



A people's war, A WORLD'S RECKONING

Every December 16, we return to the story of our Liberation War with pride, gratitude, and an ever-deepening sense of responsibility. Yet this year, we attempt something different. Instead of viewing 1971 solely through the familiar national frame, this Victory Day supplement explores Bangladesh's liberation as part of a wider global history—shaped by shifting Cold War alignments, post-colonial

aspirations, transnational solidarities, and the moral courage of people across continents who refused to look away. From the refugee camps of India to the protest streets of London, from the editorial pages of global newspapers to the halls of the United Nations, Bangladesh's struggle reverberated far beyond its borders. The war created an unprecedented

humanitarian crisis, mobilised world opinion, and forced the international community to confront urgent questions about genocide, sovereignty, and the right of a people to determine their own future. In these pages, we revisit 1971 not as an isolated national event but as a moment woven into larger histories—of empire and decolonisation, of global justice movements, of geopolitics and

people's resistance. By placing Bangladesh within this broader canvas, we hope to illuminate both the uniqueness of our struggle and its enduring resonance in the world today.

Mahfuz Anam
Editor & Publisher
The Daily Star

Activists and supporters gather at a protest organised by Action Bangladesh in London on August 1, 1971, calling for an end to genocide and recognition of Bangladesh.

Missionaries in the war zone

The role of Australian Baptist missionaries in 1971

From October 1971 to January 1972, Australian Baptist missionaries in Mymensingh sheltered 80 refugees within their compound. Ian Hawley recalled in our interview that, at first, the hostel accommodated Hindus and later also welcomed Muslims and Christians.

RACHEL STEVENS

The Liberation War triggered an exodus of approximately ten million refugees to India and a further thirty million internally displaced. Given the extent of displacement, the international community mobilised to provide humanitarian assistance to Bangladeshi civilians.

Most research has focused on the actions of foreign governments and secular humanitarian non-government organisations (NGOs), such as the Red Cross. But what about non-state actors—that is, ordinary citizens? How did everyday people with no formal links to humanitarian NGOs help refugees?

My research is part of a growing scholarly interest in “everyday humanitarianism”: the small acts that people commit to help others. In the case of the Liberation War, everyday humanitarianism involved Brits, Australians, Japanese and Americans (among others) donating cash and goods to aid organisations, lobbying local politicians to increase state support for Bangladeshi independence, and drawing public attention to war atrocities.

Historians of humanitarianism rarely examine the role of missionaries, particularly in post-colonial conflicts

save countless individual lives.

What is distinctive about this research is that it considers how faith and spirituality facilitated, rather than impeded, the humanitarian efforts of these missionaries.

Australian Baptist Missionaries in Bangladesh

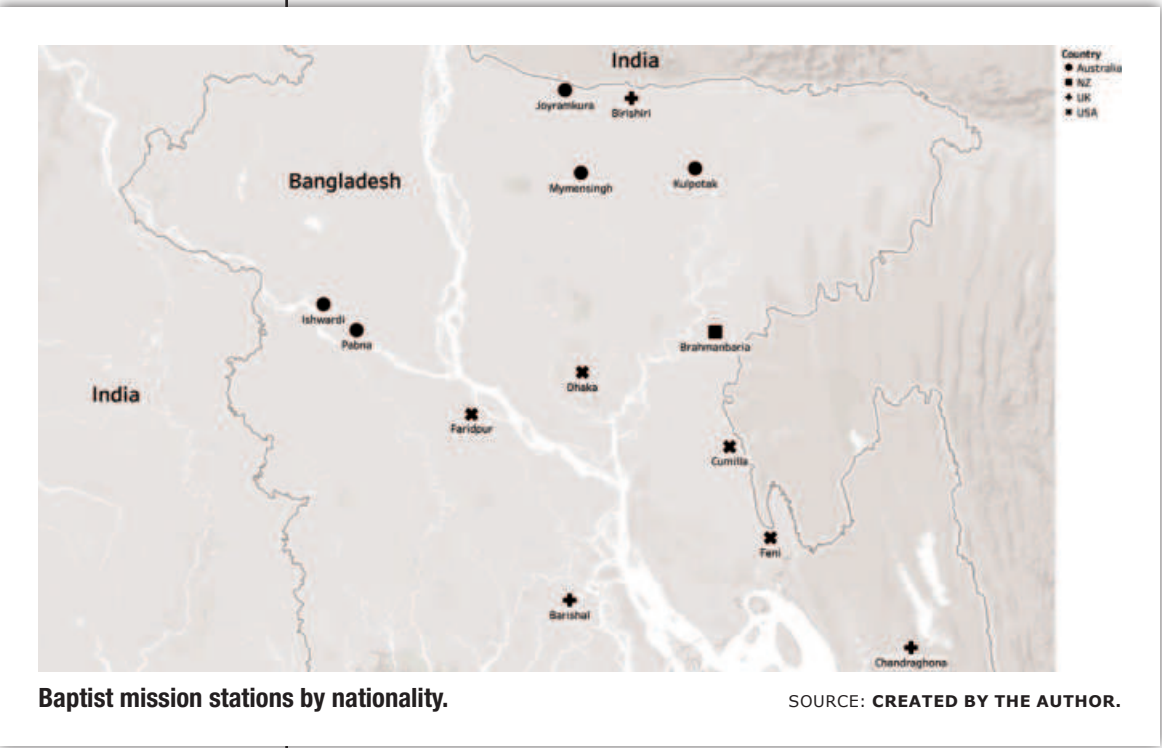
At the end of 1970, the Australian Baptist Missionary Society (ABMS) had 140 missionaries stationed in four countries and was subsidising Baptist missionary work in five additional countries. In Bangladesh, the ABMS had workers in Mymensingh, Kulpotak and Joyramkura. In this northern cluster, Australian Baptist missionaries worked alongside British Baptist and Anglican missionaries who were based in Birishiri and Haluaghat, respectively. In the west, ABMS workers were based in Ishwardi and Pabna, which had been an ABMS station since 1949 and was located north-west of the American Southern Baptist Convention station in Faridpur.

The ABMS had carved out a monopoly on missionary work in Pabna and Mymensingh, serving as the only Protestant missionaries in these cities, which had a combined population of 12 million people at the time. At the beginning of 1971, the ABMS extended its reach to Dhaka and worked



SOURCE: BAPTIST UNION OF VICTORIA (AUSTRALIA) ARCHIVES.

Makeshift bomb shelter, Australian Baptist mission, Mymensingh.



Baptist mission stations by nationality.

SOURCE: CREATED BY THE AUTHOR.

like Bangladesh. When missionary humanitarian work is acknowledged, it is often disparaged as a tool of evangelism and neo-imperialism. The true intentions of missionaries and missionary organisations are thus brought into question and presumed suspect.

In a recently published chapter in the edited collection Rediscovering Humanitarianism (Routledge, 2025), I used the case study of Australian Baptist missionaries who were based in Bangladesh to uncover their altruistic acts during this brutal conflict. While some of these missionaries left Bangladesh under direction from the Australian government, others refused to leave the country despite significant risks to their own safety.

collaboratively with American Baptist missionaries already there. However, with the outbreak of war, this operation was suspended until 1972.

When the war began, there were sixteen ABMS missionaries in Bangladesh, including eight single women and four married couples. As the war continued, some ABMS workers left Bangladesh, either due to planned furloughs, family emergencies, or because it was unsafe to remain in their assigned towns. However, three individuals—one married man and two single women—remained in Mymensingh for the entirety of the war and the immediate post-war months of reconstruction. These missionaries, Ian Hawley, Betty Salisbury and Grace Dodge, who were known internally as “the big three”, remained in Mymensingh despite significant risks to their safety.

In 2019, I interviewed two of the three surviving former missionaries who experienced the entirety of the war: Grace Dodge and Ian Hawley, alongside his wife Barbara, who was in Mymensingh until August 1971. Alongside these interviews, my research analysed the ABMS archives, the personal letters and diaries of Grace Dodge and Betty Salisbury, as well as published materials—specifically the Australian Baptist newspaper, magazines and memoirs.

Australian missionaries (and those from other nations and denominations) offered efficient, cost-effective relief, which stood in marked contrast to the alleged waste, inefficiency and corruption that plagued many well-meaning but poorly administered humanitarian programmes run by governments and NGOs.

For example, in a letter to the ABMS, Betty Salisbury wrote that despite the influx of millions of dollars’ worth of relief goods into Bangladesh, “it seems to disappear like water in sand and still hardly shows where it [donations] has been used”.

Baghmara camp

By remaining in Bangladesh, Australian Baptist missionaries were able to provide tangible assistance that was targeted to the immediate needs of refugees. It should be remembered that during the war, foreigners were forbidden from entering Bangladesh. Only those

who were already in the country could remain—and even then, often against the wishes of their home governments.

With foreigners unable to enter Bangladesh, international aid agencies therefore directed their humanitarian efforts to the refugee camps in West Bengal. The Indian government also prohibited foreigners from entering the refugee camps in the states of Assam and Meghalaya.

Within Meghalaya, Baghmara became one of the largest refugee camps. In a town with a population of 2,000 residents, the Baghmara refugee camp became home to 98,000 exiles. Yet foreign aid organisations could not assist these refugees.

However, Australian Baptists in Mymensingh found a way to assist the refugees based in Baghmara. This camp was significant to the ABMS for two reasons. First, Australian Baptist missionaries personally knew Garos who had fled to the camp. Second, Baghmara was merely eight miles from Birishiri, a base for British Baptist missionaries, including one Australian, Emily Lord, who was there on secondment.

As a trained nurse, Emily Lord offered medical assistance in the Baghmara camp from June to September. From her encounters with refugees there, Emily Lord relayed anecdotes to ABMS management. These on-the-ground stories proved valuable in eliciting donations from the Baptist community in Australia. In June, Baptist World Aid and Relief, the relief arm of the Australian Baptist Church, dispatched US\$12,000 for Garo refugees, US\$6,000 of which was raised through donations.

Sheltering

From October 1971 to January 1972, Australian Baptist missionaries in Mymensingh sheltered 80 refugees within their compound. Ian Hawley recalled in our interview that, at first, the hostel accommodated Hindus and later also welcomed Muslims and Christians.

