

1971, the War as I Saw It

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INTRODUCTION

I joined the Pakistan Military Academy in Kakul, Abbottabad, as a cadet in November 1967 and passed out from there as a Regular Commissioned Officer in October 1969. My first posting as a Second Lieutenant (2Lt) was in 1st East Bengal Regiment, a highly regarded and decorated infantry battalion, popularly known as the Senior Tigers. At that time, the unit was located in Jessore (now Joshor) in the then East Pakistan. My stay in this unit was, however, relatively short-lived as I was transferred to Chittagong (now Chottogram) in August 1970 to help raise the 8th East Bengal Regiment as a Lieutenant (Lt). It has always been a matter of great pride and joy for any Bengali army officer to serve in the East Bengal Regiment and those days, it was more so. For me, the added prize was having the opportunity to start my career with the eldest member of the Tiger family and move on to help raise the youngest.

CHANGING POLITICAL SCENARIO IN PAKISTAN

As such, 1969 was an eventful year, if not a defining one, for Pakistan. Indeed, in Pakistan's little over two decades of existence until then, the

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country had seen its share of eventful years. Just seven months before my commissioning from the Pakistan Military Academy, the government of President Ayub Khan was overthrown in a bloodless military coup and was replaced by another military government under General (Gen) Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan, Commander-in-Chief (CNC) of the Pakistan Army. The year also marked the beginning of the end of a united Pakistan.

Before stepping down, Ayub Khan was forced to withdraw the sedition case against Sheikh Mujib and other co-accused. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman walked free from prison on 22 February. The following day he was given a tumultuous welcome in Dhaka and was seen as a hero by all sections of the people in East Pakistan. Addressing a massive rally in Dhaka the same day, he announced his continued commitment to, and struggle for, securing the legitimate rights of the people. This was when Mujib was given the title of 'Bangabandhu' (friend of the Bengal).

The collective disquiet against Pakistan's ruling class found its most clear manifestation at the general elections held on 7 December 1970 and on 17 January 1971, in which the Awami League (AL), under the charismatic leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib, won 160 of the 162 seats allotted for East Pakistan and all the seven seats reserved for women. Having won 167 seats in the National Assembly of Pakistan out of a total of 313, the Awami League had the clear mandate to form a government at the centre on its own. While there was widespread euphoria all over the eastern province at the massive victory for the AL, the ruling coterie in Islamabad and their cohorts were numbed at what had transpired on the election night. The Bengalis had spoken, but the Pakistani rulers were not ready to listen to what they had said at the polls.

Prior to the elections, the powers had believed that no party would be able to win an absolute majority in the National Assembly. The major winners, that is, the AL in East Pakistan and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in West Pakistan, therefore, would have to find a common ground, seek compromises and form a coalition government that would accommodate their divergent positions on governance. The decisive electoral victory of the AL had, in fact, struck at the very roots of the traditional power brokers in Pakistan. The result of the elections was a clear reflection of the people's aspiration for a representative government. It also signalled the end of exploitation of East Pakistan by the policymakers sitting in Islamabad. There was popular optimism that stability and democracy would no longer be disturbed by a vested few.

For Pakistan's ruling clique, the very thought of Bengalis exercising power, was unthinkable. A change of strategy was, therefore, called for. While the AL had won an absolute majority in the National Assembly of Pakistan, Bhutto's PPP failed to achieve anything resembling a clear mandate. It only managed to win a total of 88 seats in the National Assembly, all in West Pakistan, and controlled only two of the four provinces there.

Notwithstanding the limitations the electoral results imposed on the PPP, the wily and crafty Zulfikar Ali Bhutto decided to play the role of a spoiler. In this, he found a willing partner in the military establishment. As Bhutto continued to raise impediments by staking a claim to be part of the central government, the Pakistan military was taking initial steps to significantly strengthen its numbers in East Pakistan.

