

## New vitality to Independence Day celebrations

It is now for us to build on resurgent spirit

A one-minute black-out at the Central Shaheed Minar at midnight on 25-26 March, followed by a lighting of candles, captures the spirit of this year's Independence Day celebrations. Such national resolve to uphold the principles of the War of Liberation surely augurs well for our future. We note here the rekindling of the old wartime spirit in recent weeks among the people of Bangladesh by such bodies as the Sector Commanders' Forum. Other organisations have also been active in shaping public opinion on such issues as preventing war criminals from taking part in politics and so recreating the ambience in which we waged our war for freedom in 1971. All these bodies, the patriotic men and women behind them, certainly deserve our collective gratitude for the awareness of history they have caused among all of us again. It is thanks to them that today public consciousness of the spirit of the War of Liberation is resurgent. We now build on the momentum to forge ahead.

In a very large sense, the growing public demand for a trial of war criminals of 1971 is but a reiteration of the national emphasis on justice and the rule of law. There may be a good number of cynics out there wondering why such a movement was not initiated in earlier years. The point, however, is that at present a momentum towards steering the country back to its original principles is on and it should be every Bengali's responsibility to carry it to its logical conclusion. What we notice today against the background of our Independence Day celebrations is a developing national consciousness on the priorities before us. Obviously, the issue of the trial of war criminals is a foremost priority.

We are encouraged by the army chief's remarks that the government will surely consider the growing demand for such a trial. We believe that things can and should go forward from here. We realise, of course, that the caretaker government may not be in a position to see the trials of the war criminals through to a definitive end. But, as we have said on an earlier occasion, it can set the ball rolling by giving practical shape to a legal framework for such trials to get underway. For good measure, it can also establish contact with such bodies as the UN and consult renowned international jurists over the foolproof ways of initiating such trials.

In short, the positivism associated with this year's observance of Independence Day bears a strong message for us -- that we need to stay steadfast in our goal of democracy by upholding our resolve to defend the national cause as it was manifested in 1971. That way the country can get moving again, in a direction that will do justice to those who sacrificed their lives for our privilege to be free citizens of a free country.

## Four years of RAB

Avoid pitfalls, build on positives

AGAINST the background of rising crime and proliferation of criminal networks across the country, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) came into being four years ago to turn the tide on lawlessness. The battalion within no time busted a number of networks of anti-social elements that have been engaged in smuggling, women and child trafficking and organising various other nefarious activities. We believe their biggest success came when they netted the ring-leaders of some terrorist groups and handed them over to the police. RAB's success in penetrating the dens of the dangerously armed and motivated obscurantist elements got words of praise from all quarters. Such focused and unrelenting operations by RAB did counterbalance the modus operandi of criminals and helped in creating a favourable law and order ambience in society to a large extent.

However, it needs to be mentioned that notwithstanding the good work, RAB came under severe criticism from this paper and others at home and abroad for overlooking certain human rights issues, especially the issue of extra-judicial killing of criminals under its custody. The much-flaunted incidence of "crossfire" largely overshadowed the success of RAB, causing voices of resentment to be raised by various human rights organisations and activists, nationally and internationally. However, it is good news that recent records show a fall in the incidence of crossfire.

The efficacy of special forces like RAB, to deal with extraordinary conditions of law and order, cannot be in doubt. But because such forces are given ample power makes them all the more obliged to be using those powers with extreme caution. Here the message is simple and clear: special forces will have to abide by the rule of law, and strictly so.

We believe RAB authorities will have to take extra care from here on to keep adding positive features to its reputation as an effective crime-fighting battalion. The imperative of following the legal process and procedure of the country must be instilled in the minds of the members of this special force. It is only then that RAB will be in a position to play a socially affirmative role.

Strengthening RAB is only part of the test. It is equally important that the police force is modernised, re-equipped and reformed to shoulder greater responsibilities in the law and order arena by way of minimising dependence on elite forces that are meant to handle special circumstances.

