

My Parents' World: Inherited Memories

Interview details

Interview with Md. Khurshid Alam [K]

Interviewed by Amzad Hossain Dinar [D]

Dinar. How are you?

Khurshid. *Ji Alhamadulillah*, I'm fine.

D. It's Friday today and all of us stay at home on Fridays. How was your day?

K. I was home too. Had some chores, had to buy some things from the market; just returned from my namaz when you came.

D. I will ask you some questions about 1947, the Partition of 1947, India and East Bengal. We would like you to share with us, whatever stories you may have heard from your family members—the stories, the memories.

K. I hadn't been born then. My grandfather had come here. The little I've heard is from my grandfather. We are from India. We had our homeland in Bihar. There is a province in Bihar, a district named Ara. My grandfather and his family were permanent residents of Ara. They came away to this side after the Partition of 1947—this side meaning Pakistan. It was known as Pakistan then. They came away here because they had heard that there were constant Hindu-Muslim riots, mayhem and arson going on in India, and they were Muslims. I've heard from him that there was a massive riot in India once—I can't tell you the year exactly—and it was probably after this incident that they decided to shift to Pakistan. Pakistan was a separate nation for Muslims. They thought because Pakistan was a Muslim-majority nation, they went away to East Pakistan.



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D. You've mentioned about the riots. Have you heard from your ancestors, stories of the 1947 Partition, or of the riots during the time? Would you like to share some of these with us?

K. No I don't know very remarkable stories. But I remember asking my father, since India was our homeland, it was our nation too, right? Then why did you have come here? He had replied, because Muslims were minority in India, and there were some areas in which Muslims had a mere marginal presence—practically non-existent. That's why they decided that when a separate State for Muslims had come into being, why should we stay here? I had asked them another question: you came away, but what about your elder brother (he had an elder brother)? He didn't cross the border. My grandfather's elder brother had some property in 24 Parganas in West Bengal. He was well provided for. So he didn't come away to this side. He had come away from Bihar to 24 Parganas and settled there permanently. And my grandfather, with his family, i.e. my father, my uncle and my aunt (Phuphu) came away to East Pakistan. There is an area known as Neelketh. The government arranged for refugees from India to stay there, and then to make them settle down by means of housing settlement. My grandfather and his family were there for some days. Then, when the Ayub government was in power, they were allotted land in a Joint Quarter in Mohammadpur in phases. The government took some money as down payment and the rest in instalments. So we moved into this house, and I was born in this house in 1965.

D. So you're saying that your family got a house through government allotment at the time of Ayub. We actually wanted to know the kind of struggle that your grandfather and his family might have gone through during that time.

K. East Pakistan ...

D. Yes. If you could share some incidents, memories of the period—

K. But at that time this was already East Pakistan and a Muslim country. We who had come away from India were all Muslims. 100% Muslims. Hindus hadn't come here. It was fine. I was born in 1965 and the country gained Independence in 1971. So far, it was pretty good. You



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probably know there was a Language Movement in 1952. After 1947, after the country was Independent in 1947, and East Pakistan created, Quaid-e-Azam, Muhammad Ali Jinnah was addressing public meetings in which he was saying that the official language of this new country, would be Urdu because East and West Pakistan were parts of the same country. The distance between East and West Pakistan was nearly 3000 kilometres. Bengalis had been living in East Pakistan since the very beginning. When Jinnah was giving his speech, there were seven and a half crore Bengalis in East Pakistan—Bengali Muslims. And we who had come away from India, we, who are called Biharis—there were some Biharis, some Marwaris, some Dilliwalas. People like us were ordinary workers who toiled and had a hand-to-mouth existence. And some were industrialists who owned mills and factories, who used to be known as Dilliwallahs and Bombaiyas. They too had come to this country. The people of this country couldn't agree with Jinnah on the language question. I now understand why they didn't. Those seven and a half crores of people who were living here for generations; whereas we who had come here in 1947 were hardly one crore in all. So we were only one crore, and they seven and a half crores. This was their original homeland. Then how could they agree to it that Urdu would be the national language? So there was this rancor inside. It was because of this that we had to face 1971.

