

People's Cause Loses Way in the Wilderness

by Nilratan Halder

POLITICAL theorists and sociologists may argue whether an all-time great leader is a product of his people's concentrated will or the leader himself wakes up a nation by his Promethean touch. Or, perhaps it is an alchemy that combines both to make the national awakening possible. Whether a people looks up to a leader for its deliverance or he is just a creation of the process, however, depends on many factors — both internal and external. In our case what happened in 1971 is rather unique in that the political aspirations were not adequately matched by intellectual and cultural gains.

Amazingly though the common people responded to the need of the hour quite creditably. In fact, their illiteracy and lack of up-to-date information proved no bar for them to rise up to the occasion. They were more than a match for their more informed and educated brothers and sisters. Actually, the latter suffered from inhibitions, some pulls and pressures but the simple people gave no reason to question their bonafides. Some of the perverted educated people even went to the extent of collaborating and guiding the Pakistani marauding forces to carry on the worst genocide of our time.

What made the people ultimately prevail is this amazing quality. Common villagers across the length and breadth of the land emboldened by the supreme confidence in their cause provided the intrinsic strength that wins a war. Weapons are a poor implement when pitted against the unflagging will of a nation. So there was a Prometheus all right. But the people ably contributed to the earning of victory.

They are the unsung heroes. The patchy, sometimes not based on facts, reports on their achievements in some encounters most of the time gives the impression of a naivety of sort. So far removed from the deadly war that those armed engagements look more than amateurish. But the resilience of our people is beyond any doubt. They took upon themselves the formidable task of matching their spirit, their desire for liberty with the sinister design of depopulation.

How could they do this? They could do this by virtue of their quality of heart. It was in those best of days and worst of days that people rose above all petty differences and narrow interests. For once people erased the religious divides that stood as a stumbling-block in their becoming a well-knit family of a nation. Ironically

though, in the name of religious unity, the Pakistani brute army went about their sacred duty of ethnic cleansing. They religious pogrom was directed both against the Hindus and Muslims. Followers of other religions were not totally spared but escaped the intense hatred.

It is the rejection of this false claim by the common villagers that really went into the making of a nation long before its final victory on this day 23 years ago. When a Muslim by religion refused to give up a Hindu to the collaborators or the Pakistani forces and instead embraced death, the nation has more than qualified to be independent. Such sacrifices are made by people of the highest order — both in terms of head and heart. In 1971, apart from the collaborators, people irrespective of their caste and creed were ready to make such sacrifices.

This is how at a sudden and huge pull, the nation transcended itself onto a plane never reached before, or perhaps after. Secularism was at its best when people learnt the value of life and man without caring for the religious or class differences. In an environment fraught with danger and death, people learnt this basic human value at a huge price. In relatively safe areas of the country,

people from cities, towns and danger-prone areas assembled for shelter. It was a massive displacement of people and valuables. But almost without exceptions, the men and materials found a safe custody.

