

The day on the other side

M ABDUL HAFIZ

I listened to it spellbound. It was a brief news bulletin announcing the fall of Dhaka. The broadcast was loud and clear that Dhaka had fallen and there was a cease-fire in the eastern front of the war under local arrangements. In other words Bangladesh was liberated -- marking its victory. It could not be disbelieved because Radio Pakistan itself was broadcasting the bulletin. The news kept reverberating first in the bunker and then in my heart for the rest of the night.

Till about 10 at night, we sat glum in the dug-in mess. On previous nights there would be discussions for hours about the battle situations in different sectors punctuated by roars of laughter at cheap Punjabi jokes. The grading-conscious officers would enthusiastically participate in the discussions to show their military knowledge, from minor tactics to grand strategy, in the presence of their superiors. But tonight there was no discussion, no laughter, no enthusiasm. Only an eerie silence prevailed, sending a chill of an unknown fear down my spine. For the last few days of the war, the situation certainly took a clear turn and was fast approaching towards some conclusion. Pakistani defenses seemed to be crumbling on the western front also, particularly in the battle for control of the air. Indian bombers flew over our battle locations near Luliani on the Lahore-Kasur road almost unhindered and then proceeded towards Lahore in majestic formation. Minutes later we could hear the thud of the exploding bombs dropped on the city that was the pride of Pakistanis. In spite of such setbacks, noone however thought that the war would come to such a decisive end so quickly.

Apparently, the Pakistanis had broken down since the afternoon, when for the first time Pakistan admitted that allied forces had entered the city of Dhaka. Fed with false assurances, the Pakistanis now appeared crest-

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fallen. I had never seen them so dispirited in the field where, under any adversity, they always put up a brave face. They could never countenance defeat.

We left the mess a little before our usual time. It was a great relief because the mood inside the mess was about to suffocate us all. The commanding officer for the first time did not turn up for dinner. Others were morose and preferred to remain quiet. Only Captain Pervez, a talkative adjutant of the regiment tried to dilute the gloom with this rather poor attempt at humour that did not click, "So what, that they have won it in the East? Victory will be ours in the grand finale. Remember Barcelona?" Pervez was referring to some Olympic game where in a hockey match the first goal was scored by India but Pakistan ultimately won the match.

Skeptical of such a prospect in interstate conflict, noone wanted to share Pervez's optimism. They were the same people who had been claiming to be the descendants of Delhi's sultans and emperors and hoped to storm the old fort any time in a big push. Surprisingly, on a melancholy December night of 1971 that bravado vanished, leaving no trace of it on anybody's face. As Pervez kept chattering, a disgusted second-in-command curtly asked him to simply shut up and abruptly left. In no time, others also dispersed.

I then hastened for the bunker. I wanted to be in time for 10 O'clock news. For the duration of the war, the bunker was a world of my own. It was here that I could get access to the forbidden news of Bangladesh, defying the military's writ that no soldier would

listen to news other than that broadcast by Radio Pakistan.

Anything forbidden has its irresistible attraction and I had to resort to this indulgence at the gravest of the risks. It was in this bunker that I could lie down under several layers of blankets and tune in to the frequencies of BBC, VOA or Akashvani.

I had been doing it for the whole duration of war without any remorse or sense of guilt. I thought it to be the rightful quest for seeking truth. Tonight I was at it again. I was listening to the greatest of news as if I had survived the hazards of war only for that moment. I was listening to the news from Radio Pakistan

immersed in ecstasy and pain. I listened to news which comes not in one's life time or in a generation, but only once in the whole span of thousands of years of the history of a people. The great moment which eluded us for hundreds of years had come at last.

One can keep his sorrow to himself. But joy? The joy can turn into pain or even torture unless shared with others or rejoiced in public in its fitting manner. I alone had no capacity to bear its burden. I was squarely facing history's avalanche which I had no power to withstand. During the cold night of December 16, 1971 an utter helplessness tormented me. I was seized with a strange feeling which

like a suppressed gust of wind afflicted me with an agonising convulsion. And the news kept reverberating in the ether for the rest of the night.

At this midnight hour of long winter night my Pakistani colleagues were in their bunkers -- either sleeping or tossing on their sides with an inexplicable anguish. A little distance away were the bunkers of the other ranks and their assorted sleeping arrangements. Some slept in the command post or in the communications exchange while others were resting in their camouflaged vehicles in the dug-in position. A chorus of insult seemed to have descended on them. Only a few sentries were awake. They were trying to drive away sleep by pacing up and down. I could hear the sound of their steps. I was their only companion at the dead of the night with, of course, Bangladesh covering the whole space of my bosom.

Brig (ret'd) Hafiz is former DG of BISS.



