

Getting Back on Track

WAR brings out the best and the worst in man. In the entire recorded history of the Bangalees, two wars — one at Plassey in 1757 and the other across the length and breadth of Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, in 1971 — stand out to be the ultimate test of their mettle as a people. Both the wars have not only decided the fate of the Bangalees but also shaped the history of the subcontinent.

Historically perceived the two points, from Plassey to Race Course Maidan (now Suhrawardy Uddyan), represents two peaks — the first, although valiant, ending up in a defeat and marking the long night of subjugation; and the second, setting right the wrong that the first was treacherously made to concede. Victory and defeat make a difference of whole world and so did the two. At no other point the two events are more dissimilar than on their outcomes. But the similarities between them are also striking.

The fact that Nawab Sirajuddowla, despite his supreme sacrifice, patriotism and courage, had to capitulate to the English force — thanks to the treachery of his commander-in-chief Mir Jafar — can still be extended to the unseemly developments of 1971 Bangladesh and beyond. Sirajuddowla has been painted as an inefficient, spoiled, coward and worthless king by the British historians understandably to serve the purpose of perpetually maintaining their illegal colonial rule over India. Only recently has the Nawab been brought in brighter and more authentic light from the penumbra of history by some hardworking historians. For long 200 years the Bangalees were fed on the most damaging information possible to the search for their own identity. Once again in the independent Bangladesh the same process of misinformation is being carried on — almost in Goebbelsian manner. The purpose is presently being well served: because if it has not been able to

do anything else, it has at least succeeded to create a chasm in the national unity.

People may have their differences of opinion on many issues but a nation need not invent its own history when the making of it has been achieved through a sea of blood, unspeakable sufferings and an outside trauma. Today controversy abounds not so much because the issues in question are contentious but because of the political fanatics, and those whose survival depends on confusing facts. People so misled are sure to disown or become disrespectful to the most glorious chapter of their national history. Men and women with ambition for power also tread on the noblest, the most sacred legacy of sacrifice people have ever and anywhere left for the posterity. Indifference and lack of capacity to evaluate the best of times and the worst of times on the part of the political leaders together with the incapacity of the writers and other creative artists to encompass the great event have all let down the achievements of the nine-month war.

Both the French Revolution and the American War of Independence had intellectual and political resources wedded into a happy alliance. Even the creative urge continues to spring forth afterwards as a fitting tribute to the spirit that helped the nation to scale lofty heights. What was amiss then that the vibrant nation in the throes of expectation for wondrous things to happen all around suddenly lost its way in a blind alley? To say that our common people were not prepared for the big occasion would be a great disservice to their unlimited capacity to respond to the necessity of times. Their unwavering support for the Bangladesh cause made them to risk everything they hold dear to their hearts. In fact, theirs was a most enviable record of coming through the acid test they were put to.

Yet, today's apathy to our

Madhu Da Lives as a Myth, but Official Recognition Hard to Come by

NO one could sleep on the night of 25th March 1971. The piercing sound of guns, bombs and cocktails mixed with helpless cries and screams innocent people made it almost unbearable for anyone at the Dhaka University campus to lie still. The adjoining gallery, behind the play ground stadium of Jagannath Hall was set on fire. Children, women, men, shouting and running for shelter and begging for mercy. Trees were being chopped down and roads blocked with. During this time, somewhere between the Science Annex building and the Medical College people shouted 'Joy Bangla'.

