

50TH ANNIVERSARY OF BANGLADESH'S INDEPENDENCE

My father laid down his life for our freedom. I couldn't be prouder of him.

ASHFAQUE HAI

It is with a sense of pride and honour that I recollect the events of March 30, 1971 at Jashore Cantonment. My father, Lt Col. Syed Abdul Hai, was commissioned into the Army Medical Corps (AMC) in 1950. He was posted on deputation to the Ghana Army from 1965 to 1969. Being abroad cultivated his perspective that the emancipation and economic development of East Bengal was not well-served within the existing political construct of Pakistan. My father had no interest in participating in Ayub Khan's 1965 misadventure against India. When the Pakistan Army recalled him in September 1965, he managed to avoid going back. The Six-Point Programme launched under the leadership of Bangabandhu, combined with the Agartala initiative, resonated with my father's pro-Bengali thinking and beliefs.

Upon his return to Pakistan in 1969, he was appointed the commanding officer of 7 Field Ambulance in Jashore Cantonment, as part of the 107 Brigade. In the immediate aftermath of the devastating cyclone that struck on November 12, 1970, 7 Field Ambulance was extensively involved in relief and reconstruction work in Bhola. While there, his interactions with Tofail Ahmed of the Awami League directly exposed him to the fundamental political awakening that had taken root in East Bengal. The December 1970 general election results vindicated this realisation.

Following Bangabandhu's historic March 7 speech, my father decided to come to Dhaka from Jashore to reach out to Awami League for guidance. Between March 8 and March 12, he held separate meetings with Barrister Amir-ul Islam and Col. MAG Osmani, seeking guidance on what actions, if any, the Bengali elements of the army ought to take. These were monitored by the army's Inter-Services Intelligence.

My father returned to Jashore Cantonment accompanied by my mother Naseem Hai, my younger brothers Adel and Aref, and I on March 13. His decision to enter with both the Shonar Bangla and black flags flying on our car was reported to Brigadier Rahim

Durrani, the commanding officer of 107 Brigade.

The Bengali soldiers and junior-commissioned officers (JCOs) of 7 Field Ambulance were very alert and sensitive to the ongoing political developments of the time. These sentiments found a sympathetic ear in my father, who by then had developed a special and direct relationship with them. Whenever they heard the adjacent units shout pro-Pakistani slogans, they retorted with "Joy Bangla!" Brigadier Rahim Durrani used to call my father and order him to control his troops. It was brave of my father to respond that the soldiers of his unit had the same right to express their feelings as the Pakistanis.

During this time, my father was desperately trying to liaise with Bengali officers in Jashore Cantonment with a view to forming a coordinated response



Lt Col. Syed Abdul Hai in 1969. COURTESY: ASHFAQUE HAI

Regiment, was away and only returned to join his battalion at Chaugachha in the third week of March. My father knew him from the time they were involved in cyclone relief work in Bhola. Given that Captain Hafiz was away and closely surrounded by Pakistani officers of 1 East Bengal Regiment, my father could not directly contact him.

Early on the morning of March 30, Lt. Col Rezaul Jalil surrendered the keys of his armoury to Brigadier Rahim Durrani. Bengali soldiers broke open their armoury and started defending themselves against 25 Baluch. Captain Hafiz and Lt. Anwar Hossain provided leadership. As they evacuated the cantonment towards Chaugachha Bazar, Lt. Anwar, Bir Uttam, was hit with machine gun fire and embraced martyrdom.

Simultaneously, the Bengali soldiers of 7 Field Ambulance also started resisting by breaking open their armoury. My father encouraged his Bengali soldiers to join up with 1 East Bengal and escape from the cantonment. The Pakistani soldiers threw away their AMC epaulets' insignia, crossed over to the Pakistani lines, and informed them that the Bengali soldiers had joined up with those of 1 East Bengal, and that my father had encouraged them to do so.

My mother received a number of telephone calls from my father. My

mother would later recount that in the last phone call my father had managed to make before the telephone connection was lost, he said, "The firing and shelling of my offices have intensified, and if anything were to happen to me, the children will be there for you." While my brothers and I have been there for my mother over the last 50 years, it is my mother who made countless sacrifices and remained steadfast in taking up new challenges to raise and educate us.

After midday, a group of soldiers of 22 Frontier Force approached the rear door of the room leading to my father's office. I understand that they were led by a certain Captain Mumtaz. I haven't been able to verify his identity. The group also included a Pakistani soldier of 7 Field Ambulance who could identify my father. They started knocking on the door and demanded that it be opened. With his adjutant Captain Sheikh to his left, my father approached the door and replied back that they were all unarmed doctors. As soon as Captain Sheikh opened the door, two men entered the room and, having identified my father, opened brush fire—first on my father and then on Captain Sheikh. Having shot them, the Pakistani soldiers did not proceed to kill anyone else. They left.

