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The forgotten tribe

*About 300,000 Biharis live in 66 camps in 13 regions of Bangladesh in extremely deplorable conditions. Since March 25, 1971, they are paying the price of their loyalty to Pakistan. Though successive Pakistani governments have treated them with contempt, most of the stateless people believe in the ideology of Pakistan, writes **Akhtar Payami***



Who are these shadowy figures lurking in and outside the dilapidated structures with broken doors and windows euphemistically called Geneva camps? Their empty, emotionless eyes have stopped narrating the frightening tales of torture, humiliation and death. For well over 35 years they have been endlessly waiting for the Day of Judgment when they would be repatriated to their chosen homeland.

For over 300,000 hapless, stateless souls in Bangladesh, it is a winter of discontent.

Once upon a time they had their names, houses, addresses and familiar neighbourhoods. Now they have none. Their ancestors were among the valiant fighters for independence. They had responded to the call of the Quaid-i-Azam knowing fully well that their provinces would never form part of Pakistan.

They did not belong to the Muslim majority areas. But they had been told umpteen times that Pakistan would be the homeland for the 140 million Muslims of India. If they had a distinct identity with their own culture, traditions, language and religion which was indeed the basis for the partition of India, all Muslims living in the minority provinces should have been accommodated in the new homeland. But this was not to be.

These people have lost everything. But they have not sold their souls.



Thirty-five years is a long period. In the shanty towns of Dhaka and other areas of Bangladesh, three generations have been living in the Geneva camps. There is nothing Geneva-like in these camps. They are the dirtiest and the most vulnerable parts of a new country which emerged on the map of the world after the 1971 tragedy.

Every year, December 16 reminds the people of Pakistan of the great calamity that befell the homeland after a brief spell of war between the Bengali separatists and the mighty Pakistan army. Of course, the Bengali nationalists were fully supported and equipped by the Indian army. Without India's active collaboration, Bangladesh could not have come into being.

It would have taken the Bengalis a lot more time at a heavy cost in terms of human life and material to achieve freedom. It would have been another Vietnam with a difference. While the American forces were fighting against the natives of Vietnam much against the wishes of the Vietnamese, the Pakistan army was trying to eliminate its own citizens who were termed as "miscreants."

Why did 1971 take place? Was it destined to be so? There is a long history of painful developments since 1947 when the subcontinent was partitioned. Unfortunately, the principle of justice and fair play was not followed in its entirety. The people of East Pakistan had a litany of grievances. The leaders of Pakistan movement could not understand the sensibilities of the people living in the eastern wing.

It was in Dhaka where the seeds of Muslim nationalism were sown in 1906 with the formation of the All India Muslim League. There was no chartered course for the freedom movement. Utter confusion prevailed for a long time. It took a shape and form through the clear vision and efforts of Allama Iqbal and Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Till the last moment, it was not clear what would be the future of the subcontinent after the withdrawal of the British who had governed the country for well over two centuries.



Whether it was because of the concerted efforts of the Muslim leaders or because of the egoistic attitude of Jawaharlal Nehru, the pace of separation was accelerated. And finally the Cabinet Mission plan was accepted and the two nations — Hindus and Muslims — agreed on the formula of dividing the country on the basis of religion.

By that time it had become absolutely clear that the entire Muslim population could not migrate to Pakistan, as the Muslims were dispersed all over the country. Some areas like East Bengal, Sindh, Punjab, NWFP and Balochistan had a predominantly Muslim population. But demographically the rest of the country had mixed populations.

A few days before the implementation of the partition plan, a delegation of the Muslim leaders from Bihar had tried to meet the Quaid-i-Azam to know exactly what would be the position of the Muslims who would be left behind in India after the creation of Pakistan. Unfortunately, they could not get an appointment with Jinnah. But they had an audience with Sardar Abdur Rab Nishtar who was a respected leader of the Muslim League.

A member of the delegation which called on Sardar Sahib narrated what transpired at the meeting. Sardar Nishtar was asked what would be the status of the Muslims who would be left behind in India after the creation of Pakistan. He replied: "They would be Pakistani citizens living in India." Obviously the answer lacked logic and substance.

It so happened that the Muslims living in the western parts of India migrated to the areas then constituting West Pakistan. But the Muslims inhabiting the eastern parts of India including Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa largely decided to settle down in East Bengal. Later this part of Pakistan

came to be known as East Pakistan.

The ancestors of the now forgotten tribe served the eastern part of the country with devotion. While the export of coal from India was stopped in the early phase of Pakistan, the railway workers from Bihar who were well versed in the technique of managing transportation section burned the forest woods to run the locomotives. It's a pity that their children are now rotting in the hovels of Bangladesh.

For about a decade since the creation of Pakistan, the euphoria sustained the new country. But the strains had already started to appear. In those days jute was a major foreign exchange earner with worldwide demand for this commodity. The Bengalis thought that they were being cheated by the central government with its headquarters in Pindi-Islamabad.

