



essay

# Some Aspects of Nationalism of the Bengalis

By Serajul Islam Choudhury

IT IS TEMPTING TO COMPARE THE nationalism of the Bengalis with the mother's struggle against the father. The father represents the state, the mother society. Between and within the two are, of course, different shades and attributes. The metaphorical father is an outsider, the mother a native. The Bengalis are a mixed race, but preponderantly they are local, receiving elements and influences from outside which came in the not-too-well definable shape of the father. The father has succeeded in gaining control over the mind of a section of the people, but has failed to win the love of many. The locals are indigenous, they existed before the state as an institution emerged, and they were denied the right to govern their country. But they refused to give in, and wanted to be a nation, desiring power and authority. That has been the mother's struggle.

But like other metaphors, the one of the mother's struggle representing the Bengalis' struggle for nationalism cannot be stretched too far. Indeed it is flawed at the very basis. For whereas nationalism is essentially local and primarily political, the mother's struggle tends to be non-temporal and non-political. Patently, mother-celebration in Bengal has been a defiance of the occupying powers of the state; but it has also been, at the same time, a way to escape from the arena of political control to that of social freedom, giving the whole exercise the character of a politically-motivated non-political action.

But an even greater inadequacy of the metaphor lies in the upsetting fact that the father has not always been identified as the enemy. In fact, the state as the father, not unlike the one in the family, has often been seen as the provider and the protector. For he was perceived to be capable of giving the people what they lacked in terms of power and honour and could, simulta-

*All-Indian nationalism has been harmful in two specific areas — casteism and communalism. There is a casteism among the Muslims too, they also have their Ashrafs and Aftabs. This, like the one among the Hindus, also came from outside.*

neously, be expected to protect against the very perils that he himself has created. As a method of procuring power and honour flattery has been felt to be even more efficacious and much less painful than revolt. And it was also known that despite her kindness what the mother could offer was nothing more than shelter. A part of this hypostatization of the father could be traced back to the culture of Bengal in which there is the urge to surrender and pray to an almighty who is a man as distinguished from a woman. The acceptance of the father as the provider and protector extends, within the family, to the mother herself even when there is no love lost between the two. The truth in the family cannot be prevented from entering the field of politics.

In the political struggle against the monstrous authority of the state it is essential to have a leader, who, quite easily, takes on the role of a father. When Rabindranath Tagore said, "Our first duty should be to decide, by whatever means we can, upon a man, subject ourselves to him, and slowly and gradually build up a system, around him" he was voicing a sentiment not untypical of the Bengali middle-class in colonial India. The leader as well as a social system was desired. The East India Company, at its early stage of occupancy, was seen by many as the father. And later, as the nationalist movement gained in strength, there has been the turning to the father-figure of Surendranath, Gandhi, Jinnah and, for the East Bengalis, Sheikh Mujib.

Behind all these lay a cruel necessity bred in helplessness. The helplessness that made the people develop nationalistic feelings and commitment also

obliged a section of them to turn to the state power for provision and protection. The protection varied as the nationalist movement progressed.

That the father is given a greater degree of importance is also symptomatic of the running truth of gender-discrimination, which has been one of the potent enemies of nationalism. The nationalist movement was weakened by its failure to draw women in.

And one of the many ironies in the movements was that the very celebration of the mother as a figure of worship was perceived as idolatrous, and therefore unacceptable, by the Muslims. Instead of uniting, it added to the divisive pull. It is very much a matter of history that the nationalist war cry of *Bande Matarom* (Hail to the Mother) which the British found infuriating was also instrumental in driving the wedge of separation between the Hindus and the Muslims still deeper. And ultimately it was this communal separation which was responsible, more than anything else, for preventing nationalism of the Bengalis from becoming comprehensive of the entire people.

To turn to yet another side of the comparison. The insulted mother was not without a quiet revenge wreaked, not on the guilty father, but on the very progeny she loved and fostered, making them withdraw still further within the shell of conservatism and exclusiveness, qualities which by their very nature are counterproductive of nationalism. Thus for many the caste, the village, the home and even the kitchen became the world.

The basic fact of the matter is that nationalism of the entire people is different from that of a section, and has to

be driven forward by a spirit more than that of the mother's struggle against the father.

