

Prof. Rafiqul Islam: A Witness to the Language Movement and the Liberation of Bangladesh

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One fine February morning, I approached Dr. Rafiqul Islam, the eminent educationist and litterateur who had lived on the Dhaka University Campus premises from 1943 to 2000, to tell me something about those turbulent days of 1952 when the Language Movement took place. Even though I knew of him (who doesn't?), I had never really “met” or talked to him before. I was somewhat hesitant to go up to his office as he is also the Professor Emeritusat ULAB. So, this is not an official interview that I am recording here, but more of a reminiscing on his part of a time when the history of a country was being made.

He did not look at me once. Or even if he did, I doubt he saw me. His eyes were engrossed in deep thought; to me he seemed to be dipping in the deep waters of memory. Bent with age, he sat at his desk.

“When do you want to talk?” he asked. When did I want to talk? I stuttered, “Whenever you want, Sir. We can talk even now.” He nodded just very slightly and went quiet again. I waited. And suddenly he asked, “What’s your question?”

I had prepared questions. I had a list of them, actually. But suddenly, I felt at a loss and wondered what I should ask. As a Bangladeshi, I knew the basic history of our nation. I have read about the history of the Language Movement, we all have heard the names of Rafiq, Salam, Barkat, Jabbar- the Language Martyrs. I knew how the oppressive powers took aim at the unarmed student body that walked the streets on that fateful day of 1952.

I had always been proud of my knowledge of history and had often made a show of it. But at this moment, I felt like a silly, ignorant child. I was sitting in the presence of somebody who saw it all. He was an active participant in the Movement, lost friends and comrades during those years. To him, it is not a distant past; it is an integral part of his very existence. Language Movement is not an isolated event; it is part of a chain of events that culminated in the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, the year I was born. What was I asking? I grew red and perspired, not knowing how to respond. Then I took a deep breath and asked bravely, “I heard you speak the other day of your involvement in the Language Movement of 1952. You talked how you took pictures in the one camera you had; pictures that later became historic documents. Perhaps you can tell me something about a few specific moments that are etched in your memory?”

Again, he went very quiet; and I thought I saw shadows of the distant past flickering in his large eyes. He did not lean back, nor change his posture. He just sat there, slightly

stooping, and by now, I knew that he would speak. And speak he did:

“I used to live in the railway colony. My father was a doctor. I had seen them around 1948—those people, mostly students participating in the procession. How old was I? I sat for matriculation in 1949; so I was a student of Class X. I was very young then. But in 1951, I became a student of Dhaka University. And as a student I became directly involved in the *Bangla bhasha, Shahitya and Sangskriti Andolon* (Bengali Language, Literature and Cultural Movement). We staged plays in 1951 titled *Jobanbondi* (Confessions) by Munier Choudhury.” Here he paused, and I was afraid he would order me to go away since I was not looking at him and scribbling away as fast as I could.

To my relief, he resumed speaking. “You know what happened in 1952. It’s history now. I had a Voigtländer camera with which I took pictures. I was a part of the procession that day, too. I was not one of the wounded,” he paused again.

“You ask me what particular event is etched in my memory? Well, I can tell you about that one scene I encountered... some people brought in a dead body of a man who was shot in the head. There was so much blood and I can still visualize the blood and liquid brain oozing out...” Another pause. After a while, he continued, “In 1953, we virtually had claimed the Bardhaman House for Bangla Academy, and one of the 21 point manifestos of the United Front was to build an institution which would be a research centre for Bengali language and literature. When the United Front was victorious in 1954, the education minister Syed Azizul Haque placed the order that the academy be built.” The sage stopped and said, “And oh, I forgot, Munier Chowdhury was imprisoned for his role in the Language Movement and in 1953, he wrote his famous play *Kabor* from jail. His inmates acted out the play inside the prison house. And in ‘54 we staged it. But the United Front was temporary and

the Government of Pakistan took over in a few months. In ‘55, there was riot yet again as the Central Government ruled against observing Ekushey February under Section 92. The history of ‘52 was repeated and many students of Dhaka University were killed and injured. There were female students too, who participated in the rally and were wounded. The authorities had built a special prison for women.

