

Life is not ours

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ASIF FAROOQ

CHITTAGONG is on fire. The scattered, burning charcoal is still warm. People say it takes a whole life's work to save a little, ensure a roof above your head and have a family of your own to live with. As the shacks burn and people flee, the lives of the countless indigenous people are shattered in a single night!

The culprits are the Pakistani *hanadar bahini* -- correction: the Bengalis. Is it because they are conveniently labelled as "indigenous" or *Paharis*? Or is it because only the Bengalis have a glorious history that makes us superior to them? Us and them -- a convenient juxtaposition -- as if it is an inevitable part of our identical jingoistic whims!

Let's get to the hard facts. The CHT Commission presented "Life is not ours" report more than a decade ago. As concerned citizens, we are not unaware of its contents. The CHT Peace Accord never got implemented. As governments changed, so did the politics of rhetoric, promises and the game plan of blaming *bohir shokti*. Kalpana Chakma's abduction, the brutal death of Choles Ritchil and others, are not isolated incidents. They have been the ethos of everything CHT people breathe in with their identity of indigeneness -- our glorious Bengali's gift to them.

Sajek is the culmination of all the problems we have been ignoring to leave behind unaccounted for. As Mahajan Para, Modhupur, Baghaicchori and many other

villages burn, and violence continues and more lives are lost, our patriotism "Brand Bangladesh" breathes in complacency of muted media coverage. Going to office, amidst *adda* and *cha, nasta*, we might end up saying "we got the army to take care of things."

The long-lasting military presence is a continuing problem. The government uses the tool, the opposition hurls blame and the political diatribe perpetuates. In the meantime, the CHT Accord breathes in locked-in syndrome and the military takes pride for being *desh shanty rokkhae ottondro prohoi*. As a result, the names that are carved in the hearts and minds of *paharis* are Buddhabati, Laxmi, Liton, Bana Shanti, and Nutunjoy Chakma.

However, we still have a Bangladesh where democracy is functioning. The voice belongs to us. It is no one but us who will dig out what is going on and will remember. If there is anything that we can look for to retain the pride of our country's forefathers, then it is our words and actions. We are ready to take the onus, and today we are all *Paharis* for a day. We may not fully realise what they are going through, but they can only yearn for our symbolic support and active protest, because we are all Bangladeshis. We will make it clear that in Bangladesh citizens care for each other. We care for *Paharis*. We have a task to finish, which is to give them back their lives.

Asif Farooq is co-founder of RIFF Productions in Canada.



JASHINI SALAM

Mourning the loss

While we pray for these luminous souls so that they can rest in peace, we cannot look into the eyes of their fathers, mothers, wives and children. Because we do not have the words to say to them, we do not have the power to console them.

MAMUN RASHID

IT'S been one year. One year of sorrow, one year of torment, one year of tears and tensions. One year of pride, one year of homage and one year of tribute.

The day has come again. The day on which we lost 57 golden sons of this soil (along with few other valuable lives), who took the vow to safeguard our motherland at the cost of their own lives when they joined the Bangladesh Army. They have kept their promise. Only, we as a nation could do nothing to save them.

