

# 'Remember, We Came', She Said, But We Didn't

**P**RITILATA Waddedar. What does that name signify to this or even the previous generation of Bengalees? It should mean a great deal, as the name is an integral part of Bangladesh's long history of struggle for freedom.

By any standard, Pritilata's name should be an honoured companion of the pantheon of heroes and heroines who voluntarily and gladly down their lives to free this nation from foreign domination.

Well, companion maybe, because while history can be distorted, covered-up, or sanitised by expunging "undestable" bits, a historical fact can hardly be completely undone.

But the tragedy is that her name is not honoured in Bangladesh, officially or unofficially, save a handful of conscientious citizens who find Pritilata's supreme sacrifice an inspiration, and not simply one of a million historical events.

Pritilata's 59th anniversary of martyrdom passed on September 23, and it passed as quietly and unceremoniously as her passing from the earth was symbolic.

She took poison and killed herself in 1932 after being seriously injured during a raid on the European Club in Chittagong. It was one of those clubs set up to entertain British officials which had signboards on the door reading, "No Dogs or Indians Allowed".

Pritilata took her own life so that she would not suffer the indignity of being taken prisoner. The head of her country was already touching

the ground from the shame of imprisonment of foreign rule. Her act of defiance — and those of many other anti-British Bengalee revolutionaries — helped to raise the head a little.

On September 23 this year, only four days back in fact, author Selma Hossain narrated the story of Pritilata Waddedar during a discussion meeting arranged by Rupantar, a feminist periodical. She wanted to know how many of us knew about Pritilata.

Naturally, the "us" here didn't mean "us women", but rather "us Bengalees" or "us Bangladeshis". She did not produce any data to answer her own question, but judging by the near-total silence — from the official and the unofficial media — that greeted Pritilata's death anniversary, we can safely deduce that not many of "us" actually care.

But perhaps we don't care because we don't know? How can we care about a Pritilata Waddedar if we haven't even heard her name, let alone known what she did and why?

That is exactly what has happened. This generation of Bengalees doesn't care, because the previous generations did not teach this generation about Pritilata, Surja Sen or Apurba Sen. They were all Bengalees who fought and died for this land and its people. But we ceased to care.

Pritilata has slipped out of our national memory because the anti-British revolutionary struggles of the first three and half decades of this century — a time known as the Agniyug or Age of Fire — has become a non-event in our history books and therefore the national cal-

endar. It is not because the people wanted it that way, but because the Agniyug has been deliberately and systematically made alien to our national history. Every ruling group of this country — from Khwaja Nazimuddin's in 1947 right down to Khaleda Zia's in 1991 — has done its level best to disown this fire of defiance that was born out of this very soil we call Golden Bengal.

Pritilata broke the law by choosing the path of armed rebellion. But whose law was it? Certainly not any law sanctioned by the people of Bengal or any other part of India. She

## By Sabir Mustafa

broke, or rather smashed a lie. A lie that says a foreign power has the "right" to impose itself as the ruler, collector of taxes and arbiter of its own brand of justice on other peoples.

In the process of their rebellion, Pritilata and countless other anti-colonial revolutionaries invoked the universal law of natural justice — that it was the inalienable right of a people to seek freedom from foreign rule.

The young Pritilata, like millions others, saw British rule in India as what it was — essentially unjust. But unlike millions others, the impatient and restless Pritilata chose not to follow the non-violent, indirect agitation of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and later Muhammad Ali Jinnah. For her, there was too much compromise in Nehru and

Jinnah's politics to be honourable for a subjugated people.

When, as a schoolgirl, she saw Surja Sen and Nirmal Sen being taken away by police for "armed robbery, she refused to regard them as criminals. The real criminals were the ones who put that signboard on the door reading "No Dogs or Indians Allowed".

The choice before Pritilata — because it was her choice, her own conscious decision — was not an easy one. Armed rebellion was not everyone's idea of legitimate protest, even when there was nothing legitimate about the rulers against whom the protest was to be made.

After the failure of the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny or the First Indian War of Independence, mainstream anti-British movement in the country moved away from violence and towards political agitation of the non-violent kind. Ideas of democracy also came in the wake of the British magistrates and cavalry officers.

Bengalee revolutionaries on the fringe of the political spectrum soon came to be regarded by the Indian mainstream as hot-heads, or as just plain terrorists. But even then, when a smiling and defiant Khudiram went to the gallows in 1908, every Bengalee in his heart knew he was a patriot and an honourable man. Every Bengalee, that is, except those thoroughly drenched with the poison of communalism.

But Pritilata faced an even bigger hurdle — she was a

woman. She knew only too well that Masterda Surja Sen and other revolutionaries whose group she was eventually to join, were not exactly eager to have women companions.

