

Bangladesh: A Rancorous Encounter with its History!

by M. Rashiduzzaman

We are at the threshold where partisan claims to history will be a dwindling capital for any group or individual that would exclusively count on it. Bangladesh cannot reproduce the past according to the partisan wishes and the changing political events, however catastrophic they might be; nor is it necessary for a healthy unfolding of national awareness.

BANGLADESH has just celebrated its 27th birthday, but the nation has not yet been able to come to terms with its own history! Strangely divided between the partisan claims and counter-claims of the past, it has been difficult to make out what was the fact and what was a presumption, a put-down, a rhetoric, a witch-hunt or an emotion without an even-handed unpiling of the compelling evidences. Regrettably, the politicians and their cohorts have used the events gone by to serve their slanted goals, and tendentious vocabulary, and the worst of all, their perceived history has been cavalierly used as the legitimizing façade to adore some as heroes and scorn others as the villains. Such a politicized historical imagination and a morbid fixation on the past have produced more hagiography, demonology or victimology than a searching historiography. The bifurcated history and the rancorous encounter with its past have polarized the nation, and put it at a risk.

Both during the 1971 anti-Pakistan liberation movement and the first three and half years in post-independent Bangladesh, the ruling Awami League occupied the vantage ground to dictate history. Soon after its independence a paradigm shift exploded in Bangladesh where, ominously, the intolerant edge of the new historical posture marked the beginning of the divide that dawned upon the nation. The reinvented, unilateral and reified narratives were more, what the post-modern thinkers call, a retrospective data fitting, not objectively verified and intellectually coherent historical precepts. By the available accounts, under the shadow of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's charismatic personality in the early years of the nation, Bangladesh gave birth to a

leader-dominated historical conception which indeed continued through the succeeding regimes.

Both the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jatiya Party (JP), emerging from the military turned civilian regimes, which ruled Bangladesh alternatively most of the time from the later part of the 1970's through early 1996, were largely non-ideological in their historical coloration. Both the parties were basically nationalistic but they did not anchor the national consciousness exclusively on Bengali language and culture. The BNP proposed that the citizens of Bangladesh would be known as Bangladeshis instead of Bengalis that the Awami League did not accept; and the debate over who is a Bangladeshi has simmered since then. More importantly, it offered a new historical claim with General Ziaur Rahman (Zia) at the center. For the BNP, it was Zia who had not only declared the independence for Bangladesh but took upon the leadership at the momentous hour of history when the politicians were disarrayed, and the fury of the Pakistani military crackdown was unleashed upon the people.

To the Awami Leaguers, on the other hand, Zia was only a "reader" of Mujib's declaration for independence, and the historical debate between the AL and the BNP intensified since 1996 when the AL returned to power, after a 21-year hiatus, under Sheikh Hasina's leadership. Clear as it is, whatever happened in 1971 remains a live issue in Bangladesh politics today; even after 27 years, the narratives of the past events were transmitted and aggressively brought alive either to bolster or malign groups, leaders, individuals and their upholders in the present. History in Bangladesh is not a "cancelled cheque", but it is

more like money in the bank for those who claimed, verified or unverified, that they were on the winning side in 1971!

It's the historical avowals and counter-avowals that bring forth the confrontation between the perceived "pro-liberation" and "nationalist" forces in Bangladesh. Those are the two contrasting and polarizing political trends that tinge the Bangladeshi historical landscape and they also generate the most powerful historical idiosyncrasies rumbling through the political precincts of Bangladesh. But those obsessive appellations are unable to offer an unbiased and clear meaning about what they stand for, and how would they differentiate from each other. Obviously, it is not a convincing political logic for someone to support Bangladesh independence but not to be a nationalist, and it is equally illogical to assert as a nationalist, but remain opposed to the Bangladeshi sovereignty.

The AL and the BNP, claiming to be pro-liberation and nationalists respectively, have fought crusade after crusade blaming each other over who did what in 1971. For most people however, such historical zealotry and ponderous self-projection of some groups and individuals created a crony-patriotism and a truncated nationalism in Bangladesh. Those self-glorifying and unbending prescriptions of the past cared little for a conceptual framework, and their wily rhetoric was an escape from the pressing reality at the present. Both the main parties (AL & BNP) were

engaged in cursing each other for what happened in the past, and they fought over the historical events, the political icons and the national heroes as if they were the exclusive partisan largesse. But it was not only the politicians who conjured history, the politically motivated writers also grabbed a piece of the action by narrating the past as if it was a linear progression between heaven and hell; and disappointingly, numerous academic historians became polemical chroniclers than inquiring scholars.

