

Of Carnage and Krishnachuras

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BANGLADESH witnessed the worst carnage of recent history in 1971. We were forced to wage a war of resistance that soon turned into a liberation war. Many of us had perished before victory came, and the whole country was left in an immense pool of blood. Flowers do not bloom on such a landscape; one does not expect to reap a harvest of carnations in a land strewn with bones. But the krishnachuras of hope germinated even in those darkest of days. The poetry of the post-war

period recorded the traumas and travails of the time most graphically as it also celebrated the hopes of a nation emerging from them.

In the light of what happened in 1971, the post-1971 Bangladeshi literature can be called an orchestration of the notes of pain and lamentation: this is true at least about the literature of the seventies, more particularly about poetry. The poets recorded their agonized feelings about death and destruction experienced during the war in a keenly emotive language.

The 'war-poetry' of Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and others marked a definite genre in the post-First-War English poetry; a similar appellation might be appropriate for the body of poems written during, and after, the Bangladesh War of Liberation. These poems form a well-defined and easily distinguishable corpus, nothing like which will ever be produced again. Time has encapsulated and enshrined them in itself and, we surmise, will preserve them for eons, when this generation of ours will be swept away by oblivion and death. Emanating as they did from the deepest core of our national psyche, they will always be revered as the authentic recordings of our poets' sincerest feelings in the most trying of circumstances. Gone are those days of glory; the poets who had written them have aged; some have already crossed into that country from whose bourn no traveler returns. We can only read and re-read their verses, and try to re-live their experiences and emotions, well-nigh impossible though the latter task may be.

After the horrifying massacre at midnight of the 25th of March, 1971, people streamed out of the city of Dhaka: as though a million Aeneases were leaving the burning city of Troy in search of a safer place. This exodus, like all other exoduses in history, was full of tragic anecdotes, beset with tears and travails. Shahid Quadri's poem captures a snapshot from that enormous canvas of tragic waste:

By the side of the heaps of rubbles at the road-crossing, in the light of

dawn, I saw Bangladesh lying like a broken violin. And that young lad, who had grown up with the wish that he would play it the way he wants, is lying beside it, donning his blood-soaked shirt. ('From the outlawed journal')

The vibrant image of 'the broken violin' speaks for the expressive might of Quadri's poetic language. A city-dweller and city-lover, Shaid Quadri resolves against leaving his milieu, come what may--

Everyone will go away leaving the city behind

(And they are leaving, in throngs). But we, a few of us, will stay here till death,

touching this heap of rubbles, in our native land, amidst the corpses of our dear ones.

A more graphic description of the besieged Bangladesh can be had in Fazal Shahabuddin's 'A Day of April, 1971':

Every day every night at dawn and in the evening in this suffocating blackout in the curfew-ridden city our livers are torn away, eyes scooped out--

Bayonets pierce the Bangali's rebellious heart.

The following excerpts from Ahsan Habib's poem 'Search' depict the pall of darkness, of doom, that covered the sky of Bangladesh at that cataclysmic time:

'Halt', thunders the demon, Death, and stands in front,

His hairy, rough hands find their way into the pants' pockets,

Fish out a few coins, two flowers, a reel of thread.

The heavy hands now search the loins. No, nothing is there.

Having emerged from the search of the enemy soldier at a city street-corner, 'that juvenile fighter/ that godlike adolescent boy' walks on-- hiding in the depth of his heart that noblest of weapons which does not yield itself to any demon's touch; the rhythm of which beats drums in his soul

day in and day out: 'Freedom. Freedom. Freedom.'

The above-quoted poems belong to the category of generalised depiction of the war scenario and were written by poets who did not actively participate in the war but whose hearts were bloodied by the sufferings of the millions around them. The best among these poems is Shamsur Rahman's famous 'In order to get you, O Freedom', which he wrote in the besieged city of Dhaka and, reportedly, smuggled across the border. What makes the poem a startling specimen of our 'muktijuddho' poetry is its synthesis of despair and hope, death and rebirth, a sense of total annihilation and an undying belief in the indomitableness of the human spirit. Freedom in this poem is not just a vague concept; it is as palpable as the scenes of carnage that it entailed.

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AMIRUL RAJIV

When history took shape and substance

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HISTORY, when it happens on your doorstep, makes you wonder about the immense possibilities which it holds out, has held out, for generations whose purpose holds to carve a niche of self-dignity for themselves. Again, history does not happen all the time. It is not always that you have a Netaji rousing the masses to rebellion or a Nehru speaking of a tryst with destiny. For those of our compatriots who came to life after the enormity of the struggle for liberation came to a close on December 16, 1971, history comes in a package. And that package is one of a plethora of memories, of a Bangabandhu striding forth to convince us into believing that destiny was what we could and ought to forge out of life. It has been our unmitigated good fortune to have been part of a time, of a moment in eternity, when men rushed off to war armed with the spirit of freedom shining in their eyes. And they would not return home until this land, celebrated in tradition and insistently recalled in heritage, stood liberated.

