

Pages from *My Bengal Journal*

Rebecca Haque*

1

Incarcerated in the Camps in (West) Pakistan soon after the surrender of General Niazi and the capture of over 90,000 Pakistani soldiers, the Bengali armed forces officers and their families counted the days and months as they eagerly awaited repatriation to their newly liberated motherland, 'matribhumi', Bangladesh. My family, along with hundreds of other families who were stationed in Rawalpindi and neighbouring cantonments in March 1972, was first taken to the mountainous North-West Frontier city of Bannu. A scenic trip by narrow-gauge 'toy-train' from the regional capital city of Peshawar.

A few months later, we were all taken in convoys and shunting stop-and-go train journey in the dead of night down to the plains of the Punjab, to the sprawling camps near the rural town of Mandi Bahauddin. It was a surreal experience for me, then 18 and waiting desperately to start classes at University of Dhaka. The night trains were diverted and made to wait at deserted, remote stations to keep our journey a secret from the hostile native populace. Heavily guarded by Pakistani soldiers, the train crept from one ghost station to another. My mind automatically registered a correspondence between our train journey and the journey forced upon the Jews by Nazi Germany, significantly noting with relief the major difference between the two journeys. The hapless, innocent Jewish men, women, and children were packed tight like cattle in suffocating, dark, locked compartments and led to the slaughter-house. In contrast, our train journey was a picnic, with our laughter and optimism and Dhakaia, Sylheti, Chatgainya, Barishaila, and Noakhaila stories and jokes. We did not fear for our lives, for we knew that Bangabondhu had 90,000 men held hostage in POW Camps in India as collateral for our safe return. As it turned out, diplomatic negotiations for our return to Bangladesh, in exchange for the release of the Pakistani soldiers, took approximately another year and a half. The first chartered East German Interflug flights out of Lahore airport began at the end of November 1973. My family was flown out of Lahore airport on 3 Dec 1973, and we landed at Dacca airport on a beautiful sunny afternoon, exhilarated with the newness of being and becoming rightful citizens in our own homeland space.

In Mandi Bahauddin, we had been placed in shared bungalows and houses in three separate sections, Camps A, B, and C. Camp A was the largest and about a kilometer away from the two smaller adjacent Camps B and C, which had a common outer gate and a linking inner gate within the guarded walled compound. The ex-army service holders were paid half their monthly salary each received according to rank. All groceries and consumer items had to be bought at the camp general store. We were not allowed to go to the town. I saw no Pakistani man, woman, or child during this period, apart from the sentries manning the gates. We would spend afternoons and evenings either studying for future enrolment in schools, colleges, and universities in Bangladesh, or we would walk to the other camps to socialize and play badminton or other sports.

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Daily life in Camps B and C was disciplined and structured by the few most senior officers, Major-General Khalil, major General Majidul Haq, and Brigadier Dastagir, who set the rules for social and moral conduct and civic behaviour, and set up separate bodies for educational and cultural activities. My father (then a Major in the Army Medical Corps) Dr. AKM Azizul Haque, had a prestigious place in the inner sanctum by virtue of his expertise as a highly respected psychiatrist. Our evenings were full of collective gathering to watch televised news on foreign channels about Bangabondhu and his international efforts for securing the rights of the people of Bangladesh. Additionally, the whole camp would tune in to Bangladesh Betar on their transistor radios at the appointed hour and we would scan the stars in the inky vault of the sky as we listened to the achingly sweet songs of home sung by Abdul Jabbar, and Abdul Alim, Apple Mahmud, Sabina Yasmeen, Nilofer Yasmeen, and so many others.

I recall, as in a movie unfolding in the mind, one special evening – the evening of the first David Frost interview with Bangabondhu. (A few families had televisions, and my father kept our Philips 14-inch black-and white TV after selling the car and other electronic goods back in Rawalpindi when the order came from GHQ to move the Bengalis to the distant camps.) Nightfall was upon us, I remember, when father set up the TV on top of the high chair outside under the window ledge of the front drawing-room of our bungalow. The majority of the residents of Camp C had begun gathering on the lawn – my army uncles and their wives, and my friends, boys and girls, even toddlers for whom the name Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a magical incantation. Rugs and bedspreads were laid on the asphalt, and chairs set up in a semi-circle in rows on the few feet of grassy lawn beyond the cemented pathway. The mood was carnivalesque, as in a harvest festival. There was a warm bond of kinship, of belonging, of a sense of home in a place away from home.

In fact, the chattering, excited crowd became one quiet, breathing entity as soon as David Frost and Bangabondhu came alive on the screen. With only the pleasant swoosh of the cool breeze rustling through the mulberry trees on the edge of the lawn, faintly heard as accompanying melody to our intense concentration, I felt my heart leap. I felt it expand to encompass the surging wave of emotion that ushered a new dawn.

This scene remains imprinted in my memory as a beacon, a beginning in my own individuation as a Bangladeshi national.

2

When, in March 1971, my eyes first beheld the radiant facsimile of the flag of Bangladesh – the small handprint of my deltaic birthplace, throbbing in the circle of the blood-red sun, safe, snug in the lap of lush green rectangular earth – I was physically a thousand miles away from my beloved motherland. Spiritually, I was in limbo, in a state of stasis, unable to split the dawn with jubilant shouts of ‘Joy Bangla’, whispering the words of nationalistic glory in private ceremony, sheltered from the seething disbelief and collective humiliation of the vanquished. In solitary spaces, in moments of thoughtful communion with my own people, my psyche resonated to the remembered rhythm of the dhol and my heart lay palpitating in the bower of delicate petals of the red hibiscus, roktokorobi. I stood tall and proud. Fearless and independent.