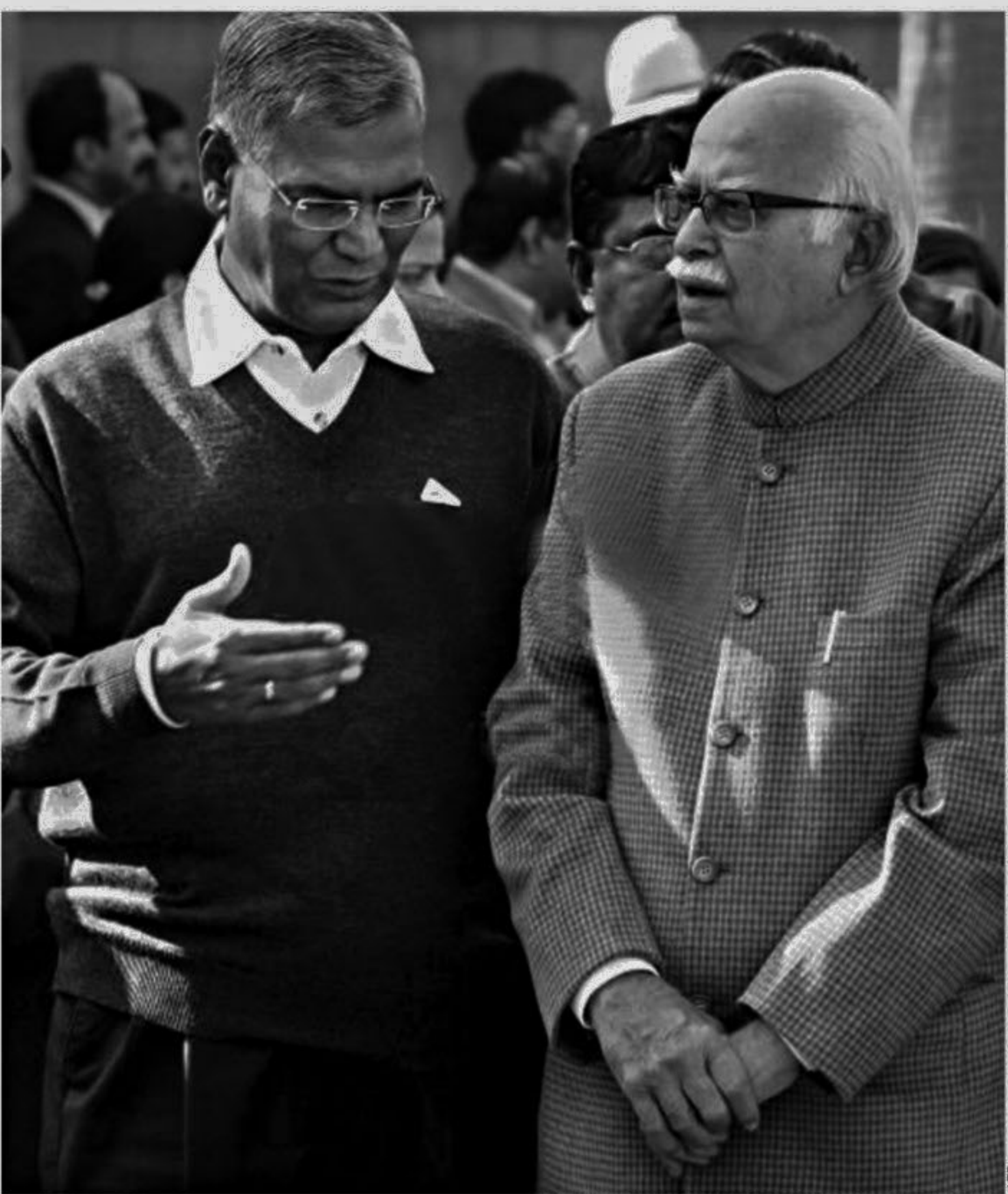
While we pray for these luminous souls so that they can rest in peace, we cannot look into the eyes of their fathers, mothers, wives and children. Because we do not have the words to say to them, we do not have the power to console them. Many of these officers were in the forefront of our liberation war and gifted us our independence, and many of them were well known for their immense contribution towards annihilation of terrorism, yet we had to let them go.

Today, many families only have the solace that at least they have got a grave, where they can go and offer their prayers; where today's youngsters could go in future and rediscover their fathers or their uncles in their own ways. The only thing the family members want now is that the nation should remember their beloved ones' names with pride and honour.

Here, I remember the famous novel of the Colombian writer, Gabriel Garcia Marquez -- *No One Writes to The Colonel*. We lost Colonel Enshad, Colonel Elahi, Colonel Mujib, Colonel Gulzar, Lt. Colonel Enayet, Lt. Colonel Kaiser, Brigadier Bari, Major Momin, Captain Mazhar and many others on this day last year. If we search our souls, if we ask ourselves what we have done to keep their memories vivid, to uphold their contributions and to preserve their memories in last twelve months, we do not have many answers.

BJP seduces the Left

When vision blurs and political parties think of their immediate gain, pluralist India has every right to worry. It sees the communists hugging BJP members who swore a few days ago at their Indore sitting to build the Ram temple where the Babri masjid once stood, to have common law in place of personal laws and to abolish the constitution's Article 370, which gives Jammu and Kashmir special status.



KULDIP NAYAR

THE Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) has triumphed in its tactics. It has emerged as the real opposition. After losing the last parliamentary election, it was keen to win over the Left, which could give the BJP -- rightist in outlook -- the image of being economically liberal. It finally duped the communists into believing that its Indian development agenda was more or less what the Left follows. In fact, efforts to woo the communists began the last session, but bore fruit only during the budget. Both found an understanding in their hurt.

This was visible when both the BJP and the Left rose in the two houses against the government on price rise, shouted in the

same vein and walked out hand-in-hand on the budget session's first day. It was about the same on subsequent days. Apparently, the two had met and consulted beforehand to finalise their strategy. Both were seen having floor coordination, suggesting who would speak when.

No doubt, the topic was the inept government's handling of price rise and abnormal inflation. The BJP also discussed the India-Pakistan secretary-level talks. Yet, the Left did not realise that making a common cause with the party with communal credentials may rub off on the communists' secular ideology. Why couldn't they retain their entity in parliament and still criticise the government? They would have found sup-

port in Mulayam Singh's Samajwadi Party and, possibly, Lalu Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal.

It is unknown what advantage the communists saw in diluting their identity with the rightists. But BJP leaders have already gone to town to propagate the Left joining their side. People are confused because they cannot reconcile what they saw on television: the BJP and the communists thumping the table to congratulate each other's speeches, attacking in tandem the treasury benches and raising anti-government slogans.

When vision blurs and political parties think of their immediate gain, pluralist India has every right to worry. It sees the communists hugging BJP members who swore a few days ago at their Indore sitting to build the Ram temple where the Babri masjid once stood, to have common law in place of personal laws and to abolish the constitution's Article 370, which gives Jammu and Kashmir special status. The communists forgot to underscore these points during the debate and did not realise that their bonhomie cannot disguise the BJP's parochialism. The party's core agenda has not changed.

