

# 50 years of Bangladesh: From pain to hope

NUZHAT CHOUDHURY

ON the eve of our victory day, on December 15, 1971, at around 4:30 pm, my father Dr Abdul Alim Choudhury was sitting on the balcony of our house with my mother, watching the Indian MiG fighters bomb the few Pakistani strongholds still remaining in Dhaka. He was joyous and extremely hopeful. He knew it was only a matter of time that Bangladesh would be free—a dream he had dedicated his entire life to. At that moment, a microbus covered in mud entered the premises of our house. They came up and entered our home and asked my father to come with them. They wouldn't specify where they were taking him. As soon as he left the house, they wrapped a piece of cloth over his eyes. That was the last time my mother would see him alive. When she saw him next, he was dead, his body battered, bruised and mutilated. His dead body was found lying in a brick field in Rayerbazar, with thousands of other intellectuals of Bangladesh—men and women who were the greatest minds of the land, best in their fields, all dedicated to the dream of a progressive, democratic, free country for their people. They had

achieved it, but it was to be bought with their blood—and the blood of three million people.

On December 16, 1971, Bangladesh was born and that was the beginning of the next war for my mother and millions of martyrs' families like ours—a war for survival. They had to fight to survive not only as families, but also to keep the ideals of the Liberation War alive. I find this aspect to be one of the greatest tragedies of independent Bangladesh. Personal loss and struggle are sad, but there is glory in making sacrifices for your country. There is no anger or despair in it. Had the families seen the country echoing the ideals for which they lost their loved ones, there would have been no complaints.

But after the assassination of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on August 15, 1975, collaborators of the Pakistani occupying forces were set free and took positions of influence in the country. Just imagine: In a matter of a few years, the widows of war heroes saw their husbands' killers in positions of power, whereas they became almost destitute. The freedom fighters saw the collaborators reaping benefits in the independent country, while

they were persecuted and doomed to live in struggle. I wonder if it is even possible to fathom what the survivors of wartime rape felt like. How can the country atone for such cruel, ungrateful actions?

After Bangabandhu's assassination, all special tribunals established during his time stopped functioning. War criminals who were jailed for committing crimes against humanity were set free. Not only that, they became members of our parliament! The proclamation of the shameful Indemnity Ordinance gave impunity to Bangabandhu's killers. And with that, a culture of impunity for criminals began in Bangladesh, from which we are slowly trying to come out only recently.

Even after facing the brutalities of 1971, Bengalis remained steadfast in their unwavering resolve to remain progressive and secular. Progressive, tolerant, personally deeply religious but socially, politically secular—that is what Bengalis were. But after 1975, the very fabric of a secular Bengali life was purposely dismantled, and then interwoven with fundamentalism. Religious fundamentalism got state approval. Books changed, history was distorted. Our cultural identity was one of the main proponents driving the Bengalis to strive for independence. But the space for our cultural activities was squeezed into fading out from the lives of common people—intentionally and meticulously. The gorgeous arts on the rickshaws were seen no more. Popular mass cultural activities like *jatra* were injected with vulgar dances—and then shut down altogether in the name of indecencies. That empty space was then quickly filled up by faith-based gatherings, many of them with an extremist bent. If they were indeed purely religious, one would have very little to complain about, but too many of these gatherings quickly became anti-progressive, anti-women, anti-social, extreme fundamentalist sermons that had very little to do with religion. In these gatherings, equal amount of vulgarities was present—still are—that kept the mass glued to them. The cultural identity that we developed over thousands of years, which coexisted with our religious identities peacefully, were pitted

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against each other—they still are. As if you cannot be religious and also adhere to the Bengali cultural lifestyle. An imported, intolerant variety of faith has been deliberately injected into our nation—turning many tolerant Bengalis into intolerant mobs.

With all these changes, the survival of the freedom fighters, the Birangonas, the war widows and the martyrs' children became more difficult. It became a lifelong fight against the same known enemies: the anti-liberation forces. For the pro-liberation side, war did not end on December 16, 1971; rather, it only marked the beginning of a lifelong fight to keep the dream of *Sonar Bangla* alive.

But then, in 1996, Bangabandhu's daughter Sheikh Hasina came to power, to lead us in our fight. She has been working relentlessly to take the country forward, and her efforts have paid off—Bangladesh is becoming a developing country. She showed the same nerve of steel in her unwavering resolve to try the criminals of 1971 and the killers of 1975. With these trials, Bangladesh is finally breaking the culture of impunity for criminals. The former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger lived to see the country he had once called a

"bottomless basket" become self-reliant in food and even export the excess—in his lifetime. As we celebrate the golden jubilee of our freedom this year, the average income of a Bangladeshi has surpassed that of Pakistan, and even India.

