

THE STRUGGLE TO RETURN HOME

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In the last three years, more than 2000 Bengalis in Pakistan's Karachi have applied for Travel Permits (TP) to return to Bangladesh. A TP is equivalent to a one-time passport, which the Bangladesh Embassy provides to individuals it believes belong to Bangladesh.

According to the Deputy High Commission in Karachi, 853 individuals applied for TPs in 2016, 836 in 2017 and 425 in 2018. Of the total number of applications, 1,116 have been accepted so far and many of them have already begun new lives in Bangladesh.

It's difficult to state exactly how many Bengalis reside in Pakistan. Various reports however suggest that the figure can vary from around 7 to 20 lakhs, with most of them living in Karachi. Many of these Bangladeshis had found their way into Pakistan in the mid-80s looking for work.

"Several of them arrived in the 80s to work in the country's textile industry and the fisheries sector," explains Rana Asif Habib, President of Initiator, a rights organisation in Pakistan.

Many also looked at Pakistan as a gateway through which they could travel to the Middle East and Europe. "There was a time when the popular opinion was that you could come to Pakistan and go to Europe through the border shared between Balochistan and Iran. That border was easy to pass around 15 years ago and many took that route to Europe and the Middle East," explains Noor-E-Helal Saifur Rahman, Deputy High Commissioner of the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission in Karachi. "Because that border has been closed, or in other words, heavily secured, many got stuck in Pakistan," he adds.

The reasons for returning, despite having stayed in Pakistan for most of their lives, seem to vary. Pakistan's weakening economy is one of them. The value of Pakistan's currency is weaker than Bangladesh's today and this has affected many Bangladeshis, whose main target had always been to financially support their families back home.

Age is another factor. A number of TP applicants are above 60 and aren't able to find suitable work. As such, they want to return home and live with their families for good.

On the other hand, there are applicants who have had enough of staying away from their wives, parents, and children and are willing to return once and for all with whatever money they have managed to earn.

There's also the issue of harassment. Most of the Bengalis in Pakistan live in poor areas and many are undocumented. Some of them have complained of being harassed by the police for not being able to produce any identity cards.

As such, several Bengalis end up applying for Travel Permits (TP) to return to Bangladesh every year. "There are two ways to issue TPs," explains Rahman. "Firstly, if a person brings a genuine Bangladesh passport which belongs to him, no matter how old it is, that person is given the TP. This basically means that the person had entered Pakistan with a Bangladesh passport and then overstayed. If someone does not have a passport, then we need evidence from Bangladesh. We need letters from the person's relatives and a copy of the person's birth certificate, national ID, other documents along with the TP application. These documents are checked by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Dhaka. If we get a positive report from them, the TP is issued," says Rahman.

Mohammad Alam is one such returnee who currently works as a Security Guard at a bank in Chittagong. The 48-year-old returned from Pakistan six months ago along with his wife, a daughter, and two sons.

"I went to Pakistan in 1986. I was young back then and I fell in the trap of a *dalal*. He told me that he would take me to Dubai. I got married, collected some money, and went along with my wife," recalls Alam.

The journey was painful. Alam did not have a passport and they travelled for days via road

through India to Pakistan. "The *dalal* made a *murga* out of us and left us in a place in Karachi," says Alam.

After struggling for a few months, both Alam and his wife found jobs in a garments factory and worked there for 27 years. Alam's desire to return to Bangladesh began 10 years ago, after his mother passed away. He had tried hard to go visit his ailing mother, but with no proper documents, there was nothing he could do. Bengalis in Pakistan, in general, are not in a good state, he says.

"The situation there is very pitiful. Bengalis are poor as it is and on top of that, the police pick us up and ask for money. No matter where we go, we have to face difficulties because we don't have IDs. Every night, there is a mother crying in Bangladesh and a son in Pakistan," says Alam.



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

"If you go in front of the Bangladeshi Embassy in Karachi, you will find a long line of Bengalis crying and hoping to go back home. They are so desperate that they even request the imams to do a special *dua* for them during prayers, just so that they can go back," he adds.

Luckily for Alam, the MP of the region he belongs to in Bangladesh was a good friend of his father's. As a result, after he applied for a TP, his verification process did not take too long. He returned to Dhaka, along with 20 others, on December 31.

"I came to Chittagong because my wife's brother told me that he could get me a job here. When I came here, I was speaking in broken Bengali because I am used to speaking Urdu. Hearing that, someone asked me if I was a Rohingya. I felt shocked and angry. I shouted at him. I told him I am an original Bangladeshi," exclaims Alam.

