

## The Curious Case against Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury

# A Review of His *Chariot of Life: Liberation War, Politics and Sojourn in Jail*

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REVIEWED BY SYED MANZOORUL ISLAM

After Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury was slapped an uncertain prison term at the end of what he describes as a 'kangaroo trial,' on 18 April 2008, he must have felt like the hapless Joseph K (of Kafka's *The Trial*) – confused, agitated and resigned, having no clue why he had been picked up and put in the dock on charges that a proper court of law would find it difficult to entertain. What he found particularly humiliating was the way he was summoned and interrogated by people who didn't even care to show him the respect he deserved as a decorated freedom fighter and a dedicated public official of high standing. He had to suffer the ignominy of seeing his integrity being questioned, but he realized soon enough that the long process of interrogation was meant to disorder and break him. So he stood his ground, and faced the trial with courage and conviction. Tawfiq-e-Elahi also tells us how he saw the ordeal as a test of faith which he resolved to win. Still, as he writes in *Chariot of Life: Liberation War, Politics and Sojourn in Jail* (Dhaka, Shrabon, 2018), it was not easy to make sense of the confusing trial which was clearly meant to be a part of the 'minus two formula' of the military led caretaker government which came to power through a coup in November 2006. Incidentally, the present Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, the principal accused and one of the two leaders the caretaker government tried to minus off, sat next to him during much of the trial and Tawfiq-e-Elahi describes with pride how she consoled him and even shared jokes to make light of the proceedings.

Tawfiq-e-Elahi's imprisonment in Dhaka central jail was marked by an initial sense of disorientation and despair, as loss of freedom hurt him deeply. But he soon adjusted to the rigour of jail life, as his survival instinct took over. As he wrote in a letter on 11 September 2008 to Dr. S.A. Samad, a retired Secretary of the government who was a co-accused in the case but who escaped the trial as he was living abroad: "Incarceration is a traumatic experience; but once you are in it, a whole new world unfolds and it is up to you to make the most out of it." He indeed decided to make the most of his time inside the jail. He learnt to follow the daily routine, eat the gross food served to him, sleep in cramped conditions and even do a bit of exercise to keep him fit. The confinement was not solitary, so he could strike up conversations with cell mates. He was given a

'faltu' – a younger fellow prisoner—to look after him and do his errands. He got used to the regular trips to the court in a crowded prison van and even looked forward to his short term return to the world outside. And most importantly, he began to keep an account of his prison days and reminisce about the events of 1971. In the years following his release Tawfiq-e-Elahi added his reminiscences of the liberation war to his prison diary in the form of a series of narratives. The result is the book, *Chariot of Life*, which weaves together the fascinating accounts of the war and those of his prison days. The two tales—one national, the other personal—although their time frames are 37 years apart, have the same themes: incarceration and freedom. In 1971, the whole of Bangladesh was a prison, and the war of liberation was waged to end this incarceration. In 2008, Tawfiq-e-Elahi was imprisoned on a made up charge, and he won freedom through patience, faith and a gritty legal battle which had the support of his countrymen.

I was one of the few early readers of the manuscript of Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury's prison diary which he sent me with a request to see how it read. It was a slim volume of nearly a hundred and fifty A4 size pages which dealt mostly with his days inside the jail and his fight for freedom. As I read the account of his journey from a peaceful and happy retired life to a life behind bars, I was overtaken by a sense of outrage. It pains me to see one's rights being trampled and one's dignity being taken away, wherever these happen, no matter which government is in power. The rule of the caretaker government has been marked by flagrant abuse of power and violations of human rights. If the army takeover was justified as a much needed move to restore law and order following the mayhem in the last few months of the BNP government and strengthen the democratic polity – what followed in the next two years did very little to support it.

