

Manju SARKAR

A story

The Ghost of the Razakar

The day Kutubuddi, the father of the only "shaheed"¹ freedom fighter Habib of our village, stuck a bunch of leaves from the banyan tree under his arm and went to the "haat"² to buy goods with the leaves as money, yes that day the villagers realized that Kutubuddi was now haunted by a ghost. This ghost was that of Nizam, a razakar, who had made the banyan tree his abode. The trial of razakar Nizam had taken place under the banyan tree a few days after Bangladesh had attained independence. In accordance with the verdict of the people's court, his death sentence had been executed without hesitation by the liberation fighters. The newly returned freedom fighters had been full of vengeance and anger. In that atmosphere of public hate for razakars echoed the strong voice of Kutubuddi--"Give him such punishment, my fellow villagers, that no traitor will ever be born again in this country!" Many spectators shuddered in watching how this exemplary punishment was carried out on the once-powerful razakar commander. After Nizam died, no one came forward to arrange for a burial. Dogs and foxes feasted on the corpse. Having died in this manner, Nizam's ghost took refuge in the banyan tree. This was a proven fact, and was accepted by the villagers without question. And in the midst of all kinds of proofs, even a courageous and clear-eyed person like Kutubuddi had now been gripped by a ghost. Whenever he had a chance, he ran to the banyan tree, muttered to himself, abused people in filthy language without the slightest provocation, and even made his cane into a rifle and tried to shoot. If he had aimed from a safe distance, no one would be afraid; people might have even laugh at the farce. But Kutubuddi used the butt and rod of his "rifle" to beat up people mercilessly. Especially those who had once been freedom fighters could not escape him at all. Then one day when Neamat Mondal, a respected villager, bore the brunt of razakar Nizam's rifle through the hands of Kutubuddi and fled crying, "O my God!" yes, since then Kutubuddi's sons kept him tied like a cow inside his house.

Now twenty-five years after independence, the news about Kutubuddi haunted by the ghost of a razakar amazed me and filled me with curiosity. As it was, the hectic, stressful pace of city life did not allow time to dwell on ghosts. Moreover, I was used to seeing razakars all around me brandishing their power. Therefore, it did not occur to me that the ghost of a familiar razakar might also wield authority. Even though I had been a freedom fighter myself, the renewed movement against the 1971 collaborators and traitors, or the call to preserve the consciousness of the liberation did not evoke much response within me. But hearing about the condition of Kutubuddi brought forth a lot of memories. It was easy to say that a ghost was not real, but I found it hard to forget Kutubuddi. I thought about how this simple-minded honest and headstrong man was connected to the liberation war. Thinking about him, a curiosity about ghosts which I had when I was a young boy surfaced from nowhere. In order to thrash out the truth of the situation, I decided to go to the village myself.

In our village we built a monument known as *shabeed minar* to preserve the memory of the liberation war. When the first anniversary of independence came around, the structure was hastily constructed at the initiative of the local freedom fighters. It was small, but constructed of bricks and

1 A martyr

2 A village market that generally sits once or twice a week

cement. The framework resembled the *shabeed minar* in Dhaka. It had been planned that on this monument the names of Kutubuddi's son, Habib, who was a freedom fighter, and three other *shabeed* freedom fighters of the area would be carved in marble. One freedom fighter had even demanded that the names of those who had fought the liberation war for nine months and could have died at any time during the war should also be preserved on one side of the *shabeed minar*. This idea was supported by many. But I had opposed it. The tug of war between the dead and the living freedom fighters for the territorial power over the *shabeed minar* ultimately resulted in that the lone *shabeed minar* of our area had no names carved on it.

Initially it received a great deal of reverence. Just as the young leaves of jute are treated with salt and oil, so too our *shabeed minar* received a lot of flowers. People stood in front of it and said a prayer, just as they might do while visiting a religious shrine. A stage was constructed beside the *shabeed minar* where the first independence anniversary celebration was conducted. It was a grand affair. The microphones were rented from the city and a group of artistes also came from there. School children recited poems, and one student even mimicked the regular *charam patra*³ broadcast from the *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra*.⁴ During the discussion session we honoured Kutubuddi as the father of a *shabeed* freedom fighter and gave him a seat on the stage as a special guest. The illiterate peasant Kutubuddi was out of place beside the local Awami League leader and chairman and the high school headmaster. Kutubuddi was used to being lost in a crowd. Now suddenly he found himself to be the centre of attention of a crowd. He was baffled and bewildered. When forced to stand in front of the microphone and say a few words, he became speechless. His whole body trembled as he stood there. Who knew what had rendered him speechless then--the ghost of a *razakar* or a freedom fighter son? The headmaster prompted him from behind, "Kutubuddi, talk, talk about your son, your freedom fighter son!" The Chairman grew impatient and urged, "Say, Kutubuddi, just say 'Joi Bangla!'"⁵ The chairman's prompting was openly heard over the microphone. When we were about to lead Kutubuddi back to his seat, he loudly began to address God in a wavering voice, "O God! You made my son a *shabeed*, I do not grieve for that. May the Bengalis live in peace and prosperity with the joy of independence!"

