### MARTYRED INTELLECTUALS DAY SPECIAL

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### REMEMBERING OUR MARTYRED INTELLECTUALS

Over the last 49 years, we have observed the Martyred Intellectuals Day annually, realising more and more the significance of the damage that the enemy caused to our nation. What sort of an enemy who, on the verge of defeat, could hatch a plan to kill the professors, writers, litterateurs, and professionals of a country? When they realised that their defeat was imminent, they wanted to destroy the intellectual backbone of our nation, and picked up people of eminence from their homes and later killed them.

Atrocities, however tragic and gruesome, have been recorded in wars over the ages. But deliberate

killings of non-combatant civilians, especially intellectuals, are a rare phenomenon and occur only when the perpetrating troops have a special hatred for the country and the people upon whom this barbarity is being perpetrated. Pakistanis had such a hatred for us, and when they saw defeat staring in the face, they killed our scholars in an effort to thwart our post-victory recovery. The further sad aspect of this already tragic phenomenon is the fact that local collaborators forming the al Badr and al Shams paramilitary forces actually implemented this barbaric plan of the Pakistani forces.

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of our country's birth, our economic and social success serves as a fitting rebuttal of those heinous attempts to debilitate the newly formed state of Bangladesh. We recall with pride and gratitude the contribution of our martyred intellectuals in creating the required motivation and the essential spirit that served as a beacon of light throughout our struggle for independence.

Mahfuz Anam Editor & Publisher The Daily Star



# The War of Liberation and my humble participation

#### MAHMUD SHAH QURESHI

During a lifespan of more than 80 years, I have had the opportunity to experience a lot of extraordinary events. But there cannot be a parallel to what I saw and felt, sometimes I acted and reacted, in 1971. This was the year of our War of Liberation.

In the beginning, it all happened in Chittagong, an ideal city for starting the struggle. On March 8, 1971, writers and workers in the field of culture gathered for a meeting in the house of Professor Abul Fazal. After a long discussion, a body was formed titled Shilpi-Sahityik-Songskriti Kormi Protirodh Songho, and I was made a coordinator. We worked assiduously for the next few days to propagate our course of liberation as we thought that there cannot be any solution in the united Pakistan. On March 25, the whole country faced a massacre sans parallel. After a few futile efforts of resistance, even armed fight with ordinary guns, we were forced to cross the border to take shelter in Agartala in the Indian province of Tripura. That was the first day of Boishakh.

During this time, our main task was to organise young students and others who were willing to fight for the country. We were also trying to help the fleeing refugees, giving them food and shelter through Indian friends.

Within the next few weeks, we met in different meetings with Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi, West Bengal's Chief Minister Siddhartha Shankar Roy, Dr Triguna Sen, former Vice-Chancellor of Jadavpur University, along with several others Indian leaders and intellectuals. We exchanged our views on going forward with the fight for freedom, which was taking proper shape by that time. In the meantime, I had correspondence with my friends in Paris. After all, I had spent more than eight years there during the

1960s. Our distinguished writer, Syed Waliullah, was working at UNESCO at that time and I was quite close to him during my stay in Paris. His French wife was my student for three years. Professor Gilles Philibert was another person who was extremely helpful and friendly to us.

Among the Indian scholars, too, I had many friends. But I did not have the addresses of any of them. However, I was able to contact Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterjee and poet-writer Buddhadev Bose. They replied. Bose even wrote a poem on me. Finally, with an invitation from Calcutta University's Bangladesh Sohayak Somiti, I went to Calcutta in the middle of May. Here, I am talking of my own experiences alone. We were all together from the University of Chittagong, particularly Dr AR Mallick, Professor Syed Ali Ahsan and Dr Anisuzzaman. Soon, we started our work to help the cause of the Liberation War. I was supplied with French newspaper clippings to translate into English and Bengali. Sometimes, I was called to our High Commission office to interpret foreign journalists and politicians who knew only French as a foreign language. But I also maintained a very good relationship with the French Le Monde correspondent in New Delhi.

Eventually, I was sent to the Middle East along with Mollah Jalal, an MNA from Awami League. Initially, we settled in Beirut. There, H.E. A K Das, the Indian Ambassador was of great help to us. We met most of the top Lebanese editors and influential journalists, politicians and intellectuals of great eminence in the Arab world like Kemal Jumblatt (Lenin Prize Winner), Rashid Karami (several times Prime Minister), Sheikh Abdallah al-Alayli, Dr Amin al-Hafez (Head of the foreign policy committee of Lebanese Parliament who invited us to speak out our cause for them), Professor Nicolas Ziade, Takieddin el-Solh, Dr Clovis Maqsood, Dr Omar Abu Risha and some

others. We tried to convince them with our political views, which were totally opposite to that of Pakistani policies. We were running some risks as I was sometimes receiving threatening phone calls. Mollah and I at that time were changing hotels very often. We received support from some influential quarters too.

We hired an intelligent young journalist, Nabil Baradi, who helped us in various ways. He translated my opuscule, "Suffering Humanity in Bangladesh," which became the only Arabic booklet on our cause. Thousands of copies were distributed to all Arab countries. From Beirut, we travelled to Damascus and Aleppo in Syria. There, the field was more difficult. But I received help from one of my old Parisian friends, Michel Abrash and his brother.

