

The demobilization of diaspora: history, memory and ‘latent identity’

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Abstract *In the context of sustained interest in the mobilization of diasporic identities, I consider how and why diasporic identities might be demobilized over time. I use the case of an Indian Pakistani community in the UK and the USA (sometimes referred to as ‘Bihari’) to examine how historical memories of conflict are narrated in diaspora and the impact this has on the presence or absence of ‘diasporic consciousness’. The significance of memory in diasporic and transnational communities has been neglected, especially where the narration of historical events is concerned. The impact of forgetting has received particularly scant attention. I argue that, in the absence of this story, important lessons about the role of history in the formation of community are obscured. In this example, the ‘latent’ identities created on diaspora’s demobilization help us to unpick the dyadic relations of ‘home’ and ‘away’ at the heart of essentialist conceptualizations of the concept.*

Keywords ‘BIHARI’, DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS, DIASPORIC IDENTITY, HISTORIES OF CONFLICT, MEMORY, SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA

The ‘semantic domain’ (Tölölyan 1996) that the term diaspora inhabits has received much attention in recent years, not all of which has been kind to the concept. The most frequently cited conceptualizations have been framed by a search for definitional accuracy (Butler 2001; Cohen 1997; Safran 1991; Shuval 2000) and criticism has focused on the concomitant tendency to consider the concept as a form of social categorization or descriptive tool. This, it has been argued, has resulted not only in the suggestion that ‘real’ diasporas exist alongside ‘fakes’, but also in the creation of ‘entities’ that emphasize coherence and objectivist measurement (Alexander 2010). As Brubaker (2005: 2) noted, this strand of the diaspora literature has been ‘firmly rooted in a conceptual “homeland”’. Whether this was real or imagined, the homeland has been depicted as an authoritative source of value, identity, and loyalty; and diasporas have been defined descriptively with reference to that origin. This version of diaspora,

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defined by a teleology of return, has been described as 'the old, the imperialising, the hegemonizing, form of "ethnicity"' (Hall 1990: 235).

Martin Sökefeld (2006) has argued that, by examining the formation of diasporic communities as an instance of mobilization, it is possible to unpick the attribution of continuous homeland relations at the heart of essentialist conceptions of diaspora. This requires us to understand diasporas as 'imagined transnational communities' and, in doing so, to ask how and why such identities are deployed. 'As identities become politically effective only when they are employed and endorsed by a certain number of people, we have to ask how these people are *mobilized* for such an identity, how they are made to accept and assume it' (Sökefeld 2006: 267, emphasis in original).

Sökefeld's approach is original in drawing on concepts developed in social movement theory. However, this interest in how diasporic ties emerge and are maintained, how identities are mobilized, is not itself new to the field. In different ways, it is at the heart of much of the early literature in diaspora studies (Gilroy 1991; Hall 1990) as well as transnationalism (Guarnizo et al. 2003; Koopmans et al. 2005). What has received much less attention, however, is the other side of the mobilization coin – the conditions necessary for a diaspora's dissolution. There has been longstanding interest in the 'assimilation' of minority groups into majority societies, but very little research on how diasporic identities might be demobilized outside an assimilationist paradigm. In this article, I consider how and why diasporic identities are *demobilized* over time and *remobilized* in different diasporic forms. I argue that, in the absence of this story, important lessons about the role of history and memory in the formation of community are obscured.

Clearly, there is tremendous variety in the nature of connections with a homeland (Anthias 1998) and a focus on ethnic attachments and pure points of origin conceals the historical contingency of nation, identity, and community (Soysal 2000). In this sense, while the concept of diaspora has been described as 'a past invented for the present' (Soysal 2000: 2), it is 'a past' of a strangely ahistorical kind. As Claire Alexander (2012: 595) argues, 'the significance and performance of memory in transnational or diasporic communities and spaces has remained comparatively unexplored.' To the extent that it has been studied, diasporic memory is usually framed in terms of private or 'domestic practices' (Winter 2010: 20), with a focus on what could be referred to as 'quotidian' memories of home or homeland. However, beyond classic interest in the so-called 'victim diasporas' (Cohen 1997), there is a surprising dearth of literature that considers the complicated and contingent narration of historical events. Moreover, while it is recognized that narration always entails silences, erasures and 'forgetting', which form integral elements in the process of memorialization (Alexander 2012), the impact of these elisions on processes of identification has received little attention. This article uses the case of an Indian Pakistani community in the USA and UK, sometimes referred to as 'Bihari', to consider how historical memories of conflict are narrated in diaspora and the impact this has on the presence or absence of collective 'diasporic consciousness' (Clifford 1994; Gilroy 1997; Vertovec 1997). The telling of history, or the not telling of history, has a profound impact on the mobilization or demobilization of diasporic ties.

