

Towards a new political dimension



ZAHID HOSSAIN

BENGALIS were dubbed "the Irishmen of the sub-continent," and a common joke claimed that if three Bengalis were stranded in a desert, their first action would be to establish four political parties.

This is what Archer K. Blood, the American Consul General in the then East Pakistan in 1971, said about the characteristics of Bengalis in his book "The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh." And, possibly, Blood's observation is not totally incorrect.

When the entire nation is abuzz with many a resentment and annoyance against the activities of some

of our political parties and politicians, the recent move by the only Bangladeshi Nobel laureate, Grameen Bank chief Dr. Yunus, to float a political party with yet to be disclosed programs and objectives has created lot of stir in the political arena of Bangladesh.

However, today is March 26. As usual, we will be enthusiastically celebrating the Independence day by holding rallies, arranging seminars, delivering speeches, issuing messages and singing patriotic songs while the bulk of the population continues to wallow in the mire of extreme poverty and wretchedness.

It is undeniable that the common

people and the nameless ones are the true stuff of history. If that is so, do we, as we observe the day, remember them and care to know how the wretched huddled masses live? Going down below the poverty level, do they have any standard of living at all? Are the slum-dwellers any better than sub-human beings?

And do the proud human beings who enjoy the "benefits and privileges of independence" recognize the obligation of rescuing the wretched ones? These are relevant questions of the day and must be answered by those who claim to represent the people who suffered for Independence.

In order to make Independence

meaningful for the privileged and the non-privileged alike hunger, poverty, illiteracy, ignorance, disease and ill health shall have to be conquered. And these are definitely conquerable.

For that what we need most is the right type of leadership, their sincerity of purpose and the proper way of governance. Political leaders must be fully answerable and accountable to the masses and effective and appropriate mechanism should be found out to ensure that accountability.

Independence is the greatest achievement in the history of the Bengali nation, which initiated a far reaching, and massive change in the imagination of the people of the country.

Getting rid of the subjugation and colonial rule of thousands of years, the nation has been crowned with its own identity and self-respect in the global forum. Beside the political, economic and intellectual emancipation, the great desire for attaining equity and democracy has brightened up at the national life.

Bangladesh is now a country of illuminating potentiality and marching onwards to the road to economic development. Immense human and natural resources are promising golden days for the people of the country. Competition for economic investment in the country is now a global phenomenon.

In fact, Independence Day is an occasion for introspection. If we ask ourselves whether we have lived up to the expectations of those who laid down their lives unhesitatingly so that we could live in peace, harmony and plenty and whether we have

been carrying forward the task that the founding father had successfully advanced, answers would be in the negative and most depressingly at that.

Not only does the dismal syndrome of hunger, poverty, disease and ignorance continue to haunt us with ever-increasing intensity but corruption permeating all strata of society and the persisting political instability make any thought of meaningful impacts on them mere day-dreams.

A nation's independence does not only constitute a separate geographic entity and the right to state power, it envisages for a people to have the maximum possible opportunity to shape their own destiny.

Have we achieved that? The essence is the liberation of a nation's spirit. The spirit was all right in 1971 and for a while thereafter. But now this nation seems to be suffering from a mental handicap.

Today it shows all the weaknesses of a decadent society. These include mismanagement, corruption, lack of social and moral values, and lack of rule of law, undemocratic practices and narrow partisan politics everywhere.

The manipulators and the more privileged whether they are politicians or bureaucrats now rule the roost. In a situation like this, mental and political liberation of a people is the last thing one can expect. Therefore, a drastic change is an urgent need and that change must be broad based and acceptable to the major players-the political parties and the people.

And the truth is that without political and mental liberation of the people independence is almost meaningless. We live at a time when "economic cannibalism" has been taking its toll quite heavily.

