A tale that needed to be told

Fakrul Alam reflects on liberation and the days after

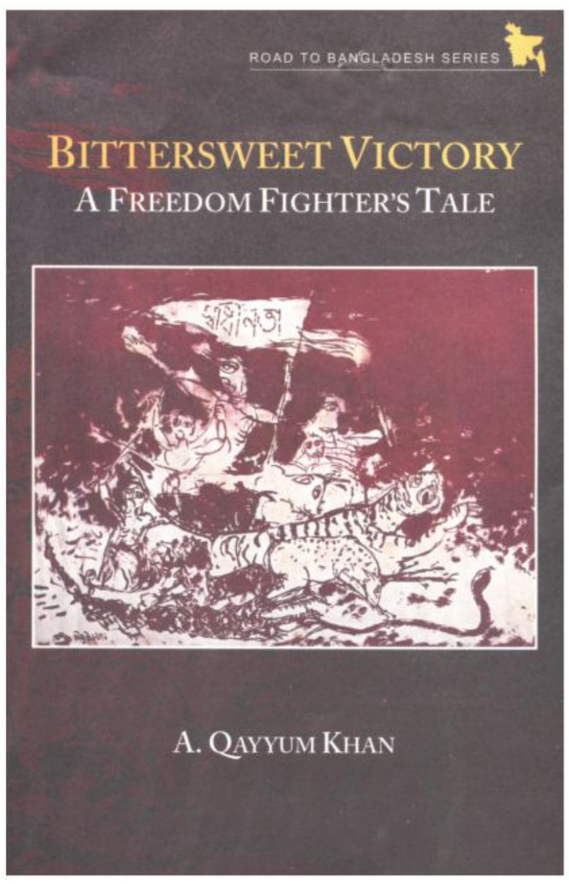
A. Qayyum Khan's account of his experience in the Bangladesh liberation war is very aptly titled: this heartfelt and thought-provoking narrative of his role in the movement that led to his country's freedom is driven not only by nostalgia about the sweet taste of victory but also the bitterness he felt afterwards at what he perceives to be the betrayal of the ideals that made him participate in that war. The man who has written the book more than forty years after the event is obviously a disillusioned one; for him the sweetness of victory had been replaced in the post-war years by considerable disenchantment. Lucidly, Khan blends in this book the story of his involvement in the war with his afterthoughts on it, suggesting in the process that many of the problems prevalent in contemporary Bangladesh could be traced to political fissures that had begun to appear in 1971 and that became more and more visible in the years that followed.

The opening pages of *Bittersweet Victory* are devoted to Khan's family history and upbringing and the years leading up to the war. He provides these details to let readers understand how he was led to participate in the war not by party ideology or professional considerations but the growing realization of a not untypical Bangladeshi youth of the period that he and his people had been relegated to second-class citizens by West Pakistanis. Khan remembers how his school books ignored "the contribution of the people and leaders of Bangladesh" and how there was increasing resentment among the educated section of Bengali society against the repression and exploitation going on in East Pakistan. By the time he was in his teens he had began to realize too that "the aspirations of the people of East Pakistan did not enter into any consideration" of Pakistan's future by its military and non-Bengali rulers.

One wishes that Khan had portrayed more of himself throughout the book; the reader is easily engaged in these opening pages by the portrait of the freedom fighter as an adolescent and a young man in the years preceding the liberation war, caught up in the steadily escalating movement for freedom. Frankly and endearingly, he reveals how his youthful exuberance led him to cast his vote once in his own neighborhood in new Dhaka's Testuri Bazar and then again in Lalbagh in the old city, since he had somehow managed to make himself a voter in both constituencies! Again and again in the narrative, such moments make his telling refreshingly candid and compelling as well as representative of what many others in his generation felt or saw at that time. Khan recollects, for example, his first sight of the first version of the "red, green, and yellow Bangladeshi flag" being fluttered by Bengali men in the mob which had invaded the stadium grounds during a test match to protest the Pakistani military government's postponement of the national assembly meet in 1971. As he remembers it, what he felt "was pride but also fear." He tells readers of his initial reluctance to follow his father's order to remove the Bangladeshi flag from their rooftop after the Pakistani army's brutal and bloody crackdown in Dhaka on March 26 of the year; he eventually complied with it after he realized that "this was no time to get into an argument," though he decided to hide it in their water tank. Amazingly, months after he had returned home from the war, he was able to "retrieve the flag."

