

# VICTORY DAY SPECIAL

## In praise of unsung heroes

by Shah Husain Imam

It is now conceded on all hands though that the sung heroes' achievements are but a culmination of the 'unsung heroes' signal contributions to the Liberation War effort. Our minds have been so taken up by the refrainous recital of acts of valour by persons readily recognisable for their socio-political standing and access to publicity that the 'nondescript' freedom fighters at best tend to draw a sympathetic reference, and only in passing.

WAR memorials all over the world almost without an exception have an epitaph on them reading something close to: "Dedicated to the memory of known and unknown soldiers who laid down their lives so that..." In some cases a visitor overseas might have come across an entirely exclusive variety of 'unknown soldiers' tombs without any individual's name, identity or an entry for him or her inscribed on them.

The Savar National Memorial has a commemorative reference to unnamed freedom fighters, but not so the other smaller ones occasionally come by. Besides, we do not have exclusive tombs for the unknown martyrs. That is as far as the dead ones went, but when it came to remembering the surviving freedom fighters in the books and crannies of the country who had been a tower of strength for the entire war effort we have given a very poor account of ourselves. Yet, immediately upon birth of Bangladesh giving them their due was not a difficult job, which by default has now assumed something of a needle-in-the-haystack exercise. Population of Bangladesh was 75 million and there could have been at the most one crore plus households. Liberation War saga was the sum-total of family experiences during the nine-month-long struggle. It was easy to make out a comprehensive and conclusive list of valiant fighters only if we had approached the matter at the community level at the right time without allowing any controversy of politics to creep in.

So, basically, what could have been a celebratory glory of a people's war fought to a resounding success through a class-neutral participation and, to that extent highly serviceable in terms of nation-building efforts subsequently, lamentably fragmented into credit ownership conflicts be-

tween elitist, cultural, political or politicised groups. The chief casualty of this process has been the memory of a vast majority of behind-the-scenes warriors for whom the marshes of Bangladesh were their workplaces.

It is now conceded on all hands though that the sung heroes' achievements are but a culmination of the 'unsung heroes' signal contributions to the Liberation War effort. Our minds have been so taken up by the refrainous recital of acts of valour by persons readily recognisable for their socio-political standing and access to publicity that the 'nondescript' freedom fighters at best tend to draw a sympathetic reference, and only in passing.

What has been even a worse indictment on our indifferent attitude and treatment towards them is the interminable publication of stories in newspapers exposing the abysmal plight of one-time freedom fighters and their siblings to a point where they have to take recourse to beggary in public.

The startling 'Muktikatha' revelations of hitherto unpublished deeds of raw courage and passionate devotion to the cause of freedom bear testimony to our monumental failure in giving them their rightful place in the society, and of course, history as well. However, with this valuable documentation done, it should be possible now to bridge the gap in information and thereby enrich the history of freedom struggle that much more.

This is not to overlook, however, a certain spurt being given by the ruling Awami League in seeking out the forgotten species of freedom fighters from the remote rural recesses: Taramon, Bhanuessa Begum, Zeenat Ara and Kakon Bibi were presented over television but there must be many more like them deserving recognition, perhaps in their twilight years. One wishes the political overtone had been avoided in deference to the all-party legacy

that the triumph of the liberation war was.

They did all the risk-taking job, driven solely by patriotism, topped by a motherly touch at a time of grave dangers to the children's lives. They provided shelter, food, medicines and care to freedom fighters in the guerilla war conditions that they were huddled. In many cases, they relayed information from camp to camp, carried basketful of ammunition, rather innocuously on their heads, delivering it to Muktiyoddhas who had run out of it. They hid weapons and helped the freedom fighters to be in touch with each other and with their families. Some four hundred who were especially trained in the use of fire arms actually fought the Pakistani regulars shoulder to shoulder with their male counterparts.

The inspirational role they played by organising cultural squads and visiting war camps to enthral the freedom fighters with their patriotic songs was a big contribution indeed to the steadying of their morale in extremely trying circumstances. It is a sad commentary on gender discrimination that in recognising the contributions of women we dovetailed their identity to that of their male relatives engaged in the war. We described them as 'mother, wife, sister or lover' of this or that freedom fighter or some of them merely as 'Biran-gana', thereby shamelessly glossing over their real status as Muktiyoddhas in their own right.

The Pentagon papers of early December, 1971 spoke of the field situation in Bangladesh having gone in favour of

Bangladesh's Liberation War effort prompting Nixon and Kissinger to relent on their opposition to it. In getting the field situation onto that convincing level or forcing the Pakistani occupation forces into a hedgehog position, the unsung heroes played a role of genuine importance no doubt. General Arora's remark to the effect that the freedom fighters of Bangladesh were capable of liberating their country on their own strength, only that it would have taken a longer time, does also remind us of the yeoman's services of our little-known heroes.

