The Other Side of the Fence: Stranded Bengalis in Pakistan

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THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FENCE: STRANDED BENGALIS IN PAKISTAN
Amena Mohsin

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Why do I find it so difficult to talk, think and write about my days in the camps, which were known as concentration camps. I have been trying to ink down those days for quite sometime now; but a certain amnesia takes me over, my mind refuses to think, I just don’t want to write or think of those days; yet those were formative years of my life and in a way shaped my ideas, my passion and love for my homeland, Bangladesh, a land with which I had very scant familiarity at that stage of my life. Despite this unfamiliarity with the objective in my subjective realm I had indeed created a Bangladesh of my own, which I carried through my camp days when I along with the other stranded Bengalis waited eagerly to come back to, it was the land of freedom after all!

I have been wondering why this inertia; is it because of the present state of politics, my own frustrations with the state of affairs, the oft repeated allegations of ‘Pakistani mentality’ of the repatriated military personnel; or it is the person within me which does not want to talk about it. It is a long journey that one has to take down the memory lane, when many of those, my parent’s generation, who took the major brunt of those days are no more there. I believe it is both. My mind is battling with two levels of politics, both very personal, emotion laden; the challenge is to wrest myself out of this battle within.

My story our stories... the stories of the Bengalis who found themselves on the other side of the fence, when the liberation war of Bangladesh started, is the voice of a people who suddenly realized they had become aliens and objects of suspicion in a land, which they had regarded as their home for years. But was this alienness a sudden phenomenon or one had lived as an alien in a land whose foundations were based on a myth of religion constituting the basis of a nation. My contention would be the alienness was in-built. I will come back to this later. However, while carrying on this work, I discovered that looking back turned out to be very difficult for my family and friends, who were stranded or interned in Pakistan. I was more puzzled and surprised and to some extent saddened by the realization that the unwillingness had a bitterness to it as well. A sense prevailed that things would go wrong for them if they were identified as returnees from Pakistan. Many of them asked me not to go ahead with this write up, they expressed their anxiousness that it might hurt me. A friend of mine who now lives in Toronto, Canada with her family and with whom I had shared and spent most of my time in camp, since we were staying in the same house in Mandi Bahauddin camp was persuaded by her husband not to send me her write up. He genuinely felt that his wife would be labeled through her childhood story and this would harm them if they visited Bangladesh. A cousin of mine who was studying engineering in Lahore and was interned in camp with a Bengali family said to me that he does not want to talk or write about his post-’71 days in Pakistan in this political situation, when there is always the fear of being misinterpreted or misunderstood. He went on to add, “who else would know it better than you”. It then dawned to me that for many of us, the personal remains political, more so when it comes to recording people’s narratives if you are or were on the ‘other’ side of the fence, just spatially and circumstantially not ideologically.
At this point let me dwell a little on the alienness between the two wings of Pakistan, that I alluded to earlier.

The Alienness:

The two wings of Pakistan, East and West Pakistan were indeed historical anomalies and a political puzzle. The politics of Bengal preceding the partition of 1947 was infested with the deep divides, schisms and differences existing between the then Muslim leadership on the question of the partition of Bengal; On the one hand, one sees differences between Mohammad Ali Jinnah and HuseynShaheedSuhrawardy, who was the organizational genius and the builder of the Muslim League in Bengal; Then there were differences between Suhrawardy, Jinnaj and FazlulHuq who was leader of the KrishakPraja Party (KPP), the most popular party in Bengal. FazlulHuq was also the mover of the Lahore Resolution, later popularly known as the Pakistan resolution. It must be remembered that in order to establish Pakistan it was important and critical for Jinnah, who Ayesha Jalal argues had appeared as the “sole spokesman” of the Muslims to control the support of the Muslim majority provinces, the Punjab and Bengal, of the two the latter was more critical, since one-third of the total Muslim population of India lived in Bengal. Though Jalal forcefully makes the case for Jinnah being the sole spokesman, but one does observe challenges to Jinnah emanating from Bengal and Jinnah too appeared to be cognizant of it. He deliberately tried to side trackSuhrawardy, who regarded the latter to be unpredictable and not the kind of person who would ever remain loyal to the boss.

When Jinnah did not come to Calcutta to start League activities, despite repeated requests from Suhrawardy, the latter wrote to him,

If you want to run the League here, we are prepared to assist but if you are really lukewarm and do not very much care, please let me know so that we can start our own separate organisation. We shall have to do something soon as we cannot allow the position to degenerate.

The relations between FazlulHuq and Jinnah were also tense, though despite being a Praja party man he was agreeable to League organisation in Bengal. Huq had formally rejoined the Muslim League at its Lucknow session in October 1937 and played a decisive role in winning the support of the Muslims and establishing the prestige of the party, yet Jinnah removed him from membership of the League Parliamentary Board on charges of insubordination and disloyalty. Jinnah sought an explanation from Huq, to which he responded sharply in the following manner

You have had the impertinence to ask for an explanation from me ... You are not working for Muslim solidarity at all but seem to be playing a deep game ... Your conduct in Bengal has surprised everyone ... I call upon to explain your conduct ...
The reconciliation between the two was short-lived. Though in 1937 Jinnah had entered into a coalition with KrishakProjaParty (KPP), it must be remembered that it was only in Bengal the Muslim League was able to form a coalition; but by 1939 Jinnah was thinking of only one party to represent the Muslims, the Muslim League. He came to believe that a coalition or any other party could not represent the Muslims of India.

Pakistan was based on the two-nation theory of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. The theory claimed that the Hindus and Muslims of India constituted two separate nations based on religion. The course of the Indian nationalist movement had engulfed the Muslims of Bengal within its fold. During that period their Muslim identity took precedence over their Bengali identity, though the latter was never lost. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan adopted an assimilative policy in line with its understanding of nation-state. Language, more specifically a common language for the entire population of the state was considered to be an essential part of nation-building and not surprisingly this language had to be reflective of Islamic traditions. In this context Urdu written in the Arabic-Persian script was considered to be the product of Hindu-Muslim and the attendant Persian-Hindu contact during the days of Muslim rule. It had become exclusively associated with Muslims and their culture in India. While Bengali (spoken in East Pakistan) written in Nagri script, similar to that of Sanskrit was identified with Hinduism. Accordingly Jinnah declared (in English) in Dhaka in March 1948:

Let me make it very clear to you that the state language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language ... without one language no nation can remain tied up solidly together and function.\(^i\)

A religious orientation was given to the same by Liaqat Ali Khan, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan. He stated:

... the defence of Bengali language infront of Urdu, is against the laws of Islam.\(^ii\)