The legacy of the Liberation Movement is a matter of enormous pride, confidence and satisfaction for us. But at the same time, it is also a great burden of responsibility. We simply cannot be oblivious to the sacrifices our mothers and sisters made, the pain they suffered, the blood shed by three million innocent lives. If we are to enjoy the fruits of independence, we should pay due respect to their legacy—and that can only be done if we uphold the ideologies they sacrificed their lives for. We need to teach our children the ideologies for which we fought. They need to be taught the right version of history. The rise of fundamentalism needs to be addressed sternly and immediately. The rule of law must prevail if we are to progress in the right direction. Justice, good governance and democracy is the basic requirement of a tolerant, peaceful society. The leadership of Sheikh Hasina makes me hopeful. The structural development is visible; people's hope for a better future is palpable. That makes me happy, but I believe this is just the beginning of the revival of the dream of *Sonar Bangla*. There's still so much left to do, so much harm to be undone.

On the eve of the 50th anniversary of the independence of our beloved country, as I look deep into my bleeding heart, I find only a great sense of pride. I was born a little before Bangladesh; we grew up together, walked together the bloody, thorny path that Bangladesh was destined to follow in its first 50 years. Looking back, I see how far we have come, despite all the trials and tribulations. I find a developing, hopeful country in Bangladesh and a proud martyr's daughter in me. Make no mistake, the bullets are there and the heart is still bleeding. But overriding it all is the glory of a free land and the pride of the ultimate sacrifice my father made for the country.

Prof Nuzhat Choudhury is the daughter of Dr Abdul Alim Choudhury, one of the martyred intellectuals during the 1971 Liberation War.



The Martyred Intellectuals Memorial in Rayerbazar, Dhaka.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HUQ

## 'We know now of wells filled with dead bodies'

In January 1972, The Indian Council of World Affairs published a collection of stories about the atrocities committed by Pakistani forces during the Liberation War, titled "How Pakistan Violated Human Rights in Bangladesh". *Andre Malraux* (1901-1976)—a French novelist, art historian and statesman who was an active supporter of the Bangladeshi cause—wrote the following foreword to this collection.

I would wish these pages were not only an anthology of eyewitness accounts. People of my generation have experienced enough horror to be, alas! no longer shocked. And human nature is such that it is rare that horror does not breed horror.

But for years, horror, in its origin, has been routinely and terrifyingly political. So, an attempt is being made to convince us that the problem of Bangla Desh is, in its origin, the same.

This is a lie. The strategists of illusion have explained at length that what was involved was a clash between China (and, if it makes any difference, the United States), and the Soviet Union.

I am well aware that a political problem existed since partition. The British Empire considered that partition was the only way to guarantee the departure of the English, and it had conceived a vast encirclement of Arabia (Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan) which the United States later took over for their count. It was also the encirclement of India, hence the policy of non-encirclement of Nehru. Gandhi had proclaimed the danger of partition not for nothing. Let us be left in peace as regards China: this time, what did she do other than making speeches?

But still, if Marshal Yahya Khan had not decided to exterminate the Bengalis, and if he had not sent his planes to bomb Indian Airfields, what would be the role of China, the United States, the Soviet Union in this affair? As is the custom, each ambassador would have defended his country. The Pakistani ambassador in France—I repeat: of Pakistan—nobly defended Pakistan. He did not kill anybody. The electoral victory of the Awami League was troublesome for Islamabad. The electoral victory of the people's front was so for the French right—it did not exterminate

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its opponents for all that. If politics is an art, it is one of reconciliation and not of assassination.

Those volunteers who were ready to fight with me for Bangla Desh belonged, in France and elsewhere, to varying political parties. At that time, they were hardly aware of India's stand (for she scarcely had any...). They were motivated by two facts, to which the memory of Biafra gave a tragic resonance: The exodus of the refugees, the extermination of the Bengali elite.

Firstly, the refugees. While our press was placing them on the same level as Yahya's troops, the fact remained that India had to take in ten million Hindu refugees, and that Pakistan did not have to take in a single Muslim refugee, not even from Kashmir. One knows the exchange General De Gaulle had with a French major in Syria who said: "After all, we

are too ill-informed to take sides." "Ill-informed, possibly," answered the General, "but someone did tell me that the Germans were in Paris." This time, however ill-informed it was—and it was not really well-informed—the world did accept that the refugees were in India.

