



fiction

The Birth of a Freedom Fighter

by Mohitu Ul Alam

Continued from last week

"DON'T leave your house. I see the whole locality deserted, except for your family and a few others staying behind. But, you are safe here, in your own country, you don't have to leave," the haveli said in his soft voice lifting his huge bulk from the sofa with a single push. The three other jawans likewise stood up, dwarfing the room.

No sooner had the soldiers gone out of the main gate than all the members of the house fell in a fresh discussion about the course of action that should be taken.

The eldest son talked in an agitated voice. "There's no point staying here anymore. The women are here. They came here just to check. After winning possession, the soldiers go for the loot and women. I've read many war stories, it's always the same. If you don't leave, I will, with my wife and children."

"Where'll you go brother?" the engineer son-in-law quipped. "The time to cross the border has passed. They've sealed the Ramgarh border for over a month now, and only the Muktabahini people dare to sneak through the border. And, inside the country, everywhere is the same, both safe and unsafe."

The other son-in-law, the politician husband of the dominant sister, was past his middle age. He hadn't been in any job since his marriage for twenty-two years. He claimed to have actively participated in the Pakistan movement, and till today had remained a staunch supporter of Quid-e-Azam. Years of non-active life had made his position rather dubious to his wife's relatives. He was generally hated by them for his dependence on his wife's income, who was a headmistress at a primary school, and again, everybody in his wife's family knew that he called them a 'mad-family'. He was a very dark and over-size man, and became in these few days the butt of innumerable jokes that the women in the house had been spinning. He kept his vest rolled up above his tummy which gave the impression of forever hanging out loose from his body. Coming to this house for shelter, he had been occupying the middle room previously used by his father-in-law, snoring day and night in deep sleep with his tummy softly heaving like a puppy beside him. He gave himself airs when he spoke, intending his listeners to understand that he had once been in politics, and if he had stuck to it, he would, given his talent, have become a minister.

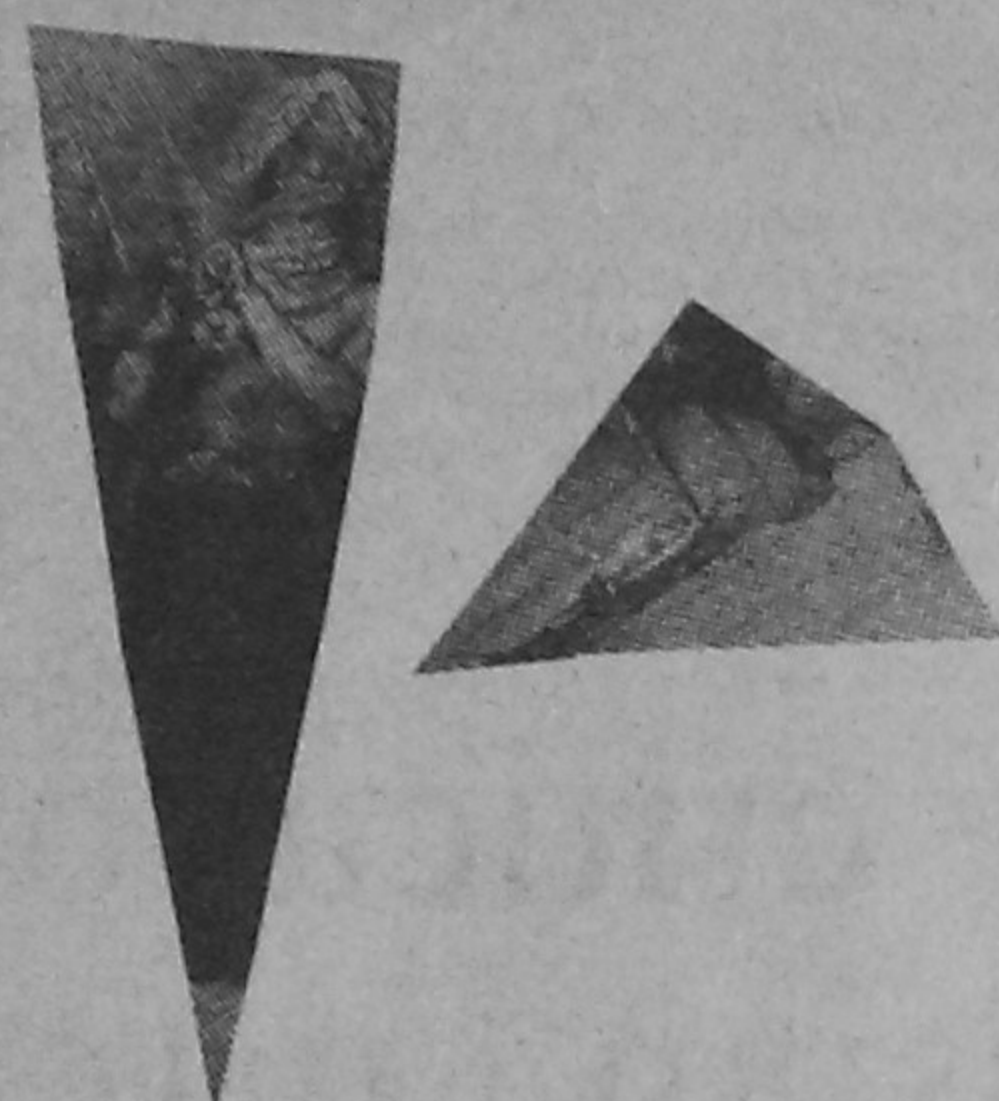
His voice was a touch thick. He cleared his throat before he spoke.