In 1949 the Central Minister for Education openly proposed the introduction of Arabic script for Bengali. It was argued that:

Not only Bengali literature, even the Bengali alphabet is full of idolatry. Each Bengali letter is associated with this or that god or goddess of Hindu pantheon ... Pakistan and Devanagari script cannot co-exist. It looks like defending the frontier of Pakistan with Bharatisoldiers!... To ensure a bright and great future for the Bengali language it must be linked with the Holy Quran ... Hence the necessity and importance of Arabic script.\(^iii\)

To resist the imposition of an alien language and cultural identity upon themselves, the Bengalis counterpoised it by a secular nationalism with language and culture as its core. Urdu was looked upon not only as a language but a politics, a politics of hegemony and domination aimed at destroying the cultural identity of the Bengalis. Thus Bengali language was adopted as a counter weapon to fight this hegemony. Language thus acquired an immensely political and emotive connotation for the Bengalis. On 21st February 1952 the police opened fire in Dhaka on students who were protesting the imposition of the Urdu language resulting in the
death of four. They instantly became national heroes of the Bengalis. The day henceforward became a day of national glory and celebration for the Bengalis. It is celebrated as a day of martyrdom as well as victory. Bengali language thus became the basis as well as symbol of Bengali nationalism. From the demands of linguistic and cultural autonomy, the Bengalis later moved to economic and political autonomy culminating in the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.

The Other Side of the Fence

Following the liberation of Bangladesh, many Bengalis found themselves on the ‘other’ side of the fence. This ‘other ness’ and ‘alienness’ perhaps was always there at the political level as the discussion above suggests which was later substantiated by the genocide of 1971. But for the Bengalis, who were stranded in Pakistan and had later opted for Bangladesh, the ‘otherness’ became starker and a threat. The Bengali military officers were given the option of choosing their allegiance, those who opted for Bangladesh were put under surveillance and their movements were restricted. One fine morning we discovered that orderlies, that army officers were entitled to, were withdrawn from our places. These were indicators of the fences being drawn. Later on the army officers along with their families were taken to camps, which in my young mind I had conceived ourselves as prisoners of war (POW), I do not know why my generation had thought so, as is alluded in Mazhar’s write up as well. Though as Brigadier General (retd) Shakhawat Hossain had said (see below) there was no line up for the stranded and detained Bengalis, which made it more dangerous, since the stranded Bengalis did not fall under any category or protection. The internment of the civilians, i.e., the families of the military personnel was in violation of the Geneva Convention 1949. The discussion below is an exposition of this. According to the provisions below, i.e., Article 79 and 42

**ART. 79.** — The Parties to the conflict shall not intern protected persons, except in accordance with the provisions of Articles 41, 42, 43, 68 and 78.

**ART. 42.** — The internment or placing in assigned residence of protected persons may be ordered only if the security of the Detaining Power makes it absolutely necessary.

Article 4 defines a “Protected Person;”

**ART. 4: Protected Persons**— Persons protected by the Convention are those who at a given moment and in any manner whatsoever find themselves, in case of a conflict or occupation, in the hands of persons a Party to the conflict or Occupying Power of which they are not nationals. Nationals of a State, which is not bound by the Convention are not protected by it. Nationals of a neutral State who find themselves in the territory of a belligerent State, and nationals of a co-belligerent State, shall not be regarded as protected persons while the State of which they are nationals has normal diplomatic representation in the State in whose hands they are.

It needs to be mentioned that on 10th April 1971, Bangladesh had signed the Laws Continual Enforcement Order, according to which the Bangladesh state acceded to all the conventions and international treaties that the state of Pakistan was signatory to; and this became
applicable from 26 March, 1971. In other words, the civilian Bengali population in Pakistan, who had opted for Bangladesh did fall under the category of “Protected Persons”.

If Article 42 was to be applicable in the context of the families of the military officials, then one has to presume that this unarmed population, majority of whom were women and children had become a threat to the security of the detaining power; it however, remains unclear in what capacity they had turned into a threat to the security of the state, which had committed a genocide in the state of the interned population; secondly if the interning state did consider them to be a security threat then one is to assume that they were perceived as a danger, which in actuality put the interned population in an extreme insecure position. One may invoke Article 78 here, which reads,

**ART. 78.**— If the Occupying Power considers it necessary, for imperative reasons of security, to take safety measures concerning protected persons, it may, at the most, subject them to assigned residence or to internment.

One needs to be mindful here that Pakistan was not an “occupying power”, so the provision cannot be applicable here, secondly even if safety measures were taken through internment for the “protected persons”, this only strengthens the point made earlier regarding the insecurity of the stranded Bengalis in Pakistan.

On the other hand, Lt. General Jagjit Singh Aurora gave his solemn assurance that Pakistani soldiers who surrendered would be treated with dignity and respect that soldiers are entitled to in accordance with the provisions of the Geneva Convention and guaranteed safety and well being of all Pakistan military and para military forces who surrendered. In addition, protection was also provided to foreign nationals, ethnic minorities and personnel of West Pakistan region by the forces in the command of Lt. General Jagjit Singh Aurora. Quite understandably and rightly the military and civilian population were pledged solemn protection, but no such protection was pledged for the Bengali/Bangladeshi population in Pakistan.

Content analyses of newspapers, Pakistan Observer later Bangladesh Observer and DainikPurbodesh during the period of March 1971 to June 1974 shows no discussion regarding the fate of the stranded Bengalis in Pakistan. A few reports, however appeared in the international media, for e.g., The New York Times on 13 April, 1972 (p.3) reported, Official reports 2,000 Bengalis held in Pakistani jails; again on 12 November 1972 (p.10) the New York Times reported, Wave of Bengalis fleeing Pakistan. On 29 May 1973 the New York Times reported, Bhutto threatens to try Bengalis held in Pakistan (p.3), The silence on the issue at the public domain in Bangladesh may be explained by the exigencies and trauma that Bangladesh was going through, not to mention the day to day administrative disorder. However at the political level the issue of POW loomed large for India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Bangladesh was eager to get the Bengalis stranded in Pakistan back. In March 1973, Sheikh MujiburRahman, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh wrote to the UN Secretary General, Kurt Waldheim seeking his assistance for the repatriation of the stranded people. The matter could only be resolved through the involvement of the three nations, but issue was complicated due to non-recognition of Bangladesh by Pakistan. The Simla Agreement between India and Pakistan paved the way for reconciliation in the sub-continent. Following the Simla Agreement, which was welcomed by Bangladesh, on 28 August 1973, the Delhi
Agreement was signed between India and Pakistan with the consent of Bangladesh. According to this agreement it was agreed that the three countries would exchange all POW except the 195 war criminals wanted by Bangladesh. Once this repatriation was complete, Bangladesh and Pakistan would negotiate directly regarding the 195.

