

Subjectivity and Citizenship: Intersections of Space, Ethnicity and Identity Among the Urdu-Speaking Minority in Bangladesh

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Abstract The paper examines understandings of citizenship and ethnic identification among the ‘Urdu-speaking linguistic minority’ in Bangladesh, addressing three key areas of debate. Firstly, it explores the relationship between the material institution of citizenship and conditions of (physical) integration/segregation. Secondly, it attempts to unpick the intimate connection between that material institution and the ethnic and national identities of individuals. Finally, it investigates a dissonance discovered between the bureaucratic state recognition of citizenship and imaginations of that status among interviewees, the ‘identities of citizenship’ occupied at the local level. The paper demonstrates the significance of subject positionality, economies of power and the ‘dialogic’ nature of ethnic identity formation, and discusses the complex emotional ordering of belonging they collectively construct.

Résumé L’article examine certaines questions relatives aux conceptions de la citoyenneté et de l’identification ethnique au sein de la minorité linguistique urdu au Bangladesh selon trois angles principaux. En premier lieu, l’article explore les relations existant entre l’état matériel de citoyenneté et les conditions (physiques) d’intégration ou de ségrégation. En deuxième lieu, l’article s’attache à déconstruire les correspondances entre notion de citoyenneté matérielle et identités réelles—ethniques et nationales—des individus. En dernier lieu, l’article étudie le caractère dissonant des rapports entre la reconnaissance administrative de la citoyenneté et les représentations de ce statut parmi les personnes interrogées—les «identités relatives la citoyenneté» existant au niveau local. L’article affirme l’importance de notions telles que la positionnalité du sujet, l’économie du pouvoir et la nature «dialogique» de la formation de l’identité ethnique, et examine la complexité émotionnelle des sentiments d’appartenance ainsi construits.

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Introduction

Ever since the devastating events of 1947, the Indian Subcontinent has provided a powerful reminder of the long-term implications of conflict and the redrawing of international boundaries. The years that followed Partition generated what are now regarded as one of the largest involuntary migrations in modern history (Daiya 2008). This process exacerbated longstanding divisions and challenged relations between ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ populations for years to come (Khubchandani 1995).

The ‘Urdu-speaking minority’ in present-day Bangladesh is a community that has been at the forefront of these tensions, but one that has received markedly little attention. Under a Pakistani regime these ‘Mohajirs’ (religious migrants), sharing religious and linguistic identities with the ruling Punjabi elite, occupied a privileged position within society (Ilias 2003). However, following the Liberation of the country in 1971 the same community were branded Pakistani collaborators, disenfranchised and socially ostracised. Dispossessed by the state and fearful for their lives (Paulsen 2006) many found themselves in temporary camps established immediately after the war. Around 160,000 remain in these camps today (Al Falah Bangladesh 2006).

In May 2008, however, the High Court of Bangladesh passed a landmark judgment. After 36 years, the entire ‘Urdu-speaking population’ was finally granted citizenship. While a dominant social discourse still openly regards them as ‘betrayers’ due to the events of the period, Bangladeshi society is clearly changing. Some ‘Urdu speakers’ alive today bore witness to the events of both Partition and Liberation, but many more have never seen India or Pakistan. Growing up in Bangladesh they have experiences and perspectives that may be very different. As Brah (1996) has argued, the conditions of reproduction and transformation of ethnic identity are critically linked to a range of interconnected social divisions and distinctions. Yet, despite apparent awareness of the necessity to de-essentialise unitary ethnic boundaries, ethnicity is still all too frequently studied as a singular unit of analysis, reinforcing a presentation of homogenous social units at the expense of intra-group differences (Warikoo 2005; Baumann 1996). This paper examines the way in which positions of space, ethnicity, gender and generation have influenced understandings of citizenship among the Urdu-speaking community. It is only when we account for intersectionality that we can appreciate how the heterogeneity of ethnic or cultural groups may result in a diversity of interpretations both between and *within* them (Toyota 2003; Gardner 1998; May 2001).

Through this intersectional prism the research examines questions of rights and citizenship as experienced and understood by those who remain in the camps, exploring the effect 36 years of discrimination has had on ethnic, cultural and

national identification. In doing so it addresses three key areas of debate. Firstly, it investigates the relationship between the material institution of citizenship and realities of land, settlement and conditions of (physical) integration/segregation. Secondly, it attempts to unpick the intimate connection between that material institution and the ethnic and national identities of individuals. And finally, it explores a dissonance discovered between the bureaucratic state recognition of citizenship and imaginations of that status among interviewees, the ‘identities of citizenship’ occupied at the local level.

Legal status represents so-called formal citizenship, in the absence of which, ‘the refugee’ and ‘the displaced’, occupy a position of heightened interstitial instability (Malkki 1995).¹ In the negotiations of this interstitiality, the paper asks, where ‘formal’ status is situated and how it is understood? It has been argued that ‘the identity dimension’ of citizenship (Bloemraad 2000) is lacking serious examination, and that ‘citizenship as a relational, ultimately subjective concept is one that requires much more debate’ (Sanchez 2008, p. 4). As Bloemraad has suggested ‘there is a need for a sustained, in-depth conversation between those who theorise the identity dimension of citizenship and those who have engaged in empirical research regarding immigrants’ own views and feelings’ (2000, p. 24). Empirical research with a community as it negotiates the lines drawn between legal status and statelessness helps us to understand some of the everyday meaning such movement involves.

