Ilimitsile Liminality or the Return to Structure? Locating Displacement in Bangladesh

Abstract

Of the estimated 1.3 million Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated to Pakistan immediately following the country’s creation in 1947 more than one million migrated to the region of East Bengal in present day Bangladesh. Sixty years later, a little over 300,000 are thought to remain, 160,000 of whom are still living in the ‘temporary’ camps set up by the International Committee for the Red Cross following the War of Liberation in 1971.

The camps themselves represent a liminal space, ‘between and betwixt’ recognised points of cultural classification. Originally constructed as transitory shelters en route to an imagined home (‘Pakistan’), forty years on they represent something quite different.

Through the experience of space, settlement and segregation, this paper questions the significance of a sense of ‘home’ in understandings of ‘diasporic identity’ and reveals that instead of a transition between homes, these spaces can be understood as liminal homelands in themselves. The camp has become both a collective identity, and the spatial and symbolic site for a re-constructed belonging. Does the resolution of liminality therefore, as assumed by anthropological theory, remain elusive?

Key Words: Displacement, diaspora, citizenship, rights, integration, space, settlement, camps, South Asia.

1. Introduction

Of the estimated 1.3 million Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated to Pakistan immediately following the country’s creation in 1947 more than one million migrated to the region of East Bengal in present day Bangladesh. As Urdu-speakers, sharing certain linguistic and cultural similarities with the (West Pakistani) Punjabi elite, these migrants came to regarded as conduits of the Pakistani colonialists and following the War of Liberation in 1971 were branded enemy collaborators, disenfranchised and socially ostracised. Only 300,000 are thought to remain, around 160,000 of whom have been living in ‘temporary’ camps set up by the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1972. The remaining 140,000 live outside the camps, ‘integrated’, to varying degrees, within majority Bengali society. With the advantage of a non-camp address and increasing cultural
and linguistic integration with the Bengali majority, some of these individuals appear also to be accessing rights of citizenship previously denied them. As a result, social and economic divisions are thought to be growing between the camp and non-camp based communities. Certain strands of ‘diaspora discourse’ fail to interrogate such divisions, constructing instead homogenous groupings “firmly rooted in the conceptual ‘homeland.’” My research challenges these debates and explores some of the ‘intra-diasporic’ issues of difference and diversity that have been much neglected. By examining the internal dynamics of one diasporic population we can see that what it means today to belong to such a grouping may be many different things to many different people. As a minority population that is negotiating distinct settlement structures, they provide a unique opportunity to explore the tension between interlocking identity bases and senses of self. Identity, solidarity and ‘community’ are clearly formed, as Brah would contend, on the basis of competing ‘multi-axial’, intersectional identifications.

The population I have chosen is a paradigmatic case of the historical aftermath of colonialism and the displacements of population that resulted. I have drawn on an ethnographic methodology and have been influenced conceptually by approaches from anthropology and linguistic politics to analyse the long-term consequences of this experience. The significance of class, status and social position in dividing ‘diaspora’ is foregrounded through the experience of settlement and segregation. My research suggests that through such experience a position of liminality is expressed; a position as conducive of solidarity as the ‘imagined communities’ of language and common ‘culture.’ Instead of a transition between homes, the camps can be understood as liminal homelands in themselves. Although they occupy a threshold between recognised points of cultural classification, they have become both a collective identity, and the spatial and symbolic site for a reconstructed belonging. Whether they therefore represent positions of perpetual liminality, a possibility little considered within traditional anthropological theory, is a question this paper confronts. I argue that a more nuanced understanding of ‘diaspora groups’ within their specific spatial setting is crucial to furthering the debate.

2. The Politics of Bangladesh and Pakistan and the Formation of ‘Diaspora’

The ‘Urdu-speaking community’ in Bangladesh could be described as a ‘linguistic diaspora’ . The descendants of over one million Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated from India to East Bengal (then East...
Pakistan) following the country’s creation in 1947, they are distinguished from the Bengali-speaking majority largely through language. On arrival, sharing a recent and often traumatic migratory experience, the community were united by a strong sense of collective membership and vivid recollections of home; India’s post-Partition ‘Urdu-speakers’ were a coherent cultural and linguistic community. Many had fled violence in North Indian states such as Bihar (as well as Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and others), and the label ‘Bihari’ has been used in reference to the descendents of these migrants in the region ever since. Controversially they also shared certain linguistic and cultural similarities with the ruling (West Pakistani) Punjabi elite and consequently gained increasing influence in the new state. However linguistic and cultural differences between the migrants and the local Bengali population prevented peaceful coexistence. They “came to be known as conduits of the West Pakistani ‘colonialists’, who were not to be trusted.”

The ‘Bengali language movement’ of 1952, marked increasing Bengali animosity to exploitation from West Pakistan and a growing determination to protect what they saw as attempts to undermine the region’s cultural identity. As suspicion mounted, the words of Major Ziaur Rahman, the future president of Bangladesh, sealed the community’s fate: “Those who speak Urdu are also our enemies because they support the Pakistan army. We will crush them.” Cultural, linguistic and political tensions culminated in the Liberation War of 1971. Following the country’s Liberation, the entire Urdu-speaking community were branded enemy collaborators and socially ostracised. Thousands were arrested or executed, while others, having been dispossessed by the state and fearful for their lives, were forced to flee. A sense of ‘Diasporic unity’ was now constructed in different terms. ‘The community’ had been displaced for a second time, but now ‘within’ the land that had become their ‘home’. They were once again ‘othered’ but not as a result of their own actions (emigration) as much as the events that took place around them.

Many of those who had lost land, jobs and family members found themselves in temporary camps set up by the International Committee for the Red Cross. In 1972 735,180 Urdu-speakers were recorded as housed in 66 temporary camps around the country. It is estimated that around 160,000 remain today in the camp-like ‘settlements’ established immediately after the war. Disenfranchised, isolated and lacking leadership, for thirty-six years after the War they were labelled ‘Stranded Pakistanis’ and left in limbo.

As the drop in numbers above also suggests, since 1971 a proportion of the population have begun to establish themselves outside the camps. Around 140,000 ‘Urdu-speakers’ are now thought to live outside, integrated, to varying degrees, within majority Bengali society. With the advantage of a non-camp address and increasing cultural and linguistic integration with the
Bengali majority, some of these individuals have been accessing rights of
citizenship for some time. As a result, social and economic divisions are
growing between the camp and non-camp based communities.22

In May 2008 the High Court of Bangladesh passed a landmark
judgment. The entire community were finally granted citizenship and
prospects for acceptance appeared to be improving. Thirty eight years since
the War of Liberation however, the complexion of the ‘community’ has
fundamentally changed. Today they are a ‘diaspora’ divided along cultural,
political, linguistic, generational, socio-economic and spatial lines.

3. Literature Review - ‘Diaspora’, Belonging and Home

The modern usage of the term ‘diaspora’ stems from a reference to
“the threat of dispersion facing the Hebrews.”23 however it is now used in
reference to broad and diverse ‘constructions of collective membership’.
Proposing itself “as a master trope of migration”24, the semantic expansion of
the term has incited criticism for many years.25 As Brubaker asserts, “If
everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so”,26 and as early as the
1980’s, a move towards definitional rigour was proposed.27 Numerous
categorisations, ‘typologies’ and ‘frameworks’ that attempted to distinguish
existing diasporas from “other, seemingly similar but essentially different
phenomenon”28 followed. The search itself assumes a great deal (not least
that ‘real’ ‘diasporas’ exist, alongside ‘fakes’) and has resulted in the creation
of entities that emphasize coherence and objectivist measurement.29
“Diasporas are cast as unitary actors. They are seen as possessing countable,
quantifiable memberships.”30

It was Sheffer in 1986 who first introduced the idea of a referential
homeland as a fundamental component. Since this time, maintenance of a
connection with a place of origin has remained pertinent to understandings of
the term; “the essential element here is a spreading from an original
homeland, and diasporas are defined descriptively with reference to that
origin.”31 This could be real or imagined but the required orientation towards
it was an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty.32 While this
“yearning for another place”33 may be complicated by attachment to ‘host’
societies,34 the assumption that it is mutually perceived by all members of the
‘diaspora’ has been insufficiently interrogated.

