

30 Years of Victory

VICTORY DAY SPECIAL

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The nation celebrates Victory Day

From a flicker to sunlight

SH IMAM

BESIEGED local media in 1971. How did it fare? It remains a less publicised tale among the lore of ruminations. But no grouse on the part of the journalists and their associates who helped weave that story, because all that mattered or matters with the dead and the living among them is this overarching fact: the vital rearguard support they provided to the international media against stunning odds was to come of tremendous use in creating an irrepressible world public opinion in favour of the Bangladesh cause. They are content with the role they had then played under extremely daunting circumstances.

The journey of Bangladesh media began precisely on March 26, 1971 when a historic mass contact took place by virtue of the declaration of independence from a radio transmitter set up at Kalurghat. After the genocidal night of March 25, it was a shaft of light and of hope through clouds of darkness thickening around us. The radio station at Kalurghat worked for four days. Then two months on it started broadcasting with a new vigour from Mujibnagar. Later on it transformed into *Suadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* working from Calcutta. It is universally known as to what an important role the *Suadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* played in the advancement of the Bangladesh Liberation War.

The besieged media in Dhaka worked on three levels with sparkling ingenuity and strategic finesse to wriggle through an extremely draconian body of Marital Law

regulations together with the imposition of an elaborate censorship regimen. Firstly, at the purely professional level, journalists would route their news items through the censorship trammels but with subtle improvisations to bring it as close to the truth as possible. In this category falls what the East Pakistan Bureau of the Karachi-based *Sin* newspaper did. The bureau headed by Ataus Samad, had Awal Khan and Fayza Haq on its staff as special correspondent and feature writer respectively. When the bureau had hibernated for a few months after the crackdown of March 25, *The Sun* publisher Parvez and its editor Shameem came to Dhaka and met with Ataus Samad and his colleagues. They said they had informed military authorities in Pakistan that Ataus Samad, Awal Khan, Fayza were on the staff of the *Sin* newspaper. They also told the three Bengali journalists that they should occasionally send dispatches to Karachi.

So, the East Pakistan bureau thought of filing some items. Initially the word 'miscreant' had to be there to any news item on bomb explosion incident to skirt the censorship rule, but later on they would drop the word 'miscreant' to simply say 'bomb explosions were heard' at such and such place. In any case, a very important purpose of news-reporting under severe constraints was served as people came to know the suppressed side of the story i.e. Muktibahini's presence and their activism in Dhaka.

At a later date when Yahya's military regime prepared to hold a series of thoroughly farcical by-elections in East Pakistan, Pakistan People's Party candidates were set

up for seats won by Awami League in the 1971 elections but declared vacant by the military authorities following their crackdown on March 25. The news on this development was served with a one-liner that spoke volumes about the party: PPP opened its Dhaka office on such and such date, only the other day, that is.

In the second category of bravado fell the work of journalists, businessmen and progressive civic society elements in a concert. Mtefaq scribe Muidul Hassan describes in his book titled *Muktadhara*, 71 as to how a communication channel was maintained with prime minister Tajuddin Ahmed in Muhibnagar/Calcutta to keep the latter informed of happenings in the then East Pakistan. A situation assessment report would be sent to Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra on a daily basis. Journalists like Muidul Hassan, Zahurul Islam, Ataus Samad and businessmen like Ziaul Haque and Mukhlisur Rahman were all working in tandem. The late lamented Ziaul Haque would offload information in Bangkok and London during his frequent visits to those two cities.

Another piece of highly imaginative and thoughtful handiwork came from journalists and photographers who would secretly build banks of information and pictures, of interest to the outside world, and release them gradually to appropriate quarters.

Another very important group of local journalists assisted foreign correspondents on assignment to East Pakistan in getting them to the right places and people thereby helping them form objective opinion on the situation.

The collapse in the share market

including a drastic fall in the share prices of jute mills, depression in inter-wing business, the sinking of eight to ten big sea vessels at the Mongla Port would form the subject-matter of their analytical reports and dispatches.

