

Looking back: April 17, 1971

TAWFIQ-E-ELAHI CHOWDHURY BIR BIKRAM

It is tough to ruminate on the past in the stranglehold of the corona virus—an evil apparition that has wrecked our lives and turned the world upside down. However, as I am heading towards the finishing line of life or at least the onset of old age dementia, there seemed no better time to write this piece.

Let me begin with a quick recap of a few events leading up to the swearing-in ceremony of April 17, 1971. I was the SDO of Meherpur. I received information about the attack of the Pak Army on innocent civilians of Dhaka on March 25. It was an anticipated move by them, minus the gruesome mayhem, and so I flipped my allegiance to the freedom struggle, ditching the prospects of the pampered Civil Service of Pakistan. While organising resistance with a handful of Ansars, Mujahids and other activists, I wrote an open letter to India on March 26 on my official letterhead duly signed by me and stamped, asking for help with arms and ammunitions.

On March 29, I was invited to meet Indian officials at Betai Border Out Post (BOP) of India. I was received by Mr. Bhattacharya, DM of Krishnanagar District, and Lt Col Chakrabarty of Indian Border Security Force (BSF). Welcomed as the first “Bangladesh Ambassador” to India with the guard of honour from a contingent of BSF, I was given a patient hearing for help. Half believing my story, they asked to meet again on March 30 at Chengkhali check post along the Kushtia border.

Some other events were unfolding simultaneously. Maj Osman and Capt Azam of EPR at Chuadanga declared their allegiance to Bangladesh. They withdrew East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) personnel under their command from border outposts to Chuadanga and were planning an attack on the Pak Army positions at Kushtia on the morning of March 30. The attack was then deferred by 24 hours. My men from Meherpur and the men from Jhenaidah under Mahbub, SDPO of Jhenaidah and an old high school friend, also joined. Volunteers, students and Awami League activists from neighbouring areas started pouring in, all charged up.



A picture taken during a furlough from war, sitting from left Captain Huda Bir Bikram, Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury Bir Bikram; standing from left, Captain Mustafizur Rahman Bir Bikram and Mahboob Uddin Ahmed Bir Bikram.

March 30. Mahbub came up with two wary guests, Tajuddin Ahmad and Barrister Amir-ul Islam, in disguise in his jeep at Chuadanga. He introduced them to me and asked whether I could arrange for them to meet Indian officials. Since I was about to head for the meeting set earlier, we started for the check post together. Lt Col Chakrabarty and Golok Majumder, Chief of BSF were waiting. They were excited and eager to meet Tajuddin Ahmad and Barrister Amir-ul Islam upon hearing that they were with us in the jeep. The guests were received with due respect. It was a meeting that would turn out to be hugely consequential for the liberation struggle. With our credibility established, Lt Col Chakrabarty lent us two LMGs and some supply of POL.

Events of the first two weeks of April 1971 moved very fast. 22 Baluch stationed at Kushtia was routed by the attack led by EPR and our boys from Meherpur, Chuadanga, Kushtia,

Jhenaidah and neighbouring areas who were christened as freedom fighters under the command of Capt Azam and the overall supervision of Maj Osman. Gradually a large swath of western Bangladesh was liberated, apart from the garrison at Jashore. However, the table soon turned against us as the Pak Army launched a counterattack on our positions with heavy artillery and air support. We started a disorderly retreat and soon were pushed to Meherpur. Maj Osman, Mahbub and I made calls to Tajuddin Ahmad pleading for a government to be announced on our soil before we made the final retreat. Tajuddin Ahmad assured us that a decision would come soon. Several foreign journalists had made their way into the liberated area of Bangladesh and were asking who we were representing.

On April 16, we were informed that Badyanathola in Meherpur had been selected for the event. Mahbub and I quickly moved there to take charge of

arrangements for the historic occasion. There were good reasons behind this selection. Although the place was only ten miles away from Meherpur, it was difficult to reach by land from Meherpur given the dire condition of the herringboned road. Camouflaged under the thick foliage of mango gardens, the location was safe from air attack although Pakistan Air Force (PAF) jets were then strafing the Chuadanga-Meherpur road, only ten miles away. In case of a highly unlikely air attack, the enemy would have to cross Indian airspace, which they could ill afford. Moreover, Indian army personnel took defensive positions along the perimeter of Badyanathola.

A modest dais was erected. Chairs were provided by the Italian missionary close by and also by Capt Yadov of BSF. A group of local people started rehearsing the national anthem. Badyanathola, with the touch of a magic wand, was coming alive to host a momentous occasion. Inquisitive villagers were bewildered by the frenetic activities but could guess that something important was about to occur in their backyard.

