

Liberation War Museum and Human Rights Education

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BANGLADESH gained its independence in 1971 after nine months of brutal war of liberation triggered by the Pakistani military junta's annulling of the results of the 1970 democratic election and genocidal attack on the population of Eastern Pakistan, which crushed the Bengali independence movement and exterminated all opposition to its power. While the war ended with Bangladesh's independence, it left behind three million dead, ten million displaced to India and 200,000 victims of sexual violence.¹

Only four years later, President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in a military coup, and a long period of autocratic rule followed during which the history of the nation's independence struggle was distorted and democratic secular values were trampled. To combat this intellectual assault, eight activists² from different backgrounds joined together to establish the Liberation War Museum (Museum) also known as Muktijuddho Jadughar in 1996. They became the original Trustees of the Museum. Established to collect and disseminate a non-partisan history of the war of independence, the Museum connects this history to Bangladesh's contemporary struggles and advocates for humanitarian and democratic values. The Museum's chief goal is to bring the history of the war into focus for the present generation, so that they might understand the past and its present implications.

Collection of Historical Materials

The Museum has an impressive collection of original documents, rare photographs, newspaper cuttings, weapons and artifacts from Liberation War. Personal diaries, guns, flags, mementos, letters and clothes belonging to the brave freedom fighters are on exhibit. The history of the long struggle for independence, including the language movement of 1952 and mass protests of the 1960s, is portrayed through different pictures and objects. Photographs of the historic 7 March 1971 speech by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his pipe, coat, pen, autograph and some other personal belongings are also on display.

The Museum regularly organizes exhibitions and events to highlight the freedom struggle of the country. It also has a library and an audio-visual

center. The museum library has a collection of around 7,000 books on the Liberation War. Visitors can sit and read the books inside the library, or buy them from the bookstore. The library has big collection of war-based novels, stories, poems, posters, and banners.³





Programs for Students and Youth

The Museum initiated a number of programs for students and youth from late 1990s. The programs generally aimed at making students and youth become aware of the history of Bangladesh especially its Liberation War.

Two of its most popular youth programs have been the Outreach and the Reach Out programs. Through the Outreach program, started in 1997, students of educational institutions in and around Dhaka get the opportunity to visit the Museum, while through the Reach Out program, which began in 2001, Museum buses take selected exhibits to schools and colleges in other districts of the country.

In 1997, the Museum started bringing in students under the Outreach program from the various schools of Dhaka city to its facility for exposure to the museum exhibits, including watching films on the emergence of Bangladesh and joining a quiz competition on what they had learned about the Liberation War.

In 2004, the Museum included in the program (in addition to the short exposure to the museum exhibits), a quiz program, education activities on their rights as children and human beings and also on becoming global citizen, in which tolerance and a pluralist society were promoted.

These measures to maximize the impact of the Museum visit are explained in the following manner:⁴

Our programs have long emphasized the need for students to take a civic and moral role as responsible citizens of the nation. To inspire knowledge and understanding, our youth programs always begin with a tour of the museum and an “instant quiz” to get students reflecting on and interacting with the material. In order to stem future historical distortions and ensure a democratic secular Bangladesh, it is essential that the younger generation start owning the history of the war.

Up until June 2020, 280,147 school-children of Dhaka city have visited the Museum in this way.

Reach-Out School Program

In 2001, to increase accessibility, the Museum started a program of bringing mobile exhibitions all over the country. Three years later, in 2004, the Museum redesigned the program to present history to the students in the towns and villages of the country. This is the Reach-Out School Program which aims to educate the students on the glory and the pain that the Bengali nation had experienced in 1971. Another component of the program is to combat the growing intolerance and human rights abuses in the present society. Through this program, students are taught that tolerance has been an intrinsic Bengali trait for centuries and in the globalized world today, one of the most important needs of the society is to respect the otherness of the other person.

The Reach-Out School Program has several components, namely:

- School exhibits;
- Film showing;
- Exhibition on “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” and “If the world had been one village”;
- Focused group meetings with students and networking with teachers;
- Oral History project.

