

## Independence Day

*Time to retrace our steps to the old idealism*

THE observance of Independence Day this year as in any other year is an opportunity for the Bengali nation to retrace its steps into that *annus mirabilis* of 1971, for the particular reason that the year remains symbolic of all our dreams about our future. Thirty nine years after the formal declaration of Bangladesh's independence, it is for us to recapitulate an era that was to push us into unmitigated tragedy caused by Pakistan's initiation of genocide and eventually on to a sun-dappled dawn of freedom nine months later. This morning, we pay tribute to the people of Bangladesh, to the Mukti Bahini and indeed to the leadership of the time for the steadfastness of purpose they demonstrated in the face of the terror typified by the Pakistan occupation army. The three million Bengalis who died in order for us to live and thrive in freedom will always have our undying gratitude. The two hundred thousand Bengali women who went through unspeakable agony at the hands of the occupation forces will be the repository of our enduring respect.

We recall today the spirit that led us to war in the defence of our national self-esteem and political integrity. It was our goal to forge out of the crucible of war a nation-state which would be underpinned by a guarantee of democracy and rule of law. Today, that goal remains as pronounced as ever, given that in nearly four decades since we hit the road to armed struggle the idealism we started off with has not yet been achieved to our satisfaction. In 1971, the objective was to ensure a decent, good life for every Bengali through providing for the basic means of sustenance for the individual and for the collective body of citizens. A very significant premise of the armed struggle, preceded as it was by a long constitutional quest for autonomy, was geared to a bridging of the gap between rich and poor. Today that need remains as glaring as it was back then. That we as a nation are called upon to guarantee the dignity of the individual, for such dignity in turn adds substance to the life force of a nation, is a task to the attainment of which we must renew ourselves today. The old idealism, based as it was on pristine old-fashioned values around which our cultural heritage and political traditions were woven, must today be restored through enlightened politics in the country. And that calls for the emergence of political leadership whose understanding of national priorities and grasp of global realities will be pivotal in a shaping of our responses to the many questions we face today.

Let an old pledge be renewed today: as we step into the fortieth year of our sovereign nationhood, it is of crucial and critical importance that the toiling masses of Bangladesh form the centerpiece of all that we do. It was so back in 1971. It ought to be so in these more difficult times.

## Helpless parents before desperadoes

*Community will have to stand up to such rogues*

HOW unprotected young girls are and, by a fatal extension their parents can be, was amply proven by the gory incident in a city flat on Wednesday morning. An armed youth with a friend wedged into the apartment to force at gun point a marriage proposal for the daughter of the family. As the parents resisted the attempt at physically dragging the girl away, first the father was shot in the head to die instantaneously and then the mother who later succumbed to her injuries.

The dastardly incident has once again brought to the fore the sheer sense of insecurity and danger to life that pervade the day to day living of ever increasing numbers of city dwellers, be it at home, market place or in the street.

Most vulnerable are middle aged or old parents or guardians, who along with their daughters, are drawn into the vortex of trouble. This is particularly true about a family without a son. Beginning with eve-teasing and making passes to girls to subjecting them to sexual harassment to attempts at enticing or forcing them away to hurling marriage proposals at their families, the stalking ruffians would stop short at nothing.

Whenever such assaults hog news lines we are apt to point to a general decline in law and order in which we say gun running drug addicted youths are let loose in a slack of law enforcement. We also finger-point at relaxed state of vigil at the apartment buildings where security guards are not up to the task. Whilst all these are true in varying degrees and in the case of Gulshan homicide, worryingly, the known culprits managed to escape the crime scene too; yet there are categories of crime that should provoke a social responsibility and obligation. In the matter of preventing and intervening in a developing situation, society, community and neighbourhood are in a better position to play the role of an effective antidote to the social variety of crime.

It is a sad combination of fragile parental authority, hiatus between individual families and the neighbourhood, cracks in the traditional community cohesion that is both the cause and effect of social dehumanisation that we experience today. Social values of collective fending and protection against evil that stand undermined today will have to be restored if we are not to be devoured by the monster of our own making.

## Independence or illusion?

Forty years ago and before, people of this country were ruled by alien governments. Those governments neither spoke our language nor understood our sentiments. They plundered this country to create wealth for their own people. Has anything changed? Yes, of course. Our own people plunder our own country to create wealth for their children.

MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

Each passing year is compared to the running of a race, then today this nation staggers across the finishing line for the fortieth time to celebrate its independence of as many years. When I say this nation staggers, I don't mean to undermine the felicity of freedom, which has come at a heavy price, weighed in blood. Neither is it meant to deprecate the sacrifice of our heroes and martyrs. Nor is it intended to diminish the significance of having our own separate homeland.

