

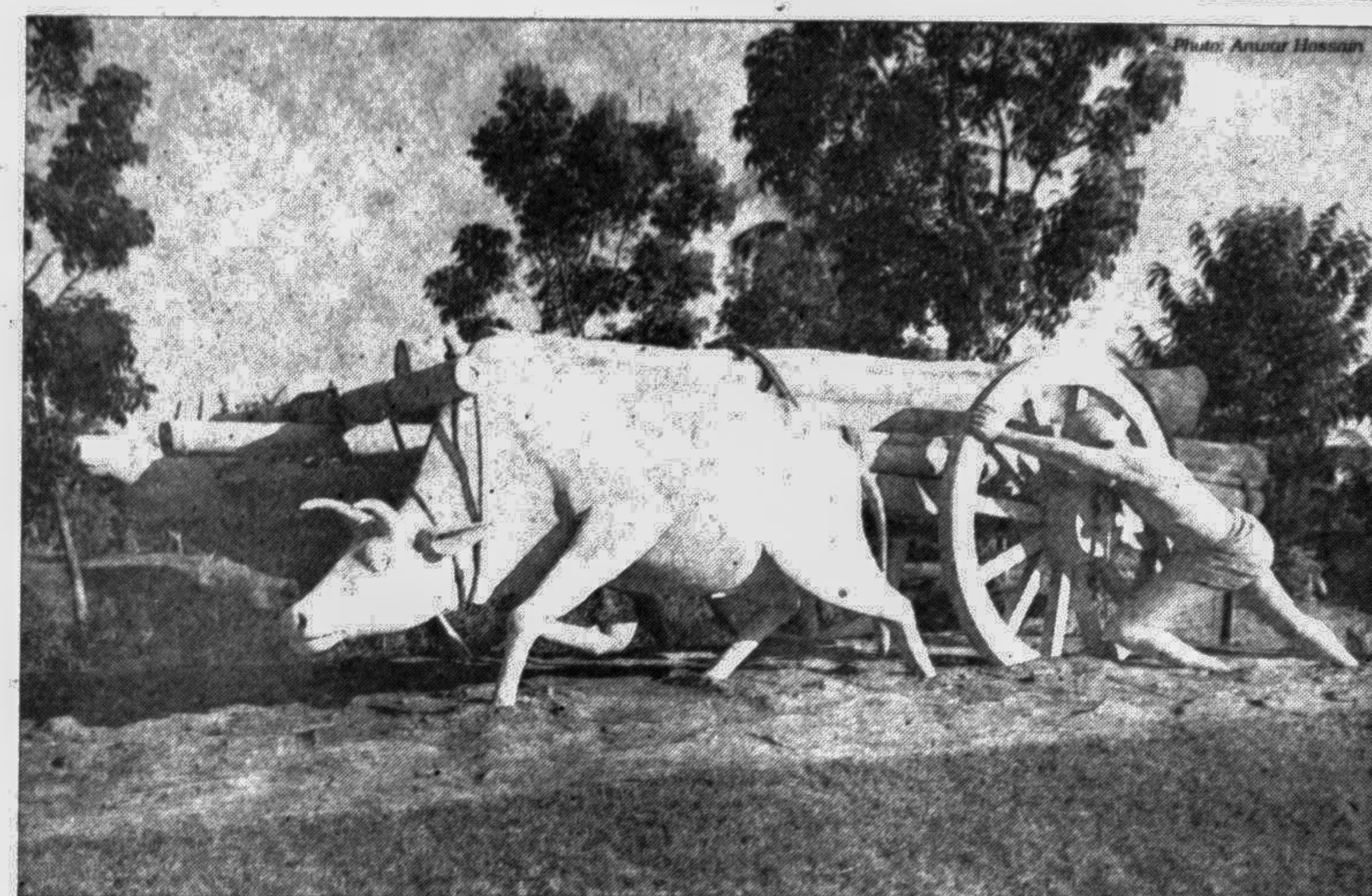
THE discourse of history is known to move towards its own inevitable conclusions, its own pre-determined goals. The burden of this discourse, as Marxist historian Helga Gallas would tell us, is the representation of reality which occurs independently of author and public. The term 'author' here primarily refers to the writer, as Gallas is concerned in her book with Marxist literary history, not with history proper; but in a broader sense author might also mean an actor who creates or influences history: A key assumption here would be that historical discourse, since its aim is nothing short of unchanging truths, would eventually bypass or subsume both its makers and the incidental archive that is built to support it. Even the makers of history, at a certain remove of time, are unable to change or alter any of its facts, and the minor archive (speeches, interviews, reminiscences — the oral/mnemonic archive, in other words) that may be exploited towards that end finally proves its inadequacy. If the discourse of history is internally homogeneous — in the sense it keeps both to the punctual events, the chronology, and the sequence of happenings as well as the trends and attitudes inherent in those events and happenings, without ideologising, moralising or allegorising them — then the 'self-movement of reality' becomes a mere chronicling process, an automated exercise whose limits are the furthest reaches to which known events and happenings can stretch. History then can be a grand narrative (the Marxist view) or a sublime movement towards a cultural ideology, or a contextualising of cultural systems (the last is what the New Historicists posit, among others), and a recording of the whole spectrum of events and happenings — continuous and discrete, in which the truth content remains as inalterable as ever.

