

PANEL: *REFUGEES AT THE URBAN FRONTIER*

## GENEVA CAMP MDHAMMADPUR AND NEW SUBURBS IN DHAKA

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### INTRODUCTION

THE PAPERS IN THIS PANEL TRY TO MAKE THREE LARGER POINTS. THEY ARE AS FOLLOWS: FIRST, THE HISTORY OF POSTCOLONIAL URBANIZATION LACKS A NECESSARY SELF-CRITICALITY WITHOUT THINKING THROUGH THE ROLE OF REFUGEES IN THE PROCESS. AS THE CITIES BEGAN TO REPRESENT THE NEW NATION, MUCH OF OUR URBAN PLANNING AND GOVERNANCE BECAME PREOCCUPIED WITH THE SETTLEMENT AND DISTRIBUTION OF REFUGEES ACROSS THE SUBCONTINENT, INCLUDING IN PAKISTAN AND BANGLADESH. THANKS TO THE EXCELLENT SCHOLARSHIP AND HOW THESE CITIES AND RESPECTIVE STATES HAVE MANAGED OR NOT TO REHABILITATE THE REFUGEES, WE CAN NOW ASK ANOTHER QUESTION, NAMELY: HOW DID THE REFUGEES CONTRIBUTE TO THE MAKING OF THESE CITIES AND STATES. IT IS NOT A QUESTION OF THEIR SELF-ORGANIZATION BUT THEIR ORGANIZATION OF THE OUTSIDE WORLD – WHAT IS THEIR STRUCTURAL FUNCTION IN THE LARGER SCHEME OF URBANIZATION. OUR SECOND POINT SHOULD EXPLAIN THIS FURTHER. CONTRARY TO THE POPULAR PERCEPTION OF REFUGEES AS A DRAIN ON VITAL RESOURCES AND CONTINUOUS THREAT TO URBAN ORDER, WE ARGUE THAT THE ROLE OF REFUGEES IS ESSENTIAL TO A WIDE RANGE OF POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS THAT ACTUALLY MAKE UP URBANIZATION. THESE INCLUDE CAUSING EXPANSION IN POOR AND MIDDLE CLASS HOUSING ALONG WITH THE NETWORKS OF PETTY TRADE AND COMMERCE, LEADING MAJOR SHIFTS IN LAND USE AND RAISING PERIPHERAL LAND PRICES AS WELL AS MAKING AVAILABLE DIFFERENT NETWORKS OF LABOR AND LIVELIHOOD AT DIFFERENT SCALES. I BELIEVE WE ARE YET TO SUFFICIENTLY INVESTIGATE THE ROLE OF THESE FACTORS IN POSTCOLONIAL URBANIZATION, IN TERMS OF THE CITY INFRASTRUCTURE AND ITS HABITUS, AND THAT IS WHERE WE SHOULD BE HEADING. HAVING ACHIEVED ITS EMINENCE THROUGH SCHOLARSHIP ON REFUGEES AND MOVING TOWARDS LOGICAL GOVERNMENTALITY, I BELIEVE A CONFERENCE OF THE CALCUTTA RESEARCH GROUP IS THE IDEAL PLACE TO SUBMIT SUCH A PROPOSITION. THE THIRD POINT OF THE PANEL CONCERNS SOMETHING THAT IS IMPLICIT IN THE FIRST PAPER AND FLAGGED IN THE SECOND PAPER. IT IS A POINT I WANT TO UNPACK AND UNDERLINE HERE.

WHEN WE BEGIN TO SEE THE REFUGEE AS A POSTCOLONIAL URBAN ACTOR, IT ALLOWS A NEW WINDOW ON HINDSIGHT TO THE PARTITION, WHICH NOW LONGER APPEARS A TRAGIC AND ACCIDENTAL EVENT. ON HINDSIGHT THE PARTITION ACQUIRES A DEFINITE PURPOSE, A CERTAIN CAREER AND THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF A HISTORICAL CONJUNCTURE, A MAJOR AGENCY. IT UNLEASHES A FORCE OF MUCH LONGER DURATION THAN THE EVENT, WHICH SPECIFICALLY WORKS TO ARRANGE AND DISTRIBUTE MASSES, MAKE AND UNMAKE SPACES, ARREST AND CREATE FLOWS OF ASSETS AND PROPERTY, AMEND OLD RULES AND CREATE NEW

