

# A Crying Shame

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Karachi: There is a blot of shame on the fair name of Pakistan. And each one of us, who has the means and the power to do something about it but chooses to be silent, bears the burden of this guilt. The story is familiar enough. On December 16, 1971, the Pakistan created by the Quaid-i-Azam, was lost. A sizable population who had migrated from Bihar to East Pakistan at the time of partition were declared non-citizens by the new Bangladesh government. Being culturally and linguistically different, they had not fully integrated with the people of East Pakistan. During the civil war in East Pakistan between March and December 1971, they readily opted to defend a united Pakistan. The army used (and abused) them as human shields for the more dangerous operations. For this crime, they have never been forgiven by the people of Bangladesh. After the war, they were herded into unsanitary ghettos on a virtually prison diet. They were branded as 'traitors', and this mark of infamy remains on their children and even their children's children to this day. These 'traitors' are now considered as 'pariahs' by Pakistan that has stopped owning them for the reason that, on migration here, they are likely to settle in Sindh and join the ethnic political ranks of New Sindhis. The estimate of those now eligible for repatriation is said to be between 100,000 and 150,000. How cynical can we get as a nation? We can tolerate the presence of a million plus illegals from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Burma and Afghanistan in Karachi but we shut the door tight on our 'own' citizens. We don't recognize them as ours on the specious plea that they had migrated to East Pakistan. The logical tailpiece of this reasoning is that our eastern province was never considered part of the nation. We accepted four million Afghan refugees in the 1980s and beat our breast in the name of Islamic solidarity. The truth is there was little solidarity but a case of push come to shove on a porous border. Pakistan's selective Islamic solidarity extends to Palestinians and Kashmiris, but not to Kurds in Iraq (when they were gassed) or the Sudanese in Darfur (currently in the throes of a genocide) and above all, to our own stranded 'citizens' who made the mistake of their lives by siding with the Pakistan army and not the Mukti Bahini during the 1971 civil war, which is now commonly referred to as war of the Bangladesh liberation. We choose to look the other way. This ugly blip is longer on our political radar screen. Islamic solidarity has suddenly vanished. Our rejection of these people exposes a visible crack in the mirror of Pakistan. It calls into question the two-nation theory. Let us be honest and say that this theory was a means to an end and not an end in itself. The theory apparently died long ago when Pakistan was transformed 'from a homeland for the Indian Muslims' to a theocratic Islamic state. In any case, mass migration in the subcontinent is no longer possible and in the context of over 125 million Muslims in India, the two-nation theory does not seem to be operative for the time being. This dichotomy on what Pakistan is or is not is the root cause of our carefully developed hypocrisy, double standards and sectarian violence. We have moved from one concept to another but find ourselves in limbo. No wonder,

the better part of our educated youth is alienated. The Quaid's concept of Pakistan was a liberal, humanizing, outward-reaching modern state, which was a homeland for those Muslims of the subcontinent who chose to migrate at the time of partition. The Quaid gave us the right direction, but instead, we have entered a black hole of pseudo- religiosity and are struggling to get out of it. Our amnesia on the stranded Pakistani issue calls into question our singular devotion to the Kashmir cause. How is a suffering Kashmiri any different from a ghettoed Pakistani in Bangladesh? Both are Muslim. Does this not smack of hypocrisy and double standards? The former is regarded as a mazloom, the latter a 'pariah'. It must be heartrending to hear these 'pariahs' sing the Pakistani national anthem and see them hoist our flag in the ghettos of Bangladesh on our national days. The Rabita Trust Fund founded in 1988 succeeded in repatriating a few hundred families. It was frozen in 2001 and the process has since stopped. It is a shame that we must invite outside money to bring home our own citizens. Have we lost all honour? We seem to have plenty of funds for all types of grandiose projects under the sun but cannot allocate a couple of hundred million rupees each year to recommence the process. The government should meet the costs of improving the living condition in camps in Bangladesh, open schools and vocational centres and take immediate steps to repatriate 200 to 300 families annually and settle them in the Punjab. Where integration is possible in Bangladesh this should be encouraged by fiscal and other means. Our parliament has a Kashmir committee on which millions are spent on members romping the globe to highlight the Kashmir cause with marginal results; the National Assembly can spend time to discuss the shortage of Sui gas in some remote town, it can spend hours to discuss the infringement of minor privileges of members, but it has never found the time to discuss the issue of stranded Pakistanis in Bangladesh. Not being true to ourselves shames all of us. The writer is a member of the National Assembly.

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