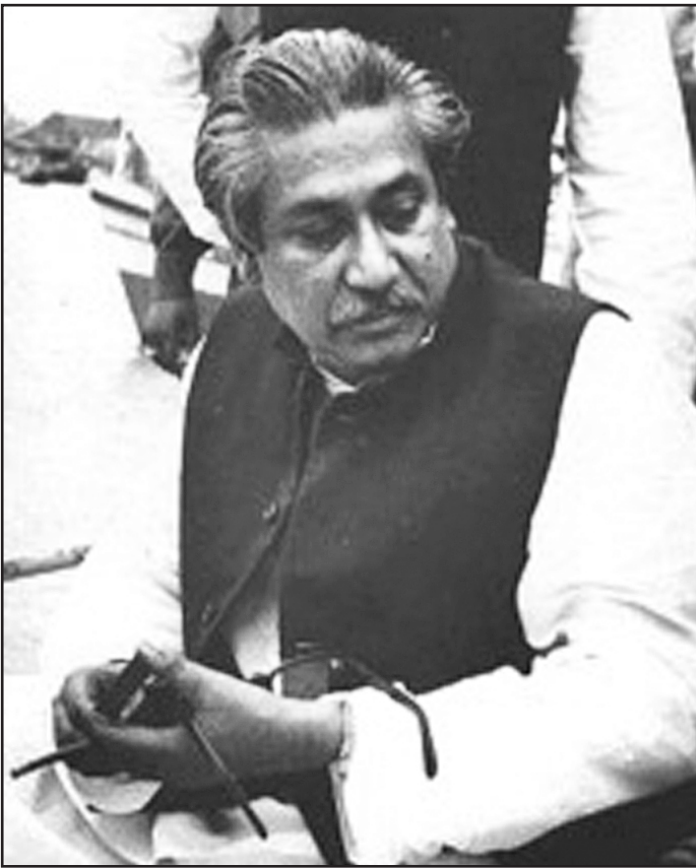
It is a shame that the so-called educated and advanced segment of the society specially a section of our politicians and bureaucrats is responsible for this economic injustice and social neglect towards the majority of the people.

So the nation now needs to take a pause and reflect on the questionable course it is charting. The many billions of dollars we have received as aid from donors have simply vanished without turning for better the economic condition of those people for whom the money was meant.

The money has been siphoned off into unaccountable pockets of the privileged few --mostly politicians, bureaucrats and some businessmen

In a situation like this we will be still more ill prepared if our quality of politics continues to plunge into an abysmal void. It will drag along with all the best achievements of ours. Before this happens let us once again be true to our spirit of independence, one that can save us from all our miseries and mental aberrations. It will also be the best tribute we could pay to the martyrs who laid down their lives for a great cause.

Frankly speaking, we have known failures and frustrations. Yet hope endures. And we have not given up the pursuit of hope. On the hundredth birthday of American independence in 1876, noted editor



and US Senator Carl Schurz said: "Our generation has to open the second century of our national life as the Father's opened the first. Theirs was the work of independence; ours is the work of reformation."

Our task is to lend substance and credence to independence and improve the quality of life by carrying on the work of reformation-political, economic and social. The progress report so far is not quite satisfactory.

In fact we have failed to acquit

ourselves well thus far. Instead of waxing eloquent on the virtues of independence, let us take a fresh vow and firm determination today to strive for achieving all that independence stands for.

Let the politicians begin a new beginning for creating a new political dimension forgetting their acrimonious past. The bureaucrats have also to play an equally important role.

Zahid Hossain is a political analyst.

A nation amused

SHABNAM HUQ

CRIME doesn't pay unless you happen to be living in Bangladesh. The last few decades we had a nation believing that the only "how" in wealth generation is "how much." Today things are a little different. The joint forces continue their raid on corruption, gaining tremendous support from the people. The biggest names in politics again occupy our television screens, but this time without a smile, being taken into custody.

How we got here is anyone's guess, whether it was ex-president Ershad who institutionalized corruption or our democratically elected governments who thought pillaging the nation was part of their electoral promise. Whatever the path maybe, the fact remains that, both political parties benefited through unbridled corruption the level of which doubled and quadrupled with each passing election and many sectors flourished as black money whitening schemes continued.

Fifteen years ago both parties by turn were given the important task of rebuilding a democracy, restoring people's rights and giving a future to 140 million people. They failed. A confused nation watched as January 11 took place, people's confusion turned to apprehension and then amusement. It took a military backed government to take the first steps to undo the damage done.

It is sad that a non-elected government had to step in to make things right, but it is sadder that those who had a voice remained silent all this time. The media is now in a frenzy to capture images of the accused, yet all



this time they remained strangely mum, civil society now is openly condemning these acts of greed, yet they too had closed their eyes, the opposition who is now in full praise of the joint forces for apprehending the "thieves," continued to harbour their own party men, failing to even whisper possible repercussions.

We saw the first glimpse of integrity

among people in power, when the four advisers to the caretaker government resigned last year. They had people's respect and support. The support continues for the joint forces on their raid on the corrupt, the land grabbers, extortionists and god fathers. But the process must be for all, regardless of party affiliation or diplomatic ties. If not, popular support may turn.

As the list grows of the accused and jail cells fill up, the concern also grows whether we have the expertise for judicial investigation to try these individuals. It is not enough to lock these persons up and throw away the key, for without a concrete verdict, in time and after the next election, many will be back in full form.

