

Protiti Devi

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Protiti Devi is the daughter-in-law of Dhirendranath Datta, the first man demanded Bengali as state language of Pakistan in 1948 in the then Provincial Assembly. Datta, a member of the Provincial Assembly, also played a vital role in the anti-colonial rule. He was tortured by the Pakistanis after being arrested in Comilla. Protiti Devi, in her testimony, describes the inhumane torture unleashed on him.

When barbaric atrocities by Pakistani forces continued in Dhaka on the night of March 25, firing also started in police line area in Comilla town and quickly spreaded to other parts of the town. We were in fear as my father-in-law Dhirendranath Datta was a famous political leader. So, we were apprehending the worst.

Many of our family friends had suggested my father-in-law to leave home, but he did not agree saying “If I leave this place, they will kill my innocent people here.”

The firing continued all through the night. The Pakistanis killed the Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police in Comilla on March 26. Curfew was imposed in the town. Movement of people was hardly seen on the streets. We could not understand what was happening outside. As the shops were remained closed many people came to us to take rice. Our house was in Dharmasagor area. This area as had some significance jail, main offices, court and residences of elite were also located in this area. Curfew was withdrawn on March 27 afternoon.

A road in front of our house goes straight to Sonamura border. We saw a stream of frightened people of all ages and walks of life heading towards the border. Three of six our house helps were sent to their village homes. Only 10-year-old Sadek and two others were in the house.

My father-in-law was not convinced to leave the house. Others, present in the house were my brother-in-law Dilip Datta, daughter Aroma, son Rahul and me.

On March 28, we saw some trucks dumping human bodies in Faizunnesa Girls High School ground.

There were, perhaps, some wounded people among the bodies brought from the outskirts or nearby villages.

The barbaric Pakistani troops sprayed petrol and burnt the bodies reducing the injured people to ashes. We heard a big bang outside our house at about 10 pm on March 29. The sound continued for about an hour. Later we came to know that the house of Bachchu Kaka (Awami League leader Zahirul Quaiyum) was attacked.

Firing and explosions continued amidst the curfew. I was very puzzled. My father-in-law looked restless.

His blood-pressure rose very high. It was 266. He took medicine after I had washed his head. All of us were sleepless.

We heard heavy firing in front of our house at about 1:30 am. It was horrifying. I went to my father-in-law's room and again back to my room. The doorbell rang. Dilip rushed towards me and asked "What should I do?"

I said, "We have no option but to open the door."

I tried to get up, but he rushed and opened the door. Immediately some Pakistani soldiers pointed their bayonets at his chest and stormed the room. They took Dilip to the chamber-room of my father-in-law, who was also dragged to that room. Aroma and Rahul were in the adjoining room. I tried to come out. Since minor Rahul was being taken away. But a young Beluch captain carrying a torch-light intercepted me. I heard shouting from Aroma's room. The entire house became a horrifying sight.

I did not hear anything other than firing and shouting since the door was open, as if, several thousand army men had occupied the house. Firing followed by sound of breaking of glasses continued. I could fathom that the pictures in my father-in-law's room were being broken by bullet shots. Blood started to flow from that room. I heard someone moaning, "Let me free, let me free". I could make out that they were being bayoneted.

I tried to come out forcibly, but the Beluch captain would not allow me.

The soldiers in Aroma's room were looking for female university students. On being asked, Aroma replied that she had appeared for the matric exam. Somedays back I had brought some female students from Dhaka University' Rokeya Hall along with Aroma. The army's main target was to kidnap university student, Aroma. Since Aroma was being interrogated, the Beluch boy didn't allow me to go there nor did he allow anyone from the other side to enter. As a result, Major Bokhari, known as killer of Comilla, did not realise there was any female inside the room. Among the soldiers, there was one who knew Urdu a little bit. He kept repeatedly asking, "Who is from Dhaka? Obviously, there is someone from Dhaka." I tried my best to shout loudly that there was no one from Dhaka. In fact, they were looking for university student, Aroma. At one stage one of them had allowed Aroma to leave the room telling her, "Go to your mother."

As the firing continued breaking windowpanes and blood flooded the floor, I felt that no one could have survived. Perhaps not even Rahul?

