

1971 AND AFTER:

A Participant-Observer's Frayed Recollections

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It has neither been possible, nor even desirable, for me to write about 1971. The reasons are fairly simple. First, while my engagement in the war was early and sincere, my actual contribution to it was rather flimsy and dull. I had carried a gun only in the last few weeks of the war. (Incidentally, nearly 40 percent of the weapons carried by American soldiers in WWII had never even been fired). I had worked for the English language weekly, *The People*, (an opportunity created for me by Aly Zaker bhai) when I was in Kolkata for slightly over six weeks in May and June, and after I came to the "front" (i.e. Melaghar, near Agartola), brought out an occasional newsletter, with Shahadat bhai, called *lorai* (Battle) as a small, perhaps insignificant, part of the informational and psy-op (psychological operations) strategies of Sector 2.

My military training was minimal, my combat experience less so. On the rare occasions I had received fire, or had to return it (mostly during our last march to Dhaka in early December), I had trembled uncontrollably – not out of fear that I would die, but out of concern that I may kill somebody. If, as Milton had said, "they also serve who only stand and wait", I had served the cause. That, perhaps, is the extent of my heroism. My war time identity was derived from my association with the brave, not through my action as one.

Like T S Eliot's "Gerontion", "I was neither at the hot gates, Nor fought in the warm rain, Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass, Bitten by flies, fought ..." I had never sought a Freedom Fighter's certificate because, compared to the honor and valour of those around me at the time, in all honesty, I do not think I deserve one. Therefore, silence was not only prudent, it was also appropriate.

Second, I am not sure that many of us have been able to achieve the emotional distance from those events for us to be objective, honest or analytical. The sheer intensity of that historical moment imposes its own constraints and distortions; memories become selective, treacherous and self-serving; judgments are often affected by the march of later events, or the promptings of other friends, or the impact of the dominant meta-narrative. Some may have the skills and confidence to transcend these limitations. I do not.

Third, our very young age at the time became the enemy of good expository writing. We had rushed into events, and were perhaps overtaken, if not overwhelmed, by them. Many of us were drawn to the war not for intellectual reasons but purely emotional ones. Hence, it became all the more difficult to wrap our minds around it, and organise our thoughts and experiences in a meaningful and substantive manner. Thus some found it easier to write individual memoirs – dramatic, linear and uncomplicated, focusing on personalities and events, often insular in being removed from the sociological or political realities of the time, theoretically innocent.

Some of these writings are, indeed, rich and evocative and allow us to relive the thrill of that brief shining moment, and

reaffirm our splendid confrontation with history, when we had dared to be our finest. They help us to recall the dangers we faced, the sacrifices made, the sufferings undergone, the exemplary acts of courage, commitment and compassion demonstrated, the tears, the laughter, the dreams shared. "Aye", as Hamlet would say, "there's the rub", for many of those dreams were variable, and were experienced or expressed as vague generalities rather than as compelling goals.

Each of us joined the war for different reasons and brought our own baggage, yearnings, confusions, angers, outrages, fantasies angst and anxieties to the struggle. Our responses were spontaneous, elemental, almost primal, made easy by the blatantly unfair way in which the idea of Pakistan was implemented, and by the gratuitous savagery of the Pakistani military. Perhaps we had embraced the Marxist fallacy - since capitalism was the root of all problems (inequality and exploitation, colonialism and violence, division and injustice, alienation and despair, commodity fetishism and false consciousness, and so

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on), once capitalism collapses, ipso facto, these problems will disappear, the old structures of class rule will "wither away", a new "man" will emerge. The deductive logic was both utterly simple and totally convincing. Perhaps, it was also maddeningly naive.

For us, at that time, Pakistan was considered to be the root of all our afflictions. The defeat of the Pakistani military would sever our connection with it. Hence, as soon as this nightmare would be over, all that Pakistan had meant to us (communal division, economic exploitation, cultural calousness, and undemocratic practices) would end. A golden dawn would break. As with Marx, the logic was seductive. And, it was just as equally inadequate.

It should be pointed out that the idea of "independence", understood in terms of the sovereign and juridical status of a "state", was relatively simple. The concept has a long lineage, maturing between the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and the Congress of Vienna in 1815, its meaning delineated by international law and upheld by diplomatic practice and historical precedence. But the notion of "freedom" is much more problematic, and is as difficult to define as it is challenging to attain. This was Bangabandhu's final words in the memorable speech on March 7. This was, truly, a moment of grand inspiration, when our nationalist instincts had found voice and agency, and our long and ambitious journey towards our own "tryst with destiny"

was about to enter a new phase. However, the content of "freedom" remained a bit shrouded in ambiguity, and the process of unpacking the term was not undertaken with any degree of care or urgency.

