

Those Were Days My Friend

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Channel called 'Maitreyee' — by the President of India

My first recollection of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is imbedded in my mind, as it was also my first brush with the law. It was in January 1969, a month after I had appeared for my class 11 School Board examination, that my political 'mentor' decided that we must join a protest outside the Pakistani High Commissioner's office to demand the release of Sheikh saheb from jail. Who? Sashanka Sekhar Ray explained the Agartala Conspiracy Case and how the Pak government had put Sheik Mujib behind bars for two long years. Sashanka was 23, a post-graduate student of political science and a scion of the famous zamindar family of Kashipur, who introduced me to Marx, Hegel, Gandhi, Vivekananda, Netaji and even Ram Manohar Lohia. Those were the tumultuous years when students's movements shook the world from Paris, London and Berlin to Ohio and China. I was 17 and while my generation was entirely absorbed in the energies that emanated from left ideologies, I could somehow not accept the extreme left position that "China's Chairman is our Chairman".

We assembled at a particular spot in the Park Circus area, where we met many left students of many hues and workers who had come in processions. We were soon joined by some known intellectuals and it felt great to be out on the streets in protest, for the first time, at one finally, with the rest of suffering humanity. We walked with placards in a decent line but were told to make sure that we blocked all traffic all the way to the Pakistani office that was, of course, not too far away. When I saw so many policemen all round, I gulped: I was sure that they would arrest me. This was more than what I had bargained for and I was also quite apprehensive that some relatives would spot me and definitely report it to my parents. Nothing so exciting happened, much to my eventual disappointment. We were stopped at police barricades a hundred yards away from the formidable gates, where we were told to squat and raise loud and furious slogans. There were, however, a few moments of high tension as some desperate protesters suddenly jumped up and broke through the police lines: only to be pushed back quite roughly, with a few strong swipes of long lathis. This was followed by volleys of abuses from both sides and my blood pressure shot up, but Sashanka counselled me to wait for the right moment. A lot of oratory followed and finally a small deputation was allowed to go and hand over a

petition to some important person at the Pakistani mission. Thus, my first encounter with the law consisted of a very mundane, non-sensational exposure to some stimulating speeches but no real action.

We were, however, glad to learn a couple of months later that Sheikh Saheb had been released from custody and by then, my interest in East Pakistan had been established. My father used to recall with pride how his dear Chit-tagong had always been on the forefront of the Freedom Movement and how so many teenagers had lost their lives fighting the British forces, but here I was: someone who had not even **n** arrested for a single hour. A few months later, I joined Presidency College which was then a Naxalite fortress and, as expected, I managed to get into trouble very soon because of my differing views. This soon led to prolonged, hot arguments and occasional violence, where a few of us were simply brutalised by the sons of Mao, who outnumbered us ten to one. Terror was their weapon and the dread of Naxalite violence had gripped the whole state. Our college classes disrupted frequently with slogans, speeches and even bombs. Common citizens had to rush home before dark as gunshots were heard late at night. The radio and papers reported numerous deaths every day about how the Naxals had 'annihilated their class enemies' and, of course, a lot of 'heartless police action'. Extremists used pipe-guns and crude bombs, often beheading their target and even Vidyasagar's head was cut off from his statue in College Square. Life was rough and the exciting events in Pakistan or elsewhere were of little interest to these students in Kolkata, who flashed Mao's Red Book and held the whole College Street area to ransom.

So, in August 1970, when Akashvani dedicated a new channel to the youth, called Yuva Vani, it was indeed one of the most exciting events of that time. I went with my friends to Moira Street for the inauguration to witness the performances of Ananda Shankar and Bappi Lahiri. Very soon, I found my entry into the hallowed portals of Kolkata's famous radio station and I still recall the wonder with which I entered its premises and soaked in its grandeur. Bibhas Bose, one of the English radio programmers, took a fancy to me (God bless him!) and introduced a callow and lean young man to the finer arts of the human voice. He taught me its delivery, roll, control and modulation and the gravitas that accompanied radio communication. We students simply loved the cool, sombre, air-conditioned studios, and the green felt on the table. It was thrilling to handle the familiar but iconic microphones emblazoned with the words 'All India Radio' on them. Glass partitions separated us from the control panel and it felt great to be given the 'thumbs up' signal by professional recordists who looked so serious, with headphones over their ears. They noted every word and gesticulated furiously whenever we went wrong. I remember with pride how we

received fifteen rupees for each programme, after signing so many pages of tiring government forms and also gumming a pink revenue stamp and cross it over.

