

Thoughts on truth and conciliation



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

NOT many would perhaps deny that we in Bangladesh are living in a perilously polarised polity. The compounding tragedy is that many opinion-makers and moulders amongst us do not correctly appreciate the magnitude of the damage such polarisation continues to cause to the society. It would appear that there is lot of bitterness and acrimony in different quarters of our existence. Flashes of that state of mind and behaviour were prominently noticeable in the unfortunate incident that followed the initial brawl between students and security forces at the Dhaka university ground.

Many sensible citizens have been deeply disturbed by the happenings of 20th to 22nd August last. There is cause for dismay when we see a part of the coercive establishment still looking down upon its own people. Equally deplorable was the attitude and actions that were hell-bent upon proving that whatever is given by the establishment must be held in distrust and summarily dismissed.

The question is, how do we proceed on the road to healthy democratic and economic progress with so much anger and antipathy?

STRAIGHT LINE

Our polity has to ensure the rule of law. The preponderance of incompetence and lack of empathy in the corridors of power has to make room for a sensitised pro-people establishment. Knowledge and skill are not the exclusive preserve of any particular group. So let us be respectful and appreciative of each other's position in the emerging scenario.

Discerning readers may recall reading a book titled "Long Walk to Freedom", an autobiography of the legendary Nelson Mandela and recollect the great work done by the "Truth and Reconciliation Commission" in South Africa. Without doubt, few nations have suffered so painfully and tragically as the native South Africans for so long. Revenge and retaliation by the black population towards the white minority following independence would not have been a great historical aberration.

However, the great African leadership chose to be sane and pragmatic and preferred to stay on a high moral ground by largely televising the heart-breaking and horrendous activities of the white colonisers that traumatised the world into shock and disbelief. There was no organised call for retribution, no demand for any scalp. This magnanimity, it is believed, was an act of great strategy and an admirable display of courageous statesmanship in contemporary history.

One may wonder if there is any lesson for us from the South African experience in the process of nation-building? Don't we need to take steps that forge unity and stop tinkering with settled facts of our political history in order to move

ahead? Is it not time to recognise the worth and contribution of all actors from across the political divide and the different professions and stop questioning the patriotism of others? Is it not time to firmly establish, at least, some truths of our national life, in a consensual manner? How about a commission wherein our respected senior citizens aided by young thinkers tell us briefly and at a very early date, about the minimum that we need to agree upon for acting as a mature polity? A divisive society perhaps stands to benefit by the wisdom of conciliation.

One may have serious reservations about toying with the idea of such a commission as mentioned hereinbefore and may reasonably question the usefulness of such a venture as there is no dearth of bright ideas and plans for our socio-economic uplift. However, the other argument could be that since the 11th January 2007 intervention was necessitated on account of the failure of constitutional politics, it may be time perhaps to arrive at a bare reducible minimum or a workable minimum, whatever you call it, for conducting the affairs of a healthy polity.

It is for the proposed commission (assuming that it may be formed) to give their considered

recommendations to be acted upon by the duly constituted body. This writer wants to take the opportunity to record his comments on some subjects (by no means exclusive) on which we may need direction.

A major subject should centre around Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who needs to be manifestly restored to his historically correct position. The salutary effort of the present caretaker government to culturally internalize Bangobodhu's contribution by means of appropriate insertion in the textbooks must not give rise to any debate in future. We have to admit that we will invite collective harm by foolishly ignoring the brave heart of our liberation struggle.

While rewriting our history we must not be myopic in recording the extraordinary valour and sacrifice of the admirable band of freedom fighters including Shaheed Ziaur Rahman, whatever be the latter's subsequent political beliefs. The quarters that question the real motive of Ziaur Rahman or cast doubt on his freedom fighter credentials do not realise the damaging ramifications of their unbridled impertinence.

Entities that really do not believe in our independent existence need to be identified and brought to book. For example, educational

institutions that do not purposely play the national anthem must be disciplined and penalised under the law.

Quarters that do not believe in our pluralist disposition and by extension in our democratic republic and want to destabilise the socio-political order by violent means should come within the threat perception. Such elements must not be shown any leniency and be treated the way anti-state elements are. They must not be the friends or enemies of a particular government. We have to remember that reins of government would change hands but state interests must not. A broad agreement would be desirable.

