

Raja's Expulsion was Forced on Us

THIS is the first time that Bangladesh has ever expelled any diplomat of any country, leave alone one from a member of SAARC. A country committed to peace and friendship towards all, we wanted friendship with all countries especially those from our own region. Unfortunately Pakistan did not seem to want it. Quite unnecessarily a senior Pakistani diplomat, in fact the deputy of the High Commission in Dhaka, Irfan Raja, made the most derogatory remarks about our Liberation War and insulted our nation in a way that tested our tolerance to the limit. We could have - and in retrospect should have - expelled him right then. But we did not, simply because we wanted to give the benefit of the doubt to Pakistan that the remarks were of an errant diplomat and did not reflect the policy of the state.

We welcomed the move to withdraw him and took it as a sign that Pakistan, though belatedly, had realised the gravity of Raja's error and had started on the path of damage control. Unfortunately our impression appears to have been misplaced. Two weeks elapsed without Pakistan making any move to take him from Bangladesh even though there was widespread public demand for his immediate expulsion. Through diplomatic channels Pakistan was urged to withdraw him as soon as possible. When that did not happen several of our ministers publicly expressed the government's anxiety as to why Raja was still around. Home minister Nasim made it clear that Bangladesh's patience was running out. Even that went unheeded.

After waiting for two weeks, the Bangladesh government yesterday declared Raja persona non grata in accordance with Article 9 of Vienna Convention and asked him to leave by the end of the day. We categorically say that Pakistan forced us to take this action knowing full well that no self-respecting country would allow a diplomat to continue to stay after making such insulting remarks. Normally withdrawal of any diplomat means that he or she was being recalled to the headquarters. But in Raja's case, contrary to its stated position, Pakistan was trying to make it look like a transfer of posting, rubbing salt on an already severe wound. Rumour has it that he was being posted to Cairo. So first the unprovoked, unnecessary and totally unacceptable remarks, then the delay in withdrawing him and finally trying to make his departure look like a transfer, indicate that Pakistan did not care much about its bilateral relationship with Bangladesh. Therefore we want to make it known to all our friends, especially in the Muslim world, that the blame for the present deterioration of relationship between our two countries must rest squarely and solely on Pakistan.

The Promise of Victory Day

VICTORY Day comes once again this year and fills us with a sense of pride and joy. December 16th is that unique day in our history nearly three decades ago, when we realised an extraordinary and heartfelt dream. We became an independent nation. The dream for Bangladesh became a reality only after a long and bitter struggle and after an immeasurable price had been exacted in return. Our martyrs paid the price with their lives, anointing our mission with their blood and ever-strengthening our resolve. As we rejoice in the memory of Victory Day, we pay homage to all our freedom fighters. The joy we feel today is greater because we are nearer to seeing the killers of the founder of the state, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, punished for their crime. Thursday's opportune ruling by the High Court, though partially divided, nevertheless reinforces our conviction that justice will be done.

On this all-important day, let us take stock of what we have achieved as a nation during the last three decades. One major gain has been our return to democracy and the attainment of representative government for the past ten years. Of this achievement, we are proud. We are also proud of the fact that we have achieved near self-sufficiency in food in this country and are able to successfully recover even after a natural disaster like a flood has affected the country.

However, our failures are overwhelming in contrast. We have a fractured democracy, with a non-functional parliament that the opposition has boycotted, destroying the possibility of consensus-building, and robbing us of a vibrant and healthy parliamentary democracy. Among the most serious of our failures is that we have not translated the fruits of our independence into real economic and social gains for our masses. We have not been able to lift a majority of our people above the margins of poverty. We have failed to give a basic level of education, health and security to a majority of our children and youth. Women in Bangladesh have made some advances in social awareness and income generation, but they still remain the lowest ranking members of the economic and social order, at high risk during pregnancy, from attacks of domestic violence, and still burdened with the care and upbringing of children. We have evidently achieved an average growth rate of more than five per cent in our economy, but this gain does not look that attractive when measured against the damage we have done to our environment. Our clean underground water resource is discovered to be contaminated by arsenic. Our surface water sources have been polluted with dangerous chemical wastes.

