 respondents 7 of them are working in various sectors in the tea garden. Rest two are working as outsider along with the garden work. Only one is working as a carpenter instead of any garden work. The amount of income varies from case to case based on their employment. The study depicts that out of 10 respondent, 5 earn between Tk 3000 and 5000, and 2 of the respondent's income is between Tk 6000 and 7000. Rest of the three respondent's income is around Tk 8000.

In our country the ethnic, minority, indigenous people are somehow excluded from the available service and neglected by and deprived of their basic need fulfillment. They are experiencing social exclusion in the entire sphere of their life and survive in their everyday lives. Their social status is very low in contrast to the mainstream. They are neglected and hated by the mainstream people. This issue is echoed by the following:

Bihari Muslim 03: Being a man of Bihari Muslim the mainstream people think us as low class people. They do not think that we are human being like them. I work as a maid servant in a garden's staff house. They do not allow me in their kitchen. Even they do not allow me to eat meal in their dishes. If I take my dish to their house then I can eat. If these staffs are Hindus then they do not let me touch their water. Not only this, I had to bring water from far place. When I go to bring water I have to stay at query. In this situation when by chance anyone of us (Bihari Muslim) touch the pitch of any Hindu, they throw this water and fill new water. Sometimes local people think us as untouchable. If any occasion takes place in Hindu staff's house then they give us leave for that particular day. They hate us so badly.

Bihari Muslim 04: According to mainstream people we are not the Bangladeshis; we are outsider. I came from Tripura, a Hindu-oriented country, so they hate me so badly. They think our actual Muslim religion is burned as a result we are now not actual Muslim. Because of that they call us 'Jala Muslim'. We are untouchable that's why they cannot always take us in their work. If they are completely helpless only then they call us. Besides, there are only seven tube wells for our whole community people. But on the other hand almost all the mainstream family has a tube well. When latrine ring are provided by the union parashid a local body, mainstream people are selected first for this. We have to exclude from all the facilities systematically. This is the example of our social status.

Bihari Muslim 07: We have a community of our own. In our community my family belongs to a higher position. As my three children are studying in college so everybody in our community respect us. When they have any problem they

come to us for suggestions. But in local community we are like an outsider. Nobody respect us. They treat us as hated creature of God. As local people ignore us so they do not want our good position. Because of this reason our people cannot manage a good job for them. I am working as a maid servant in quarter. There was a chance for me to be promoted. But because of ignorance of local people my promotion was hindered. They make obstacle in front of the officer against my promotion as I do not belong to their community.

When any disgraceful (stealing, robber, smuggling, snatching, murder, etc.) things occur in the garden, everyone of the mainstream community think that the responsibility is ours (Bihari Muslim people). Besides, mainstream people called the Bihari people '*Abadi*', broker of Pakistan and also '*Rajakar*'. In the war of 1971 in Bangladesh some Bihari people helped Pakistani ruler and naturally they are very selfish and gain seeker. They never think Bangladesh for a while their own country. That's why mainstream people called them Jala Muslim and so on. But this situation is to some extent changing now. Almost all the Bihari Muslims who live in the Karimpur tea garden area engage themselves in any kind of earning activities for their livelihood. But being a member of Bihari Muslims, here in Karimpur tea garden, employment opportunities are very inadequate. Besides, their low level of education and lack of training make their employment options more limited. They usually not get into competitive formal sectors of employment. As a result they have to work in informal sectors, which are low remunerative. The most of the Bihari Muslims are working as garden labor, maid servant, and water man of garden. Some are work as garden staff, sardar, family planning worker, and so on. Very few of them are contractor, teacher and woodcutter in the local village and also shop assistant, and so on. One respondent expressed his employment in this way:

Bihari Muslim 02: I work as a factory worker in the garden. Almost all the people who studied at least class five they have a chance to work as a factory worker. I read in class seven and my uncle had a good relationship with factory manager, so I easily got this job. Moreover the people of our community work as labor, maid servant, factory worker, and so on. Others work as day labor, woodcutter, assistant of shop keeper, vegetable seller, and so on. Those who have studied they are going out from the garden and work in different places of town outside garden. Besides some of the new generation people are now teaching the students.

