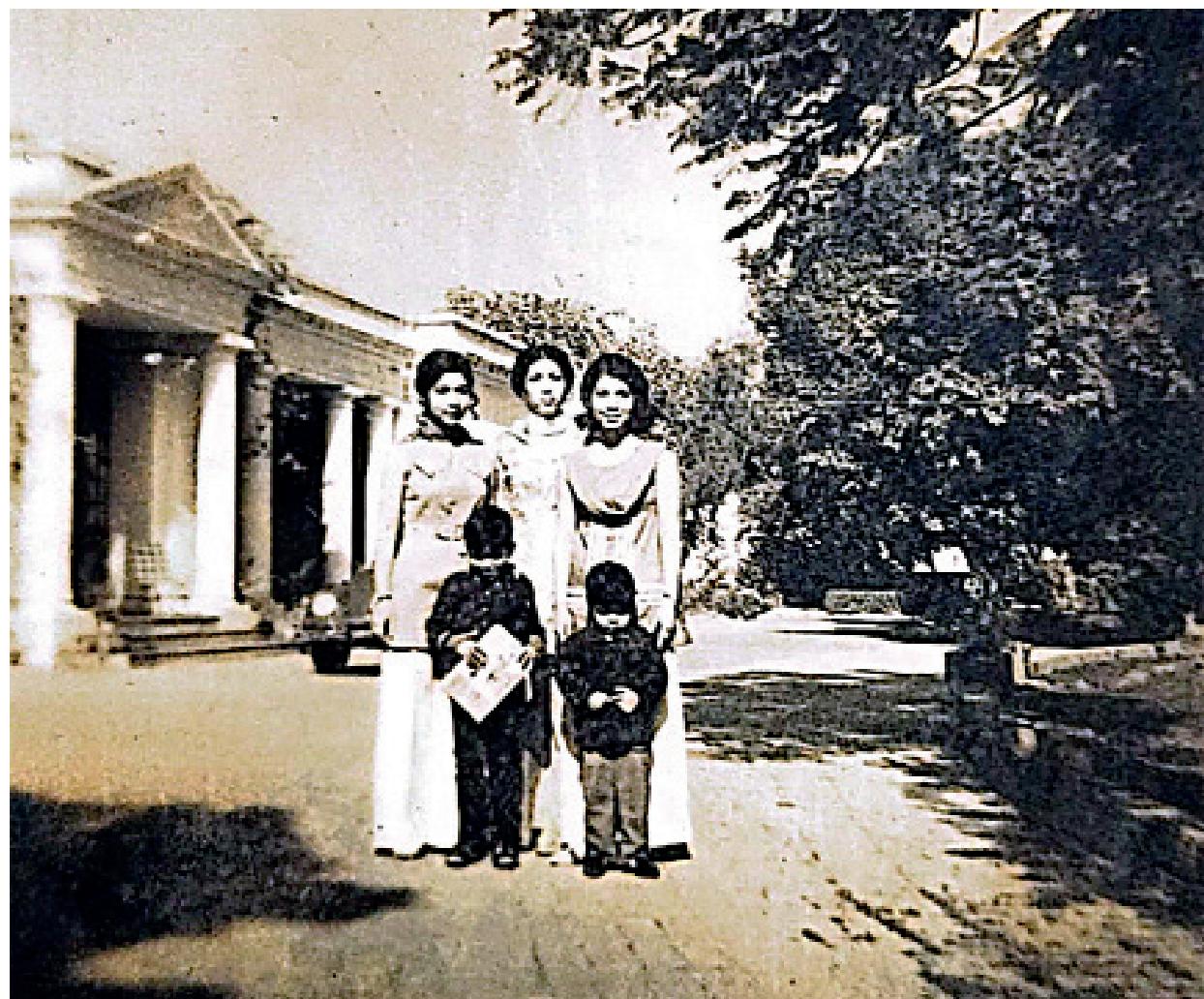


The Journey Home



Zarre and Zain with Niaz Zaman's sisters, Ghazala, Farida, and Durdana, in front of her parents' house on 5 Club Road, Lahore

NIAZ ZAMAN

Tired and exhausted, my sons had finally fallen asleep in their seats. Outside the windows it was dark. The cabin lights were still on, the stewardesses, in their moss-green uniforms, were still attending to passengers. In April, when we had taken the PIA flight Dacca to Karachi, their uniforms had been fawn. In a little while the cabin lights would be dimmed before they came on again as we approached Karachi.

The night of October 13 had given way to October 14. I heaved a sigh of relief.

