

The slain thought-soldiers of 1971

We remember

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Nizamuddin Ahmed
Ghulam Mustafa
Purnendu Dastidar
Mehrunnessa
Danbir Ranbir Prasad Saha
Mahbub Ahmed
Shahid Saber
Sharafat Ali
and all the other named, unnamed, unknown martyred intellectuals.

Source: Bangladesh Liberation War Documents, Ministry of Information, Govt. of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.



AFSAN CHOWDHURY

The intellectual occupies a major space in the narrative pantheon of the 1971 war. He is present in history not only as a person who imagined and articulated the contours of a new alternative but also the symbol of dissent and defiance in the face of state duress. Unlike the intellectuals of today he was a 'hero', a person who had taken on the state of Pakistan. He may not have had a clear idea of what constituted an alternative imagination but the pre-1971 intellectual was not a compromised soul. It's possible this happened because of the distance between the intellectual and the State declined in the post-war regimes.

When the Pakistan army cracked down in Dhaka on March 25 night, the targets show they thought lay the sources of imagination an emerging state. I remember Benazir Bhutto telling us -- Mohiddin Ahmed, Muntasir Mamoon and myself -- in her sumptuous Karachi residence while playing a perfect, if a trifle ostentatious, host that her father was surrounded by the Mukti Bahini in his Dhaka hotel. When we surprised three said, "What Mukti Bahini? There was no Mukti Bahini then", she was a bit taken aback and then said, "I mean the AL radicals. I mean they all became Muktis, didn't they?"

It was obvious that long before the crackdown, East Pakistan was thought to have been taken over by the streets of Dhaka in the Pakistani eyes and so the attack was a defensive attack or an attack on regaining lost territory, not a pre-emptive one. It helps to understand why they could be so ruthless. The crude wooden rifles and pipe guns were enough to convince Pakistan that a part had been lost to "Indian agents" which is a bit ironic considering that evidence indicates that many in Islamabad were not too keen to keep East

Pakistan within its folds.

But looking at the attack positions, one notices the Dhaka University as a symbol of the insurrection - which by the way was thought to be heavily influenced by India -- read Hindus into this too. Thus Jagannath Hall became the ultimate source of all that had gone bad, the wrong thinking Hindu academics. This Hindu-Bengali-intelligentsia collectivity as a prime mover of then contemporary nationalism was simply beyond the capacity of the Pakistani rulers to deconstruct.

The image of murdered universities was a powerful tool in the

1971 war especially at the international level and even in India much care was taken of them. If there was one elite amongst the refugees -- all those who crossed over -- it was the intellectual. They were respected, had the degrees that were universal and satisfactorily convinced the Indian elite to act. In the war, they became the thought-soldiers.

Intellectuals are defined by the defiance, dissent and disagreement; what made them the most potent unarmed enemies of Pakistan. Which is why in mid December so many professionals and academics were picked up and killed. It didn't kill Bangladesh.

If one peruses the Bangla Academy lists and documents relating to intellectuals in 1971 one notices people from different levels of life. Those identified in the list as intellectuals were generally educated social leaders, especially from outside Dhaka but not necessarily academics. Some were activists and a few warriors in secret. They were not killed as some argue to deplete the intellectual larder but more it seems to get even with the 'partisans' in society.

But most intellectuals luckily escaped death and while these murders were certainly planned, the priority in December for the Pakistan army was to escape

unhurt and manage the ignominy of their surrender to India. The enthusiasm was more with the Bengali Pakistanis, Al-Badr or Al-Shams who had a major axe to grind and did extract satisfaction of sorts by killing whomever they thought could be. Most were not killed though if they had a chance they would have.

Prof. Rashid Haider of Bangla Academy, who has worked on the issue, remarked that many of these 'intellectuals' had become social leaders during 1971. People flocked to them to seek support in times of war and perhaps they were identified as much as leaders as they were as thinkers. All had

banded together to construct a new State in quest of a new identity.

It seems that the entire imagination of intellectuals as we often understand was limited to the urban, degree holding, well-connected national profiled types. It negates the idea of the intellectual-partisan-leader at sub-national levels and certainly at levels below that. This is largely because of the ideology of history that has been practiced in Bangladesh which was again under their control. Having created the State, they naturally became a part of that and the identity was of a craftsman of state making rather than the intellectual who is "condemned to be free". While in the earlier phase, protest gave them social strength, its absence after 1971 marginalised them. It was the very absence of dissent that turned the intellectual into an 'antel', a word of derision.

