

## CELEBRATING GOLDEN JUBILEE OF VICTORY



50 years ago, on this day, Bangladesh was born out of a bloody war. In the face of a brutal massacre by the Pakistani military, the freedom-loving people of this land, with their unwavering resolve and monumental sacrifices, steered the course of history of the Bengali nation towards a

new beginning. Today marks the Golden Jubilee of the Bangladesh revolution.

As we celebrate this auspicious occasion, we humbly remember and reflect on the valiant freedom fighters and all the men and women who sacrificed so much to free us from the shackles of

Pakistani tyranny. We pay our deepest respects to the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who led us in our struggle for freedom and all our national leaders who laid the foundations of an independent nation.

In the last 50 years, Bangladesh has

achieved countless milestones in its development journey. However, there are also shortcomings which betray the spirit of our Liberation War. Now would be a good time for sincere introspection and renewal of the pledge to fulfill the dreams of the freedom fighters and martyrs by

working to establish a just society, where everyone is free and equal. Let the love of freedom bloom!

**Mahfuz Anam**  
Editor & Publisher  
The Daily Star

বাংলাদেশ  
স্বাধীন পথচলার ৫০ বছর  
চেতনায় চিরভাস্বর গৌরবদীপ্ত  
বিজয়ের আজ সুবর্ণজয়ন্তী

সকলকে মহান বিজয় দিবসের শুভেচ্ছা

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বিজয়ের ৫০

হৃদয়ের উচ্ছ্বাসে মুক্তির আবেশ  
ভালোবাসি বাংলাদেশ

বাংক এশিয়া

# An ode to 1971

**CAPT. (RETD.) HUMAYUN KABIR CHOWDHURY, BIR PRATIK**

*Joy Bangla! Long live Bangladesh!*

It was the clarion call of our Liberation War of 1971 which still fills our heart with a wild thrill.

With a proud and a joyous heart, we declare and reaffirm to the world our faith and love for Bangladesh as we celebrate the Golden Jubilee of our victory on the December 16, 2021.

We are fortunate and feel specially blessed to be able to see this day 50 years down the road. Thoughts and memories of those apocalyptic days of 71, with its terror, fear and pain, the great struggle that demanded and exacted even a greater sacrifice, still moves us with extremes of emotion.

In 1971 we contended with death, senseless violence, tragic loss of life and property, and endured endless atrocities on one hand and on the other, experienced the exultation of discovering in us the strength, the courage to sacrifice and witnessed the birth of that unique spirit which united us as a people to face a formidable and brutal enemy, undaunted. The dream of a sovereign nation was taking its roots in the battlefields and in the eager and ready hearts of the oppressed people of this country.

The blood and the pain, the struggle and the sacrifice, the pride and the joy of the Liberation War, all are our gift to the posterity, our future generation; this is the legacy that we would like to leave behind as freedom fighters.

The Liberation War of 1971 and emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country is the single greatest event in our history. It was our moment in the sun that had bequeathed a meaning to the life of the oppressed people of this country and inspiration to our future generations.

To write about the days of our war, to recreate that unique time, and to re-enact those glorious moments is a colossal task. We would need a vast canvas and special talents to do justice to its magnitude, its vast scope and understand its far-reaching consequences.

Every worthy or precious creation arises out of pain, suffering, and sacrifice. And the birth of Bangladesh is no exception.

Despite all the misinformation and the different versions of history going around these days, dished out by media and different vested interested groups, what Bangladesh achieved at the end of nine months of bloody war was truly remarkable. It was a tale of blood and gore, of abominable atrocities committed by the Pak Army who perpetrated a reign of terror on defenceless civil population. History should also take care to record that this violence was met with courage and great acts of bravery, extraordinary sacrifices were made and the iron wills of a people were forged in the fire of their passionate desire for freedom. Bengalis would not accept anything short of independence, regardless if the superpowers helped Pak Army

or we did not have anybody on our side.

We, of course, acknowledge with gratitude our neighbour India's all-out help in our war efforts in times of great need, giving shelter and succour to millions of refugees who fled the Pak Army's brutality. We are also grateful to other countries who supported and extended help in our just cause, fighting a cruel enemy in our struggle for survival.

As a freedom fighter and witness of 1971, I would like to state unequivocally for history and for our present and future generations, that our victory on the 16th of December was not the result of charity. Yes, it could have taken more time, and sacrifices of many more lives, but we were ready and more than willing to make that sacrifice and Bengalis would have earned their freedom in due course with their own blood and sweat and at whatever the cost.

Following the failure of peaceful transfer of power after victory in the 1970 Elections, the charismatic leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had thundered in a historic public meeting the awe-inspiring mantra "Our struggle now is for freedom, and our struggle now is for independence" that electrified the whole nation. The fire had kindled the Bengali hearts, and there was no turning back.

It pains us when we see some doubters, naysayers and anti-Bangladeshis preach and profess otherwise. Those who record history or meddle with it to serve some particular end, do not belittle the sacrifices and achievements of our people. Pay attention to the events that led to this avoidable unjust war and how this terrible and uncalled for war was thrust upon us.

The chronicles of 71 should be written in gold to record how a meek and helpless nation was transformed in the forge of their will to sacrifice and ultimately snatch a glorious victory from the jaws of death and impossible odds. Unless we understand our history, we will go about making wrong choices and decisions at the present and will make mistakes in choosing our direction for the future.

Defying all misgivings, disproving all negative prophecies of the political pundits, wise intellectuals and the merchants of gloom, Bangladesh is here to stay after 50 years of birth as we celebrate its Golden Jubilee. Can we recollect part of those prophecies here? That Bangladesh would not be a viable country and cannot exist as an independent state, with its problems of feeding a huge population, devastated economy, no visible foreign income and hardly any natural or other resources? Its existence could only depend on the mercy and largesse of the international community and only as a "basket case"?

Needless to say, Bangladeshis have proved to the world that they are a resilient people, and are capable of surmounting seemingly impossible odds and are thriving today, having earned a place of dignity in the community of nations.

Even in our own country there was a large number of doubters, ironically amongst a section of the educated and privileged class, who opposed and regretted the independence



of Bangladesh from Pakistan. On the other hand, the average common men did not have the luxury of this quasi-philosophical speculation as to the viability of the newly born Bangladesh. They put their head and shoulder down to work at hand to the task of survival, to make ends meet with courage, honest labour and their natural fortitude.

Our real asset, our golden resource was our people; their simple belief in themselves, hard work, love and faith in their newly independent motherland is what sustained us through the difficult years. We have witnessed time and again during the long days and nights of the nine months of the Liberation War, our people's primal and instinctive love for their soil, for their land of birth. It's a pity that the sacrifices and patriotism of our common people have not been properly appreciated or rewarded in independent Bangladesh.

The Liberation War, quintessentially, was our bloody journey of self-discovery, a populace walking up from a state of uncertainty to a new reality, a future state emerging from chaos, terror and helplessness to hope and a future of endless promise.

The birth of Bangladesh, as I mentioned before was not easy or smooth, to say the least.

It was fraught with trauma and tragedy with catastrophic consequences. The "Architect of Bangladesh", its popular leader and the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated on August 15, 1975, barely three and a half years of independence in a quasi-military coup, his entire family was brutally murdered except his daughters, Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana, who were lucky to be out of the country at that time.

A failure of leadership ensued and a period of dark uncertainty gripped the country. Bangladesh was moving away from the basic values and principles of our liberation war. Coups and counter-coups in the military, fuelled and supported by the inimical forces who never supported the emergence of Bangladesh, were leading the country towards a path never envisaged by the freedom fighters or by the freedom-loving people of Bangladesh.

It was a phase that Bangladesh needed to pass through, find its moral bearing and re-embrace the direction on which the struggle of 1971 had set them upon, for a just and exploitation-free society.

At this precious moment in our history, the Golden Jubilee of our independence, what

is important for me as a freedom fighter to say? It fills me with happiness and sadness at the same time. Happy because Bangladesh is an upcoming country with a promise-laden future, and sad because it could have been so much better.

At this juncture of our history, as we are poised to take off for our next phase, there is a sense of foreboding overshadowing our optimistic journey. Dark clouds gather around us and our struggle seems to face newer threats to our freedom and well-being. What I want to say as a freedom fighter is that I believe in the people's power. I have immense and ultimate faith in our people who, in 1971, chose not to meekly surrender to the might of the Pak Army but opted for the most difficult path of war, struggle and sacrifice to realise their dream of freedom and emancipation.

