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

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My life quickly settled down into the regular rhythm of my posting in the Peshawar secretariat as the Deputy Secretary, Home and Tribal Affairs Department. It was the typical 9 to 5 monotonous bureaucratic routine. What happened in East Pakistan appeared far away and unreal. No one seemed to be interested in that part of history. In any case, history was now turning its attention to the north-west and by the end of the decade, Soviet troops would invade Afghanistan and a new chapter in world history would open.

One visitor from East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, was the younger brother of the Bengali chief secretary. A pleasant, highly intelligent, and affectionate young man, he had arrived in Peshawar; hoping to see his brother who was under house arrest. He had nowhere to go and was worried about what to do about it. I asked him to come and stay with us and we gave him every hospitality and I arranged transport and permissions to see his brother. He was most grateful as people were avoiding him as at that stage, Bengalis were being treated as the enemy. When the elder brother was finally released from captivity, the first thing he did was to come to our house and express his deep appreciation.

The loss of East Pakistan with its literate, cultured, and lively population was like the amputation of the right hand for Pakistan.

Then, a few weeks into the new year, one early morning, not long after midnight, a cathartic poem poured out of me almost whole. I asked Zeenat to write it down. I called it, “They are taking them away to the slaughterhouses.”

The first lines were:

“They are taking them away

sullen shine the stars

the moon in agony aloof

so still stand the palm trees

the seasons are bearing

my dreams away

sanity

suspended

while all the black

horrors of the mind

uncoil

slowly

snakily

settle

over this land

they came by night

they came in shame

they came

to take the weapon and the woman

my throat

was dry

and chilled

my groin, for

they are taking them away

to the slaughter houses”

And the last lines of the poem were:

“….the lords of men

gods of pain

have taken council:

the unholy juggernaut will move

it is decreed

and none to challenge it

what compulsions drive such men

what fear makes them such savages

while reason, so thin on the breast,

deserts so quickly

who was martyr

which one saint

depended only

on the language he spoke;

to such a fine point

is the concept of alienation reduced; for

there is no shame like the shame of

taking them away to the slaughter houses.”

There has been a highly charged controversy around how many people died and who killed them. There is an equally heated debate around the figure of women raped. There were rumours that West Pakistani officers had ordered their troops to impregnate Bengali women in order to produce “Islamic children ” and “improve the stock.” Pakistanis deny any wrongdoing and dismiss the idea of genocide, while Bengalis assert that as many as three million people were killed by West Pakistanis and hundreds of women raped. My own assessment from the field was that such surveys were difficult to conduct and in any case, all assessments were distorted by wild rumours and ethnic prejudices. I believe all acts of violence are to be condemned. Each one of those lives lost, whether Bengali or Punjabi, was equally precious. Now looking back half a century later, I am disappointed to note that instead of apologising, embracing and moving ahead in order to close an unhappy chapter of their mutual history, Pakistanis and Bengalis are still caught up in debates about numbers. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the spirit of Mandela and on the pattern of South Africa, however painful and belated, should be set up to ascertain the facts and clear the air. South Asians must learn to move on; leaving their tragedies and pain behind.

1971 was a traumatic year that had seen the break-up of Pakistan. We had lived in the midst of great acts of heroism and humanity, but also horrific acts of brutality and ignorance. After 1971, Pakistan was broken in two and its critics gloated that it was all over for the Muslim nation. Yet, the idea of Pakistan remained: that idea was difficult to kill. The loss of East Pakistan with its literate, cultured, and lively population was like the amputation of the right hand for Pakistan.

But there were lessons too: Pakistan needed to have better relations based in compassion and fairness with its minority provinces and improved understanding with its neighbours, especially India and Afghanistan. Pakistan needed to create think tanks and promote public intellectuals and debate in order to guide and enlighten the government of the day and the general public to prevent them from living in dangerous isolation. But Pakistan, like most states, was resistant to learning lessons from its past.

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