I shall outline the historical background of the case before examining how a ‘Bihari’ identity is narrated or conceived. In the third section, I consider the conditions necessary for the demobilization of diasporic ties, and in the final section I explore the multi-layered identities created on a diaspora’s dissolution.

‘Indian Pakistanis’ in Bangladesh, the UK and the USA

This particular story begins with the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, an event that generated some of the largest displacements in modern history. Altogether, around 18 million people left their homes in the first two decades after the creation of Pakistan; approximately one million of them were Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated from North India to what had become East Pakistan (Ghosh 2004). Coming from West Bengal, Orissa, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar, they held strongly felt regional affiliations, but, in post-Partition Pakistan, ethnic, linguistic, and regional differences were underplayed to emphasize the unity of the new nation (Tan and Kudaisya 2000). When not classified as ‘Muslim refugees’, ‘mohajirs’¹ or ‘Urdu-speakers’ by the West Pakistani administration, they gradually became known as ‘Biharis’. Most commentators assume that this label refers to the fact that many were displaced from the Indian state of Bihar, but other explanations have been given, as we shall see later.

Although Urdu-speakers in East Pakistan, where the majority population was Bengali, were thought to represent less than 10 per cent of the population, the circumstances around their arrival granted them an unusual status. The West Pakistani Punjabi elite had appropriated and monopolized power since the country’s inception and, although Bengalis in the East outnumbered the totality living in the West, Punjabis dominated politically and economically throughout the period (Kabir 1995). Those ‘Urdu-speakers’ who migrated to the new country shared certain cultural characteristics with this ruling elite. As a result, they were seen as ‘sons and daughters of the nation coming home’. (van Schendel 2005: 192). In this way, large-scale displacement lay at the foundation of Pakistan; the refugee had become a crucial symbol of the country’s nationalist project (Daiya 2008). The government initially felt obliged to take care of the newcomers and many were given assistance not available to the locals. This, along with the imposition of Urdu as the national language of Pakistan, soon began to generate tension (Ilias 2003). East Pakistan’s Bengali population was growing increasingly conscious of its exploitation at the hands of West Pakistan and, by the 1950s, ‘Urdu-speaking Biharis’ had come to be ‘known as conduits of the West Pakistani “colonialists”’ (Ghosh 2004: 40). Over time, language-based Bengali cultural nationalism began to displace Islamic solidarity and cultural, linguistic, economic and political tensions culminated in the Liberation War of 1971. The war lasted for only nine months, but casualties were unprecedentedly high. With the help of Indian intervention towards the end of the war, West Pakistan was forced to surrender on 16 December 1971, and East Pakistan achieved independence as the People’s Republic of Bangladesh.

It is thought that around three million Bengalis lost their lives in the struggle (Paulsen 2006) and the new country was left profoundly traumatized. Some ‘Biharis’

were organized into infamous paramilitary 'Peace Committees' and 'Razakars'.² They were associated with many of the atrocities that the Pakistani forces committed during the war and, following the birth of Bangladesh, the entire 'Bihari' community was branded Pakistani collaborators and socially ostracized. Some fled overseas, particularly to (West) Pakistan, the USA and the UK, drawing on economic and social capital to cross international borders at the time of war. The state dispossessed those who remained. The latter found themselves in temporary camps set up nationwide where they became known as 'Stranded Pakistanis'.³ Today, approximately 200,000 still live in 116 of these 'settlements' where, for 37 years, the UNHCR has recognized them as 'de facto stateless'. In May 2008, the High Court of Bangladesh granted the entire 'Urdu-speaking community' citizenship, but, due to the informal discrimination that remains pervasive, they continue to be denied access to a range of social and economic rights (Redclift 2013b).

This article builds on previous work in Bangladesh to consider the small number of 'Biharis' who escaped from Bangladesh at the time of Liberation and moved to the UK and USA. It is extremely difficult to estimate the scale of this migration for reasons that will become clear. Migration to the USA appears to have been more widely dispersed across a range of urban centres than migration to the UK, which appears to have been concentrated in one or two large cities – a reflection in part of the different routes of entry. The UK has a well-established South Asian community and sponsorship by family members accounts for much of the migration flow, thus producing less diversity in socio-economic status and destination. In the USA, however, South Asian migration has a more recent history and has occurred through a variety of legal mechanisms, including employer sponsorship, family sponsorship, and the Diversity Lottery programme. This has resulted in a more diverse population, in terms of regional and socio-economic backgrounds, settling in a wide variety of areas (Kibria 2008). More recent migrants to the USA tend to be disadvantaged in relation to earlier entrants. Nonetheless, because the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration and Nationality Act opened the doors to highly skilled South Asian migrants, there are more college graduates and people in managerial and professional occupations among South Asian Americans than among their British counterparts (Bald et al. 2013). Finally, despite *local* diversity in terms of national origin, the majority of South Asian immigrants in the USA are from India and Pakistan, while the UK has long been home to large Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi populations. This demographic fact is significant given that 'Biharis' are a marginalized pariah group in Bangladesh, and that many Bengalis in the diaspora view them with suspicion as collaborators against them in the Liberation War. As we shall see, the presence of a large Bengali population in the UK, concentrated in London, has shaped Bihari identities in the diaspora.

