

# Remembering a fallen hero

NASEEM AHMED

I was recently speaking to a friend about the hierarchy of grief while talking about personal losses we faced in the 1971 war. Mothers lost their sons, wives lost their husbands, daughters lost their fathers, sisters lost their brothers. The entire nation empathised with this collective grief. Later, some spoke and wrote about their unbearable loss, some accepted posthumous awards on behalf of their heroic dear ones, others were called to speak at meetings and anniversaries. Somewhere lower in this hierarchy of entitled grief, in the audience or outside of it, were a group of women who were neither wives nor mothers of the fallen, nor sisters nor daughters. They were young women who loved the young men who went to war but never returned. Like myself.

I was seventeen when I met him. I was nineteen when he died. What is it like to carry grief in one's heart for thirty seven years when society offers you no straightforward channel to express that grief? How does

one cope with hidden grief? How does it transform the young woman as she matures in the journey of life?

I recall our days of activism against the Pakistani regime. Along with a group of young nationalists, we pioneered the protests within the otherwise apolitical isolation of Holy Cross College. I recall, frantic and tear gassed, seeking shelter in a men's hall on Dhaka University campus. Boundaries were being tested, barriers were shattered, a nationalistic surge swept us up and 1971 ripped our lives apart. I recall those extra prayers that I prayed each night pleading with God for his safety, the prayer mat the only witness to my silent tears. Months later, on a November morning, less than a month before independence, I froze while listening to Shadhin Bangla Betar. They mentioned him by name. They talked about the heroism of our soldiers. They pinpointed the place where he died the night before in northern Bangladesh. Someone called me to come down for breakfast. No one at the table noticed if anything was wrong with me and if they had, they didn't say a word. It

was only when I was alone a few hours later that I shed those first repressed tears.

Since my immediate family was of no consolation to me, I sought comfort in his family. We sat together for endless hours and commiserated over our respective losses. They pampered me immensely and his mother loved me like the daughter-in-law who was never to be. I was her link to the son who was gone forever. This, I thought, was a good place to rest my grief.

And what about the God of my teenage years? The One who I listened to my prayers each night for eight months and still took him away?

