

From New Nation Online Edition

EDITORIAL PAGE

Stranded and languishing Pakistanis! What next?

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Sun, 7 Nov 2004, 11:53:00

Munna and his disciple Pervez trace their ancestors from Bihar---Arra district to be exact. They were born in 1970 and 1971 respectively in the northern bustling railway town called Sayeedpur under the greater Rangpur district where their parents were settled and employed by the Eastern Bengal Railways.

The Sayeedpur 'Loco' workshop, in fact, was a well equipped, reputed and huge establishment where hundreds of Biharis, who came over from the adjoining Bihar province after the partition of the sub-continent in 1947 [being direct victims of the heartrending communal riots of 1947/'48], were rehabilitated and meaningfully employed. Sayeedpur in course of time, became their world or 'Jawgoth', as we call it in Bangla. They were poor, but simple folks who had nothing to do with politics of any sort at that point. In course of time however, some of them left their Railway jobs and set up their own small businesses like tea shops and groceries, while others gradually picked up handicraft related jobs in the textiles and knitting sector. One hardly came across anyone begging in that area and life was more or less peaceful and contented.

There was a sizeable number of pure, local Bengali population also living side by side and the overall community rapport was fairly good enough without any signs of irritation or friction at any time. But the Biharis ab initio made one big blunder for which they had to pay a very heavy price later, in 1971. They sent their wards to their own schools and local educational institutions whose medium of instruction was invariably [all along] Urdu. And to make things further worse, the elders never learnt a single word of Bangla by mistake even. Gradually some sort of a rift started surfacing between the members of the two communities from the late '60s onwards and when the actual movement for an Independent Bangladesh entered its final stages in the later part of 1970, the Urdu speaking Biharis and local Bengalis were clearly seen as two different communities in the same area which used to be an abode of peace in the past. Even the traditional bonds of Islam which had bound them together for years, eventually failed to keep them as one entity.

And if we further go down the 'history lane' we shall only come across the sordid tales of a brother killing his other sibling-in-faith for simple political reasons that could have been easily avoided had the Biharis accepted the reality in due time. Today, 34 years later, Munna is a grown up young man and, owns a grocery shop in Mohammadpur area having left the handicraft job, especially the one in which he specialised i.e the 'Zari' work [or the sophisticated embroidery] and production of wonderful 'Kattan' saris which have a huge market in India also. Pervez, the disciple, has of late taken Munna's place and is doing quite well independently. When I asked them about their views on migrating to Pakistan for good they put a counter-question. "Why should we go to Pakistan? We were born and brought up here; we have married local girls and we can fluently converse in Bangla. Why should we even think of Pakistan as our home?"

I must say I was quite impressed with their up-front views and the boldness with which they spoke. But I must also say that the number of 'Munnas' and 'Pervezs' is not very large by any chance. Many Stranded Pakistanis [as they are commonly called] still dream of Pakistan as their final destination---or their dream home---especially those who have crossed the 50 years age-mark. Since 1972, when the Bangladesh government brought them to Dhaka and tried to rehabilitate them in camps [at Tongi, Mohammadpur, Rugganj and Adamjeenagar to be precise], which are popularly known as the 'Geneva camps', having been alternately financed by the International Red Cross Society, some NGOs/ humanitarian organisations or mostly by the GoB itself. But life inside the camp has all along been no thing but a miserable hell. The government has paid for their rations and electricity/water, etc regularly but even then it has not been possible to salvage them from sub-human living conditions. And over the years, around 130,000 stranded Pakistanis have so far been sent to Pakistan through various channels since 1972.

According to an official estimate, Bangladesh government had spent around Tk 10 crore each year since 1976 to provide for almost 2.4 lakh stranded Pakistanis. As a matter of fact, a full new generation of humans has been added to the Bihari population; children have been regularly born since the time those camps were set up, while deaths either due to old age, or some disease or even due to sheer poverty in the camps have occurred quite frequently. A few fortunate ones have also found supplementary jobs or other avenues of supplementary income to support their families. And, once again, the more fortunate ones have managed enough funds and left for Pakistan either through India or Nepal or were officially repatriated from time to time as I mentioned above. Unfortunately, it is widely rumoured that some of the Bihari camps have by now become dens of all criminal activities and even subtle prostitution is reportedly carried out there under the very nose of the law enforcing agencies. That is anything but an utterly disgusting scenario, no doubt, if the allegation is true by any chance.

