

Inshallah Bangladesh

Praise for the Book

‘Deep Halder has a keen understanding of the new Bangladesh, unencumbered by rigid templates of the past and old ideologies. In this book, he goes deep into the factors that led to the 5 August youth revolt against Sheikh Hasina: what were the military leaders and top officials up to in the hours before the street protests erupted; how Hasina ignored the early warning signs, underestimated the threats and refused to escape to safety; and who is whispering about a global conspiracy. Read this book for an intimate view of the flux that Bangladesh finds itself in today and how it is moving beyond Sheikh Mujib’s dream.’

– **Shekhar Gupta**, founder and editor-in-chief, *ThePrint*

‘What Bangladeshi journalist Sahidul Hasan Khokon went through after the fall of Hasina is not his story alone. It is the story of a country at war with itself, trying to wipe out its own history and the legacy of 1971. *Inshallah Bangladesh* is a must read for those interested not just in Bangladesh’s future but the fate of the subcontinent itself.’

– **Manash Ghosh**, former resident editor, *The Statesman*, Delhi, who covered 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence

‘With Bangladesh trapped in an existential crisis today, brought on by local and foreign conspiracy, this work provides hope to its people. *Inshallah Bangladesh* is a prayer for a return to decency. It is also a reaffirmation of the Bengali people’s determination to recover, restore and re-establish the foundational principles of the nation-state they inhabit.’

– **Syed Badrul Ahsan**, former executive editor of *The Daily Star*, Bangladesh

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The Story of an Unfinished Revolution

Deep Halder
Jaideep Mazumdar
Sahidul Hasan Khokon

 juggernaut

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*This book is dedicated to Bangladeshi voices that refused to be silenced,
before, during, after Hasina.*



‘I am against revolutions because they always involve a return to status quo. I am against the status quo both before and after revolutions.’

— HENRY MILLER

An Open Letter to Surrealists Everywhere (1939)



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Preface

The Day I Became an Anti-National

9 August 2024

11.30 a.m.–2 p.m., Dhaka to Faridpur

‘Whose dead bodies are these?’ I ask one of the ambulance drivers at the Shyampur bridge on the Dhaka–Mawa–Bhanga Expressway. Why do they call these vehicles that carry the dead freezing ambulances, I wonder. But what else can they possibly call them! The middle-aged man looks me in the eye and doesn’t answer immediately.

There is a traffic snarl at the bridge, with five ambulances standing in a line, one after the other, along with cars, trucks, buses and bikes. Around a hundred student protestors have *gheraoed* the bridge. They are stopping vehicles, asking drivers and passengers to get down for questioning, frisking them, checking their luggage. They are escorting a few drivers and passengers down the bridge. To where, no one knows.

‘There are bodies of eleven policemen in these five ambulances,’ the driver tells me, his voice unwavering, bored, perhaps, by the delay in his journey.

‘Where are you taking them?’ I ask again.

‘Too old, aren’t you, to be a student protestor and asking so many questions?’ he smirks at me.

'I am just an ordinary citizen trying to return home to Faridpur,' I manage a smile. I am riding pillion with my junior colleague, Mir Anees, who is on the saddle of his trusted bike that has taken him far and wide for many reporting assignments.

Today, it might just save our lives.

It has been four days since Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina flew to India. Madness has descended on my country – there is no government, no rule of law, no order, no sanity. There have been big celebrations at the fall of Hasina, and killings, rapes and maiming of the Awami League's – Hasina's party – leaders, workers and supporters, as well as anybody the student protestors and faceless mobs, moving from skinny alleys to paved streets, from unpaved village lanes to newly-built highways and bridges, breaking into homes and offices, deemed anti-national. News of Hindu homes and temples being attacked across the country are pouring in.

Student coordinators, heroes of the revolution that ended Hasina's reign, are manning the streets, managing traffic, trying to separate the 'neo-nationalists' from the 'anti-nationals'. 'Anti-national' has become an umbrella term for anyone who was in Hasina's government or party, was an alleged beneficiary of her regime or was deemed to be in any way close to our neighbour, India.

