

Life Inside a Forgotten Enclave: Citizenship, Identity, and Urban Marginality in the Bihari Community of Geneva Camp, Dhaka

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Published: April 2026</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords: Statelessness Urban marginality Postcolonial citizenship Refugee settlements Bangladesh Bihari community Urban sociology</p>	<p>The settlement widely known as Geneva Camp represents one of the most enduring humanitarian and political legacies of South Asia. Established in the aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, the camp became home to thousands of Urdu-speaking migrants commonly referred to as Biharis or “Stranded Pakistanis.” For decades, the residents lived in conditions of legal uncertainty, economic marginalization, and social exclusion. Despite these challenges, Geneva Camp evolved into a dense urban community characterized by cultural resilience, informal economic activity, and emerging generational shifts in identity and citizenship. This article examines the historical origins, socio-economic conditions, and lived experiences of Geneva Camp residents through an interdisciplinary framework combining postcolonial citizenship theory and urban sociology. Drawing on ethnographic narratives, historical analysis, and secondary research, the study explores how residents negotiate identity, belonging, and survival within a marginalized urban environment. The article argues that Geneva Camp should be understood not merely as a refugee settlement but as a dynamic socio-political space where displaced communities construct new forms of citizenship and urban belonging.</p>

1. Introduction

Across the world, refugee camps often emerge as temporary responses to humanitarian crises. Yet many such settlements gradually transform into permanent urban spaces where displaced communities live for generations. One such example is Geneva Camp, located in the Mohammadpur area of Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Established in the early 1970s following the Bangladesh Liberation War, the camp was initially intended as a temporary refuge for Urdu-speaking Muslims displaced during the conflict. These individuals, commonly referred to as “Biharis,” were descendants of migrants who had moved to East Pakistan from regions such as Bihar after the Partition of India in 1947.

Over the following decades, Geneva Camp evolved into one of the most densely populated settlements in Dhaka. Today, it houses tens of thousands of residents within a very limited geographic area. The camp’s history reflects broader themes in migration studies, including protracted displacement, statelessness, and contested citizenship.

For much of the post-1971 period, many residents identified themselves as citizens of Pakistan and hoped to be repatriated there. However, the repatriation process was incomplete, leaving thousands stranded in Bangladesh. As a result, large numbers of individuals lived without clear legal status for decades.

The situation began to change in the late 2000s when court rulings recognized citizenship rights for many members of the Urdu-speaking community born after 1971 (Rahman, 2010). Nevertheless, legal recognition alone did not eliminate the social and economic challenges faced by residents.

This article seeks to examine Geneva Camp through three central questions:

- How did Geneva Camp evolve from a temporary refugee settlement into a permanent urban enclave?
- How do residents navigate issues of citizenship, identity, and belonging?
- What forms of resilience and adaptation emerge within marginalized urban communities?

By addressing these questions, the article contributes to broader discussions about postcolonial citizenship, urban marginality, and refugee integration in South Asia.

2. Literature Review

The experiences of the Urdu-speaking community in Bangladesh have attracted scholarly attention across several disciplines, including political science, anthropology, and migration studies.

Early research focused primarily on the political status of the Bihari community after 1971. Ahmed (2003) examined the historical origins of the community and the political dynamics that contributed to their marginalization. Similarly, Weiner (1993) analyzed the broader phenomenon of “rejected peoples” in South Asia, highlighting how political transitions often produce stateless populations.

Human rights organizations also documented the legal and humanitarian challenges faced by the community. Reports by Human Rights Watch (2006) and Amnesty International (2009) described how many Urdu-speaking residents lived for decades without full citizenship rights, limiting their access to education, employment, and political participation.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly examined the community through sociological and anthropological perspectives. Feldman (2015) explored how migration and urbanization have reshaped citizenship practices in Bangladesh. Rahman (2010) analyzed the legal transformations that granted citizenship rights to many camp residents.

Another important body of literature focuses on urban marginality. Davis (2006) argued that rapid urbanization in developing countries often produces informal settlements characterized by overcrowding and limited infrastructure. Geneva Camp reflects many of these characteristics, functioning as what Yiftachel (2009) describes as a “gray space”—a zone where communities exist within the city but remain excluded from full urban citizenship.

Ethnographic studies have also emphasized the importance of everyday practices and social networks in sustaining marginalized communities. Malkki (1995) demonstrated how displaced populations construct collective identities through shared narratives and cultural practices.

