



Syed Hafizur Rahman with his little brother on his lap, surrounded by other family members.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Guerrilla Hafiz and the freedom fighters we have failed



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How does one prove s/he participated in the 1971 Liberation War? It is common knowledge now that Bangladesh's civilian population – farmers, students, *majhi* and *jele* – created the backbone of the guerrilla forces that liberated this country.

However, not everyone engaged in direct combat. Families risked their lives by taking in freedom fighters and giving them food and shelter. Fishermen transported ammunition in their boats at great personal risks. Teachers distributed revolutionary pamphlets, shopkeepers watched Pakistani soldiers' movements, and ordinary workers, whether they came from a field or an office, passed on information to the resistance. It could be argued that they were all, in their own capacities, fighting for freedom.

The Bangladesh government has, to a degree, acknowledged how wide-ranging the independence efforts were. So far, 253 members of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra have been recognised as freedom fighters. Recently, 448 of the Birangona received the same recognition – a drop in the ocean given how widespread wartime sexual violence was, but nevertheless a step in the right direction.

The point is, it is not always possible to identify citizens' contributions in terms of bullets fired or injuries sustained, and it isn't easy to provide evidence towards that end either.

But when they *do* exist, surely

they help?

Take, for example, the case of martyred Syed Hafizur Rahman, whose family owns a copy of the Tk 2,000 cheque awarded to them by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1972. During his time with the well-known Crack Platoon, Hafizur Rahman earned the name "Guerrilla Hafiz" for his expertise in laying mines and planning effective ambushes. This is proven in a letter owned by the family, signed by Crack Platoon guerrilla commander Golam Dastagir Gazi. The largest collection of the Liberation War documents, *Bangladesher Swadhinota Juddho: Dolil Potro*, also has details of the operations he took part in.

Such a man, you would think, would never face trouble being recognised as a freedom fighter.

Unfortunately, he never got to enjoy this recognition. A few months before the war ended, he was captured and brutally tortured, according to eyewitness accounts. Despite having his eyes gouged out by Pakistani interrogators, he refused to give up any information. He was taken away, never to be found again. By all accounts, Guerrilla Hafiz was a hero who gave his life for his country.

But not according to the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs, which recently rejected his family's petition to recognise him as a freedom fighter for the ninth time. He has not even been recognised as a martyr, even though almost all the martyred guerrillas of

Crack Platoon have been given posthumous gallantry awards.

What is the reason behind this oversight? The relevant authorities' excuses range from being clumsy to downright absurd. Liberation War Affairs Minister AKM Mozammel Haque told media that the appeal was rejected because, as of February 8, the ministry is no longer accepting fresh applications for state recognition. This statement was then contradicted by a member of the Jatiya Muktijoddha Council, who said the ministry can't choose to end the process without consulting them first.

In fact, the minister is directly in conflict with himself, since on October 23, he told *The Daily Star* that a fresh application would lead to necessary steps being taken, and that "The recommendation from fellow freedom fighters alone is enough for state recognition."

Why these conflicting statements? It is concerning that the ministry in charge of such a significant chapter of history is implying that a technicality is enough reason to refuse to preserve our collective memories as a nation, and that there seems to be no cohesion in carrying out this important task. The government has committed to making a list of freedom fighters. Why, then, should a known freedom fighter be excluded from it? And how can we expect the list to include those with less obvious – but no less significant – contributions?

Hafizur Rahman's family submitted nine applications from 1974 to 2022. On the seventh attempt, they were specifically asked for a training certificate from India – a measure to reportedly guard against "fake freedom fighters." This implies anyone without a formal training certificate could be accused of this – a ludicrous suggestion that could wipe out many civilian fighters off of the government's list.

While the veracity of applicants should absolutely be double-checked, it is difficult to forget how the same authorities accidentally included the name of at least seven freedom fighters, including a martyr and the chief prosecutor of the International Crimes Tribunal, on a list meant for Razakars in 2019. I believe we may be forgiven for questioning just how organised this process of verification is, especially since there have been reports of freedom fighters being deprived of government benefits or allowances, despite having official certificates.

Even more worryingly, in 2014, during another attempt for recognition, his family was told by a ministry official that the training certificate issue could be solved if Tk 5-10 lakh was "paid at the right place." We have now reached a point where freedom fighters are being asked to pay bribes from beyond the grave for state recognition.

How much deeper can this rot spread? How many more will be erased from the pages of history due to government officials who are corrupt at worst, and sloppy and inefficient at best? And can we really accept that the persons responsible for these offices and ministries seem to always be "not aware" of what is going on in their own departments when such accusations arise against them?

Guerrilla Hafiz was an ordinary young man in 1971, known for his considerable skill with the guitar. After the genocide of March 25 and his father's death at the hands of Pakistani soldiers in early April, he joined martyred musician Altaf Mahmud to contribute to Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra's work. Soon after, he traded in his guitar for a rifle, and he never returned home again.

It feels almost shameful now, in 2022, to be writing about giving him the official recognition that he should have gotten decades ago.

Northern tea farming shrivelled by unfair prices



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MOSTAFA SHABUJ

Just three decades ago, Panchagarh was a poverty-stricken district in north Bangladesh. Sugarcane, paddy, and some seasonal vegetables were the main crops grown there. During the off seasons, many people spent days without work. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the poverty rate in the Rangpur division was 47.2 percent in 2016.

