

1971 and after

SERAJUL ISLAM CHOUDHURY

The coming into being of Bangladesh in 1971 was a political event of wide and deep significance. For one thing, it represents the culmination of a comparatively long and painful struggle for liberation; and for another, the creation of an unequalled opportunity for achieving the aspiration for a social revolution. But what happened after 1971 was the sad waking up of the struggling people to the realisation that the opportunity created was not being properly utilised and that the independence for which they had fought unitedly and valiantly was not yielding the same results to all classes.

The socio-cultural achievements since, and because of, independence are in no way insignificant. The establishment of Bangladesh has brought about a change in the very psyche of the Bengali. For the first time in history they have set up a state which is their own and of which the official language is Bengali. It has given them a confidence and a dignity together with a sense of identity which they had desired but found unable to gain. The war of independence had taken on the character of a people's war of liberation. The ideological advancement too was remarkable. The four basic principles of the state - nationalism, secularism, democracy and socialism as laid down in the constitution of 1972 - were not accidental accretions; they were born in, and nurtured by, the very struggle of the people for liberation, and represented clearly and conclusively, the rejection of the founding ideology of the state of Pakistan, the cornerstone of which ideology was religious nationalism. Pakistani nationalism was, in its very nature, anti-democratic, for the simple reason that it discriminated against a section of the citizens on the basis of religion and declined to accept secularism, which is the very first requisite for a democratic state, as a guiding principle.

Historically, the Bengalis as a people had for long been troubled by the question of their national identity, those in East Bengal seemed to have decided in 1971 that their first allegiance was not to religion but to language. This turning to the mother tongue was of profound cultural and social significance. During British rule bilingualism was forced on the Bengalis; the Pakistani rulers threatened to impose yet another language on them. With the emergence of Bangladesh the educated man in Bengal found that the problem of having a linguistically split personality has been solved and that he will be able to think as well as communicate in his mother tongue, a privilege he had not had the fortune of enjoying in the past. It is well-known that culturally, language is the most dependable of the elements that constitute nationalism. For it goes beyond class and caste, and contains, within its own self, the promise of a society of equal rights and opportunities. What is more, language allows creativity to release itself in a manner which is unique, lasting and full of possibilities.

Indeed, after independence creativity seemed to be at the stage of a take-off. There was great enthusiasm everywhere. Farmers returned to their fields, workers to their factories, and students to their institutions of learning. People volunteered in building bridges, setting up schools, particularly colleges, and helped each other in mending the breaches. What could have been a tragedy promised to be an epic because of the hope and confidence people had gained in themselves. Foreign aid seemed to be unnecessary and irrelevant. The nation was on its own. Signboards on shops and streets written in Bengali letters announcing Bengali names were more than objects; they were testament to a revitalisation and an arrival.

Books were being written and classics translated. Questions were asked, problems discussed, solutions debated. Ideologically, both secularism and socialism were accepted, at least publicly, even by those who had been opposed to them. Societies and organisations were coming into existence catering for various needs. Patriotic songs and plays were written and presented. Even in that complicated and densely capitalistic sector of the economy, called banking ideas relating to the implementation of socialist principles were attempted. That the army should not be expanded and that those already working in the forces should be trained to work in the productive areas of the economy were views not only aired but also supported. And that bureaucracy should not be allowed to act as a counterweight to democracy was almost universally acknowledged.

In a way, a new world seemed to have been born out of the ashes of the old one; and to many a Renaissance, not like the artificial and limited one of which Calcutta boasted in the nineteenth century, but real and widespread seemed to have been inaugurated. Dhaka promised to be the capital of Bengali culture, to which the whole world would look with respectful amazement, educated people began to imagine. Traditionally, Bengal had been a marginalized country, East Bengal was more so. When in 1971 the Bengalis in East Bengal made themselves known significantly to the world, they had found themselves, in the beginning, almost totally isolated. Most of the states were either indifferent or hostile; but as the war continued they gained admiration of people everywhere. Considerable interest was shown in Bangladesh, and the status and position of the Bengalis living abroad improved, internationally. Among the benefits that this connection with the world outside brought was the opportunity of the Bangladeshis to go abroad for employment, education and travel.

