

Tales of courage and patriotism

MAHBUB UDDIN AHMED BIR BIKRAM

It was a long arduous path that we had to wade through to reach the momentous day of glory which was proclaimed by our great leader and Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

If we want a short and crisp account of the forbearance, courage of conviction, might and unity with which the general masses in Bangladesh fought as a united entity, we must start on the midnight of March 25, 1971.

It was on this historic night that an unarmed, non-fighting force turned into a semi-armed force imbued with the determined, sense of unity and patriotism to crush an invading horde called the Pakistan army.

I would like to recount a few events that occurred in my area during the Liberation War that would show the world the kind of forbearance the common people of Bangladesh endured and the sacrifices they made to secure the end result.

SURMON BIBI

Surmon Bibi was the wife of a simple cultivator from a village called Aichpara under Kalaroa police station of the then Satkhira subdivision. She was around thirty at the time and bore an ordinary, weather-beaten look.

Bibi used to earn her living by working together with her husband, the freedom fighter Akbar Ali Sardar.

It was like any other ordinary day that betook the villagers by surprise when the Pakistani army surrounded the village and chained up most of the young and middle-aged men like a flock of beasts.

They also separated the women who were taken for granted to satisfy the animalistic lust of the uniformed Pakistani cowards.

To save the honour of his wife, Akbar embraced martyrdom along with another

also played vital roles. To supply provisions, Morshed acted as quarter master.

It so happened on many occasions that the principal allowed the food cooked for students and staff in the college canteen to be supplied to the hungry soldiers in the trenches.

In doing so, the principal always extended total cooperation so that soldiers in the battles being fought would not run into trouble.

To elaborate a little bit, Lt Col Rahman spent a very long time in West Pakistan and was a course mate of Brigadier Durrani, the brigade commander of Jashore cantonment.

Monjur's accent was more like Urdu speaking Biharis and that's why we thought he was a non-Bengali and suspected him.

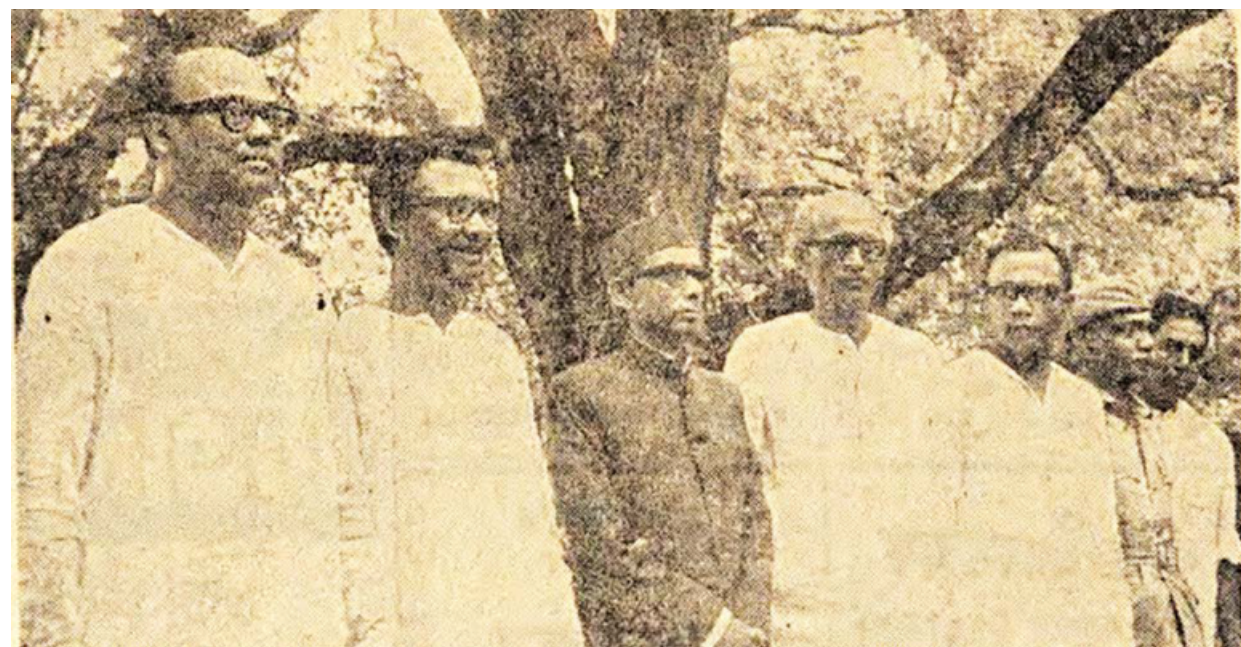
But within a few days, my distrust proved false and I started communicating with him in good grace.

On April 14, 1971, our resistance against Pakistan in the Jashore front, consisting of Jhenaidah and other parts of the south western command of Muktibahini, started crumbling as Pakistani forces reassembled for a three-pronged attack on south-west Bangladesh beyond the western side of Padma River.

With our mostly untrained troops armed with outdated rifles and having no chance of replenishment, we found ourselves running into deeper trouble.

