

International Dimension of Our Liberation

The bloody massacre in Bangladesh quickly covered over the memory of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, the assassination of Allende drowned out the groans of Bangladesh, the war in the Sinai Desert made people forget Allende, the Cambodian massacre made people forget Sinai, and so on and so forth until ultimately everyone lets everything be forgotten.

Milan Kundera (*The book of Laughter and Forgetting*)

Shah Husain Imam

THIS is how the gist of the top story in the newspapers of 17 December read: Yahya yields to Indira Gandhi's unilateral announcement of a ceasefire after the US greets India's decision and China indicates having no intention to intervene in the conflict.

The surrender in Dhaka was a mere formality. Yet, almost coincidentally, as if to emphasise his hedge-hog position, Yahya in a national broadcast blurted: "the Ganga of Islam would not rest until the enemy was thrown out of every inch of Pakistan territory."

The UN Security Council discussion was thrown out of gear and a filibustering Bhutto relented on knowing the US reaction to India's decision for a ceasefire.

The culmination sounded incredibly simple; but if one were to recall to mind the preceding international picture of an interplay of various factors on political, diplomatic, inter-religious and humanitarian levels, one would realise how hard-earned the national independence had been.

Our remembrance of the Victory Day has characteristically been confined to the genocide, exodus to India, India's help, and a blood-soaked Liberation War, for very natural reasons, but we should perhaps take a look at how these very factors sent international emotions and world humanitarianism welling up for us, to round off the picture. This outburst of empathy can be put down to an anguished, sustained and highly creative coverage of Bangladesh events in the world media.

To cite just one example, the US senators and members of British parliament in their individual and collective capacities exposed Pakistan's perfidy, some of them even

sending letters to the Editor's Column.

There were exhaustive hearings at the Senate and the House of Representatives in the USA urging a change of policy on the part of the US government which continued its tilt towards Pakistan. The US administration went against the May 7 resolution of the Senate Foreign Affairs Subcommittee and the July 15 resolution of the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee which had called for suspension of military and economic aid to Pakistan. Congressman Cornelius G. Gallahar said on the floor of the House, "the World Bank has refused to make any additional finances available to the government of Pakistan and I call upon the US to follow that lead."

Celebrity philosophers, writers, singers and poets lent their voices abroad to the cause of Bangladesh in a manner that contemporary history hardly furnishes any example of. This intellectual mix with a political cause on a truly international scale was an extraordinary development reminding somewhat of the commitment to equality, liberty and fraternity associated with the French Revolution.

The intrinsic appeal of Bangladesh's cause was so great that a sympathetic world response would have been forthcoming, sooner or later, but then to mobilise, synchronise and bring these to a cutting edge was discernably the work of the envoys of the Bangladesh provisional government with the Indian intellectuals and diplomats doing their part.

On the question of Bangladesh's territorial freedom the Indo-Soviet axis and the US-China-Pakistan axis continued until the very end. This would not have dissolved in the thin air ultimately as it did if the ground were not prepared for

it with a strong content of favourable world public opinion and the evidence of successes in the guerilla war which gave the final phase of the Bangladesh movement the convincing character of a national revolutionary war of liberation.

Even geo-politics which operate by their own dynamics metamorphosed potentially with a change in the texture of superpower relations, or in an extended sense, big power relations. A China-US rapprochement took place after Kissinger's visit to Peking via Islamabad in July 1971. China was admitted to the UN on October 26 with the formal recognition of the country as a world power which gratified her a good deal in relation to both the USSR and the USA.

As a counter-poise to Sino-American-Pakistan grouping came into the scene on August 9, 1971, the 20-year Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty. So, a balance of power was struck in the sense of unfurling an umbrella of military preparedness over the region. Soviet arms deliveries were made to India in November after the USSR had lost all hopes of a political settlement for the eastern part of the then Pakistan.

For the US part, however, it was only in December during the closing phases of the war that she decided not to press on with the despatch of Enterprise to the Bay to 'boost the morale of the Pakistani soldiers' after the Pentagon had taken into reckoning the field situation in Bangladesh.

Those were extraordinary moments of exceptional sympathy flowing in from the peoples and governments the world over. Even so, while remembering this today should we not try and erase some of the shur our passport has acquired overseas due to our melting into foreign lands in an undignified quest for a better life triggered basically though by mismanagement at home?