The research is based on 20 semi-structured interviews and five oral histories, with ten families – six in the USA (in San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, and Indianapolis) and four in the UK (in Manchester, Reading, and London). Access to initial interviewees was gained with the help of the Shamshul Huque Foundation, and OBAT Helpers in Bangladesh. From here snowball sampling was employed, which is essential in a context in which it is impossible to 'map' the population from which a random sample

might be taken (Bryman 2004). Two to three members of each family were interviewed to get a sense of displacement as a process that unfolds in the course of a life, and to capture gendered and generational differences. While 'Biharis' in Bangladesh have been thought of as both Indian and Pakistani, among those who fled the country links with the Indian, Pakistani *or* Bengali communities has been little known. This article traces some of those individuals today and considers what a 'Bihari' diaspora means to them in the range of diverse settings in which they live. Given that tensions persist between Pakistan and Bangladesh, I examine the influence of historical memories of conflict on the presence or absence of a collective 'diasporic consciousness'.

'Diasporic consciousness'

If we define diasporas as 'imagined transnational communities', we recognize that the dispersal of migrants from a certain country does not necessarily engender an imagination of community (Sökefeld 2006). As Sökefeld explains, there can be no diasporic community without consciousness of a diaspora, without an idea of shared identity or common belonging to that group. As Brubaker (2005: 13) argues, the 'groupness' of a putative diaspora is precisely what is at stake in diasporic struggles. 'We should not, as analysts, pre-judge the outcome of such struggles by imposing groupness through definitional fiat. We should seek, rather, to bring the struggles themselves into focus, without presupposing that they will eventuate in bounded groups.'

As participants in this study revealed a 'Bihari' identity certainly has meaning, but a bounded group is not what we find. Adilah, a woman in her fifties whom I met in Reading, describes where the label 'Bihari' came from: 'Bengalis derived this word Bihari from *Bahar*, the word *Bahar* means outside ... so *Bahar* became Bihari ... anyone who was either from UP or CP or Lucknow or from Bihar they came to East Pakistan, they were all called Bihari.'

As she explains, the label came to refer to all Indian Muslims who moved to East Pakistan after Partition. Like Adilah, Nafisa, a woman in her fifties from East London, explains that it was not a category of ethnic or regional origin as much as a way of designating otherness, and it was written with exclusion from the very start:

You know Bihari is not a population. ... Bihari is not like Punjabi, Bengali. ... Bihari means outsider, *Bahari*. It is not a local. ... Outsider they call us outsider. That is why the problem is that the Bangladeshi government didn't accept them. And the Pakistani government didn't accept them; that is why they are stuck in Dhaka ... we are not from Bihar. ... My mum and dad were from Benares [India] so we are not Bihari. But we are called Bihari because of Bangladesh. ... We were not Bengali, we were Urdu speaking and they called us Bihari because of Bangladesh.

A sense of 'other' ascription comes through powerfully here. In Bangladesh, the label was gradually appropriated by the vast majority of those to whom it had been ascribed (Redclift 2013a). However, among those who fled the new country, we begin

to see a more complicated relationship emerge. Nafisa's comments are interesting partly because of the way they move between an association with the label 'Bihari' ('we are called Bihari'), to a disassociation ('that is why they are stuck in Dhaka'). This was very common. As I shall explain later, among interviewees in both the USA and the UK, attitudes to the label 'Bihari' often moved between moments of recognition and non-recognition, of identification and non-identification in the space of a single sentence.

The 'Biharis' who stayed in Bangladesh have lost their connections to Pakistan and Bangladesh has become their home (Redclift 2015). However, Pakistan remains a 'homeland' to those who left the country. All but one of my interviewees in the USA and UK, irrespective of age, had severed any 'transnational ways of being' (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004) with both North India and Bangladesh. Instead, they orientated themselves towards (West) Pakistan, despite some having never lived there. Nonetheless, interviewees over the age of about 60 continued to construct their 'transnational ways of belonging' around a collective 'Bihari' identity, an identity that was the product of a unique history and shared experience. As this case demonstrates, a sense of trans-cultural belonging (to Bihar or to a shared 'Bihari' identity) can continue even when transnational networks (with India in this case) have ceased to function (Richter and Nollert 2014). Interviewees who experienced the Liberation War when they were old enough to have a sense of themselves as considered 'Bihari' by others, and the sense of a 'Bihari' community of which they were a part, have carried that with them. Afsheen (a woman in her sixties living in Seattle) experienced the Liberation War as a twenty-year-old with two small children. Following the war, she spent several weeks in a refugee camp close to the border with India. She managed to escape to West Pakistan, before moving to Seattle, but these experiences crystallized a 'Bihari' sense of self:

Interviewer: When people ask you where you are from what do you say?