Meanwhile, I learned that I was to go for a French fellowship along with my wife, who was in Calcutta and was in an advanced stage of pregnancy. So, I returned to India and submitted my reports to the acting President, the Foreign Minister and the Foreign Secretary. The war between India and Pakistan became imminent and, finally we were liberated. Again, I was to work as I had done initially, that is, to translate from French newspapers for Barrister Maudud's newsletter and to interpret foreign journalists and political personalities. I was also able to participate in Bangladesh Betar (Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra) due to the intervention of my old college friend, Belal Mohammed. I also wrote some short pieces on some aspects of our Liberation War. Finally, we headed for Dhaka on January 10, 1972, and reached our free homeland.

Professor Dr Mahmud Shah Qureshi is an eminent Bangladeshi scholar. He has been honoured with numerous accolades including Ekushey Padak and French Legion d'Honour.



Mollah Jalal MNA and Dr Mahmud Shah Qureshi coming out of the Lebanese Parliament after having a discussion on Bangladesh's Liberation War with the Lebanese foreign relations committee. September, 1971.

## A Squirrel's Tale

#### PABITRA SARKAR

All of you know about the squirrel from the Ramayana, who rolled himself on the sand at the Indian seashore and then dipped into the Indian Ocean, to shed the sand off its body on the presumption that he was helping to build the bridge across the sea that would enable Rama's forces to reach Lanka. Only then Rama would be able to fight the evil Ravana and bring back Sita from his clasp. I consider myself such a celebrated animal, when I look back to my efforts, some 50 years back, which, surprisingly, brought me the highest honour of my life—the "Friend of Liberation War of Bangladesh" title in 2015.

It was 1969 and, empowered by a

Fulbright grant, I was then a PhD student at the University of Chicago. Rumblings of dissatisfaction with the Pakistani domination had already started in East Pakistan and, as one born in that proud corner of the world, I was keeping a keen eye on the news coming from the area. Newspapers like The Pakistan Observer, Dainik Ittefaq, etc came to the University Library some six months after their issue, as they came by surface (sea) mail. I devoured whatever news I got of the troubles and unrest. They came somewhat garbled though, out of fear of the military browbeating. You could, however, get the feel of the hidden agitation, if you read between the lines. In such a newspaper, I read the news about the banning of five Bengali books, written by then East Pakistani authors. One was Trailokyanath Chakraborty's autobiography, Jele Trish Bachhar, Samskhritik Sampradayikata by Badaruddin Umar, Abdul Mannan Syed's Satyer Moto Badmash, and a book of short stories by my friend Jyotiprakash Dutta, the name of which skips my memory. Surprisingly, I found all five of them at the Regenstein Library, the major library of the university. I pored over the books and wrote an article titled "Five Dangerous Books" in Mehfil, then the journal of South Asian Studies departments in the USA, explaining why they were considered "objectionable" to the authorities, headed by Yahya Khan.

That caused some furor in the academic circles of the West. Many people in them were, one could say, academically interested in South Asia, but its politics remained out of focus for most. Now it was known that everything was not right in the state of Denmark, so to say. Pakistani students and others who sided with them objected to Professor Naim, Professor of Urdu at the UChicago, and the editor. Naim was

a liberally oriented Indian, who ignored the objections. To add to the problem, an Urdu scholar in London, Hamza Alavi, who was researching on Raja Rammohan Ray, translated the article in his Urdu periodical Chingari, and which caused it to come under wider notice across the continents. This hullabaloo went on. At that time, a young teacher from East Lansing, Michigan came to give an interview lecture for appointment in the Anthropology department of the University of Chicago. He was a Bengal specialist. In his lecture, too, Ralph Nicholas (we became excellent friends later) touched upon the unrest of Bangladesh and, while doing so, faced some heckling by listeners who favoured Pakistan. Ralph confronted all their belligerent questions with his characteristic cool, which earned for him a post at my University.

Soon after, as everything indicated an inevitable war with Pakistan, my new friend, Shamsul Bari, who was then teaching

There was an interlude which involvednoneotherthanNoam Chomsky. He came to the UniversityofChicagotolecture on American foreign policy, and we, as could be expected, thronged to hear him. In the question-answer session following the lecture, we asked him about his reactions to Bangladesh's Liberation War. Chomsky hedged a little as, we felt, he was guided by the early Chinese ambivalence about the War. We told him that he was wrong, and no force in the world would be able to withhold a free Bangladesh for long. Chomsky did not press his point.

Bengali at the Department of South Asian Studies, confided in me and informed me that East Pakistan Bengalis in Chicago and the vicinity wanted to do something for the liberation of their motherland and that they had formed a close group in the city



Dr A.R. Mallick joined a meeting at F.R. Khan's home in October 1971. Seated next to Dr A.R. Mallick are Stanley Tigerman and Dr Mushfiqur Rahman.

with that objective. Should we be ready to join them? We (my wife, Maitreyi, and I) were only too glad to agree, as East Bengal was both of our birthplace. We began to meet at the residence of the world-famous engineer and architect Fazlur Rahman Khan (F. R. Khan), who, we were thrilled to learn, had made till then the highest building in the USA, the Sears Tower in Chicago, and had already earned the title of "Engineering Man of the Year" three times from the US Engineering Association, or something of that kind. But when we met him, he looked and behaved like a Bengali to the core, which surprised us even more. His wife was German and they had a charming young daughter of about 12 years. The whole family was for Bangladesh. We were not only treated royally at Fazlur's place, but when our deliberations of the day were over, a torn and dog-eared Gitabitan of Rabindranath would be brought out from a hiding place in Fazlur's bookshelves, and he would start singing old-time Rabindra Sangeet such as Ki paini, Ami tomay joto, Pran chay, chokkhu na chay, etc. Pankaj Mallik and K L Saigal were his special favourites. We also sang to our hearts' content. Shamsul's would-be wife, Supriya, had an excellent singing voice, and so did Maitreyi. Among the others in the party was also Muhammad Yunus (later Dr and a Nobel Laureate for Peace).

