

BITTER TRUTH

Let not Churchill's dire prophecy come true



It is unfortunate that Sir Winston Churchill's gloomy prophecy about this sub-continent should be coming true in such a spectacular way, much to the dismay of the lovers of democracy and freedom.

Churchill vehemently opposed granting independence to India. He was not convinced that Indians could manage their own

affairs efficiently. He said to the House of Commons in 1946: "Power will go to the hands of rascals, rogues and freebooters. Not a bottle of water or a loaf of bread will escape taxation, only air will be free, and the blood of these hungry millions will be on the head of Atlee (the then prime minister of Britain). [...] They will fight among themselves and India will be lost in political squabbles."

Sadly enough, 65 years since, after gaining a free Bangladesh, we should reckon how much we have been able to prove ourselves an exception to Churchill's derogatory comments. Hopefully for us, Churchill is not alive at these grim hours when our country is plunging into chaos and politicians are engaged in squabbles.

At that time, many among us, quite older now, dismissed Churchill's dire prophecy as the rantings of an imperialist monster. But today, a thinking looms large in people's mind if power was handed over to people misfit for and the country was being run and ruled by "men of straw" lacking in vision and pragmatism!

We have to share the guilt of the past and stand poised for a big shake up in order to march for a better future, free from the ills of factionalism, illiteracy, fanaticism, and narrow goals of personal aggrandisement.

In analysing the sorry state of affairs and other ills that plague the nation and thwarts its march towards a self-sustaining economy, one is at once reminded of an old Chinese saying: "A fish rots from the head downward." Writing off the time from 1947 to 1971 when we were under another form of colonial rule and when this tiny land of Bangladesh was dominated and ruled by Pakistani bureaucrats and army generals as simply nightmarish and traumatic experience, we must subject ourselves to serious self-criticism and self-analysis for our way of governance during the last 41 years.

The country suffers from leadership crisis. Repeated army rule stifled the growth of democracy and leader-

ship, which was badly needed at the nascent stage of the nation. The worst came to us as we definitely asked for it, and the nation is paying the price for the small gains some of our mean minded "politicians" made at the expense of the whole nation.

Even during elections many of us delighted at vote buying, encouraged thievery and elected politicians of low background and morale. Their foul game brought to a halt the aspirations of a benighted country under constant struggles.

