



# MARTYRS *of* FREEDOM

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PRIYAM PAUL

Over fifty years ago, during the final days of the 1971 war, a significant number of intellectuals—professors, doctors, journalists, and others—were brutally murdered just before the fall of Dhaka, when the Pakistani-occupied forces and their collaborators were on the verge of surrendering. Some of these individuals remain missing to this day, their bodies never recovered after being forcibly disappeared. The death toll could have been much higher, as many survived by sheer luck or by using clever tactics to evade their perpetrators.

These atrocities were not confined to the final stages of the war; the persecution of intellectuals was an ongoing and systematic aspect of the conflict. The brutality began on the night of 25 March, when well-known professors were murdered at Dhaka University, marking the onset of the war as the Pakistani army sought a military solution to the will of the people of Bangladesh. Intellectuals and professors were specifically targeted because they were seen as the torchbearers of Bengali nationalism, actively resisting Pakistan's attempts to suppress it.

The organised killings of intellectuals, carried out in such a systematic manner, were unprecedented in the history of the Indian subcontinent. No prior instances are recorded of teachers being murdered or abducted from any university in the region. While the region had witnessed large-scale violence during the final stages

of the 1947 partition, the events of 1971 stand as an unparalleled tragedy in history. Bengal endured the infamous Calcutta riots and their aftermath, while Punjab experienced its own severe violence during the partition, where the population was sharply divided along religious lines—something that was far less pronounced in Bengal. Nevertheless, the targeted killings of intellectuals during the 1971 conflict were without precedent. While intellectuals in the colonial period were not free from divisive politics, with some contributing to religiously charged ideologies, the partition primarily aggravated religious antagonism between Hindus and Muslims. Even amidst the bitter civil strife of those times, intellectuals were not specifically singled out or persecuted.

But why were intellectuals singled out for such systematic extermination? After the Partition, a new sense of hope emerged with the creation of Pakistan. However, it soon dissipated due to the misrule of the Muslim League and the resurgence of communal violence. The language movement, along with the ongoing political and economic oppression by West Pakistan, led to the rise of Bengali nationalism. Educators, writers, and intellectuals were at the forefront of this movement, and their contributions played a central role in shaping the course of history.

During the Pakistani era, the educational landscape in East Pakistan was severely limited, with only five universities, some

of which were still in their early stages. Systematic discrimination against Bengalis permeated higher education, with professors often denied adequate resources. Scholarships and grants from the central government were disproportionately allocated to the Eastern wing, while teaching positions were generally less attractive compared to the prestigious roles in government

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administration. As a result, many young university lecturers left academia after securing positions in the Civil Services of Pakistan (CSP) or the East Pakistan Civil Services (EPCS). However, it was also a time when many individuals chose teaching as a lifelong vocation, becoming the backbone of the region's educational system and playing a crucial role in shaping its intellectual foundation.

Despite the numerous challenges they faced, the 1960s witnessed a remarkable intellectual blossoming in East Pakistan, both nationally and within universities, largely driven by resistance to the prevailing oppression. This era mirrors the British colonial period when Bengal gave rise to monumental figures like Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam—two of the most influential intellectuals in the region's history.

Even now, when the brightest minds look back on their academic journeys, they often speak of the 1960s with pride, acknowledging it as a period of intellectual brilliance fueled by dedication and a deep passion for learning. This time also represents a golden age of creativity, marked by exceptional accomplishments in the arts, poetry, literature, cinema, and beyond. It was a period defined by iconic poets, novelists, and artists whose works continue to resonate and inspire new generations.

This remarkable period coincided with a time when political leaders were bewildered and disoriented by the challenges of military rule, the convoluted politics of Pakistan's two wings, and the complexities of international politics. Amidst this turmoil, intellectuals emerged as beacons of hope, striving to define Bengali identity and exposing the regional disparities that disproportionately favoured West Pakistan.

Their search for a clear sense of identity, along with their critical analysis of the national economy, formed the foundation of Bengali

nationalism. This movement played a crucial role in the eventual collapse of Pakistan, especially after the Pakistani military waged a brutal war against the unarmed people of East Pakistan in 1971. While it would be inaccurate to label all intellectuals of that time as revolutionaries, many of them did receive recognition or support from the government and industrial figures. Despite their relatively conventional positions, however, many remained steadfastly dedicated to their work, indirectly contributing to the people's cause through their intellectual contributions.

During the 1971 war, many professors and intellectuals found themselves unable to actively engage in the resistance movement, as they were forced to continue their work under the oppressive rule of the military junta. Their lives were marked by a deep internal struggle—while their hearts yearned to support the war effort, personal responsibilities and the harsh realities of the time prevented them from doing so.

Tragically, these individuals became the targets of systematic torture and killings, an atrocity unprecedented in the region's history, aimed at silencing this vital segment of society. Yet, despite this brutal chapter, these intellectuals continue to stand as lasting symbols of wisdom, sacrifice, and freedom, etched into the nation's collective memory.

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Under the banner of “Teachers Against Repression,” teachers from various universities across Bangladesh staged a demonstration on the Dhaka University campus on August 1, 2024. They demanded justice for those killed during the quota reform movement and protested the harassment of teachers and students nationwide. PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN/ THE DAILY STAR

“What have I done in July 2024?”

