

My Thoughts

Anisuzzaman

AS we approach the twenty-fifth anniversary of our independence my thoughts ramble. Inevitably, I get back to the momentous days of 1971. Such unity of the people we had never seen, such determination never known. The suffering caused by the enemy was enormous, yet we never faltered. The sacrifice made by the people had few parallels in history. This was admired by conscientious men and women of the world over, and our struggle attracted not only their respectful attention but active support. No price was considered too high for what we wanted. And we paid it in blood, sweat and tears, and gained what has been described as the highest political end, freedom.

And then we acted like the base Indian who threw away a pearl richer than all his tribe. In our case it was, perhaps, not one pearl but several. Ingratitude, more strong than traitors' arms, vanquished the man who by his deeds and words had stirred our blood, inspired and united us for our trust with destiny. We all did love him once and not without cause: when comes such another? In less than no time the leaders who had guided us to victory were brutally murdered. In the streams of blood that flowed freely was thrown much of the ideals we fought for in 1971. Conspiracy and cunningness, whim and caprice of a few gave

Bangladesh a shape very different from the one created by the sacrifice of so many.

For most part of her existence Bangladesh laboured under direct or indirect military rule while politicians of different hues obligingly served it. The Bengalee identity for which so much was done during the Pakistan times was too easily forsaken officially. Secularism was abandoned and a state religion instituted. The bitter truth came in the way of the religious minorities in 1990 and 1992 that, despite the Constitutional promise, they were less equal citizens than others. Who could have thought in 1971, that in an independent Bangladesh those who had opposed the liberation war tooth and nail would be rewarded by cabinet positions or state awards, that coercive laws would prevail, that state-owned media would be chained by the government of the day, that the process of free and fair elections would mostly be destroyed, that student politics would degenerate into the worst kind of violence, that fatwas would render eminent people targets of public wrath or humiliate women to the extent of driving them to commit suicide?

All this has proved to be disastrously divisive, for these measures have succeeded only in fragmenting the nation. Changes were brought in the fundamental principles of state policy to serve narrow political

interest. We have been paying its price for the last twenty years. In Bangladesh today there does not appear to be any consensus on any fundamental issue concerning the nation. The unity achieved in 1971 appears to be a matter of a distant past. Loyalty to the nation has, in most cases, been replaced by loyalty to groups, parties and individuals. The current political crisis is both a result and a proof of that deep-rooted division.

Is there, then, no hope for Bangladesh? Don't we have a future?

The bare facts do not make one optimistic. In the 25th year of the existence of Bangladesh, 120 million people live in an area of 55,500 square miles. The per capita GDP is around US \$ 150, and more and more people are being pushed below the poverty line. The literacy rate is around 30 per cent and urbanisation 10 per cent. The "Golden Bengal" is a food deficit area where industrialization has not made any headway. It depends largely on foreign aid and suffers from natural calamities. It also suffers from political instability, student violence, labour unrest, and widespread corruption.

Yet our people are known to have worked wonders. They have joined hands over all divisive issues to overthrow an autocratic military ruler. They have extended every cooperation in holding the fairest general

elections we've ever had. They have stood for communal harmony. Despite the fatwas, they have elected women to general seats in the parliament and as Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition. Women are fighting back the vested interests both in rural and urban areas. The Grameen Bank and other NGOs in the rural areas and the garments industry in the urban centres have helped them a great deal to be much less dependent on menfolk financially.

The people of Bangladesh still fight for their rights and make supreme sacrifices. They have not failed but our leadership has failed them time and again. Authoritarianism on the part of the political leaders and resorting to violence by their workers have tarnished the image of the political parties. They must redeem it by hard work.

In Bangladesh today we have a greater dependence on the state than ever. When the state becomes all pervasive, then, whoever captures the state finds it easier to mould the civil society the way he likes. Thus there is a need for the civil society to develop in a way that it becomes less dependent on the state.

The reality in Bangladesh has taken away our courage of dreaming again. It is equally true that history takes unexpected turns. Since the country belongs to me I can ill afford to be pessimistic.

