



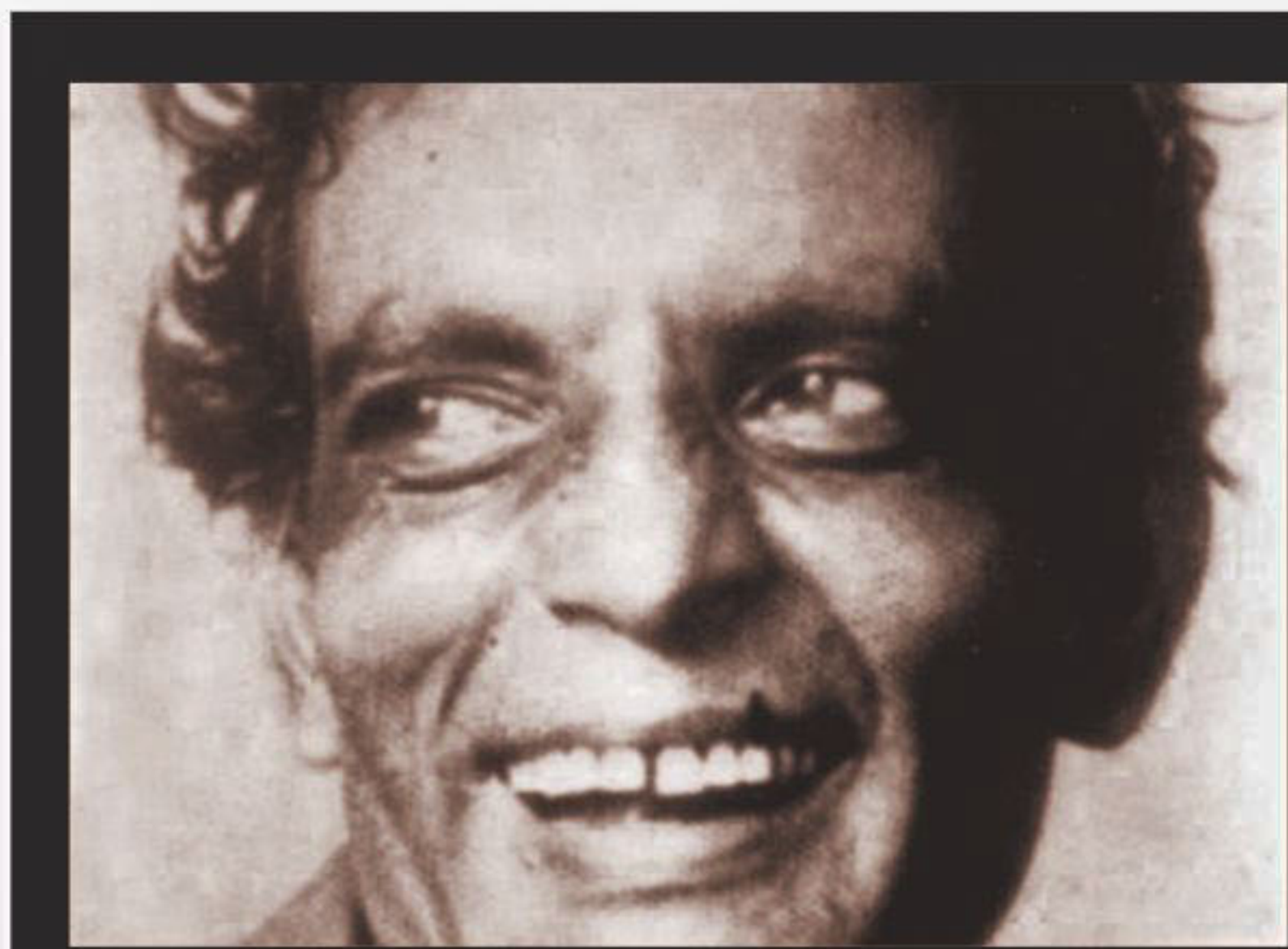
Where grows the spirit of liberation?

AHMED SOFA

IN 1971 the Pakistani military shot dead sixty-seven people from our village in just one day. There were children among those sixty-seven; there were youths, senior citizens and women among them. Fifteen other people from the village lost their lives during the war. These fifteen were not killed directly at the hands of the Pakistani military they were murdered by the Razakars and the Al Badrs.

I came to learn of two of these murders. One night, a father and his son were returning from a market that was quiet a distance from their home. They had been walking the four mile road together. When they had covered those four long miles, right up to the point where they just had to step off from the road to get to their house, both were shot dead. The villagers had been able to identify the killer. The man who killed the father and the son was a family member – a nephew to one of the dead. There was a long standing legal dispute between the uncle and his nephew regarding land. The nephew had joined the Razakars out of hatred for his uncle and his cousin, to gain ownership of the land. When a country is at a moment of crucial import, the established relations among the villagers polarises in favour or against the issue. Incidents can be found where the prevailing mentality was – if my enemy is supporting the Liberation War, then, I must oppose it.

