& EDITORIAL

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IN CONVERSATION WITH SERAJUL ISLAM CHOUDHURY

'Educational institutions are also social institutions'

Shah Husain Imam, Associate Editor and Rifat Munim, Senior Editorial Assistant of The Daily Star engage Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury in a conversation spanning a wide variety of topics mainly focused on political evolution, social dynamics and values, education and culture, and the potentials and prospects of the country.

The Daily Star (DS): Twilight of the British era

Serajul Islam Choudhury (SIC): The British rule acquainted us with the outside world, the international world. And it created a middle-class, particularly in Bengal, which has made its contribution in various spheres; economically, politically, intellectually and socially. But this class had its own predilections, concerns and interests. It had submitted to the British rule even though a part of it worked for independence. But what happened is that the British system was capitalistic in ideology, and bureaucratic in dispensation. As a result, that capitalist ideology along with its bureaucratic system is a legacy that we had inherited.

What happened was that the old system came back or remained: The old legal system, the state, the agencies of the state.

DS: Transition to Pakistan, when did a break-up seem inevitable?

SIC: In 1969. 1969 was a turning point. We had the language movement, which made us realise that the twonation theory was not only ineffective but also unproductive. And it did not lead to the liberation we had dreamt of. It began with the language movement, and then there was the United Front (UF) against the Muslim League, and the triumph of the UF at the polls. Soon thereafter the UF broke up; the military came and overthrew the elected government. So what became increasingly evident was that Pakistan couldn't work as a unified state. The reason was that the transfer of power in 1947 was from the British to the Pakistani rulers who were mainly Punjabi bureaucrats, civil and military. So Ayub Khan's regime brought out and displayed the truth of the matter that it was the continuation of what the British had created for us.

In 1969, there was this popular uprising not only against the military rule of Ayub Khan but also against the whole social system. It was almost a social uprising in which the peasantry and the rural population had also taken part. During this time, personally I had been abroad for higher studies, where I had seen the democratic system working and the popular movement surging. So having returned in 1968 and witnessed the 1969 uprising, I felt that it was inevitable that something would happen and that this state was not viable economically, because it was exploitative and it was the Punjabi exploitation of the Bengalis.

DS: Political leaders in the liberation struggle and people's involvement...

SIC: There are two eminent leaders of whom we can think of in this connection. One is Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani and the other is Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Bangabandhu was a nationalist but Maulana wanted to go beyond nationalism and the whole 1969 uprising was his movement and he had realised that this capitalist system must be transformed.

Maulana was for a social revolution but he didn't have a party comparable to the Awami League. The left elements were behind him but they, in 1969, made the terrible mistake of deciding to desert Maulana and go for the Naxalite way of achieving liberty, which was assassination of individuals and that type of thing.

So these two leaders had begun to work together. When the Awami League was formed, Maulana was the president and Mujib was the secretary, but they couldn't work together and there was a breach and then Maulana set up the National Awami Party (NAP). There were two basic points based on which the NAP broke away from the Awami League. First, provincial autonomy in which Maulana believed but Suhrawardy didn't because he thought that 99% of that had been achieved; and secondly, neutral international policy which would mean, at that moment, discarding the military pacts.

But Maulana didn't take part in the 1970 election, perhaps because he wanted that people should come out with one opinion, one verdict that we wanted to break away from the state of Pakistan. He had spoken of breaking away earlier and perhaps this was what he had in his mind.

The movement for national liberation was led by the nationalists, the middle-class nationalists, who believed in a class-based society and they continued the ideological legacy that they had inherited from the British. The problem with us was that the leadership didn't have a vision of an independent Bangladesh. They began with a vision of complete, shall we say, sixpoint programme which envisaged a self-government rather than independence. It was in 1970 that the people as a whole voted for independence. But what began as a movement for autonomy transformed itself into a movement for independence.

DS: Then it was precipitated by the army crackdown.

SIC: Of course. The army had not anticipated the results of 1970 elections. And the basic mistake, as far as the army was concerned, was that they had agreed to adult franchise which meant one man one vote and that the majority would be from the then East Pakistan. They hadn't anticipated that the whole population of the East Pakistan would totally vote for the one point, the single point, rather than the six-point, which was the independence.

DS: So, it was an 'aborted revolution' to Bhasani.
SIC: Yes, he did regret because a revolution was aborted. Ideally for him, Maulana was interested in the mobiliSation of the masses. He had set up organiSa-

tions for the fishermen, for the cultivators, for the rickshawalas, for the craftsmen.

DS: Maulana's role needs a reassessment.

SIC: More than a nationalist, he was a socialist.

Although he was a maulana and a pir, he was not doctrinal at all, and from experience he had learnt that what we need is a new society.

DS: Potential of Bangladesh at birth and where it went wrong?

