



Genocide, 1971: Buriganga bore silent witness to Pakistani army's brutality.

Photo: Anwar Hossain

When The Police Chose The People

'We Have to Do Something', Said the SP

One of the most extraordinary events of March 25-26, 1971 was the spontaneous decision by the police force at Rajarbagh in Dhaka to resist Pakistan army aggression. The police normally takes orders from higher ups without much protest. In Pakistan's power structure, that meant silently obeying anything commanded by the top bureaucracy, and particularly the military.

The army's power over the political establishment and the civilian bureaucracy was not based on any legal ground (it never is), in fact, its power rested principally on vehicles with mounted guns (as always). But the army needed the police to do its dirty work in the streets. Policemen and officers resented it, but they feared the army's superior strength in training, organisation and hardware.

March, 1971 changed all that dramatically. As an all-conquering sense of nationalism swept through the streets of Dhaka, Bengalee policemen were caught between their obligation towards the state and their cultural and emotional bond with the people. Consciously or not, they arrived at a monumental decision: the people were the state.

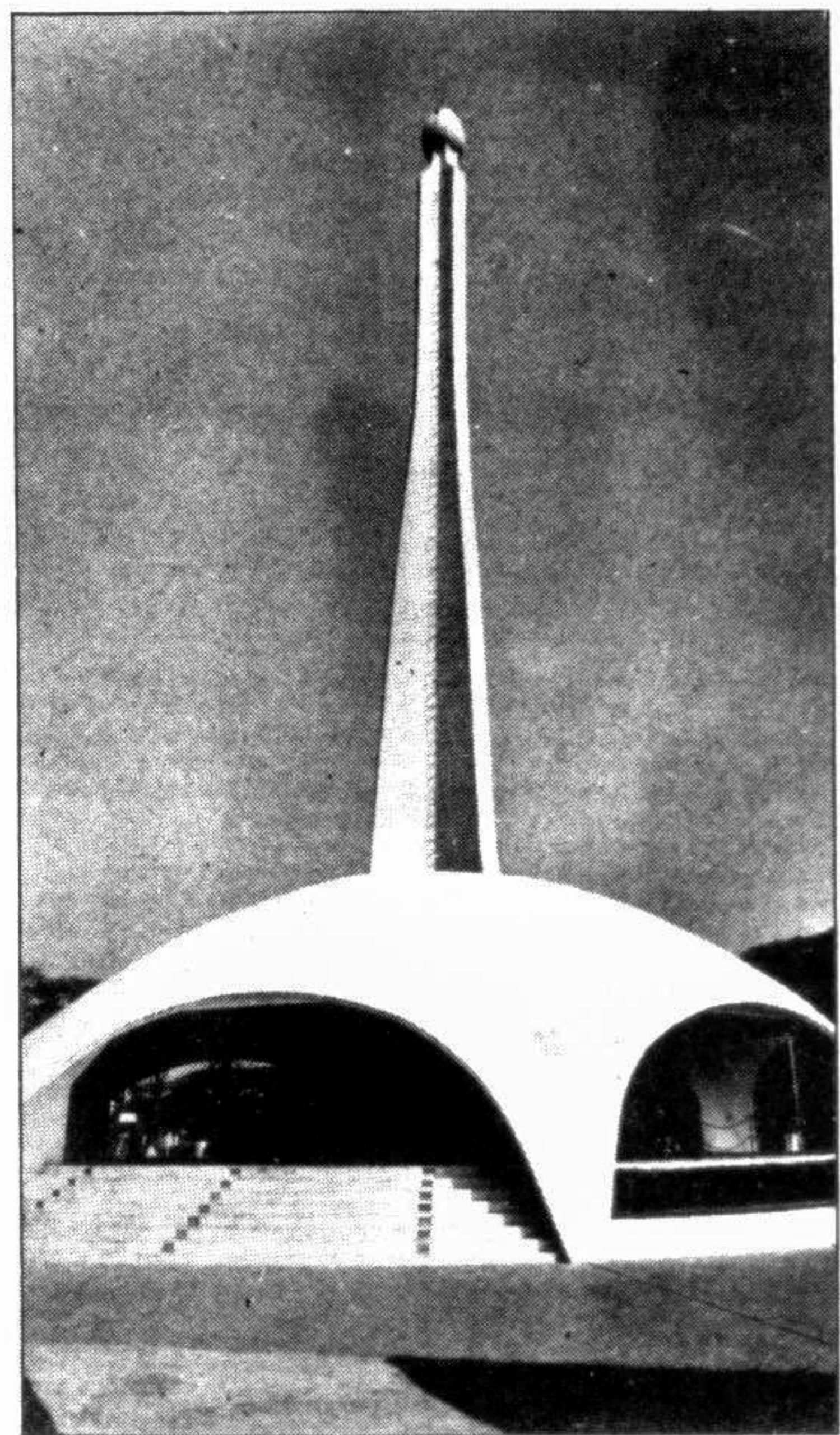
was going for a showdown that night. 'We have to do something', he said. The senior officers present decided we should go back to the line and issue arms and ammunition to the men immediately. But secrecy was to be maintained. They were to be told that there was great emergency in the country and they were to stand-by. The reason for secrecy at that stage was the presence of Punjabi and Bihari policemen at Rajarbagh. It was decided that the Bengalee officers were to be briefed in secret, and told to resist any Pakistani attack on Rajarbagh.

