

Surya Sen : Intimate Reminiscences

Ananda Gupta writes from London

THE history or struggle for freedom will remain incomplete if it leaves unexamined an episode like the Chittagong uprising of 1930. Hence, the searching question: what was behind this unique phenomenon? Mere existence of common objective factors of colonial oppression was not enough. Had it been so, we would have witnessed similar resistances and similar instances of martyrdom all over India then.

The report of the Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee set up by the British Government noted: "The news of this coup, unprecedented in the annals of terrorism, gave a thrill to the younger section of the revolutionaries who were already fired with enthusiasm to drive the British from India by force of arms... Recruits poured into the various terrorist groups in a steady stream and these included women and young girls."

Let us, therefore, try to find out the roots of this unique phenomenon in Bengal. Thanks to the emergence of mighty thought currents generated by the literature of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rangal Banerjee, Dinabandhu Mitra, Vivekananda, D L Roy, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, Nazrul Islam and others — in terms of patriotism, human dignity and sensitivity, massive cloud formations filled the spiritual and intellectual firmament of Bengal awaiting a precipitating agent to transform them into a phenomenal downpour of patriotic outbursts to secure the freedom. Immortal Surya Sen and the likes of him played a considerable role in that precipitating process.

1929, I was then a boy of 14 having just been recruited in the revolutionary group led by Surya Sen. What were the circumstances surrounding us at that time? Let me quote from my book 'Chattagram Bidroher Kahini' published in 1948: "... this historical event in Chittagong overtook the whole country by surprise. Bewildered public heard how a band of determined youth had launched an armed rebellion against the colonial overlords. Their lightning attack has immobilised all the centres of Administration of Chittagong — all the armories are in their hands... all telegraph and telephone connections have been severed railway lines have been uprooted... the whole city is in the hands of the insurgents. The news hit the headlines of newspapers. Is this a soft reenactment of the famous Irish Easter Rebellion on Indian soil? The news generated imaginary news. The number of insurgents were imagined by some as '500'. Some even raised the number to '1000'. Second round of surprise overtook all concerned when the true figure was revealed in the course of

The Chittagong Armoury Raid trial. Far from '500' or even '100', the real number of participants was 65 only, of whom 70 per cent were teenagers.

"A strange feeling overwhelms you to recall those dark days... Words like 'rebellion', 'revolution' needed real courage to utter. An all embracing fear enshined the whole population. Sense of 'self respect', inalienable human rights 'urge for a free and unfettered motherland' — all these sounded incredible like bookish jargons! We were born amidst such a weak, anaemic and paralysed society. We were endowed with all the 'do's and don'ts' as a heritage of that sick and servile society. But the spirit of new epoch and new thought provoking ideas generated mobility into our immobilised minds. Our agitated minds started to rediscover the realities around us. The indignity of enslavement stirred our minds as never before. We found food for thought in the robust voice of Tagore and Nazrul. It was the much needed voice of dignity, patriotism and human justice. Our surcharged minds were hungry for a new identity, an identity which refuses to submit to the humiliation of servile existence."

I still remember the day when I had the rare privilege of meeting immortal Surya Sen, known popularly as "Masterda". When I came to meet him at the appointed place and sat close to him, he looked very ordinary. But no sooner I looked at his eyes, I felt rather uncomfortable. I immediately had the feel of a powerful personality behind those piercing eyes. Nonetheless, his life style was truly ordinary. What then was at the root of the magic of Surya Sen's influence and leadership? There was a transparent sincerity in him which attracted the spontaneous respect of his followers. He had only scorn for all sorts of artificialities and most of all the mystique of personality cult which was thoroughly incompatible with his mental makeup. He had the real modesty of the great which stems from real strength and self-confidence. He encouraged his followers to be unsparring in their criticism if they detected any shortcomings in him.

He ended his interview with the following words: "Ours is not an easy life. Our primary emphasis is quality. The role of maximum sacrifice and dedication must not be underrated. You need not rush into any decision as to whether you want to join or not. If after serious self-searching there is least hesitation, then it is far better to part company. There will be no ill feeling on our side. It is not our aim to swell

our numbers by indiscriminate recruiting. The party must be strong enough to match the challenge facing us. The fight for freedom is going to be a long and exacting struggle. There is only one way. A dedicated band of youths must show the path of all-out organised struggle in place of individual terrorism. Most of us, perhaps, will have to die in the process but our sacrifice for such a noble cause will not go in vain. Whoever dreams of a push button revolution on one fine morning on a national scale in a vast country like ours, with varied cultures and languages, is a worthless dreamer."