Undoubtedly, the most fascinating sections of *Bittersweet Victory* are the ones on the liberation war. Khan's narrative of the days following the crackdown shows him coming to the conclusion that he had to join the war any way he could. He recollects the horrors perpetrated by the marauding and blood-thirsty Pakistani army in Dhaka and the dangers of moving around in a battered and besieged city for Bengali youths like him. On one occasion, he manages to extricate himself from the clutches of the Pakistani soldiers by proving that he was a Khan and a non-Bengali Bihari by displaying his fake identity card. Stuck afterwards in his house and listening to the reports, on the one hand, "of atrocities, mass killings and mass rapes," and on the other, of the mobilizing Mukti Bahini, he opted soon to join the war.

Khan's account of the long and circuitous journey to Murtee where he eventually enrolled in the fledgling Bangladesh army makes for fascinating reading. Naïvely but enthusiastically, he and his friends head for Tripura, the Indian state closest to Dhaka, with a couple of them wearing lungis and Hawaii shirts to escape detection while talking from time to time in English! But they learn quickly, inspired by sights such as the one of the Bengali soldiers across the border, preparing to fight, "tall and strong, armed and ready", or "uninitiated and uninformed volunteers mostly from rural and agrarian backgrounds…bravest sons of the soil." At first Khan joins the Mukti Bahini, which was initially intent on mostly harassing the Pakistanis and later became a guerilla army. His first "assignment" takes him back to Dhaka where he has to make contact and then bring back the family of one of the Mukti Bahini commanders. Here and elsewhere, Khan's narrative is interspersed with not a few moving moments, as when he meets his father briefly in Dhaka, the latter starts wailing at the sight of his son, making him feel "guilty for causing him so much pain." Back in the Tripura camp later, one of his friends is



Bittersweet Victory
A Freedom Fighter's Tale
A. Qayyum Khan
The University Press Limited

"devastated" at having to bayonet Pakistan prisoners at "the 'persuasion'" of some Bengali noncommissioned soldiers.

Soon after he had returned to his camp in Tripura, Khan and a few friends decided to go to Kolkata where they successfully passed the recruitment test so that they could join the Bangladesh army as regular officers. Their training took place in Murtee, a place located in the foothills of the Himalayas. In this excellent chapter Khan recollects the Spartan life and rigorous training they underwent. Despite these challenges, they seemed to have been full of high spirits for the narrative of their training is punctuated by the pranks they play to discomfit each other momentarily. True, they had to "shed a lot of sweat and tear, and the diet was never adequate" but these things didn't matter since "there was terrific camaraderie, everybody was jovial, and spirits were always high" and since "everyone wanted to go to the battlefield and fight the Pakistanis."

Not surprisingly, as far as his personal narrative is concerned, the climactic chapter of *Bittersweet Victory* is the account of the three months Khan spent fighting the Pakistani army as a young officer in Sector Seven, commanded by someone he admires, Lieutenant Colonel Quazi Nooruzzaman. Although he is modest here as elsewhere in talking about himself, it is obvious that he and his troops fought fearlessly and heroically. About his first raid on enemy fortifications, for example, he lets the reader infer his part in it from these cryptic lines: "A brand new second lieutenant had been sent with a bunch of mostly rookies…to raid an enemy defense at night. We had accomplished that and returned safely, a bit winded, but largely unscathed." However, Khan is bloodied on one occasion and the chapter includes brief accounts of the deaths of valiant young officers and their men. His is easily one of the most gripping narratives of the liberation war and the heroics of individual soldiers who entered the battlefield with relatively little training and limited weaponry against a formidable and ferocious enemy. Many of the Bangladeshi officers Khan writes about were clearly exceptional fighters but the man who stands out in the chapter is the valiant and selfless Captain Jahangir, who was unfortunately martyred a couple of days before victory on December 16.

The next chapter of *Bittersweet Victory* has the book's title; it describes feelingly how sweet victory tasted after the intense activity of soldiering in the Mukti Bahini and exposure to the horrors of the Pakistani occupation, as well as the glories of the war undertaken against it. This chapter, however, extends insights Khan had been getting into the conduct of the politicians whose scheming had been complicating the movement towards liberation from the outset of the war. In earlier chapters he had recorded his distaste for these men on many occasions. In Kolkata, for instance, he had found them "more concerned about finding a suitable rental property for their families" than attempting to "mitigate the hardships of their fellow citizens in India." Khan was particularly bothered by the machinations of men like Khandakar Mushtaque Ahmed and Sheikh Fazlul Huq Moni; they are almost the villains of his narrative, the former because he was apparently already conspiring to betray his country and liberation movement ideals, and the latter because he was arrogating responsibilities and vitiating the movement by organizing the Mujib Bahini, almost as a counterforce to the Mukti Bahini. Nevertheless, Khan finds an outstanding hero and patriot in his war narrative in Tajuddin Ahmed, Prime Minister of the Provisional Government, who Khan implies, was not only wary of these scheming men but always struggling to counter them and further the cause of liberation brilliantly, despite these and other problems.

