

Between bullets and borders

Fleeing the Rajshahi massacre

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SHAHIDUL ISLAM

1971. 26 March, Early Morning

Zuberi Bhaban, Rajshahi University

I was in a deep sleep in my room when a loud, relentless pounding on the door jolted me awake. Startled, I hurriedly got up and unlatched the door, only to be confronted by three Pakistani soldiers, their rifles raised menacingly. One of them barged into my room without hesitation, while the other two barked orders in an enraged tone, "Nikalo, shala!" Before I could react, a forceful kick from behind sent me sprawling onto the veranda.

A sepoy yanked me to my feet with a rough grip. My heart pounded in terror as I saw that they had also seized Mujibur Rahman from the Mathematics Department and Ajit Kumar Ghosh, a newly appointed lecturer in Economics who lived next door to me. Their faces mirrored my own horror.

Under the watchful barrels of three rifles, we were herded down Paris Road towards the residence of Vice-Chancellor Professor Syed Sajjad Hussain. As we turned towards the Vice-Chancellor's house, Mujibur

my room and began inspecting everything around them.

They asked where we usually ate. Leading them to the veranda, I pointed to a room in the front block and said, "That's our dining room." They ordered me to get ready and then walked back to their post beneath the jackfruit tree.

After completing my morning routine, I hung my lungi and towel on the wire before informing them that I was ready. The two soldiers returned, rifles aimed at me, and ordered me to step out. Moments later, they brought Ajit out from his room as well. Together, we began walking down the veranda towards the dining room. As we passed Mujibur Rahman's room, I called out to him, and he joined us.

Reaching the dining room, we knocked on the door, but there was no response. Growing anxious, I called out Zainal's name. After a brief pause, the door finally opened. A sepoy immediately slapped him hard across the face, demanding to know why he hadn't opened the door sooner. Then, without waiting for an explanation, they ordered him to prepare breakfast for us.

wing, hoping to take him with us. But to our shock, Mujibur Rahman refused to leave.

With no time to waste, I made my way to my friend Aftabur Rahim's house, while Ajit sought refuge at his teacher, Professor Mosharraf Hossain's residence. Meanwhile, the sound of intense gunfire echoed from the direction of the police lines, situated to the west of Rajshahi. On the evening of 26 March, after the sepoys had left, no new platoon arrived that night. The same remained the case on the morning of 27 March. As uncertainty loomed, teachers cautiously stepped out of their homes, seeking information. The sporadic bursts of gunfire continued to reverberate across the city.

For the next several days, until

me not to go any further. But I had to bring a few teachers from the city.

I searched for Arun Basak and Nani Bhushan Foujdar, but they had already left. Continuing my way through the city, I passed a few houses near the big mosque on the road leading to the Padma River. Eventually, I reached Sanat Kumar Saha's house.

I found Sanat and his elderly aunt, both in a state of bewilderment—they had already packed, ready to leave. Wasting no time, I loaded them onto two rickshaws and took them to Subrata's house in Purbo Para.

By then, most teachers had already fled. My friend, Nani Bhushan Foujdar, himself arrived. The rickshaw pullers were already waiting downstairs—Mazdar, Madhu, Ali, and two others.

Time was running out, and the streets of Rajshahi were becoming more perilous by the minute. The fate of those who remained behind hung in uncertainty.

Our group consisted of Subrata Majumdar, his younger sister, and the children of his two elder sisters; Sanat Kumar Saha, accompanied by his mother, aunt, and siblings; Ghulam Mursid with his wife, Eliza, and their infant daughter, Amita, who had not even completed a month of life; Eliza's younger sister, Minar; Ajit; and me.

Newly married Nani Bhushan Foujdar had left a little while earlier, and we lost track of him. Later, after the Liberation, we heard that he had crossed the Padma River from another direction, eventually reaching India before moving on to London. However, on the banks of the Padma, everything they carried had been stolen.

At 1:30 p.m., we set off. The rickshaws slowly moved through Binodpur Bazaar, heading towards the Padma River. Madhu, one of our trusted rickshaw pullers, kept insisting that we stop at their house for a while, but our only goal was to cross the Padma as quickly as possible.

I had previously arranged a boat, yet the Padma we were about to cross was not the same as it once had been. From the bank, we would have to walk a long distance to reach the boat. As we stepped down from the rickshaws and began walking towards the river, two fighter jets appeared from the direction of Cadet College. They flew directly over our heads, their metallic frames glinting in the afternoon sun before disappearing into the western horizon.

Madhu, sensing danger, acted swiftly. He quickly led us to the back and asked us to rest at his house for a while.

Moments later, the two planes returned, circling several times before suddenly opening fire. The air filled with the deafening

roar of machine guns and the thunderous explosions of bombs. Countless lives were lost in those few dreadful minutes.

Meanwhile, Madhu's wife brought out bowls of bread and chicken curry. Everyone ate whatever little they could. After that, we resumed our journey. This time, we boarded a boat, and within a few minutes, we reached the other shore.

In the distance, the border with India was now visible. But before us lay an endless stretch of char land, freshly ploughed by farmers using oxen. The scorching April sun had dried the soil to the texture of stone—there were no roads, no clear paths, only cracked earth beneath our aching feet.

We moved slowly, navigating the harsh, uneven ground towards the Indian border. Every step felt like an ordeal. Eliza struggled to walk, and we had to support her along the way. Madhu's aunt, a large woman, also found it increasingly difficult to keep moving.

Those of us wearing sandals soon found them useless—the sharp, jagged surface tore at our feet, leaving them cut and bleeding. Madhu, ever watchful, remained concerned about bandits.

