

CHAPTER 9

The Tragic Tale of The 'Biharis'

PERHAPS NO other class of people in the world today is as ruined, economically and socially, as smitten and smashed up as the community of the former Indian refugees in Bangladesh who are known here by the general term 'Bihari'. They acquired this nomenclature because most of them had come originally from Bihar and Eastern U.P. Generally, however, the term is supposed to include all those who give Urdu as their mother tongue. Hence, they are also referred to as the 'Urdu people'. (Hereafter, the term is used throughout in this wider sense, and not for the people from Bihar only.)

These people, migrating from India in large or small groups during the Partition riots and the subsequent years, built their settlements in many towns and cities of what was then East Pakistan, especially in the north-western part of it, nearest to India proper. Apart from being more intelligent and hard-working than the local people, they were also the favourites of the Pakistani rulers, because in the language controversy which erupted almost

with the inception of Pakistan, their loyalties and sympathies remained naturally with the West Pakistanis as opposed to the 'Bengalis'. As a reward for this support, they were accorded far greater opportunities for economic progress and prosperity than were the local people. Thus, during the 24 years of Pakistani rule, a fairly numerous class of successful entrepreneurs emerged from among the Biharis. This class is now lying almost prostrate in Bangladesh. And along with it, lakhs of common people—shopkeepers and middle class employees—have also lost their means of livelihood. Today in Bangladesh, to be a Bihari is the worst crime. And what is still more tragic is that the Biharis themselves have been largely responsible for bringing about this situation.

In numerous little towns and scattered places, where these people had settled in small numbers, there is no trace of them today. It is an established fact that during the first phase of the active freedom struggle in Bangladesh—in the months of March, April and May 1971—when as a result of the revolt of the Bangla Army Regiments and the Police, almost the entire country had slipped out of Pakistani control temporarily, Biharis were killed and their properties looted in scores of places, especially in the border areas. Later, beginning from June 1971 onwards, when the Pakistani military succeeded in re-establishing its hold, the stream of blood started to flow in the opposite direction. The Biharis and the military now killed as many Bangla nationalists as they could lay their hands on. Thus, it was in every sense of the term a civil war, only fought in two phases, in which both sides perpetrated the most inhuman atrocities

on one another, killing and maiming like demented savages on the rampage.

There is no point today in computing and comparing the death rolls, for, in the eyes of the world, both the 'Banglas' and the 'Biharis' stand guilty of unsurpassed brutality against fellow beings. What matters and has to be attended to immediately is that among both the communities today, lakhs of people are naked, hungry and jobless, thousands of women helpless without husbands, and numberless children orphaned. The only difference is that the plight of the 'Bengali' is thinly seen, being spread over some 7½ crore people over a vast area, while that of the Bihari lies thick in a number of small concentrations, crushing the life out of nearly half of them. In any case, those who come here from outside with an open mind and look at the problem from an impartial but sympathetic standpoint, don't have to look long to see that what has happened in Bangladesh is only a man-made human tragedy as must inevitably follow every war or civil war. In itself, war is tragic. But still more tragic are the consequences that flow from it.

Today, in Dacca proper, the situation is still so abnormal as to deter an easily recognisable Bihari from walking alone on a lonely road. Even the short-statured and dark-skinned among them, who resemble the 'Bengalis', and so do move about with a little less anxiety, avoid speaking the Urdu language as if it were poison. It really stands them in good stead today that they were sociable enough during the many years of their domicile here to pick up and be able to speak the local dialect

fairly well. It helps them to carry on their avocations with some safety, while it also protects them from hostile attention from the Banglas.

To speak Urdu in public was almost an invitation for death immediately after Independence. Even today, while it will not lead to anything so serious, it may still attract a sudden jerk or push from behind from some Bangla patriot. As the writer, being intent on making observations, made it a point to speak only in Urdu with his Bihari friends in Dacca almost everywhere, despite their repeated warning about the risk involved, he had to suffer for his folly a few 'back-shakes' in crowded bazars!

In new Dacca, around Motijheel Commercial area, some Bihari firms have now reopened, or, to put it more correctly, new businesses have been launched in place of the older, plundered ones. But their number can be counted on finger tips. The few businessmen and their staff who work in these firms with stoic courage can still be seen handling their papers or lifting the receiver with trembling hands. And this condition obtains even when these businessmen, by paying heavy donations, have gained the support and protection of the ruling Awami League. They must also close down by 4 P.M., for the Awami League, apparently, cannot guarantee protection to them after this hour.