Afsheen: I say I am Bihari from Pakistan.

Interviewer: You say you are Bihari.

Afsheen: Oh yes. I'm very proud to say that.

Interviewer: So you feel –

Afsheen: I feel, and I am very proud to be, Bihari and I am very proud to say that I am from East Pakistan. I don't call it Bangladesh, until now I don't call it Bangladesh. We are from Bihar and we are Bihari.

Afsheen's traumatic experiences of the Liberation War, and departure from Bangladesh, were vividly depicted as central to her diasporic identification. Her experience of the war was entirely a product of her 'Bihari' identity and it was clear that these dramatic, painful and formative memories had produced a sense of herself as 'Bihari' above all else. You could argue that this has contributed to what Werbner (2002) describes as a 'moral' diasporic community – a sense of a politically grounded transnational subjectivity that still today does not accept Bangladesh. Yet, Afsheen's 'pride' and politically grounded diasporic consciousness were rare among those under 60. The relationship between age, life stage, and experience has a significant impact on how the label 'Bihari' is understood. Riaz, a man in his fifties, who now lives in

Chicago, explained that he did not think of himself as ‘Bihari’ because ‘I was so small at the time [of the war]’; he was so young at the time that the label had no meaning. Asma and Saima, both women in their twenties from Indianapolis, discuss the impact of generation and experience on their own identification:

Asma: So as a personal identification type thing we kind of, I guess this could be looked at as an unfortunate way of not really identifying with our roots, but we consider ourselves Pakistani. ... We do know that historically speaking both of our parents and their parents are from the India area and our father ... he had to go through Bangladesh and then make his way over, the same with our mother. So, while that history is definitely relevant you would find that we identify as Pakistanis...

Saima: Yeah, I think in our generation ... either we are Pakistani or we are Bangladeshi. There is not really like ‘oh I used to be in that area, in that situation and then we migrated.’ You know what I mean? Like it is just one or the other right now. Obviously, if we talk about a little bit before, 10–15 years before, then there would have been that generation or that issue as well.

Clearly, among the younger generation, a ‘Bihari’ diasporic consciousness has dissipated. Bihar has been eclipsed by (West) Pakistan, the country to which transnational ways of being have been forged since the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Abbas, a man in his sixties whom I met with his brother Majid in North London, explains that an ‘aesthetic diasporic consciousness’ (Werbner 2002) – the cultural reproduction of ‘Bihari’ language, food and literature – will not continue into the next generation:

Interviewer: Your father came from Bihar; do you ever identify with Bihar at all?

Abbas: It depends really on what you mean by Bihari identity. Let’s talk about Bihari food for example. There are certain characteristics of Bihari food that I wouldn’t give up for anything. ... Do I miss part of the literature and the culture? ... I still speak in Urdu ... I enjoy Urdu poetry, you know. I can still watch an Indian movie and know what the heck is going on. ... So that part of me that is Bihari will always be with me. It will not perhaps be in my kids ... and does it really matter? To some degree it does. It gives me a little sense of who I am and where I came from. And that will stay with me, but I think my next generation, it will be diluted and their children will be diluted and the next. Eventually I think you have to come to this conclusion that who you were or where you came from will perhaps be a little different two or three steps down the road.

Part of this recognition of multiple affiliations was about a sense of ‘the changing same’ (Gilroy 1991), new affiliations that sit on top or alongside old ones or old identities configured in new ways. This ‘constant transformation’ (Hall 1990) unsettles any neat social categorization and speaks to the multiplicity of forms and contents of

diasporic orientations and practices (Morawska 2011). Like Abbas's children, Maleeha (a woman in her twenties who lives in East London) explains that her mother's diasporic identification has shifted somewhat some two or three steps down the road.

Interviewer: And did you ever have any sense at that time [when you moved to the UK] that you were Bihari?

Maleeha: No, I didn't, not until they told me the stories. I know it off by heart [now], but I didn't know a real lot [then] because the Bihari people they speak in a certain way as well, like they have a dialect and it is a little bit different to the Urdu that I speak now. So I wouldn't like say that I'm Bihari but my mum is ... even though that is my origin if you see what I mean? I speak Pakistani Urdu, and I think of myself as Pakistani.

As we see here, ancestry is 'a poor proxy for membership in a diaspora' (Brubaker 2005: 11). Maleeha here privileges language over geographic origin in relation to her own sense of self. Clearly, we cannot use diaspora as a category of analysis to refer to all persons of 'Bihari' descent living outside Bihar. There are members of an older generation who experienced the Liberation War and fled overseas for whom a 'Bihari' diasporic consciousness has meaning, and there is a younger generation for whom a 'Bihari' identity has been superseded by a (West) Pakistani identity, whether they or their parents have spent time in the country or not. While much consideration has been given in the literature to the emergence and maintenance of diasporic ties, much less attention has been devoted to the conditions necessary for this demobilization.

