

Role of Liberation War Museum in
Memorialisation: Collection of Eye-witness
Accounts by the Students

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Bangladesh, a far away place in the eastern part of the Indian sub-continent emerged as an independent nation-state in 1971 after nine-month long liberation war against brutal military forces of Pakistani Junta.

Islamic Republic of Pakistan, a unique country overlapping cultural and ethnic diversity on the basis of religious identity trampled the national-cultural rights of Bengali people on the plea of the Islamic ideology. When the Bengali population of Pakistan after a protracted struggle has won absolute majority in the first-ever held national election in 1970 they were not allowed to govern. Instead the Army, constituted mostly with West Pakistani soldiers and officers unleashed a treacherous attack on the civil population on 25th March night to establish final military solution of the political crisis. That was the beginning of one of the worst genocides of the 20th century and also the liberation war of Bangladesh. In those days of massive violation of Human Rights it is estimated that almost 3 million people were killed, 10 million out of a population of 75 million were made homeless and had to seek refuge in India and about 200,000 women were made victims of sexual violence. But the people, united under the charismatic leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rose in revolt and ultimately defeated the Pakistan Army with Indian forces joining the war in the last days alongside the liberation forces of Bangladesh.

The struggle for Bangladesh was a struggle for democracy against military dictatorship, fight for the recognition of national-cultural identity against all encompassing religious dogmatism, struggle for secularism against pan-Islamism. The heroic struggle of the people of Bangladesh won support of the common people worldwide and there developed a strong solidarity movement. But Bangladesh had quickly fallen out of the map. Internationally because of the cold-war scenario the acceptance of Bangladesh in the community of nations was much delayed and Bangladesh genocide became a forgotten chapter of history. Nationally the war-devastated country faced many problems. In 1975 with the brutal killing of the Founding Father the military came into power supported by the religious fundamentalist forces using the authoritarian power of the state. They created an atmosphere of distortion and denial of history. The perpetrators of genocide and crimes against humanity imposed a kind of impunity for them and there was a denial of justice. As a result of such developments there was no effort on the part of the Government to preserve the history and present that to the new generation in a meaningful way.

In 1996 when Bangladesh was going to celebrate the 25th anniversary of its independence it was very strongly felt by members of the civil society that something should be done to preserve the memories of struggle of such magnitude where almost every family took part and every family suffered. An eight-member Trustee Board was formed who came forward to establish a museum with support from the community. It was quite obvious that the Govt. is not interested

in the museumisation of past struggle. Even if they make an attempt to do so that will be a distorted version of history. So the Board of Trustees put forward the idea of establishing a museum upholding historical facts and evidences and rented a house to make appeal to the people to support the cause.

From day one Liberation War Museum got overwhelming support from the community and the Trustee Board strongly feels that it became a peoples' museum, established, enriched and developed by the support from the community. Apart from the display and temporary exhibitions LWM organises various events and celebrations. Any description of the events will be a long list, what we can say is that strong community participation is a feature of such events organised through-out the year.

In 1999 LWM has conducted excavation of two killing fields in the suburb of Dhaka and lot of skulls and bones were unearthed from there. In 2008 LWM constructed a memorial site at one of the killing field known as Jalladkhana. This has become another platform of public participation in the process of memorialisation.

Liberation War Museum has grown over the years and earned national and international recognition. In 1999 along with eight other museums of the world it has launched the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. The national recognition was reflected in various ways. The Govt. came out to assist the museum with an annual grant which continued during subsequent changes in the Govt. As a reflection of the service it renders to the society the interim government in November, 2008 has allotted a piece of land measuring 0.82 acre to LWM to build a permanent museum. LWM with the cooperation of the Institute of Architects of Bangladesh organised an architectural design competition for the new museum. In all 70 designs were submitted which was the largest number of entry for any architectural competition in Bangladesh. A jury board with member from ICOM made the selection and the award was won by a young architect couple born after 1971.

In March 2011 the construction will begin and LWM has planned to raise 100 crores Taka or US 15 million to build the museum and also create an endowment fund. The fund-raising drive is on and so far 34 crores Taka, that is one-third of the projected fund, has been raised. LWM is confident that with support of the people and business houses it will be possible to raise the money nationally and LWM will not need any funding from outside donors.

LWM is run by the eight-member Trustee Board which try to reflect in the museum activities the involvement of larger community. The museum is also careful about its independent status. When the govt. allotted the land LWM has paid the price at the official rate. Regarding fund-raising it has been decided that the Govt. contribution should not be more than one-third of the total amount. LWM is running a successful outreach programme with the students and of late this programme has been partially funded by Manusher Jonno Foundation.

As part of the education programme LWM is conducting an oral history or statement collection programme. LWM provides transport to the educational institutions in Dhaka and its suburb so that students can come in group and visit the museum. LWM has a mobile museum with exhibits mounted inside a long-haul bus. The mobile exhibition travels to distant places to present programme in the educational institutions. In both cases the students see the exhibits, view a documentary film on the history of liberation struggle as well as a poster display on Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Peace and Tolerance Education. At the end of the programme an appeal is made to the students that they have seen a glimpse of history and feel inspired but the events happened long before they were even born. Nevertheless the students have senior members in their family or community who have witnessed those days, the best of our times, the worst of our times. The students are encouraged to select any one of the eye-witnesses, ask him or her about their experiences of 1971 days. We encourage the students to write-down what they hear from the elderly person. The whole process has been made very

simple and do-able. The students had to write-down their name, the class and institution they belong to and also the name and age of the person interviewed. There is a leaflet distributed among the students explaining the whole process. One of the messages conveyed in the appeal is that the student should not bother about their handwriting, or the spelling mistakes, the important thing is to be authentic in the write-up.

