

As we recall Bangabandhu...

Let's draw renewed inspiration from his legacy

ON National Mourning Day, the fundamental thought in all of us is one of the tortuous course Bangladesh has traversed since the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with most members of his family in 1975. Obviously, the death of the Father of the Nation through conspiracy hatched by elements intent on bringing back regressive politics in the country was a tragedy we have not yet been able to overcome, a wound that is yet to heal. The decades since August 15, 1975 have in effect been a time when the country has lurched from disaster to calamity owing to the various phases of extra-constitutional government imposed on the nation. Of course there have been, since the early 1990s, elected civilian governments in place. And yet the feeling that the seismic shocks we went through when Bangabandhu and subsequently four of his political associates were gunned down has not quite gone away.

And it has not for a very potent reason, which is that sinister attempts have been made, and are yet being made, to deny Bangabandhu his rightful place in history. A nation whose history has been shaped, in near totality, by the politics of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has repeatedly been told since 1975 that he does not matter. The distortion of history has been crude at best and perverse at worst. The damage that it has caused the country is undeniable. It has led to a divided nation, to the rise of a generation which has wallowed in confusion about its history. Where a proper presentation of history should have been the norm, despite the chasm that has divided one political camp from another, it has been a travesty of history that has been on offer. Today as never before, there is the imperative before all of us, as a nation, to get our sense of history right through recognizing not only Bangabandhu's place in our political tradition but also according due honour to everyone who played a role in the armed struggle for freedom in 1971.

But while a restoration of history is our goal, we also realise that democracy, good governance and everything else that goes for decency and ethics in our collective life will remain a pipe dream unless justice is done, fully and absolutely, in the matter of having Bangabandhu's murderers pay for the crime they have committed. It must be done through a smooth, careful and judicious operation of the law. And when we speak of a democratic framework for Bangladesh, we speak of a restoration of all those principles for which Bangabandhu struggled all through his political career and which underpinned our final and armed revolt against the militaristic-communal Pakistani dispensation in 1971.

We pay tribute to Bangabandhu today. Let the pledge today be one of our drawing renewed inspiration and courage from his untrammelled legacy and supreme sacrifice in order for us to dedicate ourselves to the creation of the Shonar Bangla he envisioned in his lifetime.

Enriching primary school textbooks

An agenda that needs to be addressed energetically

YEARS of blasé attitude to school textbooks had up until recently been reflected through delayed publication schedules as books reached children well into an advancing academic session and, that too, with distorted textual contents in certain areas. But now it seems another dimension to the legacy of indifference has come to light. It's the poor quality production of textbooks making dull reading for our children that is now exercising the minds of our educators.

The child's mind is both receptive and impressionable, so what it soaks up it does so as if writing on a clean slate. It is said that impressions formed in the early years of childhood go to shape their mental makeup into adolescence. Primary schooling together with sights and sounds of nature and immediate environs are the stuff of which the most important phase of the learning process is made. Little wonder, therefore, that teachers at this stage are required by the experts to be skilled in child psychology so that what they impart to the boys and girls in classroom situations is appealing to the latter, can sharpen their wits, fire their imagination and unlock the deeper recesses of their minds.

What can be the quality of teachers' instructions if the prescribed books school books themselves happen to be of indifferent, or poor quality. And if on top of it, they are published with unattractive design and layout, thickly set prints, drab and inappropriate illustrations, all in poor quality paper of varying shades, what benefit can either the class teachers, and more importantly, the pupils derive from them?

It needs hardly to be emphasised that for children, illustrations, pictorial, painted or graphic are as important as the text because they receive and retain knowledge better through linking the visual to the textual. Thus, we welcome the news of the government forming a five member committee to introduce changes in cover designs and illustrations of textbooks. Experts from the civil society may be co-opted for a broader-based policy decision while implementation is left to the professionals.

August 1975 and thereafter

That collective dream has been shattered, to be replaced by one of personal aggrandizement. This change has been hastened by the despicably heinous act of the assassins of August 15. Today the people at large are paying for the prosperity of a few. And, very naturally, mainstream politics has become a shameless game of plunder...

