

'Our past has become unprecidatable'

Major General Moin-ul Hussain Choudhury, was the Company Commander of Second East Bengal Regiment and eventually became a Battalion Commander of the same regiment that captured Akhaura from the clutches of Pakistan Army early December 1971. A valiant freedom fighter and passionate patriot, he speaks to Kaushik Sankar Das of The Daily Star.



responsible to a certain extent, but others were more responsible because they decided the destiny of the country.

DS: But you were in the armed forces when martial law took over the power and stayed there for a long time. May be you could have done something in that undemocratic, uncertain situation?

MH: What could I have done? May be carry out another coup? That was something I did not believe in. I never believed in conspiracy or unethical activities. I believed in people's participation in forming governance. And they toppled the martial law government with a popular movement in 1990. But remember all these situations arose because of lack of responsible political leadership. When a country is well managed and the constitution is truly respected, no captain, colonel, major or general can come out of the barracks and stage a coup. The vaccination against military coup is good governance.

DS: During your tenure as an ambassador, the country was under military rule. How did you cope with the situation?

MH: I admit that it was a sorry state and I had to answer a lot of questions. I represented my country under two democratic governments too. But honestly there was not much difference. The country's image in the world, I would say, was nothing much to talk about. We have had three democratic governments since the nineties, but you tell me what's the state of the country now.

DS: Why are we still trying to find true stories of the liberation was from those who were

actively involved in it?

MH: We are living in a country where our past has become unpredictable more than the future. History is being written in loose leafs; with the change of each government, new pages are being added and old ones are being taken out. To tell you honestly, I am really amazed at our immaturity, the national culture of immaturity and unpredictability. After 33 years of independence, we are still making list of freedom fighters, the number in that list is getting bigger and bigger by the years.

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During the war, I had problems recruiting new members for my regular battalion, and now you hear thousands and thousands have certificates. Yes there were organisers and passive supporters, I do not want to undermine their contributions,

but who were fighting in the fields, who took up arms, who were willing to sacrifice their lives?

Most of our recruits were farmers and young boys. You would be amazed to know that I had as young as 14 year old boys in the battalion fighting. I do not see many of them cueing up for certificates? And who are issuing these certificates? They might have legal authority, but what moral authority do they have?

Let me tell you a story. Once I received an official letter that said if I wanted to get certificate

DS: Is that the reason you do not mention the gallantry award after your name given to you for your contribution in the war?

MH: I think the gallantry awards were given indiscriminately and without much investigation. Gallantry means fighting in the battlefields. So I thought it was appropriate for me to accept it, since I fought in the battle. But I think the award was also given to people who never fired a shot in anger.

I am, not angry about it, but to me it doesn't mean anything any

who fought along with me for my own satisfaction.

DS: How do you feel about the politics surrounding the liberation war?

MH: Every year when March and December comes, we say that MuktiJuddho is our pride, the rest of the ten months it remains an ornament. We Bangladeshis love myths. There are lots of myths surrounding the liberation war. Children are being taught those myths, which may not be true, but fascinating stories. It's unfortunate that we

falsehood and lies. Truth must be known to people. The efforts should be to separate the facts from fiction.

Every political party used freedom fight and the fighters for political mileage instead of genuinely respect the sacrifice and courage of the fighters. They all tried to monopolise the war of independence. It should not have been. Many people like me fought for certain values. We fought because we thought people wanted freedom from Pakistan. Life is full of risks. I was not afraid of death, but I was afraid of my life on my knees under the Pakistanis. I revolted though I had oath of allegiance to Pakistan and its constitution. But I was more loyal to my sense of honour and dignity.

We accepted certain political leadership because they were elected representatives. But whether the political leaders have been able to uphold that pride, honour and dignity is a million dollar question.

DS: Do you see any lights of hope at the end of the tunnel?

MHC: I don't really know. I would say that the disease has spread, like cancer, to all parts of our society. We are so foolish that we behave like beggars. Give a beggar a horse, he will ride it till death. Let's not do that.

