

Reminiscing about the first Victory Day



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

THIRTY-five years ago the misty winter morning of December 16th, the day the nation now celebrates as Victory Day, brought the new found glory of Bangladesh. It was the day the whole nation had waited to see after nine months of untold suffering, brutal torture and genocide that the savage Pakistani army had launched to eliminate the ethnic Bengali nation and Bengali nationalism. The massacre, taking a toll of about three million lives, was unprecedented in the history of the world.

General Manekshaw's stern warning to the occupation forces through radio was being beamed around the country since the morning of December 15, 1971, asking them to surrender or face the grim consequences. The morale of the Pakistani army, fighting pitched battles here and there, was completely broken because the entire so-called East Pakistan, save Dhaka city, had already fallen to MuktiBahini-Indian army joint forces.

People who had no way of fleeing from the country suffered cruel torture and lost their near and dear ones in this barbaric ethnic cleansing operation resorted to by the Pakistani army. They became euphoric at this first dawn of freedom, in spite of some uneasiness in the air. By early morning of December 16 it was almost clear that the Pakistani army would surrender. Till then the Indian jet planes were shelling the strategic places in Dhaka, mainly the Dhaka university halls and cantonment areas, where the Pakistani army had holed up.

People came out of their houses and hide-outs in different areas of the city, most of them with their portable radio sets in their hands, their ears plugged to broadcasts from the Indian radio, that was intermittently broadcasting news bulletins informing the nation about the time and venue of surrender. Hotel Inter-Continental, now called Sheraton, was first selected as the

venue, but it was later shifted to Race Course Maidan, now called Suhrawardy Uddyan. Lt. General Jagjit Singh Aurora, C-in-C of Eastern Command, took the surrender of Lt. Gen. A.K. Niazi, his own batch mate in the army in pre partition days, at 3pm.

Vast crowds of people, along with MuktiBahini fighters from every corner of the city, were out on the streets rejoicing and jubilant at this historic moment. Collecting in front of the Hotel Inter-Continental from

troops suddenly started firing at the crowd and at the same time an open Indian jeep driven by a brigadier, flying a white flag, followed by two convoys of troops reached the intersection.

Shooting by the Pakistani troops, positioned on the ground floor of the Sakura restaurant and its backyard, was so random and intense that the brigadier, a Sikh as evidenced by his appearance, got bewildered. After waiting for one or two minutes when he

campus on March 27, and was moving from one place to another with my wife and young children. What I had witnessed during these nine months still sends chill through my bones.

Precisely speaking, the occupation army was extracting a terrible vengeance because the then Pakistani masters thought that the political ambitions of the people of this wing were a direct threat to the integrity of Pakistan. And sure enough, not since Hitler has there

atrocities and genocide carried out by the occupation forces. After my brother's killing in May, 1971, when I travelled to Sathkira to be with the bereaved family members, risking my life in the most hazardous road journey, often meeting with army interrogation at several points, I saw village after village devastated.

Now Bangladesh is a reality for three and half decades, but the country is still in a state of turmoil. Dirty politics and political maneuvering for power have taken the country to the brink of a disastrous situation. Legacy of Razakars and anti-liberation groups are ruling the politics of the day. Shockingly, the idealism, spirit and hope that inspired our leaders and freedom loving people to fight the marauding Pakistan army are fast disappearing. At this annual event of "Victory Day" the nation must redeem the pledges that people belonging to all ranks, regardless of caste and creed, made to free this country of exploitation, religious bigotry, poverty and violence of all types.

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While the whole country, and successive governments, remain busy in celebrating the memorable occasion year in year out, our thoughts go back to those days of atrocities and genocide carried out by the occupation forces. After my brother's killing in May, 1971, when I travelled to Sathkira to be with the bereaved family members, risking my life in the most hazardous road journey, often meeting with army interrogation at several points, I saw village after village devastated.

the early hours of the 16th morning, unmindful of the random shooting by the vanquished and demoralised Pakistani army from here and there, people made a beeline to the hotel premises. The atmosphere was electrifying.

People in the country, especially in Dhaka city, greeted the long awaited news of victory with a sense of relief. Dhaka city streets, reverberated with the sound of machine-guns being fired by the freedom fighters in jubilation. It was as if, after nine months of birth pang, the nation was born to discover its new identity. By 11 a.m the crowd swelled, with the muktiyoddhas (freedom fighters) joining them after nine months.

Totally oblivious of the hazards because of the stray shootings, enthusiastic citizens from all over the city thronged the front terrace of Inter-Continental Hotel to witness that humiliating and long awaited moment of surrender. Tears welled up in many eyes while reflecting on the fierce struggle, suffering, atrocities and deaths they had to encounter to win this freedom.

