

## Social inclusion of the Urdu speaking camp-based Bangladeshis

### Background

Today, in Bangladesh, 160,000-300,000 Urdu-speaking community members are living in clustered settlements or 'camps' in different parts of the country. They or their ancestors arrived in the country during partition in 1947, from different states in India, particularly Bihar. The Urdu-speakers are of the Muslim faith and they migrated to Pakistan, what they viewed as their promised land.

While this category of people largely integrated in the new country of Pakistan some occupying privileged positions in what was East Pakistan, following the liberation of Bangladesh, the Urdu-speakers were generally viewed as collaborators of Pakistani occupation forces and were relocated to camps set up across the country by the International Committee of

the Red Cross (ICRC). Social ostracism followed, with a large number losing houses, businesses, land and jobs.

In 1973 when ICRC was handing over the management of the camps to Bangladesh authorities a survey was conducted. It noted that most of the Urdu-speakers sought to move to Pakistan. Yet over the past decades, Pakistan has made no move to accept these people, creating a situation of virtual statelessness. Many moved out of the camps and engaged in mainstream Bangladeshi life while a large number stayed back in camps. A section of them continued to demand repatriation to Pakistan. Bangladesh refused to acknowledge those living in the camps as its own citizens. Disenfranchised, isolated, lacking leadership, and labelled Stranded



Justice Habibur Rahman (3rd from left) former Chief Adviser of Caretaker Government at the RMMRU organised Convention on Social Inclusion of Camp Based Urdu Speaking Bangladeshis. Also seen in photo are Dr. C. R. Abrar, poet Asad Chowdhury and former Adviser and educationist Rasheda K. Chowdhury

Pakistanis they have been left in limbo.

In 2008, the High Court of Bangladesh granted voting rights to this minority, explicitly acknowledging their claims to Bangladeshi citizenship. It was a great victory for the community which looked like creating a better future for them. Three years on from the landmark High Court verdict, however, there has been no visible improvement in the situation for the Urdu speaking camp-based Bangladeshis. In practice, little has changed. Their effective citizenship rights are far from being achieved.

Under these circumstances, the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), has launched a social inclusion campaign for this group of people. The campaign seeks to integrate the community with dignity, ensuring they have full access to all of the opportunities associated with citizenship, including equal employment opportunities, access to education and skills development, healthcare, as well as housing and improvements in living conditions. Recent RMMRU research has found that over 86 per cent of the Urdu-



speaking community wanted rehabilitation to incorporate integration with mainstream Bengali society, arguing that exchange of culture, values

and ideas with the wider community were critical to being able to counter discrimination. Recently, two major campaign events have been organised: the first a community consultation to gauge community needs in regards to the four key themes of housing, health, education and livelihoods, held on 25 June 2011; and the second, a convention to raise awareness of these pressing issues with the broader community and to promote cultural diversity and the richness of the Urdu language and community culture held on 24 July 2011.

This policy brief presents a summary of the main areas identified by community members and experts which require immediate attention to ensure the social inclusion of the minority Urdu speaking camp-based Bangladeshis.

### Housing and infrastructure

After the liberation of Bangladesh, most homes and businesses owned by Urdu-speakers were declared abandoned or enemy property and confiscated under cover of the law. Being labelled collaborators of the Pakistani army they were forcibly evicted from their



houses. In search of safety as they waited repatriation, members of the community settled in temporary camps, where

most have been residing to the present day. The camp-dwellers face terrible living conditions with severe overcrowding and rapidly deteriorating infrastructure. The slum-like conditions in these settlements have worsened over the years as the population has grown.

Today, the constant threat of eviction from these camps is a major concern for the community across the country for both those residing on government and private land. There is a widely held belief that the threat has increased since citizenship was granted in 2008, prior to which they were somewhat protected by their 'stateless' status. A common community perception is that the High Court decision has increased vulnerability to eviction for residing on 'illegal property'.

A long-term, well thought out solution to this housing crisis and the community's inherent vulnerability, will take time to develop and should involve community, government, NGO and private sector input. An example of such a solution which has been presented would be to transfer the title of the land to the community from the private owners and the government. This transfer would then enable a series of intensive initiatives to improve the civic infrastructure, and would address issues of insecurity and threats of eviction. In the interim, however, until a durable and comprehensive housing solution is devised, there is an urgent need for the government to decree a halt on evictions.

Community engagement has clearly highlighted the



need to find a durable solution to the insecurity regarding housing as well as the atrocious

living conditions faced by this community. The solution, which should

be a primary concern of government and the NGO sector, must consider the needs and desires of the residents, and should hold the community's best interest at its core. Housing should be affordable and innovative, to best maximise the use of the small space in which residents must perform all of their daily activities.