Within the country a social revolution seemed to be not far away, to which feeling the new-found opportunity had contributed to a considerable degree. By far the most potent factor in the creation of this hope was, ironically, the experience of the devastating war itself in which the peace-loving people of East Bengal saw the mighty edifice of the state tumbling down with all that it stood for. Those who had fought, directly and even indirectly, had taken a determined stand not only against the occupation army but also against the ideology of an Islamic state and society of which the perpetrators of a cruel genocide had proclaimed themselves to be the defender. Almost everyone had suffered, and had no reason to be enamoured of the sociopolitical system that the enemy state had obliged them to live in.

Of course, the expected social revolution did not take place. The system mended itself and continued to function in a less orderly, and, therefore, more pain-causing way. Changes had taken place; but they did not constitute a revolution; indeed, they have been far from it. With steam let off, the engine hurtled on; the loss in efficiency being sought to be compensated by the clumsiness of operation. The breaking-down of the state was more physical than ideological. Even the physical aspects, viz. the laws and the judiciary, the army, the police, and, above all, the bureaucracy continued to prevail. That Bangladesh should again be under martial law and military dictatorship was inconceivable on the day the occupation army surrendered and yet that has happened, indicating, very clearly, how the estate had remained internally unchanged. The independent state of Bangladesh had not thrown out the old draconian laws; instead it has added new ones to the penal system, displaying the crisis of governance that the alienated ruling class faces. What the ruling class seeks to perpetuate is the imposition of the capitalist ideology of growth on society. The ideology of the British and of the Pakistanis has been accepted by the Bangladeshi rulers, to the utter frustration of the masses. And it is in consequence of the continued thrust of capitalism that progress amounts to the prosperity of the few at the cost of the vast majority and the ideals of democracy which, among other things, means guaranteeing equality of rights and opportunities to all, decentralisation of power and rule of elected representatives at all levels, have remain unachieved.

Within that frame, noticeable changes have taken place. Life in the

is working under political coverage. While industrial investment remains reluctant, there has been a marked rise of activities in the service and building sectors. With the continuous assault of open market economy and smuggling, local producers of consumer goods are being forced out of business. Factories have been closed down, adding to the problem of unemployment.

Society has been changing, inevitably, though not radically. It has altered more in appearance than in substance. With the gaining of money through trade, smuggling, agency business, bribery taking, extortion, loan-default, work abroad and the like some people have made fortune and gone up the social ladder. They have built houses, married in well-connected families, sent their children abroad for education, indulged in luxuries and displayed their wealth to others. They are not many in number, but are not insignificant, either. For, as it has been said by those who know, that whereas the number of millionaires in the pre-Bangladesh period was hardly more than a handful that of multimillionaires in Bangladesh at present exceed four thousand. The decline in fortune of others has certainly been less dramatic, in many cases invisible. Nevertheless the going-down has been more widespread and revealing.

This decline has been at once material and moral. Materially, more people in the middle class have gone down the economic ladder than risen. The social structure has remained the same. While only, let us say, ten per cent has prospered ninety-per cent has gone down. Families have become small; and joint families are facing extinction. They have been split by eco-

perhaps, political power. Political power itself is responsive to money and is used by those who hold it to accumulate wealth in almost primitive ways. In Bangladesh almost everyone who has made fortune has had recourse to means which are in various degrees quite illegal. There was a time when society would raise eye-brows at the knowledge of graft and corruption. Social ostracism of persons guilty of bribe-taking was not unknown. Such reactions looked like stories in the seventies; they seem unbelievable today. Money is the great legitimiser now; it justifies everything including its own coming into being. Social relationships have become subservient to the power of money. Commodity fetishism is the order of the day; and most subjects, not excluding education and justice, have become commodities with a price tagged on them. Everyone seems to know the price, few the value, of things. Professionalism tends to measure itself in terms of the money earned, and not by job satisfaction. Helpless girls sell their honour to keep themselves alive and are sometimes sold by traffickers. Assassins are available on payment.

Why did all these happen in the manner and to the degree as they did? The reasons are as much objective as subjective. Objectively, the society and culture in Bangladesh in the last three decades have been a continuation of what they were before. Rooted in history, economics and politics as they are society and culture do not change unless radical occurrences take place. The war of 1971 promised a social reevaluation; but the objective conditions and the subjective preparation were not adequate for that promise, a dream really, to be realised true.