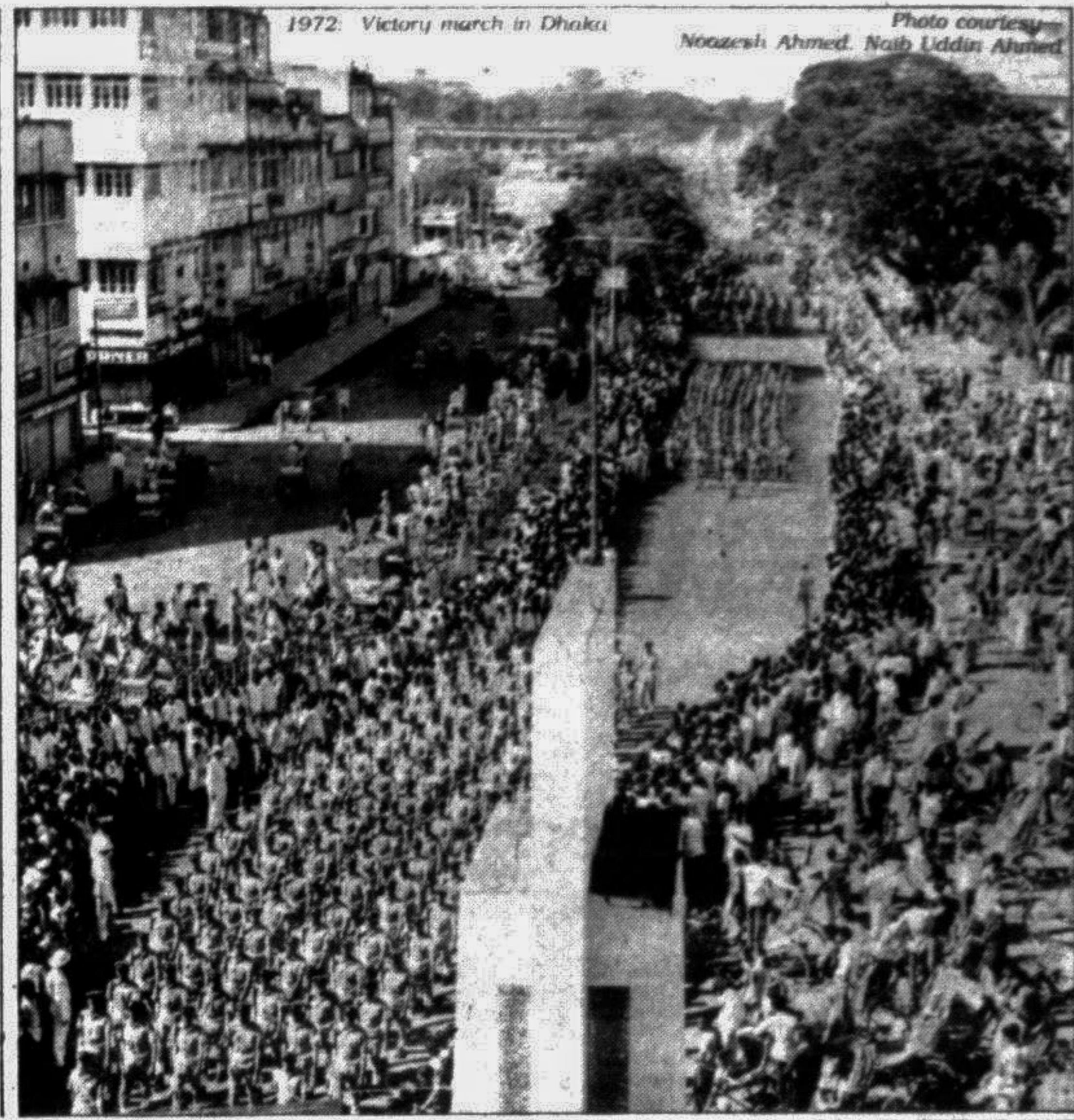
It was also a time for the people in villages to see to their own affairs. They proved they could go alone and needed no governance from the top or outside. There was hardly any incident of theft or robbery in such pockets. It was a haven of a most peaceful people defending themselves on their own. The local resources were under severe stress and yet they managed to share those intelligently and amicably. That was the driving force behind their crusade against the enemy. Not everything can be explained away by saying that the danger of an enemy attack any moment brought them together.

This is how the liberation war became a people's war — a cause for which they were ready to make supreme sacrifices. At no other points of history did the people of this part of the world become so united to pursue a political goal. Nor were they so aware of their inner worth. They knew that it was the decisive moment and they must shape their destiny. Impregnated with such a belief they pushed forward to demol-

ish the myth that the Bangladeshis were battle-shy. They came out in flying colours through the test.

However, the dream of a secular, democratic and just society soon evaporated in the Independent Bangladesh, thanks to a series of fast-moving events — both national and international. The simple commonman has long become disillusioned. Because the deception is too stark to be denied. The people who made the victory largely possible have been ignored. People's power has remained to be a misnomer. There has been a sea change in the lot of a fortunate few, but for the rest it is a story of unmitigated sufferings and deprivation.