The administration of Pakistan was also at fault. They couldn't take the right decision at the right time. The situation became murky and escalated into the War of Independence. Perhaps you know that it lasted nine months. It shouldn't have lasted that long—nine hours would have been sufficient to resolve the issue because it was a matter between seven and half and one crore people. Several Urdu speakers fought alongside them. You know, people in the media know. I've gathered certain documents. Do you know why? After Independence in 1971, we were squarely blamed for everything because we were non-Bengalis, we had come away from India. Hence we were Pakistanis; hence we were to blame. You would know how during such turbulent times, there are always people who are instrumental in inciting and raking up trouble. But that doesn't mean that all the people in the locality were involved. Those of us who had come during that time, we weren't against Independence. 90% people had maintained a



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neutral stance because they had nothing to do in the matter. But they became orphans. They didn't have any guardians. What were they to do? They kept faith in Allah and somehow survived. You know, there's another interesting thing here: the Rajakars who are being prosecuted and hanged; but the Biharis who were against this Movement promptly left the country in 1972 because they realized they wouldn't be able to fend for themselves here, once the War of Independence was won. Those who had come from India didn't feel safe any more, so maybe they returned to India, or went across to Pakistan. It wasn't safe for them any more because they had opposed Independence. But the Bengalis couldn't go anywhere? Where could they go? This was after all their homeland. The guilty are being punished today. But the ordinary citizens regarded us with revulsion and loathing—that these people had opposed our Independence. We had formed an organization and named it 'Muhajer' or 'Refugee'. We used to celebrate all the national festivals and programmes of Bangladesh.

D. So you're saying that you've seen the terrible incidents of 1971. My question is, how have you faced those times—do you have any memories to share regarding the utter mayhem that ensued, or your struggle for survival?

K. It was horrendous. I won't be able to articulate it in words, or make you understand how horrible it was. The situation that arose, practically speaking only those who had *hayat*, i.e. who had the fortune to live, survived. You see, *hayat*, *maut* [death], *rijik* [what the Fate ordains as your ability to earn], and *daulat* [riches / monetary gains] are all in the hands of Allah. So only those who were able to survive, remained alive. That is all I can say to you. But everybody wasn't harassed during the War of Independence, everybody didn't lose their homes. People who were known as good people, who had some renown in the locality, who remained inextricably a part of society, and whom society too protected and nurtured, were absolutely fine. They are still doing well. And there were the criminals and lumpens—actually the harm is inflicted by and because of a handful in any case. So that was it.



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There's another point I didn't tell you—that many Muslims from India, who had come over to Bangladesh were involved in the Bhasha Andolan, the Language Movement. They fought from the front ranks. I have lots of documents. We were there in the war in 1971, but we Biharis, non-Bengali speakers had fought side by side with the Bengalis in the Language Movement. I want to underscore this fact. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in recognition of their work and involvement in the movement made provision for their settlement, gave them houses. He told them: Because you are Biharis and you have fought for our independence, you won't be able to go back to India, neither can you go to Pakistan, because now you are their enemy. So I'm giving you these houses. You are free to live here for as long as you live. There are these houses on Zakir Hussain Road in Mohammadpur.

You know what experience tells me? After the war of independence, the locals of this country went on a looting and ransacking spree. They threatened people, drove them out and occupied their homes. This had happened then. Again, there were the good people who had no fear of any harm coming to them. But in those times, it was only natural that people would generally live in fear and terror, because there is a general sense of terror all around.

During the war because of lack of cash resources and hunger, many people sold their homes. But how much money did they get anyway in those days? Negligible sums. Besides, cent per cent homes got forcibly occupied. Homes of the Bihari families who had fled fearing for their lives, which they never could return to, were declared 'abandoned' by the government. Take my case, for instance: my home was in Dhaka, yet I had fled to Narayanganj, to Dinajpur and Chittagong, sought shelter with my relatives, and during the mayhem, I couldn't return home. In the mean time some government staff came home, saw nobody around, and listed it in their 'abandoned homes' inventory. But I was in my country, only I was not living in my home. There have been many incidents like these.

