



The Night Dhaka Burned From Political to Armed Struggle

By Mahfuz Anam

MARCH 1971 is the most eventful and significant of months in the political history of Bangladesh. For it was during those few weeks that we were transformed from a nation struggling for our political, economic and cultural rights to one that was ready to plunge into an armed conflict to establish them. The change over, for a nation used to mass agitation and civic movement, meant the pushing back of psychological, social and physical barriers and demolishing of racial and cultural stereotypes which maligned our self-image for so long. March '71 encapsulates for us the rich experiences of this critical transition.

It started with the most massive show of people power in the form of a non-violent, non-cooperation movement the likes of which the world has seldom seen. On 1st March when Gen. Yahya, the military ruler of Pakistan postponed the convening of the newly-elected parliament of Pakistan, thereby preventing the majority party Awami League, from assuming power, the AL leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman called for a non-violent, non-cooperation movement aimed at isolating and incapacitating the state machinery of the martial law government of Gen. Yahya. The total and spontaneous response of the people surprised and frightened the army junta. That a civic action could so totally decapitate a well entrenched government was unprecedented. The Pakistan army saw the writings on the wall and launched their own soon to-take-effect diabolical schemes to prevent what they made by their very action inevitable.

For us, the students of Dhaka University was a time for round-the-clock political activities. The days would be spent for mass contacts through processions, street corner meetings and big gatherings either at the campus, the Shahid Minar or at the outer stadium, which was then popularly known as the Paltan Maiklan. The evenings would see us preparing for the following day. We would organise the logistics and if time would permit, talk about the historic nature of the days we were passing through. Throughout this whole period we literally lived on the street. For us each and every procession was an endless stream of human beings by whose touch and by being a part of which we had all become soldiers of freedom and guardians of independence.

One of the significant gatherings of the early days of our agitation was one called by Students Action Committee on 2nd March at the present Arts

Faculty campus. The national flag of the future Bangladesh was hoisted for the first time (the flag was later modified after the birth of Bangladesh) on that day. Once unfurled the flag spread like wildfire and was soon in every-hand and flying from most house tops in the city. The talk of independence was all around. How it would come about, how the Pakistanis would negotiate the dismemberment of their country, we really did not know. We only knew what we wanted.

There was also widespread talk of armed struggle. I for one did not really know what it entailed. I suspected that those who professed to know were merely trying to put forward a brave face. Most of the literature on guerrilla warfare in circulation at that time dealt with the writings of Mao, Ho Chi Minh and General Giap. Vietnam's experiences were widely quoted in our animated conversations at Madhu's canteen or during well earned recesses from our daily routine of processions and sloganeering. Tired of merely talking, a friend of ours procured a .22 rifle and we made clandestine arrangements to go to an abandoned brick field towards Demra to do some target practice. It was with a total experience of about 15 rounds of target practice in a .22 rifle that I joined the armed struggle to gain our freedom. So much for our preparedness to face the military machine of Pakistan.

Soon 7th March was upon us. The whole nation, to an individual, waited to hear what direction Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was to give to the nation. The Martial Law government of Gen. Yahya and the Pakistan army also waited eagerly to hear what Mujib was to say. The city was bursting with excitement and a suppressed tension from the early hours of the day. There were rumours that Mujib would declare independence that day.

So also there were talks of an aerial bombing or an army assault on the gathering. We all had our responsibilities assigned to each of us. We were to organise processions from the designated parts of the city and once having brought the people to the meeting, to keep order and discipline till the meeting ended. The meeting at the Suhrawardy Uddyan was like a massive convergence of human flood into an ocean of people. As I joined it I had a sense of merging with something almost cosmic. I was a fragment, a spec, a flicker of energy, an insignificant unidentifiable entity in this solid mass of humanity. And yet I was alive as I have never been. As one of that agitated,

energized and motivated million I felt as if I was a mover of things, author of events — nothing could deny me the right to my independence.