In Chittagong, meanwhile, the Bengali officers in the army were watching the evolving scenario with trepidation and anger, particularly the fact that the Pakistani military, with help from Bhutto, was bent on denying power to Sheikh Mujib. This was all we talked about! On the 28 February 1971, I was called by the Commanding Officer (CO) to the office and asked to take over charge as Acting Adjutant of the battalion as Captain (Capt) Akhtar, the Adjutant, had to go on leave to his home in West Pakistan for a couple of weeks. Hence, the CO felt it necessary to have someone as Acting Adjutant and he chose me for the job.

With this turn of events, all key posts in 8th East Bengal Regiment, except that of the CO, were manned by Bengali officers: Major (Maj) Ziaur Rahman was the second in command; the senior-most company commander was Maj Mir Shawkat Ali; Capt Oli Ahmed was the Quartermaster; and I was the Acting Adjutant. Such an alignment of key jobs in the battalion for the Bengalis was to have a decisive impact on events that were to unfold in March.

On 7 March, Bangabandhu made his historical speech in Dhaka's Ramna Maidan to a massive gathering. In his around 18 minutes of address, Sheikh Mujib was unequivocal in his warning to those who mattered in Islamabad that time was fast running out and the patience of the people must not be tested any further. He catalogued the atrocities that were already being committed in various parts of East Pakistan by members of the army and called upon Pakistan's military leader, Gen Yahya Khan, to come and investigate them. He further demanded that the army return to the barracks, martial law be withdrawn forthwith and powers be transferred to the elected representatives without any

delay. He called upon the people of East Pakistan to turn their homes into fortresses and be prepared to face the enemy with whatever they had. He reminded all that having shed blood already, we were prepared to shed more blood and that the people of this land shall be liberated, 'Insha Allah' (with Allah's blessings). He ended his fiery oration with a warning, 'This time the struggle was for our liberation; the struggle this time was for our independence.' Thunderous applause and sky-piercing shouts of 'Joy Bangla' greeted his every word.

He also announced a programme of non-cooperation with the Pakistani authorities, where public offices, transport services, banks and courts would run only as he decided. The message was not lost in Islamabad. As subsequent events show, the Pakistani military quickly set in motion plans to use its might to foil the political process, especially in East Pakistan, and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was fully complicit in this scheme. In the East though, the speech set in motion a series of events that helped transform the people. They knew that it was only a matter of time before the long struggle for emancipation would turn into a full-scale fight for independence.

Within about an hour of the historic speech, I got a telephone call from Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col) M.R. Chowdhury, Chief Instructor at the East Bengal Regimental Centre (EBRC). He asked me to immediately pass a message to Maj Ziaur Rahman to meet him at Chittagong's Niaz Stadium after dark. He wanted the same message to be given to Capt Oli Ahmed. He said that a secret meeting had been convened of some senior Bengali officers to take stock of the situation and what might follow in the coming days in the light of Sheikh Mujib's public ultimatum to the authorities in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Later that evening Maj Zia told me that at the meeting, Lt Col M.R. Chowdhury shared the information that Brig Majumdar had gathered from reliable sources that there was a plan by the Pakistani Army to disarm all Bengalis in the armed forces, including in the police and other paramilitary outfits. It was also agreed by those present there that this would not be tolerated and any such attempt by the Pakistan Army would be resisted strongly. In the meeting, it was agreed that efforts would be made to coordinate things with East Bengal battalions in Jessore, Joydebpur, Saidpur and Comilla, although this would be difficult and risky. They all agreed on the need to establish contacts with the political leadership. As Maj Ziaur Rahman walked away towards his house, I stared into the darkness,

vaguely trying to recall in my mind the events of the day, one that would profoundly impact a nation's life.