Two weeks later on 13 September 1973, Delhi began the repatriation of the Pakistan POWs in exchange for stranded Bengalis and Indian nationals. This exchange also involved a substantial number of “non-Bengalis” in Bangladesh who had opted for repatriation to Pakistan.

By the end of October 1973, huge air repatriation was underway with aircraft loaned by East Germany, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom. There were six planes on mission duty carrying an average of 1200 people per day. By late January 1974, some 90,000 people had been transported from Pakistan to Bangladesh, and over 44,000 from Bangladesh to Pakistan. By mid-February 1974 over 200,000 people had been repatriated under the terms of the New Delhi agreement. By September 1974, some 9,000 people had been transported by sea between Bangladesh and Pakistan and some 231,000 people had been airlifted across the sub-continent. Those airlifted included some 116,000 Bengalis who went from Pakistan to Bangladesh, some 104,000 non-Bengalis who went from Bangladesh to Pakistan and some 11,000 Pakistanis who were airlifted from Nepal to Pakistan. They had fled from Bangladesh. It was at that time the largest emergency airlift of civilians ever organised.

Following the recognition of Bangladesh by Pakistan in February 1974, a Tripartite Agreement was signed between India, Bangladesh and Pakistan for normalization of relations in the sub-continent in New Delhi on April 9, 1974, which endorsed and acknowledged the Simla and the Delhi agreement. Important provisions of the accord are:

3. The humanitarian problems arising in the wake of the tragic events of 1971 constituted a major obstacle in the way of reconciliation and normalisation among the countries of the sub-continent. In the absence of recognition, it was not possible to have tripartite talks to settle the humanitarian problems, as Bangladesh could not participate in such a meeting except on the basis of sovereign equality.
4. On April 17, 1973 India and Bangladesh took a major step forward to break the deadlock on the humanitarian issues by setting aside the political problems of recognition. In a Declaration issued on that date they said that they “are resolved to continue their efforts to reduce tension, promote friendly and harmonious relationship in the sub-continent and work together towards the establishment of a durable peace.” Inspired by this vision and “in the larger interests of reconciliation, peace and stability in the sub-continent” they jointly proposed that the problem of the detained and stranded persons should be resolved on humanitarian considerations through simultaneous repatriation of all such persons except those Pakistani prisoners of war who might be required by the Government of Bangladesh for trial on certain charges.
5. Following the Declaration there were a series of talks between India and Bangladesh and India and Pakistan. These talks resulted in
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an agreement at Delhi on August 28, 1973 between India and Pakistan with the concurrence of Bangladesh, which provided for a solution of the outstanding humanitarian problems.

6. In pursuance of this Agreement, the process of three-way repatriation commenced on September 19, 1973. So far nearly 300,000 persons have been repatriated which has generated an atmosphere of reconciliation and paved the way for normalisation of relations in the sub-continent.

Looking Back:

I did not realize looking back or talking about a period of one’s life would be so difficult and there would be so much reluctance and resistance to talk or write about those days of uncertainty.

Noori Chowdhury

I will begin this narrative by apologizing for the haziness of some of my memories that are accounted for here. My memory with respect to my childhood and time living in West Pakistan are foggy, and it could be because I’ve chosen to forget, or because my age and clever guardedness of my parents prevented me from processing what was happening in the first place. Either way, it is not unknown that people tend to forget unpleasant memories and eventually replace them with happier ones.

Pre-1970, we had a very peaceful and happy life. By “we”, I mean my parents, and my three younger siblings- two sisters and a brother in between. We did not have much, but were content with what we did. That is how my parents raised us, to be grateful for what we had. My Abba was an army doctor, and in 1971 he was working in Sialkot Cantonment in West Pakistan as a Major. His promotion was due in 1971, but he was not promoted because he was a Bengali.

Our daily routine at the Cantonment was to wake up by 7, have a healthy breakfast, go to school, take a shower, have lunch, some rest, play outside and be back home by before sunset. In the evening study till 8, have dinner and be at bed by 9 sharp. All lights were turned off in our rooms by nine. The tonga was the means of transport for schools. Every morning tonga would come to take us to school.

I was the tomboy in the family always playing sports with the boys in our neighborhood, a practice which did not meet the approval of my Amma. As is tradition, my role as the eldest female daughter was to appear graceful and engage in activities that suited a young girl, but I was far from the ideal my Amma had in mind. Abba was like my bodyguard, and always took my side and encouraged my hobbies and behaviors. When Amma would complain about us, he would always manage to find excuses and justifications for letting us be the way we were- he was not a believer in distinguishing between the capabilities of boys and girls. He would always tell her, “let her grow the way she wants, once she is married, she will learn the skills required to be a mother and wife”. Abba’s main concern was that his children be studious and hardworking, and make something of themselves. With my father protecting me, Amma would back down for the moment, but never for too long. What I do think Amma appreciated
about me, however, was that I always looked after my siblings and helped them with schooling.

In 1970, I was aware of West Pakistan political dynamics shifting but was not quite clear about the details. I had heard about the elections for Prime Minister and how Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, had won, which overjoyed my family and I as the prospect of a Bengali leader had once seemed impossible. Then soon after, I heard talks of how the victory caused a whole host of other issues - there were many in West Pakistan who did not view Mujib as a legitimate leader and did not want power to be transferred and this caused instability, for which the army from West Pakistan was being sent to manage the unrest developing in the East.

These times were confusing. Not only because my young age prevented me from fully understanding the political climate, but also because much of the news available to us was the product of censorship and filtering. In addition, out of fear of upsetting us, my parents guarded my siblings and I from “real news” and wanted us to continue our normal, worry-free lives. It was unknown to me in my small reality in West Pakistan that a war was taking place in my homeland.

Eventually, in 1971 it became evident that there was war. Bengali military officers came under surveillance and were grounded. Their families were sent to different places. My family along with many other Bengali families was sent to Mangla dam. I was in Mangla Dam for a few months with my mother and siblings. My father was alone in Sialkot and he was taken off field; his promotion was withdrawn.