Freedom fighters rejoice in victory on December 16, 1971.

The image that we create...

Who does not like to see Bangladesh as a country where harmony exists? But one has to take into consideration that harmony of various groups and sub groups can only be achieved through a consensus on the issue among major political players. But as major players are in a state of confrontation the eventual result is a great logjam that nobody seems to be aware of how to be cleared.

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

THIRTY-two years ago Bangladesh was on the spotlight of world media not only for the sufferings of people who were denied the right to make a democratic choice, but also for the courage and endurance they had shown in fighting an evil power and creating their own independent state. It was a strange twist and turn of fate, as people were punished severely for making a democratic choice that wasn't liked by those who provided the option. But people wasted no time to learn the important lesson that when democracy falters due to lack of any respect for the verdict given by the electorates on the part of those who have the responsibility of making the system functioning, there remains little option other than going for the extreme.

This was precisely what happened in our case as we were pushed towards the wall and had to fight back as the outcome of a democratic decision-making process was not upheld by a leadership devoid of any sense of shame. As a result, the nationhood, the fruits of which we are now being able to enjoy, is based on a legacy of democratic choice of which we can legitimately feel proud. The media sympathy that we have enjoyed back then was derived largely from such objective and logical conclusion.

For almost thirty-two years since then Bangladesh never again enjoyed that much respect in international media. The brief exposure filled with sympathy and respect was quickly overshadowed by a critical approach focusing on our failure and mismanagement in

solving pressing issues of poverty and backwardness. Moreover, it didn't take much longer for a new phenomenon of bloody political infighting to join the rank of critical evaluation as the democratic legacy of our heroic emergence soon submerged into military totalitarianism that reigned for almost half of the period of our existence, and by doing so created a new legacy contrary to that of what triggered our aspiration to become free of the shackles of dependency.

A new democratic set-up at a much later stage was made possible only through a popular uprising against the military elite and its civilian cronies. But the resurgence of democracy in Bangladesh has unfortunately failed to overcome the barrier of division that received continuous greasing through subverted political the period of repeated military processes. What this division hampered most is the important tasks of finding the right path that would lead us out of the maze of underdevelopment. As a result, the subsequent focus of the world media had so much been on the negative side of our social and political life that we have by now been compelled to conclude that the country has a longer problem and it needs to be addressed if we are to attract the attention we deserve. But how to correct that distorted image remains a difficult question as we also remain divided on what image the country should have in international arena.

Most people like to portray the image of the country as a moderate Islamic nation. Saddam Hussein's Iraq was by far the most moderate Islamic country in the whole region of the Middle East and we now see

what has happened to the country and its people as it simply slipped out of favour of the mighty and powerful. Moreover, in moderate Islam there is not supposed to be any option of nurturing and protecting those whose views run contrary to any form of liberalism, be it political, social or religious.

Who does not like to see Bangladesh as a country where harmony exists? But one has to take into consideration that harmony of various groups and sub groups can only be achieved through a consensus on the issue among major political players. But as major players are in a state of confrontation the eventual result is a great logjam that nobody seems to be aware of how to be cleared. And in this logjam thrive parasites. No wonder, our own media these days are ceaselessly reporting about loan defaulters, contract killers, godfathers, rapists, extortionists and hijackers having their days in a country that once nurtured the gallant freedom fighters.

Only the dreams of our fallen freedom fighters can show us the right way. One of my senior friends in college gave his life fighting for the liberation that we are now enjoying. I still remember vividly the last conversation I had with Nizamuddin Azad. It was in the outskirts of Agartala only a few days before the final hour came for him. He was young, energetic, handsome and full of vigor. He knew the risk we all were taking, but was optimistic that no sacrifice would go in vain. As we parted without having the slightest hint that it was to be for the last time, he leaned forward and murmured, "we might die, but I won't regret if our people would be happy and content."

My experience on the first 'Victory Day'

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THIRTY two years ago, the misty winter morning of 16th December, the day the nation now celebrates as the victory day, brought the new found glory of Bangladesh. It was the day the whole nation had waited to see after nine months of untold suffering, brutal torture and genocide the savage Pakistani army launched to eliminate the ethnic Bengali nation and Bengali nationalism. The massacre taking a toll of about 3 million lives was unprecedented in the living history of the world.

Indian army General Manekshaw's stern warning to the occupation forces through radio broadcast was being beamed around the country since the early morning of 15th December, 1971 alerting the occupation forces to surrender or to face the grim consequences. The morale of the Pakistani army fighting pitched battle here and there was completely broken. Because the entire so-called East Pakistan save Dhaka city had already fallen to the MuktiBahini-Indian army joint forces. People who suffered cruel torture in the hands of Pakistan army and lost their dear and near ones in this cruel ethnic cleansing operation resorted to by the Pakistani army became euphoric in spite of some uneasiness in the air. By early morning of 16th December it was almost clear that the Pakistani army would surrender. Till the morning of 16th December the Indian jet planes were shelling the strategic places at Dhaka, mainly, the Dhaka University halls and cantonment areas, where Pakistani army was

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holed up.

