

Memories of the dark night

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AS we observe the 38th anniversary of our independence I look back at those turbulent events that led to our freedom and the birth of our beloved motherland: Bangladesh. I do not know what to make of all that. Tragic as they were I no longer feel the anguish despite the fact that I lived through my life's most dreadful and terror filled days particularly the night of the 25/26 March when a reign of terror and bloodletting was let loose on the people of the then East Pakistan by the Pakistan army.

I remember and recount the events that took place from the afternoon of the 25th of March (1971) and the killing that took place throughout the following day.

My family consisting of my wife and our two and half year old son, having been confined to the limits of our home for the past two days, decided to go out for a while to boost our morale. This was sometime between 5 and 5.30 pm. The air of Dhaka was heavy with sounds of slogans from processions throughout the day. These were angry processions by thousands chanting slogans against the government and the army. Rumours were flying all around of an apparent crack-down on the people of Dhaka particularly targeting the students living in the various residential halls of the University of Dhaka and Jagannath College.

Amidst such an atmosphere of fear, premonition and confusion, we got into a rickshaw and were on our way

to meet a friend of ours. We had hardly gone 500 yards from our house when I heard a familiar voice addressing me frantically and asking me to stop. This was none other than Kalu Chowdhury, then a member of the then East Pakistan Provincial Assembly and one of my paternal uncles, and a close associate of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. With a grim voice he told us to return to home immediately and stay indoors. He said that the Pak army would unleash an armed crack-down in Dhaka at zero hours on the 26th (midnight). We returned home promptly and told my mother of the impending danger and the calamity to follow.

Mother asked me to call all the other brothers and sisters who were living in various corners of the city. The first person I called was my brother Shaheed Munier Chowdhury who was then living with his family at one of the Dhaka University's staff quarters located in Nilkhet adjacent to the residence of the Vice Chancellor. As I talked to him I could sense from the sound of his voice that he was deeply concerned and his mind was preoccupied with the worst still to come. Having called all the others, I came down to apprise my mother of my conversations when she asked each of us to come to dinner as quickly as possible. This was 9 pm, still the 25th of March. We were as many as 12 that included my wife and my two and half year old son, two of my other brothers and their families. As we sat down to eat a grim silence prevailed.

We neither talked to one another nor ventured to look at each other. Even the streets right across our house,

which used to be filled with pedestrians and heavy movement of vehicular traffic, now, seemed to be deserted. One could hear no chanting of slogans from passing protest rallies and processions, a deafening silence and an uneasy calm filled the environment.

Around 10 at night we put out the lights of the entire house both upstairs and downstairs. We all gathered in one centrally located room on the ground floor of the house, with one light on with doors and windows closed.

True to my uncle's forewarning the crackdown began minutes after zero hour on the 26th of March. Throughout the night we continued to hear sounds of tanks and armoured vehicles rolling down the then Airport Road, passing by Hotel Intercontinental (now Hotel Sheraton), proceeding towards the University and Jagannath Hall. Our house being less than a kilometer away from the university, we could also hear loud and clear sounds of gunshots from all kinds of automatic weapons mingled with shrieks of petrified men and women, piercing through the deadly silence of the night. By now, two hours into the carnage, the fear of death and the unknown gripped us so intently that we were even afraid of looking at each other. I, for one, was however, strolling up and down the inner verandah of the house that stretched from one corner of the house to the other. Inside the room my mother was silently reading the holy Quran. So intense was the fear that we even forgot to put on the radio that was right there inside the room.

In the meantime something unusual happened. As the sounds of the bullets became louder and clearer, appearing to be coming from close to our house, sometime at four in the morning, my younger brother suddenly grabbed the old fashioned double barrel gun that belonged to my father and began to proceed towards the main entrance door that provided access to the inner part of the house. I followed him immediately to see as to what he was up to. I stopped him short and asked him in as much a low voice as possible as to what his intentions were. He responded by saying that when the hyenas were here to kill us, he for one wished to go down with at least one of them. I calmed him down and we returned to the room. A while later, however, my brother and I went to the balcony upstairs just to look around and see as to what was actually happening. Just as we arrived I pointed out to my brother some flying objects that resembled some glowing marbles and wanted to know as to what those objects were. Without a word he pulled me down to the floor and said that those were tracer bullets and potentially dangerous. Soon after, we both returned to the ground floor and once again joined the others. Later we heard a Muezzin's call from a nearby mosque for the Fajr prayers. By now the sounds of gunshots had lessened. Right at this point my attention was drawn to my son who looked up at me and said, "Abba will they kill us all?" For a moment I did not know what to say but finally responded by saying, "No son, not at all."

Although the killing spree continued right through the entire period of

occupation, nothing could match the random brutality and the horror during the night of 25/26 March.

Epilogue

On the 38th anniversary of our Independence, if one were to ask me as to where we stand today, I have no ready answer. Is today any better than the times we passed in fear and horror? To be honest, except for the fact that we live in an independent country of our own, we have but very little to be proud of. Many "professional" optimists tell me that the country has progressed a good deal since then. Maybe in terms of road constructions, fancy shopping malls and so on and so forth. But the most important of our resources, the people, the common man, stand disillusioned more than ever before. The gap between the rich and the poor is the widest ever. The nouveau riche, with hardly any exception, continues to behave most irresponsibly. We have too many politicians and few patriots.

We are still bickering about who was the first to give the call for our independence as though all other problems before the nation have been resolved. As a nation we stand divided. Government after government have failed to live up to our expectation. We have done little to serve the cause of democracy.

Our religion continues to be distorted by a handful of extremists.

We have a long and arduous path ahead of us. And we must strive as one to reach our cherished goal.

The author is a freelancer.