It was liberation we saw happening before us. Not many are given to observing history taking shape in their courtyards, and all across the green, sullen fields encompassing their little hamlets and villages. Those of us born in the 1950s and therefore old enough to comprehend the nature of the struggle in the early 1970s either plunged into the struggle as direct participants or went into it as individuals who believed they too had a necessary job to do in the task of making freedom happen. In 1971, it was for the most part uncertainty which governed our lives. Bengali men were being taken away every day, never to come back home. Their women fell prey, ceaselessly as it were, to the depredations of the Pakistan occupation army. The Mukti Bahini bravely bombed bridges and culverts into ruins symbolic of the decadence of the state of Pakistan. And the

enemy struck back, in the way a cornered barbarian lunges at those who are not willing to put up with his nonsense. It was an enemy which went around razing villages, burning plants and killing and maiming the old and the infirm. In 1971, the Pakistani forces mercilessly killed Dhirendranath Dutta and Mashiur Rahman, along with millions of others. Pakistan's soldiers stopped Bengalis on the streets of Dhaka, to ascertain, through means patently foul, if they were followers of the Islamic faith.

These are images we were to be witness to. When Eid day came along, it was a nation that did not celebrate. On Shwadin Bangla Betar, the sad strains of *chand tumi phire jao rose* loud and clear. And millions across the subjugated land prayed for the life and safe return of the incarcerated Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from imprisonment in Pakistan. That was history as we saw it taking shape, together with reports of battlefield bravery coming into the occupied areas from somewhere distant and yet not so far away. There was always the feeling in us that historical truth was on the march, inexorable and inevitable. Even as the Pakistanis imposed curfews and ordered black-outs, we knew they were weakening in the knees. The butcher that was Tikka Khan was replaced by the buffoon that was A.A.K. Niazi. And, of course, by early September of the year the military junta had its favourite civilian, A.M. Malik, installed in office as 'governor of East Pakistan'. There was no East Pakistan; and the term 'governor', could just as well have been replaced by the word 'quisling'.

The quislings took cover as the governor's mansion came under aerial attack in mid-December. It was on the reverse side of a cigarette packet that Malik scribbled his letter of resignation to General Yahya Khan. His hands shook in patent fear. And

elsewhere in an advancing Bangladesh, the forces of Pakistan shook in their boots as they retreated in chaos. At the United Nations, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto spewed nonsense about a thousand-year war even as General Rao Farman Ali asked for a ceasefire and measures to take his

city emptied of many of its inhabitants, for fear of what the embattled Pakistanis might do in the event they decided to put up a last-ditch stand. Even so, news poured in of villages and towns falling to the allied forces, of our friends at the United Nations making sure that the war would not

fighting force', the Pakistan army, gave up its badges, its weapons, its hold over eastern Bengal. On the ashes of a repressive communal state, a secular Bengali republic, the very first in history, was born.

On that exciting afternoon declining into a placid evening was heard, in



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men home to what was on the way to becoming a rump Pakistan. Chaos followed confusion. And confusion sometimes came wrapped in the ridiculous. General Niazi, arrogance still playing in him, warned that Dhaka would be taken over his dead body. In the event, he would still be around to sign Pakistan's instrument of surrender to the joint Indo-Bangladesh forces.

This was the history we observed taking shape as 1971 moved swiftly and purposefully to a conclusion. The

end until the Pakistanis had been thoroughly and comprehensively beaten in war. The Americans sent their fleet to the Bay of Bengal as a way of scaring the Bengalis and their Indian friends. The Chinese spoke darkly of a conflict that could escalate. And yet these provocations did not matter, for the Soviet Union was happily vetoing away all notions of a ceasefire until Bangladesh became a reality. On the afternoon of 16 December, truth emerged triumphant. As many as 93,000 soldiers of the world's 'best

cheerful and loud intonation, the endlessly inspirational 'aaj srishti shukher ullashe'. And then a song, sombre in tone and patriotic in cadence, wafted along. Abdul Jabbar's voice swept into every Bengali home. He sang 'hajar bochor pore abar eshechhi phire / Bangla'r buuke achhi darhiye'.

We had seized the sun. And in the light of the stars we would sing of the glories of the moon as it shone on a land of free people.