Madhu Sudan Dey and his big family witnessed all these — history's worst genocide — from their house. They didn't think, for a second, of their own fate then, they thought only of the innocent people screaming as

and Pakistanis. His famous canteen at the heart of the campus was the nucleus of all student politics, his home where, he placed two black flags as a sign of protest only made matters worse. Exactly at 7 O'clock in the morning the members of Madhu's family nervously saw their respected sir Professor G C Dey being charged by bayonets, his white dress turning red and with each blow parts of his stomach coming out. Little did they understand what lay next. The militaries surrounded their building and interrogated all the members of the rest seven flats except for them. This made everyone, specially Madhu nervous and pale. May be, he could then read his hours. Moments later they heard heavy kicks of military boots on their front door. Madhu very pensively opened the door and immediately they barged in, pointing

room to room for shelter, ultimately they pulled her ear ring and so fiercely that her ear came off. Her screams and protests were silenced by a brush fire. Ranjit, Madhu's eldest son and Bina's husband was fired in the chest and he died instantly, but the velocity of the bullet was so fierce that it entered through the back of Ranu Bala Dey, Madhu's daughter, and came out from the front, leaving her severely wounded. Satisfied they turned to Madhu, but his wife was an obstacle, they charged bayonets on the hands, so cruelly that those were dangerously dangling. Jugomaya still didn't expose her husband, she tried to hide him and save him from the rain of bullets. This time another bullet hit Ranu Bala again on the cheek and it didn't come out.

Thinking that their mission was accomplished the junta left the other members of the house shocked and horrified. They thought that all four were dead, but that was not the end of this sordid and tragic episode. No one could ever imagine of what happened next.

With a mere stroke of luck, Jugomaya could really save Madhu's life. He was alive in spite of being badly wounded. Madhu cried helplessly holding each one of his dear children, thinking how would he live without his previous wife, son and daughter-in-law. Someone then informed that Madhu was alive and when the marauding military came back with men engaged in carrying corpse, they pulled Madhu out of the house. His children begged for his life, saying that they have robbed them of everything, that they can take whatever they please from the house, in return of their father's life.

But these men only said that they came to take him to the hospital and will soon return home, so there is really no fear. Ranu Bala protested saying that she was hit too why couldn't

she go to the hospital with her father? Why won't she be treated? They didn't bother to listen to her pleas and pulled Madhu out of the house. They all cried silently as Madhu went out of the house forever, looking back to say goodbye only with his eyes. "We never knew what happened next, but saw baba being taken to the Jagannath Hall recalled Babul Chandra Dey Madhu's son. They heard from witnesses that their father was taken to the Ganokabor and fired at. He was buried there with many others. "We are still not exactly satisfied with what we heard, still don't know what really happened next, so many things happened within a split second you know; sometimes we still hope that he would come back from the hospital," said Babul ruefully.

Madhu Chandra Dey was born in 1919 sometime in Balshakh that is April and be-

tre. An under-metric, Madhu became favourite with university officials, teachers and students.

His modest behaviour and unflinching patriotism won him everyone's trust. Madhu was part of all the political upheavals and revolution in 1947, 1952, '54, '56, '62, '66 '69, '70. He acted as the media man for all. Babul said that Madhu's opinion about his deeds was "Those who thought of the country, it's his obligation and duty to think favourably of them."

He also helped them financially at bad times. Money was always borrowed and given without hesitation for posters, leaflets and other emergencies.

He didn't only stay within the walls of his canteen, he went to this home town in Srinagar and motivated the general public there. He became



