

The days of the vultures



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ONE of the most heinous crimes against humanity committed in the twentieth century was the relentless and brutal killing of hundreds and thousands of innocent civilians by the Pakistani occupation forces and their local cronies commonly known as Razakars and Al-Badars during our War of Liberation in 1971. This brutality commonly known as genocide against Bengalis has few parallel in contemporary history except the killings of innocent Jewish civilians by the dreaded Hitler's Nazi forces (Operation Final Solution), the bombing by US forces in Vietnam on civilian targets, the Genocide in Rwanda and the mass killing by the Serbs in Bosnia Herzegovina following the break up of former Yugoslavia in the nineties.

The genocide of Bangladesh in 1971 was committed in a number of phases. In the first phase which commenced on the fateful night of March 26, 1971, code-named 'Operation Search Light' the focus was on rampant and brutal killing of Bengali speaking members of the Pakistan Army, East Pakistan Rifles, East Pakistan Police, the Ansars, innocent Bengali civilians, irrespective of religious or political beliefs and the teachers of Dhaka University who were believed to be one of the driving forces of the War of Liberation. The Pakistani Military Junta accused them of indoctrinating the students of the university with the concept of Bengali nationalism and moti-

vating them towards the demand for an Independent Bangladesh. Though similar killing spree were also staged in other universities and educational institutions the ferocity and magnitude was much more severe in Dhaka University. The first phase continued till the end of April. By that time most of the country came under the control of the Pakistani forces.

The second phase, beginning in the month of May was characterized by selective killing of anyone who was believed to have had any connection, however remote, with the Awami League, the party that won the majority seats in the Pakistan National Assembly. On the heels of this phase came the killing of the minority community. The occupation forces knew very well that to maintain the pace of execution of their plan to destroy the will and spirit of the people of Bangladesh for an independent country, they must create a band of local supporters who knew the country, its terrain and the people much better than themselves. Initially they banked on the non-Bengali migrants from India and soon also had the leaders and supporters of Pro Pakistani political parties like the Muslim League, Nezami Islam and the Jamaat-e-Islami on board. Of all these parties, the Jamaat was the most organized having its roots amongst the students (Islami Chatra Sangha) and the intellectuals. Not only they were well organized, they had a functional

chain of command, were well financed and had strong foreign connections. These were ultra reactionary and ultra fundamentalist forces having unblemished allegiance towards the ideologies of Pakistan. On top of everything they enjoyed the confidence of the Pakistani occupation forces. The Pakistani occupation forces capitalized on this ground-reality and soon started to organize armed cadres from the supporters of these Pro-Pakistan political parties to fight alongside with them against the pro-liberation forces. In June 1971 the government officially created a para-military force named Razakar, comprising initially of the members of the defunct Ansars (mostly non-Bengalis) though such a force comprising of Jamaat workers were already working in Khulna area under the command of Jamaat leader A K M Yousuf. Soon the foot soldiers of Muslim League, Nezami Islam were also inducted in this force. Later this force was enlarged by recruiting ordinary poor and unemployed people. Though this force was functioning under a government promulgated ordinance it was always under the control of the Jamaat-e-Islam. There were other similar forces like the East Pakistan Civil Armed Forces, Al-Shams and Mujahid Bahini. Throughout their existence in the occupied Bangladesh they raped, looted and destroyed village after village and towns of Bangladesh. However the most

dreaded amongst all the para-military forces was the Al-Badr, the killing machine of the Jamaat.

The Al-Badrs were the elite death squad of Jamaat-e-Islami. The idea of forming such a death squad was conceived in Jamalpur when the Pakistani forces occupied the town on April 22. The then President of the local Islami Chatra Sangha (ICS) Muhammed Ashraf Hossain formed the first band of Al-Badr and commissioned the squad by killing six freedom fighters of Jamalpur. He tried to prove that the Al-Badrs would be able to assist the Pakistani forces much more effectively provided they were given the logistic support as they were better educated and better committed towards the ideologies of Pakistan than any other local collaborators. In the month of August the entire ICS as a student organization was transformed into Al-Badr with the President of the All Pakistan ICS Motiur Rahman Nizami (Present Ameer of Jamaat) as their Commander in Chief. Others who played key roles in forming and guiding the Al-Badr include, Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujaheed (Present General Secretary of Jamaat), Mir Kashem Ali (Presently a Jamaat Leader, in 1971 Chief of Al-Badr in Chittagong), Mohammad Kamruzzaman (Presently Publicity Secretary of Jamaat), A B M Khaleque Majumder (now a businessman), Delwar Hossain Saidi (former MP). Unlike other para-military forces assisting Pakistani forces, Al-Badr had more specific task, primarily selective killing of the progressive, secular and pro-independence intellectuals of Bangladesh. As the entire ICS outfit was converted into Al-Badr death squad, the organization had a very strong network throughout the country.

