

SHORT STORY

Crimson Sun

DITTO SYED-HAQ

**I**t was not the drip-drip-drip of water from the leaves of the mango trees that awoke him, nor was it the gnawing pain in his side that caused him to open his bloodshot eyes to the impenetrable darkness. Rather, it was the realisation of what had passed before, those terrible events of what could not have been more than mere hours ago, and yet seemed to him an eternity, another lifetime. Chandrapaul Ghosh started as he awoke, the dampness that seeped through his *lungi* bringing with it waves of painful awareness that flowed like contraband liquor through his veins, from the soles of his feet, over the leathery skin of his scabbed knees, through his emaciated torso and into that space where it was rumoured that some men were said to have a heart. He did not feel he had a heart just then, only a dull, throbbing, juddering piece of flesh within the confines of his ribcage that screamed "Bachao-Bachao!" incessantly with every beat. Chandra was no stranger to prejudice; he was not unacquainted with mindless hatred. He had known his time had come ever since that first burst of gunfire and the bloodshed had begun. What hope for him when the very men that prostrated themselves before the Great Creator and professed allegiance towards their "brotherhood" had themselves drawn swords upon each other?

Now, lying miserably within that clump of mango trees, Chandra had precious little energy to think about the complexities of human nature, and yet thoughts continued to float around in his head like the Aaleya that fluttered and hovered above the paddy-fields. He winced with the effort of raising his body to an upright position, the pain searing through his torn, ragged side and noticed that the girl was still with him. He had stumbled upon her in his fierce dash from the village, stumbled upon her diminutive form cowering in the shade of the trees as he ran through the night. For an instant, he had thought it was a trap, that she had been laid out as bait and yet, a small voice inside his head had told him otherwise. She was a slip of a girl, not a day past fifteen and Chandra, in his old age, could not help but think of that day -- long, long ago -- that he too had taken his bride. She, too, had been fifteen. She, too, had cried. But it had not been for the cruelty of soldiers for which she had shed her tears. Her grief had been that of the unwanted, the untouchable, of crippling poverty and the bloody legacy of this impossible partition. He remembered the day they walked seven times around the fire as clearly as he could remember the seven rounds of bullets that had smashed into their home just hours before. He thought of his wife



and the penultimate image of her that would remain forever etched into memory. Her sweet form, sublime, supine on their shanty bed; the vermilion mark on her forehead trickling down, down, further down as her still-warm blood traced in rivers across the contours of her face.

Chandra looked at the girl. Her eyes open, impassive as before. Had she even registered the fact that he had been asleep? Her face twitched convulsively in what appeared to be a semblance of some terrible precognition, and yet Chandra could not be sure. He knew

that she did not have long to go, that the pain in her body and her tormented mind would subside in time as surely as the receding tides as the blood congealed within her open wounds. Looking into those glazed Hilsa-eyes, Chandra could not help but feel a pang of envy, a feeling only to be overcome by immense grief as he watched her drift slowly on towards blessed release. No, it would not be long now and, with her parting, Chandra knew that then he would experience the suffocating, hollow emptiness that was reserved solely for one who was truly alone.

They cringed as they clung against one another, Hindu and Muslim, old and young, man and girl united in their fear. Together, they flinched with each burst of gunfire that peppered the stillness, every shower of sparks that erupted across the night skies as if in obscene parody of a Celebration of Light. But there was no longer any light in this Godforsaken land. All that remained was the darkness of bitter hatred that oozed like coal-tar through the hearts and minds of men. Chandra did not have a heart anymore; he barely had his

mind. They had taken those along with his possessions, his livelihood and every reason he could ever have had for being.

Now, all he felt was an overwhelming tiredness. The Aaleya continued their spectral dance and filled his mind with visions of deep, green fields, with images of a land tilled with his bare hands and that of his father's before him. Bullocks pulled carts through dusty fields as a lone kite billowed in the sky. Chandra gazed up at his namesake; the full, cold moon slung low in the sky and wept at a child for the life he had left behind. The eastern horizon reddened with the sanguine glow of approaching dawn as his attention drifted back to the girl. She appeared to be trying to say something, her quivering lips forming silent shapes in the half-light, but he could not make out the words. Taking her hands gently in his own, Chandra shuffled closer until he could feel the moist dew of her fevered breath against his cheek. "Say..." she murmured as her frail body heaved with a sharp intake of breath, "Say; I seek Refuge in the Lord of the Daybreak" she whispered. They were the first words she had spoken that night; they were to be her last.

