



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Prisoners of Pakistan: Bengali military personnel and civil servants in Pakistan, 1971–1974

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Abstract

This article examines, for the first time, a significant aspect of Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971: the fate of 'stranded Bengalis' in West Pakistan during and after the war. The war ended with over 90,000 Pakistani prisoners of war (POWs) captured in East Pakistan-turned-Bangladesh, who were then transferred to Indian custody. The government of Pakistan responded by holding hostage roughly the same number of Bengali military personnel, civil servants, and their dependants in West Pakistan as leverage for the return of its captured POWs. Neither group would return home immediately in what arguably became one of the largest cases of mutual mass internment post-1945. Drawing on a wide range of untapped sources, both official and personal, this article traces the trajectory of this crisis of captivity in which the Bengali officials and officers—hitherto serving the Pakistani state—found themselves as rightless citizens with 'enemy' status after December 1971. Their wartime experiences, more than half a century after the war, warrant recognition in widening the understanding of 1971, not only in the history of regional and global politics but also at what was arguably the home front—a thousand miles away from the 'war zone' in East Pakistan.

Keywords: Bangladesh Liberation War; Pakistan; Bengali personnel; internment; encampment

Introduction

Despite growing interest and recent contributions on the 1971 war and its aftermath, much remains unknown 50 years later. As Faisal Devji notes in a special issue of the *Economic and Political Weekly* '50 Years of Bangladesh Liberation', despite being the most important political event in post-colonial South Asia, it 'has nevertheless received little scholarly attention' and 'what exists of it has been dominated by the international community's vocabulary of genocide and crime against humanity'.¹ The violent 'civil war', which marked the founding of Bangladesh, emerged as a key theme in the fiftieth anniversary year of the creation of that country. Participating in this spirit of remembrance, this article moves on from the 1971 war history to look at the 'further shores'

¹F. Devji, 'End of the postcolonial state', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 56, no. 44, 2021.

of the war on the ‘home front’ by revealing a programme of internment put in place by the Pakistan state for these ‘disloyal’ countrymen, held first as ‘hostiles’ and then as ‘hostages’ to exchange for the return of its captured POWs. From being looked upon as loyal countrymen and serving as state officials, they found themselves marked collectively as a ‘disloyal’ community and a threat to national security, with the inevitable aftermath: their dismissal, monitoring, and ultimately mass internment.

The internment of Bengalis in West Pakistan was an essential component of the wartime experience, involving both a human and moral dimension; and like the events from March to December 1971, this lingering aftermath too awaits a ‘real reckoning’.² This historical recovery is important for a number of reasons, particularly in widening the scholarly canvas of the existing literature on geopolitics,³ the *Birangonas* (war heroines),⁴ refugees,⁵ and claims of genocide in relation to Bangladesh’s Liberation War.⁶ At another level, the internment of Pakistan’s Bengalis brings to mind the twentieth-century’s international war internments of ‘enemy population’, in what recently has been termed a ‘mass global phenomenon’.⁷ In this three-fold sense, this article provides a fresh historical approach to situating the events of 1971 in East Pakistan by locating the Bengalis in West Pakistan in the lead-up to and the aftermath of December 1971. Centred on the experiences of some in this group, this article is an attempt to recover some of the silences from the history(ies) of the break-up of Pakistan.

This unrecognized event of 1971, and particularly an unwritten history in the context of Pakistan, is manifest in Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s idea of silencing, in which ‘[s]omething is always left out while something else is recorded’. ‘Silences are inherent in history’, for Trouillot, ‘because any single event enters history with some of its constituting parts missing’. ‘In other words,’ he suggests, ‘the very mechanisms that make any historical recording possible also ensure that historical facts are not created equal.’⁸ Trouillot’s investigation into how power shapes mentions and silences in history serves as a starting point for examining how the making of archives, the making of narratives, and the act of history-writing are connected to power.⁹ Over half a century after the 1971 war, the internment of Bengalis remains a non-event in the

²For a review of the 1971 war, see N. Mohaiemen, ‘Flying blind: Waiting for a real reckoning on 1971’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 46, no. 36, 2011, pp. 40–52.

³S. Basu, *Intimation of revolution: Global Sixties and the making of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); S. Jaffe, *An internal matter: The United States, grassroots activism and the creation of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: UPL, 2021); G. J. Bass, *The blood telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a forgotten genocide* (New York: Knopf, 2013); S. Raghavan, *1971: A global history of the creation of Bangladesh* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁴Y. Saikia, *Women, war, and the making of Bangladesh: Remembering 1971* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); N. Mookherjee, *The spectral wound: Sexual violence, public memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); B. D’Costa, *Nation building, gender and war crimes in South Asia* (London: Routledge 2011).

⁵D. Siddiqui, ‘Left behind by the nation: “Stranded Pakistanis” in Bangladesh’, *Sites*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2013.

⁶S. Bose, *Dead reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* (London: Hurst, 2011).

⁷S. Manz, P. Panayi and M. Stibbe (eds), *Internment during the First World War: A mass global phenomenon* (London: Routledge, 2019).

⁸M. Trouillot, *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), p. 26.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 49–48.

most significant political crisis in Pakistan's history. What explains this silence in the historiography?

The Pakistan state has been actively trying to both shape and erase the histories of 1971 through its own practices of officially sanctioned history writing and narrative-making, and any attempt at deviation from this narrative does not escape or slip through the Pakistani state's relentless project of its censorship and denial.¹⁰ The necessary silencing, described by Trouillot, is evident not only in the war accounts of former state functionaries about their involvement (or not) in war events, but also in the state's hegemonic national discourse that is reproduced in the textbooks, popular writings, and cinematic presentations.¹¹ This dearth of academic reckoning is mirrored in Bangladesh's historiography too. While stories of Bengali internment are neither hidden nor forgotten, within popular memory in the country, they do not fully serve the nationalist framing of the violent events of 1971, which are understood through ideas of heroism and martyrdom. Thus, there has been a tendency for the Bangladesh state to focus rather on claims of genocide to achieve various political purposes.¹² Among its ramifications has been an invisibilization of Bengalis in West Pakistan—before, during, and after the climactic year of 1971. Given their absence in recent reckonings of the number of 'victims, who and why?' in East Pakistan/Bangladesh over the period 1971–1972,¹³ how do we understand their circumstances, its causations, and its conclusions?

This article is organized in three themes. The first begins by asking some rather elementary questions about what happened to West Pakistan's Bengalis before, during, and after the events of 1971 in East Pakistan-turned-Bangladesh. The second looks at the construction of the country's Bengali population as 'traitors', followed by their termination from government services and, ultimately, their internment. The final theme examines the encampment system and the captivity experience of some internees by presenting their accounts of living conditions and thus contesting official orders and state directives. The article concludes by considering the wider implications of internment's significance, impact, meanings, and legacies.

The 1971 war and narrative of a betrayal of the Bengalis

Writing on the theme of treason, Thiranagama and Kelly argue that the 'bond between the state and its citizens is never complete, as it is mediated by a host of contradictory affiliations to kin and social groups and can be overruled by wider ethical obligations'.

¹⁰In March 2021, the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) planned a five-day online conference 'War, violence and memory: Commemorating 50 years of the 1971 war' However, not long after it was publicized, the university's top administration was forced by the military to cancel the event.

¹¹For a critique of history writing in Pakistan about the violent events of 1971, see A. U. Qasmi, 'Sorry for what? Asking the right questions about the Bangladesh Liberation War and Pakistan's military operation in 1971', *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2023, pp. 871–897.

¹²Nurul Kabir deftly displays how the history of the liberation movement within the nationalist framing has been tampered with through various omissions to achieve particular political ends. N. Kabir, *Birth of Bangladesh: The politics of history and the history of politics* (Dhaka: Samhati Publications, 2022).

¹³C. Gerlach, 'East Pakistan/Bangladesh 1971–1972: How many victims, who, and why?', in *The civilianization of war: The changing civil-military divide, 1914–2014*, (eds) A. Barros and M. Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 116–140.

As a result, ‘any analysis of treason’, they suggest, must see it as both a historical and a politically specific phenomenon culminating from ‘a tension inherent in the state-citizen relationship’.¹⁴ In the creation of Pakistan, Islam served as the primary guiding principle, which held together two widely disparate wings separated by 1,000 miles of Indian territory. The Pakistan state pursued a policy of coercive cultural integration of the East Pakistani Bengalis in post-colonial state formation projects. Subsequently, the oppressed East Pakistan grew to resent West Pakistan’s dominance, and rising nationalism resulted in movements such as the Bengali Language Movement in 1952¹⁵ and the rise of the Awami League in the 1960s.¹⁶ Successive West Pakistani authorities deemed the Bengali Muslims as ‘by nature treacherous and unreliable’—ideas rooted in colonial narratives about Bengali ethnicity— due to their history and the supposed ‘Hinduization’ of their language and culture.¹⁷ Thiranagama and Kelly remind us that such a narrative can be understood in the context of ‘the relations between treason and the fragile nature of state-building processes’.¹⁸ Thus, these ideas served as a standing resource to which the government of Pakistan had access, and in the aftermath of the 1971 war, which ended with Bangladesh’s liberation along with the surrender of the Pakistan Army, the Bengalis on either side of the ‘two wings’ were branded as traitors, subversives, or enemies of the state.

