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The Struggle for Liberation of Bangladesh
A Partial Tale of Events in the
Washington Area and of Some People,
Here and There

History, in the sense it is now understood in the culture as being, above all, explanation of social evolution, and a discipline having specific tools of analysis and elaboration, is often at a level of abstraction which may obfuscate a fundamental fact of history itself - the mechanism of history making, i.e., the activities of individuals as agents of history. This must however be subjected to the caveat that their role is not simply as individuals, but as an integral part of a complex, consisting of variously connected and defined collectives, as well as the times, places, i.e., the entire milieu in which the individuals and their collectives exist. At the same time, however inevitable the actions and idiosyncrasies of the individuals are in the making of history, it is neither feasible nor is it desirable to account for every last detail of all of that in history per se. But, one needs to recognize that this constitutes the database for the science of history. A form of history writing known as the Subaltern Studies, is an effort to rectify the absence of the contributions of the numerous foot soldiers of history towards the 'big events' and achievements of 'famous

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personalities.’ However, the following account does not claim to fall in this category.

It is commonly assumed that writing of history is enhanced by distance in time from the subject of history, for, it some how facilitates objectivity, the later being the measure of how scientific is the history that is being written. However, although with the rediscovery of Vico¹ and the recognition of the need for history to be judged scientific, disagreements regarding interpretation and analysis of events, coincidences and personalities in history making have not diminished. Therefore, on account of the relative proximity in time to the events, and the inherent Roshomon syndrome² in interpretation, what follows is not claimed to be history of the period, nor is it assumed to be unchangeable. It is at best raw data. Even then it would be an unfair chronicle to simply cite the incidents without some explication, which may reveal the motives behind the actions that were undertaken by the actors. Explanations are problematic, because only the first person can vouch for his/her reasons; the rest is based on observations and assessments of others and depends on what one can only try to remember as best as possible, and thus potential inaccuracies are implied. Furthermore, this particular effort is confined to recording of a very small part of the events.

Having been born in a family which did not sit on the fence during the tumultuous period of struggle for independence from the British, but neither became famous personalities, nor were associated with any major documented events of the period (that is, truly were foot soldiers like many in the society), politics has been a very major force in my upbringing.

Stories of revolutionaries of the thirties and forties were told and retold to us as if fairy tales; peoples' desires for better lives, primacy of justice and human dignity in social living were presented as if religious dicta; the absolute need for intellectual enlightenment was established as a priority, and the questioning of the world as presented followed as if natural. What appeared as an anomaly early on were the ideas and the realities of Pakistan. To a child the issues were simple: if religion was good, how is it that people were being killed in the name of religion? Stories of atrocities unleashed by both sides were baffling. What makes one religion better than the other, since every one believes in a divine force, differing only in names and the modes of worship? We lived as a community of Hindus, Buddhists (our ancestors belonged most likely to both religious groups - we knew we did not come from Saudi Arabia!), Muslims, Christians, etc., so why a Muslim homeland? Most painful was to see my friends leave the country; the agony of their insecurity, the sadness of their parents and elders having to abandon their centuries old homes and hearth was devastating to witness. Being immersed in the period of the language movement, the United Front era, and the subsequent social and political upheavals, miles of walking in processions, stone-throwing at the police, speeches, slogans of fury and frustration, and being tear-gassed, etc., were both outlets for expressing disappointments with the world around, and hopes for their remedy. Basically, I grew up with ever increasing anti-Pakistan feelings, and exploring the possibility of undoing the division of the Subcontinent emerged as a preoccupation. In the political involvement of later years, the need to end this absurd formation, revulsion to the

morbid notion of a religion based homogenous political entity disregarding the reality of inherently heterogeneous nature of all social formations (family, neighborhood, community, state, etc.), especially in the Indian Subcontinent, and the resulting inhumanity and injustice, played a critical role in steering to the broader intellectual inquiries on the nature of social formations, relations and roles of social classes and groups, the dynamics of social changes, etc.

