



The Memorial Reproduction of 1971 in Present-day Bangladesh: An Introductory Essay¹

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Introduction

Within the contemporary public discourse of Bangladesh, the 1971 Liberation War (that liberated East Pakistan (modern-day Bangladesh) from West Pakistan), often serves as a reference point for interpreting the country's ongoing political, cultural and social events. In many ways, 1971 is considered to be more [useful as] a theoretical perspective in hopes of understanding the future of the country rather than a specific "past event" at a fixed point in time. This approach of collective thinking introduced multiple contested narrations about 1971, and we therefore observe a legacy of politico-cultural expressions in diverse media—literature, visual media, and spatial and material practices. The multiple narrative constructions of 1971 and the dissemination of these narrations through various discursive networks indicate the nation's longstanding conviction of the incompleteness of the Liberation War—that the struggle against Pakistan has not yet come to a closure. In other words, 1971 is presented as a historical continuum diffused over colonial, post-partition, post-independence, contemporary and future times. 1971 is being imagined as the



perpetual struggle of 'a nation in becoming'—a radical break from the 'idea of Pakistan' (*Nazriya-e-Pakistan*) and an event that is still unfolding over a historical *longue durée*.

1971 is a dual signifier—on the one hand, it marks the foundation of Bangladesh, a new country that promised to fulfil the political and cultural expression of the Bengali, but on the other hand, 1971 also announces the end of the idea of "Pakistan" that was a series of mediations spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in which the politico-cultural ambitions for a Muslim polity and a postcolonial citizenry intertwined. In this vein, the essays in this volume translate the historical exigencies of partition and confederation into methodological tools and speak to post-colonial and globalist interventions by various stakeholders—state activists, political activists, artists and professionals. The volume also responds to the urgency of historical methodologies conducive to studying the global matrices of the cultural signs in the post-1971 public discourse. To this end, the essays look into interpretive frameworks other than those of fixed statist narratives to understand how the experience and memorialisation of 1971 is central to today's Bangladeshi cultural and political thinking and how the memory of the 1971 experience is being produced and communicated in different situations, therefore generating different emotions in the philosophical sense of the word. The essays remind us of alternative methodologies for the study of the memorialisation, and they situate the memorialisation process at the intersection of fine-grained micro histories and the corresponding internationalist and global matrices.

The collection of essays in this volume attempts to foreground the critical perspective of the formation and dissemination of the multiple narratives of 1971 and their effects on public life and the cultural arena of contemporary Bangladesh. The essays respond to the questions of how the changing contour of the 1971 narration has evolved and been expressed through imaginative documentation of the memory of 1971 as a drive to create an alternative, humane archive. In doing so, the essays provoke us to question what political interest drives the state's and civil society's demands for censorship over the contested narrations of 1971. The essays recognise that the curation of the memory of 1971 is historically specific and therefore requires a robust and critical approach to discuss its memorialisation process. What is crucial for us to recognise is that the various cultural products and discourse surrounding 1971 expose the contemporary citizens of Bangladesh to a diverse memorial landscape of multiple yet overlapping human experiences. Within the global intellectual



arena, the scope of "Bangladesh" seems only to justify a "crisis narration"; rethinking 1971 not only offers us a new avenue to think about the partition of the Indian subcontinent but also provides us with a productive scope for discussing the conditions of postcolonialism in regards to political independence, nationalism and human liberty.

Nationalism and its slippage

The war, loss, trauma, struggle, resilience and heroism centred on the nine months of the 1971 Liberation war, bookended by the 26 March and the 16 December, provide the narrative limit of Bangladeshi nationalism as advanced by the state. In this statist narrative the "birth" of Bangladesh is grounded in a singular moment of history, therefore enabling an irreconcilable dichotomy between haute cultural nationalism and the vernacular Islamic identity, or between the dominant Bengali linguistic identity and the identity of the people from the hill tracts. At a time of growing tension among groups and communities, a more critical, self-reflective and syncretic approach to the narrative construction of 1971 may prove productive for moving forward. We feel that this approach is crucial for expanding our historical imagination and understanding decolonisation beyond the binary of state ideology and resistance; this approach can instead trace the various configurations of inclusion in and exclusion from the promise of citizenship dispersed from Pakistan to Bangladesh.

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It is increasingly recognised that nationalism, as an emotional project, must be ceaselessly performed and reperformed. In the other words, as a central component of Bangladeshi nationalism, the memories of 1971 must be relived and communicated through ceaseless performative actions, disseminated many times over through entangled physical, material and discursive spaces. Because neither the memory of 1971 (as encountered by people as individuals and as members of various groups) nor the medium through which the reproduction and communication of that memory confers a stable meaning are reproducible, a constant and fixed value and emotion cannot be consistently derived from every occurrence of the memorialisation process. We acknowledge the urgency of incorporating differences in the discussions of the memorialisation of 1971. For this matter, the essays collected in this volume intended neither to investigate the historiography of 1971 nor to determine the factual accuracy related to the politics, war or genocide. Instead, these essays, taken together, invested in understanding the complex and diverse memorialisation of 1971 and its contemporary implications.



Many assumptions of the essays can be traced back to Anderson's seminal work on the formation of nationalism; this nationalism was a performative action mediated by various aesthetic practices that resulted in spatial and material culture. Anderson theorises nationalism as a conglomeration of various semantic practices, a synchronised experience animated through tokens, images, icons, texts and, built environments and material artefacts embedded in the landscape of emotional, mental and haptic space for the anonymous mass to realise a feeling of communality. To this end, Anderson's much criticised concept of 'empty homogenous time' introduces a chronotropic idea of linear time over which nationalism is centred and normalised for what the anonymous mass feels a cathartic bonding with the historic time. Many of Anderson's assumptions were criticised for not paying attention to the diverse personalised, gender-specific and communal experiences of nationalism (Chatterjee 1994). The essays in this volume therefore focus mainly on the ruptured and contested versions of nationalism, which emerged from the diverse personal and collective experiences of 1971. In effect, we underscore the need for a critical approach to studying the memorialisation of 1971, its vested interest groups and agents, and its politico-cultural industry.