I, Sahidul Hasan Khokan, professional journalist and writer for twenty years, having worked with some of the top media houses in Bangladesh and India – and till recently the Dhaka correspondent of the India Today Group – father to an eight-year-old boy, husband to a college teacher, have been branded 'anti-national'. My fault? I have extensively covered the Sheikh Hasina government and uncovered the nefarious designs of the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and its hard push for a radical Islamist nation.

In 2023, I was asked to become a member of the Awami League international affairs committee, given my vast experience covering the diplomatic relationship between Dhaka and Delhi. What had seemed like a new career path then, a gradual shift from journalism to diplomacy, has now become a clear and present danger for me.

I am escaping from my home in Dhaka with a rucksack on my back, 25,000 Bangladeshi taka and a few clothes. My wife and son are at a relative's place in Dhaka, but far from the neighbourhood where we lived for the last decade. My contacts in Bangladesh's military intelligence told me that I should leave my Dhaka home immediately, hide somewhere in the hinterland, throw away the SIM card in my phone so that I cannot be traced and try to have no contact with my family so that they do not come in harm's way.

'What have I done? Why do I have to run away like a fugitive from the law?' I had pleaded with a top officer of the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), Bangladesh's military intelligence unit, a source I had cultivated over the years.

'There is no law. Run before it's too late,' the voice on the other end had said, disconnecting the call.

I could have asked for help from the police or the military, but after the attacks on cops, the police stations are unmanned and the mob has been lynching citizens in front of the military.

After dropping off my wife and son the previous night, I had made a distress call to tell Anees to pick me up from home at 11 a.m. today. I had decided against driving out of Dhaka in my sparkling new Toyota Noah, on which I had spent a small fortune, as it would draw too much attention. Little did I know that I would never see it again! Anees picked me up from home, navigated the traffic snarls within Dhaka and reached the Dhaka-Mawa-Bhanga Expressway, the country's first expressway that had been operational since 2022.

We find ourselves stranded next to the ambulance, which, along with the four other ambulances behind it, is carrying bodies of slain policemen. The driver tells me they are transporting the bodies to their respective families in towns and villages. 'They have been hacked to death, some bodies have limbs missing, some have heads cracked open. Never seen policemen killed like this,' the driver tells me, lighting a bidi.

Four student coordinators approach us. 'Where are you headed?' they ask Anees, after telling both of us to take off our helmets. 'I am a reporter,' says Anees, 'and he is my senior in the profession. We are off to Faridpur on assignment.'

My heart skips a beat. Why did Anees say we are off for an assignment! What if they ask me to open my rucksack and find 25,000 Bangladeshi taka hidden inside a bundle of clothes? Who takes that kind of money to a reporting assignment? Anees and I should have discussed this before we set out and thought of a better excuse for carrying money and clothes.

The boys move towards me. 'What is your name? Which media house do you work for?' I bring out a press card that reads 'Sahidul Hasan Khokhon, Reporter, *Ekushey Songbad*'. It is a fake ID card I had printed last evening from the neighbourhood printer shop, anticipating such a moment. With Hasina gone, being associated in any way with India is as injurious to life and limb as being part of the Awami League ecosystem. The boys take a good look at the card as I feel my heart beats faster, my throat parched. At any moment they can ask me to open the rucksack and show them what is inside.

'Let them go,' one of them says.

Anees pushes the bike's start button.

Fifteen minutes pass as we zip through the expressway, praying no further 'check posts' manned by student coordinators come in our way. At the Dhaleshwari toll plaza in Munshigunj district, a group of *buzurs* – religious preachers – easily identifiable by their long beards, skull caps and short pyjamas, ask us to stop. We are asked again who we are and where we are headed. The same answer and the same fake press card. Allah saves us one more time as they indicate that we can carry on. As I breathe a sigh of relief, something catches my eye. The signboard at the Dhaleshwari toll plaza had read 'Bangabandhu Elevated Expressway Toll Plaza'. Now, there is a new cheap plastic signboard with the words 'Jatir Pita Hazrat Adam (AS) Toll Plaza'. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding

father of Bangladesh, has been replaced by Adam, the first human being on earth according to the Abrahamic faiths!

