

### Can the self be de-individualized?

FROM THE ALTERNATIVES DESK

FEW will dispute the need for rethinking *self-reliance*. The reason is quite simple, not only has the idea failed to catch the imagination of the people but also very few have dared to put the idea into practice. One possibly will name Tagore and Gandhi for measuring the strength of the idea, but that will only invite and sharpen the debate as to what is meant by self-reliance. And there are good reasons for this.

In the English language the word is only a mid-nineteenth century invent and it meant, as the Webster's dictionary notes, "reliance on one's own efforts and abilities." This is similar to the Bangla expression "*atman nirbharshil*," with "atman" having a deep philosophical basis in South Asia identified with the "self" as well as the "Brahman, the ultimate reality." The scope for having it understood in the "collective" sense is therefore nil, unless of course one is engaged in the business of repackaging something that is old and easily understood for something that is new and hardly attainable! The smell of foul politics or more soberly consent building in the hands of organic intellectuals cannot be denied. But that is not everything.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact date or even the period marking the transformation of the self into a collective enterprise in Bangladesh. Some have referred to the Gandhian tradition, particularly Gandhi's call for swaraj, while others have brought down the notion to mid-seventies when policymakers were trying to grapple with the famine around them. Origin of the expression aside, it is true that by the end of the twentieth century serious and not-so-serious scholars alike were using expressions like "collective self-reliance," "national self-reliance," "national self-realization," "national self-respect," including "economic self-reliance," to the extent that the word "self" was completely de-individualized or externalized to mean the collective, the nation and the state. And there lies not only the contradiction but also, what I regard, the limitation of making good use of the idea of self-reliance.

I take the transformation of the self into a collective enterprise as the result of intellectual bankruptcy. By collectivizing, nationalizing and "economizing" the self, the intellectual community, including the policymakers, deprived the self or the individual the space that was required for his/her intellectual, economic and moral development. This of course would have required creative interventions and making of newer structures not only in every sphere of life and living (representation, education, banking, security, and the like) but also of the kind less attuned to traditionalism and modernist influences of the West. But for many, this is too much of a radicalism to digest, the safer path is to hide the "self" in the "nation" and transfer the burden of emancipation to the latter.

In the midst of our ill experience, I guess the time has come for raising a very pertinent question, do we really need to de-individualize the self? Can we not instead create space for the individual outside the rhetoric of party affiliation, ethnic solidarity, religious brotherhood, nation and the state? Kindly pause, ponder and pursue.



Self-reliance: Earning a living by fishing-net making

## Self-reliance: Is there a need for re-thinking?

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SELF-RELIANCE has been one of the most influential ideas of development: to develop is to become self-reliant. However, views differed on what should constitute the very idea of it. Ambiguities persisted as to which level this idea should be applied at the level of nation/state, society, community or individual. More importantly, whose self-reliance we are talking about? Is it people's self-reliance, pertaining to the poor and the vulnerable, defined as an expression of the development initiatives from below? Or, is it self-reliance of the rich, of those bhadraloks who define the boundary of state concerns from above? To illustrate how the idea of self-reliance was originally mooted in the development discourse we cite three examples pertaining to economics, culture, and politics.

In the context of economic development it was used to convey the idea of "autarchy", embedded in the so-called "closed economy" models wherein reliance on international trade and foreign private capital inflows was to be deliberately minimised by focussing on the development of the domestic market. In the context of political development the old views of self-reliance privileged nation-state over civil society, sovereignty over citizenship, and security over human rights. Self-reliance in the context of cultural development led to the projects of "national reconstruction" whereby cultural identities of people were constructed in terms of insufficiently imagined national identities. It gave primacy to the idea of nation over civilization, and privileged the local over the global cultural and trans-cultural processes. The present essay argues that these old views of self-reliance are in "crisis" and are in need of radical re-thinking.

