

March 25 through the eyes of ordinary people

March 25, 1971 marks the darkest yet most significant moment in the independence struggle of Bangladesh. It began with the Pakistan government launching Operation Searchlight, abducting and killing thousands of people in a single night in the first episode of what went on to be a ruthless genocide. It also sparked an armed resistance that led to the birth of this country. Here are three personal accounts about the victims of this dark night.

'I'll be back, pray for me'

Nazma Majid
is wife of the martyred Shah Abdul Majid who was an educationist and the superintendent of Rajshahi police.

NAZMA MAJID

In 1971, my husband was the chief of police in Rajshahi. On March 31, the Pakistan Army's Captain Salman Mahmud took him away from our drawing room. Since then, he has been missing. One can easily guess what fate befell him. Leaving behind his wife and four children in despair, he became a martyr.

Born in 1935 in Rangpur, Shah Abdul Majid was the son of Shah Yunus Ali and Mosammam Meher Afzun. He was brilliant from an early age. He always ranked first and received scholarships, so my father-in-law never had to worry about his educational expenses throughout his secondary and higher secondary education. After completing his master's degree in Political Science from the University of Dhaka in 1956, he taught at the then Jagannath College from 1957 to 1961. During this period, he passed the Central Superior Services (CSS) examination and became a member of the then Pakistan Police Service. The results of his CSS exam were published on the day our first son was born in 1961.

I had seen how calm, soft spoken, and principled my husband was. He repeatedly asked me whether he should take the job, as he was unsure whether he could be as strict as the police service often required. While teaching for three years, he earned a reputation as a beloved educator among his students. Nevertheless, he eventually accepted the position in the police department.

After completing his training at the Sarda Police Academy in 1962, he joined as an assistant superintendent of police (ASP) in Chittagong in 1963. In 1964, he joined the Special Branch of police, and from 1965 to 1968, he served as the additional superintendent of police in Dhaka district.

At that time, Abdul Majid's voice often calmed and disciplined the agitated students protesting in Dhaka. Though he held a position of authority in the police, he still carried the firmness and affectionate discipline of a teacher. Later, he served as the superintendent of police (SP) in the districts of Bogura and Faridpur, as well as the vice-principal of the Sarda Police Academy. In September 1970, he assumed the role of SP of Rajshahi district.

During the tenure of Monem Khan, when he was posted in Dhaka, the student movement erupted. There were countless days and nights when he would go without meals, he would remain awake and restless, concerned about his duty and the safety of the students.

He would tell me, "Since fate made you a police officer's wife, you must stay strong. Remember, my life is like water on a lotus leaf, it can slip away at any moment." He believed that if he stood before the students, they would calm down. Then, he took charge as the SP of Rajshahi. From the very beginning, an inexplicable sense of fear lingered in me. It felt as though I was destined to lose something there.

Then came March. The non-cooperation movement left him deeply worried. He would say, "Who knows what's coming." He was anxious.

The dreadful night of the 25th arrived. That night, members of the military swarmed our area. My husband knew that he could be arrested at any moment. I told him to leave, but he responded that it was unbecoming of a police officer's wife to say such things. He angrily asked, "If I leave, who will lead my police force?"

He tried to convince the staff at police lines to disperse and resist the enemy. The Pakistani soldiers had blockaded the area. But my husband was determined to prevent the police force from perishing unprepared and surrounded by the enemy.

When the bloodthirsty Pakistani officer Captain Salman Mahmud arrested my husband on March 31, 1971, I was told he was being taken for questioning and would return shortly.

Before leaving, he said to me, "I'll be back—pray for me." Yet, the patriotic Shah Abdul Majid never returned to the warm, loving life he shared with his wife, sons, and daughters.



VISUAL: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

'Let me open the door, they won't harm us'

Abdul Hannan Thakur
is cousin of the martyred Dr Fazlur Rahman Khan, an assistant professor in the Department of Soil Science at the University of Dhaka.

