

Projonmo '71

Awakening of a Lost Generation

By Sabir Mustafa

Looking for Common Ground

TRUTH can sometimes be so harrowing, so painful, that just to narrate it means reliving the agony in its fullest horror. But to suppress it means allowing its presence to become a haunting one; almost subconsciously, the mind races out of the present, back into the past, and the nightmare begins all over again.

Life has been like that for SAIDUR RAHMAN for the past 20 years, and that is one reason why the 29 year old bank officer has never been able to open his heart and tell the tragedy that befell his family on April 15, 1971, to anyone.

He has spent his entire childhood, his entire youth harbouring the anguish that was Pahela Bishakh of 1378, being forever tormented by the memory of how his father, a railway engineer in Syedpur, his mother and three brothers were brutally murdered by the Pakistanis and their Bihari allies.

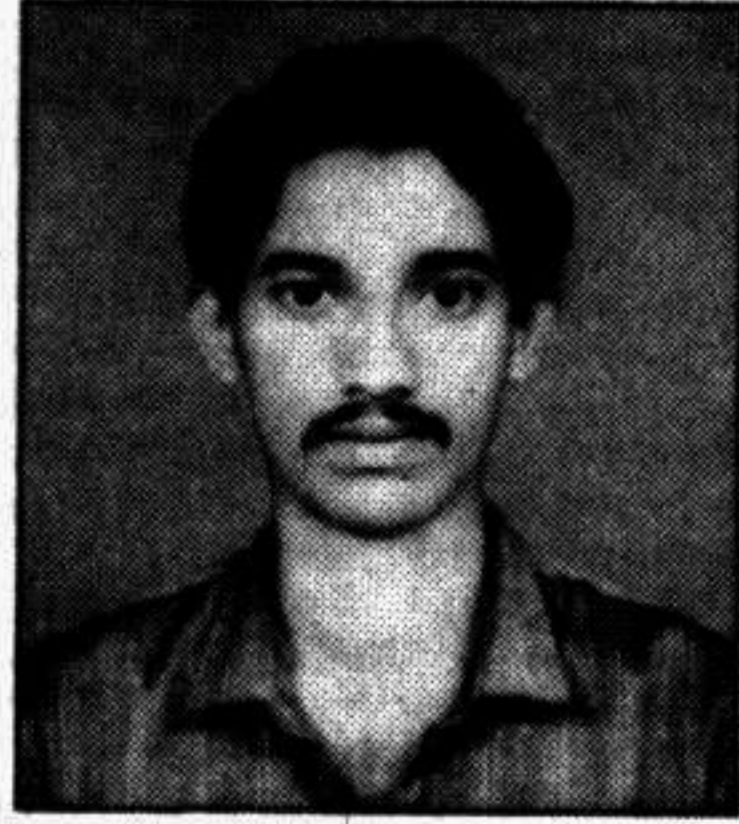
Neighbours later said his mother was still alive when the Pakistanis buried her in the garden in front of the bungalow in which they lived; his three brothers were stabbed, taken to hospital and then dragged out of there and murdered.

But Saidur Rahman needed to talk, as much as everybody else needed to breathe. But

who would be able comprehend the depth of his sorrow, the enormity of his loss? Who would understand the anguish he felt every time he thought about the way the memory of his family's sacrifice and those of countless other martyrs was being slowly erased? Who would care about the ideals, the consciousness for which three million Bengalees sacrificed their all, enough to share his frustrations about how those very ideals were being deliberately uprooted?

"I often used to look at a poster on a wall at the university, about martyr intellectuals. Every time I saw that poster, I used to think that they too, must've left behind children, who thought like me, felt like I did," Saidur Rahman said.

For him, the thought constantly flickered like a beacon of hope at the end of a long, dark tunnel. He was convinced that, if no one else cared, then the children of martyrs would. They would care, not only



Zahidul Hassan because of the loss of their near ones, but also because they knew that the ideals for which they gave their lives had to be upheld in free,

independent, sovereign Bangladesh. A Bang-ladese born out of the ashes of the gigantic funeral pyre that was 1971.

Unknown to Saidur Rahman, children of many other martyrs were going through the same agony and looking for an answer in the same way. Families of martyr intellectuals, for whom the university authorities put on a show of remembrance every time, were going through great torment.

