



*Shaheed Janani Jahanara Imam*

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# *Shaheed Janani Jahanara Imam*

Viewing war and suffering through the lens of motherhood is a raw and visceral experience that few can truly comprehend. Such is the story of Jahanara Imam, also known as the "*Shaheed Janani*"—a name synonymous with resilience and patriotism. She tragically lost her son, Shafi Imam Rumi, in the Liberation War of Bangladesh, cementing



Jahanara Imam

both mother and son as emblems of courage in Bangladesh's history.

Born on May 3, 1929, in Murshidabad, West Bengal, British India, she was the eldest daughter in a family of three brothers and four sisters. Imam's early years were shaped by the cultural and political landscape of a nation on the brink of change. Her father, Syed Abdul Ali, and mother, Hamida Ali, raised her in an environment that valued education. As a result, her formative years were spent prioritizing intellectual and moral growth, alongside an increasing awareness of the nation she called home.



Jahanara Imam was a teacher, writer, and activist. She was a highly educated woman who dedicated herself to teaching and education. She obtained her Bachelor's Degree in 1947 from Lady Brabourne College of Calcutta University and her Master's in Bengali Language and Literature from the University of Dhaka in 1962.



*Jahanara Imam in early ages*

Jahanara, along with the rest of her family, was incredibly passionate about national affairs. Her son, Shafi Imam Rumi, was a freedom fighter; her husband, Shariful Imam, assisted the guerrilla operations with maps and target identification; and her younger son, Saif Imam Jami, served as a lookout to ensure the safety of the freedom fighters as they entered or left the house. Although she was not a front-line fighter, she herself assisted the freedom fighters by acting as a sort of data hub—attending their meetings about their various plans for guerrilla operations and passing information to them. Jahanara made her house a shelter for the guerrillas, providing them with food and comfort. She assisted in transporting weaponry from one



place to another and, in some cases, hid the arms in her own house. She and her husband instructed their children to answer the questions asked by the Pakistani military in Bangla as a means of resistance against their laws of strictly speaking in Urdu, telling her children, "*If they ask you something in Urdu, answer them in Bangla, for this is your language.*"

Jahanara Imam always had an affinity for Bengali literature, becoming a litterateur and a prolific writer. Through her writings, particularly her magnum opus titled "Of Blood and Fire" (Ekattorer Dinguli), published in 1986, she documented the atrocities of the Liberation War of 1971, providing readers with a unique personal perspective of a mother navigating her life through the hardships of war and the devastating ache of losing a son. The publication of this book was a pivotal moment in the history of Bangladesh, establishing itself as one of the most important and factual documentations of the brutality of the Liberation War.



*Jahanara Imam with her family*



Initially, her writings depicted a simpler life, interrupted by minor problems like the sluggishness of her maid and the incessant demands of her ill father-in-law. However, the tone of the book gradually shifts when her son Rumi decides to join the war against her wishes. Readers quickly notice a change in her language as she begins discussing more bleak topics, describing how the abuse and assault committed by the Pakistanis gradually worsened and how Bengalis strove to fight against such oppression. She shares her experiences with the military and how they had to adopt methods to carefully pass by them, like driving a car stolen from the Pakistani army in order to avoid suspicion. In such a difficult situation, on March 23, 1971, Jahanara Imam, with courage, flew the new flag of Independent Bangladesh beside the black flag. She expressed her feelings in her diary: *"There was a shuddering in my chest. It was a mixed feeling of joy, excitement, expectation, unknown panic, and all other emotions."*



*Jahanara Imam with her family*





Jahanara's book also documents the ruthless genocide committed by the Pakistanis against the unarmed Bengalis, known as "Operation Searchlight," on March 25, 1971. This operation killed many Bengali civilians, intellectuals, students, politicians, and members of the armed forces in an attempt to stifle the growth of the country. *"There were sounds of people crying for help,"* she states in the aftermath, vividly illustrating the various acts of brutality committed by Pakistan against her people—the cruel and helpless feelings felt by all the survivors. The heinous crimes committed against women in 1971 are also documented in Jahanara's book. She recounts, *"A lady told me that she was raped on the prayer mat while she was saying her prayers."* Pakistani soldiers and the Anti-Liberation groups, known as "Rajakars," raped and tortured women during this time.



The book primarily focuses on her son Rumi and the range of conflicting emotions she feels as a mother with his departure to the “Mukti Bahini.” A mother’s heart, equipped with the innate need to protect her child from any sense of danger, wages war against her mind, knowing full well the state of her country and the life-changing sacrifice she had to make to help her country and her people move a step closer to freedom. As the two nations began gearing up for war, so too was Rumi, like many boys his age, preparing to partake in war to help aid their country to victory. Jahanara recalls her son’s response in her diary after she initially opposed his decision to join the guerrilla army. He said, *“Mother, in this situation, if you send me to the USA, I may finally go abroad, but I will be the guiltiest to my judgement. I may achieve a good degree from the USA, but I cannot stand up in front of my judgement. Do you want this, Mother?”* Jahanara knew that letting her son go would put his life in uncertainty, yet she conceded to his unwavering drive to help his country. She says, *“Alright, I concede. I sacrifice you to the country. Go, enroll in the war,”* and packs his bag for him, making sure to give him a few hundred-taka notes in the stitched secret pocket of his pants.

On August 29, 1971, her son was captured by the Pakistani Army and went missing, becoming one of the many people massacred by the military. The pain of losing her extraordinary son serves as a testament to the depth of her love.



Jahanara loved her son so much that she completely abstained from eating rice, as the Pakistani army didn't allow her son Rumi to eat rice after he was captured and put into jail. She always chose to sleep on the floor rather than the bed, as Rumi had to sleep on the floor. All these acts of love reflect their beautiful bond, actions voluntarily done by Jahanara as a means to still stay connected with her son, who was so far away from her.



*Jahanara Imam leading Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee*

Imam believed peace could not be achieved in a system where people profit from war. After the Liberation War, she organized the Ghatok-Dalal Nirmul Committee (Committee to Exterminate the Killers and Collaborators). The committee called for the trial of those who committed crimes against humanity in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War in collaboration with the Pakistani forces. The Ghatok-Dalal Nirmul Committee set up mock trials in Dhaka in March 1992, known as Gonoadalot (Court of the



People), and "sentenced" those they accused of being war criminals. In 1992, the BNP government charged her with sedition and treason. However, this charge was dropped in 1996 after her death from cancer by the Chief Advisor, Mohammed Habibur Rahman, of the Caretaker Government at that time.

Jahanara Imam's story is significant because, typically, when discussing war, conflicts, or battles, historians are often more interested in writing about the contributions of men during those trying times. They focus on valiant knights or cunning kings or generals who helped guide their country toward victory. In doing so, the sacrifices of women—their stories filled with courage and pain—are overshadowed by the dominant narratives that only speak of male sacrifices and successes, leading to their important contributions being left undiscovered, in hopes of being rediscovered by some curious mind later on rather than being celebrated and commemorated in real-time. I believe it is important to listen to and acknowledge women's stories as much as men's because they matter just as much.





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## Photographs:

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Jahanara Imam in early ages - [Jahanara Imam Memorial Museum](#)

Jahanara Imam with her family - [Bhorer Kagoj](#)

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