Australian Baptist missionaries sheltered many, but their most significant intervention was providing three months of sanctuary to 18 Hindu girls and young women. The Hindu girls were trained to sew, enabling them to repurpose disused second-hand clothing, and they planted crops in the vegetable garden for the community. Australian Baptist missionaries gave the Hindu girls structure and purpose by providing a daily routine, training, and opportunities to develop skills in self-sufficiency.

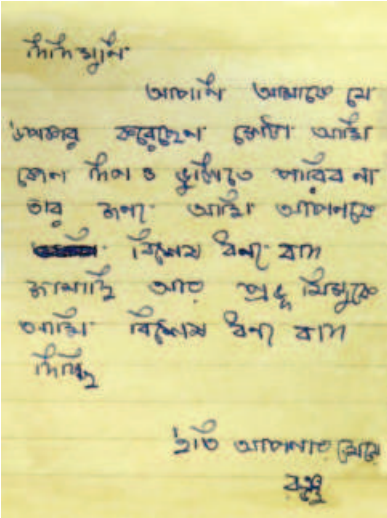
In her interview and in her diary, Grace Dodge observed the challenges faced by Hindu girls during the war. She recounted to me that the girls “had been through some horrific experiences” and noted that they arrived with nothing. In her diary entry for October 23, 1971, Grace Dodge recorded that when the Hindu girls arrived, “their entire worldly goods filled half a small plastic bucket”. When the girls arrived at the mission station, “they [the girls] said it was like arriving in heaven”, according to the diary of Grace Dodge.

The significance and impact of Baptists offering shelter and protection was not lost on the refugees. In the weeks following the cessation of hostilities, the sheltered Hindu girls wrote letters of thanks and reflection to their protectors.

One girl, Ronju Shingho, came to the mission station after her brother had been murdered and her father

feared for her safety. Ronju recalled in a letter, “Father came to know about this Baptist Mission and the way they are helping the girls... father said, ‘for your safety and peace you need to stay in the mission house because they will give you clothes, food and you won’t have any poverty, you don’t have to feel the poverty’”. Ronju wondered, “If you, the Baptist missionaries, did not help, then where would we be today? We would have been dead by starvation. So, we are thankful to God, and God will bless you”.

When the Australian missionaries decided to open their hostel to refugees in mid-October, they planned to house twelve girls. It soon became apparent that refugee demand for the hostel beds far exceeded supply. By October 31, the hostel was already at capacity, housing 13 girls. By early November, the Baptist missionaries had accepted 18 girls “under great stress” and would soon begin turning away desperate women. In her diary entry on November 8, Grace Dodge noted that one of the girls the mission had turned away was subsequently “bashed up”.



Sample thank-you letter.
SOURCE: GRACE DODGE FAMILY PAPERS.

In her letter to family three days later, Grace Dodge repeated this observation and added this explanation: “We have 18 of them crowded into the hostel. We had planned to take only 12 but that is how it worked out. There are other very needy cases that we would like to take but cannot for the space. That one girl we refused to take got bashed up the other night”.

Although it was not mentioned explicitly, the duplicated comments about the assault of the rejected girl suggest feelings of guilt and remorse about not being able to offer more to the girls in need.

Reconstruction

When Bangladesh was victorious on December 16, missionaries were already on site and could assist immediately with relief and reconstruction efforts. In the case of Australian Baptist missionaries, their greatest contribution was the reconstruction of the Joyramkura Hospital alongside the Swedish Red Cross from February to April 1972.

During the war, the hospital had been vandalised and looted, although the basic structure of the building remained sound. Given its proximity to the Indian border and the speed with which refugees were returning home, Ian Hawley recounted in our interview that “we needed the hospital going once again and we needed to do it quickly”. The issue for the missionaries

was securing supplies and trained medical staff. Ian Hawley travelled to Dhaka to persuade the Swedish Red Cross medical team to relocate to Joyramkura, while Grace Dodge and Betty Salisbury organised the delivery of medical equipment and supplies.

Rethinking the impact of missionaries

In a United Nations Information Paper released on February 18, 1972, report author Toni Hagen presented some “blunt facts” on humanitarian work during the reconstruction of Bangladesh. He wrote:

“Missionary groups are doing a wonderful job all over the world, as I know from my own experience in many countries. They generally embark on integrated rural development, vocational training and education. This requires long-term projects. In fact, such long-term projects can only be afforded by missionary groups. Only they can afford their personnel to stay for generations in the field under minimal administrative costs.”

Not only did the UN articulate the value of missionaries in providing relief and rehabilitation in Bangladesh, but it also argued that only missionaries were able to provide the long-term, structural development necessary to help rebuild Bangladesh. This extract from a UN bureaucrat is a rare example of secular humanitarians celebrating the contributions of missionaries to relief work. I would add that the Baptist missionaries examined in this research had the linguistic capabilities (fluency in Bangla; conversant in Garo) to communicate with refugees, a skill not shared by many secular or faith-based humanitarian NGOs.

The missionaries also had deep, trusting relationships with their community because they had lived in Mymensingh for an extended period, including during the war. Because of their loyalty and commitment to Mymensingh, the missionaries gained respect and admiration from locals, which in turn increased their access to the community. Although Hagen wrote about missionaries in a non-conflict context, it is the presence of missionaries in warzones that enables them to develop the relationships necessary for long-term development and reconstruction in the post-war period.

In my interview with Grace Dodge, she told me that after the war the Baptist missionaries started to wear traditional dress rather than Western clothes. This change in behaviour reveals a cultural transformation: from outsiders to committed members of the Bengali community. It also indicates an awareness of past power imbalances and acts of cultural imperialism.

This research does not seek to obscure past wrongdoings of missionaries. Indeed, the historical record is well versed in these critiques. Rather, this research offers a recognition of the humanitarian contributions of missionaries. While most of the foreigners fled for safety when war broke out, some missionaries stayed to offer assistance and protection to the most vulnerable. Missionaries may attract criticism for their evangelism, but it is this same commitment to faith that guides them in times of crisis to help the needy.

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Ladies House, Mymensingh (Betty Salisbury pictured on the right).
SOURCE: ABMS ARCHIVE.

My research reveals that the Australian Baptists who were based in Mymensingh provided material aid for evacuees in numerous ways. These included sheltering eighty Hindu and Muslim refugees, offering medical aid in neighbouring refugee camps, donating cash to displaced Garo tribespeople, and hiding refugees in makeshift bomb shelters during air raids. While this assistance may appear insignificant given the scale of displacement, it is important to remember that seemingly small acts of humanitarianism have the capacity to



The gathering in London's Trafalgar Square on August 1, 1971, to form public opinion against the Pakistani junta and advocate for the recognition of Bangladesh.

COURTESY: PAUL CONNETT



'Recognise Bangla-Desh Rally' in Trafalgar Square, August 8, 1971.

SOURCE: KEYSTONE PRESS/ALAMY

The Bangladeshi diaspora in Britain

A FORGOTTEN FRONT OF 1971



▲
A demonstration organised by the Bangladesh Women's Association in Britain during the Liberation War of 1971.

At a demonstration in Small Heath Park, Birmingham, where a symbolic Bangladesh flag was raised, Mrs Pasha delivered an impassioned speech before donating her entire wedding jewellery to the liberation fund. Her act exemplified the profound personal sacrifices made by ordinary people, with others donating their entire weekly wages to the cause.

ANSAR AHMED ULLAH

Millions of souls nineteen seventy-one homeless on Jessore Road under grey sun

A million dead, the millions who can walk toward Calcutta from East Pakistan

— Allen Ginsberg, September on Jessore Road

The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 was not merely a South Asian conflict but a global moral crisis that drew in international actors. While Cold War superpowers manoeuvred for strategic advantage and neighbouring India bore the brunt of ten million refugees, a lesser-known front opened thousands of miles away—on Britain's streets, in its Parliament, and within its Bengali diaspora communities. This transnational dimension reveals how the struggle for Bangladesh's independence became a genuinely global movement, challenging Britain's postcolonial neutrality and transforming its immigrant communities into political actors.

A global coalition of conscience

The liberation struggle attracted an extraordinary constellation of international supporters. American Senator Edward Kennedy toured refugee camps and raised the alarm in Washington. George Harrison and Ravi Shankar organised the landmark Concert for Bangladesh at Madison Square Garden, introducing millions in the West to the crisis. French intellectual André Malraux lent his considerable prestige to the cause, while German novelist Günter Grass and American poet Allen Ginsberg bore witness through their art. Soviet Premier Nikolai

Podgorny provided crucial diplomatic backing, whilst Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi orchestrated perhaps the most significant international campaign for recognition.

From Australia came W. A. Wanderland, a director at the Bata shoe company in Tongi, who transformed his factory into a guerrilla base, working alongside Bengali staff in liberation sectors one and two—efforts that would later earn him the Bir Protik, one of Bangladesh's highest gallantry awards. In Japan, academics Tsuyoshi Nara and Setsurei Tsurushima led solidarity organisations that mobilised public opinion, with Professor Nara issuing impassioned appeals condemning what he termed genocidal violence and calling upon the world's moral conscience to intervene.

Yet it was in Britain where perhaps the most sustained grassroots mobilisation outside South Asia took place—a campaign that has remained largely undocumented in historical memory.

The diaspora community: From settlement to activism

By 1971, Britain's Bengali community, though modest in size, had established footholds across the industrial heartland: London, Birmingham, Manchester, Bradford, Luton, Coventry, Sheffield, and Oldham. These were largely working-class settlements of seafarers, factory workers, and restaurateurs who had arrived during the post-war decades. Far from being politically dormant, this diaspora had already demonstrated remarkable organisational capacity.

When Pakistani forces launched Operation Searchlight on March 25, 1971, Britain's Bengali community responded with striking speed and coordination.

Within weeks, eighty-five Action Committees had formed across the country, alongside the Student Action Committee, the Bangladesh Women's Association, regional branches of the Awami League, and Action Bangladesh—the latter a solidarity organisation founded by British activists, including Paul and Ellen Connett.