People came out of their houses at Dhaka, most of them with their portable radio sets in their hands, their ears plugged to broadcasts from the Indian radio, then the most powerful and only media that was intermittently broadcasting news bulletins informing the nation about the time and venue of surrender. Hotel Intercontinental was first selected as the venue and it was later shifted to Race Course Maidan now called Suhrawardy Uddyan. Lt. Gen. Jagjit Singh Aurora C-in-C of Eastern Command took surrender of Lt. Gen. A. K. Niazi, has own batch mate in the army at 3 PM.

Vast crowds of people from every corner of the city were out on the streets to express their rejoicings and jubilation at this historic moment. Collecting in front of the Hotel Intercontinental from the early hours of 16th December now known as Sheraton Hotel and unmindful of the shooting at random of the vanquished and demoralised Pakistani Army from here and there, they made a beeline to the hotel premises. The atmosphere was electrifying. It was, as if after nine months of birth pang the nation discovered its new identity. By 11 AM the crowd swelled

with the MuktiJuddhas joining them and firing from their rifles in the air to give vent to their feelings of jubilation and rejoicings on this glorious day of victory after nine months of ruthless repression.

Totally oblivious of the hazard that might come up in such stray shooting, enthusiastic citizens from all over the city thronged the front terrace of Inter Continental Hotel to witness that auspicious and long awaited moment of surrender. Tears welled up in many eyes while reflecting on the fierce struggle, suffering, atrocities, and deaths they had to encounter to win this freedom.

With the rejoicing going all around, another eerie situation suddenly dampened the gala mood of the people. Possibly with orders from the occupation forces army command, Pakistani troops were marching towards the cantonment with their faces red in anger. The crack troops suddenly started firing at the crowd and coincidentally at the same time an open Indian jeep flying white flag followed by two convoy of troops reached the intersection of the Sheraton Hotel. Shooting from the Pakistani troops was so random, that the army officer of the rank of Brigadier ordered the troops

never returned. Major Zaman, a grandson of Moulana Md. Akram Khan, one of the pioneers of partition movement and founder-editor of now defunct The Daily Azad was summoned on a plea to attend an emergency meeting on 27th December in the Comilla cantonment and was shot dead along with other Bangali officers in the Comilla Cantonment. Major Zaman left a 3 month old child daughter at the time of his death. Shockingly, his wife living in the Comilla Cantonment residence was always told that Zaman was busy on urgent mission.

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Now Bangladesh is a reality. But the country is still in a state of turmoil. The period after liberation rise to a further, familiar litany of woes. The nation's great social ills have not been cured. Poverty elimination programme of the successive governments has been an empty promise in absence of policy framework to implement at the grass roots level. Bangladesh's poor are as poor as ever and more numerous than ever. Illiteracy, child labour, infant mortality, the privation imposed by sectarianism, fundamentalist fervour and gangsterism -- all these issues remain unsolved. In December, 1971 many Bangladeshis had idealistic hopes of a great new beginning, but now in December, 2003, they largely remain unrealised.

Shockingly, the idealism, spirit and hope that inspired our leaders and MuktiJuddhas to fight back the marauding Pakistan Army are fast disappearing. At this annual event of "Victory Day" the nation must redeem the pledges our patriotic leaders, brave freedom fighters and people belonging to all ranks, regardless of caste and creed made to free this country of exploitation, poverty and violence of all types. That's the only way we can pay tribute to our war heroes.

joining him to take position and frustrate the attacking Pakistani troops. In such a melee enthusiastic and jubilant youngsters of my age even in the face of such hazardous situation went near the Brigadier's jeep to give vent to their feelings of gratitude. All of a sudden, a stream of bullets from some unknown direction smashed the window pane of the Brigadier's jeep. Luckily the Brigadier and some of us who were near him survived the jet of firing. Instructing us to go inside the Inter Continental Hotel, the neutral zone, the smart looking Brigadier with a tall and well-built body immediately went into action. Pakistani army troops, we later discovered, were firing at the crowd of people by taking position inside the Shakura premises.

Many of us in that fateful morning jumped over the waist-high wall of the Hotel Sheraton, then declared as neutral zone and took shelter in the lobby of the Sheraton Hotel. After about 15 minutes, firing from the Pakistani side stopped and they again started marching towards the cantonment. When the situation calmed down, we came out of the Hotel Sheraton and saw some Pakistani soldiers lying dead in front of the Minto Road crossing, Ramna garden boundary wall and Shakura premises.

