

Rashomon and the murder of Major General Abul Manzur, Bir Uttam

Concluding part of second installment

LAWRENCE LIFSCHULTZ

IN this second series of articles on the Manzur case which we have just published, the affidavits taken in 1995 of several soldiers and police officials have been described and reviewed. The historical context in which these affidavits came into being under the auspices of Attorney General Aminul Haque and the CID were also examined.

As noted at the outset of this article, the most important similarity between our February reporting and this article is that each account indicates the involvement of senior military officers in a "Special Operation" which resulted in the murder of General Manzur.

As Sajjad Sharif, a senior editor at Prothom Alo has characterised this similarity, "All roads lead to Rome." In other words, the testimonies of the soldiers and the two independent sources interviewed separately (by Lawrence Lifschultz and Ziauddin Choudhury) indicate that the plan to murder Manzur emanated from the Army's "High Command."

But there are also differences in the two accounts. These differences relate to General Manzur's last moments.

In the February account, based on Ziauddin Choudhury's sources, and an independent source that I interviewed long before Ziauddin published his book, we both expressed the view that General Manzur was murdered by a senior military officer who entered the room where Manzur was being detained inside. This officer shot and killed Manzur within moments of entering the room. The murderer then left the Cantonment unimpeded and in plain view.

In the current series the story as told by the affidavits of five soldiers has been reported. Once these documents came into our possession, it was my responsibility as a journalist and *Prothom Alo's* responsibility as a newspaper to accurately describe this similar, yet different, version of events. We would have been remiss if we failed to do so. This responsibility also applied to *The Daily Star* that simultaneously published the February articles on General Manzur.

The principal difference between the two versions that have been presented is that the soldiers claim that under orders from the "High Command" one of them murdered General Manzur at the Cantonment firing range. They also provided the names of the senior officers who directed them or were present at the firing range.

Which of these two versions of General Manzur's last moments is correct? Or, is there another version of Manzur's final hours that we do not yet know?

Was there an evolution in the soldiers' affidavits? Did they go through several drafts? Initially, were the soldiers persuaded to implicate themselves and to name a particular soldier who they claim did "the job"? They named him yet he seems nowhere to be found.

In the material we have reviewed there is no indication this individual was ever arrested. Perhaps, this soldier who allegedly shot Manzur in this version left the country long ago and was

provided ample resources to do so years before Aminul Haque launched his investigation in the 1990s. As of yet, we do not know the answer to these questions.

Were the soldiers made to realise by the Chief Prosecutor and the CID that they might be convicted for murdering General Manzur's given the degree in which they were involved unless they revealed whose orders they were following? On this basis were they persuaded to identify those senior officers in the "Chain-of-Command" who were present at the firing range or had earlier told them the "Special Operation" that they had been selected to join on the night of June 1 would end with Manzur's death?

Had the soldiers ultimately realised that the insistence of their officers that one of their number carry out the murder was part of a plan that would implicate them in General Manzur's death and thereby deflect attention from the high ranking officers who Aminul Haque believed had organised Manzur's killing?

Was the propaganda on June 2 that "reckless soldiers" had killed General Manzur a telltale sign that they too were being set-up as part of an "elaborate scheme"? Had the CID or Aminul Haque pointed this out to soldiers who had made up the Hathazari patrol? As of yet, we do not know the answer to these questions.

Is it possible that General Manzur was killed by a high ranking officer sent from Dhaka, while he was being detained in the VIP Guest House, and that his body was later moved from the Guest House to the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) by Lt. Colonel Shams (aka Lt. Colonel Shamsur Rahman Shams)? Colonel A. Z. Tofael, the doctor who performed the post-mortem testified that Lt. Colonel Shams "had identified the dead body [of General Manzur] and handed it over to [the] Duty Officer" at CMH.

Was Shams assisted by several soldiers in bringing General Manzur to the CMH? Was the story of the firing range introduced in order to avoid identifying the senior officer who entered the Guest House and is alleged to have murdered Manzur? Or, is it true that General Manzur was killed on the firing range, by one soldier with a group of officers and soldiers standing by?

What we do know is that there are many unanswered questions. The point of an investigation by an organisation like the CID is to search for the answers. This principle also applies to the work which diligent minded journalists do.

The approaches are different but in some respects the objective can be similar if an essential honesty is present. The purpose is to uncover the true story of what happened. Hopefully, accurate information becomes the key to identifying the perpetrators of a crime.

All investigations are faced with different and often conflicting versions of an event. The quality of the investigator and the powers that a judiciary may provide in supporting an important investigation will often determine whether the perpetrators of a crime will be held to account.

What we have here is a Rashomon phenom-



non. Rashomon is a film that the legendary Japanese film director, Akira Kurosawa, released in 1950. Kurosawa is regarded in Japan with the same level of respect and admiration as Satyajit Ray is held in Bengal. Upon its release Rashomon immediately received international recognition not only for its quality but also due to the compelling dilemma that the film presented. Rashomon has significance for the Manzur case. It can help us understand the dilemmas we face.

The Kurosawa film is set in 12th century Japan and tells the story of the murder of a Samurai warrior as he was traveling with his wife through remote woods near the city of Kyoto. There are three living witnesses to the murder: the wife, a bandit and a woodcutter. As the story is told, the Samurai himself also appears through a spiritual medium to recount his version of his own death to the Court. Thus, in the film the Samurai represents a fourth witness.