Bangladesh came into being at a time when the world at large was not congenial for socialist dreams to come true. On the contrary, the environment had turned positively hostile. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the world has become unipolar in which even Vietnam, which was liberated through an anti-imperialist war led by the Communists, is finding it difficult to keep itself away from the encroachment of the forces of market economy and globalisation. The Bangladesh war did not have the socialists at its leadership. In fact, one of the reasons why the war was put to an end rather hastily was the fear that Bengal might turn into another Vietnam, with the socialists 'usurping' the leadership. In the context of the prevailing world-order, it was not unnatural that Bangladesh should find itself behaving like the other states in the sub-continent, and not become an exception.

The subjective elements, however, were different. And it was because of the subjective struggle that people had expected that society and culture would be unlike what they were before. It was hoped that the question of identity would be settled conclusively and that there would be democracy in state and society with equality of rights and opportunities for all citizens, decentralisation of power, rule by elected representatives at all levels of governance and guarantee of the fundamental human rights, which are what democracy really means.

But there was a hiatus in the subjective element itself, inasmuch as the class that was in leadership wanted prosperity for itself and not for the entire people. The leadership went on making private use of public opportunities created by a collective struggle. The people, were indifferent; they did not take part in these activities; they were no more than observers, if not victims.

Of course, the people's agenda was different; it was encapsulated in a socialist dream. From the people's point of view, the leadership had betrayed them, for it did not make any serious attempt to realise what the common mass had expected and fought for expecting. In fact, part of the leadership was hostile to what the people wanted, the other part though supportive of it was so only vaguely and not really. The quarrel in the leadership, which constitutes the core of their politics, was over their occupancy rights to enrich themselves at the cost of the nation. During the three decades rulers have changed; and although all of whom called themselves nationalists, their nationalism was not as much concerned with the liberation of the economy in the interest of the public as with winning favour from world capitalism.

People's expectations were set out in the state Language Movement of 1952 which was where the moorings of the war of 1971 lay. Since then people had gone ahead of the leaders, and in the war itself leadership at the top was not physically present to lead the freedom fighters. And even when the war was showing signs of victory, there were components in the leadership itself which would have been glad to accept a negotiated settlement. After independence, it was no longer possible for the people to force the leadership to continue the struggle for the liberation with a view to achieving a radically transformed society.

Where does the hope lie? It lies in the resilience and resistance of the people themselves. There have been many calamities that befell them, the man-made disasters being worse than those created by the caprices of nature, but people have not surrendered. They have resisted and stood up, personally and collectively. To that capacity has been added the experience of a continued struggle for liberation. People are more aware today than ever before. The middle class cares for history, heritage and tradition, in which it takes legitimate pride. And even among the sophisticated there is a consciousness of the value artistic as well as philosophical of indigenous culture. In many fields public taste has improved, and, for many, morality has become as part of personal taste. The arts draw wider and discriminating audiences. Among the TV-watchers there is a growing demand for the spoken word. Non-commercial film-making has been attempted, not without success.

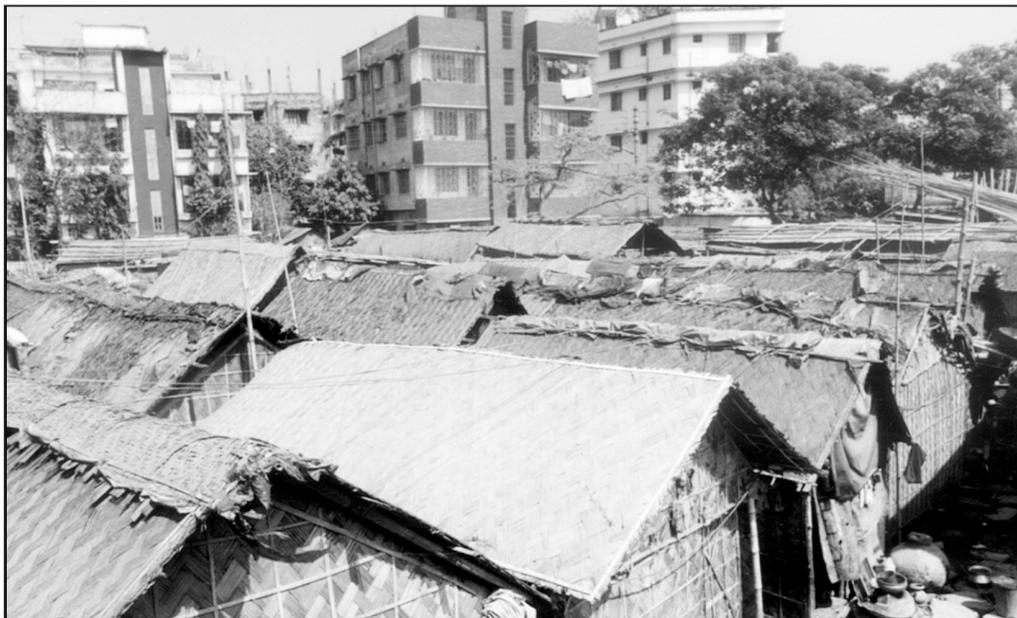
True, the collective dream has not materialised; nevertheless, the dream is not untrue; nor is the fact that it had been fought for and spoken about in any way meaningless.