Today their desperation allows them to become easily vulnerable to various temptations. Murky politics has made an inroad into their social life. And thus their integrity has been compromised and the social environment of rural life vitiated. But certainly they deserved better. Unless this process of negative politics is reversed, Bangladesh has hardly a chance of becoming a self-respecting nation. It ought to have. For God's sake if you cannot do any good to them, leave them alone. Don't try to diminish them, for without such undesirable interferences and influences they are a vibrant and vigorous people.



Memorabilia

Alauddin Al Azad

It would have been too ambitious to construct a skyscraper where a few years ago Only cactus bush and grasses composed a wilderness: But this day, to remain very low is not possible

When one needs merely proper planning — the question of money does not arise: So you understand, this is My building! — having furnished floor only twenty four

Of course, it has the foundation to bear further quarter number if not double.

O what an amazing game it would have been if we two could work together — if you could become my partner! Alas! where shall I express my hidden sorrow!

To whom to whisper that simple fact you would never come. Never, never. Never, never.

I have lost my memory, though my memoirs had been written, which will come out during the next Book festival

with attractive laminated cover One full page, yes one full page is devoted to you, my friend! Not a matter of joke, while I mentioned merely in one or two sentences the feat of our sector Commander! Certainly you will rejoice for this in the other world.

Believe me, all complex data of my Office are maintained in computer So I don't bother for my deficiency: But now, now, why I remember you, while getting from the limousine?

I have stopped journey under that mango tree

Where we fought together that night, I have forgotten you. I have forgotten — that was you who gave me second life! I have forgotten but you forget-me-not. You hate me. Curse me, forever, forever.

My Friend Amirul: We Remember

by Waliur Rahman

IT was a rain-soaked autumn evening of 1971 when I first discovered this patriot at London's Oxford Street. The inclement weather outside was far less severe than the tension inside, for my friend Amirul and I were on our favourite topic: The liberation of Bangladesh. Syed Amirul Islam had defected from the Pakistan Embassy in Tunisia; it had been a trying experience, and he was now working for our cause from London with other colleagues like ambassadors Fateh who had defected from Baghdad and Momen from Argentina. I did not know Amirul Islam before but our acquaintance swiftly transformed itself into natural friendship. Amirul Islam enlightened me about his tribulations in Tunisia — especially his problems with Prince Abbasi, who had gotten embroiled with a drug scandal. My only other memory of Amirul Islam was when I heard the news of his announcement of allegiance to Bangladesh and renunciation of Pakistan army crack-down in Dhaka. I heard the news from the car radio when I was travelling from Bern to Zurich to attend a clandestine meeting of Bangladesh partisans organized by Mr. S O Noor. Mr. Noor was the Bengali manager of a Pakistani bank in Zurich, his eyes lit up wherever he would refer to the historic role the people of Chittagong had played in Bengali history: Fearless freedom movement glorified by such heroes and heroines as Surja Sen and Preeti Lata Waddadar.

Amirul Islam, I came to learn, was another Bengali diplomat who was fluent in French. His first posting was in the Pakistan Embassy, Rome after a short stint in Islamabad. Amirul Islam's patriotism was leavened with a sharp sense of history — a fact which he modestly kept to himself. His stay in Rome, I noticed, had sharpened his sartorial sense: the haute couture of Milano and

Rome was reflected in his elegant dress sense. The jacket I was sporting did not please him much. Though I was short of both time and funds, I found myself persuaded by him to visit his favourite place on Oxford Street, Acquastucutum, an avant garde store, where he went on to cajole me into picking up an off 'the season' completé! Generous to a fault, he even made up the difference!

If diplomacy is the art of creating a convenience in the country of your accreditation, Amirul Islam perfected that art. Many summers later, when I went to Rome to serve as my country's ambassador, numerous Italians fondly enquired about Amirul Islam. A writer living in fashionable Trastevere, was a Polish immigrant married to an American millionaire (he was her second husband, her first was the brother of exiled king of Albania) Signora Winter living in No 1 Via Antoino Bertoloni Parioli, behind the American Embassy residence, where among those who remembered him after all these years, I felt proud. Such is the fellow-felling of our small group of diplomat freedom fighters!