Although different strands of literature have emerged,35 this body of
work, which places emphasis on an ancestral past, remains located in
organicism metaphors of cultural reproduction, naturalized images of blood
and nation, assuming congruence of people, state and territory.36 As such it
has received criticism for championing a diasporic identity associated with
conservatism and the reinscription of a ‘shared culture’ or past. Clifford has
criticised what he called the ‘centred’ model of Safran and others, orientated to a single source by a teleology of ‘return.’ By deploying a notion of ethnicity which privileges the point of origin in constructing identity and solidarity ‘diaspora’ reinforces the essentialism it proposed to contest, simultaneously re-ascribing the nation/territory it proposed to subvert. As Anthias has argued, whether “the phenomenology of displacement…(would) necessarily always construct some notion of homeland or ‘homing’ to use Brah’s term…would be a matter of empirical investigation at the level of the local and particular.” Such work has yet to be fully undertaken and the jury is still out.” By treating each ‘diaspora group’ as a unity inter and intra-ethnic processes were ignored. Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk have also observed tremendous variety in the nature of connections with a homeland. Not only may migrations have occurred in different historical periods and for different reasons but different countries of destination may have provided different social conditions, opportunities and exclusions.

It has been argued that, as a result, the concept of ‘diaspora’ has failed to articulate differences with regard to the roles played by class and gender. Diasporic encounters are necessarily composite, and the naturalised gender-neutral diaspora has provoked widespread criticism in recent years for failing to accept that they are embarked upon through multiple modalities of gender, ‘race’, class, religion, language and generation. “As such, all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common ‘we.’” Here Brah’s concept of ‘multi-axial locationality’ is crucial to understanding diaspora relationality, the significance of positionality across articulating fields of power. Moreover, diasporic experiences are often complicated by competing sets of social relations - those of ethnic community or ‘home’ as well as the country of settlement. This double-bind is thought to be particularly problematic for members of the younger generation and children of ‘diaspora’ are often portrayed as caught between ‘two cultures.’ While this assumption can be criticised for theorizing culture in an overly rigid and deterministic manner, it is another example of the way in which ‘diaspora’ experiences and representations are articulated through multiple sites of belonging and overlapping relations of power.

4. Theoretical/Conceptual Framework – Liminal Space

The question of home is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances, and those forcibly ‘uprooted’ from their home, for example, are likely to have a very specific relationship to it. It could indeed be argued that, ‘uprootedness’ or ‘refugeeness’ ‘is itself an aberration of categories, a zone of pollution’ precisely because of the absence of ‘home’. ‘Refugees’ and ‘the displaced’, seen to haemorrhage national
boundaries, are produced and made meaningful by the categorical order ('nation-state') that excludes them. As a result they occupy dangerous, “vacant and fuzzy spaces” challenging “time-honoured distinctions between nationals and foreigners”. The anthropology of rites of passage and the liminal phase is illuminating here. As Turner explains, “transitional beings are particularly polluting, since they are neither one thing nor another, but may be both...and are at the very least ‘betwixt and between’ all the recognised fixed points in the space-time of cultural classification.”

Werbner argues that a sense of fear or threat is strongly associated with liminal or in-between spaces at the edge of categories, or areas where categories cross. An example of this is the anxiety performatively expressed towards ‘the hybrid’ under conditions of colonial management. Set against an order premised on “culture in neat and tidy national formations” refugees, the displaced, and ‘uprooted’ are a problem, a challenge to legal codes and juridical order. The need is therefore to set aside by setting apart, to differentiate, externalise and exclude. Turner’s conceptualisation of ‘structural invisibility’, highlights possible reasons for the invisibility of refugees, displaced and stateless peoples in the literature on nationalism, as well as in national discourse or collective imagination:

“The subject of the structural passage is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, ‘invisible’. As members of society, most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture...The structural ‘invisibility’ of liminal personae has a twofold character. They are at once no longer classified and not yet classified.”

Just like refugeeness, ‘diaspora space’ occupies a liminal, interstitial position in Malkki’s ‘national (‘natural’) order of things.’ Having crossed a border, apparently stripped of the specificity of culture, place and history, the diasporic individual and the refugee are reduced to “naked unaccommodated man.” They are shown in themselves as mere matter, whose form is impressed upon them by society, human in the most basic, elementary sense. In discerning a link with the concentration camps of Nazi Germany, the contribution of Arendt retains particular resonance here. Arendt argued that the refugee loses more than culture and identity; the refugee, the displaced or de-nationalised, also loses rights. The figure that should embody the ‘rights of man’ par excellence highlights instead the concepts crisis. “The conception of human rights based upon the assumed existence of a human
being as such, broke down...when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people (refugees) who had indeed lost all other qualities...except that they were still human.\textsuperscript{64}

Georgio Agamben resumed the debate, arguing that the refugee represented "nothing less than a limit concept that radically calls into question the fundamental categories of the nation-state."\textsuperscript{65} In further analysing 'the camp' he expanded the idea of 'states of exception' in which the juridical order is suspended; the "ambiguous, uncertain borderline fringe at the intersection of the legal and the political."\textsuperscript{66} In doing so he raises a number of questions regarding interstitial social locations, and the relationship between (wo)man and citizen.\textsuperscript{67} "Situated in a limit zone between life and death, inside and outside, in which (he/she) is no longer anything but bare life."\textsuperscript{68}

Although the 'death of the nation' has long been prophesised, nation-ness remains "the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time."\textsuperscript{69} The concept of culture is deeply territorialized, and a bias to 'where you’re from' not 'where you’re at'\textsuperscript{70} has displaced attention from the material relations between the state and racialised groups, as well as intersecting positionalities such as class and gender.\textsuperscript{71} It leaves no space for internal power conflicts within the group, and assumes fixed, immutable, ahistorical boundaries. As Brubaker notes, "diaspora can be seen as an alternative to the essentialization of belonging; but it can also represent a non-territorial form of essentialized belonging."\textsuperscript{72} This form of ‘diaspora’, defined in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all cost return, is "the old, the imperialising, the hegemonising, form of ‘ethnicity.’"\textsuperscript{73}

We are reminded of the particular clarity provided by the liminal position. "One of the most illuminating ways of getting at the categorical quality of the national order of things is to examine what happens when this order is challenged or subverted."\textsuperscript{74} Exploring questions of identity from the experience of displacement opens up new theoretical spaces for enquiry, inviting us to radically rethink nationness and statelessness, and bounded conceptualisations of culture, society and community. Enabling us to question the "the notion of identity as a historical essence...or as a fixed and identifiable position in a universalizing taxonomic order."\textsuperscript{75} Exploring the role of space and settlement in the formation of Diasporic identity we see that instead of a transition between homes, the camps themselves have come to represent re-imagined liminal homelands\textsuperscript{76}. They are generative of collective identity, which gives meaning to marginality, becoming the spatial and symbolic site for re-constructed belonging.