With the rejoicing going all around, an eerie situation dampened the jubilant mood of the people. Possibly with orders from their command the Pakistani troops, as I watched from the Sheraton road intersection, were marching towards the cantonment with their heads down and faces red with anger. As usual in such a situation, people long seething with rage and anger for the inhuman brutalities they suffered during these nine months were trying to insult these troops. The crack

watched the situation taking a menacing turn, he ordered his troops to take position and frustrate the attacking Pakistani troops.

Even in such a melee enthusiastic and jubilant young men of my age went near the brigadier's jeep to give him an ovation. All of a sudden a stream of bullets smashed the front window pane of the brigadier's jeep. Luckily the brigadier, and some of us who were embracing as an expression of gratitude and rejoicing, survived the firing. Instructing us to go inside the Inter-Continental hotel, declared as neutral zone, the smart looking brigadier immediately went into action.

Meanwhile, apprehending trouble and damage to property and lives of the residents, the management of the hotel had closed the front gate. Many of us on that fateful morning jumped over the waist-high compound wall and took shelter in the hotel lobby. After about 30 minutes firing from both the sides stopped and the Pakistani troops again started marching towards the cantonment. When the situation calmed down we came out of the Inter-Continental hotel and saw some Pakistani soldiers lying dead in front of the Minto Road crossing, Ramna garden boundary wall and Sakura premises.

I was then an assistant professor in the dept. of physics at BUET (till then EPUET), just in my 30s, and scared of the Pak army who engaged razakars to identify young patriotic teachers to achieve their objective of cleansing. I had left my residence in the BUET

been anything so diabolical. As it happens in the life of every person who had lost near and dear ones during these months of brutalities, I was perturbed by the thoughts jolting me at this dawn of freedom. It was lucky to have survived the marauders' bullet shot but my eldest brother, about 48 years old in 1971, my brother-in-law, and a close friend of mine since our school days Major Mahdiuz Zaman Khan, then working at DGF wing in Comilla cantonment, could not survive.

Major Zaman, a grand son of Moulana Md. Akram Khan, founder-editor of now-defunct Daily Azad, had a tall and well-built structure with a fair complexion. If any one had looked at him without hearing him, he would have mistaken him for a Punjabi (Pakistani). It is intriguing that they could kill a man bearing so much resemblance to them, and whose grand father was one of the pioneers of the Pakistan movement.

My eldest brother, an ex-army personnel in the second World War was taken away from his business premises at Sathkira by the hyenas in May, 1971 at the instance of the Razakars guiding the occupation army, and was never returned. We could not know how and where he was killed. Major Zaman was summoned on a plea to attend an emergency meeting in the Comilla cantonment and was shot dead, along with other Bengali officers.

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Some reflections

Apparently the day relates to our victory over the Pakistan occupation forces. We had been able to drive them out of our sacred soil some 35 years ago, yet there is no denying the fact that their ghosts still stalk our sacred homeland... The evil forces we thought we had driven away often seem to have returned with a vengeance.

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

WE are entering the 36th year of our victory, and once again I shall wake up from my bed with the sound of 21 guns heralding the day. I am supposed to wake up in a joyous mood of celebration, but as I look at the state of my beloved country, far from being delighted, I feel more and more guilty and frustrated. Over the years all we have done is gone 10 steps forward and 8 steps backward.

As victory day approaches I cannot but think of our great national days like Shaheed Dibash (February 21), and Independence Day (March 26), too. It may be shocking to many that I no longer see any meaning and purpose behind celebrating any of these glorious days in the life of our nation, only for the sake going through the motions of celebration.

These anniversary days have simply turned into days of sadness and mourning for me, rather than of celebration and rejoicing. For me, who lost one of his illustrious brothers two days before the birth of Bangladesh, these celebrations for celebration's sake carry no real meaning. We have systematically trampled over and murdered all that December 16, 1971, stood for. We have, in all these 35 years of our independence, continuously flouted the founding principles on which we fought and gained our independence.

Come February 21; it has simply turned into a series of songs which, however, begins with Amar Bhayer Rakte Rangano etc, where people, young and the old, donned in their best of Bangladeshi "lebas" march towards the Shaheed Minar to lay floral wreaths in memory of the martyrs of the day. The same ritual is followed year after year. A book fair is held in the premises of the Bangla Academy, the centre of excellence in the development of Bangla language and Bangla literature which, with the passing of each year becomes less and less functional, constrained by lack of resources and support from the government.

They say that Ekushey symbolises the very core spirit behind our war of liberation and independence. Be that as it may, I ask myself as to what we have done to honour or preserve that glorious heritage? Very little indeed. On the other hand, instead of upholding that spirit we have simply turned it into yet another day of merrymaking and family picnicking. The way things are proceeding, in the coming 25 years or so, there will be fewer and fewer people who would be interested in the study and advancement of Bangla literature and culture. Like all the other national days, February 21 has also become highly politicised. It has become one of the most important tools of the trade in the hands of both the administration and the opposition alike. What is the point in recalling the sacrifices made by those martyrs when we neither follow their spirit nor translate it into action for the peace and progress of the country?

Why do we celebrate the Independence Day? Are we really independent? Are we not progres-

sively suffering more and more under the burden of poverty, except for the selected few? Are we not reeling under the vicious cycle of religious extremism and acts of terror? Are we not being steam-rolled under the curse of rising cost of daily living? Politics and political activism in the educational institutions have become more and more acute since we gained independence.

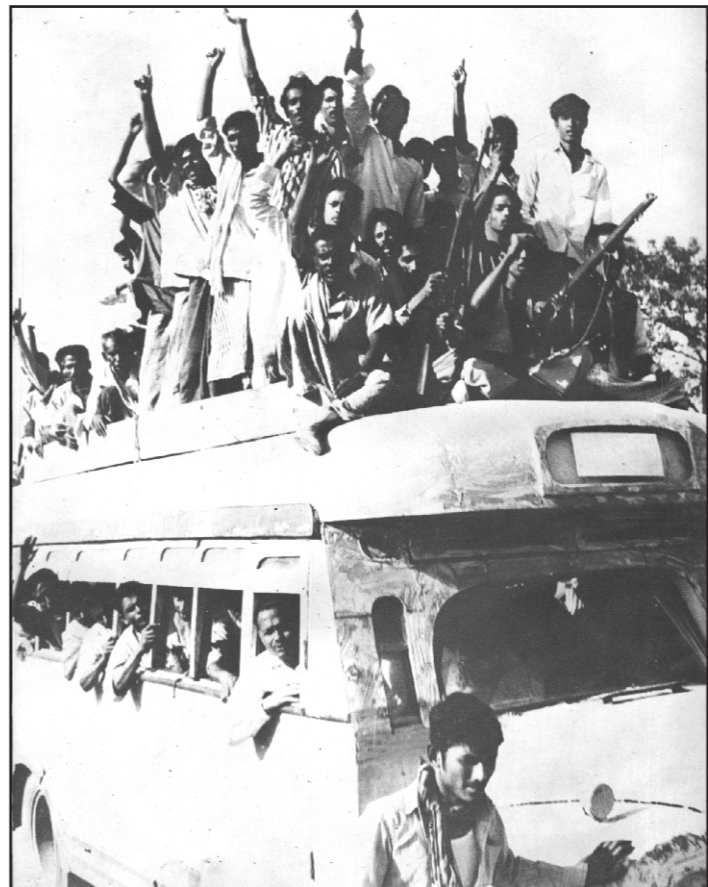
The government will have illuminations and lights burning bright in public buildings and street corners all over the capital city, just like any other year, in the name of celebrating Independence Day. Can anyone tell me as to what the celebrations can mean when people are crying for water, and electricity in their homes because their children are unable to study and prepare themselves for their examinations, and when the various industrial units are out of operation due to inadequate power supply?

Maybe we should celebrate, since a group of powerful representatives of the west have twisted the arms of both our major political parties and the government into submission, to start the process of dialoguing and do all that is necessary in order to hold "proper" national elections. Are we to celebrate since we can no longer manage our own affairs? Are we to celebrate because our judiciary is far from being independent? Are we to celebrate since the office of the Election Commission is far from being free?

Oh yes, the Victory Day celebrations. Apparently the day relates to our victory over the Pakistan occupation forces. We had been able to drive them out of our sacred soil some 35 years ago, yet there is no denying the fact that their ghosts still stalk our sacred homeland under tacit support of some of our politicians and parties. The evil forces we thought we had driven away often seem to have returned with a vengeance.

The problem with us is that we, as a nation, are incapable of any form of collective thinking. We see, but can neither observe nor contemplate. We are fiercely selfish. We can neither say thank you, nor do we know how to be grateful.

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Victorious freedom fighters entering Dhaka

GENOCIDE 1971

What does the world know about it?

