

FOCUS

A Day to Remember

by Lawrence Lifschultz

What had happened differed from the familiar turmoil of the fractious bourgeoisie politics of the Pakistani past and Bangladesh's early years. An uncertain number of soldiers claiming an allegiance to socialist principles and with firm popular roots in Bangladesh's Liberation War had stepped forward to declare a different agenda.

In the years which followed the 7th of November 1975 there would be many who would go over the day's events and its aftermath trying to discern the path taken by the powerful wind which blew across their lives that cool autumn day. In prisons across Bangladesh men waited to see if they would survive. And, as they waited, some in solitary confinement, they thought of the 7th November, examining it hour by hour, indeed minute by minute.

As secret tribunals assembled and galleys were built, men remembered their hopes. A few sat patiently convinced that the walls of their prisons would be broken by a new wave of attacks led by their comrades beyond the ramparts. Some soberly prepared for the harsh years of imprisonment and pain which still lay ahead of them. Outside the prison gates a perception gathered that an usual revolt had occurred which gravely frightened Bengal's upper classes in a manner they were never accustomed to, nor prepared to accept without a battle to the death.

What had happened differed from the familiar turmoil of the fractious bourgeoisie politics of the Pakistani past and Bangladesh's early years. An uncertain number of soldiers claiming an allegiance to socialist principles and with firm popular roots in Bangladesh's Liberation War had stepped forward to declare a different agenda. They denounced the coups and bloodletting of the preceding months where senior military officers had led (or been linked to) a multiplicity of factions with essentially conservative programs and friendly benefactors in the foreign intelligence community.

The initiative for the 7th November Uprising came from the armed wing of the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD). It proposed for the first time the existence of the Bhopi Shaikh Sangstha (Revolutionary Soldiers Organization) and the Bhopi Gono Bahini (People's Revolutionary Army). Both organizations were made up of men who had been radicalized as leaders or members of the Mukti Bahini in 1971. Independence in their view represented only half the battle. In their judgment there was little purpose to independence if it merely reproduced the same social structure that had hitherto existed in Pakistan.

Indeed, the emergence of Bangladesh had been, in part, a consequence of Pakistan's history of "immiserating growth". Azizur Rahman Khan and Keith Griffin had noted in their pioneering study for the ILO that the dramatic rates of economic growth in the countries they studied across Asia, even among the so-called "success" stories, meant anything but rising real incomes for the vast majority of their citizens. At the time the November 7th Uprising took place the ILO found that the proportion of people living in Bangladesh below what it termed the "absolute poverty" level, defined as 1,935 calories a day, rose from 40.2 per cent in 1963-64 to 78.5 per cent of the population in 1973-74. Defining an even more severe category known as the "extreme poverty" level of 1,720 calories, the ILO stated that in the same decade (1963-73) the proportion below this level had risen from 5.2 per cent to 42.1 per cent.

What was so distinctive about Bangladesh in this period from other Asian economies was that the wealthy unremittingly increased the proportion of their share of the national income even as average living standards fell. "Only in Bangladesh have average incomes fallen," wrote Khan and Griffin. "And, the interesting question there is how despite the decline in the average, the upper income groups were able to improve their living standards. In a sense, Bangladesh is the most dramatic illustration of what is happening in the rest of Asia...where average incomes have increased, the poor have tended to become poorer and the rich richer: in Bangladesh, where the average incomes have fallen, the rich have, nevertheless, become richer while the incomes of the poor have fallen faster than the average."

Perhaps, in this context it was hardly an irrational matter to challenge the economic paradigm which had yielded such dismal results. Indeed, the question the November 7th Uprising posed in dramatic form was whether or not there was a rational way out of the impasse of deepening economic misery. What would it be? More of the same? Would revolutionary socialism in one of the poorest countries on earth take hold or would a path of capitalist development based on the largesse of the United States and the plans of the World Bank prevail?

