The Daily Star

Dhaka, Monday, December 16, 1991

Resolve to Gain New Victories

On this day, twenty years ago, right had won over wrong, justice over injustice, righteousness over cruelty. In one word, life had won over death. For that is what our liberation war was all about — our right to live, grow, educate our children, talk, dress, sing, dance as Bengalis. That is what was being denied to us, and our demand for these fundamental human rights was what lay at the root of our war with military junta of Pakistan. Starting with our mother tongue, everything about our culture seemed to annoy the rulers of the then Pakistan. Thus was set afoot overt and covert attempts to change us — Bengalis — into our ruler's image of ideal Pakistanis. If we were to live in Pakistan, we literally had to cease to be Bengalis. For us, the choice was simple. We chose to live, and to fight for our right to live as Bengalis.

Twenty years ago our fight ended and we emerged victorious. After two decades of independent existence we are forced to ask, whose victory are we celebrating today. Wasn't independent Bangladesh supposed to bring happiness and prosperity to all its citizens? Weren't we supposed to have lived in freedom, democracy and basic economic benefits? What does the balance sheet of our twenty years of independence look like? To take a very generous view one could claim it to be a mixed bag. In some areas, our achievement can perhaps be highlighted. The first and foremost being the establishment of democracy, which was supposed to have been with us always, but was lost first under the yoke of one party rule, then under army rules. Military dictatorship, which was one of the most repugnant aspects of our life in Pakistan, returned in independent Bangladesh. But all this is now in the past. Through nine years of relentless struggle against autocrat rule, we have re-established democracy and have given it a parliamentary form through the required Constitutional amendments. So today, while we celebrate our victory day, we can take comfort and pride in the fact that we have been able to hold on to one of the fundamental dreams of our liberation war, namely to give our people a democratic system, rule of law and an accountable government.

But what about our other dreams, especially those of a literate society, one in which basic health care reaches all, a society where a minimum of livelihood is guaranteed to the masses. We say — and correctly so — that colonialism sucked the very blood out of our social fabric. We say — and again very correctly — that Pakistani rule made us poorer. But how far have we been able to change it all? Can we deny the fact that we have been letting ourselves down, over and over again throughout the last two decades of our independence?

Let us search our hearts and find out what was the magic that led us to victory twenty years ago. It was national consensus. It was a unified nation being solidly behind our struggle for liberation.

The battle for political independence has been won. But our other battles — those of economic emancipation, of safe health, of universal literacy, of shelter for all — are far from being won. In fact we are further away from victory than we ever were. We must learn the most important lesson from our victory twenty years ago — that it is a nation united that scores victories and not a divided one.

Let us, therefore, put behind our petty — and they are petty compared to our national interest — conflicts, and build that critical national consensus to realise the other dreams of our liberation war — dreams that three million people laid down their lives for.

Jute and Ecology

A workshop just held here has done well to emphasise the linkage between the future of jute and ecology and to remind all concerned that the increased use of the golden fibre in place of synthetics would reduce environmental hazards not only within Bangladesh but also in countries where jute is sold. The international character of the subject under discussion is due to the involvement in the workshop of the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council (CHEC) which worked with the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC) in organising the programme.

By now, participants at the workshop must have returned to their respective jobs with better understanding of the issues concerned. It is now up to them to convince others, especially policy makers in the government, that instead of writing off the future of jute, as some do, we must look at it in positive terms. This also means that we must take measures which, when implemented, would put a new lease of life into jute, from production to marketing.

In this respect, the recommendations approved by the workshop deserve careful attention by the government. In the first place, the government has been urged to set up a commission that helps in the formulation of a national jute policy, covering both short-term and long-term perspectives. If the proposed commission is representative of all different interests and, in its work, is guided by non-official experts, it should be able to offer the country a draft jute policy that drastically changes the scenario. Once a new jute policy is put into effect, other steps can follow. Then, it should be a matter of course to revitalise research on jute, to appoint a commissioner and to establish close co-operation between the Ministry of Jute and the Department of Environment. A great deal remains to be done. What is now important is to make a start.

The Blood of Our Neighbours

by S. Bari

When the first shots rang out on the night of March 25th, 1971, the fate of a nation was sealed. Dr. Anisur Rahman, then a Professor of Economics at Dhaka University, lived with his wife and two little daughters in the staff quarters facing Jagannath Hall. Twenty years later, he shared his thoughts, and his journal, with The Daily Star.

