

16 December: Aesthetically speaking

MIJARUL QUAYES

"J

Y! Bangla! Joy Bangla!" From the banks of the great Ganges and the broad Brahmaputra, from the emerald rice fields and mustard-colored hills of the countryside, from the countless squares of countless villages came the cry, "Victory to Bengal! Victory to Bengal!" They danced

of a genocide that took 3 million lives, the spontaneous and grassroots resistance, the valour and the sacrifice, the formation of the government in exile, the organisation of the armed offensive against the Pakistani forces as well as diplomatic initiatives to draw up support for the Bangladesh cause. On 16th December 1971, the occupation

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Speaking of catharsis, one can conceive of the birth of Bangladesh as a trilogy of tragedies in the classical tradition of Attica. The first of the three plays would cover the evolution of the movement for autonomy into the struggle for independence and emergence of the public persona of Bangabandhu at its height; the second would be about the genocide, the resistance and the Mujibnagar Government's successful conduct of the war and diplomacy; and the third would be about the victory, 16th December and the return of Bangabandhu to Bangladesh. The trilogy would not end with 16th December, because our proximity to the pathos generated by the war, even in victory had not sublimated. Formal victory ended the war, but did not erase the scars. That had to wait for another 25 days, when Bangabandhu returned and at the same race course from where he had created history on 7th March, he wept with the unending procession of people that thronged to see him. There was sublimation in those tears; the public outburst of private grief provided for the nation the much-needed catharsis.

Yet another storyline can be developed, in tragic vein about the 16th of December itself the day that brought our liberation. Sheikh Mujib, whose persona subsumes our freedom struggle, returned home unscathed from the Pakistani prison and charges of treason. Tragic that his precious life ended in independent Bangladesh in the hands of some rogue elements in the army. Such also was the end for those who led us through the war Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam, Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed and Ministers Mansoor Ali and Qamruzzaman. At least three sector Commanders of the Liberation War (two of them Force Commanders also) Ziaur-Rahman, Khaled Mosharraf and Manzur died not by the enemy's bullet in the War, but by their compatriot's, and within ten years of the War. Tragedy again that Bangabandhu, whose name inspired, and Tajuddin, whose labour shaped the course and outcome of the War, flew the national flag on their vehicles for between two and three and a half years; and some who stood publicly against the independence movement, and indeed orchestrated the genocide, have flown the flag for more than five years. The dénouement of this tragedy can

Liberation Joy Bangla! against their Pakistan Zindabad

And what poetry the War inspired poetry laden with symbolism: Ekti phool-ke ba(n)chabo bole juddho kori (We have taken up arms because we have to save a flower).

That prompts us to read aesthetics of 16th December in musical terms. We can conceive of a written western classical piece a symphony perhaps. The chords are struck as the impresaario waves his wand Bangabandhu on 7th March. And the symphony proceeds a brilliant orchestration of strings, winds, percussions etc, sometimes strong, sometimes faint, sometimes welling up from deep within. All this imitating the fortunes of the war as they unfold March to December 1971. It all reaches a crescendo on 16 December. And then, the impresaario takes a bow, on his return to independent Bangladesh on 10 January 1972. Alternatively, we conceive a dhun in triatal or bilamit etkaal, perhaps in raga basant (as a tribute to the youthful vigour of the freedom fighters) or some other as you will. It begins with a rambling alap signifying the beginning of the crackdown, the initial trauma. The melody takes shape as the Sheik Mujib, the Pakistan flag flew only atop the Governor's House and in the Dhaka Cantonment. Its place was taken by the yet unborn Bangladesh's flag and black flags of protest. Symbolism again that the instrument of surrender was signed at the same place from where 9 months and 9 days before, Bangabandhu gave the call for freedom.

Who has not seen the masterful sketch of General Yahya Khan as a blood-thirsty demon by Qamrul Hassan? Symbols go back to the elections to the Awami League's boat invoking the extended Bengali legacy (Hoq-Bhashanir nouka) from the 1954 elections when the United Front routed the Muslim League in the then East Pakistan. Bangladesh is the outcome of ethos and aspirations antithetical to Pakistan's. It was not a seceding territory running its affairs post independence on business as usual basis. The birth of Bangladesh is baptised in blood and fire, it was an active choice against all that the then Pakistan represented. Bangladesh's journey as a sovereign independent state, which began on 26th March 1971, became unimpeded with the end of occupation on 16 December. As we pay tribute to the freedom fighters who made it all possible, I am reminded of Tagore and his poetry that made us dream, and dream big:

"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
.....
Into that heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake."