The former owners of most Bihari shops and businesses in the city are untraceable, and very few well-known Biharis now live in their accustomed places. Unclaimed Bihari shops and businesses, which somehow still exist intact, are being run under Government control, with appropriate sign-

boards announcing the fact. The thousands of 'vacant' houses, the illegal occupation of which is described in some previous chapter, belong mostly to Biharis and West Pakistanis, and also to those who took refuge in India. Some of the last group are still waiting for their properties to be restored, and many of them have not returned at all.

Most of the Biharis in Dacca are still confined to the two colonies which made headlines after the 14-day war in December 1971. These are Mohammedpur and Mirpur, both situated in the north-western corner of the western half of new Dacca. Built more or less on the same lines as the dozens of Punjabi colonies in Delhi, both were formerly pure Bihari colonies. And just as the Punjabi refugees in Delhi later transformed their tiny quarters into fine houses by investing their own hard-earned money on them, so did most of the Bihari colonists in Mohammedpur and other towns. But today it is not the Biharis but the Bangla people who live in many of these fine houses, because the owners have either disappeared or are presumed dead. Even some of those who are alive and still here find it safer to live not in their houses but in the relief camps that have been set up in these colonies since after the December war. I had an opportunity of visiting one of them, the Mohammedpur Camp, where I took down the statements of the local Bihari leaders. The visit was a most heart-rending and unforgettably tragic experience.

But before a description of this inhuman camp is attempted, it is necessary to grasp the viewpoint

of the Biharis themselves with regard to the causes of their present misfortune. For, without this fundamental understanding, much of what the Bihari representatives are going to tell us, will remain unintelligible. Conversations with various Bihari businessmen and intellectuals in Dacca had revealed three different viewpoints which the Biharis generally adopt in reviewing the present conditions and the events preceding them. The common element in all three will become evident to the reader, with no necessity for the writer to point it out. It must, however, be stated that this common element is indeed the root cause of both their miserable downfall and their present excruciating suffering.

The first point of view asserts that the main charge against the Biharis—that of having been anti-Bangladesh—is wrong and unfounded. As evidence, the results of the 1970 elections in certain constituencies, said to be the only ones with Bihari majorities, are cited; in these, Bangla candidates of the Awami League won as against Bihari candidates of the communal parties. On enquiry in official circles, however, it turns out that none of these constituencies have Bihari majorities; they are all Bangla majority constituencies. Thus, there is no evidence to show that the Biharis as a whole did not oppose Bangladesh, rather there is much evidence to prove the contrary. In fact, if human nature and logic are any guide, the Biharis ought to have opposed Bangladesh tooth and nail, and that was exactly what they did. To be fair to them, however, it has to be admitted that, under the circumstances obtaining then, there was nothing immoral or unpatriotic in their conduct. As

Pakistanis with a vested interest in the unity of Pakistan, they were duty-bound to try to keep the two parts of Pakistan together if they could. That the six-point programme of the Awami League, then the main issue for something like a plebiscite, contained the germs of an eventual break-up, could hardly be denied by any man in his senses. So, the Biharis had every reason, democratically speaking, to oppose the establishment of a semi-independent Bangladesh, as long as it did not materialise. Their stand today should, therefore, take the form not of defending past actions but of accepting defeat with grace and offering to fall in line, subject to acceptance.

According to this first viewpoint, the reason why the Banglas became such deadly enemies of the Biharis is set down as economic—and to that extent the reasoning is correct. It is true that the comparatively greater prosperity of a class among them, and also their general success in capturing a disproportionately larger share of the jobs and businesses, did lead to heart-burning among the Banglas, and to all the poison that inevitably flowed from it. Without a doubt, this economic disparity worked as the main element in fanning the fires of Bangla nationalism. But the Biharis must also concede that their own undoubted talents were not the only decisive factor in the game; the partiality and patronage of the Pakistani rulers, however natural and understandable, had also played a big hand in bringing about the disastrous situation.

The second viewpoint presented is what might be called 'purely Islamic'. It holds that there

was, in fact, neither any mass movement for greater rights in Bangladesh, nor any opposition on the part of the Biharis to whatever there was, nor indeed any particular hatred for the Biharis among the Banglas! All that happened was that "India, the sworn enemy of Pakistan, having bought up some Bangla leaders with its money and greater cunningness, incited a mock rebellion in Bangladesh with the help of these stooges, and then by hatching up an international conspiracy with three great powers—the USA, the USSR, and the UK—it broke Pakistan into two by sheer brute force!" The final exact words of the intellectual, a graduate of Allahabad University, who represented this very common viewpoint, were as follows: "Pakistan was an absolutely sound, healthy and viable organism; there was nothing wrong either in its constitution or in its conduct. But when four powers, acting in concert, used far superior force to tear it asunder, how could Pakistan successfully resist such overwhelming odds, especially when her only ally, China, too would not come to her aid for fear of Russia!"

