

INTELLECTUALS AND THE STATE

Martyrs, conformists and the servile



Rayer Bazar killing fields.

PHOTO: KISHORE PAREKH

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The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing.

--Albert Einstein

December 14 is a tragic landmark in Bangladesh's struggle for statehood. Only a couple of days prior to the final victory over the barbarous Pakistani occupation force, a number of illustrious academics, journalists, artists and other professionals were rounded up from their homes or workplaces, blindfolded, taken to makeshift internment camps, and subsequently slaughtered in cold blood in various parts of the country.

Faced with impending defeat at the direction of its political high-ups, the newly formed Al-Badr force, composed of members of the student wing of the notorious Jamaat-e-Islami, executed a well thought-out plan to exterminate scores of top-ranking Bengali intellectuals. Corpses of some victims were subsequently recovered from marshy lands or shallow mass graves, while many others remain "disappeared" until this day. Mutilated bodies of those found only manifest the intense abhorrence of the perpetrators of what these enlightened intellectuals stood for. This targeted group carnage was the last ditch effort of the retreating Pakistani army and their local cohorts to break the back-

bone of the soon-to-be-born nation.

So, why were those intellectuals targeted? Why did they have to pay the ultimate price with their lives? What threat did they pose to the state? They were non-combatants but then why did the enemy find it incumbent to eliminate them at the fag end of the war?

The answer is simple. The martyred intellectuals were freethinkers. Their weapon was no less lethal than the guns of the freedom fighters. They stood for ideas and principles that challenged the status quo that the state wanted to maintain. In an authoritarian dispensation, they championed the cause of democracy so that the true owners of the state, the people would have their say in running its affairs. These liberals stood for unfettered enjoyment of fundamental rights, including those of freedom of expression, association and assembly. They rejected various state ploys to control the media in the garb of protecting national integrity and public morality, and maintaining law and order. As thought leaders they strongly favoured a clear distinction between politics and religion; and argued that the latter should be a private matter of individuals and groups. As secularists they opposed the policy of appeasement of clerics and bigots in politics and education, and stood for the establishment of equal rights of men and women in both public and private domains. They demanded autonomy of educational institutions from state control. A section of these intellectuals was vocal against the dominance of the so-called

'twenty-two families' in an economy that worked against merit and fair competition, stifling the growth of a national bourgeoisie. They derided and opposed rampant corruption. Conscious of the discriminatory policies pursued by Islamabad, they demanded full provincial autonomy and fair share of state resources that was quite skewed in favour of West Pakistan and the Punjab in particular.

The progressives among this lot stood for establishing a society that would reflect the aspirations of the vast majority, the working people; their right to form association and collective bargaining. They also demanded distribution of khas land among the landless and higher wages and better terms for the landless and the sharecroppers respectively. They acknowledged that the state had failed miserably to uphold the interests of the national minority groups: religious, ethnic and linguistic, and thus demanded affirmative action for the members of those groups to advance.

While resentment was brewing among the people, particularly in the eastern wing of Pakistan, General Ayub Khan, the Pakistani military dictator, tried to sell his success as moderniser, pitching the idea of 'Decade of Development'. This was the last straw for the people to bear, they revolted. Among others, it was these intellectuals who helped frame that resistance by articulating the desire for a society that valued democracy, rule of law, equality, fairness and dignity of labour.

Echoing the demands of the people that the martyred intellectuals upheld the

Proclamation of Bangladesh's Independence issued by the Provisional Government on 10 April 1971 stipulated that the new state would "ensure for the people of Bangladesh equality, human dignity and social justice". These issues figured prominently during the course of the Bangladesh Constituent Assembly debates in 1972. Members of the Assembly time and again underscored the need for setting a participatory democratic order and accountable government that would be respectful to human rights and the rule of law. They also acknowledged that everyone should be treated equally and no one would enjoy special privilege for belonging to a particular faith, class, creed, gender etc.

Accordingly the Constitution that came into effect on December 16, 1972 pledged that "high ideals of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism ... shall be the fundamental principles of the Constitution". It further guaranteed that "it shall be a fundamental aim of the State to realise through the democratic process to socialist society, free from exploitation- a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, ... will be secured for all citizens".

Thus the Preamble of the Constitution, the supreme law of the land, appeared to have secured the long drawn people's aspiration for a truly democratic order based on the principles of 'equality, human dignity and social justice'. Unfortunately, that elevated expectation turned out to be largely misplaced.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6