



Of hopes and disappointments

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AS I look back at the last 43 years, I am filled with both hopes and disappointments. For a nation, the time-span may not be long, but is not too short either. The distance we have traversed is good enough to give an insight into the successes and failures in our efforts to transform our dream of 'Sonar Bangla' into a reality.

In his intensely personal memoir 'The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh, Archer Blood (US Consul General in 1970-71)' described his moving experience of the birth pangs of Bangladesh. His stay in then-East Pakistan enabled him to feel and comprehend the hopes and aspirations of the people of this part of the country and made him deeply sympathetic to their cause. In a candid manner he chronicled the events, which he himself witnessed, leading to the fateful night of March 25. He saw with his own eyes the die being cast and forces of terror and evil being unleashed. His host of wireless messages to Washington, depicting the reality and pleading for intervention, fell, on deaf ears. In his 'White House years', Henry Kissinger (then National Security Advisor) himself said, "Our Consul General in Dacca was sending cables to Washington urging a public American stand against Pakistani repression.... The cables were given a low classification ... Our Ambassador in New Delhi, Kenneth Keating, reported to Washington that he was 'deeply shocked at the massacre' and was 'greatly concerned at the United States' vulnerability to damaging association with a reign of military terror'.... He urged that the United States promptly, publicly and prominently deplore this brutality... Nixon ordered our Consul General transferred from Dacca and he ridiculed Keating for having been 'taken over by the Indians'.

The raison d'être of our liberation war could not be fully understood initially by many nations until full facts were known. People like Archer Blood who lived here and knew this land and its people could comprehend it. They were stunned when the military terror was let loose.

We gained our liberation at a heavy cost. The human toll and sufferings were enormous. Millions of people were killed and brutalised - lakhs of women raped-millions of home-steads looted, burnt or vandalised. Dhaka University was made a special target of operation -- students and teachers were shot or mowed down in cold blood. Nearly 10million people moved across the border into neighbouring India to save their lives. Those remained inside the country had to live from day to day in constant fear.

The price of freedom was indeed heavy. This should cause us to be conscious of our immeasurable debt to those who made their supreme sacrifices to liberate this land and of our avowed obligation to requite our debt we owe to them -- to achieve their and our dream -- the dream of a society 'in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social, will be secured for all citizens'. The question that stares us in the fall is -- what gains have we made so far in our journey of



43 years towards our cherished goal?

It did not obviously please us when we used to hear Bangladesh being labelled as 'a bottom-less basket' or 'an international basket' or 'an international basket case' -- a denigrating term used by Henry Kissinger. There was widespread scepticism in the donor community about any silver lining in the Bangladesh economy. In 1976 two noted foreign economists, Faalland (Norway) and Parkinson (Britain), in their article 'Bangladesh: The Test Case for Development', expressed serious misgivings about any possible economic rejuvenation for Bangladesh. They made no secret of their view that the Bangladesh economy was in doldrums and beyond redemption. They observed, "If development could be made successful in Bangladesh, there can be little doubt that it could be made to succeed anywhere else". It is interesting that the same economists have revised their view and marvelled at the appreciable changes that have occurred in the economy. In their new article "Bangladesh: The Test Case for Development Revisited" (2007), they said, "At this point with three decades and more of experience of limited and chequered progress, sustained development in Bangladesh appears to be within reach, thought far from assured." In 1972 The World Bank viewed the Bangladesh situation as desperate, observing that "even under the best of circumstances, Bangladesh constitutes a critical and complex development problem. The population is poor (per capita income of \$50 to \$70, a figure which has not risen over the past 20 years), overcrowding (population density is nearly 1,400 per square mile) and becoming more so (population is growing at 3 per cent per annum) and largely illiterate (under 20 per cent

literacy rate)." It is the World Bank again which has, in its report of 2014, (carried by the Press recently) termed Bangladesh's current socio-economic progress as remarkable and beyond expectation. They have observed that this progress has been due to a combination of a variety of factors -- accelerated GDP growth, increase in agricultural productivity, rise in remittances from expatriates, rise in exports, improvements in health services, rise in literacy rate, women development, interventions by BRAC, Grameen Bank and various other NGOs and micro-credit organisations. Bangladesh appears to be poised to become a middle income country by 2021.

