

50 years of Bangladesh’s independence

We must forge ahead to build a fairer society

Today is a momentous day in our nation’s history as we observe the 50 years of our existence as an independent country. Fifty years ago, in the face of a brutal massacre by the Pakistani military, the freedom-loving people of this land gave their all to oppose that evil with their righteous courage and succeeded in giving us a monumental victory. As we celebrate our golden jubilee of independence, we recognise that this privilege that we enjoy is a fruit of their sacrifice and we salute them for that. Alongside the valiant freedom fighters and all the men and women who sacrificed so much to free us from the oppressive Pakistani regime, we pay our deepest respect to the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, for his unparalleled role in steering Bangladesh to its brightest moment—and the four national leaders who played a key role in the formation of the Mujibnagar government that guided the Liberation War.

Unfortunately, even on this big day, we are having to reign in our celebrations due to the resurgence of the coronavirus pandemic. The pandemic has already caused immense damage to our economy and the lives and livelihoods of countless people for almost a year now. It has also exposed many of our shortcomings as a nation. To begin with, it has illustrated the great inequalities that exist in our society, which betrays the spirit of our Liberation War. Therefore, now would be a good time to critically re-examine how well we have guarded the dreams for which our freedom fighters so nobly laid down their lives, and to retake the pledge to honour their memory by working to establish a just society, where all men, women and children are free and equal.

Aside from the grave inequality, the lack of political maturity that is holding us back from becoming a stable democracy, the widespread corruption and nepotism, are all problems that we must overcome going forward. However, if we look back, we also see how far we have come and the great things we have achieved. This only emboldens us as we embark upon another exciting new journey to not only turn Bangladesh into a prosperous country, but also one where every individual can prosper.

Get the Covid-19 vaccine – it’s safe

Govt. must create more awareness to counter misgivings

Bangladeshi-born British scientist, Dr Khondoker Mehedi Akram, is the latest expert to reassure us that the Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine, or Covishield, is safe for use and does not have serious side-effects such as blood clots. In his recent interview with this daily, the scientist reiterated the findings of the European Medicines Agency (EMA), under the European Union, which had dismissed reports of blood clots in Covishield vaccine recipients earlier this month. On March 23, the National Adverse Events Following Immunization (AEFI) committee in India also came to the same conclusion, after having analysed at least 400 major side-effects during the country’s ongoing vaccination drive.

While it is normal for people to be apprehensive about new vaccines, meant to prevent a relatively new and deadly disease such as the coronavirus, it is also essential that informed safety reassurances from experts are extensively relayed to the general population. As the number of daily infections in the country is rising exponentially, turnouts at the vaccination centres are not. There are a number of reasons for people not getting the vaccines, not the least of which are the complicated registration process and lack of promotion of the vaccine among the public.

The process of an online registration through the website surokkha.gov.bd is certainly simple, but only for the minority of the population who are able to access and navigate the Internet easily. There is also the issue of many people not having their National Identification (NID) cards, a document that is necessary and not substitutable when registering for the vaccine.

We believe the authorities need to act quickly to dispel misgivings regarding Covid-19 and its vaccine, and that there should also be extensive campaigning to make people more aware about the vaccine’s many benefits (which far outweigh its risks and side-effects, according to the EMA). Additionally, the registration process should be made far simpler than what it is now, so that those in rural and remote areas are also able to be inoculated. At the end of the day, the goal should be to get most of the population vaccinated against this deadly infection as quickly as possible.

LETTERS
TO THE EDITOR

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Prevent price hike during Ramadan

The holy month of Ramadan is going to start in the middle of April. Muslims around the world observe the rituals of this month with due importance. Unfortunately, in our country, the arrival of Ramadan also means increased prices of grocery items. This has been happening since as far back as I can remember. I urge the authorities as well as traders and businessmen to do everything possible to keep the costs of essentials within the reach of the people. Otherwise, ordinary citizens like me who have been badly affected by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic would have to face further financial hardships.