“Situation was somewhat better in ‘56, ‘57 and ‘58 because the United Front had regained power. Ekushey February was observed peacefully. However, by the end of 1958, things changed for worse, again. There was military coup in Pakistan and we saw the end of democracy. Yet we continued to celebrate Ekushey February. Then I was out of the country—went abroad to study. From ‘59 to ‘60 I was away. The Movement continued.



Occasionally, the Government acquiesced and the Shahid Minar was finally built on a small scale, and on the 21st February in 1963 we were able to pay obeisance to our Language Martyrs properly. But it was a struggle every year as Shahid Minar was a symbol of the Bengali spirit that the Government of West Pakistan wanted to subdue.”



Ekushey Minar before Kalabhaban, 1953

Here Professor Rafiqul Islam sighed and said, “You see all these are interconnected... the Mass-Uprising of 1969, the release of Bangabandhu from the Agartala Conspiracy Case. The Ekushey February of 1969 was a Victory Day for the great Mass-Uprising. It was bloodied, but it was a glorious day. All of it led to the War of 1971. So many of us were killed. I was imprisoned too. I was set free only because some friends in Washington DC pressurized a Senator who spoke to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. He inquired about the welfare of some teachers of Dhaka University who were in prison, and I was one of them. Our release order came, but we were also ordered to be hunted down and killed. Most of us fled. Dr. Khair was one who could not. So many of them died! So many! I am a witness to all that mass-murder.”

At this point, our meeting had to be postponed. It seemed that Dr. Islam had an appointment with somebody. But he said, “Come and visit me again. We can continue this conversation.”

Before I could take my leave, he spoke again: “Have you seen that banyan tree in front of the Kala Bhaban? It’s not the original

one, you know. When Senator Kennedy came after the Liberation War, we had him plant a segment from the original tree which was cut down by the Pakistani army. But can you really cut off a tree like that? The roots remain.”

I knew I would go back. There is so much to learn from him. I am also looking forward to his book that is supposed to be at Boimela any day now. It’s titled, *Shotoborsher Dwarprante Dhaka Bishwabidyalaya* (Dhaka University Attaining a Century). According to Dr. Islam, it is a revised and extended edition of his earlier book *Dhaka Biswabidyalayer Ashi Bochor* (Eighty Years of Dhaka University), and it records the role that Dhaka University played during the Language Movement and the subsequent events that led to the Liberation of Bangladesh. He said, “Everybody should know what role Dhaka University played in the Liberation War. It’s not a book of history, it’s not a memoir. And yet, I would say that it’s both.”

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REVIEWS

They Also Were Involved

Stories from the Edge: Personal Narratives of the Liberation War, Edited by Niaz Zaman and Razia Sultana Khan, ISBN: 978-984-93025-6-8, Bengal Publications, 2017.

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

The subtitle of the book proposes it all: fourteen writers reminisce about their own, or their dear ones’ experiences immediately prior to, or during, or at the end of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Although the quality of the narratives varies from writer to writer, from being patently amateurish to highly skilled, they all are interesting. As the title suggests, these might be stories from the “edges” of the struggle, but the fringes are also a crucial part of the whole narrative. As the editors, Razia Sultana Khan and Niaz Zaman state, “The purpose of this volume is not to retell the history (of the Liberation War) but to narrate the stories of people... who did not actively participate as freedom fighters, who did not cross over to India as refugees.... But, like everyone in the country, they too were affected by the war.”

Thirteen of the fourteen writers are women, while the lone male, Tanveerul Haque (“How My Wife Learnt to Ride a Horse”), relates the story of his wife’s experience in escaping from Pakistan following the liberation of Bangladesh. Others have also written about their escapes via Afghanistan, with Razia Quadir’s “Escape from Pakistan” being probably the best in capturing the thrill, danger, hardship, and edginess involved in carrying out these escapes from a hostile land. The editors quote her in justifying their endeavour. “It is these individual stories that truly flesh out and give emotional substance to great historical events.”

