

SONGS OF FREEDOM

The following is excerpted from Shahzaman Mazumder Bir Pratik's memoir 'The Guerrilla'. The book is available in the bookstores and at rokomari.com

THE GUERRILLA

BY SHAHZAMAN MAZUMDER BIR PROTIK
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We were ecstatic, jubilant. We were like children, firing our weapons in the air as if they were toys, we hugged each other, danced in wild celebrations, and our joys knew no bounds. Our country was finally free, independent, and we had thrown off the yoke of the Beast.

We, however, could not immediately leave Ashuganj and remained there until 22 December, when we left Ashuganj by boat for Narsingdi. A train was waiting for us at Narsingdi and we arrived in Dacca the same afternoon.

The Pakistani army was brutal and savage. They committed genocide against a people they had sworn to protect actually. If they thought this was 'East' Pakistan they were massacring the people of that 'East' Pakistan. This was because of a pathological hatred towards us. Literally, after 25 March 1971, the Pakistani Army could do anything in East Pakistan and did. There were no restraints. The atrocities committed surpassed all limits. Many people took up arms against the Pakistanis only because of their extreme brutality. During the nine months of the war, no Bengali in this land was safe from the Pakistanis or their collaborators. Even the lowliest of soldiers could kill a high-ranking Bengali with absolute impunity. There is also evidence that many senior commanders encouraged and commended their subordinates for such actions. Bengalis lived in constant fear of being imprisoned, tortured, killed or simply vanishing without a trace. And all suffered from persistent dread for their womenfolk. There are many recorded instances of Bengali women taken away to serve as sex slaves for officers and troops. Moreover, I have not come across a single record where any

Pakistani military personnel were in court martial rather much less punished for committing atrocities.

From the perspective of any conventional army, the Mukti Bahini was a relatively ineffective fighting force, ill-trained and ill-equipped, thoroughly inadequate for any conventional engagements. Our equipment consisted mostly of small arms. We had virtually no indirect fire support (artillery). Even the mortars we had in our sector were without sights. We were so ill-trained that most of us did not even know the rudiments of basic

regiments in action and their effectiveness was definitely not better than the irregular elements of the Mukti Bahini. The core of the Mukti Bahini consisted of the elements of the East Bengal Regiments that had revolted in March. Only these troops were familiar with the skills necessary to fight conventional wars. The second layer was provided by the former members of the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR). As the EPR was a paramilitary border security force, they were not versed in the skills of regular armies. The police and other ancillary forces such as Ansars, Mujahids, etc., were only different from the common people because of their knowledge of firearms. Moreover, without the support structure of conventional formations, even the troops of the Bengal Regiments were thoroughly ineffective as a fighting force. The officers of the Bengal regiments were not trained in fighting non-conventional wars. During the initial stages of the war (March-May), we attempted conventional warfare with the Pakistani Army, which proved largely unproductive, sometimes even disastrous. The situation was further complicated when novices like us joined the force. Instead of contributing to the effectiveness of the fighting formations, we were more like armed mobs. Moreover, our induction significantly diluted the effectiveness of the East Bengal regulars. Therefore, it's not surprising that in most of the face-to-face confrontations, we were no match for the trained professionals of the Pakistan army.

But in spite of these limitations, we went on fighting the Pakistanis. This was possible only because this was our country and we were fighting for our motherland.

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infantry tactics. In most cases, we had to confront the enemy just after learning the basic operation of a simple bolt-action rifle. The only way we could fight was through hit-and-run tactics. We were not trained for conventional warfare. During the month of September 1971, regular Mukti Bahini battalions were formed. The duration of training was thoroughly insufficient for them to become effective fighting units. I have seen some of the Bengal

THE TREE

ZEENAT CHOUDHURY

Farah saw the tree as soon as she entered the new apartment. Her parents had come to Dhaka after the Partition of India in 1947. Her father had been given a promotion and was Superintendent Engineer of Roads and Highways. The whole family was pleased for him. With the new job came a new flat in a newly constructed block of apartments built for senior government officials of East Pakistan. Her mother was a lecturer in Chemistry in Dhaka University. Farah and her brother however, studied in boarding schools in Darjeeling, which was in India. Every year in November both of them would come for their winter holidays to Dhaka-with holidays which lasted three whole months with nothing to do but read, listen to records on the newly purchased radiogram and roam around the surrounding areas with newly made friends.

Farah had a fondness for trees. In the Botanical gardens of Darjeeling Farah loved to lie below the Magnolia tree with its full blown creamy velvety flowers and gaze at the sky. In Dhaka the trees had been bought over from South America and lined the streets in various places. This tree that Farah noticed was different. It was a common jackfruit tree, short with dark green leaves and gnarled branches. It stood out because it looked awkward standing aloof from all other trees at the very edge of a large field across the road which passed by the Government Apartments.

Farah was determined to explore the tree. She soon found that there was one sturdy branch which could be used as a comfortable seat for reading or just gazing at the world passing below. In a day or two she had taken up her position on the tree and made it quite clear to friends and acquaintances that the tree with its comfortable seat belonged to her. Her friends agreed good naturedly. Now that Farah had staked out her claim she would pass the "mellow winter days reading and chatting to her friends whom she invited to join her. They all had a very good time. The branches were quite thick with leaves and provided a good hiding place from the apartments across - especially when the moulvi would come for the daily Koranic lessons.