Dipen: Human Torch of Liberation War

Waheedul Huque

WE were five. We were as different as is possible for five persons having the same social, cultural or economic profile. An engineer and an actor, a banker and a business executive and myself, the fortyish journalist. We had wasted precious time in Dhaka trying to goad an old political hand, known very well to politicians in West Bengal, to come with us. All five of us counted nothing, politically — although I had a vociferous part in the Pakistan movement in the mid-forties and, trying to atone for that sin, had been active on the outer fringe of the communist party — always pressuring it to be culturally responsive — ever since. We were on our way to join the fight against the genocide started by Pakistan on March 25. We were not too sure about there being any fight all, anywhere in Bangladesh. But we knew of Major Zia's broadcast and thought if Zia could do that, why couldn't we match him in our own way.

Before setting out on our as yet nebulous mission, I moved my family to a snug little house in some Sabbar backyard. Reza Ali of Bitopi had for years been running a rifle club. I asked him if I could help him getting rid of that burden of an arsenal. He readily gave me ten rifles which I sneaked under the nose of the Beharis on guard at Mirpur Bridge to Sabbar and gifted them to Idris Ali Dewan, that valiant fighter against communal riots. I left my family to his trusted care. On April 2 we converged on Dewan's union council office for a night of conferencing before setting out.

I had collected some important maps of both Dhaka City and Bangladesh for possible use — by any quarter — against the invaders. When these were spread out on hogla mats under hurricane light the atmosphere was romantically conspiratorial

and made at least one among us chuckle in disbelief as to the seriousness of it all. Well, the maps came to not much but the gramophone disc of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's address of March 7 that we carried was the one which, copied by the hundred, and later into unknown astronomical members, formed a core of whatever sustained us in the ferocities of war and the degrading sufferings of the refugee camps.

We travelled safely up to Aricha in our two cars — Hasan Imam's Opel and my Fiat. There we left the vehicles behind and boarded a launch for Daulatdia. Our joy knew not bounds when we espied other vessels plying with Joy Bangla flags fluttering. But this was somewhat marred by the thought that we had needlessly abandoned our cars which could be of great help in our war efforts.

It was as free a country as can be. At Magura Kamol asked us to his ancestral house for the night's stay. The ease and comfort of our journey could lull us into a dangerous feeling of false security but for the endless stream of humanity rushing westward. It was great just to be a part of that flow. And yet it filled one's mind with anger and compassion and sorrow to trudge alongside those who were leaving behind slain relatives and burning hearths. The towns we passed through were preparing for resistance. More with their spirit than with the required materiel. Ignorance of modern offensive warfare helped the spirit climb to a height from where there was no buckling even when the thing — world's cruelest horde armed to the teeth with state-of-the-art arms and a determination to wipe out entire populations if need be — was upon them.

Walul Islam CSP was helping Raushan Ali, the Awami League veteran to prepare for the worst. And in Jhenidah PSP Mahub had enmeshed himself with actual fighting

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Victory Day in Washington 1971: Some Recollections

Shah AMS Kibria

IT is hard to believe that twenty-four years have passed since the day of glory and pride dawned in Washington, DC. I have often tried to recall the events of that momentous day but I have to confess with some disappointment that the memories of the day have become rather blurred. But I do remember distinctly that a sense of relief was my dominant impression of the day. Tension was building up ever since the crackdown on the night of 25 March. Having surrendered my diplomatic status and shorn of the usual privileges and immunities I was living with my family in the United States like other expatriates but without a valid passport or visa. Our dreams about a sovereign and independent Bangladesh were tempered by a nagging sense of insecurity about the future. Will the war be short or a long one? Will the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman return from Pakistani jail safely? Will Dhaka turn into a battle field and be destroyed in the process? Will the members of my family in Bangladesh, my parents, brothers and sister, would be safe? All these questions were answered all at once when the news was flashed on the radio and television on 16 December that Gen Niazi, the commander of Pakistani troops in Bangladesh had surrendered to the Indo-Bangladesh joint command. It was certainly difficult for me to believe that over 90,000 well trained and heavily armed soldiers would lay down their arms without a fight. Only a few days earlier Niazi had boasted to the foreign journalists, "..... every Muslim soldier is worth ten Hindus. We shall give a good account of ourselves." Well, history will judge whether he and his troops gave a good account of themselves!