MIRZA TASLIMA SULTANA

During the Vietnam War, Noam Chomsky was critical of the role of intellectuals, identifying them as subservient to power while the US was abusing human rights in the war. US social scientists and technocrats provided pseudo-scientific justifications for the crimes committed by their state during the war. Dwight Macdonald, after the Second World War, questioned the responsibility of the German and Japanese people for the atrocities committed by their governments. Following Macdonald, Chomsky also questioned to what extent the British and American people were responsible for the vicious bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He emphasised that each intellectual must ask, “What have I done?”

There are many instances in history where intellectuals either took part in or supported the injustices of their state or colonial powers. At the same time, many intellectuals spoke truth to power. Indeed, intellectuals are most respected when they do so. Although we now understand that ‘truth’ is multifaceted, it is the responsibility of intellectuals to debunk these various truths. Moreover, power must be opposed whenever it acts against humanity.

The roles of intellectuals in 1971 and before were glorious. Many sacrificed their lives on December 14, just before our independence. We owe the existence of our state to their sacrifices. As the successors of the intellectuals of 1971, should we not ask ourselves in 2024, “What have I done in July 2024?” “What have I done in the last sixteen years?” “How did the autocrat manage to commit all these crimes—abductions, extrajudicial killings, money laundering?” “How has Bangladesh become a state run by mafias?” “What have I done when the right to free speech was silenced through three consecutive acts by the government, culminating in the ousting of the government on August 5, 2024?”

Some intellectuals spoke truth to power in the last sixteen years, yet many remained silent. They supported and nurtured the government as it became a demonic force that killed over 1,500 students and members of the public, leaving 22,000 injured during the July uprising. These are not just numbers but represent students, children, and ordinary citizens, each with unique life stories, relationships, and dreams. How they were killed, injured, treated—or not treated—and how they suffered, losing limbs and enduring untold pain, are stories yet to be fully revealed.

All of us have different ideologies and take stances according to them. However, the violation of human rights should be the dividing line, prompting us to act on behalf of those who do not share our ideological beliefs. Surprisingly, this basic understanding has vanished in recent times. Intellectuals have decided whether or not to act in response to human rights violations based on selective criteria tied to their vested interests. Intellectuals must urgently ask themselves how they can contribute to improving the situation.

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## Rethinking the Role of Intellectuals

SAMINA LUTHEFA

The role of intellectuals in society has been extensively examined from both western and southern experiences, often categorising them based on their application of knowledge. However, in the age of global capitalism, traditional factory-based production systems no longer define who sells their brain versus labour. A significant portion of the workforce now operates in the service sector that is founded upon white-collar credentials which are necessary determinants of the new service class as non-blue collar, i.e., non-working class. Therefore, it is necessary to have a re-evaluation of middle class and their intellectual contributions, incorporating hybridity and neoliberal capitalism. However, not all contributors are deemed intellectuals, as many do not produce original knowledge.

Historically, Bengali intellectuals like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Rokeya Sakhaawat were pivotal in bringing social reform and advancing the cause of academic advancement for all. They

used knowledge to challenge societal norms and create transformative ideas, often through academic institutions that nurtured and legitimised their efforts. Modern educators, too, have the potential to earn the intellectual label by engaging in similar pathways of thought and innovation. While Bangladeshi teachers play a role in fostering new perspectives, the consistency and efficacy of such efforts remain questionable. Intellectual pursuits today are influenced by numerous factors, including motivations for generating insights, external pressures, and the dynamics of stakeholders such as the job market and beneficiaries. Global interconnectedness, driven by technology and shared sociological realities, underscores the responsibilities of contemporary Bangladeshi intellectuals. These individuals must navigate the challenges of global narratives, engaging with extended processes of knowledge creation and dissemination.

The July uprising illustrated this through evocative artwork. A metro rail pillar was adorned with a graffiti depicting

Abu Sayeed’s mother saying, *Hmar Cheleki Marlu Kene?* Such illustrations may not fit within the traditional category of aesthetic artwork, yet today they can be regarded as art of the highest order due to their profound influence on public consciousness. This is precisely what intellectuals do—they provoke thought and inspire action. Intellectuals paved the way for innovative ideas and critical thinking. Unfortunately, during the authoritarian Awami League (AL) regime, even celebrated intellectuals and artists often refrained from articulating the struggles of ordinary Bangladeshis. In contrast, the protests empowered previously marginalised groups, including lower-income communities and students, to articulate their grievances through creative means. This shift signifies a redefinition of intellectualism in the context of globalisation, where new-age thinkers and activists challenge long-standing hierarchies.

Following the fall of the AL on 5 August, fresh narratives have emerged, prioritising inclusivity and engagement with the masses. Intellectuals must now

move beyond middle-class confines, fostering thought processes that resonate with broader audiences. This is particularly crucial in Bangladesh, where intellectuals have sometimes misled the public, exacerbating societal divisions.

Today, public spheres are contested spaces, reflecting negative populist trends and constrained freedoms of the marginalized. Reclaiming these spheres demands intellectual engagement that serves both majority and minority interests to create a cultural mosaic with sharp and broken edges, that do not lose uniqueness of each piece but creates a unity in diversity. The path ahead necessitates genuine commitment to the collective welfare, ensuring that intellectual contributions address the needs of an evolving society.