Many were being threatened with eviction from university quarters they were given, many were facing a halt to the allowances they received. For some, even more serious was the change in the

attitude of the university authorities and an increasingly large section of the teaching community towards shaheeds.

When Saidur Rahman contacted SHOMI KAISER, daughter of shaheed journalist-novelist Shahidullah Kaiser, he found he was not alone. Shomi contacted the few people she knew living on the Dhaka University campus.

"I have often thought about how we could do it, but I was never really sure as to how to go about building an organisation, and I hadn't really thought about an organisation or even what an organisation could do to help the situation", Shomi said frankly, adding that Saidur Rahman's phone call made her think more post-



Shomi Kaiser tively and she took upon herself the task of getting in touch with as many children of martyrs as she could. She found that everyone she

contacted was thinking along virtually the same line — the need for the martyrs' children to have a platform, a voice, so that they could carry forward the torch lit by their parents with their supreme sacrifice 20 years ago. Projonmo '71 was born.

Shomi said: "What I liked most was that, by doing this organisation, I came into contact with many other children of martyrs whom I'd never known. When I realised how so many families were going through great financial, social and personal difficulties, I felt terribly guilty that we could not, or have not been able to do anything about it."

"And I am talking about families mostly in Dhaka, many of them well-known. So, you can imagine what those thousands of shaheeds spread across the country are going through. I am sure, if we can help one another and do something, then the departed souls of the martyrs will find some

peace at last. This will be our revenge".

Twenty years later, the next generation is waking up, and the children are getting together. To let the people know how they came to be a free nation; to remind them that some — millions — were there to stand up for what is just and sacrifice their lives so that other, millions of Bengalees could lead a dignified existence as a free people. And to remind society and the government that they have an obligation — we have an obligation — towards the well-being of the families of the martyrs.

And justice, yes. Justice must be visited upon those who, out of racial hatred, religious bigotry, ideological blindness and criminal prejudice, robbed the country of so many of its finest souls in an effort to cripple the country at birth. There cannot be any forgiveness or amnesty for crimes against humanity.

"Those worked against independence, those who took away my father, are all walking around freely," Shomi Kaiser said, "the Razakars are all sitting pretty now and doing just fine. But why should that be? In Europe, they are still catching and putting on trial those who committed genocide during World War II. The Razakars and Al-Badr must be tried and punished in this country."

THERE was apparently no machination or detailed planning behind the formation of Projonmo '71 as an organisation. There was a lot of emotions. A whole lot of young individuals, lost as if in some wilderness for two decades, beginning to reach out to find, or rather re-discover, their identities, through sharing a common experience and common outlook on life.

They did not have a common background — some were children of intellectuals, while others were born to fathers of different professions, but Projonmo them a sense of belonging.

To learn more about their feelings, The Daily Star spoke to a number of such individuals, as they gathered for a Projonmo meeting.

ASIF TOMMOY MUNIR knew enough frustrations. His father, shaheed Professor Munir Chowdhury of the Department of Bangla at Dhaka University, was taken away on December 14, 1971. His body has never been found, while his abductors and killers — and their overlords — were never tried, let alone punished.

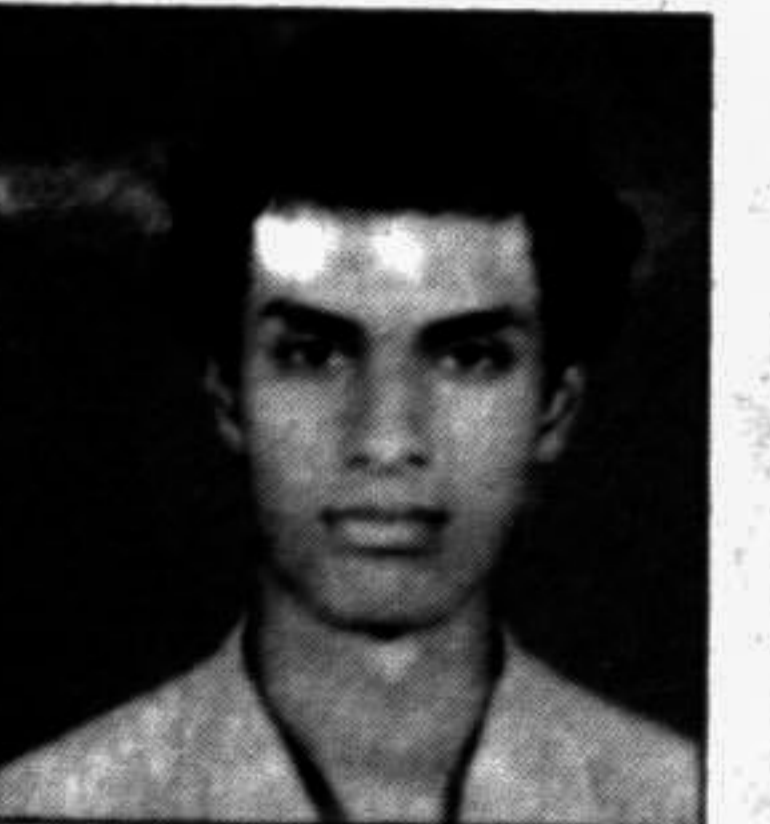
The neglect and indifference shown by the authorities towards shaheed families like his own in subsequent years came as a further, painful blow.