Amirul Islam was a man with a tremendous sense of honours and human quality. Firm but not arrogant, he was quick to point out where Pakistan had gone wrong. Amirul Islam was not pedantic. He was easy going and friendly with the smart and the chic, as well as the serious with equal facility. This reflected his liberal education and background, a quality essential for a good diplomat. He and I agreed with Dr Shahidulla's remarks, "we are neither Muslims nor Hindus — we are Bengalis above all."

After a short while in London he came to the High

Commission in New Delhi — the fulcrum of many activities during and after the glorious struggle of liberation. Amirul Islam quickly adopted himself to the new atmosphere of Delhi, charged with a sense of history, with a certain amount of equity and timelessness of the time!

For me, back in Geneva the breakneck speed of work for independent Bangladesh was almost overwhelming. Throughout 72 and early 73, contacts with Amirul Islam helped me in my work in Geneva, in taking Bangladesh to all the U.N agencies in Geneva, Rome and Vienna.

On one of our home trips my wife and I met Amirul Islam in New Delhi and it was a cementing of the old friendships. He had made a nice group of friends in Delhi, both the Indians and other foreign diplomats — friends who felt at ease in his drawing room and could order a drink with the comfortable ease of old friendships. He had this quality of attracting a bright group of sociable intellectuals. We enjoyed meeting his friends.

On August 8th, 1975, I joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Dhaka, after completing a sabbatical in Oxford. At last I could work in the country, we had all worked in our own humble ways to liberate. I could justify the feeling of pride and enthusiasm flooding over me. Amirul Islam was in the Ministry and we promised to meet frequently.

However, neither of us had foreseen the holocaust of the 15th of August which was to descend on this land so soon! We both suffered the trauma of the 15th, and the post-15th August when suddenly the Foreign Office in Dhaka was transformed beyond recognition. Those who had actively and aggressively sided with

Pakistan became our bosses. Taunts and barbed comments were aplenty. It was difficult to comprehend what was happening around us. We were actually made to feel small for our role during liberation struggle — for being freedom fighters. There were some amongst us — freedom fighters — who quickly switched their loyalty to the new orders! For us double-talk was equivalent of betrayal of the sacrifice of three million martyrs. The murder of Bangabandhu, his family members, the four jailed leaders was a shock difficult to absorb. Afterwards we would huddle in our rooms surreptitiously — very much like some undesirable, instead of people who had propagated the message of the quest of our people for their emancipation and we would discuss the times in barely audible whispers. Amirul looked shattered, and his health began to show signs of strains.

Very painfully 75 rolled to '76, and with no sign of respite in sight. People who had actively participated against our liberation began to be posted in all the important diplomatic posts. In contrast, those who had taken part in the war, were being hounded out of their homes and jobs. It was a grim time. In the midst of all this Amirul Islam slowly began to look a little happier. One day he came to my room, all beams, with a wedding card in his hand. I realized that my friend had at last decided to tie the knot. Shahrak and I heaved a sigh of relief. Amirul needed a companion. Loneliness and heavy heart are not good bed-fellows.

It was during this time February 1976, he heard later, that when his wife's family went to give the invitation to Justice Sayem, they were told that the bridegroom in ques-

tion was under order of dismissal! The then Foreign Secretary, they were informed, had sent this proposal.

On being informed of the role of Amirul Islam during the Liberation war, Justice Sayem, barely managed to stay the orders, and Amirul Islam was not dismissed after all. But the Foreign Ministry did not want him anywhere near their premises. He was made an OSD!

Amirul Islam was once again shattered by this fresh blow. I remember that afternoon when he came to my office. He looked very different from that jaunty, high spirited liberation fighter, I had met that autumn of 1971 at Oxford Street. Lines of pain criss-crossed his face. I also noticed that he did not care for his clothes any more. Pain gnawed at my heart. I was helpless.

"Friend, you are a cadre officer. They can't touch you. But they axed me all right," he said in a dejected voice. What comfort could I, a freedom fighter myself, give him that day in 1976. Eight months later, however, Amirul Islam proved himself wrong. They could axe a foreign service cadre officer too! I was made an OSD in July 1977! What was my fault? I do not yet know and then in February, 1993, I lost my job.