In 1971 our people had crossed the Rubicon, a mental watershed, that they would not be subjugated by anyone ever again, and when called to the test they would rise up in the same spirit to pay any price for their dignity, freedom and sovereignty.

Our friends, and in the same token our foes, should understand the Bengali psyche. As a race we are mild, soft and accommodating in nature but when the hour comes, we would be equal to face any challenge and never compromise with our sovereignty and independence which we earned through blood. Both our friends and foes should respect this facet of our character. Bangladesh is a densely populated country of 180 million people with a fast, developing economy and a rising standard of living; it is becoming an ever-increasing lucrative market for the world community. Its strategic geo-political position makes it very attractive to the big powers as an economic gateway and also makes it vulnerable for those very reasons.

As such, Bangladesh has to tread very carefully as it pursues its economic goals and foreign policy to be mindful of the delicate balance they must keep so as not to give offence to the neighbours.

We are a small country with hordes of issues, burdened with a huge population and limited natural resources. What we need is a real friend that we can trust and rely upon as our development partner; relationship based on mutual trust and respect and sharing all economic and bilateral issues, fairly and honourably.

Bangladeshis, majority of whom are Muslims, can be contented with very less as their otherworldly focus makes them do with little. That is why we see, that in the happiness index, Bangladesh is placed much higher in the world ranking vis-à-vis the poverty ranking.

As a freedom fighter of the 1971 Liberation War, I would like to re-emphasise on the touchy issue of our sovereignty, we would gladly open our doors and our hearts to our friends in any relationship as long as there is honourable and mutual reciprocity.

Long live Bangladesh.

*Capt. (Retd.) Humayun Kabir Chowdhury, Bir Pratik is a freedom fighter.*

## The 1971 saga

**JAYANT PRASAD**

The birth of Bangladesh was not an Indian invention to dismember Pakistan, which attacked northern and western Indian airfields on the evening of December 3, 1971. Solidarity between the peoples of India and Bangladesh had already grown over the preceding months when India hosted millions of refugees fleeing persecution in erstwhile East Pakistan.

Prime Minister Indira Gandhi spoke on All India Radio within hours of the attack about the brave people of Bangladesh who were fighting for their land and the

principles for which India too had fought before. Indira Gandhi added, "Today the war in Bangladesh has become a war on India." The people of Bangladesh waged the Liberation War since the Pakistan Army's genocidal crackdown in March 1971. With the start of full-scale hostilities in December, the Indian Army and the Mukti Bahini made short work of the Pakistan Army in less than 13 days.

Pakistan's first general elections based on universal adult franchise in December 1970, resulted in the Awami League's resounding victory. It won 160 of the contested seats for the 300-member National Assembly,

with Pakistan's People's Party (PPP) winning just about half the number: 81 seats.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto Bhutto's apocryphal statement, "*Udhar tum, idhar hum*", epitomised his reaction to the election result. For him, there was no question of sitting in the opposition. He was piqued that President Yahya Khan described Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as "the future Prime Minister of Pakistan." When Pakistan's National Assembly was called to meet in Dhaka on March 3, Bhutto promptly announced that the PPP would stay away from its session. If any PPP parliamentarian did attend, Bhutto

added, he would see that their legs would be broken.

Yahya Khan's decision, prompted by Bhutto, to postpone the National Assembly session indefinitely created conditions for a showdown. A non-cooperation movement took hold. The administration, the judiciary, and the police, all refused to obey the orders of the Pakistan establishment and began effectively reporting to Mujib. The public expected that he would declare Bangladesh's independence in his speech at the Ramna Race Course in Dhaka on March 7.

Mujib announced, "*Ebarer sangram amader mukti sangram. Ebarer sangram swadhinatar sangram!*" He did declare the start of a liberation struggle. Independence, thereafter, was only a matter of time.

Most of the Pakistan's military establishment and the West Pakistan political elite preferred a shrivelled Pakistan to a country dominated by the Bengalis. Yahya Khan took the blame for the unfolding events. The then Premier of the People's Republic of China Zhou Enlai later described him as a general "who did not know how to fight a war." Yahya Khan himself predictably blamed Mujib and Bhutto.

In a 1978 affidavit to the Lahore High Court published by the Bangladesh Defence Journal in 2009, he said that Bhutto was far more responsible than Mujib for what happened because Bhutto refused to accept that "Mujib had a right to govern." The division of Pakistan assured Bhutto of power. The military establishment took advantage of this to delay the transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people.

On March 25, Pakistan massacred hundreds of people in Dhaka and other major Bangladeshi towns. The interim Prime Minister of Bangladesh's provisional government, Tajuddin Ahmed, declared on April 17, 1971, after the oath-taking of the wartime government: "Pakistan is now dead and buried under a mountain of corpses." He pointed out that by carrying out a pre-planned genocide, Yahya "was himself digging Pakistan's grave."

**THE FAILURE OF GLOBAL STATECRAFT AND DIPLOMACY**  
The diplomatic jousting of the international actors, including the

United Nations, was infructuous and invariably a step behind the prevailing situation. The United States' role was calamitous. President Richard Nixon and his Assistant for National Security Affairs, Henry A. Kissinger, by molycoddling Pakistan, did a disservice to it, as did China's leaders. By cautioning Yahya Khan that he was treading a slippery path, they could have brought about a political settlement.

Bangladesh's agony was cut short by India's forceful intervention. Yahya Khan convinced himself that the United States and China would come to the assistance of Pakistan. When a US Seventh Fleet task force led by USS Enterprise crossed the Malacca Straits into the southern Bay of Bengal, the Pakistan Army's Chief of Staff cabled Niazi on December 11, 1971, that the Fleet "will be very soon in position" and that China had activated the Sino-Indian border.

The task force did not proceed northward, nor was there any movement by China. By then, the Liberation War was practically over.

**ROLE OF THE MUKTI BAHINI**  
India assisted the freedom fighters of Bangladesh, and their principal military arm, the Mukti Bahini, depicted by Pakistan as India-sponsored rebels and terrorists, with weapons and training. The Indian Army and the Mukti Bahini constituted a Joint Command in the Eastern Sector. It is to this Command that Lt. Gen. Amir Abdullah Khan "Tiger" Niazi, publicly surrendered on the afternoon of December 16, 1971.

Earlier, in mid-August, when Senator Edward M. Kennedy asked Indira Gandhi whether she was under pressure to support the Mukti Bahini, she confirmed she was. When asked if Mukti Bahini operations would grow, she said they would expand regardless of India's help. Its young members, she added, were highly motivated and would not give in.

Niazi himself wrote later that all the East Pakistan Police, East Pakistan Rifles, Ansars and East Bengal Regiment battalions, and the Bengali members of the Army, Navy, and Air Force rose in revolt after the military action ordered on March 25. They constituted the core of the Mukti Bahini, including its leadership. Days after its formation,

Colonel M.A.G. Osmani (Retd.) was appointed its Commander-in-Chief. India's leadership wanted the thrust of the effort in the Liberation War to be in the hands of the Bangladeshi freedom fighters, who prepared the ground for delivery of the Indian Army's final coup de grace.

The Pakistan Army was weakened by Mukti Bahini's eight-months-long attrition. Its help enabled the Indian Army to mobilise transportation, logistics, and intelligence, precisely locate the Pakistani positions, encircle and confine them, and deny them reinforcement or replenishment of supplies. Bengali marine commandos disrupted shipping, use of waterways, sank 100,000 tons of cargo, and paralysed the Chittagong, Chalna, and Mongla ports. Mukti Bahini's "Kilo Force" made early, daring air raids on storage depots and communications centres.

Niazi hastened to show the white flag for fear that the Pakistan Army's last battles might be with the *muktijoddhas* and the Mukti Bahini. The Chief Justice of Pakistan, Hamoodur Rahman, provides enough evidence in the Commission of Inquiry report that the threat of confronting the Mukti Bahini precipitated its capitulation.

**REFLECTIONS ON THE LIBERATION OF BANGLADESH**

Bangladesh's independence resulted in impressive economic progress, accompanied by significant achievements in human development, in reducing malnutrition and maternal and child mortality, rapidly increasing the rate of reduction of poverty, and enabling the empowerment of women.

