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Special Supplement

"Nobody is Thinking about the Country"

Begum Sufia Kamal, the grand dame of Bengali literature and a relentless fighter for justice and freedom, speaks on her feelings and emotions about independence and on the present political crisis. By Aasha Mehreen Amin

THE cool greenery and happy chirping of busy sparrows that surround her house give a deceptive appearance of peace. While an impending storm threatens to explode outside this sanctuary in Dhanmondi along the road of Bangabandhu's house, her thoughts are far from peaceful. In the month when Bangladesh enters its 25th year of independence Sufia Kamal is tormented by the lack of principles and values of political leaders, the death of idealism in young people and the plight of poor people caught in the mess that her beloved Bangladesh has become in the hands of a few unscrupulous individuals. Brutally honest, yet painfully sensitive, this remarkable poet, social and political activist and much loved personality, compares the inspiration of the Independence Movement in 71 with our present political mindset and offers a solution to bring back the Bangladesh that seems to have lost her way from truth.

"Since this is March 1 will talk keeping 7th March in perspective because it was that inspiring speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib that marked the beginning of our independence movement" begins Sufia Kamal whose continuous illness has weakened her body although not her mind which is as sharp and clear as ever. "Of course," she adds quickly, "the movement had roots much earlier: the seeds were sown during the Language Movement."

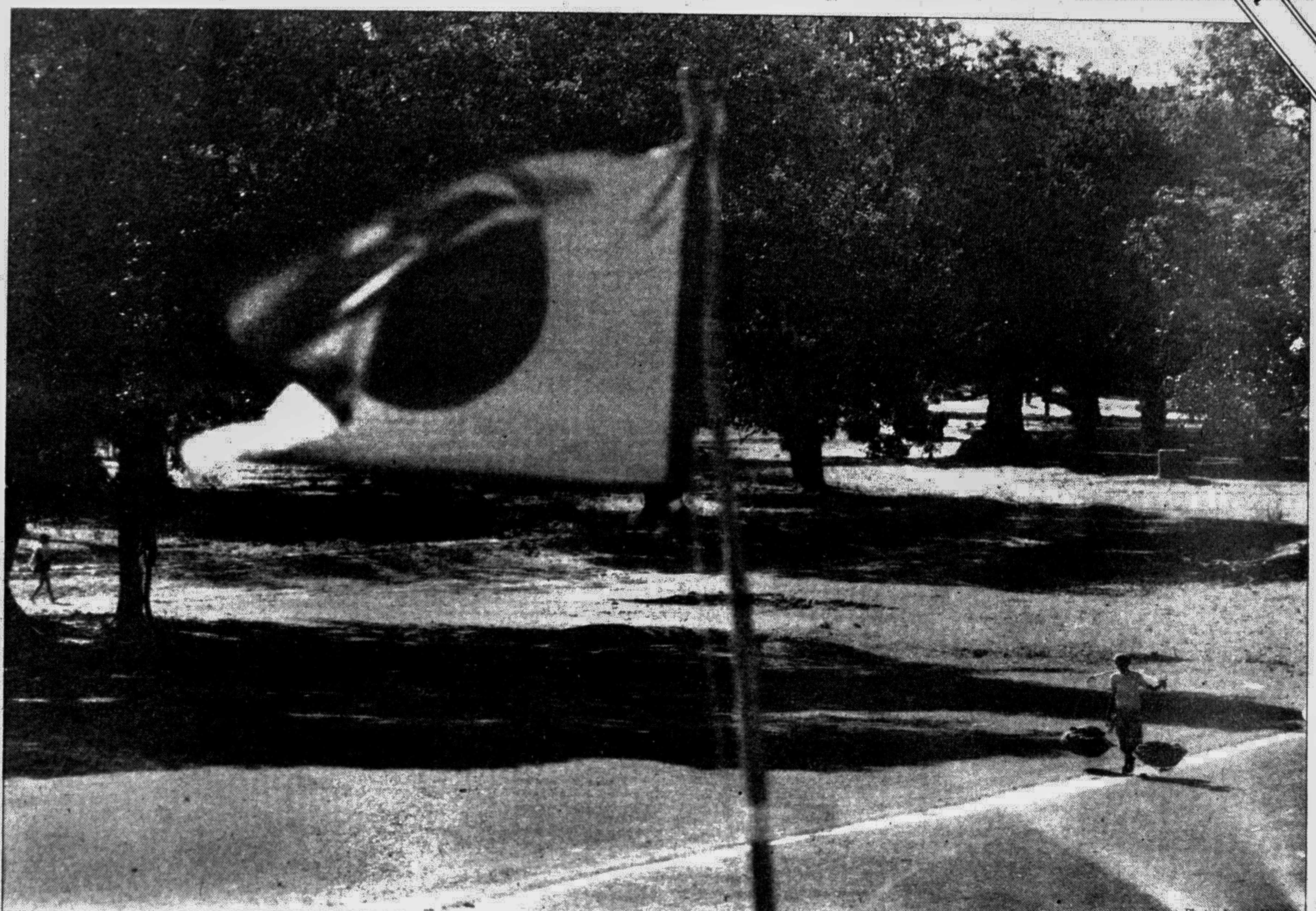
"What hurts me most is that the Bangladesh who at that time thrust themselves into the struggle for freedom with such real conviction and spirit even though they did not have any arms, money, skills or much education to fight against their armed, skilled and better equipped adversaries, the same Bangladesh are now stabbing each other's hearts. At that time they won because they had the determination, the mental strength and the inspiration from their leader who was kept imprisoned. Seeing their helplessness as well as determination, people