To quote historian Aleksei Kiva: "Extra-ordinary times

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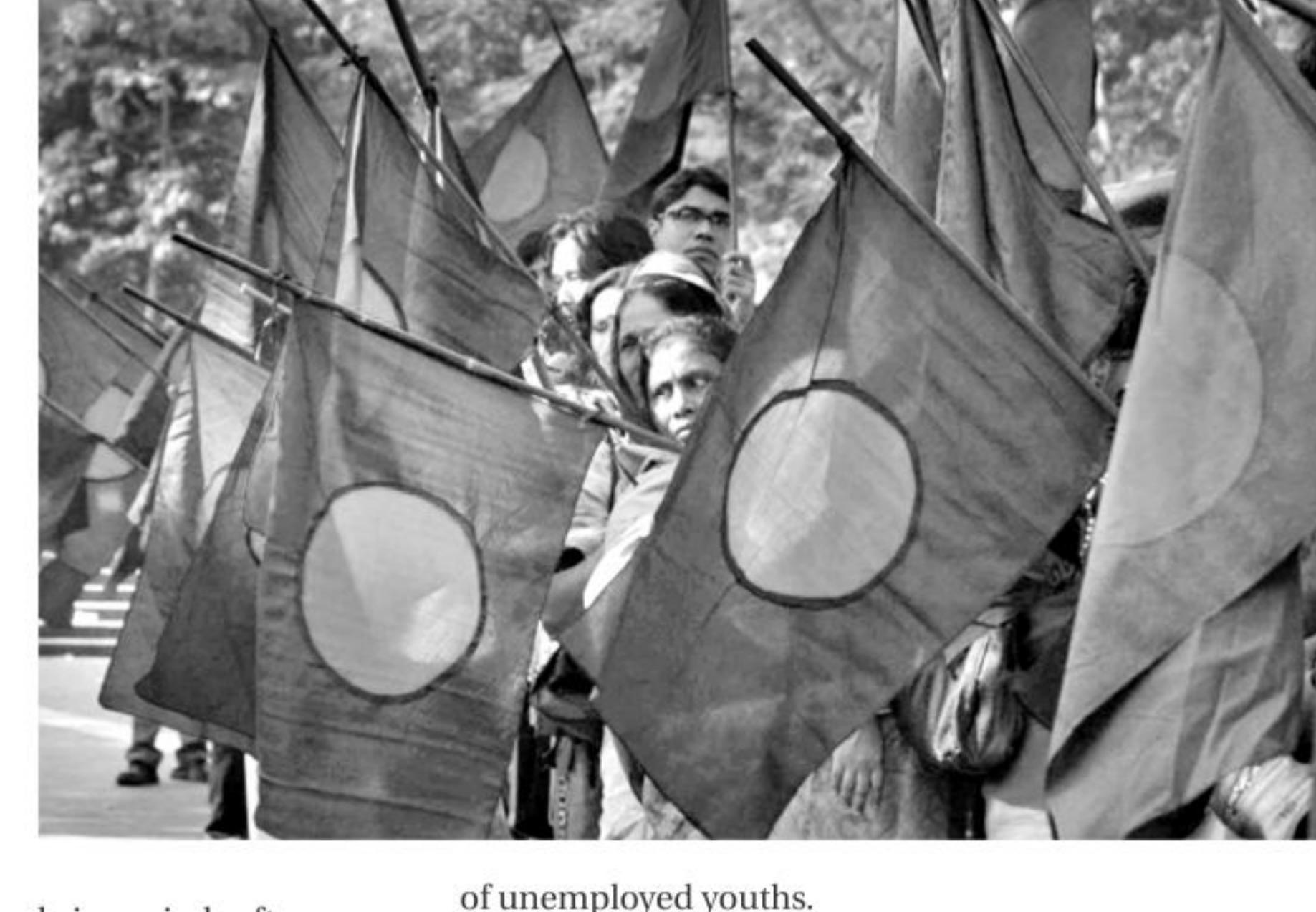
required extra-ordinary governments. Especially the role of the chief executive rises sharply in periods after wars, revolutions, major social cataclysms, and deep crises. Either power is strong and able to solve the task facing the society or it fails. There is really no alternative."

Our leaders failed at the nascent stage in targeting the priorities to be taken up in the face of all challenges. These priorities, as these were in the earlier days, are educational opportunities for all, containing population explosion, health care for all, agricultural revolution and last of all, creating employment opportunities for the teeming youths, by setting up industrial bases of sorts (mini or micro) at all locations of the country.

The country is now virtually in the doldrums. People have lost faith in politics and government. Could politics be a frontier, from now on, where leaders are honest and power that be would listen to the people? The task facing the leaders of the present day Bangladesh is enormous.

In a country where administrative machinery so long practised self-service rather than self-sacrifice, political institutions and economic development are likely to suffer.

What we inherit now is a dismaying legacy of moral malaises, economic mal-distribution, stagnation, population pressures, and tensions of sorts all around. The political biosphere is highly charged with rising and unfulfilled expectations, especially of the vast multitude



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of unemployed youths.

Prof. Ralph Buultjens warns, "If not diffused fast, the pressure vented by democracy could abort democracy itself." To be more precise, economic development and political stability come to countries that work, save and organise to achieve them.

While our leaders spoke glibly about institutionalising democracy and spurring economic development, they were singularly wrong in choosing the routes the country or the government of the past days needed to take.

The country needed to take a bus to mass literacy and healthcare, one that travelled towards empowering ordinary people by building roads, and providing them with electricity, clean water, sanitation and jobs. But we took the one which led to a country where the only entity that seemed to grow and thrive was the government and its associate evils.

This is Bangladesh in which, despite our supposed

commitment to democracy and pronouncement about proper distribution of wealth and benefits, privilege is everything.

If you are a politician or a bureaucrat, you are automatically entitled to special everything. Even this would have been acceptable if this unwieldy and murderously expensive state could actually expend its energies in bringing development and prosperity to this unfortunate land.

Years back, Rabindranath Tagore called his part of the sub-continent Sonar Bangla. As the country's Pakistani rulers departed in disgrace, the optimism of the country's populace still seemed boundless because this country had fertile lands, mineral deposits, lush forests and waters rich with fish. Its economic future seemed assured.

