

Singer Linu Billah

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Nakhalpara MP Hostel was the biggest torture centre in Dhaka during the 1971 liberation war. Music Director Altaf Mahmud and many other people were killed there by the Pakistan Army. Singer Linu Billah, who is a relative

of Altaf Mahmud, was also arrested with Mahmud and brought to MP Hostel camp. Linu Billah described his experience while making a statement on September 23, 1999.

In the early hours of August 30, 1971, everybody at home woke up hearing the outcry of my younger sister Shimul. I rushed to her room and found that some black-dressed Pakistani army soldiers had rifles pointed at her neck. The Pakistani army men entered the room through the kitchen door which was always kept open. Shimul was at that time practicing of her singing.

One army captain asked, “Who is Altaf Mahmud?”

Altaf Mahmud came forward to introduce himself and said, “I’m Altaf Mahmud”.

“Mall Kaha? (Where are the arms)”, asked the captain.

“I don’t know,” replied Altaf boldly. Without waiting a moment longer, the captain struck Altaf Mahmud with his rifle. Altaf felt severe pain on his abdomen. His nose started bleeding. Then the army men compelled him to unearth some boxes full of arms and ammunition near the tube-well behind the house.

From then, the army formally began to torture him. Before taking us from our residence in front of Rajarbagh Police Line to the MP Hostel, the army unleashed torture on us several times. I cannot say how I was taken to MP hostel. Soon after the car carrying us reached the front of the Hostel, the Pakistani army burst into joy as if their favourite food stuff had been brought for them. The soldiers started torturing Altaf on the street. They asked us to walk for a while and line up there. Then we were taken to a small kitchen. Many others were confined in the room. At about 8 a.m. they noted down our names after taking us out from the tiny house.

Then the formal torture session began.

A well-trained group of army personnel took us to an adjacent room and started torturing us. Before entering the room, I heard the groaning sounds of other people who were being tortured at that time. The soldiers continued torture on them for 20-30 minutes and then sent them back to the kitchen.

Havildar Shafin Gul was the leader of the torture group. He used to unleash torture in many ways. I heard Altaf Bhai groaning at regular intervals as he was being tortured mercilessly in the room. From another room, the screams of other freedom fighters were

also heard. Through a hole of the kitchen door I saw a man whose face was almost distorted. His right eye was about to come out while the left one was bleeding. His face was badly injured. He was yelling in Urdu, "Mujhe goli mar doo, lekin mat maro (Kill me, but don't beat me anymore)." Hearing the voice, I thought I might know the man, but I could not recognise him then. Later, I found out he was Hafizur Rahman, a close aide of Altaf Mahmud. He was a skilled player of various musical instruments.

I found a group of 5 or 6 army men inside the room when I was called in. Shafin asked me, "Who were with you and where are the arms?"

In reply, I said, "I know nothing." Then the barbaric Pakistani soldiers forced me to lie down on the floor.

Two of them stood on my hands while two others on the legs. Another man pressed my neck to the floor with his legs. They started inhuman torture on me. They beat me mercilessly from my shoulders to the knees as if they were chopping meat like butchers. It was their routine torture on freedom fighters. It was a common punishment for those who claimed to be innocent from the beginning.

They continued torture on me for about 15 minutes. I found my clothes had got wet with continuous bleeding from my back and other parts of my body. At the same time, the devilish army men unleashed torture on the other Bangalees confined in the balcony and in a room next to it. I could realise the extent of torture by hearing the screams. I also realised that I was tortured less than the others. I was sent back to the kitchen after torture lasting for about 20-25 minutes. The torture on the others, continued .

I saw the detainees taking care of the injured people back from the torture cell. They washed the blood from their face, shoulders and clothes. Spraying water on their faces, some detainees tried to bring back the sense of those who had fainted. I did not know the whereabouts of Altaf Mahmud. The barbaric soldiers took Altaf away from the camp at about 10 a.m. They also tortured my elder brother in a barbaric way.

By this time we met two handsome guys in our room. We realized that they were badly tortured. They were continuously bleeding from their nose, lips and face. Their clothes were stained with blood. The elder one was looking towards me, my four brothers and Alvi by reclining his head on the wall. Despite such unbearable torture by the army men, he was smiling. He was Sharif Imam, husband of Jahanara Imam. The younger man was Jami, his youngest son. Mr. Sharif Imam made gestures to us not to make any noise, because the army men used to multiply the level of torture on those who made noise.

We were confined in a 3-room flat of the MP Hostel. One evening, about 7 or 8 p.m, we got frightened with the sound of kicking on the door. We heard the sound of unlocking of the room. The soldiers brought in a young man, aged about 27-28 years, who was about to die. They kicked and left him in the room. One of the army soldiers said, "Bloody, want to flee? We'll not kill you by shooting". The young man was moaning and said, "Don't beat

me, please kill me.” The boy lay with us in the room, but as the door was open, we could not do anything for him. When the door was closed, we tried to raise the boy so that he could sit by the wall, but he was too weak to sit.

