



Sheela Devi: Tale of a Woman Freedom Fighter

SURAIYA BEGUM & ZOBAIDA NASREEN

We first met Sheela Devi [a pseudonym] on May 11, 1997. It was not easy to persuade her to tell us about her experiences in 1971. It was only after a great deal of persuasion that Sheela finally agreed to meet us and tell us her story. However, even after agreeing to the interview, she refused to let us record what she said. Accordingly, we were obliged to sit down every evening and write out what we remembered from our visit.

Sheela was a moody woman. In a good mood she would talk at length, in a bad mood she would not say a word. Sometimes she would flare up without the slightest provocation. She was paranoid, always afraid of eavesdroppers overhearing what she told us. She would say there were spies everywhere, enemies all around her. At such times she would clam up and we could make no progress. Sheela's narrative was disjointed and she would move randomly from one incident to another. She would often talk about unrelated things. Those who knew Sheela believed that she was not quite right in the head.

Sheela could sew well, so people gave her a lot of tailoring to do. There were often people in her house. This created a problem because, when there were other people around, Sheela would refuse to speak about the Liberation War or about 1971. On several occasions we had to return frustrated from our visit.

Here is Sheela's story, put together from the disjointed fragments of information that she gave us over a period of three months.

"I belong to a Brahmin family ... We were four sisters and two brothers. One brother and one sister are dead. Like most other Brahmin families, our family was also fairly conservative.

"My father was an allopathic doctor. We were fairly well off, and I had a pleasant childhood. We brothers and sisters used to sing and dance. We used to have great fun together.

"In 1971 I was to appear for the Matriculation examination. At the time I was friendly with a Muslim boy. He was also a freedom fighter. I don't want to tell you his name—you will understand why after you hear my story.

"In April 1971 a distant maternal uncle of mine got me involved in the war, despite the vehement objections of my family. I could draw very well. And the man I loved was also a freedom fighter. That is why I also wanted to fight in the war. In the beginning, my work was to prepare food for the freedom fighters and to carry messages back and forth. Two of my friends were also involved in this work.

"Sometime in June or July, I started to work in the *mukti joddha* camps, drawing maps for the freedom fighters. Our task was to draw maps of places where the freedom fighters would be carrying out their operations. Before the start of any operation we girls would visit the place



From *Birangona: Women of War*, a British one-act play. Artwork by Caitlin Abbott from original photo by Naib Uddin Ahmed.

and check it out carefully. We would also point out the houses of *razakars* to the freedom fighters ... My friends and I would stay in the freedom fighter's camp. This was in May. One of us would cook; I would draw maps. Afterwards we would go around with the freedom fighters, showing them the houses of *razakars*.

"The Pakistani army had set up two camps in our area. In the meantime, Sher-e-Bangla Fazlul Haq's son had joined the Pakistanis. As a result there was no military action on Chakhar. I was very courageous. Along with the freedom fighters I would go close to the Pakistani camp. The Pakistanis had cleared the forested areas and had chopped down the guava trees.

"I continued to participate in the fighting. In the midst of this I suffered a great tragedy. [After saying this Sheela Devi was silent for some time.] I will not be able to tell you what it was. I will never tell anyone about it, never.

"After the war ended, I did not return home but tried to see the man I loved. I met him and I spoke to him. I asked him to marry me. He said, 'I have just returned from the war. And, moreover, my family will not accept you.' The sky seemed to fall on me. I took shelter in the house of a friend.

"After a couple of months I left for India. My relations were reluctant to give me shelter knowing what had happened to me. [She never once used the word "rape," referring to her experience as *durghatana*,

accident or misfortune.] I stayed in the home of one of my acquaintances and took a sewing course. I returned to Bangladesh briefly for two months, staying with my friend, to appear in the Matriculation examination. I returned home finally in 1974. No one from my family had even looked for me. They were angry with me because I was friendly with a Muslim boy. My misfortune had alienated them from me even more. They believed that I was in India.

"In 1974, I returned to Bangladesh. This time I was quite alone. I tried to see my lover again, even though he had rejected me once. He told me he had joined the Shorbohara Party. He told me to join as well and advised me to sacrifice myself for the people. I listened to him. Before joining the Shorbohara Party, I passed the Intermediate examination.

"In 1975, after the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, charges were brought against the two of us under the Arms Act. He was arrested. A warrant of arrest was also issued for me. Freedom fighters were intimidated and tortured. Towards the end of the year, I managed to flee and come to Dhaka. It was a very bad time. People were afraid of each other. No one knew whom to trust. Can you imagine this situation? Unless you have had experiences like mine, you will never understand.

"I had no relations in Dhaka, but a stranger befriended me. The woman I introduced as my aunt is not really my

aunt, but a woman who gave me shelter. This woman, who became like a mother to me, looked after me for seven or eight years. I used to do sewing in her house as well.

"I approached Faizul Haq to help lift the charges against us. He was then a minister under President Ziaur Rahman. In 1971, he had sided with the Pakistanis. Nevertheless, in my desperation, I was forced to seek his aid. He managed to vacate the charges and I was released from jail.

"I was still staying in my aunt's house when I went to meet him [the man she loved]. He was grateful that I had been able to arrange his release and agreed to marry me. I was overjoyed, thinking that my life would change for the better. But a couple of months after our marriage, he took me back to my aunt's house. His family was pressurising him to give me up. I had given him all the money I had saved through my sewing. I had converted to Islam. Because I wanted his family to accept me, I had even learned to read the Quran. But his family refused to accept me. He came two or three times to Dhaka after that, but he did not take me back with him." Continuing her story, Sheela said that she had taken up her present job in 1977. "After I started working, I rented an accommodation. But I was unable to stay there. I moved to the house of my friend Jyotsna's father [a pseudonym].

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15