AROUND ten o'clock on the night of the 25th of March, Dr. Rahman heard noises outside the building. Sneaking a look, his family discovered people making barricades on the main road. Dr. Rahman crept outside and put a large padlock on the front door, to give the impression that the flat was empty; he then re-entered through the sweeper's door at the back.

Midnight: Peeping through the window, they saw trucks and jeeps loaded with arms. Men got off the vehicles and positioned themselves facing Jagannath Hall. "We immediately took the girls to an inner room, less exposed to the outside," Dr. Rahman recalls. "There was a mortar sound from a distance, and the sky roared with guns all around. The military had started firing at the dormitory, and our own building shook with the sound."

The firing went on for half an hour. Then the family heard heavy boots on the stairs. With batted breath Dr. Rahman listened as the footsteps clumped up to Prof. Muniruzzaman's flat. "They smashed open his door — the sound of heavy guns striking against the door upstairs was very clear — walked in to the verandah and smashed another door. We heard shouts, and wailing by the inmates," Dr. Rahman recounts. People were dragged out on to the landing; there was a pause, then shots rang out in the quiet of the night.

The heavy boots pounded their way through each of the flats, one by one. The macabre rhythm of boots, splintering doors and cold shots repeated itself on every floor of the building. When the fatal footsteps came to Dr. Rahman's door, and the bell clanged out, "life stopped with us, and we held our breaths." Swearing in Punjabi, the soldiers saw the padlock and assumed the family had fled.

The thumping footsteps faded as crying rose throughout the neighbourhood. The voices of women and children shook the night with what Dr. Rahman calls "unspeakable anguish." He recalls in particular Professor Muniruzzaman's daughter screaming, "Oh god, they have killed my father." In the yard a faint voice was begging for water. The Rahmans sat stunned and helpless. The shooting continued at the dorms across the road.

The elder daughter wanted to know why the military had launched this massacre, and Dr. Rahman remembers telling her that the soldiers did not like "Joy Bangla". The children knew the slogan well.

While the dormitory was set on fire and shooting continued all around, the family crouched in the study and prayed. Shots tore through the restless air all night. Early the following morning the military arrived and dragged some of the bodies down the stairs.

"I had a radio plugged to my ear. I heard curfew announced. My wife crawled to the kitchen to prepare some food." At this point the family moved to a bathroom for greater security, so as not to be seen from the outside or fall victim to stray bullets.

The night of the 26th approached. Tanks could be heard through out the city. Dr. Rahman heard civil war announced on the Calcutta radio. Morning came, but no word of the curfew lifting. Hearing Bengali out on the street, the Rahmans wondered what kind of people were arriving; someone said, "All the men of this building have been killed," and Dr. Rahman feared that miscreants might attempt to take advantage of the women left alone. Soon, however, they saw some neighbours come out of the building, and it seemed that the flats were being evacuated.

Taking virtually nothing with them, the family stepped out on to the landing.

Mrs. Rahman testifies to this being the most wrenching moment of their flight, "as we literally stepped down those stairs that were still wet with the blood of our neighbours." One of those neighbours was Professor Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta.

After the mile-and-a-half walk to Shegun Bagicha, where his wife's family lived, Dr. Rahman had to plot an escape route. A day went by in gathering information on safe roads and methods; then it was time to say goodbye to his daughters. "They asked me to be careful," Dr. Rahman says. With two sets of lungis, punjabis and undergarments, he was on his way. Along his route, he was to encounter Rehman Sobhan, and the two travelled on together.

From Professor Sobhan, Dr. Rahman heard of the army's search for Kamal Hussein. Not finding him at home, they held a gun to his wife's head, then slapped his niece. Later the captain asked the niece's forgiveness, and she replied, "Before I forgive you, can you foregive yourself?"

The story increased Dr. Rahman's anxiety about his wife's safety. On March 29th, in Badda, she joined him for a brief while. Dr. Rahman writes: "I spent the night with Dora on a chowki, told her not to worry about me. The deep uncertainty made us both very sad, but I found her very brave. Both of us felt there was an Invisible Hand protecting us from the time we were so incredibly saved on the 25th night." The following morning they parted, unsure whether they would ever see each other again.

Of the long road to India, some moments remain vivid in Dr. Rahman's memory. Rehman Sobhan's non-Bengali appearance and accent caused them not a few misunderstandings along the way. In one village, the suspicious crowd started beating them till Dr. Rahman's identity was established by a student. He then gave a brief lecture to the mob on his past, upon which someone in the crowd shouted, "Look, his Bengali is perfect."