The dreadful operation was over after 11 minutes. Army officers of all ranks, including a brigadier and a colonel, had come. Stenguns were set up on both sides of the house. The road in front of the house was crowded with troops.

An ambulance came and took away my father-in-law and Dilip. Rahul was sent back to me. He was saying time and again, "Uncle needs a bandage." In fact, minor Rahul had become very nervous. It was not possible for him to bear the pain of seeing such notorious atrocities. He fainted time and again.

The ambulance disappeared. The army officers also started to leave the house in phases. The house was freed completely of army personnel by dawn. I had lost my all senses, I did not know what to do then. Until the last soldier left the house, the Beluch boy remained standing. Later, I realised Aroma and I could survive only because of him.

The entire house bore signs of blood. A deathly silence gripped the entire home. The only sound was the groaning of Aroma.

I went to my father-in-law's room. There were signs of destruction wherever I looked. Blood covered the floor; the walls bore the signs of indiscriminate firing and damaged-pictures were lying on the floor indiscriminately. Sadek was in my room during the operation. He boiled milk and served it to Aroma and Rahul. As I lost my father-in-law and brother-in-law, I was thinking about how could I save my daughter and son and how to leave the house. I did not find any way as curfew was going on outside. Army guards were in front of the house. They were also patrolling the streets. I stood up on a chair and tried to look outside peeping through a ventilator. All of a sudden, the door of the bathroom was knocked from the backside. I thought the soldiers had come back again.

I opened the door frightfully and was astonished to see a neighbour, Mr Rahman, a C&B service holder.

He secretly came to know of our condition. Defying strong army guard around the house, he came to us crossing the boundary wall with a high risk. His courage and humane amazed me.

I said, "Please manage two burkhas (veil) for us. Then we could try to leave the house."

He said, "There is curfew outside. Soldiers are patrolling in the streets and in front of the gate. You'll not be able to go out."

"What's your suggestion then?" I asked.

He advised me to wait and told till Curfew withdrawn at about 11am for an hour, then he would back again.

I myself thought several times of fleeing through the back of the house, but it was not possible to open the old door on the backside as it would create a sharp noise drawing attention of the soldiers.

I heard knocking on the bathroom door at about 11am. Frightenedly, I opened the door and found Mr Rahman. He asked me to come out, and brought Aroma and Rahul over the wall to backside. I crossed myself, but I did not know how Mr Rahman could cross the high boundary wall alongwith Aroma and Rahul.

After reaching to Rahman's house, he asked me, "Didi (sister) where will you go now? The army might come as soon as the curfew is withdrawn."

I replied, "At first I'll go the Daroga (police inspector) bari (house)."

Aroma and I wore the burkhas. Mr Rahman took sick Rahul and advised us not to glance back while walking on the road as it would make the soldiers suspicious.

The gate of our house is on the way to Daroga bari Police officer's residence. While crossing the gate, I started weeping. The area around the gate was marked by signs of blood. Our pet dog and cat were crying around a blood-stained shoe of my father-in-law was in front of the gate.

As we were barefooted, it was very tough for us to walk through the street. Elderly people were consoling us saying, "Oh! Obviously they are from an elite family. Now they have to walk barefoot."

Aroma was weeping while walking. I tried my best to stop her. I told her, "My child, don't cry now. We'll have to cry throughout the lives. If you cry now, soldiers will come and pick us up."

After walking for sometime, we reached the Daroga Bari. Mr Kamal of the house said, "Sister, it'll not be wise for you to stay here anymore. You'd better to go hide where." They kept Rahul along with them and managed a safer place for us. Mr Rahman gave Rahul a new name- Bacchu Mia- for his safety.

I still did not know where we would be taken to, where we would be kept. However, I heard that we would be taken to a close relative of theirs. After sometime, one man came and took Aroma and me away. Our new destination was five-minutes walking distance away. It was the residence of Mr Eskander Ali, a nephew of Mr Kamal. Mr Ali was a captain and physician in the Pakistan Army. He was stranded after coming from Chittagong. He had no contact with his mother, wife and 10-month-old son who were in Chittagong.

Eskander took the responsibility of Rahul's treatment. Aroma was still abnormal. She continued weeping all the time. In the meantime, Eskander got news that his family members in Chittagong were shot dead. He told Aroma "Why are you crying. You at least have your mother. But I have lost everyone."