The term 'truth content' may give rise to another set of polemics: what truth? how to identify/distinguish that truth, or, more aggressively, whose truth? Although an etymological and epistemological understanding of the term should put to rest these polemics and these questions, the fact remains that history — more precisely, political history — is changed, distorted, vulgarised and fictionalised because of different interpretations of this truth content. What should basically be a simple (even a historical) exercise of dispassionately putting together the string of events, and happenings, and the ideas and aspirations that created a particular history, then becomes a self-fulfilling mission, often inserting an element of make-believe or untruth in place of a truth. When history is fictionalised, its discourse falls prey to a new game where referents and references, knowledge and truth are all changed to suit personal biases, ideologies or agendas. History, in Bangladesh, has always been fictionalised — to a great extent or less — depend-

ing on who has been writing it, or, more importantly, for whom. The elitist history has all along been a name-calling, and chronicling of events that centralised the powerful. The subaltern has had no place in that history. The two hundred years of British colonial rule re-invigorated the elitist historiography, to the extent that even Indian historians described the 1857 uprising from the ranks of the Indian army as the 'Sepoy Mutiny', or the armed resistance from the civilians as the 'terrorist movement.' While the writing of this official version of history could not deface the essential facts and truths, nevertheless it subjugated them to marginal positions, proving the fact that power has its own priorities and prerogatives.

Political authority in Bangladesh has always tried to use power to change systems of discourse to consolidate its base and its belief structures, however spurious these have been. Thus the writing of history, outside the strict academic practices (which mostly have only re-constituted the gaps and lacunae, and the missing links of elitist history — the research-oriented historiography, not the constitutive historiography which is forward looking) have often been mixed in delusions, distortions and outright falsities to satisfy the demands of the powers that be. This has been all the more evident in the post-1975 military or pseudo-military regimes, characterised by their divisive and anti-progressive roles. The history that bore most of the brunt of new revisionism has been, not surprisingly, that of the war of liberation. It is quite incredible that a period of time, which is firmly entrenched in the memory of a whole living generation, should have been fictionalised and with such apparent ease; but like many other things in Bangladesh, a land where anything goes, this official version of history still dominates the electronic media, the school text books and the minds of a group of intellectuals (all exclusive properties of the government).