It was also a good place to daydream in. Farah imagined a lot of things about herself. She would pretend that she was in a forest hiding from her enemies. Even though she was a girl she would take on the roles of Robin Hood or contrarily she would be a lovely princess in a tower waiting for her Lancelot. She was quite familiar with the tales of Robin Hood as she was with King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. This was when she was still young. As she grew older, the imaginations stopped and her reading began in earnest. She would even bring her Bangla homework and do it sitting

on the tree. Over the years the tree had become a good friend. A good place to give vent to her anger when someone misbehaved, or when she felt sorrowful at some insult hurled at her. She would sometimes talk to the tree. She felt that it needed comforting when someone called it ugly or tore its branches unnecessarily.

One winter, a few years later, she heard some very disconcerting news. Her father who was now Chief Engineer was talking about the Government's plans of widening the roads near the fields where the jackfruit tree stood. Farah's heart stopped. What would this plan mean for the tree?

Farah asked her father timidly, "What does widening the road entail?"

"Oh, the fields have to be dug and leveled and then macadamised," he answered.

"What about the trees?" Farah asked hesitatingly.

"Well, some trees will be retained to edge the roads, others will be chopped."

"What about the jackfruit tree?" asked Farah again.

"What jackfruit tree are you talking about?" asked her father.

"Papa, my jackfruit tree, the one in which I sit and read, that one there. Come to the verandah and I will show you." Farah dragged her father to the verandah and showed him. He looked at Farah's face ridden with anxiety and felt some tenderness.

"Look, Farah!" he said, "I don't decide about the trees. The overseer who supervises the road decides about which trees are to remain and which need chopping down. Anyhow since you are so anxious, I will ask Mr Jalil the overseer especially to spare that tree- your jackfruit tree!" He laughed and patted her head reassuringly.

Farah felt very comforted, but at the same time decided to keep a vigil over the road what was to be widened. The very next morning she noticed a team of workmen led by two engineers and a middle aged overseer, who must have been Mr. Jalil, start their work. She wasn't too worried as they started leveling the fields a few hundred yards away from the jackfruit tree. In the meanwhile she herself would sit on the tree and from morning till afternoon she would run home for a quick lunch and would come back and keep vigil till 5 pm, when all the work stopped.

Her mother was afraid when she saw Farah doing this all week. "You are obsessed with this tree. Farah, you eat and read and play with your friends, this has got to stop."

"But, Mum," wailed Farah, "I have to be near the tree to guard it."

"Don't be silly. Farah. The overseer will not cut down the tree- didn't you hear your Father reassuring you that he would give special instructions to the foreman."

However, Farah was not satisfied. Her

father spoke to her quite sternly." Farah, what is this that I am hearing from your mother. Either you trust me or not - that's up to your faith in me". But still Farah was apprehensive. For one thing she had talked to the overseer. He seemed a very important man and seemed annoyed when she came to remind him about the tree. First of all he had hardly noticed the tree for he wanted her to point it out to him. She not only did that but with white chalk drew a circle around the trunk of the tree trunk. The next day when she went to the tree she tried to reassure it.

"You will see. I will not let them do anything to you." She felt that the tree understood as it waved its dark green foliage.

A few days later she noticed that the workers were only 10 yards away from the tree. She was extremely worried. She sat near the trunk of the tree and a few drops fell over her head. She looked up and felt that the tree was actually crying. "I must stop imagining those tears" she said to herself for as she looked beyond the tree she saw that it had started to drizzle. Reluctantly at lunch time she left the tree, but not before going up to the overseer and reminding him not to touch the tree.

The overseer was amused. An ordinary jackfruit tree, and this girl was so worried that she had got her father to prevent him from touching the tree. These people, he thought must be superstitious or why would they allow this ugly tree to spoil the road. He forgot all about the tree and went inside his jeep to have his lunch. He snoozed off a bit and suddenly was awoken with the sound of a thud. He looked out and suddenly saw Farah calling out to him,

"Stop them, Mr. Jalil stop them. They've started cutting the tree!" That girl again. He suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to tell his workman about that particular tree. He walked up to the tree and saw that the workmen were busy hacking the trunk. He also saw the tiresome girl crying her eyes out. He called out to the workmen, but soon saw that they had practically sawed right through the trunk. It was too late. He should have warned them earlier. Well nothing could be done now. Perhaps to appease the girl they could plant another jackfruit tree. Just as he was having these thoughts something heavy landed on the nape of his neck. It happened so suddenly that he missed the warning cried from the workmen. The tree had fallen on him and broken his neck. He himself lay crushed beneath the tree. A crowd had amassed. Soon the workmen were busy extricating the overseer's body from beneath the branches and leaves of the tree.

Farah walked back sorrowfully towards the apartment. As she crossed the road a sudden though occurred to creep in to her mind. Was this the tree's way of taking revenge?

The Lonely Woman

RUBAB ABDULLAH

The sun is up in its never ending zest
The blue voices show the pristine aurora
The parade on the earth's lap is enigmatic.
Woman, your emotion is overflowing
Pensive you, have your eyes down conceal
Your moans sitting near the windows
Behind your eyes many happenings go
unseen.

Like a garden a woman's heart grows floras
of
Memories; as the south breeze blows on
the green
Grass looks like waves, so your sensation
flows
At the touch of care and devotion from
somebody
You love; you have a break in refusals and
parts



The solitude of woman mirrors on Nature
That's bravura every now and then, rouses
A whirlwind storm of imagination to
ardour
Or to mother a baby and all living beings
Or to satiate the passion of endless youth.
Inside you, O womanly heart! Dying to say
How great is your love; how true-life it is!

Rubab Abdullah writes from Ohio, USA

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-হাসান আজিজুল হক



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