The primacy of institution building for successful working of democracy has been appreciated and admirably effective measures are in process. These are hopeful signs. However, sensitive state outfits have in the recent past acted as appendage of ruling political party. This has to stop in the interest of service ethos and administrative propriety, and to mellow the anti-establishment postures and gain public confidence.

On the subject of institution strengthening, we must have the good sense and real political will to submit to judicial supremacy and in

order for the judiciary to be absolutely above board, the manning process must be above controversy. It has to be remembered that influence peddling with the judiciary would be fatal. We must not do anything that create confusion and thus erode public confidence in this supreme corrective organ.

Coming to the wider area of national politics, one may perhaps appreciate the values of a conciliatory approach and tempered utterances in public discourse. By way of illustration, we can see that not much is achieved by acrimonious deliberations on who imposed one-party rule or who brought back multi-party dispensation. This is all the more relevant in our parlance because the supposedly democrats here have bared their autocratic teeth in the most vicious manner. Additionally, we need to appreciate that since we are not culturally endowed with the phlegmatic virtues that facilitate democratic growth, we have to be extra careful.

It would not also serve any purpose by constantly harping on the accusation that a certain political party was born in cantonment because the said party has been accepted as a major factor in national politics and that such innuendos create bitterness and accentuate divisiveness and polarisation. One has to learn to coexist with political foes as politics is, admittedly, an art of compromise.

We may have to reconcile to the reality that in Bangladesh no one political group holds absolute sway over public opinion and on the popularity scale nobody's position is overwhelming. That ground reality may appear uncomfortable to major political parties but the same perhaps is a testimony to the

vibrancy of the "illiterate intelligence" of our electorate. Therefore, it may be pragmatic not to take the people for granted, howsoever hallowed be the credentials of our political parties.

Regarding establishment of democratic governance we have to prove the cynics wrong by substantially decolonising and in fact de-feudalising the process. Practically speaking, that would mean real empowerment of local government institutions and progressively lesser role for the politically motivated Ministry of Local Self Government, a misnomer, according to some quarters. This painful transformation, if made possible even on a micro level, it would be one big step towards real democratisation.

Effective separation of judiciary from the executive would require ten to fifteen years, according to inside information. So the executive branch and the political executives have to prove their change of mental frame by taking time-bound demonstrable actions in this regard. The political leadership must not waver and falter.

With regard to the very topical subject of ongoing anti-graft drive we may have to unfortunately agree that disobedience of law was a way of life for our dominant elite and that corruption was pervasive. However, in our efforts to contain corruption we may perhaps do well to take into view our systemic deficiencies and may confine the drive to a socially and legally advisable level to derive sustainable benefit, as has been the case with some societies that were plagued with similar affliction. The compulsion and the will to fight graft have to be indigenous, homegrown and thus culturally internalised.

In the past we have been sub-

jected to voluminous lectures on the virtues of accountability by political governments. So when the present government has started the process by booking a good number of the high and mighty, it should be an eye-opener for the educated but timid, accomplished but ambivalent and trained but indecisive guardians of public affairs. Let this unpleasant process be a part of the ordinary course of business.

Our polity has to ensure the rule of law. There could be no better test of this resolve than by ensuring justice in the Bangabandhu murder case. The trial of other ghastly murders of the immediate past and yesteryears should follow. Procrastination and dithering will give the wrong signals.

The preponderance of incompetence and lack of empathy in the corridors of power has to make room for a sensitised pro-people establishment. Knowledge and skill are not the exclusive preserve of any particular group. So let us be respectful and appreciative of each other's position in the emerging scenario following 11th January last. Signs and symbols continue to be important in our task-oriented society because core values have not been internalised and institutions not firmly established. Since it would be patently wrong to espouse a liberal principle by retaining a medieval prejudice, it is perhaps time to grasp the home truths and be conciliatory.

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Managing and mitigating floods in Bangladesh

ENGR M INAMUL HAQUE

BANGLADESH is a country of rivers coming from trans-boundary origins and has vast plain lands. Therefore, floods are must on the occasion of heavy rains in the uplands, and in the local catchments. Bangladesh is a country of estuaries and lowlands. Therefore, floods are common on the occasions of cyclonic surge coming from the sea. Bangladesh is a country of floods on many other reasons, altogether 12 types. Each of these floods are different in nature. So, apart from relief operations, they deserve different types of management and different suffering mitigation measures. These are discussed below.

