

Never a distant memory

ARCHIVE

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HERE are remembrances, and then there are remembrances. Ekushey February falls under the category of "...and then there are remembrances". As does the occasion being observed this day. Martyred Intellectuals Day might not have the awe or the significance of, say, Ekushey February, but it has its own special meaning that should inspire future generations of Bangladeshis, not just the intellectuals, but anyone with a conscience, steadfast belief in moral principles, and willingness to sacrifice for those principles. In this age, when seemingly each day of the year has been designated as one-or-the-other international something, or special occasion, it becomes difficult to keep track of all the occasions designated to remember memorable events exclusively relevant in the context of Bangladesh. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that some days are observed with more solemnity or fanfare, as the case may be, than the others.

Ekushey February, for instance, is

observed with both great fanfare and proper solemnity, and not many will disagree that it should be paid such homage. After all, 21 February, 1952 and the events leading up to it engendered feelings of nationalism among the Bengalis that gradually snowballed into an intense expression for a separate homeland that culminated in the creation of a sovereign independent Bangladesh. Martyred Intellectuals Day is commemorated to remember and honour those intellectuals who sacrificed themselves or, more appropriately, were sacrificed, for the cause of turning Bangladesh into a reality from a dream and a hope. This breed constitutes a wide spectrum, ranging from university teachers to doctors, media persons, engineers, writers, artists, musicians, and such others who rely on their intellect, creativity and skill to serve the nation. There might be quibbling over who constitutes the intellectuals, if the list given is too broad or too narrow, but there can be no equivocation on their right to be included in the hallowed company of martyrs.

Of course, as the well-informed know, not all the intellectuals were put to death on 14 December 1971. Many, in fact, were killed in the first few days of the Pakistani military operation that began on 25 March 1971. Again, not all the intellectuals were political activists; most, in fact, were what I choose to call (probably as an oxymoron) "passive-activists" and/or conscientious objectors, and a very few were political neutrals. But they had the courage of their convictions. In those days of political turmoil and passion boiling over, they embodied the hackneyed phrase "conscience of the nation". In fact, what they did, by their deed and dignity, was to have a positive psychological impact on the people, of offering them hope when things look grim, or when they needed something reassuring to hold on to while carrying their mission forward, or just creating at least an illusion of hope in the most despondent. The intangibles in their action are impossible to quantify or place a true value on because they were, in a sense, priceless. These are

the major reasons why they were targeted for elimination. And, lest one forgets, they were systematically targeted.

The Pakistani military, as documents will attest, truly believed that the intellectuals in general, along with the Bengali politicians, instigated the sense of nationalism and also of an independent country among the Bengalis. Crucially, its estimation was based on their contribution along those lines well before 1971. In 1971 the army got the opportunity to exact vengeance on them. There is a school of thought which believes that the intellectuals, especially those murdered at the fag end of the Liberation War, were killed in order to deny the impending new nation-state of Bangladesh of the services of these intellectuals. I am not sure if that, indeed, was what drove the killers to carry out the murders, although it could well be a contributory incentive. I am rather inclined to believe that the killings were well-thought-out beforehand as a part of the military's plan to eliminate those they thought had the most

profound impact on the growth of nationalism and, then, the clamour for independence, among the Bengalis.

The very fact that, as I strongly suspect, the intellectuals had long been made the target of the military attests to their role in the struggle for independence of their country. Not all the murdered intellectuals were the premier intellectuals of the country at that time; only a few were among the top echelon of their peers. And, from a practical standpoint, their loss, while grave, did not leave a permanent dent in the intellectual orbit of Bangladesh. Neither could one realistically expect that to happen. A good number of intellectuals, several from among the leading luminaries of the group, survived the Liberation War and were on hand to help out the new nation-state of Bangladesh, and as the country found its feet and more and more educated people joined the workforce, the pool of

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Tale of a martyred intellectual

ROQUAIYA HASINA NEELY

THIS country has given birth to many great individuals. They are patriots, social reformers and great humanitarians. These people have deep love for the country and are always ready to give up their lives for the good of the country. My father, martyred intellectual SMA Rashidul Hasan was one such person. He was a teacher at the English department of Dhaka University (DU).