Everything was grist to the Liberation War mill — revolutionary aplomb, martial flair, diplomatic ingenuity and sagacity, valour of officers and soldiers defecting from the Pakistani set-ups, enthusiasm of students, peasants and workers and the selfless service of ordinary folks who acted as the catalysts afield. It is the last category of forgotten but not necessarily a lost generation that brought into fusion the logistic loose ends to whom we must pay our homage in a special way to make good on our indifference to them.

When they fought they had no political colour and that is what mattered then and should matter now. Patriotism is politically colourless and it can not be any political party's monopoly either — be it AL or BNP or the Left.

In the ultimate analysis, it is the 'nondescript' generation's patriotism which should be regarded as a constant factor, our fixed asset, as it were, usable whenever the nation is in danger.

## The night before surrender

by Tawfiq Aziz Khan

A few days later I met some of the pilots at a shop on Elephant Road. I asked them why did they destroy my little house. One of them, a Squadron Leader smiled and said, "We had information that Gen. Niazi was hiding in a house at Elephant Road painted yellow." No wonder almost all yellow coloured buildings in the area came under fire from the Indian Air Force that day.

THE wailing of sirens heralded the beginning of another fearful day. The cries for caution and safety continued throughout the day almost every day since the final showdown began a dozen days ago. The airspace was secured by the Indian fliers soon after the war had started and the clear blue sky became the playground for the superior flying machines of the Indian Air Force. There was none left for surveillance even, confrontation remained a far cry. The Russian-built MIGs flew very low, almost within a touching distance, if anyone cared to do so. The Sabres rattled no more as their presence was wiped out in a short time, very effectively. The Canberra bombers flew high above keeping a safe distance from the Ack Ack guns positioned around the Tejgaon airport and other vital installations of the occupation forces. But the targets were not missed as the billowing smoke against the afternoon winter sun reassured the trapped people of liberty and freedom waiting round the corner. And as the SU7s swooped on the runway firing rockets their tails glistened against the setting sun. Spirits soared in dread at atmosphere as the aircrafts flew unchanged bringing hope to the curfewed crowd.

It was the morning of 15 December. Another gloomy day dawned on the lives of the people eagerly awaiting a brighter morning. Even in a tense and uncertain situation the daily chores of life started. And then the siren wailed to warn people of the impending air attack. Suddenly a MIG 21 appeared on the eastern sky, olive green and ominous, dressed in full ar-

moury. A small pall of smoke lost in the sky and then a huge blast. The rocket had just missed the target and hit a nearby house, a mere fifty yards away from my small home under a huge mango tree. The MIGs changed directions and soon started their sorties from the south pounding the Mohsin Hall and whizzing past our shelter in the north where about 24 of our near and dear ones were lodged. The attack continued for about an hour as the children cried for food and the elders sought mercy from the Almighty. People dared come out of their hidings despite the curfew and vigilance by the enemy troops as the air attack stopped suddenly. The dangers of further attacks looming large we decided to leave our home for a safer place nearby.

We left the house with our eighteen-month-old son and on the Elephant Road met many of our relatives and friends running scared for safe shelters. On the Mirpur Road my friend Henry and his wife spotted us and took us with them to their house at Green Road.

On a short winter day the MIGs returned after a short break. This time from the west to the east. From the balcony of my friend's house I thought the Indians were wasting their rockets on the old powerhouse. But surprise was in store for us. As darkness approached a couple of Canberras completed their mission over the Dhaka Cantonment and returned safely to their base. By now the war was 12 days old and the Pakistanis were fatigued and in disarray. Their morale was low and as Niazi claimed at later stages he was under orders to

surrender.

That night in a dimly-lit room we switched on the radio and listened to the Calcutta station of the All India Radio. This was a completely new Debudul Bandopadhyay, the Bangla news reader of Calcutta station who had been a source of inspiration for us throughout the nine months of our struggle for liberation from the occupation forces. But Debudul was not alone. The script he used to read in his inimitable style was regularly written by no other person than Pronobesh Sen, a class-friend of mine from the school days at Pabna and then an assistant news editor at Calcutta station. Debudul inspired with the definite knowledge of a Pakistani debacle told us of the rising of a new sun on the eastern horizon of Bangladesh the next morning heralding the advent of a new country, independent and sovereign. He spoke of hope and aspirations of a free nation in a voice that was trembling with emotion and expectation as he went through the Sangbad Parikrama script penned by Pronobesh. Even though there was no direct mention of surrender of the Pakistan Army, it was obvious that he was pointing towards one and that inspired my friend Henry to shout at invisible Niazi: 'Surrender, surrender you scoundrel!'

