

## Original Paper

# Literature Review of Research on Biharis Issue

YingYing Du<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of History and Culture, China West Normal University, NanChong, China

\* YingYing Du, School of History and Culture, China West Normal University, NanChong, China

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### Abstract

*During the partition, approximately 1.3 million Urdu-speaking Muslims, suffering communal riots, migrated to the former East Pakistan. They were known as Biharis. The Pakistan ruling class preferred Biharis due to their Muhajir status. Therefore, they supported Pakistani domination consciously. Some Biharis joined the Pakistan army during the Bangladesh Liberation War. All Biharis were considered traitors. A number of Biharis opted for Pakistan. Despite a repatriation process lasting over 20 years, many Biharis still stranded. The Biharis were granted Bangladeshi citizenship in 2008. However, they continue to face challenges integrating into mainstream in terms of education, employment, travel and residence. Since the 1970s, extensive research has been conducted by the international academic community on various aspects related to the origin of Biharis, repatriation efforts, identity issues and human rights. With the influence of international academics, there has been an increasing focus within Chinese academics on the plight of Biharis. The Biharis issue remains further study from various perspectives and angles. We can understand nation-state construction processes as well as examining geopolitical dynamics within South Asia from an ethnic perspective.*

### Keywords

*Biharis, Repatriation, Diaspora, Identity*

### 1. Introduction

Bihari is a common term for the Urdu-speaking non-Bengali Muslims who migrated from India to Bangladesh (former East Pakistan) during the partition of India. Around the time of subcontinent partition in 1947, approximately 1.3 million Urdu-speaking Muslims migrated from India to East Pakistan because of communal riots by Hindus, of whom about a million came from Bihar of India and its neighbouring regions. Therefore this ethnic group were called collectively as Biharis. Under the rule of Pakistan, the Biharis were valued and favored by Pakistan ruling class due to their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As Muhajirs, they enjoyed preferential treatment. Driven by Muhajir identity and

practical interests, Biharis had always supported a united Pakistan encompassing East Pakistan. As tensions between East and West Pakistan growing, the Biharis' political tendency to maintain Pakistan national unity led them to be seen as symbol of Pakistan colonial ruling. In addition, the Biharis were attacked by the Bengali extreme nationalists. During the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, some Biharis joined the Pakistan Army (Razakars) in the massacres of Bengalis for their previous acts of violence. After Liberation war, all of Biharis were regarded as collaborators of Pakistan and traitors, subjected to discrimination and reprisals, and were deprived of their property by the Bangladesh new government and stranded in refugee camps. As a result, a vast number of Biharis chosed to renounce their Bangladesh citizenship, hoping return to Pakistan as Pakistan citizens. The repatriation of Biharis became a remaining humanitarian issue of Bangladesh Liberation War. Over 20 years, the governments of Bangladesh and Pakistan continuously negotiated on this issue. Besides, The United Nations and the international community also concerned about the fate of the Biharis. However, with the changing politic landscape in the subcontinent and the domestic political turmoil in Pakistan, Pakistan stopped accepting Biharis since 1993. The Biharis have been labeled differently as stranded Pakistanis, non-Bengalis and Urdu-speaking. Due to Pakistan's refusal, the Biharis moved from pursuing repatriation to struggling to Bangladesh citizenship identity. With the help of United Nations human rights organizations, the Biharis in Bangladesh were officially granted citizenship in 2008. But citizenship is only the first step towards integration into mainstream Bangladeshi society, and they still face systematic discrimination in education, housing, employment and other aspects. Biharis communities have also become hotbeds of criminal activity in Bangladesh, including the drug trade, posing challenges to regional security and governance in South Asia. There is every indication that the issue of Biharis in Bangladesh has not yet been properly resolved.

The issue of Biharis, as a historical legacy between the two countries, not only impacts bilateral exchanges and cooperation, but also serves as a destabilizing factor affecting regional security in South Asia. Due to historical and practical considerations, more and more scholars have devoted themselves to the study of Biharis issues in Bangladesh. This paper seeks to do a critical literature review on the Biharis Issue in Bangladesh. The literature review analysis of the Biharis Issue in Bangladesh will be based on four themes—the origin of the Biharis, repatriation of Biharis, identity disputes and human rights. It is anticipated that this literature review will facilitate further research on the Biharis issue in Bangladesh.

## **2. Existing English Literature Review**

The Biharis issue in Bangladesh gained attention in 1972 report of the International Commission of Jurists—East Pakistan Events of 1971: A Legal Study. This report, based on contemporary newspaper accounts, refugee testimony, and oral accounts by jurists, details the events that occurred in East Pakistan in 1971, including those involving the Biharis. Subsequently, there has been a gradual increase in research on the Bihari problem in Bangladesh, encompassing survey reports, monographs, papers

and coverage within works on Bangladesh history. Following collection and organization efforts, research primarily focuses on the following four themes.