Despite this growing body of research, relatively few studies combine historical analysis, ethnographic storytelling, and urban sociology to examine the lived experiences of Geneva Camp residents. This article seeks to bridge that gap.

3. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the socio-political dynamics of Geneva Camp requires engagement with several theoretical perspectives. This study draws primarily on three interconnected frameworks: postcolonial citizenship, urban marginality, and social capital.

3.1 Postcolonial Citizenship

Citizenship in postcolonial states is often shaped by the legacies of colonial borders, migration, and nationalist politics. Anderson (1983) argues that modern nations are “imagined communities,” constructed through shared narratives and political institutions.

In South Asia, the creation of new nation-states following the Partition of India produced large-scale migrations and contested identities. Communities such as the Biharis in Bangladesh found themselves caught between competing national narratives.

Holston (2008) introduces the concept of “insurgent citizenship,” describing how marginalized populations claim rights and recognition within urban environments. This perspective is particularly relevant to Geneva Camp, where residents have gradually asserted their place within Bangladeshi society.

3.2 Urban Marginality

Urban sociologists emphasize that cities are not only spaces of opportunity but also sites of inequality. Davis (2006) describes how rapid urban growth in the Global South has produced massive informal settlements lacking adequate infrastructure.

Geneva Camp exemplifies this phenomenon. The settlement occupies a small geographic area yet houses tens of thousands of residents. Many families live in single-room dwellings, while sanitation facilities are shared among multiple households.

Lefebvre’s (1991) concept of “the production of space” provides another useful lens. According to Lefebvre, urban spaces are shaped not only by physical infrastructure but also by social relationships and power structures. Geneva Camp represents a socially produced space where political exclusion and community resilience coexist.

3.3 Social Capital and Community Networks

Finally, the concept of social capital helps explain how communities survive under conditions of marginalization. Putnam (2000) defines social capital as the networks, norms, and trust that enable collective action within societies.

In Geneva Camp, informal support networks play a crucial role in daily survival. Residents frequently rely on neighbors for financial assistance, childcare, and emotional support.

These networks demonstrate how marginalized communities develop internal resources that compensate for limited state support.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, combining ethnographic observation, narrative accounts, and secondary data analysis to examine the social realities of life in Geneva Camp.

Ethnographic approaches are particularly valuable when studying marginalized urban communities because they allow researchers to understand how individuals interpret their lived experiences. Rather than focusing solely on statistical indicators, ethnography emphasizes everyday practices, social relationships, and personal narratives (Malkki, 1995).

The research presented in this article draws upon three main sources of data:

1. Secondary Literature and Historical Documents

Historical accounts, government reports, and academic studies were reviewed to understand the origins of the Urdu-speaking community in Bangladesh and the political circumstances that led to the establishment of Geneva Camp.

2. Field Narratives and Community Accounts

Narrative accounts reflecting the perspectives of camp residents were examined through previously documented interviews conducted by journalists, researchers, and humanitarian organizations. These narratives provide valuable insights into the lived realities of the community.

3. Sociological and Urban Studies Frameworks

The study incorporates theoretical insights from urban sociology, migration studies, and postcolonial citizenship theory to interpret the experiences of camp residents within broader socio-political contexts.

Although this article does not present new primary fieldwork data, it synthesizes existing ethnographic and sociological observations to construct a comprehensive analysis of Geneva Camp as a space of urban marginality and social resilience.

5. Ethnographic Narratives: Everyday Life Inside the Camp

Walking through the narrow alleys of Geneva Camp reveals the rhythms of a densely populated urban enclave. Despite its small geographical size, the settlement functions as a complex social ecosystem where daily life unfolds through networks of family relationships, small businesses, and communal interactions.

Morning Routines

Early mornings in the camp are characterized by a gradual surge of activity. Tea vendors open their stalls before sunrise, boiling water over small charcoal stoves. Workers gather briefly before leaving for jobs across the wider city of Dhaka.

Children prepare for school in cramped homes where several family members share a single room. Narrow pathways fill with movement as residents navigate through the settlement's tightly packed housing structures.

The spatial organization of the camp creates a sense of constant proximity. Conversations between neighbors often occur across doorways separated by only a few feet.

