

# Parched souls that returned for rain

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I suffered a near-fatal car accident on our way to Lahore from Islamabad at the infamous Kalashahkaku point (well known for road disasters). The brand new German Opel imported just a week earlier by my boss Mr. Jamshed Rezaur Rahim, an officer of the 1952 batch of the Civil Service of Pakistan got transformed into a ball of crushed paper, I was told later. He fell asleep at the wheels and the car hit a standing buffalo cart at 80 mph. He died on the spot. It was the night of 30th. January, 1971. I regained sense on the operation table in the Mayo Hospital, Lahore a day later. I learnt later that Jamshed bhai was declared dead but my body was found warm enough for a shot. The attending doctors mistook me for a non-Bengali official. My batch mates having read the newspapers came to see me and offered all help. Following their arrival, the attending surgeons came to know that I was a Bengali. I heard them comment: 'Hamara to mar gaye, ye Bangalee kutta kayse bach gaya'. Instead of stitching the head wound, one of them just poured 'a sea' of tincture iodine on the open injury at the back of my head. My whole existence seemed to have been put on fire. I did not make any sound. I kept lying on the operation table with tears rolling partly in physical agony and partly in insult. I knew it was all over. If such toxic hate had reached the chilly confines of an operation theatre, the nation had clinically died already.

For a week I convalesced in the house of my batch mate Javed Talat (later the Finance Secretary of Pakistan) and his wife, Farida. I took leave and returned to Dhaka by the last PLA flight allowed to overfly India. In Dhaka the doctors inspected my head injury and put eleven stitches to close the wound and said that it was criminal for the Lahore doctors to have left the wound open. My two fractured wrists were left without plaster in Lahore and it was too late to plaster those when I arrived Dhaka. Both my wrists remain slightly impaired ever since.

By mid-February Dhaka was erupting. Bangabandhu was being denied the prime ministership of Pakistan. That meant the denial of democracy, as the Awami League of East Pakistan got a sweeping mandate in the elections. West Pakistan decided to spurn rule by the majority. When Pakistan's military dictator postponed the date for convening the parliament, the Vesuvius erupted. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman addressed a human ocean at the Race Course maidan on the 7th of March, 1971. I have never attended a bigger or a more charged up mass of expectant people. I was then an officer of the Pakistan government and obviously a bit circumspect so that my presence was not noticed. I was standing against the TSC wall. I found my father-in-law Prof. Nafis Ahmad, dean of the faculty of science, Dhaka University, accompanied by my wife Zulfia, standing a yard away from me. I saw Mr. A.K.M. Ahsan and Mr. Sanaul Huq, two of the senior most Bengali CSP officers also standing a few yards farther away. I felt proud of them all. I felt proud of myself. It was a declaration of independence and yet it was a millimeter short of that. Bangabandhu's speech was not a written one. It was not a memorized one. It was delivered from the depth of his being. It was a 17-minute thunder delivered in peerless baritone. Never in this country should anybody ever try to manipulate history anymore. It all happened in our times. We are the living witnesses of these times. Anyone who was present there will tell you under whose lone leadership did 7-crore Bengalees respond like one person. We wanted to live and die with him. Let none ever try to take from Bangabandhu what belongs to him and him alone.

On the night of the 25th, I scuttled home at around 11 at night, seeing barricades made of broken branches being put up by romantic young Bengali boys, who had no idea of what a tank could do. I saw a few young men practicing .22 rifle shots at the sky. I even saw one middle-aged gentleman telling some young boys that stones hurled from 'goolti' could also be very effective. As a resistance against one of the most professional armies that was fanatic with

hate, this was pure romanticism. I did not realize that I was residing at the heart of the vortex. It was my father-in-law's house (Bungalow no. 7, Dhaka University campus). I will try to cut short the narration of the tragedies that I witnessed that night. The carnage started at 12:30 pm. Jagannath Hall was the first target. Then it spread around. There was a harsh kick on the door at 2 in the morning. I was consigned under the bed of my wife's 90 year-old grand mother. But I could hear everything. There was a young army captain in uniform demanding explanation from my father-in-law why a black flag was still flying over his house. He asked which were the houses of the university professors. He stoutly refused to identify the houses of his colleagues. The young SSG captain who was drunk, started abusing the elderly professor and at one point, caught him by the collar of his shirt. Professor Nafis was a patient of high blood pressure. He lost his temper and told the drunk captain that General Peerzada and General Gul Hassan were his students at Aligarh, and a young drunk captain had the impudence to hold him by the collar of his shirt? I still believe that the references saved Professor Nafis' life that night. Then he noticed my daughter, Mubina, who was five years old. The drunk captain said: 'she looks like a Bengali girl, where is her father?' He was told that I was working in Islamabad. I crawled out next morning. The smell of gunpowder and the panic of silence were so overpowering none among the houseful of us exchanged a word. My grand mother-in-law kept wetting the jaenamaz with her tearful prayers. On the morning of the 27th of March curfew was withdrawn for a few hours. I ventured out of the house about two hours before the lifting of the curfew. I saw one uniformed and two others (these collaborators eventually enrolled themselves as the infamous Razakars) were dragging the naked dead body of one of my favourite teachers, Dr. G.C.Dev, into a hurriedly dug up hole, whose exact location only I can still tell. I rushed to Prof. Guha Thakurata's flat nearby. I found some marks of blood just outside the entrance door, but there was none at home. I returned home and told this to my father-in-law. He burst into a hysteric crying mode. He thought all his colleagues had been killed.