He was able to console Aroma. It is impossible for us to the gratitude I cannot express sufficiently what the doctor did for us at that time. Taking a life risk, he had in wards cooked food himself and took special care for Aroma like his own daughter.

Army personnel used to come to that house to interrogate Mr Eskander everyday. He talked to them keeping us in secret places. A Pathan cook, was appointed for him, also helped us. The cook even tried to make the army understand that there would be no point killing the doctor as he might help them in case of need.

When ever the army personed came we were kept in the bathroom or the kitchen or other secret places.

Had the army known of our presence in that house, a death penalty was certain for Mr Eskander. Our domestic help, Sadek used to visit us and brought clothes, rice and other things from our Dharma Sagar house. We also came to know about other developments from him. He told as about the killings inflicted by the army and their atrocities. I felt very tense all the time. Rahul was yet to recover, Aroma was still sick. I used to know the developments from Radio Australia and All India Radio.

At the end of April, I came to know that army personnel was hunting for us. They had also announced a cash prize for our capture. In this condition, I did not want to be a cause of trouble to Eskander. So I requested him to, rent a house for me. On April 30, the Pathan cook informed us that the house would be raided in the next day. Then I asked Eskander to take us in another place.

In the dark of the night, Aroma and I were taken away to another house. I did not know where the house was situated. It took 10-15 minutes to reach there after walking thorough a garden. Here we faced another trouble. People gave us suspicious looks. They started questioning — who are we? From where have we come? Where would we go? We requested them just to allow us to stay for a single night.

On May 2 morning we again went to Mr Kamal's house, where we heard a Akashbanee (Indian radio service) news item in the morning that the Parliament in Delhi would adopt a condolence motion to show respect to Shaheed (martyred) Dhiren Datta. I realised it would not be wise to stay here furthermore as the army had intensified raiding many houses to hideout the family members of Dhirendranath Datta. May be they were looking for us to compel us to make a statement that we were in safe. The reason was simple, they did not want to let the world know about their brutal atrocities. It should be mentioned here that Radio Pakistan had broadcasted the death news of Dhirendranath Dutta saying he died of cardiac arrest. I thought Dilip had died immediately after he was taken away from the house. Dhiren Babu was not supposed to be alive for a long time enduring the inhumane torture. However, Ramanimohon Sheel, a barber of our area, who was also picked up to the cantonment, said he saw Dhiren Babu and Dilip being tortured in the cantonment. Army personnel killed them unleashing brutal repression for straight five or six days. The barber claimed he had even witnessed their burial.

After the news of Akashbanee the Daroga bari advised us to cross the border. But it was very risky. At last Mr Kamal could convince his cousin Syed Mia to reach us to the border.

Accompanied by Syed Mia, we started the journey from Daroga Bari by a rickshaw at about 12:30pm. I still could visualize the people of Daroga Bari were crying to say us good bye. The road and the destination were unknown to us. The rickshaw proceeded towards the Goumti river. There was risk of death at each and every moment. Indiscriminate firing could be heard from the direction of the cantonment. Like us, many rickshaws were bound towards the Goumti and then to the Sonamura border. On either side of the road,

we saw the bodies of many people, including women and children. Many rickshaws behind us were blown away by shells. We were still confused of our destiny even after crossing the Goumti. There was only an endless void. We went through a route of which I knew nothing.

On our arrival at the dam after crossing the Goumti, Syed Mia said, “Mother, now we are free from risk.

No shell from Pakistani forces can reach here.”

While passing through the dam, we saw signs of atrocities of Pakistani forces — many houses were burnt to ashes. We could still hear the sound of shelling. In the evening we reached Sonamura border. As we were about to cross the border, I saw some soldiers jumping out from a convoy. They were ‘Gurkha’ soldiers. For the first time I realised how would we cross the border, as we did not have passports. I introduced myself and told the Indian border authorities about our situation.

They said, “Papers and passports are not please follow us.” They took us to the Sonamura Police Station.

Then, began a new chapter in our lives, leaving behind the peace of home.

Interviewed by Ruhul Motin

They used to uproot the prisoners’ nails by
