

Songs of freedom

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SYED ASHRAF ALI

MUSIC is poetry distilled into sound, music is the eye of the ear, music is the speech of the angels, music is the medicine of a troubled mind -- music has indeed been defined in a thousand and one ways. Whatever may be the definitions, it is accepted by one and all that music is the language of emotions and that this language is universal, it transcends the barriers men put up against each other. Its vocabulary has been shaped by years of human experiences; its rhetoric mirrors man's existence, his place in nature and in society. Music indeed plays a vital role in the life of a man in every sphere of activity and in every domain of thought.

Since music is related to the profoundest experiences of the individual and the group, it is nothing surprising that the tyranny and oppression of the conquering nations and the struggle for freedom of the subjugated also give rise to emotions that find an ideal expression in music. The German War of Liberation against Napoleon in the early part of the 19th century released a surge of patriotic sentiment that resulted in memorable songs and folklore opera like Weber's The Marksman. Poland's struggle for freedom from Tsarist rule aroused the national poet in Chopin. A united Italy seeking independence from Austria found her national artist in Verdi. Quest for independence in the world of music led Russia to Glinka and Tchaichovsky.

Bangladesh provides an ideal environment for a steady and healthy growth of music. Its countless squares of verdant cropland, luxurious tropical forests, lush green verdure and foliage, meandering rivers and sparkling, ever-flowing rivulets, abundant sunshine together with the quick rotation of six seasons with their varying clouds and characteristics, create an unforgettable impression of peace and fascinating beauty. No wonder, in the historic struggle for liberation in 1971 -- one of the bloodiest strifes in history -- music had as usual played a remarkable and significant role. Music has indeed been the authentic voice of a civilisation that has seen many rises and falls, that has passed through and survived many vicissitudes of prosperity and poverty, of glory and abjection, but has never

ceased to be creative in the worst periods of defeat, has never abandoned its quest for the Eternal even in periods of highest prosperity.

Bangladesh's struggle for emancipation from the clutches of alien domination has a long and chequered history. The bud of Bangladeshi independence, whose fragrance was effectively perceived for the first time through the glorious Language Movement in 1952, sprouted in all its splendour into a full bloom through the War of Independence in 1971.

It was a song -- Amar Bhaier Raktey Rangano Ekushey February -- with a haunting melody from a genius like Altaf Mahmood -- which had always been a very important factor in keeping up the tempo of our long and gruelling struggle at right pitch. But it would be absolutely unjustified if we prepare any list of songs and melodies that helped to boost up the morale of the freedom-hungry Bangladeshis without first paying tribute to the memory of the two great maestros, Tagore and Nazrul, whose songs have become almost synonymous with the culture and tradition of Bangladesh.

The tremendous impact of Tagore songs on our daily activities, on our hopes and aspirations, and on our struggle for independence is known to one and all. Each change of the season, each aspect of our country's landscape, every undulation of the human heart, in sorrow or in joy, has found its voice in some song of his. In our society, they are sung in religious gatherings no less than in concert halls. Patriots have mounted the gallows with his songs on their lips, and young lovers unable to express the depth of their feeling sing his songs and feel the weight of their dumbness relieved. Foolish attempts at minimising his popularity in the sixties proved futile and to some extent counter-productive -- Bangladeshis very wisely ignored the ignorant. In 1971, people even risked their lives to listen to Tagore songs broadcast from the Swadhin Bangla Betar. The due recognition of Amar Sonar Bangla as the National Anthem of sovereign Bangladesh indeed testifies to the glorious contribution of Tagore and his songs to our Liberation Struggle.

Kazi Nazrul Islam, the Great Rebel, perhaps occupies a unique place in the history of struggle for emancipation. The songs of the

indomitable Rebel, whom Tagore called "the mutinous child of the goddess of the Universe," not only played a very vital role in role in our struggle for independence, but also very effectively inspired and influenced freedom fighters in other parts of this sub-continent. He was undoubtedly a genius of the first water, and whether in prose in poetry, our beloved Rebel could breathe fire like an avenging angel and warble, when the mood seized him, like a refreshing, sparkling mounting-stream.

