

TO SAVE A FLOWER

Bangladesh's birth from lyrics and bullets

DOWEL BISWAS

In April 1971, on a char in Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, a 15-year-old boy sat beside a radio, adjusting the dial until the voices held long enough to understand. News travelled unevenly to villages like Babupur, but that radio carried fragments of a turning history: Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7 March address, reports of escalating violence, the early calls to resist. Between those announcements came something else, songs from Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra.

From the static emerged a line: "Mora ekti phool ke bachabo bole juddho kori..." — we fight to save a flower. Within days, that boy, my late father, would cross the Padma to join the freedom fighters near the Indian border. Hundred others did the same.

Those broadcasts did more than inform.



They shaped how the war was felt. Bulletins told listeners what was happening; songs suggested why it mattered, sometimes signalling the freedom fighters on safer roads, and information that would be crucial to win the Liberation War. In a time when villages were cut off and fear travelled quickly, music created a shared emotional ground.

Most of the songs from 1971 imagined the country through intimate, emotional images. Bangladesh—the yet-to-be-won and not-yet-actualised nation—appeared as a flower, a mother, a stretch of soil held close to the body. These are more than mere metaphors; they are organic, never forced, offering a window into how we Bangalees perceive and feel our country. This lyricism reshaped how people understood the stakes of the war. When a country is a flower and a mother, who would not give their life and shed blood to protect it? It is instinctive.

"Purbo digonte surjo utcheche, rokto laal..." The landscape itself entered the music—the rivers, the red earth, the fields that defined life in rural Bengal. In wartime, those familiar elements took on new meaning. The songs suggested that what was being defended was not just land but a way of belonging to it.



As the war intensified, these broadcasts became a steady presence for those inside the country and for those who had crossed borders. Fighters listened between operations. Families listened while waiting for news that often did not arrive. The songs carried grief, but also a quiet confidence that the struggle had purpose.

They also shaped how the nation was imagined. In *Jonmo Amar Dhonno Holo Maago*, the country is addressed directly as *Maa*. The language is simple, but the effect is profound. The nation no longer remained a distant or abstract idea; it became each fighter's home, their family, and the war became deeply personal.

In "O amar desher mati, tomar pore thekai matha..." the land is described as something held within one's own life, on someone's forehead like deities. These lyrics framed belonging in emotional terms that many listeners immediately recognised. The songs gave fighters, survivors, and civilians caught in the war what they needed most: a sustaining sense of morale and resilience.

Remembrance, too, found its place in music. *Salam Salam Hajar Salam* became a way of honouring those who had already fallen. The repetition carried a sense of collective memory—an acknowledgement that the war was producing losses that could not always be counted or named.

The songs of 1971 did not appear in isolation. Earlier cultural struggles echoed through them. *Ekusher Gaan*, rooted in the Language Movement, circulated widely during the war years and reminded listeners that resistance had a longer history. Other songs served as calls to unity. *Joy Bangla, Banglar Joy* condensed the mood of the moment into lines that could be easily repeated and shared.

Even compositions written long before the war took on new meaning. "Jodi tor daak shune keu na aase tobe ekla cholo re"

was heard differently in that moment. Its message of persistence felt less philosophical and more immediate for those living through uncertainty.

To hear "Mora ekti phool ke bachabo bole juddho kori..." today is not simply to revisit a moment in the past. It is to remember how the country was once imagined—through voice, metaphor and shared emotion—before it was secured by victory.

Together, these songs created something more than morale. They offered a way of understanding the country while it was still being fought for. Rather than presenting Bangladesh as a distant ideal, the music placed it close—within nature, daily life, within memory, within language.

This is part of why the songs endure. They helped people hold onto a sense of continuity during a time of upheaval. The war disrupted everything—the mass killings, the displacement, the breakdown of communication, the rupture of ordinary life—but the songs remained a thread connecting listeners across distance and circumstance. Through these songs, Banglaee people didn't just live in fear; they endured it and conquered it within themselves. The songs reminded them of their nation's value, placing the country on a pedestal higher than their own lives and moral strength.

Decades later, when the same songs, including the national anthem *Amar Shonar Bangla, Ami Tomay Bhalobashi*, were sung or played at public events and Independence Day gatherings, I saw my father and his fellow freedom fighters standing upright under the freely flowing flag. Their eyes were teary, but this time with pride and reassurance—they had freed our country, establishing it as an independent, sovereign nation. The valour shone through, and I knew that if ever another war threatened our existence, thousands like me would follow the same path to protect our country—a flower, a mother, a river, the setting sun, and a serene picture named Bangladesh.

NEWS

Witnesses to genocide

FROM PAGE 1

An emergency call shattered the calm.

