

The Daily Star

MARTYRED INTELLECTUALS' DAY SPECIAL

DHAKA MONDAY DECEMBER 14, 2009

Timeout for reflection

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TODAY the nation observes Shaheed Buddhijibi Dibosh. Today the nation recalls the ultimate sacrifice that members of its intelligentsia made thirty-eight years ago so that a new country could be born out of much blood, sweat, and tears. They were not the only ones who made the supreme sacrifice, that goes without saying; in fact, as a group they were a minuscule minority compared to the larger agglomerates like the farmers, armed forces, students, paramilitary soldiers,

and the police. Nonetheless, precisely because of their relatively small number, the intellectuals draw greater attention to themselves.

Because of their higher enlightenment, they are regarded as guides of a nation's collective ethos. And, not many can lay claim to possessing higher enlightenment. They are also seen as custodians of a nation's history and culture. And, not many can lay claim to this accolade, either. So, when they become a part of history by having their lives cut short violently for being ethical guides

and custodians of culture and history, that is tantamount to carving out a piece of a nation's soul. And, as the event recedes in time, its memory becomes a time of reflection for the present, and a symbolic representation of righteousness for future generations to get inspired by. The intellectuals gave their lives, lest we forget, for an ideal.

And, therefore, they cannot be forgotten even as those who knew them personally themselves take their leave from the world of the living until, inevitably, one day, none will be left to say, "I knew him/her." In 1971, the Pakistan army carried out methodical killing of a number of Bengali intellectuals in the initial stage of the liberation war. However, as the war was winding down to its denouement of the birth of Bangladesh as a sovereign, independent nation-state, the army and its local henchmen engaged themselves in a planned extensive targeted execution of university teachers, writers, journalists, doctors, engineers, and artists. They had committed what someone has termed "cerebrogenocide" on the Bengali nation. And, out of it emerged the ritualistic observance of Shaheed Buddhijibi Dibosh.

The day was born out of a tragedy that, even if for one of

those rare days in a year when that phenomenon happens, unites the nation in a common memory and a shared narrative. If only there were more days in a year like that --- many, many more! But the nation is so divided along ridiculously established fault lines, and they are perceptibly growing deeper and wider with the passage of time, that days of remembrance like today really turn out to be little more than a ritualistic exercise. And that is a tragedy for the nation.

Human beings are by nature sentimental, the average Bangladeshi probably more than many other nationalities.

Reflection on what the sacrifice of the intellectuals thirty-eight years back means in terms of the nation's progress would be a worthwhile exercise this day. None of the martyred intellectuals willingly sacrificed themselves. They were forced to embrace martyrdom for what they symbolized. And it is that symbol that we as a nation should always keep in sight. They were sacrificed on the altar of an ideal of a shared vision. That vision was that of a nation at one, striving for a sovereign independent homeland that they would call Bangladesh.

Theirs was a vision of a nation equated with a nation-state. That, of course, was realized,

although they did not live to see it, and the euphoria of that equation was sustained for some time.

The nation! That, remember, is what we identified as the ideal of the martyred intellectuals! That was the tie that bound them in 1971. That was the bond that led them to their slaughterhouse. Their killers recognized that their moral stance, courageously and steadfastly held, was a galvanizing element in an entire nation's struggle for independence and freedom. That was why they were silenced --- for what they symbolized, more than anything else. Have they been replaced? No one is indispensable. The new replaces the old. The march of a society, of civilization, demands that a more innovative, more inventive, more dynamic, more curious generation replace the one before it. It does not always happen that way, but a generational gap will usually see to it that enlightened vacancies are at least adequately replaced. So, yes, they have been replaced, as Bangladesh now has more academics, more journalists, more engineers, more doctors, more artists, more writers than, several at least just as accomplished as, the ones who left us in 1971.

But could one in all honesty

say that they share the fundamental ideals of a nation that was created on the basis of ideals held by their predecessors? Granted, the political and social environment of the two eras shows some telling differences, but, at the very least, there should be no divisibility in a shared vision (and, let us not talk about a vacuous declaration of a yearning for a happy and prosperous country) for a Bangladesh that should not be a subject of news stories in the foreign media only when disaster strikes it and its people. Take a look, many of today's intellectuals are as fiercely divided as any other group, along the same fault lines, and, in certain instances, have even contributed towards some of it. It behooves them, as members of the intelligentsia, to once again become the vanguard of an enterprise designed to minimize the rift that is bedeviling the nation, to lend their moral support, to lead by example by showing the way to the healing of the national ethos. That, at this juncture in the nation's history, would be a monumental tribute to the martyred intellectuals of 1971.

