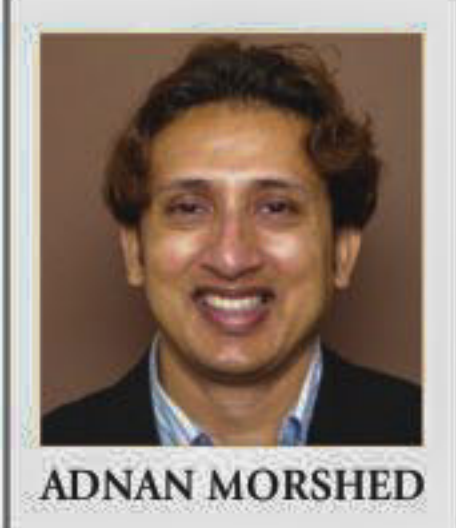


A monument of Bangladesh and the world



ADNAN MORSHED

THE month of December in Bangladesh is a time of remembrance and reflection. The country's independence in that month in 1971 was followed by a yearning to memorialise the heroism and sacrifice of the freedom fighters. On December 16, 1982, 11 years after Bangladesh became an independent country, the National Martyrs' Monument was inaugurated. Located at Savar, an industrial suburb about 22 miles northwest of Dhaka, the monument now stands as an iconic structure, encapsulating the nation's gratitude toward the men and women who sacrificed their lives for the Bengalis' right to self-rule. In December every year, thus, the National Martyrs' Monument becomes the epicentre of the nation's collective rituals in celebrating nationhood.

The monument rises from a verdant land, somewhat reminiscent of the ruinous mound of the ancient city of Pundranagarin Mahasthan, Bogra. The first phase of the project was initiated in 1972, when the government acquired nearly 110 acres. The main complex required 84 acres of land, while the remaining area was allocated for a land-water greenbelt. Access roads were created during the first phase. Mass graves, helipads, parking spaces, and pavements were constructed during the second phase, between 1974 and 1982. Construction of the main monument, greenbelt, and cafeteria, occurred in the third phase, in 1982.

With a heavyweight jury, including architect Muzharul Islam, a national design competition for the monument took place in 1978. (The previous attempt didn't yield any satisfactory results.) A 26-year-old architect, Syed Mainul Hossain (1952-2014), won the competition from a pool of 57 participants. As legend has it, Hossain's design was the jury's unanimous choice: it captured most poignantly the new nation's aspiration



National Martyrs' Monument of Bangladesh.

through an elemental composition of converging planes, achieving a sublime gesture of ascension. However, the pyramidal icon was not conceived as a stand-alone sculptural structure. Rather, the complex was designed as a holistic landscape, a sort of geometric tapestry weaving together green areas, water, walkways, bricks, and concrete, all culminating into a soaring monument. From the main northern entrance, the visitor is presented with a strong axial visual connection to the monument. Yet, the journey toward it is deliberately jagged and uneven, unlike, for instance, that of the Taj Mahal, where the approach to the Mughal marble tomb continues along the axis. The tortuous path to the National Monument

appears to symbolise the nation's difficult path to self-rule, as well as the challenging journey that lies ahead. This winding passage also allows the visitor to see the monument from multiple perspectives, experiencing its dramatically differing configurations depending on the viewing location. To many, the visual magic of the National Martyrs' Monument lies in its optical illusion, perhaps a Picasso-esque cubist twist to what "nation" means. Part of this illusion stems from the plan of the monument itself. Seen frontally, it appears to be one structure, while in reality, it is not. The plan of the monument is an arrangement of seven, independent standing concrete plates. Each is an isosceles triangle, but with different dimensions in height and

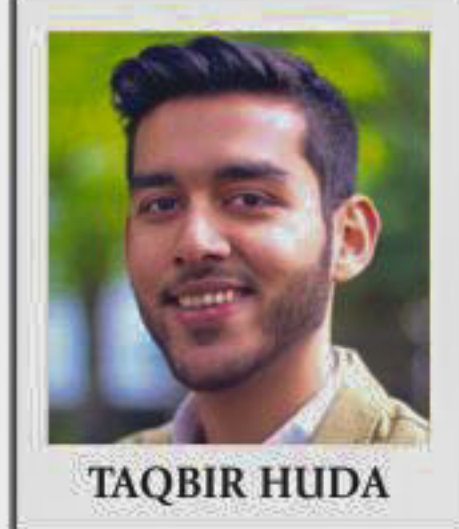
base. The plates are folded in the middle at a 90 degree angle. The highest plate (150 feet) has the shortest base (20 feet), and the shortest plate has the longest base (130 feet). The folded plates are placed one after another at a parallel spacing of 9 feet, 2 inches. The highest plate is at the front, and the shortest is at the back. This configuration creates two powerful parabolic curves that majestically rise toward the sky, when seen from the front. Yet, to a circumnavigating spectator, the National Monument presents a singular frozen architectural expression. From the side, the parabolic drama morphs into seven progressively rising triangles. What remains constant is the feeling of ascension. Numerology plays a crucial role in the composition of the National Monument, recalling the organising principles of such

