

A burning cigarette was pushed into his limbs and needles pierced into his finger nails

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Syed Abul Barq Alvi

Syed Abul Barq Alvi, a Professor of the Fine Arts Institute of Dhaka University, is a noted painter. He took part in the liberation war. He was arrested along with others on August 30, 1971. The Pakistani occupation force

conducted barbaric torture on him. He gave the following statement.

I was working in the Department of Films and Publications (DFP) in 1971. I was not involved with political parties. But since my student life, I was influenced by leftist thought. Being a conscious artist, I had experience of writing posters and making festoons during different movements and struggles. We had also been bringing out a cyclostiled magazine long before the Pakistan Army launched their attack on March 25, 1971. It was an underground publication. It had carried news items on organised protests against repression of the Pakistani junta.

As the Liberation War started, I crossed the border in May through Comilla and got shelter in a refugee camp in India. After formation of a “Mukti Camp” there, I joined it. I came to Bangladesh several times to gather information and collect maps of important installations like the airport and cantonment in Dhaka.

Another job was collecting donations for the freedom fighters. I used to return along with people seeking shelter in India. During my fifth visit from the camp to Bangladesh, I had carried huge quantities of arms and ammunition. I came with three others —Baker, Fateh Ali and Komol. We entered Bangladesh in the third week of August. While travelling by boat along with the arms and ammunition, we narrowly escaped capture by Pakistani troops. Finally we reached Dhaka and kept the arms and explosives at the residence of a relative of Baker at Badda area. According to the plan, we were to meet at USIS Library at Topkhana three days later.

But we had to change the plan following the absence of Baker. Later on August 29, I went to the house of noted music director Altaf Mahmud. He intended to send with me one of his businessman friend to India. But due to curfew at night, Altaf Mahmud told me to stay at his house.

It was the early dawn on August 30, 1971. I was sleeping in the drawing room of Altaf Mahmud’s residence at Rajarbagh. A pickup came and stopped in front of the house. I heard the sound of parking and the noise of stepping of boots. Surprised, I got up from bed. Some 5/6 uniformed Pakistani army personnel started kicking the door of the drawing room. I was frightened and confused on whether I should open the door or not.

All residents of the house, in the meantime, woke up. Altaf Bhai came forward slowly and said "I'm opening the door." As soon as the door was opened, Pakistani army soldiers pointed their guns at the chest of Altaf Bhai and shouted, "Who is the music director?"

"It's me," replied Altaf Bhai.

"Where are the arms?" one soldier asked loudly.

As there was no answer, they took Altaf Bhai to the backyard. Some of them stormed into the bed-room and checked everything. They put me, Altaf Bhai and his two brothers-in-law on to the pickup. Some boys from a neighbouring house were also taken. While taking us to the pickup, the Pak soldiers beat us with the butts of their rifles.

The pickup van took us straight to the martial-law court. The court was at the then MP Hostel, which is now the residential area of the employees of Prime Minister's Secretariat. Three buildings were being used as martial-law courts. We were lined up and later taken to the kitchen of the last building. All of us were asked to sit on the dirty and damp floor. I was seated after one or two persons. A sepoy called one of us who was very close to the door. He was taken to the torture room. We could see a little of what was going on there. Sound of whipping could be heard from there. As the questioner was asking in Urdu, I couldn't understand all the questions, but one thing was clear that he was asking the man about who were the persons with him. We were frightened as the whipping, shouting and groaning continued. He was taken to another room after being tortured for about 15-20 minutes. We saw his body was bleeding. His face was badly wounded. It was a horrible scene. The next one was a brother-in-law of Altaf Bhai. He was tortured in same way at the interrogation cell but the army couldn't collect any information from him. In fact, he did not know where the arms were, who were freedom fighters and where they stay. A burning cigarette was pushed at his limbs and needles pierced into his finger nails. Later the sepoy said, "Come on, mister music director."

Altaf Bhai looked at all of us and went to the adjoining torture room. I heard, he was being questioned:

"Tell me where are the rest of the arms?"

"Don't know."

"Who had kept the arms?"

"Some people whom I don't know."

I heard Altaf Bhai being whipped and hit by rods. The repression was slightly visible through the window.

Altaf Bhai was not able to bear the pain of the torture. As he didn't disclose the names, the level of torture on him increased. He was being hit with rifle butts indiscriminately. Burning cigarettes were also pushed on him.