Victory was declared for Bangladesh on December 16th, 1971. My family and I moved back to Sialkot, but the environment we came back to had changed. We were imprisoned in our own homes. There were no physical walls or barriers keeping us in our residences but there might as well have been. In addition to our limited mobility freedoms, there was now also the rationing of food, something which we had never encountered previously. West Pakistani regime feared that we would flee across the border and try and travel to the new-found Bangladesh, and we were being used as bargaining chips. One night there was a knock on the door. We got scared, but saw it was my cousin’s husband who was in Bengal Regiment. He wanted his wife to be with us as he wasn’t sure what will be his fate.

My primary concern was that my Higher Secondary Certificate exams were drawing near. Abba feared for all his children, and did not want to risk any of us being alone at any time. He used to send me to College with a family friend, who would also accompany me home. Abba was still working for the army in his limited capacity. In early 1972, we began hearing of East Pakistani soldiers being sent back to Bangladesh by ship. We spent this time wondering about our fate, whether we would be allowed to go home or whether we would remain political prisoners. Slowly the rumors of officers making daring escapes to freedom started trickling through the Cantonment. Different army officers were taking the risk and fleeing at night, driving to the border and then taking the rest of the journey by foot. Officers who would give their children sleeping pills in hopes of keeping them quiet throughout the journey. Every time an officer managed to escape, restrictions on those of us who stayed behind increased.
We could hear in other radios in regards to the things army was doing in Bangladesh. We could not believe our ears, as how can our own people with whom we had lived for ... years do such things to their brethren. Stories about rapes, arson and killing of the intellectuals and officers were trickling in. Since Bengali officers were a unique group of educated and trained people we were afraid that wrath will fall on them too.

Surprisingly, the general public of Pakistan were unaware of this. The media gave a totally different picture to them.

I would often hear my parents speaking in hushed tones. Undoubtedly, they were discussing next steps they should take for our family. They wanted my siblings and I not to worry, but even we could see past their brave faces and knew they were in fear. Any sound would catch their attention, a knock at the door would cause panic within the household. There were civilians who would walk around in plain-clothes, but we knew they were undercover officers monitoring us. My parents began to sell off family furnishings and valuables so that they could have extra money in the event of an emergency.

In March of 1972, we were sent in packed trains to Kohat Camp. The mental state of feeling like prisoners had become very much physically real. Kohat was primarily used as army training barracks. The camp was surrounded by barbed electrical wires and sentries were on guard 24/7. There were no homes, but instead, there were rows and rows of single-room units. Each family was given two rooms. There were common-use bathrooms for which the septic systems and sanitation was terrible. Salaries for all the officers were reduced to subsistence allowance, and we had to learn to live with even lesser resources.

My time in Kohat Camp brought about marked changes in me. Seeing the concern of my parents and the environment we were living in, I began to change from a carefree person to one who focused on household duties ad chores. No one was allowed to go to school during this time, and work within the home became my primary focus.

In March 1973, we were moved to Mandibahauddin Camp, a huge and centralized camp now designated for all Bengali officers and their families. There were bungalow houses on the camp and each house, which would normally accommodate one family, was made to accommodate two or more. Our house had three families, including my own. There was a room designated for female children and one for male children, while each set of parents had their own rooms. We all shared a single common kitchen, and there were at least two bathrooms.

The officers in Mandibahuddin were growing restless and uncertain about the fate of their families and with no idea about how long they were expected to reside in the camp, officers decided to take matters into their own hands. They decided to open a school, a play area and a dispensary. Aunties also became active by teaching us cooking and knitting, or stitching in our spare time. This was all to keep us occupied and keep minds away from ill thoughts. Soon after, the officers also started organizing cultural shows and community arts events to improve morale within the camp. At the end of each production, we would all proudly sing our national anthem, “Amar Shonar Bangla”.

Although our fates were unclear, we would not be made to simply give up or succumb to the mundanity of camp life. All the parents made strong efforts to make the camp community a
thriving and productive environment, and introduce normalcy to their lives and the lives of their children.

It should be noted that during this entire time moving from camp to camp, we had no communication with our family and relatives in Bangladesh. We had no way of reaching out to them, and they had no way of communicating with us. However, we did eventually find a loophole – communication between Pakistan and the United Kingdom was permitted, as was communication between Bangladesh and the United Kingdom. This became our over-arching means of learning about and communicating with those in Bangladesh. My Khala (mother’s sister) residing in the United Kingdom would pass letters between each respective state. In this way, we came to learn about those we had lost, the burnt and ruined status of my parents’ home villages, and those in our families who had been hurriedly married in order to avoid rape and seizure by men in the Pakistani army.

Near the end of 1973, the Pakistani and Bangladeshi militaries had begun discussions of their next round of prisoner exchanges. There was a swap of approximately 90,000 prisoners. Luckily, our time had finally come to go back home, to the newly-founded Bangladesh. We were moved temporarily to Lahore, and were soon thereafter put onto flights to Dhaka.

Once in Dhaka – I cannot describe effectively in words, the emotion and relief that came over my parents. They were finally at home. A new home, a fresh home and a home that was truly their own, and were reunited with family from whom they were kept so far apart. Ready to start a new life and build a new country with their family.

During my time in Pakistan, changes came over my whole family. I went from a carefree and sporty tomboy that had little to no concern about domestic duties, to a woman who realized the struggles of my parents and my role as the eldest sibling to ensure my parents had the assistance they needed. Abba’s hair grayed and thinned, Amma lost weight and weakened, but during this whole time they maintained their determination to ensure that we all one day came home. They scarified their own health and material possessions to keep us safe, and for us to feel a sense of stability and ease during a turbulent time. We had less than ideal means and were facing hugely adverse conditions, but my siblings and I never felt that we were without the things that we needed most.

Mazhar-ul-Huq

The memories of pre 1971 in Pakistan is of my childhood.

My father was commissioned in the Pakistan Army in 1953 and spent most of his Army career in the erstwhile West Pakistan. I was born in Abbottabad Cantonment and grew up in various cities where my father was posted. Living in West Pakistan for us was very eventful and adventurous. We moved to so many Cantonments where we met new families and friends that our life was a of a gypsy traveller.

The life was full of joy and happiness and carefree until it came to a traumatic halt in 1971. We were then living in Sialkot Cantonment when unknown to many of us, the brutal and ruthless genocide was launched on March 25th, 1971 on the innocent people of East Pakistan (our ancestral home). Bengalis were attacked, brutalized, raped and massacred by the Pakistan Army. The genocide and atrocities were so harrowing that it finally ripped apart the
bondage of the two parts of Pakistan. We as children were unaware of the intensity of the massacre by Pakistan Army and the on going liberation war in East Pakistan to liberate the region for a new country 'Bangladesh'.

