

'I would rather die than sign any false statement'

Sufia Kamal, one of the leading poets and pioneer in establishing women's rights in Bangladesh, was confined to her residence in Dhanmondi during the whole nine months of Bangladesh's liberation war in 1971.

When the news of the 'killings' of Sufia Kamal and Dr Nilima Ibrahim by Pak Army after the crack down on March 25, 1971 was broadcast on Akashbani, a radio station of the Indian state West Bengal, it drew criticism internationally and countries across the world put diplomatic pressure on the then Pakistani military government for clarification. The Pakistani government was forced to broadcast an interview of the poet on radio only to prove that Sufia Kamal was still alive.

In an interview with now defunct 'Weekly Bichitra' on December 7, 1991, Sufia Kamal recalled her memories of 1971. We publish excerpts of that interview taken by Selim Omrao Khan.

Bichitra: How did you pass the nine months of house arrest during liberation war?

Sufia Kamal: I was confined in my house during the whole liberation war. Nobody was able to come to my house on 26, 27, 28th March due to military presence in front of my house. One night Pakistani army came to the residence of Wing Commander Hamidullah, which was close to my house.

Immediately after I heard that Pakistani army arrested Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and seized the belongings of his house.

At the beginning of April, I heard liberation war had started. I tried to gather news about the war in many ways. Pakistani army kept strong watch on my house by setting up a permanent camp in front of it. Everybody used to visit my house through the back door. Pakistani army started arresting people from the month of April. An unknown silence gripped the whole Dhaka city. Borhan Uddin Khan Jahangir, now a professor of Dhaka University, came to my house through back door. He told me, "They (army) are torturing the women. Where can we keep them?" Though I couldn't go out but we tried to make arrangements to keep some girls in a safer place.

In May, Shahadat Chowdhury, now editor of the 'Weekly Bichitra', Jewel and Rumi came to my house. Rumi used to call me mother. He hugged me and said, "Ma, I will go to the war." I told Rumi's mother Jahanara Imam that his son wanted to join the war. She replied, "Since he wants to, let him go."

In the month of May, many families around my house left Dhaka in search of a safer place. They gave me their ration cards and I collected food from shops with those cards. Prof. Giasuddin and Shahidullah Kaiser would come to my house through the

back door and take those food for the freedom fighters.

Pakistani army continued their atrocities in the month of June. I made an arrangement to send Lulu and Tulu, my two daughters, to Agartala. I was not getting any information about them. One evening, a rickshaw puller came to my house and gave me a small letter. It said, "They have safely crossed the border". I was relieved.

I started going out from July. I would go to the hospital with food and medicine for the injured people. At that time there was an acute crisis of food and medicine in the hospital. I used to give those food and medicine to certain rickshaw pullers at Science Laboratory. They would take the food and medicine to the freedom fighters.

I was able to establish closer contact with the freedom fighters in August. As Pakistani army kept their strong watch on me, I would try to help the freedom fighters in different ways ignoring the risks.

Many freedom fighters were caught in the hand of Pakistani army in August. They arrested Shaheed Altaf Mahmud and some of his relative and artist Abul Barak Alvi. Shafi Imam Rumi, Masud Sadek Chuliu and Jewel were also arrested. After four days Alvi was released from concentration camp and came to my house. He had marks of atrocious tortures all over his body. I became emotional and hugged Alvi tightly. But Altaf Mahmud,



Jewel and Rumi never came back.

The rest of the three months I heard only the news of freedom fighters taking control of many parts. I spent the whole October in anxiety.

In the month of November we came to know that Al-Badar and Razakars were killing many people. Pakistani army increased their vigilance on my house. On November 15, I heard a sad news

getting freedom at the cost of blood shed by so many people. On December 13, freedom fighters began to gather at my residence.

On December 15 Pakistani forces fled from many parts of the city and took shelter inside the cantonment. Pakistani army encircled the house of Shiekh Mujibur Rahman till the morning of December 16.

I began going out from July. I would go to the hospital with food and medicine for the injured people. At that time there was an acute crisis of food and medicine in the hospital. I used to give those food and medicine to certain rickshaw pullers at Science Laboratory. They would take the food and medicine to the freedom fighters.

