

One day they forced me to lie on a slab of ice

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Lt. Col. Masoudul Hossain Khan (Retd.)

Lt. Col. Masoudul Hossain Khan (Retd.) was in command of Second Battalion of the East Bengal Regiment in 1971. His unit later under the leadership of its Second-in-Command, Major Shafiullah played an important role during the Liberation War. Col. Masoud was arrested on March 23, 1971, on the charge of organising a revolt in the

Army on March 19, 1971. He was taken to Pakistan in the first week of April where he suffered imprisonment and was tortured brutally by the Pakistani Army and Special Branch of Police . His statement was recorded on October

9, 1999.

In March, 1971, I was the officer-in-command of a battalion of the East Bengal Regiment stationed at Joydevpur. In early March, there was a cricket match between Australia and Pakistan at the Dhaka Stadium. I went to see the game. Before beginning of the match, I came to know that the scheduled session of National Assembly had been postponed. Earlier in 1970, Awami League achieved absolute majority in the general election, but the Pakistani rulers conspired not to hand over state power to the Awami League, triggering postponement of the National Assembly session. As the news spread, the crowd gathered at the stadium burst into the protest. They came out to the streets that forced the authorities to abandon the match.

Then a non-cooperation movement against the Military Junta began at the call of Sheikh Mujib. Due to strike, banks were closed, and it was not possible for me to pay salaries to the soldiers of my battalion on the first day of March. I could not even bring food rations from Dhaka to Joydevpur. We were facing some other problems also connected with administration of my unit.

On March 19, my boss Brigadier Jahanjeb Arbab came to Joydevpur along with 8 to 10 vehicles carrying troops. He said that the purpose of his visit was to see the situation and our problems. But we were suspicious of his real purpose, due to the huge contingent accompanying him. He must have had some other intention and that was to disarm us. Since last few days, I had been getting such hints.

At that time I had only 250 soldiers available at Joydevpur out of the total of 900 personnel of my unit.

There were five companies in the unit. Only Headquarter and One Rifle Company was staying at Joydevpur.

Out of the rest three, two were sent to Tangail and Jamalpur on the excuse of resisting so-called Indian aggression in the boarder and one was deployed to protect Gazipur Ordnance Factory. The main purpose behind these deployments on orders from higher authority was to remove Bengalee soldiers from the headquarters at Joydevpur.

It was clear to everybody, as it was to me, that the Brigade Commander had come to disarm us. The local people put barricades on the road from Tongi to Joydevpur Rajbari, where we were staying, so that the Pakistani troops could not reach there easily.

However, we remained alert at that time, since we were alert always to resist so-called Indian aggression from border. The army contingent led by Brigadier Arbab took extra time to reach Joydevpur after removing the barricades on the roads. After lunch, when they were planning to return, the local people once again blocked the road at the Joydevpur Railway Crossing, by placing rail wagons. Brigadier Arbab ordered me to remove the barricades. He said, "Why there is so much movement here? Remove the barricades so that I can return to Dhaka. If required, shoot the people." I said, "I'll see what I can do. But it is absurd for us to shoot our own countrymen."

After a while, Brigadier Arbab realised that I was not interested in firing on the people excepting one or two casual shots. Bypassing me, Arbab ordered Major Moyeen, a Bengalee company commander of mine, to take the responsibility. I told Moyeen to fire in such a way that the bullets did not hit the people. Seeing all these, Brigadier Arbab finally ordered his own troops to shoot on the people. They were taking positions behind and on flanks of our troops and started firing from machine guns. As they were firing from behind us, we became almost captive. Some people, including one Monu Mia, were killed in the firing. The local people also used shot guns and light weapons, but finally their efforts went in vain against strong Pakistan troops.

We tackled the situation by shifting our position and making way for the troops of Arbab. At that time, we did not think about using armed measures against Arbab, because the negotiation for a political settlement between Sheikh Mujib and Yahiya Khan was still going on.

Before leaving Joydevpur, Brigadier Arbab threatened me saying, "Command your troops properly. This is not the right way." He indicated that I would have to face a tougher situation in future.

On March 23, I was called to join a conference in Dhaka. It was nothing but a ploy. I came to Dhaka in the morning, since my family members lived there. When I went to Brigade Headquarters, Brigadier Arbab was not there. He had gone to the city where a tense situation was prevailing. In fact, he was engaged in killing Bengalees in the city. The Brigade Major told me to wait with my family members until the return of Brigadier Arbab.

After about two hours, I received a phone call. The Brigade Major told me on phone that the Commander had returned and was coming on the line. Brigadier Arbab said, "Colonel Masoud, you are not returning to Joydevpur. You are no more the Commanding Officer of

the Second Bengal. Somebody else will come and take over. You stay at home and don't move from the house. You must report to Station Headquarters everyday from now onwards."

In fact, I was placed under house-arrest on March 23. When I went to my house, I saw plain-clothe ISI (Inter Services Intelligence) personnel moving around the area. There was a rest house beside my house.

Earlier I saw the ISI personnel at the rest house. Their duty was to intercept my friends and relations while entering my house. At that time it was quite impossible for me to go outside my residence.