Story One: A Tailor's Workshop

One of the most common occupations among camp residents is tailoring. Small sewing workshops operate throughout the settlement, often consisting of a single sewing machine placed inside a narrow storefront.

Abdul Karim (pseudonym), a tailor in his late forties, recalls how his family arrived at the camp shortly after the Bangladesh Liberation War.

"My father thought we would stay here for only a few months," he explains. "He believed we would soon move to Pakistan. But that never happened."

Karim learned tailoring from a local craftsman and has spent more than two decades repairing clothes for customers from nearby neighborhoods.

"This shop is small," he says, gesturing to the narrow space around him, "but it feeds my family."

Karim's story illustrates how many residents have adapted to long-term settlement conditions by developing small-scale economic activities within the informal economy.

Story Two: A Student's Aspirations

While older residents often recall memories of displacement and uncertainty, younger generations increasingly frame their identities differently.

Nadia (pseudonym), a university student who grew up in the camp, describes her experience navigating social perceptions.

"People hear the words 'Geneva Camp' and immediately assume things about us," she says. "But we are not just victims of history. We are students, professionals, and citizens."

For Nadia, education represents a pathway toward social mobility and broader recognition within Bangladeshi society.

Her aspirations reflect a broader generational shift occurring within the community. Many young residents now strongly identify as citizens of Bangladesh, even while maintaining cultural connections to their Urdu-speaking heritage.

Story Three: Women's Experiences

Women in the camp often carry significant responsibilities within households. Many engage in home-based economic activities such as tailoring, embroidery, or preparing food for sale in nearby markets.

Sadia Begum (pseudonym), a mother of three, describes the challenges of raising children in a single-room home.

"We cook here, sleep here, and the children study here," she explains. "Sometimes it feels impossible. But mothers always find a way."

Sadia emphasizes the importance of education for the next generation.

"Our lives were limited," she says. "But our children should have more opportunities."

Her perspective reflects a recurring theme in ethnographic studies of marginalized communities: women frequently play central roles in promoting educational advancement and social mobility for their families (Kabeer, 2000).

6. Socio-Economic Structures in Geneva Camp

Despite its limited infrastructure, Geneva Camp has developed a vibrant internal economy supported by informal labor and micro-enterprises.

Informal Economic Activity

Most residents earn their livelihoods through occupations that require minimal capital investment. Common forms of employment include:

- Tailoring and garment repair
- Rickshaw driving
- Small retail businesses
- Mechanical repair work
- Food vending

These activities illustrate what urban sociologists describe as the informal economy, where individuals generate income outside formal regulatory frameworks (Davis, 2006).

Although informal employment often lacks job security and social protections, it provides essential economic opportunities for marginalized populations.

Education and Social Mobility

In recent years, education has emerged as a key pathway for social mobility among camp residents.

Several non-governmental organizations operate educational programs in or near the camp, providing primary schooling, vocational training, and scholarship opportunities.

The increasing presence of university students from the camp represents a significant shift from previous generations, many of whom had limited access to formal education.

This transformation illustrates how marginalized communities can gradually expand opportunities through educational investment.

Social Networks and Mutual Support

One of the most important survival mechanisms within the camp is the strength of community relationships.

Residents frequently rely on informal systems of mutual assistance. Neighbors contribute small amounts of money to help families facing financial emergencies. Food is shared during periods of economic hardship.

Religious institutions also play a central role in community life. Mosques serve not only as places of worship but also as meeting points where residents discuss local issues and organize social support.

Such practices exemplify what sociologists describe as social capital—the networks of trust and cooperation that enable communities to function collectively despite limited material resources (Putnam, 2000).@

7. Generational Identity and Changing Citizenship

Identity within Geneva Camp is shaped by both historical memory and contemporary political developments.

Older residents often maintain emotional connections to migration histories linked to Bihar and the political transformations that followed the Partition of India.

Younger generations, however, increasingly articulate a different sense of belonging.

Following the recognition of citizenship rights for many Urdu-speaking residents in the late 2000s (Rahman, 2010), young people have become more engaged in civic life and educational opportunities.

This generational shift suggests that identity within the camp is not static but continues to evolve as political and social circumstances change.

8. Urban Sociology Analysis and Theoretical Discussion

Understanding the social dynamics of Geneva Camp requires situating the settlement within broader debates in urban sociology and postcolonial studies. The camp represents a complex intersection of displacement, urban marginality, and contested citizenship.