Since 2014 another bus has been added to the fleet. The Mobile Museums hold exhibits in the schools for the students. Students from nearby schools that are not in the itinerary of the Mobile Museum also visit the exhibits in the afternoon. Adults from the village also visit the exhibits. The exhibits consist of more than two hundred fifty artefacts, documents and photos. They also display few original items from the museum collection. This can be called a mini-museum.





The Mobile Museums also held screening of films on struggle for independence. The twenty-two-minute documentary consisting of original footages introduces the students to the real scenes of historical events and has great impact on them.

A separate exhibition on “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” and “If the world had been one village” of the Mobile Museum highlights the pluralistic world that the students will encounter when they step outside their own world. The exhibits consist of two series of cartoons made by prominent painters on the themes “global village” and the “30 Universal Human Rights.” This special exhibition also aims to combat the growing intolerance and human rights abuses in society. Students learn about other people and human rights using the two series of cartoons being exhibited. Relevant examples are also drawn from incidents of the Liberation War to illustrate these two issues.

The Mobile Museums also hold focused group meetings with students and network with teachers. The meetings with students discuss the role they can play in retrieving history. They are encouraged to look for evidences of local history. Networking with the teachers helps the Museum to understand the challenges, problems and prospects of history education. The visit to the remote locations creates the opportunity for the Mobile Museums to gather support for the students there to join the Oral History project. Students above grade V are encouraged to interview elders in the family to recount their experiences and role during the Liberation War. The young students make written scripts of these interviews and submit them to the Museum.

The same program is applied to students who visit the Museum in Dhaka.

In doing oral interviews, students receive first-rate knowledge of a part of the national history. In this way, the Museum contributes to younger generations owning their history and in turn empowers them to fight back against the distortion of this history. In this respect, the increasing participation of youth in Museum programs kindles a ray of hope for the future.

Since the project started in 2004, more than 60,000 pieces of oral history have been collected. These written scripts are preserved in Museum archives and also posted in its website.⁵ The most moving and revealing stories are printed as wall magazines and distributed to the schools (till date, thirty-two wall magazines have been published). The selected oral testimonies of the students have been published in nine volumes by the Museum.

The Museum communicates with the teaching representatives (known as Network Teachers) in order to collect the oral testimonies. Till August 2021, 2,449 Network Teachers have been working in this Reach-Out School Program.

The Program is valuable because it⁶

- a. helps to develop the writing skill and creativity of students;
- b. provides confidence to the students in undertaking individual projects they themselves selected, conduct an independent interview, make a written version of the statement and send their writing to the Museum through the Network Teachers;
- c. helps address the confusion among students about the country's history caused by the distortion and debate regarding the history of Liberation War and the tinkering with the textbooks by the respective governments. But through the process employed, the students can understand history not only based on what is written in the textbooks, but also history that they can find in their own local area.

The huge collection of statements has become a rich storehouse of historical facts. Oral accounts collected from a particular area reflect the local history as well. These collected oral accounts are organized into one folder and shared with the community where they are drawn from. This contributes to creating a new kind of synergy in the community by sharing 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 their narratives. Students are also encouraged to identify local sites or killing fields and make arrangements to take care of them.

The number of students in the villages outside the capital city who have been exposed to this Reach-Out School Program so far is 1,324,471 (as of August 2021). Though not part of the education program, the exhibits of the bus are also visited in the afternoon by children from nearby schools and by the adults of the village. Till August 2021, around 9,43,881 adults from the localities have visited the exhibits of the bus in this way.

The Bangladesh Government, impressed enough by the success of this Reach-Out School Program, donated a second bus to the Museum, thus doubling the capacity to visit rural areas. The buses have covered four hundred thirty-two *Upazillas* (sub-districts) of sixty-four districts of the country including 2,035 educational institutions. They are doing another round of covering the whole country.

Currently, the Reach-Out Program is being funded by the Bangladesh government.

Jalladkhana Killing Field Memorial

The Museum inaugurated on 21 June 2007 the Jalladkhana Killing Field Memorial. This is the site of mass killing by the West Pakistani army in 1971. The site was excavated in 1999 and revealed skulls and bones of men, women and children inside an abandoned pit of a pump-house. This place is just one of the many killing field sites in the country.

