

Mr. Aziz Choudhury

Age: 58

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Interviewed by: Jamil Iqbal

Mr. Choudhury on one occasion, during the war in Bangladesh, was placed before a firing squad by the Pakistani army in Dhaka airport. By a strange twist of fate his life was spared quite literally from the jaws of death. He was also an eye witness to the massacre of ordinary people by the Pakistani army in the streets of Dhaka in March 1971. Presently, he works for the Bethnal Green Training Centre in the East End of London.

My name is Aziz Choudhury and I am 58 years old. I came to this country on the 16th October 1971. I worked as an accountant for 11 years before joining a housing association in the role of Finance Director. Thereafter I have worked within various community organisations and continue to do so. I am Chairman of Spitalfields Small Business Association (SSBA) and I am currently managing Bethnal Green Training Centre (Montefiore Centre), Hanbury Street, E1. In Bangladesh, my address is Kazi-Elious, Zindabazar, Sylhet, and I am originally from Jalalpur, Sador, Sylhet.

Q: Do you feel that the independence war is part of your history?

MAC: Of course, this event changed my whole life, as I originally came to this country during the war. I came to England on the 16th October 1971 and I had been in Bangladesh for the duration of the freedom fight. It was very difficult to leave the country at that time. I was granted student admission here in the UK and at that time, not everybody had the opportunity to come to England. I had applied for a passport long before the freedom fight commenced.

I actually got stranded in Dhaka till May 1971. I was in Dhaka during March, April and May 1971. Everything was happening during my time in Dhaka. I had been posted in Rajshahi as part of my job and was due to travel there on around the 26th March 1971. However, the trouble started the day before I was supposed to go to Rajshahi. I had bought a coach ticket but I never used it.

Throughout the months from March to May 1971, I was in Dhaka. I met one of the Chatro League leaders in Purana Paltan, where all the Awami League people used to meet. It was like a big moncho (platform) and they used to make decisions from there.

The name of the Chatro League leader was Akhtar Ahmed. I had a connection with Akhtar Ahmad as I had last seen him when I was due to go to Rajshahi. He had been on his way to Sylhet.

I eventually received a telephone call from my family who found out that I was alive. Nobody had known where I had been, as I was supposed to be in Rajshahi but had been stuck in Dhaka.

In June 1971, I managed to get a ticket to go back to Sylhet on the first domestic flight from Dhaka to Sylhet, since the outbreak of the trouble. There was a problem when we travelled from Dhaka to Sylhet in a small plane which only had about eighteen passengers. It took 35 to 40 minutes to go to Sylhet. After about 30 minutes, they said that there was a weather problem and that we were going back to Dhaka. The sky was very clear, and the weather did not seem that bad. I got suspicious but we could not do anything. The plane did not land on the usual runway at the old Tejgaon airport. After landing, the plane went through some bushes. We had landed on one of the small runways at the old Dhaka airport which had been used in the 2nd World War. The plane stopped and the Pakistan Army surrounded the plane. They had their guns pointed at us. The plane stopped and two Officers got on to check everybody. There was one Bengali man in civilian clothing or he may have been from the special branch. This Bengali man was trying to identify someone. The Pakistani Officers were asking him to identify whether someone was aboard. The officers asked us to get off the plane. They put all the passengers of the flight in a line. There was a machine-gun, fitted to the ground. We thought that they were going to shoot us and that our bodies would be left in the middle of the bushes. There would have been no trace of where we were. We had no alternative, so we all prayed the ‘Kalima’ and other prayers. They were looking for someone. Most young people were active in some capacity and the Pakistani army could have found a reason to shoot any of us. I was an active member of NAP (National Awami Party) for years, and I was quite involved. I had not been going to my office as everything was at a standstill, Instead I used to go to the Purana Paltan Awami League office, and attended all the meetings and other events. So I was politically active and could not say for sure that I was not the person the officers were looking for on the plane. They were looking for a particular person and as they did not find their targeted man, we all feared that they may consider all of us to be guilty and shoot us. But after a few minutes, they checked everybody and the Officer in charge said that he was sorry for the inconvenience and told us we could go. We got back on the plane and flew to Sylhet.

Another day we were sitting at home. I was talking to my friends, discussing the political situation, when suddenly the army arrived and surrounded the whole area. Somebody said that there was a bomb or something in the area. We were young at that time, I was around 26, so they could have assumed that we were members of the Mukti Bahini (Bengali freedom fighters), and could have shot us or taken us to an army camp. The officer in charge, who was very young, spoke to us. He said, “Agar Kuch milgaya, to toom logoko muchli ka khurak banayega”. We were extremely worried. There was a person in the house, who had been living in London. He had returned to Bangladesh and had a walky-talky with him. Everybody was active in those days but if they had found the radio, we all would have been in trouble. We were all anxious but this kind of tension became part of life.