On December 16, Dr. Dora was shot dead while passing a house of Dhanmondi where Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana and Mujib's wife Fazilatunnesa were kept under house arrest for the nine months. I rushed to her house after hearing the news. After few hours we received information that Pakistani occupation forces would surrender at the then Racecourse Maidan at 3 pm. I was filled with emotions. Thousands of people took to the streets after hearing the news. Freedom fighters shot blank shots in the sky to celebrate the freedom.

What was the most memorable event in those months?

Sufia Kamal: On December 7, Shahidullah Kaiser came to my house. I asked him to leave immediately because there were rumours that Pakistani military was killing the intellectuals in Dhaka. They had prepared a list of intellectuals and other important persons. Shahidullah Kaiser said, "I would not leave Dhaka. If I leave Dhaka then who would work?" At that time Dr. Fazle Rabbi told me over the phone, "I heard that the Pakistani army will kill us and your name is also that list. Why are you not leaving Dhaka?" At that time Dhaka was a city of rumours. After few days I heard that many of my acquaintances were missing. I heard that Pakistani army and their collaborators picked up many noted persons including Shahidullah

Kaiser, Munir Chowdhury and Dr. Fazle Rabbi from their houses. They cautioned me to leave Dhaka but they themselves did not leave and got caught. They proved their patriotism to their motherland by sacrificing their lives. All of them helped the freedom fighters during the liberation war in different ways by taking risks. And that's why they became the target of Pakistani army.

Bichitra: "In 1971 no massacre took place in Bangladesh." Some intellectuals in Dhaka signed a statement of the then laheya government which contained the above title. How did you refrain from signing the statement?

Sufia Kamal: I could never sign a statement which was not true. Zillur Rahman, the then regional director of Radio East Pakistan, came to my house and forwarded a paper to me to sign. I got angry after reading the paper. I refused to sign it because it said that the Pakistani army committed no crime in the then East Pakistan. I got furious with Zillur Rahman and asked him how I could expect me to sign something which was a lie. Zillur Rahman became angry too and said, "If you don't give your signature then it might create a problem both for you and your son-in-law Kahar Chowdhury." I told him that I didn't care for my life. I said, "I would rather die than put my signature on the a false statement."

Translated by Akbar Husain

A terrifying victory day

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

AFTER an anxious and sleepless night I woke up from my bed on the early hours of the day, the 16th of December 1971. I stood on the balcony of my ancestral home and looked through the East and West ends of the street known as Central Road, as far as the eye could see. It was now about 6 in the morning. The street was deserted and looked as though tired and weary. I tuned on the Radio Pakistan, as usual it continued with its broadcast of verses from the holy Quran since the last 48 eight hours or so. I came downstairs and began to stroll anxiously up and down the front porch of our house. The voice of my brother (late) Shaheed Munier Chowdhury was still ringing in my ears.

"Shamsher, after all this, if we are unable to gain our independence it is better to die". What an irony of fate he was kidnapped from this very house around midday on the 14th of December 1971 never to be found to this day. We are here and he is gone. There were sounds of pistol shots every now and then.

Suddenly I was rudely jolted by a loud call "Shamsher Bhai, Joi Bangla", it was 9.15 in the morning. As I rushed to the balcony I kept wondering as to who could it be! Lo and behold to my utter surprise it was Captain Nasser Bari of the Pak Army, standing in an open Jeep. As soon he saw me on the balcony, he shouted again at the top of his voice, "Shamsher Bhai, Joi Bangla".

I met Captain Nasser Bari quite accidentally sometime during early May/June, while I was working at the then Pakistan SEATO Research Cholera Lab. Capt Bari was a member of the Pakistan Army's Corps of Signals, looking after telecommunication systems of the whole of East Pakistan. He was all along a great help and we developed a liking for each other. During our frequent conversations right through the start of the war, to my pleasant surprise, I found out that he was a strong advocate of the cause of the Bangalees of the then East Pakistan. Capt. Bari came to our house imme-

diately after transmitting the official "message of surrender" at 0900 Hrs to the Indian Army High Command from Hotel Intercontinental then declared as "neutral zone" by ICRC.

