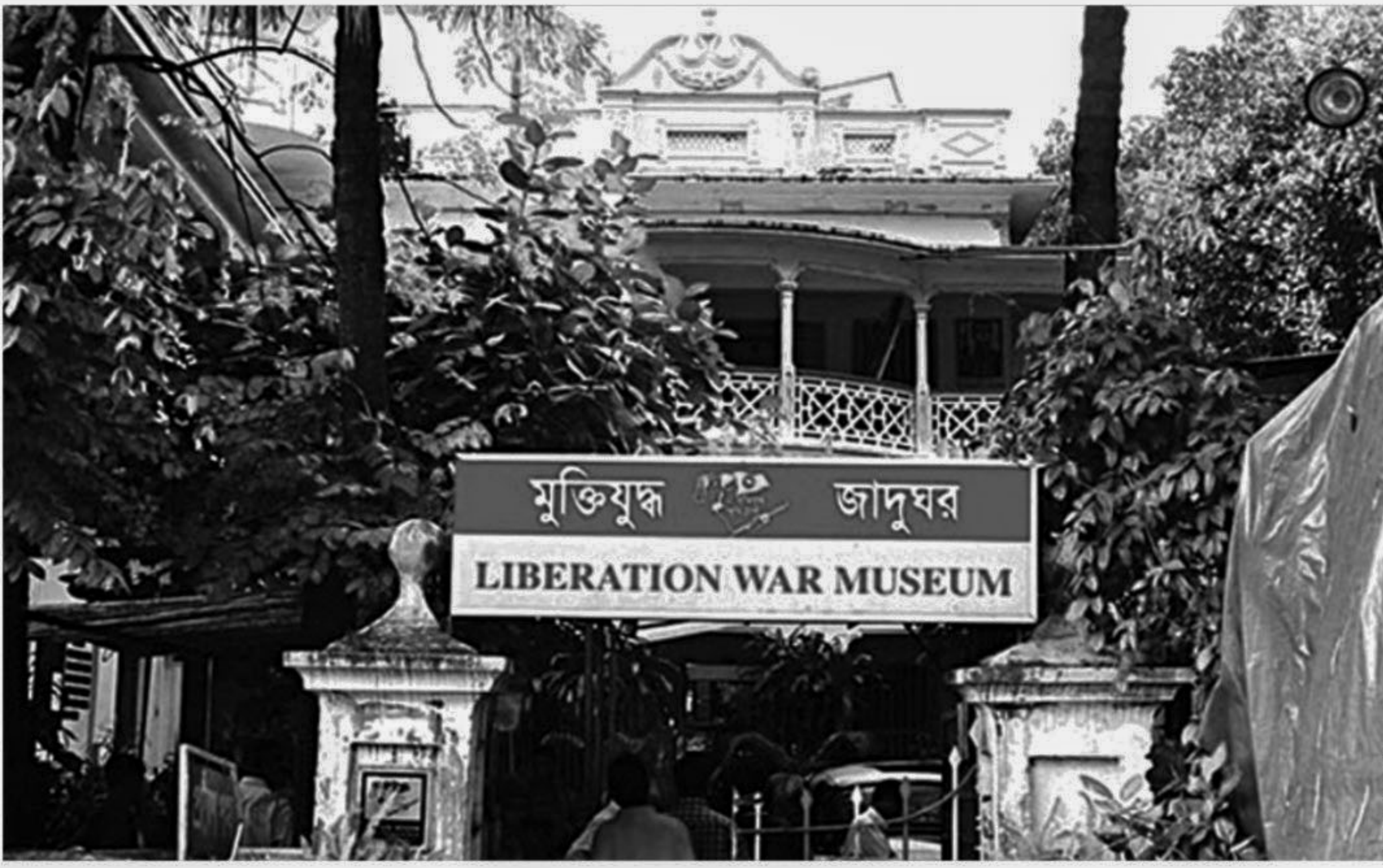


Asian Sites of Conscience meet in Dhaka



Let us learn from history and enter into a dialogue of interpreting history in the present context. Let us discard the culture of hatred and injustice and learn from history to make the world a better place for all.