The Ershad government had issued a circular, saying that all Biharis from the Urdu-speaking community who are in Bangladesh, and whose homes have been declared abandoned, if they



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are residents of this country, can apply. Many people did apply. I too applied, because I had a house that had been declared abandoned. The court case is still on. But many have got back their homes. Those house owners who could show them valid documents and prove their credentials as bona fide owners have got back their properties through court intervention. And there are many cases that are still pending. So that's how things are now, and that's how we are making do. Besides, people have somehow very nicely adjusted to the life here.

I'll tell you something that'll leave you wondering. We Biharis have come away from India, we are Indian Muslims. But our kids, at least most of them, speak in Bengali. If you ask the kids, they won't be able to speak in Urdu. Things have come to such a pass. They have a special feeling for the Bengali language, and after this country is Bengal—cent per cent population, i.e. sixteen crores are Bengalis. These changes are creeping in slowly, but surely. If this continues, I hope our children will be able to shine in future, and they will be able to see some development. We never had any guidelines in the past; no leader or mentor who guide us to the right path, to a good path—somebody who would take us towards a good future—there was none to guide us. We were always in a state of utter confusion, and still are. Immediately after independence, the Pakistan government took back some people from here. Many had the feeling that, because the Pakistan government were taking us, we'll be able to take all our near and dear ones along with us. But what was actually happening was, their employees were being taken back, for instance people working in the railways. But soon after the process started the Prime Minister died. Mrs Benazir Bhutto. She had made it amply clear in her speech that all Pakistanis in Bangladesh would be taken back. All Pakistanis who live in Bangladesh today are either Muslims who have come away from India, or Muhajirs from India. I believe this policy has done us good. Governments before her would forever give us assurance of rehabilitating us in Pakistan, but would never do it in reality. So many lives have been wasted in the process. But she was the first one who made it clear that Biharis in Bangladesh would not be taken back in Pakistan. We got a chance to think about our futures with a certain clarity. We could also think about the futures of our children—how they could do well, how they could be given good



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education. So this opportunity Benazir Bhutto gave us. We are more or less settled here. Noen of us think about going to Pakistan any more. But there are certain pimps and brokers and agents who raise funds in from the international community by being 'champions' of our cause! They get donations, and then share it among themselves.

You've come to the Geneva camp. This is the head office. There are 70 such camps all over Bangladesh. You can see our living conditions. So if this is the state in the 'headquarters' just imagine the situation in the other camps where they live in subhuman conditions. The donations that supposedly come in for us, are of no use to us. The country achieved independence in 1971. It is forty four years now. Many more complicated problems have got resolved throughout the world, but here? There's no problem; there isn't any dearth of donors in Bangladesh. They are genuinely concerned about our lives and our problems, about those families that are living in camps all over Bangladesh. The United Nations, World Bank, asian Development Bank, donors from the Middle East, the Arab countries—all are concerned about our permanent rehabilitation, but they simply are not able to get a proper direction. Hence our problem remains suspended in limbo. This is how it has been, but it is much better than before, *Inshallah*.

D. What does 'Partition' mean to you?

K. Which Partition? 1947 or 1971?

D. Whichever. We are eliciting your opinion.

K. There was no Partition in 1971.

D. The Partition of 1947 . . .

K. Yes the Partition of 1947 was a partition and not a partition at the same time. India was partitioned. We didn't have a state to begin with, so how can we say that it was partitioned? It was *maha Bharat*, the greater India which was divided into three nations—East Pakistan, West Pakistan, 3000 kms between them [and India]. So India was divided into two first, India and



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Pakistan, and then Pakistan into two. Pakistan was created expressly as a separate country for Muslims. I've heard 36 different castes and nationalities coexist in India, and a whole variety of religious practices coexist. But you'll notice something about the Islamic faith—and that's true in any Muslim country across the world—that all of them worship one Allah and Rasul. But people from other religions, they are all divided about the way they practice religion. One has one god, another has a different god. Then you'll see the Sikhs. They wear turbans; yet they are considered Hindu despite the fact that their religious practices are completely different. But Muslims—Irani Muslims, Bangladeshi Muslims or Calcutta Muslims—are Muslims all. If they don't believe in Allah Rasul, they aren't considered Muslims at all. To Muslims of all castes and nationalities, the non-believing Muslim is no Muslim at all; he is a *bidharmi*. That's why they thought of a separate country for Muslims. That's what Jinnah-sahab did. If there was a separate country for Muslims, there wouldn't be any riots, arson, etc. That is what I've heard, and this I think is a fact.

