

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 hyacinth or bright with pink water lilies. It is the same avenue, flanked on either side by massive banyan and rain trees loud with the chatter 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 ask the cab driver to pull up at a small encampment near the village of Mandalpara. 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 thatch-makers from the Jessore and Khulna Districts of East Pakistan. I start

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 Kalarua, District Khulna." One of their 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.



SEASON OF DESPAIR—At a camp near Calcutta, Pakistani refugees

"It was all because of me." Her mother-in-law soothes the girl in her arms. The crowd pushes them back.

A young Moslem, sprouting a goatee, steps in front. He is Anees Mian, a brickmaker 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. "'Shala! [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, Sheik 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 Dasi, also from the village of Bhukti, sobs 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



wait in the monsoon rain. Fleeing a civil war, some seven million have brought to India the danger of epidemics, communal violence and more war.

ravished by four or five men; some have had their nipples bitten off. Almost every one has been beaten, punched and spat upon. Those who escaped manhandling were terror-stricken. When they saw what the soldiers and their Bihari collaborators had done to the others, they fled because of *bhoy*—fear. In the four days I am with the refugees, I hear that one word, *bhoy*, a thousand times.

AS we proceed along the road toward Petrapole, we pass truckloads of Sikh soldiers going in the same direction. At many places there are military encampments, with their

eastern approaches guarded by trenches. Armored cars and anti-aircraft guns are concealed under camouflage nettings.

The car pulls up at a barricade. A sentry in the uniform of the Indian Border Security Force walks up to us. "You can't go any farther. That's Pakistan," he says, pointing the muzzle of his Sten gun toward a yellow building a couple of hundred yards away. "The border is sealed."

I step out of the car and look over a scene that is as lush green and peaceful as the one I had passed. No barbed-wire fences separate the two countries which have waged cold war (and twice hot ones) for the 24 years

of their existence as independent states. I cannot detect any sign of troop movements on the other side, only bulbous clouds floating in a blue sky and the monotonous crying of barbets in banyan trees. A peasant is driving his cattle along the road toward Pakistan. "Where is he going?" I ask the sentry.

"His home. His land is on our side of the partition line. Nothing is very clear here. People come and go as they please."

Similar confusion prevails all along India's border with East Pakistan, which is 1,750 miles long and touches on five Indian states—West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura.

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

(Continued on Page 14)

(Continued from Page 13)

9,000 miles of India's borders, extending from Sind and the Punjab in the west, Kashmir and Chinese-occupied Tibet in the north, to East Pakistan and Burma in the east.

Petrapole and Hasnabad, a village a few miles away, are on the most favored routes taken by refugees fleeing from East Pakistan, because they are the shortest way to Calcutta. I had been told that on certain days more than 100,000 people had come by these routes. This day there is not a soul to be seen anywhere; only the peasant driving his cattle toward Pakistan.

"The Pakistani Army has blocked the roads," the sentry explains. "But they come all the same—over fields and across the rivers. I don't know how many have come. The radio first said 70 lacs [7 million], then 50 lacs; now it says 60 lacs. You work out how many that makes per day, spread out over four months."

Surveying the tranquil landscape again, I note: "The papers say you have been trading shots with the Pakistanis. It looks very peaceful."

"It flares up suddenly and as suddenly dies down. But something goes on every day. Yesterday we had quite a *tamasha* [show]. Bombs fell right across that field," he says, pointing to a spot not far from where we stand. The *Mukti Fauj* [literally, Salvation Army of the Bangla Liberation Movement] tickles Yahya's Pakistanis and the trouble begins. The Pakistanis have tanks and automatic weapons; the Banglas only have small arms they have captured. Pakistanis chase the Banglas to our border and, when they can't get them, they start firing at us. They shoot. We shoot. A bullet is the only answer to a bullet, isn't it? You look like an educated man. You tell me what else one can do with a man who shoots at you."

I parry his question. "One bullet for one may be all right. But a hundred bullets for a hundred becomes a battle. You think there will be a war?"

"How should I know?" he replies truculently. "I am only a sentry. And I am not supposed to talk to strangers. You come back when the *tamasha* begins in right earnest."

"When will that be?"

