

# 1971-Remembered

Announcer: The incident, which we are going to bring into notice, is taken from the memoir of Shyamoli Choudhury written under the title 'My husband' in the third volume of the Smriti 71 published by the Bangla Academy.

Shyamoli: I am Shyamoli Choudhury. You have requested me to reminisce — reminisce my husband, reminisce 1871. My husband Dr Alim Choudhury and my 1971.

Narrator: (Announcing) The black night of March 25, 1971.

(Accompanying the slogan 'Joy Bangla, Bangabandhu's announcement — "this time it is the struggle for freedom". Slogans, processions, firing, sounds of mortar shells, machine gun, people are being gunned down, fleeing. The genocide of 25th March can be projected through sound effect and slides, film etc.)

A little break.  
Shyamoli: Then we were in a house at Purana Palton. It was a three-storied building. There was a clinic on the ground floor and the first and second floors were occupied by us.

Alim: The suspicion has now become true Shyamoli. The Pakistan army has really attacked. This is the beginning of our independence war.

[A knock at the door. Shyamoli and Alim are frightened, looking at each other face. Alim opened the door.]

Shyamoli: No sooner had he opened the door, than Nazrul Islam stormed into the room. Nazrul Islam — the first Acting President of Bangladesh.

Nazrul: Alim, for the time being I need shelter. I will flee in course of time.

Shyamoli: We kept him in hiding in a small room on the second floor for consecutive four days.

Nazrul: It was 29th march. Shyamoli dressed me as a woman putting a veil (borkha) on me. Her younger brother then accompanied me to somebody's house.

Alim: Then it was in the middle of July.

Shyamoli: One morning it was drizzling. We were standing on the balcony of the first floor. Suddenly we saw our neighbour, PDB's Mr Matin along with his men entering our house to see my husband.

Matin: Doctor, this gentleman's house has been burnt down. He is in much trouble with the members of his family. He is totally helpless. It will be very nice of you, if you give him shelter.

Narrator: Dr Alim went upstairs to ask Shyamoli.

Alim: (to Shyamoli) What can we do now?

Shyamoli: No, I don't think we should give him shelter.

Narrator: Going downstairs, Dr Alim expressed his reluctance.

Matin: Doctor, if you consider, then...  
Mannan: Shaheb, I beseech you. Doctor, please give me shelter for a few days; otherwise, I'll have to go to the street with my family. Please do me a favour.

Narrator: Alim was weakened by their entreaties. He again went upstairs. But Shyamoli was determined

not to give them shelter. Then Alim requested his mother to make Shyamoli agree. Shyamoli didn't answer. Shyamoli was very much unhappy and she wept for a long time. That man was none but Moulana Mannan. He is very much present now. He is your dear patriot Moulana Mannan. Subsequently he was embraced by Ziaur Rahman, known as a great freedom fighter, and became his minister; and he was Ershad's minister too. Moulana Mannan along with the members of his family came to live on the ground floor of Alim's house. The bed-covers of the eye-clinic were changed for their comfort. The clinic was closed. And Alim's chamber was shifted to the first floor.

They had been served with tea, breakfast, lunch and dinner for four to five days. It had been noticed after seven to eight days that Moulana's house was filled with various things. Pakistani soldiers used to visit him. They were lost in merrymaking, night

subscriptions also. Moreover, many were afraid of Dr Alim. They avoided him. They were afraid that they might fall into danger if their connection with a freedom fighter was found out.

Narrator: Moulana Mannan observed what was happening in Alim's house.

Shyamoli: Alim was always busy in giving shelter to an endangered Bangalee family. Alim's activities, his connection with the freedom fighters — everything was known to the Pakistani Occupation Army. But we were unaware of this, and when we understand we could not save ourselves.

[A slight pause]  
[A Listener: (from among the actors) Then.

Narrator: That was 15th December, 1971. Alim was getting ready to go to the Salmullah Medical College. Before he went out...

Shyamoli: You're leaving and will return just before curfew. I think today we'll not be able to leave this

[Smriti 71 has been composed keeping the memoir of Shyamoli Nasreen Choudhury's 'My Husband' in mind. The incident of killing Dr A Alim Choudhury has been narrated by the writer in 'My Husband'. In the play the technic of the memoir has been kept intact. Since it is composed from the Smriti 71, there are some real characters in it — side by side their present position has been mentioned. Moreover, there is curse for pamper — pointing fingers at the audience — every conscious citizen has been cursed.]