AKKU CHOWDHURY

IN December 1999, representatives from nine historic site museums met at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Conference Center in Italy to found the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience (now called International Coalition of Sites of Conscience).

The founding members are ground-breaking historic site museums that define their missions in social terms: District Six Museum (South Africa), Gulag Museum (Russia), Liberation War Museum (Bangladesh), Lower East Side Museum (USA), the National Park Services (USA) representing the Women's Rights Historic District, the Underground Railroad, Manzanar National Historic Site (a former Japanese internment camp), Slave House (Senegal), Project to Remember (Argentina), Terezin Memorial (Czech Republic), and the Workhouse (England).

They are museums and sites that interpret history through historic sites, engage in programs that stimulate dialogue on pressing social issues, promote humanitarian and democratic

values as a primary function and share opportunities for public involvement in issues raised at the site.

Today, after 12 years the coalition has become a major organisation with over 17 accredited member sites and 5 hubs covering all continents. There are nearly 250 institutional members in 45 countries and of course many individual members.

To inspire coordinated citizens engagement on local human rights issues, the coalition developed constellations of Sites of Conscience, called Regional Networks. 5 hubs have been created and coordinated by the leading members in Asia, Africa, Europe, North America and South America involving 7 networks.

In the Asia region, the Liberation War Museum of Bangladesh has been working since 2008 with the Sites of Conscience in Asia to use histories of both conflict and harmony to model ethnic and religious pluralism. It is developing workshops and youth camps to inspire young people to become actively engaged in promoting those values.

They have successfully held over five regional meetings and numerous youth camps and

workshops highlighting and promoting the cultures of peace and pluralism in the wake of ethnic and religious conflict visible in this region.

Recently, the 5th regional meeting concluded in Dhaka, with Sites of Conscience participants from South Korea, Cambodia, China, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Nepal, the Philippines and, of course, Bangladesh. But it is ironic and sad that though they are representatives of nations far and wide, each represents a site, or sites, which interprets a certain portion of their history, which is one of their darkest moments.

It's the history of hatred and crimes against humanity; it's the history of genocide, rape and atrocity. It's the history of aggression of people against people. It's that dark part of history that connected each and every one of them in that conference room. Yet, the brighter side is that they have each vowed to take their site to a higher level of dialogue connecting the past with the present.

The sites bear witness to those dark moments that nobody wants to ever be repeated. Therefore, they need to enter into dialogue of integrating their sites to the present context in our life and society so that we can bring a change and not just repeat the rhetorical phrase "never again" but change it to a question "why still"?

While representing various countries and histories, coalition members discovered many commonalities. They defined some of the goals of historic site museums of conscience -- to chal-

lenge stereotypes; inspire citizens to take social responsibility; inform people of their rights; work toward reconciliation; remind the world of the fragility of liberty; encourage governments to create a climate in which sites of social conscience can be preserved and interpreted responsibly; and empower local constituencies and cultivate local talent.

They also examined special challenges that the sites face -- walking the line between telling the story and engaging in politics; determining when the time is ripe to tell the story in its complexity; interpreting horror in such a way that visitors can cope with it and learn from it; inserting new/buried history into school curricula; defining/negotiating appropriate relationships with state and national governments; and airing taboo subjects.

Finally, they identified themes that cross national boundaries, which could form the basis of international programming: urban renewal, forced removal, slum clearance; poverty and welfare; homelessness and housing the poor; the official classification of the segregation of people; the contribution of "ordinary" people; war; human rights and tolerance; immigration; slavery; women's rights; political repression; and racism.

These sites represent the new era where we are all citizens of a global village, networking with each other with a social and historical responsibility to make a better world for our next generations and a world where we can boldly ask "why still" and stop the hatred and inequality amongst ourselves. Let us learn from history and enter into a dialogue of interpreting history in the present context. Let us discard the culture of hatred and injustice and learn from history to make the world a better place for all.

I had the good fortune to listen to the experiences and efforts in the Herculean job the sites have undertaken to reach their goals. I am sure this sharing will help each and every one of them and they will all go back with richer resources and higher motivation to make their sites more appealing and resourceful.

They go back knowing they are not alone in this journey but have so many hands holding theirs to make the difference that is closer to their hearts. We walk the same path and face the same challenges but the strength is in knowing we are not alone.