Owing to the determination and organisational skill of Surya Sen and his lieutenants, Chittagong witnessed the emergence of what could be truly described as an iron brigade of dedicated patriots whose motto was 'one for all



and all for one". It was, indeed, a unique organisation which almost emerged as a parallel local authority. There have been instances when the notorious goons and thugs were not only punished with utmost severity but the leading goons were even put to trial in our 'Swadeshi Adalat'. On the one hand the patriotic army of Surya Sen earned the gratitude of the victimised public at large and, on the other hand, struck terror in the underworld gangs of goons.

Surya Sen was born in 1894. His political life started round about 1916 when he was a student of Baharampur College preparing for his graduation course. One day the police raided the college hostel and a few of his fellow resident students were searched. These suspect-students attracted his keen attention and gradually he was drawn into radical politics, the aim of which was to liberate our motherland by all possible means. By then all his heart searchings were over and he was determined to dedicate his life for the cause of freedom.

To start with, he joined the Chittagong branch of the

Indian National Congress and soon became the leading organiser of the local youth movement. His all-out participation in the first non-cooperation movement left its mark on the people Chittagong. He effectively led the movement for the boycott of the official schools and colleges and courts and took a leading part in organising SWADESHI schools known as "National Schools" of which he was the most popular "Master" — hence the endearing name "Masterda". His involvement in the non-cooperation movement was extended to the field of mass movements in the form of hartals as part of that movement. He and his lieutenants successfully led the Seamen's strike against the Bullock Brothers Co. as a result of which their steamships were brought to a standstill in the port of Chittagong. He also left his mark in organising successfully the Assam Bengal Railway Strike in support of the national movement. These instances would show how misleading it was to brand patriots like Surya Sen and his colleagues as "terrorists" as if their political focus excluded the broader arena of mass action wherever situations were ripe for the same.

In due course, the inevitable difference cropped up between him and the leadership of the official Congress party to whom the constraints of non-violence were inviolable. Surya Sen and his radical colleagues insisted that any colonial movement for liberation to be successful must not be fettered by any inhibiting conditions. His next task was the formation of a radical wing inside the Congress with the help of the like minded patriots — in the form of a highly disciplined and dedicated band of youths.

To finance the needs of this newly formed group he and his lieutenants organised what was known as "Assam Bengal Railway Robbery" in the course of which Rs. 16,000/- was acquired. An armed conflict ensued in a place called Nagarkhana and he was arrested with a few of his colleagues in an unconscious state. Trial followed and it was almost assumed that capital punishment would be inflicted on him. But thanks to the skillful defence by late J M Segupta (defence lawyer) all the accused were found "not guilty". He was arrested and detained as a State prisoner (without trial) in 1926 and released in 1928.

At last came the most memorable chapter of his life, namely, the Chittagong Uprising of 1930. The first short-lived Free Provisional Government was formed in Chittagong and he was de-

clared the President of the same. Then came the most exacting period of his revolutionary career when he led a series of guerilla resistance, of which the pride of place belongs to the famous Jalalabad battle against overwhelming odds, thereby revealing the calibre of his leadership and stamina. Months later, no less a person than late Sarat Chandra Bose (elder brother of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose) offered his help to arrange for his safe transit to somewhere out of the country for his safety. The proposal, however, was unacceptable to him. His answer was: "My place is right here in Chittagong — here I will fight and die". He was, ultimately, arrested in 1933 and was brutally tortured and eventually tried by a Special Tribunal. The final stage of his hazardous life was reached on 12 January, 1934 when he was hanged with his lieutenant Tarakeswer Dasidhar at Chittagong.