Earlier, Tejgaon police station was told to keep an eye on army movements in and out of the cantonment. Also police Special Branch officers were actively watching inside the garrison area. By 9:30pm, calls had begun to come in to the SP's house about large scale movement. Tejgaon reported that around 300 trucks and vehicles were moving out towards the city. Special Branch officers from the city reported troops assembling at the Race Course Ground. By then, we had definite information that the Pakistanis were going to launch their attack at zero hour, March 26. There was no time to lose.

"So we went back to the line and assembled the men. There were about 350 of them there at the time, as many were still out on duty. Because of the presence of non-Bengalees among the ranks and officers, we gave them a general lecture. Then the Bengalee habildar-major, force subedar and armoury subedar were detailed in secret. They were told to inform the men that the army was coming, and that we were going to fight. If they found themselves overwhelmed, then they were to scatter and join East Bengal Regiment, EPR and other forces to carry on the fight.

"There was frantic activity going on outside at the time, with people erecting barricades in the streets with whatever they found, chopped trees, over-turned cars, anything.

"The army must have left their assembly point earlier than our information suggested because they launched their attack six or seven minutes before midnight. Pakistani troops took up positions at Shahjahanpur crossing and Malibagh crossing. The Bengalee policemen returned fire with their light machine guns, grenades, rifles etc. By then one of our ranks had also



Resistance: Memorial at Rajarbagh.

Photo: Mohsin

raised the green, red and yellow flag of Bangladesh atop the barracks. It kept flying right through the morning of the 26th.

"I went to shift my family after issuing arms to the men and de-briefing the Bengalee officers. I was stuck with my kids as the battle erupted in full fury. The Pakistanis were more heavily armed, as would be expected of a regular army, but our boys fought on bravely. The exchange of fire was very heavy for several hours. One Punjabi police officer was killed by our men, after which the rest of the non-Bengalees kept quiet.

"Around 4am, the Pakistanis brought on tanks and armoured cars. They shelled the barracks with incendiary bombs, the main

administrative building took two direct hits from rocket launchers. Faced with heavy armour which they could not resist with their light weapons, the Bengalee men and officers began making their way out of the barracks at around five.

Some took up positions on rooftops in nearby areas such as Chamelbagh and Shahjahanpur, and kept up the resistance throughout the day. The Pakistani tanks had smashed through the perimeter fences, but their victory was a hollow one. Many policemen joined the Mukti Bahini, and some could not. But even while the Rajarbagh police line barracks burned in the morning of March 26, 1971, the flag of Bangladesh was still flying.