Bangladesh's Liberation War shows that coercive, anti-people measures can destroy nations. Political issues can never be resolved militarily. Alienation leads to discontent, anger, hatred, and finally, rebellion. Greater fraternity must prevail in the South Asian subcontinent. Its fracturing in 1947 and 1971 ruptured the psyche of its peoples. Overcoming the historical memories is never easy and may take generations, given the divergent narratives of the different sides.

*Jayant Prasad is a former Indian Ambassador to Afghanistan.*

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# 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.



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 Bisaykhali 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.

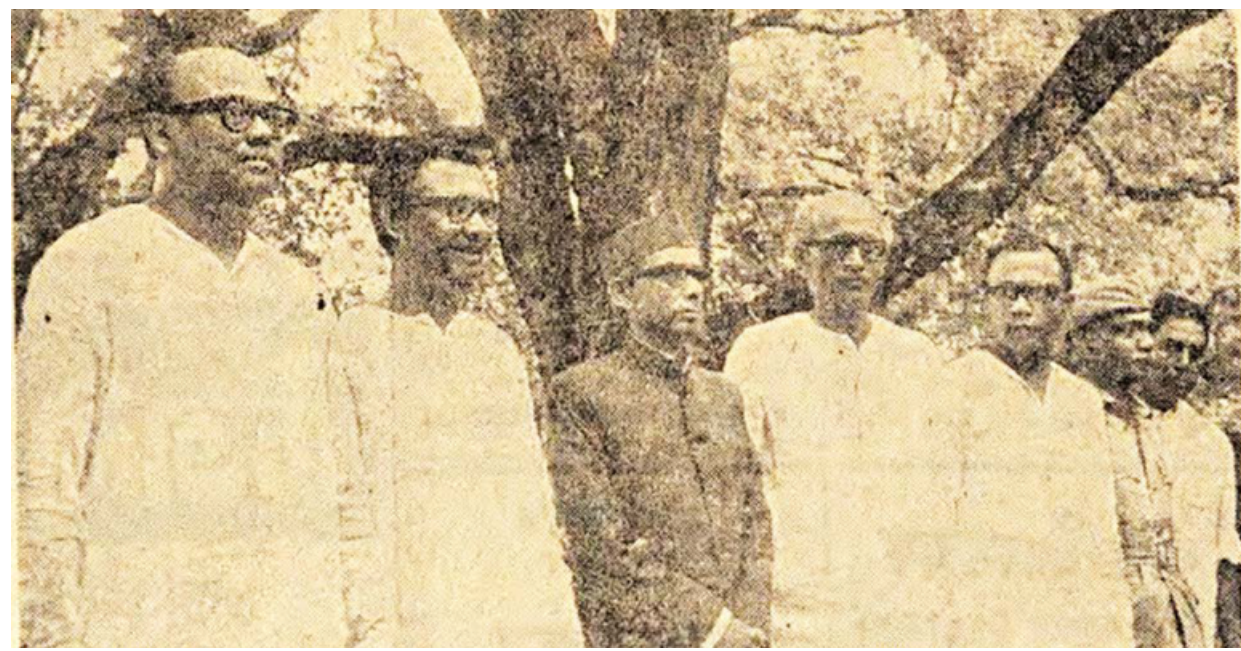
There was news that the Pakistan army would attack Bheramara very soon. For this, Pakistani troops had already started mobilising as much force as they could under the prevailing circumstances.

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.



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,



# 1971: PN Haksar in bridging the security gap

MUYEEDUL HASAN

My first meeting with Mr. P N Haksar took place at his residence at 9 Race Course Road, on 30 May 1971. It was a Sunday, 11 in the morning, five days after I reached New Delhi, looking for better understanding of India's Bangladesh policy.

Perhaps a little background information is required why I went to Delhi. I was in Dhaka till 3 May, and worked with a small group to help organize the resistance movement. By the end of April, as resistance within the country thinned down, our group's activity required a meaningful focus. It was important to know if the exile government, hardly two weeks old, would be able to reverse the decline of armed resistance, mobilize enough external support to continue the struggle for independence and, also, if they would need any specific services from our group.

Accordingly, I crossed the border near Agartala, and reached Calcutta hoping to meet Bangladesh's Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed within the next few days and return to Dhaka. I met him on 12 May, only after he returned from his second trip to New Delhi, along with his cabinet colleagues. We had a long discussion on that day and the next day, as he wanted to know all the details seen and perceived in Dhaka. He gave me a brief rundown of the promises of help he had received from Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the progress his new government had made, and touched on a few thorny problems, including lack of political cohesion, hindering war efforts. On the whole, in his view, things were improving, and without giving any details, he hinted that a new phase of insurgency would soon begin, but wondered how Pakistan would react to it.

Since the formation of Bangladesh Government, a prognosis was going round in Pakistani circles in Dhaka that, in the next phase if an Indian-backed insurgency reached a threatening dimension, Pakistan might have to declare war against India, upon ensuring China's tactical intervention along India-China border. India had no such ally; its north and north-eastern borders with China were vulnerable, its military strength was not known for its capabilities of fighting war at all the three fronts simultaneously. Would India take a huge risk to its own security by continuing to support the liberation war beyond Pakistan's tolerance level? Tajuddin acknowledged a problem

there. Would India be able to bridge the security gap on the northeast by seeking Soviet Union's support whose large army was kept deployed along the disputed north-west border of China? Tajuddin did not have a view. Or, would India let the refugee inflow to pile up further, which by then exceeded four million and be coerced to accept a US-brokered compromise with Pakistan? Please go to Delhi, and try to find out the answers to all these, Tajuddin said finally.

That called for quite a few more sessions, shelving the plan for my returning to Dhaka. The only option that appealed to us was to try for a security arrangement between India



Members of the All Party Advisory Committee including Maulana Bhashani, Moni Singh, Muzaffar Ahmed, Monoranjan Dhar, Tajuddin Ahmad are seen holding a meeting, September 9, 1971.

and the Soviet Union to restrain China from extending help to Pakistan. Would India agree to promote such security arrangement with the Soviet Union? Could we make our struggle for independence a little more acceptable to the Soviet Union by involving CPB and CPI, who had endorsed our cause? At that point of discussion, Tajuddin suggested that I should see P N Haksar, Secretary to the Prime Minister, in New Delhi and he wanted to send a word to him to that effect. Why particularly him, I wanted to know, since I heard that he

took a negative stand when some of our cabinet members pressed for recognition to Bangladesh during a meeting with Indira Gandhi in New Delhi hardly a week ago. Because, explained Tajuddin, they were facing enormous problems, which we cared least to understand, and moreover Haksar was the key person needed to be convinced first before a proposition had reasonable chance of progressing further. I would meet him, I said, but a little later, let me first find out the details of their policy and what pressures it was encountering.

On board the morning flight

far, in their view, but if it did, India should take the initiative for asking for appropriate help from the Soviet Union. I could not help inferring that India had not taken such initiative till that time.

In the evening, editor Verghese organized a rare opportunity to listen to a wide variety of views at the residence of The Times of India's resident editor Giri Lal Jain, whose forthright views made me aware that the main crisis, according to changing public perception, was how to address the growing refugee burden, rather than helping the Bangladesh liberation struggle. The

from the border, communication routes, etc. His second visit after two days made me think that some kind of staff work was perhaps on, and not everything was in a state of flux. The same evening Daniel told me that P N Haksar had invited us 'for a coffee' at 11am next day. I assumed that the actual time for discussion might not be that long, and, hence, I jotted down the issues that Tajuddin wanted to know, but with modifications in the light of the information I gathered during last few days.

PNH was very warm and happy seeing his old friend Daniel, but did not let me feel that I was less welcome. It was his weekend too, so with rest of his family, wife and two teenage daughters and Daniel around, family matters were touched upon, before he smoothly glided into the field of civil war, making it easy for me to speak. I started with a brief narration of my journey, during last one month, through three different cities Dacca, Calcutta and New Delhi; and how with the change of locations the perspective kept on evolving, so did my perception about what required to be done. It evoked no immediate questions, but a vague sign of interest, which made me put across all my thoughts in following sequences.