Women at the forefront

The role of Bengali women in Britain's liberation movement deserves particular emphasis. Mrs Anowara Jahan of the Bangladesh Women's Association delivered letters directly to MPs at the House of Commons, cultivated relationships with parliamentarians—including Michael Barnes and John Stonehouse—and attended both Labour and Conservative Party conferences to lobby political leaders. She corresponded with world leaders on behalf of the organisation, inserting the Bangladesh crisis into the highest echelons of British political discourse.

Mrs Kulsum Ullah recalled the relentless pace of activism: Sunday rallies became the rhythm of life for nine months, as she set aside family responsibilities to organise demonstrations that drew participants from across England. Women formed the backbone of these gatherings, with Mrs Ullah herself bringing at least 150 women to the largest demonstration.

Perhaps most striking was Mrs Badrun Nesa Pasha, a founding member of Birmingham's Action Committee. At a demonstration in Small Heath Park, Birmingham, where a symbolic Bangladesh flag was raised, Mrs Pasha delivered an impassioned speech before donating her entire wedding jewellery to the liberation fund. Her act exemplified

the profound personal sacrifices made by ordinary people, with others donating their entire weekly wages to the cause.

According to Mohammed Israel, accountant of the Bangladesh Steering Committee formed in April 1971, the British campaign raised £406,856, a substantial sum equivalent to several million pounds today. Justice Abu Sayeed Choudhury, the Mujibnagar Government's special envoy, personally transported these funds to Bangladesh.

Cross-cultural solidarity

The liberation movement revealed both the possibilities and the tensions within Britain's multicultural landscape. Mrs Pasha recalled recruitment drives for volunteer fighters, where queues formed of young men willing to travel to the battlefield. Most remarkably, a white English barman presented himself, declaring his readiness to fight for Bangladesh's liberation—an act that astonished organisers and demonstrated how the cause had transcended ethnic boundaries.

British MPs, diplomats, and journalists provided crucial establishment support. Michael Barnes, Labour MP for Brentford and Chiswick, visited Bangladesh during the crackdown and subsequently tabled a parliamentary motion opposing the Pakistan cricket team's tour of England, using sport as a lever for moral pressure. His speeches in the Commons exposed the scale of atrocities to British lawmakers.

Among diplomats, civil servants such as Mr Miles, Deputy High Commissioner in Kolkata (1970–74) and later High Commissioner to Bangladesh (1978–79),

the war's intimate conflicts. Pakistani and Bengali communities, previously coexisting peacefully, fractured along national lines. Bengali activists reported verbal abuse and physical attacks on British streets. One school student, Tunu Miah, recalled Pakistani acquaintances treating Bengalis with contempt, questioning their religious authenticity and likening them to slaves. Street clashes erupted, with Bengali groups banding together for protection, transforming Britain's urban spaces into extensions of the distant battlefield.

The forgotten chapter

Despite its significance, this British dimension of Bangladesh's liberation remains largely unrecorded in official histories on either side. Comprehensive historical scholarship remains elusive. The story of how Britain's Bengali diaspora mobilised action committees, raised hundreds of thousands of pounds, lobbied Parliament, and transformed themselves from immigrants into transnational political actors deserves its place in both British and Bangladeshi historical narratives.

A global history

The Bangladesh Liberation War was a watershed in postcolonial history, demonstrating how decolonisation's unfinished business could erupt into catastrophic violence. But it was also a moment when global solidarity networks emerged, prefiguring later humanitarian movements. The Concert for Bangladesh pioneered celebrity activism for distant causes. Diaspora communities discovered their political agency, learning to navigate host-



Paul Connett and Ellen Connett, photographed by Ansar Ahmed Ullah. Shocked by reports of genocide carried out by the Pakistani military against Bengalis in East Pakistan in 1971, they became leading figures in mobilising British support for Bangladesh's liberation, helping to found Action Bangladesh and Operation Omega, and organising nationwide 'Stop Genocide' and 'Recognise Bangladesh' campaigns.

provided what he termed "unofficial support". Miles witnessed the historic gathering of half a million people who greeted Sheikh Mujib in Kolkata in January 1972 as he returned from London to liberated Bangladesh. His visits to refugee camps housing ten million displaced Bengalis provided British officialdom with first-hand testimony of the humanitarian catastrophe.

British journalists Simon Dring, Anthony Mascarenhas, and Mark Tully broke through the Pakistani military's information blockade, with Mascarenhas's eyewitness account of systematic atrocities proving particularly influential in swaying international opinion.

Yet the diaspora also experienced

country institutions whilst maintaining ties to their homelands. International media, despite censorship, transmitted images that mobilised conscience across continents.

Britain's role, both official and grassroots, reflects the complex legacy of empire. Former colonial subjects turned to British courts, Parliament, and public opinion for justice, whilst British citizens responded with solidarity that transcended racial and national boundaries. This was not simply a South Asian conflict observed from afar, but a global struggle in which Britain itself became a significant theatre of action.

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The art lover who stole *The Love Letter* for Bangladesh's freedom

Although he lived more than 7,500 kilometres away, the young Flemish man felt his heart break for those suffering. Was there truly nothing he could do?

Soon afterwards, Mario resolved to take action—something that would not only help the people of the region but also generate global support for their struggle for independence. It was this resolve that ultimately drove Mario to steal the artwork.

AHMAD ISTIAK

October 1, 1971, around eight o'clock at night. An unexpected phone call came to Walter Schuldens, a journalist at the Brussels-based newspaper *La Soirée*. As soon as Walter picked up the receiver, an unknown voice said from the other end, "I am Thyl von Limburg. A few days ago, I stole Johannes Vermeer's *The Love Letter* from the Brussels Museum of Fine Arts. If the museum authorities want this artwork returned in perfect condition, they must pay a ransom of 200 million francs (four million dollars at the time). But the condition is that the ransom must be paid to CARITAS, and the money must be used for the refugees suffering in the war in East Pakistan. I am not a professional criminal. I am simply an art lover."

The *Love Letter*, painted in the 17th century by the renowned Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer, is one of his celebrated masterpieces. Preserved at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the painting was valued at around 250 million francs at that time.

A special exhibition titled "*Rembrandt and His Time*" was being held at the Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels. For this exhibition,



Brussels Museum of Fine Arts

given for overnight stays became the new hiding place for *The Love Letter*, beneath the mattress of his hotel bed.

Why Mario Roymans stole the painting

One morning in August 1971, 21-year-old Flemish youth Mario Pierre Roymans was lying in bed, half-asleep, watching television. Suddenly, his eyes froze on the screen. The broadcast showed how the West Pakistani military was carrying out some of the most horrific and barbaric massacres in East Pakistan, all in the name of suppressing so-called separatists.

Mario saw helpless, innocent people running towards the border to save their lives, seeking refuge as displaced persons. He also saw decomposing bodies being torn apart by starving dogs and vultures.

Although he lived more than 7,500 kilometres away, the young Flemish man felt his heart break for those suffering. Was there truly nothing he could do?

Soon afterwards, Mario resolved to take action—something that would not only help the people of the region but also generate global support for their struggle for independence. It was this resolve that ultimately drove Mario to steal the artwork.

that he indeed had the painting. He said he would only believe Mario if he showed it to him in secret. Mario agreed and instructed Walter to be at a specific location before dawn the next morning. Accordingly, before sunrise, Walter arrived by car at a designated spot in the Limburg forest. Mario, wearing a mask, was already waiting there. He blindfolded Walter and took him near a church, where he produced the painting. Walter switched on his car's headlights and took several photographs of it.

On 3 October, *La Soirée* published a special report featuring these photographs and Mario's claims, causing a sensation across Belgium.

The report also attracted the attention of the Rijksmuseum authorities in Amsterdam. They contacted Mario by telephone, saying that if he truly possessed the original painting, they would have experts examine it. If verified as authentic, they would pay the ransom. They also assured Mario that he need not worry about any police involvement. But Mario did not take the bait.

host were deeply moved by his account.

Mario had made the call from a petrol station in Hasselt. Recognising him and tempted by the reward money, the petrol station owner's wife informed the police. Realising what was about to happen, Mario tried to flee on a motorcycle but failed. As the police chased him, he jumped off the motorcycle and hid at a nearby farm.

He was eventually captured by the police from a heap of manure.

The police then took Mario to conduct a raid at the Sitewete Hotel in Heusden-Zolder. From beneath the mattress in his hotel room, they recovered Vermeer's *The Love Letter*.

Trial, sentence, and public support

Mario Roymans was brought to trial on December 20 of that year. On January 12, 1972, the Brussels court sentenced him to two years in prison.

Demanding Mario's unconditional release and insisting that the ransom be used to aid helpless East Pakistani refugees, ordinary citizens took to the streets. Public signature campaigns were launched, and human rights activists, journalists, intellectuals, artists, and writers all rallied in his support.

Finally, responding to the overwhelming demand of the people and considering the nature of his actions, Mario Roymans was released from prison on July 12, 1972, after serving six months.

However, even from the moment of his arrest, Mario's actions had already played a significant role in shaping European public opinion in favour of the Bangladesh Liberation War. His efforts sparked widespread discussion across Europe about the ongoing genocide perpetrated by the occupying Pakistani forces.

Mario Roymans' later life

While in prison, Mario Roymans suffered severe psychological trauma that left him mentally devastated. At one point, he became somewhat unstable. After his release, Mario married, and the couple had a beautiful baby girl. Eventually, however, his mental health deteriorated completely. He began spending his days wandering the streets and sleeping at night in parked cars.

On the morning of Boxing Day in 1978, Mario was found in critical condition inside a parked car on a street in Liège. He was rushed to hospital, but by then his condition had worsened due to massive bleeding in the brain. After fighting for his life for ten days, Mario Pierre Roymans, a selfless friend of Bangladesh during the Liberation War, breathed his last on January 5, 1979. He was later laid to rest in a small cemetery in Nerem, Tongeren, his birthplace in Belgium.

I first learned about the theft of Mario Roymans' artwork through international media. The theft of Johannes Vermeer's world-famous painting *The Love Letter* caused a sensation not only in Belgium but across Europe at the time. Alongside *La Soirée*, the incident was covered in widely circulated Belgian newspapers such as *De Standaard*, *La Libre Belgique*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, and *Het Belang van Limburg*. Two days after the

sensational theft, reports also appeared in *Le Figaro* in Paris and *La Vanguardia* in Barcelona. Details about Mario's later life emerged much later in a 2021 feature published in *Het Belang van Limburg*, which recounted his acts of bravery.