As I went to bed with a pounding heart, the sounds from a monoplane hovering over the house could not dampen the spirit though we knew about the deaths of the orphans in Tejgaon from bombs dropped from this very plane by the Pakistanis. This was, perhaps the longest night of my life.

The Pakistan Radio played only sad music the next morning as Agha Mohammad Yahia Khan, the perpetually drunk president of Pakistan, announced in a grave voice that the 'War was on and it will continue'. A fleet of army helicopters appeared on the horizon around midday on December 16 carrying General Jacobs and his team from the Eastern Command of India and landed at Dhaka Cantonment to discuss the terms and modalities of surrender. From late morning jeeps of the occupation army flying white flags drove at breakneck speed towards the Cantonment to save their lives from the wrath of the people.

Gradually citizens came out of their hidings and houses, shouted slogans and embraced each other in sheer ecstasy as the days of horrendous suspense were over. By evening everybody was on the roads rejoicing and celebrating the victory over a treacherous enemy.

We returned home on the morning of December 17 accompanied by freedom fighter Jibon and his comrades only to find our small house shattered by the shells from the MIGs. It was not the old powerhouse, but our tin-shed, which got the shelling on the 15th afternoon. A few days later I met some of the pilots at a shop on Elephant Road. I asked them why did they destroy my little house. One of them, a Squadron Leader smiled and said, "We had information that Gen. Niazi was hiding in a house at Elephant Road painted yellow."

No wonder almost all yellow coloured buildings in the area came under fire from the Indian Air Force that day.

## Darkest before dawn

by Navine Murshid

How is it that the very same people who stood by one another are today in a frantic frenzy to harm each other?

IT'S been twenty-eight years since December 16, 1971. It is a long time. This day marks one time in our history that depicted unity and love for fellow men. This is one time where we let go of differences and fought for a common goal of freedom, and won. This is one time when we proved our worth as a nation.

It is a long time. Yet, this is the only event where the whole nation was one; the only time when we were a nation in the true sense of the word. Now, why is that? Twenty-eight years is a long time.

Every year, this time around, we celebrate Victory Day. What do we celebrate? We celebrate man. But in this celebration, we find politics instead of simple love, compassion and respect for the martyrs.

Victory Day is a day beyond politics and we tend to forget that. Victory has been achieved not by a party or group but by the whole Bengali body; by the people who loved their language and motherland.

Bangabandhu is the Father of the Nation. He does not belong to any political party. True that in 1971 he was the leader of Awami League, but today he has transcended from being a political figure to a national figure. He is Father to all of us, not only those who are Awami League supporters. He is one, everyone, as citizens of the country, can take pride in.

Over the years, the political leaders have failed us miserably. We were forced to believe what our leaders told us. We saw Victory Day, not through the eyes of people who were actually there, but those who happened to govern the country. Victory day celebrations often became a tool to impress the government.

There have been arguments about who 'actually' made independence a reality. Anyone who was alive during the time would know. There's nothing to debate over this. No one can actually rewrite facts. Yet, in our country this is a major issue.

Today, the unity of the Bangladeshi people during the war, seems unreal. How is it that the very same people who fought for the war; the very same people who stood by one another; are today in a frantic frenzy to harm each other? Somewhere something has gone wrong. The phenomenon of love, compassion and trust has disappeared and somehow we cannot help but blame politics for this.

Politics achieved the impossible. It made fellow people hate one another; it took away lives

of many for no good reason; it made this a man eat man world and it made humanity suicidal. Today, we fail to distinguish right from wrong; we fail to understand what is good for us.

One day flows into another. And we find ourselves deeper into darkness, spreading darkness.