LAWS TO REGULATE POPULATIONS, IN SHORT, AND RE-TERRITORIALIZE THE NATION, ALBEIT ON A LIMITED SCALE. AT ANY RATE THE REFUGEES ARE INTEGRAL IN MANY WAYS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SEVERAL CITIES IN THE SUBCONTINENT, INCLUDING THE CAPITAL CITIES. THIS IS WHAT MY PANEL MEMBERS HAVE TRIED TO ESTABLISH. I WILL ILLUSTRATE IT FURTHER WITH THE CASE OF DHAKA. AS WE SHALL SEE, MY CASE ALSO REVEALS THE CURRENT STATE OF THE PARTITION REFUGEES, A POPULATION BOUND IN A CAMP LIKE SPACE WHERE INSTEAD OF A PAST EVENT THE PARTITION CONTINUES TO LINGER AND DECIDE THE PRESENT. IT RUNS CONTRARY TO THE NARRATIVE WE KNOW. THE ORIGINAL REFUGEES HAVE BEEN REHABILITATED AND ABSORBED BY HOST SOCIETIES FOLLOWING MIGRATION; THE CURRENT STATE IS RESULT OF NEW CYCLES OF MIGRATION. ALTHOUGH CORRECT IN A STRICTLY NARROW SENSE, WHAT THIS STUDY MISSES OUT IS ABSOLUTELY CRUCIAL: THAT THERE REMAINS A LARGER NECESSITY TO *MAINTAIN* A CLASS OF REFUGEES AND PRECARIOUS MIGRANTS, TO CARRY OUT THE PROCESS WE CALL URBANIZATION. THIS NEED HAS ONLY INTENSIFIED WITH THE NEOLIBERAL SHIFT TO SERVICE SECTOR, FINANCE CAPITAL AND REAL ESTATE. WE MUST THEN RECONSIDER THE PARTITION AS A LARGER STRATEGY, SIMILAR TO A POLITICAL PRIMITIVE ACCUMULATION, WHERE THE FUNCTION OF REFUGEES IS TO BEGIN WITH LIKE A RESERVE ARMY OF LABOR.

WHAT FOLLOWS WILL PRESENT THE SPECIFIC CASE OF A SIGNIFICANTLY LARGE REFUGEE SETTLEMENT – THE GENEVA CAMP, LOCATED IN AN AREA CALLED MDHAMMADPUR IN THE WEST OF DHAKA, WHERE NEW SUBURBS STARTED EMERGING AROUND 2000 AND UNDERGOING RAPID AND LARGE SCALE EXPANSION FROM 2015. THE PAPER HAS TWO SECTIONS. THE FIRST PART GIVES A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE URBAN GROWTH OF DHAKA AND THE REDEVELOPMENT OF MDHAMMADPUR IN THE PAKISTAN PERIOD TO REHABILITATE THE PARTITION REFUGEES. THE SECOND PART OFFERS A DETAILED ACCOUNT OF THE BIHARI MUSLIM POPULATION LIVING IN THE GENEVA CAMP. WE TALK OF THEIR SOCIAL MARGINALIZATION, LABOR AND LIVELIHOODS, AND A STRATEGIC SENSE OF SELFHOOD AS PART OF THEIR POLITICS. TO CONCLUDE WE TOUCH UPON THE LATEST URBAN GROWTH IN THIS AREA SHAPED BY CONTEMPORARY CAPITAL, WHERE THE CAMP SITS LIKE AN ISLAND OF ANACHRONISM, AN ALIEN SPACE IN THE HEART OF NEW DHAKA.

## **SECTION 1: THE GROWTH OF DHAKA AND MDHAMMADPUR**

\* THE RIVER *BURIGANGA* IS A MERE TRICKLE IN THE 2017 LAND USE MAP OF DHAKA. IT IS PUSHED SO FAR BELOW INTO THE BACKGROUND OF THE CURRENT SPREAD OF DHAKA THAT WE FIND VERY HARD TO IMAGINE HOW THE CITY BEGAN FOUR HUNDRED YEARS AGO\*. IT STARTED WITH A THIN LINE OF SETTLEMENTS RIGHT NEXT TO THE RIVER, THREADING THE NORTHERN BANK DURING THE LATE MUGHAL PERIOD. THE RIVER WAS BACK THEN AND IN GENERAL RIVERS ARE CENTRAL TO LIFE AND TRANSPORT IN THE WIDER REGION, BEING A DELTA. HOWEVER, AT LEAST IN THE ECONOMIC SENSE THIS SIGNIFICANCE IS NOW ON A RAPID DECLINE, AS MEGA BRIDGES ARE BEING BUILT ACROSS THE MAJOR RIVERS LIKE YAMUNA, BURIGANGA AND PADMA. LARGE PARTS OF THESE RIVERS ARE UNDERGOING LANDFILL AND THE BURIGANGA IS NO LONGER THE MOST ATTRACTIVE PART OF THE

CITY. BACK IN THE MUGHAL PERIOD, THIS IS WHERE DHAKA WAS, WITH MUCH OF ITS PUBLIC LIFE, URBAN CHARACTERS AND FANCY MANSIONS AND PALACES RIGHT NEXT TO RIVER.