## Building a more just society



REHMAN SOBHAN

**We need to commit ourselves to establish a political order where money and muscle no longer remain the currency of power and ordinary people, our deprived, our women, our minorities, can thereby aspire to be more substantively represented in our various elective bodies. The people of Bangladesh may once again be inclined to pledge their commitment, as they did in the course of the liberation war, to ensure the sustainability of our democratic system, if they can be motivated to believe that such a system will serve to create a more just and inclusive society.**

I feel humbled and inadequate to bear the weight of the Swadhinata Puraskar. Those of our generation who were privileged to be associated with the liberation struggle were part of a mighty army where ordinary people rose above themselves to perform deeds which were beyond our expectation.

Peasants became warriors, bureaucrats became commanders, majors became generals, housewives became part of the supply chain for our war effort and some even took up arms. Teachers such as myself became diplomats and advocates arguing the case for Bangladesh before audiences who would never have had reason to even be aware of our existence. We were all elevated in our spirits and by our modest deeds and saw ourselves as part of a historic process which culminated in an independent Bangladesh.

For those of us who participated as footsoldiers in the liberation struggle and survived to become citizens of an independent Bangladesh this was, in itself, a reward beyond price and invested us with a sense of fulfillment. The award which I receive today I, therefore, receive not for myself but for my generation who were singled out by history to participate in a great event. None of us should feel we did

anything special. In my own case, the award is related to my contribution to research and teaching. Much of my earlier research was focused on the background to the emergence of Bangladesh whilst my subsequent work extended to the policies as well as political economy which subsequently shaped an independent Bangladesh. This work was given some coherence by my unifying belief in the need to build a more just society. The nature of my work as a teacher and researcher ensured that it would be part of a shared enterprise. After all, a teacher can only be singled out through the distinctions earned by his or her students who should thereby be made part of any honour visited on their teachers. My contributions as a researcher were greatly enhanced by the support of my associates, research assistants, professional colleagues and friends whose labours and ideas provided inputs and added value to my own work. My family, who shared the tensions and occasional hazards of my unorthodox life and unconventional views, should also be recognised as contributors to my work. My family, along with my colleagues who were, thus, involved in my research endeavours or worked with me to build the institutions with which I have been associated, the Dhaka University Economics Department, the Bangladesh Planning

Commission, the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, the South Asia Centre for Policy Studies, and my home for the last 13 years, the Centre for Policy Dialogue, should rightfully be recognised as partners in this award I receive today.

This great honour which I choose to share with all those who have contributed to elevating me to this stage today at Osmany Auditorium is also being bestowed today on more heroic figures and organizations than myself who have already been enshrined in our history. Professor Shamsuzzoha was martyred on the streets of Rajshahi bravely confronting the Pakistan army during the first phase of the unfolding struggle for national liberation. My gentle and beloved colleague at Dhaka University, Professor Gobindo Chandra Deb who dedicated his life to non-violence, was gunned down by the Pakistan army on the infamous night of March 25, 1971 during their massacre of students and staff of Jagannath Hall. This heinous crime was one of the first signals of the genocidal nature of the war unleashed on the people of Bangladesh at the orders of Yahya Khan and his cohorts. The warriors of the BDR, in their earlier incarnation as the EPR (East Pakistan Rifles), were one of the first to shed their blood valiantly in Peelkhana and elsewhere across Bangladesh resisting the aggression on our sov-

eighty by the Pakistan army. They continued to play a valiant role as part of the Mukti Bahini, throughout the course of our war of national liberation.

So many other martyrs and heroes, including the unnamed millions who invested their blood, their sweat and their tears, so that we could live in a free Bangladesh, have left us the living, with unpaid debts which remain outstanding after 37 years of our national existence. Our failure to bring to account those who were responsible for the genocide has exercised a malign influence over our history. It has cost us the lives of the father of the nation and his family, his closest associates, and eventually some of the heroes of our liberation war. It has distorted our historical memories, deviated us from the founding principles of our state, and has continued to infect and divide our contemporary politics.