I was out of the country during the entirety of the war. After the war ended and I returned home, I wanted to keep a record of the barbarities that were committed during those nine months. I learned that the majority of the people who died were killed in Palpara, which was located



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at the South-Eastern edges of our village. Khetromohon, who I had studied with in school, was from Palpara. Khetromohon had the rare talent of making people laugh with his stories. Even the most trivial would turn into hilarity in his words

and we would be bent double with laughter. I would spend nights at his house. At times, he would come over to ours and stay the night. A friendship had grown between our families centring ours. I visited Palpara the day after I returned. My wish was to

keep a record – who had died, whose houses have torched and vandalised and so on.

Khetromohon was not home when I reached the place. I learned from the locals of how his wife had taken her own life by throwing herself into the fire. I present the story here in brief – The Pakistani military had set fire to the house and were going after the young girls. Seeing the situation unfold in front of her eyes, Khetromohon's wife had jumped into the fire and was burnt alive.

I had witnessed many deaths during the war. There was a time when the line between life and death had blurred within my mind. But the story of how my friend's wife had killed herself left me stupefied. When Khetro was to get married to this woman, I was to be part of the groom's entourage. I forget why I could not go but Khetro was angry at me for my failure. I would visit Khetro at least once whenever I visited my village. The sound of voice would be enough and his wife would put the kettle on the fire. I had many a times shared my happiness and sorrow with her.

I have already mentioned that Khetro was not home when I arrived at Palpara. He returned within half an hour, and seeing me, the first words to escape his lips were – did you drink tea yet? No mention of his wife's death, his torched home – he was trying to bring back the humour and banter of our past. Khetro's attempt to be cheerful brought me close to tears.

Shadhon was another friend – Shadhonkumar Dhor. A thin-framed spectacle used to perch on his face since childhood. The Pakistani military had killed him. Shadhon used to live at his uncle Shibchoron Babu's

hosue. Shibchoron's baby was murdered too. I asked those of the family who had survived if they could show me those thin-rimmed spectacles - if they still had it, it would at least give me some consolation. I was told the military had taken away those glasses along with my friend. He had never returned.

Starting 1972, every time I visited the village, I repeatedly tried to convince the villagers of one thing. From the members and chairmen to the village leaders and elders – I tried to convince them of one single thing. Almost a hundred people from our village had been killed at the hands of the Pakistani military, the Razakar and the Al Badr. The Chittagong-Cox's Bazaar road runs through our village – I proposed that a memorial bearing the names of the hundred who had died be constructed at the entrance of our village, beside this road.

I also proposed a line to be written in their remembrance – "Traveller. The village that you cross – a child of this village had given his life for the freedom of this country." I have been suggesting this since 1972. At first the people had tried to listen attentively to what I had to say. After three-four years had passed and I was still bringing up the issue – people began to think I was embarrassing them unnecessarily. I suspect that if I dare to bring up the issue at present, I would be looked upon as a madman.

My work has taken me frequently to eight or ten districts from the North to the South of Bengal and in between. Wherever I went, I asked people of the stories of what happened there during the war. People from many villages responded saying, "The Punjabis did not come to village at all." Many other villages spoke of

the arrival of the Punjabis, the torching of houses and the killings. I asked them if they knew the names and identities of those who had died. With enthusiasm they would answer "Why would we not!" They would talk of so-and-so's son grandchild or brother.

I used to then ask, "Why do you not write the names of those who died in the war on the sides of the road? When travellers will pass by and read the names, a respect for your village will take root at their hearts." The villagers would stare blankly at my face. It was as if they were completely incapable of understanding the significance of what I had to say. Nowhere I went did I see the names of the martyrs written down and remembered with care and respect. To do something like this, no great initiative would have been required. A little love for the country and a little respect for those who had lost their lives in the war would have been enough.

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Justice: Is it only to close wounds or more?

TAMANNA KHAN

ON November 3, when the apex court of the country upheld the death penalty of war criminal Muhammad Kamaruzzaman, his son Hasan Iqbal told reporters that his father was 'deprived of justice'. The comment came after Kamaruzzaman, one of the key organisers of the notorious Al-Badr force, through his lawyers got the opportunity to defend himself at the International War Crimes Tribunal (ICT)-2 for almost three years and at the Supreme Court for about a year. And now he would get even a chance to seek review of the verdict of the Supreme Court appeal.