### *2.1 Origin of the Biharis in Bangladesh*

Academics usually trace this issue back to around the partition of India in 1947. Some schoolers argued that the hostility towards the Biharis in Bangladesh has social, political and linguistic roots (Ben & Iain Guest, 1972). Certain schooler provides an overview of the history of Bihar migration from the partition of India to the Bangladesh Liberation War, and keep optimistic outlook for resolution of the Bihar issue (Ennals, 1987). Someone explains the historical and political factors that have contributed to the fate of the "Biharis" (Kuczkiewicz-Fraś, 2019). In addition, some historical works also touch on this issue. Willem van Schendel documents the transformation of the Biharis from muhajirs to Bangladesh traitors, living a long and turbulent life. (Van Schendel, 2020). Papiya Ghosh, in her works, focuses on the ethnic violence that occurred in the northern part of the subcontinent before the partition of India, providing readers with an insight into the migration paths of the Biharis Diaspora (Papiya, 2014). Overall, the partition of India and the Bangladesh Liberation War are closely intertwined with the origin of the Biharis issue in Bangladesh.

### *2.2 Repatriation of Biharis in Bangladesh*

The process of repatriation of Biharis has lasted for more than two decades, attracting continuous attention. Scholars usually make different interpretations from their national standpoint. Pakistan academics either think that the repatriation of Biharis had been resolved, or that any dissent in Bangladesh comes from their domestic political opposition rather than the mainstream (Farzana, 1989), or regard the repatriation of Biharis as "the most sensitive humanitarian issue" between the two countries, emphasizing that Bangladesh should take responsibility for the repatriation failure (Mahmood, Sadaf, & Nadia, 2015). Bangladesh scholars generally emphasize the necessity and justification of Pakistan's acceptance of Biharis (Zaglul, 2003). Indian scholars generally dismiss the implicit responsibility disputes between Pakistan and Bangladesh scholars, arguing that the complex ethnic group relations in Pakistan and the dynamic diplomatic relations between the two countries lead to the failure of repatriation (Mohammad, 1997). Outside the South Asian, some scholars believe that the repatriation of Biharis had an impact on the diplomatic relations between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (Kathryn, 1999). There also have scholars from an international law perspective to explore the role of international organizations in resolving the repatriation of Biharis in Bangladesh (Md. Kamrul, 2018). However, most scholars focus on the reasons for the failure of repatriation, and few discuss the factors that affect the long-term survival of repatriation.

### *2.3 Identity Disputes of Biharis in Bangladesh*

Because the repatriation process goes on for years, the identity of Biharis in Bangladesh has long been debated among scholars. The cut-off point is Bangladesh granted citizenship to Biharis in 2008. Before this, someone considered the Biharis are stateless and pointed out the Biharis in Bangladesh were in an awkward position because Bangladesh could neither impose citizenship on traitors nor increase

expenditure on non-Bengalis. However, Pakistan governments argued that the 200,000 stranded Urdu-speaking non-Bengalis were not Pakistanis. (A.F.M Kamaluddin, 1985). Someone pointed out that the statelessness of the Biharis stems from the partition of Pakistan in 1971. Behind the identity dispute lies the issue of responsibility for repatriation. Pakistani officials have been cautious in using “stranded Pakistani” (Eric, 2006). After the Biharis were granted Bangladesh citizenship, scholars began to focus on the practical implementation of citizenship rights for the Biharis, concluding that the citizenship of the Biharis is not worthy. Someone argued the current differential treatment of the Biharis in terms of their identity is the result of the procrastination of Bangladesh and Pakistan (Kazi, 2009). Someone noted that the Biharis in Bangladesh still suffered discriminatory policies and treatment with regard to public services, employment, education and so on, they remained stateless in fact (Zaglul, 2018). Besides, Some scholars have noted intergenerational differences in self-identity within Biharis community. Arifur Rahaman through a survey, point out the younger generation of Biharis generally consider themselves Bangladeshis. The main factor of this phenomenon is the economic status (Arifur, 2020). Some schoolers examined both legal and non-legal factors behind the deplorable condition of the Biharis in Bangladesh. (Zaglul, 2024)

#### *2.4 Human rights of the Biharis in Bangladesh*

the international community has long been concerned about the human rights of the Biharis in Bangladesh. This includes not only the violence suffered by the Biharis during Bangladesh's liberation War, but also the deplorable camp conditions in which they live today.

Earlier studies focused on the violence and physical security suffered by the Biharis. Some schoolers relied on the provisions of international law to make allegations of atrocities against minorities such as the Biharis in Bangladesh during 1971 liberation War, and argued that specialized tribunals should be set up to ensure that human rights of Biharis (Niall, 1973). In recent years, scholars have focused on the Biharis' camp and studied the real challenges faced by the Biharis through field surveys, data analysis and interviews. For example, Some schoolers pointed that the Biharis' food consumption, healthcare expenditures, education, income, and employment patterns are extremely substandard and the prevalence of infectious diseases in the camps can also expose the country to serious social problems (Ahsan & Hussain, 1990). Some schoolers argued that the Biharis, in most of the cases, are not able to meet the basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, education and basic needs such as health facilities and are considered one of the poorest and most vulnerable groups in Bangladesh (S.M. Ashikur Elahee, 2013). Some schoolers argued that the camps have both protected the specificities of the Biharis and negatively affected their integration into Bangladesh society (Abdullah, 2022).