5. Methodology

In order to examine these notions of belonging, and the role of space and settlement more generally, research was built around a comparison of the
camp-based and non camp-based communities. Non camp-based ‘Urdu-speakers’ are scattered all over the country, and although residence is far from uniform, there are no mono-ethnic enclaves outside the camps so they are all located in mixed communities. This said however, they are most likely to be found in areas with a high concentration of camps (areas such as Mohammadpur or Mirpur in Dhaka for example) often living in rented accommodation on the fringes of those settlements. As they are small in number, even on the fringes of a camp, they are physically very well integrated with Bengalis. Some have however retained greater ties with the ‘Urdu-speaking’ community, and live near the camps because they have relatives there and come and go daily. Others are significantly more integrated, in cultural, linguistic, social and economic terms, with Bengalis and have few or no ‘Urdu-speaking’ friends.

Research was conducted in two regions of Bangladesh: Dhaka, and Saidpur in the Northern Rajshahi District. Although, as mentioned, the population is fairly widely scattered and well established communities can be found in four of the five national divisions (or districts), an estimated 133,126 of 151,368 are settled in the divisions of Rajshahi and Dhaka combined. Twelve months intensive qualitative fieldwork was carried out between 2006 and 2009, through a combination of semi-structured interviews (63), narrative ‘case study’ interviews (10) and interviews with Urdu-speaking and Bengali civil society (15), as well as ethnographic methods such as participant observation. ‘Civil society’ has been used here to refer to (Urdu-speaking and Bengali) legal specialists, academics, writers, critics, and NGO officials as well as local councillors, and spokespeople from International Organisations. Civil society has therefore been used to refer to individuals who occupy relative positions of power (whether within Bengali or ‘Urdu-speaking’ circles) and unsurprising therefore only two of the fifteen interviewees were female. Of the further 73 interviewees however, 52% were female and 48% male. In addition, 57% were camp-based and 43% non-camp based, and they were broken down into ages of 18-24 (15), 25-49 (37) and 50+ (21). Having assumed ‘the middle age’ sub-section would be the most difficult to get hold of, greater difficulty was experienced interviewing individuals aged 18-24 who were often occupied with full time work and study. Older interviewees, although freer, were the most likely to be busy with religious commitments or reluctant to be interviewed due to suspicion/fear or a disinclination to repeat old, distressing tales.

Interviews were conducted in Urdu or Bengali depending on the preference of interviewees, and were recorded and then transcribed to facilitate analysis. I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Frederick
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6. Analysis/Evaluation
A. We, the ‘Urdu-speaking Community’ - ‘Insiders’, ‘Outsiders’ and the social ‘elite.’

As has been mentioned, the ‘Urdu-speaking community’ is a highly heterogeneous one, with divisions and distinctions deepening along social and spatial lines. Not only are some still living in the slum-like ‘camp’ settlements (‘insiders’) while another group has more recently moved outside (‘outsiders’), but a third group also exists. These people are neither camp-dwelling nor previously camp-dwelling and they can be found occupying an entirely distinct social position (‘elite’). They were able to retain their houses after the war and have therefore merged virtually unseen into the local Bengali majority.

When asked what defines ‘the community’ in relation to the Bengali majority ‘Urdu-speakers’ themselves disagree. Some invoke a shared experience of migration, a shared history: “We migrated from India; that is what makes us different.”\textsuperscript{78} Others a linguistic heritage: “I think it’s about our language…There is only one fact, language.”\textsuperscript{79} For some it is inherited culture, ‘ethno-racial’, phenotypical characteristics, or a combination of all these things: “The main things are language, culture and height.”\textsuperscript{80} In part these differences of opinion reflect generational developments within the community. The younger generation rarely refer to their country of origin, India, or their migration from that place. India quite clearly has less significance for individuals who have been born and brought up in Bangladesh and have never known anything else. Equally physical and cultural characteristics (such as food tastes, styles of dress, religious observation) are more often noted by the younger generation than those over 50, which may be due to greater levels of daily interaction with Bengalis, or simply because among the over 50’s these issues are simply assumed and no longer considered noteworthy. The one defining feature that remains central to all however is language, something I will consider further in the following section.

Beyond generation, a difference of opinion also reflects layers of disunion along spatial lines. Political and public discourse has located the troubles of the past less with the community itself than at the doorstep of the camps. And while those who retained their houses, retained their civil status, camp-dwellers lost all rights of citizenship previously held within the state. They have not been registered on voter lists (until the recent 2009 elections that is), and have been denied access to education, healthcare and much formal employment since 1972\textsuperscript{81}. Unsurprisingly fundamental inequality of civil status has dramatically altered the composition of ‘the community’. An
unbridgeable divide in terms of access to education and opportunities has been laid at its foundations, as one ‘community’ has slowly turned into two.

Dominant public discourse is blind to such nuances. According to this widely accepted narrative, ‘a community’ of so-called ‘Mohajirs’, ‘Stranded Pakistanis’, ‘Biharis’, ‘Urdu-speakers’ or ‘Maowras’ were disenfranchised on the grounds of their support for a national enemy (Pakistan), and as the result of an ethno/linguistic identity that had become problematic. Many of the better integrated ‘Urdu-speakers’ however have always had a passport, remained registered as voters throughout, and some have continued to work in responsible Government positions. A few of the young elite know almost nothing about the camps, and many feel no connection with the camp population. These families have the same ‘ethno-linguistic’ heritage but have always occupied a position of respect within society. The discrimination suffered by those that ended up in the camps has almost completely passed them by.

“Our family never lived in the camps, our grandfather owned this house”. (How were you able to keep it during the War?) We had two houses before the War, one house was lost but my grandfather was a contractor in the Pakistani army and he had lots of Bengali friends so we were able to save this house.”

“. . .we had some Bengali friends who were in a good position in the Government so they saved us...When the Pakistani army came I helped some Bengalis, that’s why they helped me during the War. Only four people in this street retained their houses, it used to be 100% Urdu-speaking...”

“I had a lot of Bengali friends in 1971 and I walked around with them with no problem because we saved each other...I was able to rent a house after the war because the landlord was a (Bengali) friend of mine. I was a local community figure at the time, so everyone knew me, this made it easier.”

It is clear from the above quotes that those who were able to retain their houses after the War were well connected with Bengalis, the cause and effect of which was their generally above average socio-economic status. Favoured by the ruling Punjabi elite well-educated ‘Urdu-speaking’ migrants had been
given positions of responsibility in post Partition Pakistan and during this period (1947-1971) many had developed close relationships with influential Bengalis while working at senior levels in Government departments. As such they had a better safety net to fall back on when livelihoods were threatened. Even if one house was lost, another may have been saved, or as many report, a well-connected relative stepped in with help, and they were able to avoid the desperation of the camps. The degree to which those that remained outside were affected by the aftermath of War unsurprisingly varied widely but on the whole they blended well into Bengali society. While most experienced some discrimination in the early 70’s, their widespread acceptance since (in relation to the camp-population in particular) is telling of the authority of class positionalities.

B. The Cultural Status of Language

These class positionalities are reflected in widening disparities of language use. Not only do those living outside the camps speak better Bengali than those inside (again in some sense both cause and effect), but many also have a very different relationship to the one thing that is meant to connect the whole community – Urdu. While those that have always lived outside the camps speak, to varying degrees of ‘purity’, a fairly standardized Urdu, “The language of the camp is a language of its own.” The language of the camp would in fact be more accurately be described as a language variety, than a language, (in the same way as it would be more accurate to call Standard Urdu a language variety than a language), since it is one variety of Urdu among many. Some informants described the camp form as an accent or a style but I believe it better described as a dialect since differences occur at the level of lexis, grammar and pronunciation. It blends other languages with Urdu, consisting of a mixture of Bodgupuri (an Urdu-based regional dialect of Bihar), Bengali, and Hindi.

