



Land and Destiny: Bangladesh Perspective

by Ali Ahmed Ziauddin

WITHIN 10 years of partition in 1947, Zamindari as enforced by permanent settlement of 1794 was abolished by an Act in 1958 by the then Pakistan Government with token compensation. All rent receiving and other customary rights of the Zamindars were seized. It looked bright at least in theory.

Land ceiling was fixed at 13 hectares per family. Definition of family remained quite ambiguous. Most of the non-farming or absentee owners some way or the other kept on holding their large estates — nearly 35 per cent of total arable land. Besides a very tiny fraction who owned tea gardens, rest of the landed gentry unlike in the west found it more profitable to rent out their land than invest on it. First, traditionally, farming was considered quite an unworthy thing to do by the large landlords. Second, a very limited internal market for agro products existed so it was not lucrative enough for large scale investment in land.

Moreover, the Government was too busy basking in the glory of abolishing Zamindari and squabbling among themselves to devise long term plans for promoting entrepreneurship among the landed class. The long term result was that commercial approach towards agro productivity never took off the ground.

different government agencies like railway, power, water development authority and roads & highways, remain virtually fallow.

2. Right after partition, larger Hindu migration to India left nearly 10 per cent of arable land without any legal heir. Scramble for its possession by Muslim neighbours gave rise to numerous legal and social conflicts — some of which are not yet healed. After 1965, the government, calling it 'enemy property', took over custody. It was to be leased out on yearly basis to anybody who could claim possession and bribe the most. After '72, government termed it 'vested property'. But what to do with it in the long run has remained an unnerve issue for all successive governments. Result is, temporal ownership, costly litigation and exorbitant illegal payments make investments in these types of land unprofitable.

3. Rest 40 per cent of arable land was owned by all sizes of farm holds. Medium and small farmers were also share croppers of absentee and large owners which of course was on temporal basis.

4. A tiny segment of land is under the ownership of religious trusts which is beset with multiple conflicts.

No other means of survival besides farming whatever small patches of land was available whether one's own or on rent, gave rise to the pattern of subsistence farming. It was a way of life even before the Act of '58 which rarely generated surplus. Moreover, after this Act, ownership over khas and vested lands turned ambiguous. So, long term possession rights over virtually 60 per cent of arable land remained unpredictable. Under these circumstances, it was difficult for entrepreneurship to develop in agro sector.

Ownership pattern over rest of the land developed in the following manner.

1. By the State Acquisition Act of 1958 Government confiscated all the khas — nearly 15 of arable land belonging to ex-zamindars. It was to be distributed permanently among marginal and landless farmers. However, implementation was shelved until mid-eighties largely due to the government's lack of commitment. In the meantime, khas land was leased out on yearly basis to any individual who was willing to bribe the local bureaucrat most. In the process, ownership over a big chunk was lost through false recording. Conflict arising out of this dubious practice between several parties and overall temporary ownership arrangement over khas land made it quite difficult to maximize its productivity. Moreover, a good amount of khas land under control of

land ceiling upto 40 hectares per family in early sixties. It was intended to promote large productive investments in land. It did encourage large holders to a limited scale to increase mainly paddy production. But by late sixties overall socio political turmoil and eventual re-fixing of 13 hectares ceiling per family after independence, made long term large scale investments in agriculture uncertain. Moreover, very slow expansion of internal market of agro products was not very attractive either. On top of it, near total dependency on imported inputs for HYV production made it difficult to extract surplus. Just to keep afloat, farmers had to sell much of their capital assets. Within a generation, percentage of landless shot up from 10 to nearly 60 today. All these factors put together are counterproductive for peasant proprietors to be industrious.

2. In comparison to large holders, medium and small scale farm holds were and still are more efficient. They cultivate their own as well as rented land. Their hard work however is exposed to lot of pitfalls. First, to keep pace with the green revolution their debts increased. Second, they faced uneven competition with heavily subsidised western agro products. Third, no government has ever taken into serious consideration the production of internal market from unscrupulous traders. Moreover, whatever subsidies were available have dwindled over the years to nearly zero at present. In spite of all these odds, peasants did increase production over the past quarter century only to be pulled down at subsistence level again and again because of continuous population explosion. Today land/man ratio has reached an incredible position of only 20 decimials. Far below the lowest in the world.

