

## " I don't think there is ever a death in vain "

In this interview Rashid Haider, who has compiled the history of martyred intellectuals explains what created the compulsions on the part of the Pakistan to choose and kill the intellectuals during 1971. The reasons are many, he tells **The Daily Star**

**Daily Star (DS): How did the initiative to collect the history of the martyred intellectuals begin?**

Rashid Haider: The initiative began in 1984 under the then Director General of Bangla Academy Mr. Monzur-e- Mowla. This was the *encyclopaedia of martyred intellectuals*. There was of course some kind of a common understanding of who would be an intellectual. A five member editorial committee was also set up. The identity of the intellectuals ran from authors, teachers, journalists, sportsmen, the gamut of those who are considered to be the thinking section of society. The five members were Sanaul Haq, Faruque Aziz Khan, Abul Hussain, Shamshuzzaman Khan and myself (Rashid Haider) as the Editor. This led to the publication of the "*Buddhijibi Kosh*". That was the beginning.

**DS: And subsequently?**

RH: Subsequently the effort was expanded in 1988 under the then DG Prof. Abu Hena Mustafa Kamal. He decided to take it forward and a larger project was undertaken. This project ultimately yielded 13 volumes. It has covered the entire country and included those who fell into that broad category.

**DS: Some say that there is always a tendency to see the intellectuals generally as authors and professors. Is that the case with your project?**

RH: Most certainly not. In fact we have covered all kinds of professions. As you can see, the collection is based on recollections. And those who do so are also from all sections, levels, and spaces if you will. They are remembered by their students, family members-wives, husbands, brothers, friends, and teachers. In other words, those who were close to them. So both in terms of the remembered and those remembering, it's a wide range of people.

**DS: What about the statement that most of the intellectuals are from Dhaka or what we call metropolitan minds. In fact, there is a common set of names, which appear every year, and we remember only them and not so many from the mofussils?**

RH: I agree that some bias of that sort is there and it's natural. After all, we are talking about the national figures, many of whom were from the Dhaka University. One has to recognise that they were the intellectual leaders of their time. They were also the most well known. So there is a tendency, I suppose. The media also focuses on them because their family members, friends etc are easily accessible for interviews and reports. But when we began our work, we approached it as a national phenomenon. We saw it as something, which affected the whole of Bangladesh. So those who are in these books also come from different parts of Bangladesh.

**DS: Was the killing of intellectuals more during March and December or was it spread all over the year?**

RH: A large number, perhaps most people were killed during these two extreme phases of the war. It began with the Dhaka attack on the university and a few other places and later in December a planned campaign to list and hunt down those who were perceived to be an intellectual enemy of Pakistan. But many were also killed in other times. I myself have written about my teacher Shivaji Mohon Chowdhury of Pabna. He had even taken the name of Sirajul Islam in a futile bid to escape the ethnic cleansing policy of the Pak army but he couldn't escape their wrath. He was killed on 27 October. So you can see there was some distribution in terms of time as well as space.

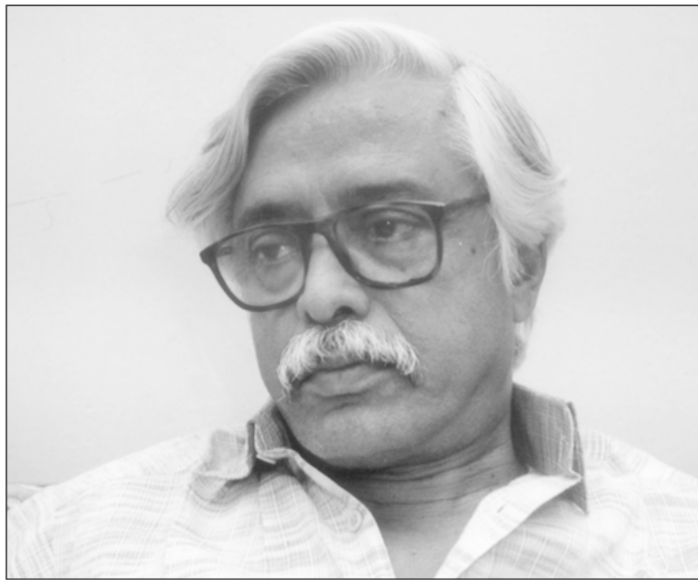
**DS: In your research, could you figure out why they were targeted so much? Were they seen as the real enemy? But they were hardly warriors. Most were stuck inside Bangladesh. Why this rage?**

