

The Daily Star

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Time to fulfil the dreams of 1971

This Victory Day, we must pledge to create a fair and just Bangladesh

Victory Day marks one of the brightest moments in our history—a time to honour the sacrifices of our freedom fighters, martyred intellectuals, and countless brave men, women, and children who contributed in various ways to liberate this country from decades of oppression under the Pakistani regime. It is a day of gratitude and reflection, reminding us of the resilience of our people and inspiring a vision of a stronger, united Bangladesh. This year's Victory Day is particularly special, as, after 15 years of authoritarian rule by the Awami League, we now stand in a free country following the student-led mass uprising that led to the regime's ouster. This moment presents an opportunity to correct the wrongs of the past and begin anew, building a Bangladesh founded on the principles of equity, justice, the rule of law, and human rights.

Unfortunately, in the 53 years since our victory on December 16, 1971, Bangladesh has yet to become a successful democracy. While the country has held four free and fair elections under caretaker governments, the elected administrations have largely failed to fulfil the people's aspirations. Over the past 15 years of Awami League rule, the situation deteriorated further. The economic condition worsened, and people's freedom of expression and right to dissent were suppressed through draconian laws like the Cyber Security Act (recently repealed). With the interim government taking charge after the fall of Sheikh Hasina's administration on August 5, there is renewed hope that the long-unfulfilled dreams of 1971 can finally be realised. On this Victory Day, we must pledge to overcome divisions and unite in our efforts to make Bangladesh a success story on the world stage.

To achieve this, we must address the major challenges currently facing the country. Stabilising the economy is an urgent priority. According to a government-commissioned white paper, an estimated \$234 billion was syphoned out of Bangladesh between 2009 and 2023 during the Awami League's tenure. Recovering this stolen money is essential to revitalise the economy. Additionally, the lower- and lower-middle-income groups are struggling due to rising inflation, necessitating immediate government action. Another critical issue is the high unemployment rate, which must be addressed promptly.

Moreover, the government must work to improve the living standards of workers, especially those in the ready-made garment sector, who form the backbone of our economy. Ensuring the rights of marginalised groups is equally important. Environmental protection must also be prioritised, with a particular focus on improving air quality, which has become a significant concern for public health recently. These are just some of the key priorities that demand immediate attention.

Let this Victory Day be a moment for reflection, recalibration, and decisive action to guide our nation in the right direction.

Ensure justice for the disappeared

Arrest and try those involved in such heinous crimes

Ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's direct involvement in cases of enforced disappearance, as revealed in the finding of the inquiry commission's preliminary report, confirms our foreboding that these gross human rights violations were state-sponsored, with orders coming from the highest echelon of power. Otherwise, this heinous crime could not have continued for so long without any perpetrator ever being tried.

The inquiry commission, formed on August 27 to investigate cases of enforced disappearances from 2009 to August 5, 2024, also found prima facie evidence against Hasina's defence adviser Maj Gen (ret'd) Tarique Ahmed Siddique, former director general of the National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre Maj Gen Ziaul Ahsan, and senior police officers Monirul Islam and Md Harun Or-Rashid. Of the four, Tarique, Monirul and Harun are still absconding. The commission's report detailed how trained professionals in forces, including Rab, DGFI, DB, CID, and CTTC, "deliberately designed the system of enforced disappearances over 15 years in a fashion calculated to avoid detection and attribution of responsibility."