During the struggles of the sixties against the military regime, in my small way I argued for addressing the nationality question within the progressive movement, because I found the movement's position on this issue weak and opportunistic and based mostly on the fear of being labeled anti-Pakistani, and the concomitant fear of being isolated from the masses. To declare to be secular while enduring without resistance a state based on the majority of a given religious community, which turns every one else into second class citizens both in theory and practice, is fundamentally hypocritical. There was this problem among the pro- gressives, of following the masses, and not leading, at least in ideas, even if it meant some initial isolation, despite touting themselves as the vanguard! The ideology and the politics of Pakistan, i.e., exploitation of religion in pursuing political power, in my view was anti- religious, and the consequences were antithetical to the objective interests of the Bengalis, Sindhis, Punjabis, Baluchis and Pathans. Especially, it was contrary to the social and cultural history of the Bengalis, and their existence as a distinct, though inseparable community within the Indian polity.

The last word on the issue, following a heated conversation with Mohammed Farhad³ in a dark (he was 'underground') cafeteria of the Engineering University on the need to end Pakistan was that I should write down the arguments for a more systematic discussion of the issues. That was sometime in early August of 1968. Few days later, on August 26, I left for Washington DC.

The family kept me abreast of politics in the country regularly. I had, and I still do have several very close friends in Bangladesh. Some were friends since high school (Tejgaon Technical High School) and junior college (Notre Dame) days; the others were acquired at the Engineering University. In all cases, friendships were cemented by, besides our personalities, the intensely felt emotions about our language, literature, music, history, especially the awareness of the struggles against the British, the need for openness and democracy, and voracious intellectual pursuit of everything. At the height of efforts to impose a Pakistani culture during the Ayub regime, Dara⁴, Shipar⁵ and I used to roam about in Dhaka wearing dhotis, perhaps to demonstrate at least to ourselves, that as Bengalis, we were products of the Bengali Hindu culture as well. What was heartening was that on occasions, when in this attire and our identities as Bengali Muslim young men were discovered by strangers, some of them were very appreciative of the courage of our convictions, and of our resistance to the efforts of the government and the religious fundamentalists to theocratize the culture.

All of these friends were political in various degrees, and some were more organizationally political. They were a steady source of ins and outs of developments in the

country since I left. Alamgir Kabir⁶ and Mohammad Abul Quassem, a Civil Engineer⁷, who was more passionate about progressive politics than engineering, a tireless and immensely enthusiastic activist, were the two close comrades who provided the analysis of the emerging changes in the programs and processes of political developments in the country, both of the parties and the people. They also regularly and rightly reminded me that I had betrayed a commitment to return to the country and devote myself to the cause of the revolution. Both of them and many of the other political friends operated out of camps in Agartala during the Liberation War.

All of the above is to say that one was prepared and hoped for the events leading up to 1971. What I did not anticipate, although I do not quite know why, was the extent of brutality unleashed by the military and the ruling clique. The daily news of the massacre became increasingly numbing. At that time I did not know of any organization of East Pakistanis in Washington DC area, and the initial reactions were from individuals. A number of people, mostly of the greater Bengali community in and around the Catholic University (CU) where I was pursuing graduate studies, called for details and to inquire about the safety of my family. Some called to say that they had heard about my younger brother, a CSP and in charge of administration of a Subdivision in Jessore who had led a contingent of Bengali police to attack a Pakistani military garrison, and that subsequently he had crossed into West Bengal and was interviewed by the news media.⁸ This was soon confirmed by a letter he sent me informing me of his whereabouts (he had appeared at the door of and was sheltered by Eela

Mitra, a renowned revolutionary leader of the Santal Rebellion in East Pakistan), and some sketchy news about our immediate family in Dhaka. I was worried about my large extended family, and especially about my father (a government official), mother, two brothers and two sisters, all in Dhaka. I wondered how they would escape the atrocities, and accounts of that period narrated to me later did send shivers.

