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**Ekattorer Debdas (Debdas of 1971): The ‘unusual’ protest and plight of
a ‘living martyr’ of the Liberation War**

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‘I’m not sure I can tell the truth...I can only tell what I know.’ [A Cree hunter who came to Montreal to testify in courts concerning the fate of his hunting lands in a hydroelectric scheme. When administered the oath, he hesitated and said this (Clifford, 1990, p.8).]
Every version of an “other”, wherever found, is also the construction of a “self” (Clifford, 1990, p.23).

“Servant of God”: A ‘living martyr’ of the Liberation War

On 10th May, 1971, Mazibor Rahman, a 41 year old teacher of Rajshahi University in the then East Pakistan, wrote a letter to the Registrar: “This is to inform the authority that I am going to leave the Campus since the University Campus has, at the moment, been degraded to the state of military camp. I may come to the campus when university regains its status of sanctity and starts functioning as a university in true sense I hope to be kept informed about situation here in the address noted below, where I hope to spend these days of calamity, genocide and freedom movement. Please note change of my name and new name should be used in future communications” (Khan & Pradhan, 2001, p.46). The letter was signed by Devadas (later spelled as Debdas), Previous Name: Mazibor Rahman, Senior Lecturer, Department of Mathematics, Rajshahi University.

It is not known by whose ‘invisible’ hands the letter reached the West Pakistan Army but it did. Within two days, Majibor Rahman Debdas was arrested. Imprisoned and tortured for four months in various prisons, he was finally released on 5th September under general amnesty declared by the Pakistani President Yahya Khan. After liberation of the country Debdas returned to his workplace and applied for medical assistance. The application was rejected with a note: “There is no teacher named Dev Das in the Deptt. of mathematics. The application cannot therefore, be entertained...” (Khan & Pradhan, 2001, p. 48). It took another two years and a legal affidavit in 1973 for the University authority to finally acknowledge his existence.

In the same year, however, Debdas resigned with a request to make it effective since August, 1971. We do not exactly know why and how he made that decision. The family and former colleagues still speculate on a variety of reasons but Debdas never explicitly said why. None of the family members of dared to question the ‘mad genius’. The University authority

of course relieved him without delay. In 1975, Mazibor Rahman Debdas was temporarily using his former university residence when the authority forcefully admitted him to the Pabna Mental Hospital. Some consider this forced admission as a ploy by the University authority to remove him from Juberi Bhaban (his former official residence). In 1976 Debdas was discharged from the hospital with a diagnosis of 'schizophrenia', as his brother faintly recollects. With a few years of moving in and out of various boarding houses and cheap hotels in Rajshahi and Dhaka – Debdas finally settled in his ancestral village Mahurul in the district of Jaipurhat in rural North Bengal. It was during that period Debdas made attempts to leave the country for higher education. He already had a Masters degree in applied mathematics from Melbourne in 1963. Unfortunately, he could not leave the country and spent most of the money he had been receiving from his family. He came back to Mohurul, out of resource, and out of opportunities – never to regain the status of the 'prodigal son' and the big brother that he had always been to the family¹. Since then he has lived with his brother's family. He never married. Except for brief visits in the late nineties, he never came back to Rajshahi.

Since his release from the prison in 1971, his younger brother found him aloof and preoccupied. It was around the same time, when Debdas was beginning to talk to himself more than occasionally, most of which was directed to an invisible enemy. He was speaking of an ongoing war, and later about "poisoning of food" by the University as well as his family members. To this day Debdas conflates that time of his life with the ongoing presence, caught up in the trauma that was Rajshahi University in 1971. With his apparently 'unintelligible' yet highly symbolic language, Debdas describes, "Rajshahi University was a place of millions of devils (*iblis-es*) and the work is done. The angels (*fereshhta*) formed committees, and drove away the devils". With a psychologically informed and historically attuned mind/ear, it is perhaps not very difficult to make sense of his unusual association of *devils* with the Pakistani army/collaborators and *angels* with the freedom fighters and those who resisted genocide or fled Rajshahi University at that time. But this is not to say that it is in any way easy to make sense of why Debdas speaks this kind of language which is far removed from ordinary speech structure. The inhabitants of his village describes him as a "matha kharap Professor" (a mad Professor). What began with pity and then ridicule, in more than three decades, has turned into a revered affection for the most learned man in the village whose only crime had been that he had perhaps 'protested too much'!