Original (in Bengali) : Zia Hyder

Translation : Kamal Ahmed

after night. It was noticed after a few days that two men were guarding Alim's gate, and our five men were guarding Moulana's gate. They were all Razakars and Al-Badars. The Alims thought since Moulana was afraid of the freedom fighters, they placed these guards on the gate. They protested against this measure.

Alim: Moulana Shaheb, your guards are causing inconvenience to us. Please remove these guards.

Moulana: What can I do? See this letter (bringing a letter out of the pocket) — a letter from the freedom fighters. They have written — if Alim Bhai had not been there, we would have blown you up long ago. That's why...

Alim: After receiving the letter, Moulana strengthened the security at the gate.

Narrator: Whatever is there in his mind, Moulana was never disconcerted in his speech. He used to say...

Moulana: Doctor Shaheb, I'll never forget your favour. You've no fear. There'll be no trouble for you. If you face any trouble, come straight to me. I'll protect you. No one can do any harm to you as long as I am alive.

Shyamoli: Moulana's words of hope convinced my husband. Freedom fighters who came to Alim's chamber were given eye treatment. They were given medicines. Dr Alim used to collect medicines moving from one company to another. He used to collect

house.  
Alim: No, I'll come back at right. I will also arrange the place where we'll go. You get ready with everyone. Now give me the kerosene tin.

[Shyamoli gave him the tin. Taking it in his hand Alim got down. Shyamoli kept on looking at the running car removing the window curtain.]

Shyamoli: Suddenly I felt nervous. I thought if he never turned up. It was 1 pm Curfew started. Then I could hear the sound of the car. Keeping the car in the garage Alim came upstairs. The kerosene tin was in his hand.

Alim: You gave me a leaky tin. Half of the kerosene has split.

[Shyamoli listened to the complaint silently.]

Shyamoli: I told that you'd be late. It's not possible to leave the house today.

Alim: Tomorrow we must leave. Let's pass the day somehow.

Narrator: After sometime bombing started. Then the Indian Migs were continuously attacking the Pakistani military outposts. The Alim somehow finished their meal.

Alim: Then it was half past four. Mother, Shyamoli and I were watching fierce bombing on Peelkhanan sitting on the first floor of our house. (laughingly) The Pakistanis are living in the fool's kingdom. They have no power to resist the Indian planes. See, they're dropping bombs to their satisfaction. It seems the whole sky be-

longs to them. They say that the American Seventh Fleet will rescue them. Yesterday the Moulana told so...

Moulana: The Seventh Fleet will reach their Bay of Bengal within one or two days.

[Alim is laughing]  
Narrator: Just after some time sound of a car was heard. Shyamoli saw that a small microbus smeared with mud stopped in front of the Moulana's gate downstairs. This type of vehicle used to come to Moulana. So they didn't think otherwise. Only Alim said...

Alim: Don't peep, go inside. Saying this I entered the bathroom. Shyamoli and mother went inside.

Narrator: After 45 minutes the door bell of the Alims rang. It was visible from upstairs that two Al-Badars were asking to open the door raising their guns.

Shyamoli: (to Alim) Shall I open the door?

Alim: Open.

arrested Alim.

Shyamoli: I ran to Moulana. I didn't hesitate to fall at his feet whom I used to hate. In a choking voice I fervently said — Moulana Shaheb the car hasn't started, you please inquire about the matter. Please tell them something.

Narrator: The Moulana didn't pay heed to the request. He was unmoved. The sound of starting car was heard. Then he said...

Moulana: Don't worry. They're my students. They're taking him. They're also taking Dr Rabbi and many more with them.

Shyamoli: Why are they taking him? Moulana: For treatment.

Shyamoli: Where did they take them?

Moulana: Combined Military Hospital.

Narrator: Being satisfied a little Shyamoli came back upstairs. Immediately she tried to reach Mrs Rabbi over telephone. After much endeavour she was found. Mrs Rabbi said...

Shyamoli: I don't know.

Narrator: Moulana Mannan has fled by that time. A few moments ago he was hiding in the dining room of Shyamoli. He has escaped at a convenient time without anybody's notice by putting on a black veil (borkha).

Narrator: It was 17th December. Hafiz somehow managed to come to Alim's house. Taking his car he was in search of his brother. Hidden militias fired on his car. But he was completely confounded looking for his brother.

Narrator: It was 18th December. The dead body of Doctor Abdul Alim was found among many other intellectuals in a Slaughtering place at Rayer Bazar brick field.