3. Within a generation or two, inheritance law divides and sub-divides land to such small proportions that it no longer remains a viable farming unit. In most of these cases, the smaller units are either handed over to sharecropping or rented out on yearly basis to other comparatively more viable farm holds. In the process, rentalism

which is absolutely counterproductive, increases. In worst cases such as ponds and other water bodies, they either virtually remain fallow or produce not even one-fourth of their capacity.

4. Massive surplus labour is a tremendous pressure over whatever increase in productivity we have. In absence of industrialisation this pressure has now turned into a vicious cycle of poverty which moribund the national economy. However, whatever growth and diversity in agro sector has been achieved during the past two decades they are at the mercy of unscrupulous traders, coupled with the lack of communication and storage facilities. The result is an incredible price variation between the producers and the consumers. Moreover, lack of effective institutional credit facilities to genuine farmers increases cost of production by depending on very expensive credit availed otherwise.

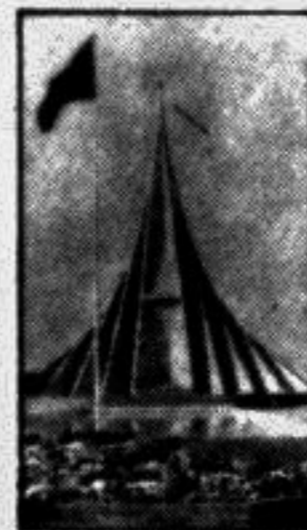
5. False land recording, dubious titles and very complicated succession rights give rise to lengthy and very costly litigations. Since evidence of possession is highly valued in civil suits, several other criminal cases appear as by-product. Net result is wastage of very meager resources which is eventually a kind of unproductive taxation over land.

6. Apart from all above mentioned man-made hindrances that contribute in reducing production and growth of entrepreneurship in the agro sector, Providence also take a very heavy toll. Every year, natural calamities destroy nearly 10 to 15 per cent of crop on average. River erodes very precious land. Unimaginative and erroneous human engineering inundates vast tracts of land with flood and saline water in different parts of the country. Recent investigations on soil erosion due to rampant use of agro-chemicals project a very alarming future.

(This is, however, not the concluding part as stated yesterday)

Monday: Concluding part — Recommendations.

The author, a development expert specialising in land issues, is working in rural areas for over two decades.



We celebrate the 24th anniversary of our Victory Day with highest jubilation. To us the Victory Day symbolises the triumph of freedom over foreign domination, of justice over tyranny and of people's rights over autocracy. On this day — 16th December, 1971 — we began a new life with high aspirations, and cherished new ideals.

The Liberation War was the fiercest part of our long continued struggle for autonomy and democracy, and the V-Day was the culmination of our Liberation War of 8 months and 21 days beginning from 26th March, 1971 when the Pakistan Occupation Army had unleashed most barbarous attack on our innocent people. They killed 30 lac people, raped innumerable mothers and sisters, brutally murdered hundreds of intellectuals and ravaged the entire country in a most heinous and brutal way.

Our patriotic freedom fighters along with the allied forces inflicted a severe blow

on the enemy and compelled them to surrender on this 16th December at the historic Race Course Maidan (Suhrawardy Uddyan). It was a great day for all of us as from this day onward, we hoped our long-cherished ideals and aspirations would be materialised. On this day our leaders hoisted the national flag with high pledges. Our high echelons committed to us to rejuvenate our devastated country where we can nourish our own culture and heritage without any hindrance and that they would establish a society free from exploitation. A new constitution was framed on four fundamental principles: socialism, secularism, nationalism and democracy.

On this V-Day, we achieved freedom which was supposed to ensure our fundamental rights of forming a government of our own by ourselves, and of getting food, clothing, shelter and security of life. So on this 24th anniversary of our Victory, let us ponder over and make reflections of what we have achieved and what yet to be, and how many of our cherished goals have just gone away along the passage of time.

'Socialism' has been substituted with 'economic and social justice', 'secularism' has been omitted, and 'Bismillah-Ar-Rahman

Rahim' has been introduced at the beginning of the Constitution. Islam has been made the state religion of Bangladesh and 'nationalism' has been brought into question whether it is 'Bengali' or 'Bangladeshi', or both. And all this has not brought any welcome change in the society, nor has checked erosion of values. The democratic process has been thwarted by frequent military interventions. Freedom of press has been curtailed by indirect control over the press and by application of Public Safety Act. Violence against women has been committed many times even, of late, by law enforcing personnel. Fair justice has been denied to them by imposing 'fatwa' by the so-called mullahs.