LWM also asks the institution to nominate one teacher who will work voluntarily as a network teacher. The students send the statements to LWM through the network teachers.

To encourage the students doing the exercise LWM promises that each student sending the oral testimony will receive a personal letter of thanks reflecting that his/her write-up was read by somebody in the museum. LWM also publishes a quarterly list of contributors with the name of the student, the class and educational institution, the name of the person interviewed along with their age. This booklet is send back to the students where he/she can see their names in print, may be for the first time in their life. The booklet also carries few samples of the testimonies.

LWM also promises that each and every piece of oral testimony will be preserved in the museum after proper treatment creating an Archives of Memory. If the student come to the museum after 10 or 15 years time he will be able to see the write-up he send during his school days.

This is a kind of oral history that is not formal and structured, rather a kind of free exercise that provided results beyond our imagination. LWM could reach various strata of the society by its outreach programme, from urban elitist school to the slum dwellers, from institutions in the towns to those in deep rural area, from schools for the mainstream population to those of small ethnic groups.

As our country is expanding the educational network and more and more boys and girls are getting enrolled in schools this has also been reflected in the oral statements collected. In many cases the students are the first generation in the family going to school and their parents or grandparents are mostly illiterate. They never got a chance to register their voices or write-down their experiences. May be this is the first time that somebody wrote down what they have witnessed in 1971. As the students send those eye-witness accounts to LWM the possibility of larger society sharing that experience is great. What remained private for so long could now become public.

So far LWM has received more than 16,000 of such oral accounts collected by the students. Since 2004 the outreach programme embraced 122,000 students of 185 educational institutions of the capital city of Dhaka. The mobile museum has travelled to 33 of 64 districts of the country and brought under the programme 270,000 students. Among the total participants more than 50% are girl students. This has also been reflected in the number of oral accounts received where there are more accounts of women than men. This has also shown the expand of the reach of the programme. The numbers of eye-witness accounts are increasing as more and more students are coming under LWM outreach programme. It is very difficult to brief in short the historical significance of the eye-witness accounts. All the testimonies are human stories narrated by common people as the interviews are conducted in an intimate atmosphere which has been reflected in the write-ups also. There is great diversity in the narratives and can be source material for writing the peoples view of history. The accounts are not only about the past but also how the participants look into the past. In oral interview process people usually become stiff and formal with the microphone, recording process and also the interviewer with his set questions. In our case the interviewer and the interviewee know each other very well. When the member of third generation wants to know from elderly person in their family about their experiences of 1971 a magical moment is created by that encounter. The whole process thereby gets a human perspective which is difficult to attain in any other formal way.

The programme has other significances apart from its historical values. Its educational role can be identified as follows:

- a. The exercise helps to develop the writing skill and creativity of the student.
- b. It provides confidence to the student in undertaking individual project as he selects a person, conducts an independent interview, make a written version of the statement and send that to the museum through the network teacher.
- c. In the backdrop of distortion and debate regarding the history of liberation war and the tinkering with the textbooks by the respective govts. the student get confused but through this process they can get the understanding that history is not only what is written in the textbooks, but history is also present around oneself and one can look for history his own periphery.

The statement collection by the students turned to be a great educational experience for LWM also. The huge collection of statements has proved to be rich storehouse of historical facts. The oral accounts collected from a particular area also reflect the local history while one put them together. As the students are collecting the statements individually and sending those to LWM they do not know what others have written. Now LWM is composing the texts and the print-out of the accounts in spiral binding form are send back to the institutions so that everybody can share the eye-witness accounts the community delivered. This contributes in creating a new kind of synergy in the community by sharing of historical experiences. Students and teachers are encouraged to invite selected persons whose oral accounts have been collected to join the national day festivals in the schools and share in more detail there narratives. Students are also encouraged to identify local sites or killing fields and make arrangements to take care of those. LWM has plan to put 16,000+ statements on the web with search option and other informations about the programme so that people everywhere can have access to this treasure. The statements opened up many other opportunities for the researchers, educationists etc. and became a base for various kind of social research and action.

LWM feels proud of the way new generation is contributing in the process of memorialisation. LWM is taking history to the students and the young students are also sending back history to the museum. This collective encounter with the past has opened up greater possibilities for memorialisation and museumisation enriching all of us. What is important is this is an ongoing process and has shown so much new potentialities that it is not only a matter of understanding history but also as exciting as creating history.

At the end I would like to draw attention to the historical shift our nation has made from the long denial of justice to the implementation of justice process. In the last general election held in December, 2008 the voters overwhelmingly gave verdict to bring the perpetrators of genocide to justice. This shift was possible due to the overwhelming support of the new generation of first time voters who constituted one-third of the voting population. This shows the power of memorialisation which the society carried in so many ways, through literature, arts, music, publication of personal experiences etc. There were also strong civil society movements demanding justice. The orally transmitted inter generational knowledge and experiences also played a significant role. LWM through its display, activities and oral history project also made a humble contribution to the historic shift made by the nation.

We have learned from our experiences that memorialisation is an ongoing process and it has great potentiality and power. One should address the issue with a creative approach and ensure the involvement of the community in the whole process, specially the involvement of present generation with the difficult experience of the past is an essential component of its continuity and effectiveness. Our struggle has strengthened our belief in the power of memorialisation.

In the efforts of TRC-Canada, in this forum we all got deep understanding of that strength expressed in so many ways. Our work has also led us to believe that inspite of denials, distortions and the forced silence history is never lost. It may remain today out of our eyes, out of our reach, but the process of memorialisation can make that re-emerge, thereby develop the connectivity with the present and led us towards a better future.

I will go back to my country with a better understanding and renewed strength, as we know the encounter with the past is not only about what happened in the past but also why it happened. That will led us to understanding, and the understanding will bring transformation, a change that society and humanity needs very badly.