The Daily Star
SPECIAL
MONDAY DECEMBER 14, 2020
AGRAHAYAN 29, 1427 BS

MARTYRED INTELLECTUALS DAY 2020

WORDS OF THE MARTYRED

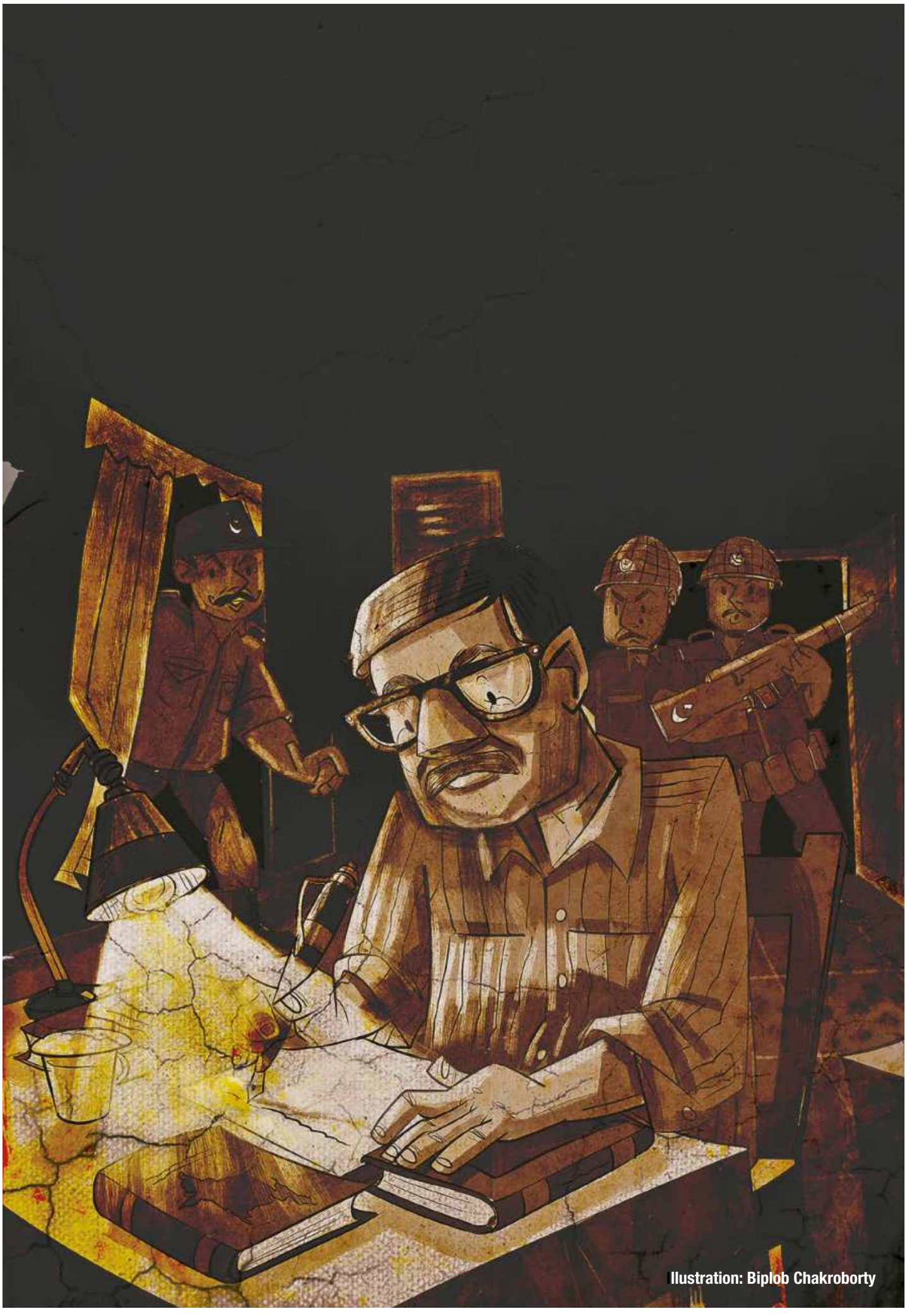


Illustration: Biplob Chakroborty

EDITOR'S NOTE

There are few moments in any nation's history as shameful and devastating as the targeted killings of intellectuals in Bangladesh by the Pakistani army and its collaborators in 1971. Pakistan's genocide against the Bangladeshi people, and the hatred it harboured for the intellectual core of the popular resistance against Pakistan's military junta, began long before the events of December 14, 1971. However, it was on this day 49 years ago that the Pakistani military, staring at the face of a humiliating defeat, decided to commit one last act of unbelievable cruelty—with the help of the militant Al-Badr and Al-Shams groups, they doubled up on their efforts to root out the minds that shaped the spirit of the Liberation War and launched coordinated efforts to massacre Bangladeshi intellectuals, in an attempt to cripple the new nation before it could begin its independent journey.

We now know that their attempt failed. But not before we suffered unimaginable loss. We will never know what our nation might have been like, had our martyred intellectuals lived. We will never understand the barbarism that influenced the Pakistani military and its supporters to drag poets, novelists, playwrights, journalists, academics and doctors out of their homes to murder them in cold blood. But we do know many of the people behind these war crimes and how, despite being tried by the International Crimes Tribunal, they have evaded justice.

In honour of Martyred Intellectuals Day, we bring to you the words of some of our martyrs themselves—in the form of excerpts from their novels, academic writings, diaries and interviews. It is a glimpse into their minds and views about life and a consoling reminder that they will live on forever through their work and the memory of their invaluable contributions to this nation. While we pay homage to their legacies, we must also remember that two of the main accused in the deaths of these intellectuals are still at large—Chowdhury Mueen-Uddin, based in the UK, and Ashrafuz Zaman Khan, based in the US, despite being sentenced in absentia for the murders of Munier Chowdhury, Anwar Pasha, Shahidullah Kaiser and Mufazzal Haider Chaudhury, among many others.

It is our hope that while remembering the martyred intellectuals, our younger generation will dedicate themselves to the pursuit of knowledge and to building a liberal, tolerant and prejudice free society.