"What the haveli said is correct. Sheikh Mujib never bargained for the independence, he wanted a loose confederation, but it is the Indian agents hiding in the Awami League who have started this confusion. Why, haven't we once fought for Pakistan! What went so wrong that we are now shedding blood! Muslims shedding Muslims' blood."

His flabby tummy lined in several rolls as he ejaculated his words. But he had better be wary, because his brothers-in-law were stung by a desperate sense of courage, and the veteran politician's speech just presented, them with the moment to disgorge their anger. The air hung hot, and the eldest brother opened his mouth. The engineer brother-in-law made an excuse to leave the room on something essential he needed to do.

"Look, Dulabhai," said the eldest brother. "You've no business to talk like that under this roof." He was not shouting, but his voice was hot like a furnace.

"And, this too is too unpollitical to say that Muslims don't drink Muslims' blood," said the middle brother who had joined a private college as a teacher of Political Science just before the



crackdown took place, but who had to cease going to the college due to the turmoil. In the brief period that he had had the chance to teach, he had already tuned himself up psychologically to the role of a teacher, and while he talked he took care that his pronunciations were correct and his language was organized as you would find in the book. He, however, was a shy man, embarrassed, particularly in presence of his seniors. His knack for correct pronunciation actually affected his speech which his elders found distressing, but they respected his self-prestige.

"The question is political, not religious. And I would rather say the question is matter, I mean, commodity — that is, in simple language of business, profit and loss. In the name of Islam, West Pakistan chose to colonize East Pakistan." He looked at everybody around as if it were a group of students he was talking to.

The Dulabhai was comforted as the personalised attack had now shifted to a broader perspective. Because his eldest brother-in-law sometimes appeared to him as nothing but a bundle of emotions. All the people in his in-law house were emotional but the eldest was incomprehensible at times.

He timidly added, "What about the fact then, that we're all Muslims?"