Bihari Muslim 05: I work as a labor in the garden. I earn very few amount. So it's very hard for me to run family. Now my daughter helps me. She teaches in a kindergarten school but her salary is very little. But my son gets somehow well. He also sends money. Everyone of our community try to overcome their barrier in getting job in the garden. They try to get engaged outside so that they can earn money more than garden job. Besides the priorities of local people in the garden

is high as there is less opportunities for us although we are capable and eligible for this job. What we get is low status and little paid. And there is no chance to be promoted. Because country is their, garden is their, so all the good job is their.

Educational opportunities are very limited for Bihari Muslim in the Karimpur tea garden. Majority of children are not admitted in the school or drop out from the school. This is mainly due to fact that their insufficient earning requires engaging their children in workforce as a supplementary to maintain their family. Besides inability to bear educational expenses plays a significant role in making them reluctance to educate their children. Another important finding is that looking after younger siblings hinders their children's opportunity to attend the school. On the other hand negligence and criticism of mainstream people reduce their interest to send their children to school. Their educational status can be understood from the following statement:

Bihari Muslim 04: The educational institutions are very little in the garden. Though we are poor, the negligence and hate of mainstream people reduce our interest to send our children to the school. Mainstream student does not behave well with our student. They do not sit with our children. They make our students sit in the last bench. Besides among us who study to a little extent no longer study in the garden. They leave garden and study at another place. After that their status increases. If a Bihari Muslim is staying in the garden, then whether he studies or not, everyone in the mainstream does not take them easily as a human.

Bihari Muslim 06: Educational opportunities are very limited for us. My elder son and daughter could not study with local children in the school. Because every teacher and student criticise as we belong to 'Jala Muslim' community. Teachers did not pay attention to them. So they did not do well and left study. But my twin sons did well in their earlier examinations and now studying in college. They can overcome the barriers of study because of the head teacher of their primary school. He also belongs to 'Khasis community'. He helped them to fight against the barriers of study. He also supports them till today and encourages them to do good in future.

Bihari Muslim 09: I did not study. Only I can write my name somehow. Indeed at present the children of garden are interested in study. Sometimes madam from big school and college come to our house and ask us to send children to school. Majority of our children cannot pass primary school. When our children pass the primary school then they leave the school forever. The reason behind is that the high school is far away from their locality. Most important thing is that the children have to go through Bazar where almost all the people are mainstreams. When they go through the Bazar to the school they become victim of eve teasing. They used to utter many rude words to our students. Indeed the environment of school is not good. But our children have to face problem to cope with mainstream people. Suddenly it starts quarreling. Not only that if any case our children reach

the school late then they are prohibited to sit on the first row of the bench. Then they have to sit on the last one. Also the number of student is high that's why when they sit on the last bench they could not understand study very well. As a result they fail in the examination.

### **Relationship Pattern**

The Bihari Muslim people are living in that area for about 50–60 years. They build a relation with the mainstream people. This issue is echoed by the following expression:

Bihari Muslim 03: We are very cordial in our daily interaction pattern. If they are not cordial then when we came to Bangladesh that time they might have driven us away but did not do so. We are both fine and living a happy life. When we are in crisis we can take loan money from them. Hence their intention is not good. They think that we are different. We invite them in our social and religious occasions and they also invite us. Besides among our community people who are in a big position, the mainstream people come to their house. They never come to everyone's house.

Bihari Muslim 05: It is simple to say that the daily interaction with mainstream people with us is well. From getting up to going to bed in the night we have to sit, talk and communicate work with them. Hence we have less trustworthy relationship with them. We hardly believe them because they are very aggressive; their head is always hot. When they are in angry mood, there must be some destructive thing to happen. That's why we believe them in accordance with their mood. We invite them in our marriage, social occasion and religious festivals. They also invite us. Sometimes they come and sometimes not. It is the same in our case.

