

A tribute to our martyred intellectuals

SHAMEEM AKHTAR

PRELUDE

Recalling the past is shunned...hey get going, don't look back.. you are too emotional.. march forward...left right left...

I am always in an uncertain state of mind when asked to write about the martyrs of 1971. Especially those who have been picked up by the Al Badr and Pakistani army in those 9 months. So unwittingly imitate Alexander Bloc, the great Russian poet and recite or copy his style as he wrote 'The Twelve'. Writing is a therapy so I agree to wrench myself out of the muck of enforced oblivion.

Confess I must, there is this morbid side of me that gobbles in whatever whenever anyone speaks of 1971 experi-

The infamous Akhtar Goonda along with Quader Molla in Mirpur and adjacent areas set off every day for head hunting of the Bengalis who had the record of being on the Liberation war side.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

ences. We were literally refugees ourselves, cocking our ears for the sound of heavy machine gun every night as though that foretold the impending victory we ardently longed for. The news of explosions by the Freedom Fighters brought in delight and maintaining a diary was a sacred duty imitating Anne Frank putting on record our condition. This prelude is necessary because unless the situation is described, it is difficult to spell out the state of mind we were in, the exasperation on events that took place then, and as a school going adolescent the pain of witnessing helplessly, being unable to fathom why innocent intellectuals were being chosen to go to the gallows for the crime of loving their land of cultural diversity.

INTERLUDE

This part of this write up comprises fragments of my stray, sporadic encounter with history. As I sat by his side recording his interview of how his brother was picked up by the Al Badr I saw his hand shake. Dr Rasiduddin Professor Emirates of Bangabandhu Medical College and Hospital, a surgeon regarded for precision, Professor Giasuddin was his much loved brother. Giasuddin Sir as he was popularly known for the kind of reverence he enjoyed from his students as a teacher at the Dhaka University, he collected medicine and food and delivered those to the posts such as one being Begum Sufia kamal's house, from where the freedom fighters picked those up for their training outpost. I saw the same happen to Ferdousi Priyobhashini as she narrated her '71 experience of rape and

abuse. As I listened to them speak my thoughts strayed away to post war days when each morning dawned with the news of the disappearances of intellectuals whose crime was that they had risked their lives to help the Freedom Fighters and were a bunch of liberals and progressives who wanted to see a Bangladesh free of regimental violence and exploitation of the Pakistani rulers. The ego laden rulers of Pakistan, considering themselves as the superior race treated Bengali's as the under dogs. They treated us like pariahs and sucked the best of us and left us devoid of our soul. So these stories of torture, rape, decapitation and finally abduction were not just one but many. Horrifying, heart wrenching and remorseful happenings that unrelated or said at low frequency waned off to oblivion.

Dr. Azharul Huq was a young doctor then, he had married 19 year old Salma who was far from the political turmoil that resulted into a loud cry for freedom. By then she was pregnant with her first child. As the agitation magnified she had a miscarriage. Probably the frenzy was too intense. On 25 March as Dhaka was burning, she was in the hospital recuperating from her physical condition. She heard the booming of canons and machine guns; screams of people under siege. Her husband was busy attending the injured those who could make it to the hospital somehow. The next day she heard her favourite brother-in-law, the famous Moazzem Hossain of Agartala Conspiracy Case, was shot dead after being dragged out of his house. Pakistani armies did not know his address then how did they come to know about his whereabouts? Who informed

them where to find Meghna Guhathakurta's father Professor Jotirmoy Guhathakurta? He was shot in the dark in the landing of the stairwell along with other professor and their family. Something he had feared most, paralysis, was inevitable. On the 27th of March, he was taken to the hospital almost deserted, except for the wounded with a handful of doctors to attend. Two days with hardly regular medical attendant, he died having bled profusely.

Salma Haq had become a widow and had brought up his posthumous son was given an apartment to live in by the then government. She recalls wiping off angry tears, the throes of having to bring up her son. The joy of her motherhood was utopia. How does one feel when at bedtime the boy looking at the darkness before him asks his mother to marry again? I would at least have a father who would feed me well. His father was picked up by the al Badr, as a bloated bayonet charged body from beside the culvert connecting Kamlapur with Motijheel way back in November '71.

Many such stories haunt me and at times there is anguish and impatience when such memories of innumerable atrocities drip deep into a restless soul. Bappa Majumdar, the famous son of the Principal of the Music College Sree Barin and his wife Ila Majumdar lost their only daughter while the family was running from the inferno in the early part of the war. Ila would just extend her hand and say - she just let go off my hand never to return. Indeed Mitu as she was called was never found. There are other stories too. The infamous Akhtar Goonda along with Quader Molla in Mirpur and adja-

cent areas set off every day for head hunting of the Bengalis who had the record of being on the Liberation war side. Akhtar Goonda would cut the head off and roll it from one hand to another letting out a war cry -here is Mujib's point with great pleasure.

