

NON-FICTION

1971: "Jamai"

In his fascinating book *The Year That Was* (reviewed in this page on March 24, 2007) Ishrat Ferdousi published the oral interviews he had taken with a diverse range of people about their experiences during our 1971 War of Liberation. Not all of the interviews were included in the volume. Here is one previously unpublished narrative, the tale of Mohammad Tofazuddin, a farmer from Kuriaram.

I was married on the 13th of Falgun. My bride was 12 years old and there was curfew in the land. My in-laws' home, where my wife still lived, was about 12 miles from our house. In Joshti I went with my brother-in-law as a farm labourer to harvest rice and jute in a sandbar island called *Doi-Khawa*, across the Brahmaputra River and close to the Indian border. My primary interest was the festivity, singing, et cetera, that accompanied the work and we planned to stay there a month.

When we were on the road, we turned around to see that fires were raging in the direction of our village. After three days we crossed the Brahmaputra in the *mahajan's* boat.

A narrow, tar-soled road had in effect become the border, leaving a thin slice of land 'free', but people from either side could not cross easily because of the military traffic.

My in-laws' house was on 'free' territory. My father-in-law wouldn't allow me to go back. "Look," I insisted, "I have a younger sister. Even if I get killed on the way I still have to try and get to her. I have no news of her."

My sister Saleha, who was seven, had only been a year old when our father had died, and three when our mother passed away. I had practically brought her up and used to cook and feed her with my own hands. I had left her with my maternal uncle.

The following day I waited in a jute field near the road. A military vehicle passed by every five minutes. I calculated the time, then sprinted. I dashed across the road, didn't look behind even once, and then my feet were plowing through the paddy, or just plain mud, as I raced on. I fell down a few times but was up and running once again. Until an old man barred my way.

"Stop, baba, stop!" he cried. "There's nothing to fear now. The way you have been running, you'll start a panic."

I had run a mile. So I rested a bit. He gave me a *biri* and lit one himself. We smoked. Then I thanked him and walked home.

By the Mercy of Allah, everyone was safe and my sister was all right. But all the Hindus had fled across the border.

I had a Hindu friend called Khagen. We were very close. We even got married about the same time, he a couple of months before me, so when I didn't find him my heart broke and I couldn't hold back my tears. I thought I'd never see him again. Before he left he told my sister: "If my friend is alive and returns home ask him to get in touch with me."

I went to his in-laws' place; it was the last village before the border but the house was deserted except for his father-in-law, who had become blind about ten years earlier. The Muslims of the area were feeding him and looking after him but the rest of the property had been looted clean--by other Muslims--but he was unmolested.

"*Jamai* (he called me that because his *jamai* was my friend), they've all left. I would've slowed them down. But if you take me to them, I shall be in your debt."

I decided to try it. We trekked two miles to the border (there was no policing at that time). Three miles inside India we found Khagen with the rest of his family. They were sheltering in a school called Shenti but food was scarce.

Khagen's in-laws told me: "Go to our fields and take what you can. If you can bring some for us, good. If not, they're yours."

I went and brought load of paddy but Khagen was not amused. "How're we going to eat the paddy? We need rice." We sold the paddy and I went back. This time I had the paddy husked and boiled before I took it back.

The Pakistanis had not been able to enter Phulbari thana. They tried a few times but our freedom fighters drove them away.



artwork by sabyasachi hazra

But there was no work. So I started this 'cross-border trade' (also called 'smuggling' for technical reasons). Jute was cheaper on our side whereas rice and flour cost less in India. It kept me going. Then I heard that household utensils made of valuable metals, all looted from Hindu houses, were being sold by the sack-load, 200 rupees a sack. "Bring the stuff to the Indian side and you can get 500 rupees per sack without asking. Even if you just get it across the Teesta River to Phulbari Thana you'll sell for a similar price."

But I would have to pick them up from the Pakistani-controlled area. Each sack could weigh between one to one-and-a-half maunds. But it was tricky. It could be filled with, say, five pitchers. But if it was packed with plates then the story was different, then there would be a lot of them. "It depends on your luck."

Late in the afternoon I went to the market and bought a loaded sack, 200 rupees, as told. It weighed about one-and-a-half maunds. I loaded it on a raft and floated down the Teesta to an Indian market. I sold the lot for 1500 rupees!