In my view, confronting this question was the underlying imperative of the uprising and the political forces which set it in motion. Yet, it was crushed and brutally suppressed by forces led by General Ziaur Rahman. Leaders of the uprising and their supporters were hunted down and imprisoned. Key figures, like Colonel Abu Taher, were secretly tried and executed. For those in Bangladesh, particularly a new generation, who are still concerned with their country's future and even now hope to establish a society which will guarantee basic fundamental principles of social justice and democracy, it is important today to recall the events which took place over two decades ago. It is a period of history with lessons worth assimilating.

In 1979 I published a book entitled *Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution* which was promptly banned in Bangladesh. It was conceived as a first, but not final account of the events which gave rise to November 7th. It was written in the immediate aftermath of Taher's secret trial and execution. Other than the few who heard his testimony inside the prison's courtroom, his statement before the tribunal had been kept secret. Taher had been denied a public trial because the public's reaction was feared. Like any man he deserved a fair trial. Like many he was denied one. He also deserved to have been heard. He had the right to express publicly the convictions behind his actions. This too he was denied. Had the public been in a position to hear or read the words he spoke at his trial, then there is little likelihood that the authorities would have been able to carry out their pre-determined sentence.

The courage, heroism, and quality of sacrifice which was observed among those who acted on November 7th, including many rank and file soldiers, will always stand out as one of the distinguishing legacies of

the revolt. In the years ahead many would die or be taken to prison as the consequences of the rebellion unraveled. However, another legacy exists which must be squarely faced and has been avoided too long. It has been the lack of any serious effort to analyze the defeat of the social and political forces which were brought into play on the 7th November. This, of course, is not a work to be undertaken by a foreign reporter. Clearly, participants should publish their own memoirs and reflections. A collective silence has existed for too long.

There are many areas where further inquiry and debate are needed. Perhaps this writer might suggest a few for consideration. Most obvious, of course, was the tactical arrangement entered into on November 7th with General Ziaur Rahman as the rebellion developed and spread. These events are described in some detail in *The Unfinished Revolution*. As is well known, Zia was under detention on November 7th, and in desperation for his own life he appealed to Taher through intermediaries to act to secure his release. Indeed, embracing Taher, Zia would claim before a gathering of soldiers that it was Taher who had saved his life. The gratitude would be short-lived.

But, the encounter between the two men and the deadly breach which subsequently occurred represented only the surface expression of much deeper conflicting forces. What is important to ask is why a tactical arrangement was entered into at all between these two sides. Clearly, each thought they would be able to utilize the other for their own purpose, if only temporarily. From the perspective of the JSD what was the concept behind its timing and action? Moreover, what was its overall operational strategy and objective?

The JSD made an assessment of Ziaur Rahman which from their standpoint proved to be catastrophically inaccurate. It may be said, however, that there were some grounds in the early and mid-seventies to believe that Zia might free himself from the confines of his class, and the classical traditions of privileges accorded to a military officer in the praetorian regimes of the Third World. According to one figure in the JSD, who was one of the individuals responsible for maintaining a regular liaison with Zia,

"We had kept in close contact with him. These links had been forged as comrades-in-arms during the Liberation War when the overriding circumstances of the war unified us in resistance. Whatever differences existed about the future were submerged in the contingencies of the war. We tried to make our assessment of Zia in the period after independence to see if at any stage he might play a progressive role. Besides myself, Taher kept in close contact with Zia through the developing crisis of the early 1970s and what we considered to be a ripening revolutionary situation in

1974-75. "If our assessment of Zia proved wrong, it was not based solely on ignorant speculation. We had some grounds for our view. To give you an example. One evening in 1974 when I sat with Zia at his home in the cantonment he told me a story of a journey he had taken in the 1960s. He had taken a senior military officer from West Pakistan on a tour into an interior area by boat. One evening as they pulled up along the river bank they were approached by a group of local villagers. These people were half starved and clothed in rags. Of course, this is not an unfamiliar sight in our country. Who has not seen it? But, life was not this miserable in most areas of West Pakistan, and the visitor was taken aback at the extreme conditions he saw."