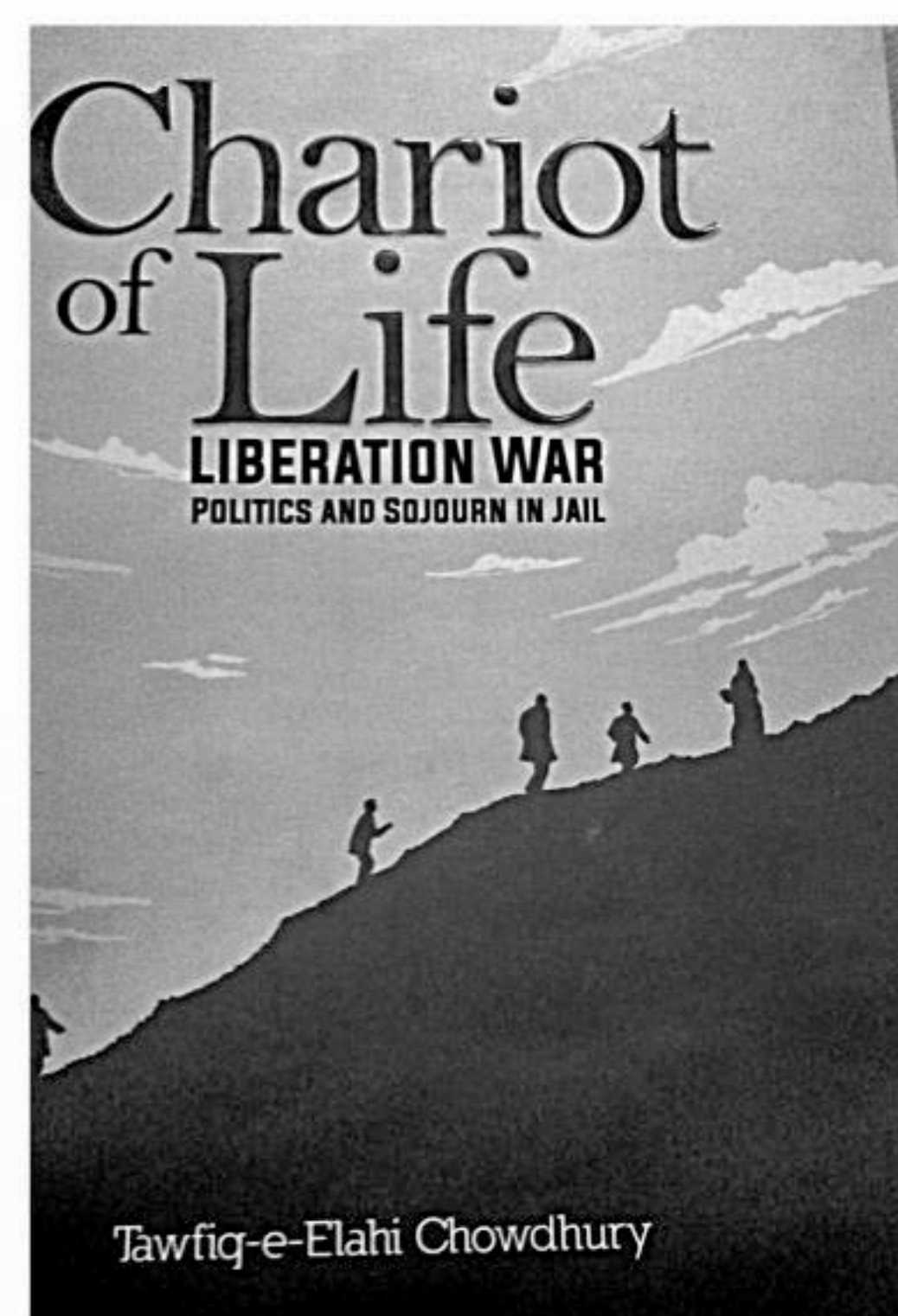
One reason I found the diary a captivating read was the way Tawfiq-e-Elahi kept his head high throughout the series of interrogations and the trial. That was something that I expected from him as a freedom fighter. I have known him for a long time and respect him for his service to the nation during and after 1971. When he was the Sub-Divisional Officer of Meherpur in 1971, he was one of the first officials to initiate resistance against the enemy. On 26 March, hours after the

Pakistanis had launched their Operation Searchlight and before any organized resistance had started, he wrote in his official pad a one line appeal to the 'Indian Brethren': "Please help us with arms." Then in May, amid bombardment and strafing by Pakistani fighter jets, he helped transport nearly four and half crore rupees (about US\$ 10 million at the time) and more than 20 kgs of gold ornament from different banks and the treasury to Calcutta to be deposited with the Bangladesh government. The money kept the government afloat for quite some time. After the war, we heard this and other stories of Tawfiq-e-

great length. But my reading of the book soon revealed why the liberation war was given such prominence. It was Tawfiq-e-Elahi's journey back to time, to the defining moment of our long history and a source of our collective strength. Clearly, during the seven months of his imprisonment, he was falling back to the memory of those heroic times to give him strength. I also felt that his pride as a freedom fighter helped him forget the deplorable turn of events that were far removed from what he fought for in 1971.

