



40 years on

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SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN

DECEMBER 16 comes with feelings of mixed emotions. For a nation, nothing can be more joyous than the realisation that we are the masters of our own destiny. But with the attainment of victory comes the acute pain of loss of all those whose blood helped ensure that the Bengali nation has a state, that we have a flag we can call our own, and that we have a country that we can nurture and help blossom in fulfillment of the pious intentions of what we fought for.

We were a nation well before we had a country of our own. And indeed, in a nation's life forty years of statehood is but a small speck in the continuum of a country's history. But, depending on how one chooses to look at it, it can be used as a good excuse for all that we have failed to achieve, yet to many it is a long enough period that merits taking stock of our performance of the last four decades. We choose to belong to the latter.

Thus, it should be a day for some introspection, for a nation cannot go forward unless it looks back to look at the mistakes and the follies that it has committed in order

not to suffer the consequences of their repetition in the future. There are a few things whose loss cannot be recompensed. The blood of the martyrs for one thing cannot be compensated by whatever we do. At best, the sacrifice of those valiant sons and daughters of the soil can be sanctified by living up to their dreams. Have we been able to?

Our achievements have been many and we can rightly take pride in those. For one thing our development index is better than many South Asian countries, and we are managing to feed double the mouths that we did in 1971, and that too without serious disruptions in spite of the many natural calamities that we had to weather, no mean achievement.

But while we boast of being a proud nation, one cannot help wondering whether we have really congealed as one, or are still suffering from the birth pangs. Why are we divided, as we stand today, in two distinct groups, led by two parties, whose efforts to outdo the other is fashioned by the worst form of animosity? Their differences have nothing to do with policies or even principles, but which stems from a loathsome mutual hostility of the two party

leaders. Our political culture has degenerated to an appalling level and democracy, which was delivered a severe blow by the military interregnum, has at best been dysfunctional in the last twenty years.

There cannot be a more ridiculous situation than that after 40 years we are still grappling with the actual number of freedom fighters. With every new government there is a renewed effort to draw up a fresh list. And as a leading daily has frontlined in its yesterday's issue, there has been a continuing number game ever since President Ershad decided to draw up a list of freedom fighters. Would it not be easier to draw up a list of Razakars?

This year, the eve of our Victory Day was sullied by the death of nearly 30 garments workers in a factory fire. And it is the plight of the workers, particularly the RMG workers, that predominates current discussions on our economy.

The garment sector has put the country in the commercial map of the world. It has done quite a lot to address the issue of poverty by providing employment, particularly to women. Yet the workers here are a little better than bonded labourers. There have been more deaths in the last ten years of workers in the RMG sector due to fire than in all other industries combined.

The RMG workers remain the most underpaid, and even when a new pay scale is agreed to by the owners, the workers have to pay through their blood to have it implemented, as we saw happen last week. And those who espouse their cause are branded as rabble rousers. And there is always a readymade excuse with the leaders of BGMETA in support of the defaulting own-

ers, who invariably get away because of their political links.

As for poverty, it has been used as a commodity rather than a problem by some of the NGOs, a commodity that has been traded to make financial windfalls. But even those that are seriously working to address the issue are coming under the severest criticism, particularly from those who perhaps feel that they did not get the international accolades they think they richly deserve, and also from those that have not done an iota of work to redress the plight of the poor in Bangladesh.

The political divide has, unfortunately, been reflected in the foreign policy front too. There has been no consensus on national issues, particularly those relating to India. Thus, there has been lack of continuity in policy implementation.

There have been achievements in equal measures as our failures. One has to be an inveterate pessimist to say that we are where we were on December 16, 1971. And by the same token one has to be an incorrigible optimist to bask in the glory of the achievements.

However, one must assert that all that we have failed to attain or accomplish may not have to do entirely with our failings per se; there might have been factors beyond our control that came in the way of attaining the aims. But the greatest impediment has been the abrasive nature of politics in Bangladesh that has affected good democracy and governance, the cornerstones of national development.

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PM bats on sticky wicket

The parliamentary system sustains confidence when people know, particularly the minorities, that those who indulge in killings and excesses will not go unpunished. The prime minister's worry should be on this point, not on the deadlock in parliament that a democratic nation can take in its stride.

KULDIP NAYAR

WHEN the efficacy of parliamentary system is doubted in a democratic polity, the finger may well be pointed at governance. The rulers make a mess of things and blame the system. This is what has been happening in India, which, otherwise, remains an open society. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's remark that he is "worried over the future of parliamentary system" in the country is misplaced and speaks more of his government's failure than the system's.