The results presented here were collected 1 year before the dramatic 2008 High Court ruling that granted the community citizenship, and therefore capture a particularly interesting historical moment.² The issues raised reflect the questions and concerns circulating among the community in the build-up to the event, and as such help broaden our understanding of its meaning.

Politics of Bangladesh and Pakistan 1947–1971

Some Urdu speakers are descended from families who migrated to the region from India (primarily Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal) as long ago as the Mughal period, as well as during British colonial rule. Many more moved there in the wake of Partition in 1947. It is estimated that around 700,000 Urdu-speaking Muslims migrated to East Pakistan following the country’s division, and the violence it precipitated all over India (Abrar 2010). The Urdu-speaking Punjabi elite-dominated East Pakistan politically and economically during the period, and as a result the newly arrived Urdu-speaking British-trained army and civil servants became particularly influential (Ilias 2003). The linguistic and cultural differences between the migrants and the *local population* however, created tensions.³

Power had been appropriated and monopolised by West Pakistan since the country’s inception (Kabir 1995) and East Pakistan’s local Bengali population were

¹ Seen to haemorrhage national boundaries, they are produced and made meaningful by the categorical order (the ‘nation-state’) that excludes them (Malkki 1995).

² The author is currently undertaking research addressing the effects of this new status on the camp population.

³ North Indian Urdu speakers who migrated to the province of Sindh in West Pakistan experienced similar difficulties (see Talbot 1996; Ghosh 2004).

growing increasingly conscious of exploitation at the hands of their privileged sister. The Urdu-speaking migrants, supported by this progressively dominant West, neglected the local population's political grievances, and further exacerbated divisions between themselves and the Bengali majority (Ilias 2003). The 'language movement' of 1952, initiated in reaction to the replacement of Bengali with Urdu in a number of political and educational institutions throughout the Eastern wing, marked growing Bengali animosity towards the new arrivals (Ilias 2003). The nationalist movement was born and with it a period of conflict that culminated in the Liberation War of 1971.

It is commonly accepted that during the War between March and December of that year, around 3 million Bengalis were killed by the Pakistan Army. Less often discussed are the tens of thousands of 'Biharis' who lost their lives throughout (Paulsen 2006). Following the country's Liberation in December 1971, the entire community were branded enemy collaborators. Thousands were arrested, executed, or fearful for their lives, were forced to flee (Paulsen 2006). Many ended up in temporary camps set up by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and the majority have remained there ever since in what was formerly regarded as a 'stateless' situation. Disenfranchised, isolated, lacking leadership, and having opted initially for 'repatriation' to Pakistan, they had been labelled 'Stranded Pakistanis'⁴ and left in limbo.

Since 1971 a small proportion of Urdu speakers (around 90,000 of the estimated 250,000) have been able to establish themselves outside the camps, occupying a range of positions within a complicated social hierarchy. With the advantage of a non-camp address many appear to have been accessing rights of citizenship previously denied them, escaping the discrimination suffered by those that remain in the camps. How this sheds light on the nature and boundaries of citizenship is of value not only to the community itself but in our understanding of displaced, disenfranchised, minority populations around the world.

Research Design

The research on which this paper is based was carried out at the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) in Dhaka, Bangladesh, with support from the Development Research Centres (DRC) in Migration, Globalisation and Poverty. It is based on 100 in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted, in Urdu and Bengali, with camp-based 'Urdu speakers'. Of this total, 50 were female and 50 male; 78 were conducted with residents of camps in Dhaka and 22 were conducted in the camps of Saidpur, in the northern Rajshahi district, close to the Indian border. Approximately one third of interviews were conducted with 18–25 year-old respondents (29 interviews), 26–49 year-old respondents (33), as well as respondents over 50 (38). A leaning towards the older generation was intentional as focus group discussions (FGDs) were also conducted with 18–25 year olds. In

⁴ 'Stranded Pakistani' is a label that was generated in the 1970s, alongside the creation of the Stranded Pakistani General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC), and is used commonly in press and official documents today. It has been more recently discouraged by elements of Urdu-speaking society due to the term's misleading connotations.

addition to these, 25 interviews were conducted with members of the community living outside the camps, as well as local community leaders and political representatives. Participant observation took place in both of the field-sites and the research took place between November 2006 and March 2007.

The term 'Bihari' originated in Bangladesh defining a cultural, ethnic, and linguistic community of specific geographic origin (the state of Bihar in India). However the research revealed that the geographic origin of those for whom the term is used was in fact significantly wider; the label can more appropriately be understood to refer to 'all those Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated to East Bengal from India, between the British period and 1971'. 'Bihar' has been discursively constructed in the Bangladeshi imagination as a symbol of both communal conflict and desperate poverty and occupies a highly charged space in the rhetoric of identity and belonging. It is more than just a label in Bangladesh, but a pejorative term of abuse and along with the term 'Stranded Pakistani' instantly denationalising.