It is unfortunate that the successive governments of Bangladesh failed to prepare a complete list of all the intellectuals killed by the Al-Badr goons in 1971 but it can be safely concluded that the bulk of the intellectuals who were killed during this period, especially in the months of October to December lost their lives in the hands of Al-Badr killers.

The Al-Badr high-command became very desperate starting from the month of November as they realized that the time was running out for the united Pakistan and the emergence of an independent Bangladesh was

in sight. It was something very similar to the situation during the Second World War when the allies were closing in on Germany and the liberation of Europe was in sight. The Nazi regime of Hitler stepped up their plan to complete the extermination of the Jews in Germany and see their 'Final Solutions' come to a successful end. Additional gas chambers, firing squads were pressed into operation and the person in-charge of the Operation Final Solution Adolph Eichmann, saw everything executed to its minutest details. In Bangladesh the Al-Badrs did something very similar and with the active participation of the occupation forces started picking up their victims in dozens. Dr. Muntasir Mamoon in his well researched and edited publication Muktiuddho Kosh (Encyclopedia of The Liberation War) mentions that from the recovered documents it is revealed that on November 16 Pakistani forces made a final briefing on the killing of the Bangladeshi intellectuals and issued a circular to the Al-Badrs in Dhaka detailing about their final plans including decisions to supply all types of logistic support and arms and ammunition required to complete the killing mission. Crash courses were offered to the Al-Badr killers under the supervision of Brigadier Bashir, Captain Qayum and other senior Pakistani officers. Lists of Bangladeshi intellectuals were meticulously prepared with the help of the Al-Badr high command and handed over to the executioners for instant and swift execution.

On the fateful night of December 4, when the final battle for Dhaka began curfew and black out were declared all over Bangladesh. This was primarily done so that the Al-Badr victims could be picked up either from their hiding places or their residences. Ali Ahsan Mohammed Mujahid and Mir Kashem Ali in a joint statement hailed the Pakistani forces for their 'victory' in the battle fronts and promised all out support towards Pakistan's President Yahya Khan. While the joint liberation forces were closing in on Dhaka a systematic abduction of the intellectuals were being carried out by the Al-Badrs throughout the country, the main focus being the Dhaka City. It gained momentum between December 10 and 14 and the number of intellectuals picked up swelled and additional deten-

tion and torture centres had to be opened in Kakrail Mosque, Dhanmondi High School and MLA hostel in Nakhla para. Those picked up in Dhaka during those fateful nights and the nights preceding included Professor Munier Chowdhury, Professor Gyasuddin Ahmed, Professor Rashidul Hassan, Professor Anwar Pasha, Composer Altaf Mahmud, Journalist Serajuddin Hossain, Journalist Nizamuddin Ahmed, Journalist Ghulam Mustafa, Writer Selina Pervin, and Physician Alim Chowdhury. The Al-Badr killers conducted similar operations in other parts of the country. After severe physical tortures were carried out on all the victims, they were blind folded; hands tied in the back and were taken to the killing fields and brutally executed. After the liberation of Bangladesh on December 16, their mutilated bodies were discovered in the killing fields of Rayer Bazar, Mirpur and other parts of the country. The primary reason for such brutal and systematic killings was to deny a newly born country the much needed intellectual capital in its early phase.

Though all the pro-Pakistani political parties were involved in assisting the Pakistani Army in committing one of the most heinous genocides in contemporary history it was only Jamaat-e-Islami that put an institutional and structured form in such a crime against humanity. Their entire leadership went into hiding from 1972 to 1975. Few escaped to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Britain. None of their leadership including Motiur Rahman Nizami, Ali Ahsan Mujaheed, Kamruzzaman, Delwar Hossain Saidi, Mir Kashem Ali, A B M Khaleque Mazumder was ever tried in any court of law for their crime against humanity. After the killing of Bangabandhu on August 15, 1975 the political scenario of Bangladesh took a U turn.

