

TURNING FORTY Of Carnage and Krishnachuras

FROM COVER

President John Adams (1797-1801) lost the Presidential elections for the second term mainly for his declaration that if re-elected, he would give support to the private sector initiatives. The private sector stakeholders felt threatened at the possibility of the government's intervention and did not vote for him. He failed.

Now let us come down to the case of Bangladesh as a new state established just in the manner the USA was established. Our theoreticians and pamphleteers and political leaders of the Bangladesh Revolution also advocated for people's rights and people's supremacy in state affairs. But what they promised while organizing the Revolution could not be delivered. Revolution remained unfinished. Institutionally, there is no difference between the states of Pakistan and Bangladesh. Instead of establishing revitalizing free institutions as it happened to post-Revolution America, Bangladesh inherited the colonial and Pakistani institutions and thus the old days of domination and subordination in political and social spheres remained unchanged. The Bangladesh Revolution was reduced to a toothless tiger. Keeping intact the colonial supremacy of bureaucracy and armed forces; keeping the old executive and judicial rules and regulations unharmed which were all instruments of the colonial system, meant the total negation of the War of Liberation.

War ended victoriously in the battle field, but sorrowfully in the political field. The political demands remained ever unresolved. If not followed by necessary reforms and reconstructions, mere military victory is a massive waste and eventual degeneration. No state propaganda in the name of Independence or Liberation Day can hide the failure of the Revolution. Thus, while a barter economy like America with a population of hardly three million (1780) could turn into a strong modern nation politically, economically, culturally and scientifically within forty years of her independence in early modern times, Bangladesh with a huge resourceful humanity endowed prospectively with all international cooperation failed to rise up and swim with the flow of the time. In the march of development, even the most recent starters have overtaken Bangladesh. Examples not necessary. Under the circumstances, the civil society does have the responsibility to give a serious thought to the problem. Our task, at this moment, is not to fix the blame for the past regimes, which is unproductive, but to fix the course for the future. One who does it will be Washington, Lenin, Maotse Tung, Ho Chi Min of Bangladesh. Here I recall a famous saying of JF Kennedy, who once remarked, "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution possible".

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And above everything the poem is aglow with hope as it begins and ends with an insistent demand, "Tomake Ashtei hobe he Shadhinata : Come you must, O Freedom", because--

In order that you would come, O freedom, Sakhina Bibi's lot has become a wreck; the vermilion mark is wiped out from the forehead of Haridasi. In order that you would come, O Freedom, Olive-coloured tanks rolled into the city following like a monster; In order that you would come. O Freedom, Dormitories and slums were laid waste... With a burning declaration reverberating

from one end of the globe to the other, flying a new flag, filling the horizon with the sound of a drum in this Bengal of ours, you must come, O Freedom.

The poems that were written in the battlefield form a distinct group. They are marked by the boiling passion of the poets in the actual battlefield, and thus have a kind of authenticity of tone and verve that is incomparable. Among these poets are Humayun Kabir, Rafiq Azad, Bulbul Khan Mahbub, Mahbub Sadiq, Abid Anwar, Abu Kaiser, Ashim Saha, Helal Hafiz, Altaf Hossain, Musharraf Karim, and Khondakar Ashraf Hossain. It will be noticed that these young poets of the time did not philosophize about freedom and its necessity; neither did they dream about any utopian future for their land. They were engrossed with the immediate realities of the fight, its strategies, deaths of the fellow fighters, their life in the trenches or in the hide-outs, guerrilla operations, and so on. Their poems are littered with a new breed of vocabulary connected with the war: 'ambush', 'grenade', 'bunker', 'rifle', 'surrender', 'barbed wires', etc. They have become a part of the Bangla language ever since. Take for instance Humayun Kabir's 'Grenade like a red ball':

The red ball of childhood, hurling grenade at ease

Automatic guns sound like the bright tunes of

mouth organ

In the midst of the green backdrop of crops, In grandmother's placid village, in the lighted streets

of towns with golden minarets Leap up all on a sudden, throw a hearty invitation to the enemy-- Hurl your grenade, red like a ball. Mahbub Sadiq's 'juddhobhashan', Abu Kaiser's 'Journal '71' and Bulbul Khan Mahbub's 'Carrying a wounded comrade on my back'-- all are vivid sketches of guerrilla action. We can quote these touching lines from Mahbub Sadiq's poem:

The mangled body of Asiruddin returning from the haat with a hilsa fish in hand lies prostrate on my consciousness. I am pledge-bound to him. I have been to Sakhipur--the charred dwelling and the boundless grief of the boy leaning against one of its half-burnt poles gravitated me towards Sakhipur. In the camp there the young boy Quddus with a bandage around his head stood upright:

Bangladesh was burning in his distant gaze-- How can I forget him? Wherever I go, Sakhipur goes with me. The optimism that was born out of the ashes and the blood is recorded in the poems written by the younger poets of the seventies. The best representative of them is Rudra Muhammad Shahidullah, from whose poem 'Swajaner Shubhra Harh' I quote :