Vibrant words set to exhilarating music, his marching songs spread far and wide and inspired the oppressed and the depressed in every nook and corner of Bangladesh. But this was nothing new -- even Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, while organising the Indian National Army (INA) gratefully acknowledged: "On our way to the war -- we shall sing Nazrul's songs and proceed."

No wonder, the brilliant songs of Nazrul, whose rhythm heaves and swells like the demented waves of the sea lashed by wind, inspired the 75 million Bangladeshis, prepared their imagination for the glorious version of a sovereign state of their own, urging them to wake up from their slumber, to unite and to overthrow the foreign domination - - by "tearing apart, piercing, smashing," if necessary, even "the sun, the moon, and the planets."

As a result, the valiant freedom fighters in 1971 braved the bullets smilingly and marched triumphantly towards emancipation and victory with the songs of the daring Rebel on their lips. Very few of us know that the songs which the Occupation Forces in 1971 banned comprised not only Tagore and folk songs but also included a good number of Nazrul songs like Karar Oi Luho Kapat, Bhenge Phyal, and Kar Re Lopat.

Incidentally, it was this banned creation of the great maestro which was very rightly chosen as the first songs to be broadcast from the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra in Mujibnagar on the May 25, 1971. The wise and happy selection of Chal Chal Chal as the March Song of the Bangladesh Armed Forces very eloquently indicates and acknowledges the unsurpassable contribution of Nazrul and his songs to our historic struggle for independence.

But Tagore and Nazrul were not the only poets whose songs inspired the Bangladeshis in their long quest for sovereignty.

Enchanting melodies like DL Roy's Dhono Dhanye Pushpa Bhara, broadcast over and again by the then Radio Pakistan, Dhaka in March, 1971 and the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra in Mujibnagar, fascinated the listeners in the difficult hours.

A good number of poems by the renowned poets like Sukanta Bhattacharya and Jibananda Das, hitherto almost unknown to the realm of music, were set to tunes by the Swadhin Bangla Betar and enthralled the listeners. Many other songs by poets of comparatively lesser calibre and fame also rejuvenated the morale of the suffering millions in the then East Pakistan.

Village bards like Mohammed Shah Bangalee, Monoranjan Sircar, Shah Ali Sircar, and Mohammad Ali Bangalee took the pain and risk to cross the border and pour out songs to encourage and inspire not only the freedom fighters but also the 65 million captives in the occupied territory as well. The emotion was so intense, the tempo so high, and the spirit so indomitable that even a crippled singer like Mofiz Angur, literally crawling on the ground, had the courage and conviction to reach Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, not on his feet but on his elbows and knees, to render services to the cause of liberation.

It is indeed very difficult to throw light on all the hit songs broadcast by the Voice of the Nation, Swadhin Bangla Betar. The limited space available will be too insufficient to cover the long list. A few are cited below to provide only a bird's eye view.

Fazle Khoda's Salam, Salam, Hajaar Salam was first broadcast by Radio Pakistan, Dhaka in March 1971. It was repeated innumerable number of times by the Swadhin Bangla Betar. One has to listen to songs like this to realise how compellingly a melody may capture the accent of tenderness and patriotism.

"With an endless meaning in the narrow span of a song," as Tagore called it, Mora Ekti Phul Ke Bachabo Bole Juddhya Kori and Tir Hara Ei Dheuer Shagar Pari Debo go by Apel Mahmood captured the attention millions, and Apel Mahmood as a singer earned overnight nationwide fame.

Ek Shagore Rakter Binimoye Banglar Swadhinata Anlo Jara, written by Gobinda Haldar and sung by Apel Mahmood and Swapna Roy, was another top favourite which has been duly



Songs of Freedom: A still from Muktir Gaan directed by Tareque Masud.

selected as the signature tune of BTV's National News.