His last letter to his comrades, written on 11th January, 1934 will remain enshrined in history as the most eloquent testimony of the excellence of his manhood. "Death is knocking at my door. My mind is flying away towards infinity... this is the moment to prepare myself to embrace death as the dearest of friends. In this happy, sacred and crucial moment what am I leaving for you all? Only one thing, my dream, a golden dream, the dream of a Freedom... dear comrades, march ahead; never retrace your steps. Days of servitude are receding. Freedom's illuminating ray is visible over there. Arise and exert. Never give way to despair. Success is sure to come..."

Many a time we had been asked: "How could you hope to liberate the country by such a small group whose range of performance was so limited?" — The very question exposes the limitation of the perspective of the questioners. In any unequal war of liberation where the enemy is vastly superior in terms of armed strength and resources, the only historically valid option is to go through a series of "small" and "limited" struggles, each of which, if seen isolately, is an act of "failure" or "partial failure". But seen in a historical perspective, these "unsuccessful" battles pave the road to the ultimate success of the respective LIBERATION struggles. History of the erstwhile colonial countries (such as Ireland, Algeria, Vietnam, Zimbabwe etc.) is strewn with thousands of instances of such "unsuccessful" efforts. They are like the invisible bricks underneath the ground, which though invisible, provide, nonetheless, the foundation of the massive edifice which is seen and admired by all except the blind. Such questions remind me the memorable words of the Irish patriot.

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Portraying the Intellectual as an Old Man

WHEN I use the word 'intellectual', I have in mind a particular type, quite familiar now-a-days in our national life. He is an old man who is honoured as the chief guest or special guest in seminars, conferences or public meetings organised on issues of national importance. Sometimes, he is also seen to preside over such meetings. When a matter demands urgent attention of the nation, he along with other fellow intellectuals issues statements in the newspapers in order to organise public opinion either in its favour or against. Often, the statements become so numerous and cover such a staggering variety of problems, academic, cultural, social and political that they lose their weight and appeal. People who are habitually irreverent and prone to laugh at things sacred or profane, serious or light, often cast oblique glances at such sombre statements on high public issues and go to the length of being so audacious as to belittle them. In most cases, the intellectual belongs to the academic world and has spent most of his life at say the university. He is either retired or at the age of his career. During the fruitful period of his life, he contributed little to scholarship which could bring fame both to him and his institution. He has enjoyed all the benefits which usually accrue to various groups of people except the poor and the unlucky. I am, of course, speaking of the third world where, following the withdrawal of foreign imperial power, a dramatic revolution of expectations sieges the whole nation. At the higher reaches of life, in trade and commerce, in government offices and public institutions, there is little competition although opportunities abound. People with a modicum of merit rose to dizzy heights and, consequently, some lost their heads. But such a happy time could not last long. Soon the race began, the young, the bold and the clever, threw challenges to their seniors.

In such circumstances, a moral crisis is created. Norms and values which sustain a society and ensure its gradual growth come under attack and begin to lose their validity. Personal ambition overrides communal order and takes precedence over collective welfare. Individual man, not the community, becomes in such situations, the focal point and age-old restraints are done away with. In other words, anarchy is let loose. The intellectual whose career I am sketching was at that time of our national life a young man. Suppose he had been a very clever student and did very well at his examinations, because he learnt all the tricks that yielded good results at public examinations. In those days, when Pakistan came into existence, opportunities were abundant. Our scholar got the chance of going abroad and studying at a well-known university. He came back with a foreign degree, which proved to him in course of time an inexhaustible gold mine. No more brain-racking, no need for burning midnight oil during the rest of life. From now on eating an sleeping, earning and spending, going abroad on short-term fellowships and/or on visiting programmes, holidaying, shopping and returning with a handsome amount of saving. Often the foreign organizations which offer such fellowships or arrange the visits observe with surprise how their valuable money is used for purposes other than those for which it was granted. They may also be baffled for they cannot but offer these opportunities to countries to which they are related and avoid selecting persons whose academic records are so excellent.

Dear reader, you may think I am unnecessarily venomous, while talking about our intellectuals. Like you I also value them most and think that they are the best among us. I do also believe that the intellectuals play the most vital role in promoting the welfare of a nation, in setting its moral tone and in developing public spirit in the citizenry. For, intellectuals can perceive to the full degree the ills to which society is subjected and suggest fearlessly effective measures for their removal. The intellectuals are children of truth and light. They are profoundly committed to the betterment of mankind. For what is the use of the intellect if it is not pressed to the service of man? The intellectuals possess the courage of conviction and can rise above petty selfishness. They do not hesitate to court displeasure of the powers that be in taking the side of what is true and right. In short, the intellectuals are the conscience of a nation.

