



## EDITOR'S NOTE

This is a day of mourning, a day to shed tears for forced departure of the cream of our intelligentsia whose lives were taken away in the final hours of our struggle for liberty. The patriotic Bangalees – writers, engineers, journalists, teachers were handpicked for summary execution by Pakistani forces and their local collaborators, the death squads operated by the Jamaat-e-Islami, paramilitary forces known as Razakars, al-Badr and al-Shams. This was done with one diabolical purpose only. To cripple the newly-emerging independent nation of the best Bangalee society possessed and whose contribution would be sorely missed in the rebuilding of a war-torn country. This macabre plan was to concentrate on intellectuals hoping to break the back of the Bangalee nation and on December 14, we lost some of our brightest to this insidious plan of massacre.

Reyerbazar became the infamous “killing grounds” where hapless victims were disposed of by Razakars and other such squads in a demonic fashion. The site has become a place of pilgrimage for millions of Bangalees who pay yearly homage to those who paid the ultimate price in their sacrifice for the birth of a nation.

43 years since independence, Bangladesh has come a long way in delivering justice to the thousands of family members who never saw their loved ones relish the joy of victory. The International Crimes Tribunal has handed down judgment to some of the worst perpetrators of atrocities during wartime and we have confidence that due process of law is being followed. Once again, we bow our heads in gratitude in remembering our martyrs this morning.

--Editor

# The sacrifice of intellectuals

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**B**ANGLADESH stands out among many nations as one with a special day that commemorates the sacrifice of the Intellectuals. It has often been commented whether it was justifiable to separate them from others who were victims of a gory history of mass killings. But the fact is that the commemoration of the day was not so much as to treat the Intellectuals as a separate entity but to make a point that they were targeted specifically within the broad framework of the military operation known as 'Operation Searchlight' conducted by the then Pakistan Government. Although the day has been celebrated from the very inception of the Bangladesh state, it took more than 40 years to legitimize such sacrifices, or in other words to legally term such killings as crimes against humanity. This was possible through the judgment of the International Crimes Tribunal in its case versus Motiur Rahman Nizam. It was stated in the verdict that “the fierceness of the events of 'intellectual killing' and the 'mass killing of unarmed civilians' were extremely detrimental to basic humanness. It deserves to be evaluated as 'crimes of serious gravity' intending to demean the human civilization. The designed plan, pattern of such large scale killing of intellectuals, professionals and un-armed civilians inescapably aggravate the magnitude of the criminal acts and liability of the accused as well. Mass killing of a large number of individuals belonging to the intelligentsia class of Bengali nation as well as un-armed civilians 'extremely serious' offence of crimes against humanity. The case in hand concerns such type of unheard of killing committed in execution of designed murderous scheme. It not only increases the magnitude of the crimes but it has imprinted untold trauma to the nation. Such 'extreme seriousness' inevitably is considered as an aggravating factor in awarding sentence for the crimes of mass killing. Letters of law cannot remain non active to the enormous colossal and unspeakable pains being carried for decades together by the relatives of martyred intellectuals, professionals, un-armed civilians and the nation too.”

As soon as the verdict was heard by relatives of those who had lost their dear ones, “something shifted” inside them. What was it? The heavy burden of responsibility that one carried of having to prove to ones society, country and the world that those moments of terror that one witnessed were real and that they actually happened? Or was it the struggle and toil of raising ones children in a world that was clueless to the history of domination and oppression of a state that had carefully planned a way to eliminate intelligent minds and creative souls from an insurgent state that was poised for freedom? Or, was it the decade long silence that one had to tolerate as war criminals ruled the upper echelons of a nation that they had once chosen to destroy? Perhaps it was all three and more.

I remember once witnessing the news of the Prime Minister of New Zealand making apologies to the indigenous Maori community for the long history of oppression and domination that they had thrust upon them. I particularly remember that some Maoris had broken down in tears. There was no apology at this end, but the verdict itself had released a sense of hope among the survivors and their families that perhaps their sacrifice has not been in vain.

But one wonders whether that's all there

is to it...to feel a relief that that your rights have been vindicated and justice served. Is there not a deeper lesson that we can learn from such sacrifice? Perhaps we should review why the Pakistan state wanted to rid Bangladesh of its best minds and the ways in which they did that.

The first answer is of course obvious. They did not want the new nation to prosper as a free and independent country and hence what better ways to do that then eradicate from the scene those minds that have served as the fountains of wisdom to future generations of leaders and policy-makers. They were right. The loss of these individuals had left a black hole in the fabric of our society, in the coffers of our education sector, in journalism, media engineering and medical sciences. Institutions had to struggle hard to make up this gap. That was not all. The Pakistan state through its strategy of “Operation Searchlight” not only targeted intellectuals, whom they thought were responsible for sparking the fire of Bengali nationhood and freedom, they also targeted the symbols of such thought processes embodied. “Madhur canteen” in the Dhaka University campus was a centre of political thought and practice and for that they targeted Madhu da the owner of the canteen on the very first night of the operation and killed him and members of his family in cold blood. The Central Shaheed Minar was built in memory of the language martyrs day, (Ekushey February) but in the sixties and seventies was the platform for the movement protesting the domination and oppression of the Pakistan state. During the civil disobedience movement called by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman it turned into a site for reiterating ones commitment to the movement for autonomy. For that the Pakistan Army blew it up with dynamites in the first few days of its operation. And then there was the “Bottola”, the space for political gathering beneath the sprouting green leaves and branches of the banyan tree in the corner of the Arts Building, in the Dhaka University campus. It was where students rallied together in solidarity with demands for independence. Towards the end of the nine months of the Pakistan Occupation, even that had to go. The trunk of that magnificent tree was cut down and sawed in half, a testimony to the cruel obliteration engaged by crazed minds. The logic was the same.. to kill the symbols of freedom around which dreams were born, a future unfolded and from which generations drew inspiration. This killing of inspiration is a crime against humanity. That is what the Intellectual Martyrs day is here to remind us of. “They took my father away in the dark of the night, They did not say where, But I knew instantly, why.

They took him for the same reason That they had to knock down the concrete Shaheed Minar They took him for the same reason That they had to cut down the leafy banyan tree Under whose branches had gathered The seeds of rebellion!

Train your eyes Watch carefully and you will see One day this country will be free!

The writer is Researcher and daughter of Shaheed Jyotimay R. Thakurta