Washington is no doubt very far from Bangladesh but because of modern means of communications we were able to learn about the day to day progress of the war from the very beginning of the conflict. Because of the time lag, some of the events were often reported in the US news media on the same day. We knew in early December that some elements of the Indian Army had penetrated the defence of Dhaka and its fall was imminent. The sight

of the advancing tanks, seen on television news bulletins, warmed our hearts. Our valiant freedom fighters were already in control of large areas of the country and some units had reached the outskirts of the city. These youthful fighters made us proud. Dhaka's sky was in full control of the friendly Indian Air Force. How could the demoralized Pakistani troops defend their positions without air support? Thanks to the extensive coverage of the war by the American television networks, we could see while sitting in our drawing rooms what was going on, perhaps as well if not better than the local residents. In this rather euphoric situation came some ominous signals from different sources. From Dhaka we heard about a press briefing that Gen Niazi gave

in the Hotel Intercontinental on 12 December. Asked what the Pakistani Army would do if the Indian Army and the Mukti Bahini attacked Dhaka from all sides, Niazi replied, "What you fellows don't know is our hidden strength. I tell you, things are going to happen very quickly, amazing things. By tomorrow or the next day the whole situation will have changed...." What was he hinting at? Obviously he was hinting at a miracle and that miracle was the appearance of the American 7th Fleet on the scene. By that time it was already steaming towards the shores of Bangladesh. The 7th Fleet was referring to. Indeed, later we learnt that the collaborators and Razakars in Dhaka were not only jubilant but some of them even cele-

brated victory when the news about the presence of the 7th Fleet was circulating in the city. The conspiracy to snatch victory from our hands at the last minute was going on till the day when Niazi surrendered. From our vantage point in Washington we could follow these developments and realize the gravity of the situation. The plan was simple but deadly. A resolution of the Security Council would be passed calling upon the parties to the conflict to cease-fire and negotiate. Once the fighting stopped and the cease-fire was enforced, the Bengali dream of an independent Bangladesh would vanish into thin air. That is how the enemies of Bangladesh must have reasoned. That is why Pakistan's friends repeatedly tried to

get a resolution passed by the Security Council calling for a cease-fire. Thanks to Soviet veto, this was not possible. Thanks also to the determination of the Indian leadership, these desperate manoeuvre in New York did not slow down the advancing troops of the joint command. The friends of Pakistan, as a last resort, went to the General Assembly with a draft resolution which called upon "the governments of India and Pakistan to take forthwith all measures for an immediate cease-fire and withdrawal of their armed forces on the territory of the other to their own side of the India-Pakistan borders." Unlike the Security Council resolutions this one did not have any binding force. However its endorsement on 7th December, proved that the very thought of secession was anathema to most member countries of the UN. Even on 7th December the majority of the UN members were refusing to acknowledge the existence of the emerging state of Bangladesh although most of them knew that it was an inevitable reality. The General Assembly vote proved the force of Pakistani propaganda in the global forums. The resolution, not surprisingly, assumed that it was just one of those recurring wars between India and Pakistan. As expected, Pakistan in a letter dated 9 December promptly accepted the call for cease-fire. No one was surprised that Pakistan's Yahya Khan was desperately seeking a miracle to escape defeat and disgrace, but it was difficult to understand why the United States should have become a party to such desperate tactics. Indeed, why should the United States try to thwart the emergence of independent Bangladesh? Was it not contrary to the great democratic tradition of the United States? Henry Kissinger has tried to invent a rationale for the US policy but it was nothing better than a pedantic and rather pathetic after-thought. In Washington, DC I was following the developments in the Security Council almost on an hour to hour basis. All the radio and the television channels but especially the CBS radio provided non-stop coverage to the dramatic developments in the UN headquarters. Press coverage, especially by New York Times and the Washington Post and other important newspapers published in New York,

Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia and Boston kept me fully informed of every move by the different actors on the stage inside the Security Council chamber. While the Indian troops and the Mukti Bahini were closing in on Dhaka and its fall was a matter of days if not hours, the White House cold-warriors, Nixon and Kissinger, were frantically moving the levers of power to arrange a cease-fire in order to avert the surrender by the Pakistani troops. The Bengalis living in the United States in those critical days had a somewhat mixed feeling about that great country. While we found nothing but sympathy and support to our cause from the American people, here was the government of a great country bent on nullifying the hard won independence of a poor nation. Neither Nixon nor Kissinger ever expressed a word of sympathy for the suffering people of Bangladesh or the millions of refugees who had taken shelter across the border. Nixon and Kissinger had set the goal: following the cease-fire the Bengalis would negotiate with the Pakistani junta for a settlement within the framework of a united Pakistan. This was the goal. Nixon wanted nothing less for his favourite country and he was ready to go to any length and take almost any risk for a lost cause.