I was yet to come near his jeep, when suddenly from nowhere a group of young boys surrounded the vehicle with all sorts of firearms shooting in the air and shouting at the top of their voice "Joi Bangla." Hardly ten minutes had passed when I was confronted with another dilemma. This time the crowd had swelled to nearly 50. In a frenzy, they began to shout, "Let us kill this Pakistani bastard and also take this Dalal with us". Barefooted and dressed in a Lungi and a T-shirt I was sweating on a winter day like this.

My friend by now got into the act and was in the process of, delivering a lecture on the heroic people of Bangladesh and their great exploits against the coward Pak soldiers. I clearly remember some of his deliberations, he said in broken Bangla "You are a heroic people. I salute all of you. I am here to congratulate my brother Shamsher and the most illustrious family of your nation. Surely you cannot kill an unarmed helpless man standing in front of you?"

Extremely nervous and thinking of the impending fearful consequences I too joined Captain Bari. In the midst of this turmoil I heard a voice calling my name, "Shamsher Bhai what is happening?" This was a young man of the locality who new my family well. Pushing the crowd aside he came near the Jeep and whispered into my ears, "Please quickly ask your friend to move away and disappear, the crowd is growing restive and may go out of control at any time". He then in a commanding tone asked the gun toting young and angry boys to make way for the Jeep. As the vehicle and Capt Bari began to move away slowly, I followed the vehicle, with the unruly mob shouting, dancing, firing shots in the air in ecstasy and in euphoria that I have never experienced before. The vehicle was now approaching the Hairpool. Soon Capt Bari disappeared over the bridge. I had a big sigh of relief but

only to be short lived.

It was now time for the most dreaded and the longest "journey" of my life, crossing over a distance of mere 6 to 8 hundred yards, which lay between my residence and I. As I began to move, each step of the way, the gun toting band of young boys were following me, calling names and threatening to kill me, after all I was to them nothing but a Pakistani Dalal. In this way, in perpetual fear of death at any moment, I finally arrived at the doorstep of my residence, covering the distance in 30 agonizing minutes, which normally takes between 5 and 7 minutes.

Epilogue

I bear no grudge against anybody to this day. Our entire nation is plunged into extreme turmoil and conflicts of all dimensions. There are still others whose families had undergone far more tragedies leading up to our Independence and Victory Day. As I look back to that "dreadful day", I also think of those teeming millions who continue to live in anguish and extreme poverty. The fear factor from their lives may have gone, but the uncertainties of their existence continue.

It is indeed sad that at a time like this we are indulging ourselves in such political games of "identifying and issuing certificates" to what the management calls "genuine Mukti-jodhas," etc. As a nation we already stand bitterly divided. Let us not divide it any further into pockets of conflicts. There are various other ways we could honour our valiant fighters without such deliberate fanfare. As it is we are engaged in the bitter struggle of establishing political supremacy over one another. We are engaged in the race for money making at "any cost". We are busy more than ever before in establishing our values social, moral and ethical based on the size of cars or houses we own. The comparatively affluent section of our society along with the relatively more conscious section of the civil society must behave and act more responsibly and sensibly. Then and then only we may be able to carve out a sustainable future for our people at large.

Could war have been averted?

ARNOLD ZEITLIN who was The Associated Press bureau chief in Pakistan when he covered events leading to the creation of Bangladesh in 1969 till 1972 gives us accounts of political manoeuvrings that in his opinion could have averted the bloody war between East and West Pakistan.

WEEKS before the conflict between East Pakistan and West Pakistan that became a liberation war in March 1971, I was the unwitting witness to a precious, fleeting moment that might have averted the bloodshed in which Bangladesh was born.

The story started for me on February 13, 1971 in Rawalpindi, the morning after Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the triumphant leader in the west of the Pakistan People's Party, met the country's military dictator, President Yahya Khan. The evening before and after meeting Bhutto, Yahya had announced that the National Assembly would meet on March 3 in Dhaka to begin the process of forming a civilian government following the 1970 election.

That morning I met Bhutto at the Rawalpindi airport just before he flew to Peshawar. Bhutto moodily refused to discuss the presidential announcement. He appeared annoyed, although friendly. He suggested I meet him in Peshawar for a talk, then flew off. I had not planned to be in Peshawar but I drove that same day from Rawalpindi along the Grand Trunk to the home of Mohammed Hayat Khan Sherpao, the Frontier PPP leader, where Bhutto was staying. Bhutto was making the rounds. He didn't roll into the Sherpao house until midnight, tipsy from a day of politicking and drinking. Because the time was late, I suggested I return the next morning. No, Bhutto insisted, "Come upstairs."

