

FEEDBACK

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# NEWAGE Xtra

June 24-30, 2005

## A requiem for a dream

In December 2003, **Mahtab Haider** visited the Geneva Camp in Dhaka to find a people broken and ravaged by history, desperate to find an identity. To mark World Refugee Day 2005 that was observed this week, Xtra reprints the article that first appeared in SLATE, the monthly magazine from Holiday

The story opens as a muezzin clears his throat over the microphone, breaking the funereal stillness of a winter dawn among a smattering of shanties along the eastern edge of Mohammadpur.

Down the third lane from the mosque, past the butcher's — where a pack of strays lie foetal and gorged on scraps — past the lathe-metal workshop and the Mecca Tehari store, gentle, stirring morning sounds can be heard, where a family of seven lie curled and asleep in the darkness. Khadijah Begum gathers her receptacle and a piece of cloth from under the bed to go to the toilet. It is her time of the month, and though she cannot read a clock, she knows well that to tarry now, would leave her standing in the morning queue. Two hundred and seventy toilets for a population of 22,000. And the numbers increase daily. The rituals of life, death, triumph, hope and misery of each family, packed into neat little boxes that measure eight-feet by eight feet.

Before she leaves, Khadijah makes sure little Munni is covered well. The child, not yet of four years, has caught a death of a cold, and every once in a while, Khadijah is sure she has heard the little one's lungs whistling. Also on the bed that spans all but the entrance of their hovel is her husband Md Salman, their eldest boy and his wife — pregnant with her first child — and the two younger sons, lying shoulder-to-shoulder.

Once outside, Khadijah uses her sari to shield her nose from the stench of day-old remains of the four hundred or so cows slaughtered here everyday, dotting the shoulder-breadth alleyway in untidy piles. Somewhere, a baby cries; and from mosque to mosque, the first azaan of the day resonates through the last few moments of the gathering darkness.

This is not just a story of poverty and despair.

This is the story of a community of over 2.5 lakh people who have lived like animals for the last 33 years and will, in all probability, be forced to live on and die as animals in congested ghettos at

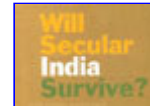


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makeshift camps and shanties all over Bangladesh. Poverty is not all that holds them back. Everyday, they are wilfully denied an education, opportunities, a future, and an identity. This is the story of a people whose lot it is to only exist as numbers in ration cards, relief programmes and slum-arson stories. This is the story of the Biharis of Geneva Camp.

### **'Outside these walls, animals live better...'**

'You think conditions at this camp are squalid? My friend, this is the Paris of all sixty-six Bihari camps spread throughout Bangladesh,' says a local leader as he walks me through the constricted alleyways of the Geneva Camp later that morning.

Even in the early hours of the day, the street-sides are strewn with blood, innards and the fetid refuse of the cows slaughtered here every morning for the supply of beef to the neighbouring markets. For upto three hours after daybreak people stand in winding queues to use the toilets, while others squat in makeshift baths side by side with the carcasses of slaughtered cows. In the midst of all this, runny-nosed children course the streets, playing cricket, flying kites on corrugated tin roofs, and crowding roadside stalls that sell a one taka breakfast of a rice cake with a lump of molten molasses buried deep in its belly.

A peep into any of the box-shaped houses reveals a single room with a bed raised high on bricks, on which innumerable sleeping bodies lie side by side, and under which the woman of the house sits on her haunches lighting a kerosene stove, grinding spices or feeding infants. In one corner is the occasional concrete wash basin, or a goat or a lamb tied to the bed-post, all crammed into the space of a moderate-sized office cubicle.

'Can you imagine what it is like for me, my wife and our two daughters to live in the same room as my son and his wife?' an old man was to ask of me, glowering with rage, on the third and last morning that I visited the camp.

