

# Waking up to freedom

SADYA AFREEN MALICK

**W**ITH every passing day the memories seemed to grow stronger, instead of fading away. One of the everlasting memories was of December 4, 1971, Dhaka University campus. It was midnight. The familiar stillness was suddenly shattered with piercing sirens from all around. The sky lit up like a huge ball of fire. The anti-aircraft missiles hissed skywards, like hundreds of

in an air of dread and apprehension. But as the ground continued to shake under the onslaught of the bombs, there was a unifying feeling of hope amongst all of us looking up to the sky; the end of our nine month long Liberation War was near. Very near.

The long nine months had been a period of excruciating pain for the nation. Millions uprooted, countless dead and the toll of widows and orphans con-

down and mass murder in the early hours of March 25, 1971. The Dhaka University campus was the country's lightning rod against the scheming of the Pakistani junta, and one of the central targets of the anti liberation forces. It was also where we lived.

March 25, 1971, as we woke up to the sound of gunfire in the middle of night, it seemed the whole country was waking up to the realities of war. We stayed up all night crouched in fear. We strained our eyes and ears to understand what was happening all around us.

But it was only the next morning that, we came face to face with the carnage. A feeble knock on the door, a young man in a blood drenched shirt, asking my father for directions to a fellow Professor's house. What followed was like a haphazard sequence of events as hour by hour, more and more people started to stagger into the campus with tales of carnage and mass murder. Offices burned, people dragged away in army vans, lynched, brutalised, killed and left in a heap on the streets.

Fearing the worst, we set off to join our family at the small township of Korotia, just as the overnight curfew was lifted.

Danger loomed large from all corners as we drove in our white Volkswagen towards Tangail. There were hurriedly set up checkpoints all along the way. At the Mirpur Bridge, we were stopped by a bunch of armed and ruggedly dressed non-Bengalis who took us for rebels. Minutes seemed like hours as they eyed my father, mother and us and started to search our car. Finally satisfied that we were not an immediate threat

they let us through.

At every nook and corner anxious people would stop our car to gather news of the city, to know if their relatives were safe or the area where they resided was demolished by the army.

Once we reached our destination, the air seemed clean in contrast to smoke filled Dhaka. Soon, anxious relatives who had reached there before us, gathered around and the relief of seeing near ones was acutely real.

The next few days passed quickly as we waited for news. Tangail was famous for the sweets, the moira would bring the fresh Rasgollas and chamcham every evening, while the tantis gathered to sell the bright handmade tant saris for only Tk 12-25.

But our peace was short lived. Within a week or two the olive jeeps raided the sleepy town, burnt the bazaar, raided our house and soon our entourage numbering not less than 80 were once again on the run to the dense interiors of Tangail. Helicopters hovered from the sky and shot at us. Many of us had been wearing red and green saris to symbolise our national flag. The snipers' main purpose was to shoot down anyone who showed any signs of patriotism.

The small towns now seemed to be in constant threat. It was time to decide whether to take refuge in unknown surroundings or return to our home. Those months went by a blur as we continued to be on the move, waiting to hear news of men of our family who had marched to the battle frontlines. Stories of betrayal by friends, capture,

narrow escapes filled our days. As we travelled, our own experience of escapes seemed unreal. Once my aunt had to drag her young son and keep him half submerged in the lake to avoid the army jeeps. Other times, we had to share the house with complete strangers who welcomed us at different villages and shared their own horror stories with us. My brother was once stopped at the checkpoint and asked to prove his allegiance to the Pakistanis. When he refused, he was dragged away and only managed to escape in a split second when his captors looked away. He still remembers the bullets whistling over his head as he ran with his head down through the cornfields.

By mid-June we returned to our home at the university campus. What was once a bustling life, seemed listless and dying. Scars from the war were all around us, with burned walls, debris and ransacked houses.

As darkness crept in we would listen as one to Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra to hear the latest news of guerilla warfare. The Mukti Bahini were going from strength to strength. There were jubilant reports of bridges being destroyed, the army being met with fierce standoffs and rising casualties. People who were not in the front line formed a human shield, giving refuge, food and shelter to the Mukti Bahinis. Unimaginable stories of how some people willingly let themselves be arrested and tortured rather than give up information on the Mukti Bahinis filled our eyes with tears. It was as if an invisible wall with sheer will was

driving the army back as much as the Mukti Bahinis were crushing the advancing forces.

Then came December 4, when India retaliated and declared war against Pakistan.

As the air raids intensified, it was again time to leave the already deserted campus. This time we took refuge at one of our relative's house in Wari--Old Dhaka. The Mukti and the Indian armed forces were closing in. Often against the will of the elders we dared to go to the rooftops to watch the air raid relentlessly pounding Government building to the ground. We realised how close we were to the war, when one day a rocket landed on the building next door and demolished it.