There followed a discussion between Zia and his superior officer about what could be done to change the miserable lives of such people. Zia expressed a guarded but familiar nationalism, saying that East Pakistan, having a majority of the population, needed to have its fair share of national resources for economic development. "But, you see," Zia then said to me, "I also understood looking at those starving souls it was not only a question of 'nationalism'. I realized back then that in our situation only socialism could change the misery of these people's lives."

"It was because of statements like these that we thought Zia might play a 'progressive' role, if necessary conditions arose. This was not only my assessment, but also Taher's who knew him better than I did. As it proved, this was a big mistake."

In 1974-75 amidst a sea of conflicting currents Zia was an uncertain figure, perhaps himself, not knowing in which direction his life and commitments would flow. When the hour of decision came, however, he chose to follow the familiar and conventional route.

But, the issues posed by the insurrection of November 7th will not seriously be confronted if the question is reduced to the behaviour of Ziaur Rahman. Indeed, such a focus would merely be an escape from serious analysis. If the JSD had acted on November 7th with certain goals and objectives, it should have been prepared for a number of contingencies. It was not. Why it was not raises a series of harsh and controversial questions particularly for those within JSD as an organization or tendency on the left. Most of these questions have never been squarely faced up to by those who were involved.

As a journalist in the years since I first reported these events, I have tried to reexamine what occurred based on interviews with former participants. This became possible once the prisons opened up and survivors emerged after the nightmare of the repression. But, I have not been in a position to conduct the kind of research which is required. This should be done by others who are in a better position to do so. If at all

possible it should be done outside the narrow borders of factional self-justification. This is where historical scholarship is required. I, however, have come to a few tentative conclusions of my own. I emphasize the word 'tentative'. It is often asked what precisely was the JSD attempting on November 7th when it ignited the simmering revolt. Were they attempting to seize political power for their own organization or did they have another goal in mind? My conclusion is that they recognized that they were not organizationally in a position to seize power. They were not foolish enough to overestimate their strength to this degree. Many of their cadres and rank and file members were already in prison. As far as I have been able to gather, the leadership of the JSD did believe that it was in a position to create the first stage of a major opening for itself which would have ultimately been consolidated at a later point.

The objective of the 7th was



November 7, 1975: Dhaka street scene.

layed by several months, while an interim provisional government held uncertain power. But, the question in historical retrospect, is whether from the perspective of the JSD, its organizational preparations were sufficiently developed to achieve even its minimum objectives when it acted on November 7th. This question has several dimensions to it and undoubtedly will always be a subject of dispute among the participants. Indeed, when I met Taher on November 15th, a week before his arrest, he discussed precisely this subject. I had arrived from India to report the crisis. I had not seen Taher for just over a year. The man who had once patiently explained to me the ancient history of irrigation in Bengal and the intricacies of modern flood control, I now suddenly encountered as a leading figure of a revolutionary uprising.

In our discussion Taher emphasized that the pace of events had pressed them into early action. He said that by their own estimate they anticipated that

change in position by Ziaur Rahman or any other senior military officer would have been irrelevant. But, why this did not happen 'is the key question. There are no easy or ready made answers. Some say that those who were assigned important responsibilities failed to carry out their designated tasks. Others argue that between November 3, the day of Khaled Mosharraf's coup d'etat, and the 7th was too short a period in which to make adequate preparations. They argue the JSD, whatever the pressures, should have shown disciplined restraint and waited.

Five years later when most of its leadership had been released from prison, there was a noticeable lack of capacity at the higher levels of the organization to come to terms with what had happened. After the trauma of years in prison, the dark memories of mass executions in 1977, and the experience of the jail killings following prison revolts in Khulna and elsewhere, it would be no easy task to emerge from the enormous strains of such a nightmare of repression to begin again. Yet, any political movement which was unable to evaluate its own theoretical conceptions and the experience of its practice, including traumatic setbacks, would not be able to successfully regroup and advance.