MOHAMMAD OMAR FAROOQ

IT has been three and a half decades since the people of Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) suffered one of the worst genocides in history in 1971. According to Dr. Adam Jones, a professor with the International Studies Division, Centre for Research and Teaching in Economics (CIDE), Mexico City, Mexico, "The mass killings in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) in 1971 vie with the annihilation of the Soviet POWs, the holocaust against the Jews, and the genocide in Rwanda as the most concentrated act of genocide in the twentieth century."

Even without any such comparison, the people of Bangladesh know first-hand the horrific nature and extent of that genocide. Every year we celebrate our Independence Day and Victory Day. Despite being quite divided and dysfunctional politically, we regularly remember the independence struggle and the 9-month long genocide as a nation. There are many who constantly speak and write about the horrors of 1971 and our awareness (chetona) of it. Over three decades have passed since the genocide and gaining of independence but there has been no accountability for the war crimes, and emotional healing for integration of the nation continues to elude us.

I remember the horror of 1971 from my limited personal experience as a 12 year old boy. Yet, more than three decades after that genocide the boisterous ritual of remembering it, in my opinion, has not made any positive impact on our subsequent history, offering little else but pompous vacuity. But more importantly, I find the silence and negligence of many others, especially the so-called Islamist-oriented segment of Bangladeshis, agonising and disturbing.

I have been out of the country as an expatriate since 1981. Throughout this period I have come across people of various backgrounds, Muslims and non-Muslims, whose ignorance about the genocide has astounded and baffled me. There are many Pakistanis whose indifference, or

even prejudice, I could understand and attribute to the malicious manipulation and distortion of facts and history by the ruling elite of Pakistan (then West Pakistan). Yet the problem seems to be endemic.

A crime committed by anyone against anyone else is a crime. A genocide committed by anyone against anyone else is genocide. To me, as a human being who is a Muslim, it can't be any other way. I had a rude awakening 5-6 years ago when I was invited by one of the leading Islamic monthly magazine in the United States to contribute an essay with the theme "Muslim Unity" to one of its upcoming issues.

I reminded the editor about my often unorthodox or non-conformist views or approach, but I was still asked to send in the essay. The editor, most probably, regretted it upon receipt of my essay. While the editor commended my write-up I was requested to remove a portion from there in order to conform to their length requirement. It was told that if I just removed the part related to Bangladesh and the genocide in 1971, it would be excellent and conform to their length require-

One of the reasons genocides have occurred in distant and not-so-distant history is because human beings have often lost their own humanity and their faith in humanity; consequently, treating other fellow human beings, Muslims or non-Muslims, communists or non-communists, Jews or non-Jews, Armenians or non-Armenians, in inhuman manner seemed acceptable. If our faith, philosophy, ideology, creed, conviction do not guide and inspire us to rise above our parochial views and attitudes, to see these matters at the human level, we may not have seen the last of genocides.

I firmly refused. I was deeply disappointed and I sat on the article for more than a year before publishing it elsewhere.

Over the last few years since I have actively participated in numerous cyber-exchanges that revolved around topics related to our history, independence struggle, and the genocide. My experience has been that generally we are quite emotional and partisan, unable to engage in substantive discourse that promotes accountability and facilitates healing. Last year, when I shared with the Bangladeshi cyber community some western work on genocide in general and 1971 in particular, one overly zealous writer showered

'obhishaap' [curse] on me, because one non-academic work of one of the western authors about the genocide in 1971 had some significant omissions or lapses.

Before being saddled with such 'obhishaap', however, I had already contacted the western author about these lapses and he readily explained that he was not an expert on the 1971 genocide, and that particular piece was merely an introduction for the general cyber community that was interested in various genocides. He also welcomed any pertinent corrections so that he could consider revising his piece. Evidently, while some people interested in presenting the genocide would appreciate better

information, some of us seem more enamored with partisan feelings and flinging curses, instead of providing accurate information to those people.

As I began to take a closer look at the available works on the 1971 genocide, I was truly disappointed and disturbed by the misinformation, as well as lack of information, about it. Relevant to note, the internet in recent times has become an essential media of information, but what is available online about the genocide is indeed pitiful. Deeply saddened I decided to start a website about the 1971 genocide in February 2003. As I communicated with some genocide experts my suspicion about misinformation as well as lack of information was corroborated before long.

Here is a summary picture. There are about 20+ different universities in the USA that offer either a research centre and/or some degree programme on genocide studies. These universities include major, well-known ones such as Yale University and University of Minnesota, and others such as Clark University and Drew University. The most commonly and extensively covered genocide is the Jewish holocaust in Nazi Germany. However, among the other common ones are those that occurred in Armenia, Cambodia, Russia, Rwanda, and Bosnia. While there are several universities that cover one or more such genocides, there is not a single university that has a research programme on the 1971 genocide in Bangladesh. There are also focused courses covering one or more such genocides, but not a single course is focused on this 1971 genocide.