D. In 1947 the entire subcontinent was divided by a wall known as 'border'. India and Pakistan were separated by borders. What does the term 'border' mean to you? What significance has it been in your lives?

K. Borders do harm to the common people, the common masses of the country. But every State, every government makes borders for its own security—we're on this side, you're on that side. Borders have prevented us from visiting one another. I cannot go to India because I feel like it one day. Since I'm a Muslim from India, I have relatives in India, my blood, my genealogy—all in India. I have to go there, right? But because of this border, I have to go there as a foreigner. It's not that I cannot go; I have to follow certain regulations laid down by the government. Make a passport, take a visa, visit India according to the rules. I had gone on a trip to India only a few days ago. But being a foreigner, a Bangladeshi, I have to take the passport of the country I am a citizen of. They had given it to me right at the beginning. I don't know what they wanted, or what political play was behind it. But we were all together—us and India—all of



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us together. Take our former President, Alhaz Hossain Mohammad Ershad. He was Muslim from India, just like me. He has no roots in Bangladesh. Just like my father came from India, so did his father. But he rose to be the President of Bangladesh. There's none above him. If you can prove your capability, you have ample option for work. But people look at us with disdain, with a negative mind because some had taken the support from Paksitan. The bureaucracy too eyes us with suspicion because some of us supported Pakistan during the war of independence. That has slowly cleared. Not all were against independence. I think we have successful about 50 per cent. The rest is in Allah's hands. They too have realized their mistake. Were all Bengalis in favour of independence? If they were, why so many hangings ? Even the Rajakar army—what was it actually? Just like Ansar army, police army, the Rajakar army. There were Urdu-speaking Biharis in it, and there were Bengalis too. They were cent per cent Bengalis, because you'll notice another aspect—the Urdu speaking Biharis were all residents of towns in Bangladesh. In Dhaka, we were in the town, not in Dhaka Manikganj, neither in Dhaka Narayanganj or Narsinghdih. At one time Narsinghdih was in Dhaka district, it has now been separated. Similarly the Biharis of Khulna were in Khulna town, not in any village or mufassil. There weren't of this country; how could they stay in mufassils or villages? They were always in towns, in the capital.

We are doing well more or less; but efforts are on by some philanthropic organizations to shift this camp to some other location. How long can we endure this camp life? I've been here 44-45 years of my life. This room you are sitting in, this practically houses the entire family quarters. We live, eat, cook, wash here. By the grace of Allah, this house is my younger brother's. This is practically his double room. And our family has been living in a room half this size for the past 45 years. This is the state we are in. We've heard that our respected Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina is very proactive about how to end this camp life for us, and make arrangements for rehabilitating us. There is an effort.



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D. The rites, rituals, practices, cuisine, dress that your forefathers would follow, how much of those are still alive in your practice, or how far do you practice these?

K. In a way they are still the same. There hasn't been much change. There's not much difference in what we wear and what the people in general wear in this country. Indian culture has stayed on in us, in whatever we do. In marriages, family occasions, celebrations related to the birth of babies or their rice ceremony, our rites and rituals have survived. Therefore you'll notice that this is the month of Muharram. We bring out a procession that is called the 'tazia micchil.' You'll be able to see it if you come around the 9th or 10th in the month of Muharram.

All Bihari localities are steeped in Indian culture. Even our marriages follow Indian customs. We cannot just abandon these, because none of the women in our family will support this. Natives of Bangladesh never put vermillion on the parting of the hair. It is not a custom among Muslims in general. Hindu Bengali Muslims must have sindoor, and so do we. That's an essential item. A few days ago during namaaz prayers, our Huzoor explained things that are good and bad, and we come and tell our mother-grandma-aunt at home not to use certain items. They are unwilling to change what they have been following all these years. They tell us, 'You've been born only the other day; these customs have been followed for generations, from the times of our grandparents, and their parents.' We don't create pressure on them. Come to think of it most of our cultural expressions are Indian, that's what we live by.

