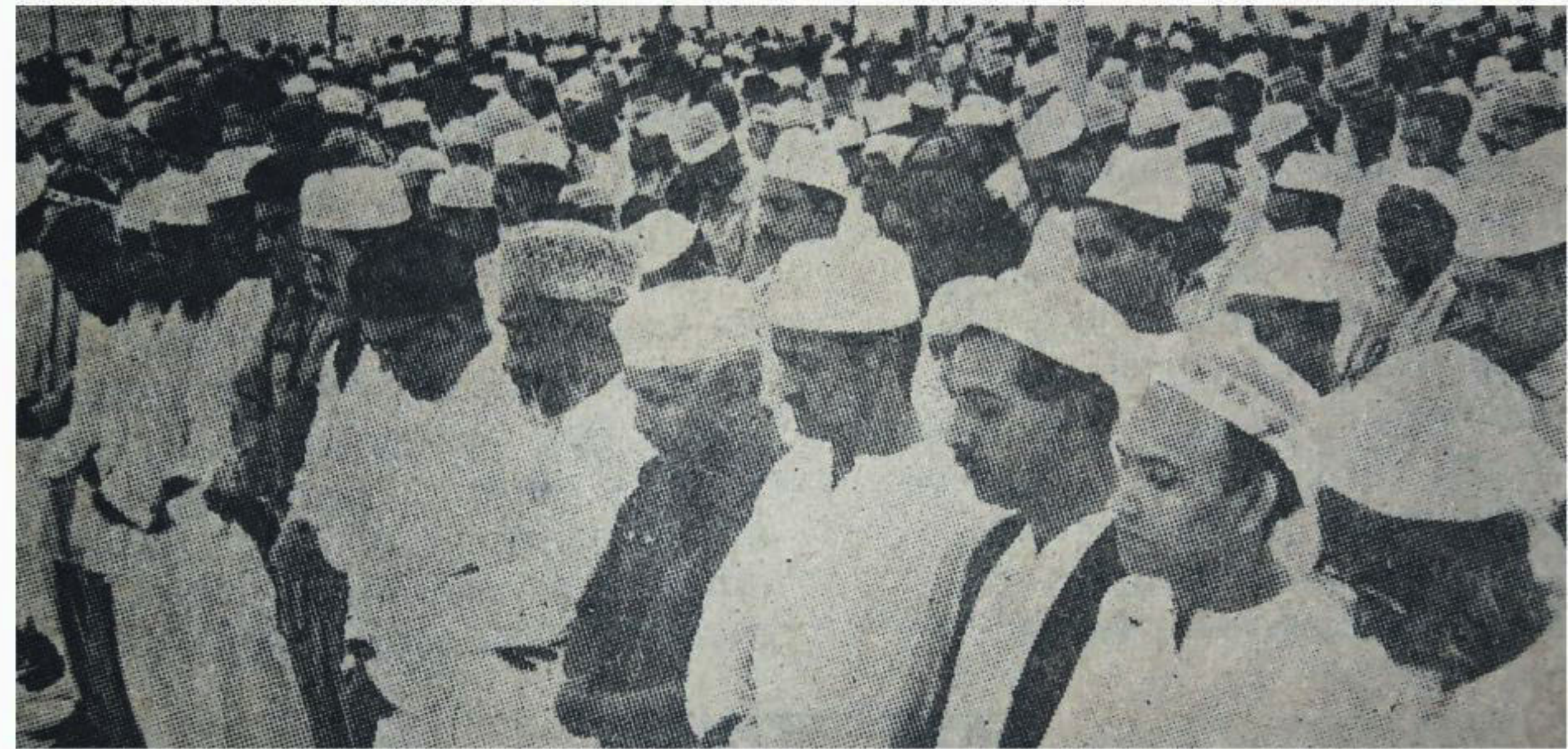




Tajuddin Ahmad, General M A G Osmani and other employees of the Mujibnagar headquarters join the Eid prayers.

PHOTO: JOYBANGLA



Eid prayers at the Outer Stadium in Dhaka.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Eid in 1971

A forgotten chapter of the Liberation War

EMRAN MAHFUZ

TRANSLATED BY SARAH ANJUM BARI

The year was 1971. Dissent steadily brewing in East Pakistan as we knew it then, intensifying in momentum by the clarion call of Awami League leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The streets of Dhaka rose in uproar from as early as March '71, and had reached a crescendo after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Race Course speech on March 7. The enemy's brutalities continued well into November. That November, people cried. But they dreamed of victory too. Amid these mixed emotions arrived an Eid-ul-Fitr. How did the Muslim masses celebrate this particular Eid, perched precariously upon a pivotal moment in history?