Syed Manzur Elahi

Twenty five years have passed and we are back to square one—but this time, it is worse because we cannot blame anybody else but ourselves, for our present precarious situation. So what went wrong? Failure of the political leadership—our political leaders have totally failed us. Their priorities are all wrong. First priority is their own interest, the second is their party's interest and last of all, if at all, the country's interest. "No body loves this country. I sometimes think the Liberation War should have lasted for nine years instead of nine months."

Sure, in the process, people like you and I would have perished but the survivors would then have been made of sterner stuff and not like the bunch of opportunists that we now have. These thoughts are being continuously echoed all over the country but does it influence our political leaders at all? Not a bit. One is shouting "Right to constitution" and the other "Right to democracy" and caught between the two are the people whose woeful cries of "Right to survival" have no effect. Here again, the priorities are wrong. First priority should be people's welfare and thereafter the Constitution and/or Democracy. The Constitution is made for the people's well-being and not the other way round. But who will listen to all this? Who will pay for the mind boggling losses to the

economy which a poor country like Bangladesh can ill afford? When my business goes bankrupt or I lose my job, will the political leaders compensate me? My political friends will be unable to answer these questions and the people will remember this for a very long time and I do not think the people will forgive their utter selfishness.

The younger generation are today totally disillusioned. We need the educated youngsters because good managers are not easily available. So what do we tell these young people? "Start a movement to break the non-cooperation movement of the opposition" says the ruling party politicians. "Sacrifice for the sake of Democracy," says the opposition politicians. The people realize that these politicians want to use the shoulder of the people to fire their guns, so that they can hold on to the power or grab power. What is alarming in this dangerous game of power politics is the rise of lawlessness and erosion of moral values.

"Today is the age of might is right." End justifies any kind of horrendous means. "Bank default is smart business", "Protection money is justified" etc. etc. etc. have become accepted values of our society. Whoever rules Bangladesh will face a very tough task to remove these value distortions from the society for which we can only blame ourselves.

Syed Nasim Manzur

carry on. Every act of courage, every struggle against the odds by the common man is manipulated and exploited for the purely personal political gains of our so-called leaders.

My generation knows its history. We know our glorious tradition of having overcome impossible odds against an occupation force to bring about the reality of Bangladesh. But that is not enough for us to live on. ENOUGH OF THE PAST. WHAT IS OUR FUTURE? Every university graduate, young farmer, garments worker and civil servant wants to build a better future for themselves than they have now. This desire is the strongest force for change in human society. But sad to say the current political leadership in Bangladesh has totally failed to harness this force. We are tired of dwelling in the past; we want to move on to designing our future.

Bangladeshis working around the world have shown that we possess a tremendous work ethic, we are capable of building institutions and that we want to do better for our society, and ourselves. Even in Bangladesh the success story of the garments industry has not been due to multinational investment or policy. This success is the fruition of the natural talents and abilities of a young, new class of entrepreneurs who, despite capital and structural limitations, have built viable businesses

from scratch simply because they believed that by helping themselves they could best help others. This simple belief has produced millions of success stories all over Bangladesh of people trying to actively shape their future, instead of waiting to have it prescribed to them. Today this spirit is being snuffed out in the name of democracy, Constitution, etc etc ad nauseam.

My comment to all our politicians spending their invaluable time and energy in "preserving the Constitution" or "formation of a neutral non-party caretaker government" is four simple words: "It's the people, stupid." Government FOR the people, (emphases my own) by the people and of the people. People do not "support" strikes and hartals because they believe in it—it is because they fear for their life and property. People do not bestow legitimacy through silence, they remain mute because they lack freedom of speech. The rickshawpuller, farmer, factory worker and storekeeper have not abdicated away their right to self-determination, they live with the hope that their hopes and aspirations of a life with democratic and economic freedom will find its way into the countless charters of demands drawn up daily. But unfortunately no one is listening. Our leaders mistake silence for acquiescence.

The younger generation remarks, "Hartals have become a way of life in Bangladesh. Suppose, for arguments sake, the Awami League comes to power and then BNP calls Hartals on any issue in order to give a taste of their own medicine to the Awami League. Where do we go from there?" Recent returnees from abroad queries: "All our lives you have told us what a great country Bangladesh is, and since we belong to the privileged few who have studied abroad, we should repay our debts to our country by working here. So we have come back to our country. But we see a small section of the people, i.e. the politicians, are ruining the country because of their silly ego problems. We have no ability to fight these politicians who have brought in a reign of terror, and we do not see any solution. Tell us why we should waste our time here?" My politician friend will sarcastically reply, "So who is telling you to stay here? Go back to your beloved America or England or wherever you have come from. We do not need people like you in Bangladesh."

