

Victory day-1971, as witnessed by foreigners.

The 16th of December, 1971 on this day the world witnessed victory of Bangladesh, as the Pakistan Armed Forces had to surrender to the joint command of the Bangladesh and Indian Forces, although many parts of the new country were liberated before that day.

Foreigners who were in this land at that time or came here on assignment, narrated or reported their experiences in the form of letters, reports or memoirs. Looking back to those descriptions, one can share the feelings and reactions they had during the birth of a new nation after a nine-month long armed struggle.

It was not possible for most of us specially the new generation to go through all the books and documents published on the issue so far, as the volumes are too big. Considering the factor, we present here some excerpts from the articles of foreigners.

Jim McKinley, an American missionary along with his wife and four children witnessed the struggle of Bengali nation from the genocide of 25th of March to the joyful victory of 16th of December, 1971. In the midst of deep suffering of his local neighbours, experience he gathered and incidents he witnessed, everything he tried to narrate in a book entitled DEATH TO LIFE: BANGLADESH, published by Immanuel Baptist Church, Dhaka in 1979.

Mr McKinley was in Dhaka in late 1971. He wrote: 'On the early morning of December 16th, I climbed the steps leading to the flat roof of the Guest House (15 Christian families took shelter here at the southern part of Tejgaon Airport). Only one Indian plane was in the sky. The burst of shells could be heard and smoke seen in the distance, but the city was not being attacked. It seemed that this was the calm before the storm.'

'But thanks to God I was wrong. We were sitting in the death trap, but the radio news said, "General Niazi has been ordered to surrender his forces in East Pakistan." With that statement there was no more East Pakistan to anyone.'

'Suddenly, we saw... we experienced, the birth of a giant nation—the world's eighth largest in population. Bangladesh, the nation of the Bengalis was born. And we felt like one of them.'

'Within an hour time, hundreds of fully armed Pakistan soldiress came from every direction and moved north up the road by the Guest House toward the army base to surrender to the Indian Army. We had no idea that so many of them had been in hiding near us waiting for the arrival of their would be attackers.'

'The Pakistani Soldiers' heads drooped low as they dragged their feet. For thirteen days, they had been under heavy attacks from the air. Most of them had little sleep. They seemed hardly able to carry their rifles. From this problem, some of them received help as Bengali young men ran out into the streets and pulled at their rifles. Some of them handed the rifles to the Bengalis.'

Within that same hour, the Bengali and Indian soldiers poured into the city. The first main entrance into the city was from the west down the road by our Guest House. So we were in the welcoming group. The Bengalis went wild. Everywhere we looked, there were people carrying rifle, firing them wildly into the air. Some little boys had to drag theirs, for they were too heavy to carry.'

'Some young men ran past the Guest House changing clothes as they ran. We knew they were the Razakars, who had collaborated with the army. They were quickly trying to change their appearance.'

Correspondent of the Washington Post Lee Lescaze, who witnessed the preparation for surrender of Pakistan Forces and the entire situation of Dhaka city on the 16th of December, 1971 gave a vivid description in his despatch published on the following day: 'Now the Bangladesh (Bengal Nation) that they have been hoping for is born. One of Gen Naagra's aides carried a Bangladesh flag as the General stood at the airport.'

'Other Bangladesh flags are being waved in the streets by civilians who stop every passing car to shake hands and shout their happy slogans.'

'Along the sides of the streets, for the most part ignored by the crowds, soldiers and police of defeated Pakistani Government file by—still carrying their weapons—but heading for the collection points

where they are to be disarmed.

'The Surrender and Indian army arrival came suddenly, after some bleak early morning hours in which it appeared that plans to surrender had been snaggled in West Pakistan and that heavy fighting, plus waves of new air strikes, would cause serious damage and death in Dacca— The formal surrender took place at 5 p.m. local time (6 a.m. EST) on the race track in-field, with firing and shouting from surrounding areas....'

'Each bus-load of Indian soldiers is mobbed with cries of thanks, and Bangladesh flags are being pulled out from the hiding places where they have been kept since last March 25, when the Pakistani army began its brutal campaign to keep control here.'