I have stopped believing what I hear from our leaders. I only believe what I see. Celebrating independence has become a ritual. But I would ask our leaders who celebrate the day to search their souls. They should ask themselves what have they done to celebrate the victory day, what have they done for the country. They should ask their conscience.

DS: How do you feel about the country as a freedom fighter after 33 years of independence?

MH: I feel I have contributed my fare share in the making of this nation. At that time victory was not a destination, it's just a beginning of a journey. But now after so many years of the freedom struggle, I have to say that the state of affairs in Bangladesh, in my opinion, is in a stage of decay and it's unfortunate that I have no option but to watch from the sidelines.

DS: May be you could have done something for the country from the position you held over the years?

MH: Well, as a government servant I couldn't do much. But I have done whatever I could with a clear conscience. If there were any errors in my judgement, it occurred not because of my dishonesty or self interest. Because to me, my country always came first. I have been loyal to it all along, wherever I served, whether in the armed forces or as an ambassador for sixteen years and various positions. At the end of the day my conscience is clear.

But after more than three

decades of independence, we have lawlessness, brutalities and developed a feeling of simply grabbing whatever we want. We are loosing all the habits of a civilised living. People of Bangladesh have been accustomed to lawless conditions for so long that they are no longer law abiding. Only gun is feared today. Terrorism, corruption, injustice, poverty, inequality and uncertainty has become a way of life for people in Bangladesh.

DS: So do you regret fighting for your country's independence?

MH: I don't regret it at all. As such. Till today it was the best phase of my entire life. I spent nine months in the battle field fighting for my country that brought me more pride, satisfaction and enjoyment than any other of my duties. I have had a lot of important assignments in my career, but nothing could ever match the days of fighting for my country. And if the need arises, I would fight again.

But the question is whether those in the leadership have failed the people of Bangladesh. I agree that like others I am also



Major Moinul Hussain Choudhury (centre), seen with Lt Colonel Shafiqullah (right), Commander of S-Force and an Indian Army Major Gulhati (left) in front of Pabna Store at Dhaka Stadium in the morning of December 17, 1971.

of a being a freedom fighter, I had to be recommended by my Thana Commander. I laughed because I myself was commander of a battalion. It was ridiculous!

more. That's why I do not use it after my name. The mere fact I arrived in Dhaka on December 16 in a uniform with my 800 troops should be enough. I got my recognition from the people

are still quarreling over this. As a nation we remain immature. We must know our past. We can only build our future based on the values and spirit of the past. But definitely not based on

Streets of Dhaka on 16 December

NILUFAR BEGUM

WHEN we heard about the offer to surrender of the Pak Army from General Manekshaw of the combined forces we were contemplating over the reaction of General Niazi to it. Our utmost concern was whether the Pakistani General would accept the offer or not. We were very much terrified over the consequence of rejecting the offer by Niazi.

As the day passed, our anxiety and restlessness increased. With the passage of every minute we became desperate to know about the latest position. The transistor and particularly the news broadcast of the foreign Radio stations were the only sources of information for us. It however did not help us much.

Three migs, obviously Indian ones flew in the morning over the sky of Dhaka. We still could not conclude about the fate of the surrender offer though the deadline for accepting it was already over. As there was no other visible sign of the surrender, anxiety turned into great apprehension. We started thinking perhaps the last battle is going to be fought very soon.

It was noon. The elders were pale and terrified. It had its repercussion on the younger lot too. This could not, however, stop their war-play. Occasionally they asked -- why the flocks of Migs don't play in the sky to-day? Why there is no sound of firing? Naturally there were very few responses to their queries.

It was about 2.30 pm, just after having lunch, all on a sudden a very known horn and engine sound surprised us. It was my elder brother who just parked his car outside the gate of our house and knocked at the

door. He was smiling, beaming with joy -- and triumphantly broke the news of victory to us. 'Don't you know Niazi has declared to surrender? Very soon he will formally surrender to Lt. Gen. Aurora at the Race Course.'

We hurriedly got into my younger brother's car and started for the Race Course.

