Why They Fled Pakistan—And Won’t Go Back

By KHUSHWANT SINGH

"It is going to be hell for us."
—INDIRA GANDHI
CALCUTTA.

THIS is my third visit to the India-Pakistan border 60 miles east of Calcutta. The countryside has not changed. It is the same lush, emerald green of the paddy and the dark green of the jute, the stretches of swamp with snow-white egrets hunting for frogs and the limpid ponds encircled with hynchins or bright with pink water lilies. It is the same avenue, flanked on either side by massive banyan and rain trees laden with the chitter of mynas and the dulcet notes of magpie robins. The only evidence of conflict on this peaceful, drowsy landscape is slogans painted on tree trunks: "Long Live Mao," read some, and "Long Live Indira," the others.

Then there is the almost unbroken succession of thatched huts, tents and shelters made of bricks and canvas that line the road on either side. Every town and village I pass through is crammed with people. Schools, colleges and other public buildings have been turned into reception offices, ration depots, clinics or homes for a large number of the seven million refugees from East Pakistan who have streamed into the country in the last four months. The monsoon season normally brings material benefits to India. This year it brings tides of hungry newcomers—and with them the threat of epidemics, communal violence and war.

I asked the cab driver to pull up at a small encampment near the village of Mandaipara. As soon as I step out of the car a crowd collects around me. They tell me they are about a thousand families of fisherfolk and thatchers from the Jessore and Khulna Districts of East Pakistan. I start

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with the question I had put to the refugees when I came this way in 1957 and 1964: "Why did you leave Pakistan?"

They are very eager to tell of their experiences. "Yahya’s soldiers raided our village, killed many young men and burned our huts...Biharis [people from the Indian state of Bihar who migrated to Pakistan] looted our homes and took our cattle...My daughter was raped in front of me and I was told if I did not get out they would rape my wife and mother as well."

My eye falls on a fair, doe-eyed girl being pushed toward me by an old woman. "What happened to you?" I ask her. The girl continues to gape at me without replying. "This is my daughter-in-law, Tarabala Dasi," said the old woman behind her. "We are from Village Murari Kalbi, Police Station Kalaura, District Khulna." One of her fellow villagers takes up her tale. "It was on a Sunday afternoon when the Pakistani soldiers came for her. When we heard the sound of jeeps approaching, we told our daughters to run away and hide in the fields. The soldiers surrounded our village and ordered us out of our huts. Where are all the girls?" they asked. "Where is that Tarabala?"

"You see, they had heard of her. How could we suffer them to dishonor any one of our daughters? We told them that Tarabala had gone out with her friends into the fields. They did not believe us. They beat us with the butts of their guns. They stuck bayonets into our chests. They set fire to our huts. They picked six of our boys, including Tarabala’s husband, Anil, tied their hands behind their backs and made them stand in a line. Then they mowed them down with their guns."

Tarabala Dasi, who has listened without showing a trace of emotion, begins to tear her hair and beat her breast. "I did it! I did it!" she screams.

"It was all because of me." Her mother-in-law soothed the girl in her arms. The crowd pushes them back. A young Moslem, sprouting a goatee, steps in front. He is Anees Mann, a bricklayer from the village of Bhukti in Jessore. He shows me a gash across his chest inflicted, he says, by the bayonet of a Pakistani soldier. "Shut up! [a term of abuse insinuating that a man has had sex with his sister] You voted for Mujibur Rahman! the soldier shouted. "You are a namak haram [a person false to his salt] and haram jada [bastard]. With each insult he slapped me. I said I had not voted for Banga Bandhu [Bengal’s friend, a term of affection for the captive East Pakistan leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman]. That made him mad. ‘This is for your Banga Bandhu!’ And he cut me with his bayonet."

A Hindu lad of 11 from the same village holds up a crooked arm that he says has been fractured by the butt end of a gun. Mandhari Das, also from the village of Bhukti, sobbed as she tells me how the soldiers first raped her in front of her husband and then killed him. She holds up her 1-year-old child and asks, "Who will look after her now?" Women cover their faces when they are unable to talk of what happened to them. Some say they have been
waist in the monsoon rain. Fleeing a civil war, some seven million have brought to India the danger of epidemics, communal violence and more war.

