

IN FOCUS

THE JOURNEY TO LIBERATION WAR by a fifteen year old boy

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On June 14, 1971 at the crack of dawn, I got up and slid quietly out of bed. I quietly dressed for my journey—a pair of pants and a vest. I carried my shoes in my hand as I tiptoed to the front door on my bare feet. As I carefully opened the latch on the front door, it made a sharp squeaking sound and I froze instantly. I glanced around frantically before I quietly stepped outside my home, where Belal and Kamal joined me shortly. We collected our bundles of clothes and headed towards the backyard. We were greeted by my thoroughbred Alsatian dog. He approached me with his tail wagging and looked at me with his big brown doleful eyes. As he licked my hands, I felt a surge of emotions going through me. I petted him and scratched him behind his ears and asked him to take care of my family as I bade farewell. Glancing back once at my dear home, I quickly climbed over the backyard wall. We did not know if we would be seeing our families ever again or even be able to come back home, fully aware of the possibility that we might get killed during the war. It was a bittersweet feeling. But I knew I would rather fight bravely and passionately than get beaten or killed by the ruthless soldiers while sitting at home. From this point on, there was no turning back.

At Fulbaria we went to the ticket counter in pairs to buy our tickets to Narsingdi Bazaar. I stood in queue for my turn to reach the busy window of the counter. Trying to hide my nervousness, I reached the counter and asked for two tickets to Narsingdi. I paid for the two tickets in full while the elderly man behind the counter gave the tickets to me through the small opening of the counter window. I turned away from the counter and walked casually towards the bus which was already being loaded with passengers for the journey. We walked through the busy area where people gathered, waiting for their respective buses arriving and leaving at regular intervals. No one paid any attention to us as we boarded the bus and mingled casually with the other passengers.

It was just the four of us. Salim and I got on the bus first, followed by Kamal and Belal. We picked seats near the front of the bus and avoided even the slightest bit of eye contact with each other. Belal and Kamal walked past us and sat in seats a few rows behind us.

This was it! Nervous and thrilled, the four of us started our journey to Narsingdi. This was our stepping stone towards the path to becoming Mukti Joddhas.

Our journey to war

The two-and-a-half-hour bus ride to Narsingdi was quite uneventful. The bus was stopped at a few checkpoints by soldiers. They boarded the



The writer taking a class for local Freedom Fighters on self-loading rifles at Gazibari, Dharmari.

PHOTO: SHAFIQU ISLAM SWAPAN

with her baby on her waist and greeted us shyly. The farmer asked his wife to spread out the *pati* (a mat) for us so that we could sit down to rest. There was no electricity in the village and the farmer did not even own a lantern to provide some light. We sat in the light of a small oil lamp made of tin, which he lit for us when we sat down. They did not have much in terms of possessions but they were very kind to us and welcomed us warmly into their home with open hearts.

The farmer had wanted to join the Mukti Bahini but he could not leave his family behind. He wanted to help in any way he could. That is why he had volunteered to help others who were crossing by on their journey for joining the war. He was very kind and insisted on having us stay the night in his small ramshackle home. They served us coarse rice, lentil soup, and a bowl of chicken curry which hardly had any spice other than red hot chilli paste in it. We ate heartily and

they broke into a full-fledged fist fight. We rushed to break the fight up but Kamal had become very angry and had taken out a small pen knife from his pocket to scare the stranger away. Belal finally managed to convince the stranger to leave us alone while we tried to calm Kamal down. Being threatened with a knife, the stranger got scared and he finally decided to leave. We had barely managed to bring the situation under control without blowing our cover.

We walked several kilometres travelling through muddy paddy fields, bushes and jungles, tree groves and bamboo groves while we crossed the villages. We crossed Songhari, Kundahgar and Botani on foot. Except for that incident with the stranger, our journey was quite uneventful that day. We finally managed to reach the C&B Road. The road connected Comilla to Brahmanbaria and ran parallel to the rail tracks of the eastern part of the country. Our destination, Tripura in India, was just across the border. The C&B Road was the most challenging point for us to cross. We had to wait till nightfall as the soldiers always patrolled the area in their jeeps and trucks.