RH: A good point. I would say that one single reason didn't work behind the killing. We are really talking about social leaders, about emotional caretakers, about morale builders. You see, in that terrible year, when life and death was just a matter of a few moments, people needed assurance and reassurance. People needed comforting, hope and a light to keep the spirits up. Scared and worried people in our society, especially outside Dhaka went to the educated people, the traditional leaders who could assure them, perhaps calm them down. This was obviously watched by the Pakistanis and their collaborators and once the end drew near, the revenge attacks began. So you could see that they were being attacked also for providing support and in some way preventing society from breaking down. That's a major reason and that is not always stated enough.

**DS: What about their role as intellectuals who had kept the idea of Bangladesh alive against all odds?**

RH: Yes. There was this revenge for sustaining an idea as well. After all Bangladesh wasn't just a street movement but a well articulated intellectual platform from which the liberation war could be launched. Initially, that is during the March-April phase, there were killings to suppress the movement. But this didn't go according to their plan. So when the fight back began, when the issue of sustaining the spirit began and it appeared that intellectuals were still playing a role, they were targeted.

**DS: And what about the idea often expressed that the Pakistanis wanted to deplete the newly emerging Bangladesh of all intellectually competent people.**



RH: Well, certainly that was part of the agenda. After all, there was a concrete and definite plan, a plan to pick and choose certain individuals and kill them. If you notice, a plan like this can't be made and executed unless a long-term objective is there and this was trying to cripple the people that were becoming free, from intellectual inputs, the people who outlasted the Pakistani terror.

**DS: So would those be the main categories of people who were considered dangerous intellectuals according to Pakistan?**

RH: There was another category of people, activist intellectuals who were part of the war. People like Engineer Nazrul who had provided many of the maps and plans, which had led to the demolition of the power stations inside Bangladesh. He was picked up and killed. He had gone over and later was picked up and executed. There were others like him. That was one category. Some were also targeted but escaped like Prof. Maniruzzaman of the Bangla Department. Some were picked up for their role over a period of time. Take Prof. Munier Chowdhury who was known for his firm stand on Tagore culture, Bangla language and linguistics, Prof. Mofazzel Haider Chowdhury, a man who wasn't an activist but very much part of the cultural scene. Yes, I agree that a single explanation won't work for all. There were a number of reasons at work behind the killings.

**DS: We don't see many women on the list?**

RH: There were some women certainly. Selina Parveen, Editor of Shilalipi magazine, Lutfunnahar Helen, a leftwing cultural activist of Magura are two names. Prof. Neelima Ibrahim was targeted but she escaped. A driver came to her one day and said that he had brought people to the building looking for her but they couldn't locate the exact apartment. Yes, they were not that many but they were also targets.

**DS: One question that people ask nowadays is about the relevance of those sacrifices, those deaths. Something went wrong and the Bangladesh that we have today is hardly that which inspires confidence and pride for all. And these people died, mostly for upholding that ideal or objective which wasn't achieved. Would it not mean that those deaths were in vain?**

RH: I won't agree with you as far as describing all of them as deaths in vain. I would agree that we hardly have been able to create a country where life is dignified, fair and equitable. The question of justifying the deaths of 1971 by looking at contemporary Bangladesh is a difficult matter. But one doesn't think of life and sacrifice that way. They did what they thought was right, what they thought they must do. Consequences are another matter. I don't believe that there is ever a death in vain. All sacrifices are profoundly important. I do think that today it seems a far away dream but we shall one day have a country that will be worthy of all that we did in 1971.

**DS: And finally do you think that there is any justification in the statement that intellectuals in the post-71 era have let the people down. That they themselves have become unwilling to play the kind of role that society demands from them.**

RH: I think there is some truth in that statement. It's not a question of worthiness but priority setting. The intellectuals have become too engrossed in improving their material life and are not of playing an advanced role in taking society forward. This is probably a general phenomenon and we should admit that this has happened. But I think one day, all this will change. I think we will have a land that is worthy of everyone's dream.