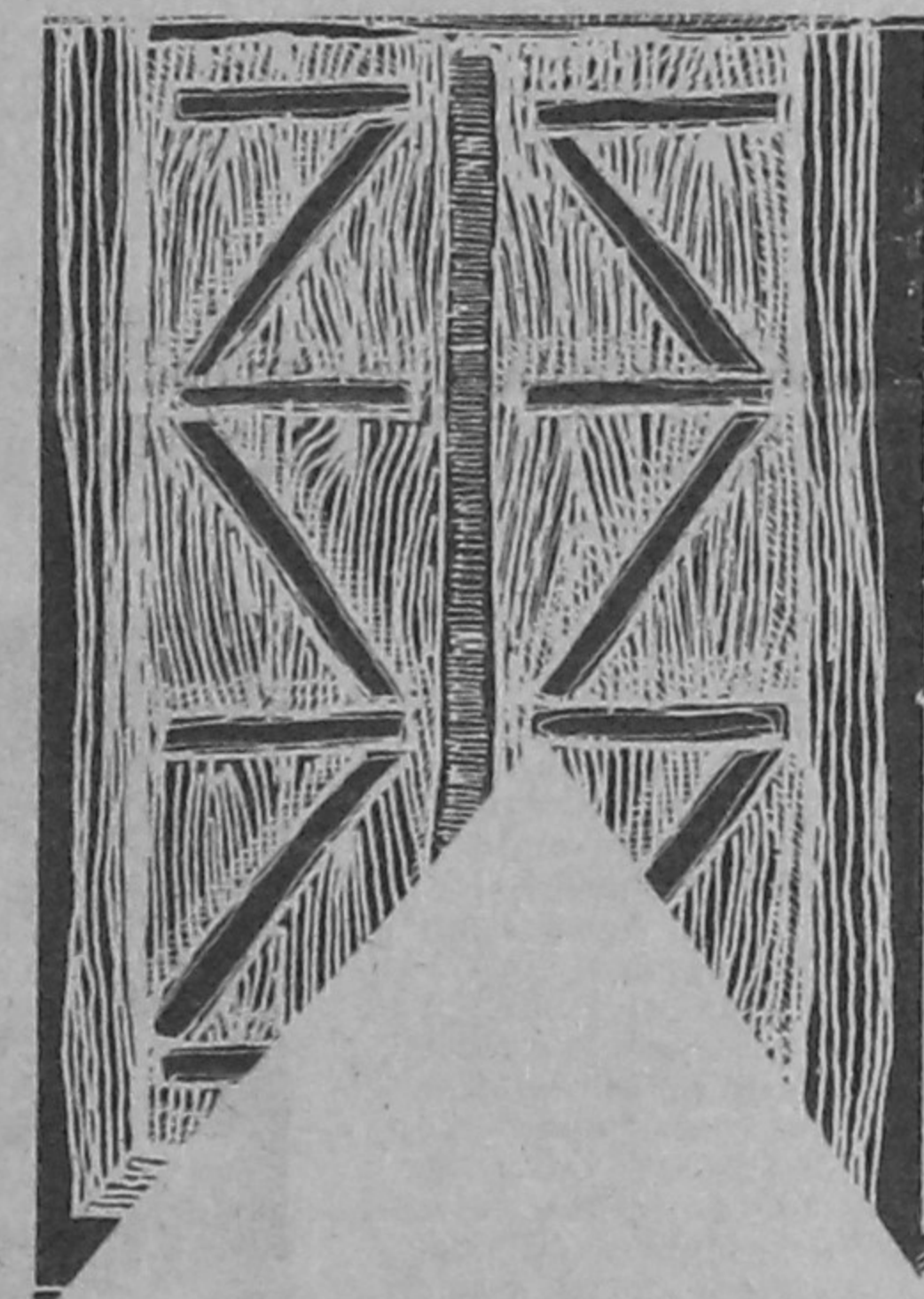
"That's also a notion as weak as a feather is against the force of wind. When political concerns gain ground this feelings — the passion of being a Muslim — becomes confused. Look at the Middle East, you can't say that the Islamic states in that region are united. They're divided on every conceivable issue."

The engineer brother-in-law had finished puffing at his cigarette outside under the coconut tree. Entering, he quickly picked up the thread of the conversation and passed a comment which nobody understood as to which side it went to. His ego was hurt, nobody in the house held as big a position as him. So he chose a safer route and suggested that young people

like Jeeban should be warned not to try anything daring as it would bring disaster on the house. Inwardly he relished the idea of meeting his newly-married wife in bed, if everything else kept peace. He was only married for two weeks before the crackdown.