So, while we rejoice in the anniversary of our victory today, we do so with a heavy heart. The promise of Victory Day remains unmistakably unfulfilled. It is this realisation that we urge on the entire leadership today. We remind them all of their shared responsibility towards the nation, towards the higher moral obligation of living up to the faith that the masses have placed in them. We expect our leaders to lead by example, to rise above the petty squabbles of ordinary people, to display vision and statesmanship. We expect to see democracy work inside and outside parliament. The time has come for those who are responsible to take concrete steps to substantially lift a majority of our people above the poverty line, to provide them with health, education and a safe environment. These are the responsibilities that the people entrusted to their leaders. We urge them to live up to this trust, to convert the victory we gained on this day into a real victory for all our people.



Sonar Bangla: Still a Distant Reality?

by Mansoor Mamoon

The people are all right. The mindset of the political leaders, bureaucrats, the business segment and others concerned needs to be changed. What Bangladesh lacks most is proper leadership in every sector. In the absence of proper leadership, Bangladesh would continue to grope in wilderness and the dream of 'Sonar Bangla' will remain illusive and a distant reality.

AMAR Sonar Bangla Ami Tomar Bhalobhasi (My Bengal of gold, I love you) with these words of the famous song composed by Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore the people of Bangladesh confronted with uncomman valour and courage the marauding Pakistani occupation forces and wrested independence at the cost of immense sacrifices. The song has a nostalgic appeal. It reminded the people of the days of yore, of the past bounty and affluence of Bengal and how the two centuries of colonial subjugation and exploitation denuded the country of its glory, riches and resources and turned them into the poorest of the poor. The people, therefore, thought that if they could free their country they would be free to again turn it into the legendary land of gold. The word 'Sonar Bangla' was in everybody's lips from Sheikh Mujibur Rahman down to Sheikh Hasina and all the past and present rulers promised that they were striving towards the direction of restoring the past glory of the country and translating into reality the dreams of the martyrs.

After 29 years of the liberation of the country, if the people take stock of the balance-sheet of achievement, they are likely to be rudely jolted to find that their dream of 'Sonar Bangla' has largely remained illusive and that it is still a distant reality. The vernacular daily 'Prothom Alo' in

a front page report in its issue of October 17, 2000 quoted UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) sources as saying that it would take 50 years more for Bangladesh to graduate from the status of Least Developed Country (LDC). The report said: "The chances of Bangladesh to become a middle income country are also dim". The report said per capita income of the neighbouring country of Bhutan along with some other LDCs (Sudan, Lesotho and Laos) would reach US \$900 per annum which is the minimum requirement and pre-condition to graduate from the status of LDC. The United Nations has identified 48 countries including Bangladesh as LDCs for their endemic poverty, backward and unskilled human resources and slow GDP growth rate. The 'Prothom Alo' report said there had been a meeting at the Prime Minister's Office to examine if Bangladesh could be excluded from the list of the LDCs. But the meeting held the view that Bangladesh has not as yet reached the stage of a developing country.

In November 2000 a regional preparatory meeting for the third

United Nations Conference on Least Developed Countries was held in Dhaka in which the forecast was made that "Bangladesh would require about 25 years to graduate from least developed country status if it maintains the growth rate observed in the past decade" (The Daily Star, November 14). Twenty-five years make a generation and if the prediction of the UN body is to be given credence the present generation in Bangladesh would not be able to see their country graduating from the stage of LDC. Then what did Bangladesh achieve during all these years? If land-locked Bhutan can make it, why should Bangladesh still be struggling for bare survival with the per capita official income figure of something like \$380?

According to an estimate, during the last three decades Bangladesh received as aid, grants and loan 34 billion US Dollars. Till 1974 the amount of foreign assistance to Bangladesh stood at over 2.5 billion US Dollars. With half of this amount Germany could successfully recover from the devastation and destruction wrought by the Second World War and emerge as an

economic power. But with US dollars 34 billion in foreign assistance, Bangladesh is still staggering as an LDC. Where did all the money go?

It has been estimated that 30 per cent of what Bangladesh received (fifty five thousand crore taka out of a total of one hundred thirty thousand crore taka) as aid was stashed in the pockets of the greedy and corrupt elements. Bangladesh has been listed at this year's World Economic Forum as the most corrupt country in Asia. A six-month scanning (Jan-June 2000) of nine mainstream newspapers by the Transparency International, Bangladesh has shown of loss a taka 11,534.98 crore to the national exchequer caused by 211 separate incidents of corruption. The TIB report said corruption has increased in the country during the last three years and what it has estimated is just the tip of the iceberg. The World Bank has given a detailed account of the offices, departments and sector-wise instances of corruption and concluded that if corruption could have been contained Bangladesh's GDP growth rate

would have increased by 2.9 per cent per annum and poverty would have been reduced by 25 per cent.