This article argues that the Bengalis’ internment was the Pakistani state’s policy against a set of its own citizens, among them officials and officers directly serving the state, on its own territory. It thus exposed for one final time the two-winged problematic existence of Pakistan since 1947, creating one last category of ‘suspect’ subjects who did not fit neatly within the nation-state’s territorial and national identity projects. For many, whose ‘conceptions of Muslim identity from the partition of Bengal’ in 1947 had seen them rise to serve the state of Pakistan up until the creation of Bangladesh in 1971,¹⁹ this was an unusual predicament. Here, crucially, there was a difference between the treatment of the Bengali military and civilians, not only because the former had access to information and weaponry, but also because their dual status as civilians-officials complicated their lives in adverse ways, since the international rules written to protect POWs covered combatants only. They were looked upon as ‘the enemy within’, in a continuum of the state’s actions during the Indo-Pakistan war of 1965, wherein the 1947 partition-related evacuees and their property were declared

¹⁴S. Thiranagama and T. Kelly (eds) *Traitors: Suspicion, intimacy, and the ethics of state-building* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), pp. 2–3.

¹⁵A. Dutta, ‘Making of the Bangladesh state: Shaheed Dharendra Nath Datta, Bengali Language Movement and birth of a nation’, *Strategic Analysis*, February 2022, pp. 22–40.

¹⁶M. Rashiduzzaman, ‘The Awami League in the political development of Pakistan’, *Asian Survey*, vol. 10, no. 7, 1970, pp. 574–587.

¹⁷See, for example, M. A. Khan, *Diaries of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan 1966–1972*, (ed.) Craig Baxter (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 100, 188. Also see H. Khawaja, ‘Vicious and embodied imaginations: Martial masculinities, Pakistan Army and sexual violence in 1971’, MA thesis, Columbia University, 2021.

¹⁸Thiranagama and Kelly, *Traitors*, p. 4.

¹⁹F. Hashem, ‘Elite conceptions of Muslim identity from the partition of Bengal to the creation of Bangladesh, 1947–1971’, *National Identities*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2010, pp. 61–79; see also I. Iqbal, ‘State of (the) mind: The Bengali intellectual milieu and envisioning the state in the post-colonial era’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2018, pp. 876–891.

'enemy property' in Pakistan (and India).²⁰ During the wartime conditions in 1971, the government furthered this under the authority of Defence of Pakistan Rules (DPRs) of 1971 in which juridical order was suspended in 'states of exception', in order 'to provide for special measures to ensure ... the defence of Pakistan, and for the trial of certain offences...'.²¹ This casting was done especially to catch the Bengalis.

Giorgio Agamben investigates the relationship between sovereign power and 'states of exception'—the spaces in which the juridical order is suspended—and in doing so examines the relationship between non-citizens and the state as well as the influential binary between 'political beings' (political body) and 'bare life' (excluded body).²² The ambiguous, uncertain borderline at the intersection of the legal and the political situates those it contains 'in a limit zone between life and death, inside and outside, in which (he/she) is no longer anything but bare life'.²³ It was the statelessness of inter-war European refugees, stated Hannah Arendt, that consigned them to the state of 'mere life' in the absence of constitutionally granted rights that are not accompanied by a sense of belonging.²⁴ This expression describes a refugee who faces the 'loss of a community willing and able to guarantee any rights whatsoever', rather than merely losing specific rights.²⁵ The wartime experience of stranded Bengalis remained rather distinct from the concepts of 'mere life' and 'bare life' theorized by Arendt and Agamben. Bengalis were still Pakistani citizens; their citizenship was not legally stripped from them and they had not become stateless. Yet, they had become rightless citizens or mere bodies. These citizens, labelled *ghaddar*, were deliberately fashioned as state enemies by wartime measures such as the DPRs. It happened to such an extent that every Bengali, including civilians living in West Pakistan—close to half a million people—became suspects. At least 81,000 of them, mostly Bengali military personnel, government officials, and their dependants were put in different internment camps until their repatriation to Bangladesh in 1974.²⁶

How was this Bengali community of state traitors defined, detained, and dealt with? What prompted the Pakistan state to undertake the measure of interning its Bengali citizens? Was the fate of Bengalis in West Pakistan merely a result of wartime governmentality? How did the Pakistan state justify the internment of its own citizens and how did the Bengalis experience and interpret it? Lastly, what was the response of the Bangladesh government and society, as well as the reaction of the international community?

²⁰S. Umar, 'Constructing the "citizen enemy": The impact of the Enemy Property Act of 1968 on India's Muslims', *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2019, pp. 457–477; S. Goel, 'Tales of restoration: A study of the Evacuee Property Laws', *Studies in History*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2020, pp. 251–279; I. Chattha, 'Competitions for resources: Partition's evacuee property and the sustenance of corruption in Pakistan', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 5, 2012, pp. 1182–1211.

²¹See, for example, 'The Defence of Pakistan Rules Ordinance (1965 and 1971)', Pakistan National Assembly Debates (NAD), 28 April 1972, pp. 34–36.

²²G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); G. Agamben, *State of exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

²³Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 159.

²⁴H. Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism* (Orlando: Harcourt Inc, 1968), p. 290.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 297.

²⁶I. Chattha, *Traitors: Bengalis in Pakistan, 1971–1974* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2024).

Table 1: Percentage of commissioned officers in the Pakistan Army, 1960s.

Services	East Pakistan	West Pakistan
Army	7%	93%
Navy	9%	91%
Air Force	18%	82%

Source: Pakistan National Assembly Debates (hereafter NAD), 3 July 1962, pp. 928–929.

Table 2: Number of West and East Pakistanis as secretaries and deputy secretaries in the Central Government, 1962.

Designation of posts	Total number	East Pakistani	West Pakistani
Secretary	19	1	17
Joint secretary	46	7	30
Deputy secretary	126	24	102
Section officers	763	88	674

Source: NAD, 18 June 1962, pp. 105–106.

In the quarter-century since 1947, the Bengali community in West Pakistan had grown to number about half a million people.²⁷ The community was concentrated particularly in Karachi, where about half of them lived, although pockets of settlements existed throughout West Pakistan. These comprised labourers, farmers, craftsmen, missionaries, workers, industrialists, and merchants. The Bengali population included a significant number of personnel in West Pakistan who were Bengali civil servants in the Central Superior Services of Pakistan (CSP) and military personnel who lived in West Pakistan, as Tables 2 and 3 enumerate. However, as seen in Table 1, ethnic disparity within the Pakistan Army was significant, as evidenced by National Assembly debates. On the eve of the 1971 war, only three Bengali officers had reached the rank of major general or above. However, Bengali personnel did hold key positions in certain fields in West Pakistan.²⁸

There were some administrative postings with a ‘West Pakistan allowance’, which meant these staff were billeted with family, that also made it difficult for them to desert their posts when the war broke out. Unsurprisingly, people in this group found themselves in the crosshairs of state policy and public opinion in the western wing of the country, in the lead-up to the 1971 war. Suspicion of the Bengali ‘traitors’ was fuelled by a variety of factors, including defections, escapes, hijacking

²⁷By 1971, the Bengalis in West Pakistan had become a vibrant and diverse demographic group, and—a year later—a survey of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) conducted for the repatriation of Bengalis to now-Bangladesh accounted for 200,000 ‘documented Bengalis’ with 75,000 women and children in West Pakistan. On the other hand, both their representatives in Pakistan and the newly formed government of Bangladesh claimed that the Bengalis numbered between 400,000 and 500,000. For details see, ‘Bengalis in Pakistan’ (Part B), The National Archives (henceforth TNA), FCO 37/1385.

²⁸They included the National Shipping Corporation (NSC), Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), Ports and Shipping Authority (PSA), Pakistan Broadcast Corporation (PBC), Military Medical Corps (MMC), and Electrical and Mechanical Engineering (EME).

Table 3: Number of East Pakistanis as non-gazetted posts in the Central Government, 1962.