My Bangladesh has irrevocably changed.

We reach Faridpur town by 2 p.m. There are no interruptions on the way. Anees hasn't stopped for roadside tea or coconut water. We have exchanged no words.

2 p.m. Onwards

At sixty-six, Syed Modarres Ali Isa is a man of considerable influence not just in Faridpur district – Bangladesh's second largest district after Dhaka – but also in every nook and cranny of Bangladesh where the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) holds sway. Isa is not only the district president of the BNP's Faridpur unit, but also a central executive committee member of the party. Last evening, 8 June, Isa bhai, again an old contact since my reporting days, had made an unexpected call.

'Sahidul, are you okay?'

'Bhai, as okay as one can be given what's happening all around.'

'They are hunting for "Indian agents" and Hasina's people. I am scared you might be targeted. Come to Faridpur with your family.'

'Bhai, I do not know how to express my gratitude for such generosity. But I do not wish to be a burden.'

'Come over, Sahidul. Don't be stupid. People have gone mad. Just pack a bag and come,' Isa bhai had said.

Isa bhai had reasons to be worried about me. News had been pouring in of media offices being taken over by raucous mobs, journalists being heckled on streets and attacked inside homes on charges of being pro-Hasina, pro-India or both. The few like me who had doggedly reported on the rise of fundamentalism in Bangladesh even during the Hasina years were in graver danger.

My wife and I had decided to stay in separate places for the safety of the family. She would be in Dhaka with our boy and I would reach Faridpur and take shelter at Isa bhai's house.

‘This is your house, Bhai. Make it home,’ Isa bhai’s wife tells me. ‘You should have brought your family here with you.’

I tear up as I try to say something.

Bhabhi smiles and gently points me to a room. ‘That’s your room. Please freshen up. You must be hungry.’

The three-storied white house has an electronics shop on the first floor, sharing space with a women’s clothing outlet. The second floor, where the Isa family stays, has three bedrooms and an expansive drawing room. The third floor has been rented out.

I freshen up, sit with Bhai and Bhabhi and Anees. Bhabhi has prepared quite a spread: two types of river fish cooked with spices, dal and steaming hot rice. Famished from the travel, we eat to our heart’s content. Anees takes his leave after lunch. Isa bhai asks me to rest as he goes out to attend a party meeting. ‘Do not go out and do not talk on the phone,’ he tells me. I assure him I have thrown away my SIM card. He turns to Bhabhi and says that if anyone asks who I am, she should say I am his distant cousin who works abroad and is visiting.

‘Do not let strangers come inside the house,’ he tells her before leaving.

I go to my room, lie down on the bed and fall into a deep sleep in no time. I have hardly slept the last four nights.

The last thought on my mind? The face of my boy and the question he asked when we said goodbye to each other: ‘Baba, when will you come back to me?’

I wake up to darkness. It takes me a while to remember where I am. The wall clock shows that it’s 7 p.m. I feel like a having smoke, though I have not had a single one since I was detected with a brain tumour in 2020. It had taken almost three years and gamma knife surgery at AIIMS, Delhi, to heal me.

I come out of my room and request Bhabhi for a cup of tea. With the first sip, memories of what has been lost in the last four days since Hasina’s fall come flooding back.

5 August had passed in a jiffy; too much had happened too soon for me to register it all. Sipping tea at Isa bhai's apartment, somewhat relieved at having found a temporary refuge, I look back at the day Bangladesh changed. I had woken up early on 5 August with a sense of unease and called my contacts in the army and the police to know how things were.

Student protestors demanding the resignation of Sheikh Hasina had clashed with the police and paramilitary forces. Reports had come in of horrifying deaths in these clashes, of students and citizens being shot, of policemen being attacked by mobs, stripped on the streets, lynched or burnt to death and hung from bridges. The news had disturbed me. As a Bangladeshi, I am not new to violent protests, terror attacks or political clashes. In the last fifteen years of the Sheikh Hasina government, there have been many student protests. They have resulted in violent clashes with the police, injuries and deaths.

