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India's Finest Hour

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INDIA'S FINEST HOUR

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It might seem blasé, even presumptuous, for me to write about the charismatic, far-larger-than-size, iconic figure that has just passed on. All the obituaries and tributes to Sam Manekshaw have referred to his being the architect of the effort that led to the crafting of India's signal triumph in December 1971—the defeat of Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh. Indeed, it is difficult to recall any other example in post-World War II history of a country being partitioned, and that too by a war of liberation. In the literature, the Bangladesh war is recognized as a 'just war,' since the conflict was triggered by the forced migration of some millions of East Bengalis into India, and ended with their returning to their homes in safety and honour. I was then (1971-75) a lowly Deputy Secretary, later Director, in the Ministry of Defence, working on the general staff side. The circumstances and the times transformed that job into a pivotal post; it also provided a window on the day-to-day, year-long, efforts made to prepare for the looming war of 1971, and the political events that led to its unfolding. All intelligence reports passed across my desk, and there was often need to take decisions in those days that Secretaries would hesitate to take in these difficult times. We worked long hours in that dramatic period, with no holidays, but there were no complaints.

Sam's refusal to be stampeded into a conflict despite being pressured has been widely reported. A reality check is necessary here. There is absolutely no doubt that we were wholly unprepared for a war when the crackdown by the Pakistan military occurred on the night of 25-26 March 1971 in Dhaka. Sam was firm and quite right therefore, in refusing to enter a

war immediately, despite the political pressure on him by Indira Gandhi to take some steps to stem the rapidly deteriorating socioeconomic situation in the Indian states around East Bengal due to what came to be described as 'demographic aggression.' The East Pakistan Rifles and East Bengal Regiment had revolted, and were being hunted down by the Pakistan Army, as were students and intellectuals in East Bengal, since they were perceived as the nodes of Bengali resistance. Hundreds, then thousands, of East Bengalis fled across the border into West Bengal, Assam and the Northeastern states; the ethnic mix slowly changed with more Hindus being targeted by the so-called Shanti Bahini that was established by the Pakistan military to control the situation. But we needed time to gear the armed forces for a war, raise new units, procure the required engineering equipment, weapon systems and make up the war wastage reserves. Even the medical facilities for the expected war wounded had to be earmarked.

A decision was also taken in the summer of 1971 to support the rebellion by training and equipping a motley group of East Bengalis, collectively termed the Mukti Bahini, consisting of elements who had deserted the Pakistani Army like the East Pakistan Rifles and the East Bengal Regiment, students, able-bodied and willing young men, and political workers, including some of Marxist persuasion. Highly motivated and imbued with a deep sense of injustice, the Mukti Bahini quickly gained proficiency in guerilla and minor tactics to harass the West Pakistani armed forces in East Bengal. By the time the hostilities commenced the Pakistani forces were largely confined to their battalion

locations, and were loathe to moving out of their secure positions, especially at night. With a free run of the countryside, the Mukti Bahini was able to dominate the communications network, which made movement by the Pakistani forces even more difficult.

Sam was a veritable dynamo in this preparatory stage leading to the war in December 1971, exhorting everyone to hurry along with establishing the wherewithal for the expected conflict. But, it would be grossly unfair to ignore the fact that the success in 1971 owed equally to Admiral SM Nanda and Air Chief Marshal PC Lal, the Navy and Air Force Chiefs respectively at that time. Admiral Nanda's affability and Air Chief Marshal's quiet assurance could not mask their fierce determination to maximize the contribution of their Services to the on-rushing war. Neither should one underestimate the skill of Mr. (later Dr.) KB Lall, then Defence Secretary, in achieving a large measure of cooperation between these three strong-willed Service Chiefs, while harnessing the efforts of the MOD to the war effort. "Remember," he would tell us, "you are not going out to fight the war. Give them [Services] whatever is reasonable." Nor should one underestimate the consummate skill of Babuji (Mr. Jagjivan Ram), the Defence Minister, in mediating between the Service Chiefs, who were often at loggerheads, while providing the clear political direction needed to keep the war effort firmly on track. Babuji made a fetish of leaving operational plans strictly to the Service Chiefs, while maintaining the overall direction of the war effort in the hands of the political executive, largely by an orchestration of public statements along with the Foreign Minister, expressly designed to keep Pakistan and the international community guessing about India's intentions. Above all, the handling of the crisis by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, ably assisted by the KB (Kashmiri Brahmin) quartet of PN Haksar, DP Dhar, RN Kao and TN Kaul was masterly; it was no mean feat to achieve the comprehensive defeat of Pakistan, despite an inimical axis of

nations – United States, China and Pakistan – against India, following Henry Kissinger's historic flight from Nathiagali in West Pakistan to Beijing in July 1971. The speedy conclusion of the Indo-Soviet Treaty in August 1971 was clearly designed to be a counterbalancing measure.

