

SHORT STORY

ZAHIR RAIHAN
(abridged and translated by
Farhad Ahmed)

A few days back I visited a forward camp of the freedom fighters to report about them for a newspaper. The camp commander was a very busy man. Yet, harried as he was, he pushed a diary towards me. Please sit down, read this journal. I have to finish up some work. I'll be with you soon.

I extended my hand and took the diary. It was dusty and ink-smeared in places. I opened it. A large, somewhat feminine, rounded handwriting. Parts of it seemed disordered.

I began to read.

At first I used to feel pain if I saw somebody dying, would feel weak. Sometimes I would even shed a tear. But now it has become easy. Who knows, maybe my nerve-endings have dulled-- yes, it must be that. We get news of death, see corpses, lower dead bodies into the grave, and the next moment forget about it.

Shouldering the rifle I walk up to stand atop the small hillock. I look in front of me.

A huge sky, and bamboo latticework from which dangle unripe pumpkins. They sway gently in the wind. Rice fields, two palm trees.

In the distance is a village. Where they, we have information, have set up their base. They who were once a part of us. We who once lived together, ate together, slept together, sat and talked at the same table. Occasionally who we also quarreled with. Loved. And today their sight makes my blood rage,

my eyes sting. My hands twitch, and I fire bullets at them like somebody possessed. I want to kill them. If I kill one of them I feel like bursting with joy. I spit on their corpses.

One ring.
Gobs of blood.
Dark blood. Red blood.
Mens' hands. Feet. The soles of feet.

Pudding-like blood.
A piece of skull.
A chunk of brain.

The smear from a foot sliding on blood.

Long lines of blood, small and big. Lines of blood.

A letter.
A wallet.

A gamcha.
A red mat.

Bangladesh was speaking.

After seeing it I had screamed and fled from the scene. Not just me. Countless other people. Countless other people had fled like ants. With suitcases on top of heads, bundles of clothes under their arms. Hurricane lamps in their hands. Babies dangling from hips.

A wild fear in their eyes.

Rice fields in front. A bamboo latticework for pumpkins. Green pumpkins dangling. Behind me a grove of bamboos, and hidden within it some tents. An old building. This is where we have set up our camp.

A total of twenty-seven men. At first we were nineteen. A mortar shell killed eight. We were eleven when we returned to camp after burying them.

One man fled that night, never to return. Another got sick and died suddenly. Before we could even know what it was, he laid his drawn-out body on the floor and never got up. In his breast pocket I found a letter, written to his mother. Mother!

Don't worry about me, Mother. I am well. We put the letter in his grave. Let it remain there. Then we were nine. Now we had grown again to twenty-seven.

Twenty-seven men.

In front of me are rice fields. A few cows, a goat bleating continuously. A flock of birds wheels away towards the distant village.

A movement catches my eye.

Suspicious, I focus my eyes there. Then notify the camp commander.

Sir, I think they may be advancing.

Arms bent, he was hunched over a field map. He lifted his head to look at me. A pair of red eyes. He hasn't slept the last two nights hasn't been able to spare the time and said, What did you see?

I replied, I thought I saw some movement--

You're mistaken, he said, interrupting me. They are not going to advance for the next two days. Go back and look again.

I came back to my post. Kept a sharp lookout. Sometimes sleep would come, my vision would get blurred. Perhaps I did make a mistake.

But I would never forget what I saw inside the narrow confines of the waiting room of the Buriganga launch terminal. I had heard that a lot of people had taken shelter there. When I went there, I didn't see anybody.

On the floor was pudding-like blood.

Boot-prints.
Marks made by a lot of bare feet.

Small feet. Big feet. Young feet.

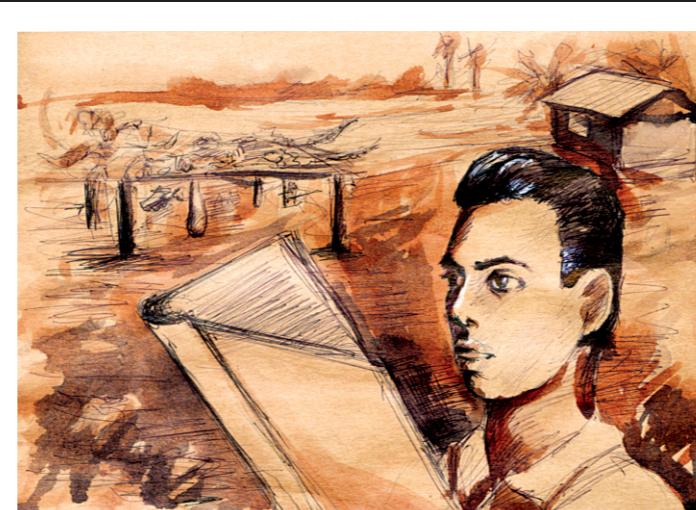
Girls' hair.
Fingers from two hands.