## The intellectual as a partisan: The case of 1971

At one level we have the intellectual as a victim and as innocent one at that. At another level as a partisan both guilty and glorious of being a warrior and finally as an intellectual who defines an independent space in any situation including in or before nationalist wars.

AFSAN CHOWDHURY

**T**HE death of numerous intellectuals at the hands of Pakistani collaborators and armed militants has become one of the most hallowed imagery of the year that was. That of patriots paying an extreme price for supporting the nationalist movement. The visual image of dead intellectuals lying in mass graves in various grotesque poses of finality tell more about the brutality of war than most words strung together can. The country has paid homage to those people in their own way all these years and the memory has been sanctified through observance of the Martyred Intellectuals Day on December 14 and other activities that commemorate their death and in a sombre way celebrate their life and deeds. Thirty years later after the event, it has become an absolute symbol of punished partisanship. How far has it grown as a substance that feeds the hunger of an emerging "country/nation/state" that it itself had helped midwife? It remains a rhetorical question because the crisis of Bangladesh intellectuals and partisanship in the background of the legacy of 1971 at this point of time demands a serious inquiry.

At one level we have the intellectual as a victim and as innocent one at that. At another level as a partisan both guilty and glorious of being a warrior and finally as an intellectual who defines an independent space in any situation including in or before nationalist wars.

**The multiple levels.** The first level is a fairly easy one to understand as it simplifies the death as a simple act of patriotism that is self-explanatory. What makes it significant is the attribution of innocence in many cases. In other words, the person killed is guilty of no crime except by association with an idea or persons who themselves may be innocent. This association is that of belonging to a cultural structure, perhaps nothing more dangerous than being fond of it. Thus the innocent as a victim is triply victimized as an intellectual. He is an innocent victim, an innocent intellectual and finally an intellectual who is a victim. In the nationalist historical imagination he provides the necessary victimhood.

This argument made that the Pakistanis wanted to drain the Bangladesh brain of all gifted people and it was genocide of intellectuals also is important. This is because two independent positions were strung together. This is that, he is being killed as an intellectual only, depleting social capital. The nationalist identity would be irrelevant here except we notice that the areas of activity are almost all linked to some category of knowledge, which involves inter-action with society at some level or other. Hence the fact of activism is critical too.

At the second level, he is a partisan intellectual. This is probably the most significant identity thought it's

also at this level that the inner contradictions of that definition emerges. Is a partisan an intellectual or not? Does he fulfill one identity or both and if so which one dominates? Which identity is subsumed and within which?

This in fact isn't an issue especially in today's world of partisanization of the political variety of the entire society. This social division of spaces of the intellectual who emerges as a sub-class within the ruling class is now fully established and legitimized. The source of this was the role of the intellectual as a partisan in the construction of the nationalist imagination. He was critical in developing the intellectual platform on which the pillars of the movement rested. In a nationalist movement where sophisticated cultural expressions became the semantics of resistance, the role of the intellectual is defined not just by his partisanship but also his acumen. However, independent positions are less significant in such situations and what strengthens the nationalist argument is more necessary in that point of history. In other words, the partisan is more important than the intellectual is.

In 1971, this role was seen as an expansion of the earlier role-played

interned in the Nazi concentration camp. He is providing food for life and thought inside the camp to many others and helping fellow beings to survive or face death with dignity.

There is however one difference. In the Nazi camps, he was first identified as a Jew and then interned and he later played the role of a social supporter. In case of Bangladesh he was first playing the role of a social supporter/intellectual and later identified and killed as an intellectual. But his social role was also possible because of the social prestige of the intellectual.

This was an unusual situation where all intellectuals were or had to be partisans. Thus, either, one supported the cause of Bangladesh and risked death at the hand of the Pakistanis or one went against the cause and risked death if the war went the other way. How intellectuals survived even after siding with the killers of the intellectuals- their own clan- defines the class or social positioning of intellectuals and their strategic decisions to enhance partisanship in post-1971 Bangladesh.