SERAJUL ISLAM CHOUDHURY

WHAT happened in August 1975 was a great tragedy perpetrated by an anti-people clique who did not want Bangladesh to move in the direction its people had desired it to take. The desire embodied a dream and an ideology; and for its fulfillment the people had struggled not only in 1971 but even before. The long struggle did not begin all of a sudden. It had a glorious history of its own. In December 1971 it reached a point where it was impossible for the old state not to yield to the emergence of an independent Bangladesh. What the assassins were bent upon doing was the bringing down not only of a great man but also, and not less importantly, of the ideology of secular Bengali nationalism together with the dream of a long-awaited and urgently needed social revolution. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had promoted that collective desire among, and with, the people. In mourning his death we bemoan the loss of a leader as well as of an opportunity. Sheikh Mujib died a martyr, heading the long list of those who laid down their lives to liberate the people of Bangladesh.

The assassins were a motley group comprising disgruntled army men and a section of the reactionary elements within the ruling party itself. And they acted with the silent support of the capitalist world, of which the USA was the leader. The capitalist countries had, we recall, opposed -- both morally and materially -- the formation of Bangladesh, being apprehensive of its turning to the left.

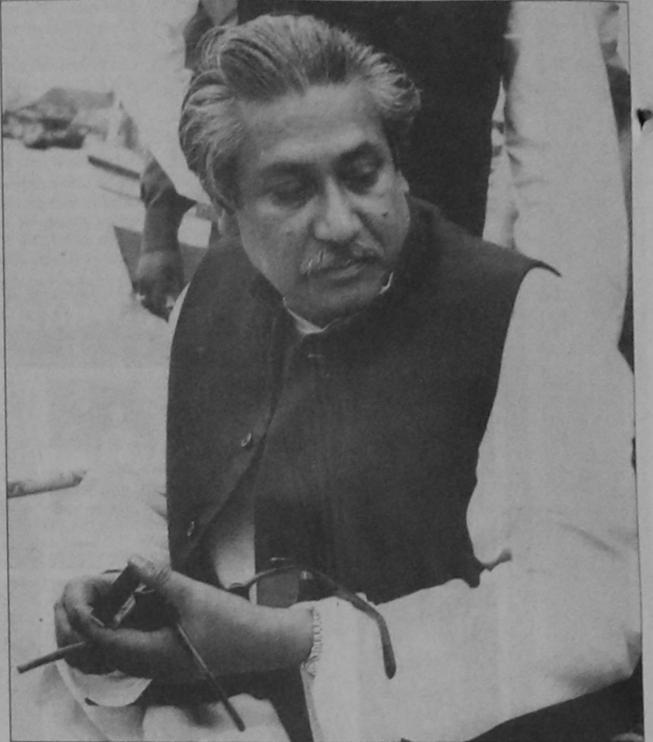
Not that the leftists at home were satisfied. Some of them were disheartened to see the new state not taking the line of non-capitalist development; others had gone underground fearing repression on account of their failure to join the war of liberation due to their inability to see that a resolution of the class question demanded a settlement of the national question and that the principal contradiction at that moment of history was between the people of East Bengal and the Punjabi military-bureaucratic combine that ruled Pakistan. None of the leftist groups was against a social revolution; indeed, they were fighting for it. But they did not know how to achieve that objective, which is the primary reason why they were divided among themselves, and, despite their sacrifices, were unable to take on the leadership of the liberation war. The leftists had nothing to do with the tragedy of 1975, although the Awami League leadership thought them, quite mistakenly, to be their real enemy, ignoring the reactionaries within their own camp.

The August mayhem was a rightist affair. The whole business of conspiracy, consolidation and execution was done by the ultra rightists. The more easily identifiable anti-liberation elements, including the Al-badrs and the Razakars, were not directly involved in the operation, but their ideological kinsmen had taken upon themselves a task which those known and condemned for their activities were incapable of performing.

The liberation war, let us remind ourselves, was not fought for the limited political aim of independence. We have had the experience of independence in 1947 enormously paid for in terms of miseries and tears, and found it to be no more than a transfer of power to the Punjabis to rule over the Bengalis. That is why, since 1952, we had been struggling for liberation, which, we had realized, must be based on the twin recognition that the Bengalis were a nation and that national independence would never be meaningful without an accompanying social revolution. Revolutions have come and gone, but society, which is where people live and expect to thrive, has not changed; it has remained as class-ridden and exploitative as it has since the 1793 Permanent Settlement enforced by the British. We needed and wanted a real revolution, ensuring a democratic transformation of the state and society, guaranteeing equality of rights and opportunities to every citizen. The four state principles adumbrated in the original constitution of Bangladesh indicated the goal of a social revolution, for which the first step to be taken was secularism and socialism had to be the ultimate goal.