Security of life and property has been endangered by the constant threats of marauders and hijackers. Honesty and moral values are being frowned upon as foolishness. Law and order situation has gone down to an alarming level. Corruption and bribery

have become the order of the day. Dishonesty has eaten up into the vitals of the state. However, in spite of this backdrop, some progress has been made in many fields as narrated by the Prime Minister in her last address to the nation.

The most critical issue of concern is the threat to the democratic process over the vital issue of holding a fair election to be participated and accepted by all. The ruling party and the combined opposition are at daggers drawn stance at each other keeping the entire nation as hostage. Everybody is waiting with breathless suspense as to 'what's next?' We believe, 'where there is a will, there is a way.' Behind all darkness of despair, we see some golden rays of hope. We have confidence in our leaders and hope good sense will prevail, and people's will shall be honoured by them. People's will is God's will and God's will always feigns supreme. With His blessings, we shall overcome all our crises and our democratic process will continue with best fervour. Therefore, with hope let us celebrate this 24th Victory Day as the real victory day of the people.

Does Bangladesh Speak What Shaheeds Wanted to Say?

by Anwarul Kabir



I feel sorry for my father Shaheed Lt Mohammad Anwarul Azim who was then the General Manager of North Bengal Sugar Mills and was killed with nearly 250 fellow colleagues for taking part in the great Liberation War.

Should I say Great Liberation War or feel ashamed at the state of things today? As I am linked with the organization Projonmo '71 (an organization of the children of the martyrs) there are many like me who feel the same way. WHY so? Let us take some example.

Please tell us what is there in our text books from which our next generations can learn the truth regarding our Liberation War?

Is there any 1971 war memorial museum made till now? What would it really cost for the nation to make a war memorial museum in true sense of the words when every Government whenever in power gave only (false) hope to the people? One might say that yes we do have a National Museum where in the ground floor they have devoted space to our Liberation War exhibits. But is that enough? Only one floor covering the total nine months of freedom fighting? And what is actually there? There are some valuable documents in the 'Grontho Shala' of Rajshahi University but that can easily fall into the hands of the anti-liberation forces and can be destroyed.

There is a certain trend prevailing at present in our country regarding museum. The defense forces have taken steps to make museums inside the safe boundary

of their cantonments, such as the recent museums in Jessore Cantonment, Mymensingh Cantonment, and inside the campus of Bangladesh Rifles. And of course there is the huge plot allotted for the Armed Forces Museum at Bijoy Shorony, We, as a Shaheed families appreciate the steps taken by the Defense Ministry. However we also feel that rather than doing this in a scattered manner at various places, such efforts should combine into one and reflect not only the sacrifices of the Armed Forces but all those who took up arms at that time to free that country. In other words, of all the Freedom Fighters.