Further insights into Mario can be found in journalist Su Summers' book, *MARIO: HET VERHAAL VAN TIJL VAN LIMBURG*, published in Flemish. Bangladesh-born Belgian expatriate Syed Musaddekur Rahman assisted me in accessing and understanding the book.

Searching for Mario Roymans' family
Fifty-two years after the Liberation War, I began tracing the final whereabouts of Mario Roymans and searching for his surviving family members. At first, despite speaking to several Bangladeshi expatriates in Belgium, I failed to uncover any information, as none of them knew anything about Mario.

Within a few weeks, however, one Bangladeshi expatriate introduced me to Humayun Maksud Himu, another expatriate Bangladeshi living in the city of Hasselt, Belgium. Through Himu, we finally discovered Mario Roymans' world, his last known address, and the whereabouts of his only daughter. As soon as Himu began speaking to us, Mario's address and family history started to unfold.

Himu first learned about Mario Roymans back in 2008. At the time, he attempted to locate Mario's family and contacted the Belgian Federal Police. But because Mario was a convicted criminal in Belgium, the police initially refused to provide any information.

Himu told me, "When they initially refused to provide me with the information, I explained to the officials that although Mario was considered a criminal in Belgium, he was an extraordinary figure in the history of Bangladesh's Liberation War." Eventually, they agreed to give him the address of Mario's daughter.

Himu then tried to contact Mario's only child, but even there he faced difficulties. "Her name is Isabella," Himu said. "When I went to her home and she learned why I had come, she refused to speak. She held Bangladesh responsible for her father's tragic end. On top of that, she faced a language barrier and did not understand anything except Flemish. I spent years trying to reach her, but she would not talk to me. After several years, her anger finally faded. She eventually spoke to me, and a few of us Bangladeshi expatriates met her several times."

However, over the years, the connection between Himu and Isabella broke again. Isabella changed her address, and he lost all contact with her. In 2021, *Het Belang van Limburg*, a widely circulated Belgian newspaper, published a special report on Mario Roymans' daring 1971 operation. After the article came out, Himu met the reporter who wrote it. With the reporter's help, he was able to locate Isabella's new address. She currently lives in the Belgian city of Hasselt.

With Himu's assistance, I was able to speak with Mario Roymans' only surviving descendant, Isabella Roymans. Isabella told me, "I was only three when I lost my father. My mother had already left us by then. I have no memories of my father. But knowing that he helped your people during the Liberation War makes me very proud. I am not financially well off now, but if I ever get the chance, I would love to visit your country at least once, because my father risked his life for it. My father may have been a criminal here, but what he did for your freedom struggle matters. I only hope your people will always remember that."

No one remembered Mario Roymans' bravery

Neither Belgium nor Bangladesh remembered the bravery of Mario Roymans. In Belgium, he remained forever labelled as a criminal. And in Bangladesh?

Between July 25, 2011 and October 2, 2013, the government honoured 339 foreign friends and organisations from 21 countries with the Bangladesh Freedom Honour, Bangladesh Liberation War Honour, and Friends of Liberation War Honour. But Mario Roymans' name never appeared on any of these lists.

Even in the latest compilation of Bangladesh's foreign friends—348 individuals from 33 countries—updated by the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs, Mario Roymans' name remains missing.

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Mario Roymans is being presented in court.

the Rijksmuseum had loaned *The Love Letter*. Along with Vermeer's masterpiece, several other notable artworks from the 16th and 17th centuries were brought in from museums in France, Denmark, and Germany to be displayed.

How *The Love Letter* was smuggled out

On the evening of September 23, Princess Pamela inaugurated the exhibition. At one point, Mario Roymans entered the museum on the pretext of viewing the exhibition. Being an art enthusiast, Mario was well aware of the artistic value of *The Love Letter*.

Just before entering the museum, and again after doing so, Mario carefully observed his surroundings. He noticed four unarmed police officers guarding the interior and exterior of the building. On one of the walls, Vermeer's renowned painting hung quietly. Before anyone could realise what was happening, Mario slipped into a drawer-like storage space.

The reason was simple: it was practically impossible to carry out a painting measuring nearly 17 inches in length and 15 inches in width without being detected. So Mario waited for the museum to close. Once it did, and as night deepened, he crawled out of the drawer. With a knife taken from his pocket, he cautiously slit the frame surrounding the artwork hanging on the wall. He then rolled up the canvas, folded it, and tucked it into his pocket.

Through a ventilation opening, Mario Roymans escaped before anyone noticed a thing.

Returning home to Tongeren with the painting, he found himself in great trouble. Where would he hide it? Unable to think of a better option, he buried the artwork in a nearby forest. But heavy rain fell that night, and at dawn he retrieved it and brought it back home.

Mario then began looking for work. Shortly afterwards, he found a job as a waiter at a hotel named Sitewete in Heusden-Zolder. The room he was



The *Love Letter* by Johannes Vermeer.

Mario was caught

The day after the incident, the Museum of Fine Arts authorities discovered that *The Love Letter* had gone missing. Detectives inspected the site and concluded that the theft was almost certainly the work of a professional organised gang. The Belgian government announced a substantial reward for information leading to the recovery of the artwork. A massive search operation also began.

On the night of October 1, during the phone call, journalist Walter Schuldens repeatedly asked Mario for his real name and identity. Each time, Mario introduced himself as "Thyl von Limburg". It is worth noting that "Thyl Ulenspiegel" is a legendary character in Flemish folklore, known for righteousness and moral courage. Over the phone, Mario also told Walter that if the ransom of 200 million francs was not paid for refugee relief, he would steal the remaining 39 paintings from the Brussels Museum of Fine Arts as well.

Walter then asked Mario for proof



The book *MARIO* by journalist Su Summers, about Mario Roymans.

Meanwhile, Mario contacted another newspaper, *Hot Faits*, stating that if the ransom of 200 million francs was not paid by 6 October, he would sell the painting. Several potential buyers had already approached him, he claimed. Mario added yet another condition: the payment of the ransom had to be broadcast live on television, and the insurance company responsible for the artwork had to be present during the signing of the agreement.

Realising that raising 200 million francs in such a short time was virtually impossible, the Dutch museum authorities eventually refused to pay the ransom.

On the morning of October 6, after failing to secure the ransom, Mario was given a chance to speak live via telephone on VRT Radio's popular show *To Bed or Not to Bed*. During the broadcast, he revealed his entire plan. He also described in detail the monstrous genocide being carried out by the Pakistani military in East Pakistan. Both the listeners and the

The history we walked past

The BSF–Mukti Bahini collaboration that shaped Bangladesh’s birth



Bangladesh Liberation War heroes in Chittagong after the war (left to right): Ashoke Gupta, Captain Mahfuzur, Captain Enamul Haque, Major Mir Saukat Ali, Captain Ali (P. K. Ghosh), and Major Rafiqul Islam.

USHINOR MAJUMDAR

For 12 years, I passed by a dusty, red building on what is now called Suhrawardy Avenue in Calcutta (before it became Kolkata) and never noticed it. A colonial-era building standing next to Lady Brabourne College, it was not a local landmark. It would be years later that I chanced upon its historical and cultural significance during research on a freedom struggle that changed the map of South Asia forever.

Those 12 years were spent at my alma mater, Don Bosco Park Circus, barely half a kilometre from that red building. A fine institution, it taught us history as per the curriculum. But there was nothing on South Asia’s only liberation movement based on language and culture.

The building once housed the Pakistan High Commission. Following a carefully orchestrated move, it became the first diplomatic mission of the ‘Bangla Desh’ government within three weeks of the Liberation War beginning. It stands slightly unkempt now, but it is a symbol of great courage, will, determination, and culture. That was perhaps the first brick-and-mortar institution to emerge from collaboration between the Indian government and the exiled government of Bangladesh. During the nine months that the struggle lasted, it hosted meetings of the War Cabinet and discussions between Bangladeshi political leaders of different allegiances but with the common purpose of liberating Bangladesh. It is also a testament to the work of the Swadhin Bangla Betaar Kendra and housed the first-ever diplomatic mission of Bangladesh.

I learnt this during my research into India’s secret and covert role in the

nine-month-long Liberation War. The findings of my research are available in the public domain in the book titled India’s Secret War, published by Penguin Random House India in 2023.

Here is a gist: it is a story of many firsts for both South Asia and the world. Among them is the first-ever collaboration between Bangladesh and India, which lasted for the nine long months until Liberation. The protagonists of my book are the officers and personnel of the Indian Border Security Force (BSF), who worked alongside the Mukti Bahini. They jointly carried out covert missions deep inside East Pakistan, sabotaged the Pakistan Army, and facilitated several key political events, such as the swearing in of the Mujibnagar government.

The BSF were India’s first responders to the genocide unfolding next door. Their role was different from that of the Indian Armed Forces, which joined the fray later. Back then, the BSF symbolised safety and security for the millions of Bengalis fleeing murder and rape in East Pakistan.

The Indian press has covered the book widely and mentioned the role of P.K. Ghosh, known to the Mukti Bahini as Captain Ali. Major (and later President of Bangladesh) Ziaur Rahman had given him this name. Ghosh, then an assistant commandant with the BSF, was posted in southern Tripura. He worked closely with several well-known war heroes such as Major Shawkat Ali, Captain Rafiqul Islam, Major Parvez Musharraf, and others.

Ghosh’s role began on the morning of March 26, 1971, when he helped half a section of the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR), led by Havildar Nooruddin, to liberate a small hamlet. A section of Pakistan Army soldiers had been positioned there to guard the Subhapur Bridge on the River Feni. Nooruddin and the five EPR personnel took out some of the Pakistani soldiers, and an angry mob of villagers finished off the rest following their arrest.

The Subhapur Bridge lay on the trunk road connecting Chittagong to Comilla and Dhaka. Later, Ghosh, along with a team of commandos and the Mukti Bahini, would blow up the bridge (and several others) to obstruct the Pakistan Army. The joint Indian and Bangladeshi forces lost the bridge to the Pakistan Army in May 1971, but only after holding it for 21 days against a full battalion of Pakistani troops.

