

Night of 25th March: Why don't we observe as "National Vigil Night"?

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Every nation has glorious and black or darkest days in its history. For example, Londoners observe every year "Blitz Day" in September when German aircrafts bombed London in September in 1940 for its destruction. They also observe the surrender of Nazi Germany as "Victory Day" on 7th May in each year.

Jews in Israel observe their "Black Night" on 9-10 November each year because on this day in 1938, mobs attacked their synagogues, shops and homes. More than 100 Jews died on the spot and about 30,000 Jews were arrested. Jews called it "Kristallnacht" (Crystal Night) because glass windows of shops, synagogues and homes were smashed.

Although we observe 26th March as our Independence and National Day each year, we don't observe the night before when Pakistani armed forces committed a brutal military crackdown on unarmed Bengali civilians including professionals, besides numerous Bengali law enforcing personnel.

Pakistani General Niazi, Commander Eastern Theatre, (Commander of the Occupation Army) when asked by a journalist, admitted that at least 30,000 people had been killed (Perspectives of Pakistanis on 1971: 2004)

The story leading this crackdown was told by a Pakistani Public Relations Officer attached to the Pakistan military, Sadiq Salik. In his book "Witness to Surrender" (1997) Salik writes:

"Before giving the final order to General Tikka Khan, Pakistan military President General A.M. Yahya Khan, phoned him and said: "The bastard is not behaving. You get ready... Tikka Khan rang up General Officer Commandin (GOC) at 10 PM to say: 'Khadim, you can go ahead". The codename for the military crackdown was "Operation Searchlight".

The massive military action on 25th March midnight onwards was on the scale of a war without warning against unarmed Bengalis and the unprovoked military assault had very few parallels in history. There were indiscriminate killing of people, and burning of homes and Dhaka city was filled with corpses. The military targeted students' dormitories and University teachers' quarters and killed many. When curfew was lifted from the city, tens of thousands of people left the city for rural areas.

Many surviving victims have left their written records with revealing details. One eye witness late Professor Jahanara Imam who lost her son left a graphic account of what occurred in the night of 25th March and afterwards. She writes:

"Someone said that President Yahya quietly left for West Pakistan under strict security. I don't understand why there should be soldiers on the streets... I was fast asleep.

Suddenly I woke up at a very loud sound. Rumi and Jami came rushing to my room. Deafening sounds of heavy guns, the intermittent sounds of machine guns, the whistling sound of bullets filled the air. The tracer balloons brightened the sky. South of our house across the playground are the University Students' dormitories—Iqbal Hall, Mohsin Hall, and a few other buildings of university staff quarters. All the noise came from that direction.”

The military crackdown and their deaths had sparked the determination of freedom fighters for independence. The dastardly crimes against our people led the youths and ordinary independent-spirited people of Bangladesh in the countryside to fight the oppressors and criminals of Pakistani army.

25th March night was the moment of truth when Bengalis faced a demonic power of the Pakistan military. It was that night when brave Bengalis decided to fight for independence. Their grim determination to fight emanated from the darkest hour of 25th March night.

On 25th March it seemed the lamps went out all over Bangladesh and on 26th March, we witnessed lamps again being lit. There is some dynamism about 26th March but the dynamism originated in 25th March night.

Because of 25th night horrors we saw new forces of hope, new aspirations for independence and emancipation, new compelling urge that could mobilize ten of thousands men and women for liberation war.

Although it was the darkest hour of Bengalis, we were made to feel not only powerful but also morally righteous to fight against the oppressors. International community supported our liberation movement. India and European powers including the Soviet Union were sympathetic to us at the critical time of our history.

Young people must know why, how and what occurred on 25th night before National and Independence Day arrives on 26th March. In the preamble of our Constitution, it states: “We, the people of Bangladesh, having proclaimed our independence on the 26th day of March and through a historic war for national independence, established the independent, sovereign People's Republic of Bangladesh.”

Can we forget our darkest hour? In my view, on 25th March night, what we could possibly do is to observe a peaceful vigil night with candle lights and prayer for the eternal bliss of the departed souls. Let there be candle lights burning in every house to remember that night.