Arnab Sarkar, a fellow graduate student at CU from Calcutta told me about a meeting being held one evening shortly after the news of the events. It took place at the house of Sri Ranjan Bora, a librarian in the South Asia section of the Library of Congress (LOC). That evening, speeches were made praising Bangabandhu and heroism of the Bengali people, and condemning the Pakistani army. Patriotic songs were sung and guarded hopes of reunification of Bengal were expressed in muted voices. Ranjan Babu was a singer, a generous soul, an ardent supporter of every thing Bengali, and perhaps in that vain, a supporter of Netaji Shubhash Chandra Bose. He announced that there was no other Bengali leader who came close to Netaji except Sheikh Mujib. In conjunction with his admiration for Netaji, he held certain regressive (to me) political views; it led to uncomfortable arguments whenever we met till his death several years ago. Throughout the period of the War he gave his time, enthusiasm and other resources to the cause of Bangladesh. That evening at his home I came to know Enayetur Rahim, who at that time was doing research at the LOC.⁹

The following day I met Enayet and several other people at a small cafe near the LOC, and headed for the doors of

Senators Edward Kennedy and Frank Church, both members of the Foreign Relations Committee, to ask for help. In the lobby of the Senate building we met a group of Americans who were variously involved in East Pakistan before, including Dr.

William Greenough of Johns Hopkins University and Dr. David Nalin of Harvard Medical School, also there to lobby. However, here I will not go into the details of the efforts to marshal the help of the US Congress in support of the Liberation of Bangladesh.

It is through Enayet that I came to know that one Mrs. Anna Braun Taylor from Boston had begun a fast at the Lafayette Park¹⁰ on the Pennsylvania Avenue side of the White House to protest the atrocities in Bangladesh and to focus attention on the plight of the Bengali people. She had lived in Dhaka for several years with her husband Dr. James Oliver Taylor, a specialist in tropical diseases and at that time affiliated with Harvard Medical School, who had worked at the Cholera Research Laboratory in Dhaka, where Dr. Greenough and many of the Americans who were the first American organizers of support movement for Bangladesh, had also worked. Anna had many friends in Dhaka and other parts of the country and maintained contact with them even after she left East Pakistan. She had traveled in both parts of Bengal, and always wondered about the separation of the two. A Polish Jewish woman, as a child she and her mother had survived Hitler's concentration camp (Bergen-- Belsen) during world War II, were rescued by the British soldiers, and had settled in England. She later moved to the US, and went to college here. I believe her father was killed by the Nazis. A pacifist

with strong inclinations towards Buddhism, an admirer of Bengali culture, an enthusiast of Indian classical music (especially of raga Deshi & Paharri), she was overwhelmed by the extent of violence against the people she knew. Though a leftist liberal at heart, she disliked organized politics, and deeply believed in the responsibility of the individuals to do their personal best to help others, and concluded that fasting was at that time the best way for her to draw attention of the American people to the calamity that had befallen on the Bengalis. Her effort was reported by the major newspapers, and did help to generate support for our cause among the Americans. Anna invested an enormous amount of her personal resources-money, time, talent and physical and emotional labor - to the cause, and gave courage and solace to many of us who lived through the period in guilt, agony and uncertainty. She was one of the Americans who had established the Bangladesh Information Center, provided resources for it, and became its first full-time unpaid staff. Actually, for a while she lived at the Center in Washington DC. (Capitol Hill, 414 Seward Square, S.E., 2nd floor). The Center was the hub of activities for lobbying the Congress to stop US shipment of arms to Pakistan and later to stop all economic assistance as well.

