

MARTYRED INTELLECTUALS DAY 2025

# What does it mean to honour the legacy of Bangladesh's martyred intellectuals?



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Occupying powers often follow the same old playbook. They fight not only armed opponents, but also the social conditions that make resistance possible—education, free speech, professional integrity, and the willingness to question authority. If these survive, a society can rebuild even after defeat. But if they are destroyed, even a so-called victory can become a lasting defeat.

Bangladesh in 1971 followed this pattern. The violence carried out by the then-Pakistan army that year was not merely widespread; it was targeted. It focused on two connected groups: spaces where knowledge is produced and people who keep public life active. Dhaka University was not simply caught in the crossfire, nor were journalists, teachers, doctors, writers, and artists randomly targeted later in 1971. They were chosen deliberately. To the attackers, these individuals and institutions were obstacles. This is a truth we must confront. For the perpetrators, ideas were not harmless; they were dangerous.

Operation Searchlight began with an assault designed to paralyse Dhaka. By December 1971, the violence had become more focused. Journalists, university teachers, writers, doctors, thinkers, artists, and other professionals were tracked, abducted, blindfolded, and taken to killing sites around Dhaka, including

carried out these crimes alone. It relied on local networks; groups such as Al-Badr and Al-Shams were tasked with hunting down intellectuals. According to Banglapedia, Pakistani forces killed 1,111 intellectuals during the Liberation War, including 149 in Dhaka alone.

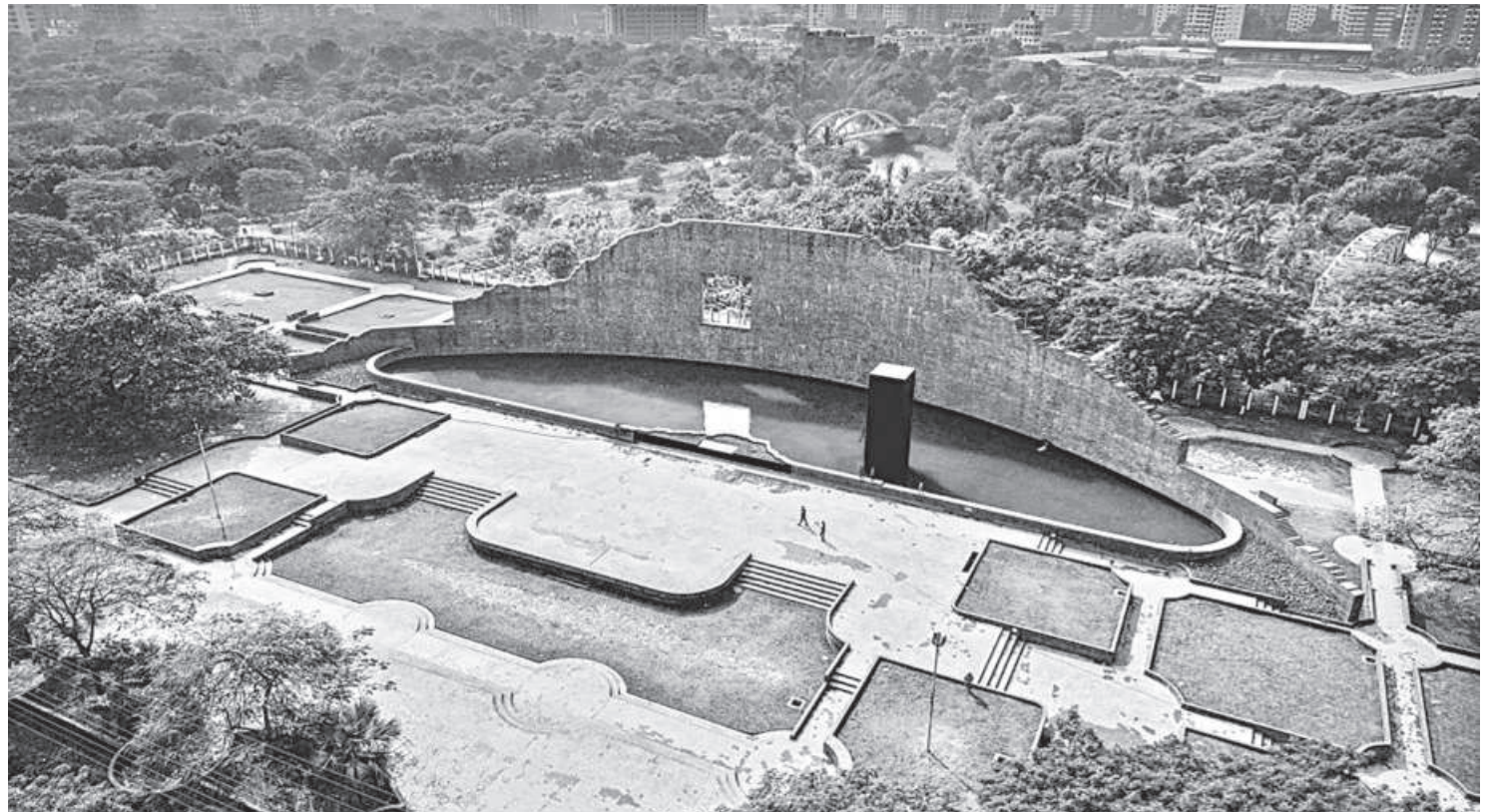
What distinguishes the final phase of 1971 is this shift from mass intimidation to targeted killing. This is why collaboration is central to understanding these events. Targeted violence requires social knowledge. An army can seal off streets, raid neighbourhoods, and spread fear through open force. But it cannot, on its own, locate a person's residence at midnight or know who edits which newspaper, who teaches in which department, or who influences which community. That knowledge comes from within society itself. This is why targeted political killings almost always depend on local assistance. There is always another layer behind what we see—a network behind the network. Ignoring this turns a political crime into a story of faceless violence, and faceless stories are easier to forget.

