Identity Conflicts & Integration

How Religious, Ethnolinguistic, Class and Gender Identity Influence Integration of Bangladeshi Diaspora in Germany

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In day-to-day discourse, the Bangladeshi diaspora has adopted the phrase "they are like Germans" as an expression of how they interpret *integration*. The Bangladeshi diaspora reflects its own identity and the identities of others by viewing itself in light of German society, and through this process, varied understandings of integration, such as isolation, cultural exchange (Multiculturalism), and assimilation, come to the fore. In action research conducted between January and June of 2020, a link was found between self-perceived cultural and religious identities and various integration strategies. Given the connection to individual behaviour, it may be beneficial to investigate and understand this link between self-identity and strategies of integration from the community perspective. To that end, this article sheds light on different understandings of integration within the Bangladeshi diaspora and draws a connection to cultural and religious identity conflicts within the Bangladeshi society in general. This points to the need for engagement with this community beyond structural integration measures limited to language courses and support in accessing job markets.

Case Study Research on Integration of the Bangladeshi Diaspora

The results presented here derive from case studies within an action research project initiated by Verein zur Förderung der Bildung (VFB Salzwedel e.V.) in cooperation with academic partner South Asia Institute (SAI) (a subset of Heidelberg University's Centre for Asian Transcultural Studies [CATS]). The primary concern of this research is to understand the Bangladeshi diaspora's perception of integration. It asks how they express their relationships and interactions with other cultures, and how they relate to the day-to-day discourses that influence their integration behaviour.

This article is based on qualitative interviews. One of the objectives here is to "understand the barriers of integration" and the term integration itself was discussed at the beginning of each interview. I use the language of the interviewees to illustrate their interpretation of *integration*. In this paper, I limit the discussion to the content of the interviews and I deliberately avoid addressing the academic debate behind the terms used. This is an important step in an effort to do justice to the interviewee's applied language and their distinct perceptions.

There is no confirmed data about the number of Bangladeshi diaspora living in Germany, but a report from 2016 suggests that 13,465 Bangladeshis had registered in Germany at that point. According to a report from the German Embassy in Dhaka, around 2,500 Bangladeshi students were studying in Germany in 2019, which is 34% higher than in the previous year (Tithila, Joarder 2019). It is expected that the overall number will rise further due to increasing numbers of Bangladeshi students.

The Bangladeshi diaspora is not a homogenous group. Rather, it has various internal conflicts related to class, gender, political affiliation, religious beliefs and preferences for secular ethnolinguistic and religious identity. This heterogeneity becomes clear in the statements of the interviewees and their perspectives on integration. I will first present some insights into the discourse on integration within the Bangladeshi diaspora. After that, I will present the different forms that understandings of integration can take against the background of this discourse.

They are Like Germans

The following stories collected from around 25 case studies throughout Germany illustrate a key phrase used by the Bangladeshi diaspora in reference to integration. The word *integration* is not usually employed in everyday discourse. Instead, interviewees use the phrase "she is like Germans" to refer to some degree of integration into the German society. 'She is like Germans' can mean a number of different things. One example is a working-class father applying the term to his daughter in reference to her fluency in the German language. His praise and comparison with Germans means that her language skills are as good as those of native speaking Germans. Here the phrase has a clear positive connotation. To him, language matters and she has no language barriers as a diaspora person.

In another case, a mother complained about her Bangladeshi relatives, who express disapproval of her daughter's social behaviour and preferences in clothing by saying, "she is like Germans". Her daughter wears jeans and greets others with *hello* instead of *Salam*, which disappoints relatives concerned that the girl is not honouring Bangladeshi "culture". The daughter's behaviour is seen

as a betrayal and an insult, and in this case the connotation of the phrase she is like Germans is a pejorative one. The mother strongly disagrees with her relatives and considers her daughter's behaviour to be perfectly appropriate since she is living in Germany. The mother also criticised Bangladeshi parents who won't allow their daughters to study and instead make them wait for suitable boys from Bangladesh to marry them out. "They are living in Germany but still have a backward attitude to their female children", she argued.

The consideration of appropriate cultural behaviour has a gender dimension. When a boy wears so-called western clothing it is not that unacceptable, but for girls it is. If a boy is "mixing with" German classmates, it is less noticeable than when a girl has German friends. Therefore, the same behaviour in boys and girls may result in very different levels of acceptance within the Bangladeshi diaspora.