The Jalladkhana Killing Field Memorial has become a place for victim-families who live in different parts of the country to gather. This gathering of victim-family members led to the organization of a Committee of Victim-Family Members. The Committee holds annual get-together at the site on Independence Day. LWM organizes a program at the site for students to meet members of the martyrs' families and hear their story. This sharing of stories has a healing effect on the trauma suffered.





Visit by Undergraduate Students

In addition to school children, the Museum has attracted the attention of students in colleges and universities. Undergraduate students in these colleges and universities visit the Museum as a requirement in the different courses they have enrolled in.

The Department of Economics and Social Sciences (ESS) of BRAC University organized a visit to the Museum for students taking Bangladesh Studies (DEV101) course in June 2009. The students were informed about the history and culture of Bangladesh as well as historical perspectives, archeological evidence and importance of Lalbagh Fort during Mughal period.⁷

The Department of Sociology of East West University arranged a field trip to the Museum on June 29, 2019 as part of the course “GEN 226: Emergence of Bangladesh.” The following report on the visit states:⁸

On arrival, students came to know about the four galleries of the Museum which display the heroic struggle of our people for establishing their identity as an independent nation from the British regime as well as the struggle for democracy, political and economic emancipation from 1947 and finally their armed struggle during the 9-month long War of Liberation in 1971. Students were shown a documentary on the Liberation War. The documentary illustrated the background of the Liberation War, historic events, and sacrifices of the three million Bengalis respectively. Subsequently, they participated in a quiz competition which concluded with the prize giving ceremony and correction of the wrong answers. Ten students were awarded in the quiz competition. Students showed their utmost love and respect for the national heroes who sacrificed their valuable life for the establishment of the independent Bangladesh.

Ninety law students of the Department of Law, East West University (EWU) joined a half-day long Study Tour of the Museum on 22 June 2019. After visiting the Museum, the students took a written examination contest on what they learned from the Museum. The three highest scorers were awarded with books by the Museum for their excellent performances in the examination.

The student who received the highest score, Imran Hasan Shaikat, expressed his thoughts about the visit:⁹

at our visit at the galleries, we came to know about many historical artifacts including personal belongings, weapons and human remains in relation to our Liberation War 1971. We also went through many archived documents and personal histories of the freedom fighters. We learned about many unknown histories and realized that we still do not know the actual history and true facts about our Liberation War. The museum showed us, in

short, the images of liberation struggle, importance of leadership, inhumanity of Pakistani militaries, patriotism of Bengali people, and birth of a new nation. I believe that the visit to the LWM is a very important tool for teaching the youths and giving them a sense of pride about our Liberation War. I would like to thank the Department of Law, EWU for giving us such an opportunity to visit the LWM.

Students of the Department of Media and Communication of Independent University, Bangladesh taking the course entitled “Bangladesh 1971 through the lenses” (BDS 109) visited the Museum on 9 November 2017. The Museum visit has become a semestral activity to help the students relate the Museum exhibits to the topics taught in class.¹⁰

Students of Eastern University toured the Museum on 27 July 2017 as part of the Bangladesh Studies course. This tour is a common platform for students of various disciplines including law and English of the university. In this July 2017 tour, the students watched documentaries on historic events like the non-cooperation movement, genocide, general election of 1970s and the liberation of 1971.¹¹

Liberation DocFest Bangladesh

The Museum started in 2012 the International Festival of Docufilm on Liberation and Human Rights, which was subsequently renamed Liberation DocFest Bangladesh. This film festival is dedicated to documentary cinema, seeking to highlight the struggle for liberation and human rights of people in various parts of the world and its contemporary significance. It seeks to uphold new forms of viewing the human suffering and struggle for justice in global perspective. The film festival also focuses on breaking new ground and on the great diversity and vitality of storytelling and creativity of the documentary genre.

The film festival features various sections and workshops, and provides an opportunity to engage with young filmmakers and youth around the topic of human rights.

The main program consists of the International Film Panorama Section and the competitive National Section. There is also a non-competition section called Cinema of the World.

The Exposition Young Film Talents: Story Telling Lab (EYFT Lab) is a project development and funding workshop. Submissions on fresh project

ideas are accepted and fifteen projects are selected for workshop. Experts guide the participants in developing the project ideas. The workshop ends with a pitching session. The best two projects are funded by the Museum with five lakhs and three lakhs funding support respectively.