VIEW FROM THE COLONY

Caged Tiger Assaults Its Master

By Sabir Mustafa

MORNING of March 26, 1971 wore an eerie, surreal look. Azimpur Colony was quiet. People were beginning to gather outside, but staying close to the buildings, grown men speaking in a hushed voice, not even daring to venture out of the shadows of the three-storey apartment blocks painted in ghastly yellow.

This was the morning after the night before. No matter how hard one tried, it was practically impossible to get any sleep the previous night. The peace and calm of the spring night was shattered into billion pieces by sounds of gunfire. Heavy, continuous sound of machinegun fire; sharp, short bursts of automatic rifles; explosions that made the floor shake; the night air pierced by whistling, screeching sounds. Some near, some faraway, but the maddening noise of death and destruction travelled fast through the stillness.

The Pakistan army was on the streets of Dhaka. The city and its people were its targets. But not until later would I have the faintest idea that the fateful night was witnessing merely the beginning of the most brutal genocide the world had known since Adolf Hitler let loose his army across Europe in 1939.

A tumultuous day came to an abrupt end that night. This particular 'day' did not last for a mere 12 or 24 hours. It spanned nearly the entire month of March, 1971. From the 1st onwards, each day was like a new beginning with no end. We did not want it to end. People talked about the Prague Spring of 1968, but they probably hadn't seen Dhaka Spring of 1971. Unlike Prague, Dhaka was not to be cowed into submission by brute military force.

On March 1, Dhaka Stadium was the place to be. Earlier, Raqibul Hassan had become the first Bengalee to play international cricket for Pakistan. He batted twice, out lbw both times for a total of 2 runs. We had no doubt that the West Pakistani umpires had unfairly given him out to discredit him, and with him the entire Bengalee nation.

Raqib's bat had a triangular sticker on it, with the words 'Joi Bangla' and the map of Bangladesh (then still East Pakistan, but only just) proudly emblazoned on it. His short stay at the crease did not dispirit us too much. After all, he had made the REAL point, hadn't he? If two symbols could express an entire people's yearning for justice, freedom, and yes, nationhood, then 'Joi Bangla' and the map of Bangladesh were those symbols.

March 1 was an extraordinary day at the stadium. The explosion of anger, out of frustration and a sense of being wronged once too often, was a

sight never to be forgotten. General Yahya Khan, Pakistan's military ruler, had postponed the first session of the newly-elected National Assembly scheduled for March 3. With that, a thin bond which had existed precariously for 24 years, snapped in an instance.

For 24 years, the Bengalee people of East Pakistan endured what amounted to no more than colonial rule from West Pakistan. They fought and died against conspiracy to destroy their language, culture and freedom for over two decades. In 1970, they voted overwhelmingly for a man and a party that had, through years of struggles and sufferings, given Bengalee nationalism a concrete shape, form and substance — Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League. Yahya Khan's declaration on March 1 came as yet another sign that the Pakistanis would spare no effort to keep the Bengalees

only sporadic bursts of gunfire, including some from near the Pilkhana area. The cries of 'Joi Bangla' from that direction had come to an end. I was beginning to feel that the end was near. Not war's end — that had only begun — but my life's end.

"As we have shed so much blood, we will shed even more blood, but we shall set the people of this country free, Insha'allah! The struggle this time is for our freedom, the struggle this time is for our independence. 'Joi Bangla!'"

The all-conquering slogan rang out again and again from beyond the colony wall. Was it wise, on the morning of March 26 when the whole city was facing the bayonet, to be so brave? Wise or foolish, another piece of reckless bravery came roaring towards us. A jeep-load of youngsters, some carrying rifles, came speeding into the colony from the direction of the Palashi crossing. A barely suppressed excitement spread among the

All through march, we had worried about which way the East Bengal Regiment would turn. They lived in barracks and cantonments, cut-off from the people and obeyed orders as a matter of course from Pakistani commanders. Would they break a life-time's habit, training etc. and take up arms against their senior commanders? As kids we worshipped the East Bengal (and only the East Bengal) and its supposed fighting prowess. We knew if they came over to the people's side, then the Punjabis and Pathans and Baluchis would meet a very sordid end in a watery Bengalee grave. But if they didn't ... the thought was too frightening even to contemplate.

subjected. It also turned out to be the last straw.