While Alam seems relieved upon returning to Bangladesh, his children, who were born in Pakistan, don't share a similar sentiment. According to their father, the children cried every night during their first month in the new country.

"My parents were born here, but I was born in Pakistan. So, it's obvious that I will feel bad here," says Neha, Alam's eldest daughter who studied till the tenth grade in Pakistan.

"In school, my friends used to tell me that my parents are Bengalis, but I am not because I was born in Pakistan. I don't know any Bangla

and I feel like an uneducated person here," she laments.

Neha does not plan to continue school. She wants to get a job, earn money, and support her parents.

The Committee for the Welfare of Prisoners, a government committee in Pakistan, has recently published findings which reflect Alam and his daughter's claim of harassment of Bengalis in Pakistan in a recent finding. According to the committee, three Bengali prisoners, who claim to be from Bangladesh, have been languishing in a prison in Karachi for several years, despite having completed their required time in jail.

One of them is Anwar Koko, who was sentenced to three years in prison in 2011. The other prisoner, Badruddin Ahmed, completed his sentence on April 14, 2012, but can't come out of jail because he claims to be a foreigner.

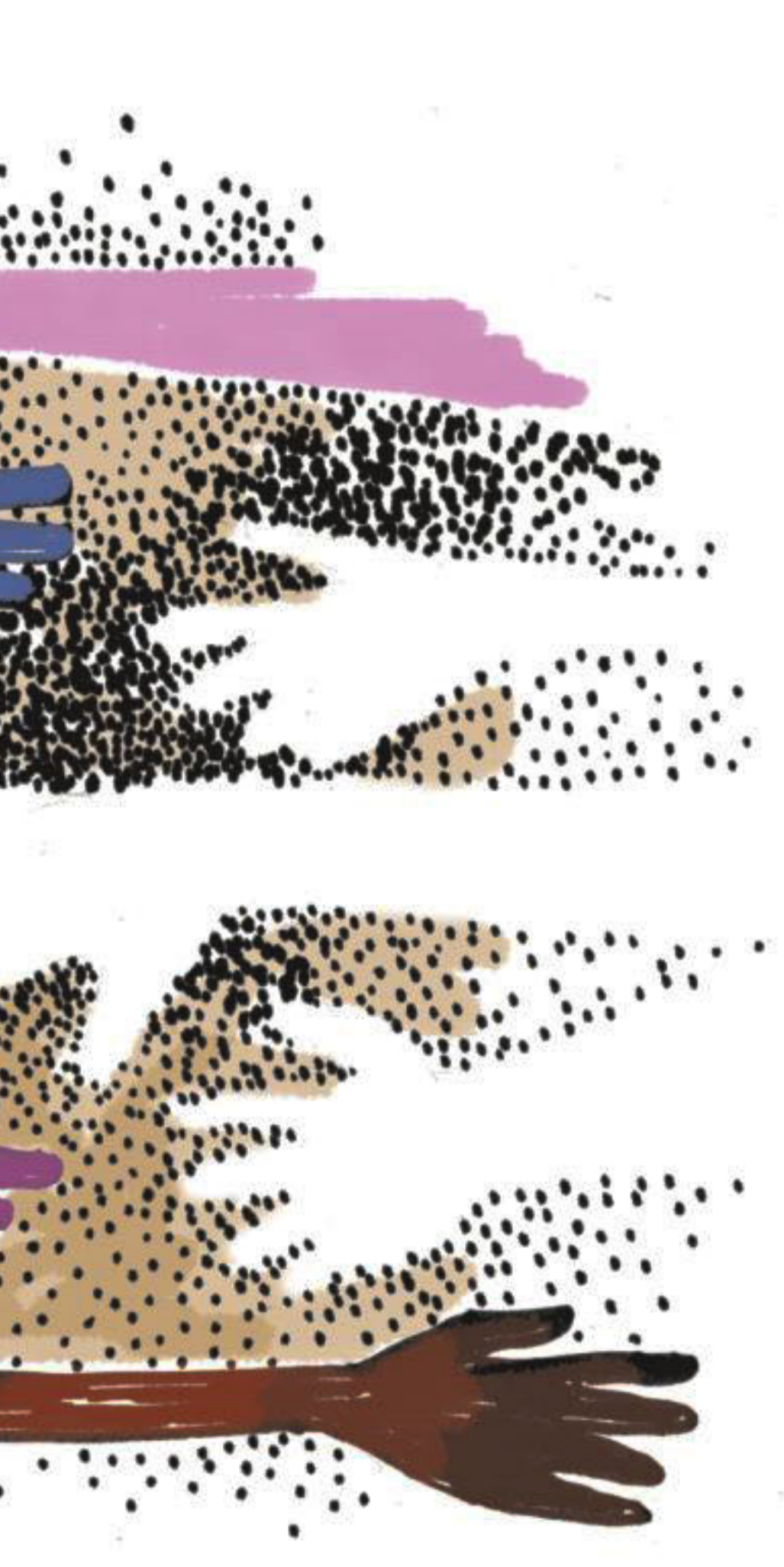


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The Bangladeshi embassy, regarding the issue, has said that the prisoners haven't been able to provide any contact of their relatives in Bangladesh or the required documents to prove their nationality. As such, there's not a lot that the embassy can do yet.

45-year-old Mohammad Jahangir returned to Bangladesh around 10 months ago. He used to work in a plastic factory in Pakistan and currently lives in Faridpur. Jahangir, who had gone to Pakistan when he was just 15, returned home because he wasn't able to send as much money home as before—around Rs 50,000 per month," says Jahangir.

Things, however, became difficult for Jahangir once the value of the Pakistani Rupee began to fall. Today, Tk 1 is around Rs 1.45.

"Before 2008, Rs 20,000 could give my family around Tk 40,000 in Bangladesh. But now, 20,000 gives you only 10,000. Also, my mother kept asking me to come back home. So, I decided to leave everything and return," says Jahangir.

While Alam and Jahangir were lucky enough to receive their Travel Permits (TP) and return to Bangladesh, there are several others who are still waiting to get their TPs issued.

Shafiqur Rahman, who claims to be 80 years old, is a *maulvi* in Karachi. He lives with two of his nephews and makes a living by teaching Arabic. He went to Pakistan 35 years ago and is

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desperate to return home and talk to his brother and sister while they are still alive.