As our independence day approaches, I can visualise this history once again taking over the airwaves, and the imagination of the stump-thumping parliamentarians and ministers, and the ruling party functionaries down to the petty member of one or the other front organisations. We have been fed this history in different doses in the last twenty years. First, the role of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in our liberation history was downgraded; then he was banished into the sidelines. For a long time, during the Ershad regime, it was the people and the members of the armed forces who achieved our independence, sans any civilian leadership, of course. And our fight was always against the *hanadar bahini* (the invading force). Who were the *hanadars*? Where did they come from? Where did they go? Hush! don't ask, or the Pakistanis will hear, and the great camaraderie existing among the Muslim ummah will shatter like cheap glass.



Fictionalising History

Syed Manzoorul Islam

However, after the BNP formed the government in 1991, the already de-centred Bangabandhu suddenly became a villain; and lo and behold his place was completely taken over by Shaheed Zia. A minister of the government, a turncoat politician who was once an influential student leader, a Mujib protegee, even threw up an open challenge. Sheikh Mujib (no longer Bangabandhu), he said, never wanted Bangladesh's independence. Case closed. To continue with my visualisation of what the airwaves will ceaselessly churn out by way of our history of liberation this silver jubilee year: On March 26, we will be told, Major Zia announced the independence of Bangladesh. The country which did not know what to do, as the talks to settle the political stalemate failed, was suddenly given a new sense of direction, and it plunged into *[jhatpat pariol]* the bloody war with the *hanadar* forces. Earlier, Sheikh Mujib had made a cowardly (and complicit) surrender to the Pakistan (not *hanadar*) army. Throughout the next nine months, the country — more precisely the armed forces personnel, the students, peasants and labourers — fought under Major Zia's leadership, while the Awami League spent an easy and profligate time in Calcutta. A minister of the 1991 BNP government, himself a freedom fighter, came up with the

anecdote that Ziaur Rahman announced independence to a cheerful mix of soldiers and civilians on 25 March, 1971, in Chittagong from atop an oil drum. There have been politicians and even intellectuals avowing that the 'announcement' by Major Zia ignited the dying spark in them and drove them to fight the war. This official history, of course, does not accept any events before the 26th of March for the simple reason that Zia was nowhere in it, not even remotely. The historic 7th March, the perpetrators of this history, is not even a footnote, but a plain aberration. Another minister, whose wild and irresponsible remarks in the parliament and the subsequent refusal to apologise led to the walkout from the parliament (which led to their resignation, and so on), said that to him the 7th March speech of Bangabandhu was nothing, because Sheikh Mujib did not say what the people wanted to hear. There will be more bizarre twists to this history in the days to come, depending on whose imagination is set on fire by what bigotry or zeal, or simple opportunism, and we shall see a progressive elimination of all political leaders, sector commanders and other non-BNP type freedom fighters. The day will not be far, when the only memorial of our war of independence will be a huge bronze statue of Shaheed Zia atop an oil drum, harangu-

ing the three ministers, and others like them, igniting their dying sparks, etc. While no one ever denies the role of Ziaur Rahman in our war of independence — particularly the importance of the radio announcement he made on behalf of Bangabandhu, which did ignite sparks in a lot of people, and enthused them into action — to elevate him into a role greater than that of Bangabandhu, however, is not only absurd and vicious, but also a denial of what amounts to plain, historical truth. That bit of history is still current memory, unless of course the nation has a fit of collective amnesia, and forgets the events of the most glorious time of its history. Ziaur Rahman himself, as long as he lived, never disputed the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, or usurped his pivotal role during the war of independence. On the contrary, in an article he wrote in 1972 titled 'The Birth of a Nation,' and published in the weekly *Bichitra*, Ziaur Rahman reiterated what he always said in public. But after his death, his followers, in need of a centralising force that would glue the party together and keep it a contender for power, invented the Zia myth, and once in power, started rewriting history to elevate that myth into a national symbolism. But fictionalising history has its own dangers, as the subversion of facts this entails leads to other

