



# The horrific memories of 1971

Here is an excerpt from Jahanara Imam's account of the Liberation War published in the book "1971: Bhoyaboho Obhiggota," edited by Rashid Haider, Jatiya Shahitto Prokashoni, 1989.

JAHANARA IMAM

WHICH memories of 1971 are horrific? The whole period from March 25 to December 15 was one continuous hell. Which special event should I describe as a horrific memory? The events of the fateful night of March 25? The night when we all had to abruptly wake up to the sound of an inhumane ghostly uproar? The night with the boom-boom sound of heavy bombs, with the *tha-tha-tha* sound of machine guns, with the outcries of countless helpless people all around, with the unceasing yelps of dogs; the night when the darkness, overpowered by the spreading fire, created an unnatural, infernal atmosphere; the memory of that night? But no, that was just the beginning of the hellish torment. How can I identify one memory as horrific when each day, each night since then we were consumed by an insufferable, inexplicable anguish?

The hellish memories still keep rushing back to me, tormenting me to this day.

I remember the morning of March 27, 1971. How can I express in words the shock I felt in the morning when I went out after a 32-hour curfew and saw the state of the Shaheed Minar? They had tried to demolish the very symbol of our existence. I was stunned by the gruesomeness of their efforts. I was stunned by the wretchedness of people everywhere. For fear of life, helpless people flocked to the hospitals for some safety. The roads were filled with processions of people, fleeing. The head of the family who had never even lifted a small load in his life was escaping that morning with a suitcase on his head, holding his young son's hand. The housewife, who had never taken a step outside her house, was that day running away with her child pressed against her bosom. Those memories have left a scar deep in my heart -- for all eternity. I didn't know yet what had happened at Iqbal Hall or Jagannath Hall. Later, the descriptions I heard from other people were enough to rob me of my sleep. Even five days later, the coagulated red blood stains lingered in the balcony in front of the flat of the beloved *jamai-babu* (son-in-law), Jyotirmoy Guha Thakurda. The dreadful memories have not faded away, even after so many years.

Have I been able to forget the sorrowful day when Rumi went to the Liberation War? I still feel as suffocated as I did that day when the inevitability of the future pressed down upon me with such force that I thought I would die. A lot of mothers

were in the same condition as me. When her treasured son goes to war, the terror of the war becomes as entwined with the mother's life as the pride she feels for her son. The sorrow of a mother is a thousand times multiplied when her son becomes a martyr.

Every time I think about the night the Pakistani army took away Rumi, my whole being becomes numb for a few moments even today.

Was there any peace in my mind even before Rumi went to war? Amidst all those stories of terror, it was also suffocating to live with a 20-year-old brawny son. I would wake up from nightmares in the middle of the night and sit up on my bed in horror.

carries her kittens in her mouth to one place to another, seeking a refuge.

Rumi was captured by the Pak army on the midnight of August 29. On the same night, at the same time, Pak military forces also raided five other houses and captured many freedom fighters. Bodi, Rumi, Chullu, Azad, Jewel, Bashar, Altaf-Mahmud, Nuhel Kholu, Linu, Dinu and many more. I didn't know all this when the Pak army came to our house that night. I was in a deep sleep. I woke up abruptly to the sound of loud thumping at the gate and people shouting. Peeking out of the window, I saw our house had been surrounded by the Pak army. They had come to arrest Rumi. But they didn't say that even once.

passed everything I had heard about the seven hells. When they went to the small room where they kept Sharif in the MP hostel, they saw that a lot of freedom fighters and some of their fathers, uncles and other relatives had been arrested and crammed in there. When I heard about the inhumane way they physically tortured and verbally abused them from Sharif, Jami and Masum, I wanted to die of disgust and shame. Jewel, Bashar, Hafiz, Alvi, Altaf Mahmood were beaten so badly that some of them had broken wrists, some had broken noses and others broken fingers; their clothes were soaked with blood. When they couldn't find freedom fighter Ulfat, they hung his father upside down from a fan and beat him; they did the same to freedom fighter Shapan's father. Rumi's father, brother, Shapan and Ulfat's father, uncles, Altaf Mahmud's brothers-in-law were released after 3-4 days. But even though they returned, they would never be normal again. The memories of their torture and abuse would never allow them to be normal. They kicked Sharif with their boots; for a long time after he returned, he felt as if he was wearing an iron cap. It took months for the marks from the whipping to fade. But more than the physical torture, it was the agony of the insult that hounded him. He couldn't live for long bearing the burden of that insult. On December 13, he passed away of heart failure, leaving everything behind.

How do I describe the terrorising memory of that day? Dhaka was embroiled in a terrible war; no one could understand what was happening amidst the curfews and the blockades. We didn't know yet that the plan of killing intellectuals was being put into action. Meanwhile, on the evening of the 14th, a few people died in a bomb attack in our neighbouring house. Some died, some were injured, and others, feeling scared, came to our house with the wounded, seeking refuge. Our house had been a shelter during the air-raid of the 1965 war; that's probably the reason everyone hurried to our place on that day. That was another dilemma. I had to arrange food and shelter for so many people, including the injured, children and infirm. Curfew, blockades, disconnected phone lines and the incessant sound of planes hovering around our heads -- I don't have the power to describe the terror of those memories. I am overwhelmed by the excruciating pain of those incidents till this date.

