

"Solidarity in silence" sent across an eloquent message

Attack on newspaper, TV unacceptable

WE have seen the power of silence demonstrated as the whole nation stood without a word -- some in their respective places at home or work, others lining the streets outside -- for three minutes on Tuesday demanding justice in the 1971 war crimes trial. It was a phenomenal move, proving that silence speaks louder than words, creating history. Throughout the past week and a half, the young and old, students, professionals and homemakers, irrespective of class and faith, have expressed their solidarity through fiery slogans, passionate music and, now, silence. They are our promise of change for the future -- in our laws, our politics, our society and our democracy.

We would, however, like to flag one concern here. While the whole country is united in the demand for justice, some vested groups seem to be taking advantage of the mass movement for their own selfish interests and personal vengeance. The attack on the offices of the newspaper Naya Diganto and threats put out to Amar Desh are cases in point.

Much as we differ on issues with these newspapers, we would firmly uphold their right to express dissenting views. That is what press freedom is all about. We may differ with these publications, as we vehemently do, but this does not mean that they should be violently attacked. That is not the language of democracy. Pluralistic democracy demands right to dissent and difference of opinion, of not only individuals but organisations as well. While to be sceptical of them or to boycott them outright is our choice, they, too, have a right to security and to preserve themselves. Now is the time for united stand against the perpetrators of genocide of 1971. It is time for us to stand as one for the restoration of values of our Liberation War. It is time to fight with all our strength against communal forces and forces of chaos and destruction that is being unleashed on our streets.

Dastardly attack on college principal

We condemn it

BANGLADESH Chhatra League (BCL) elements have exposed their rowdy nature by assaulting the newly appointed principal of Barisal BM College Prof Shankar Chandra Dutta on Tuesday.

We condemn in the strongest term such a dastardly attack on the new principal of the college.

Photographs of the outrageous incident carried by the national dailies say it all. It is extremely revolting to see how an aged person is running for life with hoodlums in hot pursuit. And one shudders to think of the level of moral degradation those youths, in students' and political activists' garb, have reached so that they think nothing of raising their hand against a teacher. This is beyond all norms of civilised behaviour in a society where a teacher is supposed to be treated with respect.

A faction of BCL allegedly loyal to the former principal has been behind the untoward incident. However, the former principal Prof, Nani Gopal Das, refuted such claim as he had already handed over charge to the new principal.

Clearly, the violence was not something that came out of the blue. The factors leading to the day's eruption must have been brewing for some time before it came to a head on the day that new principal was going to take charge. There are already allegations of corruption in various forms including admission business in which some BCL cadres and some other quarters in the college administration had a hand.

One wonders how law-enforcers could drop their guard and allow the violence to happen in such a prime educational institution of Barisal. As some reports suggest the new principal sought protection from the administration, but it has not been provided.

We would urge the police to carry out an impartial investigation and find out the culprits responsible for the attack. They must be brought to book and the victim prin-

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

February 14

- 1804** Karadjordje leads the First Serbian Uprising against the Ottoman Empire.
- 1949** The Knesset (Israeli parliament) convenes for the first time.
- 1950** Chinese Civil War: The National Revolutionary Army instigates the unsuccessful Battle of Tianquan against the People's Liberation Army.
- 1956** The XX Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union begins in Moscow. On the last night of the meeting, Premier Nikita Khrushchev condemns Joseph Stalin's crimes in a secret speech.
- 1989** Iranian leader Ruhollah Khomeini issues a fatwa encouraging Muslims to kill the author of The Satanic Verses, Salman Rushdie.
- 2011** As a part of Arab Spring, the Bahraini uprising, a series of demonstrations, amounting to a sustained campaign of civil resistance, in the Persian Gulf country of Bahrain begins with a 'Day of Rage'.

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STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING

The message of Shahbagh



IT has been ten days since the start of the momentous event, and one who has not witnessed the spontaneous overflow of youthful energy infecting each and every one, young and old, and far and near the Shahbagh Square, will find it difficult to comprehend the sheer power that is sprouting out of the collective consciousness of the young people that have gathered in the Square. And it is not vengeance but justice that they seek.