forms of subversions, omissions and lapses. Once history is turned into fiction, it is assailed by fiction's indeterminacy, open-endedness, and possibilities of endless interpretations. Already, suggestions like the 'oil-drum theory' have been relegated to the realm of the comic, if not the ludicrous, and Zia's activities during the war are coming under closer scrutiny. In their zeal to promote him above Gen Osmay and other commanders, Zia's followers are raising the question of his military discipline, which is unfortunate. Fiction can turn an event upside down, and still not exhaust its serio-comic possibilities. This is happening in the official attempts to reconstruct the history of 1971. The first years of the independence saw the glorification of the Awami League, to the exclusion of all other parties that took part in our struggle for independence. That was the first attempt to fictionalise history. All these years later, we are only revisiting the site, which has turned more intractable with the passage of time. Perhaps there will be a way out in the future. History, as T S Eliot reminds us, has many 'cunning passages', and 'contrived corridors'; to treat it as a highway where one can drive as straight and as fast one wants is perhaps a mistake not worth repeating. But repeated it is; every year, with increasing vengeance.

Foreign Policy Constituency

Shah Husain Imam

THERE is little doubt that our foreign affairs experts and executives are trying their level best to catch up with the changing global realities. Obviously they are not doing it from any position of strength. More than the growing political instability it is the difficulty to explain it away in their representational role that is holding them back from realising their full potential to deliver. Most well-wishers of Bangladesh fail to understand why a society as homogeneous as ours should be politically so vulnerable. More so when they had seen a proven success against autocracy leading to the reinstatement of democracy in 1991. They have started finding fault with the political culture itself. Then, the Bangladesh passport, once the endearing symbol of a freedom loving people, and also of a survivalist against stunning vagaries of nature, has lost some of its original appeal through the melting away of several of its holders into foreign lands in quest of better life. The exodus is summarily put down to economic mismanagement, although our macro-economic

stability, lately largely eroded, had until the other day won us laurels in the international circles. The NGO success held aloft by the likes of Prof Yunus and Abed at an expanding micro-level has done us proud. Only that the official elation over their excellent work which, for all practical purposes, has been a national capital worth utilising decently for our image-projection, left something perhaps to be desired. There is an underlying point here about not quite systematically following the NGO strides through their origination and evolutionary stages but wading up to these belatedly on being applauded abroad. The foreign office needs opening a window of communication to the prestige-enhancing NGO operations to be on the upkick in good time. The foreign office has a much larger constituency to cultivate than that. Interactions with economic professionals brook no delay whatsoever to bring about a fusion between the private sector chemistry here and that which is obtaining overseas. The Morshed Committee report in so many words stressed that new working equations be developed between the foreign affairs min-

istry on the one side and the ministries of finance, including (ERD), commerce, industries and manpower on the other side. We agree that for target-oriented economic performance by our overseas missions, the planning commission has to be brought into some kind of a relationship with Segun Bagicha. Slightly in a different category of coordination falls perhaps the foreign ministry's contact with the home ministry as far as the recognition of the sensitivity abroad of the human rights issue goes. Needless to say, since we have defence and information wings to our missions abroad and that our students study overseas, with not as many from foreign countries studying here though, the foreign office remains in some touch with the defence, information and education ministries. This nursery book-type elaboration of where the foreign ministry ought to draw its strength from has the purpose of urging a closer inter-ministerial cooperation to do the extra mile. Obviously all this can not be ensured merely for the asking or by snorting exhortative utterances from time to time. Ways have to be devised through what we believe to be a series of colloquia, preferably

held at the behest of the ministry of foreign affairs and on themes carefully chosen with an eye to the inputs required to embellish the foreign policy performance. Such discussions with select political leaders from both sides, senior journalists, academics and foreign policy or strategy experts could freshen things up considerably. The foreign ministry should be heard on what they expect to be the gist to the mill of a better performance by them. What an ambassadorial role the World Cup cricket victory by Sri Lanka has played by a single stroke for that deeply trouble-torn country. Our sports and culture ministry can take a leaf out of Colombo's book and do the needful in areas where we have plus points. Even in countries where parliament is the principal forum for discussion on foreign affairs or strategic issues, symposia on these are held more or less at regular intervals. It is important to realise in our context that a parliament without the mainstream opposition is an inadequacy that is bound to be short-lived if democracy is to stay here. So it is a question of building a bipartisan attitude from the scratch through public debates and call-up polls on foreign policy directions that needs to be addressed as a precursor of good things to come.