It was middle of 1971 and there were quite a number of Bengali officers and their families living in Sialkot Cantonment. We used to live in a big bungalow house with sprawling garden and backyard. Bengali officers and families would visit our house regularly and huddle together listening to radio in closed room. I did not know their concern at that time but later learnt they would keenly listen to the 'Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendro' news which was being broadcast from somewhere in India giving the latest news and brief about the grave situation Bangladesh. My father was the cheerleader for the grim faces and would provide moral and mental support to all the Bengali families. I was still attending class 9 in the Sialkot Cantt Public School and had a happy and carefree life. Our parents would keep us away from worries of the on going war in Bangladesh but I could sense the unrest in the Bengali community because of their frequent visit to our house and hush hush talks about the situation in Bangladesh and the danger lurking ahead. On one occasion I remember then Major Manzur (later became Maj General in Bangladesh Army and a valiant freedom fighter) visited our house with family and had dinner with us. He spent lot of time with my father in closed door and next day we found out that he escaped to India with his family to join liberation war. From then onward my father was always under close scrutiny by the intelligence forces. Time was passing and the liberation war was gaining momentum in Bangladesh until December 16th of 1971 which dawned the victory of the Liberation Forces and Pakistan Army was defeated and taken POW (Prisoner of War). The heralding of victory of the Liberation Forces in Bangladesh brought more miseries in the life of the stranded Bengali officers and their families living in West Pakistan. Even at this adverse situation they maintained their moral high and their heart was full of joy and happiness to be part of the new sovereign country 'Bangladesh'. When we learnt about the birth of the new country and that we will be going back to Bangladesh to join victory celebration, we were bursting with joy and excitement but it was short lived when we learnt that we will be taken as hostages to bargain for the return of the Pakistani POWs. It was around March of 1972 when all the Bengali officers and their families were rounded up in Sialkot Cantt and put in a guarded train for transportation to Concentration Camp in Kohat Cantt.

It was then I felt the first shivers of unknown danger looming ahead being POW. What a strange feeling of transformation from carefree life of peaceful citizens to alien POW in the same country where we lived for so many years as citizens. The love and respect for us had turned into anger and mistrust by the same Army where our fathers were commissioned and served with full allegiance. For our parents it was a shock and disgrace but they endured it for positive participation for the greater cause of the Liberation war in Bangladesh. They gave away their right of the military honour and pride in the same Pakistan Army for the sake of joining the new Bangladesh where the hopes and aspirations of million of Bangladeshis was the source of our energy.

The train journey from Sialkot took us to the barbed wire fenced camp in Kohat Cantonment and we were put in the barracks of the soldiers and treated like POWs. The irony was my father graduated from OTS (Officer Training School) in Kohat as 2nd Lieutenant almost twenty years ago and now landed back in the same place as POW. I wondered, how he must be feeling at that time but outwardly he smiled and being the Camp Commander of the Bengali stranded officers and families he had to manage the adverse situation with courage and
smile. Shortly after an incident of an escape of a Bengali officer from the camp, my father was moved out of the camp to another station in Bannu Cantt. May be it was blessing in disguise because I could attend school there though for a short period. For few months life was good though we were still POW under strict watch. Few months later all the Bengali Officers and their families were transferred to a larger Concentration camp in MandiBahauddin. There we got reunited with our friends and families of Kohat Camp.

The life inside the FENCE was multifaceted. Parents were worried about the unknown future and time frame to live with minimum financial resources. Also the tension of failed talks of Pakistani POWs was having great toll on our parents life. On the other hand the youngster were enjoying extended vacation from their schooling. All day long we would play and hang around in pranks and gossips. Later our parents decided to open classes for school going children and hold cultural events and programs to keep the families busy in positive activities. Nothing could hold down our morale and excitement for going to Bangladesh. I remember my friends and colleagues were preparing for the SSC exam under lot of pressure from peers to maintain continuity of our education since repatriation to Bangladesh was quite uncertain and time unknown. My efforts not to give exam did not work out. I had to study in the verandah in a makeshift study room since three families shared a single house in the camp. My father would encourage me to study hard and show that soldiers and families can face all kind of challenges and hardship. Our mind and soul was kind of lost in the dreams of going to Bangladesh. The life inside the camp was very challenging and distressful for our parents but they managed with lot of courage and patience for the greater cause of Bangladesh.

Finally in September 1973 the good news came of fruitful talks between the Red-Cross authorities and Pakistan Govt for our safe return to Bangladesh in exchange of Pakistani POWs. We were overjoyed by this news and immediately started packing to board the flight to freedom and new dreamland.

We were among the first group to be repatriated from the Camp. It was Oct 10th when we finally landed in Bangladesh and a new era of life began. Our joy and excitement knew no bound as tears were rolling down as our feet touched the soil of our beloved free country Bangladesh. So many freedom fighters have shed their blood to bring freedom and so many of our families have shed their tears and sacrificed their honour, pride and dignity to be part of this historic liberation movement. Has our part been ever evaluated or given due recognition?

Meanwhile it has been over 42 years since our repatriation to Bangladesh and I tried to put my childhood in an enclosed shell and forget about the time and period of humiliation to our families in the Concentration Camp of Pakistan. But the memories kept haunting me and finally I got an opportunity to visit Pakistan in November 2015, and retrace my childhood.

Few years ago I got connected to my high school friends of Sialkot through social media and upon their constant persuasion decide to visit them in Pakistan. Though I have been living in Canada for about 20 years and never though of revisiting Pakistan but the destiny had some other plans. It was the most memorable trip for me trekking down the memory lane and seeing the places of my childhood including my place of birth in Abbottabad. The reunion with my school mates and visiting major cities like Lahore, Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Peshawar and valleys of Murree & Nathiagali was so nostalgic but I felt like a visitor only. Though the connection of childhood was re-established and the friendship rekindled but the land still felt...
like a foreign land. May be the 1971 scar so too deep to heal !!! but what about the saying 'time is the best healer' ???

Wajiha Shireen

At a very young age my sisters and myself had seen turning points in life and gone through experiences that many do not get to encounter in a lifetime. How these events had affected our young minds and how it has contributed in making me the person I am, is what I am trying to reflect in my writing here.

Many times in the past years I have thought I should document all that I could recall from my memory about our experiences starting from 4th April, 1971, after my father and Uncle were killed in front of our very eyes by the Pakistani Army. It is a long story and I know I want to and have to put it down on paper some day. Today, I will write about my memories that will cover only a small portion of the story.

This is about the time when we arrived in Karachi, Pakistan after travelling from Chittagong port by ship (Safina-e Arab) for two weeks. This was towards the end of April, 1971. How we happened to get on a ship and why we, a Bangladeshi family, consisting of mother and three sisters travelled to a country with whom Bangladesh was in war at that time, is that part of the story which I am not telling here today.