HISTORICALLY BENGAL HAS NEVER been one. Apart from the cleavages of community, class and gender there has been the geographical separation as well. At one time there was as many as six Bengals. But ultimately two divisions emerged — Gaur and Bengal, corresponding roughly to East Bengal and West Bengal. The process of nation-building has been hindered, among other factors, by disparity between the two Bengals. East Bengal has been poorer and more populous. It was startlingly revealed in 1872 that the majority of the Bengal population were Muslims, and that most of them lived in East Bengal. The middle class, the most important element in the effort to weld the nation into a whole, was overwhelmingly Hindu; but population-wise the Hindus were the minority. The problem of relationship between a minority which was powerful and a majority which wanted power led to conflicts, resulting, ultimately, in the partition of Bengal — an event regretted by all Bengali nationalists but accepted by most as the only possible solution in the menacing circumstances prevailing at the time of its happening.

The foundation of the nationalism of the Bengalis has lain in the mother tongue. This is, of course, true of many other nationalisms as well. The Aryans and the Dravidians were linguistically identified, so are the Arabs, today. Right in 1948, after Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the 'father' of the putative Pakistani nationalism, had declared that Urdu alone shall be the state language of Pakistan, Mohammad Shahidullah had said:

আমরা হিন্দু বা মুসলমান যেমন সত্য, তার চেয়ে বেশী সত্য আমরা বাঙালী। এটি কোন আদর্শের কথা নয়, এটি একটি বাস্তব সত্য। মা প্রকৃতি নিজের হাতে আমাদের হোঁহায়ায় বা বাহায়ায় বাঙালিদের এমন ছাপ দেবে দ্বিভাষী হতে পারবে।

মালা-তিলক-টিকিতে কিছা টুপি-দুপ্পি-দাড়িতে ঢাকবার জোটি নেই।

[That we are Bengalis is even more true than the truth that we are Hindus or Muslims. This is not an expectation, it is a fact. With her own hands, mother nature has put such an imprint of Bengalism on our appearance which it is impossible for either beads-headmark-hairknots or caps-clothes-beards to cover it up.]

That is how the Bengalis should have seen themselves, but were unable to, because of the interference of communalism, which had elements of class interest inside and was manipulated by the state. These three — class, communalism and the state — have been persistent enemies of Bengali nationalism; the fourth enemy being gender-discrimination.

Nationalism has often been viewed with suspicion and rightly so. In its aggressive form nationalism has done much mischief. Writing in 1917, years before the rise of Fascism as a political ideology, Rabindranath Tagore had called nationalism a predatory evil. He saw nothing mother-like in nationalism. Nations, moreover, are usually divided. Nor did Lenin mince words in noting that, "In every modern nation, there are two nations. In every national culture there are two cultures." The Marxist proposition that the workers have no country of their own is not untrue, either. Nevertheless, that the workers need a place to settle their account with the local bourgeoisie is also true. And that place is the nation. There is a progressive, indeed democratic, nationalism which struggles against aggressive nationalism and seeks to give the individual a home address, an identity, a place to fight imperialism within and without, and also a unity to bring out his creative potentials. It tries to create a nationhood, as Annada Sankar Roy has put it succinctly, "through a struggle,

for the sake of a struggle." This nationalism has a socialist content, for it considers the entire people as a nation. In a colonial context a nationalist movement can be part of a larger national struggle for liberation, moving toward the emancipation of the masses. That is precisely how the nationalist movement in Bengal should have developed itself. That it has failed to do so is a measure of the failure of the socialists, and of the success of the vested interests — both local and foreign.

Even the bitterest critics of nationalism, Rudolf Rucker for example, admit that language is the true homeland of a people. Rucker argues that "In nothing else does the national character, the imprint of the mental and spiritual powers of a people, express itself as clearly as in language," and that "of all the evidences which have been cited for the existence of a national ideology, community of a language is by far the most important." With Rucker's view most Bengalis will readily agree; for them "community of language" has been a fond objective. Unfortunately, this objective has been, and still is, difficult to achieve, because of class and communal differences. The nationalism Rabindranath hated was aggressive. The poet, however, was a very strong believer in the national identity of the Bengalis. He wrote,

এতকাল যে আমাদের বাঙালী বলা হচ্ছে তার সন্জা হচ্ছে আমরা বাংলা বলে থাকি। শাসনকর্তারা বাংলাদেশের অংশ প্রত্যংশ অন্য প্রদেশে ছুড়ে দিয়েছেন, কিন্তু সরকারী দফতরের বাইরে তারা ভাষা কেটে দিতে পারেন নি।

[That we have been called Bengalis over such a long period is because we speak Bengali. The rulers have joined parts and border areas of Bengal with other provinces, but they have, beyond the government offices, failed to scissor the language.]