#### Case Example: Eviction threats a real possibility



A lack of government protection and vulnerability to eviction became more than just a threat to the residents of the Patgudam camp in Mymensingh

when a bank, the owner of the adjacent property, attempted to claim the land on which the camp is based, as its own. Prior to 1947, the area in which the current camp is situated was a farm house owned by the Hindu lords of the era. After partition, the Hindu landowners fled their land leaving it vacant until the ICRC established relief camps for the Urdu-speaking community there in 1972. Subsequently the bank purchased the land adjacent to the camps and in 2007 when the bank sold its property to Progati Creative, it claimed the camp land adjacent was also part of the contract and attempted to evict the camp residents. In the process of selling the property, the bank published an advertisement that included the land on which the camp was located. In an attempt to counter the threat of eviction, camp dwellers have taken the matter to the High Court of Bangladesh where a writ petition has been lodged. The camp dwellers believe that the bank and the purchaser wanted to identify the camp residents as destitute (Bastu Hara) and sought a direction from the court to evict them.

#### Recommendations

- A long-term, well thought out solution to the housing crisis of the Urdu speaking camp-based communities should be developed with input from the community itself, government, the private and NGO sector.
- Until a long-term solution is developed there is an urgent need for government to decree a halt on evictions.

#### Health

With limited access to affordable healthcare, and poor sanitary conditions, health issues are a major concern for the camp dwellers. Deteriorating infrastructure in the camps further compounds the public health situation. Communal water and sewage lines, toilets, garbage disposal sites, bathing areas and footpaths are inadequate in servicing the vast number of people who live in the camps. In monsoon season, the drainage problem is so severe that polluted water regularly enters residents' living spaces. According to a Refugee International survey (2004), in Camp Three in Rangpur City there are merely two working wells and ten latrines for 5000 residents, similarly, in the Mymensingh camp, there are ten latrines and five tube wells for 10 000 people. The situation is even worse in Mirpur's Millat Camp, where there is only one latrine for 6000 people.

These cramped living conditions and terrible sanitation create a breeding ground for diseases, particularly diarrhoea, water borne and skin diseases. These common diseases are left untreated due to extremely limited health services available to camp residents. Most camps do not have a single medical clinic and residents face difficulties and discrimination when attempting to access healthcare outside the camps. Residents report Bengalis being given priority at clinics and that they have to pay speed money to be treated.



The camp residents simply cannot afford treatment at government and private healthcare institutions and as such, the majority

find themselves dependant on under-funded NGO services, most of which have been discontinued in recent years due to a lack of funding. This dearth in healthcare providers and inaccessibility of adequate medical facilities also means that chronic diseases such as polio and sexually transmitted diseases go untreated and that women are vulnerable to unsafe deliveries causing increased infant mortality. Additional concerns which have been raised is the threat to community members of being used by certain organisations as guinea pigs for drug testing.

#### Recommendations

- Immediate donor and government attention should be placed into developing additional

public infrastructure and accessible and affordable health services.

- Government should allocate funds to upgrade the current deteriorating infrastructure such as latrines, wells, footpaths and drainage systems and implement more frequent garbage disposal.
- Government, NGOs and the donor community should contribute funds for medical facilities, medical staff and awareness raising education programmes about health, hygiene and sanitation which are essential to ensure the public health of this community.

## Education

For the Urdu-speaking camp-based Bangladeshis one of the many reasons for their migration from India in 1947 was the desire for education and social development. They believed that in India their children would be compelled to learn through Hindi, but in Pakistan their language, literature and culture would not only be preserved but promoted and developed and generations would be able to learn through their own mother language, Urdu. During the 24-year East Pakistan era, the Urdu-speaking community built and funded numerous schools, colleges and cultural institutions across the country, demonstrating their keen interest in education and social development.



Government, NGOs and the donor community should contribute funds for medical facilities, medical staff and awareness raising education programmes about health, hygiene and sanitation which are essential to ensure the public health of this community. Yet since December 16 1971, when these institutions were taken over, their names changed, teachers driven out, and Urdu-speaking students expelled from classes, education of this community has been scarce. Presently, there is no Urdu medium school in Bangladesh, nor is there a group of qualified and trained teachers available in any of the 116 camps across the country. To facilitate the community's basic right to study in their mother tongue, there is a need for resources such as libraries containing Urdu books, as well as Urdu-focused educational facilities to be developed.