D. What about your food—cuisine, recipes, do you follow the same recipes as you used to earlier?

K. Yes, as I told you, these are all Indian—that have come down to us from our grandfathers and grandmothers.

D. Would you tell us in detail? The process, the difference in cuisine patterns of India vis-à-vis this country?



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K. We Urdu speakers prefer things fried, i.e. what we call *bhuna kism*. Any fish would have to be fried before cooking. Then a curry can be made with vegetables, or just a plain curry made—but the first requisite step is that it should be fried. Nobody will eat if it isn't fried. Even in meat preparations, the favourite items are those which have been deep fried. Even tea, snacks, etc. whatever we have today, is from the Indian culture.

The spread in our marriage feast includes pulao—the plain pulao is a must—and with it chicken roast and beef curry. We don't have any fish in the marriage banquet. Even in the most sumptuous of banquets, there will be no fish. But here in Bangladesh, fish is an extricable part of the local culture and any major feast will have fish. Fish is not part of our culture. This has remained, and I think won't be removed so easily. This is here to stay. The standard expression is—this is how our forefathers used to do it, and it will be done in the same way.

D. You are Urdu speaking, and the language used here has a certain continuity; but you said that the next generation almost cannot speak the language. What do you feel about this? Will this trend continue?

K. It will, but my child, who is very small, can only say that my language is Urdu. When you are talking about language, let me tell you something: now I'm a Muslim from India, so my language ought to have been Hindi, isn't it? Hindi is the national language of India, so my mother tongue should also have been Hindi since I'm an Indian. We are Indians, true, but Muslims. So our mother tongue is Urdu, a language in which we speak and write. My kid is more comfortable speaking in Bengali, and feels diffident speaking Urdu in most places. His twenty five classmates speak in Bengali, hence he speaks in Bengali too, and he likes it. But I strongly feel that he must be taught Urdu in future, because it is our mother tongue. This language can be of use to us any time. We have to reclaim our mother tongue, but we don't have the right atmosphere here. I've studied Urdu till class VI. When I used to study in 1973/74, Urdu used to be a subject in school. But now it isn't a subject any longer. Since it is our mother tongue, where is the harm in my kid learning it a little? That's what I feel. When you are out

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somewhere and you cannot speak in English, or you are not used to speaking in English, but you can speak Urdu, you will be able to make your way through. You'll surely get somebody to understand you; but if you speak Bengali, nobody will. In India itself, if you go to Delhi or Mumbai, nobody will understand Bengali. Maybe two in a thousand will be able to answer your query if you speak in Bengali. But you go anywhere, there will be somebody or the other who can speak in Urdu or Hindi. I've heard even in Europe or the foreign countries, you'll get somebody to understand you if you can speak either in Hindi or Urdu. That way it is very important that one has to learn Urdu.

There's another thing I had heard when I was a child (don't know whether it is correct) that English is the first language of the world, and Urdu is the second language of the world. I don't know how far that is true, because I've never gone abroad, but I've been to India and seen for myself that Urdu and Hindi can take you anywhere; doesn't matter if you don't know English. Go to any country in Saudi Arabia, Middle East, you'll be able to get along fine with knowing Urdu. So I feel our children must learn Urdu. I am trying to put it across to our leader to include it in the school curriculum, particularly in the school in our camp. But it won't be possible for schools outside without a government order. I'm trying to open an Urdu class informally at home. I'm trying to procure books and teach Urdu.

D. You've shared a lot of memories of 1971 instead of 1947. Would you like to share or pass on your stories or memories to your next generation?

K. I feel it would not be correct to go on carrying this load of memories. We don't need these memories now. We are Bangladeshis, and my son or my children are Bangladeshis by birth. So many tales and annals will only bring about a divide; tensions will creep into them. They will lose their attachment towards their motherland. I don't think these need to be prolonged. There sure was a time when these tales had a relevance—not any more. No use telling the tale over and over again. There won't be any benefit. We may show a lot of compassion and love, but we can never regain a position of trust and camaraderie among the people of India. To



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them we are merely objects of hate. We understand this now, since this is our motherland. Allah Rabbul Alameen must have thought it would be good for us. We migrated to the other side for our own convenience. I don't think the government or the people of India would take that very kindly. We came away from the same family, didn't we? We were children of India, and we came away from the family. Do people at all appreciate those who go out of their families? Never.

