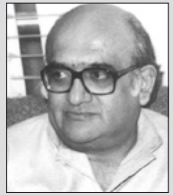


# Recapturing the spirit of the Liberation War



REHMAN SOBHAN

[This is Part I of a 3-part series that contains the full text of a speech given by Prof. Sobhan at the Liberation War Museum on March 22.]

TODAY, we are commemorating the 35th year of Bangladesh's independence. In these 35 years, Bangladesh has registered many gains for which we should feel proud. I have spoken about these achievements elsewhere. Our achievements remind us how much more we could have made of ourselves, where Bangladesh could have fulfilled the promise which inspired our struggle for nationhood. My presentation today, however, focuses on the unfulfilled expectation of the generation which shared the privilege of participating in the liberation struggle. Had we been able to live up to these expectations, Bangladesh would have been a very different place today. I will therefore explore this chasm which separates the hopes of yesterday from the reality of today, and will then offer some suggestions on what we may attempt to do to build a society which restores meaning to the spirit which sustained our struggle for liberation.

Bangladesh was not born through a historical accident. Nor was it the gift of a departing colonial power grown weary of bearing its imperial burden. Our nationhood emerged out of a long process of struggle which culminated in a bloody war of liberation. To move large numbers of ordinary people to pledge their lives for a separate existence we needed to inspire them with a vision for a better world than the one they were repudiating. This inspiration was what came to be known as the spirit which inspired the liberation war, what we

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popularly term: *muktijuddher-chetona*. This is a phrase which is used so frequently and so casually as to be rendered almost devoid of meaning. We invoke this spirit as a ritual incantation and rarely bother to ask ourselves what this spirit embodies. I would argue that the spirit of the liberation war is adequately captured in the four principles which have guided our constitution: Democracy, Nationalism, Secularism and Socialism (which has later been elaborated to mean social justice).

In this piece, I will discuss why these pillars of our constitution capture the spirit of the liberation struggle and how far we have departed from these guiding principles. Today: democracy and nationalism.

## Democracy

Our emergence as a separate nation-state was the direct outcome of the persistent denial of democrat rights to the people of Bangladesh by the Pakistani ruling class. In 24 years of shared nationhood never once was central power in Pakistan exercised through the outcome of a free and fair election. The first such election in December 1970, 23 years after the emergence of Pakistan, led to the Awami League, under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, capturing a majority of seats in the National Assembly, with an electoral mandate from the people of Bangladesh to establish self-rule. It was the attempt by the Pakistani military junta to frustrate this democratic mandate, through the instrument of genocide, which inspired the liberation war. The liberation war was, thus, the final phase of our democratic struggle when the Bangali people had to come to terms with the reality that democracy could never be realized within the Pakistani nation state.

It is the tragedy of Bangladesh

that our nationhood emerged out of our quest for democracy, yet we have spent most of our national existence frustrating its realization. We have lived through long episodes of martial rule and civilian autocracy. In 1990, when the Ershad autocracy was overthrown through a mass mobilization, the nation experienced the excitement of a second rebirth of democracy. But what a mess we have made of this process of renewal. We have spawned a democratic order built on confrontation and intolerance where the party elected to office functions with complete disregard for the democratic rights of the opposition. The opposition responds by violating its democratic mandate and boycotting parliament. As a result, three successive parliaments have been rendered virtually dysfunctional and have totally failed to discharge their primary mandate of keeping the executive accountable to the will of the voters through their elected representatives.

The malfunctioning of our democratic institutions is compounded by the absence of democracy in our principal political parties. The major political parties, in turn, reflect the gradual ascendance of money and muscle power as the driving force in democratic politics. As a consequence, politics in Bangladesh has degenerated into a rich man's game, where both women and the financially deprived have been effectively disenfranchised. The dominance of money has ensured that issues of principle, policy and public service are no longer the motivating force for participating in politics. Rather, politics has become an extension of business and money has become the route to electoral office.

The proliferation of violence, which becomes more pernicious when it is patronized by the state, has increasingly been deployed to

further political and personal objectives. The purveyors of violence, the *mastaans*, have served to undermine our public educational institutions, interfere with the working of the administration, challenge the credibility of our institutions of law enforcement and compromise the vitality of our investment climate. In such a malfunctioning democracy, every institution of governance is compromised. Our administration has become ineffective, where both recruitment and advancement have become politicized and divorced from performance or norms. The integrity of the Public Service Commission has been compromised by the politicization of its senior appointments. As a result, virtually all public services as well as law enforcement have become partisanized and commoditized to a point where the machinery of government has lost virtually all capacity for functioning as an instrument of public service.

