

A Victory Day like never before

It comes amidst a pandemic, testing how much we've grown as a nation

TODAY marks the 49 years of our existence as a sovereign nation. On this day in 1971, our struggle for independence following a nine-month war was rewarded with a richly deserved victory that came at the cost of unimaginable loss of life and persecution. While we honour the memory of the fallen, we cannot but recall, with a deep sense of gratitude, the enormous contributions of the freedom fighters who fought and bled on the ground and the leading role of Bangabandhu and his four trusted lieutenants in steering us to this moment. Together, their efforts and sacrifices, as well as that of countless other individuals both at home and abroad, paved the way for the fulfilment of the Bengali dream for self-determination.

This is indeed the brightest moment in our history, one that we observe amidst a raging pandemic this year. Ironically, perhaps it is fitting that the run-up to the 50th year of our existence should coincide with the emergence of the biggest challenge we've ever faced—a litmus test, in other words, for how much we've grown as a nation over the past decades. Covid-19 continues to test our resilience and integrity in ways never seen before. Besides infecting nearly five lakh people, killing over 7,100, and exposing the dark underbelly of our economy and nearly all sectors, it has created an unprecedented crisis in our lives, the effects of which will be felt long after the pandemic is over. In a way, it is stress-testing our foundation as a nation, and how we respond to it will show how far we've progressed, or regressed.

Today, our society remains deeply divided, scarred by injustice, intolerance and extremism. The values and traditions that once held us together are being threatened. We no longer seek unity in diversity. Narrow nationalism and self-serving individualistic aspirations have replaced our dream for a fair, rights-based society where everyone is treated equally regardless of their gender, class and religious/political affiliation—a dream that was central to our struggle for independence. There is an abject lack of compassion manifesting itself through crimes and cruelties of all sorts, in greater number every day. The list of things going haywire is astounding, which calls for deep introspection and a renewed commitment if we want to see a reversal in the current trend.

That said, Bangladesh has also achieved a lot over the decades that we can be proud of. We've reached many milestones, especially in various socioeconomic sectors. But a true tribute to the Victory Day is not about uncritically romanticising the journey we've had as a nation, but about being reasonably proud of our achievements while making a conscious effort to understand and learn from our mistakes and failures. If the priority after December 16, 1971 was to start nation-building, the time has come to embark on a journey of nation-rebuilding in light of our founding principles, a fight made more urgent by the pandemic. Only then can we truly honour the legacy of all those who gave their lives for our freedom.

On the road to a cherished dream

Graduating to a developed country

THOSE who labeled us a basket case should eat their words. It has been a hard grind but Bangladesh is at the threshold of joining the ranks of developed countries. The news couldn't have come on a better day—on the eve of the country's 49th Victory Day. It has been a long 49 years since the day in December when the UN included Bangladesh in the list of 25 Least Developed Countries after the world body formally endorsed the three criteria. According to the UNCTAD, Bangladesh is well on its way to graduate to a developing country from a least developed country as, according to its estimates, our score in all three criteria, namely, Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, Human Assets Index (HAI) and Economic Vulnerability Index (EVI), would be much higher than the required score for graduation next year. It was only in 2015 that Bangladesh became eligible for graduation in 2018 by crossing the threshold of the World Bank-defined lower middle-income country. The UNCTAD forecast is even more encouraging given that the country had to combat a global pandemic that stunted the steady growth of nearly eight percent year on year.

However, while we can rightly rejoice at our soon-to-be newly acquired status, what the planners should stress upon is the equitable distribution of income across the board to make growth and development meaningful. The negative consequences that our graduation to a developed country would entail should also be taken into cognisance. Scholars foresee certain predictable impacts. According to the Committee for Development Policy of the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs, the most important impact of Bangladesh's graduation would be on trade, which might affect specific market access provisions accorded to LDCs. Equally importantly, we are likely to lose access to the benefit of duty free quota for LDCs and to simplified rules of origin reserved for LDCs. That will pose an impediment to our garment exports. Our future policy, therefore, should be crafted to offset all the likely adverse impacts so that the road to further progress is unhindered.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