Therefore, I took the decision to extricate my forces as well as the towns that had been helping us with all their might. So, I gave a general order of demobilization towards the Indian border.

In the meantime, we had established a liaison with the Indian government, which appeared to be helpful to our cause. I then organised a large gathering in the public square near the general post office of Jhenaidah town to guide people through an orderly withdrawal.



Leaders of the Mujibnagar Government listening to the national anthem: Amar Sonar Bangla Ami Tomai Bhalobashi. April 17, 1971.

member of our semi-military force called Mujahid Bahini. His name was Ayed.

In an opportune moment, the freedom fighter engaged in a fistfight with the rapist. In the ensuing duel, the Punjabi soldier named Qaiyum was thrown off balance by another freedom fighter, Abdul Ahad. As a result, Qaiyum lost control of his combat rifle. Bibi had been raped but she would not cower in fear as she found a rare opportunity to take control of the bayonet.

With the bayonet that she managed to snatch away from her attacker, Bibi stabbed him in the back with all her might, thoroughly piercing his lungs to ensure total annihilation.

After a short while, she was rescued by the freedom fighter, who covered her up as they escaped to a remote village.

Later on, Ahad was captured alongside others by Pakistani soldiers in the house where they were sheltering. He was then brutally tortured but even with heavy wounds, Ahad managed to escape and report to Baliadanga to join battles.

THE MARTYRS OF JHENIDAH CADET COLLEGE

During the first weeks of our war of attrition, the exceptional role played by the Jhenaidah Cadet College community, including the teaching staff, students and rank and file employees, cannot be exaggerated.

They played a very crucial role in annihilating the Pakistan army contingent that was falling back from Kushtia after its humiliating defeat at the hands of its citizens, supported by a contingent of the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR), led by its commanding officer Maj. Abu Osman Chowdhury.

This battle, from its plan to execution, was supported by Dr Ashabul Huq, the MP of Chuadanga, my friend Towfiq, the sub-divisional officer of Meherpur, people from all walks of life from Kushtia, Jhenaidah, Chuadanga, Meherpur, a few brave non-commissioned officers and junior commissioned officers of the EPR-4 wing, a corps of engineers of WAPDA, Jhenaidah, and myself.

After a glorious victory of the people of the South Western Region of Bangladesh against the marauding army, styled the S&T BN of the Pakistan Baloch Regiment, we had to wage two more battles at Garaganj and Bishoykhali, which are both in the periphery of Jhenaidah subdivision.

The battles continued for more than a week. Our aim was to thwart any advance of Pakistani forces that were heading from Jashore cantonment to rescue members of the fallen army which was wiped out by the valiant freedom fighters of Jhenaidah.

During this crucial and dangerous time, Lt Col (Retd) Monjurur Rahman, principal of the Jhenaidah Cadet College, Abdul Halim, a body builder and boxer who served in the Pakistan army for some time, and his colleagues served our fighters food and other logistics so that they could stay in the trenches and continue guarding strategic locations and resist Pakistani advances across a bridge at Garaganj.

In this dangerous pursuit, Professor Shafiqullah and Professor Nazre Morshed

While preparing for the withdrawal, I had very sincerely and ardently requested Lt Col (ret) Rahman and all the teachers and students of Jhenaidah Cadet College to move out of the area with us.

Unfortunately, no amount of persuasions would convince Rahman, who refused to leave the college campus. He also persuaded Abdul Halim to stay back with him.

Once we had vacated our positions at Jhenaidah, Pakistani forces captured the town with heavy reinforcements. They immediately arrested Rahman and Halim, and took them under chains to Brigadier Durrani.

Durrani displayed a mock sense of sympathy for both, entertaining them with tea and snacks while asking them to collect all employees and professional staff of the college and immediately start normal activity.

Both fell into his trap. They were allowed to return to the campus but Brigadier Durrani had other motives in mind as he sent 25 Baloch Regiment Captain Iqbal to kill the two the next morning.

The killing that followed was inhuman and brutal. It is impossible to describe, however, I shall try to make paint a picture of the brutality meted out by Captain Iqbal.

To achieve his mission, Iqbal first took Prof Halim and handed him over to a non-Bengali staff of the college named Tomato.

Tomato then began his deranged work. First of all, he cut down Halim's nose and then dismembered his ears. Halim was crying in intolerable pain by this point when Rahman asked Iqbal to shoot him instead of carrying out such ghastly torture.

Iqbal then shot him point blank several times and after that, the captain told Rahman: "now it is your turn".

To Lt Col Rahman the utterances of Iqbal appeared despicable and rude and he shouted aloud: "I am a senior army officer, you must talk to me with respect."

In reply, the obdurate shame of an officer told him: "I will shoot you, I will kill you".

Understanding his motive, Rahman told him: "Give me one minute to pray", which he was allowed.

The colonel took a few minutes to say his prayers in front of a rose tree in the garden and then told Iqbal: "Now I am ready". It was precisely at that point that Iqbal killed him with his personal pistol. He was last heard uttering the name of his daughter: "Ayesha, I could not see you before my death."

