INDEPENDENCE DAY



PHOTO: ANWAR HOSSAIN

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Rabeya Begum is now 42-years-old. She knows this because her mother had told her that she had been only 40 days old when the country was freed and victory was announced. "It was *sheetkal* I think when I was born" which makes it likely that she was a December child. When you ask her what happened during that time she is a little taken aback; people like her do not have time to dwell on the past.

Were people killed in your village? (a good starting point). "Oh yes my mother told me during the *Shangram* some men in uniform came and then they started taking people and lining them up and shooting them, there were even women among them." *So what is Shangram?* Rabeya pauses and gives an embarrassed smile: "Who knows what it is" but then she adds, "But I know from my mother that five of my uncles joined something called the Mukti Bahini and one of them never came back. *Who were these Mukti Bahini?* 'Who knows, they went through the marshes to fight or something." This she says in a bland tone before going back to mopping the floor. With a husband who is almost blind after a speck of wood fell into his eye and three young girls to put through school and feed, Independence Day does not have much meaning for her.

Rabeya has never been able to appreciate the fruits of this priceless gift called Independence. Her entire life has been one of struggle. Living in a haor area in Shingpur (she cannot say what district it is under) all she can remember is the hardship her family went through. Her parents were poor and the three sisters were married off early. Rabeya and her husband along with their three girls came to Dhaka in search of work.

The first time Rabeya came to work at the house in Cantonment she was a lively, attractive young woman; she wore colourful saris and sported an armlet her husband had given her that gave her a Bohemian look. But everything about Dhaka was alien to her – the tall buildings, busy streets, the leering men, even the houses where she worked part time seemed a little scary.

In 2008 the entire *busti* she lived in was cleared out with bulldozers, leaving her and her family staring at the open sky while clutching on to a few belongings. Everything was gone – even the paltry savings she had hidden under some clothes. When she came to say goodbye with her youngest on her hip, she looked like the world had come to an end. Her sari torn, hair disheveled, she couldn't stop crying: "I have lost everything, we have nothing, the rain ruined all our clothes, someone stole most of our cooking pans when we fell asleep..." There were around two and a half lakh people in that area –all of them lost their homes in a single sweep of a bulldozer to make way for residential flats for the privileged.

So Rabeya left with her semi-blind husband and three emaciated girls to stay at her husband's village. But there was nothing there for them there – no land, no work, no one to turn to. A housing scheme initiated apparently by the government for the 'ultra poor' turned out to be a scam that left her poorer and heavily in debt. Her only hope was to come back to Dhaka - harsh, brutal Dhaka but where at least you could earn a few takas doing something.

Her husband's condition deteriorated over the years giving her the title of sole breadwinner of the family. Unlike her parents though, she made sure all three of her girls went to school. With the help of her employer she has managed to become part owner of a rickshaw – her brother-in-law drives it and she gets around TK 100 a day, enough to buy the daily groceries. She still works at the house in Cantonment and goes through the regular mishaps in her family. Her own health has taken heavy blows, her back is weak, she is heavily anaemic. Her face is permanently creased with worry – she worries about her husband who may go completely blind, her daughters who often fall ill and about when some storm or bulldozer will come and blow away the only home she has now – a tiny shack on a marshland kept up with stilts. She no longer wears the armlet.

So do you know what '26 March Independence Day' is? She smiles disarmingly and says: "I don't really know anything but my girls read about it in their books and that day they will get a holiday." ■