"That is known only to

Yahya Khan and Indiraji." Pointing to the sky, he suggests that another consideration is *Indradev*, the rain god. "When the monsoon breaks right and proper, and the Pakistanis are asleep in their tents and their tanks can't move, these Banglas will fix them. It rains a lot here, you know."

WE adjourn for tea to the shed of the ubiquitous *chaiwala*. Sant Ranjan Ghosh has had his tea stall on the border post for the last 24 years. He has made enough money serving cups of tea for a little over a cent apiece to the B.S.F. boys and the incoming refugees to buy a small house and half an acre of land, on which he grows bananas and vegetables.

"I can't recall a day since partition when there weren't some refugees coming out of Pakistan," he recalls. "At first they came, saw conditions here and went back. But for the last 20 years it has been one-way traffic—from Pakistan into India. One autumn, I think it was in 1952, more than a thousand came by this route every day. I know because I am the first *chaiwala* on the Indian side."

"Good business!"

He points to the thatched roof above him. "*Bhagwan* [God] gives. I only take money from those who have money to give. I never refuse a cup of tea to anyone—money or no money. And I have never refused shelter to anyone who asks for it. In 1955 there was another big influx of refugees. I had whole families squatting on my land. I have three families staying with me now—one of them is Moslem. And I am a *baidya* [one of the upper Hindu castes, who would normally shun contact with Moslems]."

Other men take up the theme. "No difference between Hindus and Moslems this time," says one. "We are Bengalis; they are one of us."

This is new to me: All previous migrations had been triggered by Hindu-Moslem conflicts. I recall that from 1949 to 1957 more than four million Bengali Hindus had fled East Pakistan—each wave following discriminatory action or agitation against Hindus, or actual violence. In 1955, for example, the exodus was due to the imposition of Urdu, which few Bengali Hindus can speak, as the national language of Pakistan, followed

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 37.9 per cent higher by 1969-70. West Pakistanis 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. Sheik 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 their new country 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 "Biharis." (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 Sheik 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 last December's general elections (it won 167 of the 169 seats assigned to East Pakistan in the National Assembly), tension between Biharis and Bengalis exploded into violence in many cities. The Biharis took a terrible beating. Not until the army took full control of the situation and the Awami League was outlawed did the Biharis come out in the streets to settle their scores. While the West Pakistan 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 Pakistani Army was soon giving the rebellion a religious twist. The military began concentrating on ridding the country of only Hindu Bengalis. (Hindus make up 90 per cent of the seven million refugees.)

Will the refugees ever return to East Pakistan? Most of those I met were landless peasants, shopkeepers, fisherfolk, thatchmakers, potters, weavers, cobblers, ironsmiths or just unskilled laborers. The holdings of those who had land was seldom more than one acre. And this they know 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." Hardly any of



WIDOW—Tarabala Dasi, an East Pakistani refugee in India. "Where is that Tarabala?" asked the West Pakistani troops who entered her village. When they didn't find her, they shot her husband and five others.

the Hindus 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 grabbed by them, and for the Hindus to feel secure enough to return. "Why should we go back?" many replied. "This is our country." To the Pakistani Hindu, India has always been *Amar 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."

ON the way back to Calcutta we stop at many refugee camps and hear the tales of violence, rape, killing, looting and vandalism. Most people seem to be in a daze, not knowing what the future holds for them. Men spend many hours a day queuing up for the family ration of a few handfuls of coarse rice and vegetables; women cook, feed their families and brood; children play as if on an endless vacation from school and homework. But in every camp the most common sight is men and women sitting on their haunches in groups, looking vacantly into space and sighing.

We stop on the outskirts of Barasat, 12 miles short of Calcutta. It is a warm afternoon and a passing monsoon shower has washed everything clean. At the roadside, three fishermen sit hunched under broad-brimmed straw hats, their lines suspended motionless in a pond. In the same pond are a couple of water buffaloes eyeing the fishermen. I ask the men if they have had a bite. One looks up and dolefully wags his head in a negative gesture. I watch them for a while. Suddenly the silence is broken by the muezzin's call to prayer, "Allah-ho-Akbar — God is great." A heron raises its head in alarm and flies away, the fishermen rouse themselves, wind their reels and pick up baskets to go to the mosque. They are Moslems. I accost them:

"Are you from Barasat? I heard there was some trouble there last week."