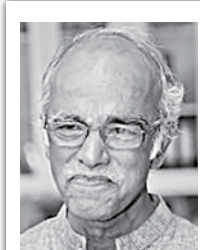
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A cervical cancer-free future

The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) is marking Cervical Cancer Awareness Month in January to support the WHO Global Strategy to Accelerate the Elimination of Cervical Cancer. According to IARC, more than 50 million Bangladeshi women are at risk of developing cervical cancer, and 17,686 new cases and 10,362 deaths occur annually. If diagnosed at the precursor stage, however, cervical cancer is a condition that can be successfully treated through vaccination and screening. It is high time we discuss the issue in depth and help fight this cancer.

Iftekhar Ahmed Sakib, Dhaka

VICTORY DAY 2020



MOFIDUL HOQUE

THE emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state on December 16, 1971 was a major event in the political history of the subcontinent, whose significance needs to be studied from different perspectives. This does not mean an immersion in the past, but rather an exercise for the future. The legacy of the past has greatly influenced the postcolonial development of the newly independent nations. The colonial legacies of India, especially in the first half of the 20th century, has been determined by diverse factors, but the rupture in the body politic was most evident on the issue of Hindu-Muslim relations. The end of colonial domination in 1947 was not a celebration, rather it was a "chequered mourning" as poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz depicted. Independence was marred by unprecedented violence and the period remained engraved in people's minds, not as the first day of freedom but as the time of Partition. India was divided on religious lines to carve out Pakistan as a land of the Muslims of India, with the declared aim to solve the Hindu-Muslim conflict once and for all. Pakistan became an Islamic republic while India proclaimed itself as a secular democratic state.

The acceptance of partitioning the land to separate the Muslims and Hindus as two contesting religious groups who failed to define their life together as a community, has opened the path to disrupting the communal harmony essential for the development of society. The result is evident in the subsequent developments in the subcontinent, which showed that the line of separation was drawn not only on the map but also in the minds and psyches of communities everywhere. Moreover, Pakistan as a country defined its neighbour as a Hindu state, the other part of its two-nation theory. Right from the beginning, India also failed to establish a healthy relationship with its neighbour. The tension between the two states culminated into bloody riots in 1950 and 1964, as well as brutal wars in 1948 and 1965.

In this backdrop, the role of the Bengali people, specifically the Bengali Muslims, needs to be analysed in historical context. There are myths created by various quarters which have been busted by later day historical developments. The emergence of Bangladesh as a secular republic upholding its national identity was a landmark event, a clear departure from the two-nation theory and the postcolonial reality of communal conflict. Thus, the concept of secularism as one of the fundamental principles of the state showed the path to the future, amending the rupture in the subcontinental body politic.

Bengali Muslims, who voted overwhelmingly for Muslim League and endorsed the creation of Pakistan, became disillusioned very soon. This is the common belief that mainstream historians are putting forward for long and has become a kind of meta-narrative. But if we take a deeper look at the historical events of the time, we will be able to identify the other narratives that help us to explain the journey made by Muslim communities at large. A careful reading of *The Unfinished Memoirs* by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman reveals what Pakistan meant to Mujib, then a young activist of the Muslim League and the undisputed leader of the students of Islamia College of Kolkata, who can rightly be considered as the voice of the educated Muslim youth. He belonged to Muslim League, but to the other faction of the League, led by Suhrawardy and Abul Hashim, both related to each other and belonging to the Muslim gentry, and more concerned with Muslim rights than a separate homeland for Muslims. Their vision of a separate homeland was a Muslim majority united Bengal, where Hindus and Muslims could live as a composite community.

Bangabandhu quoted the Lahore resolution verbatim to highlight its call for independent states to be formed in the Western and Eastern part of India where the



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

a short period of time. We can't but also pay tribute to the sacrifice made by the countless millions during the Liberation War, and in the years before 1971, as well as after. Many of those who helped build this nation did not survive to see victory and we remember them all with gratitude and deference.

