

Witness to VICTORY

The struggle for the freedom of Bangladesh was long, bloody, and full of instances of extreme violence and extreme bravery in the face of it. There was also resilience, and defiance. Yet, each and every soul in the country back then saw, felt, heard and experienced the war in their own way.

Collective memories are of course rich anthologies of history, but in it, get lost many individual voices. With the passage of time, we are losing many of the people who were witness to the struggle for independence. Here, we bring you some testimonials of general citizens, of varying ages, describing what they remember of the very first Victory Day, and the lead up to it.

Dhaka city played host to the actual surrender ceremony. Consequently, the city was also witness to pitched battles, random skirmishes, bombings, and all manner of atrocities. In the varying degrees of suffering that the population went through, nobody emerged unscathed, be it in the loss of life itself, loved ones, or trauma of various kinds. As the end of the titanic struggle came near, each individual experienced the days differently.

JAYANTA SEN
Businessman
(23-year-old youth in 1971)

The final phase of the narrative of victory actually started on 3 December, as the then President Yahya Khan's troops bombed parts of India, and India formally declared war on Pakistan. Propaganda by the state machinery intensified, claiming that Pakistan's flag was still proudly flying over Agartala. The war drums had truly started beating, and feelings

in the impact ditch. It further cemented what people already knew.

We lived in Eskaton Garden area then, as the Intercontinental Hotel was considered an internationally neutral zone, and the adjacent areas were relatively safer in the city against the sudden raids and action by the Pakistani army.

The days leading to victory were terrifying of course, but the nights were altogether more stirring, and intense. We followed the news on *Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* diligently. All sorts of emotions were felt — the radio waves carried missives of victory by the freedom fighters in different spots, but it also brought us missives of targeted abductions, and the disappearances of many of the brilliant and public figures of the nation.

The night skies would often light up brilliantly, as the Indian air force dropped down lights that looked like paper lanterns, before the actual attack, to illuminate and properly identify the targets.

In the city, we started to hear shots and mortars from the Demra side from 10 December onwards, as the freedom fighters started to make their way here.

One of my most striking memories is of the Victory Day itself. As the Pakistani army was making their way to the surrender ceremony, to be held at the Racecourse, a sizable number of political figures and the Indian army had

the landing had actually broken her leg, and yet, I found her smiling through the pain, glad to think of the victory and freedom that we could all feel within our grasp already.

Perhaps that is a perfect description of the nation's emotions; the pain, scars and tears were all there, but so was the joy of liberation won.

However, after all these years, what saddens me the most when I think about those days of the war and struggle by the entire nation, is that the very spirit of being a nation is no more there. We had all come together then, with Bengali brotherhood. People sacrificed their own lives to save others, then. The same nation today, has fallen so low, that there are people trying to become wealthy or influential by trampling the rights and dignity of others. I feel the spirit and values of freedom, and of the liberation movement, are lost.

SHARMEEN MURSHID
Human rights activist and CEO of Brotee
(Finished Class 10 in 1971)

The immediate feeling upon learning of the surrender by the Pakistan army, and the consequent victory of Bangladesh, was indescribable joy, and elation. Yet, even as a young school girl, I questioned why had that army not surrendered to the actual people it had trampled, tortured, and then lost to? My feelings will perhaps be clear with



every conscious member of the society was subconsciously aware of that.

In truth, I feel that open conflict began the very day West Pakistanis refused to hand over power to the elected government, and war began exactly when they unleashed their military might to occupy us.

Both my parents being part of the government in exile, we heard about the surrender immediately as it happened. The sheer joy of knowing that we could now return home cannot be expressed in words, as the fear of not being able to return had been a very real one, until that moment.

People everywhere began to rush out and look for their missing loved ones. Gradually, we learnt of all the people we had lost. Seven of our very close friends, and 14 members of our extended family were gone forever. Learned men I used to call 'chacha,' them being friends of my father, were cruelly butchered as part of the drive to deprive us of our intellectuals.

The just ecstasy of a hard-earned victory was, of course, marred by the grief, emotions which perhaps winners of all wars, will attest to. Also, we need to remember, there were pockets of Bangladesh's area still occupied, and skirmishes and battles raged in various places as late as January 1972.

And yet, just as on the first Victory Day, today in 2019, I still question why the losing army did not surrender to the people of Bangladesh, as I feel it should have. The general, simple people of Bangladesh had taken the organised Pakistani army, one of the most well-equipped in the developing world, and fatigued, demoralised, and destroyed it, bringing the behemoth to its knees. At that point of the struggle, our Indian allies

swooped in to help with the final push.

While being duly grateful for that, I still question as to why it should be termed as a victory of India over Pakistan in an Indo-Pak war, rather than being acknowledged as the achievement of the freedom fighters, that is the population of Bangladesh? Especially, since this is the only occasion when Pakistan truly surrendered, unlike any other wars that the neighbours have fought since 1947. The efforts of the *Muktijoddha* population of Bangladesh need to be acknowledged, as Victory only came because our people did a grand job.

TAHSINA SHAMSUNNAHAR
School teacher
(Student of Class 1, in 1971)

There were trucks full of revellers, chanting slogans and being merry, in what I can recall clearly of the first Victory Day. I was a child then, a student of class 1. The next day, we returned to our flat on the Dhaka University Campus. Some of my memories are hazy, yet some are clear as day, perhaps for the impact they had on me.

Two days prior to Victory day, on 14 December, I had been sitting in the veranda in my father, Late Prof Aminul Islam's home, — then a teacher in the department of Soil Science, in the teachers' quarters on Isa Khan road, opposite today's British Council. I had a fever, I remember. Suddenly, a minibus came and stopped outside the gate, and some men with guns came out. One of them looked up and saw me, and told me, flicking his gun, to go inside. I ran, minding to wear the sweater, as otherwise, father would scold me, and announcing along to everyone that the military had come.

