

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the time of hope and dreams. It was the time of fear, terror, panic and uncertainty. Every night we went to bed not knowing whether we would see another day. If we heard the sound of a jeep entering our alleyway, we knew someone was going to be picked up for torture, or worse, to be killed. We were almost numb with fear thinking who among us would be the next victim. The screeching of the wheels of a jeep was the most chilling and terrifying sound to every person in every city of East Pakistan. People who managed to escape across the border were not doing any better—they were also suffering because they were forced to leave their homes, their lands, their belongings, in many cases their near and dear ones too. But it was difficult, almost impossible to explain the mental as well as physical state of the people living in a besieged city. Nonetheless, I am proud that I could be a witness to the Liberation War and the days that would become history.

We were in Khulna at the beginning of the war. My father, Syed Shafiqur Rahman, was a Forest Officer working for Khulna Newsprint Mill. We did not see the crackdown of March 25, but we saw the brutal killing of Bengalis, first by the Biharis and then by the Pakistani Army. We tried to flee, but as the newsprint mill was the only one in the whole of Pakistan, my father's movements were severely restricted by the local administration and he was forced to carry on with his work. Eventually, however, he decided to take us to live with his elder brother, my *chacha* (uncle) and his family in Dhaka. I always loved the journey from Khulna to Dhaka by the "Rocket" or paddle steamer service—sailing on the Rupsa, Madhumati, Meghna, and finally, Buriganga. But frightened for our lives, we were in no condition to enjoy the journey.

When we reached Dhaka, we came to know that our youngest cousins—the twin brothers Mizan and Munib—had left home without telling a soul, leaving behind just a small note. We realised that they were joining the war. We felt very proud, but could not stop worrying about them at the same time.

Another cousin, Syed Najmuddin Hashim, was in the civil service, posted all the way in

Islamabad, and during 1971, he and his family were confined to a Pakistani army-controlled camp with other Bengali officers and citizens. We were concerned about them too.

Our eldest sisters Nina and Rini—one a doctor, the other a student of medicine—spent most of their days at the Medical College Hospital, helping people wounded by the Pakistani Army or their collaborators as well as freedom fighters, which was risky on its own. Our eldest brother-in-law, a doctor and a most kind and caring man, did the same.

My *chacha's* youngest daughter Piu and I felt helpless as we could not do anything. My friend Miru used to live nearby, so we managed to go to her place now and

then. We would discuss what we could do to help. That was when Ajmiri's brother Shaukat gave us some documents to translate that they were going to distribute discreetly. We were happy to help out in some little way. One day, I was coming back from Miru's house alone in a rickshaw. I had a file containing some designs that we were going to sew onto tablecloths and bedcovers. It was a way to keep ourselves occupied as we were stuck home in those days, unable to go to class. Hidden among those designs on tracing papers were

leaflets I had been assigned to translate. All of a sudden, I saw the EPR (East Pakistan Rifles) personnel stopping and searching vehicles up ahead. I could feel my blood turning to water, cold sweat running down my spine. I knew that I was most probably facing the end of my life. But by some twist of fate, the EPR did not bother to stop me and waved my rickshawala ahead.

At one point, we even planned to leave for the comparative safety across the border. "We" included my

Continued to page 5

REFLECTIONS |

REFLECTIONS |

THE STORY OF FEAR, LOSS AND HOPE

After page 4

eldest sister Nina and my *dulabhai* (her husband) Mahmud Jamaly (who were planning to join a field hospital), Piu and myself. The safest route would be by river, so we arranged a boat and started making preparations. At the time, *muktijoddha* or freedom fighters—Maya bhai (Bir Bikram Mofazzel Hossain Chowdhury Maya) and Manu among others—would occasionally take shelter in my uncle's house near the edge of Azimpur and Lalbagh. They would be engaged in talk of clandestine operations, after which they would go back to their camp, and come back again for the same purpose a few days later.

The day before we were planning to leave Dhaka, the army suddenly came and picked up my cousin Tubul, uncle's second son. We came to know that some *muktijoddha* had been captured earlier and one of them, while being interrogated and tortured, disclosed the location of shelters used by the guerrilla fighters, one of which was *chacha's* house at 40/2 Bishnucharan Das Lane, Lalbagh. Tubul was allegedly named as a main contact for the *muktijoddha* and for this reason, he was apprehended by the Pak Army. He was released many days later and came home with marks of torture all over his body. Due to this incident, our plan to cross the border was abandoned and we were forced to spend countless more agonising nights at home.

At night, we would spread a map of East Pakistan on the floor, shut all the doors and windows, and in the light of a candle, mark the places that had been

Now, after over four decades, I do not recall all the details of the work, but when I think of those days, I remember that they were quite dangerous. The other members of our families did not know anything. We behaved as if it was business as usual—sewing, chatting, praying and, at night, listening to the radio and marking on the map the places that were claimed by the Bangladesh government-in-exile. Under the pretext of going to Miru's house, we would carry out our tasks.

liberated by our valiant freedom fighters. We listened to the bulletins by Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra and BBC, setting the volume of the radio as low as possible.

We had a family friend, Dr Shafiullah, whom we used to call Shafi Mama. He was a frequent visitor and one of the very few people with whom we openly talked about the war. One day, he asked us whether we wanted to do some work inside the country. We readily agreed. After a few days, he came back with one of his friends, Borhanuddin Khan Jahangir. We had a chat, a sort of interview, and finally he said he would be in touch soon. We recruited Miru and the three of us started working for Shafi Mama and Borhanuddin Khan. We were given tasks that we fulfilled according to the directives they set.

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chatting, praying and, at night, listening to the radio and marking on the map the places that were claimed by the Bangladesh government-in-exile. Under the pretext of going to Miru's house, we would carry out our tasks. We collected money and warm clothes, some of them lovingly made by relatives and friends whom we could trust. I remember two incidents that were more difficult than the others. One day, Miru had to go to a UN office to deliver a letter given by Borhanuddin Khan. It was risky, no doubt, but she managed somehow. Another day, we were asked to go to Sadarghat, the busiest port on the Buriganga, to check the numbers and positions of the military bunkers there. Piu and I took a rickshaw there. We walked along the embankment, took mental notes and then another rickshaw home. We do not know how many others were involved in the type of work we did. Given that secrecy was of paramount importance and there was the looming danger of being discovered if someone was caught and cracked under investigation (as had

happened in the case of our cousin Tubul), we were never told the bigger picture.

Finally, the short but intense military engagement between India and Pakistan in the month of December brought the war to an end. We finally got our freedom—the sovereign state of Bangladesh was born. In celebration, we wrote posters on sheets of old newspapers and on December 17, placed them in different parts of the city. We walked through the streets of Dhaka, among thousands of joyous people—our own people. It was a brilliant new morning, the beginning of a glorious era. Mere words are not enough to express that joy, that happiness. I am, we are, proud that we lived through those days and moments and were able to contribute in the tiniest ways to the heroic efforts made by the people, common ordinary people, to liberate our motherland and create a new, independent country.

Urmi Rahman is a writer, novelist and journalist and former producer-broadcaster with BBC Bangla Service. She can be reached at urmi.rahman6849@gmail.com.

A STORY OF FEAR, LOSS AND HOPE

URMI RAHMAN



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