I will build my home here at this golden time. Here the Aghraan fullmoon will shine all the year round

The long night of sorrow over, The bloodshed of destruction over, We meet again on the coral reef of woe. The dear earth is awash with blood White bones of the dear ones are abloom like bright flowers. Shahidullah wrote with anger and disgust about the widespread carnage of the war of

liberation, the decomposing corpses strewn everywhere, the outcries of the widows and the orphans. But the waning of the values of the liberation struggle as was manifest in the infinite greed of the power-mongers and the resurgence of the anti-liberation communal forces immediately following the birth of Bangladesh saddened him all the more. Rudra's language is emotional, unadorned, direct and piercing:

Even today I smell the corpses in the air, Still I watch the naked dans macabre on the earth; I hear the outcries of the raped women in my sleep; Has this country forgotten that nightmare, that bloody time?

..... The same old vulture has clutched the national flag.

The pathos of the following lines written by Abul Hasan still wrings our hearts: So many wars have passed, So much blood has been shed, The wind scattered gold and silver like wool in the air.

I do not see that young brother of mine, I do not see my sister with a soft nose-ring. I only see flags, I only see flags, I only see freedom. Is my brother then that flag of freedom? Is my sister then a fest on the altar of darkness?

Forty years have elapsed; forty summers and winters have heaped up the dust of oblivion on our memory. The generation who fought the war is fast dwindling in the natural course of time. The 'Muktijuddho' now lives on in the memories of those who still live and in the myths and metonymies enclosed in literature. The latter will ultimately be the place for any future retrieval, of those fires and tears that had once surged in millions of hearts in this land where krishnachuras bloom.

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Constitutional rights versus reality

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The Awami League-led government got a rare opportunity to restore the true spirit of the Constitution of 1972. But its efforts went from the sublime to the ridiculous for some unreasonable measures; including the one for inserting the article 7B in the Constitution that states: "Notwithstanding anything contained in article 142 of the Constitution, the preamble, all articles of part I, all articles of Part II, subject to the provisions of Part IXA all articles of Part III, and the provisions of articles relating to the basic structures of the Constitution including article 150 of Part XI shall not be amendable by way of insertion, modification, substitution, repeal or by any other means."

This article "Basic provisions of the Constitution are not amendable" imposed a ban on amending around 50 articles including those dealing with the citizens' fundamental rights. But the unpleasant truth, however, is that the present parliament has curtailed or limited authority of the future parliaments to bring changes in these articles.

Even if a future parliament wants to bring changes in the Constitution for further advance-

ment of the country's citizens and further refinements of their constitutional position, it will not be able to do so until or unless the ban imposed by the article 7B is removed. This also means the parliament in future cannot bring amendment to undo the changes brought by the second amendment in 1973 to declare supremacy of people's fundamental rights. This is ridiculous, surely!

The article 142 gives power to parliament to amend any provision of the Constitution -- addition, alteration, substitution or even repeal. A constitution is meant to be permanent, legal experts say, but as all changing situations cannot be envisaged, and the amendment of the Constitution may be necessary to adopt the future developments, provision is made in the Constitution itself to effect changes required by the changing situations.

But the reality is different in Bangladesh. Successive governments abused the parliament's authority to amend the Constitution for their own political purpose and the true and basic spirit of the amendments were always ignored.

The Constitution is the creator of a government, but the confron-

tational culture of politics is so horrific that the creature does not hesitate to launch attack on the creator. If a country's rulers merily disregard the country's Constitution, they can comfortably disregard people. Remaining loyal and respectful to the spirit of the Constitution will provide public leaders and representatives with immense strength and courage to perform better and to do something extraordinary for the country.

If they do so, people must, in return, honour them by extending their mandate, by electing them again and again to assume the state power. They should keep faith in the simple political philosophy that winning the hearts of people means winning the source of all power. In that case, politician will no longer require adopting dubious and dirty techniques to clinch in power. And there is still time and a way to begin the process for change. Political will is the main driving force for the change. So, political leaders now just need to demonstrate the will to become true leaders of the people, who are still the source of all power.

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Mainstreaming resistance?

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own social and political locations? Of course, one must remember that the civil society is not a homogenous body. There are numerous civil society members who question the current state of world affairs and relentlessly work towards a more equitable economic and social order. Similarly, there are many NGOs that are critical of their positions

vis-a-vis global capital, and that strive to maintain a "bottom-up" approach to development whereby the people themselves develop the collective strength to demand their rights and challenge injustice. But when all is said and done, what gives me hope is the thought that the people with the real revolutionary zeal -- labourers, workers, villagers, adivasis, marginalised

communities -- do not really need us -- the civil society or privileged well-educated youngsters -- to lead the fight against injustice and oppression. That is not to say, however, that we fold our hands and wait for an upheaval, but that we think of ourselves as part of a collective struggle for a liberated and liberating Bangladesh.

