

—A Childhood Memory: Evening Cookouts in Bangladesh—

One of my fondest childhood memories is of evening picnic parties. These parties would take place in the winter vacation, a period of several weeks that starts at the end of the school year, in late November or early December. This time when our exams were over and we had nothing to do was one of boundless freedom. One of the best things about these events was that my friends and I would organise everything ourselves, without any adult supervision.

There were nine of us, five boys and four girls. We were all members of the same clan, which means that we were relatives, and our houses were all close to each other. During the school term we would look forward to the picnic, regularly saving a tiny amount of money from the pocket money that our parents gave us to buy snacks or sweets during the school breaks. This money was used to buy ingredients for the picnic, such as cooking oil and spices. It was fun to be able to shop for our project, but the really fun part of the preparations was spending the whole day in the fields or jungle, busily gathering the food that we would cook for the meal.

It was the job of the girls to collect the rice and vegetables. At this time of year the rice had already been harvested, but there were plenty of dry rice plants stored by rats in holes which they had dug all around the fields. The farmers never usually complained if we took this rice, as the fields had already been harvested by this time of the year. The girls would use hoes to dig up the holes. Then they would prepare the rice for cooking by using a pestle and mortar to remove the husks from the whole rice. There were also tomato, spinach and other vegetables growing uncultivated around the fields, and the girls would gather as many of these as we needed for our meal. The boys' task was to collect firewood from the jungle so that we would have a fire to cook over. It was also our job to catch fish from the nearby marsh and to trap and kill herons or pigeons.

At the end of the day we all went to the village market to buy those ingredients that we couldn't manage by ourselves, such as cooking oil and spices. The boys would also buy cigarettes, which village shopkeepers often sell individually rather than in packs. They were used to children being sent by their fathers to buy cigarettes, and so did not know that these boys as young as eight or nine were planning to smoke them themselves.

The place we chose as our picnic spot was quite far from our houses. The boys set up a tent there, and by the time the girls started cooking it was late in the evening. The girls would by this time be dressed in saris, and we all felt like adults. Our parents and some neighbours would come to visit us, to see how we were doing and to try to offer advice. But their efforts to help the girls with the cooking were invariably refused. None of the girls was very good at cooking, but they were determined to learn for themselves. The boys made sure that the adults did not see them smoking. Once the cooking was done we played the games that we usually played in the village itself. Then, around ten o'clock, we would have our dinner, using banana leaves instead as plates. By the time we got home it was long past our usual bedtime, and we went to sleep with a deep feeling of satisfaction at having lived a beautiful day.

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