

Remembering the year of war

SHIMUL (BILLAH) YOUSSEFF

WE lived in Rajarbagh Road, across the tin-roofed bamboo barracks of the Police Lines. On the night of March 25, 1971, my brother-in-law Altaf Mahmud, my two brothers and I were playing carom on the veranda until 10:30. After that, the three of them went out. Just then, we heard some shots, but they seemed far away. Scores of people had come out on the street. The policemen looked agitated. "Please get off the streets and go back into your houses!" they shouted to the crowd. "And if you can, get out of the area!!" Then, half a dozen policemen ran up to our roof with their rifles. They were also taking position on the roofs of other houses along the road. We were, in fact, the front-line.

Suddenly, a storm of firing erupted. We went under our beds immediately. The volume got louder, now joined by explosions and sounds of automatic fire. The policemen were firing back. At one point, the sound turned into a roar.

The police barracks caught fire. It was windy and we could feel the heat inside the house. The walls and the floor were warm to the touch. The policemen on our roof came down. We didn't know any of them although we lived just across their barracks but that night, being Bengali was very real. We were all together in this fight. They asked for clothes, lungi and vest, and told us to get rid of the uniforms. They were very emotional. They touched my mother's feet in salutation. "Mother, we'll meet again!" Before they left, they dumped their weapons in a pond behind our house.

By then, we had as many as twenty-six people in the house. Mustafa Manowar ran in from an adjacent house and Badal Rahman also made it somehow. A lady on the second floor had to be brought down on the shoulders of her relatives. A bullet had singed her hair and she had fainted.

But our house was far from safe. To make Molotov cocktails, Altaf bhai had stored petrol in a couple of forty-gallon drums in the bathroom. When the barracks caught fire, the drums became objects of terror. If the fire reached them, the whole house would go up and everyone with it. We could not even pour it down the sink. There was just too much petrol.

Desperately, Altaf bhai brought blankets, mattresses, and piled them on the drums. Cash and other articles came tumbling out as he pulled out clothes from the almirahs. Then he poured water over the heap to keep the drums cool. Perhaps, feeling guilty that so many might be killed because of him, he sat near the bathroom, keeping vigil for most of the night. Thankfully, because of the high wind, the barracks burned quickly and soon the heat disappeared. For some time, amid sporadic shots, we could hear the sound of boots, and people shouting, but all that also died down. From around 4:00 in the morning, there was just silence. Nobody had slept.

A little after 7:00 in the morning, we heard someone shouting over a loud-speaker, "Take those flags down and put up

Pakistani flags immediately." The loud-speaker was mounted on a three-wheeler auto-rickshaw and we recognised the voice. It was of a rabid supporter of the Pakistani cause, but the announcement in Bengali was still jarring. We took down the flag, the black one and the new Bangladesh flag that we helped Ma put together.

Suddenly, Altaf bhai's three year old daughter Shaon climbed up on the wet pile on top of the petrol drums, and for no rhyme or reason started shouting, "Joy Bangla! Joy Bangla! Joy Bangla!" She was quickly hushed.

The following evening, after dinner, we quietly slipped out and went over to my friend Kashfi's place.

At curfew-break on March 27, we decided to move from Rajarbagh. We did not have any close relatives in Dhaka and my late father had left his village ages ago. So there was no question of going there. We knew the Mahathero, the chief



Shimul (Billah) Youssuff

monk of the Bouddho Mondir (Buddhist monastery). He used to call me "kuti-ma" or little mother. We left in Altaf bhai's car, now wiped clean of all incriminating stickers, etc., bearing nationalistic slogans that had adorned the vehicle just a couple of days earlier. We passed the destroyed Police Lines and I glanced at the vicious faces of the patrolling Pakistani soldiers. They were laughing. "Why are you leaving?" they taunted in Urdu, leering at us. "Why don't you stay the night?"

I just stared ahead, wanting to get away from that place. Altaf bhai dropped us at the Mondir and went out again.

We spent two days and nights there. We came across familiar faces among the dozens of refugees, among them cinematographer Baby Islam, his wife Tandra and their son Joy. The monks looked worried and advised us to move further in, to another neighbourhood.