Shyamoli or Narrator: The shirt was on his body. Two hands were tied behind by a rope. The cloth for tying the eyes touched the throat. The chest had been extremely worn out with bullets. There was a cut in the abdomen — bayonet was charged. May be there were many wounds.

Shyamoli: But — but I couldn't see.

Narrator: He was buried beside his father in the new graveyard at Azimpur.

Shyamoli: You've requested me to reminisce. I have got memories — marriage with Alim, conjugal life, babies, family. Among all the memories only two — only two are eating into the existence of my life bit by bit like an insect. One is Alim's departure. The another is — Moulana Mannan's survival with much wealth, fame and power, and Mannan's ideal godfather Golam Azam's infernal pride in denying the map of Bangladesh.

You attribute my husband to 'Shaheed'. But have you every thought how many times from 1972 to till now you have been disgracing this sacred word with contempt?

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## Dipen : Human Torch . . .

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by sheltering all Bengali patriots deserting Pakistani army and encouraging them to go out on a hunt for Pakistani small groups or stragglers. One such element, Rashid, dazed by what he had been through, had promised not to eat before killing his daily quota, self-devised, of Pakistani jawans.

We heard of daring leadership given by two other CSP officers, Taufiq Elahi and Kamal Siddiqui in the building of resistance while the war was fast shaping. Thanks to these officers — first of those that forsook Pakistani slavery and shouldered Bangladesh government duties — civil and military — fifteen days before the coming of such a government. We felt proud to be in their company when they were at the height of their patriotic performance — offering their life and career in the cause of ridding our dear country of colonialist murderers and rapists. Their undeclared rebellion and a lot other such unheralded acts of heroism formed the foundation of the War of Liberation.

We rode up to the border by a transport arranged by Mahub. By the afternoon of the fourth of April we were in West Bengal and in the hands of BSF who reached us to Calcutta by their transport. There was a kind of serious hush-hush in our passage to India, which we felt was not only unavoidable but also very necessary. But through it all we got the impression all right that Tajuddin Ahmed, our supreme leader in the absence of Bangabandhu, was handled by the same people from the same Meherpur border, the very previous day. By and by we got to know excepting him, a teacher of the Dhaka Notre Dame College had preceded us into West Bengal right from Dhaka. We wanted to feel that we were the first organised group to get across.

And by the time we had done that we knew what we were going to do in Calcutta. We found refuge in the cordial welcome of Mansur Habbibullah, the legendary Communist leader later to become the Speaker of West Bengal Legislative Assembly and got started on our two

missions of finding out as many Awami League functionaries roaming round the Calcutta maze as possible and reach them to Congress refugees and as such helping their regrouping; b. building contacts with governmental and other political leaderships of West Bengal to canvass for a strategic plan devised by us. In both we felt we achieved success of no small measure.

We had three meetings with Hare Krishna Kongar, the member two man of CPM. And many more with the famous CPI leader Bhavani Sen and at least another three with Indrajit Gupta, a member of the Indian Defence Council. All such meetings excepting with the CPM leader were arranged courtesy Ramen Mitra and Ila Mitra of the Nachole fame. We had a five-point strategy to sell. The main point was to get India to give us the Jessore Cantonment through covert and limited intervention and secure for us the Rajshahi and Khulna Divisions by fortifying the banks of the great Jamuna and Padma. This then would allow us to fight our own war. We should soon set up government and raise our own army from our own areas. And in no time we would be able to send war into the occupied Dhaka and Chittagong Divisions and join up with local guerrilla resistances there.

Early in our attempts to get our ideas across, we were offered a meeting with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It was gracious on her part to grant a hearing to completely unknown quantities like us. We declined the offer on hearing that Tajuddin Ahmed had talked with her the previous day. We had nothing to say to the Indian Prime Minister besides what our leader had deemed fit to tell her.

Thanks to Syed Hasan Imam, the popular cine actor, we got a good start in lobbying for our plan at the Kidd Streets MLA Hostel among the youthful leaders of Awami League. Very soon Tajuddin Ahmed was back from New Delhi and called into conference the AL Parliamentary Party to report on his talks with Mrs. Gandhi. The participants returned from the meeting seemingly not in

any resolute frame of mind. Some were half-jesting about the shaping of things according to understandings reached in Indira-Tajuddin parleys whose importance in guiding the course of our war hardly dawned upon more than a very few of the parliamentary leaders.