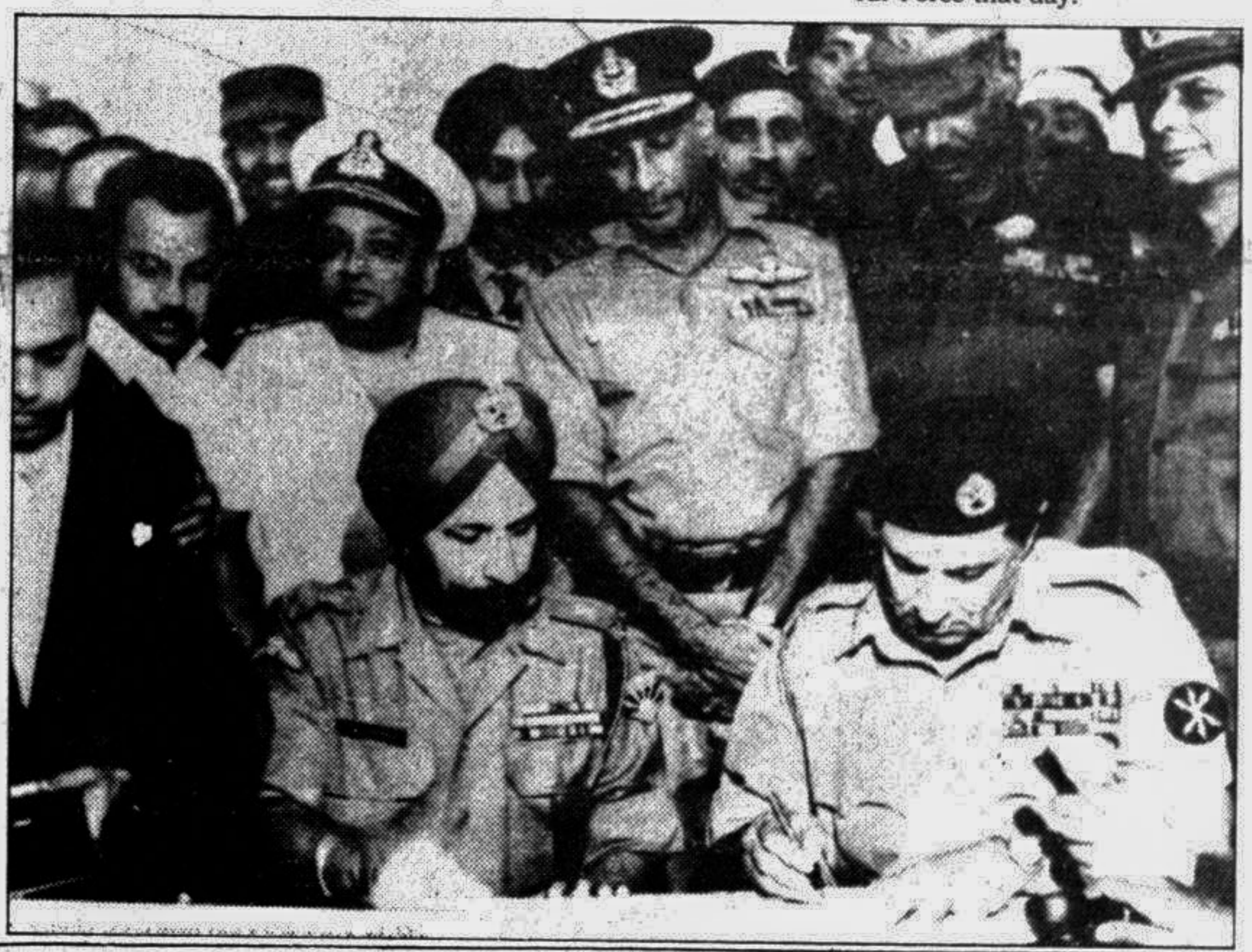
Perhaps the main cause of such turmoil is the lack of vision. Over the years we have promised many things, we have planned to make our country more developed, but we failed to implement anything. We are a nation good at words; good at promises. We are a nation, fickle-minded and treacherous. We know how to promise, but know not how to keep that promise.

After twenty-eight years, instead of progressing, we have managed to inch towards the pitfalls we created. The biggest irony is that we are practicing exactly what we opposed in 1971. Can we really say that we have paid tribute to the martyrs who lost life for us? We have only managed to prove that we are hypocrites.

They say that it is darkest before dawn. We only hope so!



The surrender at Race Course (now Suhrawardy Udyan), Dhaka, December 16, 1971 and signing of the document (right).



## Detering divisiveness

by Mir A Zaman

Admittedly, our failures have heavily outweighed our successes. Still, we will be judged by how we have dealt with our failures. Our greatest asset is our independence. We still have an independent land we call our home. Time is still there for us, especially our leaders, to learn from the mistakes and transform them into success in the future.

ment. Smiles, tears and fears flowed from collective sensitivity.

Now, twenty-eight years later, the nation stands torn apart by differences within. Differences that we have ourselves given rise to, at times, on issues of inconsequence. So obsessed

we, especially our political leaders, have become these days, that even the glorious war of liberation has been subjected to controversy.

