

How Two Very Different Days Bring Back Memories of 1971

by Julian Francis

It is, I believe, quite natural and understandable to look back as we come to the end of this millennium and this century but for the new one we all need to have a greater resolve and commitment to make sure people like those existing precariously on Begun Tila find a better way in which to live.

LAST Wednesday, 15 December, in my capacity of representing the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Bangladesh, I joined the Honorary Treasurer of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, Mr Monir Hossain Khan, at a relief distribution of food for families camped very precariously on Begun Tila under Pallabi Thana in Mirpur.

This distribution was organised by the Dhaka City Unit of the Red Crescent Society. The people at Begun Tila, some 3,000 families I was told, previously lived in slums near to the High Court and Kamlapur Railway Station and have now been relocated near to government land which will be allocated to them soon for low-cost housing. Until then, they exist under blue plastic sheets supported by arched split bamboo supports. This is a low-lying flood-prone area and these little tents or huts are perched on the higher ground of Begun Tila. Many of the families do have breadwinners of some description or other because at this time of year construction work is going on in full swing and the Mirpur side of Dhaka continues to expand.

So, I got the feeling that the majority of families might have preferred something to help with the winter breeze which was beginning to blow across some of the water still standing nearby. Blankets and warm clothing will, I hope, be sent there as soon as possible, and it is hoped that more tube-wells can be installed on an emergency basis as there are only two or three to serve so many. Next day, early in the morning I had the privilege to join with President of Bangladesh, the Prime Minister, Government Ministers, as well as members of the Diplomatic Corps at the solemn occasion of remembering those who lost their lives in the Liberation War of 1971. The setting at the National Martyrs' Memorial was very peaceful and serene early on a winter's morning and the grounds were so very well kept. Later in the day I attended a reception given

by the President of Bangladesh at Bangabhaban which was also a beautifully organised event. These, then, were contrasting days both of which strongly reminded me of my work for Oxfam (UK) among the Bangladesh refugees in India in 1971, and also that as we approach the over-hyped new Millennium, there are still many vulnerable and disadvantaged people who need help and encouragement.

In 1971, Oxfam had a programme of supplementary assistance to some 500,000 refugees all around the border area — supplementary food for children, medical and sanitation facilities, clothing and blankets. The events of many months for many of us remain vividly etched in our memories, as if it was only yesterday. I remember the continuous digging of graves or organising cremations at the camps during the cholera epidemic: the heavy monsoon which made conditions in the camps so bad; and the irritating conjunctivitis which seemed to sweep throughout West Bengal at that time.

The inhabitants of Begun Tila in 1999 are living in conditions very similar to the refugee camps of 1971. I only hope they will be in better places at the onset of the monsoon in 2000. I remember how, in those days, we in Oxfam had great faith in the youth of India and those of the refugees and we shied away from bringing in teams of foreign doctors and nurses. Instead, we arranged that doctors from the Calcutta and Bombay Medical Colleges worked on a rota basis in the camps and the social workers we needed for other distribution and sanitation work came in large numbers from many different Gandhian organisations with which we worked in long-term development programmes elsewhere in India. The people who worked in my office and the large Oxfam warehouses were mostly refugees themselves who had come from Chittagong and all seemed to have been educated in the same school, St. Placid's. There are many things we learnt from the difficult days of 1971.

That was where the ORS was tried out quite widely. That was where at a camp at Gobardanga, near Calcutta, Oxfam pioneered their portable 'super toilet', a number of latrines which were linked to a large butyl rubber septic tank. Our attention was also diverted at the end of October 1971 by a devastating cyclone in Orissa. Again, the recent cyclone there brought other painful memories back.

However, above all, and through all of this, we learnt how important the self-dignity of people was, regardless of the conditions in which people were living. I remember that on 16 December 1971, I burst into tears with my Bangladeshi colleagues when I heard the news of the surrender and therefore victory. These were tears of relief and exhaustion as well as emotion, but we soon found that very hard work lay ahead.

How were organisations like Oxfam to work in war-torn Bangladesh where there were no channels like NGOs through which to work? I remember my first journey overland to Dhaka and being part of queues of thousands of Bangladeshi streaming home, past many burnt-out villages, in a remarkably emotionally charged atmosphere. I remember reaching Dhaka around midnight one day and driving slowly into a very quiet city and, exhausted, arriving at the Purbani Hotel with much relief. Soon, however, I became involved in sending thousands of tonnes of roofing materials and also negotiating the provision of new river ferries and the repairs of many more. We were also associated at the beginning of pioneering NGOs like BRAC and Gonoshasthaya Kendra, which today are both household names and whose work has been admired in many countries of the world.