In the 7th Festival, held on 18-22 April 2019,¹² featured films were from Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Spain, China, India, the US and Indonesia alongside those from Bangladesh.

Several Bangladeshi documentaries—"Jathorleena," "Lal Sabujer Deepabali," "Merciless Mayhem," "Janani Jantrana" and "Shabdoshena"—entered the competition section, Documenting 1971 and Beyond.

Foreign documentaries included "The Look of Silence" (Denmark), "Austerlitz" (Germany), "The Third Breast" (India), "The Girl and the Picture" (USA), "Stranger in Paradise" (the Netherlands), and "The Supreme Price" (Nigeria).

A Special Focus of the 7th Film Festival was on the Rohingya persecution.

A workshop on Documenting Mass Atrocity: Survivor's Testimony was organized in collaboration with the University of South California Shoah Foundation.

A series of workshops was held at educational institutions to teach students about making film with a smartphone. This activity resulted in the screening of twenty-five one-minute films on past atrocities made by students.

A project development workshop enabled twelve young Bangladeshi filmmakers to pitch and develop their project under the guidance of two renowned filmmakers from India. At the end, the best project received support to complete the film.

The 8th edition of the film festival was supposed to be held from 2-6 April 2020. But due to the outbreak of COVID-19 virus a countrywide lockdown was declared and the Museum like many other institutions was closed. The film festival had to be postponed, but later on held as an online film festival from 16 to 20 June 2020, the first such film festival to be held online in South Asia.

EYFT Lab 2020 was organized online from 28 April to 5 May 2020 with thirteen young filmmakers from Bangladesh pitching their film projects. Renowned Director of Manipur Film Institute, Nilotpal Majumdar, and awarded documentary filmmaker, Sourov Sarengi, mentored the pitching sessions. Two projects were given awards:

1. “Sumon Delwar” – “Jolgerilla” (জলগেরিলা)
2. “Biplob Sarker” – “Bismritojon” (বিস্মৃতজন)

One project received a certificate of Merit – “Goal” by Amena Akter.

Special Day Celebrations¹³

The Museum regularly organizes programs on human rights issues. Muktir Utsob (Freedom Festival) is a significant event of the Museum that students from different schools, colleges and universities attend. Last year, the event was organized on the Dhaka University campus. Songs, dances, quiz and poetry recitation were the main highlights of the event.

Students of different schools, colleges and universities regularly participate in the programs organized by the Museum, and because of their vibrant presence, the programs are becoming huge successes.

Kazi Samin Yasar, a 16-year-old student was impressed about the Museum while it was housed in the smaller building:

I have come to this museum for the first time. I am studying O-Levels and I don't know much about this place. My father is a freedom fighter and he always tells us stories about our Liberation War. Recently, he suggested that I visit the museum before it moves from Segun Bagicha. We all know about our Liberation War. But I believe that unless you visit the museum, you really can't get a good idea and comprehend what was actually going on during those turbulent days. I am really excited to look through the museum's vast enriching displays. I truly understand the significance of this place.

I believe every student should visit this museum to learn about our Liberation War. Visiting the museum is a fun way to relax and learn about our history. My visit really inspired me to know and explore different unknown facts about our struggle for independence.

Visiting the Museum in its bigger facility can elicit more reactions about the history of liberation war. The Museum also addresses the confusion among many students between Independence Day (March 26) and Victory Day (December 16) by providing an opportunity to clarify the matter through the exhibits. It also hosts various events on special days, such as Independence Day, Victory Day and Pahela Boishakh.¹⁴



Center for the Study of Genocide and Justice

The Center for the Study of Genocide and Justice (CSGJ) started its journey in 2014 under the umbrella of the Museum aiming to organize and promote research, documentation, study, education and networking on genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Bangladesh and other parts of the world. CSGJ offers regular certificate course, organizes the Annual Winter School, provides fellowship, and publishes scholarly publications since its inception.

One of the main functions of CSGJ is to educate the young academics, researchers, students, and related professionals about genocide and justice through the certificate course. Since 2014, six batches of students have successfully completed the program. In 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, CSGJ initiated month-long online certificate course. In this course, eminent experts and practitioners give lectures on topics related to international crimes, transitional justice, legal aspects of trial of perpetrators of genocidal crime, etc. In 2020-2021, CSGJ organized four online certificate courses for more than one hundred students and young professionals.