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artwork by apurba

Of different ages. Religion. Opinions.

We did not know each other before. Had never seen each others' faces.

Some were students, some labourers. Farmers. Or else middle-class clerks. Jute traders. Fishermen from the banks of the Padma. Now we were all soldiers. We lived together; ate and slept together. We all lived for a single cause. Sometimes when we rested sitting together in a circle we would exchange stories.

Stories of the past.
Stories of the present.
Stories of the future.
Chit-chat on various other topics.

What was my mother doing right now?

A pain grew in my chest at the thought of my mother.

My younger brother. My sister. How were they doing?

Were they alive or dead?

Maybe. I didn't know. To know was to think. To think now was agony. Though at one time I used to love to think. Especially about Joya, Chinu bhabu's sister. How many were the ways had I

thought of her!
Sometimes with wind-tossed seas as a backdrop.

Sometimes in the middle of wave-like processions.

By the side of a small house. During the day. At night. In darkness. Or at noon, while sitting in a corner table at a restaurant. Solitary. Sitting silently for a long time with a cup of tea in front of me. I loved thinking about her.

We two could float in the waters of rivers named Ichhamoti, Korotoa, Mayurakhi, and play hide-and-seek with the waves.

Joya had never seen the ocean, and desperately wanted to see it. One day she laughed and said You know, I went and saw the ocean. When? Where? I had enquired in astonishment.

Why, in this city. She wiped the beads of sweat on her forehead with her sari. Haven't you noticed the ocean in the alleys and streets of our city?

The ocean of people. Deeper than the sea. Wider than the ocean. Swift-flowing. And no matter what obstacles we faced, this ocean would sweep everything before it.

All of us gave roughly the same answer. For the nation. For

Millions and millions of faces. Faces carved by God. Fists that blotted out the horizon. The sound of a million thunderbolts or the chant of waves, all are drowned out by the roar of millions marching.

I had never seen it before. February 1952, 1954, '62, '66 or '69, all these I had witnessed.

But this outpouring of so many souls I had never seen.

Never before had I seen so many deaths.

I look in front of me again. A huge sky. A few green pumpkins hanging from bamboo latticework. Rice fields. Two palm trees. In the distance a village.

I see them every day.

Even Joya I had never inspected so closely. Some bamboo groves at the back, within which nestled a few tents. A crumbling building. On its walls we had drawn many lines with charcoal. It was a death tally. Not ours.

Theirs.

Whenever we dispatched one of the foe, we would immediately draw a new line on the wall. It made it easier to keep track. We would often stand in front of it, count. Three hundred and seventy-two. Seventy-three.

Seventy-four. We were waiting to fill up the whole wall.

We kept count of our own dead too. But that was in our minds, the lines were inside our minds. That too we occasionally counted.

One day, quite a few days back, the sector commander had come to inspect our camp. We were standing at attention, welcoming him. He had asked us a question. Can you tell me why we are fighting the war?

All of us gave roughly the same answer. For the nation. For

the motherland. We are fighting to free our land. Bangladesh.

But no, later I had thought that perhaps the answer had not been correct. We had discussed it among ourselves for a long time. Had we given the right answer?

Nation was simply a matter of geography, something whose borders changed a thousand times in a thousand years. Is changing. Would change in the future.

So what were we fighting for? My friends all gave different reasons. Revenge, some said. They mowed down our mothers and sisters like dogs, that's why. This is revenge.

We were fighting injustice, others said. Those bastards have oppressed us for long, we are now fighting to get rid of them.

Yet others said, I don't get all this, I know I am simply fighting for Sheikh Mujib. Some said, you know why I am here, to rid the nation of all the goondas and thugs, to kick all the corrupt and the perverted, the middlemen and religion-peddlers in the arse.

I had listened to them all. And had been thinking. Had argued with some. Yet could not come to a satisfactory conclusion. What were we fighting for? Sacrificing so many lives, shedding so much blood.

Maybe for happiness, for peace. To fulfill one's hopes and dreams.

Or else, simply to survive, to live. To save oneself. Or perhaps because it was the need of the hour. We were fighting to fulfill the expectations of the moment.

No! I could not bear thinking in such large terms. My head could no longer hold such big thoughts. It hurts.

What I knew was simple: We had to drive them out of our land.

This was the need of the hour.

Rice fields in front of me. A huge sky. A latticework of bamboo, from which hang unripe pumpkins. Two palm trees. In the distance a village, named Rohanpur. They have come and camped there, those who once were a part of us.