In attempting to turn the abstract concept of identity into an empirical category unsurprisingly complexities were encountered. The idea of 'labelling', by 'self' and 'other' was found to be the most useful way of unpacking the concept, and turning it into a locally meaningful category. Similar considerations were required in the translation and interpretation of terms such as 'citizenship' and 'nationality'. Clearly, concepts do not move unproblematically across cultures (Temple 2002), and in the desire to access real individual understanding, the vocabulary used was fundamental. While the term 'Bangladeshi' is located within the boundaries of the nation-state, 'Bengali' might be defined in terms of the wider cultural and linguistic region of Bengal (Eade 1997). Few of the interviewees made such sharp distinctions themselves (see also Eade 1998 on this), but some sense of the difference was clearly present in collective perceptions. Only a small minority used the terms interchangeably, and if questioned further all eventually articulated a distinction as understood above.

'Statelessness' and Segregation—Land and Citizenship

In analysing the production of Partition identities in India, from 1947 to the present day, Daiya points to the much neglected issue of property in the relationship between refugees and the nation-state (2008). She shows how India's Displaced Persons (Compensation and Rehabilitation) Act of 1954, reconfigured displacement as the process by which one is 'divested of managerial control over private property'; articulating displacement with property ownership in such a way that belonging was disconnected from the sense of inhabiting a territorialized space as home. If literally losing private property also becomes about losing ones place, 'property ownership, then, in critical ways, impacts the production and realisation of postcolonial citizenship' (2008, p.123). Daiya goes on to show how, in the eyes of the newly constituted states', Partition's migrants were constructed both as citizens of the state in which they were found, and simultaneously aliens in their original homes. As such, the property and assets of the departed were appropriated by the state, in the form of refugee rehabilitation (for those who had arrived). Abandoned properties were requisitioned by the government as 'evacuee property' as early as February

1948 and The Administration of Evacuee Property Act was formally passed 2 years later. Citizenship itself, had become a tool in the construction of ‘the refugee’ (Daiya 2008).

In the aftermath of 1971, the use of property as a state technology of ethno-nationalism, legitimised the displacement of thousands in the newly formed Bangladesh. The ‘Urdu speakers’ deprived of property after the Liberation War were not only deprived of the citizenship of Bangladesh, but granted citizenship nowhere else. Neither Pakistan, nor India were keen to take them, and there was no ‘refugee rehabilitation’ for which they qualified.⁵ Much like 1947, some people left their homes for the protection of the camps assuming they would return once it was safe. But as a new country emerged, laws were quickly promulgated that reflected the Bengali nationalism on which the state was founded. Through the ‘Bangladesh Abandoned Property Order’ of 1972,⁶ designed to dispose of ‘enemy property’, the appropriation of properties was legalised. As one interviewee observed, ‘my parents left their house for their safety but were unable to get it back when they returned’ (female, 18–25). Many people, having moved to the camps for temporary protection, never returned home.

The lack of recourse for defence against such acts constituted by their non-citizen status was further compounded by their lack of official recognition as refugees by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Not having migrated to the region ‘for fear of persecution’ (a position many would challenge), they had effectively *become* refugees in the country in which many had resided for 60 years or more (Ilias 2003; Sen 2000). As Sen (2000) observes the creation of Bangladesh denationalised ‘Biharis’ and therefore raised questions regarding their status as ‘de facto stateless refugees’.⁷ As internally displaced people (IDPs) the community’s rights were equally ambiguous. The definition of IDPs is in itself descriptive rather than legal (as opposed to the term ‘refugee’) and a special legal status for IDPs has been denied on the basis that they are entitled to the same rights as citizens or permanent residents of the state in which they have been displaced (Mooney 2005; Brun 2003; Barutciski 1998). But, as the situation in Bengal reveals, very often this is patently not the case.

The Bangladeshi Citizenship Order of 1972 states that,

“every person whose father or grandfather was born in the territories now comprised in Bangladesh and who was a permanent resident of such territories on the 25th day of March 1971 and continues to be so resident; or who was a permanent resident of such territories on the 25th day of March 1971 and continues to be so resident and is not otherwise disqualified for being a citizen by or under any law for the time being in force” shall be deemed a citizen of Bangladesh.⁸

⁵ A limited number were eventually ‘repatriated’ to Pakistan under agreements of 1973 and 1974, but in 1992 around 250,000 remained and Pakistan refused to take more (Ilias 2003).

⁶ The Bangladesh Abandoned Property (Control, Management and Disposal) Order 1972 (President’s Order No. 16 of 1972). See also Farooqui 2000.

⁷ Due to the definition of a stateless person as someone ‘who is not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its law’, under both the 1954 UN Convention Relating to Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (Paulsen 2006).

⁸ Bangladesh Citizenship (Temporary Provisions) Order, 1972 (Bangladesh), 149 of 1972, 26th March 1971, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b51f10.html>. See also Pakistan Citizenship Act, 1951 (Bangladesh) [Bangladesh], II of 1951, 13 April 1951, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6b52a8.html>.

Under this provision, ‘Urdu speakers’ born in the region as well as those who migrated would qualify for citizenship, as long as they had not been disqualified under law. But (interestingly, considering the salience of private property noted above) such grounds for disqualification were ultimately found in the form of camp residence itself. Under the Amendment Ordinance of 1978 (relating to the Order of 1972) eligibility for citizenship is denied to any subject who expresses ‘allegiance to a foreign state’. In 1972, the camp community were surveyed by the ICRC and asked to choose between settlement in Bangladesh, or the so-called repatriation to (West) Pakistan, a country most had never seen.⁹ Such allegiance was apparently expressed by 60% of the camp-dwelling community in opting for settlement in Pakistan, resulting in the disqualification of all camp residents. ‘Repatriation’ requests made by little over half of a homeless community, therefore became the legal loophole necessary.