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village has altered. Trees have been felled, and road links improved. Automobiles move about throughout the country. Electricity, mobile phones, power tillers and water pumps are active in the villages. The rural economy itself has undergone noticeable changes; agricultural yields, including vegetables and fruits have become commercial commodities; so has land itself. Tradesmen have become more powerful than ever before. A large portion of the farmers have been thrown of their land, and obliged to world as wage labourers. They work at construction sites, in road building and as transport workers; and are also employed for agricultural work by rich peasants. Employment, however, remains scarce; and that is the main reason why there is internal migration towards towns and also the capital. In Dhaka slums abound. Slum-dwellers live in inhuman circumstances and are frequently evicted by both government agencies and local goons and extortion-

omic disparity; brothers have become strangers to each other, if not enemies; so have sisters. Blood ties have been severed by the financial knife. Many in the middle class have become lower-middle class; while those in the lower middle class landless; the landless have lost their house and are now left without an address. The inhuman slums in the city do not even provide shelter to the poor; for they are under constant assault from the police, the extortionists and the fake landlord. It is the individual who has moved, and not the society he lives in. Society remains as exploitative of the weak as before. It discriminates against the unprivileged, believes in, indeed promotes, gender inequality and classism, even if desperately, to feudal values of the centrality, fatalism and obedience.

What has remarkably altered is people's attitude towards money. Over the years money has become more potent than anything else, except,



Poverty persists despite development

History as it rolled on

ARSHAD-UZ ZAMAN

TODAY Bangladesh completes thirty years of her independent existence. In the life of a nation the time-span is a tiny dot but as formative years it is full of significance.

Thirty years ago Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave leadership in our War of Independence.

In a sense Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared Independence on 7 March 1971. That was the culmination of a quarter century of struggle to free the Bangalee nation from the clutches of West Pakistan. Before a million people gathered at the vast Suhrawardy Udyan Bangabandhu delivered the most brilliant speech of his life, he filled his entire Bangalee nation with steely determination. He said, 'the struggle this time is the struggle for emancipation, the struggle this time is the struggle for independence'.

The year 1971 will remain etched in the Bangalee psyche as long Bangladesh lives. It was the year of tragedy and triumph, it was the year of incredible valour faced with tremendous adversities, it was the year when three million lost their lives, 200,000 women were raped, villages burnt to the ground and the minuscule infrastructure of Bangladesh totally destroyed. Faced with superhuman odds the people responded to the call to arms of Bangabandhu and fought gallantly and snatched victory at the same Suhrawardy Udyan on 16 December 1971.

For three decades the ship of state has sailed on through rough waters. Yet it has managed to stay on course although the nation has faced terrible tragedies.

The provisional Government of Bangladesh came to Dhaka from Calcutta in the beginning of January 1972. There was the independent State of Bangladesh, but it was without its head. Then on 10 January 1972, Bangabandhu reached Dhaka, after being released from Pakistan jail. He was welcome by a delirious crowd, overcome with joy of the father reuniting with his children. For a moment the wounded and mauled nation forgot its grief.