On the night of 21 March 1971, five of us Bengali officers had a secret meeting with a group of local AL leaders in Chittagong University. Our group was led by Capt Rafiqul Islam, Adjutant, East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) in Chittagong. Other members were: Capt Harun Ahmed Chowdhury, second in command of the EPR wing in Kaptai; and Capt Khalequeuzaman Chowdhury, Capt Oli Ahmed and myself, all three from 8th East Bengal Regiment. Maj Ziaur Rahman had earlier given us the green signal for attending the meeting. From the AL side, there was Mr Hannan, Dr Zafar, Mr Ataur Rahman Kaiser and one or two others whom we didn't know. During the meeting, we made it clear to the AL representatives that Pakistan was moving a large number of troops into East Pakistan, mostly in civilian guise. Also, a ship carrying huge quantity of arms and ammunition had already reached Chittagong Port. It was clear to us that these actions were aimed at launching a military crackdown on the Bengalis. We assured them that we were prepared to face any such assault, at least initially. What was needed was a decision from the political leadership on the next course of action in the face of these alarming developments. The AL side assured us that the discussions in the meeting would be conveyed to the political leadership in Dhaka. Till then, we needed to wait, but had to remain alert. Under the situation prevailing at that time, such a meeting was fraught with risks, but such high risks had to be taken.

The battle lines were now clearly drawn. These lines were crossed on the fateful night of 25 March, culminating in the dismemberment of Pakistan and changing the landscape of South Asia forever.

THE WAR OF LIBERATION

It was midnight of 25–26 March 1971. I was doing road patrol duty near the Chittagong Cantonment. I had with me 12 sepoy and a total of four rifles only. As I approached the Baizid Bostami Mazar Sharif, I was stopped by Naib Subedar Habibur Rahman of my battalion, who was on patrol duty in that area. Habib told me that tremendous firing was going on inside the cantonment. I got out of my Dodge and heard for myself the relentless sound of guns firing. Sensing something wrong, I immediately rang my unit and told Capt Oli Ahmed, who was the duty officer, about what was happening. He told me to try and further ascertain the situation. Soon after that, one Havildar Moniruzzaman,

who was in EBRC, along with five other soldiers, came rushing towards me. Trembling in shock, he said that 20 Baluch of the Pakistan Army had attacked the EBRC and had killed Lt Col M.R. Chowdhury, some Junior Commissioned Officers (JCOs) of the EBRC and innumerable recruits, who were all sleeping in their barracks. Some officers had also been arrested.

On hearing this, I immediately rushed to my battalion, which was located at Solashahar Market, and passed the information on to Capt Oli Ahmed. Soon after that, the West Pakistani officers were arrested and Maj Ziaur Rahman declared mutiny against the Pakistan Army and assumed command of the battalion. Fearing that we might be attacked by the Pakistan Army, Maj Ziaur Rahman and other senior officers decided to move the battalion to a safer location. So, during the night, 8th East Bengal, under the command of Maj Ziaur Rahman, left its lines and marched on foot and reached Kalurghat area a little after dawn, where we established our hideout. Here, we were joined by Capt Harun of the EPR, who had come from Kaptai. The troops led by Capt Harun and our own troops combined to become the first elements of the Bangladesh Liberation Army. The other officers were Maj Mir Shawkat Ali, Capt Khalequzzaman, Capt Sadek, Capt Oli Ahmed, Lt Mahfooz and myself. This was on 26 March 1971. The same evening, Maj Ziaur Rahman made us take an oath to fight for the independence of Bangladesh and be prepared to sacrifice our lives if necessary. On 27 March, we opened the first Bangladesh radio station from Chittagong from which Maj Ziaur Rahman spoke and asked for the recognition of Bangladesh. The same night, at about 12.30 a.m., I marched into the city with a section of the battalion. At Chatteshari Road, we were confronted by the Pakistani Army, who fired at us from a building. After throwing some grenades into the house, we withdrew to Kalurghat.

On 29 March, I led a platoon into the heart of Chittagong city, in spite of the fact that the Pakistan Army was already occupying most of the city. We took up position at Ispahani Hill near Askar Dighi. From Ispahani Hill, we had a very heavy exchange of fire with the Pakistan Army. With my mortars, I shelled the Circuit House, which was the Army Headquarters. During late afternoon, the Pakistan Army tried to surround us with a company strength. By then, we were running out of ammunition and so, I had to return to Kalurghat. The very fact that we fought right inside the city, shaking the Pakistan Army, with no casualty

on our side, was a big victory for us. Our mortar shelling killed eight Pakistanis and wounded some more.