*Chariot* alternates between accounts of Tawfiq-e-Elahi's detention and those of the war. By any reckoning, these are completely different stories except for the fact that the person telling them is the same. But the transition from one to the other is never jarring or forced—the reader rather welcomes the transition as a release from the oppressive present to a reassuring past. In spite of the Kafkaesque nature of his ordeal, Tawfiq-e-Elahi doesn't allow his narrative of imprisonment to lose objectivity, since he was also writing a bit of history which shares many common elements with those written by others who had similar experiences during the caretaker years.

After reading *Chariot*, one part of which reads like a chronicle of our war of liberation, I feel encouraged to request Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury to write an enlarged and more detailed version of it in English, beginning with the rise of Bengali nationalism in the wake of the cultural, political and economic repression in the 1960s and ending with the surrender of the Pakistani forces. There are two compelling reasons why he should write the book: his firsthand experience of the war both as a participant and organizer, and the sheer bulk of work written by others – Indian and Pakistani military officers, researchers and journalists—which take the limelight away from Bangladeshi freedom fighters. The Pakistani accounts often present a counter narrative that distorts history and absolves their military from any wrongdoing. These books are, unfortunately, used for reference in research on 1971 in many universities in South Asia and beyond. We have truth on our side; all we need to do is to present it in narratives that freedom fighters like Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury are the most qualified to write. I urge the younger reader, especially those born after 1971, to buy a copy of the book because both the histories described in this book are important for you to know.



Elahi's courage and honesty which became a part of the collective history of bravery and resistance of our freedom fighters.

When I received a copy of *Chariot of Life* I was intrigued by the title. No, not by the metaphor of chariot (one doesn't usually associate it with life) but by the two bold words of the subtitle in black placed just under the title: liberation war. I tried to recall if his prison diary had any section on the war. It did indeed mention the war, but not at

# Pahela Baishakh in Carbondale

SOHANA MANZOOR

Celebrating Pahela Baishakh is only getting more and more colorful. It is no less than a carnival these days. As far I can remember, since the days of my girlhood I have been visiting Ramna, first with my parents, then with friends. The companions changed, but the spirit never did. It was always the same—birds chirping, getting ready in a frenzy, dressing in red and white, the same but ever new "Esho he Baishakh," chotpoti and fuchka, panta and hilsha, and everything else that comes with it. The day is no different from any other, but it's the spirit that makes all the difference. Come to think of it, however, I suddenly realize that the most memorable Pahela Baishakh in my life is connected not with Ramna Botomul and the greenery of Dhaka, but a small nondescript town in Illinois, USA. In Dhaka, I have been a more or less regular botomul goer. But in that alien town of Carbondale, where there was nothing Bengali, we strove to evoke the spirit of Baishakh with all our might—a handful of 25-30 Bangladeshi students and some spouses and children.

That particular year, I was the general secretary of the Bangladesh Student Association at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. I don't recall exactly how it started, but we were determined to have a grand Pahela Baishakh. The worst thing about Bangladeshis, as we all know, is our divided existence. If there are four Bengalis in one place, there will be at least three groups. Carbondale was no different. But in spite of everything, we decided to celebrate the Pahela Baishakh. A venue was chosen, the funds were raised, the Bangladeshi faculty members were generous, and the students came forward with whatever little they could spare. There was no lack of spirit. The cooking and the decoration were divided in two groups. And then it began....

There was a residence hall with a huge kitchen with seven ovens with a total of 14 burners. Two of our graduate students lived there and we swarmed the kitchen the night before Pahela Baishakh. It was difficult to get hilsha that year. Apparently, hilsha export was banned by the Bangladesh Government and no hilsha to be had.

Then, a Bangladeshi bhabi called me up. "Apa, there's boal maach at the International Grocery."

I was kind of short tempered for many reasons, and barked, "So? Do you want to feed people boal maach?"

"Yes, I mean the boal looks and smells exactly like hilsha fish," the bhabi replied hastily.

I was dumbfounded. As it turned out, our deshi brethren exported hilsha under the name of 'boal' to fool the customs officials. And of course, we got



fifteen pieces of 'boal maach' and turned them into hilsha.

