

The commitment of the martyred intellectuals

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THE Martyred intellectuals of 1971 had their differences from one another, but they had one thing in common and that was why they were killed. This was their patriotism. Patriotism is a virtue as well as a curse. It drives the patriot to act in the interest of the people, and proves to be a curse for him when it makes him suffer. Patriotism can also be, and often is, as Samuel Johnson has famously put it, the last refuge of a scoundrel. To be sure, the Pakistani army and their local collaborators called themselves patriots and displayed what that virtue can turn into when handled by scoundrels. These men believed in the ideology of the Pakistani state which was Capitalistic in character, hidden under its Islamic garb. They perpetrated one of the worst genocides in modern history. But the patriotism of the martyred intellectuals was entirely different; it was pro-people. Their love was not for the state, not so much for the land they were born in as for the people they lived among. In contrast the protectors of the Pakistani state wanted occupancy of the land, annihilating if necessary, all its owners. The people fought for their liberty and the intellectuals joined them — not as leaders but as fellow sufferers. They knew the world and wanted to change it for the better, ensuring liberty for all.

These intellectuals were nationalists with socialist inclination. It is not at all true that all intellectuals in East Bengal were pro-people. There were many who supported the Pakistani state for personal gain. Some were under the fond delusion that Pakistan was an ideological state of Islamic nature. And it was against the backdrop of the activities of the pro-Pakistanis that the martyred intellectuals looked very different. The list of martyrs in East Bengal right from the inception of the new state consisted mainly of the socialists, whom the state power preferred to call communists in the hope of inciting public hatred.

In 1971 the masters of the state machinery had promptly identified these progressive intellectuals as the driving force behind the people's uprising for liberation. At the beginning of the 1971 genocide they killed the people indiscriminately, and near the end of their unsuccessful operation found it necessary to eliminate the intellectuals, selectively. They had at least two palpable motives for doing so. Firstly, there was the traditional hatred of the brawn for the brains. Secondly, they wanted to maim the new state that was emerging by removing as many intellectually advanced persons as they could lay their hands on. Mixed in this was the motive of revenge.

Maybe the genocidal activities were accelerated by another political factor. This was the state power's apprehension that the idea of linguistic nationalism inculcated by Bengalis might spread among the non-Punjabi nationalities in West Pakistan, leading to total disintegration of Pakistan. They feared that the Sindhis, the Beluchis and the Pathans, and even the Mohajirs might take their cue from the Bengalis and rise in revolt. The fear was not unfounded, for the oppressed

Nationalities were becoming increasingly aware of the domination of the Punjabi military junta. Tikka Khan who came to become Martial Law Administrator and Governor had had the personal knowledge of the rebelliousness of the Beluchis on whom he had cast himself like a butcher. The local collaborators, the Al-badrs and the Al-shams in particular, who had done the job of killing the intellectuals, knew them personally. They acted at the instance of the army but had their own motive for action, which was their hatred for the socialists. In this respect the field operators and their masters were kith and kin. And being what they were both had their rationale for this hatred. After all, the socialists had been the principal force behind all the anti-state upsurges in East Bengal. The government as well as their foreign mentors had seen a communist conspiracy behind the flare-up of the state language movement. Although their diagnosis in that case was wrong, they were right in thinking that the people's uprising in 1969 would not have occurred but for the militancy of the leftists led by Moulana Bhasani. It is also a matter of historical record that because of their feeling that the nationalist movement for autonomy had been taken over by the 'extremists' that the Americans had declined to support it in 1971. By extremists they meant the leftists. The American disapproval of the setting up of an independent Bangladesh can be explained, quite easily, by their appre-

hension of its likely veering to the left.

As the war broke out the supportive Indian authority too did not want leftist elements to be recruited in the Mukti Bahini. The guiding consideration was the same as that of the Americans. On Indira Gandhi's list of worries the communist extremists figured quite prominently. With India as its host, the nationalist leadership of the Provisional Government of Bangladesh took particular care to keep the socialists away from the armed struggle for liberation. There were among the ministers men like Khondakar Mostaque Ahmed who were not only non-communist but positively and self-proclaimed anti-communist. The radically anti-left Mujib Bahini that was hurriedly formed under Indian auspices

expected to be prevailed upon to compromise the Moulana, they feared, would remain beyond their reach. This, in fact, is what Ghulam Azam, the arch collaborator, had said to an audience he addressed in Lahore in mid-1971. Thus the leftists were exposed to attacks from the reactionary nationalists as well as the fascist Pakistani rulers and their heinous Bengali collaborators.

Because of disunity among themselves the socialists were not in the leadership of the national liberation movement which was taken over by the nationalists. Indeed they were in a precarious situation throughout the period of liberation war and even after. This is illustrated by the animosity Tajuddin Ahmed, the Head of the Provisional Government, had to encounter. Being a

men engaged in a dastardly mission of killing Tajuddin Ahmed, whom he had known to be a rather quiet and very sober political leader, was the most hateful of adversaries.

It was natural to expect that Tajuddin would be present on the historic occasion of the surrender of the Pakistani Generals on December 16. But he was not. The only plausible explanation of this disappointing absence is the lack of security of his person in Dhaka, particularly because of presence of Mujib Bahini boys who, it was feared, might take advantage of the anarchic situation prevailing at that time to settle their scores with him. In fact Tajuddin himself had confirmed this reason in a conversation with one of his friends in his Mujibnagar office. We recall that he

by gunmen sent to his prison-cell by Mustaque. This was how the career of an intellectual-turned political leader came to an in the very land which he had so earnestly fought to liberate.