For almost three decades, camp children were denied admission into public schools creating generations

without education. As such, the establishment of adult education institutions is also required to address this gap.

In Bangladesh, as a whole, urban literacy has improved significantly. As noted by Ahmed Ilias of Al- Fala



Bangladesh at RMMRU's community consultation on 24 June 2011, the literacy rate amongst children aged between six to 12 years is 85.4 per cent for boys and 87.2 per cent for girls. On the

contrary, literacy rates for Urdu-speaking camp residents for children aged four to 12 is only 7.48 per cent for boys and 6.4 per cent for girls. This vast disparity has emerged because of the inability of Urdu-speaking camp children to access education. According to a 2006 Manusher Jonno Foundation study after the emergence of Bangladesh, 47 per cent of camp populations could not access education due to financial constraints, only two per cent could read up to secondary level standard and only six per cent passed secondary level. The survey also highlighted that language was a significant barrier to education.

The poor literacy rates can be attributed to the extremely limited schooling options in the camps. Where schools are available, poverty excludes most of the community members from sending their children, or students drop out at a very early age to earn an income for their family. Girls face even further obstacles in attending school. Often due to poverty they are forced into early marriage – a commitment which does not leave room for schooling. Due to the water crisis and a lack of infrastructure, camp-based girls have to wait in long queues for toilets and to fetch water limiting their school hours.

In cases where there are schools, due to financial constraints these are inaccessible to camp-dwellers. Free or affordable community schools are rare and the recent implementation by government of the Junior School Certificate Examination, which requires education providers to be registered and to comply with a number of standards such as owning a building, makes it almost impossible for these small service providers to exist.

## Recommendations

- NGOs and donors are to invest in the development of Urdu-focused resources such as libraries, teachers and schools
- Efforts are to be directed for the establishment of affordable community education facilities in camps.

- Government and private initiatives are taken to provide scholarship to primary and secondary school students to cover the cost of books, uniforms and admission fees which can add up to Tk. 20,000 per year and which acts as a barrier to admission. This will also address drop outs.
- To address the community's lack of access to education it is recommended that a quota of places for Urdu-speakers be assigned to primary, secondary and tertiary school seats, similar to those of other indigenous groups in Bangladesh.

## Livelihood

After the creation of Bangladesh, almost all Urdu-speaking community members were dismissed from their jobs on various pretences. Urdu-speakers' pensions, bank accounts and investments were seized. Today, in search of a living they occupy extremely low paying jobs. A section of older people have turned to begging to earn an income and many unmarried girls are vulnerable to human trafficking and forced prostitution for a living. Some are forced into criminal activity to earn their livelihood.

The Urdu community is rich in cultural tradition including handicrafts, Bensari sari weaving and fabric embroidery; however there is a great amount of competition in the camps to sell these products. Community members require assistance to diversify, specialise and market their products and to ensure there are linkages with retailers and buyers. In addition, they require access to small loans to improve their livelihood opportunities.

Community members are generally daily wage earners in particularly low paid jobs, in a saturated marketplace. They occupy jobs in the informal sector and are typically butchers, barbers, handicraft and sari makers, fish vendors and rickshaw-pullers. Technical and trade skills training and workforce capacity building would diversify the skills of the camp-dwellers and would assist the community in securing suitable employment in varied fields, generating income and increasing their earning potential. The camp dwellers would benefit from demand and market oriented skills. Entrepreneurship development and business management training would further assist trainees attempting to run micro enterprises.

### Case example: Sari artisan promise yet to be fulfilled

Mirpur is home to the Benarasi weaving industry. In

1991, the Government of Bangladesh announced a rehabilitation plan for the industry by allocating 40 acres of land to the sari artisans, 74 per cent of which was assigned to weavers of Indian descent and also promising monetary incentives for them. To this day however, the government's endeavour has not been implemented. Community leaders claim that the land has been distributed on political grounds.

## Recommendations

- Micro-finance organisations to provide small loans to the community for enterprise development opportunities.
- Provision of skills, vocational entrepreneurship and business training for camp dwellers are to be created.
- NGOs to implement programmes which provide marketing assistance required to diversify existing skills, to market products and to establish linkages with buyers and retailers.

## Discrimination

Although the minority Urdu-speaking camp dwellers have national identity cards in Bangladesh, because of their distinct language and camp address, they continue to face discrimination. This discrimination has become institutionalised particularly in regards to access to employment, education and passports.