In the meantime, my driver came with the car to take me back to the regiment office. But the ISI men sent him back.

I was replaced a few days later by Colonel Raqib, a Bengalee officer who was the commander of 32 Punjab Regiment. But the Bengalee soldiers could not accept him spontaneously. Major Shafiullah was actually commanding the unit as Col. Raqib was not accepted by the troops, who came from a Punjab Regiment.

On the night of March 25, trouble erupted in Dhaka. I heard sound of moving tanks. I never heard so much heavy firing in my life. I called Major Shafiullah over telephone and informed him about the situation at Dhaka. I also wanted to know from him the situation at Joydevpur. He replied, "No, nothing wrong happened here." I told him, "You should be prepared. Joydevpur is a likely target, and you may face an attack any time."

Earlier, I had told the entire battalion that we might have to leave Joydevpur and take shelter at Madhupur jungle or any other place. I said this in early March. At that time, Shafiullah had said, "Sir why are you saying this so loudly?" I said, "I'm telling this to you only. Every body here is Bengalee, so no problem." Some Bengalee officers who were present there laughed at it for this comment. Then I said, "I may not be with you in the days ahead. Nobody knows what will happen to us tomorrow. So I'm telling you what I'm thinking today."

I told Shafiullah by phone, "You better try and leave that place." Shafiullah was also thinking on those lines. Two or three days after talking to me, he left along with all his troops, arms and ammunitions. He also took away the reserve and additional military equipment which were at Joydevpur and was surplus for a battalion.

When the Pakistan army came to know that Shafiullah had fled, they suspected me. They took me to Station Headquarters on March 28 in the evening. They said that they would not allow me to stay at my house.

At first I thought that they would tell me to stay in the officers mess, but later I was confined in a quarter guard (military prison) of a Punjab Regiment Battalion (32 Punjab).

Every regimental unit has a quarter guard for soldiers. I was a colonel at that time, and so the quarter guard was not a suitable place for me. However, they forced me to live there and the army officials started torturing me. They used to treat me as an ordinary soldier. At first they started torturing me mentally, and not physically.

Sometimes breakfast was given at 10 a.m. instead of 7, and lunch at 3.30 p.m. instead of 12.30. Sometimes they did not serve me any meal at all. Sometimes I was given cold tea and dry bread.

About 8 or 10 days later, in the first week of April, on an early hour (about 1am) a Subedar came and said,

“Sir, get ready. You’ll have to go with me.”

“Where?” I said, but he did not reply.

Frightened, I asked, “Where you’re taking me? And why?” I also wanted to know whether I should wear my uniform. The Subedar said, “No need, you better come in plain clothes.”

I had a bag with me. I took some clothes in the bag. Then I was told to get into a jeep. The soldiers handcuffed me and tied my hands from behind with a long chain, like a prisoner.

The jeep was advancing towards Air Headquarters at Tejgaon. I had heard that the Pakistan Army used to take freedom fighters there and kill them. I thought that possibly I was being taken for the same purpose, and I was very frightened. My physical condition also deteriorated fast. My situation then can only be imagined by those who have faced death or were about to face.

After reaching Air Headquarters, the jeep crossed the air strip and stopped near the Hanger. A Boeing aircraft was waiting there. I was dragged and ordered to board the plane. At that time I was still tied with a chain. I again asked, “Subedar Saheb, where you’re taking me?”

“Aap jaar ahe hain West Pakistan (You’re going to West Pakistan),” he replied.

“But why you’re taking me in such a manner? Why you have tied me with chain? Am I an animal?” I asked.

“I am carrying out the order of my officer. I must do it.”

He forced me to sit in the plane in the same condition. I shouted, “How can I sit like this?” At this time, a pilot of Pakistan Airlines, possibly a foreigner, came and said, “He cannot sit like this. This a flight of 10 to 12 hours.” At that time, Pakistani aircraft were not allowed to fly over Indian skies, and so the West Pakistan-bound flights were operated via Colombo.

On the request of the Captain, I was allowed to sit with my hands placed in front of the body, but they did not unchain me.

It seemed to me that I was the only Bengalee officer who was being taken to West Pakistan, because all other passengers were Pakistanis. They were going to Pakistan due to the war and most of them were family members, women, elders and children.

During the journey of 10 to 12 hours, I had to go to the toilet with the chain tied to my handcuffed wrist.

The subedar used to hold the chain from outside.

The plane reached Karachi Airport and I had to get down in the same condition. Subsequently, I was taken to a quarter guard of Malir Cantonment. A captain received me. I wore sunglasses, and the captain said,

“Colonel, You can’t wear a sunglass. You have been killing our Pakistanis.” He took my sunglasses, money and all other belongings.

After 3 or 4 days, three officers came one early hours of morning and said, “Colonel, You are going with us. We’re taking you somewhere else.”

They took me in a jeep without handcuffs this time.

According to rule, an army officer should be escorted by an officer of the same rank. For the first time I saw an officer of the rank of colonel escorting me. There were 2 or 3 jeeps with us. On the way, we stopped and Brigadier Majumdar and his family members were also picked up on the way.