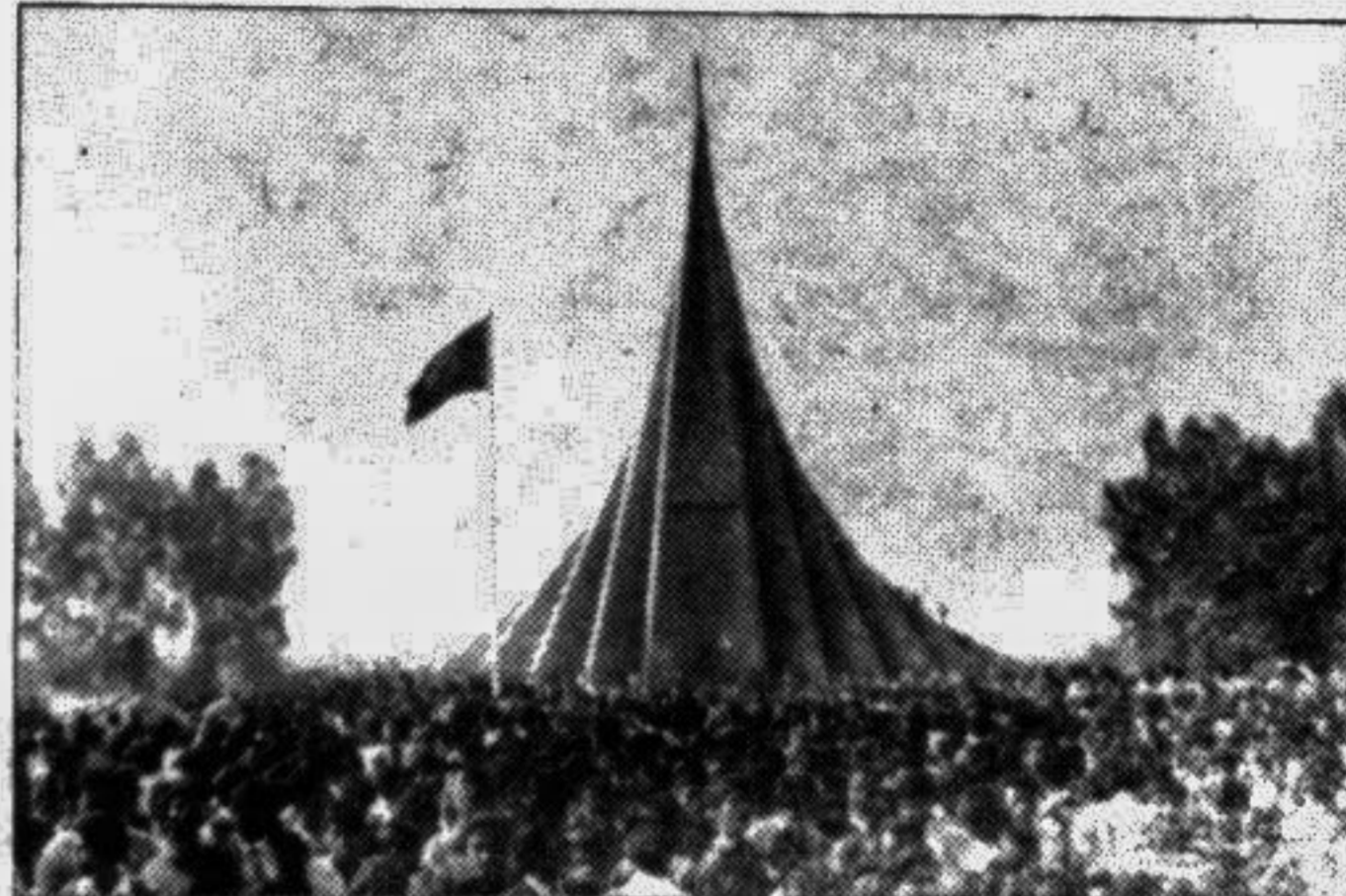
There is also a grievance in most of the Shaheed families that either it is the Shaheed intellectuals or the Shaheed Armed Forces personnel who would get most of the coverage in the newspaper, television or in the museum. They feel, and rightly so that a farmer, a rickshaw-puller, a student, or a common man who took up arms at that time and laid down his life should get the same

respect as all others irrespective of his occupation. It is our disgrace that we didn't bother to try to find out these lost heroes and give them the respect they deserved. A recent example could be Taragon Begun who of late has found out that she is a BP, after 25 years. We should feel sorry and be ashamed of our indifference. A recent article in The Daily Star 'Ami Birangana Bolchi' was highly appreciated by Shaheed families as well as different groups of people. A suggestion to the Sammlita Nari Samaj could be that this should have been focused way back. It should not have taken 25 years to tell the truth of these heroines.

We, the children of the martyrs do not find so much logic to appreciate and often criticize the activities that take place on 25th March, 14th or 16th December by different organizations around the monuments. We go there to show our respect to our beloved ones who died for this country to give us all a better future. Yes! these days are precious to us all as

we consider these occasions as new births of freedom and therefore many feel like rejoicing with songs, slogans, drama, etc. but did they ever try to think what these days mean to those who have lost their beloved ones? Shouldn't their sentiment rule the mood? For example, a song like 'sader lau banalo ama botraghi' on 14th December inside Mirpur Intellectuals Mausoleum — is really not fitting rather hurts the mood. On behalf of all Shaheed families our earnest request would be — rejoice in different places and just place wreath or observe a symbolic silence for the ones who died for this country. We want to see solemn pledges more than rejoicings.

