

E-S-S-A-Y

Weeping under the Burden of Glory

Waheedul Haque

THE celebrations of the 25 years of Bangladesh are going to be devoid of substance in a large measure. The independence carved out in 1971 at a hefty price was first of all a political phenomenon. And the nation is at present stuck up in a stinking political cesspool—perhaps worse than it was in March, 1971.

But then there was Mujib there embodying two decades of struggle for a fair deal to the Bengalee majority of Pakistan. And there was then the awakening in the people about their true identity which Pakistan would not accept. So the day was saved. Bangalees rose as one man, fought an unequal war and defeated Pakistan—an improbability equalled only by the defeat of America in Viet Nam several years later.

And what would this year's celebrations amount to if this state is not going to officially pay its respect to its architect Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and to its first Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed who led us to victory in the Liberation War? And what kind of a celebration will it be if we do not acknowledge our debts to India in sincere heart-felt gratitude?

Why is the state being distanced so unbecomingly from much that it cannot sustain itself without? The question is not difficult to answer. If one dares to look in its face, the classes of people - or shall we say coterie - that ruled Bangladesh for two decades after the coup in which Bangabandhu and the foremost among the builders of this state were murdered, spared no pains to push our people into national amnesia making them forget every achievement of the Liberation War and the 23-year long glorious democratic struggle that led to it. Liberation War, the term MuktiJuddha that is, was, however, allowed to stay only to call the first general to rule us in independent Bangladesh a MuktiJuddha and to give the same one the glory of declaring the war. The successive governments after 1975 have relentlessly gone about their number one business of convincing people that the Liberation War was an isolated event having neither a background of political struggle against colonial exploitation and a denial of cultural identity nor a sacrificing and successful leadership. Every bit of state and party power was spent on getting down the nation's gullet that it was an army rebellion that earned Bangladesh its independence—people and politics had no part in it.

This silly scenario of some army elements suddenly going berserk and defeating the Pakistan army for no better reason than a call made over Chittagong Radio and then making both China and America to beat a retreat and forcing the 90,000-strong heavily armoured Pakistan army to surrender could be sold only at a great and grievous loss to the state that lives in the mind of every citizen and grows in the form of patriotism generating faith in the state and enough self-confidence to dream on its destiny.

Zahir was a great admirer of Dinen. That came from the latter's literary eminence. Dinen was the forerunner and pathbreaker of a new genre of fiction writing, particularly short stories. He is now dead 17 years and still he is regarded as their mentor — guru — by his more famous contemporaries like Sunil Ganguly and Debesh Roy or the recently departed dozen of Bengali poets Shati Chattopadhyay. Dinen knew about Zahir as a fine writer of short novels and a film director and also as a younger brother to the Marxist political activist and writer Shahidullah Kaiser. The Liberation War brought them together. From their first meeting in June in Calcutta they were a perfect match as comrades-in-arm.

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friends - and our foes as well — were greatly mystified by the fact of an institutional army being at the core of the people's war we were waging in 1971. There is not much in history to compare with the bravery and sacrifice of the army of Swadhin Bangla — fighting almost without food and weapon. But they were fighting along their own people - the peasants and students of Bangladesh and against the same foe. And the civilians were no mean fighter either. Both elements were shaping the culmination of the long struggle against Pakistani colonial exploitation and a Pakistan-mounted genocide right at hand. *Mukti Sangram* had crescended in its ultimate days into the MuktiJuddha.

The two-decade long constant brainwashing took much toll of the mind of the simple illiterate masses. Memories of glorious heroism and sacrifice were gone, issues became confused and confidence — in both the nation and one's own self lost. The result is for all to see and suffer. Back to an impasse not similar to but worse than the one there was in March '71. The way out this time too lies in the people's victory. Everyone knows what that means. But, as things are, this state is not going to recall the services to its founding either of Bangabandhu or of India. And that's enough to make the celebrations hollow.

To take courage in this dismal situation I rather seek refuge of some of my fondest memories of the Liberation War. I have written about them before and I hope to go on writing about them as long as I can. I have met quite a range of our war heroes when engaged in action: from Tajuddin to Khaled Mosharrif to Ziaur Rahman to Nuruzzaman. I had also the honour of contributing boys to our army all of whom distinguished themselves in numerous battles—one of them earning a Bir Uttam. But for patriotism and total dedication in the cause of our victory: I have known none to excel Dinen Bandyopadhyay and Zahir Raihan.

