**1971: A Personal Account of the Year Pakistan Broke Apart (Part I)**

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Into 1971, there was one thing I knew for certain in East Pakistan: a tsunami of ethnic violence was heading my way and unless I moved out of its awful path, there was no chance of survival. But there was a catch. Moving out of my jurisdiction meant obtaining permissions not easily given. In 1971, all leave was cancelled. I was a young officer fiercely committed to protecting and representing the Pakistan state that my elite cadre of civil servants, the Civil Service of Pakistan, believed we embodied. By the end of the year, many of my core beliefs would be challenged as I saw the state that I so proudly represented begin to collapse around me.

There has been a great deal of commentary and discussion on the 50th anniversary of the creation of Bangladesh, which was marked recently. To that considerable outpouring of commentary and discussion, I also wish to offer my first-hand and eye-witness experiences based on my having lived through that historic period. It was a harrowing and traumatizing time that would scar me.

The government in its wisdom had decided to send West Pakistani CSP officers to East Pakistan and vice-versa in order to strengthen ties between the two. We were told that we were the last link between the two wings of Pakistan. The idea had merit but by the time it was implemented it was too little too late. I was at the time posted as Assistant Commissioner in charge of Mansehra one of the most beautiful parts of Asia with Swat on one side and Kashmir on the other. I swapped with my batchmate from East Pakistan Shafi Sami who would one day become the foreign secretary of independent Bangladesh. I had recently married Zeenat from Swat and after a brief honeymoon in Bangkok, where my father worked for the United Nations, we flew to Dacca. From there we travelled by train, boat and rickshaw to my posting at Kishoreganj, which was a heavily populated remote area in the northern part of the Province with poor communications to the capital city Dacca.

The history of neglect and humiliation on the part of Pakistan since the creation of the nation was well-known.

At the beginning of the year, my aim was to return with Zeenat to my home base in Peshawar. For me to arrive back in Peshawar by the end of the year with my posting orders in hand, several steps had to take place, one connected to the other and each smoothly following the other. A single missed connection would have derailed and foiled my plans. As the year progressed, the concatenation of events worked meticulously as if an invisible hand was planning them to keep me one step ahead of disaster and in the end to extract me from the jaws of death.

I had arrived in East Pakistan to find a discontented and surly population. The crisis in 1971 had been brewing. Perhaps the two most significant developments in the previous year were: the elections in Pakistan that established the victory of the Awami League representing Bengali nationalism against West Pakistan political parties and the apocalyptic cyclone that devastated East Pakistan. All in all, the elections were fair and the results should have been honoured by West Pakistan who now saw power slipping from their grasp. The history of neglect and humiliation on the part of Pakistan since the creation of the nation was well known and Bengalis had little faith in finding justice even after the elections. There began to grow a feeling that perhaps the only answer was a complete break from Pakistan, even an independent nation. There is no doubt that this anti- Pakistan emotion was fanned from and found active sympathy in India. The situation was fraught with danger. With every week as the violence increased there was less and less hope of the Bengalis being offered their right to form the national government and the chances for reconciliation became increasingly remote. It was becoming like a Greek tragedy with the ending not difficult to predict. Pakistan, I believed, had to handle the delicate situation with great wisdom and compassion.

The second crisis came with the cyclone that destroyed lives and properties and devastated crops and paralyzed communications including railways and roads. I recall attending a meeting with the Governor of the Province on his official yacht one evening as he arrived on his tour to assess the damage. We were desperately short of every kind of resource and the population again felt neglected by West Pakistan. That evening the rain and winds lashed the land and after the meeting, I decided to head back to my headquarters as I especially did not wish to leave Zeenat alone for the night. The rivers had swollen and become vast lakes at night with the storm and rain and in the darkness, no one was prepared to cross the waters and get me to the other side. In the end, I did find a person with a boat that was little more than a couple of planks tied together and resembled a raft. After some persuasion, we plunged into the waters. I had to stand in the middle of the boat holding onto the mast which shook as much as the planks under my feet. Through the planks, I could see the dark raging waters below me and there were moments when I felt I may not survive the journey. Later even my office chided me for taking such a risk but appreciated the fact that I was determined to return to my headquarters.

On arrival in East Pakistan, we travelled by train, rickshaw, jeep, and boat to arrive at Kishoreganj. It was late and I had a splitting headache. My assistant came to brief me about the political situation and warned me of growing tension among the workers union demanding rights. I noticed the punka puller sitting unobtrusively on the floor, his back against the wall, pulling the rope that moved the fan-like cloth hanging from the ceiling so that it would generate some wind for the officer. Tiny moth-like insects with glutinous limbs buzzed about and were impossible to control. We were sitting in the veranda with the hot sticky pitch-black night around us when I noticed dozens of what looked like fireflies in the distance. These began to grow in size and appeared to be moving towards us. With some alarm, I realized they were heading towards the house of the Assistant Commissioner where we sat. There were no walls of protection around the huge compound so there was no way of stopping them. There were literally thousands of Bengali men holding torches, their semi-naked bodies glistening in the dark and under the torches, and they looked deadly earnest. I realized I faced my first administrative challenge and that a misstep could spark a larger crisis. I, therefore, went out to meet them at the entrance so there was no question of the forced entry. After a brief conversation, I persuaded them to meet me in the office the next morning.

On arrival as Assistant Commissioner in charge of Kishorganj, I found myself in charge of several million people and by virtue of my post was the administrative head of the subdivision. Appreciating the developing political crisis and its ethnic overtones, in due course, I requested the Deputy Commissioner, a senior and brilliant Bengali CSP officer, that I wanted a posting near Dacca. At first, he was unsympathetic but later helped me get posted to Manikganj, a subdivision nearer to Dacca. I noted with growing alarm that the Province was wracked by anti-government processions and then a complete lockdown. Atrocities of an unspeakable nature were being reported. My Bengali friends said, only half-jokingly, to memorize the sentence, “I am not a Punjabi” in Bengali, as Punjabis dominated the Pakistan army and government and were being especially targeted as the authors of Bengali misery. There were wild rumours and unconfirmed reports circulating everywhere. Everyone was involved and everyone a potential target. It was like a game of Russian roulette and our lives were in the hands of fate.

Everything in Manikganj, my subdivision, came to a stop; shops and offices were closed and life came to a standstill. I was in splendid isolation but continued my work in the office provided on the grounds of the official residence. My local assistant would still come to my office hoping no one would see him and I could carry on a modicum of official work although no communications were working. I was acutely aware of the stories now circulating of attacks on West Pakistanis where they were isolated or vulnerable. These attacks were being joined by the local police whose job was to maintain law and order. At this stage of my posting, I was literally cut off from the world. As violence spread, I became aware of the imminent danger to our lives. There were stories of four of my CSP batch mates being brutally butchered in their subdivisions by their own public and police. Wives had not been spared.

Zeenat had been remarkably calm, but I knew that I must now get her out of the Province as soon as possible. The desperate situation demanded urgent action. But as normal channels were in paralysis, I was not sure what line of action to take.

(To Be Continued)

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