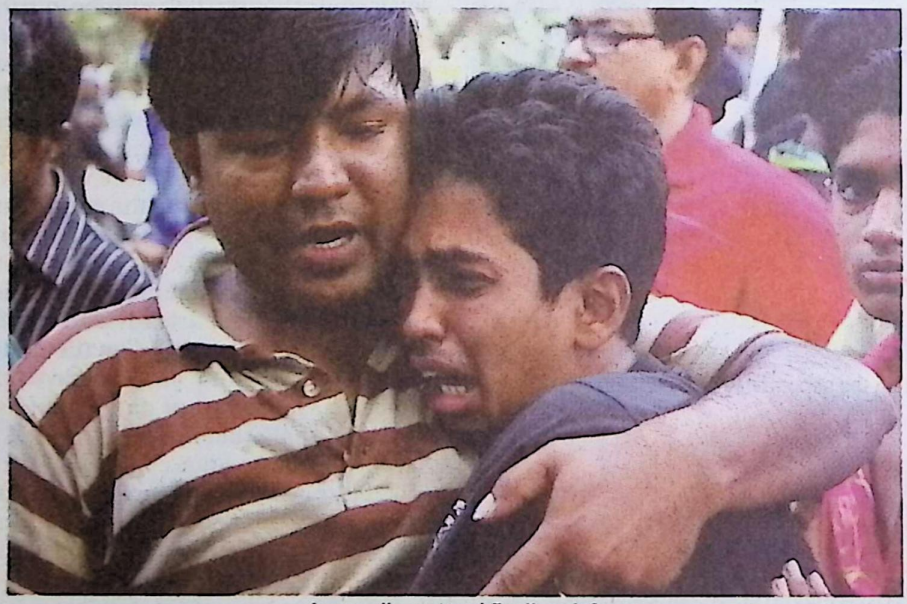
Portrait of a Mutiny

The Unanswered Questions

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Anger, disgust and finally grief.

It was meant to be a celebration. Red, yellow and green flags fluttered atop the arched entrance to the Bangladesh Rifles Headquarters. A cultural show was planned for the evening. The annual Darbar of the Bangladesh Rifles brings together officers and men from all over the country, and celebrates the achievements of the paramilitary force over the course of the year. This year there was much to discuss, since the BDR had been involved in several high profile operations, including Operation Daal Bhaat -- a campaign to combat the rising price of essential commodities by importing and selling groceries at wholesale rates.

As the officers of the BDR -- all deputed from the army met the Jawans in the Darbar hall on the morning of the 25th of February, little did they know that the stage had been set for the bloodiest mutiny in the history of the country. Bangladesh has seen upwards of half a dozen coups and uprisings in the 37 years of its existence. But the sheer mindless brutality of this latest uprising shocked the nation. The basic facts of what happened on that fateful morning have been fairly well established. Gunfire broke out as the Director General of BDR Major General Shakil Ahmed was delivering his speech. In the first wave of shooting, the DG and other senior commanders were mowed down.

Speaking to the Star, Col. Syed Quamruzzaman, GSO of the BDR headquarters described the harrowing scene. "The jawans asked us to come out and said we wouldn't be harmed. We walked out with the DG in the middle. They told us to walk in single file. We fell in line with the DG leading the way. They started firing at close range..."

As the horrified nation watched on live television, machinegun toting BDR jawans, with red cloth covering their faces, took up position around the compound. Leaflets were distributed saying they had risen up in retaliation for "hundreds" of years of deprivation and unless they received pay hikes and better facilities immediately, there would be worse to come. Government ministers scrambled to negotiate. Rebel leaders were taken directly to the Prime Minister. But when the rebellious soldiers agreed to lay down their weapons thirty-six hours later, 69 army officers lay dead. Several of their family members along with three passers-by had also been killed. Mass graves with decomposed bodies, homes gutted by exploding grenades and walls pock-marked by hundreds of bullets the scene of carnage sent the nation into anger, disgust and later into mourning.

The BDR mutiny may be over, but disturbing questions remain. Why did the rebels kill all the officers if it was a dispute over pay and benefits? Could military force have been used to quell the rebellion? Could the deaths have been prevented? How could this have been planned without anyone knowing? What were the intelligence agencies doing? Who stands to gain from this horrific atrocity? What was the mutineers' exit strategy?