I have heard the speeches of many famous and obscure leaders in my life, and have forgotten them all. But Kutubuddi's brief speech and the manner of his presentation remain vividly imprinted in my memory. After saying those words, Kutubuddi got down from the stage and did something strange. He hugged the *shabeed minar* and broke down into uncontrollable sobs. Many in the crowd started to weep as they tried to console him.

The 1971 memory-laden *shabeed minar* is now a strange sight. For many years now it has not seen flowers, tears or celebration of festivities. After the '74 famine and the '75 killing of Sheikh Mujib, it seemed that people who paid tribute to independence suddenly vanished from the village. On one occasion some school boys had planned to begin festivities by laying wreaths at the *shabeed minar*. The new chairman of the area stopped them: "Are you Hindus that you will offer 'puja' with flowers?" Since then the *shabeed minar* had become a superfluous part of the school, more obsolete than even a broken bench. Naughty boys jumped up and down its walls and the plaster was chipped in many places. On holidays, cows grazed in the school yard and shepherds used the walls of the minar to tie the animals. The neighbourhood dog often rested on the platform. The *shabeed minar* was

3 This was a popular program broadcast from the *Swadhin bangla Betar* ridiculing the activities of the Pakistani army

4 Independent Bengal Radio, operated from India.

5 "Long live Bengal." This was a popular slogan during the liberation war.

filled with the stench of urine and feces, and lost all traces of its sacred image. A saint's tomb or shrine or the dome of a mosque inspires awe and respect in the minds of the viewers, but our neglected *shabeed minar* could no longer evoke the memories of either the liberation war or the freedom fighters who had died during that war. But had the memorial monument lost its significance even in the mind of Kutubuddi, the father of a freedom fighter? Since he had become haunted by the ghost of a *razakar*, Kutubuddi often frequented the banyan tree, but he never came to the *shabeed minar*. If the haunted man had lain by the *shabeed minar*, acted out his lunacy there, then doubtless it would have been easier to discover the traces of the consciousness liberation war had brought within him. But how did the influence of the banyan tree, the abode of the ghost of a *razakar*, loom larger in his life than that of the *shabeed minar*?

The abode of *razakar* Nizam had been, of course, far out in the open and an was integral part of the natural setting of the village much more so than the monument for the freedom fighters. The river *Khonra* at the edge of the village was small, but the banyan tree on its bank was ancient and had an almost eternal image in this area. A vast tract of undisturbed jungle grew around the banyan tree. It was in this jungle that *razakar* Nizam was buried up to his chest and punished by the freedom fighters. After three days, his death wails, lamentation of pain, and sound of his breathing stopped. Thereafter the animals, birds and insects pecked at him and ate his flesh.

If the banyan tree had not been nearby, there would have been no way now to identify Nizam's place of execution. People had long since cleared the jungle and cultivated the land for crops. One thing was certain, Nizam's corpse had turned into fertilizer and contributed to the well-being of the farmers. His place of execution was now filled with growing paddy. The banyan tree still has a forbidding aspect, just as it looked after *razakar* Nizam had taken refuge there. Amidst its numerous branches which fell down making up a wide base, monstrous figures could be seen almost clearly. The branches and leaves overhead were so dense that it was not unnatural to see spirits hanging around. A lot of villagers had seen them. That is why not only the villagers, but even the cows and goats avoided urinating under the banyan tree. Even during the daytime no one had the courage to sit alone beneath it because its leaves trembled with the sighs and breathing of *razakar* Nizam.

Above the hissing of the wind, one could clearly hear the agonizing death-shrieks of the *razakar*. At times the stench of his rotting flesh floated in the air. I myself smelled the stench one day as I walked past the banyan tree, and I will not deny that my hair stood on end. The gloom, fear and darkness which had descended upon the village in the wake of the 1971 Pakistani military coup, could be felt under the banyan tree as if the ghost of the *razakar* Nizam had sustained that eerie darkness here. Or was it that the villagers were mobilizing their deeply ingrained fears and making the harmless tree their monstrous symbol? Whatever the reason, it was a solid fact that the banyan tree was associated with fear and awe. One of the first truths I had known as a young boy growing up in the village was that there was a ghost in the banyan tree. Even before *razakar* Nizam's ghost took refuge there, many kinds of supernatural creatures resided in the banyan tree. Even today, recalling the antics of some of those spirits, I find it hard to believe that there is no truth in the existence of ghosts. One of them spread fear as widely as the Pakistani military.