No clear road ahead, and the refugee influx could ignite unforeseen political crisis; ad hoc assistance to skirmishing would not lead to any strategic breakthrough, could only widen Pakistani reprisals and increase refugee outflow; no 'political solution' would work, would not give any confidence to refugees to return till Pakistani troops were withdrawn, nor the junta would withdraw troops for fear of greater peril; only to a liberated Bangladesh refugees would go back, and to liberate it a large number of freedom fighters needed to be trained and inducted according to a well formulated strategy; Pakistan might disrupt that buildup by a pre-emptive war, in collusion with China making diversionary attacks along India's north-eastern border; only the Soviet Union, because of its huge mobilization on China's border, had a powerful lever to restrain China and fill in India's security gap; to overcome the Soviet apathy towards Bangladesh's independence, an ideological format could be created by floating a national liberation front comprising of AL and two pro-Moscow parties of Bangladesh, CPB and NAP; such unity with a common programme of setting up a political infrastructure could help well co-ordinated attacks deep within the country; and, finally, it was for India to make its armed forces ready to effect a final blow and fulfil the conditions for refugees to go back.

A tiring long canvas, I took quite a bit of time to elaborate, but PNH listened to me without any interruption, and at the end he got up to telephone to someone: 'Professor sa'ab, if you are free, why don't you come over and share pot luck with us, there is somebody from Bangladesh.' P N Dhar, Advisor to the Prime Minister, joined us soon after. But before that PNH asked his first question — would it be acceptable to Awami League to forge unity with other parties even on a minimum programme? No, I answered, the party as a whole had been all along opposed to seeking unity with other parties, and rightly so after they won almost all the seats in the last election. But now as the situation had drastically changed, their views would change too, and in fact, sections of the AL leadership were considering to seek some kind of unity to pursue a programme with other pro-liberation forces, including CPB and NAP, in order to set up secure bases within the country to assist guerilla operations, and, also, to improve the acceptability of the Bangladesh struggle to the Soviet Union.

PNH asked me if he could know who led that group. I mentioned Tajuddin's name, and hastened to add that all I spoke to him a little while ago, were discussed previously with Tajuddin in details, and it was his idea that I should draw your attention to our view on broader geopolitical aspects of the struggle; and that he also wanted to arrange a meeting with you, but meanwhile Daniel's unparalleled enthusiasm changed that format somewhat and gave me an opportunity to try out the ideas first and establish references later. Daniel, the extraordinary American scholar friend of Haksar, who was listening all through, could not contain his happiness at this point. Before leaving, Haksar wanted me to postpone my departure by a day and to see him on Tuesday at the South Block.

view of editor Narayan, of left leaning The Patriot, was more comforting to my ear, but did not dispel doubts that the existing policy could adequately cope with the evolving crisis. K Subramaniam of IDSA handled, with professional objectivity, the problem of unabated refugee influx and its immense capacity to ignite a major security crisis. G Parthasarathi, probably the most informed man on policy in that crowd, raised more questions having a bearing



PN Haksar (1913-1998), Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's Principal Secretary during 1971

on Pakistan's capacity to resolve the political mess it had created, the prospect for rapprochement between Sheikh Mujib and General Yahya under US sponsorship, and also ways to revive the liberation struggle in the near future. Before parting, he quietly invited me to his residence next evening.

During the next evening at GP's residence, I met a smaller crowd, only two apart from the host, and closer to the centre of power: Indian planning minister C Subramaniam, and the foreign secretary TN Kaul. I kept my expectation level low about getting hard information from people involved at the policy level and also tried to avoid speculative areas in answering their questions. In short, no brain storming like the previous evening. But it was interesting that some of the questions raised the previous evening, were raised once again by GP, perhaps he wanted to hear the same answers along with his guests. From all these discussions, I got the impression that even at the higher policy level, the existing policy on Bangladesh was not being perceived as something adequate or sustainable.

Next day after lunch hour, as I came back to Mitra's residence, I met an unexpected visitor waiting for me, who introduced himself as Major General B N Sarkar, Military Secretary to the Chief of Staff of the Indian Army. He showed an unusual interest to hear my ideas on how to set up a political infrastructure to help launching resistance operations inside Bangladesh. He unrolled some old survey maps of East Pakistan and wanted to know the prospective targets for insurgent operations, nearby political bases for support and sanctuary, distances

to New Delhi on 24 May, next to me was sitting Professor Daniel Thorner, who was posted in Dhaka as a Ford scholar, and was known to me for his very helpful role during the turmoil. Even without knowing why I was going to New Delhi, he volunteered a few names worth talking to in order to understand how Indian policies were responding to the evolving situation. As he mentioned Haksar's name, I enquired if he knew him well enough? Sure, from 1939, when the two of them plus Krishna Menon and Shelvankar used to roam in and around Gower Street to share some radical dreams in the backdrop of gathering clouds over Europe. But if I wanted to see Haksar, he came back to the present, an appointment could be fixed soon enough. Daniel's second and most generous offer that morning was his invitation to share the guest room he was going to occupy in New Delhi. Barely half an hour later, at the airport baggage collection point, he introduced me to the host Dr Ashok Mitra, Chief Economic Adviser to the ministry of finance, a man of profound knowledge and integrity, on whom I started counting to steer my way through in Delhi's power-centric terrain. And the door of his house at Lodhi Estate was always kept open for all my subsequent visits.

To feel New Delhi's political temperature, I decided that morning to venture out to the office of the Hindustan Times. Daniel volunteered to come with me. Luckily editor B G Verghese, whom none of us met before, was available and he responded with frankness to my opening shot: what's next as the euphoria over Bangladesh was nearly over? After a round of inconclusive discussion on hard policy choices India was facing, Verghese made a generous invitation to interact with a small group of people having diverse views on the same subject over dinner next day.

Next morning I visited the CPI headquarter, and listened to an assessment on the current situation made by two senior leaders, Comrades Bhupesh Gupta and Krishnan. They were of the view that a policy of helping the Bangladesh liberation struggle, was growing lately; and the 'pro-American lobby' within the Indian government was exerting tremendous pressure to seek political settlement with Pakistan through American mediation. I accepted their assessment, but also wanted to know what would happen if the lobby favouring 'political settlement' failed to effect a policy change in New Delhi? Would not Pakistan try its next option to derail the liberation struggle by starting a war against India and, worse still, try to manoeuvre China to start conflicts along India's north-eastern frontier? If China was tempted to play such role, would not the Soviet Union, with its huge army mobilized along Chinese northwest border, put a little pressure to restrain China? The matter had not progressed that

বাংলাদেশের স্বাধীনতা ৫০

Bangladesh

মুজিব শতবর্ষ

বাংলাদেশের স্বাধীনতা ও বিজয়ের সুবর্ণজয়ন্তীর মহোৎসবে বাঙালি জাতি জেগে উঠুক নব আনন্দে

স্বাধীনতার মহান স্থপতি জাতির পিতা বঙ্গবন্ধু শেখ মুজিবুর রহমান ও সকল বীর মুক্তিযোদ্ধাদের প্রতি মহান বিজয় দিবসে আমাদের বিনম্র শ্রদ্ধাঞ্জলি

সাইটেক্স ব্যাংক লিমিটেড

একটি দূরদর্শী ব্যাংক

# 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 had 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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 23<sup>rd</sup> 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".

Sugata Bose is the Gardiner Professor of Oceanic History and Affairs at Harvard University.

## Some fragments

FROM PAGE: 6

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](http://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 7<sup>th</sup> March speech at Ramna Maidan on the radio. Then came the grim news of the military crackdown on the night of 25<sup>th</sup> 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

FROM PAGE 4

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!

Muyeedul Hasan was a special assistant to Tajuddin Ahmad, the Prime Minister of the Bangladesh Government-in-exile. He is also the author of *Muldhara '71 and Upadhara 71*, March-April.

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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

# How nationalist imaginaries were reconstituted in 1971

SYED JAMIL AHMED, PHD

It was March 1971, some day between the 7th and the 25th. I was a student of class ten, listening with amazement to the subversive language flying among the crowd gathered in front of General Post Office in Dhaka, next to what is now known as the Zero Point. The schools were shut, and so were the offices. I was with my uncle, a few years older than I, mingling with the crowd, listening to the language they used in complete astonishment. This is not what I was taught at school. Yes, I loved Pakistan with all my heart, and it maddened me to hear the seditious language of the crowd. Unable to control myself, I commented to my uncle that the people are utterly wrong. Pakistan had to be saved from such an unruly mob! In the instant of an eye blink, as they say, an incensed crowd encircled me and my uncle. He had to plead with all his inherited skills of a lawyer's son to whisk me away to safety.