Her breathing came in ragged gasps as she convulsed and strained rigid against the trunk of a mango tree and Chandra began to whimper with the realisation that her time was near. But even as her eyes closed, her head sinking gently onto her bosom as if in prayer, he himself began to feel a release that was at once communal and still entirely his own. Soaring alongside the newly-departed soul, soaring high, higher into the skies, his mind describing lazy circles like the mighty *cheel* in the vast expanse of nothingness around him, looked down detachedly upon the scene below -- the glowing embers of the fire that had been his home, the prone body of his dead wife, the violated body of the girl. It was of no consequence now; it didn't matter anymore. Staggering painfully to his feet, he was vaguely aware of the sound of approaching gunfire as he made his way towards a clearing at the edge of the trees. They would be upon him soon. But nothing mattered anymore. Hobbling on towards redemption, Chandra discarded everything that he had ever held dear: his morality, his sins, even those few minor virtues. Discarded them ruthlessly, one by one, like the filthy rags that they had become; nothing mattered anymore. Arms outstretched in a Krishna pose, Chandrapaul Ghosh limped out into the line of fire as the crimson sun rose slowly over fields of green.

Ditto Syed-Haq is a Bangladeshi living and working in London. He is currently at work on a novel.

NON-FICTION

1971: "Bangabandhu Club"

(In his 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, story of **Mushtaque Ahmed Khan**, then aged 17, a student in Bogra.)

and saw Peshta, a tough activist, already mobilising people. "The war has begun," he was telling the assembled folks. "We have to fight, we have to train ourselves." When I came back home around 5:00 in the morning I could see my family had been very worried about me. Manju mama was waiting with a stick. "Where had you been?" he demanded, and followed it up with harsh dressing down. I told my father that no one could sit at home at a time like that. He told me it was all right. So avoiding mama, I went out again. A few hundred people had gathered at our playground. I saw dozens with guns single- and double-barreled shotguns and hunting rifles -- doing drills with a number of armed policemen and Ansars. Already, I thought.

we had nothing to do all day long we decided to clean up the place -- the small chilla room, the mosque and our family graveyard next to it. My grandfather was buried beside the grave of the pir shahab.

Long ago, when my grandfather was a young man, a deranged fakir used to be a regular there. The man or 'pagol', as he was commonly known, would often spend the night in the mosque. One night he was sitting there when my grandfather came and sat down behind him and began his zik'r. The fakir suddenly reached behind, grabbed my grandfather by the scruff of his neck and in one movement swung him in the air over his shoulders to plonk him down in front. Where did the strength come from? My grandfather could never explain. One day, the 'pagol' came and put his earthen bowl on the roof of the chilla room and entered it after telling my grandfather, who was the only one around, to bolt it from the outside. My grandfather did as ordered but afterwards, went and told everyone. People rebuked him saying that the 'pagol' might injure himself or worse. They all came and the chilla room, still bolted, was opened. It was empty. The 'pagol' was never seen again.

We finished clearing the place which had had a wild look to it earlier. Now it looked nice and clean. We were admiring our work when we discovered some eggs -- snake eggs -- and destroyed them without a thought. After that we went to bathe in the pond. We were drying ourselves when we saw two large snakes, and they seemed to be playing. We immediately grabbed sticks and stones but my uncle stopped us: "Why? They have not attacked you and you have been working in the area for hours. Let them be!"

We had seen snakes performing before with charmers but this spectacle was so different. The entwined pair made small pecks at each other in a strange rhythm, beautiful, graceful, haunting, at once play, at once dance. Then my aunt said: "They are not snakes! Get a bed-sheet quickly!" Someone went and got a large bed-sheet, which was carefully spread. As if on cue, the snakes slithered and rolled onto it and began their extraordinary dance anew.

We were mesmerized by the serpents' movements, and watched in wonder as if the passing of time had been arrested. It went on for quite a while and we were experiencing all that along with half the village. Then quite suddenly, just as they had appeared, they disappeared, slithering off the bed sheet onto the grass. And then -- nothing!

A few weeks later my father and I started for Bogra town. We saw some agitated people running around. I went to our house in Malotinagar. Abba said he'd join me after he drew his salary. He worked at the post office. They told us that the state bank had been looted a couple of days earlier. However, most who had entered the bank vault in order to get the cash to friends waiting outside didn't see any of the fruits of their labour. When they came out, the truck they had helped fill had disappeared. At Muroil village the truck broke down so they transferred what they could into a jeep. People of the village were just waiting for their chance and looted the rest in a frenzy never seen before (or hence).