And each of us, in our painful struggle for survival, lost touch with each other. I went off to Jeddah with the help and support of Ambassador Arshaduzzaman and then Secretary General of OIC, Amadou Karim Gaye of Senegal, whom I had met earlier in Geneva.

Amirul Islam could not make it back to the Foreign Office till 1983. His health was failing and he needed sophisticated treatment. A hostile government closed all the doors

for his going out for treatment. Amirul Islam kept getting worse.

It was in 1984, that the government of President Ershad showed greater kindness to this freedom fighter than the "democratic" government of Justice Saftar, and he was posted to Berlin. He stayed in Berlin till '87 where he had terrible time with the then Ambassador of Bangladesh. A broken hearted Amirul Islam could never recover, never get over the shock he had received. Perhaps a more sympathetic environment could have helped, but that was not to be.

From Berlin Amirul Islam was sent back with a bad chit — and the result was that the Foreign Office doors were again closed to him. The ministry of establishment accommodated him and there he remained till September '93, when he retired.

Amirul Islam breathed his last on December 7, 1994. When I visited his house on the 9th of December 1994, to console his widow Syeda Fatema Islam Rosy, I had no words of comfort for her. I could only say "Yes, on the battle fields of 71 our people were lined up against the wall and shot dead. But the freedom fighters of this country today are dying a slow and painful death and ironically the killing of 71 almost seemed like mercy killing in comparison! The spirit of liberation is in shackles!" ... And I added — I discern the footsteps of history. Our second liberation struggle has started — and we cannot fail as this struggle is "the moral equivalence of obedience to God." We remember Amirul Islam on this day...

The writer set up Bangladesh Representative Office in Geneva in 1971 after resigning from the Pakistan Embassy in Switzerland. This office was later converted into Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the United Nations in Geneva.

Victory Day Thoughts

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serve as a watch-dog of civil liberty. A most effective instrument was the control of advertisements. Pro-establishment press was favoured with more than their due share of this major source of revenue, while the press supposed to be critical of the government was deliberately starved of advertisements. There were other means, too, of ensuring that the press be

calls to the editor, advising him on some specific news. Control over the quota of news print could be used as an expression of favour or frown.

While the print media could sometimes put up some resistance against excessive encroachment on its freedom, the electronic media were under the absolute control of the government. Radio and television lost all credibility as news media, with the result that, for many years now, the only way

of putting an end to this slavery has been perceived to place them under a corporation, enjoying a measure of autonomy.

Separation of the judiciary from the executive, one more unfulfilled pledge, gained strength during the years of autocracy, as the Supreme Court was a chosen target of the autocrat who ruled the roost for nine years. A blow was dealt to the oneness of the Supreme Court, under the pretext of bringing justice nearer the doors of the poor, but the ulterior motive of crippling the

judiciary could not be covered under the cloud of pious professions.

The decline of the civil society continued unabated till the end of 1990. The fall of the autocrat, the caretaker government, the election of March 1991, the ushering in of an elected government — all, taken together, constituted the watershed in Bangladesh politics.

The Victory Day, which was under eclipse for the entire period of autocratic rule, now came to its own. Now that the old inhibitions were gone — not fully but nevertheless considerably, a dispirited and demoralised people could sit up, and take a long look at the past, the year of glory, the War of Liberation.

The road to democracy has proved to be long and tortuous. Parliament, the heart of democracy, is ailing, and a bypass appears to be long overdue. The judiciary is yet to be disentangled from the executive; the electronic media to be liberated from their shackles. All this, and more, are on the political agenda of the nation. Available leadership is lamentably lacking in its ability to find a path out of the maze, and ay, there's the rub.

If the above picture is generally correct, which I believe it is, then the Victory Day is still under eclipse, politically speaking. And it will remain so as long as a new political culture does not replace the prevailing one. The new culture will dialogue and the art of mutual accommodation. It has to come, otherwise the nation is doomed.

How to Compromise

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Bangladesh the same nation that came into being out of the womb of the liberation war on December 16, 1971? The nation has been willy-nilly made to move very close to what it was before. The victory on the battle field on December 16 was overwhelmed by defeats on the social, cultural and above all political planes.