The same evening at about 7 o'clock, I was called by Maj Ziaur Rahman and asked to take up position at Chowk Bazaar, thus blocking the only route which the Pakistan Army could use for reaching Kalurghat. I was given a fresh platoon for this purpose. Early next morning, I heard some firing going on in Boalkhali, a village nearby. Someone came and informed me that two Pakistan Army commandos had entered that village and were firing at the villagers. So, I took 10 of my men and slowly approached the village. Soon, we saw the commandos. We took up lying position and once they were within range, we opened fire. One of the commandos was killed on the spot and the other one was seriously wounded. The villagers, who were waiting with sticks and rods, pounced upon him and beat him to death. Later, I collected a map, their weapons and a piece of paper which showed that they were from the 3rd Commando Battalion of the Pakistan Army.

At Chowk Bazaar on 31 March, the Pakistan Army tried to break through our position, but were beaten back. I wanted my position to be strengthened because I felt that the enemy would make all possible attempts to break through Chowk Bazaar. Capt Harun Ahmed Chowdhury of the EPR came and joined me with a platoon. He had a machine gun with him, and the two platoons were so deployed that the Chowk Bazaar defence became almost impregnable.

Repeated attempts were made by the Pakistan Army to get through our defences at Chowk Bazaar, but all in vain. On 4 April, they launched two companies, supported by tanks, against us. We were left with no other alternative but to get into a street fight. Fortunately, our mortars came to our help. In the street fight, there were some casualties on the enemy's side, but none on ours. Being outnumbered, and since defence against tanks was not possible, we had to withdraw from Chowk Bazaar to Kalurghat. Two buildings were blown up by the tank shells just after we vacated them.

The battle at Chowk Bazaar lasted for five days. During our stay there, the civilians were of great help to us. They gave us food, tea and anything else we needed. After moving to Kalurghat, we built a strong defence on both sides of the bridge.

Also, on 30 March, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) had rocketed our radio station, but it was a sheer waste of ammunition because we had already removed the transmitter from there. After the PAF rocketed

the empty radio station, the Pakistan Army reported that Maj Ziaur Rahman had been killed in the radio station. This was part of their false propaganda.

On 1 April, on the Comilla–Chittagong Highway, an EPR force ambushed a commando company. About 100 dead bodies, including that of a Lieutenant Colonel and a Captain, were later recovered by the Pakistanis from there. Till then, that was the heaviest number of casualties inflicted on the army by us in a single operation. It was indeed a great battle.

After retreating to Kalurghat, we decided to follow a ‘hit-and-run’ tactic. With our limited strength and being severely under-equipped, we could not afford to launch any large-scale offensive operations. At the same time, as we had built a strong defence at Kalurghat bridge, our hit-and-run policy worked very effectively.

On 5 April, Pakistan Army forces tried to attack our position at Kalurghat, but were beaten back by Capt Harun with his EPR troops. Capt Harun himself was firing a light machine gun in that operation. This defeat had a serious effect on the morale of the Pakistani Army. They withdrew by four miles and took up position in a tannery factory on the Kaptai Road.

On 7 April, we saw some men of the Pakistan Army occupy an under-construction cinema hall near Ispahani Jute Mill. Maj Mir Shawkat Ali and I launched a joint operation against them. He fired upon them with his automatics from close range, while I fired three 83 mm Blendicide rockets into the particular room that the army was occupying. The rockets blew up the room, with very few Pakistan Army’s men managing to escape alive—most were killed and some were wounded. In this operation, I lost my sepoy, Naeb Ali. He died a hero, one of the first shaheeds of the Bangladesh Liberation Army. The local people gave him a befitting and emotional funeral.

Our job was not to give the enemy any rest. As part of that plan, Lt Mahfooz and his platoon attacked them at the tannery factory late at night on 9 April. The Pakistan Army was taken by complete surprise and this attack shook them up badly. They must have suffered heavy casualties in this action.

The fateful day of 11 April dawned. It was a bright morning and with me, there were: Capt Harun; Shawkat Hussain, a student of Chittagong University; Shawkat Alley of Dhaka University; Fazlur Rahman, a local student; and Hashmi Mustafa Kamal, a cadet from the Marine Academy.

