

MOVE TO ENROL BIHARIS AS VOTERS

A glimmer of hope amid doubts and despair



Geneva Camp: The day of the stranded Pakistanis starts with stepping into filth as they come out of their so-called houses in the morning.

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Urdu-speaking Bihari community has welcomed the caretaker government's recent move to enrol them as voters. The community, especially the younger generation, sees new hopes in the move, yet doubts remain about the future.

Known as 'Stranded Pakistanis,' the Biharis have been searching for a place called home for the last 36 years. The post-1971 generation who were born in Bangladesh have been waiting for a change of their status as the 'citizens of nowhere'.

An inter-ministerial meeting on September 6 agreed in principle to include the Urdu-speaking people, who were born in Bangladesh after the Liberation War, in the voter list.

Those who were between the age group of 10 and 18 years during the Liberation War and showed loyalty to Bangladesh will also be on the voter list.

"None of the previous governments took such a bold step. The move is a milestone and extremely commendable. It will definitely change the fate of many of us," said Md Hasan from the Association of Young Generation of the Urdu speaking community.

Hasan however added that there are concerns about some issues that might create new confusions. The decision to make some Biharis voters has raised fear of eviction, displacement and an uncertain future for the camp dwellers.

"I will exercise my voting rights in the next election for sure. But what will happen after we become voter, what is actually waiting for us in the future?" asked Wasim, one of the post-war generation camp dwellers. This is the question that many have been asking in the camp with fear that they might be evicted again.

These people have been deprived of their basic rights for a very long time. Without citizenship they were denied access to property, education, skills, social security.

"I at least have a place to stay in the Geneva Camp. But I don't have any property. I don't have education and a secured job. Where will I end up after this?" asked Wasim.

"How do we prove our loyalty

to Bangladesh? Is there any means of measuring loyalty?" questioned Hasan. "According to the criteria, I will be a voter, which means I will be a citizen here but what about my father, my uncle or others? What will be their fate?"

A segment of the older generation has been hoping all these years that one day Pakistan would give them a place for living. After 36 years of 'betrayal,' older generation's hopes of returning to a land that didn't want them are slowly fading away.

The older generation who does not fit in the set categories for making them voters is wondering about their status and fearing whether they will be evicted from the camp at this age. They feel their fate is hanging in a balance.

Md Ramjan, 60, said, "My family has come here about 40 years ago. We've known this place as our home all these years."

Masqud Alam, 65, who does not fit to be a voter in any category, said, "I have come to Bangladesh 45 years ago from Patna (India) with my parents. I have nowhere else to go at this age. I want to know my status here."

Ahmed Ilias, executive director of Al-Falah Bangladesh, an organisation of the Urdu speaking community, has many questions. "If someone says I want to be a voter here, is there a better way of expressing loyalty? If Golam Azam can be a citizen of this country as per birth rights, then why can't we?"

There remains confusion about the number of Urdu speaking people living in Bangladesh as the census always ignores them. There are many who live outside the camp and have already mingled well with the mainstream population.

However, according to a survey conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are around 250,000 to 300,000 Biharis in Bangladesh. Around 160,000 of them are languishing in as many as 116 camps across the country.

The survey also reveals that some 50,000 to 52,000 Biharis are living in Dhaka in around 30 camps. The largest of all these camps is the Geneva Camp in Mohammadpur where around 22,000 Biharis live in around 3,000 households.

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Satgumbuj mosque surrounded by green trees on all sides was built in 1680. The architectural design shows resemblance of the structures built at the time of Mughal Subedar Saista Khan. The river Buriganga passed alongside the mosque. This site was selected because of the serenity of the area. Satgumbuj is situated at Zafarabad on Satmasjid Road. The Buriganga has now changed its course and greenery has faded away.

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Life stranded in 80 sq ft room for long 36 years

CITY CORRESPONDENT

Mohammad Raju first arrived at the Geneva Camp in Mohammadpur 36 years ago when his family took shelter in the camp along with many other Bihari families after the liberation war ended.

In the beginning there were only tents. With the arrival of new faces in the families, the camp took a permanent shape with brick walled, tin-shed quarters.

"I was only ten years old when we came here in December 1971. A single-room house was enough for our four-member family at that time," Raju recalled. "My family gradually grew bigger. Now we are 10 members in the family."

Raju lived in the same room in E block of the Geneva Camp since he moved in. Every time a new member arrived, his household arrangement changed. They tried to utilise every inch possible. Gradually the room became cramped, damp and dirty.

Today the 80 sq ft room serves every purpose. The family members sleep in the bed hoisted up at least 4 feet to make room for several goats to stay under the bed at night. Some families use this space to store necessary goods.