We do not remain accountable to history but also to the living. Let us not forget that Bangladesh originated in our struggle to build a democratic, just and equitable society where people of all faiths and beliefs could live in harmony with one another. Those of us who first joined this struggle once argued that Pakistan's policymakers needed to recognise the reality of two economies co-existing within a nation state. Having achieved an independent

Bangladesh, with a single national economy, we now find our nation state inhabited by two societies divided between an elite minority enjoying First World life styles and a deprived majority struggling for survival on the margins of subsistence.

Bangladesh has undoubtedly made significant gains during its life as a nation state. Our small farmers have tripled our food production. Our migrant workers are bringing in close to 7 billion dollars in remittances. Our garment entrepreneurs and workers, mostly poor women, have together contributed to the emergence of a globally competitive export industry. Our micro-credit revolution has established that our resourceless millions can be both creditworthy and productive. We have registered significant advances in our human development indicators. Yet these very gains registered by Bangladesh serve to remind us of how much more we could have achieved and how much more justly we could have distributed the fruits of our independent existence.

Our political history established the prospect of Bangladesh emerging as a model of democracy in Asia, with a stable two party system where extra-constitutional interventions would have become historical memories. The relatively egalitarian social order we inherited could have been used to build a more equitable society through providing a greater stake for our deprived majority in the development process. Our exposure to a genocide committed by abusing the name of religion should have educated us to the importance of building a more inclusive society. I do not need to remind anyone here as to how far we have deviated from the vision of a society which motivated so many to

stake their lives. Today as we stand on the path towards yet another political transition it is surely important to reaffirm our faith in the beliefs which inspired our liberation struggle. It is, thus, imperative that we restore our democratic process without delay and allay any uncertainty about the road map to this cherished goal. We need to ensure that this democratic renewal will be sustained by committing ourselves to attain some of the other neglected, yet no less important, goals of the liberation war which were designed to strengthen the foundations of democracy by providing the ordinary people of Bangladesh with a direct stake in protecting our democratic institutions.

To this end we need to project a credible vision of a Bangladesh freed of the injustice of poverty, where the less privileged majority are invested with a broad range of opportunities which enhance their capacity to participate in the development process and derive a more equitable share in its rewards.

We need to commit ourselves to establish a political order where money and muscle no longer remain the currency of power and ordinary people, our deprived, our women, our minorities, can thereby aspire to be more substantively represented in our various elective bodies.

The people of Bangladesh may once again be inclined to pledge their commitment, as they did in the course of the liberation war, to ensure the sustainability of our democratic system, if they can be motivated to believe that such a system will serve to create a more just and inclusive society.

Prof. Rehman Sobhan, an eminent economist, was awarded the Swadhinata Puraskar 2008. The above is his address on the occasion of the award of the Swadhinata Puraskar 2008.

## Fortress of solitude

**But Nathaniel was extraordinarily lucky with the timing of his film. A few years later and he would have filmed his finale in a lonely fortress, empty of people, life or meaning. His last low angle shot would take in a wire fence, past the legs of guards, sentries, paramilitary and police. There would be no civilians in a single frame (certainly not the exuberant "Dhaka morning walker's club" of the film). Since 2006, the building has been dying, fatally surrounded by fences. The cage of national security, the only framing device left for Kahn.**

NAEEM MOHAJEMEN

THE man wakes in an unfamiliar city. It is hot, sweaty and only seven in the morning. Curse this infernal heat! Cycle bells, footsteps and strange sounds seep in.

The visitor's guides arrive, it is time. He is blindfolded, and the two set out in a car. Soon they are standing on a grand lawn. Wet dew seeps through his sneakers. The guide, a Bengali architect, takes the blindfold off. Blinking into the sunlight, the visitor stares at a castle of lines and stone, rising out of a moat of crisscrossing canals. He stares for a long moment. Slowly, quietly, he begins to cry.