To be continued  
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## fiction The Fall

by Abdul Mannan Syed

Translated by Pabitra Sarkar and Clinton B. Seely

Continued from the last week

THE RICKSHAW CAME TO A HALT AT the park gate, and he sullenly got down. He paid the fare and then entered the park in an unhurried manner. The late afternoon crowd had by then faded away, but a few people were scattered around here and there enjoying the open summer evening air, some sitting, some strolling about. A large family was sitting in a circle, talking. A group of young couples — what lousy luck he himself had had, life had been so barren for him — where had they been hiding so long, these young lovers? Another group of young people passed by him — waves of light and laughter and happy cooings coming from them. That fellow in the group, I've seen him somewhere. Sure I have, but no, I can't recall where, it escapes me completely. I've been in Dacca so long, was he a school-mate? Did I run into him on the street one time, or was it in New Market, or maybe somewhere else? It could have been almost anywhere. The face seems so familiar, but still I cannot attach a proper name to it, don't know where he lives, what does he do. The face is so very familiar, yet everything else is hidden somewhere deep down, why is it that way? And so, musing, he speaks his handkerchief on the almost black lawn by the side of the man-made lake. Not too many people were around, nor were there many lights shining, only a peanut-vendor made his habitual rounds in the half-light. He was unmindful of everything. He'll have to leave behind all this loving blue light that now surrounds him and venture to some nameless beyond devoid of pleasure, the deep, sonorous bell of which was now tolling in his consciousness; who are they who holding onto the roots of blood continuously call the child cast away into the winds? What extrasensory image of sorrow manifests itself, it is his hundred-fold agony echoing throughout the universe, his and only his, since everybody else, all men wrapped in all this loving blue light, bound in pleasure and pain but, alas, they don't know it, don't know that life is greater than all pleasure, life is greater than all pain. Years of life are awaiting them, with their myriad pleasures and pains, he was jealous even of their pains, since all pains were only joys. Intensely felt; they are fools, a herd of donkeys, these people become upset by the paltriest of sorrows without understanding what that really means, yet it's better to be a live jackass than a dead raja, they have years of life left to fritter away. He alone was spent up, so soon, a life exhausted in an instant. Then suddenly a giggle pinched awake his senses, and he turned his head. It was a girl. Even in this half light she had taken care to put on heavy make-up, a strong scent, emanating from her

body, almost punched him in the face. With all that glitter she had the appearance of a main street store. Can I sit here? — her voice sounded like the chirping of a bird, and, without waiting for his permission, she sat down close to him. Should he give his consent; he felt a dryness in his throat. At a distance he got a glimpse of a male figure turning away and blending into the darkness. Were they watching me all the time while I was lost in thought? Do they happen to know that my world is slowly slipping away from under my feet. "Looks like you've something on your mind. I can make you forget all of that, for a couple of hours at least," giggled the girl. He was shivering inside, his throat dry like that of a bird. Finally he thought: "What is there to be scared of? I fear nobody now." He, the wise, solemn college lecturer, could have said, "No, miss, whatever seductive charms you might have at your command, they are simply no match for my worries, you cannot make me forget them," but he said nothing, for in fact he was feeling rather nervous. The girl was very close and he could almost feel the warmth of her breath; she said, "You look lonesome. Want to go home?" Now he stumbled on his first word: "No." The girl burst out in a giggle again and left him wondering if he had just said anything particularly amusing. She said, "Then you must come to my place." It didn't take him long to find what the girl did for a living and he was thankful for that. Still his heart went on beating faster and faster, for this was the first time he'd met such a girl. He asked her, "Where do you live?" The girl again burst into giggles to hear him address her with the respectful "you" and told him to switch to the more familiar form of address. He was feeling rather relaxed by now since the girl had a way with words, maybe even from a good family, so he smiled, "Well, you didn't tell me where you live." The girl smiled in response and replied, "I live near Sadarghat. Want to come right away?" She herself was still using the respectful "you," but he didn't feel like asking her why, so he just said, "No, let's take a stroll first, for a couple of minutes." They got up and came out of the mist and darkness, holding hands. The summer night had meanwhile granted a breeze, one that was sweet, sad, charming, weightless, nostalgic. The park was almost deserted. They ambled around on the paved park roads, talking. He plucked flowers while nobody was looking and planted a flower in her hair, which shined like a moon on her hair, dark as night. "Let it happen now, let someone I know run into us now, anyone, maybe the girl at the university who I was crazy for but who didn't care for me and who married a guy before she was out of school — why isn't she here now, why doesn't she come to see what I



