Shirin Banu Mitil
'The Girl With a Gun'

JACKIE KABIR

Her name is Shirin Banu Mitil but she was called Mitil Khondaker during the war of independence. Mitil was born in a family where being active in politics was quite normal. Her mother Selina Banu was an active member of the Communist Party since 1938 and her father got involved with the same party in 1940. Selina Banu won in the election with a NAP (National Awami Party) ticket from a mud hut. Mitil's maternal grandparents' house where she grew up was a centre of communist activities. So, none of her family members was surprised when she decided to fight in the war along with her two male cousins. She disguised herself as a boy wearing her cousin's clothes and sneakers. Mitil was the president of Chhatra Union in Pabna district. At that time, she was also a student of Victoria College. Her cousin Jahid Hasan Jindan was Chhatro Union's General Secretary. They joined the freedom fighters in Pabna. The independence war of Bangladesh left a lot of scars in many of its citizens. Though it's been more than 35 years since then, the wounds of war are still very raw.

In what circumstances, did you join the war?
As I grew up in a family which was very conscious about the politics of the country and was directly involved in it, it was hardly a surprise to my family members when I decided to join the war. My aunt, whose two sons were my companions, ordered them to fight for their country and commented that she didn't want them to get shot at the back. They were an inspiration for me.

How did your family react to the fact that you were joining the war?
My eldest aunt was the decision maker of our joint family. As my cousins got ready to go for the war, I was desperate to go with them but didn't know how. But I was making banners and festoons like everyone else at that time. Suddenly, my cousin Jindan asked me to dress like Pritilata Waddedar and go with them. Pritilata was an inspiration for many women at that time of war. I put on men's clothes and went in front of my aunt and she told me she thought I was ready to join the war. She asked me to take off my gold chain and earrings and carry them with me in case I needed them.

How did you fight in the war?
One has to understand when we say 'fight the war' we don't always mean fighting with a gun or a rifle. Women all over Bangladesh fought the war - some physically, some helped the wounded soldiers, some cooked for them, some sacrificed everything in order to free their homeland. They are all freedom fighters. There were three stages in Bangladesh's war of independence. The first was the primary defense stage; then came the preparatory stage and then was the severe counter-fighting stage. In Pabna district, the first stage started on 25th March and lasted till 9th April. All the 240 Pakistani military officers were killed there. As the military started torturing the people in Pabna on the night of 25th March, the public and freedom fighters together took part in the revolt. Most people didn't have any weapon so they came out with sticks, knives whatever they could get hold of. The women were driven by only one dictum "either kill or die." Those of us who had the weapon were practicing how to fire. It took us only half an hour to learn to use rifles. Pabna was freed on 30th March. Then the freedom fighters' contingent proceeded towards Kushtia and then Chuadanga. I was moving with freedom fighters dressed as a man all the time. While going to Chuadanga from Kushtia, Jindan and I were left behind, as there was no space in the vehicle. We met the police in charge and political leader Aminul Islam Badsha and two Indian journalists in Kushtia camp. Later we reached Chuadanga with some journalists in the same jeep. As the fighters ran out of ammunition, we were sent to the border to get more ammunition from the Bangladesh Shohayok Committee. When I returned I was told that a journalist had published my photo with the news titled "A shy girl with a gun" in the The Statesman newspaper of India. I lost my chance to take part in the war as a male fighter. While my companions were sent to different camps I was sent to Ila Mitra's house. She was the famous anti-British revolutionary in Nachol. Both Ila and her husband Romen Mitra became very good friends of mine.

Do you think nine months was too short a time for winning independence?
We never thought we would win the war in nine months.