Though the poverty rate has not decreased much in other districts of Rangpur, it has decreased significantly in Panchagarh. One of the reasons for that is the fast-growing tea industry there.

Currently, more than 100,000 men and women are regularly employed at stone quarries and tea plantations with a daily wage of Tk 400-700. Between 2000 and 2021, about 11,433 acres of plain land was brought under tea farming in five northern districts – out of 50,000 acres of suitable land. Tea board officials in Panchagarh said there was a shortage of about 25,000-30,000 workers for the fast-expanding tea

scythes instead of by hand, which is the reason behind bad quality leaves. Moreover, they claim that, due to the low price in auction markets, they are not able to pay good prices to tea farmers.

Visiting Panchagarh recently, I found that tea farmers were cultivating relatively fast-growing, low-quality Indian varieties instead of the 23 good-quality varieties developed by the Bangladesh Tea Board. Most marginal farmers in Panchagarh are growing new tea gardens on their croplands with no previous experience. As a result, they are dispensing fertiliser inappropriately, thus affecting soil fertility. The cost of tea production can be reduced further if fertilisers are applied after testing the soil, as advised by agriculture officials.

According to regional tea board officials, there are more than 700,000 small-scale tea farmers in Panchagarh, Thakurgaon, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari and Dinajpur districts. Last year, the production of tea (finished goods) from the northern districts was more than 14.5 million kg, with a market value



PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ

farming in the region.

Initially, the tea industry appeared to be a boon for all, but irregularities and mismanagement seem to have turned that into a curse. One of the main concerns is that tea farmers have not been getting fair prices for years. If the problems are not fixed promptly, the industry will have to face long-term troubles.

According to the tea board, producing tea leaves on plain land costs around Tk 8-10 per kg. At present, farmers can sell tea leaves for only Tk 14-16 per kg. When they take their produce to tea processing factories, 20-40 percent of the leaves get discarded for various reasons – wet leaves, low quality, etc. So, if a farmer sells 100 kg (or, one quintal) of tea leaves at the rate of Tk 15 per kg, instead of getting Tk 1,500, they would actually get Tk 1,200 at best, which is the price of 80 kg of leaves.

They have to pay tea workers Tk 300 (Tk 3 per kg) for picking each quintal of tea leaves. Added to that is the transportation cost of Tk 100 per quintal. So a farmer is actually suffering a loss of Tk 200 per quintal.

Tea board officials say that if tea leaves are wet during the monsoon season, tea factories can discard 10 percent of the total harvest at maximum. But in reality, factory owners are rejecting more than 20 percent, which is unethical. Tea board officials claimed that factories are regularly raided and fined to stop excessive deductions.

On the contrary, tea growers complain that not only during the monsoon season, but factory owners discard 20-40 percent of the tea leaves brought to them throughout the year, and the tea board and local administration play a silent role in this regard. Protests don't make any difference.

Although the district administration fixed the price of tea leaves at Tk 18 per kg this year, tea factories are not buying tea at that price. Farmers also complained that the factory owners formed a syndicate and did not want to buy tea leaves during peak time. Thus, the factory owners are making a profit by driving farmers away from fair prices. To mitigate the losses, many tea growers have started planting mango trees in their tea gardens.

On the other hand, tea factory owners claimed that they would face losses if they did not discard "bad" tea leaves because growers harvest wet leaves all the time. Tea leaves are plucked using

of approximately Tk 225 crore. The government earned a revenue of Tk 34 crore and the tea board also received about Tk 2 crore from the tea cultivated in this region.

In the northern region, tea plantation increased by about 12.4 percent and production increased by 41 percent in 2021 compared to 2020. Now, these plainland tea plantations are supplying 15 percent of total domestic production, second to only Sylhet.

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While the government, tea board and factory owners have benefited, farmers have been suffering losses for years.

If farmers don't get a fair price for their produce, they can't make any profit after investing a lot of money year after year. They also need proper training and technical skills to be able to grow good-quality tea, for which the government is responsible. If they can't grow quality tea, exports won't grow, which in turn will affect local market prices.

If that happens, what can tea farmers do, except lose interest in growing tea?

The bottom line is, the tea board should train farmers, and the government should ensure fair prices by monitoring tea factory owners in Panchagarh. They can also set up state-run tea processing factories and auction centres in Panchagarh. This may save the tea industry of the plainlands.

/Opinion

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Sing like Ella Fitzgerald

5 Fossil resin

10 Like bulls and bucks

11 Car from a repair shop

13 Shortly, in poems

14 Some livestock

15 Cheers for

17 Game official

18 Lease signers

19 Water, in France

20 Lynx or lion

21 Exam

22 Sell tickets for profit

25 View anew

26 Big book

27 Day light

28 "Exodus" hero

29 Muscle connectors

33 Lyricist

34 Area of common interest

35 Post-quake sight

37 "Would – to you?"

38 Ill humor

39 Not recorded

40 Scout shelters

41 Plant starter

DOWN

1 Stylish

2 Camp craft

3 Crazy as –

4 Octopus arm

5 "Little Women" author

6 Sounds of agony

7 Baseball need

8 Main dishes

9 Let go

12 Prove false

16 Ginger cookie

21 Vine parts

22 Flight makeup

23 Morally bad

24 Friendly

25 Celtic letter

27 Common dice rolls

29 Apartment sign

30 Skateboarding jump

31 Artless

32 Velocity

36 Actor Affleck

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SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