But once we were out of the pink sandstone coloured building, the stark reality of Naxalite terror of the in Kolkata hit us strongly. The exciting developments in Pakistan that followed the 1971 elections, however, made real big news, more so in Bengal, and this managed to overshadow the news of Naxal-Police violence. All of us keenly followed, over radio and through the newspapers, the momentous political drama that unfolded itself in the months of February and March. Kolkata was aghast at the brutalities that took place in Dhaka and elsewhere, on and after the 25th of March and all sorts of rumours came in, enraging us even more, every day. All India Radio became our main source of authentic, updated information as the young could hardly wait for the next morning's newspapers. In any case, the morning papers would they would be monopolised by our seniors, who were really worried about the military crack-down. It was at that point that our generation became emotionally involved in the happenings across the border. So strong was the bonding with suffering Bengalis 'on the other side' that none here seemed to mind the endless streams of refuge-seekers who crossed over, with tales of white terror. I was, of course, a step ahead of others, as I could narrate the background of the happenings to my less informed friends.

Within weeks, Joy Bangla fighters cropped up in the tormented land and began retaliating against the ruthless occupation army, by blowing up bridges and supplies. Though India recognised the new 'Government of Bangladesh' in exile, it refused to intervene with its military, which infuriated students and the masses in Bengal. We were impatient as the world seemed to take ever so long to wake up and condemn the atrocities on the innocent who stood up for their culture and their rights. I remember Senator Ted Kennedy had come over, to express his solidarity with the refugees and both nations. By then, I had become quite a little expert and I had started familiarising many of my friends with the names of the student leaders of "Joy Bangla", as we called the new movement. I had read of, and so explained the role of Shahjahan Siraj, Noore Alam Siddiqui, Abdur Rob and Abdul Quddus Makhan, though I did make a few mistakes in narration.

Many a young man in West Bengal was driven to such rage that taking up arms for our harassed brothers and tormented sisters became an obsession. Some actually did, in ways that cannot be described in this short piece. I looked for my own outlet and it was then that a senior leader introduced me to one of

the several units of 'Joy Bangla' that had sprung up in many parts of the State. I started working for some days after college, in one that was on Balu Haq Lane, quite close to that building of the Pakistani Deputy High Commissioner on Circus Avenue, to which we had marched over in 1969. In 1971, it had to be guarded like a total fortress, with more security than the American Consulate. We were, therefore, taken by total surprise a few days later when we heard that the Bengali officials in the Pakistani office had revolted and had pulled down the Pakistani flag. We went across eagerly to see it and could not hold back our tears of joy to see the new green and red flag of Bangladesh flying atop that building. It was a severe emotional moment. My work in the Joy Bangla office was basically to help translate from Bengali to English some 'releases' and also to familiarise newer groups of freedom fighters who had come over from the battled land with the city of Kolkata. I met many of them and heard so many heart-wrenching tales of woe. Once in a while, older volunteers pointed out to important leaders and I was introduced to some, like Abdul Mannan, who later became Home Minister of the free nation. I also met Khondakar Mushtaque Ahmed and others, whose names I cannot recall just now. It was a great feeling to be part of the 'liberation movement', in some small way.