From the stadium to the university battala, to Bangabandhu's residence at Dhanmondi. Students raised the new Bangladesh flag with the golden map on March 2; they read out a declaration the next day at Paltan Maidan calling for total independence. They, like the rest, looked to Bangabandhu for direction, for a signal that the train of events set in motion on March 2 and 3 was on the right tracks.

The signal came on March 7. Pakistani military authorities deprived me and millions others the pleasure of watching Mujib's speech on television (come to think of it, I am still waiting for that pleasure, 20 independent and sovereign years later). But it seemed the whole speech was passed from mouth to mouth. People were excited. There was no mistake.

younger onlookers. They had recognised the handsome, bearded man holding a megaphone. He was Khasru. Those of us too young to be university students had merely heard of the semi-legendary Khasru and Montoo, who were credited with driving out Monem Khan's thugs from the university campus in the late '60s.

Khasru made a brief announcement from the jeep: "Pakistanis have killed Sheikh Kamal, but the students, police, EPR and soldiers are fighting back. We will win! He asked people with licensed guns not to hand them over to the military authorities, but to give them to the freedom fighters, as he called himself and his comrades. They then drove off, leaving us with a weird sensation. The fight this time was for real.

The evening wore on with no electricity and no water,

only sporadic bursts of gunfire, including some from near the Pilkhana area. The cries of 'Joi Bangla' from that direction had come to an end. I was beginning to feel that the end was near. Not war's end — that had only begun — but my life's end.

Radio was the best companion one could hope to have at such times. Some station was broadcasting news, Calcutta or Agartala or Delhi, wasn't sure but it was certainly India. They said Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had declared independence for Bangladesh, and resistance to the Pakistan army was taking place all over the country.

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March 27 ended all worries on that score. Cooped up in a large Dhanmondi house with several families of relations, the radio once again became point of gathering. We had heard rumours during the day that Chittagong was still free. Somebody said he had heard it on Calcutta radio, someone else said he simply knew, never mind from where.

Evening tuning caught a strong signal, and it turned out to be Chittagong. So, the place where Surja Sen and his braves defied the British in 1913 was still alive! A strong, calm voice identifying himself as Major Zia (of the 8th East Bengal) read out an English text. Calling himself the provisional commander-in-chief of the Bangladesh liberation forces, Zia read out Bangladesh's declaration of independence on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

So, it was true. Indian radio wasn't lying the other evening, as some neighbours, over-imbued with Pakistani propaganda, had suggested. And what's more, the East Bengal Regiment had finally broken out of its cage and assaulted its master. As soon as people realised the Bengalee people and soldiers were one, they had no doubt about the outcome. The only question remaining was whether they and others would live to see the day of victory.



Their activity through March became placid, sometimes even co-operative with the hundreds of thousands of demonstrators marching up and down Dhaka thoroughfares everyday. The Pakistanis made a note of that, and decided the police had to be dealt with in the same way as the East Bengal Regiment and East Pakistan Rifles.



The police in turn made a note of that, and decided, mentally, to shed its subordinate role and not take part in any more suppression of their own people at the behest of a foreign army.



