

# 1971: Of remembering, of not forgetting

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SPRING came to our courtyard on a long ago December afternoon. After all the weeks and months of murder and mayhem, of tears and travails, of homes burnt and women raped, of young men abducted and killed, of the elderly swiftly done to death by men calling themselves soldiers of the Pakistan army, Bangladesh emerged from the ashes of East Pakistan. And pure joy it was to be alive, to be young, to know that the land was finally ours, that we had indeed turned our backs on the pernicious two-nation theory which had kept us in its straitjacket for close to a quarter of a century. On that afternoon of 16 December 1971, it was Joi Bangla which reverberated all over the country. On the radio, Kazi Nazrul Islam's '*Srishti shukher ullashe*' came alive, in all the euphoria of freedom. Abdul Jabbar's soulful '*Hajar bochor porey abar eshechhi phirey, Bangla'r buuke achhi darhiye*' pierced the soul in all its poignancy.

Only minutes earlier the 'brave' soldiers of the Pakistan army, 93,000 of them, led by Lt. Gen. Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, had surrendered to the joint command of the Indian army and the Mukti Bahini. That one signature affixed to the surrender document by Niazi formally brought an end to Pakistan in our political and cultural ambience. Nearly twenty years after the Bengalis first asserted themselves on the question of their language in 1952, it was more than the language that was free. It was a country we could finally call our own. And to those who made it possible --- Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the dedicated band of men shaping the Mujibnagar government in exile --- we paid homage. It was homage they richly deserved, and much more. As the evening descended into twilight on 16 December, we reflected on the dramatic five years that had gone by since Bangabandhu first informed us of our road to emancipation through the Six Point programme of autonomy. We reflected on the irony of the circumstances. Bangabandhu had

formally announced the Six Points in Lahore in February 1966. And yet it had been in Lahore where the resolution for the creation of Pakistan on the basis of communalism --- that the Muslims of India were a separate nation --- was adopted in March 1940. Lahore made Pakistan; and it was too the very place where Bangabandhu gave out the signal that Pakistan was soon to come to an end in its distant eastern province.

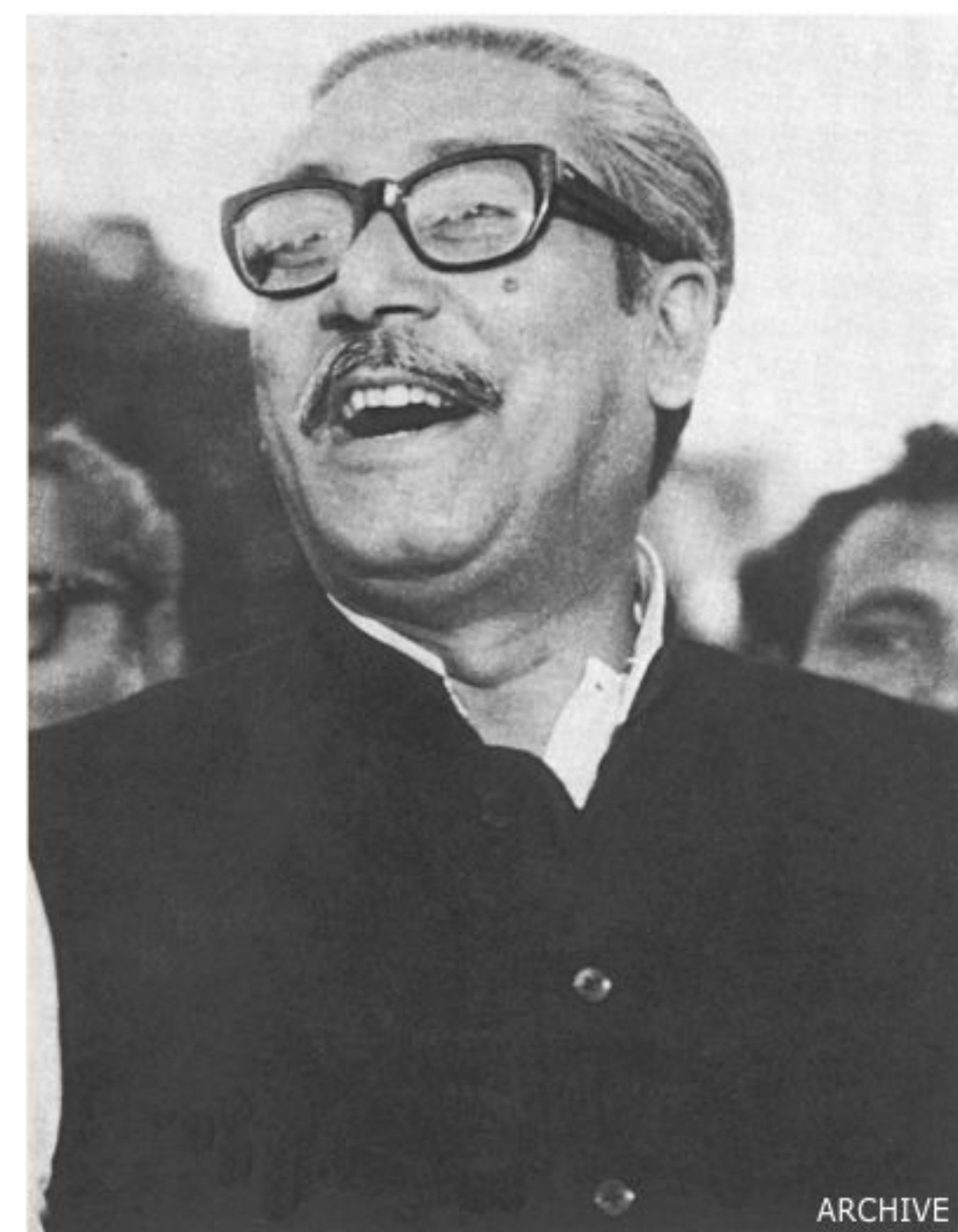
That was in 1966. On that first evening of liberation, we in Bangladesh dwelt on the moment we decided to call our land Bangladesh. Throughout history, in mythology and in our folk tales, Bangladesh had always been a reality. Tagore sang of Bangladesh; Nazrul depicted it in his poetry. And our fathers, when they referred to home, constantly brought up the image of Bangladesh. And so it was that in December 1969, on the sixth anniversary of the death of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman informed Bengalis that thenceforth East Pakistan would be known as Bangladesh. It was political judgement we welcomed, indeed cheered. A mere two Decembers later, there was indeed Bangladesh --- not as a province of Pakistan but as a sovereign state based on the grand ideals of secular democracy. It was a principle Tajuddin Ahmed, the cerebral man who was prime minister in Mujibnagar, would reassert in the early hours of freedom. Through a decree, he clamped a ban on all communal political organizations in the new country. We were, finally and happily, on our own. We were on a journey, across a new landscape.

