March 1971 . . . in Quetta

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When the Pakistan International Airlines jetliner landed at Tejgaon airport in the evening on 5 July 1971, it was desolation that I saw all around. With me were my parents and siblings. We had just flown more than six hours from Karachi, all around the western and eastern coast of India, to be back in our occupied country. No, it was not a province for me any more. Beginning at midnight between 25 and 26 March, it was a country we belonged to. Yes, it was an occupied country, but it was ours. On 3 July, bidding goodbye to my friends at Quetta railway station, I had told them that the next time I travelled to Pakistan, it would be as a free citizen of a free Bangladesh. Twenty five years later, in January 1996, I did go back to Pakistan, as a proud citizen of a sovereign Bangladesh.

On that July 1971 evening, it was a ceaseless downpour that greeted us at Tejgaon airport. More ominously, all the well-dressed men (and not a single one among them was a Bengali) traveling with us were, to our consternation, being saluted by Pakistani soldiers as soon as they stepped outside the airport. We had not known they were military officers about to join operations in Bangladesh. We had, we realised, travelled to our own land with the very enemy then busily engaged in killing our families and friends and pillaging our villages and towns. And how did we happen to be on that plane? The answer is simple: my father, having been transferred from his Quetta office to Dhaka a few days before the general elections of December 1970, saw that transfer order cancelled days after 25 March 1971. That did not deter him from having the transfer order restored, through moving mountains, in a manner of speaking. And so it was that we were on that flight, the only Bengalis.

There are periods in life you do not forget, either because they have been thrilling or because they were symbolic of horror. For me, the thrill came through the electoral victory of the Awami League in December 1970. I cycled all the way, a day after the elections, to the offices of the Baluchistan Awami League and cycled back home with a huge portrait of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. On the way, I was stopped by curious pedestrians, for they wanted to see the image of the Bengali leader. An elderly Punjabi informed the others around him, "Sheikh Saheb is the next leader of Pakistan." You can imagine my joy. I went home, a good bit of Bengali arrogance suffusing my attitude. We would govern Pakistan. Who could stop us?

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But we were stopped. As a school student, I had always been diligent about reading newspapers right from the time I was in kindergarten. Hard to believe? Yes, believe it, for it is all true. In March 1971, I read the newspapers Dawn and the Pakistan Times in minute detail, to keep in touch with what was happening in Dhaka. When 25 March came, my father and his Bengali colleagues looked happy. They were certain within a couple of days a solution would be found to the political crisis and Bangabandhu would take over as Pakistan's prime minister in Islamabad. All day long, we waited for General Yahya Khan to make a radio announcement on an anticipated transfer of power to the Awami League. We were all too naïve to think that Yahya or the Pakistani civil-military combine would do anything of the kind. Even so, when Yahya began speaking in the evening, something in his tone told us something was wrong. We know the rest.

The next day, on 26 March in school, through my depression and anger I informed my friends that my country was in occupation by their army, that I was no more a citizen of Pakistan. That infu-