There were a few brokers who were working for Pakistan and speaking in favour of Pakistan even after independence. They are the ones who are calling us 'Pakistanis' and giving us a bad name. They have ensured that we fester and rot. So I feel it's no use prolonging the tale any longer. We are Bangladeshis, and by birth Bangladeshis. Now we think about how we can contribute towards making this country better. We think about the good of this country, its security. We have suffered doubly over. Once when the country was divided in 1947, and then again in 1971. If some devious idea creeps in once again, then it will be a third time. There's absolutely no need.

Allah had ordained. Let it be this way. My grandfathers and father's generation had come from India. Father was born in India, grandfather too; I've been born here, in Bangla, the present Bangladesh, previously East Pakistan. It is my bidden duty to serve this land, to ensure its security. I don't want to give this long tale to my kids. I just want to get his message across— Bangladesh is your motherland, your birthplace; and if at all you want to do anything good, serve this land, protect it from enemies, and if need be, be prepared to lay down your lives for it. Just this much. As I said, I don't want a repeat again for a third time. There's no need.

D. You've said that the people of India look upon you with hatred or with negativity because you have migrated to this country. Do you remember any incident or verbal exchange that you may have faced, that you might want to share with us?

K. No, none that I can remember. I've been to India three / four times, and three times to Delhi. I had gone to Kolkata three months ago in April. I went to Fairlie House where they give railway



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tickets to foreigners. I was standing in a long queue, and got to know a gentleman who was the RPRB, in the Railway Police force. We got talking in Hindi, I mean Urdu; and that person did not believe that I was a Bangladeshi. After speaking for about fifteen minutes, he asked me, 'Brother, where are you from?' He had thought it would be somewhere here in India. When I said, Bangladesh, he turned round and told me, 'Why are you joking with me? Am I to be the butt of your jokes? I'm a police officer, why are you cracking jokes with me?' So I replied, 'Why should I joke with you? Mustn't I tell you what's true? You asked me where I lived, I said it is in Dhaka, and I live in Bangladesh.' He still wouldn't believe me! My mother was with me too. I had taken her on a pilgrimage to Ajmer Sharif. So then I told him, 'Ask my mother, here.' He believed at last when my mother told him. Then he believed that I am originally from India. I told him that my grandfather had gone over to Pakistan in 1947. Now it is Bangladesh. I've been born there, and I live there. His eyes were filled with tears. He asked me, 'Aren't you sufferers?' then he asked me where I was born. I said, Dhaka. He replied, 'Yes, but you live there as foreigners.' I said, 'Yes, Sir, it's somewhat like that.' 'That's the end result of betraying India. That's the price you're paying for the betrayal of your forefathers,' he said, 'that in your own country you live as refugees. You don't have a proper roof over your heads, and you live in camps.' He told me directly that we had betrayed India. He asked me, what was it like here? And then gave references of other Muslims. When I replied saying widespread riots and arson and killings were the reasons why our family left, he replied, ok, you ten had gone, what about the ten thousand who stayed back? Are they not alive? Are they outside governance? In the mean time, another SI arrived, a sub-inspector of the GRP. He was a Muslim. He introduced him to me saying, look, he's a Muslim. Isn't he living here? He's with the police, in the police headquarters of Lalbazar. He too told me the very same things, about betrayal, etc. Then he quoted an adage, saying, '*jo aapka watan ko bhoola, uska hathpao phula*', meaning someone who forgets his own country, destroys his own peace, and buys unrest.

I too had fought with my grandfather, asking him why he had to come away, because it feels like home, going to India. Even if I go to Chittagong or Noakhali, however perfectly enunciated



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my Bengali is, the discerning person will be able to make out that I'm not a Bengali. But if I go anywhere in India—Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai, even if I tour the whole of India, people will not question me, nor will there be any occasion for believing or not believing, because by my looks, my gait, my dress, there's nothing to distinguish me from a Hindu.