As well as being sworn bachelors, in order to avoid family responsibilities, Surja Sen and his comrades felt women would become an obstacle to their work, especially when things got rough and bloody. In conformity with the rest of this male-dominated society, they too felt women, as the "softer" sex, were not cut out for field work.

Undaunted, Pritilata persisted. "If our brothers can pick up arms against the British, then why not the sisters?", she asked, and eventually won Masterda's confidence.

She left Eden College in Dhaka without taking her B.A. exams because, as she later put it, "All this education would be a big lie without freedom ... what will we do with all these degrees if remain subjugated?"

Driven by nothing other than sheer patriotism, Pritilata turned her back on a comfortable life, and embraced a glorious death. A Bengalee woman shot the jailer of her nation, the jailer shot her back, but she refused to allow him to put her back in chains.

Again, what does the name signify to us in Bangladesh, the country which produced Pritilata and for which her fearless soul made the ultimate sacrifice? To most it means basically nothing. To some, it is a name they may have come



Pritilata Waddedar

across in a rare book or two.

But to a few, it is a name that burns as brightly as any other in this nation's long list of heroes — Khudiram, Surja Sen, Salam, Barkat, Mattur, Sgt. Zahurul Huq, Assad, Capt. Jahangir, Flt. Lt. Mattur, Jyotirmoy Guha Thakurta, Mofazzal Haider Chowdhury ... the list is endless, but there are still millions others which we, in our boundless, shameless indifference to our own history, have not bothered to

document.

It is strange, indeed perverse that a nation should disown a part — a glorious part at that — of its history. But is it really that strange? We have spent such a long time under foreign rule that we have probably forgotten how to appreciate and value our own selves.

Why else do we teach our school children all about the bravery of Sultan Razia of Delhi, but choose to keep

them ignorant about Pritilata who fought against greater odds and sacrificed everything she had?

There is a street in Dhaka named after Sultan Razia, to whom Bangladesh and the Bengalees were probably no more than a country and a people she could conquer and rule. But Pritilata, a daughter of this soil, died for the love of this land and hatred of those who oppressed and insulted its people. And we rewarded her, not by naming anything after her, not even her alumni Eden College, but by throwing her out of the history books altogether!

The comparison between the two women, both driven in their own ways by a sense of what is right, is certainly not fair. One, after all, was the ruler of Delhi and commander of an army, while the other was a mere college girl who had to struggle every step of the way. But the contrast, in our treatment, is stark enough to merit mention. It is a demonstration of how we eagerly honour foreign historical figures, while ignoring our own.

We have not officially denied Pritilata or anybody else's existence. We have simply driven them out of our collective memory by what Professor Anu Muhammad called a "conspiracy of silence". Ignore them for a few decades and the next generation and the one after that, will not even know they existed.

"Remember, we came", Pritilata Waddedar wrote. They came when the nation called, and did their bit for the motherland in their own way. But, on the threshold of the 21st century, we failed them. We didn't remember.

## For Millions, the Ideal Home is Still a Cave

The cave dwellings of north-western China, much prized by their inhabitants, are now inspiring overseas architects to copy this type of structure. by PU Yuntong

**YAN'AN, China:** Families living on the Loess Plateau in north-western China have all the common household appliances that modern technology offers: TV sets, washing machines and refrigerators. But they still prefer to live in caves in a style that dates back 6,000 years.

"We like the cave because it is solid and inexpensive," says Ji Haijing, a farmer in Ansai county, northern Shaanxi province, pointing to his new, five-room cave-dwelling. "It is warm in winter and cool in summer."

About 40 million Chinese live in cave dwellings of various kinds on the Plateau. Woods are sparse and hills aplenty in the 635,000-square-kilometre area.

Here in Yan'an, northern Shaanxi, half of the 1.48 million farmers have moved in the last 10 years to new cave dwellings built of stones or bricks and equipped with electricity.

Construction of a commercial street lined with dome-shaped houses in the style of cave dwellings will start this year. At the University of Yan'an, six lines of brick-laid cave dwellings serve as student dormitories. The school is called China's only "cave university".

One-quarter of the Yan'an population, or some 50,000 households, live in cave dwellings, according to Zhang Huaixin, head of the Urban Construction Bureau of Yan'an. "Cave dwellings," he says, "will continue to be a main construction style in this mountainous area for a long time."

The natural temperature inside cave-dwellings is regarded as ideal, ranging from 10 to 22 degrees Celsius. And a dwelling can last up to 50 years.

A cave-dwelling is usually excavated out of the side of a hill or formed by digging a square pit. It can take almost any shape — indeed, it may hardly be a "cave" at all.

On parts of the plain, for example, some people have built cave-like houses which have 30-centimetre thick, dome-shaped roofs. They believe that these roofs can resist extreme temperatures better than other kinds.