"We were taking an initiative within the university to ask the authorities to provide something for our mothers, as widows of shaheed", Tommoয় said.

Then came the contact with Saidur Rahman through Shomi Kaiser. Meeting children of other shaheeds who faced even more problems was an eye-opener for him. After that, giving an organisational shape to their association was a formality.

"It feels as if Projonmo '71 is my own; in fact, all of us feel that way", Tommoয় said, adding, "we hope to broaden the organisation by contacting as many martyr families as possible. Even if we manage to just document the names and present conditions of all those who lost near ones during the War of Liberation, we will consider it a success".

In the process, Tommoয় hopes public opinion can be



Asif Tommoয় Munir

built-up in favour of resisting all those groups that were opposed to the forces and liberation, and who continue to work against the spirit and objectives of the struggle of 1971.

TAUHID REZANUR was just three years old in 1971. His father, Serajuddin Hossain, news editor of the Ittefaq, knew he was running a risk by inserting subtle pieces of information into his stories that did not, technically, violate censorship rules, but gave the alert reader something more than the Pakistani military authorities would have liked him to know.

When on the night of December 10, 1971, the Al-Badr death squad came to pick him up, Serajuddin was without fear. He identified himself as the news editor of Ittefaq with all the dignity he would have expected the rest of the nation to show in face of the

enemy. Mrs. Hossain noticed that the armed goons nodded to one another, signalling they had got the right person, before taking him away. There was little doubt that this was part of a pre-planned, systematic campaign.

Tauhid never saw his father again. Serajuddin Hossain's body has not been traced to this day.

"My father was a very religious man, but he could never tolerate the use of religion to fool the people. And he was a strong believer in Bengalee nationalism", Tauhid said. No doubt his memory of his father and what he stood for had been kept fresh in his mind through the effort of his mother and family.

Serajuddin's refusal to accept the use of religion as a weapon to defraud the people and his staunch faith in nationalism were anathema to the bigots who ran Pakistan and their local allies who paraded the street with the crescent and the star.

Through killing Serajuddin and thousands like him, they hoped to destroy the twin ideals of secularism and Bengaleeness, which were the inspiration behind the War of Liberation.

Tauhid's sense of loss is compounded many times by the realisation that the very ideals for which his father gave his life, have been suppressed over the years.

"Twenty years on, it seems we are being split from the memories of the martyrs and the War of Liberation itself. As children of martyrs, we have not received the kind of recognition we could have expected in liberated Bangladesh. This is very painful for us. Our generation is frustrated and confused by this continuous neglect shown towards the ideals for the martyrs gave their lives," Tauhid said, alluding to the reason why he thought a platform like Projonmo '71 had become imperative to carry forward the task of their fathers.

MIZANUR RAHMAN was barely two when he was robbed of the privilege, the right to be brought up with the love and attention that only a father can give.

His father, shaheed Mohammad Hanif, was manager of the Atrai-Ahsanganj branch of the National (now Sonali) Bank when the country erupted in revolt against the rule of Pakistani military junta.

One day in May, a patrol of Pakistani troops came to his bank to check out the "security situation". They accidentally left behind a map before leaving. Hanif saw the map contained a number of Mukti Bahini positions in the area, marked out in detail.

Without hesitation, he contacted the local MB commander, Mohammad Aziz Khan and handed over the map, providing the freedom-fighters with invaluable intelligence about what the Pakistanis knew about them. When the Pakistanis came back to look for their lost map, Hanif denied all knowledge of it, instantly making himself a suspect and a target in the enemy's eyes.