It was heartening to read a news story on another report of the World Bank that came out last month (Prothom Alo of 4.11.14). The report showed the position of Bangladesh vis-a-vis India under some important social indicators in a comparative chart of 1971 and 2011. The statistics show that Bangladesh appears to be ahead of India in life expectancy (Bangladesh 69, India 66), child mortality rate (Bangladesh 37, India 44 per thousand), birth rate (Bangladesh 2.2%, India 2.5%), women education (Bangladesh 80%, India 74%), vaccination (Bangladesh 96%, India 72%). It would be more satisfying if you look at these indicators against the position of each in 1971. In 1971, life expectancy, child mortality, birth rate, women education and vaccination in Bangladesh were 39, 150, 6.9%, 27% and 1% respectively. The difference is indeed heart-warming.

We should not fail to notice significant increase in agricultural productivity and food production despite continuing shrinkage of agricultural land and chronic natural calamities.

Research, innovation and extension are being given increased fillip to help agriculture compete successfully with the growing population. Noticeable changes in the scenario of education are also particularly stimulating. The rate of literacy for both male and female has gone up dramatically in recent years to 77% and 80% against 44% and 27% respectively in 1971. To our delight, a number of innovative and corrective measures have been taken by the government in this sector to remove the ills in the existing system. They include free distribution of text books for primary and secondary students, holding of classes and examinations in due time, introduction of creative questions for examinations, publication of results at the scheduled time etc.

It lifts our heart when we see these positive aspects of Bangladesh. But our heart sinks when the picture loses colour and straits darkening. I would like to touch briefly on three areas which disconcert many people.

Good governance is a since qua non for any good government, more so for a democratic polity. People aspire for a government which is responsible, judicious and non-discriminating -- which looks upon all citizens equally and has their welfare at heart. Their hopes is for that kind of government whom they can approach without reservation for redress of their grievances, for delivery of services or for dispensation of justice. To ensure good governance it is important to see that the divisiveness in the society is done away with, the rule of law is finally, established, the institutions like police, judiciary, Anti-Corruption Commission etc. are strengthened and their functioning without outside influence or interference is ensured. The imperative of

placement of right people in right places in the administration needs to be recognised to cure the country of the present predicament.

There is serious concern in all circles about the ever expanding paws of corruption. It appears to have become almost all-pervasive, infiltrating into even such areas where it was almost unknown. We shudder at the extent to which corruption is reported by TIB and the press to have spread and started eating into the vitals of the country. Corruption is no longer confined to bribery alone, but beyond -- into gross abuse of entrusted power for private gains and distribution of political patronage. The administrative machinery has sadly become controversial -- being seen not as neutral, but as subservient to political interests. According to TIB, people in general, think that the administration is riddled with corruption and that its accountability is more to the political party is power than to the government. There is a widespread impression that bribe and political influence are the two key means for acquisition of any profitable work including tender and for pecuniary benefits. 'Politicisation' of corruption is making the situation worse, making corruption more difficult to control. It is alarming to see quite a few disquieting reports in the press on unexplained acquisition of wealth by a number of political leaders. The wide gap in the assets shown in the affidavits submitted by a number of candidates for parliamentary elections in 2008 and 2014 has been very startling. The advantage of control over public resources for a party in power is also making free and fair elections difficult. Victory in elections is being perceived regrettably as an opportunity to gain control over public resources and a handle to distribute political patronage among party supporters through tender or lucrative work. In the interest of ten country and for a better tomorrow it is time for all political parties to sink their differences on this vital issue and put up a United Front against corruption. The civil society should also come forward to mobilise strong public opinion against this menace. In combating corruption ideas like strengthening ACC, upgrading it to a constitutional body with full independent character, appointing Ombudsman under Article 77 of the Constitution merit serious consideration.