### Old Views of Self-Reliance

The concept of economic self-reliance is a case in point. In this approach the emphasis is laid on producing goods and services mainly for the domestic market. The idea is to achieve economic self-sufficiency through elimination of dependence on external economic factors such as foreign trade, foreign aid, and foreign investment. Indeed the autarchic model is premised on the deep-seated distrust in international trade both as one of the mainsprings of domestic economic growth and as the ultimate disciplining device leading to periodic adjustments in domestic economic processes. Nehruwritting as early as 1943-captured the mood of his time when he termed international trade as "a whirlpool of economic imperialism".

The old views of self-reliance were defined by all the three key elements of economic nationalism, namely, consciously minimizing the reliance on international trade, dominant role of the public sector in industrialization under centralized

investment planning, and finally, the critical role assigned to the basic and heavy industries in accelerating the long-term economic growth. The third element was not present in all country contexts (it was absent in Bangladesh, for instance), but the other two elements were the common ingredients. It is important to note that the autarchic position toward international trade is intellectually distinct from and pre-dates the famous Nurskian doctrine of balanced growth and the influential view of export pessimism although both the positions lead to the same outcome for the economy. The intellectual origin of the idea of self-reliance based on a notion of inward-orientation was rooted in the pre-existing economic nationalism that dates back to the idea of economic swadeshi mooted in the early decades of the 20th century in the context of Indian nationalist movement.

### Pitfalls of Inward-Oriented Thinking

Persistence with self-reliant doctrines had long-term adverse economic, political and cultural effects. The most obvious case is provided by the dismal economic record of South Asia compared with that of East and South-East Asia, although in the beginning of the post-colonial journey many thought that South Asia would emerge as the lead performer in the entire developing world. The policy package associated with old views of economic self-reliance had certain well-known features, namely, keeping the exchange rate overvalued (in the then prevailing system of fixed exchange rates), the imposition of various quantitative controls on foreign exchange and imports and the graded tariffs (highest on consumer goods, lower on intermediates and the lowest on capital goods) to contain the excess demand for foreign exchange resulting from overvalued currency. It discriminated against exports and resulted in perpetual balance-of-payments deficits which, in turn, led to further tightening of import controls in an unending cycle. It has discriminated against agriculture which was the major source of primary exports and the major provider of livelihood to an overwhelming proportion of the population.

The economic consequences of the persistence with import-substitution orientation as a mode of economic self-reliance in South Asia may be summarised as follows. One, it increased

import dependence rather than reducing it and the growth process became import and foreign exchange intensive. Two, insulation from international competition resulted in inefficiencies in industrialization and made it internationally non-competitive besides widening the technology lag. Both these factors reduced the productivity of investment and contributed toward slowing down the growth rate for given rate of investment and limited the capacity of the industrial sector to absorb abundant labour. The focus on industrialisation and the consequent neglect of agriculture further accentuated the trade policy induced bias against agriculture and reduced that sector to the status of residual absorber of labour. Combined with demographic pressures, most countries of the region succeeded in reducing the share of agriculture in GDP much faster than its share in work force. Thus, agriculture became a drag in raising average productivity of labour at the

economy-wide level and hence resulted in the persistence with low living standards.

Pressure groups thriving on the distortions associated with the inward-looking self-reliant strategy vary across the countries, but one can identify some common ingredients. They often represent an eclectic coalition, ranging from the control-bureaucracy, domestic protection lobbies engaged in trade, service and manufacture, trade unions operative in the "protected" sectors, and other special interest groups linked with inward-orientation. A large part their activities are in the nature of unproductive rent seeking. These groups had rather modest political voice in the beginning when these countries initiated the development process. The situation has changed significantly over the decades of post-independence. Overcoming market distortions (especially the ones associated with the functioning of labour and capital markets) goes beyond just the issue of market imperfections. It has become increasingly interlinked with the question of overcoming political opposition on the part of these pressure groups (including the conservative anti-private sector biases among the middle-class intellectuals).

In short, the social and political forces unleashed by the inward-oriented regime and governed by the inward-oriented ideas are the "children of autarchy", and cannot be easily dealt with as mere "policy problems" or as abstractions of "market distortions". They persist as "negative

superstructures" retarding the pace of economic and political reforms. Their continued presence in economy and polity explains the progressive erosion of the gains from economic liberalization and blunts the prospects for using the powerful instrumental role of international trade and globalization to step up domestic rate of economic progress. This adverse political economy representing the anti-reform coalition appears to be the most important institutional challenge facing Bangladesh today.

