

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. Nasim 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 coincidence, 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 musclemanship.

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 subjugation. That was twenty-eight years ago; to us it is a lifetime. And as the clock ticked, Bangladesh, efficiently or awkwardly, has come a long way. But we the young heroes, 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 "disbelief", at our older generation's nonchalant attitude towards the spirit of independence. An attitude of nonchalance, submission towards everything they fought against has set in. Over the years, 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, rampant for power gripped the leaders. 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 changes 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. But without vision, we do not have a future. There has to be a vision, 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 economies, military spending, gender discrimination and so on, 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 is 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

THERE is boundless joy and tremendous pride in today's Victory Day. Twenty-eight years back we won our liberation war, with the assistance of the Indian people and its armed forces. We recall with gratitude the sacrifice of our three million martyrs—civilians and freedom fighters who were killed by the Pakistani army in one of the worst cases of genocide in the post-Second World War period. We gratefully acknowledge the sacrifice of the 4,000 Indian soldiers who laid down their lives to help us in liberating our country. We recall with pride the courage and determination of our freedom fighters.

However there is a tinge of sadness in our celebrations today. The question that is tearing us from within is what have we done with 28 years of our independent existence? More than a quarter of century is not an insignificant span of time. What has happened to all the promises we made to our people and to ourselves? No more colonial powers to blame. No more Pakistani oppression to blame. We have been the proud owners of a free and independent country. We have fought against the British and then against the Pakistanis on the basis of certain principles. We shared our dreams with our people when we urged them to join the anti-colonial struggle in the pre-partition days and the freedom struggle in the sixties and seventies. Whatever happened to those dreams? Have we redeemed the promises we made to our younger generation? Are our poor and the deprived any better off than they were under the oppressors? Is it the only difference that now they suffer and beg for survival in independent Bangladesh instead of the oppressed East Pakistan or colonised Bengal? These are the questions we must ask today and be courageous enough to answer and not hide under convenient rhetoric.

For those of us who had the honour and privilege of being freedom fighters, this day 28 years ago marked the culmination of two sets of magnificent

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 Bangladeshi 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 preceding few days. Will there be a massive resistance at Dhaka? Will our beautiful Dhaka city (at that time it was unbelievably so) be despoiled 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 we 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 *Suadhin 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 time 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 version 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 give logical causes of our failure with some element of objectivity and sincerity. We seem to think that truth has no relevance. Facts are playthings for us to be used when it suits us and to be set aside when it does not. 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 differences 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? But unfortunately in our case, it is. Yes, there have been some deliberate and planned distortion of our history. These were done to suit the political and ideological purposes of certain well-known forces that opposed everything we ever did for the interest of our people. They opposed the Language Movement of '52, the 21-point programme of the Jukta Front in '54, anti-Ayub struggle in the late fifties and early sixties, the six-point

programme of Bangabandhu, and later the 11-point movement of the students in mid- and late-sixties. Finally these forces opposed our Liberation War, and till today have not uttered a single word of apology for their role in '71. However the tragedy is that distortions have not been confined to these hands alone. When our chances came we did not show a very generous attitude towards those who were not our particular heroes. We had our own versions and prejudices. When others had lied, we were of course telling the truth but selectively so. Ours was not the whole truth, and constituted a special type of distortion that came through selective emphasis and deliberate omission.

This playing with history, and some sort of fundamental disregard for truth, lies at the root of many of our political problems of today. This political culture must be changed. One of the offshoot of our destructive political culture is the refusal by our two political parties to acknowledge the rightful place of its two leaders, and the constant attempt to glorify one's own hero and denigrate that of the other. This has caused so much bitterness in our politics. If history was allowed the necessary freedom to make its own judgement and assign whatever rightful place our respective heroes truthfully deserved then we would have solved this rivalry long time ago. But as we said before, when facts are mere playthings history is confused with propaganda. In such circumstances truth stands banished and logic

is confused with brute force. So where do we go on from here? 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.

