

‘We must stand united to uphold the spirit of our Liberation War’

On the occasion of Victory Day, Mofidul Hoque, war crimes researcher and trustee of the Liberation War Museum, speaks to Shuprova Tasneem of The Daily Star about the incredible journey that Bangladesh has gone through, and what must be done to preserve that history.

We are celebrating 50 years of our victory this year. Being someone who lived through the war and celebrated this victory, what do you think is the significance of this milestone?

Celebrating 50 years of victory is definitely a milestone for any nation, and is especially so for Bangladesh. There are not too many examples in the world of freedom being achieved through such a bloody struggle against its oppressors.

Pakistan became an oppressive state from the very beginning of Partition, because it was founded on the two-nation theory. Being a religion-based communal state, it ideologically excluded all other identities. The Bengali nation, under Bangabandhu’s leadership, was liberated from Pakistan’s occupation on December 16, 1971, which re-established our rights. So the 50th anniversary of that victory and the freedom gained from that is



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

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definitely a big achievement to celebrate. Throughout this journey, the nation went through many ups and downs, but the basic values that we held on to gave the nation the strength to flourish.

There was a long period of darkness after the brutal assassination of Bangabandhu. There was denial and distortion of history, and the fundamental values of the nation were repressed—the very values that inspired us in our struggle for liberation. Our constitution was also not spared: the anti-communal ideologies were removed from it.

But Bangladesh has turned around and stayed strong to uphold the spirit of the Liberation War. It is really inspiring to see that the generations, born after 1971, played a significant role at some turning points of the country: The movement for the trial of the

war criminals under the leadership of Jahanara Imam, and the 2008 election, in which an overwhelming number of younger voters participated to give a mass verdict in favour of the spirit of liberation.

However, we must remember that while currently Bangladesh has many achievements in terms of economic development, we also have many failures in addressing various major issues, such as ensuring good governance and fighting against communalism and hatred. Social media has particularly become a place for hate campaigns. Corruption has also become a big issue. If we want to uphold the spirit of our Liberation War, we must stand united to re-establish the values and ideals that it was founded upon as well.

The trial of war criminals in Bangladesh has been a major achievement, but on an international level, there is still very little legal recognition of the 1971 genocide, and Pakistan has not apologised or even acknowledged it. What are your thoughts on this?

This is a difficult issue, and we need to be prepared to wage a long battle over this. We fought to establish our right as a nation; we have held trials at domestic tribunals for criminals who were the Pakistani’s local collaborators, and we are continuing to enforce justice and accountability. The International Crimes (Tribunals) Act, 1973, which

was enacted in our parliament, is a major achievement and a seminal legal document for the trial of the perpetrators of genocide, even when viewed from a global perspective.

But a fundamental question remains: How do we put on trial the major perpetrators—those who planned and executed the genocide? We have established our moral right through our own domestic tribunal, which is increasingly becoming accepted and appreciated internationally. The continuation of this work will be the trial of Pakistani war criminals.

There is the possibility of a symbolic trial—if we can conduct it on an international level. In terms of international courts, the major obstacle is that the International Criminal Court does not deal with retrospective justice; events that occurred before 2002 do not fall under their jurisdiction. So what will happen to such events?

There are examples of many countries that have now apologised for past atrocities. The latest one is by Germany for the Herero-Nama genocide in Namibia, for which they also agreed to pay reparations. And even this took about 100 years to fulfil. Justice is being delayed for sure, but we must stay vigilant that justice is not in any way denied. We need to keep the flame of truth and justice burning, and for this, we should also communicate with

Pakistan’s civil society to make our voices heard. It is now much easier to raise issues across borders via social media—we can use technology to conduct a vigorous campaign.

Some progress has been made in Pakistan. For example, Jahanara Imam’s “*Ektattor Dinguli*” has been translated into Urdu and published in Lahore. We need to ensure that such efforts are continued. This is a multifarious struggle, and I think we need to continue this struggle in a more serious and determined manner. Ultimately, I believe that we will prevail, and the new generation now has the greater responsibility to carry it forward.