1971: Shahid Minar

Why I Fought in 1971

Habibul Alam, Bir Pratik

OUT of the ashes of the 1952 language movement, most probably, was born the war of liberation in 1971. This may sound quite different from what we may have been reading or for that matter hearing. However, for an individual with no real political background like myself, it was my regular attendance in the 21st February congregations, which gave birth to the awareness that later made me join the liberation war. It could be that I am a bit confused now, nevertheless it seems proper to say that what lent wings to my decision of joining the liberation movement in April '71, was definitely my passion and practice of attending the commemorative programmes of February 21. What really paved the way for my joining the war was the speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on March 7, 1971 and subsequently the on-air announcement of Major Ziaur Rahman on March 27, 1971. Looking back, I consider the act of joining the liberation

war along with four other friends in Dhaka University as a rare privilege bestowed on me by the rare Almighty. There thousands and millions who could not join the freedom fighters in the battle fields were and there I was one of those really proud and privileged class fighting for the freedom of the motherland. Liberation war comes once in a nation's life. How could we miss it and nobody in Bangladesh missed it. As a flaming youth of 21, it was not at all surprising to be guided by dreams. But we were surprised to enjoy the privilege & delight of mixing and sharing life with people of the same age group. Urban and rural thinking was tuned to the same wave length. The valour shown by our rural brothers on the battlefields was remarkable. In fact freedom fighters from the villages fought more bravely than almost all their

urban peers. While explaining why I joined the liberation war, I feel that it would have not been possible in any way to sit idle when the lives of so many people were at stake. What could be more worthy than taking revenge on the Pakistanis? I could see and smell 'the holocaust created by the army junta once the curfew was lifted for few hours on March 27, 1971. One could very clearly see how the innocent people started to move out of burnt, battered and ghostly cities to nearby villages. I had no idea whether we would survive this scare. It seemed to me that premature death was the destiny of the every able-bodied youth and man of Dhaka city. Being the only son in a family of five I had to make up my mind whether to stay back and

see what others are doing or to join my brothers and friends who have decided to fight for a right cause. During my student life I was involved with the scout movement and junior cadet corps, which gave me the courage to take the decision of joining the war of liberation. Whatever I learnt during my scout days gave me positive advantages over those who were with me in the Motinagar camp. My first objective was to join the liberation movement and take revenge on the Pakistani army, who abused our families and generations to no limit as well as to expose the myth of the superiority complex of the Pakistani army and unmask them to show their real faces to those who were in doubt about the liberation war and the existence of the free-

dom fighters. Secondly, I wanted to fight hand in hand with our brave soldiers as they were trying their utmost to secure our existence: to fight until the Pakistanis surrender to our people and make the world realise what those animals with the support of some of the western countries have done to the innocent Bangladeshis; and also to show the world what the people of Bangladesh can do. The most significant incident over took place my joining when one of my friend Ali Ahmed Ziauddin came to my house during the first week of April 1971. It was evening when he arrived and said, he had just returned from a place called Motinagar. It is the place where our 4th East Bengal Regiment was trying to reorganise and reactivate the fight against the barbarous Pakistani army under the lead-

ership of Major Khaled Musharraf. Major Khaled was being assisted by some brave officers amongst them was Capt A T M Hyder, an ex-SSG of the then Pakistan army and he would be in-charge of the guerrilla warfare for this sector. Major Khaled and Capt. Hyder sent requests to all the college and university students to come and join them as practically no university students had joined the liberation war until then. Hearing this news from Zia I felt a shivering sensation in my body as for the first time I had been told by someone that there existed a Bangladesh Force to defend us. I decided to go along with Zia and seal my fate to a place where fate itself was an unknown entity. Now in the mid forties and I cherish the days gone by and have no regret at all. What could be a better gift by my country to me than keeping me alive during the nine months of liberation war? The writer is a freedom fighter

Pages from My Diary

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politicians play. It seems that we should better observe this day as the day of national failure!