Syed Shamsul Huda's Rakte Jodi Photo Jibaner Phul Phutuk Na, Abdul Latif's Sona, Sona, Sona, Lokey Bale Sona, TH Sikder's Anek Rakta Diechi Amra, Habibur Rahman's Protidiner Suryadaye Tomai Dheki, Sikander Abu Zafar's Janater Sangram Cholbe Cholbe, Shahidul Islam's Chand Tumi Phire Jao, were some of the haunting melodies which not only rose to the occasion but also boosted up the morale of the Bangladeshis, the heart of each one of whom throbbled with genuine emotions, pulsated with hopes and aspirations, dreamed beautiful dreams of a free Bangladesh, a happier Bangladesh, a renascent Bangladesh, a sovereign Bangladesh.

It is not that each and every song put out by Swadhin Bangla Betar was a hit. But there is simply no denial of the fact that for sheer delight in the creation of forms, for the correct seriousness of mood, playfulness of thought and liveliness of language, for exquisite frivolity of genius, Bangla music never produced anything finer, whether before or after, than the songs which led the Bangladeshis to ultimate victory and sovereignty in 1971.

In beautiful songs like Habibur Rahman's Muktir Aki Path Sangram and Md Muniruzzaman's Bandhu Ebar Tule Nao Hatey Hat, both blessed

with the golden touch of Azad Rahman's magic wand, the imagery and diction conjure up the black terror of the elements, the accents resound with the thunder of doom -- each testifies to the fact that humanity is not flotsam and jetsam to drift along with the waters, following the easy path of least resistance, humanity is like a rock in the midst of swirling waters holding aloft its great heritage over the flux.

But as regards popularity, it was perhaps Joy Bangla Banglar Joy which topped the list. The lilting melody of Anwar Parvez together with the enchanting voice of Shahnaz Rahmatullah and the lyric by Gazi Mazharul Anwar resulted in a superb production which was adored and literally hummed by millions, young and old, even in the worst period of occupation.

It should be mentioned in this connection that Mafizur Rahman, the first Bengali Director General of Radio Pakistan, had the guts to permit in writing the broadcast of this popular song from all the six Radio Stations in the then East Pakistan. This lilting melody became so popular that it was selected as the signature tune of the voice of the oppressed and depressed Bangladeshis -- Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra.

Purbo Digante Shurya Utechhe was another song which enthralled the listeners all over the sub-continent. This beautiful song

emanated from the powerful pen of Gobinda Haldar and was blessed with the experience of a maestro like Samar Das. Another remarkable creation was Sardar Alauddin's Jagat Bashi Dekhey Jao Ashia.

It is needless to emphasise that those who successfully tried to motivate the Bangladeshis through songs and music towards the ultimate goal of liberation had to face many a trial and tribulation. The political implications of musical nationalism were not lost upon the authorities. The valiant Director General of Radio Pakistan, who had the courage and conviction to permit in writing broadcast of Joy Bangla Banglar Joy, was suddenly transferred to a comparatively weaker or insignificant post.

For his golden voice behind numerous songs like Salam Salam Hajaar Salam and Sangram, Sangram, Sangram, Abdul Jabbar was given 14 years' rigorous imprisonment. A good number of officers of Radio Pakistan, Dhaka were suspended and interrogated by the occupation army. Some were even physically tortured or dismissed. Day in and day out attempts were made to nip in the bud the endeavour of the singers and the composers to rouse the nation towards Bangladesh nationalism.

Censoring went to such a ridiculous extent that even the inimitable words of Kazi Nazrul

Islam were changed to satisfy ignorance and foolishness. But this was nothing new in history. Verdi's operas had to be altered again and again to suit the Austrian censor. Sibelius' Finlandia with its rousing trumpet calls was forbidden by the Tsarist police when Finland was demanding her independence at the turn of the nineteenth century. But who can stop the nightingale from singing?