Our leaders in those days were brave, bold and patriotic. They believed that their leadership would engender benevolent national policies. But these leaders are mostly gone now and their dreams have largely been derailed or, worse, disintegrated. The dream of Sonar Bangla has dissolved into teardrops of misery.

Present leaders must contend with a terrible truth: social and economic signals point to a cataclysmic future. The country has become a sad and bitter region marked regularly and ruthlessly by hatred. Even when the country is redolent with the stench of corruption all around, there is a denial mood from the top.

Pathetically, some unscrupulous businessmen in collusion with public fund managers are swindling people's money and public fund at will. Shockingly true, a sense of impunity seems to be present everywhere. After the share market scam, the country witnessed scams and cheating one after another in the name of business and people's welfare.

Multicultural Bangladesh has become more a cauldron than a country. Every leader seems to have its own narrow cause, often in disregard of the national interest. But gloomy as it may be, the country's abundant resources and human capital are readily available for a national revival -- if only there is enlightened and determined leadership.

Bangladeshi people tend to invest goodwill in their leaders, even overlook their transgressions. But only up to a point. And that point surely has been reached, and the country's politicians should understand that.

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Honing language skills in schools

MUHAMMAD ARIF IQBAL KHAN

ONE important reason for the low skill-set of the local workforce is their lack of language proficiency. Not that linguists are naturally more talented but professionals without strong background in languages will eventually expose their lacking. School-level education has to partly take the heat for falling behind in this important area.

While it is easy to dump the blame on the general shortage of teachers, especially in foreign languages, it really can't be an excuse for a country that was under British colonial rule for 200 years and Turkic-Persian rule for almost a thousand years before that.

Not too long ago, conscious Bengali Muslim families would make it a point to impart at least four languages (Bangla, Arabic, Persian and English) to their children (mostly sons) in preparation for their entrance examination in the civil services or for higher education at provincial capitals. Shortage of teachers was not acceptable as an option, regardless of the geographical disadvantages. The objective was to acquire the language proficiency and the skills needed to compete for a decent job.

English is undoubtedly the most important of all foreign languages in the subcontinent. It is quite unfortunate that many people still believe that English language is the monopoly of a particular race. South Asians inherited the language through a combination of multi-cultural interplay of civilisations and a cross-racial experience in education and politics. The English language in South Asia is indeed a language of South Asia as much as it is the language of Britain, Canada, Australia and America. Knowledge of this language will result not in any physical transformation, but will boost a person's ability to communicate effectively with the world.

There is no excuse not to have more skilled teachers in this field. Families 60 years ago did whatever it took to impart that training when life and commuting was a lot harder. It should now be all the more prevalent and customary for any child in any village to build that skill-set.

In a globalised human resources market competition is fierce. The demand for menial workers in the Middle East will dry out sooner or later. So will the \$50 a month minimum wage in the sweat shops. With rising living standards and the impact of

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globalisation class systems will likely come under greater fire. That sort of situation cannot be sustained by any government. One small spark will have the potential to engulf an entire city in a riot. European countries too have experienced such outbursts in the last few years. Frustration bottled inside unemployed youth is like a deadly social bomb waiting to explode any moment.

"English is not enough." These are not the words of a South Asian dreamer but are in fact the conclusion of a survey conducted by the British government in 2000 under Sir Trevor MacDonald and Sir John Boyd. They wrote: "It is a regrettable fact that for many years, after a strong period in the 1980s, the major foreign languages, French and German, have been in continuous and sometimes dramatic decline in British schools and universities. Britain faces the great task of changing this trend. It is absolutely in this country's interest that British young people, now and in the future, should be competent in foreign languages. In January 2002 the House of Lords debated the value of foreign language learning. All the speakers agreed that in a globalised world characterised by international links and intercultural connections, linguistic skills and international experience are crucial for employment and career. International skills should have a major part in every young person's school curriculum."

Urdu and Hindi are non-geographical languages, especially Urdu whose centre is Delhi not Islamabad although Pakistanis speak this language in addition to their distinct dialects. Urdu was "designed" by the Turkic-Persian rulers in a way so as to encompass the immensely diversified cultures of the sub-continent. It was a stroke of genius. The court language continued to be Persian while Urdu spread through the length and breadth of Hindustan -- an Arabic-Turkic-Persian name for South Asia -- for their admiration of the unique and colourful cultures of India.

