

# GC Dev: A glimpse of his humanist philosophy

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**M**ARTYRED Professor GC Dev (1907-1971) dedicated his entire life to the cause of preaching and practicing a life-oriented philosophy -- something that earned him wide reputation at home and abroad. He is commonly recognized as a distinguished philosopher, rather than a philosopher in the conventional sense. He had no charm for metaphysical quest and for knowledge for the sake of knowledge. For him, philosophy at this critical juncture of history can no longer afford the luxury of ivory tower speculation, but needs to serve as the ideological incentive to successful living. He not only said this but meant it in every sense. Thus he worked relentlessly and even gave away all his properties for the welfare of man, more particularly the most neglected and downtrodden common man. "The moorings of my heart, my dreams and visions that have sustained me through my struggles", says Dev, "centre around them". Thus we see that of his many philosophical works, one entitled 'Aspirations of the Common Man' deals mainly with the weal and woe, the dreams and frustrations of the ordinary men and women, who find it difficult to make both ends meet. It is with them in mind that he was in search of a philosophy

that can give a push ahead to man's progress in terms of material prosperity as well as spiritual values.

On the basis of a new orientation, he has resurrected idealism from a materialist angle by putting a brake on the excesses of materialism and spiritualism. There with he puts up a strong defense of one-world based on amity and fraternity of all mankind. He visualizes the future of the common man in a synthetic philosophy which finds the truth of matter. This, he says, can be worked out by achieving a measure of equilibrium between materialism and spiritualism, reason and faith, science and religion. He assures us that the new philosophy, as outlined by him, underlies all religions and is the meeting ground of men of religion on the one hand, and humanists on the other. He makes no secret of his respect for religion and says that religion on its bright side has always spoken of love and friendship; but its so called followers have, in an open defiance of the great intention of their great founders, often used religion as a fertile soil for the growth of sectionalism, jealousy, hatred and even war and terror of the works kind. A lot of damage, regrets Dev, has already been done, and it is high time that we review and reconsider our role, and beware of all such sectional and fanatic actions that run counter to the compli-

cated needs of the modern environment. In our own interest, we need to guard against all such ideas and activities which may jeopardize the one-world mentality, the spiritual counterpart of physical unity brought about by science throughout the length and breadth of the world.

Dev next passes on to a critique of science and technology, the most glaring example of man's creative genius. Science, he admits, has worked wonders by changing the shape of the globe and opening links with the outer space. By so doing it has contributed immensely to the broadening of man's outlook of life and the universe. By brining into bold relief the physical unity of the world, with its good and bad effects, its enormous advantages and perplexities, science has really made the spiritual course of the world smooth. What is alarming, however, is the fact that science in its latest phase as technology has emerged as a disastrous power and is being misused as a blatant instrument of destructive actions hitherto unknown and unimaginable. Sadly enough, it has degenerated into a power cult with a most bleak and gloomy prospect for man, reminding him every moment of his doomsday.

This power cult, devoid of the cementing force of love, has created an ethical vacuum that has brought man to an unstable

equilibrium. This vacuum can only be filled in by an unshakable faith in the basic unity of man irrespective of caste, creed, colour and clime. Now, the unity of man can be restored only by bringing philosophy and science closer in a harmonious relationship. Left to themselves, science and philosophy stand respectively for unrestricted power and universal love. Apparently, they are repellent and mutually exclusive, but in the final analysis, as two different branches of human knowledge they are amenable to union and reconciliation. An unflinching optimism, Dr Dev hopes that a day will come when a truce will be signed between the two and a merger there of will ensure peace and security of man. Loyalty to science will then help us grow materially, and our faith in spirit and ethical values, liberated by scientific rationalism, will save us from tension and disintegration. The task is no doubt mountainous, and there are manifold obstacles in the way. But if we proceed with care, caution and circumspection, we must triumph in the way. The sense of unity, cautions Dev, must prevail over the sense of difference, human interest over sectional affiliation and love over power. For the present, we must cry halt to the prevailing power cult in different spheres of life and work hand in hand for successful living. Here also the concept of

successful living has to be considerably broadened so that it may work in our new environment and answer its challenge to our existence. We cannot afford to fail here, for in that case all our efforts to build up a secure future are bound to melt before the heat of jealousy, strife and conflict.