Ministries	Total staff	East Pakistanis
Ministry of Finance	337	40
Ministry of Industries	187	39
Ministry of Commerce	142	28
President Secretariat	72	3
Pakistan Forest Institute	284	18
Central Labour Directorate	32	2
Ministry of State	110	0

Source: NAD, 18 June 1962, p. 112.

attempts, ministries leaking information, the sale of property, and the transfer of assets. The making of a Bengali suspect on the home front was an important aspect of the flight of Bengalis in West Pakistan. There were some instances of anticipatory flight—paralleling the 1947 partition-related migration of wealthy Hindus and Sikhs from Pakistan to India—among the privileged sections of the community, as some civil servants and traders started to shift their families and assets to East Pakistan on the eve of the Pakistan Army's crackdown in March 1971. An American journalist, who flew from Karachi to Dacca in mid-March, reported thus after speaking to some Bengali passengers:

Carrying all their belongings of value ... [Bengali passengers] fill the only two flights [PIA] that still operate daily between East and West ... Each carries 160 people ... so the waiting list is staggering ... At Karachi Airport the fleeing Bengali mothers did not talk of panic, but their faces betrayed their fears. They were taking all their gold jewellery, their transistor radios, blankets and their best clothes ... Most of the Bengali passengers refused to give the real reason for their trip. 'I am going home for rest and recreation', one man said. 'My mother hasn't seen us for a long time', said another.²⁹

In many cases, the questioning of Bengali servicemen's 'loyalty' centred on India's role in the 1971 war in East Pakistan. In July 1971, an official dispatch appeared on the front pages of Pakistani newspapers, stating that an 'Indian conspiracy to cripple East Pakistan's economy had unfolded'.³⁰ There was widespread belief in government circles about a 'link' between the Indian treachery and the involvement of Bengali officials. In July 1971, Agha Hilaly, Pakistan's ambassador to the United States (1966–1971), told former Pakistani President Ayub Khan (who was in the United States for medical checks) that 'Bengali personnel met the

²⁹S. Schanberg, 'In Pakistan, some flee to the East', *The New York Times* (New York), 18 March 1971, p. 2.

³⁰Excerpted in *The Morning News* and *The Pakistan Observer* (Dacca), 12 July 1971, (Part A), TNA, FCO 37/1384.

Indians daily and openly to take instructions.’³¹ Such suspicions arose in the context of a growing number of Bengali diplomats defecting from Pakistan’s foreign missions and switching allegiance to the government-in-exile of ‘Bangla Desh’.³²

Inside Pakistan, Bengali civil servants, whether posted in Islamabad or Dacca, were specifically identified as leaking information or sympathizing with the cause of Bangladesh. They included high-ranking officers such as Shafiul Azam, the chief secretary of East Pakistan (1969 to 1971), who was labelled a ‘traitor’ for interacting with the Mukti Bahini (a Bengali freedom fighter group). He was subtly transferred from Dacca to Islamabad in September 1971 and was then detained in Warsak camp (in the North-West Frontier Province; NWFP) with his family until his repatriation to Bangladesh in late 1973. Suspicions against the Bengali community were sharpened as 1971 wore on. With the Pakistan military’s surrender and the emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign state in December 1971, the Pakistani authorities began to distinguish the population in West Pakistan as ‘loyal’ and ‘disloyal’ citizens, with the Bengalis consistently appearing in the latter category, being considered ‘traitors’ who engaged in espionage and were ‘enemies’ of the state. One government document of the 1971 war, the ‘West Pakistani Class 1 Civil Servants Petition to the Central Government’, laid out a comprehensive scheme for the mass dismissal and confinement of their Bengali counterparts. Signed by 300 civil servants on 1 January 1972, it urged the new President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to ‘remove all Bengali officials ... working in the Secretariats’ and to recall ‘all East Pakistan officials serving in foreign missions...’. Second, it asked to disallow the ‘interning allowance admissible to East Pakistani officials working in West Pakistan...’. Third, it sought, ‘for residential purpose, the Bengali officials to be concentrated in one locality in Islamabad so that their activities and movements could be easily checked...’. Fourth, it urged, ‘all gold whether in the pockets, family possessions or with the individuals should be taken by the government...’. The final lines of this directive read: ‘if the Government does not take any action immediately, [its] servants would not be responsible for the incidents that will take place because of the feelings that have cropped up’.³³

What procedures were used to identify the Bengali *ghaddar* (traitors) among the populace? Within weeks of receiving the petition, the Bhutto government circulated a ‘note’ à la 1947 among its officials giving them the option ‘to serve in east or west Pakistan’. Most Bengali civil servants opted to serve in the east, and as a result, all of them were dismissed, and they were prevented from leaving the country as their passports, travel documents, and banks accounts were seized. Sultan Mohammad Ahmad (1919–2010), the newly appointed Pakistan foreign secretary who had replaced his Bengali predecessor M. S. Yusuf (1966–1972), confirmed to the Pakistan media: ‘All unpatriotic Bengalis have already been removed from the government services; however, some patriotic Bengalis continue to work alongside their Pakistani counterparts.’³⁴ In early February 1972, the Pakistani press confirmed the government’s

³¹Khan, *Diaries of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan*, p. 485.

³²For example, see ‘New York diplomat deserts Yahya’, *The New York Times* (New York), 27 April 1971; ‘Defection by E. Bengalis in Paris embassy’, *The Times of India* (Bombay), 8 July 1971.

³³Chattha, *Traitors*.

³⁴‘Unpatriotic Bengalis dismissed’, *Nawa-i-waqt* (Lahore), 10 February 1972, p. 2.



Figure 1. A cartoon depiction of Bengali internment in Pakistan, February 1972. Source: *Pakistan Times* (Lahore), 7 February 1972.

'list' of West Pakistan's over 25,000 Bengali civil servants and 28,000 military personnel, who would be shifted to camps 'within a week', quoting the home minister, Sardar Abdul Qaiyum Khan.³⁵ Despite efforts to censor the press, information regarding the Bengali roundup was communicated through cartoon images in some newspapers (Figure 1).

Why was the Pakistani government concerned about Bengali disloyalty even after the war? Various setbacks in the war in East Pakistan-turned-Bangladesh led Pakistan's public to believe that 'subversive' activities on the home front were widespread. Such moral panics were also closely linked with the government of Pakistan's efforts to generate political and moral authority for a state-building logic. In this process, the spectral figure of the 'Bengali traitor' embodied Pakistani's failures in the war and justified furthering the coercive apparatus of the state to ensure its ideological commitment in West Pakistan. In other words, the disintegrated state fabricated an atmosphere of insecurity in Pakistan in the wake of the loss of its eastern wing, in which Bhutto's government deliberately stoked up fears to strike at internal enemies, garnering the compliance of the defeated army, demoralized bureaucracy, and, above

³⁵Ibid.

all, compromised nation, thus extending the hand of the state further into society through monitoring arrangements.

An important parallel to the labelling of traitors can be understood through the body of work on treason accusations. Accusations of treason are ‘powerful’ and labelling groups as ‘traitors’ as a precursor to a targeted terror strategy against them has historically played a ‘central role in the attempt to maintain social order and political authority’.³⁶ In the case of Bengalis in Pakistan, the reason given for the calls was the needful internment of ‘traitors’ for the fiscal and territorial sovereignty of the nation. A state-sanctioned ‘spy fever’ was whipped up as the Urdu newspapers cultivated the image of Bengali civil servants as Indian ‘spies’, who were found ‘stealing documents and sensitive equipment’ from government ministries. Plentiful examples of this narrative appeared as a series of articles in one of Lahore’s popular Urdu newspapers, the *Daily Mashriq*. Citing official sources, its publication of 29 May 1972, for example, reported: ‘Ten top civil servants from Islamabad Secretariate belonging to East Pakistan were arrested yesterday when they were escaping with state top-secret files and tools to Afghanistan on their way to New Delhi.’³⁷

The desperate need to evade internment necessitated a wide range of escape operations. The Bengalis were no longer simply a matter of law-and-order, but state enemies. The Pakistan press promoted hostility towards them by portraying the community collectively as ‘disloyal’ during and after the 1971 war, despite the lack of credible evidence. They were not only considered dangerous to the state’s territorial sovereignty—and seen as conspiring with the Indians—but also to its fiscal sovereignty. Bengalis selling property was interpreted as another proof of suspicion. Thus, those who tried to transfer their assets out of Pakistan were charged in treason cases under the wartime DPRs. As proof of these activities, it was asserted that the Indian High Commission and the Russian embassy in Islamabad were working against the sovereignty of Pakistan. Citing intelligence sources, the *Nawa-i-waqt* attempted to convince its Urdu readers that ‘there are potent proofs for depositing their [Bengalis] stocks of gold in the Indian and Russian embassies in Islamabad’.³⁸

For these reasons, the portrayals enabled state initiatives to cordon off the Bengali community, based on ethnicity, regardless of its capacity to harm. The Pakistani state’s general campaign against Bengalis might also be seen, in part, as an attempt to rally popular patriotic support in the loss of its eastern wing, to make the dismembered state more ‘national’, and to mobilize better for security and stability. While the state created security mania, its motives were the internment of Bengalis to influence the parlays for the exchange of the captured POWs. Provoked by events in East Pakistan and later in the surrender of the Pakistan Army, fears that an ‘enemy within’ existed on the home front gripped the public’s imagination. In many ways, the security scare was actively created by the state and was encouraged by sections of society to serve specific purposes. These were the need for the authorities to find scapegoats to explain their defeats and to enhance their power as a means of influencing India and Bangladesh to abandon the ‘trials of war crimes’ against the Pakistan POWs. This opens the question

³⁶Thiranagama and Kelly, *Traitors*, pp. 3, 12.

