

BANGLADESH AT 40: LOOKING BACK AND MOVING FORWARD-PART II

# Nationalism

Rehman Sobhan

[Part Two of a Four-Part series]

NATIONALISM was identified as a pillar of our nationhood because our founding fathers recognised that liberation was tied up with our struggle to establish our national identity as distinct from Pakistan. Our founders were also conscious about asserting our identity vis a vis India, our friend and neighbour, who had played such a critical role through their support of our liberation struggle. However, in the day to day affairs of nation building the issue of nationalism is more concerned with the need to recapture autonomy over our political as well as policy choices. Our founders were aware that their Pakistani rulers had surrendered autonomy over policymaking, in large measure, to international development partners on whom we had become heavily dependent for both military and economic aid. However, in a fast globalising world policy choices available to a least developed country such as Bangladesh are severely constrained. Regrettably, successive regimes in Bangladesh have made little effort to design our policies and restructure our economy so as to enhance our flexibility in coping with the challenges of globalisation.

In the last two decades the maximum influence over Bangladesh's decision making process has vested with our principal aid donors who have attempted to influence the terms on which we globalise ourselves. This leverage was inherited from an era when our aid dependence in the 1980's exceeded 10% of GDP. We were then dependent on aid to finance our entire development budget and part of our current budget. Particular bilateral aid donors and multilateral institutions such as the World Bank used this dependence to influence our policies towards a more market oriented, private sector based, development strategy. Donor pressure has compelled us to liberalise our imports at a faster pace than was even demanded by the WTO. This has threatened the sustainability of a large number of small and medium sized industries serving our domestic market as well as inhibited the growth and diversification of our manufacturing sector.

Today, Bangladesh is much less aid dependent with aid accounting for around 2% of our GDP. However, donors still remain a force in influencing our policy directions, particularly in areas such as infrastructure development where Bangladesh remains seriously deficient. The \$3.2 billion of aid committed to finance the Padma Bridge has empowered donors to exercise a high degree of leverage over the governance of this project. In practice, in this day and age our donors simply do not provide enough resources to compel a government to take up positions which are likely to be politically unacceptable.

Today, Bangladesh's global trade deficit is largely financed by migrant remittances which contribute six times the foreign exchange provided by aid. If any class of people need to be propitiated it is our migrants whose enormous contribution to keeping our balance of payments healthy remains inadequately recognised.

In the last decade Bangladesh has moved from being an aid dependent to a trade dependent country. At the time of liberation in 1971, Bangladesh's export volume was around \$500 million. Today, it is apparently \$25 billion, a fifty-fold increase. Whilst we originally remained dependant on export of jute and jute goods, today 80% of our exports are centred around readymade garments (RMG) with over 75% of our exports directed to the markets of North America and the European Union (EU). In recent years the United States and the EU have begun to use political considerations in determining the degree of market access offered to any country. Governments in Bangladesh have thus remained sensitive to these extraneous political influences.

This high trade dependence is fortunately changing as new markets for our RMG exports are being located in Asia and most recently in India. Now that India has provided duty free access to all the major categories of garments where Bangladesh enjoys competitive advantage its large market provides significant opportunities for our exporters. The gradual withdrawal of China, the world's leading RMG exporter, from the low cost range of products, due to rising wages and high end export opportunities, has established the prospect of unlimited growth for our RMG sector. However, it remains unwise to rely exclusively on RMG exports and we need to aggressively follow up on the diversification of our export base where a range of products from leather exports to ship-building and other products provide enormous opportunities of export growth.

Our most proximate neighbour, India, has now emerged as a global economic power with an import market worth \$350 billion. It is projected to grow into the world's third largest economy after China and the USA within the next 2 decades. It is now much sought after by all the major economic powers and has been recognised by its East Asia neighbours as a major partner in the emergence of Asia as a dominant player in the global economy over the next 50 years.

India is not only one of our major trading partners but is also an upper riparian to Bangladesh as the source of 58 of our principal rivers. Given Bangladesh's Indian-centric geography, our increasing economic links and the extraordinary economic opportunities becoming available to Bangladesh now that India has, after all these

years, finally provided us with duty free access for our exports, we need to develop a strategic vision for defining our relations with India. This relationship is too important to be kept hostage to the shifting sands of our party politics. Designing such a strategy demands a process of public consultation and would eventually need to be backed by all political parties so that India-Bangladesh relations are addressed as a national rather than a party issue.