Bangabandhu got down to work without waiting for the adulation of his people. He had tough work in his hands. The coffers were empty. The departing Pakistanis had caused the maximum damage to the economy. Bangabandhu as a matter of principle wanted to steer clear of big power entanglements. Aid was pouring into the country but the ports were clogged with sunken ships. Bangabandhu wanted the UN to clear the ports. The UN had already built up the largest aid programme anywhere in the world. The UN hummed and hawed. Bangabandhu took an early trip to the Soviet Union (now Russia) since she had helped the birth of Bangladesh by using her veto in the Security Council of the UN. The Soviets were very keen to clear the ports for us and they said they had the expertise. Bangabandhu delayed his reply until his return to Dhaka. Since no answer was forthcoming from the UN Bangabandhu accepted the Soviet offer. Bangabandhu made sure, however, that the Soviets left as soon as their job was done. On his way back from Pakistan jail to Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had stopped in New Delhi and conferred with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. They had agreed that India would withdraw her troops from Bangladesh soil, the moment Bangabandhu so desired. True to her word Prime Minister Indira Gandhi withdrew her troops from Bangladesh within three months of the end of the war. In the history of relations between nations, this is a unique event, when foreign troops left the soil of another country, voluntarily, without any pressure of any kind.

With sovereignty fully recovered Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman devoted his attention to internal matters. The job of Constitution making was entrusted to the famous lawyer and the Law Minister Dr Kamal Hossain. Within one year of her birth Bangladesh adopted a Constitution, which could be the model for the civilized world. The Constitution stood on four pillars - nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism. Armed with the new Constitution Bangabandhu called for general elections and won it handily. There was no force to challenge his leadership. It was time for Bangabandhu to pay attention to external affairs. Since

Bangladesh was well established, recognition for the new state started

Embassy in Algiers. I was Chief of Protocol then and had a warm relation

The country was lucky to get the leadership of the founder of Bangladesh, in the most critical years of its existence. The assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his family and associates, nearly overturned the ship of state. Luckily, thanks to the sagacity of the people the nation survived.



Bangabandhu comes to independent Bangladesh

arriving, Bangladesh is a third world country and virtually the entire non-aligned world from Asia, Africa and Latin America had withheld recognition. The Non-Aligned Summit was due to be held in Algiers in September 1973. My Algerian friend for many years M'hamed Yazid came in July to announce recognition of Algeria and invited Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to attend the Summit. Yazid wanted that Bangladesh open an

with Bangabandhu. He allowed me to go to Algiers reluctantly. The Algerians remained faithful to their word and Bangladesh was admitted by unanimous acclamation to the Non-Aligned Summit. Bangabandhu arrived in Algiers with an important delegation. This was a major breakthrough in our foreign policy for we joined a group of nearly 100 states in the presence of their heads of State. Bangabandhu made a profound impact on the conference and our flag flew high. Pakistan had been trying strenuously to block countries from recognising Bangladesh. She went out of the Commonwealth and broke relations with several states. Pakistan ended up being totally isolated. In 1974 a Summit of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) was due to be held in Lahore in Pakistan. Algeria played a leading role in bringing Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Pakistan President Z A Bhutto together in Lahore. Bangabandhu had insisted on simultaneous recognition between Bangladesh and Pakistan and travelled to Lahore following Pakistani recognition.

Nineteen seventy-four turned out to be a difficult year for the Government of Bangladesh. Floods devastated a large part of the country. There was crop failure. The suffering of the people was becoming acute. On the plus side Bangladesh was admitted to the UN as member. China, a permanent member of the Security Council, who had not recognised Bangladesh, refrained from using veto. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman created history by delivering his address to the UN General Assembly in Bangla.

Bangladesh experienced near famine conditions in 1974 and it spilled over to 1975. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had reached the pinnacle of his career. He had become truly the Father of the Nation. Along with food shortage law and order deteriorated. Bangabandhu felt that something drastic needed to be done. He instituted what came to be known as Baksal. All political parties were banned and brought under a single umbrella, all newspapers were closed, parliamentary democracy was abolished and a Presidential form of Government was established and Bangabandhu became the President. Such was the authority of Bangabandhu that there was hardly any dissent. The Great Leader, who throughout his life had fought for democracy, turned against it.

