



(L) A news item reporting hundreds of Indian tanks slashed deep into Pakistan in a bid to sever the vital communication artery linking Lahore and the capital, Rawalpindi (The Australian, September 13, 1965). It was the East Bengal Regiment that saved Lahore from being over-run by Indian troops. (R) Indian Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri and Pakistan's President General Ayub Khan after signing of the historic Tashkent Treaty (January 10, 1966) that ended the 17-day war between Pakistan and India of August-September 1965.

# The myth of martial race: Seared into a schoolboy's memory!

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The years 1968-1969, were a tumultuous period in the political history of the state of Pakistan. My father a Bengali civil servant from East Pakistan, was an official in the then central government in Islamabad. I was a schoolboy in the 10th grade. In February, 1968, President Ayub Khan suffered a near fatal heart attack in Rawalpindi. I distinctly remember that there was this 48 hours of gripping silence in Islamabad, especially at the government level. There was a complete blackout of news on the fate of Ayub. Nobody knew who exactly was running the country. There was widespread speculation that the self-styled Field Marshal had actually died. Meanwhile, as death danced at Ayub's door, the jockeying for power had begun in earnest at the army General Headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi. An Ayub protégé General Yahya Khan, C-in-C of the army and his nefarious cohorts General Hamid et al, were getting restive to take over. There were rife rumors of an impending military coup d'état. However, Ayub survived to linger in power until 26 March, 1969, before handing over the presidency to Yahya Khan in the face of relentless people's agitation throughout the country against his hated regime. Subsequently, the despicable Yahya would go on to infamously unleash an apocalyptic genocide on the unarmed people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) as a final solution – an ultimate denial of their political rights in 1971. The rest is history!

Let us revert back to the days of political turbulence of 1968-'69 in Pakistan. The embassies of the western countries, especially the American and the British were then busy sizing up the Pakistani political situation. Unlike today, there were no ISPR releases in those days regarding Ayub's health. A certain colonel Dr Mohiuddin (Ayub's personal physician) would at times send a bulletin to the press about Ayub's health condition, which appeared to be slowly improving. During this time as the story went there was a dinner hosted at the residence of a top western diplomat in Islamabad to which General Yahya was invited. At dinnertime, Yahya found himself seated next to the wife of a senior western diplomat, an attractive blonde. As the dinner progressed merrily amidst small talk, an inebriated bleary eyed Yahya with a sheepish grin turned to the lady and whispered if she was aware who she was sitting next to. Somewhat taken aback, the lady pouted and exclaimed coyly, "Why, the chief of the army of course!" "Nah!" snorted Yahya raising his bushy eyebrows. "Madam, you are seated next to the future President of Pakistan" he quipped. It is not on record if the lady was amused or alarmed, but she surely 'spilled the beans' because the incident made the rounds in select social circles of Islamabad. If Ayub had heard of it through the 'grapevine' (intelligence reports), he must have shrugged it off as one of Yahya's usual faux pas from his binge drinking. It appears he did not take it seriously. But then from all reliable accounts, Ayub was never a good judge of men.

The 14th of August, 1968, Pakistan's Independence Day has left an indelible imprint in my memory. A combined armed forces parade was scheduled to be held at the General Headquarters (GHQ) grounds of the Pakistan army in Rawalpindi. President Ayub presumed to have sufficiently recovered from his illness by then, was supposed to take the salute. It was done to shore up his sagging morale, as well as to reassure the public that all was well with the country's president. Our family received an invitation to witness the parade. I have always loved military parades and was excited. On the appointed day we took off early for Rawalpindi. The parade was scheduled to start at 10:30 am sharp. On reaching the venue we

were delighted to be ushered into our sitting enclosure by a young Bengali army officer on duty.

The Pakistani armed forces officers and families sat next to their foreign and civilian guests under large 'Shamianas' (marquees). I had to seat apart from my family since there was no additional space to accommodate me on the same aisle. Therefore, I moved down to another aisle and sat next to a nattily dressed bespectacled Punjabi gentleman who was of a gregarious temperament. He was a young man with slick black hair, big sideburns, sunken cheeks and a prognathous jaw. We exchanged pleasantries. I was quite tall for my age with aquiline features and not dark enough to fit into the archetypal stereotype image the average Pakistani held of a Bengali. So, when I told the man that I was from Dhaka, for a fleeting second he gave me a queer look. Then he suddenly said that I must be a smart fellow. I was not sure what he meant. He added that his Bengali classmates both at the Government College and the Punjab University in Lahore, had all been good students. I was just a schoolboy and felt rather flattered. The young guy, a professional accountant was easy going. He laughed and joked a lot. He thought I was much too shy and quiet for my age and would