You said previously that the war in 1971 was very much a fight against communalism. Are we still fighting this battle?

In 1947, a communal state was established, and we fought against a state ideology that was very much communal. The secular philosophy was simply not practised. But it is the core psyche of the Bengali people, who have always had a diverse culture and society that spanned over thousands of years.

We are now facing a completely new challenge: the rise of fundamentalism in various religions. It is not only Islam that is being misinterpreted. Christianity is being manipulated in certain European countries as well as the US, while a political game surrounding Hinduism is being played out in the subcontinent. We have also witnessed what Myanmar has done with Buddhism, once known as the religion of non-violence. We are in the middle of a global civilizational crisis, where, despite material achievements, we still witness conflict, intolerance, hate and violence. In the face of all these, it is not just a secular philosophy, but the ideals of humanity that are coming under threat.

So I would say that Bangladesh’s struggle is a struggle for humankind, and Bangladesh has shown the path and inculcated it into its constitution, and we are now fighting to establish it in our society. And we have to keep fighting—as they say, continuous vigil is the price of freedom. Secularism is not achieved by simply declaring it or even codifying it. Education and culture has the strongest roles in defending us in these circumstances. On the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh’s independence, we

need to take stock and come to this realisation. Our goal is fine, but we need to change and develop our methods.

As time goes on, do you think younger generations will become less interested in learning about (what will seem to them like) a distant past? How do we tackle this?

Studies of history will shift, change and adapt, but some fundamental historical truths will remain. Our colonial legacy, the fact that we have suffered huge plunder and been greatly harmed as a result, is a fundamental truth. The emergence of Bangladesh, similarly, is a fundamental truth. So many people have stood up with so much courage, and sacrificed so much for the sake of our core values, that the knowledge of this is bound to be intergenerational. And this intergenerational memory is what makes societies diverse—what makes every country and its people unique.

History is on our side, but limiting history to our syllabuses and to questions on exam papers will not do any good. We need different exercises of remembering that are beyond our current educational remit, including more cultural interpretations. There is no easy formula to create a connection between younger generations and the Liberation War, but we need to work on many different plains, including through museums, theatre, art, etc.

Another important factor is public memory. Every family carries a bit of 1971—every family has a refugee, freedom fighter, or martyr. The generation who witnessed the Liberation War has a responsibility to share their experiences, and as a society and a nation, we all have our parts to play—including the government. I think instead of worrying about what the new generation will or will not do, we should focus on whether we are able to bring history to them in a way that touches them. And the new generation also has a responsibility of wanting to know. We also need to promote the great creative work that many young people have been doing on the Liberation War.

I am hopeful, because without hope Bangladesh would not have been created, and we would not have overcome so many obstacles to come as far as we have. However, only hope is not enough; we must work to turn them into reality.

An apology long overdue



IQRA L. QAMARI

Rwandan genocide, asking for the “gift of forgiveness” from those who survived the atrocities—without, however, putting forth an official apology. Though this has disappointed many, Rwandan President Paul Kagame praised Macron, saying, “His words were something more valuable than an apology. They were the truth.”

Bangladesh, currently celebrating its golden jubilee of independence, has achieved remarkable feats in economic and social indicators, rising from a looted and ravaged state to gradually becoming a country poised to become the 28th largest global economy by 2030. On the other end of this glorious timeline, though, lies a dark, painful episode steeped in atrocities, which ended with the surrender of West Pakistan—but with no official apology. Fifty years have passed, and it appears we have risen quite remarkably from the ashes, but does this long duration and success on our end waive the need for an apology or simply, as the Rwandan president put it, the acknowledgement of the “truth”? And that, too, a truth that formed the basis of the birth of these two nations in question? While the flags are proudly hoisted and songs sung on December 16, commemorating independence in Bangladesh, the same day is uncomfortably recalled in Pakistan, somewhat distastefully for us and conveniently for them, as the “Fall of Dhaka” or the “Dismemberment of Pakistan.”

