

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, litterateurs, 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.

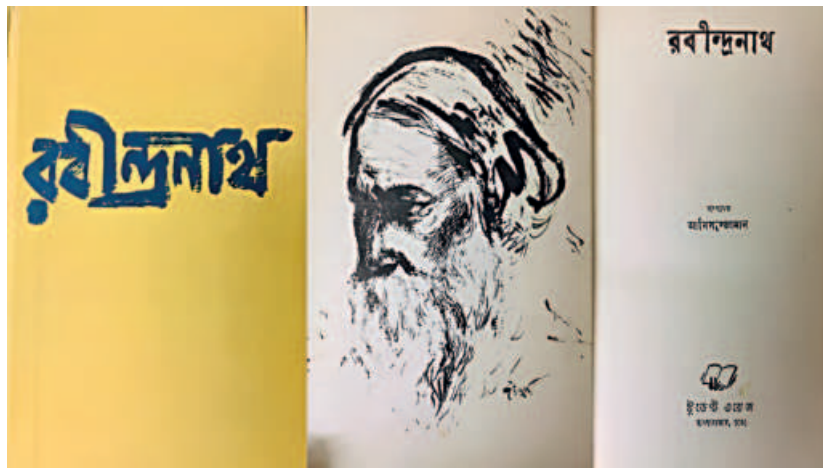
I think many in this generation are simply unaware of the iconic value of Rabindranath Tagore, or the deep-seated, unwavering reverence for the ideals we fought for in 1971, or the uncompromising dedication to the concepts of inclusiveness, non-sectarianism, and secularism that an overwhelming majority 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 instill 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 "Ghorrey 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 Akhter 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

hard work of most of the actors. The film, being Shamim Akhter's second (the first being *Itihash 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 Brahmaputra 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 Akhter has taken bold and courageous steps in this direction, and one looks forward to seeing more of her work in the near future.

Meghna Guhathakurta is a former professor at Dhaka University and the daughter of martyr Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta.



On December 13, 1971, Selina Parvin 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