But it is in the chapter titled "*Bittersweet Victory*" that Khan's bitterness about politicians who are intent on prospering by employing dubious means and his unhappiness at the slighting of true patriots like Tajuddin Ahmed and the ordinary men and women who were giving their life for their countries selflessly becomes clear. From this chapter onwards, Khan becomes more and more outspoken in his condemnation of the time-servers and unfeeling or incapable politicians and their cohorts who he suggests were leading their country to the brink of disaster. Ordinary Mukti Bahini soldiers appeared to him to be slighted consistently in the days and months that followed liberation at the expense of the Mujib Bahini, a force comprising mostly of men who had not played an active role in the war front during the liberation struggle. It appeared to Khan that a section of the Awami League was getting a disproportionate share of the fruits of victory. Bitterly, too, Khan recalls the activities of the "16th division", a coinage of the post-war years meant to disparage opportunists "who became freedom fighters on the sixteenth of December," claiming to be guerillas but really working to get the spoils of war without any claim to anything. It seemed to Khan that "the Government of Bangladesh was abandoning those sons of the soil who had made the biggest sacrifice for the liberation of their country." What was equally depressing for Khan was to see committed and able battle commanders like Major Jalil or Colonel Taher or Colonel Ziauddin having to leave the army for standing up for their country and/or against the conniving politicians. As he reflects on the coming days in one part of this chapter, "Is justice going to be selective in independent Bangladesh?" Or, as he writes ruefully a little later in it, "Alas, in Bangladesh, it did not matter what you did for your country. What mattered was which powerful politician you knew."

Khan's final chapter is titled "Bangladesh" and is basically a litany of grievances against the post-war administration as well as an indictment of venal and/or inept politicians and officers who he felt were propelling the country head forward towards disaster. His narrative suggests that he had become increasingly aghast at the way Bengali officers who had fought against the Mukti Bahini men were being rewarded with high administrative positions while genuine freedom fighters were being disbanded or marginalized. He notes the real problems that the country had to tackle because of the brutal war that had battered its infrastructure but indicates that the bad situation had been made worse by poor decision-making and governance or "inertia" in addition to widespread corruption and partisanship. What was worse, Khan suggests, is "the culture of impunity for the anointed [that] was getting entrenched in Bangladesh". Opting for an almost apocalyptic ending to his book, Khan brings his narrative to an end in the tragic mode sometime in 1974. The country was then on the brink of the famine that would devastate it soon. In Khan's words, "The euphoria and aspirations engendered by victory and the liberation of Bangladesh had turned into despair."

Bittersweet Victory is clearly the work of a freedom fighter whose passion for his country and the war he fought to liberate it is still intensely alive in him. Clearly, too, he has written the book not too glorify himself but to remind readers that the road taken by the country's leaders had brought it to a precipice. There can be little doubt that he thought long and hard before writing the book and it is important to note that he has chosen to write/publish it at a time when Bangladesh's leaders have brought it to another precipitous corner from which it must now extricate itself. Indeed, one is reminded by reading the book at this moment of our history of Marx's famous observation: "History repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce." The events of 1974 and 1975 were in the tragic mode, but now all around us events arise that make us think that we are going through the most farcical moments of our political history.

Qayyum Khan's book is without a doubt an invaluable addition to the ever-growing library of books about Bangladesh's war of liberation. Not only has he written the book after reflecting intensely about it over a period of time, he seems to have taken great care to write a work that is very readable, fast-paced and instructive for anyone interested in the future of Bangladesh. The publisher, too, appears to have taken considerable care in producing a book that looks attractive and is a pleasure to read.

Nevertheless, one can't help pointing out that the book could have been more carefully copy-edited. Also, since the book quotes again and again from other published books on the liberation war, one can't help thinking that the book could have benefited from the adoption of conventions that are considered to be standard as far as documentation is concerned. This is a particularly important point since on quite a few occasions Khan makes assertions that are quite contentious by quoting others; for sure, such quotes need to be properly contextualized and correctly documented.

But the last words on Qayyum Khan's *Bittersweet Victory* must be devoted to praising him unreservedly for publishing a very important work. If we are to extricate our nation from the quagmire that our leaders have now led it to, and if we are to avoid more tragic or farcical moments in the future, we need to learn from the history of our independence movement and embrace its ideals once again. This is where the book can become indispensable for all thinking Bangladeshis.

