

A year of sacrificial patriotism

SUGATA BOSE

It was late afternoon on probably the last Sunday of November 1971. After finishing work for the day at the Netaji Field Hospital in Bakchara village, my father Dr. Sisir Kumar Bose suddenly decided to drive towards the Bongaon border. Our jeep sped along the road towards Jashore until it had to slow down at a culvert. Indian soldiers in camouflage fatigue emerged from the roadside to inform us that we had left no man's land far behind and advised us to turn back. That was my first visit to Bangladesh without passport or visa at the moment of the new country's birth.

Fifty years ago, I was a high school student. We keenly monitored the news of the Awami League's spectacular election victory in December 1970 and the tense political negotiations that followed in early 1971. We were thrilled to hear Bangabandhu Sheikh

Sometimes coconut water had to be used in place of saline. The bravery and dedication of these simple freedom fighters has remained for me a source of profound inspiration.

In Calcutta my father set up an office on the ground floor of Netaji Bhawan to support the cause of Bangladesh. My mother Krishna Bose was one of the women who worked there every evening under the leadership of the legendary revolutionary Bina Das Bhowmick. It was at Netaji Bhawan that Fazlul Huq had made a speech in 1954 that was cited as a reason for the dismissal of his United Front government. Many leaders and activists of the movement for Bangladeshi independence visited during 1971 and told us that they felt rejuvenated upon seeing the museum on Netaji's struggle for freedom. I had the opportunity to meet some of the field commanders of the Mukti Bahini. I especially remember Najmul Huda, an uncle

tomar pather dhular range range anchal rangin hobe".

My experience of trespassing across the border in late November 1971 had indicated that the crisis of 1971 was reaching a climax. I went to the Calcutta Maidan on 3rd December and was a bit disappointed to hear Indira Gandhi give a rather insipid speech. On returning home I learned that airfields in northern India had been bombed and close to midnight Indira Gandhi came on the air to say that the country had been put "on a war footing". We anxiously followed every twist and turn of the two-week war, especially the presence of the US nuclear carrier *Enterprise* of the Seventh Fleet in the Bay of Bengal, until Dhaka was liberated on 16th December.

The news of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's release from a Pakistani jail came as a great relief. We did not have television in Calcutta yet. We heard a running commentary on the radio of his triumphant return to Dhaka in January 1972. A week after Bangabandhu's return, my father drove from Calcutta to Dhaka in an ambulance carrying medical supplies to the war-torn capital of the newly independent country. On January 17, 1972, Sisir Kumar Bose had a memorable meeting with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who wept as he said, "Amader aar kichhu nai". Having recently learned of the terrible repression unleashed on his people, he felt this sense of enormous loss. My father tried to reassure him saying, "Apnader sab aachhe" – nothing was lost to a people who had won freedom by shedding their blood. Phani Majumdar was present at this meeting. Bangabandhu spoke about Netaji as his inspiration and the movement in honour of Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula to remove the Holwell monument in 1940 that had united Hindus and Muslims. He also remembered Sarat Bose and told my father that Suhrawardy had been utterly sincere about the united Bengal plan in 1947.

Bangabandhu sent a tape-recorded message in his inimitable voice to be played at Netaji Research Bureau in Netaji Bhawan on 23rd January 1972. He said that Netaji's ideal of sacrifice and suffering (*tyag o titilishar adarsha*) would forever illuminate the path of freedom-fighters the world over. Nilima Ibrahim attended the traditional Netaji birthday assembly as his personal envoy and gave a stirring address.

When Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman came to Calcutta in February 1972, I attended the mammoth mass rally where both he and Indira Gandhi spoke. On the occasion of that visit, my parents decided to give Bangabandhu a special gift. In Mandalay Jail during the mid-1920s Subhas Chandra Bose had a "ganer khata" – a notebook in which he had written down his favourite songs in his own hand. A silk scroll was presented to Bangabandhu on which was printed in red a facsimile of Rabindranath's ode to Bengal in Subhas's handwriting – "Amar Sonar Bangla Ami Tomay Bhalobasi".

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Some fragments

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Militarily, too, signs of an organized struggle became evident. Training centres were set up across the border, and areas of operation demarcated into sectors and sub-sectors. Volunteers began trickling across to join the Mukti Bahini, as the liberation army came to be known. Other volunteers facilitated their journey, guiding them part of the way.

In mid-May five of us, three cousins and two young uncles, decided that we would soon make a move. To allay the suspicions of elder members of our families we let it be known that we would visit a distant relative who had invited us. The plan was that we would spend a couple of days there and then move on to visit another distant relative. There, we would meet a Chhatra League volunteer who would accompany us to a village on the banks of the Meghna. The rest of the way we'd be on our own.