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creation than their directors: Alamgir Kabir and Babul Choudhury. This nation is hardly aware of Zahir's other contributions which came from the nobility of his heart and a power for complete self-abnegation.

Of Dinen's part in our war efforts no one in the political set-up of the war — the Swadhin Bangla government, its army and the leaders of Awami League in general — no one knew anything. And as a result his total sacrifice has gone completely unrecognised by all who came later to power and politics in Bangladesh. This was due to the nature of Dinen's service and his great success in avoiding the lime-light. Dinen was one of the two secretaries of the Pashchim Banga Shilpi Sahityik Bodhiji Sahayak Sangostha, which was formed soon after the March 25 crack-down and collected a small pot of money to help in Bangladesh war efforts. It was Dinen's idea that the money be spent on raising a musical squad from among the young and talented ones come to west Bengal as refugees. And it was primarily and solely to his efforts that the unique Bangladeshi MuktiSangrami Shilpi Sangostha got to a flying start as early as on June 3 and on the Rabindra Sadan stage. It was due to his inhuman labour that the squad could sustain both its spirit and quality till the very last December '71. It was at Dinen's behest that Zahir Raihan and his admirers and friends formed the Liberation Council of Bangladesh Intellectuals.

Dinen was an Indian writer born in Calcutta but with roots in Dhaka Birkampur. He did his secondary education in the health retreat of Bhagalpur—perhaps because his parents were unsure of their son's progress in life in Calcutta. Dinen's was a malformed body of substantially less than four feet height.

He overcame this problem by facing it in the face. He developed into a person who could charm any human being in a matter of minutes, and that was how he married the most beautiful of his contemporaries at the famous Presidency college of Calcutta. What I have not written so far about him is death.

He was so much a part of the Liberation War and specially of the family he had organised of young people from Bangladesh that he kept coming to Bangladesh over and over again after the war was over.

Not only to meet his young friends but also with a mind to be of whatever service Bangladesh might require of him. The performance of Bangladesh's early years of independence did not much enthuse him. It was coming very close to disappointment.

He started on a way to distance him from Bangladesh—the real one as well as the one he had been nursing in his mind. The assassinations of August 15 and November 3, 1975 completed the rupture. What he had achieved through sacrifice as his life's greatest thing of love and adoration has gone out of his life. Leaving a dangerous void. But he was an indomitable kind and began collecting himself — without Bangladesh. This was too much

of a try — and he died eight years after Bangladesh's emergence. In his fight against death in the 30 days he was confined in the intensive care unit of Calcutta PG hospital, the doctors couldn't even diagnose his malaise. How would they?

Zahir's wider recognition as both an artist and a patriot did not help him a whit when he was killed at Mirpur in mysterious circumstances. Even more mysterious was why his murder was not gone into seriously by any government since 1972.

And whenever the thought of that one war of my life comes to me I cannot but recall something I heard about as soon as I got back to my village after returning from Calcutta '71. The whole village was one single continuous spread of black ashes, unmitigated and in a way very pure. Pure as an epitaph. The Pakistan army had burnt it down. But before burning they went through a ritual, perhaps to work up a fury.

When army came to the village adult males and women of all age and children abandoned their homesteads and hid themselves in the bushy slopes of a dying canal. However, the hajis of the village and the imams and other venerable looking aged musallis did not panic and chose to stay back. The horde gathered them all and lined them up on the highly visible highway. And asked of them, Where is Mukti? They asked one. Didn't get an answer. They shot him. And so on to the next man. And then the next. Not one of them spoke. And all nineteen were shot and thrown to the ditch behind. How I wept under the weight of glory that was mine for as long as I live.

And I returned to Dhaka on completing my self-imposed war duties not anymore to find the youngest of us three brothers was a malformed body of substantially less than four feet height.

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Pledge to Our Villages

Nilratan Halder

ONCE there was a trend for the ministers to create an ideal village in their own constituencies. Quite a few criteria had to be met for a village to attain the status of an ideal village. The criteria were not themselves bad either: they concerned a village's education level — better say literacy, economic and employment opportunities, health and hygiene and some infrastructural development.

