

The sublime moment of the past

Onupam wakes up on a muggy morning, rather, he wonders how he would feel if he sees his Mum, Dad and a favourite older cousin who has just journeyed to ‘that undiscovered country from which no traveller returns’ in front of him. He ponders what would be his Mum’s reaction? Would she ask him to pray five times meticulously, reminds him to look after her favourite people or express her usual concern for him? What would Dad ask? Would he express his usual worries for his sons and daughters? Particularly, Dad would definitely enquire about Onupam whom he wanted to be an idealist in establishing himself in a corrupt and corrupting society. His cousin, Oni bhai, would certainly enquire about the beloved motherland for which countless young people of their generation fought in the year 1971.

His obsession with death, dying and after life is not something new to Onupam. Basically, it is with him ever since his eleventh birthday. He remembers with vivid and graphic images of the scene when he was just eleven. It was March the 28th 1971. His family had just gathered, rather, took shelter in their small beautiful house by the river Monu. Dad came from his workplace, Chittagong. His eldest married sister came from Dhaka with her husband and children. Onupam’s big brother who is a university student in Dhaka could also join the gathering. Everyone was expecting something of the stature of a revolution going to happen in their beautiful land. They were scared that freedom will come with a substantial loss – a great blood bath of the land. Onupam could understand from his readings of the East European Social Revolution and the Maoist China’s communist revolution that their fight to liberate Bengal would cost them dearly.

Something terrible happened on the night of the 25th March. Everybody was guessing and knew what could have happen but nobody among the adults wanted to verbalise the horrific scenes of that certain darkest of all nights. It was not before the late afternoon

on the following day that the actual scenes of Dhaka started to unfold through news reports from all India Radio Calcutta. Onupam and his other siblings along with his nieces were playing on the other part of the house. An older cousin Ansari bhai ran to them and told that a radio broadcast was telling that there were a huge fight and an all-out war had broken out in Dhaka and other major cities of Bangladesh. Onupam (a quiet, introvert and inquisitive boy) sprung up and ran towards the meat-safe on which the transistor radio was placed. The broadcast was reading out the same message in every 10/15 minutes. Onupam can recollect every word of that broadcast till today: “Civil war has broken out in East Bengal. The west Pakistani military is facing a tremendous resistance from the East Bengal regiment soldiers, the EPR, the Police, students, workers and the general public. There are large scale casualties on both sides”. This is followed by that inspiring Tagore song: *Amar shunar bangla ami thumai valobashi*. (My golden Bengal I love you so much!)

Now, the issue of bringing the local collaborators of Pakistani military came to the forefront in 2012. This is now a central topic of discussion in Bangla and abroad. Onupam has been to a Bengali social function at a friend place recently. One of the invitees who happened to be a senior academic at some Australian University expressed his displeasure at the news that Bangladesh is trying the local war criminals of the year 1971. He is not the one. There are others who are of the same opinion that after 42 years why the criminals are tried? Onupam and his friend wanted to avoid the morons. Onupam just couldn't help but made this statement: “Bangla must try the criminals who killed their own people and who helped the Pakies in killing and raping their people.” Onupam moves to take his food from the dining table leaving the morons to ponder on his statement.

Onupam and his friend move outside walking in the quiet cul-de-sac of the suburb. Aftab informs that there is a book in the market written

by a Paki Military General who was the commanding officer in East Bengal in the year 1971. The disturbing piece of information that Aftab could quote from that book is enough to revolve Onupam to his guts. The General in charge of East Bengal massacre said to his commanding officers almost at the end of their miserable defeat at the hands of the *Mukthi bahini* (the liberation forces) and the Indian troops: “I will just erase this lowly race from the face of the earth and I command you to rape every woman in Bengal.” The book contains an honest confession by a human element in the Paki Army which speaks a lot whether Bengal should bring those beastly people who consciously collaborated with the Pakies to justice or not. Onupam goes home and in no time gets hold of the following passages from the internet: “[Enter] Commander East Pakistan General Niazi, wearing a pistol holster on his web belt. Niazi became abusive and started raving. Breaking into Urdu, he said: *Main iss haramzadi qaum ki nasal badal doon ga. Yeh mujhe kiya samajhtey hain*. He threatened that he would let his soldiers loose on their womenfolk. There was pin drop silence at these remarks. The next morning, we were given the sad news. A Bengali officer Major Mushtaq went into a bathroom at the Command Headquarters and shot himself in the head” (p.98).