Separation of the judiciary is only half the battle; it is imperative that fair trials are ensured and exemplary punishment is pronounced. After all, if there is no justice or retribution, what message is being sent?

An amused nation watches waiting to see the outcome of these arrests and of justice being served. But this cannot be a stand alone program; steps to thwart future pillaging must be instituted. The discussions of voter ids and transparent ballot boxes, disclosure of wealth statements and maximum limitations for electoral spend, clean candidates and progressive parties should no longer remain idle chatter.

The joint forces have raised the expectations of the people. It has been proved, with the right political will this country can be transformed. For those in power there are always two paths, one that serves the people and the other that serves self.

The fruits of the latter in the end have always been sour. The question now remains, will the joint forces meet or exceed people's expectations and lay the foundations for a better democratic Bangladesh or will they ultimately falter as those in power have in the past?

SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

PRESCIENT it may have been in the choice of colors, but the story of Bangladesh is right in front of our eyes, in red and green, fluttering in the wind -- proud, vivacious, graceful, and eagerly waiting for its sons and daughters to step up and fulfill the dream of freedom promised in 1971. Yes, it is our flag, our pride, our honour, and our heritage, born on March 26 from the dark and heinous activities of a duplicitous, hateful, intolerant, and cruel regime.

In her flaming red ambience, she tells the story of this nation's cataclysmic birth and the fiery sundown of external oppression; of the blood of the Muktis and the language martyrs; of the saga of conflict and hate in the nation's political landscape; of the anger and suffering of the multitude; of the hunger pangs of the withering child.

She tells the story of the lament of the mother chained by this society to a narrow and limited existence; of the pain and suffering of the neglected citizens of different faiths bred from discrimination, intolerance and hate; of the tyranny of one countryman over another; of the apathy of the haves for the have-nots; and of the bankruptcy of our past leaders and their avarice, corrupt and immoral ways.



From this oppressive milieu, the flag beckons at her children to step into the green pastures by the tranquil river; into the lush and verdant green countryside; under the shade of the green canopy of trees offering respite from a hot and humid oppressiveness; into the cool emerald waters of the brook by the little green village.

She waves at the immense green mountain that exudes a quiet somber strength; at the signs of renewal that spring forth from the hard ground after a spell of fresh rain; at the green grass that soothes the eye and rests the weary; at the green traffic light to free the congestion of a confused and entangled nation.

Red and green, war and peace, conflict and rapprochement, tears and laughter, sorrow and joy, shackles and freedom, reality and dream -- such is the duality ingrained in the flag, depicting a saga of continuing struggle. Symbolically she points to the red encircled by the green, kindling the hope of containment and the expectancy that good will restrain the evil.

Since the birth of this nation the red has dominated the green. An entire generation has been mired in its scorching and searing effects. Is this what we will hand down to the next generation? Is this the legacy that we want to endow them with? When will the soothing green of

life, replenishment and regeneration gain preponderance and rejuvenate the nation?

In the vibrant youth of today, there is immense promise...in their sparkling eyes, in their youthful spirit, in their boundless energy, and in their desire to overcome all odds. For them, March 26 should represent a day of renewal to build and sustain the promise, the energy, and the eagerness espoused thirty-six years ago so that their aspirations and dreams do not turn into disillusionment and apathy, and that sparkle of hope into hopelessness.

The red and green story is an unfinished one. No one who is not of this soil should write the story for us; it remains only for us to write. It is a story to be written everyday, every season, every year, and by every generation. Whether that story will reflect the fiery red of blood and rage or the peaceful green of renewal and revival depends on what we want to write. As the flag flutters in anticipation, let us rise to her expectations. If we truly love her and the nation she stood for since 1971, let us begin to believe that we can write the new chapters in her lush green splendour.

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Remembering Andre Malraux and Peter Shore who stood by us in 1971

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

AS the nation celebrates its independence day today, I would like to remember Andre Malraux and Peter Shore, great friends who stood by us in the critical hours of our nationhood. They were thousands of miles away, yet they keenly followed developments in our country and extended their full support to our cause.

Andre Malraux, a renowned French intellectual, statesman, and a great humanist, was one of our staunchest supporters in France during our war of independence. He not only sensitized his government and people about the ongoing genocide in Bangladesh in 1971, he publicly volunteered on September 18, 1971 to fight for our cause.

Why would an elderly French statesman make such an offer? Malraux gave the explanation himself: that it was not only because we were "most cruelly decimated, the most threatened" but also because we belonged to a civilization which he thought has been the "civilization spirit" for the last three thousand years. He was a great admirer of our region's civilization,

culture and history. After our independence, Malraux continued to work for recognition of Bangladesh and greater international assistance for our war-ravaged country.