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Nationalism is considered to be both a force that shaped the spatial and aesthetic culture of a nation and also a geopolitical and temporal limit of historical subjects in which a nation appears as a discrete field of knowledge. The vast early scholarship on nationalism is generally based on the thesis that nationalism and nation state is an essential and inescapable force of modernisation and a natural course of history. Nationalism is often treated as an all-encompassing project and is conditioned by the assumption that there cannot be any "outside" of the nation state. However, the post-nationalism theorist has begun to question this thesis by surfacing the issue of migrant and diasporic communities, refugees, the fluidity of identities and many other subjects that challenge a static view of nationalism. Substantial scholarship argues that nationalism is not an all-encompassing, all-pervasive force and therefore the process of nationalisation is characterised by the existence, operation, and development of substantial "outside" space that is not fully transformed or affected by the forces of nationalism. These spaces sometimes activate resistance of the homogenising effect of nationalist forces.

While geopolitical and temporal limits offer a convenient way to define the scope of intellectual investigations, a general scholarly consensus has recently been made to interpret nation and nationalism as a diverse, over-



lapping phenomenon. For instance, Faisal Devji (2013) argues that the idea of Pakistan was not based on a specific territory in the conventional sense. According to Devji and some other historians, Pakistan was thought of as a home to the oppressed Muslims of the Indian subcontinent, which is quite different from the idea of modern nationalism as developed in Europe. This de-territoriality was of course very unique to Pakistan, which was broken into two geographic regions separated by another country in between. There may be multiple ways of defining nation and nationalism, and the essays in this volume offer different interpretations of this idea and the constituencies of forces and discourse that lay beyond the usual interpretation of nationalism, nation building, and the nation state.

To this end, Bhabha (1994), Derrida (1988) and Spivak's (1996) critique of nationalism proves particularly productive. Bhabha argues that nationalism's apparent effort to create a homogenous and continuous narrative is misleading. Instead, Bhabha argues, nationalism in its effort to produce a wholesome narrative through texts, images, or artefacts exposed itself to slippage, or the 'intrinsic ambivalent and unstable nature of language or any communication medium.' (Bhabha 1994: 18) It is because of this nature that nationalism cannot maintain a constant and stable core meaning, and it is in effect incapable of claiming a perpetual sovereign authority. The slippage of meaning also occurs in nationalism's essential requirement for continuous performance, reproduction and recreation. Slippage, in other words, is nationalism's dispossession of a fixed meaning and thus indicates its endless possibility to generate new meaning in new contexts.

In addition, Derrida argues that language is an evolving system that transgresses old meaning through iteration of ideas. Language is therefore susceptible to change and is infinitely capable of generating new meaning through repetition, and reappearances. Following this line of argument, we contend that the memorialisation process of 1971, whether to demand a closure of the Liberation War or to capture the nuanced human experience of the war, has been subjected to iteration based on the individuals' and group members' changing interests in specific contexts. We observe that there exists a gap between the nation's utopian pedagogic project of re-inscription and replication in which 1971 is treated as a gigantic myth versus a more pragmatic and humane memory of 1971 that is wilfully vulnerable to slippage and transgression.

Nusrat Chodhury's essay in this volume begins with the birth centennial of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 2020 to show how mimicry is central to the culture of democracy. In contemporary Bangladesh where the famous



'black coat'—a dress that is inseparable from Mujibur Rahman's sartorial politics—becomes an exemplar. Mimicking Mujibur Rahman by changing one's sartorial gestures justifies one's allegiance to the "spirit of 1971". In this process, the image of Mujibur Rahman is transformed into an icon with 'monumental reproducibility', as Chowdhury terms this phenomenon, in hopes of providing stability to the linear narrative of 1971. However, this political mimicry, as the novel she analyses shows, can simultaneously bolster and challenge sovereignty. While Chowdhury presents how the state intended to extend its sovereign violence through the reappearance and reproduction of the icons of 1971, Seuty Sabur's essay in this volume examines how the Shahbagh uprising in 2013 that demanded the capital punishment of the leaders of *Rajakar* exposes the increasing ideological polarisation in contemporary Bangladesh as various camps rely on a rigidly linear history of 1971. Sabur's ethnographic study of Saidpur—a small multi-ethnic community outside of the major urban centres of Bangladesh—presents overlapping and dissonant experiences of diverse communities during and after 1971.

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Slippage brings new forms and formations. By explaining the slippage of nationalism as a 'deformation', Nayanika Mookherjee (2011: 6) elaborates on this process, as she writes, 'The nation that emerges through performance is thus never a complete self-presence. Its performance demands re-performance which necessarily becomes an iterative performativity: a deformation.' Deformation, however, is not the perversion of facts or commitment of deliberate errors. As Mookherjee explains, deformation is the essential consequence of nationalism's anxiety to recreate the indifferent unchangeable and fixed meaning. Despite the repetition through icons and aesthetic artefacts as nation's signature, every performance introduces new forms and new presence. The concept of deformation therefore emphasises the indeterministic nature of nationalism. Deformation as the inevitable consequence of reappearance, performance and retelling, emerge from historic amnesia. A nation as an abstract body will inevitably forget what gives it the identity in the first place. This argument helps us to reassess our theoretical disposition in interpreting the statist narratives of nationalism exclusively as a coercive action. Deformation reminds us that, without reproduction, the project of nationalism will fall apart, and as a result, nationalism thrives through periodic amnesia. Citizens are apt to forget what the unifying factor is, what makes them putative members of a nation state.



Sabur contends that the intersecting lives of Bengalis, Biharis and Marwaris connected three different moments in history—colonial formation, Partition (1947) and the Liberation War (1971)—each with its nationalist narratives founded on both aspiration and violence. This ethnography is an attempt to see beyond the binaries of good and evil, *Muktijodhdha* (freedom fighter) and *Rajakar* (collaborator/perpetrator), directing us instead to recognise our collective culpability. It also explores the possibilities of a "plural" nation-state that recognises the multiple allegiances of its citizen, and how such a nation-state has been articulated at its "margins".

Naeem Mohaiemen's essay makes the case to pay more attention to this willful forgetfulness of the consumers of the representation of the historic narration. While we tend to look exclusively at the power structures that produce such narratives, Mohaiemen reminds us, we often overlook the fact that the consumers of such representations also have a strong part to play in structuring the narratives. He presents the case of *Muktir Gaan* (*Song of freedom*)—a film that is based on actual footage from 1971 but also included new, choreographed scenes created and edited by directors Tareque and Catherine Masud. In post-1971 Bangladesh where a representation of 1971 was vastly absent, the audience enthusiastically received the film as an authentic documentary, despite the filmmakers' reminders of the actual making of the film. Mohaiemen argues that the audience was willing to withhold its critical considerations to "believe" in a narrative that it was desperately searching for an authentic version of 1971, eventually turning the consumers into the makers of the narration.