"They are like Germans" is a prevalent phrase used by the Bangladeshi diaspora. It is related to different social behaviours, for example, to manners of dress, to children's behaviour towards their parents and others, to their ways of arguing with elders, to their relationships with people outside the family and to the use of language, e.g., the words used to greet somebody. Here, the diaspora context is a key element in the interpretation of individual behaviour.

The evaluation of such preferences and behaviours within the Bangladeshi diaspora, meaning whether clothing, food preferences, contacts and friendships, etc. are seen as acceptable or not, as progressive or backward, can depend on religious considerations and identity. In these cases, the reference shifts from "Bangladeshi culture" to "Muslim culture". Appropriate cultural behaviour is then seen

from a religious identity perspective. The phrase "they are like Germans" functions as a mirror: it is not about Germans but about the self-perceptions of the Bangladeshi diaspora in the German context. The integration discourse "she is like Germans" provides the subjective basis for expression of different perspectives on individual integration behaviour.

Different Understandings of Integration Within the Bangladeshi Diaspora[1]

The different types of integration—isolation, cultural exchange and assimilation—are shown in figure 1 below. The figure shows these types on a continuum, spanning opposing poles. Each end of the continuum has one more category: resistance (for isolation) and solidarity (for assimilation). At each end there are people resisting cultural interactions (resistance), and on the contrary talking about inclusion and collective social development (solidarity).

Figure 1: The perceptions of integration among the Bangladeshi diaspora and how they relate to perceived identities (the author's own elaboration).

[1] All wording reflects its usage in the interviews. For instance, assimilation here is used in a meaning different from academic and policy discourses in Germany. For interviewees it means "open to interaction".

Isolation does not mean withdrawal from structural integration like the economy or job market. It rather means coexisting without any proactive social and cultural interaction. There are different subcategories within this category. The following story of a Bangladeshi family in Berlin illustrates one position for people who believe in coexistence with cultural isolation. The idea here is that cultures do not mix, which doesn't necessarily entail antagonism to other cultures. Cultural isolation may result from a conscious decision to remain culturally isolated and avoid social and cultural interactions, but it can also happen due to living conditions, based on class and gender positions, that contribute to isolation.

The father of the family had been a political activist in Bangladesh. He moved to Germany in 1985 and received asylum. Following this, he worked in a factory and married a woman from Bangladesh. His wife learned German and worked as a caregiver in a home for the elderly. Together they have a 13-year-old daughter who is studying and wants to "live like a German." The daughter considers herself an atheist and does not want to follow her parents' Muslim religion. The family has a conflict over religion that is rather complex: the father is not a practicing Muslim and the mother is also not a conservative Muslim, but they assert that the daughter should learn Arabic so that she can perform her prayer as a Muslim if needed. Additionally, the father is still interested in Bangladeshi politics. Germany is important to him because of the job, income, and security it provides. His desire is to go back to Bangladesh after his retirement. He wants to spend his old age with his relatives in Bangladesh, although he knows that it is not easy to re-integrate into the Bangladeshi society with secular beliefs.

He will face social pressure for not being a practicing Muslim but expects he will find his "own people" to get along with.[2]

In this case, the daughter is evidently leaning towards the German society and the parents consciously decided to coexist with other cultures without any hostility or resistance. The father accepts the other culture as different and does not impose his "own" culture on his daughter. Of course, the parents will be happy if she maintains some parts of their Bangladeshi culture.

A second subtype shows that people also consciously isolate due to their religious beliefs. For example, since drinking alcohol is discouraged in Islam, one restaurant owner stopped selling it. He knew that the decision would exclude non-Muslims and will impact his earnings. However, he decided to be culturally isolated. Isolation can also show in other forms. Some interviewees also live in isolation due to a lack of contact. This occurs because of their living and working conditions, gender roles and related hierarchies. For example, there are women who live and work inside the home, taking care of the children and the husband. From time to time they may go to markets, but only if their husband accompanies them. Consider also a working-class person with a kitchen job, without the chance to learn the language properly and without opportunities to interact with people from other communities.

