



RASHID TALUKDAR/ DRIK NEWS

Reflections on a picture

SHAHID ALAM

EVER since I first saw that photograph, I have never failed to be moved by it. I am talking about Rashid Talukdar's picture of a head lying amidst a scattered pile of bricks and mortar in what appears to be a pool of brackish water. The picture is vivid, and, while the colours involved cannot be discerned, the black-and-white composition (as is often the case) tells more than it shows and allows the imagination so much room to soar. Talukdar's photo appears surreal, almost like a Salvador Dali painting transformed and adjusted for a still camera shoot, and it brilliantly portrays the day that is being observed this day: Shaheed Buddhijibi Dibosh, or, Martyred Intellectuals Day. It is at once poignant, somber, ghastly, and a mute story of what the intellectuals sacrificed, their today, so that the nation could see the light of freedom and independence tomorrow.

At first glance, you could not be faulted if you did not take any notice of the head and thought it to be a somewhat bizarre part of the view. On a closer look, however, the image of the head will more likely than not be forever etched in your head, and will give a fair indication of the way many of the intellectuals died. The face could so easily be mistaken for a

mask, pale, expressionless, detached from a body, hollowed-out eye sockets. There! The blank eye sockets and head minus body! That is how that poor man was horribly tortured, and, eventually, killed. The eyes were gouged out, almost certainly when he was alive, and his head severed from his body, probably after he was killed. All the intellectuals who were prematurely removed from the land of the living, thereby abruptly depriving all those that they had been enlightening, were thus murdered. No, not in exactly the same fashion; some in a hail of bullets in the heat of frenzied assault by the Pakistan army, others cold-bloodedly, selectively, by right-wing Bengali religious fundamentalist-extremists who tortured their victims in a gamut of horrific ways before dispatching them, also by a variety of means.

They were university teachers, journalists, writers, doctors, engineers, and artists. They were not killed in one fell swoop. The army had engaged in methodical killing of several in the initial stages of the liberation war, and, as it was winding down to its denouement of the birth of Bangladesh as a sovereign, independent nation-state, the army and its local henchmen, in a planned ritual, disposed of the rest. They had commit-

ted what someone has called "cerebrogendicide" on the Bengali nation. The intellectuals, because of their higher enlightenment, are regarded as guides of a nation's ethos. Furthermore, they are seen as the custodians of a nation's history and culture. That is why, 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.

I knew some of them, heard of a few, while the rest, probably because they had not attained nation-wide fame, I had not heard of. That is poignant. They were not allowed to realize their full potential. Maybe not all, or any, would have succeeded in going beyond respectable obscurity, but, we will never know now, will we? We will never know the putative impact for the good they could have had on the fledgling nation-state. My father was a student in the History department of Dhaka University in the late 1930s. That consideration, plus my own keen interest in the subject, directed me to take it up as one of my two subsidiary subjects in Dhaka University. And I had two of the best teachers that the department could offer to guide me through the long winding intricacies of South Asian

history and modern European history. Prof. Santosh Bhattacharjee was excitable as he delivered his lectures in a somewhat high-pitched voice. The man was encyclopedic. Prof.

Giasuddin Ahmed was equally knowledgeable, but his voice was measured, sonorous, commanding. He was unforgettable in hammering into our heads a defining event in human history, the French Revolution. Oh, those being the days, they lectured in impeccable English, but reverted to the familiar Bengali outside of class. And they were equally adept at both.

Prof. Munier Chowdhury was the father of a friend and basketball teammate at Notre Dame College as well as of his younger brother, who was my cameraman in a telefilm that I had directed and acted in and which was broadcast from 2001 to 2004 over India's Alpha (now Zee) Bangla TV; and was tragically killed in a recent road accident. Prof. Serajul Huq Khan was the father of another friend and neighbour across a wide field in those days of livable Dhaka. Prof. G.C. Dev I had heard of before taking admission in Dhaka University. Prof. Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta shortly after. How can I forget Prof. Dev, with his Einstein-like head of hair, not quite Einstein-like moustache, in dhoti and, during winter, a somewhat

faded black coat encompassing his considerable bulk, slowly trudging along, the very picture of the proverbial absent-minded philosophy professor?

None of the martyred intellectuals willingly sacrificed themselves. They were forced to embrace martyrdom for what they symbolized. They were sacrificed at the altar of a shared vision. That vision was that of a nation at one, striving for a sovereign independent homeland. Theirs was a vision of a nation equated with a nation-state. The nation! That, to reiterate, was the ideal of the martyred intellectuals! But we find ourselves increasingly a nation divided, against itself, along entrenched fault lines that, sadly, seem to be widening with each passing year, with no end in sight for the foreseeable future. As if to reinforce this conclusion, we find many of today's intellectuals as fiercely divided as any other group, along the same fault lines, and, in certain cases, even having contributed towards some of it. Know what? The intellectuals martyred forty years back could be proverbially turning in their graves, real or symbolic. And they would have every reason to do so.

The writer is head, Media and Communication department, Independent University, Bangladesh.

We still hope for justice

ROQUAIY HASINA NEELY

ESPITE being a lecturer in the English department of Dhaka University, my father martyred intellectual S M A Rashidul Hasan had a deep love for and attachment towards Bengali culture and literature. From his behavior to attire, everything reflected Bengali tradition. Tagore literature and Tagore songs were his favourite. This is why I became a Tagore singer. It was his dream that his daughter would sing Tagore songs. In those times prior to the liberation, singing Tagore songs on TV and Radio was banned by the government. Even so, my father enrolled me at a music school so that I could learn to sing his favourite songs. He believed that nourishing Tagore literature and practicing Tagore songs are vital to keep Bengali culture alive. I have always seen that whatever he

thought was good, he tried his best to abide by it and implement it in his life and surroundings. Hence, my musical education continued despite government obstructions. His vision got me where I am today.

The ability to retain and practice our own cultural values is a great achievement of our independence. Today we are free to exercise our cultural rights as a nation. We are free to talk, write and sing in Bangla. A Tagore song is our national anthem. In the past 40 years our country has developed much in terms of culture and education. Bengali singers are famous all over the world. Bengali students and teachers could be found in the top universities of the world. We are moving towards becoming a technologically developed country as well. But with advancement of science and

technology we sadly notice that our young generation, being heavily influenced by foreign culture, is slowly diverting from our own traditions. These subtle shifts in the young ones pose a great threat to our unique entity. Bengali culture itself is very rich and exquisite. We do not need adaptations of different cultures, instead it is our responsibility to make this culture known to our young generation the same way our parents upheld its beauty and depth to us. It is our duty to give a clear and precise idea about our nation's history to the young ones. Through proper guidance and enlightenment we Bengalis as a nation can hold our heads high before the whole world well without being jingoistic.

Our nation was freed from our Pakistani oppressors with the hope of building a golden nation. Maybe we

have achieved quite a lot in the 40 years but still I feel that we have not become the nation that my father had dreamed of. The people who had laid down their lives for our country did not envision a country as it is now and I believe the politicians are largely to blame for this. After the liberation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman called in the widows of the martyred intellectuals to ask what they wanted from an independent Bangladesh. Everyone answered that they wanted justice brought to the murderers of their husbands. Sadly enough, even after 40 years their demand has not been met with. Murder of intellectuals was a planned event. National traitors known as Rajakar, Al-badar, and Al-shams joined forces with the Pakistani army and executed the massacre. With defeat



Rashidul Hasan with her daughter

banging on their door their last desperate act of crippling our nation was to kill our intellectuals who provided us with hopes and dreams of a new Bangladesh.

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