These young men had been with us from the beginning. We had given them the basic training on weapons and they had taken part in all the action we had fought till then. Their courage and sense of patriotism was boundless.

It was about 8 o'clock in the morning when we heard heavy firing somewhere quite close. Suddenly, we saw a large number of Pakistan Army troops advancing towards us. I ordered my troops to open fire and took defensive position inside my bunker. Capt Harun moved to the railway guard room nearby and was firing on the advancing enemy. The Pakistan artillery was shelling our position heavily. I told Capt Harun to take cover, but when he started moving, he got hit by shrapnel. As he fell on the bridge, I asked my troops to move him to the rear. During Capt Harun's evacuation, I gave covering fire. Soon, I realised that we could not stay there for long, so I asked my troops to start retreating. I told them that I would join them shortly. By then, about five of my men had been wounded. The enemy had also lost some men. When all my men had withdrawn, I got out of my bunker and started firing at the enemy while standing in the open. This was when I was hit by a bullet. I collapsed on the bridge and when I tried to get up and run, I could not move as there was no strength in my legs. There was nobody to evacuate me as all my men had withdrawn by then.

The Pakistan Army men walked up to me and started abusing me. Some even kicked me as I lay flat on my back, bleeding profusely. Instead of killing me, the Pakistanis decided to take me as a prisoner. They picked me up and took me to the Martial Law Headquarters at Chittagong Circuit House. All the while, I was being subjected to a variety of abuses, including being repeatedly called a traitor. At the headquarters, the authorities decided to give me some necessary medical treatment. So, I was sent to the Naval Base Hospital at Chittagong. There the doctor discovered that the bullet had entered my left thigh, pierced right through my stomach, shattered my right hip and was lodged in the femur. The same night I was operated upon and the bullet was taken out. Three days later, I was shifted to the Chittagong Combined Military Hospital (CMH). On the way, two sepoy of the Pakistan Army tried to choke me to death. God, once again, bestowed his mercy on me and their brutal attempt failed.

The same evening, while I was lying in my bed in the CMH, Maj Meher Kamal of the Pakistan Army attacked me. I had known Maj Kamal well as he, like me, was from the East Bengal Regiment and at

that time, was posted to the EBRC. At first, he started hitting me with his fist on my face and nose and then, he started stabbing me with a bayonet. He stabbed me repeatedly on my chest and once on my cheek right below my left eye. All this stopped when a nursing orderly rushed in and physically pushed him out of the ward. I was shaking from the whole trauma. When the CO of the CMH came in a few minutes later, I told him that either he should kill me or give me some protection against such attacks.

The doctors at the CMH declared that there was not enough facility for my treatment in Chittagong and so, on 24 April, I was flown to Dhaka and was admitted in the military hospital there. Instead of keeping me in the ward, I was kept inside a makeshift tent under a mango tree out in the open, and no treatment was given to me. Although the doctors said I should be taken to the CMH Rawalpindi, the authorities decided not to because I was a traitor, and also because I was to be interrogated by the Army Intelligence. I was supposed to stay in the hospital for at least eight weeks, but was removed on a stretcher to the Field Interrogation Centre (FIC) after 12 days. There, I was subjected to 10 sleepless nights. If I dozed off, the sentry would hit me with the rifle butt. It was clear to me that the Pakistanis could not accept the genesis of the armed uprising. Their contention was that we had planned this whole thing. At last, I asked for paper and pen and wrote down my "confessional" statement, saying all what we had done in Chittagong prior to 25 March and the events thereafter. I left out no details. I wrote down my statement while lying flat on a stretcher and a powerful light bulb hanging over my head all night.

I concluded my statement recalling the words of a college classmate from way back in 1965 when he said, 'The existence of East and West Pakistan as one Pakistan is an absurdity.' As it is, they felt like two separate countries. There is nothing common between these two people, except religion. Thus I was extremely happy with the result of the general elections of December 1970. I knew, it was only a question of time before we parted ways. I did not know, however, that it would happen so soon.