Shahbagh is not unprecedented. In the past too the students and the youths had taken upon themselves to voice the demands and the sentiments of the people and had in fact acted as the moving force behind all national movements since 1947. The positive vibe is a reflection of the youthful energy that had influenced and indeed set off many of the events that were turning points in the nation's history. And this is a positive sign in which we take great comfort. This sense stems from the feeling of confidence that our youths can and will take positions on national issues and influence opinion to establish truth and justice when it comes to the crunch. If we thought they had gone into a state of torpor we were wrong!

Shahbagh is extremely heartening for many reasons. It is a refreshing change from the past where we saw issues being hogged by either of the two parties, and it is only they who called the shots. Not so now. We have seen the expression of new voice, which motivated people to gravitate towards Shahbagh, and there is a Shabbagh in every nook and cranny of the country, and though it has the tacit support of most of the major student organisations, and the major parties have lent their support to them too, it remains largely a non-partisan youth-



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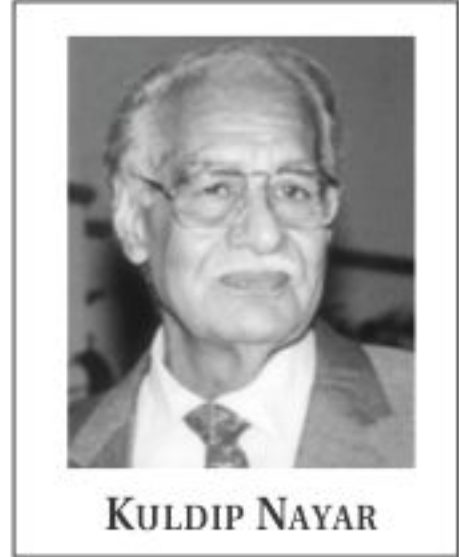
It would do the older generation, particularly the leadership, well to ponder why this has this come about ... what caused Shahbagh? The Quader Mollah verdict was merely the spark. This general awakening has occurred

from a pent up feeling of despondency, of hopelessness, of despair because of our failure to deliver them the Bangladesh that was promised. It is a peaceful outburst against being let down. And I am paraphrasing some of the comments of the young men and women at Shahbagh, who have no truck with any particular political party, but who are acutely conscious of what has and has not been done in the last forty two years of our existence.

There is another message of Shahbagh which I hope our leadership would not fail to recognise. The youths have said enough is enough, that it was time they were given the chance to

BETWEEN THE LINES

Afzal's hanging and its aftermath



I was at the Parliament House when Afzal Guru and a few others attacked it in December 2001. Members like me were furious over the incident and the first suspicion was on Pakistan. It turned out to be true because the three who escaped were from Pakistan. Guru was from Kashmir and hence the same mix-up of Kashmir with Pakistan.

How to sort out the Kashmir problem or, more so, why it has been held hanging thus far are the questions which need to be answered by the rulers, both at Srinagar and New Delhi. State Chief Minister Omar Abdullah shrugs his shoulders and says that it is a long-term problem as if it becomes less pressing by saying so. He says he has attended to the short-term problem of security and law and order following Guru's hanging.

Has Omar Abdullah really done so? Already, most towns in Kashmir are under curfew and there are reports of clashes between the youth and the security forces. The fact that newspapers have been advised not to publish stories about the trouble and the television channels told to black out are enough indication of how the situation is.

The effect on the youth, which are entrapped in a situation not of their doing, is there for everyone to see in their psyche, uneasiness and futureless tomorrow. Some 66 years of uncertainty, accentuated by three wars between India and Pakistan, should have been a long enough period to narrow the distance on the Kashmir problem, if not to find a final settlement. What do the Kashmiris do when

they are considered a problem in the rest of the country? Are they spotted out as Kashmiris who have not accepted their state's accession to India from the heart?

By repeating ad nauseam that Jammu and Kashmir are an integral part of India, the state does not become one. True, independent elections have thrown up the representatives who govern the state. Yet, they are always looking towards New Delhi for its rating. Sheikh Abdullah, who spent 12 years in detention, had to accept an agreement which he assumed would give the state autonomy of sorts. But

Guru, no doubt pronounced guilty by the Supreme Court and the constitutional head, President Pranab Mukherjee, who refused to commute the sentence, was not given the due before being hanged. His family was not given access to him. Even a dictator like General Zia-ul Haq allowed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's family to meet him a day or so before he was hanged. Why not Guru's family?