Fondling a whiskey, he flopped in his double-breasted suit on the

bed. While his valet massaged his fully-clothed limbs, he said:

"My party and I will not attend the opening of the National Assembly."

This statement, it occurred to me, was the beginning of the end of undivided political Pakistan. If there had been doubts about confrontation with the Bengalis in the east, the course of the colli-

Bhutto lay back on the bed. He said he was sure his party would not attend unless Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave way on his insistence on basing a new constitution on the Six Points. "It's good to be back in the saddle again," he said...

tion was clear.

Bhutto lay back on the bed. He said he was sure his party would not attend unless Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave way on his insistence on basing a new constitution on the Six Points.

"It's good to be back in the saddle again," he said, arching his back cat-like on the bed. He said he wasn't sure when or how he would make a public announcement.

He said he would attend as soon as Mujib sent him a signal of accommodation.

What sign? "I have been considering," he volunteered, "a scheme for two prime ministers."

The time was 2 a.m. I went off to write a story. Bhutto left at 8 a.m. to visit nearby Charsadda where he told Khan Abdul Wali Khan, the National Awami Party leader, of his decision.

Wali later recalled, "I remember Bhutto said that it had been arranged with the 'powers that are' that in East Pakistan Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would rule, and in West Pakistan, Mr. Bhutto would be the Prime Minister."

In a statement read over Pakistan radio at 12.05 p.m. March 1, Yahya called off the start of the National Assembly.



Dhaka went wild. Two days later, a crowd eager to hear Mujib utter the word "independence," gathered on Paltan Maidan.

Instead, Mujib shouted across Paltan Maidan to Bhutto in the west in a remark little noticed at the time: "If you do not want to frame one constitution, let us frame our constitution and you frame your own. Then let us see if we can live together as brothers."

Responding to a telephone call to my room at the Purbani Hotel, I visited Sheikh the next day at Road No. 32. The house was uncommonly quiet and empty at midday.

I entered through the kitchen and waited in the dark, tiny dining room.

Behind a curtain in the front room, Sheikh met with several colleagues. One was Dr. Kamal Hossain, who sat with me. He asked about Bhutto's two prime ministers.

They had heard about it, he said, on February 14, Valentine's Day.

I then was ushered in to see Sheikh. Many times I had been in that front room with its mouse brown chair coverings and the photographs of Suhrawardy and Tagore. It always had been crowded with people listening or contributing their own wisdom to whatever ongoing conversation.

This time was different. Sheikh was alone, curled in the brown

said Haq.

I asked to talk directly to Sheikh.

"This will hurt me in Karachi," he complained. "It was not correct."

Of course, it was correct, I reminded him. He had told me to tell Bhutto, "Well," he said, "you misunderstood."

I told him I would try to hold back the story but if it had gone to London, no way could I explain to my office why it should not run. It was correct.

I returned to the cable office. The office was on strike. I returned to tell Sheikh he was now the only person in Dhaka who could get into the cable office. And the story had gone.

The next day, the story was broadcast on All India Radio. Sheikh denied it, but in a nice way. He denied the All India Radio story, not the Arnold Zeitlin-Associated Press story. Otherwise, I would have been a marked man in Dhaka.

That seemed to be the last moment of agreement between Sheikh and Bhutto.

Later that month, there was talk of two committees to concoct east and west constitutions, but all the talk ended in the killings on the night of March 25.

Rafi Raza, one of Bhutto's deputies in Dhaka that March, later wrote in a book that Mujib had offered the committees as a possible solution. I told Rafi about my February conversation with a tipsy, ebullient Bhutto and his two prime ministers.

"He never mentioned that to me," said Rafi, shaking his head.

That was the end. Bhutto and Mujib realized better than most politicians in this frantic days what had to be done to save lives: politically, in some way, separate East and West Pakistan. In fact, that was what the people of Pakistan voted in the 1970 election.

The two leaders could not act together, they could not sell the idea to the army and to other West Pakistani politicians. So it died. And so in the ensuing months until December 16, 1971, did hundreds of thousands of Bengalis.