At the end, they passed two declarations: one for each site to commit to stronger connectivity and commitment to meet their goals and vision; the second is closer to the heart of the Bangalee nation as they declare their solidarity with the people and the Bangladesh government, with the initiative to try the perpetrators of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes from 1971. Not only is it solidarity but also an appeal to the international community to both support and provide appropriate assistance to make the trial a success.

Akku Chowdhury is a Trustee, Liberation War Museum.

No way trivialising private universities



Private universities play a vital role.

With all their strengths and weaknesses, private universities are going ahead with the noble mission of enlightening society with education. Public universities have taken a pioneering role, true, but private universities can never be ignored.

BINOY BARMAN

CAN private universities be ignored? I was with the question after reading Professor Mohit Ul Alam's article "Beating up on private universities" published in The Daily Star on July 29. I learnt that the government has, under a delusion that private universities are making RMG-like profit in their business of education, imposed tax on the tuition fees -- resulting in protest by the students and subsequent harassment by the police.

The government's position and decision on the private universities is really regrettable. Private universities do not deserve such treatment from the government and its law enforcing agencies. I agree with Professor Alam's opinion that private universities are better managed than public universities as there is "dynamism" in the management of the former.

I write here to just supplement the observation of the respectable educationist, arguing that private universities are contributing significantly to the country's education sector.

In fact, private universities are playing a vital role in disseminating and promoting higher education in Bangladesh. Since their emergence in 1990s, they have been an important and integral part, with a rather dominant stance, of tertiary education in the country.

Private universities as well as the students studying there have, by now, outnumbered their counterparts. In the last two decades they have flourished with spectacular successes, despite some acknowledged failures. But, on the whole, their role is positive and encouraging. They can probably play an even better role if they get proper government support in the form of policy guidance.

Private university education is important because, first and foremost, they offer time-

demanded courses for the aspiring students. Private universities are far ahead of the public sector in terms of using modern technology in education. Their curricula are updated in the western pattern and are revised regularly and promptly, while public universities lag behind in this respect. Private universities give students the skills required by the job markets. This sharpens the fighting edge of the graduates in the competition of employment.

Private universities are creating scope for higher study for the students who would otherwise give up education in the absence of opportunities. Public universities can accommodate only a small number of students. Those who are denied entrance may get a place in the private universities, though it would be a little costly. They are not deprived of the pride of studying in the highest seat of learning, and need not regret that their education will remain unfinished.

The private universities are saving a lot of foreign currency for the country. Some good private universities in the country attract students who, having economic solvency, would otherwise fly to foreign lands. Given the option of studying the desired subjects in the country, they tend to choose the local ones. This gives them the advantage of living with their families and acquaintances in a familiar environment.

Foreign education is not only extremely expensive but also full of risk -- the uncertainty of living and of culture shock. The second factor, particularly, causes dilution of the indigent values, which ultimately affects national life and widens the generation gap. The choice of a local university, on the other hand, reduces the risk of disintegration of traditional social codes.

Private universities have created a culture of close teacher-student contact, unlike public universities where the teachers are often accused of being officious and reluctant to talk with students outside their class schedules. Students are also less interested in attending classes. Most private universities have the provision of mandatory class attendance and mandatory counselling for students by the teachers.

Students are awarded marks for attendance, just like they are for assignment, quiz, presentation, project and examination. It ensures frequent interaction between teachers and students, which has a positive impact on the learning process. Teachers' sanction of extra time obviously strengthens their relationship

between the students. In public universities we usually find the opposite picture.

A common allegation against private universities is compromising of quality. It is often alleged that they are merely business centres and care little about the quality of education. Most regrettably, they are sometimes charged with selling certificates. I think these kinds of allegation cannot be leveled across the board. There may be stray incidents of malpractice of one kind or other but it is not applicable to all.

There are some private universities which are really committed to quality education despite having business concerns. They try to produce competent graduates with their earnest efforts. They employ scholarly teachers having PhD and foreign degrees, who are given high salary. They strive to create a congenial atmosphere and use their own developed systems for sharpening their students' skills. The ultimate beneficiaries are the students.