His face was almost distorted. His nose and mouth were bleeding continuously. He tried to get up several times, but failed. We could not recognise him. Later, Alvi told me that he was Badiul Alam, a freedom fighter.

He was known as Badi in the Dhaka University campus. Badi made an attempt to flee from the concentration camp as he thought it was better to die than to be tortured, but the Pakistani army men foiled his attempt and arrested him. Badi fainted as the army men unleashed brutal torture on him. The devilish Pakistanis left him in an unconscious state in our room. His off-white trouser and shirt were stained with dry blood which made the clothes blackish. At about 8 p.m. the army men took him away. I never saw him again.

After several rounds of interrogation and torture till 8 p.m. the army men took us away from there in two pick-up vans. At about 9.30 p.m. the army men took some other people from adjacent buildings. They picked up another handsome young guy in a separate jeep from Building No 2. He was severely tortured, but still strong enough to stand. He himself got into the jeep. His name was Rumi, a freedom fighter and the eldest son of Jahanara Imam. It was my first and last meeting with Rumi.

We were taken to the Ramna Police Station by 10 p.m. Everyone was lined up in the verandah. I was surprised to see Chullu Bhai in the line-up. He was also severely tortured. Chullu Bhai told us not to disclose anything.

On August 31. Pakistani soldiers came to the Ramna thana by bus. They packed all of us in the bus and took us again to the same Nakhalpara MP Hostel at about 10 a.m.

Everybody was feeling severe pain on their body due to the previous day's torture. The army men started torturing us again that day in same way, asking similar questions. The torture turned more violent. I applied the strategy according to tips given by the detainees in the Ramna thana custody. It worked. At one stage the severity of punishment was lessened. I gave Alvi and others the same tips. In the meantime, one of Alvi's

finger was fractured. It happened when he tried to resist the stroke of the baton. His finger was still bleeding.

The army men slapped Dilu my younger brother, on the ear, as he did not give satisfactory replying to their questions. His ear was also bleeding. He could not even hear anything after the blow. Dilu is still short of hearing. We spent the whole day in a reign of torture. At about 10 p.m. they took us to a cell at the Ramna police station.

The next day was September 1. At about 9 o'clock an army bus was brought and the army men asked us to get into the bus. For the first time there I saw cricketer Jewel sitting beside me with bandage on his finger. I heard that he had received bullet wounds on his finger during an attack on the Pak army near Dhanmondi Road No 18. I heard Jewel

reciting from the Quran. Perhaps he thought that he was going to die soon. His injured finger was proof of his active participation in the war. Jewel was an active fighter in several important operations against the Pakistani occupation forces. On August 30, when he was being brought as a prisoner, he told Mr. Samad, “You have helped the Pakistan army to arrest freedom fighters. If I return I will kill you.”

But Jewel never returned. He embraced martyrdom.

We were detained again in the same rooms after getting off the bus. After a few minutes, all the prisoners were taken outside the buildings. The soldiers ordered us to line up and walk slowly towards the ground floor of the biggest building of the three. They also ordered us to be seated on the floor. The place resembled a court room. A colonel was sitting nearby along with two captains. It was Colonel Naser Hezaji. One of the captains was called Quaiyum, but I cannot recall the name of the other. Among others, Shafin Gul and his accomplice Bihari Muktar were there. We understood that they were going to take the final decision as to who was to be killed and who to be released.

I was observing the captain who was sitting beside Colonel Hezaji. I recalled that the captain used to go to the DIT television centre. I decided to talk to him. The captain was so ferocious that he used to remove the prisoners nails by piercing knives to their fingers. The colonel was delivering the verdicts like a judge, by pointing his finger to the right or left — release or punishment.

At about 12.30 p.m. I was called in. The colonel asked me, “What’s your name?” I replied. Then he asked the names of others. The Captain was moving the knife about as if it was a pistol. Suddenly I told him, “I’ve seen you earlier.” Surprised, the captain said, “Where?” I said, “At the Television Centre.” Then the captain said, “Yes, I used to go there, but what did you do there?” In reply, I told him that I was an artiste. The captain smiled and asked what my job was. I replied that I used to sing and play the tabla (a musical instrument).

As soon as I replied, the captain kicked a small table towards me saying, “Play on it and sing a song also.”

I felt a new lease of life, and I started singing and playing on the table like a tabla. I cannot recall which Urdu song I sang. All of us were released, except Altaf Bhai. The captain once again ordered us not to disclose anything of what happened there. He also asked us to supply the names and addresses of the freedom fighters and report regularly about their activities.

When we were leaving the Hostel, Altaf Bhai said, “Don’t worry about me. Take care of Shaon, my child.”

Interview by Ruhul Motin

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