Too many stories to tell, Munier Chowdhury was picked up by the Al Badr and a witness who survived had narrated how he recognised him as he screamed while his fingers were chopped off. Have mercy that's all he had said. As this was being done the butcher said -write your famous essays on Rabindranath Tagore. This happened in the renowned Physical Training College. That was the last that anyone saw of them. Gradually they faded into the void of time no more than mere stories occasionally recalled on Martyr's Day.

CONCLUDE

The stories told are on record. Though repeated still those never fail to wet our eyes. Still the truth is that only measly fragments of the horrific events have been related here. The stories are too many to recall, most not known to the next generation of Bangladeshis. At the time it happened in 1971 the population had been 70million, about more than half of that generation are no more to relate the events any longer. In fact, today many know nothing as to what it was like then. Uncertainty ruled supreme. Death was at every door for those who believed in a dream called Bangladesh. Today Bangladesh is here to stay. Flourishing, prospering, earning and on its way to a prospective developed country, in a better state than its earlier condition under Pakistan of despondency today.

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But the loss of our intellectuals - the best of the lot, bring in a pall of gloom as we see the crimes committed on the innocent millions are waved off by the generation next as a time to forget. Those who went to the gallows stand tall before us. They will only be revered by those of our generation who saw the crimes committed against humanity. We are the last generation and stand with undisclosed misery in our heart as we watch with wistful eyes the prospering nation being attacked by the obscurantists against those the valiant martyrs had fought so that we could start to write history on a clean slate.

The writer is an Activist, Journalist, Filmmaker.

The day, the killers, the tribunal

SHAHRIAR FEROZE

As the war for independence neared its end, a final attempt to eliminate the members of then known as East Pakistan's intelligentsia was executed by the Pakistani military junta. Mostly planned between 12 and 14 December over a 1000 academics, journalists, physicians and lawyers, including people from other professions were ruthlessly murdered. However, the campaign intended to strip the newborn nation of its intellectuals did not succeed and a new nation did emerge.

The killings of, 14th December 1971, were a sheer act of desperation by an army that sprang out from fear, hatred and frustration. The Pak intention evidently was to create a crippling-effect - to what would be lost - but with the mindset of a fanatic too. The focus of this year's intellectuals killing day - unlike before - is not to lament over the systematic and organized killing spree spear-headed by General Rao Forman Ali. It's not even the motive behind the killings, but now it arrives in the light of the verdicts handed over to some of the members of native auxiliary forces at the time, that helped the Pakistani army for materializing the cold-blooded act.

More specifically: apart from Abdul Quader Mollah, Chowdhury Mueen-Uddin, a Muslim leader based in London, and Ashrafuz-Zaman Khan, based in the US, were also sentenced in absentia after the court found that they were involved in the abduction and murders of some 18 intellectuals during the

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killing spree. All three have directly and indirectly functioned as Al-Badr activists related to the killing of intellectuals. The chance for the two sentenced in absentia to return home is nil, and also our experience with convicts sentenced in absentia has not been very satisfying with the Sheikh Mujib killing case either. But Quader Mollah's verdict has kept many of us on tenterhooks.

Inadvertently, it had to be the same December when a hearing on a review petition would halt Quader Mollah from being hanged. The man who was supposed to be in his grave by now is not only alive, but managed to proceed with his review petition with the judges at the upper echelon of our judicial system.

So why was not the chance for a review petition considered earlier by the prosecutors? What was

the need for a dramatic announcement of Mollah's hanging in the first place? Isn't it annoying to witness, that after having repeatedly been told by the Attorney General that 'there was no scope for reviewing the death penalty for war criminals' then why was a hearing held? The law must follow its own course but there is enough reason to believe that if Mollah's death penalty were lifted then it would clearly come out as a reprehensible case in light of the law being retroactively passed after the Shahbag uprising in order to enable the death penalty to be applied. This will certainly impact and question the impartiality and validity factors of other verdicts too. The already doubtful state of the ICT will even worsen.

This writer is unwilling to observe this year's martyred intellectuals' day as a formal event, as held many times before; instead he thinks differently. He thinks that reforms are needed to give our ICT a global acceptance. We want the ICT to meet the highest standards in order to properly deliver on those promises for the victims that could either be the death penalty or life imprisonment. The perfect approach to honouring December the 14th should not be restricted within lamenting the killings of our intellectuals while hating the murderers. The approach would be to enrich and carry forward the contributions of the martyred intelligentsia. The approach would be to build a Bangladesh - for whose liberty they were slain.

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PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN