



PHOTO: INTERNET

We lament your absence

TARIQ ALI

EVEN from a definitional standpoint, the killing of the intellectuals in the final moments of the war can certainly be termed as genocide. It is genocide because it could not have been invented overnight and must have been well thought-out and rationalised at the highest levels of the Pakistani government and military machinery. There is documentary evidence from the notes found on Rao Farman Ali's desk that this was a planned and co-ordinated operation. We shall try to reason-out the rationale that must have driven the Pakistanis to take this route. First is the deep-set belief in the Pakistani mind that the Bengali brand of Islam was a polluted one, in which popular folklore and the baul philosophy, etched in the colours of the sanatan origins of the Bengali people had made deep inroads into the desert-dry, austere brand of Islam, shorn of adornments of any kind --which they were familiar with, ostensibly from their proximity to the Arab lands. Then there was the fear in the Punjabi folk traditions about Bengali witchcraft, which they did not understand, so in their trigger-happy state of mind in 1971, the easiest way to deal with it was to spend a bullet. The third factor -- a belief which even the ordinary Pakistani shared -- that their land of the 'pure' was poisoned by the presence of one crore Hindus still left in the country who would have to be replaced with true Islamic blood brought from Bihar, (of all the places!) as one Pakistani army officer, who I had given a ride on one of my trips to Tongi in April, had confided in me. Then there was an inferiority complex which lurked in the mind of the Pakistani elite that the superiority which Bengali literature, painting and music was endowed with (despite its creators being largely of "Hindu" origin) and the sheer weight of

modernity which was carried in them, would one day overtake what West Pakistan had to offer. They were mortally afraid that this could have a lasting effect in shaping the minds of not only the Bengalis but eventually of the Pakistani elite as well. It therefore is no surprise that so many of the December victims were men who had something to do with creative work.

Bengalis were lucky that the Pakistani military establishment crumbled like a house of cards not only in East Pakistan but also in the Sind and Azad Kashmir theatres within a few days after December 3. Not only was Dhaka cut-off from the rest of East Pakistan but the amount of exchanges through friendly countries could hardly sustain a meaningful communication between Yahya Khan and Niazi. The battle-weary and bewildered Pakistan army was gasping for breath and had other more desperate issues to deal with for their survival than carry through the master plan they had carved out for crippling the Bengali superiority in the intellectual world. Farman Ali did the best he could under the circumstances, using his foot-soldiers, the Al-Badr Bahini.

In Munier Chowdhury, Shahidullah Kaiser and Mofazzal Haidar Chowdhury we lost those people who could have given the intellectual world of this country the kind of leadership that would guide this nation for generations. Brilliance they all had, but what distinguished them from the others is that had they lived, they would have been able to combine creative skills with political insight and give artistic and creative work a dimension which would be hard to quantify today. Along with the other men of the cultural world who perished with them, they had the wisdom to comprehend how creative work may be combined with the energy and

vigour of a new nation and steer it along so that the legacy nurtured so far mainly by people from West Bengal would be reinforced with the energy of people bubbling with the enthusiasm of having created a new nation. Bengali creativity could have been catapulted to heights which the Indian cultural world had not witnessed before. In losing them to the daggers of the Al-Badr butchers, the nation lost out in creative genius.

The Bengali society suffered another great loss through the killing of the intellectuals, a loss which on a long-term basis has affected us profoundly. That criminal act was not done in the dark nights of December alone, but carried out on every desolate night of the nine months. Thus the society was cruelly purged of those who were the bulwark of the ethical and moral value system that the Bengali society carried. The moral fabric, woven from the yarn of intrinsic values that our societies had held for generations and the yarn spun by the light that western education had imbued in us, is now in shreds as a result. The entire society today suffers from a loss of ethical values; it has become intolerant of the underprivileged -- be it of the religious, financial or gender kind; and it nurtures fundamentalist tendencies. We suffer the vacuum that they left in our everyday life. And let us not blame the politicians alone because values have been eroded from the lives of academicians, army and civilian bureaucrats, businessmen and even young students, many of whom have become millionaires before they even cross the gates of their Universities. The intellectuals whose absence we are lamenting today would have provided those moral values.

The writer is a Social Activist and Trustee, Liberation War Museum.

We do care

ASIF MUNIER

EXACTLY 10 years back, I wrote a piece for this same newspaper dedicated to write ups by the family members of the martyred intellectuals of the liberation war of Bangladesh. I ended it with an emotional call, which also became the title of that piece -- 'Show us that you care'. At that point in time, I felt the ideologies and the memories of the martyred intellectuals were being slowly eroded in society and at the state level.