No doubt, the winter session of parliament has been a washout and both the houses were stalled for 21 days (224 hours and 40 minutes), a record of sorts in India's parliamentary history. Yet the problem is not the failure of the system. Both the ruling Congress and the opposition could not agree upon a mechanism to probe into the 2G spectrum concerning mobile telephones. (The scam runs into an abnormal figure of Rs.175-lakh crore -- \$12 billion).

There has naturally been a countrywide debate on corruption. Congress President Sonia Gandhi's attack on the BJP does not absolve the Congress because both the parties are corrupt in the public estimate. One was found guilty when it ruled for six years from 1998 to 2004 and the other since then.

The Congress has stuck to its stand that the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), headed by an opposition leader, is the best authority to hold an inquiry. The opposition, which includes the Left, has

demanding a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) probe. The BJP was first alone, but then the government's obduracy led other parties, including the Left, to join a common front to have a comprehensive investigation by the JPC.

Probably, it would have been better if the PAC had come to be accepted because the JPCs in the past have not done an effective job. But is the inquiry by the JPC such an impossible proposition that the prime minister should go to the extent of questioning the parliamentary system?

The United Progress Alliance (UPC), headed by the Congress, has a majority in the JPC. But it is a divided house now. The more the Congress opposes the JPC, the firmer becomes the conviction that the party wants to hide something because the JPC is an open-ended inquiry.

The prime minister's "worry" ventilated before the press is not an off-the-cuff remark. He did not say anything for 21 days when the two houses did not transact any business. That he should now doubt the future of parliamentary system is indeed disconcerting. The standoff in parliament is nothing new. I was in the Rajya Sabha when the Congress had stalled the proceedings for nearly two weeks. Atal Behari Vajpayee, the then prime minister, never said that the parliamentary system was in jeopardy.

In fact, Manmohan Singh's "worry" tantamounts to a threat to the political parties that the parliamentary system could undergo a change if the Congress stance is not accepted. The situation may worsen because opposition leader Sushma

Swaraj from the BJP has said that the confrontation may spill over to the budget session. This should be a warning for the ruling party that it has to either break the opposition unity or think of reaching a consensus.

Otherwise, the Congress must consider going back to the people to ask for a verdict on its stand. A mid-term poll, when the present Lok Sabha has still another three years to go, is a hard choice to make. Yet there is no option when both sides do not want to back-off from their positions. There is no other way out in a democratic society.

In fact, the prime minister should be more concerned about what WikiLeaks has revealed in the assessment US Ambassador David C. Mulford conveyed to the State Department on the 26/11 terrorist attack in Mumbai. He has said that a section of the Congress leadership was seen playing religious politics after one of its leaders, A.R. Antulay, implied that Hinduva forces may have been involved in the attack.

The Congress explanation is that it cannot react until Mulford's cable is authenticated. This is neither here, nor there. Probably, the party felt that way. Unfortunately, the State Department is not willing to either to confirm or deny Mulford's communication.

The suspicion gets strengthened when Congress Secretary-General Digvijay Singh, former Madhya Pradesh chief minister, says a few hours before Mulford's cable became public that police officer Hemant Karkare, who was killed during the 26/11 rang him up (Digvijay Singh) hours before the attack began to say that he (Karkare) had received death threats.

The people threatening him, Karkare said, were those opposed to his probe in which Hindu groups were allegedly involved. Mystery deepens when Mumbai police allege that there was no call made to Digvijay Singh according to its records. Digvijay Singh sticks to his statement that he did receive the call.

Karkare's wife has justifiably criticised

Digvijay Singh for politicising the terrorist attack. He has not withdrawn his words and has stuck to the line that Karkare was "harassed by the BJP leaders." It is true that the Congress has distanced itself from Digvijay Singh's disclosure. But that is not enough. The Manmohan Singh government must look into Digvijay Singh's charge, which is very serious and has wider implications.

More so because two years ago, Congress minister Antulay had said: "They (terrorists) had no reason to kill Karkare. Whether he was a victim of terrorism or terrorism plus something, I do not know. Karkare found that there were non-Muslims involved in the act of terrorism in some cases. There is more than what meets the eye."

Antulay was a member of Manmohan Singh's cabinet in the first term. The PM did not question him, nor was there any action taken on his allegation. Antulay was defeated at the polls and hence it cannot be said that he was not included in the new ministry because of his allegation. Still, the charge remains hanging.

The BJP is understandably angry. It has attacked Digvijay Singh for "helping Pakistan and Ajmal Kasab." The RSS too has made some harsh remarks against Digvijay Singh. Since he continues to stick to his charge, the Congress-led government, for his credibility's sake, has to entrust the matter to a Supreme Court judge who should have his own special investigation team, as had been done in certain cases of mayhem in Gujarat in 2006. They were closed by the Narendra Modi's government.

The parliamentary system sustains confidence when people know, particularly the minorities, that those who indulge in killings and excesses will not go unpunished. The prime minister's worry should be on this point, not on the deadlock in parliament that a democratic nation can take in its stride.

