



# Challenges in Building a Memorial Site: The Experiences of Jalladkhana Killing Field

by Mofidul Hoque

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Every memorial site is unique and tells the tale of human suffering, resistance, and resilience in its own way. The challenge of creating a memorial site is to identify its uniqueness and ensure the flowering of its memory; to connect the visitor meaningfully to the past and at the same time make it relevant to the present in a common effort to build a better future.

In 1971 Bangladesh, which had been known as East Pakistan, emerged as an independent state through a nine-month long heroic war of resistance against the brutal military dictatorship of Pakistan (then known as West Pakistan). This resulted in one of the worst genocides of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when 3 million people died and 10 million people had to leave their country to seek refuge in India. The

atrocities happened all over the country, and almost every family suffered. There are sites of past brutalities spread all over the country, and many memorials have been erected marking the place. Jalladkhana Killing Field at Mirpur in the capital Dhaka is one such site. This article describes the museum created there.

## Founding of the LWM and Discovery of the Site

The Liberation War Museum was established in 1996 by the Muktijuddha Smriti Trust to commemorate the popular struggle and sacrifices that led to the emergence of independent Bangladesh. The Museum is the outcome of a civic effort to disseminate the history of the War of Independence in a non-partisan way. Currently holding over 16,000 items in its collection, including rare photographs, historic documents, memorabilia and artifacts used by freedom fighters and victims of the Liberation War, LWM is a private museum that has received strong support from the community. The museum runs an extensive outreach program with young students and is building an archive of memory with eye-witness accounts collected by the students.

The Museum is housed in a rented colonial era building in the heart of Dhaka city, where the Pakistani reign of terror began. In six galleries, it presents the historical roots of syncretistic, tolerant Bengali culture; the history of Bangladesh's emergence from the times of British colonialism; the struggle for independence from West Pakistan; and the genocide and the formation of the Bangladesh government. Bangladesh has paid a very high price



The stairs to enter the site are also an entry down memory lane. Courtesy of the Liberation War Museum.



Overview of the triangular site with the mural at the back. Artist Rafiqun Nabi used burnt brick to depict mutilated dead bodies found at the pit or at other killing fields of 1971. The title of the mural is 'And the Soul Goes Marching On.' Courtesy of the Liberation War Museum.

for its freedom. The scars of genocidal acts can be found in about one thousand killing fields scattered all over the country. Jalladkhana or Butcher's Den in Mirpur in the suburb of Dhaka is one such killing field where the excavation made by LWM in 1999 unearthed 70 skulls and more than 5000 pieces of bones from the abandoned pit of the pump-house. In 1971 that place was situated outside the city limit, and the pit of the abandoned pump house was considered to be an ideal place to slaughter Bengali people and throw the dead bodies into the deep water-logged cavity. With the excavation there was not only a recovery of bones and skulls but also a resurrection of memory. Victim's families, the local community, as well as the younger generation took great interest in the process of excavation.

### **Planning the Museum**

After the excavation LWM managed to save a triangular piece of land from the expanding urbanization that engulfed the area. The total area that LWM could get under its control is not large, only 2,840sf, the focal point being the small room covering the pit, still filled with water. The author and the

architect Rabiul Hussain worked together with input from the Trustee Board in designing the memorial. There were many challenges before LWM while developing the conceptual plan of the memorial site. Here are some of the decisions we made in order to achieve our goals.

### ***Honor the Victims and Describe Their Suffering***

The area is small, but the site has many stories to tell. The excavation produced shocking testimonies of atrocities, which also raised the ethical question of whether to put the skulls and bones on display or not. The local community carried in their memory few of the victim's names, and the victims' family members looked forward to a memorial that could bring solace to them. It became clear that the site should pay respect to the dead but also bring back the sufferings and sacrifices of the victims.

### ***Keep the Design Simple and Accessible to the People***

The Government has recently undertaken a project to construct memorials in the killing fields, and more than 100 such memorials have already been constructed.

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In between the epitaph-like lists of killing fields, the sacred soil of a particular killing field is placed in an earthen urn. Above is the genocide wall highlighting the major genocides of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Courtesy of the Liberation War Museum.

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One standard architectural design has been selected for this project. It seems, however, that an abstract architectural design can express the feel of the site but does not tell the human story related to the site. Moreover, the uniqueness of each site, though part of a general pattern of killing, has not been reflected in the common design. A grand memorial has been erected at the riverside of the capital city of Dhaka where leading intellectuals of the nation were brutally killed and dumped. The memorial is architecturally brilliant but does not narrate the story in human terms to the visitor. As a result it has become like an entertainment park in the city where large numbers of people gather with no link to history. A standard design for all the sites or a grand design at a single site, both can fail to communicate. We kept this experience in mind in planning our site.

