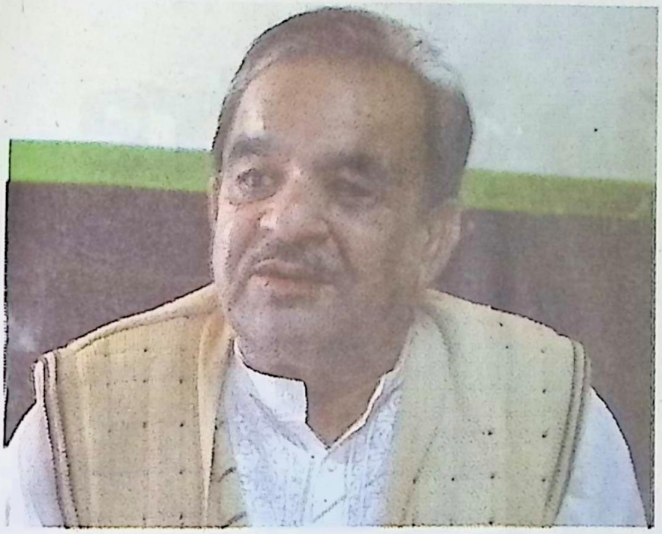


President of SPGRC, Abdul Jabbar Khan.

70-year-old Osman Gani worked as a driver for the Pakistan Army in 1971. He owns up to 'taking up arms' against the Bangalis but points out that his brother was shot in front of him by the Bangalis and he lost a lot of near and dear ones during that time. "I think its time to forgive," he says, "fights can happen between brothers and even if your brother does something wrong are you going to get rid of him?"

40-year-old Khairunnesa who does handicraft to eke out a living says that she is tired of the journalists and NGO workers coming in and questioning them about their condition. "We didn't come here to go to West Pakistan. We want to become Bangladeshi; the people here have to accept us. The government has to do something about our situation or just kill us all with a firing squad."

The tale of these people's lives is miserable. Families have grown since 1971 but they were left to make their lives in this one small room. Three generations of people live in this single room. Every morning people have to stand in a queue for hours to use the common bathrooms -- whether it's a pregnant woman or a fragile old man they will have to wait their turn to use the bathroom. Hygiene in and around the camp is almost non-existent. But for the sake of argument the slum-dwellers all over the country also live in very similar conditions so why should the plight of the camp-dwellers get priority?

Dr C R Abrar, Professor at Department of International Relations of Dhaka University and Co-ordinator of RMRRU (Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit) says there's a major difference between the two groups. "The difference is that these people's identity has not been made clear and this is the one group of people for whom the state and NGOs have over the years shown complete apathy towards."

Abrar talks about a single incident which explains in a nutshell why this group deserves attention. A child born of Urdu-speaking parents was taken to an orphanage after both her parents died. When the orphanage authorities wanted a certificate from the local commissioner the commissioner refused to give it because she was a 'Bihari'.

Abrar says that the general impression that these people are getting all the utilities for free is not true at all. "The government may not be getting the money but there are rent-seekers who are making money out of this," he says, "without trying to stereotype there are chances that criminality from these areas will increase as a result of this if we don't address these issues."

Pointing out that the High Court has already declared that they are Bangladeshi nationals Abrar says that the point that they opted to go back to Pakistan [in 1971] in the ICRC form has no legal validity. "In a country which has a large Diaspora population, where many people have dual citizenship and where hundreds of thousands of people apply for diversity visas every year, how do you ascertain whose loyalty is where," he adds.

Abrar thinks it is very distressing that this community is made a scapegoat for the atrocities committed in 1971. "Whoever has committed the atrocities should be tried for their crimes, irrespective of whether they are Bangali or Bihari."

So is this an internal matter or does the Pakistan government have some responsibilities for their rehabilitation? "Pakistan has a moral responsibility," says Abrar, "except for Benazir Bhutto's government, right from Zulfiqar Bhutto to Parvez Musharraf subsequent heads of state said that they are going to take these people to Pakistan for the sake of the Islamic solidarity. In the end all these hopes worked against the anchoring of these people here and the term 'stranded Pakistanis' came about."

Because of the half-hearted repatriation process hundreds of families have been divided between Bangladesh and Pakistan. There is a father who cannot attend his only daughter's wedding and there is a wife who cannot attend her husband's funeral. But the new generation who were born after the war and comprise the biggest chunk of camp-dwellers don't have any affiliations with either India or Pakistan. They were born in this country and identify themselves as Bangladeshis. Unfortunately the state is reluctant to accept them as such. It's a very complex issue because a lot of ambivalence from the majority population that is skeptical about these people's loyalty to the country they want to be citizens of. But the inhuman conditions they are living in and the subsequent effect it is bound to have on the society as a whole makes it imperative to resolve this painful issue.