

DEFIANCE AND DILEMMAS

Administrative Dynamics in 1971's War of Liberation



their lives, consideration for the safety of their families, and potential sacrifices related to a prestigious and competitive exam.

Akbar Ali Khan observed that while some officers may have felt they had no alternative, many had ample opportunities to contribute to the liberation war throughout the nine-month conflict. Akbar Ali Khan and Kazi Rakib Uddin Ahmed, who served as Sub-Divisional Officers (SDOs) in Habiganj and Brahmanbaria at the time, actively engaged in the war effort by aligning themselves with the local Awami League and supporting the resistance movement. Their focus was on maintaining morale, law and order, and organizing provisions such as shelter, food, and arms for the freedom fighters. It's noteworthy that they embarked on these efforts with a limited understanding of the situation unfolding in other parts of the country.

Akbar Ali Khan noted that he issued numerous directives by writing 'on behalf of the Bangladesh Government,' even before its formal establishment.

jointly departed from Habiganj. They, along with the local Awami League leader Enamul Haq Mostafa Shahid, sought refuge in Agartala. In Agartala, they encountered HT Imam, a senior official, who had initially organized the resistance movement in CHT but, regrettably, couldn't sustain it, leading him to also seek refuge in Agartala.

In the southeastern region, certain government officials took a principled stand by rejecting the authority of the Junta-controlled bureaucracy. Opting for independent resistance against the occupying army, they endeavored to steer their territory in support of the Bangladesh government, all while grappling with the looming threat of military occupation.

Despite their efforts, their administration faltered over time, leading them to seek refuge in Kolkata. Their "liberated zone" succumbed to Pakistani army control, prompting them to eventually integrate into the Mujibnagar administration after the government's formal establishment.

Sadat Hussain, a junior CSP officer

memories, he documented numerous firsthand accounts from various officers within that zone, providing valuable insights into the challenges and triumphs of the wartime efforts. He chronicled his entry into India on May 22, recounting a harrowing experience of crossing a river while grappling with intense disappointment. Along the border, he faced severe torment from local touts, and throughout the journey, he encountered significant hardships at the hands of several Pakistani collaborators.

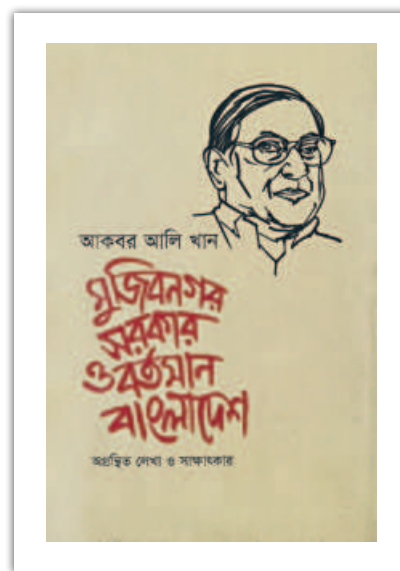
Before the war, on March 23, Sadat Hussain convened a private gathering with his fellow officials in Jhenaidah, where they collectively pledged to fight for independence. This commitment was clearly manifested in their actions when the Pakistani army waged war against Bangladesh.

Furthermore, Waliul Islam, serving as the SDO of Magura, not only engaged in the war effort but also assumed the position of Deputy Commissioner (DC) in Jessore in December, contributing significantly to the liberation of Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, Kamal Siddiqui, the SDO of Narail, assumed leadership of the resistance movement, rallying the people in his region to fervently engage in the war effort. He passionately advocated for the establishment of training centers in villages following the crackdown. Ultimately, he became part of the Mujibnagar government in exile.

Historian Mahboobul Alam, in his acclaimed book "Muktijuddher Itibritto," highlighted that while the Awami League exerted maximum pressure on the Pakistani Junta through their movement, their preparations for the 1971 war were minimal. The initial administrative response to the War of Liberation in 1971 also reflected apparent unpreparedness but later gained momentum through the sheer will of the people.

Priyam Pritim Paul is a researcher.



Subsequently, on April 16th, as the Pakistani army advanced to seize control of Habiganj, both Akbar Ali Khan and Kazi Rakib Uddin Ahmed



-serving as Assistant Commissioner in Jessore, played a pivotal role in orchestrating the war resistance primarily centered in Narail. In his war

The government administration neither wholly capitulated to the Junta authority nor staged a coordinated rebellion fueled by the spirit of war against the occupying force.

PRIYAM PRITIM PAUL

The War of Liberation in 1971 commenced late on the night of March 25th, as the Pakistani army initiated a genocidal campaign from all its cantonments, aiming to seize control of cities amidst the growing resistance movement. However, the Pakistani army encountered unexpected resistance from ill-prepared police, military, EPR, and notably, students, youths, and civilians, who bravely confronted a formal army unprecedentedly. The administrative response to the freedom struggle during wartime was also unrivaled and distinctly different from any historical moment in the subcontinent's transition from one government to the guardianship of another. The government administration neither wholly capitulated to the Junta authority nor staged a coordinated rebellion fueled by the spirit of war against the occupying force.

This paradox underscores the puzzle of an administrative response unfolding without a formally established government to lead the struggle. The scenario mirrored a setting in which administrative authority operated de facto while awaiting formal de jure governance. This duality endured until April 17, 1971, when the government officially materialized through the swearing-in of the cabinet at Mujibnagar.