Bangabandhu delivered the finest speech of his long, prison interspersed, struggle-ridden political career. It was political oratory at its sublime best. In my opinion it was perhaps his finest hour. The composition of the speech, its symbolism, its diction, voice modulation, and the climactic delivery of some of its finest lines makes it a classic in public oratory. He moved his audience, energized them, gave them a plan of action and yet did not go far enough to justify adventurism. Many of my friends were disappointed because Sheikh Mujib did not declare independence that day.

I myself felt that he had gone as far as our preparation would permit. The story from 7-25 March, 1971 is well known. With all our talks and political agitations we were not, I feel, ready for the army action of the night of the 25th and what followed from then on. That one act of inhumanity inflicted on a unarmed freedom loving people changed my perspective of what Pakistan meant to me.

The army action of the 25th night and 26th morning stunned us all. For its ruthless brutality there would be no comparison. It took us a while to find out the real extent of the carnage. What we saw for the moment was an attack by one's own army (we were citizens of Pakistan till that moment) upon its unarmed defenceless people. We saw a refusal to negotiate, a denial of our basic rights. We saw the attitude of a "master" not that of a partner. We, through the genocide of the Pakistani army, were told that within Pakistan ours would not be a status of equality but one of subservience. We chose to be enslaved or to fight for independence. We chose the latter.

For me more than anything else, 26 March is a day of intense feeling, of growing up, of self-assertion, of struggle, of demanding what is rightfully mine and a readiness to fight to get it, of a willingness to kill an enemy that threatens my existence — only because it threatens by existence, of feeling within me that time has come when, I as an individual and we as a people, must take our future into our own hands and face all the consequences of such a decision — hence to be Independent.

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The Day Jyotirmoy Died and We Went to War

By Waheedul Huq

I think of independence, and the night of the massacre comes to my mind. It was only nine in the night. My editor — the non-Bengali of a most notorious anti-Bengalee newspaper — was rushing me for no reason. "Huq Saab, electricity-wallahs may strike any moment. We must go to bed before that and complete our full run", he said. He was vociferously supported by my news editor — a headmaster-type, also from chhapra.

By nine-thirty the 'electricity-wallahs' were rushing to governor's house in convoys of all kinds of military vehicles. Facing a rather formidable barricade just beneath the Trust Building — all of them went for some detour. At ten they broke the barricade. At ten-thirty we went up to the roof to see the fireworks. The electricity-wallahs were shelling Rajarbagh.

Yes, they knew. All of them knew — all the Urdu-speaking people knew. And they kept it from us, Pakistan was finished in so many ways — and there was no coming away from this hardened 'we-they', created all of it all the way by 'they'.

Well, we got stuck up in our loft. In the morning the city was dead. Swishing army vehicles heightened the sense of desolation every now and

then. Because 'we' and 'they' were there in the same hole — none of us were able to come fully into ourselves even in such dire times. The mutual insularity was complete. But a kind of mistrust and source of premonition kept popping up in relation to 'they' — we couldn't simply help it. About noontime a hall of bullets holed our Trust Building. Most of us most of the time kept ourselves from harm's way by ducking under tables. All of us somehow knew any sighted blob of a head would be drilled from the streets. God merciful no one came after us up the stairs. After all it was the most trusted Trust Building — the most hated by the natives and to make up for it most prized by the lords come from afar. The trust is back, the building stands there as the self-same Trust Building. Look at the building and its name and its performance — it's Pakistan all over again, the martyred lakhs, the migrating millions, the myriad acts of heroism, the surrender of ninety-seven thousand murderers coming to nothing.

Another night with all of us caged in. The perennially better knowing Bihari colleagues said curfew had

been lifted. My editor and news editor condescended to get into my car. Only when Musa came from Observer across the road for a ride I was sure I could indeed drive them all and myself home. It was not that easy. We were interceded at the Elephant Road crossing. "Hey Budruddin, take on your deshwall", I hollered, more in carelessness than in fright. The fellows in uniform didn't know of any relaxation in curfew. They were there to cut down all and not to respect relaxations. But evidently Budruddin was neither a native nor a Hindu — which of course meant the same thing for all in khaki and for most people in the other wing. They let us pass.