But soon after the article was published and I shared it online among friends and acquaintances, many responded to me that yes, they do care. They too want justice for the war crimes including killings of the intellectuals in 1971. They also value the spirit and ideals of the liberation war all year-round and not just on some special days. They assured me that they do make their personal efforts in line with their commitment. It was of course some comforting reassurance in response to my piece.

Much has happened since then and still is continuing to happen, on the issue of seeking justice for the killings of my father and other intellectuals as well as for all forms of crimes against humanity during the liberation war. Some of it is quite inspiring. Campaigners like us, Projonmo '71, the children of the martyrs of the liberation war, and others involved in the movement for the trial of war criminals since the '90s, reminded people not to vote for known collaborators in the last parliamentary elections. Most of these collaborators are linked to fundamentalist Islamic political organisation Jamaat-e-Islami. They have tried to change their colours and enjoyed impunity from their political allies since 1975, even enjoyed the status of ministers. But the new, mostly youth voters rejected them out of power in the 2008 elections.

Then in 2010 we saw the much awaited International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) being formed, along with a revision of the related special law from 1973 in line with international legal and human rights standards. We read about the tireless investigation by the ICT in collecting evidence from all over the country and even abroad as a preparation for the trials. Then in the next two years we began to see cases being filed against some well known local collaborators that are popularly known as Razakars, including their ring leader Golem Azam. In 2013 we began to hear the convictions one by one, with mixed reactions of course. A personal cathartic and positive experience was being a witness for the case on intellectual killings, culminating into a verdict of death sentence for the two main collaborators -- even though in absentia.

And then we had Projonmo Chottor at Shahbagh earlier in 2013. There we saw the outpouring of love and dedication to the motherland, to the spirit of the liberation war, to the voice of reason and humanity, and respect to all the martyrs. Never have I felt so proud to be a citizen of Bangladesh, of being a Bangalee, of being a martyr's son, until I was there at Shahbagh with millions of youth-old-children, chanting 'Joy Bangla' or singing the national anthem, or lighting one of the million candles. Not just for a moment or a



Professor Munier Chowdhury with his three sons Ahmed Munier Chowdhury Bhason, Asif Munier Chowdhury and Ashfaque Munier Mishuk (From left to right).

COURTESY:
ASIF MUNIER CHOWDHURY

day but for many days. Along with all that, we saw the revival of the spirit of the liberation war in different aspects of arts and culture -- music, fine arts, folk art, theatre, literature, fashion - and so on. So 2013 does promise a better future than 2003.

But of course there are many minuses. We have seen shameful targeted fundamentalist attacks on minorities, secular forces and activists of movement of the war crimes trials. We have seen the systematic propaganda and sometimes misguided fault finding about the tribunal, mostly by lobbyists paid by Jamaat sympathisers. The tribunal itself was riddled with its challenges, with the controversy over the leaked conversation and the subsequent resignation of the head of the tribunal. We have seen the disappointing outcome of not awarding the highest punishment of the land to the chief mastermind of the collaborators only because of his old age. We are still uncertain if the absconding and convicted war criminals

can ever be brought back to justice, if the verdicts of the other war criminals will be carried out, if other war criminals will be tried, if Pakistani war criminals could ever be brought to justice and above all -- if the tribunal could continue to function at all in the near or far future.

In the face of so many ifs, the present and the future may seem rather bleak, but I am always an optimist who sees the glass half full and nothing else. I am hopeful that most, if not all, the 'ifs' will become a reality. But to do so, Bangladeshis at home and abroad who love their motherland, must continue to be vigilant about the opposing forces of the spirit and ideals of the liberation war. We must continue to be united beyond petty personal interests. Before the upcoming national parliamentary elections, we must again raise voices against the collaborators who would be seeking our votes, even within the guise of other political parties than Jamaat-e-Islami.

Then, whichever major political party comes in

power, we have to continue to demand for the trials and the execution of the verdicts to continue, correcting any procedural flaw of the tribunal that is legitimate to be corrected. We must continue to support the process of respecting all the families of martyrs, freedom fighters and birangonas, help identify and preserve many of the war-time killing fields across the country, preserve and promote the factual history of the liberation war in every sphere of personal and professional life.

Readers, you do not really have to listen to me. But don't you think you (and me) really need to do all this? After all, without the supreme sacrifice of the martyrs, who knows what would have happened to the country. You owe it to them for your own sake, not for me. If you don't, I am sure your conscience will come back to bite you one day.

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