**The post-nationalist State.** Another point to be added is that, most of the intellectuals comprise



Body of Dr Fazle Rabbe

in the preceding years to develop the nationalist argument over a period of time. What became the necessary argument was better than the (possibly) correct argument. In the given moment of history the intellectual sought usefulness by becoming part of the cause. This was a near universal position held by most intellectuals in Bangladesh and they were martyred as partisans though not necessarily as intellectuals.

**Causes of victimhood.** Researchers probing the issue have also explained some of the attendant causes. According to them (see interview of Rashid Haider), the intellectuals were providing support, solace and assurance during the extremely troubled year. He is the pillar, the foundation of society passing through an extreme phase. Ordinarily people seek him out for his social role, which is to assure them that they will survive. This way, he is closer to the college teacher

what is roughly the vague term describing the professional elite. Thus the network of the elite functioned well to ensure that the borderline partisan intellectuals were rehabilitated and within a short time a new configuration could be developed after 1971. This led to new equations requiring a fresh set of partisan positions for the newly emerged history as the imagination of politics had changed including the role of the intellectual to meet the demands of the post-nationalist state.

But the old language remained without the idea as the engine and this was a dilemma that the new intellectuals or the old new ones couldn't reconcile. Thus ideology became a casualty even with partisanship and what mattered was partisanization rather than the intellectual argument or even ideology behind that. While the pre-1971 intellect was partisan he wasn't

platformed on that being an intellectual objective. He justified being a partisan by defining that through either an intellectual or a social role. But the new intellectual is different. And this is a new development that seems to separate the two that is probably linked to the nature of the new state. The argument has become more important than the validity of an argument. How does one link this to 1971 and what does it state in terms of defining the role of a universal intellectual? Or is this a post-intellectual state?

It was perhaps in the post 1971 period that the history of the intellectual was formulated and his role in future defined. The new state demanded loyalty and dissent was equated with sedition. Hence it was unsafe to be an intellectual and disagreement was later proved to be dangerous or rewarding, depending on who was in power.

Intellectualism was superseded by partisanship. While the partisan strength of the intellectual lay in constructing a new set of imaginations to be realized, the new crop was more successful in defending an earlier set of precepts, even if not realized or unnecessary. The position of the partisan defined the intellectual. It's the tragedy, which all intellectuals face when they refuse to disagree and hence abrogate that particular role which determines critical functions and critique. In turn they become part of the state and was rewarded through the benefits of co-optation.

**The inheritance of 1971.** When the nation pays homage and tribute to the intellectual, we might ask if the present intellectual is a continuation of the shaheeds line or not? Is there a real inheritance? Are we talking about the partisan, the intellectual or just the intellectual? The martyred intellectual was probably killed among other things for opposing a collapsing state. In some ways he had tried to fight that state before it began to collapse by questioning it. However, almost all such processes involve their involvement in the creation of a new state of which he was a part.

Those who survived through that year emerged as intellectual partisans of the pro-state sort, which eclipsed their social identity to a great extent. Had the legacy been more dominated by the pure intellectual, they might have taken an independent position within a rebellious construct. But the intellectual seems to have developed a stake in the new state rather than in the social argumentative process that pits him against it. However, events seem to have overtaken that position allowing the decline of neutral spaces, which could have led to creation of independent intellectualism replacing the trend of only partisans as intellectuals. That was a legacy not transferred to the post 1971 generation. It must surely have existed in the heart of the souls who were martyred in 1971.

## Death outside the metropolis

Professionals, intellectuals and social organizers faced an extremely precarious life outside Dhaka during 1971. They were playing a role not that of just the sustainer of ideas and thoughts but also of society as well. They provided assurance, hope and also fuelled the militant movement at various stages. While this was of one sort during the pre-March 1971 days, it became much more intense and dangerous as the country was torn by war. Another fact that made life particularly difficult for them was the fact that they were all well known in their area and their activities were most often not a secret. Thus they were an easy target. On the 30th anniversary of our Victory Day we pay tribute to those intellectuals who lived and died outside Dhaka in their search for freedom.