I was working with the Faison’s Pharmaceuticals Company in Dhaka. When I was due to go to Rajshahi, they gave me two months salary plus bonus in advance. That was more then 1500 rupees which was a lot of money. In those days the average salary was 250 rupees or something like that. I kept all this money in the back pocket of the trousers. In the night we used to sleep with our trousers on as you would not know when you would have to run in an emergency. The Bihari (Urdu speaking Muslims who came to East Pakistan from Indian province of Bihar during partition in 1947) people in Dhaka used to collaborate with the Pakistani army and people used to be frightened of them.

Have you witnessed any killings?

MAC: I saw a dead body of a priest in a temple in Nowabpur, Dhaka. I could see he had been shot, with bullet through his forehead. I saw another scene in the BATA shoe shop. The man wore one shoe and the other one was in his hand. He had been shot and killed.

I do not recall the exact date, but it may have been the 3rd or 4th March 1971. Processions came from all corners of Dhaka while the City was under curfew. The missils (processions) went towards the Governor’s house (Banga Bhavan) with slogans like Joi Bangla, Joi Bangla. The people broke the curfew, and were approaching like sea waves and I thought that the whole of Dhaka had become one voice, Joi Bangla, Joi Bangla, Joi Bangla.

I was in Nowabpur at that time, and we went up to the roof of the building. Those who had a little bit of sense avoided the roads, but the ordinary people became so exited and did not care about their lives. They all joined the procession and the voices of the crowd became one voice and got louder and louder.

It was half past seven, the army started to fire into the crowd. I think after about 20 to 30 minutes, the whole of Dhaka had gone quiet. People were screaming on the road, I do not know how many people the Army killed that day. The next day we heard that bulldozers were used to move the dead bodies. 30 minutes earlier, thousands of people were in the street and after the firing, there was no sound. These people must have been killed as they could not have escaped. The sound was of gun fire and then screaming, and crying. Then everything became silent.

Q: How did you manage to come to London in a situation like that?

MAC: I had been trying to come to London, to study electrical engineering and I had applied for a passport six or seven months before the war. I had been working on admission and other formalities. After the Pakistan Army’s attack, the freedom fight started, and I did not think that the whole war would finish within nine months. In Vietnam, the power struggle had taken eleven years, I had a job already but after completing my BSc, I wanted to move onto higher study in electronic engineering. Then Peer Habibur Rahman motivated me to join the NAP (National Awami League). He used to be in Sylhet, and I used to go to him. He is my distant cousin. He was like my role model and I saw his political life at first hand. He did not do anything for himself; he did everything for the people. I could not be like him and I did not give up everything for the cause. I used to do my work, and participate in these activities. I followed his principles but at the same time my approach was a bit different. I wanted to do a job and advance myself. I had a good job at that time.

We had very little communication in Dhaka because in Dhaka there was coded communication. There was a pro-freedom radio station. In passing, people would say a number such as 953. If you were Bengali and in favour of freedom, you would know that 953 might be the frequency of the radio station. If you are a Pakistani or a Muslim Leaguer you would not understand what the number was and people would pretend that they were talking about a telephone number or something. It was like a code and people would pass it on to people they thought were for freedom. There used to be all sorts of codes and people used to come from India and send messages to one another.

When I returned to Sylhet in June 1971, I received a message from Peer Habibur Rahman. He used to know of my plans to come to London. He sent me a message advising me that people in London were making a huge effort to help the movement but needed to know what was actually happening in the country. He told me to come to London to raise awareness. So I went to the Director of Passport, in the passport office, in Sheikhghat, Sylhet, I cannot remember what I told him. I did not know him personally and I had to be careful about what I said, as you would never know exactly who you were taking to.

You could not openly declare that you were for pro-freedom. The Director of Passports did not say anything to me. He just listened to what I had to say and told me to return the following day at 5:30 or 6:00 o’clock. The office closed at about five o’clock, or five thirty and I went back to the office the following day after closing time. I was very anxious and suspicious. I thought that when I arrived, the army would come and shoot me. The office was closed and the director was sitting in a room with only a dim light on. I was afraid that the Pakistani Army would catch me for trying to come to England. At that time we had no security and the Pakistan Army could have done anything to a young man like me. The Pakistani Army needed a lot of blood to treat its injured personnel. The Army would sometimes seize a person and take a maximum amount of blood from him and dispose of him. If he was an old person, he might be spared, but if it was a young person, you were in danger.