Similar adverse effects were discernible in other areas as well, though here the causal links that connect autarchy/inward-orientation with cultural stagnation need to be explored further. In the cultural arena the ideology of self-reliance led to the rise of "nationalist culture". The latter not only undermined the spontaneous expressions of local cultural forms, but also tended to appropriate, subordinate, and "nationalise" these inde-

nationalism, the latter being torn apart between the faith and the habitat, between East and West, between nation and civilisation, between bhadralok and sub-altern expressions. Cultural tensions over Bengali/Bangladeshi, for instance, were played out in the insufficiently imagined space of Nation, with little connections with people's self-history as the expression of diverse ethnoscares, pluralist convictions, multiple identities and trans-cultural processes. As a result, the pace of cultural development stagnated under the rule of nationalism.

As for politics the idea of self-reliance had much more immediate consequences. It led to the emergence of the "strong state" in the sense of burgeoning size of the state, strengthening of the policing and surveillance capacity of the nation-state over its subjects, and governmentalisation of the private economic and social spheres. The outcome is one of undermin-

of-payments crisis became unavoidable. Indian development experience provides a classic example in this regard. Apart from the flawed system of incentives generated by the soft budget constraint in the public sector the industrial licensing in the private manufacturing activities resulted in noncompetitive market structures, constricted flexibility in adjusting to the market signals and persistent shortages besides inducing corruption associated with unproductive rent-seeking behaviour. The consequent inefficiencies further reduced the productivity of investment thereby slowing down growth. The inefficient and expanding monopolistic public sector activities raised the cost of universal infrastructural services and contributed further to the internationally non-competitive character of the insulated domestic industrial sector.

Second, in other countries of South Asia the degree of inward-oriented policy-induced distortions was relatively less prominent compared with India, but the economic outcomes were similar. In these smaller economies, the problem was compounded by the context-specific factors. Thus, in Bangladesh although the degree of import-substitution bias has been reduced considerably since 1990, the problem was compounded by the very poor governance capacity leading to limited enforcement of efficiency-enhancing measures in both public entities and publicly financed private sector industrial projects. Government directed investible funds through the banking system resulted in large-scale debt default and the failure to target subsidies to the selected firms based on export performance criteria magnified the problem of state-managed investment promotion strategy. The growing list of industries caught up in bad debt as well as those classified as sick industries remains a pointer to the quality of state interventions. All these point to the failure of state-led modernisation projects in these countries.

Third, changing global circumstances provided the new context for rethinking the traditional views of self-reliance. Growing internationalisation of capital as expressed in globalised production and services transcended national barriers bringing the national market increasingly under the spell of international competitive pressures. Rise of electronic mediation challenged the old notions of national security, policing and surveillance. It also led to new consumerism dictating new labour, social and environmental standards on the Third World production and export. Increased international migration especially cross-border migration through informal channels transformed the entire

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Both new communitarianism and new globalism are influential processes of our time, bringing new imagination and new changes in the very structure of our feeling, re-constituting the old configurations of our "selves". It is on the basis of this "re-constituted self" that the process of re-thinking the very project of self-reliance and the articulation of new views and measures of it must begin.

pendent cultural forms in the name of nation. It tended to re-write and officialise the socially complex history of people and its culture from the perspective of "national history". As a result the varied text of what may be called the polyphonic culture of people was reduced to a monistic metanarrative of nation. In the latter approach the focus shifts to tracing the origin and growth of nationalist consciousness rather than on culture defined as the spontaneous and creative expression of various individuals and communities.

Ideologies of nationalist culture tend to gloss over the fact that people's cultural history pre-dates the origin of nation and transcends the political, historical, geographical, and mental boundary defined by nation. Privileging nation in matters of culture becomes even more problematic in view of the illegitimacy of nationalism itself, as Ashis Nandy has strongly argued in his work on Rabindranath Tagore's political philosophy. In any case it is clear from the entire oeuvre of Tagore that he did not consider "nation" to be the highest expression of civilisation. Indeed, he was extremely skeptical of the potentials of nationalist culture as the natural flow of human creativity, and in one place he even termed nationalism as the "geographic demon".