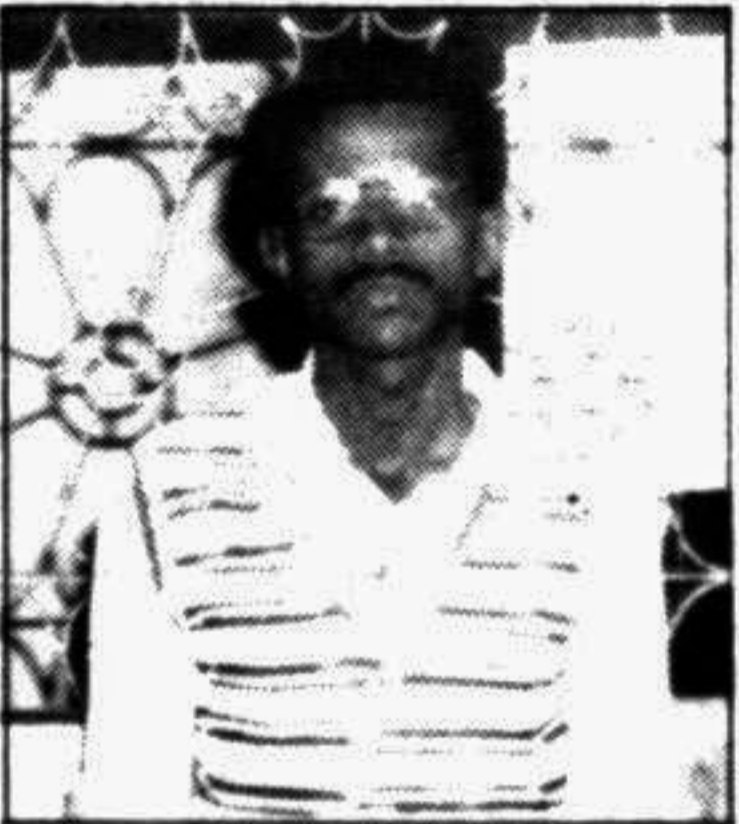
Several days later, during an army sweep in the area, Hanif, along with a number of other freedom-fighters took shelter in the local chairman's house. Many ordinary families had also taken shelter there as it was a fairly big house.

The army assault on May 26, 1971 left Hanif and 32 other freedom fighters dead. But the martyrdom has not meant social recognition or even concern for Hanif's family. On the contrary, they are now faced with harassment of a kind not thought possible in a country earned with the blood of shaheeds. "The Muktiyodha Kalyan

Trust has stopped giving us any allowances since October last year. They said that my father was working till two days before he died, so how could he have been a freedom-fighter?", Mizan, whose family began receiving allowances from the Trust only since 1984, said.

Mizan has no doubt why his father carried on working through the month of March — because Gangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in his March 7 speech had exempted banks from the non-cooperation movement.

"But it is not right to say he couldn't be a freedom-fighter while keeping up his job.



Tauhid Rezanur

Many people risked their lives helping the Mukti Bahini in many ways while working, as did my father. And aren't the Trust forgetting about the map? Wasn't that an act of valour too?", Mizan whose anguish, at having the integrity of his shaheed father brought into question by people applying a new set of rules, was quite visible.

The Kalyan Trust, meanwhile, conducted two sets of investigations and seemed to have accepted as "valid" only the one that threw doubt on shaheed Hanif's role as a freedom-fighter.

Mizan now thinks that more should be done for the families of shaheeds, not less. Their children have now grown up, but without any hope that a career or livelihood is guaranteed. Many children of shaheeds are not getting adequate schooling because of lack of money.

What Happened to Their Ideals?

"Even after 20 years, many martyr families are passing days in utter poverty. The government should make realistic allowances for their children's education, and provide greater job opportunities," Mizanur Rahman, now a 22-year old student of history and resident of Ziaur Rahman Hall, said.

ZAHIDUL HASSAN does not want much from the authorities. He had asked the university to preserve as a monument the grave in which his father, shaheed Mohammad Sadek, is buried in the grounds of the teachers' quarters at Fuller Road.