But do our intellectuals come upto this standard? Alas, on the contrary, those who know them well or have worked with them in close cooperation, have been how great is the difference between what the intellectuals profess pub-

ly and what they practise privately. As far as I know, intellectuals came to be known in the sixties. That decade was, perhaps, the darkest time in our intellectual and cultural life. The hope that Pakistan would be a free, modern state was most ruthlessly shattered to pieces. Instead, we observed with limitless sorrow that Pakistan was being gradually turned into a fascist, totalitarian state in which its citizens lost all freedoms. The administration was bolstered up by the eternal trio: the army, the bureaucracy and the capitalists. The trio followed a policy which enabled them to realize their individual and class interest. They did not hesitate to act against national objectives in order to satisfy their own needs. The Pakistan junta was a small, close-knit, well-organized clique which was basically anti-people. Jealousy and unhealthy competition, mistrust and intrigue were motivating factors which kept the junta functioning.

In such circumstances, op-

by Diogenes

portunism flourished. The ruling clique needed support, support from youth, particularly from the university. Here stepped in even some professors. A few of them came to the support of the government publicly. Most unashamedly, they organized student groups in support of the government. These groups resorted to violence in order to silence or neutralize dissident voices under the patronage of these professors who were usually placed in powerful and privileged positions. Some wore clever disguises, supported the government and reaped rich harvest. Many others (oh, how many of them) professed neutrality and began to propagate sanctimoniously that teachers should concentrate on their academic duties and eschew politics. Most of them were hypocritical; they each advised others, themselves doing nothing. The net result was an awful lowering of academic standards and paucity of genuine intellectual activity. But the ruling clique got the advantage. They succeeded in eliminating protest or dissidence from the academic circles. It is needless to say that no political ideas or institutions strike deep roots in a country where they are not backed and nourished by the intellectual elite. An intellectual may not be a political activist. But he can propagate his ideas on politics through his writings and speeches. Such activities give an indication of vigorous political thinking among intellectuals and academicians. But our young intellectuals with their brilliant academic records were so cowed by the powerful Pakistani regime that they surrendered their freedom of thought in favour of a safe, comfortable career with prospects of promotion and patronage. Thus, our intellectuals muffled the mild voice of their conscience and became skilful in the ways of the world. The older they grew, more skilful they became in the art of maneuvering and compromising.

To sum up: during the countless political and social upheavals, most of our intellectuals cultivated and refined the qualities which guaranteed not only survival but also steady worldly improvement. Compromise, adjustment, the power to find out the middle course even in the darkest hour of life, were the equipment which enabled them to steer clear of all dangers and perpetuate a position in life. To speak frankly, such a habit of the mind gives permanent shape to the personality of a man. He loses the strength of his mind, shifts his position with every buff of fortune and becomes rather a slave to the ever-changing circumstances of life.

The intellectuals I am talking about perhaps are guided by the same opportunism even in the new state of Bangladesh. This may sound paradoxical because these intellectuals have adopted a bold posture since the emergence of Bangladesh. Whenever the government do something which is undemocratic and reactionary, they show the courage of protesting against it. This they did not dare to do during the Pakistan regime. Have then these intellectuals undergone a moral transformation, a change

of heart, on the creation of Bangladesh? Did they promise to wear themselves from all sorts of moral cowardice and play henceforth a bold, patriotic role in our national life? I do not say that all of them are of the same dye, that not a single one changed. A few of them might have passed through the cathartic process of soul cleansing. But many of them have grown old and along with advancing age their habits have also hardened. They have perhaps adopted a bold posture because it pays now as their cowardice in Pakistan times paid. This may sound harsh but this is painfully true. They possess the sense which has enabled them to realize that times have really changed. They have understood that the emergence of the sovereign state of Bangladesh is essentially the embodiment of the Bengalees' aspiration for freedom in the true sense of the term. Our idea of Bangladesh at the time of its birth was that it would be a democratic, secular, modern state in which, as there was no wide economic gap at that time among the Bengalees, the idea of equality of all citizens would be fully ensured. In fact, during those long nine months of bitter struggle for freedom, all Bengalees, despite differences in rank and status, displayed the noblest sense of unity in the face of a common enemy. We believed that this unity would survive the war and lay the foundation of a society based on true equality.