³⁷*The Daily Mashriq* (Lahore), 29 May 1972, p. 1.

³⁸*Nawa-i-waqt* (Lahore), 10 February 1972, p. 1.

of the degree to which the 'Bengali traitor' was a creation of the Pakistan authorities themselves rather than a spontaneous reaction among the general public.

However, the captivity campaign did not proceed evenly, as it went through fits and starts in the early stages of the war. The government initially targeted Bengali military personnel, but thereafter extended its campaign to the ranks of civil servants and to all sections of the Bengali community whose loyalty was questioned. As the fate of the captured POWs hung in the balance, the Pakistani government used the powers granted by the wartime DPRs to round up Bengalis in large numbers. They were used as a negotiating tool for the release of Pakistani POWs, the vast majority of whom were Punjabis, as will be explained next. It is possible—and convenient—to divide Bengali internees into two broad categories and their corresponding periods, essentially maintaining the distinction between civil servant and military personnel internment.

Encampment of Bengali military personnel

At the start of the Pakistan military's crackdown in East Pakistan, many Bengalis, particularly army and civil service officers, were accused of conspiring with the Indians. They were identified and presented as a potential security threat, labelled as 'disloyal' and 'traitors', and subjected to increased surveillance and public discourse. As early as 9 April 1971, it was revealed that a 19-year-old sub-lieutenant, M. Nizam, had attempted to plot a revolt in the Pakistan Navy. On charges of 'inciting defections', he was court-martialled and sentenced to five years in prison, alongside three other Bengali navy men. By the end of the month, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) had grounded all Bengali personnel following a hijacking attempt by a Bengali flying officer of an American-built 7-33 jet fighter from a base near Karachi. By the end of the year, dozens of Bengali navy and air force officers had been court-martialled for 'treasons' or 'anti-state acts', including 'inciting defections', 'hijacking jet planes', and 'leaking ministerial secrets to enemies'.³⁹

The Pakistan government had begun disarming Bengali regiments and interning Bengali military personnel soon after the Pakistan Army's crackdown in East Pakistan in March 1971. The end of the war in East Pakistan-turned-Bangladesh in December 1971 led to the internment of higher-ranking Bengali officers in Pakistan, who had already been furloughed. Lieutenant General Khawaja Wasi-ud-din, commander of the 11 Corps Rawalpindi, was placed under 'house arrest', along with his family, in an army bungalow in Kharian Cantonment (near Jhelum) and his pay and allowances were stopped.⁴⁰ Another prominent detainee was Major General Mohammed Iskander-al-Karim, the commander of the 6th Armoured Division, who was relieved of his duties

³⁹'Bengalis in Pakistan' (Part A), TNA, FCO 37/1384.

⁴⁰Wasi-ud-din was the highest-ranking Bengali serving officer in the Pakistan Army in 1971 and came from the Dhaka Nawab family; his father Khwaja Shahbuddin was the governor of the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, and a senior minister in the government of Ayub Khan; his father's elder brother was Sir Khawaja Nazimuddin, the second governor-general of Pakistan and subsequently its second prime minister. His mother was Farhat Banu, the niece of Sir Salimullah and member of the Bengal Legislative Assembly. His wife Waheeda came from a well-known Punjabi family. For details, see S. Waheed, *Khwaab Jo Haqiqat Panay* (Urdu) (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 2011), pp. 39–40.

in December 1971 and kept under 'house arrest' in Kharian Cantonment. There were reports of their 'imminent court-martial, subject to some sort of trial', for if the Bengalis decided to 'go ahead with war crimes trials in Bangla Desh, the Pakistanis decide to reciprocate'. The Pakistan government claimed that it had 'a great deal of evidence of treason and intrigue by Bengali servicemen'.⁴¹

Before any of that could happen though, these officers and other ranks needed to subsist somewhere, maintained on a monthly 'allowance', which ranged from Rs 25/- for sepoy to Rs 500/- for generals. While the high-ranking internees rarely faced serious threats or physical torture, the camp detention of the Bengali sepoy represented a long, undeserved, and uncertain captivity in Pakistan. A report of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) described the internment conditions: 'the soldiers are kept in barracks and forts on subsistence pay and [they are] not allowed to go out except under supervision'.⁴²

The Bengali military personnel's experience of captivity greatly varied, according to their serving status and seniority to their marital status, age, and gender. In many ways, the ranked officers with families had a more cushioned experience of captivity than sepoy/soldiers. The circumstances and capacity of the camps varied, and the largest camp, Shagai Fort, was the site of some of the most difficult aspects of this encampment, which has remained a hidden aspect of the 1971 war.

Shagai Fort camp

Shagai Fort, which was built by the British in the 1920s in the NWFP to oversee the legendary Khyber Pass (in the tribal borderland with Afghanistan), housed a large contingent from the Bengali regiments, along with several military-civilian servants and doctors. The camp, which had been abandoned after the Second World War, provided primitive living conditions. The first internees arrived there immediately after the Pakistan Army's crackdown operation in East Pakistan in March 1971, and further groups would follow regularly throughout 1971–1973. The site had an adequate infrastructure for the number of internees that it was originally planned to hold, but the constant increase in numbers meant that regardless of the degree to which the facilities of the camp were increased, they were never sufficient for the numbers that were held at any particular time. As internment operations for Bengalis continued across West Pakistan and numbers rose throughout 1971–1973, new accommodation had to be sought.

Shagai's internees faced squalid conditions. According to some escaped soldiers, 'they were living in subhuman conditions [with] no medical aid [and] twenty men in one room; the other ranks were even more cramped and had no beds for the first five months [and] there were no latrines...'.⁴³ Although some of these conditions improved throughout the internment period, ICRC monitors noted the overcrowded barracks amid harsh weather conditions, with Dr Testuz, a representative of the ICRC, highlighting 'little ventilation' at Fort Shagai in '50 [degree] Celsius temperature', while making it clear that it was 'not [a] "concentration camp"'. In otherwise 'reasonable conditions',

⁴¹'Bengalis in Pakistan' (Part A), TNA, FCO 37/1384.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³'Escaping Bengali Military Personnel', TNA, FCO 37/1284.

he received 'complaints about too many in one room', and that 'the officers were no longer allowed to go out from the Fort...'. But Testuz did not 'regard these complaints as very serious'.⁴⁴

Between 22 and 28 May 1972, Testuz visited three 'pre-repatriation centres' at Sandeman, Loralai, and Shagai, where tens of thousands of Bengali soldiers and their families were interned, and noted that 'they were in far better condition than DPs in 1945', adding however that:

...deep mental depression has gripped many officers ... and men isolated and abandoned ... They are not getting much mail from Bengal ... Some officers who used to have their own houses and servants are living in three to a room. They are depressed because they now have to go to the toilet under the eyes of guards carrying bayonets ... In one camp, Bengalis were arguing furiously over who was to be the 'wet sweeper' or the 'dry sweepers' in helping keep living quarters clean...⁴⁵

While this report highlights the conditions of the Bengalis in some camps, with both class and caste undertones, camp conditions and capacity varied, as did the internees' experiences in captivity. How did the Bengalis view the ICRC's efforts? Accounts of some internees describe their captivity experiences in far harsher terms than the ICRC's inspection reports, with the testimonies of several escapees who managed to flee Pakistan attesting to this. 'The most terrible role has been played by the Red Cross. This institution, as a friend of Pakistan, is merely monitoring how horribly the Bengalis live their daily lives ... [their delegates are] taking photographs, and enjoying the scenery...'⁴⁶

The ICRC had its own constraints, for it was the only international organization permitted to visit some Bengali camps in Pakistan. While its inspection reports are an important source for investigating both the conditions in the camps and the situation of the internees, they frequently employed the Pakistan authorities' vocabulary of the camps when characterizing them as 'pre-repatriation centres'. Nonetheless, the ICRC was the internees' only option, and they eagerly awaited its scheduled visits to express their grievances. Some internees' accounts indicate their discontent with the ICRC's visit to their camps. According to a Sandeman Fort Camp internee,

News came that Red Cross people are going to visit our camp to know the condition of the people. The camp people over enthusiastic about the fact that they would get an opportunity to vent their grievances, drafted and redrafted long memorandums. When they arrived the camp people were disappointed because they felt that proper attention was not given to their problem, and they have been deprived of their right to ventilate their grievances.⁴⁷

⁴⁴'Bengalis in Pakistan' (Part B), TNA, FCO 37/1385.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶S. Begum, '4.5 lakhs Bengalis in humanitarian crisis in Pakistan; bring them back', *Ittefaq* (Dacca), 4 October 1972, p. 4.

⁴⁷F. Huq, *Journey through 1971: My story* (Dhaka: Academic Press and Publishers Limited, 2004), pp. 329–330.