The Sun of Baltimore published a details report on surrender on 17th of December 1971: 'At breakfast-time Major-General Gangharv Nagara, whose troops ringed Dacca, was told that the Tiger (G O C of Pak Eastern command Lt, General Amir Abdullah Khan Nizai) wanted a cease-fire. India's Eastern Command Chief of Staff, Major-General J F R Jacob, flew to Dacca from Calcutta to discuss the surrender with Niazi over lunch. Then, as dusk was falling, General Aurora (G O C of India's Eastern Command) arrived to sign the pact. Hundred of cheering Bengalis were held back by Indian troops who cordoned off the race course.'

'Aurora, a turbaned Sikh was hosted on to soldiers' shoulders by the slogan chanting crowd. Fusillades of celebration shots and cheers greeted Indian paratroops as they entered the city. The first jeeps that swept into the city were packed with burly Sikhs who were hugged and kissed. The excited crowds threw garlands of flowers-marigolds and red frangipans.'

'But, in the background, there was still the crackle of gunfire as Mukti Bahini guerrillas moped up 'collaborators' and pockets of fanatical Pakistanis who refused to surrender—'Bangladesh' flags sprouted from buildings in the city as the inhabitants came out into the open after hiding from shells, bombs and bullets for days. The mobs were chanting... Long live Bangladesh!'

James P. Sterra reported in the New York Times: 'In Dacca itself, there were spontaneous eruptions of joy and celebration in the streets. Bengalis kissed Indian Punjabi soldiers, tossing flowers at them and at the rebels (Muktibahini-Bangali soldiers) who accompanied them. Most of the soldiers looked exhausted and bleak-eyed.'

'Pictures of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who was Awami League leader until he was imprisoned in West Pakistan in March, were hoisted above cars. Bengalis surrounded them, shouting 'Joi Bangla' (Victory for Bangla) and 'Sheikh Mujib.'

Dennis Neeld wrote in the Daily Mail of London: 'Liberation day for the people of Dacca came yesterday (December 16). They were delirious with joy. Old men danced in the streets like youngsters, and everywhere the city rang with the independence cry of "Jai Bangla, Jai Bangla (Victory to Bengal)!"'

There was chaos and confusion. And there was bloodshed.

Everbody knows, British M.P. John Stonehouse had extended all possible co-operation to our liberation movement. In a statement on December 18, 1971 he said 'I think the war by the Mukti Bahini and Indian Army is a just war that we have seen since the war against Hitler. I rejoice at the success that has been achieved.'

John Stonehouse came to

Bangladesh just after two days of the victory day on December 19 to participate in celebration. But during the much-awaited visit he took share of our grief and shock as the Pakistani troops and their collaborators like Al Badar, Al Shams and Razakars carried out a planned programme of killing of Bangalee intellectuals and top professionals on 14th and 15th of December. The British Labour party M P in an interview with the Hindustan Times, New Delhi said, 'Ten senior Pakistani army officers were responsible for organising the recent murders of a large number of people, especially intellectuals in Dacca'. Declining to name the officers he said, 'they were the ranks of Major-General, Brigadier, Colonel and captain.'

Mr Chand Joshi, correspondent of the Hindustan Times in a despatch from Dhaka after the victory day wrote, 'the Bangladesh authorities have recovered a list of nearly 5,000 people in Dacca city alone from the occupation forces. These persons were to be annihilated' the list included practically every single intellectual in the city. Liberation' came before 'operation liquidation' came into full effect. Only Allah knows what would have happened if they had gone through their full programme. Even now, practically every single family has lost somebody or something.'

'Today, I see a crowd in front of Government offices and police stations, and people asking for a brother, sister, father-in-law or somebody who had been away. They know what the answer will be in all probability, but there is, still the lingering hope.'

Sydney H. Schanberg, a journalist of the New York Times along with a large number of correspondents and TV newscrew came to Jessore, the first district headquarters liberated on 7th of December, 1971. In a despatch he narrated the celebration as follows: 'The Bengalis danced on the roofs of buses. They shouted independence slogans in the streets. They embraced, they cheered, they reached out in spontaneous emotion to clasp the hands of visitors from other lands.'