Our plans were primarily to raise a dollar fund using which we could send some

weapons of war to the Bangladeshi soldiers, and other war materials like rubber boats and gear for divers such as flaps, snorkels, etc. That part was handled by Shamsul and Fazlur, who had made connections with some American agents who dealt in such matters. To raise money, we had a three-pronged programme. One was to raise direct subscriptions from South Asian and American friends who sympathised with our cause. Second, to prepare dinners for guests, mostly Americans, who would pay USD 100 for a South Asian treat. And third was to organise "cultural events" in which attendance would also be for a fee.

Come the summer of 1971, and we were all out with our plans. My role was to tie in the Indian, particularly the Indian Bengali community to this project—and that was no big problem. I had some hand in forming the Bengali Association of Greater Chicago with my friend Girin Ray, and we already had a solid body of people interested in our cause. Shamsul also put the responsibility or organising cultural events on my shoulders. Bengali wives of Chicago were excellent cooks, (my wife not excluded) and our two dinners in the city were huge successes. The International House, the hostel for foreign students by the University, was ever ready to provide us with an excellent venue. We Bengalis had already been using it for many cultural events, including theatrical performances.

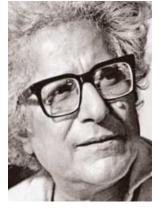
There was an interlude which involved none other than Noam Chomsky. He came to the University of Chicago to lecture on American foreign policy, and we, as could be expected, thronged to hear him. In the question-answer session following the lecture, we asked him about his reactions to Bangladesh's Liberation War. Chomsky hedged a little as, we felt, he was guided by the early Chinese ambivalence about the War. We told him that he was wrong, and no force in the world would be able to withhold a free Bangladesh for long. Chomsky did not press his point.

We organised two cultural programmes, one in Chicago, and another at Ann Arbor, Michigan. Artists from Bangladesh and India took part in them enthusiastically, and Bengalis, spread over two or three hundred miles across the US Midwest, crowded to watch them. There was the usual fare of Tagore and Nazrul songs, with some of Abbas Uddin and Salil Chowdhury thrown in. There were lectures and skits. Details will be out-of-place here, but I'll end my story with an episode that I have not been able to

Our programmes usually ended with Amar Shonar Bangla. So did the one at Ann Arbor, during which the audience stood up and greeted us with thunderous applause. We came out of the auditorium with a sense of satisfaction. The crowd came out and milled about to talk to friends. At this time, a diminutive and shrunken old man came forward and started almost wringing my hands. He was shaking and his eyes were full of tears. He said, "You don't know what you have brought back to me this afternoon. I didn't dream of this ever, in the wildest of my dreams. My own language! My own culture, and the land I was born in! It's all come back to me!" He addressed his stately wife and tall son standing beside him, both Americans, "See Emily, see Frank, this is my country, this is my culture, and they've brought all that back to me, from across the oceans!" Tears began to roll down his cheeks. His wife gently patted him on his shoulder, and tried to calm him by saying, "Easy, Amar, easy! Calm yourself!" But he could not. He was sobbing, still wringing my hand.

This was Amar Chakraborty, who had fled his village in Bikrampur in the 1930s, as he was being hounded by the British for being a "terrorist". He came to the US, found a job at the Ford Motor Company in Detroit, and married an American girl and built a home there.

Pabitra Sarkar in an author and former Vice Chancellor of Rabindra Bharati University, Kolbata



**SUBHASH MUKHOPADHYAY** 

### Bhai Zahir Raihan

My brother Zahir,

I do not have the audacity to console you, the same way I couldn't console the mother of Sheikhpara's Akram. Do you know when I kept being reminded of you? The day the Pakistani army surrendered in Dhaka.

I was in Jashore at the time. I came out when I heard the sound of aeroplanes. I could see a white plane flying over my head, towards Dhaka. When we were in Monirampur, I saw it returning. For some reason, it made me think that I was watching one of your documentary films from the future.

This dream of mine felt even closer to reality when I heard on the radio that very evening that you had started for Dhaka with your unit. Then I heard you missed your flight at Dum Dum because of traffic problems on the road, so you arrived a day later.

On the other hand, I was still dreaming of going to Dhaka from Jashore. I wondered how surprised you would be to see me in Dhaka all of a sudden. The Pakistani army still hadn't given up arms in Khulna. They had absolutely demolished the city. They went house to house, fishing out Bengalis from their houses and killing them like rats from holes. When defeat became inevitable, groups of armed traitors fled, some towards the villages, some towards the rivers, looking for a way to escape. The Pakistani army still held bases in Faridpur and Rajbari. The army and the Rajakar forces were still shooting at the roads from their bunkers in Bhatiapara. Thus the road from Jashore to Dhaka was still closed. A way might have opened up in two or three days, but within 24 hours there were many people anxious to get to Dhaka. Some of them had their wives and children stuck behind enemy lines, some of them had parents. No one knew how their families had been all these months, or even if they were alive. Having witnessed this wave of worried individuals with my own eyes, I decided not to go to Dhaka for now. Because my going might mean someone else not being able to.