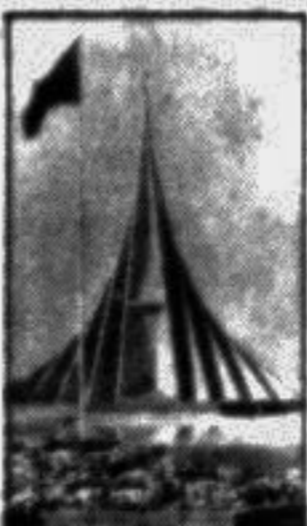
Last but not the least, now that we are entering into 25th year of our great Liberation War memories our request to all the people as well as the different political parties is to come forward and make Bangladesh speak what the Shaheeds wanted to say. Let Bangladesh not be battered by anti-liberation forces who still seem active with their ill motive. We should all combine and ask Pakistan to pay compensation for what they did, at least, to start off they should apologize for that nine months of massacre and misdeeds. What are we scared of? If Japan can realize their mistake and apologize then why can't Pakistan be made to do the same? We also feel that the culprits who killed our dear and near ones should not go unpunished and that they should be tried in the international tribunal. If this can happen then the silver jubilee year would be a fruitful one and only then the souls of the Shaheeds can rest in peace.



The ritualistic congregation at the National Mausoleum, Savar.

Independence and Achievements

by Towheed Feroze



Sixteenth December 1971 — a memorable event in the history of our country. Over the countless millions a nation was really born.

After nine months of sanguinary war, Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation. The dream of millions was fulfilled. More than two hundred years of a chain of slavery came to an end. People of Bangladesh found a new identity — an identity of dignity and honour.

Our liberation war was mainly fought in order to establish the rights of the oppressed people to the then East Pakistan. The main purpose of this movement was to establish a nation where the common people would live in peace and harmony. Millions sacrificed their lives to achieve a sovereign nationhood for the persecuted people of East Pakistan. Their dream was to establish a country free from corruption, violence, nepotism, destruction and poverty. We have achieved independence. Bangladesh is now a sovereign nation, but have we

attained the ideal country the freedom fighters dreamt of? We are far from achieving that objective. We have failed miserably to make it the ideal country visualised by so many of our freedom fighters.

The Bangladesh we now live in is not the country dreamt of by our freedom fighters. Corruption is prevalent in all spheres of life. We live in a country where violence controls the educational institutions. We live in a country where there is no united effort for socio-economic development. We live in a country where the Government and the Opposition parties are constantly criticising and undermining one another. Is this the kind of nation for which so much blood was shed? Present Bangladesh is a country plagued by hartals, strikes, political bickerings.

Our freedom fighters dreamt of a self-sufficient and developed Bangladesh. They did not dream of a country burdened with a huge foreign debt. They did not dream of a country divided by different political beliefs. Do we ever pause to think which direction the country is heading for? Widespread corruption, vio-

lence, nepotism have rather become integral part of our life. Our politicians follow the politics of self-development. Politics is supposed to secure and promote the interests of the common people but, in Bangladesh, politics serves the interests of the wicked and the corrupt. Using politics as the key to self-development, certain sections are getting richer and richer. People belonging to this category are taking advantage of the ignorance of the common people. And the overall economic condition of the common masses remain well below the poverty level.

Metropolitan Dhaka is being filled with luxury apartments, expensive sleek cars, posh restaurants. Perhaps no one can blame it as the capital of one of the poorest countries of the world. But this is just the facade. Go deep into the countryside — one will get the actual picture of Bangladesh. Masses living in abject poverty, children dying of malnutrition, people suffering from curable afflictions. Isn't it ironic that when, elite in the capital are going to expensive restaurants, thousands at the same time are virtually counting their days in starvation? One can't help wondering 'Is

this the Bangladesh for which so many intrepid fighters sacrificed their lives?'

Every year when the Victory Day arrives, we hold functions, symposiums, fairs, discussions and earnestly talk about giving material form to the dreams of our Shaheed fighters. We talk about the spirit of independence and express our 'inner-most' desire to use this spirit for the progress and development of our country. But that's all we do, just make empty commitments. Sixteenth December passes away and we abruptly forget our promises.

Today Bangladesh is nowhere near the image visualised by the freedom fighters who bravely laid down their lives in 1971. The situation in this our beloved country is getting worse day by day. This year, when we celebrate our Victory Day why don't we make a solemn pledge that from now on we shall sincerely try our utmost to build Bangladesh based on the ideals of the freedom fighters? Why don't we make a formal promise, as much stakeholder as it can be, that we shall make a 'united' effort and salvage this country from this dark abyss?

