

How nationalist imaginaries were reconstituted in 1971

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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.

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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.

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