On my third trip, my raft was about a hundred yards from the hostile shore when a flashlight came on. I slipped into the water with the loaded sack that was secured to the

raft by a rope. Moments later, the stillness was shattered by savage firing. The raft jerked repeatedly and I felt it each time a bullet struck but didn't realise it, never having been a shooting target before. The firing stopped after 10-15 minutes but I still dare not raise my head. With only my nose above the water I pushed the raft along for more than an hour.

I finally reached the other shore and was trying to secure the sack when some freedom fighters suddenly showed up.

"Where did you come from?" they demanded. "Did you hear the firing?"

"Yes," I said and then told them the rest of the story. There was a stunned silence. Then they played their flashlights raft, which was made of banana plants. There were many pockmarks where the bullets had gone in. They looked at me in awe. By Allah's mercy I was unscathed.

"Never attempt such a thing again!" they cried. "You could have easily lost your life!" I was also a long way from where I had planned to land. They gave me directions and helped me retrieve the sack.

After I returned home I was bedridden with fever for the next few days. I think it was the realisation that if I had been killed back there, my folks might never have known my fate.

I continued my business, jute from this part and flour and rice from India --but never again looted material.

One night, after dinner, firing started. We ran to our 'trenches', half a dozen pits in the ground. Bullets were hitting trees in our yard. It lasted a couple of hours. In the morning I went out and found that the Pakistanis had left, but two of our valiant freedom fighters had been killed--a Hindu and a Muslim. I knew Gulshu bhai, the Muslim guerrilla but only just, didn't know where he was from or whose son he was. The Hindu boy had joined the group just a few days earlier. The two had no relatives in the area. We didn't have the resources to cremate anyone so we buried them both.

Then the Indian soldiers arrived, Sikh soldiers, and they made camp. We couldn't understand their language but the freedom fighters explained that they needed porters to carry their stuff, mostly ammunition, from Nawashi bazar to Jagla bazar. I'm used to carrying stuff on my head and made a few trips with some others.

One night, there was a tremendous battle at Bhurungamari. The following day, I was carrying my jute to the Indian market and had to cross a road when I saw an Indian army truck, disabled, and they were not letting people go near it. It was covered by a khaki tarpaulin and just like water (melted ice) trickles down the side of trucks carrying hilsa fish, blood was flowing down and gathering in great puddles. No one had to tell us that it was carrying dead soldiers, Indian or freedom fighter we couldn't know. That the Pakistanis were responsible for it we had no doubt. We were struck dumb and sat down on the roadside. I could not even carry the jute I had brought along. A long time later, another truck came and towed away the stricken vehicle. A man approached me for my jute. I sold it to him for what he asked, which was much less. I also didn't feel like bringing anything back. I was sick for the next couple of days.

After a night of terrific battle the Pakistanis finally left. In the morning I took a bicycle and pedaled to Nageswari bazar. It was deserted except for half a dozen curious loiterers.

There was big Pakistani bunker (on what is today the Keramati High School grounds) and when some of us approached, we heard someone call out, "Who's there?" It was a woman! But we still couldn't see her. "Brothers, don't come any closer!" she

cautioned. "The Pakistanis have kept bombs and they may go off and kill you all!" "Why don't you come out?" we asked. "Brothers, I cannot."

"Why?" "I don't have any clothes on." I bunched together my *gamcha* and a shirt given instantly by a student and threw it into the bunker. When she came out it was a sight I would never forget. She was a young girl, fair and pretty. It was her physical condition that left us speechless. Her cheeks and neck looked like a cat or monkey had been at her. Her body was a mass of wounds, some dried, others still raw. We asked her where she was from. "Rajarhat." A Hindu, she had been trying to cross the border along with her father and brother when they were apprehended by Pakistani soldiers. They killed the men and brought her along for their pleasure. Crying, she described her ordeal. Who had done what! She narrated, things that I can repeat only perhaps to my wife and no one else.

An elderly person, a prominent member of the village, gave her temporary shelter. (These violated mothers and sisters for me have a place above any leader or freedom fighter).