A few days later, at around 2 am on 26th March 1971, my father woke me up to show me from the verandah of our second-storey flat in Siddheswari, how the southern horizon of Dhaka city was ablaze. On the morning of 27th March, when the curfew imposed on the city was briefly lifted, I rushed out to see for myself what had actually happened. Shantinagar Bazar from where I always fetched fish, meat and groceries, Gulistan movie theatre intersection, and Nayabazar, the timber market – all were deserted. A few crows flew past, an occasional dog strolled leisurely, or a solitary human figure rushed furtively. Shantinagar Bazar was roofless and charred, with a few burnt-out tall wooden posts still standing. A corpse lay near Gulistan crossing. The head was cracked open like a wood apple, with flies buzzing busily. These images of death and destruction triggered an avalanche of disbelief at the very notion of 'Pakistan'. Finally, on the evening of 30th March, I heard on Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra the voice of Major Zia declaring independence on behalf of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib. It took no further reasoning as to what my course of action should be, because the call to action matched the inhuman brutality of the State. I joined the war as a guerilla and operated in Dhaka city.

Our house was a safe haven for arms cache and the attic lodged a cyclostyle machine to print Guerilla, a newsletter on news of the war, which I distributed early in the morning to locations around Siddheswari. I even made an unsuccessful attempt to cross over to Melaghar near Agartala to train myself as a freedom fighter. Nevertheless, my chance to operate as an urban guerilla came about a few months later. On 29th August Rumi and his comrades of the Crack Platoon were apprehended, and in early September, they were killed. My school friend Selim Akbar, a freedom fighter trained at Melaghar under Captain Haider and a member of the Crack Platoon, miraculously escaped apprehension as he was staying at his home on the fateful night. Selim got in touch with me and asked if I would join him in carrying out a few operations. As I agreed readily, he explained the simple mechanics of lobbing a hand grenade. It was quite simple: you pull the safety pin to release the spring-loaded striker-lever to hammer the percussion cap. The impact creates a tiny spark to light a slow-burning fuse. It takes five seconds (in some cases, seven seconds) for the fuse to ignite the detonator, which leads to an explosion. As long as I had my fingers clasped around the striker-lever, even if the safety pin was removed, there would be no explosion. I understood the mechanism well enough.



Martyred intellectual Dr Mohammad Fazle Rabbee (1932-1971)

However, because I had no practical training, I was apprehensive. How long would it take for me to open the safety pin? I had seen Hollywood heroes clasp the pin with their teeth and lob the grenade. I was not sure that would work in actual life. Besides, I knew that the Pakistan Army was well-trained. What if, during the time I took to dislodge the safety pin and the time it took for the grenade to explode, they shot me or lobbed the grenade back to me? I decided not to risk it, and in all the operations I took part in, and even in reconnaissance missions, I would clasp the striker-lever with my fingers, take off the safety pin, push my clasped fist into the pocket of my trousers, and walk the streets. Nasiruddin Yousuf, the commander of Dhaka North guerilla unit, thoroughly reprimanded me for the way I risked my life with a grenade, when he saw me a few days after 16th December. However, during the war, it mattered little if I died, so long as my death would be after killing a few of the heinous Pakistani soldiers.

I took part in five guerilla operations in Dhaka city, of which two are memorable for the risks involved. The first was a grenade charge at Rajarbagh Police Line. Selim and I receded the roads around the Police Lines, from Shantinagar intersection to Malibagh intersection, then down the Outer Circular Road, DIT Avenue and Shantinagar Road. We decided that the West Gate was the most convenient target because there was a narrow alley across the gate, and the alley would allow us to escape through Shantinagar residential area to Jonaki Cinema Hall. At about ten in the morning of the appointed day, Selim carried a tiny .25 calibre revolver, and I, a hand grenade with a five-second fuse. There were about four or five guards at the West Gate, all para-militia from Pakistan. As Selim covered me, I took a deep breath and lobbed the grenade as hard as I could. Immediately, both of us ran as fast as our legs would carry us, as the grenade exploded behind us, followed by the sound of shots fired from rifles. I outran my friend by a huge distance, and he had a good laugh at me after the operation. "Jamil," he said, "you were really running for your life!"

The other memorable operation was another grenade charge at Pakistani para-militia guarding the gate of Kamrunnessa High School on Abhay Das Lane, during the SSC examination. I and another friend of mine, Faruque, had met at Selim's, and decided that Faruque would make the grenade charge, and I would cover him. Once again, I had only a .25 calibre revolver with which, ironically, I never had the chance

to practice shooting. We receded the area and decided to escape through a side lane branching off the Abhay Das Lane, which would lead us to Ram Krishna Mission Road. However, just before the charge, Faruque said softly, "Jamil, I think I am going to chicken out." I told him not to worry, went to the side lane for Faruque to hand me the grenade, and told him to go. I walked near the gate, took out my grenade and saw that the para-militia had noticed me. I lobbed the grenade as I saw some of them taking aim at me. I was so scared that I ran not across the side lane that I was supposed to, but along Abhay Das Lane. As shots screamed past my legs, I saw a young man riding a bicycle beside me. He told me to jump on his bicycle, which I did, and he shot across Abhay Das Lane to Gopibagh. When it was safe, he stopped, and I alighted, thanking him with all my heart. I would have been dead on this day, had not this unknown young man risked his life to save mine.

More than these hit-and-run operations, the most painful of all war memories was the abduction of Dr. Fazle Rabbee on 15th December. He used to live next to our house in Siddheswari. On the fateful day, sometime in the afternoon, Pakistani soldiers along with Al-Badr



PAINTING BY ZAINUL ABEDIN

and Al-Shams para-militia encircled Dr. Rabbee's house. On that afternoon, quite a few grenades, some land mines and plastic explosives were packed under the bed in my sisters' bedroom. My aunt, who was living with us because of the war and knew of the ammunitions, was so scared that she informed my father as soon as she saw the soldiers at Dr. Rabbee's house. My father was livid with anger, for he said, I had recklessly endangered the lives of all the family members. Swiftly, he carried the landmines and the plastic explosives and threw them from the verandah of our flat to a pond that lay immediately beyond. My mother grabbed the grenades and threw them inside a large drum used for storing water. I saw the soldiers and para-militia leading Dr. Rabbee blindfolded to one of their vehicles. He never returned.

Dear Dr. Rabbee, I never met you in person. But I salute you. May you and all other martyrs of the Liberation War rest in peace. Your sacrifice was never in vain. Today, we are because you were.

Syed Jamil Ahmed is a theatre practitioner, and retired Professor of theatre and performance studies at Dhaka University.

# 1971: SOME FRAGMENTS OF MEMORY

KAISER HAQ

For a couple of months after the 1970 elections everything seemed simple and straightforward. For the first time in fifteen years a Bengali was going to head the government of Pakistan. Coincidentally, the USIS had organized an all-Pakistan English-language poetry contest whose award ceremony would take place in early January in Lahore. My Dhaka University classmate Feroz Ahmed-ud-din and I were among the three prize winners, and earned an all-expenses-paid trip to the city. Everyone we met seemed to have accepted the election results; some wanted to know when "Sheikh Sahab" might visit Lahore and address a public meeting. Little did I suspect that in two months we'd look upon Lahore as a foreign city – in an enemy country.

Academic life was on hold as negotiations for the longed for transition went on. I would gather with my closest friends for virtually endless addas. As the political temperature shot up after the postponement of the parliament session, the big question on our minds was: will Yahya peacefully hand over power or would there be an armed struggle? Sporadic violence had already become a common occurrence,

Revolution, the 1848 Springtime of the Peoples, the 1871 Paris Commune.

I had barely reached home and gulped down the cold supper left for me on the table when the shooting started. Within minutes it spread to various parts of the city, a low-rise sprawl with barely a million and a half inhabitants. From my second-floor rooftop room in Naya Paltan one could make out the key hotspots: Rajarbagh Police Lines, Peelkhana EPR Headquarters, the Dhaka University campus. Tracers flew like flaming birds and rang against the newly built water tank in Fakirapool, flares lit up the sky, screams came from the distance; and all night the rattle of incessant automatic fire blended into a banshee shriek.

Those born into a high-tech world of instant satellite communication, Whatsapp and smartphone videography will have to use their imagination to understand that while the mayhem went on all night and into the following day, the rest of the world knew nothing. There was nothing immediately on the radio, not to mention television.

