



Editor's note

BANGLADESH at forty is as much celebratory as it is an introspective and self-evaluatory occasion. Though 40 years is not too long a time in the life of a nation, the hard truth is we are getting older. As we do so, we are put willy-nilly on a scale of comparison with other nations at a similar stage of life. While pre-independence generation and the participants in the liberation war measure the gaps between aspiration and attainment, the post-independence generation weighs up achievements and failures against a different criterion. They are interested in an interpretation of how their seniors have utilized independence to enhance opportunities for their self-growth and where they have faltered.

Just as we have made strides in social sectors

and the economy as well, democracy is yet to strike firm institutional roots. A built-in self-resilience, however, helped us through natural disasters and economic recession giving us a measure of self-confidence. It is from the vantage point of such self-belief that we can turn our populous country into a vibrant entity of well-developed human resources. But for this to happen, we need a stable political culture and a thrust of patriotism.

TURNING FORTY

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ONE reason why I love history is that from the past you can always cite examples to illuminate your viewpoints, your ideas. In this attempt, my plan is to dig in history and make a comparative analysis between two great events of mankind -- Bangladesh's War of Liberation and the American War of Liberation, though the two events are apparently incomparable in terms of time and space. But since the essence of the two events is the same -- freedom, I venture to have a comparative look at what they did in the first forty years of their independence in terms of material developments. I resort to parallelism on the premise that the behavioural history of mankind is not as diverse and complex as we imagine. Human kind has diversity certainly, but unity as well. What one people achieve can be achieved by others, of course, may be with a variance of degree. This is the main mark of history of the modern world. However, my plan in this exercise is not to repeat the sacrifices made by our heroes, but to make a comparative presentation of Bangladesh's achievements through the first forty years of its independence. To sharpen the idea, the achievements in the first forty years of American independence have been imported. Why? Precept is more powerful than preaching. The motto of both American and Bangladesh Revolutions was to achieve political and economic freedom through independence. Let us take the case of American independence first.

America was totally an agricultural country at independence (1783). Money economy was minimal or absent. Goods were exchanged

against goods in the day-to-day transactions. Industry was at collage level. Thus, urbanisation was virtually absent. Housing was mostly of logs and straw. But, people had enough to eat and enjoy. Literacy level was very high, as high as 70% at independence, while literacy in Britain did not reach 35% yet. Religiously, people were divided into Catholics and Protestants, who are again divided into not hundreds but thousands of denominations. According to one count, there were over seventeen thousand Christian denominations at independence, which is a low mark, according to a Christian history of denominations.

Then what did the Americans do with their independence? The people's representatives met and made a constitution based on the spirit of the War of Independence. The spirit was to establish people's 'natural rights' first. A long debate took place in the Congress on the natural rights of the people. To them, the real person to enjoy freedom was the individual, not the people whom you cannot see really. If the individual can be made free, the freedom of the people takes its own course. So, making the individual free became the main concern of the Continental Congress. Furthermore, emphasis was given on making the individual free and to bind the government with obligations, so that the government could not interfere with the individual's natural rights. The constitutional obligations imposed on the government were to honour always the natural rights of the people. The government functions were limited to giving security from external aggression and nothing else. People would enjoy their natural rights,

including possessing guns. The spirit of the debate on constitutionality was making the individual the focal figure in the state and federal system. To the individual, government would have only obligations, and over him, no power. The purpose of War of Independence was to make the individual free. The individual would expect nothing from government other than security.

The political thought behind the 'least governance idea' advocated that the best government is the least government. The delegates maintained that the people were naturally good and they tended to become nasty only when government control interfered with their ways of life in the form of religion, rules and regulations, central institutions, taxations, policing, banking, directives and so on. The delegates supported the least government theory. They did not allow the government to establish regular army and navy and introduce central banking, which they considered to be a mechanism to interfere with people's freedom and equitable relations. Barter-based agricultural economy based on physiocratic theory, that is, agriculture based polity and economy, was made an official policy. Earlier, the congress gave a thought on making the constitution based on the political ideas of the Chinese philosopher Confucius, but the idea was abandoned later.

The US Constitution incorporating in it the agriculture-based economy was adopted on September 17, 1787. The post-Revolution America became the first and last country in the modern world to support and practice the least government theory, maintain the barter econ-

omy predominantly, discourage industrialisation and allowing people to enjoy maximum natural rights. Introducing such a political system, when strong central governments were established in Europe, was indeed a revolution by itself.

After forty years of the operation of the constitution, that means by late 1820s, we find a new America built by the people themselves without any support from the government. The growth of foreign trade, shipping, industrial revolution, urbanisation, railways and high ways, urban water supplies, etc. was spectacular. The rise of universities and cultural institutions, rise of a literary and philosophical class, and rapid growth of arts, sciences and technologies made America parallel to Great Britain. All these were within just four decades! All these developments were the sole achievements of the private investors and entrepreneurs. The government had no role in this revolutionary transformation. The constitution barred the government from doing things beyond defence and internal security. The constitution even barred the government from introducing central banking and currency. The successful war against Britain (1812-14) was fought more by the private shipping entrepreneurs than by the government navy, which was then too small to fight a naval war.

Thus, the theory of the founding fathers that best government was the least government proved to be correct. The people developed so much confidence and respect for the private initiatives that President John Quincy Adams (1825-29), son of the founding father and