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Our remembrance and pledge on the Victory Day

Burying the era of confrontation, let us forge ahead

TODAY is the 40th anniversary of our victory in the 1971 War of Liberation against the Pakistani occupation army. After the Independence Day on 26th March, this day marks the culmination and the ultimate victory of the Bengali people's protracted struggle for emancipation from subjugation and oppression by foreign occupation forces.

Through celebration of this day amid much fervour we declare to the whole world how proud we are about our success in vanquishing the enemy of our freedom. But do all our responsibilities towards the nation and its people end with the celebration of the Victory Day?

How much we remember today with a profound sense of gratitude the contributions of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the other four leaders in making this historic day possible. We recall too, the valiant fight waged by the whole people who turned into soldiers of freedom.

We recall the neighbouring India's generous and unflinching support in sheltering and caring for the millions of refugees who were encamped in the Indian soil. The words of tribute will be incomplete if we do not recognise and reminisce the sacrifices of the Indian army shoulder to shoulder with the Muktibahini in the joint force.

A word of thanks is due to the international community and the media who were a tower of strength at our hour of need. They did a tremendous catalytic job of securing goodwill for Bangladesh's cause for which no word of gratitude would be enough.

Now, after the triumph of democracy two decades back, people pinned much hope on our politicians, who they expected, would rid the nation of the legacy of assassinating our national leaders and liberation heroes, usurpation of state power through extra-constitutional means and of foisting of dictatorial rulers upon the people. People believed the return of democracy, for which they have been struggling so long both before and after the independence, would now deliver the exploitation-free just society ushering the era of their economic prosperity they had dreamt of.

If truth be told, much of the dream remains unfulfilled. Unfortunately, after the fall of autocracy and return to democracy, the nation has been witnessing the rise of confrontational politics of the worst kind. The ruling party, rather than taking the opposition into confidence and giving them the necessary space for criticising the government for its lapses, is forever in its pursuit of bashing and holding it at bay. The opposition, on the other hand, far from meeting the constituency's expectations, is keeping itself aloof from attending the Jatiya Sangsad, the national parliament, where they might put across their grievances, their opinions about where the government is failing the people and what wrongs it has done to the opposition leaders and activists. Far from that, it is rather busy getting a political mileage out of the eviction of the opposition leader from her cantonment residence by a court order. In this case, the opposition leaders and activists are defaulting on the fact that the very spirit of democracy is to abide by the law, which makes no distinction between the big and the small, the leader and those led.

The net outcome of this pervasive infantilism in politics is that the people are being denied their right to lead a better life, the craving for which the victory in the liberation war had instilled into their hearts. It is therefore time, those in power as well as in opposition, had an honest soul searching and sorted out all the issues that are coming in the way of national progress and address those in the revitalised spirit of democracy. And that should be our pledge on this 40th national Victory Day.

Private entrepreneurship in telecom sector

Why stifle it through a drastic measure?

WHEN development of indigenous capability in the telecom sector had been the avowed objective of the Telecom Act and accordingly local initiative was allowed to flourish with generous licensing and supportive facilities, it became a shiny sheen to the growth of an expanding, cutting-edge sector. But then came a shock as five locally owned PSTN (Public switched telephone network) operators like Dhaka Phone, National Telecom, People's Tel, RanksTel and WorldTel were delicensed by BTRC in May this year.

They were alleged to have been involved in illegal call termination business. The punitive measure, clearly uncalibrated, would have perhaps been justified, if in the sequel to the shutdown, incidence of illegal call termination were to come down. Expert analysts, therefore, tend to look at the move as making a scapegoat of the local operators who but constitute one percent of the total national telecom network. The level at which international call traffic bypassed the legal gateways is too high to be the handiwork of local PSTN operators.

The problem needs to be tackled technologically rather than by any arbitrary and over-reactive administrative measure. Let's not forget, altogether 11 national and regional operators invested more than Tk 2,000 crore, imported sophisticated equipment and installed them to employ a few thousand qualified engineers, technicians, other professionals, aside from an array of dealers and distributors. They have been serving more than six lakh subscribers including banks, multinationals companies, hospitals, transport companies, embassies, international bodies, SMEs and PCOs.

The five shutdown companies have outstanding debts with individual banks and syndicated lenders who had themselves come forward induced by a positive policy of the government in the sector. For months they have been dipped in uncertainty.

Against this backdrop, we endorse the call of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications made to the government to reopen the closed down PSTN companies immediately. In addition, new licenses should be provided to more of private operators under an overall consolidation process taking care of an industry that has been 'highly fragmented with too many operators having narrow functionalities'. The cloud of uncertainties over the sector must be cast away with new vigour injected into it.