Elora Halim Chowdhury's essay in this volume also attends to the question of the subjectivity of the filmmakers and their topics corresponding to the power structure within which the film operates. Chowdhury studies two recent documentaries by activist filmmakers Leesa Gazi and Farzana Boby—*Rising silence* (2019) and *The poison thorn* (2015), respectively—that attempt to reposition the marginalised histories of women in the Liberation War. Chowdhury observes such attempts to recover the hitherto unheard voices of the War, challenging the reductive national history on the one hand and on the other hand reifying the role of women in the nationalist struggle. In doing so, Chowdhury examines how the documentaries disrupt the patriarchal focus on 1971 and eventually position themselves in the discourse of transnational feminist aesthetic.

Objects, icons and visuals catalyse remembrance. Williams (1977) stresses the emotional dimension of nationalism that is aroused through encountering objects in specific contexts and within specific social relation-



ships. 'Structure of feeling,' as Williams theorises, shows us how people experience unique feelings generated through the aesthetic of objects. Deleuze and Guattari (1988) further explained the capacity of objects to create 'emotional affects' on the public as 'affectuations' in which they laid stresses not on an object's capacity to create and circulate emotional affects but instead on how these affects enable a consensual public body. Deleuze and Guattari define affect as a prepersonal experience that is different from emotion based on personal and social history; affect is instead generated through personal and public encounters (Massumi 1987: xvi). Objects signify meanings but meanings are subject to slippage; therefore, the meanings and emotional affects that the objects cause are also unstable. An emotional affect is intricately related to the ways in which people experience personal feelings triggered by objects. While the essays in this volume focus on understanding this particular role of objects and icons as generators of the structure of feelings, we do not subscribe to the idea that objects and their emotional relationships with the public can be understood separately from the objects themselves. We understand objects in their specific social and spatial contexts and as a result of social relationships and related power structures.

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Despite the inherent instability of the meaning of objects, cultural historian Tony Bennett (1995) shows how the various institutes of display or the "exhibitionary complexes" of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ranging from museums to shopping arcades, remained important factors in creating a civil society. In his discussion on museums, Bennett contends that in setting up the spatial layout of the museums, equal attention was given to designing the display of the objects and how the "moving bodies" or the spectators would engage with each other and with the objects to grasp the normative narration that the museum intended to communicate. Bennett termed this strategy as "narrative machinery" in which a panoramic optical field is produced through juxtaposition of the spatial itinerary of the visitors and the fixed location of the objects in display, allowing the visitors to see and to be seen. When it comes to specialised museums related to the national "birth", the narration of pain and struggle defines the framework for a national identity. Ernest Renan (1896) wrote more than a hundred years ago that a diverse nation can effectively identify its national commonality by acknowledging its history of the shared suffering. Recently, a body of scholarship (Butler 2004; Kleinman, Das & Lock 2000) identifies how memory of common sufferings and pain is utilised to create a sense of membership and ownership in



individuals even when the particular individual did not experience sufferings first hand. This allows for creating a nation that is also a moral community.

Nubras Samayeen's essay in this volume examines three museums that exist as part of a unified memorial landscape: *Swadhinata Stambha* and the Independence Museum; *Muktijuddho Jadughor* or the Liberation War Museum; and the Torture Cell and Burial Ground Barisal (to be built). Samayeen proposes that we consider these buildings in an assemblage, rather than in isolation, to therefore be part of an expansive landscape. These three monuments/museums mark a new turn in the architectural memorial practice in Bangladesh as these three buildings for the first time display archival documents, photographs and artefacts that narrate the diverse experiences of the Liberation War, while the earlier memorials were conceived only as freestanding monuments. While the earlier monuments were exclusively emotional in nature, either to evoke melancholy as in the monuments of Rayerbazar or to evoke heroism as in the Jatiya Smriti Shoudha, Samayeen contends that these three new buildings are didactic, as they intend to display 71-documents in a convincing manner. The pedagogic missions of these buildings are further expanded by merging with the urban landscape and therefore alluding to nationalism being an integral part of the landscape. In addition, the presence of archival documents in these monuments/ museums creates an ideological setting intertwined with an imaginary landscape to inflect a new sense of nationalism, one that is more insular and exclusive in nature.

While Samayeen analyses the architecture of the new museums as part of a choreographed landscape, Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi's essay in this volume provides an insightful account of the centrality of objects—including the museum as an architectural, spatial, and urban object—as a portal into experiences of empathy and the construction of narratives. Siddiqi analyses the founding and design process of the country's first museum of the Liberation War in the context of the emerging international movement to memorialise the experience of genocide and mass killing. To this end, Siddiqi situates the recent turn towards evidence-based exhibition in contemporary Bangladesh as a local as well as global phenomenon. Siddiqi's study pivots around the design and construction process of the Liberation War Museum and demonstrates how its effort to situate 1971 in an expansive historical time highlights the diverse, multifaceted human experiences of the war. Siddiqi discusses this process in terms of 'architecture of inconclusivity' for it develops an open-ended aesthetic language corresponding to the museum's commitment to preserve and display the 'people's



history of the war.' While the impact of the architectural design resides in its possibilities for aesthetic inclusivity, the artefacts collected from various personal sources and held in the museum collection proposes an embodied understanding of the archives of violence and agency to challenge statist and hegemonic knowledge production about 1971.

In the remainder of the essay, I will present a short vignette of a so-called Bihari refugee camp in Dhaka to discuss how the narrative slippage, reappearance, display and deformation of the memorialisation of 1971 affects the experience of contemporary citizens and non-citizens alike. Since Bangladesh's independence, the Urdu-speaking community known as the Bihari has been living in extremely dense "camps" across the country. The Bihari community is generally identified as anti-liberation and anti-Bangladesh because a significant number of individuals from this community supported and aided the Pakistani army during the 1971 Liberation War. While a substantial number of intellectuals and human rights activists within Bangladesh have made the case to include the Urdu-speaking community, legally and ideologically, within Bangladeshi nationalism, the task has been extremely difficult. The hegemonic knowledge produced through the memorialisation of 1971 that pushed the Bihari community into a perpetual limbo has not been easy to alter. "Bihari" is a conjectural identity that grew organically after the Partition as a general term to describe the diverse but unified immigrant communities who adopted Urdu as opposed to Bengali as their main mode of communication and political identity in East Pakistan.