Exclusions are sewn into the social fabric (Goldberg 2002) and access to citizenship may be blocked by forms of ethnic, gendered, social, or cultural discrimination. Whether interviewees believed access to citizenship might positively affect such discriminatory agendas was an area of discussion that revealed a good deal about what interviewees understood citizenship to mean. Interestingly, in light of the above analysis, much of the community associated the concept of citizenship with automatic land ownership. As one female explained, they had heard that ‘the camps will be demolished and we will get some land’ (26–49). Although some believed camp conditions would automatically be improved as a result of citizenship, the possibility of being given some land and ‘rehabilitated’ outside was voiced by several. Middle-aged and older women were particularly likely to emphasise that discrimination would only reduce if such ‘rehabilitation’, outside the camps, was an automatic condition.

In a context in which civil status is effectively denied on the basis of camp residence, it is not surprising that citizenship should be identified with property ownership in this way. Females were more likely than males to make this assumption, and age also increased this likelihood, both possibly reflective of the lower levels of education among these groups. As we have seen however, the connection being made is not an inconsequential one. The relationship between property and citizenship is of resounding historical significance.

The UNHCR’s Guiding Principles state that displaced people should not be discriminated against ‘in the enjoyment of rights and freedoms on the ground that they are displaced’ (Brun 2003). However, from 1972 onwards the camp community’s very displacement had come to represent an expression of ‘allegiance (to Pakistan) by conduct’, and was used to deny their eligibility to the rights of citizenship. No official announcement was ever made by the Government, for fear of de-stabilising a fragile situation (and as a result of vested interests within both the main parties). The institutionalisation of a Government position, can however be deemed through the legal cases that have arisen, to dispute its position. A

⁹ Under what is known as the Tripartite Agreement, signed in New Delhi in 1974, reviewing processes initiated by the Indo-Pak Agreement of 1973, that attempted to put the wheels of Government-sponsored ‘repatriation’ in process.

number of which have held that the camp dwellers involved should be citizens under both the Citizenship Act of 1951 and the Order of 1972 (Ilias 2003).¹⁰

The Rights of *Man* and *Citizen*

Despite such cases, until the ruling in 2008, the country continued to deny the community as whole civil, political, social and economic rights (Ilias 2003). As Malkki explains, having crossed a border, refugees and ‘stateless’ people, stripped of the specificity of culture, place and history, are human in the most basic, elementary sense (1995 p. 12). But, as Arendt (1951) asserted, the figure that should therefore embody ‘human rights’ par excellence highlighted instead the concept’s crisis:

“The conception of human rights based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down... when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people (refugees) who had indeed lost all other qualities... except that they were still human” (Arendt 1951, p. 299).

Arendt revealed that the inherent tension between ‘the rights of man’ and ‘citizen’, lay in the fundamental dependance of one on the other. As Parekh (2004, p. 44) explains, the subject of human rights was not a concrete person, but rather an abstract human being ‘that seemed to exist nowhere’. As such the source of rights, was not the individual but the people; the rights of man having come to be identified with the rights of a people or nation (Parekh 2004). If it is ‘the people’ who are the bearer of rights, ‘then human rights must be linked with national sovereignty’ (Parekh 2004 p. 44). Or, more specifically, it is only sovereignty of the people that is able to insure them (Arendt 1951). As Arendt argues, ‘the calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness... but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever’ (Arendt 1968, p. 159). The inalienable rights of man became equivalent to the rights of a people under the protection of a government. Human rights and citizenship rights had been conflated; the loss of one, representing the loss of the other.¹¹

As a ‘human rights’ discourse has been growing in Bangladesh, so has the awareness of this discourse, particularly among younger camp dwellers. A number of 18–25-year-old interviewees were keen to emphasise the ‘human rights’ which they were denied; rights they held regardless of their civil status. In doing so however these individuals repeatedly reinforced the conflation described above. One

¹⁰ For example, ‘Abid Khan vs Bangladesh’ in which the Supreme Court of Bangladesh ruled that mere residence at Geneva camp “cannot be termed allegiance to another state by conduct” and therefore residents of Geneva camp should not be excluded from the laws of the country, from Electoral Rolls or from the Citizenship Act of 1951 (Ilias 2003). The Supreme Court added that as per the 1951 Act ‘every person born in Bangladesh after commencement of this act shall be a citizen by birth’ (as per the 1972 Order all those who have been in the country since 1971 are also eligible). In 2003 the Supreme Court found ten petitioners from Geneva Camp ‘Bangladeshi Citizens by birth’ (Ilias 2003), and other cases confirm such rulings (Ilias 2003).

¹¹ A contention that has since been reconfigured in the contemporary moment, see Soysal (1994).

19-year-old girl for example, having mentioned that the camp created problems accessing decent housing and facilities such as playgrounds, was asked whether or not she considered these facilities ‘rights.’ She cogently explained, ‘These are called human rights and these rights Bengalis have but we don’t’. Citizens (in this case Bengalis) have ‘human’ rights that she does not. Housing facilities and playgrounds may not be ‘civil rights’ per se, but as we can see they are rights associated with citizenship, not with universal, inalienable humanity. The discursive deployment of the terms ‘displaced person’ and ‘refugee’ elides the contemporary condition in which statelessness represents a loss of human rights (Daiya 2008). Our inability to appreciate this reality may have diverted attention away from the specific problems of statelessness in contemporary society.