OUR SITE, MDHAMMADPUR, WAS A SPARSELY POPULATED BORDER OF MUGHAL DHAKA. MORE OF AN OUTPOST PRIOR TO FLOODING IT HAD NO SIGNIFICANT HABITATION. LARGELY MARSHY AND LOW LAND, LYING VERY CLOSE TO THE RIVER, IT MARKED THE CITY'S LIMIT TO THE WEST, WHILE CENTRE LAY DOWN IN THE SOUTH IN LOCALITIES LIKE GENDARIA AND SADARGHAAT, THE BIG TERMINUS OF RIVER TRANSPORT SYSTEM, NEXT TO THE AHSANMANZIL THAT HAD USED MUGHAL ROYALTY. THE CITY GAVE UP GROWING ALONG THE RIVER AND STARTED SPREADING NORTHWARD INSTEAD UNDER THE BRITISH RULE, TURNING ITS BACK TO THE RIVER, LIKE IN DELHI AND KOLKATA, MOVING TO LAND LOCKED AREAS AND USING SURFACE TRANSPORT MORE AND MORE HEAVILY. HOWEVER, DESPITE NEW ROADS COMING UP NOT TOO MANY SETTLEMENTS DEVELOPED IN COLONIAL DHAKA. IN CONTRAST A LARGE NUMBER OF MODERN SETTLEMENTS, RESIDENTIAL AREAS AND IMPORTANT COMMERCIAL LOCALITIES LIKE MOTIJHEEL CAME UP IN THE EARLY POSTCOLONIAL PERIOD, UNDER MILITARY RULE IN THE PAKISTAN REGIME. AYUB KHAN BUILT THE FIRST EMBANKMENT THAT STARTED THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE AREA CALLED MDHAMMADPUR. UNDER THE LIKES OF HIM, THE PAKISTAN REGIME SET OFF A NEW SPATE OF URBANIZATION, MAINLY BY CLAIMING MARSHLANDS AFTER STOPPING THEIR INUNDATION WITH CONCRETE EMBANKMENTS. TO THIS DAY IT REMAINS A MAJOR MODE OF DHAKA'S URBANIZATION.

THE EMBANKMENT HELPED TO CREATE NEW HABITATIONS FOR THE URDU-SPEAKING PARTITION REFUGEES FROM INDIA WHO WERE SETTLED ACROSS LOCALITIES STRETCHING FROM MDHAMMADPUR TO MIRPUR IN THE EARLY 1950S. FORMERLY INHABITED BY A FEW LOW-CASTE HINDUS, THE REBUILT AREA SOON ASSUMED A LOOK FAMILIAR TO MIDDLE CLASS LOCALITIES OF THE PERIOD, INCLUDING A POPULATION CONSIDERED CLOSE TO THE RULERS WITH SOME WORKING IN LOWER RANK ADMINISTRATIVE POSITIONS. A NEW EMBANKMENT WAS ADDED TO THE AREA WHEN ANOTHER MILITARY FIGURE, ERSHAD, CAME TO POWER AFTER THE FORMATION OF BANGLADESH. ERSHAD CHECKED THE INUNDATION FURTHER AFTER A MAJOR FLOOD IN 1988, LEADING TO MORE LANDFILL AND RECLAMATION OF LAND ADDING NEW NEIGHBORHOODS TO MDHAMMADPUR. BY THE 1990S, A SET OF NEW HOUSING PROJECTS HAD TAKEN OFF IN ADABAR IN MDHAMMADPUR, WHICH BECAME DENSELY BUILT UP BY THE 2000. THE LOCALS STILL RECALL WITH A SENSE OF WONDER HOW RAPIDLY THE PLACE CHANGED. IT WAS A SMALL SETTLEMENT AND A QUIET PICNIC SPOT UNTIL 1980, WHEN ONE TOOK A BOAT TO VISIT THE OLD SAATMASJID IN ADABAR OR NEARBY VILLAGES IN BARSILA. BY 2000, THERE WERE IDENTICAL ROWS OF MULTISTORIED HOUSING SOCIETIES CONNECTED TO NEW ARTERIAL METAL ROADS AND AXIAL BRIDGES. MDHAMMADPUR HAD CAUGHT UP WITH THE CITY. NO MORE A BORDER IT WAS A NEWSUBURB OF DHAKA.