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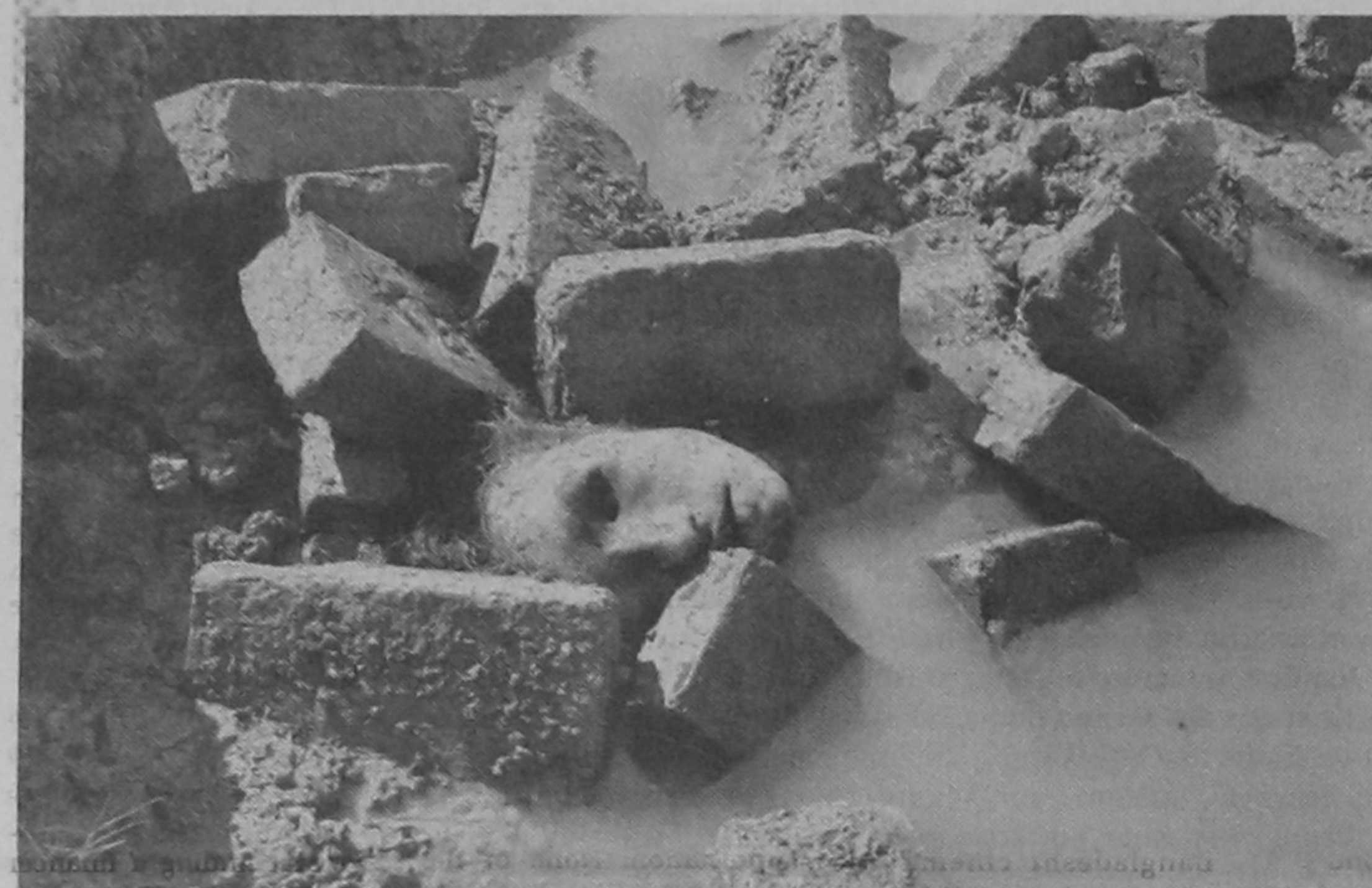


PHOTO: RASHID TALUKDAR

They lived for dream, died in nightmare

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

I don't know which would be more appropriate on the thirty-ninth anniversary of the Martyred Intellectuals Day. Should we mourn the loss of some of our best brains? Or, should we celebrate their sacrifice? Each year we remember them precisely on the same day. Each year the Day throws back the same images of decomposed bodies, blindfolded and both hands tied behind the back, strewn like broken dolls in a brickfield at Rayerbazar. What do we do? Do we resent how they were killed? Or, do we remember what they had died for?

Business as usual, there will be fireworks of fiery speeches. Auditoriums will be packed with audience. Speakers will speak. Singers will sing. Poets will write poetry, not to speak of newspaper scribes who will write ream after ream. One of the ironies of observing any day of significance year after year is that it becomes hackneyed. People get used to the motions. The emotions are forgotten.

That is why, the most haunting question of the Day is how should we remember the martyred intellectuals? Floral wreaths will be laid on their memorials. There will be photo exhibitions where visitors will pore over the grisly photographs of the killing fields. Once again parents will cover

the eyes of their children and briskly skirt the picture, which shows the mangled corpse of a female journalist, a hungry dog nibbling at its flesh.

