

Unfulfilled dreams of a victorious nation

TO ATIQ a freedom fighter



ANOTHER Victory day has come, the 48th in the history of independent Bangladesh. Considering the short span of our life, we have travelled quite a distance from 1971. Memories are what make us, our dreams and aspirations keep us going and our hopes sustain us through the journey of life.

It is important that with the ugliness of war we should also remember and cherish the rewards that this war has gifted our nation, the heroic resistance of our people, the great acts of courage and bravery and the great sacrifices made, how our people faced an unequal enemy and laid down their lives for the honour and love of their motherland. So why did we choose to go to war?

Only when our very existence, as it were, was threatened, our life, liberty and our way of life were at stake, were we forced to go to war, to save our culture and heritage, our very "Bangaliness" as a nation.

In fact, the reasons were many and included the seething discontent of the people of East Pakistan, disparity practiced between the people of two far lying wings. We fought against oppression and exploitation, to end social injustice and economic deprivation by the rulers in the capital located in the western wing of the country.

Peace loving people of Bangladesh led by their great leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman tried till the penultimate moment to get their legitimate rights and demands peacefully, hoping for a political solution to the crisis following the election of 1970, where the Awami League had won an absolute majority and deserved to form the government at the centre, but were being stonewalled by the leaders in West Pakistan.

The hoped-for peaceful solution never came about, the minority leaders of the West Pakistan backed by a power-hungry military junta went on a killing spree on the sleeping people of East Pakistan at the dead of night on the black night of March, 25, 1971. Liberation was the only answer.

After the glorious victory, the country was throbbing with energy that the war generated, dreams were blooming in every heart, the future was awaited with great expectations and full of all kinds of possibilities. What has happened to all our dreams and aspirations? Have our leaders, the immediate beneficiary of the victory of '71, been able to deliver on the promises that were the moral imperatives for the suffering and sacrifices made by the people?

Hindsight often makes us wiser and we can

see where so many things could have been different. Many of the sore issues that were the reasons for us to fight the war are still here, very much alive, and continue to plague our people. Social and economic disparity between rich and the poor remains and in many cases the gaps have widened. Economic anarchy has proliferated.

A major portion of our economy is controlled and vandalised by a small section of the people who are politically powerful and are in league with a group of unethical businessmen who have no love for the people or the country and are only spurred by unbounded greed.

No doubt, Bangladesh as a country has made laudable progress in many of the social indices. It has alleviated poverty to a great extent, solved the perpetual food shortage and bettered the lives of millions. These are all benefits of our independence and I am confident that under the right winds the boat of progress will sail ahead.

To a freedom fighter, the most worrisome trend in our country at the moment is the lack

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of rule of law. Common people are often the victim of a corrupt justice system. It fills us with great sadness to see the grave erosion of moral values; hypocrisy has become the guiding religion and is practiced in politics, and has pervaded in all of our social transactions.

This deterioration has poisoned all spheres of our society, specially, the most vital areas like education, healthcare, justice system, that holds a civilised and enlightened society together.

Our society has differing structures and layers. Ideally, they should all be supporting each other in order to have a healthy and functional social system where no one group should be thriving at the cost of the other. Our rulers and decisionmakers should be keenly aware of the grievances that pile up and accumulate among the helpless common people who have no recourse to get remedies to their problems.

We often talk about the spirit of Liberation

War, but what does it actually mean?

To me it was actually a liberation from many of our age-old, regressive notions, prejudices and practices. We forgot about class, social-status, religion, sects or gender in '71, we were all thrown onto the same plane, fighting for our lives, our very existence. The whole country was united as never before. We were just men and women only, facing a common enemy.

Humanity saw its great face during the short months of the Liberation War. That was the great legacy of our Liberation War, one country, one culture, one language, spiced with our ethnic varieties, but all harbouring the common dream of a united country, all hoping for the promised golden future.

Tragically, we have strayed far from that spirit. The country is divided today and our political system is fractured.

By nature, I am optimistic and as a freedom fighter I have immense faith in the ordinary people of our country. If we are able to make the right call, they will always come up and deliver.