\* AS THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE AREA KEPT CHANGING, SO DID THE LOCAL DEMOGRAPHY. BY 2005 MDHAMMADPUR HAD BECOME THE HOUSING ADDRESS OF A RATHER LARGE AND MIXED POPULATION, INCLUDING STUDENTS, LOWER AND MIDDLE CLASS FAMILIES, YOUNG URBAN

PROFESSIONALS, AND MANY WHO WERE DAILY MIGRATING FROM DISTRICTS AND DISTANT TOWNS TO TRY THEIR LUCK IN DHAKA. THEY HAD NO ORGANIC CONNECTION WITH THE AREA BUT FOUND IT CHEAPER THAN UP-MARKET LOCALITIES LIKE GULSHAN OR BASUNDHARA. MDHAMMADPUR WAS NOT TOO FAR FROM COMMERCIAL AREAS LIKE MOTIJHEEL WHERE MOST OFFICES ARE LOCATED, AND VERY CLOSE TO NEW ADMINISTRATIVE CENTERS LIKE SHEAR E BANGLA NAGAR AND THE PARLIAMENT. BY THE TIME THE JAPAN CITY MEGA HOUSING PROJECT WAS COMPLETED IN 2010, THE ELDER POPULATION WAS MORE OR LESS GONE. IN PARTICULAR, THE URDU SPEAKING BIHARI MUSLIM REFUGEES WHO BUILT THE AREA AND POPULATED IT IN THE PAKISTAN PERIOD WERE ALMOST ENTIRELY ERASED FROM THE LOCALITY. MANY OF THEM HAD MIGRATED, SOME DIED IN THE 1971 WAR AND SUBSEQUENT MASSACRES. THE SURVIVING LOT, MORE THAN TWO MILLION, CONTINUES TO LIVE IN CAMPS FOR 'STRANDED PAKISTANIS' SPREAD ACROSS BANGLADESH. THE GENEVA CAMP IS THE LARGEST OF THEM, LOCATED RIGHT NEXT TO ADABAR.

## **SECTION 2: THE GENEVA CAMP**

\* IT DOES NOT FEEL LIKE 2017 INSIDE THE CAMP: A CERTAIN RHYTHM AND A CERTAIN PACE OF LIFE CHARACTERIZES THE CAMP THAT FEELS CLOSER TO 2000 OR EVEN THE 1990S; YOU STILL FIND AUDIO CASSETTES OF QAWAALI AND RELIGIOUS SERMONS SOLD NEXT TO SHOPS OF SOME OF THE BEST KEBABS IN THE CITY AND A BIG OUTDOOR VEGETABLE AND FISH MARKET THE LIKE OF WHICH IS UNKNOWN IN DHAKA. MY FIELDWORK IN THIS CAMP STRETCHES OVER THE PAST DECADE, AND MAINLY CONSISTS OF LONG INTERVIEWS AND SEVERAL ROUNDS OF ETHNOGRAPHY, SOMETIMES TRACKING THE SAME FAMILY AND INDIVIDUALS ACROSS YEARS. AS NOTED BEFORE, THE ENTIRE NEIGHBORHOOD HAS CHANGED IN SPECTACULAR WAYS THAT DISORIENT ME. BUT THE ONLY VISIBLE CHANGE IN THE CAMP IS THE PRECARIOUS VERTICAL EXTENSION OF TWO OR THREE STOREYS ON THE NARROW TENEMENT STRUCTURE ERECTED BACK IN THE 1970S. I HAD STARTED WITH LOOKING AT ISSUES OF CITIZENSHIP AND VOTING RIGHTS IN THE CAMP, RAISED BY A YOUTH ORGANIZATION IN THE EARLY 2000, WHOSE DEMANDS HAVE SINCE HAD LIMITED SUCCESS. MY WORK THEN MOVED TOWARDS LOOKING AT MEMBERS OF THE ELDER GENERATION WHO DID NOT WANT CITIZENSHIP, AMONG OTHER REASONS BECAUSE THEY HAD ACCESS TO ILLEGAL ROUTES OF SEASONALLY MIGRATING AND WORKING IN OTHER COUNTRIES. A FEW BELIEVED AFTER ALL THESE YEARS THEY WILL BE TAKEN BACK TO PAKISTAN WHILE OTHERS HAD NO HOPES FROM THE STATE. AS I SHIFTED TO THE AVAILABLE FORMS OF LIVELIHOOD AND LABOR AMONG THEM I BECAME INTERESTED IN THE COMMUNITY AND LOCAL RESOURCE NETWORKS THAT SUSTAIN THEM. IN THE PROCESS, I FOUND SEVERAL LAYERS OF POLITICS INVOLVED IN THE INTERACTION WITH THE LOCAL STATE THAT ARE NOT UNCOMMON TO THE URBAN PERIPHERY CONTEXT. WHAT I FOUND UNIQUE IN THEIR LOCATION AS A REFUGEE UNDERCLASS WITHIN THIS WIDER BODY OF PERIPHERY IS HOWEVER THEIR POLITICAL SUBJECTIVITY, ESPECIALLY THEIR PRACTICE OF KEEPING IDENTITY AND SELFHOOD OPEN TO A STRATEGIC FLEXIBILITY. IN THE PAST TWO YEARS, I HAVE TRIED TO EXPLORE ITS RELATION WITH THE RAPIDLY CHANGING NEIGHBORHOODS AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE WIDER