Had there been a really serious effort, a movement, villages in Bangladesh stood to benefit immensely and the post-independent Bangladesh could indeed emerge as a dream country. But still there is a long way to go to catch up with the production level in other Asian countries such as Japan and Thailand.

More crucial is the issue of landlessness. With the population growing at an unacceptable rate, people's share of agricultural land is dwindling fast. Fragmented land cannot support a family and small land-holders soon lose out in their portion to the rich farmers. So the challenge of education to such landless families become insurmountable. Choices for such people are few: either they have to turn into day labourer in village or move to towns or cities for existence. Road communication and manipulation of facts — ideal villages started to come up in different constituencies.

The experiment however did not last long. Then it was the turn of Ershad to develop cluster villages most of which even withered before the fall of the autocrat. The political hypotheses concerning the development of villages were never in short supply. Politicians playact and shed crocodile's tears over the issue with every opportunity. In reality then how do the villages fare now? Are they any better or worse off over the past 25 years?

The answer to this question

cannot be simple and certainly not in a word or two. For the simple reason that villages may not have turned ideal, they have certainly done well in some areas whereas in others the records are dismal. We can touch on a few to see the major successes and failures. Village economy revolves round the agriculture and therefore it is wise to shift our focus on this still mainstay of the country. The near-self-sufficiency in food — cereal mainly — speaks volumes of our agricultural success. But still there is a long way to go to catch up with the production level in other Asian countries such as Japan and Thailand.

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Road to Reform

Andre Nette

WHEN aid and political support from the former Soviet Union dried up in the late 1980s, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia all took the road to reforms. Since then, however, the three Indochinese countries have taken widely divergent paths.

The change has been most dramatic in Cambodia, where a UN peace plan helped it become the only Indochinese country to establish a multi-party system. The groundwork for this shift was laid in 1991 when the Kampuchean People's Revolutionary Party, which had ruled Cambodia since Pol Pot's fall in 1978, changed its name to the State of Cambodia party and formally dumped any adherence to Marxism.

The display items of MuktiJuddha Museum is be divided into following categories:

a. Tradition and culture of Bengal; b. Anti-colonial struggle of people; c. Pakistan period; d. Language movement; e. General election of 1954; f. Martial law 1958; g. Struggle against military rule 1962; h. pt. demand and movement 1966; i. Agartala conspiracy case 1968; j. Mass upsurge of 1969; k. Cyclone of 1970 and general election d. Non-cooperation movement; l. Brutality of 25 March and Liberation war. The MuktiJuddha phase will again be divided into the following.

The spirit of 1971 is still very strong when one sees these mementos. Enthusiasm and response among the general people is very good, otherwise who would give up their such treasured possessions after 25 years," explains Akku Chowdhury, a member of the museum trust.

These lines, far from being a part of the distorted, misinterpreted history of our War of Independence that is all too common, is an authentic relic of our history.

The things that most young people in their teens and twenties know about independence, after 25 years, are vague. Most books on the liberation war have the writers' own version of beliefs and opinions, the heroism of his hero, leaving only a confused jumble of images in a child's mind.

The MuktiJuddha Museum in Segunbagicha has made its goal to concentrate on facts and filter out lies. Even if the effort is some two decades behind schedule, it is never too late for the truth.

"We are collecting these famous mementos from absolutely authentic sources. Our MuktiJuddha volunteers in different districts, and a few young registered volunteers, are doing the collection for us," says Akku Chowdhury, a member of the museum trust.

Some of the evidence gathered stir up ones emotions all over again. For instance the T-shirt of a four month old baby girl. This child, Rehana, was crushed to death by a Pakistani jawan's boot on March 30 in Senhati, Digholia, Khulna. Her crime was that she was the daughter of valiant freedom fighter, Abdus Salam Khan. The Pakistan army and their collaborators had a price on his head. Instead he had to pay a much greater price — his life.

On display at the museum will be the original letter sent to Shaheed Lt Samad's family

experts say was a retort to their calls for more pluralism in the party.

The experts say, these moves seem like the authorities' attempts to assert control after the normalisation of relations with the United States and Vietnam's entry into the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). Says one analyst: "It's the leadership's way of saying even though they are opening up to the outside world, the party is still very much in control."

The arrests coincided with official denunciations of Western interference in Vietnam's human rights