The most serious concern of our people and our development partners is in the area of politics, democracy and election. They had expected pursuit of healthy politics, responsible conduct of political parties, successful operation of democracy, practice of democratic norms and values and meaningful elections. Our experience, on the whole has not been happy. For the most part of our history democracy has not taken wings, democratic practices have not taken root, elections barring a few have remained questionable and healthy electoral culture elusive. It is in our interest to see that the democratic institutions in our country are strengthened and public confidence is restored in the electoral and political process.

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... and the Defeat

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Thirdly, we were indifferent to the prevailing urge for liberation in the other oppressed nationalities of the bureaucratic-capitalistic state of Pakistan, i.e. the Sindhis, the Beluchis, the Pathans and the Mohajirs. Had we given timely support to them, our own struggle would have been different with the likely refusal of the non-Punjabis to participate in the genocide of the Bengalis. Perhaps, there existed the possibility of a massive and united uprising against the Punjabi clique that ruled over Pakistan. Had we met these deficiencies, the story as well as the outcome would have been different and the victory would have been total.

The question that needs to be asked and answered is who is it that defeated us even after we had vanquished the mighty Pakistani army and its cohorts. There are those among the liberals who take the easy view that it is the Pakistani ideology of Islam that has, willy-nilly, subverted our much-cherished spirit of liberation, and that this had happened owing to Islamic proclivities in a section of the ruling class. To be sure, the Pakistanis were not without ideological commitments; but to suggest that they were promoters of Islam is to give them undue credit. Because they were in no way Islamic ideologues, and the fact of the matter is that most of those they fell upon in Bangladesh were better Muslims than they were. These killers were crass materialists, and the ideology they were firmly wedded to was of Capitalist exploitation.

Capitalism was not a Pakistani invention. It had prevailed before; its ideals were practiced in the sub-continent by the British colonialists. These were subsequently adopted by the Pakistani rulers and put into

operation in all their governmental activities, including the genocide in 1971. Capitalism is anti-people; it has to be. We in Bangladesh have vanquished the Pakistani occupation army, but not their ideology.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries we were British Indians; in 1947 we turned into Pakistanis; and after 1947 we have, finally, become Bangladeshis. The flags have changed and the state has gotten smaller in size, but inside the super structural façade the character of the state has remained unchanged. The old rulers have been replaced by their successors; but the relationship between the rulers and the ruled remains as of before. It is one of exploitation guaranteed by the continuation of the state's bureaucratic-capitalistic nature.

The pre-1947 bourgeois leaders of the struggle for independence sought to drive away the British rulers with the expectation of gaining state power. They were not interested in overhauling the social system. On the contrary, they wanted to keep it as it was, because it suited their purpose excellently. The decisive force within the Independence Movement lay in the antagonism between an occupying foreign bourgeoisie and the one rising within the country. During the process of that struggle a contradiction developed between the advanced Hindu bourgeoisie and the advancing Muslim bourgeoisie, resulting, ultimately, in the setting up of two separate states of Hindustan and Pakistan. In Pakistan the Bengalis were deprived and exploited; they wanted a change in their fate and a new struggle began, the leadership of which was taken over by the Bengali bourgeoisie. And it was this new struggle that brought Bangladesh into being. The nationalistic leadership and the people

whom it led did not, however, share the same agenda of expectations. The leadership wanted prosperity for itself; the people expected an improvement in their intolerable conditions of living. The two were contrary to each other. In the absence of a social revolution, the rich in Bangladesh continued to be richer, with the poor getting poorer by the day.

The independence of 1947 made its way through communal riots and that of 1971 was achieved through a people's war. Although the ruling class would remain unwilling to admit it, the 1971 war was in reality a peasants' war. The peasants fought and suffered and were, eventually, disappointed. The four decades of the progress of Bangladesh can hardly cover up the history of the misery of the peasants. Uprooted by hostility of the ruling class as well as that of nature, they have flocked in the towns in large numbers, only to find themselves living sub-human slum conditions. That the economy has not broken down is due not to the entrepreneurial undertakings of the rich but to the hard labour put in by working men and women in the agricultural, manufacturing and foreign-exchange-remittance sectors.

