

Escape to Freedom

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for him kept on driving around at a safe distance from our house so as not to arouse any suspicion in the neighbourhood about an unknown man visiting a Bangali family. During the discussion, he had the two girls brought before him, and made a solemn pledge that they would get the same protection and treatment as his own daughters during the entire journey until we reached Kabul.

He also left detailed instructions about the precautions that we must take while travelling the stretch by train – no luggage except a small hand bag, absolutely no conversation amongst us, and no carrying of any photographs or certificates – and we should all be dressed in a manner indistinguishable from others in the compartment, so as not to compromise our identity in any way. We were to get down one station before Peshawar main station, and rush to the marked car (with its engines on start and running).

What an irony of fate! With the political change, we had turned out to be subversive elements from loyal citizens, and now being compelled to flee the country. On the appointed day, February 28, 1973, our fateful journey to freedom began. We got up well before dawn, had a quick wash in candle light, and left for Pindi railway station in a taxi, ordered the previous night. The train was on time, and we started early in the morning accompanied by our friend and his daughter. We reached Peshawar cantonment station around 9am, hurried to the car waiting just outside the platform, and crammed (all seven of us) ourselves in it.

The driver at once released the clutch and started moving along the main city road, diverting almost immediately to an unpaved side road. After we had covered some distance, we saw somebody frantically waving the car to stop. Instead of

Each one of us was given a mule to ride in a single file. A man was assigned to each mule who was holding the bridle to guide the beast along the narrow and dangerous hilly path. We commenced our journey in the afternoon around

stopping, the driver took the car to an open wheat field and continued driving. As he explained later on, the man with the flag was there to warn us not to proceed along the road to preclude any chance of being caught by police. It was sheer good luck that we got the timely warning.

After about two hours of bumpy ride, we reached a village far into the non-regulated tribal area by the side of a hill. Four local people received us and immediately took us inside a cave. We were told that this had been done for our safety. There were many rival clans living nearby and we, as guests

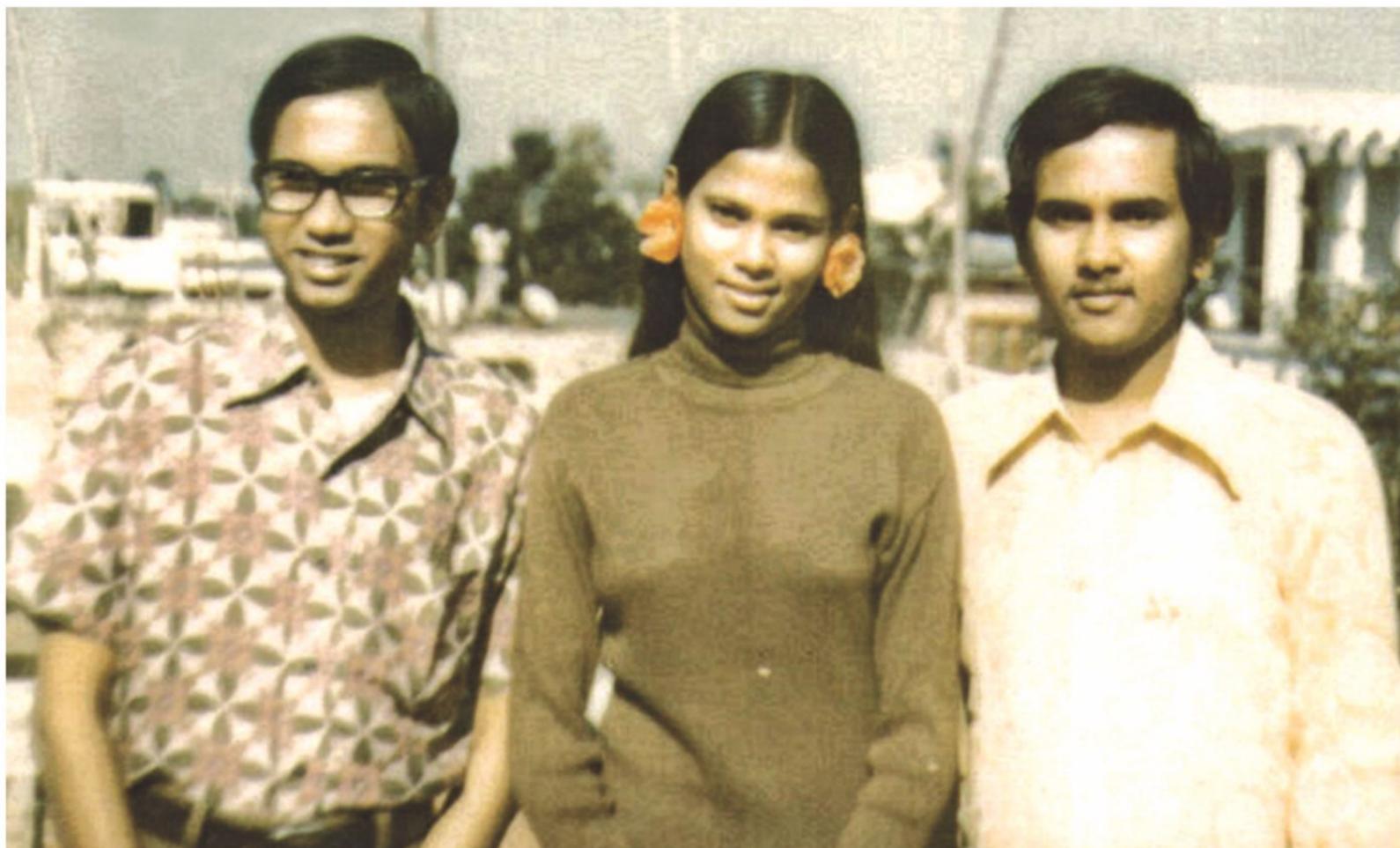
of one clan, might arouse jealousy in others, provoking unfriendly acts. Inside the cave, we ate some boiled eggs and bread that I was carrying in my hand bag. It was very timely since we were famished. By this time, it was late afternoon and we were asked to start walking deeper into the tribal area towards the border. After about two hours we took shelter in a thatched hut for food and stay for the night. The host provided two straw beds and two blankets for all of us. As for dinner, each was provided two thick *chapatis* and two green onion stems. The food was not adequate for our taste, but heartwarming, considering we