Twenty years later, the grave, which is the university's property, is used as a spot to grow vegetables by other teachers who should have known better. Underneath all the poorly-tended shrubbery and plants lies the mortal body of a man, acting principal of the University Laboratories School on March 26, 1971, who was one of the selected targets eliminated by the

Pakistan army at the onset of its genocide.

"Some teachers living in the same quarters, like Aftab Ahmed of the Urdu Department, guided the Pakistanis to our flat. The soldiers first shot my father's hands, then bayoneted him to death", Zahid, 23, recalled, "my uncle, who also a great believer in Bengalee nationalism and freedom, hurriedly buried the body underneath water pipes within the compound because the Pakistanis had come back and were looking for all the bodies they had massacred".

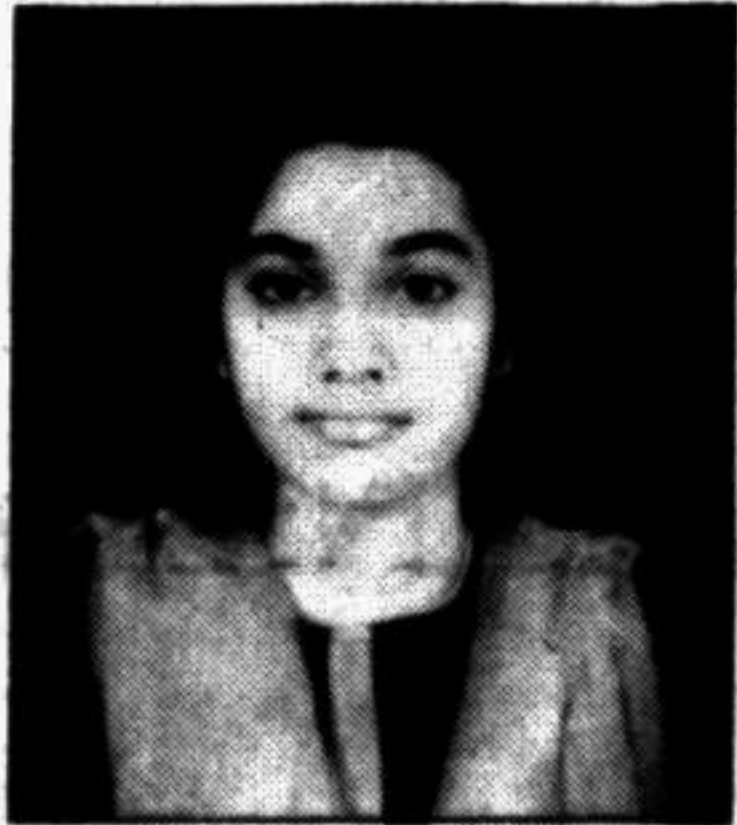
His uncle had good reason to hurry. Earlier they had seen the body of Dr. G.C. Dev, professor of philosophy, being run over and then dragged behind an army truck. They couldn't do anything about that, but they didn't want the same to happen to Sadek.

Today, Zahid feared, an influential part of the teaching community and the university authority seem to be domi-

nated by people with the same kind of ideological bearing as those who conducted the massacre, and dragged G.C. Dev's body down the road hanging from the back of a truck.

Otherwise, why would they not show the minimum of respect to someone who was one of their own and who gave his life for the love of this country, its people and culture? an incredulous Zahid, a student of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, asked.

"What is going on? This independence was achieved through the blood and sacrifice of the martyrs, but this isn't what it was supposed to be



Farzana Chowdhury Neepa

like. All that suffering and effort and where are we now? What happened to those ideals for which the martyrs gave their lives? We seem to be increasingly moving away from those ideals, sometimes I feel we are moving in the opposite direction", Zahid said.

On top of the emotional blow, came a financial one. From this January, the family of shaheed Sadek stopped receiving its allowances from the authorities; they have also been told to leave the quarters they were given as a martyr family.

The harassment of shaheed families, the deliberate stamping out of the shaheed's names and ideals from social memory and the on-going rehabilitation of those who were accomplices to genocide, are all part of the same pattern, and symptomatic of the nation's loss of values.

"It is not surprising that we are, as a whole, lacking in



Resurgence: Banyan tree soars into sky above Dhaka University campus

Can't You Do Anything to Help?

As an organisation, Projonmo '71 began to take shape after the initial contacts were made by Shomi. In April this year, they got together for their first meeting in Panna Kaiser's drawing room at her Eskaton house. Some of those present were meeting one another for the first time, discovering the strong emotional bonds that bound them.

