



A LIFE LESS ORDINARY
ALY ZAKER

After the War

I arrived in Dhaka on the 10th of January. Pakistani occupation army had surrendered after an ignominious defeat in the hands of the joint forces comprising Mukti Bahini (Liberation War Army) and the Indian Armed Forces on the 16th of December 1971. The government of Bangladesh in exile came back to Dhaka from Mujibnagar soon after the surrender of the Pakistanis. I was late in returning home because I was asked by my superior Alamgir Kabir to hold fort until the equipment used by our English language department could be handed over to the Indian authorities.

Tenth January was also the date when Bagabandhu returned to Dhaka from the Pakistani jail, via London. I entered the city at noon and was overwhelmed by the presence of men, women and children all over the city. They were colourfully attired and in great mood of celebration. I don't remember seeing Dhaka so vibrantly colourful ever in my life of 24 years by then. It seemed as if the entire population of the city flocked in to the city streets from a protracted period of solitary confinement! The breezy mood was precipitated by the coming back home of the father of the nation from the Pakistani jail.

After spending some time with my elder brother in his Narinda residence, I decided to come out with the crowd on the streets. My journey through the streets of the city, some on foot and others on rickshaws did not have to be pre-planned. I just got along. The mood of the city carried me with it to wherever celebrations were happening. This lasted until the wee hour of the morning. Then I returned home exhausted and crashed on the bed. The next day my new life in my free country would begin with newer resolve.

But before that it would be in order to share with my readers the journey at the end of the war that I made to reach my favourite city of Dhaka from Kolkata. We had to report at the bus station at Kidderpore in Kolkata at six in the morning where a reserved bus would wait for us, the late returnees of the Bangladesh Government in exile. We were twenty-six in number saying 'good bye' to India for the time being. When we reached the bordering town of Bongaon it was about one in the afternoon. We had to force-feed ourselves to an early lunch for we did not have any idea if food would be available on the road beyond the border. We were not sure what was the state my motherland was in, post the gory war of nine months.

Between Bongaon and the Ferry ghat at Goalondo we stopped by in small tea shops. We were not necessarily thirsty for tea but then these stoppages provided us with the opportunity to talk to the common people. These little chats gave us enormous insight in to the life of the people of Bangladesh during the war of nine months. We came to know that life was far worse than what we were informed through our Government in exile but were surprise to find that the people of my valiant nation withstood all miseries for ultimate freedom. We took a bow to our brave people and proceeded towards the river Jamuna. We were also astonished at the enthusiasm of the common people who greeted us as heroes. By the time we reached Goalondo it was almost evening. We were not aware of the fact that the ferries across the river were no more there. So, the bus could not go across the river. We had to wait overnight and cross the river the following morning in country boats. We found a place to rest in the local Dak Bungalow. There were no beds or other furniture. Therefore, we bought some jute mats from the local bazar and decided to sleep on the floor. I decided to go and sit by the river Jamuna flowing quietly in the darkness of night. The river had a lot to tell. And I was the lone listener.

The author is a renowned stage performer, actor & director. He is also a successful business personality.

Muktijudhdho and I

1
Muktijudhdho (Liberation War), like innumerable Bangladeshis, is a revelation of amour to me. At the very outset I have a plain confession to make—I am not a *certified* Freedom Fighter. I love to consider myself an apolitical person—but that does not mean I remain untouched by any sociopolitical events of considerable significance, for, as John Donne has said: *No man is an island entire of itself; every man/is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; . . . Being a part of the main* Liberation War did stir me a lot directly.

Between 1969 and 1971 we in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) went through both *the worst of times and the best of times*. The *worst of times* because the army junta of Yahya Khan, succeeded by his predecessor army autocrat Ayub Khan, was carrying on a continuum of cunningly oppressive dictatorship on the people of this part exclusively. As for the best of times I can say, solidified with the worldwide awakening against oppression during the sixties of the last millennium we the youths of that time too learned how to protest and fight fearlessly against such autocratic abuse.

The prevailing political turmoil climaxed on March 7, 1971 with the phenomenal speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. I was there to listen to him, and I still feel privileged for that. During our time in our matriculation we had to read *The Gettysburg Address*, the historical speech delivered by Abraham Lincoln on November 19, 1863 in the English syllabus. But I have no hesitation admitting the March 7 speech was a great revelation of political aesthetics for me—a so-called apolitical person that I was until then.