Translated by: Sushmita S. Preetha



Two days after March 25, I heard that all the grown men from different neighbourhoods and homes were being listed. I was shocked. I remembered that there were some non-Bengali young men who live on a street north of the main road, with whom Rumi had had a fight. Thanks to them, Rumi-Jami's name was sure to be on the top of the list.

How scared I was that day! In a hurry, I moved Rumi-Jami to Sharif's friend's house in Gulshan. He, too, had three grown sons. He, too, was worried beyond his wits. A Punjabi major lived in the house next to his, which compounded our distress. I would keep Rumi-Jami in one house for a couple of days, then bring them back, then take them to another house. I felt like a mother cat that

The captain said, in an ordinary manner: "Everyone in the house has to go to the *thana* for routine interrogation. Just for a few hours." They took away all the men in the house -- Rumi, Jami, their father, their cousins. I was the only one that remained in that empty house; in a separate room my elderly, infirm, blind father-in-law was fast asleep. He didn't feel a thing, he didn't even wake up.

The hellish torment wasn't over. Everyone returned after two days -- Sharif, Jami, Masum, Hafiz. Only one person didn't return -- Rumi. They took away everyone in the name of routine interrogation to what was a *Habiya dojkoh* (the worst hell). The tales of torture by the Pakistani army narrated by Sharif, Jami and Masum sur-

Have I been able to forget the sorrowful day when Rumi went to the Liberation War? I still feel as suffocated as I did that day when the inevitability of the future pressed down upon me with such force that I thought I would die. A lot of mothers were in the same condition as me.

## Fear and freedom

SYED ABUL MAKSUD

IN his speech on January 6, 1941, 22nd US President Franklin D. Roosevelt said: "A world founded upon four essential freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression ... everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way ... everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want ... everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear ... anywhere in the world." One of the most respected presidents in American history, Roosevelt, a Democrat, was the first president to break the third term tradition and was elected to a fourth term in 1944.

Every nation needs able and far-sighted leaders to make it a prosperous and great State. Shortsighted and inept leadership cannot deliver any good to the nation. According to our Constitution, every citizen shall have the right to 'freedom of speech and expression' and 'freedom of the press.' The Constitution guaranteed our 'freedom of thought and conscience,' but 'subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interests of the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court defamation or incitement to an offence.'

Our Constitution guaranteed us a lot of rights. We have 'the right to move freely throughout Bangladesh,' but we



know that we don't have the right to enter anybody's house scaling a wall. That is invasion of privacy -- a punishable offence. We have the freedom to think and say whatever we like, but have no right to hurt anybody however small, weak and insignificant she or he might be.

But these days, everybody fears to move freely even in the highways. Nobody knows who will unhesitatingly hurl petrol bombs on the public vehicles to kill unknown innocent people. People of high position have been

hurling invectives against somebody they do not like. That is not freedom of expression. Freedom of expression is to speak the truth.

In our People's Republic, all citizens are not equal in the eyes of the State. If you are a powerful person, you are free to do whatever you like. You can grab government khas lands with fake documents or without any documents whatsoever. If you have clout in the administration, you can murder your opponent in broad daylight and the law enforcers will not

dare touch even a hair on your head. Even if you are accused of murder and arrested, you are sure to get bail.

In a democracy that we have in our Republic, an opposition leader can enforce a countrywide indefinite blockade for months together to reach a 'logical conclusion' of her movement. She does not bother about economy of the country, education of the children and the right to free movement and security of the people. Threats to freedom of expression have negated the fruits of democracy in Bangladesh.

Laws are twisted by the powerful, thereby depriving the common people of their legitimate rights. Words like petrol bombs, crossfire, encounter, forced disappearance, abduction and death in police custody overwhelm people with fear. Our existing laws do not allow anything like crossfire or encounter even if the victim is a heinous criminal. He has the right to take shelter of the rule of law.

In an independent and sovereign country, all kinds of fundamental rights are guaranteed by the State to its citizens. A country like Bangladesh with a low literacy rate has failed to secure people's rights that are guaranteed by the Constitution. The underprivileged and illiterate people are not in a position to be aware of the rights that are enshrined in the Constitution. We need to wipe out illiteracy from the society and educate our people.

The people have very little understanding of the implications of the

denial of their fundamental rights. Constitutional rights are being violated at the behest of the powerful section of the society. If such subversion is to be resisted, efforts have to be made to spread education and awareness among the masses.

It was a long-cherished dream of the people of this land to establish a society free from fear, hunger, exploitation and oppression. To fulfill the dream, lakhs of people sacrificed their lives in 1971. We fought the brutal Pakistani army to establish truth in our society.