The demobilization of diaspora

When a diaspora is not a diaspora usually refers to the semantic debate about which groupings should or should not be considered diasporic, rather than the conditions necessary for the demobilization of a diasporic consciousness. In this particular case, to understand the demobilization of a 'Bihari' identity we need to understand the impact of history, or indeed the telling of history, on our sense of self. After all, 'identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past' (Hall 1990: 225). This sense of the narratives of the past comes out clearly in the quote from Maleeha above – she did not have a sense of herself as 'Bihari' 'until they told me the stories'. Later, her mother Nafisa explained to me why the younger generation in general did not identify with the term:

Nafisa: Because they don't know Bihari. You know they don't know Bihari. What is Bihari [to them]?

Maleeha: Like I don't think anyone of my generation knows what Bihari is, only like the older people. They will ask me where I'm from and I am like 'Oh my parents were from Bihar and stuff' but my friends don't know what Bihari is. I don't even know what it is if it wasn't for my parents. Like we just know it as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

In the literature on social movements, this could be considered as the absence of ‘framing’. Frames are ideas that produce a shared understanding; they are ideas that enable a common framework of interpretation and representation (Snow et al. 1986; Sökefeld 2006: 270). ‘They don’t know Bihari’ alludes to the absence of this frame; ‘Bihari’ is not an identity or an imagined community that has been rendered meaningful, which is, in part, because the history of the community is not a history that is easy to tell.

Hidden histories of war and conflict

Saima explains that when she meets other people from India or Pakistan or Bangladesh, history is not something they discuss:

When we talk about our backgrounds, we say either Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Indian. ... I say Pakistani. ... We don’t talk about it, coming from India and the [Liberation] war and all that, I guess I don’t talk about it. ... I think that *it is such a touchy subject*, nobody really talks about it. I have yet to talk to anybody. ... But, it is just that you are either Pakistani and that’s just it and you don’t talk about that issue, you know.

As she makes clear, more straightforward national identities eclipse complicated historical origins. Her father, Altaf, and mother, Afshan, both from Indianapolis and in their sixties, explained this in more detail:

Interviewer: Some people don’t know about the Liberation War and its –

Altaf: Not some people, a lot of people.

Interviewer: Really?

Altaf: Especially for the Biharis [in the camps], that is why we call them forgotten people. Nobody knows about them.

Interviewer: Yes. Why do you think it is that most people don’t know?

Altaf: I was always mad on Pakistan. ... Pakistan never raised the issue in international profile, never.

Afshan: Even they don’t talk in the country [in Pakistan]. They never talk about those things.

Altaf: That is true, it is not discussed. ... The people [in Pakistan] they are not aware of anything going on in that part [Bangladesh]. ... But those people who are in the camps [in Bangladesh], they know the history, because their parents are still in the camps. Their parents still have their houses but they don’t live in the houses, they live in the camp, because in their house somebody else is living. So those people know the history and all those things ... [but] all the new generation that is coming from Bihari families [in the diaspora] ... they don’t know ... even they don’t know that when Bangladesh happened, what happened and who was killed and all that.

Bengalis in the diaspora, of course, know this history well; it is the history of their liberation. However, as we know, histories are very often written by the winners and the silence of loss is deafening. Back in London, Abbas and his brother Majid reiterated this point:

Abbas: I have talked to many Pakistanis who don't even know this problem [Bihari camps in Bangladesh] exists ... 'Really? They are in camps? You mean they haven't left yet? And who are these people?' I mean that is pure ignorance but it is ignorance that is by design, you know. It is not their fault.

Majid: Is it even taught in Pakistan?

Abbas: No, no.

The Liberation War was brutal, and Bangladesh feels it a heavy duty to remember it. However, in Pakistan, 'not talking about that issue' was commonly discussed among my interviewees, even among the older generation who experienced the war and escaped from Bangladesh. Rabia and Afsheen, women in their mid-sixties from San Francisco and Seattle respectively, had both spent time living in the camps in the 1970s and recounted the war in vivid and horrifying detail. Both interviews lasted for more than 90 minutes and focused largely on the experience of war itself, yet both explained that this history was not something they otherwise shared.

Rabia: And if somebody [a Bihari] came they don't talk about it, they just say like 'I'm from Pakistan.' Like I always say I'm from Pakistan, if nobody asks me I don't tell them, and if they ask me 'oh which Pakistan are you from?' I don't tell them unless they ask and I don't ask.

Afsheen: And here in Seattle my son-in-law was telling me there are many Bihari. ... I have met them but they don't say 'I'm Bihari'.

Interviewer: They don't?

Afsheen: Maybe, maybe, they hide it.