am doing? This would drive the point home into her that I too could love some-body." He was full of such wishes. After quite a while, when he still had met nobody familiar, he became almost dejected. Finally the girl's coaxing made him leave the park. At the gate he looked at his watch out of the corner of his eye, it was about ten o'clock. They hired an auto-rickshaw and told the driver to head toward Sadarghat. He noticed a sly little hair-thin smile arise and then vanish on the driver's face. "He knows everything, the bastard. How come that all of them know everything?" The rickshaw was bouncing and lurching as it moved along and the girl's body kept hitting against his body, which may have been deliberate on her part, and once, when they took a sudden turn, she was almost in his lap. He rather enjoyed that; he was tasting a kind of strange, unfamiliar excitement in all that pretended childishness, in that expanding and contracting of the girl's glistening, bare belly and in the movement of her arms; this was the first time in his life, after all, that he sat so close to an unrelated girl. They got down at the Sadarghat intersection and started walking, side by side — a lot of people were casting glances at them and he felt quite good about that. And though it was late in the evening, there were quite a few fellows wearing sunglasses, handkerchiefs tied around their necks, gold watch bands, and they gave him that understanding smile. He suddenly became very nervous: "Have they found out too? Do all of them know this girl? Damn it, I will be ruined if someone I know finds me here." He walked along, rather uneasy now; they went through a seemingly endless course, and finally, turning at a corner, approached a still, ancient, one-

storied building. "This is where we live," cooed the girl with a pull at his sleeve. There was a wide verandah in front, and at one end, sitting in a circle, were three burly men and a scarlet-lipped, scantily-dressed middle-aged woman playing cards. At the sound of footsteps, they looked up with lazy remote gazes and then turned their eyes away the next moment. Only one of them mumbled something to himself, like some faint, distant star, hardly audible even to his own ears. Someone else inside the room sensed their approach and came out — a tall man. "Who is it? Is that you, Firoza?" "Yes," the girl replied, "There is a man with me." The person gave him a brief look and went inside without saying a word. "Come along," said the girl and took him to another room, closed the door and latched it. At one corner of the room there was a niche in which a lantern was faintly burning; she turned up the wick and the light became brighter. He now saw that there was a fairly big bed under which were kept a few rusty tin suitcases and other junk. A few pillows were scattered here and there on the bed. He sat down, his feet dangling over the edge of the bed. "So you're Firoza." The girl nodded, and then, out of politeness, "What is your name, please." He lied, saying his name was Kalim, and asked, "Well, who was that man there?" To himself he said, "I've lied about my name, maybe the girl is a liar too. Who knows if her name is really Firoza." The girl giggled again for no apparent reason and said, "That was my father." He was somewhat surprised but said nothing. Firoza added, "If anyone from the police comes, I'm sure none will, but just in case someone does, tell them I'm your sister, will you?" He grinned and nodded assent, but didn't ask anything further. He was sitting on

