

# Keeping the spirit of the Liberation War alive

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AKKU CHOWDHURY

**T**HE theme for International Museum Day, which is celebrated on May 18, many years ago was "Museums: Building Community," which underlined the important social role museums play. The theme reiterates the importance of the museum and recalls the definition of the museum as a permanent institution in the service of society and of its development. I recall that theme today to reiterate the important role the Liberation War Museum has played in our community ever since its establishment.

The Liberation War Museum was opened on March 22 1996, and has been promoting nation building and community not only through the displays but also through its various programs advocating humanitarian and democratic values, and through the historic sites' connection to contemporary issues.

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The Liberation War Museum has been set up to collect and disseminate information regarding our Liberation War. We try to find the truth regarding our liberation struggle, and seek justice for those millions who had perished in the most inhuman way. The truth is important, not only for the present generation but also for the future, so that they can grow up knowing how bloody and gory the birth of the nation was. This will give them impetus to be patriotic, and have determination to be better leaders of the society and the nation.

It is believed that the Museum can be a very important tool for teaching them, and giving them a sense of pride in their country. The Liberation War Museum wants the future generation to know the rich heritage of their motherland, and draw from the spirit of the Liberation War the inspiration and pride to build a better future and make a difference in nation building.

The Muktijuddha Smriti Trust (MST) is dedicated to honouring the spirit of the struggle for freedom and the Museum is its prime project.

MST is involved in identifying and preserving the historic sites of the Liberation War, the killing fields, and the graves of the victims of the Pakistan army and their agents. Let the victims of the genocide be remembered, not buried in lies.

When, on July 27, 1999, a killing field was discovered, the Liberation War Museum had taken the initiative for an extensive excavation of the area to find the remains

the debris that had been thrown over the bodies of thousands of Bengalis in 1971, to give them the honour they deserve for the supreme sacrifice they made for our freedom. Only then we shall know ourselves.

The discovery and excavation of the killing fields has had an awakening effect in all of us, especially the younger generation. For over 25 years, history was not only distorted the truth was also gagged systematically so that future generations would be unaware of their rich heritage that was the Liberation War.

It is also important to explore the various mechanisms of legal and social redress to improve the psychological and emotional support system for the families long affected by the loss of their dear and near ones and the failure in finding the truth.

The Museum is taking the leadership on this issue, and has made a big impact on the society by exposing the historic sites and bringing them into focus for the present generation to understand the past. We owe it to our martyrs to establish the truth about the genocide committed by the Pakistani military and bring to justice those who committed such heinous crimes. We have held many seminars and conferences on the genocide and on the need for a tribunal to try the collaborators and perpetrators.

As part of the preservation of 1971 sites, MST took the initiative to develop and restore the jalladkhana killing field in Mirpur. With the involvement of the local community, we built a memorial park, retaining the original pump house and making it a memorial site with information, photographs, objects and data from the killing and excavation. This site was opened on June 21, 2007, and the families of those killed here are regularly invited to share their experience with school children who are invited to visit the site. We hope this will impress upon others to take the initiative of preserving the killing fields that may be found around their communities.

The Outreach program, whereby we bring in students from different schools, plays an important part as a teaching tool for learning about our history. It plays an important part in building their civic and moral role as responsible citizens of this nation. The participants take an instant quiz as part of the program, and take a tour of the museum and view a 25 minutes video showing the freedom struggle of Bengalis from 1947 to 1971. The quiz is basically about what they have seen.

We try to motivate them to be proud citizens and become "ambassadors" of the Museum, and to participate in all its activities, which gives them a sense of belonging. Since we began this program in 1997 we have had over 100,000 participants. In 2000, we revamped the program by providing transport and including an instant quiz program for the visiting students. The Bangladesh Freedom Foundation sponsored the program, which enabled us to provide transport to the participating schools and give prizes to the quiz winners.

The program has become so popular that we sometimes have to bring in two schools on the same day, whereas we had planned to have the Outreach once a

week only. Although the majority of the students are from Dhaka, on Fridays we try to bring in students from the outskirts of Dhaka (travel time of maximum two hours). The visual learning with actual objects, artefacts and photographs from 1971 makes a very deep impression on these young minds, which is reflected from their comments and the question answer sessions.

The interest of the students can be seen from the continuous interaction we maintain with them through mail, activity participation and the annual Freedom Carnival that we began from this year.

Outreach was expanded with the introduction of a "Mobile Museum" so that we could reach out to the youth in far-flung areas of Bangladesh. We launched this program in August 2001. The mobile exhibitions have been designed to take the Museum on the wheels. Exhibits are mounted in a specially designed bus, and a video projection unit is included to show a 25-minute video on our history (1947-71). A specially trained instructor/manager conducts the program, including the instant quiz. We contact various schools to schedule their visit, and coordinate with development organisations (NGOs) for local assistance. This has added a new dimension not only to the Museum but also to our commitment to community and nation building.

In our outreach program, from 1997 till 2008, we have had participation of 104,845 students, out of which 51,473 (49%) were boys and 53,512 (51%) were girls. Total number of schools was 379. In 2009, we have had 2684 students of which 1200 were boys and 1484 were girls.