Having patiently heard out this theory (there are many in India who also support it), I felt like asking the gentleman, 'Well, friend, let's go to the stairs of Masjid Bait-ul-Mukarram nearby, and there, in the name of God, you explain this theory in 'the national language of Pakistan' to those thousands of 'good Pakistanis' who throng this revered place all day long. May God crown your effort with success.' But to say such a thing would have meant inflicting another wound on an already bleeding heart. So I said only this: "Dear friend, no country is free from foreign agents and

mercenary stooges. But such people do not lead popular movements, nor do they fight elections and capture Parliaments. Indeed, if by chance or mistake, they ever happen to hold elections, they themselves are washed away in the resulting tidal wave, like poor Yahya. And if your theory is that this entire new nation has mortgaged its freedom to India or to the other powers you mention, then, where is the question of any treason? A people are sovereign; they can decide even to cease to be! But, of course, you can always express an opinion."

The third viewpoint seeks to assert that the Biharis were neutral, but they wished justice had been done to East Pakistan. It is admitted that the eastern wing was subjected to continuous and grave injustices. But for that the military rulers in Islamabad were responsible, not the poor Biharis here. The Biharis suffered because they had ties of blood and language with the West Pakistanis; and the Banglas had only them within reach to wreak vengeance on when they were oppressed. What they could not do to the oppressing but powerful Pak military, they did to the neutral and weak Biharis by proxy.

There is no doubt an element of truth in all this. But even this nicely-balanced and rational viewpoint suffers from a serious fallacy. If justice was to be done to East Pakistan in accordance with the universally accepted principles of the present-day world, then East Pakistan should have had the status usurped by West Pakistan. In other words, everything from the national capital to larger

investments should have been located in this wing. But then the result would have been an almost immediate rebellion in the West and its separation from Pakistan within a few years instead of the 24 years taken by the East. And, subsequently, the remaining Westerners would, in any case, have been driven out of the residual 'Pakistan' in the East just as they have been in actual fact. So, by working on the principle of justice, all of Pakistan would have vanished long ago, whereas by adopting the principle of injustice, at least a country by the name of Pakistan still exists on the map of the world!

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It was in the company of my Bihari friends in Dacca that I visited the Mohammedpur Relief Camp. (These friends were former Urdu journalists from Calcutta, and had been my colleagues in the fifties.) As stated above, the other colony, Mirpur, too has a camp like this, and in the two of them some three lakh people are presently hovering between life and death. Of course, these are not the only relief camps for Biharis in Bangladesh today; such camps exist in almost a dozen places all over the country—at Saidpur, Rangpur, Bogra, Jessore, Khulna, Chittagong, Mymensingh, Rajshai, Ishardhi, Admaji Nagar, etc. According to the Bangladesh Red Cross, a total of some 7½ lakh Biharis have been given shelter in these camps—which is another way of saying that exactly half of the known Bihari population in Bangladesh (15 lakhs) are at present living in camps on charity.

Mohammedpur Relief Camp is spread out on a large open piece of land in the centre of the colony.

Beginning with the December war, it started taking shape here, gradually spreading all over like some slow, creeping thing of horror, found only in fiction of that name. The camp is composed of more than two hundred huge sheds made of mat and bamboo. A road runs through the middle, dividing the camp in two halves. The sheds of only one half have tin roofs, while those of the other have mat for roofs too. The floor everywhere is just plain, raw earth. As such, one can well imagine the plight of the afflicted humanity under these sheds, particularly under mat roofs, during the terrific monsoons which descend on these parts for four months in the year. Even without rain, mud, silt and overflowing stinking drains abound everywhere. Heaps of garbage and excreta mark the inner lanes. The stench is unbearable.

Every shed is partitioned by mat-screens into some 50 or so small boxes or cells, the smallest being only 10' x 5'. In each such cell, a family of five to ten persons has been stuffed in like some inert material. Thus inserted, they stay there, not even like vermin because vermin move; they just stay there—motionless, expressionless, lifeless. Looking at them in their mat-cells, one can scarcely believe that these lumps of bone and skin can be living human beings. They all appear to be dead.

Apart from those in the cells, the camp area as a whole is also seething with naked, starving, disease-ridden and blank-eyed humanity—men, women and children—all seemingly locked in a life-and-death struggle. Within minutes, the outside visitor starts feeling suffocated, and a strange dread and dis-

belief descend on him: 'Can man live like this? Is all this possible?'