'For Bengalis, today (December 8) was 'liberation day' in Jessore—the strategic city in East Pakistan that, for eight months until yesterday (December-7) had been under the control of West Pakistani troops, who had come last spring to put down the Bengali rebellion.'

Correspondents of the SUN of Baltimore, The Evening Star of Washington also reported similar events of jubilation of Bangalee people. Describing the celebration of December 7, 1971, the Evening Star wrote: 'At one point along the road between Jessore and Khulna, the Bengalis danced around the bodies of a dozen slain Pakistani soldiers and shouted "Hail Bangla" for the benefit of foreign television cameras. None of them ever has seen TV. They do not even have electricity.'

Glimpses of the events of joy and sorrow of the nation on the victory day as seen by some foreigners we presented here quoting published documents are not enough to realize the day's total picture. We hope amid the celebration of our glorious victory day today this sketchy feature will drive us to go down to memory lane sometime because still we see skulls and remains of our disappeared brothers sister and others dearest relations are being unearthed from various parts of Bangladesh.

Compiled by: Mahbul Alam

Sources: 1. Death to Life: Bangladesh. 2. Bangladesh Documents, Vol-II, The University press Ltd. Dhaka 1999.

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creating a new state i.e. Bangladesh, in South Asia. Second, it proved wrong the militarist theories that it is the strength of the weapon that determines winners and losses in war. In 1971 the Pakistanis had the most sophisticated and advanced military hardware and weapons in their arsenal. But those did not ensue their victory against the unsuspecting Bengalis. Rather it brought to them the most ignominious defeat in the hands of the

Victory Day : Achievement and Expectation

Bengali Freedom Fighters known as Mukti Bahini. The image of invincibility could not save 96,000 Pakistani soldiers from surrendering to the joint command of the Mukti Bahini and the Indian army on this day. Third, it once again proved that democracy has an inner force which is many times powerful than any other mechanical force.

The strength that the Bengalis had in 1971 was that of

the historic victory of the Awami League in the December 1970 elections in which the Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had won 167 of the 300 seats in Pakistan's parliament thereby establishing the democratic right of the Awami League to form the government. When the Pakistani demons imposed war on us, we won because we had the democratic results of the

election in our favour. Fourth, it brought to the front the hallowness of the two nation theory based on the religious faith of Muslims and Hindus of south Asia. Rather it opened the door for the peoples of the sub-continent to reconsider the basis of their mutual relationship more on the basis of linguistic nationalism than anything else. This would suggest that nations of the sub-continent may have to

redraw the map at some point in the future history.

As has been mentioned at the outset of this article, Bengalis had never been a martial nation nor did it have any remorse or contrition for not being one such. We are more apt in taking pride in our performances in the field of knowledge rather than in the field of war. There is only one violent occasion, that is the victory of Bangladesh in the war of liberation in 1971 and its culmination of 16 December through the surrender of the occupation army of Pakistan on 16 December, that fills us with joy and pride. This was the day when the Bengalis established their identity as an independent nation, we established the state of our own for the first time in history.

It is true that expectations flew high and impossible dreams were dreamt by the people, especially the Freedom Fighters, at that time. After all, the state was created on the corpses of hundreds of thousands of innocent people who had sacrificed their lives for a Bangladesh that would be different from what it had been in the past.

We those who fought in the war of Liberation, wanted to see a democratic, socialist, nationalist and secular Bangladesh that would inspire other countries of the world to follow the beaten track. We dreamt of a Bangladesh that would be free from exploitation, hunger, illiteracy, poverty, religious bigotry, fanaticism and hatred. We also wanted to see Bangladesh emerge as a leading nation in Asia in the field of rapid economic development. We also wanted to see democracy take a firm root in our society and institutionalised.

The first government under the Father of the Nation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman began to rule the country with these in view. He gave the nation a constitution which upheld Democracy, Secularism, nationalism and Socialism as the four basic principles on which the state of Bangladesh would rest.

But before the pro-liberation forces could establish full control over the machineries of the state, and the unity of the war field loosened for a while on the issue of political and economic management of the nascent state the enemies in ambush pulled the trigger on 15 August 1975.