Encircled as I was then, by tall fair-skinned Punjabis, I was the proverbial outsider, the 'other'; a petite, precocious, dark-brown seventeen-year-old bookworm among classmates whose ignorance of my race and culture was often ridiculously comedic, or racist and offensive, depending on the nature of the comment or query directed at me. Most often, I would quietly contemplate the rows and rows of dusty, musty volumes in the spacious, silent library of the College, comfortable in dialogue with the enlightening pages in my chosen place of refuge, away from the negativity and narrow-mindedness of the boorish and the prejudicial.

Forty-nine years on, the seventeen-year old is excited to celebrate the fiftieth Independence Day on Friday 26 March 2021. Today, I remember that the long months of waiting in the Camp was one of preparation for my life here. I have learnt to see life as a chiaroscuro, a painting in shades of light and dark. It is as complex and enigmatic as a Picasso cubist painting: the arc of one's personal journey cuts across the radius of the circle as it draws a perpendicular line along the vertical and horizontal axes of the rectangular canvas. It has been so in my own journey, where fate and choice, circumstance and character have determined my present, made me what I am now. For a long time, my identity as a strongly vocal and, sometimes, of necessity, belligerent Dhakaite has invisibly and inexorably melded with my identity as a graduate of the University of Dhaka. I remember I loved to linger on the different floors of the Central Library, adjacent to the newer Natmondal Theatre of the Department of Drama, the department founded by my erstwhile classmate Professor Jamil Ahmed, who left at the end of our first undergraduate year in 1974 for Delhi to study drama. He heeded his calling, he had his vision; he followed his dream. Later, he did a pioneering doctoral degree on folk drama, and produced original, experimental plays, winning international renown for our University and for Bangladesh. He is a revered teacher and theatre activist, elected as an Ashoka Fellow in 1992.

In the Central Library, I wandered through alien floors and thumbed through thick old bound volumes of Anthropology and Psychology and History and Geography, with quick detours to Philosophy and Sociology, before settling in my legitimate terrain – Literature. Some of my contemporaries, teachers in University of Dhaka or in distant Universities in the five continents, began our journey together. Classmates and friends and lovers, we spent hours of fun-filled time writing copious notes on reams and reams of paper in that time before the age of the Xerox machine. Learning was fun, being together was fun, and my University was the best in the world for me. I remember that we lived at a time of such buoyant optimism that joy was visible in our jaunty footsteps on the thoroughfares and avenues of Dacca. Eyes luminous with the quest for knowledge, we were a merry band traversing the open grounds of the beautiful campus. Future economists, historians, sociologists, and litterateurs – dear friends of mine studying the humanities and the social sciences – we would parade in groups up and down Fuller Road up to BUET, or down from TSC to the Fine Arts Institute (Charukala) for the sensual, visual experience of the latest art exhibitions and mounted displays, and oftentimes, we would sit awhile gazing at the artist breathing life into clay or canvas.

Oh! What thrill it was to be alive at that dawn of our Nation. Creation was alive, and we echoed its creativity. Today, after forty-one years as teacher and writer, if I have

achieved a small success in bestowing upon my students a measure of my own veneration for art, culture, and literature, and have planted in their receptive minds a deep respect for the enduring values of courage and integrity, it is because I too had teachers who led me to develop my own moral vision; I am indebted to my mentor and father-figure, Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury, Shakespearean scholar and expert on the British novel, especially Conrad and D. H. Lawrence, who was Chair in 1973 when I started classes as a First Year (Honours) student on 06 December of that year. I am equally indebted to Professor Razia Khan Amin, poet and writer of noteworthy fiction in Bengali, an affectionate Mater-figure whose fiery passion echoed in me and ricocheted off me to embrace every experience; to Late National Professor Kabir Chowdhury – our expert on American Literature; to Late Professor Husni Ara Huq, who made me become sensually involved with Keats to imbibe the essence of his Negative Capability; to Late Professor Ahsanul Haque, an expert on Chaucer and Middle English, who regaled us with witty, anecdotal digressions and united the entire class of eighteen-, nineteen-year-olds in joyful camaraderie, especially when we took the high or low road to Canterbury Cathedral with Chaucer's weebegone pilgrims.

I believe each individual of a community must develop a secure moral centre, just as a healthy independent nation – the body-politic –needs to maintain moral boundaries in all sectors within the social infrastructure. My days as a tenured teacher in the Department of English will soon end as I retire on 30 June 2021. But I am happy that my role as educator will not end as I continue to share my love of learning with those I have mentored, and assist those who consult me from time to time to translate, or seek to utilize my expertise as literary critic and editor.

Today, my attitude towards the young students grows more protective, even maternal, as I grow older. The light of intelligence shines forth from their eyes, and I want to embrace them and give them more, do more for them. So much potential, only asking for the right kind of guidance, the deservedly adequate support to make the truly ethical choice. To enable them to live with grace under pressure in a clean, well-lighted place.

*The memoir draws on Professor Rebecca Haque's two reflective pieces published in *The Daily Star*.