Marriage is a scared bond between not only a female and male but also two families. It bears much significance in the life of Bihari Muslim community. This important issue is stated by the following comments:

Bihari Muslim 02: In the case of marriage we the Bihari Muslim never compromise with them. We never arrange marriage with them. We very well know that our daughter will not be happy in local Muslim family. They are very short-tempered and they always torture their wife for any reason. As our daughter is a Bihari Muslim she will obviously suffer much. Besides mainstream people also do not want to make marital relationship with us. The reason behind is that they think we are mean people. They think if they make marital relationship with us their social status will be jeopardised. They will also mean not to everyone of their own society. Besides when boys and girls choose themselves then they marry alone. Nobody accompany with them in their marriage from both parties. Moreover as a result both families have to be mean to their own society.

Bihari Muslim 05: We, both the parties, are not interested in the marital relationship between us. We assumed that the mainstream people will not accept us cordially,

always rebuke us. Besides we think the mainstream people are superior and if they get marry with us their position will be inferior. All the people of mainstream community neglect, rebuke, tease us that's why we do not agree to make marital relationship with them. But if any daughter or son of both communities make a choice themselves and want to marry, then they have to marry by themselves. Arrange marriage will not be possible. Once they get married without our consent, they usually threaten to go out from the garden.

Bihari Muslim 06: We have no marital relationship with mainstream people. Actually we are not the human being according to them. That's why they won't like to marry their daughter or son to us. They think if they make marital relationship with us their social status will be low. We are class less people. Hence we also do not agree with them in the case of marriage because we very much understood that we could not adopt or cope with them. But when any boy and girl from both parties' make choice for themselves and get marry by themselves they have nothing to do. So both parties can accept their marriage. Hence the girl and boy from our community and their family will be very shameful for the long time.

### **Political Participation**

As a human being everyone has the right to participate in political activities. But it is different in the case of Bihari Muslim community. The study shows that although Bihari Muslim community has their right to vote but in many cases it is not properly exercised. From their views in most cases it is not so important for them. This is illustrated by the following comments:

Bihari Muslim 04: Till now I did not cast my vote. My father said that we have no right to vote. But I have heard that local people cast our vote by their name.

Bihari Muslim 07: I have participated in all the national and local elections held in our garden. Every male member of the family can cast their vote. Female are not doing so. On the Election Day there are much crowd in that place. Hence we think it not safe for the women to cast vote in the election.

It is common that in the election period the elected person or political leaders go to the voter's house and request them to give them vote. In many cases some powerful people influence us by provoking, treating and also by alluring us to give money and materials. This is not exceptional in the case of Bihari Muslim community. This is illustrated by the following comments:

Bihari Muslim 01: It is normal that in the election time the local leader along with politician come to our house. They say many hopeful words and request us to give our vote. We agree because we live in their place. But sometimes we are in confusion when more than one local politician requests us to give our vote. Then if we are two members, we give our one vote to one and another vote to other.

Bihari Muslim 08: Political leaders do not come to our area as usual. But they only come here when it is time to vote. We do not get any improvement because of their effort. As we live in this area so we agree to cast vote for them. Local leaders come to visit us during election and promise to change our condition. But after election they escape from us. We do not get any remedy for our problem.

Bihari Muslims give vote because if they do not cast their vote it will be fake and anyone can cast their vote on their name. Moreover they think that they are not original Bangladeshi so any one from Khaleda or Hasina will pass then they have nothing to do. Besides some of the Bihari families have the right to female voting. In the time of election the local people behaves well with them. But after that they behave in their original manner and mood.

### CONCLUSION

Bihari Muslim community of Bangladesh is placed in a deplorable condition and experiences a multifarious problem for their survival. Different indigenous and migrants groups are frequently emphasised and targeted but still this Bihari Muslim community segment is in a miserable condition as their vulnerabilities have received less consideration by both the government and larger society. Above all it can be said that the suggestions proposed in this paper would need long effort for all concerned and it is possible only through joint venture at different levels with special attention to different policy initiatives focusing on problems and specific needs of Bihari people. All efforts remain immaterialised unless Bihari people themselves are the agent of change. It would be a much wider and successful venture when Bihari people make their voice heard and represented on decision making for their betterment.

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