Mahfuz Anam
Editor and Publisher
The Daily Star

Literature and national consciousness

Professor Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta was a Bangladeshi educator and humanist. In 1971, he was a Reader at the University of Dhaka, as well as provost of Jagannath Hall. On the black night of March 25, 1971, Pakistani military officers broke into his flat and shot Professor Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta in cold blood after cordoning off the entire Dhaka University campus with tanks, mortars and armed vehicles. The wounded intellectual died of his injuries on March 30, 1971. This article was originally published in 1962 in 'Matters of Moment' and was later reprinted in 'Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta Sharokgrantha'.

National consciousness, unless we twist the expression to mean tribal consciousness which is as old as history, is a comparatively recent phenomenon. It originated in Europe during the Reformation, when the State was separated from the church. It was then mixed up with a new religious consciousness which endorsed the separation and in its extreme form i.e., the Puritan Movement sought to remove all intermediaries not only between the state and the individual but also between God and man. But National consciousness, which was originally defensive, was little more than the instinctive love one feels for one's own community strengthened by allegiance to the newly organised Nation trying to defend itself against the forces of Counter-Reformation. National consciousness evolved into Nationalism or the Cult of Nation in Germany during the Napoleonic regime in the early nineteenth century. The idealisation of the Nation-State, a distinctive feature of German culture, was the result of a widespread feeling of frustration among the Germans who had been struggling without success to carve out a Nation-State ever since the sixteenth century. Fichte, the romantic prophet of German Nationalism wrote:

"The Germans are the (chosen) people, metaphysically destined, possessed of the moral right, to fulfil the destiny by every means of cunning and force."

Professor Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta (1920-1971).

Thanks to the spread of liberal education under the British, National consciousness in the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent has been on the whole free from the trait of aggressive nationalism. The Hindu National consciousness under the influence of Bankim, Tilak and Arabindo came perilously close to the Aryan past, the deification of the historic-geographical entity, Bharat. There was also the added stimulus from the victory of an Asiatic nation in the Russo-Japanese war. But the Gandhian cult of non-violence and liberalism of CR Das acted as brakes to the nationalist zeal of the extremists. The liberal trend in Hindu Nationalism was the direct consequence of achievements of the men of the Bengali Renaissance such as Rammohan, Madhusudan, Vidyasagar and Tagore. With them, National consciousness was just another name for the instinctive love of one's own country and her life-giving traditions which they all tried to revaluate, each in his own way in the light of western rationalism.

The beginning of Muslim National consciousness may be traced in the anti-British Wahabi Movement which paradoxically enough was supranational in character. The Wahabi has been described as "Anabaptist in religion and red-republican in politics." Toynbee has described them as zealots who were up against everything modern. The Wahabis were, however, the first terrorists of India and took prominent part in the peasant revolts in Bengal against the indigo planters. They were puritan and were highly critical of the hybridisation of Muslim culture in the eastern parts of India. The more intellectually and spiritually gifted leaders of the Khilafat Movement tried without success to launch a freedom movement with a view to establishing a caliphate in the Muslim world in the beginning of the twentieth century. There is a tendency in certain quarters to trace the origin of the Pakistan movement in the ideas of the Khilafatis. The argument runs like this: The Muslim League when it was first founded was more concerned with jobs for the educated Muslim and separate electorate than independence from British Raj. The spirit behind the Lahore Resolution, 1940 was therefore a new thing altogether. Wasn't it the same spirit that moved the Wahabis and the Khilafatis? To my mind, the new spirit at work is the spirit of the new middle class which had already begun to assert, a class which was brought into existence by the pioneering efforts of Sir Syed Ahmad and which was the Muslim counterpart of the English-educated Hindu middle class intelligentsia. Deeply rooted in the spiritual traditions of Islam, Sir Syed realised, as Rammohan had done half a century earlier, that without western education which they had hitherto ignored, the Muslims of the subcontinent could not make much headway in a world completely dominated by the scientific and humanistic culture of the west. If there is any progenitor of the Pakistan movement, it is the Aligarh movement. There was no trace of the politico-cultural medievalism of the Khilafatis in the temper and outlook of the leadership of the Pakistan movement, which grew as the Hindu Nationalist movement gathered momentum. It grew as an "opposition" in a bid for its legitimate share of political power.

In Bengal, however, the bulk of the peasantry which supported the Pakistan movement was conservative and puritanical in outlook. The Wahabis and the Khalifatis had left a legacy which was still very active in the villages. The Sufi-Vaishnavic mysticism of the middle ages which brought the Hindu and the Muslim peasant under common cultural participation had already become a spent force. The new puritanism drew its inspiration from the simplicity and purity of early Islam, sought to purify Islam of both mystical and idolatrous accretions and was frankly suspicious of the secular eclecticism of the English educated Muslim, of their sophistication and urbanism. On the other hand, the educated middle-class which still had its root in the soil, in its turn smarted under a sense of alienation from native traditions. To the educated up-country Muslim with his feudal background, the Pakistan movement meant little more than the restoration of power and privileges he once enjoyed during the days of the Great Mughals. He was less concerned with the cultural aspects of political freedom,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

In Bengal, however, the bulk of the peasantry which supported the Pakistan movement was conservative and puritanical in outlook. The Wahabis and the Khalifatis had left a legacy which was still very active in the villages. The Sufi-Vaishnavic mysticism of the middle ages which brought the Hindu and the Muslim peasant under common cultural participation had already become a spent force.

Literature and national consciousness

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

for he had already a highly sophisticated country culture of his own. Fedualism has been abolished but sophisticated aristocratic attitude typical of feudal relationships persists in spite of Western education in the absence of an organised peasant movement conscious of its rights. After independence, the Pakistan movement showed its chief weakness in that it was built on an insecure cultural foundation. The new middle class intelligentsia was too weak to resist the political chaos that set in with the disintegration of the Muslim League. The decay of that great national organisation was itself a symptom of the crisis. The army took over in October 1958 after years of misrule. It was felt for the first time since independence that Pakistan was yet to evolve into what Albert Hourani of Oxford called a political society, where various group loyalties would be integrated into loyalty to the nation-state. It was no wonder, therefore, that the new regime laid the greatest emphasis on national unity and did everything it could to create conditions for positive cultural orientation of the national movement. The fundamental problems of Democracy and Islam are being raised and discussed as also the host of other problems connected with them. One of such problems is the role the literary people are expected to play in the promotion and enrichment of national consciousness resulting in increased stability and integrity of Pakistan as a nation-state.