We all know the aftermath of the speech—the beginning of the Liberation War. Though I never had the opportunity to be trained to fight in the front line, for which I still repent, I had to be in the group of allied *Muktijudhdhas* (Freedom Fighters) in a different way. Today I wish to narrate that story.

2
As I entered home in a melancholically depressing afternoon—all afternoons during 1970-71 were melancholic—I sensed an eerie ambiance thickening the air. My younger brother whispered, 'Babubhai's back!'

'Where's he?'
'Sleeping in your room.'

3
March 25, 1971. Political impasse made us all dispirited. We—Botu, my civil engineer friend—and I, went to Jagannath Hall riding his Kawasaki motorbike. It was his worksite at that time. They needed water connection for the construction work. A few Water and Sewerage Authority people were digging a corner of the premise for the connection. Little did we know at that time only twelve hours hence Pakistan army would dig the same field to bury dead bodies of students! It was a sultry summer afternoon. Students thronged at places. Some were parading at a distance with fake rifles in hand. Dr. Gobinda Chandra Deb came out from the Hall building, and as he walked passed us asked, 'Everything Ok?' An all-smiles philosopher crossed the line of life and death with ease!

4
March 25 night. Malibagh Chowdhurypara.
Something was in the air! Everybody was extremely apprehensive.

They were—Botu, Babu, Vosky (he was nicknamed so because he was head over heels in love with the then Soviet Russia), Akhter—playing cards

WHAT'S IN THE THEATER?
ABDUS SELIM



downstairs. There was an unbearable unpredictability everywhere.

I lost my appetite, went down to watch their card play, went up again, down once more, and finally resigned to the bed.

What time was it? I had no count though I was not asleep. Something inside was tearing me apart!

What sound was that? I jumped up on the bed instantly! Hurried down the stairs.

'Did you hear that?'

'Yes!'

Everything went mute for a while. Then there started sound of incessant shooting and shouting! Rajarbagh was burning!

'I'll go!'

'At this hour?'

'Yes! This is the exact hour! Hand me a *chador*, will you?' Shouted Akhter, my debating rival of political ideologies!

5
Vacillating seven days went by!

'Where's Sheikh Mujib?'

'They must have killed him!'

'But this is impossible—unacceptable!'

'What're we going to do now?'

They announced in perverted Bangla, 'Surrender your licensed guns immediately or . . .

6
'How could you do that knowing very well he was my only reliance?'

'How could you let Babu go like that?' my widow *fufu* (maternal aunt) wailed releasing her deep sigh.

A feeling of guilt as if electrocuted me.

7
Babu, my cousin, came back exactly after two months. I went to see him in my bedroom. As I went in I asked myself, 'Why has he come back? Whatever the clandestine *Swadhin Bangla Betar* broadcasts about Freedom Fighters is fake then!'

He slimmed a lot! Seeing me he smiled. I had no guts to ask him how he was or where he had been so long. He spoke first, 'Listen, Selim, we've a lot to do. Brought many things with us—have big plans too! My accomplices are hiding in different places of Dhaka city. We'll meet in the evening. I'll take you with me to meet them.'

My mean feeling immediately prompted me to answer, 'Yes, yes, I'll go with you, wherever you wish to take me! I'll do whatever you ask me to do.' Uttering that I felt so relieved and happy!

8
That was how I got into *Muktijudhdho*. There were a bunch of *Crack Platoon* fighters—Sayeed Babu, Kazi Kamal, Ulfat, Foteh Ali, Gazi Dostogir, Bhulu Mallick, Hanif, Pulu, Mumin, Helal and Shafiul. I had the task to keep them hiding, transferring them to safe places every after single operation, providing medical support whenever needed, smoothing the supply-line of arms and ammunitions, etc. Gradually I became oblivious of my social status as a teacher in Jagannath College and found tremendous comfort extending my services to those valiant Freedom Fighters who in time busted two substations of the city and caused severe damages to the Pakistani Army.

I found so much respite helping them that I never felt that I needed to obtain a Freedom Fighter Certificate.

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