As he mentioned Jeeban, the dominant sister suddenly remembered that Jeeban was still locked in the bathroom. She rushed at once to the bathroom, switched on the light, and, unbolting the door, found Jeeban, ashen-faced sitting over the commode. Seeing her own little brother covered in fear of death, the elderly sister's heart moistened, and tears came to her eyes when she held Jeeban in a deep embrace. She kissed Jeeban lightly on the head, while tears also forced out of Jeeban's eyes.

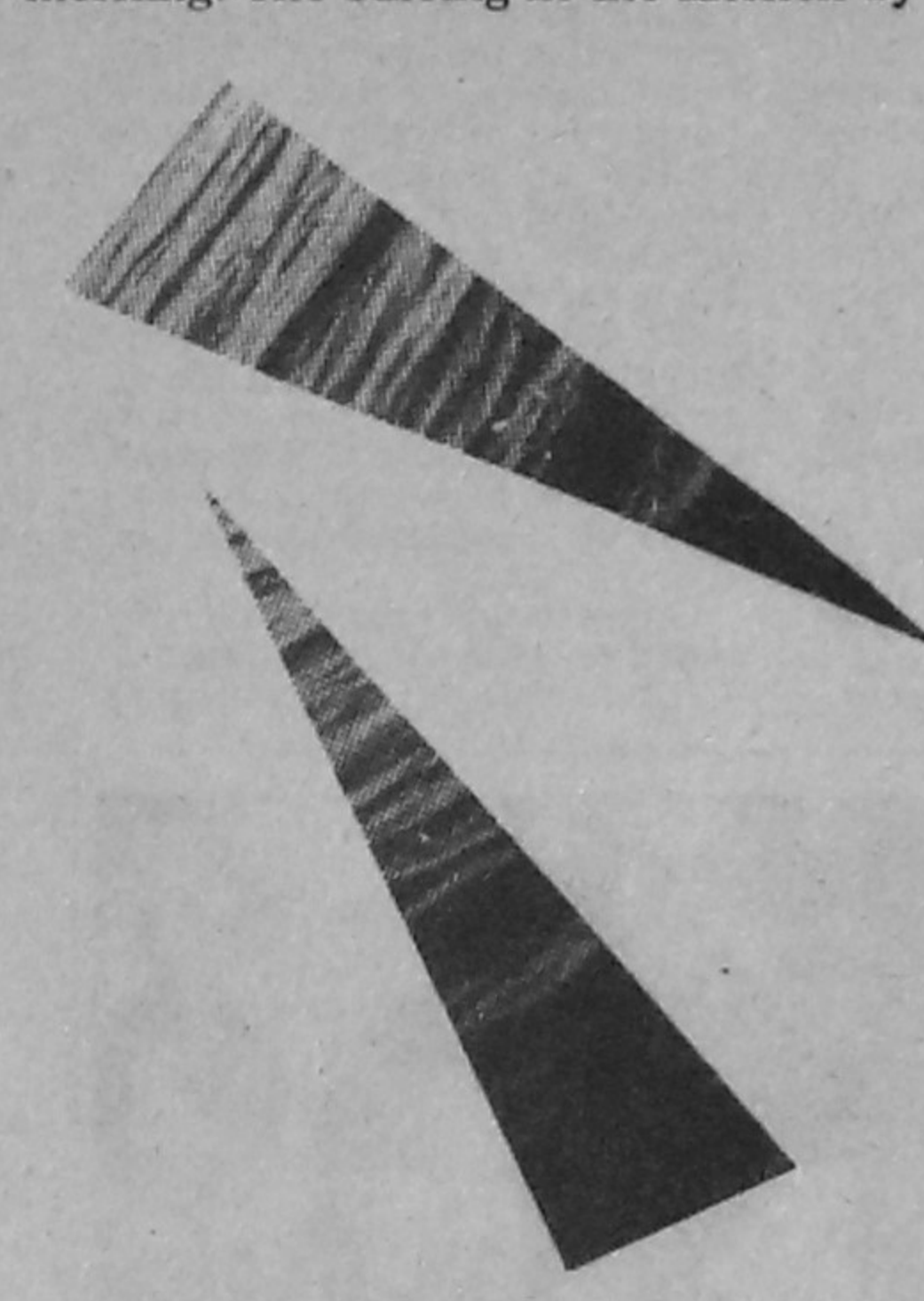
As Jeeban slowly trudged to the dining room, he felt heavy as if his feet were chained. As he went to bed later, the heaviness did not desert him. He had to share his bed with his nephews. The whole night they slept like two corpses, but he was awake till dawn. He had jumbled thoughts, and at the dead of night he heard grenades cracking and shots firing. He was shaken to his bone, afraid of death, for himself and for others. For a moment he thought he knew it was Monju, Belal and Rafique running an operation. They were once his neighbourhood playmates. They were hurling grenades at the enemy, and he was sleeping in his bed! He felt strongly about his family bond, but didn't they? They did not complete school, he did, he was going to a college, and they became freedom fighters, and he was preparing for the examination! The whole night Jeeban was tormented to no end. Monju's father was a mechanic in a garage. He often came home dead drunk. Once Monju's uncle