The BJP's appeal to the Muslims to allow them to build the temple may have been worded differently but the content remained the same. The party should recall that it came to power only when it put aside its three-point agenda. By doing so, the BJP gained the much-needed credibility to attract secular parties, except Congress and the Communists, to support the relatively moderate Atal Behari Vajpayee government. True, the BJP honoured its promise to not touch the issues of mandir, common law and Article 370. Yet, it saffronised all other fields, particularly education and the Information and Broadcasting ministry.

It looks as if the communists have let the BJP off the hook on communism. Battering the government for its non-performance is justified, but not sharing the platform with the party which has been openly taken over by the RSS. Surely, the communists, after the rout in the Lok Sabha election, have not strayed from their ideological moorings so much that they want support from known communalists. How does the Left square with the party which hates communism and all that it preaches?

Word has spread that the entire opposition was against the India-Pakistan talks. Even if the communists have a different view, it remains unclear. They seem to be joining in the BJP's rants. Talks between the two countries are not yet in stride. The communists should have stood farther away when the BJP poured venom. Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi has unnecessarily introduced China in the

bilateral talks. He has given a "blank cheque" to China to become a part of improving Indo-Pak ties, knowing well New Delhi's stand against mediation.

Unfortunately, a Muslim gathering, the National Meet of Reservation Activists at Delhi, gave a handle to the BJP and the Shiv Sena by passing a resolution to reserve 10 percent of the seats to Muslims. Even the banner at the meet's back wall said: National Movement for Muslim Reservation. Understandably, backwardness can be the criterion, not religion. Some high courts have already rejected religion as the basis for reservation.

The constitution makes the government obligated to address the problems of poverty and educational backwardness. The reservation activists should have tried to get reservations without translating the demand in terms of Muslims. The RSS, the BJP's mentor, began propagating that reservation will lead to another partition and induce Hindus into embracing Islam and Christianity.

The Sachar Commission on the plight of Muslims was correct in diagnosing the malady. It pointed out how the community had been denied its share in education, economic benefits and services on the basis of its population. However, the subsequent Ranganathan Commission has recommended reservations for all minorities on the basis of religion.

India is a pluralistic society and cherishes diversity in the name of religion, language and customs. The community consciousness the reservation activists are trying to arouse may deliver a serious blow to pluralism. The old question of separate identity will come to the fore when there should be only one identity -- Indian. Reservation for Muslims may open a Pandora's box of communal and divisive politics.

Yet, the country's 12 to 13 percentage of Muslims should be reflected in government and private sector employment. The community's share should also be tangible in the economic fields. There is no alternative to affirmative action. The government has done little since the submission of the Sachar Commission report two years ago.

However, mixing the Muslims' genuine aspirations with religion will misdirect the effort to find a remedy to their long-time neglect. The louder the reservation activists raise their voice, the more favourable the fallout for the BJP to exploit. Pluralistic India cannot afford it. Nor can the Muslims in the discussion.

Kuldip Nayar is an eminent Indian columnist.



A light for each soul.

Each officer left behind his loved ones. Some of them were newly married, some of them had newborn children. Have we thought how their children, wives, parents and relatives will regard them ten years from now, how they will feel about them? Each of these gallant souls will remain alive through his heroism.

I visited many families after the incident. Most of the wives were speechless, many of the children were looking blank, parents were directionless and relatives confused. Colonel Gulzar was not from my cadet college fraternity, but I had heard many good things about him and his gallantry while he was with Rapid Action Battalion (Rab).

My friend Lt. Colonel (retired) Shahadat, who was totally devastated with the loss of so many brilliant batch mates and colleagues, took me to Colonel Gulzar's house. I could see that this valiant soldier used to leave an extremely simple life. One of his last letters was about his concern regarding the increased turbulence from the militant and ultra religious groups.

I went to Colonel Mujib's house to share the sorrow with his bereaved family, his wife being the sister of a close colleague of mine. I had a debate over market intervention with Colonel Mujib, who was a part and parcel of Bangladesh Rifles's *Dhal Bhat* program. Colonel Enshad, ever soft but smiling brother of mine from Faujdarhat Cadet College was supposed to retire in a week.

Our sports mate Lt. Colonel Kaiser would always play jokes with me. He was a very good soccer player and a fun loving soul, yet firm in his convictions. My friends from Institute of Business Administration (IBA) still remember Colonel Elahi, who got 19 As (out of 20) in MBA. They all are lost now; no one will write to them, no one will care for them, they have all gone to eternity.

But, as a nation, it is our duty to carry the same fire of patriotism within us and preserve their memories, the memories of their bravery, the memories of their contributions and the memories of their great works, so that our future generation can learn what they have lost and how all these heroes had sacrificed their lives; and we all would be able to rediscover our soldiers in midst of silence and dedicate our good works to them. We would always stand up against any uncalled for deaths, especially those of our nation builders.

Mamun Rashid is a banker and former student of Faujdarhat Cadet College, Chittagong.