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At some places, it is demarcated by rivers, but, for the most part only stones mark a paddy or jute field in one country from cropland next to it in the other. The boundary crosses dense tropical jungles, swamps and mountains, and runs through the habitations of aboriginal tribesmen who are more conscious of tribal loyalties than of being Indian or Pakistani. On the Indian side, the only guardians of the frontier are the 70 battalions (about 70,000 men) of the Border Security Force, a paramilitary organization equipped with small arms. The B.S.F. not only guards this frontier but the entire stretch of more than...
by the adoption of a Constitution declaring Pakistan an Islamic state. In 1964, Pakistani Moslems were agitated over the theft of the Prophet's hair from a shrine in Srinagar, India. Once more, there were rioting and forcible evictions. This time the migrants who crossed into the Indian State of Assam included large numbers of Christians and Buddhists.

Likewise, anti-Moslem riots in several cities of India, chiefly Calcutta and Ranchi in Bihar and some towns in Madhya Pradesh, forced thousands of Indian Moslems to flee to the eastern wing of Pakistan, which was nearer to them than the western wing. But, beginning last March, for the first time in the history of Indo-Pakistan refugee movements, migration was taking place not because of riots between Hindus and Moslems but because of the violent suppression of a democratic movement by the Pakistani Army. And thousands of Moslems from the Islamic state of Pakistan were seeking sanctuary in predominantly Hindu India.

What made the Moslems and Hindus of East Pakistan overcome their traditional religious animosity toward each other was exploitation by West Pakistan. Although East Pakistan had a larger population—72 million against West Pakistan's 58 million—and earned most of the country's foreign exchange, West Pakistan pre-empted 70 per cent of the foreign-aid imports and 80 per cent of the funds set aside for development. Consequently, the Westerner, who was always richer than the Easterner, more than doubled the income gap in two decades: His per capita income, which was 17.9 per cent higher than an East Pakistani's in 1949-50, was 27.9 per cent higher by 1969-70. West Pakistan controlled all the big industries and held most of the senior executive posts in business and the bureaucracy. The army was almost entirely drawn from the West; the Bengali was considered fit only to serve in the armed constabulary or the police (both of which eventually went over to the Bangla Desh revolutionaries). A strong factor in the unification of East Pakistani Moslems and Hindus was their common language, Bengali. Sheikh Mujib's fervent support of Bengali against Urdu as the language of East Pakistan was an important factor in his emergence as leader of the movement for Bangla Desh, a Bengali homeland.

GRIEVANCE over language and the economic exploitation thus gave birth to East Pakistani nationalism, which soon crystallized as a demand for an autonomous homeland. Once when Mujibur Rahman was asked why he wanted to break away from a Moslem state, he is reported to have replied: "If the only reason for our continuing to be with West Pakistan is that we are both Moslem, why shouldn't we join some other Moslem state, like Kuwait, from which we might get more money?"

Bangla Desh nationalism isolated non-Bengali residents of East Pakistan. Indian Moslems who had fled from India in the wake of anti-Moslem riots in Calcutta and towns in Bihar and Central India found themselves living in separate colonies in big cities such as Dacca, Chittagong and Khulna. Their language was Urdu, and they never bothered to learn Bengali. In the long run, they threw in their lot with such linguistic minorities as the Punjabis, Pathans, Sindhis and Indian Moslems from Uttar Pradesh, groups that were well established in businesses, the civil service and senior echelons of the police. All these non-Bengali minorities were lumped together and described as "Muqaddams". Their total number is hard to determine, though estimates range from about half a million to around two million.

The "Biharis" did not participate in the movement for an autonomous Bangla Desh. They did not support Sheikh Mujib's Awami League, which demanded an end to the economic exploitation of East Pakistan and the loosening of its relationship to West Pakistan. After a sweeping victory of the Awami League in late December general elections (it won 161 of the 297 seats assigned to East Pakistan in the National Assembly), tension between Biharis and Bengalis exploded into violence in many cities. The Biharis took a beating. But not until the army took full control of the situation and the Awami League was outlawed did the violence come out in the streets to settle their scores. While the West Pakistani army cracked down on the Awami League's leaders and Bengali intellectuals, the chief target of the Biharis were Hindus—who had enthusiastically supported the Awami League.