With apologies to Mr. Gresham, "Bad people, after driving out good people, will rule Bangladesh." Will this be our future? I do not know but I do remember what Mr. Lee Ken Yew said in his convocation address at the University of Singapore a few years back: "If good people do not join politics then that country has no future."

The politicians of Bangladesh are bankrupt; they have nothing new to offer, no vision to share. The reason that our best and brightest are seeking immigration is not because they do not support democratic institution building in Bangladesh. It is only because they realise that this, like all other "issues", have become a lever for power and a way to settle scores. In these Byzantine power struggles the people are innocent bystanders and increasingly the victims. Burning public transport, disrupting production, looting stores, closing down campuses does not cause any real hardships to the political leadership. Our political leaders do not use BRTC buses, factories and shops are not their major sources of income, and their scions probably do not attend Dhaka University!

So then whom is it all in aid of? Why is the proposal for formation of a non-political caretaker government, that has been shown time and time again to be in accordance with the desires of the people, acceptable ONLY after the country has been brought to its knees? Why is acknowledgement of the irreparable damage to the fragile economy by this non-cooperation movement ONLY possible, after the people have been pushed to their limits and forced onto the streets? When will the bigger picture, the country, gain precedence over short term political ambition and the lust for power?

Pages from My Diary Thoughts on Independence Days Past And Present :

26 March 1971, Friday

CHITTAGONG: History shall record the events of this day in letters of blood. It's only the beginning, I'm convinced much more blood shall be shed.

It was past twelve last night when Atiq Rang. He was all excitement. "Haven't you heard? Sheikh Saheb has declared independence! Fighting is going on in the streets of Dhaka."

It was a night of anxiety and excitement. I hardly closed my eyes. Again there was another telephone call at seven-thirty in the morning. Bengali soldiers in the Cantonment are locked in battle with the Pakistanis. Some of them have left the Cantonment and are already in the city seeking help.

Then came another piece of alarming news about Dhaka. Pakistani tanks and heavy artillery are being used to attack the Bengali residents in the city. Indiscriminate killing and arson are continuing since last night.

Dhaka radio station come alive at eight-thirty. The announcer spoke in Bangla — with heavy Punjabi accent. The Dhaka city is under curfew till further orders. Anyone seen outside shall be shot dead. This was followed by the announcement of a number of martial law orders.

I heard so many things on the situation, both in Chittagong and Dhaka, during the day. I'm certain a good part of the same are just rumours and speculations. But the news about the soldiers of the Bengal Regiment fighting the Punjabees is definitely correct. The police and Ansars have joined them. We could hear the sounds of exchange of fire, including mortars and heavy weapons, throughout the whole day. Thousands of young men are helping them as best as they can. They are going from house to house collecting any kind weapon available.

The city of Chittagong is free. And the Chittagong radio station is in the hands of the freedom fighters. It was thrilling to hear the declaration of independence in the radio. Appeal was made to world to stop the genocide. At the same time, instructions are being issued to the people to remain vigilant and help our soldiers.

All the time, I am glued to the radio, alternating between Chittagong and Dhaka. Yahya spoke at eight. "Sheikh Mujib is a traitor to the country," he declared. "He and other traitors and rebels will soon be suitably punished." Yahya added that he would consider restoring power to civilian public representatives when 'suitable conditions' are ensured.

Our leaders and most of our people, keep on hoping that there will be a solution through dialogue. But I was never optimistic about it. For one simple reason — the other side is neither sane nor rational. I suspected all along that they were going through the charade of dialogues just to gain time, to get enough men and weapons from West Pakistan, and then they would strike. And I tried to tell the same to everyone I could.

Today, I wish I were wrong. Now it is nearly midnight. From my hill-top house, I can see the city enveloped in eerie darkness punctuated by the sound of guns and streaks of tracer bullets. It's as if I am viewing a war-film. Yet, it's not in cinema; it's very real and happening right here.