There had been several anxious moments earlier at the PIA counter at Lahore when I learned that the plane was overbooked. One of us four had to stay behind. The most logical choice was Mukul Apa, the sister-in-law of my youngest sister-in-law. But she had been adamant. She suggested I stay behind. She would accompany my sons to Dacca. Zarre, my six-year old was perhaps mature enough to travel without me. Zain, my three-year-old? No. They would have to travel two hours to Karachi. Wait at the airport for a connecting flight

to Dacca. The flight to Dacca was a good six hours via Colombo. And who knew what was lying in wait for them once they reached Dacca? How would the conflict situation affect them? Would Siddique be able to look after them if I never returned? Suppose they had to flee Dacca once more, how would Siddique cope? In Karatia, hiding on the bank of the pond, Siddique had held Zarre, while I had held Zain. Would he be able to look after both of them by himself?

In late March, after the curfew was lifted, my family and I sought shelter with other members of Siddique's family in Karatia, the shoshur bari of one of his brothers. We felt safe there but then, on April 4, the Pakistan military entered Karatia. We had to go farther into the interior or return to Dacca where the government would try to show that conditions were normal. Siddique's brother, Quazi Nooruzzaman, left to join any resistance he could find. The news of his joining the resistance spread and Karatia was no longer safe for his family. His wife, Sultana Bhabi, with their two daughters Naila and Lubna, left for a village where a distant relative of the Karatia family lived. Their son, Nadeem, had not come with us. Siddique's brother-in-law, Muzharul Islam, and his family decided to wait a few more days in Karatia. Siddique, the boys and I returned to Dacca.

There were rumours that young boys of a lighting age were being picked up by the Pakistan military. Nadeem would be safe in Lahore. Accordingly, at the end of April, Nadeem, my two sons, and I took the long, six-hour plane journey to Karachi. We would stay a few days with Siddique's Mejo Bhai – who was like a guardian of the family – before proceeding to Lahore. However, when I wanted to buy train tickets for the four of us, Nadeem refused to go to Lahore. Would he continue to stay at his Mejo Chacha's place then? He shook his head. He was not going to be able to remain there.

So we left Nadeem behind in Karachi. The whole purpose of my Pakistan trip had been to keep Nadeem safe in Lahore. I felt that I was betraying him by leaving him behind. However, I could not stay on in Karachi, hoping that Nadeem would change his mind. My sister-in-law was generous, but her brother was still serving in the Pakistan army, and many in the house did not look at freedom fighters the same way Nadeem and I did. So my sons and I took the train to Lahore by ourselves.

At Lahore, however, I realized that, except for my father, no one in the family really believed that the Pakistani army was waging war against Bengalis. My mother told me that Bengalis had attacked unarmed Biharis, killed babies by holding their legs and splitting the bodies apart, cut off women's breasts. My grandmother was terrified that any day she would hear news of something terrible happening to her son and his family in Pahartali.

As long as I didn't talk about the war, things were all right.

My sons had been warned not to address me as "Ma" or speak Bangla when outside the house. Their habit of hiding under a bed or a table or behind a sofa whenever there was the sound of fire-crackers had puzzled and amused everyone. Like them, I too had initially been startled by the explosive sounds but it took a long time for Zarre and Zain to stop seeking shelter. Siddique and I had dinned into them after the crackdown: hide if you hear noises. It had become second nature for them. When my family asked, "Why are they hiding?" I tried to explain that they had been taught to hide when they heard gunshots.

I tried to describe how on April 4 at Karatia the army had randomly shelled the place. We had barely finished our lunch when we heard the rumbling of jeeps and heavy vehicles. There had been no time to flee. The only escape was beyond the pond at the back of the house, through a large gap in the back wall where the bricks had fallen out. But there had been no time to even do that. We just somehow managed to slide down the banks of the shallow pond – where we bathed and washed our clothes. We were lucky that the soldiers did not come up to the pond. Perhaps, seeing the empty house, and the scattered unwashed plates, they assumed that all of us had fled through the gap in the wall.

We waited for what seemed hours and then slowly left the pond. Our cars, parked outside the house, were riddled with bullets. If the soldiers had found us, the bullets would have been used on us not on the cars. If

we hadn't fled as quickly as we had, if the gap in the wall had not been there, if the soldiers had proceeded a few steps farther, all of us would have died that day. I told my family how, afterwards, we heard of other families who had taken shelter on the banks of a pond and been mowed down by Pakistani soldiers.

We had escaped unharmed. But we might easily have been killed. It was a miracle that we were alive.

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I could not express how terrified I had been that day, terrified that any moment might be our last.

My sons and I were safe at 5 Club Road, in the spacious house in GOR, the Government Officers' Residence. There were no soldiers chasing us, no curfews, no shortages of essentials. But, unable to share my stories and my feelings, I felt suffocated.

In July Siddique came for a two-week training programme. My sons and I joined him in Karachi. That was the first time I learned about what was really happening in East Pakistan, learned that Nadeem had joined his father. The two weeks we spent together had been such a relief.

In Karachi the war did not seem to exist. Siddique was busy during the day, but we went out in the evenings.

friendship, sometimes in Dacca, at other times in Rawalpindi when they came to visit.