Whether it is the role of Mujib or Zia, it has been "politically incorrect" to evaluate them by dispassionate historiographers. All that we have is either a hagiography or an exhortation of those leaders! Both the Awami League and the BNP venerated "Bangabandhu" Mujib and "Shahid" Zia, their respective deceased leaders, not for an "ancestor-worship"; indeed, the idolization of the dead leaders comes as a convenient resource to get power as well as to keep it, if they are already in power. When their respective detractors spurn those leaders, it is also politically motivated. Unfortunately, free-wheeling opportunism, power politics, political hyperbole, unresearched eulogy and conflicting claims by the leaders and the activists had a greater sway than the accuracy and consistency of the freedom movement, and its genuine participants.

Soon after independence, the Bengali nationalists' prime target was the history-challenging theory that there were two

nations in the sub-continent, one Hindu and the other Muslim, championed by Mr. M. A. Jinnah and supported by millions, who wanted a Muslim-majority homeland in the Indian sub-continent. Several Bangladeshi historians stated that the Hindu-Muslim differences in Bengal were banal, which did not call for a partition along religious lines. However, an emerging bunch of historians has confirmed that the 1947 partition of Bengal came out of the two-nation theory of the Muslims as it was also the outcome of the Hindu communalists, and their unwillingness to yield to the prospect of an undivided Bengal dominated by the Muslim majority. A plethora of books, monographs, pamphlets, anecdotes, memorabilia authored by the university teachers, creative writers, bureaucrats, patriotically inspired historians, politicians, columnists and journalists endeavored to redraw the historiographical vision, which really started a fresh strain of politicized historical narratives in Bangladesh.

Frequently maligned as the "anti-liberation" persuasion, the Muslim separatism was the other leading strand of Bangladeshi historical thinking, which was not identical with the growing storm of religious orthodoxy in many countries. It is not the guiding political gospel, nor is it poised to take over power in Bangladesh, but it remained a resilient and ubiquitous reality that few could deny. Both Islam, the majority religion as well as

Bangla, the common linguistic estuary shared between the Muslims and Hindus in Bangladesh and West Bengal, India, have bedeviled the Bangladeshi the quintessential conflict between lingo-centric secularism and the Muslim consciousness. Most of the Islamically inclined groups and their leaders charged that post-independence politicians and their intellectual supporters have disfigured the Muslim history of Bangladesh, and they also insist that the Muslim nationalists have been the victims of unfounded accusations and snide portrayal.

Both the BNP and the JP acknowledged and facilitated the rise of the rightwing political groups largely banished in independent Bangladesh. Reversing its earlier policy, the Awami League, under Hasina's leadership, also conceded to the Muslim sensitivities during the 1996-election campaign, and promised not to offend them in the future. The fact that Islamic sentiments cast aside in 1971 resurfaced and struck back with a counter-history of Bangladesh corroborates the theory that group identities and their historical claims are not fixed and stagnant.

Indeed, a nation may oscillate between different layers of history and identities, instead of being trapped by a single consciousness, and one may be fiercely competing with the other. They can be quiescent or awake, and they can go back and forth depending on time and circumstances. It also proves that selective recitals of

the past, as it happened in Bangladesh, could be incomplete, counter-productive, mercenary and divisive for the nation.

Prominent Bangladeshi leaders and their intellectual cohorts periodically reminded that Bangladesh was possible only through "blood" and "revolution", not by a constitutional process. Such a revolutionary imagination contributed to a conceptual difficulty that not only misguided the people, but also confounded the historical interpretation. Several Bangladeshi groups and their leaders, who looked upon themselves as the radical inheritors, lost their sight as constitutional actors working through a pluralistic democracy where one group cannot question another group's (or individual's) patriotism and scorn their ideological convictions. Truly, the 1971 independence struggle was propelled by divergent elements although the AL provided the general leadership whose historical role is undeniable. No doubt that the confrontation was bloody but its main threads were more nationalistic than extremely ideological. Disturbed by the radical overtone in the early years of Bangladesh, Mr. Abul Mansoor Ahmad, an elderly Awami League statesman and an astute political thinker warned his party not to confuse parliamentary government with a revolutionary leadership.