Our only chance of moving away from the present stranglehold of poverty is to change our present political culture. We profess to serve the people but in reality exploit them most ruthlessly under one convenient slogan after another. We must realise that what we are indulging in today is dead-end politics. There is no light at the end of the political tunnel into which we seem to have been thrown. Please take lessons from other countries. They are progressing because their leaders are joining hands with their opponents for the betterment of their nation as a whole. Take the recent peace in Ireland. Or the grand compromise worked out between the Blacks and the Whites in South Africa. Nearer home take the case of Cambodia where two opposing forces, who took up arms against one another, are now in the government. Most recently in Indonesia Magawati emerged as by far the most popular leader of the country. Yet she agreed to the second position because that brought greater unity among all the democratic forces. We are not the only country in the world practising democracy with two bitter opponents. There are plenty of others. But for the good of the people they do make compromises. Why is people's welfare so remote from the mind of our leaders? In the name of the martyrs we appeal to all our leaders, please change the present political culture that is driving us to the very brink of disaster.

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.

1971—the untold story

Kuldip Nayar writes from New Delhi

WASHINGTON has released some secret papers concerning the birth of Bangladesh, which will be 28 years old in the next few days. India's role has also been commented upon. As early as April 16, 1971, eight and a half months before Bangladesh became independent, a paper entitled, 'The Reassessment of Pakistan-American Relations', said: "The Pakistan government will not only have to maintain itself in power by force in the East but will have to deal with complicated constitutional problems in the West."

This assessment was supported by "a special intelligence estimate," which was sent by the State Department to President Nixon. The intelligence estimate said: "There is little if any long-term prospect for a politically united Pakistan except through the continued use of force."

The State Department's own recommendation was that relations with West Pakistan be maintained "while not alienating East Pakistan Bengali leaders." It was stated then (June 5, 1971): "In the long run they may be running their own show separately or with the loosest possible lines to West Pakistan."

There are many telegrams and memos containing the repeated requests by General Yahya Khan, then the President of Pakistan, to America to intervene. The reply of the White House was: "Foreign involvement would create new problems and compound difficulties for securing an ultimate settlement. We have been in touch with the Government of India and have discussed the implications of the present situation. We have stressed the need for restraint," said the White House. During May itself the Secretary of State sent a memorandum to President Nixon warning against a "possible India-Pakistan war."

The released papers reveal that America was worried not only about East Pakistan but also about the disintegration of Pakistan. An assessment note said: "The four regions of West Pakistan have also been seeking enhanced autonomy. Pressures for constitutional change from the constituent units, notably the Northwest Frontier and the Sind, are likely to increase. These may place additional strains on the political viability of the Yahya government. While we do not anticipate demands for independence from the units of West Pakistan, there will be growing demands for a transfer of power to elected representatives. In the case of Punjab and Sind, the radical and militantly anti-Indian People's Party of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto would be the immediate beneficiary of a return to parliamentary government. If these pressures are not met, there could be violence and disturbance of the severity which brought down the Ayub government in 1969."

Apparently Bhutto was not popular with Washington. In a telegram to the State Department informed its Ambassador in Islamabad and New Delhi: "As you know, Bhutto does not enjoy high degrees of popularity here, although we recognise importance taking account of his present influence as well as future political potential in event representative government restored at national and/or provincial levels."

There is a vignette of Bhutto by the American embassy in Islamabad. It said: "It seems that every time Mr. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto moves into the Imperial Hotel (at Lahore), a certain matron who controls a stable of girls moves in at the same time. Each evening the girls go to Mr. Bhutto's suite where they perform songs and dances."

The intelligence note dated September 27, 1971, said that Yahya Khan went to Tehran to appeal to the Shah to use every influence to arrange a summit meeting between himself and Mrs. Gandhi in order to avert war as he had been rebuffed by Mrs. Gandhi. The State Department's own assessment was: "It seems implausible, however, that Yahya went to Tehran solely to try to revive the idea of conciliatory meetings. While the subject may have come up in his talks with the Shah, Yahya's probable primary purpose was to seek reassurance of Iranian support."