As with all camps, overcrowding and abysmal sanitary conditions contributed to outbreaks of infectious diseases among the internees. Outbreaks of fever, influenza, and chickenpox were especially severe during the early months when many suffered from various ailments and three people died of chickenpox, giving the camp a reputation for wretched living. The ICRC confirmed that 'the men's diet was very meagre and there were no proper medical facilities...'.⁴⁸ These conditions inevitably led to several desperate attempts to escape from the camp and reach the neighbouring Afghan borderland, with few successes. One of the more dramatic episodes took place in January 1973, when Captain Nazimuddin (Baluch Regiment), Lieutenant Mohammed Alim (Frontier Force Rifles), Lieutenant Syed Ali Mahmood (EME), Flying Officer Rafiqul Haq, and Cadet Mohiuddin Khondhar of the Pakistan Air Force escaped and made their way to the Afghan border on foot. According to these escapees, 'many officers have been tried on flimsy ground ... and sentenced to rigorous prison terms ranging from six months to fourteen years'.⁴⁹

For those who got caught, solitary confinement became the order of the day and, among them, those who could not endure it became 'mentally ill' and a liability for the camp management. They were returned to Bangladesh as 'a message of good-well from Pakistan' and to knit 'bonds of Islamic brotherhood'. In one such gesture in May 1973, Pakistan returned 15 Bengali military personnel to India at the Wagah border check post. A Pakistan Army spokesman, Major General Qamar Ali Mirza, told newsmen that 'eight of them became mentally ill on receipt of information about the brutal murders of the Mukti Bahini in East ... One was suffering from acute abdominal trouble, whereas others were mentally disturbed due to unknown reasons...'.⁵⁰

For those who managed to escape, their harrowing accounts of harsh treatment, lack of privacy, and unhygienic conditions became a weapon in post-1971 war propaganda. 'Pak Bengali officers living in hell holes' headlined the *Times of India* on 19 February 1973, quoting accounts of escapees from Fort Shagai. One such was Major A. K. M. Shahjahan of the Pakistan Frontier Force, who had escaped along with six other Bengali officers, and who spoke about '22 concentration camps' in West Pakistan, 'in which we were lodged [as] living hell holes on face of the earth'.⁵¹ Such descriptions fed both regional and international press accounts and aroused public opinion. For example, the *Morning News* of 21 February 1973 featured: 'Harrowing tales of torture meted out to Bengalis in Pakistani concentration camps...'. Three days earlier, on 18 February 1973, BBC New Delhi had aired interviews with some escapees from Fort Shagai:

They were held there for almost a year and were not allowed to go out or to have visitors. From the day of the crackdown in East Bengal on March 20, 1971, the Bengali army, air force and navy personnel and the civilians were living in subhuman conditions. They were denied all basic facilities necessary even for criminals lodged in jails.

⁴⁸ 'Escaping Bengali Military Personnel', TNA, FCO 37/1284.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ '15 Bengali military personnel returned via Wagah', *Dawn* (Karachi), 20 May 1973; see also *Jang* (Karachi), 20 May 1973.

⁵¹ Excerpted in the *Times of India*, 9 February 1973, 'Bengalis in Pakistan' (Part B), TNA, FCO 37/1385.

Captain Ikramullah of the Pakistan Engineers Corps gave a compelling account of the circumstances of their internment:

We were posted in places and positions where we had nothing to do with the actual operations ... In December [1971], all Bengali officers and men were asked to collect at the camps set up for them. Officers and their families were boarded in trains and taken to the interior NWFP where they were lodged in old forts like, Shagai and Khajauri etc. We were herded like sheep and cattle in these forts, which had watch towers, floodlights, watch-dogs and armed guards.⁵²

Ikramullah described the fortresses of Shagai and Khajauri as ‘completely bare when they were lodged in them [without] cash and other valuable [with] bank accounts frozen and [payment of] 20 to 35 rupees a month after deducting huge amounts for food and other facilities were not there ... All our woolen clothes were withdrawn, and soldiers were made to sleep on bare floors without any covering in extremely cold conditions.’⁵³ The BBC’s correspondent reported that one of the escaped officers, Major Shahjahan, told him that they escaped on the night of 4 February 1973 through a ventilator hole ... and, after walking for two nights, crossed over to Afghanistan, where they went to Kabul and contacted the authorities. ‘In all eleven of us came out but four were captured,’ Major Shahjahan said. ‘We were chased by hounds and scouts. The army and civilian authorities searched for us, but we managed to give them the slip.’⁵⁴

The following section assesses the treatment of civil servants who, regardless of where they had been interned, faced living conditions noticeably better than that of the military personnel and the rank-and-file internees.

Internment of Bengali civil servants, 1971–1974

In early 1972, a group of Bengali civil servants in Islamabad was able to pass on a petition for David Ennals (1922–1995), a Labour Party MP and campaigner for human rights. Ennals, a former minister, was then the head of an organization called ‘Friends of Bangla Desh Conciliation Mission’. In appealing for the well-being of the East Bengalis in West Pakistan, the petitioners detailed their circumstances in Pakistan. Ennals visited Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India in April–May 1972, accompanied by Paul Connett (a university lecturer who had given up his teaching to work for an organization called Action Bangladesh), M. S. Hoda (an Indian citizen of Bihari origin living in Surrey), and F. Chowdhury (a British Bengali from London). Their visit, named ‘The Ennals Mission’, was backed by a number of international agencies and societies.⁵⁵ The mission was concerned with ‘the problems of the 400, 000 Bengalis in Pakistan

⁵²‘Bengalis in Pakistan’ (Part B), TNA, FCO 37/1385.

⁵³‘Escaping Bengali Military Personnel’, TNA, FCO 37/1284.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵These included the National Association of Mental Health (of which Ennals himself was director), Action Bangladesh, the Friends of Bangladesh Conciliation Mission, and the Minorities Rights Group. The mission was also supported by a number of international organizations, including UNICEF, the Red Cross, Christian Aid, War on Want, and other relief organizations, such as Operation OMEGA whose field workers accompanied members of the mission in Bangladesh.

and one million Biharis in Bangla Desh and for solutions to the nine million refugee problem in India'.⁵⁶ In its tour of Pakistan, the mission first visited Karachi's Lalukhet area where some Bengali civil servants lived.

Almost all these people have been made redundant ... because they were Bengalis... These people are now looking after each other, sharing accommodations and funds. We have seen considerable overcrowding and shortage of money in these areas ... instances of sporadic violence and intimidation were [also] reported.⁵⁷

While members of the mission were not permitted to visit the camps where Bengali military personnel were interned, the Ennals Mission met many dismissed senior Bengali servicemen as well as other citizens both in Karachi and Islamabad and concluded that:

They live in guarded government quarters and the morale of these officers and the subordinate staff is at a low ebb. Many of them have been asked to vacate their houses ... Many of the Bengali officials especially Class III and Class IV employees who took cyclone and flood relief advances [in 1970], or took surety for Travelling Allowance Advances are not allowed to draw their salaries as the office is recovering [these] from their salaries ... These employees are facing dire financial distress ... Less fortunate Bengalis, laid off from factories in Karachi, are fed in gruel kitchens and beg from door to door ... The Bengali civil servants of Class I are encamped in their houses ... their telephones cut off ... They live on £5 to £20 a month ... They have sold their cars and furniture ... fridges...⁵⁸

The mission was told by a senior dismissed Bengali civil servant from Karachi that fear of the future was 'the most important problem', adding to the current sense of insecurity. Ennals and company also met President Bhutto and urged that the process of repatriation should begin, at least in cases where families were separated and children involved. They concluded in their report that:

It seemed clear that no significant number of Bengalis would be permitted to return until the Pakistani POWs have been returned ... To this extent, they were being held as hostages. They are absolutely innocent. They have not committed any crime against anybody. Even the army personnel, who had been removed from sensitive and authoritative positions long before the December War, did not and could not in any manner, direct or indirect, take part in the War.⁵⁹

The mission submitted its report to the British authorities with a number of observations and recommendations:

⁵⁶'The Ennals Report: Bengalis in Pakistan', April–May 1972, TNA, FCO 37/1067.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid.

