

PILKHANA CARNAGE

How do we define justice?

SAQUIB RAHMAN

HAVING fallen in my life's greatest dungeon of despair nine years ago, I am writing this with a heavy heart. Every now and then in national dailies, I would highlight the military and educational achievements of my martyred father Col Quadrat Elahi, who was believed by those who knew him well to have been destined to reach the highest level of his career. For someone who had graduated with flying colours from IBA, Dhaka University, received a medal of gallantry from UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and many more, perhaps it was the will of the Almighty that He took my father at the zenith of his life. This particular piece, however, contains merely my personal observations.

Following the High Court verdict on November 27, 2017, I was faced with a common question from journalists and friends as to whether I, as an ill-fated family member, received justice. I thought to dedicate a few sentences to answer the question, which requires that I discuss the broadly categorised schools of thoughts that grew over the years in light of the carnage, trials, and justice.

Bangladesh versus international "human rights"

At first, I am uncertain as to how many of us agree with opinions by the international organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Whereas their stance against the death penalty (which, according to them, violates human rights) and the mass penal trial of BDR Jawans conducted in Bangladeshi courts kept strengthening, they failed to provide a solution as to how, according to their standards, a trial of such barbarian acts would be satisfactory. Local rights organisations have since the beginning been reporting tortures of BDR Jawans inside the prison cell; however, I wonder if they would ever openly express their viewpoint, differing from other Bangladeshi laymen, who I doubt are ready to accept the abolishment of capital punishment, given the culture of impunity by the high and mighty in the country. Fifty-seven Bangladesh Army officers were killed in the massacre, people bred by the



A girl is comforted by her mother after she offered prayers for her uncle who was killed in the 2009 BDR carnage.

STAR FILE PHOTO

taxpayers who pray that offenders receive the highest degree of punishment, in spite of the way the international organisations choose to define "human rights." Thus, Bangladesh, I would like to believe, remains united here.

However, justifying in every possible way that the bloody Pilkhana incident was a failure of the government, in many instances, has become a political tool for some. A common question they tend to throw is, why the military was not allowed inside the Pilkhana premises on time (or at all), referring to past instances when timely action by the uniformed had saved lives. They feel that the trials are a farce, but never publicly stated anything to discredit that, probably fearing contempt of court, or more likely, due to lack of substantial evidence.

On the other hand, the government mainly focuses on two aspects. Firstly, they deem their decision of not letting

the military handle the mutiny to be a judicious one, saying such a decision had, according to them, significantly reduced the possibility of civilian casualties, both in and outside Pilkhana on the day of the tragedy.

Secondly, the government takes credit for successfully making arrangements to hold the largest criminal trial in the history of the world. They refute arguments from the opposition, saying that the mass killing was a conspiracy to destabilise the government. They now have cleaner hands, considering the fact that a local Awami League leader, Torab Ali, who the trial court in 2013 had convicted and given life imprisonment due to his alleged involvement with the carnage, has been acquitted by the High Court. The full text of the High Court verdict would better explain the reasons for his acquittal. Supporters of this school of

thought believe that the nation has witnessed unbiased justice. They believe that the judiciary is independent, and the trials and the verdicts given during their tenure give them a sense of accomplishment.

I am not a politician. Neither do I possess the expertise to comment on how better the mutiny could have been tackled. Regarding trials, it would be unfair to say that families of the victims did not receive justice. But for such unnecessary and cowardly killings, it is not, or should not be, a matter of glee that the perpetrators are being tried. It is only normal that they should expect punishment, and of the highest degree, where applicable. However, it is noticeable that the level of sensation that the verdicts (of both courts) were expected to create was absent. Somehow the general people, other than the staunch supporters of either of the two

views above, seem to be oblivious.

I think the reason for this is that the laymen are of the opinion that there were men behind the guns who are yet to be unveiled. Unsure of what reasons they might have had to be involved in such bloodshed, or who they are, but certainly it was not the BDR Jawans alone. Thus, my honest answer would be, yes, I have received justice, but partially.

By now, I am exhausted. I feel that demanding the trial of the conspirators will be a cry in the wilderness. The only beacon of hope is that the ocean of tears of the families of the victims will fall on the plotters from the Creator Himself. If earthly justice is denied, justice from the Omnipotent will never spare anyone, today or tomorrow.

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