

WHERE IS HOME?

RASHA JAMEEL

For as long as I can remember, my grandfather would tell me about the events surrounding his migration from Sahasram, a city in Bihar, India. He'd tell me about the struggles he faced with his rights as a migrant all on his own, about the difficulties that his children, my father and his siblings, had to go through, trying to identify as one with the rest of the Bangladeshi citizens.

Growing up, I almost always reacted to my grandfather's stories with insensitivity and dismissed them as ancient history. I didn't think it would ever have an effect on my life in any way. "Why should I bother with ancestors I've never met or with the ancestral lands I've never set foot on?", I'd think to myself. After all, I was a Bangladeshi citizen, born and raised in this country.

Oh, how wrong I was.

I remained oblivious throughout pre-school and primary school. It wasn't until middle school that reality dealt its first blow.

A classmate walked up to me on the first day of fifth grade and promptly remarked that I looked different than the rest of them. That I looked "Bihari-type". It turned out that a lot of my other classmates felt the same way. As did some of my teachers. Thus began my slow and steady alienation from the rest of the class. I still had some difficulty understanding the situation even when I was made fun of for trying to express my interest in Bengali festivities, when I wasn't taken seriously whilst carrying out class projects on the Liberation War. The situation worsened, I was occasionally addressed with derogatory terms such as "ghoti", had my patriotism doubted, had my citizenship questioned. I simply didn't understand the discrimination and hate – I was a Bangladeshi citizen who spoke Bangla as her first language. I wasn't the same as my ancestors.

Turns out, I wasn't the only one on the receiving end of ethnic and racial discrimination.

There were a handful of other kids who were also deemed as "different". Their facial features and accent were a little too unique, names a little too outside the norm. They were all denied acceptance because they all stood out due to the diverse nature of their ethnicity.

A friend tells me about the experience of being asked as a kid if frogs and snakes were part of his daily diet, because of how he looked. "Incidents such as these made me feel very different from others, and that I didn't fit in," he says.

Unfortunately, such discrimination wasn't limited to school.

I personally witnessed the sentiment



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

being sustained by bigots for over a decade.

Things at university were far worse than what I'd faced at school. All those who had small eyes were collectively referred to with derogatory terms. Everyone who had a slight ethnic accent in their Bangla like I once did got the same derogatory treatment. Everyone deemed even the slightest bit "different" on grounds of ethnic diversity, was eligible for discrimination, for being made to question their idea of home.

"You're not from here."

"Where are you from, really?"

The hateful comments, the incessant questioning - it's everywhere. For those of us who identify as ethnically diverse, it's practically impossible to attend a social gathering and not get stared at or extensively questioned about where we're "really from". Our responses of "we're Bangladeshi" are only regarded with further scrutiny, since it turns out that how we describe ourselves doesn't

really matter. Us young adults, we will always be defined by our ancestors.

A lot of the kids like me have somewhat accepted that there's an uncertain future in store for them, one that comes without job security. All because of their backgrounds, which gives rise to the social stigma surrounding their very existence. They all know how difficult it'll be to attain a well-paying job in a place where they were born with a social status deemed disrespectful by the wide majority.

Another person I had a conversation with describes an unsavoury experience they recently had, "My family recently moved to a different part of the city, and when the furniture was being moved in, my parents were conversing between themselves in Urdu. The neighbours may have heard them because according to my parents, when they eventually met the neighbours, they just stared at my parents instead of greeting them. One day, I even heard the neighbour telling

other people in the building that my family would 'pollute' the building. This incident made me feel really angry."

Stereotyping and bigotry continues to run rampant in my university campus, the same as the rest of my country, the same as the rest of the world.

In the 50s, my grandfather had to adapt to changes in a foreign land so his children could then call it home. In the early 2000s, the idea of home is something that I, his granddaughter, was struggling to comprehend. This cycle of identity crises keeps finding new frontiers as borders become rigid, only to be endured by generations to come.

Reference

DW.com (October 10, 2019). *The neglected 'Bihari' community in Bangladesh.*

The writer is using a pseudonym because she still feels insecure when talking about her Bihari ancestry. Tell her it's okay at rasha.jameel@outlook.com