When I entered the office, the Director did not ask me to sit down. I walked over to another desk in the office and there were some papers on it. I received my passport and the date was already on it. The issue date had been backdated by three months. I realised that the military government had stopped issuing student passports three months earlier. Technically, my passport ought not to have been issued. After signing the backdated passport, he told me to leave it there and that there was an envelope in the desk drawer. I was told to take that envelope and only to open it after leaving the office. As I left the office, I was terrified that I would be confronted by the Army and that I would be questioned. I knew that I was carrying evidence in my hand. I took a rickshaw and I touched the envelope very carefully and was pretty sure that it was a passport inside. Eventually, I opened the envelope and was relieved that the passport was there. The Director had risked his life. In those days, if I had been a Pakistani spy or supporter, I could have told the army. He would have been shot immediately.

That sort of sacrifice by certain people resulted in Bangladesh freedom. I cannot even remember his name.

I bought a ticket from Dhaka to Karachi. My brother and uncle were in Karachi. When I arrived, nobody was there to receive me.

I had sent a telegram to inform my Uncle that I would be arriving in Karachi at about 1:30 or 2:00 O’clock. But nobody was at the airport to receive me and the airport was deserted. I got so frightened and did not know what to do. I had come from Bangladesh and was now in the Pakistan mainland. I went to the taxi area and looked for the smallest driver. I was thinking that if there was trouble, I would at least have a chance of fighting. I had no alternative as I could not go back to Dhaka. I t was my first time in Karachi, so I have to trust them. I got into a taxi and gave him my uncle’s address. I got in the back seat of the taxi. The minute the taxi started, a big man sat in the front of my taxi. I thought they would take me somewhere to kill me. It was 2 am and I thought that although I had not been killed in Bangladesh, I would be killed in West Pakistan.

After stopping the taxi, we went to one house after another looking for my uncle’s house. The people were so good even though we were knocking on their doors in the middle of the night. The Pakistani people were all keen to know what was happening in East Pakistan. The general public in West Pakistan did not seem to have a clue about the massacre that was taking place in the East Pakistan. The people were very hospitable and eventually we found my uncle’s house. I was so pleased with the way I was so warmly received and my whole perception of the Pakistani people changed. I stayed in Karachi for a couple of days before travelling to London. My experiences and memories of that time will always be part of my life.

Despite my plans to study engineering in England, I never took up the course for which I was supposed to enrol. The minute I arrived in London, I was met by many people who had travelled in 10 to 15 cars. Later on, people used take me on trips to Luton and Birmingham to share my first hand experience of what was occurring in Bangladesh. I eventually got contact with the NAP people. At that time the NAP and the Communist Party used to work together and used to meet in Tottenham Court Road. Barrister Ashraf Ali, Barrister Sayedur Rahman, Nikhilesh Chakraborty, and others used to attend. They were publishing a newspaper and used to distribute in Brick Lane, and at all the meetings. At that time the war was reaching a conclusion. Due to my involvement in attending meetings and raising awareness, I never managed to attend my intended course of study. Later, the next year, I started accountancy and I ended up being an accountant.

The most impressive feature of the struggle for independence was that fact that the people worked in unity to achieve the goal. Across the board, from the intellectual people to the grass-root people, everybody was working against the Pakistan government and the army.

Q: Did you participate in any campaign?

MAC: I attended meetings and was involved in the campaign to raise awareness of the plight in East Pakistan. I was involved in distributing the campaign newspaper and leaflets.

I was also involved with the U K Student Parishod, which was a combined student wing of Awami League, and National Awami Party (NAP), working together. They formed the student Union here and I was elected as a member of the executive committee for two terms. So I was in that and lot of meetings and campaigns were arranged by the Union. We used to go and campaign for freedom.

Q: Were you proud of the new nation, as the independence was achieved?

MAC: We were proud to have our own identity and it will flourish. We have our own flag, anthem and nation.

One young had come to England from Dhaka and came to work in the same chartered accountants office as me. He was not keen to discuss the independence struggle in Bangladesh and did not show any pride for the new nation. Another trainee accountant said to him, “I am an Asian, born in Africa, living in England. When I go to India, they say that I am an overseas Indian and when I go to Africa, I am not an African. When I am here I am British, but not White. I can’t say any country is mine. You have a country so you should be so proud!”

Q: How do you tell the young generation about Bangladesh? What do you have to say to the young generation about Bangladesh?