Before I end my ruminations let me share a story. In 1974 I was part of a state visit of the then chief of our Army Staff, General Shafiqullah BU, to Moscow as his Aide.

Every day we would go past a simple but beautiful square and I would see somebody or the other, a man or a woman, come and lay flowers there. When I asked our interpreter Colonel Ishkov about this, as everything was written in Russian, he explained that this was in memory of the unknown fallen soldiers of the Second World War that ended in 1945. Our Liberation War had ended in 1971, only three years had passed, emotions were still raw and my eyes filled with tears. Great respect rose in my heart for the people of Russia, after 29 years of World War II, people were still honouring their heroes with fresh flowers every day and I realised this great country will never have any dearth of heroes if it were in crisis and in need of them. In my own country, after only three years, freedom fighters were already being neglected, pushed to the fringes, with controversy and confusion sown to marginalise them in society.

A society and a nation honours its heroes, not for their benefits, but for itself and for all the future generations to come, for it perpetuates a noble strain, admirable examples for them to be inspired by and to emulate. Otherwise, in times of need, there will be no heroes in that nation who will come forward to sacrifice.

Here I have to say that the greatest neglect and folly we made after the war, was that we forgot that it was the common people who were the most heroic of all, who had suffered and sacrificed the most. May we all acknowledge that and pay them back with respect, care and fairness.

Capt (Rtd) Humayun Kabir is a freedom fighter (Bir Pratik).

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I remember before the war, The hazy summer days, Warm monsoon nights, nothing to worry about, Life drifted on its carefree ways As the earth hurtled on its regulated orbit Drawn by the blazing sun And encircled by the shy moon I remember the night of March '71 When all hell broke loose on 70 million The army rolled out on the streets of Dhaka Morning found the dying and the dead The streets were littered with Bengali blood Innocent blood Once again was bled I remember, Khokon Bhai's blood soaked, Bullet ridden body Perhaps not knowing why he died I remember, at the funeral The silent vow, that sprung deep inside me, "Khokon Bhai, you will not have died in vain".

I remember, the fear in my mother's eyes When I told her I must go, "Good bye" she said with hurt and tears Yet so brave, in lonely despair There was a glimmer of hope As our youth and amour Trudged across the border To return stronger, as warriors I remember the hectic training days The brilliant Khaled Musharraf, The business-like Capt Haider And the hundreds and thousands of nameless Faceless Comrades in arms I remember the brotherhood, As young and old, Man and woman The child, the sick, The villager and the city slick, All united together in an unwritten bond So strong so vibrant. I also remember the treachery, The hate, The plunder and the rape, The agony, the pain, The nagging fear of being picked up, The torture stories, I remember, the selfish Bengali, Unwilling to part with some money For the cause, I remember most, The failures, the hopelessness, the helplessness The abyss, I remember the hiding of arms underground At the back of our house, The army raid in the early hours of dawn The month long hiding at Moni's house I remember how brave my mother and her friends were

Cooking for hungry freedom fighters, organising stitching of *kathas*, By the hundreds, as winter set in Making money available whenever we needed it, Encouraging us to go on, when all seemed lost. I remember being arrested With the route map to the border and beyond, Somewhere in my pockets, And being saved, only by the Help of the Almighty. I remember, the trip Atiq and I Made to Karachi,