She was actually the plague-goddess. Her attire was a sari, as white as a gull, and her hair, falling all the way down to her feet. This incident occurred a few years before the liberation war. On the other bank of the *Khonra*, in the fishermen's village cholera had spread. One evening the cholera goddess was seen sitting on the banyan tree trying to enter our village. Kutubuddi had taken his large net and gone to fish in the river. He was the first to see the scene. He rushed back home and first announced the war against the goddess of death by beating on his tin roof. In order to protect all the village homes from her, a crescendo of sounds began to fill the sky. In every house people started

beating on tin roofs, clanging their brass platters and bowls; some even called out the *azāan*.⁶ The sounds spread from one house to another, and then to another, until an unprecedented orchestra was created resounding throughout the village. This orchestra, built from fear, made that evening even more dreadful. Cows in their sheds, hens in their coops, children in mothers' laps, even dogs in the streets--none remained silent. With a palpitating heart, I had also joined that orchestra by clanging a brass platter. In face of such united resistance, the goddess of death could not enter any home in our village on that evening. Many saw her flying away from the banyan tree and going south down along the Khonra.

When in 1971 the entire village was ripped by fear of the Pakistani military, Kutubuddi recalled how they had united to drive away the goddess of death, and thus tried to inspire courage in his fellow villagers. This incident occurred in our home. All most all the people of the village gathered in our courtyard every evening to listen to *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra*. Amidst the fear of the military, listening to the liberated radio station became a source of consolation and also a symbol of resistance. Even after the broadcast had ended, people stayed back and kept talking among themselves. The most entertaining comments were made by the simple peasant Kutubuddi, known as a blind devotee of Sheikh Mujib. Speaking of his leader, he showed a great deal of emotion and enthusiasm. On first hearing Sheikh Mujib's powerful tape-recorded speech on the air from the *Swadhin Bangla Radio*, he leaped up in joy at hearing the voice live. "Who says that Sheikh Mujib is not with us in this war of liberation? Which bastard says that the Pak army has held the Sheikh in captivity? Listen, listen to the Sheikh's voice with your own ears!" This was followed by a long debate whether Sheikh Mujib was physically present at the *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* or was a part of the liberation war. I did not join the debate because I did not want to destroy Kutubuddi's illusion.

One night, the villagers were sitting around and analyzing the news they had just heard on the *Swadhin Bangla Betar*. Suddenly someone rushed in with the news that the military had arrived at Hatkhola. During a war, people cannot afford to wait and figure out whether a piece of news is true or false. As soon as they heard that the military was coming, people began to flee. Only an agitated Kutubuddi called upon the villagers to remember the incident of the goddess of death, and fight the military united, sticks in hand. Even the most simple-minded villager realized the foolhardiness of trying to resist a rifle and machine-gun-laden military with sticks. They knew the consequences and thus nobody responded to Kutubuddi's call. Everyone knew that the Pak army was not a lone and helpless female like the goddess of death. The army moved in large numbers and they were more vicious than a tiger. The goddess of cholera would take at least a day or two to kill a person, but the military shots pierced a man's liver within seconds. The Pak army raped women, cut up their private parts and ate these like dragons. They pulled up the lungis of men to verify if they had been circumcised. If the military did not find traces of Arabic or Urdu in the speech of the people, they did not hesitate for even a minute before drawing out all the blood from their bodies. At the beginning of the war, a crowd of people armed with sticks had surrounded the Rangpur cantonment. The Pak army replied with arms, and a rain of blood washed the streets. Then tanks ran over the blood and numerous corpses and the military spread all over the town. All the way from there to the villages. If you were a Benagli, you were an enemy, that was all there was to it. They wanted to

⁶ A Muslim call for prayer. Also used during natural catastrophes, child birth etc.

destroy all Bengalis, and wrench away all the resources and wealth of this land. That this dangerous army at last reached Hatkhola and would soon be in our village was news in face of which the resistance of our fellow villagers was crushed in an instant.