Students were felling trees to barricade streets, and key West Pakistani leaders, including President Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, had abruptly left Dhaka.

By around 10:00pm, a second call brought worse news — the crackdown had begun.

Together with the guests (trapped at his house), the US consul general spent much of that night on the roof as they watched "...with horror the constant flash of tracer bullets across the dark sky and listened to the more ominous clatter of machine gun fire and the heavy thud of tank guns," wrote Blood in The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh: Memoirs of an American Diplomat.

There was particularly heavy firing around the police lines and the East Pakistan Rifles barracks. "We could see many fires burning, some of them in old Dacca," he wrote.

Siddik Salik, public relations officer of the Pakistan Army, described the night: "The gates of hell had been cast open."

Salik wrote, "I watched the harrowing sight from the verandah for four hours. The prominent feature of this gory night was the flames shooting to the sky. At times, mournful clouds of smoke accompanied the blaze, but soon they were overwhelmed by the flaming fire trying to lick at the stars. The light of the moon and the glow of the stars paled before this man-made furnace."

There was a curfew throughout the entire day, and it was lifted the following day (March 27) at 7:00am for several hours.

"We hurried to use this window of opportunity to check on the safety of the American community and to begin to piece together the events of the night of March 25, the horror of which we sensed but could not yet document," Blood wrote.

On March 27, the US consular office submitted its first situation report saying that the Pakistan military was in complete control, that the crackdown on Bangalee nationalists had been carried out

swiftly, efficiently and often with ruthless brutality.

In another dispatch on March 28, the US office reported that despite Radio Pakistan's announcements, life had not returned to normal in Dhaka. It reported a continuous flow of people streaming out with their meagre possessions.

"We now are informed that the Army is attempting to pick up all Awami League leaders including MNAs, MPAs, and student leaders. All roads out of the city are blocked, hence it is impossible for well-known figures to slip into the countryside," the situation report said.

'THE NIGHT ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE'

A New Zealand-based independent scholar, Samuel Jaffe, writes in his book "An Internal Matter: The US, Grassroots Activism and the Creation of Bangladesh" that the Nixon administration's response to Operation Searchlight was muted and cautious, with the White House "tilting" heavily in favour of Pakistan.

But for the general American expatriate community in erstwhile East Pakistan, the military crackdown provoked shock, outrage, and, for some, a sense of resolve.

The Rohdes were among many such Americans.

Jon E Rohde, working on cholera research at what is today icddr, and his wife Candy woke up to gunfire and explosions. They rushed to their balcony to see what was happening. Candy watched in horror as American-made Patton tanks rolled out from the nearby cantonment and moved towards the city centre. Their neighbour, Alfred Sommer, remembers it as "the night all hell broke loose".

"I'll never forget because my wife and I were asleep, and we woke up at about 1:30am, hearing 'Poo! Poo! Poo!' in the background. My wife says, 'What's that?'" Jaffe quotes Sommer in his book.

They ran up to their roof where they found Dhaka ablaze.

"... Old Dhaka was just burning in the distance," Jaffe quoted Sommer as saying.

Nearby, Richard and Nancy Guerrant awoke to their night guard

calling for help: "Saheb! Saheb! Let me in, they're shooting outside!"

They let him in.

For months after they returned to America, Richard remembers that his young son would hear a car backfiring and say, "Mom, they are shooting again."

Surrounded by an unfolding campaign of terror, several young American expatriates, during a break in the curfew the next day, ventured out. As the Rohdes cycled towards the cholera hospital, they saw the burning remains of houses.

BLOOD ON THE WALLS

The roads were clogged, Candy Rohde remembered, with "streams of terrified people" leaving the city, carrying what little they could.

The following day, the group visited Dhaka University, which had attracted much of the Pakistani Army's wrath. The scene shocked Marty Chen, who recalled, "We pulled up to the apartment building in the university, and I said 'oh my gosh!' because the front steps were just caked with blood..."

Candy described her first impressions as a shaken survivor showed them inside a student hall: "Walking up the steps to the entrance, we noticed the walls are heavily pockmarked from countless rounds of gunfire.

"There are red streaks as if wounded or dead bodies have been dragged across it. Although gore is spattered everywhere, the most awful sight to me is finding the bloody prints of a student's bare feet. Wounded, he must have run to find refuge in the bathroom, where the tracks suddenly come to an end."

Henry Mosley, another doctor (cholera researcher), recalls "blood on the walls" where "subversive" academics were killed in the hallways: "it was an empty building by that time."

In the narrow streets of Old Dhaka, Marty and Lincoln Chen walked through the burning, bullet-ridden remains of Shankhari Bazaar, a Hindu neighbourhood. There, they found houses "razed to the ground" and piles of "bodies and ash".