The road was monitored 24/7 by armed soldiers in their military vehicles. We arrived at the village next to the road near sunset. We met one of the villagers who told us which direction to follow in order to reach safely and told us to wait half an hour until it was dark enough for us to cross without being noticed by the ever watchful soldiers. The four of us were nervous and the wait seemed to stretch on forever. Our crossing point was about 3 kilometres north of Mondobag Railway Station. When it was dark enough for us to safely cross through, the villager showed us the place where we should cross over the road and the direction of the railway tracks which marked our safe zone. We took a deep breath and at the count of three dashed across the road as fast as we could towards the rail tracks.

The Pakistan soldiers had three vehicles parked and were waiting by the side of the road to catch anyone crossing the C&B Road. They had the pickups parked facing in three directions so that when they switched on the headlights of the vehicles they could see anyone trying to cross. The moment they heard any sound of any movement of people they switched on the headlights to aim and shoot.

We were told to run across the road for about 300 yards following the railway tracks in order to be safe from the effective range of rifle fire. We were warned not to stop at any cost and not to cross our destination as fast as we could. Once we crossed the rail tracks, we would be safe since that area was not under the control of the Pakistani Army.

Here I was, pounding in my ears, I sprinted towards safety. To our dismay and horror, the soldiers heard us scuttling across the road and opened fire. The headlights of the vehicles switched on. However we could not stop and had to keep on running. There was no time to process anything aside from the sheer panic and the adrenaline running through my veins. The silence of the dark night was broken with continuous gunshots and the air was filled with the smell of gunpowder as we tried to make our way through. Luckily, we were far enough from the vehicles and their glaring headlight beams for the soldiers to take a clear shot at us. Legs burning, we ran as fast as we could and managed to cross the road and fell straight into a canal. The water level was shallow and we struggled our way out through the waist high muddy waters as we tried to make our way over to the high embankment. Once there, we hurried down into the paddy fields. The soil of the paddy fields was soaked with water and quite muddy. Suddenly Salim yelled out to me "Towfic,

stop!". Gasping for his breath, he managed to utter "I have lost my glasses". He had stumbled while crossing the paddy field and dropped his glasses in the mud. He had poor eyesight and could barely see without them. The four of us stopped and frantically started searching for the glasses in the darkness of the night. Kneeling down, we groped around blindly in the mud trying to locate it as quickly as possible. I finally managed to find them. Clutching his glasses in my left hand, I grabbed Salim's arm with my right hand to guide him across the field. We did not have much time to spare as we were not safe in this area. I dragged him along with me while stumbling several times as we quickly tried to cross to safety.

It was very difficult to move quickly through the mud, as it clung to our feet and slowed us down. Our legs felt heavy, but we ran for our lives as we could still hear the guns being fired behind us. We dared not stop. We had to cross over the railway line which was just after the paddy field to be on safe grounds. It was quite sure that the soldiers could hear us running. The distance felt like the longest we had ever covered in our lives.

As if being chased by the devil, we somehow managed to cross over the railway line approximately 3 kilometres north of the station. The rattle of the machine guns could still be heard behind us as we found ourselves on the embankment of a huge pond or *dighi*. Without looking back, we kept on running, turning left and then right following the embankment of the *dighi*, trying to get as much distance as possible between us and the bullets. Not realising how much distance we had covered, we all stumbled into a deep ditch cut into the embankment. It was an irrigation ditch which had been cut to let the water from the pond run out. All four of us fell into the ditch together, one stumbling on top of the other. We were exhausted and out of breath and we lay there unconscious.

Crossing the border

I regained consciousness to the sound of voices talking nearby. I was not sure how long it had been since we fell in the ditch. Maybe an hour had passed. I stifened, worried that we might have been caught. I heard people talking, not in muted whispers, as if they had been doing while we were crossing through the different villages during our two-day journey. The conversations were genuine with no fear or doubt. Believed, I nudged my friends, who were lying on top of each other in a haphazard way, trying to wake them up. Salim was sprawled across my legs while Kamal and Belal lay across each other beside me. We got up and untangled ourselves awkwardly from each other; cautiously we walked around the embankment to the end of the *dighi*. As we rounded the corner, we came across a family sitting together, gathering their possessions while talking to each other animatedly with no inhibition or fear of being heard by soldiers. Realisation slowly dawned. We had managed to cross the railway tracks and were now safe. Here the Pakistani soldiers had no control over the land and the people. The activities of the people were no longer monitored by armed soldiers. Even the air somehow felt lighter as the people around us went about their daily chores. The soldiers could not harm us here. I felt proud and empowered that we had not narrowly escaped the attack without sustaining any injuries. Feeling relieved after the ordeal, we held each other tightly and chanted, "Joy Bangla", realising at that moment what freedom meant.

The writer is a businessman, who joined the Liberation War at the age of 15. He is the author of *The Guerrillas of Dhaka 1971*.

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The writer in 1971

bus, checked the passengers and then let the bus proceed on its route. Once we arrived at Narsingdi, we had to make our way to the docks to catch a boat to our next destination. We ensured that nobody suspected us and asked a shopkeeper for directions to the docks. Based on his instructions, we walked about 800 meters from the bus stand towards the east to reach the docks by the Meghna River. The river gushed past the town of Narsingdi and there were several boats and dinghies at the dock waiting to be boarded. We had to cross the river to reach Nabnagar. The boatmen were yelling the names of the destinations they would be heading towards to attract passengers.

We travelled due east on the River Meghna from Narsingdi passing by Baghaikandi and Sitarampara to Nabnagar in Brahmanbaria district. We passed through several villages stopping in-between for a few minutes to rest underneath the shade of a large tree. At last, we came upon Koribari, a small village where we had been told to halt for the night. We were greeted with enthusiasm by the villagers. They seemed to know where we were headed. We were taken in by a poor farmer and his family for the night. He was very poor and had a wife and child to look after. He lived in a meagre bamboo hut on a small piece of land that he owned. His tiny house was surrounded with large trees and foliage but there were no fences built around his property. A scrawny dog lay in front of the porch of his house, looking lazily at us as we entered. The dog attempted to lift his tail slightly to wag, but he could not seem to gather enough energy to stand up. The farmer's wife stood on the porch

enjoyed the meal thoroughly.

We were really indebted to the farmer and his wife for welcoming us into their humble home. We started the second day of our journey bright and early and headed towards our destination after bidding farewell to our hosts.

Content and well rested, the four of us set out for Boro Shal Char. On the way, we passed through Bangura and Nababhat. It would take us a good day to travel the distance by foot. The only way we could repay the kindness of the farmer and his family was by praying that they would stay safe and healthy throughout these difficult times.

The toughest part of the journey

As we walked towards Songhari, a man suddenly joined us and started asking all sorts of questions. He was dressed like any other ordinary man from the village, wearing a *lungi* and *kurti*. Wary and suspicious of the stranger's questions, we had to somehow shake him off our trail. We had already been warned about potential informants and spies who were always scouting to provide information to the Pakistani soldiers, especially about youths joining the Liberation forces. We were on our guards and avoided providing any information that might lead to any suspicion about our intentions. The stranger walked alongside us for quite some time trying to gauge us and to get more information about us. We politely informed him that we were just walking over to the next village but the information did not satisfy his curiosity. Kamal, being short-tempered got annoyed and nervous at the same time due to the stranger's persistence. At one point during our journey, Kamal and the stranger started jostling each other and before we knew it,