When examining the accounts of government officials who defied the orders of the Pakistani government in Bangladesh and promptly decided to align themselves with the liberation movement following the crackdown on March 25th, certain common features emerge.

It may be mentioned here that a mere fourteen CSP officers out of approximately a hundred displayed exceptional courage by actively participating in the liberation war. This decision involved substantial risks to

March 1971 as witnessed by women

"Baba placed the table clock on the table after gathering the rest of the members in the same place, and our eyes were fixed on it while sitting around. There were sounds of firing, and in between, everything became eerily silent. In those quiet moments, the sound of the ticking—I never experienced the sound of a clock to be so terrifying; I experienced that day."

SAUDIA AFRIN

The entire month of March in 1971 stands etched as a profound turning point in the birth of Bangladesh. The harrowing events of March 25th in Dhaka bore witness to a deliberate onslaught by the Pakistani army upon unarmed civilians, leaving an indelible mark of trauma upon the collective consciousness.

Beyond objective narratives, the subjective retelling of survivors is imperative for comprehending the true extent of the atrocities endured. Among them, three extraordinary women offer firsthand testimonies providing invaluable insights into the struggle and the unwavering resilience displayed by the people in the face of unparalleled adversity.

General Yahya Khan's abrupt suspension of the National Assembly session led to the non-cooperation movement across East Pakistan. Makhduma Nargis, then a civil medical officer at the Pakistan Air Force, chose to join the movement instead of going to work. Reflecting on her commitment, she remarked, "Every day, people would march from Dhaka Medical College to Paltan." Makhduma, an active member of the Student Union and Mohila Parishad, emphasized the crucial role of organizations like Mohila Parishad, led by poet Sufia Kamal, in uniting women of all walks to accelerate the movement.

The stirring speech on March 7 rallied millions, unified in the quest for freedom. Following the speech, students, both boys and girls, commenced armed combat training with dummy rifles at the Dhaka University playground. As a teenage girl, Dr. Nazma Shaheen, now a professor at the Institute of Nutrition and Food Science, University of Dhaka, underwent armed training under two



PHOTO: RASHID TALUKDER

retired Bengali Army personnel at Kola Bhaban. "Besides the political exposure, I always felt the spirit of freeing the nation," recalled Nazma Shaheen, reminiscing about training sessions that included strategies for taking control of enemy camps and weaving flags in the morning of March 25. Following the university training, female student leaders dispersed to various colleges and organized training sessions for girls.

Dilara Mesbah, now a writer, described the entire situation as perplexing, reminiscing, "In our Gopibagh home, discussions about the political situation and circulating rumors took place quietly behind closed doors. Meanwhile, my four sisters-in-law were sent to the village for security, leaving only five of us there."

Then came the night of March 25th when the gates of hell were cast open.

"That night, we were all engaged in our usual nighttime activities. It was around 10 pm; mothers were chatting, and I was sitting with a friend on a slipper near Fular Road," said Nazma Shaheen. Upon learning about the approaching convoys of Pakistani tanks and truckloads of soldiers towards Dhaka University, Ahmed Sharif, professor of the Department of Bangla, rushed to circulate the information to students leaving the hall and instructed Nazma and her friend to tell their mothers to go home. Along with Prof Sharif, Nazma's father, then the secretary of the Fular Road Para Association, tried their best to inform university quarters not to light up rooms and to avoid peeking through

windows while firing. Her sister and Nazma went to sleep while waiting; suddenly, the artillery and the vicious clatter of machine guns woke them up. "Baba placed the table clock on the table after gathering the rest of the members in the same place, and our eyes were fixed on it while sitting around. There were sounds of firing, and in between, everything became eerily silent. In those quiet moments, the sound of the ticking—I never experienced the sound of a clock to be so terrifying; I experienced that day," she added, then residing at 17/A Fular Road.

Makhduma recalled people in the locality, political and apolitical, started hastily assembling a makeshift barricade of tree stumps across the road, unaware that they would soon face tanks. "As our house was beside

the road, flashes of light emanated from the Razarbagh police line as a battle erupted, where the police force fought with all their might. From pin-drip silence to the sound of artillery and the vicious clatter of machine guns, the atmosphere transformed drastically. I held my nine-month-old close to my heart, cramming 12 people into the stair passage, while pondering what was happening at the police line. My promise as a physician and a Bengali weighed heavily on my mind, contemplating handing over my child to someone and going to the police line to help," said Makhduma.

Nazma Shaheen and her sister thought they would share their experience with fellow members the next day, recalling the memory as teenagers unable to decipher the actual reality until the next morning. As the light grew, they heard gunfire and saw firing in the rooms of Iqbal Halls on the morning of March 26, peeking from the upper portion of the curtain.

Shaheen witnessed corpses brutally killed and stabbed multiple times with bayonets in the fields of Jahurul Haq Hall while traveling to Azimpur with the family on the morning of March 27 upon the lifting of the curfew. "Since nowhere was seen to be safe as we headed towards Jinjira," said Shaheen.

Dilara, accompanied by her family members, embarked on the journey of leaving the city while holding her 4-month-old baby.

Makhduma also became part of the throng of people leaving her home behind. She had to leave without her husband on the same day, only to reunite with him at the Agartala refugee camp months later.

Saudia Afrin is a journalist at The Daily Star.