

Gently blow the winds of change

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IN 1971 a nation was born out of a fierce and bloody battle for independence and even as I was a witness to that painful birth, I was myself "reborn" out of it. That deep well of sorrow also held my cup of joy. It was in enslavement that I dreamt of liberty and it was in repression that I sang my most beautiful songs of freedom.

As we died, we were reborn; as we were decimated, we were recreated and when we hated bitterly, we learnt the meaning of true love and loyalty. And when our dreams were torn apart, we weaved together yet, another. And we weaved our dreams with the silken "threads drawn from our hearts," a work of love, to clothe our beloved, our Bangladesh.

That day we worked in unison and, with love, we "bound" ourselves to ourselves, and to one another, to People and to the Truth. In that one moment of togetherness, Bangladesh was born, a Dream was born, I was born and with me, millions more, seeking a life of dignity and a place of pride under the sun.

The moment came and passed. With it passed our moment of togetherness, of faith in People, common vision of a just society and of passion for Truth. Instead, we embraced selfishness, intolerance, and conflict and succumbed to greed, corruption and lies to gain personal wealth and power. We now worship the "market god" where everything is put on sale, the child, the tree, the air -- our Beloved Bangladesh.

Like the flow and ebb of a mighty tide, over the years Bangladesh moved in and out of hope and despair. The flow of 1970-72 and the ebb in 1974-75; the flow of 1978-79 and ebb in 1981-82, the flow of 1991-92 and ebb in 2001 and the flow of 2007-08, today in 2011 begins to recede.

We wait for the next tide, as it must come. Bangladesh was born out of the ashes of a demolished Pakistan, a religion based state that imploded because of its narrow, intolerant and divisive politics. Bangladesh rejected this politics and emerged a secular nation with an inclusive democratic ethos. A secular nation that did not deny religion, rather, gave an equal space to every religion with the promise that none shall be allowed to use religion for political ends. The reality is Bangladesh could not live up to that ideal. With changes in regimes and the constitution, religion became more and more a political tool in the hands of communal forces striving to gain power. Thus "religious minorities" were created as a way to "marginalise, trivialise and divide" people.

Out of Bengali nationalism and the struggle for its separate cultural and social identity, Bangladesh was created a nation by Bengalis, for Bengalis. Hence, a Bengali State was a natural consequence. The Bengalis were the "marginalised, trivialised and divided" segment of Pakistan, radicalised by oppression. That was the origin. This synthesis of a nation based on the thesis of Bengali cultural and linguistic identity, gave birth to a new anti-thesis -- the creation and marginalisation of the "ethnic minorities." Cultures as deeply rooted in the soil of Bengal as the Bengali culture, were being left out in the cold. Bangladesh unwittingly recreated and continued the politics of "marginalisation" and "impunity of the majority." A vision of an inclusive, People's Democracy was being replaced by an exclusive "dictatorship of the capitalist" formed by those who control the market (business class), the government (the bureaucracy) and the Parliament (elected politicians). This powerful nexus of those "who are more equal than others" governs the Republic and the social order built to protect them, is no longer woven with "threads from the heart." This disempowered and impoverished a segment of our people making them vulnerable, deprived and alienated from growing together in unison, as we had one day hoped.

Thus poverty remained, not just a class and gender issue but a cultural and ethnic issue as well.

Bangladesh made great strides in annual rate of growth despite global recession, in improving our electoral management, in strengthening independence of the media and in the making of a strong civil society movement. But it has failed to grow a healthy political culture of inclusiveness. Political parties, much as they like to be elected to power, they never learnt to respect or practice democracy.

One of the poorest countries in the world, Bangladesh is the third most corrupt nation, having the fourth highest rate of violence on women globally. It has an unstable democracy reeling under confrontational politics and increased intolerance to differences in opinion. After 40 years we still ask - is this the right road for us? Then why do our children still go to bed hungry?

Who did this to us?

The increased "political" marginalisation and deepening of divisions among the poor, the ethnic and religious groups, which is a result of callous state policies and narrow political views, belies the true nature of our people and our essentially rural society. While there are people who continue to live with prejudice and intolerance, there are far many more who embrace co-existence as a normal part of their heritage. Yet, state policies and (in) actions and the prejudice of a few, continue to marginalise the ethnic communities and the poor.