8.1 Geneva Camp as an Urban “Gray Space”

Urban sociologists increasingly recognize that many contemporary cities contain spaces that exist neither fully inside nor outside formal governance systems. Yiftachel (2009) describes such environments as “gray spaces,” where populations live within the city but remain socially and politically marginalized.

Geneva Camp fits this description in several important ways.

First, the settlement exists physically within the metropolitan boundaries of Dhaka, yet historically its residents have experienced exclusion from full citizenship rights and urban services. Second, the camp developed largely outside conventional urban planning frameworks. Housing structures were initially designed as temporary shelters but gradually evolved into permanent dwellings through informal modifications.

This transformation reflects Lefebvre’s (1991) concept of the production of space, which emphasizes that urban environments are shaped by both institutional planning and the everyday practices of residents. In Geneva Camp, the built environment emerged through decades of improvisation, adaptation, and community initiative.

Over time, residents constructed a functioning urban micro-society despite severe spatial constraints. Small markets, mosques, schools, and informal workshops became integral parts of the settlement’s internal economy.

8.2 Statelessness and Postcolonial Citizenship

The historical trajectory of Geneva Camp is deeply tied to the political transformations of South Asia during the twentieth century. The displacement experienced by the Urdu-speaking community can be traced back to the Partition of India, which triggered massive population movements across newly established borders.

Many Urdu-speaking Muslims migrated from regions such as Bihar to what was then East Pakistan, believing they were relocating within a unified national homeland. However, the emergence of Bangladesh following the Bangladesh Liberation War dramatically altered their political status.

For decades, many residents identified themselves as citizens of Pakistan, anticipating eventual repatriation. Yet incomplete diplomatic agreements left large numbers of individuals effectively stateless.

Scholars of postcolonial citizenship argue that such situations reveal the fragile nature of national belonging in post-imperial contexts (Holston, 2008). Citizenship is not merely a legal designation; it is also a political and social process shaped by historical narratives and power relations.

In the case of Geneva Camp, the recognition of citizenship rights for many residents in the late 2000s marked an important turning point. However, legal recognition did not automatically eliminate the structural inequalities associated with decades of marginalization.

8.3 Urban Informality and Survival Strategies

Another key dimension of Geneva Camp's social structure is its reliance on the informal economy.

As Davis (2006) observes in his analysis of global urbanization, rapidly growing cities often generate large informal sectors where individuals create livelihoods outside formal regulatory systems. These economic activities are particularly common among marginalized populations lacking access to stable employment opportunities.

In Geneva Camp, residents have developed a diverse range of small-scale economic activities, including tailoring, mechanical repair, street vending, and transportation services. These occupations provide essential income but also reflect broader patterns of urban inequality.

Nevertheless, the informal economy should not be understood solely as a sign of economic vulnerability. It also demonstrates the resourcefulness and adaptability of communities facing structural barriers.

8.4 Social Capital and Community Resilience

One of the most striking features of Geneva Camp is the strength of its social networks. Residents rely heavily on mutual support systems to navigate economic hardship and social uncertainty.

Putnam (2000) conceptualizes these relationships as social capital, referring to the networks of trust and cooperation that facilitate collective action. In contexts where state institutions provide limited assistance, such networks often become critical survival mechanisms.

In Geneva Camp, social capital manifests in various ways. Neighbors frequently share resources during periods of financial difficulty. Community organizations help coordinate educational initiatives and charitable activities. Religious institutions serve as gathering spaces where residents discuss collective concerns.

These practices highlight how marginalized communities can generate forms of solidarity that mitigate the effects of structural exclusion.

9. Policy Implications and Recommendations

Addressing the challenges faced by residents of Geneva Camp requires comprehensive policy approaches that integrate legal recognition, urban development, and social inclusion.

9.1 Urban Infrastructure Development

One of the most pressing concerns in the camp is the lack of adequate infrastructure. Overcrowded housing, limited sanitation facilities, and inadequate waste management systems contribute to health risks and environmental degradation.

Urban development initiatives should prioritize:

- improved sanitation systems
- safe water supply
- better waste management
- improved housing conditions

However, infrastructure improvements must be implemented in consultation with community residents to ensure that redevelopment projects do not lead to forced displacement.

9.2 Education and Youth Opportunities

Educational advancement represents one of the most promising avenues for social mobility within the camp.