According to Ziya Gokalp, the ideologist of Turkish nationalism, national movements first have a cultural awakening, then make political decisions and finally formulate an economic policy. Literature in the first stage of the Muslim national movement in India was consciously but spontaneously national. Who does not owe his debt of gratitude to the contributions of Iqbal, Hali, Kaikobad, Ismail Husain Shiraji and Nazrul Islam to the cultural awakening of the Indian Muslims? But the quality of thought in this literature was rather poor. Iqbal alone was the honourable exception. He alone had a distinctive vision of his own, based on a critical revaluation of both the heritage of Islam and that of the modern civilisation of Europe. He gave a new direction to the Muslim philosophical thought in India but curiously enough, he did not find a successor who could follow it up.

Starting about a century earlier, thanks to their acceptance of western rationalistic tradition, the men of the Bengali Renaissance found time enough to lay an effective philosophical foundation for the Hindu national movement. In the case of the Muslim national movement, the task remained unfinished. Not that such a task can ever be really finished. What I want to say is that our intellectual preparation for a modern Muslim state was rather inadequate. We were racing against time and wishfully thought that deficiency in critical thought could be made up by

Professor Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta with his students at the University of Dhaka in 1967.

PHOTO: **MEGHNA GUHATHAKURTA**

an overbalance of action. But we are, on the whole, on the right track. We know that we are weak but not weak enough to be infected by the "terrible frenzy" of the Arab world which has yet to find a crystallisation of its national aspirations in an organised political society.

It is often pointed out that we are still to go a long way before we find a common cultural base for the much desired national unity—a unity more significant and meaningful than mere political unity. We Bengalees suffer, it is alleged, from an excessive attachment for the regional culture in which we are born. But is regionalism necessarily inconsistent with national unity? It will be useful to refer to the literary programme of the East Pakistan Renaissance Society (founded in Calcutta in 1941) in this connection:

To publish the works of the Muslim writers hitherto neglected by the Hindu intelligentsia.

To return to the medieval *punthi* literature, and folklore of East Bengal for inspiration.

To depict the social life and religious consciousness of east Pakistani Muslims.

To produce literature based on the Islamic cultural tradition not only of India but also of other Muslim countries of the world.

The programme rightly stresses the importance of the regional cultural tradition and of the Islamic tradition as whole. The programme marks a fruitful departure from the ideological romanticism of both the Wahabi and the Khilafat movement and is a bold attempt to root East Pakistan culture "more deeply into its locale". In the brochure entitled *Muslim traditions in Bengali literature*, Mr Syed Ali Ashraf writes:

"The emotions of the Bengali Muslims were not attached to their soil, they did not think much about their own surroundings, they did not draw much inspiration from their recent past; they attached their emotions to their evolutionary glory of Early Islam, ... The difference between *Muharram Shareef* of Kaikobad and *Navi Vangsha* of Syed Sultan clearly indicates that these values of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were puritanic."

Mr Ashraf's later statement, that it is in the Pakistan movement that the puritanism found its goal, I find difficult to accept. The stress on regional literature which is partly secular and partly Islamic is a new element which can be hardly described as puritanical. If there is anything wrong in it, from an artist's point of view it is the parochial nature of the programme. It excludes reference to the two of the most vital literary traditions that are meaningful for every writer in Bengali, namely the nineteenth century Bengali literature and modern European literatures. The nationalist approach to literature appeared to be wrong not because it gave precedence to cultural regionalism over the claims of political nationalism but because it ignored the supranational aspects of literary traditions, and tended to make literature an instrument of politics. In actual practice, however, the sponsors of this programme were more catholic in their literary taste.

In matters cultural there are certain tangible local elements which cannot be suppressed for the sake of political uniformity. Mr Tremaine McDowell, an American author, writes:

"Josiah Royce thoroughly approved of what he called provincialism as calculated to root Americans more deeply in their own locale and thus to strengthen resistance to conformity and mass hysteria. His provincialism we today call regionalism."

Regionalism in literature, painting and music is the interpretation of human experience in the symbols which the artist finds in that area of United States with which, either for life or for the moment, he is most familiar. This does not mean that regional art is merely local. It employs unmistakably regional language to express the universal—otherwise it is not art—If a region is not to relapse into a section, it must constantly share with other regions what it possesses.

The nationalist approach to literature appeared to be wrong not because it gave precedence to cultural regionalism over the claims of political nationalism but because it ignored the supranational aspects of literary traditions, and tended to make literature an instrument of politics. In actual practice, however, the sponsors of this programme were more catholic in their literary taste.

Kobor: A unique artistic representation of an unusual situation

Munier Chowdhury was a Bangladeshi playwright, educationist, linguist, literary critic and a staunch Bengali nationalist. On December 14, 1971, he was picked up by Pakistani collaborators, never to be seen again. This is the translation of an interview, published in 'Munier Chowdhury Rachana Shamagra-1'.

He made it clear at the very beginning that he was passing extremely hectic times and that it would not be possible for him to talk for long. He told me that he undertook some important project recently, which was keeping him awake till late at night—till 3 or 4 am in the morning. I saw scribbled papers spread all across the room. Yet, when I told him that I came to learn about the background of his much-acclaimed play *Kobor* (The Grave), his face brightened up.

He remained silent for a moment. Then, slowly, he got immersed in memories. He wanted to go away from this neon-lit house in Nilkhet and get lost in the days that were long gone. During the cold nights of December and January in 1953, Munier Chowdhury was in Dhaka Central Jail. He was feeling restless and focused his thoughts on writing *Kobor* in a small notebook, the play which stirred the whole nation during that time and is still discussed with similar enthusiasm. The play carries the signature of originality in all aspects—from the selection of the content to the novelty of its form and the construction of its scenes.

Munier Chowdhury was in jail during that time. He was arrested with several others during the Language Movement in 1952. He used to live with 15 to 20 political prisoners in one room. In another room, there were 60 to 70 political prisoners. Among them was Ranesh Dasgupta.

