



The war we fought from home

In a personal account, the writer, then a young university student, tells the story of the millions who stayed back during the Liberation War doing their part in supporting the struggle and the freedom fighters amidst the fear of being tortured or killed and losing loved ones by the Pakistani Army.

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Forty-eight years is a long time to remember any episode of one's life; yet the memories of that morning of August 30, 1971 remain so vivid, etched forever in my heart and mind. In fact, every single day of those nine months of 1971 is embedded, engraved deeply forever in my consciousness as the entire nation became one to fight and defeat the marauding Pakistani Army. It was a time when parents willingly allowed their sons and daughters to join the liberation struggle, when selfish individual interests were sacrificed for a greater cause, a time of great pain and anguish yet exhilaration at the possibility of having a free and independent country of our own. We, were there, honoured to have played a role and be a part of history that resulted in the birth of Bangladesh.

However, independent Bangladesh came at a big price. Stories of the atrocities being committed by the Pakistani Army started coming in and young men and women in the thousands joined the liberation effort. The Mukti Bahini started to emerge as a force which further enraged the Pakistani Army intensifying their brutality as village after village were razed to the ground, with indiscriminate killing, looting and rape of women. Over the course of the next nine months three million people were killed, millions

displaced, at least 200,000 women raped and the entire infrastructure of the country destroyed. Ten million people crossed over to India, most to save their lives but thousands of others to join the liberation struggle and establish an independent Bangladesh.

But this story is about those millions who stayed behind, could not cross over, were never called Muktijoddha, but were as intensely involved in the struggle for liberation. It is about those men and women who lived in danger everyday of being searched, humiliated, picked up, tortured, or even raped. My family and I were among those millions.

Life for us had only one purpose, that was to support the liberation effort. Wasif Islam, my brother joined the band of young boys, the urban guerrillas known as the Crack Platoon. Among his close associates were Shahidullah Khan Badal, Masud Sadique Chullu bhai, Alam, Bodui Alam Bodi, Ashfaque (who later joined the Bangladesh regular army and embraced martyrdom) and many others. Together they carried out many daring operations in Dhaka city such as blowing up the power station, transporting arms and ammunition and yes, even helping Captain Khaled Musharraf's daughter cross the border and taking her to her parents. As early as March 27, they brought a few 303 guns and hand grenades to our house in Road 4 and buried those in our

backyard. I remember our youthful exuberance, our somewhat naïve belief, that we would indeed drive the Pakistani Army out of our country with this ammunition.

Months passed and our house in Dhanmondi Rd 4 became a meeting place for the Muktijoddha friends. We started collecting funds, medicine, blankets and most importantly, providing shelter and safe houses, alongside translating news and information and sending them across the border. Friends and their friends would come from across the border, have a meal and share with us their exploits. Their stories made us cry and yet proud, sad at the death or capture of our freedom fighters, yet hopeful that a new dawn would surely emerge someday. How we clung on to Shadhin Bangla Betar, to every bit of good news of our young men inflicting losses on the enemy. We learned to live frugally, saving every penny to support the war.

One regular visitor was Masud Sadique, our beloved Chullu bhaiya, whose stories were always the most frightening and fascinating. Once he and my brother Wasif were transporting guns from one hideout to the other and almost got caught. The army stopped them on their way but did not search the car; on the way back their car was searched thoroughly but by that time they had already deposited the guns. He would often tell me, "Shaheen, if they

ever catch me they will skin me alive." This would send a shiver down my spine as I constantly prayed for their safety.

Our closest friends at that time were Shireen Huq, her family, Towhid Samad and his family who lived down the road from us. Our mothers, cousins, aunts too joined our cause by raising funds, stitching blankets and sweaters. We had our heroes too among the freedom fighters as every young woman I knew said they were knitting a sweater for Khaled Musharraf! The entire population had become a family with one purpose and that was to defeat the Pakistani Army who wanted to destroy our language, culture and way of life. However, many of us experienced deep regret for not being able to join the war personally.

But coming back to August 29, 1971. It was my youngest brother Rizwan's birthday, he had turned 15. I had hand-stitched a red sleeping suit for him and baked a cake. The day passed uneventfully as we quietly celebrated his birthday. Rumi, my friend from Dhaka University who had joined the war as a freedom fighter came to visit me around 9 pm. I reprimanded him for roaming around so freely and asked him to stay back that night. He said no, that he wanted to stay with his mother and was to join his fellow freedom fighters the next morning.

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From left to right: Major Ansar, Dr Ahrar Ahmed, Zia, Fateh Ali, Sabek Singh, Habibul Alam, Major Haider, Shahdat Chowdhury, Masud Sadique Chullu, and comrades (who could not be identified).