



(NY9-July 17)—HOMELESS IN ANOTHER LAND—The latest exodus of refugees from Pakistan brought thousands over the Indian border to Bongaon, where they already outnumber the native population. This group has settled in an open field near Bongaon because the 29 relief camps in the area are filled. Other homeless Pakistanis continue through Bongaon, on the road to Calcutta, about 70 miles away. (AP Wirephoto)

The Anguish of War

A young collector builds up a collection of rare photographs from our Liberation War

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With the rise of extravagant urban pursuits, how many from the young generation has time for a hobby? Not too many of us. Many believe that having grown up as a tech savvy age group, especially in a time when we have a confused-twisted-stressful political situation, the current young generation would show interest in

anything but the political history of Bangladesh. But Mannan Mashhur Zarif refuses to conform to any of the above. He is a hobbyist. He is a history-lover. This young collector would readily jump on collectibles like stamps and rare photographs that has anything to do with our liberation war. "I have been an avid stamp collector since 1991,"

comments Zarif. "I love collecting stamps which have rich historical values. For me stamps were the doorway that had led me to collect rare photographs from 1971."

Zarif's hunt for these vintage images was a bit of a coincidence. "Back in 2001, as I was looking for some Indian war related stamps, I came across a book by the UNHCR which portrayed the plight of about 10 million refugees who had to flee to India during 1971," he recalls. "I got in touch with a few photographer friends right away, gathered information about the images and started collecting them."

A hobby that over the years has seen Zarif putting together a treasure trove mainly of rarely found wire photos from different international dealers, has turned into a passion to record our national history.

"These are not original photographs, rather they are wire photos, a type of a photographic image that was transmitted via telegraph or telephone wires, and later, via satellite," explains Zarif.

"The method was similar to sending and receiving a fax, where the photo was scanned at one location, transmitted over "the wire", and received at another location."

So what prompted Zarif to take up this off-beat hobby when he himself is not a photographer?

"History has always been my favourite subject. Not only Bangladeshi history, I love world history as a whole. My mother and uncle had a huge collection of history books, so I grew up reading many of them."

But what particularly made him interested in this field was the content itself, as Zarif points out. All of these photographs sum up the struggle of the swarms of people who had to flee to India leaving their homes to save themselves. Some of these pictures depict the agony of their endless walk carrying heavy bundles of whatever they had been able to retrieve balanced on their heads ignoring monsoon and cholera epidemics; some of them show their struggle over limited food assistance while some bear the inhuman condition the refugees had to deal with in the refugee camps, perched together in overcrowded

tents or abandoned sewage pipes.

Moved by this struggle of the refugees which is overlooked by historians Zarif would religiously spend hour after hour depicting the background story and whereabouts of a picture that was taken back then.

These rare pictures give us a vivid window to look into these displaced people's distinctive battle; a brave battle for survival."

Initially having these collectibles in his hand was a tough job for this history buff. "Most of the images that I have collected are from either Canadian or American dealers," he continues. "These days there are lots of online platforms for selling and buying vintage collectibles, but back in the 2000's, those were not as popular as they are today in our country. So contacting and finding them was a bit challenging."

In the beginning Zarif was planning to set up his own webpage that would display the entire collection. But as The Daily Star launches "Freedom in the Air", an online portfolio of our liberation war with rare video footages, video interviews, images, articles, stories and documents, and newspaper clippings, now anyone can find those photographs online. The photo section offers 36 rare photographs from Magnum Photos along with 111 from his personal collection.

"Freedom in the Air has been a great platform for me to share my collection with the rest of the country," believes Zarif.

With plans for future expansion of his photography collection in mind, Zarif is planning to write a book on different postage stamps during our liberation war that would help to explore our rich philatelic history.

"I am not a historian, but I derive happiness from history. I believe each of these pictures is able to whisk us back in time. Each of these pictures has a story to tell, if people interested in this field find my collectibles helpful for their research I would deem that as an achievement," he smiles, flipping through a pile of laminated black and white images.



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