The media in India loved and lapped up the stories of covert operations, demolitions, and the bravado of Ghosh

and other officers like him in my book. Equally important, however, are the stories that did not receive enough coverage—those describing daily life at the border, where the Mukti Bahini camped and where refugees first stayed when they set foot in India.

One of the chapters is about P.K. Halder, who was then serving as a sub-inspector with the BSF and was posted close to the border where it runs between Petrapole and Benapole. This story is told from the point of view of an ordinary young man whose family migrated from East Bengal a few years after Partition. He grew up in West Bengal, where his family built a new life away from their ancestral home.

Halder joined the BSF for the pay cheque and found himself leading a platoon of border sentries. When the Liberation War started, Halder was one of the young men leading small operations jointly conducted by the Mukti Bahini and the BSF in civvies.

BSF personnel and officers wore civilian clothing and crossed the border along with Mukti Bahini guerrilla fighters. They donned lungis with primed grenades tucked into their waistbands and slung gamchas around their shoulders, which concealed carbine pistols.

Such small operations are often overlooked in the grand narratives of dogfights in the sky, the destruction of American tanks, and airdrops. To me, these seemingly smaller stories provide granular insight into how the Mukti Bahini kept pressure on the Pakistan Army.

The Muktijoddhas made do with whatever weapons and tools they had available. They used microphones and speakers to draw soldiers out from the safety of their camps and then shot at them. They conducted ambushes on military parties until it became difficult for the Pakistan Army to move in smaller formations, especially at night.

In his book on the war, Lt Gen. Niazi speaks of how his soldiers were no match for guerrilla fighters during the monsoon. The Pakistan Army soldiers were not accustomed to incessant rain and the mushy terrain, he wrote. What he does not admit is that by the time the monsoon arrived, the Muktijoddhas were in good fighting form. Cooks, tailors, farmers, students, and engineers had all undergone training and took on both razakars and soldiers of the regular army.

Some military researchers have concluded that the success of the Mukti Bahini was responsible for the

deployment of razakars at the border, while Pakistan Army soldiers remained in the safety of their camps. Later on, the Mukti Bahini and the BSF also targeted such camps of the regular army with guns and mortars in operations that are usually the function of regular armies.

Halder’s point of view showed me life at the BSF camp and at the Mukti Bahini camp adjacent to it. Muktijoddhas were issued passes that allowed transit across the India–East Pakistan border to gather intelligence, ferry arms and ammunition, and conduct guerrilla missions. I found some of these items, such as the identity cards and passes they used, displayed at the Muktijuddha Jadughor (Liberation War Museum) in Dhaka.

The largest liberated zone in East Pakistan during the Liberation War was in Tangail, under the control of the Kaderia Bahini, led by Kader Siddiqui. His militia consisted entirely of guerrilla fighters, and he entrusted a few of them with carrying messages to and from an Indian Army brigadier operating out of Meghalaya. They carried arms and ammunition back to Tangail. This was to become one of the most important strategic partnerships of the Liberation War.

This channel facilitated the Tangail Airdrop, which eventually led to the surrender of Dhaka. Indian paratroopers were airdropped into Tangail, which had been secured by the Kaderia Bahini. These forces, together with a company of BSF personnel, then fought their way towards Dhaka and surrounded the city.

Calcutta was home to the Mujibnagar government, and I based myself in my hometown after many years while researching the book. There are buildings in the city that house secrets from the Liberation War. The Swadhin Bangla Betaar Kendra came to the city much later, after fleeing Chittagong.

a building on Ballygunge Circular Road in Calcutta.

That clandestine radio station was one of the most important politico-cultural devices of the Liberation War and was the first of its kind in Asia. Its broadcasts influenced the western media to report against US-funded Pakistani oppression. Much of South Asia has felt the effects of the Richard Nixon administration, and particularly that of the late Henry Kissinger, whose influence outlived his tenure as national security adviser to Nixon by several years.

It was also the BSF that received Tajuddin Ahmed and Amirul Islam. The BSF’s Director General, K. F. Rustamji, arranged their meeting with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and personally escorted them to meet her. Rustamji took a personal interest in backing the Mujibnagar government, which was housed in a BSF safe house in Calcutta from April 1971 until Dhaka was liberated.

Both the roles of the BSF and the Mukti Bahini need to be remembered better in Indian history books. The contribution of both has been ignored by some military officers who have written about their experiences at the eastern frontier during the 1971 war. Some such officers have praised both the BSF’s and the Mukti Bahini’s roles in private conversations with me. But in public, they abstain from acknowledging the role of any other force. The BSF has a history that deserves fuller acknowledgement and more honest representation in the writing of the war.

The writing of history has a duty to rise above the limitations of men telling their own tales of bravery—a challenge that South Asian historians will no doubt meet with ease and rigour. I am eager to read that complete and granular history of the liberation



The Bangladesh national flag being hoisted at the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission in Calcutta, shortly after India’s recognition of Bangladesh, 6 December 1971.

Initially, the BSF housed them for two months in Tripura and provided logistical and technical support to the radio team. The radio programmes were recorded and broadcast from different locations in Tripura, starting in April 1971. On the one hand, the BSF was supporting the radio station in Tripura; on the other, it was also running covert operations with the Mukti Bahini from there.

After two months, the Indian R&AW saw the value of the radio station and helped set it up in Calcutta. There too, it was the BSF that gave them a home in

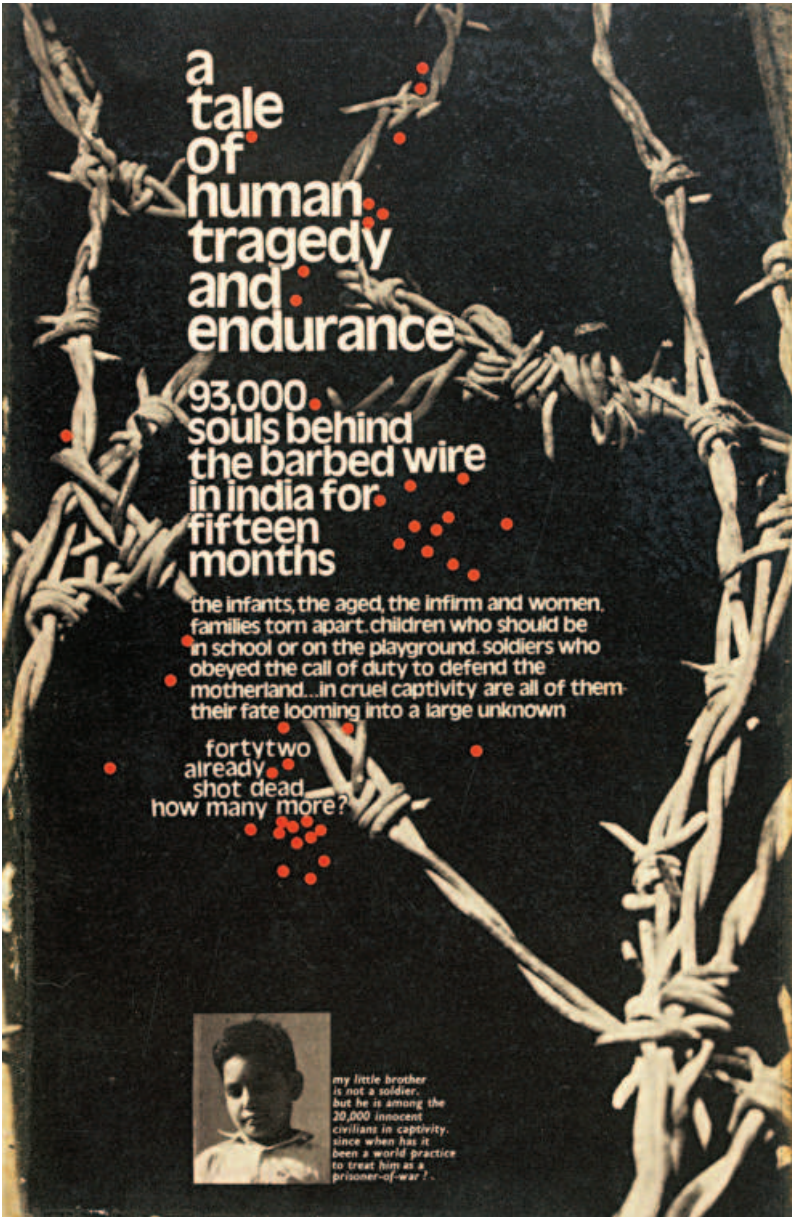
of Bangladesh that will be taught to generations ahead.

That red building on Suhrawardy Avenue is still awaiting its due recognition.