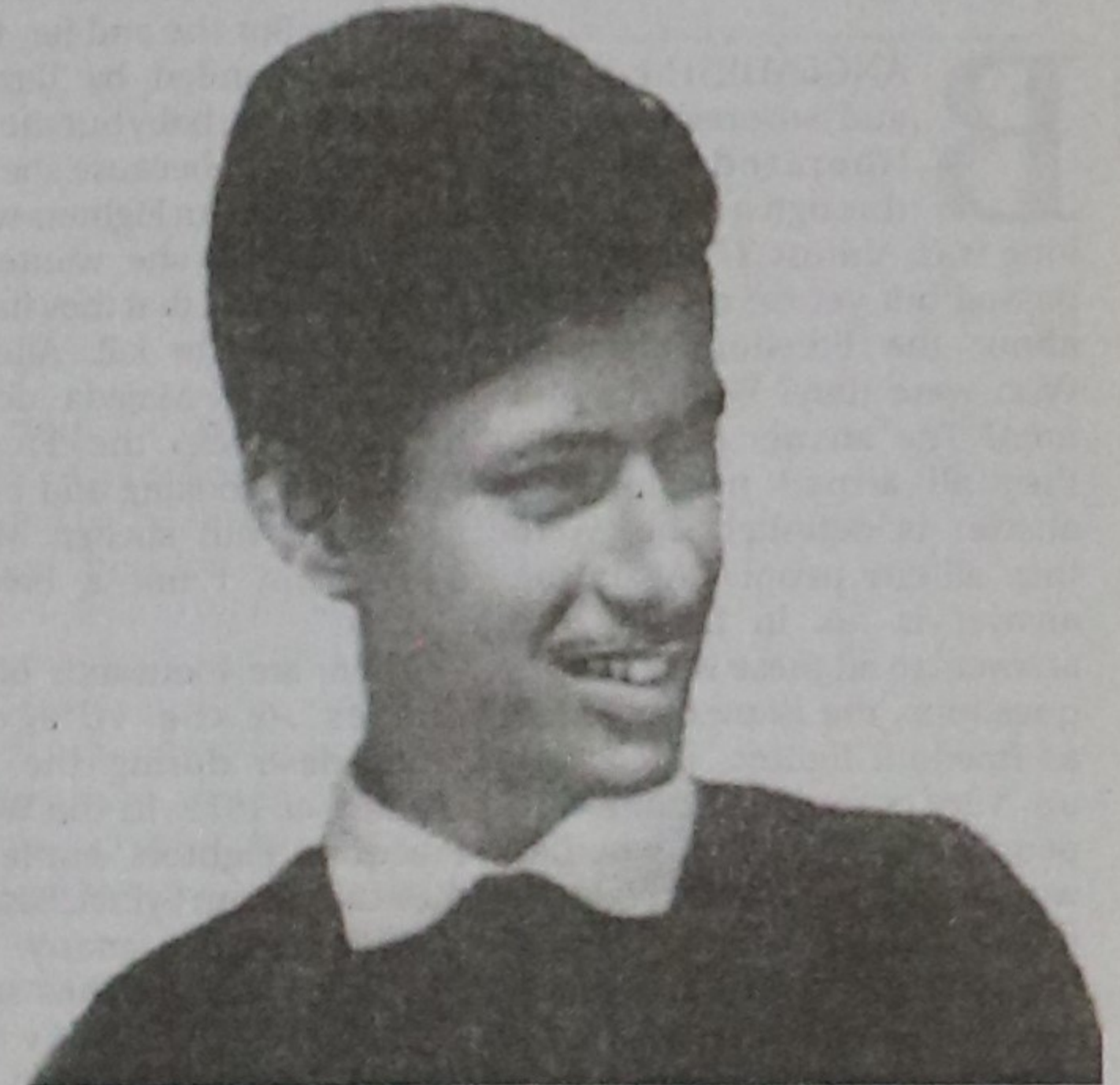
I have been living abroad for the past 33 years. Overall, I have few regrets about my life which seems to be filled with work which has given me much satisfaction, good friends all over the world, and a loving daughter. When my daughter turned twenty, I told her of my first love and showed her one of my most valuable treasures: a bead necklace that he had once given me almost forty years ago. He had bought it from a beach vendor while

vacationing with friends in Cox's Bazar on his stringent student budget. The necklace has been with me all these years in a ceramic trinket box in the deepest drawers of my life. Recently, while visiting Mukti Joddho Jadugar, I showed my daughter his picture behind the glass frame. Amidst his personal belongings on display is a pen very similar to the one I had once given him years ago. Ironically, our mutual gifts have withstood our separation in completely different ways: one, a tenderly cared secret whose story I can share at my discretion while the other, an encased national specimen for all to see but with no powers to tell any story.

Though I visit Bangladesh frequently, I have not quite forgiven myself for leaving the land. Periodically I make efforts to cleanse my soul by being involved in projects and research in Bangladesh. I carry her in my heart, and it manifests in my foreign home and environment. Yet, my relationship with motherland remains uneasy. Each time I come to Bangladesh, I search

endlessly for what has been lost. I search for secularism and democracy, I search for sound and just economic policies, I search for a political independence that every sovereign nation deserves. Instead, I see fundamentalist religiosity, military obesity, and a brand of greed, corruption and vanity to which I cannot relate. With each missed encounter, I recall his cold body laying all night long on that cold November night... a bullet pierced through his forehead... sinking... blood and flesh into the soil of this land... with one last dream: an independent and vibrant Bangladesh.

Now in my mid-fifties, I yearn to make peace with my conflicted self. I no longer want to dwell on things that are not there for me anymore. Bangladesh, the land, is still what it was to me since my birth; Bangladesh, the system, is what I am alienated from and feel betrayed by. There is still that certain green of the rice fields that I can see with my eyes closed... raindrops dripping from papaya leaves in my mother's garden amidst the symphony of the monsoon rains... the calming fragrance of



Lieutenant Samad

dry soil after a light shower -- these will remain the gems I will treasure from the remnants of my tumultuous relationship with motherland. As for the bead necklace, who will treasure it after I am gone? Who will tell its story?