Enayet, his wife Joyce and their two sons, and many in the Bangladesh community visited Anna at the park often. We all felt very grateful for her sacrifice. It was during one of my regular visits to the Lafayette Park to see her (I used to help transport the things she used in her fast-vigil, e.g., placards, signs, umbrella, water bottle, etc., between the Park and her hotel), that I saw a group of young people, popularly known as hippies, holding a small demonstration

outside the fences of the White House on Pennsylvania Avenue. I walked over and introduced myself to a young woman at the head of the line, and joined them in their demonstration. They were members of a group of followers of Rene Davis, a former leader of the Students for Democratic Society (SDS, which played a key role in organizing the anti- Vietnam war movement in the US), and one of the people arrested at the 1968 Democratic Party convention in Chicago on conspiracy and other charges. The group was there to voice their opposition to the collaboration of the Nixon administration with Pakistan. Although they were not familiar with the history of the struggle of the Bengali people, they considered the struggle a just cause nevertheless, and were committed to do whatever was necessary to help. Their subsequent actions proved that. I was invited to their commune on New Hampshire Avenue several times, and discussed what else could be done. The general conclusion was that the best way to change Nixon's policy was to bring pressure from the American people, and the best way to do so was to dramatize the plight of the Bangladesh people. The idea was to undertake events which would be reported by the media, and therefore inform the public.

Thus came the idea of a tent city, actually, a city of sewer pipes. A large number of concrete pipes were in the Park for replacement of broken city sewers, and members of this group and other radical and church groups took those over and lived in them for several days to portray the living conditions of the refugees created by the actions of the Pakistani army. This did get a great deal of media coverage. On many occasions after that, every time the Bengali

community organized any demonstration in Washington DC in support of the liberation efforts, when called, they joined us, organized members of other radical groups to join, and brought many of their friends to these events.

A group of Quakers (religious pacifist group) organized a demonstration in Baltimore to stop suspected ships from leaving the port with shipments for Pakistan. Rumor had it that there were weapons in those ships. We all trooped down to Baltimore to participate.

There were boats available to try to block the ships. Some of the Americans tried to climb into the ship, but they were rebuffed by the sailors. Some other Bengalis came down from Philadelphia on that occasion as well. In a separate incident, when a Pakistani ship docked in Baltimore, a group of Bangladeshi sailors jumped ship and asked for political asylum. Along with our American supporters, we were able to get them shelter and other assistance.

It is not clear now any more, perhaps some one loosely associated with these groups, or some one brought into our efforts in one of many demonstrations, approached and befriended me. Always garbed in surplus military fatigue, he turned out to be a small-time dealer in marijuana, and hinted of his various secret involvements. At an informal gathering in his and his girl friend's apartment on Q Street near Dupont Circle one evening he asked me how the resistance movement was going, and if the movement was adequately armed to fight the well- armed Pakistanis. Though somewhat naive, and did not have much experience in these matters, I saw the direction the discussion was heading, and asked him straight out if he

was in a position to procure arms if needed. He said we should pursue this discussion later.

Subsequently various discussions took place on the subject, but nothing concrete happened. He then vanished all of a sudden, called me from somewhere outside of D.C., asked me to call a certain number at a certain time for details regarding what could be available, cost and delivery arrangements. I faithfully followed the instruction (I was supposed to call only from a public phone), and there was no one at the other end! I never heard from him again.

I was also approached by friends of some wealthy liberal individuals regarding the availability of financial assistance to Bangladesh and especially, arms, in exchange for recognition of Israel by the government at some future date after the independence. I was assured that any quantity of arms could be easily delivered in the Sundarban area, and/or in the coastal areas of Chittagong, etc. My ideological orientation at that time made it difficult to pursue this option, but I was prepared to explore with contacts in Agartala and Calcutta, because at the time the international material support for the movement was not very clear, at least not sitting in DC. However, the alliances became clearer soon, and it became unnecessary to pursue this route. I was relieved, because I knew that my contacts would not have been happy to know about this proposal.

While at the Center, one day a young man¹¹ called to say that he wanted to help. We became friends, and he devoted a lot of his time to the cause of Bangladesh in the US. A devout follower of Chairman Mao, he argued with others and me in the commune we lived in later on, that

Bangladesh was ready for a peasant revolution, and that he must go there to participate in this anticipated monumental event. In spite of pointing out the problems a blond, bearded, bespectacled budding European intellectual might have in “blending” with the peasantry in Bangladesh, which his hoped-for role entailed, he insisted and ended up in Bangladesh after the liberation, and got himself and a lot of innocent people in a heap of trouble.