Music teacher Bareen Majumdar, had sought shelter in Jinjiri with his family. The place was already crowded with refugees when it was attacked by Pakistani soldiers on the night of March 27. Bareen-da had run out with his teenage daughter but after

running blindly in the dark for sometime he realised that his daughter was no longer with him. He searched far into the night, desperately crying out her name again and again. But it was as if the earth had swallowed her up.

Our landlord sent word that the military had asked him about the empty flat, warning him that if the tenants did not return, they or some non-Bengalis would move in. But a month passed before we returned. The house had been looted clean and what they couldn't take away they had smashed.

We had people visiting Altaf bhai soon afterwards. These were freedom fighters. One day, he brought Shahadat Chowdhury who was member of a Mukti Bahini outfit. He had been to India and had just returned after training. Altaf bhai started working for them. There were others like Samad bhai, Chullu bhai, and Hafiz bhai, an excellent violinist. A number of operations were planned in our house. The

Police Lines next door were now full of collaborators and (West) Pakistani personnel.

The thrill was in waiting in excitement for some impending operation. For instance, they'd tell us: "A bomb will go off at Chamelibagh today late in the afternoon." We'd be up on the roof, and sure enough, we'd hear an explosion in the distance. We could not shout or cry out, so we'd come down and hug each other in joy. The freedom fighters stopped by at times for food. Ma usually cooked extra. Uncle Alvi (Prof Abul Barq Alvi, Institute of Fine Arts, Dhaka), an artist and freedom fighter was among the regulars.

One day, Altaf bhai brought in two steel trunks in his car. They were full of arms and ammunition. He had not been able to close the boot of his car properly and had driven in like that. That night, he and Uncle Iku, a neighbour, took the trunks to the backyard of another neighbour's house and buried them under a lemon tree. Dogs were howling mournfully and constantly that night, and continuously so they completed their job in a hurry.

On 27 August, my sister Minu, one of

my brothers and Uncle Iku, left for India with Shahadat bhai and Alam bhai (Habibul Alam, Bir Protik). Altaf bhai was supposed to leave on September 3.

Early morning on August 30, I heard the sound of a vehicle. Ma was reciting the Koran. I peeked through the window slates. A military truck and a white car had pulled up near our house. Soldiers were jumping out in great hurry and in no time, our house was surrounded. Moments later, they had broken in through the back door, shouting, "Altaf Mahmud! Where is Altaf Mahmud?"

A sleepy, dishevelled Altaf bhai came out in the corridor and as soon as he said he was Altaf Mahmud, they grabbed him. Then they began kicking him and clubbing him viciously with their rifle butts. Jhunu apa was stopped by Ma from rushing out of her room. Then Shaon started throwing up. Uncle Alvi and my three brothers were sleeping on the living room carpet. They woke up by the noise and on the spur of the moment, Altaf bhai identified uncle Alvi as, "Abul Barq" (the first two names).

The officer-in-charge told Altaf bhai that he would count up to 10, and if by then he didn't tell them where the weapons cache was, they would shoot all the male members who were now lined up against the wall, including Naser and Rasul, two boys from next door. And he started counting. Altaf bhai looked at me and my brother, once. Then he started walking. The officer and some soldiers followed him. My brothers and the others were also led out and made to sit on the veranda floor.

I didn't know what to do. In desperation, I started calling up people on the phone. But what could they do? It seemed I was the only one unoccupied then. Ma was with Jhunu apa and Shaon, locked up in their room.

I ran out to the building next door. From the first floor veranda, I could see Altaf bhai and the soldiers with him. They had reached the lemon tree. A rope and a shovel appeared. Altaf bhai started digging. Time to time, they slapped and kicked him, shouting, "*Kafir ka bachcha!* (Son of an infidel) *Communist ka bachcha!*" Perhaps weakened, at one point, he fell on the ground. A soldier lunged, his bayonet stabbing Altaf bhai. When Altaf bhai got up again, his face was covered with blood, a piece of torn skin hanging from his forehead. He could not even open his eyes and two of his teeth were missing. Finally, with the help of the rope, he pulled the trunks out and loaded them into the truck without help. Then they tied his hands behind his back with the rope. The white car drove up. As Altaf bhai passed me, his eyes met mine briefly. Then he was bundled into the car. My brothers and the others were kicked all the way into the truck, and they all drove away.

Something strange had happened earlier. Altaf bhai owned a nila ring (star sapphire) which some say can bring extreme good or bad luck.