from the entire world gave their support and recognition. What saddens me is that now there are no foreign enemies, they have made enemies within themselves, says Sufia Kamal, breaking down with emotion. "Women are given no respect, no recognition for their work, no security," she continues, "the Bangladeshes have become so self-destructive, this is what hurts me the most and makes me feel so ashamed."

So what can be done to regain the moral strength of our society and bring back our lost dignity? Sufia Kamal believes that the first thing to do is pin point the reasons behind our socio-political degradation. "There is an invisible strength, a 'Black Hand', she philosophises, "drowning our country into a sea of bigotry and communalism. The tyranny of religious fanaticism is oppressing women and other helpless people. If we cannot arrest this force then there is no hope."

"There is a glimmer of hope," continues Sufia Kamal. "In the potential of the young generations. The new generation has to renew the spirit to fight these forces so that Bangladesh can stand together and protect the honour of our Independence Movement," she says with conviction. "The politics of terrorism that has gripped the student population is another evil that needs to be removed in order to free Bangladesh."

After 1975 when Bangabandhu was murdered, it is as if Bangladesh had become a 'moa' that everyone wanted a bite of. And the looting and robbing began. Due to this our future youth leaders became corrupted. During his government, Sheikh Mujib told the leaders of various youth organisations, "go back to the universities and study; if I need you I will call for you." But later, after '75 the students were brought back into politics, given arms and now they are involved in political terrorism. Greed and corruption have been implanted in them.



Unemployment and education too, should be a major priority issue since without a sound economy a country cannot be morally fit. "In the old days," remembers Sufia Kamal, "parents use to have a dream — that their child would grow up, become educated, get married and be settled in life. Now nobody has a dream. Getting married is out of the question when they can't even feed themselves."

"There is no academic atmosphere, year after year students have to wait to get a degree, the universities remain closed. Many parents have sold their land, just to send their child to the city to get an education. And what do they get? Sometimes that child ends up

as a corpse lying in the street. Others resort to terrorism, hijacking etc to survive. What has the government done about all this?"

Unemployment of the poor is of great concern to Sufia Kamal. "We hear that Bangladesh has developed — there are more bridges and better roads. We can now go to Sylhet in 6 hours. But what about those boatmen who used to earn a modest living taking passengers, selling mangoes, rice, vegetables etc at the ghat. How will they survive now that they are out of work? They are now in the streets, begging and starving ending up in the basins of Dhaka. Others have resorted to terrorism to earn

their bread. "The Prime Minister has said that she has ensured 'dal bhat' for Bangladesh's people. Who can afford dal bhat these days?" Sufia Kamal recalls that at one time rice was 4 paisa a seer and dal 6 paisa and now the prices of rice and dal are 16 taka and 40 taka respectively.