Ibsen, in his play *An Enemy of the People* writes: "One should never put on one's best trousers to go to battle for freedom and truth." Battle for freedom and truth is the noblest of all battles. We fought that battle in 1971. And we won.

Truth went away from the soil of Bangladesh long ago. In a society where truth is absent, all citizens are not equal in the eyes of the law. Where all citizens are not equal nobody is free from fear. As a nation, we have distanced ourselves from truth. As a result, we have lost our freedom -- freedom of movement and freedom of expression.

How much freedom we do have in our People's Republic we do not know, but we have these days freedom to fear. Now we have to launch a battle for freedom and truth to make our motherland a peaceful and livable place free from all kinds of fear.

The writer is a noted writer, researcher and social activist.

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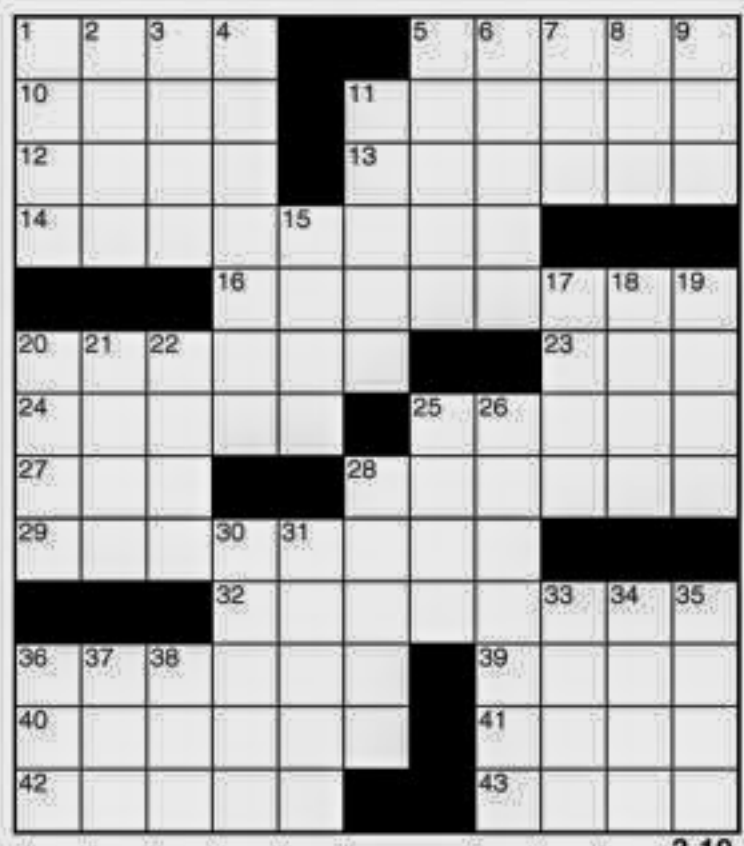
### QUOTABLE Quote

Setting goals is the first step in turning the invisible into the visible.

Tony Robbins

### CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

- ACROSS
- 1 Biting remark
  - 5 Soph teachers
  - 10 Open space
  - 11 Goof
  - 12 Some stories
  - 13 Danish, e.g.
  - 14 "Don't fight!"
  - 16 Confirm
  - 20 Predicament
  - 23 Lawn makeup
  - 24 Canadian birds
  - 25 "Superman" star
  - 27 Rainbow shape
  - 28 "Stalag 17" star
  - 29 Clear the schedule
  - 32 Succeed
  - 36 Zit
  - 39 Qualified
  - 40 Gladdens
  - 41 Seasonal song
  - 42 Stratagems
  - 43 Midterm, for one
- DOWN
- 1 Soothing stuff
  - 2 Diva's piece
  - 3 Smell awful
  - 4 One on a diamond
  - 5 Site
  - 6 Stands
  - 7 Make a choice
  - 8 Cat coat
  - 9 Secret agent
  - 11 Piton, for one
  - 15 Snoozes
  - 17 Not new
  - 18 Wander
  - 19 Perfect place
  - 20 Close with a bang
  - 21 "Downton Abbey" countess
  - 22 Scissors beater
  - 25 The Eternal City
  - 26 Swanky
  - 28 Wooland walks
  - 30 Vacant
  - 31 Yarns
  - 33 Bassoon's cousin
  - 34 Corrida cries
  - 35 Shoulder muscle, for short
  - 36 Energy
  - 37 Under the weather
  - 38 Chinese chairman



### Yesterday's answer



**CRYPTOQUOTE** 2-3  
 QDPH LHDLYH XIGCU ZIDP FOH  
 ZDJCFRGC DZ UCDBYHXNH, DFOHIQ  
 EJQFNRINYH. - IDKHIF RCFODCV

**YESTERDAY'S CRYPTOQUOTE:**  
 THIS IS ONE TIME WHERE TELEVISION REALLY FAILS TO CAPTURE THE TRUE EXCITEMENT OF A LARGE SQUIRREL PREDICTING THE WEATHER. - PHIL CONNORS

### BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



### HENRY by Don Trachte