was almost stabbed to death by his father. Education was absent from that family. Rafique's father was a caretaker of a big merchant from the area. His mother was a big woman always shouting at her neighbours. As Jeeban grew up it did not take long for him to realize the difference between his family and those of his local friends. But the less tidy family atmosphere had instilled courage in his friends, and he was still thinking of his mother. Once as a child when he was going out for school, he passed his mother at the gate who was buying vegetables from a

street vendor. That day he came back home from half-way, as the image of his mother's bending figure examining the vegetables jumped in front of him at every step. An army jeep sped down the street in a deep groan. Another rumbled by. Then silence. The night rode on his open eyes like a military lorry.

The morning broke like every other morning. The stirring in the kitchen by



the women was already sharpening up everybody's appetite. Jeeban was still sleeping when the breakfast was laid on the table. His politician brother-in-law who had gone to the mosque for his morning prayer had collected the information that an attack was made by the insurgents on a petrol pump at Jamal Khan Road and two dead bodies were found. They were of the insurgents, people suspected. At the words 'dead bodies' Jeeban's sleep snapped as if he had been touched by a live wire. He leapt out of his bed.

"Those dead bodies are they!" His brother-in-law did not answer but gave out a loud belch. On his fleshy neck a black patch of eczema peeped over the borderline of his punjabi, and some hairs rooted into the eczema curled up like the feelers of a cockroach. Jeeban lost his patience. "Those dead bodies are they!" he repeated. His raised voice surprising others and himself.

The brother-in-law minced his words: "The insurgents!"

"How dare you call them insurgents!" Jeeban's voice shot out.

The brother-in-law wore a look as if he saw a snake in front of him. The eldest brother quickly sat down on a chair close to Jeeban, softly touching his back with a hand. But Jeeban felt himself beyond any control and said in a threatening voice, "I must say there's something wrong with your blood."

"What, what did you say, boy!" The brother-in-law finally found time to bring words to his mouth. "I must leave this house at once!"

As he rose from the chair the dominant sister and the eldest brother rushed to him to appease him, but he was not to be, even though as he left the room he saw his father-in-law advancing toward the dining hall.

The dining table remained busy for yet sometime, spread over with a cloud of gloom. The children continued their feasting. One of the dominant sister's son who was Jeeban's age looked grave. His young face crimsoned. He munched at the loaves of bread as if they were

foreign things to him. Jeeban began to feel bad. The brother-in-law, however, didn't go out of the gate. He stood there talking to a passerby whom he knew.