I took a hurried bath, told my wife and children I was coming back in a jiffy and went out looking for Anis — Anisur Rahman, the economist. Not because I was his best friend, but because I was very worried about him. And there was enough reason for that. His flat was closed, both the doors were locked. But what did I see in that building opposite to the Shahid minar. The landings and stairs of that three-storeyed was bloodied in way that there must have been some three hefty cows butchered on those. Dr Mantruzzaman on the top floor was one of those human-cows slain in God-knows-what-kind-of-a-qurbani. Four others were in his flat. In the ground floor Jyotirmoy Guha-Thakurata was shot. There was no trace of the other two tenants of the building — Anis and Professor Razzaq.

I couldn't muster courage to have a glimpse of the Jaganath Hall ground for by now I have had the full story. Instead I went to Dewan's father's house in Segun Bagan. And after that to his father-in-law's. No one would utter a word. Exactly Anis had vanished, so also seemed to have vanished all political people. While I had my fill of the Dhaka of genocide for full three hours, I scoured the whole of it for some politically responsible people.

So, first of all I got hold of Rezak Ali who used to run a rifle club and took from him eleven rifles. I took my family and the rifles to Sabbar and entrusted to Dewan Mohammad Idris, the lion-hearted fighter against communal cowards and subsequently a valiant freedom fighter. And I cleared out taking along four others with me. Qazi Iqbal, Nurul Sagor, Syed Hasan Imam, Mashroor-ul-Huq Siddiqui and myself went to war on April 2. The group led by me reached Calcutta on

April 4 and soon enough established contact with Indrajit Gupta, member of the Indian Defence Council, Bhabani Sen, the CPI stalwart, Harekrishna Kongar, the CPM No. 2. I was immediately offered an audience with Mrs. Indira Gandhi. But bearing that Tajuddin had met her only the previous day, I declined the offer. It was no more necessary, I said.

Mashroor, popular by his nick name Kamal, fought in the front, lost an eye and was duly awarded the biggest honour for valour — Birottam. Qazi Iqbal was caught rehanding while on a mission to blow up an army train in Kushtia but somehow survived to be freed on December 15 from Dhaka Central jail. Syed Hasan Imam worked for the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendro and served the provisional in various other capacities. Nurul Saifur a banker by profession, served at the secretariat of the provisional government.

As for myself, I entered Dhaka twice or thrice with a hefty price on my head. But my boys were smart. One of them — a secretary to the governor — always kept me posted with the dangers of my entry and exit. I came mostly to ferry people. And the escape route I set up via Kabilia Bazar and Shiber Bazar in Comilla served eminently to help very many famous people to freedom, and possibly the most colourful of my Dhaka escapades was the wedding of Benu and Shaheen. Precisely with that in mind I brought Benu, an indomitable freedom fighter, to Dhaka by way of a planter's Skymaster plane ride and foot journey into Bangladesh from Agartala. Benu met his girl, married her and off to Mujibnagar we went — with one more freedom fighter. Shaheen worked tremendously in the motivational works by the squads we sent out to the hundreds of Mukti Bahini camps and refugee dumps. As the director of these war efforts, I managed to survive on forty paisa worth of food a day. But my weight came down to 85 pounds and I started passing out every now and then.

I didn't scare. I knew it was plain hunger and was always capitally repairable. Freedom would be the right food for my problem. Sure enough — I came back to my earlier dimensions of a rather rotund one by the sixth month of independence. I gained 45 pounds in those six months. Freedom was the name of such magic. It took me two more years to know that magic had already gone out of our life. We were in for trouble that only an unprepared independence can bring.



Future from the past: Out of the thunder of war, a free Bangladesh is born.

Photo: Anwar Hossain