The Bengalis had a litany of grievances — real and imaginary. Once a chief minister of East Pakistan — Aatur Rahman Khan — went to Islamabad to seek approval of a project. But he returned a frustrated man. At Dhaka airport he told the local journalists that while the concerned minister had agreed, the section officer did not cooperate with him. Such situations prevailed for a long time.

Hardly anybody was made secretary of any department. It was during the days of General Yahya Khan that some measures were taken to fulfil the demands of the people of East Pakistan. The headquarters of some corporations were shifted to Dhaka. Some senior officers were promoted to the rank of secretaries. But these were much belated steps taken by the federal government that did not satisfy the desperate people of East Pakistan.

The final blow to the unity of Pakistan came with the indefinite postponement of the National Assembly session after the 1970 elections. These elections were considered by all, including foreign observers, as the most fair ever held in the country. But those elections brought into the fore the most terrifying reality — the country was sharply divided.

The Awami League candidates won most of the seats in East Pakistan. The Muslim League was completely routed in that province. The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) founded by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto emerged as the dominant party in West Pakistan. The assembly session, according to the programme, was to be held in Dhaka. But Bhutto, who was in a hurry, vehemently opposed the move and threatened the elected members of the assembly with dire consequences.



Despite such threats, some members from Sindh, NWFP and other parts of West Pakistan did go to Dhaka. But, by then Pakistan's Establishment had already taken a deadly decision. The army cracked down on the militants, and the resounding sounds of gunfire broke the silence of the night of March 25.

There was indiscriminate killing. The Bengalis who were ardent supporters of the Muslim League and bitterly opposed the policies of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were also not spared. It may not be known to many that even close relatives of a federal minister in Sylhet were targeted for killing but were miraculously saved by some senior military officials who recognized them.

Along with the army operation in East Pakistan, began the schism in the ranks of the people. The non-Bengalis, for whom East Pakistan was a chosen homeland, sided with the army and played a pivotal role in identifying the members of the Mukti Bahini consisting of militant Bengali youngsters who had the active support of the Indian troops. Thus the population of East Pakistan was sharply divided.

Sometimes it is asked why the non-Bengalis did not join the mainstream instead of supporting the

Pakistan army. How could they? They had responded to the call of their leaders. East Pakistan and West Pakistan was one country populated by the Muslims who were originally of Indian origin. It was just a matter of chance that some of them migrated to West Pakistan while others preferred to go to East Pakistan which they found congenial for their habitation. How could they then join those whom they considered their enemies?

Since March 25, 1971, they have been paying the price of their loyalty to the cause of Pakistan. Their only crime is that they followed the voice of their conscience and remained faithful to the idea of a united Pakistan which in their view was being threatened by some misguided people. They didn't think that the Pakistan army would suffer such a shattering defeat.

As a logical consequence of their loyalty to the Pakistan army, the Bengalis termed them as collaborators whose only punishment was death. Rumours were afloat that the Chinese army would descend from the Himalayas and the sixth fleet of the American Navy was close to the shores of East Pakistan. But no miracle happened. On December 16, 90 thousand Pakistani soldiers and their officers laid down their arms at a well orchestrated ceremony.

From March 25 to December 16, the non-Bengalis remained the target of the wrath of the local population. They did not realize that when the whole country is in a state of uprising, the army alone could not win. The army crackdown and its aftermath was not a matter of conjecture. The casualty figure of three million, announced by Mujib may have been exaggerated and the tales of torture and rape may not be wholly true. But nobody can challenge the veracity of the incidents.

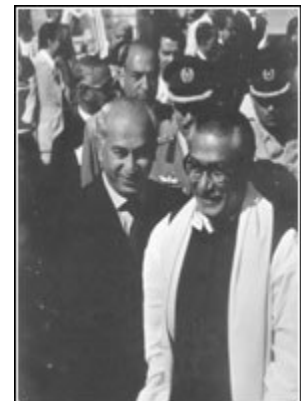
Similarly, the killing and the suffering of the non-Bengalis, though unreported or under-reported, cannot be wholly dismissed. Long after March 25, the central government had deputed a senior member of the Board of Revenue to collect facts about the killing of the non-Bengalis. As the concerned officer had no access to the troubled areas, nor did he have the assistance of relevant persons in the process of documentation, he could not prepare a fully authenticated report. This scribe had seen part of the hand-written report compiled by the federal government officer. It is not known what eventually happened to that ill-fated report. No government, not even any military government, cared to publish it.

But while fleeing from Bangladesh, at the bordering villages of Bangladesh and West Bengal, I came across hundreds of non-Bengali women whose husbands and relatives had been killed and who were left in the lurch by the agents who had taken money from them, promising safe passage to India. These women were seen reciting the Holy Quran hoping that angels would come to their rescue. What happened to them afterwards is not known.