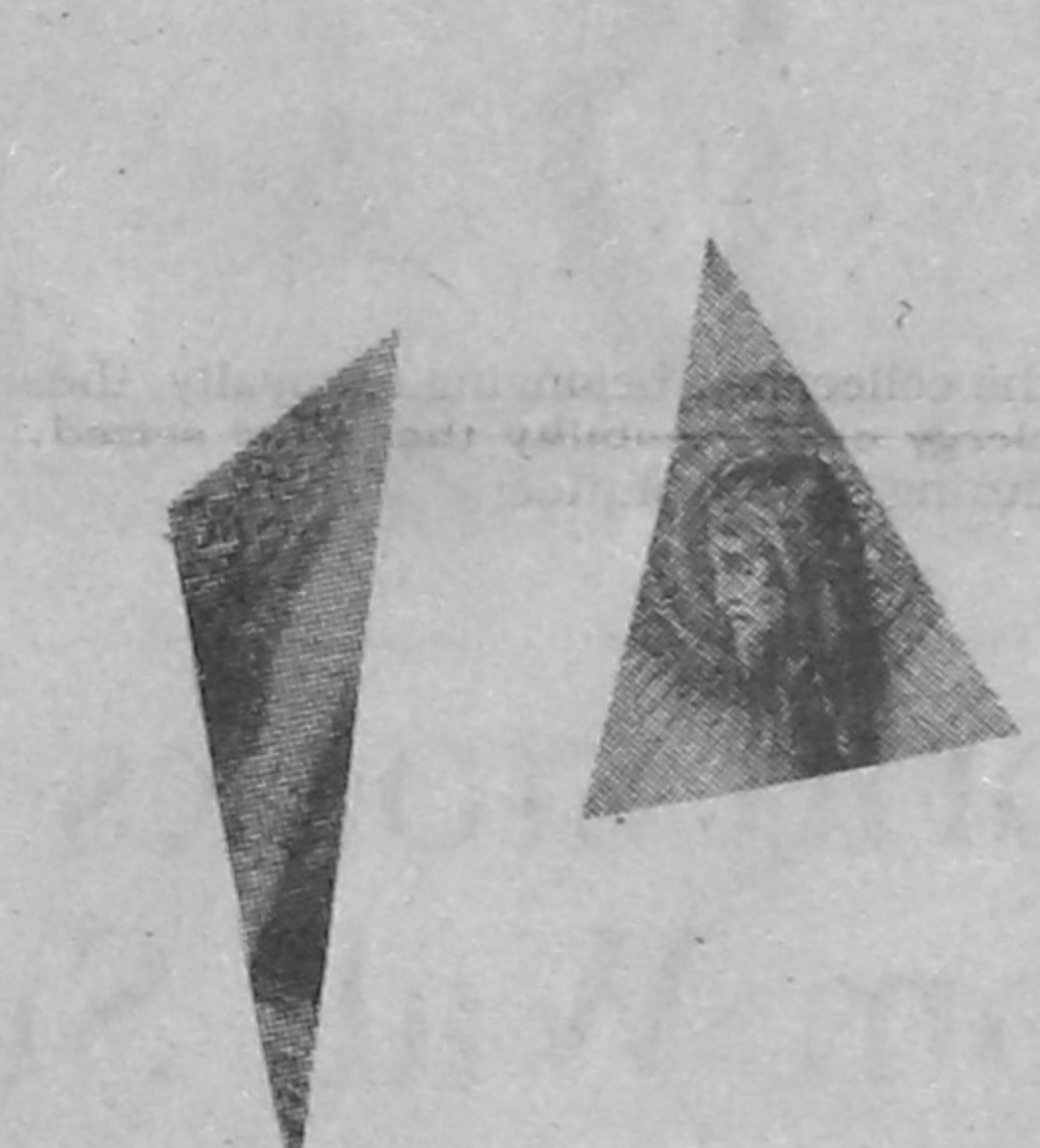
The passerby was actually the ward commissioner, the convenor of the recently constituted peace-committee.

"What did they say, Bhaijan." He was referring to the night incident.

However, talking to the commissioner was unsafe. Leakage was feared. Jeeban's father had the front room of the house stored up with the belongings of the Hindu families. This made the family live under constant fear as they might well be. Jeeban's father, when asked about the discretion of the decision, said that it was his sacred duty as a Muslim to protect the property of his neighbours.

