

Remembering December 16, 1971



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FOR the people who were held up in Dhaka on December 16, 1971, the memories of the Victory Day are more of relief from days of nightmarish fear and deep anxiety over an uncertain outcome than joy of victory.

We were sure that the days of the Pakistan army were nearing the end, but we were not sure that would live to see the day. Days before the actual D-day, rumour was ripe in the city of a last ditch battle by the retreating Pak army to defend the city, with us the civilians as hostages. Other rumours of the hordes of Razakars and Pakistani loyalists let loose in the city to murder, loot and plunder the Bengali homes drove many to panic to the point that another exodus of the citizenry to the villages began like the one following March 25 army massacre in Dhaka.

I had left my post as sub-divisional officer of Manikganj about two months prior to the Victory Day following a serious difference of opinion with my boss, the deputy commissioner of Dhaka. The difference, which was

actually my refusal, was over his demands for undertaking joint "anti-miscreant vigilance missions" with the superintendent of police -- an officer seconded from the Pakistan army.

Since my boss did not leave me any option, I simply turned in an application of leave of absence for an uncertain period on grounds of illness, and left my station. I was prompted in this rather unpremeditated act partly by impetuosity induced by my youth (I was twenty-seven then). But I was also motivated in a large part by reports that I had received through my sources in the field (local UP members and some student operatives) that the final onslaught on Pakistan by the liberation forces now in India would be happening some time in late November. This seemed credible to me as we had heard over BBC that the Indian army was assembling massive troops along then East Pakistan border. I left for Dhaka city where I chose to stay in a cousin's house instead of with my parents to avoid any contact with the boss, who actually reported me as an absconder to the government.

I came to Dhaka hopeful that a large-scale war was looming in the

horizon that I thought would be wrought upon the Pakistan army by November. While the situation for the Pakistan army steadily deteriorated in November, the formal fight, however, would not start till December 3 when Pakistan made an air attack on the western side, and India declared war on Pakistan.

For us in Dhaka, the war came in the form of strikes by the Indian air force over PAF base in Tejgaon in the midnight of December 3. We could not sleep the whole night from the wailing sirens, the thunderous sounds of bombs that fell, and the shrieking sound of the jets. We were excited that the war was finally there, but we were equally fearful that we could become victims of collateral damage. Fortunately the accuracy of the bombing over targeted areas spared largely any civilian damage in Dhaka. Over next two-three days, we would witness thrilling low-level dog fights between PAF and IAF jets. The results of the IAF's assault were that by December 7, the PAF in the East was effectively grounded.

In the meanwhile, the Indian army was steadily advancing

toward Dhaka with the fall of major Pakistan garrisons, one after another, as well as other major cities and towns.

On December 5 and 6 the Pakistan army abandoned Jessor and went towards Khulna. On December 7 the Indian army encircled the garrison of Comilla. By December 10, the Indian army, which had captured Daudkandi landed a battalion in area east of Sitalkhali opposite Demra. On December 11, another battalion was para-landed near Tangail. That the end was nearly in our sight came from the final coup de grace delivered by the IAF with an attack on the Governor House when the puppet governor Dr. Malek was holding his last cabinet meeting. We realised that the fall of Pakistan was only a matter of days if not hours when the governor and his team took refuge in then Inter Continental Hotel. It is from that point also that our anxiety and fear reached their peaks.

Our dilemma was whether to wait out the war in Dhaka while risking our lives in a last ditch battle by a desperate Pakistan army that would use the city as a last fortress, or to escape to the villages. Thoughts of returning to Manikganj with my parents and siblings also occurred to me. But we had an equally pervasive fear of being in cross fires between the Mukti Bahini and retreating army convoys on the roads, or becoming possible victims of loyalist Pakistani civilians guarding the city roads. My cousin's and our families decided stay put in Dhaka.

The three days preceding the Victory Day -- December 13 to 15 -- were probably the most traumatic and fearful days of our lives in Dhaka. The streets were nearly empty of people, with Razakars and Pakistani loyalist civilians roaming

the street. The nights we had curfew, no one dared step outside their homes. Although the sirens had abated since the end of the air war, we would still hear sounds of machine guns and other weapons rattling the night sky.

I think it was December 13 that the Indian army first dropped leaflets from the jets passing over Dhaka asking the Pakistan army to surrender. This they would repeat the next two days also. We actually got copies of the leaflets that were floating like confetti in the sky. We were desperately hoping that the Pakistan army would have finally the good sense and spare us the macabre prospect of street fights and countless civilian deaths. We went to our sleepless night that evening not knowing where we were headed.