Though conditions of poverty will increase ... and insecurity grows, the situation for these Bengali people is much better than for Biharis in Bangladesh. Unlike Biharis in East Pakistan, Bengalis in Pakistan have been serving the government or private employers ... They have not done anything against the law of the land. Yet Pakistan would like to link their fate with that of the Biharis ... There is not any convention to protect their life and to assure human treatment towards them. In this sense, they are even in a situation worse than that of the POWs [under] the Geneva Convention...⁶⁰

Upon his return to the United Kingdom, Ennals wrote a series of articles for British newspapers, highlighting the plight of stranded Bengalis in West Pakistan. He asked the British prime minister to 'press for a meeting' between Bhutto and Mujib so that a population exchange could begin between the two countries. He also called on international observers to pay a visit to the camps in West Pakistan, saying:

An amnesty should be declared for those against whom there is little evidence, those whose detention is based on their professional positions under the Government of Pakistan, and those who are very young or advanced in years ... The opportunity was not accorded to me of visiting the military 'collection camps' but there are disturbing reports of conditions of life of those Bengalis in the armed forces and such reports can only be disproved if observers of the Red Cross are permitted to visit the camps.⁶¹

Some international organizations attempted to stir up transnational public opinion about the circumstances of Bengalis in Pakistan by publishing accounts of life in captivity, accompanied by visual representations whenever possible. By the spring of 1972, relatives of 'the stranded Bengalis' had established an organization called the Association of Rescue Stranded Bengalis in Pakistan and held regular protests on the streets of Dacca, petitioning the Bangladesh government and international institutions for the return of their loved ones.⁶² Members of Bangladeshi society, too, advocated for the return of Bengalis from Pakistan. On 6 April 1972, eight Bengali intellectuals issued a joint 'appeal' to their Pakistani counterparts, urging them to exert pressure on the Bhutto government for Bengali repatriation.⁶³ They stated that,

The Bengalis in Pakistan are going through barbaric oppression and are subjected to horrific cruelty... This is a humanitarian issue because many Bengalis are children, women, and unarmed civilians. These people cannot be used in the

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²In one such protest on 1 April 1971 relatives of the detained Bengalis staged a protest in Dacca, handing over a memorandum to the UN office demanding the release of their loved ones in Pakistan. *Daily Ittefaq* (Decca), 1 April 1972, p. 1.

⁶³They included academics Syed Ali Ahsan (1922–2002), Shawkat Osman (1917–1998), Kabir Chowdhury (1923–2011); painter Zainul Abedin (1914–1976); poets Begum Sufia Kamal (1911–1999), Shamsur Rahman (1929–2006); scientist Mohammad Qudrat -i- Khuda (1900–1977); and journalist Hasan Hafizur Rahman (1932–1983).

negotiations over Pakistani POWs. They should not be confused with any other chess game in politics or diplomacy... The Bengalis have already paid a high price for their freedom, so we urge Pakistan's intellectual community to step out and put pressure on their government to resolve the issue as soon as possible.⁶⁴

The government of Bangladesh pushed for the repatriation of Bengalis. Mujib wrote on a regular basis to the heads of several states and humanitarian organizations 'to save some half a million stranded Bengalis from Pakistani oppression'.⁶⁵ Others urged 'the UN to take custody of the incarcerated people until they could be repatriated to Bangladesh'.⁶⁶ In the meantime, the Bangladesh government offered a living 'allowance' to the dependants of the stranded Bengalis in Pakistan. At the administrative level, the Mujib administration attempted to fill the gaps by employing retired and previously 'dismissed' Bengali civil servants. Among others, M. R. Farouk, who had retired from the Pakistan Police Service in 1964, was brought back as a Dacca super-intendent of police. Azizur Raul, a Class I civil servant who had been 'compulsorily retired' in 1969, was reinstated as a section officer in the Ministry of Cabinet Affairs' Establishment Division.⁶⁷

Prelude to mass internment

By late 1972, the government of Bangladesh had stepped up its campaign in support of the projected trials for 'war crimes' committed by the Pakistani POWs during the war. Bangladesh's foreign minister, Kamal Hossain, confirmed to the BBC that a trial would be held 'within two months', which prompted an editorial in the *Bangladesh Observer* titled 'Trial of war criminals'.⁶⁸ As shown in [Figure 2](#) the Urdu press in Pakistan reported that India had handed over thousands of the POWs to Bangladesh for the war crimes trials of 'patriotic Pakistani soldiers'. Thus, the Pakistan government and sections of society renewed calls for the widespread imprisonment of Bengalis, who were Pakistan's most powerful negotiating chip in this negotiation. 'If India hands over Pakistani POWs to Bangladesh for trials, then Bengalis in Pakistan would be tried for acts of treason and subversion', said the chairman of the National Council of Repatriation of Pakistani POWs to *Dawn* on 2 May 1973.⁶⁹

Soon thereafter, the government of Pakistan drove out Bengali civil servants from their houses and held them in what they would term a 'general repatriation centre'. Until then, a selective policy had been executed, which distinguished between the 'unpatriotic' and 'patriotic', according to the level of danger to 'national security' the

⁶⁴'Bengali intellectuals urge Pakistani intellectuals to create influence for the return of Bengalis', *Daily Ittefaq* (Decca), 6 April 1972, pp. 2 and 6.

⁶⁵Mujib urged the UN's assistance in repatriating the Bengalis during his meeting with UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Prince Salauddin Agha Khan. For details, see 'Bangabandhu-Prince discussions over stranded Bengalis', *Daily Ittefaq* (Decca), 2 April 1972, p. 1.

⁶⁶Abdus Samad, 'Bengalis trust UN', *Daily Ittefaq* (Decca), 1 April 1972, p. 1; see also details of the meeting of Foreign Minister Abdus Samad with the ICRC's representative Mr L. Matt. 'Create pressure to return Bengalis', *Daily Ittefaq* (Decca), 12 April 1972, p.1.

⁶⁷A. S. M. Shamsul Arefin, *Bangladesh Documents 1971*, Part IV (Dhaka, 2011), pp. 679–80.

⁶⁸Editorial, 'Trial of war criminals', *The Bangladesh Observer* (Dacca), 20 January 1973, p. 5.

⁶⁹*Dawn* (Karachi), 3 May 1973.



Figure 2. A cartoon depiction in *Nawa-i-waqt* depicting Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's handing over of a third group of Pakistani POWs to Sheikh Mujibur for 'slaughter' [the 'trials of war crimes']. Source: *Nawa-i-waqt* (Lahore), 3 May 1973, p. 1.

individual supposedly represented. From May 1973, however, the Bengali population in West Pakistan would become a camp community—what Davis has conceptualized as 'war camps as social communities'⁷⁰—culminating in the detention of close to half a million Bengali people until they were repatriated to Bangladesh in late 1973 and 1974. According to the ICRC,

The operation took place between 2300 hours 5 May and 0100 hours 6 May 1973, when Class I and Class II civil servants, but not their families, were taken from their government quarters first to Islamabad Police Station, and thence to the Police Training Institute, outside Rawalpindi.⁷¹

Thus began an operation in which, according to the ICRC, the 'total number rounded up in Islamabad and Rawalpindi were 'in excess of 200', who were shifted to 'internment camps in some obscure places...'. The reasons for the '5/6 May Midnight round-up' were listed as:

- A. [the] realization that the hostage value of Bengali is being steadily reduced as more and more escape. Two recent disappearances which may well

⁷⁰G. H. Davis, 'Prisoner of war camps as social communities in Russia: Krasnoyarsk 1914–1921', *East European Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1987, p. 147; H. Slim, *Killing civilians: Method, madness, and morality in war* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

⁷¹'Bengalis in Pakistan' (Part B), TNA, FCO 37/1385.

have helped to precipitate the latest move are those of Syed Ahmad, ex-information secretary, and Mohammed Sultan, an ex-director general of the MFA.

- B. counter suspected blackmail for the government of Pakistan to reportedly moves the Pakistani POWs from India to Bangladesh for war crimes trials.⁷²

In many ways, Bhutto himself proved to have a major impact on the internment campaign against the Bengalis in Pakistan. On 29 May 1973, he spoke to an American newspaper about the Bengali officials' 'treason trials': 'They aided Indian and Bangla Desh forces. We know the Bengalis passed on information ... [during the war]. There will be specific charges. How many will be tried, I cannot say.'⁷³

Arrested as 'disloyal' people and officially classified as part of the repatriation in 'collection centres', these Bengalis included prominent professional classes. The British embassy in Islamabad reported to London thus: 'Bengalis have been rounded-up in Pakistan ... We cannot estimate numbers, but if the sweep is comprehensive, hundreds, even thousands maybe involved.'⁷⁴

The BBC Sunday World Service of 7 May 1973 broadcast the news of widespread internment of the Bengalis across the country. The Pakistan authorities seem to have been surprised by the level of worldwide reportage of the crackdown. While the Indian and Bangladeshi, as well as the international, press reported the 'mass arrest' of Bengalis in Islamabad, referring to it as 'blackmailing' and 'a barbarous act unprecedented in history, dumping innocent Bengalis into concentration camps',⁷⁵ what most worried the Pakistan authorities was the BBC broadcasts. The Pakistan Minister of Foreign Affairs (MFA) summoned the British ambassador regarding the 'serious damage done to Pakistan's image'. The British ambassador reported to London about his meeting with officers from the MFA:

Aziz Ahmed [Pakistan foreign minister] stated ... there had been a misstatement of the facts on three main points. First, the BBC had said that the police had raided the houses of the Bengalis; secondly, they had said that the Bengalis had been taken to a police station, and thirdly, that the Bengali officials had been separated from their families ... [According to the MFA], some 200 to 250 had been relocated, but they had not been forcibly separated from their wives and families ... They were not arrested ... In reply, I said that it was common knowledge among diplomats in Islamabad that the police had rounded-up the Bengali officials in the small hours of the morning, that they had taken the Bengalis to the police station in the first instance ... although I was aware that later on, they had been moved to camps such as Warsak...⁷⁶

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³'Bhutto threatens to try Bengalis held in Pakistan', *The New York Times* (New York), 29 May 1973.

