

52 YEARS OF BANGLADESH’S INDEPENDENCE



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

The fight for people’s freedom



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The fight for people’s freedom in Bangladesh neither began nor ended in 1971. It has been going on for many years, and 1971 was a major phase of it. It was not only major, but it was also enormous, glorious, and horrific all at the same time.

The basis of the Liberation War of 1971 was built through numerous movements that took place in the 1950s and 1960s. New thoughts and new demands sprouted, and through the sacrifice of many lives, people became organised. A vision for the future was developed in the minds of the people. The main point of this vision was that a state must be established that would not be built in the model of Pakistan.

Throughout the unrest of the 1950s and 1960s, the mass uprising of 1969 and eventually the Liberation War, the people developed an idea of a set of characteristics of the Pakistani state that they wanted to avoid for their own state. Firstly, all the protests featured the rhetoric that it was a fight against the “22 families”. At that time, there was a centralisation of wealth in Pakistan surrounding a group of families known as the “22 families”. They held sway over the politics and economics of Pakistan. The abolition of this type of centralisation of wealth was a major objective of the movements during that time.

The second objective was the eradication of all sorts of discrimination that was rife in Pakistan. Discrimination between the East and the West, the existence of two economies in one country, discrimination based on regional origin, nationality, religion – these are the things that were being fought against. The goal was to get to a stage where people were ruled by the democratic process, where groups like the “22 families” and their military and civilian accomplices don’t have authority, where the country belongs to the people, where public rights can be established. The centrepiece of all of this was democracy.

During these movements, another central factor that strongly came to the fore was jute. Jute was produced in massive amounts in Bangladesh, an industry existed based on jute, but the profits earned from it went entirely to West Pakistan. A desire to make jute the centre of future industrialisation materialised at that time. A desire materialised for the people of this region to reach a place of prosperity with jute as the main driver.

Other than these, there was a desire in the cultural sphere that all people, no matter their ethnic or linguistic identity, would be able to practise and celebrate their own cultures without anything being forced on them. Even though it didn’t appear directly among the six-point demands, it was made clear in the eleven-point demands as

well as during the mass uprising of 1969 that this region would not bow its head to imperialism or any sort of domination. This region wanted to exist freely as a strong entity among other nations of the world.

These desires encapsulate what the people rejected about the state of Pakistan and the thoughts that were taking hold in their mind for the model of a new state. The desire grew louder during the Liberation War of 1971, and a sense of achieving this new state through this war became prevalent. The rejection of Pakistan started to become clear from the beginning of March, and once the Pakistani army initiated a genocide on the night of March 25, the people of Bangladesh were in no way going to stay with Pakistan afterwards.

No matter the exact date of the declaration of independence, starting from the night of March 25, people from all walks of life, regardless of profession, gender, religious beliefs and ethnicity, fought with the goal of achieving that desired state.

Over 50 years have passed since, and we can now take a look at the things about the Pakistan model that people had rejected, fought against, and died in the process of doing so. This is a major question, a place to evaluate and self-reflect. It is our responsibility as citizens of Bangladesh to pose these questions.

The centralisation of wealth that occurred with the “22 families” in Pakistan can be seen occurring in an even more intense way in Bangladesh. In Pakistan, the criticism was that it had two economies. Similarly in Bangladesh, because of the centralisation of wealth in the hands of a select few, a huge majority of people’s lives are full of struggle and suffering. On the other hand, the select few that own this wealth have lives and prospects for the future that are disproportionately different from the rest. This discrimination was exactly what we fought against.

In every movement for education in the 1960s, the main point was that the state would take the responsibility for universal education. The demand was that everyone would receive the same education that was aligned towards the same goals, that the responsibility for it should be taken by the state and that education would not become commercialised. Similar things were said about healthcare too. But since independence, we have moved towards the opposite direction on these matters.

In the 50-odd years since independence, Bangladesh has become immensely wealthy. We have prospered in the agricultural and industrial sectors, we have way more roads and buildings than we used to. But we have moved towards the opposite direction from the

desire and the spirit that drove the Liberation War, the ways in which our state was supposed to be different from the Pakistani model.

We have seen the flourishing of a capitalist system here, but at its core are three main characteristics. First is the centralisation of wealth, second is the increase in all sorts of discrimination, and third is the brutal destruction of nature. Rivers, streams, canals, lakes, forests, our air, and the biodiversity of our nature have all been under constant attack. A scope has been created to generate profit at all costs, even at the cost of our nature.