"It was Raneshda who secretly wrote me a letter. He wrote that Ekushey February was around the corner and asked me to write a play to be staged inside the jail. I had to write it as it was Raneshda's order."

Munier Chowdhury (1925-1971).

Munier Chowdhury was in jail during that time. He was arrested with several others during the Language Movement in 1952. He used to live with 15 to 20 political prisoners in one room. In another room, there were 60 to 70 political prisoners. Among them was Ranesh Dasgupta.

"Who were with you in jail during that time?"

"There were many people: Abul Hashim, Muzaffar Ahmed, Oli Ahad, Mohammad Toaha, Ajit Guha, Maulana Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish, Khoyrat Hossain and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman."

Munier Chowdhury told me that he became close to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in jail.

"Wasn't it difficult to stage the play in prison?"

"Of course, it was difficult. And that's why the form of the play had to be innovative. To tell you the truth, *Kobor* was an artistic representation of a special situation."

"Would you please explain?"

"For instance, the lamps (hariken) used in the play helped portray the solitude of the burying ground. Raneshda told me that they would stage the play in their room after 10 o'clock at night when all the lights of the prison would be turned off. The plan was to borrow 8/10 lamps from the student prisoners (who used to study at night with those) to make the stage. Actually, we were forced to create a mysterious atmosphere of light and darkness in the play. Otherwise, it wouldn't have been so successful that day in the dim light of a prison cell. And that's why after coming back from prison, I never talk about the lack of a stage."

"Have you ever seen a play being staged in a small place abroad?"

"Of course. You will be surprised to know that most of the experimental plays abroad are shown in small rooms, in a very confined and homely environment. The audience gets the scope to watch the play from such a close distance that during the performance, there remains no gap between the audience and the performers."

"Do you remember any such plays?"

"When I went to West Germany about a year ago, I had the scope to watch such plays at people's homes. I was fascinated by the two plays named *The Rehearsal* and *The Mail Train Stops Here*. What I think is, the really good plays that are close to life are not being staged in big theatres but in small houses and in the presence of passionate youth in that country."

"I couldn't watch the play in jail though, because I was in another room. I heard that the performance was also great. I personally think that it's the best thing I've ever written. But it was also controversial."

"How did you feel when *Kobor* was first being performed in a room in prison and you knew it from a distance?

"I felt aloof. Because prison is such a place where one has to overcome all kinds of mental anxieties and I have never had any anxiety about my own writing."

"What is your own opinion about *Kobor*?"

"This is, undoubtedly, my best writing that has opened my eyes."

"Where was the play first published?"

"A copy of the play got out of the jail right after I wrote it. It was first published in *Dainik Shangbad*. Then in a compilation of writings on Ekushey, edited by Hasan Hafizur Rahman. Later, I felt that this play might have been influenced by another foreign language play. But I felt that much later."

He got lost in memory again. He kept his eyes closed for a while as his greying hair covered his forehead. One side of his forehead rested on his palm.

"It was '43, '44. I got to talk to some leftist, progressive American soldiers. They lived in Kurmitola at the time. I got the opportunity to read quite a few books from them. My interest grew in American literature, especially drama, and through extensive reading, I became quite familiar with it. Those soldiers' progressive thoughts attracted me. Some of them became very intimate friends. One of them is the famous Dr Norman Springer."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

The last days of a martyred intellectual

Mufazzal Haider Chaudhury, noted essayist, linguist and scholar, was taken away from his home on December 14, 1971 by members of Al-Badr and executed. The following (translated) excerpts from his diary in 1971, when he was Reader of Bangla at the University of Dhaka, provide a window into the last days of this martyred intellectual.

Monday, November 29
We were on strike today to protest the attack on India. None of us went to the university. I sat at home and prepared examination questions. I didn't go anywhere else today. By evening, I had finished the question paper for the Honours students.

Tuesday, November 30
This morning, I went to Shumon's school first before going on to university. None of the students of the primary section are attending school anymore.

None of the university students came into class either. I submitted the Honours exam question paper. In the afternoon, around 12pm, I took Syed, one of the office peons, and went to Gulshan. Didn't go anywhere later on in the day. At 7:35pm in the evening, there was the sound of a large explosion.

Wednesday, December 1
I went to the university at 10am today. There was meant to be a second MA class, but none of the students came in today either. I went to the Shahbag store later to buy a milk tin, but there was none. I bought a tin of Ovaltine instead. I went to Eskaton after that, and went by Laboratory Road.

My wife was not willing to listen to why I couldn't get any milk for our youngest child, so we had an argument. Didn't go anywhere else today. At 6:15pm in the evening, and later again at 8pm, we heard the sound of bombs exploding.

Thursday, December 2
Today, the first thing I did in the morning was go to the registrars office and pick up my salary cheque, which I then took to the bank. I also picked up money for household expenses from the bank. After that, I went to the university—again, no students came in today. I went to Shahbag store afterwards and got a tin of Molly. This is the tinned milk we get for Shobhon.

Kanchan came over today in the late afternoon. He cautioned me to be more careful. We didn't go out anywhere else.

Friday, December 3
I went to the university today at 9:15 in the morning. There was a class for second year Honours students. But again, there were no students. I went to the registrar's office after that to pick up a cheque of Tk 60. Then I attended the jumma prayers at the university mosque.

In the late afternoon, I went to Mr Bari's house in Dhanmondi—after Mr Bari passed away, they have just come back on the 30th. At 7pm in the evening, the sound of explosions again. At 9pm, there was a sudden black out.

Saturday, December 4
Last night from 3am, there have been large scale aerial attacks on Dhaka. All the city dwellers must have been woken up by the relentless sound of explosions—there's nothing to do except stay up through all of it. Even this morning, the Indian aerial forces' untiring attacks continued. The sound of bombs and cannons was all that we could hear. This went on till around 1pm.

I didn't leave the house today.

Sunday, December 5
Today during the day, there was more or less a break in the air attacks, but in the middle of the night, they started dropping bombs again. We could also hear the sound of gunfire.

I didn't go outside today either. Everyone is scared. I heard again today that an emergency hospital is being set up, next to us in Iqbal Hall.