26 March 1969, Sunday

DHAKA: How fast time passes. It seems just the other day when the independence of Bangladesh was first declared. The War of Liberation is almost like a story to the youth of today. My only son was born in free Bangladesh. I really don't understand what the Liberation War was all about. Didn't you fight for the creation of Pakistan only a few years prior to that? he said one day. I was ashamed and embarrassed. Perhaps, it was my fault as well as the fault of our system of education. Yet, in a manner, he spoke for many of his generation. Why the War of Independence? What price the nation had to pay for it? What we received in return? They know so little about all these.

Sometime I feel that we are a strange people. Strange are our rulers, leaders and political masters — otherwise they would not time and again try to induce collective amnesia among the masses. There was this feature on the TV this evening on independence struggle of Bangladesh. There was lot of old picture of 1969 and 1971. But Sheikh Mujib was shown only once very fleetingly — and that was a single shot from the back during his 7th March speech!

26 March 1991, Tuesday

DHAKA: We completed two decades of independence. Yet somehow we have not yet been able to work out how we should rule ourselves, how the country should be governed and how we can best choose the right persons to manage the business of government. Meanwhile, two presidents have been assassinated, one forcibly removed and another forced to resign by popular uprising. Perhaps after the recent elections, the cycle of violence and era of uncertainty will finally end. Last week, a new cabinet has been formed. The country expects so much from the new rulers. This was, by all accounts, first ever free and fair election in Bangladesh that put them in power. Their task will not be easy. There are so many problems — economic, social and political. But one of our great advantages over most governments of the past — unquestioned legitimacy. I wish them all success on this Independence Day.

Independence Day 1996

WHENEVER I meet anyone — friends, relations, even casual acquaintances — there is only one question — 'What is going to happen? What will things get back to normal? How the present impasse is going to be resolved?' Perhaps they think here is an old man who has seen much and he should, with his experience, be able to come up with some answer. I have to disappoint them and say, 'I don't know.' The whole country is engulfed in a miasma of frustration, disillusionment and mistrust. Corruption and violence has become endemic. Almost every ordinary citizen is going through unrelieved anxiety — not only about livelihood but also the safety of the very life and limbs. Till now, there is no glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. Commercial and industrial activities have virtually ceased.

The Labyrinth of Politics

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mental human rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person shall be guaranteed.... and from which the omitted words have since been restored; and in which effective participation by the people through their elected representatives in administration at all levels shall be ensured.' Begum Zia's constitutionalism has presented us with a Sangsad of abortive birth and the nation is being urged to rejoice over an event which has brought shame and disgrace to the government who planned the election and to the Election Commission that allowed this mockery of an election to take place. The recent elections have turned out to be a pyrrhic victory for Begum Zia. The cost in terms of life and money has been too high and the end result? Confusion worse confounded, an alienated people, and economic life thrown completely out of gear. Politics have earned a bad name and politicians as a class an obloquy which it will take years to eradicate. Damage done to the country appears to be total, all-embracing, and much of the good work done, not by the government but in spite of the government by individuals and groups have come to naught. The whole political process that has landed the country in this turmoil has come to be regarded by many as something totally irrelevant and meaningless.