(L) M.A.G. Osmany was the first Bengali Commanding Officer of the East Bengal Regiment. (M) The Senior Most Tiger Officer, Officer Commanding, Training Regiment, Major Abdul Waheed Choudhury (1914-1965) was one of the founding father of The East Bengal Regiment. (R) Cap badge of the East Bengal Regiment

often prod me with his elbow to enliven me. I was perhaps self-conscious of being 'proper' and thus may have seemed a bit inhibited. However, the parade was delayed by about twenty minutes or so, a rare occurrence for a formal military parade. The crowd became restless and garrulous.

Soon the loudspeakers crackled as an announcer said apologetically that the President was unable to attend, whereby the defense minister Vice Admiral A R Khan would take the salute instead. The impressive show started off. As in the British military tradition the army took the lead with its elite infantry regiments. Contingents of the Punjab and Baluch regiments started to go by with the witty Punjabi gentleman next to me passing funny comments. As a column of the Punjab regiment was passing by led by its commanding officer, a bulky 'huffing and puffing' mustachioed lieutenant colonel with a flabby belly and bouncy gait, he was jeered at by the man sitting next to me. I clearly recall that he excitedly stood up cupped his hands to his mouth laughed raucously and yelled, "Arey motuwa, tu ya bara tonhd lekar dushman se larog kaise?" (hey fatso, how will you ever fight the enemy with such a big tummy?). I was taken aback by his audacious remark in public,

especially at a military parade. However, people around us burst into laughter at his antics. The man relished the attention. He seemed to be a seasoned prankster, who could play to the gallery. He made me laugh, too. Unimpressed, the man jabbed me hard with his elbow saying, "Arey, zara jorse hantso toh yaar!" (hey, do laugh a little louder my friend!). After a while, the Frontier Force (FF) went by in their militia dress and stiffly starched pugree (turban). On the whole their complexion was paler to those of the average Punjabi soldiers. Incidentally, they also looked taller than their Punjabi counterparts because of the additional height added by their starched pugree.

Every passing regimental formation of parading soldiers after saluting the admiral at the dais were loudly applauded by the assembled crowd. However, something strange and unexpected was to happen next. The loudspeaker crackled to announce the upcoming East Bengal Regiment after the Frontier Force had just gone by. I sat upright in proud anticipation to watch the Bengal Regiment come up and pass us by. Every time a regiment would come by a short brief on them was read out by the announcer in English and Urdu. As the announcer started to read a brief about the Bengal Regiment, especially



about its valor at the Lahore front during the Indo-Pak war of 1965, the marching 'Bengal Tigers' came into view. They were smartly approaching the saluting dais in a column, the soldiers led by senior officers. Then out of the blue an unbelievable thing happened. As they came into full view a 'ripple of laughter' went through the Pakistani crowd, especially in the rows where senior armed forces and civilian officials and their families were seated. I simply could not believe it! The jovial guy sitting next to me had also joined in full throated laughter. For a moment, I the school boy, a Bengali from East Pakistan sitting next to him had become 'invisible'. I slumped back in my chair, hurt and deeply embarrassed. After the Frontier Force the average height of the Bengali soldiers were shorter and their complexion in contrast was darker. All this had played out in the collective mindset of the prejudiced Pakistanis. The myth of the martial races cleverly propounded by the erstwhile British colonialist to recruit poor peasants/villagers from the Jhelum district of West Punjab, North West Frontier region and Baluchistan in the British Indian army as 'cannon-fodder' for the imperial Raj, had played out shamefully in the Pakistani mindset still in the throes of a colonial hangover, particularly those of the elite/oligarchy.

However, as the Bengal Regiment saluted at the dais and passed us by, the same crowd who had laughed a second ago finally clapped.