However, by the end of July 2024, WhatsApp forwards from colleagues, friends and neighbours reported thousands of student deaths. My own sources in the administration, police and military gave vague answers every time I called. 'Don't quote figures without verifying,' they told me each time. Who would verify the number of student deaths, I had asked. The calls went cold.

What had also bothered me in those dark days was that I could remember no time in the country's history – since the birth of Bangladesh – of police personnel being killed in this manner.

Were these killings done by students who wanted the end of Sheikh Hasina's dictatorial rule? Or was there someone else behind the protests? If so, who? How had a students' protest in response to the Supreme Court of Bangladesh reinstating a 30 per cent quota for descendants of freedom fighters turned into this? These questions had given me sleepless nights. None of it added up. I could sense a gap in the narratives being floated. Frantic phone calls to sources in the government, to student leaders, opposition party leaders, the police and the military had given no clear answers.

It is frustrating for a journalist to seek the truth and not find it. But Bangladesh, during July 2024, had entered the post-truth era.

August 2024 would bring hard truths back to Bangladesh.

I had woken up on 5 August with one prayer: Allah should stop any further bloodshed in my country. Not just student protestors, but also people from all walks of life, from every nook and cranny of Bangladesh, had threatened to descend on Dhaka and lay siege on Gonobhaban, Hasina's official residence. I dialled my contacts. Before I had gone to sleep the previous night, my contacts in the army had said that no lethal force would be used and that the army and paramilitary personnel would push back protestors who tried to lay siege on Dhaka. My morning calls revealed the exact opposite. From the four main entry points to the city, Jatra Bari, Uttara, Gaptoli and Babu Bazar, big crowds of protestors had entered the city and were moving towards Gonobhaban. All my reporting colleagues confirmed this, as did the news channels.

'Do not worry, they will be stopped well before they come near Gonobhaban,' my source at the DGFI told me. This was around 12.30 p.m. He added that the army top brass would shortly sit with members of all political parties and the student leaders of the mass movement against Hasina to reach a solution.

'Peace is just round the corner,' he assured me.

In hindsight, I would have perhaps got two-and-a-half hours of peace if I hadn't made one more phone call that afternoon.

In the life of a field reporter, sometimes sources become close allies, which can be both a good thing and bad. In this case, the Bangladesh army major I dialled had become a very close acquaintance who gave me very bad news as he picked up my call. He is still a serving officer and for his safety I shall withhold his name.

'Bhai, the army has betrayed Hasina.'

'What! Why? What does that mean?'

'I can only say that the army won't stop the crowds now.'

'What happens then? They will storm Gonobhaban?'

‘There would be no one to stop them if they do. There will be mayhem in the city, bhai. *Apni safe thaken* [You stay safe],’ he said.

I sat holding my phone for I do not know how long. At some point my wife came, asked me what was happening in the city, and what I would have for lunch. I do not remember what I told her or whether I said anything coherent at all.

At 3 p.m., an Awami League central committee leader texted me: ‘It’s over. *Apa* [elder sister, a term Hasina’s close associates reserved for her] is flying away from Bangladesh.’

At 3.05 p.m., the world saw the dramatic visuals of a helicopter flying over Gonobhaban. And then the C-130J military transport aircraft took her to India.

Hasina left Bangladesh.

My world was crumbling.

How does one recount days lived in abject fear? I have interviewed survivors of massacres and political violence who have seen death at close quarters and shivered when asked to narrate what they witnessed. Over the years I have hardened as a person and learnt to separate fact from emotion. Looking back on 5 August and the days that followed, I forget the sequence of events that led to my flight to Isa bhai’s house.

What happened immediately after the news of Hasina fleeing Bangladesh came up on TV screens? What happened the morning on or after 7 August? What did I do all day on 8 August as Bangladesh descended into darkness? At what hour on 8 August did I first think of fleeing Dhaka?