To attract tourists, farmers in the eastern suburb of Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi province, have built a cave hotel on a sloped and equipped it with modern facilities.

In the more developed regions of the Loess Plateau, rows of cave dwellings are built on terraced slopes to save space. From a distance, their

repetitious pattern gives the impression of an ultra-modern design.

In Lanzhou City, Gansu province, the government invested 200,000 million yuan (US\$40,000) in a trial project in the Baota Hill suburb. There, 50 cave dwellings with a total floor area of 1,500 square metres were built on a barren slope.

The dwellings, each measuring 34 square metres, stand in five terraces of 10 dwellings each. The backs are separated from the hillside so as to keep damp out. Windows can be installed to let in fresh air.

The project has won praise from both local and foreign architects. "This experience can be spread to developed parts of southern China where better off farmers are using too much agricultural land to build houses," says Ren Zhenying, an architect who specialises on cave dwellings.

China accounts for one-fifth of the world's population but its arable area is only 7 per cent of the world's agricultural land and is decreasing at an annual rate of 130 million hectares, architect Ren says. He suggests that rural areas should take full advantage of the sunny side of barren slopes for building cave dwellings.

To preserve the local style as well as to save land, about 100 Chinese scientists and architects are studying ways to improve cave dwellings. Architects from Japan, Belgium, France, Australia and the United States have come to the Loess Plateau to study the dwellings.

Some American scholars categorise the world's cave dwellings into three major types — those found in Africa, in the Middle East and in China. The cave dwellings in China differ from the other two areas in that they have the longest history, are widely distributed and are still popular.

After seeing China's underground cave dwellings, some Japanese architects have decided to use the same construction method in various African projects. There the land area is vast enough to allow cave dwellings to have spacious cool interiors suitable for the hot climate.

Cave dwellings take full advantage of gullies and ridges in the Loess Plateau. The original form of a cave dwelling dating back 6,000 years can be seen in Banpo village, Shaanxi province. It is a dome-shaped hole dug horizontally into the southern face of a hill, 7 to 8 metres deep and 3 metres wide.

Today, standardised shapes and measurements provide sufficient sunlight and resistance to collapse. One family usually has four or five rooms in a row, the doors facing the front.

Then there is the underground cave dwelling. A big square pit is dug into a flat field, forming a sunken courtyard that can accommodate four dwellings.—DEPTHNEWS

## Videotapes Defeat the Mexican Movie Censors

Mexico recently saw for the first time a movie that had been withheld for 30 years by the powerful Secretary of the Interior. It deals with the sensitive topic of the 1927 murders of leading opposition figures by the troops of Alvaro Obregon, then the nation's strongman. Another controversial film, Red Dawn, about a 1968 massacre of students, was shown after a two-year delay. But, as Gemini News Service reports, the government is finding it impossible to control TV videotapes. by John Ross

**M**OVIE buffs recently queued for a full city block outside a mid-town Mexico City cinema to view a jerky, bleached-out, black and white print of a film with a soundtrack so soupy it might have been recorded under water.

The Shadow of the Strongman had just been released by the Mexican government after 30 years "in the can", as censored films are labelled here.

Three decades ago it was deemed offensive to the military because it dealt with the 1927 murder by the Army of opposition leader General Francisco Serrano and 13 of his supporters.

The film was banned on the eve of its 1960 premiere, and since then five Mexican presidents have claimed that all prints of the movie have been "lost" in government vaults.

The Mexican movie industry is celebrated throughout the Spanish-speaking world. Idols of the Golden Era of the Forties and Fifties such as Maria Felix, Cantinflas and Pedro Infante still occupy honoured niches in the region's cultural pantheon.

Today, despite its drive to privatise state enterprises, the Mexican government continues to subsidise and supervise the film industry, even making its own movies. At the same time as it limits what the public can see, it maintains the lowest cinema prices in all Latin America.

By keeping a movie in the can, the Cinematographic Direction of the Radio, Television, and Film Department of the Secretary of the Interior, a powerful ministry responsible for internal security, can break any celluloid endeavour of which it disapproves.

Release of The Shadow of the Strongman followed on the heels of a much newer movie, Red Dawn, which is about the 1968 massacre of hundreds of students in Mexico City's Tlatelolec housing complex.

Red Dawn, locked up for only two years, opened just after the 22nd anniversary of the killings. It has been doing booming business at 23 Mexico City theatres ever since.

The film was written, directed, and acted by veterans of the 1968 student movement that rocked Mexican society to its roots.

Showings often take on aspects of opposition political rallies with audiences hissing

and cheering and chanting the traditional slogan: "The Second of October — don't forget it."

Until the film's release, the student massacre was a taboo subject for the mass media here.

Scriptwriter Xavier Robles found all newspapers for October 1968 had been removed from the National Archives. The government has always maintained that only 32 people died in the clash, but foreign news agencies put the

toll at 337.