Time and again, Bangladesh has pressed Pakistan for an official apology for the 1971 genocide of Bangladeshis, and each time, the demand has been met with elusiveness—perhaps under the guise of partial amnesia of the crimes that had been committed—or just the ruthless political logic that wartime military actions do not warrant an apology. Not to be confused with casually-thrown, superficial diplomatic

regrets—like the one President General Pervez Musharraf expressed during his visit to Dhaka in 2002—a national apology is a genuine condemnation of a grave historic wrong, and a collective commitment to establish justice and truth, made usually by the head of state. It upholds changed values of the malefactor and facilitates reconciliation with the ones violated. Interestingly, the apology not only attempts to rectify wrongdoings of the past, but it reverberates into the present and future grand narrative(s). However, this also begs the question whether such an apology risks the chances of evoking ripples of wartime guilt across future generations, or if it allows the country to move forward restoring national dignity.

Germany would perhaps be the ideal advocate to argue in favour of the latter. The 1970 historic moment of then Chancellor Willy Brandt kneeling in silence at a memorial to Warsaw Ghetto became the image of atonement for the contrite nation. Explaining his gesture, he had commented, “...I did what we humans do when words fail us.” Starting from the Nuremberg trials and unequivocal apologies, to educational reforms focusing on denazification—their whole mechanism of apologising did not just focus on redressing the horror of the past, but also on enlightening the future generations. To prevent the repetition of such a horrendous crime, no stone was left unturned to ensure that the next generations had no confusion about the culpability of Germany.

If we juxtapose this against the government-endorsed textbooks that are still prevalent in Pakistan’s schools, it is apparent that the authorities, even today, are trying to spoon-feed their youth nonsensical “conspiracy theories” about the 1971 war, while washing their own hands of any liability for the massacre. These theories—propagandising state-level scheming by India and Russia and the US—are factually taught in their history classes, which, in turn, discounts the blood-soaked sacrifice of an estimated three million people. The nine-month-long democratic struggle of Bangladeshis and their terrifying memories of the genocidal military operation are appropriated and hijacked time and again, to make us appear as a by-

product of the Indo-Pak conflict.

Going beyond a classroom lesson, the Army Museum in Lahore, inaugurated in 2016, proudly exhibits a plaque that declares, “...”(The) Indian government resorted to state sponsoring of terrorism inside East Pakistan through the creation of various terrorist organisations like *Mukti Bahini*...”, flagrantly labelling our national heroes as terrorists. Denial then took the shape of a cancelled conference this year. Organised by two Pakistani institutions, the conference aimed to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Bangladesh Liberation War by highlighting new analytical literature and research to better comprehend the conflict of 1971.

It seems like their deep-rooted institutionalised tendency to obliterate history and resort to selective national remembering are still in practice at the state level. A distorted narrative of our Liberation War has already been established in Pakistan’s mainstream national discourse, with the report of the Hamoodur Rahman Commission (HRC)—a post-war inquiry commission sanctioned by the Pakistan government then—kept hidden from the public for decades. Every copy of the report was ordered to be burnt by then President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, allowing the guilty, which included many military bigwigs of Pakistan, to escape blame for so long.

