

FEATURE

READING AS A FORM OF RESISTANCE

Some anecdotes from the 1971 war



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

On May 3, 1971, five weeks into the war, Jahanara Imam noted in her diary that it was her birthday. Her sons, Rumi and Jami, paid her a visit in her room to extend their greetings. They brought no surprise gifts like they usually did. Instead, Jami presented a black rose from their garden, while Rumi gifted her a copy of Leon Uris' 'Mila 18'.

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

It was towards the end of June in 1969, only a few months after the massive uprising that led to the downfall of Ayub Khan's decade-long dictatorship. Historian Ghiyasuddin Ahmad was visiting his friend Anisuzzaman, who was in the midst of packing up his home in Dhaka for a move to Chittagong University. As they chatted in Anisuzzaman's reading room, Ghiyas perused his friend's bookshelf and spotted a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. He picked it up and declared, "I will keep it, as it will be of much help to me. You can keep my *History of Bengal*." Anisuzzaman had borrowed the *History of Bengal* from Ghiyasuddin a long time ago, but had forgotten to return it.

Professor Anisuzzaman, reflecting on this incident in *Amar Ekattor*, his memoir of the Liberation War, recalled how many times after Ghiyas's death he had thought of this exchange of books, seeing it as a gift of free Bangla from Ghiyas who had chosen to walk the path of fighting fascists.

Ghiyasuddin Ahmad is one of our martyred intellectuals. He was abducted from his House Tutor's residence at Mohsin Hall by anti-liberation forces on the morning of December 14, 1971. His dead body was recovered 20 days later at the Rayer Bazar slaughter site.

There are many such stories that reveal a lesser-known aspect of Bangladesh's Liberation War—how books fuelled hope and resilience during the War. The seemingly passive act of reading became an active resistance effort in

multiple forms, from learning guerrilla tactics to fight the occupying army to finding solace in the history of people living under siege, to keeping up the spirit of freedom. Here are a few anecdotes.

In the first week of May 1971, Muyeedul Hasan was making arrangements to depart for India to join the war effort. One day, Akhtar Ispahani hurried to his residence and gave him Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, urging him to read the book as it was written in a similar context.

Akhtar was the wife of Isky Ispahani, who belonged to one of Pakistan's 22 wealthiest families.

Upon starting to read the book that night, Muyeedul found it to be incredibly insightful and relevant to the freedom struggle of Bangladesh. As he delved into the text, a question arose in his mind—why would a non-Bengali neighbour risk her life to give him such an important book? Unfortunately, Muyeedul never got the chance to ask her.

Subsequently, Muyeedul Hasan became a special assistant to Tajuddin Ahmad, the Prime Minister of the Bangladesh Government-in-exile, and played an important role during the war.

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Leon Uris' *Mila 18*. This historical fiction was loosely based on the turmoil caused by the Nazi invasion of Poland during World War II, as well as the subsequent resistance.

Rumi gave the book to his mother and said, "By reading this book, Amma, you can regain your mental strength...It has the power to dispel all your fears and help you move on from your grief...If you simply change the names of the country and nation in the book, you will see that it tells the story of Bangladesh, the sorrows of Bangalis, our resistance, and our struggle for life and death."

We learn from Jahanara Imam's war diary titled *Ekattorer Dinguli* that Rumi had almost all of Leon Uris' books in his personal collection.

It is worth mentioning that the Pakistani junta actively targeted books during the war, banning many works that spoke in favour of the freedom struggle, and burning libraries across the war-torn country.

One of the libraries that suffered this fate was the Raja Ram Mohan Ray Library in Old Dhaka, established in 1871 as the first library in Dhaka. On the night of March 25, the Pakistani Army attacked the library and set up camp there, squandering its rich collection.

Many of the library's books were subsequently sold in lots on the footpaths of besieged Dhaka. After the war, the library authorities placed advertisements requesting people to return any books from the library that they might have in their possession, but the response was poor. The library's hundred-year-old collection was lost forever.

One more story related to Professor Anisuzzaman comes to mind.

During the Liberation War, Indian historian and political activist Gautam Chatopadhyay, along with his wife Manju Devi, devoted themselves to the welfare of Bangladeshi refugees who sought shelter in West Bengal. Gautam also used to visit the training camps of Bangladeshi freedom fighters, providing for their needs and supplying them with essential items, including food and clothing.

Once, when asked about his needs, a young fighter remained silent. Eventually he lowered his head and said, he would appreciate a copy of Jibanananda Das's *Ruposhi Bangla*. Jibanananda's poetic evocation of Bangla's natural beauty had become a symbol of freedom during the war.

Sharing this incident with Anisuzzaman, Gautam opined that those who possess such love for their country and culture cannot be kept in shackles. History has proven Gautam Chatopadhyay's words to be true.

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WORTH A RE-READ

An invaluable study of Bangladesh's political history

'In Fool's Paradise' by Nadeem Qadir (Subarna, 2003)

TASNIM ODRIKA

"If our leaders can fool us, I have the right to seek paradise in that," writes senior journalist and author Nadeem Qadir in his article titled "In Fool's Paradise". This title goes on to become the name of his book, which compiles his articles that were published in various newspapers and magazines between 1993 and 1999. The collection comes with a foreword by Afsan Chowdhury, noted Liberation War researcher, columnist, journalist and academic; alongside notes from Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of *The Daily Star*, and Enayetullah Khan, who was then editor-in-chief of the weekly *Holiday*. Some additional materials include an unpublished article and a poem dedicated to the author's father.

