

An ode to 1971

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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-a-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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