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The article was transcribed by Nihad Nowsher of The Daily Star.

## What should our intellectuals do now?

GHHABIB

Despite the widely-held non-agreement regarding the definition of such an overused but not-so-old word called ‘intellectual’, it is not difficult, I think, to map the overall role of the intellectuals in the society in any given context. This is common knowledge that they hail mostly from the middle class, though the upper class does not fail to produce one often, with the lower class lagging far behind. And according to Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, “All men are intellectuals, ...: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.”

As regards the point of mapping the roles of the intellectuals, it includes, a sheer understanding – be it through academic study or general experience, or both – of the world and society they live in and of the power relations, and, above all, the mettle to speak the truth looking in the eye of the authority staying conscientiously away from its

gainful fold. And this reminds us of Edward Saïd who said that the “true intellectual is, therefore, always an outsider, living in self-imposed exile, and on the margins of society.”

But “there’s the rub”. Many an intellectual does an injustice to their names, thus proving themselves to be pseudo-intellectuals, with all the gear and no integrity. In Bangladesh, the recently toppled regime witnessed quite an astonishing number of them who, paying lip service to their vocation, did a mockery of their roles enumerated by Edward Saïd. Giving no heed to the regime’s misrule and crime spree and keeping mum about the excruciating sufferings of the common folks of the country, they just harped on the mantra of *unnayon* (development). In the name of Bengali Nationalism, the now-defunct regime practised othering, as a consequence of which a considerable number of people found themselves to be second rate citizens in their own land. Even

a significant portion of Muslims were thought to be militants by the authority, and ostracized as an enemy of the people, while the conniving intellectuals looked on.

The July uprising this year tried to put an end to all this, a very ambitious aim though. With those pseudo-intellectuals of the bygone regime now sidelined and a few brought to book, the ones who kept raising their voices through their talks and writings during the last 15 years, braving innumerable odds, as well as the aspirant ones, have a long way to go. In a land that is afflicted with sores all over making it a whole-body problem, with not a single institution running properly, the “true intellectuals”, it seems, need to push a huge boulder up a big mountain like mythical Sisyphus, but unlike him, can’t afford to let it come down to the ground as happened many times before.

Intellectuals of our country should keep raising their voice against our

starting from scratch again and again, help secure our achievements, and move forward in every sector of national efforts keeping aside factionist and personal gain. Like scientific research nowadays, intellectual activity also harvests best today when done in unison, as a group. Ideas spread quickly nowadays, and it is very easy to disseminate them, thanks to social media and modern technology. With their concerted efforts based on the priorities of the nation, namely rule of law under the aegis of a democratic government, top notch education, good governance, strong foreign policy, etc. the intellectuals need to remain alert so that the slacking in any of these areas is promptly protested by them and the dignity of an individual as a human being is never compromised.

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# A Loss That Still HAUNTS BANGLADESH



**The murder of Bangladesh's finest educators in 1971 was not just a physical genocide; it was an attack on the nation's intellectual capacity. The effects are still visible today. Think of the martyred educators as "master craftsmen" of human development. In their absence, we are struggling to build a society of thoughtful, skilled, and moral citizens**

KAMRUL HASSAN

"Knock! Knock!! Knock!!! Sir, please come outside, we need to talk."

On the night of December 14, 1971, a sinister knock echoed on the doors of 1,111 homes in Bangladesh. The question "Who is it?" from inside was met with a simple yet chilling reply: "Please come outside, we need to talk." That was the last time these 1,111 individuals would step out of their homes. They never returned to their loved ones. It's not just a phrase but a symbol of a calculated attempt to destroy a nation's future.

Today marks the 53rd December 14 — Martyred Intellectuals Day in Bangladesh. On this day in 1971, when the country stood on the brink of victory in the Liberation War, Pakistan's military, with the help of local collaborators, executed a ruthless plan to eliminate the nation's brightest minds. Teachers, doctors, journalists, writers, artists, and lawyers — the intellectual class who could guide a newly independent Bangladesh — were systematically abducted, tortured, and killed.

Among the 1,111 martyrs, 991 were teachers, 49 were doctors, 42 were lawyers, 13 were journalists, and 16 belonged to other professions. While their professional identities are well-documented, their political ideologies are often overlooked. Notably, most of them leaned towards leftist politics, which is not surprising. True intellectuals, much like white blood cells in the human body, serve as society's natural defenders against injustice. Historically, left-leaning individuals have been more inclined to challenge the status quo, while those on the right have often prioritised personal or religious interests over broader national concerns. This reality was evident then and remains so today, although the left has since become fragmented and divided into multiple factions.

The question arises: Why did the Pakistani military, along with local collaborators, target so many educators on the eve of Bangladesh's victory? The answer lies in the inherent power of education. By default,

teachers are critical thinkers and vocal critics of injustice. The enemies of Bangladesh knew that to cripple a newly independent nation, they had to destroy its intellectual backbone. Killing teachers meant weakening the future generation's ability to rise, resist, and rebuild. It was a brutal yet calculated strategy — and, in many ways, it succeeded.