"He lost his wife four years ago and has been wanting to go back ever since. He is sick and has diabetes. His last wish is to go back and stay with his family members," explains Dawood, Shafiqur's nephew.

Shafiqur might have to wait for a long while as, according to the Bangladeshi Embassy in Karachi, only eight Travel Permits (TP) out of 1200 applications have been issued since October 2017.

"Individuals who manage to show old Bangladeshi passports are issued TPs by the Embassy. However, for those who don't have passports, we need to send the application back home to get them verified. In the second category of TP applications, only eight TPs have been permitted in the last 10 months," explains Rahman, from the Bangladesh Embassy in Karachi.

While Shafiqur awaits his Travel Permit (TP), Dawood has his own share of problems to deal with. Dawood arrived in Pakistan soon after the Bangladesh cyclone, which devastated the coast of the country in 1991.

"The cyclone demolished my house. I was 12 years old then and I needed to work to support my family. That's when a *dalal* told me that he could find me work in Pakistan and I went along with him. I still remember the lies he told me. He said that he was going to take me to a place that would give me grape juice if I asked for water, because that's how wealthy the place was," recalls Dawood.

After reaching Pakistan, Dawood was left stranded. He started by working as a domestic worker and then went on to garments. Eventually, he ended up getting a job at a production house and that's where he continues to work today.

Dawood has a Pakistani passport and doesn't face any kind of harassment. However, his problem is that he hasn't been able to get a visa to visit his family in Bangladesh.

"There was a time when you could just pay Tk 200 at the embassy, get a visa and go to Bangladesh. But now, you need so many documents. It's difficult to get a visa if you don't know any one personally at your hometown's police *thana* in Bangladesh, because they must get your document verified before you can get the visa. And getting the document verified takes a lot of time unless you know officials back home," explains Dawood.

Dawood had last visited Bangladesh in 2013. That's when he got married to a Bangladeshi. His wife gave birth to a boy soon after he left—someone who Dawood has only managed to interact with through his mobile phone.

"I video chat with my family every night. It feels bad when I see my boy. He has grown up so much. My wife is gradually losing patience. She keeps telling me that I can't come home because I am a Pakistani," laments Dawood.

To get past the system, Dawood and his friends have made a group. Each member of the group is required to save Rs 500 every month. Once the group has enough money to surpass the visa troubles and book a flight to Bangladesh, one person from the group goes to Bangladesh with gifts for all the family members of the contributors.

