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### A people ravaged by history

BENGALIS are poised to celebrate their independence day on December 16. But what are some 2.5 lakh 'Pakistanis', stranded in Bangladesh since 1971, doing here?

"They have been forced to live in animal-like condition for the last 32 years and will, in all probability, be live on and die in congested ghettos at makeshift camps and shanties all over Bangladesh", observes Slate, a Dhaka-based monthly publication, in its December issue.

"Poverty is not all that holds them back. They are denied an education, opportunities, a future, and an identity. They only exist as numbers in ration cards, relief programmes and slum-arson stories," says Mahatab Haider, a young, passionate writer in Slate, after visiting a camp in Dhaka.

With no running water, no drainage, a solitary school, and a population steadily growing within walls that shrink every day due to forced evictions and illegal occupation, the camp — known as Geneva Camp is a heart-rending symbol of the fate of this dispossessed community. No municipal services reach the locality. "Why would they?" asks Ehtesham Khan, vice-president of the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC). "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."

Less than 10 per cent of the children living in camps have the opportunity to go to school. Until 1996, the only school run in the Geneva Camp used to receive an annual allotment of primary school textbooks 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," says the headmaster of the school.

To get free books, the school has to get registered; and to get itself registered, the school has to produce a deed of ownership for 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."

The tragedy of the stranded (or Bihari) community unfolds as far back as 1946, with thousands of Muslims massacred in an organized pogrom in Bihar of India. Families by the thousands left their ancestral lands to take refuge in the erstwhile East Pakistan between 1947 and 1952.

In the decades following 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. During Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971, most of these people ideologically opposed the idea of Bangladesh's independence and actively supported the military operations of General Yahya Khan's junta.

After independence, the government of Bangladesh offered the community two options — staying back in Bangladesh as its nationals or repatriation to Pakistan. 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 accepted a total of 1,26,941 individuals and a further 18,000 were repatriated to Pakistan in 1979, some 9,000 in 1982 and 325 in 1993. Then the process stopped. In 1993, the number of stranded Pakistanis in 66 camps was 238,000.

After 32 years of broken promises by successive Pakistani governments, the bitterness is now apparent. "The ruling elite of Pakistan, especially the politicians and bureaucrats, are responsible for the plight of the stranded Pakistanis", comments Nasim Khan, president of the SPGRC.

"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 his deputy Ehtesham Khan. "In 2002, we met Gen. Musharraf when he visited Dhaka and urged him to resolve our longstanding problem. He assured us of repatriation, emphatically, and asked us to leave it to him. 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 SPGRC leaders also met Pakistani Foreign Minister, Khurshid Kasuri, who visited Dhaka earlier this year. Once more they were given assurances of action upon his return, and once again, the Islamabad has remained silent on the issue.

Meanwhile, as the years have progressed, the point of view of the SPGRC leadership and the general populace that it assumes to represent has diverged. The aspirations of the generation that has grown up in independent Bangladesh belies 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, which introduces itself as Student Unity, is fast gaining popularity among the younger section of the camp residents. This group opposes the idea of returning to Pakistan. "Bangladesh is where I have been born and grown up. I have no dream of going to Pakistan to become a refugee once again," says a member of the group. "I am a Bangladeshi, whether you accept it or not."

Such talk however finds little favour among the senior leadership of the SPGRC. But is it permissible in official Bangladesh circles? Bangladeshi establishments? The answer is, perhaps no. So, as Bangladesh celebrates its 32nd anniversary, the stranded non-Pakistanis in the Geneva Camp, suffering from poverty and illiteracy, strive for an identity.