

Beyond the laser light shows of Independence celebrations lies the quieter work of movement building, and the common people's suffering in the days following the launch of Operation Searchlight. Chronicled in the pages of this diary are the everyday details—thrills, uncertainties and horrors as experienced by one of the most prominent figures and salient voices of '71. Sufia Kamal's encounters, as chronicled in her diary, flesh out the revolution as more than just emotive rhetoric and make it possible for us to examine its legacy in light of what is happening in Bangladesh today. Here are excerpts from her diary of the tumultuous days leading up to, and immediately after, March 26, 1971, as translated by Mayeesha Azhar.

March 18, Thursday, 1971

There was a meeting of the Mahila Parishad's Shongram Committee at the Azimpur Ladies' Club today. Many young women attended. People are so enthusiastic these days. Some men, too, joined in. They expressed their wholehearted support. Amidst so much sadness, this gives so much hope.

March 19, Friday, 1971

At 11am today, poet Shamsur Rahman and I did a recording of our poems. Poetry that could not be recited on the radio before is now being read so freely. Such is the world! It feels good that the people of this country have awakened—who dares stop them! Today there was a Mujib-Yahya meeting. Again in the evening there was a meeting between Mujib's people and the military. We have not been able to know what was discussed. There is no other way but to wait for the 23rd.

March 20, Saturday, 1971, 1am

40 Enayet Bazar, Chittagong
I got on the train at noon to come to Chittagong for the Mahila Parishad meeting. Maleka and I. Dulu, Simin and Abbu were at the station. Nazmul Huda was there. We arrived at 10 at night. Kawsar and Murad were not at home. I just finished catching up with Dulu.

March 21, Sunday, 1971, 2am

Headed out at 10am and met with Fazal Shaheb, Bulbul and Apa. I returned at 1pm, had lunch and went to the meeting. There were around 1500 women at the J M Sen Hall field. Outside, too, there was an impossible crowd of men. Maleka gave a speech. Hannana, Padmaprabha Sengupta, Mrs Sharifuddin, Mushtari Shafi also spoke. (Umu) Umratul Fazal



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

Diary of '71

SUFIA KAMAL

headed the meeting. I spoke. Then [I] joined the procession to the Shahid Minar at Jinna Park. After attending the committee meeting at Fazal Shaheb's house, I returned home and then went to Jahed's house at 8pm to see Bulu. After eating at Shahjahan's house at 10:30pm, I came home at midnight and wrote a poem for Mahbub. I went to bed at 3am.

March 22, Monday, 1971, 10pm

After going to bed at 3am, I woke up at 5am and caught the Ulka at 6am, reaching Dhaka at 3pm. At 7pm, I went to the Shahid Minar to listen to music by Chhayanaunt and learnt that the programme would be held the next day at 7am.

I returned home at 9pm from Bouma's house. I can barely rest for worry about Kawsar and Bulu. I came home to find that everyone is doing well by the grace of Allah. Dulu does not have any house help. Simin and Dulu are working very hard. I am feeling slightly blue. So very tired now.

March 23, Tuesday, 1971, 11pm

On March 23, Pakistan Day festivities were observed as festivities for an independent Bangladesh. The flag with Bangladesh's map on it was hoisted in every home, office, the High Court, hotel, and car. It filled me with extraordinary excitement. I keep thinking—amidst such a movement, we must win.

Today, I inaugurated the Shongram Committee of the Jigatola-Rayer Bazar branch of the Mahila Parishad. The excitement is palpable; women are joining in droves. At the end of the meeting, burqa-clad women brought out a procession that ended at Sheikh Mujib's residence. I hope people don't drive the poor man crazy. Today, too, there has been no letter from Sabbir.

March 24, Wednesday, 1971, 9pm

I returned from setting up a branch of the Mahila Parishad's Shongram Committee at Palashi Barrack School. I am not well. But I wish for these girls to

not lose their enthusiasm. This is why I am still going to these events. When it is me that everyone wants, what choice do I have but to go?

I do not know whether this is good fortune or misfortune. [...] Today, too, Bhutto or Yahya failed to show prudence. There is no end to these meetings.

March 25, Thursday, 1971, 10pm

I just returned after meeting Niyogi babu. The situation in the country is tense. It will be good if an agreement can be reached by the 29th; otherwise, it will be hard to tackle the backlash. All of Dhaka is impatient today. Meetings have been going on for so many days, but there is no sign of an agreement. Who knows what is to come for Mujib! Niyogi said that a revolution will take place. I didn't go to any meetings today. I am not feeling well. Since I've been feeling down, I haven't been able to write anything.

March 26, Friday, 1971, 10pm

Yesterday at 11:45pm, we got a sudden phone call from Chittagong; they were

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worried about unrest in Dhaka. Until then, Dhaka had been peaceful. Just as we put down the phone, we heard somebody cry out "Ma!". Right after that, we heard machine guns, followed immediately by yells of "Joy Bangla". Then came the noise of rifles, bombs, sten guns, and machine guns, going off continuously. From the direction of Sat Masjid, EPR came the sound of cannons

March 27, 1971, Saturday, 10pm

From 7pm till 10pm, the military laid waste to Rayer Bazar. All of Dhaka is terrified under military rule. There are no markets. There is no rain, so everything is burning. The lives and livelihoods of the poor, unsheltered, and penniless are burning. Who will answer to Allah about the inhumanity these people are being subjected to? What will they answer? We heard that Tikka Khan is injured. Mujib is being held captive.