And every day the Mukti were drawing closer to the city stronghold. Our patience was at breaking point until that fateful day: December 16. We looked in dazed wonder at each other as we listened intently to the voice on the radio: Pakistan had surrendered. We were free.

The memory of that day would forever remain fresh in my mind. As dusk fell, hundreds of people ventured from their home, eyes filled with tears, choked voices filling the air with joy. Then came the Mukti in thousands firing their rifles into the clear sky. The message was clear what had begun with bullets would end in a hail of gunfire announcing to the world the birth of a proud new nation. The birth of a new dawn.

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Old Dhaka on the eve of December 16, 1971

angry serpents looking for prey. The war which had so far been on the ground only had just spread to the skies the war truly was all around us, blanketing us

continued to rise by the day. Great swarms of people seemed to move like a giant wave across the country in search of a safer zone ever since the start of the crack-

## For You, my beloved country

TULIP CHOWDHURY

**T**HERE is immense gratefulness in me to God for giving me this life. From the bottom of my heart I am content with all that He has blessed me with. Among all the blessings a very special one is my motherland. I sometimes imagine myself as one born in a buffer zone and at such times I panic. I would then have no country to call my own! How lucky I am to have my motherland, my Bangladesh, to be born on its soil!

In my country I am born free and I enjoy my freedom to its zenith. The childhood spent in a small village in Sylhet has given me hundreds of dreams on which I have learned to build my life. With these dreams I have learnt to love my country. What is a man without dreams? My village home with its serenity and peaceful life has filled my heart to the brim with contentedness. Witnessing spectacular sunrises over the marshlands I learned to cherish my life. My home was on a steep hill that was surrounded by smaller hills. To the east was the marshland that met the horizon. For hours at a stretch I would sit gazing at the vast stretches of land before my eyes. I would feel as if I was floating with the clouds that roamed endlessly over the green and yellow paddy fields. When the wind blew over these fields the yellow and the green of the paddy would send waves, folding and unfolding in their coloured hues.

Over the north there stood the deep blue outlines of the mountains. I would look at the mountains and feel a sense of mystery over what lay on the other side. The mountains so far away seem to be reaching

for the sky upwards. On moonlit nights they stood like dark warriors guarding the horizon. I would feel a secret thrill as if they held mysteries and were beckoning to me to cross them and see what lies on the other side. I think those mountains awoke in me the curiosity about the outside world, they planted in me the thirst to seek the secrets of life. Thinking of the unexplored world in the big, big world I would often hum the song by Tagore,

"ochenare vhoiki amar ore  
ochenakei chine, chine  
uthbe jibon bhore..."

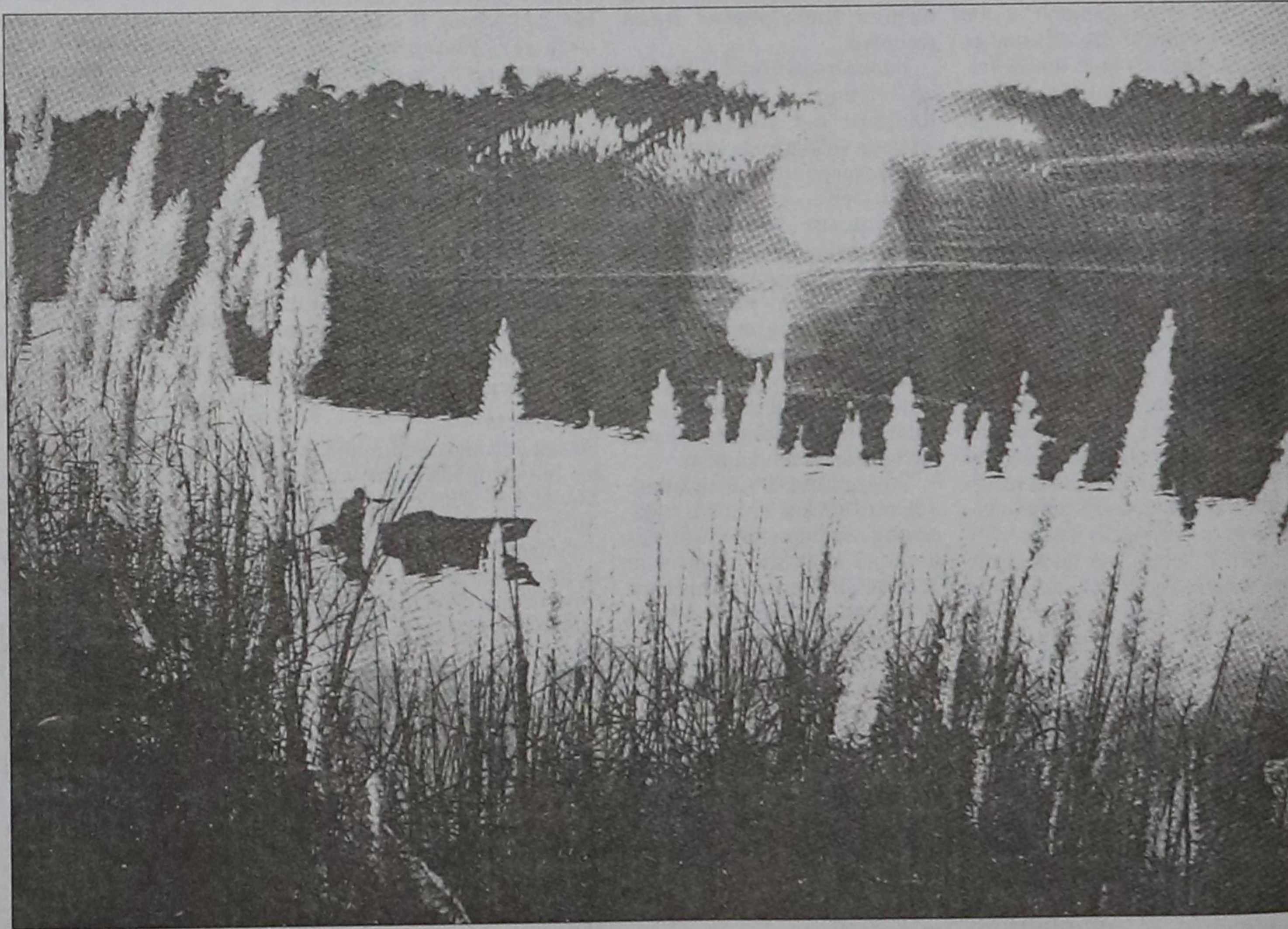
Seasons changed and with them came with their alluring changes upon the nature. When summer came the endless hot days seemed to make the whole nature clamor for little coolness. I would sit on the top of the hill where our house stood and stare at the listless sun shining over the land. I would stare at the people sitting under the cool shade of the banyan tree below. In the midday when the sun was straight over the head you would find very few people out. The villagers working from the dawn would be resting in their huts or would be under the trees. Occasionally one could see women carrying water in their earthen pitchers. Walking barefoot and their heads covered with the an end of their saris they seemed to blend in with the serenity of the village.