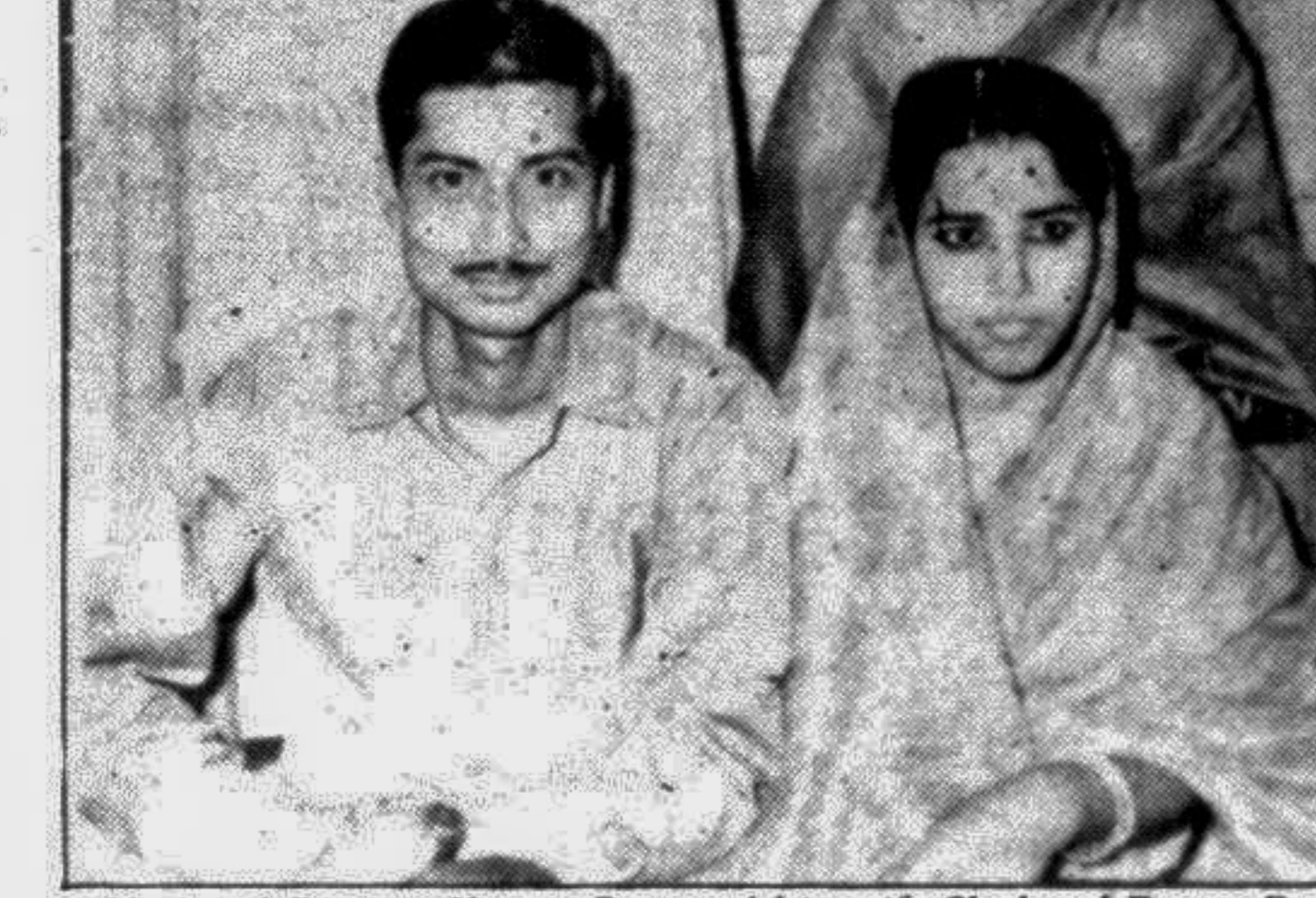
Shaheed Madhu Shudan Dey and his wife Shaheed Jogo Maya Dey.

they died outside.

They stayed awake the whole night praying for others and making plans for the morning. Not knowing what the morning held for them. The wheel of fate was moving fast for them, but in a wrong way.

Madhu was a patriot, that everyone knew but what his dear ones didn't know was his being the target of Razzakars

guns at him. His wife Jugomaya Dey rushed to his side when they pulled the trigger, and tried shelter him with her body, begging to spare his life. The army men pushed them both on the floor of the verandah. Madhu asked everyone in the house to surrender. A few men went inside the house, Madhu's daughter-in-law Bina Rani Dey was their target. She ran from



Shaheed Ranjeet Kumar Dey and his wife Shaheed Reena Rani Dey.

came a martyred on March 26, 1971. In this span of time Madhu was a favourite and trustworthy friend of all the students and leaders. His canteen he inherited from his father Aditya Chandra Dey in 1933. Aditya started his canteen from 1921, the time when the university came into being. Madhu, his second son, turned this place into a throbbing cen-

tre. Unfortunately his name is nowhere mentioned on the university's Shaheed list.