Majibor Rahman Debdas, today, is a 79 year old man. In 1998 his contribution to the Liberation War was finally recognized². He was honored with the ironic title "The Living Martyr" (*Jeebanta Shabeed*), for his 'unusual' yet heroic response to the genocide of course but also because despite being alive, in the present times he no longer lives among the living, and

¹ Debdas had attained a level of education that was no less than brilliant, compared to that of his siblings or anyone in the village. His past letters show a genuine and continuous concern with how the family was managing its property and how the younger brothers were carrying on with their lives. Debdas concerned himself with all these familial duties till 1971.

² In 1997/98(?) he was formally invited to the Rajshahi University and received the title, "*Jeebanta Shabid*" (the living martyr). The University authority formed a committee to follow-up the possibilities of compensating him. It never materialized in the last eleven years, and Debdas spends his solitary life 'far from the madding crowd' - invisible to the public eye, an irretrievable fact at the corner of the public memory, as a less 'significant' event within the macro-political construction of the 1971 Liberation War History. An edited book with compilations of articles was published in 2001, followed by brief reports on his life and contributions in local newspapers (*Ekata*), and a recent documentary film (*Kan Pete Roi* by Mafidul Hoque). National dailies have not been interested to publish a full report but they provided a good coverage of the documentary film which was broadcasted twice by the popular private television channel, Channel I in the last few months.

therefore, he is considered a *shahheed*, a martyr. Be it age, the loss of memory or the sense of living - Majibor Rahman Debdas no longer remembers why in 1971 he changed his name from Majibor Rahman “The Responder to God” to Debdas, “The Servant of God”. Incidentally, both names affirm Response and its special relationship to the transcendental existence most prefer to call God.

Trauma and post-trauma

It is evident that Debdas suffered from at least three distinct traumatic events. The first was of course witnessing the Genocide. The second and perhaps most severe was his months of torture in the concentration camp. The third and final ‘nail in the coffin’ seems to have been hammered not by the extreme brutalities of war situation but the everyday neglect, discrimination and institutional power exercised/abused by the University Authority in post liberation Bangladesh. One could add more by including the initial ridicule by villagers, losing the status of a university teacher in the community as well as the family, and the failure to leave the country to pursue higher studies etc. as examples of the other ‘everyday’ nature of his trauma.

What however immediately comes to mind is the widely circulated automatic association of his condition with PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder³ and the “diagnostic criteria” probably fitted neatly with his condition right after his release from the prison camp (APA, 1994b). One could also argue that Debdas is suffering from paranoid schizophrenia the “diagnostic criteria” of which he perhaps still meets (APA, 1994). One can continue ad nauseam with the taxonomy of psychiatry by assessing his mental condition and suggesting a series of differential diagnoses such as, schizoid/schizotypal personality disorder, adjustment disorder, so on and so forth. Diagnosed and labeled as such, no wonder, each mental health professional could jump on this ‘unusual’ personality as a paradigmatic case, illustrating the severe effects of war-time trauma.

The purpose of this paper, however, is not to give Debdas yet another label, or burden him further with a title which means absolutely ‘nothing’ to him, and very little in terms of explaining or understanding the ‘trauma and tribulations’ of a hero who has been a victim of not only the ‘extraordinary’ trauma of genocide and prison torture, but also the ‘everyday’ trauma in the hands of by his liberated fellow country men and women. This paper is aimed to evoke the public memory of not only what war does to a particular conscientious man, but what men do to a fellow human being, and what happens to the victim who becomes a freedom fighter simply because, as a conscientious man, he was left with any choice but to protest.

We have never heard Debdas elaborate in plain text what exactly he went through in the prison. It is true that he occasionally mentioned his ‘arms were rotated as if these were bird’s wings’, or that they ‘put needles around the eyes’ – but that history is buried deep in his memories, and now seemingly impossible to gather from his withdrawn, troubled, interrupted speech. Debdas speaks the language of the ‘schizophrenic’, with loosening of

³ *Traumatic experience* – is defined as an event that involves “actual or threatened death or serious injury or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others” (APA, 1994a, p.427). The connection between the traumatic event(s) and the psychiatric symptoms distinguishes PTSD from the rest of mental illnesses recorded, listed and codified in the APA manual. (Breslau, 2004). Judging from Majibur Rahman Devdas’s past and current conditions – his afflictions could also be diagnosed/labeled as paranoid schizophrenia. In that case, the precipitating cause could very well be the trauma and tribulations during the 1971 War of Liberation sustained and perpetuated by the post-liberation neglect and non-cooperation.

association between words, phrases, idioms – that are often interspersed with mundane descriptions of events, as well as world events published in dailies, coupled with his anecdotes from 1971. Whatever recognition, attention or care was due for this war-time hero, he certainly did not receive it from where and when it was necessary to have it. When Debdas returned from the prison, his complaints fell to deaf ears and henceforth his ‘unusual’ complaints became tokens of ‘madness’ and automatically invalidated. Then, should it come as a surprise if today we find Debdas putting earplugs in both his ears to avoid noise traffic, the disturbing words from an alien, inattentive world who never listened to him, never made efforts to understand his plight?