There was no one either to invite us or offer us a ride to Mujibnagar for the inauguration of the provisional Bangladesh Government on April 17. And this marked the loosening of my tightly cohesive group. Kazi Iqbal, the young Students Union element who had performed so wonderfully in the three months we were on the Bay of Bengal islands doing relief and rehabilitation work in the wake of the November 12 tidal bore sloop killing at least a million — was among the first to receive commando training and was being sent regularly on sabotage missions inside the occupied territory. Sagir, the banker, also joined the Mukti Bahini in its earliest days. Kamol who was to be honoured by a Bir Uttam at the end of the war joined the provisional government secretariat. Syed Hasan Imam found his deserts in working alongside Zahir Raihan on the one hand and with the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra on the other. Was I left in the lurch?

Not at all. Zahir and his constant companion Alamgir Kabir had struck it up so wonderfully with our dear old Maitreyi Devi, the talented daughter of philosopher Surendra Nath Dasgupta and one on whom Rabindranath so much doted. What didn't this half-invalid and obese writer of that fine and celebrated book *Mongputey Rabindranath* do to help Bangladesh get going? Let whoever say whatever to the contrary I know it deep in my heart that the first stationeries of our provisional government were printed and supplied by her. And that the BSF was cajoled by none other than her to lend their radio transmitter to broadcast the Swadhin Bangla Betar programmes. No doubt, the programmes could not be carried without central government approval, the first moves were made by Maitreyi Davi.

## Discovering Chaturanga

Kaiser Haq

TILL about seven years ago my acquaintance with Rabindranath Tagore's novels was limited to a somewhat casual perusal of *Shesher Kabita* and *Jogajog*. I decided to remedy my ignorance and spent a very pleasant couple of months reading all his novels in chronological order. The better-known ones did not fail to live up to their reputation, but it was the little-known *Chaturanga* that caught my imagination. I did not know of any English translation and decided to do one. It is available as *Quartet* in Heinemann's Asian Writers Series. The opening paragraph of my introduction will give some idea why the book impressed me.

*Quartet* (*Chaturanga* in the original Bengali) is one of the greatest novellas in world literature. The economy and concentration demanded by the form are perfectly exemplified in this tale of archetypal conflict — between reason and emotional orthodox and liberalism, spiritual aspiration and earthy passion — set against the background of *fin-de-siècle* Bengal. That it is virtually unknown outside the native Bengal of its author, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), and even there isn't one of his best-known works, is a lamentable instance of recognition deferred. However, a few discerning critics have long believed that it is artistically more satisfying than Tagore's longer and more celebrated novels; it more than makes up in intensity for what it lacks in detail, and is unique in the author's oeuvre for its range of technical experiments. Transitions in plot and character development are abrupt, descriptions are compressed into minimalist dimensions, the terse language flashes suddenly into image and epigram. Such devices have become part of the inherited repertoire of the contemporary writer, but if we remember that before book publication in 1916 *Quartet* was serialized in 1914-15, when literary mod-

ernism was still in its infancy, we will better appreciate its daring originality.

After reading Tagore's novels I jotted down my immediate impressions of them. The following is what I noted about *Chaturanga*.

As the title indicates there are four chapters, each of which is titled after a character. One of them, Sribilash, is the unassuming narrator who provides us with a perspective on a series of dramatic events. In college he comes under the spell of the brilliant and aloof Sachish, and his uncle and mentor, Jagmohan, a staunch atheist, humanist and utilitarian of the kind who flourished in Calcutta in the second and third quarters of the 19th century. Jagmohan is portrayed with a charming mixture of sympathy and mild irony. His younger brother Horimohan (Sachish's father), however, in his meanness, greed and hypocritical piety embodies all that is wrong with traditional Hindu society.

A young orphan girl, widowed in childhood, is seduced, impregnated and abandoned by Sachish's elder brother, who has taken after his father. Sachish shelters the girl with his uncle and decides to marry her to save her from scandal. But on the eve of the marriage she hangs herself after confessing in a note that she hasn't been able to forget her seducer. Such an irrational, masochistic attachment seems to make mockery of Jagmohan's rationalism; it prefigures later developments. Soon after a plague epidemic breaks out (there was one in Calcutta in 1898); Jagmohan contracts the disease while nursing poor victims, and dies.

