

# The Daily Star

# WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## Witness to History

# Life and Times of Gen. Wasiuddin : A Chapter in the Rise of Bengalee Nationalism in Pakistan Defence Services

by Major General M Khalil ur Rahman

**One largely unwritten subject relating to the growth of Bengalee nationalism is part of the history of the Pakistan defence services, not just of the War of Liberation but also of the formative years of the country's military establishment. Thus, the relentless fight that General Wasiuddin fought, with help from Gen. Osmany (then a Colonel), to give officers and men from the erstwhile East Pakistan, even by using Bangla in the then East Bengal Regiment, an identity of their own is now being told, perhaps for the first time, by an officer who saw it all from close quarters, thus witnessing a part of our history.**

DEATH came very suddenly last month to General Wasiuddin. He played a full game of golf that evening and then was attending a dinner party in a friend's house — talking and joking. Suddenly, he collapsed and passed away soon after.

Though we, soldiers, cherish such deaths, the shock it produced was severe, nevertheless. Numerous people who thronged his house the whole day were numb and mute. No one had apprehended this for a man so healthy and full of life. A foreign diplomat remarked "He was a giant of a man." The soldiers, both retired and serving looked as if they lost the head of the family too unexpectedly.

As I returned home, some journalists rang up and requested that I tell them what I knew about this great son of Bangladesh. I must admit I was at a loss — I didn't know where to begin and how to describe such a giant of a man and his enormous contribution to his country, in a few words. I told them of a few disjointed incidents. While they hurriedly scribbled those for the next day's write up, they fervently requested me to write a fuller account of this great son of Bangladesh. When I looked diffident and hesitant they rebuked me by saying that I owed it to the countrymen to tell them whatever I knew about one of their brilliant compatriots and fore-bears.

I saw their point and hence this effort. But when I actually start writing I find that the contribution of General Wasiuddin cannot be recounted without describing the backdrop in which he lived and worked.

General Wasi was born in a

naturally take to mercenary role. The British, for that matter any discerning mind, knew that a Bengalee would not fight for money. They will fight and die like flies only for a cause. They also knew that unlike the Punjabis and the Gurkhas perpetuation of British Raj could by no means be a cause for a Bengalee to fight and lay down life for. So the Bengalees were declared a non-martial race.

In Pakistan the Pubjabi Muslims who were reared with the British favour since their collaboration in the Sepoy Mutiny, believed in this myth. Then the economic backwardness of the Bengalees coupled with their shorter physical structure added to this conviction, especially amongst the mindless West Pakistanis.

In this backdrop, an Infantry Regiment, consisting of 100 per cent Bengalee soldiers was raised in 1948 and

Punjab regiment appeared in the boxing ring against the 1st East Bengal (The Senior Tigers) at Dhaka Cantonment. Out of 11 bouts, the Bengalees knocked out the Pubjabis in 8 bouts and won the remaining 3 in points. This alerted the Pakistani authorities. They were not prepared for this prowess of a Bengalee in an area which was their domain since the Sepoy Mutiny.

The farsighted Ayub Khan saw in this a danger to his future scheme of things. The Bengalee soldiers organised in a regiment with 100 per cent purity would prove a threat. So he decided to dilute them. He planned to introduce the Punjabis and Pathans in the East Bengal Regiment. In an infantry battalion, there are four infantry companies. Ayub's plan was to convert the East Bengal Regiment so that it would have one pure Bengalee Company, one Pubjabi Company, one Baluch Company (which in fact is another Punjabi Company), one the other Pathan Company. To compensate for this sacrifice the Bengalees were offered that in place of only two East Bengal Regiments they could have a dozen or more East Bengal Regiments.

General Wasi and Col Osmany saw through the game and decided to oppose it even at the peril of their careers. An officer with outstanding merit, with an assured future in the army and with a feudal background General Wasi was not expected to risk his career for an airy fairy idea like this. But here he was — every inch a Bengalee and as if born to uphold whatever the word Bengalee meant.