What I mean though is that we have missed forty opportunities to win the race. We have limped where we should have walked, and we have walked where we should have run. In forty years this nation has been dragging itself at a diminishing rate of political return.

French writer Gustave Flaubert warns that by dint of railing at idiots, one runs the risk of becoming idiotic oneself. Still we need to rail at ourselves over the mistakes of the past. We have made progress against all odds. This nation has moved forward in spite of many years of military rule, in spite of endless political squabbles, and in spite of countless natural and man-made disasters.

Which is why we should also regret while we celebrate this Independence Day. This nation could have moved faster. This nation could have gone much more forward. Counting the progress made despite mistakes, more progress could have been made if those mistakes were avoided. Ours could become a stronger nation. Ours could become a more affluent nation.

Benjamin Franklin, an architect of the American independence, was profoundly influenced by the history of the Iroquois Indians. Those Indians inhabited what is now known as upstate New York, and they were continually at war with one another.

One day, a stranger introduced himself as "The Peacemaker" and showed them how five arrows bound together couldn't break as easily as a single one.

The meaning of the word "independence" works backwards in collective sense. A nation is independent when its people learn to depend on each other. Rousseau maintains in Social Contract that the individual submits to the collective will to safeguard his freedom. One is free alone only when one gives up freedom in togetherness with others.

Then, what are we celebrating today? Are we celebrating the individual or collective freedom? We have got a handful of individuals in this country who enjoy excessive freedom. They have power and money. They keep governments in their pockets.

Their freedom infringes upon the country's freedom. Their independence eclipses its journey. Then what are we celebrating on this fortieth milestone? Are we celebrating the caprice of a few that abuse the conscience of many? Are we celebrating collective subjugation in the hands of some ambitious people?

If anything, we are celebrating a contradiction. The people don't matter in this People's Republic. They are ignored. They are squeezed. They live in fear. They live in anxiety. Price hikes. Load shedding. Extortion. Mugging. Corruption. Land grabbing. Then of course, unending political bickering. The vast majority is captive of the whims of a minuscule minority.

This minority exists like government within government. The business bodies, trade unions, school committees and ersatz associations and societies have divided this country into spheres of influence. They control admission in schools. They regulate prices of goods. They decide



**We shall win!**

allocation of land. They set the distribution of housing.

More than 80 percent hoardings in the capital city are unauthorised. Illegal VOIP trade captures 40 percent of international calls. A 2006 study showed that at least hundreds of thousands of vehicles in Dhaka city had fake licenses. Food adulteration is rampant. Corruption is pandemic. Law and order is pathetic.

It shows that since the birth of this nation, our government has been shrinking. Ronald Reagan wanted to reduce the American people's reliance upon government. According to him, the Americans wanted a minimum of government authority. They liked to be left alone in peace and safety, so that they could take care of their families by earning an honest income and putting away some savings.

People anywhere in this world would like to do all of these things. But our case is different. Here the government isn't being minimised; it's being ignored. A handful of people have taken over this country. So, whose country do we celebrate today? Their country? Our country?

Forty years ago and before, people of this country were ruled by alien governments. Those governments neither spoke our language nor understood our sentiments. They plundered this country to create wealth for their own people. Has anything changed? Yes, of course. Our own people plunder our own country to create wealth for their children.

So, this independence is an illusion. The hand that strangles us is our own.

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## Looking south-east on Independence Day

To me, as we celebrate the 39th anniversary of our Independence Day, this is the shortcoming we need to ponder most deeply: our continuing failure to create a society which recognises and respects the simple human dignity of all men and women.

ZAFAR SOBHAN, back from Hanoi

UNTIL the mid-90s Bangladesh was wealthier and more developed than Vietnam, but as Vietnam has moved decisively ahead of us in recent years, we now often look to them with envy to see what they have done right and we have done wrong.

The reason Vietnam piques our interest is that, with its 86 million people, deltaic terrain, and rice-growing culture, Vietnam is a close-ish approximation of Bangladesh. The economies are about the same size at roughly \$90 billion, though per capita income is a third higher in Vietnam.

I had thus always been keen to see Vietnam for myself, and so when I was invited to attend a conference in Hanoi on post-crisis growth and poverty reduction in low-income Asia, I responded with an alacrity that had little to do with the scintillating content of the conference.