I told my wife that my presence may endanger other lives of her family. Because by then a number of songs composed by me against Pakistani oppression had been telecast and a number of inflammatory articles had been published under the pseudonyms of 'The Eagle' and 'The Falcon' in the daily People. I thought of leaving for Faridpur, where I come from, on my way to Kolkata where I had many friends to give me shelter. The driver went for petrol, which he could not collect. But he came back with terrifying news. Some non-Bengalees were slaughtering every Bengali crossing the Mirpur bridge. My wife rushed to PIA's Airport Office, got our reservations and we left for Islamabad. If time or space ever permits, I would write about some of the blood-curdling accounts of brutalities that I saw with my own eyes.

Hedayet bhai then Deputy Secretary, Cabinet Division, Islamabad, had sent his car to take me home from the airport. Mubina, my eldest daughter tugged close to me, looked into my eyes and murmured in a voice choked in fear: 'Abbu, aami ki ekhon banglaey katha bolte pari? Very few, if any, have seen me breakdown. What millions of bullet sounds, artillery fires and the dying shrieks on the night of the 25th could not do, these eight words did. I broke into a spasmodic jerk between pain and helplessness. For me it was the moment of catharsis. It was like waters gushing out of a long-closed high dam. I tried to look normal. I ventured to describe the unprecedented tales of horror to some of my friendly colleagues, whose summary response was that a national professional army cannot indulge in such atrocities as I was narrating. They did not even empathize. I was hurt. My wife advised me to keep quiet. One friend was from Kashmir. His mother sent me a heavy quilt knowing that I was not used to the Lahore chill, when I joined the Academy. Mohammad Ahmad was my best friend. He did not think I was exaggerating. He took me to his mother and

asked her to listen to the horrendous account of cruelty done by the Pakistan Army in East Pakistan. She heard me but interrupted me often enough to remind me that: 'magar hamara fouj aeysey kaam kar hi nahin sakta'. In other words, this was the first time she did not trust me.

In such times, when you can see that you are being watched, you build a small group of highly reliable friends. We constructed one. Mohammad Sirajuddin (former Chairman BSCIC, former Member Planning Commission), Abul Ahsan (former Foreign Secretary, recently deceased), Humayun Kabir (Former Foreign Secretary, my cousin) and sometimes Masud Ahmed (former Ambassador to Tunisia) formed one such group. What was the latest situation, who could quote which radio/tv, who received the last letter from Bangladesh? Most of us were denied a telephone at home and were hardly called to attend any meeting in office. All Bengali officers, whether in civil services or in the armed forces, were perceived as potential traitors to Pakistan's safety and security. We were well trained services and we also were professionally of elite standards, more often better than our West Pakistani counterparts. Silent humiliation in offices and surveillance for the rest of the time, non-arrival of letters from our dear ones, or letters reaching us after indecent censors, waiting for days and weeks to get a call through to Dhaka (again censored), listening to BBC or Aakashbani under the cover of a quilt (the domestic help, who may very well be an informer, was invariably a local except for Sirajuddin, who would always manage one from Feni) were no ordinary rituals through which we had to pass every day. Sheikh Mujib's trial was another matter all Bengalees were following. During one such week, we heard that Bangabandhu was being executed in a day or two at night. We had no way of knowing the truth. Sirajuddin, apart from being an extremely popular person, was also working in the Interior Ministry. So, we would wait for him. He came literally running one such evening and revealed that Bangabandhu was perhaps being executed that night, according to his informer, and that he would be shifted by helicopter from the present prison to another. As coincidence would have it, we were breaking up when at about 11:30 pm, a small chopper was heard and seen flying in the sky of Islamabad. In the sad silence of night, just disturbed by the distant drone of a chopper, Mohammad Sirajuddin cried out as if he had just lost his mother. 'Mujib bhai, amra ai ashahay bangaleera apnake bachate parlamna'. I cannot think of a person who could cry on and on like a child piercing the cool aristocracy of the Margalla Hills, unless it all erupted from his heart. We learnt by next morning that it was an unfounded presumption.