Altaf Bhai did not shout like the others, because, he knew that he would not be freed and it would be his last day. He admitted everything about himself, but did not name any one else. He fell down many times as he could not bear the torture. But every time, he was compelled to stand up. The questioning and repression continued. He was taken to another room after about an hour. Another person was taken from us and the repression continued in the same way. I was the next to be taken away. So I decided what I would say. They asked in Urdu, “Who is Alvi?”

I was surprised to hear my name. How they knew my name? Did Altaf Bhai tell them my name? No, he couldn't have. Then the next person? Or was it anyone else? I was silent for a while thinking of all these things. The sepoy again shouted, “Alvi Koun (Who's Alvi)?” I stood up.

Others in the waiting room were observing me. I could not escape denying my name. They knew it. As soon as I entered the torture room, one officer mentioned a date and said, “You came from India along with the arms.” He also mentioned the names of the freedom fighters who came with me. Everything in his statement was correct. How did they come to know? I understood that one of our team had been caught.

Nervousness started gripping me.

I firmly denied everything — I never went to India, I knew none. Showing a piece of paper, one of them asked, “Do you know Fateh Ali Chowdhury, Komol and Baker?”

“I know none of them,” I replied confidently.

The army personnel wanted to know, “Are you Alvi?”

“Yes, but I don't know any of them.”

One of the interrogators said, “You will be freed if you admit everything.”

Again I said, “I know nothing.”

Among the three or four army men, one started beating me mercilessly. Such indiscriminate beating continued. He struck me hard in the abdomen with the butt of a rifle. At the same time, I was also being whipped and questioned. A soldier said, “Do you think you'll be freed after denying everything?”

I was feeling severe pain at the beginning of the torture. At one stage my feelings became numb. My palms were seriously wounded as I tried to resist the beating with my hands. Bleeding started from the hands.

As I had no sense following continued torture, I could not fathom the exact condition of my body. Later, I found bleeding from the back and legs. The beating stopped after a long time. Again the questions were repeated. I denied again. They mentioned many other names who were known to me. They had gone to India along with me at the beginning of the war.

The middle-aged armyman who was torturing me became ferocious like a blood hound after he had failed to dig out anything from me. He hit my abdomen with the butt of a rifle. He also repeatedly punched and kicked me with full strength. I fell down, but was forced to stand up again. The extent of torture increased. I had no strength to remain standing up. I fell down repeatedly.

At one stage Baker was brought. He was our team leader. Only one week back we carried arms from India under his leadership and kept those in the house of one of his relatives. He was to come on August 29, but he did not. We were worried about his fate. Now seeing him in front of me, I understood everything.

The army personnel asked Baker, "Is he Alvi?"

Slowly raising his head, Baker looked at me and said, "Yes". Then he was taken to another room. His entire body and face was stained with dry blood. It was for the last time I saw Baker. I told the army personnel,

"I don't know him. He gave a wrong statement. He lied to save his life. I never saw him."

In fact, from the very beginning I had decided what I would tell them. I knew they would not spare me if I admitted the facts. The army officer asked me, "Do you know Fateh Ali Chowdhury?" I replied in the negative. "I've no friend by that name. However, I can try to check whether he is known to me if you could bring him in front of me."

The officer tried to lure me that I would be freed if I tell the truth, otherwise, I could have to die. But he could not get any information from me, and became almost like a mad dog. He started hurling abuses and *asked a sepoy to take me and beat me. He said in Urdu, "suaarka bachchako udhar le jao. Aur maro usko"*

(Take away the son of bitch and beat him up). Being excited, he also threw a paper on my face. Perhaps, the paper was the torture report containing the list of those who were picked up or would be arrested later.

The sepoy took me to another room where torture continued until evening. I was not given a drop of water all day. An elderly army man, perhaps a subedar major, secretly brought two pieces of bread for us at about 3 p.m. He also brought some sugar. The man was a Beluch. Among the barbaric soldiers, only he showed a little kindness.

Looking at me, he told the sepoy, "Itna mar na maro. Ye bachcha hai. Itna mar marne se ye mar jayega"

(Don't beat him too much. He is a kid. He will die if he is beaten anymore.) The blood over my body made me more confident that I would not admit anything. Never.

At night we were taken to Ramna police station by a bus. The army troops handed over us to the police. A policeman told the troops to record the names of those who were taken to the police station. I thought, my name should be changed and it would be helpful to prove

myself innocent. In fact, except for my close relations no one knew my full name as it was a long one. I mentioned my name as Syed Abul Barq.