Besides, to be honest, I feel more of a connection to Chattogram than to Dhaka! Because my first experience of Dhaka wasn't pleasant. Let me tell you

The first time I stepped foot onto Dhaka was at least 28 years ago. Comrade Jyoti Basu and I went there together. The party commune was possibly at G Ghosh Lane at the time. Some moments after we got there, a group of people marched out with sticks and logs, ready for battle. Before leaving, they told us, "Sit and wait. We will come back soon." They returned right after dark, seemingly victorious. Later I learned that some boys from a leftist party had stabbed one of our people. This is how they took revenge for that, with sticks, on a culvert somewhere.

That was the first time I had spoken with Satyen Sen and Ranesh Das Gupta. But the person whom I'd met for the first time even before this in Kolkata – I don't know if you still remember him, Zahir - was Somen Chanda. And let me say this even if it doesn't sound right, among all our contemporary communists, Somen Chanda had all the elements and the qualities needed to become a big writer, he was the only

But it was long before my first visit to Dhaka that, while leading an antifascist procession of yarn mill workers, Somen Chanda was killed by a group of anti-communist leftists. It was in the memory of Somen Chanda that on that day, we formed our Anti-Fascist Writers' and Artists' Association.

That's why right after reaching Dhaka, this violence between leftists left me a bit disheartened.

What happened the day after could not have made any newcomer like Dhaka at all.

There was a meeting of the district committee in the party office the next morning. Around midday, news arrived that a riot had started between Hindus and Muslims. A combined group of Hindu and Muslim comrades escorted me to Narayanganj that very day. And when I got to Narayanganj, there was no way to tell that there was a riot going on in the city right next to it.

Therefore, the length of my first visit to Dhaka was less than even 24 hours. That too with trouble at every step. But within that short span of time, I met people that I could love, people who were ready to sacrifice it all for their fellow man. I met some of them after two decades in Kolkata. They still hadn't changed colours, only the colour of their hair had turned white. Finally out of iail or coming out of hiding these people will enjoy the open air and sun for the first time in 25 years in

independent Bangladesh.

Even though I'm a son of Kolkata, I cannot help admitting - there was only one instance in my life when I was jealous of Dhaka. When Jukto Front decimated Muslim League and won the election the first time standing on the groundwork laid down by the Language Movement. The literary conference was organised right after that. A big group from Kolkata went there as brotherly representatives. The city of Dhaka looked so beautiful at that time that I couldn't describe it with words. It wasn't just the new houses and the bright lights. The Language Movement



**Shahidullah Kaiser** 

birthed new life into the stones of Dhaka.

I will never forget that city full of life The walls still had Jukto Front written on them, and pictures of boats drawn. Rickshawpullers pulled their rickshaw in a manner similar to that of rowing a boat. Those days will always remain etched in my memory, unharmed.

You must have been just a boy back then. That was when I met your dada, Shahidullah Kaiser

When I was in Jashore, Mehbub told me, "Shubhashda, stay two more days. I will take you to Dhaka." I left Jashore the next evening without telling Mehbub. I restrained myself from going to Dhaka looking at the faces of all those anxious travellers.

I'm glad I didn't go that day. I saw the horrible news on the paper upon returning. Shahidullah Kaiser's name was on the list. I still held some hope in my heart, because the

suspicions based on capture, there was a slim chance they weren't completely

I went to Lake Garden in the morning to find Opu and Topu alone at home. Shuchanda had gone to Hari's place to call you.

When I saw Shuchanda, her face was swollen from crying all day. Shahriar let me know that someone from Dhaka came and told them that what they feared was true.

We can't bring back someone who has left us. But what we all were worried about was you. Because if they had you in their grasp, everyone in Bangladesh knew what they'd do to you. A band of defeated, mad dogs were hiding out in the alleys of Dhaka, and even now they wouldn't let you go if they found you. More than the pain of losing dada, we were all fearful of what might happen to you. The only thought we had was to find a way to warn you. Shahriar, Hari, and Santosh spent the entire day in front of the telephone that day.

Zahir, why am I writing you this letter? Not to console you for the grief of losing dada. Even though I know, Shahidullah was much more than just dada to you. Shuchanda told me in between tears, "Dada built him up with his own hands. All he has become today is because *dada* was behind him."

When I didn't know you, I read your book - Hajar Bochor Dhore. When I spoke on the radio about literature, I quoted from your book and said that I'd never read a better Bangla book written about the life of a destitute farmer. I was asked by so many about the book on buses and trams, it was beyond count. I told them they couldn't find the book here, it was from East Pakistan

I found out much later that you were a film director. I found out even later that you were Shahidullah Kaiser's

A letter shouldn't be drawn out much longer than this. Before I finish, I iust want to let you know that I've gone and watched Jibon Theke Neya in the meantime

There's nothing stopping me from saying this now, but I was afraid. I

was afraid it wouldn't be exactly how I wanted it to be. Because at the end of the day, it was still a movie shot during the rule of the military. But all my fears ebbed away inside the hall. The entire audience became at one with your movie. They were laughing, they were crying, at certain times, they were seething with anger. During intermission, after the show, they were only talking about the movie. I couldn't tell when I found myself immersed into a group of those ordinary people. With the enormous pressure of working under the military government on your chest, not only did you find a way to breathe in secret, you managed to spark a flame to the pile of dry gunpowder. Not only have you honoured the brave, you have also honoured the art as well as the artist. You have told the story of a home, but that home spanned the entire nation. I have heard that the movie has many flaws. I am tired of watching flawless movies. Let there be flaws, right now we want some fire in our lives.