Was it when Bangladesh started committing patricide by urinating on, garlanding with shoes and finally pulling down the statues of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the hero of the 1971 War of Independence and the founding father of the nation? I remember the first time I saw those visuals on TV – there would be many more such incidents in the coming days across the country – and how I had thrown up in fear and disgust.

My mind was a mess, and my memories jumbled like a jalebi’s spirals. What I do recall is that I wanted to light a cigarette on

5 August immediately after seeing the visuals on TV of Hasina leaving, and had walked to the balcony of my second-floor apartment in one of Dhaka's oldest neighbourhoods, famously known as Puran Dhaka. Over the decade that I had lived there, I had fallen in love with its old-world charm that seemed untouched by the winds of change that had transformed some of the newer society blocks in the city.

There is a mosque right next to my apartment building, and another one barely 500 metres away, a Shiv mandir not far from it, a church in the next lane, and Muslims, Hindus and Christians live together as good neighbours. An Awami League party office stood right opposite my building. My local Member of Parliament (MP) Sayeed Khokon, councillor Haji Samsuz Zoha and many leaders from the Awami League top brass were regular visitors.

As I stood on my balcony, a small group of students came out of the madrasa next to the mosque that shares a boundary wall with my apartment building.

'Nara-e-Takbeer,' they shouted, followed by *'Allahu Akbar'*.

Something was amiss, I had wondered. But what? These have always been their slogans. And then I saw they were carrying lathis and cans filled with a liquid which I couldn't immediately recognize.

'Hoi hoi, roi roi, Sheikh Hasina gelo koi [Where has Hasina fled]?'

'Dhaka na Dilli? Dhaka, Dhaka.'

The group had started shouting these slogans as more boys from the madrasa joined them. By now, some neighbours had come out onto the street to see what the commotion was about.

Two boys kicked open the door to the office building, which was locked from outside. And then they unscrewed the cans and started splashing the liquid on the office door, windows and signboards of Sheikh Mujib and Hasina.

I realized then what was in the cans. Petrol.

As I watched from the second-floor, the Awami League office building went up in flames. Before spraying it with petrol, some of the boys had broken into the office. Now they were laughing loudly

as they carried away chairs, tables, a TV set and a few desktop computers.

‘Bharat er dalal ra husiyar, sabdhan [Dalals of Bharat, beware, beware],’ some of them shouted. The entire lane had, by then, become a sea of white skullcaps as smoke engulfed the building.

I think my wife had pulled me back inside the drawing room.

What had she told me? I forget now. Maybe she had said I should not draw their attention as I too could easily be branded Bharat’s dalal, since I had covered Bangladesh for India Today and the Bengali news channel based out of Kolkata, Kolkata TV, for almost a decade.

I remember switching on the TV. There were visuals of a raucous mob entering Gonobhaban, ransacking its inner chambers, pulling down chandeliers, raiding the prime minister’s closet.

‘Apa-r bra,’ a toothy young man had shouted before the TV cameras, laughing, displaying for the world the prime minister’s undergarments. ‘Turn off the TV now!’ my wife had almost screamed. She had never been a fan of Hasina; she had been rather critical because of the allegations of large-scale corruption that had been levelled against her government for years, as well as the suppression of opposition voices. But that day, seeing the naked hatred on public display and the attempt to strip someone who had been the most powerful woman in the country till that morning of all dignity made my wife shudder and turn her face away from the TV screen in shame. There were tears in her eyes as she sat down beside me on the sofa. ‘What have we done! What will happen to this country now?’ she whispered.

I remained quiet.

When was it that I had redialled the major who told me that the army had betrayed Hasina? Was it the morning of 6 August or the evening? My memory fails me again. But I remember I had made that call after news of violence poured into my phone from across the country. Women being raped, houses being torched, people being

hacked to death. Frantic calls had come in from colleagues in the hinterland running away to safety, Awami League contacts crying out for help, journalist friends from India wanting an exclusive story, asking me to fact-check the videos from Bangladesh they had been receiving on their phones.

But there was one call that made me tear up.

My former boss at India Today, Deep Halder, called with one question.

‘Sahidul, are you okay?’

I couldn’t answer. My voice was choked with tears.

‘Boss ...’ That was all I could say.

‘Let me know if there is anything I can do, anything at all,’ he had said, asking me if the Indian High Commission office building would be a safer space for me at such a time.

‘No, boss, I will manage. I will let you know,’ I remember saying.

With a heavy heart, I had called Nitai kaka. As the vice chairman of the BNP’s central executive committee, a former state minister for law, justice and parliamentary affairs, and a Supreme Court lawyer, Nitai Roy Chowdhury is not a man of modest means. But apart from who he is, it was the familial bond I share with him that prompted me to make a distress call to him. Nitai kaka is from my village and is my father’s childhood friend.

‘What do I do now, Nitai kaka? Where do I go with my wife and son?’ I had almost pleaded over the phone.

‘What can I do, Sahidul? You should not have written those reports for Indian news outlets. You also shouldn’t have been a part of the Awami League international affairs committee.’

‘Kaka, it was something I had taken up to improve Bangladesh’s relations with India. In almost every country, senior journalists on the foreign affairs beat are invited by governments to help in diplomatic affairs. Before me, senior journalist Ranjan Sen has been appointed first secretary (press) at the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission in Kolkata.’

‘Well, you shouldn’t have accepted their offer, Sahidul. What more can I say?’ He hung up on me.

It is in times like these that relationships cultivated over decades come undone, when knowing powerful people from close quarters doesn’t protect you from harm.

‘Maybe Nitai kaka is right. You shouldn’t have written those reports against the Jamaat-e-Islami or worked for Indian news outlets or become a part of the Awami League international affairs committee,’ my wife said.

My boy simply asked, ‘Baba, why can’t I go out to play?’

Again, I had no answers.

An interim government headed by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus would take oath in Bangladesh at 8 p.m. on 8 August, Bangladesh Army Chief General Waker-uz-Zaman said at a press conference in Dhaka. ‘A government will be in place. This madness will now stop,’ my wife sighed in relief.

On 8 August, the major called again.

‘Where are you, Bhai?’

‘Home. Puran Dhaka.’

‘Why!’

‘Yunus will take oath. The worst is over.’

‘How long have you been a journalist, Bhai? This will be a government controlled by the Jamaat-e-Islami. They will systematically target anyone associated with the Awami League, Dhaka journalists, free thinkers and “India-backers”. Run!’

And so I had.

‘Bhai, will you have pangas fish and bele fish curry with rice for dinner? The servant has got fresh catch from the river,’ Isa bhai’s wife asks, breaking my reverie.

‘Yes, Bhabhi. Sounds delicious.’

The Next Ten Days

What do neighbours see when they peek inside your home? When they watch your family squabbles turn into murderous assaults, see you become your own worst enemy? From the relative safety of Isa bhai's house, I read how India and the rest of the world reported on Bangladesh going to war with itself. Some of those reports were disingenuous, some spread disinformation, some spoke of hope when there was none.

The Western media feted Chief Advisor Muhammad Yunus as the reformist who would bring Bangladesh out of the dark ages of Hasina's authoritarian rule and turn it into a secular, democratic country where the citizens would be empowered. What I saw instead was the release of the dreaded terrorist Jashimuddin Rahmani, chief of the banned militant outfit Ansarullah Bangla Team, on 26 August, barely weeks after Yunus took over the reins of the country on 8 August.

Not only had Rahmani spread his terror network within Bangladesh, but two terrorists linked to his outfit – Bahar Mia and Rarely Mia – were arrested at Guwahati railway station by the Assam Police in May.

However, before this news came out, terror winked at me through an email.

Disturbed as I was with the goings-on in the country and my separation from my family, Isa bhai and Bhabhi were making every effort to ease my mind. While Isa bhai would keep me engaged by talking politics, Bhabhi would lay out a big spread of basmati rice, fresh river fish cooked in mustard oil and homegrown spices, and thick red mutton curry.