This idea of 'hiding it' was even more prominent in the UK than the USA, where the large and concentrated Bengali population has always made it difficult for people of 'Bihari' origin to openly claim themselves as such. Shafiq (a man in his sixties living in East London) stayed on in Bangladesh until the 1990s when he moved to London. He was, therefore, the only interviewee who had lived in Bangladesh for many years after the Liberation War. It is not surprising then that he was the only interviewee for whom 'transnational ways of being' were orientated as much to Bangladesh as to Pakistan. Here, and in London, he continued to hide his identity, and he was the only interviewee who actively passed as Bengali in day-to-day life:⁴

Shafiq: If I stay over there [Bangladesh] I should have to take me as a Bangladeshi because I can't tell to them (that I am Bihari), but common people

know me, that I am the grandson of that person, [that] we belongs to India ... some old peoples knows it. But young generations don't know ... [and here in London] no, no they don't know about me ... when a Bengali is meeting to me I'm saying I'm from Bangladesh ... when I am going to the mosque they are thinking that I am a Bengali person ... most of the people I know think I am Bengali.

As Avtah Brah (1996: 183) has argued, the narration of collective memory serves as a way of constituting community through telling 'the everyday stories ... individually and collectively', and as a bid for inclusion within other stories and other histories. As this case shows, those stories are central to the constitution of community. People, especially in the UK, hid 'Bihari' origins because of their association with a conflict that is still not easy to discuss. In their absence other stories are told, as a bid for inclusion within other histories, other communities are constituted. According to Stuart Hall (2012), Avtah Brah's 'diasporic reasoning' draws on a 'structure of feeling' – a range of meanings that various people seem to share. These understandings are always embedded, not just in the things people do or say but also, and so often, in what they do not or cannot say at all. As Hall suggests, the absent/presences are key parts of the 'data' too, however easily they are overlooked.

Politics, pride and poverty

Another barrier to the establishment of community is the present-day political situation that this difficult history has produced, which hampers the possibility of forming collective memories. As Falzon (2003) and Morawska (2011) have argued, political conditions on the ground – whether they produce the possibility of relations or make them unviable – affect relations with a putative 'homeland'. Put another way, certain political conditions are required to transform an autobiographical memory into a 'social' memory (Falzon 2003). Rabia explains that the treatment of 'Biharis' in Bangladesh today severs ties for her with a country that might otherwise be a home:

Rabia: I feel Pakistani ... for me that is my homeland.

Interviewer: Even though you didn't live there?

Rabia: Yes.

Interviewer: That's interesting that it has become –

Rabia: Because the way they [Bangladesh] treated us. And, when I went two years ago ... I saw Bangladesh, I saw people living in the camps, 30–40 years and they are still in the camps, generation after generation they are in camps. So how anybody can want to go and stay there again. I know that there are a lot of Urdu speaking people there, but there are still a lot of people, like thousands and thousands who are still in camps. And they don't have any life. I don't know how they are surviving. I lived there [in the camps] for three weeks and I remember every single little thing from there.

These present-day political conditions, the *long durée* of conflict, have other consequences. Today, the term 'Bihari' is widely associated with the camps themselves, camps that have become synonymous with the poverty that 37 years of statelessness and segregation have produced (Redclift 2015). The stigma associated with the camps contributes to demobilization in the diaspora. I asked Riaz why people did not want to associate with the label 'Bihari', and he explained:

Riaz: Because there is no pride behind it.

Interviewer: Because?

Riaz: There is no pride behind it. You always associate things when you see pride there. If you don't see pride you disassociate yourself; that is human nature ... if there is something really proud about it you can say 'Hey I belong to this', because you know you can name – you are carrying what is called dignified things. But me telling them that 'yes I was in the camp, and I was there', nothing to shame about it but nothing to pride about it too.

As Takenaka (2009) has argued, for a collective identity to crystallize we need to feel proud of our collective history. Without pride it is impossible to narrate our past collectively. Not only is a 'Bihari' identity heavily stigmatized in Bangladesh and among some Bengalis in the diaspora, but Pakistanis in the diaspora also place it ambivalently in relation to the Pakistani state. As Riaz suggests, this stigma arises partly from the history of the Liberation War, but partly also from how the conflict affected many 'Biharis' in Bangladesh. As the last sentence of Riaz's quote above suggests, the encampment, statelessness and poverty of many 'Biharis' in Bangladesh was 'nothing to shame about ... but nothing to pride about' either.

As other scholars have noted, class and status significantly affect a person's ability to retain transnational connections (Guarnizo et al. 2003; Herbert 2012). Of my sample, those who had settled in the USA had a greater share of the resources necessary to reproduce such ties. In some cases, they used these resources to visit the camps in Bangladesh on charitable missions, operating within a moral diasporic community of 'suffering' or 'co-responsibility' (Werbner 2002). However, as Rabia explained, the social and economic resources that enabled her to reconnect physically in this way with her origins and co-diasporans also worked to produce an emotional disconnect with those she visited. Her status placed her in sharp contrast with the 'Biharis' she met in the camps of Bangladesh, and highlighted the distance between her present life and the 'home' which she had been able to leave:

Rabia: I saw those people [in the camps] ... I talked to some of them and told them that I have been here [in the camps] and they just look at me as if – 'she is such a liar' ... they don't say it but I can see it in their eyes.