Born in a wealthy family in France in 1901, Malraux always stood by people who fought for their independence and emancipation. He was highly critical of the French colonial authorities in Indo-China and, in 1925, had actively helped them to set up "Young Annam League" and bring out a newspaper called "Indo-China in chains."

During the Spanish Civil War, he had served as a pilot in the Republican Army and later, when his country was invaded by Nazi Germany, he had joined the tank unit of the French Army. Malraux was captured in 1940 during the western offensive, but he escaped and joined the French Resistance. He was captured again by Gestapo in 1944 but escaped for the second time. He led the Alsace-Lorraine brigade to defend Strasbourg. This great freedom fighter received several medals for his outstanding patriotism during World War II. Bangladesh war was another battle

that he wanted to fight.

After the World War II, he served as the Information Minister in General Charles De Gaulle's government from 1945-46 and 1958 and later as his Culture Minister from 1960-69. He wrote several well known books, including his autobiography called "Antimemoires."

In response to Bangabandhu's invitation, Malraux visited Bangladesh in April 1973 and was given a tumultuous welcome everywhere he went. Bangabandhu had a warm and cordial meeting with him. Malraux visited the Martyrs Memorial, wounded freedom fighters at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar hospital, National Museum, and Dhaka and Rajshahi Universities.

He was well aware about the massacre at the Dhaka University. When he was given a rousing reception at the university's Teacher Student Center, Malraux had said: "For the first time, I speak in this lone university of the world where there are more dead than the living. Students of France know that your teachers and friends embraced death for the liberty, and that they know that nowhere else ever before



Andre Malraux

students and teachers paid such a heavy price for liberty. They also know that among so many of the students who fought, there is one place where the students would rightfully tell those who would come later: 'We have fought with our brave hands' ... Your dead have rendezvous with the fate of Bangladesh, but now it is up to you to make the nation." At Rajshahi University he was given the Honorary Doctorate.



Peter Shore

Malraux's visit to Bangladesh was in a way fulfillment of his desire to see the country and the people for whom he had been prepared to fight. Malraux died in 1976. It is a pity that I never got a chance to meet this great man but soon after my arrival in Paris, I went to the Pantheon, where his remains were moved in 1996, to pay my respects.

Peter Shore was another steadfast supporter of our cause. He was

a ranking member of the British Labour Party and had earlier served as the Secretary of State for Economic Affairs and as the Deputy Leader of the House. The Labour Party went out of power after the general elections in 1970. Shore, however, was elected Member of Parliament from Stepney, a relatively under-privileged area in London where a large number of Bangalee expatriates lived. He actively espoused our cause in UK and all over Europe.

Shore, the son of a Merchant Navy captain, was brought up in a middle class family. After studying at King's College in Cambridge, he had joined the Royal Air Force during World War II and during the later part of the war he had spent a great deal of time in British India.

Shore's Labour Party, in a way, identified itself with the wishes and aspirations of the freedom-loving people of Bangladesh. He and other Labour MPs at the British Parliament mounted a continuous pressure on the ruling Conservative government to support Bangladesh. The British press and news media also played a major role sensitizing

British public opinion in favour of Bangladesh and London emerged as "our home away from home" in 1971.

Why did Shore support our cause? As he told a researcher years later: "I found myself very quickly and deeply involved and I mean really wholeheartedly involved ... I was outraged frankly by what had happened and I was better informed really than most people in British politics, because so many of my constituents gave me sort of firsthand accounts of what their families and relatives were enduring."

Shore played an important role after our independence, securing early British recognition of our country and the dispatch of sizeable assistance for our massive reconstruction efforts. When the Labour Party returned to power in 1974, he served as the Secretary of State for Trade and then for Environment. Later, he served as the shadow Foreign Secretary in 1979.

The Bangladesh war, in a way, marked the beginning of political assertion by our expatriates in UK. Shore was a great facilitator. He

helped Bangladeshi expatriates in immigration and other related issues, and his constituency extended full political support to him and reelected him every time he contested, even if it meant voting against Bangladeshi-origin candidates. Consequently, there was a new phase in British immigration policy in the 1970s and families of our expatriates were allowed to come to Britain. The Bangladeshi community always regarded him as a true defender of equal rights for "the ethnic and religious minorities" against many discriminatory policies in the areas of housing, education, health and employment.

Shore retired in 1991. Ten years after retiring from politics, Shore did not forget the Bangladeshi community. He came to meet former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in London in May 2001; I was amazed to notice how well aware he was of the problems faced by our expatriate community. Peter Shore died on September 24, 2001.

Syed Muazzem Ali is a former Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh.