

# 16th December: The Politics of Space, and People's History

by Azfar Hussain

*They told us you will conquer when you love.  
We loved and found dust and ashes.  
They told us you will conquer when you give up your life.  
And we gave up our life and found dust and ashes.*

— George Seferis

MOST of the histories of the 1971 Liberation War, written so far, have some obvious qualities that include rhetorical characterization, linear narratives, hyperboles and understatements, the binary extremes of accolades and brickbats, and of course, the ostensible and ostentatious presences of the middle class. This being the case, the complain that a true, comprehensive history of the Liberation War has not yet been written is still being raised, but not always with the consequence that this complain is adequately addressed. In fact, this complain moves further beyond the history of the Liberation War to indicate that the history of the Bengalees itself is mostly *unwritten*, and that whatever has hitherto been passed off as *written* history evinces a strong elitist bias.

It also needs observing that a great deal of our history, since British rule in India, has been written by outsiders — by foreigners who have mostly obtruded their authorial selves and presences upon the narratives of their own making. These narratives still surviving, effortlessly crystallize the inevitable divide between the 'us' and the 'other', and show how the process of colonializing the 'other' is at work. Caprices have also had their roles. Siraj-ud-Doula, for example, has been inordinately

idealized and apotheosized by those who have found the romantic historiographic ethos better suited to their temper and interests. On the other hand, the same ruler has been subject to downright denigration when such an act has been demanded by one's interests ranging from the personal ones to class interests. But such caprices have mostly drawn their support from the colonialists' ideology which is always in favour of presenting and writing a fragmented, incomplete, discontinuous history of the colonized to the extent of even de-historicizing it.

The "elitist historiography of the colonialist or neocolonialist type," to use Ranajit Guha's words, has not yet lost its spell even after more than two hundred years of our struggle for freedom. Foreigners or outsiders are still involved in writing our history; even foreign media, with images and focuses varyingly constructed, adjusted, distributed and disseminated, have remained quite active as 'our' history-writers. Our academics, to a large extent, remain quite attached to such practices in the name of modernizing their ways and means. And what actually results from such colonialist historiography, media-dictated history-writing and so-called modernist academic practices is that people — peasants and workers — remain either relegated to an

almost invisible margin or virtually absent in historical writings. Noticeable as it is, it is the middle-class, a class that is mostly involved in the writing of history, which consumes and appropriates most of the space within what is passed off as 'history'. Yes, thus, history inevitably involves the politics of space which, in the present piece, is one of its central concerns.

Why are mostly outsiders involved in writing our history? True, as Marx once pointed out, a nation which is not independent cannot write its own history. It is to be noted also that the very business of writing is not an innocent, automatic activity. In fact, writing involves both power and politics, and the writing of history, particularly, is perhaps more political than otherwise. Because of this politics of writing, one can see how various forms of divides and discriminations go on to characterize historiographies or historical narratives. We have, for example, the history of the ruled and the history of the ruler, the unwritten history and the written history, and so on. Given the potentials of such categories, one can also think of *linear historiography* and *dialectical historiography*. Linear historiography is one which is regulative, uniform, axiomatic, sequential; which is dominated and written by the ruling class that invests itself with the images and incidents of self-satisfying, self-justifying idealism and interest. For example, when an Awami Leaguer tries to write a history of the Liberation War overlaying and glorifying the leadership of a few individuals, while undermining the participation of the masses, we have a linear history pandering to the narrow interests of a particular

political party. On the other hand, dialectical historiography indicates a mode of writing which is accommodative of various internal and external forces at work, conflicts and contradictions between various class-interests, and people's participation at various levels. Such historiography is not intended to either magnify or dwarf any individual role, ideology and interest as such. And what is called *unwritten history* is part of this dialectical history which is very much concerned with potential and suggestive spaces like silences and margins (here silences and margins are not mere metaphors for the absence of the people, but they also indicate the presence of the people often lost sight of in the elitist discourse).

The history of the Bengalees is obviously one of exploitation perpetrated on them by the colonialist rulers and external forces, and this history, for that matter, is also one of resistance and opposition to such forces. Some research findings recently indicated that the 1971 Liberation War, which resulted in the emergence of Bangladesh as an independent sovereign state, was nothing but a significant but unwritten phase of the history of struggle for freedom.

The epithet 'unwritten' might invite some questions here: for, how can the history of the Liberation War remain unwritten, while attempts have been made, even at the national level, to come up with a 'complete' history of the war, and while certain amount of research has meanwhile been undertaken to unearth hitherto hidden facts, and while certain volumes of historical writings have appeared over the past twenty years? True, this history, written as it is,

Given the circumstances, one can fairly easily see that the victory of the people is yet to be achieved. And such an achievement is possible only through the involvement and intervention of the subaltern classes — peasants and workers — who constitute the majority of the population, in bringing about an alternative political and cultural revolution. Indeed, the mainstream middle-class politics has utterly failed, in so far as people's interests are concerned.

But, historical writing of this kind fails to acknowledge, to argue *a la Guha*, 'the contribution made by the people on their own, that is, independently of the elite,' to the liberation war. People, in this history, are in fact conspicuous absences. Sheikh Mujib has become a hero, albeit: Zia too has been pushed to that posi-

tion, but the people have never become heroes in our written history, despite the fact that peasants and workers — the subaltern classes — mostly fought the war in vast numbers, sacrificed their lives uninhibitedly, far outstripping the scale and space of the middle-class participation and intervention in the Liberation War in 1971.

Now, the absence of a people-centred historiography, which is itself a conspicuous presence, indicates that the middle-class political culture has not yet been able to exercise the 'colonialist goblin' which, in fact, increasingly assures itself of its power, position and prestige. This also indicates that the politics of the people is virtually left out as an illegitimate practice to the extent that the exiguous few time and again occupy and consume all possible space within politics, society and history. Had the culture of recognizing and facilitating people's politics been developed, we could have by now had our own written history, our freedom from the spectral bondages of colonialism against which the Liberation War was fought by none but the people — the subaltern classes. In fact, whatever victory had been achieved in the 1971 war primarily through the participation of the subaltern classes has ultimately benefited the members of the middle-class, to be more specific, the ruling middle class who have a self-styled history readily available, who have institutions of their own making, and who have power and wealth only at the expense of the people.

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## Ode to the Sun of My Flag

by G A Momin

To the rising sun in the East I said:

'Let your light wash away all the darkness of our land, and scare away the vultures and predators' band.  
Your heat the bloodstains all over must scorch, and your warmth fondly embrace the hurtment of the marginals who for their hopes longingly look to your torch:  
As the day draws to a close,  
to the setting sun I say with regret  
You have only diverted darkness from the field and have placed it all into our hearts  
you have scared the grisly beasts out of the forests and swamps  
but only to find safe haven in our backyards  
The bloodstains have not been scorched at all, instead they have received additional gloss from your shine and that way you have gone back  
Your lustre does not reach an underling's yard for the palaces and fortresses of neo Rajas and Maharajas block your way.  
As the sea flows without offering a drop of water to the thirsty mariners so do you glide over our horizons withholding your bounties from the needy millions.  
So I sit in here on the edge of a moor whispering to the parting sun 'I shall wait for you.  
And shall lie in wait for you amid bevelled and bedewed cropland  
I shall lie in wait for you in a tiny boat in a foamy river  
I shall lie in wait for you beneath the tall tree on the edge of my village to greet  
a reformed and invigorated sun rising tomorrow.'

Two poems by Aroop Talukdar

## If You Offer Me, Comrade

If you offer me, comrade,  
a rifle, machinegun, SLR,  
Or at least a grenade by whos explosion Enemyfort would be shattered down.  
A clanging egotism.  
Instead, I can offer my  
Heart's non-stop bleeding.

If you can give me, comrade, provision to-day at self-barter  
Or responsibility for a million souls  
Instead, at this instant I can face enemy death arrow  
For God's sake, willingly I'll go to death's den  
Without utterances, and for weapon's sake,  
I'll not ask for any slogan  
Except 'freedom' till my death.

## Secret Incantation

From self agony hoe do you now back again  
To that blazing world where golden childhood  
Awaits erect and unshaken, where a life in frustration  
Has lit up in the dark: like an inert fool  
Someone is striking terribly in each moment  
With a sword of peace.