Her assessment on the present political crisis is clear. "What can be done?" She asks, "all this oborodh is not helping anyone but it must be done. Mujib was a real leader he never fled from his enemies. He got killed but till his end he gave leadership to the people. At present, continues Sufia Kamal, there are no leaders

who will stand by the people. "There is no unity among Bangladeshes," she comments, "everyone looks after their own interest, nobody is thinking of the country."

Sufia Kamal says that there is no such thing as *desh prem* (patriotism) in our leaders. Nowadays we talk of bringing people from abroad to solve our crises. How shameful that is! Can't we even solve our problems ourselves anymore?" "In this struggle," continues Sufia Kamal, "someone has to compromise. In the case of the opposition, it seems that Hasina cannot control her party members, because she is not well organised she cannot give proper leadership. She should have been in the parliament; then we could have voted for her."

"As for the BNP government, it is illegal as far as I'm concerned. None of us voted in this election. How can it be legal?" she demands.

The government's past record hasn't been very positive either in her eyes. In the case of women, so many atrocities against women have been committed: state violence, acid throwing, wife burning. All sorts of horrible things are being done to women. We had all these women parliamentarians. Not once did they voice their protest against any of these atrocities. What have they been doing?" Sufia Kamal describes the present state of Bangladesh as

when "the monkey holds the sword." There are only opportunists and traitors ruling. "But I still hope and believe that eventually a true leader will emerge — one who has the qualifications to be a leader and are who has true love for his or her country," she adds.

At this point Sufia Kamal is silent, trying to catch her breath. She has a faraway, almost wistful look on her face, perhaps dwelling on those last thoughts. The only sound that can be heard is the gayling of the sparrows, the quiet rustling of trees in the spring breeze and a distant vendor singing out his wares. In the midst of madness, these are the only sounds of peace as they are of hope.

Bangladesh, in the Labyrinth of Politics

Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

ON the eve of the twenty fifth anniversary of our independence, the entire nation is thrown into a confusion unprecedented in its complexity. It looks as if we have lost our way in the labyrinth of politics. A little over five years from now, we had emerged from one such labyrinth. Political forces had united with a single mission: ouster in the person of General Ershad. The forces were mixed in their composition, political parties of diverse ideologies who had buried their differences, and the civil society which remains politically dormant in normal times but wakes up to a positive consciousness in crisis. Students, mostly from colleges and universities, appeared on the scene as a decisive force in the last days of the movement. Ershad climbed down from his position of power as an elected leader. He received clear signals that his power base had withdrawn its support from him. His last desperate attempts to cling to power and to foil the movement has been vividly described by one who had the privilege of witnessing his moves from close quarters. Major General Manzoor Rashid Khan, Military Secretary to the President, has written an account, perhaps the most authentic and accurate we have had so far, of those hectic days which ended well but might well have ended in disaster.

Ironically and tragically enough, what we are now witnessing in the form of a massive movement has many points of similarity with the movement launched against Ershad. There are differences between the two principal figures, General Ershad and Begum Khaleda Zia. Ershad had

no political legitimacy which Khaleda has, or to put it differently, which she started with but which she started losing around the middle of her tenure as Prime Minister. The process of a popularly elected leader and a Prime Minister losing her contact with political and social realities, refusing to behave according to the norms of Westminster-type governance, and proving herself a prisoner in the hands of self-seeking councillors and singularly unable to make up her own mind, all this and more has been a sorry sight. I am speaking as one of those who had nothing but goodwill for her about this time five years ago. Drawing a comparison now with her husband the founder of her party, I must say that the comparison will be to her disadvantage. As politicians there is not much to choose between them. They — the two generals and their successor — are politicians without a political education and with little real political commitment.