The mobile museum, traveling all over the country since 2001, has covered 25 districts and 141 villages. It has traveled to 508 schools, and been viewed by over 280,000 people.

In June 2004, a unique project, "Human rights and peace education in the light of history of the Liberation War," was launched. This project, being run with support from "Manusher Jonno Foundation," has now spread all over the country. Till March 2008, 1,94,410 students from 370 educational institutes of 101 upazillas of 19 districts had participated in this program. They received primary knowledge on human rights, tolerance and peace based on the history of the Liberation War.

These students from towns and remote villages, by taking interview of elders in the family and neighbourhood on 1971 events, have enriched history with many untold stories and, in the process, feel the pain and glories of the Liberation War. In this oral history project, they have so far collected 7759 interviews, which are kept in the Museum's archive.

The trustees of the Liberation War Museum strongly feel that, for identifying friends and enemies of democratic secular Bangladesh and correcting distortions, it is essential that the younger generation start learning the history of the Liberation War. In this respect, increasing participation of youth in the Museum's programs kindles a ray of hope.

"Museums and globalisation" is also a



very appropriate theme considering the impact globalisation is having the world over. The theme reiterates the importance of the museum and recalls the definition of the museum as a permanent institution in the service of society and of its development. It is important to note that even before globalisation became fashionable and then a necessity, the museum community had been sharing knowledge with each other knowingly or unknowingly.

Park Services (USA), Gulag Museum (Russia) and the To Remember (Argentina).

At the Liberation War Museum we believe that teaching our future generations the importance of historical facts and international interaction is important, so that the people of the world know each other better. The planet is becoming a global village.

In our collection we have over 20,000 memorabilia and documents from 1971, of which about 30% are not exhibited due to space constraints. In 677 weeks, we have had over 4,030,500 visitors.

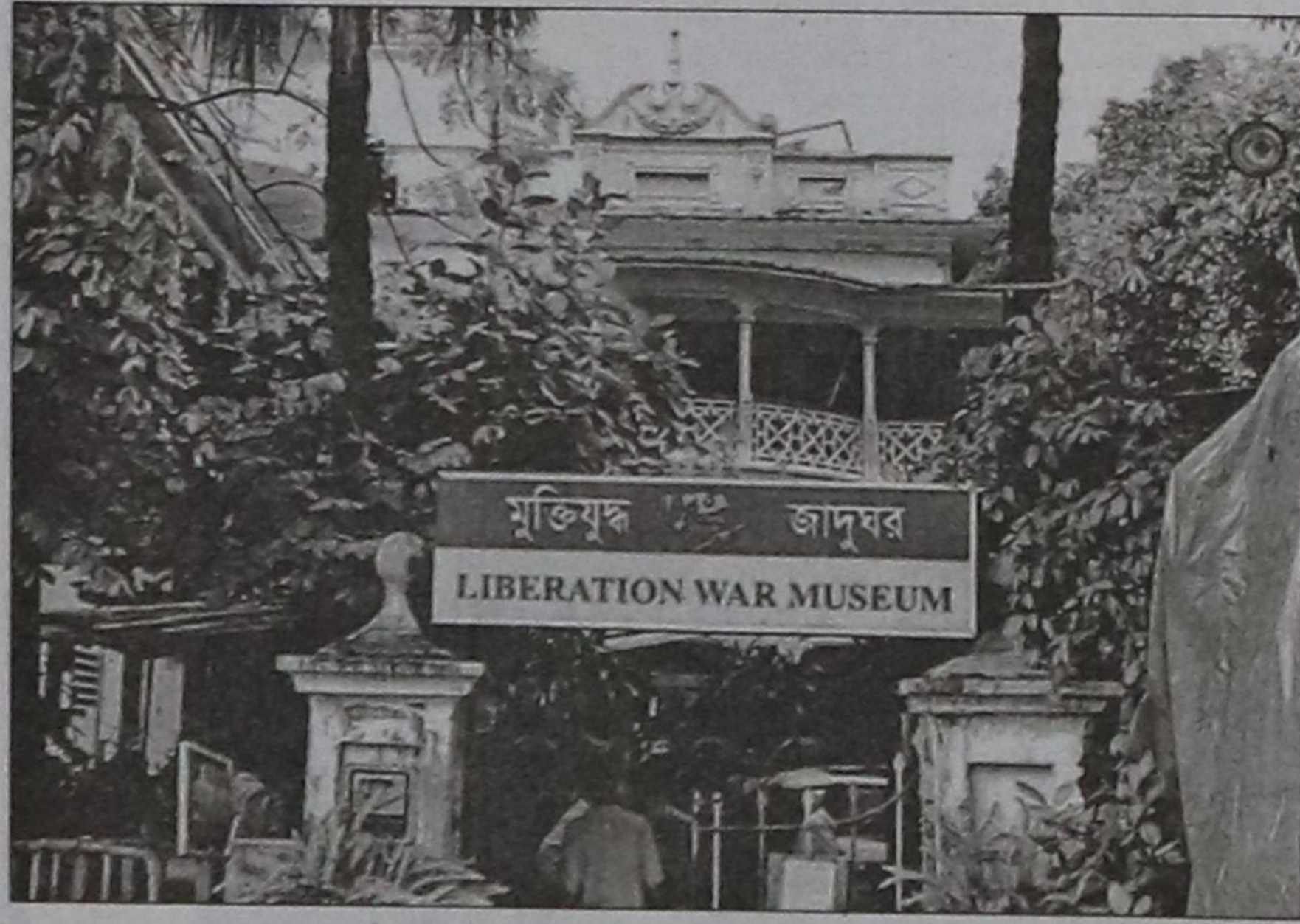
Every year we hold a freedom festival with the students who participated in our outreach program.