From evening to dawn, not a light could be seen and there was a curfew.

The night is full of horrors.

Monday, December 6
The planes have continued to attack from this morning. I went out around 10am in the morning with Nuru to try and get rations, but there were such huge crowds that we returned without any.

Went to the university around 11am. There was no one there.

I went out again around 12:15pm to get some bread and biscuits. Went to Eskaton and got stuck there because of the aerial attacks. Came home around 2pm.

I didn't go anywhere else today.

Tuesday, December 7
Nuru went out at 7:15am and brought back rations. The aerial bombardments are continuing unabated. When we had sat down for lunch, Nuru came and told us about attacks by miscreants in certain parts of the city. After hearing this, we packed a few of our belongings and came to Eskaton at around 5pm.

Wednesday, December 8
My wife and I went out this morning and looked in on our house. Dropped by the university on the way there. We ate at home.

I can hear the sound of heavy bombing tonight. We found out later that some of the bombs had been dropped very near Eskaton (this was on Friday night).

Thursday, December 9
Went home with my wife around 10am. In the meantime, the bombs had already started falling. We ate quickly and went back to Eskaton.

The whole night, we could hear the bombs falling.

Friday, December 10
Went out today again around 10am with my wife and Babu's wife. We dropped her off in Bakshibazar, at her parent's house. Came home and showered, after which I went to attend the jumma prayers at the university mosque. We could hear bombs exploding, before and after the prayers. We didn't eat today, we went straight back to Eskaton because of that.

Saturday, December 11
Yesterday evening, Boro Mama and his family suddenly took the decision to move out to Mr Haque's house in Tikatuli, so we decided to go with them. But it was quite difficult there at night. So today, we came to Ninu's house in Shantibag.

A curfew was declared suddenly from 3pm. At 10, I took Ninu to the bank and withdrew some cash. We also went back to my house and picked up the TV set.

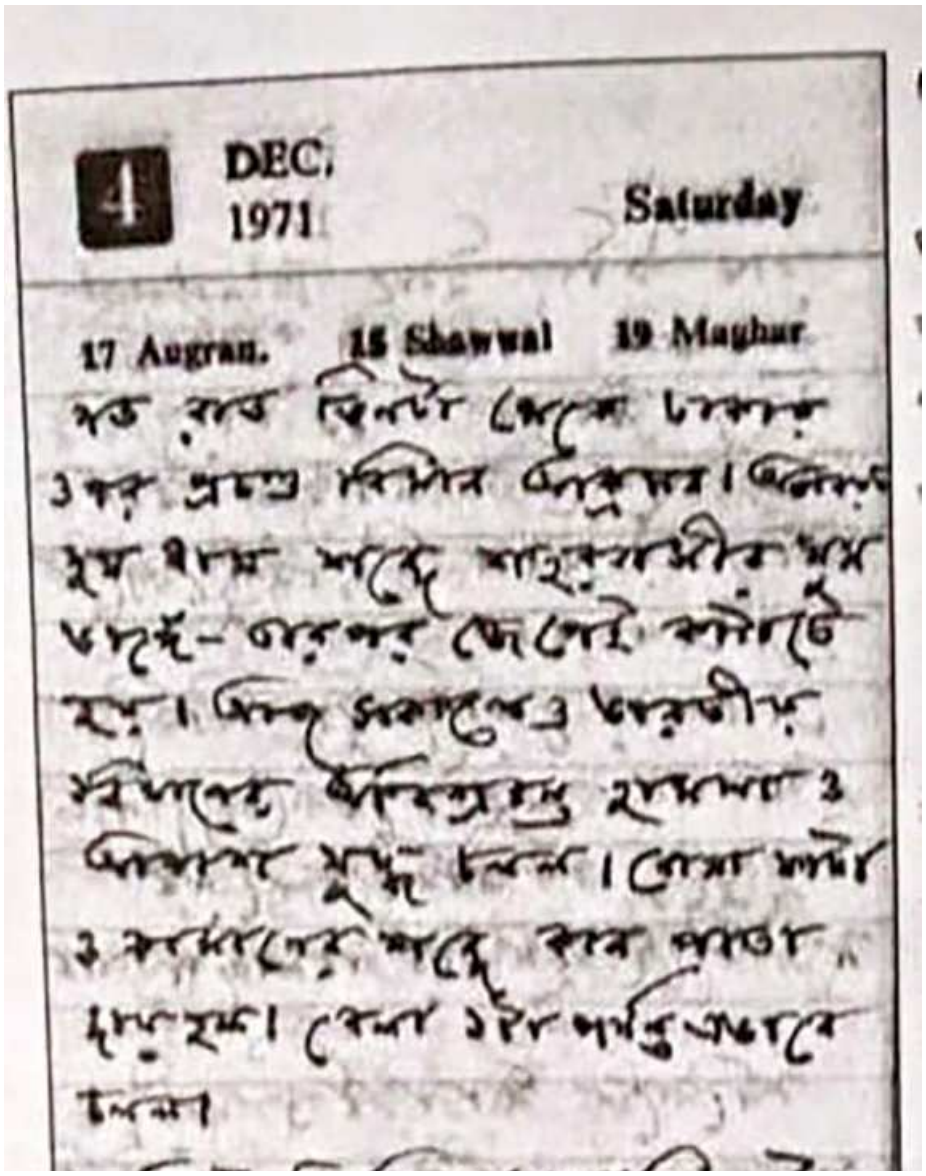
Sunday, December 12
There was a curfew all day today. I found out that the telephone in our house is also not working. We couldn't get any news or updates from anyone, anywhere.

The whole day was spent worrying and in fear. But we didn't hear much sounds of bombs or explosions today.

