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

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Then out of the blue, my chance came. I heard on the radio that General Yaqub Khan had been appointed the Martial Law Administrator, MLA, for East Pakistan, He was a family friend, a sort of uncle, but how do I send him a message? Inundated with urgent matters of state would he even heed my message? Nothing was working and all roads such as they were remained blocked by aggressively marauding groups: it was a complete lockdown or as they called it a pya jam or “jamming the wheel.” I selected one of my guards, a Bengali, and gave him a handwritten personal letter and asked him to deliver it to the house of the MLA. I wondered whether he would be allowed near that highly secure military zone. I wrote my letter in urgent tones; unless we were moved we may well be killed. The next day, there was a radio message for me received at the nearest police station where the wireless was still working. It was orders from the MLA to the civilian government to ask me to immediately relinquish charge at Manikganj and move to Dacca as a member of the Governor’s Inspection Team.

Early in 1971, desultory attempts were made by Pakistani politicians to keep Pakistan intact. The senior politicians came to Dacca to talk to their counterparts. Mr Bhutto had already made statements suggesting, we are happy here, you will be happy there, meaning effectively that West and East Pakistan respectively should separate. Mr Kasuri, a senior legal figure, asked me to show him around so he could see for himself what was going on outside official circles. I drove him about in the evenings in my official jeep and he had an idea of the gravity of the situation.

I will always be grateful for the memory of Wali Khan from the Frontier Province as he told the military high command, I want my officer back to my Province; he should not be here. When the talks between the politicians stalled, the military abruptly took action. If 90% of Bengalis were for Pakistan before the military action, after the shooting began 90 per cent were against it. Even then I was acutely aware that unless Pakistan acted with wisdom, we may end up losing more than just the goodwill of the Bengali people. Bengalis needed balm not bullets.

And in the midst of negotiations, General Yaqub was ignominiously sacked when he argued against military action in East Pakistan noting the impossibility of holding the province with only three divisions against the Indian army in the war that would inevitably follow. At his send-off at the airport, I was one of the very few civilians invited to say goodbye.

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A heavy air of doom hung over the land. As the year progressed the sense of crisis grew exponentially. Political positions hardened and mobs roamed the streets taking the law and order into their own hands. People were divided along ethnic lines. But the majority were still pro-Pakistan when in March the military crackdown began. After the violence, the majority had had enough of Pakistan and wanted Bangladesh. It was becoming dangerous to be a West Pakistani.

My one thought now was to get Zeenat out of the Province. We were staying with Brigadier Ali Al Adroos, Chief of Staff to the Martial Law Administrator and we lived in the Cantonment. But to get a place on the one daily flight to Karachi and then push our way through the thousands who had more or less permanently camped at the airport in the hope of getting a ticket was going to be a struggle. In order to make sure everything went smoothly I asked two friends to escort Zeenat to the airport. Early in the morning both turned up looking dashing in their uniforms. Major Tahseen Mirza in his dark cavalry uniform and Major Sabir Kamal in his Frontier Force khakis. Both were fully armed and had brought along their armed guard. In a procession, we set off for the airport and had no problem along the way. My friends escorted Zeenat to her seat on the plane. I will always honour the memory of those wonderful friends, Tahseen and Sabir, both alas no longer with us. It was a pleasure to reconnect decades later with Tahseen’s twin brother Commander Kemal living in London.

After Zeenat left things began to move swiftly with stories of violence circulating wildly. Once the plane took off a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders: My wife Zeenat was safe. My fate now was in the hands of God. Yet events moved which would get me to Zeenat in Karachi and both of us to Peshawar by the end of the year.

After President Yahya Khan launched a military operation to crush the opposition, Bengalis who resisted were called “miscreants” – this was a time before the word terrorist was popularized. There were stories of Bengalis being picked up and disappearing because a neighbour had given in their name as a possible suspect. As 1971 progressed, the violence spread. Recall the horrific bloodbath in Rwanda and Bosnia was still decades ahead and the world had little idea how to deal with this intense internal violence.

An army major recounted how he arrived at a girl’s school with his soldiers and found female breasts piled on the dining tables while the women writhed in agony upstairs. At Santahar railway junction women lay spread out on the railroad tracks the Bangladesh flag jammed into their vaginas. In the midst of this madness, the Bihari community proudly and provocatively declared its allegiance to Pakistan and proudly waved the Pakistan flag. The price was enormous and would haunt them to this day. In the end, they were rejected by the new country of Bangladesh and Pakistan refused to accept them. Few even know the tragedy of these gifted and neglected people.

By now the international press was almost unanimous in condemning Pakistan and supporting the Bengali struggle. Perhaps the cherry on the cake was the famous concert organized by George Harrison of the Beatles along with the legendary Indian musician Ravi Shankar at Madison Square Garden in New York.  In addition, albums were sold to raise funds for refugees from Bangladesh – the name being widely used for East Pakistan. Both the Pakistani government and the public simply ignored these developments and their implications for the perception of the country. Pakistan had lost the media war by this time.

On the international front, while Pakistan had alliances with the United States, India secured treaties with the Soviet Union which insured that any Indian action in East Pakistan would not face censure in for example the Security Council. In the event, the Soviet Union supplied India with arms and gave it full international support in 1971 while the United States Sixth Fleet which we presumed would save the day for us never arrived in the Bay of Bengal thus creating the popular belief in Pakistan that Americans are only fair-weather friends. What Pakistanis did not know at the time is that when Indira Gandhi threatened to move Indian troops from East to West Pakistan after the fall of Dacca with the intention of finishing Pakistan it was Nixon who emphatically challenged and dissuaded her.

Much of the anger and violence of 1971 came from ethnic ignorance and hatred. The irony was here it was Muslim on Muslim violence, which is an illustration of intra-religious violence based on ethnicity. But there was ample evidence of how outsiders were looking at South Asia through the prism of racial contempt. There are, for example, plenty of quotations from the historical archives in which President Nixon and Secretary Kissinger during this time call Indians, “the most sexless, nothing, people”. They compare “Black Africans” who they admit, “have a little animal like charm,” to Indians, “but God, those Indians, ack, pathetic.” Indira Gandhi is referred to as a “bitch” several times. The two wonder how such a repellant race can “reproduce.”  Pakistanis in contrast are “fine people” but still “primitive” “I tell you, the Pakistanis are fine people, but they are primitive in their mental structure. They just don’t have the subtlety of the Indians.” (Kissinger to Nixon in August 1971)

Systematically, East Pakistan was being cut off from the world. Indians were constantly sending in their agents to create dissension between the communities. The Indian government put every possible hurdle between the two wings of Pakistan to weaken the links between them, for example, the Pakistan international flights which flew over India were denied permission and had to fly down south to Sri Lanka and then up again adding considerable time and the need to refuel in Colombo. This made flights expensive and infrequent and restricted to once a day. That was just not enough for the volume of passengers who required transport out of Dacca to escape the growing crisis.

Following the military operation, as I had little work to do in the office, I asked for a few days’ leave to go and see Zeenat in West Pakistan.  I boarded the flight to Karachi and was seated behind Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. I knew him but was too agitated to go up and say salaam. I knew Pakistan was in deep danger and I felt angry and betrayed. I was highly agitated and my appearance must have been quite dishevelled as I had not had a haircut for a long time. On disembarking, Bhutto said something about thanking God that Pakistan had been saved. I wondered whether he believed that.

(To Be Continued)

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