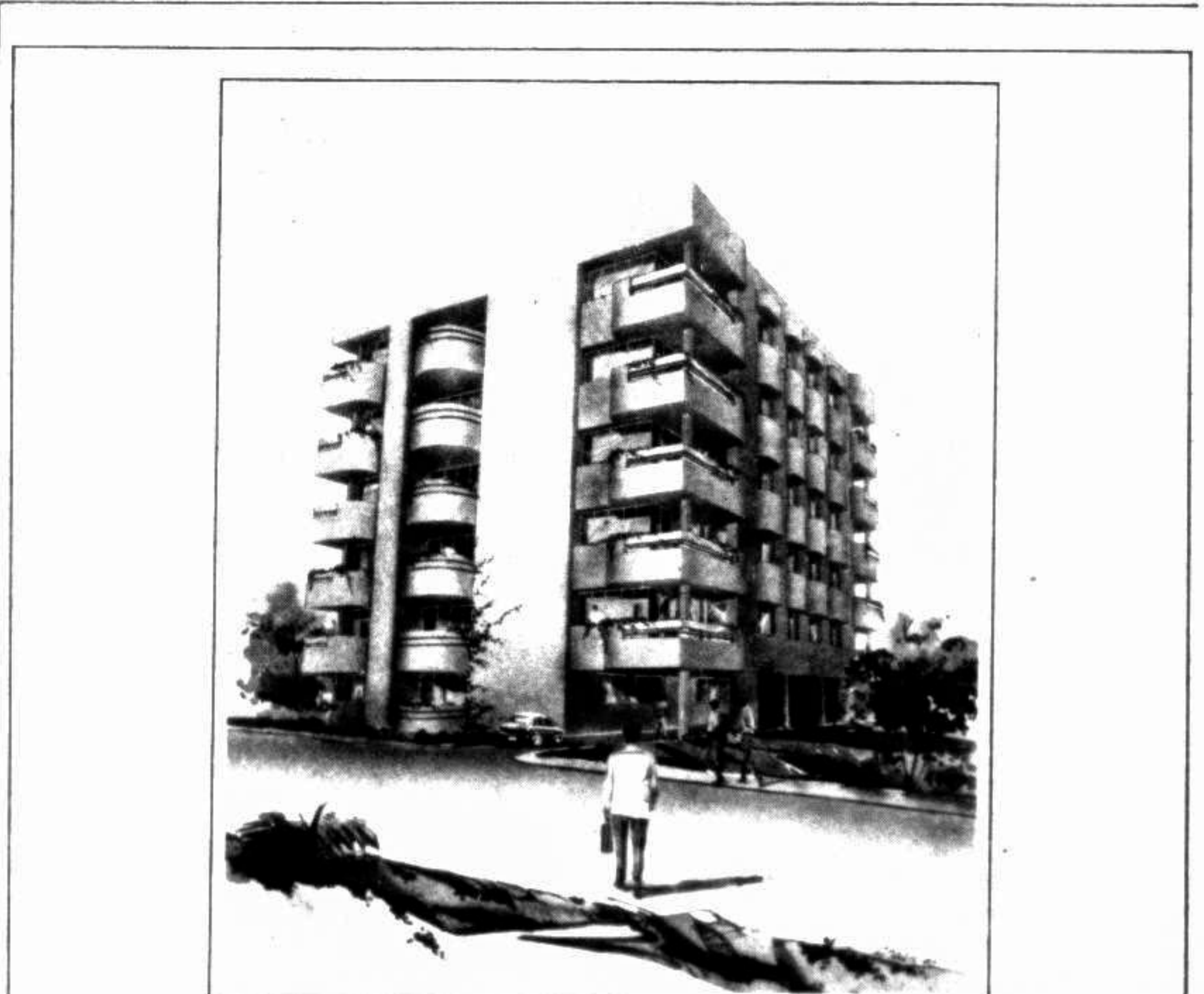
But it was obvious there was no grand plan of resistance. To plan in advance would have been to give the game away. It would have allowed the enemy to strike in the name of putting down a rebellion and carry the force of legitimacy behind it.


In the end, the decision to resist was a spontaneous, almost reflex one, almost as if they had been psychologically conditioned by the force of events to do just that.

Nawajeh Ali Khan, now retired, was a Deputy Superintendent in charge of East Pakistan Police Reserves (EPR) at Rajarbagh at the time. In a conversation with The Daily Star, he rummaged through his memory bank to see what scraps of information were still there:

"Around 9pm of the 25th, I got a call from the commandant of EPR, Mr. Habibur Rahman. I had just sat down to dinner after a long day out on duty. He calmly asked me if I had had my dinner, then he said, 'Just get hold of a car and come straight over to the SP's place'. There was urgency in his words.

"At Superintendent E. A. Chowdhury's house, there were, apart from my commandant, Additional SP Mr. Shahjahan, district commissioner — his name escapes me right now, as does the name of the reserve inspector of Rajarbagh lines who was also there.





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