As soon as my father heard the news, he picked up the radio and ordered us to flee at once. He did not waste a minute. The crowd which gathered to listen to the news from the radio of liberation now dispersed. Leaving the house empty, I took all our family members and ran towards the river. The jungle under the banyan tree was very convenient for escape. Most villagers took their lives in their hands and ran in that direction. That was the first time people were not afraid of spirits in the banyan tree. Maybe compared to the monstrosity of the Pak army all supernatural spirits had lost their power of vengeance, or else the spirits too had become one with us against the onslaught of the army.

The Pak army did not actually come to our village that night. But the rumour was not entirely false. A motor car had come to Hatkhola from the city. The noise of the vehicle and its headlights created a sense of the presence of the military in the villages nearby. In order to erase the shame of fleeing from a nonexistent military, some of the youth of our village decided to go across the border and join the freedom fighters. This news reached the ears of Kutubuddi. He wanted his oldest son Habib to go with us also. We had planned not to let even our families know of our secret desire to join the freedom fighters. Which parents would be willing to thrust their sons into the face of possible death? We were amazed when Kutubuddi himself proposed that his son should join us. His son Habib was even younger than us, barely 16 or 17. He had not gone to school for long. Rather than help his father on the field, he was more inclined to spend time in sports. Was this the reason that Kutubuddi was angry with his son and wanted to send him to fight in the liberation war? When I questioned him, Kutubuddi replied more with emotion than reason. He said that if the responsibilities of family maintenance and work in the fields were not on his shoulders, he himself would have been the first to join the war of liberation. If the country did not gain independence, he asked, wouldn't everyone have to die like a dog at the hands of the military? Wasn't it much better to die while fighting for the liberation of the country? Then at least the *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* would broadcast the name of the dead freedom fighter.

The night we left our homes, we were waiting under the banyan tree according to plan so that all of us could be together. Inspired by his father's enthusiasm, Habib had joined us. Among our guardians only Kutubuddi uncle was there to bid us farewell. Even Kutubuddi's wife, Habib's mother, did not know that her son was going to join the liberation war. Kutubuddi had brought *chira-muri*⁷ tied in a *gamcha*⁸ for his son to eat along the long and tedious journey. He gave the bundle and said in a trembling voice, "Go, my sons, may God be with you all!" Trying to console his father, Habib failed to conceal his tears and said, "Don't worry about me, father!" Even so, Kutubuddi had held my hand and asked me to keep Habib under my wing always.

We had felt somewhat irritated by the tearful farewell of father and son. The rest of us had not been able to say goodbye to our parents. We did not want to put the burden of consoling and giving courage to them on the shoulders of Kutubuddi. We five young men of the village left and proceeded on our journey to war. Standing alone under the banyan tree was Kutubuddi uncle. Who

7 Puffed rice etc.

8 A scarf used for many purposes

knew how long he stood alone under the tree even after we were long gone?

In order to understand how Kutubuddi came to be in the grip of the ghost of the razakar so many years after independence, it is necessary to know how he came in contact with razakars during the liberation war.

After we fled from our village, Pak army never came to our village. It was difficult for them to spread into the remote villages because of the fear of freedom fighters. They now recruited young men within each village to represent them and to protect Pakistan. These men comprised the army of collaborators. It seemed Nizam had been waiting for such an opportunity all along. He was the son of a poor father, had failed in the Matriculation exam, was unemployed, had no qualifications or prospects for employment, and was not regarded highly in the village. He once stood in the line to join the army, but was disqualified owing to inadequate height. He lobbied with a member of the *Jamaat-e-Islami*⁹ entered the razakar army, became commander and established a camp at the local primary school. Even though his home was in the adjacent union, he was well-known as a good *kebadi*¹⁰ player because our boys had once hired him to play for them. Nizam was short and stocky. He had so much physical strength and agility that he could overcome ten guys alone. Dressed in a razakar's attire, armed with ammunition and leading a dozen subordinates and having the support of the Pak army, Nizam was fully equipped to establish his own kingdom and reign without any obstacles.

Nizam patrolled different villages at night to search for freedom fighters and other liberation-loving elements. He had announced that it was unlawful to listen openly or under cover to the *Swadhin Bangla betar Kendra*, say a word in support of *Joi Bangla*, or try to flee across the border to India. In order to ferret out the violators of these laws, Nizam would enter any house in the dead of the night, or put his ear to the fence and listen to whatever was going on inside. In a fit of rage at secretly listening to the *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra*, Nizam threw and broke five radio sets, but that was not enough. From each violator of the law, Nizam would extort not only cash in compensation for showing support to the cause of the liberation war, but rice, pulses, chickens and goats for the sustenance of his camp. He could make any offering to please the army major in the nearest military camp and he could also report against the activities of pro-liberation villagers and call upon the army to come and burn them to ashes. That is why the poor, helpless villagers had no alternative but to treat razakar Nizam like a king.

