

Dateline Joydevpur

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THE month of March of the year 1971 is a classic example of how to build up public emotions and morale, preparing for a big event. For about 40 per cent of the voters, and nearly 50 per cent of the total population of Bangladesh, the events of 1971 fit into the category of contemporary or recent history. It is the duty of the elders, more importantly of those eye witnesses who are still living, to let them know.

I was a Second Lieutenant with only seven months service, serving in the Second Battalion, the East Bengal Regiment located at Joydevpur about 32 km away from the old airport in Dhaka city. The battalion was housed in the palace or Rajbari of the Bhawal Raja. It was not a typical cantonment. A thana headquarter, Joydevpur was politically sensitive and active.

The month of March 1971 had become volatile from day one, because of the cancellation of the National Assembly session scheduled for 3rd March 1971. Political distance between the ruling military oligarchy and the Pakistan People's Party on the one side and the Awami League on the other, continued to grow. The fate of the-then East Pakistan was being written on the wall, slowly, gradually and day-by-day but indelibly. The famous and historic speech by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the Ramna race course on 7th March 1971 turned the political wheels towards an independent Bangladesh. People of the-then East Pakistan were being primed for a major event. But what about the Bengali speaking soldiers of Pakistan Army?

As political tension and apprehension continued to grow, the high command of the Pakistan army also started becoming mindful of these battalions of the East Bengal

Regiment located in East Pakistan. For those readers who are below the age of 47, they will find the following description easy to monitor. Elections to the National Assembly of Pakistan were held in December 1970. The army was deployed for internal security duty (IS duty) that is, to assist the civil administration in maintaining law and order during elections much as it happened in Bangladesh in December 2008 or October 2001 or June 1996 and the like.

At the end of the election duty, the battalions of the East Bengal Regiment came back to their normal station and took part in winter collective training in late December 1970 and January 1971. At the end of the training period, our battalion was ordered to go back to IS duty stations. So, one out of the four Rifle Companies of our battalion went to the district headquarter of Mymensingh district, another Rifle Company went to the district headquarter of Tangail district while the remaining battalion remained at Joydevpur and adjacent areas. Part of the troops of Joydevpur were busy guarding the ammunitions depot at Rajendrapur, which is about eight miles away from Joydevpur, while another contingent was guarding the ordnance factory at Gazipur, which was about three miles away from Joydevpur. For today's readers, Gazipur still has the ordnance factory and Rajendrapur has a cantonment. Our soldiers deployed across various districts as they were, were having the advantage of mixing with common men. Officers and soldiers of our battalion were having first-hand knowledge of the political emotions and sentiment of the people.

The people of Joydevpur were politically conscious and active. Awami League on its own as well as under the banner of all party action committee held complete sway over the people. Interaction between the people and

soldiers has always been mutually respectful and cordial. Therefore, while the people had much love for the battalion, being Bengali speaking, they were also anxious for safety and security of the regiment. In similar vein, the Bengali speaking officers and troops were also very mindful of the safety and security of the people around the Joydevpur Rajbari. Therefore, it was an ideal environment for any future cooperation between the two sides. The Bengali officers and soldiers were gradually abandoning their apolitical status and psychologically becoming part of the campaign or political movement for autonomous (based on Awami League's six points formula) East Pakistan or in the best case an independent country. Psychologically, the affinity between the soldiers and the people was fast becoming stronger. It could not have evaded the eyes of the watchful Pakistan Army hierarchy in Dhaka.

For whatever reasons, a large contingent of nearly seventy officers and soldiers of one of the battalions of Punjab Regiment located in Dhaka cantonment under the leadership of none but the Brigade Commander of 57 Brigade, Brigadier Jehanzeb Arbab, visited 2 East Bengal Regiment at noon on 19th March 1971. The people of Joydevpur, having got wind of this visit, made their own interpretation. They thought, and in retrospect we agree that they were right, that the visit was aimed to disarm the Bengali speaking battalion. The people under their political leadership decided to impede the mission of Brigadier Arbab. The contingent under Brigadier Arbab came to Joydevpur Rajbari only to discover that officers and soldiers were dressed and equipped to meet any combat situation. The Brigadier decided not to pursue his hidden agenda with the troops.

The eyes of the officers and soldiers

of 2 East Bengal gave the Brigadier an impression about danger in implementing his hidden agenda. Meanwhile, politically agitated people of Joydevpur created a barricade on the 'level crossing' at Joydevpur Bazar by using three empty cargo-carrying bogies with the locomotive (or engine) removed to a distance. A few thousand swarmed the bazaar and surrounding area chanting various political and anti Pakistan slogans. So, soon after midday on the 19th, when the strong contingent under Brigadier Arbab wanted to go back to Dhaka, they found their way obstructed. In the hour or two that followed, two major events occurred.

2 East Bengal was tasked to clear the road of the obstruction in a military manner, using force and killing people if needed. The command was given by the Brigadier himself to Lieutenant Colonel Masoudul Hossain Khan, the commanding officer of the battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Masoud ordered 'D' Company Commander Major Moinul Hossain Chowdhury to undertake the task. The Bengali speaking officers and soldiers were facing a very critical test. You have to obey your superior as well as you have to ensure that the local population is not harmed. Major Moinul Hossain Chowdhury achieved the task superbly.

The opposing Bengali crowd also fired odd shots but without aiming at the soldiers of the battalion. The Bengali soldiers also under orders fired shots, but not to kill anyone or harm the people. The trick did not escape the eyes of the Brigadier. It was a very tense hour or two. Between 3-30 and 4-00 PM something more difficult happened. A military truck carrying a group of soldiers came from Tangail heading for the Joydevpur Rajbari. As soon as the truck entered Joydevpur Bazar, it was engulfed by a formidably aggressive crowd, albeit Bengali. The crowd discovered that the soldiers in the truck

were Bengalis. They seized all the weapons from the soldiers before the soldiers could even raise an eyebrow and then the crowd allowed the soldiers to cross the road block on the level crossing and join the military contingent of 2 East Bengal. As soon as the incident of the arms loss became known, the situation became very grave. The battalion came under tremendous pressure to take immediate aggressive and coercive action to recover the weapons. The battalion decided to settle one problem before the other. So, arrangement was first made to let Brigadier Arbab and his contingent go away from Joydevpur safely. The patriotic crowd of Joydevpur cooperated. The contingent met other obstructions on the way but 2 East Bengal was not made responsible for clearing. The recovery of the lost arms took time. On the third day following 19th March, the weapons were brought back to the battalion.

2 East Bengal was a different breed on the morning of 20th March because of what had happened the day before. The battalion was more than convinced that Pakistan would break and that the battalion will have to play a positive role for the independence of the Bengali people. It was a matter of days before the historic moment arrived. The cooperation between local people and the battalion became an open secret. So when the barbaric attack took place on the sleeping population of Dhaka, Chittagong and other major cities, 2 East Bengal went by the foregone conclusion. The companies of Mymensingh and Tangail revolted on 26th March, while those in Joydevpur and surrounding areas joined the revolt on 27th afternoon. The story of Joydevpur is a classic example of cooperation between the people of the country and the soldiers for the supreme patriotic task.

The author was a 2nd Lieutenant with 2 East Bengal in 1971

