

## Liberation War and the post-1971 generation

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**T**HE post-1971 generation in Bangladesh is distanced from the liberation war not so much by years as by dreams. Till the end of 1971 there was a strong and growing collective dream not merely of driving away the invaders but also, and more importantly, of building a new society under a new state. That dream was violated by the

genocide; nevertheless it did not break down. Far from it, the dream remained stronger than ever before. But after the war had ended, the dream was tragically dismantled and dissipated not by the enemy hordes but by the winners themselves. The collective goal disappeared, and all dreams, mutually exclusive and antagonistic as they were, became increasingly personal and nightmarish.

The substitution of the col-

lective by the personal was effective and visible in all fields of life. Privatisation became the ruling ideology. What was achieved by all tended to be the monopoly of the few, and freedom, it was thought, could be gained only through the acquisition of personal property. The idealism of the liberation struggle was, to put it briefly, subverted; and the policy of self-aggrandisement practiced by the erstwhile rulers came back almost with a vengeance.

The consequence was not only chaos and anarchy, but also rise in inequality to the detriment of patriotism. Poverty did not disappear. On the contrary, even famine became a possibility. Employment was not generated. Plunder of state and common property rather than investment in productive projects became rampant. Many were uprooted from the villages. Security of the individual was not guaranteed. The promised golden Bengal receded into darkness.

Naturally, the post-1971 generation felt bewildered and betrayed. They had not had the misfortune of knowing at first hand what things were like before 1971, and were, therefore, unable to compare; and the stark reality they were forced to confront did not make them feel proud of their identity and history or confident of the creation of a better future.

Privatisation continued and extended itself to the unspeakably shameful limit of distorting history itself. To be sure the war of liberation did not begin all of a sudden on 25 March 1971 at midnight; it was the culmination of a long process of struggle by the entire people, led, initially, by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, and, later, by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Sheikh Mujib was the undisputed leader during the war, despite his physical absence from it. To try to dislodge him from that place is not only a distortion, but also an attempt at subversion, of history. The subversive attempts went even beyond, and sought to undermine, if not to negate, the role of the people, the nation as whole. There can be no gain-saying that it was the people who fought and suffered, and acted as the driving force of history, even when there was no viable and visible leadership present. But they have remained poor and marginalised

as before; and the ruling class, in its heartless business of misappropriating all gains, material as well moral, remained totally oblivious of the role of the millions of ordinary men and women who had shed blood and tears and yet not given up their struggle.

Not unexpectedly, though harmfully, those who led the nationalist movement had not made it clear to themselves, let alone to the younger generations, what their vision of the future was. It was necessary to know why the liberation war was necessary, how and why the idea of a secular Bengali nationalism developed itself in East Bengal, discarding the Pakistani nationalism of a non-secular dispensation; and also the fact that Bangladesh cannot be a mono-nation state inasmuch as there are non-Bengali ethnic minorities living within the state. Knowledge and understanding of vital issues like these were not cultivated.

The post-1971 generations were confused by what was happening in the material and cultural world. They were denied the moorings of a collective memory and deprived of a sense of tradition of which they could be proud as well as objectives to be achieved through the continuation of the collective struggle. The original constitution of the state of Bangladesh had, nevertheless, set up in an ad-hoc manner, the four basic principles of nationalism, secularism, democracy and socialism as the goals to be pursued. Needless to say, the goals could be reached only through a social revolution worthy of its name. But that revolution had not appeared to be impossibility in the context of the hopes as well as the preparedness for further sacrifice generated by, and displayed in, the liberation war. Well, the revolution has not happened. On the contrary, the objective

state principles themselves have been successfully removed, signifying very clearly, that the new state continues to be of the same capitalist-bureaucratic character as it was before, and that what had happened, at the cost of immeasurable suffering of the people, was no more than a transfer of power to a new ruling class. The people had no reason to feel enthusiastic; the new generations, most certainly, were disappointed.

