

# The Days of War

TRANSLATED BY ARIFA GHANI RAHMAN

*This is an excerpt from the unpublished translation of Susmita Islam's memoir, My Days. Aamar Dinguli, the original book, was published by Bengal Publications Limited.*

On March 1 at 1.00 pm when Yahya Khan declared on the radio that he was suspending the National Assembly session because of the situation, a fiery rebellion erupted everywhere immediately. A cricket match was going on at the stadium at the time and many people in the audience had radios with them. The game halted with Yahya Khan's speech and roaring slogans from the outraged public filled the air.

Sheikh Mujib had been in a meeting at Purbani Hotel with the presidium members since morning. He called a press conference to let reporters know that he was holding a meeting on March 7 at the Racecourse Maidan and calling a strike. By now, processions of the public had come and stationed themselves outside the hotel, shouting slogans.

University students at the *Bot Tola* announced to the assembled students that a meeting would be held at 3 pm. At the Institute, we heard Yahya's speech and were dumbfounded. Even as he spoke, students left the building in groups and headed to the *Bot Tola*.

I had never engaged in politics, but I felt a strong desire to attend the meeting at Paltan at 3 pm. I had no one to go with, however, so I stayed at home hoping to hear the news on the radio or TV. I was constantly worried about what would happen.

The strikes were on from March 1 from six in the morning to 2 pm, and angry slogans from different groups rang through the air. It was hard to sit quietly at home then. On March 3, there was a radio announcement from the government of a curfew to be in effect from 8 pm to 6 am the next morning. Instantly, with thunderous slogans, students and the general public came out in hordes, protesting the curfew by breaking it, and marching through the streets of Dhaka. The government didn't sit back quietly either. Shots were mercilessly fired on the unarmed public. The blood of these innocent patriots bathed the roads and turned them red. The government did not stop at curfews, though. Using the power of the 110<sup>th</sup> item of martial law, they banned the publication of all news, opinions, pictures that went against the unity and sovereignty of Pakistan, declaring that anyone found breaking this order would serve ten years in jail. The enraged public and students carried the bodies of the eight dead protesters through the streets of Dhaka and finally laid them down at the Shahid Minar. In one voice, they swore to realize the rights of East Bangla. The next day, funeral prayers were said at the Baitul Mukarram mosque for the eight protesters.

The meeting on March 7 was scheduled for



3 pm. Since it was so close to our home, we set out at 2 pm in Khuku's car intending to drive close to the Maidan, but we were flabbergasted. The entire area was flooded with people – most carried long bamboo poles or sticks. Even after we arrived, people kept pouring in. Seeing it was impossible to go on, we somehow parked the two cars opposite the Bangla Academy and sat down wherever we could. Sheikh Mujib arrived as scheduled and began his historic speech. This was the first time I heard him speak in person. What an incredibly animated voice he had – full of emotion and extreme strength! Each word he uttered touched the very souls of the people. It was a massive crowd but there was no disruption anywhere. Sheikh Mujib said, “We have given blood – we will give more!” and the crowd responded. “Make your home a fort – and be ready to fight with whatever you have!”

Whatever he said, the entire crowd seemed to be absorbing it with their entire beings. Finally, with Sheikh Mujib's mantra – “Our fight now is for freedom. Our fight now is for independence” – echoing in our ears and souls, each person at the meeting left with a

vow, chanting “Joy Bangla!”

It was March 25. The word on the street was that Bhutto and Yahya had somehow managed to flee and Tikka Khan was a governor in name only. The Chief Justice had refused to swear him in, so despite his being the governor, he could only do his job as the martial law administrator. The roads were filled with rallies. Babli returned in the evening, tired after a day of singing and rehearsals. She asked for food as soon as she came in, then after freshening up and eating, she went to bed. I had sent the servant boy to buy something or the other. He returned, breathless, to report that the students had used large trees to barricade the Balaka Gate and Nilkhet area. Army vehicles were plying the streets. A shiver ran down my spine for fear of some unknown danger. Instructing everyone to eat quickly and go to bed, I came to my room, but I couldn't sleep – and neither did I want to turn on the lights.