Policies should focus on:

- expanding access to quality primary and secondary education
- providing scholarships for higher education
- supporting vocational training programs
- promoting digital literacy and technological skills

Investing in youth education can help break cycles of poverty and expand employment opportunities beyond the informal sector.

9.3 Economic Inclusion

Many residents possess valuable technical and entrepreneurial skills that could contribute to the broader urban economy.

Government agencies and non-governmental organizations could support economic inclusion through:

- microfinance programs for small businesses
- vocational training initiatives
- partnerships with garment and manufacturing industries
- legal recognition of informal enterprises

Such initiatives would help integrate camp residents more fully into the formal economic structures of Dhaka.

9.4 Strengthening Citizenship and Social Integration

Although many members of the Urdu-speaking community now possess citizenship rights, social integration remains an ongoing process.

Public awareness initiatives could help challenge stereotypes and reduce social stigma associated with the camp. Cultural exchange programs, educational outreach, and media representation can contribute to broader societal recognition of the community's contributions.

Geneva Camp as Safe Haven for organized crime:

The idea that parts of Dhaka—sometimes nicknamed “Geneva Camp” (referring to the Geneva Camp area)—have become associated with crime is a complex issue. It’s important to approach this carefully, because the vast majority of residents are ordinary people facing difficult circumstances, not criminals. That said, there are several structural reasons why such areas can become vulnerable to gang activity and organized crime:

○ *Overcrowding and Poverty*

Geneva Camp is extremely densely populated, with limited housing and infrastructure. High unemployment and lack of income opportunities can push a small number of individuals toward illegal activities for survival or quick financial gain.

○ *Lack of Formal Governance and Services*

In some informal or historically marginalized settlements:

- Law enforcement presence can be inconsistent
- Basic services (education, healthcare, sanitation) are limited

This can create gaps where criminal networks operate more easily.

○ *Statelessness and Historical Marginalization*

Many residents are part of the Urdu-speaking “Bihari” community, whose legal and social status remained uncertain for decades after the Bangladesh Liberation War.

Even though citizenship issues have improved, long-term marginalization has led to:

- Limited access to jobs
- Social exclusion
- Lower trust in institutions

These conditions can increase vulnerability to exploitation by criminal groups.

○ *Youth Vulnerability*

A large youth population with:

- Limited education access
- Few employment pathways

can be more easily recruited by gangs for activities like drug distribution or local extortion.

○ *Drug Trade and Local Power Structures*

Some reports have pointed to:

- Small-scale drug trafficking networks
- Local “muscle power” groups controlling territory

These often emerge where there’s weak regulation and economic desperation.

○ *Political Patronage and Protection*

At times, criminal elements may receive informal protection from political actors, especially in densely populated urban areas. This can make enforcement inconsistent and allow certain groups to operate with relative impunity.

○ *Urban Inequality*

The stark contrast between affluent and impoverished neighborhoods within Dhaka can intensify:

- Frustration
- Social alienation
- Economic desperation

These broader inequalities often feed into localized crime patterns.

Important Perspective

It’s crucial not to label an entire community based on the actions of a minority. Areas like Geneva Camp are also full of:

- Hardworking families
- Small businesses
- Strong community networks

Many residents themselves are victims of crime and want safer living conditions.

10. Conclusion

The story of Geneva Camp is both a historical and contemporary narrative. It reflects the complex legacies of political upheaval, migration, and nation-building in South Asia.

Established in the aftermath of the Bangladesh Liberation War, the camp initially functioned as a temporary refuge for displaced Urdu-speaking populations. Over time, however, it evolved into a permanent urban settlement housing tens of thousands of residents.

The experiences of Geneva Camp residents illustrate how marginalized communities navigate structural exclusion while developing strategies of resilience and adaptation. Through informal economic activities, strong social networks, and increasing educational opportunities, residents have gradually transformed the camp into a functioning urban community.

At the same time, the settlement remains a powerful reminder of the enduring consequences of displacement and contested citizenship. Addressing the challenges faced by the community requires policies that combine infrastructure development, economic inclusion, and social recognition.

Ultimately, Geneva Camp should not be viewed solely as a symbol of historical injustice. It is also a testament to human resilience—demonstrating how communities can construct dignity, identity, and belonging even within the most constrained urban environments.

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