Our patience in India was soon wearing thin and we regularly speculated through heated debates in Coffee House whether our army would, in fact, intervene across the border. In Akashvani, where I was not a total stranger then, I was told that the Central Government had certain limitations in coming out with more open support. One morning, I was indeed very surprised to be taken by Bibhas Bose to Dilip Sengupta, the Station Director himself. He was known to be a direct, no-nonsense, energetic official, who could barely conceal his strong sympathies for the tormented country. He had permitted many a bold programme on Yuva Vani, which would otherwise have been hit by the Union government's 'restraint order' on Kolkata's primary 'A' or 'Ka' channel. He came straight to the point and asked me whether I could get over two of the four top student leaders of 'Bangladesh' who had crossed over to Kolkata and invite them for a talk on Yuva Vani. I was chosen as I spoke well in English and if the talk was recorded in this language, rather than in the normal Bengali, it could perhaps be circulated to other mainstream services of Akashvani in Delhi and elsewhere.

I could hardly let this opportunity go and within a few days, I had located and dragged Shahjahan Siraj to Akashvani, along with another second-rung leader. I roped in Nandita Basu Mallik, my friend from Presidency College and we were joined by a smart young girl from East Pakistan or 'Bangladesh' called Nimmi Choudhury. Our radio talk with Shahjahan Siraj discussed every area of interest where the liberation struggle was concerned, freely and frankly.

It was, in fact, one of the boldest as India was still controlling its response to the new nation and did not want to be seen as instigating problems. Nimmi turned out to be the daughter of a Bangla diplomat, I.R. Choudhury, and she gave us a drop in her father's big car, treating us to ice cream on the way. We exchanged phone numbers and one day, we were invited to her very impressive home. There, we met her boyfriend, a tall, dark army captain, who she said, had managed to escape from Pakistan. He was on the way to soon join the Joy Bangla forces. I remember that he had a big hand and he seemed to crush mine, in his overpowering hand shake. We had small talk and this Captain Dalim did not appear too friendly.

For the next few months we were listening in keenly to the radio sets, as dramatic developments were taking place. From after the Durga Pujas, through the autumn season, we would see planes of the Indian Air Force tearing through the skies with ear-splitting sound and military trucks carrying armed soldiers day and night. This continued till Pakistan attacked India and war was finally declared on the 3rd of December. We were glued to the radio right through the 13-day war, as blackouts and sirens ruled our universe. We followed every step of the war to liberate Bangladesh, replete with battles, attacks, setbacks and the collapse of Pakistani garrisons. On the 16th of December, when the Pakistani army surrendered in Dhaka. It was the one of the most memorable days in my life. The whole of Kolkata was delirious with joy, as 'Jai Hind' and 'Joy Bangla' rent the air. Even food vendors gave free sweets and snacks to every passer-by. The euphoria of the new nation was shared on both sides, but then, life had to move on. I remember Sheikh Mujib and Indira Gandhi addressing a mammoth gathering in Kolkata and many other exciting events of history.

Soon, however, I had no option but to get busy with my graduate exams, that were postponed and regularly disrupted by political disturbances. I passed them quite well, but immediately thereafter I started preparing for the toughest examination of those days — the Indian Administrative Service or the IAS. Thus, even before my much-delayed M.A. classes had taken off seriously in Darbhanga building of Calcutta University, I started appearing on different dates. To me, the examinations were just as a 'wild card' try but luck and God were both extremely kind to me. I got through with a high rank in both the IAS and the IFS, in the first attempt. On the 13th day of July, 1975, I joined the IAS at the IAS Training Academy in Mussoorie.

Oh, I forgot to mention that I used to get letters from many of my friends who had done well in Bangladesh. One such letter came from Nimmi Choudhury, who invited me proudly to her marriage with her fiancé, Major

Dalim. Someone told me later on that some problems had taken place at that marriage, between the Major and political leaders of Mujib's party. I was not able to follow all events as I was more engrossed in securing my career. On the 15th of August morning, we celebrated Independence Day at Mussoorie, with a lot of events. It was when the programmes were ending that we received the terrible news that Bangabandhu Mujibur Rahaman had been assassinated, in cold blood a few hours ago. More tragic was the news that every member of his family had also been brutally murdered by a squad of disgruntled army officers.

As more news filtered in through the mountain air, we learnt that leading the pack of killers was (oh God!) none other than that Major Dalim!