

# Who carries their torch?

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**T**HE killing of the Bengali intellectuals during 1971 is, in some sense, far more premeditated than the notorious Holocaust. Although the Holocaust claimed twice as many lives compared to our Liberation war, the murderous Nazi did not pick and kill hundreds of top-notch intellectuals in such a short time span as did the bloodthirsty Pakistan occupation army and their local collaborators the Razakar, Al-Badr and Al-Shams. Why did they murder the best brains in the country? Although a few could escape by pure chance, the mission was the elimination of all the intellectuals from Bangladesh with a view to cripple the country with ignorance and eternal backwardness. The assassinated intellectuals were the highly educated academics, writers, physicians, engineers, lawyers, journalists, and other eminent personalities of the country who helped liberate the nation from prolonged Pakistani subjugation.

The martyred intellectuals were a very great wealth of talents. The French Enlightenment figures, Voltaire,

Rousseau, Montesquieu, and John Locke kindled popular interest in the three basic principles of French Revolution Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. Similarly, our intellectuals ignited masses of people in the spirit of freedom which resulted in gaining independence through a liberation war. They were the voice of conscience in all the scenes of the independence struggle. They were no less than Socrates, killed by vested interests for showing his people the right way or Galileo, condemned to life imprisonment for his so-called heretical beliefs or Bruno, burnt alive at the stake for telling the truth. Our intellectuals, too, were butchered by the neo-colonial forces for showing us the road to liberation and inspiring us to fight for our freedom of thought and expression. They were fully successful in instilling their own thoughts and ideas in the people who had been blinded to the real needs of their country for ages.

But what kind of legacies do our present-day intellectuals carry from our history? It is hard to believe that they are left with any legacy from the

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martyred intellectuals who had laid down their lives for their country. On the contrary, most of today's intellectuals have chosen a different path. They may fall roughly into three groups. The first group consists of the self-centred intellectuals who are only

concerned with their own wants and needs, and never think about other people's good. They are mostly varsity academics and work part-time with different private institutions, NGOs, multinational companies, and projects to earn a fortune. Most of their time is spent juggling between their workplaces, and no spare time is left to think about their country and its people.

The second-group of intellectuals are highly politicised. They are the intellectual vanguards of their party, and see everything around them with a partisan eye. They are social climbers, and their sole aim is personal aggrandizement. They wait their turn in order to grab the chance of holding high office. They suck up to people in authority for achieving goals. They toe the party line so strongly that they often give highly lopsided views on even undisputed facts and common public interests ignoring objective truth. The events of our art, culture, literature and history are also split by these one-eyed intellectuals. Years of polarisation have sapped

them of their integrity and moral standards.

The third group comprises of the seeming nonpartisan intellectuals who love being called 'civil society'. Most of them are the hired hands of international hierarchies working in their native country. It is a part of their job to pick holes in political affairs. They give voice to different national crises in such a grave manner as if the country has completely gone to the dogs, and there is no escape from it. The implication written all over their faces is that the nation would have its best governance only at the hands of these civil society guys. Although they put on an air of neutrality, they must be working willy-nilly to realise Colonial mandate. One may reasonably smell a hidden agenda behind their activities.

These three groups of intellectuals have nothing common in them other than ignoring true love for the country. Be that as it may, one must ask what the responsibilities of today's intellectuals are. Noam Chomsky has said, "It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies." Antonio Gramsci, a theorist on intellectual exercise argued: "Intellectuals view themselves as autonomous from the ruling class." Jean Paul Sartre considered intellectuals as the moral conscience of their age, and the observer of the political and social situation of the moment, and urged them to speak out freely in accordance with their consciences.

Do our intellectuals speak the truth and expose lies? Are they able to do things and make decisions of their own accord? Do they have a voice of conscience? The bulk of our present intellectuals in Bangladesh are far away from these basic tenets of true intellectuals.

There are, however, some good intellectuals who, amid the razzmatazz of the fake intellectuals' activities, are working steadily to voice the thoughts and needs of mass people. It is they who cherish the true ideals of the martyred intellectuals from the bottom of their heart. If good triumphs over evil in the end, all the three groups of pseudo-intellectuals must be overshadowed by these few, for they are carrying the torch for the martyred intellectuals.



Dead body of Shilalipi editor Selina Parvin with telltale marks of brutal torture

STAR ARCHIVE

The writer teaches English Literature at Kushtia Islamic University.

## Intellectuals: the Martyred and the Living

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We have been experiencing the outcome of this clinging to capitalism. Socialism has been successfully driven out from the list of state principles; even secularism has not returned, having been thrown overboard for reasons of political expediency. Since 1972 inequality, which is direct result of the capitalist dispensation, has been continually rising, forcing patriotism to decline. The collective dream of a truly democratic state and society has been shattered by the phenomenal rise of the greed for personal aggrandizement. In almost all spheres of life, the national interest has been made subservient to personal interest. Privatization continues to threaten public property, including rivers and wetland. Education and healthcare have become commodities.