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Starting at home

FROM PAGE 6

The unity of female voices in 1971 came due to a common struggle towards the independence for the nation. Educated or not, rich or poor, women played their part as nurses, warriors or even as those who gave shelters to wounded soldiers. However, it seems like women today are no longer fighting together towards a common goal -- they are now fighting against each other. Something as simple as the look of arrogance exchanged between women in beauty salons to the fierce competition in academia, in career and in the overall struggle towards being the best wife, mother and daughter-in-law, the fight this time is individualistic and against each other. From a bird's eye point of view, many stare at awe that Bangladesh, a conservation nation trying to wiggle out of its traditional slogans, has two female leaders! Many within the nation laugh at how the cat fight between the two

can only get worse with age, knowing wholeheartedly that all this is really backed up largely by a man's framework of political combats. But again if those two leaders can't be examples of healthy competition between women, how can we expect any woman to treat each other with respect let alone expect men to treat females with respect?

So in the era where women seem often too busy trying to create and understand their roles, their identities and their choices, what we must not forget is the lessons we leave behind every action, and how it affects those around us. A little more compassion while telling the house help how to clean the dishes would probably make her clean it better without wanting to bomb the elite class, and at the same time the younger children, the younger girls in the house, would grow up learning how to maintain basic

civil relations with others irrespective of class, gender or even race if it comes to that.

With more and more women in the workforce, where the formal education is taking proper effect, what we perhaps need is the practice of the informal education. There is no way a poor man will behave nicely on the road when all he is contemplating on is his mission towards his next meal. But those of us who have some privilege and a sense of consciousness should at least try and promote civic sense. If women are the cultural transmitters of every nation then perhaps now, 40 years in, we should take a positive attitude towards the relationships around us so that in 2051, 40 years later, we can at least look back at a nation well integrated and not further divided.

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Bangladeshi Writing in English

FROM PAGE 8

which has just come out in a Bangladeshi edition, who in Bangladesh has had access to what they have published afterward?

No, the conclusion is inevitable; there is very little Bangladeshi writing in English of value and not much to be excited about the work that has come out of our country or outside it in the language. Why hasn't Bangladeshi writing in English taken off? One can only come up with a few quick answers here.

Linguistic nationalism, the raison d'etre of the country, had cornered English for far too long and though English has steadily made a comeback in schools, colleges and universities since the 1990s, it will take a long time to put the English

language in good kilter again or at least bring it to the point at which people feel tempted to imagine the world through it. Indeed, it is not difficult to see from here that the complacency that we are a homogenous nation has cramped most of us in many ways. For far too long cultural nationalists have had a kind of superiority complex that led them to declare that there was no scope for writing creatively in any other languages in this country.

As for the Bangladeshi diaspora, no doubt the first wave of emigrants has for too long been preoccupied with consolidating their presence in the countries that they had landed in. Most of them did not have the kind of education that would have encouraged them to write creatively.

In all probability, they did not use English at home. Nor did they ensure that their children were not sequestered from the English language once they came inside the house. How, then, could their children grow up into adults who could write creatively about the "aloofness of expatriation" or the "exuberance of immigration" in English verse or fiction? (Bharati Mukherjee's words?) And the few that had the kind of education necessary to articulate their consciousness in English appeared to have opted to be doctors or engineers or bankers instead of daring to be writers afloat in a world where financial security was not the chief reason for living abroad. Also, very few of the new generation of educated Bangladeshis who were

growing up abroad had decided to shuttle back and forth between the land they or their parents had left behind and the countries they had become citizens of, as did Rushdie (before the fatwa), Mukherjee, Ghosh or Lahiri. These writers had embraced a kind of mobility that allowed them to write about emigrant lives or return to lands left behind. Finally, until recently, very few of the Bangladeshis who had been educated abroad where they had begun their careers wanted to come back home to start businesses or begin careers and write creatively on the side.

But is this situation going to change and will we be able to see Bangladeshi writing take off soon? The signs, lately, have been on the positive side. There are more and

more poets and writers of fiction and verse following the paths pioneered by Razia Khan Amin, Kaiser Huq and Niaz Zaman. The publishing house writers.ink has now lasted for close to a decade even though it has decided mostly to showcase people writing creatively in English. The performance group Brine Pickles has been encouraging young writers to do experimental work in the language for a few years now. Last month the mostly Bangladeshi writers' collective based in Dhaka called Writers Block brought out a lively anthology called What the Ink? Surely the best word to describe the recently concluded Hay Festival in Dhaka is "vibrant"! Tahmima Anam has been coming back to Bangladesh again and again and is clearly bent

on publishing a worthwhile trilogy rooted in the land she left behind as a child. Judging by her contributions to The Daily Star weekly magazine Sharbari Ahmed appears to be on the verge of publishing something noteworthy in English writing sometime soon.

One must then continue to hope and look for the breakthrough work. Will Bangladeshi writing in English take off in an exciting way in the not too distant future? The answer has to be "yes". Here is wishing that it will have the verve that has characterized works of Indians, Pakistani and Sri Lankan authors writing in English for some time now. Surely its time is coming!

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