The military the worst enemy of democracy captured power and established a de facto Pakistan in Bangladesh. A reign of terror was unleashed against the pro liberation forces while those who had tried till the last minute to save Pakistan by killing Freedom Fighters were rehabilitated in politics as ministers and party leaders. The history of the Freedom Movement had been distorted in school text books and the gallantry of the Mukti Bahini was being undermined in all possible ways. The military Generals changed the constitution and erased secularism and socialism from it. The killers of the Father of the Nation were not only awarded with prized government positions, - provisions were included in the constitution to indemnify the crime and all other anti-state activities of the military later.

Twenty one years of military and quasi-military rule finally ended in June 1996 with the victory of the Awami League in parliamentary polls. With Sheikh Hasina at the helm of the government, new hopes again dawned in. The nation began to pin its hopes on the democratic government of Sheikh Hasina. But, the enemies of democracy and the stooges of military rule would not let it happen so easily. They have joined hands in the name of the so called four party alliance which comprises former dictators, terrorists, Islamic fundamentalists and political opportunists of all hues. They are out to grab power in whatever way they can. With this in view they are calling industrial strikes, business lockouts and road-rail blockades almost on a weekly basis. They have held the nation hostage to meet their undemocratic political end. They do not want to wait till the next parliament election due early 2001, because they know they do not have a chance of winning in the polls, the peace and democracy loving people of Bangladesh will reject them. That is why they want it the way the Generals did it in the past. Unfortunately for them, that is not going to happen this time around. They must face the polls or be efaced from the political scenario of Bangladesh. There is no middle course left for them. ■



Officers of Pak Forces surrender their arms, 16 December, 1971, Dhaka

1971 And After: Perspectives of The War

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would take away its very reason for being. The only plausible course therefore was following a new road map, one that would take the Bengali population of Pakistan on to newer and higher political ground. The Six Points were thus the initial salvoes in a war against negativism, the first tentative steps towards the building of a new ethos.

The rise of the Bengali state in 1971, given the circumstances attendant on its birth, was a manifestation of a clear demarcation between right and wrong, white and black, liberalism and parochialism and, in broad measure, between good and evil. The right consisted in the country asserting its resolve to be free in the face of the wrong that came to be symbolised by the systematic attempts of the Pakistanis to hold on to iniquity, to the spectre of injustice across the land. The white was simply the expression of the desire for democratic governance, and it clashed repeatedly with the blackness that was Pakistan's repeated collapse into autocracy and dictatorship. Bengali liberalism, encompassing as it did the traditions of literature and religious mysticism, was a necessary assault on the citadels of fanaticism represented by the entrenched military-civilian-political combine in Pakistan. The nine months of the war in 1971 brought into sharp focus these realities for the people of the country.

The underlying theme of the struggle for Bangladesh in the years of the crusade against the communal dispensation in place between the late forties and early seventies was one of a triumph of good over evil. And evil was everywhere. The state had shifted away from the people it

was supposed to provide security to; and elitism had for long destroyed all concepts of decency in Pakistan. The economic subjugation of Bangladesh in the years it formed the eastern region of Pakistan remains a moot lesson in history. The genocide carried out by the Pakistan army in 1971 will for all time remain embedded in the conscience as a supreme manifestation of evil. That was why Pakistan needed to be struck down in Bangladesh. The surrender of ninety three thousand Pakistani soldiers in Bangladesh on a winter's day was something more than the humiliation of an oppressive state. It was also a resolute crushing of evil. Within Bangladesh, the banishment of the local collaborators of the occupying forces was to serve as a reminder to people that men and women who are willing to betray the cause of the mother country are undeserving of national sympathy. To that extent, the struggle in 1971 was a battle against the enemy within.

The Bangladesh cause remains to be carried to its totality of spirit. There are good enough reasons for that. The operation of a secular Bangladesh lasted a mere three and a half years before Pakistanisation set in with the assassination of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in 1975. That and the murder of his trusted lieutenants later that year yanked the country away from its political and cultural moorings. The age of darkness was to last twenty one years. And in that time, the country was coerced into watching the spectacle of two military dictators taking it by the scruff of the neck, into standing helplessly as former

henchmen of the old Pakistan army crept back into politics and power and proceeded to violate the dignity of the land. In the twenty one years between 1975 and 1996, the nation's self-esteem lay in tatters as assassins stalked the land in the garb of 'politicians' and 'diplomats'. The concept of Bengali nationalism took a battering at the hands of men of insidious intent. In short, Bangladesh scamped in the dark, a fugitive from itself, in the bad years when bad men pressed down on its life force.