to forge alliance with the sympathetic Sindh

to study the possibilities of an hijack I remember how we rescued Khaled Musharraf's daughter Badal, Shopon, while Chullu Bhai drove his car, The attack at the power stations of Dhaka Alam, Maya and the rest While I hurled the incendiary bomb, And the darkness lit up, a symbol of freedom I remember the planning of raids, Yes, the elimination of traitors, Arranging medicine and patriotic doctors For the sick and the wounded, Locating hideouts in the city As more and more groups moved in I remember, the 4th of December As the sky grew bright with flares, And the air Was pierced with air raid siren While the earth shook with bombs dropped by the Indians Who had joined the fray, Yet the bombs fell on friends and foe alike. I remember the morning of the 16th, We drove triumphantly to the Intercontinental Hotel The banner of Free Bangladesh unfurled in my hands People looked on, bewildered, incredulously Victory, Joy Bangla, It was victory day, Everywhere people greeted us with tearful, Thankful gaze I remember the tears rolling down From the cheeks of Pakistani officers As they laid down their arms Before the Indian army brass I remember the celebration, At our house in Dhanmondi, When Col Khaled Musharraf came with so many muktis And freedom fighters, Also present were, friends and relatives, and of course children running around. The sun had come up Once again in Bangladesh Today, I remember the dead Who were with us during those nights and days, Ashfi, Rumi, Bodhi, Khokon Bhai, Azad, Col Khaled, Moni, and so many more, We salute them, for what they have given us And pray for their departed souls I remember the living too Who may read this, And remember along with me. I remember on victory day, we were full of hope, Proud of our freedom, Proud of our people Goodbye, we thought To corruption, to greed, to petty politics, To injustice, to quarrels and strife. Yet after so many years hence, What have we gained? At the cost of blood and tears Of our friends and fellowmen? Perhaps we were naive then We had not won a war We had only won a battle So the war goes on, Against the treachery and the hate, The corruption and injustice, Hypocrisy and vice.

The poem was written in 1975

Passage to freedom



FORTY-EIGHT years have elapsed since we overthrew the yoke of exploitation and oppression and gained our Independence, through blood, sweat, and tears. Introspection is particularly necessary since the post-independence population now

represents two thirds of our people. The youth has undoubtedly read and learned about our freedom struggle, but I feel that personal stories can be effective in creating awareness and reinforcing the importance of being a citizen of a free nation.

Hence, here is the story of my journey leading to our victory in December 1971. My political orientation began to take shape in the late 60s as a student at Dhaka University. It was then that I became conscious of the unfairness and exploitative nature of our relationship with West Pakistan. My Alma Mater was the hotbed of activism and resistance against the exploitation and even overt racism of the political elites in West Pakistan. Almost the entire student body was galvanised by the inequitable treatment that Bengalis were subjected to. I became part of the zeitgeist gradually veering towards the idea that we have to win our rights through active struggle. My transformation also owes a big debt to Chhayanaut where I studied music. This was more than a music school. Our teachers helped us develop a deep love and appreciation for Bengali art and culture. It was a time when there was a surge of Bengali nationalism among the population of East Pakistan and Tagore's literary works were an integral part of this movement. I believe this cultural awareness instilled a sense of pride in my Bengali identity and subsequently inspired me to participate in the Liberation War.

The brutal crackdown on the civilian population on March 25-26 dealt a deathblow to the idea of a Federated Pakistan. The Rubicon was crossed. People of East Pakistan made a life changing choice—the choice of becoming active participants in Bangladesh's struggle for independence inspired by Bangabandhu's historic call of March 7, 1971.

Imbued with the idea of "freedom" I, too, consciously decided to join the resistance movement with a group of young men and women and crossed over to India where the exiled Bangladesh government was working for the independence of the country.

Initially, my parents did not agree with my decision to join the resistance, but later relented, fearing the army's witch-hunt of young singers and artists. In retrospect, I cannot fathom how they parted with their teenage daughter, despite the risks and challenges of an uncertain future. Perhaps they were also aware that sacrifices would be required to gain freedom. The truth is that those were exceptional times and people were not applying the kind of rationale that they do under normal circumstances.

The journey to India was arduous—we

trekked through unknown territories, using rickshaw and boat where possible. With tremendous ardour and determination, we ventured on the road less travelled, literally and metaphorically. Throughout this ordeal, what touched me most was the love and support of ordinary villagers we encountered on the way. They risked their personal safety by guiding us through remote country roads to escape army surveillance. Perhaps this fearless commitment of the people of East Pakistan was a major reason for our ultimate victory.