Our house was safe because the local *Shanti Committee 11* chairman happened to be a relative. Even so, my father would close the door, put the radio next to his ear and then listen to the *Swadhin Bangla Betar* programmes. The only outsider who could not be discouraged from coming was Kutubuddi. He continued to come secretly to our house to listen to the news on the *Swadhin Bangla* station. Since sending his son to the war, an irrepressible urge to keep abreast of all news had gripped him. One day, as he listened to the forbidden programme, he was caught red-handed by Nizam. Nizam always kept in his pocket a list of those families whose sons had gone to join the liberation war. He was not unaware that Kutubuddi's son was one of those.

After he had smashed the three-band radio to pieces, Nizam's rage was vented upon Kutubuddi.

9 In the name of Islam, this party collaborated with the Pakistani army.

10 A kind of wrestling game, popular in the countryside.

11 A peace committee, formed by the Pakistani army for purposes of collaboration..

"Why is Sheikh Mujib's godson in this house?" My father tried to appease Nizam's anger in many ways. But Kutubuddi could not control himself that day. He shouted and questioned Nizam how being a Bengali himself Nizam could commit such atrocities against other fellow Bengalis. Did Nizam's conscience make him hesitate at all?

"What, such impudence! You have the guts to support *Joi Bangla* to my face! You dare to frighten me with your godfather and freedom fighter boys! I will stick your *Joi Bangla* up your ass. We are going to your house!"

It was as if Kutubuddi had provided relief to Nizam that night from the scorn of major sahib, and his own frustration at being unable to catch even one freedom fighter, dead or alive, from around all the villages he patrolled. Nizam saw the image of Sheikh Mujib and the liberation war in Kutubuddi and started to beat him up in our courtyard. When Kutubuddi was being dragged to his own house, he cried out aloud fearing impending death and seeking the help of the villagers. My father remained silent, even though he knew that he shared Kutubuddi's guilt and should partake of the punishment. All villagers followed the motto: "Save your own skin first," and not a single soul came forward to rescue Kutubuddi.

One of the older men in the razakar group secretly consoled Kutubuddi: "Please don't mind, brother. This is our job. On one side we live in fear of the *mukti bahini*, on the other, we are trampled upon by the military commander. Whatever cash or gold you have just hand it over to us-- we must keep the commander pleased."

The search in Kutubuddi's house yielded nothing of value except a lone goat and ten seers of rice. That was not enough to cool Nizam's fury. With his band he started to descend upon Kutubuddi's house every few days apart like a decoit group. There was no way for the inmates to escape. If they ever tried to do so, the house would be burnt down--Nizam had threatened so himself. Because two hindus of the fishermen's neighbourhood had fled to India, Nizam had burnt down their houses. The widowed daughter of Haridas had vanished into thin air. Everyone speculated that Nizam had sent her to the military camp as a gift. Nizam had created such an aura of terror in the village that husbands and wives were afraid to indulge in conjugal union lest Nizam stood with his ears placed against the fence and on hearing the sounds of sexual delights, banged in suddenly on the pretext of searching for freedom fighters.

The terrorist activities of razakar Nizam had reached the ears of the freedom fighters also. Finally a group of freedom fighters fighting in sector 9 came to our village on a cold November night to conduct an operation on the razakar camp. They hid in a house near the school until midnight. On hearing gunshots in the deadly hours of the night, many villagers panicked and started to flee, thinking the military had arrived. On learning the truth, however, everyone heaved a sigh of great relief. Kutubuddi had once dreamt that his freedom fighter son sat on a branch of the banyan tree and shot at razakar Nizam. Kutubuddi was overwhelmed with joy to learn that his dream had come true. He quickly organized a group of villagers armed with sticks and spears and rushed to the camp to help the freedom fighters and see his own freedom fighter son.

Ultimately Kutubuddi did not get a chance to see his freedom fighter son or any one else in the group. The guerilla group did not wait to receive the compliments of the villagers after the operation. Commander Nizam and his army had surrendered their ammunition and left the camp in the darkness of the night. After capturing seven rifles and only two razakars, the liberation warriors had crossed the river and vanished before the first light of dawn.