⁷⁴'Bengalis in Pakistan' (Part B), TNA, FCO 37/1385.

⁷⁵*The Indian Express*, 8 May 1973, focused upon 'all the secrecy surrounding their removal from their homes'. *The Statesman* of the same day objected to 'the tacit attempt to equate non-combatant civilians with soldiers on active duty'. Similar sentiments were aired by the *Voice of America*. *Dawn*, 7 May 1973, carried the reports of BBC and Reuters, arguing that 'the former [i.e. civilians] did not take up arms against Pakistan'. Excerpted in 'Bengalis in Pakistan' (Part B), TNA, FCO 37/1385.

⁷⁶'Bengalis in Pakistan' (Part B), TNA, FCO 37/1385.

The British ambassador concluded that his talk with Aziz and other Pakistani diplomats indicated that 'the MFA had no information of the round-up and they must be as alarmed as we are at the damage which this incident will do ... abroad at a time when the sympathy of the world is at last beginning to turn Pakistan's way over the POWs issue'.⁷⁷

On 11 May 1973, the British ambassador received a letter from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office requesting answers to some questions and further explanations: 'What are the latest figures for Bengalis detained in Pakistan? What are [their] circumstances? How are Bengalis prevented from leaving Pakistan ... How do the Pakistan government explain [these] restrictions ... Do they use the word detained?'⁷⁸ By now, a week after the crackdown had commenced, the ambassador had a better idea of the situation. In reply, this time the British consulate-general in Karachi wrote to London thus:

All Bengalis in Pakistan were not in camps. Some were in protective camps. We have learned that arrested men are being kept at a Centre, some 20 miles out of Karachi. The family have been told that they will join their husbands when accommodation became available ... Rev. Hinton of the Inter-Aid Committee, an organization providing relief to some 24,000 Bengalis, tells us that they know of 102 arrests in Karachi and 11 in Quetta who have been transferred here. Chairman of Bengal Wing of Committee, K. B. Rai Choudhary, who had retired from the State Bank of Pakistan and therefore did not opt for BD has been arrested. Hinton was much concerned about the arrest of 6 ex-doctors of Jinnah Hospital that rendered the committee's medical relief schedule inoperable.⁷⁹

The internees had been packed on trains and buses, covered with grass planks intended to hide those inside from the general public, and transported to different destinations. On 8 May 1973, a government spokesman called on the wives of the detained Bengalis to explain the reasons for their arrest. He claimed that 25 Bengalis civil servants had escaped from Islamabad. After apologizing for the 'crude way' in which the operation was organized, the spokesman informed the families that the Class I civil servants, numbering about a dozen, had been taken to Warsak (near Peshawar), which already housed some Bengali civil servants and air force officers. They had been given an officers' quarter each and were allowed to invite their families to join them there. All the Class II civil servants had been taken to Gujranwala and 'those wives who [wished] to join their husbands [should] bring with them curtains, cooking equipment and mosquito nets, ... as well as cigarettes [for their husbands]'!⁸⁰

The 6 May 1973 round-up had a significant impact on the development of internment camps in West Pakistan. There were now three categories of Bengali internments in these camps: i) former members of the Pakistani Army and their families; ii) non-combatant servicemen and their families; iii) civil servants and their families. Sometimes, living conditions and the general welfare in internment camps were

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

observed by the ICRC, but other international and local humanitarian agencies were not allowed to visit the camps. Bengalis were concentrated in an array of camps. Most Bengali civil servants from Islamabad were interned in Warsak Dam Camp in the NWFP.

Warsak Dam Camp

Warsak was constructed in the late 1950s by the government of Canada to accommodate their engineers and workers at work on this dam built on the Kabul River, near Peshawar. It had a variety of accommodation and facilities available, including a swimming pool and tennis, squash, and basketball courts. While all these facilities were inoperative or unavailable to the Bengali internees, the living conditions at Warsak were far better than at Fort Shagai. The Warsak internees were allowed to roam around the vast swathes of the dam area. The camp became a showcase for international journalists and humanitarian agencies to review Pakistan's treatment of the Bengalis to contrast with the harsh conditions of Pakistani POWs in India and Biharis in Bangladesh.

The Bengali civil servant families lived in shared quarters at Warsak. The most prominent among them included Tabarak Hussain, the former director-general at the MFA, and Khalilur Rahman, the deputy secretary in the Ministry of Defence. Anwar Hussein Khan and Shafiqul Azam shared a 'bungalow' with 12 members of both families. Khan was most recently the secretary of the Pakistan Planning Commission in Islamabad, while Azam was the chief secretary of East Pakistan until the summer of 1971. Both were apparently made Warsak's representatives in order to explain life in captivity to international monitors as 'per programme', in the presence of a government spokesman. 'Camps are camps,' Anwar Hussein Khan told a *New York Times* journalist who visited the camp on 7 July 1973, adding, 'I have no feeling of guilt. I do not think I have done anything to be tried for.'⁸¹ A government spokesman explained to the journalist the Bengalis had been picked up not only to prevent escapes but also because 'these officers were doing certain things not good for the country—they had anti-Pakistan feelings'. When some internees complained about the heat and overcrowding in their quarters, one Pakistani camp guard who escorted the journalists remarked, 'many ordinary Pakistanis cannot afford what these Bengalis are receiving here'. The Bengalis in the 'Warsak detention camp', the paper concluded, 'are hostages, in sense. If Bangladesh goes ahead with her plan to try Pakistani prisoner of war for war crimes, Pakistan will try some of these Bengalis.'⁸²

The Pakistani press interpreted the camp conditions quite differently. For example, the *Nawa-i-waqt* reported on 7 July 1973 that a party of foreign journalists visiting the Warsak camp spoke to Bengali officers, who told them that they have been living '*maz-zay saay*' (with contentment) and the Pakistan government 'never maltreated them ... When journalists visited the residence of a former secretary [Anwar Hussein Khan], he told them he has been living contentedly and there are no restrictions on his mobility ... and all the reports of ill-treatment and short-rationed in the camps are untrue.'⁸³

⁸¹ 'Bengalis in camps hope to go home', *New York Times* (New York), 15 July 1973.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ 'Foreign journalists visited Bengali camps', *Nawa-i-wakat* (Lahore), 7 July 1973.

Such seemingly humane conditions should not detract from the physical and emotional hardship suffered by the internees. In her study of violence against POWs, Heather Jones has questioned this 'benevolent captivity interpretation', pointing out that all wartime captivity came with varying degrees of mistreatment or injustice.⁸⁴ The emotional toll could be strong, as one of the worst aspects for many was separation from family, friends, and communities, alongside a loss of job, status, and above all, dignity. Although at Warsak, the internees' families were allowed to join them, for many privileged families, the issue of lack of privacy emerged as a concern. In any case, not all wives joined their husbands. While short visits to the camp were allowed, for most families, distance, cost, and the war situation itself made visiting impossible.

Mrs Tabarak Hussain, a British national, sought the help of the British embassy in Islamabad to visit her husband at the Warsak camp. Thus, the government of Pakistan allowed Mrs Hussain to visit Tabarak. Her observations give a glimpse of the Warsak camp:

He and two other Bengali civil servants share one room; they have a charpai [bed] each but no other furniture. This room is dirty and badly maintained ... Running water and electricity are laid on, and there are five Bengali doctors in the camps who provide medical care ... Electric fans have recently been supplied; just as well, since the maximum shade temperature in Peshawar these days is around 105F ... The camp also holds 120 Bengali ex-officers of the PAF and their families ... Families are allowed to walk freely about the camp, but unmarried officers and those whose families have not joined them are confined to their rooms ... 'where they just sit staring into space' ... The Camp Commandant told that since he had received no instructions on how to deal with the civilian detainees, he would have to treat them in the same way as the military ones ...⁸⁵

Mrs Hussain reported her reflections on the camp to both the American and the British embassies in Islamabad, which informed their reports to London and Washington. According to the British embassy:

Mrs Hussain having seen the conditions in which her husband and his colleagues are living is understandably less anxious to join him than she was earlier this month. She is particularly concerned about the effect detention would have on their 18-year-old son Riaz, who like most sons of influential persons in Pakistan has been brought up to expect the best from life. As his mother says (her English ancestry is never more apparent than at moments like these), he has no backbone. As long as she is allowed to visit Tabarak and take him reading material and food she will probably stay in Islamabad, unlike wives of the Qadirabad detainees (in Gujranwala), the majority of whom have already joined their husbands in detention.⁸⁶

⁸⁴H. Jones, *Violence against prisoners of war in the First World War: Britain, France and Germany, 1914–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 7, 249.