AS we all know, murder of intellectuals was a planned event. National traitors known as Rajakars, Al-badars, and Al-shams joined forces with the Pakistani army and executed the massacre. When victory of the Mukti

Bahini became a reality in December, their last desperate act of crippling our nation was to kill our intellectuals who provided us with hopes and dreams of a new Bangladesh. My father was taken away by these heinous collaborators on 14 December, 1971 from our residence at DU. Two days later, the defeated Pakistan army surrendered and we achieved victory. But my father never came back. Twelve days after victory the dead body of my father was recovered from Mirpur mass graveyard. He was later buried with other martyred DU teachers beside the central mosque of Dhaka University. The man who was absorbed with the dream of emancipation of this part of the then Pakistan and believed without freedom Bengalis as a nation had no future; could not see the victory for himself. He had to sail to an unknown destination just two days before his long yearned victory. He could not even join the procession of victory!

I lost my father when I was only 13. At that age, I had little idea about patriotism and freedom. I only knew that he was a very caring father. It was due to his wishes that I am a Tagore singer today. But how he was and who he was and what his ideologies were answers to all these questions would have remained unknown if it were not for his meticulous diaries. Over the years, I have read the diaries many a times, and each time what amazes me

is how a person could have led such an organized life and carried out his love for the downtrodden masses of the country. His thoughts concerning our country and poor people still surprise me. He wrote on 22 December, 1968:

After finishing our Eid prayers in the morning, when I was returning home along with my friend Anwar Pasha, his son Aftab Mashar and my son Hasin, we saw quite a large number of beggars, all emaciated and poorly dressed in stained clothes, asking for alms to the well-off. As soon as they saw us, they stood up in earnest modesty and began to murmur like young birds in a nest as if their mother has brought them some food. But none of us had any money in our pockets, so we could not help them at all. It really hurt me. Seeing their hungry faces, anyone could tell that the joy and happiness of Eid has never visited them. Eid is an alien occasion to them. This is also true to hundreds of thousands of people, like those living in slums along the rail lines who lead a life no better than animals. What meaning does Eid hold for them? Have these people ever been able to lovingly feed their kids any sweet, leave alone any new cloth?

When Eid will bring joy to all the country's people, only then this occasion will bring happiness to me. (translated from Bangla)

What stands out in my father's diaries is how he had a big heart filled

with love for mankind and the people who were born with poverty. He felt saddened by the misery of the people. His compassion towards the less fortunate could be felt through his writings. He wished them well; in fact, he wished everything and everyone at all times well. He looked upon all with love. If we had more selfless, dutiful and humane individuals like him in our country today, our country would not have been in the present state. Our politicians and rich people have forgotten their duties to the lowly and the lost in society.

My father was a true patriot. Better off families, nowadays, are leaving this country and going abroad for settlement. They feel pity for homeland. They often express their unhappiness by saying, 'It is not a country where we can live, it is on the verge of destruction and full of anarchy'. But they forget about their duties and responsibilities. My father wrote in his diary on 11 February 1969:

Today's thoughts

It is a sin to lose one's faith in one's homeland. We have committed that sin which is why we focus so much on foreign degrees these days. Whatever has a foreign tag to it is held in awe. This is actually our ignorance. (translated from Bangla)

Despite being a teacher at the English Department of DU, my father had a deep love for and attachment towards Bengali culture and literature.

From his behavior to attire, everything reflected Bengali tradition. He talked as beautifully as he wrote. He was very outspoken, honest and conscientious as well. He loved his country and wanted the best for it and was not afraid to say so either. On 25 March 1971, the Pakistan army began their genocide campaign by attacking the innocent Bengalis. They attacked university teachers' quarters. We took refuge in our washroom and fortunately escaped from attack that night. But the Pakistan army came to arrest him in September. He was released from Dhaka jail after twelve days with the help of one of his friends. His friends told him to leave Dhaka and flee to Kolkata as he was the target of anti-liberation forces. But he did not listen to them. Our homeland is Birbhum in West Bengal; he could have easily gone back to India. But my father was a brave person and he tried to help our freedom fighters. He refused to leave the country. He shared his thoughts about liberation war with his students and colleagues. He always told the truth even when it could cause him trouble.

He was a fascinating combination of devotion, honesty, brevity, truthfulness, humanity and political exhortation. I feel proud to introduce such a human being to readers.

The writer is a Tagore singer and daughter of martyred intellectual Rashidul Hasan.



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