

SPOTLIGHT

Heroes of Bengal

The Bengali nation that stands free and proud today, is not the product of just a decade or even half a century's struggle. This psyche to crave independence, knowledge, and a strong streak of daring and inclination to flout the rules, has been a key characteristic of the populace of this delta. Numerous revolutionaries have emerged from here, and through various movements and struggles, both armed and unarmed, became architects of the ultimate freedom won in 1971. They live on today in the annals of history as legends greater than life. They live in our folklore and collective memories, with exploits larger than life, remain inspirational for anyone that happens to look.

ISA KHAN OF THE BARO BHUIYANS

Living a life with ups and downs truly suitable to creating a legend for the ages, Isa Khan, and the Baro Bhuiyans, became symbolic of Bengal's struggle against the greater forces of its attackers. The land of this delta has always been extremely fertile, and thus coveted for its riches as long as the tenets of physiocracy (wealth vested in agriculture) held true at the global level. It was no wonder that the Mughal wanted it too, and the local zamindars, a group of varying numbers loosely called the Baro Bhuiyan (the dozen landlords), were not inclined to give it up.

After his father's slaying, Isa and his brother were sold as slaves, and much later rescued by their uncle. Isa was bestowed a vassal estate in Sonargaon, and teamed up with the neighbouring zamindars to outwit numerous attacks by the much stronger Mughals. Despite being of mixed ethnicity and not completely local, he became a true son of the soil, having grown on these rivers, and used his knowledge of the terrain and astute observation of Mughal politics, to continue to rebuff the empire's advances for as long as he lived.

He also supported other local rulers to thwart attacks from neighbouring kingdoms. For his generosity, loyalty, and independent spirit, his name and glory



with Titu himself martyred in the last armed conflict, but not before passing into the annals of local heroes revered even today, securing the 11th position in the list of Greatest Bengalis poll compiled by the BBC.

SHER-E-BANGLA AK FAZLUL HUQ

It is not difficult to imagine the stature of a man who came to be known as Sher-e-Bangla or the lion of Bengal. AK Fazlul Huq, was a native of the verdant isles of Barishal, and played an important leadership role in the political fight against the British imperialism. He was the one selected to read out the Lahore Declaration, the pivotal document that ultimately led to the creation of India and Pakistan. He was also among the few capable and willing to go toe to toe against the West Pakistan political hegemony, and supported the cause of Bengali nationalism even before the words were coined.

He proposed the establishment of the Bangla Academy in 1948, took steps to create it during his brief stint as chief minister, and was a supporter of the Language Movement as well. He was among the key figures behind the Jukto Front as well.

A man of many talents, Huq reportedly took the Masters exams in Mathematics just to prove wrong the jibe of a fellow student about him studying English because it was easy. With just six months' preparation, he cleared the exams with the highest credits.

Known for his depth of knowledge, wit, legendary eloquence, the great statesman with unwavering patriotism came in fourth in the BBC poll of Greatest Bengalis of all time, and continues to inspire even today.

SURJA SEN AND PREETILATA WADDEGAR

One of the first armed uprisings by local civilians against the British empire in India was brewed right in Chattogram, led by the unassuming Surja Sen, also fondly called Master Da, for in his day to day life, he was a school teacher.

Sen recruited a number of similar minded revolutionaries thirsting for freedom. They hatched a plan to capture and isolate Chattogram from the rest of the empire, by first seizing arms from the local British armoury, and then severing communication systems. However, the inexperienced band failed to take into account the different location of the ammunition, and thus faced a major setback, and ran for cover into the neighbouring wilderness.

A few days later, an armed conflict took place between the rebels and imperial soldiers, where many of Surja Sen's band died, and the rest fled into hiding. Sen was later betrayed by a villager, and viciously tortured by the British, before being hanged to death in 1934. He became symbolic of the unbroken spirit, never giving up in the face of unimaginable torture and unsurmountable odds.

Preetilata Waddedar was a comrade of Surja Sen, also worked as a teacher, and is among the first female active revolutionaries of the independence narrative, known for her fierce zeal and commitment to the cause.



passed into the folklore of Bengal, nurtured in the hearts of its people.

TITU MIR

Titu Mir, born Saiyid Mir Nisar Ali, was a peasant leader, and is legendary for resisting colonial British indigo planters and oppressive local zamindars, armed with just raw courage and simple weapons and garrison made of bamboo.

Initially making headway against the oppressive zamindars, he also sought political solutions by lodging complaints with the central East India company against the local officers, but to no avail. Gradually, the conflict kept intensifying and Titu Mir raised his own cohort of nearly 5000 fighters, and trained them in indigenous techniques and arms.

He went as far as to announce himself as the ruler of the area, and demanded taxes from the offending zamindars. Ultimately, Titu's soldiers and rebellion lost to the superior arms and strength of the British,