archetypal structures as the Athenian Parthenon, in which numbers were seen as the philosophical foundation of ideal architectural beauty and proportion. The magic number at the National Monument is 7, which is the number of landmark movements between 1952 and 1971, the period of Bangladesh's nationalist struggle. For instance, among others, the Language Movement in 1952 contains 5+2=7; December 16, the day of independence in 1971, has 1+6=7; and there were 7 *birsreshito* (war heroes) who sacrificed their lives for the cause of liberation. Even so, the numerical composition of the National Monument seems less important than the overall experience of its captivating and illusive geometry. And, ultimately, even this geometry seems less important to the evocation of meditative remembrance that it inspires. In 1988, architect Syed Mainul Hossain received the *Ekushey Padak*, one of the highest civilian honours of the country, for creating a monument that continues to uplift the spirit of the nation. Yet, the architect's life had been tragic. He spent the last years of his life in complete self-isolation and anonymity, due to some kind of mental illness, perhaps paranoid schizophrenia. The architect's haunting final years remind us of Ernest Hemingway's provocative suggestion that there is a mysterious correlation between genius and melancholia. As much as it tells the story of Bangladesh's journey to independence, the National Martyrs' Monument narrates a beautifully choreographed architectural story. It should rank among the finest monuments in the world.

The writer is an architect, architectural historian, and urbanist, and teaches in Washington, DC, and is the author of *Impossible Heights: Skyscrapers, Flight, and the Master Builder* (2015) and *Oculus: A Decade of Insights into Bangladeshi Affairs* (2012).

Photo: Nasir Khan Saikat (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_National_Martyrs'_Monument_of_Bangladesh.jpg), "The National Martyrs Monument of Bangladesh", <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/legalcode>

Birangonas: The liberators left unliberated



TAQBIR HUDA

THE 16th day of this month marked the 46th Victory Day of my beloved country, Bangladesh. I could write a jovial, hyper patriotic and reassuring Victory Day piece, but I will not. Instead, I am going to use this opportunity to touch upon a topic that has long been deemed to be too 'unworthy' of our acknowledgement, too 'dirty' to infiltrate our conscience and too 'impure' to fill the pages of our history books. That is the story of the Birangonas, our forgotten female freedom fighters, who fought not with weapons but with their bodies. In the Bangladesh Liberation War that lasted nine months, it is estimated that members of the Pakistani military and local collaborators raped between 200,000-400,000 Bangladeshi women. However, even such a high number is believed to be a conservative estimate by Dr. Geoffrey Davis, the Australian abortion specialist who volunteered his medical services to Bangladesh in 1972. It is important to note that rape on such a mass scale was not merely incidental, rather it was deliberately organised to function as a weapon of war. Bengali females ranging from eight-year-old daughters to seventy-five year-old grandmothers were abducted and confined in Pakistani military barracks, where they were raped repeatedly, which often ended in murder ('Why is the mass sexualized violence of Bangladesh's Liberation War being ignored?', Anushay Hossain, *The New York Times*, March 2016). The ultimate aim of this vicious campaign is believed to have been to disenfranchise and tarnish the vertebrae of Bengali society, i.e. their women, to

wipe out the reproducers of future Bengali generations, akin to the targeted killings of Bengali intellectuals (Dr. Nusrat Rabbie; *Ami Birangona Bolchi* (The War Heroine Speaks), Dr. Nilima Ibrahim). Survivors describe how females were "strapped to green banana trees and repeatedly gang raped. A few weeks later, they were strapped to the same trees and hacked to death" ('Bangladesh', *Women Under*

independence, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation, conferred the rape survivors the title of "Birangona" (war heroine), as a means to reintegrate the women into society with honour and respect. However, this failed as the public at large still viewed these women as a symbol of "social pollution" and shame, dishonoured and defiled by the abhorrent enemies beyond redemption