Regrettably, Pakistan has so far failed to accept and rehabilitate their own citizens over the years---people who have been doubtlessly a security threat to the host country. What would happen, God forbid, if some mischievous quarter, in order to malign the government of the day which could be either BNP or Awami League, or to put the government in a seriously embarrassing situation, one fine morning slaughter a few hundred stranded Beharis and vanishes in the thin air? Who will carry the load of that blame then? And what would happen if some foreign power, inimical to Bangladesh for reason/s known and unknown, employs a few non-local Biharis and uses them effectively in any sabotage work? After all, the Biharis who have time and again displayed their weakness and opted for Pakistan unhesitatingly cannot be expected to be 'love-struck' for Bangladesh under any circumstances. They must be sent to Pakistan without any loss of time.

But, unfortunately, all previous governments in Pakistan had made some sort of commitment and then gleefully reneged on their promises, as if they had never committed anything on that count! Being quite curious, once I asked a close friend from Pakistan who was very well connected with different highly placed quarters there and who understood their politics quite well, as to why these poor people, who had willingly opted for Pakistan ages ago were not being taken back? His answer was: We have enough headaches [problem] in Pakistan, and we would not like to add one more to that list! In fact, for unknown reasons, Biharis are considered a great headache everywhere---a race of people who simply cannot assimilate themselves easily with their fellow citizens or the environment in which they are placed. That weakness, people say, somehow lies in their blood streams.

Of course, there are many honourable exceptions to the above contention and the present generation, I must say, is quite different from what we have seen in the past. But unfortunately, reputations once tarnished are very difficult to be reconstructed so easily. Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and her arch rival Nawaz Sharif, I was told, were both 'tremendously' allergic to the very word 'Biharis'. And I wonder if there is any other superlative that I can use to describe their exasperation, since every time the 'Bihari-bhai' case was placed or pleaded through the official/diplomatic channels, the two Pakistani leaders are reported to have spent sleepless nights till the matter was once again sent to the political archives for a cold storage status! However, all said and done, there is also a great humanitarian side of the long, unresolved 'Stranded Pakistani' problem and Pakistan, under the able leadership of President Musharraf, can very well solve it this time in a spirit of pure understanding and compassion.

Without mincing words, let us admit the bare fact that what General Musharraf can do in minutes, his predecessors would have failed to do in ages even, because of their political tint and unscrupulous commitments. I have mentioned it in the past and I would like to mention it once again that Bangladesh being a much poorer country financially and completely war ravaged, did not fail in 1973 and '74 to bring back home almost half a million of their citizens who were stranded in different make-shift camps in Pakistan, promptly.

That was indeed, a great feat, no doubt. Only those few Bengalis were left out of the list who did not want to be repatriated willingly, for one reason or the other, and stayed back. However, I would like to strongly assert here that those who have completely assimilated themselves with our language, culture and environment and who were born after 1971; those who are reluctant to go to Pakistan even if Pakistan accepts them, should be accorded Bangladeshi citizenship without any further loss of time. In this connection a recent welcome news indicates that a high-powered committee with the Minister for Food and Disaster Management has been formed to decide on Stranded Pakistani's status.

The committee will also examine whether the willing stranded Pakistanis can be given citizenship under the Bangladesh Citizenship [Temporary Provision] Order issued by the President in 1972. Some people have also suggested giving them 'refugee status' but personally, I do not think that it would be a wise or possible solution at this stage.

The Foreign Office should concurrently and seriously take up the entire matter pertaining to the Stranded Pakistanis this time, since it is not at all dead by any means like the 'assets and liabilities' issue. Let us get the Stranded Pakistani issue resolved once and for all and let the languishing poor human beings be rehabilitated properly, either here on the soil of Bangladesh or in the country of choice.

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