

Remembering March 25: What I witnessed on that dreadful night and(Part I)

- Ajoy Roy

After a somewhat long time I am writing again about the dreadful night of March 25, 1971, the blackest night in the history of world genocide. This write up is aimed for the younger generation of MM forum. From 1971 to 2007 a long 36 years elapsed, but the night still haunted me in my dream, many a times, even today. No, I have not forgotten the ferocity, dreadfulness and butchery of bloodthirsty Pakistani killers in uniform. Yes, those killers in uniform were supposed to be our protectors, defenders of Pakistan and its people, whom we bred and nourished with our money and wealth.

I will only narrate my own experience of that night and the following days- what I saw in the Dacca University Campus. I was then living in Fuller Road Residential area of DU at 5th floor with my wife and mother. On March 23rd the so-called Pakistan day, instead of hoisting Pakistani Flag, we along with rest of our countrymen hoisted the newly devised Bangladesh flag infested with a golden map of Bangladesh imbedded on a blood red circle over a bottle green background. Since that day Bangladesh was a reality in the hearts of the millions of Bangalis. Black flags were flying atop most of our buildings within the campus since 3rd March. On 24th March it became apparent to us that talks between Pakistani President Yahya and Bangabandhu failed. From March 25 morning the city was full of rumors of all sorts. Some said an agreement had been reached between the Bangabandhu and Pakistani military junta, other said a renewed vigorous Martial law was offing with the arrest of all top political leaders including Bangabandhu. It was learnt that most of the west Pakistani political leaders had left Dhaka on the previous night. Only Mr. Bhutto was still at Dacca.

At about 4 p.m. I went to 32 DRA, residence of Sheikh Mujib, the head quarter of Bangladesh Liberation Movement only to find the place crowded with host of foreign and local journalists. I heard that a close door meeting was on at the upstairs with Bangabandhu and AL high command. I could only find Capt. Mansur Ali, with whom I had nodding acquaintance, whom I asked about the latest situation. He told me that the situation was very grave hinting that formal talk had come to an end, anything could happen including army take over. He further told me that the ball was in the President's court; only he could make a pronouncement in the light of the solution suggested by AL. He advised me to be very cautious and careful. As I was turning away to leave Bangabandhu's residence I found Professor Mazaharul Islam of Bengali Department, RU coming downstairs. He was an activist of liberation movement in RU campus and a staunch supporter of Sheikh Mujib. He also repeated it thing what Capt. Mansur Ali told me. He told me that he was going back to Rajshahi to organize liberation war as suggested by the Sheikh. In fact I was waiting for Tazuddin Ahmed with whom I had little acquaintances, which became a bit closer during non-cooperation movement, among the top AL leaders. But Prof. Islam said there was no chance as all top AL members with top students leader waiting outside the conference room for Bangabandhu's direct

instructions, were having discussion in case army came to the street what would be their strategy and action plan.

I left the residence of Bangabandhu. On my way back I noticed that streets were almost empty of EPR patrolling. Near mew market Nilkhet Police substation I found a few EPR jowans on duty. I asked them why so few EPR jowans were found on the street. One of them said that most of them were asked to return to barrack as their non Bengali commander said, "*Tumhara Joy Bangla Ho gia, barrack me oapas chala jao*" (Since you have got your Joy Bangla, return to the barracks). This appeared to me as an ominous sign.

I straight went to DU club where the Action Committee of DUTA was to meet at 7-30 p.m. for chalking out some programmes of ours. But a very few turned up, as most of had left Dhaka for home. We had informal discussion, but no new light any one could throw except a sense of uncertainty and fear gripped all of us.

After watching TV news at 9 p.m., I returned to my residence at 9-30 p.m. The news said that Awami League had submitted all its papers with proposals to overcome the present crisis of the country to the President with the hope that President would make a pronouncement in this regard within a day or two. If the President failed AL would take sterner steps to achieve its ultimate goal as proclaimed in the 7th March of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In the mean while AL asked the countrymen to keep calm and observe a daylong *hartal* on March 25. As I was coming along through lonely dark Fuller road, I noticed all the street lights off and found a few groups of armed young with black uniform taking positions here and there including inside our area. I also found our area too very dark. I wondered who were these armed young men, were they guerrillas or commandos of Pakistani army. I attempted to talk to one group just taking position inside our area near the gate, but they waved me away pointing to go home. I got afraid of our non-Bengali colleagues, honestly speaking.