Within the broader context of the pre-Partition Indian subcontinent, Bihar and its population carried a stigma of poverty and deterioration (Puri 2007). Although the term Bihari was generally accepted by the Urdu-speaking migrants as a common locus of their social identity, in the political discourse of Bangladesh after the liberation, the term *Bihari* suggested a discursive concept and a source of communal conflict, treachery, poverty, and immorality (Ghosh 1991, 1994, 1995, 1997). However, throughout the tortuous historic trajectory of this community, the Biharis constantly adapted and readapted their identity—once aligned with the hegemonic state narratives (as in pre-1971 Pakistan) but later resistant to be fully assimilated into the oppressive Bengali nationalism (as in post-1971 Bangladesh).

The discussion of the Bihari camp will set up the context against which the contributions in the Focus-section of this volume can be situated. This example is important for us to understand that the ways in which the



country chose to remember 1971 could have a lasting effect on the lives of thousands. It can be argued that the issues are nothing more than the massive diplomatic failure between Bangladesh and Pakistan. However, the new generations of Biharis have indeed experienced extreme difficulties in claiming their rightful residency; they are overlooked as members of an abstract community that is remembered exclusively in the context of 1971. In this context, the memorial reproduction of 1971 creates a biased historic knowledge that exploits a marginalised community. It is specifically this production of biased knowledge and its various cultural, aesthetic and political forms that the authors of this volume seek to identify and interrogate. The analysis of the essays thus provokes us to think how a more humane, methodologically robust, and critical knowledge of 1971 can strengthen the core of a plural and inclusive society.

Bihari camps: a case study

Amidst the busy neighbourhoods of Dhaka, about 35,000 registered Urdu-speaking Bihari "refugees" are currently living in a 14.4-acre camp in Mohammadpur, commonly known as the Geneva Camp for the "stranded Pakistanis", established by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1972. Similar to this camp, there exist 116 recorded "camps" located across the country today. These camps are home to about 50,000 people who are descendants of the approximate 1.5 million Muslims who, after the 1947 Partition, migrated to East Bengal from various ethnic and geographic backgrounds, namely from West Bengal and Bihar (Sen 1999, 2000). The immigrant communities whose common practicing language was Urdu (although their primary language may not have been Urdu at the time of immigration) were cumulatively known as *Bihari* (now used as a derogatory term in Bangladesh) because the majority of these immigrants came from the state of Bihar in India.²

Before the 1971 Liberation War, the Bihari community maintained a unique identity from the majority of Bengali communities, often centred on the housing colonies built by the East Bengal government after the Partition (Waterston 1963).³ The Urdu-speaking community in general identified themselves more with the Urdu-speaking Punjabis and *Mohajirs* (Urdu-speaking Partition refugees or migrants who mainly settled in Lahore and Karachi) in West Pakistan (Ghosh 2001; Kumar 2009) than with the Bengali-speaking East Pakistanis. Although Urdu was spoken by a small fraction of the population immediately after the Partition, the cultural and political elites used Urdu as a measure of cultural progress for the



language's historic connections to the Mughals. Muhammad Jinnah, the first prime minister of Pakistan, recommended Urdu as the official lingua franca of the new Pakistan and thus scaffolded the political and cultural expression of the unified Pakistani nationalists. In effect, the Pakistan Muslim League, the governing political party of Muhammad Jinnah, advanced a political narration that advocated for a monolithic nationalism and thus compartmentalised non-Urdu languages and cultures as being regionalist if not provincialist.

The Bengali-speaking population in East Pakistan, whose language and culture were stereotyped as being Hindu for its linguistic roots in Sanskrit (imagined as Hindu and dichotomously opposite of Urdu), was considered incompetent as citizens and Muslims alike. The linguistic differences between Urdu and Bengali (and for that matter other languages such as Balochi) and the associated identity discourses were politically instrumentalised to marginalise the non-Urdu-speaking communities of Pakistan. The Bihari community subscribed to the State's political propaganda about the racial and cultural inferiority of the Bengalis and the impurity of the Bengali religious status⁴; therefore, throughout the political conflict between East and West Pakistan, the Urdu-speaking community in East Pakistan was generally politically inclined to the West Pakistan's suppressive political treatment of the East (Ghosh 2007).

During the Liberation War of 1971, a significant portion of the Bihari community actively facilitated the Pakistan Armed Forces in collaboration with the pro-Pakistani Bengali groups such as the Razakar and the Al-Badr to commit mass killing in East Pakistan (Schofield 2012). As a result, after independence, the Bengali community considered the Biharis as traitors, and the Bihari communities faced several attacks (not aided by the Bangladesh government) by Bengalis.⁵ To keep the Bihari community safe from the Bengali attacks and to gather the community for the repatriation process, the Bangladesh government in collaboration with Oxfam and Red Cross temporarily housed the Bihari communities in 116 makeshift refugee camps across the country, camps that were thought to be temporary housing before the refugees would be repatriated to (West) Pakistan. The Biharis that ended up in these camps soon came to be known as 'the stranded Pakistanis,' experiencing apathy and negligence from the Bangladeshis on an everyday basis. Generations later, Bihari people continue to live in these camps—although a few still live with the hope for repatriation, the majority have strongly claimed their citizenship rights and full legal



assimilation into Bangladesh, now facilitated by a 2008 supreme court ruling that all Biharis born after 1971 are Bangladeshi citizens by birth.⁶

The paradox of the stateless situation of the Bihari community, resulting from the independence of Bangladesh, lies in the fact that the Biharis are not refugees according to the 1951 Refugee Convention because they did not flee the country of their residence; rather, the territory of their residence seceded from the whole and became a sovereign nation-state, deeming them refugees at home. They are also not officially stateless, according to the *1954 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons*, because the Bihari community is entitled to citizenship under Bangladeshi Law. This means that the Biharis are *de jure* citizens but *de facto* stateless: their citizenship does not work or is ineffective in the real world (Redclift 2013).