It is also important to remember that one’s relationship to rights is dictated by diverse axis of differentiation. The very concept of citizenship stresses principles of sameness that strip subjects of their multiple identifications (Brun 2003). In the context of self-identification, however, the ‘Urdu-speaking community’ is not a homogenous social unit. Forced movement of people challenges the relationship between people and the state, but that relationship will not be experienced or understood by all actors similarly (Brun 2003).

Ethnic Identification at the Intersections of ‘Community’

Despite little agreement as to the precise nature of ‘ethnic phenomena’, its ‘ubiquitous presence’ (R. Cohen 1978, p. 379), has long been recognised. Regarded as a component of a wider social identity and sense of self, ‘ethnic identity’ (distinguishable from ‘ethnicity’¹²) has likewise witnessed a discursive explosion. In the last 20 years approaches inspired by post-structuralism and influenced by discourses of feminism and cultural criticism, have dominated the fields of anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies (Barth 1969; Hall 1990, 1996; Brah 1996; Kershen 1998; Gilroy 1997). In an attempt to situate racial meanings and identity, by unpacking the essential, intrinsic, fixity of older understandings, they emphasise ambiguity, fluidity, process and relationality (Alexander 2010).

Brah for example criticised the ‘ethnicism’ inherent in depictions of racialised groups primarily in *culturalist* terms, representing groups identified as culturally different as internally homogenous as a result (Brah 1996). The ‘Urdu-speaking community’s’ internal heterogeneity is a case in point; revealing that as a result of such assumptions we often fail to recognise the social relations of power in which all individuals are implicated. While too little is known about how membership of one social group affects membership of another, many suggest, for example, that ethnic identity will decline among later generations, and among those who have spent a greater proportion of their lives in a new country (Phinney 1990). In the case of camp-based Urdu speakers, this is an assumption that appeared to be founded; 18–25-year-old males were by far the most likely to consider the other-ascribed label ‘Bihari’ incorrect and inappropriate while 80% of the older generation considered

¹² Ethnicity is more than a question of ethnic identity; it involves partaking of the social conditions of a group... and always involves a political dimension (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992).

the term un-problematic.¹³ In explaining reasons for accepting or rejecting the term, many of the younger interviewees not only specified that the majority were born here, but several also noted that their parents had no connection with the state of Bihar. One young female explained, 'They use it to differentiate us because of our language but many people are not from Bihar. We were born here, educated here and many of us were born after 1971 so we are Bangladeshi just like them'. One young male explained that others called them 'Bihari' just because they lived in the camp, without knowing where the name came from, and added that, 'before the Liberation War we would both have been Pakistanis anyway'. As this quote reveals, what is understood as an 'ethnic' appendage only becomes significant in the absence of nationality. It was only when they lost the citizenship of Pakistan (through the Liberation of Bangladesh) that they became 'Biharis'.

Not only did association with the term increase with age, but also within each age group more women than men identified with it. When asked if the term insulted her, a middle-aged female in Saidpur replied 'we are 'Bihari', why would we feel insulted?' And the most common response among females of all ages was to consider the term correct simply 'because I am Bihari'. The literature suggests a number of reasons why females might maintain a stronger connection with an ethnic, cultural or family identity. Warikoo (2005) for example has suggested that tighter social control contributes to a stronger association with family culture. Many interviewees believed that *purdah* was practised more strictly than among the majority Bengali population and that as a result girls were discouraged from leaving the camp, even to go to school. As one young female explained, 'Many in the camp prevent their children, especially girls, going to school because they think they might be abused or start having affairs' (female, 18–25; Geneva Camp). Middle-aged and older women frequently explained that they had hardly ever been outside. If Rumbaut (1994, p.756) is correct that 'ethnic self identity is a... measure of the degree of children's sense of identification with parents' then the fact that girls in the camps spent a good deal more of their time in their parents company could also be associated with a greater propensity to identify with an ethnic or cultural label such as 'Bihari'.

Women have long been understood as central to processes of ethnic or cultural reproduction, depicted as 'carriers of ethnic traditions' (Phinney 1990 p.509) marking the boundaries of collectivities (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992). Rumbaut (1994) has noted that the greater someone's level of 'acculturation' (particularly linguistic), the greater someone's identificational assimilation. As a result of day-to-day interaction with the Bengali population, the majority of Urdu-speaking males are significantly more fluent in their use of Bengali than females, and this is particularly true among the two older age groups. Differences in levels of integration clearly affect self-identification (Phinney 1990).

A particularly striking gender dimension was observed among the youngest age group in Saidpur. Here all the women disliked the term 'Bihari' because of the way it was used by the majority population, but 100% considered it to be correct. In

¹³ Whether this reflects processes of generation, age, experience or length of residence in Bangladesh is unclear, however, we can assume that the life stage reached is likely to have contributed, alongside socio-historical circumstances and personal history (Gardner 1998).

contrast, 100% of the males not only disliked the label but also considered it incorrect. A significant number of middle-aged and elderly women also described the label ‘Bihari’ as correct simply because they had been “referred to as ‘Bihari’ since childhood”, clearly demonstrating the ‘dialogic’ nature of identity construction. Male interviewees were more likely to explain in practical (and even sometimes legal) terms why they were Bangladeshi, and therefore not ‘Bihari’. Again, the existence of a ‘national’ identity appeared to override the necessity for an ‘ethnic’ one. The label itself confirmed their lack of nationality, and some believed therefore stripped them of an identity altogether. One young man explained that on account of the label, ‘I am nowhere, have no identity, not Bihari, not Bangladeshi, nothing’. His statement implies that a Bihari identity is incompatible with a Bangladeshi one; nationality and ethnic identification are, in this context, in some way oppositional.