The first lap of the journey involved a trek of ten kilometres or so. Halfway through we ran into heavy rain and arrived thoroughly drenched. Our host, a distant cousin with a sharp sense of humour, joked that we had received just chastisement for not visiting her for years. After enjoying her hospitality in the form of gargantuan meals for a couple of days, we trekked to our next stop at the home of relations so distant that none of us could trace the genealogical lines connecting us. But good cheer and hospitality, still a strong tradition in rural Bangladesh, wasn't lacking.

By now the family elders had wised up to our intentions; perhaps one of the youngsters had squealed under pressure. Father's elder brother sent an emotional note asking us to go back through a fleet-footed relative. We persuaded him to eat and rest before heading back to report that he had missed us. He was a little soft in the head; I am sure he reported the entire conversation with us.

By now we had liaised with our guide, a brisk and personable young man. We set off so as to arrive after at our destination after dark. We were now beyond the family network, dependent on the goodwill and kindness of strangers who might run into trouble for helping us. We skulked under a tree outside a farmer's house while our guide called him out in soft tones. He came and beckoned us to follow. We were shown into a hut with a couple of cots. Our guide left, assuring us that we would be safe and wishing us luck. Our nervous host gave us gur-moori and water and asked us to get some sleep.

He woke us up before first light, and pointed out the direction we should take to get to the river where a ferryman could be found. Once across the Meghna it was a straight easterly trek all the way to the border. The sun was setting when a gaggle of boys playing in a field told us we were in India. I have described what followed in a few articles readily accessible online: "Strike a Heroic Pose: A Memoir of Camp Life in the Independence War"; "Remembering Murti" (both in *The Daily Star*); and a battlefront memoir, "With the Hamzapur Tigers" (bdnews24.com). Here I have tried to acknowledge the quiet contribution of those on the home front, without whose active cooperation the war effort would have floundered. At least six members from my extended family who had gathered in the village after the crackdown became freedom fighters.

I will end with an anecdote from one of the bravest combatants in my company, a country boy called Bodi. He had been detailed to accompany my sub-sector commander, Idris Khan, Bir Bikram, on an operation along the Biral-Dinajpur axis. A comrade-at-arms fell, mortally wounded. Bodi carried him to a nearby pond to wash his wounds. The water turned red. The sun was setting. Bodi told me in passionate tones, (and here I translate) "Sir, that day I saw how a martyr's blood colours the sky and reaches Allah in heaven."

I remembered the climactic passage in Marlowe where Faustus cries out, "See, see where Christ's blood streams in the firmament."

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Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Sisir Kumar Bose in Dhaka, January 1972. Courtesy: Archives of Netaji Research Bureau

Mujibur Rahman's electrifying 7th March speech at Ramna Maidan on the radio. Then came the grim news of the military crackdown on the night of 25th March and the flood of refugees into India.

Growing up in Calcutta, I had witnessed grinding poverty, but not the depth of human misery that I encountered in the refugee camps near the border. On school holidays I used to accompany my pediatrician father who tried to provide medical care as best he could to children in these camps. He also set up the Netaji Field Hospital where wounded soldiers of the Mukti Bahini were operated upon by leading surgeons from Calcutta. That is the only time in my life that I have seen surgeries being performed in the most challenging conditions.

of a close school friend of mine. He survived the war of independence but was killed along with Khaled Musharraf after Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination in 1975. The loss of Tajuddin Ahmed was another grievous blow that year to the fledgling state of Bangladesh.

While eagerly following the heroic resistance of the people of Bangladesh, including students and intellectuals, 1971 also afforded an opportunity to become more familiar in West Bengal with the literature and music that had flourished in East Pakistan. I still remember listening on 45 rpm records to Fahmida Khatun singing Rabindranath's "Ekhone tare chokhe dekhini shudhu banshi shunechi" and Iflat Ara's rendering of "Prabhu balo balo kobe

1971: PN Haksar in bridging the security gap

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When I met him at his office on Tuesday, 1 June, he was warm and more communicative, and I felt from the very nature of his talk my references meanwhile had been checked. He wanted to know details about the prospect of floating a multiparty front, and the ground work required to be done in this connection, and said that he would remain interested to know about its progress. Secondly, he said that someone on behalf of the Bangladesh Prime Minister should try to set up direct contact with the Soviet ambassador or a senior embassy official and should maintain regular contact with them to exchange views. He said nothing about the prospective security co-operation agreement with Soviet Union, nor did he dispel our perception about China's possible collusion with Pakistan to derail the liberation war. But by showing interest in promoting a liberation front, to suit Soviet Union's ideological taste, and by advising that regular contacts be started with Soviet embassy officials in India, he gave me an impression that our views were worth considering.

