

## **Massacre at Jagannath Hall (1971)**

This testimony is from Kali Ranjansheel's, "Jagannath Hall e-Chilam" ["I was at Jagannath Hall"], in Rashid Haider (ed.), 1971: *Vayabaha Ovigayata* [1971: Terrible Experiences] Dhaka: Jatiya Shahitya Prakasheni, 1989, p. 5. It was translated by Sohela Nazneen. Reprinted with permission.

I was a student at the Dhaka University. I used to live in room number 235 (South Block) in Jagannath Hall. On the night of 25th of March I woke up from sleep by the terrifying sound of gunfire. Sometimes the sound of gunfire would be suppressed by the sound of bomb explosions and shell-fire. I was so terrified that I could not even think of what I should do! After a while I thought about going to Shusil, assistant general secretary of the student's union. I crawled up the stairs very slowly to the third floor. I found out that some students had already taken refuge in Shusil's room, but he was not there. The students told me to go to the roof of the building where many other students had taken shelter but I decided (rather selfishly) to stay by myself I crawled to the rest rooms at the northern end of the third floor and took refuge in there. I could see the East, the South and the West from the window. I could see that the soldiers were searching for students with flashlights from room to room, were taking them near the Shahid Minar (Martyr's memorial) and then shooting them. Only the sound of gunfire and pleas of mercy filled the air. Sometimes the Pakistanis used mortars and were shelling the building. The tin sheds in front of assembly and some of the rooms in North Block were set on fire. ...

After some time about forty to fifty Pakistani soldiers came to the South Block and broke down the door of the dining room. The lights were turned on and they were firing at the students who took shelter in that room. ...When the soldiers came out they had Priyanath (the caretaker of the student dormitory) at gunpoint, and forced him to show the way through all the floors of the dormitory. During this time I was not able to see them as I left the restroom by climbing up the open window and took shelter on the sunshed of the third floor. But I could hear the cracking sounds of bullets, the students pleading for mercy and the sound of the soldiers rummaging and throwing things about in search of valuables. The soldiers did not see me on the sunshed.

...After they left I again took refuge in the washroom. I peeked through the window and saw that the other students' dormitory, Salimullah Hall, was on fire. The Northern and the Eastern parts of the city was on fire too as the North and East horizon had turned red. The whole night the Pakistani soldiers continued their massacre and destruction. ...Finally I heard the call for the morning prayer. ...

...The curfew was announced at dawn and I thought that this merciless killing would stop. But it continued. The soldiers started killing those who had escaped their notice during the night before.

...It was morning and I heard the voices of some students. I came out of the washroom, and saw that the students were carrying a body downstairs while soldiers with machine guns were accompanying them. It was the dead body of Priyanath. I was ordered to help the students and I complied. We carried bodies from the dormitory rooms and piled them up in the field outside.

There were a few of us there-students, gardeners, two sons of the gates-keeper and the rest were janitors. The janitors requested the Pakistanis to let them go since they were not Bengalis. After a while the army separated the janitors from us.

...All the time the soldiers were cursing and swearing at us. The soldiers said "We will see how you get free Bangladesh! Why don't you shout *Joy Bangla* (Victory to Bengal)!" The soldiers also kicked us around. After we had finished carrying the bodies, we were divided into groups. They then took my group to one of the university quarters and searched almost every room on the fourth floor and looted the valuables. Downstairs we saw dead bodies piled up, obviously victims from the night before. They also brought down the flag of Bangladesh.

...After we came back, we were again ordered to carry the dead bodies to the Shahid Minar. The soldiers had already piled up the bodies of their victims and we added others bodies to the piles. If we felt tired and slowed down, the soldiers threatened to kill us-

...As my companion and I were carrying the body of Sunil (our dormitory guard), we heard screams in female voices. We found that the women from the nearby slums were screaming as the soldiers were shooting at the janitors (the husbands of the women). I realized that our turn would come too as the Pakistanis started lining up those students who were before us, and were firing at them. My companion and I barely carried the dead body of Sunil toward a pile where I saw the dead body of Dr. Dev [Professor of Philosophy]. I cannot explain why I did what I did next. Maybe from pure fatigue or maybe from a desperate hope to survive!

I lay down beside the dead body of Dr. Dev while still holding onto the corpse of Sunil. I kept waiting for the soldiers to shoot me. I even thought that I had died. After a long time I heard women and children crying. I opened my eyes and saw that the army had left and the dead bodies were still lying about and women were crying. Some of the people were still alive but wounded. All I wanted to do was to get away from the field and survive.

I crawled towards the slums. First I went to the house of the electrician. I asked for water but when I asked for shelter, his wife started crying aloud and I then left and took refuge in a restroom. ...Suddenly I heard the voice of Idu who used to sell old books. He said,

"Don't be afraid. I heard you are alive, I shall escort you to safety." I went to old Dhaka city. Then I crossed the river. The boatman did not take any money. From there, I first went to Shimulia, then, Nawabganj and finally I reached my village in Barishal in the middle of April.