**Lutfun Nahar Helen (Teacher, Government Girls' School, Magura)**

Lutfun Nahar was born in Magura, 1947, finished her B.A. and started working as a teacher in Magura High School. Her courage and depth astonished people around her when she worked as an informer in 1971. Pakistani army tied her to a Jeep and carried her till the WAPDA Khalpar, which was about one and half a miles away. On 5<sup>th</sup> October she was brutally killed.

**Nutananchandra Singha (Social worker and education patron, Rauzan, Chittagong)**

Nutananchandra Singha never had the chance to finish primary school but deep inside he felt that female children need to be educated. Founder of many schools for girls, he did not get the opportunity to complete Kundeshwary Girls' College. He was shot on April 13th, 1971 when the new college building was still under construction. Nutananchandra was born in 1900, December 12th in Gohira of Rauzan, Chittagong. At the age of eight he went to Burma with his father and started his life at a grocery shop. In 1942 during the World War II he returned to Cox's Bazaar walking all the way down barefooted. He started his famous Kundeshwary Oushadhaloy in 1946. He also set up Kundeshwary Primary School and Balika Mondir in 1960, Monorama Hall in 1968, and the K. Girls' College in 1970. When the war broke out in 1971, the Kundeshwary Bhaban was a common shelter for many intellectuals. People around became aware of this and soon the Pakistanis decided to act. The consequence was that he was killed with twenty-eight other people on April 13, 1971.

**S.M. Fazlul Haque (Lecturer, Rajshahi Govt. College, Rajshahi)**

S. M. Fazlul Haque was born in the village Mohanpur, Rajshahi in 1933. His father Md Fazlul Haque was a teacher. S.M. Fazlul Haque passed his Matric in 1952 from Chak Altitha High school, ISC in 1954 from Rajshahi College, BSC in 1956 from the same college. In 1959 he completed his graduation from the Dept. of Mathematics, Rajshahi University and joined Naogan BSC College as a Lecturer of the Mathematics Dept. Later on he joined Ananda Mohan College and Rajshahi Govt College. S.M Fazlul Haque was an amateur actor and a social worker. On 25<sup>th</sup> April, 1971 the Pakistan Army attacked the village Mohanpur. S.M Haq unfortunately did not get enough time to escape and hid in his room. The soldiers smashed down the door and killed him along with ten other family members.

**A. F. Ziaur Rahman (Head, Sylhet Medical College)**

Born on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1926, in Narayanganj, A F Ziaur Rahman lost his father at a very early age. His school years passed under his mother's care. He became a doctor and joined the medical core of Pakistan Army in 1949. He became a Lt. Col. in 1963. In 1968 he was appointed as the head and superintendent of Sylhet Medical College. Ziaur Rahman started the construction work for a new campus for the college,



Rayerbazar Killingfield

halls and teachers' quarters that we see today. He became the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine of Chittagong region in 1969-70. In 1970 he was the head of a medical aid team that served the cyclone-hit people. He stayed back at Maizidi court to help the people till February 1971. He returned to Sylhet on 1<sup>st</sup> March with his family and was arrested on 15<sup>th</sup>. They were confined inside the house often without food. On April 14<sup>th</sup> a jeep came and stopped outside. Dr. Zia had just taken his shower and was ready for the first meal after a few days. But he did not get a chance. He was taken for questioning and never came back.

**Golam Hossain (Additional Police Super, Barisal)**

Golam Rahman was killed on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1971. After the March crackdown, when the whole country was on fire this man risked his life and supplied one hundred rifles to Nurul Islam Monju and Major Jaiil. He became a commander of Sector One though his physical condition was not good at all. Golam Rahman, was born in 1919, Dec 1<sup>st</sup>. He left home without notice for Europe on a ship after his mother's death and at that time he was only eleven years old. He came back during the World War II and passed the Entrance exam in 1941 and Higher Secondary in 1943. Rahman joined the Bengal Police as a Sub-Inspector when he was still a B.A. student of Ripon College. In 1969 Golam Rahman was the S.D.O. of Chuadanga. During the 1969 Movement he did not let the police fire on the people of his area. Some of his very close companions betrayed this courageous man. He was handed over to the Pakistanis on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1971. People say he was brutally killed on May 3<sup>rd</sup> but his body was never found.

