

Come December

CHINTITO

Come December you hope to reminisce the terrible tragedy that befell our torn-apart habitation especially towards the end of our War of Liberation.

14 December 1971. It was a Tuesday. It was the day when the new Bangladesh nation discovered the final brutality of the Pakistan Army and their Bangla-speaking cohorts, the Razakars, the Al-Badr and the Al-Shams. Their decomposed bodies lay naked in the murky cold water among piles of bricks, the only silent witnesses, perhaps. No defeated force has ever shown its ugly face with such venom, and cowardice.

The butchers had earlier picked up dozens of learned and professional Bangalees, blindfolded them, tortured them, and then mutilated and battered them to silence. Some names are still fresh after over four decades... Dhaka University professors Dr Govinda Chandra Dev, Dr Munier Chowdhury, Dr Mufazzal Haider Chaudhury, Dr Anwar Pasha, Dr Abul Khair, Dr Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta, Humayun Kabir, Rashidul Hasan, Ghyasuddin Ahmed, Sirajul Haque Khan, Faizul Mahi, Dr Santosh Chandra Bhattacharya, and Saidul Hassan; Rajshahi University professors Dr Hobibur Rahman, Prof Sukhranjan Somaddar, and Prof Mir Abdul Quaiyum, Cardiologist Dr Mohammed Fazle Rabbee, Ophthalmologist Dr AFM Alim Chowdhury, Journalists Shahidullah Kaiser, Nizamuddin Ahmed and Selina Parvin, Lyricist and musician Altaf Mahmud, Politician Dhirendranath Datta, and Philanthropist Ranadaprasad Saha... then there are so many of them unnamed, unrecognisable; but we know them all as the greatest sons and daughters of the soil.

Come December we are also agog with joy to celebrate Victory Day that came to seal the nine-month bitter war against Pakistan.

The revolutionary War of Liberation 1971 was necessary to free Bangladesh (independent 26 March same year) from the clutches of the ruthless armchair officers that manned the Pakistan government, from the fanatical attacks of the hyenas that was the Pakistan armed forces, especially its Army, and from the cruel conspiracies of the bloodthirsty collaborators that were the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Razakars, the Al-Badr and the Al-Shams; they were "engaged in the

systematic genocide and atrocities of Bangalee civilians, particularly the nationalists, intellectuals, youth and religious minorities".

We have cause to celebrate, as 16 December marks the day when 10 million refugees sheltered in India and 30 million displaced persons could dream of returning to their home in an independent country.

We have cause to rejoice because our guerrilla freedom fighters and regular forces albeit with the support of India (which joined the war 3 December) captured exactly 93,000 prisoners of war (56,694 Armed Forces men, 12,192 paramilitary fighters and 24,114 civilians), the largest number of PoWs since the Second World War.

We have cause to exult because we were victorious.

Come December Bangladeshis who are planning an inexpensive break beyond our borders look to visit India; always an attractive destination given our common history in time. That now seems unattainable, not for any other reason but for diaphanous corruption.

Here's a post from the Facebook, dated 15 December 2014:

'Visa section of Indian High Commission, Dhaka unleashed a visa scam to extort as high as Tk. 5,000 through organised hustlers just for an appointment date! Evidently insiders in the High Commission office are gaming the website so that online applicants never get an appointment, hence, forcing them to rely on the hustlers waiting outside the premises for underhand deals! Please share this to try and bring it to the notice of higher authority.'

The situation is particularly painful for patients seeking medical assistance in Chennai, Mumbai and Kolkata. Sick people are being forced to pay. For them it is not much different from being held up at gunpoint. Some of these Bangladeshis need to urgently consult with their Indian doctors, reputed and respected for their professionalism, but between the need and the service is a hurdle that can only be crossed with hard cash.

This is a test case. Let us see how quickly the sworn-against-corruption government of Narendra Modi picks up this news (as if their reps in Dhaka did not know) and cleans the High Commission here as well as the image of India in the eyes of their good



PHOTO: STAR FILE

and supportive neighbours, and the world.

Come December we are also deluged with phone calls and text messages informing us how almost every organisation and association and club and society in Bangladesh is in need for a change, although change in leadership does not necessarily bring the best results always.

We get to know the good side, in fact very good side, of people, now a candidate seeking a post in some committee, who we knew all our life as dishonest, fraud, and *luccha*. That's a change. Conversely, we are fed with the bad side of people who we thought we knew as righteous citizens. They don't need to change.

Feeding also has its time and frequency. Okay, if you are diabetic, doctors advise you to have five small meals a day. But, when the election season catches fire in Dhaka, we are inundated with so much information, a lot of it unpalatable, and none of it ordered for, that we have to digest, however infuriatingly, call after call, message followed by message, more than a dozen times a day.

SMS after SMS, phone after phone, leaflets, pamphlets, banners and festoons, personal contact, public address system, gifts, unusually good behaviour... all to elect some people to work for a group in to which you were admitted *ex officio*, or unfortunately by choice during one of your witless moments.

2AM. Trrrrinng! Message: 'Decide for the best person. Don't go for the second best. You deserve the best'. Yawn! You wonder what the heck this guy is talking about. You are already sleeping in the arms of your chosen best, or are at least dreaming to.

5.15PM. Maghrib time. Trrrrinng! Message: 'I

come with the promise to stand beside you, look after your interest, take care of all your needs.' Sounds oh so divine! But, it is your one vote they seek; and to that end they will go to any end, including yours.

11.45AM. You are in an important meeting. Trrrrinng! This time it is a call from someone you have not heard from in the last fifteen years. He begins, 'Dosto! My friend is candidate for GS in omuk club. I am counting on you. Please. And bring all your friends to vote. Remember 18 December is the voting. He is best for the post. He is a hard worker, sincere, honest, good-looking...' Nah! The last one I made up. But the one-way tirade does not stop, unless you are fortunate to say, 'This year I am not a voter'. Click! Call drop.

What is it in this getting-elected 'business' that is so profitable that one has to spend all his time, a stupendous sum of money, even if borrowed, and an enormous amount of labour just to canvass for votes? It is pathetic that people have to sometimes leave their long-serving jobs to serve in a committee for a year or two. In some ways that is dedication, but then it is from someone who first failed to serve himself. If all the candidates, eager as they are before the ballot, did actually perform as enthusiastically after being elected, then many of our problems should have long been over.

Let us hope that India will solve its visa section misery soon. Let us pray there is a way out from the annual suffering meted out to uphold democratic practice in our institutions. Come next December we would like to remember the month for the sacrifices of our Shaheeds and others, and for the heroics of our freedom fighters, including ever