REGION, TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THE ISOLATION OF THE CAMP IN THE MIDDLE OF IT ALL.

TO BE SURE, THIS POPULATION CARRIES THE BURDEN OF MULTIPLE STIGMAS THAT CANCEL THEIR CLAIM TO THE COMMUNITY ONCE DECIDED ON RELIGIOUS BASIS. THOUGH MUSLIMS, THEY ARE 'BIHARI', IN A SENSE WHERE THE TERM SIGNALS THE STEREOTYPE OF A SUB-CONTINENTAL UNDERCLASS, PRESUMED TO BE CRASS AND UNEDUCATED. THEY ARE ALSO KNOWN TO BE URDU-SPEAKERS. EVEN IF THE CURRENT GENERATIONS USE ONLY BANGLA, THEY ARE DENIED THE RECOGNITION OF BEING BANGALI, AND TREATED AS EXCLUDED OTHERS. FINALLY, BECAUSE THEY WERE MAJORLY EMPLOYED BY THE PAKISTANI REGIME AND MANY SUPPORTED THE RAJAKARS, THEY ARE SEEN AS TRAITORS TO BANGLADESH, NEVER DESERVING OF TRUST, AND SECRETLY LOYAL TO PAKISTAN. THE LATE HISTORIAN PAPIAGHDSH COULD HAVE TOLD US, NOTHING COULD BE MORE IRONIC. BEFORE BEING FORCED TO MIGRATE FROM SOUTH BIHAR, THIS POPULATION HAD RESISTED JINNAH'S PLANS AND INSISTED ON STAYING BACK IN THEIR ANCESTRAL LAND. TRUE, MANY OF THEM PROSPERED IN THE PAKISTAN REGIME AND THEIR PROSPERITY SHAPED THE EARLY RESIDENTIAL STRETCH BETWEEN MIRPUR AND MDHAMMADPUR. ALL OF IT WAS LOST HOWEVER IN COURSE OF THE BANGLADESH WAR.

