



Seize the Dialogue Opportunity

It is painful for us that on an occasion like the Victory Day when a triumphant feeling should be the unalloyed mood of the nation we are having to strike a cynical note. Let's say this to our political leaders: We don't see any light at the end of the tunnel. Please show us some light before it is too late, before we write off your capacity for political reconciliation, an issue which is basically of your making which you must solve yourselves as a matter of supreme obligation to the popular aspirations generated by the creation of Bangladesh 28 years ago. We are headed for a political disaster, with it an economic collapse and thence we court social destabilisation with a breakdown of law and order—the sequences are pretty much predictable.

This is how the field situation is rapidly unfolding before us: the Chittagong municipal polls look destined to be boycotted by the opposition, politics of destruction and violence are set to rule the roost as the Election Commission goes through the motions and the opposition in a body rejects the poll results out of hand. Even if a mayor gets elected, albeit on a low turn-out of votes he will be, whatever he does, received with disdain by the opposition. The very purpose behind the municipal election which is the delivery of efficient civic service to the people will be defeated. The question therefore is, must we persist in accomplishing the rituals of democracy rather than the substance of it.

Whenever this axiomatic truth was ignored in the past the government of the day suffered, not only the backlash internally but also loss of face abroad. In fact, the government's capacity to function diminishes with each such election, to say nothing of the damage inflicted on the democratic system itself.

Having concluded that the current stalemate has all the makings of an irreversible dead-end in national politics we counsel the government and the opposition to immediately engage themselves in a dialogue process. In fact, so desperate is the situation that our instant advice to the opposition would be to seize the flicker of an opportunity for talks being just about kindled by AL leader Mohd. Nasir at the instance of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

We have some specific suggestions to offer by way of building upon the new prospect for a dialogue thrown in by the Prime Minister, who in a happy co-incidence, has also been invited to an Iftar party being given by opposition leader Begum Zia. Either the Prime Minister or the AL Secretary General should write to her or his counterpart in the BNP offering a dialogue in concrete terms. Since the Prime Minister is on record having said that she was open to talks on any agenda and at any time and place, all the demands that the opposition are pressing for should stand included in the list, no questions asked. Here we urge the opposition not to give any preconditions to their presence at the talks. We readily endorse the opposition's demand for electoral reform, especially election tribunal reform which brooks no delay whatsoever as we see it. But on their clamour for resignation of the government and early elections we have to say that at best one and a half years' time is left to the AL's government's tenure warranting that a realistic revision of the position is made by the opposition.

It is within the precincts of parliament that the spade-work for dialogue should be done, perhaps at the joint advisory committee level. Since the opposition members attend committee sessions despite their boycott of a JS session, what we need is an extended attention to the question of dialogue, although nothing will be as effective a confidence builder as the opposition's return to parliament.

For the AL's part it is of vital importance that they create the right ambience by avoiding the type of incident at Barisal in which they brutally fell upon opposition activists in a show of musclemantry.

For a better tomorrow

by Ekram Kabir

We have been impaired by our inability to get united. And so we are bewildered and confused. But surely not without hope for the future.

We still want the best for our country.

OUR elders told us a lot of things. Things that made us wonder at their strength, their courage, their commitment. They told us how they struggled under tyrants; protested; fought for the country's independence; triumphed and finally broke away from Pakistani subjection. That was twenty-eight years ago; to us it is a life-time. And as the clock ticked, Bangladesh, efficiently or awkwardly, has come a long way. But we the young hearts, who used to listen to our elders with admiration, are no longer mesmerised by what our fathers did during the war.

However, we still do wonder, but with 'doubt', at our older generation's nonchalant attitude towards the spirit of independence. An attitude of motionless submissiveness towards everything that fought against us. A sense of reluctance has crept in the valiant minds of the 1971 people. Values that guided the nation before and during the war do not seem to be working these days. Through the Seventies, Eighties and Nineties, penitent for power gripped the elders. The mistrust among them, sown a little after the war, has now grown to a proportion of no-return. Our national future sometimes looks bleaker than it was under occupation.

The change in attitude has surprised us during the past years and it continues to surprise us. However, if we had looked closely at the careers of our elders engaged in statecraft, perhaps we would have been less surprised. When the wartime generation began to steer, they did not have any 'vision' for the future of their Land of the Freedom. Our apprehension, not assumption, is that our forerunners have politically failed us. There were challenges before them, but no vision. They certainly had a dream when they got united in the battle field. But now they have no vision to show us. That is where our post-independence leaderships have failed. This

temperament perhaps has been diffused, to a great extent, among us. We have been impaired by our inability to get united. And so we are bewildered and confused. But surely not without hope for the future. We still want the best for our country, a vision that can be realised and, at the same time, based on our 'likings', 'needs' and of course 'wants'.

As we celebrate our Victory Day today, it is time to take stock of our past follies, present status and future plans. Today after twenty-eight years of independent polity, where are we? What have our leaders given us in terms of absolute 'independence'? Aren't we still grappling with poverty, low growth rate, illiteracy and lack of basic health care, joblessness, environmental catastrophe, an inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy and discrimination against women? All these phenomenal factors indicate that Bangladesh is one of the worst governed country in the world.

