

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

## The day we became independent

### Changing narratives about the glory of the Liberation War must end

The Independence Day holds special significance for Bangladesh as it marks the moment when we asserted our separate national identity and, following a nine-month-long, blood-soaked war, achieved our freedom. However, we must admit that even after 55 years, the narrative of our Liberation War is not uniform. Shifts in the narrative have occurred with the changing political winds of the day, not only during military rule but also under democratic governments. This has greatly damaged the legacy of our Liberation War and so must be stopped.

In this connection, as the new government considers revising textbooks, it must recognise how past revisions, reframings, and rewritings of history—as well as the idolisation of certain leaders while ignoring others—have affected all of us, especially younger generations. Many, unfortunately, feel disconnected from this defining chapter as constant revisions have created confusion and weakened the emotional bond with our struggle for independence. National history should unite; in our case, it has often deepened divisions. Thus, it is important that the new government led by BNP refrains from repeating past mistakes of revision and reframing in pursuit of partisan interests.

We also expect the government to stand firm against any attempt to undermine our Liberation War. As seen in the aftermath of the July uprising, a section of political actors used the people's upsurge against the autocratic Awami League regime to attack the Liberation War narrative as well as the values it stood for—democracy, nationalism, secularism, and socialism. According to a report in *Prothom Alo*, between August 5 and 14, 2024, its correspondents documented 1,494 incidents of sculptures, murals, reliefs, and memorials being desecrated and vandalised across 59 districts of the country. Targets included even the Mujibnagar Muktiyuddha Memorial Complex, muktiyuddha memorials, and *boddyobhumi* grounds representing the genocide perpetrated by the Pakistani army and its local collaborators. The interim government did little to restore these during its 18-month tenure.

The new government must act to protect and restore these sites, especially those representing the glory and pain of our nation's history. This is particularly urgent as global efforts grow to recognise the 1971 genocide. On March 20 this year, a US congressman introduced a resolution in the House of Representatives calling for formal recognition of the 1971 genocide, citing evidence from officials, journalists, and international bodies. At such a moment, any attempt to distort our history, under any ideological guise, must be firmly resisted.

However varied the narratives of the Liberation War may be, no compromise or inaccuracy should be tolerated in portraying the nation's independence struggle, the sacrifices of millions of lives, and the violation of thousands of women that eventually led to the achievement of independence. The heroes of different narratives may vary, as may interpretations of their respective contributions, but the historic significance of the war, the sacrifice of millions, and the bravery of freedom fighters must never be minimised. Undermining it would only harm the nation itself.

## Rein in errant clinics, diagnostic centres

### Drives must continue against non-compliant private medical facilities

We are deeply concerned by the irregularities revealed during the Directorate General of Health Services' (DGHS) latest drive against private clinics, hospitals, and diagnostic centres. It has brought to the fore a troubling picture of negligence, illegal practices, and disregard for patient safety in some private healthcare facilities in the capital. From intensive care units (ICUs) functioning without doctors to hospitals operating with expired licences and exceeding approved capacity, the situation points to systemic failures in healthcare oversight.

The case of Jamuna General Hospital, located at Muktiyuddha Tower-1 in Mohammadpur, is particularly alarming. ICU services in the hospital were reportedly being run without any dedicated doctors, leaving nurses to manage critically ill patients with only occasional support from on-call physicians. No ICU protocols were being followed and the operating theatre was found to be unhygienic. Equally disturbing was the situation at TG Multispecialty Hospital and Diagnostic Centre, where no doctors were found on duty and no proper appointment records existed. Both facilities were operating with expired licences.

The DGHS has shut down some of these errant clinics, closed certain ICUs, and issued show-cause notices to others in its recent drive. But the question remains: why were these facilities allowed to operate in such conditions for so long? According to a 2024 DGHS report, around 1,027 private hospitals, clinics, diagnostic centres, and blood banks across the country are operating without valid licences, revealing a prolonged failure of oversight. This must not continue.

For years, patients have complained about excessive charges, poor services, and unprofessional staff behaviour in private healthcare facilities. In the absence of accountability, effective monitoring, and consistent enforcement, these grievances have largely gone unaddressed. Many facilities continue to charge substantial fees for critical services like ICUs while failing to meet even the most basic standards of care. Patients, often unable to secure beds in public hospitals, are left with little choice but to turn to such establishments, unknowingly exposing themselves to grave risks. This is deeply worrying.

We urge the DGHS to conduct regular drives against errant, non-compliant private medical facilities and to enforce the rules strictly. All unauthorised facilities must either be brought under a proper legal framework or shut down. The DGHS must also be adequately staffed and empowered to ensure continuous monitoring. Implementing the Health Sector Reform Commission's recommendations—including setting up a service centre to expedite licensing and administrative processes for private hospitals, clinics, and diagnostic centres—is crucial. Ensuring safe and reliable private healthcare requires consistent vigilance, institutional reform, and strong accountability.