**Md. Muslemuddin Mian (Headmaster, Jhaoail Girls' school, Tangail)**

People used to call him "Muslim Master" as he lived a life to educate others. He went to every house to find students for his girls' school. Born in Karatia, 1924, Md Muslim Mian passed Matric from Koaail Maharani Hemantakumari High School in 1944 and Intermediate from Ripon College, Calcutta in 1946. He came back and started his life as a school teacher. In 1948 Koaail Shurendrabala Girls' School was upgraded due to his hard work and devotion. His wife also worked with him and both of them worked without any remuneration for years just to provide a wage for another teacher. In 1971 Muslimuddin sent many people to India for training. On 28th June he was killed for keeping connection with the freedom fighters.

**Habib Ur Rahman (Educationist, Dept of Mathematics, Rajshahi University)**

After completing B.S.C. (Hons) from Aligarh University Habib ur Rahman joined the Rajshahi University, Department of Mathematics. For long 13 years, he served the Department of Science and Mathematics. His secular writing and contribution to the world of literature is still remembered. During the Nationalist Movement in the 60's and 69's uprising against the Ayub government, he played a leading role. He was picked up by the Pakistani soldiers and was taken to the rooftop of the University Guest House and never returned.

**Anwarul Azim (Chief Administrator, North Bengal Sugar Mill,**

**Gopalpur, Rajshahi)**

It was May 5, midday, 1971. Soldiers of Pakistan army gathered over a hundred workers and employees of North Bengal Sugar Mill beside the millpond (now known as Shahid Shagar) and killed them. Lt. Md. Anwarul Azim is one of those who were martyred that day. Very popular among the mill workers and staff this man was brave enough to raise his voice against the killers even just before his death. Anwarul Azim was born in Naogan, December 13<sup>th</sup> 1931. His father Md. Azad was a Deputy Magistrate. He passed his Matric in 1949 from Dinaipur Zilla School, I A in 1951, from Surendranath College and B. A. in 1953, from Rajshahi College. He was a brilliant student. His political awareness made him a "wanted" man in 1952 during the Language Movement. He shaved his head to save himself from the police. He completed his MA in International Relations from Dhaka University and went abroad with a Fulbright Scholarship in 1965. In 1969 he joined the North Bengal Sugar Mill. People of Gopalpur still recalls that day, Anwarul Azim with his colleagues lay dead on the steps of the pond. Gopalpur station is now known as "Azim Nagar".

**Jikrul Haque (Doctor, social worker, Syedpur)**

Before our Liberation in 1971, greater Rangpur was largely a non-Bengali area and the Bengalis were very neglected by the authorities but Dr. Jikrul Haque, whose chief concern was to ensure privileges for the local people, struggled continually and established their rights. Born in 1913 in Syedpur, Dr. Jikrul finished his medical studies in Calcutta. A politician since his student days, he returned to his birthplace and worked in local hospitals. He preferred to settle down in his birthplace. Everyday he treated numerous patients but never took any fees from them. In the 1954 Elections Dr. Jikrul was elected from his area as an independent candidate. He was the Secretary of the Syedpur high school for twelve years, the first Chairman and Founder of Syedpur Municipality and initiator of the Syedpur Government Hospital. Jikrul Haque was elected again in 1970 as a candidate of the Awami League. On 25th March 1971, Pakistani soldiers took him to the Cantonment at 8pm and tortured him brutally. Later he was killed that night.

**Mir Abdul Qayyum (Teacher, psychology Dept. Rajshahi)**

Mir Abdul Qayyum was born in Ghagra, Mymensingh, on July 6th, 1939. He graduated from the Rajshahi University, Psychology Dept in 1962 and joined as a Lecturer. Very popular among his students Mir Qayyum was politically aware and participated in the movements before Liberation. He stayed back in Bangladesh in 1971 because he wanted to see his motherland free and he paid the price with his life. On November 25th Pakistani soldiers took him from the campus residence. Mir Abdul Qayyum was buried alive with many others in Bablatola.