The morning of December 16 by itself brought no joy for us, as the radio stations operated by Pakistan government broadcast the same old Pakistani patriotic songs, and manufactured news of strong resistance to India by the Pakistan army. It was not until late in the morning that we would hear (from Indian broadcasts) of the surrender that was negotiated by Maj. Gen. Jacob of the Indian army with Lt. Gen. Niazi, the Pakistani army commander, earlier that morning. We also learnt that General Niazi had accepted the surrender terms and signed the unconditional surrender document at a public ceremony in Dhaka on December 16.

Two incidents that day following this news would always belong to my personal diary of the great Victory Day. First was witnessing two fresh victims of what appeared to be public retaliation on the occupation forces. The second was a near brush with death from the gun of a surviving Pakistani loyalist.

On way back we took the old Elephant Road instead of taking the rather deserted Second Capital road (now Manik Mia Avenue). As we entered Elephant Road from the Shahbagh Hotel site (now Bangabandhu Medical College),

Our immediate impulse after hearing the news of surrender was to go out and visit the Governor House which we had heard was bombarded by IAF a few days earlier. My cousin's neighbour (also a civil servant who was working as director of an autonomous government entity that time) volunteered to drive. We decided to take a less trafficked route to the Governor House via Hare Road with my cousin and me as passengers.

We came across several small processions, mostly of young people, shouting *Jai Bangla* and carrying the Bangladesh flag as we drove through Mirpur Road. Some of them were carrying guns. Some stopped us, and we shook hands with them and moved on. As we passed by the Inter Continental Hotel and approached Hare Road, we found the streets eerily quiet. There were no people, and no vehicle.

As we moved we soon realised the reason why the streets were so deserted. Right on Hare Road, by the way side, there were two dead bodies in the uniform of EPCAF -- East Pakistan Civil Armed Force -- the entity that had replaced East Pakistan Rifles, and were being used to guard the city of Dhaka. The dead bodies looked rather fresh as they had blood still running. We realised that there were still people being chased and gunned down as we also heard sounds from gunfire from near the street. We decided to turn back without venturing toward the stadium.

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Pakistani loyalist on the very day that we had so long waited for.

We could have gone to the public ceremony that was held that afternoon in the Ramna Race Course to witness the great surrender. I wanted to become a witness to history. But the two traumatic experiences earlier that day made us ponder over the wisdom of another venture in a city that was still very frightful. Instead we would hear about it on the radio, and later see it in the first ever TV broadcast in free Bangladesh.

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The songs we sang on the fields of battle



popular democratic aspirations progressed, Dhaka Radio introduced Bengali to a rousing song.

Joi Bangla Banglar Jol Hobe Hobe Hobe Hobe Nischay turned out to be a point of reference for all of us as the negotiations for a political settlement swiftly turned into a gathering confrontation between the people of what was already

becoming known as Bangladesh and the regime in West Pakistan.

The military crackdown of March 25, which quickly translated into a prolonged genocide of the Bengali people, would soon lead to a concerted effort by the Bengali nation toward an attainment of national liberation. By mid-April, the very first government in

Bengali history, the Mujibnagar administration, was in place.

By May of the year, it was Shwadhin Bangla Betar, or Free Bengal Radio, that was beginning to make waves among people, both those trapped inside Bangladesh and those who had crossed the frontier to link up with the guerrilla struggle against Pakistan.

Patriotic songs briskly turned out to be a fundamental premise upon which the war was being waged. Apart from the political struggle and the war waged by the Mukti Bahini on the battlefield, music served as an inspirational theme for the nation as a whole. And it was Shwadhin Bangla Betar that let that music flow into Bengali homes, into the hearts and souls of Bengalis yearning for freedom from Pakistan.

Shona Shona Shona Loke Bole Shona was one of the earliest of songs broadcast by the clandestine radio station. The defining song was of course the Tagore number, *Amar Shonar Bangla*, which would soon be redefined as the emerging country's national anthem.

There were other songs from Tagore which became part of the musical repertoire of the Bangladesh movement. *Banglar Mati Banglar Jol* and *O Amar Desher Mati / Tomar Pore Thekai Matha* served to reassert the pris-

tine quality of Bengal and its historical traditions. But if it was a sense of tranquillity that Tagore injected into the struggle for liberation, Nazrul gave it some of the martial attributes which have generally been symbolic of desired change in society. His songs, notably *Chal Chal Chal* and *Karan Oi Louho Kopat* were regularly broadcast and certainly spurred the freedom movement on. Then again, there was *Ei Shikol Pora Chhol Moder* which went a long way in substantiating the cause.