My brother Zahir, Hari came from Dhaka and told me that you started taking photos as soon as you landed in the airport. Then after spending the entire day taking photos of different places in the city, you couldn't even look at your house once you got there. They had smashed it all up, destroyed

When you ran and ran and finally reached dada's house, you were at a

That was when you learned the most devastating news you've ever heard in your life - Shahihdullah Kaiser was no

No, Zahir, I will not console you. There are still many dead bodies rotting in the fields and the creeks, waiting to be buried. Many are still dead and missing.

Let's raise our flags half mast for one day, in memory of all the Bengalis in Bangladesh and Indians killed, let's darken our cities, and observe a day of no cooking in all our homes.

You came into your home taking pictures and then you were stunned by the pain of loss, now shake it all off and come back out.

Subhash Mukhopadhyay was one of the foremost Indian Bengali poets of the 20th century. The article was originally published in his book titled Khoma Nei (1972). It is translated by Azmin Azran.

### To Opu and Topu ...

Dear Opu and Topu,

I am writing this letter in the hopes that you will read this someday when you're all grown up.

Once you've grown older, will you remember the days you spent in Kolkata when you were little? Maybe you will forget. Or maybe you will remember.

I am very forgetful, but memories from when I was your age are still flashing before

I'm speaking of memories from when I was still a child. There was someone from Odisha who used to cook for our home. I was very dear to them. When nobody was looking, I used to take away the paan from her mouth.

I stole a telebhaja made with chillies one time but eating it had me in tears because it was so spicy. Even after eating a fistful of sugar, the burning did not subside.

There was a balcony on the second floor. I used to stare outside through the gaps in the iron railing. Colourful torn kites interspersed on the telephone lines moved as the wind blew. After the rain, water droplets would slip through my fingers.

I didn't want to leave the balcony when the steamroller would repair the road because back then, there wouldn't be many vehicles moving on our street apart from a few horse carriages of the affluent and hackney rented by regular people. Motor cars weren't found there.

On Chaitra Sankranti, the neighbourhood clowns would come out as entertainment. I only got to see them once in my life, since I then moved to the village. A man used to come and sing Hapu songs quite frequently there. When I got older and moved to Kolkata, I never heard anyone sing a Hapu song again. You're not supposed to know what a Hapu song is. One person sang a few verses of the song and then made a "Ha-pu' sound while spinning a whip and flogging himself. I would retreat from the balcony if anyone came to our street while singing a Hapu song. But there was no point because the man's "Ha-p-pu" sound and self-torture would follow me relentlessly. I used to feel like I was in hell during those times.

Look how I've become busy recounting my memories. This happens when you grow older. If I start thinking about the old days, I can't stop.

It feels great to imagine how, when you're older, you will reminisce your childhood days too.

You came to Kolkata with your mother by overcoming so many obstacles. This was no comfortable car or plane journey from Dhaka to Kolkata. You had to hide from your country's enemies and escape through the jungles and rivers. You might not have understood the situation entirely, but you might get chills thinking about the memories or remember the pain of the journey. You didn't have your father with

Your father was in Kolkata back then. Zahir used to spend his days anxiously waiting for you. Meanwhile, something

happened. Zahir Raihan was in Kolkata. As soon as word about this spread, reporters and photographers from the cinema industry flocked to him. While speaking to them, Zahir casually mentioned your journey to



Kolkata. This news accidentally spread far and wide through the newspapers. Zahir was in trouble. What if the enemy troops hear the news and detain you? Zahir's face paled with fear. The same Zahir who had never known what fear meant before. This is what love and affection do to a person.

Then, you arrived. Zahir left the onestorey home in Prince Anwar Shah Road and got a spacious apartment on the third floor in Lake Garden for you. You could see so much of the sky from your room's south-

facing window. Do you remember? During the monsoon months, the sky would be filled with grey clouds. And in the autumn? What a clear blue night sky!



the cattle shed on the side of the road used to dance in joy. Weren't you afraid of the Bhagalpuri cows standing in line in the alley leading to your stairs? You tried so hard to make them move out of the way, but they wouldn't budge.

How long did you even get your father at home? Poor Zahir. He used to be so busy with work that he didn't even have time to take care of himself. He was the most dependable and closest person to the freedom fighting writers, artists and intellectuals of Bangladesh. He was the one who had to solve all of their problems. Where was the time for him to sit at home? But as a man who constantly thought about others, he wasn't in a good state himself. There's no count of how many days he spent roaming around in the city like a depressed nomad before you arrived. Although, I heard he was drowning in riches back home. He wasn't sad even after losing everything. There's no shortage of talent in the world—but it's rare to find people with such big hearts.

You know, Opu and Topu, I'm not exaggerating at all—I haven't met many people with as big of a heart as Zahir.

Although, we didn't have a close relationship for that long. Most days, I would go to visit him and not find him at his place, or he would come to visit me but not find me. I had only known him for less than a year.

You don't only need personal experiences with someone to know them; you can also learn about them through their interactions with other people. I knew Zahir in the latter way. If Zahir had thought about himself a bit, he could've very easily lived like a king in Kolkata. Instead, even when he was struggling financially, he spent all of his money on the betterment of his country. I can't help but tell you one thing. Once you're older, if you ever feel bad thinking about how you could've lived a more secure and comfortable life growing up, remember that your father's world was much larger than what lies within these four walls, and be proud of that. The sky was his limit, and the world was his oyster. He expressed his deep love for you by loving all people unconditionally.