Eventually the radio station in Dhaka announced that we were under a shoot-at-sight curfew. This was lifted for a few hours on 27 March, giving us an opportunity to glimpse the horrific signs of carnage on the Dhaka University campus. The streets carried a stream of humanity escaping the city of death on foot. Their leader, whom they referred to with a mixture of reverence and affection as Bangabandhu, had been arrested, but in the evening the declaration of independence in his name by Major Ziaur Rahman reached many ears, kindling hope.

I spent some time over the next two days with a few friends who would lose their lives in the war: Rumi, Chinkoo (Alauddin Zaqueen) and Ahmed Bhai. Ahmed Bhai, a Chittagonian, was eager to head for his hometown to join the resistance, as was Chinkoo. I said I would go with them, but first I had to go to my mother's ancestral village where most of my family had already gone, and see if they were all right.

The village, though only a mile from the road to Narsingdi, was tucked away amidst leafy trees, farmland and ponds. The crackdown had resulted in our biggest family reunion ever. Along with my numerous cousins I tried to follow the course of the war by monitoring radio broadcasts from the BBC, Akashbani and, most inspiringly, Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. It became clear that it would be a long war. The resistance in Chattogram crumbled within days, and in the first week of April the enemy attacked Narsingdi, where rebel forces had gathered.

Meanwhile, Chinkoo and Ahmed Bhai had impetuously set off for Chattogram, only to disappear under mysterious circumstances. From hearsay rather than any reliable information it was later surmised that they had been mistaken for non-Bengalis and murdered. They were both light complexioned, and though Ahmed Bhai spoke impeccable Chittagonian, Chinkoo had scant acquaintance with rural Bengali culture, and it is not unlikely that he failed some kind of ethnicity test. All this came to light after the war, and like all other losses (Rumi and some other members of his urban guerilla squad were picked up and never heard of again) added a melancholy undertone to the euphoria of victory.

The swearing-in of a Bangladeshi government at Mujibnagar marked an important step forward, politically speaking.

SEE PAGE 5



## অহনা

জামানতবিহীন উদ্যোক্তা ঋণে বিকশিত হোক সন্ধান

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# 'I regret that Pakistan has still not formally apologised'

In conversation with Ayesha Jalal, Mary Richardson  
Professor of History and  
Director of Center for South  
Asian and Indian Ocean  
Studies at Tufts University,  
USA

Priyam Pritim Paul (PPP): How do you evaluate the events of 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh?

Ayesha Jalal (AJ): As a continuation of the historic dynamics of centre and region in the aftermath of a watershed moment like India's partition along ostensibly religious lines. In other words, I consider the birth of Bangladesh much like that of Pakistan—as a failure of federalism in practice in the subcontinent.

PPP: It has often been pointed out that the two great events in the South Asian state system – 1947 and 1971 – involved crises over the question of power-sharing. What was the role of ideas and identities (such as religion, language, region and so forth) behind the two restructurings of the South Asian state system? How do you compare the two events?

AJ: The preeminent idea undergirding the two events was the invention of territorialised identities under European colonialism, that is to say the notion that certain regional and linguistic groups were temperamentally suited to inhabit a specific part of the globe as opposed to others. As for self-identification, the idea that came to gain prominence was the notion of communities-turned-nations



Lt Gen AAK Niazi, commander of the Pakistan occupational forces in East Pakistan, signs the Instrument of Surrender at the Race Course Ground in Dhaka on December 16, 1971.

Pakistan prior to 1971, was there any meaningful difference between East and West Pakistan? For example, did East Pakistani politics have more popular-democratic content and West Pakistan more feudal-aristocratic hegemony?

AJ: There was certainly a stronger intellectual and agitational basis of politics in East Pakistan than in West Pakistan that was directly related to different kinds of social relations in the urban and agrarian sectors of the two wings. The relative success of the 1951 land reforms in East Pakistan compared to the land reforms of 1958 in West Pakistan also gave a different character to Bengali politics. The land reforms in the West allowed big landlords to retain most of their land while the ones in the East by comparison brought some relief to landless classes. Also, landownership in the West was much more skewed towards bigger landlords than in the East.

PPP: In 1971, state-sponsored violence was unleashed against the unarmed masses of East Pakistan. This contrasts with the rather diffuse and socially organised mass violence of the riots of 1947. You have written on Saadat Hasan Manto, one of the greatest narrators of the horrors and memories of partition. Manto was also a trenchant critic of South Asian nationalist leaders and their politics. What do you

think Manto's take on 1971 would have been had he lived to see it?

AJ: He would have condemned the hollow state narrative that sought to justify the atrocities committed in the name of nationalism and security. And knowing Manto, he would have something different to say about the spectacle of Muslims murdering Muslims that was unlike what he personally witnessed during 1947.

PPP: How do you see the impact of 1971 on the post-1971 history of Pakistan?

AJ: 1971 brought about a decisive shift in the regional balance of power in the South Asian subcontinent that

has had lasting effects on all aspects of the region—political, economic, and social. In Pakistan itself it resulted in the unchecked dominance of one region – Punjab – over the non-Punjabi regions, generating new centre-region tensions. But this was a dominance exercised by the institutional pre-eminence of a mainly Punjabi bureaucracy and military rather than by a politically united Punjab.

PPP: What's your view on the post-1971 relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh? How do you see the future of their relations?

AJ: I regret that Pakistan has still

not formally apologised for the atrocities committed by the army and associated groups. This should have been done a long, long time ago but politics has got the better of ethical considerations. I also think East Bengal's role in the making of Pakistan needs to be recognised more in Pakistani historiography and the impact of the "Pakistan" idea on Bangladesh also acknowledged. Relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh would improve considerably if Islamabad formally issued an apology, leading to more vigorous intellectual and economic exchanges between the two countries.



Ayesha Jalal

that were entitled to certain prerogatives.

1947 and 1971 are both instances of the failure of power-sharing arrangements and thus the need to create yet another hyphenated state. They represent an extreme instance of political failure where instead of sharing power, it was deemed better to separate even if that entailed perpetuating problems rather than solving them as is apparent in the continued centre-region tensions in Pakistan and communitarian hostilities in India.

PPP: In terms of the ruling classes and hegemonic ideas in the two wings of

## Retracing the 1971 exodus

FROM PAGE 8

The accelerated timeline and the poor transition of power from Britain to India and Pakistan may have prevented an agreement for the Rohingya population to be accepted in East Pakistan, and they remained part of Burma.

As Burma gained independence from Britain in 1948, Bamar Buddhist majority attitudes toward Rohingya Muslims slowly deteriorated. In 1978, the military junta in Burma carried out a crackdown in the Arakan province followed by the revocation of citizenship of the Rohingya community in 1982. Most Rohingyas have sought refuge in Bangladesh at different stages since then.

The partition process and the Two-Nation Theory both ignored the concerns of groups outside the center of power, including that of the Bengalis of East Pakistan and the Rohingyas of Arakan. More importantly, in both cases, successor states suppressed the political aspirations of those who later became refugees, despite external pressure against doing so.

By comparing the two crises, it illustrates how easy it is for governments and international organisations to frame refugee crises in a manner that imposes restrictions on their liabilities.

It was evident soon after the conflict began in East Pakistan that the Pakistani army had committed genocide in its eastern wing. Meanwhile, successive governments ignored the situation, which was the underlying cause of the refugee crisis, labelling it as a civil war and a matter of Pakistan's internal policy.

As with the Rohingya crisis today, if governments and international organisations had accepted state-sponsored "ethnic cleansing and

possible genocide" were taking place, more meaningful action would have been required.

However, one of the main differences between the plight of the Bengalis of East Pakistan in 1971 and that of the Rohingyas, is the likelihood of external military intervention to improve their conditions.

Unlike the Indian military that unilaterally helped create Bangladesh, it does not appear that the Rohingyas are receiving any similar help, at least not anytime soon.

The international community's inaction and indifference may have also limited the likelihood of an international coalition engaging militarily.

Since all United Nations member states endorsed the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in 2005, the absence of such outstanding interventions for the Rohingyas is now even more apparent.

The role of humanitarian relief organisations is another key difference between the two crises. In both cases, although the NGO community mobilised to highlight the sufferings of the refugee communities, the Rohingya crisis has tended to produce more criticism of Myanmar's government than what the East Pakistan crisis did of the Pakistan government's actions in 1971.