Both in the political arena and in the academia, we have often fought over the capricious periodization of Bangladesh past that does not survive the test of historiography. For example, it is historically arbitrary to dismiss the 1947 freedom from the British through Pakistan as all but an extended colonialism although former East Pakistan had suffered blatant economic disparities, political domination and lastly

the brutal repression in 1971 by West Pakistan. The events and circumstances that led to Bangladesh independence could not retroactively dismiss the history of 1947. Much of the middle class that leads Bangladesh today owes its genesis during the period from 1947 to 1971, a historical fact grossly neglected in the post-Bangladesh narratives of the past. More for the sake of historical authenticity, as some non-partisan observers pointed it out, Bangladesh had two historically crucial dates, one was in 1947 and the other was in 1971. Partly, those conceptual confusions, and the illogical assumptions crept in because of our leaders' own failings as analytical thinkers.

Conclusion: We are at the threshold where partisan claims to history will be a dwindling capital for any group or individual that would exclusively count on it. Bangladesh cannot reproduce the past according to the partisan wishes and the changing political events, however catastrophic they might be; nor is it necessary for a healthy unfolding of national awareness. Indeed the narrative structure of Bangladesh history should be open, flexible, and willing to accommodate diversity to reflect the past as it happened, not as it is imagined. Let the professional historians work outside the political manipulation and the bureaucratic paradigm and retrieve objective accounts of the past; otherwise, Bangladeshi historiography will be lost in the blackhole of partisan myths, historical McCarthyism, invented memory and self-righteousness driven by unproven hypotheses, vendettas and the welter of unsubstantiated inferences.

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Remembering a Nobel Laureate

Prof Salam and his Center for Theoretical Physics

by Dr M Muniruzzaman

(The second death anniversary of Prof Abdus Salam was commemorated recently.)

WHAT more can you write about Professor Abdus Salam that has not been written many times over? Born in 29 January 1926 in Jhang, Pakistan Professor Salam was one of the greatest exponents of Physics this century. A boy prodigy, who published his first Mathematics paper at the age of 16, obtained an M.A. in Mathematics from the Punjab University, standing first in all the examinations. A scholarship took him to St John's College, Cambridge where he obtained a B.A. (Honours 1946-49) and became a Wrangler (Double first in Mathematics and Physics) without much difficulty. He obtained his Ph.D. in Theoretical Physics from the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge (1952). It is said that the flower gardens of St John's so fascinated Salam that he was later on to turn down an offer of a fellowship to Trinity College — considered the best college in Britain, more for aesthetic reasons than anything else. Incidentally Salam completed his Ph.D. in five months and was also awarded the Smith's Prize for the most outstanding predoctoral contribution to Physics in 1950.

He then returned to Punjab to be appointed Professor at the Lahore Government College and then the Punjab University. The scientific isolation that he suffered forced him to accept a Lectureship at Cambridge in 1954. In 1957 he was appointed a full Professor of Theoretical Physics at the Imperial College of Science and Technology, London. He was also the youngest Fellow of the Royal Society at the time.

Fired by his own unhappy

tor. The first session of the Scientific Council was chaired by J R Oppenheimer. The Associate Membership Scheme was launched to curb brain drain.

After four years the office moved to its present location in Miramare. To quote Rushworth M Kidder: *The International Center for Theoretical Physics perches on a pine covered slope overlooking the sapphire-blue Adriatic.* To mark the occasion the Symposium on Contemporary Physics was held where eminent physicists like H A Bethe, PAM Dirac, W Heisenberg, E Wigner, O Klein, E Lifshitz amongst others were invited. 1971 marks the beginning of an important event at ICTP. The shift from a purely theoretical to Applied Physics was introduced through the College on Computing as a Language of Physics. 1975 marked another turn of events in the short life of ICTP. The *ad hoc* committee chaired by Prof L Van Hove suggested that Biophysics and Earth Sciences be added to the curriculum and that the computing facilities be further strengthened.