The torture and tyranny proved to be a blessing in disguise -- Bangladeshis drew such strength, vigour, and music out of it that the experiment may be said to have revolutionised the very future of Bangladeshi music. For composers and singers started pouring out in greater numbers and in hitherto unknown excellence. None cared what his fate might be, but knew it well that he had "lived in love, and not in mere time." On being asked, "Will thy songs remain?" he would smile and say, in the words of Tagore:

"I know not, but this I know That often when I sang I found my eternity."

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How to fight Islamist extremism

In sum, in fighting Islamist militancy our society should not only resist those who are using terror to further their ultimate goal of establishing political Islam, but must also face squarely all others who share the same goals. It needs unequivocally to reject political Islam, while continuing to guarantee full freedom of conscience to all individuals.

MAHFUZUR RAHMAN

THE mayhem being perpetrated by Islamist extremists in Bangladesh is so widespread, and the threat of worse to come so real, that there is now a sense of crisis in the air. And it is time too. An unconscionable degree of complacency at almost all levels of society has so far prevented a hard look at a phenomenon that has been years in the making. Even as of today, one cannot be sure that an adequate understanding of the nature of the peril has yet permeated our society.

Anyone who has observed the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Bangladesh would be struck by the long sorry path that has led us where we are today. The country's slide towards theocracy, or political Islam, is not new; it began some three decades ago. It is well known that the big push came in the mid-nineteen hundred seventies when political parties with overt religious agenda were allowed to operate in what was the new-born secular Bangladesh. That was an enormous boon to an already large body of fundamentalists whose hostility to the very creation of secular Bangladesh is all too well known and whose political agenda it was to make Bangladesh an Islamic state. But the momentum of the slide was also maintained by a complex set of factors, not the least of which was the pandering of political parties to forces of obscurantism. The history of the country is replete with instances of political leaders falling over each

other in depicting themselves as the only "true" Muslims, and hence deserving of support of Muslim voters.

But what has this to do with the emergence of Islamist extremism? A whole lot, in fact. It is not difficult to gauge the awful logic of the militants. If political Islam is the ultimate goal, they may well argue, why not achieve it now rather than later, and thus hasten divine pleasure? The emerging militant ideology elsewhere in the Islamic world must have added to the urgency and external assistance in the form of both money and skill must also have bolstered the militants. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that the wind of Islamist extremism was sown over all those years when political Islam was being nurtured in the country: it is now time to reap the whirlwind. It will not be easy to destroy the bitter harvest.

The nature of protest that we are beginning to hear nowadays against Islamist militancy should make one wonder whether we are yet equal to the task of defeating it. Some of the recent pronouncements against suicide bombings are not much more than anodynes. Actually, they conceal far more than they reveal.

There have been numerous public statements to the effect that "Islam is a religion of peace" and "does not condone violence." Some of these pronouncements decried suicide bombing as "un-Islamic," even a sin. Others have claimed that this (that is, the extremists' method) is not the way to "establish Islam." Some have

denounced the bombers as "enemies of Islam."

These assertions -- some or all of them -- have been made by many segments of the society, the government, the clergy, and the press included. The government reportedly put out propaganda flyers emphasizing the peaceful image of Islam. These, for example, cited a Koranic verse suggesting that killing an individual is like killing the whole human race. Far more importantly, religious leaders have made some of these assertions. Imams at Friday congregations have condemned the militants and prayers have been offered for divine deliverance from the extremist menace.

The usefulness of merely proclaiming that Islam is a religion of peace is highly questionable. To the public at large, its value is minimal; a large majority of them are in any case peace loving people who hardly need to be given a message of peace. To the militants, the message is totally worthless. As far as they are concerned, they represent "true" Islam, and for every verse of the Koran that the "moderates" might quote to criticize them, they could offer quotes that they would say vindicated them. They could also fall back, rather easily, on traditional exegeses of the Koran. The usefulness of a polemical confrontation with the extremists as a way of subduing them is very limited indeed, especially when it remains on paper.