# Independence and its discontents: For whom was 1971?



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History, too, bristles up, staging and restaging questions and concerns that remain unresolved. They persist, stubbornly, as we continue to inhabit a conjuncture marked by chasms and contradictions: between rhetoric and reality, between *what has been* and *what is yet to be*. And so, as we step into the 56th year of our independence, these contradictions compel a crucial, even urgent, question: whose independence is it, anyway?

Globally, at a moment when Donald Trump has come to embody the gangster logic of US imperialism at its fascistic height, and when Israel, as a Zionist settler-colonial power, works in close cahoots with that imperialism, while continuing their genocidal assault on Palestinians and expanding their war against Iran, the question returns with renewed urgency: whose independence is it, really?

And it is hardly surprising—yet no less outrageously anti-independence—that the newly elected BNP government, in its foreign ministry's recent statement on the imperialist war against Iran, failed to call a spade a spade—failed even to name, let alone condemn, the US and Israel. This silence is not incidental; it is symptomatic. For the stubborn historical fact remains that no government since 1972 has been genuinely or adequately critical of US imperialism—an imperialism that even opposed Bangladesh's Liberation War both diplomatically and militarily. But Bangladesh, as an independent state, was not born at a negotiating table. Its being-and-becoming was forged in struggle: in 1971, through a people's war that made independence not a concession but a gargantuan achievement. Its birth was not only an unprecedented event with its own rhythm, character, and content; it was also a rupture—a radical, insurrectionary interruption in the political history of South Asia.

Yet this rupture was no isolated singularity. It was tied to a genealogical horizon stretching far back, encompassing multiple forms of resistance by women, workers, peasants, and minorities, not only since 1947 but well beyond. Unlike other "postcolonial" states in South Asia, whose sovereignty was brokered across negotiating tables in the long shadow of World War II, Bangladesh emerged through an armed, collective uprising and war against the neo-colonial, militaristic, bureaucratic, oligarchic state of Pakistan—an uprising marked by genocide and the systematic, large-scale rape of women. Indeed,

**Women, including those from Indigenous and other minority communities, played pivotal roles; yet their contributions remain elided in mainstream narratives dominated by ruling-class historiography. While middle-class Bangalee leaders occupy centre stage, how many of us know names like Kakat Heninchita, a courageous Khasia woman, or Princha Khen, a young Rakhine girl? What kind of independence did they achieve? What did the poor, who constituted the overwhelming majority of fighters, actually gain?**

the blood-drenched emergence of Bangladesh remains the only instance in South Asia in which independence was wrested from within, not granted from above.

But the significance of 1971 does not reside there alone. The birth of Bangladesh dealt a decisive blow to the ideological foundations that underwrote the partition of India. It flagrantly dismantled the so-called "two-nation theory"—first incubated within Hindu majoritarian thought and later institutionalised by Muslim nationalism—by demonstrating, in the most historical-material terms, that religion alone cannot sustain a "nation." At the same time, it unsettled

the competing myth of a singular, seamless Indian nationalism, exposing the inherent fissures and fragility—indeed, the fiction—of homogenising narratives imposed upon a profoundly heterogeneous subcontinent.

The emergence of a Muslim-majority Bangladesh grounded in ethno-linguistic Bangalee nationalism delivers a clear historical verdict: language, culture, and lived social realities matter more than theological or statist abstractions. No state, however ideologically armed, can indefinitely bind diverse peoples under the sign of religion alone. In this sense, Bangladesh's birth itself is a proposition, a living argument against all projects of forced unity, whether religious or secular-nationalist.

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There is no doubt: without the Liberation War of 1971, there would be no Bangladesh. It remains our brightest historical achievement—the defining moment of our political history. And yet, the moment we say this, the question presses forward, insistent, unsettling, necessary as it is: whose independence have we achieved?

For what is increasingly evident is this: independence has been monumentalised, but not fully materialised.

The national ruling class—

the overwhelming majority of fighters, actually gain?

To celebrate Independence Day while erasing these struggles is not a celebration; it is a ritual emptied of history, a performance without memory.

And memory itself is a battlefield. True, history was violently reduced to slogans—"Muktijuddher chetona"

unsuccessful, yet generative of political consciousness and collective rage. And I think it would be a grave historical injustice—an affront to our conscience and to the people themselves—if a mass uprising like that were reduced to a "conspiracy," as some would have it, or dismissed as the handiwork of opposition-linked forces. Such erasures are not interpretations; they

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repeated to exhaustion, stripped of context, co-opted by authoritarian power.

Partisan, class-driven repetitions masquerade as historical knowledge. We forget the *longue durée* of resistance: from the division of Bengal, to the Language Movement, to mass uprisings, denied electoral mandates, and the accumulation of economic, political and cultural grievances, to name but a few explosive conjunctures in our history. 1971 was not a beginning; it was an eruption, the culmination of histories still insufficiently reckoned with.

But true, Bangladesh's history has been written in blood, even as it remains erased in official narratives. Mainstream historians often apotheosise their "heroes," but there are *other*—and *othered*—historians:

are distortions. The uprising belonged to no single party; it belonged to the people, the masses, thousands of whom shed their blood, many fatally.

That uprising—of which I was a direct, unrepentant participant—reclaimed the three foundational principles of 1971, long violated by successive regimes. It also dismantled the Awami League's manipulative binary of "freedom fighter" versus "razakar," exposing its inherent inconsistency and authoritarian deployment. It is not for nothing that the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement platform repeatedly declared, "A new Bangladesh will be built through the student-citizen uprising—one where equality, justice, and human dignity will prevail." We must hold on to that declaration. To



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

including the fascist Awami League and the BNP (whose own fascist tendencies during previous rules are well-documented, as Badruddin Umar has already demonstrated in his superbly researched work), along with other ruling class formations, not to mention Jamaat-e-Islami, which opposed independence in 1971 and was complicit in genocide (to say the least)—has, in various ways, violated the promises of equality, social justice, and human dignity, the three core principles enshrined in the Proclamation of Independence on April 10, 1971. For women, poor peasants, workers, Indigenous communities, and minorities—ethnic, linguistic, religious, and gender/sexual—who fought, bled, and died, where is that promised equality? Where is justice? Where is human dignity?

To ask these questions is also to ask: who were the freedom fighters? Not merely a handful of leaders elevated to near-myth, but overwhelmingly peasants, labourers, and the lower middle classes; women who resisted, organised, nursed, and fought; even children who bore the brunt of a guerrilla war; and countless others across communities, whose names mainstream historiography refuses to remember.

Women, including those from Indigenous and other minority communities, played pivotal roles; yet their contributions remain elided in mainstream narratives dominated by ruling-class historiography. While middle-class Bangalee leaders occupy centre stage, how many of us know names like Kakat Heninchita, a courageous Khasia woman, or Princha Khen, a young Rakhine girl? What kind of independence did they achieve? What did the poor, who constituted

peasants, workers, women, minorities. They not only make history; they keep it alive through storytelling, through memory, through collective struggle.

To reclaim that history is an ethical and political task. It requires wresting history away from sycophancy, distortion, and spectacle, and returning it to the people. It requires refusing the comfort of victimhood even as we remember violence; resisting the conversion of nationalism into exclusion; and recognising, with clarity, that a people who fought oppression cannot afford to become oppressors.

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Let me now turn, conjuncturally, to the relationship between 1971 and the July uprising of 2024.

There have been reactionary attempts by apologists of Awami League and by Jamaat supporters alike—to pit 1971 against 2024. Yet the historical record resists such attempts and erasures. The July uprising repeatedly foregrounded the unfulfilled principles of 1971—equality, social justice, and human dignity—thus keeping the spirit of independence at the very centre of its discourse.

It was, in fact, the largest mass uprising in the history of Bangladesh. Marked by the sacrifice of so many individuals, it inaugurated an unprecedented moment: for the first time, a politically unaffiliated, student-led movement toppled an entrenched fascist autocracy, forcing Sheikh Hasina to flee. And its significance lies not only in its outcome but in its form: a decentralised, non-hierarchical movement that attests to the creativity and determination of both youth and the people. Its immediate success was rooted in more than 15 years of accumulated struggles—often

remember is to resist; to forget is to face defeat. Independence lives in memory.

Let us reject the false binary that pits 1971 against 2024. They are not antagonists but historical echoes, linked struggles animated by the same unfinished demands. As my favourite African revolutionary, Amílcar Cabral, reminds us, "Claim no easy victories."

As I have argued elsewhere, every progressive mass movement is incomplete and paradoxical—never fully victorious, never entirely defeated. The struggle persists, even as there are attempts, domestic and external, to discredit both the gains of 2024 and the legacy of 1971.

What is required now is genuine connection-making, on behalf of those who continue to bear the weight of history: women, workers, poor peasants, and marginalised communities who constitute the overwhelming majority of Bangladesh. Democracy, if it is to mean anything at all, must serve that majority in real, material terms, not merely the upper and middle classes. And independence? It must mean the independence of that majority—economic, political, and cultural—not the ornamental sovereignty of a privileged few.

But let us be clear: no such independence can be realised within a political culture that remains stubbornly middle-class centric, Dhaka-bound, dynastic, and beholden to money and the market. To speak of equality, justice, and human dignity under such conditions is to speak in promises perpetually deferred. The task, then, is not reformist tinkering but a radical reorientation—one that returns independence to the people who made it possible, and who continue, even now, to struggle to claim it.