On March 31, Brigadier Durrani called and told my mother that my father had been killed in a crossfire. She said to the Pakistani officers present that she had a pistol and would shoot herself if she was not allowed to take my father's body back to Dhaka. Arrangements were made for us to take the body back to Dhaka on one of the flights bringing in Pakistani reinforcements. The Pakistan Army ordered us not to mourn publicly, and that the burial should be done in a quiet manner. On April 1, we buried our father in Azimpur graveyard under the surveillance of the army.

Two excerpts reproduced below establish the Pakistan Army's premeditated intent to kill any officer with pro-Bengali views.

The first is from the memoirs of Lt. Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury, Bir Bikram, of 8 East Bengal Regiment, who was wounded and captured at the

famous Battle of Kalurghat Bridge: "An ambulance carried me to the Dacca CMH and I was admitted to the Officer's Ward after the Duty Doctor completed the necessary paperwork. I told him my name, Unit, and that I was an officer from 8 East Bengal and was wounded in Chittagong. Within seconds, the mood changed and the word was spread around the Ward that I was an enemy. At one stage, I overheard one of the Pakistani officers telling others how Lt. Col. S A Hai, a Bengali officer of the Army Medical Corps, was killed in Jashore on 30th March. I heard one of the officers going to great lengths to describe how Col. Hai in connivance with his wife was inciting Bengali officers in Jashore to revolt. They were caught and he was shot in cold blood."

The second excerpt is from "What Was Once East Pakistan" (OUP 2010), written by Syed Shahid Hussain, a Pakistani national. He was the Additional Deputy Commissioner of Khulna in March 1971 and was evacuated to Jashore Cantonment on March 29. He wrote: "That evening an army captain was recounting the day's (March 30) exploits. I was saddened to learn from him that they or perhaps he himself had killed our good Bengali doctor, an army colonel. I expressed my horror at the unwarranted murder of an innocent and well-meaning human being who had invariably shown great concern for us. This remark provoked the young captain to point his gun at me because he felt I was defending a traitor; for the Pakistani troops, every Bengali was a traitor."

A play based on the above events in Jashore Cantonment was produced and broadcast by Bangladesh Betar as part of the series "Pages from History" (Etihasar Prishtha Theke). Fifty years have elapsed, yet the memories and emotions of those days of March 1971 are still etched fresh and forever on my mind. These recollections are dedicated to those who, like my father, were killed by the Pakistani army in Jashore. Invoking the colossal sacrifice in times of war by a historic city, "let no one forget, let nothing be forgotten."

Ashfaque Hai is the son of Lt Col. Syed Abdul Hai, who was killed by the Pakistani army on March 30, 1971.

Brigadier Rahim Durrani used to call my father and order him to control his troops. It was brave of my father to respond that the soldiers of his unit had the same right to express their feelings as the Pakistanis.

to any direct action that the Pakistani army might take. The greatest obstacle he faced was the unwillingness of Lt. Col Rezaul Jalil, the Bengali commanding officer of 1 East Bengal Regiment, to contemplate any response. Leading up to March 25, Lt. Col Jalil was the senior-most Bengali army officer wielding direct command over combat troops in East Bengal.

My father did manage to arrange meetings with Captains Nuruzzaman and Abdul Wahab. Captain Hafizuddin Ahmed, Bir Bikram, of 1 East Bengal

What 'liberation' means to millennials like me

SANJANA RAHMAN

In his historic speech on March 7, 1971, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation, declared that our struggle was "a struggle for liberation" and "a struggle for independence". The war of 1971 did embody and embed the spirit of both these struggles. At the same time, I think liberation is a continuing journey towards making our independence meaningful for our people. When I hear of the word "liberation", two interlinked thoughts tend to cross my mind: "liberation from what" and "liberation for what". When I reflect on these in the context of my country, I deeply feel that our war of liberation was like crossing a Rubicon in our nation's march "from what" to "for what".

Our martyrs made the supreme sacrifice, in response to the call of Bangabandhu, because they didn't want their past to be our future. The war of liberation, thus, for me, is both a departure from the past and an embracing of the future.

In light of this, liberation is both a rejection and an affirmation. A rejection of repression, subjugation, economic deprivation, lack of basic human rights and political freedom, an absence of people's voice. At the same time, it is an affirmation of a future that represents the opposite of these rejections—a future where our

country will be poverty-free and hunger-free, where every child will have an opportunity to fulfil her/his potential, a country that upholds the principles of equity, distributive justice and fairness, a country where human dignity will be respected and human rights safeguarded.

Liberation, for me, is a continuing struggle to consolidate and strengthen the four pillars of our constitution by strengthening democracy and the values of secularism, and by being true to the principles on which our republic was founded. As a millennial born in an independent Bangladesh, liberation for me means being aware of what we have rejected and embracing the ideas and the ideals that we have fought for by waging our war of independence.

For me, liberation is a multi-phased concept, not a goalpost but an embodiment of many mileposts in realising the promise that is Bangladesh.



'I am proud of the political freedom that we gained through our glorious war of liberation. But other freedoms must inform our journey as a nation.'

ILLUSTRATION: AMIYA DHARA HALDER

Without doubt, our country can be genuinely proud of what it has achieved in its five decades of existence: growing per capita income and rising standard of living; lower poverty rates; access to universal primary education for children; women's education and empowerment; low maternal and infant mortality rates. Each post-independence generation has lived better than their parents. However, there remain many unfinished tasks and new challenges are emerging as our country moves forward

in the twenty-first century. Twenty per cent of our people still live below the poverty line, and nine per cent live below the extreme poverty line. Income and wealth inequalities are on the rise. Many children are still deprived of quality education. We need to do more to improve our state of governance, enforce the rule of law, and uphold the rights of citizens.

The ongoing pandemic has, indeed, further accentuated many of these challenges. For me, liberation is a multi-

phased concept, not a goalpost but an embodiment of many mileposts in realising the promise that is Bangladesh.

I am immensely proud of the political freedom that we gained through our glorious war of liberation. But as I have argued above, other freedoms must inform our journey as a people, as a nation and as a country, to realise the opportunities that political freedom and the birth of an independent Bangladesh have created for our generation.

Our generation should appreciate and be aware of what our parents and forefathers did for us and the opportunities that we had enjoyed growing up in this country. It is for our generation to build on what have been achieved over the past and to help attain new milestones as we move to the future. Liberation for me, thus, is also a call of duty to fight for economic and social liberation to make the political liberation more meaningful and consequential for our people.

It is in this sense that I see "Liberation" as an ongoing endeavour—as a torch that one generation passes onto the next, a relay race from the past to the future inspired by the spirit of our liberation war, and a pledge to do our best to realise the aspirations that are embodied in that spirit.

Sanjana Rahman is a graduate of Queen's University, Ontario, Canada.

QUOTABLE Quote

CHARLES F. KETTERING
(1876—1958)
American inventor

My interest is in the future because I am going to spend the rest of my life there.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Bowling challenge
- 6 Shady spot
- 11 Make blank
- 12 Suit fabric
- 13 Free of suds
- 14 Takes to the sky
- 15 One way to pay
- 17 Last letter
- 18 Good serve
- 19 Roster of enemies
- 22 Went ahead
- 23 Worthy aims
- 24 Bakery output
- 25 Snaps
- 27 Groom's answer
- 30 Matures
- 31 Asian holiday
- 32 Turn bad
- 33 "Who cares?"
- 35 Mumbai's nation
- 38 Chicago airport
- 39 Tempest
- 40 More polite
- 41 Forum garments
- 42 Prepares for a fight

DOWN

- 1 Continuing story
- 2 Royal heir
- 3 Pierced
- 4 Rae of "Insecure"
- 5 Popular tops
- 6 Braying beast
- 7 Early auto
- 8 Amazon setting
- 9 Fiona, for one
- 10 Stopwatch button
- 16 Grotesque
- 20 Cough syrup doses
- 21 Young buck
- 24 Gift topper
- 25 Right away
- 26 Frank
- 27 Cornell setting
- 28 More precious
- 29 Weasels' cousins
- 30 Grain to grind
- 34 Lash
- 36 Bank choice
- 37 Mornings: Abbr.

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

P	A	C	E	S	Y	A	C	H	T
E	T	H	E	L	A	G	R	E	E
C	A	I	R	O	K	E	E	L	S
C	I	T	E	S	A	L	T		
R	A	K	E	S	E	A	M		
O	W	E	S	E	A	G	O	D	S
B	A	N	J	O	S	O	F	I	A
S	Y	N	E	R	G	Y	T	E	
B	L	O	T	T	O	T	O	T	E
B	L	O	T	T	E	A	M		
R	A	D	I	O	A	B	A	T	E
I	D	L	E	R	R	O	T	O	R
G	E	E	S	E	L	O	O	P	S

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT