



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

The genocide of MARCH 25 as a metaphor



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Pakistan is the metaphor of everything Bangladesh doesn't want to be. And the independent land we call Bangladesh today ceased to be a part of Pakistan on March 25, 1971 when the Pakistan state apparatus launched a genocidal war. The genocide was unique in the sense that it was perpetrated by the state against its own people. The Pakistani state lost its legitimacy by killing its own citizens.

Bangladesh's Proclamation of Independence has emphasised this *causa finalis* by stating, "Whereas the Pakistan government by levying an unjust war and committing genocide and by other repressive measures made it impossible for the elected representatives of the people of Bangladesh to meet and frame a constitution, and give to themselves a government... we declare and constitute Bangladesh to be sovereign peoples' republic."

The March 25 genocide became the metaphor for the irreparable break that the Bangladeshi state will never reverse. As if the Bangladeshi state, which pledged to uphold the principles of "equality, human dignity, and social justice," would never perpetrate such violence against its citizens. To fully comprehend the metaphor's significance, it is essential to have a more profound understanding of the nature of the violence that transpired on March 25, 1971.

Numerous eyewitness accounts exist regarding the events that occurred on that fateful night. In this instance, we are focusing on Ahmed Sofa's testimony. In his article titled "*Dhakay Ja Dekhechhi Ja Shuneechhi*" (What I saw and heard in Dhaka), he vividly depicts the heinous brutality unleashed by the Pakistani state, showcasing a dreadful contempt for the democratic aspirations of the people of East Pakistan.

After spending the night of March 25 in a hideout, Ahmed Sofa ventured out when the curfew was lifted for a few hours the following morning. Upon witnessing the city's situation, his eyes were filled with tears. He described the scene as if thousands of savage animals had descended upon the city, leaving scars of destruction and chaos in their wake.

He traversed the city, from Topkhana to Gulistan, then to Dhaka University, Medical College, Salimullah Hall, Pilkhana, and Rajarbagh. At every turn, he encountered signs of death, torture, rape, and barbarism.

The lethal apparatus of the Pakistani state not only killed the ordinary citizens, but also numerous members of the state's uniformed personnel, including police and EPR members. Historian Thomas Newbold aptly noted, "No other 'police operation' by a state before or since has started with the slaughter of its own security apparatus, and few other commanders who have ordered the killing of their soldiers in their barracks have ever had the nerve

to accuse those they ordered to be murdered of 'betrayal.'"

While returning home, Ahmed Sofa discovered that the Pakistan Army had burnt down the newspaper offices of *The People* and *Daily Ittefaq*.

At the conclusion of his account for the day, he shared the distressing news of the brutal slaying of Lieutenant Commander Moazzem Hossain. The Pakistan Army, after murdering him in cold blood, tied his lifeless body to a jeep and dragged it along the road. Sofa expressed his sorrow, stating that they had killed a hero of Bengal and desecrated his body in such a despicable manner.

The following day, Ahmed Sofa went out once more and arrived at Ramna Kali Mandir, only to find it in ruins. The idols had been demolished

by shelling. In the midst of such devastation, a thought occurred to him: where did all the people go? The region was cordoned off by soldiers, yet someone whispered to him that the army had first set fire to the houses by pouring petrol. When the inhabitants came out to escape the flames, the army opened fire on them.

Ahmed Sofa bore witness to numerous other heinous acts committed against the Hindu community in various areas of Dhaka. In Shankhari Bazar, he encountered hundreds of charred corpses displaying clear evidence of torture, rape, murder, and arson. According to Ahmed Sofa's testimony, the Pakistani junta specifically targeted religious minority communities. The collaborators of the Pakistan Army would identify Hindu homes and properties during the day, which the army would destroy under the cover of the night.

Ahmed Sofa witnessed the most horrific brutality near Nawabpur crossing, where shanties built by impoverished people lined both sides of the rail track in an area stretching

from Tejgaon to Kamalapur. The Pakistan Army mercilessly set fire to the entire area, leaving burnt rubble and human skeletons. The stench of charred bodies permeated the whole air, Sofa testified.