Apologies were in order, and the whole village turned out to greet the fugitives." News got around that prominent leaders had arrived from Dhaka: rumour even spread that Sheikh Mujib had come! "Dr. Rahman smiles at the thought.

"One thing I remember is that my mother had given me a rubber comb when I left home, and I was guarding it sentimentally. In the mob attack, I lost my jhola, and even now I mourn the loss of that comb," recalls Dr. Rahman.

Also in the course of his escape, he came across Major Khaled Musharraf, who was training young guerillas and quoting Shakespeare in his conversation, along with robbing a bank of 10,000 rupees.

Finally they reached India, where their guides were paid. Dr. Rahman keeping only a five-pound note which his friend Makki Apa had given him. Some days after his arrival, Dr. Rahman discovered that the route he had taken was already unsafe, that he had made it out just in time.

"These are memories that never fade," Dr. Rahman says twenty years later. "Each shot, each cry, each heartbeat of panic remains just as fresh in my memory as that day." On those heartbeats a nation was born, and today we pay tribute to the men and women who gave it life. Their memories are our memories.

SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF BANGLADESH

Integrated Rural-Urban Development Should Top the Agenda

by Aminur Rahim

THE urge for living in its semi-amphibious condition has a distinct effect on the life process in Bangladesh. The people who settled here from pre-historic times developed a technique of deep water rice cultivation and fishing that are agreeable to the deltaic environment. Thus ecological factors tended to have an important effect on the Bangladeshi consciousness. Being situated on the eastern part of the sub-continent and separated from the main stream cultures, the Bangladeshis developed a culture which is distinct in South Asia. Thus, dissident and religious eclecticism found a fertile ground in pre-colonial Bangladesh.

The religious and cultural life of a people, in essence, reflect their tradition. This is because culture articulates the inner feeling of human compassion and consciousness. To paraphrase Victor Hugo, the human soul is anchored in one spot in the world. This particular spot forms an important element in shaping his aesthetic sensibility. The indigenous culture (language) and Middle Eastern culture (religion) played a crucial role in forming the Bengalee Muslim consciousness. They take pride in their language and literary heritage which flourished both in the pre-and-post Islamic periods. But the conquest of Bengal by the Muslims at the beginning of the thirteenth century had an important effect on the socio-political landscape of Bengal, particularly in East Bengal (Bangladesh). Egalitarianism of Islam and local mysticism had brought forth a new self-consciousness among the masses who accepted Islam. This eclectic trend at first manifested itself in the field of folk literature and thus Muslim institutional culture began to co-exist with the pre-Islamic popular culture. This convergence of eastern and western ideas had produced a syncretistic tradition which is secular, liberal and tolerant. Before Bengal was colonized by the British in 1757, it had developed a well-integrated economy in conjunction with agriculture. The manufacturing industry was the most dynamic sector producing large quantities of fine textiles for export abroad. The refined and sophisticated methods of Bengalee weavers were acclaimed as unrivalled in any country of the world. But the policy of de-industrialization adopted by the British destroyed Bengal's potential for an autonomous growth. In response to such underdevelopment, political movements for provincial autonomy began to gain support among the rising Bengalee middle-class. Virtually the Bangladeshi fought a protracted struggle for an autonomous status from 1905 to 1971.

Failures

Following independence in 1971, successive governments have failed to live up to their promises. As a result, mass poverty and the dispossession of the peasants have accelerated on an unprecedented scale. Forty per cent of the poorest Bangladeshis are living further below the poverty line than twenty years ago. At present, sixty per cent of the rural population is landless labourers. In other words, a majority of Bangladeshis have no access to land where land is considered to be the primary resource. The country's socio-economic inequities are overwhelming where poverty and wealth co-exist side by side; the situation is reminiscent of China before the Communist Revolution. A tiny percentage of the population (ten per cent) owns almost fifty per cent of the arable land; twenty five per cent of the landowners are absentees. This inefficient agricultural policy is linked to the problems of underdevelopment in Bangladesh and it is also forcing the landless labourers to migrate to the overcrowded cities and the coastal *chars*. As a *char* is the *khas* land, so fights among the peasants for the possession of a piece of land are frequent. In some cases, the peasants are encouraged by unscrupulous rich farmers, who lease the land to more than one group of peasants and then let them fight for possession.