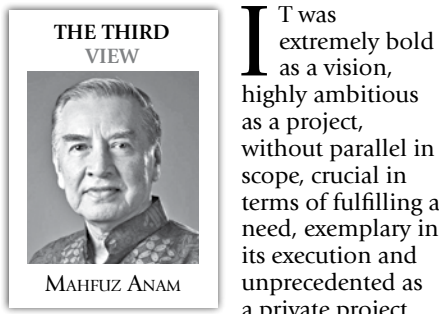
Md Rasel Sheikh, Uttara

EDITORIAL

25TH ANNIVERSARY OF MUKTIJUDDHO JADUGHAR

Celebrating our ‘activist museum’

On the occasion of the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence, Mahfuz Anam takes a look at the momentous journey of the Muktiyuddho Jadughar (Liberation War Museum).



It was extremely bold as a vision, highly ambitious as a project, without parallel in scope, crucial in terms of fulfilling a need, exemplary in its execution and unprecedented as a private project in which people’s participation was the main driving force. But most importantly, it was something for which there was a deep yearning, a thirst in our people. They wanted an objective, non-partisan and authentic record of our historic journey culminating with our most glorious act as a people—achieving freedom and an independent state for ourselves.

I am, of course, talking about the Liberation War Museum (LWM) whose 25th anniversary we observed only a few days ago, on March 22, 2021.

With the assassination of Bangabandhu and military takeover of the government—first by a murderous group, and later by General Ziaur Rahman as the head of the army—a malicious revisionist tendency became discernible whose underlying purpose appeared to be rewriting the history of our Liberation War. Its most shameful and disgusting manifestation was that we could not directly say that Pakistan Army was instrumental in carrying out our genocide, but that a “hanadar bahini” (as if descending from the sky) was responsible for all the heinous crimes committed against our people. There was a long period when Sheikh Mujib could not be referred to as Bangabandhu and the sad day of his brutal murder would only be observed by Awami League and that too in a hush-hush manner, mostly within the premises of the party office. History was being revised—subtly and crudely—both in terms of our culture and language, which played such a vital role in rejuvenating our nationalistic aspirations, and also in terms of personalities who inspired and led us to the battle. Suddenly, the language movement of 1952 with all its associated impact on our literature, music, song, dance, etc. was made to appear as of peripheral importance, and the observance of the Bengali New Year, Pahela Baishakh, was turned into a near anti-national act as it was falsely implied to be anti-religious. Our glorious Liberation War with its long history of gestation and evolution was condensed into a few flimsy events in which the real heroes were absent and some uniformed ones became central.

The LWM is not only a museum that kept history intact but also one that, through its various activities and initiatives, strengthened the values and spirit for which the people of Bangladesh struggled for so long—values of freedom, democracy, secularism, diversity of cultures and an inclusive way of life.

Sadly, this continued till the early nineties, even after the restoration of democracy in 1991. This is when a few activist-friends came together to chalk out what can be done to preserve the history of the emergence of Bangladesh, especially the history of the Liberation War. Thus was born, in 1995, the founding trustee group consisting of Aly Zaker, Dr. Sarwar Ali, Mofidul Hoque, Asaduzzaman Noor, Rabiul Hussain, Ziauddin Tariq Ali, Akku Chowdhury, and Sara Zaker, the only woman to grace the group. The idea of a museum was not their first choice, but eventually they decided to go for it. Those of us who have known them all were a bit surprised at the combination especially as none of them were known to have even the remotest idea what setting up a museum entailed, let alone how to set it up and run it.

So when they announced their plan to launch a specialised museum dedicated to preserving the memories of the most important event in the nation’s history and to promoting that history to the new generations, naturally, all of us were elated but not without a nagging feeling as to whether they would actually be able to pull it off. Twenty-five years later, there is no doubt that they did so in a stunning and most praiseworthy manner.