And it is this possibility of a liberating revolution which the assassins of August wanted to destroy. Those who succeeded them in the running of the state did not find it necessary to make apologies. Briskly they want about achieving their self-appointed task of altering the whole character of the constitution, eliminating the principles of secularism and socialism. Promulgating a martial law order, General Ziaur Rahman removed secularism and put above the preamble words which read, "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful", and inserted within it a pledge "in the name of almighty Allah." Socialism was replaced by the innocuous idea of economic and social justice. The amended constitution negated Bengali nationalism by introducing Bangladeshi nationalism in its place. Clearly, the purpose was not to widen the definition of nationalism to include the small nationalities to which recognition has been denied in the constitution, but to do away with the idea that the Bengalis are a nation. Not satisfied even with that, General Ershad went to the extent of introducing Islam as the state religion.

It is not without significance that what was called 'a historical struggle for national liberation in the original document has been changed by Ziaur Rahman's decree into 'historical war for national independence,' suggesting that we fought for political independence and not for social liberation. There is absolutely no reason to doubt that those who made the alteration were unaware of the difference between inde-



pendence and liberation. They wanted to make us forget that we had fought not for another independence of the 1947 type, but for emancipation of the people through a total transformation of society. What these anti-people elements wanted was not a secular state and a democratic society but a smaller edition of what was once known as Pakistan.

Even bourgeois democracy, not to speak of the one of socialist dispensation, demands as its first requisite secularism, meaning, as it does, complete separation between state and religion; and that exactly is what has been denied to us by the rulers who commandeered the state after August 1975. What surprises us is that the Awami League, which had provided leadership in the war of liberation, has found it convenient to remain silent on the question, giving us the impression that it does not consider the restoration of secularism to be an important issue. Even in a land where corruption and crime are being committed everywhere and every day, a more grievous crime than the removal of secularism from the constitution would be difficult to find. The action has not harmed any particular person, group or institution but has struck at the very foundations of the state which had been founded on the rejection of the non-secular two-nation theory on which Pakistan had based itself. That Pakistan was a curse and a nightmare has been made obvious to those who are now living in that broken political state. We have all sympathy for them in their suffering. We ourselves came to the knowledge about the monstrous character of that state as early as 1952, having paid much too much in terms of blood and tears for allowing ourselves to

be led into voting for it in 1946 by our leaders. M. A. Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, had himself realized the mistake he had made even before the state was set up and had discarded the two-nation theory at the first opportunity that came to him, namely, the occasion to speak before the constituent Assembly on 11 August 1947.

Looking at the happenings in Bangladesh since August 1975 from a slightly different perspective, one could say that the progress we are supposed to have made amounted really to a widening of the road for capitalism to flourish. The collective dream of liberation was for the establishment of democracy in the country, and it has to be admitted that there is not much of a difference between proper democracy and socialism. That collective dream has been shattered, to be replaced by one of personal aggrandizement. This change has been hastened by the despicably heinous act of the assassins of August 15. Today the people at large are paying for the prosperity of a few. And, very naturally, mainstream politics has become a shameless game of plunder in which the ruling class, the members of which are related to one another by social and even family ties, has engaged in cut-throat competition for the acquisition of money and power.

But mere mourning would not do. It may prove to be counterproductive, creating despair. What we have to undertake is the continuation of the struggle to achieve the realization of the collective dream of a social revolution. To give up the struggle would be to degrade ourselves further than we have already done.

Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury is a reputed academic, writer and commentator on social and political issues.

The day historical distortion set in

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman turned into a non-person, a fact that persisted for as long as General Zia held on to power. Absolutely no mention of the Mujibnagar government was there; and sanitized versions of national history made their way into school textbooks.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE assassination of the Father of the Nation on 15 August 1975 was but the first step in the distortion of national history. Sit back and reflect on all the falsehoods that have been disseminated in these past thirty-four years by elements who have clearly derived benefits from what is truly the worst episode in free Bangladesh's history. Moments after the soldiers completed their macabre mission, it was given out on the radio that Bangladesh had been declared an Islamic republic. That, of course, was not true, as later events were to prove. But that the country had been forced at gunpoint to take a regressive step towards what would amount to communalism was made clear through the religious invocations of the killers. Suddenly, the state did not appear to be for Bengalis any more. The Bengali battle cry of *Joi Bangla* was supplanted by the Pakistan-inclined *Bangladesh Zindabad*. The broad hint was there that the largest religious community, in this case Muslims, were in the ascendant.