Morning walks, *addas* over chai, sumptuous meals and sleeping early were becoming routine when an email from an unknown sender, without a subject line, landed in my inbox. I opened it on Isa bhai's desktop and saw a screenshot of a 2015 article I had written for a local daily on a Pakistan-based terror outfit Lashkar-e-Taiba

operative being arrested from Dhaka on charges of circulating fake currency and operating a terror module.

I had written the article a few days after the man was arrested; by the time the article was published, he had been released on bail. But after my article came out, it created a sensation in Dhaka, and he was rearrested. I called a contact in the cyber security cell of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police. 'Forward me the mail and delete it from your inbox,' he instructed me. A day later, he called back on my new number to say the mail had been sent to me from a Pakistani server.

My DGFI contact and Isa bhai both told me it was not safe for me to stay in one place. A witch-hunt was on for 'people like me'. 'Go somewhere close to the border and try to get out of the country,' the DGFI officer told me. I had been at Isa bhai's house for ten days. I called Anees and we set off again on his bike to a new hideout.

20 August–21 October 2024

At six-foot-something, Simul Khan, the BNP's local leader in Jessore district, is around fifty years of age and built like a prizefighter – except for a missing palm and a left leg amputated at the knee. This was the result of the violence unleashed under the last caretaker government in Bangladesh in 2007, infamously known in history books as One Eleven.

Khan and I first met before that, in 2003, when I did a story on gang wars in Jessore district and did not mention him in good light. Khan had threatened to kill me then. How I managed to save myself and come into his good books as he went from being gang lord to BNP leader is a story for another day. But now, Khan is my last resort because he controls the muscle on the streets in Jessore.

It is a homecoming of sorts. Khan and I have met each other with our families many times since our bitter beginning. Meeting him after months, tired after a long bike ride, I did not expect the knockout punch he delivered to my face. Through his question, not literally.

‘Sahidul, are you a RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) agent?’

‘Uncle, you are asking me this!’

Khan laughs his loud laugh. ‘I know you are not, Sahidul. I know you are just a pesky reporter who pisses off everyone he meets. But Jamaat has been spreading this lie about you everywhere. The word has reached me,’ he tells me. ‘Do not worry. No one can come here and harm you. And if such a time comes, I shall let you know beforehand. Rest now.’

In the days that follow, the hospitality at Khan’s matches the treatment I got at Isa bhai’s house. But I lose both my sleep and my appetite as Bangladesh stares into the abyss. The fourth pillar is crushed by the heavy hand of the mob and the law. On 16 September, my dear friends and two of Bangladesh’s most famous journalists, editor of *Bhorer Kagoj*, Shyamal Datta, and Muzammil Babu, managing director and chief editor of Ekattor TV, one of the biggest TV channels in Dhaka, are arrested. A mob accosts them and takes them to a police station, where the cops book them under spurious charges.

This would be the beginning of the clampdown on free press by the Yunus administration, along with the attacks on minorities and civil rights activists. The targeting, killings and arrests of Awami League workers and supporters hadn’t stopped since the day the mob set fire to that office opposite my Dhaka house.

October brings back sweet memories of my village, where every year I sponsor the local Durga puja as a mark of respect to my Hindu neighbours. This year, I have no way of reaching there. Instead, news comes of my friend Haradon Roy, ward councillor of Rangpur city corporation, being hacked to death by student protestors for being Hindu and part of the Awami League.

‘*Sabash*, revolution, *sabash*!’ I cry out in pain.

But my troubles won’t let me mourn my friend. Mid-October, Khan kaka tells me the CCTV camera outside his house has captured groups of men in skullcaps and kurta pyjamas in the dead of night, pointing to my room on the second floor of the house.

I call my contact at the DGFI. ‘There is no place to hide inside Bangladesh, Sahidul. Wherever you go, they will find you. Khan may be able to save you from a mob, but not from rogue cops. Call your contacts in the Indian embassy and get a medical visa asap.’

Leaving the family behind was an idea that didn’t sit well with me even then. But then my wife called, afraid, hardly able to speak through her tears. ‘There is an online article on you that is being mass circulated. It is titled: “Khokon: The Indian Media’s ‘Trusted Insider’”, with links of some of your articles for Indian media and your pictures with Indians, including Deep Halder during the launch of his book on Bangladeshi Hindus. Please go, go away from here and save your life. In this life or the next, we shall meet again. Inshallah.’

