

The price paid for the victory

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FORTY one years ago in 1971, I was working at the blood-drenched war fronts as an Information Officer of the Mujibnagar Government. Alongside this I discharged my tough responsibilities at the fronts as a war correspondent of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra (SBBK). It won't be an exaggeration to say I was hovering between life and death amid artillery shells and thousands of bullets whizzing overhead. I had to rush from one front to another with the valiant freedom fighters and the allied forces. In front of my eyes, I have seen hundreds of Bengali soldiers and freedom fighters falling to death while blood was gushing out of their bullet-hit wounds.

I used to broadcast from the SBBK station a round-up of the happenings at the fronts twice a week under the title "From the battle-front" and "From the liberated areas". During the war many of my dispatches were broadcast by BBC, Radio Australia and Akashbani and were also headlined in many international newspapers. I had to carry messages from one camp to another and also at times informed our fighters of

ers who had fought valiantly on the bank of the river Sonabhoari. On the eastern bank at Rajibpur was the defence line of the freedom fighters. The eastern bank stretches from Roumari to Rajibpur, from Mollar Char to Bahadurabad river terminal. The entire area was their stronghold. The Pakistani defence line lay along the entire western bank. The two forces used to fire at each other from opposing banks. This was how the battle was going on.

The undaunted freedom fighters summoned up all their courage and made a sudden thrust across the Sonabhoari, the fateful river, in the last week of September. Before dawn the Pakistan defence line was occupied. Two men of the occupation forces were killed and many others were wounded. With flawless calculated moves the muktibahini snatched away the long-coveted victory without sustaining any casualty. The Pakistani occupation forces were compelled to retreat. Standing there like heroes, Subedar Major Altaf Hussain, Commander Kobirul and freedom fighter Samad prayed to Allah

Kodalkata, encouraged by the fact that the freedom fighters were not well equipped like them. Believing that the muktibahini's defence would not hold out for long, the Pakistani troops mounted stronger pressure. They intensified their attack. Fate also seemed to work against Kobirul and his co-fighters. The muktibahini's defence began to crumble. Till quarter to six in the morning the muktibahini kept fighting with unflinching spirit but ultimately they could not match the overwhelmingly manned army of the enemy. Besides, their weaponry consisted only of lms which too were not in excellent condition. After a two-hour-long frontal battle with an army three times stronger, they decided to retreat. When they swam across the river to a safe place, they found that four of their comrades including Samad, a student at Gaibandha College, were unable to return. The Pakistani occupation troops had captured the four from two bunkers. The occupation troops brought the four to the river bank and exhibited their captives to Kobirul and his co-fighters.

Till then no one knew what cruel fate

orchestrated with the gurgling of the river tide. The news of this atrocity travelled like wild fire through the villages on the river bank. The villagers, mothers and sisters, with bleeding hearts rushed to the river bank to witness this devilish spectacle of a gunboat cruising with five freedom fighters tied to the stern and the occupation troops on board holding their rifles in both hands and gleefully shouting 'Pakistan zindabad'. On the eastern bank was heard only the heart-rending wails 'Help, oh Allah, help'. The men were running all along the bank from Rajibpur to Bahadurabad river terminal and weeping. No one cares to know today how and when the five youths yoked to the stern of the gunboat disappeared and got swallowed by the swirling water. No one among today's tycoons and socialites cares to know that.

The other story took place in Khulna. That was the early phase of the war, April 24. The morning sun had begun to shine over Shekhpara in Khulna. Innocent children of the neighbourhood had abandoned their play and gone to the near-by pond. From the bank of the pond they jumped into the water in a group and were playfully shouting "Joy

children's blood. Not only Shekhpara, the whole city of Khulna sobbed.

When the occupation forces were entering the town of Dinajpur, they hoisted the Joy Bangla flag on their vehicles and were chanting "Joy Bangla" slogan in order to delude people. At 'Dinajpur Lodge' a boy, expressing solidarity, shouted "Joy Bangla" in their direction. That boy was taken to custody and shot dead.

They did not even spare religious preachers. In Dinajpur father Lukas Marandi fell prey to them. He looked after the Ruhia mission. Certainly he was not the one to take up arms against them. Nor did he instigate the freedom fighters. How could such a charge be brought against a religious savant? His only fault was that he had given shelter to some terrified fugitives. After making this kind of accusation against a pious philanthropist they shot him dead at his very mission premises. Ruhia mission is still carrying forward father Marandi's ideals of service and humanist principles.