"We took a write-up of our baba to Bangla Academy to be published in the books but we were rejected. The reason, it was only for the intellectuals", Babul said. "We not only miss our father and are robbed of his love, we are also humiliated", Babul felt.

Remembering the Young Ones

THE month of December brings with it strong memories of valour and of hope of pain and of great loss. For the survivors of the Liberation War especially, it is a month that brings back images of friends, family and of strangers who were just as close — all lost forever after giving the sacred gift of freedom. Naila Khan and Lubna Marium, two sisters who worked as medical assistants in the war, recall their experience and the spirit which led them to risk their lives for the sake of liberating their country.

At the time of the war they were only teenagers. Naila a first year student of Economics at Dhaka University and Lubna a second year HSC student at Holy Cross College. Their father, now Cornell Nuruzzaman had joined the Muktiyoddha with his name being frequently an-

ing and sewing again and again", she adds. Soon the advanced medical station had turned into a massive open air hospital with a sea of wounded Muktiyoddhas.

Travelling on to Chhapainawabganj and Rajshahi the advanced medical station finally reached sector seven. "As a girl I felt a bit redundant. I thought to myself that if the war goes on for years, I would become a doctor and be able to help, the cause at same other point.

The war, points out Naila, changed the way they thought of themselves. "We underwent an intellectual transformation. As teenagers we were very involved in Bengali culture but the war made us realize you needed a patriotism of a different kind to win the war. What won the war was the common people fighting."

The role of women, in the liberation movement, is something that should be acknowledged, says Naila. "It was the women who helped hide the Muktiyoddhas after which their entire village would be wiped out, it was the women who spied for the cause and willingly sent their sons to the war."

Being with the Muktiyoddhas, helping them, the two sisters felt they were contributing to the liberation movement. Consumed by their patriotism, there was no fear of death. "A lot of our friends had died, says Lubna. "We thought that if we were to die it would be for our country. "Death was just not on our minds; just standing on Bengali soil was so heart-breaking and inspiring, our prime motive was to liberate the country," add Naila.

Amongst the brutality of war, there were happy moments too at the camp. "We would sing songs and talk to the Muktiyoddhas who would tell us about their village, their mothers and other loved ones," says Naila. "Lubna, my mother and I were the only women amongst so many men, yet not once did they make any rude remark or treat us with any disrespect. They said we reminded them of home of their mothers and sisters." Lubna smiles at the memory of a young Muktiyoddha about her own age, who had insisted that she take his pet monkey as a gift of friendship.

Twentytwo years later, Naila is now a pediatrician at Shishu Hospital and Lubna a classical dancer who also works for Thai Airlines. Their lives are very mundane from those eventful, exhilarating days at the war camps. But nothing can make them forget the spirit of hope and courage that had swept them along with thousands of others towards the dream of a free Bangladesh. "For me, says Naila, I got a chance to show my love for my country; it was a privilege I would not have given up for anything."

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

"But this was not gratifying enough," says Naila, we wanted to be closer to the front especially since even our brother had joined our father." It was meeting a doctor called Dr Moazzem in Kalyani that decided their fate. Dr. Moazzem had just come from the US to help the cause by opening a war hospital. Both Naila and Lubna decided to join him and soon enough they had, in a sense, joined the war too.

They were now a part of what was called an advanced dressing station, a medical unit that would actually move with the Freedom Fighters. This was in late August in Modipur, Sona Majid, with (Bir Srestha) Mohan Jahangir as camp commander.

"We truly saw what war was, says Naila, we saw the Freedom Fighters infiltrate deep into the battle fields, come back and go



Naila Khan (left) and Lubna Marium (right); Remembering the liberation spirit.

nounced on Sadheen Bangla Betar. The family being in danger, had to flee the country crossing the border to Agartala in May 71. For Naila and Lubna however, this was a bit of a disappointment since it meant being distanced from the liberation movement.