The second particular characteristic of the Bengali tragedy was the systematic, organised extermination of those who, in Bangla Desh, had voted against Marshal Yahya. We know now of wells filled with dead bodies of intellectuals. They were selected, well selected. And, this time the Hindus were not involved. I must emphasise this because it is easy and sinister to make out the tragedy of Bangla Desh (the West did so) as a war of religion. If the Muslims of Bangla Desh had been in agreement with Islamabad, how would the Awami League have managed to obtain 167 out of 169 seats? And who does not know still that a large number of the leaders of the resistance, those whom the Marshal called deserters, had been officers of the Pakistan Army? Nobody disputes that the Hindus were the first to feel themselves threatened. But the civil war, until the intervention of the Indian Army, was not religious, it was national: That of the Muslims of Dacca against those of Islamabad.

Assuming the worst (but without bloodshed), the Pakistan of Islamabad could survive without Bangla Desh, the proof is that it is doing so now. When a state wishes at all costs to make secession impossible, the wisest policy is not to treat half of its territory as a conquered country. When the revolt started, the soldiers of Islamabad were no longer, for the East, compatriots or co-religionists, they were occupants.

If there is any doubt about this, let one read the following eye-witness accounts.



### GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH Prime Minister's Office

Request for Expression of Interest (EOI) for supply of Diesel (HSD), Octane-100 & Lubricant (15W40) at Bhasan Char under Ashrayan-3 Project

1	Ministry/ Division	Prime Minister's Office
2	Agency	Bangladesh Navy
3	Procuring Entity Name	Bangladesh Navy/ Ashrayan-3 Project
4	Procuring Entity Code	224115700
5	Procuring Entity District	Dhaka
6	Expression of Interest of	Supply of Diesel (HSD), Octane-100 & Lubricant (15W40) at Bhasan Char under Ashrayan-3 Project
7	EOI Ref No	PD/ Ashrayan-3 Project/ 2019-2020-2021
8	Date	13.12.2021
<b>KEY INFORMATION</b>		
9	Procurement Method	Open Tendering Method.
<b>FUNDING INFORMATION</b>		
10	Budget and Source of Funds	GOB
11	Development Partners (if applicable)	NA
<b>PARTICULAR INFORMATION</b>		
12	Project / Programme Code (if applicable)	NA
13	Project/ Programme Name (if applicable)	Ashrayan-3 (Development of Shelter House for Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals and necessary island security infrastructure at Bhasan Char in Char Isshor Union, Hatia, Noakhali) (1 <sup>st</sup> Revision).
14	EOI Closing Date & Time	20/12/2021 (Up to 13:30) EOIs shall be submitted in sealed envelope to Project Director, Ashrayan-3 Project, NHQ, Banani, Dhaka and be marked clearly as name of the task with EOI reference number.
<b>INFORMATION FOR APPLICANT</b>		
15	Brief Description of Assignment	Supply of below items to Bhasan Char upto 28 June 2022: (a) Diesel (HSD) - As per demand (b) Octane-100 - As per demand (c) Lubricant (15W40) - As per demand
16	Experience, Resource & Delivery Capacity required	The Interested Companies will have to submit the EOI with the following documents: (1) 02 (Two) years' experience in the relevant items supply. (2) Valid Trade License, BIN, TIN, Income tax & type of contractors from NBR is to be updated (3) Bank solvency certificate (4) Relevant documents in favour of organization strength of the firm. (5) Previous experience at Bhasan Char is preferred. (6) Appropriate means of water transport. (7) Appropriate containers as portable reservoir.
18	Association with other firms	Distributorship of Padma, Meghna & Jamuna
19	Association with Foreign firms	NA
20	Name of Official Inviting EOI	Cdre M RASHED SATTAR, (N), NUP, psc, BN
21	Designation of Official Inviting EOI	Project Director, Ashrayan-3 Project, Prime Minister's Office Naval Headquarters Area, Banani, Dhaka -1213
22	Address of Official Inviting Tender	Project Director, Ashrayan-3 Project, Prime Minister's Office Naval Headquarters Area, Banani, Dhaka -1213
23	Contact details of Official Inviting EOI	Tel No: +02-9836141-9/ 2565, 01769705095 Email: ashrayan3bn@gmail.com
24	The Procuring entity reserves the right to accept or reject all EOI's and short listing will be made accordingly.	

GD- 2302

13/12/21  
Commodore M Rashed Sattar  
Project Director  
Ashrayan-3 Project  
NHQ, Banani, Dhaka-1213