The central desire was that this new state will be for the people, that the people will have agency. The people here include the environment in which they live, where their power resides. The institutions and the democratic process should have been for the people and run by the people. Democracy is not an abstract concept. It can be thought of clearly and in a concrete manner as a system where the people have the power. This is written down in the Constitution, but Bangladesh today is still far from that reality. Bangladesh was supposed to be a country run by its people, but we are dangerously moving towards a country being run by a coterie.

The reason we don’t lose hope and courage after making such evaluations is that a country where the Liberation War of 1971 can take place, where the people can fight against such a terrifying military power, where the people don’t take a step back from sacrificing everything in their fight, where the scope is created to realise the people’s desire to establish a new state, is not a country where there is any reason for the situation to remain this way. That is also the reason why this evaluation is necessary.

We were shown an illusion of development during the time of Ayub Khan, like the Kaptai Hydroelectric Power Plant that displaced hundreds of thousands of people, a development project that was the source of decades of conflict in that region. The plan for Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant was also initiated during that time, which is now being implemented on a much bigger scale. Are there any lessons for us here?

So, on Independence Day or when we are talking about independence in general, it is important to pose these questions and make these evaluations so that we can make sure we are not covered in the shroud of illusory development once more. By posing these important questions, we can explore our long history of protest, of fighting for our rights, of the desire to make our dreams come true. This history provides us with the inner strength that personally makes me believe that the situation will change.

The goals and the desires that have empowered people to fight this fight, have turned each of them into strong individuals with an indomitable spirit. This inner strength will carry Bangladesh to a place where we can make the necessary changes for people.

Transcribed and translated by
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Stories that we tell ourselves



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SHUPROVA TASNEEM

How should a nation memorialise its history? How should a people respectfully bear witness to the trauma and violence of the past, while also celebrating their achievements? And as recent memory becomes distant history, and generations drift further and further away from the events that shaped their nation’s identity, how can we stop these remembrances from becoming hollow and tokenistic?

At the risk of sounding clichéd, when Dickens wrote, “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times”, he could just as easily be talking about 1971 as the French Revolution. The most ordinary people did extraordinary things during the Liberation War. It was a time of great hope for the people of this country, whose resilience, courage and spirit led to the birth of an independent country.

But it was also a time of unthinkable bloodshed and slaughter. The barbarity of the Pakistani soldiers’ attacks on Bangalees/Bangladeshis, especially from Hindu communities, has been well documented. It is difficult to forget some of the images taken by photojournalists during 1971, reflecting the horrific and indiscriminate torture and murder of ordinary civilians. The country is still dotted by unmarked graves, and many of those who survived the war continue to carry its scars with them today.

And every year, as we celebrate our Independence and Victory Days, so close on the heels of March 25 and December 14 – days that mark the beginning of the genocide against the Bangladeshi (then East Pakistani) population by the Pakistani military forces, and the targeted mass killing of Bangalee intellectuals – I can’t help but wonder, have we been able to properly retell the stories of the “best and worst” time in our national history?

Do the post-1971 generations really understand what it means for a country to have faced genocide and the enormity of what ordinary Bangladeshis achieved? Or do they only know dates and names from a period in history because their schoolteachers forced them to memorise it?

The reality is that, the further removed the younger generations become from the events of 1971, the harder it will become for them to connect to them. It won’t matter how many art competitions we hold every year, or how many patriotic songs children learn in school, and how often we wear red and green outfits to mark our national days – if we fail to tell them stories of the Liberation War that they can form an emotional attachment to, it will stop being real to them.

In this regard, there is a lot more that needs to be done. As a nation, we have made a mess of how we remember history. At different points in time, political parties and military dictatorships that once held power

have misrepresented history, or told a biased version of it. I remember when I was in school, our private educators decided to skip the chapters on 1971 altogether in order to “avoid conflict”.

Although this is in the process of being rectified, it is possible that the younger generations now know even less about history prior to 1971, and next to nothing about Partition and colonial rule in Bengal. While the crucial events of the Liberation War are now common knowledge, the stories of farmers and day labourers who secretly trained for combat, of boatmen who ferried weapons, families who risked everything to hide freedom fighters in their homes, and the everyday stories of courage and resistance, I do not believe, are common knowledge to younger generations in Bangladesh.

