

Historic day for Bangladesh

BY LEEMA FARHA

ON DEC. 16, 1971, Bangladesh became an independent nation on the world map.

A short history as to why, how and from whom Bangladesh freed itself to become an independent nation could enlighten you as to why Dec. 16 is marked as a red-letter day for the whole nation.

The 1948 partition of the then India subcontinent (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), divided the subcontinent into two free countries — Pakistan as the Muslim-majority country and India as the Hindu-majority country. Bangladesh became a part of Pakistan and was called East Pakistan.

Geographically, East Pakistan was very distant from West Pakistan, with India being in the middle, connecting both. Later, East Pakistan found out that not only were they geographically distant from West Pakistan, but also wide apart in terms of language, culture, habits, ideology.

Why this partition took place is a question for another day. Today I want to give you a snapshot of how and why East Pakistan became a separate independent entity called Bangladesh. This discussion will then lead to how much our children know about this glorious day and to what extent they understand it.

The West Pakistan elite-led government tried to oppress East Pakistan through economic subjugation, political exclusion, and suppression of democratic practice. The last bombshell from West Pakistan that infuriated East Pakistan was, despite achieving a majority vote in Pakistan, East Pakistan leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was prevented from forming government for all Pakistan. On top of that, West Pakistan declared Urdu to be the national language, ignoring the Bangla-speaking majority citizens.

This lit a fire in the heart of East Pakistan which led to a language movement and then to the liberation war. West Pak-



ONE CITY,
MANY VOICES

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istan war crimes included atrocities such as rape and murder of the general population including the scholars and intellectuals. West Pakistan was on a mission to break the backbone of the East. Minority Hindus in East Pakistan were tortured and forced to become Muslims.

This led many to flee and seek refuge in India.

With aid from India and support from a few other global nations, East Pakistan achieved its glorious victory on Dec. 16, 1971, the very day West Pakistan surrendered. This day led to the birth of a new nation, named Bangladesh.

This is a snapshot of the nine-month bloody war between West and East Pakistan. The mass genocide, rape of both women and children committed by the West Pakistani militaries of the time were among the most heinous acts in human history. Till this day, many Bangladeshis feel a proper apology from the government of Pakistan has not been made.

I was born after the liberation war, so was spared from the 1971 hellish nightmare. I have heard from my elders and read the history in the books and watched documentary films. I have seen, even till this day, many elders who have lost loved ones in the bloody war, have not been able to set aside, forgive, and accept Pakistan. The bleak time they had gone through in 1971 has left a deep scar in their very soul.

No, I can't really judge them, as I understand what Bangladeshis went through and how many are still mourning

the loss. Others have moved on, building mental strength from the past and focusing on present and future global economic and political relationships.

How do I convey the greatest history of Bangladesh to my son, who has been here in Canada since he was four? He has such wonderful, good friends who are from Pakistan. I know their parents and they know me well. We have such a good relationship through our children's friendship. I gave him papers to read about our liberation war and kept aloof from influencing my son's thoughts with any kind of negativity.

My son told me: "I understand what happened to Bangladesh during the 1971 war, but it is nothing different from any other war I have read about. I don't feel what grandma feels when she reminisces."

It is my solemn duty to let him know about our history, historical achievement, and the glorious moments; to let him know that he is a proud Bangladeshi by birth.

I will conclude with how we celebrate this victory every year. In Bangladesh, it is a national holiday. We raise the Bangladeshi flag and pay tribute to the freedom fighters (both fallen and alive), sing the national anthem, sing heartwarming patriotic songs commemorating the sacrifices made by both men and women to free this nation.

In Thunder Bay, the Bangladeshi community gets together on the weekend of the Dec. 16 week to celebrate the day in a community centre. Community members sing songs, dance, recite poems of patriotism and the liberation war. We end the day with a nice Bangladeshi feast. In this way we also impart to our children the importance of this day.

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