bolstered by elements divorced from the mainstream of the nation's feelings and aspirations. With all these limitations, Zia was steadily gaining a sort of political respectability. His was an ascending political career whereas Begum Khaleda's is a descending one. Left to herself and acting on her own good sense, she might yet have retained her status as a politician, as much of the popularity she had earned as the principal antagonist to Ershad. But her unexplained surrender to her chosen councillors, and her consequent loss of her own political upstart, some with a dubious track-record in politics, and others now household names for their alleged corruption, has reduced herself into a questionable figure. In short, Khaleda of the

days she was spearheading the anti-Ershad movement followed by the days of electioneering and the days she raised high hopes as a popularly elected leader of the House was a very different person in the public view from what she is now. There has been a steady decline, and what looks like an irredeemable loss in public confidence: confidence in her ability to run a government with a clear mind, ability to explain to her people what she wants and why and finally to explain her much-vaunted constitutionalism which has led the nation to the verge of despair.

What is really this constitutionalism, one is tempted to ask. The 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh is supposed to be one which could serve very well this nation of ours for many years to come in our progress toward a democratic polity. Some amendments were normal but others leave a question, not excluding the 4th amendment. Both the Presidential form of government and the one party system were things for which we were not prepared. But just remember the days when people in different professions were vying with others to join the official party, Bksal. It shows that the politically conscious citizen did not see anything bad about it. It cannot be that the entire nation had lost its political sense overnight. Let us also remember those few who stepped back, who did not join and who felt extremely uneasy, understanding, at the same time, Bangabandhu's anxiety to lift the state from chaos and to meet more effectively the threat to its very security posed by well-engineered lawlessness. Mujib, the undisputed leader, could by no stretch of imagination, take a most unlikely measure

for ulterior purposes. And this remains one good argument in defence of bad case.

The same cannot be said in extension of the 5th, nor of the vicious 8th amendment. These were all works of the post-Mujib governments, with a clear design in their minds which was to undo all that was achieved in our War of Liberation on the plane of political ideology. The 1972 Constitution was an expression in legal terms of that ideology. The 5th and the 8th amendments, between them, gave a legal sanction to the crimes committed since August 15, 1975 and to steer the state away from the course charted out for it by its founding fathers. The new rulers saw their 'New Bangladesh' which was born in the first week of November after the jail killings of four leaders as a new beginning, in almost every sense. It was a ritualistic killing of the Bangladesh born of the War of Liberation, 1971.

The Constitution now, mangled and disfigured over the years, has suddenly become holy in the eyes of those very people who had treated it with contempt in the past. For them, the argument against election under a caretaker government is that the Constitution does not provide for it. Ways of circumventing this difficulty have been suggested. But is it really a dilemma of ways and means? I do not think so. Nor can it be a genuine concern to go by the Constitution. Where was the Constitution when all the MPs of the opposition resigned their membership of the Sangsad in a body? And where is the Constitution now when an election is held without the voters' participation, making a mockery of article 11 which reads "The Republic shall be a democracy in which funda-

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Flashback to 1971 and Today's Irony

Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad

ON the occasion of the 25th anniversary of our independence, my thoughts first go back to 1971, the year of our War of Liberation. Let me start by remembering with deep gratitude all those sons and daughters of the soil who laid down their lives as also those who suffered inhuman oppression in that war as well as in all struggles waged against British and Pakistani rule that eventually led to 1971. My memories relating to the struggles against Pakistani rule date back to the 1952 Language Movement and are obviously many and of varied nature — of shock, of horror, of joy — and depth. Let me recount here just two of them — one of horror and shock and the other joyous.

First, I speak about my memory of 25 March 1971 mid-night when the treacherous attack on innocent Bangladeshes was launched by Pakistani armed forces. During the period of non-cooperation movement in March 1971, there were many socio-economic questions answers to which were required by Awami League High Command for the purposes of both negotiations and developing policy ideas. Some of my colleagues and I at the (then) Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) — (later BIDS) worked hard to provide data, information and analyses concerning some of those questions. We, however, worked in the background while Prof Nurul Islam, then director of (then) PIDE was the focal point passing the issues and questions to us and the results of our efforts back to Awami League High Command. On 25 March 1971 we were given several issues. At night following that day, two of my colleagues and I met at my residence for several hours and

agreed on how to address the issues and to meet again the following day to complete the work. They left at about 10:00 pm. After that we watched TV news, ate and went to bed.

