

Islets of memory



AHMED SOFA
THERE is no event bigger than the Liberation War in the history of the Bangali nation. A hundred years from now, the Liberation War will still remain alive in discussion. The true import of the birth of a language-based nation among Bangalis will be analysed from different perspectives. It was an event of immense significance. Like our soil, our sky, our rivers, our sea, our mountains, the Liberation War will remain forever alive in our history. It seems to me that even those of us who took part in the Liberation War and experienced it very closely in many different ways -- as observers and as participants -- do not quite grasp clearly its true worth.

Events that leave a long term impact

around three hundred thousand. With the flood of Bangali refugees, the life of Agartala natives came to a standstill. Prices of goods skyrocketed. Coming from the then East Pakistan, we were totally surprised at the prevailing high prices.

Let me give an example. In 1971, a boiled egg would cost 4 anna, (25 pice), in Dhaka. In Agartala hotels, I found that a boiled egg would cost 1 Taka 4 anna. In any case, let me come back to my topic.

One day, we, 10-12 youths, spent the whole evening in a discussion meeting. None of us ate anything in the afternoon. When the meeting wrapped up, we went to the kitchen (*langarkhana*) of MBB College Hostel where we also lodged, and found that the tiffin period was over. We were hungry as bears. So we had to go to Agartala town to find something to eat.

When we reached there, we found all eateries were closed. We became acquainted with a hotel owner. He had not closed his shop. We went in. The food was finished, he told us. He would have food cooked for us if we paid double.

We did not have a second choice. The man went to the back room and called to the cook to wake up. The woman had dozed off. Rattled by the disruption in sleep, she asked: "What's the matter at such a late hour?" The man said: "Joy Bangla customers have come. Need to cook a meal for them." The woman said angrily: "To hell with Joy Bangla or Khoy Bangla! I can't work at this late hour."

Hearing 'Khoy Bangla' from her hurt us more than it angered. Granted, we were refugees. Still, how could one insult the word that stood for our liberty! Needless to say, none of us could make himself eat that night.

Let me now come to the second incident. There is an alley in Calcutta, called Antony Bagan Lane, situated between Shealda and Rajabajar. Walk through Sir P.C. Roy Road, move past the Surya Sen Street northward and there you will find the Antony Bagan Lane. I had to go to there day in and day out.

Muktadhara office of Chitta Babu was at 6, Antony Bagan Lane. He was printing my book '*Jagroto Bangladesh*.' I used to go there for checking the proofs. I met Mazharul Islam at 9, Antony Bagan Lane. We became friends.

Mr. Islam owned a leftist publishing house. He was a member of CPM and quite close to *Kakababu* Comrade Muzaffar Ahmed. We were introduced to *Kakababu* via Mr. Islam. It was Mr. Islam who would help us if we faced



Ahmed Sofa (June 30, 1943 - July 28, 2011)

any trouble. His house was something of a sanctuary for us. I and Naren Da (Professor Naren Biswas) would go to his house at any time, with or without a reason.

I set foot in Calcutta in the month of July. Every day, as I walked down the P.C. Roy Road into Antony Bagan, I would see a Bangladeshi flag flying on a bamboo pole beside the banyan tree Shani Puja site. Not the present flag with a red sun on a green ground. It was the flag of the original design created by Shibnarayan Das with the map of Bangladesh in it. No one would lower the flag even in the evening.

One day, I was returning late in the evening and found that someone had lit a big candle at the bottom of the flag. Whoever it might be, there were people in Calcutta who would feel so

strongly for our national flag! I felt so moved! Every day, as I walked by, I would stand for a few minutes beside the flag in silence. For me it was like a private prayer.

At the end of July, it began raining heavily. One day, I saw the flag had faded with all the rainwater. No one was lighting a candle anymore. Day after day, the flag rotted in the pouring rain and slowly became tattered. I was deeply struck witnessing the sorry state of our national flag.

At that point, the future of the Liberation War of Bangladesh was on a somewhat shaky ground. Where the War was heading to and what fate it would bear for us was anybody's guess. In my mind, I would liken the tattered flag to our precarious fate.

At the end of August, as I was return-

ing from Antony Bagan, I found the pole standing bare, with no sign of the flag. It hurt me so profoundly that I wept all night.