Probably, the most interesting part is the exchange of correspondence between the Indian Prime Minister and President Nixon. She wrote on December 15 that "the tragic war, which is continuing, could have been averted if during the nine months prior to Pakistan's attack on us on December 3 the great leaders of the world had paid some attention to the fact of revolt, tried to see the reality of the situation and searched for a genuine basis for reconciliation. I wrote letters along these lines. I undertook a tour in quest of peace at a time when it was extremely difficult to level, in the hope of presenting to some leaders of the world the situation as I saw it. It was heartbreaking to find that while there was sympathy for the poor refugees, the disease itself was ignored. We could also have been avoided if the power, influence and authority of all the states and above all the United States, had got Sheikh Mujibur Rahman released."

"Instead," she said, "we were told that a civilian administration was being installed. Everyone knows that this civilian administration was a farce; today the force has turned into a tragedy. Lip service was paid to

the need for a political solution, but not a single word of help was taken to bring this about. Instead, the rulers of West Pakistan went ahead holding farcical elections to seats which had been arbitrarily declared vacant....

"We are asked what we want. We seek nothing for ourselves. We do not want any territory of what was East Pakistan and now constitutes Bangladesh. We do not want any territory of West Pakistan. We do not want peace with Pakistan. But we will give up its ceaseless and yet pointless agitation of the past 24 years over Kashmir. Are they willing to give up their hate campaign posture of perpetual hostility towards India? How many times in the last 24 years have my father and I offered a pact of non aggression to Pakistan? It is a matter of record history that each time such offer was made, Pakistan rejected it out of hand."

In reply, President Nixon wrote: "The United States did not condone Pakistan's use of force in March of this year, but this action by the Pakistan government does not justify the use of force by India to dismember another state, particularly when there were proposals available to you and your government which could have started the process of military disengagement and political accommodation. Your insistence that political accommodation could only come by immediate release of Mujibur Rahman amounted to a precondition which the Government of India was fully aware could not be accepted by the other side. It is for

these reasons, Madam Prime Minister, that United States officials have said privately and publicly that India bears the main responsibility for brooding the hostilities in the subcontinent. The subsequent disregard of the Indian government of the repeated calls of the UN for a ceasefire and withdrawal of military forces confirm this judgement."

One vainly searched in the papers President Nixon's order to the Seventh Fleet, led by the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier *Enterprise*, to go to the Bay of Bengal. News of this first came from Moscow which had monitored a message to the Seventh Fleet in the Gulf of Tonkin, off the coast of North Vietnam. The Indian Embassy at Washington soon after confirmed it, a senior US marine officer had unwittingly revealed it in a conversation with an Indian Embassy official. An Arab diplomat in New Delhi also openly talked about the Fleet moving to the Indian Ocean.

American columnist Jack Anderson said the US wanted (a) to compel India to divert both ships and planes to shadow the US Task Force; (b) to weaken India's blockade against 'East Pakistan'; (c) to divert the Indian aircraft, *Vikrant*, to its military mission; and (d) to force India to keep planes on advance alert, thus reducing their operation against Pakistani ground troops. "Evacuation of American citizens was clearly a secondary mission," Anderson wrote, "adopted more as the justification than the reason for the naval move."

The question that awaits answer

by Nazrul Islam

THIS is the last Victory Day of this century and millennium, though this statement indulges in a little bit of inaccuracy. Bangladesh is now almost thirty years old. Sometimes it is hard to believe that so many years have passed by since December 1971. Those days of December are probably the most glorious days of the entire history of the Bengalee people.

There is no harm in recognizing that Bengalee is not basically an arms-bearing martial race. In this respect they are different from say the Sikhs, the Scottish highlanders, or the early settlers of the American West. This fact was used in Pakistan times to deny Bengalees their due share and stature in the armed forces. However, Bengalees are no less daring a nation than many others, even though they do not have the tradition of bearing arms.