There was nothing else written in the diary.

I pushed it back to the camp commander and asked, Who wrote it, you?

No, a freedom fighter who had been with us.

Could I talk to him? I asked again.

He started to answer, then stopped and stared at me for a few moments. Then said, He went on a operation a few days back and was captured.

And?

I don't know what happened then. Maybe they killed him, maybe he's alive.

My eyes, almost unknowingly, went back to the diary. For a long time I went through the pages again. Then turned my face away from it.

A huge sky. Green pumpkins swayed from a bamboo latticework. A few rice fields. Two palm trees. A village in the distance. A fire burning there.

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1971: A time to remember, a time to tell

AFSAN CHOWDHURY

For the last four years I have been reporting in the December pages of *The Daily Star* on our work in progress, a book of history of 1971.

The task is now finished and our book is in the press. After four years of constant work, it's a matter of relief more than any other feeling. Now that it's done, we are all glad that the journey is over.

We had begun the project because all of us had felt that there was a need to construct a history that would not be located in a personal or political space. We were not overtly ambitious. We hoped to construct a book of around 500 pages with a core chapter on life in the villages of 1971, the rest touching the main topics of related history. It would be like a bright sunflower with the core chapter in the middle and the rest like petals spread around it.

The other chapters would be desk work based, chapters constructed on the documents and narratives of 1971 that had gained credibility over time. The 15 volumes of documents popularly known as 'Dolipatra' has stood the test of time and as we had access to the first edition, we felt we would find enough materials to do this work. Obviously, we had underestimated the scale of our endeavour.

As work progressed so did the scope of work. The initial plan of 10 chapters reached 22 and after adding the interviews and personal narratives, the book crossed 1500 royal-sized pages. We have most probably read every book that has come out in Bangladesh on 1971, many books by Indian and Pakistani authors and perused what we could lay our hands on. Had we known about the enormity of the task, I am not sure if we would have dared. The book took a life of its own almost dictating where it would go and how, a bit like our own 1971. We followed the logic of our task.

To participate in such a journey, which for some could be a sacred one, was in the end an adventure for us. To hold a job full time and work on such a vast book project wasn't easy for most of the older members of the project who had been involved with its birth. As they fell away, pulled by demands on their time and livelihood, it's the young who stepped in and finally influenced the tone of the book. Free from political baggage, they seemed very keen to participate in a task which would present the history just as it was and face some of the ignored or evaded questions that haunt our history. In the end, it was about the meaning and exercise of intellectual integrity in history writing rather than constructing a heroic or a tragic narrative.

We had of course felt that the social experiences especially of those who are not part of the star cast had been neglected over time. They are seen only as victims or warriors and the whole description of survival didn't seem adequate. We felt uncomfortable with that approach. We wanted a fuller and more well-rounded description of the past, an analysis of the historical process and not just the narrow confines of nationalist

historiography. Perhaps, we were not making a point about who was right or wrong.

We wanted to say it as it happened and expect the events to explain what occurred. I hope we have achieved some part of that ambition.

In the end, it's of course a platter full of several histories. Just as we observe three States in three stages - one collapsing, one emerging and one expanding - we also pondered on the nature of these states. Yet our own focus was on bringing society in 1971 as alive as possible because we know so little and collective forgetting has set in.

Some of that has been possible because of the designated chapters and some because of over 200 interviews that are in the book where the original voices have been kept as pristine as possible. These interviews of Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis ranged from the topmost leadership to those of ordinary villagers. By putting them at the same level, we found a sense of balance and 1971 looked more real, liberated from the hypotheses of the accuser and the accused.

It was also humbling because once the task was over we realized how flawed the work is. Oh, if we could go on and on, far beyond the ten revisions of the work. I wish we had another ten but it's the existential hazard of attempting something like this which has to be completed and presented.

For me personally, it became a race to finish the book before my health totally collapsed. With each diagnosis of a fresh symptom, I would not see the end of my body but the end of the work, left unfinished. I resented my body for being a stumbling block. It was a humbling experience but the great journey and adventure is almost done.

Why should our book be worth such importance or attention? Quite frankly, it's not worth it. Yet it has a right to exist along with other works. It's not a history of subalterns or even by them or of leaders and experts but it's a chorus of which the words and tunes have been agreed after polishing and sweating through hard work. The collective words drawn out the individual voice and in this history there is no glory seeker. Just as the war was a great leveller, the book is perhaps one attempt when people of all shades and types got together and constructed the work, a collective history of ordinary people, about themselves, their society and their State. The absence of official patronage has perhaps preserved this integrity.