I won't make this letter very long. I thought of quickly writing some words for you, in case death starts knocking on my

door before you grow older. You will hear from your elders or read in history books about all that happened in Bangladesh in the past year. Alongside, you should watch a film. You will find it in the archives of old films. It's called "Stop

Genocide."

Zahir Raihan made this film. Your father. We got goose bumps watching the film. I don't know what you will think of it. In the film, you will find Bangladesh chained by its invaders, a country that has no resemblance to the Bangladesh of your time. Zahir made this film for you so that you are careful not to let this happen to Bangladesh ever again.

Opu and Topu, you might not understand now what your father has left behind for you, but someday you will. What he has left behind is more valuable than any riches. He has handed you the torch of freedom and socialism. You have to protect him at all

We felt so empty when Zahir left Kolkata. Then suddenly, one day, he appeared. He was going to Ajmer Sharif with your mother. There was no still no trace of Shahidullah. Zahir was supposed to visit with time on his hands because we had a lot to talk about. The gang of murderers are not only changing appearances to save their skins, but also hatching a new demoniacal plot. A few days later, I came home in the evening to hear Zahir had come to visit. He was going to leave for Dhaka the next morning. I went to catch him in the Fairlawn Hotel. We spoke till night-time. I took his hands and told him many times, "Stay safe. Don't do anything reckless."

I will never forget his smile and the sparkle in his eyes.

Everybody knows what happened next. I didn't cry or mourn too much. I was furious that Zahir did not listen to me.

I had told him to make a new film about a man in Bangladesh searching for his missing brother. But why did he lose himself while trying to look for him?

You have to search for Zahir when you grow up. While searching for him, search for Shahidullah too. Don't search for their bodies; search for their hearts. Search for every place that they poured their hearts into. I want you to grow up and pour your hearts into the same places. It's gotten quite late now. I'll take my leave.

The article was originally published in Subhash Mukhopadhyay's book titled Khoma Nei (1972). It is translated by Mayabee Arannya.

# The country my father wanted

#### TANVIR HAIDER CHAUDHURY

We are celebrating the golden jubilee of our country's independence this year. Fifty years of existence of this sovereign state called Bangladesh; the Bengali people's thousand-year yearning for statehood finally given tangible shape and form. At the same time, however, many families across this beleaguered yet proud land are observing the absence of loved ones: a father or a mother, sisters or brothers, cousins, aunts, uncles, friends, nieces, nephews; an uncountable number lost before their time. Far too many families paid in blood and tears so that this country could be born.

My family is one of those. I lost my father, Mufazzal Haider Chaudhury - a teacher of Bangla language and literature at what was then known as Dacca University; a linguist, essayist and thinker - on December 14, 1971. As many of us know, this was not an isolated incident. Hundreds of his compatriots - writers, teachers, artists, journalists, physicians, engineers - were picked up from where they happened to be, taken to a remote location, tortured and murdered; in some cases, they were shot where they stood, in full sight of members of their family. This macabre exercise started right when the Pakistani army launched a full-fledged assault on the unsuspecting and unarmed population of the erstwhile East Pakistan on March 25, 1971 - their 'Operation Searchlight' - and continued until December 16 of that year, just hours before the surrender and absolute defeat of that army.

The abductions really kicked into high gear on December 10, and on December 14, around 200 of these unharmful, gentle souls - as Bob Dylan would have put it - who were noncombatants and had not fired a weapon in their lives, were taken away from their homes in Dhaka by the Al Badr militia, collaborators of the Pakistani army. They were blindfolded; some of them

also victims of these murderers. He never did time as a political prisoner; possibly never shouted himself hoarse in a procession. Why then did he come to this cruel end?

To answer this question, we would need to understand what kind of person Mufazzal Haider Chaudhury was, and what his aspirations were for the country he held in his heart. Since he was murdered for his ideas, we would need to understand why these ideas were so heretical from some perspectives.

He was born on July 22, 1926, in a small village in Noakhali to a father he referred to in a dedication in one of his books as a 'lover of literature', and a mother who was very literary-minded, as evidenced by the many lyrical letters she wrote throughout her life. He received a conventional religious education in his childhood and early youth, and was sufficiently enthusiastic to actually develop translation skills from the original Arabic language of his religious studies. He had inherited his parents' literary bent, however: always a good student, the high marks he achieved in the Bangla and English examinations in his school days started to draw attention. He did not have much of an opportunity to encounter Rabindranath's poetry, music and prose in his school curriculum, but what little he did find captured his imagination.

His young mind was confronted with something of a spiritual crisis at this point. Orthodox Muslim religious education had led him to think nonbelievers would never ascend to heaven. Yet Rabindranath Tagore, whose work was steeped in a generous, all-encompassing humanism, was not of his faith. How was he to reconcile this? His love of creativity extended to art and he used to draw the great poet's portrait, had collected many other portraits of his at different stages of the poet's life. He would look at those pictures and wonder to himself: how was it possible that this saintly man would be



Mufazzal Haider Chaudhury with his younger son Tanvir Haider Chaudhury on the latter's 3rd birthday (November, 1970).

students, the relaxed rules, the focus on learning not to pass exams but to improve oneself and develop true insight into the subject matter, the emphasis on the joy to be derived from music, dance and the creative arts, the pristine beauty of the nature that surrounded him – all of these worked on his young, sensitive, beauty-seeking soul like a magic spell. His spirit took flight in this environment. He would never be the same again.

