

Sheela Devi ...

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I stayed there for several years because I felt afraid to stay alone. I used to imagine that people were following me. I tried to go back to my husband, but he beat me twice and threw me out of the house. Still, from time to time, he would come and ask me for money. He got married again.

"I was staying at my aunt's place at the time. Even after his second marriage, I tried to go back to him a couple of times, but every time he beat me. In 1985, I left my aunt's place and moved into staff quarters. At that time my younger brother, who had gone to India, came to stay with me. He was the only one of my family who had kept in touch with me. Nowadays he stays with me. For these 25 years after liberation, I have tried to commit suicide but I haven't succeeded.

"When people ask me about 1971, all I say is that I was a freedom fighter. I do not want to remember anything else. I am still very afraid. In the middle of the night, I continue to wake up in fear. Anyone else in my place, would have died long ago.

"I didn't have any children. But I tell people that I had a son who died. If I hadn't said this, people would have thought that I was bad, inauspicious. Women who live alone arouse curiosity and gossip.

"I am not in touch with my relations. At the beginning I had no connection with them at all. At present I meet them occasionally, but I am closer to those who gave me shelter when I was in trouble. One of my sisters got married after the war.

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Another sister got married a short while later. I didn't attend the marriage of either.

"In 1985, my younger brother returned to Bangladesh. In fact, I had sent him a letter when he was in Kolkata. After that we kept in touch. It was through him that I was able to contact the rest of my family.



File photo of a woman freedom fighter carrying a gun.

"One of my uncles stays in India. Of course he is not really related to me. I took shelter in his house for some time. He did a lot for me. Sometimes strangers are better than one's relations. He still sends me clothes and other gifts from India. After the war was over, my own relations refused to take me back. Can you imagine that I was all alone in Kolkata? That was when uncle gave me shelter. He still keeps in touch with me. Acquaintances have been closer to me than my real family. After my brother died, I did not go to meet my sister-in-law. I do not like her. I didn't even go when my sister died."

We met Sheela Devi's younger brother. We learned that he had spent some time in India. In 1985 he had returned to Bangladesh and since then had been staying with his sister. He told us, "Occasionally, Didi gets very upset. On these occasions she behaves quite abnormally and talks somewhat disjointedly. The Liberation War has affected her badly."

He told us that Sheela had sat for the Matriculation examination in 1971. At that time she could sing and dance very well. She could also draw. After the war she stopped singing and dancing. He said, "Former, President Abdur Rahman Biswas had invited me to sing at a function. I declined the invitation. Thinking about it now, I believe I made a mistake. Everyone took some advantage of the other. We suffered so much during the war. My sister's life turned upside-down. Is it wrong for us to take some benefits?"

Sheela Devi had three sisters and two brothers. One brother had died some time ago, and a sister had died shortly after getting married. Sheela's mother died on February 18, 1984; her father died later that year, on December 16. Talking to us,

Sheela Devi said, "My family now consists of just this one brother. I don't have much contact with my sisters. I don't want to go back home."

From time to time, Sheela Devi would look terrified and start talking to some invisible person. She would say things like, "No, no, you will not go anywhere alone. There are enemies all around us. I don't trust anyone. If people hear you talking about the war, if they see the two of us conversing together, both you and I will be in trouble." At other times she would say, "I am going to take revenge twice: against the Pakistani army and against my husband." At other times she would say, "I think everyone is a razakar." Once a certain gentleman came to visit her. Pointing to him, Sheela Devi whispered in our ears, "He is a university teacher but belongs to the Jamaat. He is a razakar. Didn't I tell you that we are surrounded by enemies? He comes to my brother to learn singing. This is a pretext, to ensure his own safety."

When we had first met him, Sheela's brother had told us about a young freedom fighter from their area who had been killed. He wanted to keep alive his memory. While we were talking, Sheela Devi listened to use with her head bowed. She didn't join in the conversation. However, when someone said that even people who had not fought in the war were eager to get certificates that they had been freedom fighters, Sheela Devi suddenly raised her head. "Who is a freedom fighter?" Agitatedly, she added. "I too am a freedom fighter."

During the course of our conversation, we discovered that in March 1997, Nari Pragati Sangha had given a reception to women freedom fighters. Sheela Devi hadn't gone. She said, "I have some problems, so I don't go to these

functions."

Sheela did not like to talk about what had happened to her. She explained, "I do not want to remember the war, I have nightmares when I try to sleep. And to whom will I say these things? I feel everyone is an enemy." She added, "I am afraid of nightmares, very afraid."

Sheela refused to provide any information about others. For example, she didn't tell us anything about the woman she called Khala. All she said was, "One day I'll take you to Khala's house." She didn't want to give us her husband's name. She also did not volunteer information about her child who had died, and about whom we had learned from other sources. When we asked her about her child, she denied that she had had a child.

Sheela tended to introduce people as relations. At the most difficult time of her life, Sheela had had to live without the support of her family. The only what she had been able to survive was by creating relationships, through the kindness of others. At present too she lives alone, and it is with the help of these relationships that she manages to survive. This was her legacy of 1971. The Liberation War changed her life, uprooted her from her moorings, her relations, her society, her religion. In a fact, it alienated her from the world around her. Hurt, stubborn, angry, Sheela Devi is fighting still. The 1971 was not over for Sheela Devi.

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