For this reason, Bangladesh observes December 14 as Martyred Intellectuals Day. It is more than a date marking the end of the war. It symbolises the war's most cynical objective: to cripple the nation's future by destroying its intellectual foundation.

That is why a second battle often begins after the guns fall silent: the battle over narrative. In recent years, a troubling pattern has re-emerged in how some speak about the martyred intellectuals. Instead of asking who abducted and killed them in 1971, some question why they stayed at home, why they did not cross the border to seek shelter in India, why they continued working, or why they accepted salaries from

intellectuals and professionals precisely because they fear organised public life. In occupied Poland during World War II, Nazi policy included systematic attacks on educated citizens and civic leaders, driven by the belief that a society without teachers, cultural figures, and community organisers would be easier to control. In Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, education and professional life were viewed with deep

Ultimately, this commitment must return us to the promise made at Bangladesh's birth: a society founded on equality, human dignity, and social justice. These are not ornamental ideals. They are the standards by which the state should be shaped and civic life conducted. The Constitution of Bangladesh places human dignity at its core, offering rights and legal protections that are not favours granted by power. If we are



The Martyred Intellectuals' Memorial in the capital's Rayerbazar. The monument was designed by architects Farid U Ahmed and Jami Al Shafi to honour the luminaries who sacrificed their lives for the country's independence.

FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

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Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Rajarbagh, and Rayerbazar. Many were tortured and murdered, their bodies dumped in mass graves. The Pakistan army could not have

Remembering this day reminds us that sovereignty is not only about borders. It is also about the freedom to think, speak, teach, and build institutions without fear.

the Pakistan government. These questions are sometimes framed as "criticism," but their intent is often political rather than scholarly. They attempt to shift suspicion onto the victims and divert accountability away from perpetrators and collaborators.

This is not a minor shift. It alters the moral structure of the story. Once victims are portrayed as compromised, their killing appears less like a crime and more like an unfortunate consequence. This is how justification takes shape—not through open defence of murder, but through the slow erosion of public sympathy. Such reasoning is morally indefensible. It punishes the dead for being targeted, undermines collective trust, and teaches society to doubt those singled out by terror. In doing so, it leaves space for future violence to be excused in the same way.

History offers many parallels. Across different contexts, regimes have targeted

suspicion. Violence against those linked to learning and urban institutions caused long-term damage to the country's social fabric.

Different places and ideologies share the same instinct: to dominate a population, weaken the people and institutions that help it remain resilient.

What does it mean, then, to honour the legacy of Bangladesh's martyred intellectuals? It requires more than remembrance; it must become a civic practice. It begins with rejecting defamation and continues with defending the idea that citizens contribute in different ways, according to their skills and capacities. In any liberation struggle, some march, some fight, some organise, some write, some teach, some document, and some create art to sustain hope. A movement is built through many roles, not a single model of heroism.

serious about equality, dignity, and justice, they must be practised daily as institutions are built. Universities must allow space for difficult questions. Newsrooms must report facts without fear. Courts must protect people equally, whether powerful or powerless. And as a society, we must allow room for disagreement, because a country that forces everyone to speak in one voice is not stable—it is afraid.

This is the deeper lesson of the 1971 Liberation War. Genocide is not only the destruction of bodies; it is an attempt to shatter a society's confidence. The perpetrators seek to teach that resistance is futile, that truth is dangerous, and that silence is safer than courage. Against this logic, we must defend rights for all, keep institutions fair, and protect the freedom to speak when power demands silence. This is how the legacy of the martyred intellectuals endures—not as ritual, but as responsibility.

## Martyred intellectuals: The torchbearers of our nation



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MOHAMMED ISHTIAQUE KHAN

I remember reading a memorable quote from one of the characters in Humayun Ahmed's novel *Jochona O Jononir Golpo* (2004). She says something along the lines of: "Muktijuddho touched every Bangladeshi soul. For some, it was intense; for others, it was a light touch. But not a single person was spared."

What the country's most popular novelist tried to convey through this statement is that the reported 30 lakh casualties were not merely a statistic. Every one of the deceased souls belonged to one, two, or even more families. Brothers lost sisters; parents lost children; grandparents lost granddaughters and grandsons; young women lost their betrothed; many lost their friends, and so on. Some even lost their entire family. As a result of the systematic ethnic cleansing carried out by the then-Pakistani army and its cohorts, two or even three generations of a family were simply erased; their names now remain inscribed only on tombstones.

However, the killing of doctors, teachers, educationists, and other prominent "intellectuals" was a particularly horrendous massacre carried out in 1971—one that has very few parallels in human history. This targeted killing affected my family as well. Nevertheless, they were considered lucky in many ways, since only my grandfather, Dr Serajul Haque Khan, was abducted and killed. His wife, five sons, three daughters, brothers, and sisters were somehow left



Martyred intellectual Dr Serajul Haque Khan. PHOTO COURTESY: MOHAMMED ISHTIAQUE KHAN

unharmful.

My grandfather was a prominent educationist and academic at the University of Dhaka. He served as a faculty member at the Institute of Education and Research (IER), where he contributed significantly to the field of education during a turbulent period in Bangladesh's history. After earning his Doctor of Education (EdD) degree in 1967

from the University of Northern Colorado in the US, he joined IER as a senior lecturer. He was respected among his peers, loved by his family, and a central figure in the university staff quarters' community.

On December 14, 1971, my grandfather was abducted and killed by the cohorts of the Pakistani army. The *razakars*, as they have been termed since then—the collaborators

knew him during his brief life, cut short by the Pakistani army.

One of our favourite stories to relive and imagine was the day my grandfather quit his well-paying and influential government job. After his graduation, he began his career as an inspector with the Department of Customs and Excise of the then-Pakistani government. But three months later, when

**On December 14, 1971, my grandfather was abducted and killed by the cohorts of the Pakistani army. The razakars, as they have been termed since then—the collaborators of the repressive West Pakistan regime—killed many others on that same day, and this much information is available on the internet. However, what you may not know is that Serajul Haque was also a loving, albeit tough, father. His eldest son left us a few years back, but until the day he breathed his last, he had many stories to tell about his father. The same goes for everyone else who knew him during his brief life, cut short by the Pakistani army.**

a businessman had the audacity to offer him a bribe, he left the job. Even the prospect of declining such offers disgusted him. After quitting, he moved into the field of teaching. The rest is, obviously, history. My grandfather, as I learned from my uncles and aunts, was a jolly person—a family man, through and through. He enjoyed reading the morning paper while holding

a steaming cup of milk tea. He believed in Ayurvedic treatment. His wife prepared the concoction every day, and she did so even on the fateful day of December 14. But my grandfather never got the chance to take it. He was picked up unceremoniously by members of Al-Badr.

His body was discovered in Mirpur (now the Jollad Khana Boddhovumi) long after the country was liberated—almost three weeks after the ceremonial red and green flags were hoisted across the country. His young children identified his decomposed body by the expensive watch he wore, which, surprisingly, remained intact, along with the remains of his distinct clothing.

Fast forward many years. Nowadays, I come across questions about why the martyred intellectuals did not flee to safety or why they kept their government jobs under West Pakistan—shocking and offensive questions that fail to comprehend wartime realities. They come across as deliberate insults towards the memories of our martyred intellectuals and their contribution to the Liberation War. It is similar to a certain quarter's overzealous attitude about the actual number of casualties during the war. It is as if every incident, event, memory, and source of pride that revolves around Muktijuddho needs to be "questioned."

It was not like this all the time. Growing up in the 1980s, as a third-generation member of a "*buddhijibi poribar*," I mostly received respect, admiration, and kindness from others. My grandfather, and the numerous others who were killed on that fateful day still live on as a source of inspiration. If they were still alive, we could have become a different nation. Questions can always be asked, but that does not necessarily mean those questions have any merit. The martyred intellectuals were the torchbearers—each in their own field—and nothing can change this fact. Ever.