#### The Lasting Impact: A Nation Crippled by Intellectual Void

If we look at Bangladesh today, it is evident that the void left by the massacre of intellectuals has not been filled. Corruption, moral decay, and unethical practices have become rampant. The country's moral compass seems broken, and our ability to produce "true humans" has diminished. This isn't surprising, as we have failed to restore the intellectual foundation that was shattered in 1971.

UNESCO prescribes that at least 20% of a nation's total budget should be allocated to education. In Bangladesh, it's only 10-11%. Given our unique

context — the brutal loss of intellectuals and the need to rebuild our society — we should be investing at least 30% of the national budget in education. Bangladesh lacks natural resources like oil or minerals, but it has something far more valuable — human potential. However, that potential will remain untapped if we don't nurture it.

The potential of humans is limitless if they are given the right guidance and education. But instead of building "true humans," our education system is churning out "false humans" — individuals who lack moral integrity, creativity, and the ability to think critically. This is evident in the rise of corruption, fraudulent schemes, and the plundering of natural resources like the Sundarbans. The Rampal coal power plant project, which threatens the environment, is a glaring example of this moral degradation.

#### The Consequences of Neglecting Education

The murder of Bangladesh's finest educators in 1971 was not just a physical genocide; it was an attack on the nation's intellectual capacity. The effects are still visible today. Think of the martyred educators as "master craftsmen" of human development. In their absence, we are struggling to build a society of thoughtful, skilled, and moral citizens. The British colonial rulers destroyed the art of muslin weaving by cutting off the weavers' thumbs. In 1971, the same was done to our education system. But this time, the "thumbs" of our master human builders — our teachers — were severed.

Today, we continue to "kill" our educators, not with guns and bullets but through neglect, disrespect, and underfunding. The salaries of primary school teachers are abysmally low, treating them as third-class government employees. How can we expect excellence in education when those tasked with building the minds of our children are treated with such disregard? The same applies to college and university teachers. We continue to fail them, and in turn, we fail our students.

#### Brain Drain: The Silent Exodus of Talent

Since 1947, Bangladesh has been experiencing a "brain drain" — the departure of its brightest minds to other countries. Every year, thousands of talented students leave for higher education in the US, UK, and Europe. How many of them return? Very few.

Why don't they come back? Because the system has no place for them. Even those who want to return are met with bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of employment opportunities. The system treats them as outsiders, as if returning to serve their homeland is a crime.

Instead of welcoming them, we close the door on them. The message is clear: "Stay abroad, we don't need you." But

the reality is that we do need them. The loss of these potential intellectuals is a tragedy in itself. Without thinkers, innovators, and scholars, how will Bangladesh develop the next generation of policymakers, teachers, and scientists? There is no government policy to bring these intellectuals back or create opportunities for them. If this trend continues, where will Bangladesh's future intellectuals come from? Without thinkers, researchers, and teachers, who will lead us to prosperity?

**Why Not Welcome Foreign Faculty?** One way to fill the gap in our intellectual ecosystem is to recruit skilled foreign educators. Foreigners work in nearly every sector in Bangladesh — health, banking, and business — but not in education. Why? Imagine if our universities had professors from globally renowned institutions. It would create a competitive academic environment, pushing local teachers to improve their research, teaching, and engagement. Students would benefit from exposure to diverse perspectives, languages, and cultures.

Many top universities worldwide have an international faculty base. This gives students a "global education experience" even if they never leave their country. But in Bangladesh, university regulations require faculty to be Bangladeshi citizens. This is a restriction that serves no purpose. It is time to remove this policy and open our universities to skilled educators from abroad. If we truly want to create global citizens, we must give them access to global teachers.

#### Are We Witnessing a "Silent Genocide" of Intellectuals Today?

In 1971, intellectuals were dragged from their homes and killed in a single night. Today, we are killing our intellectuals slowly, over decades. By underfunding education, offering poor wages to teachers, and failing to recruit top talent, we are silently "killing" the future of Bangladesh.

Look at our schools, colleges, and universities. Are we producing independent thinkers, critical analysts, and problem-solvers? Or are we producing rote learners who simply memorise and regurgitate information? Our schools are like factories — but instead of producing innovative minds, they are churning out "flawed products" with no critical thinking abilities.

Our education system prioritises exams, certificates, and grades — not real learning. But real learning requires visionary educators, the kind of teachers we lost on December 14, 1971. Today, we continue to produce mediocre minds because we have failed to restore the legacy of those intellectuals.

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## Let's Reclaim Our Role as the Conscience of Society

RUSHAD FARIDI

During the tumultuous days of the July Uprising in 2024, a name that surfaced repeatedly was that of Shamsuzzoha, an exceptional teacher and academician from the Department of Chemistry at Rajshahi University. Dr. Zoha came to the forefront to protect his students from the murderous onslaught of the Pakistani army, embodying the courage and moral conviction that seem alarmingly rare in contemporary Bangladesh. He was brutally killed by the Pakistani army on 18 February 1969 when police opened fire on the students on the Rajshahi University campus, and Dr. Zoha was there to save them.