The fall of the socialist world contributed to their sense of frustration. Globalisation, which really is capitalism thinly disguised, has taken over the power to rule in the so-called unpopular world. Capitalism, we all know, is both a power and an ideology, which puts profit-making at the centre and alienates the individual from the rest of the community. We in Bangladesh are very much within the sphere and control of globalisation -- economically as well as ideologically. The togetherness, the camaraderie, the spirit of sacrifice and the zeal in the face of adversities we have known and felt throughout our long struggle for liberation have been confronted with an unexpected challenge. And the cruel thrust of capitalism without entrepreneurship continues to threaten to make Bangladesh a land of fallen aspirations.

All these defeats have been a traumatic experience for the post-1971 generation. It feels, as does everyone else in the country, that one must fend for one's own self, and not expect others to help. An idea, almost a precaution, that stalks the young as well as the old is whether Bangladesh has a viable future. Whereas the old can be cynical about it, the young feels painfully frustrated and lost. Globalisation is causing harmful drainage of human and natural resources; the pull

from outside and the push from inside being simultaneous and inexorable.

But who is to blame for all these? That important question is not difficult to answer. It is the leadership that has hopelessly failed, and not the people. The leadership came from the well-to-do class. It did not have a vision; nor was it organically connected with the toiling masses. And what they did after 1971 was nothing short of a historic betrayal of a cause and an opportunity created by enormous sacrifice made by the people. Only a few have prospered at the cost of many.

But was the nationalist leadership really expected to go beyond the achieving of transfer of power from the enemy to their own selves? The idea of a democratic system of state and society with equality of rights and opportunities for all, decentralisation of state power and rule of elected representatives at all levels of state and society was beyond their apprehension. The task of moving further ahead lay with those who were committed to the establishment of proper democracy. And it is this leadership that has really failed and is to blame.

The post-1971 generations are victims of failures, circumstances and globalisation. It is, therefore, the responsibility of those who are, at once patriotic and democratic to forge a unity and move forward -- politically, culturally, and, of course, ideologically. The new generations as well as the people at large need this leadership. But the youth too have the task of rising up to the occasion. We recall that it has, traditionally, been the youth in Bangladesh who have worked as the vanguard, and even provided leadership at critical moments of our history.

They were very much there in the liberation war itself.



## 1971: Shall we remember, forget, or fabricate?

RUBAIYAT HOSSAIN

**I**T is debated whether or not a comprehensive and objective history of Muktiyuddho has yet been written or not. It seems that the history of Bangladesh's Muktiyuddho is still in its making. Thirty-five years since our independence, the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs is still struggling to come up with a finalized list of Muktiyoddhas.

While the history of Muktiyuddho is reinterpreted by our political parties to meet their individual political imperatives, strong nationalist rhetoric reign the bulk of war literature, and Bangladeshis still cannot agree over who declared their independence on March 26, 1971 -- our history is being written and authorized elsewhere!

In the United States of America, Sarmila Bose a Harvard scholar of Bengali origin and family connection with Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose is working on a project called "1971: Images, Memory, Reconciliation."

Sarmila Bose's statement in "Anatomy of Violence: An Analysis of Civil War in East Pakistan in 1971," that: "In all of the incidents involving the Pakistani army in the case-studies, the armed forces were found not to have raped women" created quite a stir in Bangladesh print media.

Regardless, Ms. Bose continues her project, "1971: Images, Memory, Reconciliation," with the intention of providing a "basis for an analytical approach that challenges both the silence and the unsubstan-

tiated rhetoric that have obscured the study of the conflict of 1971 to date."

Ms. Bose also claims that: "Bangladeshis are understandably more voluble about the birth of their country, but have done less well at systematic historical record-keeping, and a vast proportion of literature put out on 1971 is marred by unsubstantiated sensationalism." I may have strong empirical evidence to counter her first statement, but I somewhat agree with the last one.