It is pertinent to note that for much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, voluntary humanitarian action was characterised by the belief that humanitarian relief was a politically neutral practice, one where "strangers were saved" regardless of their allegiances.

The International Committee

of the Red Cross, among others, remained relatively silent on the political matters causing the refugee crisis in 1971 – an indifference which Oxfam and other radical non-government organisations (NGOs) increasingly questioned as the war continued.

NGOs responding to the Rohingya crisis, by contrast, have shown a much heightened willingness to engage in political discussions related to the refugee crisis, reflecting an overall strengthening of humanitarian NGOs as part of the international response to such crises.

Despite the fact that the two refugee crises in the eastern part of South Asia were precipitated by unlikely causes and events in the short term, their roots can be found in colonial British India and Burma, and in the subsequent partition in 1947.

British rule in the region and their exit in 1947 sparked a series of conflicts, including the conflict surrounding the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, and also indirectly the events in Arakan that led to the Rohingyas becoming stateless.

With independence in 1971, Bangladesh has slowly developed, and in many ways is outshining its bigger neighbours India and Pakistan. By contrast, the situations of many minorities in South Asia have deteriorated since 1947 and this is the case of the Rohingyas in particular, whose struggles do not seem to be ending anytime soon.

Dr Rudabeh Shahid is a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center. This article is an adaptation of an earlier article written by the author and Samuel Jaffe in November 2019 for the online outlet, The Geopolitics.

# The Chattogram Resistance

In an interview with Priyam Pritim Paul of The Daily Star, Major (Retd) Rafiqul Islam Bir Uttam, a Member of Parliament, and Commander of Sector-1 during the Liberation War, discussed some of the initial episodes of the Liberation War of 1971. Below are excerpts of the conversation.

**Priyam Pritim Paul:** Please briefly describe the developments in March 1971 before West Pakistan's crackdown on the Bengali nationalist movement.

**Rafiqul Islam Bir Uttam:** On March 1, 1971, Yahya Khan suddenly cancelled the inaugural session of the Pakistan National Assembly which was supposed to start just 2 days later, on March 3. People were expecting that the Bengalis would be able to form the government of Pakistan after a great victory in the National election in 1970.

This cancellation confirmed our suspicion that the Pakistan army would not hand over power to the Bengalis. Instead, they were sending troops from West Pakistan to East Pakistan. A ship named 'Swat' arrived at Chattogram port with 10,000 tonnes of explosives and other war materials. I was serving as Adjutant of the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) in Chattogram at the time and was cautiously watching these developments.

I came to realise that the Pakistan army was strengthening their military strength in East Pakistan in order to unleash a genocide upon the Bengalis which could destroy the peoples' spirit for the next 50 or 100 years.

**Priyam:** How did you plan to attack the Pakistani forces in an act that is now considered dangerous, yet exceptional, in the history of our Liberation War?

**Rafiq:** I made a war plan based on the conviction that if we attacked them before they were ready, our chances of victory would be greater. So, the options were to either attack them first or wait and consequently be killed. Carrying out a pre-emptive strike against the Pakistanis meant that our chances of winning was greater.

Therefore, I gave directions to my EPR soldiers regarding the target and instructed them that once I gave them the order to attack, they should be fully prepared to attack and destroy the Pakistani's and take control of Chattogram city.

Chattogram sector of EPR had its headquarters in Halishahor. About 70 to 80 percent of the EPR soldiers were Bengalis. In

Sholoshahor, the 8th Bengal Regiment was made up of exclusively Bengali soldiers. Major Zia, Captain Khaleq, Captain Oli, Lt Shamsher, and Major Shawkat—all Bengali officers—were in 8 Bengal Regiment.

In EBRC (East Bengal Regimental Centre) in the cantonment, there were 1,800 Bengali soldiers who were either being trained or awaiting posting to different regiments. My plan was to take over Chattogram city, and later with the help of 8 Bengal Regiment and soldiers from EBRC the naval base, Chattogram Port and the Cantonment.

**Priyam:** Did you have discussions with political leaders regarding the plan?

**Rafiq:** I secretly met with the Awami League president of Chattogram, MR Siddiqui, on the night of 3rd or 4th of March with the help of a senior Awami League leader, Dr. Zafar. I told MR Siddiqui that I was planning for war and requested him to let Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman know about it.

I requested MR Siddiqui to let Bangabandhu also know that my father Mr. Ashrafullah, a government officer in Gopalganj in 1951-52, was known to him. After the historic and tragic day in our language movement on 21st February, 1952, Bangabandhu was released from jail on 27 February, 1952, and I had gone to greet Bangabandhu with some of my school friends from Gopalganj Model School. That was the first time I personally saw and met Bangabandhu. When MR Siddiqui delivered my message to him, Bangabandhu recognized my father and told MR Siddiqui 'he can be trusted'.

Bangabandhu's historic speech on the 7th of March at the Ramna Race Course Maidan sent a clear message to everyone—that people had to be prepared to make great sacrifices to achieve freedom. He declared, "The Struggle this time is for emancipations, it is for Independence.

On the 24th of March, the Bengali Brigade Commander in Chattogram was withdrawn and a non-Bengali, Brigadier Ansari, was given command. He ordered the unloading of arms and ammunition from the vessel MV Swat. Those Bengali workers and porters who tried to prevent the unloading were shot and killed. People in the city set up barricades all along the road.

I received this information through the intelligence unit under me and realised that the Pakistan Army was about to launch an attack and start a campaign of genocide on that night.

Orders were issued by me immediately to all Bengali soldiers in EPR to disarm the non-Bengali soldiers in the bordering EPR posts and come to take control of Chattogram city.

Having sent the orders, I went to the Railway Hill where I had planned to establish my headquarters during war. As I waited for my additional troops to come from the border areas to the city to join the battle, two Bengali



Syed Nazrul Islam, Acting President of the Bangladesh Government-in-exile, visiting Sector 1 at Harina on October 14, 1971. Major Rafiq, Sector Commander of the Sector 1, is seen on his left.

officers came to my headquarters at Railway Hill. One was Major Zia from 8th East Bengal and the other was Colonel Chowdhury from EBRC in Chattogram Cantonment.

"They enquired as to what was going on. I said, 'I have given orders to my soldiers to launch attack against the Pakistanis.'

"You can't do that because Bangabandhu is in the midst of negotiations with Yahya Khan."

"If we don't attack them first, we will never get a chance and will be the losers. We either make the pre-emptive strike and defeat the Pakistanis or risk being attacked and killed—with no hope of getting an independent country."

"Tonight we can't join you and attack the Pakistanis."

Unable to convince them to launch a pre-emptive strike, I sent a message to my Bengali soldiers to stop all military actions. By that time, they had wiped out all non-Bengali soldiers in the border outposts. That made me worried, and I was apprehensive of very grave consequences. Stopping all military actions stopped my soldiers from coming to the city, but what about the non-Bengali EPR soldiers who had been killed in action in Border outposts? The news would reach the Pakistan military; we would be arrested, court martialed and killed. In quick time.

**Priyam:** What happened after that night?  
**Rafiq:** On the night of March 25, Awami League leader Dr Zafar came to me and informed that the negotiations between Bangabandhu and Yahya Khan had failed. It

was around 8:30PM.

Two days earlier, I had sent a message through MR Siddiqui to Bangabandhu that, in case of war, Bangabandhu could come to Chattogram city, form a government here and seek help from friendly countries. With my troops I could hold the city under control for 10 to 14 days. Later MR Siddiqui told me that the message had been delivered to Bangabandhu by him personally in Dhaka and Bangabandhu would send message at the proper time.

I then disclosed to Dr Zafar that I had already launched the war on the night of the 24th and requested him to go to Halishahor and talk to Major Zia or other junior officers to capture Cantonment and then join me to take over the port and the naval base. I had also planned that we would take defensive position on the banks of Feni and Muhuri rivers so that the Pakistan army from Dhaka couldn't come to recapture Chattogram. I sent a message to my loyal JCO's and NCO's to capture all the tactically important buildings along the main roads of advance and deploy weapons to attack the Pakistanis—should they even try to venture out from the naval base or cantonment.

Our initial pre-emptive strike against the Pakistan army was such a great success that it emboldened Bengali soldiers in the EPR as well as others—especially the Bengali population. Everyone's morale was high, and the Bengali nation realised that it could now hope to achieve freedom.