Abad Khan, a popular newspaper columnist, was also there. It was Abad Khan, on request from Saidur Rahman, who had penned an article in the daily Ittefaq on March 23, which raised the issue of shaheed families' problems and society's responsibilities towards them. Those present had all read the article which had given them the hope that something, after all, could be done.

The initial meeting decided an organisation was necessary to carry forward their monumental task. It would be an organisation that would remain above party or sectional interest, one that would hold the spirit and ideals of the War of Liberation close to its heart.

Later Colonel (ret.) Shawkat Ali MP of the Muktiyodha Sanghati Parishad attended several meetings and provided immense help and encouragement to Projonmo '71 organisers, all of whom except Saidur Rahman were in their

early '20s and still at university or college. Col. Shawkat and Abad Khan's presence were invaluable, because they could give practical assistance and advice, and bolster their belief that their cause was a just one.

"Isn't there anything you can do for us? What answers will you give to the thousands of orphans of martyrs? Wasn't it your duty to say the things that we are saying today?", was how Saidur Rahman addressed Col. Shawkat, but the freedom-fighter did not really need any persuasion before extending a helping hand.

The hard task of contacting new people, taking the message to as many shaheed families as possible and formulating a list of demands that were just and with which all conscientious citizens of this country could feel at one, began in earnest.

Naturally, along with demands to rehabilitate families of all shaheeds of the War of Liberation, came the question of trial of all those Razakars, Al-Badr and Al-Shams who betrayed their country and the people, figured prominently.

The demand to preserve the killing fields of Rayer Bazaar and Mirpur, where countless intellectuals were shot in cold blood by the Al-Badr in December, 1971, as a sacred, living monument in memory of the martyrs, is a long-standing one. But there

are disturbing rumours of a plan which, if implemented, should cause the head of the entire nation to lower in shame and disgust.

"I have heard from many sources that they are planning to turn the Rayer Bazaar killing ground into a housing development area. Can you imagine? If Rayer bazaar is turned into a housing plot, then our children and their children after them, would have no knowledge of what took place there." ROKEYA HASSINA NILLI, daughter of shaheed Rashidul Hassan of the Department of English at Dhaka University said.

The recognition of shaheeds, the cultivation of their ideals, and rehabilitation of their families — these three demands do not come in any particular order, because they are inextricably inter-linked; if one is removed, the whole lot goes.

Not surprisingly, the ideals of the Liberation War figure above everything else in the list of Projonmo '71's demands, along with the demand for the trial and punishment of those responsible for perpetrating what was perhaps the most systematic, gruesome mass murder in history since Adolf Hitler threw millions of European Jews into gas chambers.

Projonmo's political nature meant there had to be a drive

gather support for its cause from across the political spectrum, treating the Jatitya Sangsad as the reflector of the country's political opinion.

Saidur Rahman then took his message to Dr. Badruddoza Chowdhury, the Deputy Leader of the House, as a prelude to seeking an audience with the Speaker and handing him a memorandum.

"Why do we have to come to you after 20 years of liberation? Wasn't the country supposed to make sure the ideals of the freedom struggle were upheld and that the children of the martyrs whose sacrifice freed this country, should be looked after", an emotionally-charged Saidur then pleaded Projonmo's case to the veteran and respected political leader.

Badruddoza Chowdhury, a freedom fighter and one of the torch-bearers of progressive thinking in this country, was moved. He offered to help, but the meeting with the Speaker could not be immediately arranged, as the last of session of parliament was pre-occupied with the crisis in Rangpur and adjacent districts.

The organisation was formally launched with a press conference on November 29, after the scheduled earlier date had to be cancelled because of the fatal shoot-out on the Dhaka University campus on Nov. 27.

moral backbone or patriotism. By throwing out the values and memories of the Liberation War and the shaheeds, we have left us with nothing. The result is all this ill-discipline and violence at colleges and universities. These are isolated events. They have to be judged within the overall context of lack of consciousness about patriotism, our history. We are being surrounded by a great darkness", Zahid said, adding that the birth of Projonmo '71 may succeed in stemming the slide towards total moral collapse by spreading awareness about the ideals of the freedom struggle.