As adults, we cover our eyes and skirt much more. How can we observe a day without being curious about who killed these intellectuals? Who planned their killing? Who picked them up from their homes? Who blindfolded them and tied their hands? Who actually fired the lethal shots at them? Who gave the order? How can we feel anything for these victims without being angry with those who killed them?

Instead, we have mechanically bifurcated the observance of this Day into two different strands. One strand is for holidaylovers, who enjoy the Day as an opportunity to rest and relax. They eat rich food watch movies and visit families and friends.

The other strand has the political opportunity-seekers who use it as an occasion to joust with their opponents. Hand on heart, how many people in this country are actually bothered that these intellectuals had to bear the mortal brunt for our freedom? For them the Day is no more than another break from the drudgeries of business and work.

It's possible that as a nation we are culturally deficient in our sense of gratitude. No offense, it happens. The killing of intellectuals didn't create the same kind of backlash in

Algeria as it did in Lebanon and Egypt. When Egypt's secular author Farag Fouda was assassinated in the early 1990s, his death sparked both an Egyptian national and a pan-Arab debate. But the reaction has been rather lukewarm in Algeria where more than 80 intellectuals have been assassinated by the fundamentalists. The only reaction so far is general outrage that the country has been slipping into violence.

Four factors have been identified as the cause of this difference in Algeria: (1) historical precedents for targeting intellectuals during the French colonial days; (2) linguistic duality that has diminished readership and precluded the emergence of broad-based literature; (3) pseudo-religious justification that does not discriminate between those who wield gun and pen; and (4) a lack of government commitment to protecting the intellectual and journalistic community.

I am not saying any of these is true for us in Bangladesh. We probably have our own reasons. We probably don't even see it as a problem. Independence Day, Language Day, Martyred Intellectuals Day, Victory Day and many other days we observe are mere milestones, which tell us more about distance than destination.

So, we need to take a decision on how to remember the martyred intellectuals. Do we

remember them as a means to an end, or an end to a means? We need to sort that out in our minds to segregate cause from casualty. We need to sort that out before we decide whether to lament their loss or laud them as liberation to the cause of our freedom.

There are nations who despise their intellectuals. In Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, anyone wearing spectacles or looking bookish was target for elimination. Kim Jong Il of North Korea believed that intellectuals were vulnerable to infiltration of decadent capitalist culture. In the Soviet Union many intellectuals ended up in gulags to do hard labour. Chairman Mao is known for his attack on the Chinese intellectuals for their divorce from reality.

In that respect, our record is far better. We hold our intellectuals in high regards, and that's why we separately observe the day of killing a handful of them as landmark in a war that claimed three million lives in nine months. But what are we going to tell our children? Why should they observe the Day if we don't know why we do it ourselves?

Even in ancient days, intellectuals were not popular with rulers. Somehow the clash of pen with sword is the longest running form of conflict in the history of mankind. The Roman emperors had their writers erase their writings with their tongues. Many intellectuals

were branded as heretics and burned at the stakes or thrown to lions. Many more were hanged or beheaded.

So, it shouldn't come as surprise that the Pakistan army and their compradors should have killed those intellectuals. It has been proven time and again, that in the ultimate sense the pen is mightier than the sword. The invaders and conquerors believe in subjugation. Their armies and weapons are engaged in suppression. Creation of fear in others is the source of their ambition.

On the contrary, intellectuals are in the business of freedom: freedom of thinking and freedom of expression. They oppose subjugation, oppression and exploitation. They unfetter truth from the dungeons of fabrication. In an ideal scenario, the intellectuals are, therefore, natural enemies of the powerful and the greedy. Infusing courage in others is their aim of erudition.

A TIME essay has described the human brain as 31/2 pounds of pinkish-gray material with the consistency of oatmeal. In this sticky mass of brain cells, the entity of a person is assembled, his faculties connected like network. This is where thoughts are filtered, emotions are refined, impulses are censored and instincts are defined.

Intellectuals are believed to be brainier than others. What that means is that intellectuals

are more cerebral compared to rulers. Of course, there could be intelligent and clever rulers as there could be silly and disillusioned intellectuals. Both could be thinking people, but there's a rule-of-the-thumb difference. The rulers think in favour of the constant. The intellectuals think in favour of the change.

Needless to say, our intellectuals died for change. All those blindfolded and hand-tied bodies thrown amongst bricks strewn across the shallow rim of a swamp stand for nothing but change. They died because we wanted change. They were killed because they wanted change.

If we should celebrate anything on this Day, we should celebrate change, measured year on year because that's the best way to remember them, the best way to tell that their sacrifice hasn't gone in vain. Anything short of it becomes platitude. We mourn the martyrs and ignore the intellectuals. We ingest the casualty but ignore the cause.

By the time this article is published, this Martyred Intellectuals Day should be already in progress. But this will leave us enough time to plan for the next. Next time we should focus on celebrating the dream in which the martyred intellectuals lived, while mourning the nightmare in which they died.

The writer is a columnist.

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