"It is Eid today. We have not made any arrangements at home. No one has bought any new clothes. The curtains have not been washed. Cobwebs have

armed struggle against the West Pakistanis even on this day. Deaths swept the nation. In Bhurungamari on this day, Bir Uttam Ashfaqus Samad became a martyr.

In Kolkata, however, Eid prayers were being performed at the temporary secretariat premises at Kolkata on the Theatre Road, arranged under the initiative of the expatriate government. Among the participants were Syed Nazrul Islam, Acting President of the Mujibnagar government, Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad, Finance Minister M Mansur Ali, Home, Civil Supplies, Relief and Rehabilitation Minister Kamruzzaman, Commander-in-chief of the Bangladesh Armed Forces Mohammed Ataul Gani Osmani, Chief of Air force A K Khandakar, and Professor Yusuf Ali.

Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad had

of Bhola who was known to recite the Quran and its tafsir (interpretation) on the Bangladesh Radio.

Acting President of the time, Syed Nazrul Islam had spoken to the country on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr. This was broadcast on the Shwadhin Bangla Betar Kendro, and also published on Joybangla, a pro-government Bangladeshi expatriate weekly, on November 26.

In the speech the president says, "Even during the holy month of Ramadan, Bangladeshi Muslims and countless other men and women are being killed by the brutality of the invading forces. Last year, we could not celebrate Eid as we were mourning the 10 lakh lives lost to the devastating storm of November 12. This year, we join the Eid prayers with the sorrow of thousands of people brutally killed by

the enemy. The success of our struggle is within sight. Let us all pray and work selflessly to bring that day nearer."

In that same issue of Joybangla, an editorial titled "Not a festive Eid, but one of sacrifice" (Utshober Eid noy, tyag er Eid) was released in the name of Bangabandhu who was at that time confined within the cells of a Pakistan prison.

It reads, "I am proud to call myself a Bangali. Our culture is as lively as a flowing river. Motivated by self-power, the Bangali will once again raise his head in front of the rest of the world. One is my religion. The other is my national identity. Religion is my personal belief and practice. National identity is my collective heritage. The only difference between a Hindu and a Muslim Bangali, or a Buddhist or Christian Bangali, is their religion. But they are the same in their food, their taste, their geographic environment, their health and culture, their colour and political goal."

Artist Hashem Khan was staying in Dhaka at the time. In an article titled "20 November 1971", he recalled, "Today is Eid. A day of joy and festivities. But what can we celebrate today? There is no excitement to buy new clothes. The children have no sweet demands. Will any of the homes cook *polao*, *phirni* and *shemai*? There are certainly no such arrangements at my house today. It must be the same in all houses."

In his memoir, journalist MR Akhter Mukul remembered the day thus: "The prayers had just ended when we reached Theatre Road. I exchanged hugs with nearly everyone. After that there was only the grief-stricken talk of Dhaka and the war. I realised that though we were residing in Mujibnagar, our hearts and souls were all in occupied Bangladesh. The people there, meanwhile, looked to us for success. I have never seen such solidarity in the Bengali nation."

In his book *Amar Ekattar*, Professor Anisuzzaman recalled how Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad had summoned him on the day before Eid. They talked about the ongoing war, about the significance of the Indian Prime Minister's recent visit, about how world opinion would prevent the Pakistanis from killing Bangabandhu during his trial.

At the end of the discussion, Tajuddin Ahmad walked over to an iron safe in his room and from it brought out an envelope, which he gave to the professor.

"What is this?" the professor had asked.

"Eid is coming up, this is for that," the prime minister had replied.

"There was Tk 500 in the envelope—equivalent to a month's salary for me at the time," professor Anisuzzaman wrote in his book. "I did not want to take the money. He [the prime minister] replied: 'I can at least give your children a present for Eid, can't I?' He had said this with a lot of emotion. I was too overwhelmed to argue further."

Meanwhile, writer Abu Jafar Shamsuddin's account described the ambience on Eid day in Dhaka, in his article "Eid er din Shonibaar". He wrote, "No jamaat is allowed during wartime, so I did not go for the prayers. I took my youngest son Kayyes to Siddique Bazar at 5 am. The roads are empty. Our rickshaw is turned away upon reaching the television office. There are truckloads of military guards all around. On the way

back, we notice jamaat prayers being performed at the Baytul Mukarram mosque, surrounded by military guards. This the first time I am not participating in Eid prayers."