Niazi also asked Raja for phone numbers of his Bengali girlfriends: “*Abhi tau mujhey Bengali girlfriends kay phone number day do*” (p.99). Niazi surrendered to Indian General JFR Jacob in 1971. ‘Tiger’ Niazi handed over his personal pistol at the famous Race Course ceremony. Jacob examined the weapon: the lanyard was greasy and frayed, and the pistol was full of muck as if it hadn’t been cleaned in a long while. (*Surrender at Dacca: Birth of a Nation*; by Lt. Gen JFR Jacob; Manohar Publishers 1997). *Published in The Express Tribune, July 8th, 2012.*” Onupam senses that at least some form of poetic justice is done for him when he can easily deduce from the text that the beastly thug had to become worse than a cowardly cat at the end of the liberation war.

Onupam ran to the bank of the river Monu in the year 1971. The remnant paki soldiers from the Indian border in the town imposed a curfew from the night of 25th March. As soon as they lifted the

curfew for a few hours, Onupam just ran towards the spot where he heard the noise of gun shots coming last night. There were a few labour shades or little bamboo thatched shades by the river. The brick-laying workers used to stay there. Onupam peeped through one of the low windows. The moment he glanced inside he felt that he was running out of oxygen to breathe. The ghastly scene was so overwhelming he remained there transfixed watching the bodies of fallen workers. There were four of them lying dead on a pool of blood. He turned quietly tip-toeing to the bank of Monu to find another horrific scene – a worker’s body stiffened and stuck to the shallow river bed with a bullet on his neck. Onupam ran back to the window as if they were not leaving this world without him as the witness to their murder. He forgot the other things around, visibly; anything else meant nothing at this moment of his existence. He was trying to figure out these apparent markers of life and death before him. How long was he engrossed in this business of answering so many questions he can’t remember. He was startled by the mob of town-dwellers coming near. He reacted instinctively. He lost control on his own brain and body. He screamed and cried at every other human who gathered around to see what actually happened by the old motherly river. Onupam felt that it’s now his duty to show everyone what he has discovered or to avenge the deaths readily in his child’s sense of loss and the enemy’s savagery.

Onupam remembers a picture that speaks a lot about the aspects of death and dying. He works for a University in the south coast of New South Wales of Australia. It was a muggy Sunday evening. He was flipping through online newspapers from Dhaka. One weekly magazine article drew him in no time. The special item on the top of the article was its photo of a young girl. She was dug out of a trench. She was kept in the Paki trenches from the beginning of the war in the year 1971. She seemed to be dazed and dying. It was so sickening for Onupam that he could not sleep that night. Everyone around him

was so tired and fast asleep. He had lectures and tutorials on the following morning. He was in a possessed mood and felt so small that he wanted to find out some deeper meanings of life. He had a break of two hours after 11:30. He sat down to write and to shed his emotional suffocating repression that he was carrying from the last night.

People of Onupam's generation seem to have some memories of deaths and dying in the year 1971. This would surface in their discussion at any form of social function. This is more predictable as the Government of Bangladesh is trying to bring the marked war criminals to the docks. Onupam puts an item of counterargument to someone in the Facebook as his status. A person, a moronic Bengali, arguing from Washington that "if 3 million men, women and children were butchered and another 3 million women were raped, then, the question remains: how could it be done by only 158 criminals?" Moshi points out that the morons fail or pretend not to understand that those accused are commanding officers. They are the ones who planned, organised and executed the massacre in the year 1971.

Onupam wakes up for the Morning Prayer on a muggy morning. As usual, he checks his Facebook account for any new postings and messages. This has become an everyday thing – more than an obsession. Most of the messages are light-hearted. There are some serious ones which involve him emotionally and existentially throughout his life. Somebody posted a link to breaking news. He clicks the link with a panting heart and a weird feeling which he has never felt before in his life. He paraphrases that item in his own terms – a war criminal of the year 1971 has been sentenced to death. The beast has been tried for 8 counts of murder and gang-rapes. Seven cases are proved to the tribunal. Onupam stands still for a moment. This time he feels genuinely proud for his mother, homeland and the Bay of Bengal. He feels proud again for all the rivers: the Padma; the Meghna; the Jhomuna and for the sweetest of all rivers that runs

through his ancestral home at Moulvibazar – the Monu. He tries to react to the news for which they have been waiting for the last four decades. Gradually, he comes to his natural senses. He murmurs and says loudly, ‘thanks be the one (whoever) at the top!’ The news item also says that the beast has been tried in absentia. The war criminal has fled and probably took shelter in a foxhole in the northern Bengal. Whatever? Onupam’s generation has witnessed the crime committed in the year 1971. Now is the sublime moment!

- By Dr Khairul H Chowdhury
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