Yet, each of these witnesses gives a different description of how the murder occurred. The story opens with a priest and the woodcutter sitting beneath Kyoto's main entry point known as the Rashomon Gate with a heavy rain pouring down around them. They have taken shelter underneath the gate. The two men are discussing the murder for which both had been summoned to testify before a Court.

The priest had passed the Samurai and his wife as they traveled on the road. The woodcutter had come upon the Samurai's body and says that he immediately fled the scene in order to notify the authorities. Much later the woodcutter would admit to the priest that from the woods he watched the entire sequence of events leading up to the murder. However, he had not revealed this to the Court because he did not want to become entangled in the case.

What is far from clear in each of the witness accounts is who is telling the truth. Each of them

presents a different version of what they claim they witnessed. The Japanese priest is trying to understand who is telling the real story. The brilliance of the film is how the priest determines in his own mind which witness has spoken truthfully and why. Achieving this insight restores the priest's hope in humanity.

Rashomon walks the streets of Chittagong. The Rashomon phenomenon is also walking the corridors of Bangladesh's courts. There is no doubt that a man was murdered. He was a distinguished soldier and a heroic figure from Bangladesh's Liberation War. The writer, Syed Badrul Ahsan, echoing Shakespeare, has called General Manzur's murder, a "Murder Most Foul."

As in Rashomon there is an answer to certain conflicts in the testimony of the witnesses. Both accounts agree that General Manzur was murdered. Both accounts implicate senior military officers in a pre-meditated crime. This makes it murder in the first degree. The issue is whether General Manzur was killed by a soldier, a Major General or a senior officer, whose rank we do not yet know.

Furthermore, there exists the important question regarding what individual or group of military officers may have been directing the operation. Further investigation is the only way to resolve this matter. There are also witnesses that have not yet been heard from and may be willing to testify under the right conditions.

It needs to be understood that General Manzur's murder was a political murder. A seismic shift happened within the Bangladesh Army. An army made up of veterans of a war in which they fought bravely against the atrocities of the Pakistan Army and its dictatorship was taken over in 1981 by a group of officers who had by-and-large either collaborated with the Pakistan Army or abstained from taking up arms in defense of their country during its darkest hour.

In General Moin's view it wasn't Manzur who had staged a coup. It was General Ershad and his close associates who were now in the final stages of a multi-year project by which they were taking the final and crucial step toward full consolidation of power by the repatriated group who had returned from Pakistan in 1973. Once pariahs they would now dominate and brutally purge the Army of their opponents. These developments were not rooted in happenstance.

There is no doubt that many lies have been told over the years about General Manzur's alleged involvement in Ziaur Rahman's death. Not a shred of evidence was ever produced. Yet, General Ershad and his associates accorded themselves the role of judge and jury. If the accounts given by the soldiers of the June 1 "Special Operation" unit or Ziauddin's Cantonment source are true, then the Army's "High Command" under General Ershad also accorded itself the role of executioner. General Manzur's death was an important part of a much wider operation.

The Army Command in the months that followed remorselessly carried out many executions in kangaroo courts known as "express" Field Court Martials that were preceded by the systematic torture of the accused. No time for a

plausible defense was given any of the soldiers who were charged. It was an express train that had one destination.

General Moin as Adjutant General had refused to allow these trials and opposed their initiation without a careful investigation of the facts as required by law. Ershad stepped in and took over Moin's portfolio. Thus, it was under Ershad's signature and authority that mass executions in a massive breach of Army regulations took place. In his book, General Moin describes this in great detail. Anwar Kabir has called it the "Bloodbath of the Bangladesh Army."

Zia's murder provided the opportunity to eliminate Manzur and purge the Army of all Mukti Bahini elements from within the officer corps and among the rank-and-file. Had the issue only to do with Zia's assassination, then Manzur would have been kept alive and been tried in a Court of Law.

However, a political sea change was underway and the removal of all opposition elements within the Army was a necessity for the establishment of the decade long Ershad dictatorship that would soon emerge. Thus, in this context Manzur's murder must be understood as a political murder. The full story of this transformation is yet to be told.

Something more needs to be said before we leave this subject. The author and his readers have spent a great deal of time and effort trying to unravel truths and untruths about the death of General Manzur. At times it has bordered on a forensic discussion. But, an important reality has not been recognised.

In the past month I have spent several hours with General Manzur's family. Not a single one of them has been able to read these articles. I don't expect they ever will. I respect them for it. I admire them for it. The pain in recalling these events is simply too enormous to be revisited. They know the importance of the articles but the trauma of remembering is simply too great.

Rubana Manzur, General Manzur's oldest daughter, remembers how her arms were wrapped tightly around her father's waist at the Hathazari Police Station and how she would not let go of him as Captain Emdad's "special" unit pulled her father away from her for the last time. She would never see him again. Within a few hours he would be murdered.

Rubana was only a young teenager when she was separated from her father. She has tried to describe to me what happened but she can never complete the description. The pain is too great and the tears are too many.

The Manzur family have begun talking with attorneys in Dhaka in the hope that the Supreme Court in the "public interest" establishes its authority over the Manzur case so that one day the full story can be known and that those responsible for Manzur's murder will be punished according to the law of that country, Bangladesh, for which he fought so bravely.

The writer was South Asia Correspondent of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (Hong Kong). He has written for *The Guardian*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *The Nation* (New York) and the BBC. He is the author and editor of several books including *Hiroshima's Shadow*, *Why Bosnia?*, and *Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution*. He can be reached by email at - OpenDoor.Lifschultz@gmail.com

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