Infused with joy at the elimination of the razakar camp, villagers could discuss only the whirlwind guerilla operation the next day. Even those who had not witnessed the operation, or had seen the freedom fighters only from a distance of a couple of miles were so elaborate in their description of

the freedom fighters and their bravery and initiative that it seemed they had taken over the role of the *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra*. Many even enacted the scene where the bold commander Nizam had fled like a fox with his tail between his legs. Kutubuddi kept narrating his dream in which his freedom fighter son sat on the branch of the banyan tree and shot at Nizam. Trying to prove the presence of his son Habib in the night operation, he said, "Whatever you say, my son was definitely involved in the operation." But there was no scarcity of direct eyewitnesses who---- Maybe it was due to the disappointment of not being able to see his liberation warrior son, but that night Kutubuddi began to experience again a deep fear that chased away his sleep. Not all the razakars had died. Surely, Nizam must have fled and reported to his military bosses. What if Nizam appeared again in broad daylight like a *barkandaz*, the rent collector of the feudal landlord, to demand his dues? What if he descended upon them in the darkness of the night like a band of dacoits? What if the Pak army also came with him to set fire to the entire village? Who could wipe away this terrifying dread from Kutubuddi's heart unless the liberation army or his freedom fighter son appeared on the scene with arms and ammunition?

At first Kutubuddi did not believe that his son Habib had been killed in the war of liberation. When one by one the freedom fighters from the adjoining areas began to return with red sun of liberation on their chests, rifles in hand and the rapture of *Joi Bangla* on their lips, Kutubuddi rushed to each one, familiar or unknown, to gather accurate information about Habib. Even after the terror of the Pak army and the torture of the razakars for nine months, Kutubuddi had continued to dream and imagine his son fighting the war of liberation. Even after the radio had been smashed, in the depth of his heart he continued to hear the stories of his son's valour at the Swadhin Bangla Betar Station. He had almost witnessed the presence of his son in the freedom fighter operation against razakar Nizam. But even though Habib was one of the courageous freedom warriors, even though he had learned how to handle a rifle, still he had been hit by an enemy bullet, his skull broken open and his brains seeped out. This was the dreadful consequence Kutubuddi had never anticipated for his son. Who knows why he hadn't. Habib was buried in a border village of Panchagarh. As we buried him, I remembered Kutubuddi uncle, and the loss of my own younger brother, and broke down in tears. That is probably why, when I gave the news to Kutubuddi, my voice was emotional but there were no tears in my eyes. But in order to share the joy of victory and convey my deep-felt condolence, I hugged the man. Kutubuddi broke down sobbing and asked why we had returned leaving his son under foreign soil.

I am sure Kutubuddi did not want to blame us for leaving Habib behind. But I did feel somewhat irritated that the loss of his son loomed larger than the joy of acquiring the precious liberty we had fought for. In an emotional tone I started to utter what leaders said in their passionate speeches about the war of liberation. The freedom attained at the cost of the blood of three million Bengalis and the honour of hundreds of thousands of mothers and sisters, should be a matter of pride to the father of a freedom fighter, now was the time to pledge to build this country, and on and on. That was all I could give Kutubuddi that day.

Kutubuddi invited all freedom fighters from the areas surrounding his home. He treated them to a feast of fish from his pond, home-raised poultry and ducks. Because Habib preferred hot and spicy food, the duck was hot and spicy. Habib loved milk-cakes, so his mother had made those also. Mixed with the delicacies were the salty tears of Habib's mother. Seeing those tears, one freedom fighter who continued to eat with relish, commented, "Please don't cry. We are all your Habib. Feed us all you can."

As long as I stayed in the village, I tried to grant importance and respect to Habib's father. Besides involving him in the liberation day celebration at the *shabeed minar*, we also made him chief judge at the people's court which tried razakar Nizam. We asked him to give his judgment first. Kutubuddi had not been able to speak in front of the mike at the school function. But at the people's court, even without a mike, he said loudly, "First cut off the bastard's both ears. Subject him to such punishment before he dies that no Bengali ever dares to inflict torture upon another Bengali again."