Since cunning is weaker than moral force, the Pakistani authorities relented. Instead they ordered that the East Bengal Regiment be tested in battle conditions and reported upon by a genuine Pakistani Senior Officer. If unsuccessful, the East Bengal Regiment



Gen. Wasiuddin

would be mixed. This officer was General KM Shaikh, a friend of Ayub. He put the first East Bengal Regiment through a very rigorous test under the most difficult conditions in the hills of Punjab during severe winter. We had thought that Gen KM Shaikh was anti-Bengalee. But he proved to be an honest soldier. When the regiment passed through those rigorous tests, he in his unimpeachable style and language painted the Bengalee soldiers as the best he knew. To ascribe the possible cause for such high standard of discipline and training, he said that as every Bengalee soldier believes that he is an ambassador of East

Pakistan to the West, he conducted himself as such and performed to the best of his ability. He said, he believed that if they are left unmixed as they are in a regiment, they would fight the best and would be second to none in the world.

General Wasi and his colleagues stood redeemed. Ayub Khan had to drop his scheme of mixing up the East Bengal Regiment. But, not necessarily he loved General Wasi or Col Osmany for this — in stead these two Bengalees suffered for this.

In 1965 War, 1st East Bengal Regiment was deployed in Bedian sector in Punjab.

They fought bravely and frustrated all attacks from India and won 17 gallantry awards. This was the largest number of gallantry awards won by a single battalion. While the population of West Pakistan acclaimed this, the Pakistan authorities became again alerted by this military prowess of the hitherto believed to be non-martial race.

I remember that I met General KM Shaikh soon after the war and with good natured humility I remarked, "Even we did not expect such a brave performance by the Bengalee soldiers."

A matter-of-fact honest soldier, Gen KM Shaikh quipped, "Why? I personally knew that they would do well in any battlefield. Didn't I say that the 1st East Bengal Regiment is the best regiment in the Pakistan army?"

I couldn't help recalling one event of 1957 when I served in GHQ Rawalpindi, Mr Khairat Hossain, MP was perhaps, a minister of state in Pakistan. We had written a paper recommending that the number of battalions of East Bengal Regiment should be raised

from the present two to twenty, in order to increase the representation of the Bengalees in the army. This was a popular demand those days. The Cabinet sent the paper to GHQ for comments. Ayub, the C-in-C, circulated the paper to the heads of the departments for comments but fore-stalled their freedom of opinion by writing his own comments on it first. I still remember his bold big hand writing.

"While the danger of an attack by India is constantly lurking, we cannot experiment with a questionable material of Bengalee soldier." Then he added, "Mr Khairat Hossain is guilty of subverting the loyalty of either a serving officer or a retired officer of East Pakistan who helped him draft this letter."

I must admit I was struck at this arrogance and audacity of a serviceman on matter involving the political demand of the majority of the population of Pakistan. I was also convinced that our Independence earned from the British was utterly meaningless.

I promptly and quietly got

Ayub's remarks copied and showed to both Col Osmany and Gen Wasi who only rubbed their teeth in frustration.

I would have very much liked to ask Ayub as to what he thought of the exemplary bravery displayed in the battle field by the 'questionable material', as opposed to the questionable performance of some of his compatriots who were defending their own home and hearth and the honour of their mothers and sisters but ran away from battle lines as cowards. But I did not get the opportunity. I am sure Gen Wasi would also have liked to ask the same question to Ayub.

General Wasi wanted to instill pride among the Bengalee soldiers. Speaking in provincial language e.g. Pubjabi Pustho or Sindhi was forbidden in the army. The Pubjabis enforced this custom on the Bengali language also which had already attained the status of a state language along with Urdu. Being in minority the Bengali Officers and men did not dare use Bengali in public. Gen Wasi set up the precedent. He wrote the name plate in front of his house in Bengali at Rawalpindi. The Pakistan authorities looked perplexed but did not know what to do. Gen Wasi do not stop at that. He read his speech in Bengali at his investiture ceremony as the Colonel Commandant of the East Bengal Regiment at Chittagong. Then he read his speech in Bengali in Lahore and Sialkot at the Presentation Ceremony of the National Standard of Pakistan to the 4th and 5th East Bengal Regiment. General Tikka Khan, the later killer of the Bengalees, listened to his speech standing behind him in Sialkot like a lamb. The Pakistan authorities were bitterly critical of this audacity of a Bengalee, but could do nothing about it officially. Such was the personality of Gen Wasi, such was his spirit of Bengalee nationalism which dared and awed the mightiest of the Pakistanis.

Ayub fell and Gen Yahya became the Martial Law Administrator of Pakistan in 1969. Gen Wasi was the Second Senior most officer after Gen Yahya. Gen Wasi was told to remain prepared as No 2 to Gen Yahya. He certainly would have been the next Chief of Staff of Pakistan Army. But the events took different shape. In February 1971, the Pakistan army decided to take military action on the elected representatives of East Pakistan. Top to toe constitutional minded and a genuine Bengalee, Gen Wasiuddin was aghast. He protested it but to no avail. Then he did the next best he could. He sent his Bangalee PA to Dhaka at his own expense to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

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Gen Wasiuddin with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, while the former was serving as Bangladesh Ambassador to Kuwait

feudal family but curiously enough went through a middle class type of schooling in the childhood with the local boys. After that he was in the St Gregory School, Dhaka where he again studied and played with the middle class Bengalee boys. Although he left for the Royal Military College, Dehradun, in his early adolescence, and was raised in a rather British Public school atmosphere, his early grounding in a vernacular school in Dhaka endured and he sustained his Bengalee background. Possessing a keen mind, he found virtue in his own culture and heritage as a Bengalee.

RIMC was a Cadet College, perhaps the only one in India, where selected boys from entire India were admitted and trained either for the British Indian Army or Indian Civil Service. General Wasi was a meritorious student who also excelled in sports. It was indeed creditable that this short statured Bengalee student became the best Cadet and was appointed the Cadet Captain in 1937-38. He joined Indian Military Academy Dehradun in 1939 and passed out as an Officer next year.

General Wasi's pride as a Bengalee assumed a different connotation in the new milieu of Pakistan after 1947. Here his Bengalee pride came in direct conflict with the patronising attitude of the Punjabis towards the Bengalee soldiers whom they considered as an underling.

Following the Sepoy Mutiny the British avoided recruiting the Bengalees who would not

named The East Bengal Regiment. The Pakistanis opposed it and retained their belief that it was a wastage of the government money of the country.

General Wasi and his friend and junior colleague Col (later Gen) Osmany took up the challenge of proving to the world that the Bengalees are soldiers, though not mercenary soldiers. They knew that born and bred in the raw elements of Nature, all engulfing floods and devastating cyclones, a Bengalee is a fighter. So soldiering comes naturally to him. All he needs in guidance with sympathy.

These two senior most Bengalee soldiers provided precisely that. They became the sympathetic guide of these newly recruited officers and men. They insisted on high standard of discipline and very high standard of professional efficiency. The Bengalee soldiers in general and the East Bengal Regiment in particular, responded to these two guides with enthusiasm and zeal. They attained high standard both in training and sports. To illustrate, the East Bengal Regiment beat the Punjabis and Pathan troops in drill in the 14th Aug Parade held in the Race Course in 1950. They beat them in sports like football and swimming. But the Pakistanis whittled down their credit by saying that football and swimming came naturally to a Bengalee. Then the East Bengal Regiment decided to take them on in boxing which was a ferocious game involving pitting the guts of a man against another. In 1950 3/8th

Until 1985, the South African government's apartheid policy of influx control made it virtually impossible for black contract workers from the rural areas to move legally with their families to the cities. They were forced to live in migrant worker hostels, sometimes a dozen or more men to a room, and to leave their wives and children in the country's impoverished rural areas.

Nowhere was the migrant labour system more deeply entrenched than on the mines. An estimated 97% to 98% of the mining workforce of 700,000 were migrant workers, forced to share crowded hostels on the premises of their employers.

Indeed, the development of the mining industry — the pillar of the apartheid economy — depended on the cheap, unskilled labour supplied by migrant workers. "It's arguable that gold mining would never have come into existence without migrant labour," says Dr Jonathan Crush, of the Department of Geography at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario and a joint leader of a co-operative project between Queen's and the University of Cape Town. The IDRC-funded project is exploring alternatives to the migrant labour system.

**Predates apartheid**  
The mining industry's exploitation of migrant labour pre-dates apartheid by more than 80 years. "The mines' migrant labour system is not simply a product of apartheid policies," says Dr Wilmot James, of the Department of

## South Africa in Transition-II

# From Hostels to Homes : Housing Options for Miners

**When Richard Mamola grew up in rural Transkei on South Africa's eastern seaboard in the 1950s, he hardly knew his father, who was a migrant worker on the gold mines.**

Sociology at the University of Cape Town and the other project leader.

"Certainly, apartheid practices — here I have in mind homeland policies, influx control, and single-sex hostels — have upheld and reproduced the migrant labour system and used its example as a model for other sectors of the economy. The abolition of apartheid is hardly a sufficient condition to the abolition of migrant labour," says Dr James.

The immediate aim of the project is to examine how to dismantle the migrant labour

system on South Africa's mines and to develop housing alternatives for black mines and their families. Dr James says there is a need to move beyond rhetoric and to place migrancy and the restructuring of labour markets on South Africa's political agenda.

There is a perception that the issue is already being addressed. With the easing of influx control, the emergence of a powerful black union on the mines, the National Union of Mineworkers, and the liberalization of employment practices, some of the mining con-

glomerates began to implement housing schemes for migrant workers.

One of the beneficiaries was Richard Mamola, who had moved out of the hostels almost 20 years ago to live with his wife, Selina. They lived in a tin shanty in Thabong township near the mine where he worked. When the mine announced that it was building new houses in Thabong and that senior staff could apply, Mamola was one of the first in line.

His housing problems, however, did not end with the purchase of his home. Out of his pay-cheque of R450 (CAD \$200) a month, Mamola has to pay R170 a month for his house. After other deductions, he's only left with R200 a month. He has bought his house on a 20-year bond scheme. But in three years, he will retire and he does not know how he will be able to pay the monthly instalments. Eviction could follow.

### Lucky few

Even so, Richard Mamola is one of the privileged few. Dr James says the impact of the home ownership schemes introduced by mining houses such as Anglo American, Johannesburg Consolidated Investments, and Rand Mines has been limited. These companies still have a work force that is 96% migrant.

Dr James says that for the most part, only the better paid and more senior black workers got family housing. Moreover, it was the policy of mining companies and the state to forbid foreign workers from settling permanently on or near the mines. Most of the black mining workforce come from the homelands or neighbouring countries, such as Lesotho and Mozambique.

One of the housing scheme's key limitations has been the top-down, paternalistic planning approach of mine management. This has resulted, says researcher and town planner Katherine Laburn-Pearl, in inadequate education on housing matters and a failure to meet the housing needs of a large proportion of mineworkers. "Workers have not been consulted about, let alone invited to participate in the planning process for changes to mining house delivery. What they have been subjected to is a barrage of promotional material from mine management, yet gaps in their understanding remain. This points not only to inadequate education on the subject, but also to the inappropriate planning process that is being followed."

Laburn-Pearl, a member of the migrant worker project, conducted a survey in 1988 on behalf of one of the mining houses on the attitudes of black workers to the housing

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A mine compound of the 1950s. All hostels can be seen from a central point.