The writer is a diplomat and columnist.

on the roofs of buses and marched down city streets singing their anthem Golden Bengal. They brought the green, red and gold banner of Bengal out of secret hiding places to flutter freely from buildings, while huge pictures of their imprisoned leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, sprang up overnight on trucks, houses and signposts.

This is how the Time (Bangladesh: Out of War, a Nation Is Born, TIME, Dec. 20, 1971) records the quintessential moment of delivery of a nation in freedom, patriotism and dignity. The 16th of December, 1971 a day that Bangladesh has marked since then as the Victory Day - has the making of an epic. It encapsulates in that moment of euphoria the long and arduous struggle of the Bengali people and the shaping of sovereign Bangladesh - the first Bengali republic.

It all began with the assertion of a national identity in the face of systematic denial, discrimination and deprivation an identity rooted in a millennia-old heritage of language, culture and customs. It evolved through the shaping of political demands for inclusion and equal access to opportunities, against marginalisation of the Bengali people and their cultural essence, the resistance against martial law and military dictatorship, and repeated articulation for democratic rights under a constitutional government. It is a constitutional government. It crystallized into the 6-points, a detailed manifesto for autonomy and devolution. Then came the first ever general elections in the then Pakistan and landslide victory for the Awami League and the 6-points the prospect of Bengali-led majority in government. And then, in the face of the Pakistani authorities refusal to hand over power, came the non-co-operation movement culminating in the declaration of independence. 16th of December is when the inexorable train set in motion by these events came to an end with the surrender of Pakistani forces in occupation of Bangladesh. Between the 7th of March and the 16th of December, there was first the unrelenting resolve of the Bengali people, the unwarranted and ruthless crackdown of the Pakistan military, the unleashing

Duttain the Brotocchari Nrito.

What would be the most memorable lines of this unwritten epic? One can of course begin far back in antiquity from the Charyapada, or perhaps the brilliant outpouring of homilies to mother Bengal at the beginning of the 29th Century (notably Tagore, DL Roy, Rajanikanta and later, Nazrul Islam), or closer to contemporary history, the dirge that has become the immortal anthem for the 21st of February. I would choose however, to limit the search to the immediate contiguity of the battle proper. The first lines I choose are from 7th March, when Bangabandhu gave expression to our collective aspiration: "ebarer shongram muktir shongram, ebarer shongram shadhinotar shongram" (the struggle now is the struggle for freedom; the struggle now is the struggle for independence). The second quote from this "organic" epic, if so it may be called, would be from the Proclamation of Independence (10 April, 1971):

"... Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the undisputed leader of 75 million people of Bangladesh, in due fulfillment of the legitimate right of self-determination of the people of Bangladesh, made a declaration of independence in Dacca on March 26, 1971, and urged the people of Bangladesh to defend the honour and integrity of Bangladesh..."

"We, the elected representatives of the people of Bangladesh... constituted ourselves into a Constituent Assembly, and... in order to ensure for the people of Bangladesh equality, human dignity and social justice, declare and constitute Bangladesh to be an sovereign People's Republic..."

The third and final quote would be from the instrument of surrender of 16 December 1971: "The PAKISTAN Eastern Command agree to surrender all PAKISTAN Armed Forces in BANGLA DESH to Lieutenant-General JAGJIT SINGH AURORA, General Officer Commanding in Chief of the Indian and Bangladesh forces in the Eastern Theatre. This surrender includes all PAKISTAN land, air and naval forces as also all para-military forces and civil armed forces."

It was high poetry that a people rose in unison, challenged and humbled the might of an occupying regular army nearly 100,000 strong. It is again the stuff of poetry that an all-out war was waged in the name of a man, who was interned in enemy hands. It was the common man that setup barricades and died as early as 3rd March. The vanity of the "invincible" Pakistan Army was shattered in the course of the War, not by a regular army but by peasants, workers, students, political activists and even the idlers who turned freedom fighter all singing "Amar sonar Bangla, ami toma-e bhalobashi" as they went to battle. This is an epic that reminds us that our infatuation with plaintive folk tunes and Tagore notwithstanding, we can take up arms and make a difference. In fact, the military credentials of Bengalis are quite strong. The 1857 uprising against the British Raj started from Bengal. Today's Bahadur Shah Park in old Dhaka bears testimony to the British vengeance against the Bengali "rebels". It was a consequence of the "mutiny" that Bengalis, among others, were sidelined from the British forces, and myths were created of martial (read loyal) and non-martial (read inde-

pendent minded) races. History also records Titu Mir's resistance, Masterda Surya Sen's attack on the Chittagong Armoury. Indeed, it was another Bengali, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, who formed the Azad Hind forces to drive out the British. The martial dimension of the Bengalis was raised to the level of an art form by Guru Shodoy