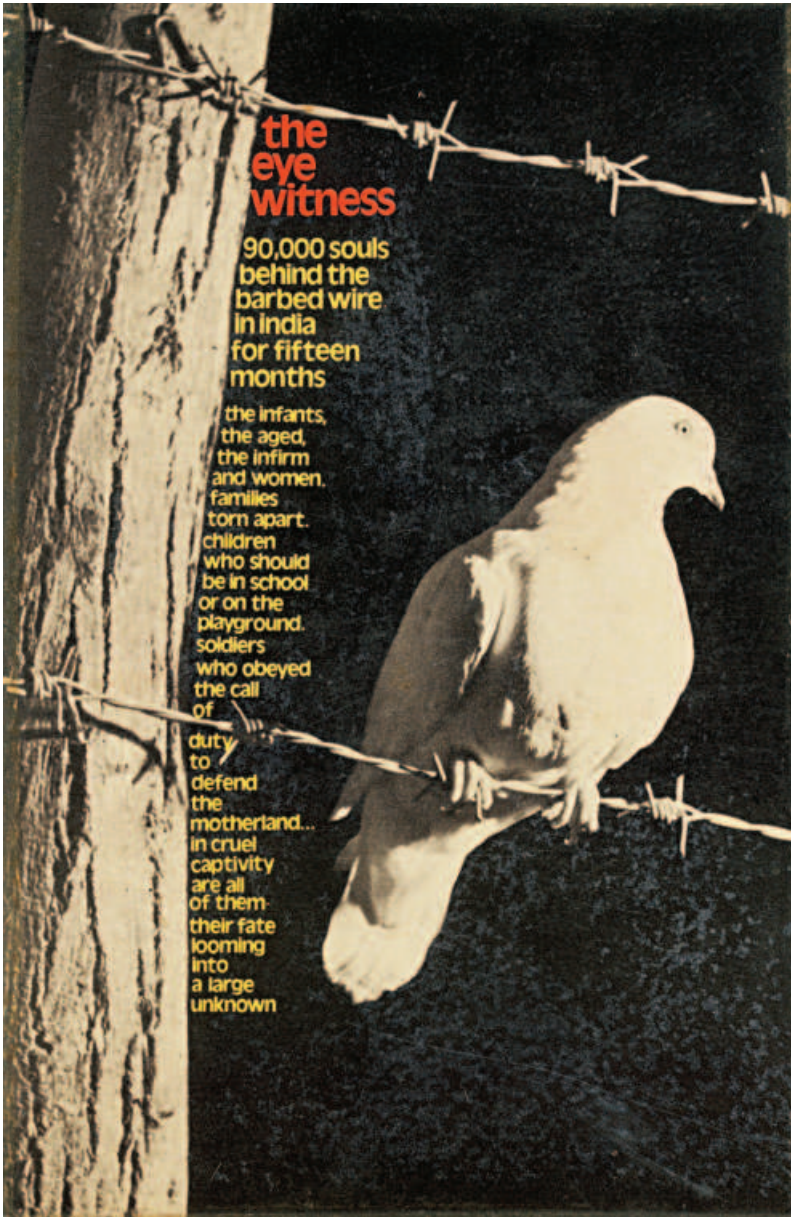
Ushinor Majumdar is an award-winning investigative journalist and the author of two works of non-fiction—*India’s Secret War: BSF and Nine Months to the Birth of Bangladesh* (Penguin India, 2023); and *God of Sin: The Cult, Clout and Downfall of Asaram Bapu* (Penguin India, 2018).



Postcard showing children appealing for the release of POWs.



Propaganda picture postcard.



Picture postcard with a propaganda message.

The war after the war: Pakistan’s POWs and postal propaganda

MANNAN MASHHUR ZARIF

The cessation of conflict on December 16, 1971 led to the surrender of the Eastern Command of the Pakistan Army, and over 90 thousand Pakistani prisoners of war (POW) were taken into custody. In the months following the laying down of arms, they were moved to Indian camps, and this sparked one of the most intense political campaigns seen in South Asia since the Partition of 1947.

For Pakistan, the defeat created a moment of national humiliation. Within the country, the government were faced with rising public rage and a sudden resurgence of talk about military accountability. There was also a growing fear within the military that the POWs might disclose details of atrocities committed by the army during the nine months of Bangladesh’s freedom struggle. Thus, it was felt that the immediate release of the POWs from Indian camps was essential to save Pakistan from further shame.

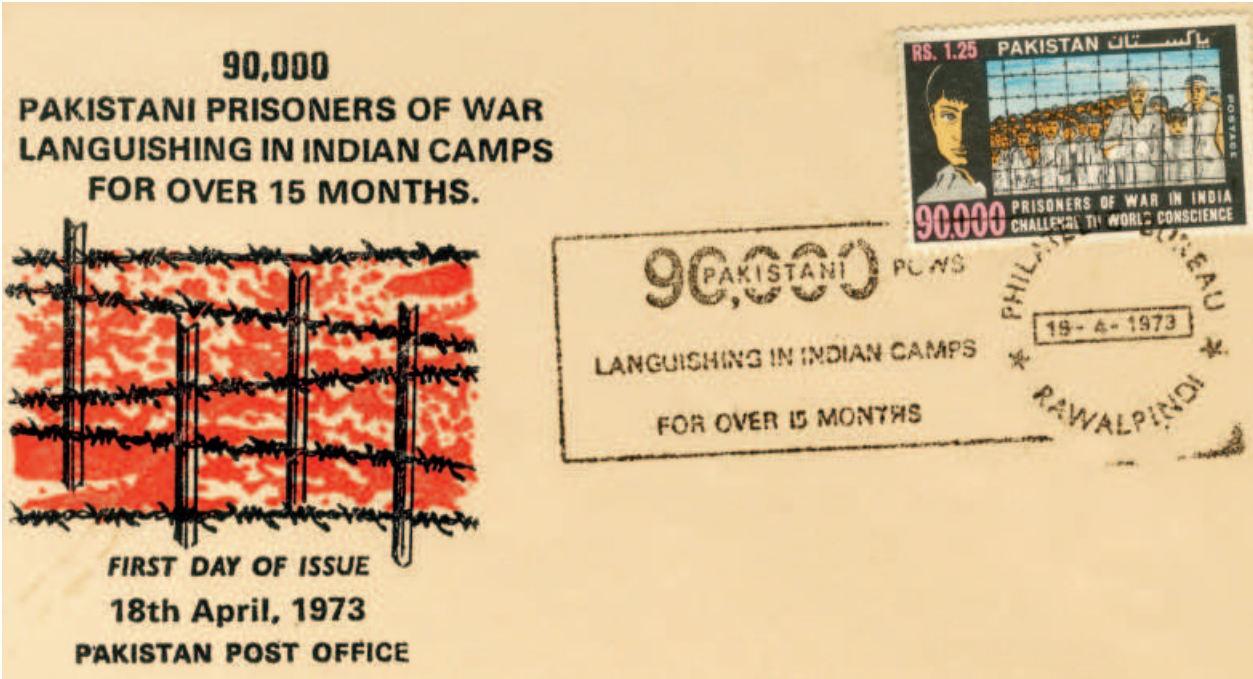


Aerogramme sent to NSW, Australia.

After the events of 1971, the country also found itself globally isolated. There was mounting worldwide sympathy for Bangladesh and India’s control of the POW talks. The international press viewed the situation not as a humanitarian concern at all, but rightly in the context of war crimes committed by an occupying army. To counter this growing pressure, the Government of Pakistan needed to construct its narrative fairly quickly.

Postal evidence supports the view that a propaganda campaign was underway as soon as the army surrendered. This was a desperate measure to address internal disputes and to regain a fast-disappearing moral stance abroad.

In mid-1973, a philatelic scheme was launched. It eventually failed to achieve its desired goal, but the stamps, postal stationery, postal markings, and picture postcards of the time remain as



First Day Cover dated April 18, 1973 from the Rawalpindi Philatelic Bureau.

documents of contemporary political history.

UNDERSTANDING PHILATELIC PROPAGANDA

Since their first issue in 1840, postage stamps have been used to indicate the prepayment of postage. Even in the early days, it was understood that because of the cross-border exchange of letters, stamps could reach wider international audiences and spread national narratives. The fact that they were widely collected meant that any information conveyed through them was preserved by collectors.

During both World Wars, the nations at war rediscovered how effectively philatelic materials could present national narratives across international audiences. The Cold War period saw a wider use of this tactic. Nations used philately to present political narratives and often to counter rival ideas. This created an international precedent for what stamps could achieve beyond their postal function.

By the time the world entered the tumultuous times of the 1970s, the use of stamps and philately as a means of spreading political messages was already an established practice. In the 1971 War, the Mujibnagar Government fully exploited this “newly discovered” tool in diplomatic warfare. It used stamps to present the case of Bangladesh, a nation desperately trying to fight a genocide and proclaim political sovereignty.

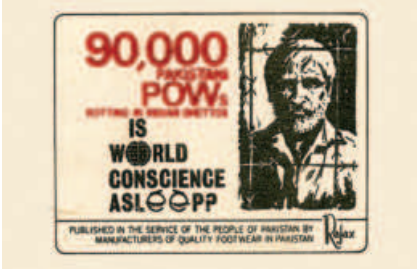
Initially, Pakistan tried to counter this clever philatelic campaign. Although late in realising its potential, post-December 1971 the country adopted its own scheme to garner international sympathy. This time, for the case of the POWs, it echoed the Cold War strategy of “rebranding” political and military failures as humanitarian tragedies.

THE CAMPAIGN

In July 1973, the Pakistan Post Office issued a special postage stamp of Rs 1.25 denomination to raise world conscience in favour of the 90,000 Pakistani prisoners of war in Indian camps.

Released on July 18, 1973, the stamp—designed by Mukhtar Ahmed, a Pakistani designer—is noteworthy—

A gloomy picture of a prison camp is shown in a rectangle on the right side of the stamp against a black background. A multitude of prisoners clad in uniform are shown standing behind a mesh of barbed wire. In the broader panel to the left of the rectangle, a sad boy is shown anxiously waiting for the return of his father. The figure 90,000 appears in pink below the figure of the boy, while



Publicity labels issued by Rajax, a footwear manufacturer.

the caption “Prisoners of War in India, Challenge to World Conscience” appears in two lines in white below the rectangle.

The accompanying First Day Cancellation reinforced the same message with the slogan, “90,000 Pakistan POWs Languishing in Indian Camps for Over 15 Months.”

On August 16, 1973, two different aerogrammes were issued, also on this topic, and their designs mirrored the urgency of the stamp—

A human hand suspended in barbed wire at the centre, the Human Rights symbol at the left, and the words “HELP RELEASE PRISONERS OF WAR 90,000” in the bottom panel. Barbed wire appears on the front in black, forming a frame line.

In addition to the stamps and postal stationery, a slogan postmark was introduced. It simply read: “90,000 POWs in Indian Camps are on World Conscience.”

The postmark is known to have been used to cancel stamps and stationery, and was also used as a transit mark on mail destined for foreign addresses. Another slogan, “HELP TO RELEASE PAKISTANI POWs,” appears in violet on some covers. This is likely of private



Propaganda stamp.

origin and possibly produced by a commercial enterprise.

Private labels amplified the campaign further. At least two commercial firms—S A Lodhy & Co. (transfer stamp manufacturers) and Rajax (manufacturers of footwear)—issued labels with similar designs, differentiated only by their imprints. Each depicts a Pakistani POW behind barbed wire, accompanied by the text: “90,000 Pakistani POWs Rotting in Indian Ghettos; is the world conscience asleep?”