The juxtaposition of particular ‘cultural resources’ with the apparatus of the nation-state renders the one primitive and particularist, the other modern and universal. However, this dichotomy, between nation and ‘cultural collectivity’ conceals the link between ethnicity and nationalism that works to represent the culture and history of the dominant ethnic group as that of the nation-state (May 2001). Constructed in this way national identity implicitly inscribes traditions of ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘nation’ and ‘foreigner’ that attempt to arrest the proliferation of *difference* that cultural plurality produces (Lewis and Neal 2005; Yuval-Davis et al. 2005).¹⁴ In pre-2008 Bangladesh, the cultural collectivity of the other (‘Bihari’) sat squarely outside the nation-state. Interviewees not only suggest that progress away from ethnic labelling and discrimination lies in Bangladeshi citizenship, but that consequently an ethnic identity can (and possibly should) be renounced. It is important therefore to ask whether such an ethnic identity would need to be discarded for citizenship to have any real value. The following section will explore processes of identity construction and belonging further, in the context of a highly ambiguous legal status.

Understandings of Citizenship—‘Effectivity’ and Current Status

It was clear before the High Court ruling of 2008 that regardless of the ‘official’ status of Urdu speakers, true and effective equality before the law would remain unobtainable if historical levels of discrimination continued to be legitimised. As Goldberg has warned, a commitment to formal equality of rights often neglects ‘the substantive conditions rendering materialisation or manifestation of those rights possible’ (2002, p.251). Where understandings of racial categorisation, language, ‘culture’ and ethnicity serve as a structuring principle for national discourses (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992), materialisation of those rights is very often dependent on ideas of ‘sameness’ on which those discourses rely. As such, the question of how official citizenship might translate into ‘effective’ citizenship has been of interest among the community for a number of years. Castles and Davidson (2000) discuss the importance of understandings of citizenship that recognise the real ambiguity of citizenship status. ‘Citizenship is not an either/or situation’, it is

¹⁴ The myth of common origin, and a homogenous national culture/religion as encapsulating totality, is central to such constructions (Yuval-Davis et al. 2005).

characterised by blurred boundaries, discontinuities and fluidity (2000, p. 103). Although formal access to citizenship is symbolised by the receipt of specific documents certifying membership (such as a passport, or here a ‘commissioner’s certificate’ of identity), ‘substantial citizenship’ can only be achieved if equal chances are given throughout the system (Castles and Davidson 2000). Talking of citizenship, as if it were a concrete and bounded construct, risks not only ignoring the *legal* barriers outside the narrow framework of citizenship law (Dauvergne 2000) but I would contend the *social* barriers that exclude in subtle but often highly institutionalised ways.¹⁵ As this study confirms, ideas of belonging and sameness can be integral to the ability to claim the legal status one (constitutionally) holds, but how is this understood by those navigating the social location of the ‘in-between’? In what way does identification with a socio-political community, and participation in its structures and activities therein, constitute citizenship—despite formal recognition of status?

When asked if they *believed* themselves to currently hold the citizenship they desired, the age group that was most likely to answer positively were those aged between 18 and 25. As a result of some legal knowledge this age group, particularly young males based in the capital, were also the only group to respond with reference to national or international law. A couple of young women did however refer specifically to the National Constitution stating that as they were born in Bangladesh after 1971 they should be considered citizens. As one explained, ‘we are citizens now, by law, but we need a court judgement or Government announcement so that we can prove this to people’ (female, 18–25). Overall, vastly divergent responses were given, on which the age of interviewees appeared to have the greatest impact. The older generation were much less likely to have any knowledge of the Constitution, and much more likely to believe that they were waiting for the Government to declare citizenship, until which time they were ‘without country’ (male, 50+) in a stateless limbo.

The possibility of a Government announcement, was widely discussed when research took place, but opinion as to its impact varied significantly (particularly as it was not clear whether it would alter the community’s status as such, or simply officially authorise a state of being already held). Interviewees were therefore asked whether they believed some form of official statement of this kind would improve their individual situation, and if so why; whether their *identity* as ‘Bangladeshi’ *depended* on some kind of formal recognition of citizenship, or not. Some of the people who answered ‘yes’ when asked whether or not they currently held citizenship (previous question) answered this question as if they did not. Some explained specifically that it did and they therefore felt ‘without identity’ as a result, ‘We don’t have any nationality: we’re not Indian, not Bangladeshi, not Pakistani, so we don’t have an identity’ (male, 25–50). Many however explained that their understanding of themselves as citizens did not require Governmental recognition, although their status and access to rights within that citizenship did. Few were able to articulate the conflict between these two positions better than one old man who simply explained, ‘I am a Bangladeshi citizen that just doesn’t have any rights’. Here

¹⁵ As Sieder argues, ‘Citizenship is often conceived of as a fixed and nonnegotiable set of rights and obligations, such as those embodied in a written constitution. However it is in fact best understood as a dynamic process rather than a static juridical construct’ (2001, p. 203).

citizenship is clearly a highly nebulous concept, and the space of in-between one of decided ambiguity.