During the period of Pakistan's rule, university teachers were among the primary targets of the army's ruthless campaign to silence dissenting voices. Their fearless protests against oppression marked them as enemies of the state. This unyielding

courage, however, appears to have diminished over time. The July Movement of 2024 starkly highlighted the dearth of such courageous teachers willing to stand up for students against the violent actions of the Awami regime. Many students lamented that only a few teachers today exhibit the moral fortitude of Zoha, who put his life on the line to protect his students.

This lack of courage is not confined to a single episode such as the July Uprising. Throughout the entirety of the fascist regime and even before, most university teachers have often displayed a troubling subservience to political authority. Many have adjusted their principles to align with their career aspirations or political affiliations, rather than standing up for justice and academic integrity. This behaviour has rendered universities, once bastions of critical thought and resistance, complicit in perpetuating oppression by ruling regimes.

It is quite deplorable that for decades, a large number of students and, in some cases, a few teachers bore the brunt of government-backed student political organisations' repression on various university campuses, but most teachers chose to remain silent. Their lack of protest or resistance to such brutal acts is indicative of a broader failure to uphold their moral responsibilities. The plight of their students and colleagues, and the broader suffering within universities, went largely ignored.

A few of us attempted to challenge this silence through activism under the banner of the University Teachers Network. Yet, at rallies and protests we organised, the turnout of our peers was dismally low. The reasons for this apathy towards challenging authority are clear: fear of earning the wrath of political authorities, a reluctance to jeopardise personal benefits, and an overall lack of conviction in the face of injustice. This cowardly mindset has

become a defining characteristic of many in our academic community.

The situation is not limited to university teachers; the broader intellectual community has also failed to meet its moral obligations. Writers, journalists, newspaper editors and columnists, along with other opinion makers and thought leaders of society, have remained either subservient or silent, unwilling to challenge the oppressive regime. This collective abdication of responsibility raises serious questions about the state of intellectual courage in Bangladesh.

If we are to honour the spirit of martyred intellectuals, we must confront this degenerated mindset. The ideals for which they sacrificed their lives demand a renewal of courage, integrity, and resistance among teachers and intellectuals. Unfortunately, the advent of "Bangladesh 2.0" does not guarantee a significant shift in this regard. The same patterns of fear and subservience

may persist, undermining the progress and principles we claim to uphold.

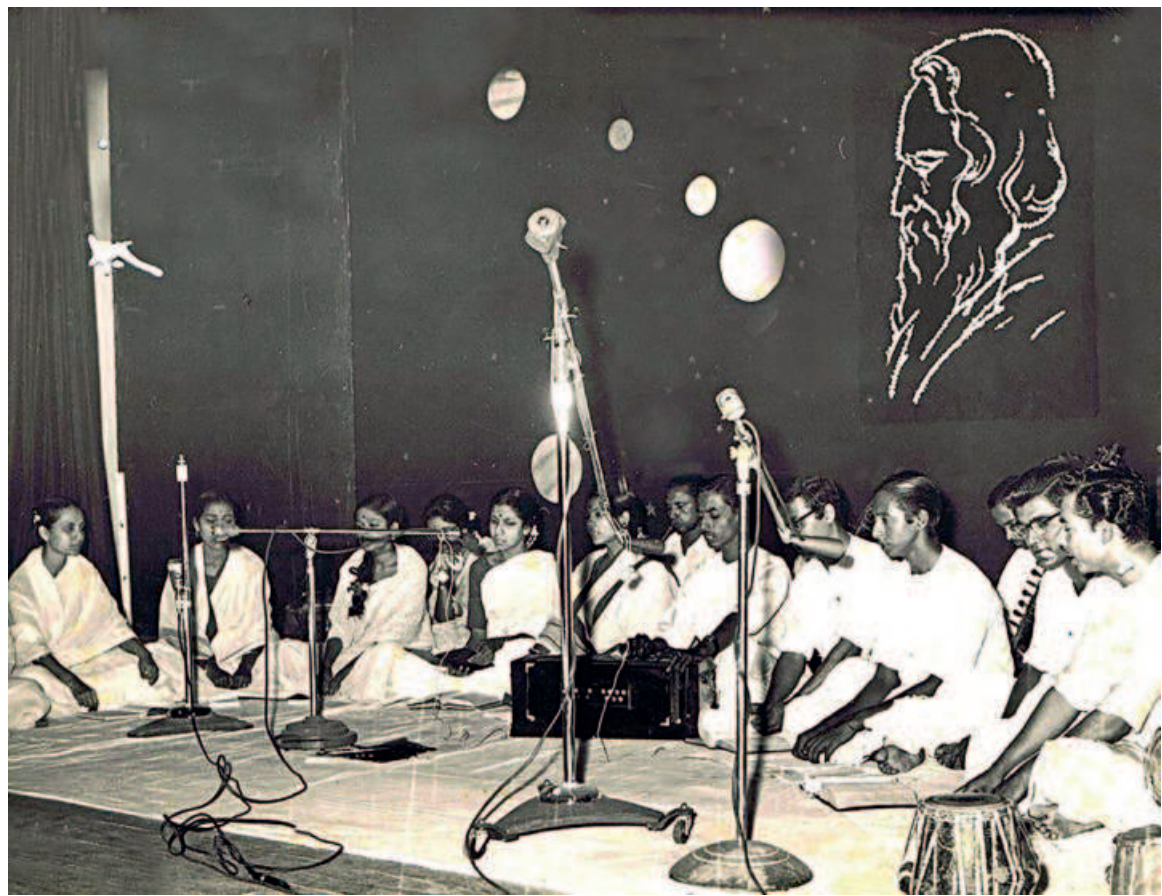
At the same time, it is true that during the July Uprising, we saw quite a few university teachers and other intellectuals come forward in support of their students and the people in the movement. That gives us hope for the future.