One of the most important events in the life of ICTP occurred in 1979 when Professor Salam shared the Nobel Prize in Physics with Professor Sheldon Glashow and Professor Steven Weinberg. They were awarded the Nobel Prize for gauge unification of weak and electromagnetic interactions — the unified force is called electroweak force — a name given to it by Salam; predicted the existence of weak neutral currents and W, Z particles before their experimental discovery.

During the period 1982-87 the Galileo Guest House was built the Training and Research

scientific meeting Frontiers in Physics, High Technology and Mathematics was a review of some of the most important achievements in sciences in the last 25 years was held.

The Laboratory for Laser and Optical Fibers started its activities (1990) and many offices including the Library moved to the new wing of the Main Building. The Plasma Research Group was established. During 91-92, the Diploma Course in High Energy Physics, Condensed Matter Physics and Mathematics started. Two new research groups were established — Structure and Non-Linear Dynamics of the Earth (SAND) and Aeronomy and Radiopropagation (ARP). In 1993 Professor Salam resigned from the directorship of the ICTP and is appointed President. In 1995 Professor Miguel Angel Virasoro of Argentina is appointed new Director. On 21 November 1996 Professor Salam passed away at Oxford after a long illness and is buried in Pakistan. On 19-22 November the following year a Memorial meeting was held to commemorate Abdus Salam and an official ceremony was held to rename the Center. The Abdus Salam International Center for Theoretical Physics.

I had the privilege of knowing Professor Salam from my Imperial College days (1973-78). But it was in Trieste that I came to know him better. I can still recall the first time I met him in Trieste. It was during a lunch break at a workshop I was attending in the



Professor Salam with the writer's three-year old son. The photograph was taken in the late eighties at his office

in touch with the TRIL people. I accompanied by my wife, our two and a half year old son came from UK to join the Programme in '86. My association with ICTP started with my attendance at the workshop in 1981. Over the years I was a Junior Associate, worked under the TRIL Programme and then became a Regular Associate.

THE campus of ICTP is made up of five buildings, the Main Building (MB), the Enrico Fermi Building (EFB), the Microprocessor Laboratory (ML), The Galileo Guest House (GGH) and the Adriatic House (AGH).

The MB houses the large Lecture Hall, Seminar Rooms, Computing facilities and the offices of the Research Groups. The offices of the Director, the Deputy Director, offices for the Scientists and Staff as well as the cafeteria and bar are located in this building. All administrative and financial services, the TRIL Programme, Associates and Federation Scheme have their offices at the EFB. The ML is located in its own building. The GGH and AGH can accommodate 100 and 150 scientists respectively. The ICTP Library can boast of one of the finest collections

of Physics, Mathematics and related books and journals. Facilities of the library include access to various bibliographic databases, on line catalogue of books and journals accessible from any office on campus and world wide, access to electronic journals, daily display of newly arrived journals and reports, weekly display of new books inter library loans and document library etc.

However, one of the most attractive additions to the library in recent years is a room marked Professor Salam's Room. The room has been reconstructed to look like his office. On the table are 8 bound volumes of his work containing about 250 publications on Physics between the years 1943-93. The walls are lined with his personal books in shelves and in one of them is a framed picture of Einstein. In another a card from L. Landau shows a fox catching fish with its tail. A devout Muslim Professor Salam's Room contains a large number of quotations from the Holy Koran engraved in ceramic plates, wall mats or framed. Included amongst these is an inscription of the 16th century Persian prayer that says: *He cried: O Lord, work a miracle. Salam loved miracles are possible provided one works hard enough for*

them. Other personal belongings in the room are his walking sticks, hats, spectacles etc.

The walls of the adjacent room are filled with many framed degrees, awards given to him by various Societies, organizations and countries the world over.

On the opposite walls of the main entrance to the library are two shelves displaying some of Professor Salam's private collection. These include among other things the Nobel Certificate and a replica of the Nobel Medalion.

Professor Salam was elected member of scientific academies and societies in twenty-four countries and received a large number of honorary degrees. He was made an honorary KBE in 1989. He received nine medals for his contribution towards peace and promotion of international collaboration. Besides representing Pakistan in a large number of international forums he was also the Chief Scientific Adviser to the President of Pakistan between 1961-1974. Looking at these rooms one cannot fail to wonder how could a man in one life-time achieve so much.