I asked my wife about my cousin, a resident student of JN hall and physics department (whom I instructed to stay at home instead of staying at Hall during these turbulent days) whether he had returned home. My wife told me that after having a meal he went back to the Hall to stay with his friends. I became worried of his safety and thought he should have stayed with us this night. This was just an instant reaction. Mother was already in her bed. We had a very quiet dinner together with my wife. I then decided to go to JN Hall to bring back my cousin, but my wife asked me not to go at this night so late to the Hall as it was already half past 11 p.m.

We went to sleep thinking melancholy what was ahead in the next morning for us! I don't know how long I had sleep; I wake up as if the sky had fallen over us with all-powerful thundering sounds and lighting. My wife and mother were already awake. My wife was trying to see what was happening from our balcony. I drew her inside. It was the army action, no doubt – I imagined. Cracking sounds of machine gun and rifle bullets, rolling sound of tanks and other army vehicles, throwing of light crackers that illuminated the sky as daylight made our campus a hell. We saw through our windows flames of fire all

around us. I could imagine the target of army operation was the DU campus, especially the halls of residence, JN Hall and Iqbal Hall in particular. I have never been exposed to such an experience, nor did I recognize those horrible things just now described. All these were later acquired knowledge. As sounds of bullets appearing coming from all around we assembled inside a small space that was covered on all sides by thick walls and laid down on the floor. Mother was repeatedly kept asking what was happening. My wife was trying to solace her saying that nothing would happen. My wife asked if army came up what should we do? I then put a big lock in our main entrance door and shutting the second door from inside giving an impression that the flat is vacant.

Through out the night I kept on tuning HF radio signals with my small but powerful Murphy radio set and intercepted some strange communications in Urdu and English. These communications though seemed very strange appeared to me between army personnel and its commanding office. In one such communication I heard some one was informing that his unit had killed not less than 300 hundreds, as they did believe in arrests. I had no recording unit so those messages I could not record. But later on I came to know that many had done it including a scientist friend of mine at AECD. At last the dreadful night of 25th March was over with the morning Azan call for prayer. By that time as cracking sound of machine guns lessened, we went for sleep for an hour.

At about 6-30 a.m. on the following morning an army truck entered our area. In Urdu it was announced that a daylong curfew had been imposed, no one should dare to come out his or her houses. The announcement also asked the residents to bring down BD flag from our housetops. I remembered that we had also a BD flag and a black flag on our building. The army sepoy started shooting at our building tops. I did then a courageous job. Small boy servant and I went up to the roof and brought down both the flags. The army did not see us, and the bullets they fired just escaped overhead. We were lucky that we were saved. On that morning the army in our very eyes they killed mercilessly two of my colleagues (i) Mr. Muktadir Ahmed, a senior lecturer of Geology department, (ii) Mr. Md. Sadek, an assistant teacher of University Laboratory School and (iii) a nephew of Mr. Naqi, a senior lecturer of Sociology department. After the random operation the column left. We spent whole day and night. As I tuned Dhaka radio station, it appeared that it had been taken over by the army as the announcements were done either in Urdu or in urduised broken Bengali. The All India radio came up with the song of 'Sonar Bangla' that brought immediate solace to me, and broadcasted that a civil war had started in East Pakistan, streets fights were on in Dhaka city and its suburb.

The AIR gave me a strength that Bengalis were fighting back, although this turned out to be a myth at least in Dhaka city. Only meaningful resistance came from the ordinary police constables of Rajarbag police line where 400 brave police fought to the last against the tanks and modern weapons of attacking Pakistanis with ordinary rifles. The EPR our only hope were cleverly disarmed at Pikhana EPR head quarters and hundreds and thousands of them were brutally killed by the Baluch regiment in the dreadful night of 25th March. The 'Operation search light' planned and executed by Pakistani Military Junta, as I came to know later, continued entire day of 26th March; we saw blazing fires from the south and heard sporadic sounds of machine gun and rifle bullets. My entire

thinking was pivoted around the safety of Bangabandhu- I asked myself, “is he safe? Has he been able to escape from the brutality of Pak-army for leading the war of liberation as he promised in his 7th March address, “This war is for our Emancipation, This war is for the Independence (*Ebarer Sangram, Amader Muktir Sangram; Ebarer Sangram Swadhinatar Sangram.*”

In the evening we heard Yahya addressing over Radio-Pakistan blaming the AL and its leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, accusing him as traitor, for ruination and attempted breaking the country apart. He thanked the Pakistani army for saving the nation and warned Sheikh Mujib “This crime will not go unpunished.” He banned AL and all its activities. Throughout the night I was tuning at random all world radio stations, when on all a sudden, I picked up very feeble message claiming to be radio Australia that stated that East Pakistan had seceded from Pakistan as its leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared independence in the early Morning of 26th March. The radio message further said that an outer sea anchored ship near Chittagong seaport had picked up a feeble radio signal declaring the independence of Bangladesh. This made me wild with joy. I thought that the Sheikh was safe to lead the nation to victory. But alas how, I became disappointed when in the following morning Radio Pakistan claimed that Bangabandhu had been arrested and flown to Karachi in West Pakistan.