The subsequent events, however, belied our hopes (but this unhappy turn in our national life does not mean that those noble ideals which sustained us in the darkest time and led us to victory have been lost for ever. On the contrary, the march of human civilization has demonstrated beyond doubt that those ideas are imperishable and will continue to nourish men and women across the ages. They may fall temporarily but will ultimately prevail over all odds and act as beacon light to guide man to a better future. Our intellectuals in question are clever and have a true understanding of the pulse of national life. They know that the great ideals, underlying the war of liberation, are immortal and in spite of temporary set-backs will ultimately conquer the forces which are let loose to destroy them. This assessment is based on cold calculation; they are hard-boiled practical people and believe in tangible results. They had read correctly the signs of the time and understood that there was no risk propagating the ideals, underlying the liberation war.

People may say that I am unnecessarily cynical. I admit that I have some doubts about the motives of those who are engrossed in the competition to prove that they are on the side of liberal and secular ideas: What one believes in does not require to be proved. One grows with the ideas which shape one's outlook upon life, and become part of one's own nature. But there is an unhealthy move in our society to equate ideas with men. Some people are extremely active in organizing groups of like-minded people, projecting themselves as the sole advocates of great universal ideas. Others to them are suspect. It is in this way modern, secular ideas are being entrenched in small cliques in Bangladesh. Even genuine believers of such ideas for one reason or another, have failed to be included in those charmed circles. As a result, broad, universally acknowledged ideas and institutions lose their popular appeal; reactionary, regressive and obscurantist views gain currency. Passion triumphs over reason and misleads people, particularly the youth. Hence, progress is impeded and the nation as a whole suffers.

Therefore, it is time for such intellectuals to submit themselves to a penitential process of soul searching. They should try to find out what their weaknesses are and how they can get rid of them. They should rise above selfish considerations if any, and eschew divisive tendencies. If the intellectuals aim at contributing to the creating of a free society, in which everyone may enjoy the basic right to his or her own opinion, they should try to forge unity among themselves, forgetting petty differences, silly pretensions and personal likes and dislikes.

Grammar Game

We have recently included some articles on phrasal verbs. Here is your chance to try out your knowledge with a little worksheet.

Fill in the blanks in the following sentences with one of the following phrasal verbs:

set out, keep out, make out, pull out, run out of

1. They built an electric fence to intruders.
2. We had a very long way to go and decided we should early.
3. We had bread and cheese so I went down to the shop.
4. It was so dark that I could hardly her face.
5. My gear box seized up and I was forced to of the race.

Good for a Game?

Opposites in English can be made by adding a whole range of prefixes, that is groups of letters that are added to the beginning of words. Three prefixes that are often used are un-, in- and im-.

Decide on the correct form for the opposites of the following words, using one of the prefixes above. The first one is done for you.

1. lucky.....unlucky
2. fair.....
3. practical....
4. efficient....
5. possible....
6. correct.....
7. able.....
8. adequate.....
9. plausible....
10. expensive....

The British Council Language Matters

The Intro

Just a few short exercises on offer today. There is the usual Wobbly Words puzzle and another vocabulary game on opposites.

Then there is a grammar worksheet which offers you the chance to show off your skill with phrasal verbs.