Now, the third incident. It was December 16. The previous night had passed in deep tension. The result of the war was up for endless speculation. Everybody was saying that surrender of Pakistani army was just round the corner. My body was aching severely. Mainly to freshen myself up, I went to Darbhanda Bhaban of Calcutta University. The head office of the Teachers Assistance Committee for Bangladesh was in that Bhaban. Shri Dilip Chakrabarty (who later became MP during the Janata govt.) was the General Secretary of the Teachers Assistance Committee. Dilip Babu was very warm-hearted and tender to me. He would always give us sundry assignments and pay some money in return. The assignments were pretexts for helping us with some money while taking great care not to hurt our sense of dignity. I remember with sincere gratitude that, for a span of time, the money Dilip Babu gave us was the sole means of subsistence for the motley crew of a family that we made in Udayan Dormitory. I was a special favourite of Dilip Babu and he trusted me. At times he would go beyond his means in trying to help me out.

Let me now come to December 16. It was 10:00 AM or 10:30 AM -- or it could be 11:00AM. Suddenly a loud bang was heard at the Presidency College corner -- as if a thousand fire-crackers had exploded at once. Panic spread rapidly in the Darbhanga Bhaban. Some thought that Naxals were bombing in the streets.

Dilip Babu was outside. He rushed in and said: "It's no frippery! Dhaka has fallen; boys are celebrating with firecrackers."

At once, joy swept all over the Darbhanga Bhaban. I was the only Bangladeshi present there. Everyone would come to hug me. I was also responding mechanically. But a different thought was running through my mind. We had been fighting the Pakistanis since 1948. Our fight had turned into a fight between India and Pakistan. The Pakistani army surrendered not to us, but to the Indian military. I joined the celebration with everyone else. Dhaka has fallen, I said to myself -- everything is fine. We have entered a new struggle.

The writer was an eminent litterateur and activist.

Translated by Tahmidal Zami. Source: *Dainik Ittefaq*, December 16, 1995.

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in history do not appear in their full shape all at once. Nor can the people of today imagine how the futurity would assess the event.

It would not be impossible to compose an epic based on the extent to which I saw, knew and experienced the Liberation War. This is not the era of epics though. Nor is there the right milieu and occasion for writing an epic. I only write -- on different occasions -- bits and pieces of memories that flash into my mind now and then in an attempt to relieve myself.

I will express only very personal feelings in the present text. These are entirely my own feelings; one may not be quite able to relate them directly to the larger course of events of the War. Yet it is true that it was the circumstances of the War of Liberation that gave rise to these personal feelings.

Let me recount the first feeling. We -- around 1.5 million Bangladeshis -- took refuge in Agartala, the capital of Tripura. The population of Agartala was

"Dream weavers unite"

SHIFTING IMAGES



MILIA ALI

SPEAKING at London's Science Museum recently, physicist Stephen Hawking said: "The human failing I would most like to correct is aggression. It

may have had survival advantage in caveman days, to get more food, territory or a partner with whom to reproduce, but now it threatens to destroy us all." The scientist, who was hosting a museum tour for the winner of London's official guest of honour contest, also asserted that the human quality he would like to magnify most is empathy. "It brings us together in a peaceful loving state."

Interestingly, Hawking, a world-renowned cosmologist, did not predict an astral disaster as the likely cause of the human race's extinction! Rather, he singled out aggressive and selfish behaviour as the gravest threat we face. While this may not be a fresh revelation to many, I believe it is worth reflecting on. The idea becomes especially rele-

vant in the backdrop of last week's brutal murder of author, blogger and progressive thinker Avijit Roy, by an religious extremist group near Dhaka University's bustling Teacher Student Center. Since much has been discussed and written about the new wave of religious fanaticism and the culture of intolerance that are creating deep fissures in Bangladeshi society, I would like to focus on the human and social dimensions of Avijit's ruthless killing.

As a matter of fact, it's an eerie coincidence that I happened to be in the same spot as the killing the night before the tragic incident. While confidently walking back to my car after a singing performance in the nearby Bangla Academy, I was encouraged to see the enthusiastic crowds enjoying the annual book fair festival held in the Academy premises. Not once did the thought cross my mind that my safety was in jeopardy. On the contrary I found comfort in the chatter and laughter around me. Hence, the question puzzling me is: "Were my instincts totally wrong?" If not, how did a seemingly safe haven turn into a site for a brutal assassination? More importantly, why did the crowd not intercede when Avijit and his wife Bonya were being assaulted? There was

a time when protecting a human life was considered to be a noble act, admired and celebrated by society. But today the common reaction seems to be: "I don't want to get involved -- lest I am victimised too." What has caused this seismic shift in values? Is it only fear of recrimination and backlash? Or is it much more?