On the following morning curfew was lifted for two hours. I immediately rushed to JN Hall the scene of Army barbarity and brutality. I had never seen before a war field. I saw dead bodies scattered throughout the campus, in the rooms, dining rooms, staircases, bloods streaming. It was a deserted place. I went up to my cousin’s room but he was not being found, but I saw blood pools all over his room. A similar picture in each and every room. There was no trace of life. No living human being. I found a hurriedly dug big mass grave at the centre of the play ground with limbs of many dead bodies stretching out the grave. It was a horrible scene ever to be forgotten. On all a sudden a living man appeared from behind the dining hall of the South House of the hall, who rushed to me and said, “Babu no one is alive. The army has killed all. I some how escaped.” I recognized him as Makhan, a guard of the hall. He narrated the devastating episode of genocide committed in the JN Hall premises. I asked him to leave the area immediately and move to a safer place of the city. But was there any safer place in Bangladesh, I wondered. I then met two house tutors who locked themselves in their respective flats, both of them were shattered men who luckily been saved but witnessed in their very nose how their students were killed with machine gun and bayoneted. I asked both of them to come to our premises, which was relatively safer. On my way back I saw a small mass grave in front of Shamsunnahar Hall. I gave a quick move throughout the campus and saw for myself the effect of operation searchlight of Pak army. I returned home at about 11 a.m. to see that the entire campus of ours was already barren. I met my colleague Dr. Azahar Ali of IER, who was then leaving the campus, told me hurriedly that today Swadhin Bangla Radio would be on air. When I entered my flat mother was crying and asked me if I had found my cousin. My wife asked me in the event of every one was leaving the locality where should we go or do? At this stage my colleague late Professor Rafiqullah appeared and offered us to go with his family to his elder brother’s residence in New Eshkaton area. Since then I went to underground moving from one place to

another in the city pitting my mother and wife in a safer place under the care of a brave lady. From my experience and on the spot visit of the affected areas of the DU campus I gathered the following information stated below:

1. Not less than ten thousands innocent people were killed alone in the city of Dhaka on the night of 25th March, and lakhs of people were rendered homeless when army went to operation in bustees along the railway tracks.
2. Following teachers were killed or severely wounded because of army crackdown.
 - Dr. G. C. Dev, Professor of Philosophy
 - Mr. Anudwaipayan Bhattacharyya, Lecturer in Applied Physics and Assistant House tutor, JN Hall.
 - Dr. Fazlur Rahman, Senior Lecturer, Soil Science department
 - Mr. Abdul Muktedir, Senior Lecturer, Geology department
 - Mr. A R Khan Khadim, Lecturer, Physics department
 - Mr. Sarafat Ali, Lecturer, Mathematics department
 - Mr. Mohammad Sadeq, Teacher, University Laboratory School
 - Mr. A N N Muniruzzaman, Reader in Statistics
 - Dr. Jyotirmoy Guhathakurata, Provost JN Hall and Reader in English, (He was grievously wounded on 26th March night and then succumbed to his injury on 31st March at DMCH)

Wounded but survived:

- * Professor Nafis Ahmed, Head, Geography department
- * Professor Innas Ali, Provost, Mohsin Hall and Head, Physics department
- * Mr. Feroz Ali, Lecturer, Physics department
- * Professor Mofizullah Kabir (was verbally threatened for giving shelter of wounded students), History department.

During the army operation hundreds of students in JN Hall, Iqbal Hall and SM Hall, many employees of the University including four class iv employees of DU Club, a few relatives of teachers and employees and Madhuda, the beloved proprietor of University Canteen were brutally killed by the Pakistani sepoyes deployed in operation search light.

During the time when curfew was relaxed I visited many paces in the city from 27th to 31st March to see for myself the atrocities of the Pakistani soldiers committed on our innocent people. In my next episode I would describe how and under what circumstance my respected colleagues faced death on the dreadful night of 25th March.

(End of Part I)