

# Escape to Freedom

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It was March 1970. My husband, Aminul Islam, came to Islamabad on a posting to Pakistan Central Secretariat. I accompanied him with our two sons aged 15 and 13 and daughter aged 10. It was a comfortable living in Islamabad and we were all happy. But little did we know then that we had to be literally smuggled out of Pakistan to freedom in less than three years' time.

What happened was this. Bangladesh was born on December 16, 1971 after a brief nine-month war of Liberation waged against Pakistan. The emergence of a new country in the eastern wing of Pakistan after a lapse of 24 years following partition of India was a unique event and meant a big change in the entire Bengali population living mainly in the twin cities of Islamabad-Rawalpindi and Karachi. Because of our origin, we became aliens in the eyes of the authorities there, overnight. Those working for the government were gradually laid off and given a pittance in lieu of salary.

With rare exception, we all opted for Bangladesh to work there, and build a newly independent country of our own. The process of sending us back was, however, being delayed due to various complications; mainly on the question of repatriating a large number of Pakistani troops being held back in Bangladesh as POWs.

We still had our jobs and had not been fired. The date was March 26, 1971 and one can imagine what our mental state was on that date. The newspaper headlines screamed that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had been arrested at the airport. My husband had become very agitated upon hearing the news on the BBC on the night of March 25. He became sick with fever and was running a temperature of 106 degrees. I thought he was delirious when he kept saying: "We will have our own liberation army!" It turned out that he was right. He was fired from his job earlier. Because there were a few Bangali officers who did not enjoy the confidence of their Pakistani bosses, like Secretary A.K.M. Ahsan, who was not given any meaningful work in the service because he was considered pro-liberation. The same happened with my husband. Before they could resign, they were told not to attend office.

Thankfully, I still had my job then. My personal experience in college was not pleasant. I used to teach at the Federal College for Women. Students came from both East and West Pakistan to study. The number of women from East Pakistan was naturally few in number. Most were Punjabi, Sindhi, but mostly Punjabis. The few Bangali teachers that were there, all of us were sad because of the prevailing circumstances. One experience stands out from the rest, one which I remember even after all these years.

It was March 26, 1971 and mentally devastated though I was, I went to take my class. A Punjabi student stood up and asked me "Madam, if somebody wants to secede, what is the punishment?" I felt very indignant at the question and wanted to shout out a response. But that would have been suicidal and hence my reply was thus.

"Ok, Mr. Jinnah wanted to secede and he was successful. If you are successful, then you become a hero. Mr. Jinnah became a hero and if you are not successful, then there is punishment of course." And this had to be delivered in a calm voice keeping one's composure. The next day I got a letter from the Education Board relieving me of my services. The principal called me to the office and said "Mrs. Islam, please don't come to the college from tomorrow. The situation is very bad. There is a complaint

We both lost our jobs. We were given a stipend of Rs500 per family (not per head) to survive the month. We were however allowed to stay in the government quarter. Authorities cut off the telephone connection. My husband, Mahmood Aminul Islam was, at the time, Joint Secretary in the Agriculture Department.

In fact, we became pawns to be used in an exchange for those POWs with Bangali civil and military personnel serving in Pakistan. As days passed by, the situation

life? Do menial jobs in life?

When we were in this desperate mental state, news reached me in mid-1972 of a few instances of Bangali families successfully escaping to Kabul, Afghanistan using the route through Pak-Afghan border on their way to Bangladesh with the active help of some influential local people of the Pathan tribe.

I carefully listened to those stories and after discussing with my husband and children decided to follow their example,



Mr. and Mrs. Islam, 1973.

against you." And other Bangali colleagues informed me that I would get beaten up if I came to the college.

About 3-4 days after that, my husband told me that some of my students had come to see me. I was wondering that perhaps I had some notes belonging to students and they had probably come to collect those. They came back and asked "Madam, Bengali lok wa ke Hindu hey?" (Are Bangalis over there all Hindu?). This was a question that they asked repeatedly. I replied, "Don't you know? My husband is Aminul Islam. You cannot make out from the surname? Does he sound Hindu? Fazlur Rahman, Ziaul Haque, they are all Hindu? Can't you make out from the surname? And you people, Junjua, Bajoa, Rathore, Rajput, Yasmin Rajput, Bushra Rathore, they are all Muslims, aren't you? My husband was scared because he thought this time they would rough me up. My son came to the rescue and asked them to leave and not to bother me since I was already very upset with everything. Incidents like this made my life quite miserable.

was becoming unbearable for us. We did not have enough cash for a decent living, and had to remain confined in the same place against our will. We did not have access to direct postal or telephone link with Bangladesh, further contributing to our isolation and mental depression. We all felt like virtual captives.

The Rs 500 was simply not enough to survive and we started to sell our fixed assets. The TV went to pay for one month's survival. Another month we sold the refrigerator. Then went the fine crockery, decoration pieces, etc. and in this manner we were helping to feed ourselves. All Bangali families in our situation were doing the same. The last thing of value we had was our car.

So I thought if we sold the car and ate up the proceeds, then what would we do for food? We were already going through a lot of emotional turmoil. The children of all pro-independence Bangali families were expelled from school. They were loitering about with nothing to do. We were worried about them. That they would grow up as illiterates. Then what would they do in

come what may, before we were taken to the proposed detention camp and held there till we could be sent back. Soon, we established contact with one of them, directly involved in organising these escape operations. He demanded Rs. 10,000 then roughly equivalent to USD4,000.00 for his services. Fortunately, we had some ready cash, the sale proceeds of our car, and the deal was made. Right at this time, a young, robust Bangali gentleman with his 14-year-old daughter volunteered to join our group. This proved to be a boon for us.

As the time of our secret departure from Islamabad was approaching, I was getting very worried about our personal safety during the flight. How prudent would it be to repose complete trust on total strangers who would take us across the desolate mountain path towards the border during night. What, if they betrayed our confidence and try to be nasty especially to the two young girls?

Hearing about my concern, the man responsible for the operation came to see me in his car. His driver, instead of waiting

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