Far more significant is the reported criticism of the extremists from religious leaders that took the

form: "This is not the way to establish Islam." Implicit in the statement is, of course, their often declared goal of "establishing Islam." One should have thought that Islam was firmly established fourteen hundred years ago and remains one of the major faiths, espoused by a billion people. The Islamic faith satisfies the spiritual needs of countless millions. What do these leaders mean, then, when they say that they want to establish Islam? Plainly it is political Islam that they want to establish. In other words, their goal and that of the Islamist militants are one and the same.

Let us quickly remind ourselves that it is the relentless progression of the ideology of political Islam in Bangladesh over the past three decades that has nurtured extremist ideologies we are supposed to be fighting against. Now we are being told to continue on that very path. In other words, we have a situation where the "mainstream" Islamists are denouncing the extremist Islamists only to advance their own political agenda. They in effect seem to be all too willing to reap the whirlwind.

This actually leads to some crucial questions concerning the aim of the Islamist leaders on the one hand, and the future of the country as conceived by its founding fathers and its valiant freedom fighters, on the other. The militants have demanded the abolition of our secular judicial system. Hence was their bombing of courts of law and killing of judges.

Would the mainstream Islamists

abolish our judicial system? The extremists have demanded a radical transformation of our educational system, with even more emphasis on madrasa education than in the past. Would this be the aim of their more peaceable counterparts? In recent days the radicals have threatened the life of women who do not wear the hijab. We may remind ourselves here that not so long ago their counterparts in Algeria slit the throats of many Muslim women for not dressing "modestly" in public. Would the political Islamists enforce such purdah? And would all of these, and probably much more, be done through peaceful means? History comes up some uncomfortable precedents.

In modern times there have been two radical attempts at establishing political Islam: in Iran and Afghanistan. The revolution of 1979 in Iran established a fully fledged Islamic state. Ever since its inception, it has brutally suppressed dissent and individual freedom, ferociously enforced Islamic laws, and has been utterly intolerant of religious minorities. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan even upstaged the Iranians. Its brutality in suppressing everything that smacked of individual freedom and secular culture has become a legend. Its treatment of women was unimaginably vile.

When Islamist leaders in Bangladesh talk about "establishing Islam," it is political Islam exemplified above that they have in mind. Consider the stance of some of these leaders in defence of it. In not so distant a past, they publicly declared their intention of turning Bangladesh into a Taliban type state. This makes them indistinguishable from the Islamist extremists they now seem to decry. It is worth

remembering too that when the Americans put the Taliban to flight in Afghanistan many imams in Bangladesh, including some who are lending their voice against extremist bombers today, wanted to wage jihad against the Americans. The reason behind the protest was of course not that a Muslim country's sovereignty was violated, but that the political regime of the country happened to be close to the protesters' hearts. It is also important to note that none of these religious leaders of any stature has protested the many past bombings of secular jatra stages and cinema halls and even darghahs as unacceptable acts not in conformity with Islam. On the question of the place of the Ahmadiyyas in society, they have either prevaricated or have come down heavily against the sect.

In sum, in fighting Islamist militancy our society should not only resist those who are using terror to further their ultimate goal of establishing political Islam, but must also face squarely all others who share the same goals. It needs unequivocally to reject political Islam, while continuing to guarantee full freedom of conscience to all individuals. For the society to be doing anything less will be to deceive itself. The rejection of political Islam must also be combined with a longer-term effort at free and open discussion on Islam that goes well beyond piety and instills a critical spirit of inquiry among mainstream Muslims in the country. An open society is generally one where shadowy groups find less scope for mischief.

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The secular values of 1971 are now under assault.