

# MARTYRED INTELLECTUALS DAY SPECIAL

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## 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, Takiuddin 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 opusculé, "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'Honneur.



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. Rumbblings 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*, *Samskhratik 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

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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 of 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.

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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 forget.

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.

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