Perhaps the overall bankruptcy of compassion, trust and empathy is an extension of the country's deeply flawed and polarised social and political system. The State's use of extrajudicial methods to maintain its monopoly of power and the opposition's tactics of spreading terror and insecurity have exposed the masses to enormous injustices, violation of human rights, crumbling social cohesiveness and fractured personal relationships. The shocking indifference of the crowd and the abdication of responsibility by the police, who watched Avijit and Bonya being hacked by machetes and cleavers, are indicative of a fragmented and broken society where widespread cynicism has become the modus operandi. People seem to accept crisis without weighing the implications, even cost to human life. They are no longer concerned about how to address and rectify injustices, only how to side step or

survive them.

I am in no way justifying the callous behaviour of the people and the police who watched Avijit's murder as if it were a spectacle. But I do believe that their insensitivity is indicative of how despair merges with the notion of a future that is no longer worth fighting for. A kind of psychic numbing coupled with a total disregard for the suffering of others. A helpless resignation in which self-preservation is the only interest that matters.

Going back to Stephen Hawking's observation about the destructive nature of aggression and the salutary affect of empathy, one may ask: is it possible to trigger a positive change in Bangladesh's social behaviour and attitudes? Especially given the current context of lawlessness, public disenchantment with political leaders and low level of civic engagement? Or have things moved so far that the process is irreversible? Cynics tell us that only heroes who dwell in myths and novels can reform a society that has been festering deep wounds for long. At times I am inclined to believe them because I, too, become a hostage to hopelessness.

But then ... I bounce back and make a conscious decision to hold up my

flickering candle for those who are fighting for freedom of speech, freedom to practice the religion of their choice, freedom to walk the streets without being beaten, stabbed or gunned down. People like me may not be heroes but

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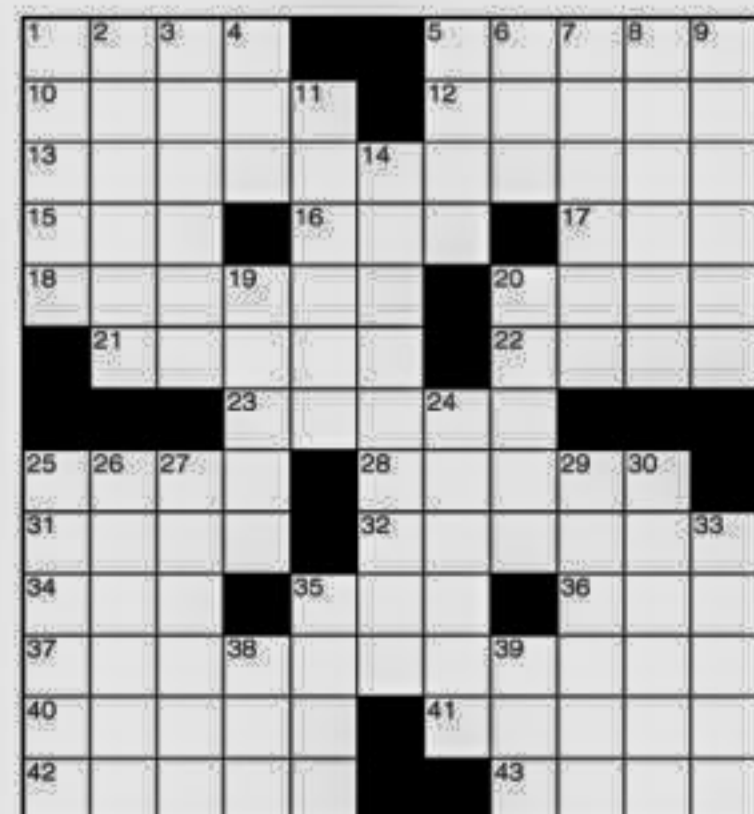
we have the potential to nurture and spread the dreams of the "Avijits." And everything is possible when "dream weavers" unite!