The martyred intellectuals had joined Tajuddin and the entire population in building up the collective dream of a social and political system which was outlined in the four state principles written in the constitution of 1972. That dream, however, has not materialised and the state principles themselves have been driven away. The tragic failure of the state to ensure the emancipation of the people was inevitable, given the fact that nationalist political leadership was committed, not unlike the Pakistani leadership they had overthrown, to capitalism as distinguished from socialism. The capitalist ideology does not believe in You and I, its faith is in I or You. And as Thomas Carlyle, himself no lover of socialism, had put it in his nineteenth-century observation, capitalism develops a system in which cash payment is the sole nexus of man to man. The system does not care for morality and, indeed, thrives on submission of all human considerations, including the moral ones, to the heartless autocracy of profit-making. The toiling masses, without whose productive labour the rich would have been obliged to eat their money instead of food suffer and groan.

Capitalism has not been a stranger to this land of ours. But what the post-independence Bangladesh witnessed was the violent liberation of its forces. The non-Bengali industrialists and business men had left, abandoning their properties. These the ruling class grabbed through means both legal and foul. Crafty men smuggled goods, practiced fraud, occupied land and public property, stole money from banks and became fabulously rich. This was Capitalism of trade and plunder and not of investment and production. Compradors and touts flourished to the detriment of collective prosperity. Patriotism continued to decline. And all these were made possible because in the post-independence Bangladesh the freedom fighters including the patriotic intellectuals were unable to play the role expected of them. Needless to say, the state has remained as anti-people as before, if not worse.

The martyred intellectuals have left us a legacy and an obligation. The obligation is to carry forward the struggle for liberation. The nationalists have done what they were supposed to, and capable of, doing. It is no use blaming them, because their commitment lay elsewhere. The failure has been of the socialists. As a whole they have failed to provide leadership to the war of national liberation. Had they woken up to that responsibility, the result most certainly would have been different. Part of them was in disarray owing to their inability to join the war in the manner and to the degree they should have done. Some of them tried, but were prevented by the nationalists, and a large number was later eliminated firstly by the Mujib Bahini and later, by its successor, the Rakkhi Bahini. The well-organised group was the Communist Party of Bangladesh. Its failure was tragic. At one point the party looked like an appendage to the ruling Awami League, having decided to forge an unnatural unity with it.

What the people wanted was signified by the phenomenal way in which young men and women vied with one another to join the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, set up by a faction of the Mujib Bahini. Tactfully, the party had pledged itself to establish scientific socialism in the country. Its voice was loud, its pledge hollow, and it flourished, for the time being, in the vacuum created by the relative absence of genuine socialists in the political field. The state was, as it has been before, openly hostile to the leftists. In relation to them, it followed the carrot and stick approach, and its success in silencing the voice demanding a social revolution was not unnoticeable.

But there is neither room nor reason to despair. Because to despair, would mean surrender to the anarchic and exploitative rule of the powers that are causing misery to the people and violating the fundamental human rights. As a people we are a great survivor. We have gone through disasters — natural as well as man-made — and have stood up. We owe it to the martyrs and to ourselves to strive to establish a liberated state and society. They died so that we could live, and we must live fully to prove that they have not died in vain.

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Munier Choudhury



Serajuddin Hossain



Dr. Alim Chowdhury



Mofazzal Haidar Chaudhury



Shahidullah Kaiser



Nizamuddin Ahmed



Anwar Pasha



Syed Nazmul Haque



Syed Abdul Mannan



Dr. Abul Kalam Azad



Dr. MAM Faizul Mahi



Dr. MA Khair



Zahirul Haq



Selina Parvin



Dr. Santosh Bhattacharya



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Anudvaipayan Bhattacharya



Altaf Mahmud

defied the authority of the Provisional Government and acted upon the objective of keeping the leftists under surveillance, and, if necessary, eliminating them. The hidden enemy, they decided, was no less harmful than the open one. Leaving the Pakistani hordes to be encountered by the Mukti Bahini, they took upon themselves the responsibility of handling their socialist foe.

Intellectually, the socialists were more advanced than the nationalists, and their participation in the liberation movement was in no way less significant than that of the nationalists. In the eyes of the Pakistani collaborators, Moulana Bhasani was a more dangerous enemy than even Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, because whereas the Sheikh could be

strong nationalist with socialist leaning, he was perilously vulnerable. The Mujib Bahini activists hated and defied him and the Pakistani killers vilified him, calling him Hindu-born.

There is no reason to doubt that to the Pakistani army he was the worst of the trouble-makers, and they made no secret of this. Sardar Fazlul Karim, a leftist intellectual, has been a witness to their outpouring. In mid-1971 he was picked up by the army and, in an unconscious act of their kindness that saved him from brutal murder by the Al-badrs, was sent to prison. During his fearful interrogation he was abused by an army officer who called him and the likes of him 'the bastard sons of Tajuddin.' Sadar Fazlul Karim recalls that he felt that to these

returned to Dhaka with his cabinet six days later, on December 22, by which time the security situation had improved. The cause for the absence of General M.A. G. Osmani from the theatre of that momentous happening has also been attributed to the same problem of security. He too was not on good terms with Mujib Bahini.

Tajuddin's rise in prestige was well-earned, but discomfiture did not leave him. It is not without significance that after independence the effectiveness of his role continued to decline. In 1974 he lost his cabinet post and in 1975 became the odd man out, declining to join the one-party system of governance. After the August mayhem he found himself in prison and was, eventually, assassinated