With no running water, no drainage, a solitary school, and a population steadily growing within walls that shrink everyday due to forced evictions and illegal occupation, the Geneva Camp is a heart-rending symbol of the fate of this dispossessed community. No municipal services reach the locality. 'Why would they?' my guide asks. 'We have become a burden that no one wants to carry. To the world outside, we don't exist. We are the leftovers of history — stranded Pakistanis because we speak the wrong language. Outside these walls, animals live better.'

### **The wrong side of the line**

The tragedy of the Bihari community unfolds as far back as 1946 — the year communal riots in Bihar tore irreparable divisions through India — with thousands of Muslims massacred in an organised pogrom that added momentum to the movement for the partition of India resulting in a separate homeland for the region's beleaguered Muslims. Families by the thousands left their ancestral lands to take refuge in the erstwhile East Pakistan between 1947 and 1952.

'If only you could have seen what I have seen in 1947,' says the 67-year-old Md. Iqbal as we sit at the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee office drinking oversweet tea. 'We left everything — our land, our history and our past — to arrive at the borders of (erstwhile) East Pakistan, where for the first time in our

lives we would be able to hold our heads high on our way to the mosque for Jumma prayers,' he recalls. 'I was eleven years old and I remember how the villagers lining the Birol-Radhikapur border in North Bengal embraced us, and gave us food and shelter until we were ready to move further inland.'

In the decades following the partition, a large number of the octogenarian residents of today's Geneva Camp settled in areas like Mirpur and Mohammadpur in Dhaka, and thrived in business and trade.

After the liberation of Bangladesh from Pakistan — through a war hard-won in 1971 during which a large section of this migrant community actively aided the Pak military junta and openly expressed ideological opposition to the creation of Bangladesh — the government of Bangladesh offered the community the choice of repatriation to Pakistan. According to a survey conducted by the International Red Cross, a total of 5,29,669 non-Bengalis expressed their desire to go to Pakistan.

In 1973, under a tripartite agreement between Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, the Pakistan government took a total of 1,26,941 individuals to Pakistan. 18,000 were further repatriated to Pakistan in 1979, some 9,000 in 1982 and 325 in 1993.

According to a survey, conducted jointly by the Pakistan High Commission, the Pakistan Rabita al-Alame Islami and the Ministries of Home and Foreign Affairs of Bangladesh in 1993, the number of stranded Pakistanis in 66 camps was 238,000.

After thirty-two years of betrayals and broken promises by successive Pakistani governments, the bitterness towards the country that this community pledged allegiance to, and lost all that they had built in two decades for, is apparent.

In comments to the media, Nasim Khan, the president of the SPGRC, has time and again reiterated that he believes that 'the ruling elite of Pakistan, especially the politicians and bureaucrats, are responsible for the plight of the stranded Pakistanis'.

'Over Rs.100 crore has been collected in Pakistan for the cause of our repatriation and settlement, but till today we have neither been repatriated nor helped financially with that money,' says my guide the local leader. 'In 2002, we met with Gen. Musharraf when he visited Dhaka,' he continues. 'We asked him to resolve our long outstanding issue of repatriation. "Leave it to me," he replied emphatically. Not once, thrice! Today all I want to ask him is, "Gen. Musharraf, we left it to you sir, but who did you leave it to?"'

The leaders of the SPGRC met with the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri, who visited Dhaka in 2003. Once more they were given assurances of action upon his return, and once again, the Pak government has remained predictably silent on the issue since.

'We know we will never be repatriated,' says the leader, 'because we would then have to be allocated the money that was collected in our name. It is much too profitable to keep us in limbo.'

### **'We are Bangladeshi, whether you accept it or not'**

But as the years have progressed, the ideologies of the local leadership and the general populace that it assumes to speak for have diverged. The aspirations of the generation that has grown up in a liberated Bangladesh gives lie to the term 'stranded Pakistani'. In their

interactions with the world outside the camp, these young men and women try desperately to shake off their identity as 'stranded Pakistanis' in an effort to escape the stigma associated with the term.