The last remaining bastion of the rule of law, the judiciary, is now under threat. The lower judiciary has degenerated into a politicized instrument of the ruling party. The upper judiciary is now being exposed to a process of creeping politicization, where judicial appointments, even at the highest level, are now made with an eye on who will be more serviceable as the head of the Caretaker Government. The appointments to the Election Commission have been similarly politicized so that the very institutions which are designed to safeguard the democratic credentials of our electoral process are being compromised. Prior to a national election, all recruitment and postings in the police force, *upazilla* administration, schools, and now the armed forces, which can in any way influence the direction of the national elections, are being politicized. In

such circumstance, the scope for a free and fair election where the role of money, defaulters and *mastaans* can be contained, is becoming progressively more untenable.

The last recourse of democracy, the free media, is demonstrating considerable resilience. But the security of journalists has become increasingly endangered and the independent press itself faces a constant struggle to secure itself from both state pressure and private terror. Here again, people with money and state patronage are making inroads into the media and are investing both in the print and electronic media with the expectation of "managing" the news in the service for partisan gain. That our institutions of democracy and governance should have degenerated to a level where the very sustainability of the democratic process is endangered is particularly distressing when we consider our long and painful struggle for democracy.

## Nationalism

Nationalism was identified as a pillar of our nationhood because our founding fathers recognized that liberation was tied up with our struggle to establish our national identity as distinct from Pakistan. Our founders were also conscious about asserting our identity vis a vis India, our friend and neighbour, who had played such a critical role through their support of our liberation struggle. However, in the day-to-day affairs of nation building, the issue of nationalism is more concerned with the need to recapture autonomy over our political as well as policy choices. Our founders were aware that their Pakistani rulers had surrendered autonomy over policymaking, in large measure, to the United States and the World Bank, on whom we had become heavily dependent for both military and economic aid. Nationalism, in the context of a sovereign Bangladesh, thus meant the assertion of our autonomy in policy and decision making. However, in a fast globalizing world policy choices available to a least developed country such as Bangladesh are severely constrained. Regrettably, successive regimes in Bangladesh have made little effort to design our policies and restructure our economy so as

to enhance our flexibility in coping with the challenges of globalization.

In the last two decades, the maximum influence over Bangladesh's decision making process has vested with our principal aid donors who have attempted to influence the terms on which we globalize ourselves. This leverage was inherited from an era when our aid dependence in the 1980s exceeded 10% of GDP. We were then dependent on aid to finance our entire development budget and part of our current budget. Particular bilateral aid donors and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank used this dependence to influence our policies towards a more market oriented, private sector based development strategy. Donor pressure has compelled us to liberalize our imports at a faster pace than was even demanded by the WTO. This has threatened the sustainability of a large number of small and medium sized industries serving our domestic market as well as inhibited the growth and diversification of our manufacturing sector. Today Bangladesh is much less aid dependent but our principal aid donors continue to exercise a disproportionate influence over our policy direction. Successive governments remain unduly attentive to donor advice even though they have little capacity or even inclination to respond to such advice.

In the last decade, Bangladesh has moved from being an aid dependent to a trade dependent country. 75% of our exports are centred around readymade garments (RMG) whilst over 80% of our exports are directed to the markets of North America and the European Union (EU). In recent years, the US and the EU have begun to use political considerations in determining the degree of market access offered to any country. Governments in Bangladesh have thus remained unduly receptive to the policy advice of our principal trading partners and have remained disinclined to take any position which would be contrary to their strategic interests. This overdependence on RMG exports to two major markets to sustain the livelihood of close to two million (mostly poor women),

has generated a sense of helplessness in our policymakers whose principal foreign policy goal has been to propitiate the US and EU in order to retain and enhance our access to their protected markets. In a world where these countries are increasingly using entry to their markets as a strategic resource, Bangladesh's foreign policy options are being compromised by our inability to diversify our economy and broaden our export base.