Then a non-Bengali man with a young girl blundered into our area. He was a soap factory owner from Kurigram town and perhaps they had wanted to go to India, the border being so close but they were caught and everyone joined in the beating. The two were already dead when we kicked them down the canal's edge. Someone wanted to bury them in the same grave but people had heard him call her "Ma" and she had called him "Abba", so we planted them in different holes. Later, however, I felt very sorry for my acts.

Three days later, dogs or jackals had pulled them out from their shallow graves and feasted--and hundreds of currency notes were all over the place, floating in water, sticking to mud or fluttering in the wind. I didn't touch any, but others were retrieving them quite enthusiastically. No one had searched the two for money or valuables earlier, they had been too busy killing them.

Shortly afterwards, at Nageswari, we went to see a well that had been filled up with dead bodies. The well was later sealed.

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On Bangladeshi-Australian writer Adib Khan's new novel *Spiral Road*

Adib Khan was born in Dhaka. He was still a student of the English department at Dhaka University when he left in 1973 for Monash University in Australia. Subsequently, he began teaching creative writing at Ballarat University in Victoria. He is currently back at Monash University, working on a PhD in creative writing while continuing to teach at Ballarat. Adib Khan's 1994 novel *Seasonal Adjustments*, popular with our *probashis* for its portrayal of post-colonial disillusionment with Bangladesh, was the winner of the 1995 Commonwealth Writer's Prize for best First Book as well as the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award for Book of the Year. His subsequent novels were *Solitude of Illusions*, *The Storyteller* and *Homecoming*.

Below Rebecca Sultana looks at Adib Khan's latest novel *Spiral Road*, published in June of this year from Harper Collins, Australia, in which the author has, after a protracted period, returned again to Bangladesh and its various seasons of discontent. The return may be more than fictional. "One of the perks of an academic scholarship," he recently emailed me, "is a generous travel grant to any part of the world for research. So, a trip to Bangladesh is not out of the question in the near future."

Thomas Wolfe notwithstanding, you can go home again, at least for the short term!

---The Literary Editor

Way back in October 2005, I had asked Adib bhai about his latest venture and he had hinted at working at a novel set mostly in Dhaka and the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Later on he was more specific, suggesting (in his own words) that his "original intention was to write about the way a proud and 'aristocratic' Bengali family implodes after it discovers that one of its young members is involved with a terrorist group training in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. But somehow the novel became complicated with the personal and complicated lives of the Alams. The various strands of the novel include honour killing, a secret love affair, loneliness and the emotionally stunted life of the Bengali-Australian protagonist who goes back to Dhaka to see his family." This succinct description sums up the novel well.

Adib Khan's new novel *Spiral Road* (Harper Collins, Australia; 362 pp.) could not have come at a more opportune time. Given the volatile political climate in Bangladesh with the arrests of the Islamicist militants and the quick implementation of their capital punishment, *Spiral Road*, too, deals with the rising terrorism in the world and reveals the existence of a stronghold in Bangladesh itself. Revolving around the Alam family, a young member of the said family is found to be involved in the movement with tragic repercussions on the rest of the members.

When I had first heard about the inclusion of Chittagong Hill Tracts, my initial inclination was to think about the long-standing unrest between the indigenous population and the government troops. But the Hill Tracts only play as setting. Again, to quote the author himself: "It is precisely because Chittagong Hill Tracts has a volatile history that I chose to use it as a setting for a terrorist base. Most of the action, however, takes place in Dhaka and the ancestral village of the family. I figured that indigenous people would not be too concerned about subversive activities around them since they have a long history of grievance against the governments of both Pakistan and Bangladesh. I know the region fairly well and I had several Bangladeshi friends who were immensely helpful with their knowledge of the Hill Tracts."

Even so, the novel is more the account of Masud Alam, an Australian-Bangladeshi, who comes to visit Dhaka to see an ill father, to reconnect with a family with whom he had virtually no contact for years and to find himself entangled into the larger issues of international terrorism and counter terrorism. The authorial intent might be to emphasize more on the corrosive effects of terrorism on a family rather than the politics of terrorism itself; nonetheless, the movement does often seem to tower over the more personal stories.