Peasant societies also had their thinkers and their experience as survivors or martyrs provide evidence of complex activities, far more complex than the one which the urban intellectuals at bay had to go through. However, they are not recognized as intellectuals or otherwise and their deaths and sufferings are ignored too.

Without intending any insensitivity whatsoever, one should ask as to why we have not established a single day to remember the Shaheed Peasant whether as an intellectual or as a social leader when it's they who died, suffered and fought the most.

Observing the death anniversary of intellectuals has significance beyond their brutal and tragic deaths.

The killers of December 14 achieved tragedy rather than purpose. Because in post-1971 Bangladesh, the role of intellectuals took upon themselves neither resulted in a successful state nor resistance to a successful rot of the same.

The writer, an eminent columnist has done extensive research on 1971.



Monument at Rayer Bazar killing field

PHOTO: ZAHEDUL I KHAN

Reminiscing the day

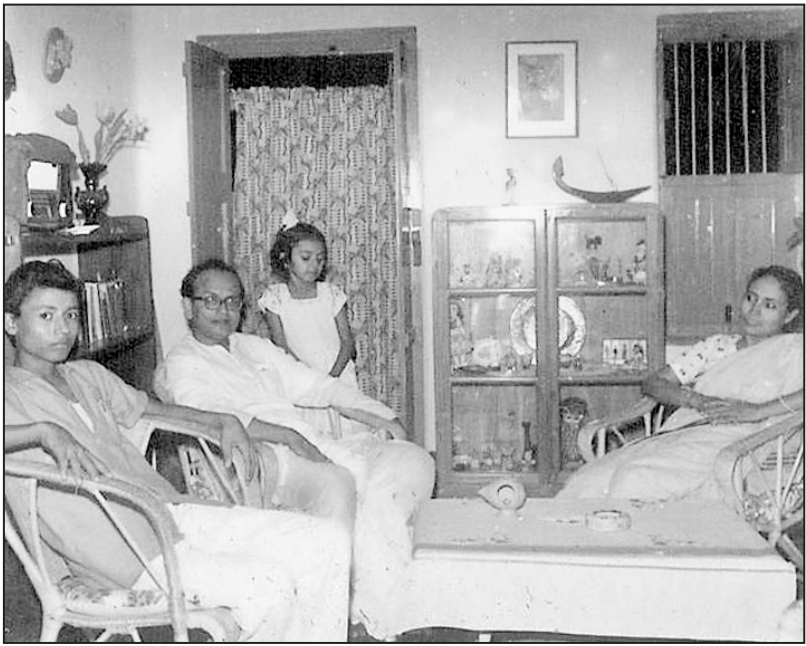
MEGHNA GUHATHAKURTA

In the thirty-two years since the Independence of Bangladesh, there has been for me only one 14th December. I remember that cold wintry day in 1971, as if it was yesterday. My mother and I were seeking shelter with an American friend of ours who helped us at our time of need. Henry Selz was an American Quaker who became acquainted with my parents as a young volunteer in the early days of Pakistan when he came to do social work for the Red Cross at the time of post-partition communal riots. He had married an Indian Kashmiri girl and was working for CARE in Kenya when she died of cancer. At that time he was posted in Islamabad, but hearing of the 1971 war and the plight of people in East Bengal, he chose to be CARE representative in Dhaka. The minute he landed in Dhaka he started looking for us.

My mother and I were at that time having to take shelter with friends and well-wishers. Dhaka was then an occupied city. The military crackdown on the Dhaka University campus on the night of 25th March had targeted many intellectuals and my father Shahid Jyotirmay Guhathakurta was one of the first to be sacrificed. My mother refused to flee to India like so many others since she felt that that was the only way we could prove his death. So for months we stayed incognito taking shelter wherever we could. There were times I had to stay at a Christian orphanage under the name of Monica Rosario. With the help of the sisters of Holy Cross School, my mother took shelter at the Holy Family Nurses Quarters.