Even so, there was the anticipation of waiting for Bangabandhu to come home from his lonely incarceration in Pakistan. There was no knowing, in those early days of liberty, if he was alive, if he had been executed by the Yahya Khan junta. And in our hearts and souls there was worry about the tens of thousands of our compatriots trapped in Pakistan. With Pakistan

defeated on the battlefield by Bangladesh's freedom fighters, it was quite natural to suppose that our fellow Bengalis in Pakistan would be subjected to harsh treatment. We worried about them, justifiably.

In a larger sense, our tragedy would not end with the victory of 16 December. It would be two days after liberation that we would learn of other horrors that had been perpetrated by the Pakistanis and their local goon squads even as Bangladesh was emerging free. Scores of Bengali intellectuals, straddling a variety of professions, had been picked up over a period of three days and systematically tortured to death. Much of the euphoria attendant on freedom came to be suspended when the mutilated corpses of these leading lights of society were discovered in Rayerbazar. We wept, copiously.

And we would weep, down the years. Yes, we were free. Yes, Bangabandhu did return from Pakistan. Yes, we were citizens of a secular Bengali state. But, no, we did not know of the conspiracies that were yet afoot against us, against all the values we stood for. Enemies within and without were ranged against Bangladesh. Sinister men moved within the corridors of power, with daggers concealed in their cloaks. They murdered Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; and then they bayoneted and shot to a gory end the four illustrious men who had provided leadership to the nation in the shape of the Mujibnagar government. In the months and years after August 1975, we would lose our battlefield heroes to the depredations of their detractors. Khaled Mosharraf, Abu Taher, MA Manzoor, ATM Haider, Najmul Huda and scores of others would die in the darkness imposed by neo-communalism. Bangladesh, a land of freedom, would become hostage at the hands of ambitious soldiers --- on 15 August 1975, on 7 November 1975, on 24 March 1982 --- and would careen down a bizarre alley of abortive coups d'etat, illegitimate government and questionable politics. Truth would be a casualty.



History would be airbrushed out of our books.

Forty one years after that beautiful winter spring of December 1971, it is for us to reclaim the land and the legacy from those who would have it regress into communalism, into everything that militates against its freedom. Today, the message ought to be loud and clear: that Bangladesh, if it means to march forward in step with the rest of the world, must have enlightened leadership to guide it along. The time is here and now for a reassertion of history, for measures that will erase the falsification which has gone into a mauling of its cultural and political heritage.

It is time to sing of Joi Bangla again, of the spirit that led us to war against the denizens of the dark. It is time to remember. Forgetting is a sin. Looking the other way from truth is criminality that will not be condoned.

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## A child's victory

INAM AHMED

December 15

THE usual nightly sortie of the mysterious droning plane was there. Followed by the terrifying bombardments. Usually two or three bombs flew down from the mysterious plane. You could actually hear the bombs coming, or at least we would imagine them because it was so quiet everywhere. Then a blue flash would fill the rooms, something like camera flashes. And then

glass splinters could not hit anybody. Who told us to do it, I have no idea now. But probably it came from my father who had defence training.

