

essay

Some Aspects of Nationalism of the Bengalis — VII

by Serajul Islam Choudhury

THE story of nationalism has been, as this brief overview shows, one in which friends and foes were working for and against the people. The enemies have been four — communalism, class, gender-discrimination, and, of course, the state. They are still working. The friends were drawn from the middle class as were many of the enemies. And it was from this class that the leftists, who were declared friends of the people, came. But unfortunately the leftists were not in the leadership of the nationalist movement, which is one of the main reasons why the movement did not achieve its ultimate purpose of making a social revolution possible. The nationalist movement has made compromises with the imperialists and allowed itself to be dominated by the reactionaries who have continued to divide the people instead of uniting them and have forestalled, quite successfully, a radical social change from happening. The situation would have been very different had the left been in leadership of the nationalist movement.

The left was expected to be de-classed, secular and uncompromising. Its leadership, not unexpectedly, was drawn from the middle class. What was wrong was not so much the genesis of the leadership as its failure to go beyond some of its class characteristics, even when enormous sacrifices were being made by its members at the individual level.

There was in the left leadership the

middle class propensity to depend on others, in this case on the paternal (rather than fraternal) communist parties — first, of the Soviet Union and, later, also of the People's Republic of China. The supposed liberators were not themselves liberated. This foreign dependence was one of the causes why the Communist Party of India was unable to grasp and handle the nationalist urge and aspiration of the people. The flaw was particularly and almost disastrously manifest during the crucial period of 1941-45 when the nationalist movement had reached its height. The Communist Party kept itself aloof from the flow and, in fact, stood against it, simply because by that time the Soviet Union had become an ally of Britain owing to Hitler's invasion of its territory.

Besides, all along the history of its struggle, the Communist Party of India, and later of Pakistan as well, had failed to link up the class struggle with the struggle for national liberation. That the principal contradiction in a colonial state was bound to be between the subjugated people and the occupying state and that the class question could not emerge clearly and completely unless and until the national question was resolved were facts lost sight of by the communist leadership.

Mao's ready example of the communists' being qualified, more than the ostensible nationalists, to be the real and the most uncompromising vanguard of the national war of liberation against foreign occupation did not have an adequate impact on the leadership.

The leftists could, and should, have offered a clear-cut and credible alternative to what the Indian Congress and the Muslim League wanted to achieve, and that alternative should have been nationalist in form and socialist in content. It did not do that; consequently despite the respect that the leftists as individuals had won, their movement was incapable of drawing the masses. Moreover, the party leadership suffered from petty bourgeois restlessness of swinging from one extreme of near-pacifism to the other of extreme of violence, from the mass line to the line of insurrection, and vice versa.

The party was urban, and drew its workers from students, educated youths and professionals. The population lived in the villages, where the *bhadralok* leadership of the left did not cultivate. And it is profoundly ironical that the rent-receiving and exploitative leadership of the Congress and the League had established a greater closeness to the peasantry than the Communist Party was able to develop. The rightists spoke on issues which were visible and easily identifiable; and they spoke in the language the peasantry understood. The despair that occurred among the communists in the sub-continent after the collapse of the Communist bloc was, among other things, indicative of the fact that they were not rooted deeply in the people, in whose struggle for existence there was no room for despair.

The left movement also suffered because of the opposition from the reactionaries, and among the strategies they

enacted was the one that the Brahmins had used in driving out the Buddhists from Bengal, namely, branding the adversary with the stigma of atheism. In a culture where dependence on the supernatural was endemic because of the helplessness of the people, the strategy did not fail. And the leftists themselves were unable to counter this propaganda as also to make the people they were working among realize that secularism and atheism were, as ideologies, wide apart from each other. Theoretically, the leftists were the real nationalists; for whereas others worked for community and class they promoted the cause of the entire people, who constituted the real nation. The left elements had emotion and devotion in plenty, but were limited because of these very qualities.

Therefore, the nationalist movement in Bengal remained essentially and almost irredeemably middle-class in character. The linguistic basis worked, but only to a limited extent. For even in that area the middle-class predilections promoted separation. The educated middle class was bi-lingual, and they were boastful, not always quietly, of their English education which had given them jobs, power and status not enjoyed by the rest of the community. The Bengali middle class, we recall, has had an earlier start of 50 years in respect of learning English, compared with those in the other provinces in India. In the Bengali language itself the communal divide had entered because of the competition between the two communities in displaying their re-

spective power and authority. This was to add to the already existing divisions between the chaste and the vulgar, the general and the local. At a different level, the Bengali language became the property of the middle class as a whole, to the deprivation of the vast majority of the population who remained uneducated. The Bengali intelligentsia over-emphasized the value of literature, which is the most important reason why in the culture of Bengal literature occupies a place much weightier than other branches of the arts. The British government required the young ICS officers to acquire suitable knowledge of English literature before making their voyage to India. The acquisition, it was expected, would give them a sense of pride and a protection of insulation against any possible contamination by local culture. The Bengali middle class derived a similar pride from their possession of a literature which was written in language not spoken by the common folk. Literature was also an insulation for the educated.