And, of course, a very interesting memory of mine is the meeting I had with Sheikh Mujib, hardly two weeks after his return to Dhaka. I asked how a relatively small organisation like Oxfam could assist Bangladesh. "How did you come here?", he voiced boomed. I replied that I had driven overland from Calcutta. "Then, Siyam Francis works in Dhaka for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

All these memories of 1971 were triggered off by remembering the martyrs as well as my visit to Begun Tila which is very similar in many ways to one of those hundreds of refugee camps in which we worked. Many friends keep asking me to write all my memories down in some form or other. This, then, is a sample of some of them. I am sure it is clear from reading these few lines, to what extent my life has been enriched by the eventful times through I have lived. It is, I believe, quite natural and understandable to look back as we come to the end of this millennium and this century but for the new one we all need to have a greater resolve and commitment to make sure people like those existing precariously on Begun Tila find a better way in which to live.

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BANGLADESH'S protracted sanguinary War of Liberation had been the greatest single revolution of the century in the entire South Asia region. India and Pakistan achieved independence largely through consensus of their leadership with the British colonial overlords. As a result, the Union Jack was lowered and in its place the flags of the two sub-continental countries were hoisted almost automatically at the stroke of the midnight on August 14, 1947. But for Bangladesh, it was entirely a different saga. Bangladesh was the only country in the entire region whose people had to take up arms to wrest their independence. By any measuring rod, the 1971 War of Liberation had been a total armed revolution and encompassed the entire populace throughout the length and breadth of the landmass, which demonstrated their superior consciousness vis-a-vis the peoples of the other countries in the region.

The War of Liberation was triggered by the barbaric and brutal crackdown of the ruling junta in Islamabad on the unarmed democracy- and freedom-loving people of erstwhile East Pakistan when they resolutely stood for realising their clear and unequivocal verdict to have their rightful share in the running of the statecraft and in the fashioning of their destiny according to their free choice and option and would not allow their leadership to budge an inch and vacillate. Their encounter with the occupation forces had been one of the world's most heroic as well as tragic episodes for all time to come. The international community was literally spellbound and witnessed in both awe and admiration the worst genocide perpetrated by the Pakistan occupation forces on the one hand, and on the other the undaunted valour and resilience of the Bengalees who used to be contemptuously regarded as a non-martial race by the successive British and Pakistani rulers.

The resistance put up against the marauding forces was spontaneous and at that time the issue as to who had, in fact, declared the independence did not matter much to the people. In a people's war such as the War of Liberation of Bangladesh, the prime consideration at that time was to fight back with all strength, eject the occupiers and free the motherland.

When finally the long-cherished victory came, it instantly brought about widespread commendation for the victory of right over wrong, freedom over colonialism and literally electrified the countries still waging armed struggles for their liberation like Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and the Palestine along with a host of other African colonies viz. Angola, Mozambique, Rhodesia, Namibia, South Africa etc with new enthusiasm and inspiration. The Bengalees proved to be pathfinders for the people in colonial agonies.

While the world went all out in its acclamation of the liberation of Bangladesh, at home, however, the revolution began to rot no sooner did the flag

The Victory and the Betrayal

by Mansoor Mamoon

Even the most backward segments of the society are now fully conscious about the play of the political leaders and their real intent. In their frenzied craving for power the opportunist political leaders have put aside all that remained of the spirit of the Liberation War

with the crimson sun dyed with the bloods of the martyrs in the background of green flutter in the horizon. The high hopes and rising expectations that the hard-earned victory generated among the people were soon dashed to the ground to their utter bewilderment and utter frustration.

The spirit of the War of Liberation had been, to quote from the original Preamble of the 1972 Constitution, "secularism, nationalism, democracy and socialism" and to establish a just society "free from exploitation — a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social — will be secured for all citizens" irrespective of religion, caste, sex, ethnic considerations and social standings. The Preamble further stated, inter alia, that these ideals "inspired our heroic people to dedicate themselves and our brave martyrs to sacrifice their lives in the War for National Independence".