We have been no less dependent on the energy exporting countries of the Middle East who host our migrant labour who remit over \$3 billion a year to Bangladesh. Whilst a few of these countries once made some effort to influence our social behavior, they made few, if any, policy demands on Bangladesh. Nonetheless, successive regimes have made it a point to remain on good terms with them.

India remains a major trading partner of Bangladesh as a source of imports but it has not been able to use this dependence to extract political leverage because Bangladesh also has access to other suppliers such as China and South East Asia to meet its import needs. Until India opens up its markets to Bangladesh to a point where they absorb at least 20% of our exports or can inject a significant volume of foreign direct investment as well as bilateral aid into Bangladesh, their leverage over our policy choices will remain limited. As host to a large number of "unofficial" migrant workers from Bangladesh, India and to a lesser extent Pakistan, could exercise some leverage over Bangladesh. But since Bangladesh does not recognize such migrants as Bangladeshi citizens, there is little India can do to transform this market dependence of Bangladesh into a political resource. Given the importance of India, not just as a trading partner, but also as an upper riparian which remains the source of 58 of our principal rivers, we need to develop a strategic vision rather than the ad hoc responses which guide our uneasy relationship. Designing such a strategy would be facilitated by a process of public consultation and would eventually need to be backed by all political parties so

that India-Bangladesh relations should not be used as a source of domestic political opportunism. Such an agenda would need to be skillfully negotiated with the government of India but should also be intensively discussed between civil society in India and Bangladesh.

In recent years, the issue of resource nationalism has also surfaced. Bangladesh has few resources so that we have to ensure that these resources are optimally used. Issues relating to the development and export of gas and coal have become highly contentious which has constrained the extraction of our resources. Part of the problem of dealing with finite resources lies in the lack of transparency in addressing such issues. But our principal failure lies in our inability to develop a strategic plan for the most productive use of our resources which can be publicly discussed and its operationalization backed by a political consensus.

In the prevailing circumstances, Bangladesh's principle assertion of nationalism must lie in reestablishing our surrendered sovereignty over our policy direction. Now that aid accounts for less than 3% of our GDP, it should not be too difficult to recapture our policy autonomy. However, such an assertion of nationalism, whether in policy making relations with our neighbours or in exploiting our natural resources, demands political maturity and courage. Courage can be sustained through a willingness to reach out to as well as motivate Bangladesh's highly skilled indigenous professional community to develop policy alternatives to guide the country and to then explain these policy options to the public. To sustain any such assertion of sovereignty we would also need to build a domestic political consensus which would strengthen the capacity of the government to challenge the tradition of external hegemony over our policy choices.

Rehman Sobhan is Chairman of Centre for Policy Dialogue.

# Resilient Bangladesh

The people of Bangladesh are already fed up with the callous activities of our political parties. They are raring to have a change for the better. I believe the people will not fail in being comrades in the fight against dishonest and incompetent people. Justice Habibur Rahman's confidence expressed in the dialogue in getting a large number of companions in the race just launched won't remain a mere optimism for long. The people just cannot remain bogged down in the quagmire of political bankruptcy. Believe me! We will soon come across a resilient Bangladesh.

KAZI SM KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

EMERGENCE and growth of pressure groups is a very positive development in the contemporary world, not least in Bangladesh. Many of these groups can be called civil society groups in modern parlance. The role of these groups in a state's day-to-day affairs is becoming increasingly prominent. In fact, civil society groups are termed as bridges between the government and the people, and rightly so. As the masses are never so organized, these groups play a pivotal role in articulating people's demands.

In the backdrop of such a crucial role for civil society groups, the formation of a citizens' group to prepare a mid-term development vision for the country and launch a campaign for electing honest and competent candidates in the next general elections is indeed a very welcome move and a giant step forward. This is more so in the context of Bangladesh since this beloved land of ours has long been labouring under the wrong policies and selections of our political parties.

Though democracy came back in 1991, following a lengthy and blood-letting mass movement, it is poised to be marred as our political parties could not play their due role. It is true that the glorious role of our major political parties cannot be overlooked in the struggle against the autocratic ruler. Painfully though, they have indulged in unabated criminalization of politics instead of creating a

cleaner political culture. The rot has reached such a point that an incisive and decisive move is well overdue.