ABDUL HANNAN THAKUR

Fazlur bhai was my paternal cousin. We used to call him Chhotobhai. He was born on March 2, 1939. As a student, he was exceptionally brilliant—always ranking first in every school examination. Despite his restless nature, Fazlur bhai was deeply devoted to his father. Perhaps in his father, he found the warmth and affection of his lost mother. Since her death, he shared a soulful connection with his father—whether it was anger or affection, it was always directed towards him.

He completed MSc from the University of Dhaka (DU) in 1962. On August 1, 1963, he joined the Department of Soil Science at Dhaka University as a lecturer. From childhood, Fazlur bhai had dreamed of becoming a university teacher. That calling became his life's purpose. He immersed himself in research, books and study.

Fazlur bhai earned a scholarship and went to the University of London for higher studies. On July 25, 1968, he received his PhD and rejoined DU the same year. On August 15, 1968, he was promoted to senior lecturer. In 1970, he married Farida Khanam Shirin. Farida bhabi was also a student at DU. She earned her MSc in Physics

with first class and later joined there as a faculty.

It was March, 1971. Teachers and students were united in the spirit of independence. Fazlur bhai also declared his solidarity with the Liberation War. He lived in the university staff quarters near Nilkhel. After his wife left for London, he felt increasingly lonely. When he mentioned this to our eldest sister in Azimpur, she sent her son, Ali Ahsan Khan Kanchan, to stay with him. At that time, Kanchan was a second year science student at Dhaka College.

Then arrived the dreadful night of March 25. Fazlur bhai went to Azimpur. Our eldest sister earnestly insisted he stayed for dinner. But he declined, saying he would eat later with Kanchan, and hurried back home. The same night, Kanchan visited his aunt Renu's house on Mitali Road, saying the same thing—"I'll have dinner with uncle." A young boy Joban, a relative of Farida bhabi, prepared their dinner at home that night.

Shortly after 10pm, the brutal Pakistani Army took over Dhaka. At exactly 12:20am, they pounded violently on Fazlur bhai's door with their rifles, nearly breaking it down. Inside were Fazlur bhai, Kanchan, and Joban. Following the relentless pounding, Kanchan said, "Uncle, I've had UOTC training. Let me open the door with the gesture of surrender—they won't harm us." Fazlur bhai tried to stop him but failed. The moment the door

opened, the soldiers unleashed a barrage of bullets, riddling Kanchan's chest. Overwhelmed by horror, Fazlur bhai shouted in anguish. Instantly, their guns roared again—his chest was also torn apart. They then desecrated his body further by carving an 'X' on his chest with a bayonet. Just like that, two vibrant lives were silenced forever. The horrific scene was witnessed by Joban, who was hiding in the adjacent bathroom. He too had been shot in the leg but somehow managed to survive.

On March 27, when the curfew was temporarily lifted, people went to retrieve the bodies of Fazlur bhai and Kanchan. The scene was beyond description. The house and veranda were soaked in blood—nothing but blood. Congealed, darkened blood. Kanchan's lifeless body lay near the door. One of Fazlur bhai's lifeless hands rested on the steel cabinet beside him as if he were trying to protect something precious. Later, we learned that it contained some belongings of Farida bhabi. Both Chhotobhai and Kanchan were hurriedly buried side by side in coffins at the Azimpur graveyard on March 27. After that, none of us returned home. We fled into the unknown, driven by the fear of the ruthless attackers.

The three accounts are abridged versions of memoirs taken from 'Smriti: 1971', edited by Rashid Haider.