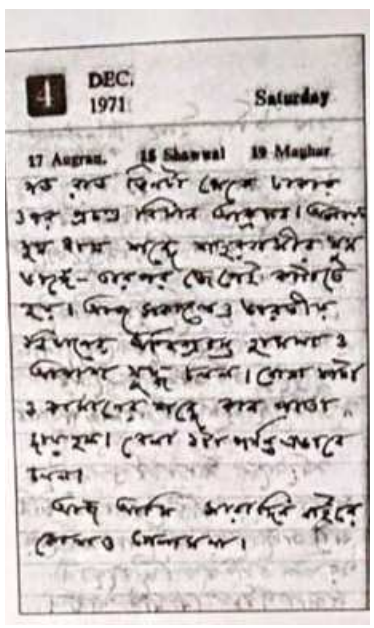
Monday, December 13
The curfew ended at 8am today. My wife, Nina and I left the house around 9am and went to Purano Paltan first, to Kanchan's house. Amma is there. Then we went to my in-law's house in Haathkhola. From there, we went to our house in Fuller Road. We collected some belongings from there and came back to Shantibag. We got out again to change two of the tyres on the car—it cost Tk 80.

Tuesday, December 14
9-15 B. A. Exam. Hall : Chief Supervisor.

Translated from Bangla by Shuprova Tasneem.



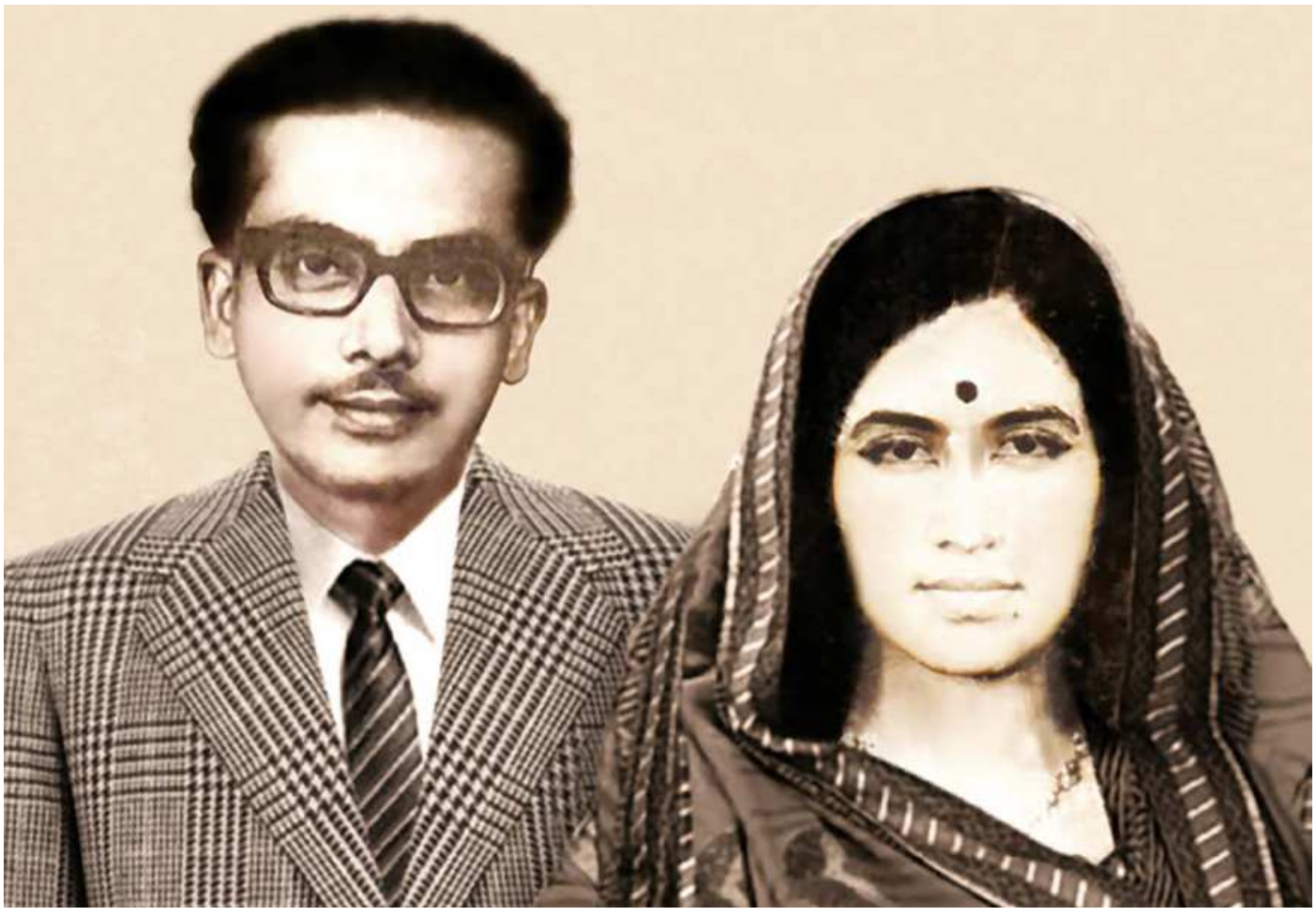
Mufazzal Haider Chaudhury with his son. PHOTO: COLLECTED



Mufazzal Haider Chaudhury's 1971 diary.

‘Won’t Sareng come home?’

Shahidullah Kaiser was a Bangladeshi novelist, journalist and political activist, who delivered medicine and food to the freedom fighters as part of the Liberation War efforts in 1971. On 14 December, 1971, he was picked up by the collaborators of the Pakistani military and executed. The following is an excerpt from the martyr’s novel A Seaman’s Wife (Sareng Bou), translated into English from Bengali by Syed Najmuddin Hashem and published by Prothoma Prokashan.



Shahidullah Kaiser and his wife Panna Kaiser. PHOTO: **COLLECTED**

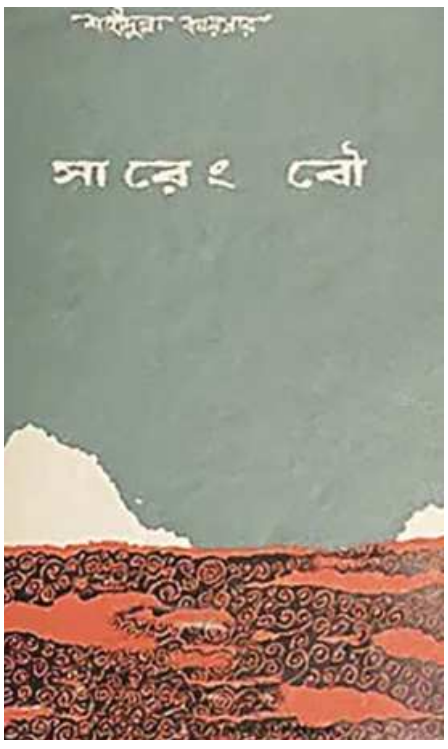
Whatever her worries, however enormous her anxieties, somehow as soon as she went to bed, all these would be pushed aside by the remembered face. Kadam’s face seemed to make her forget even the pangs of hunger, the insults heaped on her during the day. Such magic was in it. Nabitun had not seen this face for over three years. Yet, on this dark night, the image of him was very clear to her. Those strong arms, that romantic smiling face.