The Bengalis in Washington DC - Baltimore area had organized themselves in various entities to support the effort. People from all walks of life, from students to diplomats dedicated themselves to the cause. Among them there was a small group of radicals/liberals (of various shades)¹² who met often outside the larger organizations to discuss various theoretical issues as well as analyze the workings, directions, personalities, etc., involved among the Bangladeshi groups as well as the Americans who were working to support the liberation efforts. Among the radicals, there were a few sympathizers of Chairman Mao, but they did not support China’s policy towards Bangladesh at that time. Although critical of the ‘bourgeois nationalist’ leadership of the movement, and fear of the dominance of the ‘rising Bangladesh capitalist class’ after independence in spite of a commitment to socialistic economic policies by the Awami League, the liberation of Bangladesh was seen as a ‘necessary historical step’ towards the ultimate goal of creating a socialist Bangladesh.

I had also established contact with Bengalis especially the radicals, in New York. Dr. Khandokar Alaimgir and his wife, leading activists themselves, provided hospitality to Enayet and me often, when we visited them to discuss

strategies and actions and participate in demonstrations in front of the UN and other places. One of the most active and dedicated group of people was the Bengali restaurant workers of New York. At one time when there was some apparent reluctance on the part of some diplomats of Bangladesh origin to leave the Pakistan Embassies in the US, they sent messages that they would pay their salaries, if that was the reason for the hesitancy. Whenever needed for a demonstration at the White House or the US Capitol, they would drive down to Washington DC, even though it meant loss of income for them.

Prof. Muzaffar Ahmed came for a short visit, and was staying with a former Economics professor of his, who had migrated to India. I went to see him. He impressed upon me that the progressive forces must not get bogged down with 'radical' issues, but should focus on organizing support for the on-going Liberation War. He indicated that the emergence of the coalition of the political parties leading War was one of the most significant developments, and he expected this spirit to continue in the form of some kind of a national government at least for a few years after the liberation.

The most ardent supporters of our effort outside of the Bangladesh people were the Indians, especially the Indian Bengali community in the area. From diplomats to students, they provided shelters when needed, gave moral and material support. Some of them who had migrated from East Bengal to India before 1971, were as vigorously patriotic as us. In discussions it often came out that they did not expect to return to their former villages - they were much too settled where they were. But as East Bengalis, they saw

it as their patriotic duty to support the liberation of Bangladesh. Many were thrilled at the anticipation of being able to visit their birth places again without fear. They were proud and elated by the adoption of 'Amar Sonar Bangla' as the national anthem of the independent country.

A group of radical Pakistani scholars and students, more or less affiliated with (at that time Trotskyite) Tariq Ali of UK came to our support. The initial contact was made through Fazlul Bari, a Bengali employee at the Pakistan Embassy who had quit in protest, and was working with us. We met with the group a few times at his apartment on 19th street, NW. They often joined us in demonstrations. Clearly, there was a section of Pakistanis who also found Pakistanism unacceptable, and supported the right of self-determination of the various components that made up the country, and therefore felt it necessary to support the liberation struggle of Bengalis. Tariq sent me letters and clippings of articles he had written in support of Bangladesh. Some of them in the US argued the case of Bangladesh among the Pakistani community, although I am not sure with how much success.

In the middle of all the chaos, endless meetings, lobbying, demonstrations, running around, etc., I was surprised and happy to receive a letter from a dear friend, Tayeba Ahmed Toru. An activist in the East Pakistan Students Union (in the cultural front) at Dhaka University, Toru and I met while we studied Russian language in the International Relations Department, and became good friends. She came from a talented family, was an early feminist, had hopes of becoming a stage actress, and did some acting. She used to

tell me how important it was to stage Tagore's plays in East Pakistan to preserve the integrity of the Bengali culture. The letter was written from a hospital in Calcutta. In the letter Toru reminisced about evenings at Chayanot concerts, our long rickshaw rides after class, about talks we had regarding the attitudes of Bengali men towards women; and wanted to know if I still liked Rimbaud's poems, especially the one titled *Royalty!* She wrote about returning soon to a free Dhaka, and asked if I really planned to return too. I wrote her back that there was a piece of paper on my wall, over my desk, in which it was written, in Bengali "Amar Dhakay ferar kotha" (I am supposed to go back to Dhaka). I did not hear from her any more. Later I was informed that Toru had died in that Calcutta hospital. (Actually she died in Dhaka).