According to a report published by the Daily Sangbad (15 November 2000) as many as a staggering number of 40,000 cases are pending before the Bureau of Anti-corruption. Recommendations from various quarters for the creation of an independent anti-corruption bureau have fallen to the deaf year. Apart from high incidences of corrupt practices, kick-backs and palm greasing, there is also a high degree of wastage caused by power failure, congestions at the ports, traffic jams on and so on. Due to bureaucratic tentacles and accompanying hassles and high transaction cost of doing business in Bangladesh, the flow of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has declined. Only 8.3 per cent of the registered FDI could actually be invested in Bangladesh (807 million US Dollar out of 9.6 billion US dollar registered) while this rate in Singapore, Thailand, Korea, Brazil, Malaysia, Hungary, China, USA, Ireland etc is from 65 per cent to 100 per cent.

The East Asian countries

started their march in the seventies and achieved economic miracles. Malaysia, Thailand, etc started in the eighties and by now they have also graduated to the status of NIC (Newly Industrialised countries). Now Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are marching ahead with bold strides. In the new millennium when the whole world is moving forward with new expectations and promises, Bangladesh appears to be stuck in the quagmire of a vicious cycle of poverty, corruption and underdevelopment.

Dr Kim Hak-su, Executive Secretary of ESCAP, said Bangladesh with below US dollar 500 per capita income and plus four percent annual growth, needs double digit economic growth to cross its benchmark of LDC status of per capita US dollar 900 annual income. He suggested for pursuing productivity driven growth by utilising plenty of human resources, increasing the education level, providing training and changing the mindset of the people.

The people are all right. The mindset of the political leaders, bureaucrats, the business segment and others concerned needs to be changed. What Bangladesh lacks most is proper leadership in every sector. In the absence of proper leadership, Bangladesh would continue to grope in wilderness and the dream of 'Sonar Bangla' will remain illusive and a distant reality.



Victorious Freedom Fighters

-- Photo courtesy Drik



Surrendering occupation Army

-- Photo courtesy Drik

Portrait of 'One of Us'

By Almas Zakiuddin

His lungi danced in the sunlight as he did a hop, skip and a jump. Stopped. Then he held up a photograph almost as large as his torso, a portrait that was unmistakable to us even from that distance. The face of Bangabandhu. Etched sharply, the clearly recognisable image of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman glinted in his hands as Ainuddin brandished it, his shoulders raised to hold it aloft, so all could see the prize he had unearthed for victory.

TIME, they say, blunts the sharp edges of recall. But nearly 30 years after that fateful morning of December 16, 1971, one seemingly obscure man's face remains etched in my memory. On that day this special man surprised all who knew him, though if anyone had asked him, (and none did for we were each preoccupied with our own heady celebrations) he, himself was not surprised.

His name was Ainuddin. A slightly built, shortish man, perhaps in his early 20s or even younger, with no known means of employment, he lived in the basti next to our two-storey apartment in Eskaton Gardens. We came to know him as the son of the day-help known to our household as 'ayah'. She worked herself to the bone, cleaning and washing and, when she could find a sympathetic ear, pleading for her son to be given an 'offici' job. At some point, my father-in-law succumbed to her pleas and he was employed in the family business. Exactly in what capacity I have never found out, though he was always on hand to run errands, post letters and stand in for the regular darwan.

As the summer of 1971 pro-

gressed, Ainuddin's basti, which our home overlooked, became the site of numerous nighttime raids by the Pakistan army. We heard, rather than saw these assaults on the wretched inhabitants next door, for as night fell we were usually huddled in our smoke-filled drawing room, listening to the clandestine station or the BBC on our radio, playing cards, monopoly, or simply fretting.

Consequently, it is difficult to say when Ainuddin got his inspiration or indeed, why he, of all people, risked so much. Certainly, there was nothing new in his demeanour to signal that he had a secret so dangerous locked inside his basti that both he and his mother, and hundreds of other innocent inhabitants could have paid a fatal price for it.

If you recall the long, wet summer and the dry, baking autumn of '71 that followed, you might agree that for ordinary civilians living in Dhaka, life was a slow burn. Each day was a challenge of endurance, defined by a sense of apprehension of the unknown. Like lovers nursing a forbidden love, each of us hid our thoughts and anxieties as much as possible not because we were afraid to share the tensions, but because we were unable, most often, to express ourselves. The present was bearable only because we each hoped, desperately, that victory would be ours, soon.