Almost all the major western countries, including United

Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, Australia, have one or more such genocide studies or degree programmes. As far as covering the 1971 genocide is concerned, it is no different with these countries either.

There are a good number of international organisations that focus on genocides. Some of these are generally focused on creating awareness about past genocides, preventing future ones and/or addressing any ongoing ones. Some of the notable ones are: End Genocide, an initiative of World Federalist Association with headquarters in the US; FEWER, USA; Genocide Watch, Canada; Genocide Prevention Initiative, run by Aegis Trust in United Kingdom; Genocide Research Project, University of Memphis and Pennsylvania State University, USA; Genocide Watch, Netherlands; Prevent Genocide International, a global network; Centre for the Prevention of Genocide; Web Genocide Documentation Centre, University of the West of England.

Except Genocide Watch, none of the other ones had any information or link about the 1971 genocide. Genocide Watch included a web link to the Liberation War Museum in Bangladesh. Others did not have any such links listed. Some of these are now being updated with the new site that I have just begun.

There are four academic journals that are focused on genocide studies. They have been there for years. Unfortunately, my search did not turn up any refereed paper on genocide in Bangladesh in 1971.

This should make us wonder how much do we, the Bangladeshis, really care in a substantive manner about what happened in 1971, and what have

we constructively and proactively done in creating awareness about that terrible tragedy. This question is especially pertinent for those who also want to establish some kind of accountability for the genocide and the crimes against humanity. While web pages dedicated by Bangladeshis to the 1971 genocide and the independence struggle may abound, most of these are merely emotional statements and/or personal memoirs. These are valuable, indeed, but collectively they do not contribute adequately toward increasing global awareness about the genocide.

Of course, the bulk of the work has to be institutional and Bangladesh Liberation War Museum has done the most valuable and extensive work. However, we are in the cyber age, and presence of information online is critical for wide and easy dissemination. While really substantive work must remain to be carried out by pertinent endowed institutions and organisations, individuals can also make a meaningful difference in this regard.

It was with this goal in mind that a new website dedicated to the 1971 genocide was conceived. It is still in progress. But the pertinent materials that have already been assembled at the site are substantive, and readers should find these valuable.

For example, how many of us know that in 1971 the International Commission of Jurists undertook an investigative study of the events? Though the work remained incomplete due to lack of cooperation from the Pakistani rulers, the Commission did publish its study in 1972, which still remains one of the most referred to sources by all those who work on the 1971 genocide. How many Bangladeshis have read this document? It is a must reading for all those who want to know and create awareness about the events in 1971. The new site has that entire document online, within the reach of all those with internet access.

One of the goals behind creating this site is to help improve awareness among the global Muslim community, as they seem to have a hypocritical stance regarding the

genocide. While they know and care about the genocide in Bosnia and Chechnya, most of them neither know about the 1971 genocide, nor do they seem to care about it. Could it be that when Muslims perpetrate genocide, we need to treat it differently than when Muslims are victims of the same?

One of the reasons genocides have occurred in distant and not-so-distant history is because human beings have often lost their own humanity and their faith in humanity; consequently, treating other fellow human beings, Muslims or non-Muslims, communists or non-communists, Jews or non-Jews, Armenians or non-Armenians, in inhuman manner seemed acceptable. If our faith, philosophy, ideology, creed, conviction do not guide and inspire us to rise above our parochial views and attitudes, to see these matters at the human level, we may not have seen the last of genocides.

Hence, as a Bangladeshi, I can't care only about the genocide committed against the Bengalis. As a Muslim, I can't care only about the genocide committed against the Muslims. As an Asian, I can't care only about the genocides committed against the Asians. As human beings, we need to care about any and all genocides committed against any group of humans. Wherever possible, we must expose the perpetrators and hold them accountable, and continue to work toward preventing any future genocide anywhere on earth.

You are invited to visit this website about the 1971 Genocide at <http://www.globalwebpost.com/genocide1971> and help in further developing it as a major resource site for information about the 1971 genocide. Let us help the world be informed about the genocide in 1971, just as it is about all other genocides. At the institutional level, Bangladesh and Bangladeshis should work toward establishing genocide studies programmes, with special focus on 1971, and also be connected with all those around the world who are working on the noble goal to prevent future genocides.

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An instance of mindless destruction by Pakistani forces