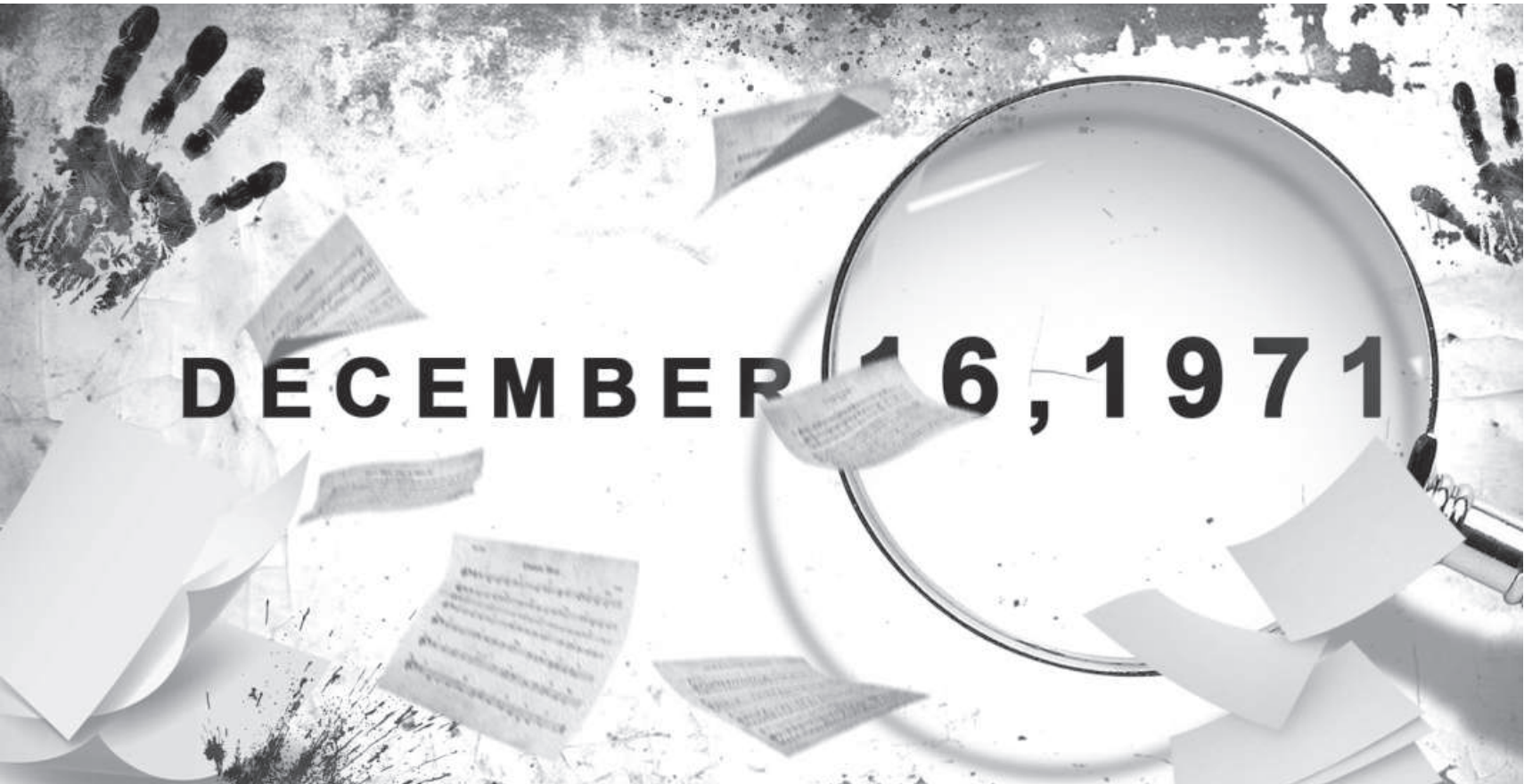
In fact, the commission estimates that the actual number of enforced disappearances might exceed 3,500—more than double the 1,676 complaints they received so far. To date, the commission has examined 758 complaints, and in 27 percent of the cases, the victims never returned. Another interim report will be published by the commission in three months, but the final report will take at least another year. While it is necessary to take as much time as needed for a proper investigation, the concerns of the families and rights activists that much evidence might be lost or destroyed during this time should also be taken seriously. The government must ensure that no perpetrator goes free because of any lapse in collecting and preserving evidence or delay in starting the trial process. It is, therefore, imperative to unearth and preserve all the Aynaghars, which, according to the latest findings, now total nine.

Meanwhile, we welcome the commission's recommendation to enact a new law criminalising enforced disappearance and amend the Anti-Terrorism Act 2009, which has been used as a weapon to victimise many innocents. The commission's recommendation to disband Rab, which was found involved in 172 cases of enforced disappearance, should be considered and weighed against the alternative of extensive reform. Most of all, everyone, including Sheikh Hasina, must be held accountable for their involvement in enforced disappearances, which not only traumatised surviving victims for life but broke many families who, not knowing the fate of their loved ones, cannot get closure.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Clinton orders air attack on Iraq

On this day in 1998, then US President Bill Clinton announced that he had ordered airstrikes against Iraq because it refused to cooperate with the United Nations (UN) weapons inspectors.