I don't remember how late it was at that moment but suddenly my room and verandah were filled with sudden flashes of light and sounds of many machine guns and

tanks blasting shells in the direction of Iqbal Hall. Like lightning, I glanced at the sleeping Babli and shook her awake, “Babli, wake up and get dressed quickly. Then go say your prayers.” Babli awoke but before she could say anything, there was the sound of machine guns and flashes of light from the mortars. I don't know what she thought of this but without another word, she changed her clothes and sat on the prayer mat to pray.

The whole night was rocked by the sound of machine guns, firing cannons, and intermittent flashes of blue light, and by the time they died down, dawn was approaching. I carefully peeped out from behind the little gap in the curtain on the window that looked out onto Jagannath Hall and the scene that met my eyes was hard to ever forget. I saw 8 or 10 young men lying on the compound facing our quarters. An arm or a leg quivered as a crow or two came to sit on them. That meant that as the army went into each room and killed the sleeping boys, these unfortunate ones had tried to escape. So they were brought out here on the field and killed by brush fire. Some of them were still alive so

their bodies twitched now and then. Babli broke down when she saw this scene. I moved her away, but I continued to stare through that gap in the curtains. At one time, I saw a woman and a little girl, mugs of water in their hands, running as fast as they could from the other side of the field, where the washerman Mahadeb's quarters were, to the wounded boys. They gave them water and then ran back as fast as possible. Armed cars were patrolling the area and yet, how incredibly brave Mahadeb's wife was, that with her daughter, she repeatedly brought water to these unfortunate, dying youths. The very next day, the military gunned down a sleeping Mahadeb and the only son born to them after five daughters.

As time passed, the bodies began to grow still. The crows had flocked down on the bodies of these young men. I shook myself and got up.

Going upstairs, I peeped out from behind my bedroom window curtain towards Rokeya Hall and tried to see how things were. Suddenly, from the direction of Jagannath Hall, I saw two boys somehow cross the road and, in their bloody state, try to crawl over the covered drain towards Rokeya Hall. It was probably eleven in the morning then and light everywhere. Thinking of how bad their fate could be, I began to pray, unable to take my eyes off them. At one point, I couldn't see them anymore. I never found out whether they were able to reach a safe place.

The university area was quiet, except for the occasional sound of the patrolling armed cars. I had never experienced such a still, cold situation. I don't remember if I ate lunch or showered that day. The sight of the eight or ten young men's dead bodies covered now by crows nauseated me – I couldn't think of food or drink.

When morning arrived after the night of March 26, I heard muted voices in the compound downstairs. I instantly bounded out to the verandah to see Munier Chowdhury, Comptroller Masud Khan Shaheb, and a few others discussing something. My young servant boy was quite smart. I told him, “Run and find out what they're talking about.” He ran off immediately but what he reported on returning turned my blood cold. He said, “The Hindu professors in the quarters on the other side were shot by the military last night. Even today, the army is entering people's homes and killing the professors.”

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## Ferdousi Priyabhashini: “A Lifelong Impression of Eternal Struggle”

TRANSLATED BY NISHAT ATIYA SHOILEE

*This is a translated excerpt (abridged and modified) on Ferdousi Priyabhashini from the book, Sangrami Nari: '52 and '71– published by Daily Star Books in February, 2018. The Daily Star Literature team expresses deepest condolences at the death of this eminent sculptor and freedom fighter with due respect.*

The indescribable grief and agony the aftermath of 1971 had set off in the eventful life of Ferdousi Priyabhashini can be perceived easily from what she stated herself. In her own account,

*The same flesh and blood with whom I used to match my clothes and had fun growing up, those aunts and uncles, people who spent an entire lifetime appreciating culture and liberal taste, even they began to avoid me, for I was abused and tortured by the Pakistani Army. Only Boro Mama, Mejho Mama, and Ma acted normally, giving me the recognition of an actual human being. Whenever there was a program or social gathering, all the ladies would jostle into one corner of the room and find faults with my past. The very moment I tried to mingle, they would slowly disperse one by one. My second husband, who decided to get married despite all, even he found it compulsory to discourage me from attending any such community events. I have done my part, of course, and rebelled since I cannot be considered guilty for what happened with me in any way. Why should I have to stay home, then? The nine-month long War didn't only disown me, but left a lifelong impression of lingering stress and eternal struggle.*

As Priyabhashini attempts to recall her 1971 nightmares, she seems visibly shaken as if a cold chill down the spine made her shiver. Nevertheless, she continues,

*I dare not think about that time. When I try to unravel the layers of the past, all my senses cease functioning at the same time. I fall sick, and it takes a long time to recover.*

In the same breath, she calls to mind the handful of people who were there by her side when all hell broke loose. For instance, the first time she explained to Boro Mama her willingness to share these never-before-told stories with the people all around, he was severely sick and bedridden. Yet, the kind and



progressive soul inspired her, gave her guidance, showed her the way. Priyabhashini ruminates,

*It's not that I am craving mass attention and therefore, doing it as a part of my deep-rooted desire to attain collective sympathy; rather, the millions of other mothers and sisters, the stories they have been systematically forbidden to reveal at different times, they motivate me. It's time these women come out of their shells, pour their hearts out. As for me, I just wanted to set an example, and that's about it.*

Similarly, about an old BBC Bangla interview question regarding Priyabhashini herself mastering an exceptional courage to raise her voice, she responds calmly,

*It was as if my decided estrangement from the society in turn, made me an outcast. Twenty eight years since the war had passed and still they raised their fingers at me, someone who closely witnessed the reality for what it was and still is. I*

*was like an outlawed refugee. I asked myself whether I had to do anything with my own misfortune. Of course, back then I was not mature enough to approach this issue the way it is supposed to be done. When I did manage to reach the stage, though, I made peace with myself, knowing that I was innocent. At that defining moment I came to terms with myself. I regained my confidence and knew that I had a story to tell for the generations to come.*

After that, Priyabhashini is asked about the immediate reaction she received once her stories were out for public consideration, the strenuous battle she had to take on herself before attaining due recognition as one of the most eminent sculptors in the country. In her own words,

*Well, if you ask me, life itself is all about sparing no effort. Therefore, I don't think I can be complacent with whatever I have been able to achieve as of now. Just because people know you*

*by your name doesn't mean you are “successful.” The hardest task is to maintain that good name you have earned as long as you can, as well as you can. I believe this generation should try and understand the true significance of the Liberation War, the momentous sacrifice over thirty million people had readily made, and the unimaginable trauma about four million women directly or indirectly were forced to undergo. If they don't know what happened in the past, they won't be able to prepare themselves for the future, which is why, I wanted to share my part in the first place. And let me tell you, it's a tale that goes on.*

In reply to another question from BBC regarding all the setbacks imposed on her way by the post-birth pang of a newly emergent country, she states,

*Those torturously long months taught me in ways I did not see coming at all. You know how*

**I never tried to invade their private world and never even opened their personal letters without permission.**

*people need to learn a lot in order to obtain a PhD degree; for me, the times I have been through gave me a horrific glimpse of the inhumanity, teaching me how to be fearless at the same time. If I could survive after all these, I could learn to survive in my latter days, too. Here, I have to stop and acknowledge the one very special individual, without whom I would not even*

*dream to continue- my fellow comrade, my husband. We have always had an indefinable mutual understanding with each other. Undoubtedly, marriage is not the final answer and being married couldn't help me in those days either; but what I do feel like admitting now more than ever is that he is a good man, after all. Never in our lives did he misinterpret my activism. There was a time when I had to see the worst of what life had to offer; I felt exhausted and emotionally distant. Thankfully, he appeared in my life when I was working as a service-holder and due to some inevitable issues or information gaps, we took a break, too, only to come back to each other at the end. [...] Even now when we differ in our opinions, he is there when I need him. Bent with age, the peace-loving man still looks for me anxiously when I am not home. His brother was martyred in the War. An avid reader, he knows how to appreciate the little things. He is a man admired by many and I do love him, too.*

The last question of that interview was about her children and how proud they felt having Ferdousi Priyabhashini, a Birangana, a freedom fighter, as their mother:

*The way you people love me and care for me, well, the same thing can be said for my own children. [...] I have never tried to invade their private world and never even opened their personal letters without permission. I have never asked them about their friends or where they come from unless they felt like telling me themselves. I have tried to parent them in an atmosphere free from unnecessary constraints. You have your lives to live just as I have mine. I tried to bring them up following what you could call the basic principles of liberty. I guess that's how it goes between my children and I.*

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