But Shumon Zahid's mother poet and journalist Selina Parveen did not even get three days to make her plea to the Al-Badr men who took her away right in front of Shumon on December 13, 1971 and killed her by charging bayonets on December 15, 1971 at the killing field of Dhaka's Rayerbazar.

The judgment of absconding war criminals Chowdhury Mueen Uddin and Ashrafuzzaman Khan, two other Al-Badr men, found guilty by the ICT for intellectual killing, described the brutality of the moment, as below:

"Selina Parveen begged for her life, appealed to spare her as she had a young boy with no one to take care of him (Shumon Zahid) except her. But the brutal killers did not spare her. She was instantly killed by charging bayonet. What an impious butchery! What a sacrilegious butchery! What a shame for human civilization! Selina Parveen was a mother. The appalling attack was done not only to Selina Parveen but to the mother's line. The killing was rather a 'matricide'. This indescribable brutality shocks the human conscience indeed."

Shumon never knew why his mother, who promoted a pro-liberation weekly magazine 'Shilalipi' and used the proceeds for treatment of wounded freedom-fighters, was killed brutally by Al-Badr men.

On the other hand the criminal charges against Al-Badr leader such as Kamaruzzaman, Mueen Uddin, Ashrafuzzaman, Ali Ahsan Muhammad Mujahed, Mir Kashem Ali, Motiur Rahman Nizami as well as their guru war criminal Ghulam Azam were clear, specific and a part of history. They planned and executed the killing of millions of Bangalees, not just to carry out the orders of their Pakistani army bosses, but in the hope that their party Jamaat-e-Islami could reap the benefits of power if West Pakistani military rule continued in the land.

Like Shumon, Nuzhat Chowdhury, Tawheed Reza Noor, Shomi Kaiser, Meghna Guhathakurta and hundreds of other children of intellectual martyrs never knew why their parents were killed with bullets and sharp metal bayonets. To the Pakistani military rulers, the crime of the martyred intellectuals was that they wanted freedom of their motherland; they wanted to build a nation which would be based on socialism, nationalism, secularism and democracy.

Those values were far from Jamaat's ideology founded by Syed Abul A'la Maududi, preacher of his own interpretation of Sharia-based state in the subcontinent against secular democracy. Thus it was not a surprise that while

tasked with listing of the intellectuals, Jamaat-leader heading para-military forces such as the Al-Badr and Al-Shams, picked not just Awami League men but people who would stand as barriers to Jamaat's philosophy.

Thus even on the eve of Bangladesh's victory, when the Pakistani military knew they were losing the war, they did not stop killing the intellectuals with the help of Al-Badr and Al-Shams. From December 10 - 15, it is estimated that more than 100 doctors, engineers, journalists, teachers and artists were killed alone in Dhaka.

"...It is now known that on Sunday December 12, as the Indian columns were closing on Dacca....a group of senior Pak army officers and their civilian counterparts met in the city's Presidential residence. They put together the names of 250 peoples to be arrested and killed, including the cream of Dacca's professional circles not already liquidated during the civil war. Their arrests were made on Monday and Tuesday by marked bands of extreme right-wing Muslims belonging to an organization called the Al-Badr Razakar...Only hours before the official surrender was signed (on 16th), the victims were taken in groups to the outskirts of the city.....where they were summarily executed....." The Times, December 23, 1971 (source: Bangladesh Genocide Archive)

Al-Badr, a para-military force created in the likes of Hitler's Gestapo, traced houses of pro-liberation people, especially intellectuals of different professions, took them to torture camps, where they were detained, brutally tortured and murdered.

This special force was formed with members of Islami Chhatra Sangha, student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami, on April 22, 1971.

Journalist Azadur Rahman Chandan, in his book, 'Al-Badr Chhilo Gopon Commando Bahini', referred to an interview of Pakistani Major Riya Hussain Malik of Baluch regiment taken by Salim Manur Khalid, "We needed a group of patriotic Bengalese for defending who will be able to help us in protecting Pakistan. In first one and half month our experience with Razakar force became a failure. But in my sector I was observing that the Bengali students of Islami Chhatra Shongho were doing their duty of defense, leadership and maintaining secrecy very constructively. Therefore I made the students united separately with a hesitating mind as I had no permission from high command. They were 47 in number and they all were the workers of Islami Chhatro Shongho. On 16th May, 1971 at Sherpur (Mymensingh district) they were given a short term military training. After being introduced with their devotion and their merit to acquire the war strategies I delivered a speech to them. In midst of my speech I told them spontaneously that children of Islam like you who have such character such merit and such strength should be entitled as Al Badr. Just like lightning I got the idea that I could name the organization as Al Badr. This name and separate training for the students were so effective that within a few months the work of organizing the all students of Islami Chhatro Shongho became accomplished." (source: Wikipedia)

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