Razakar Nizam was captured on December 27. His capture and trial was the last and most sensational operation of our area's freedom fighters. In addition to them, thousands of villagers from several villages were part of this event. Nizam's close neighbours had come in the early hours of the morning and fugitives provided us with his whereabouts. Nizam had returned home in the late hours of that night, and was now on his way towards the bank of the Teesta river across which he planned to escape to India. Upon hearing this we rushed on our bicycles towards different *ghats* on the Teesta river. Nizam was captured quite easily at the *bajra ghat*. He had put on the disguise of a freedom fighter. He held a flag of independent Bangladesh in his hand. We tied his hands with that flag, then ensnared him with a cow's rope and dragged him to the banyan tree. Along the way many waved their fists, striking him. Even though people had lived for nine months under suffocating dread and panic, most had never had a chance to see the enemy face to face. Since the defeated one lakh soldiers of the Pak army had surrendered to the Indian army, they could not be seen either. But their one representative Nizam was right there in front of them. So people from several villages crowded under the banyan tree to view his trial. Even those youth who had not been able to go to India and fight for the liberation, had now turned into powerful freedom fighters. On one side was the hatred and retaliation of the victorious people, and on the other was Nizam, the lone representative of hundreds of thousands of military, razakar and *al-badr*.¹² Even the sight of his bloodied face with his two ears cut off could not lessen the abhorrence and fury of the people. He was half buried in the ground, and his wrists cut. The skin from his face was scraped off and salt sprinkled all over. Nizam's bloodied face had taken on such a frightening aspect that the horror of all those invisible inhabitants of the banyan tree, the goddess of cholera spotted all over her body, the skeleton-like ghost, the black witch with long black tresses--paled in comparison. The last distorted shrieks of Nizam and his dreadful appearance made it so terrible that most people did not have the courage to look at him for more than an instant. Many of those who witnessed his dying state perceived the truth that after death the vindictive Nizam would be a monstrous ghost. That is why even many elderly persons fled from the court of judgment.

Before the agonizing groans and the stench of the rotting corpse had been absorbed into the air, razakar Nizam took refuge in the banyan tree. After I left the village, I continued to hear stories of how Nizam had taken the shape of a ghost and there were plenty of facts and witnesses to corroborate. Whenever I went home, I was afraid to walk alone under the banyan tree at night. One reason was that within six months of independence, liberation fighter Quddus, who had participated in the Nizam-operation, was found dead under the banyan tree. Quddus' brother filed a murder case against three persons, one among whom was a freedom fighter. That case did not go too far. How could it? The real culprit was Nizam's ghost. It did not take too long for people to understand that. The villagers who had heard the muffled groans of Nizam in the banyan tree during the night numbered not one or two, but a good many. Those who had been fortunate enough to escape

¹² A murderous band formed by the Jamaat-e-Islami to kill intellectuals on the wake of independence.

Nizam's ghostly attacks as they walked by the banyan tree at night were not so few either. The razakar's habit of looting had not disappeared even after he became a ghost. One day the cloth merchant Rahim decided to take a short cut on his way back from the Sundarganj *Haat*. He crossed the Khonra and was passing by the banyan tree. Bundles of cloth were tied on the back of his bicycle. A lighted lamp hung from the front and a young man accompanied him to provide courage. As soon as they reached the banyan tree, commander Nizam along with his other ghost cohorts jumped down from the branches and attacked with such ferocity that Rahim had to flee for his life leaving behind his bundles and the bicycle. Next day the villagers saw the bicycle hanging on the tree and some pieces of new cloth clinging here and there to the branches. At times youngsters were afraid to go by the banyan tree even in a group. The razakar threw banyan leaves, and if those leaves hit anyone they would feel like weighing no less than a maund. One boy, fatally hurt by the leaves, mumbled "razakar," "razakar" before dying. After all the above pieces of evidence, when Kutubuddi went to the *haat* with leaves of the banyan tree and wanted to exchange them as cash, it did not take long for anybody to figure out the reason behind his madness.

But it seemed hard to believe in the range and power of Nizam's ghost after twenty-five years. The entire village had transformed in that time. The woods around the banyan tree had vanished, the narrow path had become a broad road, and a concrete bridge had been built on the river. There was even a shop at the foot of the bridge. About a mile down were the rural electrification poles. Many power-pumps were dumping water into the IRRI fields with a constant coughing noise. How could a ghost live on in this age of progress? I expressed my wonder and suspicion to my village friend Nadir and said, "You couldn't manage to drive out the razakar's ghost from the banyan tree, hunh?!"

Nadir was a brave freedom fighter. We had been very close all through, from going off to the war until Nizam was found. Presently Nadir was a busy village doctor. Blowing smoke in my face from the expensive cigarette I had given him, he said, "You live in Dhaka where there are so many movements, yet you could not obliterate the betrayers and collaborators of 1971. How do you expect us to fight against an invisible ghost?"

"I think Kudubuddi has really become insane. How can he remain sound when the razakar's ghost has him in its grip?"