Writing in 1930, S Wajed Ali, a nationalist writer, made a prophecy to the effect that it is in the fertile soil of East Bengal that a real Bengali state and society is expected to grow. For that what is needed is a national awakening, he said. We agree. But who should lead? Wajed Ali thought of the man of the age (যুগমানব) Rabindranath, we recall, had looked up to a *দেশনায়ক* (a leader of the country). At one time, he thought of two and not one — each representing a community. But the history we have

been looking at tells us, that it is not a person, but the entire nation who must do the job.

History has given East Bengal a role to play. It has set up a state which is secular in commitment; and secularism is the first pre-requisite for the achievement of democratic nationalism. In Bengal nationalism began to grow in the nineteenth century as a secular phenomenon, but, as we have seen, secularism was disturbed by revivalism and communalism. Even the terrorist revolutionaries of Bengal were, at the beginning, reluctant to include Muslim youths in their organisation, a fact mourned, among many, by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the nationalist Muslim leader. And nationalism to be democratic must also be able to encounter and subdue the forces of class-division and gender-discrimination.

The job is collective, it must draw all into its flow, but the leadership would come from the intellectuals, who by the very obligation of their task, have to be secular, democratic and de-classed in their commitments. The fruitfulness of their work will depend on the participation of the masses, to whom they must go not merely to educate but also to be educated. There has to be a unity which would have the vision and the courage to go against the current of capitalism, which is now seeking to submerge the world both economically and ideologically, wiping out national identities. The current is strong, but the desire to survive, we hope, is stronger. ■

The War of the Triangles

by Andaz

SOME YEARS AGO I WAS TRAVELLING by train in Europe with a copy of the London Independent (daily). There was an interesting article on the mammary (glands). These holy reflections are based on the notes jotted down during the silent and uncrowded (but not boring) trip.

The Creator, in His infinite wisdom, decided that bra-less the female shall come into this world, and bra-less shall be her return, and wisely designed not to provide an in-built bra to the human female form; otherwise a multi-billion dollar industry would not have seen the light of the day — thanks to modern

human weaknesses, and the ensuing battles of the sexes.

Men associate women with the figure of 8, or that of the hour-glass, but women aspire to higher forms of mathematics; and insisted on maintaining the shape of the equilateral triangle (the three sides are equal; that is, the distances between the two nipples and the navel). This space configuration of the three points was said to have been discovered by the yogis of yore; but no mathematician ever got a doctorate on this thesis, and no professor of anatomy harped upon it.

But Mother conspired with Father

Time to transform this equilateral triangle into an isosceles one (two sides equal). Hence this space war, soon after Father Time had exacted its toll; with the industry providing the technical assistance, and the fair sex taking control of the cunning strategy and tactics.

Experts are of the opinion that for the perfect design of the bra, the services of aeronautical specialists are required, as it is easier to design an aeroplane (with a rigid body) than to design a bra to contain a soft, shapeless mass of mobile tissues, without changing its outer shape under any form of dynamic stress. That's a tall order for any scientist.

list.

To cite an example of the social strain, sometime back, a press report from a SE Asian city reported that the headmistress of a girl's school had reprimanded a student for attending school without the bra. The school authorities considered the non-use of the bra as 'immodest'.

Perhaps the movement of the organ was frowned upon; as we find that in some countries nude shows are allowed if the live models remained perfectly still (did not move). But this explanation is not enough, as the question arises: what about the immodest

movements of the imagination? The moving picture is a devil's workshop; therefore a bra is required to contain the imagination (of the gazer). But there is no bra or goggles available for the roving eyes.

Men have nothing much to contribute, except as onlookers, and very keen ones at that. It is a spectator sport, in which only the players pay. But men do have a ready complaint: pointed references are pointedly noticeable. Why not call a round-table (or triangular?) conference and try for a consensus? Mind your own business, is the retort. How? Was the body given to woman to

conceal the dress, with the exception of the bra?

It is still debatable why women wear the bra. Men wisely keep mum, perhaps angling for the benefit of the doubt. Also open to subjective debate is the question as to who has the first option on the appreciation of the contraption: the wearer, or the onlooker?

Never in the history of women's emancipation was so much covered to expose so much of covert intentions. In strategic manoeuvres, only the tip of the iceberg is clearly outlined (but not exposed).

poems

Introducing Angus Calder, Poet

by Kaiser Haq

To those interested in Commonwealth literature Angus Calder is something of a legend. As an editor, teacher, critic and organiser of literary events he has played a crucial role in bringing writers from Britain's former colonies to the attention of a wider readership.