I lay there awake, hearing the elders whispering about the 'imminent street fighting' and the Indian forces and the Mukti Bahini advancing on Dhaka city with cannons booming. We did not know what to do. We could not escape because of the curfew in force. The scared baying of dogs, the swirl-

silver fighting machines not screaming across the sky and then suddenly diving onto Dhaka Airport. The sudden burst of flame from around the wings. And then the zapping missiles shooting into targets. The strange, heart-piercing noise as if somebody was tearing a sheet of steel apart. And then the boom and smoke. There was no air raid siren going on at high pitch. From the second-storey Eskaton building, we could clearly see the airport. The huge white balloons roped around the airfield to obstruct the fighter planes from approaching flying lifelessly. Not that they mattered in the past two weeks. There was a strange silence in the city. We could feel something was happening. Otherwise why the Razakars in black garbs, on army jeeps were not on the streets?

It was around 2 or three in the afternoon--we hardly needed a clock in times of war--that we saw the first jeep entering Dhaka. We looked in amazement at the huge green and red flag with the golden map inscribed inside on top of the open jeep. Behind there were more jeeps and trucks with Indian soldiers and Mukti Bahini in jubilation. The vehicles rolled down the airport road towards Hotel Intercontinental. Then we knew that the country was liberated. That we became an independent nation. That we no longer had to listen with a trembling heart to the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendro at night on low volume in case the Razakars got to know that we were listening to the station. We no longer had to worry about our father and brothers and sisters falling into the hands of the Pakistan army and the Razakars and the Al-Badars. About ourselves, too, the children. There were shots around. Sporadic. We did not know what was happening and did not dare to venture out in case the Pakistan army hit back. (They did actually in front of Intercontinental and a few were dead). Instead, we tuned in to BBC and All India Radio.

December 17

It seemed years since we had last come outdoors. We were going in a Ford Cortina. The city looked so strange. It seemed ages since we had heard Joi Bangla slogan on the streets. Now there were people in groups shouting the slogans as the Mukti Bahinis moved around with sten guns and rifles on Willis jeeps and trucks. Suddenly, a dead city was coming alive.

We saw Pakistan army trucks with Pakistan soldiers moving towards the cantonment. They looked wild and dejected as people booed and showed sandals and shoes at them. But they looked menacing with their machine guns that they had used for the last nine months to mull down the Bangalis. They were all heading to surrender. There was this truckload of soldiers taking the turn at Farmgate and with a sudden impulse one of my cousins took off his shoe and waved at the retreating army.

The next few seconds were terrifying. A Pakistan army soldier suddenly jerked his Chinese rifle off his shoulder and pointed it right at our car window. We could hear the bolt cocking. We ducked inside the car and our driver floored the pedal. The car took a U-turn and whizzed past the truck at lightning speed.

Our next stop was the airport. Huge holes created by bombs dropped from Indian fighter bombers looked like volcano craters or dents left by huge meteors and there were the debris of Indian jets shot down in Pakistan army's anti-aircraft gun fires. We picked up some pieces of the planes as souvenirs. Then there was that burned-up Pakistan Air Force jets on the ground and the rocket holes on the ATC tower and the little masjid by the runway. The whole place was a mess. No wonder that the PAF jets could not be seen in the air for the last few days to counter the Indian fighters.

Just then we saw a helicopter, a French built Alouette with bullet holes patched with aluminium disks. It was

outfitted with missile pods on both sides and a pair of heavy machineguns pointed down and out on the side doors.

There was a pilot standing by the chopper and he told us that they had used it and another single-engined Otter, similarly equipped, to launch the first attack on the morning of December 3 at Godnail oil depot.

We took pictures of the pilot with all of us standing there by the chopper. Later, we came to know his name was Sultan Mahmud Bir Bikram, who was to become an Air Vice Marshall and head the Bangladesh Air Force. Much later, he was a minister in Ershad's cabinet.

From the airport we headed for the stadium where the Indian army had taken position on the ground floor circular verandah in front of the shops. The soldiers looked tired and battle-weary. They had marched all the way from the border. Dusts still clung to their steel helmets, their heels worn-out. They had their dust-covered machine guns open on the veranda and the bullet belts flowed like coiling snakes.

There was this soldier who had come all the way from Punjab, a Shikh with turbans. My mother who had just lost her eldest son in the war on December 1 suddenly got emotional and held the soldier tightly and broke down in tears.

The Shikh soldier patted my mother and in his heavy drawl called her Mummi (mother) and said something that translates as "Mother, you have lost one son, but we all are your sons. You have gained more."

It was late afternoon when we returned home to Indira Road. We had left two weeks ago when the Indian planes started pounding Dhaka airport. The neighbourhood looked deserted. Grasses had grown tall in the Farmgate park. We opened the door and stepped into the sweet home that smelled stumpy but welcoming.

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the drone of the plane would face away. Every night it happened and we waited in muted anxiety and fear for the routine thing to be over.

That night, the December cold seemed even more suppressing as we could hear distant cannon fires. The booms were barely audible. You could only feel the change in the air pressure in the room and the windowpanes clattered. The windows were pasted with papers crossed in X so that the

ing fogs and the occasional swishing of tyres of army jeeps deepened the winter cold. It was a winter like never before. Or could be. It was the winter of 1971.

December 16

There was something unusual about the morning. It was a dull morning with thin fog still spreading across the city. The unusual thing was the absence of the morning bombings by the Indian MIG-21s, the delta-winged