

Geneva Camp -- hope fades away

SHARMIN MEHRIBAN

In a congested quarter in Mohammadpur, behind an alley of shops lays a single line of toilets and tubewells. This leads to alleys of single rooms, each about the size of an average bedroom, occupied by a single family. The rooms are simultaneously used for cooking and sleeping.

The appearance of the inhabitants, dressed in saris and lungis, cooking rice on kerosene or earthen stoves and speaking in a Bengali that resembles the Dhakaite dialect would easily give an impression of any ordinary impoverished Bangalee. But in reality, this is a community still waiting for a national identity and paying the price for a mistake committed 34 years ago.

To them December 16 does not represent the day of liberation but the day they lost their citizenship for collaborating with the then occupying Pakistani forces in 1971 against the creation of Bangladesh. They were denied citizenship in independent Bangladesh and were

ultimately converted into stateless 'stranded Pakistanis', commonly known as Biharis.

"We regret what we did in the past," said M Shoukat Ali, general secretary and presidium member of Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC).

Like Ali, many Biharis fled their homes after the Liberation War. They gathered in territories dominated by other Biharis. The International Committee of the Red Cross set up the Geneva Camp in 1972 for their protection. And the government declared their property as 'abandoned'.

"My father was in government service and had a house in Dinajpur," said Ali. "But after liberation we did not dare to go back there in fear of harassment. We also lost legal rights to the property as we lost our citizenship."

The origin of the inhabitants at the Geneva Camp, also known as the Bihari camp, is Bihar in India. They are Sunni Muslims. After the partition between India and Pakistan in 1947, many of them migrated to the then East Pakistan.

Many of the residents still

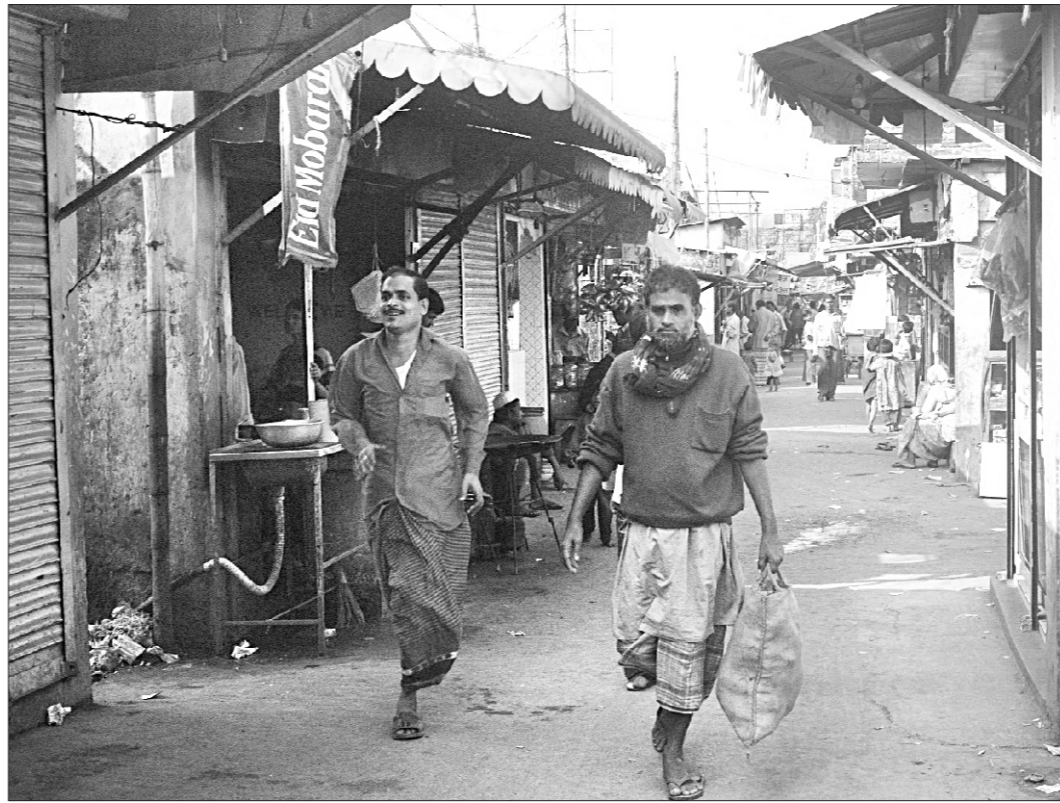
have relatives in Pakistan and some of the families have been separated after the repatriation in 1993, when 56 families were repatriated to Pakistan.

The Rabita Trust, a Saudi Arabia-based NGO, constructed 41,500 housing units with necessary facilities in various districts in Punjab (Pakistan) to accommodate them. Currently the Trust is appealing for donations to repatriate the remaining Biharis.

"We still keep in touch with our relatives in Pakistan," said the vice president of SPGRC.

The Geneva Camp has nine sectors with a varying number of rooms in each sector. Around 4,500 families live in the camp. There are 250 community toilets, two mosques, a junior school (up to class-VIII) and a few maklabs (primary religious education schools) inside the camp. There are a few tubewells and community bathrooms, some of them without roofs or doors.

The school currently has 360 students, five classrooms, and seven teachers. It operates in two shifts. The students are not required to sing the national anthem of Bangladesh, like in



Residents of the Geneva Camp continue to live a miserable life.

other schools, and are taught Urdu as an additional subject.

The residents at the camp have access to medical

services in government hospitals but are deprived of cleaning services of the Dhaka City Corporation.

However, the camp residents are exempted from paying electricity bills and house rent. "These are the only privileges of

having refugee status," said Abdul Jabbar Khan, president of SPGRC.

Most the Biharis are barbers, tailors, butchers, embroidery workers, shopkeepers, salespersons, richshawpullers and security guards, as no Bihari can have a government job.

"Many private employers prefer Biharis for recruitment as security guards, as they are diligent in their jobs even with low pay," said Khan.

Although deceased Biharis are buried in public graveyards, Bihari children are not registered at birth. Consequently, they are exempted from government health programmes. They are unable to enrol in government schools and colleges while private institutions are comparatively expensive.

The lack of citizenship also means no passports and voting rights. "As we have no passports, we cannot travel abroad for jobs, to see our relatives in Pakistan or even to perform hajj," said Ali.

For the older generation, repatriation to Pakistan is the only solution to their problems.

"We speak their language and have the same culture," said the vice president.

A survey conducted in 1992 revealed that 2.83 lakh 'stranded Pakistanis' are willing to go to Pakistan. When asked about the views of the younger generation, Jabbar Khan said that they would go where their families lead them.

For the present generation of Biharis like Mostafa, a man in his late 20s, returning to Pakistan means more than just returning to one's roots. Living in a single room with his family of five, his only concern is the well-being of his children. He also said that his uncle, aunt and brothers live in Pakistan and are comparatively better off.

According to him, the Biharis who are financially well off can afford to leave this camp and do not need to return to Pakistan. "If my daughter can get a secured education and a respectable job in Bangladesh, then I won't think of settling in Pakistan," he added.

13x8