India apart, Bangladesh is also a neighbour to China which is currently our largest source of imports. China has, today, emerged as the world's largest trading power and is already overtaking the US as the world's largest economy. Over the next two decades, China is projected to emerge as the leading economic force in the global economy. This provides extraordinary opportunities for Bangladesh which now commands a position of proximity to two of the world's largest and most dynamic economies. Rather than obsess ourselves with apprehensions of domination by our large neighbours we should have enough self-confidence in our competitiveness, professional capacities and negotiating skills to build relationships of mutual benefit with them.

In the prevailing circumstances, Bangladesh's assertion of nationalism must lie in re-establishing our sovereignty over our policy direction. Now that aid accounts for less than 2% of our GDP it should not be too difficult to recapture our policy autonomy. However, influence over public policy is not today just exercised by donors. Powerful domestic corporate players and special interest groups have now begun to exercise their influence over particular areas of policy, as regards such issues as malfeasance in the stock market and condoning debt default. A democratic state needs to insulate itself from such anti-democratic forces.

Such assertion of nationalism, whether in policy making, relations with our neighbours, in exploiting our natural resources, or in challenging special interests at home, demands political maturity and courage backed by a stronger capacity for professional work. Courage and professionalism in policy making can be sustained through a willingness to reach out to as well as motivate Bangladesh's highly skilled indigenous professional community to develop policy alternatives to guide the country and to then explain these policy options to the public. To sustain any such assertion of sovereignty we would also need to build a domestic political consensus which would strengthen the capacity of the government to challenge the tradition of external hegemony over our policy choices.

SHIFTING IMAGES

## It's still a beautiful world



MILIA ALI

IT'S that time again: time to reflect on the year that has gone by. To hold on to the good things that life offered, to fondly remember the people we lost and take stock of missed opportunities.

In many ways 2011 represents a milestone in our lives. Across the globe ordinary people challenged the status quo, rallied against crony capitalism and rejected corrupt political regimes. The

nature of the protest movements in the Middle-East, Europe and the United States differed, but there was a common thread of belief that the current economic system favoured the elite at the exclusion of the masses.

The Arab Spring gave rise to renewed hope for the common citizens of the region. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen have already dethroned their despotic rulers while the Syrian regime is on the brink of collapse. True, uncertainties still cloud the future of these nations but we can rejoice in the fact that they succeeded in asserting the will of the people against dysfunctional and oppressive dictators. The mass movements in the Arab World have also demonstrated how social media can connect individuals to bring about collective change.

In the United States, the Occupy Wall Street movement, initiated in September 2011, opened up a whole new front for combating economic inequities and corporate greed through peaceful protests. The protesters have been criticised for their lack of a consistent message, but thanks to the movement, the idea of reducing the income gap between the "wealthiest 1%" and the

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"other 99%" is now kosher. The world has come to terms with the fact that economic parity and social justice are necessary ingredients for a balanced society.

2011 will also be remembered for the withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq, after eight years of post-invasion occupation. Iraq may now face political uncertainties, the Shia-Sunni divide may escalate, and day-to-day violence may increase. Nevertheless, Iraqis can proclaim that they are no longer an "occupied" nation!

On a lighter vein: some good news for women. The Hindi movie "The Dirty Picture", released in December 2011, busted the myth that only "Size Zero is beautiful!" Actress Vidya Balan flaunted her 12 kgs excess weight with unabashed oomph, winning wolf whistles as well as critical acclaim. So, ladies, if "losing 10 kgs" was on top of your list of resolutions for 2012, just delete it. I have!

Does this mean that 2011 marked the fulfillment of a wish list of all our "favourite things?" Of course not. Life remains a mixed bag and there have been "bee stings" and "dog bites," too.

We lost three movie icons: Elizabeth Taylor, Actress Vidya Balan and Dev Anand. As "Cleopatra" Liz, "Jungle" Shammi, and "Guide" Dev, bid their real-life good-byes, people of my generation were left feeling vulnerable. After all, we were coned into believing that these screen personalities of our youth were immortal and invincible! The death of cricketer Mansoor Ali Khan (the Nawab of Pataudi) was another unexpected blow. He launched sub-continental cricket on the world stage with style and chutzpah. Call me soft-hearted, but I spent many hours of my teen years romanticising about the fairy tale wedding of the Nawab and the talented Bengali actress Sharmila Tagore: a union which triumphed over caste, religion and language. The demise of these legends herald the end of an era when celebrities dwelled in a fantasy world, shrouded by mystery and romance!