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Women, politics and power

Shahid Alam dwells on the hurdles that remain

BANGLADESH is a country which, at one point of time in its distinctly checkered history, had women as the Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition, and the Speaker of Parliament. Not to speak of one of the key cabinet positions: that of Foreign Minister. Add to that the fact of the two major political parties of the country, Awami League and BNP, having women as their heads, and the casual observer of Bangladesh, its society and politics might be forgiven for thinking that Bangladesh is a matriarchy, where females dominate every aspect of life. Nothing could be further from the truth, concludes Farah Deeba Chowdhury in her monograph-turned-into-a-slender book entitled *Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh: An Empirical Study*. Other than the getup, it feels like, and reads like a monograph with its potential attendant weaknesses. We will go into these later.

In the Preface, the author, an Associate Professor of Political Science at Rajshahi University, acknowledges that her work is a revised version of her MA thesis from a Canadian University, one that was centered on "the problems of women's political participation in Bangladesh." She finds that this country's women must struggle against patriarchy to establish themselves as human beings, and for political institutionalization to prevent violence and corruption. Now, is not that stating the obvious? Ah, patriarchy! So, behind a façade of women seemingly dominating all aspects of life, the reality is the obvious: a strong, seemingly entrenched, patriarchal society that would be very hard pressed to yield much of its self-appointed privileges. The author does not fail to note that Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia went to apex power positions almost by default, that they "emerged in Bangladesh politics due to the low level of political institutionalization in the absence of suitable male heirs."

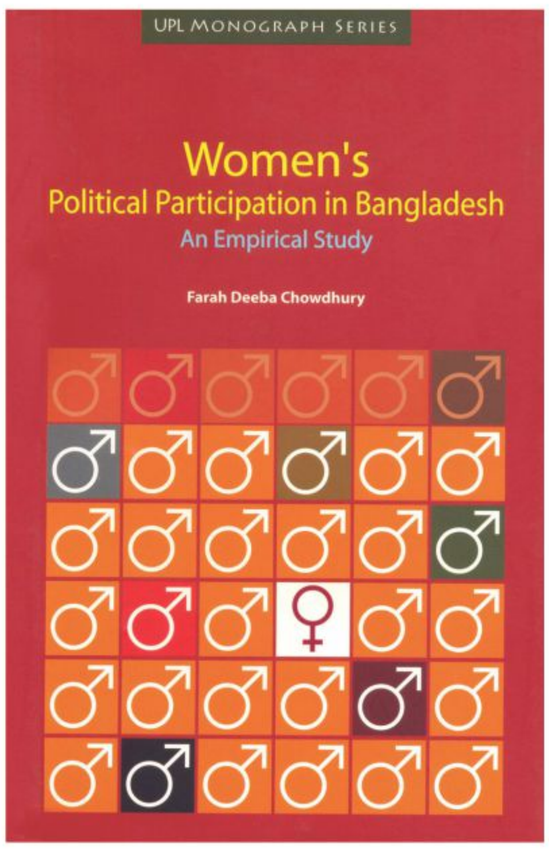
Chowdhury interviewed twenty three, out of thirty eight, female members of the 7th Parliament as part of her study. Among the fifteen who did not respond included then (and current) prime minister, Sheikh Hasina. She uses Samuel P Huntington's construct of political institutionalization to try to explain Bangladesh's political scenario in the context of women: adaptability-rigidity, complexity-simplicity, autonomy-subordination, and coherence-disunity. One aspect of Huntington's adaptability-rigidity theory could very well apply to Bangladesh and its incipient years in attempting political institutionalization: that sometimes a nationalist party (as Awami League was one) whose role was to free the country from colonialism, on gaining independence, finds it difficult to adapt itself to governing the country. Could the firm grip of patriarchy have been relaxed if sound political institutionalization had taken place as soon as Bangladesh became a sovereign independent nation-state? This would be a difficult question to answer, given the imperatives of a very traditional society, but it would have been fascinating to find out if, indeed, successful institutionalization had taken place and if it would have had any impact on patriarchy, and in what way!

Chowdhury specifies a vital aspect of this country's tradition of patriarchy: "Women are oppressed through misinterpretation of Islam by Bangladeshi men and a section of little learned religious leaders." And, another harsh reality, although a little too generalized: "Girls are considered as liabilities and boys are regarded as assets in Bangladesh." Perspectives have been changing in this country, ever so imperceptibly, but incremental changes become demonstrative after a number of years as they add up, but the slow pace can, and does, leave one with the impression that time has not moved, and that society has stayed static. Other factors lend credence to the view that patriarchy has an unshakeable grip on society, including women's political participation. Chowdhury's findings on her respondents will provide a partial picture: "…women parliamentarians were the exclusively elite class in terms of their family's educational and occupational background." Notwithstanding their privileged background, though, in a bit of confusing data provided by the author, "out of twenty women parliamentarians (although 23 respondents have been studied) fifteen had no political experience before being elected as members of the parliament. Among them, fourteen were nominated due to the connections of their husbands and one in recognition of her father's contribution, dedication, and martyrdom for the politics of the Awami League. Three of them got selection to reduce the grievance of their husbands…."