Our group crossed over to Agartala in June 1971. We stayed a few nights in a camp under unimaginably difficult conditions. A few of us then flew on a rickety, small plane to Kolkata—a risky and bumpy flight that I would never take now! My destination was the home of my uncle, professor AW Mahmood. I remember him in humble recognition of the fact that he provided a safe haven to many homeless Bangladeshis, including myself. A well-respected academic, he used his student connections effectively to increase awareness and support for Bangladesh's independence.

In Kolkata, I joined a group of Bangladeshi musicians called "Shadhin Bangla Mukti Shangrami Shilpi Shangstha"—later popularised in Tarek Masud's documentary "Muktir Gaan". The members visited the refugee camps and sang patriotic songs to keep the spirit of a "free Bangladesh" alive for the demoralised men and women who had left their homeland to escape the brutalities of the Pakistani army. Another important objective of the group was to rally support among Indians (politicians, decisionmakers and civilians) by narrating the story of Bangladesh's freedom struggle with the help of poetry and music. The Shangstha was founded by cultural icons like Hassan Imam, Wahidul Haq and Sanjida Khatoun, with support from many prominent Indian activists. Occasionally we also performed for the Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra—the radio station that broadcast programmes to motivate and inspire the people living in "occupied East Pakistan."

During the course of our musical tours, we were fortunate to meet several inspirational personalities. One person who left a deep impression on me was Kalpana Dutta, a prominent member of Surya Sen's group that attacked the Chittagong armoury in 1930 as part of the armed resistance against British colonial rule.

Sometimes adversity can gift you with rare and positive experiences. The forced-exile in India took me to Tagore's ashram "Santiniketan" where I met my music gurus—Kanika Banerjee and Nilima Sen and other Tagore exponents like Debabrata Biswas and Shubha Guhathakurta. What I discovered was that, in the monastic environment of the ashram and the outer world of Rabindrasangeet, egos and prejudices did not exist. Hence, an insignificant young girl from a country with only a name but no territory was readily accepted into the affectionate fold of Tagore's disciples!

Meeting the many women in leadership

positions in the independence war was yet another life changing experience for me. Fortunately, women like Sufia Kamal, Jahanara Ara Imam and Matia Choudhury had already made their impact on the country's broad canvass. The women "muktijoddhas" carried this initiative a step further and inspired many young women like me to make the quantum leap toward redefining their new role as equal partners in the fledgling nation.

It would be amiss if I didn't highlight a particular aspect of my experience as an exile in India. I would like to mention with reverence and humility the many ordinary Indians who gave us material as well as emotional support and embraced our cause. At a very impressionable age they taught me the intrinsic human values of tolerance and compassion for the less fortunate.

When I look back on those days with nostalgia and also a sense of pride, I realise that, unwittingly, I had stepped into a very important crossroad of history and was destined to be a part of a momentous event: the birth of independent Bangladesh. I keep reminding myself that we fought not only for our freedom, but also for creating a secular, democratic state that would provide equal opportunities to all its citizens. Unfortunately, Bangladesh has been ravaged by famine and political upheaval since its inception. The brutal murder of Bangabandhu and his family, as well as the killing of our leaders in jail and military coups, have left deep scars on our country's psyche. In some ways we are still striving to recover from the trauma and the polarisation these tragedies have caused. The setback has shifted our goals and the country has, on occasion, deviated from the founding principles that are embodied in our Constitution. Principles that ensure equal rights to minorities, encourage a free media and allow space for a healthy opposition that helps the democratic process through constructive criticism.

It is encouraging to note that we are making remarkable economic progress. However, one does not live by bread alone. The reversal toward religious extremism is alarming and extremely demoralising for people who fought to free the country from intolerance and bigotry. The government is taking some positive steps to arrest these militant forces, but more needs to be done, especially in terms of civic education and cultural programmes for the youth. It's important to make the younger generation aware of the sacrifices that were made to "earn" the status of an independent country. We should not take our freedom for granted. If we look at other examples like Palestine and Kashmir, we will begin to appreciate how fortunate we have been to win a war of independence in nine months. We are unique in this respect. But now we must nurture our hard-won freedoms, and create an equitable and harmonious society whose central objective should be equal opportunity for all its citizens.

Milia Ali is a Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

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