One noon, my friend Fazle Hassan Abed arrived with his typical smiling grin. He gave us an update on the latest situation in East Pakistan. We got some news of some of our relations. Abed asked for my car for some of his work in Pindi. He left in the morning. The day rolled past and there was no news of him. We got panicky. At 6 pm arrived a group of police officers to search my house for anti-state printed materials that were reportedly being distributed by me among members of the Bengali community. The whole house was put upside down but nothing was found, although what I was distributing was right over the record player about a dozen 45 RPM records containing Bangabandhu's speech of the 7th March, 1971. EMI, the successors of HMV in Pakistan, brought out the record with the speaker's personal approval. The speech was in great demand and Rashed Latif and Rosie (my niece) both working for EMI in Pakistan wanted me to distribute these records free of cost to all Bengalees. I got saved as the wordings on the labels were all in Bangla and the Punjabi Police officers could not read Bangla. People forget. But we forgot too soon. We have shown official respect to George Harrison, Ravi Shankar and Devdual Bondopadhyay. But nobody recognized the courage and contribution of Rosie or Rashed who printed one million copies of Bangabandhu's speech in gramophone disc for free distribution all over East



and West Pakistan. Rashed is today a Canadian national and Rosie died in 1976. I am paying them my personal tributes in this article, 37 years later.

And then came the question: 'Mr. Abed was staying at your house?' 'Yes' we replied. 'He holds a British passport'. 'I have no desire to know about that' I told them. 'Why does he stay with you?' 'Probably because he is my boyhood friend' I replied. We asked where he was and why he has not returned. One of the officers brought out the key of my car and asked me to accompany them. I refused to do so. I collected the car next day from the parking lot of the Hotel Intercontinental, Rawalpindi.

I was posted out to the remote province of Baluchistan. I was so happy when I called on the Chief Secretary, Mr. Rifat Pasha Sheikh (uncle of Javed Talat) and he greeted me with unaffected Bangla: 'ki mia kyonon aso, bou bacchago loia aiso to?' I was so touched. It was like a migration from prison to a playground. Next day, I called on the Chief Minister, Mr. Ataullah Khan Mengal and the Governor, Mr. Bizenjo. They treated me with love and respect. I was not used to either of those since a long while.

Bangladesh was born. We wanted to return as early as possible. But my elder brother was detained alongside many other Bengali officers of the armed forces at Risalpur. I had earlier written to mother that I might try to escape before I was detained. In those hard times, one had to take resort to allegories to convey information. Mother informed that I must not come back without bringing my brother with me. I was called by the Governor, who said it was not possible any longer to keep me on the job (I was holding the post of secretary home and services) as Mr. Bhutto was asking him everyday to lay me off. He asked me to be mentally prepared to leave, as reporting to any camp would make everything more uncertain for me and my family. I set out for Islamabad, took a taxi and

reached Risalpur. I was stopped at the camp gate. But I was technically still the Home Secretary of Baluchistan. I was asked to take permission from a Lt. Col. It was lunch time. My cab honked. He came out, observed me upside down, looked at my official ID card and let me go. Inside, the room got filled within minutes by young Bengali officers eager to know what information I had brought for them, whether I could tell them anything about their families in Bangladesh. I saw their pathetic living conditions----crammed up, dreadfully short of supplies (even of powder milk for their children). They looked pale but their eyes were alight. I found them fearless, waiting restively to serve their motherland whenever that time arrived. Late that night I told my brother the true purpose of my visit. I asked him to pack up. He declined. I told him of mother's wishes. He still declined. He said, after one such escape by a Bengali officer, the remaining families were subjected to further hardships by the Pakistani custodians as a punishment. So he would not do any such act that would land his colleagues into tortures or hardships. It was before the 'Fajr azan'. I left----sad because I had failed to accomplish my mission assigned by my mother---but euphoric that when these sons return, who showed me such silent solidarity and resolve, the liberty of Bangladesh shall be in safest hands.

I returned to Baluchistan. Went to my bank, which said my account was already frozen by an order of the central government. My friends helped me out with more cash than I needed. My soul had unfurled and nothing could stop me from reaching the embracing arms of my mother and my father. They were waiting and I could not wait any longer. I set out in the name of Allah, and through Kabul, reached home in August, 1972.

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