All the songs that came through Shwadhin Bangla Betar made a profound impact on the Mukti Bahini; and within the occupied country they sustained hope in the idea of an eventual liberation of the land.

Abdul Jabbar's *Salam Salam Hajar Salam* made a signal contribution to the propaganda effort. It was as much a tribute to the martyrs of the liberation war as *Sharer Shaat Koti Manusher Aaj Ekti Naam Mujibor Mujibor Mujibor* was an invocation of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the war to free the land of foreign occupiers. Jabbar paid further tribute to the incarcerated Father of the Nation through *Mujib Baiya Jao Re* and would, as freedom finally dawned in Bangladesh with the surrender of the Pakistan army,

come forth with a grand, quiet finale of a song that was *Hajar Bochhor Pore Abar Eshechhi Phire / Banglar Booke Achhi Danriye*.

A song that served as poignant consolation to mothers who had seen their children sacrifice themselves in the crucible of war was *Bhebo Na Go Maa Tomar Chheler Hariye Giyechhe Pothe*. That the struggle was destined to be hard and long was succinctly encapsulated in Apel Mahmood's *Teer Hara Ei Dheu-er Shagar Parhi Dibo Re*. Another Apel number, *Mora Ekti Phool Ke Bachabo Bole Juddo Kori* made waves through the entire course of the war.

Soft, lilting numbers were an important part of the music on Shwadhin Bangla Betar. Ferdousi Rahman's *Amar Mon Bholano Chokh Jurihano Ei Oporup Mori Mori* remains a case in point. There were others, notably *Dhono Dhanne Pushpe Bhona* and *Chand Tumi Phire Jao*, the latter a number first heard as Eid-ul-Fitr approached in that season of bloodletting, a song that held forth the image of a nation battered and bruised in the genocide that the Pakistanis continued to perpetrate in Bangladesh.

And then came some more stirring numbers. In this category clearly were *Purbo Digonite Shurjo Uthechhe* and the Rathindranath Roy number *Amari Desh Shob Manusher*. The spirited *Shuno Ekti*

Mujiborer Theke Lokhha Mujiborer Konthosher Dhoni would turn out to be a powerful underpinning of music as the theme of the struggle.

Bangla Moder Bangla Maa Amra Tomar Koti Shontan addressed the theme of the indivisibility of the Bengali psyche when it came to questions of tradition and culture.

There were other songs, other lyrics, that strengthened the national resolve to be free of Pakistan. *Banglar Mukhi Aami Dekhiyachi* and *Oi Pohailo Timir Ratri* are two such instances of music fortifying patriotism in the Bengali. Add to these *Badi Bhenga Dao* and *Durgamogiri Kantar Moru* and you experience that old surge of defiance of the enemy in your soul.

There were *Nongor Tolo Tolo* and *Joi Jai Nobojat Bangladesh*. The soul could only feel its expectations of victory soar with such songs as *Janatar Shongram Cholba* and *Banglar Hindu Banglar Bouddho Banglar Khrishitan Banglar Mussulman / Amra Shobai Bangali*.

Jonno Amar Dhonno Holo Maa-go and *Muktiro Mondiro Shopano Tole Koto Paro Holo Bolidaan* are songs that are yet recalled by the generation that was part of history as it shaped itself in 1971.

When the struggle drew to a close in December 1971, it was time for new songs, all a follow-up to a

those sung in wartime, to arise in free Bangladesh. Shahnaz Rahmatullah's *Ek Nodi Rokto Periye* remains a tribute to the valour of unsung Muktioddhas. Saiful Islam sang *Bangladeshher Kobi Aami Shobcheye Bhagoban / Aami Likhte Perachhi Bishsher Sheri Muktir Itihas*. As Bangabandhu came back home from the darkness of imprisonment in Pakistan, Sandhya Mukherjee burst upon us with a moving number: *Bangabandhu Tumi Phire Ele Tomar Rokim Shwadhin Banglaye*. In *Ogo Bondhu Tumi Chinte Paro Ki Bangla Tomar Bangla Jaaake Reke Gachhi Ponchishe Raater Aagey*, it is a silent, emotional reminder of a world left in ruins as Pakistan went into the horrible job of exterminating Bengalis on March 25.

Dreams came on the wings of the songs we heard in 1971. Endless tales of heritage and culture were part of the lyrics. In the final reckoning, every song was an embodiment of a nation steadfast in refusal to yield to the immorality of force and the crudity of lies. Our songs gave us verve. They proved to be a reason to be alive in an annus horribilis that would soon translate into an annus mirabilis.

