



ILLUSTRATION: FAIAZ RAFIQ

ON THE EVE OF INDEPENDENCE

50 years may seem like a long time, but for those with memories of a harrowing night where life and freedom came under attack at once, March 25, 1971 lives on with clarity. For the young readers of SHOUT, it's impossible to imagine the horrors of an enemy on your doorstep, of impending doom for an entire nation, of what it might have felt like to witness a massacre. But it's important to know these stories, and what better way to hear them from those who saw it first-hand.

For this week's cover story, SHOUT spoke to a handful of people who were present in Dhaka on March 25, 1971, and we got to hear their stories and experiences, what they had to navigate to ensure safety for themselves and their family members. We listened to their recollections of the horrors of the "Kalo Raat", and attempted to present it in a format that makes a mark on our readers. As young people, we want to be transported to the hour that made our nation, because only then will we know what got us here, and what it will take to move forward now.

Dhaka, March 25, 1971.

The air has an eerie quality about it. There is a discomfiting sense of inactivity, although nobody could have predicted what was about to unfold. In the countless homes in the countless areas across the city, countless stories are about to unfold.

In the narrow winding lanes of Narinda, Old Dhaka, lives Sabera Begum. The eldest of ten siblings and a postgraduate student, Sabera, like many others, has been hearing faint whispers of an approaching war since March 22 or 23. She can almost sense that something big is about to happen.

On the morning of the 25th, the growing tensions translate to a numb fear for the whole day. In the afternoon, Sabera tries to distract herself - she focuses on weaving the covers of their living room cushions. It's around evening when she's done with three covers and about to move to the fourth, when she's interrupted by shouts and cries nearby. Dogs start to bark and whimper - a bad omen.

She and her siblings rush to the rooftop of their two-storey house to find the sky reddened with distant fires all around the city.

Elsewhere in Dhaka, 15-year-old Rasel is also on his rooftop. He lives in his house in Kalyanpur with his family but a week before March 25, his mother and siblings felt something dangerous was about to transpire in the city. So they handed the heavy bundle of keys to their house to a trusted neighbour who swore she'd keep an eye on things, and left Dhaka for Barisal, their hometown. Some family members were staying back in Dhaka and Rasel wound up being one of them.

On the afternoon of March 25, Rasel hides alone in an empty water tank on his roof. For three days, he hides in the tank.

Stocked with sufficient food to survive and only sporadically venturing out when it felt safe, Rasel holds his breath in the empty darkness as he hears boots running across the rooftop - boots that must belong to the enemy. They are here. The troops search but don't discover Rasel's hiding place. Unsure if the troops have really left or if they will return, Rasel continues to breathe quietly in a corner of the tank.

Back in Old Dhaka, Khaled Hasan lives with his brother on Jagannath Saha Road. On the morning of March 25, he gets out early to visit his parents, who live at the PWD staff quarters in Palashi. The air - he could feel - is different on that day.

Ever since Bangabandhu's speech on March 7, Khaled and his friends have been preparing for a war in their own ways. He gathers with the team at the grounds of the Salimullah Muslim (SM) Hall, University of Dhaka, around noon for training. The entire operation is voluntary; Khaled does not study at the university but has been taken in by student leaders as one of their own. In the afternoon, they are instructed to create barricades to resist any vehicular movement coming in from outside the area. They fell large trees and set up a roadblock on Orphanages Road, right next to Dhakeshwari Temple. The next one is set up near the Baby Ice Cream factory. After a day's work, the teams reconvene at SM Hall in the evening, and Khaled starts making his way back home.

At midnight, pandemonium. The Pakistani Army start attacking the university halls. The sound of heavy mortar and machine guns from a distance jolts Khaled awake. He runs outside, fearing not for his own life, but for the lives of his parents and younger siblings who live close to the

university halls. The night is terrorised with shells and mortars; flares light up the sky as they spend each minute in horror, each moment feeling like an eternity.

In a dark bedroom in Elephant Road, a young mother named Aliya wakes up. To live in Elephant Road meant living in the heart of chaos - traffic, pedestrians, noises and smells from neighbouring markets.

However, that night, Aliya and her family spring up to a furious avalanche of gunshots. They turn off all the lights and spread out blankets in front of the bathrooms, so they remain invisible from outside. Aliya knows her toddlers can cry out any minute, so they need to be fed and put to sleep. She crawls across the room to prepare their food and eventually falls asleep lying face down.

Trying their best to ignore the chaos outside, Sabera and her siblings also hunker down in her house for the rest of the night.

In a government colony in Banani, Rita, another young mother is also asleep. Along with her husband and very young son and daughter, she wakes up to the hounding sound of bullets right before midnight. Her husband rushes up to the rooftop with the neighbours to find out what is happening while Rita tries to watch from the balcony. Her children are curious to know what is happening outside, but she keeps pushing them inside the house to keep them safe. The family spends three stressful days in that flat in Banani before getting any news. It won't be until days later when they get to know the tragedy that befell their city and people.

The gunshots after midnight have no intention of fading out. Nine-year-old Masuda and her brother are hiding under their table in their home in the capital's Siddique Bazar area.

Everyone in their house stays awake for the rest of the night. They are curious about what is happening outside, terrified because the gunshots do not seem to end and helpless because there are noises of people screaming seemingly from all directions.

Their rooftop has a small room with windows, where the family relaxed in normal times. The war turns the room into a watchtower for peering into what is happening outside.

At the break of dawn, Masuda and her family all go into the room and witness the carnage. They see flames and smoke all around. Structures are being burned down, the whole city ablaze. The gunshots and screams were still loud and clear.

In Elephant Road, Aliya wakes up to find army vehicles and tanks milling the area. Crowds gather over the many dead bodies strewn across the streets. The face of her neighbourhood, once a hub of students, writers and thinkers, is about to be transformed. Aliya's brothers-in-law start making phone calls to try to find out what has transpired in the night. After a few days, the family moves to a small press office a few roads from their house, sleeping surreptitiously on floors.

It's another whole day before Khaled comes to know his parents' whereabouts and that many near and dear ones - his brothers in arms - have fallen victim to the Pakistani Army's brutality.

Sabera remains in Old Dhaka for the rest of the war, in the dimmed light of a *hariken*, sometimes down in their makeshift bunkers in fear of falling shells, sometimes sneaking between the congested homes of Old Dhaka through brick tunnels to avoid Pakistani patrols.

The war had just begun.

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