My last week in Bangladesh is spent making frantic calls, getting a medical visa from a contact at the Indian embassy for post-operative complications that I developed after my treatment, and calling contacts in the Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) to ensure a safe passage for me from Jessore. Taking a flight is fraught with danger, as many people with valid visas are being arrested by airport immigration.

Interestingly, perhaps I never once worried about my impending visit to India or the time I would have to spend there in exile. I knew Sourav Sikdar and his wife Suchismita Sanyal – who I call my Indian family – would make sure my time in exile was spent in comfort and among people I love on the other side of the border. And it is not because of the fact that Sikdar is an influential politician in West Bengal, but because his forefathers are from the land which I call my country. Sikdar’s grandfather Dr Dhirendranath Sikdar was my granddad Manik Fakir’s closest friend. Neither Partition nor time has been able to wipe out the generational bond our families share.

Sikdar told me over a phone call that he would make every arrangement to escort me to safety from the border.

A journalist friend in Jessore, whose name I cannot disclose, takes me to Benapole border on 21 October 2024 at 12 p.m. A senior

official of the Indian intelligence establishment had already spoken to top officials of the BGB to allow me safe transit. Sikdar had ensured this happens by calling up his contacts in India's security establishment. On Sikdar's instructions, I had called up a lieutenant colonel of the BGB who had assured me safe passage to India.

'Carry only a small rucksack,' he tells me over the phone.

And here I was, standing inside his office at the Benapole border, carrying just a rucksack.

The officer instructs my friend to leave.

'I will take it from here,' he commands.

I hug my friend, the only person apart from Khan kaka who I had trusted with my whereabouts in Jessore. We can't stop the tears. I have left my family behind; he is the only one close to my heart in Bangladesh to whom I can say goodbye.

'Do not worry. You will reach your destination,' the officer assures me, his tone cold, eyes fixed on mine. He tells me immigration police has become very strict in the past few months. There are also intelligence officers from various agencies who are checking papers of Bangladeshis in transit and detaining whoever they have to.

'If anyone among them decides to cross question you, leaving Bangladesh may become impossible even with a valid medical visa,' he tells me. I feel fear rising up my spine, but the officer tells me he has spoken to an immigration officer about me.

'One of my officers will walk with you to Zero Point where your passport will be stamped. Someone else will walk you to India,' the lieutenant colonel says. I nod a yes, what other option do I have now but to trust him.

The process will take some time, and the lieutenant colonel offers me lunch. I could hardly eat. 'Rest in my room,' he tells me after and leaves.

Rest? I smile to myself. My family, friends and colleagues, my entire life I was leaving behind. If I was leaving at all and not being detained a short while from now.

The lieutenant colonel comes back at 3 p.m., with him was a major in the BGB. I am told the major will take me to the crossover point at the border. I hand him my passport. 'When you walk with me, walk straight and talk to me as if you know me from before. It should appear you are one of us, a BGB officer in plain clothes,' he tells me.

We walk out of the lieutenant colonel's office, get into a security jeep and in about five minutes reach the border crossing zone. A soldier is waiting for us. He takes my passport and my rucksack. The major and I walk to Zero Point. As instructed, I begin talking to the major, who I have only just met. 'My boy loves toy cars you know. He also likes toy guns. But I scold him and tell him he should not have a gun.' I blabber. The major smiles. 'That's what I tell my boy too,' he says. I feel tears welling up, but I cannot allow them to come out. I keep smiling and talking, and pushing back tears and fear. The soldier comes back with my stamped passport and rucksack, hands it over to me.

'Best of luck,' says the major.

He has walked me to the point where Bangladesh ends and India begins.

I cross over from Benapole to Petropol, from Bangladesh to India. I turn back and whisper: 'I shall come back. No matter what it takes. And I will tell your story to the world. Inshallah Bangladesh. Till we meet again.'

Sahidul Hasan Khokon

June 2025

Delhi