As a non-collegiate student, he came  $1^{st}$  in the  $1^{st}$  class in the BA (Honours) examination of Calcutta University in 1946 with record marks in Bangla. This was an inconceivable thing for a Muslim boy from the backwaters of East Bengal to accomplish back then, and this singular achievement also brought unprecedented glory to Santiniketan. Overjoyed, the revered, hermetic professor of the Rabindranath chair in Santiniketan, Probodh Chandra Sen, gave him the nickname 'Mukhojjol' - loosely translated, one who makes us proud. It was not just Muslim students from East Bengal he brought glory to that day, but the whole of Santiniketan.

Rathindranath Tagore, son of the great poet, gave a leather-bound copy of the *Gitanjali* as a gift to my father when he heard what the young man had achieved. "My father would have been the proudest of you if he were still alive," he told him. The famous

He sat for the internal examination of the Lok-Shikhkha Sangsad of the Bishwa-Bharati University in 1948, again coming first-class-first and being awarded the Shahitya-Tirtha title. This was considered the equivalent of an MA degree at that point, but it was not officially approved by Calcutta University. Given this, Professor Probodh Chandra Sen advised him to complete the formality of getting an MA degree from Calcutta University. But in his own mind, the young scholar was already past that stage. He obtained a scholarship from Bishwa-Bharati and started on a research project on the works of Rabindranath Tagore under the guidance of Professor Sen.

By then, of course, the partition of the sub-continent was already a reality, and traveling to Santiniketan, which was now part of West Bengal in India, from his home in East Bengal which now fell in Pakistan was becoming increasingly difficult. So, the young man, still in his early twenties, decided to return home. But his homeland was not as welcoming as he might have imagined. His Santiniketan degree was not accepted as the equivalent of an MA by Dacca University, so he was deemed ineligible for employment there.

It is at this point that we begin to see the glint of steel underneath the mildness of this young man. He refused to sit for an MA degree from Dacca University and accepted a position as a script writer at East Pakistan Radio. Here again, his ethical principles – some may have termed it obduracy – got in his way. After having worked there for about a year, he was told by seniors that his preferred attire of panjabi-pajama was not suitable for the workplace. He resigned from his job right then and there.

By then, his reputation as a scholar had already spread – he was a regular speaker at literary events and contributor of essays to newspapers and periodicals, and tales of his academic feats at Santiniketan had also filtered through. He had stints of teaching at Jagannath College and St Gregory's College – later renamed Notre Dame College – and serving as one of the managers of the Dacca Centre of the Lok-Shikhkha Sangsad during this period.

In 1953, he reached a momentous decision. Since Dacca University would not back down in its position regarding his Santiniketan degree, he finally opted to sit for an MA examination under DU. He appeared for both the 1st and 2nd parts of the exam together and came first-classfirst in part 2.

This is not a decision that sat well with him. He saw it as a defeat, a capitulation to faceless officialdom. He was an acknowledged scholar and teacher for more than seven years by the time he joined Dacca University as a teacher in 1955

He got married to my mother, Tahmina Monowara Nurunnahar, in 1956. They had to wait 8 years for their first child, my brother Suman, to be born.

In 1958, my father was awarded a British Council scholarship to study linguistics at the London University's School of Oriental and African Studies. After traveling with my mother to London and spending two years of his life on his research, he fell out with his supervisor over differing views on the project and started for home with the work left incomplete. This had an adverse

impact on his standing back home - he was thought to be too sensitive, verging on being self-righteous, by some of his peers.

Here again, however, we see his unwillingness to back down in the face of powerful adversity when he knew himself to be right. He paid a high price for this trait many times over in his life, and it is this same characteristic that possibly led this affable man to stare down powerful adversaries and brought his life to its tragic end.

He never relented on championing the unique cultural heritage of the Bengali people, be they Muslim, Hindu or of any other religious persuasion. The fact that the oeuvre of Rabindranath Tagore was essential to make sense of the cultural context of the modern Bengali people, that recognition of Kazi Nazrul Islam's syncretic beliefs and avowed secularism was as important in understanding him as is his 'rebel' persona, that the inclusion of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Nabin Chandra Sen, Hem Chandra Bandopadhyay -- all of the great poets and writers who enriched Bangla language and literature in the pre-partition era -- he never tired of communicating these self-evident truths in his writings and lectures. In the profoundly paranoid and xenophobic climate of the East Pakistan of the '50s and '60s, these were subversive, even dangerous statements. But my father never backed away from making them.

The dismal truth is, in 2021, the year we are celebrating the golden anniversary of our independence, these ideas have once again become 'controversial', after decades of stoking the flame of religious intolerance by those in power.

It is this steadfastness in spreading his ideas that earned my father a place in the list of East Pakistani educationists, physicians, journalists, writers – all the prominent individuals who espoused secular/progressive ideals - that Ghulam Azam, then the head of the Jamate-Islami party of East Pakistan, drew up for Major General Rao Forman Ali in September 1971. Following this list, many of these individuals were rounded up, tortured, and murdered – most of them just two days before the independence of Bangladesh.

I am the final surviving member of my father's family. My mother passed away, at 58 years of age, in September 1990, and my brother died of a sudden heart attack in December 2011, when he was just 47.