Two of the major Bihari refugee camps are located in Mohammadpur and Mirpur, two very dense neighbourhoods of Dhaka, the country's capital. When the camps were first established in 1972, the areas were located on the outskirts of the city. The Mohammadpur camp was adjacent to the site of the second capital at Ayub Nagar, later renamed as Sher-e-Bangla Nagar designed by Louis Kahn. Kahn's famous National Parliament building is just about one kilometre west of the camp. Unlike the camp in Mohammadpur that developed within a large urban block, the Mirpur camp is comprised of twelve loosely connected camps. The Kurmitola camp is the largest among these, and according to the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC), at present there are approximately 15,000 dwellers in the Kurmitola camp.⁷

When these camps were established in 1972, Oxfam International commissioned an inter-institutional research group—a collaboration between Carnegie Mellon University, Texas A&M University, and Frederick C. Cuny, one of the first-generation designers of emergency shelters—to design and build a group of "demonstration houses" in the Mirpur Bihari Camp. The objective of the project was to teach the camp dwellers through the model houses how to develop their own version of camp housing.⁸ This collaborative group was known as the Working Party⁹ and was funded by the Office of Science and Technology Technical Assistance Bureau Agency for International Development Department of State and Intertext Relief and Reconstruction Corporation to develop prototype designs in four different Bihari settlements: Mirpur, Tongi, Bhashantek and Khulna. One of the main purposes of their project was to develop a prototype that could be adapted to different disaster sites across the globe.



Theoretically, the Working Party was critical of the so-called "modern" thinking that imagined a universally applicable and often prefabricated, prototype.¹⁰ Rather, the Working Party focused on developing a system to extract data on the refugee population, their emotional, behavioural and cultural preferences, and an intimate knowledge of the local construction technique.¹¹ During the research phase of their project, the Working Party worked in two groups: Cuny worked at the Texas A&M research group and experimented with the pneumatic dome structure, while the Carnegie Mellon team was led by Volker H. Hartkopf, and they experimented with lightweight A-frame structures. Eventually, the prototype developed by the Carnegie Mellon group was selected for implementation in Bangladesh. They named their house the 'Evolutionary Shelter,' which was part of Cuny's broader idea of a 'shelter-to-housing' program (Figures 1, 2 & 3).

Manuals of building an A-frame prototype.

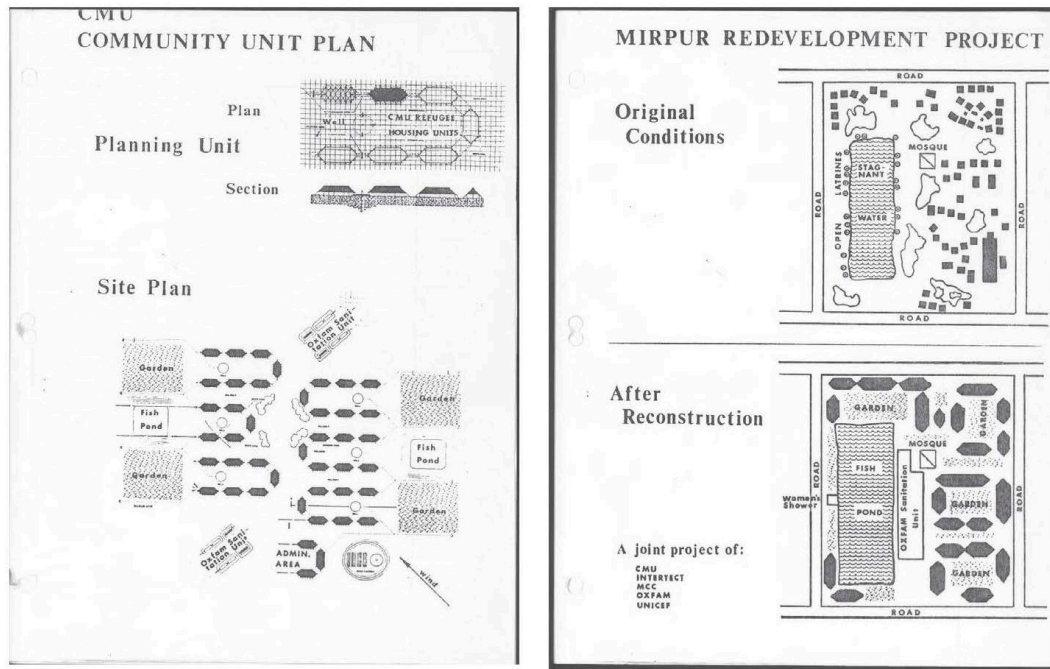


Figure 1, source: Frederick C. Cuny. n.d. *Refugee camps & camp planning*, <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/159953> [retrieved 16.01.21].



Structural prototype of A-frame.

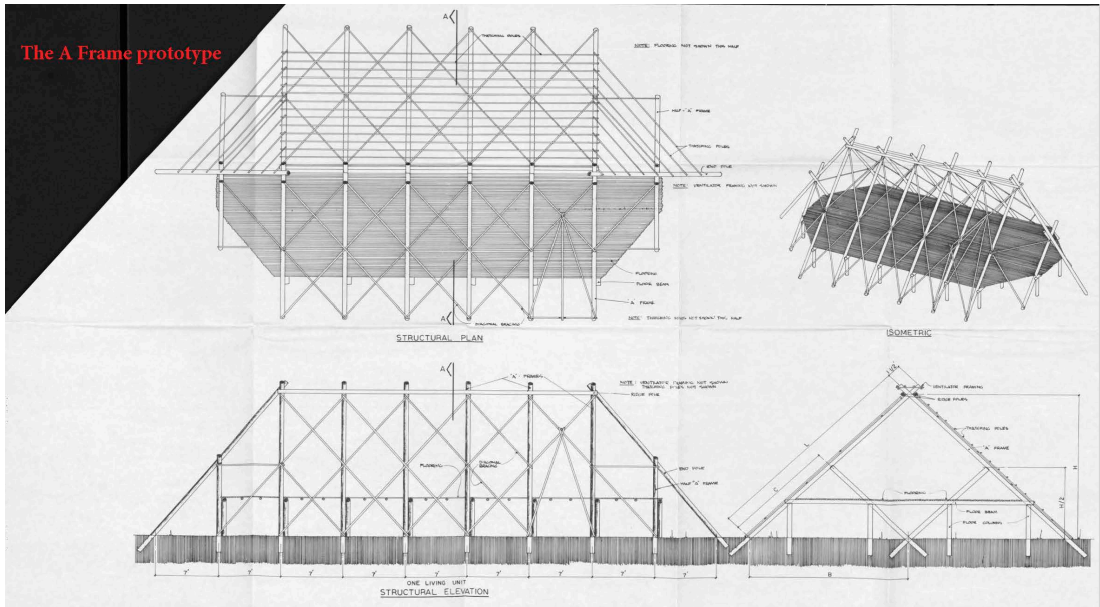


Figure 2, source: Charles H. Goodspeed et al. 1975. *Feasibility test of an approach and prototype for ultra low cost housing*. Washington: Office of Science and Technology, Technical Assistance Bureau, Agency for International Development, <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/159947> [retrieved 16.01.21].

