

Liberation War Museum Bangladesh In the time of Pandemic

Mofidul Hoque

Greetings to all who are far from us but very near to our heart. Firstly I would like to give you a brief about the Liberation War Museum and the present situation.

LWM was established in 1996 as a citizen's effort which earned great support from the community that made it a People's Museum. The journey began in a small way at a rented two-storied colonial era building and we have grown ever since. In 2017 the museum moved to its permanent abode with wide space and supportive facilities. The complex was build with public donation and government support.



We want to dedicate our space and facilities for the national, regional and global efforts of not to forget the past and say 'Never Again' to mass atrocities.

The Covind-19 attack came as a sudden shock both for our nation and our museum. Although we heard the footsteps but were not prepared for a catastrophe of such massive scale. The first case in Bangladesh was detected in early March and Government gradually introduced protective measures including social distancing, home quarantine, closure of educational institutions and museums, area-wise lockdown and very quickly declared national lockdown since the third week of March. Now it is more than a month that the nation is under complete lockdown.

Spread of Coronavirus has not yet reached its peak in Bangladesh. So far we have about 6000 detected case with 160 death. The number of affected person appears to be low because of the low rate of testing. We have great shortage of testing kit and PCR lab. The national health system is meagre in terms of magnitude of the crisis.

Nevertheless the nation is struggling to meet the challenge of the time and a great human bondage among different segments of society is our new-found strength. The looming economic crisis is most worrisome for us. Economically and socially we were doing well with annually about 8% growth rate. But the economy is very much dependent on global market. About 10 million expatriate workers and 5 million garments workforce form the backbone of our economy and foreign exchange earning. The loss in growth will mean loss of opportunity for millions of our people and everybody will be sufferer.

We at the museum were also unprepared. Initially we were more concerned with the safety of our staff and museum collection. With the sudden introduction of complete lockdown our staff members got scattered and we lost contact with them. Our presence in digital space is very little. We have neglected the digital communication opportunities and do not have much online activity, like virtual museum or online teaching etc. Even our website is not that active and update. We remained more focussed on inter-personal connectivity. But with the Covind-19 attack the doors of the museum were suddenly shut, all our programme and festivities cancelled. We lost contact with our network teachers, volunteers, associates and of course visitors.

Most painful was loss of our contact with the Rohingya victims in the camps. With Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) we are engaged in work to empower the victim women. 15 March was the last day for the foreign and local non-essential staff to work in the camp. The victim women bid farewell to the AJAR-LWM activists in a touchy way.



Fortunately that was also the day when I took French intellectual and activist Bernard-Henri Levy to the camp. Last week he published a long article in Paris Match about the visit which is commendable.



Life in refugee camp is always difficult and specially with 1 million Rohingya refugees crammed in 34 camps. But the Bangladesh administration with the help of international agencies have organized the support system very well. Now they have focussed strongly on protection of Rohingya refugees from Covind contamination. The camps are closed for all except essential service providers like those supervising food supply, health etc. The awareness program,

sanitization, masks etc. has been introduced. Local hospitals are getting prepared for Covid patients. In spite of the preparedness there are shortages of PPE, ventilator etc.



In this scenario a small gesture has inspired us much. Some of the victim women are now sewing masks to be distributed free in the camps. LWM staff members are creating fund by themselves to buy few sewing machine for the victims.

LWM is now regrouping itself in the new situation. We have created a chat group for our staff members which became a window for them to release tension. We have conducted zoom meeting for our researchers with their mentors. The 8th International Docufilm Festival had to be postponed in the last hour. Now after several zoom meeting it has been decided to hold workshop and pitching session with mentors online from 28 April 2020. We are also exploring the possibility of organizing the Festival online.

Now we would like to place before you what we have learned during this unforeseen and unpredictable global crisis and the way to address the future.

While facing the grave situation we learned the importance of digital communication in all its form. We need to provide special attention on taking advantage of digital communication, learn how other memorial museums are doing this and how we can be benefited by that.

We received new strength from the global connectivity, our links with ICMEMO, AJAR, ICSOC, GAAMAC, IAGS and other organizations and persons. This has broadened our perspective and gave us strength to work together.

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.

Let us do this together.