We finally landed up at Henry's place in Dhanmondi when India declared war with Pakistan since the place where we were staying was too near the airport and in clear line of Indian bombers to be considered safe. Henry then came to our rescue. He brought us to his house and offered us his home and warm hospitality. But as the war wore on, things started getting tense. The Pakistan Army was facing defeat after defeat, and muddled army jeeps were often seen playing through the streets of Dhaka carrying war weary soldiers to and fro from the frontline to the cantonment. A curfew was imposed, and people generally stayed indoors unless it was absolutely necessary to go out. Dhaka seemed to be a city of phantoms.

But tension was brewing in another sphere. By the 12th and 13th December, one was hearing of journalists, reporters, intellectuals being picked up from their homes by masked men wearing plain clothes. Where they took them no one knew. The families were equally kept in the dark. Henry was at that time appointed 'a general caretaker' for the expatriate community in Bangladesh. After the formal war started, many expatriates were waiting to be transported from Dhaka by British Airforce Hercules planes, which the Pakistan Government had



From the family album: left to right Kanti Dutta (nephew), Jyotirmay Guhathakurta, the writer and Basanti Guhathakurta (wife).

given permission to land. But the Indian bombers had strafed the runway (at that time it was the Tejgaon airport, which was in use) so much, that the planes could not land.

Each morning we would see them circling the clear blue winter skies like huge birds with floppy wings and then soar away into the distance. The Pakistan Government had also permitted three neutral zones within the city of Dhaka. These were the Hotel Intercontinental (the current Hotel Sheraton), Holy Family Hospital and Notre Dame College. Big signs of Red Cross were hung over each building declaring them protected against bombing or attack. Many of the diplomatic and expatriate community took refuge there, including fifty UN Volunteers who were assigned to this region at that time.

Since Henry went out regularly during the day on his duties, leaving my mother and myself alone in the house, we no longer felt safe with rumours about pick ups and raiding of houses by a notorious team of collaborators who called themselves Al Badr or Al Shams. Henry then suggested that we too take ourselves to Notre Dame College, under his protection. The neutral zone would protect us from outside attacks. So we packed some of our essentials and off we went. But no sooner had we arrived we realised it was a big mistake. We arrived around eleven in the morning. But by noon, the sky was thundering with the sound of Indian fighter planes, Russian MIG 21s. They swooped low over Notre Dame College and seemed to target the Governor's House (current Bangabhaban).

The whole afternoon was filled with the noise and clamour of strafing from the Indian side and answer of ineffective anti-aircraft guns from the

Pakistan side. Later we heard that pressure was being built up for the surrender of the Pakistan civilian government who was meeting at the Governor's house at that time. Later that day, the news came of their surrender. But my mother and I who during this whole period were huddled up in a room assigned to us decided that we have had enough of the Neutral Zone and informed Henry that we would return to his house and await our fate, whatever it may be.

As we returned that night and were sitting in Henry's drawing room with our lights blacked out, my mother thought she heard the howling of jackals nearby. They could have been stray dogs, but the call was ominous. Two days later, we witnessed the liberation of our beloved homeland, but at the same time the news started seeping in of all those loved and dear ones, our friends, my father's colleagues, and many unknown names of those who had met their fate at the hands of the Al Badr and Al Shams in the killing fields of Rayer Bazaar and Shialbari.

Thirty-two years after I read in the papers that the beautiful monument that was built at Rayer Bazaar, a monument that had to be literally fought for by organisations such as Projonmo 71, lie dilapidated and neglected. But history itself has shown that history can not be denied. A crime that is committed may go unpunished by the courts of law, voices of protest may be silenced, but no amount of wealth or power can assuage a guilt consciousness that lurks in the mind of an offender. The monument at Rayer bazaar stands as a testimony of history which constantly interrogates: *Tomra ja bolechiley, bolchey ki ta Bangladesh?*

The writer is the daughter of Jyotirmay Guhathakurta, a martyred intellectual.

ASIF MUNIER

14 December, 2003. Another year, another day of remembrance, another occasion to relive the past and looking ahead at the future. It's been thirty-six years I was born, thirty-two years Bangladesh was born and thirty-two years my father Munier Chowdhury disappeared.

The nation says he is a martyred intellectual, but we the family never learnt about his remains, only know how he was picked up by some Bengali speaking youth on this very day in 1971, just two days before the country was victorious against the occupation forces of Pakistan (then West Pakistan). Only a lot later we heard that those who picked my father and many other intellectuals were the local allies of the occupation forces, the Al-Badr, Al-Shams and the sort. In the initial months, even years of his disappearance, my mother half believed her husband will come back, or at least some news of him. I was told, I was a very quiet child then, and never asked anyone why suddenly there was one person missing in the family. I just became quieter and probably drew my own conclusions and reactions. As I grew older I saw the difference of other children with both their parents, which I didn't have and that was a painful experience in my childhood. It just felt not fair why I don't have a father. But it never is a fair world is it? I know now at this stage in my life.