How could these happen? This unavoidable question is too broad to be answered by the disjointed musings I am jotting down here. I shall therefore mention only certain contributing factors that have often been overlooked.

War prizes and spoils are things that victors exact from the vanquished. Why did the victors of December 16, 1971 namely the party which led the Bangladeshis during the Liberation War — its cadre, functionaries and leadership and the demands of the regular conventional army or whatever of it was there at the time take Bangladesh as a war prize. This let the situation on to the second sin. There were too many people unhappy with the outcome of the war and the way it came — as if from the hands of Awami League whose leadership of people never rose a party character, into a national one.

The second sin was to divide the nation on an imaginary line of who left the country after March 25, and who didn't. An editor of a weekly epitomised the position by

calling all 65 millions who stayed in the country as collaborators — as if that was the way the government and the AL and all of the 10 million returnee refugees were treating the other 65 million. This was clever and suicidal for the new emerging state's interests — manoeuvre absolved all who fought against Bangladesh. And helped the collaborators to stave off integration into the freedom-loving patriotic mainstream. There was certainly virtue in joining the war and fighting a real war, often at the cost of life. The value of this was compromised. Sacrifices and heroism in the war ceased to be glorious. The Liberation War suffered as a whole bereft of anything to look up to. The situation was exacerbated by tens of thousands of people rummaging through the land for prizes and privileges — posing as war heroes.

Sin three, when Liberation War itself has been shorn of all halo and reduced to be a highly suspicious thing harbouring an unknown but satanic all the same friendship treaty with India, it was little wonder that the biggest contributor to the victory of December 16 after the people of Bangladesh — India — should fast and deliberately be a thing best forgotten. Informally this can happen. But as a matter of formal interest-state relationship, Bangladesh chose rather not to celebrate the event than being forced to pay debts of gratitude to India at least formally.

Quite in keeping with this state failing, the society deliberately tried to avert its eyes from the very plain fact the Hindu population of former East Pakistan bore the brunt of the Pakistani carnage. This happened not just incidentally. Barring the initial few days of the genocide, Pakistan all but officially carried out a policy of ethnic cleansing by weeding out Hindu citizens on the plea that they were Indian infiltra-

tors. First our crime was to be Bengalees. When that ploy failed to deliver, the crime was to be a Hindu. And this fact, known as it is to all, has never so far been as much as articulated.

These factors robbed the Liberation War and its gift, the independent Bangladesh, much in the way of moral strength of Bangladesh's independence.

Not a Dew-drop

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front. There was thus a kind of realpolitik consensus at the centre of world stage to let it happen cutting across power bloc considerations. Such was the logic and force of Bangladesh's war of independence that few could remain blind-folded to these *ad infinitum*.

It is worthwhile here to recall the creditable advocacy of our cause in the major world capitals by some committed Bangladeshi groups and eminent foreigners with a clout as public opinion leaders heard in the corridors of power.

We should think we have left behind the legacy of seizures of power and autocracy which put us in a seemingly endless state of political flux making the outcome of the Liberation War look like an 'unfinished revolution'. That is how it was also sought to be passed off by the beneficiaries of such changes. The fact is that we do not really have any crisis

of identity, only the vested quarters like to think we have.

Our emotions are our greatest national asset. This can also be an overpowering liability if channelled wrongly. The Liberation War tapped the grounds-well of our emotional wealth and demonstrated what we can accomplish by closing our ranks among all classes of people communities and all professional groups. The accomplishments are with us to guide us through the nation-building process we have embarked upon. In an independent country, nationalism is a settled fact and to raise new questions about it is not only a waste of time but also a reflection of a perpetually unstable national psyche. The best defence of our sovereignty and the rock-bed of our self-esteem can come from economic self-sufficiency achieved through stepped up productivity at all levels. So, the basic appeal of our nationalism should be economic now, not political.



December 8, 1971, "Madonna is Dying in Bangladesh": A rally by the British and Bangladesh Liberation activists. Photo, courtesy—Noazesh Ahmed, Naib Uddin Ahmed.