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CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

- ACROSS**
- Butte's kin
 - Presentation aid
 - Bowl game setting
 - Olympian in a sled
 - Island east of Florida
 - Have lunch
 - Lion's home
 - Playing marble
 - Less fresh
 - "Modern Family" dad
 - Squirrel's find
 - Holm and McKellen
 - Thai or Korean
 - Goatee setting
 - Door sign
 - Feedbag fill
 - Reacted to pains
 - Slight, in slang
 - Lifeboat need
 - Maturity
 - Island south of Cuba
 - Moved laterally
 - Ship bottoms
 - Alex Halax book
 - Away from the wind

- DOWN**
- Wizards
 - Book blunders
 - Washington airport
 - TV's Curry
 - Highlands family
 - "What'd you say?"
 - Christie of mysteries
 - Stay
 - Fishes, in a way
 - Venomous vipers
 - Comic who acted in "Ocean's Eleven"
 - Bank offerings
 - Ship of 1492
 - Hooded jacket
 - Old fogey
 - Salon Creation
 - "We're on!"
 - Tooth layer
 - Give a feast
 - Thick
 - Casino figure
 - Tennis need
 - Backer's vote



Yesterday's answer

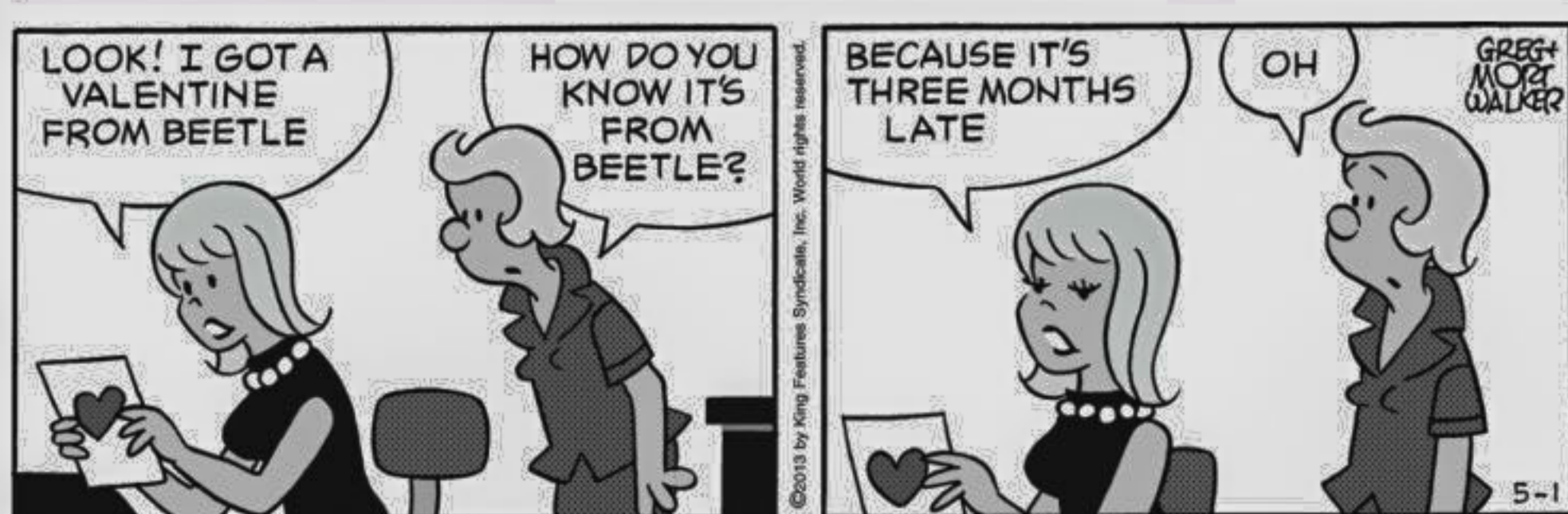
V I V A S H A M E
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CRYPTOQUOTE 1-27
 JNWUB, BILO, GLGNWMB--ETBFB GNB
 ETB FJGNDF TGLB FBE CI ZWNB ETB
 TBGNEF CZ GSS KBI.
 -- UGIEB GSWXTWBNW

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: WHEN WORDS BECOME UNCLEAR, I SHALL FOCUS WITH PHOTOGRAPHS. WHEN IMAGES BECOME INADEQUATE, I SHALL BE CONTENT WITH SILENCE.
 -- ANSEL ADAMS

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



HENRY

by Don Trachte



QUOTABLE Quote

Being a woman is a terribly difficult task, since it consists principally in dealing with men.

Joseph Conrad