This correspondent found in some rooms another layer of bed above, almost touching the ceiling. Without a ladder it is not possible to get up there. Cooking, dining and other household chores take place in the same room.

In another block of the camp, Meherun's day starts waiting in a long queue in front of the common toilets every morning.

There are 250 toilets in the camp for about 22,000 people living in around 3,000 households. Half of the toilets are now unusable.

"Every morning I have to wait in a line of about 100 men and women to go to toilet," Meherun said. "Those who go to work early face hard times in the morning."

Privacy is a luxury in the camp, said Meherun. "Because of space constraints men and women are forced to take bath at the same place. There are around 50 bathing space in the camp majority of them does not have roof or wall."

Collecting water is another ordeal, said another resident named Baby. "Most of the time foul water comes out of the line. To collect the dirty water we have to stand in queue."

"The water line in my block is

Meherun's day starts waiting in a long queue in front of the common toilets every morning. There are 250 toilets in a block of the camp for about 22,000 people living in around 3,000 households. Half of the toilets are now unusable.



STORY ZAKIR HOSSAIN

out of order. I go to another block to collect water," she added. There are 25 water taps in the camp, creating a competition among the dwellers.

Scuffles involving the water tap are very frequent in the camp.

During Ramadan the ordeal has a different twist. Residents need to speed up their Sehri because of limited number of water tap and toilets.

Last renovation in the camp area took place in 1986 after a fire devastated the place. Today the entire premise is filled with garbage here and there. Without proper sewer system dirty water from the toilet go straight to the walkway inside the camp.

During the rainy season it reaches in the living quarters. Food poisoning and waterborne diseases are very

common in the camp. For the entire population there is just one clinic with no doctor posted, said the residents.

Literacy rate is very low among the Biharis. Today there are only 6 primary schools for them in Bangladesh. One of them is for Geneva Camp dwellers run by Plan Bangladesh, an NGO. Around 100 children go there.

The community produced only one master's degree holder in 36 years.

The living condition of Biharis in other places is worse than that in Geneva Camp. With rubbish piled up in every alley, with broken toilets, dirty water, messy pathway and damp living quarters, Geneva Camp is considered the finest among the 116 camps.

Community comes to the rescue of a park at Baridhara

DURDANA GHIAS

Amid the growing concrete jungle a park in the city stands out to offer the locals a breath of fresh air and the opportunity to walk in the serene ambience of the Gulshan-Baridhara lakeside.

After the success story of a well-maintained Baridhara Park, the Baridhara community has now started developing Baridhara Lakeside Park, a long 20-bigha strip beside the huge lake.

The tranquillity and cleanliness of the park invites those craving for a little walk. Among the numerous parks occupied illegally or left in a deplorable state, the Lakeside Park must be an exception.

Abdur Rauf, general secretary, Baridhara Society, said seeing their

successful maintenance of Baridhara Park, Rajuk has handed them over the Baridhara Lakeside Park around one and a half years ago.

Brick pavements, tessellated grilles, halogen lights, walkways and electric poles were set up spending over Tk 25 lakh by the members of Baridhara Society, an organisation of the local community.

After the handover the Society had made tremendous efforts to free the park from the grip of illegal occupiers. False cases, threats on life were some elements the Society had to deal with during the process of eviction.

Just a year ago this park was a safe haven for drug addicts and antisocial elements. It was dotted

"After receiving their consent we

went to the park to ask the occupiers to leave it. But still they did not listen. We had to coax them, warn them and even had to use force to make them leave the place. It took us at least six months to free the park from illegal occupiers," said Rauf.

However, the Society could not evict five to six multi-storey houses in the park on five to six katha plots allotted illegally during the rule of Ersad. Some of these houses encroached on the park's space by setting up backyard garden, which were later removed by the Society, said locals.

For the residents this is one place where they can walk safely. "It is very crucial for a congested city like Dhaka to have a place for a walk. I love walking but it is hard to find well-maintained open spaces in this city," said Diane, a regular park user.

Some rules are followed to keep the park clean and quiet. Smoking, munching on nuts, gossiping and wearing informal dress like lungi are prohibited.

The Society will ensure 24-hour security at the park after its main gate is constructed. The gate's design has been approved by Rajuk. Besides, an architect has prepared a master plan for the park's beautification.

Rajuk is assisting in setting up walkways in the park.

Another park well maintained for 7 years

Baridhara Society has been also maintaining the Baridhara Park from its own funding. DCC handed the park over to the Society around seven years ago. After that they had done the design of the park. Various types of flowerbeds and trees were planted according to the design.

The park is open for all.