They also told us that people really started leaving Bogra town after that.

We were sitting and chatting when suddenly warplanes roared past overhead! My companion (I don't remember who it was) and I ran and our neighbours ran with us. I saw people with bundles of currency, in bullock carts, rickshaws, sprinting with armloads of the stuff, women holding them in the canopies of their saris oblivious to the height of the hemline now close to their waists! How many could finally carry them to their destinations is another story. There were ambushes by hordes of other civilians wanting a piece of the action. I trekked to Kahalu, seven miles from Bogra town to



**A** few years earlier we had formed a club and named it Quaid-e-Azam Club. It was now dubbed Bangabandhu Club and after 7 March we were doing 'night-duty' -- to maintain peace. It was fun and felt great and every member attended. Siraj, Jampu, Anwar, were among the regulars. We were giving support to the elders, seniors, et cetera, people that we normally avoided.

On the night of 25 March, we were on the street when alarming news came that the Pakistani army was preparing to attack Bogra! They said they were marching from Rajshahi cantonment so we had to cut down trees, block the roads. Some said Pakistani soldiers were also marching in from Airhabazar camp. Airhabazar was not far from the town, so we ran and grabbed axes and billhooks, mainly from Siraj's house, and rushed out again. Most among the dozen or so I think forgot about the route we were taking in our headlong rush through the non-Bengali neighbourhood of Biharipatti. We only realised it when we saw the Bihari men standing in front of their houses, staring at us as we raced past with sticks, machetes or billhooks in our hands!

We crossed the Police Lines without incident and reached Sherpur Road when suddenly we saw lights. A jeep! The army had come! We scattered into the nearby bamboo grove but as it passed us we saw it was a political leader going into town. But the vehicle had scared away most of our gang. Only Siraj and another guy were left; the rest had disappeared. We tried to cut down a tree but succeeded only in chipping it a bit. We thought of bringing back some more people and starting all over again. We didn't find anyone at the Club. "They've all gone to Chanmari!" someone said. We went to Chanmari

and saw Peshta, a tough activist, already mobilising people. "The war has begun," he was telling the assembled folks. "We have to fight, we have to train ourselves." When I came back home around 5:00 in the morning I could see my family had been very worried about me. Manju mama was waiting with a stick. "Where had you been?" he demanded, and followed it up with harsh dressing down. I told my father that no one could sit at home at a time like that. He told me it was all right. So avoiding mama, I went out again. A few hundred people had gathered at our playground. I saw dozens with guns single- and double-barreled shotguns and hunting rifles -- doing drills with a number of armed policemen and Ansars. Already, I thought.

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Freedom, You Are

SHAMSUR RAHMAN

Translated by Kaiser Haq

Freedom, you are

Rabindranath's evergreen verses  
and timeless lyrics

You are Kazi Nazrul shaking his shaggy mane,  
a great-souled man in the grip  
of creative exaltation

You are the bright-eyed crowd  
at the Shaheed Minar  
on International Mother Language Day

You are the militant  
flag-waving demonstration  
resounding with slogans

Freedom, you are  
the peasant's smile  
in a field of lush crops

You are the village girl's  
carefree swim across a pond  
under the midday sun

Freedom, you are  
the sunburnt biceps  
of a young worker

You are the freedom fighter's eyes  
glinting in the dark  
at the desolate frontier

You are the dazzling, sharply worded speech  
of a bright young student  
in the shade of a banyan tree

Freedom, you are  
the stormy debates  
in tea-stalls and on maidans

You are the drunken lashes  
of summer thunderstorms  
across the horizon

Freedom, you are  
the broad chest of the shoreless Meghna  
at the monsoon's height

Freedom, you are  
the inviting velvet texture  
of father's prayer mat

Freedom, you are  
the undulations on mother's spotless sari  
drying in the courtyard

Freedom, you are  
the colour of henna  
on my sister's soft palms

Freedom, you are  
the colourful star-bright poster  
in my friend's hand

Freedom, you are  
the housewife's glossy black hair  
hanging free

You are the wind's wild energy,  
the little boy's colourful kurta,  
sunlight on the little girl's soft cheek

Freedom, you are  
the arbour in the garden, the koi's song,  
glistening leaves on ancient banyan trees,  
the poetry notebook, to scribble as I please

Kaiser Haq is professor of English at Dhaka University.