We were taken to Lahore by plane. My family members still had to live in Dhaka Cantonment. From Lahore, we were taken to a place named Pannu, near Kharian Cantonment. We were confined in a dilapidated rest house of the Roads and Highways Department. It was protected by two-fold barbed wire. The roof was also protected by barbed wire. Soldiers were on guard on the roof with machine guns. Armed guards were also posted at all corners of the rest house. It was like a camp for prisoners of war.

Brigadier Majumdar and his family members were confined on one side of the building. However, I was not given even a suitable room. I was confined in a tiny chamber under the staircase where there was no electricity or furniture. I got a blanket and a cot. It was the month of April. Soon I felt exhausted with the hot weather in that desert-like place. The mosquito menace added to my miseries. After repeated requests, an officer gave me a mosquito net and a small fan. The food was fair, but it was not usually served on time, though served from an officers mess.

One day I asked an officer whether I could contact my family members in Dhaka. He allowed me to do so.

So, I wrote a number of letters to Dhaka, but all my letters were censored. My family members also wrote to me, but I used to get the letters after a long period, sometimes even after a month. All the letters from Dhaka were read by the army authorities. My

address was : C/O M.I. Directorate, General Headquarters, Rawalpindi, West Pakistan. The name of the place where I was confined (Pannu or Kharian) was not in the address. I had to write all the letters in English so that they could read those or censor.

After about one month, I used to be taken to Jhelum from Pannu. It was on the way to Rawalpindi. I was regularly interrogated there. Sometimes the interrogation continued for 3 to 4 days in a row. They used to interrogate me by setting up some high-powered bulbs towards my face. My interrogators used to ask various types of questions like “How do you know Sheikh Shaheb?” “What sort of discussions did you have with him?” “What you have done at Joydevpur?” “How have you maintained contact with the Awami League?”

I used to reply some of their questions and avoid some others. My old colleague Colonel Quaiyum Anjum from the MI Directorate was among those officers who interrogated me at Jhelum. He was my old friend. He allured me a lot. He used to tell me, “Masoud, you were my cadet-mate. I know you well. Please tell the truth.

I’ll free you. You’ll become a full colonel.” He further said, “Colonel Yasin gave us a statement about you.

According to it, you had a meeting with other high ranking Bengalee officers at Joydevpur. You were planning to make East Pakistan an independent country.”

I replied, “Let him face me.” As they could not succeed in getting any information from me, they sent me to the Special Interrogation Centre of the Punjab Police Special Branch at Lahore Fort in the month of August.

I was told earlier that Colonel Yasin was there and I would have to meet him and confront his statement.

I was confined in a cell near the special interrogation centre of the fort. I was taken to the centre everyday for interrogation. During interrogation, I saw Mr. Durrani, a Punjabi, and Mr. Mohammad Anwar, both Special Branch police officers. They referred of Colonel Yasin while interrogating me. I denied everything.

On the very first day, Mr. Durrani asked, “What sort of link have you maintained with the Awami League?

We know that you had direct contact with Sheikh Shaheb and Awami League. You were involved in politics and planned to make East Pakistan an independent state.” I denied the allegation outright, “Question does not arise, I’m an army officer. I never got involved in politics breaking discipline of the armed forces. I have never maintained contact with any political leader.” When he realised that I would not say anything, he started beating me up. Once he slapped me and pushed a burning cigar onto my leg. I cried out in pain.

Durrani and Anwar used to initiate the torture sessions. Then others carried it on thereafter.

Both the officers used to watch this standing by the side.

Once they posed me a new question. “You arranged a picnic at Joydevpur Rajbari in early January and invited some serving and retired army officers to join. Many senior Bengalee retired officers like General M.I. Majid, Colonel Osmani and their families joined the picnic. When the ladies were busy cooking, you had a meeting to hatch a conspiracy to divide the country.”

I denied it also. Then they said, “Colonel Yasin and Brigadier Majumdar said this. Why you are denying?” I said, “Take me to them for cross-examining their statement.”

They thought that I was lying. So they began another session of furious torture. Beside slapping, fisting and boxing, they pierced needles into my nail, pushed burning cigar onto my legs— from knee to toes. At one stage, I fell unconscious. When I recovered slightly, they gave me electric shock on my nipples, and other sensitive parts of the body making me unconscious again.

After a few days, one Brigadier Kader came and said, “You had a good career record in the last few years.

However, your career has been finished by the negative confidential report submitted by Brigadier Arbab.

General Khadim Hossain Raja, the G.O.C. and General Yakub of Eastern Command however gave good reports about you. Why you are not telling the truth? If you do so, I’ll arrange your freedom. You’ll be promoted to the rank of Brigadier. Why you are spoiling this great opportunity?” This Brigadier was a few months senior to me.

I was not convinced by his temptation. The interrogators again they started torturing me. Durrani beat up me with an iron rod wrapped with rubber. They wrapped rubber so that there was no stain on my skin. I fell unconscious many times during the torture.

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