As far as governance is concerned what one experiences daily on the streets of the capital is symptomatic of the anarchy that threatens to engulf the country. While private cars overflow on the narrow streets, public transport remains scarce and risky. Bribes are openly demanded by the police and readily paid by the drivers. When someone is hit by a running bus or a car, sympathetic hands are slow in helping the victim. But beating up of the driver and the helper in case they fail to flee is as spontaneous as is the

vandalizing of innocent vehicles plying nearby. Happenings such as these are not unrelated to one another and they encapsulate the misery, the insecurity and the discontent of the public.

History tells us that, after an initial hesitation in view of the pressure of public expectation of the people, the state accepted, even if surreptitiously, and privatisation as one of its guiding principles. To take examples: Nationalized industries were sold to influential parties at throw-away prices. Private Banks were set up and some of the government-run banks were privatized. Public hospitals lost their capacity to serve the public and health-care became a marketable commodity. Education has ceased to be a fundamental human right and has become a privilege to be paid for by those who can afford to do so.

Has the state failed? No, it has not. It has been serving the interests of the ruling class dutifully and well and in doing that it has become crueler with every change of government. The old machine hurts as it hurtles. The law-and-order situation continues to worsen. Society is dominated by local grabbers and goons who enjoy the freedom of war-lords puffed up by political support. Habitually, the ruthless capitalist system promotes self-indulgence, profit-making, and, above all, alienation. It remains engaged in transforming everything, including human relationships into commodities.

We are a marginalized people. The honour we had gained through people's victory in 1971 has largely worn out, so much so that it is tempting to call us incorrigibly cursed. The truth, however, is that we have been defeated by a system and its ideology.

Yet there is no reason to despair. We must live and be respected, not only by

others but also by our own selves. The collective struggle is on. We drove out the 'invincible' Pakistani army in 1971. We brought down a dictatorial regime in 1990. Unfailingly, there has been local resistance to anti-people governmental acts. The people of Fulbari have not allowed their land to be spoiled by open-pit coal mining. The Osmany Uddyan in the capital has been saved from destruction. Then there has been the relentless countrywide movement forged by a people's committee against government's designs to hand over our mineral resources and the management of ports and electricity to transnational corporations. Such achievements are many, and none of them is insignificant, indicating as they do people's wide-awake vigilance.

Although the Shahbagh youth upsurge did not last long, owing to the limited nature of its objective, its spontaneity, youthfulness and commitment are not to be lost sight of. It assures us, that the spirit of liberation is alive and also, not less importantly, that the people in general, and the youth in particular, are prepared to rise up, should the occasion arrive.

It would be helpful to remind ourselves that considered in the perspective of our continued struggle for liberation we had won in 1971 really a battle and not an in-itself-complete war. To have thought that the victory was complete and that the war had ended was a grave mistake for those who really believe in liberation, because liberation requires more than transfer of state power; it calls for a social revolution. The nationalists were satisfied; they had achieved what they had pledged to themselves; but the socialists should have carried the war forward -- a war that neither began on 25 March 1971 nor ended

on 16 December the same year. In fact, it can never end. For in essence it is a continuous onward journey in which stations are not the destination, but successive stages of success. In failing to move ahead, we, all of us, have allowed the existing social order, shaken though it was, to defeat us. The struggle is really between the forces of life and those of death and we cannot afford to accept a humiliating existence under subjugation. Surrender would signify death, collectively speaking. Reforms will not do, because it is the system itself which is wrong. Corrections will only help it operate in the way it is doing now.

Much depends on the youth. They constitute the future and must build their own future too. Occasional outbursts would not be enough; what is required is a sustained and organized movement as continuation of the people's war of liberation. It is imperative for the urban youth to unite themselves politically with the working class in towns and villages and carry on the struggle. The right-thinking people owe it to the country as well as to themselves to help the movement gain momentum and move ahead.

The ruling classes are complacent because they neither believe in democracy nor in an accountable governance process. The slumberous liberals find it disturbing to look into the root of the malady. The witty cynics would promote despair and unwittingly play into hands of the plunderers that thrive on public apathy. But those who are patriotic and democratic can afford to be neither satisfied nor indifferent. History will not forgive them if they do. Forces of defeat must not be allowed to eat up our achievements.

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