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## The Bagbati massacre

An eye witness account of a vicious military operation



PHOTO: RAHIM TALUKGAR

MADAN SHAHU

**D**URING the War of Liberation the brutal Pakistan occupation army raided innumerable villages across the country on regular basis in a heinous spree of killing, rape and destruction. Bagbati in Khoksabari union of Sirajganj sub-division was one such village where in a predawn raid they killed between 160 and 204 people (two estimates). How many women were violated was not known, nor the extent of property loss estimated immediately, however. The following is a surviving victim's account of the gory nightmare.

It was still dark. The daybreak was yet to be. The silence of early hours of June 1, 1971, Tuesday, at Bagbati village, some 12 kilometres northwest of Sirajganj town was broken by gunshots. The awestricken residents looked out of their houses -- there was a barrage of bullet fires slicing the semi-darkness in ferocious speed. And the shrill sound was soon joined by chorus wail of the people running and falling prey to the bullets. What else could be more terrible a nightmare. Ultimately, the apprehension had come true. The Pakistani occupation army stationed at Sirajganj town had struck. Not against any adversary, but as elsewhere, at the unarmed, unassuming, simple villagers

and their already scared guests who had fled occupied Sirajganj town.

But there was no time to pause and think. People were running helter-skelter for cover and in the desperation getting wounded or shot dead. They opened fire just when Azan called people to pray: prayer is better than sleep. The marauding army preyed upon the people some of whom had waken up to pray.

I was running too, along with some family members -- wife, our first child baby son in her arms, and two sisters-in-law. Aged parents and very young brother-in-law were just not with us at that moment. It was still not clear enough to recognise faces from a distance. We were just going, where we didn't know. After a few breathless minutes we stopped for moments to determine direction. I heard a voice from nearabout. It was my father's, asking us to find a ditch for cover as bullets were flying over head. He was hardly visible.

A few steps and we could find a small ditch, yet it could accommodate all of us and had wild plant cover overhead. As we settled we heard a few shots nearby. We didn't know then for whom those were particularly fired, nor that one of those was as fateful as killing my father, who sent us to apparent safety risking

his own life.

By then it was daybreak. The predawn attack was now visibility continuing. Yet I just raised my head to see if the immediate surrounding was clear of the marauders. But that was not to be -- only at some 20/25 feet distance were standing four of them. They could see me and pointing their guns called me out. I was just bewildered, what to do? For moments I thought the end of my life has come, if I don't go they would come and kill other members too. I whispered to them not to peep and keep quiet, and went to the devils.

They quickly took hold of me, one in front, one behind, placing their guns on my chest and back, respectively. I took it for granted that it was the last moment or moments of my life. The first thing they did was ask me to give them whatever money I had. Oh, they had already turned into greedy looters!

To be rather in a camouflage, as my father advised, I was in lungi and punjabi got slightly dirty by days of wear and had grown some beard by not shaving for weeks. I showed them both the pockets of my punjabi where I had coins amounting to less than a rupee (taka). They didn't spare even that and kept on uttering like a parrot that I was a 'Mukti' (freedom fighter) and had 'sucked' the blood of their 'jawns' who had passed that way. I decided to play the last act of my life's drama. I reacted and kept on retorting that no 'jawan' whatsoever had come there before them and that I was a 'Behari' not 'Mukti' and sell tobacco in the village for livelihood.

Incidentally I could speak Urdu better than they did (distorted by their Punjabi accent) and was an outfit more akin to what I wanted them to buy, yet they seemed not convinced and did not remove their guns from my chest and back. I was just maintaining a straight line between them and myself, so that any one pulling the trigger would kill two at a time -- me and his comrade after me. Moments passed, they were waiting for whom and for what I couldn't guess. Suddenly an officer accompanied by two other sepoy appeared from behind a tree. I was still arguing with my captors. He came near and asked, "What hap-

pened?" They told their version and myself mine. The officer, who looked and talked more like a Baloch than a Punjabi, seemed convinced that I was a Behari and told me to go, even showed me the way! What an irony, a stranger was showing me way in the village where I had been staying for a couple of months! Still I clearly remember what he said, word by word: "You go this way, we'll go there (opposite side), kill Hindus, kill Bengalis." They were seriously on a mission to kill!