THE Programmes of ICTP covers a wide spectrum of scientific disciplines. From the most sophisticated subjects like ultimate structure of elementary particles to more practical do-

newly established Physics of Weather and Climate (PWC). The Synchrotron Radiation Group will start its activities in 1999 and is aimed at bringing the researchers from ELLETRA (Synchrotron Light Source, located at Basovizza, outside Trieste) and ICTP into joint collaboration.

High level training courses, workshop, conferences and topical meetings take place throughout the year.

The TRIL Programme started in 1983, gives the Third World Scientists an opportunity to spend periods ranging from a few months to one year at Italian research laboratories, universities, governmental and industrial institutions, which operate in different branches of Physics.

The ICTP organises each year a one year advanced training in the fields of Condensed Matter Physics, High Energy Physics and Mathematics. The Diploma Programme consists of several basic and advanced courses given by experts in the fields. The minimum qualification for applicants is a degree equivalent to an M Sc or a very good B Sc in Physics or Mathematics.

One of the reasons for which the Center was created was to check the brain drain. The response of ICTP to this necessity was the creation of Associate Membership Scheme. Included in it are the Junior Associate, Regular Associate, Senior As-

sociate and the newly formed Group Associate to be launched in 1999. In addition to individuals coming and spending some time at the Center, the Federation Scheme was also introduced with the idea that universities could have regular access to the facilities of the Center.

The World-Wide-Web (WWW) server allows one to search and retrieve general information regarding the many scientific activities carried out at ICTP through the WWW Protocol. The ICTP WWW server URL (Uniform Resource Locator) is <http://www.ictp.trieste.it/>

The Abdus Salam ICTP has been a source of scientific inspiration to many of us over the years. Let us hope it continues to be so for the future generation. Let me end this article by quoting from Salam: *The widening gap in economics and influence between the nations*

of the South and the North is essentially the science and technology gap. My sincere hope is that whichever political party is in power will make sufficient investments in science and technology to minimise that expanding gap.

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The article is based on information

available at the ICTP Library,

in Ideals and Realities

(Selected Essays of Abdus

Salam).



The Main Building of the Abdus Salam ICTP in Miramare

ness at having to choose between Physics and Pakistan, he was determined to find a way of making it possible for those like him to continue working for his country while still remaining first rate scientists. It was thus in 1960 that he conceived the idea of setting up an International Center for Theoretical Physics.

OCTOBER 5, 1964 is a memorable day for ICTP for on that day the Center was launched with programmes in High Energy, Nuclear and Plasma Physics. Its offices were temporarily housed at 6, Piazza Oberdan in the city with Professor Salam as its founder direc-

in Italian Laboratories Programme popularly known as the TRIL Programme was launched, the Dirac Medal of the ICTP was instituted and the High Temperature Superconductivity Laboratory (HTS Lab.) was established.

The twenty-fifth anniversary, celebration of ICTP was held in 1989. In the formal ceremony the Prime Minister of Italy On. Giulio Andreotti, the Director General of IAEA Dr Hans Blix, 5 Nobel laureates and all those who contributed to the growth of ICTP were present. Professor Salam was presented with the key of the New Wing of the Main Building. The



Part of Professor Salam's private collection on display at the Library

mains like earthquake prediction, atmospheric dynamics and modeling and microprocessor. The activities of the Center include several components (1) research (2) high level training courses (3) training in Italian laboratories (4) diploma programme (5) external activities and (6) book and equipment donation programme.

The current research groups at ICTP are, High Energy (HE), Condensed Matter (CM), Mathematics, Structure and Non-Linear Dynamics of the Earth (SAND), Networking and Radio-communication and the

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The ICTP and the Third World Academy of Sciences (TWAS) have, since their establishment initiated a scheme for providing developing countries with books, journals and equipment through the Book and Equipment Donation Pro-

gramme. The Center has made appeals to libraries, publishing companies, laboratories and individuals requesting them to donate any books, journals and equipment they no longer need, with the Center acting as a go-between.

Under the ICTP External Activities Programme, support is given to activities initiated by scientists in the Third World. The Center offers assistance to hold international and regional scientific meetings in the Third World in the fields of Physics and Mathematics, support the Visiting/Consultant Programme and finance long term research projects.