The Pakistan army had a plan up their

sleeves as well. They planned to launch an attack on us in Chattogram in the same way they did in Dhaka—capture the city and surroundings and carry out a genocide to subdue the population for decades to come.

In the early hours of March 26, I received a message through telephone that Brig Iqbal Shafi, Commander of the 53 Brigade in Cumilla, had left for Chattogram with nearly 100 vehicles and a big military force. I immediately asked Subedar Musa, one of the company commanders of my reserve force, to lay an ambush in Kumira area—just about 13 miles from Chattogram.

In the evening of March 26, 1971, the Brigade was within the well-laid ambush zone when Subedar Musa's force—which had taken position on the high ground of Sitakunda Hill Range—opened fire on Brig Iqbal Shafi's forces with LMGs, MGs, mortars and rocket launchers.

Taken completely by surprise, the non-Bengali soldiers of Iqbal Shafi ran for cover in the hills. By the time they could return fire, nearly 72 of the enemy officers and soldiers were dead, many injured and a number of their vehicles totally destroyed. Brig Iqbal Shafi narrowly survived but could not make much headway and remained stuck for the next three days. The Pakistan army's plan of an easy and quick attack in Chattogram and capture the city was a total failure, and we had won a brilliant victory which had great impact on the war.

**Priyam:** What is the significance of this initial war attempt?

**Rafiq:** Had I not made plans for war and executed the plan taking mortal risk, the Pakistan army would have launched a vicious attack and start the genocide for which they had prepared for over a month.

They did carryout a genocide in Dhaka where the EPR Head Quarter in Peelkhana, Rajarbag Police lines, Students Halls in Dhaka University and other areas came under attack.

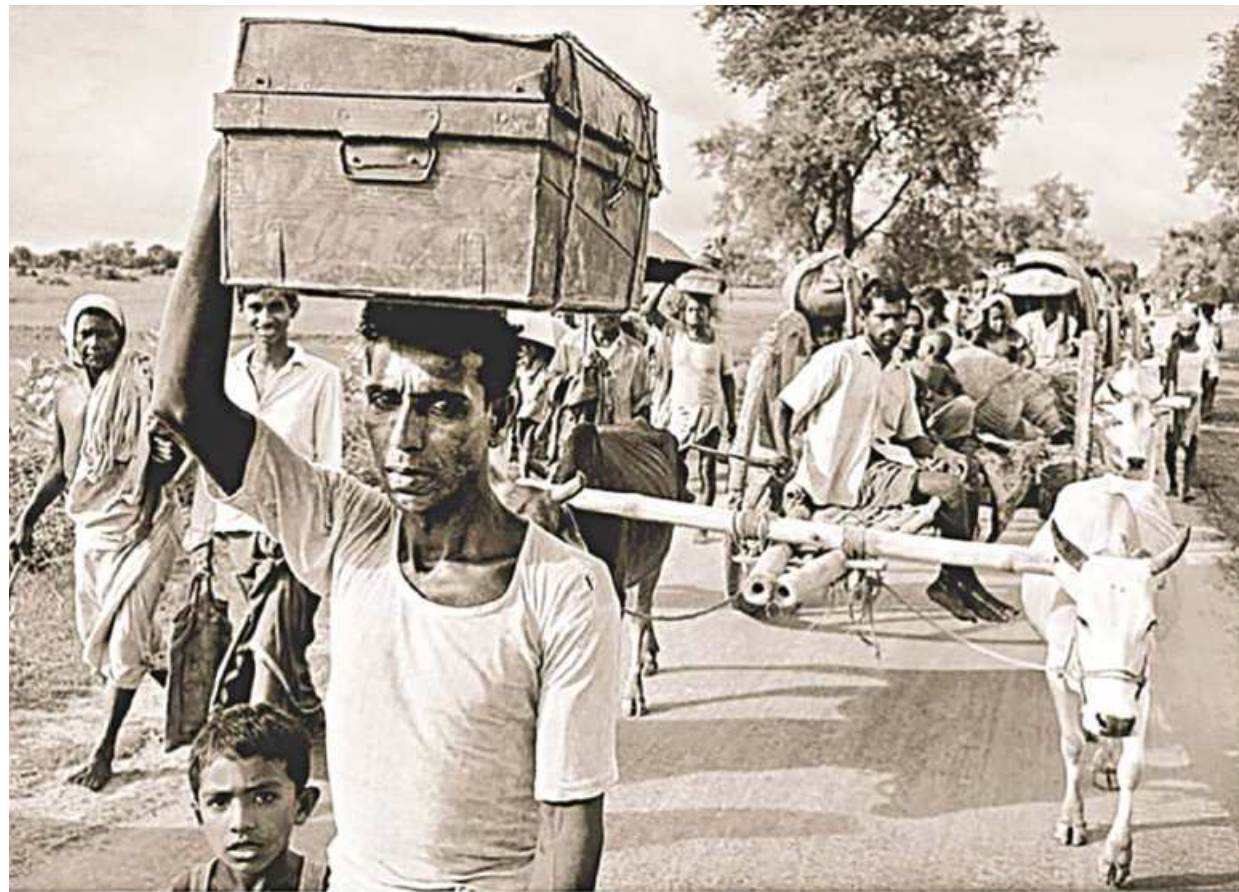
Because of our pre-emptive attack, the Pakistanis failed in similar sinister move in Chattogram.

The risks we had taken in launching a pre-emptive attack was a tide turning event in our history. Otherwise, the Pakistan army would have taken over the city of Chattogram and carry out a bloodbath on the Bengali population there.

Our success helped the Muktiyoddhas. They could quickly get organized and put up stiff resistance—inflicting heavy casualties on the Pakistanis.

We launched the attack on March 24, took control of Chattogram city on March 25, and our forces executed a successful ambush on March 26. All these acts proved to be of great historical significance that culminated in our victory on the 16th of December 1971. We raised our national flag in front of Chattogram Circuit House on the morning of 17th December, 1971.

## Retracing the 1971 exodus



Bengalis fleeing for a safe refuge, 1971.

PHOTO: MARK GODFRET/MUKTIJUDHO E-ARCHIVE

**DR. RUDABEH SHAHID**

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the victory that led to the birth of Bangladesh, attention should be paid to the devastating humanitarian crisis that unfolded during the nine-month war.

In addition, it is useful to understand this crisis in light of the ongoing Rohingya crisis, which unfolded more recently before our eyes.

The British had slit an undivided India with a 7,000 kilometre gash in August 1947. Pakistan may have been born along this artificially constructed border, but this led to deep wounds for many years to come.

Other than creating a refugee crisis during the partition of 1947, the British left the region in such a way that it generated subsequent refugee crises during the formation of Bangladesh, and in today's situation

concerning Rohingya refugees.

First, let us analyse the case of Bangladesh. As a response to the economic and cultural discrimination from the 1950s onwards, Bengali Muslims from East Pakistan began demanding more regional autonomy from the authorities of West Pakistan, leading to an ethno-linguistic shift in their identity consciousness.

The Pakistani military began a sweeping crackdown in its eastern wing in 1971 with the intention of suppressing dissent and stunting Bengali nationalism permanently. Around ten million people were displaced into India's border states as a result.

In the beginning, the Indian government provided hospitality to the refugees and trained many Mukti Bahini freedom fighters from East Pakistan, who fought the Pakistani army for nine months.

Subsequently, the Indian army

intervened militarily in East Pakistan, resulting in the Pakistani forces surrendering. India justified its military intervention with the argument that continual refugee flows into eastern and north-eastern India would create additional human suffering and further destabilise the region.

In spite of the USSR's backing, India's humanitarian intervention was not met with substantial support internationally.

A quick glance at the origins of the Rohingya crisis also point towards events surrounding the partition. In the time leading up to the partition of India, the Rohingya people of the adjacent Arakan province in colonial Burma hoped to join the future Muslim-majority province of East Pakistan, but were denied this opportunity.

SEE PAGE 7

## বিজয়ের গৌরবে ভালো থাকুক বাংলাদেশ ভালো থাকুন আপনিও

**বিজয়ের ৫০ বছর পূর্তিতে**  
দেশের নানা গর্বের প্রাপ্তির সাথে  
জুড়ে আছে কনকা ফ্রিজ-ও।  
**কনকা ফ্রিজ এখন তৈরি হচ্ছে**  
প্রিয় বাংলাদেশের মাটিতেই।











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