GROUND WITNESSES

Jon wrote a letter to Senator William B Saxbe on April 17, 1971, after his

evacuation, in which he described in stark detail how the Pakistan Army had begun its genocidal campaign.

Senator Saxbe presented this letter to the Senate on April 29, according to the book "Bangladesh Documents".

After two days of loud explosions and continual chatter of machine guns, they took advantage of a break in the curfew to drive through the city. "In the old city we walked through the remains of Nayer Bazaar, where Moslem and Hindu woodcutters had worked, now only a tangle of iron and sheet and smouldering ruins," Jon had written.

He wrote that complete documentation was difficult due to the thorough search of everyone leaving Dhaka. The young medic noted that complete censorship was facilitated with the burning of three prominent dailies — the People, the Ittefaq, and the Sangbad.

According to "Bangladesh Documents", another letter from James F Ragin to Senator Gordon Allott, and his address to the Senate on July 14, 1971, also vividly describes Pakistan Army's brutality.

The senator described how people were executed at Sadarghat. He said that troops attacked the terminal on the morning of March 26. A machine gun was installed on the terminal roof and all men, women, and children were fired upon.

Inspection of the terminal on March 29 revealed pools of dried blood on the terminal floor. The toilets were completely soiled and soaked with blood.

According to a student witness, people waiting for boats at the terminal were all killed. After the massacre, bodies were dragged into buses and burned. On March 29, corpses were still floating in the Buriganga River adjacent to the terminal.

According to an American missionary living in Old Dhaka, machine guns were placed at the ends of the street and soldiers attacked the entire area without warning on the morning of March 28.

Independence Day today

FROM PAGE 1

fly-past will be held at the National Parade Square, according to the Inter Services Public Relations.

Shahabuddin and Tarique will be present at the event, which will be open to the public.

On the eve of the occasion, the two issued separate messages.

The objectives of independence were to ensure political and economic freedom, establish a society free from exploitation, uphold the dignity of every citizen and strengthen the empowerment of people at all levels, Shahabuddin said.

"I also pay a humble tribute to Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman, Bir Uttam, along with all valiant freedom fighters, the persecuted mothers and sisters, the national leaders and organisers, and the countless people from all walks of life who made outstanding and significant contributions to our historic struggle for freedom," he added.

Tarique remembered with profound respect the nation's finest sons, whose sacrifices yielded an independent and sovereign Bangladesh.

"The Great Independence Day inspires us anew with the spirit of courage, sacrifice and patriotism. The fundamental goal of independence was to establish a Bangladesh that is free from discrimination, and to be democratic, peaceful and prosperous," he added.

In a letter to Shahabuddin, Indian President Droupadi Murmu yesterday extended the neighbouring country's felicitations.

"India and Bangladesh are bound by a shared history, deep cultural linkages and enduring linguistic traditions that form the foundation of our close partnership," she said.

National dailies will bring out special supplements while Bangladesh Betar, Bangladesh Television, private radio stations and television channels will air special programmes highlighting the significance of the day.

Different political parties as well as socio-cultural and professional organisations have drawn up elaborate programmes to observe the day.

Ships of the Bangladesh Navy and Bangladesh Coast Guard will be open to visitors at Chattogram Port, Mongla Port and Payra Port, as well as river terminals such as Sadarghat, Pagla Ghat and Barishal Launch Terminal from 9:00am to sunset.

Coast Guard vessels will also be open to visitors at Chandpur and Munshiganj launch ghats, reports BSS.

To mark the day, Tarique yesterday unveiled a commemorative postage stamp.

Exhibition football matches, T20 cricket tournaments and kabaddi competitions will be organised at the district and upazila level.

Cinema halls across the country will screen Liberation War-based films free of charge, while government and private museums will remain open to visitors without tickets from morning to evening.

Recreational centres for children will also remain open.

Cultural programmes will be held at tourist spots nationwide. Special prayers will be offered at mosques, temples, churches, pagodas and other places of worship, seeking eternal peace for martyred freedom fighters, good health for living freedom fighters and national progress.

Special meals will be arranged at the government hospitals, prisons, rehabilitation centres, orphanages, disability welfare centres, old-age homes and daycare centres across the country to mark the day.

Two Russian navy ships

FROM PAGE 2

and visit the navy training base.

The Russian ships are scheduled to leave Bangladesh waters on March 27.

The detachment of ships of Russia's Pacific Fleet departed Vladivostok on February 12, 2026, for a long-distance, Asia-Pacific deployment.

Previously, as part of their international activities, the Russian Navy ships made friendly calls at the port of Georgetown in Malaysia, the port of Thilawa in Myanmar, and the port of Visakhapatnam in India.