If I may borrow from the title of a very popular film of our younger days, “The Magnificent Seven” (1960), the eight founding trustees of the Liberation War Museum can be termed as “The Magnificent Eight”, for what they did was not only unique, necessary and extremely important but also quite unprecedented and extraordinary in our history. In a culture where dependence on the government or a big private donor is assumed to be the *sine qua non*—an indispensable precondition—for setting up any major public institution (like a museum), to have the vision and courage to execute such an undertaking through public donations was indeed bold and ambitious and also reflective of their singular conviction that their goal was bound to succeed. In fact, the trustees were so confident that they adopted a deliberate policy of not allowing a few donors to monopolise the funding and rather opting for small public donations as its main source of support.

This was an inspired decision that lies at the core of the museum’s success in engendering in people a sense of

importance that were not known (or known only locally) previously. These now became nationally recognised historic events, much to the satisfaction of local freedom fighters and the families of those who were martyred. This added to the overall richness of the newly founded museum, giving them a crucial momentum and much-needed self-confidence to carry on their work.

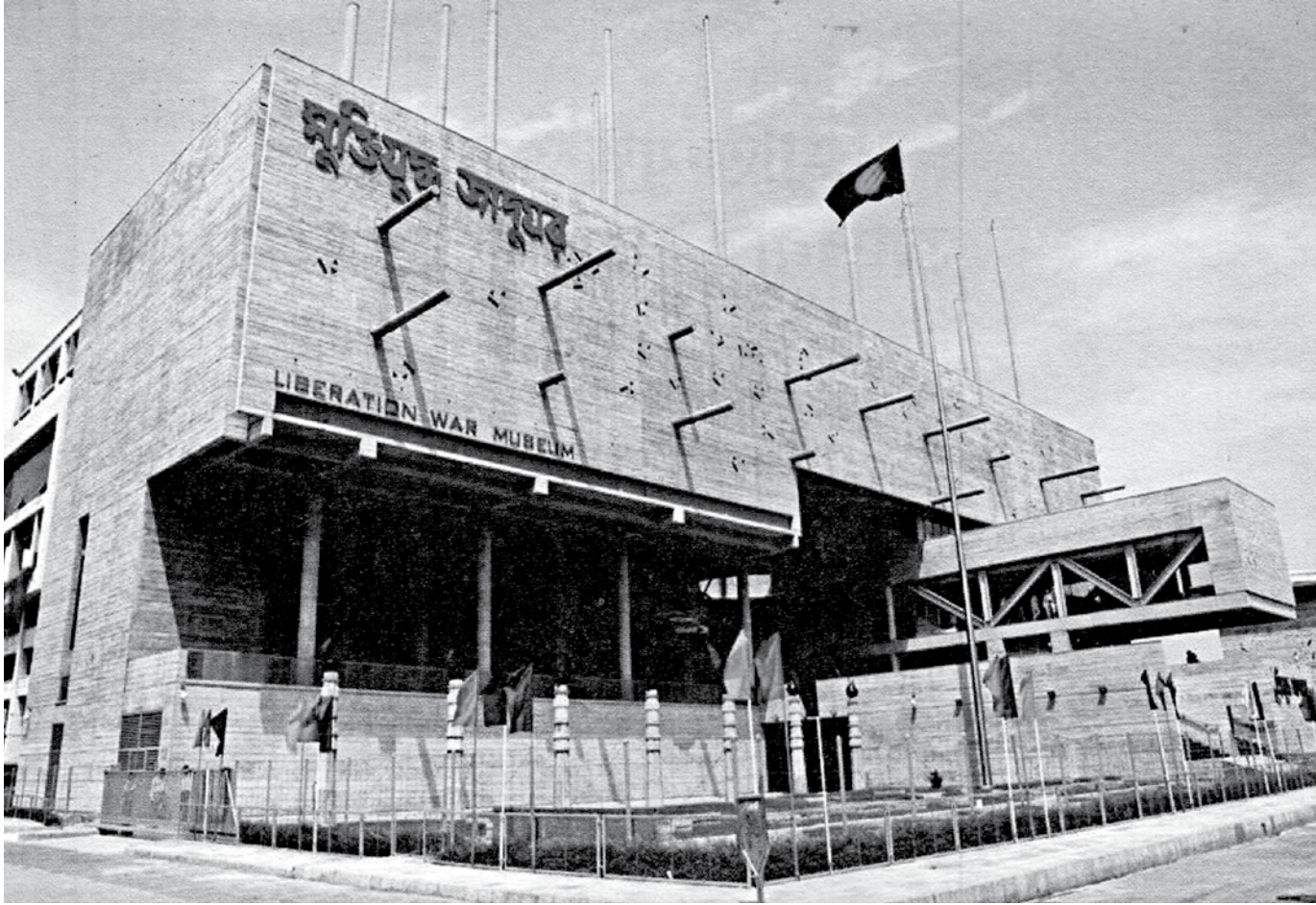
As the museum became a national institution and drew more and more display items, the thought of having a permanent abode for these invaluable artefacts started taking root in the minds of the founders. By this time their confidence had grown, as had their experience and international connections, which were vitally needed if they were to build a modern and functional museum comparable to the ones that existed elsewhere.