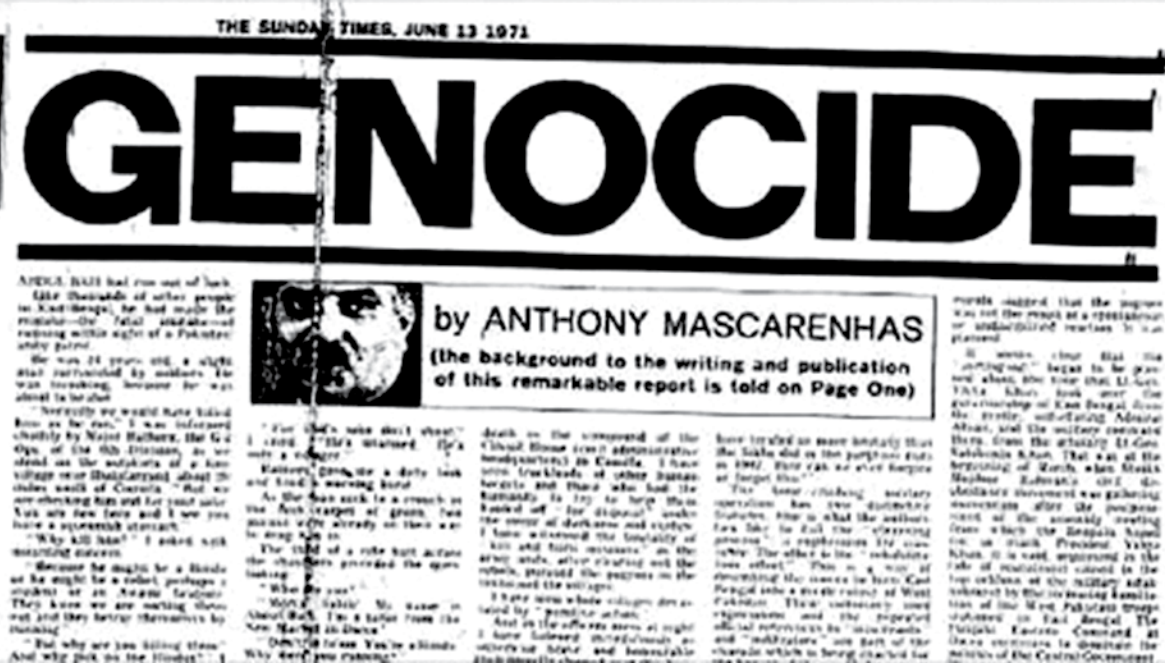
On the other side of the coin, there are strong opinions and theories circling around political apology. Former Australian Prime Minister John Howard, when asked to offer an apology for the mistreatment towards the Aboriginal peoples, asserted that today’s generation is not liable for the wrongs committed by their predecessors. A few studies factoring in variables such as time and generational gap, in between the crime committed and the apology offered, suggest that this “...temporal break should theoretically weaken the need for an apology,” affirming Howard’s claim.

Despite the notion that guilt is not passed on, there is no turning away from the fact that history shapes our present identity and, therefore, it is in the present that responsibility for past actions must be borne. According to a study report titled “Why do countries apologise?” conducted at the University

of Texas at Austin, “Values such as human rights and justice are atemporal and, thus, violations of them in the past persist throughout and shape the present. As a result, apologies remain relevant and necessary despite the passage of time.” More so, heads of state are custodians and keepers of national values and official memories, rendering them responsible for ensuring historical accuracy in their

atrocities of 1971—a stance that has been reiterated by Bangladesh.

An apology is the ultimate prerequisite to making public amendments, initiating a social repair, and re-establishing trust, which means Pakistan’s idea of emphasising economic revival while neglecting and downplaying wartime accountability will prove to be ignorant and futile. In order for these two nations to



A Sunday Times article by reporter Anthony Mascarenhas exposed for the first time the scale of the Pakistan Army’s brutal campaign to suppress the independence struggle of Bengalis in 1971. PHOTO: COLLECTED

official public memory and paving the way for reconciliation.

This brings us to the recent chain of events indicating reconciliation attempts from both Bangladesh and Pakistan. Ministerial and diplomatic-level meetings have hinted at enhancing diplomatic and economic ties between the two countries, with Pakistan’s eyes ambitiously set on wider regional connectivity and economic activity. Prime Minister Imran Khan made their resolution even more concrete by congratulating Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on the 50th Independence Day of Bangladesh—a move commended by many. However, for any meaningful bilateral development to occur, Pakistan must extend an unconditional official apology for the heinous

begin a new chapter on a clean slate, coming to terms with their collective past is critical. The Bangladeshi survivors of the 1971 Liberation War and their family members live a life of loss and transgenerational trauma, and that has only been compounded by Pakistan’s failure to give recognition to past injustices and simply ask for forgiveness. While this acknowledgement and apology will not undo the horrors, they can renew the scope for proper awareness for the next generations, break ground for genuine reconciliation and, perhaps, bring some degree of relief for the ones who are still tormented by the vivid memories of roaring bullets.

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