Construction of A-frame structures in collaboration with the Bihari community.

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Figure 3, source: Charles H. Goodspeed et al. 1975. *Feasibility test of an approach and prototype for ultra low cost housing*. Washington: Office of Science and Technology, Technical Assistance Bureau, Agency for International Development, <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/159947> [retrieved 16.01.21].



Although the camps were initially thought to be temporary, very soon the dwellers realised that the camp would be their home for a long time. The very slow repatriation process began in 1973 but stopped abruptly in 1990 as a result of a disagreement between the governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh (Haider 2016). While some camp residents were transferred to Pakistan through the arrangement mediated by a diplomatic team from Delhi, many Biharis remained in Bangladesh awaiting their turn. At the time of the Kurmitola camp's establishment in 1972, each family was given an 8-by-8-foot plot. By 2000, most of the plots were developed into one story brick structures with tin roofs, financed and developed solely by the residents. By 2010, about one-third of the original 8-by-8-foot plots were merged with adjacent plots and were made into multi-story structures. As the Biharis were not eligible for bank loans, the development was mostly done by using personal savings or loaning from each other. Within the camp it usually costs around 250,000 Taka (about 3,000 USD estimated in 2018) to build a two-storied unit on an 8-by-8-foot plot. Each family has a minimum of five to ten members, all living in the same room. Members of a family use timesharing techniques and use the house in shifts: some members sleep at night, whereas others sleep during the daytime. The urban evolution of the plot divisions has created unique functionality and use, making the camp a self-organising, albeit extremely challenging urban entity. The current living form of these two camps (Figure 4)—an extremely dense ghetto-like area of 3- and 4-story brick and concrete structures without access to even minimal public services—could be seen as both the archives and as a historic palimpsest that captures a moment of postcolonial disenchantment, the end of the political idea of Pakistan as a deterritorialised, ideological homeland (Devji 2013).



The Mohammadpur Bihari Camp today.



Figure 4, source: photograph by Mahmud Hossain Opu/*Dhaka Tribune*.

The camp residents have developed internal protocols for financing, informal cooperative construction, and management (Figure 5). The camp dwellers have also developed a consensual way of locating ownership of each plot (on the basis of oral history) and also help each other by lending capital and with the construction process. From this perspective, the so-called "informality"—an ambiguous term that loosely indicates the absence of authoritarian control—indicates, in the case of the Bihari camps, a space of resistance: the influence and control of the state is minimal within the camp life. Life outside the camp is characterised by the privatisation of personal life, the separation of productive labour from communal relationships (although this is rarely the case), and the increasing obligation of people to face the state as individuals instead of as a community. The unwieldy growth of real estate in the surrounding neighbourhood is driven by the almost deregulated market of Dhaka's real estate. The meaning and courses and tactics of development within the camp are quite different. In contrast, the development of the land, the building construction, and the financing of building activities were supported by personal and communal networks.

Collaborative construction.

Figure 5, source: photograph by Tasniva Rahman.

While the rigorous collective and cooperative initiatives that constructed the dwelling units testifies to the ongoing drive of the Bihari community to establish their identity, it is important to note here that the camp community conceives the camp not as a collection of disparate dwelling units but instead as a unified whole, albeit having contested parts, creating a contested complementary of the "outside" city. Therefore, an exclusive study of how individual units came into place would ignore essential components of the complex process of making the camp into a unified whole. The camp does not exclusively signify a shelter to its dwellers; rather, the camp is the source of an emancipatory mental space and of a spatial armature enabling the dwellers to counter the experiences of oppression and injustice. One of the ways to understand how the camp, as a mental space, provides the scope for establishing solidarity is the ways in which the children of the camp relate their everyday experiences with the spaces of the camp. A few children of the camp receive education mainly from the camp school, which is operated by the non-government organisation Al Falah, but most students do not have the opportunity to receive any formal education.

For the substantial number of children who do not go to the camp school, the alleys or the spaces between houses are the work and play areas. The children hardly leave the camp; for most of these children, the city appears



as a distant and mysterious curiosity. For the children, the "outside" is an unknowable territory of insecurity and threat. The play that takes place in the alleys of the camp is a powerful tool for the children to imagine the entire camp as an integrated and extended house (Figure 6). The mental image of the camp as an extended house was strengthened by the absence of toilets or common rooms in individual dwelling units; the shared toilet and shared community space has forced the plot to operate as a shared, yet fragmented, living area. A camp resident's sense of belonging is attached to the unit, the camp, and even the city beyond the camp; residents have subsequently developed a unique code of privacy and a unique relationship between private and public realms of their lives. Rehana, an 8-year-old girl, said, 'I want to go outside the camp school. There is a big school nearby our camp. I want to study there, but my parents said I can't ever read there. They have large fields too. I have seen the fields from the street.' The children's natural desire to break through the camp not only tell us about the desire for growth but also a fundamental need to amplify one's existence through the broader public life.

The aisles as the play area.



Figure 6, source: photograph by Tasniva Rahman.



The ritualistic collective display of the camp residents to claim their rightful existence in the public life of the city takes place on the Day of Ashura, the tenth day of the *Muharram* (the first month of the Muslim calendar) that marks the tragic death of Imam Husayn ibn Ali in the battle of Karbala that was fought in present-day Iraq. On this day, the camp dwellers make a procession with a *Tazia* (or *Ta'ziyeh*) (Alexander, Joya Chatterjee 2016: 161-90)—an Urdu word for a symbolic mausoleum or bier of Imam Husayn—and march in a loop around the urban blocks close to the camp (Jalais 2014).¹² Ashura is a predominantly Shia festival, but even the Biharis who are Sunni Muslims adopted it to express a resistance against the structural coercion. For the Sunnis in the rest of Bangladesh, Ashura is an obsolete ritual.

Historically, Sunnis remember this day privately with fasting to remember the day of the freedom of Moses (Musa) and his followers from the Pharaoh. For the Shias around the world, who in most places are the minorities, Ashura carries immense socio-political significance, for they conceive the day as a symbol of perpetual struggle between the oppressed and the oppressor expressed through collective mourning (Dabashi 2011). Unlike the Bengali/non-Bihari Shia community, Ashura is not a day of mourning but is instead a day of expressing agility, spirit, solidarity and tenacity of a community through colourful *tazia* and dresses and *tazia*. The procession, gathering members from different Bihari camps of Dhaka, is a collective remembrance of the solidarity of all camp dwellers. As the city is the theatre of such a display of resistance, the urban spatial dimension of the procession is crucial. While the non-Bihari procession starts at Hussaini Dalan, a seventeenth-century Mughal centre for Shia Muslims located in Old Dhaka, the old southern city centre, the Bihari procession starts from the Mohammadpur Geneva camp: a powerful gesture to state the community's differences from the Bengali Shia community.

Intriguingly, many camp dwellers who left the camp and established a better economic standard eventually returned. The significance of the camp to the resident's existential identity cannot be exclusively understood in economic terms or in terms of property ownership (Sigona 2015). The impossibility of landownership within the camp could not prevent the residents from claiming their authority and right to dwell in the camp. This act displays a very complex attitude towards one's right to a place and a self-definition of human identity. A significant number of residents have left the camp over the years by saving up enough resources to support themselves outside the camp, but they sacrifice a part of their identity in doing so,



losing the opportunity to use the Urdu language in public spaces or even in their new private lives. They are also compelled because of the social stigma to cut off all social and economic ties to the camp and fully invest in assimilating with the mainstream life outside the camp. However, the "racial passing" as Bengalis and the total abandonment of the camp that is the physical embodiment of the Bihari existence is neither affordable nor acceptable for many camp residents. Especially after the declaration of naturalised citizenship in 2008, many Biharis who had previously left the camp returned as a widespread fear grew that the government was going to evict the residents and acquire the camp land (Parveen 2008).

The survival of the Bihari camp is underpinned by the irony of the refugee status of the Biharis: they were not entrapped in a foreign country along their escape route to another foreign country as is the typical refugee, but in their own country. They were denied entry to a country that was not only native to them but also for which they engaged in mass killing. The two contrasting feelings of displacement and domesticity have been accumulated over the spatial memory of the entrapped Biharis in a nuanced way. The domestication involved ingenious spatial tactics and techniques and is entangled in contested legal and existential questions, as several generations of Biharis have been fighting to claim their citizenship and their right to public life in Bangladesh.

In modern-day Bangladesh, the Biharis who have undergone an everchanging status as refugees underwent multiple changing statuses as refugees during the Partition and through the secession of Pakistan occupy a threshold entity, fractured into pieces and spread over the *longue durée* of partition, confederation, and dissolution of the colonial empire and the making and remaking of postcolonial nation-states. This case of the Biharis is not a standalone issue that once occurred and has since settled but instead demonstrates how the contour of the Bihari identity is continuously in flux. The case of the Biharis exemplifies an inherent crisis of the post-colonial condition in which nation-states are still producing new political narratives that generate refugees and invent new terms such as illegal immigrants, internally displaced populations, undocumented labourers, and statelessness. The Partition refugees therefore present a perennial challenge for the postcolonial world that is still aligning its diverse conditions within the global situation.

With the 2008 Supreme Court ruling that issued citizenship, statelessness has been theoretically resolved as the court directed the election commission to include the Bihari community in electoral rolls and thus



provide them with national identity cards. However, anthropologist Victoria Redclift discusses how the legal status of citizenship for the Bihari community remains ineffective for the 'identity of citizenship' is not acknowledged by the society at large (Redclift 2011 a&b). The camp dwellers told the authors about the ineffectiveness of the newly issued voter identity cards: with their cards, they can obtain neither passports nor driver's licenses. The driver's license issue is a major determinant of occupation for the majority of male members of the community. The only thing that can be achieved with these new identity cards is voting, which according to the residents has turned them into nothing more than mere electoral statistics (Haider 2018).

Biharis are still socially and culturally ostracised, and it is virtually impossible to get white collar jobs outside of the camp or access bank loans. The change in legal status alone does not suffice to end the socio-political ostracism. Naeem Mohaiemen has identified the 'blind spot of 1971', that the post-1971 Bangladeshi nationalist narrative excluded various minority groups such as the plain-land Adivasis, the Jumma (Chittagong Hill Tracts people) and the Biharis (Mohaiemen 2011). Within the dominant framework of the nation-state, and with nationalism being the primary determinant of legal identity, the camp residents have faced two issues in establishing their identity in Bangladesh: first, the mammoth bureaucratic hindrance to issue legal identity of citizenship, and second, the cultural identity and authority of the Urdu-speaking Bihari as opposed to the dominant Bengali culture.

Conclusion

In the discussion of the biases and limitations of the current scholarship about "Bangladesh", Willem van Schendel (2014) pointed out 'low self-esteem' of scholars of Bangladeshi origin being one of the important factors that hinders critical development of this academic discipline. He contends that a substantial number of scholars and researchers choose to overlook the history of Bangladesh through a long lens. In effect, he observed, the overall intellectual culture is entrapped within an uncritical nationalist saga that is often limited by 1971 as its only point of departure. Although Willem van Schendel does not provide a context of how this low self-esteem was created and nurtured, he rightly identified the killing of the intellectuals during 1971 and the subsequent weakening of the university-level education system being a defining factor. However, the other important factor that might play a catalytic role in developing this insular historic consciousness is that 1971 never received a fair and just closure. The absence of



closure tainted the historic consciousness of the society for more than five decades, leading to precarious binary oppositions between religion and nationalism, between culture and provincialism, and so on and so forth.

Historian Ali Usman Qasmi (2017) suggested out that a just historic closure cannot be achieved by Bangladesh alone. In observing the war crime trial, Qasmi stated that Pakistan, its government and its citizens alike, are obligated to assist Bangladesh in achieving this historic closure through fair acknowledgements and memorialising the historic facts. However, despite all limitations, Iftekhhar Iqbal (2014) shows that there has been a growing critical body of scholarship that investigates "Bangladesh" through the lenses of historical *longue durée* and also demonstrates a formidable historic imagination, creativity, and intellectual labour. There undoubtedly exists a strong body of emerging scholarship that interrogates Bangladeshi nationalism giving due attention to its multifaceted and complex trajectory. The aim of this special issue, nevertheless is not to provide another mapping or survey of the Bangladesh studies; we instead want to provide an account of how the historic consciousness embedded in the diverse traumatic and heroic experiences of 1971 percolated in the other arenas of intellectual investigations, cultural productions and political movements—whether this consciousness has been exploited to gain an unfair political benefit or can be utilised for achieving a more humane and inclusive society based on a plural historic consciousness.

