that community concluded that migrating to Pakistan was their only choice, Ilias was unwilling to surrender his community's rightful claim to citizenship of Bangladesh. He refused to share the view that an entire community should be punished for the crimes committed by a section of its members. From day one of independence Ilias argued for trial of all war criminals, Urdu speaking or Bengali, to ensure justice and bring a fair closure for the families that endured brutalities; but he doggedly opposed blanket branding of the entire community for the misdeeds of some.

Ilias devoted the rest of his life driven by the passion to serve his community. On the one hand, he provided leadership to engage in what turned out to be a long drawn out struggle to re-claim Bangladeshi citizenship rights. On the other, he had to counter the pressure and dirty tactics of those who were pushing the barrel of repatriation to Pakistan. Needless to say, it was a daunting task, as an overwhelming majority of stranded camp dwellers opted and registered to go to Pakistan. Ilias realised that a community deprived of education and other basic entitlements of civic life was most susceptible to manipulation by interested quarters. It is in this context that his Al Falah continued to render education and health services for the camp dwellers.



Ahmed Illias, poet and activist.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

The failings of Bangladeshi NGOs may be put on record here. While a number of them were securing international accolades for rendering education, health care, skills training and upholding of human rights of various groups of underprivileged, no national NGO or rights organisation worth the name was ever engaged with the camp dwelling Urdu speaking community. Likewise, while the mandated international agencies were engaged in futile protracted debates about the nomenclature of this community (refugees, internally displaced or nationals of Bangladesh or Pakistan) and determining their status, the development partners remained oblivious of the human security and basic needs of the community. The government of Bangladesh in its turn was happy to affix the label of 'Stranded Pakistanis' to the community and felt contented by providing them irregular supply of basic relief with endemic 'system loss' and power supply to camps. It also made half-hearted attempts for their repatriation to Pakistan.

It is in such bleak conditions that ten members of the Bihari youth under Ilias's guidance moved the higher judiciary for confirming their Bangladeshi citizenship. With astute Senior Advocate MI Faruqi leading the case, they secured the verdict in their favour in 2003. Although the Election Commission was forced to enroll the applicants as voters on court's directive, it refused to apply the same principle to enroll other members of the community. It was only in 2008 an unequivocal directive of the Court made the Election Commission register all members of the community as voters, if they chose to. Ilias's contribution was immense in this legal battle of the camp dwelling Urdu speaking community.

Ilias's struggle for the establishment of rights of his community members took a new turn after gaining of citizenship rights. Rehabilitation with dignity became the cornerstone in this phase.

Ilias is acutely aware of the need to document the history and achievements of the Urdu speaking community of Bangladesh. His 'Biharis: the Indian Emigres in Bangladesh' is a seminal work that traces the movement and struggle of the community. His two recent works on Urdu literature and literary practice in Bangladesh will serve as important reference on the subject.

In his struggle to revitalise Urdu language and literature in Bangladesh Ilias was fortunate to count on the support of a few national figures. Included among them are poet Asad Chowdhury and freedom fighter Kamal Lohani. While sharing Ilias's vision, these individuals have endured disparagement from a section of mainstream intelligentsia and the establishment, many of whom are still guided by prejudice and chauvinism.

The Bangla-Urdu Shahitya Foundation organised an event to celebrate the life and achievements of Ahmed Ilias on the eve of his 80th birthday. It was heartening to note Prof Harunur Rashid, former Director General of Bangla Academy, poet Asad Chowdhury and president of Jatiya Kabita Parishad poet Habibullah Shirazi paying glowing tributes to this Urdu poet along with jurist MI Faruqui and Prof. Niaz Zaman. It is hoped more will join Ilias and his associates in their pursuit for a culturally plural and tolerant society in Bangladesh.

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