It was difficult for me to be honest about their whereabouts. I couldn't tell her that Baby Apa was in Calcutta, where her husband Muzharul Islam was working with the government in exile. Or that Sultana Zaman's husband, Quazi Nooruzzaman, had joined the Mukti Bahini along with his son. As we talked, slowly the topic of what was happening in East Pakistan came up. She said, India had never been happy about the creation of Pakistan. Now it had got a chance to destroy Pakistan. She told me about the atrocities being perpetrated in East Pakistan by Bengalis – echoing what my mother had told me: about babies torn apart and flung to the ground, of women raped and mutilated, their breasts cut off. Bengalis would be punished, she said, for the crimes they were committing. "Bangalon ko makhion ki tarah kuchal dein gay. We will crush the Bengalis like flies." No, General Khadim Hussain Raja was not like Lieutenant General Sahibzada Yaqub Khan or Admiral S. M. Ahsan.

As I was leaving, I mumbled that I would soon have to go back to East Pakistan. In parting she said, "Don't go back to East Pakistan. Your husband will cut off your breasts and then kill you. You are a Punjabi."

And then, over a cup of coffee at Shezan, another friend in Lahore, a non-Bengali originally from Aligarh, remarked that, with the onset of dry weather, by November, the fighting in East Pakistan would escalate, there would be full fledged war between India and Pakistan. He echoed what Siddique had said, "You will be safe in Lahore. Don't go back."

But I knew then that I could not stay in Lahore and that is why I was desperate to be with my sons on that long flight to Dacca.

There were rumours that flights would be cancelled, that civilians would no longer be allowed on aircraft. If the rumours proved true



Zarre, Zain, and Niaz Zaman with her parents, Hasan Turab Ali and Sakina Nigar Ali, at 5 Club Road, Lahore

His allowance made it possible for us to do the things that I could not in Lahore where I had to save the little money I had brought with me. We also took our first family portrait – at Zaidi's.

When Siddique's training was over, he returned to Dacca and the boys and I to Lahore. This time the stay seemed unbearable. I could not listen to BBC or VOA. How safe would Siddique be if the fighting increased? How were Phul Bhai and Nadeem? Nadeem was only sixteen. Surely that was too young to be fighting! Then, in one of his letters, Siddique mentioned that the weather would get hotter in November. He suggested that I stay on in Lahore with the boys.

Could I stay on in Lahore away from Siddique if there was war between India and Pakistan? Would there be war? Siddique's youngest brother-in-law, Majidul Haq, had a few close friends in the Pakistan army, one of them General Khadim Hussain Raja. Rafia, General Khadim Hussain Raja's wife, and my sister-in-law, Mantu, were fairly close. Perhaps Rafia could give me news about what was happening. So sometime in September, I went to visit her.

Rafia recalled the pleasant times she had spent with Zeba and her family. She called her Zeba – like most of my sister-in-law's Pakistani friends did – instead of Zebunnissa or Mantu, the nickname by which all of us knew her. She asked about Zeba's relations, most of whom she had met during their long

and flights were cancelled, if I did not get a seat on another flight, how would I go back? If war broke out with them there and me here, how would I live without them? But, thankfully, a little before the announcement for departure, I was given a seat. All four of us were allowed to board.

My mother had pleaded with me to stay back in Lahore. If not for myself, for the boys. When she had embraced me at the airport, she had tears in her eyes, but mine, anxious as I was to board the plane, had been dry. If war broke out, when would I see her or my father, or Nani Bibi or my sisters again? The tears came now but there was no time to weep.

The seat belt sign came on. I woke up the boys, fastened their seatbelts. Had we reached Dacca, Zarre asked. Not yet, I said, we still had a few more hours to go. But we would be there, soon, inshallah.

As we disembarked from the plane to wait at Karachi Airport for the flight to Dacca, I wondered what Siddique had really meant when he asked me to remain in Lahore. That he no longer loved me? Or that he wanted the boys and me to be safe?

I could not forget Rafia's words: "Your husband will cut off your breasts and then kill you. You are a Punjabi."

Niaz Zaman is an academic, writer and translator. With Razia Sultana Khan, she co-edited *Stories from the Edge: Personal Narratives of the Liberation War (2017)*.



বঙ্গবন্ধুর নেতৃত্বে মহান মুক্তিযুদ্ধে যাদের বীরত্ব ও আত্মত্বাগ্রহ
আমাদের এনে দিয়েছে বিজয়ের পৌরো তাঁদের প্রতি বিনয় শুক্রা।

মুক্তিযুদ্ধের চোলনার অধিযাত্তের যাত্রামোশকে এগিয়ে নিজে নর্ত সার্টিফিকেটিন্সিটির পক্ষ থেকে
সকলকে বিজয় দিনসের জরুরো ...