the bed, a bit cramped with his legs hanging over the edge; Firoza was on a chair, at a distance. Then she smiled as she got up, "Will the lantern stay on?" He felt his throat clogged but finally managed to articulate, "What's the harm?" Firoza mentioned a figure in a rather playful, unbusiness-like manner, smiled and remonstratingly said, "Went take less, I tell you." He had all the time been thinking of the fee, even was slightly apprehensive about it, "Who knows what she is going to charge, doesn't she have some hoodlums to share the booty with?" He now became rather relieved and agreed, smiling. After this Firoza did not tarry but took off her clothes and in just a minute she stood there, without a stitch on her. This was the first time he had looked at a nude female body; he was agog with curiosity and excitement, felt a lump in his throat, looked at Firoza and then bent his head the next instant, unable to raise his eyes again. Firoza smirked and cooingly said "What, are you a new bride all bashful?" He was embarrassed, hurriedly got up from the bed, went to the lantern and turned it down, then came back and sat down again. A few more silent minutes ticked away on his watch. Firoza, slightly annoyed, asked, "What's the matter, don't you know anything?" He replied with an awkward whisper, "I don't, as a matter of fact. Tell me about." This was another lie, though. He knew well enough but just wanted to utter and hear those nasty words. He'd heard his class-mates use such words, write graffiti on the walls, the blackboard. He has secretly relished them but never dared to utter them himself in front of others, even among his friends. When he was growing up, lying there in bed he'd played with such words, rolling them around on his tongue, as if they were tiny balls. In the darkness Firoza burst out in laughter, as a fountain bursts forth in a sudden spurt, and then brought her mouth close to his ear and in detail, using earthy frank language started whispering the secrets of the art of love. She herself kept on giggling time and again, and he even asked one or two questions just to use a couple of dirty words himself; Firoza was replying, her soft, fair legs clutching one of his own... After he paid her and was about to leave, he asked, "By the way, do you drink?" "Not usually," Firoza replied, "only once in a while, if someone really presses me; but why?" He did not say anything in reply and asked instead, "There must be a liquor store somewhere around, where is it?" "Right over there, just at the corner as you enter this lane. Didn't you notice it when we came? You can buy it there, but if I were you, I wouldn't go near the place. You better head straight home." But he didn't pay any attention to what she said and smiling, blurted out a "Goodbye." Firoza

invited him to come back again and as he stepped out, he gave a curt, "Sure." It was half past eleven. The twisted lane was quickly motionlessly lined with buildings of various sizes. A translucent darkness hung around; only one square window in a distant three-storied house had light coming from it. He felt a titillating fear as he walked, a fear that was vague and ill-defined in this cool breeze. And in that light he felt a calm, sweet luminescence in his heart. From a ground-floor room on one side of the road came snatches from a thick-voiced song: "There she goes, stabbing all and sundry with her eyes." And accompanying it came the sharp beats of a tabla and the jingling of dancing anklets. He, rather apprehensive, tip-toed past this area. After a few more steps he reached the corner and found that restaurant Firoza spoke of, under the stained light of a streetlamp. Inside a few drunks were seated on a bench, speaking in fuzzy, confused voices; as he approached, one of them stretched out both arms and threw out a broken, muffled invitation, "Good evening, Babushaheb." For a moment his head whirled, a little dizzy, but then he was back in full control of his senses and went straight in hurriedly and sat down. Very soon after, a fair-complected but ugly girl came out from the back room and sat at his table opposite him. There was a forced, strange, terrifying smile on her lips. Then he looked at the stuff they brought to him in a dirty vessel, closed his eyes and gulped the whole thing down. All of a sudden lighting lashed through out his senses, a thousand bells clanged throughout his whole body. He had a few more pegs, bit by bit his body became drowsy and numb. From within that haze it seemed to him that the girl was clinging to his body, and he had laid his head, a head that had at once the weight of a rock and the lightness of a balloon, on the terrible lap of the girl; his body was lying on the floor; a feminine hand seemed to be slowly taking off the dumb and unseeing watch from his rickety wrist and exploring his pockets, taking out whatever he had on him. Then he, lying flat in his own spew, arms and legs spread out, muttering those obscenities that are associated with definite parts of the bodies of Firoza, of Firdausi Begam, of the maid; those vulgar words which he'd picked up from his school-mates but had never uttered aloud himself. There he was lying there prostrate in that spew, talking to himself, with careful, measured accents, "I take a vow, right here: I have had a crazy sort of a life on this earth, I shall not waste another moment of it. And, so, in this precise manner, for the year or so I'm left with, I shall attempt to fritter away all this false, erroneous mass of respectability accrued and compiled over all these many years."