Bangladeshi elites have failed to link natural disaster to the problems of underdevelopment. They are united in their belief that food, cash, and commodities from abroad are the best way to solve the country's endemic poverty. An integrated rural-urban based economic development is yet a topic of discussion among the thin-skinned policy makers of urban Bangladesh.

Education

On educational issues, the urban biases of state policy continue to oppose universal primary education for the masses. The literacy rate is only twentyfour per cent and has been declining lately and one third of the school-age children are not atten ding school. The goal of universal primary education has been shelved for a distant future. The two-tier colonial education system has continued to dominate, which offers uneven educational facilities to the elite and masses. Following the colonial legacy, schooling in Bangladesh continues to serve as the vehicle for social mobility rather than developing sense of purpose, commitment and removing social and psychological barrier between the elite and the masses. Education for a critical discourse is still an abstract concept; rote learning is the prevalent mode of teaching. The government has no plans for improving a uniform standard school system nationally, nor seemingly a plan to universalize primary education. While spending on the elite education has been increased, elite are yet to appreciate that education is absolutely basic for developing national agenda and socializing the people.

Natural Disasters

Natural disaster and a poor economic planning are not the only problems. Nine years of negligence corruption and mismanagement by the Ershad quasi-military regime have contributed greatly to the suffering of this impoverished and crowded country. A complete lack of will among politicians, the absence of popular participation in government, and the government's unaccountability to the people has resulted in massive corruption and in incoherent economic policy. No wonder that instead of improving prospects of the poor and providing adequate protection against cyclones, public monies were used to decorate Dhaka city. It has been alleged that the government has not build a single cyclone shelter since 1978. Of 500 planned shelters, only 63 were actually commissioned and all of these were financed and constructed by non-government agencies. Bangladesh is a classic case of the Third World syndrome. It has received US $18 billion in foreign aid over the last twenty years. But successive governments have failed to provide support to the 80 per cent of the population which lives below the poverty line. Foreign aid was being misused and abused. The meagre resource is spent on government employees without any increase in their productivity. The government continues to encourage import grain and other consumer products than produce locally. It continues to dole out large scale food subsidies for urban dwellers, even for relatively well-off social classes.

Now, there is usually a silver lining if we look hard enough. Despite Henry Kissinger's warning that Bangladesh would become an international basketcase, the country has achieved a modest growth rate. It has remarkably improved its infrastructure. Indeed, the booming garment industry is expanding and expects to boost its exports close to US $1 billion. The country has made good use of its natural gas reserve, reducing petroleum imports from 70 per cent in 1980-81 to 22 per cent in 1987-88. Despite the cyclone and flash flood this year, a record harvest is expected.

Lately, the political change reflects the fact that the people have a widespread desire for participation in the decision-making process of the country. This desire is obviously dictated by the human condition. But political democracy is not a panacea for social and economic equities. Social engineering requires a political will and the leadership has to show its hand. Unless the government draws up a long-term economic policy and achieves a sustained 5.5 per cent economic growth phasing out foreign aid and standby credit and replacing them with trade and investment, Bangladesh will be in the eye of the storm.

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Imitate Suhrawardy!

Sir, Great leaders such as H S Suhrawardy had qualities of the head and heart which are in short supply today, because these timeless virtues take generations to develop, and strict self-discipline to cultivate (throughout life, that is). The latter is not the fashion of the day, as developing societies are enamoured of instant successes, bypassing the techniques of first finding the solutions, and laying the foundation on which success is based.

Here only one example is cited: the lack of moral courage; the courage to stand by one's principles, and be willing to suffer for it, without compromising one bit on what are time-tested truths, or what is right, publicly or privately. How many of our contemporary leaders are willing to suffer personally, alone, without followers as props?

Coming down to the commoners, corruption is a form of compromise; so is the convenience of becoming a 'yes-man', in carrying out the wrong orders or policy decisions. Violation of rules and regulations for self-gain is also a display of lack of inner courage.

When a person cannot stand up and fight alone when he is right, he does not deserve to be a leader. The corollary is that he must be able to denounce his supporters or colleagues when they are wrong — it needs moral courage to become unpopular. How many of our top leaders can pass this test today — criticize their own undoings (not that of the opposition) publicly?

Call a spade a spade, and use the spade for national gardening. Only then we can enjoy the fruits of freedom. We seek the fruits when the tree, or even the sapling, is not there!