Here who are friends, who is darling to a bad  
Though all the time a shapely and delicate arm  
Has been a necklace, although lips are on lips.  
On bosoms' spire as if a wild youth extends a kingdom.  
What you call a flower, it is a surprising rule  
Tell me, on what magic touch does the whole world  
Crime and virtue, varied colours turn down?  
On what illusion love becomes charming?  
I do not know anything of it at all  
Who'll teach me now this incantation?  
Yet how easily I am keeping simple faith for ever  
In my big flying kerchief on hand  
Even from the burning den of silence  
I'm picking up eternal materials of life at high-tide.

Such atrocities were unknown to the contemporary world as displayed by the Pak forces.

## Victory Day: Celebration for Whom?

by Akku Chowdhury

THE Sixteenth of December comes every year and with it the celebration of victory. But for many of us we cannot rejoice. November and December of 1971 was the time when the war of our independence reached the fiercest point and not only our enemy the Pakistani forces lost many of their soldiers we also lost a lot of our comrades. Thus, every November-December, we have anniversaries of our dead freedom fighters and intellectuals and our mind is crowded with the memories of our raped sisters and mothers. This is the legacy of our Liberation War — nine months of horror, blood and terror. Now after 23 years, when I stand in front of the tombstone of the unknown freedom fighter, I ask myself what right have I to bring the bouquet of flower for him? Have we achieved the dreams, the ideals and the aspiration of the Liberation War? Is this the Bangladesh that we fought for? Did the rivers flow with the red blood of my fallen brothers and raped sisters for a nation of the ungrateful? Bangladesh was born out of a blood bath and much bravery by the whole nation facing a force much stronger to surrender. But in no time how could we manage to erase all that from our memory?

Twentythree years later I continue to ask myself, 'What have you done? What was our commitment for? Why did we take up the guns in our hands for?' is the answer 'blowing in the wind?' As I look around me what do I see? We are living in a false pretence. Our nation has become almost a beggar bowl while we living in the dream of our past glory. We talk about Bengal being the granary of India, we talk about our great language movement, we talk about our great Dhaka University which was the Oxford of the East. We talk

talk and talk. Don't we see what we have become; what are we today? Let us not live in the past but in the present. The world is moving ahead and we are treading behind. The time has come for some straight questions and straight answers. Let us not hide behind past glories and wait on the top of the mountain for our slow death. If we are to die let us at least stand up on our feet and proudly accept it. Before we die, let us fight the last fight and give all we have, so that, at least, we can leave behind a legacy for those Bangali survivors spread all over the world. They can have something to show and be proud of where they have come from.

On national level moral degradation has reached its lowest at the moment. All values and social fabrics have broken down. We have replaced them with false, and pretentious, materialistic values that are breeding a totally corrupt, vicious, and immoral society. As a nation, rather we have discarded morality for a corrupt social order. And for this, the man in the street is not responsible. The greedy, ambitious, and nonchalant attitudes of our leaders, and people on the top, are responsible. The leadership has always ignored the intelligence and sentiments of the general public, but always expected the people to sacrifice whatever little they have. The patronizing attitude of leadership towards the people ever since our national independence has had a negative effect. Their weakness and insensitivity have slowly become more and more apparent as they became national figures and, with power and prestige, often have lost their heads. Ours is a very close society and we all live in glass houses. Everybody's affair is somebody else's. Thus those who matter are more visible

and less visible. The way of life of the people on top, whose hearts bleed for the toiling masses in the public meetings, apparently do not bleed in their comfortable homes. This does not go unnoticed. Therefore, many people feel they have the right to comfort, by whatever means they can use. And we then continue with the vicious circle of greed, ambition and corruption. Why work hard if you can make more money by robbing your neighbour? Why pay back the bank, if the bank itself is not all that kosher? Why pay taxes, if the government you pay to seems not responsible in using your money for the betterment of the people? The list goes on and on and on. The situation has become so bad that it affects our everyday life, even in our home.