Was it at the behest of the then Indian leadership or due to the insecurity arising out of the large-scale isolation of the Awami League leadership from the mainstream freedom fighters? What was the necessity of forming a separate Mujib Bahini and their special training and over whom even the chain of Mukti Bahini leadership had no command? Why Tajuddin Ahmad's reported

any such evidence of disarming the freedom fighters in such haste. It was, indeed, a tragedy that those who fought for the country's independence and were ready to sacrifice their lives were not trusted and properly utilised for the nation-building task. This distrust of the greatest sons of the soil — the freedom fighters — still remains a mystery.

As already mentioned, the independence of Bangladesh was not a gift on a platter. It had been a do or die protracted struggle. Millions of lives had to be sacrificed. Hundreds of thousands of local women were violated. The best sons of the soil — the intellectuals — embraced martyrdom. Loss to properties, national and individual, was simply stupendous. In such a morbid and cruel situation the trial of heinous war crimes was the widespread demand of the people. The Nazi

rule for over sixteen years in one form or the other. The people witnessed with great remorse how anti-liberation forces were rehabilitated (the process started before 1975), the state principles floundered one after another, the freedom fighters systematically screened out and eliminated both physically and politically. Known anti-liberation forces occupied state powers and the very character of the country and the constitution was changed beyond recognition. From 1991 to 1996 the Awami League courted the favour of the reactionary anti-liberation forces and now it is the BNP's turn to do so.

The principles and ideals which inspired the people to take up arms are now in utter shambles. The vast majority of the people still grope in abject poverty being denied of their basic economic rights so holistically enshrined in the country's constitution. Women are tortured as they used to be during the days of occupation. Looting, plunder, extortion and political killings continue. Bureaucratic tentacles still hold sway over virtually everything. Instability and anarchy plague the land with the rabid cravings for power without the basic norms of democratic polity. Default culture and corruption have become endemic and filtered down to all segments of the society coupled with alien and obscene culture to the detriment of the best of Bangladesh. Black money and muscle-flexing have unfortunately become the deciding factors in elections. Democracy, transparency, and accountability have become misnomers. Parliament in Bangladesh was never effective and still remains so. Internationally Bangladesh also stand greatly marginalised.

Whatever scarce materials the country still has after centuries of plundering by the colonialists, neo-colonialists and the comprador class that clung to power, are now being handed over to the foreigner exploiters in exchange of personal clout and fortune and without least bothering for national or people's greater interests. With the beginning of the countdown of the Millennium 2000 the people of Bangladesh, by and large, feel that they have become the victims of the great betrayal and hence are greatly disillusioned with the present state of affairs which resembles a moribund society.

In 1974 a man-made famine played havoc followed first by a state of internal emergency and subsequently by the so-called Second Revolution providing for a monolithic one-party rule burying the last semblance of multi-party democracy. With the denial of the right to food, the right to free expression was also muzzled. The Tragedy of mid-August 1975 and the subsequent coups and counter coups further shattered whatever remained of the spirit of the Liberation War. If the leadership had been errant, a handful of misguided army officers in cohort with a faction of the party in power, had no right whatsoever to effect a violent change. Only the people reserve such a right and the people have not mandated them to do what they did. It was, no doubt, a criminal act and deserve to be punished accordingly.

It was indeed an irony that Bengalees who detested and fought against Pakistani military rule for over a decade were made victims of the same jungle

Significance of Ramadan — the Third Pillar of Islam

by Abdul Latif Molla

The Prophet (Sm) said, "As Siyam annihilates the roots of the devil, closes roads for his movement and narrows it down, so it has become eligible to be connected to Allah". It is presumed that if any one performs the Siyam perfectly for the whole month of Ramadan, he will become sinless as if he is a newly born child.

ISLAM, the universal religion, stands on five main pillars. Ramadan (Siyam) is the third main pillar of Islam. Allah the Almighty has made it obligatory (Farz) for the Muslims through a commandment in the holy Quran, "Oh, believers, I have made Siyam (of Ramadan) obligatory for you as I made it obligatory for your ancestors, so that you learn to restrain" (2:183). We learn from this Ayat (Revelation) of the holy Quran that Siyam was obligatory for our ancestors also. Moses (Musa AS) observed fasting for forty days on the Mount Sinai. Jesus (Isa AS) observed fasting for forty days

for it if one recalls it in the afternoon. Allah is all merciful. He may condone this unintentional miss.