To lionise one leader's contribution towards creation of Bangladesh, the politicians have tended to undermine others. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, General Ziaur Rahman, Colonel Abu Taher have been dragged into partisan bickering in total disregard for their unquestionable role leading to the birth of the country as an independent geopolitical entity. In our blind partisan preoccupation, we have failed to evaluate their contribution and appreciate their vision of an independent Bangladesh. On the whole, division, not the union millions of people sacrificed their lives for, has been the harvest of 28 years since independence.

And difference rooted at times in irrational impulses has blurred the greater goal of liberation war. Democracy is, thus, far from being institutionalised. Fortunately, unlike many other nations, we have had a second chance, even after our pursuit for a society based on justice, equity for all and secularism got derailed by military interference. Years of autocratic rule by military junta in the garb of democracy failed to blow out the people's inherent commitment to democratic values.

Thus came yet another mass upsurge and an end to nine years of autocratic regime. Parliamentary system of governance was once again established. However, petty partisanship was not buried. Conse-

quently, the very concept of parliamentary democracy was undermined. Irresponsible behaviour from legislators on both sides of the aisle led to frequent walk-outs and eventually boycott of sessions. Difference of opinion was taken out to the streets. Hartals, processions and other agitation programmes took precedence over democratic norms of settling disputes on the floor of the House. Parliament was rendered inoperative and normal socio-economic life came to a halt. The trend still continues. There has been a change of government but governance more or less remains similar. Once again, the parliament is faced with an uncertain future.

Political stand-off has had a spillage effect on life in general. Inadequate governance has occasioned rampant corruption and mismanagement at every nook and corner of the society. No light is visible at the end of the tunnel. At the same time, politicians have tirelessly tried to convince the citizenry with empty rhetoric. Cracks are apparent in almost every institution that we have. In every sector, the indicators have shown negative trend. Still, the political leaders remain indifferent. While the ruling party blame the opposition for destabilising the country, the latter harps on the now-familiar tone of the government compromising national interest at the behest of extraneous forces.

As their bitterness intensifies, it's the people who suffer most. Series of violent hartals and other agitation programmes have hurt them both directly in the form of damage to their person and property

and indirectly in the shape of debilitating the economy. Even worse, each and every public-interest issue has been politicised. For every lapse, the ruling party blames the opposition and vice versa, instead of even trying to figure out means out of the mire.

People's mandate has been subjected to total disregard. By resorting to unilateral boycott of polls and hardened position of dragging an elected government down through intense agitation programme, the opposition parties have, knowingly or unknowingly, denied the electorate the fundamental right to choose whom they want in power. Equally insulting has been the ruling party arrogance to take the people's mandate for granted. On the whole, people have been dissociated from the ruling process and, our recent experience shows, even from the electoral process. The three by-elections that we had were marked by painfully low voter turnout. Here lies the failure of the leaders and here lies buried the dreams of millions of martyrs.

Yet, our politicians remain ruefully reluctant to admit to their inadequacy and woefully adamant to put the blame on each other. Even the notion of consensus has been employed to breed difference, not inspire union.

Regardless of whether the nation started off on a wrong footing or not, the time has come for our political leaders to wake up to the fact that their indulgence in party-oriented politics has done the country and her people more harms and than good.

After 28 years of indepen-

dence, we are worse off than many other nations. On every count, Bangladesh today is at the wrong end. There are many people-oriented issues for the politicians to address and redress than the ones they have over the years concocted. Truth is: majority of the population still live below the poverty line. Truth is: most of them do not have one square meal a day. Truth is: barring a few, almost the entire population is outside any kind of healthcare coverage. Shooting unemployment, rising crime and terrorism, sagging economy, so on and so forth are the cruel realities the nation is faced with. These are the real issues, issues that should have overtaken the lofty ideas our political leaders are prone to dealing with.

Admittedly, our failures have heavily outweighed our successes. Still, we will be judged by how we have dealt with our failures. Our greatest asset is our independence. We still have an independent land we call our home. Time is still there for us, especially our leaders, to learn from the mistakes and transform them into success in the future.

To that end, however, the first step should be a reassessment of the past and put it in the right perspective. The politicians must muster the courage and sincerity to admit their mistakes, something that they are loathe to do in fear of losing credibility. Ironically, they fail to realise that admission of fault and inadequacy enhances, not undermines, one's image. That done, finding the right avenue to invest their energy and wisdom would be a matter of time.

On the threshold of a new millennium, the nation expects of them to have that realisation and to overcome conceit and arrogance to do properly what they are meant to do — serve the country and her people. The spirit and ideal of independence will be right there for them as the guiding star, burning bright as ever.



Jubilant freedom fighters after the victory.