Sam was not an easy person to work with, at least not from the perspective of the Ministry of Defence. He was anxious to get everything done yesterday, which was understandable, since the conflict became inevitable and imminent as the summer of 1971 witnessed the refugee influx becoming a flood, and the likelihood of their return to East Pakistan seeming more and more bleak. There were several occasions when I had the privilege of meeting Sam in those days while visiting officers in Army Headquarters; he had an informal though disconcerting habit of dropping in unannounced into any office at any time to discuss an issue or chase some file. Often he would march into Mr. Lall's office and bang a file down on his table saying, "I cannot fight a war if this is the attitude of the Government." This would be followed by a harangue on what needed to be done, why it was critical to the war effort, with colorful remarks about who was holding up a favorable decision, followed by all present having a cup of tea, and the file being left behind with the Defence Secretary for being sorted out.

A wise police officer once told me, "Senior officers must carefully cultivate their eccentricities. That way, they will be remembered long after the others are forgotten." He had once come to a district for inspecting the office of the Superintendent of Police, and evinced a desire to inspect a parade the next day. Nothing unusual about that, but the officer in question landed up at the parade ground an hour before his inspection to find things at sixes and sevens and the constables running around trying to fall in. After watching this for a while he left the parade ground, commenting that he had come to inspect a parade and not to be presented with a mob of policemen who

were obviously not physically fit, and could not even run fast. He is still remembered in that district, exemplifying his wise philosophy.

Sam was an epitome of this wise observation, calculatedly but unpredictably doing the unexpected thing. He was flamboyant by nature, and I think he carefully cultivated this persona to inscribe his image in the minds of those whom he met. Like suddenly asking a startled Gorkha soldier what was his [Manekshaw's] name, and being informed it was "Sam Bahadur," which quickly passed into the folklore. He also had a ready wit and spontaneous sense of humor. Two instances come to my mind, pertaining to the events of 1971. On a report coming to him assessing that Gen. Yahya Khan was an untruthful person and his utterances could not be relied upon, Manekshaw minuted that Yahya had been his G-2 in the MO (Military Operations) Directorate before 1947, after which he opted for Pakistan. He added, "Yahya was truthful then. But he has obviously deteriorated after joining the Pakistan army." And, when the United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan (UNMOGIP) reported the Pakistani air attack on Indian airfields on 3 December 1971 which initiated the war, Manekshaw wrote on their report, "Please award a mahaaaaa..... ceasefire violation." I cannot be sure about this one, but I think he had coined the slogan for troops entering the Shakargarh Bulge during the war, "You are now entering Pakistani territory. No visas required. Bash on regardless."

Sometimes his sense of humor went awry, and did not quite amuse the political class. Like when he informed a media person that he (Manekshaw) had the choice in 1947 of joining the Pakistan Army and, had he done so, the results of the 1971 war might have been different. That raised a furor, which took some time to die down. So did another incident when he was to take the salute as the chief guest at a function for girl NCC cadets. He chose to kiss one of the prize winners on the stage, which led to

another furor, requiring careful handling by the Ministry. This problem eventually went away by the Ministry adopting the time-honored practice of announcing that it was taking the matter seriously, and seeking an explanation to enquire fully into the matter. The enquiry was proceeded with at snail's pace and the case delayed until it evaporated from the public memory. Anyway, Manekshaw's explanation was that he saw nothing wrong in one soldier greeting another in this affectionate manner. I have a feeling that Indira Gandhi, being of a prudish nature, did not quite approve of these amiable eccentricities. Even his evenings spent after work hours in the Oberoi bar, which was known to everyone, was not quite approved and seen as displaying a certain lack of gravitas.

There are many things that could be retailed about the actual conflict in 1971, but this is not a history of the war, but only an impressionistic opinion. The area in Chamb, west of the Munawar Tawi, was lost to India due to a tragic error of judgment with the division concerned not preparing defensive positions and being attacked before it could attack, and then having to retreat. The capture of territory across the then existing ceasefire line in the Kargil-Drass area served India well to gain depth for protecting the Srinagar-Leh road. Not surprisingly, Pakistan chose this very area for its intrusions in 1999 to, among other motives, regain its lost advantages, which then precipitated the Kargil conflict. The defeat of the Pakistani armoured thrust into Rajasthan in the Longonewala sector has unfortunately become a matter of recent controversy, with the Army and Air Force both claiming credit for stopping this attack. In truth, this was a bold initiative taken by Pakistan, wholly unanticipated by the Indian Army. Since it could not be concentrated to repulse this attack within any effective timeframe, the Air Force Hunters undertook the task of stemming the offensive. In this, they were largely successful, since, for some inexplicable reason, the attacking armored column had no air cover. In the

open desert the Pakistani tanks were sitting ducks, and the Air Force had little opposition in decimating that attack. Why the Pakistanis did not provide air cover leads to another general issue. Intelligence reports of that time indicated that large parts of the Pakistani Air Force had become very difficultly serviceable due to the East Bengali technicians being laid off. They could not be trusted, since it is not difficult to sabotage an aircraft, but that led to its own problems of keeping the squadrons airborne.

The greatest controversy, however, attaches to whether India's original operational plans had called for the occupation of Dhaka, or whether they had only envisaged the acquisition of enough territory to establish the Bangladesh government, then in exile and located in Calcutta, in some credible manner within the country. In point of fact, the early success achieved by the Indian Army's Eastern Command in various prongs of the Indian offensive bypassing the Pakistani positions and making steady progress into East Pakistan led to the operational plans becoming more ambitious with Dhaka seeming within India's grasp. India's plans were also assisted by the decision taken by Lt. Gen. AAK Niazi, commanding the Pakistani forces in east Bengal to distribute his forces in penny packets along the borders rather than concentrate them for the defence of the Dhaka "bowl." Indeed, Niazi had expressly overruled his deputy, Maj. Gen. Rao Farman Ali, who had recommended that Pakistan should not waste its limited assets by manning the borders but hold out for as long as possible by defending the Dhaka "bowl" until the international community came to the rescue. In the event, a race to Dhaka from the east, west and north was occasioned by the need to occupy it as soon as possible before the international community could pressure the end of the hostilities. The US Seventh Fleet was also closing in to interpose itself between the Indian Eastern Fleet and the coast of East Bengal. The Soviets were also urging India to finish their operations as it was

becoming increasingly difficult for them to veto a Security Council resolution to bring about a ceasefire. Dhaka, therefore, was, in essence, a target of opportunity, which presented itself as the operations proceeded, which was quickly taken advantage of. The debate to claim credit for the plan to seize Dhaka and how some opposed it while others supported it is, in point of fact and history, quite sterile.

Some tributes have noticed that Sam had no rancor towards the enemy. This is very true, for Manekshaw believed they were adversaries to be defeated fairly, but when that was over and done with, they needed to be humanely treated. They were really comrades in the profession. Nothing illustrates this better than the briefing he gave on the 17 December to the Committee of Secretaries in the Home Ministry—not the War Room. They were frankly very curious to know how the war had been won, straight out from him. Giving some details in this regard, Manekshaw was fair-minded enough to appreciate that the Pakistani troops fought well wherever they were well-officered, especially in the western sector, but he also added that he was fighting a 'defeated army' in East Bengal. Due to constant harassing by the Mukti Bahini and their sense of abandonment by Islamabad, the Pakistani troops were in very low morale, and almost grateful to the Indian Army for taking them prisoners, and providing them safety, so fearful were they of their fate at the hand of the local population. Indeed, the magnanimity with which Gen. Niazi was treated—he was given a jeep to go around Dhaka—raised some hackles in New Delhi about the Indian Army going overboard in this matter of POW privileges.

Finally, I cannot resist the temptation, while journeying down memory lane, to mention an anecdote of my own. This relates to the renowned French strategist André Beaufre, who was invited by Sam to visit India and opine on the 1971 operations. A program of visits to several theatres of the conflict was arranged by the Foreign Liaison

section of the MI (Military Intelligence) Directorate. But Beaufre had a mind of his own, and gave out his own program of places he wished to visit as soon as he alighted in Palam with his wife. Following these visits he went back to France and sent a brief, two-page commentary on the war. As nearly as I can remember he was greatly appreciative of the East Bengal operations designating it as a classic war of movement, but was handsome enough to acknowledge that it was really an “engineer’s war.” About the sinking of the Pakistani submarine, PNS Ghazi off the Vizag coast in a purely accidental manner, he offered the insight that India was fortunate in having a “lucky” Admiral (Adm. Krishnan) as its FOC-in-C Eastern Fleet, paraphrasing what Churchill had said about Montgomery when he selected him to take on Rommel during World War II. He was frankly disparaging, however, about the dilatory manner in which the Shakargarh Bulge was captured, and called it the “creeping offensive.”

All the anecdotes repeated about Manekshaw have him coming out on top, but here is one about an encounter where he came out second best. Sometime after the war, the Chief of the Ceylonese Army, Gen. Attygalle, came to India. After making his ceremonial call, tea and sandwiches were served and the two chiefs started moving towards the door. Manekshaw then pointed to the wooden paneling, adding in a jovial manner, “That’s where I keep my operational plans. You know I have one for Ceylon, too.” Unfazed, Gen. Attygalle replied, “Is that so General? In fact, I have a similar arrangement for the operational plans in my office. And I have one for India, also.”

A many-splendored being like Manekshaw will have many of us remembering him for long, and quoting him often, since he was so quotable and retailing a fund of anecdotes about him. But memories fade and those retailing them will also fade away. What a historical personage like Manekshaw deserves, in truth, is an impartial biography, not a hagiography,

for crafting India’s finest hour. With competent military historians available that should not be a problem, and the United Services Institution of India should be taking the lead in this matter.