On return I briefed Tajuddin about the strong cross-currents in New Delhi over Bangladesh policy, and the broad understanding that was reached with PNH. Tajuddin said that he would soon be able to start work to promote the national liberation front. Hardly a week after my return, Aruna Asaf Ali, publisher of *The Patriot*, came to Calcutta and informed me that following a request from PNH, she had made an appointment for us with VI Gurgianov, of Soviet Cultural Centre located at Wood Street in Calcutta, who would receive us whenever we wanted. Tajuddin wanted me to carry on the dialogue. During the very session he was awfully frank in expressing his negative views about viability of the liberation struggle, the political commitment of its leadership for a long-drawn struggle, and India's capacity to sustain it. Despite the tough stance during the first session, the negotiation continued for three more weeks, once every week, mostly on about perspective than policies. He started accepting that something new was emerging and eventually some common ground was identified.

Nothing appeared to have happened in the next five weeks to indicate that developments were taking place along the expected line. The public expectations meanwhile kept on boiling in favour of 'political solution', to be mediated by the US, which received a setback a third week of June, after the disclosures that a number of US ships were sailing towards Pakistan carrying armament spares and components. The hype reached its highest point on the occasion of President Nixon's national security adviser, Dr Kissinger's visit to New Delhi during the first week of July. I received a message around that time from PNH enquiring about the progress made towards formation of the national front. That was the first indication in more than a month that the approach decided upon earlier was still relevant, despite all the interactions between India and the US at various levels. But Tajuddin meanwhile made little progress in floating the proposal of national alliance, since he faced hostile factional campaigns on the advent of AL elected representatives' conference (5 and 6 July) at Siliguri, and he barely succeeded to pacify a faction openly advocating for 'going back to the country to carry on the fight or seek reconciliation with Pakistan, since India had let us down in every respect'.

I went to New Delhi soon after Dr Kissinger's secret trip to China was made public, which created commotion in all circles, and dismay for those who advocated US mediation so far. On 19 July, a little late in the evening, PNH dropped in at Ashok Mitra's house and informed me that 'some thing very positive, along the line we discussed, was going to happen soon'. To be precise, as I barely mentioned the name of Soviet Union, he gave a firm nod. I left for Calcutta the very next day, and Tajuddin planned to start the initiative for the multiparty unity, but only after the security co-operation treaty between India and the Soviet Union was signed.

On 9 August, the Indo-Soviet Treaty for Friendship and Cooperation was signed in New Delhi, which Kissinger subsequently termed as a 'bombshell' in his memoirs. Indeed, the treaty, by agreeing to have joint consultation in the event of a threat from a


third party and to take appropriate action to restore peace and security, decisively changed the course of subsequent events. As the reconstruction of history goes on, some writers in recent years play down the threat of collusion perceived by us to the level that the US was using the Pakistani channel to open up to China for its own geopolitical interest. That might well be, but, in addition, there was a darker aspect of that opening too, as Richard Nixon made it clear in his memoirs: "The Chinese played a very cautious role in this period. They had troops poised on the Indian border, but they would not take the risk of coming to the aid of Pakistan by attacking India, because they understandably feared that the Soviet might use this action as an excuse for attacking China. They consequently did nothing". (page 530)

And how much Haksar did to make that strategic treaty a reality?


I have not seen any official papers on that yet, but I can reproduce from my notes on what D P Dhar told two years later. A draft treaty for friendship and co-operation was first proposed by the Soviet Union in the buoyant era of 'Brezhnev doctrine' in 1969, and DP, as India's ambassador in Moscow, had negotiated it for six long months, twice every week on Wednesday and Saturday, before it was finally shelved as both sides failed to resolve their differences. DP was summoned to Delhi in June 1971, and Haksar gave him the brief to reach an agreement on the treaty incorporating the amendments acceptable to the Soviet side but covering the security contingencies India might be facing. PNH followed it up all the way down till it was presented to get the approval of the political affairs committee, a committee of cabinet members, where PNH, P N Dhar and D P Dhar were present just to assist them if required!

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ইসলামী ব্যাংক
বাংলাদেশ লিমিটেড
ইসলামী শরী'আহ মোতাবেক পরিচালিত



‘বিজয়ের বছর’



স্বাধীনতার সুবর্ণজয়ন্তীর মহান প্রেরণায় আসুক অর্থনৈতিক সমৃদ্ধি সবাইকে জানাই ১৬ ডিসেম্বর মহান বিজয় দিবস-এর শুভেচ্ছা