Nabitun drew Akki closer. She let her head rest on her bosom and pressed it hard against her breast. In her sleep, Akki snuggled closer to her mother. The child slept on. The mother lay awake.

Wide awake, her mind strayed after. Who knew on what distant sea Kadam had set sail? Nabitun had heard that to these seas there was no end, no limit. Even those ships were not ordinary ships. They were bigger than even Lundar Sheikh’s double-storied house and floated on the water with the help of intricate machines. They rode easily on waves which seemed to reach the sky.

Even thinking of these things used to fill her with wonder. To think that her Kadam was a sareng on one of these ships, that he pressed the buttons and handled the machines. If only she could see him once, riding on the crest of the sky-high waves. It had been her wish for a long time.

The more she thought the more she felt confused. She just could not visualise such enormous vessels floating leisurely on limitless expanses of water. Her mind refused even to imagine such a marvel.



Original cover of Shahidullah Kaiser’s book Sareng Bou.

And how would it? When she had been very small, small enough for her father to fondle her on his lap, she had gone by boat once to her maternal uncle’s house over the river Kayal. What a river that was. One could not see the banks. There was only water and water. Nabitun had been dazed by the sight. Truly people said: “One who crossed the Kayal, made his wife a widow by noon.” But even this Kayal was nothing compared to the ocean. The Kayal beside the ocean was like a ribbon of water, or at best the drain behind the Sareng House.

Suddenly Nabitun felt a pain in her heart. Was Sareng still alive? She had heard that blows of those high waves and collusion with hidden blows of those underwater rocks smashed the ships. Nor there were banks close by to which one could swim. No, no she would not even indulge in such thoughts. But when she went to sleep, along with other thoughts, this would inevitably come to her mind.

Suddenly Nabitun pricked her ears. Something was scratching against the bamboo partition. Was it a cat? No, it was not a cat. There were two blows against the bamboo wall. Then there was a sound. One, then another and then a few more.

Gujaburi had told her to keep her door open two hours after midnight. Could it be that bastard Lundar Sheikh? She was fully awake. She sat up. Reaching her hand towards the head of her bed, she picked up the hatchet she kept there. She shouted, “Which scoundrel is that?”

Suddenly Nabitun felt a pain in her heart. Was Sareng still alive? She had heard that blows of those high waves and collusion with hidden blows of those underwater rocks smashed the ships.

As if hearing her voice, the sound stopped. Also the scratching on the partition. Now she felt certain that this was none else but Korban. He had been eyeing her recently. Besides, he had made this sound on dark nights a few times previously. Again there was the sound. This time it was soft and came from the direction of the door. There were also a few taps on the door.

“I am warning you, I’ll hit you with this hatchet.” Nabitun called out the warning in a loud voice, but it did not stop the ringing blows on the tin door.

“What shameless rascal is that? With a wife at home, what scandalous going ons are these? Just wait, I’ll cut your ears off or my name is not Nabitun.” She quickly came off the bed and flung open the door.

Even in the dark she made out a man, even darker than the night, go running with loud steps towards the East House. What rash courage on her part! Opening the door in this pitch dark night! Supposing instead of running, the man had grabbed her? What could she have done? Quickly shutting the door, Nabitun came back to bed. She was still trembling furiously.

But how much longer could she protect herself like this? Such persecution, such want, and such temptation? How long could she guard herself against dangers from so many directions?

Tears flowed onto her chest. Into the silence of the night went her sobs and the soundless question, “Won’t Sareng come home?”

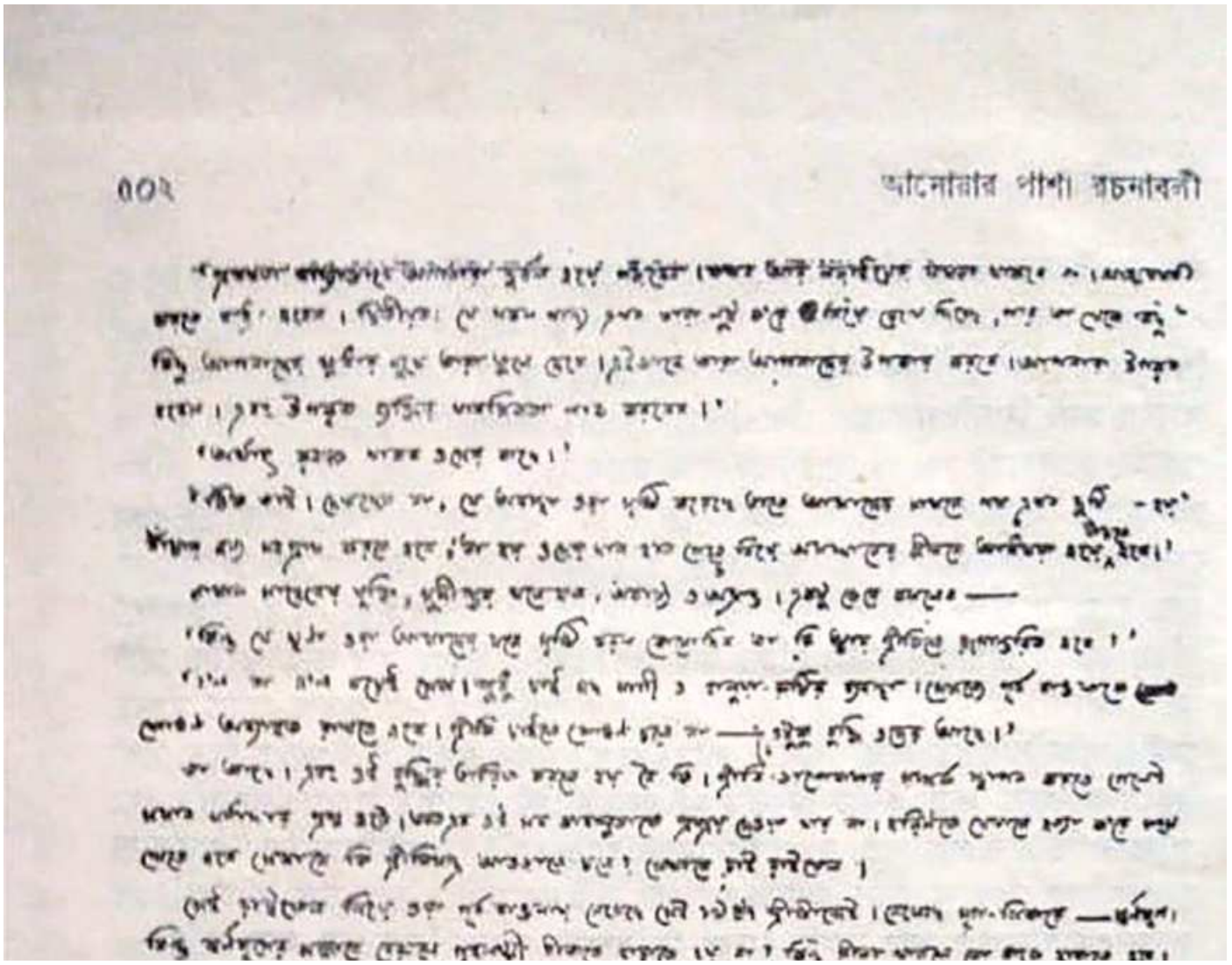
Rifle, Roti, Aurat: The first novel on the Liberation War