Civil society members comprising enlightened and conscious people of the country had two options. One was to resign to the whims of political parties and leave the future of the state to their mercy and another was to rise to the occasion. They have opted for the one that the people of Bangladesh expected of them. This is, however, not to imply that the civil society groups are alternatives to the political leaders.

I pin high hopes on the initiative because the people within the citizens' group are not merely some well-meaning people. To be fair to them, they have already exhibited their commitment and capability in their respective fields. CPD has become a very respected research-oriented organization with almost all of its activities geared to national development while conscious citizens of the country are convinced enough as to the role of The Daily Star and The Prothom Alo in establishing media activism in Bangladesh.

However, the individuals, bodies and newspapers involved in this initiative are not the only people or bodies who are promoting the cause of national development and media activism. In fact, many others are in place and credit to all of them for their commitment. It is my firm conviction that other committed and dedicated individuals, bodies and forums will definitely supplement the move

or promote the cause from their respective platforms. In fact, there is no other option left for them and the people of Bangladesh, as all of us have high stakes in the future of the country.

Many people have developed antipathy to politics because of its prevailing murky nature. When our new generations are asked about their comment about joining politics, they express instant abhorrence for it. But who will take the helm of the country if all the brilliant students shy away from politics? After all, the politicians are supposed to be at the top while taking key state policies and decisions. Such a pessimistic thinking on the part of our new generation will definitely risk consigning the future of the country to the incompetent people who already loom large on the horizon. However, it is we who will have to create a supportive environment for them, replacing the current one.

Actually, there is ample room for all conscious individuals and groups to engage in politics designed to serve the country without being engaged in party politics. I think Editor Mahfuz Anam has rightly remarked in the citizens' group floating dialogue that: "It is possible for anybody to get involved in the political process without engaging in party politics." Shedding the escapist and pessimistic attitude can be key in this regard.

Without relishing in mere politics-bashing, we can hit hard at the ones who criminalize our politics. It is high time we all

pulled our own shares. Professor Yunus in the dialogue remarked: "We have to take preparations from now on for resisting corrupt and incompetent people from entering the next parliament." In view of our prevailing political ambience, his anticipation is an alarming one, as he added: "If the corrupt and incompetent candidates get the chance to enter the next parliament, the level of corruption will reach such a stage that violence and unrest in the society will go beyond control."

He, however, very rightly observed that the corrupt and incompetent ones could be defeated if all the citizens become aware. He has also come out with a formula as a remedy. In his formula, Yunus suggested the launch of a citizens' movement in the name of "honest candidate movement" or "competent candidate movement." The people of Bangladesh who have fought against the overbearing British, the tyrannical Pakistanis, and the unjust dictators have shown a fair amount of resilience at the call of time. Never did they shrink back. Our country has no doubt reached another critical juncture of history.

The people of Bangladesh are already fed up with the callous activities of our political parties. They are raring to have a change for the better. I believe the people will not fail in being comrades in the fight against dishonest and incompetent people. Justice Habibur Rahman's confidence expressed in the dialogue in getting a large number of companions in the race just launched won't remain a mere optimism for long. The people just cannot remain bogged down in the quagmire of political bankruptcy. Believe me! We will soon come across a resilient Bangladesh.

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# One martyr's story

Are my fellow citizens of my generation at all aware of the war that 30 lakh martyrs and their families went through only for us? Do their parents tell them what "muktujuddho" is? Do they know of the gruesome killings when the rivers of Bangladesh were flowing with the carcasses of human and animals together or when the rivers were transformed into pools of blood, under the nine months occupation of the Pakistani army?

ROBAIYA NUSRAT

HE was a man of great wisdom. A man of great courage and bravery. A person with no disloyalty or dishonesty towards his any responsibilities. A unique, charming personality, whom I would have long held a desire to meet; even once, in my dreams, and to cherish that moment in my heart and mind for ever.

Such a person of substance he was that all his students and junior staff would follow him as a role model, while his seniors always praised him. He was such a character that none ever spoke any unpleasant word about him. Our dear motherland is privileged and proud to give birth to such brave sons. And I, being the third generation of Bangladesh, now realize how much we have lost.

The person I have been describing is the person I admire most, my charismatic grandfather -- Shah Abdul Majid (ex-PSP) and SP of Rajshahi -- who embraced martyrdom in the liberation war of 1971.