Apostasy and psychopathology: What is so unusual about Debdas?

Thirty eight years after the War, today, I am standing here to present the plight of a Freedom Fighter whose armamentarium did not include firearms, and no other instrument of violence, but plain words in simple English. In a single page he protested against genocide, this manmade calamity, and later also the unwarranted use of Islam to kill Hindus as well as Muslims of the then East Pakistan. He stated his position, enacted his rebellion with a change of his name, his identity, his faith in Islam. He also wrote/spoke clearly for the freedom movement as early as in May, 1971. In all that, Debdas reminds us of the GENOCIDE of course, but more than that we are made aware of what is or is not permitted as valid attempts to uphold TRUTH, and through that we are driven to consider what perhaps JUSTICE is or should be in this case.

When I first heard about his ‘unusual’ response to the 1971 Genocide, Debdas became my living hero, and not a ‘living martyr’, a hero who remains relevant to our present times. Not just because he was brave and foolish enough to defy the Pakistan Army but also because he dared to ‘change his faith of Islam’ as a symbolic protest against those who were killing in the name of Islam. It is alleged that he said at one time: “If these people are Muslims, then I better not be a Muslim.” In that Debdas was a freedom fighter in both sense of the term. An outer fight against the genocide perpetrators of course but the other war was directed toward the broader category of religious bigotry. Therefore, Mazibor Rahman Debdas was a self-declared apostate and a double enemy of the ‘Muslim’ Pakistan Army. Given the circumstances in today’s world, I am certain that if Debdas repeated his ‘heroic’ act today, he would be persecuted and haunted, again in the name of Islam. He would be considered a *murtadd*⁴ by the fundamentalist standard, a crime punishable by death according to the extremist view of the *Shariyah*.

[However, for the purpose of the paper, I will not speak more on his apostasy, but on the nature of his protest, and subsequent turn of occurrences in his life-world. What Debdas throws at us with his perpetual silence and occasional ‘unexplainable’ remarks/comments/monologues – is a question of the nature of ‘normality’ and ‘abnormality’ and how these categories can problematize the victim/hero narrative. How a psychiatric label can diminish/undermine/subjugate the validity of an individual’s ‘unusual’ form of protest in times of acute social pathology. In the standard psychiatric discourse, MJD’s ‘eccentric’ personality would be considered a predisposing factor, the 1971 genocide and prison torture as precipitating factors, and finally the ‘insensitive’ response of the

⁴ *Murtadd* (Arabic) is an apostate, an ex-Muslim who has rejected Islam, either by converting to another religion or became an atheist. According to most Islamic traditions consider the standard punishment for being a *murtadd* is death penalty, if he/she is not repentant of *irtidad* (apostasy) and return to Islam (Bosworth et al., 1993)

University authority would be the perpetuating factors – all of which led to his mental ill-health, his decision to resign, to withdraw himself, to wander around, and wrap his being with the unreachable armor of silence and suspicion of the world outside.]

[Moreover,] as soon as we bring in the question of his apostasy as a form of protest, a devout Muslim would feel hurt and might say: “He did not have to *change his faith of Islam* to protest, did he?” One of his ‘normal’ countrymen might argue: “He was mad enough to bring his own downfall by sending the letter in the first place. It was foolish of him to do so. Maybe his psychopathology preceded his act of protest, and was not a result of the traumatic events that followed.” Of course, changing one’s traditional faith is a taboo, protesting on the face of genocide foolish. What it therefore illustrates is that even though the forms of atrocities could move beyond the darkest human imaginations, the various forms of protest are delimited in the ways they are *always-already* constructed, sanctioned, and prescribed by the ‘victims’ and understood by the ‘perpetrators’. In 1971, the choices were limited - to collaborate, to run away, to die, or to fight. The nature and typology of fights could be multitudinous but they were to stay within this mutually agreed upon normative framework. What Debdas did was his idiosyncratic response – forever incomprehensible or ‘unusual’ in the eyes of his peers. Yet in all that he did, he did what he felt he could – confronting the ‘madness’ of the genocide perpetrators. Only that, and always that ‘unusual’ step made all the difference in life, or the in between twilight zone that Debdas now inhabits

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