The World Bank Mission was in Dhaka when a bomb was blasted by Muktibahini commandos near Sheraton Hotel and another exploded in front of the Bangladesh Bank building. Also, earlier in September, some three months before the surrender of the Pakistani forces at the Race Course Maidan, Muktibahini guerillas took Munshiganj, marched through the streets of the township and kept it in possession for two hours, the news of this early Muktibahini success reaching outside world in no time. Here one remembers BBC correspondent Nizamuddin Ahmed's extraordinary courage in sending dispatches to Bush House at great personal risk. Eventually he courted martyrdom with other valiant intellectuals on December 14, 1971.

In a fitting tribute to the scribes who did a Yeoman's job during the Liberation War, the Dhaka Reporters' Unity (DRU) awarded 50 journalists with certificates of recognition calling them 'Muktijoddah Sangbadiks' on December 16, 1996. Some of them had worked in Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, others had taken up arms and yet others their pen. That was good thinking on the part of DRU to have honoured them, but the awardees' best satisfaction must come from the fact that they served the people at their hour of the greatest need.

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THIRTY YEARS ON To what use have we put our national independence?

KAZI MAMUNUR RAHMAN

IT is now thirty years that Bangladesh won its independence as a nation after a bloody and cruel war by the Pakistan army against the quickly recruited Bengali freedom fighters, students, peasants and workers. Hundreds of thousands of civilians, men, women and children supported and backed their fighting compatriots. For the first time in hundreds of years at independence the Bengalees felt proud to be ruled by their own people.

Expectations and aspirations obviously were high that in an independent state everything would be better, people would be able to live their lives free from oppression that always had accompanied colonial rule, be it Persian, Mughal, British or the Pakistani variety.

Thirty years on, are we any nearer to attaining the goals we set ourselves after the Liberation War?

I suppose nearly everybody's answer to this question will be in the negative. Yes, no doubt, Bangladesh is a free and independent state whose voice is well received in the international arena. But inside? We are free from colonial rule. But have we ever thought about the fact that full freedom can be only attained through freedom from within. Here comes a big question mark. To what use have we put our freedom for which we sacrificed so much? Have we ever, on a national level, even thought about this question? You can hear verbal statements of love for the nation at every corner. No function, however, attracts so many visitors as the one where opportunities to stay, work or study abroad are offered. Whoever has the possibility to leave the country will perhaps do so. Most Bangladeshis like to leave their country to escape the unacceptable living conditions at home.

Then, there might be one good

reason for Bangladeshis to stay at home. Those who are smart and unscrupulous enough may find in Bangladesh the best field in the world to exploit their fellow countrymen and women by extortion, intimidation or simple cheating.

Corruption is widespread. Everybody knows it, everybody experiences it. But nobody seems to do anything about it.

Where does the corruption money go to? That is hard to ascertain. But a chunk of this money goes to supplement the meagre pay of employees. Without this 'extra pay' thousands of families would suffer bitter hardships. The problem is, no way connected with service or performance of the concerned officers. Those who work outside the rules and regulations get most of this money. I think every state should be able to pay its officers enough, so that they can exercise their duties without worrying how to bring up their children in a decent way. In Bangladesh, the system seems to have deteriorated so far that a government officer is paid for coming to his workplace, but to exercise his duties he has to be paid an extra honorarium by the client.

The bigger the graft, the bigger will be the expectation of extra money, speed-money or whatever nice names that circulate to conceal corruption. But has anybody ever thought about the fact that a company that which has to pay every month one or two lakh taka in *bakhshish* to different organisations, people or so-called service providers under the threat that the production of the company may be seriously hampered, has to extract this money from somewhere? Eventually it will be counted into the cost of the products of this company, e.g. the price of the commodity.

Bangladesh's only advantage on the international market is low

wage, which keeps the production cost down. Productivity on the other hand is very low in Bangladesh. With strong competition from countries like China, the question arises whether Bangladesh can afford to bring up the price of its goods by such factors as corruption and speed money.

On the other hand, there are so many burning issues of general concern such as mass education, housing schemes for low income group to finally get rid of the urban slums, measures to get the traffic congestion right and the smoke from vehicles and factories under control, so on and so forth.

Would any company not do better to invest in its workforce instead of spending about one crore taka every year on corruption? Why not help its workers find suitable living space, care for the schooling of their offspring or develop the skill of the workers themselves? How long does Bangladesh want to stay at the bottom of worldwide scale of social advancement?