It was during the tenure of the last caretaker government that plans were finalised and towards the fag end of his rule as Chief Advisor, Fakhruddin Ahmed issued a “letter of intent” from the government for a land plot in Agargaon,

With its expansion, its operational cost skyrocketed. Running a museum is a highly specialised affair requiring a level of technical sophistication that most visitors would never know about. Experienced staff requires higher pay and constant upgradation of their skills requires training, which needs money.

For its independence to be real in the long run, it needs a reasonably large endowment fund, to which the trustees are now focusing their attention. Given their successful track record, demonstrated abilities and reputation of integrity, that should not be a huge problem especially when our economy is growing.

This group of “magnificent eight”—seven men and one woman—have pulled off a near-miracle. In my view, their achievement is unmatched and unmatchable. They had set up the museum to preserve the authentic history of our liberation war at a time when we were facing the threat of a state-sponsored revisionist narrative. They commenced their journey when the environment was quite apathetic, if not hostile. “What is the



A view of the Liberation War Museum building in Agargaon, Dhaka.

COURTESY: LIBERATION WAR MUSEUM

ownership of the project, which triggered an immediate outpouring of support for it. The gamble paid off, and collecting funds for the LWM became like a public cause, almost a movement of sorts. As if giving donations was a way of expressing solidarity with the freedom struggle, and both those who participated directly in the war and those who could not, for various reasons, poured their heart out by being involved with it.

A museum cannot be built in a day, and once built, it cannot be intended for a generation or two. It must last forever, or at least, for the foreseeable future if it is to fulfil its purpose. And when the purpose is perpetuation of history, it must be based on as much of objective truth and facts as it is possible. Thus, the trustees were clear in their minds that the museum must be non-partisan and far above the party lines that were tearing our democratic institutions asunder. It must also be outside the control of the government which, in a democracy, is bound to change with the political wind blowing in one direction or the other.

So, if they were to be non-partisan and outside the control of the government, and fully based on public support, they first needed to earn that support. The trustees were conscious that asking for donations from the start would most likely backfire. They would have to demonstrate their determination, expertise and organisational skills to set up and run a museum and build their credibility before they could expect the public to trust them with donations. So they put up the seed money and, with the help of some close friends, rented a house at Segunbagicha in central Dhaka, refurbished it, and set up a small but full-fledged museum. This was itself a very creditable accomplishment. With no practical knowledge and training of setting up and running a museum, the founding trustees did a highly praiseworthy job, showing once again that “if there is will, there is a way”, and earning that crucial credibility and the resultant public trust.

The launch was an immediate success and people flocked to their support, which grew from a trickle into a torrent as time went by. Perhaps the most heartening development for the trustees was that Muktijoddha families from remote areas started to bring mementos of their own role in the Liberation War and those of their loved ones who died in the fight. Thus, the LWM became a magnet that drew in war-related artefacts from all over the country. This helped to bring out many incidents of crucial

where the museum is now located.