At the kitchen, there was complete chaos. Nobody wanted to chop onions. The ladies were all yelling, "We can't cook and chop onions too." I am not sure how the selections were made, but suddenly, Zaman, Halim, and another young man whose name I no longer remember, were sitting with several plastic containers, chopping knives and a huge pile of big, round purple onions. They were peeled but not chopped. We all got busy and there were laughter, banter, squeals, and of course, the din of sounds of pots and pans. The hilsha fishes were entrusted with one of the bhabis and were being cooked elsewhere. We were busy with ten different kinds of bharta, daal, chicken and beef.

At a crucial moment, Tariq came in with a huge bundle of potatoes and said, "Hey Zaman bhai, why are you crying? Are you missing bhabi?"

We all looked and saw poor Zaman and his two comrades in copious tears. We laughed out loud, and Zaman yelled back, "Why don't you come and take my place? You'll be wailing for your yet-to-be- bride."

At this moment, someone remembered, "O dear, we did not rehearse for the chorus. Should we try it now?"

Right. So there was the cultural program. While we did prepare for the decoration and had everything ready, the cultural program was a total mess. The individual songs and recitation were fine, I guess. But the chorus of "Esho, he Boishakh" had not been practiced even once.

Tariq was the BSA president. He said, "Why do we need to practice? Isn't it like our national anthem?"

We scowled and somehow started singing right there in the kitchen with the seven ovens. The pots and spoons became our musical instruments and we were chopping, cooking and singing all at once.

I think we probably slept only for a couple of hours that night.

The morning of the program now seems like a blur. The program was supposed to be held at a local church. We had created a large painting showing a bright sun, blue sky, trees, birds and butterflies. There were kites and other ornaments hanging all around the large room. The guests were yet to arrive and I barely had time to wear my Baishakhi saree. Toma had borrowed one of my sarees and suddenly I heard her squeak, "Apu!" she sounded horrified. Both my hands were full of treats for the kids and I asked, "What's it now?"

"You have to look. It's Tariq bhaiya."

Tariq had gone home to put on Baishakhi panjabee. So, he had returned. I turned around and dropped whatever I had in my hands. A blazing red something was standing at the bottom of the stairs. It had eyes and it was grinning at us. Then I realized that it was Tariq, and he was wearing the most horrendous shade of red panjabee I had ever seen. And it did not seem like a simple panjabee, but something out of a Bollywood film.

"W...where the hell did you get that?" I gasped. "Arif bhai lent it to me. Is it so bad?" Tariq's

face fell at our expression.

"Bhaiya, don't you have any sense? You are the BSA president. What will the faculty members say?" Toma moaned.

"You have nothing else?" I asked.

"The ones I have from home don't fit any more," came the embarrassed reply.

"Then I guess it will have to do," I said decisively.

Toma groaned while I smiled, "At least, nobody can miss him."

The hall room slowly started filling up. People from our community and others came in twos and threes. I could see some critical glances and some derisive ones. But most of the faces seemed happy and expectant. Lunch was being served as a buffet. People were interested in hilsha most, of course. No Pahela Baishakh can happen without hilsha. People praised the cooks highly. There were light skirmishes over the hilsha too—who would get the bigger piece, etc.

The dreaded cultural program was after the dinner. And one of the notorious singers of the community stepped forward to grab the microphone when singing the chorus. We were all yelling at the top of our lungs, and I prayed fervently that nobody would detect the off notes. No such luck though. Right after we finished, a senior apa who had not sung, whispered in my ear, "Good lord, who asked that cat to sing?"

The rest of the performances went better. I would not say that we were stars, but everything was spontaneous. At one point, I realized that everyone was enjoying the day tremendously. The games were a lot of fun—frog leap, *hari bhanga*, *belun phutano*, musical chair for the ladies. The most serious of professors suddenly became zealous defenders of their respective balloons. We laughed and laughed till our sides ached.

By the time we were done with the program, it was almost evening, and we were totally exhausted. But everyone had huge grins on their faces. Someone said, "Thank God, tomorrow's Sunday. I don't think I can get up in the morning."

As we were packing, Tariq shouted, "We need *hari dhowa* party. The pots and pans are still lying dirty in my kitchen. You guys better help!"

Halim yelled, "Why did we ever agree to organize this program?"

And someone grumbled, "Yet why do I have this feeling that we'll do it again next year?"

Sohana Manzoor is Assistant Professor, Department of English & Humanities at ULAB. She is also the Editor of the Star Literature and Review Pages.