"We had already seen the Muktiyoddhas, and villages being burnt to the ground and so already quite militant in our emotions," says Naila, "we were very sure we wanted to join the freedom fighters."

Later the family went to Kalyani one of the biggest refugee camps in Jessore where families of Muktiyoddhas were given quarters. It was at that time that Naila and Lubna started to work actively for the war. Their first project was Khela Ghar — an orphanage for children from the camps, that the two sisters ran along with their mother, Dr Sultana Zaman and two other young women.

Naila and Lubna would also go from camp to camp to locate children, give water purifying tablets, oral saline etc. At the same time, Naila, the elder of the two, joined a singing group that travelled to the camps in a truck, inspiring the people through their patriotic songs.

back again." The medical unit was also near the bunkers and so very close to the fighting.

Both sisters become emotional, recalling the faces of boys some as young as fourteen, who lost their limbs or their lives right before their eyes. "They were so full of enthusiasm; there was so much energy and hope in all of us," says Lubna barely able to fight back the tears, "this energy could have been used later, these were young people who would have done anything for their country."

Although the facts are a little blurry after 22 years, Naila remembers a few inspiring incidents. "It was a true test of endurance," she says, going on to relate the story of a young teacher named Shahjahan who had been injured four times but still came back to the camp so that he could go back to fight the war.

Being so close to the war was no doubt also very traumatic. "At that time," says Naila, "the fields and mango orchards, were full of mines; in the last month of the war all we saw was blood. Every day villagers, men, women and children were losing limbs."

"I remember doing several amputations each day, clamp-

MARCH 28, 1971. Pabna Telephone Bhaban was in the hands of 36 Pakistani soldiers.

The operation is to take over and successfully. The guerillas very tactfully surrounded the Bhaban, their groups were divided, one on the ground, other on top of the roof of Bani Cinema Hall adjoining the Telephone Bhaban.

"Fire!" their commander screamed, the Muktiyoddhas used all their strategies and techniques. They attacked from all sides, fired from the top of the roof of the cinema hall, ultimately overpowering the Bhaban and killed all 36 inside.

Among these daring, brave guerillas was Mithil Khondar otherwise known as Shirin Banu — a woman.

If attires pose as barriers in braving war and freeing the country from the clutches of the enemy, then what use is the dress? It should be abandoned. It should be war from all sides, irrespective of sexes. This was exactly the thought of Shirin Banu in 1971, then a second year Bangla Honours student in Pabna Edward College. Thus the 21 year old set aside her differences and enlisted herself as Mithil Khondokar — a Muktiyoddha (freedom fighter).

Shirin was always actively involved in leftist politics, President of Pabna Chhatra Union, she came from a family where politics was discussed in the dining room, drawing room, even the bedroom. Daughter of the legendary political figure Selina Banu, this was no surprise at all.

Shirin's mother Selina Banu was elected Jukto Front's MP from Pabna and Rajshahi in 1954 and she was a NAP worker till her death, she was also the head mistress of Farida Biddyalaya. Her father was also an underground communist party activist and manager of Comilla's Halima Textile Mill. Her maternal aunts, uncles and cousins were all in politics. In fact in those days, when the air was thick with tension and apprehension; when mothers didn't even let their sons go to war, Shirin's family was definitely an exception. Dressed in a trouser and shirt, she looked a perfect man with her already short hair (this was not particularly cut because of the war). She stood in front of her khalai (maternal aunt) Rakiba Banu, and passed the test excellently. With her approval Mithil Khondokar alias Shirin Banu left home, in a single dress on April 6 or 7, 1971 only to return home after nine months of bloody war on January 1, 1972.

Shirin's family lived in Comilla where her father worked but she came to Pabna in 1970 mainly to study in Pabna Edward College. At that time her mother was nominated to participate in the ongoing election, where she was a candidate with the election symbol Kure Ghar. While still a kid she was a member of Kochi Kanchar

recalled those daring days of her life. "So fool-proof was my disguise that people confused me to be my own younger brother," she laughed.