Are we to remain the wretched of the earth because somehow, by hook or by crook, a few people can manipulate and misguide (like the Pipe Piper of Hamelin) the whole nation to a point of drowning may be in the black waters of the Padma-Meghna-Jamuna. It is unfortunate that ever since the birth of Bangladesh after such a glorious but cruel war of liberation, every leader we have had and put our faith in, rather turned their backs on us. What is it in us that makes us so different that, as soon as people put their trust in us, we become untrustful? Can we not have one among us who is magnanimous and self-respecting to put the cause of the nation before self? Are we so short sighted that we do not realize and forget what happened in this short 23 years of our country? We have already had three heads of government — none of whom has had a very pleasant exit.

After twenty years we Bangalees have been given a second chance to emancipate our

selves and embrace democracy. This is an opportunity we cannot forego. After a long struggle we were able to get ourselves rid of Pakistani oppressors and then for long couple of decades we have allowed our own people to rule us and subjugate us. At least, after nine years of intolerant reign by a single man who thought himself to be 'above all' we have been again liberated. But now the question is, are we going to fall 'into the fire from the frying pan'? If one looks around and sees the so-called political parties and the leadership, one has to be skeptical: Are they going to the last drop of their blood risking their lives to make this country independent? They now rest in peace at various graveyards throughout the country. Among these tombs the most widely known is the mass burial of Rayerbazar.

Just three days before our independence, which we achieved on the 16th of December, 1971, the enemy forces took up the most abominable strategy as a dying animal would do, and butchered a great many intelligentsia at this very place. A very grieving event for any nation is to be crippled like this. Well, no use crying over spilled milk now. Time passes, and we must follow their footsteps and move on but the most ironic fact is that we are totally forgetting this event and its heroes. They are in much more shameful shape now than ever before. Now, if you go and visit the burial place situated beside the dam near Rayerbazar, you will be surprised to find nothing but just some sort of brick cavity whose construction (i.e. if you call some bricks placed to and fro a construction) is near ruined. Surely this they do not deserve.

Urchins play football on top of this burial ground, not knowing the consequences or the past for that matter. To them it is just an open field or

a playground. No use blaming them. It is we who have created such a situation. The graveyard is literally in a no-man's land position. Construction work is going on nearby, trucks unloading and loading, people working here and there, but not a single soul is to be found near the burial place. Shouldn't there be some guard or even some sort of caretaker to look after it? But of course what a fool I am, there is nothing to take care of. Are we so ungrateful?

Md Mostafa, a middle-aged man and a localite of this area for many years, gave some very saddening information. He said that, whenever it is the month of December, only then you may see people randomly visiting the graveyard. Other than this, it's just a play ground for the local boys.

There are two tombstones near the burial, one founded by the existing government, the other founded by the children of those who were killed namely 'Projomno Ekattor'. Both these groups come on the sixteenth of December and place flowers, wreaths and so on. They are formed thus it is eroded day by day. The government must do something about it immediately.

If this be the case with such an important burial place (which is in question now), then what is the situation with so many other unknown graves throughout the country. One of so many tombs is the grave of

martyr Tito, which is situated in the Dairy farm beside the Jahangirnagar University Campus. It is right beside the entrance of the farm's gate, his tomb is placed which is signified by a small brick wall. Not even a tomb stone with his name on it, there.

In his renowned book 'Tito Shadonota' (The Independence of Tito), Nasiruddin Yusuf very clearly sketches the war moments and at the same time his moments with Tito.

As Yusuf was in same sector with him. At the end of his book Yusuf stated that Tito before succumbing to the wounds, received in a very brave operation against the enemy, kept saying that he wanted to see his country liberated before dying. Tito got his liberation, but is his self-sacrificing work worth the treatment now? This is just one simple example of unknown graves of brave heroes.

Like Tito's, so many graves are left unnoticed, throughout the whole country. Beside the river 'Bongshai' near the Savar Bazar in Savar, some graves are said to be of the martyrs of the liberation war. Nobody knows how many are there, but it is also kept in negligence.

We must always remember that without their noble sacrifice, we wouldn't even exist today. These soldiers will never grow old, they live eternally in our hearts forever, for times to come they shall inspire us and the next generation. As the famous English poet Laurence Binyon has said in his poem 'For the Fallen' says:

As the stars are known to the Night:  
As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust.

Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain;

As the stars that are stary in the time of our darkness.

To the end, to the end, they remain.



Mass graves