Already, there is talk of new political factions. A group is fast gaining popularity among the younger demographic, camp residents told me, not only for their alleged criticism of the idea of a return to Pakistan as 'a foolhardy proposition', but more so for their pledge of allegiance to Bangladesh instead.

'Bangladesh is where I have been born and spent my entire life. I have no dreams of going to Pakistan to become a refugee once again,' says Md Arsalan, 24, who runs a small variety store inside the camp. 'I am a Bangladeshi,' he told me, 'whether you accept it or not.'

But according to Arsalan, such talk is totally unpermissible among the senior leadership. 'They refuse to hear any talk of settling down in Bangladesh,' Arsalan says, 'and we don't feel that we are represented by these leaders any more.'

'This was inevitable,' says Showkat Ali, the headmaster of the camp's solitary primary school. Ali, who graduated from BFF Shahin College in 1970, saw his family dispossessed of all their assets in their relocation to the camp in 1971. He has, since, struggled against indomitable odds to see his two elder sons through their HSC at Dhaka College, and now has a younger son whose education he hopes to see through to university.

'Today,' he says, 'even if you forcefully sent me off to Pakistan, I would get a passport and a visa and I would come right back. We have built our lives here, in spite of this new reality. I will not survive or accept another dislocation.'

According to Ali, if a new survey were to be conducted among the residents of all 66 camps in Bangladesh, not more than twenty per cent of the residents would agree to be repatriated to Pakistan. In fact, an overwhelming majority of the residents of the Geneva Camp interviewed during the span of the last week echoed their unequivocal opposition to repatriation to Pakistan. 'What we now want is for the Bangladesh government to recover the Rs 100 crore that is lying idle with the Pak government in our name, and use it to relocate us,' says an impassioned local leader. 'We need another tri-partite meeting with our issue as the main agenda. That is all we ask. How long will we live like this?' he asks dejectedly.

### **'Education is the answer...'**

According to Showkat Ali, the survival in limbo of the last thirty-three years has taken its greatest toll on the community's children, who have been denied an education, and opportunities that every other citizen of Bangladesh is entitled to.

Ali says less than ten per cent of the children who live in camps countrywide have the opportunity to go to school. The school he himself runs at the Geneva Camp operates on four shifts, with a total of four-hundred students. 'But books are scarce,' he says, 'and as we are forced to charge more and more fees (Currently Tk 30/month), parents opt to send their children to Madrassahs or even to work.'

Until 1996, the school would receive an annual allotment of primary school text books from the local Thana Education Officer, since primary education has been declared mandatory and free for all. 'Since 1996, we have stopped receiving this allocation, on the pretext that our school is not registered,' he says. The irony is that in order to

register the school, Ali has to show the deed for the ownership of the land it is built on. 'But we don't own this land. We are only temporary residents in this camp. So our fate remains sealed, as a poor, uneducated community, that will descend to greater depths of ruin with each successive generation.' While Ali admits that a great many children of the community attend schools in the neighbouring areas, 'The majority,'

he says, 'are unable to afford that luxury.'

'If our children were able to attend schools and colleges, and perhaps secure jobs in the government, the incidence of crime and the disturbing trend of their trade in drugs like phensidyl would fall significantly,' says Ali.

On my last evening at the Geneva Camp, as I made my way out of the SPGRC office, I noticed a plaque on the outer wall. The Bangla inscription — a quote from the Quran — roughly translated to: 'Verily does the Almighty chose to leave the fortunes of a community unchanged, till such time that they strive themselves, to change their own fortunes.'

All around me, everywhere I looked, the inherent travesty in this inscription was apparent. In the faces of the emaciated children on the dimly lit streets, the unemployed youths who resorted to drugs and violence to escape and overcome their reality, the broken old-men, dislocated time and again, stripped of everything they built in the last 56 years, who would never realise their dream of a glorious return to a land that didn't want them. Here was a community that had done everything in its power to change its fortunes, ravaged by history time and again. And in exchange, they had received no help. Human or divine.

*\*Names of certain individuals in this story have been changed to protect confidentiality.*

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