It was perhaps a resurrection for me. I started to move away but very cautiously, for who knew they wouldn't shoot from behind. They were also moving away. I hid behind the tree the officer appeared from and kept watching them more further away out of sight. Then I came to the ditch and called my wife and sister-in-law out. For some time we took shelter in a nearby house watching the surroundings peeping through gaps and holes of thatched. No more troops passed by that side but on the other side where from we had fled intermittent gunshots were still heard and smokes coiling up from more than one spot. They were still killing people, perhaps also raping and burning their houses. We moved to the direction of the river flowing by northwest of the village.

Soon we found small groups of other people also rushing towards the river from many directions. Suddenly I found my 8-year old brother-in-law with one of them. Mother was yet to be seen with any. We reached the river bank. The river was not much wide, rather a small one, yet the other side seemed safer to the desperate shelter seekers. We crossed the river by a boat -- a small boat of 5/6 persons capacity. Again an irony. This was one of some 50 boats we kept ready for taking all villagers to safety at the time of approaching attack. We lost that opportunity because of our own folly and doing the same after being attacked and losing many dear and near ones.

In fact after the occupation of Sirajganj town by the Pakistan army on 24 April 1971 we organised in the village a group of volunteers, many of whom were aspirant freedom fighters waiting for a call from a training camp. They had collected a few shot-

guns from some well-to-do residents of the village. I advised them not to be too enthusiast with that. To fight a trained ferocious army they needed training first and those were no proper weapons at all. For one shot from that would invite hundred shots in the next second to our peril, so it would be better for us to build a system for safe escape of all villagers at the moment of impending attack which we were apprehending because when the occupation army would come to know that a considerable number of town dwellers had taken refuge in the village they might mount an attack.

Such attacks were occurring in the country off and on here and there in varied scales mostly at night. So we kept vigil whole night dividing in groups by turn. We had developed a signaling system that would enable us to know the army's position if it advanced towards the village, and inform the villagers at least an hour before it could reach. We had already instructed each villager to remain ready only with his/her essential small handy baggage so that he/she could instantly move, as soon as informed, towards the river only half to one kilometre away where we kept those boats ready. But perhaps things were ordained otherwise. I led this vigil continuously for a month. On that fateful night I was feeling very drowsy, and told my comrades to take charge. They were just happy to let me go to sleep at 12 midnight. A fateful sleep indeed! For in my quest of the reason for failure of our vigil I could find that my charge taker comrades also went to sleep after an hour observing that I kept them awake for nothing till dawn, the army wouldn't venture a raid at dead of night. But the army really came two more hours later, surrounded the village in further one hour and launched the predawn attack.

I was also told later that the biggest shop owner in the village market belonged to Jamaat and was a collaborator, who might had informed the army of the lax of vigil that night. Whatever the blame, the nightmare couldn't be averted. It was our folly and their frolic with our lives. But there was yet another irony. Assuming it for an wealthy

adversary's the attacking army first torched the shop of their collaborator and informer.

It was about 11am we reached the other side of the river. Many others had already arrived there and more were coming. I could find my mother there. She was not in herself. But seeing us perhaps found her voice back. She was holding my father's walking stick: "I found it not your father, where's he?" I could only say her to hold on and started looking out for him among all those gathered there. I found not him but some close neighbours and relations. They just held me back when I wanted to go to the village in search, for the army was still there in their killing mission.

I sat there, forgetting everything, looking towards the other side of the river. Some people were still coming. It was by then about 2pm in the afternoon. Some one offered me some puffed rice to eat and a green coconut to drink from. But I was just bereft of any hunger or thirst. I kept on looking. Hours passed. No more people were coming. It was about 4pm. I stood up to go and find him by myself. This time some others held me back. They belonged to the cleaners' community: "Dear brother don't go. The killer army has not left yet. And it's no use going... we buried uncle along with others at the army's behest..."

I just couldn't believe. I couldn't cry, couldn't speak, only tried to get loose and run. But by then some others also had gathered, whose very dear ones too had met the same fate.

The cleaners said the marauding army forced them to dump more than 200 bodies in some 20 wells of the village and cover with earth. They did that and fled. It was not practicable to dig them out in such situation. Now I was bereft of the most precious possession in life -- my silent friend, philosopher and guide. But not perhaps of the added responsibility till I was alive. The abode we left was no more safe to return. We had to move. Some to freedom fighters' training camps, some to refugee camps across border.

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