WHILE SOME MIGRATED AND MANY DIED IN THE WAKE OF BANGLADESH, THE SURVIVORS WERE RESCUED BY THE RED CROSS AND SET UP IN CAMPS LIKE THE GENEVA CAMP. ONCE OWNERS OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD, THEY WERE NOW REDUCED TO HOMELESSNESS AND DESTITUTION, STRIPPED OF DIGNITY AND POWER, CAUGHT IN A PERMANENT ENCLASURE, WHAT ONE MAY DESCRIBE AS 'BARE LIFE'. THIRTY YEARS HAD PASSED WHEN I MET A NUMBER OF YOUNG MEN FROM THIS POPULATION IN THE EARLY 2000, BITTER ABOUT THEIR CONDITIONS AND DESPERATE TO INTEGRATE, LUCKING FOR SUPPORT FROM CIVIL SOCIETY. THEIR BIGGEST FRUSTRATION WAS ABOUT EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES. DESPITE MANY BEING GRADUATES, THE OCCUPATIONS AVAILABLE TO THEM REMAIN HIGHLY LIMITED AND MAINLY LABOR INTENSIVE. THEY FIND WORK AS BARBERS AND CARPENTERS, MECHANICS AND GARAGE HANDS, DRIVERS AND RICKSHAW PULLERS, BESIDES CASUAL AND CONSTRUCTION LABOR ON HIRE. A TINY SECTION HAS NOW FOUND JOBS IN THE MEDIA. THE LARGEST SEGMENT IS HOWEVER HIGHLY SKILLED CRAFTSMEN – *ANSARI* WEAVERS OF *BENARASI*. THEY RUN SMALL-SCALE INDUSTRIES FROM THEIR HOMES. MANY TENEMENTS HAVE WEAVING Looms DUG INTO A PIT IN THE FLOOR OF INDIVIDUAL HOMES AS WELL AS WORKSHOP SPACES, WHERE THE *KARIGARS* WORK AROUND SHIFTS. THE DEMAND AND MARKET FOR THEIR PRODUCTS, I WAS TOLD, USED TO BE QUITE LUCRATIVE UNTIL THE 1980S, WHEN *BENARASI* WAS THE SIGNATURE FABRIC OF ELITE SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN. THE DEMAND SHARPLY DECLINED ACCORDING TO WEAVERS FROM THE 1990S AS THE ELITE CLIENTELE INCREASINGLY SHIFTED TO SHIFFON. REGARDLESS OF WEAVING SKILLS, MOST OF THEM ARE NOW REDUCED TO *KARCHUPI* WORK, WHICH INVOLVES SETTING GLITTERS AND TINSELS INTO DESIGNS ON THE SHIFFON PRODUCED IN FACTORIES. WITH THEIR FALLING INCOMES IT IS NOT SURPRISING TO SEE ENTIRE FAMILIES WORKING AROUND THE CLOCK TO MAKE ENDS MEET.

LIKE SLUM SETTLEMENTS ELSEWHERE, THE GENEVA CAMP SEEMS TO ENJOY A CERTAIN DEGREE OF PROTECTION FROM LOCAL POLITICAL LEADERS OF

DIFFERENT PARTIES AND PERIODIC SUPPORT AND CREDIT ASSISTANCE FROM ISLAMIC NGOs. HOWEVER, NO PARTY WANTS TO EXTEND THEM CITIZENSHIP DESPITE THE SIGNIFICANTLY LARGE NUMBER OF POTENTIAL VOTERS. WITH THE SINGLE EXCEPTION OF JAMAAT E ISLAMI NO OTHER PARTY HAS SHOWN INTEREST IN ENGAGING THIS POPULATION, WHICH OFFERS A FAVORABLE GROUND FOR MILITANT RECRUITS OF FUNDAMENTALISM. CERTAIN INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES PERIODICALLY RISE TO BECOME MEDIATORS WITH THE LOCAL STATE AND INTERNATIONAL AID AGENCIES, WHO THEREAFTER MOVE OUT OF THE CAMP TO A NEW ADDRESS. THERE ARE MAINLY TWO ASSOCIATIONS: THE 'STRANDED PAKISTANI' AND THAT OF THE YOUTHS WHO SEEK BANGLADESHI CITIZENSHIP. OVER THE LAST DECADE THE LATTER HAS MADE MANY EFFORTS TO DRAW PUBLIC ATTENTION TO THEIR CONDITIONS THROUGH MEASURES LIKE NEWSPAPER REPORTS, FILING PETITIONS, SPEAKING AT HUMAN RIGHTS SEMINARS AND PRODUCING DOCUMENTARIES ON THE CAMP. AS THEIR LEADER KHALED ADMITTED, MUCH OF IT SEEMS NOW IN VAIN. HE IS AN ARTICULATE MAN WHO SPEAKS WITH PASSION AND OPTIMISM WHEN I FIRST MET HIM IN EARLY 2000. DESPITE MAKING A NAME FOR HIMSELF AND SPEAKING AT FORUMS AROUND HE APPEARED DEEPLY PESSIMISTIC AND A DEFEATED PERSON WHEN I MET HIM THIS YEAR. KHALED'S DEJECTION SHOWED ME HOW SUCH CONDITIONS POSE FORMIDABLE LIMITS TO LIBERAL AND PROGRESSIVE POLITICS THAT ASSUMES IGNORANCE OF THE STRUCTURAL FUNCTION OF AN ARRANGEMENT.