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Home they brought her warrior dead

MAMUN RASHID

ON December 11, the nation with great pride welcomed home the remains of Birshrestha Hamidur Rahman. More than 36 years after Hamidur sacrificed his life for the cause of country and its people, he returned to the liberated Bangladesh that he did not live to see. We laud the government for their initiative in bringing back the remains of this glorious son of the soil who, along with his other six birshrestha comrades, and the millions of others gave their lives in 1971.

This act will continue to represent the values of liberty, equality, and secularism as being the central tenets of our liberation movement. The Indian authorities also deserve praise and gratitude for their cooperation in having Hamidur's remains excavated and returned from Tripura, where he fell during a battle on October 28, 1971.

Hamidur's remains were duly accorded a guard of honour in presence of both the president and chief adviser along with his fellow brothers in the armed forces and

laid to rest at the Martyred Intellectuals' Graveyard in Mirpur, Dhaka. This is the second instance of the remains of a Birshrestha coming back to Bangladesh, the first being those of Flight Lieutenant Matiur Rahman, who was martyred in August 1971 while attempting to fly a Pakistan air force fighter jet from Karachi to Dhaka.

In the month of our victory over Pakistan occupation forces and the auspicious occasion of the last of the Birshresthas returning home, perhaps a certain amount of soul searching is in order for the generation that has enjoyed the fruits of independence that the millions made the ultimate sacrifice to earn.

In all levels, be it national, be it collective or be it individual, all our success has the foundation hidden in the supreme sacrifice of the millions of people during liberation war. Because of their sacrifice, because of the sacred spirit of the liberation war, we all now have an identity, an independent territory.

I am yet to close out on how much and what the independence has brought for the common people, farmers or day labourers of my

country, 40 percent of whom are still earning less than a dollar each day. However I know it for sure, some of us have become statesmen, many of us have become senior civil and military bureaucrats, diplomats, generals and some are enterprise entrepreneurs and high officials in international organisations, because Bangladesh is being treated as an independent nation.

This would not have happened to many of us, if Bangladesh was a part of another country, having its capital elsewhere other than in Dhaka. And all of us have become proud citizens of a liberated Bangladesh. The spirit of liberation war is always mightily present through our whole-hearted acceptance of this identity.

Come what may, the persons and the organisations who have worked against the creation of our nation will have to be brought to justice. The argument that it has been late is not a valid one. No government gave any amnesty to people who were proven to be involved in criminal activities.

Even if they had done so, and

successive govt as a result of political opportunism have avoided the issue, it does not reduce the weight of the demand of bringing war criminals into the hand of justice. There is a saying -- "two wrongs do not make one right." Moreover, our liberation was fought by mostly religious Muslims and the "fawta" of some opportunistic religion-based parties could not make them "kafir."

The spirit of liberation war is embedded in all of our identity. Therefore the question of rekindling with the spirit of liberation war does not arise. It is there, it was there and it will be there. The whole world has accepted this and respects Bangladesh as an independent nation. Many of us had fought in direct action. And all other who have not fought directly have lived through the spirit and participated in the war whole heartedly. This is the whole truth and not the half truth. Nothing can alter that, as is evident from the extremist activities that we have seen last year. I have not seen so many people and cars moving around with Bangladesh green and

red flags in the recent history, it is time for all of us who have benefited from the spirit of liberation war and establish the whole truth. It is time for us to go beyond this whole truth, and be united in the spirit of liberation war to fulfill the dreams of three million martyrs of a happy and prosperous Bangladesh with resolute self confidence and conviction.

This nation possibly deserves more people to ensure true democracy, economic emancipation of the down-trodden people, transparency in the government's decision-making and, above all, justice to the people. Poet Shamsur Rahman, who was denied a "state honour" after his death because he did not fall into the definition of a freedom fighter delineated by the government, once wrote: "Rajakar Matrik Shoktey Urche Amar Praner Pataka (my beloved flag of independence is flying at the cart of a anti-liberation minister)."

As the Poet said: "How many days we have to wait for you, Independence?" On this very day, when we are remembering the supreme sacrifices made by our

best intellectuals, young students, army men and many others, we are also questioning ourselves, how many days we have to wait to see our independence, our successes, our achievements as an independent nation which have not been swallowed by people, who do not have any contribution behind these successes, independence or struggle to better the lives of the common people.

I have borrowed the caption of this article from a poem written by the great English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson. In the poem he literates: "Then they praised him, soft and low/Called him worthy to be loved/Truest friend and noblest foe/Yet she neither spoke nor moved."

To let the motherland get rid of her shock affect, to let her move, we need to