But let me come back to the main question of what are we using our freedom for?

Might it be a fact that in Bangladesh those who are in power, (I mean not only political but any form of social power), are not even interested in the social advancement of their own people! Have-nots and know-nots are easier to rule, easier to use for one's own ends. Give anybody twenty taka he will clap at your public meeting, give anybody fifty taka he will help enforce a hartal for you, give anybody one hundred taka he will intimidate people who might like to vote against you, give anybody control over a bus stand and he will return you some thousands of taka every day, give anybody five thousand taka and he will execute a murder for you.

Is that the freedom we wanted? Is that what our independence stood

for? Is that the national will of Bangladeshis?

Or is it not high time that we start the real struggle to gain independence, this time from oppression from within?

So that one day a dream can come true

A dream showing Bangladesh as a country

where all men and women have a place to live not only at the edge of the footpath,

where they can have clean drinking water and clothing, also in winter time,

where they have food that nourishes their bodies and souls,

where they can find a doctor who cares for them and not for the pharmaceutical industries,

where they can breathe the air around them without getting permanent cough,

where they can send their children to a school, in which they are taught something relevant for their lives,

where men women and children can move around freely without fear of being attacked

where everybody can utter his opinion without fear of oppression or arrest

where Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians live as good neighbours in mutual respect and not one group denies the other its rights as citizens, just because in this part of the world they are they majority...

'This dream may today, on this 16th December 2001, seem a utopia outside our reach. But only if more and more people join in this dream it can be converted into a goal, for which Bangladeshis people will strive for with the same might as they did in 1971 for their external independence.

AL, BNP need to discard their outmoded politics

M.A.S. MOLLA

BANGLADESH was born 'by declaration' as an independent state on March 26, 1971. But she achieved political sovereignty on December 16, 1971 through a bloody war of about nine months with the Pakistani occupation forces helped by the then USSR and the neighbouring India. The independent Bangladesh is observing 30 years of its victory this year. But in this long 30 years Bangladesh has failed to achieve any remarkable economic progress. This long time has also proved inadequate even to settle some disputed matters of our national life. This is because our two major political parties, namely the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) are reluctant to settle these matters. They intend to fish in the troubled water.

But their aims are also defeated by themselves. Now it is high time to settle some matters so that the two can respect each other, which is of utmost importance for the greater benefit of the nation. The 21st Century and the 3rd Millennium began their journey on the 1st day of January this year. So at the advent of a Millennium and also at the three-decade celebration of our victory, the nation may take vow to settle the disputed issues so that these are no longer raised anew in the second year of this century. The most important national matters of dispute are discussed below. The aim of such a discussion is to reach a consensus so that the 31st year of our victory may have a congenial

atmosphere. The nation in general and the two parties in particular are to take a fresh vow in this last month of the first year of the new Millennium.

Dreaming, Declaring, Organising and Executing Independence

Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani was the first Bangladeshi leader who realised the need for national independence from the Pakistani colonial rulers in the latter half of the fifties (of the 20th Century). He bade 'Walaikumassalam' to the Pakistanis in a big gathering. So he is the 'Dreamer' of our national independence.

However, he could not organise the people of the then East Pakistan for a movement towards independence. This was effectively done by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who was nurtured by his political guru Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy and helped by his companions like Tajuddin Ahmed and others. So Mujib should be regarded as the ORGANIZER of our struggle for freedom.

Then the question arises who declared Independence of Bangladesh on the 26th March, 1971? Was it Major Ziaur Rahman? It was Md Hannan of Awami League who declared independence (decided by a group of leaders present there) from the *Suadhin Bangla Betar Kendra* (Radio Centre of Independent Bangladesh) established by Belal Mohammad and Abul Kashem Swandeeep. Later, on the 27th March Belal Mohammad took Major Zia to the *Betar Kendra*. Zia first declared

independence on his own, but later corrected saying 'on behalf of our great national leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman'.