Both my grandfather and father had told me that they had come away because of an impossible situation. Whenever I'm in India, it seems like home. It seems I'm in my own house—such is the attachment. This is true not only of Kolkata, but anywhere in India. The train from Delhi to Kolkata and back to Delhi, a journey of about forty hours—it seemed I was sitting in Mohammadpur; went to Ajmer Sharif, it seemed like I was roaming around Mohammadpur. Delhi seemed as familiar as Dhaka.

It's only the language of a neighbouring country. What's the harm in learning it? I feel that the government here should open a Hindi school. Koran Sharif does not say that nobody except a Muslim can learn the language. There should be a mutual exchange in learning language, which gives a sense of knowledge, empowerment, and the ability to move across nations with ease.

D. Do you want to share anything at all that you might want to share, something you have missed, or something I've forgotten to ask?

K. The burra saab told me that he was coming from Delhi, and he was working on some collateral project between India and Bangladesh. Through him, I want to communicate this message to the people in the administration in Delhi, and the people of Delhi, that if he upholds this before them—that the Indian Muslims who are now living in Bangladesh had very little choice in doing what they did then. They were victims of circumstance, and didn't take this step knowingly. They shifted out of compulsion, not by choice. This needs to be communicated in no uncertain terms. I'll naturally not feel good about my son leaving home to live elsewhere. Jinnah sahib created a country to which they had come. Now even the name has changed—it's Bangladesh now. The land remains the same, the skies, the air: nothing has changed, really. The environment hasn't changed either—it's just the name that has changed. They actually hadn't



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come to Pakistan, they had come to the land of Muslims. They had been brainwashed into believing that if you stay in India, there will be riots every two to five years, and the Hindus will chop you alive. There are crores of Hindus, and you are just one lakh. And that's a separate nation for the Muslims. They were cheated into believing this. You know there are people in this society who are stupid, ignorant, and illiterate. Ten per cent people who came here were like this. Those who were well established in India, with their business, property, homes, agricultural land, mills and factories, they hadn't come here. The ones who came were the toiling masses, those who had a hand-to-mouth existence, those who had very little education, practically illiterate. And the really high class people had come away too—the VIP class. Like the ones who had mills in Tejgaon, mills, factories, industry, large jute mills and factories. The middle class actually didn't come here. Why would a person who had two to three factories or 500 bighas cultivable paddy fields come here at all? Or somebody who had four businesses in Kolkata or two in Delhi for that matter? No talk about Pakistan being a Muslim state, or even Koran state would have persuaded them to move. And they didn't move. Of the population that moved, more than half were landless, homeless. They were in Kolkata, Delhi, Bihar. They were coming in search of land, a new house, a job, some facilities—those were the temptations. You'll find all these instances if you search history. Not a single middleman had shifted.

I had heard a story, about a real gentleman, a Maulana, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. He was a very respected and honoured man in India. When he heard that the Muslims were all leaving India, he had organized a huge mass rally. He had told in his speech not to make this mistake. He had warned that those who leave would suffer. This is your motherland, your birthplace, don't leave it and go. You'll have to pay for it dearly—he had said. I had heard that the Biharis who were hell bent on going away had thrown slippers at him—not one or two, but five hundred slippers were flung at him on the dais. He had said, don't quit your motherland, the atonement will cost you very dear. His words are being proven true today. Not a single punctuation has been proved wrong. I must call him Hazrat Maulana. He was surely an *Oli*, an *Oli Allah* personified. He had tremendous foresight. In that open meeting he had proclaimed



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these words. They could have killed him, for all you know, but he did not flinch from his stand. The penance has been going on for the past 45 years now; all his predictions proven correct to the letter. We honour him and call him Hazrat Maulana.

There's another, a poet, whose grave is probably in Pakistan. He was an Indian. Hazrat Allama Iqbal. You must have heard of him. In his poetry he has said many times that one who quits his homeland, his happiness, peace and future are destroyed. He has said that in several of his writings. He has also said that—a people, a nationality who do not endeavour to change / improve their position, Allah too abandons him.

But our forefathers had this strange rose-tinted notion that all would be hunky-dory in a Muslim state. They thought they would be able to live freely, never have to confront any Hindu, never have to see a Hindu face in his life; never get into a riot like situation with the Hindu community—they would spend their entire lifetime in peace and happiness. This was the virus that had been injected into their minds. As I said, we are much better than before, and there's enough sympathy for us. And the thing you said about the border—the dream of a free border will remain a dream. With the present situation of terror and armed insurrection all over the world, there is no question about freeing the border any more. But we do get passports from the government. We take our passports, get our visas and go on trips to India, or to any other part of the world. There are no restrictions. But the fact that this was a nation just adjacent to us—that would never be. There should be border security. That's essential. But since it is a Muslim nation, there are many non-Muslim nations that are in its target. Many nations, groups, parties try to harm our country, they try to discredit us, because we live here happily and in peace. In a country of sixteen crores, fifteen crores are Muslims. Besides, they are a terribly god-fearing people. The number of mosques here outnumber all the mosques taken together in the ten Arab states.

I remembered another point. You were talking about 1947. The country was divided in 1947 into two nations—India and Pakistan. Why was Bangladesh a part of Pakistan, why not Bombay



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or Delhi, or even Rajasthan? This was done on the basis of a survey. It was decided that those regions which had Muslim majority would be declared as part of Pakistan. Then there would be minimal 'changing.' A team had come to do the survey. At that time there waterways were in greater use, and roads less. So they saw the peasant reaping harvest, the boatman rowing his boat promptly settling to prayers at the call of *azan*. We were very poor then. Most of the toiling masses hardly had a garment for the torso. The surveyors decided that here are a religious minded Muslim people, so let this be in Pakistan.

There were six crore Muslims then. There were Hindus too, but most of them came away to India. Then there came the exchange—Hindu and Muslim properties were exchanged on both sides of the border. Maybe I had a land in Patna, Bihar, and a Hindu had a land in Dhaka. So there was a mutual exchange. As a Muslim, I must grant that I am in a good position now in a Muslim state. All states have malcontents, troublemakers and corrupt people. If Allah had enemies, we are small fry! But even amidst all this trouble, all one wants is to lead a moderately pleasant life, with honesty, obeying the strictures of religion. Allah helps all tide over.

I have only one prayer: that the people of India look at us with equanimity and clarity of vision. My forefathers have died, my father's generation has died too, now we are the only ones remaining, and after us our kids. If this lingers on, the darkness of the heart does not clear. Since I have been educated, people look at me with some suspicion. As I told you, we have been victims of circumstance. But one good thing is that when I went to India I saw there weren't many commonalities. It was good in a way. I became reconciled to my father. Else I would have gone and seen two mills owned by grandfather and that would have led to a quarrel with father. When I saw we had next to nothing, I was saved!

The Pakistan government has an embassy in Gulshan, and the embassy representatives occasionally come and work in the seventy-odd camps that lie dotted all over Bangladesh. There are community toilets where twenty people use one toilet. The embassy does the maintenance work in these toilets. The Indian embassy on the other hand hasn't taken similar



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initiatives—neither in the past, nor do they now. I somehow have a feeling that they are not sympathetic to our problems. Our blood is Indian, only the body is Bangladeshi.

It is my earnest request to you to communicate this message: to look on us with some compassion and empathy. Whatever be the faults and errors of our forefathers, let those not be dumped on us. They were duped into taking certain decisions that were not their own. You have come to us, I thank you from my heart. And those who have taken this project, I hope our community will benefit from it to some extent. I'm sure of it.

Of the seventy camps, you can consider, you are sitting in the capital. If you visit the camps in RAngpur, Dinajpur, Maimansingh, you'll be shocked to see the miserable state in which people live. They have no life. They move about like live corpses.

*zinda hai is tarha, zinda hai is tarha,
ke koi zindagi nahi
jalta hua diya hai, magar rowshni nahi
aur zinda hoon is tarha ke kahin zindagi nahin*

We are alive, but without any life / Our lamps are lighted, but without illumination

It is my earnest plea to you that you represent it in a way that they have some compassion towards us. May *Allah* instill *rahmat* in their hearts, may they think good of others. The Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has promised us rehabilitation. If everybody pitches in and gives some strength to her—all those who want us to have better lives as human beings, who love us, may all those people from all over the world join hands with her in order to help us get proper rehabilitation.