All this while, a number of organisations such as the Bangladesh Chhatra Sangam Parishad and the Bangladesh Women's Association were playing a vital role in generating public support of the Liberation War on the international stage. In a letter issued by the Bangladesh Women's Association in Great Britain on November 16, expatriates were invited to donate money to freedom fighters. The was drafted thus—

"103, Ledbury Road, London, W. II
 Telephone : 01 727 6578
 Ref : 2/R.
 Date : 16 November, 1971

To all,
 On this Eid-ul-Fitr, every Bangali lives with a heavy heart. The country is facing grave disaster. Yahya's policies and propaganda are embroiled in brutal military oppression. The Yezid forces are determined to wipe out the name of the Bengali nation from the face of the planet. Amid this crisis, our only hope are our freedom fighters. They will save Bangla and Bangladeshis, even at the cost of their lives. Our Eid will hold no value if we forget our duties towards them on this day.

As such, the Bangladesh Women's Association of the UK has decided to collect money and send it for clothes and other essentials to be bought for the Mukti Bahini. We ask for your sincere cooperation with this endeavour.

We invite you all to participate in the fight for freedom by donating this money to the Mukti Bahini through the Women's Association. May this lighten some of the burden of your duties towards your nation. Wishing you a blessed Eid.
 Joybangla

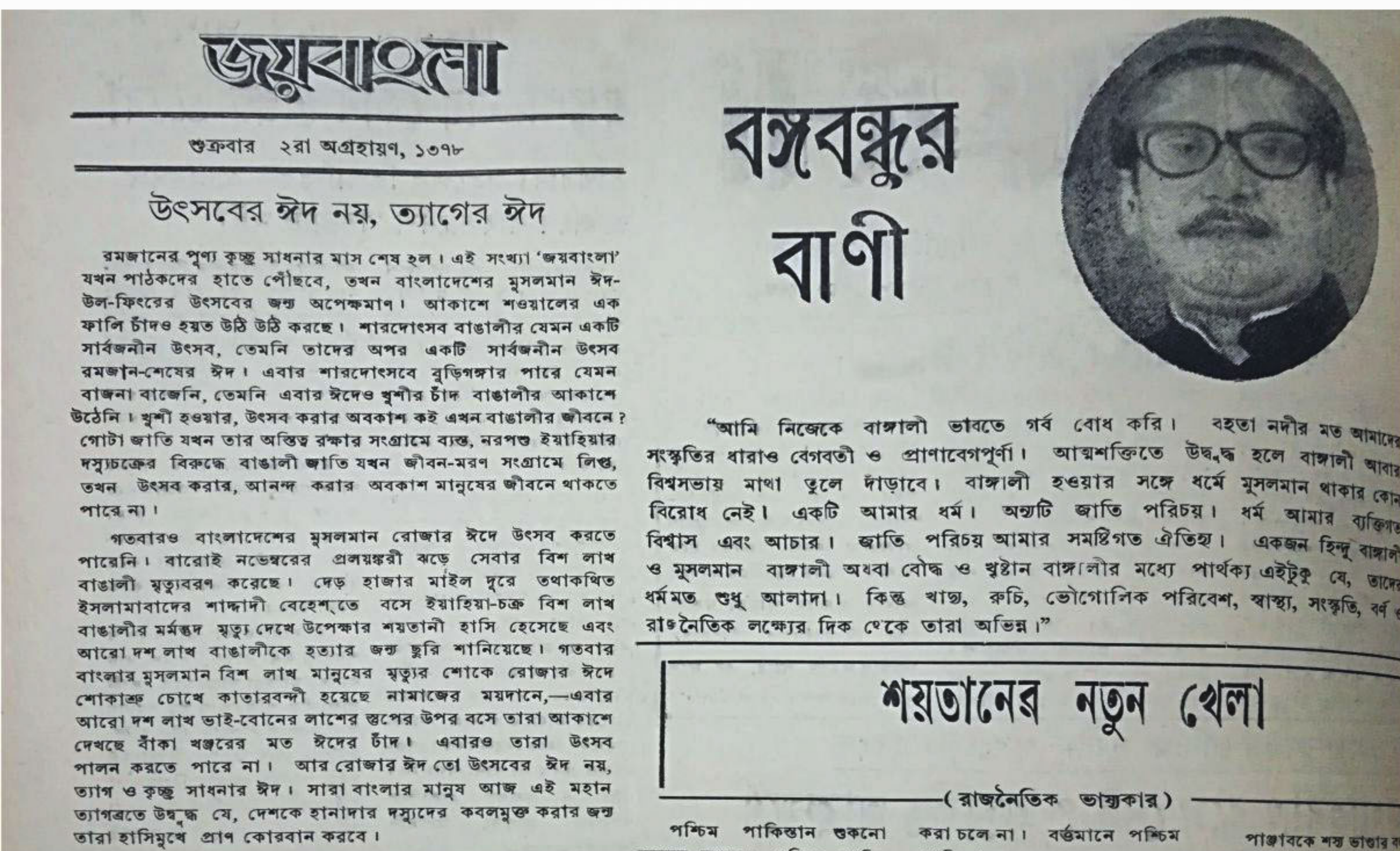
Nibedika
 Mrs. Baksh"