National wealth is being cheerfully handed over to foreigners. Human rights-violation and extra-judicial killing have reached a magnitude never known before. Ecologically the country is facing many dire threats. The fair name that Bangladesh had owned through the liberation war has been darkened by corruption and nepotism. In the comity of nations Bangladesh is being perceived as a country of natural disaster and political mismanagement. Within the country there is despair prevailing everywhere. Behind all these it is capitalism of a peculiar kind that is operative.

The intellectuals are not silent. One hears their voices in talk shows, round tables, occasional gatherings, press conferences; they sign statements and write in newspapers. More often than not, they speak about the symptoms, ignoring the disease. They demand reforms and corrections, and are oblivious of the fact that what we need is a

social revolution that has been pre-empted by the ruling class. What is worse, many of our intellectuals are tied to the apron strings of the two major political parties and their views conform to the party line. In a word, their role remains very different from that of the martyred intellectuals, and their isolation from the people makes them ineffective. The root cause is their acceptance of the capitalist ideology. In this crucial respect there is no divergence between them and the ruling class. Not unlike the political leaders of the ruling class, they too support capitalism, although they would not confess to it publicly.

This ideological weakness holds them back and does not allow them to participate in the people's movement for emancipation in the manner the martyred intellectuals did. In the inevitable contradiction between the state and the public, the living intellectuals serve the state and not the public. Political independence is a significant achievement, because among other gains it has resolved the national question and allowed the class question to come to the fore. And it is the class question that has to be addressed now by those who believe in the emancipation of the entire people, including that of their own.

The martyred intellectuals have left a legacy that they would expect us to carry forward. Those who are living can be vitally alive, effective and worthy of being called intellectuals if they join the people in the way their noble predecessors have done. For this it is imperative that they disaffiliate themselves from their capitalist moorings. This is the primary task, others would follow.

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## We still hope for justice

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What I still do not understand is how such a heinous act goes unpunished for four decades? Why is not justice being delivered? How long will the political leaders put it off for their own benefits? Is it not embarrassing enough to see that the ones who didn't want a 'Bangladesh' in the first place somehow ended up being a minister of Bangladesh, riding in cars bearing the country's flag? The culprits are not unknown. So what is it that is keeping the authority from punishing them?

I have lost my father, the person I held dearest to my heart, in the hands of the traitors of Bangladesh. My mother has struggled and sacrificed enough to raise her three children alone, without much help from the government. It is about time we saw justice being served. After 40 years I still dream of a nation my father had dreamt of. But in order to establish that country, the murderers of my father and other intellectuals must be brought to justice because I believe that even after 1000 years people of Bangladesh will not forgive the traitors.

The writer is a Tagore song artist and daughter of S M A Rashidul Hasan.

## My brother Munier Chowdhury

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During the last days of his life from October 1971 till the day he was kidnapped, he routinely sat beside my mother close to her prayer mat with a book or a pen and a copy scribbling and reading at the same time. One of those days, a group of young men came to the house to escort him across the border into India. They were sent by his eldest son, who was then in India, getting ready to join the Liberation Forces.

Mother, with tears in her eyes, tried to persuade him to go, but he stood his ground and refused to leave by saying, "Look, mother, how can you say this being a staunch Muslim and a God fearing individual. You know too well that each individual is destined to die wherever God wills."

In reference to this, I would also like to recall yet another shining aspect of Munier Chowdhury's character. My father, even in his last days, used to go for his Juma prayers to the nearby Paribagh Masjid. My brother, each Friday, took him to the mosque, waited until the prayer was over and then brought him back to the house. He used to come to

the house from his residence at Nilkhet to pick up my father. On arrival at the mosque, he used to park his car under the shade of a flame tree (Krishnachura) close to the mosque, take out a book from the glove compartment of the car and begin to read until the prayer was over. Imagine a man

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doing that religiously every Friday who never said prayers in all his life. Being asked, he told me that he believed more in living religion rather than practicing religion as a mere ritual. His religion consisted of serving humanity in all conceivable

ways.

He taught each one of us all about plain living and high thinking. Till the last days of his life, Munier Chowdhury was seen in the corridors of the University dressed in a set of clothing made of khaddar. He loved his country most dearly and was always thinking how to do something new and innovative. He was the inventor of a typewriter key board in Bangla, in collaboration with a German typewriter manufacturing outfit known as the Optima, which still bears his name. He was the pioneer of modern day theatre through his groundbreaking plays.

Munier Chowdhury was a living legend. He was gentle, polite and a speaker of exceptional calibre. During his teaching career, students from other classes studying different subjects used to flock together to listen to his lectures. He treated his students like his family. I have never seen him being angry at anyone, no matter what.

This is the image and memory of my brother I continue to cherish and will do so for as long as I live.

The writer is a columnist and younger brother of Munier Chowdhury.