AT THE SAME TIME THE BIHARI HAS ANOTHER REGISTER OF POLITICAL SENSIBILITY, WHICH HAS NO EXPLICIT DISCOURSE BUT CAN BE UNDERSTOOD FROM THEIR STRATEGIES IN SOCIAL EXCHANGE. IT IS BEST TO APPROACH THIS POLITICS FROM THE GESTURES AND PRACTICES ORGANIZED AROUND THEIR IDENTITY—THE QUESTION OF WHO THEY ARE. IN ORDER TO FIND JOBS, FRIENDS AND WIDER SOCIALIZATION, TO BEGIN WITH, THEY MUST NOT APPEAR AS 'BIHARIS' FROM CAMP, BECAUSE IT WILL INVOLVE IMMEDIATE DISTRUST AND HOSTILE EMOTIONS. THEY MUST BE ALSO WARY OF PRESENTING THEMSELVES SIMPLY AS 'BANGALIS' SINCE LONGER INTERACTIONS MAY LEAD TO COMPLICATIONS. THEY ARE FROM THE CAMP AFTER ALL, WHICH MANY WANT TO ESCAPE FOREVER; THE ONLY SOCIETY THEY HAVE PLACES THEIR ENTRY FROM BELOW. STORIES OF FRIENDSHIP AND ROMANCE WITH THE LOCAL POPULATION ARE NOT UNCOMMON BUT INSTANCES OF MARRIAGE AND MIXED FAMILIES ARE VERY RARE. EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS WITH THEM AS DOMESTIC HELP OR THE GREENGRADER AND LOCAL HAWKER DOES LITTLE TO DISPEL THE ALMOST RACIAL CONTEMPT FOR BIHARIS THAT IS SEEN AS NATURAL AND NATIONALISTIC BY MANY AMONG THE BANGLA SPEAKERS, INCLUDING REFUGEES FROM WEST BENGAL. UNLIKE THE BIHARIS, THEY ARE SETTLED IN BETTER LOCALITIES WITH BUSINESS AND WELL-PAID JOBS. SOME HAVE ACQUIRED THE NECESSARY CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CAPITAL TO JOIN EVEN THE UPPER MIDDLE CLASS, PROFESSING PROGRESSIVE VALUES. A SUCCESSFUL BUSINESSMAN FROM THIS SEGMENT, A REFUGEE FROM BARDHAMAN CURRENTLY SETTLED IN GENDARIA, EXPLAINED TO ME THE DIFFERENCE. UNLIKE US, THE BIHARIS ARE *JANDWAR*, ANIMALS THAT WORK HARD LIKE NO HUMAN CAN, BUT WHO WILL BACKSTAB YOU THE MOMENT YOU TRUST THEM.

THE ELDER BROTHER OF THIS GENTLEMAN IS AN EMINENT WRITER, LITERARY CRITIC AND PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL. I HAVE ENJOYED HIS

GENEROUS HOSPITALITY AND SPENT MANY LONG HOURS LISTENING TO HIS MEMORIES THAT ARE SO CENTRAL TO REFUGEE SUBJECTIVITY. THEIR FAMILY PERIODICALLY VISITS BARDHAMAN AND FREQUENTS KOLKATA TO KEEP OLD RELATIONS ALIVE, TO NEVER FORGET WHO THEY ARE AND WHERE THEY CAME FROM. INDEED, MUCH OF OUR SCHOLARSHIP AND THINKING ON REFUGEES ARE ANCHORED IN THIS RECOVERY OF MEMORY AND SELFHOOD THAT SUFFUSE, SAY, THE FILMS OF RITWIKGHATAK. YET, WHAT STRUCK ME IN GENEVA CAMP IS THE COMPLETE IRRELEVANCE OF THESE QUESTIONS. AN ELDERLY MAN WAS INTERESTED IN RECALLING PRE-PARTITION MEMORIES DESPITE MY REPEATED PERSISTENCE, AND YOUTH SEEMED CURIOUS ABOUT WHERE THEY CAME FROM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THEIR SELFHOOD. ON THE CONTRARY MOST RESPONDENTS WERE ANXIOUS TO AVOID SUCH QUESTIONS, DISMISSING THEM AND DISTANCING THEMSELVES FROM THE PAST. THE DEEPER REASON FOR THIS, AS FAR AS I COULD SEE, IS THAT THEY DID NOT SEE ANY FUTURE FOR THEMSELVES AS ATTACHED TO THIS PAST. BEYOND OF PAST AND FUTURE, THERE WAS ONLY THE SENSE OF BEING TRAPPED IN A PRESENT WHERE THEY SURVIVED ONLY BY BEING SOMEBODY ELSE.