The grief-stricken Sachish disappears from Calcutta and is rumoured to have become the disciple of a dubious Vaishnava guru, Likananda Swami. Sribilash tracks down his friend in distant Chittagong and finds him happy in abject submission to the Swami. Not so strangely, perhaps, Sribilash too comes under the Swami's spell; but he can maintain a degree of healthy detachment.

conversion may appear, it is both psychologically and historically justifiable. Sudhir Kakar, in his book *The Inner World* (Delhi: OUP) explains that the Indian tendency to withdraw into mysticism springs from having an underdeveloped ego, which needs the stability of family and caste as a buttress. When these supports are threatened, one feels totally lost. In Sachish's case, ironically enough, caste, faith and parents were renounced without loss of equilibrium for his uncle took their place. Jagmohan's death leaves him an easy prey to an irrationalist cult. Historically, the rationalists of the third quarter of the last century underwent a crisis at the turn of century when they realized that human reality was not particularly amenable to a positivist approach to its problems; many of them turned round like Sachish.

Fresh complications arise when the Swami comes to Calcutta with his followers and puts up at the house bequeathed to him by a dead disciple. The disciple's widow, a wonderfully vital person called Damini, who is habitually irreligious to the Swami, falls hopelessly in love with Sachish. The turmoil this generates within Sachish is powerfully depicted in a scene excerpted from his diary. When the group goes out on tour and camps for a night in a cave, he imagines that he is in the mouth of a hideous, primitive beast. In a semi-conscious state he feels something soft embrace his feet; he kicks them and feels hair brush his feet, then hears the patter of retreating steps and muffled sobs. It is of course Damini. (Students will find it interesting to compare Tagore's use of the cave as a symbol with Forster's or Kipling's) the Swami's group breaks up after the wife of a devotee commits suicide on discovering that her husband and her younger sister have fallen in love. Damini charges that the tragedy was precipitated by the influence on the husband of the Swami's cult of ecstasy, which ignores social and ethical considerations; the point is pitifully brought out by the

Swami's reaction to the suicide: he begins to dance.

At Damini's request Sachish agrees to become her guru, but finally asks her to leave as she distracts him from his personal quest for a spiritual solution. Sribilash now proposes to Damini and she accepts, realizing that he has loved her all along. They are happy together, engaging in busy welfare activities, and though she dies within a year, her memory remains a vital presence in Sribilash's

mind. This is a memorable story of a few 'outsiders' in turn-of-the-century Calcutta; among them Sachish and Sribilash move dialectically from atheistic humanism, through the cult of devotion, to a synthesis that brings them back to social work, but without the strident iconoclasm of the early phase.

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## Elections

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the support of a breakthrough faction of the Muslim League. The relatively neutral role of the army was another factor contributing to the reversed results. The army, however, quite actively helped the Election Commission in conducting an election generally free from blemish.

SAARC observers, however, in their final assessment of the just-concluded election, after praising the authorities for giving the country a fair election, kept the highest praise reserved for 1991 Bangladesh elections where the army's role was the most unobtrusive.

This practice of an election being watched by a group/groups of observers from other countries, to the extent the government of the host country lends its full co-operation to the observer, can be a morale-booster in countries where they are yet to build a firm tradition of free and fair elections. Among the SAARC countries, only India has so far cold-shouldered any suggestion of foreign observers coming and watching their proceedings. But then, India is a different case where, despite rigging here and there, there is a much better record of elections.

I will now come to some conclusions in respect of elections as practised by our people, and as viewed by them. We, Bengalees, are not particularly sports-minded, and I wonder if this goes to explain why we fail to regard

election in the spirit of a game. We take it too seriously, more seriously than is good for it. True, it was not always like this.

In the 1954 elections, the ruling party, Muslim League, was completely routed, but the government of the day did not come out with bloody claws. Institutional elections, like the one we contested in 1950 for the Muslim Hall Union, were fought with all seriousness, but little, if any, violence. Bloodshed was beyond our wildest dreams.

Apparently, long periods of army rule, through its distortion of the procedure, has changed the whole character of national, local and institutional elections. Both money-power and muscle-power have increasingly played a major role in deciding results. Our people have the reputation of being highly political, also volatile and the first signals of an election send a wave of excitement across the land. There is something feverish, even frenzied, in the last stages of an election in the manner and conduct of the workers. I am convinced that the violence and irrationality even madness we have come to associate with elections stem from a total misconception of the democratic norm. It will take all our patience, all our good sense, all our wisdom, to see election in its true perspective — as a means to an end and not an end in itself.