The community members claim they have been denied government positions and due to their camp address and perceived undefined legal status, discrimination in the job market remains a problem. They fail to get interview cards and are in no position to produce the documentation required of potential employees to prove legal status. Those who do find work face wage discrimination and inequality of treatment. Discrimination further impacts on the community's ability to enrol in schools. In many cases, camp-dwellers who can afford to send their children to school outside the camps face difficulties enrolling because of the requirements of a nationality certificate, home address or parent's occupation. Further discrimination is experienced when attempting to access passports. Since gaining citizenship a number of the Urdu speaking camp dwellers have had their application for a passport left pending, it is assumed because of their camp address.



## Recommendations

- The government of Bangladesh should formally recognise the Urdu-speaking community as a linguistic minority of Bangladesh and also include "language" in article 28 of the constitution of Bangladesh which currently reads: "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen only on the grounds of religion, race, sex, caste, or place of birth."
- To address the community's lack of access to jobs and to foster integration and acceptance into these areas by the minority, it is recommended that a quota of places for Urdu-speakers be assigned to government jobs, similar to those of other indigenous groups in Bangladesh.

### Facilitating social inclusion

Various factors can be attributed to the poor social



and economic status of the Urdu-speaking camp dwellers. These include a lack of political recognition of the community, ignorance on the part of the public and private sector,

lack of involvement by NGOs, the donor community and civil society and the ill-thought out repatriation movement. As noted by Former Adviser to Bangladesh's Caretaker Government, Rasheda K. Chowdhury, at a Convention held on the issue by RMMRU, Bangladeshis have "given blood for their own language and so we should pay respect to others". In this respect, the rights of this minority community could be realised through respect and dignity displayed by the broader Bangladeshi community. In addition, the government, NGOs and donors have an important role to play in funding the schemes mentioned above which will contribute to the social inclusion of this community. Finally the community itself, spread across Bangladesh, needs to display cohesion, unity and persistence to take their cause forward.

### Social inclusion and attaining the Millennium Development Goals

Adopting the various initiatives outlined in this policy brief for the social inclusion of the Urdu-Speaking camp-based community, is a vital step in the process of Bangladesh achieving the Millennium Development Goals by the year 2015.

**Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger:** Providing livelihood enhancement opportunities, and ending workplace and passport discrimination, will increase wages and reduce the number of people living below the poverty line, thereby reducing the number of those suffering from hunger.

**Universal Education:** Developing community schools and education accessible to the Urdu community through scholarships and other schemes will address the target of all children, both boys and girls, being able to complete a full course of primary school.

**Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women:** Addressing issues of poverty which see girls marry at a very young age and having to wait in long queues for water and for toilets will see more girls able to attend school and will thus eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education.

**Reduce child mortality:** Development of accessible and affordable health services and awareness raising programmes on maternal and child health issues for camp-based Urdu-speakers would work towards improving the infant and under-five mortality rate as well as the proportion of one-year-old children immunised against measles.

**Improve maternal health:** Development of accessible and affordable health services and awareness raising programmes on maternal and child health issues for camp-based Urdu-speakers would also work to improve the maternal mortality ratio, the proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel and access to reproductive health care.

**Combat HIV/AIDS and other diseases:** Again, accessible and affordable health services and education programmes would work towards reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS, improving access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it and reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.

**Environmental sustainability:** Government investment in improvements to infrastructure across the 116 camps in Bangladesh such as wells and latrines, drainage and garbage collection facilities would work toward reducing the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. All of the initiatives proposed under the themes of housing, health, education and livelihoods would work towards achieving the target of significant improvements in the lives of slum-dwellers.

Lynch, M. and Cook, T. (2004) "Stateless Biharis in Bangladesh: A Humanitarian Nightmare," Refugees International Bulletin, 13 December. URL: [www.refugeesinternational.org](http://www.refugeesinternational.org)

## References

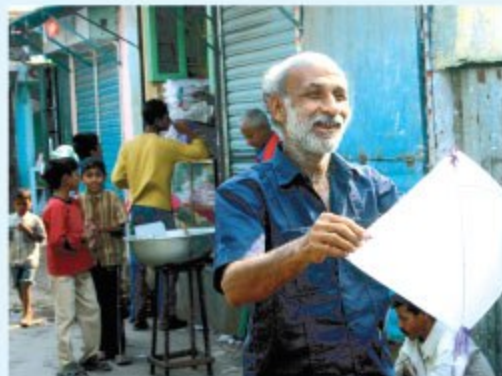
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Colours in the darkness of camp alley



Skilled craftsmen at work in camps



Beating boredom of camp-life



Rendering qawali at national convention

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