Just as significant has been Calder's work as a social historian: *The People's War: Britain 1939-45* (1969) has become a classic and has been influential in shaping literary portrayals of the Second World War; and the more recent *Revolutionary Empire: The Rise of the English-Speaking Empires* (1981) has been described by Edward Said as a 'gripping book'. His literary criticism to date adds up to a distinguished and variegated body.

Till taking early retirement in 1993 Calder has taught in the Open University in Scotland and, in Africa, in the universities of Nairobi, Malawi and Zimbabwe. Currently a free-lance writer, he is copiously publishing scholarly and critical studies, as well as creative work. Thus, happily, his career comes round full circle, for his involvement with literature had begun with teen-age attempts at verse.

As a promising young poet he was recipient of the coveted Eric Gregory Award in 1967. I can only think of

excessive modesty as the reason for his having put off collecting his poetry till the appearance of *Waking in Waikato* this year from Diehard Publishers, Edinburgh. But, as the cliché goes, better late than never, and Calder's many admirers — and indeed those who encounter him for the first time in the pages of this slim, yet substantial, volume — will warm to its pithy, humane notations.

'Friends, faces, times, places memories are made of these,' I recall from the commentary in a TV serial on the Great War. Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory, is the mother of the Muses. And so it is no surprise that like so much of art and literature, Calder's poetry is about friends, faces, times, places. Cricket, a game Calder loves as passionately as any Bangladeshi, is interwoven with these themes in the two poems reprinted below. In one of them, 'Rajshahi', the Padma provides a magnificent setting for Calder's musings, as, not so many years ago, it did for those of our greatest poet, Tagore. In 'Meditation on Mohammed Azharuddin' Calder celebrates those unlikely, magical moments (whether in sports, the arts or in interpersonal relationships) that add the spark of meaning to our otherwise dull lives.

Meditation on Mohammed Azharuddin

for Sudeep Sen

Azhar's out for a duck before I switch on the TV....
What a pang. As splendid Tendulkar smites on,
I consider the love you and I share, Sudeep,
for the art of Mohammed Azharuddin,
a sizeable man with a serious face
and wrists which whip the ball
past point or through midwicket
faster than sound, though his feet aren't in the right place.

Have you ever yourself made moments like those,
timing a stroke out of time? Once — in Surrey I think —
I went out to bat with a loured hangover,
lunged at my first ball, and it flew
just over the fast bowler's head, never high,
for a flat six... Of course, I was out soon after.
Told of myself, such stories tickle laughter,
as if a bad poet had written a great line
(some do), or the least experienced cook
had executed a perfect Pavlova (might happen).

Art's nowise élite. A child can paint
a definitive picture. Unaccompanied song
from an untrained voice may be entirely beautiful.
Like Azhar's, all our imitation, practice,
revision, response to advice and nasty critics,

merely frame (if we're in form) the swift gift
of verb or rhythm which pushes words not there but
there, like a perfectly placed stroke in cricket.

Christians speak of Grace,
Zenpersons of one hand clapping.
I don't think of orgasms, which are usually worked for,
or the well rehearsed climax of a great Mass,
but of something finished at once yet in time without end
as when my daughter, aged three,
held up bits of breakfast, declared,
'Here is a boy called Toast and he is looking
for a girl called Friend', or what a colleague confided
of unlikely late love, 'As soon as she came in,
and our eyes first met, we knew.' Can
what is given so randomly matter?

It has to, or we're bust, and life is nothing
but genomes joggling between dark and dust,
soiled carryout cartons in the gutter,
instant clichés coined and proudly quoted,
and tea sipped dourly behind lace curtains by noted
connoisseurs of bread and butter,
while, half heard, the TV news
says, 'India's captain soon left, out for a duck'.

Rajshahi

Osim and Soheli, Mahmum and Asit
down by the Ganges where the grey mud

sucking at sunset matched my grey hair, grey shoes
you are a combination that can't lose,

in memory, if not in fact. In time
and out of time, you hire a boat —
small fish in the bilges as the sun goes down
I sit astern like emperor or clown.

There is no other sun than this red ball,
no other life than this: breath's all we'll get.
Sage old and ardent youth are now confused
I'm using you, and by you I am used....

For what, though? Oh, of all things I prefer
things used and worn, as Brecht said, but I see
lads at the starting point, all sleek and new
(that's Yeats) and wonder what I offer you.

Hope? Like the blazing pull that wee left-handed
bat played on the strath as we drove here: splendid
as Sobers or as Gower in their primes....
I fear that lad, though, will endure hard times.

six unrecorded, life reduced to mud —
But, oh, those vivid pictures on rickshaws.
Bright sans on poor women's bodies gloat,
as we do, on the Ganges, just afloat.

For a few takas as sun sets we get
a lakh of rupees, red and glowing wealth.
Mud washes down the river towards ocean
as we delight in motion and emotion.