Since Mujib was arrested by the Pakistani forces on the late night of 25th March, 1971 he could not lead the armed struggle for freedom. It was Tajuddin Ahmed who was at the helm of all affairs of the armed struggle that led to our victory just three decades ago. Therefore, Tajuddin should be regarded as the EXECUTOR of our national liberation.

If no declaration of independence was made prior to the formation of our interim government, the anxious people would have had to live some more days in anxiety. The most effective declaration of our independence was made on April 17 from Baidyanathpala (later named Mujib Nagar) Mango Orchard of Meherpur by the newly-formed provisional government. It was Tajuddin Ahmed whose initiative, wisdom and firmness was the main pillar of our independence. However, Zia's admirers need not be disheartened. Zia's credit was not much in declaring independence, but his credit was more in being the most effective Sector Commander and in leading the Z-Force, and also leading the nation as an honest and successful President of Bangladesh.

Having had a glimpse into the past through the above paragraphs, we may ask both the parties (AL and BNP) to take a renewed vow that they will no more try to distort history. History has given each of our prime national leaders some specific credit and none can snatch away those from them.

Our Nationalism

There is a ridiculous dispute among the partymen on the question of nationalism. The Awami Leaguers claim them to be only 'Bangalees' and not Bangladeshis. While the BNP men claim them to be 'Bangladeshis' and they are reluctant to use the term 'Bangalees'. It is true that most of the citizens of Bangladesh are Bangalees, but there are some non-Bangalee tribals living in this country for thousands of years. Sheikh Mujib himself could not make them Bangalees. Besides, there are Bangalees beyond our international border. They are mostly Indians (living in West Bengal) who love to remain Indians rather than uniting two Bengals to form a greater Bangladesh. So it is wise to use the term 'Bangladeshis' for all the citizens of Bangladesh. In being Bangladeshi, most of us don't lose our 'Bangalee' nationalism. On the other hand in remaining Bangalees, we do not lose our 'Bangladeshi' citizenship.

The Awami Leaguers should not find any small of Islam in 'Bangladeshi Nationalism' and the BNP men should abandon the sense of being Hinduish to remain 'Bangalees'.

Pro-liberation and Anti-liberation concepts

The entire nation minus a microscopic section of the countrymen were united against the Pakistani

occupation forces in 1971. Unfortunately the Awami Leaguers claim only themselves 'pro-liberation' and term all other parties including even the non-partisan mass as 'anti-liberation'. The main party working for the liberation struggle should realise that many freedom fighters left their party because of their wrong policy and assembled mainly under Ziaur Rahman's BNP, some formed leftist groups and some others may have entered the Jamaat-e-Islami!

We all know that many Jamaat members including the party MPs of the 8th JS worked against our liberation war. These anti-liberation elements have been incorporated in the present government of the 4-party alliance. Therefore, the Awami allegation against BNP on this count seems at least partially true.

However, the neutral observers may realize that the ministers taken from Jamaat have to ride on cars raising the flag of independent Bangladesh and as a state protocol, they have had to pay respect to our martyred freedom fighters. This is their defeat and our victory, although such a victory is not enough. To have enough victory on them, we are to make them admit their wrong stance during the war of liberation and apologise for it.

Bangabandhu and the Father of the Nation

In the later half of the sixties, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was given 'Bangabandhu' title in a large gathering for his unquestionable patriotism, oratory skills and indomitable boldness. Mujib's popularity was sky-high and the general mass were happy with the title of their favourite 'Sheikh Saheb'.

After liberation, Bangabandhu failed to govern the country up to the expectations of the people. But his boldness and patriotism were never to diminish. So there is no cause for snatching the title of 'Bangabandhu' from the great leader. The BNP has some reservations about using the term 'Bangabandhu' before his name but they better eschew this because we are all indebted to 'Bangabandhu'.

Terrorist Theory of Politics

The present generation of Bangladeshi leaders harbour a terrorist theory of politics. They rear terrorists to fetch money and votes for the party. They think the people can be frightened by the terrorists so that they have no other way than supporting the party concerned.

So, what is the message? It is high time for both the parties to feel the pulse of the people. Both of them have to take renewed and sincere vow that they will discard their outdated terrorist theory of politics.

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Pakistan occupation forces surrendering on 16 December 1971



Freedom fighters entering Dhaka after the surrender