Flash Floods: These floods come quick to the plains, after heavy rains on the adjacent hills, through the rivers with origin there. Embankments along these rivers can protect low magnitude floods. A medium range early flood may inundate the boro crops far downstream. A major flood shall overtop and breach through the embankments, inundate the crops over the plains and the lowlands, and inflict severe damages to the human property and life. All the districts lying along the hills to the north, northeast, east and southeast are affected by these floods. The flood of 2004 is an example of major flood of this type. These floods need prompt mitigation measures to reduce sufferings of the people, by closing the embankment breach, rebuilding the house, supplying crop saplings, etc.

Rain Floods: These floods occur by rains due to static or moving atmospheric depressions, anywhere in this country. Heavy rains make the embankments ineffective, inundate crops, roads and houses. The historical flood of 1988, by rain mainly, inundated almost every district in the country. If drainage system is good, a medium range rainfall shall be drained down to the rivers without inflicting heavy loss. The suffering mitigation measures shall be: improving the drainage system by good design, and removing the blockages and obstacles, support

for rebuilding houses, supplying crop saplings etc.

Lowland Floods: These floods occur all over the country on arrival of monsoon. Before that, the Kalbaishakhis fill up the ditches and beels. In monsoon and floods, water levels in the lowlands rise and touch the village roads. These floods are normal and necessary for the lowlands of Brahmanbaria, Comilla, Narayanganj, Dhaka, Munshiganj, Gopalganj and Shariatpur. The suffering mitigation measures are: restrict putting up industries, create fish sanctuaries, improve healthcare and education facilities, check drying up of lowlands.

Floodplains Floods: These floods arrive from distant sources through major rivers. People can be warned and embankments can check these floods. If not checked, medium range floods are good, major floods disrupts normal life of the people. Mymensingh, Kishoreganj, Narshingdi, Tangail, Manikganj, Faridpur and Madaripur areas are affected by this flood. The suffering mitigation measures are: roads, houses etc. to be constructed above high flood level, drying up of lowlands to be checked, fish sanctuaries to be created, areas/zones for protection by embankments to be designated.

Haor Floods: These floods occur in the northeastern Bangladesh by excessive rains in local or upper catchments, before arrival of monsoon. The Kalbaishakhis in summer fill up the beels, but floods damage the crops. In the monsoon and floods season (June to October), water levels rise and submerge the embankments. This is normal and necessary for the haors of Netrokona, Sunamganj, Sylhet, Maulavi bazar, Habiganj, Kishoreganj and Brahmanbaria. The suffering mitigation measures are: restrict putting up industries, create fish sanctuaries, improve healthcare and education facilities, check drying up of lowlands.

Charland Floods: These floods arrive anytime, during the monsoon and floods season. The floods coming from distant rainfall inundate houses in chars located



between embankments of major rivers. A low magnitude flood is not harmful, but major floods can wash away people, their homes and belongings. Suffering mitigation measures shall be: construct flood shelters and have flood preparedness. As soon as the floodwater recedes, rebuild the damaged houses. Make law order improved, and restore healthcare and education facilities.

Embankment Breach Floods: These floods come suddenly in the Flood Control and Drainage (FCD) project areas, when the rising river breaks through the embankments at their weak points. These can happen if embankments are not maintained to the required level, or the advancement of the eroding river to the embankment is not checked. As people inside the FCD project areas change their lifestyle, their housing and cropping patterns etc., such floods are catastrophic. The Flood of 2007 in Sirajganj district was a similar one. So much the depth and so long the inundation, so severe and so large are the damages and casualties. So, the suffering mitigation measures should be of quick response. Flood shelters, relief operations are badly needed. After the floodwater recedes, help rebuild the damaged

houses, help traders, industries to bring the business back to usual, strengthen the embankments of FCD projects for security against flood.

Tidal Floods: These floods occur in the coastal areas due to sudden atmospheric depressions or tsunami type waves generated from distant natural events. These floods caused by abnormal high tides, disrupt public life by catching them unprepared. These floods recede quickly, but when of high magnitude, these can inflict large scale damage to properties and cause casualties. All the islands and southern districts of Bangladesh, where there are no embankments, are vulnerable to these floods. Suffering mitigation measures shall be: put up embankments against such floods, help rebuild the damaged houses, help traders, industries to bring the business back to usual as soon as the floodwater recedes.