Anthony Lewis, noted New York Times columnist, expressed concern about the danger of policy-making by a president on the basis of considerations which were personal rather than national. "Mr Nixon," he wrote in an article on 10 December, "is a committed supporter of Pakistan. The extent of that commitment, if anyone doubted it, was made clear when in receiving a new Pakistani ambassador he publicly welcomed 'the efforts of president Yahya Khan to move to reduce tension in the subcontinent.' That of a man whose forces in the last eight months have cold-bloodedly murdered thousands of innocent civilians and forced millions to flee because of their race — the most savage pogrom the world has seen in many years." Americans were naturally outraged when Nixon praised Yahya Khan for his effort to "reduce tension in the subcontinent." Was it self-delusion or a deliberate attempt to deceive the Ameri-

can people? Nixon and Kissinger were mad at the media because they thought that the American public were not getting a correct story on this issue. So on 10th December Kissinger himself appeared on the scene to give a so-called "background" to the journalists. What he tried to tell the press, under cover of anonymity, during an hour-long briefing was a self-serving explanation of US efforts for a peaceful solution of the India-Pakistan conflict. Even at that late stage the main issue to him was the India-Pakistan war and not the independence of Bangladesh. Kissinger simply wanted a dialogue between the Pakistani junta and some representatives of "East Pakistan". The great professor was too busy with global geo-politics to hear the cries of the suffering people groaning under the heels of a brutal dictator or the voice of the elected representative of a nation.

What Kissinger said in that famous "background" is most illuminating. It was widely commented upon by the US news media and I remember having read about the whole episode with disgust and contempt for this disingenuous man. There was at the time an almost universal demand that Sheikh Mujib be released from Pakistani jail because no one else could negotiate on behalf of the Bengalis. But even on 10th December when the Indian troops and Bengali freedom fighters were literally knocking at the door of Dhaka, Kissinger was not asking for Sheikh Mujib's immediate release. Instead he was suggesting negotiation without Sheikh Mujib. According to Washington Post of December 11, Kissinger said, "Once negotiation started, the release of Mujibur would be an inevitable consequence after some period of time, and, therefore, we felt that the most important thing was to get the negotiation started." One should note the underlined words. Kissinger thought that Sheikh Mujib would be released "after a period of time" but it was just a thought. Meanwhile the cease-fire must take effect! What a clever ploy to snatch victory from the victorious Bengali nation. Fortunately, neither India nor the Soviet Union was browbeaten or bedwinked by American diplomacy which was at work in conjunction with China and Pakistan.

Unlike Dhaka or other parts of the country where cheering crowds went out to the streets in throngs to welcome the brave freedom fighters and their Indian allies, there was no such collective celebration in Washington, at least on that fateful day. Instead, all of us, members of the small Bengali community, were glued to the radio and the television in our respective suburban homes, to get every bit of information about the surrender ceremony. The arrival in Dhaka of the Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam and Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad and their colleagues marked, in a symbolic way, the assumption of authority by the government of independent Bangladesh. The new Republic was at last a reality. Thanks to the television we could see many of the street scenes of Dhaka some of which gladdened our hearts while others saddened us deeply. In particular, disclosures about the brutal and planned murder of hundreds of the cream of our society on 14 December was a profound shock. The repulsive scenes of the Rayer bazar execution ground on the television screen was danger signal that the enemies of Bangladesh would stop at nothing to destabilize the newly independent state. Who were the perpetrators of this ghastly crime? Why did they do this? We did not have the answers then and even now I wonder if we have all the answers to these questions. The spectacle of the so-called "execution" of some Beharis for their alleged collaboration was equally disturbing. Thus the Victory Day ended for us on a mixed note. Will peace and tranquillity be quickly restored to the strife-torn nation? Will the Father of the Nation return to his beloved Sonar Bangla safely and in good health? These were the thoughts in mind when we began to put together the pieces of our life abroad. Though we regarded ourselves as the diplomatic representatives of Bangladesh in the United States our status in that country was still that of "foreign agents" without any privileges or immunities. Nixon and his Security Adviser Kissinger did not accord recognition to the new state for several more months. But it did not stop us from planning our future. At the day ended a new era had begun in our life.