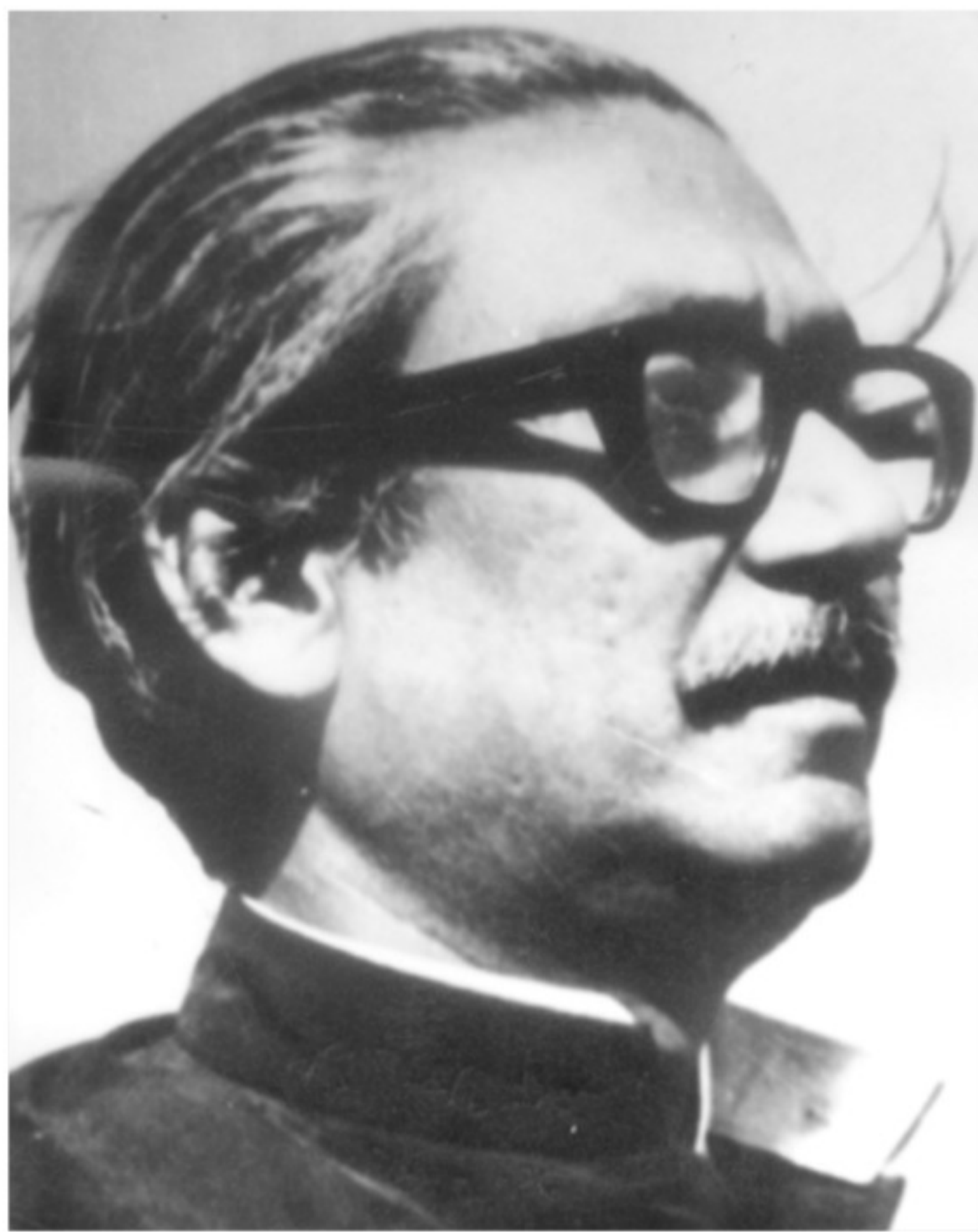
Can a new tide reverse the politics of exclusion and

marginalisation in Bangladesh as we had reversed the politics of religion in 1971?

For this, the "majority must protect the 'marginal minority and vulnerable' facilitating change in their arrogant, intolerant, majoritarian attitude to a more generous, inclusive and participative way of thinking -- giving space to diversity."

Even as I write, I feel the fresh wind of change blowing gently over us. I can hear bustle in rice fields and the smell the fragrance of a new dawn. The wind of change blows over Tanore, Manda and Mahadevpur in the North. This is my story of hope.

In 36 villages, more than 500 young peasant girls and boys have, on their own, undertook to identify and make a list of the ultra poor families in their village, and have so far organized 90% of



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them into 89 cooperatives to eradicate poverty and hunger. Started with nothing, they now have about Taka one million saved in three years. Without micro credit, without bank loan, "they have built on what they have." They save, invest and earn. They are like village financing institutions that give loans to those who need it, at a very small interest. They undertake small businesses. Here, no one goes to money lenders. More than 3000 marginal farmers and 500 marginal youths have begun to form capital.

These young people, all under 25, and unknown to glittering Dhaka, are quietly working together, bonding with themselves and with one another, re-constructing their lives and their villages, searching ways to collectively solve problems and improve their lives. This is an amazing story of collective action and search for identity and dignity. Here, everyone is equal, in poverty, in religion, in citizenship. If nationally we are losing our togetherness, then locally we are rediscovering a common heritage and a common dream.

It is an inspirational story of how young peasant *adivasi* and non *adivasi* girls and boys are defending their rights.