The Bengalis considered their grievances mainly political, but the Biharis saw the situation giving a religious twist. The military began concentrating on rid- ding the country of only Hindu Bengalis because they make up 80 per cent of the seven million refugees.

Will the refugees ever return to East Pakistan? Most of those I met were landless peasants who were tenant farmers, fisherfolk, thatchmakers, gardeners, weavers, cobblers, ironsmiths or just unskilled laborers. The holdings of those who had land was seldom more than one acre. And this know-how has been acquired by the Pakistani Army and given away to Moslem peasants to win their support. I asked all those I interviewed whether they would go back to Pakistan. The Moslems replied, "Yes, when Bangla Desh is liberated." Hardy any of
the Hindutva thought of returning. They have nothing to return to. India's promise of one square meal a day and a tent over their heads is more than they expect to get in Pakistan. Even if Bangla Desh comes into being, it will take a lot to persuade the locals to part with properties and belongings of their ancestors. They love and cherish them, and the Hindus feel secure enough to return. "Why should we go back?" many replied. "This is our country." To the Pakistani Hindu, India has always been Amat Desh—"my homeland."

Eventually, it is estimated, the refugee migration will add a total of nine million to India's teeming population. Mrs. Gandhi was right when she said in Parliament: "It is going to be hell for us." But she was being wishful when she added, "We are not going to allow them to stay here."

The next day of my visit, I call on officials in the Bengal state government who are entrusted with the handling of the refugees. Nirmal Sen Ganga, chief secretary of the government, explains: "Our tragedy is that as soon as we begin to make headway in any direction, we are pulled back by some catastrophe or other. No sooner have we made plans to supply villages with drinking water and more schools than we have to put them in cold storage and make arrangements for refugees. For the last four months we have had to deal with an excess of food, cloth and house these refugees. The refugees are costing us more than $13 million a day. We have no money left for anything else."

"In 8 of our 16 border districts the number of refugees is higher than that of local inhabitants. It is the same in the border districts of Assam; the Assamese don't like Bengalis. And in Meghalaya the tribals don't like any outsider. The refugees have doubled its population in two months. This creates a real law-and-order problem. You must have read of the trouble we had in Assam and with the tribals in Assam and Meghalaya. When the monsoon forces the refugees to seek shelter in temples, mosques and churches, there will be more trouble. For the first time, pray that there be no trouble."

"How long do you think we will be able to go on like this? Do you think it will lead to war?"

"We have no idea of what will happen. Will there be a war?"

Dr. Abedin is a doctor but has a lawyer's habit of listing his points: "First, we must remember that except for a mild protest from Soviet Russia, the world has remained indifferent to our plight. Secondly, we Indians were so scared of world opinion that we failed to interfere when we could have done so in the earlier days. Third, knowing that China will support West Pakistan, how can we now use force on them and risk a world war? And he too ends with a note of warning: "India has not yet seen the last of these refugees; the worst is yet to come."

In the afternoon, I call on Mr. Hoein Ali, who defected from the Pakistan government and is now the chief representative of Bangla Desh in India. He is ensconced in a massive, three-story mansion which was once the office of the Deputy High Commissioner of Pakistan. The green-and-gold flag of Bangla Desh now flies from the mast. "Joy Bangla—victory to Bangla Desh," I say upon meeting him. He gracefully acknowledges the greeting. "It will be soon, Inshahullah—If Allah wills. We are giving our liberation forces extensive military training. We'll throw out this Pakistani Army," he says with confidence. He is discreet and does not tell me how many are being trained, where and by whom. But I have picked up the information from my journalist friends, who report that 15,000 are undergoing regular army training and many more are being put through a three-week course in guerrilla tactics, how to dynamite bridges and roads, how to throw hand grenades, and so on. The target is a force of 50,000 in a few months.

"When will your forces go into action?"

"They harry the Pakistanis all the time. Go to any point of the border and you'll hear sounds of rifle and mortar fire. Now the monsoon is on and Pakistani tanks are immobilized. But our liberation forces have stepped up their operations. It won't be too long—Inshahullah."

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