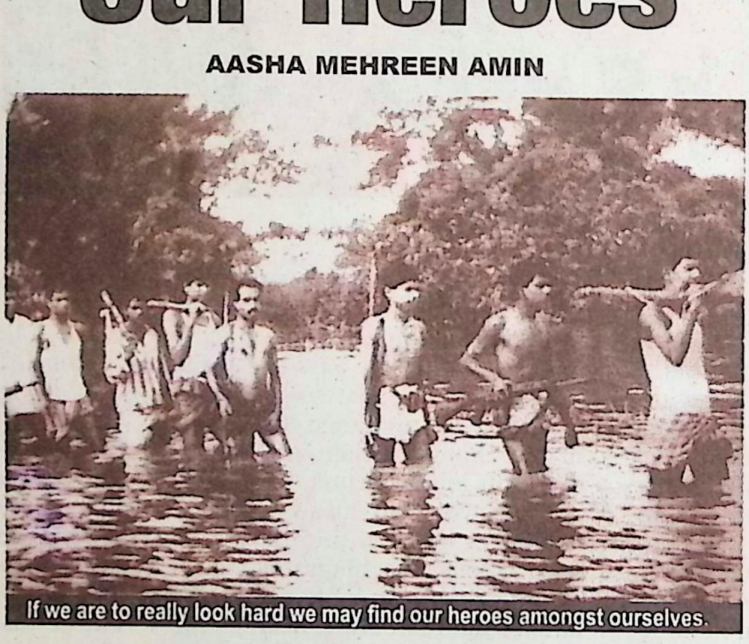
In Honour of Our Heroes

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If we are to really look hard we may find our heroes amongst ourselves.

It seems like a cruel joke. A news item in The Daily Star from Nilphamari on March 22 says: 'The government initiative for helping families of insolvent freedom fighters through monetary grant for their funeral turns (into a) nuisance for the bereaved people who have to wait long tiring months or years to get the 'aid of honour'.' What could be more shameful than the fact that those who risked their very lives for freedom, a freedom we take so much for granted to have to wait for government grants for their own funeral? Is it not enough that we, the ungrateful beneficiaries of the sacrifices of the freedom fighters have not bothered to make sure that the surviving Muktijodhas and their families as well as those of the martyrs, at least lead a close to decent life? Is it not enough that we the free Bangladeshis have mutilated the dreams of our heroes and created a society that rewards the wealthy and punishes the poor, that continues to persecute women and deprive them of basic rights and a society where Bangalis are not united but fragmented by greed and bigotry?

You would think that this was more than enough for us to bow down our heads in mortification. But no there is always more to add to this terrible burden. The present generation may find it a little hard to visualise a freedom movement that was wholeheartedly participated by all the people of this nation - rich, middle class or poor, educated, unlettered, men, women, teenagers, young and old. After all why were Muktijoddhas and their families allowed to drown in poverty, why did not those who took the most advantage of our hard-earned Independence, take care of them? The truth is that the dreams of an equitable, just and progressive society that our heroes nurtured when they left their families and took up arms, when they shed their blood so generously, those dreams have not come true.

Instead we have to read news reports that tell us that not only have these heroes who have survived suffered in abject poverty, many of them plagued throughout their lives by war injuries, their families have to go begging from door to door to raise funds for their funerals when the time comes.

So are we all out of heroes? In a popular American television series called 'Heroes' a group of individuals with extraordinary abilities go through a series of complicated conspiracies and counter conspiracies to apparently 'save the world'. It is not clear however, in these blood-curdling episodes how much of the saving these heroes actually do despite having powers like the ability to fly, make fire, read minds or alter them, kill people with angry thoughts and come back to life again and again. They don't exterminate terrorists nor do they prevent wars or world hunger or deadly diseases from spreading. All they do is fight superhuman squabbles amongst themselves and try to get the better of each other. But the point is that they do *have* the power to fight against evil.

Our own heroes of 1971 did not have superhuman powers in the conventional sense. What they had was a superhuman spirit that defied fear and the love of one's own life, that gave them extraordinary powers of bravery and endurance to fight injustice. Perhaps it was the presence of an obvious common enemy, perhaps it was because people were different back then. Now the enemy seems a little hazy, its face keeps changing and often seems eerily familiar.

But if we are to really look hard we may find our heroes amongst ourselves. They are the common day labourers, the rickshawpullers who do backbreaking work for a pittance. They are the women who battle abuse and deprivation yet still manage to raise their children. They are the firefighters, the divers and ordinary citizens who risk their lives to save others. They are the farmers and fishermen and their families who refuse to give up despite natural calamities. They are the migrant workers who send all their money home. They are the men and women who make other people's lives a little better through love and sacrifice. There are innumerable examples of heroism, some obvious while others hidden behind the walls of apathy. These are the kind of people who left everything behind to rush into the battlefield to free their motherland. Most of them did not receive medals of recognition or even a minimum level of assistance to survive. They were forgotten along with their sacrifices. Yet they did exist and will continue to do so, not with supernatural powers but with that extraordinary spirit that can vanquish even the most formidable enemy.