I have thought long and hard about why the lives of my mother and my brother turned out the way they did; why they left us so early. I remember the many indignities my mother suffered in her untiring efforts to ensure a good life for us. How she continually had to struggle against adversity after losing her husband. She had lost her mooring to this world, but soldiered on regardless, valiant and alone.

I have stated before that my brother was born to my parents relatively late in their marriage. I have only recently begun to understand how traumatised Suman would have been at losing his father when he was just seven-and-a-half years old; this treasured child who was pampered for all he was worth in the first years of his life, only to be left facing a bleak and uncertain future. I am convinced both of them would have had much longer, more fulfilled lives had they not had to deal with the horror of my father's abduction and murder.

As for me, I was just four when he was murdered. I realised very early on that the world was a hostile place for us, that I should not expect too much out of life. So, I learned to adjust.

And as we know, ours is by no means a unique story in Bangladesh. Innumerable families across this bloodsoaked land suffered the same fate in 1971, and beyond.

I have gone into some length in describing here what kind of person my father was, and the homeland he held in his heart; the ideas he ultimately died for. The country we see around us, where religious intolerance has run rampant, where money and power decide whether one has recourse to equity and justice, where secularism is ridiculed and looked upon with contempt, where the rich get ever richer and the poor are left to fend for themselves, where misogyny, graft, deception and nepotism are the order of the day, where the institutions that uphold democratic values have been rendered impotent, does not embody those ideas.

If we value the sacrifices of the martyrs of 1971, if we want all those lives lost to have some lasting meaning, we have to defend those ideas. They are worth fighting for.

Tanvir Haider Chaudhury is a son of Martyred Intellectual Mufazzal Haider Chaudhury. He currently runs a branded food company and occasionally contributes essays to periodicals



Mufazzal Haider Chaudhury and Dr Md Shahiduallah at an event (late '60s)

taken to an abandoned physical training institute in the city's Muhammadpur area where they were beaten with iron rods, drenching their clothes with blood; some had their eyes gouged out. In the early hours of the morning of December 15, they were all taken to a place named Katasur and bayoneted and shot to death. We know all this because a gentleman named Delwar Hossain, the only survivor of the massacre of that day, has provided vivid and heart-rending account of what took place that day.

If you are a person possessed of the usual degree of moral outrage, you would have found the above account chilling, even after all these years. What had these people done to provoke the ire of those who saw themselves as their sworn enemies, to the extent that these antagonists were driven to such monstrous, indefensible acts? Most of them did not even know these people they abducted and murdered. The murderers were not soldiers performing gruesome acts in the field of war. Yet they knew precisely whom to pick up, torture and kill. And - this always gets to me - what inspired the worst savagery in them was not unkindness or hostility but certain ideas, some beliefs. On that fateful night of December 14, what the young men armed with rods and sharp weapons wanted to know of their hapless victims was who among them had written a book on Rabindranath Tagore. When my father said he had, they pounced on him

with renewed ferocity.

As if writing about the great humanist poet and philosopher had made that gentle, scholarly person, a lifelong lover of beauty in all its forms, their worst adversary. A dangerous element that

needed to be wiped out.

What makes this anger even more perplexing is the fact that my father was never an overtly political person, unlike many of his contemporaries who were

hell-bound? How would a just and loving God allow this?

He had a debate with his mother once on this subject, but could not reconcile it to his satisfaction. In the end, he found his own way to the answer to this dilemma, as one has to. The wider humanism he tapped into in his exploration of literature, philosophy and the arts gave him a path to extract himself from the parochialism of rote religious

This is what the young man wrote to describe himself at that stage in his life: 'Life has wounded me in many ways. I lost my father early on, was raised in an environment of neglect and unhappiness. But the Creator has not been unkind in providing riches in my soul. The sadness the outside world inflicted on me was more than made up for by the bounty He had given me within.' (I have taken the liberty of translating this from the original Bangla)

That bounty helped him perform extraordinary feats. This young man from a remote village in Noakhali came 4th in the 1st division at the matriculation examination held under the (erstwhile) Calcutta University in 1942, earning a first-grade scholarship. Since the savagery of the Second World War was then going on in full force, Calcutta was at serious risk of being bombed by the Japanese, So, he, along with most of the bright young men of his time, got admitted to the Dacca Government College. From there, he passed his intermediate examination recording marks of over 75 in all of his subjects and coming 1st in the 1st division.

Owing to a series of complicated circumstances, but mainly driven by a desire to study Bangla literature, my father ended up in Santiniketan in 1944. This was a life-changing experience for him. The wide-open environment of Santiniketan, along with the easy friendliness of his teachers and fellow

Mufazzal Haider Chaudhury and his wife in London (1958-59)

Surendra-Nalini gold medal was also awarded to my father to recognise his record marks. And incidentally, that record was still intact in 1958, at the time of the centenary of Calcutta University, when he was awarded the Sir Ashutosh Gold Medal to commemorate the highest marks ever recorded by anyone in a Bangla Honours examination in the University's hundred-year history. The Vice Chancellor specifically mentioned the young scholar's accomplishment in his speech that day.

In 1946, my father got admitted to the Master's programme at Calcutta University to continue his studies on Bangla language and literature. By then, horrific communal riots had started to break out in Calcutta. This, combined with the financial difficulties he was having at that point, led my father to heed the urging of his teachers at Santiniketan and return there to study for his MA degree.

