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An Archivist in Pursuit of Justice

Naimul Karim

Martin Luther King Jr once said that every step towards the goal of justice requires the tireless exertion and passionate concern of dedicated individuals. For archivist Mohammad Mahbubur Rahman Jalal, the pursuit for justice began two decades ago when he started collecting documents related to the liberation war; hoping that one day the world would recognise the atrocities committed by the Pakistani army in 1971 and officially recognise the genocide.

Having witnessed his elder brothers fight the Liberation War as a young man, Jalal first started gathering war-related documents in 1990 after he migrated to the United States. From buying hard-copies of newspaper articles published during the struggle to spending countless hours reading war-archives, Jalal's tireless dedication has made him one of the most sought-after archivists of the country today. "I collected documents in English, Urdu and several other languages. If I couldn't read them, I would store them in my library and find someone who could," explains Jalal.

A constant source of information for researchers, Jalal's documents have been frequently used in projects related to the Liberation War. The value of his data of course doesn't just stop there. "My documents have been used by government officials for war-trials as well," he claims. Moreover, Jalal also claims to have gathered new-found video clips of the war, with the help of government officials.



Genocide on March 25, 1971. Photo: Archive

The motivation behind Jalal's two decade long practice is singular, the more the number of documents, the easier it would be to convince the United Nations to officially deem the atrocities of 71 as genocide. Thus with an aim to collect more data, Jalal created the Center for Bangladesh Genocide Research in 2008. "The Center plans to gather documents and make them available to the public," explains Jalal. With members of the organisation living in different countries, Jalal hopes that the centre can collect documents that haven't yet been tapped. "As of now we are dumping all the information we get on a common portal," he adds.

Working for the genocide centre however isn't as easy as it seems. With a full-time job, Jalal is often required to stay up late in order to meet the centre's deadlines. But as expected, he doesn't mind that at all. "Due to my wayward routines, my son often mocks me and tells me that I still live in the year 1971," smirks Jalal. "It all becomes worth it when people come to know more about the Liberation War through my collections," he adds.

Jalal's next step, digitising the war- documents, is a venture that the government has been supposedly carrying out for a long time. In order to avoid copyright issues, Jalal wants the government to digitise the documents and create a portal through which people can receive the exact details of the war. A tough ask, considering the fact that the new media sector in Bangladesh is still a developing one, nevertheless, Jalal has not lost hope. He has been consistently trying to persuade government officials to digitise the war archives. "The people of Bangladesh should know their true history, not the one that changes every time after the arrival of a new party," exclaims Jalal.

As an archivist Jalal feels that there are plenty of issues related to the Liberation War that need to be highlighted. According to him the problems faced by the migrants who were forced to leave the country require more focus. "Several people died while migrating towards India; we need to highlight these events and maintain a proper record," he says. He also finds it hard to believe that the government is debating on issues such as 'who declared



organises programmes and exhibitions on Tagore and Nazrul, using his own documents. "As a Bangladeshi, it is my duty to spread my culture and that's what I do," says Jalal. Although these events don't bring about any sort of financial gain, Jalal makes it a point to organise them every year. "To be honest, it feels really good when a mother introduces her children to Nazrul and Tagore through my documents," explains Jalal.

Although the term genocide had been used by several organisations to describe the atrocities of 1971, the allegation has never been officially investigated by the United Nations. However, with individuals like Jalal, making this a personal battle, one can indeed hope for justice to be served. With frequent changes in historical facts, brought about by the respective political parties and the government's lack of interest in making war documents easily available to the public, the 56-year-old archivist's dream might be many miles away. But that doesn't bother him. As Jalal puts it, "I feel that it is my personal duty to spread these documents and show the world a true picture."



Mohammad Mahbubur Rahman
Jalal, Photo: Amirul Rajiv

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