Surge Floods: These floods occur by cyclones in the coastal areas due to incoming sea borne depressions. They arrive giving warnings beforehand. All the islands and southern districts with or without embankments are vulnerable to these floods. These floods of low magnitude can be

checked by embankments. But high magnitude floods may overtop and breach embankments, inflicting large scale damage to properties and causing casualties. Suffering mitigation measures: construct flood shelters and have cyclone preparedness. As soon as the floodwater recedes, help rebuild the damaged houses, improve law and order, restore healthcare and education facilities.

Water Logging Floods: These floods occur by local rains or arrive from distant source, and inundate crops, roads and houses because of poor drainage condition. The floods in the Bhabadah areas and at the depressions of Noakhali, Comilla, Bagerhat, Khulna, Jessore and Satkhira are of this nature. Due to change in morphology, and rising of the riverbeds, the incoming water cannot get drained out as before. All the houses, roads and crops go under water and people lead a inhuman life. People face force migration by losing their jobs and livelihood. The suffering mitigation measures shall be: improve the drainage system by good design and remove all the blockages and obstacles from flow path. Encourage and support fish farming following the Beel Dakatia example. Keep all the draining

rivers free from any interventions in the name of sluice gates, bridges etc.

Domestic Sewage Floods: These types of floods occur regularly, particularly in the seasons of monsoon and floods, by rains over the cities. Unplanned growth of housings, slums, markets and roads in the cities have blocked the previous drainage networks, so any rain creates stagnation of water on the roads and lanes. Moreover, in absence of sewage treatment system, people channel the domestic sewage to the storm water drains. These sewage rebound to the houses and mix with the stagnated water on the roads and lanes. This type of floods is spreading in the cities and towns all over the country. The suffering mitigation measures are: construct sufficient capacity domestic sewage treatment plants in the cities, improve the drainage system under comprehensive development plan for roads, housings, commerce, markets, etc. The Daily Star July 25, 2004. News Caption: Dhaka floods on floodwater & sewage

Industrial Effluents Floods: These types of floods occur anytime in the year whenever it rains. Indiscriminate growth of industries have damaged all the streams and water bodies in and around the cities, towns and growth centres, by their disposal of untreated toxic effluents. At the time of rains these toxic effluents mix up and flow on the roads and lanes, and also into the houses in residential quarters. People live in inhuman conditions, suffer from diseases and lose their sense of basic rights. The suffering mitigation measures are: construct sufficient capacity industrial effluent treatment plants in the industrial areas, relocate industries out of the residential districts, etc.

I have discussed above 12 types of floods in Bangladesh, of which, floods from 1 to 6 can be acceptable to a limit. But floods from serial 7 to 12 are not acceptable at any limit, as they bring misery and damage to our properties.

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LEST WE FORGET
Abidur Reza Khan
A liberation war organiser

KAZI SALIM

TWO years have gone by since Abidur Reza Khan, a veteran Awami League leader, a freedom fighter, an organiser of the liberation war, a former MP, a former member of the Constituent Assembly and a lawyer of the Supreme Court, passed away (Sept 3, 2005). It seems as though it was the other day that we visited him in his Elephant Road residence. But in reality we have only memories of him to cherish today.

In our lifetime we come across many people. We do not remember all of them. Some we do. Abidur Reza was one of them. He was known for his honesty, integrity, simplicity, humility, kind behaviour, and benevolence.

During his eighty years, Abidur Reza Khan made his mark in the areas of law, politics and social welfare. Born in September 1927 in the village of Digor Mahesh Khali under the Bhederaganj upazila of the district of Shariatpur, Abidur Reza Khan graduated from Rajendra College of Faridpur. It was during his college life that he came in touch with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1946, got involved in politics and became the president of the Faridpur district Muslim Chhatra League. Later on he obtained his LLB from the Dhaka University and entered the profession of law, and joined the Dhaka Bar. He was in this profession till the end.