In rejecting the idea of Pakistan we were also, by definition, discarding the evils it had supposedly represented, and reaffirming its opposite. Thus, the "freedom" we had dimly visualised consisted of: economic justice - with particular emphasis on sensitivity towards the marginalised and oppressed; inclusive democracy - with particular emphasis on the rule of law, civil rights and liberties, and electoral fairness; communal harmony - with particular emphasis on ensuring "the privatisation of religion" (as Voltaire had envisioned) through creating a modern, secular state; and cultural identity - with particular emphasis on preserving and advancing the heritage of our language, country and people. These principles emerged not because they were clearly articulated by any individual or document, but because of the historical logic that the circumstances dictated.

It is possible that the war came too quickly for us, thrust on us by Pakistani impatience and cruelty. We had little time to prepare ourselves psychologically, militarily or intellectually. We paid a heavy price for that initially. But we had identifiable enemies to defeat, and we learnt on the job (as it were). We succeeded.

But, it is also possible that the end, facilitated by India, came too soon, and too abruptly. And again we revealed our unpreparedness and vulnerabilities. This time we could not prevail as easily. The euphoria of victory was soon followed by a period of drift and disillusion. We began to realise that the second enemy we had to conquer was ourselves - our lusts and envies, our pettiness and venality, our duplicity and subversion, our greed and insecurities, our desperation to acquire material comforts through any means possible, and our need to dominate and intimidate others. We were able to defeat the Pakistani military, but not our baser instincts.

What is striking is how quickly the worm had turned, and how fully. We began to realise that earlier we had merely engaged in a war, not a political struggle. There was a moral clarity that drove us, patriotism, Bangabandhu. But, we had no ideological framework to guide us, or a common platform that beckoned. Consequently, there was a frantic improvisational quality in designing the institutions, laws and political directions after our victory had been attained. The process of mobilising the people towards desired objectives, that had appeared to be so easy and obvious, remained overlooked, fraught and confusing.

There is no doubt that the physical challenges were formidable. Almost 10 million refugees were returning from India. Our infrastructure was in shambles. Our trade, industry, agriculture and national exchequer remained disrupted and drained. Pakistan refused to honour our legitimate financial claims. There was a pall of death and destruction (particularly the cynical and cowardly murder of intellectuals towards the end) that hung like a heavy cloud over

everything. Many trained and experienced Bangali government officials had remained trapped in Pakistan. There were daunting events over which we had little control that added to our difficulties (the 1973 Arab-Israeli war that led to the OPEC price hikes, increases in international price of food grains, natural disasters, and so on).

But, at the same time, the people were homogenous, enthusiastically united, and eager to contribute to the rebuilding of the country. They had proven their incredible sense of individual virtue and collective consciousness during the war. The world had been impressed by the pluck and resilience of the Bangalis, and was willing to be generous in helping us to recover from the ravages of conflict. We had a powerful neighbour that was friendly and supportive. We had a political party that was nationally organised and demonstrably popular. And, beyond everything else, we had a leader whose towering, charismatic presence reassured us, stirred our souls, and commanded our total subservience.

The Constitution and the initial Planning Commission documents, drawn up by some of the best minds in the country, were entirely relevant and admittedly brilliant. But the political untidiness and moral squalor of the period generated increasing levels of distractions and frustrations, and kept us from enjoying the rights, hopes and visions they contained. We fumbled. We demonstrated our failures in several sad and unexpected ways.

First, it was almost unbelievable that some of the same people who had shown such integrity of purpose and nobility of conduct during the war could, so quickly, descend into such crass displays of self-interest, corruption and insensitivity towards others. Second, it was equally surprising that the party which had derived its entire identity and moral authority from its struggle to secure the democratic rights of the people, would seek to curtail some of those very rights through an unprecedented and clumsy political experiment that began in late 1974 and culminated in mid-1975. And finally, and perhaps most dramatically, it was absolutely inconceivable, that our unquestioned leader, the person to whom we gave our total allegiance, and for whom we were willing to undertake any sacrifice, would be assassinated in a brutal and dastardly manner by some misguided and disgruntled military officers. I had left the country within two weeks of that tragedy.

In his poem "The French Revolution as it Appeared to Enthusiasts at Its Commencement", William Wordsworth had written, "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very Heaven". We had been greatly fortunate to have experienced that "heavenly bliss" in our own land and among our own people. Thus it was particularly heart-wrenching for us to realise how incomplete our effort had been, and how unfulfilled our promise. It remains so even today.

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