The savage attacks extended to industrial areas and nearby labour colonies, such as Narayanganj, Demra, and Gazipur. The rampant hatred towards the labourers and the urban poor, often termed as "lumpen class," was fuelled in part by their active involvement in all the protests against the Pakistani state. Unfortunately, the sacrifices of the labourers and urban poor are conspicuously absent from the nationalist narrative of Bangladesh's liberation struggle.

On that day, the prominent Bangla daily *Sangbad* was set on fire.

Ahmed Sofa had to flee Dhaka to save his life. He ends his article with the lament, "Dhaka has become a dangerous place for students and young people. The Pakistan Army is shooting young people at sight and abducting them without any trace. The soldiers appear to have grown weary of killing, and the whereabouts of the arrested individuals remain unknown. Rumours are circulating that the detainees are being

As I read Ahmed Sofa's testimony, a question continued to plague my thoughts in the context of present-day Bangladesh: what distinguishes state-sanctioned killing of one individual from the mass murder of many? Wasn't the genocide on March 25 the ultimate culmination of Pakistan's 24-year history of state violence? As we ponder the significance of March 25, it is critical to ask ourselves whether the oppressive nature of the state has changed. Are practices such as extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, custodial deaths, and the systematic persecution of religious and ethnic minorities, still prevalent in contemporary Bangladesh?

taken to a secluded area near the Shitalakkhya River in Narayanganj and shot dead, or that they are being drained of blood using syringes before being killed. In various parts of Dhaka, including Kamalapur and Dhanmondi, bloodless bodies have been discovered."

As I read Ahmed Sofa's testimony, a question continued to plague my thoughts in the context of present-day Bangladesh: what distinguishes state-sanctioned killing of one individual from the mass murder of many? Wasn't the genocide on March 25 the ultimate culmination of Pakistan's 24-year history of state violence? Perhaps the only difference lies in the number of victims.

As we ponder the significance of March 25, it is critical to ask ourselves whether the oppressive nature of the state has changed. Are practices such as extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, custodial deaths, and the systematic persecution of religious and ethnic minorities, as well as the structural killing of labourers, still prevalent in contemporary Bangladesh?

Remembering my teacher Dr Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta

On the fateful night of March 25, 1971, Prof Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta was dragged out of his university flat and shot repeatedly on the back by the Pakistan Army. He died later in the Dhaka Medical College Hospital on March 30, 1971. The following is a tribute to the martyred professor.



Dr Shawkat Hussain taught at the Department of English of Dhaka University.

SHAWKAT HUSSAIN

If Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta sir were alive today, he would have turned 103 in July. I was fortunate enough to be in his tutorial class both in my second and third years. In 1967, when I was a first-year student at Dhaka University, JGT – as we used to call him – had just returned from the UK after completing his PhD. He was 47 years old, slightly balding, always smiling, a trifle portly. I'm more than 50 years too late with this tribute, but I'm still grateful to be able to write the following words.

I remember often seeing JGT hanging around at the end of the dark corridor near the mezzanine floor (between the Department of English and the Department of International Relations) where he had his office, sometimes smoking a cigarette, often chatting with senior students walking by. He was the only teacher who did that, the only teacher who seemed to enjoy talking to students. Years later, in the early 1980s (1981-85), that office was mine coincidentally. I felt a secret pride in having the same room that JGT used to have.

I remember eagerly waiting for his lectures in the second year (1968-69). In the promotion test from first year to second year, I had done rather well, so when we started attending his classes on Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*, he already knew me by name. Incidentally, Swinburne and his use of classical myths were one area of his PhD research. He often called upon me and a few other class friends to take on dramatic roles from the play and read aloud in class. I was not particularly good at it and didn't enjoy the experience, but it did feel good to be singled out by him. Interestingly, when I was doing my PhD in Canada about a decade later, I once wrote a term paper on Swinburne's interest in the Italian revolutionary Mazzini in *Songs before Sunrise*. I certainly had Guhathakurta sir in mind.

In the English department, you get to know your teachers better in the tutorial classes. The teachers also get to know students much more closely in these small classes. I had tutorial classes with JGT both in second year and third, so I got to know him better than the other teachers. I remember once getting a B++ for a paper on Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, and JGT sir could see that I wasn't too happy with that grade. He said to me with a big smile that I really had not given too much effort on that tutorial, and then he added that if I spent less time hanging around the corridors of the department and more time studying, I could really do well. I have written about this elsewhere, but let me repeat that JGT's words made me "ambitious" academically for the first time in my life, and I did well in my Honours and MA exams. I owe this to Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta sir. A few words of encouragement, a small gesture of

appreciation from a teacher can work wonders for a student. He was that kind of a teacher.

Tragically, we lost him too early. We only had him for a little over two years. I did enjoy the special privilege of being invited to his house in Gandaria, where he lived with his wife and daughter (Dr Meghna Guhathakurta). His wife Bashanti Di, as she was known, was the headmistress of a school, and their house was located within the school compound. On that occasion, JGT gave me Buddhadeva Bose's novel *Golap Keno Kalo* to read. Set in the 1930s and 40s, the novel gives a wonderful account of Dhaka in those decades, and of Buddhadeva Bose's own experiences in the



Prof Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta with his wife Basanti Guhathakurta and daughter Meghna Guhathakurta.

English department. I remember one paragraph where the great writer talks about the "unreadability" of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. This had a direct impact on me. When I was preparing for my Honours final exam, I found Spenser's allegory equally unreadable and decided not to read it, like Buddhadeva Bose.

Besides tutorial classes, departmental picnics afforded opportunities for students to get close to teachers, and for teachers to show their more "human" face to students. In late 1969 or early 1970, we were at a picnic with JGT and other teachers which involved a river cruise up and down the Buriganga River. JGT was a smoker. We watched him trying to light a cigarette and the wind blowing out the matchstick every time he tried. Then he approached a group of us, sitting close to him; cupping his palms expertly around the flame, one of us managed to light JGT's cigarette. It might have been me, for I was an expert smoker in those days. JGT was the only teacher who smoked. I would have enjoyed a smoke with JGT and I feel certain he

to staunch the bleeding, too scared to go to the hospital, just a stone's throw away. They took him to the hospital after curfew was lifted on March 27, but it was too late. He died on March 30 from too much loss of blood.

For those of us who knew him personally, it was an immeasurable loss. When I started teaching in the department about a year later from August 1973, I often thought of JGT, missed not being able to drink tea with him in the lounge, maybe even smoke a cigarette. Personally, it was a great loss not having him around as a colleague and a mentor. I came to know later that Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta sir was a follower of MN Roy's "Radical Humanism" in his youth. In the 1920s and 30s, the radical humanists believed in the armed overthrow of the British government. It certainly would have been wonderful to hear him talk about our own armed struggle against the Pakistanis. It's a great honour to be able to write about JGT to bring alive my memories of a wonderful person and an inspiring teacher.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Copier problem

5 Trill

11 Clarinet's kin

12 Foolish

13 Sky shade

14 Syrian city

15 Ready to go

16 Wilma's husband

17 Male deer

19 Combo instrument

22 Sentimental

24 Clean with effort

26 Memo letters

27 Goddess of the moon

28 Historic event

30 Cracked

31 Have something

32 First Hebrew

letter

34 Male deer

35 Buddy

38 Use a mister on

41 – California

42 Sources of answers

43 Turkey neighbor

44 Hit on the noggin

45 Gumbo veggie

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1 Resume listings

2 Skilled

3 Insect's feeding apparatus

4 Spot

5 Milk shot

6 Except if

7 Really impressed

9 Sixth sense, briefly

10 Old roadster

16 Make tempura

18 Phone downloads

19 Comedy Central series

20 Uncle's wife

21 Clinic picture

22 Ump's call

23 China setting

25 Thunder sound

29 Be a snitch

30 Implore

33 Took it easy

34 Ailing

36 Cracked

37 Turner of movies

38 Express despair

39 Debate side

40 Operated

41 Book jacket bit

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