A second text-only version is also known: “90,000 Pakistani POWs languishing in Indian camps for over 15 months; is world conscience asleep?” Additionally, three picture postcards were printed by Golden Block Works Ltd., Karachi, publishing the same message. The close similarity between the texts on the labels and the postcards suggests that all were commissioned from a single source—likely printed at the same Karachi press—and may have been released around July 18, 1973.

A FAILED SCHEME?

Perhaps not.

Pakistan did succeed in repatriating its nearly 90 thousand POWs without a trial for the crimes they had committed. The momentum for the return of prisoners came not from postal propaganda alone but from diplomatic channels opened through the Simla Agreement and finalised in the Delhi Agreement. The philatelic messaging ran parallel to these talks, shaping public sentiment in Pakistan but perhaps having little influence on the negotiations themselves.

As for the “misinformation campaign”, one may question how it came to be accepted internationally. While it does not explicitly ban “propaganda”, the Universal Postal Union, the specialised UN agency that serves as the central coordinating body for international postal services, has loose guidelines on what subjects are deemed acceptable on postage stamps.

Under Article 6 (Postage Stamps) of the UPU Convention, postage stamps must be “devoid of political character or of any topic of an offensive nature in respect of a person or a country”. The UPU views stamps as symbols of national identity and culture, expecting members to uphold quality and cultural relevance in their designs, discouraging “abusive” issues or those lacking postal or philatelic value, and promoting international peace through stamps.

While some renowned catalogues give September 10, 1973 as the date on which the POW stamps were withdrawn from circulation, an official directive on the matter remains untraceable. The issue is still debated among collectors of 1971 philately.

Pakistan’s philatelic campaign of 1973 stands as a compelling reminder of how states repeatedly turn to visual, easily exportable media when political narratives begin to slip beyond their control.

The POW stamp and its related postal material sought to reshape a conversation that had already been framed internationally as an issue of war crimes, not humanitarian neglect. And although the campaign did little to alter global opinion or secure early repatriation, it left behind a fascinating paper trail.

Mannan Mashhur Zarif is a journalist and a philatelist. Images are from the personal collection of the author.

AMERICAN DOCTORS WHO EXPOSED THE NIXON–KISSINGER LIES

Dhaka’s Cholera Research Laboratory as a witness to the 1971 genocide



PHOTO CREDIT: BIC COLLECTIONS, COURTESY OF DR. DAVID R. NALIN

A group of protesters including former C.R.L. staff members and their families and local Bengali activists protesting at Sheridan Circle, May 1971.

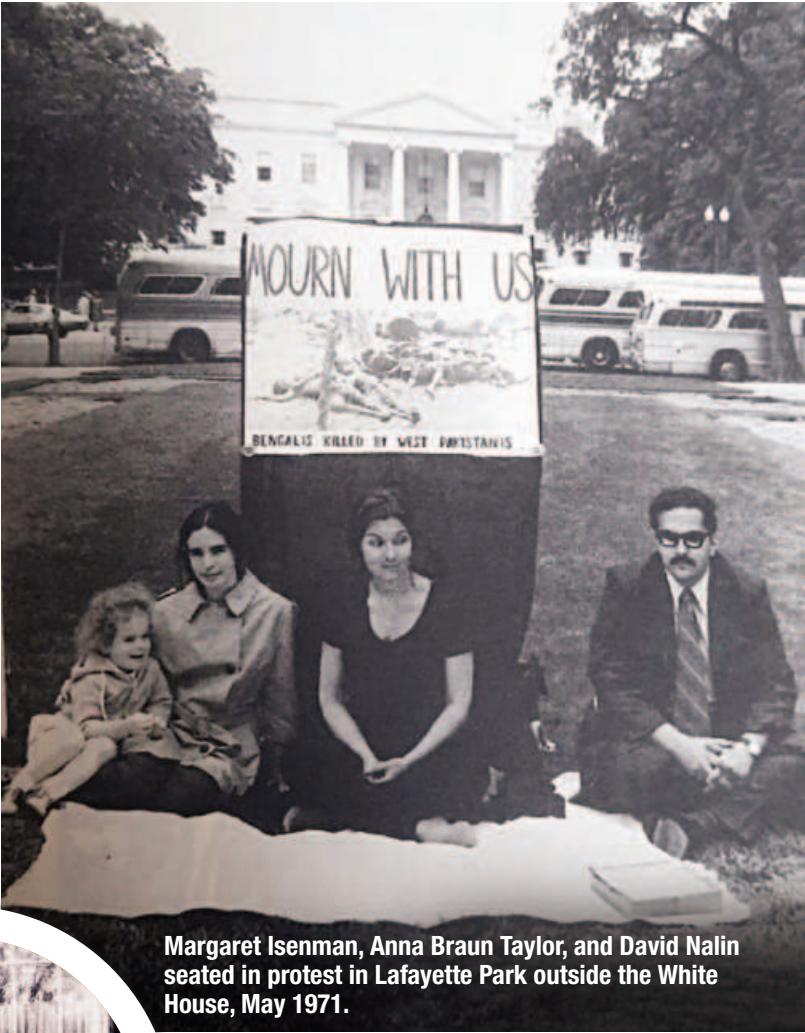
MINHAZUL ISLAM

The air in Dhaka in March 1971 was thick with fear, but within the Cholera Research Laboratory (CRL), there was a different kind of stress. While US President Nixon and Henry Kissinger were busy reinforcing the bedrock of the US–Pakistan alliance by framing the burgeoning conflict in East Pakistan as a mere “internal matter,” a small contingent of American doctors and scientists witnessed an atrocity that defied diplomatic euphemism.

Due to its strong ties to Pakistan as a Cold War ally, the Nixon administration declined to recognise the genocide. Approximately 750 American officials, doctors, and humanitarian workers were present in the city when the crackdown began. Most people remained silent—out of fear and out of protocol. However, a few could not. Archer Blood, the US Consul General, witnessed Dhaka’s descent into terror and felt his conscience revolt. His now-famous “Blood Telegram” to Washington portrayed a city rife with burning homes, machine-gunned civilians, and the methodical slaughter of its intellectuals. It was a protest from within the US administration itself.

Meanwhile, a growing chorus of condemnation rose among non-diplomatic professionals. Individuals like Gulshan Ara and Shamsul Bari were already knocking on doors, trying to cut through the confusion. Many in Washington, however, continued to view Bangladesh as an “internal matter”—a struggle that was too far away, too complex, and too easily equated with another tragedy, Biafra. American politicians were reluctant to recognise a genocide in East Pakistan because of the aftermath of that Nigerian civil war, which featured images of malnourished children and an unsuccessful secessionist movement. Only when actual, indisputable human evidence began to emerge did the story start to change.

Silence did not endure for long. Congressmen visited refugee camps, and Senators received letters on their desks. Uncomfortable questions



Margaret Isenman, Anna Braun Taylor, and David Nalin seated in protest in Lafayette Park outside the White House, May 1971.

PHOTO CREDIT: BIC COLLECTIONS, COURTESY OF DR. DAVID R. NALIN

began to be asked by journalists. However, when a group of unlikely heroes—scientists, physicians, and public health experts working at Dhaka’s Cholera Research Laboratory (CRL)—stepped up, the floodgates truly opened. Established in Dhaka in 1960, CRL, supported by SEATO and American health agencies, became a prominent centre for cholera research, contributing significantly to cholera epidemiology and immunisation, including the development of Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS). What began as a medical mission quickly evolved into one of the war’s most significant human rights lobbying initiatives. Its doctors had no diplomatic responsibilities. They were not prepared for politics. But they had seen the truth.

Many CRL employees left when the violence broke out in March. But some,

like Patrick Talmon and Henry Mosley, stayed in Dhaka and continued working at the lab despite curfews and violence. They observed the army taking over colleges and streets. Throughout the night, they heard gunfire. They saw bloodstained classrooms at the University of Dhaka and unclaimed bodies near the Racecourse.

Candy Rhode, Anna Taylor, William Greenough, and other CRL figures—most of whom were far removed from the world of Washington lobbying—decided that silence was unacceptable. “We really cared about the people,” Rhode later explained. “We cared that this was genocide. We cared that our own country was involved in sending arms... It was frightening for us at that time to be up on our roof in Dhaka, with bombs falling on the city, and to see that our (US) fighter jets were doing it.” According to Rhode, the law of the jungle prevailed in East Pakistan, where mass killings of unarmed civilians, the systematic elimination of the intelligentsia, and the annihilation of

the Hindu population were underway.

A network of communication developed from Dhaka to Tehran to Washington. The testimonials, photographs, handwritten notes, and newspaper clippings that Mosley and Talmon risked their lives to bring out were sent to CRL figures based in Washington. They slept in cars, on friends’ couches, and spent days knocking on office doors on Capitol Hill. These were field notes from a genocide, not diplomatic correspondence. Their messages, conveyed to Washington via Tehran, became one of the few continuing sources of eyewitness testimony. Mosley described killing fields with a clinical clarity he wished he did not possess. “Stories of massacres continue to be our daily fare. It makes My Lai look like child’s play,” he reported grimly.

a coordinated organisation tasked with ensuring that Congress had access to the data the State Department was refusing to provide. The group realised that, in order to link pro-Bangladesh activists across the United States, brief members of Congress, and supply evidence, they required a single focal point. This led to the creation of the Bangladesh Information Center, which over the course of the following six months developed into the hub of American grassroots activism for Bangladesh. Its efforts, including testimony, lobbying, and legislative briefings, contributed to the formulation of amendments intended to halt military and economic aid to Pakistan.

Samuel Jaffe’s seminal book, *An Internal Matter*, details this extraordinary alliance. According



Protesters chant slogans in Philadelphia against the US government’s policy of supporting the Pakistani military dictatorship, 1971.

Rhode and Taylor repeatedly presented these documents to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, which was chaired by Senator J. William Fulbright. Congressmen like Edward Kennedy, meanwhile, visited refugee camps in India and returned in shock. The informational barrier that had prevented the truth from emerging gradually began to break. The congressional record was irrevocably changed.

‘Fully recognising the inability of our government to oppose actively or to intervene in this oppression of the Bengalis, I urge you to seek and support a condemnation by Congress and the President of the United States of the inhuman treatment being accorded to the 75 million people of East Pakistan,’ Jon Rhode wrote in a letter to Senator William Saxbe.