2011 shook the music world with the passing away of Maestro Bhimsen Joshi, who dominated the classical music scene of the sub-continent for seven decades. Sadly, Jagjit Singh and Bhupen Hazarika also sang their swan songs last year. Jagjit's melodious rendition of ghazals mesmerised audiences and rekindled interest in the genre among the younger population. In contrast, Bhupen will be remembered for his revolutionary patriotic and people-centric songs. Tagore singer Ritu Guha left us on Christmas Day. Her inimitable singing style, especially for classical-based Tagore songs, will haunt Tagore buffs for many years to come.

In October, 2011, the world of technology lost one of the greatest innovators of our times: Steve Jobs. Although we miss him, his sphere of influence continues to touch our daily lives -- whether we send text messages or emails or listen to our favorite music on the i-phone/i-pad.

Closer to home, Tareque Masud, the path breaking film maker and friend passed away in a freak road accident. I remember, more than twenty years ago, a young and enthusiastic Tareque walked into our Princeton home with his talented wife Catherine. He talked about his dream of making a film on the Muktijuddho. In some ways "Muktir Gaan" was born that day while we sat around the kitchen table sharing ideas over a simple meal. I never thought that I would be reminiscing about Tareque without him being around. If nature had adhered to its laws, Tareque would, perhaps, have produced yet another epochal piece for his motherland. But, such is life!

As I stand on the threshold of 2012 with mixed emotions of hope and despair, love and antipathy, I am amazed that, despite the "noisy confusion" of our existence, how good it feels to be alive. Yes, "with all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams it's still a beautiful life." Let's live it to the full and, on our own terms!

Happy New Year!

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.