On 18 May, I was shifted to Prisoner's Camp No. 1, located inside Dhaka Cantonment. This place was a scene of brutality beyond imagination. All prisoners were generally subjected to ruthless beating by the Pakistan Army sepoy. Even in this seriously wounded condition and lying on a stretcher, I was not spared and was beaten mercilessly on 19 May, as a result of which I could not have my food for a couple of days.

I was beaten time and again over the next few days. There were many prisoners in that camp and nobody was spared the brutality let loose by the guards in the camp. A.K. Shamsuddin, a top civil official, was beaten to death inside the camp.

This beating officially stopped in June, but unofficially, it continued in the cells where the civilians and other ranks of the army and the air force were staying. The food that we were given was of a quality which even a stray dog would not want to eat. However, by the end of June, the quality of food improved somewhat. The treatment meted out to us also changed slightly. The FIC people would come once in a while to take some officers for interrogation. Some of them never came back and this included at least one Bengali Captain. Much later, we came to know that he was tortured to death. The official version was that he was 'killed while trying to escape'!

Around early July, the officers were shifted to Shere Bangla Nagar and housed in buildings that were part of the Second Capital. Here, the living conditions were much improved. We were also allowed to see our families once a month or so. The days passed by and some officers were released turn by turn.

Towards the very end of August, a Major from the Pakistan Army intelligence asked me to be a state approver. He said that if I agreed, I would not be given the death penalty for mutiny. He gave me three days to consider his offer. He also admitted that he needed this to 'justify our actions'. After the third day, I told him bluntly that I refuse to be a state approver. The Major was furious and warned me about the consequences of my decision to not cooperate with their nefarious design. I looked him in the eye and said, 'Sir, I am not afraid to die'.

On 1 September, I was issued the chargesheet, containing six charges, the first of which was 'abetting mutiny'. This charge alone was enough to give me the capital punishment. I mentally prepared myself for the worst, but I was never afraid. I knew what I had done was right and I had no regrets.

On 19 November, my parents came to see me in the prisoner's camp. This was their second visit since my captivity. My father told me that he has been approached by the authorities saying that I should apologise to the Pakistanis in writing for my acts of treason and seek mercy from the President. They also told him that if I did that, I would be spared the death penalty but and given a lighter sentence and dismissed from the Army. I told my father that I have done nothing for which I should

apologise and I shall never seek mercy from the Pakistanis. My father just said, 'I understand your decision. May Allah bless you'. My brother, who was also there, kissed me on the forehead and said, 'We are proud of you'.

On 28 November, I was moved to solitary confinement. This for me was hard because of my physically disabled condition. I was told that the move was in preparation for my trial by a military court on charges of 'Treason', along with abetting mutiny. Again, I mentally prepared myself for the worst, but I knew that the Almighty will bestow His mercy on me.

Then came the day we were all waiting for. It was the 4th of December 1971. From early morning, Indian Air Force aircrafts had been playing havoc in and over Dhaka. The Pakistan Air Force could barely fly any of their fighter aircrafts after the second or third day of the war. From my prison window I watched with uncontrolled excitement as the scene was being played out right in front of my eyes. I anticipated that it was only a question of time before the Pakistan Army laid down its arms and Mukti Bahini and the Indian military proudly marched into Dhaka. My dreams came true on 16 December. At that time, I was in the cantonment, where I had been shifted after the building in which I was being kept in the Shere Bangla Nagar caught fire after being hit by the Indian Air Force.

On 16 December, we received the news of the surrender of the Pakistanis with tremendous jubilation. The false pride of the Pakistan Army, their sadistic ego and the war mania they were nursing had ended forever in utter ignominy. Rarely in military history can one find such disgrace and shame which the Pakistan Army had to face.

On 17 December, six of us army officers who were prisoners, proudly walked out to free and liberated Bangladesh. The damage done to me by the Pakistani Army on 11 April never healed. My left hip was shattered and I still walk with support. Throughout my eight months and six days in captivity, I was given no medical treatment whatsoever except for the first operation. Instead, I was subjected to the most brutal form of physical and mental torture.