The first thing I found was that Hanoi was a truly lovely city. With its population of 6 million (half that of Dhaka) and with 3 million motor-bikes and motor scooters so that there were few cars, the city was arrestingly scenic and uncrowded.

The tranquil and breathable feel was enhanced by the wide tree-lined boulevards and many lakes and open spaces where people could sit quietly to enjoy the outdoors. Most impressive for a visitor from Dhaka, it was neat and tidy and clean, and the environment seemed unpolluted.

Hanoi remains a charming and well-planned city, with many French colonial-era buildings, narrow three- and four-story houses with graceful balconies, gabled roofs, and green wooden shutters.

It didn't seem as modern or as developed as Dhaka. The city still has roundabouts and rickshaws and an old school, old-fashioned feel to it. There were fewer high-rise buildings of glass, concrete, and steel, far fewer (and less fancy) cars on the roads, far less neon and glitz, far fewer flashy mod-cons in the appliance stores.

But the people are better off. There was no real grinding poverty all around us as we see in Dhaka. In Vietnam the poverty rate is 12 percent while in Bangladesh it is 35 percent.

This you can see. The slums of Hanoi were far fewer and far less miserable than the slums of Dhaka. Even the shabbiest dwellings were less like the squalid tene-

ments of the Dhaka bastis and more like the neat little shacks one sees in villages here, which are humble but often clean and nice.

What struck me most about Vietnam, though, was the palpable respect for the simple dignity of all men and women. In how people spoke to one another and behaved with one another it was clear that this was a country of equality where everyone is treated with fairness and respect.

This is surely, in considerable part, a result of the country's communism that still exists in its societal structure if not in its economic policies. But, then again, this respect for individual dignity, like the admiration for asceticism and obedience and the rejection of material excess, may have as much to do with the society's traditional values as with the country's ideological moorings.

When I went to the home of my friend who is the head of the UN in Vietnam, I did not find it brimming with staff like it would be here. There was only a driver, whom he did not use for personal business, and a part-time maid and cook who come in a few times a week for a few hours. I was introduced to all three and they shook my hand, something that would never happen here.

This, I think, more than any of the economic steps or policy decisions it has taken, is Vietnam's comparative advantage: the more equal a society is and the greater the respect for human dignity, the quicker the country will move out of poverty.

Of course, the two are inter-related. The high level of education they have is a reflection of their respect for human dignity. The high level of tax-to-GDP ratio compared to Bangladesh (22 percent to 11) is reflective of their commitment to the public interest.

To me, as we celebrate the 39th anniversary of our Independence Day, this is the shortcoming we need to ponder most deeply: our continuing failure to create a society which recognises and respects the simple human dignity of all men and women.

The fix we need isn't so much what we think it is. We are always looking for a quick fix. We think that economic reform, or political reform, or judicial reform, or legal reform, et cetera et cetera ad infinitum, will solve all our problems.

But these quick fixes, these reforms,

never work. Why? Because the problems are merely manifestations of the greater problem, and that is that need to fix our society and our culture, because what is our utter disregard for those below us on the social ladder, our utter disdain for the notion of equal rights for all, our utter contempt for the common good -- other than the values of our society and culture?

This is the thing we never like to look at because it means looking in the mirror and admitting that the problem is us. The problem is our values. The problem is our moral compass as a nation, or lack thereof.

This, more than anything else, is what needs to be fixed. This is what ails us. This, far more than economic policies or political systems, is the difference between Vietnam and Bangladesh.

One last way that Vietnam is similar to us is that it, too, is a country forged in the crucible of war, though theirs lasted for 30 years against an even more ferocious enemy and left even more people killed.

Again, the difference is striking. The Vietnamese give due pride of place in their historiography to what they refer to as the American War. It forms the central core of their identity as a nation today. There has

been a unified post-war narrative of what it meant in terms of building a nation and a national identity.

We in Bangladesh, have, of course, suffered the blighting of our national narrative, the history of our heroic war has been rewritten and the central narrative of our nationhood compromised.

In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh, lying in state in his mausoleum, remains revered by all, and the great military commander, General Giap, 100 years old this year, still lives in honour and glory.

There is no counter-narrative that excuses or tries to explain away the actions of the South Vietnamese army and government and their collaborators, who are referred to by the common people as puppets. For a senior puppet leader to be in high honour in government or even in society would be unthinkable.

As we start our war crimes trials, almost 40 years after the fact, it is worth thinking about what the failure to hold them has cost us in terms of forging a unified nation with a unified national narrative and identity. This is another area we could take a page out of Vietnam's book.

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