Several Islamic political parties are identified as well as individuals, including the dreaded Bangla Bhai. Masud is quickly brought up-to-date into the local political scenario by his Dhakaite brother: "In the north, there's a fellow trying to establish an Islamic state. Then there's Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh, Islami Oikyo Jote, Jamaat-e-Islami, Jagrata Muslim Janata... A new political party crops up every week. And no matter what, a revolution is always on the agenda" (40).

International espionage encroaches in the guise of Steven Mills, a fellow traveler on the plane home whom Masud initially dismisses as an obnoxious passenger. Turns out Mills is an Australian secret service agent working in cohorts with a CIA operative and already has a profile on Masud, on account of his being the uncle of a terror suspect. Also, while in Australia, the fact that Masud was sent a missive by "like-minded brothers" to join their *majlis* do not help matters in his profiling. Once in Bangladesh, despite his firm belief that the country does not contain a terrorist base, Masud is gradually disproved when he finds an inquisitive journalist being killed and himself being cautioned and then offered a counter spying position by Mills. Masud declines.

What seems to be the larger aspect of the novel is an attempt to make sense of what makes young Muslim men go the "fanatic" way. The narrator is never judgmental or accusing but tries to decipher the disillusionment that his nephew goes through. The fact that Masud himself had his grand rhetoric of patriotic duties disintegrated facilitates his understanding of Omar's transformation. Like Farid, in the movie

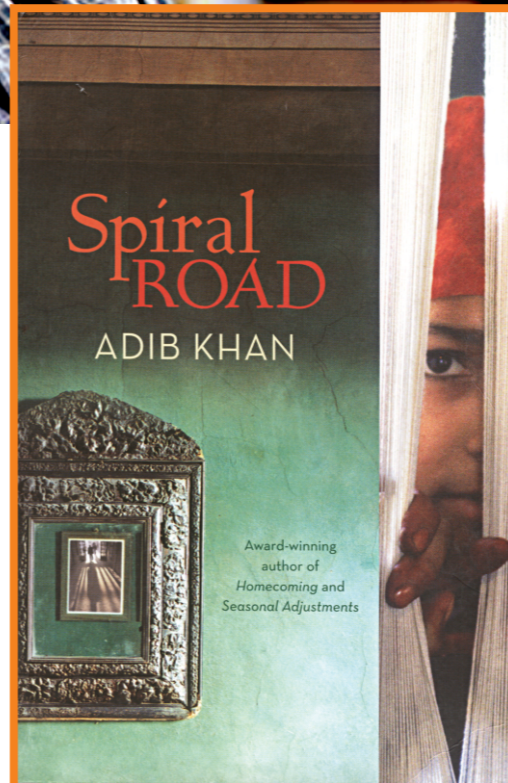


*My Son the Fanatic* or Karim in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Omar, his nephew, has his reasons for seeking justice with "like-minded brothers." Omar is U.S. educated and was well-employed. And then 9/11 happened. One day he is picked up and asked the routine questions. Interrogation followed. The nightmarish experience, Omar confesses "crushes your ego with the force of a hammer hitting an egg. You shrink into a cowering mess, covered in sweat, blood and piss. Two broken ribs, bruised chest, legs and arms. A crushed finger" (288). This indignity, then, leads to a larger solidarity with oppressed people of one particular faith, transcending national borders. Masud is forced into Omar's world and fortunate enough to come out, wiser but troubled.

Of the other things in the novel, a secret love affair, impecunious aristocrats and an old uncle marrying a teen aged girl are less consequential to the terror plot. These provide insights into the disintegration of old fangled values of the Zamindari era when conflicted with the more egalitarian concepts of the post-Zamindari period.

Masud Alam reminded me much of Iqbal Chaudhary of *Seasonal Adjustments*. While it was only Masud who fought in the independence war, both suffer from post-war disillusionments and abandon Bangladesh for Australia. Both disconnect from family, to return after a prolonged absence to pick up the threads where it was left off. But of course, as Salman Rushdie so aptly puts it: "...we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands..." (*Imaginary Homelands* 10). Iqbal Chaudhary, thus, returns to Australia, dejected. Masud's intentions are left more ambiguous.

And both have concerned mothers bent on a matrimonial mission for their errant sons, with a vengeance.