I am very much thankful to Allah for giving me birth in a martyr's family, thus enabling me to be a part of the war-stricken memories of 1971. I have known the personal war that the wives and mothers of the martyrs had gone despite 35 years of independence.

Are my fellow citizens of my generation at all aware of the war that 30 lakh martyrs and their families went through only for us? Do their parents tell them what "muktujuddho" is? Do they know of the gruesome killings when the rivers of Bangladesh were flowing with the carcasses of human and animals together or when the rivers were transformed into pools of blood, under the nine months occupation of

the Pakistani army?

Hey, my contemporaries, have you ever heard about the appalling torture the womenfolk of that time had gone through in terms of rape, repression, and losing their beloved husbands and sons?

Could we ever perceive and visualize the massacre of innocent people, the cruelty shown by the Pakistanis? Have we ever thought or felt a lust for a sip of water a muktijuddha might have desired with his last breath or the desire for food cooked by his mother?

Muktijuddho can never be explained in a single article.

But are we really enjoying the benefits of being liberated from the wrath of the Pakistani junta or we are still being oppressed, divided and fighting for our own existence on our own soil?

This question looms large in the air of liberated Bangladesh after long 35 years of independence, as still today we could see the defeated forces are trying to destabilize our sweet home by hatching plots against the sovereignty of the nation.

This we could see by the sudden emergence of Islamic militancy, killings of innocent people through bomb blasts, creating a division amongst the peaceful people of our country, posing a serious threat to our culture, independence and violation of human rights.

Did the people of this country ever dream of an independent state at the expense of 30 lakh innocent people. 35 years back we fought unitedly against the Pakistani army to get liberated and establish a "Shonar Bangla." 35 years after, instead of fulfilling our dreams, the soil of our sweet land is continuously being bathed with the blood of her own children, fighting amongst themselves for petty personal gains.

Such a tragedy.

For the present situation of Bangladesh I point my finger to my nation's people -- how could we have been so self-centered and acted so selfishly by not contributing even a bit to the nation. We all blame the government, the country, and its people. But did anyone among us come up to make the situation better? No.

And we will never do since we all have forgotten 1971, we have forgotten muktijuddho, we have forgotten the sacrifices of 30 lakhs and their families. Not a bit of patriotism survives within our heart. It's a shame for us. It's a shame for our nation -- do we even realize that? Does anyone even spare a minute to think where the country is heading?

Today, as I was thinking about my grandfather with so many questions in my mind with no answers. But one answer that I have always sought to know: was it worth losing a wise person like my grandfather? Was my family's sacrifice (especially my grandmother's) worth it?

The answer, I fear, may well be "no." It was never worth losing him for the Bangladesh in which we are living today. But I am proud the way he is being respected today and proud to be his granddaughter, and hope that we can build a country where the answer to this question is "yes."

Since my childhood, I have heard many stories of this brave warrior from my grandmother, mother, uncles, and aunts. The unforgettable memories they have cherished in the deep core of their hearts. I was told my grandmother waited long ten years for her beloved husband to come back.

I also heard that she sacrificed all kinds of enjoyment and good things in life for her beloved

husband. My grandparents were such a happy couple that my grandmother took many long years to finally realize that her husband would never return. I even heard she avoided all kinds of food that was liked by my grandfather. Such stories are only seen on movies or read about in novels, but this was reality for my grandmother and countless others.

Her only thought in life then was to raise up her four children that her husband left behind. And today she is a proud mother as all her four children are well established and holding respectable as well as responsible positions in their respective fields.

Gradually, as I have been growing, my mother has shared few of her treasured memories with me at times when she grew nostalgic, specially during the months of March and December.

Today I will share one of her memories which made me cry every time I heard it. My mother was the most pampered child of her father and was really loved.

The day my grandfather was being taken away, at the very moment he knew that he was never coming back and tears rolled down his eyes, he wanted a handkerchief, and coincidentally my mother was playing with a small piece of white cloth which she kept inside her father's cigarette packet, she was then able to give her father the last piece of gift from her -- the white cloth which her father used as a handkerchief. There are many more memories that I wanted to share, but if I start I can never end.

Last, but not the least, my humble request to all my fellow citizens, please don't forget the war. Know it, and let the future generations know. Let the history of war and patriotism live within every citizen. It is a shame to not know our own history.

The author recently completed her A level examinations.