

# Have we conquered the hate?

KHUSHI KABIR

FORTY-FIVE years ago, we were, at this particular time and month of that year, just waiting. Even while war was going on with the sounds of gunfire, the anti-aircraft guns, which were then commonly called “ack-ack” guns, trying to down planes, sirens wailing, warning us to go down to the trenches we never dug, but shutting all the lights off out of fear that our house would be attacked by the Pakistanis, with the windows painted or papered black; slowing down the sounds of the Joy Bangla Radio, as the *Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* was popularly called, we were waiting. Waiting to hear the end we imagined, wanted to imagine, had arrived. We were full of trepidation yet daring to be full of hope; we were saddened beyond consolation yet hoping what we were hearing were actually rumours; we were often scared, yet in our hearts, in our minds, we had courage beyond imagination. The belief that we shall overcome, we shall win, even in the face of such brutality, what terror that had been unleashed during the past nine months. Despite such travesty of human behaviour



Aminul Islam, Genocide, oil on canvas, 1972

It is time that we looked at what we call our beliefs, whether it be religion or otherwise, and ask ourselves whether our beliefs are pushing us and our nation into intolerance. It is time we take a step back and bring back what every belief, every religion, every

that belief lay firmly entrenched within our very being, in our hearts, in our minds. We never lost hope. We knew we would win, we just had to. Losing is only when you give up and as a nation of peoples, fighting for their country, for a belief, for humanity and our rights, we knew we would never give up; our freedom fighters would never give up, until we got our freedom. Over our favourite radio station, we got news of all the inroads we had made, the victories that we had won. It was just a matter of days, of weeks, at most months. But give up? Never!

Two days later, the Pakistani army surrendered! We were a free nation. People from every house, hovel, shanty, building poured out on the streets as one, chanting *Joy Bangla* to everyone, irrespective of whether one knew one or not. During these

nine months, our freedom fighters showed us what it meant to fight and live shoulder to shoulder, without thinking or even questioning class, occupation, ethnicity, age, experience, the Liberation War acted as a social leveler. On Victory Day, the same sense prevailed upon everyone. Freedom fighters, the Indian soldiers, every single person on the street were all cheered and welcomed with such glee, such a warm glow of Victory, *Joy Bangla! Joy Bangla!*

In the midst of all these celebrations, there was fear and worry too. What would be the fate of Bangabandhu, still incarcerated in Pakistan's jail? Would all our friends, the world's powers who believed in us, negotiate to set him free? The fear was always present. Then came the news that even on our Victory Day on December 16 some citizens were killed by the then already defeated Pakistani Army and their ever active collaborators. As all our friends, families, people we knew, or did not know, started returning from fighting the war, from refugee centres in India, we began to find the horror of those nine months. We got confirmation that the number of people brutally killed, deliberately killed, throughout the Liberation War, from the time it started, was of such a large unimaginable number. From the night of March 25, 1971, just less than an hour or so before March 26, the day our independence was declared, genocide began which continued all through the Liberation War. The collaborators informed the army and helped them prepare the lists to pick out professionals from all walks such as doctors, lawyers, journalists. Only family and friends knew who had been picked up. The other source of information was the radio services like *Swadhin Bangla Betar*, *Akashvani* and BBC that gave us all the news from the front and what they heard was happening inside Bangladesh. But it

was only after our liberation that we heard of the extent of the killings. We discovered mass graves, where many of our country's greatest minds' bodies were found, brutalised beyond imagination. The largest numbers were picked up just before the Pakistan Army was defeated. Thus December 14 was declared as Martyred Intellectuals Day.

Why were our greatest minds killed so brutally? The answer to the question is intricately tied up with what the ideology of our Liberation War stands for, the principles we fought for and the values that we all so strongly believed in. It lies in the reasons why it was unquestionably decided that Bangladesh had to become a sovereign nation, totally separate and totally independent from Pakistan. The rationale being our identity which was so separate from those who lived a thousand miles away; our language and culture, which the Pakistani state did its best, albeit unsuccessfully, to curb; our syncretism which believes strongly in the principles of Secularism. Here, I deliberately used the capital letter for S, to reinforce how important this principle of Secularism was for us as an identity, in democratic principles, in Socialism which at that time was the populist ideology prevalent and which has now been reworded and expanded to mean social justice which we termed as progressive thinking. It was primarily those who believed in and lived their lives with these ideologies who were put on the hit list. Though, as I stated earlier and reiterating now, the murder of such individuals began from March 25 and continued throughout.

TODAY, forty-five years later, where do we as a nation stand? I pose this question again, the question I began writing this piece with. The then

President and Founding Father of the country along with most of his family and his close associates were killed on August 15, 1975. Later, through successive coups entailing more killings of those who would and could stand for the ideals that this country was based on, the very nature of the nation began to change. On November 7, 1975 General Ziaur Rahman was formally installed as the person at the helm of the country. It was necessary for him to create a new political discourse in order to stay in power, an ideology that would be totally opposite to what the Awami League was perceived to have been based on and thus a new party was formed. Secularism was removed and Socialism watered down. First to join this new party were obviously the opportunists, then politicians who had lost their clout or their base, those who opposed the creation of Bangladesh, the defeated forces of the 1971 war, the losers, those who failed to gain favour from Awami League or from Bangabandhu and many such others. So, what could be the main message to portray its distance from Awami League? Whereas Awami League people felt they stood for Secularism and religion was projected as equal space for all beliefs and patronising of all religions, the new party began in earnest as trying to project itself as a Muslim Bangali party.

The nation would be Muslim first, Bangali or nationalist second. This was firmly nailed when the word Secularism was removed from the Constitution. During the second coup in 1982, when General Ershad came to power, history repeated itself. A new party was floated, and Islam as state religion found its way into the Constitution. The nail in the coffin for Secularism was now firmly established.

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