At around 10 or 11 in the morning, a motorcade arrived from the Indian side of the border with political leaders and scores of media people. We received Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmad and others at the foot of the dais. The ceremony started with recitations from the holy books. Prof Yusuf Ali, who later became a Minister, was duly appointed by the government, which was formed on April 10 by elected representatives from East Pakistan, to read out the Proclamation of Independence and administer the oath of office to Syed Nazrul Islam as the Vice President and Tajuddin Ahmad as the Prime Minister and other ministers. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was declared the President of Bangladesh. The Proclamation laid out the history of our national struggles, the denials perpetrated with brute force and bullets. It established the legitimacy of our independence and sovereign government by the collective decision of the elected representatives from then East Pakistan and now Bangladesh. It went further to announce that this new nation will adhere to international rights and obligations.

The national flag was hoisted as a local group of people sang the national anthem. It was now turn for the acting President (in the absence of the President, the Vice President was to take charge) to take the guard of honour.

In the meantime, a glitch in preparation had occurred. Maj Osman, who was to lead the contingent of EPR for the guard of honour, had not arrived. Time was running out fast. I asked Mahbub whether he could pull his police experience to come up with a solution. Instantly he agreed and started rehearsing with the assortment of Ansar and Mujahids who had been posted at the border outpost to guard it symbolically. In a seamless operation, the guard led by Mahbub was presented to the acting President, who later inspected it. Speeches were then made by leaders befitting the occasion.

I introduced the acting President and the Prime Minister to the civil and military officers present at the occasion. They had converged from surrounding areas where they had taken up arms against the Pak Army. People from the media were swarming all around.

Holding onto a bamboo fence, I was lost for a while as a stream of thoughts rushed into my head. History was being reclaimed at this very location that was about 100 miles away from Plassey, where Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah was defeated by the deceit and chicanery of the British company army, setting the stage for the colonisation of India and the ‘glory’ of the Raj. The absurd construct called Pakistan, two wings separated by a thousand miles, the last apple of discord planted by the British at the partition of India in 1947 and nurtured by their surrogates, the army-civil oligarchy, was being buried for good with a stinging epitaph.

Soon enough, the ceremony was over, and guests started departing. I congratulated Tajuddin Ahmad and thanked him for having given me the opportunity to witness history. With his measured smile, he corrected me and said: “You are part of history.”

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From movement to a nation

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On March 30, 1971, a disheveled Tajuddin Ahmed, the general secretary of Awami League, and his associate Barrister Amir-ul Islam, crossed the border of Pakistani occupied Bangladesh into India. They were not sure of Indian reception. Though Bangladesh declared its independence on 26 March, Pakistani military junta was still internationally recognized as the legitimate government of both wings of Pakistan. Tajuddin and his associates had no legal locus standi from diplomatic perspective. Meanwhile, Bengali troops and police forces who came to control major towns in Bangladesh, were brutally crushed by the well-trained and well-armed Pakistani forces. Spontaneous resistance broke out in the country and soldiers of East Pakistan Rifles, armed police forces of East Pakistan and youth volunteers tried to liberate their localities. They were looking for a political center to guide them.

India was surprised and concerned by the rapid turn of events in East Pakistan. India is a multinational polity with significant Bengali population concentrated in the states of West Bengal, Tripura and Assam, all bordering East Pakistan. Since 1967 West Bengal returned a communist dominated United Front to power and the CPI(M) the principal partner in the United Front further augmented its strength in an election held in February 1971. More importantly, since 1967, a radical Maoist offshoot of CPI(M), rechristened in 1969 as CPI(ML), stirred the countryside of Eastern India with their slogan of annihilation of class enemies. Known as Naxalites, an appellation based on the originating site of their movement, these revolutionaries shook the foundation of the Indian political system. India was aware of the presence of Maoists and communists in Bangladesh too. Thus, India was not thrilled that another national democratic revolution, with Bengali nationalism as their legitimizing ideology, unfolded just across the border. Yet they recognized that the Bengali nationalist movement in East Pakistan aimed at the independence of East Bengal only. The newly designed flag of Bangladesh indicated that they would respect the Radcliff line. Bengali leaders of Bangladesh evinced no interests in

the political affairs of West Bengal and Tripura. Thus, to the pleasant surprise of Tajuddin and Amir-ul the Indian border security force staged an impromptu guard of honor for these disheveled fugitives and assured them of shelter. BSF commander in chief Rustam Ji actually met with Tajuddin and Amirul Islam in Calcutta and transported them to Delhi by military cargo plane on April 1, 1971. On the same day, Indian parliament passed a resolution condemning the atrocities in Bangladesh. On 4th April Mrs. Gandhi, the Indian prime minister met Tajuddin and offered sympathetic hearing. On the following day, during their second meeting, Mrs. Gandhi informed them of Mujib's arrests. Sensing the urgency of the situation, Tajuddin informed Mrs. Gandhi that senior members of Awami League had formed a government and he was the prime minister. The seeds of Mujibnagar government were sown in the courageous impromptu statement of Tajuddin. The crucial need for governmental center was necessary to obtain international recognition.

