



SEPTEMBER ON Jessore Road

*"Millions of souls nineteen seventy one
homeless on Jessore road under grey sun
A million are dead, the million who can
Walk toward Calcutta from East Pakistan"*

In the early 1970s, the world witnessed upheavals on a scale never seen following the end of World War II. With the Cold War at its zenith, the geopolitics that governed the fate of global citizens was something that shook and touched people, even when they were not victims but mere witnesses to the crises.

The Liberation War of 1971 raised a global outcry, and politics met with opposition from the human perception of right or wrong, and the world stood behind the oppressed. Artists drew, poets scribed, musicians played and singers sang; people suffered from guilt at the heinous acts that were going around even though they were miles away from the military zone and had no direct link with the atrocities.

*"Millions of fathers in rain
Millions of mothers in pain
Millions of brothers in woe
Millions of sisters nowhere to go"*

There has been a recent controversy regarding the number of casualties in the war and thus the honour of those who laid down their lives desecrated. But little is said about the near 10 million helpless people who fled to neighbouring India to evade persecution, murder and rape. The unsung stories of a crore people have

been unheard of till now.

The exodus of people from East Pakistan began as early as the weeks following the execution of Operation Searchlight. And the numbers increased as the carnage of the Pakistani forces inflicted on the innocent population caused widespread loss of human lives and rampant violation of the sanctity of human honour.

*"Taxi September along Jessore Road
Oxcart skeletons drag charcoal load"*

The mass flow of the people across the borders took place largely on feet. Some cycled their exit at the outposts; others took vans. As photographers got busy capturing photos for their assigned newsfeeds, moments got frozen in time – a young man carrying his octogenarian mother, or a terrified child holding on to his mum seeking security.

Boats anchored in riverine outposts carrying hundreds of people; some had walked hundreds of miles before finally securing a mode of transport. Some had arrived in India to seek guerrilla training; while others just wanted to find some respite from the turmoil; their lives had already seen too much.

*"Millions of daughters walk in the mud
Millions of children wash in the flood
A Million girls vomit & groan
Millions of families hopeless alone"*

This perilous journey was an excruciating experience. Monsoon 1971 was a gruelling time, not only for the armed rebels but also

for millions who were fleeing their homes fearing persecution. Jessore Road, a highway that once connected the two major parts of Bengal, became an avenue for human exodus. People walked in mudded roads, crawled their ways through waist-high water heading for an uncertain future, which nevertheless was a glimmer of hope.

*"Two children together in palmroof shade
Stare at me no word is said
Rice ration, lentils one time a week
Milk powder for warweary infants meek"*

Visitors from across the globe flooded the refugee camps set around the Indian stations surrounding the borders of East Pakistan. The UNHCR had extended its hands in assistance as did Oxfam and other institutions providing humanitarian aid, while politicians fought the battle of the minds and their warheads at the UN Security Council.

At the camps, the inhabitants were given rationed food and even that often came late. The burden of a crore of hungry mouths was taking its toll on the economy of India and war seemed imminent.

By mid-September, with torrential rain over their heads, the people amassed in Indian villages and cities, often surpassing the indigenous population of the places. At times, flights provided by Russian aircrafts took them at alternative refugee camps where the numbers of inhabitants were low.

"Wet processions Families walk

*Stunted boys big heads don't talk
Look bony skulls & silent round eyes
Starving black angels in human disguise"*

There were deaths on the roads, as there were deaths at refugee camps. The outbreak of cholera spiked the statistics. And every day the death count of the genocide increased as more civilians succumbed to their ailing health. As numbers of refugees grew, so did the casualties. Some parents, without a source of income for sustenance, resorted to begging.

*Refugee camps in hospital shacks
Newborn lay naked on mother's thin laps
Monkeysized week old Rheumatic babe eye
Gastroenteritis Blood Poison thousands must die*

The children suffered the most. Within months of opening the refugee camps, the rate of child mortality grew on an alarming scale. It seemed as if the angel of death had frequented the place claiming lives of the youth, the young and the elderly. Corpses—Hindu or Muslim -- were cremated. The dead, it seemed, had no religion then.

The medical facilities provided for easing the situation, were of course, too inadequate. Standing in the long queue for the rations – the paltry supply of rice, lentils etc. the children often fought each other for food. There were times when even the rations dried up.

"Where are the helicopters of U.S. AID?"

*Smuggling dope in Bangkok's green shade.
Where is America's Air Force of Light?
Bombing North Laos all day and all night?"*

As early as April 1971, the world conscience stood behind the cause for Bangladesh. As the days passed by, the number of people who stood behind our struggle was on the rise. But there remained a lot who went against the human conscience. In the battlefield of geopolitics, the powers at play were weaving their evil schemes. But truth always remain victorious. Victory was sweet not only for the warrior who battled with ammunition in the war field but also to the activist who did the little s/he could do. *Where are our tears? Who weeps for the pain?
Where can these families go in the rain?
Jessore Road's children close their big eyes
Where will we sleep when Our Father dies?*

Come 16 December, every year we celebrate the moment that gave us our freedom. We remember the hour of victory but fail to ponder on the price we had to pay for our valued freedom. September on Jessore Road, immortalised by the poet, forever remains a reminder that freedom comes at a price. Not just the three million dead, or the six lakh women violated; victory came at the anguish of millions more. Victory is not only about celebration but also of appreciation; of the lives lost and the lives hurt.

**By Mannan Mashhur Zarif
Photos from the collection of war memorabilia of the author.**