The story of Kader Master is another horrifying tale. He was a teacher in



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the position and preparedness of Pakistani troops. Towards the end of the war, I was caught unawares by Pakistan army and was subjected to brutal torture. Later, Captain Huda along with his soldiers launched a sudden attack and rescued me.

On 16 December 1971, freedom fighters came home from the fronts wearing gum boots, their hair tousled and a few days' stubble on their cheeks. Many were shedding tears for their lost co-fighters. Hundreds of thousands, however, did not return. The question could well be asked whether we pay roper respect to those who had laid down their lives in absolutely selfless devotion to the cause of liberation. And I could easily go on for hours about this. However, this is not what occasioned this writing. Instead of those complaints, as much valid as they are, I would like to present readers with some real stories of the war as they were fought by our freedom fighters. Needless to say, these stories were culled from my firsthand experience at the fronts.

The kobiruls were among those fight-

with their hands raised. They vowed never again to allow the occupation of their motherland.

It was 4th of October. It was raining. At 4 o'clock in the morning about one hundred men of Pakistani occupation forces aided by three hundred razakars attacked the Kodalkati defence base of the muktibahini. In the rain-soaked morning the muktibahini put up a bold resistance against the army. On the one side were the Pakistani troops armed with mortars and on the other were the freedom fighters carrying simple rifles.

A desperate do-or-die battle was fought for long two hours. Every bullet of the occupation force drew a retaliatory shot from Kobirul, Shafiq and others who were hitting their targets accurately. In one bunker they were able to hit three Pakistani troops. The occupation force suffered huge casualties. Quite a few razakars were also killed. The way the freedom fighters were able to push back the invaders despite possessing no safety space on the left or right or at the back, further enraged the invaders. After suffering unexpectedly heavy casualties they became desperate to seize

awaited those unfortunate four. Five hours later five launches and two gun boats came cruising from the Bahadurabad terminal side of the river. It was witnessed that five freedom fighters after being tied to the stern of the gunboat with cords were thrown in the water while Pakistani soldiers were steering the boat merrily, shouting "Pakistan zindabad". They performed this in full view of the freedom fighters on the eastern bank. The gunboat was speeding towards Bahadurabad to the accompaniment of gleeful chanting of "Pakistan zindabad" by Pakistani armymen. Samad and others tied to the stern were helplessly tossing their bodies in the water. The strong tide and the waves churned by the boat were lashing upon them. In this savage way they were towed from the bank of Kodalkata to Bahadurabad terminal. The gunboat was cruising along the western bank. The Pakistani armymen were dancing on board and occasionally firing blank shots at the eastern bank. The freedom fighters, robbed of their companions, were also running alongside the eastern bank, laterally to the gunboat. They were all in tears. Their wailing 'oh Allah', 'oh Allah'

Bangla" as they splashed, tossed and plunged in the water. Those children had no understanding of politics. They had grown no awareness of the foes as distinct from friends. They were unblemished like flowers. Playfully they were jumping and splashing in the water and shouting "Joy Bangla". Little did they know that in the guise of play violent death was creeping close to them.

It was not yet noon. A military jeep was rushing through the road on the side of which the pond lay. As the sound of "Joy Bangla" reached the jeep, it pulled its brake hard and groaned to a halt on the side of the pond. There were seven or eight children in the pond, an old woman on the landing step and on the bank stood a hotel waiter. Three men of the Pakistani army got down from the jeep with sten gun in their hands. Without sparing a moment's thought they emptied the magazines of their guns on the children swimming in the pond. The old woman dropped dead into the water of the pond and the hotel waiter collapsed on its bank. On the surface of the water floated the skulls and limbs and organs of the children. The water became red with the

Tetulia, several hundred miles away from Dhaka. Much like an intellectual, he propagated that Pakistani soldiers committed atrocities. He also provided shelter to some freedom fighters. Soon he was picked up from his house and tied to the rear of an army jeep and dragged at high speed from Tetulia to Thakurgaon while his body, especially his head, chest, thighs and knees were brutally mangled and battered from constant dragging.

There are thousands more tales like these all of which should be brought out to the youths who seem to be moving away from the history of our liberation war, from the horrendous price that our martyrs had to pay to achieve this.

The 16th December is the landmark date in our nation's life. It is the date on which we saw light after darkness, a new sun-etched flag was raised signalling the birth of the Bengali nation. We must renew our pledge on this day to build Sonar Bangla as dreamt by our martyred, brave freedom fighters.

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