They eye me suspiciously; on the subject of religious confrontations, Moslems distrust Sikhs like me as much

as they distrust Hindus. I encourage them:

"Hindu refugees occupied your mosque?"

"It is the house of God. It's meant for prayer," answers one.

"If they had been Moslem refugees, would you have let them stay?"

They fidget uneasily. Then one answers:

"It was not like this at all. These fellows forced their way in and told us to get out and go to Pakistan. Why should we go to Pakistan? We are Indians. They should go back to wherever they come from. Besides, how can we be sure they won't defile our mosque by cooking unclean food? If they had come and like gentlemen asked for shelter, do you think we would refuse them?"

Barasat is one town where an ugly situation was averted by the police. This very week newspapers have reported outbreaks of communal violence between locals and refugees in towns in Assam and Meghalaya. Many Hindus of the right-wing Jan Sangh party have begun to say openly that they will not let the refugee migration be a one-way traffic. "If Pakistan dumps nine million Hindus on us, we should dump nine million Moslems on them," said one party member. "We have 50 million Moslems in India. What right have they to stay here if Pakistan throws out all its Hindus, Christians and Buddhists?" Communal tensions will be yet another legacy of the refugee influx.

THE next morning I visit a hospital with a maximum capacity of 230 patients that has been stretched to more than 600. Every bed has one patient on top and at least two lying on the floor underneath. All verandas are crammed with the sick. Those who have died of cholera in the morning are laid in a corner with only their faces covered. In the clinic I see a doctor pour the remains of white powder from a bottle marked "cholera" into the open mouth of a woman. A few minutes later I see her throw up and collapse in her husband's arms. She is laid alongside the corpses, which by now include a dead child with his eyes open. The morning papers give the official figure of cholera deaths as 5,000. Another thousand or two have died of dysentery or typhoid or fatigue. As I leave the encampment, a three-wheeled minitruck called a "tempo" is being loaded with the corpses of three adults

and three children, piled on top of one another.