At that time my Uncle (mother's brother) who we used to call Bachu Mama was a fresh engineering graduate who had moved from Dhaka to Karachi, Pakistan and had started his first job. Mama came and picked us up after the ship arrived and took us to his single room hostel where he lived. We were three sisters and my mother. My eldest sister was about 12 years old but since my father’s death she had left her childhood behind and had transformed into a young adult who became the support that my mother needed. My mother was a very soft person who had broken from inside and needed my sister’s support to face life again. The two of us younger sisters at that time did not realize the implications of the tragedy – for us all the things that were happening were new and exciting experiences. We were in a journey away from all that was familiar to us till that age. Till then we three had been the much loved and ever protected daughters of a father who was always there who took care of everything including my delicate mother. Looking back I realize what a difficult time it was for my mother. In addition to the unsurmountable pain of losing her husband here she was with the responsibility of taking care of her three young daughters. I do recall my mother crying at times but I will say during those days she did try her best to hide her tears and helplessness from us younger sisters. My older sister probably saw a different version of my mother. As a result, we knew there has been a major tragedy but I do not think we were mature enough to understand the implications. That is why unlike my eldest sister, we continued our journey as fun loving, carefree children. If one asks me -did the horror of the tragedy haunt me sometimes then, my answer will be no. Sometimes when people referred to us as “yateem” those are the times I would feel insulted/humiliated – I cannot explain why. For some reason being referred to as “yateem” made me think I was unfortunate and I felt like people are looking down at me with pity. As for the horror of the tragedy that happened in front of my eyes at that very young age- I do recall quite a bit. I remember what I was wearing, I remember how the person pulled my father out of the door holding his undershirt collar, I remember how we were lined up in front of the building ready to be shot. Standing there I do not recall having fear of death – I wonder why – do we not know what death is at
that tender age? I remember seeing my uncle shaking his hands making signs not to shoot. I remember my father being shot at the head. I saw my mother and sisters running out on the streets and I just followed them, I do not think I looked back even once at my father. Was it fear or was it lack of understanding I do not know. I do not recall myself crying for my father with the realization that I will never see him again. As I grew up I would have tears in my eyes when I saw tears in my mother’s eyes when she talked about the tragedy. But during those initial days after the tragedy maybe subconsciously I used to avoid thinking about the incident and instead used to concentrate on the present.

Initially, during our stay in Karachi we did not have any obligation to go to school- we were free to do whatever we wanted to. One uncle of mine was also killed along with my father- he also had three daughters. There were six girls and two devastated mothers who had travelled to Karachi in a ship. Four of us (my older sister, myself and my two cousin sisters) would have so much fun together. At that time I understand Bachu Mama provided support to my mother and her three daughters. It was almost like he had become the father of three girls at that young age when he was not even married. We were playing around all day and we would get hungry ever so often. I remember Bachu Mama spreading jelly on bread and giving it to us. We would eat one slice after another so fast that he could not keep up. We were all living on my mama’s limited income and so resources were limited but we never felt it – the bread and jelly tasted so good- I still can feel the taste! Maybe this is why I still love bread and jelly so much and it bothers me when my son does not show enthusiasm for this delicacy. We then started school in Karachi. I do not remember what type or which school this was – all I remember is that it was strange and I felt awkward going there. The curriculum was so easy that it frustrated us. My mother knew this was not a place where her daughters should be going. We had my Aunt (mother’s sister) living in Islamabad at that time. It was arranged that we would go there and stay with my Aunt, so that we could go to Islamabad Model School for Girls a highly reputed school of that time. We had to say goodbye to my cousin sisters in Karachi and the care-free life there and go to live at my Aunt’s house. My Aunt had two sons and a daughter who also went to the same school. This life was different – we lived in one room of the house, which had three bedrooms. My mother was an independent woman so she decided that we would cook our food separately. Initially we used to use the same kitchen but my Aunt was a moody person and the arrangement did not work well. I remember there was a small kerosene stove that we had in the bedroom itself and my mom used to cook our meals in there. We used to sit around the stove and eat our meals- it always tasted so good. In the meantime my mother started as a teacher in a Bengal medium school where my Aunt also worked. My mother’s salary is what we used to live on. It was a bare minimum but I never felt that there was lack of anything. Islamabad Model school was high class and we had to purchase uniforms and winter clothings, all with school logos, for each of us three sisters. I wonder how it all worked out with my mother’s income. I remember even during that time my mother used to give us pocket money and we were allowed to buy anything we wanted with that. I remember that even though my Aunt owned a car – once a month my mother and us three sisters would walk quite a distance to a nearby shopping complex. One shopping trip I remember I bought a tennis ball with my pocket money- I was so happy. I spent so many afternoons playing with that ball. Little things that we purchased left us so content that we never felt that there was anything lacking. At school, very soon it started to show that I was a very good student. Few months after we started school there was the Annual prize giving ceremony. I had to run around the stage seven times because I got six awards for scoring the highest grade in all the six subjects and the seventh
award was for the best student in the elementary section of the school. This was a big trophy and I have photograph of me getting the award tucked away in some album. While writing I realize how valuable that picture is- I will look it up tomorrow. My sisters also did well in school. Of course we three sisters outshined my Aunt’s children (who also went to the same school) in every way. All this did effect my Aunt and her behavior towards us reflected that.

Time went by and soon there was this discussion amongst our elders about going back to Bangladesh. It was decided that all our family (Bachu mama, us and my Aunt’s family) would cross the borders into Afghanistan and then via India enter Bangladesh. There were these agents who took money to smuggle people out of the country. This started another different journey which would add yet another unique experience in our lives.

Brigadier General (retd.) Shakhawat Hossain and Dr Rehana Khan

I went to interview Brigadier General (retd.) Shakhawat at his Mohakhali New DOHS residence on 21st February 2016. He and his wife Dr Rehana Khan welcomed me. Both of them were interned in Pakistan, this how they narrated their experience.

I was commissioned in the Pakistan army 1966 in the artillery. I was first posted to Sialkot 8th medium artillery then to Lahore from 1969-71. When the India-Pakistan war started on 3rd December, 1971, I was sent back to Sialkot under posting. I was taken to battlefield, in the battlefield I realized that these people had started distrusting and mentally demoralizing the Bengali officers and men. I was in 23 Field regiment. I was just sitting with the battalion as an observer. After the end of war for 2-3 months we often used to hear that we will be tried; since 195 were being tried so there will be counter trial. There were allegations of treason under Wasiuddin.