Years later, in 1976 while living in the United States, I was standing with my friends in a crowd during the Bicentennial Celebrations (200 years of the American independence) in the downtown of a mid-western town in Indiana, while a plethora of marching bands and decorated floats proudly went by to the vociferous applause of the joyous holiday crowd. Suddenly, an all black marchers of the black chapter of the Indianapolis 'National Association for the Advancement of Colored People' (NAACP estd. 1909) came along with its distinctive marching drill. The flag of the NAACP was carried by a token white member. As they came up the road where the crowd had assembled a 'ripple of laughter' went through the all white crowd. I had a flashback! In an instant I was transported back to the painful, humiliating experience of the military parade I had witnessed as a schoolboy in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, in 1968, where the proudly marching Bengal Regiment had met with a similar fate. Although, the analogy, that is, the history and the context of the incidents were vastly different, the substance was the same – racial prejudice - and all that goes with it! You just



have to read two books entitled, 'The Invisible Man', by the scholarly African American writer Ralph Ellison and 'The Colonial Man' by Albert Memmi a brilliant leftist Sociologist, the Tunisian-Jewish writer and essayist who had fought in the Algerian war of independence against the French colonialist, to reflect and understand what I am talking about? It is worthwhile to recall here, that humans and nations are apt to forget favors but not humiliation. It even extends to the animal kingdom. Think of the majestic pachyderm - the elephant with its indelible memory of a hurt?

For one last time let me revert back to the military parade again on 14 August, 1968, at the Army GHQ grounds, Rawalpindi, in the then West Pakistan. In September 1965, when regular units of the Pakistan army finally invaded Jammu and Kashmir after a month of proxy war, the Indians counter-attacked Lahore in a surprise move which caught Pakistan completely off guard. The 17 day Indo-Pak war broke out in full fury. Meanwhile, the road to Lahore lay bare and open. Had the Indian army not taken a pause to ponder and wonder why Lahore was left unguarded, they could easily have rolled in and had their drinks (Chota or Burra pegs!) at the Lahore

Gymkhana Club. But in those days with no overhead satellite coverage or other means of high-tech surveillance gadgets for detection, the perplexed Indians wrongly concluded that the Pakistan army had set up a booby-trap for them as a surprise. In the meantime, Lahore lay unguarded and vulnerable.

The only professional Pakistani army regiment in strength available to immediately react to the looming Indian threat was the 1st East Bengal Regiment nicknamed the Senior Tigers which was stationed at Kasur. Here lay a golden opportunity for the Bengalis to prove their mettle. It is said that Colonel Osmani (later General) then a senior Bengali army officer affectionately known as the 'Papa Tiger' hastily addressed the assembled officers and men of the Bengal Regiment who were about to be rushed into battle to defend the city of Lahore at any cost. The 'Papa Tiger' growled and told the Bengali officers and soldiers of the Senior Tigers something to this effect, "Here is your chance of a lifetime. Show them what stuff you are made of!" Surprisingly, he was not referring to the Indians, but to the Pakistanis instead. Even in the heat of the moment it was all about humiliation. A battalion of the 1st East Bengal Regiment was hurriedly deployed along the Bambawali-Ravi-Bedian (BRB) canal to defend the city of Lahore. The brave Bengali soldiers jumped wholeheartedly into battle and repeatedly blunted the Indian offensive until additional reinforcements could be diverted and rushed from the Kashmir front and elsewhere.

It is on record in the annals of the Pakistan Army that Lahore was saved in 1965, by the timely intervention and bravery of the officers and men of the Bengal Regiment who sustained heavy casualties as a consequence. The graves of the dead are still there in Pakistan to see, hopefully? Therefore, it's not without reason that at the cessation of hostilities in 1965, the highest number of gallantry awards for valor and supreme sacrifice was awarded to the 1st East Bengal Regiment among all other infantry regiments in the Pakistan Army, which saw action in the Indo-Pak war of 1965. Thus, it is a matter of great shame and ingratitude that in the military parade at the GHQ grounds on 14th August 1968 in Rawalpindi, only three years later the disgraceful Pakistani crowd conveniently denied history and had the audacity to mock the East Bengal Regiment as they marched by. It is little wonder then, why 1971 came along? And, thank God for our deliverance from the clutches of an ungrateful Pakistan! In 1971, the brave sons of the East Bengal Regiment again rose to the occasion, this time against the marauding Pakistani occupation forces and proved their steadfast patriotic resolve by the creation of our beloved Bangladesh.

This article is dedicated to the glorious 50th Anniversary of our Independence Day. Today, we recall with pride and gratitude all those gallant freedom fighters and noble martyrs who laid down their lives for our beloved motherland. On the occasion of our Golden Jubilee, a special mention is due to our 'Mitro Bahini' (allied forces) of the Indian armed forces, in particular the Indian army for their help and support in our Liberation War. Joi Bangla! Joi Bangabandhu! Long live Bangladesh and its indomitable people!

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