"Even street urchins can enter the park. But they never pluck the flowers. Even when the flowers fall on the pavement no one collects those," said Rauf, talking about the sense of discipline among the park users.

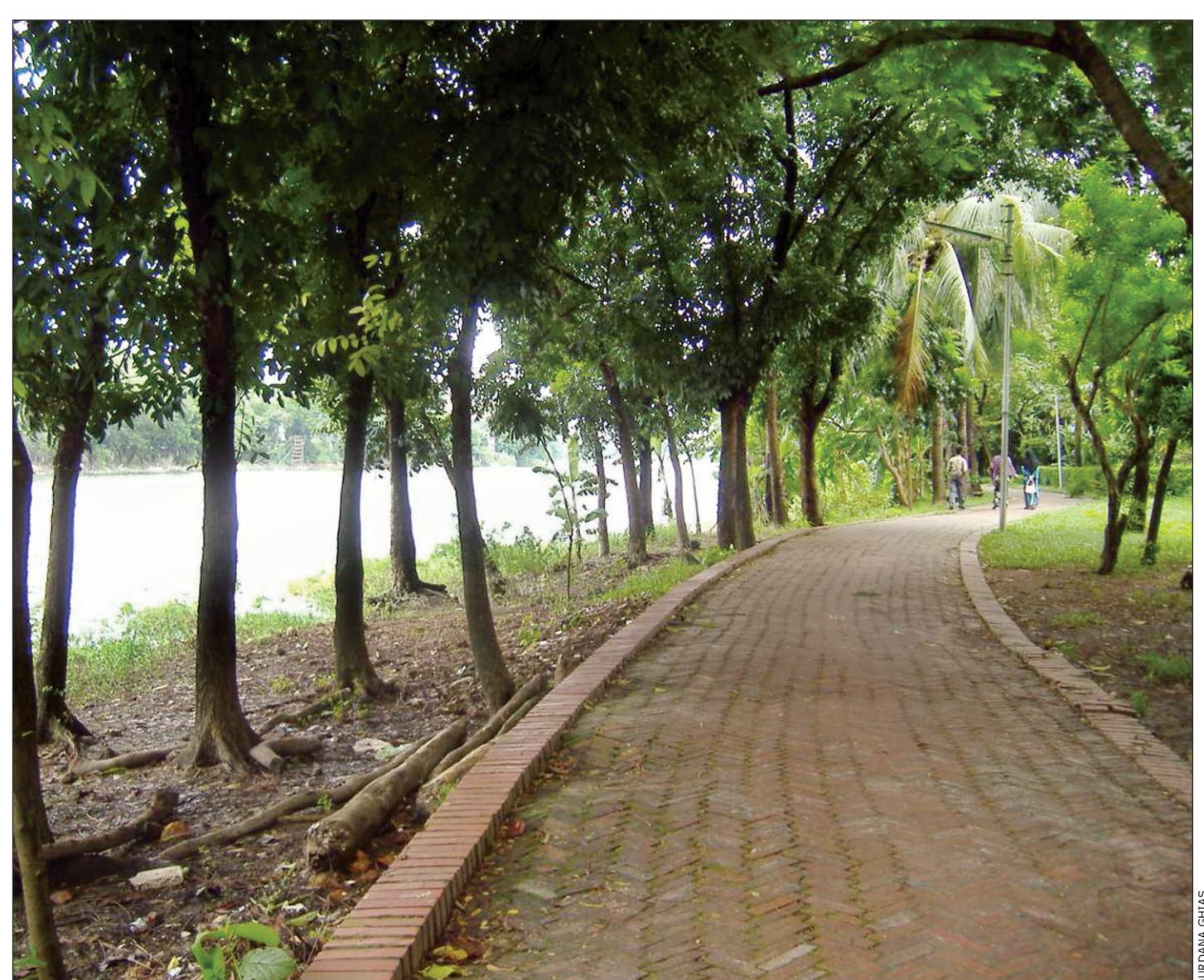
There are several posters and signboards in the park that

encourages people to walk and keep obesity and other diseases away. Smoking, munching on nuts, gossiping and wearing informal dress are forbidden inside the park.

DCC is spending crores of taka in maintaining the city's parks but most of them are in a bad shape. "If these parks can be handed over to community they can be maintained properly with much less expense," Rauf said.

"We introduced 24-hour security system in the park. Seven workers are employed for maintenance. The park is open from 5:00am to 10:00pm and 2:00pm to 5:30pm. City Bank Ltd gives an amount of Tk 2.5 lakh annually for the maintenance of the park," he added.

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A strip of walkway in the Baridhara Lakeside Park.

DURDANA GHIAS