SIC: The potential was great. We had a collective vision, collective dream. This was the first time two things had happened: one was the armed struggle, not individuals or a group rising against the state but the entire population; number two, it meant that all the classes came together and the class division evaporated for the time being. So, that was the collective dream of a new society. The people expected that the state would be different being based on real democracy which would mean equality of opportunity and rights. And secondly, the decentralisation and devolution of power; and thirdly, the rule by elected representatives. But the credit for the victory went to the political party that led the liberation war, that's the Awami League. And they wouldn't take into consideration other political parties. That's where it went wrong.

DS: Any change in character of political leadership? SIC: No, it hasn't changed. On the contrary, there is a decline in patriotism.

DS: Though we experienced, on and off, parliamentary system since the British India Act 1935, we in Bangladesh have a dysfunctional parliament even to this day.

SIC: The two-party system that was there in the British days was there in the Pakistani days and has continued in our country also. But then these two parties do not

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believe in parliamentary system and practice because they are not democratic in outlook.

DS: Middle-class losing its character?

SIC: Yes, there has been a decline. The middle-class has not grown to be a unified class, it has split. There is a section that has gone up, become unbelievably rich. Some were rich before and later augmented and added to their riches and some have become rich through plunder. So this is a part of the middle-class and power has gone to this part increasingly, and today power belongs to those of the middle-class who have the money while commercialisation is taking over everything. This is what we have today in the field of education, health and everywhere, and even in politics. Politics belongs to the rich. In the parliament, you have the businessmen, 75% of them as members, and the other 25% are also involved in business activities. So making money through business becomes the objective. And the struggle between the two political parties is the struggle for power to plunder and get rich.

There was idealism in the middle-class during the British period and Pakistani period. But now it is entirely lost because both the British and the Punjabi rulers were foreigners and our enemies. Now we are pitted against ourselves, now our friends and relatives are in power, but they cannot be identified as the enemy because they are a part of us and the middle-class itself is a beneficiary of the system. Secondly, this rise of capitalism is characterised by a lack of entrepreneurship, investment and without participation in productive activities. It's through business, agency work and plunder that people are getting rich. So with the rise of inequality, patriotism has declined proportionately: the more the rise of individualism, the more the decline of patriotism. It's a very sad thing to happen.

DS: Craving for a fair and just society left in whom?

SIC: Mainly, in the youth. They have the idealism. But there tragically was a vacuum after liberation for about 20 years because there were opportunities and many young men left the country and the talented didn't return. So, that was how the potentiality of the youth

was wasted. And then the remaining people who were supposed to transform the society became more interested in personal indulgence and acquisition of riches. Thus the youth was polluted by the activities of the political leadership.

Now I see the potentiality in the youth again because young persons are realising all over the world and also in Bangladesh that this system cannot work and must be changed because 99% of the common people are left out.

DS: Seeds of discontent ...

SIC: Yes, and people are realising why this system is not working and the enemy is the system itself, not the individuals, and the system itself is against the people. There has to be a systematic movement. For that what was necessary was at least the reduction of the difference between the rich and the poor. What has happened after the liberation is that the gap has widened and deepened. It is reflected in the three systems of our education, which is a product of this class division -- the rich going to the English medium, the middle class going to the Bengali medium and the poor going to the madrasas.

DS: As long as people are fed, what chance is there for a movement?

SIC: Even so, there is dissatisfaction because of unemployment, which is a very serious problem. Then there is the rise of population where the leaders have failed to do anything for their lack of seriousness. Besides, we are having this change in the climate and environment. There is the share market problem which is an indication of the chaos prevailing in the economy. As a result of these economic crises, we are seeing a rising trend of stalking of women, drug addiction etc. What is worse, you can hire people for killing. Then there is the decline in law and order, which has seen a rise in extortion, mugging and snatching. All these are related to the problem of unemployment. This is another failure of the political leadership that none of them has addressed this issue.

So getting back to the potentiality, this will either lead to anarchy, which is not desirable in any way, or it will lead to a systematic, organised movement which is what we desire. A movement aiming at democratisation of the society can grow when the educated people, the so-called intelligentsia and the working class come together with a vision, just as we had in 1971. The lead-



ership will not come from above, it will grow from the movement itself.

DS: The civil society role...

SIC: No, the civil society will not be able to give political leadership. I'm rather talking about the movement for preserving the local energy resources such as gas and coal. This is a very significant movement that draws our attention. We have mineral resources; we have the sea which has been neglected. These resources have to be taken over by the people, and not by the multinational or corporate companies. So this movement for the preservation and ownership of our resources will grow.