CONCLUSION

In an article in *The Express Tribune*, Khalid Ahmed has quoted Ikram Sehgal, a retired Pakistani Army officer from the East Bengal Regiment, on the conduct of the Pakistan Armed Forces during the Bangladesh Liberation War as saying:

When soldiers make war on women and children, they cease to be soldiers. That is why in the final analysis, when it came to real combat, they could not face up to bullets which is their actual job as soldiers...the terror that was unleashed by them in East Pakistan between March and November 1971 is simply inexcusable.¹

On 23 January 1972, 25 of us wounded freedom fighters, military and civilians, were flown to East Berlin, capital of the then German Democratic Republic (GDR) for medical treatment. The GDR was the third country in the world to recognise independent Bangladesh, after Bhutan and India. The GDR government had offered to provide this treatment as a gesture of friendship.

Noted author Salman Rushdie, in his 1983 book, *Shame*, has described Pakistan as it was created: ‘...that a country divided into two Wings a thousand miles apart, that fantastic bird of a place, two Wings without a body, sundered by the land-mass of its greatest foe, joined by nothing but God...’² Salman Rushdie’s cynical view of Pakistan was not misplaced. The year 1971 proved that religion alone was not enough to keep Pakistan united. What was crucially missing was an inclusive democratic mindset, not a unity based on religion alone.

In 1971, the people of Bangladesh had won. It was a proud and momentous time for us as a nation. For many though, the victory had come at a huge cost. For the widow of Lt Col M.M. Rahman, my school principal, killed by the Pakistanis in Jhenaidaha in April, the pain of the loss of her husband would live with her forever. For the families of my friends, Capt Salahuddin Mumtaz, and 2Lt Anwar, my roommate in Jessore, both of whom made the supreme sacrifice, the war brought more pain than joy. This was also the case for the families of my sepoy, Naeb Ali, who was killed in Chittagong in the early stages of the war, and Subedar Major T.M. Ali and Sepoy Motuk Miah, both killed in action in Sylhet towards its very end. They, and thousands more like them, did not live to see the fruition of their sacrifice: a free Bangladesh.

Freedom does not always come without pain and sacrifice. I bow my head in paying my deepest respect to those brave Bangladeshis who made the supreme sacrifice for their motherland. My gratitude is equally due to the brave members of the Indian military who shed their blood for our freedom. As a nation, we owe all of them an eternal debt. It is because of this shared sacrifice that, today, we stand tall having achieved an identity that we can rightfully call our own.

Being a prisoner of war in the hands of a brutal Pakistan military for a major part of the war, I had little or no knowledge of what was happening in the international arena with regard to the situation in Bangladesh. It was only after liberation that I became aware of the critical role that the Government of India under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had played in shaping global public opinion in favour of Bangladesh and the involvement of India in it. She did this even in the face of open opposition from the Nixon administration, from China and from almost the entire Islamic world. The situation had reached such a critical point that by December, it had paved the way for the Indian Armed Forces to get directly involved in the final days of the war. This led to the emergence of a free and independent Bangladesh on 16 December when the Pakistan Army in Bangladesh surrendered to the joint forces of the Mukti Bahini and the Indian Army.

Current Indian External Affairs Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar, describes India's political, diplomatic and military involvement in the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 as a 'Triumphal one'.³ It indeed was. It is this piece of irreversible history that had laid the foundation for the relations between our two countries and the two people. The task for us now is to build on it based on the universal principles of mutual benefit and mutual respect.

The Bangladesh Liberation War was not just for a geographical territory, nor was it only for the red and green flag. It was the culmination of the people's long quest for political, social and economic emancipation. Over the last half a century of the existence of Bangladesh as a state, the country has achieved much in the socio-economic area. Challenges, however still remain for us as a nation. We need to remain focussed on ensuring a democratic, inclusive, non-communal, just and exploitation-free Bangladesh. These are the values and goals for which so much was sacrificed by so many.

NOTES

1. Ikram Sehgal, *The Express Tribune*, Karachi, 14 October 2012.
2. Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1983, p. 178.
3. S. Jaishankar, *The India Way*, Uttar Pradesh: HarperCollins, 2020, p. 74.