Cultural Exchange

Exchange between different cultures may take the form of an exchange of food, music or literature, for example. This exchange may happen at the individual level, with neighbours or colleagues, or through Bangladeshi cultural

[2] This is a protocol from a research diary entry.

organisations, informal groups, self-organisations, and initiatives that organise social and cultural events beyond family and neighbours. One such organised cultural exchange event is the annual "Carnival of Cultures" in Berlin Kreuzberg. The event is organised to emphasise multiculturalism and promote ethnolinguistic culture. Parts of the Bangladeshi diaspora join the event, with some who live in other parts of Germany even traveling to participate. Attendees participate with ethnolinguistic dress and music. The Bangladeshis who actively participate in cultural communication are primarily secularists, more inclined to express their ethnic linguistic identity (Bengali). They consciously promote multiculturalism, and are therefore interested in secular cultural exchange, willing to share food, music, literature, and the Bengali history.

One Bangladeshi living in Frankfurt has published a book of Begum Rukeya, a reknowned Bengali feminist and writer. He translated the book from Bengali to German to share the important Bengali literature. According to him, "Bangladeshi people should visit museums, read German literature and learn German culture. We also should translate our Bengali literature for German readers".

Assimilation

Assimilation means adapting, integrating and an openness to interaction with other cultures. A long interview with a Bangladeshi woman married to a German teacher provides an interesting example of her perspective on what she calls "assimilation". Her position is shaped by a feminist understanding. She bitterly expressed her disappointment with Bangladeshi women living in Germany who live in isolation and treat their daughters with a traditional patriarchal attitude.

> "You are living in an advanced society where girls can get a good education, good job, freedom of choice, and can be an independent person. But what are their parents doing? They are preventing them from freedom. I am happy that many parents are allowing their daughters to get an education."[3]

Most of the multicultural families are assimilated as they have family members from "other" cultures. Assimilation in their perspective means speaking German well, having a job, meeting colleagues and neighbours, sharing food, etc. It also means the refusal of religious suggestions. People who believe in secularism, liberalism, and feminism consider multiculturalism and assimilation a better option for integration. The idea of assimilation to a liberal culture, with its secular ideals and individual freedom, then becomes a choice. It is a choice in comparison to the Bangladeshi society and culture where the dominance of Islamic fundamentalism and patriarchal violence are growing. The secularists among the Bangladeshi diaspora consider the Islamists as feudal, conservative, and backward. Thus, the justification for assimilation by secularists is expressed as being culturally "progressive". The political-ideological conflicts centred on narratives of being "backward", "feudal", "patriarchal", and "progressive" have ramifications in social interactions within the Bangladeshi diaspora community. The Islamists and the secularists among the Bangladeshi diaspora in Germany rarely meet and have few social interactions.

[3] All direct quotes are notes from research diary protocolls.

Resistance to Cultural Interaction

People who actively pursue alienation and resistance to other cultures do so because of their religious beliefs. According to them, performing prayers, wearing Islamic dress, eating halal food, and not forming friendships with non-Muslims are all part of their religious duty. Such strict ideas about Muslim identity are a relatively new phenomenon. One of the reasons for such perceptions is the overwhelming propagation of fundamentalist literature through social media. Religious discourse among Muslims is at present dominated by Political Islam, which promotes Islam as an ideology, encompassing all spheres of individuals' lives. For example, fundamentalist activists are looking to organise their own kindergartens, forming groups with people who have similar world views. Therefore, they are only willing to interact with people who share their ideology. Hence, they resist cultural interaction and have potential for islamic radicalisation. One of the interviewees illustrates how religious beliefs spread among the Bangladeshi diaspora in Germany.

> "My mother called me the other day from Dhaka (Bangladesh) by phone. She asked me what I am doing. I said that I am visiting my neighbour who is a very old man living alone. My mother told me not to visit him because he is not a Muslim. She explained that in Hadith[4] it is written that you will go to hell if you are mixing with non-Muslims. I was surprised because my mother was not like those

[4] The Hadith is the collected traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, based on his sayings and actions. There are six canonical hadith collections that are widely accepted by Sunni Muslims; the two most famous are those of Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari (810–870) and Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (817–875), both of which have the same title al-Sahih (The Authentic).

> who asked me not to take care of old and sick people. I was straightforward and asked my mother how she could ask me to behave inhumanely toward a person who gave lots of time to my son when he was a baby. This neighbour helped me a lot. How can I be so ungrateful to him? My mother said she learned a Hadith recently and before that she was not aware of the punishment for mixing with non-Muslims."

In the above case, the woman is not subscribing to her mother's religious views. Nevertheless, there are many Bangladeshis, who consider their identity as a singular Muslim identity and conceive of their religion as providing a "code" for all facets of life, which prohibits "mixing with" non-Muslims.