Professor Dev's theme has been to express the concern that the world today has drifted to an erroneous philosophy of life, one that is disproportionately materialistic. Lured by the apparent achievements of science and technology, contemporary men and women are unwittingly making a mad rush for material possession to the utter disregard for moral and spiritual values. This, he laments, is highly disconcerting inasmuch as it has dragged the present day world to a point of crisis - the crisis of existence. In consequence, mankind is fast moving towards war, tension and perhaps total annihilation. The possible way out of this crucial predicament is a new philosophy of life based on and wedded to a synthesis, a happy marriage between material wealth and spiritual values, science and religion as well as power and love.

For my part, I find to reason to disagree with Professor Dev and feel very strongly, as he does, that if we want to save humanity from utter destruction, then we have no alternative to preaching and practising the perennial philos-



GC Dev (M) with Dr. Lalit Nath and Jyotiprakash Dutt (1966).

ophy of love which is also the underlying gospel of all religions.

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## Looking behind and beyond a sorrow

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**T**ODAY marks the 37th anniversary of a sad day for the nation of Bangladesh. It commemorates Martyred Intellectuals Day. Its significance should exist in the collective conscience of the nation, though some of the names might have faded away from its collective memory. And that should come as no surprise. Those born on, or after, that day would only know of them from oral history, hearsay, and written accounts. And, just a few of the martyrs have attained the status of national icons that have generated a multiplicity of lore. They could be expected to arouse greater general interest than the rest, those who recede into the shadows of recognition from the 37 year-old and younger generation of Bangladeshis with each passing year. And this number inevitably keeps growing, and will continue to do so.

For those, however, who have had the opportunity to have been in close proximity to any of them, whether as students, colleagues, friends, or through familial ties, the sorrow and regret are personal. And this number, also inevitably, keeps getting smaller as the years go by. And, one day, just as inescapably, there would be no one left to give personal reminiscence on any of the martyred intellectuals, and only the annual observance of 14 December and historical records will inform, and/or remind the people of the intellectuals who had their lives cut brutally short as price to pay for the birth of a new nation-state.

To be sure, not all the martyred intellectuals were university teachers, nor were they all murdered on 14 December 1971. But the lion's share came from the ranks of Dhaka University faculty members, and most were sacrificed on the day that commemorates all in the group. As personal reminiscences go, I had

Professors Ghyasuddin and Santosh Bhattacharjee teaching modern European history and ancient Indian history, respectively, in two of my General History subsidiary classes. Professor Ghyas stood out in my mind for a deep resonant voice delivering his lectures on modern European history, especially the French Revolution over a protracted period, in impeccable English. From a fairly long distance in time, I recall that he seemed almost to be talking aloud to himself in measured tones, fascinating himself with the momentous chain of events called the French Revolution. Professor Bhattacharjee, also in flawless English, but with a rather frenetic delivery style and more of a high-pitched voice, was as enthralling in talking about Mohenjo daro and Harappa. Dedicated teachers both, men of dignity, both lost before they could enrich the minds of more students, or, indeed, aim for their own self-actualization needs, if they had not already been realized.

So what prompted the killers to take out their victims, even though their actions have created more than they had destroyed? One explicit clue may be found in cultural historian Jacques Barzun's perspective on a critical offshoot of the intelligentsia's métier: "Many thinkers of the eighteenth century had presentiments of revolution ahead; and it is now obvious that these thinkers themselves contributed to the upheaval, for the most part without desiring it or knowing how they were hastening the day. Their ideas, their hopes, their apprehensions fitted themselves to the unstable structure and helped bring it down." This is as forthcoming a possible explanation as any. It does not mean that the intelligentsia invariably succeeds in fomenting successful revolutions or insurgencies.

A realistic assessment on this count is provided by historian Hugh Seton-Watson in the context of the prelude to the 1905 Russian revolution: "A leadership from the revolutionary intelligentsia and a limited mass following among the working class were sufficient to create a strong political movement, but they were not sufficient to take power in an agrarian country ruled by bureaucratic, police, and military regime" (The Russian Empire 1801-1917).

Therefore, the intelligentsia can act more as moral catalysts of legitimate protests rather than being the central figures in leading actual revolutions, insurgencies, or freedom struggles. What probably drives the psyche of their oppressors is not necessarily that the intelligentsia would succeed in their mission, but the fear that they could be stoking the passion of others into doing what they would be more capable in executing. The fear of, or disgust for, or distrust of, the intelligentsia leading to their harsh treatment have ample examples in history. Two of the relatively more recent cases have occurred in Asia. They are particularly noteworthy because of the magnitude of their application.