Mohammedpur camp, at the time of the visit, had 18,260 families or more than 1,46,000 people on its rolls. Thousands of these people were well-to-do till yesterday. Some were successful businessmen or executives in private concerns, others were employees of the Railway and P & T Departments—Government servants who had opted from India in 1947 to serve Pakistan, or may be the employed sons and nephews of those who opted. But few of them can report for duty today for fear of their lives. Thousands have been discharged from service on the ground of 'long absence without leave'. But their salaries and funds have not yet been paid. Bank accounts too have been difficult to operate; in any case, most are already exhausted. Many persons rejoined duty on the strength of 'clearance chits' given by Awami League M.P.'s. But they did not return; even their bodies remained untraced.

Thus, thousands of these Government servants and a larger number of petty businessmen and workmen have been reduced to the same state of destitution which is the normal lot of the majority of the camp-dwellers. And like the latter, they too now live entirely under the flimsy shelter of the camp and on the doubtful charity of the world. To what a state of social and moral degradation this must have brought them, can easily be imagined.

The camp formerly was run under the direct care of the International Red Cross, but for some months now the Bangladesh Red Cross has taken

over. On its behalf, a Central Relief Organisation and a Managing Committee composed of local Bihari representatives look after the day-to-day affairs of the camp. The Bangladesh Red Cross is committed only to supplying 40 tonnes of wheat grain every day for the inmates, not a thing beyond that, although no less than 30 items of relief are recognised internationally. Even these 40 tonnes of grain are not supplied on a regular basis; both the quantity and the number of days never exceed 20 in a month. Thus, one can easily calculate the actual amount of daily ration that is distributed against the fixed quota of six chhattaks (less than a pound) per capita per diem. Naturally, many have to starve for days on end. As to what becomes of the nearly half of the total grain issued from Government godowns, can be known only to the Government. This observer felt that large-scale pilferage, black-marketing and other forms of corruption were resorted to by some in the camp management itself.

This very quota of six chattaks of wheat grain per capita per diem is also extended to many other Biharis, who live in their own quarters in the colony. Being unemployed, they too have been put on relief. If by chance, these house-owning people get the full quota, they exist by eating half of it and sell the other half to meet their sundry needs. Some petty bazars have sprung up within the camp, and a number of grinding mills have been set up to turn the grain into atta. Thus, a most painful and degrading form of localised economic system, based only on the wheat grain flowing fitfully from international charity, has emerged here. This

by itself constitutes a revealing commentary on the present life-pattern of the Bihari inmates of the colony and the camp. And the same conditions must hold true of every other Bihari relief camp in Bangladesh today. What is worse is that no Bangla leader, of the ruling party or the opposition, ever takes the trouble to visit the camps, nor do the Bangla people generally show any sympathy for the unfortunate Biharis huddled in their midst.

The local Bihari representatives affirm that no proper procedure has ever been adopted to ascertain the wishes of the Biharis with regard to citizenship. Beginning from August 1972, many kinds of forms have been distributed, but in them the question has never been formulated on a clear-cut basis. Besides, thousands of forms have still to be collected. Thus, according to these representatives, the official claim that 2,60,000 people have opted for Pakistani citizenship, is fictitious. This figure, they say, is simply put down on paper with the sole object of sending out so many unwanted Biharis to make room for the Banglas who are awaiting repatriation from Pakistan.

However, these representatives also admit that only about 20% of the Biharis here have any relations in Pakistan, while the other 80% have all their relations in India; and so naturally they look more towards India today than towards Pakistan. They divulged that many of them are secretly slipping into India by spending money or otherwise, and the Government of India have so far adhered to a policy of looking the other way. The Biharis desire that this policy of leniency and compassion

on the part of the Indian Government should continue.

But they are also conscious of the many political difficulties now being faced by both India and Bangladesh internally. As a principle, however, they suggest that if Mujib Government itself could ensure their civic security here, and, in place of the present attitude of vengeance and retribution, adopt a policy of clemency and reconciliation, the Biharis could still stand on their feet again. But, if that is not possible for political reasons, then, the only solution is agreement between the three countries for exchange with Pakistan, with India's help in the matter of transport.¹ But to determine precisely who among the Biharis really want to go, the necessary survey should be conducted under international auspices as has been suggested by Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib himself. The Biharis regard this proposal as a rational and reasonable one, and wish that this be implemented as early as possible. The result, they hope, would remove the ill-feeling that the Banglas have towards the Biharis as well as any illusions that Pakistan may be harbouring.

1. Such an agreement has now been reached between India and Pakistan, and Dacca may also become a party to it formally in the near future when Pakistan recognises Bangladesh. This, it is hoped, will solve the two-way repatriation problem of the Banglas in Pakistan and some of the Biharis in Bangladesh, though not of all the 7½ lakhs now in camps.