On our way we saw a group of men assembled in the Nimtali Rail crossing and seemed to be whispering with each other. They were at first surprised to see us in a car out to move

It's that young man who was carrying the flag of new nation; who was at the head of the small procession, we saw an hour ago; who shouted 'Joy Bangla', at us and whom we saluted in respect. But the murderers were not able to snatch away the flag from his hand. Suddenly our attention was drawn to dead body lying on the other side of the road just in front of the former BNR office. We were simply thunder-struck at the sight.

around in the city. Then suddenly one or two of them greeted us with the slogan, 'Joy Bangla'. Instantaneously we all reciprocated quite vigorously, for a moment we were carried away by a sentiment of oneness and victory.

Crossing the Railway Hospital we proceeded to the direction of the then DPI office. There was hardly anyone on the street. Unexpectedly we saw a small procession of ten to fifteen men at best in the corner of the old High Court building. A few kids were also among them. They were carrying triumphantly the new flag of the newly born country. We waved at them and they replied in chorus with thundering slogan 'Joy Bangla'.

When we reached near the

Engineers' Institute, we were stopped suddenly by the soldiers in a truck. They forbade us to proceed further. We could not exactly recognise them to which side they belonged. We had to turn back. Keeping the Ramna Garden to our left we then started for Tenement Road where Mr. Mahammad Ali, my younger brother's friend and a co-fighter in the liberation struggle used to reside. He was completely taken aback to see us. Until then he was unaware of the surrender of the Pakistani

of our temporary hide-out and tried to return to safety in Tenement Road. We were told that it was not yet safe to move in the street as many Pakistani soldiers were unaware of the surrender till then and as such could fire at anybody they saw in their way. At this stage we became really nervous and desperately wished to reach home safely.

On our way-back we saw in few places non-Bengalees lying in position with their machine guns in ditches, bushes and

Army and the consequent liberation of our country. On getting the information from us he was choked with emotion and delighted in joy.

From there we started again for the Race Course by a different road. After proceeding a while a pickup with a few non-Bengalees suddenly overtook us in a menacing way. Immediately after that a jeep arrived on the scene. It came just behind us. It seemed the jeep had been following the earlier pick-up. Suddenly they started exchanging fire. We were caught between them. Fortunately we managed to save ourselves and got a way-out. Quickly we entered into an empty house to save ourselves.

When the exchange of fire stopped we hurriedly came out

behind walls and bearded Mukhti Bahinis in batches to wipe out the remnants of the Pakistani resistance.

Changing our route we came in front of the Gulistan Cinema Hall. Here again we were intercepted by two Bengali patriots. Greeting us 'Joy Bangla' they asked us not to go towards the then Fulbaria Station. Pakistani soldiers were still on guard there. Expressing our gratitude to them we changed our direction and came in front of the then DPI Office through the Secretariat road. Suddenly our attention was drawn to dead body lying on the other side of the road just in front of the former BNR office. We were simply thunder-struck at the sight. Oh God! It's that young man who



was carrying the flag of new nation; who was at the head of the small procession, we saw an hour ago; who shouted 'Joy Bangla', at us and whom we saluted in respect. But the murderers have not been able to snatch away the flag from his hand. He has lost his life but he has not given up the honour of the nation.

We then turned to the FH Hall and thought to be completely safe but all on a sudden quite unexpectedly we were in the midst of a large number of soldiers who were passing through the road.

They were in two rows and we found ourselves between their rows. At first we considered them as Indian soldiers and as such we greeted them by waving our hands. Soon we realised our mistake and shuddered in fear. They were Pakistanis, demoralised, dispirited and demoralised -- marching towards the Race Course for their formal surrender.

In such a situation our car came to almost a dead stop. We took about ten minutes to cover a distance of two seconds -- from Curzan Hall corner to the Railway Hospital (present Karmachari Hospital) turning. When we were passing through the rows of Pakistani soldiers we were apprehending death at any moment. We were perhaps counting moment of our final end.

When we reached Railway Hospital turning we saw two fresh dead-bodies lumped together on the street. We thought they had been killed by the same Pakistani soldiers through whom we passed a few moments ago. Seeing these dead-bodies we pondered why they had not killed us? Until today I have not got the answer to this query.