I often used to pick up fights with the Commanding Officer, Lt. Colonel Murtoza over Bangladesh. The whole unit was in Syedpur before 25th March they were supposed to be withdrawn. But due to Operation Search Light they stayed there for 3-4 months. He threatened me with Court Martial for ganging up with Bengali men. For about 2-3 months it was like this. In my ACR for the first time he wrote that I was an ultra anti-Pakistani., because I had said that all their hands were stained in blood. After three months options were asked. We were told that we will be given land, ranks but we did not take it. I opted for Bangladesh.

I went back to Lahore and gave Hajira (presence) in the morning and evening. There I got married.

Then I turned to Dr Rehana Khan, who was sitting there listening to her husband.

I am Rehana Khan and I was studying in Fatima Jinnah Medical College with a scholarship from Pakistan Council for National Integration. Shakhawat was my relative. As a student I did not face any adverse situation. Even during the war the teachers never talked about the war. I had planned earlier that I will come back with my relatives. M.S Doha, Principal National Railway Institute, was our match maker. He was like our guardian, after our marriage we decided that I will come back with my husband.

Then Brigadier General (retd.) Shakhawat said, at that time the families were concentrated. We were laid off. There was like a roll call morning and evening. Initially they did not put us
in the camp. When the 94000 were put in India and the 195 trials, at that time they wanted put pressure on us. It was a mental pressure. Around March-April we were taken from Lahore to Upper Baria outside Muree Hills. They had set up a camp in an abandoned British cantonment. There were 28 families. It was a cattle house. In upper Baria we were put in a single room.

Then Rehana Khan remarked, I was pregnant, I remained a positive person, I thought that there were so many people involved they would not harm us physically. There was no water, ice had to be cut to get water. The senior officers were very depressed, but I was positive, I never thought of any mishap. My child was born in Muree CMH on 14 December 1972. Since I gave birth to a male child they took care of me, but in the cabin next to me, Major Rabbani’s wife had a daughter. They did not look after her at all. Nobody even gave her water. In that condition I went over to her and gave her water. In the camp the men did not know what was happening, transport was provided only for medical services.

Then Brigadier General (retd) Shahawat started talking again, We were taken to Jhelum camp. They systematically bred indiscipline. They put the officers and men together in the Jhelum camp. It was like the Nazi concentration camp, save the gas chamber. Recently we visited the Auschwitz, our camps were the same save the gas, there I was reminded of our camps. Our ranks were downed. I became a Lieutenant from a Major. We were given subsistence allowance, then sold my wife’s jewellery to buy milk for my son. Whatever little money we had it was spent in Lahore concentration camp. At that time four Bengali medical students lived with us, their relatives in Pakistan did not take their responsibility. In the camp it was a strange life, total psychological breakdown, since officers and men were put together, ill discipline was breeding, it was a calculated move on their part to demoralise and breed indiscipline in the Bengali army personnel, this later had its impact on Bangladesh army. The chain of command had broken down, when bazaar came there was total chaos, nobody listened to anyone. As days passed by we thought we will never see the earth again. There were in fights we had to sell everything for our survival, we were concentrated in one room, there was no schooling for children. Nobody was certain that they would ever come back to Bangladesh In our camp a list was being prepared of how many of us would be tried. It was a quid-pro-quo.

The camps were declared repatriation camp. We were not declared POW. If we were declared POW, then officers and jawans would be put separately. POW’s from Pakistan in India were under Geneva Convention. They were treated under Geneva Convention and given full privileges; they put on uniforms.

The camp had double layered fence with search light in the outer layer. High volt current passed through those fence. My mental state was so depressed, I thought we would never come back.

Dr Rehana, however added, I used to think that how long they would keep us, we will be liabilities for them.

Brigadier General (retd.) Shakhawat said, I used to think of 2nd World War when the trucks used to come at night. I used to think that the male members would be taken first and shot. We had a small radio, we used to listen to Bangladesh radio news. After 25th March we listened to Charam Patra. I used to feel very depressed at night. I was the family head and having some sense of history. We were neither POW nor enemy combatant, so there was no
accountability for us. It was a very difficult time, a total breakdown of moral courage, indiscipline all around; there was no relief till we left Pakistan soil.

There was a lot of pressure on Bhutto, Bangabandhu was sympathetic towards us, he wanted us back. After the agreement repatriation started, when we returned in December 1973 there was so much relief. A few of my colleagues in Pakistan army came to see us off.

Mohiuddin Ahmed's accounts of his times in Karachi in 1971:

I don't recall specific dates, months, or time of the year when I recall the events of my stay in Karachi during the war of 1971. I remember that as a lecturer at the Journalism department in Punjab University, I went to listen to Mr. Bhutto's speeches. I used to visit with journalist Mr. Wares Mir. Later on, when I joined Oxford, I used to race off to Lahore and Peshawar to follow the political speeches at that time. My friend Faiz was also there. When the war started, I was in Karachi. I was staying with Martin (Mr. Martin Pick was editor at OUP, Karachi office). We lived close by from Dina and David Cunningham (David Cunningham was the Managing Director of OUP, Karachi. His wife, Dina Cunningham used to work at the US Embassy). I used to get news from them. They used to keep me close and they used to call me over every other day.

There was one person called Jack Smith, who used to be head of Singer. He had given up his job, but he used to come back to Karachi. He used to give me messages from the Foreign Secretary, EnayetKarim in terms of the conduct of the officers. I used to call up the civil servants and pass on the message. Messages such as they should not get into violent activities, etc. I used to get Jack to come with me so that they would take the messages seriously.

Few of us, like myself, Mr. Mahmudul Haque, Dr. Tofail -- 6-8 of us Bengalis had transports. Others had lost their jobs, had no transport or other facilities. We used to live in Clifton, or Bath Island. We used to do rounds to visit the Bengali families (mostly civil servants), gave them our contact numbers so that they could call if there was any problem. I didn't know most of the civil servants, and came to know them through Dr. Tofail and Mr. Mahmudul Haque. I think he used to be with the British Tobacco Company.

Professionally, I used to have a lot of social commitments at that time, like book launches, exhibitions and other cultural events. Martin used to introduce me as his successor editor, and I could see that the warmth in people used to be gone the moment they found out that I was a Bengali. I felt socially discriminated against, and quite lonely. At that time I just didn't have many friends that I could visit, except for David Cunningham and my friend SuheLari. They stood by me during those suffocating days.