It is only appropriate that we keep in our mind and our hearts the hardship and challenges that the people of this country faced to break the shackles put on us by the colonial rulers. Some of us lost family members, near ones, friends and neighbours, and it is appropriate that we pay tribute to them. Even today, I never get tired of listening to the stories of how millions escaped the rage of the Pakistani Army, the trials and tribulations of those crossing over to the Indian border, then on to Kolkata or Agartala, and the hospitality of our hosts in India. It seems that, with age, these memories rekindle the pride and passion we felt, and they grow brighter as time passes.

Like every year, today I pay homage to the friends I lost in the War of Liberation. My classmates from Dhaka College and Dhaka University, Nazrul Islam and Nizamuddin Azad, my kindergarten classmate Nasim Mohsin, my senior Zaheen Chinku, a thespian of immense promise; my friends Arun Choudhury and Shafi Imam Rumi, and many many others. My classmate Sraboni Endow Choudhury, occasionally tells us stories, sometimes on Facebook, of the sufferings during the early stages of the War when Pakistani bloodhounds were on the loose looking

Secularism past, secularism present



Indian National Congress leader Mahatma Gandhi visiting a house in Bengal in 1946 accompanied by Bengali premier Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy (sitting to Gandhi's right) and a young All India Muslim League activist Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (standing).

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Muslims were a majority. His vision of Pakistan was not a Muslim dominated state, but a space where both communities would live together in peace and harmony with equal rights. During the heydays of the struggle for Pakistan, Sheikh Mujib could easily endorse the idea of united or *akhanda* Bengal as proposed by Sarat Bose and Suhrawardy. However, the move never got momentum and soon Bengali society became entangled in bloody riots in Kolkata on August 16, 1946, followed by riots in the rural hinterland of Noakhali, and subsequently in Bihar. Society dived into a deep abyss and Hindu-Muslim unity became a dream never to be fulfilled. The dark scenario blinded the politicians to look beyond the existing reality and search for other options. Bengal and Punjab were partitioned on the basis of the religious identity of the people. Partition happened to stop the violence, but it brought more violence and death. The mad frenzy quickly culminated in the absurd policy of population exchange, where under the interim administration, the total Muslim population of East Punjab was taken to West Punjab and vice versa for the Hindus and Sikhs of West Punjab.

The birth of independent India and Pakistan has been marred with blood and the memory of Partition is one of victimisation unbound. The suffering it brought to millions still haunt us. But what is overlooked is that in 1947, when Punjab burnt and bled, Bengal was peaceful. Riots erupted in Bengal later in 1950, resulting in indiscriminate killings and mass exodus. At that time, a few of the right-wing politicians called for population exchange, but fortunately, that didn't happen. In historical narratives, not much attention is given to Bengal in 1947. It is also important to look where leading politicians stood in mid-August, 1947. We found Mahatma Gandhi in Kolkata, calling for peace between

Hindus and Muslims. As a mark of his political action, he spend the day fasting at the Haideri Manjil, the Muslim house at Beliaghata which was looted and burnt by the rioters in August of the previous year. A photograph found many years later showed Gandhi sitting on the floor with Suhrawardy at his side and the lanky young man standing at the door was Sheikh Mujib.

The day when India was divided, Mujib was standing not with politicians blinded by their communal outlooks, but with a handful of leaders who defied the prevailing mood. They represented the future, and the emergence of Bangladesh as a secular state has endorsed that dream which few others could uphold and struggled for.

Bangladesh, a Muslim majority country, opted for secularism as an essential part of its national identity. In the name of creating an Islamic state and its purity, the Pakistani rulers adopted the policy to impose a sole religious identity, obliterating the cultural-linguistic traditions of our people. That contradiction was there right from the beginning and national identity and culture became the rallying point for the survival of the nation. Nationalism with a strong cultural component united the people and Sheikh Mujib transformed that unity into a massive political struggle. A poster of the Bangladesh government during the war depicted the secular basis of the Bangladeshi state eloquently as it proclaimed: Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims of Bengal—we are all Bengali. Thus religion and nationalism are mingled together, creating spaces for all. In the strife-ridden reality of today, the state of Bangladesh points the way to the future of peace, tolerance and harmony with its commitment to secularism. The ideal needs to be protected under all circumstances.