"I sent some toffees and chocolates for my boy. When I saw him eating that on IMO (a video-chat application) I couldn't control my tears," says Dawood.

"With the currency losing value, it's difficult to save money here. I earn around Rs 30-35,000 a month, which is around Tk 15,000. I have to give 10,000 to my wife and some to other family members. I barely have anything left to survive. I just want to save some money here before going to Bangladesh for good," he adds.

The complexities related to the huge number of Bengalis in Pakistan are aplenty. It deals with both the nations' migration policies and human rights.

It's obvious that both countries need to outline pragmatic policies to resolve these issues. However, Bangladesh-Pakistan relations haven't been at its best in the recent past. And at the moment, it seems as though it will be a while before the cries of the sufferers are heard and a comprehensive system is drawn up. ■

| INTERVIEW |

Tahmidal Zami: What drew and sustained your interest to India and its architecture?

Catherine Asher: I came to India the day after I was married, almost immediately after graduating from college, and knowing nothing about the subcontinent. I had read two books about India, both quite depressing, and so the reality of the situation was much better than the one portrayed in those books. My husband, Frederick Asher (Rick), was coming to do research for his dissertation, which ultimately ended up as a book, *The Art of Eastern India, 300 – 800*. I loved doing the field work, trekking across rice fields to find old sculptures and temples. So, as you can see, my initial introduction to Indian art was not to Islamic art but to older