I had an adopted "son", Tofail, who was a senior officer in the Pakistan Air Force. He was posted in Karachi in 1971. I asked him not to visit me, and I used to go see him at his air force base under a different name. Tofail had lost both his parents during 1947 riot. I used to bear his expenses for education and food when I was studying in Punjab University. I went to see Moti (Birsreshtho Matiur Rahman) with Tofail before Moti died in the plane crash.

Then a time came for heavy action, because a lot more people were being sent as corpse of West Pakistani officers and soldiers from Dhaka. So they elevated their tortures on the
Bengalis. BBC used to be mockingly called Bharat Broadcasting Corporation by West Pakistanis. They banned BBC, but people still used to listen. In local media, they would attribute everything as: "sarkar ne boldiya...", and that had to be the last word. In all the cinema halls, they started showing 10-15 minutes of porn, just to keep people diverted and go to cinema. Any film you went to see, you had to see 10-15 mins of porn - that was one thing we noticed. And there was all positive news being delivered to people - that the troops were doing fine, etc. etc. Then, towards the end, journalists Clare Hollingworth and Neville Maxwell (author of India's China War), they arrived in Karachi, and we got to learn about some ground realities from them.

My youngest sister Dolly used to live with me during the war. But we had to leave the house. Our house used to be right at the sea front. If India decided to land soldiers, they would have done so from that entrance, and we used to be afraid that our house would be the first target! So we all shifted. Karachi was almost empty; there was heavy bombardment. We used to stay at Farid's, who was an artist and used to work with Lintus (later at Adcomm).

Throughout the war, an informer was posted in front of my house. He was from the intelligence department. I used to joke with him, and informed him where I was going so that he had things to report!

SP of McLeod road used to come and occasionally ask me, Aapka bjaara hain hain wapas? For some time, I was not allowed to leave, because they wouldn't give me endorsement. I went to Lahore, and I thought I had a friend who was a DC and they would help me. But later I found out from our office personnel Fernandez, that it was the Deputy General Manager at Oxford - Mr. Wajed Mir, who had something to do with the SP McLeod road inquiring on me, and also my passport not being endorsed. They also couldn't throw me out since I was employed by a British company.

Then the war ended.

I was sitting in the office one day when I got a call from my sister, Daisy. She said that Doctor (my brother-in-law) was picked up the previous night. This was when Bangladesh demanded trial of the 193 prisoners of war. So they said they want to try the Bengalis also. So they picked up 200 Bengalis. My sister's family used to stay in their own house in Lalukhet (Karachi). All the CSP's were picked up -- Kishu's father (need the name of this person), Mr. Anisuzzaman - former secretary agriculture, they used to live in Bath Island. Someone or the other was picked everyday.

I used to have slight acquaintance with Raja Tridiv Roy; he was a minister in the government. So I called him up to find out what was going on. He said, don't worry, it was all a political game. I don't understand all these political games. I told him that I was personally affected - - my brother-in-law has been picked up. He said he could do nothing, and that he was just a dummy.

My brother-in-law and other government servants from East Pakistan, who were picked up were all put in jail for about a week, and then taken to guarded camps or quarters to live in with their families. I went and got things for them to cook and eat at the quarters. They were not tortured or anything.
After the war ended, I had decided not to come back immediately, because there was no job for me in Dhaka. They said that if you go back, you have to be waiting for a posting to take place. Later I agreed to that arrangement and repatriated to Bangladesh in 1973.

**Voices:**

The voices of the children of the military officers talked collectively of their loss, the loss of their childhood, the loss of carefree days, the uncertainty, the fear and the shivering at being categorized into POW. But then as Brigadier General (retd.) Shakhawat Hossain pointed out that the interned Bengalis were not lined up in any category, the question remains if they were “protected” persons? But since they were interned, they constituted part of the “other”. This other was being used as bargaining chips by the Pakistan authorities; and since they were part of the civilian transfer of population, called repatriation, they were part of the war.

A war is fought by varied means. The officers who were denied promotions, who sold all their material belongings except the bare essentials; who gave up a life of certainty and willingly embarked on the path of uncertainty and fear in a territory and land, which was hostile to them; they risked their present and future lives as well those of their children to come back and serve their country. They knew very well that the journey to freedom could have been a long one or there could have been trials and no return. But they had opted for their homeland, they had opted for Bangladesh. They had opted because they had wanted to serve this country, to rebuild their war torn country, they were full of nationalistic and patriotic feelings. They had tried to instill the same in their children who had grown up as children in the other wing of the then Pakistan. Despite much risks Bengali cultural festivals were observed in the camps, as Noori says, “after each program, we proudly sang our national anthem, “Amar Shonar Bangla ami tomae bhalobashi”; when the songs were being sung and the programs observed, Pakistani security personnel were patrolling the camps with loaded guns. Yet these programs went on. Defying those guns in Pakistani territory, the Bengali interned persons were building their own Bangladesh, a Bangladesh of their dream, a land of freedom, I wonder what imagination and passion was being created; was it to do with Bengali and Bangladesh or Pakistani mentality! I leave it to the imagination and wisdom of the readers. But as a member of those interned I believe we in our imagination and spirit built a free country of our own- Bangladesh; and we yearned to come back to this land where we could talk freely and move freely, since these were denied to us in those days of captivity.

There was no dearth of hope in the camp because that is all they could cash on. The parents had double burden, they were worried but for the sake of their children they had to put up being ‘normal’, small schools were set up with bricks to carry on the studies of the children.

Wajiha’s father was killed in front of her eyes, this land became insecure for the mother and her three daughters. They journeyed to the land with which their country was at war, as Wajiha puts it; this suggests the fluidity of territory as a secured zone, since they sought security and safety among their relatives who were in Pakistan. Wajiha’s father was a doctor, a Major serving in East Pakistan Rifles (EPR). She is a Mukti juddha shontan, a Shaheed shontan, the crossing over and then the return; her innocence of that age where she was even unable to comprehend the loss of her father, whose body or remains they never got. She does not know where he is buried; how does one factor in territoriality here?
Mohiuddin Ahmed, the owner of the publishing house UPL whose contributions in knowledge production and knowledge dissemination in Bangladesh is and will remain phenomenal had to endure surveillance and agonizing times, periods of uncertainty.

But then the decision was to come back and be part of this country, which was and is their homeland. Let us honor and recognize those feelings, sentiments and sacrifices, as Mazhar puts it, if their fenced voices and sacrifices had ever been recognized or acknowledged.

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3 Suhrawardy to Jinnah, 5 July 1937, ct. in ibid. p.6.
4 Fazlul Huq to Jinnah, 30 October 1936, ct. in ibid., p. 8.
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