"Really, Nadir, tell me the truth, do you really believe in this idea of a ghost?" Nadir pulled up his shirt sleeve and showed me the talisman on his arm. To protect himself against the onslaught of the invisible ghost, this amulet was now his constant companion, like a rifle. But even the amulet did not work face to face with Nizam. The bastard had already beaten him twice. Nadir said that if I went to see Kutubuddi, the razakar would beat me up also as an act of revenge. Also, if I still harbored any doubt about the existence of the invisible inhabitants of the banyan tree, then on the next full moon I could go alone and sit under the banyan tree to find out for sure.

I was not eager to stay until the next new moon to verify Nadir's statement. I did not have leave. But brushing it all aside and forcing Nadir to accompany me, I went out one morning to see the ghost which had Kutubuddi in its grip.

Kutubuddi's house seemed very unfamiliar. There was now one tin-roofed room, the space in front consisted of some cowsheds with plough buffaloes and cows, nearby was a pile of manure. Kutubuddi used to have all that a well-off farmer would, but now there was nothing left. There was a bamboo grove behind the house that too had become barren. The pond from which he had fed us fish was now only a muddy pool. But there were more thatched rooms than before. Apart from the *shabeed* son Habib, Kutubuddi had three more sons. They all had their families on the same family

grounds. Because it was difficult to survive on the earnings from their meagre fields, each of the sons worked either as a laborer on other people's lands, or at betel nut shops, or as a rickshaw puller. Kutubuddi's wife died before he totally lost his mind. It was as if the old woman was saved through her death.

Upon seeing me, all of Kutubuddi's sons, grandsons and granddaughters came running. Even the wives and daughters from indoors came out with their veils drawn. Setting up tools and low wooden seats in front of the house, Kutubuddi's sons asked us respectfully to sit down. They even called indoors to their wives to send forth betel leaf and nuts for us.

"I came to see Kutubuddi uncle. How is he now?"

"Father is okay now. But as soon as he sees you, the devil will take over."

"Especially when the doctor is here too."

"Why don't you try treating him? I mean there are plenty of *fakirs* ¹³ in the village who deal with ghosts."

Kutubuddi's sons eagerly explained how they had left no stone unturned in trying to cure him. One said, "The fakir wanted to trap the devil in a bottle but as soon as he came, the devil would flee to the banyan tree, and Kutubuddi would become a perfectly sane man. He would lie as quiet as if dead. He would even say his prayers and perform other religious rituals. But when the razakar exerts power over him, it became difficult to restrain the old man at home, even with a chain and a rope. The entire village was fed up with his irrational acts. This ghost of the razakar has cursed our home as you can see for yourself."

I was startled. Before I could even begin to assess the state of Kutubuddi's family affairs, from inside the house, a weak shriek was heard, "What son of a bitch has come here, gimme my rifle. Wait, I will finish all of you!"

Nadir doctor got up in terror of the ghost, even though it was broad daylight. I was startled too. Kutubuddi's sons ran inside. After they had finished tying him up we felt somewhat secure and went to see him in the inner courtyard.

He sat under a jackfruit tree in a corner of the courtyard. He was tied to the tree with his hand cuffed and ropes wrapped around his waist and legs--as if a wild bull had been tied up. But if you looked at him you would see an emaciated figure of a man weaker than a cow. His attire consisted of a worn out *lungi* and a dirty cap. His hair, beard and the few hairs on the chest were white. There was a woven mat under the tree. That seemed to be the bed on which he lay day and night when in this condition.

Even though this man had no resemblance to the Kutubuddi I knew, I greeted him with a *salaam*. When there was no answer, I wondered if I had mistakenly greeted the ghost of the razakar. Nadir cracked a joke, "Have you recognized your annihilator? He has come from Dhaka to capture you in a bottle and take you away."

The skeleton-like figure fixed his red-shot eyes on me and trembled like a leaf. It seemed he was more afraid than he would if he were encountering the military face to face in 1971. Between the *shahed minar* and the haunted banyan tree, what other realities of life during the interim twenty-five years were responsible for bringing this courageous farmer and freedom fighter I had known so closely to such a dismal state? I don't know. Maybe because I wanted to know I asked in a sympathetic voice, "O Uncle, what has happened to you?"

I guess the tremor was not of fear, but of crazy rage, of Nizam razakar's violence. Kutubuddi

13 A village quack.

burst forth so vehemently with a torrent of abuse that I backed away in apprehension. Along with his frenzied shrieks, he also began to struggle out from captivity in order to attack me. The knot of his *lungi* had loosened, but he was utterly oblivious to the fact. He continued to hurl abuses uninterruptedly: "Gimme my rifle, O wait, I will stick your independence and your *Joi Bangla* up your asshole . . ."

Nadir pulled on my arm. We walked briskly so as to increase the distance between us and the haunted Kutubuddi.
