



**A LIFE  
LESS  
ORDINARY**  
**ALI ZAKER**

## My War (2)!

(My apologies for temporary discontinuation of the column. I will try to continue with it for as long as I can. Please bear with me.)

Rustom was an adolescent of about 13. He belonged to a village close to Satkhira, then a sub-division in the Khulna district. He arrived in a sub-sector camp of the Mukti Bahini in action along the border between Satkhira and Hasnabad. When asked he said that he wanted to fight the war. Much as the commanders told him not to worry about fighting at this tender age, he would continually dream about becoming a fighter and take on the Pakistanis. I saw him during my visit to this sub-sector for *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra*. He was a boy bubbling with ideas about how to overcome the enemy. The primary action in hand then was to extradite about two platoons of the Pakistani soldiers who were in defense in a bunker about a few hundred meters away.

As a broadcaster of the *Radio Bangladesh* in exile I saw action mostly in the western theater starting with sector-5 situated at Rangpur-Dinajpur border with West Bengal to the southern border in Satkhira of Bangladesh. I am sure my readers who have some knowledge of frontal combat in modern warfare are aware of what it takes to dislodge a group of armed soldiers from a bunker for as long as they do not run out of their ammunition. But we were running out of time. The enemy had principally agreed to surrender to the combined forces of *Mukti Bahini* and the Indian Army but this bunch of Pakistanis were oblivious of that fact. Our battle fatigued fighters were almost at a low degree of patience. But intermittent shelling and firing from small arms went on through the night. Towards dawn, when both parties were tired and took a breather we saw a relatively small figure running quietly from our rear through the right side and jump in to the enemy bunker yelling, 'Joy Bangla'. Soon afterwards the bunker with all its occupants went up in the air with a loud noise, fire and all. This was tiny Rustom who sacrificed his life with a live grenade in his hand. We were all dumb founded. Until now I can't forget his innocent face, asking me, every now and then, if I needed a cup of tea or a glass of water. Our war is dotted with memories like this. And the heroics don't belong to the fighters alone. They come from various sections of the population.

On the 16th of December I was on an assignment from our radio that made me travel well within Bangladesh. I was walking by the Jessore Roads towards Jessore with my tape recorder in one hand and a back pack behind my back. The road was nearly empty that afternoon. I saw an Indian army jeep coming from the direction of Jessore. I waved at it to stop so that I could have some information about the conditions prevailing in Jessore and Khulna. They slowed down a bit and as it came closer an army officer stuck his head out smiling and said, "Rejoice, you are free" and then the jeep went away towards Calcutta.

I became numb. The tape recorder slipped from my hand and fell on the road. I sat down and lay on the road for a few minutes. I just could not believe that we were free.

## 3 West Bengal plays and a dividend

*My last visit to Kolkata during Eid-ul-Azha holidays in August (August 21-27) this year proved to be very fulfilling by all accounts after a gap of many years – eliminating the heat, of course! It was rewarding because my good friend (though he is almost thirty years younger than me) Angsuman Bhoumik made it so in every possible way. I had called him two-three times before I flew to Kolkata to make sure he could arrange for me to watch some good plays during my 4 day stay there as we (my colleague, his wife and I) had a plan to revisit Shantiniketan for a day in the course of our trip.*

Experiencing West Bengal plays is nothing new for me – during and after the Liberation War I had had the opportunity to watch legendary actors, directors and playwrights of the day, like Ajitesh Bandopadhyaya, Utpal Dutt, Sambhu, Mitra, Tripti Mitra, Sova Sen and many others, but I never had the opportunity to see Shaoli Mitra performing on the stage. When Angsuman mentioned on August 22 *Naathvati Anaathavat* was to be read out (not performed as such) by Shaoli Mitra at Academy of Fine Arts, I immediately started enthusing over an extraordinary feel. *Naathvati Anaathavat* is a first person narrative of Draupodi's story of female marginalization even though she was the wife of mighty *Pandavas*. Draupodi has been a much talked about female character of the world's longest epic *Mahabharata* for multiple reasons. I must mention here *Naathvati Anaathavat* was penned, directed and acted by Shaoli herself back in 1983 and is estimated to be one of her milestone creative works. After watching her reading/acting the narrative I was genuinely intrigued by her performing agility at the age of, perhaps, almost seventy.

The second play that I saw on August 25 at the same



venue, that is Academy of Fine Arts, was *Don Taake Bhalo Laage*, an adaptation of Miguel De Cervantes's acclaimed Spanish novel *Don Quixote*. In fact it is a Bangla version of the Broadway musical production titled *Man of La Mancha*, created by Dale Wasserman (script), Joe Darion (lyrics), and Mitch Leigh (music). The Bangla script written by Suman Mukhopadhyaya, has been directed and acted by Sujana Mukhopadhyaya. It was simply awesome, for it was a perfect musical! Rabindranath has composed several dance-dramas but our stage still suffers from a crucial dearth of musicals – I haven't seen any remarkable musical performed in Bangladesh. I can only recollect two so called musicals, which are essentially dance dramas and not musicals in

**WHAT'S  
IN THE  
THEATER?**  
**ABDUS SELIM**



the proper sense of the term – *Alibaba o Chollish Chor* produced by Nrittanchal, and *Gohor Badsha o Banesa Pori* by Ngorik Natyagan. But perhaps witnessing my very first real Bangla musical performance was *Don Taake Bhalo Laage*. It impacted my inner mind so much so that I made sure to collect a copy of *Man of La Mancha*, the Broadway musical that I referred to earlier, with a silent conviction to give it a Bangladeshi version by 2019.

The third and last performance that I witnessed was a diametrically opposite experience that I had had so far. It was an English play titled *Iron*, directed by Arghya Lahiri and produced by the Rage Production of Mumbai, at GD Birla Sabhaghar, Ballygunge. Performers were all Indians with their Indian-accent English dialogues (one of the *Englishes* defined by famous linguist Braj Kachru), but without any fumbling or faltering. This I mention because our stage actors or for that matter most of the actors of all genres have problems speaking English, though actors need to get well adapted to the language of the characters they depict. However, to tell the truth my experience of watching this very elite and expensive (tickets sold at one thousand rupees each though ours were complimentary) theater show was not pleasant at all. But then, it was a distinctive exposure for me no doubt, for we don't get to see English plays performed in Bangladesh.

My Kolkata visit provided me a dividend too – I had the opportunity to listen to the *Minority Problem in India* lecture by Nobel Memorial Prize winner Amartya Sen on August 25, afternoon.

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