With daylight much of the fear of the night was gone. Jeeban gathered courage to go out in the neighbourhood. He stepped into the lane which was long and narrow and fashioned by boundary walls of adjoining houses on both sides. There were many snaky bends. It would not be surprising if you encountered a Punjabi soldier at the next bend. The environment of the neighbourhood was intimate and homogeneous. Yet when he mixed with Rafique, Manju, and Belal, he never had it gone away from his mind that he had come from a family with a better standing. Moreover none of them went to college as he had. His college friends were growing in number, and his distance from his local friends had already widened when the Pakistan army clamped down.

If his brother-in-law's report was true then who could it be that got killed! Rafique! Belal! Monju!! Yesterday they didn't disclose anything, but the Lafaz petrol pump at Jamal Khan was a potential target. He couldn't immediately check it as very few people



were out on the street. Everybody sort of hushed up. He heard the grenades blowing off at night followed by reports of rifles. His impulse was to know at once if his friends were there. Rafique's comical face came to his mind — a full roundish face with a few stubs of beard fencing his chin. He was a jolly fellow, with a pair of big eyes rolling in small circuits when he cracked a joke, which he did quite often.

Further up the lane it was absolutely deserted. The sun was hot, unblinking, and the blue sky looked dusted. Over the graveyard the giant karui trees

bloomed in early summer flowers — magenta and yellow. To the west of the graveyard, there was a small pocket of slum houses which were burned on the second night of the attack. Jeeban walked on past the house of the commissioner, his hatred thickening as he sighted a jubilant Pakistani flag flying on the house top. On the last bend there was a small betel-leaf shop which was closed, because the owner, a spirited man, got killed on the first night as the Punjabees were advancing. As the tension was building up before the crackdown, he urged the youths of the area to prepare lances by tying up kitchen knives on the heads of iron bolts. The community centre at the head of the lane was in ruins one wall still standing with the top sawed off by a cannon shot. When the ships from the bay started firing on the night of the crackdown, the booming sound of the cannon shook the hearts of the youths roving the area with knife-lances with fear they had never experienced before. Jeeban's mother urged them all to hide under the large bedstead in her room. The vegetable market on the other side of the lane was not destroyed, but it showed no sign of life. A raid by the army was expected anytime as retaliation for the last night's operation.

But Jeeban walked on undeterred. His small room came to his mind where he used to sleep alone and keep his books on two shelves. The room had to be left to the brother-in-law who married his sister just two weeks before the crackdown. His mother's affectionate face floated in his mind, and so did his father's wary but affectionate visage; and the compound of their house with the towering coconut trees, the yard, the gate, the conversation between his brother-in-law and the ward commissioner, all began to crowd his mind in flashes, in unstoppable rushes, and his own pace slowed down. A few years ago while swimming with others in a pond he had almost met with death. As he reached the middle of the pond, the other bank looked so far away that all his courage whisked off him, and his legs cramped, he gulped water, and he was drowning. He looked back. The steps were equally far. A bather saw him and slowly guided him back to the steps by gentle pushes beneath his belly. His friends jeered at him from the other bank, but Rafique came over walking back along the bank. "You should never have looked back," he said.

As he reached the main road, which lay simmering in the boiling sun, he swept his eyes from one end of the road to the other. The shops were closed, and the road was emptied of people and vehicles. Jeeban turned left in the direction of Jamal Khan Road. His spine shivered as a patrolling jeep screeched past him on the melting pitch. He expected a bullet to hit him on the back. Yet he walked on without caring to see what the jeep looked like. Then suddenly he realized that he had no money on him. But as an afterthought it dawned on him that he was wearing the wristwatch that his dominant sister gifted him on his passing the SSC exam brilliantly. A hot wind blew along the empty road, flattening his shirt on his sweaty back, and he felt soothed. His shuddering stopped, and he never looked back. Mohitu Ul Alam is professor of English at Chittagong University.

profile

Gustave Moreau, "The Worker Who Assembled Dreams"

by Florence Raynal

ON the occasion of the centenary of his death, the Grand Palais is holding an important retrospective of his work.