FARZANA CHOWDHURY NEEPA still has some way to go before finishing her MBBS at the Dhaka Medical College. But she is lucky in one sense. Her awareness about the War of Liberation, its history and objectives is possibly due to the fact that she is a daughter of shaheed Dr. Alim Chowdhury. She has no doubt why three million people gave their lives in 1971.

"The shaheeds like my father thought about the well-being and interests of the Bengalee people; they were totally against the oppressors and aggressors from Pakistan. They believed in the ideals which inspired the struggle from the beginning", she said, adding, "now we have the free Bangladesh of their dreams. That is the fulfilment of their sacrifice. But the consciousness, the ideals behind their dream seem to be moving away from us little by little".

Like many other children of martyrs, Neepa is disturbed, to use a mild expression, by the trend of down-playing virtually all aspects of the liberation struggle in every sphere of society where the government has a controlling influence, such as the media, social mobilisation and most importantly, educational institutions.

"It is really pathetic that even our generation doesn't really know anything. I wouldn't say the consciousness of '71 has really been destroyed, because it has never been conveyed to the generation growing up since '71.

"I am aware of what the liberation struggle was all about, but that is probably because my father was one of the martyrs. But even my class-mates do not know. Our generation will run the country in the future, but if we ourselves become isolated from the inspiration and principles of the Liberation War, then which way will we take the country? What would that mean to the future generations?"

Having this and the next generation grow up without any real knowledge about why and how we came to be an independent nation, and the ideals on which this new state was supposed to be built, will mean that those who tried to kill this nation through killing the intellectuals will have triumphed. That is Neepa's fear, and it is shared by all in Projonmo '71.

The organisation itself means a great deal to Neepa apart from being a vehicle of building public awareness. "Projonmo '71 has given me a whole new set of brothers and sisters. I feel that only members of this organisation can comprehend the true extent of my feelings. We understand and feel for one another, that is the main thing at the personal level", she said.

The organisation is another reason why she is hopeful that, as long as there are people left in this country with sufficient awareness to distinguish between the truth and lies, between what we wanted to be as a nation and what the allies of Pakistan wanted us to become, then the forces of communal-

ism and reaction may not yet succeed in their design to accomplish what they failed to do in 1971.

TANVIR SHOvon HAIDER CHOWDHURY was too young to remember his father, shaheed Professor Mofazzal Haider Chowdhury. But he knows enough to realise that what people like father and other intellectuals murdered by the Al-Badr stood for was exactly what led to the liberation of Bangladesh.

"What are our ideals? We wanted recognition as Bengalees. We wanted to create a democratic society where all people, irrespective of religion or political beliefs, would live as equals", he said.

Professor Chowdhury once wrote sent an article to the daily Azad in 1965. The article was intended to refute claims made by the Azad that the Bangla syllabus at Dhaka University was polluting the cultural environment by not having enough things to propagate what the paper called Islamic culture.

The Azad printed Prof. Chowdhury's article, but throughout the article, the Azad also carried comments from the editor, often sarcastic and derisive, written into the article itself. It was an incredible display of journalistic intolerance. Shovon said, because the paper could not even allow the readers to make their own judgement on his father's comments.

Prof. Chowdhury was allowed to live till December 14, 1971, when he was picked up by the Al-Badr and transported in a bus along with Prof. Munir Chowdhury and others. None of those bodies was found, and to this day Shovon often wonders if...

Twenty years on, Shovon like the rest, could have given up hope that what they knew to be the ideals of liberation will ever be fulfilled in this country. But he is far from giving up.

"We have to revive and hold on to the martyrs' memories, but nobody seems to be doing it. But we, the children of the martyrs, can do it because we are directly affected. We have access to their ideals through their memories", he said.

This revival is necessary, Shovon said, because their



Tanvir Shovon Haider

killings were designed to serve the purpose of blocking any cultivation of democratic values or Bengalee culture, which were what a free Bangladesh was supposed to be about.

But his involvement with Projonmo '71 also owes his disquiet over the condition of other martyr families, and his increasing disillusionment with the sincerity of the authorities to tackle their problems.

"Many shaheed families do not even have any social recognition; many of them did not have any support from anybody else. Some even had to endure ill-treatment at the hands of people whose motives may not have been clear", Tanvir Shovon Chowdhury said, stressing the importance of cultivating respect for the ideals of the War of Liberation if the shaheeds and their families are to get the recognition and support society owes them.