We surely have not done enough of systematic historical record-keeping of Muktiyuddho history. The attempt to collect and compile Muktiyuddho history has been fragmented and interrupted. For example, some records were collected under *Jatiya Swadhinotar Itihash Parishad* between 1972 and 1973. It seems after that the projects slowed down, and picked up its pace again under *Muktiyuddher Itihash Lekhon O Mudron Prokolpo* between 1977 and 1987. A very worthwhile document came out of this project, the fifteen volumes of *Bangladesher Swadhinota Juddho Dolil Potro* edited by Hasan Hafizur Rahman. Reputed historians such as Afsan Chowdhury and Dr. Sukumar Biswas were part of this endeavour.

After a long interruption, in 1996, another project was undertaken by Muktiyuddho Gobeshona Kendra to collect oral history of Muktiyuddho. However, after collecting 25,000 interviews in 19 compiled volumes this project was interrupted. After the forma-

tion of the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs in October 2001, the ministry has taken possession of all documents collected by Bangla Academy and Muktiyuddho Gobeshona Kendra.

A new endeavour started under the ministry to compile the history of sector-wise armed conflict. The original plan of Awami League government in 1996 to collect oral history from all 64 districts and publish a total of 91 volumes of Muktiyuddho history has been interrupted by the four-party alliance government after the 2001 election. Such interruptions and change of action plan surely creates hindrance in collecting a coherent historical narrative of 1971.

Another curious element of Muktiyuddho history I discovered as an MA student researching in the field was the obscurity of Muktiyuddho history keeping in Bangladesh.

For example, there is no official figure based on empirical evidence of how many people actually died during the nine months of 1971. How many women were raped and how many war babies were adopted by foreign families still remain unknown.

I was told at the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs that they are currently engaged in compiling a list called the "Nei Talika." This list aims to document all of those who were not listed in the past four compiled lists: the *Jatiya Talika*, *Kallyan Trust Talika* (those trained in India), *Voter Talika*, *Muktibartar Talika*. It is also surprising a national effort to compile the list of freedom

fighters was not initiated until 1980!

As Muktiyuddho Certificate earns one certain benefits, there is no shortage of forgery these days. Thus the true identification of real freedom fighters becomes even more obscure. As we lose the identities and voices of those who really fought and suffered in 1971, we also begin to lose parts of the real picture of our Muktiyuddho.

We have buried women's memory of war under our ideology of honour and shame. In doing to you have lost yet another segment of Muktiyuddho history. The truth is in order to really understand 1971 one has to look at it from every single angle possible.

If we really want to learn about Muktiyuddho, we need to read not only Ferdousi Priyobhashini, but also General Niazi. We have to read Chorompotro as well Nurul Qadir's "Blood and Tears" -- a book about the plight of Biharis in 1971. We have to understand accounts of freedom fighters, and also look at the foreign policy documents to comprehend the larger geo-political scheme. We have to look at the fifteen volumes of Dolil Potro edited by Hasan Hafizur Rahman in order to get first-hand factual documents and testimonies. We may also visit Muktiyuddho Research Center and Muktiyuddho Jadughor, but still we will not have factual data. We would still lack numbers and strong empirical evidence to prove what really happened and how many really died.

In fact, our government

needs to begin a research project and document 1971 from all different angles. For example, as we need to documents the songs, poetry, and literature produced during 1971 to understand the emotional and cultural temperament of the people, we also have to employ archeological teams to bring up hard historical evidence at hand for what really happened.

Thirty five years is a very long time and then again it is

also a very short time. There are still bones buried underneath the land that we walk on. There are numerous gonokobors in the country that one could dig up to find history. It really is not too late. In fact, this is the right and ripe time to start such an endeavor.

As confused we have been between Vande Mataram and Muslim League, Muslim League and Awami League, between Joy Bangla and Ban-

gladesh Zindabad, autocracy and military regime, pseudo democracy and militancy in the name demanding an Islamic state, we will be truly headed for a national doom if we do not make a conscious and honest effort right now to document a comprehensive and objective history of 1971.

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