A number of interviewees referred passionately to the idea of ‘proving’ their constitutional status through tangible and material markers in the form of documentation. Of these, predominantly male, interviewees, the ability to raise their voices as a result of such proof, was understood as a tool with which to fight for social equality. The issue of discrimination therefore becomes significant as ‘formal’ recognition is understood to be an important instrument with which to gain ‘substantive’ access. One middle-aged man in Dhaka explained, ‘as voters we will live as equals’, and ‘political parties will be able to offer to solve our problems in exchange for their vote. How will we get opportunity from politicians if we have no voting rights?’ (male, 26–49). A few older gentlemen in Dhaka agreed, ‘when we are on the voter list the local representatives will have to come and see us to get our vote which will give us some leverage politically’ (male, 25–50). ‘Identities of citizenship’ may not be dependent on ‘formal’ status therefore, but ‘effective’ citizenship appears difficult to achieve without it.

Social Discrimination and ‘the Camp’

As we saw in the first section, property ownership has to be understood as a key determinant of postcolonial citizenship (Daiya 2008). The legacy of this can be observed in the number of camp-based ‘Urdu speakers’ who believed the camp itself had become the primary barrier to achieving civil recognition. Again it is important to deconstruct the notion of a homogenous ‘Bihari’ diaspora by considering a range of variables intersecting with legal status and shaping attitudes to citizenship. Women of all ages, for example, were much less likely to discuss the ‘markers of citizenship’ than men,¹⁶ and on the whole less confident articulating the related issues. However, among those women who had previously lived outside, several succinctly explained that they first felt like a citizen when they moved outside the camp.

While it is true that ‘national citizenship remains indispensable for immigrant integration’ (Joppke 1999 p. 645), in this context, the reverse was understood to be more tangible. Integration was understood by the majority as indispensable for ‘effective’ national citizenship. Over half of those females present at the Dhaka focus group, and all of those at the one in Saidpur, although at first arguing that citizenship was important in itself, added later that as the camp created so much differentiation, nothing would really change until it was removed. One 18–25-year-old woman in Dhaka described the paper alone as ‘worthless if Bengalis don’t accept us, and they won’t accept us unless conditions change, without rehabilitation outside the camps’ (i.e. physical integration). Many understood integration *as* citizenship (or vice versa), assuming, as we have seen, that citizenship would automatically entail access to land outside the camps and very often abolition of the camps altogether: ‘Citizenship would remove the camp, so it will remove discrimination’ (female, 18–25). Others saw them slightly differently, not automatically conditioned upon each other, but contingent in some way. One

¹⁶ Such as ‘commissioner’s certificates’ necessary for formal employment etc.

middle-aged male explained that they needed citizenship not only to get good employment but to be ‘accepted by Bengalis’. Others spoke of relatives outside the camp who ‘now speak Bangla, have houses and enjoy rights’ (female, 25–50). Here, linguistic (/cultural) integration, physical integration and access to ‘effective citizenship’ are heavily co-defined. And according to the vast majority of respondents, above all else, it was ‘all about the camp; this is what creates the difference’ (female, 18–25; Dhaka FGD).

Confusion and Contingency—The Political Economy of Identification

In an influential ethnography of Southall, Baumann (1996) has observed the variable significance of ethnicity in different social situations arguing that it is an empirical question when and how identities become most relevant. In Bangladesh, interviewees from mixed parent backgrounds articulated particularly well the complexity of context and contingency. Inter-marriage between Bengalis and ‘Biharis’ is now not at all uncommon and most Urdu speakers have a Bengali marriage somewhere in their family. Some evidence even suggests that as many as 25% of camp residents are ethnically Bengali. Interviewees from mixed parent backgrounds, or those who had entered into mixed marriages, were the only group to use hyphenated identities with regularity. The reasons for their choices however were sometimes significant. One female over 50 years, for example, explained that her father and grandparents were native Bengali speakers from West Bengal but she herself had grown up in an Urdu-speaking community in Calcutta as her mother had been Urdu-speaking. She described herself as Bihari-Bangladeshi explaining that she was Bangladeshi simply because she was living in the country now. Although descent in Bangladesh is thought to be determined paternally, she did not describe herself as ethnically Bengali in any way. In fact her Bengali heritage did not appear to play into the construction of her own identity at all. She concluded by stating that her children would be Bengali, unlike her, because they were learning Bengali at school. That identity is conceptualised within the confines of language is in many ways unsurprising considering the social-political history of the ‘community’. As an identifiable cultural marker, or symbolic ‘border guard’ (Armstrong 1982), language constructs boundaries around minorities such as ‘Urdu speakers’ (Spivak 1992; Simon 1996; Temple and Edwards 2002). The degree to which a connection is made is nonetheless striking.