As we enter into the depths of Tanore, Manda or Mahadevpur, we discover teams of young peasant girls and boys, of all ethnic and religious colours, busy discussing their most recent achievements or challenges. They are having their weekly meeting. They start out with a prayer. This week their *adivasi* friend Elizabeth recites from their religion and their Muslim friends and others listen with solemnity. Then they take an oath. They follow this ritual every week and by turn they listen to the messages from all religions. They are practicing inclusiveness.

They fight for the land rights of their *adivasi* friends. In Ekannopur of Badhair Union, they reinstated their displaced *adivasi* friend with the help of Union

Parishad and the law.

In 4 villages, 670 families suffered due to land dispute. Through repeated actions (75 events) these young people reinstated 154 families (23% of this) 79 landless families were reinstated on 11 bighas of *khas* land.

In another village, another similar youth group talked excitedly. They got the UP to give them sanitary latrines for those houses which did not have it. These young people had threatened to make a public display of the list of houses that have not installed their latrines and shame them publicly! The result was they quickly achieved 100% sanitation coverage -- in villages, Kirtoli, Haji Gobindopur and Gaihana. Through this sanitation movement average coverage increased from 46.42% in 2008

Shah Husain Imam's column could not be printed today because of unavoidable circumstances. It will appear tomorrow (December 17).

boys are holding a consultative meeting with their elders in a "courtyard meeting," on a case of child marriage. The register's office gave a false statement on date of birth of the child. Parents, fearful of the youth movement and community resistance that have grown over the past years, secretly take their girl child to the next village and in the dead of night marry her off, it was said! The young defenders of child rights are unable to implement the law as they are unable to stop false certification of birth dates. Yet, there were a large number of successes they could be proud of. "We want a village free from dowry and child marriage." In their actions against dowry violence and child marriage they were able to gain support of the police, the local administration and respect of the village. This occurred in Uchadanga. Almost all the 36 villages had similar stories to tell.

The youth movement against child marriage in these villages decreased noticeably. In 2008, 77% of total marriage was child marriage. It came down to 21.5% in 2010. Although the data shows brilliant results in decrease in child marriage, serious systemic challenges remain. Since there is community surveillance to resist child marriage, parents are found giving their child to marriage secretly in another village or in the dead of night, which remain undiscovered till it is too late. This, and the fact that false birth certificates provided by the Union Parishad or local schools make it difficult to eradicate child marriage.

The young declared "the formation of a village committee to resist violence against women and children" at the *Gram Shabha*, which is a space created by them to consult with village elders and representatives from all households to discuss problems and take collective action. To work more strategically and to involve all stakeholders, this decision is taken in the presence of the UP members and local government representatives. No case of violence will go unchallenged. They promised to eliminate stalking and sexual harassment. Twenty two *Nari o Shishu Nirjaton Protirodh* Committees in 22 villages have thus been formed comprising elders, Imam, school teachers, and of course the youth leaders -- operating in the five unions of Pachondor, Badhair, Varsho, Kushumba and Vimpur.

Through the youth movements, in 2008 the giving and taking of dowry was reduced by 20%. By 2010, this was further reduced by 52 %.

The Cooperative movement of the poor led by the peasant youth resulted in innovative ways of addressing food insecurity. There were cooperatives of the poor in every village. In one village we found the extreme poor collecting and saving rice. They developed an informal system of "rice credit" which they provide to poor families who go hungry during *monga* or periodic joblessness. This rice is returned with a marginal interest (4kg for every 40kg) after three months. These vulnerable people have found a collective way to increase food security for themselves through a system of rice banking. Eight *Adivasi* Cooperatives formed such "rice banks." Presently they have about 1,000 kg of rice. Vulnerable women comprise 73% of the cooperatives.

Now the target is to create Rice Banks in every village for the poor and run by the poor.

It is common knowledge that resources and benefits of development hardly reach the very poor. But they can create their own resource base. For the first time the poor marginal farmers from these 36 villages have begun to form collective capital which they manage themselves through the cooperatives they operate. They no longer borrow money from outsiders at high interest rates. Through the cooperatives they save, invest and earn income. The cooperative members in three years have achieved higher per capita income than the lowest national rate per capita, though they come from the lowest economic strata.

The 36 villages are like 36 MDG villages, carrying the MDG forward at the micro level. In some of the parameters given below, in almost all cases, these villages score higher than the National average.

In reducing the number under poverty line, they surpassed both National and MDG targets. (National- 31.5%, MDG - 29%, 36 villages- 10.32%)

Net enrollment in primary education of children aged 6-10 years in these villages was 83% in 2010 whereas national progress was 84.75%. The proportion of pupils starting grade 1 who reach grade 5 -- in the 36 villages was 91% in 2010 while the national figure was 79.8%. Adult literacy rate in these villages was 90% in 2010 but only 59% nationally.

The proportion of 1 year old children immunised against measles in the 36 villages was 94.5% in 2010, while the national figure was 88%. In the case of the proportion of population using an improved sanitation facility it was 67% in these villages in 2010, nationally it was 41.84% while the MDG target was 60%.

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