The visitor is Nathaniel Kahn, and the building is the Shangshad Bhaban -- centerpiece of Louis

Kahn's National Capital Complex in Dhaka. The intense preparation for this moment of communion is behind the scenes. The story of the blindfold, put on by a local architect, came out in a later interview: "I said, look I want to see this thing the right way. I don't want to see it in an accidental way."

The viewer who comes to the film *My Architect* meets Louis Kahn through his physical sculptures. The sunlight streaming through Kimbell Museum roof, the grand geometry of Exeter's library, the unfinished designs for a Holocaust memorial, the dewy mornings that surround Shangshad Bhaban -- all are rendered with a quiet, unblinking precision.

Kahn's mission was to instill the monumentality and mystery of the

classics into architecture, replacing the cold functionality of the steel-and-glass era. In his structures, the materials were simple, often limited to brick and concrete. In his quest for spirituality, he would engage the raw material itself in the dialogue. The interplay of light with material was the base element that could create a changing building -- one that moved forward with time and vantage point.

"I knew that when I was in Dhaka the film was over." There in front of the Shangshad Bhaban, Nathaniel discovers his father in the lines and cavernous spaces. Even in the midst of brutal warfare in 1971, Louis Kahn continued work on this project. "When the war was on, everybody said stop working, because we don't know

what's going to happen, we don't know if there is going to be a government after this, and you're not being paid." His response was: when there is peace again, they will need this building.

When I first reviewed *My Architect* four years ago, I wrote: "Not only is it home to Bangladesh's parliament, its central, vast green grounds act as an oasis in the middle of a poorly planned, congested, third-world mega-city." Speaking of its multiple uses, Nathaniel said: "Everybody has a story about meeting a friend on the plaza, playing a game on the lawn, being a child on the lawn, walking around the Crescent Lake, exploring the area that the streets go past the hostels."

But Nathaniel was extraordinarily lucky with the timing of his film. A few years later and he would have filmed his finale in a lonely fortress, empty of people, life or meaning. His last low angle shot would take in a wire fence, past the legs of guards, sentries, paramilitary and police. There would be no civilians in a single frame (certainly not the exuberant "Dhaka morning walker's club" of the film). Since 2006, the building has been dying,

fatally surrounded by fences. The cage of national security, the only framing device left for Kahn.

Two weeks ago, a group of German architects came to visit Dhaka. Armed with university letters, ministry permissions, VIP phone calls, they were allowed access to the inside grounds. I called up one member and asked if my friend could join them. She has never been inside, you see.

"I don't think we can manage that, they have taken photocopies of everyone's passport."

"But she's Bengali."

It seems the officials didn't care. My Bengali friend stayed behind. Later, they met us for dinner. We who could only imagine the interior had to depend on these visitors for a second-hand look. Wide-eyed stories of soaring beauty. But also sadness at a crumbling interior, absence of light, eerie stillness, sleeping cleaners, the musty smell.

It has come to this. The only way I can enter the Shangshad is to come with foreign friends. The rest of you: go home, go home. Wanting to take a morning walk, do *adda* with old friends, eat *chinabadam*, hold hands with your partner, take in the fresh air, gaze into the open space, the vision of stone, the

beginning of life. Not now, not here. Your city is dying, finally.

Architect Dorothée Riedle wrote to me in an email: "I started to wonder what this security fuss is all about. What can be the reason for sealing off the building for the last few years? Maybe I am too foreign to understand? It is very hard to understand why a government would want to keep people from enjoying their nationality around their parliament building in this desperately needed green and open space. It deprives the building and what it stands for of much of its qualities. Writing all this I started to wonder how easy it would be to get access to the German Reichstag. According to their web-page, it is really easy. It is possible to take part in guided tours through the house daily, to apply for a visitors seat for the hearings, etc."

In *My Architect* a young boy stares up at the Shangshad Bhaban, and is reflected into the water. He expresses the sense of wonder we drink in at journey's end. Someone, somewhere has choked the joy out of that scene. In the name of what?