Such was the ending of two brave, patriotic officers who did not surrender to the beasts to save their lives in the face of imminent death, and instead stood like rocks to uphold their dignity.

A few more junior officers, a peon and an accountant were also murdered in the college campus the same day.

My recommendation today would be to rename Jhenaidah Cadet College as Lt Col (Retd) Monjurur Rahman Cadet College to honour the sacrifice he made for the country. We also need to recognise the bravery of Professor Abdul Halim.

THE SUICIDE SQUAD: 12 BRAVE YOUNG MEN
After victory in the initial war of resistance,



Identity card issued to a suicide squad member

it was necessary to organise our forces and prepare for a possible counter-attack by the Pakistanis and take steps to oust them from Jashore cantonment.

For this purpose, I withdrew my forces from Garaganj and Bisyakhali and started advancing towards the cantonment.

Our first line defence posts were prepared by digging trenches at various places along the Kaliganj, Dulalmundia and Barobazar railway lines on the Jashore-Jhenaidah road.

Two recoilless rifles were dug in on both sides of the rail line and camouflaged at a slightly lower plane than that of the road. They were put under command of two Habildars of the East Bengal Regiment. Earlier, they had participated in the Battle of Bishaykhali. As usual, members of the EPR platoons were also posted in support. Some members of Muktibahini were deployed too.

This whole preparation I made in consultation with Major Osman because he assured me that Indian tanks and heavy weapons and ammunition would arrive very soon.

At this stage, I needed some courageous young men who would fight bravely as suicide squads. For this purpose, on the morning of April 12, I called on the freedom fighters to gather at the WAPDA ground. 50 to 60 enterprising youths appeared and many of them participated in the resistance war.

After talking for a few minutes, I explained the real purpose saying: "It is a festive occasion for sacrifice. It has been continuing with extreme devotion for the motherland."

I continued: "If you want to

save the country, if you want to live independently, you have to shed blood. The souls of our martyrs who died in the last few days of fighting are shining like stars in the sky. They are looking at us, can we let their lives go in vain?"

Everyone shouted in unison: "No".

I then said: "Those of you who are willing to die for the country raise your hands."

After a few moments of pin drop silence when those present were looking at each other obliquely, several of them raised their hands.

I asked their names and counted twelve. I put these 12 youngsters together on one side and told them to go to my room. I called my cook and told him to arrange food for them.

I had a long discussion on tactics with them separately before I finalised the list and issued identity cards, urging general members of the public to extend all possible help if needed, including accommodation and food.

I asked Mr Latif to arrange two jeeps and the necessary arms and ammunition. One of the 12 was a Pakistan returnee soldier. He had returned home for holiday before March. He joined me from the very beginning of the war. His name was Abdul Alim and he belonged to Jhenaidah. He was strong and courageous.

Having already been in the Garaganj and Bishaykhali battles, had Alim proved his mettle and showed enough courage in front line fights.

Another was his young friend Kamaluzzaman. Trained by the National Cadet Corps before the start of the war, on the night of the 25th he started the resistance by collecting rifles

from my police station.

In the battle of Bishaykhali, the two of them collected bullets from my headquarters and crawled into the firing zone to deliver large boxes of ammunition to the battling trench there. After sitting in the drawing room of my residence, briefing them and having lunch together, I rendered an oath of allegiance and patriotism in the name of Almighty Allah.

I led the oath composed as thus: "We, the twelve freedom fighters have gathered here to take an oath in the name of Almighty Allah that we will sacrifice our lives fighting the Pakistani hordes to turn our motherland into an independent Bangladesh. We will not hesitate to take any risk to achieve our goal. We will undertake suicide missions to free our country. In this mission, our strength is patriotism, our guide is Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib and his clarion call to free Bangladesh at all costs, and our task is to fight with our last drop of blood. Joy Bangla, Joy Bangabandhu."

Then we had a hearty make-shift meal together, gave them light automatic firearms to rejuvenate their spirits, packed as many grenades and bullets they could carry, organised two jeeps with flexible hoods to move and finally sent them to the Kushtia-Hardinge bridge area.

There was news that the Pakistan army would attack Bheramara very soon. For this, Pakistani troops had already started mobilising as much force as they could under the prevailing circumstances.

It was April 12, 1971, when the 12 brave youths left and joined with Captain Huda near the Hardinge bridge point. That night and the day after, they had to recce the area and on the 14th, they were in a severely dangerous situation.

Pakistanis had already started their most vital recapturing operations, including strafing from the air and bombing through long-range artillery.

This was the most important mission of Pakistan to reoccupy the western part of Bangladesh. The 12 young men who undertook this hazardous journey fell under attack here and in the trenches along with Captain Huda's company, they fought bravely.

Mahbub Uddin Ahmed Bir Bikram was the sub-divisional police officer of Jhenaidah during the Liberation War. He was in charge of presenting the guard of honour to the Acting President of Bangladesh Government-in-exile, Syed Nazrul Islam, at the oath-taking ceremony on April 17, 1971.