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Remembering the hardships we faced in 1971



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for young girls to kill and molest, and how they managed to dodge that bullet. However, ten of her family members perished by December 16, most of them killed by a bomb in Sylhet town in an area known as Manipuri Rajbari. Her young cousin who died was denied a decent burial, forcing her *Kakima* to carry the corpse to the water's edge, letting it float away in the river Surma.

Recently, I had the opportunity to sit down with some of the elders who had similar harrowing experiences and close encounters with death during those months. While memory is fast fading for

renamed the Suhrawardy Uddyan, would be witness to so much of our history, our hopes and determination, and the ultimate climax with the surrender of General Niazi, who had vowed to eliminate the dreams of the Bengali nation?

I talked with Gulshan Anwara Haque, an octagenarian, and past President of Dhaka Ladies Club, who after attending the historic speech at Dhaka Race Course on March 7, travelled the following day from her house in Dhaka to Sylhet for a wedding and was stuck there for a few days as the Non-Cooperation Movement and the negotiations between Awami League



PHOTO: ARCHIVES

many of them, their tales of the Liberation War, from March 7 to December 16, is one of great pride for them. I have heard from hundreds of people about attending the historic meeting at the Dhaka Race Course on March 7, and of the horrifying acts of betrayal and manslaughter committed by Yahya Khan and his cohort on the night of March 25 and the early hours of March 26. Those memories, the escape and the struggles in April, May and June onwards until the early breakthrough in November and the final surrender of the Pakistani Army at the ceremony in the Race Course, are fresh in all of our minds. Who could have imagined that this ground, now

and the Pakistan Peoples Party dragged on. On March 25, she and her family were in Sylhet town and immediately took shelter in a "Chairman bari" on the other side of the River Surma after Operation Searchlight was launched by the Pakistani Army in Dhaka. Following the crackdown, they along with a few others, ferried scores of people from the town in their small cars over the rickety Keane Bridge spanning the river Surma to the safety of the villages on the other side. Subsequently, they escaped to an interior location with her two young daughters and son to evade the Pakistani Army that had been let loose in Sylhet town. They first went to Kaliti Tea Estate in

Kulaura upazila of Moulvibazar. However, when the blood-thirsty Pakistani Army and their collaborators also crossed the Keane Bridge, they targeted the tea gardens and started going from one estate to another to flush out the "muktis".

She tearfully recalled one encounter with the Pakistani troops at a roadside checkpoint. Their small car, a Fiat 650 with six passengers, was stopped and lined up on the roadside to be taken down with one brushfire. The entire family, along with her late husband, started reciting the Kalima and Surah Fatiha in anticipation of the massacre. But they survived when one of the commanders had a last-minute change of heart and let them continue their onward journey. The trauma still haunts her and she says, "I don't know what happened. The Almighty looked down and foresaw what might happen if that lunatic soldier decided to pull the trigger. Maybe the captain also had young children and saw something that reminded him of his own family back home in the West!"

Finally, let us also recognise the contribution of our friends amongst the rest of the world, who rose up in arms to defeat the nexus of Bhutto, Yahya and the marauding Pakistanis. Even some of the sober Pakistanis, then and now, admit that the nexus got itself into a corner, in a no-win situation. In a recent paper, entitled, *History: Bhutto, Mujib and the Generals*, Prof Dr Moonis Ahmar, Meritorious Professor of International Relations and former Dean Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Karachi, wrote that by March 25, 1971, there were sufficient indications to "convince the Awami League that the nexus would never hand over power to the Bengali majority because of their suspicion, mistrust, antagonism and hatred against them." I only wish that the power-hungry military-political junta in Islamabad had recognised this truth then and spared us the nine months of bloodshed, mayhem and pain.

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