MAC: My two sons always used to be busy with school and homework, so I could not tell them much about Bangladesh. But I used to make sure that on every 21st February, I would tell them the whole story about Bangladesh. I used to take them to the Kabi Nazrul Centre in the 1980’s and then to the Surma Centre in central London when I was working there.

I live in South London so it would be a long drive to East London. I had a long story to tell my sons because my family lived in Shillong, India before we went to Sylhet during the riots which occurred as a result of Partition (in 1947). I used to continue the story from the language movement and then the independence war. My sons would listen to the story once a year.

A long time later, my eldest son attended medical school. One day he phoned me in the office and said, “Thank you Baba.” Then he explained that five students had been talking about where they all originated from. When my son said he was from Bangladesh, a Pakistani girl said, “Oh, we gave you freedom.” My son was furious at this mindless comment and gave a full ten minute account of what he knew of the struggle for independence. He stressed that so many innocent people had been killed, women raped. He was angered that such a flippant remark could be made when so much blood was spilt in the bid for freedom. The girl apologised. My son was surprised but thankful that he knew so much of the history of the war and that he was able to put the record straight.

The next generation will learn from their parents’ passion and pride for Bangladesh and hopefully this will leave a lasting impression on them. People love their homeland, culture and language and this why there are so many newspapers, radio and television stations. The growth of Banglatown is an example of a community drive rather than any one individual. It is like a ‘third Bangla’. The first one is Dhaka, the second in Calcutta, and the third is Banglatown in London.

Q: What do you think about the Pakistan people now?

Now there is a new generation, who perhaps know less about history and politics. If Pakistan was united with Bangladesh these days it would be a major strength in South East Asia. It would be another power next to India. So Pakistan lost out. Before independence, the Pakistan government took all the money from Bangladesh and at that time, jute was the golden fibre. The Pakistan government built Islamabad and all the cities with money from Bangladesh. By staying together Pakistan used to gain and Bangladesh used to lose. Ultimately, the Pakistan government could not keep the two nations unified and through their oppression of the Bengali people, they lost out.

The everyday people of West Pakistan were unaware of the situation in East Pakistan. When I was coming to London, there was a Pakistani man sitting next to me on the plane. He was the director of Lahore radio or television and he was asking me what is going on in East Pakistan. He was very nice and extremely sympathetic. It seemed like all the oppression and acts of massacre were all was done against the will of the Pakistani people. The Pakistani people were normal but the government and the army were arrogant. There was serious conflict when the Bangladeshi people tried to demonstrate that they had their own identity, culture and language.

Q: Do you plan to settle in Bangladesh?

MAC: Now many Bengalis are living here in England. The world has become smaller with better and cheaper travel and improved modes of communication. We will not ever forget our home and we cannot live without Bangladesh. So what we have to do is share our memories and experiences with the next generation. We have to try to preserve our culture whilst moving with the times and our current location and circumstances. We can try to contribute to Bangladesh and help to make it an even greater nation. We have to strengthen and modernise Bangladesh and make sure that the sacrifice of many is never forgotten.

It does not matter whether we live here or in Bangladesh. Lots of people who have lived in Britain for many years still leave the country and go to Bangladesh. When it is summer, they come back to Britain, although that kind of arrangement obviously depends on financial resources.

My father was well established in Shillong India. However, when the riots took place following Partition, he lost everything and we went to Bangladesh. If he had had big investments in Bangladesh, he would have been all right. But he has all his interest in India and he suffered when we had to move. The same thing could happen to all the Bengalis now settled in Britain and other places in the world. That is the negative possibility but looking at it positively, we are international people now. We have Bengali people in England and across Britain, in America, Australia and all over in Europe. There are Bengali people all over the world who can always fall back on their proud history. It is a global village and the Bengali people have to continue to become more educated and experienced, so that they can live and work anywhere.

Sylhet will have an international airport and if that can be developed, we can go straight to Sylhet from anywhere in the world. It is a brilliant city with nature and plenty of resources such as gas and oil. Sylhet could be developed into an excellent city.

There are industries which are already thriving such as trade of food produce from Bangladesh to abroad. There is a range of expertise which Bengali people possess which could be invaluable in other countries. If we seek to build and improve economic bridges and trade links between Bangladesh and the rest of the world, Bengali people will be able to live anywhere. They will forever be connected to their homeland Bangladesh and will be able to visit whether it is for a family holiday or a business trip. Visitors will not just be spending money in Bangladesh for a few weeks but will be contributing and strengthening the economy.