#### **Encourage Questions**

For me a moving experience was a makeshift memorial local people constructed at a killing field in Kishoregonj, about 120 miles from Dhaka. In August 1971, after an attack on the train carrying army supplies, the whole group of villagers was brought near

the rail crossing and brutally slaughtered by the Pakistani military. The village people later constructed a memorial of their own, with no architectural design to speak of. It is like an epitaph inscribed with the words: "Behold O'passer-by, if you are born in Bengal." The words are from the epitaph of the greatest 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengali poet Michael Modhushdhan Datta. They are known to every school-boy in the country. Here they took a different meaning and raised questions in the minds of passersby. The memorial does not provide any answer but provokes the visitor to undertake a journey to fathom the past. There is no museum, no facilitator, no guide, but if a passerby stops he will find many opportunities to learn from the local people all around who will be guides and facilitators. I myself learned about the history of the site from the owner of the adjacent teashop, and what a moving experience that was.

#### **Create a Dialogue with the Visitor**

The process of creating a memorial is a journey, an intimate journey where the site should raise different issues and engage in a dialogue with the visitor. Since the pit is the high point of the site the visitor should

## The process of creating a memorial is a journey....

take a journey before he/she enters the room with the pit. Along the path of the journey various elements of the design will engage the visitor in a constant dialogue with the past.

### **Link the Event to the Larger Historical Context Past and Present**

The basic idea was to open before the visitor the depth of human suffering and pain and link this particular killing field with other killing fields of Bangladesh; as well, we wanted to place this site within the backdrop of major genocides of history. We thought that the site should also contain dossiers and photographs that can convey the past reality in human terms. To be precise, it would be a particular site, but linked with other national sites of killing and also with the tragic international acts of genocide.

### **A Walk Through the Site**

We can take a journey at the site and see how the concept works in practice. When the visitor enters the site he has to negotiate a few steps down, like stepping down into memory. Once inside the visitor has to walk along two wings of a triangular path. The long list of various killing fields of 1971 is placed down the walkway like epitaphs, each site of tragedy written in black on white marble stone.

At the conjunction of two walls there is the large mural depicting mutilated dead bodies, as the pit was in 1971. As the visitor walks on he will see on the long wall above the epitaphs a list of major genocides of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the bottom in small letters is written "Cont'd." highlighting the fact that genocide still continues some place in

the world. At the end of the walk the visitor comes before the room with the pit. There is a bell hanging on the arch at the entry, the resonance of which will perhaps remind the visitor of the famous lines of John Donne's poem.

Now as he is set to enter the room he has to take off his shoes, showing in our traditional way respect to the sacredness of the place. The room is almost bare: it is difficult to display in this small room the extent of brutalities that happened here. Moreover, LWM has decided not to display the skulls and bones on ethical grounds. On the contrary it was decided to provide glimpses of atrocity in human terms, not much to be told in terms of history. Inside the room on one wall the history of the killing site has been described briefly. On the other wall are inscribed the names and addresses of 39 victims who have been identified by the local community. In the white room there is a black circle that covers the floor, wall and the ceiling; a visitor has named this "The circle of grief." At one corner of the circle is the pit covered in glass. The visitor has to stand in front of the glass-covered pit to look deep inside. On the glass is written, "We bow our head in deep respect to the martyrs." On a shelf a few personal



*Entrance to the room with the pit. The bell for visitors to ring hangs above. The question "What Happened Here?" is written in six languages, highlighting the global significance of learning about injustice everywhere. Courtesy of the Liberation War Museum.*

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Members of the victim-families in the weekly meeting with the students at the site. Courtesy of the Liberation War Museum.

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The bell is tolling  
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belongings of the martyrs are put on display. A cheap sandal torn apart, a portion of the dirty frock of a girl, a prayer bead still intact, a pair of broken spectacles. The display has no shocking images, no skulls or bones unearthed from the pit; the presentations only try to draw attention to the reality of lives which met a tragic end here.

### The Impact of the Site

Ever since its opening the Jalladkhana Killing Field has generated great involvement of the community and visitors. Firstly it has provided the opportunity to add new information to existing knowledge about the killing fields all over Bangladesh. The victim-families who were scattered before now have the opportunity to come together and know each other through the site. Jalladkhana has provided them a platform and this has led them to form a Committee of Victim-Family Members. The Committee organizes an annual get-together at the site on our Independence Day. Moreover, the affluent families are providing support for the poorer families, especially for the education of the new generation. Every Saturday LWM organizes a program at

the site where local students are invited to come and meet a member of the martyr's family. The family members share their stories with the students and feel proud in doing so. This has a healing effect on the trauma the families have endured. For the students it has also proved to be a memorable experience.

The site has also become a center for music, theater, and film. A choir, "Children of the Killing Field," performs at various events; a documentary film has been made about the site; local cultural and theater groups organize programs here, especially during a week-long celebration of our National Days. On an average around 200 people visit the site every day. There is no entry fee but the site earns from the box for voluntary donation.

Jalladkhana Killing Field Memorial is a vibrant site embraced by the community which provides it with strength of its own. The site highlights past atrocities with a clarion call to establish justice and truth, so that humanity together can raise a strong voice to stop genocide. The bell is tolling at Jalladhkana and it tolls for thee. ✨