By following the footsteps of these few courageous intellectuals, the time has come for the overall intelligentsia to reclaim their role as the conscience of society. This requires stepping out of the shadows of selfish interests and into the light of active resistance. Only then can we truly honour the legacy of Shamsuzzoha and the countless others who gave their lives for the pursuit of justice and truth.

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## Of 1971, 2024, Rabindranath Tagore and Martyred Intellectuals Day



Historic photograph of brave individuals from BAFA's Oikotan group, who defied the Ayub Khan regime's ban by performing Rabindra Sangeet in Dacca (East Pakistan) in 1961/62. The background Tagore artwork was created by Tutu Saad using white cement on jute. Photo credit: Naheed Brown.

TANVIR HAIDER CHAUDHURY

Fifty-three years is a long time—long enough for memories to fray, for many details to be lost, and for even those that endure to begin to fade.

I say this because December 14th is upon us once again. In the changed circumstances of our country, some may need to be reminded of what this day means in our national context.

Fifty-three years ago, from the 10th to the 15th of December, 1971, some of the best and brightest minds of this land—teachers, journalists, medical practitioners, literateurs, thinkers—were extinguished by the Al-Badr and Al-Shams collaborators of the marauding Pakistani army. While this process of intellectual killing began when the rulers in West Pakistan declared war on their fellow citizens in the erstwhile East Pakistan—the first teachers were killed on the Dhaka University campus on March 25th, and more than a thousand intellectuals were murdered over the course of the nine-month war—approximately two hundred were abducted from their homes on December 14th, taken to

specific locations in the city where they were tortured, and ultimately killed, just hours before the liberation of the country on December 16th.

Why were they killed? The obvious explanation might seem to be that they were political opponents of the ruling Pakistani regime and their local sympathisers. However, this was not the case for all of the martyred intellectuals. I was reading the autobiography of the eminent philosopher and essayist Sardar Fazlul Karim, *Atmojiboni o Onyanyo*, the other day. He notes that some of the most prominent intellectuals who were murdered in 1971 were not active in the political arena. He mentions Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta, the eminent Professor of English at Dhaka University, who was shot by the Pakistani army on March 25th and died of his injuries on March 30th. He also refers to my father, Mufazzal Haider Chaudhury.

My father was a teacher of Bangla language and literature at the University of Dhaka. He never participated in active politics in the forty-five years he lived until he, too, was abducted by the Al-Badr, tortured, and murdered on December 14, 1971.

The obvious question that arises is: Why were people like my father and Professor Guhathakurta, as well as figures like Professor Munier Chowdhury, the famous playwright and educationist, who had been involved in leftist politics in his youth but had not been politically active for decades, identified as enemies by the collaborators of the Pakistani army? They were not political opponents. Why were they seen as such threats that they had to be eliminated?

The answer is this: Each of these gentlemen, along with the majority of other intellectuals who were martyred in 1971, had a vision for their country that was non-sectarian, secular, embracing diversity, and rooted in the rich cultural and ethnic heritage of the Bengali people. It was because the ideas they espoused were considered dangerous by the Pakistani rulers and their collaborators that they were marked as enemies. To the extent that, faced with certain defeat in a matter of days, the Al-Badr and Al-Shams planned and carried out their massacre as a final, desperate act. This was their attempt to cripple the emerging nation of Bangladesh.

In July and August 2024, we witnessed another mass movement emerge victorious in Bangladesh. This

to unconscionable, murderous tactics to suppress the rising tide of rebellion. Just as in 1971, this movement has had its martyrs: gallant young men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice for their cause.

These are different times, however, and in some ways, these young people see the world through different lenses than their predecessors. In particular, since the ousted regime sought to justify their wrongdoings by commodifying the amorphous 'spirit of the liberation war' and professed to be secular while nurturing sectarian elements within their own ranks and in society at large, today's young revolutionaries seem to have an instinctive distrust of those who claim to be secular and invoke 1971 at every given opportunity. It is this unease that I believe we saw reflected in many of the events that followed the movement, with talk of replacing the national anthem, wholesale rewrites of the constitution, and so forth. If they had their way, some would even change the flag of the nation or rename the country altogether, it seemed.

I found some of the arguments for replacing the national anthem particularly intriguing. Some claimed that Rabindranath Tagore, the writer of 'Amar Sonar Bangla', was not Bangladeshi, blithely ignoring the fact

Bangladesh came into being or India was even partitioned). They argued that the song was too pastoral and did not invoke the martial spirit within them. Well, my young friends, I wish I could have told them, it is a pastoral song for a pastoral people. It reflects who we are, which is why it resonates with so many of us.