The degree to which these language variations replicate pre-War class and language variance is not entirely straightforward. The centrality of Bodgupuri within the camp dialect suggests some degree of congruence with pre-War social dialectical forms. Although some Bodgupuri speakers would also be proficient in Standard Urdu, as a rural dialect it is generally associated with a lower socio-economic status. Standard Urdu like any other standardized form is however associated with those of a higher socio-economic status in part because it reflects access to certain social experiences in particular certain forms of education and schooling. Over time however both language varieties have developed. The camp form has blended with other regional dialects from India (due to the sudden cohabitation of migrants from different parts) as well as vocabulary borrowed from Bengali and Hindi. It is referred to by those in the camps as ‘Urdu’, although this is contested by those living outside. The younger generation of elite Urdu-speakers who have
always lived outside refer particularly condescendingly to this strange “bastardised” form:

“All they don’t speak Urdu in the camps anyway. Or not proper Urdu. They speak some kind of South Indian dialect I think”...“No, something from Bihar...a kind of ‘Bodgepuri thing’”95

“The camp dwellers speak the Bihari local dialect.” (Is that the language you speak?) “I cannot speak that (laughs)!”96

(So how often do you speak Urdu?) “Only to my mother and my aunty but I speak it fluently. It’s not like they speak in the camps though (he laughs). If you heard me speak you would notice the difference. They speak a kind of mixture of other things.” (He looks at his younger cousin and says something I don’t understand and they laugh. Why are you laughing?) “Because it’s funny. Have you heard the way they speak? It’s like the difference between Cockney and English. It’s funny.”97

The previous quote makes a useful comparison. Both Cockney and Standard English are well recognised language varieties of English with some similarities to Standard Urdu and its nonstandard variants in relation to socio-economic association. Nonstandard dialects of English, as of other languages, “are generally simultaneously both geographical and social dialects which combine to form both geographical and social dialect continua”.98 However Standard English and Standard Urdu are purely social dialects, even if we can tell that their origins may have originally been in the southeast of England99 or the area around Delhi respectively. The camp dialect differs from Cockney and most nonstandard language variants however in the specifics of its geographical connections. Unlike most nonstandard dialects it has no regional home in the sense that it can be found all over the country, in urban areas, from North to South, East to West. However at the same time it has a very definite geographic locus, being only found where camps are situated. The dialect takes much the same form in camps nationwide, differing only very slightly from region to region. Like Cockney however, widely associated with the working class, the dialect’s social base is strong. It is a dialect only spoken and understood by those concentrated at the very bottom of the social scale. It is a language that has developed out of marginalisation from the nation, among those with little or no access to education
(particularly education in Urdu), and has therefore diverged powerfully from standardized forms.

The cultural status of language is clearly potent in this context. It connects individuals instantly to a particular end of the socio-economic spectrum, and is the source of much teasing and abuse. Some in the camps themselves, or among those recently ‘integrated’ outside, speak equally disparagingly of their own language:

“No, no we are not practicing Urdu. It’s a kind of hodgepodge of languages.”

“In the camps we are speaking the Urdu which is valueless. It is Urdu ‘dust’, ‘rubbish’ (‘dhula’)… they (those outside) can’t understand us...and they say my Urdu is valueless.”

Language itself forms a barrier between and within an apparently ‘linguistic community’.

Despite its troubled past, outside the camps among literary circles, Urdu in its ‘pure’ (standard) form, associated with North India and Pakistan, is still revered. Even though it remains unrecognised by the Bangladeshi state and is treated with some suspicion by the majority Bengali population, here significant capital is still generated through a respected Urdu cultural lineage. Intellectual gatherings and Urdu poetry recitals (Mushairas) are common and linguistic heritage is valued. Urdu, in this context, has to some degree therefore remained ‘high culture’, despite its bloody past.

Unsurprisingly generation draws further boundaries however and among younger ‘Urdu-speakers’ such reverence is less common. Outside the camps Urdu is only spoken in the home as, after the war, Urdu-speakers were forced to hide their ancestry for fear of Bengali reprisals. As a result most young Urdu-speakers who grew up in Bangladesh no longer read or write the language and many continue to conceal their linguistic heritage:

“Lots of literary people’s children don’t read Urdu. They (the parents) have some fear (that they will be discriminated against) and so they started sending them to learn Bengali.”

“When I speak with my wife I do it in Urdu, when I speak with my daughter I do it in Bangla...And Hindi….This is the fact, after our aged generation pass away Urdu will be lost. The young generation are interested to learn Bangla and English for their livelihoods.”
Another language has been embraced by this generation as the above quote illustrates. While Pakistan and the Urdu language have complicated associations in Bangladesh, India’s national language, ‘Hindi’, is free of many of the battle scars:

(What language do you speak?) “…Aaaaah Hindi – my parents are from Bihar, India. My father knows Bangla but he feels more comfortable with us in Hindi” (Is this not Urdu?) “Most Hindi channels on TV are in Urdu. All Bollywood songs are 90% Urdu, but they call it Hindi.”

“In India basically in Bollywood they are using the Urdu language but the language is commonly known as Hindi. Lots of Hindus in India speak Urdu but they call it Hindi because they’re almost ashamed to call it Urdu due to the Muslim association…The young generation in Bangladesh are very much interested to watch the Hindi channels…”

“I feel embarrassed to speak Urdu because the Pakistanis were the losers and they speak Urdu too…If I say that I am Indian, I can speak Hindi well. It’s something of a relief.”

(Her father adds) “Bengali people hate Urdu but love Hindi. And yet they can’t tell the difference!”

For young people in Bangladesh India is aspirational; a global power representative of fashion, media and modernity in all its forms. The growing influence of Hindi among a younger generation of middle class ‘Urdu-speakers’ (and Bengalis alike) is sentiment to a shifting geopolitical landscape, in which Pakistan’s old adversary has increasing international sway.

C. Class and Social Stratification

As we have seen, those who were able to retain their houses and avoid moving in to the camps were ‘the community’s’ social elite. Spatial segregation therefore also represents social stratification. The rich have become richer, educating their children in universities overseas, or migrating again themselves, and the camp-dwellers, without access to education and discriminated against in terms of employment have become poorer. As it was on the whole those of a lower social status that were forced to move into the camps this internal social structure does to some degree replicate pre 1971 positions. However any previous social stratification within the Urdu-
Speaking community has been magnified by the existence of the camps, and the attending de-nationalisation of some members of the community and not others. Those who have in recent years made enough money to move out of the camps into rented accommodation outside have felt this social shift first hand:

“Camp-dwellers are treating us differently (since we moved outside), they think Alim is rich now. Bengalis (also) think that ‘if Alim managed his rented house he has wealth’, so it will increase your value. ‘He has dignity now because he lives outside. His landlord knows he must have some money that is why he is ok with it’…It’s a big problem to get a flat in Dhaka…If we say we are from the camp they do not allow us to rent their flats…It’s about their society, they are not able to mix with Bengali educated society. They cannot maintain their status with the locals…some think ‘if they have lived in the camps they won’t know about hygiene etc, they might not look after the house’.”109

“Sometimes our camp neighbours treat us as an elite or rich. They felt shy to talk to us, it created a barrier. When we went to them they often say that now you people are rich so we are not on your level…I found out my sisters hadn’t been back to the camp for two or three months…they are socializing more with Bengalis as a result.”110

The ‘barrier’ Mr Alam describes has widened to such an extent that many of those that have always lived outside feel as detached from the camp community as they do from poor Bengali society:

“I do not have friends in the camp, because we are wealthy and have ‘better society’ (acchi mahol). I know some of them who are very poor…some of them cannot even speak Bangla…”111

“In my family we have some cross marriages with Bengalis. It’s good to merge with the locals. Better than Bihari people who are uneducated and illiterate.”112

(Have you ever been to the camps?) “of course not, why would I? (laughs) I don’t have any time for those people. They’re called Maowra you know.” (pause) “I’m sorry… I’m not a humanitarian. I look after myself, that’s how we do
things here.” (Have you ever called any of them Maowra?)
“I’m ashamed to admit it, but yeh, I have. One time I had some of them fixing my car and I knew it was the brake, but they kept saying no it was the exhaust, and I knew, I know a lot about these things, and I was getting annoyed so I shouted the same thing in Urdu. And then they listened, and decided it was the brake! They gave me a cheap deal and the job was done. So I said to them ‘right, so you *#?*# Maowra you’ll listen to another Maowra but no-one else.’”
(So you’d call yourself a Maowra too?) “No, I’m not a Maowra, I mean no-one would call me that.” (Why?)
“Because I have too much power.”