The battle against evil, against the negation of decency, goes on despite the brief period in time, over the last few years, in which secular government, one dedicated to the great principles of 1971, has operated. The barriers to civility put up by the elements uncomfortable with a liberal democratic Bangladesh are yet there; and the forces which built those barriers have gone on making a mess and a mockery of life since their defeat three and a half years ago. In 1971, the war was one of beating the nefarious entities polluting the river taking us to our destiny on the high seas into silence. That war is yet being waged — to preserve the clear purity of our lakes and streams, to revive the old music in our tormented souls, to give the country back to the people who fought long and hard to make it free. The war, if you remember, claimed the lives of three million of our fellow beings. It destroyed the dreams sparkling in the astral eyes of our beautiful women. It is one great reason why we cannot afford to let the country slide again, into the grasp of the hollow men consorting today with the cadaverous beings who once made a bonfire of the land. The war goes on. It has to. ■

last victory

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suppressed truths of our war of liberation. Officially, the party in power maintained its earlier line—therefore the same attempts to distort history, deny Bangabandhu and the common masses any place in the liberation war and magnify Ziaur Rahman's role persisted. However, the print media took up the battle on behalf of history. The newspaper reached the truth to hundreds of thousands of readers everyday, and hundreds of books began to be written on the war—many by "the participants themselves—so that the official attempts to distort and suppress history not only appeared ludicrous, but were questioned. While the party has not yet given up its official stand on the liberation war, its stalwarts have begun to realize that people are now more aware than their leaders, and they will not accept any lies or half-truths. Indeed, there has been a welcome realization in some quarters that history should not be tempered with. A member of parliament from the opposition who is also a former first lady recently spoke out against suppression of facts. No one should be denied their place in history, she said.

This is precisely the point that this article is attempting to make. As we prepare ourselves to celebrate the last victory day of the millennium (a symbolism that has its own value, whether we care for it or not), we must leave behind the accumulated luggage of mutual hatred, intolerance, lies, deceptions, murderous intentions, inordinate and often extra-legal ambitions. Political antagonism in our country often leads to violence and killing, but democracy demands respect, and tolerance. If democracy has to survive, there should be a paradigm shift: old habits, old attitudes that stifle growth and stand in the way to progress should go. Truth should be embraced, even if it proves unpalatable in the short run. A nation cannot stand on foundations that are constantly shaken by dissonance and disquiet; it cannot progress if its landmarks are disfigured and faked by dealers in lies and deception.

The victory day will lose much of its meaning and symbolism if its prior history is blurred and forgotten, and is replaced by a concocted one. As I see it, liberation war historiography suffers from three basic lacks: it has been subjected to a great deal of mutations and changes; it is still largely an oral record, not properly substantiated by painstaking research; and it still ignores the subalterns and their local resistances and involvements. These lacks should be adequately addressed if history has to be comprehensive and beyond all controversies. Efforts are already under way to correct the distortions, but these should be done carefully, so that new distortions don't creep in. As Hasan Hafizur Rahman, the poet and editor of the 15 volume liberation war documents said, writing history is like reaping a fallow land for crops: every inch of the land has to be prepared with painstaking labour, every step of the process has to be meticulously followed. There cannot be any shortcuts or deceptions. The reward of the hardworking peasant is a rich harvest.

As a nation we can only claim respect and attention from other nations if we show respect to each other; they will count us in only if we count each other, and give recognition where recognition is due. There will be differences of opinions and approaches, perceptions and visions—indeed, these are the signs of a robust democracy—but there cannot be differences of opinion about facts of history and the basic principles that guide a nation. The last victory day of the millennium calls for a national consensus in this regard, and we shall only ignore the call at our own peril. ■



Rejoice of Victory, 16 December 1971, Dhaka