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## The 'swift boating' of Barack Obama has begun

### LETTER FROM AMERICA

**Will the rightwing Republicans succeed in denying Obama the presidency by demonising him? For America's sake, let's hope they will not. Progressive Americans realise that President Obama will be a tremendous healing force at home. What Americans may not realise is that President Obama will do wonders for America's image abroad.**

FAKHRUDDIN AHMED

THE "swift boating" of Senator Barack Obama has started in earnest. Through his association with former pastor Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Republicans and their surrogates have started a smear campaign to label Obama as an unpatriotic and racist anti-Semite.

Former president Bill Clinton suggested that only Hillary and John McCain "love their country," insinuating that Obama may not. If President Clinton had cared to read Obama's best seller, *The Audacity of Hope*, the last sentence in the

book would have struck him: "My heart is filled with love for this country."

Rightwing guttersnipes have reduced Obama's lofty speech on race, "A more perfect union" -- a rhapsody -- into distorted sound bites. Realising that Obama's grandiloquent speech would go over the heads of the average Americans, they decided to do some translation.

Sean Hannity of Fox News, the unofficial TV channel of the Republican Party, had a unique take on Obama's comment: "I can no more disown him (Rev. Wright) than I can my white grandmother-

- a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe."

"Obama called his grandma a racist!" cried the bigot-in-chief.

Promising to rerun the Rev. Wright videos through the election, the destructive genius of deductive reasoning offered his own analysis: "Since Obama sat in the pews and

listened to Rev. Wright's anti-American, racist, and anti-Semitic rants for twenty years, that makes Obama unpatriotic, racist, and anti-Semitic!"

Hannity, the Aristotle of Fox News, would not dream of accusing Senator John McCain of "guilt by association" because of his association with "spiritual advisors" anti-Catholic pastor Rev. John Hagee and anti-Muslim pastor Rev. Rod Parsley. The furor over Rev. Wright's comments gave the Fuhrer, Rush Limbaugh, the perfect excuse to dismiss Obama as a "race candidate."

Right-wingers are worried that if the average Americans actually read Obama's speech, they may be tempted to participate in an honest discussion on race and be inspired to vote for him. Therefore, they are telling Americans what to think of the speech.

Removing contexts from Obama's speech, they have caricatured it to racially-tainted anti-white snippets the Average Joe can recoil at.

They are mad because in his speech Obama exposed the modus operandi of the hate merchants: "Talk show hosts and conservative commentators built entire careers unmasking bogus claims of racism while dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice and inequality as mere political correctness or reverse racism."

No party ever won the presidential race after eight years in power, when the country is in recession. Republicans lose on every major issue, such as the economy and the Iraq war. Prices of essentials have shot up; gasoline is over \$3 a gallon.

Americans are hurting. Just as they won the 2002 and 2004 elections by touting national security, this time around the Republicans believe they can steal another one by impugning Barack Obama's patriotism and labeling him an anti-white anti-Semite.

Surely, an anti-Semitic Obama would not have said this in his speech: "Rev. Wright expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country -- a view that sees the

conflicts in the Middle East as rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel, instead of emanating from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam."

Three of the four Obama foreign policy advisors are Jews, including Bill Clinton's Middle East peace envoy Dennis Ross.

Just as he was trying to implicate Obama in Rev. Wright's sins, a photograph surfaced showing Bill Clinton greeting Rev. Wright in the White House during his presidency. If Rev. Wright was such an extremist, how did he merit an invitation to the White House? Clinton tried to explain it away by saying all kinds of people visit the White House. Oh, yeah? Since it is so easy, maybe I should try and visit the White House to meet the president!

Will the rightwing Republicans succeed in denying Obama the presidency by demonising him? For America's sake, let's hope they will not. Since Americans know little about Obama, his detractors have tried to fill the void with mis-



information, such as he is a Muslim. At least that rumour has been shot down.

Many Americans will not vote for a totally black candidate. Rarely does a charismatic, brilliant and inspiring candidate come along who is half white and half black, and dreams of unifying the races.

Progressive Americans realise that President Obama will be a tremendous healing force at home. What Americans may not realise is that President Obama will do wonders for America's image abroad.

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