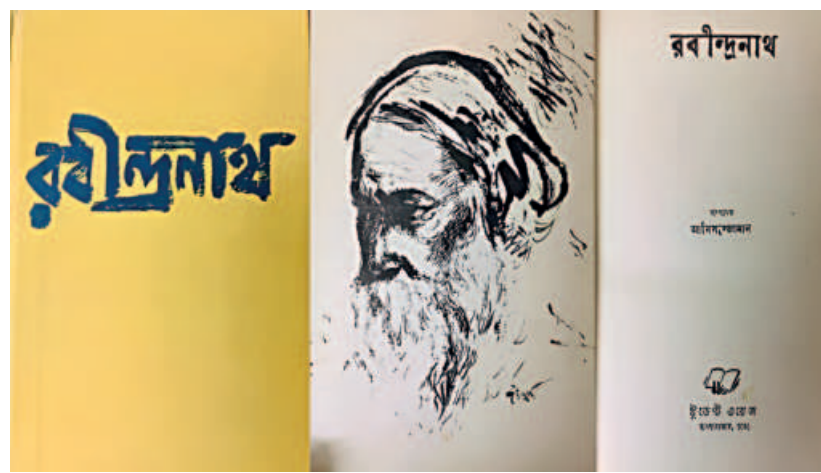
I think many in this generation are simply unaware of the iconic value of Rabindranath Tagore, or the deep-seated, unwavering reverence for the ideals we fought for in 1971, or the uncompromising dedication to the concepts of inclusiveness, non-sectarianism, and secularism that an overwhelming majority of their predecessors hold in their hearts. They do not know that the autocrats and despots of a different time, such as the Ayub Khan government in West Pakistan and Monem Khan, the Governor of East Pakistan, sought to ban Rabindranath's songs in this land in 1967, only to fail. That 'Amar Sonar Bangla' was sung in Mukti Bahini camps across the land in 1971, giving the valiant young women and men fighting for the survival of their land the inspiration and steely resolve to soldier on until victory or death. So, it seems, that pastoral tune did its bit to instil the martial spirit as well.

They do not know that in the final moments of my father's life, he was asked by the Al-Badr assassins if he had written on Rabindranath Tagore, as if to do so would be a sin. An eyewitness, who was the only survivor from that wretched day, later testified that my father said he had. He looked death in the eye and said he wrote on Rabindranath.

This is the price that people in this land paid for loving Rabindranath. For holding on to our cultural heritage. We will not negotiate on this, nor shall we compromise.

These young people, who must surely love this land as much as my father's generation did, as our generation does, need to know these things. And if we all love this beleaguered, intrepid land so much, this country soaked in the blood of our martyrs, surely we can find common ground. Surely December 14th will forever endure in our hearts as a day, in equal parts, of profound sadness and overwhelming pride.

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The cover and title page of the iconic edited volume *Rabindranath*, a landmark publication from the Pakistan era. This book features contributions from prominent scholars of the time, including Mufazzal Haider Chaudhury's insightful article, *Rabindranath's Dharma*.

time, as on so many other occasions, it was the students of public and private universities who stood up against a regime that had come to embody an oppressive, kleptocratic oligarchy; a regime that had resorted

that the Tagore family has ancestral roots partly in Jessore and that the great man composed many of his enduring works at their family property in Kushtia (not to mention the fact that he passed away in 1941, long before

## Shilalipi: A Legend Carved in Stone

MEGHNA GUHATHAKURTA

The film *Shilalipi*, directed by Shameem Akhtar, is a fictionalised version of the life story of Shahid Selina Parveen, a writer, poet, and magazine editor who was picked up, tortured, and killed by collaborators of the occupying Pakistani army during the war of 1971. Her name, therefore, shines as one of the Martyrs of the Bangladesh Liberation War. *Shilalipi* is a film that captures both the milieu in which the voices of protest were being articulated by the Bengalis of East Pakistan against the ruling military junta of Pakistan, as well as the intensely personal life struggles of a woman fighting for her individuality. It is, therefore, a deeply political film attempting to link the personal with the political.

Selina Parveen (screen name: Nasrin) is portrayed as a middle-class woman striving hard to eke out an income for herself and her eight-year-old son, Sumon (screen name: Suborno). In her day-to-day struggle, she takes up proofreading for a publishing firm and takes shelter in a rambling old building in Old Dhaka, where she and her son receive the fatherly love and care of Asad Bhai, and the intimate mothering of their Muslim and Hindu co-tenants. The gaunt, graying stones of the massive house are filled with the sights, sounds, and smells of warmth, comfort, and good cheer. But the distant thunder rumbles deeply, forecasting stormy weather. The voices of anti-Ayub protesters spill over the high walls, sometimes lighting the faces of the inhabitants of the house with anticipation and hope, sometimes spreading shadows of doubt and fear of the ominous.

The onset of the Pakistani military crackdown changed the situation almost overnight, transforming the carefree, breezy

gait of the inhabitants into the measured stealth of their steps and the lowered voices. Ominous changes took place. Some tenants left for safer shelters, others were forced to leave for fear of being identified as 'Indian infiltrators', a nomenclature commonly reserved by the Pakistani state for those not identifying themselves with the defence of the structural integrity of the Pakistan state. Ultimately, Nasrin was left alone with her eight-year-old son, resisting pleas to go elsewhere. On top of this, she was sheltering freedom fighters in her house, thus putting herself in a dangerous position. Having lost a brother in the war, these were her brothers whom she could not forsake. As one tenant after another left the house, they left behind their presence in the mind of eight-year-old Suborno, a boy who had learned to bid farewell far too early in life.