THE IDENTITIES OF MOST RESPONDENTS CAME ACROSS AS THIS STRATEGIC NEGOTIATION. THEY GAVE OUT SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT NAMES DURING DIFFERENT CONVERSATIONS; THEY AVOIDED SPECIFIC REFERENCES TO FAMILY AND BACKGROUNDS; THEY OFFERED SCHEMATIC VERSIONS OF LIVING CONDITIONS THAT SEEMED TAILORED TO THE FORMAT OF STANDARD SURVEYS. THE MOST IMPORTANT CATEGORIES IN THESE SURVEYS WERE HOWEVER NEGOTIABLE AND FLEXIBLE ON THE GROUND. ONE COULD PURCHASE THE CERTIFICATE OF BEING A 'STRANDED PAKISTANI' AND OTHER DOCUMENTS NECESSARY TO ACCESS BASIC FACILITIES OF WATER AND ELECTRICITY AGAINST FIXED SUMS OF MONEY. LIKEWISE, WITH GOOD CONNECTIONS AND BRIBES ONE COULD CHANGE ONE'S ADDRESS IN THESE DOCUMENTS TO LOCATIONS OUTSIDE THE CAMP, AND IF POSSIBLE, CHANGE ONE'S IDENTITY AS A BIHARI. BUT SUCH WINDOWS WERE RARE. INSTEAD OF PROVIDING AN ANCHOR THEIRSELFHOOD WAS LIKE DEADWEIGHT, WITHOUT ANY VALUE AND IMBUED WITH A SENSE OF WASTE. IDENTITIES ONLY BECAME USEFUL WHEN THEY COULD PASS THEMSELVES OFF AS LOCALS, NOT ONLY IN DHAKA AND BANGLADESH BUT ALSO THE DIFFERENT CITIES AND COUNTRIES WHERE THEY ILLEGALLY MIGRATED FOR SEASONAL WORK. IDENTITIES THEN BECAME A STRING OF LOCAL ALIASES THAT NEED JUGGLING ACCORDING TO SHIFTING CONTEXTS. THEY MUST LEARN TO BLEND INTO EVERY URBAN RECESS, THE SELF ALWAYS ADAPTING TO MAKE A LIVING. THAT IS WHY IT BECOMES NECESSARY TO INHABIT A KIND OF SELF-ALIENATION, WHICH MAKES POSSIBLE THE STRATEGIES OF FLEXIBLE IDENTITIES, ABSENT FROM POLITICAL DISCOURSE.

IT IS DIFFICULT TO TELL IF THIS FLEXIBILITY WILL BE ABLE TO ADAPT TO THE SELF-ENTERPRISE AND AFFECTIVE LABOR OF THE ECONOMIC GROWING IN THE AREA. TEN MINUTES WALK FROM THE CAMP AND WE CAME OUT OF THE 1990S BUBBLE INTO THE BIGGER ONE OF 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY DHAKA. THE NEW EXPANSION IS LEAVING MDHAMMADPUR BEHIND AND CREATING NEW SUBURBS LIKE BORSILA FURTHER TO THE WEST. THIS IS HOW DHAKA IS GROWING OF LATE, CUTTING ACROSS THE RIVER, ACQUIRING FARMLANDS FOR REAL ESTATE AND FILLING UP WATER-BODIES AND RIVERBEDS. THE PROCESS IS PARTLY SIMILAR TO HOW MDHAMMADPUR CAME UP IN 2000.

BUT NOW IT INVOLVES LARGE-SCALE ACQUISITION OF FARMLANDS, WHERE CULTIVATION HAS TAKEN PLACE EVEN THIS YEAR BUT FOR THE LAST TIME. THE LANDSCAPE IS CHANGING WITH ROADS UNDER CONSTRUCTION AND NEIGHBORHOODS OFFERING APARTMENTS ON LOW RENTS, DRAWING IN NEW MIGRANTS. THE SURVIVING FARMLANDS ARE SIGNPOSTED WITH THE SALES PITCH OF NEW TOWNS AND APARTMENTS ON EASY TERMS. *AGEYJMI PDRE TAKA, BARIH BENDUN DHAKA*. HOW LONG MUST THIS *NDTUNDHAKA* ENDURE THE CAMP? FOR A LONG TIME IF OUR ARGUMENT HELDS. IT IS THE CITY'S OWN PURGATORY, THE EXILE INSIDE THE STATE.