Some members of the uprooted families will have many tales to tell. Who will come forward to document them? Some women with mutilated limbs can still be seen in the slums of Karachi.

While the Bangladesh government had given them several options, most of the stranded Pakistanis refused to become citizens of Bangladesh. They were prepared to wait endlessly for Pakistan to repatriate them. Unfortunately, some local Urdu speaking leaders also misguided them.

The successive governments of Pakistan have treated them with contempt. No one accepted them as citizens of Pakistan. They continued to live a life of ignominy. They have lost the government subsidized food. Many families have been deprived of their homes due to tornadoes, fire and eviction.



In pre-independent India, the Biharis were an Urdu-speaking Muslim minority in the Hindu dominated Bihar. In 1947, at the time of partition, they moved to what was then East Pakistan. In 1971 East Pakistan became an independent state of Bangladesh. The Biharis were left behind as

the Pakistan army and the West Pakistani civilians evacuated. They found themselves unwelcome in both countries. Islamabad feared a mass influx of Biharis could destabilize the fragile community with a culturally mixed population. On the other hand, the local people hated them for having supported the army. With neither country offering them citizenship, the Biharis have remained stateless for over 30 years.

About 300,000 Biharis live in 66 camps in 13 regions of Bangladesh. These camps are horribly overcrowded. In northern Bangladesh at Rangpur, there were several instances where 12 or more family members slept huddled together in a single room. There is no privacy.

In some camps concrete mud in the monsoon season flows in, adding further misery. Rain water creates another problem. A widow and mother of four told Refugee International, “We cannot stay here during the rains. We have to live at the railway station. Last year, in September, a storm hit the camp and destroyed 54 homes. Temporary structures, some with no roofs, were built giving them no protection.”

In December, a fire ripped through a camp in Saidpur rendering 200 people homeless. Last year over 150 families were threatened with eviction. In one Chittagong camp some people were forcibly removed from their homes.

Lack of water, living with animals, poor drainage and sanitation, lead to health problems including skin and respiratory infections and water-borne diseases. In one camp there are only two working wells to supply water to 650 families. In a Mirpur camp there was only one toilet for 6,000 people. There are a few medical clinics. Several camps have no health care facilities.

For the children basic education is a luxury. A school in Sardar Bahadur camp was closed down because of lack of funding. In Adamjee Nagar only six boys from an entire camp made it to secondary school. Teachers hardly get their salaries. Lack of education and impoverished economy provide no opportunity for employment. Four- year- old Kajal in a torn dress covered from head to foot in dust, rolls a stick of incense as she has seen her elders doing everyday. She must roll twenty-two thousand sticks to collect her remuneration of a hundred taka which is equivalent to 1.50 US\$.

This is the state of affairs in the so called Geneva camps of Bangladesh. Dhaka is not prepared to extend any financial help to the stranded Pakistanis as it is itself an over-crowded country with limited economic opportunities. Pakistan also looks the other way. It is amazing how a sizable population having its historical links with Pakistan can be ignored in such a manner. Most of the stateless people believe in the ideology of Pakistan. For them Pakistan is a dream world. At many places the elderly people hold classes for young children. Their day begins with the hoisting of Pakistan flag and reciting its national anthem.



It cannot be easily understood why they are not being repatriated. Sufficient donations have been collected from various sources to meet the transportation charges and the rehabilitation of the people. Now that we have congenial relations with India they can be brought here through the Wagah border or by road.

The need of the hour is to conduct a fresh survey of the non-Bengalis in various camps of Bangladesh. They should be given the opportunity to decide about their future. Bangladesh government could be helpful in conducting this exercise. Recently, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh granted citizenship to 10 Pakistanis.

Is it not amazing to note that in a land where these famous words “Urdu and Urdu alone will be the state language of Pakistan” were uttered, there is no hoarding or sign board in Urdu, there is no

When death is the only way out

A beeline of outmoded cycle-rickshaw workshops manned by tired, hopeless, thin and starving young men; narrow, dirty and dingy alleys that lead into even a dirtier maze of overcrowded lanes with shanty huts that go on ad-infinitum; the sight of barely clad middle-aged women that make a study of pain, sorrow and humiliation; undernourished children running helter-skelter; a water pump that stands in a pool of stinking water and latrines with no drainage: this is one of the Geneva camps in Mohammedpur, Dhaka, where some 100,000 stranded Pakistanis are condemned to a life that has little subsistence and no hope to offer. For the estimated 300,000 Biharis now living under such conditions in refugee camps across Bangladesh and for whom no one wants to be responsible, the human tragedy that began at independence in 1947 has continued through the generations.