The socio-economic distance between those still living in the camps in Bangladesh and those who had been able to escape to the USA and UK produced a certain

disidentification among those I interviewed. We are reminded of Nafisa's quote at the start of the article in which she moved between association with the label and disassociation when referring to those living in the camps. The stigma of poverty associated with the camps contributes to the absence of pride, which Riaz discusses, and, along with the horrors of the Liberation War, it contributes in turn to the 'not-telling' of this particular history. It contributes then to the demobilization of diasporic ties and, in so doing, produces a complex multi-layering of identities and relations.

Coming out: 'latent identities' and multiple affiliations

Mohsin, in Seattle, was about ten years old when he left Bangladesh. He described himself as Pakistani rather than 'Bihari' but he explained why he thought the label 'Bihari' was eventually appropriated in Bangladesh:

Mohsin: I think because they are living there, and *they are out*. And it is what they want to be called, you know. They have become you know Biharis and the Bengali people they saw the Biharis live there, so they have to be Bihari.

He is describing a situation in which people cannot escape their identity. He explains that the people in the camps have to be 'Bihari' because they are living in the camps; they have not left and they cannot hide; they are *out*, so to speak. In Seattle, where he lives, there is no need to claim this identity; this is a history that does not need to be remembered. In East London, Nafisa and her daughter Maleeha discuss how Nafisa approaches the process of 'coming out':

Nafisa: If I meet someone who [is] Urdu-speaking and belong from Bangladesh, and then I feel very happy. 'Oh so you are Bihari?'

Maleeha: [speaking of her mother] Because obviously Biharis have like a distinct accent [dialect], so when she meets people and she thinks they are Bihari, she will tell them, otherwise not.

In these new and neutral places, identifying oneself to others was an important theme, but, interestingly, identifying oneself to oneself also emerged as an issue, particularly for those who had left East Pakistan at a young age. Riaz had left East Pakistan during the war when he was around seven or eight. Consequently, he experienced the tragedy and trauma of liberation but a 'Bihari' identity had not yet become central to his sense of self. Riaz explains what it is like to be considered to be 'Bihari' by others:

Riaz: I met Bengalis there [New York] and they know I am [an] Urdu-speaking Bihari and not Bengali.

Interviewer: Do you think they would think of you as Bihari?

Riaz: Most likely yes. Because if you say you know Bangla, if you say you are coming from Bangladesh and you are not Bengali then automatically you are a Bihari.

Interviewer: Would you consider yourself Bihari?

Riaz: No, Bihari is not the identity. I don't think about it because I was so small at the time; I don't think about it at all. But when this discussion comes up then I have to identify myself, if somebody is identifying ... and then if they want me to *identify myself* ... then *I open those things*, 90 per cent I don't even think those things.

The people who were young when they left East Pakistan did not live their 'Bihari' origins in the present, but there were moments when they 'opened those things':

Riaz: The thing is this ... when I see myself, then in better situation [than in 1971], thanks to God, giving situation rather than a taking situation ... then this is a time when I always think about Bihari. The reason I think about Bihari, I want to remind myself, 'Hey look at yourself, where you were, you were here where you did not have clothes to put on.' ... So, that is a good remind to us to look at how much God gave you and how fortunate it is. ... So Bihari – the word doesn't come into my mind ... but the thing is that I see myself living in the camp ... and at a very poor level to coming to the better level, then Bihari is coming to my mind.

Like other 'twice migrants' (Bhachu 1985), neither India nor Bihar feature prominently in the minds of many interviewees. For those of Riaz's age, India is eclipsed by Pakistan. The quote above reminds us of the range of more or less enduring perspectives – the different saliency of identification for different people depending on their age and life stage at departure. However, it also brings to mind the different saliency of identification for the same people at different times. The idea of 'latent' identities refers to the way a 'Bihari' identity is there in the background, not at the forefront of thought but ready to be 'opened up', ready to 'come to mind' when called. It illustrates the layering of identity and affiliation, which is insufficiently recognized in a field of literature that has tended to concentrate on 'dyadic' relations of 'home' and 'away' (Trotz 2006). Back in East London, Shafiq's centre of gravity shifted almost in a single sentence – from 'we belong to India', 'they know I am Bihari' to 'still I am ... I am from Bangladesh ... they know that I am the Bangladeshi', and towards the end 'I'm not Pakistani, I'm not Bangladeshi now, I'm British.' In a similar way, Maleeha and her mother remind us that migration has to be seen as an incomplete process (Herbert 2012):

Maleeha: I feel like it is weird because I wasn't actually born here [in the UK], my grandparents are from India, my mum was from Bangladesh, and I was born in Pakistan. And so it is like I don't know where I'm from.