Winter School

Since 2014, the CSGJ has been hosting an annual week-long residential program for students and young academics known as the Winter School. The program is specially designed for students of Law, Sociology, International Relations, Peace and Conflict Studies, Women and Gender, etc., to provide an in-depth knowledge on genocide-related issues from national and international perspectives. So far CSGJ has organized six Annual Winter Schools.

Research Activities

1. CSGJ Junior Research Fellowship Programme

CSGJ launched the “Junior Research Fellowship Programme” in 2020 to promote young and independent researchers. The Fellowship Programme provides support to selected youth to do research under a supervisor based on their proposals. Till 2021, two batches of students under this program have successfully completed their research work. Priority areas under this Fellowship include genocide, transitional justice, liberation war, peace studies, etc.

2. Rohingya Research

After the sudden influx of the persecuted Rohingya people into Bangladesh in August 2017, the researchers of CSGJ visited the make-shift camps located in Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar. As a follow-up, the CSGJ team visited the camps five more times from October 2017 till July 2019 to conduct further research. The CSGJ team also participated in pre-field visit workshops conducted by United Nations Development Programme, the National Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh and reputed experts. Primary data was collected from the victims and eye-witnesses and survivors through testimony and in-depth interview. In addition, the findings of the research were recorded and later transcribed by the CSGJ team.

Publications

CSGJ publishes books, booklets, journals, etc. apart from playing active role in research. Notable publications are *Prosecution of Genocide for the Massacre of Intellectuals: A Legal Study* under the supervision of Professor Laurel E. Fletcher of Yale University (published in June 2021); *The Rohingya Genocide: Compilation and Analysis of Survivors' Testimonies* edited by Mofidul Hoque and co-edited by Emraan Azad, Shaoli Dasgupta and Naureen Rahim (published in January 2019); *The Testimony of Sixty on the Crisis of Rohingyas in Myanmar* (published in October 2017); and *From Genocide to Justice: National and Global Perspective* (journal of the first Winter School, published in 2014).

The Future

It is fitting that I end this article with the statement I made in light of the current COVID-19 pandemic:¹⁵

Global crisis has given rise to global solidarity. The crisis brought forward the fundamental questions of existence, inequality, destruction of environment, harmony within human community as well as between nature and human habitat.

We do not know what the future holds for us but we are sure to enter into a new and much more difficult world where we need to build a global solidarity to be more responsible, more profound in our thinking and collaborative acts. We need to redefine memorialisation based on new reality.

Endnotes

1 Texts from Akku Chowdhury, *Engaging Youth in an Unknown History*, International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, www.sitesofconscience.org/en/2017/03/engaging-youth-in-an-unknown-history/.

2 Aly Zaker, Dr. Sarwar Ali, Mofidul Hoque, Asaduzzaman Noor, Rabiul Hussain, Ziauddin Tariq Ali, Akku Chowdhury, and Sara Zaker.

3 Texts in this section drawn from Sheikh Iraj, "Liberation War Museum," *The Independent*, 23 March, 2017, <https://m.theindependentbd.com/printversion/details/86677>.

4 Akku Chowdhury, op. cit.

5 The stories are accessible online in Bangla language: www.liberationwarmuseumbd.org/oral-history/.

6 Based on Mofidul Hoque, "Role of Liberation War Museum in Memorialisation: Collection of Eye-witness Accounts by the Students," paper presented at the Forum to discuss the creation of TRC's National Research Centre, Vancouver, Canada, 1-3 March, 2011. Text available at www.lord.ca/CulturalCapital/Spring2012/TRCS-National-Research-Centre-by-Mofidul-Hoque.pdf.

7 Liberation War Museum visit by the Students of Bangladesh Studies, 21 June 2009, www.bracu.ac.bd/news/liberation-war-museum-visit-students-bangladesh-studies.

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13 Sheikh Iraj, "Liberation War Museum," op. cit.

14 Sheikh Iraj, *ibid*.

15 Mofidul Hoque, "Liberation War Museum Bangladesh In the time of Pandemic," <http://icmemo.mini.icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2020/05/2.-Mofidul-Liberation-War-Museum.pdf>.