Meet 50-year-old Mehrunnisa who lost her husband, father and a baby boy to the anti-Bihari riots during the 1971 imbroglio: “I have nothing left to live for. Khulna, I think it was, from where I was brought here by a bunch of men, women and children who were fleeing for their lives. And now I ask myself, ‘why did they have to save me?’” Can anyone blame her for this state of perpetual agony?

In the next lane, Mohammed Alimuddin, 65, but looking much older, can barely rise from bed. ‘What are you suffering from?’ He is asked. “Life,” comes the straightforward answer, and then he begins to cough. Decades of rickshaw pulling, hardship and living in unsanitary conditions have all but consumed his lungs.

Neither Merunnisa nor Alimuddin mean anymore than mere statistics to the Pakistan government — statistics that don’t even exist on a pale, decaying paper buried under heaps of files in the government’s record rooms in Islamabad. What about the thousands of undernourished children running the dark alleys of the Geneva camps? They are nothing but forgotten, step-children of a nation that champions causes of suffering humanity from Kashmir to Afghanistan, from Chechnya to Palestine.

The Geneva camps and the three generations of Pakistanis languishing there, many for 34 long years now, are very much a part of this country’s image problem abroad. Today, when as a Pakistani you visit Bangladesh, it is our own stranded people before whom you should go and hang your head in shame for not doing anything about their condition. The Bengalis have long forgiven us for our sins, but these people continue to pay for theirs, as they remain unwanted, undocumented Pakistanis, stranded in a land to which they ceased to belong a long time ago.

—*Murtaza Razvi*

A woman’s ordeal

A tall, burly woman, in her late 50s, Seherunnisa comes to our house to collect the monthly stipend fixed by my mother. There are other families who help in the same way and she and her son — who also lost his limbs during the attack and suffers mentally due to the trauma — somehow make ends meet. She lost one arm and a better part of her other hand which she hides with her saree draped round her. Seherunnisa has seen extreme terror first hand and just hearing her recount her ordeal makes you wonder of the horror that she and others went through 34 years ago.

Having accepted her fate, she recounted her story without any bitterness in her voice. After partition Seherunnisa and her family moved to East Pakistan and settled in Shahjahanpur like many other Biharis. Her family belonging to the working class had no problems living with the Bengalis. Problems grew in 1971 when political issues between the two wings became worse.

The Biharis and other non-Bengali Pakistanis supported the army as they did not want a break-up of the country. During the debacle Seherunnisa's husband was picked up by the Mukti Bahini and presumably killed like all the other Bihari men. Women would band together, hiding in houses. One day the Mukti Bahini, wielding hatchets and axes, entered their house and attacked them. Many were killed as they ran. Seherunnisa lost her arm and fingers, her son suffering the same fate. Her daughters miraculously escaped unhurt with a relative.

Later, the Red Cross doctors came and took her and the other surviving victims, presumed dead by the Mukti Bahini, to hospital. After recovering they were sent to a camp where the International Committee for Red Cross made an arrangement with the Pakistan government for them to be taken to Pakistan.



Seherunnisa and many others came to Pakistan because their names were on the top of the list. The unlucky ones are still living in camps today. She along with her group was rehabilitated in Rahim Yar Khan. The government gave them free food and homes, but the Bihari men abused their rights by not working and living an easy life. The government later on stopped the subsidies and told them to work for a living.

With no help from the government, their living conditions becoming unbearable as there was no one to look after them, Seherunnisa and her family came to Karachi as beggars. Their condition through the years has improved due to the support she gets. Her son cannot work because of his illness. She lives with her married daughter. Even in this condition Seherunnisa thanks God that she is okay and that people and the government have helped her. She also thanks God that she was able to leave the camp.—*Khursheed Hyder*

Views of a Sindhi nationalist

Nationalists in Sindh have been in the forefront in opposing the return of stranded Pakistanis or Biharis from what was East Pakistan until Dec 16, 1971. Many of them described any move to settle them in this part of Pakistan as a conspiracy to convert the local Sindhis into a minority in their own province. During the Nawaz Sharif government many stranded Pakistanis were settled in the Punjab, though many of them finally made their way to Karachi and other parts of the province.

This scribe spoke to Awami Tehrik's chief, Rasool Bux Paleejo, who emphatically opposed the move to bring them back after so many decades. The argument was an oft-repeated one:

“There is no need to bring them here, they should settle and live their lives in their host country which is also Muslim.


“They have committed serious treachery. These people were used by the generals to betray their fellow countrymen. The generals left them in a lurch.”

Paleejo was of the view that since the generals had got away with their crime, these people who now live in sub-human conditions in Bangladesh should also be forgiven by the government there.

He was of the view that originally two countries of Muslim majority were to be created. They (Biharis) chose that country as their abode. There are many Muslims in India also if they don't want to go there, they should remain where they are. There is no need for them to come to Pakistan.— *Shamim-ur Rehman*

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