pay a large dowry. Those women who were 'lucky' enough to get married were usually maltreated, and the majority of men, once having received the dowry, abandoned their wives. For these women who were ostracised by society, abandoned by their husbands and even disowned by most of their own families, their lives were one of destitution. The plight of the Birangonas can be tragically

to infanticide or forcibly taken from their mothers and adopted by foreign nationals as no one wanted 'their polluted blood in this country' ('Extremely Violent Societies: Mass Violence in the Twentieth-Century World', Christian Gerlach, Cambridge University Press 2010). However, some mothers, unable to bring themselves to look at their 'impure' newborn children, did willingly give away their children to adoption. After fighting a long and harsh battle for recognition, 41 Birangonas finally received official recognition of 'Freedom Fighters' by the state in 2015. As welcome as this change may be, it must not be forgotten that these women have already lived the better part of their lives in utter misery and stigmatisation. Furthermore, 41 is an awfully minuscule number, not even coming remotely close to covering one percent of the total number of Birangonas, even if the lower estimate of 200,000 is taken into consideration. Even though Jatio Muktiyuddha Council promises that "all the Birangonas will be recognised in due course of time," the fact remains that most of them have already died and those who are still alive may not live to see it, given the state of bureaucracy. So while terminology and legal classifications may be reversible, the lives that these women have led as a result of our misdoings in the past remain irreversible. They lived and died as liberators who were failed to be liberated. For indeed, justice delayed is justice denied. Therefore, I remain unable to wholeheartedly partake in rejoicing our Victory Day, for I strongly believe that until the Birangonas receive the honour, respect and heed that is so truly deserved and so long overdue, our 'liberation' remains somewhat self-serving, un-inclusive and incomplete.

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Victim, Oil on Canvas, Aminul Islam

Siege Project, Hirche Lent Michele, February 2012). The systematic campaign of this kind of genocidal rape was spearheaded by certain West Pakistani religious leaders who issued fatwas which categorised Bengali women as *gonimoter maal* (war booty) in a convoluted attempt to give their barbaric war strategy an aura of religious legitimacy. After Bangladesh attained

('Ravished women of 1971: For whom the bell tolls', *The Daily Star*, December 2013). Consequently, the term *Birangona* became more and more associated with the derogatory term *barangona* (prostitute), and these women came to be viewed as the spoils of war. An official strategy of marrying the women off was largely unsuccessful as not many men came forward, and the few who did expected the state to

juxtaposed with those deemed worthy of being officially recognised as 'freedom fighters' who were not only revered by society but also received state benefits such as a monthly stipend, medical care and reserved quotas for their descendants in public recruitment and enrollment in educational institutions. As for the thousands of children borne out of the rapes, they were either subject

QUOTEABLE Quote

EMILY DICKINSON
AMERICAN POET

“Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul - and sings the tunes without the words - and never stops at all.”

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Zodiac dozen
6 Small statue
10 Hike route
11 Unmoving
13 Stallone role
14 Seoul setting
15 Money machine
16 That woman
18 That woman
19 Upper-most part of a ship
22 King, in Latin
23 Hold power
24 Diner lists
27 Scooter's kin
28 Yale students
29 Uncooked
30 Marine, informally
35 Fall behind
36 French friend
37 Fellow
38 Radio station sign
40 Not oblivious
42 Not as good
43 Unsophisticated
44 Ewes' mates

45 Gives the onceover

DOWN

1 Sipping aid
2 Hopping mad
3 Letter after beta
4 Pen point
5 Spills clumsily
6 Chopper rider
7 One, for Juan
8 Dish out
9 Cloying sentiment
12 Failed in a big way
17 Spell
20 Confidence
21 Inundate
24 Laid-back
25 Mrs. Roosevelt
26 River with famous falls
27 Pitcher Rivera
29 "Losing My Religion" band
31 Rabbits' kin
32 Some messages
33 Cut with precision
34 Leg joints
39 Belief, in brief
41 Funny fellow

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

ROBS GASP
GENRE ALTAR
OASIS MARIO
IMITATE IDO
NET MESSKIT
GRETTEL LENS
OSAKA
CHOP VIPERS
ROPED IN LET
ELI OVERATE
ADAGE TETON
METER INERT
METS COST

BEETLE BAILEY
by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES
by Kirkman & Scott