The authors of this volume collectively investigate the centrality of 1971 in forming the historic consciousness of the contemporary society and how this consciousness has influenced the forms of cultural and political expressions of today's Bangladesh. In a sense, a linear, biased and reductive narration of 1971 hinders the historic fact that the current Bangladeshi residents are not a homogenous monolith but are instead a diverse population that arrived at this contemporary moment via many different historic trajectories. This history does not have a fixed point of origin; rather, the country and its occupants underwent multiple changing statuses as refugees during the Partition and through the secession of Pakistan. The historic consciousness of Bangladesh should therefore be understood not as a settled issue but as a fluid consciousness—a perpetual threshold entity, fractured into pieces and spread over the *longue durée* of partition, confederation, and dissolution of the colonial empire and the making and remaking of postcolonial nation-states.

By analysing different forms of cultural and political reproduction of the memory of 1971, in this volume we have stressed that 1971 is not a



unilateral moment that once occurred and has since settled but instead demonstrates how the contour of Bangladesh's identity is everchanging and continuously in flux. We have also observed an inherent crisis of the contemporary condition in which the nation-states are producing new exclusive political narratives that generate new forms of marginalisation and that outcast subjectivities. However, 1971 remains and will remain a defining framework for determining the national identity of Bangladesh, and therefore a nuanced and humane history of 1971 and its memorial production can be the key aspect for strengthening the plural basis of Bangladesh.

Endnotes

¹ The idea of this special issue was first developed in conversation with Anandita Bajpai in 2018 when she invited me to talk at Humboldt University Berlin. I am grateful for her feedback on the initial draft of the call for proposal. My discussion on the 'Bihari' camp is part of a larger research project (recent government-initiated relocation program of the Urdu speaking community), which I am collaborating with Tasniva Rahman. My special thanks to Michael Mann and Domenic Teipelke for their insightful comments, patience, and editorial support. Last but not least, my special thanks to the authors for their commitment and dedication in this volatile and difficult time.

² The young residents feel that the changing nomenclature—Bihari, Urdu-speaking, or stranded Pakistani—is less about establishing technical accuracy or political correctness and instead reflects the changing perception of the Bihari community in general.

³ Mohammadpur and Mirpur in Dhaka was allocated for the settlement of incoming Bihari migrants. East Pakistan government also built several refugee colonies in these two areas. See: 1948 East Pakistan Planning Subcommittee Report in Waterston, 1963.

⁴ Minority Rights Group, report no. 11, 4th edn. London 1982.

⁵ The exact number of victims are still debated. According to the UNHCR, Bengalis reportedly killed over 1,000 people. See: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/469f3868c.html> [retrieved 12.01.21]. According to Ben Whitaker Almost 100 people on either side of the conflict were killed. See, Ben Whitaker. 1977. *Biharies in Bangladesh*, Minority Rights Group (July 1977). Since the independence a good number of Bengali scholars and activists has written about anti-Bihari violence. One of the earliest examples is Mafizullah Kabir's (1972), *Experiences of an exile at home: life in occupied Bangladesh*.

⁶ Immediately after independence, in 1972, the Bangladesh government announced Presidential Order 149, offering naturalised citizenship to the Bihari community. About 600,000 people accepted the offer and eventually assimilated with the mainstream Bengali society while about 500,000 refused and opted to return to Pakistan (Kelley 2010).

⁷ From our discussion with the camp residents at Mohammadpur on 22, 23, 26, 27 July 2019, and 2, 3, 9, 18 August 2019. Our key resource persons were Mr. Khorshed, Chairman of Mirpur branch, Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC); Mr. Manna, Secretary of Mirpur branch, Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC).

⁸ During the liberation war Cuny worked with Oxfam Chief Engineer Jim Howard on a cholera epidemic. See: A. J. Taylor. 1972. A survey and analysis of administrative, organizational, and technical experience accruing to Oxfam and other voluntary agencies arising out of Bangladesh Refugee Relief Operations April 1971-February 1972. Unpublished Report Oxfam.



⁹ Among the three collaborators, only Cuny had prior field experience in designing emergency shelters. In 1971 Frederick Cuny founded the non-profit Intertect Relief and Reconstruction Corp. of Dallas, Texas, a relief mission technical assistance and training company. His company became the major disaster relief agency, INTERTECT. Cuny also founded the Center for the Study of Societies in "Crisis" which became known as the Cuny Center after his death. For a critical history of the development of humanitarian practice in architecture see Siddiqi (2017).

¹⁰ Report: a prototype refugee shelter. Part 1. INTERTECT. Available electronically from, <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/159974> [retrieved 12.01.21].

¹¹ The Working Party was given a relatively small area in Mirpur for their experiment with the idea that the area could serve as an example for the rest of the Bihari camps. The experiment site was almost square, approx. 250' on each side, with a large open tank in the western third of the site. The entire area is above the possible flood level. When Cuny's team arrived, one hundred and eight Bihari families occupied 64 structures, all made of various combinations of bamboo, bamboo mats and mud. Some occupants were provided or had obtained synthetic materials including fired bricks, polyethylene sheeting, and C.I. Sheet, though the vast majority only used indigenous materials. Within the area there are a combination of single-family units, 2-family units, and 1 large 15-family structure built by the I.C.R.C. in 1972. All units have been in the area since 1972 and are dilapidated. Only a few could be expected to survive the upcoming monsoon. See: (1975). Refugee camps in Bangladesh 1975, available at, <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/159954> [retrieved 12.01.21]. Also see, Frederick C. Cuny. Refugee Camps and Camp Planning. Camp Development Programming. Report No. 3. Available at, <http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/159951> [retrieved 12.01.21].

¹² Also see: <https://www.racheltanurmemoialprize.org/rememering-karbala-claiming-space-in-the-city-through-ashura-celebration-by-the-stateless-biharis-in-bangladesh/> [retrieved 12.01.21].

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