It is difficult to see the possibility of a flourishing, spontaneous, pluralist, and creative people's culture under the "spiritual rule" of that geographical demon. Part of the problem is derived from the internal splitting within the cultural voice of

ing the idea of inclusive citizenship and civic development, and gross violation of human rights as the nation-state became stronger and "overdeveloped" while the society remained caught up in the state of maldevelopment.

In short, deficiencies in the old views of economic self-reliance were reinforced further by the deficiencies in old views of cultural and political self-reliance. Nationalist cultural ideologies, polarized and hartal-prone political processes, governmentalised, donor-dependent, and fragmented civic and NGO institutions and movements, and in general a weak social capital base leading to limited bonding and bridging capacities across local communities transform the very idea of self-reliance into a mimicry of progress and self-development.

### Need for Rethinking

While the critique of the old views of self-reliance is not a recent development, it is true that the voice of dissent became louder only in the recent years. Old views of self-reliance were challenged on several counts. Both local and global factors led to the crisis of self-reliance as a mode of development thought and shaped the need for rethinking the old paradigm. First, with passage of time it was clear that the autarchic model has become unsustainable. As pointed earlier, the model of inward-orientation penalized exports and agriculture while it encouraged capital-intensive manufactures. As a result, the balance-

ble decline of our identity. This may be summarized as *culture-shock*, a feeling of confusion and anxiety caused by contact with another culture. Binayak Sen observed that we still do not know what we mean by the much talked terminology Bangaliness. We do not exactly know what we wall-in or wall-out by upholding this identity. So perhaps the nationalist mode of culture need to be rethought. Dr. Simeen Mahmud of BIDS observed that apart from the question of cultural identity, we could not ascertain if and how culture is linked to the question of self-reliance. Mr. Ejazul Islam of the Bangladesh Bank observed that our education policy has added to our confusions and divisions. We have failed to arrive at a unified educational system in the last three decades. The course contents of Bangla medium School, English medium school and the Madrasa are radically different from one another. Boys and girls of the same country (society) are being sent to educational institutions of varied (often conflicting) nature. He said, as pointed out in the key-note paper, for obvious reasons, three groups of students are not likely to make similar response to the *Lalon bachao* movement.

The dialogue ended with an optimistic note with the participants stressing upon the need for improvising the standards of education, the need for opening negotiations between and among cultures and more importantly to be creative and imaginative in our thoughts and lives.

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## Rethinking cultural and intellectual self-reliance: A dialogue report

BERTOLT Brecht, the legendary German poet and playwright, once commenting on "*Cultural Imperialism*", pointed out that material attack is being made on the cultural world and that attack could best be faced with material strength rather than the *pure cultural strength*. This observation by Brecht was deeply reflected in the dialogue held at the BIDS auditorium on 17 February organized by the BIDS (Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies) in collaboration with *The Daily Star* and the *Centre for Alternatives*. The day-long dialogue was divided into two sessions. The first session focused on the economic dimension of self-reliance while the speakers were supposed to shift their attention to the cultural and intellectual aspects of self-reliance in the second session. But interestingly, the multidimensional nature of the very terminology "*self-reliance*" virtually turned the two separate sessions of the day into *two inseparable parts of one single session*.

In the second session of the dialogue, key-note paper titled "*Cultural Autonomy In An Age Of Globalization*" was presented by Professor Ferdous Azim of Dhaka University. Finance Secretary to the Government of Bangladesh Dr. Akbar Ali Khan chaired the session. The paper which has been published in this issue of Alternatives raised an interesting debate. The following are the key issues that were deliberated upon by the participants.