Kazi Fazlur Rahman

Are all those who are either already dead or shall be dying soon giving their lives in vain? Only Heaven can tell.

26 March 1972, Sunday

DHAKA: Independence Day! It seems we have traversed a century in a year. On 26 March last year, we were the slaves of the Pakistani soldiers. Today we are Bangladeshis, the free citizens of Bangladesh! The people of Bangladesh paid a very heavy price indeed to acquire this status.

Still, a question haunts me. "What next?"

On Monday tenth of January, Bangabandhu on his triumphal return addressed the nation in words truly befitting a great leader. He narrated how Bhutto had pleaded with him to retain some kind of link with Pakistan. "No, that's not possible," he had replied. "Let the people of Pakistan live in happiness. But we can't have anything to do with it. We have our own independent sovereign land — Bangladesh." He advised non-Bangalees living in Bangladesh to fully identify themselves with the country. He appealed to all countrymen to desist from taking the law in their hands, and not to punish or harm anybody without the due process of law.

His very first address to the nation set the right tone and laid down the right guidelines. Like almost every citizen of the new Bangladesh, it engendered hopes in one that now a system will be at last in place which will enable the energy and aspirations of all to be channelled for the peace and prosperity of the nation.

It has not been even three months. Yet somehow I sense an unease — even disappointment and despair — slowly engulfing the whole nation. I can't help asking myself —

why? I must be mistaken — sometime I try to reassure myself.

26 March 1974, Tuesday

DHAKA: Independence Day was celebrated with all official formalities. It was only three years ago that Yahya and Tikka unleashed the armed Pakistani beasts and set them upon the unarmed Bengalees. They wanted to perpetrate a holocaust, and make permanent slaves of any survivors. They failed, but the cycle of killing begun by them seem to go on without end. Why?

Last evening, TV broadcast the Prime Minister's speech recorded from his sickbed in Moscow. On this day, he said, he remembers the millions dead, thousands upon thousands of our women raped and dishonoured. He assured the country that all secret killings shall stop. And he condemned all acts of nepotism and favouritism by all those in positions of authority.

He sounded very sick, and appealed to the countrymen to pray for him and to forgive him. Yes, most, if not all, in this country will pray for him and even forgive his mistakes. But how will history deal with his lapses as the ruler?

I spent almost the whole day reading and re-reading my diaries of seventy-one. I just can't stand the illumination and the air of festivity outside. To many in Bangladesh, this is a day of mourning, not of joyous celebration. I am one of them.

26 March 1976, Friday

DHAKA: Another Independence Day being celebrated with all the official trappings. Yet a feeling of unease pervades. Almost everybody appears to be waiting anxiously for some disaster to happen. People of Bangladesh only

yearn for peace.

26 March 1977, Saturday

DHAKA: As usual, Independence Day was celebrated with a garden party in Bangabandhu Park and street illumination.

There was something totally unexpected in the TV this evening. A feature story describing the genesis of Bangladesh from 1947 showed Sheikh Mujib's historic speech in the Paltan on 7th March 1971. There was only glimpse of him making the speech without even mentioning his name! This was the first time since 15 August 1975 that a picture of Sheikh Saheb featured even fleetingly in an official medium in Bangladesh.

How outrageously ridiculous! He may be blamed, perhaps with justification, for many acts of commission and omission as the ruler of the country. But who can deny that but for him, there would not have been any independent Bangladesh? How can anyone presume to write a history of this country without mentioning the name of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman?

26 March 1978, Sunday

ABOARD ROCKET STEAMER GAZI: Bhutto has been sentenced to death. Miraculous is the way the providence dispenses justice.

I read that there have been many requests, including one from the UN Secretary General to General Ziaul Haque to spare his life. What is really amazing is that a group of persons in Dhaka are issuing statements in his favour. Jadu Mia's party even staged a demonstration in front of the Pakistani Embassy!

The massacre that began in Bangladesh on this very day seven years back was really the culmination of Bhutto's scheming, that fool Yahya was but a tool in his hand. And today demonstrations are being held in Dhaka for saving his life. What an irony!