In Fool's Paradise is aptly named as it gives us a glimpse of post-independence Bangladesh, a young nation still struggling to find its identity amidst post-war blows. Bangladesh was still battling famine, and independence did not magically solve the problems related to corruption entrenched within its system. Soon, it was also clear that independence was not synonymous with democracy. Qadir's articles give way to the idea that true paradise would be a country dedicated solely to serving its people, not just a few higher officials. A country for the people, by the people.

Although each of the articles tackles a different issue with incisive and insightful analysis, there is coherence. "I caught one boy and told him he



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BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

A refugee's tale in Calcutta

'Amar Kolkata Jibon' by Mahbub Talukdar (Oitijjo, 2023)

PRIYAM PRITIM PAUL

Calcutta was a central place in the life of Eastern Bengalis for more than a century as the capital of colonial Bengal. The Partition of Bengal in 1947 made a complete breach of Calcutta's link to Eastern Bengal, and in 1971, in a twist of fate, it once again became the go-to refuge for many Eastern Bengalis fleeing genocidal violence.

Late Election Commissioner Mahbub Talukdar, born in Tangail in 1941, has sketched a brief scenario of his life in Calcutta in *Amar Kolkata Jibon* ('My Experience in Calcutta'). He spent five years in this city in his childhood with his parents. The author's father, a government employee, had migrated to Dhaka in 1948 from Calcutta and settled in a house at Thakurpara in Kamalapur named 'Satis Bhaban'. Mahbub would revisit Calcutta as a refugee when the Pakistan army unleashed a war against Bengalis.

After the creation of Pakistan, social and cultural relations between Calcutta and Eastern Bengal were abruptly interrupted. Mahbub notes that India had been marked as a land of enemies; thus, separation from any kind of interaction with India was regarded as the foundation of Pakistani nationalism. Contact between the two parts of Bengal became nearly nonexistent. Mahbub recalls in his book the events of the Kagmari Shommelion in 1957, when



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many acclaimed Bengali writers and thinkers attended that meeting from West Bengal. That was the first and last major meeting in the entire period of united Pakistan that reconnected both sides of Bengal through cultural exchange.

Mahbub had planned to do doctoral research on the rise and development of Satya Pir in Bangla literature, a subject with no direct connection to the Pakistani identity. He intended to examine how two distinctive religions met in Satya Pir through indigenous rites and practices. He wrote to scholars of West Bengal such as Suniti Kumar

Chatterjee, Sukumar Sen, Ashutosh Bhattacharya and Panchanan Mandal. All responded to him with suggestions and assured him of assistance. However, he could not materialise this plan as he got preoccupied with other social and cultural activities.

Though communication with West Bengal was dangerous in those days, Mahbub established a channel with journals and some other people in Calcutta through his literary works.

When the war of 1971 began, he was a junior faculty member at the University of Chittagong. He initially took shelter in Agartala in June 1971. After staying some days, he finally managed to fly to Calcutta using his political connections with the leaders in the resistance war. There he got a shelter in his pen friend Archana Chowdhury's house.

In his candid testimony of the war experience, Mahbub mentions that after reaching Calcutta, he was gripped by a certain callousness. Unlike many of the war refugees from Bangladesh in Calcutta, he felt no urge to be involved in the war. He had fled the country to save his life, not to participate in the fight, even though he had been an influential activist in the '60s. Eventually, though, he did play a part in the war efforts by giving a speech on Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra's clandestine radio, but took care to change his name so that the Pakistani Army could not identify him.

It was his 18-year-old younger brother Mosaddek Talukdar Babu, a frontal freedom fighter, who came to Calcutta to briefly meet him. They watched a film together—*Kati Patang* starring Rajesh Khanna and Sharmila Tagore. Babu enjoyed the film immensely. Before leaving, he said he liked this Calcutta city. Bangladesh would definitely be liberated, he said, and they would meet again.

It was the last meeting between the two brothers.

War is a strange situation that gets people acting in uncommon ways.

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will have the best flowers provided he narrated the significance of the day. Sadly he left without a single flower and red-faced," writes Qadir in "Let the flowers remain unplucked, the martyrs in peace", an article where he laid bare the vain celebrations the nation carries out during 21st February without half the population realising the significance that it carries. As the book is a glimpse through the 1990s in Bangladesh, you will also pass through regime changes, and Qadir does not shy away from criticising the turmoil that greets such political transitions.

"In 'Turn grief into strength' and 'In the land of 'holidays', all is fair' he calls out the same old tired role that all opposition parties seem to play in Bangladesh, with the opposition always resorting to some form of street agitation and the party in power seemingly being on the side of peace.

What's fascinating is how some (maybe most) of these issues discussed in the book hold true even to this day, two decades later. There are commentaries on campus violence, controlling traffic jams in Dhaka, corruption, bribery, and many more. The writer suggests keeping a separate rickshaw lane to reduce traffic gridlock; and, for owners of multiple vehicles, "using only one of them during peak hours". These are suggestions I've noticed even after the recent surge in traffic resulting from the COVID and, this, for a moment, made me think if we have failed to make any progress at all.

But then the candour with which Qadir holds political elites accountable jolt you back to the present time. He does not shy away from criticising them and their role in perpetuating the cycle of violence and corruption; something that might not be reported as bluntly today.

The writer's motivation for compiling his previously published articles into this book was so that his ideas don't fade away, since most of these pieces might not have been digitised or archived online. Throughout the frustrations he reflects in his articles, one thing is clear—Qadir's love for his country and his wish to see it prosper. His writing is also strongly influenced by the disappearance of his father during the war of 1971 and this pain is reflected in each and every criticism he presents about his motherland.

This is a fascinating account of Bangladesh's political history, particularly its struggle for democracy, the rise of authoritarianism, and the challenges facing the country's democratic institutions.

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