Finally, it must be mentioned that the Shwadhin Bangla Betar Kendro played a vital role in motivating the freedom fighters out on the battlefields. On November 20, the radio channel broadcasted a special programme for Eid. All day long, they played the heart wrenching song "Eid er chaad ke fire jete bolar moto ghotona kothao hoyeche bole jana nei." The lyrics were written by Shahidul Islam, the song was composed by Aji Roy, and was sung by artistes Rupa Farhan and many others.

The crescent moon had indeed arrived and been denied, all in the hope of making a dream come true. That dream became reality on December 16. But on the Eid-ul-Fitr of November 20, 1971, the day was filled with anguish and heartache.

Emran Mahfuz is a poet, researcher, and coordinator of Daily Star Books. He can be reached at emran.mahfuz@thedailystar.net

Sarah Anjum Bari is a member of the Star Weekend magazine team. She can be reached at sarah.anjum.bari@gmail.com



Bangabandhu's Eid message published in Joybangla on November 19, 1971.

PHOTO: JOYBANGLA

not been dusted. No vial of *attar* rests on the table. Sharif, Jami have not gone to perform Eid prayers.

But still I woke up early today and cooked *jorda* and *shemai*. Just in case some of Rumi's fellow freedom fighters come to visit. In case some guerilla fighter comes in the dark of the night, separated from his parents and siblings. To feed them, I have cooked *polao korma*, *kofta kabab*. I will serve them food with my own hands, should any of them show up. Even a bottle of *attar* awaits them, stowed away, to make their clothes fragrant with scent," wrote Jahanara Imam, the mother of Rumi... a martyr, in her diary on November 20, 1971, published in *Ekattorer Din Guli*.

That year freedom fighters had not celebrated; they had hoped to rejoice in a "bijoyer Eid" (victory Eid) in liberated Bangladesh. Eid dutifully arrived on November 20, on a Saturday, perhaps the only Eid of its kind to ever greet our people. It was shrouded with a medley of complex emotions — panic, determination to free the nation, and lives clouded by uncertainty in the refugee camps. The country was caught up in

had the opportunity to enter Bangladesh close to its border on the night of Eid. About that night, General Osmani's public relations officer Nazrul Islam wrote in *Ekattorer Ronangon: Olikhito Kichu Kotha*:

"Eid-ul-Fitr jamaat prayers were held in an unfamiliar environment this time, on the small lawn of the Mujibnagar headquarters. The independent Bangladeshi government in Mujibnagar heartily promoted the Eid celebrations to counter the propaganda and misinformation wrought by the fascist Pakistani Government regarding the emergence of an independent Bangladesh..."

The celebration shattered the misconception spread deliberately among other Muslim countries that Bangladesh's fight was against Islam and a Muslim nation. It emphasised the fact that this struggle was about the establishment of self-determination of a nation. A fight against fascists who were against humanity and religion. It was to spread this awareness that the Mujibnagar government organised a large number of Eid celebrations that year. The jamaat prayers were led by Mawlana Delwar Hossain, a resident

Yahya's troops. Sadly, freedom must be attained at the cost of such sacrifice. But I promise you we will celebrate the Eid festival once we have freed the country from the enemy."

On November 19—the day before Eid—prime minister Tajuddin Ahmad released a message titled "Let this Eid be our prayer" (Ei Eid amader prarthona hok) in Joybangla's 283rd issue.

The prime minister said, "Eid this year is welcomed by great tragedy. The enemy wreaks havoc on the occupied areas, millions of people have been snatched from their regular lives, preparations are underway in the independent areas to wipe out the enemy, and people are struggling to free their motherland at the cost of blood. The joy of Eid has been wiped out from our lives this year. There is only the grief of lost loved ones, the promise of the struggle for victory, and the resolve to sacrifice.

On behalf of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, I extend my heartfelt Eid greetings to the people of Bangladesh. The joy we are deprived of today will hopefully be compensated to us the day we will have freed our country from