26 March 1979, Monday

DHAKA: Eight years ago, Dhaka was burning just at this time. Dead and mutilated bodies had piled up on the roads and in the ashes and ruins of houses. Those dead bodies constituted the stepping stones to pomp and power of the presidents, ministers, generals and bureaucrats of all kinds. But who remembers them? I doubt if anyone bothered to pay even a pro-forma homage to their memory on this day.

26 March 1980, Wednesday

DHAKA: Another Independence Day has been observed amidst great fanfare. I didn't attend any of the functions and festivities. To me, it is still a day of mourning.

26 March 1983, Monday

MANILA: Somehow our Independence Day has made me reflect on the state of affairs back home. It seems that every thing is on the boil. 7-party and 15-party alliance successfully observed "hartal" on 1st March despite active and violent resistance from government party "students" and "workers". Police was also active with their lathis and guns, official version concedes two deaths. Those arrested number more than five hundred. Most of the educational institutions including universities are closed. Education is always the first casualty in the games

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The Wound that Bleeds

Meghna Guhathakurta

IN January 1971 I was a student of Class X of Holy Cross School. We were then living across the road from the central Shahid Minar in the Dhaka University Quarters. My father, Dr Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta has appointed provost of Jagannath Hall, a residence hall for minority students. It was only a matter of months that we had moved into our new quarters from the old town and my father being very fond of gardening had transformed the back yard of our ground floor flat into a vision of many colours. Little did we know then what the future had in store for us.

March 1971 was a month of turmoil and being situated opposite the Shahid Minar, we were right in the middle of it all. The day-long demonstrations, the angry speeches, the solemn oath taking and the tensions permeated the air with an ominous sense of dread. The 25th of March was just such a day.

shot were still groaning so there was a lot of hurrying and scurrying for water. My mother asked our cook to take me away from the scene, but soon another lightning struck us. The wife's sister informed us that my father had also been shot outside the building, he was conscious and asking for water, and calling out our names. We rushed to the spot. There we saw my father lying on the ground fully conscious but his body was paralysed waist down. He said that the soldiers had asked him his name, and his religion. He couldn't lie. So after he said that he was a Hindu, the officer ordered to shoot. Helping hands came to help us to carry him to our flat, through the front door, over the bodies of Prof Moniruzzaman and family!

My father and I dragged my mother away from the window and were confusingly wondering whether to open the doors (we couldn't even if we tried because the doors were jammed from the blows of the soldiers) when three soldiers (one officer & two jawans) came in through the back. They ordered our cook to open the kitchen door and then threw her to the ground outside. She ran away scared, to the room of our driver above the garage a few yards away.

The officer asked in Urdu, "Is the professor here?" My mother replied, yes. He said, "We will take him away." My mother asked where? The officer went up to my father who was, putting on a Punjabi, passed to him by my mother. My father felt sure that they had come to arrest him. The officer told my father to go with him. My father asked "why." But instead of answering the soldiers led him away. On their way out he asked at the soldiers still banging away at the front door: "Yaqub, stop banging, I'm here." And then with a wrench of his hand, pulled open the door. The minute they left with my father, I ran to the phone and then discovered that it was dead. The phone lines were cut off. But we were not given much time to think because the soldiers came back. They started to search our home, bathrooms, under the bed. At one point they asked us "where is Mujibur Rahman?" I replied,

we don't know him. He barked at me: "What do you mean, you don't know him." My mother was trying to get information as to where they took my father, but to no avail. On their way out they asked whether we had any boys in the family. My mother held me close and said that she had only one daughter. They told us to stay in doors & left.

In the meantime our cook had returned distraught, but before we had time to explain we heard a commotion from our front door. Several soldiers had brought down professor Moniruzzaman along with three members of his family (all male) and there was a tussle going on between his wife and the soldiers. My mother tried to calm Mrs Moniruzzaman, by telling her that they had also 'arrested' my father, so if she creates problem they might shoot. As we were still trying to get some communication through our telephone, we here running to and fro, when he heard several loud shots which pierced our eardrums. Seconds later when my mother went to the door she screamed and started away from the door. When I went to the door I too screamed like I've never screamed before because the sight that met our eyes were undecipherable. The soldiers had left and all four of Moniruzzaman's family were dying in their own blood. His wife cried out to my mother, "Sister you said they wouldn't shoot!" Two of the persons