As it happens in the life of every person who has lost his near and dear ones in the tumultuous days, I was perturbed by thoughts jolting me at this dawn of freedom. I was lucky to have survived the bullet shot but my eldest brother, about 48 years old in 1971 and my brother-in-law, then 30 and of my age Major Mahdiuz Zaman Khan, then working at DGFI wing in the Comilla cantonment could not survive. Major Zaman superbly fair complexioned, had a tall and well-built structure. If anyone had looked at him without hearing him, he could have mistaken him for a Punjabi (Pakistani). It is intriguing that they could kill a man bearing so much resemblance with them. My eldest brother, an ex-army personnel in the second world war was taken away from his business premises at Satkhira by the hyenas in May, 1971 at the instance of the Razakers guiding the occupation army and was



Freedom fighters in action in a remote area.

In the enemy camp

Joy becomes unbound when it is shared with many. But for the lonely outcast in the enemy camp it was a soulful and solitary joy unto himself. His tears of ecstasy were his only companion on that historic moment... It has been said that history repeats itself but the historic moment of 16 December 1971 will never repeat itself.

M. SHAFIULLAH

WINTER in Islamabad was very cold but for unexplained reasons also appeared to be cruel that December in 1971. Shutting up doors and windows was essential to keep the icy winds at bay but also became absolutely necessary that Fall to avoid incurring the wrath of hostile neighbours during the broadcast time of All India Radio and BBC World News Service. Despite threat to life, Bengalees [East Pakistanis] were glued to foreign broadcasting stations day in and day out. A full scale war in December between India and Pakistan, ignited at the instance of the military junta in Rawalpindi, dwarfed the tempest of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. The naked intervention in favour of Pakistan by President Richard Nixon and his National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger abetted by the Mao regime in China added elements of uncertainty to the logical culmination of the liberation of 90 million Bengalees.

At the very height of the ravaging Indo-Pak war, one afternoon world radio stations broke loose with the most momentous news that the Bengalees in the enemy camp cherished to hear. That was the end of a nightmarish nine months and the bloody birth of a new nation -- Bangladesh. After the never-ending hard news, commentaries started pouring in. In the core of the commentaries was the epic struggle of the East Pakistanis under the leadership of Sheikh Mujib, the heroic resistance of the valiant Bengalee

Liberation Forces, the contribution of Indira Gandhi with men and material, and the ignominious surrender of one hundred thousand invading Pakistani armed forces at Dhaka racecourse.

Commentators ruefully asked whether Sheikh Mujib had heard that his life-long struggle had been crowned with success. Was Mujib even alive? Would he be allowed to return to his dreamland? Through the night, news and views were zeroing in on the many aspects of the newly born country. A number of radio stations commented that the birth of Bangladesh would remain incomplete without the safe return of Sheikh Mujib to the liberated soil from the accused cell of the notorious Mianwali prison. Some broadcasters even doubted whether Indian forces would all leave the country they helped to gain independence.

Under the blanket of the biting Islamabad winter, confined within the four walls of their accommodations, insulated from the rest of the world, isolated Bengalees were warming up with every wave of news flooding in about their liberated homeland. At nightfall, the basic instinct to survive overwhelmed the "free souls under captivity." Hardly had the "Sadare-Bengalees in the enemy camp" returned to their homes, the "Sadar-e-Bengalees" in the national hoop, then "wounded packs" resumed roaming in the neighbourhoods of Bengalee quarters. If the Bengalees let their joy overflow the bounds of their four walls, catastrophe would have been

the sole response. The only option for them was to subdue the rare pleasure for the sake of very basic instinct!

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It was an unparalleled afternoon and a late evening for Bengalees a thousand miles away in the

wrong side of the ring when their compatriots in their millions were soaking in the torrential blessings of joy of freedom!

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib returned to his homeland in triumph on January 10, 1972.

The architect of the new nation laid the foundation stone of the Jatiyo Sriti Shroddho on Victory Day on December 16, 1972 at Savar in commemoration of the millions who had made the supreme sacrifice to realise the thousand year dream of the Bengalees.

Today is the day for us to ask ourselves what kind of homage we will pay to the founder of the nation and the gallant freedom fighters who sacrificed so much to bring us our independence and what small sacrifice we can make to bring their dreams fully to fruition.

Former Ambassador Shafiqullah was stranded in Islamabad, escaped overland to Afghanistan and returned home in mid 1972. He served Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as press officer from late 1972 to May 1975.



Occupation forces surrendering outside Dhaka.