

We have grown up on wartime stories. I can remember a time when the lights would go out, when load-shedding was a thing, and the whole family would sit down on a rug in the balcony and I'd ask my father to tell me stories of '71. Below are six such stories heard by our writers from their family members — parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles. Our writers have chosen different ways of telling these stories, some in their own voice, while some have chosen to tell it in the voice of those who first said it. Regardless, these stories hope to provide what may just be the entire point of learning history — perspective.

Heading East

FAISAL BIN IQBAL

March 26, 1971. Dawn.

The gunfire had ceased, the agonising cries could no longer be heard. The streets of Dhaka went silent after a night that many had thought would outlast eternity itself. Karim left his residence in Mohakhali and headed towards his hometown in Daudkandi to meet up with his family. He had to cover most of the distance on foot using alleyways and avoiding the main roads. But with the pace he was going at, Karim managed to reach his destination by noon.

There, Karim witnessed the misery and terror in the eyes of thousands heading East towards the border, most of them women and children, carrying nothing but a bit of food and clothing. All of them were fleeing the country, and the military oppression.

Karim and many other villagers piled up sacks of fruits, vegetables, rice, and large water drums along the sides of the road. The idea was to provide the people with something to eat so that they could carry on with their journey.

Every once in a while, a few would stop and take a drink from the drums, or pick up a cucumber and bite down on it. They were tired, devastated, and helpless. Yet, the expressions on their faces spoke only of anger and rage.

Conflicted

JISHAD BIN SHIRAJ AL HAMID

April, 1971

My grandfather, in those times of danger and uncertainty, was met with an unfortunate occurrence that could have resulted in his demise.

The Pakistani forces would conduct searches on people's houses in order to find anything out of the ordinary that may associate someone with another faith. A search on our ancestral home was carried out. The authorities scoured the house and stumbled upon a chest that contained a harmonium; this raised eyebrows as a Muslim family owning a musical instrument was deemed suspicious.

Afterwards, my grandfather was forcefully taken to a nearby field and lined up with other "perpetrators" to be shot to their deaths. However, a local guide within the Pakistani military recognised my grandfather at the field as my grandfather was his former mathematics teacher. He pleaded to the army men to try and convince them that he was indeed a Muslim.

My grandfather was let go. As a new Bangladesh emerged from the rubble of war a few months later, my grandfather held contempt for those who had helped ravage his land and its people, yet it was one of those people who saved his life.

Two Brothers

RABITA SALEH

May, 1971

On the second floor balcony of their three-storey house on Abul Khairat Road in Becharam Dewri, Dhaka, two brothers were fighting.

"You cannot go to war. You are too young," stated sixteen-year-old Rakib definitively. His younger brother, twelve-year-old Nayeem, had always been a bit of a wild child. Enacting fighting sequences he had witnessed on television was his favourite pastime. However, this was not pretend anymore. It would have to be Rakib, as the older brother, who would go to war. It was only fitting.

"You can't go! You have a million responsibilities. What will happen to Mother and Yasmin *apa* if you go? Little Paru can't even feed herself yet. You are needed here. I will go. I will fight for our nation," protested Nayeem, his newly developed voice cracking on the last sentence. Why didn't his older brother understand? He was ready for this.

This was a daily battle. One night Nayeem heard something as he slept. He snuck out of his room to see that Rakib had left his bed and was sleeping on the bare floor. Nayeem approached him.

"What are you doing, *bhaiya*?"

Rakib opened his eyes.

"I'm practicing," he said. "There won't be a bed when I go to war."

Nayeem considered this. In the next moment he lay down beside his brother, curled up on his side, and closed his eyes.

No More Pretending

SARAH WASIFA

For many, life went on during the war. Balconies were off-limits, beds were dismantled, valuables — buried. Offices ran at full capacity, spurred by the fear of being killed for missing days, as had been the case for many. Every day brought with it news sined with fear and loss, yet each minute was strung on with an iron fist. Military check posts were set up everywhere. Under this façade of normalcy, the only act of rebellion for the officers was the secret funding of the war effort. Envelopes under the table, in hidden pockets, spirited away into the frontline; a small role for many to play in the liberation of their country.

For nine months, everyone kept up this pretence of regularity, until the night Eastern Refinery was bombed. Seeking shelter under the stairs was no longer enough. The tremors ran deep, and within a day, the C Colony emptied itself of all signs of life. Their new refuge at Pahartoli bore dire news of a new threat; bad men were on the prowl, looking for chances to loot and kill. Nights were spent on patrol, torches in hand, sleepless, and with worry eating away at their sanity.

More people disappeared. Offices were shut down. There was no more pretending.

The Rice Boy

FATIMA JAHAN ENA

Whenever my father talks about his experience of the war, there's one story that he always tells us about with a warm smile and tired eyes. During the war, he was around ten years old, so his mother refused to let him join the brutality. Instead, they opted to feed the freedom fighters who were stationed near their hometown in Brahmanbaria. Thus began my father's life as the rice boy.

With great pomp and circumstance, he would carry a bowl of rice to the weary soldiers, often-times joining them during their meals. He would listen to their stories with rapt attention and even offer to serve as a look-out for enemies while they enjoyed their meals. Almost every day, without fail, he would carry his bowl of rice and innocently partake in being a spy.

After hearing this story countless times, I realised that it had shaped my perception of what had transpired during that time. Whenever I think of the war now, I think of that little boy with the bowl of rice, chatting away with worn-down soldiers as the sounds of gunshots and bombs filled the air around them.

Upheavals

ADHORA AHMED

The constant upheavals began when my peaceful slumber was shattered by a rain of bullets on March 25, 1971. I watched in fear from the balcony of our flat in Banani, while your grandfather went up to the rooftop with the neighbours. The children, including your mother, wanted to see as well, but I shoved them inside.

After three days of anxiety and confusion, we learned that a war was upon us. After a short stay in Badda, we fled to Manikganj, since the military had not infiltrated the countryside yet.

Judging by the stability of the situation, we alternated staying between my village and your grandfather's, which were five miles apart. We returned to our flat around June, when the military had begun attacking the countryside and Dhaka had cooled down to an extent. But the state of relative safety fluctuated; we stayed wherever we felt the most at peace, whether it was in the city or the village.

Those nine months were spent being tossed around by circumstance. This uprooting finally stopped after December 16, when we could finally return home and safely settle ourselves without the fear of another upheaval.

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