Following from Barth’s (1969) influential analysis of the boundary, Abner Cohen took the concept’s relational components and defined ethnic organisation as a kind of political organisation in which social interaction and social organisation both combine aspects of utility and meaning (Cohen 1974).¹⁷ One individual in the camps, of Bengali origin, appeared to support Cohen’s claims to *utility*. Her family were Bengali but like many others she had married an Urdu speaker and moved

¹⁷ In this way, ethnicity is used in competition for control of resources but circumscribed by ideologies of shared culture, origins and metaphoric kinship (Cohen 1969; Eriksen 2002). As Baumann (1996) observes, even the word ‘ethnic’ is relational, as is the criteria that determine whether or not it will be used. For example how ‘descent’ is defined is socially constructed, and differs significantly between groups.

into the camps some years earlier, alternating identification in relation to context and contingency:

“When there is an option to get any advantage out of saying I am Bihari, I do. Like when there was lots of relief in the camp because there was a fire, then I said I was Bihari. But if I need to do anything outside, I say am Bengali. It depends on the demand of the time. It is a fact, people don’t want to say this but it’s true” (female, 25–50).

There is danger in conceptualisations that accord agency too much value and discourses of resource competition (see Roosens 1989) have since been widely criticised for ignoring power differentials.¹⁸ Findings do however clearly demonstrate that the different criteria drawn on to define ethnic boundaries are highly situated, ascertained subjectively, relatively and contextually (Nagel 1994).

All respondents eventually provided some sort of meaningful overriding self-identification, reflecting some degree of hierarchical ordering (Eade 1997). Which identities predominated depending on context, audience and a balance between external and internal definitions (May 2001). Urdu speakers are not ‘dupes of the dominant discourse’, but individuals who develop ‘their discursive competences in close connection with the social facts of everyday life’ (Baumann 1996, p.204; Toyota 2003). A political economy of identification is clearly inherent in these choices, as connections, associations and relationships are disentangled, creating a complex emotional ordering of belonging.

Conclusions

While displaced populations are frequently denied citizenship rights on the basis that they are not registered as residents (Brun 2003), it is very often their ‘other-ascribed’ ethnic identifications that dominate popular discourse. The overlap between issues of property ownership/residence, and ethnic, cultural or linguistic identification is sometimes highly opaque. In the case of Bengal’s ‘Urdu speakers’, the very fact of their displacement (as a result of ethnic conflict), having come to represent an expression of ‘allegiance (to Pakistan) by conduct’, was used to deny their eligibility to the rights of citizenship. Here, as elsewhere, the use of property as a state technology of ethno-nationalism has critically impacted discourses of citizenship.

Set in the context of a highly ambiguous legal status, I argue that research into displaced populations such as this opens up important new sites of enquiry. The research challenges the assumption that ‘identities of citizenship’ are *dependent* on ‘formal’ status, although it argues that such ‘formal’ status is sometimes considered necessary for these ‘identities’ to be truly ‘effective’. Additionally, ‘formal’ citizenship alone is thought to be insufficient in the achievement of that ‘effectivity’ in the absence of (physical) integration that is here considered indispensable. Furthermore, where national identifications were appropriated they appeared to replace or supersede ‘ethnic’

¹⁸ In many cases ethnic identities are constructed (or imposed) from the outside by dominant groups and an important distinction must be made between self-ascription and that of others (Gingrich 2004; Baumann 1996; Bloul 1999).

affiliations held. A number of interviewees adopted an approach Malkki (1995) described as ‘the pragmatics of identity’, assuming the identity of citizenship to evade the discrimination of ethnic labelling, in an ultimate ‘quest for invisibility’ (p. 156).¹⁹ Decisions to adopt or reject identity labels were intimately associated with the socially shared classificatory structures that order the relationship between self and others (Baumann and Gingrich 2004; Hall 1996). Constructions of belonging can be seen as situated in relation to context and contingency, and the ‘process of ‘selfing’ and ‘othering’ (Baumann and Gingrich 2004), observed empirically, becomes part of one dialogic whole.

As the paper demonstrates, relationships to rights, and self-identification, are dictated by many axis of differentiation. The intersections of subject positionality presented here reinforce the necessity to examine intra-group difference in ethnic identity formation. While results show that identification can clearly be multiple, they also reveal that the ‘fluidity’ of the notion may have been overstated. All respondents were able to provide some sort of meaningful overriding self-identification, reflecting some degree of hierarchical ordering. None of the Urdu speakers I spoke to exhibited identities that were amorphous, disparate or intangible. Connections, associations and relationships were unravelled to reflect a complex emotional ordering of belonging. In the last 20 years, approaches to ethnic identity inspired by post-structuralism and the 1990s deconstructivist turn, witnessed a discursive explosion. They revealed that identities were not singular or discrete forms, but overlapping, intersecting, dynamic and adaptable, changing and evolving in response to individual, contextual, historical and political factors (Gilroy 1997; Baumann 1996; Gardner 1998). Results presented here however argue that they are nonetheless patterned, structured and identifiable. I believe conceptualisations that recognise that these distinctions are mappable in relation to subject positionality, economies of power, and context could open the door for greater rigour and productive debate.

Some Urdu speakers reinforce a cultural identity that distinguishes them from the Bengali majority, while others embrace a ‘Bangladeshi’ identification, seeking an ‘assimilation’ through which they can mask their stigmatising Urdu ancestry. A dialectic between the two positions is formed, structured in relation to the political economy of the world around them. How this will change in light of the recent court ruling, and what this means for the future of the community and traditional Urdu culture in the region, are important questions to ask, raising debates of relevance not only in Bangladesh, but among minority communities across the globe.

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¹⁹ Shifting categories and the creative management of identities have been examined elsewhere by writers such as Vincent (1971, 1982).

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