Anwar Pasha, novelist and senior lecturer of Bangla at the University of Dhaka, was picked up by the Pakistani army and their collaborators on December 14, 1971 and taken to Mirpur, where he was martyred. Here, we present excerpts (translated) from his novel "Rifle, Roti, Aurat", written during April-June 1971.

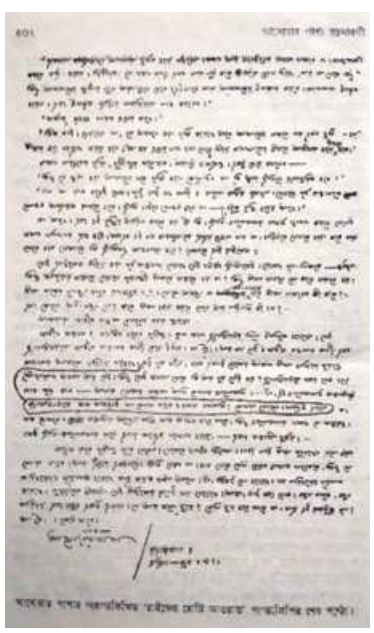
Dawn broke in Bangladesh. Shudipto is an early riser, and today was no exception. But it could have been. He didn't sleep much last night. There was the intermittent firing that rang out throughout the night. Along came the fear. Not of death—death no longer seemed frightening. He was afraid of living. Can a man live with such fire and bombardment? Thoughts like these crowded his mind. This place he was in now could have been another deterrent to his sleep. Sleep doesn't usually come easy to those visiting a new place, although in his case, it was the fire and shells and the accompanying fear that kept him awake. He could hardly focus on his new setting. Until now, that is. After waking up, his eyes wandered but couldn't find that familiar face of Number 23… those well-arranged book shelves, those tables and chairs, the looking glass. Nothing familiar greeted him at the break of a new dawn.

His mind veered to the present as he remembered Firoz. His friend Mohiuddin Firoz, in whose house he was now. A former poet, Firoz was once a well-circulated name thanks to his poems published in newspapers.

It was his first night in his friend's house. Shudipto, a professor at the University of Dhaka, reached at dawn on March 28, 1971 after traveling all night long. What of the preceding two nights? Shudipto found himself thinking about March 25 and 26. Those were no ordinary nights. Two nights with the length of two decades, as if offering a condensed history of the two decades of Pakistani rule, of the attitude of Pakistanis towards Bangladesh. Rule and exploit. Rule and exploit them in any way possible. If it becomes difficult to exploit, double down on ruling. Keep doubling down. If the rule of law doesn't work, then rule them with rifles, rule with cannons and machine guns. And, somehow, he survived two nightlong re-enactments of the dreadful rule of the past decades.



Anwar Pasha (1928-1971). PHOTO: **COLLECTED**



Anwar Pasha's handwritten notes.

It now surprised him that he did. He could have been dead.

We all fail in our endeavours sometimes. Shudipto, for instance, couldn't be a CSP officer even if he wanted to. Or, could he be a rich person just by venturing into business? No. There are many who cannot even marry in their lives. But one thing that is certain to happen in all our lives is death. So, Shudipto was prompted to think, here was one thing that all can do—all can die. Without exception. It requires no effort really. You can eat all you want, do as you please. No need to break a mental sweat. The task will have been accomplished invariably one day. It's really that simple. It's your relatives and friends who will then be faced with a number of tasks. There will be the burial rituals, the prayers, the mourning, the tributes, the careful estimation of the money and property you leave behind. For some days afterwards, your loved ones will have nothing else to worry about—you'll have put them in a state of stupor. All these you'll have accomplished without so much as an effort on your part.

But no, all his ideas were proved wrong in his own case. Death was easy and within touching distance, yet Shudipto couldn't accomplish it. Why he didn't die, he doesn't know. Perhaps an easy death is not his fate. Many thousands of people easily did what Shudipto failed to do. He couldn't die. This made him wonder, perhaps dying is not so easy after all.

Not easy? Didn't Sofia die? Didn't he see how thousands of your brothers and friends died that day? Yes, he did. But he also saw that death can be difficult to achieve and he stands as living proof of that. If dying is hard, killing is even harder. Who will you kill? Can you kill an idea—a belief? The deep love and conviction with which those thousands of fallen souls embraced death couldn't be killed. They lived on.

Translated from Bangla by Badiuzzaman Bay.