"Never, at any period in time, had watercolours managed to attain that brilliance of colour. Never had the poverty of chemical colours thus brought such a sparkle of jewels, such a glow of stained glass windows struck by rays of sunlight, such glorious and blinding sumptuousness of materials and flesh," the French writer J K Huysmans enthused on the subject of Gustave Moreau's 'Appartition'.

This watercolour, which struck critics by its strangeness, figured among the works exhibited last autumn in the Grand Palais. The exhibition then went to Chicago (at the Art Institute, from 13th February to 25th April 1999) and then to New York (at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, from 24th May to 22nd August 1999). The three key masterpieces, 'Oedipus and

Gustave Moreau, a precursor of Symbolism, was one of the most talented watercolour painters of his time. For the power and originality of his pictures, he is considered as one of the great.

the Sphinx' (1864), 'Hercules and the Lemean Hydra' (1876) and 'Jupiter and Semele' (1895), were accompanied by drawings and studies having served for their creation as well as other versions painted by the artist. The retrospective allowed the public to judge the richness of his dazzling and mysterious style. In his studio, next to minutely elaborate works intended for collectors, the artist kept major paintings which looked unfinished or even abstract.

Gustave Moreau, who was born in Paris on 6th April 1826, in a cultivated middle class family, displayed a strong penchant for drawing from the age of eight. In 1846, this inclination led him to the Ecole des Beaux Arts for three years, where he studied in the class of

the neoclassical painter Francois Picot. There he met the French painter, draughtsman and engraver Théodore Chassériau who was to influence him. But the real revelation came in Italy where he went on a study tour from 1857 to 1859.

The masters of the Renaissance, Raphaël, Michelangelo and, above all, Carpaccio, fascinated him. Back in France, he explored many classical and biblical subjects and was noticed at the 1864 Salon thanks to his work 'Oedipus and the Sphinx' which was considered as a hope for renewal in historical paintings. 'Orpheus', which was presented at the 1866 Salon was bought by the state for the Luxembourg museum. At the 1876 Salon, the artist with sen-

sual and refined aestheticism who had become a master in the arabesque, presented 'The Appartition', a highly successful evocation of the theme of Salme which was to be recurrent in his work.

Withdrawn into himself, in his imaginary and fantasy world, peopled with dreams, visions and bizzarerie, invaded by gods, heroes and fantastic creatures, between literature and idealism, this obscure "worker who assembled dreams" in his own words, whose "subjects could be a symbol of events and aspirations as well as of present-day cataclysms" was popular. His most fervent admirers included the writer J K Huysmans, the poet José-María de Haredia and later the writer Marcel Proust and then the Surrealists who

found a source of inspiration in him.

He was listed among the Symbolists for his biblical (Salome, Moses, Jacob and the Angel and David) or classical subjects (Hercules and the Lemean Hydra, Galatea and Helen) and, in spite of some stern criticism at a time when 'naturalism triumphed, Gustave Moreau attracted collectors. From 1879, he painted a series of watercolours on the theme of La Fontaine's fables. Marked by the death of his "only woman friend", Alexandrine Dureux, he plunged into work on one of his major paintings as a tribute to her memory, 'Orpheus on the tomb of Eurydice'.

This artist, who was acknowledged for the liberality of his teaching, was appointed head of art classes at the

Ecole des Beaux Arts in 1891. He decided to set up a museum to house his works, in his country-style Paris house. In spite of his death in 1898, the project was completed. In his will, Gustave Moreau had taken care to bequeath the means to continue the project to his friend Henri Rupp. The museum was officially inaugurated in 1903. Today, it contains the famous composition 'Jupiter and Semele' and has some 8,000 paintings, watercolours and drawings by the artist. In parallel with the exhibition at the Grand Palais, it will present a few unknown works by the artist.

The first curator of the museum was the famous painter Georges Rouault, one of Moreau's students at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Moreover, Henri Matisse, Albert Marquet, Charles Camoin and Henri Manguin studied in the same class, which is as much as to say that the Fauvism movement sprang up there.