There are certain things that I wished were more elaborated. Masud harbors dark secrets that tend to send him into self-reflecting gloom. In conversations with his favorite nephew and through his own narratorial insights, some light is shed into his secrets. But I came out with the feeling that there is more to what he reveals and I finished reading the novel with the nagging feeling that I really did not get to know what it is. The family secrets that Masud gets intimations of remain unearthed and not further investigated. Perhaps, this is to emphasize Masud's half-hearted attempts in his rekindling of home-ties. He has already become a lost soul.

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Literature EXTRACT

*Spiral Road*: poor lighting at the dhaka club

With foresight Zia tells me on the way to Dhaka Club, I can shape my future in any way I choose. There's a fortune to be made in the garment industry. I'm advised to ponder the benefits of entrepreneurial initiative. Age is not a valid excuse for neglecting the opportunities of a new beginning -- and behold! Zia turns even the limitations of a developing nation into a landscape of dazzling possibilities. Servants, luxury house, resplendent with imported furniture, works of art and electrical gadgets, cars, overseas holidays, investments, an ever-swelling bank account. Unlimited success. Power. New friends. Even a future in politics. Above everything else, the supreme advantage of returning home. What else could I demand from life? Gregorian chants, mantras, solitude and the time to plant trees? Equilibrium? But I remain quiet.

...The night air is thick with smoke and fumes. There's ceaseless movement of people on the road and the footpaths. The traffic is as debilitating as a clogged artery. The heavy rumble of trucks and the metallic noise of auto-rickshaws -- all this sound is relentless. We inch forward in the snarl.

A Hindi song from one of Bollywood's celluloid nightmares blares from a roadside food stall. Between the vehicles agile boys weave, plying their wares for sale. We are offered *muri* and spiced peanuts, plastic toys and bios. One small fellow pushes the palm of his hand against my window. From my side, I slap a high five. He looks bemused and then breaks into a toothless grin.

"Don't encourage them!" Zia snaps. "I can't understand why you lack ambition." Garish neon signs flicker seductive messages of consumerism to uninterested pedestrians. Someone has damaged an IBM sign next to the brightly lit billboard espousing the virtues of flying with a popular Middle Easter airline -- the model aircraft has been forcibly tilted, so that it appears to be nose diving into the defaced cardboard container.

Just up ahead, a truck has broken down. We grind to a stop in a line of cars. A policeman waves a torch and begins to direct the traffic along a single lane of the road. Someone in front of us yells abuse through a car window. Another policeman blows a whistle and stops the vehicle.

"The police here are extremely sensitive during the day to accusations of corruption," Zia says. "But at night... That poor man will pay heavily for his indiscretion. The free market economy thrives after dark."

Angry voices. Several cars rev their engines, adding to the din. A pushcart, piled high with furniture, clatters past us. I feel powerless, boxed in the stationary car.

After nearly twenty minutes, we begin to move again. Boldly, Zia threads the car through the seething street to Dhaka Club. I'm sweaty and palpitating when we get there.

"Not much point in arriving here after midnight." Zia is unmoved by the ordeal. The club rooms are dismal. Tacky furniture and poor lighting. But there's a feverish energy in the dining area, as though matters of political urgency are being loudly discussed over sumptuous meals. Everywhere middle-aged men are eating and drinking. The bar is well stocked and business is brisk. We hear raucous laughter and high-pitched arguments.

An unfamiliar face, I'm scrutinised. I have memories of a less frenetic atmosphere in the club. The swimming pool was rarely crowded and, during the afternoon, the main club room was a regular sanctuary for privileged teenagers mimicking adult behaviour. No one ever told us the limits of how much we could eat or how much we could spend. The families picked up the tabs without admonishment. This was the network of the younger generation of powerful people -- concealed, wasteful, and aspiring towards executive positions in the world of our elders.

Zia waves to several men eating mutton biryani. I order a beer as we scan the menu. We order chicken tikka, prawn *dopiazza*, pea pulao and naan. "This is where we solve the problems of the world," Zia declares. "The Taliban either disappear or become reasonable; suited politicians develop a social conscience; Israel and Palestine sort themselves out. A form of global egalitarianism is usually in place by midnight, before most of us stagger out to our cars. Then it's home to our wives, children and debts."

"The unseating of imperialism brought about by altruistic vision, plans of noble deeds and gluttony." "Great dreams need to be nourished."