And how would they be known? As far as I am aware, the Liberation War Museum is the only

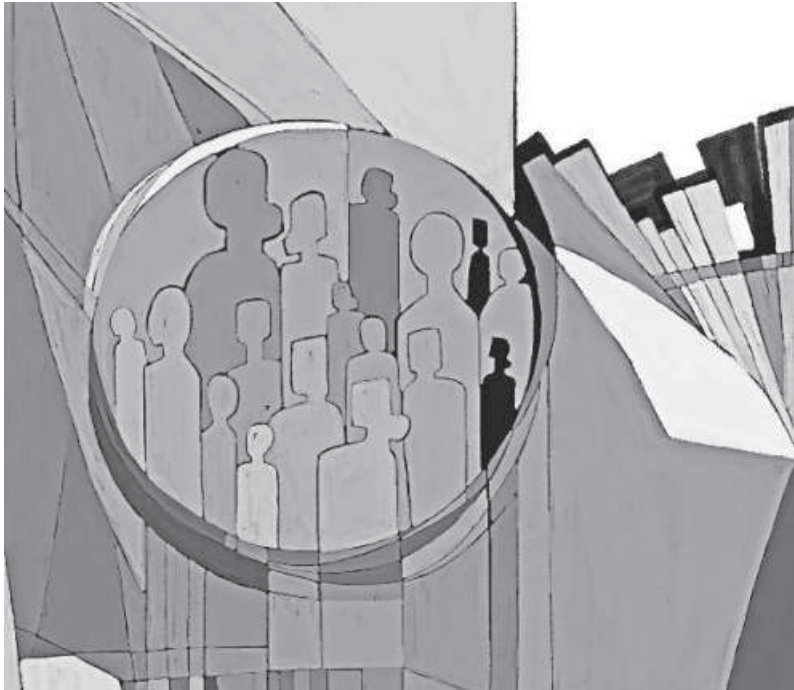


ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

organisation in the country that has conducted a nationwide drive to collect oral histories from 1971 by asking schoolchildren to interview someone from their locality/village who survived the war, write down their stories, and send to the museum. This archive is now a treasure trove that brought together a winning combination – children who harnessed the power of storytelling to record the stories of their communities, thus exercising their agency and feeling connected to their local histories in the process.

Local memorials can also play an important role in creating these connections. The fact that almost every locality in the country has a Shaheed Minar definitely has an impact in keeping the Language Movement alive, and in many unions and district towns, they have become centres for the community’s congregations and movements as well. So why are there not more memorials to the Liberation War

The stories that we tell ourselves, and tell the world about ourselves, are a crucial part of nation-building, and of the process of constructing a national identity. They can help a nation process the trauma of living through genocide, and at least lead to a certain symbolic justice through the recognition of said genocide from the outside world. And remembering the tragic waste of human life that is the end result of any war can then become an important tool to remind future generations of the idea of “never again”.

As we move forward as a country, if we truly want the 1971 genocide to be remembered and recognised, we need to make sure our stories are heard – not just the mainstream narratives of dates, events and actors as copied down in textbooks, but the tales of ordinary Bangladeshis who, despite the odds stacked against them, struggled against a cruel and unjust system of power and brought it to its knees.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Buds

5 Indulge (in)

11 At the drop of—

12 Scaly pet

13 Antifur org.

14 Sounded hoarse

15 February birthstone

17 Regret

18 Did some tailoring

22 Command

24 Steamed

25 Yacht spot

26 Due follower

27 Gate feature

30 Alacrity

32 “Carmen,” for one

33 Hole number

34 At risk

38 Redress

41 Poll numbers

42 Carter’s successor

43 Resting on

44 Taxi devices

45 Dispatched

DOWN

1 One of a bear trio

2 Attention-getting sound

3 Future time

4 Rodin creation

5 Lean and sinewy

6 Tennis star

Andre

7 Sheen

8 Pool unit

9 Binary digit

10 Gum mass

16 That woman

19 Historic hotel

20 To be, to Balzac

21 Title paper

22 Ibsen’s home

23 Take in

28 Shrink in fear

29 Plane’s place

30 Sauna site

31 Bamboo eaters

35 Bears’ lairs

36 School near Windsor

37 All ears

38 Ulna’s place

39 Victory sign

40 “Dig in!”

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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

J	A	M	S		Q	U	A	V	E	R			
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