Asfa Hussain (“Free at Last”) tells the tale of her husband’s and her own ordeals in the days leading up to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s momentous March 7, 1971 address, the onset of Operation Searchlight, and its aftermath. This piece captures a range of deeds that evince humanity, ingenuity, activism, and patriotism. The daughter of a prominent politician in undi-

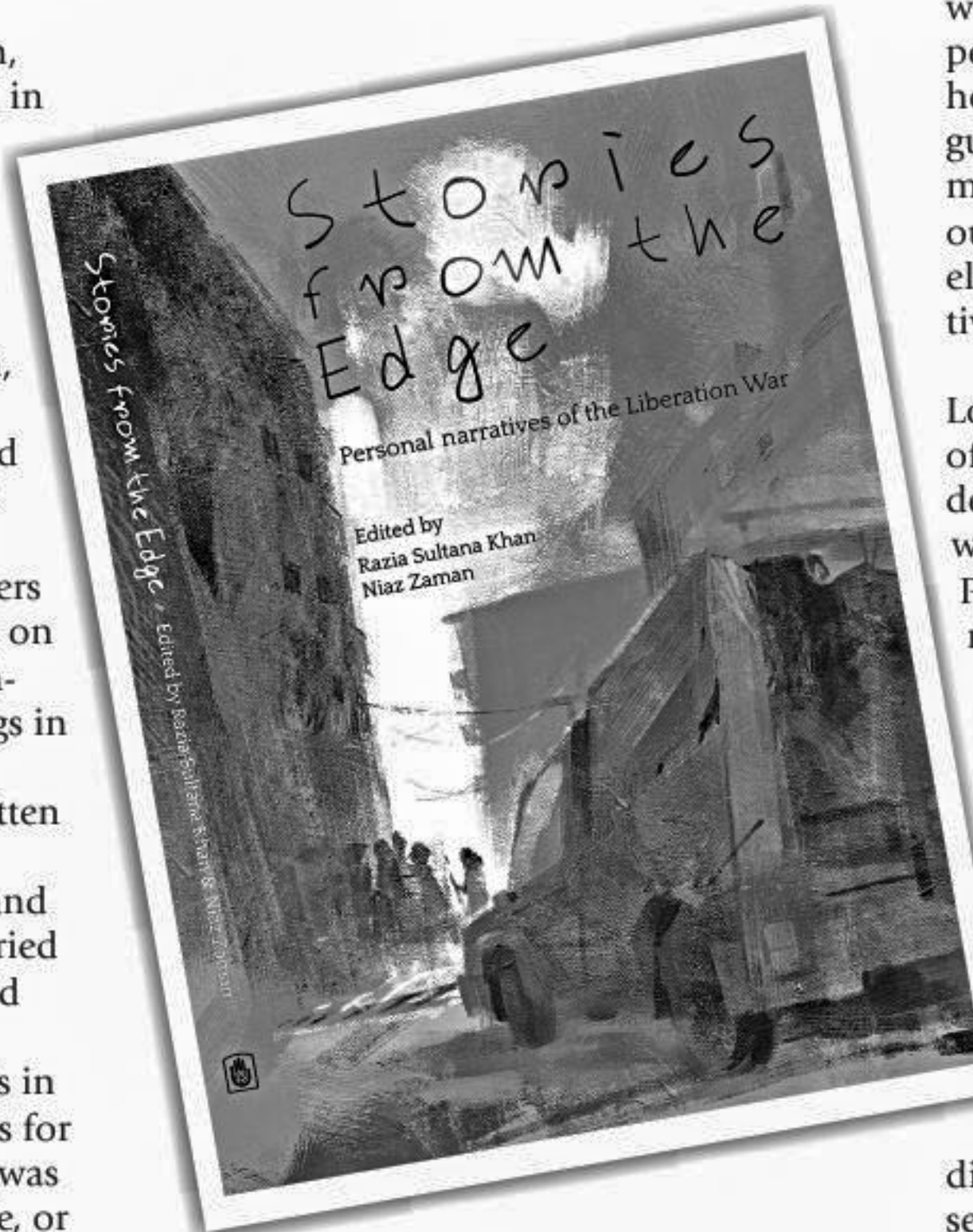
vided Bengal (the private Secretary of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy) as well as East Pakistan, she was actively involved with the pro-Bangladesh rallies in London, where she had gone in 1971. Her terse comment in this regard is noteworthy, “There is little documentation of the immense contribution of the London Bengalis in the struggle for Bangladesh.”

One of the editors, Razia Sultana Khan, daughter of a Bengali diplomat stationed in Turkey, tells the story (“And Never the Twain”) of her family’s travails there in 1971 that evoke memories of real and fictional stories. Her father distanced himself from the Pakistan mission and returned to Dhaka via Delhi. Razia Khan, while giving an account of her parents’ brief encounter with Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip in Turkey in 1971, observes the irony, “The previous colonizers and oppressors censuring the present colonizers and oppressors. Was that what was going on in the Queen’s mind as she listened attentively to my father’s account of the killings in Bangladesh?”

The other editor, Niaz Zaman, has written an account (“A Long Flight Home”) that combines specific realizations, dogmas, and self-doubt. She is of Punjabi origin, married to a Bengali from a prominent family, had her education in East Pakistan, and was acutely aware of the plight of the Bengalis in 1971. That year, following frantic searches for places of safety as Operation Searchlight was in full swing, she admits it to be a miracle, or sheer luck, that saved her and her extended family’s lives as they fled to, and took shelter in a rural area away from Dhaka.

Subsequently, she had gone to Lahore and was confronted by her kinsfolk, where her own mother and grandmother flatly refused to believe the horrifying first hand encounters

the Bengalis were experiencing with the Pakistani Army. Just before returning to embattled East Pakistan, she had gained an insight into the mind of Major General Khadim Hussain Raja, who was the GOC of Dhaka during Operation Searchlight. Trying to figure out if he was like Lt. Gen. Shahibzada Yakub Ali Khan and Admiral S.M.



Ahsan, who had resigned from their posts than carry out genocide against the Bengalis, she met up with his wife, and quickly got her answer. Mrs. Raja told Niaz Zaman, “Don’t go back to East Pakistan. Your husband will cut off your breasts and then kill you. You are a Punjabi.”

Zakia Rahman’s (“The Exodus”) is a sensitive story of herself and her family getting up in the maelstrom created by the onset of Operation Searchlight, and at the fag-end of the war as Indian warplanes strafed and bombed Pakistani positions not too far from where she lived. In between, she found love in another sensitive, intelligent soul. She witnessed the exodus of waves upon waves of people across the Gulshan Lake, and recalls how “complete strangers became our house guests --- all of us seeking safety from a common foe.” Her philosophical and poetic outlook regarding the liberation struggle is eloquently expressed throughout the narrative.

Mahmuda Haque Choudhury (“The Day I Lost My Husband”) relates the poignant story of her husband, who lost his life in the defense of Bengalis in Chittagong, where he was the Superintendent of Police. Particularly touching was Bangabandhu’s remark to her in January 1972, “Your husband saved my life but could not save his own.” He was referring to an incident on December 12, 1970, when SP Shamsul Haque foiled a conspiracy to kill Bangabandhu in Chittagong.

Shirin Hasanat Islam (“A Camp Survivor’s Tale”), wife of a Bengali officer in the Pakistan Navy, relates her own harrowing tale of being virtually confined to a restricted area in Pakistan.

She speaks lovingly of her father, a distinguished academic who, in 1971, was the senior-most professor of Dhaka University, the president of the Dhaka University Teachers’ Association, and a well-known critic of Pakistani politics, “...he always carried grief like a shawl wrapped around him.”

One of the authors was born during the Liberation War and another after it was over, and they narrate their respective mother’s

stories. Jackie Kabir (“Green Helmets”) relates how her mother lived in a large extended family in her village and had a close brush with the military. Masrufa Ayesha Nusrat (“Nine Months in Agartala”) tells the story of her mother taking refuge in Agartala and the kindness she and her family members were shown there.

Shahana Khan (“Stateless in London”) had moved to London with her husband in May 1970 and was soon involved in the Bangladesh cause once Operation Searchlight began. Zeba Rasheed Chowdhury (“Chittagong Days”) talks about the turmoil and tribulations she had faced in Chittagong, while Nusrat Huq (“Love, Death and Allama Iqbal”) observes about the Pakistani army jawans for whom speaking and writing in Urdu was the sign of being a good Muslim. Shahrulk Rahman (“When Sheikh Mujib Came to Geneva”) relates her experience in Switzerland where her husband was posted as a diplomat, and who defected in October 1971. Bangabandhu did not go to Geneva in early 1972, of course, but the symbolic relevance of the title of the essay should not escape the reader.

The emergence of Bangladesh as a sovereign independent nation-state has had a number of phases, culminating in the Liberation War of 1971. Bengalis of this country played their parts in different ways. *Stories from the Edge* contains some such stories as told by the participants or their close ones. For the most part, they are gripping tales infused with nostalgia, but also educational for those who were born after 1971.

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