



The mass grave in Ataikula village of Naogaon's Raninagar upazila.

Words unsaid, wounds deep

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"We hope the official recognition will come shortly," said Goutam.

ATAIKULA MASSACRE

Some 70km from Rajshahi city, Ataikula is by the river Chhoto Jamuna.

In 1971, this river was the only communication to the village, where around 115 Hindu families of Paul, Sutradhar, and Saha lived.

Among them, some 15 families were affluent farmers while the others were either small farmers or potters who used to manufacture brick tiles and clay materials.

On April 25, some 150 Pakistani forces and their collaborators reached Ataikula by six boats and raided the village for eight hours starting from 9:00am.

They gathered 60 males at the house of one Jogendranath Paul.

They divided the males into two groups -- those who agreed to provide money and gold willingly, and those who were unable to give any. They opened fire on the second group first

and then on the other group with light machine guns.

The 52 people shot to death were buried together near Jogendranath's house after the army and collaborators left.

It was not possible to observe the Hindu rituals for the funeral of the dead as the houses were burned and almost everything was looted by the occupation forces.

Eight men survived, some with bullet wounds and some unhurt.

Pradyut Paul, then an SSC candidate, who lost his father, an uncle, and three brothers in the mass killing, is one of the survivors.

"I stayed low avoiding the bullets," Pradyut said, adding he was among the group who had no money to give to the Pakistanis.

"Hundreds of bullets flew over my head. A wounded man fell over me. He asked me to remain silent," he added.

"The place was flooded with blood and we saw blood draining into the river. The Chhoto Jamuna turned all red."

Pradyut said the Pakistani military men were divided over the tortures and rapes.

"The attackers included Punjabis, Biharis, and those who were from Baluchistan. The Beluch ones were against rapes, torture, and robbery."

He heard local Bangalee razakars gossiping about this divide among the Pakistani officials.

"We were here for war. But how can this be a war? Instead of fighting a war, we are torturing these simple unarmed villagers," Pradyut quoted a Beluch officer as telling a Punjabi officer.

"The Punjabi officer then shut him up saying it was an order from the high-ups."

Before the killing, the Pakistani military sought suggestions from their headquarters over radio.

"Ataikula is not a village, rather a town of big buildings. All dwellers here are malauns [derogatory term referring to Hindus] who have money and gold," he quoted a Pakistani official as speaking over the radio.

The male voice from the other side ordered killing everyone, said Pradyut, who understands Urdu.

Before gathering the men for killing, the Pakistani forces kept the women confined to their homes, Pradyut said.

"We know none of our adult women were spared. Some committed suicide, others attempted to. Many died unmarried."

The mass killing and the torture of the women of Ataikula and elsewhere moved the district's youths, said Prof Md Shariful Islam Khan, a freedom fighter and retired government principal from neighbouring Durgapur village.

"Most youths like me in the district later left our homes to join the war to free the motherland," he said.



The plaque inscribed with the names of the martyrs of Ataikula village.



Pradyut Paul



Girendranath Paul

The battle of Beni Commander

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What he saw that day shocked him, he said, "It injected in me the courage to take revenge."

Beni said they set up a temporary camp for freedom fighters at Banaripara's Burirbari area.

He described how, after an attack on their camp by the Pakistani forces, the guerrilla fighters escaped and ambushed a group of 50 policemen passing through a nearby area.

"The police forces were not prepared to fight against us as we launched the attack suddenly. So, they surrendered. They had 28 rifles with them, which we carried back to our Burirbari freedom fighters' camp," Beni said.

Recalling his guerrilla life, Beni said his group attacked Pakistani gunboats, Banaripara police station, and the EPR [East Pakistan Rifles] camp several times.

"With the aim to strengthen our force and launch tough attacks on the Pakistani forces, we set up temporary camps in Billabari, Burirbari, Narerkathi Bepari Bari, and in Rani Kamala's house in Banaripara," he added.

Over 150 freedom fighters, including several women, were in the guerrilla group locally known as "Beni Bahini". Some of them were martyred in battle.

Mohiuddin Ahmed Bir Pratik, one of the members of the Beni Bahini, said the Pakistani forces did not

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dare enter Jhalakathi Sadar upazila, Banaripara, and Swarupkathi, fearing attacks by the guerrillas. Another member of the guerrilla

group, Mujibul Haque said they employed hit and run tactics against the Pakistani forces.

The valiant freedom fighters succeeded in freeing Banaripara and its adjacent areas from enemies on November 27, 1971.

After the war, Beni was not able to return to teaching after independence, later engaging in agro-farming and other businesses.

He lives alone at Banaripara upazila headquarters after his wife's passing, with their only son in Dhaka.

Now 76, Beni expressed his frustration at the country's present situation.

"We fought for Sonar Bangla. But our country is still far away from reaching that dream."

Blood-soaked house of horror of 1971

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Now there is only a small dilapidated wall surrounding the graves and no official measures have been taken to preserve the site.

However, in 2010, the Sector Commanders Forum-Muktijuddho '71 of Khulna division erected a plaque inscribing the names of the 16 martyrs.

"We have long been demanding arrangements to preserve all the killing fields of Liberation War in the district," said freedom fighter Rafiqul Islam Tuku, former deputy commander of Kushtia District Muktijoddha Sangsad.

"What happened to the family in Kohinoor Villa is unspeakable. The authorities should preserve this site," he added.

Asked about it, Kushtia Municipality Mayor Anwar Ali, himself a freedom fighter, said, "Nobody from the family said anything about this [preserving the site] yet. But we will think about it."