Continuing on the topic of patriarchy, Chowdhury harps on that theme in order to explain as a paradox Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia's rise to political power: "…these two women leaders emerged in Bangladesh politics due to the low level of political institutionalization and patriarchy. Paradoxically, these are also the main reasons, which keep women in general down." Introducing another perspective, "…both Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia emerged in politics due to their kinship and marriage to prevent disintegration of their parties." Chowdhury also perceives the "minus two" formula of the 2007 caretaker government as "a patriarchal conspiracy undertook (sic) by the military backed caretaker government to remove the two most popular women leaders from the politics of Bangladesh." That might well have been the case, but the reader might be hard pressed to find compelling arguments from the author to substantiate her conclusion.

Chowdhury then goes into an interesting discussion on the problems faced by women in political participation due to public and private patriarchal factors. "In Bangladesh," she states, "the problems of women in political participation in the category of public patriarchy include mastan culture and the availability of illegal arms, accessibility to black money, and fear of sexual harassment. The problems of women in political participation in the category of private patriarchy are mainly lack of control over own income, family involvement, and non-cooperation of husbands. Marital status and age are factors that involve both public and private patriarchy." This is a formidable list of manifestations of patriarchal influence and control over women.

Women are subjected to patriarchal control particularly glaringly in the local governments of the country. The list of woes of female members of Union Parishads is striking. Some, as will be evident, are demeaning to women's ability to think for themselves, and their capability as efficient political executors: "…in most Union Parisads the male chairs and members are reluctant to provide an important role to women members and they do not often constitute the standing committees. Male members complain that women members cannot take any decision independently. They always want their husbands' help in decision making. Sometimes women members even invite their husbands in Union Parisad meetings for taking decisions. Sometimes they want to change the



Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh
An Empirical Study
Farah Deeba Chowdhury
The University Press Limited

recorded decisions, because their husbands want different decisions."

A thoughtful chapter on "Women in South Asian Politics" highlights the state of women in politics in countries of the region. In general, the author concludes, "Most of the time women play supporting roles in politics. They participate in voting, in campaigning, in mobilizing electoral support --- specially women's support. But they generally do not stand for elections. Women are also active in trade union movement and peasant struggle, but not as leaders." Chowdhury, as is not unusual with quite a few scholarly writings (and as a potential problem in writing monographs), offers a gamut of very broad suggestions for improving women's conditions as active political participants. They go on and on and on without some much needed specifics on how to effectively bring about some of the solutions she proposes. And the operative word here is "effectively". It will, in several cases, involve the question of "who will bell the cat". For example, the sound suggestion that "democratic culture should be introduced in the decision making process of the political parties" would require such action. As would the rather expansive suggestion that, "At the same time the patriarchal attitude towards women should be changed." However, incremental changes, as noted above, have occurred. Women have occupied important ministries like foreign, home, and agriculture. And the percentage of women cabinet ministers had risen to 13.64%. We can reasonably expect more responsibilities for women in the political arena of the country, more incrementally than previously. The country can only benefit.

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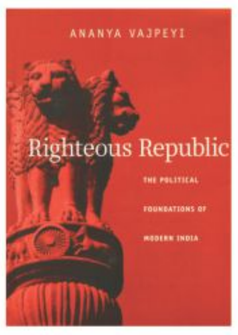

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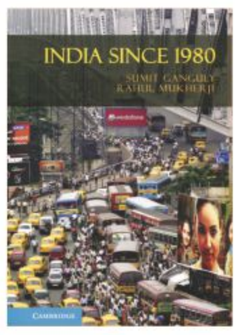

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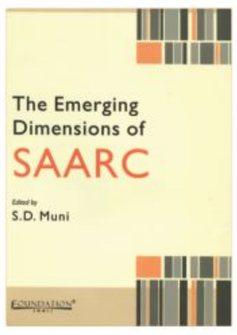

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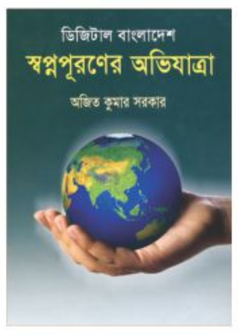

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