In about an hour's time, we were woken by ear-splitting sounds of heavy bombardment that the Pakistani army had launched on the innocent ordinary Bangladeshes. We lived in Elephant Road in those days and one of the major targets of their assaults on that first night was the Dhaka University residential halls located quite close to our residence. Firing continued for hours and we often felt that shots were coming towards us. On waking up, my first thought was: that was the end of East Pakistan and it was a matter of time before Bangladesh would be free. My wife, Zaheda Ahmad, also excitedly pressed the same thought. When the curfew was lifted on 27 March, I ventured to go out to see what had happened. I was horrified and shocked to see, in the fish and vegetable market beside New Market, a number of dead bodies of people who apparently had been shot dead as they lay asleep. Zaheda also walked out after I had. She went to Dhaka University campus and, in reaching one of the residential halls, saw, to her horror, dead bodies littered all over. Back home, neither of us was sure whether what we had done, i.e. wandering around in the New Market area and the University campus, was courageous or foolhardy. But, on having told each other about what we had seen, we felt sure (not based on any logic, just instinct) that there was no going back and our thought of the previous night about independence of Bangladesh was going to be a reality. At that time we had no

idea (as surely nobody had) as to how long it might take. In reality, it took only about nine months. The second memory I wish to talk about concerns 16 December 1971, the day Pakistani army surrendered and Bangladesh was liberated.

Having left our Elephant Road house on 27 March, we stayed in a house in Dhanmondi for a while. As soon as the situation permitted, we managed to leave Dhaka and crossed over to India via Sylhet (the whole journey was arduous and replete with dangers) and reported to Bangladesh authorities in exile. Later, when it was established, I worked in the Planning Cell of the Bangladesh Government in exile, which had the responsibility of preparing policy papers on various aspects of society and economy for use immediately following liberation as and when it comes. It was about 4 pm on 16 December 1971, when we received the message at the Planning Cell Office that Pakistan army had surrendered and Bangladesh was liberated. All of us started shouting, with tears of joy streaming down our cheeks, in celebration and jubilation. Somebody said, someone should go and get some sweets; yes, yes, said almost everybody to get sweets. But nobody made a move, apparently all were numb. The reality was that most of us had no money. Eventually, someone, I don't remember now who it was, found a 100-rupee note. Sweets were brought and we all celebrated. I returned to liberated, independent Bangladesh on 31 December 1971 with the fond hope that *Sonar Bangla* was at last going to be a reality. That hope was in consonance with those of millions of Bangladeshes who were

free at last. But it has turned out to be an euphoric dream. In reality, the greed of so few has shattered the hopes of so many. Thus, as 25 years of independence is completed, people at large have remained as alienated and deprived as ever and are once again thrown into the boiling cauldron of violent political conflicts.

What a nightmarish turn of events! As if the people had not suffered enough at the hands of the Pakistani army, they had soon to find themselves reeling under martial law imposed by their own armed forces. Once again, they had to endure and fight long and hard before the yoke could be thrown off. Another freedom was achieved in December 1990. But renewed hopes — this time of many more millions than in 1971 — have once again been shattered by the few that constitute the power structure.

Politics should be about public service; but in the political arena of this country, greed — for power, for wealth — rules supreme. Thus, regardless of what the people wish and how ever much the sufferings inflicted on them, a reasonable solution could not be found to the political impasse in two years, allowing it to generate into catastrophic proportions. But, even the short history of independent Bangladesh clearly shows that this path is very steep and slippery for the powers-that-be with an abyss at the bottom. Once you are embarked on it, you folles multiply and the downward spiralling accelerates, and re-tracting becomes increasingly difficult and eventually impossible.

It was in March 1971 that Pakistani rulers unleashed an all out armed assault on the people of this country. After 25

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