## Comrade Moni Singh: A lifelong communist

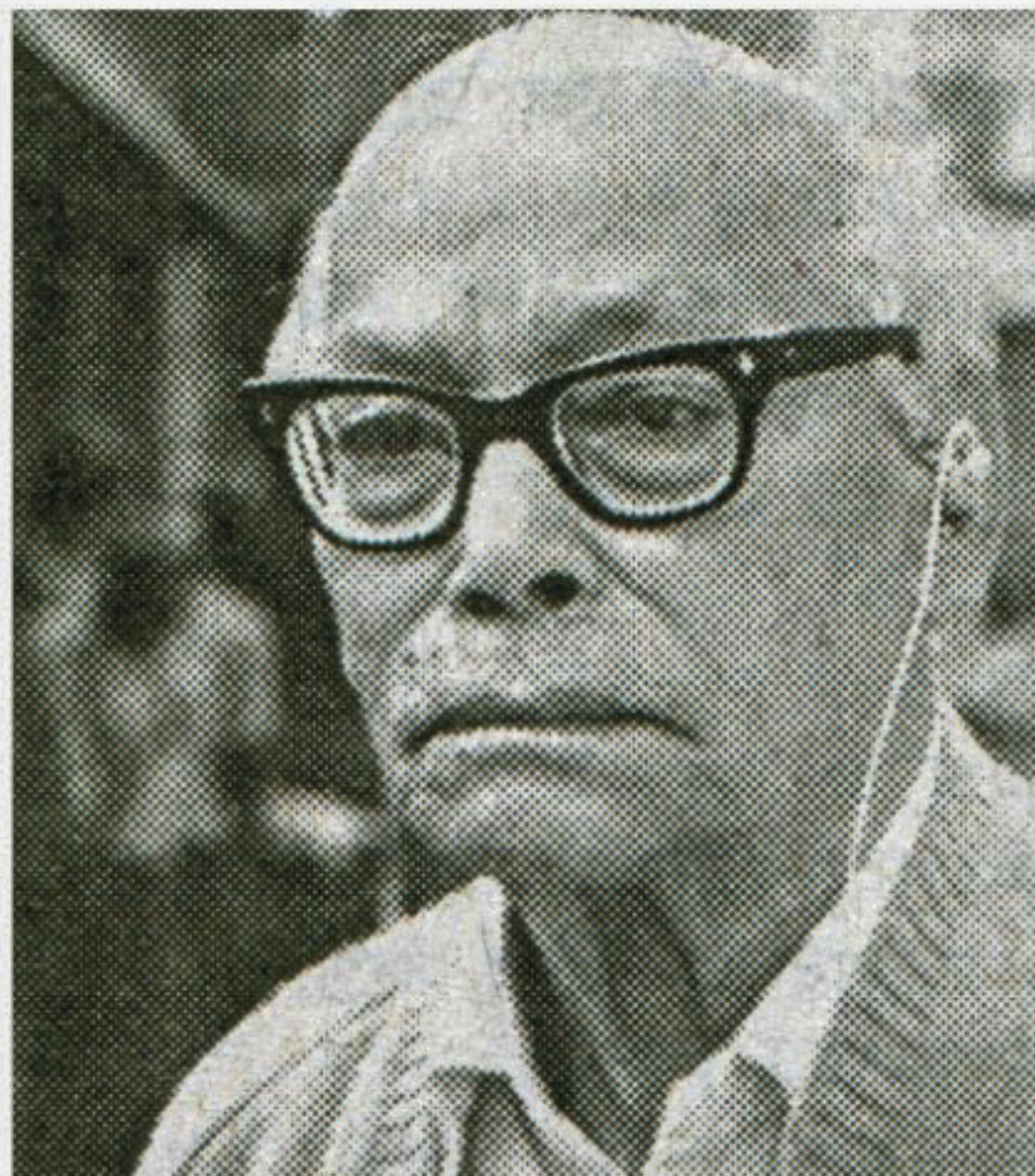
DELWAR HUSSAIN

IN 1945, a general session of the Council of All India Peasants was held in Netrokona. At that time, Netrokona town was no bigger than a bazaar. Thousands of people attended the session. A weeklong bazaar was organised on this occasion, and it created shortage of cash money. Papers signed by Comrade Moni Singh were used as currency to tackle the crisis. People had such unflinching faith in and respect for him.

Moni Singh was born on July 28, 1901 in Kolkata. His father, Kali Kumar Singh, was the son of the zamindar of Purbadhala, Netrokona. His mother came from a royal family of Susang Durgapur of Netrokona district. Although born in a royal family, Moni Singh selflessly detached himself from the opulent, peaceful and elegant lifestyle and instead chose a hard life of struggle. He devoted himself to bringing about revolutionary changes in the society. He revolted against his family's exploitation of the poor people. He organised peasants' movements and soon became the favourite of the have-nots.

In his school days in Kolkata, Moni Singh got involved with revolutionary activities. He joined the secret Aushilon Samity and waged armed struggle against British imperialism. In 1921, an arrest warrant was issued against him. While living in hiding, he was indoctrinated with the idea of communism. In 1925 he joined the Indian Communist Party at the very seminal stage of the communist movement.

In his early political life Moni Singh got involved with the workers' movement. He was very popular among the workers at Metia Buruj, Kolkata. But observing the dire condition of the peasants of his district, Mymensingh, he decided to join the peasant movement. He launched a fierce peasant movement in greater



Mymensingh. He was the mentor of the Tanka and Tebhaga Movement. The spark of the peasant movement forced the government to concede to the demand and abolish the Tanka system.

Moni Singh did not confine himself only to the peasant movement but also inspired others to set up educational institutions, health facilities and small industries in this region. He motivated his party men to devote themselves to this end. He used to say that without collective development of life one could not have a developed society. Patriotism means assurance of food, clothing, dwelling, health, education and freedom of speech for all.

Moni Singh was one of the founders of the East Pakistan Communist Party, which was totally banned during the Pakistan period. Communist leaders had to be either in prison or underground. The Communist Party and Moni Singh

played very crucial role in the 1948 Hunger Procession and 1952 Language Movement. The role of the Communist Party under the leadership of Moni Singh in the Jukto Front Election in 1954 was valuable and positive. It also played an important role in the anti- Ayub movement in '60s. Here it is important to mention the student movement. Moni Singh, while being underground, directed the student movement with his valuable advice.

In 1971, during the massacre by General Yahya Khan, Moni Singha was in Rajshahi jail. His followers broke open the jail and freed him and thereafter, he, along with his loyal comrades, entered India and devoted himself to organising the liberation war.

His unforgettable leadership during the liberation war, and especially his role in forming the peoples' army with the members and supporters of CPB, NAP and Students' Union, is noteworthy. Moni Singh's contribution was by no means confined to the battlefield only. He was one of the most influential advisers to the government-in-exile during the liberation war. Moni Singha and the Communist Party secured the political and military support of the then Soviet Union and the international socialist world and communist movement, for the liberation war.

After liberation, he was the inspiration behind rebuilding of the Communist Party as well as the devastated country; his party joined the struggle vigorously to liberate the working class. His honesty and sincerity in personal life is worth emulating, and his love for the people was proverbial.

The great man left us in mourning on December 31, 1990. His sacrifice, courage and struggle will inspire our future generation forever.

This article was first published in Prothom Alo on December 31, 2011. ( Translation ours.)