As they met again for the first time since the uprising, there was in fact an acute inability to re-examine the details of the past, take account of the defeat, and to reemerge within the existing political terrain with a new programme and a fresh vitality. Senior figures such as Sirajul Alam Khan resigned rather than give a detailed account of their role. Other leading personalities were forced out because they had become personally compromised in their relations with the state authorities or other political groups.

In part, this was the result of a planned intent of various security agencies who had made a diligent effort to destroy those who were incorruptible and to corrupt those who were susceptible. It was a familiar pattern, but perhaps even more significantly, the second and third tier leadership, which included many of the most honestly dedicated of the organization's membership, was unable in the immediate aftermath of their release from prison to stand back from their earlier mentors and reconstitute the organization under a new leadership which could reestablish a relevant and principled political presence. As a consequence, a brave and dramatic chapter in the radical politics of Bengal had effectively come to a close.

To understand the degree to which they persist and the level to which Bangladesh has descended, one only has to read an article on Bangladesh which appeared in *The New York Times*, the leading newspaper of the United States. *The Times* reporter described Shafia Khatun, a fourteen year old child, as having "made a pioneering journey from rural poverty to a low-paying job in a crowded garment factory" in Dhaka. Perhaps, only *The New York Times* could perceive the transition from a landless peasant into an impoverished worker as being a "pioneering journey."

The report states that "the labour of women" like Shafia Khatun is a "boon" to Bangladesh. She earns 377 taka a month to work in Dickensian labour conditions which in the 19th century were legally banned in Europe and the United States, not only for children but also for adults. Yet, today it is Western firms that promote these operations in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the post-colonial societies of the Third World. Shafia Khatun's employer, Redwan Ahmed of Saleha Garments, described his workers as "bred to subservience", prepared to work for \$13 a month, and to "accept harsh conditions and long hours without complaint." One researcher reports how "factory owners sometimes lock their doors to keep women at their places for overtime work" and then "frequently short changed...the wages due them." Due to an export trade based at this level of wages *The Times* claims that "planners [in Bangladesh] now dare to talk with guarded hope of industrialization."

Although *The Times* reporter will not remember, there are those who do recall the early days after independence when a different set of planners talked of industrial development on a different basis and within a completely different social framework than exists today. Having lived under the sway of industrial capital based in West Pakistan, it seems that Bangladesh made the break only to industrialize on terms set down by the dominant states in the world market. As *The Times* story put it:

"The garment boom began only recently when the United States opened its quotas to Bangladesh. America now takes 85 per cent of the country's garments. Clothing exports to the United States grew from \$45 million in 1984 to more than \$300 million in 1988, making Bangladesh the sixth-largest supplier of apparel to America."

The author has been South Asia Correspondent of the Far Eastern Economic Review. He has written extensively on Asian and European affairs for *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *Diplomatique*, *the BBC* and *the Nation*.

শুভ উদ্বোধন

বিশ্ব বিখ্যাত জাপানী মিতসুবিশি ক্যান্টার ও বি এম বাস



RANGS GROUP

Commercial Vehicle Division
113-116 OLD AIRPORT ROAD DHAKA-1215 Phone: 325001-4, 9129536-8, 9130141

Dealers:

- | | | | |
|--|---|--|---|
| NAZMEEN TRADING
House # 4, Road # 11/1
Mirpur 10/B, Dhaka -
Phone: 801876 | MITSUBU AUTO ENG.
96, North Jatrabari,
Dhaka.
Phone: 011863181 | PROME MOTORS
1 Palash Pur
Shatkhira
Phone: 3883 | BENIMOY AUTO
Poshari Mansion
Jawtola, Bogura
Phone: 4177 |
|--|---|--|---|



CREATING TOGETHER