In the long history of the nation, this daring and bravery surfaced on many occasions. Isha Khan defeated the Mughal commander Man Singh. Tiptu turned put up a valiant fight against the British; the Indian War of Independence of 1857 started from the sipoy barracks in Bengal; the tradition of a

civilian-based armed resistance against the British gained ground in Bengal than in any other province of India, including Punjab; Master-da Surja Sen led the raid on the British ordnance depot in Chittagong in order to wage an armed struggle; and Khudiram gave his life in the gallows.

Even the women displayed courage and valour. Birangana Sokhina fought in an open battle. Prtilata Waddedar was a member of Surja Sen's team.

However, it is during the Bangladesh War of Liberation of 1971 that the Bengalee nation's valiance and daring could come out in a large scale and in full force. Almost the whole nation became involved in an armed resistance. The fact that they did not bear arms before did not hinder thousands of young Bengalees from participating in the Liberation War. Hundreds of instances of valor and courage were set. An innumerable number of Bengalees gave their lives. Others suffered and paid terrible costs. The War of Liberation of 1971 proved that ordinary Bengalees could grab arms and fight for their rights if such a necessity arose. This armed struggle represents the pinnacle of the honour and

dignity of the Bengalee nation. The victory of 1971 was not only a victory of a year-long war of liberation, it was a victory of millennial significance.

There is a saying that "Revolution devours its own." One just wishes that this were less true of the Bangladesh revolution. It remains a sad fact of our national history that Bangladesh devoured the leaders of its own revolution. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other major civilian leaders of the Bangladesh revolution lost their lives within only a few years after that glorious victory of December 1971. A process of annihilation of the military leaders of Bangladesh revolution also unfolded in the Bangladesh armed forces. As a result of this tragic process, most of the sector commanders and decorated officers of the Liberation War were killed. Thus the glory of 1971 victory was quickly followed by a tragic and ignominious chapter of the nation's history. The ignominy of annihilation of the leaders of Bangladesh revolution was also of millennial proportion.

It is of some solace that these killings are now being tried. The trial of Bangabandhu murder case has been completed. The trial of the killing of the four national leaders in Dhaka jail has proceeded to some extent. The trials of the killings of the military officers have also been resumed.

However, the larger question will remain. Why did Bangladesh revolution slip in the direction of these tragedies? Despite the saying quoted above, not all revolutions devour their leaders. The American Revolution did not end in decimation of its leaders. Nor did such decimation happen to many other revolutions. Why did then Bangladesh revolution gravitate to such tragedies?

The facts are known. The trial of Bangabandhu murder case brought to fore many more details. The main facts surrounding the killings of the national leaders and the freedom fighter military officers including General Ziaur Rahman are also known. But beyond the superficiality of facts, what are the larger social tectonic plates whose movements found reflection in those facts? How to view these facts from a longer, historical and a wider, global perspective?

It is this deep analysis of the Bangladesh revolution and its aftermath that is still lacking. Yet this analysis is important

because of another reason. The Bangladesh revolution has not only failed its original leaders, it has also proved inadequately successful in fulfilling the dreams that the common people attached to this revolution. The dream of a clean, healthy, equitable and prosperous Bangladesh that arose in mind in those sunny days of December 1971 still remains largely unfulfilled even though almost three decades have passed. Where did the revolution go wrong? Where were the weaknesses? Clearly, decimation of its leaders and disappointing socio-economic achievement of Bangladesh revolution are related facts. This makes an insightful analysis of the Bangladesh revolution all the more essential.

An anniversary always induces one to rise above the minutiae of the present and take a longer view of the past and the future. An anniversary coinciding with start of a new century and a new millennium is even more conducive to doing so. Let's hope that the finest minds of Bangladesh will take up the above task and thus help the nation to find its path to a glorious future.

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