The nights were most terrifying. It was then that the sounds of the basti changed, without warning. Women cried out and young feet scampered into dark corners. Trucks with boots and threaten-

ing voices pulled up and there were sounds of violence, of feet scraping and bodies scuffling, to what end we could merely visualise; we could do nothing, but huddle closer and pray.

There were few young men around those days and those who remained wore a hunted look. Our faithful Ainuddin, younger than many, had been told to lie low. We knew he managed to do this successfully, because supplies of food to him and others like him continued from our several household kitchens, but we often wondered how long he would manage to elude these occupying hordes. Yet, each time the basti was shaken by the sound of army boots, Ainuddin managed to survive. With other young men who were left behind in these bastis, he would sleep in different portions of the slum or, when warned of a raid, would simply slip away.

Soon, our skies turned into battlegrounds. During the day, we dared to rush on to our roof and watch the dogfights, while at night, we turned to the radio and learned about the advancing armies, the battles being won and the fate of the occupiers being inexorably sealed. As the noise around Dhaka tightened, the occupiers began a series of cold-blooded murders, picking up our leading intellectuals and academics, and systematically killing them. We learned of these horrors only much later.

December 16, 1971, was a misty and cool day. We had hardly slept for the last few days, from the 14th if memory serves me correctly, when it had become obvious that the end for the Pakistani army was inevitable. That is when Ainuddin entered our lives again. Ayah told us first, but we paid little attention. He has something he will bring out on the day the Pakistanis leave, she had said. And we told her it was a wonder he was still alive and warned her that he must not jump the gun; the army was going insane and could do much dam-

age before the end.

It is difficult to remember exactly when we knew, but by the early morning of the 16th we were ready to rejoice. The radio was turned on full blast. This was unusual, for we always worried about the dogfights, or of being heard listening to the broadcasts. But this morning, we were on the roof, my young brothers-in-law jiggling with the controls to get a better reception. There was a vague new sound in the distance, one that we could not at first identify for Dhaka had been still and stark under the occupiers. Later, we knew it was the sound of rejoicing, as people took to the streets to welcome the Mukti Bahini and the Indian army.

Before all that happened, there was a tumult in the basti that drowned out all else, even the radio. We turned our heads sharply in surprise. There were a handful of people at first, running out of the mud huts and narrow alleys. We saw them from the rooftop, unable to identify them or their purpose.

Then we saw him, Ainuddin, he of the slight physique, ayah's son, our part-time darwan and errand boy. They were following him. It was a sight to behold. His lungi danced in the sunlight as he did a hop, skip and a jump. Stopped. Then he held up a photograph almost as large as his torso, a portrait that was unmistakable to us even from that distance. The face of Bangabandhu. Etched sharply, the clearly recognisable image of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman glinted in his hands as Ainuddin brandished it, his shoulders raised to hold it aloft, so all could see the prize he had unearthed for victory.

"Joy Bangla!" he called. For a small man, he had a large voice. It carried to us. The refrain was a release that no one could have imagined till that moment. Our voices, long silent and our hearts, long stilled, began to pulse in excitement. Ainuddin's gaze was catching, as were his repeated calls of "Joy, Bangla!" and the