### **3. Existing Chines Literature Review**

In 1882, Sun Shihai translated the Minority Rights Group's report on the Bihar issue, Chinese academics began to pay attention to the Biharis in Bangladesh. Some Chinese schoolers published articles to describing the origin of the Bihar issue and the dilemma it faces in Bangladesh (Ling, 1992).

Enter the 21st century, with the deepening of China's engagement with Bangladesh, Chinese schoolers have paid more attention to the Bihar issue, studying Biharis issue in the framework of Bangladesh-Pakistan relations and the politic situation of the two countries. For example, Some schoolers argued that the Biharis issue has hindered the relations and friendly exchange between Pakistan and Bangladesh, as well as negatively affected the regional security of South Asia (Chen, 2011). Some schoolers pointed out that the Biharis issue has become a historical problem affecting the normalization of relations between Bangladesh and Pakistan (Luo, 2015). Some schoolers pointed out that the repatriation of the Biharis in Bangladesh had affected the Muhajir movement in Pakistan (Yang & Li, 2016)

In addition to these papers, some monographs in China have also introduced the basic information of the ethnic minority Biharis in Bangladesh. such as Politics and Economy of Bangladesh (Xie & Lin, 1994), Contemporary Bangladesh (Zhang, 1999), Bangladesh (Liu, 2010), and Studies on Political Development and Ethnic Issues in Bangladesh (Zhang, 2015). In general, the attention paid by Chinese academics to the issue of the Biharis in Bangladesh is still extremely limited, and no systematic research has yet emerged.

#### **4. Strengths and Weaknesses of Existing Literature**

In general, the English academics have studied the Biharis issue in Bangladesh trough a wide perspective, with a variety of innovative research methods, achieving rich and varied results. Their works provide a basis for Chinese scholars to continue further research on the issue of the Biharis in Bangladesh. However, Based on the current academic research results, there are still some areas that can be further explored. Firstly, in the scope of the study, most schoolers focuses on the Biharis living in Dhaka, Khulna and other big cities, and pays insufficient attention to the Biharis in the rest of the cities, or other smaller camp. Secondly, in the subject, most scholars regarded the historical Biharis as a whole without class, gender or age, and although recent studies have focused on the differences within the Biharis, but the relative neglect of history is not conducive to further research. Thirdly, in the research perspectives, there is a lack of clarity in Bangladesh about the changing attitudes and policies of Biharis, both official and civilian. most studies look at the plight faced by the Biharis in Bangladesh from the historical, political, ethnic, and legal perspectives, but lack economic and psychological perspectives.

#### **6. Conclusion**

Biharis issue in Bangladesh is the products of political turmoil in South Asia. Their identity is complex and changeable. Throughout history, they were political immigrants from northern India subcontinent who have been devastated by the communal riots in South Asia. They were victims of Pakistan's failure to build a unified state. They served as a tool for Pakistan, Bangladesh and India to pursue their respective political objectives and interests. They were stateless and their status had long been a point

of contention between the Bangladesh and Pakistan. Presently, they are a marginal linguistic minority in Bangladesh and face challenges in integrating into mainstream society.

Therefore, the study of Biharis in Bangladesh holds significant academic value and practical importance. From a theoretical perspective, focusing on ethnic minorities allows for a re-examination of the extensive impact of political turmoil in South Asia, as well as an analysis of both success and failure of nation-building in Bangladesh and Pakistan similar to other post-colonial countries. From a practical perspective, the study of Biharis in Bangladesh help us to understand the evolving relationship between Bangladesh and Pakistan at different history periods, as well as comprehend how domestic ethnic issues affect the society and politics of Bangladesh and Pakistan. Futhermore, research on Biharis issues also deepens our understanding of current domestic affairs in Bangladesh while offering practical references for addressing other similar problems like Rohingya refugees, even Chittagong Hill Tracs conflict, contributing to useful insights for constructing the BCIM Economic Corridor.

It is encouraging that the Government of Bangladesh is also working to address this real problem faced by minorities in Bangladesh. On June 20, 2023, National Housing and Public Works Minister Sharif Ahmed said the government plans to build 5,600 homes in Keraniganj township on the outskirts of Dhaka, to accommodate non-Bangladeshis living in the Bihar Refugee Camp in Mohammadpur, Dhaka. The long-term marginalized Biharis are expected to gradually integrate into mainstream Bangladeshi society (Dhaka, 20 Jun 2023).

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