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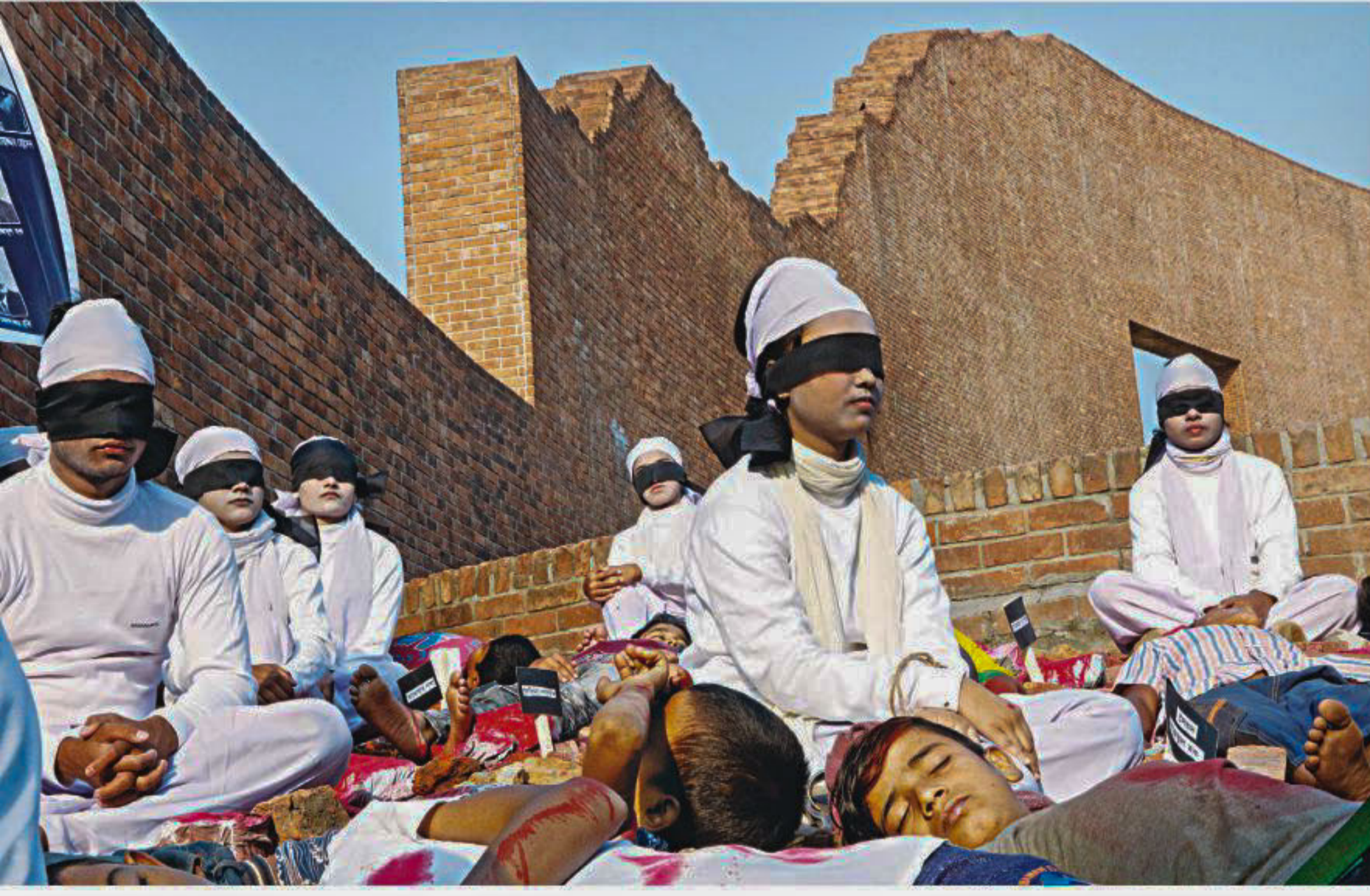


PHOTO: THE DAILY STAR ARCHIVE/PALASH KHAN

of it were palpable in the environment.

The shelling of targets inside Dhaka city increased, and it was claimed to be by the Indian army. That was a lie however, as the Pakistani army took off in their own helicopters and randomly shelled parts of the city, without care for the consequent targets, like when an orphanage in Tejgaon was bombed one night. In another such bombing, a culvert near the Darul Kabab hotel, which used to be opposite to where the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Dhaka hotel stands today, was bombed. The next morning, we found pieces of shrapnel stamped with "Made in Pakistan"



stationed themselves in and around the Intercontinental in Shahbagh.

We were in the spectators as well. Back then, there used to be red-bricked minister's quarters opposite the hotel. All of a sudden, while marching towards the ceremony, the Pakistani army opened fire on the Indians, who also retaliated. There were injuries on both sides. But as we rushed to take shelter away from the firing, many of us ran towards the ministers' quarters compound.

I literally picked up a lady and helped by shoving her over the wall to safety, and climbed over as well. We immediately saw that

a bit of background on my circumstances during the war. My mother was an elected MP, through the general elections held in 1970, but the winners of that election never got to form a government, as was their due. All members of my family — my father, sister, brother, and I, were thoroughly embroiled in the struggle for independence, and it gave me, even as a teenager barely out of school, a unique and intimate view of the entire movement, even before the armed struggle began. Bangladesh had been gearing towards a full confrontation much before that March onslaught by the army, and I feel