### Culture and rural-urban divide

Dr. K. Toufiq of BIDS pointed out that the forces of globalization have greatly merged the rural-urban differences, a direct consequence of globalization is that people from the the sides are consuming the same cultural products. In other words, the rural-urban cultural boundary is withering away. Countering this, Ferdous Azim argued that

she raised the issue of rural-urban gap in her paper because this is quite prevalent in our cultural sphere. She pointed out how the media portrays the rural-urban differences, the differences between a *gramer maye* and a *shahore chheley*. This may at best be termed as the urban portrayal of rural life. Former Foreign Minister, Mr. Anisul Islam Mahmud observed that the rural-urban dichotomy is a product of the difference in the income-levels of rural and urban people and it does not indicate any cultural difference. Dr. Akbar Ali Khan observed that rural-urban dichotomy puzzles us more than any other because ours is a rural-urban society. The British had called the entire Bengal a slum and Dr Khan believed that we are still leading a slum life.

### Intra-society cultural diversity

Ferdous Azim aptly raised this issue with the observation that the International Mother Language Day recognizes the multiplicity of languages and culture and talks about the co-existence of many languages no matter how small in number their speakers, no matter how tenuous their cultural position and with no evaluation or rating of literary tradition and culture. Dr. Imitiaz Ahmed of CA elaborated the point. He pointed out that no society could achieve cultural progress without paying due respect to the *intra-society cultural diversity*. He regretted that linguistic and nationalistic chauvinism has generated many a negative elements in our cultural movement, by closing up our windows, we have been depriving the succeeding generations of the constructive aspects of other languages, nations and civilizations. Ahmed termed it a paradox of history that though we had fought a lot against the marginalization of our cultural heritage but when we gained independence we did not mind practicing the same oppressive course of

marginalization against the other linguistic and cultural entities existing within our territory. In the last three decades of independence, we could never think of composing the popular lyric *amar bhai-er roktye rangano* in chakma/ marma language let alone publishing text-books in those languages. Ahmed cited two reasons responsible for the linguistic racism. One, governmentalisation of cultural practice. By definition, culture is what we are but in this case the ruling authority decides what we should be and two, the all pervading nature of power-structure. This is a long-term process of history. Whenever any economic, social or cultural power becomes organized, after the Foucaultian discourse of post-structuralism, it becomes very difficult to come out and in the process positive cultural aspects might become negative. Ahmed urged all the cultural activities to come out of the *power-structure* and restore creativity in their respective fields.

### Social capital for self-reliance

Although all the necessary ingredients of self-reliance could not be identified in the dialogue the need for social capital was deeply felt by the discussants in both the sessions. Dr. Binayak Sen of BIDS observed that this particular issue never received due attention in the past. He pointed out, this capital has largely declined in the last three decades due to anti-people politics. Highlighting the importance of dynamic social capital Dr. Akbar Ali Khan, regretted that negative social capital has grown up in the past decades and the entire nation is paying the cost. Dr. Abu Abdullah, DG of the BIDS made a departure on this point. He pointed out that justice and equity are far from being established in our society. He observed that we have achieved progress by dint of the hard-work of the toiling masses but regret-

tably we have not recognized their hard-work. They have made the most significant contribution to our economy so we must bring them to the forefront in order to expect a vibrant social capital. He further emphasised upon the need for building up self-sustaining institutions.

### Gender and culture

To date, gender discourse is almost completely missing from the lexicon of culture. Yet women are treated as the sole purveyor of culture this has often had negative impact upon women. Dress, for example, is regarded as a component of culture and tradition. But it appears that the society is more concerned about the dress of women rather than of the men. Dr. Amena Mohsin, of the University of Dhaka pointed out that often women prefer shalwar kameez to saree simply because they feel more comfortable but the wide acceptance of shalwar kameez is considered as a *deviation* from tradition because in Bengali mindset only saree enjoys the status of a traditional dress. Reshmi Chowdhury, a young social researcher pointed out that culture is not only male dominated but also age dominated. Ferdous Azim, pointed out that men and women equally participated in most of the popular movements including the language movement and the war of liberation but the spirit got *patrified* in the subsequent times and women were kept at bay. She suggested that the gendered nature of culture should be properly focused by the students of culture otherwise cultural studies would not be free from *intellectual bankruptcy*.

### The question of intervention

This issue was discussed by most of the participants. Dr. Akbar Ali Khan observed that perhaps there was something wrong with the naming of the dialogue and wondered if there was any such