The events of 15 August 1975 can in no way be explained by the change of the political scenario in Bangladesh. The assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the President of the country and founder of the independent state of Bangladesh, and his family and close associates is the result of a carefully laid out plot. The objective was to sow terror in the hearts and minds of people by the sheer scale of the murderous plot. In scale the crime surpassed the murder of the Czars or Russia and his family following their overthrow in 1917. The trial of the assassins that is taking place in Dhaka, is laying bare the carefully crafted plot not only to kill the Father of the Nation, his family and associates but also the jail killing of the closest associates of Bangabandhu, who had provided brilliant leadership during the War of Liberation in 1971. The objective of the assassins was to finish the Awami League, the party which provided leadership during the War of Liberation.

On 15 August 1975 Bangladesh entered the dangerous phase of instability. Coups and counter-coups followed until Gen Ziaur Rahman emerged as the strong man of the regime. To face the situation created by the plotters he hit upon the stratagem of sending them to various Bangladesh Embassies as diplomats. Within the country he brought about far reaching changes. The assassins were to receive indemnity from any proceedings in any court of law. The Constitution, which was adopted by the sovereign

Assembly in 1972 and which was the product of national consensus, was changed beyond recognition. It was Islamised as gone were the secular chapters of this document. So was thrown away socialism. Religious extremists, who had played havoc during the War of Liberation of 1971, were given a free hand to participate in politics. Gen. Ziaur Rahman played his anti-India card to the hilt.

On 30th May 1981 Gen. Zia was assassinated in his bed in Chittagong by disgruntled army officers. The circumstances leading to the assassination are murky. Accusations fly around the country. Some army officers have been hanged for conspiring to murder President Ziaur Rahman. Gen Zia was succeeded by his Vice President Justice Abdus Sattar. His was an interim regime. In 1982 he was unceremoniously thrown out by Gen H M Ershad, the Chief of Army Staff. For nine years Gen Ershad ran Bangladesh as an autocrat. His regime distinguished itself by corruption on an unimaginable scale.

Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who had a miraculous escape because she was away from the country at the time of the assassination of her father and family returned to Bangladesh in 1981. She took over the Presidency of the Awami League party. Begum Khaleda Zia, the widow of the assassinated President Ziaur Rahman, took over the reins of her party Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Together they launched a movement against Gen Ershad. Finally the movement was crowned with success and a popular upsurge toppled Gen Ershad in 1990. He found himself in Dhaka jail.

Elections were held in 1991 and the BNP of Begum Zia defeated narrowly the Awami League of Sheikh Hasina. The most notable event of the reign of Begum Zia was that Bangladesh returned to the Parliamentary form of Government. The Bangalee nation has always been wedded to the parliamentary system and once again the nation was returning full circle. As leader of the opposition Sheikh Hasina threw a challenge and forced Begum Zia to accept the concept of a caretaker administration, which would conduct elections. This was the answer to charges of fraud and wrongdoing during the elections. In the June 1996 elections the Awami League of Sheikh Hasina defeated the BNP. It seemed Bangladesh was entering a two-party system, an ideal system of democracy. The country is now getting ready to hold elections once again.

To take a global view of events of the last three decades, the country was lucky to get the leadership of the founder of Bangladesh, in the most critical years of its existence. The assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his family and associates, nearly overturned the ship of state. Luckily, thanks to the sagacity of the people the nation survived. During the three decades the nation has had time to stay its course. Needless to say that the nation suffered the most profound jolt on 15 August 1975. The return of the Awami League to power is a proof that the nation has returned to its moorings. There is some distance to travel. Fortunately the worst is over.

Bangladesh has taken long strides in her economic development. She has achieved self-sufficiency in food production. This is a major achievement for an ever-growing population squeezed within a tiny territory. Bangladesh is a leading exporter of garments, she earns handsome money from manpower export, her soldiers are number one in the world in peace keeping missions around the world.

If you ask a Bangalee his thought about his country, this homogenous people is likely to answer that his only regret is that the nation has not achieved better results. Indeed here is a nation raring to go ahead but often frustrated by ridiculous roadblocks like hartals. After thousands of years Bangalee as a nation has appeared on the map of the world. It is making its presence felt around the globe. The foundation laying of the International Language Institute in the presence of the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan is proof that the eyes of the nation are fixed on a glorious horizon.