Catherine Asher

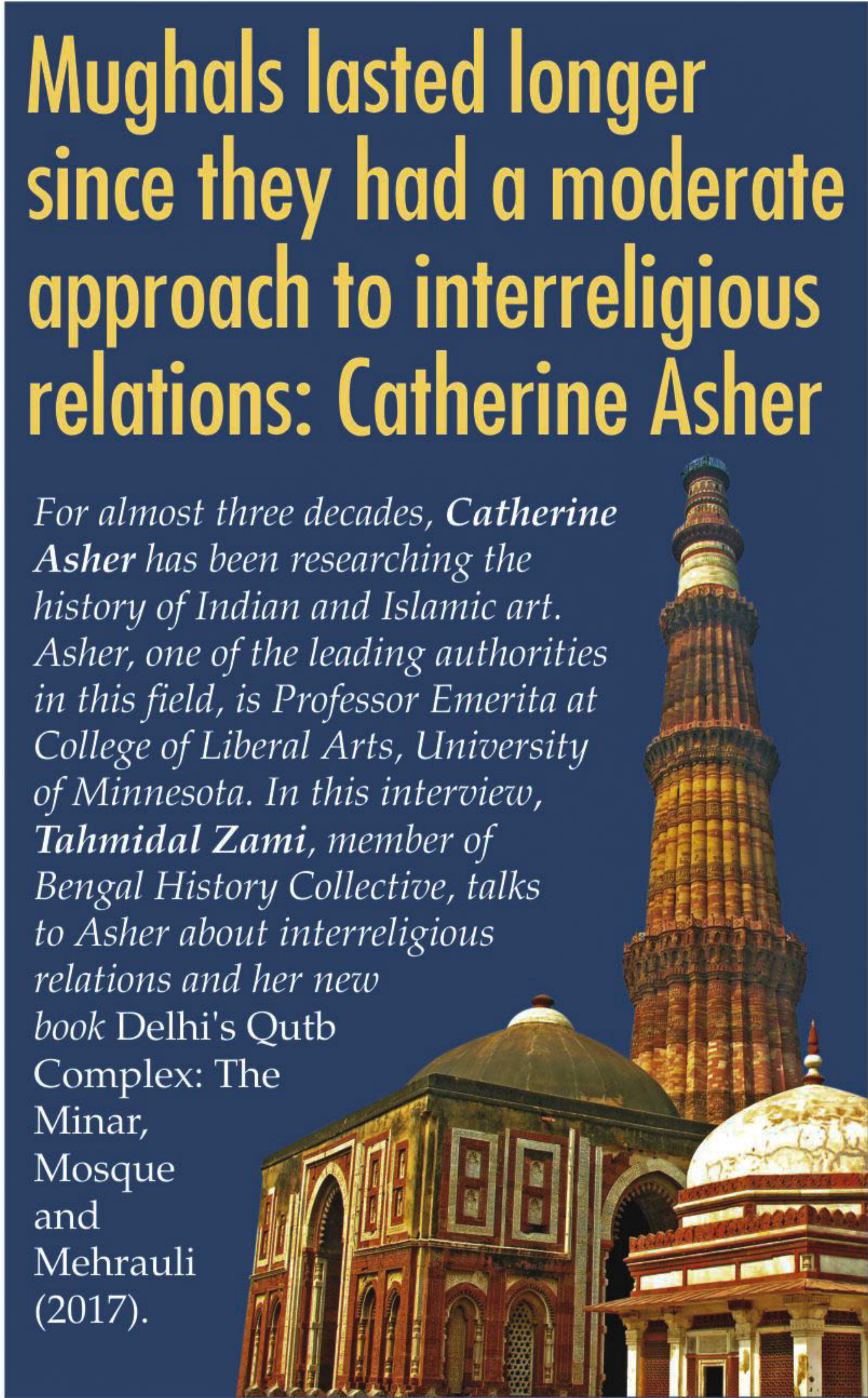
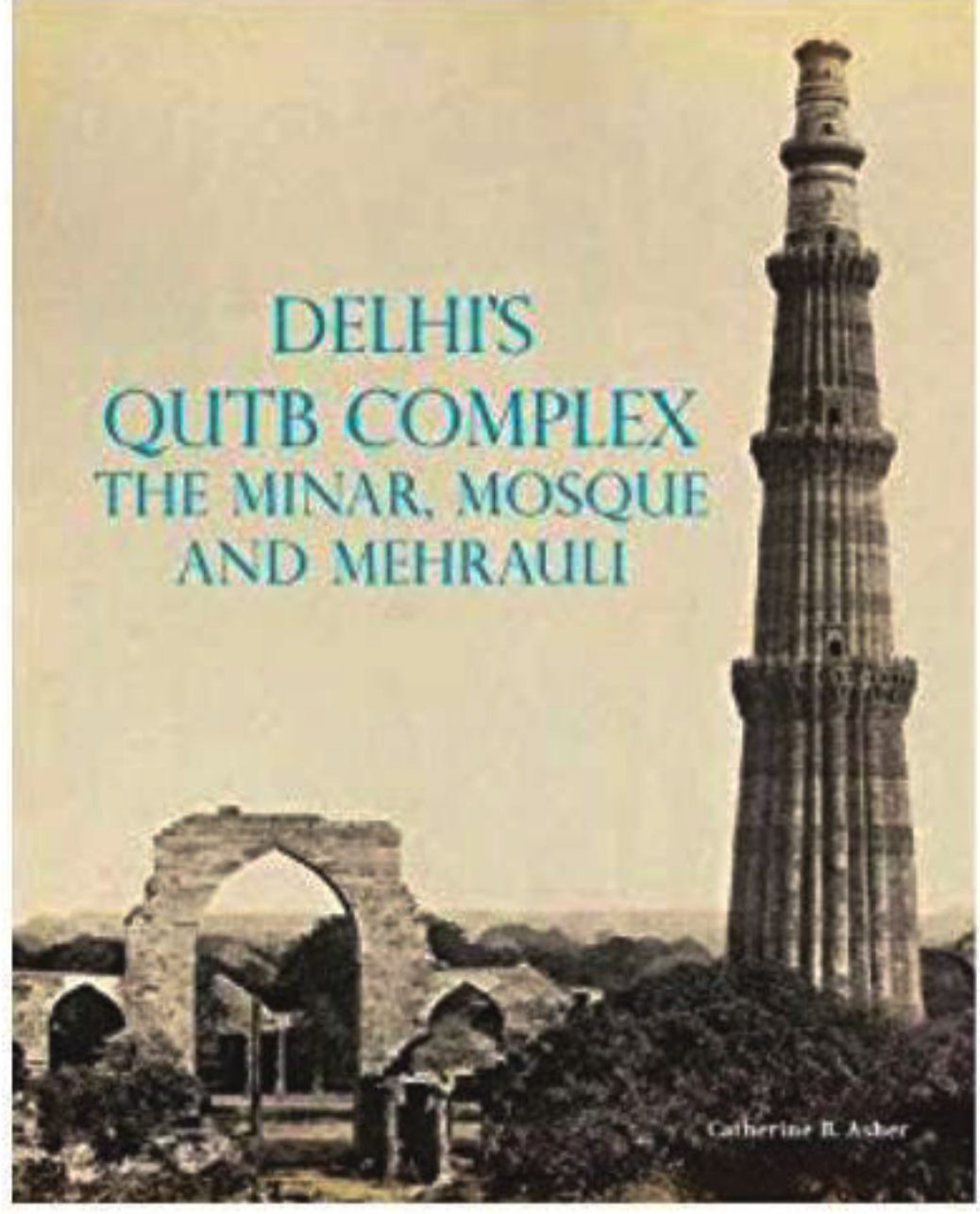
material. As time went on, and I came to India several times, I decided to earn an advanced degree in South Asian art-history. But I didn't want to follow Rick's path, so I decided to study Islamic material. At that time, very few people studied Indian Islamic architecture.