Interviewer: You bring Pakistan, Bangladesh and India together?

Maleeha: Yes!

- Nafisa:* My son always says, ‘Oh you are a liar, you always tell you are Pakistani, you are not Pakistani, you are Bengali.’ [Laughs] Oh no I’m not Bengali.
- Maleeha:* I think it’s quite interesting, like it makes for an interesting story, telling people that my parents are from Bangladesh and India. ... It makes me sound cooler than just saying I was Pakistani and I moved here [to the UK]. ... It is cooler like that.
- Nafisa:* I am Pakistani but I was born in Bangladesh ... and now we are Britishers.

Yasmin Soysal (2000) has contended that the concept of diaspora suspends the immigrant experience between ‘home’ and ‘host’, thus obscuring new practices of citizenship that are multi-referential and, for her, post-national. I would argue that the stories that emerged from this case study reinforce ‘the national order of things’ as much as they disrupt it. When asked about their identities, very often narrow and sometimes ill-fitting *national* identities took the place of more complex ‘latent’ historical, ethnic and transcultural ties. ‘Bihari’ statelessness in Bangladesh, and the significance of laying claim to a nationality once ‘Bihari’ emigrants found safety overseas, may have bolstered this desire to reassert a national identity. Nevertheless, the desire to assert a national identity cannot be dismissed.

In line with Soysal, however, the case study speaks clearly to the multi-referential aspect of diaspora identities, as well as to the need to decentre diaspora in analytical and geographical terms (Falzon 2003). This was particularly apparent in the UK. Most of my US interviewees had moved to areas with relatively large Pakistani (and very small Bengali) populations and were deeply embedded in Pakistani–American community life. They also all occupied upper-middle-class social statuses and, therefore, had expanded wherewithal with which to maintain links to (West) Pakistan (namely the resources required to visit regularly or to send remittances to family). In the UK, however, the interviewees lived in areas with very diverse South Asian communities, including large populations of Bengali Muslims. Not all of them had the resources needed to maintain or create strong links with (West) Pakistan. Maleeha and Nafisa’s words above highlight the complexity of the multi-layered identities that their background and local context produced.

Conclusion

This article is not just about the importance of history in the present; it is also about the importance of *narratives* of the past, or *discourses* of memory – the way a history is told. Stuart Hall explained that ‘cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture’ (Hall 1990: 226). I argue that the points of ‘suture’ within these discourses have been buried beneath a much greater interest in ‘identification’. When we miss the suture, we miss the fact that performance and narration are not the automatic products of history and memory. Narration is socially structured and open to change (Alexander 2012, citing Antze and Lambek 1996). I argue that examining the

silences or erasures at the heart of the demobilization of the 'Bihari' diaspora provides a window onto the contingent nature of these narratives. It gives us some clues to how the narration of history relates to diasporic identification. And it reminds us that for a variety of reasons some histories simply are not told.

Investigating these silences is an important part of a project of differentiating rather than homogenizing the South Asian experience (Herbert 2012). South Asian diaspora in the West continue to be represented through the terms of fixed and bounded cultural difference. Constructed as the privileged site of 'community' and static immutable 'tradition', they have been defined through cultural absolutes located outside the political process or history. However, this well-rehearsed representation is quickly unsettled by history itself. In this example, most 'Bihari' migrants in the UK and USA have become part of Pakistani communities, but individuals continue to identify in complex, layered, and multi-faceted ways that can be seen as the product of political process rather than ahistorical tradition. The case of the 'Bihari' diaspora reveals the specific, variegated histories and present-day politics that position South Asians in very different ways. The idea of 'latent identities' illustrates the limits of a diaspora concept that relies on fixed cartographic coordinates of 'home' and 'away' (Trotz 2006). Once we recognize this difference, the idea of diaspora can truly 'trouble the notions of cultural origin, of "roots", of primordial identities and authenticity' (Hall 2012: 30). The demobilization of diaspora reminds us that there is always a politics of identity and that sometimes the silences, the erasures, and the forgetting are a part of that politics too.

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Notes

1. Although a direct translation into English is not possible, the term has been translated as 'religious migrant' or 'religious refugee'. Unlike the term 'refugee', 'mohajir' does not suggest an involuntary flight; it is best understood in the context of a religious flight ('hijra'), which is central to Islam.
2. Although literally meaning 'volunteer', in everyday parlance the term 'razakar' carries the connotation of a 'traitor' or 'collaborator'; and it is therefore used as a term of abuse in reference to 'Urdu speakers'.
3. This label refers to the support given to the Pakistani forces during the Liberation War, as well as their subsequent disenfranchisement in the newly created Bangladesh.
4. None of the other interviewees positioned themselves as part of the Bangladeshi community, but Bengal was an important part of who they were.

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