Guru's family could have been called to New Delhi on some "urgent work" if even a whiff of suspicion was not to be raised. The jail manual lays down meeting of the condemned with

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his assessment turned out to be wrong. I can appreciate the argument that the centre wants to "do something" but I find it hard to believe that the opponents are willingly endorsing what New Delhi does.

Pakistan could have helped the situation ease by not sending terrorists across the border. But why should it oblige New Delhi when from ISI to Hafeez Sayeed, responsible for the 26/11 Mumbai attacks, are demanding the valley's accession to Pakistan? Enemies can sit across the table for talks but so long as they do not give up suspicion and mistrust, they do not reach anywhere. Therefore, the composite talks will take the two anywhere, but the composite approach can. For one year, the Atal Behari Vajpayee government kept the forces at the border but had to withdraw them sheepishly.

Yet it is not understandable why

the family before hanging. It is understandable that the body cannot be handed over to the family, lest another centre of martyrdom should come up at Srinagar. But there would be no harm in allowing the family members to say 'fateha' at the place where he is buried at the Tihar Jail in Delhi.

When the Supreme Court bases its judgment primarily on "the circumstantial evidence," it becomes all the more necessary to commute the death conviction to life sentence. It would have been better if it had been done so. I am against capital punishment. But the life sentence till he breathes last in the jail could have served the end of justice.

If Guru's hanging leads to serious discussion on Kashmir, the entire furor would take some shape. But if this had been in view of the government, it would not have detained the Hurriyat leaders. It is a pity that the whole thing

steer the course of the nation. They demand the baton and, much as we like it or not, the baton must be passed on to them. And in fact it has been passed. They want to define the destiny of the nation, and who are we to deny them that right.

There is no doubt that it is the intense sense of patriotism and commitment to justice that have moved the young people to take the position that they have today. But in seeking justice we must not give the impression that we are coercing the tribunals. That will only help validate the position of those who are trying to paint the tribunals as controversial.

The positive energy of the youth, we like to think, can also be used in other areas too in the future. We feel that they should also, alongside demanding justice, become the force for change in order to bring about an egalitarian state by helping remove all the impediments to national development.

The tremendous potential of youth power, that has been vociferous without being violent, should be employed to bring about a corruption free society, a transparent and accountable government and fair treatment of the underprivileged. It was time for the youths to call for and induce the government to ensure good governance, to prevail upon the parties to abjure violence and confrontation, to cut across party lines on vital national issues, to make politics free of corruption and to put up honest and dedicated people as candidates. That we hope will accord real meaning to 'youth power.'

We recall that youth power had helped the nation to cohere as one entity in 1952, in '62, '69, '71 and in '90, and it has done so now in a manner that has rekindled the spirit of 1971 in all those who believe in a pluralist secular Bangladesh. Such an event reinforces our trust and confidence in our youth and we implore them to become the key agents of change.

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Whether or not a dialogue begins, the experience of being in Parliament House when it was attacked will always stay with me. I recall how tempers were frayed in the Central Hall. Two hours after the first shot was heard, the then minister for parliamentary affairs Pramod Mahajan stood up on a table to announce that MPs could now leave, women first. The members were not panicky even in the first instance but appeared more than relieved when they heard that all was over.

Information and Broadcasting Minister Sushma Swaraj refused to go with the caravan of women. I heard her saying something like, "Let me find out what really happened." By then, the army had arrived. I saw some members thanking Mahajan, including those who had sought his resignation. It was a curious kind of camaraderie, reflecting a unity which the country assumes when confronting an external threat.

Democracy is an idea, a nation's determination that extremists can never understand. They only strengthen the belief that no price is too high to sustain freedom and democracy. I returned to parliament the following day as usual, as others did, to reaffirm our faith in the institution and to warn the assailants and their masters to keep their hands off.

Still the anger against Pakistan was voiced practically by every member. I often wonder if Pakistan is a solution or a problem.