The people are freed in their demand for a free and fair election under the auspices of a caretaker government and, as a precondition to that, the immediate cancellation of the results of the election of February 15. The sooner Begum Zia and her men accede to this demand, the better for her and for the nation. The nation has chosen its path of salvation and if some people have put blinkers on their eyes they can only prolong the nation's agony but cannot avert the destiny that awaits them.

Food production is facing a disaster for want of fertilizer and irrigation facilities. Most development work have come to a stop. Economy and government finance are fast approaching a collapse. The machinery of government is in a state of near atrophy. Worst of all, the overriding political issues which led to the unprecedented confrontation between the government of the day and the opposition are no nearer to solution than they were two years back. Indeed the conflict has reached an unprecedented pitch and intensity. The country is being torn apart.

Wiser individuals may be able to do it, but I can't even make a tentative guess on what will happen to the country tomorrow, next week, next month or even next year. Still I remain cautiously optimistic regarding the medium-term and unreservedly so about the long time future of my country. However despairing and bleak the situation may look of the eve of the completion of the quarter century of independence, I am confident that will take place in a truly happy Bangladesh. Even then it will be far from the richest or militarily most powerful country in the world. But it will at par with any other country in areas that really matter — education, health, culture, human rights and good governance.

My optimism is not the product of sentimental day dreaming or wishful thinking. Time and again, in a crisis, our people have demonstrated an ability to overcome the greatest odds and to keep going. Since its independence the people of Bangladesh have gone through disaster after disaster — inflicted both by men and nature — and survived. Neither bad governance nor hostile nature could stop the people of Bangladesh from truly outstanding achievements in a number of important areas. In the last twentyfive years, food production has nearly doubled, population growth has been significantly reduced, female education has taken an enormous leap. Ordinary citizens are demonstrating outstanding quality of entrepreneurship, both at home and as immigrants abroad.

For all their successes, the people of Bangladesh do not owe anything to the political leadership or the bureaucratic administration or the Ivory tower intellectuals. The people survived and kept the country going on their own, and despite all those who pretend to lead them.

When my friends, articulators whose in the donor community, used to express their despair in respect of development process, I would point out to them one truly exceptional advantage Bangladesh has over most developing countries. We may be a weak country in terms of military or economic power. Yet as a nation we are stronger than most others. The amount of resources and effort most of our neighbouring countries have to invest in just trying to hold the nation together is stupendous. Our nationhood, forged in the fire in 1971, has never been in question despite the inane 'Bangalee/Bangladeshi' bickering.

And my gloom is further relieved when I think how shot a period is twentyfive years in the life of a nation. Many of the rich, powerful and successful countries of today spent at different stages of their history much longer periods in hunger, poverty and inter-ethnic strife. If they could overcome those handicaps, so shall Bangladesh. I celebrate this Independence Day of 1996 by renewing my faith in the people of Bangladesh.

Flashback to 1971 and ...

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years, again in March, the army has been called out in independent Bangladesh to restore law and order in the face of widespread non-cooperation movement in the country spearheaded by all major opposition political parties demanding cancellation of the bungled 15 February parliamentary election and a fresh election under a non-party caretaker government — by a person who was voted to power 5 years ago in the country's exemplary fair election. Quite apart from the irony of the act, the impasse cannot be resolved by attacking the symptoms, leaving the basic malaise unaddressed or trying to treat that by applying a medicine that may in fact aggravate the malaise further. But the fateful path had been chosen by not finding a solution to the political impasse before the bungled 15 February election. When the President of the Republic took an initiative following that election, I expressed the hope as an optimist in an article published in this daily that he would succeed. But I warned that if he failed, catastrophe lurked in the background. He failed; it appears — not because he was constitutionally constrained but because he had to choose to. Only the other day, the Indian President declined to sign two bills presented to him by the Indian government because, in his opinion, the bills would not be passed by the ruling party in the forthcoming Indian parliamentary elections. Democracy requires checks and balances, and honesty and courage on the part of those who have the responsibility and authority to apply those brakes when the situation so demands in the national interest.