

Memories of the angry March

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12

There was hardly any time to be nervous, rather think and act fast. So this was the neighbourhood I had grown up in fringing at the edge of the old Dhaka and facing the new Dhaka, was witness to so many upsurge, movements, and riots since day one of

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my life. Our caretaker was a fearless, fierce woman, highly politicized as were the people in general in those days. She came running in from the bazaar whispering that we may fall prey to the skirmish that had become inevitable. So three of us blocked our gateways pushing the heavy mahogany table, both the backdoor and the front one.

Somehow we passed that night in the midst of chaos and war cries. The next day dawned with my brother's arrival from Comilla. There was a general strike with not even rickshaws in sight. All of Dhaka had poured out in the street intermittently chanting slogans. We were relieved to see my brother. Every now and then he shook his head saying how could Yahya do this, meaning dissolving the assembly. Somehow we passed the night in great anticipation. The next day dawned with the news from the Dhaka University; the flag of Bangladesh has been hoisted atop the university building by the student leaders amidst a huge number of spectators. There were reports of riots between the contending Bengalis and Biharis in Mohammadpur and Mirpur and in our part of the city too, of which we were the witness. But the casualties were mostly Bengali. I called up my non Bengali friends to find out how they were. Everyone seemed uncertain as to what actually was happening. The air was tense as more

and more angry Bengalis poured out in the streets. Suddenly an EPR truck entered our lane with the *jawans* chanting full throated 'Joi Bangla'. By then it was crystal clear that the civil disobedience has broken loose. That, there was no turning back.

Since March 1, every single being had one destination in mind, Dhanmondi road 32, Bangabandhu's house. Any answer sought, go to Sheikh Mujib, such was his popularity. He had announced a general meeting on March 3 at the Paltan Maidan that was renowned for political rallies. That field could be clearly seen from our veranda and we used to take our binoculars to distinguish the speakers at the podium. We did the same on that day where Sheikh Mujib gave strict orders to observe restraint and treat non Bengalis as equal. Along with it he announced the date of his final speech where he would give directives to the people what was to be done next on the 7th of March at the racecourse maidan.

The surging tide

The radio announced that they would broadcast Sheikh Mujib's speech on the 7th March. Meanwhile people had started to believe we were standing on the verge of a major change of events. The anger imbedded in every heart was so strong that none took note of the military as it fortified both in number and strength. Pakistan Airlines was prohibited to fly over Indian territory on the basis of a plane skyjacked earlier resulting in contentions between India and Pakistan over the issue. So PIA took a long route via Sri Lanka and civilians who made the long journey saw most passengers were men in uniform. Tikka Khan notoriously known as the butcher of the Northwest province Baluchistan, was flown in to take charge of the military affairs in East Pakistan. While the people rallied in the streets the army prepared for their Operation Searchlight, the master plan to gun down thousands of innocents. My brothers walked over to the racecourse to listen to Mujib's directives for days to come. Millions turned up to hear his baritone mesmerising voice proclaim an all out war against the Pakistan Army. We grew up hating the army rule because that's what we were under ever since we were born. Every day the talk was let's end it all. The tea stalls, breakfast –lunch-dinner every nook and corner buzzed with people planning apprehending, guessing ways and means to stop the political farce. So people moved in large number to listen to what Sheikh Mujib had planned for the days to come.

March 7

We were sitting before the radio to listen to Sheikh Mujib's speech having no notion that the army had intervened to stop the broadcast. Disappointed with the usual songs and skits we knew that something had gone wrong. Soon

there were people returning from the meeting dreamy eyed, planning and anticipating a skirmish at the most with the army. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had declared a non-violent, noncooperation movement till Yahya Khan handed over power to the people. That indeed was the beginning of the nine month long struggle that led to the inception of Bangladesh. Indeed many were killed ruthlessly. Women raped. People left their houses fleeing death. Orphans and widows increased in number. Brothers lost their sisters and vice versa. Every living Bengali has a tale of how they had spent those days of doom. But on March 7, they were yet to witness or embrace death that was hovering in days to come. No, none had any clue of what was to happen to each one of them. None knew that we were destined to lose the intellectuals, the best of the Bengalis; the promising youth with dreams of a sovereign land so on and so forth.

25th was like any other day in the raging month of March marked by people going over to the central Shaheed Minar and taking oath almost every day. Processions poured in comprising of people of different professions as though they had to prove their unflinching allegiance to their motherland by visiting the sacred monument. On the 23rd March the Bangladesh flag had been hoisted atop all buildings, shanty huts, market place everywhere and above all Sheikh Mujib's house challenging the failing talks and defying the army rule.

The fatal night

It has been discussed many a time how Yahya Khan and Bhutto initiated a talk with the Sheikh Mujib which has been told and well recorded, so no use repeating those events elaborately. Instead let me say of the effect of the rampage and unforgivable massacre that had been let loose on innocent people on the mind of a young girl who had cried having read Anne Frank's diary. 25th was like any other day in the raging

month of March marked by people going over to the central Shaheed Minar and taking oath almost every day. Processions poured in comprising of people of different professions as though they had to prove their unflinching allegiance to their motherland by visiting the sacred monument. On March 23, the Bangladesh flag had been hoisted atop all buildings, shanty huts, market place everywhere and above all Sheikh Mujib's house challenging the failing talks and defying the army rule. He even entered the premise of the president house, where the talks were being held, flying the Bangladesh flag in his car, eventually facing lots of protest by the *jawans* at the gate. It was evident that Sheikh Mujib had realized that mere talks would bear no fruit. So the 25th was a usual day with no prospect of any breakthrough and with the people getting more agitated as there was no sign of progress. Barely did they know what was awaiting their fate that night. That they would be gunned down, armoured vehicles with canons would blow up the Shaheed Minar and newspaper offices to be shelled shut with the workers burnt to death alive inside. And 7,000 people would see their last bit of the red *palash* flowers in bloom, the scorching tail end of the spring sun and the dazzling blue sky. They had no idea of the massive showdown awaiting them that fatal night.

Forgive or forget? No, never! Needless to say how many perished that night throughout the country. One flare before the clock struck 12 midnight and the carefully coveted 'Operation Searchlight' let all hell loose. That was the beginning of a ruthless massacre yet people did not eat it out of the Pakistan army's hand as Yahya Khan had predicted. Yes, a handful of people did pronounce their allegiance to Yahya, and so did some political parties, but the rest either fought or resisted with all their might. Sheikh Mujib was transported to a jail in Pakistan while Bangladesh independence was spelled out in his name. The valiant Dhirendranath Dutta who pioneered in pronouncing that Bangla should be the state language of Pakistan as the Bengalis were the majority way back in 1948, was brutally taken out of his house in Comilla and taken to the cantonment, never to return with no trace of his body ever. The entire country had seen enough of the colour red with which the name Bangladesh is written. The initial fear had turned to an inexplicable strength to challenge a well organised army who claimed to be the best in the world. But who one in the end clearly tells whose courage and dedication was mightier than sword.

The writer is an activist, journalist and filmmaker.

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