One of the more eerie aspects of the bloody coup was the patent glee with which Pakistan welcomed the fall of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his government. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto cheered the rise of an 'Islamic' Bangladesh and announced a dole of rice and cloth for the Bengalis. And then came the radio and television address by Khondokar Moshatq Ahmed, the commerce minister who had suddenly turned into 'president'. Broad overtones of rightwing religious politics underlined his remarks. The queasy feeling was there among citizens that Bangladesh had taken a wholesale journey back to darkness. But if that was the beginning of a rejection of history as it had shaped up in 1971, there was worse to come. The infamous indemnity ordinance was but a stepping stone to the insidious things that were yet to be. And yet hope of a sort dawned, feebly, when Khaled Mosharraf put the killers out to pasture

through his coup of 3 November 1975. Four days later, he was dead. And those who had felled him raised all the communal slogans reminiscent of Pakistan's perverted politics in the pre-1971 era. All-enveloping darkness threatened to consume secular values in the land.

Villainy was in the air; and it came through a dishing out of more untruths. Bangabandhu, it was whispered in lingo-like fashion, had surrendered to the Pakistan army in March 1971, that he had indeed little intention of securing Bangladesh's freedom through a war of liberation. Meanwhile, with the Zia regime firmly ensconced in power, larger plans were being made to strip the country bare of the basic decency it had historically symbolized. M.G. Tawab, heading the air force and operating as a deputy martial law administrator, organized a 'seerat' conference that left few in any doubt about the military junta's intentions. In February 1976, matters became a little clearer. Khondokar Abdul Hamid, a journalist and Zia acolyte, spoke of 'Bangladeshi nationalism', a mishmash of ideas intended to drill holes in the Bengali nationalism that had propelled the nation to war against Pakistan in 1971. Then came Zia's unilateral act of tampering with the constitution. Secularism, socialism and nationalism were prised out of it and replaced with themes that were a clear negation of Bengali history. The parliament that was elected in February 1979, stacked as it was with apologists for 'Bangladeshi nationalism', adopted the fifth amendment to the constitution. Included in it was the indemnity ordinance. Bangabandhu's killers were safe, for no court could bring their misdeeds into question. Many of them were sent off abroad, to serve as diplomats at various Bangladesh missions!

A definitive manifestation of the distortion of history came through the reluctance of the regime to identify the Pakistan army as the perpetrators of the genocide in 1971. On Independence Day and Victory Day, the reference was only to an 'occupation army'.



Bangabandhu at Comilla cantonment in 1973. Behind him, on the right, is then deputy chief of army staff Ziaur Rahman.

never to Pakistan's soldiers. Through a repeal of the Collaborators' Act of 1972, the door was opened for the old, active supporters of Pakistan's genocide to re-enter politics in independent Bangladesh. Under the cover of 'Bangladeshi nationalism', which clearly espoused non-secular causes, the Jamaat-e-Islami, Muslim League and other Pakistan-friendly parties swiftly occupied the political arena. Known Pakistan supporters joined the regime as ministers. On state-controlled radio and television, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman turned into a non-person, a fact that persisted for as long as General Zia held on to power. Absolutely no mention of the Mujibnagar government was there; and sanitized versions of national history made their way into school textbooks.

Ziaur Rahman's murder in May 1981 only speeded up the process of historical distortion. General H.M. Ershad, the nation's second military ruler, pushed the country even more into a communal corner when he decreed that Islam be the religion of the state. It was on his watch that Bangabandhu's killers were permitted by the authorities to form a political party, which then fielded one of the assassins as its presidential candidate at the 1988 elections. Politics was made to stand on its head when another assassin was made a member of parliament. And then, in a moment of supreme irony, the dictator went all the way

to Tungipara to pray at the grave of the Father of the Nation.

The mauling of history simply intensified with the rise of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party to power in February 1991. Suddenly, it was being given out that Ziaur Rahman had declared Bangladesh's independence in March 1971 while the political leadership was busy trying to save itself from the wrath of the Pakistan army. Curiously, though, that was a half truth. The other half was that Zia had made the announcement on 27 March 1971 on behalf of 'our great national leader and supreme commander Sheikh Mujibur Rahman' (his words). That other half has never been revealed. In all the years that Zia and his political descendants held power, the 27 March announcement was never played on the radio.

Distortion took its worst form during the period of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led government in 2001-2006 when moves were made to peddle the untruth that Zia had declared Bangladesh's independence on 26 March 1971! Covert steps were underway, toward the end of Khaleda Zia's government, to meddle with the April 1971 Proclamation of Independence and supplant it with Zia's alleged call of freedom to the country.

We rest our case.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.