December 16: Proudly celebrated, not seriously studied



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December 16, 1971 was a unique moment for Bangladesh. The supposedly fractious and non-martial Bangalees had united in struggle, sacrifice, and courage and prevailed over an organised, trained, and brutal military force. The dream of freedom had been desperate and determined, the sacrifices many and excruciating. Therefore, when the day finally arrived, the people were overwhelmed with relief, pride, vindication, wonder, confidence, joy, and hope. They were not concerned about who would claim credit and what narratives would emerge. They assumed that research would be undertaken, and authentic histories would be preserved and presented. The intellectual failures that became evident later were surprising and disappointing.

Given the systemic and structural tumult that followed (and probably lasts to this day), there was some fear that our economic elite and our leaders, political parties and policymakers could presumably be lured by selfish ambitions driven by the imperatives of power and profits. However, our educators, particularly our university teachers, enjoyed an enviable position of trust and respect. They were expected to enlighten the people and bring some clarity and understanding about the development and significance of the moment.

This optimism was dictated by several factors. First, the subcontinent, including Bengal, had inherited a long and rich tradition of historical research and writing that had been published and acclaimed by internationally recognised platforms. It was naturally expected that scholars of history would bring their professionalism, training, experience, and their location within an active intellectual environment, to the new challenges that had been fortuitously created.

Second, the dynamics of the Liberation War constituted probably the most dramatic and traumatic development in the history of this region. Therefore, it was anticipated that the interest it would generate would be immediate and popular, and the support from governmental and private sources to advance an agenda of research and analysis would be steady and robust.

Third, 1971 happened in the full light of day. The cruelties of the genocide, and the heroism of the resistance—the trainings, mobilisations, encounters, losses, victories—were all parts of the people's lived experience. Most facts could be easily located, verified, codified, and compared. Moreover, many of the participants in the armed struggle, some occupying leadership positions, were themselves students. It was presumed that they would appreciate the importance of historical enquiry and willingly, perhaps eagerly, become complicit in the effort to further our knowledge and understanding.

One of the biggest challenges all historians face is simply finding material in their hunt for appropriate

empirical evidence, substantive documentation, logical connections, and causal explanations. All studies are expected to satisfy the demands of the Popperian "falsification doctrine," i.e. results could only be scientifically acceptable if they could be subjected to challenge and rejection. In other words, if the research offered "proof" that was weak or untrustworthy, documentation that was not appropriate or reliable, conclusions that were not logically established, or explanations not theoretically grounded, that particular historical project could not claim academic validity.

In the case of Bangladesh, the evidence was all around us, memories were fresh and vivid, names and numbers, places and boundaries, population movements and resettlements, perpetrators and victims could all be identified, counted, and organised for academic purposes. Moreover, relevant documentation was easily accessible. Also, there were no contrarian voices that could confuse the project. The facts were "us"; this was "our" history; we were an open book. Sadly, we did not study it with any degree of professional seriousness or scholarly authority.

Several explanations for this sluggishness may be suggested. First, the events were too raw, too immediate, too overwhelming. We did not have the kind of psychological/intellectual distance and composure to undertake the kind of studies that would satisfy the standards of academic efficacy.

Second, the authoritarian intolerance and political tuggery into which the country descended soon after independence (a presidential system, one-party rule, a severely restricted media, all in just three years), the moral squalor created by predatory capitalism, kleptocratic cronyism, a perverse rent-seeking state establishment (breeding pervasive bribery, corruption, and exploitation), and the class inequities, social divisions, and gender violence it generated, all contributed to an environment where people had little patience for, or interest in, the principles and practices of history. That process obviously and notoriously deteriorated over the years.

Even the universities felt the loss of moral authority and scholarly respect they had traditionally enjoyed. Teachers realised that the usual norms and standards that are followed for appointments and promotions, perks and protections, an administrative position here or a foreign trip there, were usually determined by considerations that had little to do with excellence in research, service or teaching.

Similarly, some students felt sufficiently emboldened to engage in various money-making schemes, terrorising others through threat and intimidation (including occasional violence), controlling residential halls and, in some cases, even manipulating university policy, with absolute

impunity. They had little respect for the teachers, academic integrity or education itself.

To expect teachers to engage in research and remain focused on the acquisition and circulation of knowledge in that context was quite unrealistic (though a few brave souls and iconoclasts persisted with admirable determination and honour). In international rankings, the position of Dhaka University, the flagship institution which, at some point, had been heralded as the "Oxford of the East," progressively worsened.

It should also be pointed out that the economic elite of the country, or the political leadership represented in the legislature which had final authority over public universities, had little interest in improving the condition of the universities, since most of them (almost 60 percent of the last parliament) were businessmen, and their children mostly studied abroad.

Third, in the battle of controlling the meta narratives of our historical evolution, it became increasingly evident that one party could eventually claim total "victory." It not only set the parameters of enquiry, but it also dictated the outcomes. Questions and challenges were considered intolerable and eventually illegal. The "truth" had been discovered, evidence-based research was irrelevant, and history was weaponised in a hyper-polarised

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environment. Thus, we could never know real figures of those who died, who were raped, who fled, who fought, who disappeared, or who became the enemies of the liberation. The answers were all "given."

The process led to a partisan usurpation of the historical dynamic, the presentation of a singular, unilateral, absolute version of events, and the elevation of Bangabandhu (whose charismatic presence in the history of our struggle cannot be neglected or even minimised) to a level of personal cultism. The hero-worshipping excesses, aggressively promoted by cynical sycophants, were relentless, tasteless, and eventually counterproductive (which partly explains the angers and frustrations unleashed after the fall of the previous regime). But the damage to independent research it inflicted was rude and debilitating.

Finally, written research projects also had to contend with the patterns and expectations of popular culture. The compulsively oral tradition characteristic of the region indicated a greater preference for speeches

than for written records. Hence, oratorical talents were valorised over the supposedly plodding effort of researchers (a shadow that continues to hang heavily over the intellectual scene in Bangladesh). There are some notable exceptions of productive scholars acquiring sterling reputations and large followings, but those are probably few.

Related to that is the Bangalee penchant for melodrama, sentimentalism, and romance. The interest was in personal stories of bravery and sacrifice, not micro-histories of specific areas, groups or subcultures, nor macro-histories that were more inclusive. This led to three consequences.

First, given the natural propensity for stories of suffering, tragedy and loss in the Bangalee psyche, there was an emphasis on depictions of brutality inflicted by the Pakistani forces, of murders and rapes, of people who disappeared, and homes destroyed, of *jalladkhanas* and *bodhhobhumis* (killing fields). However, the accent was on description, not quantitative elaboration.

Second, there were some memoirs of influential people who had been involved in the events in some form or another, describing the internal issues and workings of the leadership. Many of these biographical undertakings are most useful for their insights and impressions, for tracing connections between specific people, events, and decisions, and for cross-checking facts and individual claims. Most of these could be fruitfully mined to support larger studies.

Third, there was a plethora of publications containing individual experiences and testimonies of our freedom fighters. Many of these publications were commendable (incidentally, the *Muktijuddho* has generated thousands of books, more than almost any war for liberation in history). They were basically honest, many were engagingly written, some brilliant, and had the advantage of first-hand accounts of participant-observers that cannot be replicated. But their focus was necessarily limited and personal. They form an essential part of our history, provide indispensable raw materials for historical reconstruction, and offer important dots that could be connected for more comprehensive portrayals. But, by themselves they do not constitute history as an academic enterprise.

This essay, and the lament it contains, reflects the perspective of history presented by Prof John Lewis Gaddis in his influential *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past*. It follows a long and rich tradition blazed by Will and Ariel Durant, William H McNeil, Marc Bloch, E P Thompson, Howard Zinn, Arnold Toynbee, E H Carr (and subcontinental historians such as Irfan Habib, Romila Thapar, Tapan Raychaudhuri, R C Majumdar, Niharranjan Ray, Nalini Kanta Bhattachali, Amiya Kumar Bagchi, Abu Mohamed Habibullah, Salahuddin Ahmed, Ranajit Guha and the subaltern historians, among others) who tried to follow the scientific method in terms of maintaining a theoretical framework, methodological sophistication, rhetorical discipline, empirical grounding, logical clarity, and fairness of analysis and judgement. Perhaps historians of 1971 will also be inspired by similar ideals, convictions, and craftsmanship.