

Flight to FREEDOM

The nine-month struggle for our liberation saw endless dead, millions displaced, thousands lost, and countless enduring abject dishonour — and as ironic as it may sound, especially for a country that was formed under the banner of religion, the perpetrators were the very people we were told to be our brethren. For the people of the hitherto East Pakistan it was nine-months of terror. Yet, for a large segment of Bengalis residing in what was then West Pakistan, the fear was inexpressible. People and families who opted to return to the new country of Bangladesh, had to endure psychological trauma, scars that have not yet healed; for some they are wounds that still go deep. This week, Star Lifestyle presents the tale of Shabnam Chowdhury, then 18, and now a teacher of English literature and language. She was just like countless others, but her story is as relevant to us as that of any memoirs by any stalwarts who made history.

MEMOIRS OF A BENGALI STRANDED IN PAKISTAN AFTER THE 1971 LIBERATION WAR

In the late sixties, my father was a professor working at The Forest Research Institute in Peshawar, as the head of the department of Medicinal Plants. Until the reign of terror that started in 1971, my three sisters and my parents had led a peaceful life of comfort, and luxury.

Overnight this rosy situation had changed and we were living a life in utter frustration and trepidation. Time passed very slowly as life became increasingly difficult. We were forced into a situation where we had to be careful as to what we said or did. This was no longer our country.

A lot has been written about the War both home and abroad. What I want to share is how thousands of Bengalis, who were trapped in the then West Pakistan, passed their days in constant fear, without any idea of what the future held for them and almost in total isolation. Mentally and emotionally broken, hope was the only straw to cling upon.

1971: A LAND WE COULD ONCE CALL OUR OWN

The memories of that two and a half years are still quite vivid in my mind and thus I have tried to capture those unforgettable days of our lives and share it, as there were

many thousands like us.

Actually we did not know till much later of all the atrocities being committed against the innocent and harmless citizens. We were presented with the impression that the army was trying to punish some rebels who had gone against the state. As the media in those days was not as liberal as now, we only knew what was being broadcasted to us on TV or printed in local newspapers.

Thanks to the radio channels like BBC, All India Radio, and Voice of America (VOA), we eventually did get to know the real picture, but everything was 'hush-hush' and we never said anything in public.

Slowly the Bengalis in West Pakistan became aliens. We could feel the change in the attitude of friends, classmates and acquaintances, and it worsened every day. The teachers in schools started being sarcastic too. Many West Pakistanis had lost their dear ones in Dhaka so they gave us strange looks as if somehow we were responsible for this.

Life was not the same as before, although we had not changed. We still belonged to the same country, but due to our mother tongue, now we were considered not only enemies of the state, but at times even our religious belief as Muslims were questioned.

For the first time in my life, I had the first hand experience of people of the same

religion, 'brethren,' turn against each other.

In order to bring the cause of Bangladesh to the forefront, there were demonstrations across the world, and protests against the genocide going on in Bangladesh.

The people of West Pakistan however kept a blind eye to this. Everyone talked about how well the army was doing and how they were doing 'jihad' by saving Muslims from the 'kafirs.'

Life was seemingly normal but there was always a prevalent sense of hatred towards us, Bengalis; local people even started calling names in public places. Imagine the trauma — surrounded by enemies, we had to hide our joy or express our delight over the news that the Mukti Bahini was gradually gaining control and there was hope that they could win. At that time there were a few lakh Bengalis living and working in West Pakistan, and my father was just one of them.

16 DECEMBER AND BEYOND... THE TRAUMA CONTINUES

A few months after victory, all Bengali officers in the armed forces were sent to camps. And that was the time father got anxious. One day he came home and said that he had been summoned and asked whether he would stay in Pakistan, or return to Bangladesh instead.