At least in the world I lived in, the opposition which existed to the division of the country before 1947, and which the Muslim League tried to deny and wipe out after 1947, persisted and fought to raise the voice of reason from the very beginning. The unresolved issue of nationalism in the Indian subcontinent, which the Indian National Congress and the leftist parties of the time did not and the Muslim League could not, address became the most important, even though not consciously recognized, factor in Pakistan's politics; and it remains so even today, in the entire Subcontinent. The struggle for its resolution, however, is a historical one, and the absurdity of a monolithic polity, which theocracy, no matter which kind, tries to impose on civil societies that are inherently heterogeneous in nature, seems to become apparent only bit by bit. In Bangladesh, it manifested in the emergence of

language movement, in the long drawn battle for secular democracy, and exploded in the liberation war of 1971; and to borrow an expression from the Angolan liberation movement: a luta continua! (the struggle goes on).

What is remarkable is how this work takes place: through the conviction and personal work of individuals, those of the organized political entities and even in the responses of otherwise non-political individuals to a catastrophe which such struggles seem to precipitate from time to time. The war for the liberation of Bangladesh is an example of this process.

Yet, it was clear to all of us that it was in the battlefield, the actions of the millions of people who were engaged in that struggle, and the courage, tenacity and the acumen of their political leaders, and India's help, will determine the ultimate outcome. And we were confident what the outcome would be; we just felt that we had to do all we could to help the situation. And many, Bengalis, Americans, Indians, Pakistanis and members of other nationalities did just that. (Published in "American Response to Bangladesh Liberation", by A. M. A. Muhith, University Press Ltd., 1996, Dhaka, Bangladesh.)

Notes :

- (1) Giambattista Vico, who wrote "The New Science" in 1725, and is given credit for having established the science of history.
- (2) A film by Akira Kurosawa in which every one has a different view of a highway robbery they have witnessed.
- (3) At the time a leader of the East Pakistan Students Union who later became General Secretary of the Communist Party of Bangladesh and remained so until his death a few years ago.
- (4) Sikandar Dara Shamsuddin, now at Jahangir Nagar University.
- (5) Shah Md. Nazinul Alam, now a government official. (retired)
- (6) A disciple of Prof. Muzaffar Ahmed of the National Awami Party, trained as an architect at the Engineering University, and after the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, became an ardent admirer of Bangabandhu & one of the organizers, and if I recall correctly, a Secretary, of BAKSIIL - a political formation which broke away from the Awami League; and he was also the editor of its news paper. He died much earlier than he needed to.
- (7) Now with the government.
- (8) Dr. Kamal Siddiqui, now at the Asian Development Bank. (currently Prime Minister's Principal Secretary)(Retired)

- (9) Dr. Enaytur Rahim, teaches history at Georgetown University in DC. (passed away)
- (10) In fact she had began this at the Sheridan Circle on Massachusetts Avenue, near the Pakistan Embassy, and later moved to the Lafayette Park because the Embassy protested.
- (11) Peter Custers, at the time a graduate student at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Advanced International Studies in Washington DC.
- (12) Dr. Farhad Faisal, now at University of Bielefeld in Germany & his wife Wanda; Dr.Nassim Rahman, now at University of Trieste in Italy & his wife Juliana (deceased); Dr. Rafiqul Huda Chowdhury, now with the UNDP and his wife; Dr. Lata Chatterjee, at that time with Johns Hopkins University; and several others.



Genocide 1971, Drawing: Mukti Bhowmik