Here I must add that discontent depends on the level of culture. If you are not aware of your needs and are satisfied only with two square meals a day, then your life is as simple as it was in the past. But this level of awareness has to be raised because discontent is a moving force behind the formation of this kind of movement. And that is where we need cultural activities. But sadly enough, today in Bangladesh we don't have cultural activities because we don't have the elected bodies of the students' union; we don't have cultural festivals going on, nor debate or creative writing competitions. The universities today are like a slum where educated persons quarrel. Cultural activities are thus dwindling whereas these, I think, are important for society and civilisation.

DS: Knowledge-based society, to what good use we are putting it?

SIC: We are not putting it to good use because the acquisition of knowledge has been a private property all through, and the notion is if you want education you get it individually. But educational institutions are also social institutions. They should raise social awareness; they should cultivate the societal instincts within the individual. Man lives socially, develops socially, intellectually and morally. So what education is doing is alienating the educated from society.

DS: Human face to education...

SIC: I believe in the development of education together with culture. And culture can be developed through

social activities. In other words, I want an educated man to be a social being with feeling for others and a sense of responsibility for changing the existing social inequality and injustice. We are not getting that kind of education, what we are getting is a sort of training to make one prosperous and eligible for a job.

DS: Educational tools have improved, but its content?

SIC: As far as content of education is concerned, I'm interested in culture; I'm interested in history which is a part of culture. What we see is the study of history in schools is sadly neglected. Study of philosophy is simply disappearing whereas philosophy is one of the basic things one has to learn and know to be completely educated.

DS: State of higher education

SIC: Higher education has become utilitarian. Few people are interested in pure sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities. What we see in the private universities is symptomatic of the entire situation wherein you have the faculty of commerce. Well, the change is interesting. When the Dhaka University was set up in 1921, there was no commerce faculty and commerce was a part of Economics. Later there was a commerce faculty comprising two departments, Accounting and Finance. But now there are as many as eight departments in the faculty because it brings you a job. So it's utilitarian and it's not widening the students' outlook and it's not instilling societal instincts in them. So higher education is for the benefit of the individual, not for the collective well being. Lack of coordination exists between stages as well as within stages of education.

DS: What kind of student politics would you like to see?

SIC: I wouldn't call it politics. I would call it students' movement aiming at social change, protesting against injustice and helping the distressed. These are the two things that students have always done: protest and help. Whenever there were disasters, the students worked as volunteers; whenever there was martial law or autocratic rule, they used to protest.

It is essential that the concerned institutions hold regular students' union election for creating leadership, developing culture, fostering a sense of togetherness. Without togetherness you cannot have patriotism.

DS: Threats to our culture and values, external and internal...

SIC: More internal than external. And the mass media is not helping us in this connection. Say for example, the television channels have brought the Hindi language to our children. To our great regret and sense of misery, I see children watching Hindi pictures and films. Then they have advertisements which are even more important than the cultural shows, and there are no discussions about national progress except for the predictable outpourings from persons of known credentials. This is how media is badly affecting culture whereas it should promote culture. Culture should not be subsidiary to advertisements. Very sadly however, what is happening is that advertisements and goods are more important than culture. So culture is becoming subservient to consumerism, and that is being promoted. As a result, people are being uprooted from their heritage.

DS: But is the media not focusing on social issues of real value?

SIC: Whatever it does gets lost because of the hullabaloo and the noises made by the advertisements and the shows and the spectacles. But what we should have is discussion and debate about the national problems and the utilisation of our resources by ourselves. As I said earlier, the neglect of the sea has been such a tragic thing because we are losing our rights over the Bay of Bengal, whereas it not only provides us with a port or outlet but also with so much untapped resources. But discussion on these issues does not prevail in the media.

DS: Equal opportunities society

SIC: Yes, we need equal opportunity. Nowadays, success does not depend on merit and devotion, but on other things such as connection and bribery. You don't lose your job if you are connected with bigwigs.

DS: Well, what about the Mecca of the capitalist world crumbling?

can stand on inequality.

DS: There will emerge from the ashes some kind of a

SIC: Yes, these are crumbling now because no society

DS: There will emerge from the ashes some kind of a new society or a global society?

SIC: No. What we want is an international society, not a global society. Internationalism means that every community has its own culture, every country has its own heritage, and then what we need is the international understanding, harmony and cooperation in matters of global business. What we see today is the grabbing of local resources by some superpowers like the Americans. This must not happen and internationalism should replace this malpractice.

DS: Role model before the young generation

SIC: That is what we lack. We got our role models in our teachers from schools, colleges and universities and we thought that they were our heroes. In those days, teaching has been a vocation where you gave yourself totally, so it was an avocation. But teaching now is like any other profession and so now you don't have the role models in the educational institutions. Now the teachers are also affiliated with political parties. Added to this is the loss we suffered during the liberation war when we lost many of our great teachers. After that the thrust of capitalism came and teaching became like any other profession in terms of money-making because you have to cope with your neighbours.