

Review of *The Boy Refugee: A memoir of a long-forgotten war*

By Khawaja Azimuddin

By Shailja Sharma

The short novella/memoir/testimony by Khawaja Azimuddin takes us back to one of South Asia's important wars that followed its decolonization from the British Empire: the 1971 war between East and West Pakistan, which resulted in the independent state of Bangladesh. Khawaja Azimuddin's narrative places us squarely in the middle of this war, and its aftermath, in his memoir *The Boy Refugee*. Told from the perspective of a young Azimuddin, it recounts his bafflement in the face of the growing hostility by Bengali speakers in the days leading up to the war, his parent's anxiety about their future as Urdu speakers in an atmosphere of Bengali nationalism, and the outbreak of the war itself.

Though the war was between the Pakistani army and the Bangla Mukti Bahini, the Indian army was equally involved in the conflict leading up to the breakup of Pakistan into two nations. And it is the Indian army that plays an outsized role in the memoir, as Azimuddin's family is first sheltered, then transported through North India to a POW camp where they live for almost two years.

The bulk of the narrative is devoted to the experience of the camp, with its tiny barracks, its cast of characters including the Indian camp commander, Harnam Singh and his sympathetic and fair treatment of his charges. The children in the camp adjust easily to this time without school or homework but they, too, are aware of the tensions that their families go through as their stay in the camp lengthens, subject to the political machinations between Pakistan, Bangladesh and India.

We read about Azimuddin's brother and his desire to pursue his education even in the camp, his mother's family from Hyderabad Deccan, which tries to provide help and succor, and his father's dismay at seeing his career and savings trickle away, a casualty of the war. The narrative veers between the child's perspective and the historical one, trying to adjust to a Western audience. What it does portray well, is the difficult effects of the political partition of 1947, one that was played out in the wars between India and Pakistan in Bengal, now in Kashmir and in the nuclear brinksmanship between the two countries. Ultimately though, this memoir is an important narrative about how the figure of the "refugee" is so central to shifting citizenship in South Asia. What do refugees feel when they are uprooted, what do they lose, how does their displacement contribute to their resilience and desire to do better than their peers.

Azimuddin's family moved from the POW camp to Karachi, then to Saudi Arabia and eventually to the US. He and his siblings are all medical and technological professionals, but they will never forget their experiences of being a refugee in a POW camp.