On our anniversary we have a lecture series, and on the first anniversary we had Lt. Gen. Jagjit Singh Arora. Besides, we also bring unknown freedom fighters to speak on various occasions celebrating historic and important days.

The Museum is housed in a rented building. We have been trying to get a piece of land to build a proper Museum. I will end with the happy news that the previous caretaker government approved our application and made an allotment for a piece of land in Agargaon. Hopefully, the construction work of a grand Museum of Liberation will begin with the help, assistance and cooperation of all the people. As we have branded our Museum as a "Citizen's Museum," we are confident the citizens will come forward to build this museum brick by brick.

The Liberation War Museum celebrates its 13th anniversary on March 22, 2009.

Akku Chowdhury is one of the Trustees and the founder Director of the Museum.



## Intellectual capital

The realisation of Vision 2021 will require very substantial investment in education, science and technology, greater coordination between relevant science-related Ministries, and the establishment of partnerships between the government, universities and relevant industries in areas of national priority such as food, health, energy and environment.

AHMED A AZAD

**T**HE government has recently set up a 27-member "recession task force" to periodically monitor international trends. The FBCCI has suggested a Tk 6,000 crore "salvage" package, a tax break for five years and requested the government to turn a blind eye to black money. I hope such a recovery package is not used to bail out companies that are in trouble because of greed or inefficiency. The stimulus package would be better utilised to support com-

panies that strive to become internationally competitive through technology and innovation, to create jobs for the unemployed including those forced to return home, and for infrastructure and capacity development.

In spite of a myriad of seemingly insurmountable problems Bangladesh has a reasonable chance of climbing out of the LDC pool into the ranks of middle-income countries. This optimism may seem misplaced for a country that keeps lurching from one natural or man-made disaster into the next, and where mere

survival remains the primary concern. In the past we have always reacted to emerging challenges and adopted band-aid solutions instead of acting on long-term plans. The in-coming government's Vision 2021, a pledge to transform Bangladesh into a self-sufficient and technologically proficient state by 2021, is a welcome departure.

The current priorities of meeting food and energy shortages are also long term concerns with added pressures from environmental degradation and climate change. The prevalent high youth employment is bound to get worse with a decrease in the overseas job market due to the international recession. It is also clear that our export sector, dominated by RMG, needs to be diversified into new products and markets where we can remain internationally competitive. "Digital Bangladesh" has been promised as a panacea for all our problems. Countrywide "digitisation" and availability of high speed internet is without any doubt highly

desirable and also a critical tool for modernisation, but by itself ICT can not provide sufficiency in food and energy, provide health equity, or protect our environment from the ravages of pollution and climate change.

The greatest asset our country has is our youth. We need to get over our national obsession of manpower export when there is an acute shortage of trained workforce to tackle the domestic challenges. We should also reverse the brain drain of our trained professionals and create conditions that allow them to create wealth for Bangladesh rather than for other countries.

The stimulus package could be best utilised for creating jobs for the increasing numbers of unemployed youth and for capacity development. Vast numbers could be employed in capital work programmes for infrastructure development. Youth with vocational training could be immediately employed in a variety of technology-driven SME throughout the country. Using already

available biotechnology it is possible to set up local manufacturing plants all over the country for the environmentally friendly production of bio-fertilisers from plant and agricultural waste, and biogas from animal waste.

The technology available in Bangladesh for improved food production has reached its limit in the face of environmental challenges such as salinity, flooding and drought, and biological challenges such as pest infestations and viral infections. In order to produce food crops that can counter the above challenges cutting edge genetic engineering technologies (agricultural biotechnology) need to be properly developed in Bangladesh.

The technology gap with the developed world is already too large and increasing exponentially with time. The Ministries of Education, Science and Industry should seriously consider setting up a joint Department of Postgraduate Research, Innovation and Technology Transfer that could host

independent Commissions in areas critical for future development such as ICT, Biotechnology, Energy, and Climate Change. To bring us into the modern world each of these Commissions could set up a world-class multidisciplinary research institute with a central core facility and R&D nodes in universities and industries throughout the country.

The realisation of Vision 2021 will require very substantial investment in education, science and technology, greater coordination between relevant science-related Ministries, and the establishment of partnerships between the government, universities and relevant industries in areas of national priority such as food, health, energy and environment. The recession instead of defeating us should give us the incentive and resolve to start on the way to a modern and self-sufficient Bangladesh.

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