When we 'celebrate' the anniversaries of great men, more time should be devoted to analyzing our current weaknesses (vis-a-vis), than dumping mere praise on the dear and departed souls; and then forget them next day; for a full one year. If we cannot be original, it is no sin to imitate our heroes. Why point out? Let us show, not say.

Long live Bangladesh — depending on our present leaders! No apologies for this circumstantial cynicism.

A. Mawaz
Dhaka.

Repatriation

Sir, The issue of repatriation has again been focused in the news. I wish it all success but I am sorry to say that I have strong doubts about the process to start early. If past performance is any indication, then hardly any body could feel hopeful with the talks between the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and Pakistan. The issue is pending for the last 20 years and its 'solution' is still awaited. Late Mr. Bhutto had around seven years of rule but this could not be solved. Late Mr. Ziaul Haque had ruled almost 10 years but this problem remained unsolved. In the later part of his days he formed a trust under his chairmanship to collect funds. Reportedly around 10-12 million US dollar had been collected in about 4-5 years time against the need of around 278 to 300 million US dollar. Now that international financial assistance is assured, further delay will only adversely affect the issue since very rapidly the fare and prices are rising. After two years, I am afraid, instead of 300 million, around 400 to 500 million dollars would be needed. And in the meantime the unfortunate stranded people will continue to suffer.

In my humble opinion there is lack of seriousness in solving the problem. It may be recalled that during the Gulf war, around 70 to 80 thousand Pakistanis were repatriated in the soonest possible time of around a month or two. Perhaps if this line of action is followed in respect of the stranded people, the problem may be solved within reasonable time.

The cost of repatriation can also be minimised if some efforts are taken. Plane fare is expensive — around Tk. 10,000 per person. If governments of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India extend their helping hands and agree to repatriation over land by train, the cost will be reduced by around 90 per cent. Then they can also be shifted by sea-going vessels (Chittagong-Karachi). This will also be less expensive.

Where there is a will, there is a way is an old proverb that holds good even today. If there is the real will to solve the problem, solution might not be difficult.

Abu Imran
Dhaka

Insecurity

Sir, Following is a painful incident narrated to me by one of my colleagues. I sincerely hope that the concerned civil administration will note the content of this letter and investigate into the matter to ensure justice.

Mr Suvash Chandra Sarker is the elder brother of my colleague who has been an inhabitant of Bakhorpur village of Barhatta upazila of the Netrakona district. Recently a group of miscreants have mercilessly beaten him. Mr Suvash had narrowly escaped death but received serious injuries. In this connection a case was filed with the Upazila Court.

My colleague told me that enmity with some villagers started with his brother as the learned court passed a verdict in favour of him in a land dispute case. He told that certain influential people unlawfully took possession of his brother's domestic land vide a fake deed. When the court's verdict went in favour of Mr Suvash, the enmity took a new turn. Of course the opponent party filed an appeal against the lower court's verdict to a higher court before Mr Suvash could get the possession of his land back. Meanwhile, Mr Suvash Chandra is now passing his days in great fear because of the enmity and feeling insecure.

Above is the case in short. Of course, I don't know the story of the other side. But it appears from the sad and painful appearance of my colleague that they have indeed fallen into a insecure condition and silently seeking justice. We often hear about cases of such fake deeds, and insecurity of relatively weak parties, which some times culminate into painful persecution and even gruesome murder like 'Nidarabad'.

M. Zahidul Haque
Bangladesh Agricultural College, Dhaka.

CEPZ

Sir, It is a shocking news, as it appeared in your Daily on December 10, that fund crisis stifles growth of Chittagong Export Processing Zone (CEPZ). An estimated Tk 200 crore (about US$ 51.61 million) could be needed to complete the development and expansion work of CEPZ under third phase project scheduled to be started from July 1990, but it could not take off due to fund shortage. Tk 200 crore is not a big amount for a developing country like Bangladesh. We could easily cut down or scrap several unnecessary projects that are being approved by Bangladesh's ECNEC. CEPZ should be given immediate priority in the field of foreign investment and trade in Bangladesh.

The World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Islamic Development Bank and other financial agencies may come forward with their open heart to make the CEPZ a real success. And how about our own financial agencies? Bangladesh Shilpa Rin Shangstha and Shilpa Bank can take active role to promote the CEPZ development. We must make it a success at any cost.

Meah M. Khalilullah
Chawk Mogultuly, Dhaka.