To compensate for the failed Great Leap Forward policy, as much as to rekindle the spirit of the Chinese Revolution, Chairman Mao Zedong launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In this phase, the Red Guards were encouraged to attack all traditional Chinese values and bourgeois effects, schools were shut down, and teachers and other members of the intelligentsia were made to carry out manual labour in the fields. Apparently, Mao considered the intelligentsia to have been decadent and counter-productive, even dangerous, to the ideals of the revolution, and sent them to punishment posts. The Cultural

Revolution resulted in anarchy, terror, and economic paralysis, and not a few intellectuals died as a direct outcome of privations suffered in carrying out hard labour. It set back Chinese education and refined intellectual activity by several years, in the process, probably losing some brilliant minds.

After his Khmer Rouge forces overran and captured Phnom Penh in 1975, Pol Pot, Cambodia's infamous prime minister, ruthlessly pursued his objective "to return to 'year zero' and create an ethnically pure, agrarian communist state." The policy resulted in the deaths of anywhere from one to two million people, including, significantly, all manners of intellectuals. Presumably, Pol Pot thought that the intelligentsia and their activities constituted a fundamental threat to his vision of returning to 'year zero', and to the creation of a pure communist state. A common factor in the two cases presented is that the intellectuals were persecuted, severely, one may add, leading to many deaths on grounds that they were inimical to the attainment of pure communism in the two countries.

But what threat, real or perceived, did the Bengali intellectuals present to the Pakistanis in 1971? Apparently, quite a lot, for them to be subjected to sustained persecution, beginning with the killing of a number of them, including Professor GC Dev, at the commencement of the military onslaught. One may reasonably conclude that the relevant authority had decided that the intellectuals had contributed significantly to, and inspired, the nationalist sentiment in the Bengalis, and so they had to pay with their lives. This anger never abated during the course of the liberation struggle, and culminated on the eve of the triumph of the nationalists and the emergence of sovereign

independent Bangladesh. Quite possibly, out of pure spite on the eve of a shameful defeat, to which the intellectuals in their own way had contributed, and, secondarily, to deprive the new country of much-needed advice and guidance, the devilish plan for the roundup and execution of prominent and lesser known intellectuals was devised and acted upon.

By that act, Bangladesh had to suffer through a period of acute deprivation from counsel that could have helped in easing the early trials and tribulations that it faced, a factor and its consequences that the country has not been able to totally overcome even to this day. This is not to say that the intellectuals would have succeeded for sure in guiding the country in the right direction, but we will never know if they would have or not. This was a crime committed against a nation, as much as it was one against humanity.

How does one look beyond a sorrow as the post-14 December generation proliferates? One can call for justice to be carried out even after all these years, although, realistically, such a proposition probably would not come to fruition, or, at least, partial realization, since the Pakistanis accused of having committed war crimes have either died a natural death, or, those living, given the reality of international politics, would not likely be brought to trial before the International Criminal Court (ICC). Slobodan Milosevic and Radko Mladic were convenient sacrificial sops to the ICC's existence and mandate, since not much global political ambitions of the great powers were disturbed by bringing them to book, and they could score brownie points with the other nations by projecting an image of assiduously adhering to international law.

The ICC was established by the Rome Statute (1998) to try individuals accused of genocide,

war crimes, and crimes against humanity, and became operational on 1 July 2002. In 1946, the UN General Assembly declared genocide a punishable offence committed by an individual, group, or government against one's own citizenry or another's, in peacetime or wartime. Crimes against humanity is narrower by legal definition since only wartime activities are specified. However one views the two terms "genocide" and "crimes against humanity", both cover the killing of the intellectuals in 1971. Nonetheless, to reinforce the notion of the self-serving nation-state answering to no higher authority than itself, and the unwritten hierarchy of states calling the shots from the top echelon, by 2002, China, Russia, and the US had made clear their intentions not to participate in ICC.

The fact is that an entire slew of equations enter into defining self-interest of any nation, especially the great powers. And they will acquiesce in such matters of international concern as the trial of people accused of committing genocide or crimes against humanity at ICC only if they do not impinge on their vital national security interests. Regarding the Bangladeshi nationals so accused, that onus falls on the government in office, and efforts in that direction, thus far, have been practically nonexistent. If the present status quo persists into the future, and the day eventually comes when there are none left to be charged, then the only recourse left would be for the nation of Bangladesh to solemnly remember the sacrifice of its intellectuals so that a sovereign independent nation-state might be born. They are at least owed that much eternal honour.

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