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

firing, and cries of "Joy Bangla" and "Allah Akbar" until 2am. After that, there was only the sound of cannon fire. At 3:30am, a military van drove by the house. Curfew has been declared from tomorrow. We're hearing that Mujib has been imprisoned. We can see fire burning in that direction. Until 10pm today. Yahya made a speech on the radio at 8pm. The Awami League has been shut down. It is being said that Mujib has not agreed to their conditions and has violated military rule. We can still hear machine guns. There's nobody anywhere to be heard, and we cannot leave the house.

The curfew is until 7am. At night, we could hear cannon fire. The tanks are destroying everything.

March 28, 1971, Sunday

There was supposed to be a curfew at 12 today, but then the time was changed to 5pm. Where are our boys and girls, our loved ones? Allah is most generous. May Allah do the best for everyone, give them good sense. All of Dhaka, the entire country is in a state of panic. If this is what was fated for the citizens of Pakistan, why was Pakistan formed? Driven to the brink, having lost everything to the oppression of "the

Others", Muslims brought Pakistan to be. Today, Pakistan's President himself is firing at those who live in Pakistan—at unarmed, helpless, innocent people.

March 29, 1971, Monday, 9pm

After so many days, it finally rained today after much rumbling. The merciful rain of the merciless. May the heart of Bengal be green again, beautiful again. May it be cleansed of the blood of the holy martyrs and become peaceful again, soothing again, refreshing again. May

news from Chittagong. Kawsar is in Sylhet, there is no news of him either. My Dolon, how is she doing with her husband, children and household. I do not know whether they are still here or dead. I am restless. I pray, I recite the Koran but I am still restless. The whole country will go up in flames, burn, and shrivel into nothing. I do not understand what kind of oppression this is, with people living day and night in panic and apprehension. I have no fear, I only worry for others, my own death is inevitable.

Bangladesh be freed of its curse. Let them be free, those kinsfolks of imprisoned, pained, helpless souls. May Bengal be filled to the brim with pride. With joy. All night yesterday and all day till now, we have not heard of anything untoward happening in Dhaka. We know nothing about Chittagong. The radio is cut off. Not only did it rain, there was hail—there is no end to the hardship! All the flowers, mango blossoms are done for! What is this that Allah is doing?

March 30, Tuesday, 10pm

So many days have gone by! There is no

March 31, 1971, Wednesday, 9pm

There was heavy rain, with hail, from 3am today. There is no good news anywhere. There is no news from Chittagong, no news from Sylhet. I find no peace even after praying, oh Unmerciful! How will the fragile endure if tested so many times—they burnt down the Shantinagar bazar yesterday.

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FILM

DELIBERATE DISJUNCTURE

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Second, most viewers have not come in close contact with tortured corpses and so, cannot truly realise the scale of tragedy through images. However, they do encounter butchered poultry in their kitchen on the daily. Seeing humans in the same state as an animal whose death we have already been desensitised to, makes us aware of our desensitisation to violence. In this way, seeing images of dead animals creates a unique kind of discomfort in the audience.

These are few of the examples using which the documentary pokes the viewer in the eye, demanding empathy. But what of "universal" empathy that I spoke of earlier in the essay? Raihan's attention to empathy's universality is explicit in the film's content. The

documentary opens with a quote from Lenin's "The Right of Nations to Self-Determination", a book which discusses a nation's right to exist. Raihan strategically puts this quote in the beginning to cut straight to the chase and present his argument: the documentary is about a nation's struggle to freedom, nothing more, nothing less. The documentary (and the Liberation War) takes place during the Cold War and so the quote is also a way to subtly resist Nixon's America, or in other words, pledge closer alliance with the Soviets. Moreover, Zahir Raihan was inspired to make this documentary after having watched several Eastern European and Cuban documentaries during his stay in India in 1971 as a political refugee (Leahy, 2002). Various styles used in the film pays tribute to the style of Cuban filmmaker, Santiago Alvarez (Leahy, 2002). By putting Lenin's quote at the

start of the film and following the cinematic styles of socialist filmmakers, the director introduces the audience to the film's larger ideological association. Later into the documentary, Raihan inserts footage of burnt Vietnamese villages, drawing a comparison between Saigon and Dhaka. Zahir Raihan here is situating Bangladesh's genocide amongst a lineage of imperial violence such as the American invasion of Vietnam. The documentary then moves to Bongaon, a refugee camp in India full of fleeing Bengalis. A Bengali man shouts statements and is dubbed by the narrator. He accuses Yahya Khan of genocide of the same scale committed by oppressive rulers such as Mussolini of Italy, Sultan Mahmud of Gajni, and alas, Hitler. The parallel put forward by Raihan makes an important case: fascism is not unique to any region or race or religion. Fascism, in its various facades is

only a form of oppression that has similar destructive consequences on the weakest members of society. In fact, Raihan's visual critique of oppression is not only universal, but also timeless. For example, a still from Stop Genocide (Fig. 3) put next to a contemporary painting such as Syed Jahangir's Fleeting Rohingya (Fig. 4) brings forward an uncomfortable truth that not much has changed since then. In a culture where scenes of tragedy saturate mass media, Zahir Raihan's documentary stands out for being able to incite critical self-reflection in its viewer. The film has a particular impact in reminding its viewers about the reality of oppressive regimes and our role in relation to it.

References:
James Leahy, "Films that Make a Difference...Santiago Alvarez and the Politics of Bengal: Cicon," in Senses of Cinema, 2002.