3. To prevent anything from entering the stomach consciously, remembering the Siyam. So while fasting, eating and drinking anything willingly or any food or drink entering into the stomach through the nostrils will break the fast. But unconsciously or unwillingly if anything enters the stomach, it will not affect the Siyam.

4. To stay away from sexual intercourse with wife during the day. At night it has been permitted.

5. Not to vomit willingly during the fast. Vomiting willingly breaks the Siyam. However, if it occurs unwillingly beyond one's control then it does not harm the Siyam.

Internal Obligations of Siyam

The great Imam Gazzali have stated the three kinds of Siyam as below:

1. Siyam of the common people: This type of Siyam is to keep the stomach and the genital organs restrained from fulfilling their natural instincts.

2. Siyam of the special persons: This type of Siyam is to keep the eyes, ears, tongue, hands, feet and other organs away from sins.

3. Siyam of the most special persons: This type of Siyam is to keep the conscience away from adventurism and dauntlessness, from the mundane thoughts and to refrain from everything else other than the remembrance of Allah. This kind of Siyam gets spoilt due to thoughts on mundane matters other than concentrating one's thoughts on Allah and the hereafter because it is the wealth of the life in the hereafter and not of this world. This kind of Siyam is for the Prophets and for those who have attained the highest stage of faith and dependence on Allah. The following acts make this kind of Siyam full and perfect:

a. To keep the eyes down, not to witness sinful act and to restrict the eyes from looking at things which may distract the mind from remembrance of Allah.

It is for two reasons:

Allah.

b. To restrict the tongue from unnecessary talks, telling lies, speaking ill of others, incidental activities, quarrels, etc. and remain quiet, be engaged in the remembrance of Allah and recitation of the Quran.

c. To restrict the ear from listening to foul words. The Prophet (Sm) said, "The speakers and listeners of ill of others are the equal sharers of the sin".

d. To restrict the hands from other organs from bad activities and to keep away from eating forbidden foods, at the time of breaking the fast (iftar). It is because, if any one keeps himself away from permitted (Halal) things for the whole day and breaks his fast with prohibited (Haram) things then his breaking fasts have no value and gets spoiled.

e. Not to fill the stomach with so much food at the time of iftar (breaking the fast) so that it gets expanded. It is because, to Allah nothing is worse than the period that defeats the physical as well as spiritual purpose of Siyam.

f. After breaking the fast there should be a realistic hope that the Siyam has been accepted by Allah and also fear and doubt that it might have been rejected by Him. It is because one must have to obtain pardon of the wrongs done by him to other persons and then beg the forgiveness of Allah. Allah the all merciful promises to forgive him who returns to Him after an inviolable Tauba.

Physically also, Siyam offer many benefits to one who observes it. It burns extra fat, carbohydrate and the harmful elements in the body. It helps improve diabetes, heart ailments, blood pressure and many other diseases. It helps the rich to realise the pains of hunger the poor suffer and teaches them to be kind and sympathetic to the poor. Eid-ul-Fitr, after Ramadan brings immense joy for all equally. Such great is the significance of Ramadan. The Muslims must take this great opportunity to earn salvation in this month of Rahmat, Maghferat and Najat, properly performing every Siyam of this month. May Allah enable all to take this opportunity and get His blessings.