On an early December morning, the chilling event came that was to tear his mother away from Suborno. Suborno was on the roof, imitating the fighters commonly seen amidst the blue, hazy clouds over Dhaka. The Indians had joined the war against Pakistan and had already taken command of the skies. Pakistani troops were surrendering to the joint command in outlying areas, and total surrender of the Pakistani forces was imminent.

It was during this time that bands of collaborators carried out Gestapo-like raids on targeted houses, blindfolding, binding, and taking away noted intellectuals and professionals of the country to camps where they were tortured and then taken to their deaths. Their decomposed bodies were later found in the brickfields on the outskirts of Dhaka city. But Selina Parveen, alias Nasrin, had never thought she had done anything great to warrant such a fate. She had been writing against



Journalist and poet Selina Parveen (1931-1971)

the Pakistani state in her magazine and had been sheltering young Muktiyoddhas (freedom fighters) at great risk, but she took these activities in her stride, thinking it was her duty to her homeland.

Separated from a husband who believed that the Party dictated everything, Selina Parveen's personal life was a struggle to attain her own selfhood. She therefore understood the sufferings of a nation experiencing that same pain and humiliation, and hence, helping it to stand on its own feet was a way in which she was helping herself too. Her sacrifice for the nation was not that she gave up her own life, but that she gave up the very things which had been at the root of her creativity: being a mother to her eight-year-old son and editing her own journal. The scene in which she was picked up by the collaborators, as seen through the eyes of eight-year-old Sumon, alias Suborno, is therefore spine-chilling. As she is led down the stairs by the collaborators, her son calls out to her. Her only reply is a tense and urgent "Ghorey Jao!" (Go inside). She repeats the

phrase as they blindfold her and tie her hands behind her back, but with her head held back, looking at where her son must be at the top of the stairs, she tries to prolong her 'gaze' through her blindfold as she is finally dragged away. This memory is etched into the hearts of every viewer, as it must be in the heart of Sumon.

The whole story is narrated through the eyes of Sumon, who has grown into a young man carrying the pain of losing both his father and mother (he claims that his mother was both to him) at a tender age. His friend encourages him to research and write about his mother. They begin to visit old friends and acquaintances of his

and struggle are part of the creation of Bangladesh.

The film ends with Suborno (the fictionalised version of Sumon) and his friend viewing the monument for the martyred intellectuals in the killing fields of Rayer Bazaar, where Selina Parveen's body was found. The foundation stone laid by Projonmo '71 poses a question to all who visit there: "Tomra ja bolechhiley, bolchhey ki ta Bangladesh?" (Does Bangladesh say what you had said?). The song in the background, written by Shamim Akhtar and sung and lyricised by Moushumi, accentuates the loss, struggle, and sacrifice of individuals such as Selina Parveen and adds grace to the visual imagery, which can only be compared to



On December 13, 1971, Selina Parveen was abducted from her home in Siddheswari by the AL-BADR cadres. She was later executed at the Rayerbazar scaffold. Her body, with eyes covered by a black veil, was found at the site. She was laid to rest in Azimpur graveyard on December 18.

mother, exhibitions of 1971, and the story unfolds through flashbacks. As an introduction, the real Sumon speaks a few words about his mother and his memories of her, stating that this film is a way of paying homage to Selina Parveen, who is not only his individual mother but whose life

that of a flute playing amidst the swaying green rice fields of Bengal. It is a scene whose sights and sounds linger in the memory of a viewer long after the film is over.

The effectiveness of the film lies largely in the creative imagination of the director and the sincere and

hard work of most of the actors. The film, being Shamim Akhtar's second (the first being *Itihas Konnya: Daughters of History*), shows signs of the director's maturity in laying out her story with ingenuity.

Needless to say, the contribution of the actors to the film has been immense. The acting of Sara Zaker as Selina Parveen, Asaduzzaman Nur as her friend, Manosh Chowdhury as the grown-up version of Sumon, and Jishnu Brahma Putra as the young version of Sumon has been exemplary. They have given their all to portray what must have been, for them, a singular opportunity to give vent to those sublime emotions which go beyond any rhetorical understanding of 1971.

From fear to elation, from outrage to suppressed anger, from pain to the practicality of survival, from courage to sheer desperation, the full spectrum of emotions has flitted to and fro across the celluloid realities of *Shilalipi*, making it not only a story of a nation or an individual but rather a story of the human condition.

Like any human situation, no doubt, the film has its share of technical flaws and limitations, but that is not what is foremost in the minds of the viewer after watching the film. As in any work of art, it takes one down to the essence of human emotions, while at the same time elevating the soul to a plane where one feels as though one can see eternity, or rather, things eternal, like love, pain, beauty, and understanding. Shamim Akhtar has taken bold and courageous steps in this direction, and one looks forward to seeing more of her work in the near future.

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