Yet international situation was dire for Bengali revolutionaries. Far away from Dhaka and Delhi, in the oval room of white house, President Nixon was toying with the idea of establishing a diplomatic relationship with China, a move that would enable him to achieve a breakthrough in the cold war and to withdraw US soldiers from the battlefields of Vietnam. Aided by his brilliant but maverick national security advisor Henry Kissinger, they planned to use Pakistan's good standing with China. Nixon liked Pakistani military generals and was fond of both Ayub Khan and Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan. In 1953, during his visit to South Asia as a Vice President, he was impressed by Pakistani military leaders and since then he held them in high esteem. As a Vice President, he was instrumental in forming military alliance with Pakistan in 1954. Kissinger, on the other hand, was a hardnosed real politic man. Kissinger recognized the brilliance of the idea of neutralizing Chinese hostility and as, Gary Bass asserts (Bass, Gary Jonathan. 2013. The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide First ed. New York: Alfred A Knopf.), was willing to sacrifice Bengalis as collateral in the larger schemes of global political realignment. Thus, both of



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them assured Pakistan US support in return for Pakistan acting as clandestine diplomatic conduit between US and China. Meanwhile, China, located at the center of this clandestine diplomatic initiative of US, remained steadfastly loyal to her all-weather friend—Pakistan and viewed Bengali revolutionaries as Indian agents who were disrupting Pakistan's unity. Internationally, elsewhere the situation was not favorable to Bengali revolutionaries. From the perspectives of London, Ottawa, Tokyo, Paris and Bonn, the middle ranking powers in the world, Awami League had moral legitimacy, because of the verdict in 1971 election but no legal status. Though Soviets were sympathetic, and on 4 April 1971 Soviet President Podgorny, appealed to Yahya Khan to exercise restraint, they were not forthcoming with their support for independent Bangladesh in the initial days. They viewed such move as symptomatic of secessionism. By then, international community was already tired of secessionist war in Biafra in Nigeria and did not want another long drawn civil war in a third world country. Meanwhile, refugees, escaping Pakistani military atrocities, poured in India. Their number arose from 500,000 in April 1971 to almost 8 million by the end of August 1971. Pakistani military occupation of Bangladesh turned out to be the worst humanitarian crisis in South Asia after the partition.

The crucial task before Tajuddin and his associates was to establish a legitimate presence in international circle as a governmental authority. The new government had to coordinate revolutionary resistance at home

and obtain Indian support as well as diplomatic recognition from abroad. On April 17, in Baidyanathola, of Meherpur district, in a mango grove, new independent government of Bangladesh was sworn in. It was a symbolic move too. Bengal's independence was lost in a mango grove on 23 June 1757 in the infamous battle of Plassey and was regained on 17 April 1971 in another mango grove.

In the early days, international journalists were not sure of the formation of the government. Peter Hezelhurst, a correspondent of London Times, who covered the liberation war extensively, wrote on 13 April 1971 in (London)Times that Tajuddin, the principal strategist of Awami League, who was rumored to be dead during the military crackdown in Dhaka, had been alive and would form a government. Soon the government in exile became known to the world through a proclamation issued on 17 April.

Western powers were obviously worried about Tajuddin, the kingpin of exile government of Bangladesh and the Prime minister. The British High commission in Calcutta interviewed Hiren Ghosh, a Congress (organization) member to collect the background information on Bangladesh leaders. According to the secret memo of British high commission, it was mentioned Tajuddin was ‘unpopular lone wolf’ through which ‘Communist influence percolates’ in the government. (Foreign & Commonwealth Office Document- Eleanor Lane to RLB Comack 9 November 1971 File P1/14 Secret Correspondence Government of Bangla Desh in East Pakistan) Clearly, the former imperial

masters were nervous about Indo-Soviet pact that materialized in August 1971. The formation of the all party advisory committee comprising NAP Bhasani and NAP Muzaffar Ahamed and Bangladesh Communist Party in September 1971 further made them nervous about the future inclinations of the Bangladesh government. Yet it was the Mujibnagar Government that acted as the legitimate government of Bangladesh.

The formation of Mujibnagar government changed the image of Bangladesh liberation war. From a movement for autonomy within Pakistan, the government in exile morphed into a political center representing the people of a newly emerging nation. Several Pakistani diplomats starting with M Hossain Ali, deputy high commissioner in Kolkata took oath of loyalty to the Mujibnagar Government. Rehman Sobhan and Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, as envoys, made favorable impression on Western diplomats. The Mujibnagar Government thus developed an independent presence in international community. The existence of Mujibnagar government enabled Bangladesh to have an independent government after the victory on 16 December, 1971. The tragic irony of Bangladesh was that in 1975 the luminaries of the first independent government of Bangladesh were murdered in a dastardly manner not by Pakistan army but by the soldiers of the very country that they brought into existence.

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Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam speaking at the oath-taking ceremony of Mujibnagar Government on April 17, 1971.