Social discrimination among and between ‘Urdu-speakers’ would obviously have occurred before the camps existed, but the complexion of this discrimination has clearly changed. Camp-dwellers are not simply social inferiors but a national problem, dirty, un-educated, burdens on society. The memories they evoke in the national imagination, and the condition of stateless such imagination afforded is threatening to the position of the non-camp social elite in a way that their mere social inferiority could never have been. For some disassociation with the camp population has been a strategy of self protection.

D. The Power of Place: labels, ethnicity and identity

As we have seen popular discourse and the corresponding silence of the state re-enforced the camp population’s ‘de-nationalisation’, turning spatial divisions into national ones. Those Urdu-speakers who have lived for many years as citizens may be culturally distinct from the Bengali majority in some way, but they are no longer liminal. Liminality is located in the camps, and individuals express their own identities in these spatial terms. Inside the camp they are an un-categorizable ‘ethno-linguistic’ minority, outside they are Bangladeshi:

“Before I moved outside the camp I had many names, Bihari, Stranded Pakistani, Maowra. Now to other people I’m just Bangladeshi.”

“The people who are living in the camp are treating me differently now I have a good place to live. When I was in the camp, the Bengalis used to call us Bihari. However here no-one can say that...I think the label Bangladeshi is more
comfortable for me (now)…When I was in the camp I was a Stranded Pakistani.”

(What label would you give yourself?) “Bangladeshi. People who live outside the camps are very much Bangladeshi.”

The language of labelling in contexts such as this is clearly incredibly powerful. The label ‘stranded Pakistani’ helped to cement the camps externality in the country’s national psyche (and throughout the country’s legal system) for thirty-six years. In a hostile host environment, when people move outside the camps the line between ‘integration’ and ‘assimilation’ is inevitably blurred. Outside the camps a ‘Bihari’ or ‘Urdu’ heritage retains identificational resonance only among those powerful enough to associate with the term:

“I do not have any Urdu-speaking friends. I know some of them that I think are Urdu-speakers but they hide it. The number of people hiding their language is high. It’s very important to hide the Urdu language to get a job. Sometimes I might work with someone for 2 years and not know they are Urdu-speaking because society doesn’t let us...People are afraid of being the minority.”

“I like to introduce myself as Bihari as I am a person who is not dependable on others. I often say’s to my Bengali friends that they are the farmers and we are the prince (she laughs)...I don’t want to take it seriously. But I am exceptional. Trust me.”

The significance of these spatial divisions is highlighted by those individuals whom we might describe as ethnically Bengali but who understand themselves as ‘Bihari’ due to the context of their social community. Shahana Begum’s story highlights the identificational resonance of place/settlement, and the way in which it intersects with language and local community:

“When I came here before my marriage I was totally Bengali. I couldn’t speak a word of Urdu and since coming here I have completely switched! (She laughs) Now it’s difficult to understand Bangla rather than Urdu. Now I’m more fluent in Urdu!” (Laughs again). “When I first came to the camp I was teased for not speaking Urdu. They said things in Urdu but I didn’t understand. The one word I
understood was ‘Bangali’. They were calling me ‘Bangali, Bangali’…"

“At that time I didn’t feel like an Urdu-speaker I felt like a Bengali but as I came here and was teased so much, I struggled so much to learn Urdu. And after two or three years hard work I got Urdu and the teasing stopped. And now I feel like a Bihari.”

Interruption between Bengalis and ‘Biharis’ is no longer uncommon. Most Urdu-speakers have a Bengali marriage somewhere in their family. Some evidence even suggests that as many as twenty five percent of camp residents are ethnically Bengali. Ethic, cultural and linguistic boundaries are clearly highly opaque, and informed by the realities of a local environment:

“We have to mix with the Bengali culture whether our culture will be lost or not, that is not the matter…I cannot even write my name in Urdu. When a person leaves the camp he leaves his culture there…”

E. The Social Location of Home.

In many cases with more to unite around ‘inter-ethnically’ than ‘co-ethnically’ a once important ‘diasporic home/origin’ now occupies an illusory position. The label ‘Bihari’ is probably that most commonly used among all social strata, the very word descriptive of a majority diasporic homeland. Despite its own misleading reference (to the state of Bihar alone as opposed to North Indian states more generally) and pejorative usage, camp dwellers in particular identify strongly with the term. The geographic location or ‘home’ it originally denoted however has all but disappeared: “They think of themselves as ‘Bihari’ but only four or five of the camp population would actually describe themselves as ‘Indian.’" This correlates with the first phase of research I conducted in 2006 in which under ten percent of the camp population referred to themselves as Indian.

“I would call myself Bihari. ‘Hay Bihari Pakistan, hay Bihari Pakistan’ (a traditional lament for Pakistan’s refusal to accept them)...I wouldn’t call myself Indian because people are always saying we are Pakistani, why should I alone call myself Indian? If I say I am Indian will India take me? No.”
Historical associations in part explain this. Much of the older generation in the camps have complicated feelings towards India due to memories of the devastating communal violence they experienced. Many still greatly distrust the Hindu population, and lost family and friends in the violence before they fled. Immediately after the War of 1971, and in part as a result of fear and exclusion, they chose to identify with a ‘home’ (Pakistan) that further excluded them, disenfranchised them even. Ever since, they have been lost in the limbo of India/Pakistan/Bangladesh: “Now I am nowhere, have no identity, (I am) not Bihari, not Bangladeshi, (I am) nothing.”

“We don't have any nationality: we're not Indian, not Bangladeshi, not Pakistani, so we don’t have an identity….”

A sense of loss is naturally felt most strongly among older members of the camp community, those born before 1971. The vast majority of the younger generation in the camps feel a strong sense of Bangladeshi identity. They have spent their lives trying to be accepted in Bangladesh, and know nothing else. The ‘silencing of trauma’ is well-researched and after years of communal violence, a brutal war and a double displacement many youngsters don’t even know where their parents came from let alone the true tragedy of their story.

Notably however, outside the camp, association with India (and as we have seen, the Hindi language) has become possible again. Among this ‘integrated’ section of the population pride in the original ‘diasporic home’ may be coming back. ‘Bihar’, as a state has no cultural kudos and Pakistan is tainted by War, but here India as a country is modern, trendy and sophisticated:

“When I say my mum’s from Bihar people frown upon it still….When people say to me ‘if your mum is Bihari is she Pakistani?’ I say ‘Do you know where Bihar is?’ Have you looked on a map? It’s in India!’ It shows that the perception of an association between Biharis and Pakistan is still very much there. Bengalis don’t have a problem accepting Hindi but they do have a problem accepting Urdu.”

“Hindi is very common in Bangladesh. It is true also; we migrated from India so we are Indian rather than Pakistani. I sometimes tell my friends I am Indian and speak Hindi, I create an identity for myself.”

Paradoxically the notion of India somehow distances these individuals from their ‘Bihari-ness’, juxtaposing them against Pakistan and the War, and instead they are associated with Bollywood movies, global fashion and modernity. The older generation outside the camp have retained a strong collective memory too, articulated particularly through the Urdu
literary culture mentioned. In some sense class, status, and the ‘luxury’ of memory they bring, have given many of the more successful, integrated Urdu-speakers the chance to explore their geographic and cultural roots.

The “ethnic myth of common origin, historical experience and…geographic place”\textsuperscript{135} that may still hold for more ‘integrated’ members of the community, has however been erased for much of the younger generation in the camps. This generation of camp-dwellers describe themselves as ‘Bihari’ but their home, as well as their ‘homeland’, is the camps of Bangladesh. Identities have been constituted in spatial terms and in the camps years of disenfranchisement and the silencing of trauma have cut them off from their geographical roots:

“What unites the (camp) community isn’t language, India, history…it’s the camp. A camp identity is stronger than anything else. It is this identity that is labelled ‘Bihari’, that’s why it’s become a term of abuse – and within the camp it is also how 90% of people define themselves.”\textsuperscript{136}

“We are residents of the camp, we are camp people.”\textsuperscript{137}

In many ways diaspora discourse has privileged ethno-racial links of origin and ‘home’ over inter-ethnic relations of space, place and locality. In an increasingly interconnected world the ability of transnational communities to share more than physical ones has been well recognised but the “limits of those transtate communities”\textsuperscript{138} has not. Physical proximity is formative of cultural communities too, and can generate powerful bonds of mutual engagement. To neglect these not only undermines restrictive power relations intra-diasporic groups may conceal, but also the potential for inter-ethnic alliances.

7. Conclusion

In an influential analysis of camp and non-camp ‘Hutu refugees’ in Tanzania, Malkki observed a similar but distinct, situation.\textsuperscript{139} She too encountered a camp population that had formed a powerful connection to their liminal situation, locating “their identities within their very displacement, exacting meaning and power from the interstitial social location they inhabited.”\textsuperscript{140} She also studied a town population that underwent some form of ‘assimilation’, or in her words ‘creolization’, where “the very ability to ‘lose’ ones identity and move through categories was for many a form of social freedom and even security.”\textsuperscript{141} The difference is however significant. Without the intra-diasporic issues of power I have
highlighted, her reading is more celebratory; ‘Hutu refugees’ in Tanzania are seen creatively exploiting an order of liminality. While in Tanzania “categorical loyalties were regarded with caution, sometimes disdain”142, in favour of ‘cosmopolitan’ subversions of identification, in Bangladesh they are everywhere embraced. Here, categories and labels of bounded fixity give meaning to a liminality that has ‘structurally silenced’ them for so many years. When surfaces are unpeeled emotional attachments and the boundaries of belonging, fuse, fissure and fragment, but this belies some sense of necessitated self-classification.

The responses I witnessed were also conditioned by the realities of money, power and status. The powerful elite ‘Urdu-speakers’, the poets and intellectuals, were able to assert an Urdu heritage without shame. With a recognised civil status, a Bengali education, wealth and acceptance, they had become less of a threat, less of a problem. In stark contrast to the camp’s status in Tanzania, as a “locus of categorical purity”143, in Bangladesh the camp and those who live there still occupy that dangerous ‘fuzzy’, polluting space of order resisted and reversed. Among the non-camp elite therefore ‘integration’ has to some extent protected individuals from the necessity to erase their history and their ‘home’ altogether. Without this ‘integration’, those of a lower social status face much greater pressures from ‘assimilation’. Their ‘Urdu-ness’ is not accepted because it comes for the camp, because it comes from poverty and threatens the purity of the national (‘natural’) order. In order to get by, ‘Bengalization’ becomes a priority.

Previous analyses of ‘the liminal phase’ in ‘rites of passage’ have assumed a third phase, in which “the ritual subject…is in a relatively stable state once more, and by virtue of this has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and ‘structural’ type.”144 They have therefore assumed a resolution. Men/women are released from structure, only to return to it. “What is certain is that no society can function adequately without this dialectic.”145 The ‘Urdu-speaking’ camps in Bangladesh, like many other across the globe, represent a case of displacement, turned ‘long-term displacement’, and transition turned permanent condition. However, the research also reveals the pressure society or ‘structure’ exerts on this order of liminality. The demands of assimilation are patently apparent. Some evade such pressure, retaining elements of competing cultural worlds, but only by the virtue of their location within the structures of society that frames them. Mother-tongues (to which memories, relationships and socialisations are often tied) are abandoned in the name of belonging, as the border-guards of culture, religion, language etc define the boundary of the nation. As van Gennep, Turner, Douglas and others originally proposed, through a return to structure, a resolution is assumed.146

In many ways the ‘Urdu-speaking community in Bangladesh’ does not match up to much that is associated with the concept of ‘diaspora’.
Thirty eight years of segregation has left a community divided on linguistic, religious, cultural, political and socio-economic lines. The existence of a historical ‘motherland’, as a constant point of reference, has simply not survived. Within one city they are a group constructed as much in terms of singularity as solidarity. 147

This empirical investigation however reveals that while internal connections are varied and multiple, these ‘spaces of exception’ not only constitute a place of origin for the thousands of people born and brought up there, but they also represent sites of real emotional and metaphysical connection. For some therefore they have come to represent the ‘homeland’ or ‘referent-origin’148 that was believed to have been lost.

Postmodern approaches have made substantial contributions to widening ‘diaspora’ discourse, emphasising the importance of individual trajectories and historical perspective,149 ‘routes as well as roots’,150 fluidity and dynamism. However the attempt to define ‘diaspora’ “not by essence or purity but…hybridity”151 continued to draw more comparison between ‘diasporas’ than within. The enduring emphasis on a collective point of origin persists in situating the nation-state at its heart.152 Difference is indeed celebrated, but too often premised on absolutist notions of ‘collectivity’ (the ‘illusion of community’ to use Dufoix’s term) that is insufficiently addressed.153 Anthias notes that within the academic debate “the lack of attention to issues of gender, class and generation…is one important shortcoming.”154 Research here clearly highlights the danger of neglecting such intra-diasporic issues of difference and diversity, homogenising a highly heterogeneous population. Gender, class and generation are areas of key social signification that position Urdu-speakers in highly contextualised ways. Other areas of intra-group division are significant too however and even further neglected from the academic debate, such as settlement and segregation which my research finds to be a powerful variable of opposition.

What binds a large proportion of ‘the community’ here therefore is not an attributed origin but conditions of space, place and locality. Solidarity is manifested at the local level. While in part reflective of a deeply-rooted intra-ethnic socio-economic hierarchy that is very difficult to bridge, it is at the same time enabling of trans-ethnic alliances that should not be foreclosed. Within diasporic groups understanding of ‘home’ are fluid, multiple and continually contested in response to individual and dynamic contextual conditions. The importance of more nuanced understandings of ‘collective origin’ to diasporic populations is critical not only in maintaining space for inter-ethnic dialogue but also in understanding how identities and inequalities are conditioned and expressed.
The ability of the group to survive over time, to retain a ‘diasporic consciousness’ or a sense of collectivity, has been regarded by some as another ‘condition’ of definition. This paper shows that the degree to which a consciousness of diasporic roots, collective memory, history, culture, or an ‘ethnic myth’ is retained will depend considerably on relations of power and acceptance within the host community. Here the elite ‘Urdu-speakers’, those ‘better-integrated’ into Bengali society, who have avoided the stigmatisation of the camps (and the disruptive liminality they represent) are better positioned to claim an Urdu ancestry without fear. Paradoxically therefore ‘integration’ to some extent protects individuals from what appears to be the slow but inevitable ‘assimilation’ faced by those of a lower social status. In the last thirty eight years they have gradually been forced to forget their history, their ‘historic home’ and I believe, over time, as structure intercedes, will merge seamlessly into the majority.

8. **Policy Implications**

Long-term displaced populations occupy an increasingly significant position in the context of national and international geopolitics. They are likely to increase in line with global instability, growing regional inequality and international migration. This makes it particularly important to expand our understanding of the particular forms of discrimination to which such groups are subject.

In May 2008 the entire ‘Urdu-speaking community’ were finally granted citizenship. Issues of citizenship are still highly contentious but as the High Court and the Ministry of Law continue to consider cases, interest has grown. Optimism has been high since the verdict in 2008 but if the rights they have access to are conditioned by, in this case, the discriminatory experience of a stigmatising Urdu ancestry what might citizenship mean? As Goldberg has warned, a commitment to formal equality of rights often neglects “the substantive conditions rendering materialization or manifestation of those rights possible.” As long as the camps are ‘othered’ in the public imagination as they continue to be today, associated with Pakistan and memories of war, those that inhabit them will be unable to belong as effective and equal citizens of Bangladesh. Certain quarters have advocated positive discrimination to compensate for some of these difficulties, particularly in relation to quotas for Government employment, but any such move is unlikely to materialise in the near future.

The policy implications of the research are therefore of value not only to the community and local civil society but in evaluating the extent to which ‘integration’ or access to rights impact upon experiences of discrimination elsewhere. They cast a severe warning against the homogenising tendencies of Governments and International Organisations in relation to displaced, refugee or minority populations and remind us that
access to rights and respect are dependent on numerous competing intersectional identifications.

Notes

1 This research was undertaken as part of a Sociology PhD at the London School of Economics, under the title, ‘States of exception’ and the creation of political space: integration and citizenship in Bangladesh.’


5 Ghosh, 2004; Talbot, 1996

6 A Ilias, The Indian Émigrés in Bangladesh: An Objective Analysis, Shamsul Huque Foundation, Saidpur, 2003. A new class of bilingual Urdu-speakers is emerging, who for obvious reason do not want to identify with the camp population. Inter-marriage is considered increasingly uncommon. In some areas of North-western Bangladesh, for example towns such as Saidpur, the non-camp population are a successful community, increasing numbers working as teachers, businessman and even local councillors.


10 Turner, 1969 p94-130. Turner argues that one particular attribute associated with the ‘liminal phase’ is ‘communitas’, communitarian expressions of solidarity.


12 Part of a broader ‘Urdu-speaking’ diaspora worldwide, but also a much more local grouping speaking a particular form of the Urdu language that
combines North Indian dialects (such as Bodgepuri) with elements of Bengali and Hindi.

13 Ghosh, 2004; Talbot, 1996
14 Ilias, 2003; M G Kabir, The Changing Face of Nationalism: The Case of Bangladesh, University Press Ltd, Dhaka, 1995; D A Low (ed), The Political Inheritance of Pakistan, Macmillan, London, 1991. Among the total Pakistani population, Urdu-speaking migrants are thought to have constituted around 10 per cent. Comprising members of the Indian Civil Service, Army, noted businessmen, as well as academics, poets, and members of the Muslim League, they were considered “a political force to be reckoned with.” Ghosh, 2004 p.66; Ilias, 2003.
15 Ghosh, 2004; Talbot, 1996
17 Kabir, 1995; Low, 1991; Ilias, 2003. As the movement gained momentum, so did concerns over the threat posed by non-Bengali Muslims in seeking to force their language and culture onto the Bengali majority.
20 A situation mirrored in recent years for example with the redrawing of international boundaries in the Former Soviet Union (FSR) (See J Shuval, ‘Migration to Israel: The Mythology of Uniqueness’, in International Migration, vol. 36, issue 1, 1998, pp. 3-26). “Hungarians, Russians and other ethnonational communities separated by a political frontier from their putative national homelands have been conceptualized as diasporas in this manner” (Brubaker, 2005 p.3).
22 Ilias, 2003. In light of the advantages that a ‘Bengali identity’ is understood to generate, increasing numbers express a desire for cultural and linguistic integration through which they can mask their stigmatising Urdu ancestry.
23 In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (S Dufoix, Diasporas. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2008, p.4)
26 Brubaker, 2005, p.3.
29 Alexander, forthcoming.
32 Brubaker, 2005.
33 Shuval, 2000, p.44.
34 Or other ‘diaspora’ communities residing elsewhere. Leading to the notion of ‘multiple centred diasporas’ (Clifford, 1994, Kearney 1995).
35 It is important to note that a second strand, in which ‘diaspora’ is posited more as a mode of engagement than an assertion of separateness has been developed in recent years (Alexander, forthcoming). In this reading, ‘diaspora’ belongs as much to the future as to the past, it recognises similarity but also crucially difference with ‘cultural origins’ and is an attempt to situate forms of ‘claims staking’ or ‘place’ making’ among ‘minority’ communities (Brah, 1996; S Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, in Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader, J Brael & A Mannur (eds), Blackwell Publishing, London, 1990; P Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness, Verso, New York, 1993a; Clifford, 1994; Alexander, forthcoming). Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk describe it as a divide between those who use ‘diaspora’ chiefly as a descriptive tool and those that apply it as a process (V S Kalra, R Kaur and J Hutnyk, Diaspora and Hybridity, Sage, London, 2005).
38 Anthias, 1998; Alexander, forthcoming.
39 Brah, 1996.
41 “Diaspora formulates a population as a transnational community. The assumption is that there is a natural and unproblematic ‘organic’ community of people without division or difference dedicated to the same political project(s).” (Anthias, 1998 p.563).
44 Clifford, 1994; Brah, 1996; Anthias, 1998. The formation of ‘diaspora’ itself, as Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk show, “relies on a gender division that construes women as vessels of culture and men as vehicles of labour power” (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk, 2005, p.52). As a result of which, representations of ‘diaspora’ have tended to ignore masculinity, in favour of femininity, in the construction of ‘diaspora’ difference. Women have been described as, “the creators of the ties that bind as well as the carriers of culture” (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk, 2005, p.52).
50 Tambiah, 1985 p.4.
55 Ambivalences, cultural fusion and exchange, challenged the claims to absolute distinction on which colonial authority rested and thus necessitated the repeated marking out of difference (H Bhabha, The Location of Culture, Routledge, London, 1994).
60 Malkki, 1995.
61 Turner, 1967, p.98-9. As Malkki explains this imagined loss of specificity is one more refraction of their liminality in the national order of things “…Refugees confront this order as a symptom of its own fragility and endangerment” (Malkki, 1995 p.12)
64 Arendt, 1951, p.299. Arendt argued that Human Rights and Citizenship Rights had been conflated a confusion that could be said to have diverted attention away from the specific problems of statelessness in contemporary society.
67 “Rights are attributed to man (or originate in him) solely to the extent that man is…citizen” (Agamben, 1995 p.128).
72 Brubaker, 2005 p.12.
73 Hall, 1990 p.8. While all identities may appear to invoke some form of shared historical origin, Hall argues they are more about using the resources of history, culture or language in the process of ’becoming’; relating as they do to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself (see also S Hall, ‘When was “the Postcolonial?” Thinking at the Limit’, in The Postcolonial Question, I.Chambers and L.Curtis (eds), Routledge, London, 1996).
74 Malkki, 1995 p.6.
75 Malkki, 1995 p.2.
76 ‘Homes’ and ‘homelands’ are frequently confounded, in both the academic literature and conversations with interviewees. A distinction between ‘current
residence’ and ‘sites of real/imagined origin of emotional/metaphysical connection’ is however significant (Brah, 1996).