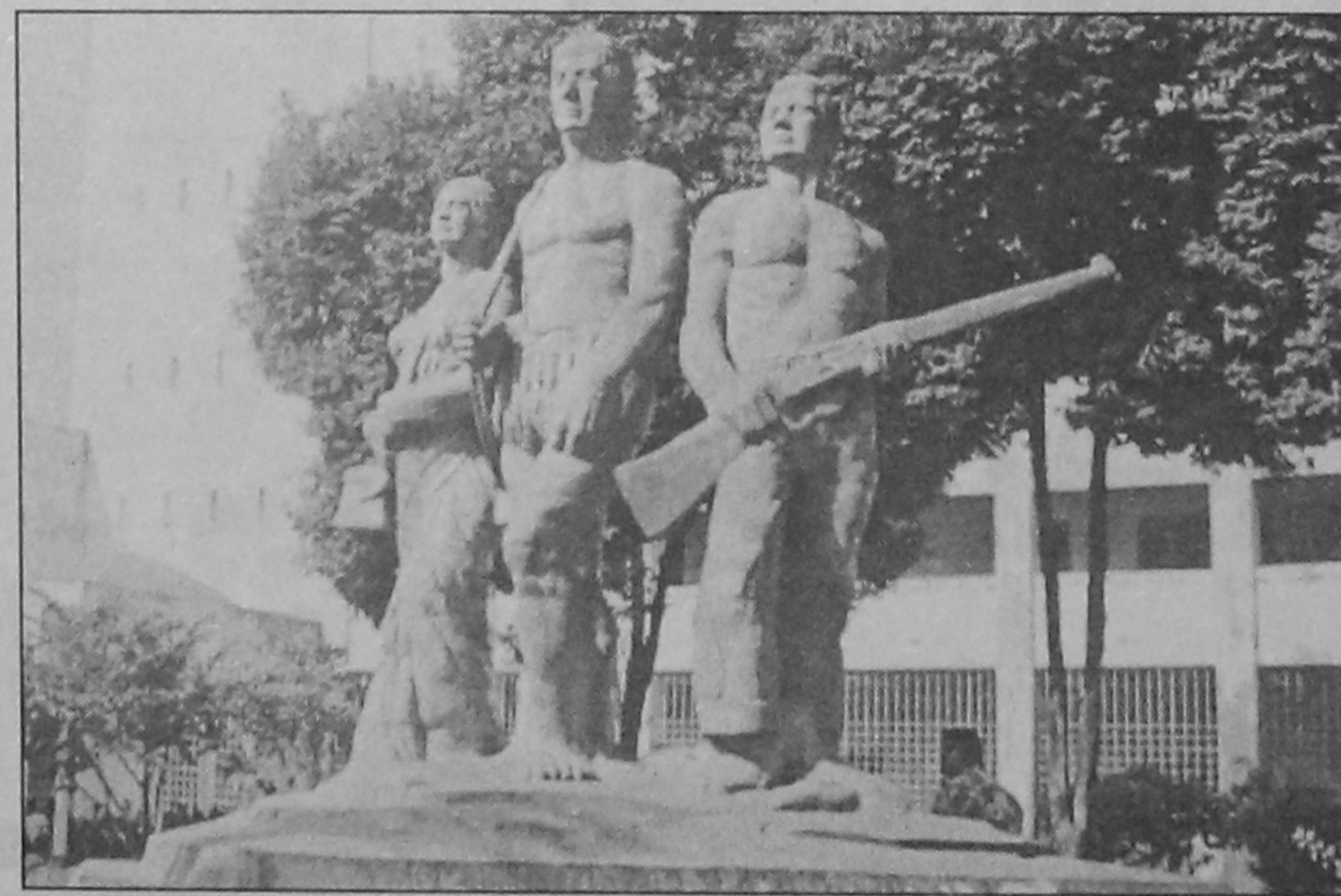
group that formed behind him began to echo both, in unison. We watched them dance and prance. We watched them move down the dusty lane, towards the main road. We heard their cries and we joined in. Some of us had tears running down our faces, others cried out that we should go, we should run downstairs and join the others, the multitude that was moving toward Ramna, to welcome the tanks and the troops.

We, who were on the rooftop that day, and who knew Ainuddin, were too caught up with his infectious and victorious display to ask where he had found that rare and opportune image of our leader. We rushed to join the crowds near what was then known as the Hotel International, Dhaka, where a couple of Indian tanks had arrived. My friend had her little daughter with her and we held hands, husbands, wives, cousins, friends as we chanted and rejoiced.

Ainuddin appeared, then, before my eyes. I have no idea if any of my party saw him because I was too moved by the sight to say anything to anyone. There he was, perched on the side of one of the Indian tanks, holding the portrait high in the air. Cameras clicked and the moment was recorded for posterity and my last glimpse of him was lost because the crowds moved in, the shouts became louder, the excitement turned the crowd into a crazed, virtually uncontrolled mob and our protective men pulled us away, swiftly and almost in a panic, to relative quiet and safety.

Later that evening, ayah trundled into the family living room. He hid it underground, she said, her voice clearly impressed. We were impressed too. It was a large picture to hide under the ground, we remarked. What if he had been caught, we wondered. What if, during one of the raids, they had dug up the mud hut and discovered the portrait.

If they had, it would have been the end for him. But intrepid Ainuddin, devoted citizen of the land of his birth, believed in his icon and took the risk. It was a simple gesture, small in comparison to the loftier achievements of greater mortals. But it was one man's singular contribution to the cause. And therefore, if for no other reason, worth saluting today.



Aparajeo Bangla: The invincible

-- Star photo by Zahedul I Khan