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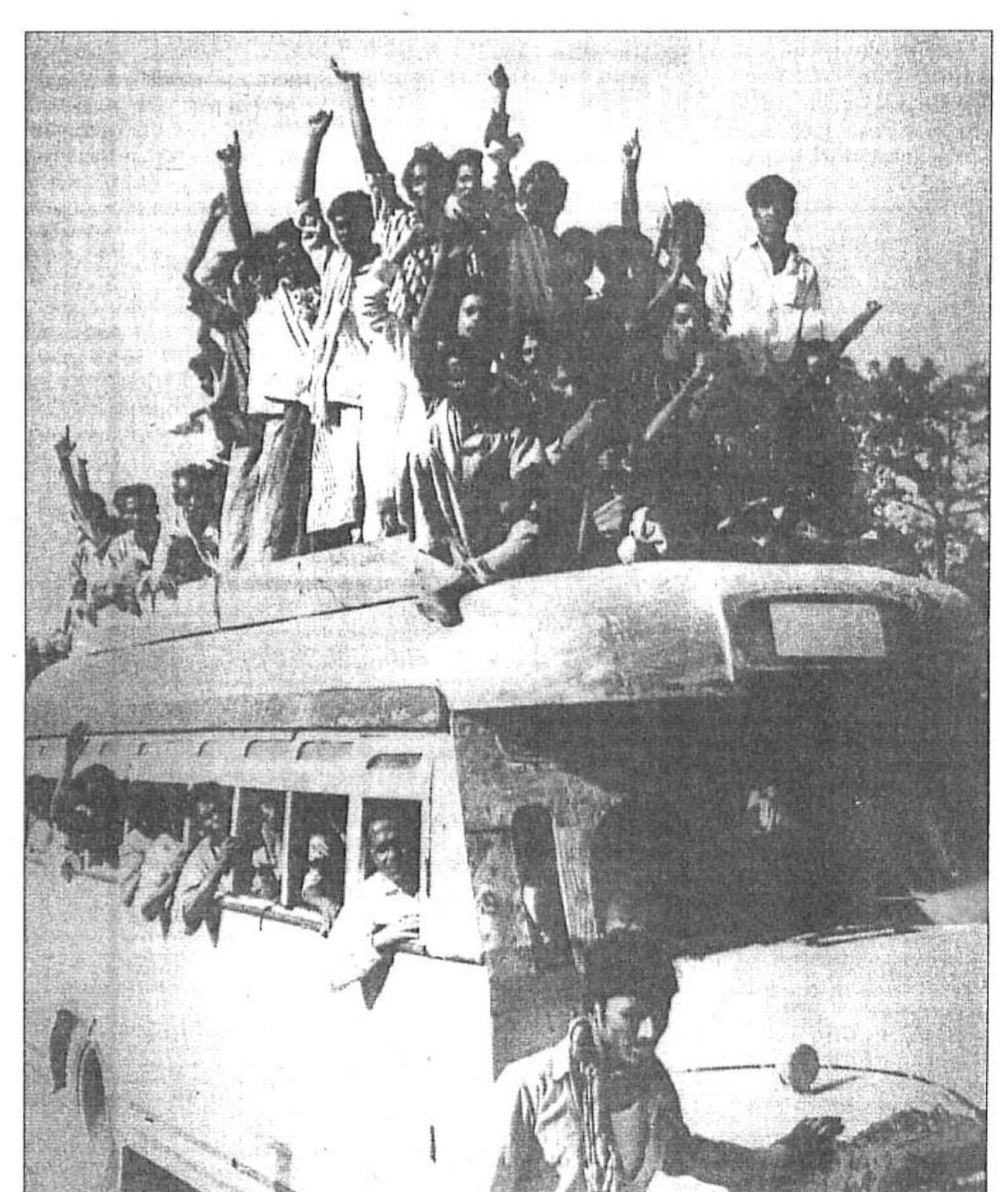
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