Satellite TV programmes are almost entirely in Urdu though they may originate in states not home to majority Urdu speakers. Pop culture being an important ingredient of modernity excludes the usage of ancient languages in preference for "fusion" of languages and cultures to suit their multicultural thoughts.

Four languages are now being used in our urban centres -- Bangla, English, Urdu and Hindi. There is a fifth language, which has traditionally been studied but only for religious reasons. It's a pity that millions of Arabic readers are denied the opportunity to grasp the language with just a little bit of extra effort. In effect, Bangladesh can make use of five languages in the curriculum, supported by a high level education policy.

"Why should we learn foreign languages?" This would have been a very normal question until the age of the internet took over.

An individual, thanks to the internet, is a member of the global online community, at par with anyone else from any city in the world. Development in internet speed will narrow the gap in cultural exchange in the future. In an environment of multicultural influences knowing multiple languages will further improve and add to our existing skills.

The next generation can benefit immensely from the internet in terms of sharpening language skills in addition to old fashioned classroom based study. Specialist sites deliver learning results through animated teaching online. Children can also be encouraged to enroll for foreign language classes in French, German, Malay and Mandarin at various private language institutes. However, the easiest and the most economical way to boost language skills would be through the public and private school curriculum, online blogs, and the mass media.

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Notional airline or a national airline?

SHAHABUDDIN AHMAD

POPELLE expected stern reactions from the government on the current incompetence of Biman in handling flights. During the last few weeks Biman has operated its Hajj flights and other international flights in such an unprofessional and unplanned way that it caused not only tremendous hardship to the passengers who were booked for the Hajj flights, or for other destinations, but it caused strong public resentment.

It is still the talk of the town. The print and electronic media have profusely published news and information about the agony, discomfort and clash of the passengers in the briefing counters at the Shah Jalal International Airport, Dhaka, and Shah Amanat International Airport, Chittagong. This situation enraged the Finance Minister Abul Mal Abul Mohit where he stated that Biman would be dissolved if it does not perform duties in an orderly manner.

This reaction was rather late. The minister roared in a function held in Sylhet on Sunday, September 30, 2012 where a function was held for the resumption of Sylhet-London direct flight which was suspended in December last year for administrative and natural reasons.

Biman has been in the red mostly since its birth in 1972, after the country became Independent. Its character was changed from a corporation to a government owned company in 2007 by the military backed civilian government in the hope of ensuring that the national carrier earns profit for the country.

But contrary to expectation the national carrier failed to improve its performance. The organisation has been constantly loosing during the last many years. Muhit said that last year Biman incurred a loss of Tk.2,000 crores. The reputation of Biman's financial condition in the internal and external market is very low. Biman owes crores of taka to local and foreign companies on account of services rendered by them.

Biman is unable to take delivery of two new wide bodied aircraft from the Boeing Company of USA as it is unable to pay Tk.150 crores.

Biman has a board which is headed by one Air Marshal (Retd.) Jamaluddin Ahmed against whom a case was instituted by the government for his alleged complicity in the purchase MIG-29 from Russia. This case was subsequently quashed by the court when the present government came to power.

Besides him, the other members of the board are non-professionals appointed at the choice of the government from government departments and from private institutions except the managing director of Biman. This Board is supposed to be responsible for policy decision for the operation of Biman but after the current debacle the board members did not make any press statement except one or two serving directors speaking as to why the current difficulties arose.

From reports, it appears that the chairman of the board is not answerable to anybody. He was asked to appear before the parliamentary standing committee on civil aviation and tourism in the past and also recently. But he refused to attend. It is really surprising how the chairman of the board of Biman can ignore the invitations of a committee which is manned by members of the parliament, to attend meetings where the issues of Biman debacle are discussed.

He is riding the crest and it seems there is nobody to take care of this, should I say, insolence.

The former civil aviation and Tourism Minister GM Quadir, now commerce minister had publicly stated as printed in newspapers that the chairman of the Biman board does not listen to him. He only listens to the prime minister and she is also not reported to have taken any notice of the precarious conditions existing in Biman.

Few months back the labour union of Biman and its officer's association staged demonstration in the Biman office for rectification of some irregularities including the chaotic Biman schedule. The civil aviation and tourism minister had assured the labour union members and officers that the irregularities would be looked into.

However very recently I read a post editorial in an English daily where the writer Md. Badrul Ahsan had posed a question to be noted under such lights: Is Biman a notional airline or a national airline?

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