At last, we set foot on Indian soil. Though the sun had already dipped below the horizon, the sky still glowed red with the remnants of evening light. The women collapsed onto the soft grass, utterly exhausted.

Madhu's sister's house was only about two hundred metres away. Their family ties were strong, and they often visited one another. Upon hearing of our arrival, Madhu's relatives hurried forward, embracing us with warmth and relief.

We led the weary travellers to the house, where cool water was poured into gleaming brass glasses. As we drank, the soothing touch of water on parched throats made us realise just how drained we were.

As evening deepened, they served us steaming plates of rice, accompanied by a fragrant broth of catfish and shrimp, along with masoor dal. It felt like ambrosia.

That night, the women remained inside the house, while we lay on the porch, beneath the vast, starlit sky. Within moments, sleep overtook us, the weight of exhaustion pulling us into the deepest slumber.

That harrowing day, filled with terror, escape, and relief, remains one of the most unforgettable moments of my life.

The article was translated from Bangla to English by Priyam Paul.

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Bengalis fleeing for a safe refuge.

PHOTO: MARK GODFREY

Rahman, in a voice steady but edged with defiance, suddenly spoke in fluent Urdu, "Once, a good man named Muhammad was born. After that, every Muhammad turned into a thief and a scoundrel."

Hearing his words, the sepoys reacted instantly—kicking Mujibur Rahman hard before savagely beating him with their rifle butts. Ajit and I stood paralysed, curling up in silent dread, unable to do anything but watch in helpless terror. Mujibur Rahman had lived in Karachi for a long time, which explained his fluency in Urdu.

We were all dressed in lungis and undervests—completely vulnerable, both physically and emotionally.

Vice-Chancellor Syed Sajjad Hussain was enjoying the gentle spring breeze in the vast garden of his residence when the soldiers presented us before him. With a casual air, he introduced us, saying, "They are all teachers." After a brief exchange of words, we were ordered to march back. Each of us was locked inside our respective rooms in Zuberi Bhaban, with a chilling warning: "If anyone steps out, they will be shot!"

By then, the sun had risen high in the sky. On our way back, I carefully observed how Pakistani soldiers had taken control of the entire campus—positioned strategically with weapons, their presence exuding an ominous authority. The once-familiar surroundings now felt like a prison.

The day dragged on in agonising slowness. The sun began its descent, casting long shadows across the veranda. As dusk settled in, the soldiers reiterated their warning: "No one steps out of their rooms!" Then, they left. Silence gradually engulfed the surroundings. Even the sepoys who had been patrolling the area drove away in their vehicles. Later, we discovered that it was a shift change—another group would soon take over.

This seemed like our best opportunity. I hastily packed a few clothes and some essentials into my bag and helped Ajit do the same. Moving quickly, we made our way to Mujibur Rahman's room in the front

Without a word, they entered

We sat at the dining table with dry mouths, tense and uncertain, while Zainal hurriedly prepared parathas and fried eggs. The soldiers stood against the wall, watching us intently. At one point, one of them asked, almost casually, "Are you all Muslims?" Without thinking, I blurted out, "Yes."

Ajit's expression from that moment is etched in my memory—a silent, fleeting look of fear and disbelief. One of the soldiers muttered, "A month ago, we were sent to East Pakistan to kill Hindus. But we can't seem to find any. Everyone here claims to be Muslim. Where are the Hindus?" Their frustration was evident.

After breakfast, they forced us back into our rooms at gunpoint, repeating their warning: "If anyone steps out, they will be shot!" Lunch was served in the same manner—under the oppressive watch of the soldiers. Throughout the day, they frequently entered our rooms, rummaging through our belongings without warning or reason. From Ajit's room, they took his newly purchased radio. He never got it back.

At one point, when I managed to whisper to Ajit, I told him, "If they ask your name, tell them it's Wajed Ghaus." The surname "Ghaus" was borrowed from a Baloch leader's name. Fortunately, they never asked for names.

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In the early hours of 3 April, a sudden knock on Aftabur Rahim's door startled us awake. Fear gripped us instantly. Was it the army? Had they returned? After a brief moment of paralysing tension, we recognised the voice of a boy from Fazlul Halim Chowdhury's house. Cautiously, we opened the door. The boy delivered his message: "Sir is calling you." Without delay, we hurried to his residence. Inside, we found Professor Mosharraf Hossain and Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqui already seated.

Chowdhury Sir asked, "Have you heard anything?" We shook our heads in unison. "No, Sir." His next words sent a chill down our spines. He informed us that, earlier that morning, the Pakistani Army had brutally murdered several Hindu gentlemen in the city. Lawyer Salam Sahib had confirmed that Advocate Biren Sarker and Suresh Pande were among the victims.

By then, daylight had fully set in. The professors issued a solemn directive: "No matter what, we must ensure that every Hindu teacher and their families from the university reach India safely before the end of the day."

Without wasting a second, Aftabur Rahim and I set out on this perilous mission. We decided to gather everyone first at Subrata Majumdar's house in Purbo Para, where our trusted rickshaw pullers from Binodpur would transport them to India.

Our first stop was Sukhranjan Samadder's house. When we urged him to leave, he refused. "Why would they kill me? I don't get involved with anyone," he said. His words were absolutely true. Yet, on 13 April, the Pakistan Army stormed the campus, dragged him away, and executed him by the side of Kazla Pond.

I hurriedly grabbed a rickshaw and headed towards the city. Along the way, chaos unfolded before my eyes—panicked families fleeing Rajshahi in rickshaws and horse carts, desperate to escape the city. Familiar faces stopped me, urging