Sheikh Hasina’s return to power in 2009 greatly facilitated the process of formalisation and the work on construction started in real earnest, finishing in April 2017. In the meantime, the LWM had developed their own international resource base with the formation of an eight-member “International Coalition of Sites of Conscience” consisting of museums from the US, South Africa, Czech Republic and some other countries. There were occasional consultants and visiting scholars and museum experts who extended their helping hands, but there was one—Barbara Fahs Charles of Staples & Charles Ltd, Washington—who took the project as her own. Her help was constant and her commitment to the LWM went far beyond the call of any professional duty.

The LWM was not only a museum that kept history intact but also one that, through its various activities and initiatives, strengthened the values and spirit for which the people of Bangladesh struggled for so long—values of freedom, democracy, secularism, diversity of cultures and an inclusive way of life. The LWM became, so to speak, an “activist museum” which is where its unique and special value lay. For this purpose, it had reached out to thousands of schools, colleges and universities, and held programmes of awareness building in all the districts and upazilas of the country. Students, teachers, civil society members, professional groups, all came together in creating the mass awareness that became its crucial driving force, earning the adoration and love of the people of the country. It is this emotional bond with the people that can be termed as the LWM’s greatest achievement, and the key to its extraordinary success.

It was during the AL’s first government in 1996 that the budgetary allocation of a modest sum for running its expenses was made by the then finance minister, SAMS Kibria. This continued during all successive governments including that of Khaleda Zia. Sheikh Hasina has been a crucial patron of the museum and her personal patronage has been of great importance. One trustee recalled how, as the opposition leader, back in the formative stage of the museum in early 1996, she exhibited her support and confidence for this new venture by donating the iconic pipe, black-framed glasses, and some items of clothing of Bangabandhu to the nascent LWM. Since then, her support has been continuous and ever-growing.

use of preserving the past when our future looks uncertain” would have been the most constant refrain in those days when our economic prospects did not look so bright. But they braved all the external scepticism and internal inadequacies and set up a magnificent monument embodying the nation’s finest hour.

A doctor, a mechanical engineer, an architect, three stage personalities, a book publisher and a young professional would hardly make for a good combination to create the most enduring and invaluable monument to the history of our Liberation War. But they did, and magnificently so. In a country where political divides dominate everything, where group dynamics are extremely fragile, and where jealousy and misunderstanding destroy many superb beginnings, this group of eight endured, persevered and performed in a way that was not only unique but also exemplary. Each one of them developed their expertise in specific areas as the need arose—Dr. Sarwar Ali supervised finance, Sara and Aly Zaker focused on fundraising, Ziauddin Tariq Ali coordinated the whole construction of the new building, Mofidul Hoque, assisted by Amena Khatun, headed the Curation Team, Rabiul Hussain coordinated with the Institute of Architects Bangladesh and managed the complicated task of design completion, and Asaduzzaman Noor and Akku Chowdhury looked after the overall management and execution of LWM.

On the occasion of the golden jubilee of Bangladesh’s independence, we pay tribute to the trustees of the LWM, their staff, all the volunteers who gave and continue to give their time so generously, all those institutions and individuals who directly or indirectly assisted the project, and the people of Bangladesh who took ownership and made it happen for giving us an institution that helps us relive our days of dreams, passion, valour, glory, and sacrifice and ensures that the future generations will not only remember the freedom fighters for their sacrifice but also draw inspiration from the museum to build the Sonar Bangla of our dreams. Happy silver jubilee of the Muktiyuddho Jadughar and a sincere thank you to the founding trustees.

Postscript:

During the pandemic, we lost three of the trustees—Aly Zaker, Rabiul Hussain and Ziauddin Tariq Ali. Our deepest respect to these dreamers and doers who made the LWM a living reality.

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