Private universities are doing their job in their own way. It is the responsibility of the University Grants Commission to help them in performing their job properly. If the UGC regularly monitors their activities, the irregularities in the private universities will be minimised. Through necessary legislation and actions, it may create an environment in which all private universities will come into healthy competition with one another and improve their quality to increase enrolment. That will mean "no quality no business." In this way the UGC and private universities for the nation.

Private universities are now a reality. The limitations of public universities have been responsible to a great extent for the emergence and development of these private universities. In Professor Alam's words: "The reality behind the growth of private universities had been formed and cemented not in spite of but because of the existence of public universities. The public universities have become like so many other things in our nation that exist, and simply exist, and nothing else."

With all their strengths and weaknesses, private universities are going ahead with the noble mission of enlightening society with education. Public universities have taken a pioneering role, true, but private universities can never be ignored.

Dr. Binoy Barman is Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English, Daffodil International University.

Tribute

Santosh Gupta... man of substance

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

SANTOSH Gupta was, from every perspective, a man steeped in modernity. And that is what made him different from other men. He was unlike any other journalist in that he believed journalism had a larger role to play than being a mere presentation of news as it was shaped around the journalist.

A journalist, in Gupta's view, was a good deal more than one upholding his profession. He was indeed an individual with a deep sense of commitment to all those causes which touched the lives of citizens. Those who came forth with news, a packaging of it, were for him people who through their world view made a difference in the way society transformed itself at varied points of time.

That was when Santosh Gupta became Aniruddha. It was a column he lived with, identified with, indeed became it over time. It was within its parameters that he held forth on the ills that afflicted society and offered thoughts that could in the end produce a solution.

Aniruddha's was a clinical foray into the dense wood of socio-political deadwood. Gupta saw the thick bushes, the dark undergrowth and then chose to hack away at the mess. He took on arrogant men with politeness but with razor-sharp sarcasm. Never abrasive, he nevertheless knew he owed it to his country to reveal the hollowess that the seemingly great appeared to thrive in.

Through his column, Aniruddha gave readers a clear sense of what journalism ought to be. It was never the journalist who was in the limelight. It was always the journalism that mattered.

There was much that was self-effacing in Santosh Gupta. He carefully steered clear of the temptation of turning into a celebrity. That is what cerebral men generally do. They come up with great thoughts and incisive writing and gentle demeanour, all encompassed in humility.

Gupta was a cerebral individual. He was a poet who believed rhymes and verses must reflect the worries of contemporary times. A revolutionary spirit underpinned his commitment to national causes, through his poetry:

Mrityu'r janaza mora kichhu-tei koribo na path / koborer ghum bhange jiboner daabi aajato-i biraat.

Life, in Gupta's comprehension of the meaning, was but a constant struggle for the uplift of the collective human spirit. And the struggle was to be waged through the relentless march of socialism. For Gupta, socialism or for that matter communism was the modality that would give men with sliding hope a coruscating new meaning to their lives. That was modernity, again, at work in Gupta. He never gave up hope in the ability of socialism to make people take care of their own world. It was a belief he never let go of, even if it meant a march to prison in the dark days of Pakistan.

The journalist-poet-socialist, beyond and above all that, was also a Bengali who would not abandon his cultural heritage. He watched a rainbow take shape for Bengalis through the gathering momentum of rising nationalism in the 1960s. As part of that nationalistic wave, he became part of the war in 1971, in order to be part of the generation that was to cause wonders in this land.

Santosh Gupta was made of stern patriotic stuff. He was one of the soldiers who came home on a winter's day and let us in on the truth that Bangladesh was free.

It is this courageous man we celebrate today, six years after death put an end to the vibrancy and vigour penned through his ceaseless writing. Santosh Gupta never made light of life. There were the convictions he held on to, despite the weakening men around him. There was seriousness of purpose in him. He believed in the ability of the masses to uphold their larger interests.

Democracy in Bangladesh, he was willing to agree, was frail and flawed. But he was never in any doubt about its digging deeper roots in the Bengali soil in the flow of time. It was the thinker in him that spotted the light at the end of the tunnel.

(Santosh Gupta -- journalist, poet, political commentator -- died on August 6, 2004.)

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsantareq@yahoo.co.uk.