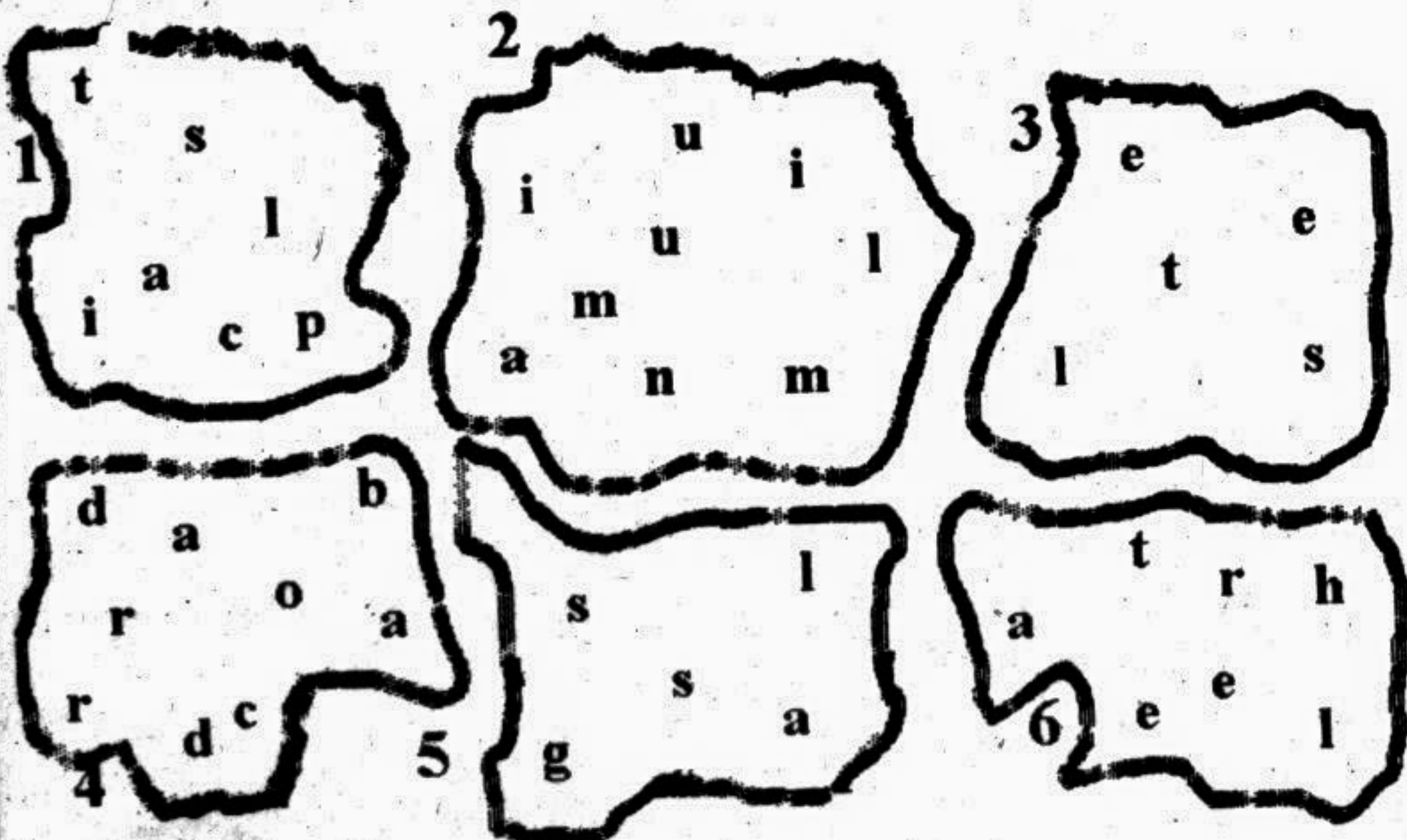
Hopefully we will be able to return with some longer articles once the backlog of

work from the holiday period is cleared!

Meanwhile, we forgot last week to offer all our readers greetings on the Eid festival. Our apologies and a belated Eid Mubarak.

Wobbly Words

Try this word puzzle. In each shape the letters are jumbled up. Put them in the correct order. What do all of them have in common? What is missing?



1. 2. 3. 4.
5. 6.

Answers:
1. plastic 2. aluminium 3. steel 4. cardboard 5. glass 6. leather
They are all materials that things can be made out of.
Grammar Game
made out of.
7. unable 8. incoherent 9. implausible 10. inoperative
Contributors: Marina Burns, Dolores Long, Michael Matthias, Dennis O'Brien, Janet Raynor, Robert Shruball

Reader

by Gazi Sadeq

With a television set on a person in a room is a viewer. Anybody in a room or car with a radio on is a listener. But a person with a book, even open, is not necessarily a reader!

But do our intellectuals come upto this standard? Alas, on the contrary, those who know them well or have worked with them in close cooperation, have been how great is the difference between what the intellectuals profess pub-