Henry Kissinger's role in 1971



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KOLLOL KIBRIA

Henry Kissinger, one of the most influential yet controversial political figures of the 20th century, passed away in 2023, leaving behind a legacy that continues to spark heated debates. Lauded by some as a master of diplomacy and realpolitik, he remains, in the eyes of others, a war criminal who should have been held accountable for his actions. In The Trial of Henry Kissinger, Christopher Hitchens meticulously builds a case against Kissinger, arguing that his policies and decisions—from his role in extending the Vietnam War to his backing of right-wing coups, complicity in genocide, and orchestration of covert operations—led to mass suffering across the globe. The Bangladesh chapter of the book is particularly damning, exposing the cold indifference and realpolitik

calculations that led to one of the most horrifying atrocities of the 20th century.

In December 1970, the people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) overwhelmingly voted for self-rule under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League. However, instead of honouring the democratic mandate, the Pakistani military, led by General Yahya Khan, launched Operation Searchlight on March 25, 1971. What followed was an unrelenting campaign of mass killings, systematic sexual violence, and forced displacement. Conservative estimates place the death toll at 300,000, though many argue the real number was closer to three million.

As reports of massacres spread, one of the earliest and most powerful condemnations came from Archer Kent Blood, the US

Consul General in Dhaka. Blood and his team sent a series of telegrams to Washington detailing the atrocities being committed by the Pakistani military. In the telegrams, they pleaded the US to take a stand against the Pakistani government. The message read:

"Our government has failed to denounce the suppression of democracy. Our government has failed to denounce atrocities...Our government has evidenced what many will consider moral bankruptcy..."

This was signed by dozens of diplomats, making it the strongest internal protest ever recorded within the US State Department. Yet, Nixon and Kissinger dismissed it outright. Kissinger, obsessed with using Pakistan as a backchannel to China, saw Yahya Khan as an indispensable ally. Instead of acting against genocide, Kissinger chose silence and complicity. In fact, the US government, under Kissinger's guidance, actively supported the Pakistani military by supplying them with weapons.

Kissinger also made a callous remark in a private conversation, referring to Bangladesh as a "basket case," illustrating his dismissive attitude toward the country's plight and people. Between March and December 1971, the Pakistani military

conducted some of the most gruesome acts of ethnic and political cleansing of the 20th century. Bangalees were specifically targeted and executed, Hindu minorities were slaughtered, and millions of women were subjected to rape as a weapon of war. While the world condemned the atrocities, Nixon and Kissinger continued to stand by Pakistan.

His secret conversations with Nixon reveal racist and derogatory remarks about Bangalees and Indians, showing his complete disregard for human lives. Even when the then US Ambassador Kenneth Keating urged the administration to publicly condemn Pakistan's brutality, Nixon said to Kissinger that Keating had been "taken over by the Indians." Kissinger, for his part, at the height of the genocide in late April sent Yahya a message praising him for "delicacy and tact."

As the crisis deepened, India, overwhelmed by millions of Bangalee refugees, prepared to intervene militarily. On December 3, 1971, India officially entered the war to assist the Mukti Bahini. In response, Kissinger orchestrated a dangerous and reckless move. He deployed the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise into the Bay of Bengal. This was meant to intimidate India and deter its intervention, but it failed.

Mukti Bahini with help from India swiftly defeated Pakistan, leading to the creation of an independent Bangladesh on December 16, 1971. But Kissinger's hostility toward Bangladesh did not end there.

When Mujib sought international recognition and aid for the war-ravaged country, the US remained distant. Kissinger saw Mujib's government as an embarrassment, resenting the exposure of US complicity in genocide. In November 1974, Kissinger made a brief eight-hour visit to Dhaka, where he refused to acknowledge the role of the US in Pakistan's actions.

Hitchens' book meticulously builds a case against Kissinger, arguing that his actions in Bangladesh, Chile, Vietnam, and East Timor amount to war crimes. Kissinger's secret involvement in overthrowing democratically elected leaders, his orchestration of military coups, and his support for genocidal regimes paint the picture of a man who viewed human lives as collateral damage in his grand strategy. As Bangladesh continues to push for global recognition of the 1971 genocide, the question remains: will history hold Kissinger accountable, or will his crimes fade into the shadows of realpolitik?