Intentionally I hid the last name Alvi.

We were kept in custody at the police station. There were many others like us. I told Altaf Bhai the story behind my name. He said, "Ultimately there is no way to escape. Baker might be called again tomorrow. He will again identify you. They will again interrogate and torture you."

In police custody, we're kept along with some thieves and pickpockets. They were very sympathetic to us.

The Bangalee policemen at the thana were also sympathetic. A pickpocket cleaned my face and back with his towel while others rubbed ointment on our wounds. At that time, the prisoners kept medicines like paracetamol and painkiller, iodex etc. Their relatives used to supply those. We could not sleep at night due to severe pain all over the body.

The next morning we, as per the list, were taken to the martial-law court. This time they took us to another building (building no. 2). On not seeing any of the previous day's army men there, I felt courageous. We were kept in a room, with a wide balcony. We were taken to the balcony one after another, according to the list, for interrogation. But the torture was not like the previous day. There was only questioning. Altaf Bhai was the last man to be interrogated. I was not called. Somehow I was dropped from the list. Maybe my name was on the paper which was thrown at me. I stood up and said, "I was not called."

The army officer looked at me, and asked me my name.

I said, "Syed Abul Baraq." Now the officer looked at the list he was carrying. He went through the list from top to bottom several times, but did not get the name. He asked, "Why were you caught?"

"I don't know. I had gone to the house of Altaf Bhai in the evening and was picked up from there the next morning."

"Why had you gone there?"

I said, "His parents are related to me."

"Did you not know that he is involved with the Mukti Bahini (Freedom fighters)?" asked the army officer.

"No."

"What do you do?"

"I do work at the DFP."

"Do you attend your office?"

“Yes.”

“What is the telephone number of your office?”

I didn't go to office after March 25 except for some days to get my salary. In fact, the entire time I was in India. At first I thought I should give him a wrong number, but that could be more dangerous for me. So, I told him the correct number. I was thinking if the officer rings up my office and anyone asks about my absence, I would get into trouble. However, I was confident that everyone at my office would say that I was attending office regularly as they liked me very much, specially, my boss Mr. Bari. The army officer took the telephone set. He dialed thrice keeping an eye on me. Perhaps, he was trying to observe if there was any change on my face. Again I thought that I was going to face trouble. Instead he said at last, “Okay,” and asked me to stand beside him. In the meantime, one army man brought a copy of the holy Quran. The officer ordered, “Touch the Quran and say I never went to India. I don't know anyone.” I did the same without any hesitation and said to myself, “May Allah pardon me. Saving one's life is the prime farz (duty).” These incidents, one after another, were making me feel more and more confident. I heard, the army people talking among themselves, “He is a kid. He has been tortured enough.”

A new problem arose when it was confirmed that I was going to be released. The subedar major who had brought bread the previous day came into the room at the last moment. He heard everything about me. He could tell others about me. It was my good fortune, he did not say anything. Other than Altaf Bhai, all of us were released. But I had some more problems. The sentry on duty at the gate, was the one who had told me on the previous day, “Do you think you'll be freed after denying everything?” To avoid him, I said, “How shall I go? I can't even stand up. If you give me a lift up to the road, I'll manage somehow to go thereafter.” The officer enquired and found out that there was no car. He said, “You are young enough. I believe you can walk and go.”

As my attempt to avoid the guard at the gate failed, I said, “I will not be allowed to cross the gate in this condition.” The subedar major ensured my crossing the gate by carrying my body on his shoulders.

We came to the main road on foot. The sepoy who had threatened me the previous day was looking at me with anger as if a tiger had lost his prey, but he could not say anything as one of his senior colleagues was accompanying me. The Beluch army man coming near the road touched my back and said, “Go home, you must call a doctor to check your condition. Take care.”

I was on the main road but there was no vehicle. At this time, a private car came back after crossing me. I was astonished. The driver said: “Come on.” He was a neighbour of Altaf Bhai, father of TV actress Nima Rahman.

I stayed at Altaf Bhai's house for 15-20 days. I went to India again along with a group. My fingers started to become normal after treatment at Muktiyoddha Hospital for many days. At that time, my only work was drawing pictures of war fields.

I still feel the pain on my fingers whenever I paint for a long time. The horrible memories still haunt me and take me back to those tormenting days I spent at the Pakistani army camp during the Liberation War.

Interviewed by Ruhul Motin

As we entered the building, we saw