⁸⁵'Bengalis in Pakistan' (Part B), TNA, FCO 37/1385.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*

Thus, while their experience of captivity varied, in all cases, the Bengali internees were removed from society and placed in an uncertain state of limbo until their repatriation in late 1973 and 1974. The liberation of Bangladesh did not result in the instant release of the internees, who had no means of knowing when their incarceration would end. Many internees spent the time following their initial imprisonment in either the same camp for a month or moving from one area to another between 1971 and 1973. Rebecca Haque, who eventually became a professor at the Dhaka University, was 18-years-old when her father, a doctor in the Pakistan Army, was detained. She remembers:

My family, along with hundreds of other families who were stationed in Rawalpindi and neighbouring smaller cantonments in March 1972, was first taken to the mountainous North-West frontier city of Bannu. A few months later, we were all taken in convoys and shunting train journeys in the dead of night down to the plains of the Punjab, to the sprawling camps near the rural town of Mandi Bahauddin ... The night trains were diverted and made to wait at deserted remote stations to keep our journey a secret from the native populace. Heavily guarded by Pakistani soldiers, the train crept from one ghost station to another. My mind automatically registered a correspondence between our train journey and the journey forced upon the Jews by Nazi Germany, significantly noting with relief the major difference between the two journeys.⁸⁷

Naeem Mohaiemen, now a Columbia University academic whose father was a surgeon in the Pakistan Army stationed at Rawalpindi Army Headquarters in 1971, writes about his family's experience of internment in Pakistan:

My parents and myself (at age three) arrived in Bannu prison camp, and were later transferred to Mandi Bahauddin [Qadirabad?] and finally Gujranwala. Also at adjoining camps were two uncles, members of the Army Engineering Corps. When I ask my mother if it was dangerous, she says 'We were afraid, every day, that they would finish us. No one knew what would happen next.'⁸⁸

In late August 1973, when an agreement was finally reached on the exchange of 'stranded populations' between the conflicting countries, the repatriation process started under the aegis of the ICRC. Naeem explains his family's experiences:

Finally in 1973, the Pakistan government negotiated our repatriation to Bangladesh, in exchange for the Pakistani POWs in India. Fokker Friendship planes waited at Lahore airport, manned by the Red Cross. When we were boarding the plane, father handed over our bedding to another Bengali family that was still stranded. That recipient later became the chief of the Bangladesh air force. At age four you do not remember much, but I have a clear memory of my father driving his white Volkswagen at breakneck speed toward the airport. My mother

⁸⁷R. Haque, 'Bangabandhu and the birth of our nation', *The Daily Star* (Dhaka), 17 August 2017.

⁸⁸Mohaiemen, 'Flying blind', p. 51.

was nauseous but he was too afraid to stop, and so she vomited continuously out of the side of the car. It was some kind of homecoming.⁸⁹

By mid-1974, some 120,000 Bengalis had left for Bangladesh. Yet many thousands of ordinary Bengalis evaded the ICRC's 'list of repatriation', while many of those who were repatriated, returned to Karachi within months. The key reason for their return to Pakistan were pecuniary. As an example, the demand for Bengali cooks was so high in 1974 that in Islamabad, some of them were receiving as much as Rs 500 (about US\$50 per month), twice the pre-1971 rate. In contrast, many repatriated Bengalis in Bangladesh faced unemployment. In addition, the prices of food staples such as rice, peppers, and mustard, had risen by 300 to 1,000 per cent.⁹⁰ Returnees were denied Pakistani citizenship and some were repeatedly deported to Bangladesh, which would not accept them, and deemed them as 'illegals' and 'stateless' people.⁹¹ Uncertainties did not end there and continue 50 years later in places such as Dhaka's Geneva Camp and Karachi's Machar informal settlements—among the 'world's largest slums' and undocumented community(ies) of South Asia. This helps build the foundations for future research that re-examines historical and political paradigms through the questions of mass displacement, exclusion, belonging, citizenship, and statelessness.

Conclusion

The stranded Bengalis branded as disloyal citizens from 1971–1974 serve as the best example of what Hannah Arendt famously formulated as the vacuity of legally endowed rights that are not backed by a notion of belonging.⁹² It was not that Bengalis did not have a right to have rights; they were Pakistani citizens when the state dumped them in internment camps. Since most Bengalis had not committed any crime and the majority of them were not even suspects or serving in sensitive positions, the Pakistani state had to invent a legal fiction to put them in these camps. Therefore, the government invoked the 1971 wartime DPRs to intern the Bengalis. Unlike Nazi Germany, which denationalized Jews before killing them in gas chambers, the Pakistani state interned Bengalis as citizens. This makes the Bengali experience different from what Arendt theorized when she talked about the alienability of human rights in the nation-state system once men cease to be citizens of a state. It is thus not the membership of a political community that authorizes the inalienability of human rights which are supposedly universal, but the notion of belonging. The Bengali internment confirmed that they *did not* belong to the *nation* even though they were still *citizens* of the nation-state.

Given the spectacular violence that the Bengali liberation fighters unleashed in East Pakistan with the possibility of forming an alternative legal order with claims to sovereign power, the Pakistani state asserted its sovereign power over the bodies of Bengalis by putting them in camps. Thus, the Pakistani state acted out in the camps the space where, in Agamben's terms, 'the states of exception'—the founding

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰H. D. S. Greenway, 'Bangladesh riddled by poverty', *Washington Post*, 29 November 1974.

⁹¹For the contemporary plight of Bengalis in Karachi, see A. A. Shigri, *Illegal Immigration Report Alien Registration Authority* (Government of Pakistan, 1996).

⁹²Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism*.

basis of sovereign power—was actualized. Agamben describes Nazi camps as a space whose inhabitants were ‘stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life’, making the camp ‘the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation’.⁹³ The question, for Agamben, therefore, is not how such atrocious crimes against humanity could have been committed, but ‘to investigate carefully the juridical procedures and deployments of power by which human beings could be so completely deprived of their rights and prerogatives that no act committed against them could appear any longer as a crime’.⁹⁴ This article narrated the story of those against whom crimes were carried out with impunity as an expression of a state’s sovereign power in the name of cleansing the body politic of the nation of traitorous elements. Given that the ‘traitor’ was within, it was through the violence inflicted by the Pakistani state that their bodies were made legible, marking them out distinctly and placing them *outside* in spatially demarcated spaces, while they remained *inside* the national territory and subjected to the state’s spectral violence.

In a broader sense, the mass internment of Pakistan’s Bengalis is comparable to global war internments of ‘enemy populations’ in the twentieth century, except that the legacies of 1971 were neither limited to this group nor this time. They were to serve as a ‘practice run’ for those groups later labelled *ghaddar*.⁹⁵ Camp internment experiences have been best documented with respect to the First and Second World Wars,⁹⁶ and historians have stressed colonial India’s significance in the British empire’s global internment practices in the early twentieth century.⁹⁷ In government administration where bureaucratic continuity has existed since at least the First World War, it is a simpler practice to follow. Pakistan, like other post-colonial states in South Asia, inherited the internment frameworks and responded with a range of strategies during wartime situations, in which one just needed to be considered ‘suspicious’ or a ‘suspect’. However, those early internment practices provide one set of parallels to the 1971 wartime experiences of the Bengali population in West Pakistan, albeit with one crucial difference: Pakistan state actions against Bengalis after the war had less to do with their ‘subversive’ danger than with the latter’s political need to exchange its POWs.

Thiranagama and Kelly suggest the figure of the traitor is at the heart of politics and the forms of suspicion inherited in both ‘social and political relationships’.⁹⁸ In the case of Bengalis, looking at the roll call of those accused of being traitors in Pakistan, existing structural, political, social, regional, or ethnic prejudices were vital

⁹³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 171.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ N. Ali, *Delusional states: Feeling rule and development in Pakistan’s northern frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); M. Ahmad, ‘Destruction as rule: Containment, censoring and confusion in Pakistani Balochistan’, PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2019.

⁹⁶ Manz et al., *Internment during the First World War*.

⁹⁷ P. Panayi, *The Germans in India: Elite European migrants in the British empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); J. Cronin, ‘The operation, experiences and legacy of the Prem Nagar Central Internment Camp at Dehra Dun in British India, 1939–present’, in *British internment and the internment of Britons*, (eds) G. Carr and R. Pistol (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), pp. 207–220; Y. Khan, *The Raj at war* (London: Vintage, 2016).

⁹⁸ Thiranagama and Kelly, *Traitors*, p. 4.

in creating these relationships. They show how the security scare gained legitimacy by being associated with those who were already targeted and mistrusted by the Pakistan authorities. Admittedly, 'treason is never given once and for all: its content changes alongside fluctuations in power and authority'.⁹⁹ While in terms of space, this historical recovery of the Bengalis in Pakistan is, thus, a new vantage point: in terms of historical time, it follows on from similar state practices and narratives over citizenship and exclusion, developed in and from the 1947 partition, with changing 'boundaries of belonging' in post-independence South Asia, from subjects to citizens, evacuees to enemies, and citizens to traitors.

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⁹⁹Ibid.

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