Several scenes had to be cut before the picture could be uncensored. And the original title, Flares in the Night — a reference to flares dropped from government helicopters to signal the beginning of the massacre — was changed.

Similarly, the release of a 1985 melodrama, entitled Has the President betrayed Us?,

had to be rechristened intrigue Against Mexico before it could be shown at the Mexico City Film Festival.

Despite the recent uncannings, the Mexican government continues to hold several films hostage, including a full-length video presentation of the 1988 presidential elections entitled Chronicle of a Fraud.



## WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,

I gave up the chance of a good banking career to marry the man I loved 10 years ago. My husband believed a woman's place is at home and I agreed. Recently this has started to bother me especially when I see most of my friends having interesting careers. Meanwhile, I have become lazy and hesitate to take a full time job. I have two children aged 7 and 5. Are there part time work available for people like me besides teaching?

Samira, Nilkhet, Dhaka.

Dear Samira,

You made a conscious choice to bring up your family instead of a career. This must have had its rewards and nothing to be ashamed or embarrassed about. Your children are still very young and deserve a few more years of your time. However, you can start thinking of a career and can begin to make preparations. There are few part time jobs available besides teaching. If you have a flair for writing then you could contribute articles in some local dailies. Remember it is never too late to start.

Dear Mita,

I grew up in a family of 7 brothers and sisters and am the youngest. So everyone pampered and spoilt me. I married the eldest son of a big family where everyone expects me to take all the responsibilities. I try my best but this is really hard. I find it impossible to please everyone and whatever I do does not seem enough. Please advise as to how I can cope. It creates friction in our marriage.

Ruby, Dhaka.

Dear Ruby,

I agree that your job is a tough one but women in our culture have a tremendous capacity to adjust. Being the eldest daughter-in-law is a big responsibility but, if you can win them over with your intelligence, affection and warmth then you can reign almost like a queen. Unfortunately, many times it does not work that well. Be sure that your husband and you are on the same side. Concentrate on making your relationship with him strong, mutually supportive and secure. The rest will then be much easier.

Dear Mita,

I am in love with a man and want to marry him but my parents will not let me. They don't like anything about him, his family, his looks etc. What can I do now? How can I make them understand? I know they love me and don't want to do anything against their wishes. I am 18 years old and can make my own decisions.

Lucky, Dhaka.

Dear Lucky,

It is wonderful that you are in love but where is the hurry? Complete your education and give time for your parents to know about him and gradually accept him. Since you realize that your parents mean well then you should try and find the

reason for their objection. Perhaps there is some logic in it, or there is some misunderstanding. To correct both of these they need time. Marriage is a life-time affair, so please don't rush into it.

Dear Mita,

My son is 4 and loved going to school. But since the last one month he refuses to go to school. No amount of coaxing or scolding helps, he just will not go. I have had to take him by force on several occasions. I don't understand his behaviour at all. Can you please help? Do you think I should be strict with him?

Ruksana, Lalnatta, Dhaka.

Dear Ruksana,

Your son is only 4 and definitely should not be forced. Have a talk with the teacher and find out where the problem lies. The reasons could be many, also check if he is feeling physically well. Often children suffer from stomachache at school and develop a fear of going. Find out if somebody is bullying him. You are sure to find the answer at school or at home. If the situation becomes too serious then think of changing the school. Now is the time for him to develop a positive image of school which will last him a life-time.

Dear Mita,

My best friend was in love with a girl who lived in the same building. Few weeks ago the girl went to a neighbouring country where her marriage was arranged with another person against her wishes. Last week we heard that her fiancé had taken poison. This news has upset my friend's family and they have turned against her. The girl's father is willing to marry her off with my friend. He is very confused and needs your advice. Please Mita, advise me to get out of this problem in a smooth and successful way.

Rashid Sultan, Dhaka.

Dear Rashid,

You did not tell me how old your friend is and what he does. Is he really prepared to enter into a life-long commitment? The depth of their relationship is the crucial factor in making a decision. They must find out if this whole episode has changed their feelings towards each other. Please request them not to rush into anything. Your friend's family might have some serious reasons for objecting. It is important to analyse those reasons also. If they are really serious about each other ultimately nothing will stand in their way.

Run by a trained and experienced Family and Marriage counsellor, assisted by a professional team of doctor, psychologist and lawyer, this column will answer questions relating to family, marriage, health, family laws, and social and interpersonal relationships. Please address letters to Mita, The Daily Star, GPO Box 3257 or to 28/1, Toynbee Circular Road, Motijheel, Dhaka-1000.



Rupa Ganguli as Kopila in 'Padma Nodir Majhi', a Bangladesh-India joint production, being shot on location here, directed by Goutam Ghosh.