In autumn the coolness of the breeze sent a new sensation down the whole body, a whisper of the coming winter. Some trees would be shedding yellow leaves, leaves that swirled and fell zigzagging on to the ground. There were four jasmine trees lined along the edge of the hill. In autumn the trees would be filled with flow-

ers. Early in the morning I would be beside the trees. Barefoot, I would feel the wet, dew laden grass under my feet. The coolness of the grass would give a feeling of ecstasy. I felt like holding on to the moment. The morning breeze would swish through the boughs of the trees and send the flowers to the ground. It was a heavenly sight! Some flowers would fall on my head and others would be lying on the green grass. The white flowers on the green grass and the sunrays sparkling on the dew drops; it would all be like a fairy land. Some early birds would join me, pecking for food among the grass. They would hop and twitter around as if trying to engage me in their lively chorus.

Far in the eastern horizon the marsh land stretched endlessly. Cutting through the marsh land a river flowed in its own course. When the sun rose the sunrays would glisten on the flowing water. From my place on the top of the hill I could see boats sailing along the river. Far away the boats seemed like toys with their sails and masts. I would watch the boats and imagine myself sailing in them to a far away land. The outlines of the villages lay in the northern and southern horizon, huddling against each other. They seemed to be seeking strength from each other. I would wonder about the people who lived in those villages; are they rich or are they poor? Are they happy or are they sad? There was this immense curiosity within me to know what was unknown to me.

If the childhood had been first chapter of my love story with my country the years following are the chapters that hold the enriched tales of growing up. This is a tale that has its climax



continuing till I breathe my last. And to this day when I am more than half century old the story continues with added life and love.

The picture of my love story in my country cannot be complete without the people who have come across my life. Friends, relatives, colleagues and even the strangers whom I have met on my journeys; somehow I have never been hurt by anyone. Maybe that is a blessing of the stars. I have found love and respect from people from all walks of life. Even the villagers I had known in my childhood still fill my heart for

the simple, deep love they held for me. There is empathy within me for the less fortunate people. I feel a pang of love that goes beyond words when I think of the people of my country. I wish that heavens would come forward and give up peace and prosperity in this land.

I fell in love with my motherland very early in my life and the love story still continues. As I grew up the days of youth picked up the colours of spring in life. Those were the days when we sang and danced as if life would never end. The friends and laughter, the

school days, the college and then gradually going through the university; these were all each a unique love story of life. I might have gone to another country and got a better education. But the freedom, the independence of my own country would not have been there. I would not have felt as if my heart was as big as the whole world, as if life offered me endless choices. My motherland holds out its heart to me perpetually, for one simple reason; for I was born and brought up here. "Jo Bangla!"

Tulip Chowdhury is a writer.