worrying was that from time to time I was losing sight of the two girls who were riding singly with their respective guides. This plunged me into worst fears about their safety.

A little before dawn, after trekking continuously for over ten hours we reached a forest clearing. We were promptly taken to an inn perhaps kept open to receive unusual travelers like us. To our surprise, we found the inn comfortably heated by a slightly embedded fireplace of burning embers, placed centrally in the room. The warmth helped us to recover from the paralyzing cold and revived our spirit. I was

the truck sped along the main highway to Kabul. On several occasions the truck stopped to allow us to stretch ourselves and have food. It was about midnight when we arrived at Kabul after covering a long distance. The truck took us to the hotel, pre-arranged for food and accommodation of Bengali escapees from Pakistan, by courtesy of the local Indian embassy. We were warmly received at the hotel and allotted two rooms, one for the five of us and the other for our friend and his daughter.

Next morning, my husband went to the Indian embassy and got all of us registered for repatriation to Bangladesh. After a week



(From Left) Raihan Amin, Nusrat Amin, Razi Amin.

were in a far-flung inhospitable territory.

We passed the night peacefully. Next morning, after finishing the morning chores and eating a simple breakfast, we left on foot accompanied by our guides. Within two hours we reached the foothill to start the more physically challenging and hazardous part of the journey. A distance of some forty miles of lightly forested hilly terrain was to be covered on mule backs, both during day and night. The whole proposal seemed gloomy to me and I thought I could never make it. But the gentleman who unexpectedly joined us in Islamabad offered to carry me on his shoulders to help me negotiate any difficult patch and he did it with ease. It was luck again that favoured us!

Each one of us was given a mule to ride in a single file. A man was assigned to each mule who was holding the bridle to guide the beast along the narrow and dangerous hilly path. We commenced our journey in the afternoon around 2pm and it went on and on. The road seemed to be unending in the darkness of the night. And to add to our hardship, halfway through, it started to drizzle that turned into light snowfall under the sub-zero temperature of early March. It was freezing cold and I could hardly move my limbs. What was more

so glad to see the two girls and the two boys after a while sitting around the fireplace, safe and sound.

After about an hour's rest at the inn, we resumed our journey. It was now dawn and we were gradually descending into a river valley surrounded by tall hills. On reaching the plains, we dismounted from the mules and started walking along the river bed. Soon, it was day-break. The morning light was very refreshing and made us all happy. We continued walking for another two hours and reached a small market place, used as a loading point for trucks to carry commercial merchandise to Kabul and other places. While waiting there, we helped ourselves to tea and snacks at the local tea stall. Here we were told to get ready for the long journey by truck to Kabul which would take the whole day and part of the night.

It was about ten in the morning when a truck came to pick us up. The truck was already loaded with merchandise and we were asked to clamber up and sit on the top of gunny bags containing rice, sugar, wheat, flour and other commodities. It was pretty uncomfortable, but with our buoyed up spirit of freedom we didn't feel the inconvenience much.

We started a little before mid-day and

in Kabul, we flew to Delhi as arranged by the embassy. We stayed there for a few days in an officially rented accommodation before taking a morning train to Kolkata. The train was over-crowded and we travelled for the whole day and through the night to reach Kolkata. From there I rang my father in Dhaka to convey the good news of our escape with a request to arrange for our flights back home. He was overjoyed to hear my voice once again. After several days of interesting stay in Kolkata, we flew to Dhaka on March 19, 1973 after passing 20 thrilling days on the road.

Thus came to an end the saga of our audacious journey to freedom with the entire family intact. Looking back, I sometimes wonder whether trekking through the treacherous mountain trail in the company of total strangers to come to Bangladesh, when so many other families like ours were languishing in Pakistan, was worth the risk. The whole harrowing journey could have resulted in a major tragedy. But then, I desperately wanted to be back in my own country, which snatched independence after a heroic struggle and tremendous sacrifices.

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