78 Emran, ‘outsider’ 37
79 Yusuf, ‘insider’, 90
80 Afsar, ‘elite’, 26. Height and fairness of skin are two characteristics frequently associated with ‘Urdu-speakers’. Those that are of UP, Punjabi or West Pakistani origin (some of whom are descended from Pathan tribes in Pakistan) are thought to be particularly tall and fair. Whereas those from Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa etc are considered shorter and darker, much less distinguishable from their East Bengali cousins.
81 In 1972 the camp residents were surveyed by the ICRC, asked to choose between settlement in Bangladesh or so-called ‘repatriation’ to (‘West’) Pakistan, a country most had never seen. Homeless, destitute and fearful for their lives the majority opted for ‘repatriation’. Some left under the agreements of 1973 and 1974 (an estimated 163,000 in total by 1992, Abrar, forthcoming) but as the Pakistani Government’s enthusiasm for these incomers waned the process gradually petered out. While the cultural and linguistic association between ‘Urdu-speakers’ and Pakistan was always problematic, it was actually this expressed desire on the part of the camp population, to be taken to Pakistan (to be Pakistani) that ultimately disenfranchised them. A small but powerful political group soon formed within the camp population, the ‘Stranded Pakistani General Repatriation Committee’ (SPGRC), with the primary purpose of achieving continued ‘repatriation’ to Pakistan. Ever since (whether the rest of the population shared such sentiments or not) the label ‘Stranded Pakistani’ has effectively denied the camp community a civil status in Bangladesh. They are understood by wider society as of a collective political voice that is ‘pro-Pakistani’, despite internal political divisions.
82 ‘Mohajir’ was the term applied to the faithful that accompanied the Prophet from Mecca to Medina in AD622. It was a term more commonly used in the years following Partition defining them at the time by a label that commanded considerable respect (Indian Muslims in today’s West Pakistan retain the label).
83 A term coined by the pro-Pakistani ‘Urdu-speaking’ political organisation, the ‘Stranded Pakistani General Repatriation Committee’ (SPGRC), which became powerful in the 70’s fighting for the community’s so-called ‘repatriation’ to (West) Pakistan. Although the most common official label since the mid 70’s, early 80’s, it is now dying out, having been largely replaced in everyday and official parlance with the equally problematic and
derogatory term ‘Bihari’. There is a more recent attempt to replace both terms with the more politically neutral ‘Urdu-speaker’.

84 A term of abuse largely nowadays only used in reference to camp-dwellers. They are sometimes referred to as ‘razakars’ or collaborators, and are strongly associated with a pro-Pakistani political position. ‘Razakar’ is a reference to the East Pakistani militia group that aided the Pakistan Army against the Mukti Bahini (Freedom Fighters) in the Liberation War. Some have admitted to collaborating with the Pakistanis, some appear to have been forced to fight, and some took no part at all. A few individuals also fought with the Freedom Fighters against Pakistan.

86 Noor, ‘elite’, 19 yrs
87 Ali Reza, ‘elite’, 44.
88 Osama, ‘elite’, 53.
89 A small number have remained incredibly wealthy and politically powerful, although largely by hiding their Urdu identity from the start. The majority, while they are no longer the social elite of the country, remain the social elite of the Urdu-speaking community.

90 Standardization consists of the process of language determination, codification and stabilisation, “concerning the selection of particular languages or varieties of language for particular purposes in the society or nation” and whereby that language acquires a publicly recognised and fixed form (P Trudgill, Introducing Language and Society, Penguin, London, 1992, p.71).
91 Osama, ‘elite’ 53
93 In part simply because the difference between Urdu and Hindi in their spoken forms is limited.
94 Trudgill, 2009.
100 Tuni, ‘outsider’, 27.
102 (“you will see Victoria, everyone is a poet here!” Mr Islam, ‘elite’, 50+).
103 Osama, ‘elite’, 53.
104 Parvez, ‘elite’, 50+
105 Noor, ‘elite’, 19.
Shabana, 26.
Md Ali, ‘elite’, 50+
Shamama, ‘outsider’, 38.
Parvez, ‘elite’, 50+

A term of abuse largely nowadays only used in reference to camp-dwellers.


Similarly, the label ‘Bihari’, with its seemingly innocuous regional reference, brands them as outsiders to such an extent that some regard it as “a swear word in Bangladesh” (Syed, ‘outsider’ 30).


Obviously the word ‘ethnic’ is relational, as is the criteria that will determine whether or not it will be used (G Baumann, *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-Ethnic London*, Cambridge University Press, 1996). How descent is defined is socially constructed and in Bangladesh it is thought to be determined paternally.

This is quite common in fights between Bengalis and Biharis, an impersonation of the way in which Bengalis shout ‘Bihari, Bihari’ as a form of abuse.


As camp residents they have been denied the rights of citizenship as a result, despite their ethnic origins, the lack of association with an enemy state (Pakistan), and never having ‘opted’ for ‘repatriation’.


Despite attempts to replace it with the label ‘Urdu-speaker’, considered more politically neutral.

Farhana, ‘insider’, 70.
Rashed, ‘insider’, 42.


‘Whiteness’ is desirable all over the world and Bangladesh is no exception. ‘Urdu-speakers’ from Delhi, UP, and West Pakistan gain a certain kudos in relation to darker skinned, shorter ‘Biharis’: “Many other people
Illimitable Liminality or the Return to Structure? Locating Displacement in Bangladesh

just say they are (from UP rather than Bihar), like Mr K, I don’t think he is really. He looks just like me, he looks too Bihari!” (Syed, ‘outsider’, 30). Bihar’s tragic history of famine, poverty and violence has done little to improve its cultural status: “Bihar means ‘moitree’, that is friendship, it doesn’t mean violence etc, but it’s famous for Hindu/Muslim communal riots”, “yes that’s the major identity of Bihar!” (Mr Siddiqui, 50+, elite and Syed, 30, outsider).

135 Vertovec, 1999 p.3
137 Faizur, ‘insider’, 35.
139 Malkki, 1995
140 Malkki, 1995, p.16. Paradoxically deploying their ‘refugeeness’ in an effort to become a ‘nation’ like others – “For the camp had become a central means of asserting separateness from ‘other’ categories” as well as a way to make themselves ‘fit’ into the national order (Malkki, 1995, p.3).
141 Malkki, 1995, p.16.
142 Malkki, 1995, p.16
143 Malkki, 1995, p. 6
144 Turner, 1969 p.95.
147 Different collective representations have formed elsewhere also. In Pakistan the label ‘Mohajir’ (with its religious connotations) is still used in reference to ‘Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated from India after Partition’, instead of ‘Bihari’ or ‘Urdu-speaker’, as in Bangladesh.
150 P Gilroy, 1993a.
151 Hall, 1990 p. 235 Breaking “the dogmatic focus on discrete national dynamics” (Gilroy, 1993a p.6).
152 Anthias, 1998.
153 Dufoix, 2008.
155 “The will to transmit a heritage and the ability of the group to survive over time” (G Chaliand and J-P Rageau, Atlas des diasporas, O’Jacob, Paris, 1991, p.xiv-xvii, see also Kearney 1995 p.553).
157 As is slowly being adopted in the case of Bangladesh’s indigenous populations such as the Chakma and Marma of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

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