Issues like poverty, corruption, governance, and economics, military spending, gender discrimination and social injustices still remain unaddressed. Even after all this, we all want to see the elimination of poverty. We hope that Bangladesh will become at least a middle-income country. But our ambitions have so far failed to convince the planning echelons. If there has been any impact at all, the concerned are showing no concern. But a plan for the future for its honest implementation is imperative. There's a saying that the best way to predict the future is to invent it. Maybe we never tried to do so, but it is high time we do!

Efforts of the last twenty-eight years has not created a dent in poverty and therefore something must be done. The country's growth performance has to improve. We may take some lessons from our neighbours in East Asia, but policies

have to be ours. To do that, we need to invest in our people. In our approach to human capital, there have not been enough investments in education. Therefore we need to do so in meeting the challenges of the 21st century. We need higher economic growth to create a dent on poverty. We need to invest in our human resources. For the 21st century, there is no way out but to develop our human capital by adequate investments in the human resources. The skills required in the next century would be quite different from what we have known till now.

What is more, most of the problems today seem beyond control. But most of us are not in the driver's seat. Most are expecting someone else to do the work for us. This is unfortunate. The importance of the quality in leadership is absolutely essential for leaders not only in politics, but also in communities and in public and private organisations. Today's politics is not leadership-driven and also remote from the majority of the population. People do not know what their leaders are planning. But for a journey on which society will launch itself in future, freedom of information and transparency are essential to take the people into confidence. Unfortunately right now, we are even more preoccupied with the past, and wasting time. Let's do away with this destructive practice.

It is vital that we promote a 'culture of peace' through education, effective implementation of human rights, promotion of tolerance and cultural pluralism and a dialogue between all the components of society. Peace is not merely the absence of war, or order imposed by hegemony. Authentic peace is the positive peace which, according to the philosopher Spinoza, is born out of the strength of the soul, concord and justice.

There has to be a tomorrow for us—a better tomorrow which our elders never planned for us.

VICTORY DAY SPECIAL

Victory Day's call: Change our political culture

By Mahfuz Anam

At the doorstep of the 21st Century, when the rest of the world is preparing itself to welcome the wonders of information and biotechnological revolutions, we are retreating back into a medieval mind-set in which the only thing we seem to know is how to destroy rather than create, bring disharmony in place of co-operation, intensify rivalry instead of working together, indulge in propaganda and rhetoric instead of seeking knowledge and truth. We are moving towards self-defeat rather than self-regeneration.

dreams. One set of dreams was

of freeing our motherland. Of living in a country which will be our own. Nobody to tell us that we cannot speak in our mother tongue. Nobody to tell us which songs we can sing and which we cannot and how our women should dress. The other set of dreams dealt with building our country in democracy and social equality so that the whole world would look up and say, yes the Bangali nation, after centuries of subservience and exploitation, has finally arrived. I was recruited in the second batch of commissioned officers of the wartime Bangladesh Army during the last months of the war, and was still in training in an army camp in India when we heard the news of Pakistani surrender. It had been a nerve-wrecking wait for the nearly fifty of us over the proceeding few days. Will there be a massive resistance at Dhaka? Will our beautiful Dhaka city (at that time it was unbelievably so) be destroyed by the Pakistanis as a parting act of vengeance? Will our parents and loved ones be alive if there is a do-or-die fight in the capital city? These anxious questions made us glued to the radio for every bit of news. The announcement of surrender of the Pakistani army electrified our spirit and filled us with joy and happiness that had never felt in our lives before or since. The sense of relief and of pride made everyone of us cry like children. With tears rolling down our cheeks like streams of joy we shouted 'Joy Bangla' over and over again hugging and embracing all who

were near us. We started singing 'Amar Sonar Bangla' spontaneously and kept on singing for hours without stopping. Suddenly we became aware that our 'Swadhin Sonar Bangla' was a reality and that centuries old dream of the Bengalis had finally become a reality. A magnificent pride swept through us in the realisation that we were now free and were citizens of an independent country, and was equal to all other free and independent people of the world.

Words fail me to express what

feelings we had on that day and in the days that followed. It was a dream come true like no other dream we ever had or would have.

It is hard to recreate today

the spirit, the joy, the happiness, the pride, the sense of achievement, the elevated self-esteem and the overwhelming sense of glory of that day, and of the period of years that followed. A significant part of that exquisite feeling still remains.

But our glorious achievement stands burdened with the knowledge that while one set of our dreams had been fulfilled

on this day 28 years ago, we have miserably failed to realise the other set of our dreams—that of building our 'Sonar Bangla'.

Why have we failed? The

biggest frustration of the present is that each of us will

have a different answer to that question, depending on which side of the political divide we belong to. Most of us have lost the capacity to take a comprehensive view of things, accepts facts for what they are and not try to manipulate them like soft

clay to be shaped to suit our convenient versions of history. When we complain today of history being distorted most often we mean 'My role has not been glorified enough'. When that is done because we have come to power, our complain ceases and is taken up by another who follows to political power and is able to effect changes in the official versions of things. That is how we respect history. Our shortcomings are many, but the biggest and the most debilitating one is our incapacity to identify the causes of our failure with some element of objectivity and sincerity. We seem to believe that if we are sufficient in number, and if we can shout our beliefs with vigour and consistency over a period of time then it acquires the status of facts, and in time becomes history. Otherwise, how can there be so much difference and so many divergent views about our liberation war, and about who did what and when? Why should it be so difficult to establish facts? 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