Her disguise was finally brought to public or found out when a journalist from India's Statesman paper disclosed in a scoop article ran with pictures "A shy girl with a gun." When she came to India, Mithil's days

ended when the wife of Jadavpur University's professor gave her a saree and a blouse to change her dress for the first time in 15 to 16 days. "There is no Shirin Banu in the Muktiyoddha list now, you will find a boy called Mithil Khondokar in our list," she said proudly. She gave away her set of trousers to her brother who was training in some camp in



India.

She stayed in India for 6 to 8 months and during this time initially they made contacts with the Bangladesh government and set up first women's Gobra camp with 136 such girls like her. They all asked for higher arms training and wanted ardently to fight the war, but the problem was shortage of arms. The men didn't get arms at that time so the women's chances were very slim. But this didn't keep them away, they started campaigning and motivation work. This was mainly making people aware of the ongoing Muktiyoddha (liberation war) in Bangladesh. Making the general people understand the intensity of the war. "We worked as Mukti Joddha Shapokhya Communist Party's workers at that time and raised funds, went to camps, collected news it was war all right and we played very important but not active roles," she said. "A vital group with 36 of us was formed and Bibha Sarker, no one actually knows about her, was our camp in charge. Bibha was our leader, the group also had Zinnatara, Lilla Chakroborty, Tushar Kona, all gallant and deserves salutes no doubt." Shirin recalled fondly.

While commenting on the

The Woman who Rose upto the Challenge

Mela and many other such organizations, in one word politics was in her blood. 1970 was a very busy and crucial year for all, during those days Shirin as a leader of Chhatra Union, chanted slogans and conducted many meetings, inspired young men to group together and plan strategies. They made her the leader, irrespective of her sex, she stressed the need for war and said "If necessary women will go to war," and it was these words for her that later made her guilty, when she bade farewell to her group and stayed back. "My younger cousin (brother) teased me saying, why don't you come along now, or was it only for the meetings," said Shirin. And it was only then, that she felt strongly and decided that more could be done than just staying back and cooking food for the fighters or nursing the wounded.

At the initial stage only three persons knew her true identity in the battle field, her two cousins Zahid Hassan and Habib Hassan and Aminul Islam Badsha, president NAP and one of the members of the three-member committee of Pabna's control room. "As we all know Pabna's history was quite different, all the people, the general public united together and defeated the military and on April 10 Pabna was in the hands of the people," she recalled. "A control room was set up with leaders of all political parties and we worked as war workers in the control room, this was our main assignment," she said. Fortified against all attacks this fortress was later, temporarily lost to the enemy force. All the workers and people involved started moving back and she stayed with the last group but ultimately backed to Kushtia, Chuadanga and finally to Darshanardi in India. Mithil learned to fire a gun and she had a police rifle. "The only time I really fought side by side with men in our rank was when we took the Pabna Telephone Bhaban, it was hardly a day's fight," she

ended when the wife of Jadavpur University's professor gave her a saree and a blouse to change her dress for the first time in 15 to 16 days. "There is no Shirin Banu in the Muktiyoddha list now, you will find a boy called Mithil Khondokar in our list," she said proudly. She gave away her set of trousers to her brother who was training in some camp in

ended when the wife of Jadavpur University's professor gave her a saree and a blouse to change her dress for the first time in 15 to 16 days. "There is no Shirin Banu in the Muktiyoddha list now, you will find a boy called Mithil Khondokar in our list," she said proudly. She gave away her set of trousers to her brother who was training in some camp in

ended when the wife of Jadavpur University's professor gave her a saree and a blouse to change her dress for the first time in 15 to 16 days. "There is no Shirin Banu in the Muktiyoddha list now, you will find a boy called Mithil Khondokar in our list," she said proudly. She gave away her set of trousers to her brother who was training in some camp in

We play a vital role in augmenting food supply by producing adequate quantities of quality

ZIA FERTILIZER FACTORY LTD.
BRAHMANBARIA

an enterprise of Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation

DFP (BA) 11465 (15-12-93)