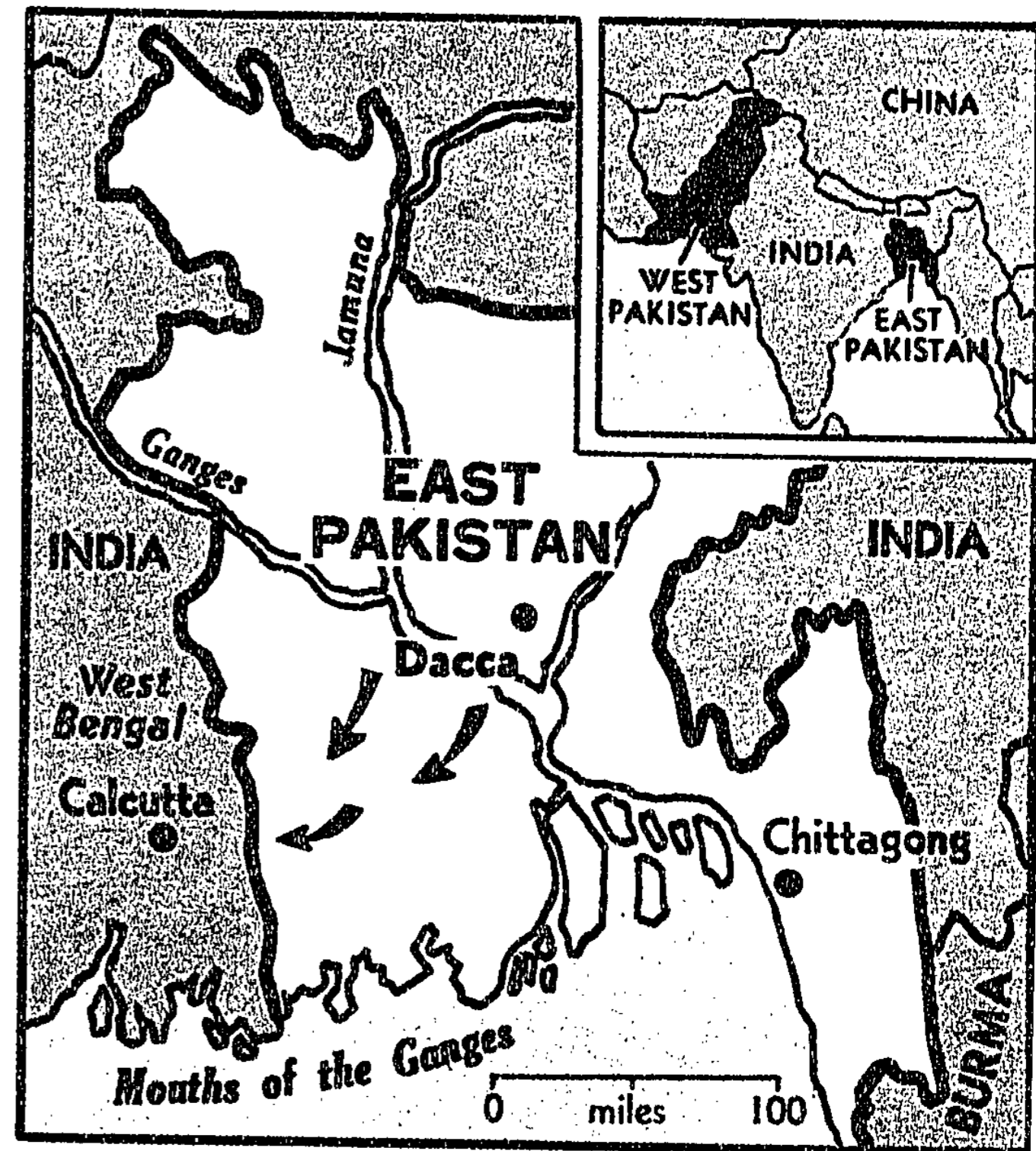
Shahara Camp next to Calcutta's Dum Dum Airport has more than 40,000 refugees under tarpaulin, tent, thatch and open sky. The camp, which is well below the level of the road, is known to turn into a lake after a heavy downpour. I see men and women defecating in the open and ask the social worker on duty why he has not forbidden this. "How can I?" he pleads. "The pit latrines are full. One smart shower and all the night soil will be floating into the tents." He covers his nose with his handkerchief. "When the monsoon breaks, there will be real disaster."

ON the last day of my visit, I call on officials in the Bengal state government who are entrusted with the handling of the refugees. Nirmal Sen Gupta, chief secretary of the government, exclaims: "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 done nothing except feed, clothe 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 outsiders. Tripura has doubled its population in two months. This creates a real law-and-order problem. You must have read of the trouble we had in Barasat 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 rain."

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

He waves his hand in despair. "War is a luxury we cannot afford. Our best bet is a political solution which will force Pakistan to take back these people. That only the big powers can do. You think Pakistan could last a single day if the United States and the United Kingdom withdrew their support?"



ESCAPE HATCH—The arrows show the route favored by Pakistani refugees. On some days more than 100,000 have come this way to reach West Bengal.

A few rooms away in the secretariat building of the state government is Dr. Zainul Abedin, until recently Minister in Charge of Relief and Rehabilitation. A Moslem, he is, like most Indian Moslems, inclined to express his loyalty to India through verbal abuse of Pakistan: "Barbarous savages, uncivilized brutes who spared neither Moslem nor Christian, neither Buddhist nor Hindu. Never, never, has the world seen such *bonyata* [the Bengali word for savagery]."

He draws a graph of the refugee exodus, rising from 25,000 in March to 200,000 a day in the last week of May. "It is difficult to explain why," he admits. "It is like a river. When the summer comes, snow melts on the mountains. It takes a few days before the flood gets to the lower reaches of the river. People living in the interior were subjected to violence. As they trekked toward the frontiers, other villages joined them. By the time they crossed to India, it was like the bursting of a dam."

"What do you think 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. Second, we Indians were so scared of world opinion that we failed to interfere when we could have done so in the earlier stages. 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 the refugees; the worst is yet to come."

In the afternoon, I call on Mr. Hossein 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 so soon, *Inshallah*—if Allah wills. We are giving our liberation forces extensive military training. We'll throw out the 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. Our liberation forces have stepped up their operations. It won't be too long—*Inshallah*." ■