Those who worked on Islamic material were mostly concerned with painting and with style. There wasn't much interest in architecture. I would say that in part, this was because just reaching many of the monuments was a challenge. It was a bit easier for me since my husband and I would, when our children were young, try to find places to work where we could be together. Field trips were family projects. I'm very happy to see that these days scholars across South Asia as well in Europe and North America are taking a serious interest in Islamic architecture.

History is a deeply politicised issue in South Asia, as different kinds of politics appropriate history for different purposes. How does the politics of history figure in your work? Interreligious relations have time and again returned as a central theme in your assessment of pre-colonial Indian history. Is this related to the rise of modern communalism and right-wing historiography? Or do you think interreligious relations is an important lens through which to understand the society and culture of medieval India on its own, emic

terms?

Muslims in South Asia were not a majority until the modern nation-states of Pakistan, and then Bangladesh, came into existence. I have always felt that South Asia's cultural traditions need to be understood in a more holistic manner.



For almost three decades, Catherine Asher has been researching the history of Indian and Islamic art. Asher, one of the leading authorities in this field, is Professor Emerita at College of Liberal Arts, University of Minnesota. In this interview, Tahmidal Zami, member of Bengal History Collective, talks to Asher about interreligious relations and her new book Delhi's Qutb Complex: The Minar, Mosque and Mehrauli (2017).

But all the same, until 1992, I did teach courses with titles such as "Art of Muslim India". After the destruction of the Babri masjid, my entire approach to teaching changed, as I'm sure my scholarship did as well. I no longer taught courses on just Islamic material but then started teaching classes that included multiple traditions. That was one of Cynthia Talbot's and my goals in writing *India before Europe*. That said, even before I completed my dissertation on Sher Shah, I was deeply interested in Man Singh as both Mughal amir and Rajput raja. To answer one of your questions, I believe that interreligious relations is an important lens in understanding the society and culture of India. By the way, I dislike the term, "medieval" that you used in your

communalism and right-wing historians (as if they would ever listen to reason), is to consider South Asia's interreligious relations.

In your work, you have highlighted the fusion of motifs and architectural styles between Islamic and indigenous elements in pre-Mughal architecture as well. Would you agree with the common characterisation that the Mughals by and large present a more moderate approach to interreligious relations compared to the Delhi Sultans and regional dynasties preceding the Mughals?

Perhaps one of the reasons that the Mughals lasted longer than any pre-Mughal or regional dynasty is that the Mughals did have a moderate approach to interreligious relations. However, the earlier and regional houses were often much more tolerant than they are given credit for. That was another theme we addressed in *India before Europe*.

As a leading expert on North Indian architecture, what do you think should be the approach towards the question of temple destruction and iconoclasm in Indian history?

Ideally one would use a dual approach while dealing with temple destruction and iconoclasm. That is, one would approach it from both a political and religious viewpoint, but I don't think this is always possible. You can only use the evidence at hand. I think Richard Eaton has gone overboard in estimating that only 80 or so temples were destroyed, but certainly not the 1000s imagined by right-wing writers, most of whom are not properly trained historians. Temple destruction/construction is an issue that I'm working on. I think it is more complicated than just wilful desecration but involves neglect, population movement, and natural calamity as well. I've seen this with old temples that have been abandoned when a population shifts or when the funds to support it vanish. Next, vegetation grows and ruins the building. I know that in 19th century Lucknow there were originally at least 13 Jain temples but now there are only two because people moved to more lucrative positions in other cities as patronage in Lucknow decreased. I'm not suggesting that wilful destruction isn't involved, but it's not the only factor. I also believe that people imagine temples in north India were huge edifices like those in south India, but the evidence suggests that they were not.

How do you think archaeological and art historical studies re-shape our reading of and approach to medieval texts and literary works?

Historians and those primarily using written texts as sources for history need to realize that visual evidence is also a text; it is just presented in a different manner. To my mind, the best way to approach history is to use every resource available. To only use the visual can be misleading, and to only use written sources can be so as well. A combination of every available source, including a consideration of the original intended audience, is one excellent approach.

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