This is a tragedy of history that the 145 million people of Bangladesh, three million martyrs of our liberation war will have to live with perpetually, unless these perpetrators are brought to justice by some patriotic government in near future.

The writer is an educationist and a researcher.

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Reflecting on the Martyred Intellectuals

SHAMSHER CHOWDHURY

WE are on the threshold of the 38th year of Martyred Intellectuals' Day. Those who sacrificed their lives were teachers, professionals, litterateurs and their likes of exceptional caliber. When I look back at that dreadful day, I am not only sad but also pensive. One of our failures as a nation has been our inability to duly assess and recognize the contributions made by such worthy sons of the soil. I am often gripped by this uncomfortable feeling that they perhaps died in vain.

Government after government came and went and all one comes across, is hectic activities in washing and cleaning of the memorials on the night before followed by a gathering of people at the site paying "homage" to the Martyrs on the day and thereafter all is forgotten until another year passes by.

They talk about bringing to justice those guilty of the heinous crime committed in these

gruesome murders and yet nothing happens other than the media publishing some gory pictures of the killing fields including the tragic accounts of how, when and where some of them were kidnapped and murdered. Each year it is all a one-day affair. Discussion meetings too are held on some of them recalling the life and times of those who sacrificed their lives. There is nothing wrong with it except for the fact that these have now tuned into empty rhetoric and meaningless rituals.

I keep asking myself as to what about the ideals and ideologies they lived for and died? There will always be devils in society but the question is have we been any better ourselves? Look at the state of the polluted environment in the educational institutions right up to its highest seat, the universities. These have become veritable centres for obtaining degrees and no longer serve as the house of learning and education. Many of today's teachers are, pardon my

saying so, morally and ethically bankrupt. They even indulge in tampering with the laid down processes of admissions. A large section of them thrive on partisan politics, the worst of its kind.

Doctors are issuing fake certificates and have become instruments of money making more than coming to the aid of the sick, more so the poor and the disadvantaged. The spirit of service to humanity has taken a crude blow and the downward swing of their moral and ethical calling is indeed horrifying.

Our media has become highly commercial and its gurus of today are engaged in subtle balancing acts including tailoring news and views often in complete disregard of the "truths and realities" on the ground. Admittedly, it has often risen to the occasion in molding public opinion during certain critical junctures facing the nation but thereafter the story has been one of convenience and serving the interests of its owners. I may be wrong to some extent but I am almost certain

there is considerable truth in what I have stated. It is not only worrying but also painful.

Those who died were people of conscience and commitment. They taught us how to be of service to fellow beings, they taught us compassion, tolerance, forgiveness and how to treat the unfortunate and the downtrodden alongside the unfortunate. They taught us to be free in our thoughts and action. They knew that it was better to be a failed matriculate than being a graduate through unfair means. Those who gave their lives on this fateful day were people whose ideals and ideology were a part and parcel of the foundation of our nation and nationhood.

Our best tributes to these intellectuals would be to build a society that represents the very ideals they lived for and died. What we needed most today is a Munier Chowdhury, a G.C. Dev, a Shaheedullah Kaiser, a Mufazzal Haider Chowdhury, a Dr. Shamsuzzoha and more of their kind that gave their lives.

Let us turn our tragedies into our strength. It is towards that objective that we should work with real earnest without loosing further time; that and that alone would be a befitting tribute and homage to these intellectuals who died some 37 years ago at the hands of those hyenas.

Admittedly all that can only be brought about through a conscious social movement, a task that is not only long drawn but also require participation of all sections of the civil society and intellectuals, who above all, are honest, morally above reproach, independent in their thought and action.

In the meantime, the government should come forward and do more than just observe the day year after year by going through some ritualistic exercises.

It should include the lives and times of some of the leading martyred intellectuals in the school curricula, for they were "a part and parcel of those valiant fighters of our liberation war".

The print and the electronic media should come forward and highlight the achievements of these martyred intellectuals and do so, not just as a yearly event but throughout the year at reasonable intervals.

Today many of the living spouses of these intellectuals have not only grown old but also passing their days in solitude. Some of them are also reeling under spiraling prices. The government and conscious members of the civil city should not only inquire about their mental and physical well-being but also provide succor by way of free basic medical services and help and make them feel that they too are an integral and important part of society. They should routinely be invited to all important national day functions at Bangabhaban and elsewhere.

Can't we try to pay back a bit of the heavy debt that we owe to those martyrs?

The writer is a columnist.

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