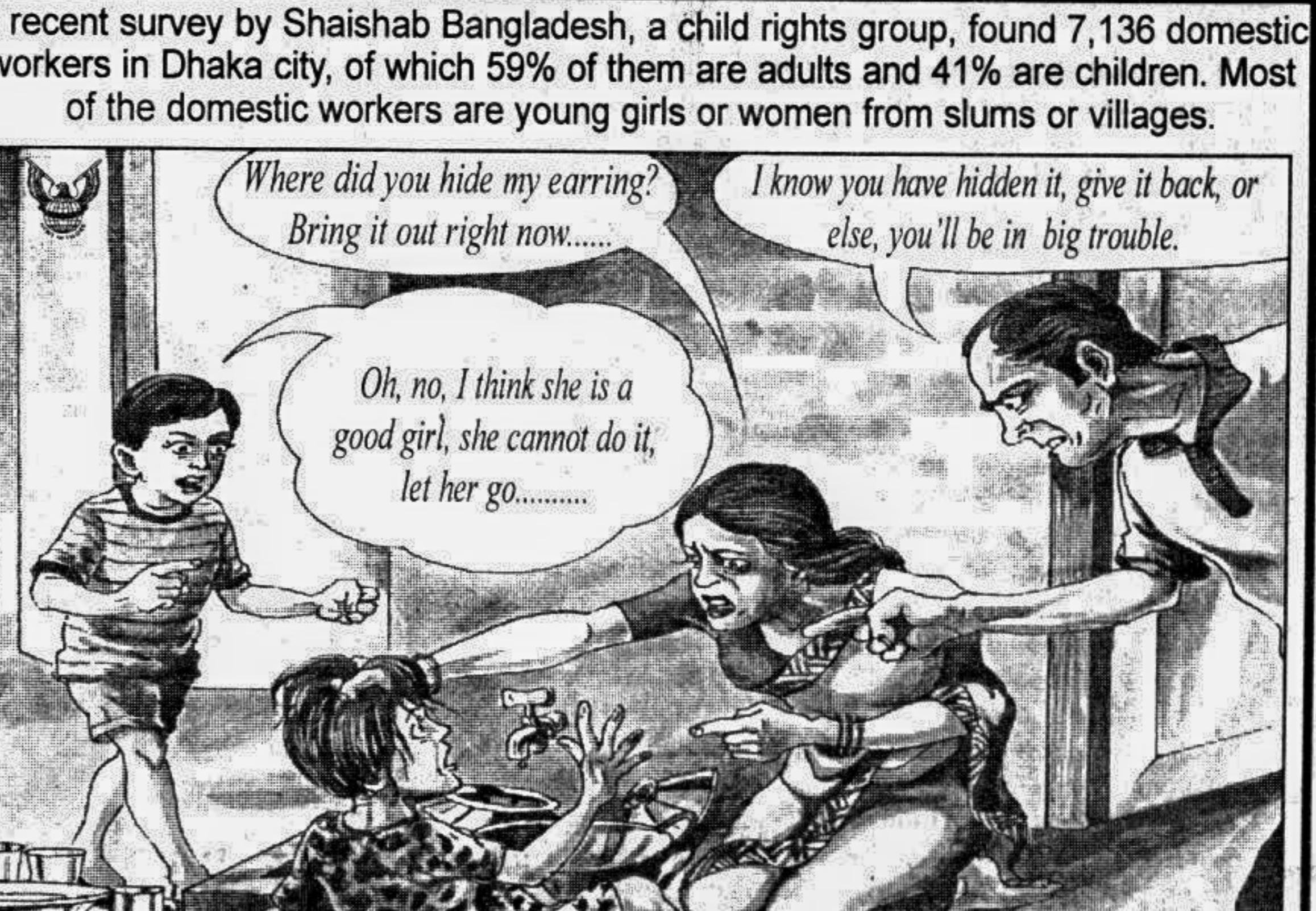
their real intent. In their frenzied craving for power the opportunist political leaders have put aside all that remained of the spirit of the Liberation War and are even found hobnobbing with the known anti-liberation elements. The same is equally true with both the AL and the BNP.

With this increasing new found consciousness gradually spouting among the masses, there is no reason to believe that the people will not be able to emerge victorious again in their renewed struggle for real and total emancipation which they dreamed of when they fought the Pakistani occupation forces. Their victory they are now required to fight the enemies remaining within and that fight will be more arduous than the one they had waged in 1971.

The Writer worked as the Second-in-Command, Youth Camp, Sector Seven and subsequently as English Language Editor in the News Desk of the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra during the War of Liberation.

A "domestic worker" is a politically correct term for a house servant. There are growing incidences of that violence against domestic workers in Bangladesh.

A recent survey by Shaishab Bangladesh, a child rights group, found 7,136 domestic workers in Dhaka city, of which 59% of them are adults and 41% are children. Most of the domestic workers are young girls or women from slums or villages.



Over a three month period, the Bangladesh Domestic Workers Association (BDWA) recorded 29 murders of domestic workers — five were raped and killed and four were burned to death. Another twenty-nine were raped, 19 tortured and nine abducted. Four were reported to have committed suicide due to abuse, and 21 were forced into prostitution.

Another survey by Ain-O-Salish Kendra, a human rights group, showed that only a small number of cases were taken to court.

The country's labour law does not cover domestic workers. BDWA Coordinator Aminul Haq Amin says that domestic workers should benefit from labour laws. It will soon launch a campaign to persuade authorities to create such laws.

The Women and Children Repression Prevention Act of 1995 is used to deal with violence against domestic workers, most of the cases being children and women, says Amirul Islam, a noted lawyer.