Vigils were organised in Washington by Father Tim, Anna Taylor, and others. They collected clippings, photographs, and letters from Pakistan’s strictly regulated press. The dossiers made their way to legislative desks, while the vigils attracted inquisitive onlookers. In a letter to Congressmen, Taylor wrote: ‘This is not some inevitable calamity but the result of a premeditated policy of genocide, ruthlessly carried out by the government of West Pakistan. Would you have authorised American

to Jaffe, the persistence of the CRL group formed the foundation of the entire pro-Bangladesh movement in the United States. Even though the US administration continued to openly support Pakistan, the people—officials, researchers, doctors, students, and activists—told a different story. And that story mattered.

CRL holds a unique position in the history of Bangladesh’s Liberation War. It was not a political organisation, but rather a medical research facility. Yet it acted in 1971 with a courage that many administrations lacked. Its scientists were inclined to see human suffering clearly; they were able to speak honestly because they were not bound by diplomatic or bureaucratic restraint. For whatever reason, they became among the first and most effective witnesses to genocide—and among the witnesses who refused to allow geopolitics to silence the truth.

In Bangladesh, ORS, vaccinations, and advances in public health are frequently used to recall the legacy of CRL. However, its moral legacy from 1971 remains equally significant. A small group of medical professionals and researchers chose a different path and spoke the truth when governments remained silent and superpowers calculated their own interests.

“America supported Pakistan during 1971” is a common historical assertion. However, that is only part of the truth. Decisions are made by governments. History is made by people. And in 1971, some of the earliest and most courageous narrators of the genocide in Bangladesh were cholera researchers and scientists trained to save lives, not to fight political battles. Perhaps because of its non-political character and life-saving mission, the Cholera Research Laboratory did what every humane, moral, and ethical being ought to do. The CRL figures acted according to their training—not only in medical science, but also in moral responsibility—regardless of who stood to gain and who did not.

The CRL, which after independence became icddr,b, is remembered for its moral bravery and the resolve to speak out when it would have been easier to remain silent, to document the truth when doing so was dangerous, and to stand with a nation fighting for its birth.

Minhazul Islam is an independent researcher and translator.



PHOTO CREDIT: BIC COLLECTIONS, COURTESY OF DR. DAVID R. NALIN

An early flyer written by former Cholera Research Lab staff and families in Boston to raise awareness about the war in East Pakistan, April 1971.

aid to Hitler? The present situation is entirely analogous.’

By the middle of 1971, CRL’s unofficial network had developed into



Faces band performing at the ‘Goodbye Summer’ rock concert at the Oval in 1971.

HOW MUSIC

carried Bangladesh’s struggle to the world

MIFTAHUL JANNAT

Wars are remembered not only through dates and declarations, but through voices, images, and sounds that refuse to fade. The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 survived erasure because it was carried beyond the battlefield—into songs sung on crackling radios, poems recited in packed halls, photographs passed from hand to hand, and films that bore witness to both atrocity and courage.

This artistic resistance did not stop at Bangladesh’s borders. From concert halls and stadiums thousands of miles away, artists transformed grief into solidarity and outrage into action. Without these cultural interventions, it is hard to imagine how the world might have recognised our struggle as its own. Art endures because it does what politics alone cannot: it fixes memory, awakens conscience, and turns spectators into participants. In 1971, artists did not merely respond to history—they helped shape it.

The ‘grand mushaira’ and a poem for Bangladesh
During the Liberation War, India

extended its support not only at the state level but also through an outpouring of individual solidarity. This was true not just in West Bengal, but also as far away as Bombay and Maharashtra. Writers, artists, and intellectuals all across India stood firmly beside Bangladesh.

To support the refugees and the freedom fighters of Bangladesh, a grand mushaira was organised on May 13, 1971 at Bombay’s renowned Rang Bhavan auditorium. The event brought together celebrated Urdu poets Kaifi Azmi and Sahir Ludhianvi, actress Meena Kumari, and many other notable figures. It was here that Kaifi Azmi recited his powerful poem, Bangladesh.

In his book *Bhalobasay Barano Haat*, Matiur Rahman recounts the dedication of the poet through the words of the poet’s wife, actress Shawkat Kaifi. She once mentioned that poet Azmi had devoted himself wholeheartedly to supporting Bangladesh’s struggle. He felt a deep affection and special connection with the people of Bangladesh—whom he saw as progressive, warm-hearted, and profoundly humane—and that love moved him to write for Bangladesh. Poet Azmi also recited the same poem at another mushaira in Kolkata, presided over by the eminent writer Sajjad Zaheer. The poem beautifully captured the unwavering resistance of our people during the Liberation War. Its final stanza read:

*How senseless you are!
The tanks you have received as alms
you roll them onto my heart,
all day and night you rain napalm on me.
Listen, you will tire one day.
How will you shackle my hands?
My hands are one, forty million.
Which head will you axe?
I have seventy million heads on my shoulders.*

Strings & Stars: A stadium full of solidarity
In Bombay, another significant cultural initiative in support of Bangladesh took place on November 24, 1971. That evening, the historic Brabourne Cricket Stadium became a powerful site of solidarity as the Bangladesh Sahayak Committee of Maharashtra organised a grand programme titled “Strings and Stars: In Aid of Refugees from Bangladesh.” The programme aimed to raise funds for Bangladeshi refugees and freedom fighters, and to channel public outrage into collective action.

Tickets for the event were sold from 36 different locations across the city. Special buses and trains were arranged to accommodate the crowds, while the Indian Navy assisted with stage construction and logistics—underscoring the scale and seriousness of the effort.

The programme was directed by actor Pran, with music led by Kishore Kumar



An album published on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of ‘Concert in Sympathy 1971’.



Poet Kaifi Azmi reciting his poem Bangladesh at the grand mushaira.

and Lata Mangeshkar. A hundred solo performers, guided by Kalyanji–Anandji, filled the stadium with music. Pran himself performed qawwali, comedians Mehmood and Johnny Walker brought moments of laughter, and dancers such as Padma Khanna and Lakshmi Chhaya captivated the audience. Leading stars—from Rajesh Khanna to Amitabh Bachchan—also appeared on stage.

Nearly 60 prominent figures from acting, dance, and music came together that night, holding the packed stadium enthralled for hours. The list of participants read like a roll call of Indian cinema and music in the 1960s and 70s—Dilip Kumar, Nargis, Sunil Dutt, Manna Dey, R.D. Burman, Mahendra Kapoor, Waheeda Rehman, Shashi Kapoor, Jaya Bhaduri, and many others.

By the end of the evening, nearly five lakh rupees had been raised—accounting for half of the Bangladesh Sahayak Committee’s total donation



Poster of the ‘Goodbye Summer’ concert.

target. In an interview for Shahriar Kabir’s documentary, Waheeda Rehman, who served as the chairman of the programme committee, recalled that all the artists performed without taking any remuneration. The collected funds were used to supply medicines, warm clothing, ambulances, and other essentials for Bangladesh’s freedom fighters.

A distant war in the London theatre
Fifty-four years ago, hundreds of Londoners also gathered at Sadler’s Wells Theatre to show their support for Bangladesh’s struggle for liberation. That event, along with similar concerts staged across seven different English cities in the following weeks, came to be known as Concert in Sympathy 1971. Though more intimate in scale than the celebrated Madison Square Garden concert organised by George Harrison and Ravi Shankar, these concerts carried a depth of feeling that resonated far beyond the stage. Sadler’s Wells alone hosted three shows in a single day.

The driving force behind the initiative was Birendra Shankar, nephew of Ravi Shankar and founder of the Sanskritik Centre of Indian Arts. Drawing on his experience of organising major performances at venues such as the Royal Albert Hall and the Piccadilly Theatre, Birendra brought together artists from both parts of Bengal, British musicians, and public figures—including Oscar-winning actress Glenda Jackson. His aim, as he described it, was to “show something of the soul of the millions”. The programme became a rare cultural dialogue. Bengali folk traditions, songs by both Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam, and depictions of

rural life unfolded alongside Western compositions performed by British artists. The concert opened with the azan at dawn, followed by a Hindu devotional song and a symbolic scene of a farmer heading to his fields.

Jazz vocalist Norma Winstone, pianist John Taylor and Marilyn Knight, and cellist Keith Harvey took part, while Glenda Jackson recited poetry. A sculpture donated by French artist Jephian de Villiers was also displayed for auction to aid Bangladeshi refugees. The concert flyer captured both grief and defiance: “A battered people’s Art lives.” Supported by parliamentarians, cultural leaders, and intellectuals, Concert in Sympathy bore witness to Bangladesh’s suffering as well as its steadfast hope.

The ‘Goodbye Summer’ at Oval
On 18 September 1971, the Oval cricket ground in South London reverberated with the sounds of rock in aid of Bangladesh’s war. Goodbye Summer may not have achieved the enduring fame of the Madison Square Garden Concert for Bangladesh six weeks earlier, but the day-long festival had its own constellation of stars. Headlined by The Who and Faces, at the height of Rod Stewart and Ronnie Wood’s fame, the concert drew a crowd comparable to the twin shows in New York. The performances of both bands truly transformed the evening. Their electrifying performances, coupled with colourful, flamboyant costumes, turned the concert into a spectacle of noise, energy, and sheer joy. Yet beneath the music and revelry, the concert carried a profound purpose. It helped to raise funds for Bangladesh during a time of extreme hardship. For Londoners and the performers alike, the event became an expression of alliance—a chance to channel grief and empathy into meaningful action.

In a 2019 interview, guitarist Pete Townshend of The Who recalled the event. “Rod Stewart kicked out 500 footballs into the crowd,” he said, “which bounced around for hours, all the way through our show.” The concert was more than a rock show—it was a reflection of a generation that grew up in London’s multicultural neighbourhoods, a mosaic of Polish, Jewish, Japanese, Somali, Caribbean, and Bangladeshi families. “These were our people,” Townshend reflected. “We adored them. We wanted to help.”

Though the event is less remembered today, the funds raised through the concert helped those in desperate need. It made the love and solidarity of Bangladesh’s international friends palpable, and stands as a testament to how music and compassion can merge in a moment that is both celebratory and profoundly humane.

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Advertisement for the “Strings & Stars” event held at Bombay’s Brabourne Stadium.