



1972 visit to war torn Bangladesh

By Prakash Subbarao

I have traveled a fair bit in my time but the most exciting journey I have ever made came in early 1972.

I was in Calcutta then, on a holiday during my college vacation. My close friend and neighbour in Bangalore, Naren Udaygiri, was with me.

The Pakistani Army Commander in the Eastern Command, Lt. General A. A. K. Niazi, had surrendered to Lt. General Jagjit Singh Aurora of the Indian Army on 16th December, 1971 and Bangladesh had been borne. My father had a lot of contacts with the Government-in-exile of Bangladesh and so I pestered him to take me to Bangladesh.

All one needed in the days immediately after the war was a pass signed by the Indian Army or issued by the Bangladesh Government in Exile which operated from a building in South Calcutta and called itself "Mujibnagar" after Mujibur Rehman.

We got the pass from the Army and on 2nd January set out to see the new country. I took along my mother's camera, a Leica with a Zeus Icon lens. Another hardy piece of equipment that she had purchased in 1958 and which was still going strong in 1972.

My father had told me that we would go to Bangladesh only on one condition – that we would leave very early in the morning and return the same day. In those days it was very dangerous as there were a lot of fleeing Pakistani troops who were still armed and a lot of Razakar's – Bihari Muslim civilians who had supported the Pakistanis violent suppression of the people of former East Pakistan.

The Benapole border

The border is not very far from Calcutta and can be reached fairly quickly. When we got there, there seemed to be some sort of commotion going on. This was at Petrapole, on the Indian side. Apparently a car trying to smuggle guns had been detected by the Indian Army and we were advised that there would be a long delay.

We got out of the car to stretch our legs and to try and work our way out of the jam. We were in luck – there was a Mukti Bahini officer (a Bangladeshi Freedom Fighter), Arun Barun Biswas, who was in a hurry to get to his place

and he offered to get us out of the traffic jam and moving if we could drop him at Khulna. We agreed and thereby started a great adventure.

Using his influence we were off in minutes. He knew everyone at the customs. We came to a halt at the Benapole Land Customs on the Bangladesh side which is a little further down the road. There we saw a very young boy, maybe just 15 years old but already a hardened Mukti Bahini fighter standing on guard with a Lee Enfield 303 rifle. The rifle was almost three fourths his height!

We were soon waved through when they saw Arun Barun Biswas with us.

Tension in the air.....

As soon as we entered Bangladesh, we could feel a strange tension in the air. Everywhere we looked, we saw scenes of destruction. Railway lines torn up, burnt cars and trucks on the side of the roads, buildings bearing bullet holes indicative of the aimless firing of machine guns.....

There were no civilians on the streets. Just Indian Army soldiers everywhere.

A blown up bridge

Just after the border comes the town of Jessore with its Cantonment. It was here that I got my first taste of a war zone.

In their bid to stop the advance of the Indian Army, the Pakistani troops had blown up the bridge and the Indian Army had created a temporary floating pontoon bridge. Huge Army trucks were crossing and had preference and we had to wait till they got across. It was like a scene out of a war movie!

All the buildings were pock marked with bullet marks. There were burnt out petrol stations all along the route. The road, though a metal one, was rough because it had been churned up by tank tracks.

There were Indian Army 'Shaktiman' trucks patrolling everywhere, with a machine gun mounted on the roof and an alert gunner scanning the area for any disturbance.

Tanks with live ammo

A little further we came across a Sherman T-42 Pakistani Army tank that had been abandoned. The machine gun with live ammunition dangling from it was still in the turret! I hopped off the car and stood on the tank and was duly photographed.

Foxholes

I asked Biswas whether he had been a participant in the war in this sector. He said 'yes'. "The Indian Army did not use the roads but traveled off the road, in the fields" he told me. He said that he would show us foxholes where the Pak Army had dug in. We detoured and saw the foxholes. Some of them had suffered direct hits by Indian Air Force aircraft but many were intact.

In one foxhole there was a live unexploded rocket! It would have detonated at the slightest vibration and seeing this made our hairs stand on end in fright. We tiptoed away from it.

A Razakar has just been captured

A little further we saw a huge group of people standing in the middle of the road. There seemed to be a lot of commotion and we immediately knew that something out of the ordinary was taking place. We stopped the car and elbowed our way forward to see what it was.

A Razakar had been captured!

We saw this bearded person in ethnic dress with his hands tied behind his back being marched by a huge crowd. We were told that they would probably finish him off in the next few minutes. I asked whether I could take a photograph. "Yes" Biswas said and promptly introduced us to the crowd as "international photographers"!!!

(You will read later in this article that I lost the pictures that I took during this trip; I had safeguarded them for 29 years and lost them, in Dubai, in 2003. However, if you'd like to get an idea of what it looked like when a Razakar was captured, see this image on the net.

Biswas got off in Khulna and we were sorry to see him go. We had lost a good guide and a person who had had firsthand knowledge of the war in this sector.

Almost mistaken for Pakistanis!

On the way back, I wanted to have a cigarette and so we stopped the car. My friend Naren Udaygiri (sadly no more in this world) and I strolled off the road for a hundred metres or so.

I lit a cigarette.

I suddenly became aware of a group of villagers eyeing us out of the corner of their eye.

"Kya baath hai!?" I asked them.

They instantly started slowly creeping upon us the way they would on a wild animal, intent on capturing it. I realized with a shock that they thought we were Pakistani! Hindi and Urdu are so similar that instead of welcoming me as an Indian they were trying to capture me thinking I was a Pakistani!

"Aami Indian aachee!" (I am an Indian) I told them in broken Bengali. "Aamee Kolkatta thakay aaschee" (I have come from Calcutta). Aamaar gaadi raastaa thakay aachay!" (My car is on the road). That slowed their advance and they followed us back to the road. When they saw a Calcutta registered Ambassador car (WBG 8537) they relaxed and it was only then that we saw a few smiles. I tentatively offered a hand shake to the headman and he reciprocated warmly. We were now no longer Pakistani's but liberating Indians! They waved as we drove away.

We were soon back at the Indian border. We were actually happy to be back in India. The safety that India exudes is unbelievable and can be felt only after such trysts with danger. We were finally able to let our guard down and relax!

The saddest part of this story is that I lost all the pictures taken on this trip. It happened in Dubai. I was telling some colleagues about the trip and I could see that they felt I was pulling a fast one. I took the pictures to the office to show it to them. There were four or five pictures - me standing on the tank with live ammo, the Jessore bridge in pieces, the Razakar been marched off, hands tied behind his back.....

I lost the envelope with the picture in them, a few days later.

With it went the chance of proving the above strange tale.

It is 100% true, I assure you.

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