Years passed and it was only few years back during the research for David Bergman's film 'War Crimes File' for Channel 4 in the UK that we got to know about the fate of my father and many more intellectuals, a first hand account of a survivor who heard certain prominent names while being interrogated at the Teacher's Training Institute, himself being confined there as well. So no matter what the nation said, for me, it was only when I met this man and heard him.

I am not sure why I am writing this today. My mother has become a very private person and also very bitter about reminiscing about the war over the years. 'What's the point?' she says, like many mothers and family members of the martyrs. My two brothers and I never talked about it, not about even my eldest brother who was in the war with the famous crack platoon doing operations in Dhaka. His daughter living abroad came and stayed with us for a year and only with her that I talked a little bit about it, telling her a bit about her father, also playing her Moushumi Bhowmik's song 'Jessore Road' (love that song first time I heard I cried) and Joan Baez's 'Bangladesh' on CD.

Its only when I look at the kids of today, in the city, in the villages, Bangladeshis abroad for generations, that I feel we have to talk about it, we have to tell the young ones about the true history, the experiences and the

feelings. The country, the people much of whom want to respect and remember, are drowned by the distorted history and the indifference of the state mechanism to preserve and respect history. I read loads of emails through networks on the internet, and feel encouraged of so many non resident Bangladeshis being more of a Bangali than many of us in the country. That is why we need to speak up, demand, protest.

Over the years, I have been part of the activism around liberation war through Projonmo '71, an organization of children of martyrs. Some of us formed it in 1991, initially not sure how we will go ahead but sure of what to do to rekindle the spirit of the cause of the war, for which our parents laid down their lives. Soon we were in the spotlight, with lot of expectations from the country, including the thousands of families who lost someone in the war. We became active in the campaign for trying war criminals, as well as developing welfare projects for the children of martyrs who are merely struggling to survive. The work is not easy.

It takes a lot of time, energy and money to build what we wanted to build. Quite a few of us were students then with dreams of the young blood and time in

our hands but very little money and no long term planning. As we grew older, got jobs, got married and had kids, it became more and more difficult to run an organization. Plus internal differences and factionalism created nasty mud slinging and deadlocks. The nation who looked up at us where very disappointed. I say, the nation and we ourselves expected too much out of Projonmo 71. We can't do it alone to preserve the spirit of the war. We can not expect to be over and above all sorts of propaganda in the country that confuses us and divides us. We are humans too.

I'll end with a personal metamorphosis. A few years back I visited Pakistan for the first time in my life as part of my work. It was eerie, seeing the typical kurta payjama clad men with their long moustache in the streets. That is how we depict 'razakars' in drama in Bangladesh, though one might say 'what is in a dress' and lot of men in Bangladesh do wear the same clothes. But as I met the Pakistanis, the fear gradually disappeared. I met people who came up to me and personally apologised for what happened in 1971.

I know that the general people hardly know what happened at the time, only

that they lost a 'Muslim brother in a Pakistan-India war'. Sure its no excuse that they don't know the real story, but when the State stifles free speech completely for decades and permanently distorts history, young generations of people actually believe strongly the State propaganda. So now I don't hold the hatred against all the Pakistanis, neither does my family. Pakistanis are humans too. I have plenty of colleagues and friends now in Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad.s

Now I leave the reader with a question -- those of us who lost a member of the family in the war, or have been maimed or shamed by the Pakistani army and their local allies, live with the agony and ecstasy of a free nation every day of our lives but how do you pay your respect to those who fought and lost something in that war -- throughout the year and not just in March or December? What is your contribution in making the Bangladesh that they died for? What are you doing when the traitors in Bangladesh are living a life of luxury and power? We don't want your sympathy. We want you to show us that you care.

The writer is the youngest son of martyred intellectual Shaheed Professor Munier Chowdhury.



Shaheed Professor Munier Choudhury with his wife Lily Choudhury and three sons, Bhashon, Mishuk and Tonomy (the writer on his mother's lap) in the only picture of the full family.