Integration as Solidarity and Social Development

Some interviewees see integration not only as a cultural phenomenon but as a social solidarity process; a process of political understanding and engagement for both host and diaspora communities. Integration is seen as a challenge for both communities. The underlying assumption is that integration is a dual process of collective interactions, which is only possible with mutual recognition and solidarity. This is an understanding of integration that is closest to what academic discourses in Germany recently define as integration.

A student active in a Bangladeshi cultural group illustrates this position. In her view, every society faces common social, economic, cultural, environmental, and political challenges, such as climate change, unemployment, inequality and violence.

> "I don't like the word 'integration'. The common perception is that it is about culture and one has to take another culture. But the question is not only culture, it is about how people are facing social problems of exclusion and discrimination. Maybe we are talking about social solidarity."

The context and the nature of the problems may differ but they are not isolated. Therefore, integration has to be seen in relation to systems of oppression, power structures, class, gender discrimination, and exclusion. In fact, integration affects the lives of all citizens of a society. Accordingly, integration needs collective action for social transformation through mutual support and solidarity. Integration thus becomes a partnership and cooperation process, building consensus, and commitment with a common future vision. Looking at integration from the perspective of inequality, social progress, and human rights is not new. This is a broader framework, looking at human relationships from a development perspective. This perspective goes beyond viewing integration as merely cultural interaction with the so-called host community and enters into the realm of social development policy agenda.

Identity Conflicts in Bangladesh and the Diaspora

To better understand the relationship between identity and perspectives on integration, some background is necessary. Bangladesh is a class-divided and strongly patriarchal society. The power structure is largely dominated by the educated class. Bangladesh is a mixed nation, best described as trans-ethnic and multireligious. Community identity is based on religion (Hindu and Muslim), and so

religion plays a key role in identity perceptions. Religious identity has various sub-divisions: atheists, secularists, Sufis, and fundamentalists.

Additionally, political parties, religious groups, and social and cultural institutions experience conflict due to the inner heterogeneity of the society, e.g., various class, gender or ideological positions, and these differences further shape identity conflicts. Gender conflicts, for instance, manifest within the family space. Working-class women share similar problems with female elites at home, like seclusion.[5] While education and jobs may provide women the opportunity to overcome class disparities, religious identity plays an important role in influencing marriage decisions. In these cases, religious identity is more influential than other identities. Identity conflicts are thus shaped by the intersection of aspects of class, gender and religion.

Contemporary Bangladeshi identity politics influence identity consciousness throughout Bangladesh and the diaspora. There are class and gender division and conflict, however, the religious (Muslim) and ethnolinguistic (Bengali) conflict remains dominant. Usually, those of the Bangladeshi diaspora who consider their religious identity as primary are inclined to remain isolated and resist cultural interactions. On the contrary, those who consider their identity as secular ethnolinguistic are interested in cultural exchange and assimilation in the sense of greater interactions. Thus, identity perceptions play an important role in cultural and social interactions.

[5] Seclusion here means the state of being private and away from other people.

Addressing Identity: Structural Integration is not Enough

The Bangladeshi diaspora is not isolated from or immune to religious identity politics. The growing religious identity orientations of the Bangladeshi diaspora have direct consequences for individual integration behaviour. Second generation members of the Bangladeshi diaspora do not receive enough mother tongue (Bengali) education and are deprived of their parents' ethnolinguistic secular culture. With the growing influence of Islamic organisations, second generation children have more occasions for radical religious orientation.

Germany has introduced a new skilled immigration act (March 2020) that allows skilled workers to migrate to Germany, and more people with varied social backgrounds are expected to migrate. The policy and strategy of "Governance of Migrant Integration in Germany" (European Commission 2019) is primarily labour market-oriented and focuses on aspects of structural integration: education, language and technical training, employment and cultural integration. This approach follows the dominant perspective which considers different diaspora communities in Germany as cohesive communities. As I have shown in this article, the Bangladeshi diaspora is, on the contrary, not a homogenous but rather a heterogenous group. The design of structural integration services like common language courses and training to achieve job skills is not enough to address the internal and intra-community conflicts based on different identity perceptions. It would be beneficial to address these different identity perceptions and community conflicts. These conflicts influence the social integration of the Bangladeshi diaspora. Instead of a focus on only structural integration it would be important to consider political integration to address the different dimensions presented in this paper.

Referenzen

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