During 1966-69, as a lawyer, he contributed in providing legal assistance to those accused in the anti-Ayub agitation and in the Agortala Conspiracy Case. What was remarkable about him as a lawyer was that he did not always care for his fees. There are instances when he took nominal or no fees from poor clients. He joined politics and became a member of the National Assembly of the then Pakistan in 1970, and later an MP. Money-making was not his goal, which was to serve the people. His



honesty was never questioned by any quarter.

As a dedicated politician, Abidur Reza Khan did not step back when he was needed during any crisis of the Bengali nation. In 1971, when he was an MNA of the then Pakistan and an established lawyer, he left his family behind in his village home and went to Agartala, India, to join the liberation struggle. There, with Col (Retd) Shawkat Ali (of Shariatpur) and others, he contributed in organizing and enlisting the young men of his constituency as freedom fighters, and in arranging training for them. From Agartala he was called by the wartime Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed to Kolkata to assist the Bangladesh government in exile, and he served there till the liberation of the country. After independence, he contributed to the country as a member of the committee constituted for drafting the Constitution.

Abidur Reza Khan was a close associate of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Like his leader, he was a believer in non-communal politics, an ideology to be followed for communal harmony and peaceful-coexistence of the communities in a nation. As a social worker, he contributed in establishing schools and colleges in his locality. He was the founding-president of Haji Shariatullah College in Shariatpur.

MICROCREDIT AND POVERTY REDUCTION

A success story

MD ENAMUL HAQUE

MONI Begum is a popular name to most households in many localities of Mymensingh town today. Seldom a social function or arbitration is held in these localities without her. She owns a mini garments factory with 10 stitching and embroidery machines; 20 poor and hardcore poor women work there in two shifts earning Tk 2000 to 3000 per month. She also owns a small chocolate manufacturing and selling outlet where five male

employees earn Tk 3000 to 4000 per month. Moni Begum is both financially self-reliant and socially empowered now. And all this because of her proper utilisation of micro credit. She is a success story worthy of emulation by thousands of beneficiaries of micro credit system.

But 16/17 years ago Moni Begum very often had to pass her day without even a meal. In 1990 this often unfed often halfed hapless poor woman organised a 20-member landless women's group at Purohitpara area of

Mymensingh town. Initially their rate of weekly savings was only Tk 2 per head. She took first loan amounting to Tk 2000 from ASA in 1990 and with it started her enterprise of supplying panties and banyans for the new born to the Gyne Ward of Mymensingh Medical College.

She used to buy piece cloths from market and make the babywears herself. Next year she took a loan of Tk 4000 and started a small scale saree trade. She could sell 15 to 20 sarees per week moving from house to house in

neighbourhood localities. This fetched her Tk 400 to 500 per week. Next year she took a loan of Tk 6000 and bought two sewing machines.

This gradual increment in the micro credit amount taken by Moni Begum and its progressive utilisation earned her trust and support of the providers. Obviously she took it by turn from the same organisation and repaid usually in time. Of late she has taken Tk 1,30,000 from ASA under small

entrepreneur credit. Adding with it her savings of 16 years she has established

her mini garments factory. And for marketing her products she has also opened a centre in the town in partnership with one of her relations. This too has cost her no insignificant investment.

Micro credit is playing its part in poverty reduction. Mymensingh has been marked as the most poor district by FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation). The reasons for its being so have been identified as agrobased economy, amount of land much less than required for the population as well as only

single crop land in the vast haor area and scarcity of permanent employment opportunities. However, with a view to reducing the scale of poverty in the district ASA alone has opened 96 branches covering all the thanas and brought about two lakh hardcore poor families under micro credit programme.

Grameen Bank, BRAC, Proshika and other micro credit providers must have similar significant coverage and have been working to reduce poverty of their respective members.

This must have helped thousands of poor and ultra poor families to cross over the poverty line and many among them to be self reliant like Moni Begum.

It is believed that through proper utilisation of micro credit amount it is no more a dream but just possibility for thousands of Moni Begums to stand on their own feet and with their projects help many others to overcome poverty.

One thing is significant in case of ASA that 96 per cent of its members pay

installments regularly and its recovery rate is 98 per cent. In case of other providers also these rates are supposed to be similar. With such achievements and projections, micro-credit's poverty reduction potential stands out to be enormously impressive. What is needed is some dedication and integrity as shown by Moni Begum, because these are the virtues behind any success.

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Moni Begum's mini garments factory workers.