

“The country is thriving on the exploitation of the poor.”

Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury is a man of diverse traits. He is a well-known, much revered voice that speaks in support of human rights, freedom of expression, environmental protection, social justice and anti-corruption. He has had a long career of teaching at the Department of English Language and Literature at Dhaka University. He is one of the brightest minds to have worked tirelessly on prose in post-independence Bangladesh. He is a Marxist and the founding editor of tri-monthly Notun Diganta. On June 23, he will turn eighty. On this occasion, Emran Mahfuj of The Daily Star talks to this legendary figure.

The Daily Star (TDS): In recent times, there have been some disturbing trends such as the TSC incident, the controversial city corporations election and the hostility towards the media etc. Intellectuals have expressed their protest against these issues. But the government seems to have paid very little attention to these complaints. How do you explain this apathetic attitude of the government?

Serajul Islam Chowdhury (SIC): The reason behind this apathy is that the government does not consider the interest of people, rather it is busy satisfying a few people. They do not care about public opinion. They do not act responsibly toward people. These incidents matter greatly to the common people, not to the government. The government does not consider these events as a threat to their well-being.

We often see that criminals escape from punishment and that's why crimes continue to rise. If you investigate, you will find that these crimes take place with the overt or covert support of the ruling power. Here, both the ruling party and bureaucracy is part of the ruling force. The ruling force does not rule with the consent of the people. Even though they come to power through elections, it does not guarantee the true representation of people's will. Those who have money and muscle power win the elections. After getting elected, they abuse state power to become richer. Sometimes it also happens that voter-turnout is very low but so-called representatives still get elected. The blessing of foreign governments gets priority over public support. On the whole, the state has become the protector of the ruling class. So you cannot call the state democratic even in a bourgeois sense.

Our intellectuals respond to various national issues in a partisan manner. Some of them belong to the ruling party. They say what those in power want them to say. They have already enjoyed government facilities or hope to enjoy them in future. And those who oppose the government think that they will be rewarded for their services in the near future. But their opposition does not hold any strong ground. On the one hand, the media does not care much about such opposition, as the owners of media houses do not want to go against government or fear to do so. On the other hand, the government does not like criticism and try to throttle any dissenting voice.

None of the two major parties want to delve deep into the sufferings of the common people. They are busy with superficial problems. They deny the reality that surface level problems are reflections of the deep-rooted crisis of capitalism. They want to keep the existing state intact and exploit it for their interest. Sometimes, they try to cloak their conflict of interest in the disguise of ideological conflict.

We have to also consider the fact that critical thought is not encouraged in our country. Here we do not engage in any ideological debate. There is no student union in colleges or universities. The national Parliament is busy with self-aggrandizement, sycophancy, and criticism of the absentee opposition. Here we do not value knowledge. The so-called revolution in education does not mean that we have really improved in knowledge production, rather it shows the opposite.

There are few intellectuals who rise above partisanship and think that the society cannot be freed without establishing a democratic state. They are not organised. They get little focus in the media. The government does not like their voice.

TDS: Ideally, there should be a close relationship



Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury

between the state and the people. Do you see this in the present context?

SIC: Yes, the state has a relation with people. The state earns its power and money from the common people. But it is a one-sided relation. The state gives orders and the ordinary people obey them. The state does not pay heed to people's voice; it rules and people get ruled.

The executive body of the state does whatever it wants. In the legislative body, there is no real representative of the people. A large portion of people do not have access to the judiciary.

Media is an effective medium of communication between the state and people. Media can truly reflect the aspirations and demands of the people and, in some way, make the state responsible. But in our country the media does not do that. The media basically publishes the success stories of the government or lectures and speeches of the members of the ruling party. It happens because the owners of media houses are biased toward the ruling party. This partiality is not ideological but driven by narrow interest.

The problem of unemployment has been rising alarmingly. The general public, particularly women, are becoming more and more vulnerable. Apart from other problems, these are two stark issues that are not getting adequate focus in our media.

TDS: The duty of the state is to protect the weak and resist the wicked. But we do not see this happening in our country. How can we overcome this situation?

SIC: This happens only in an ideal state but it is really difficult to find such a state.

In our state, weak people are under the control of wicked people. The state is run by the whims of the rich. The rich did not earn their wealth. The working class produces wealth for them. They capture the wealth by grabbing, looting and other nefarious means. Weak people feel helpless amidst these

wicked people. There is no easy way to get rid of this. We have been fighting for long but could not achieve success because in our country we could not bring any social revolution. In the super structure, we find some developments but not any revolution. The relation between the ruler and the ruled has remained the same as the relation between the king and subject. The name of the state has changed, its area has changed, and the old ruling class has been replaced by a new ruling class. But exploitation of the poor by the rich has remained the same. The gap between the poor and the rich has increased. There is no way but to continue the social struggle to bring the long cherished social revolution. We cannot compromise on this issue.

TDS: You have been writing on nationalism for quite a long time. Do you think the readers have grasped your views?

SIC: Nationalism is a concept and experience. It becomes clear through lived experience, and not only through writings.

Nationalism is a very important issue. It has both positive and negative sides. The positive side is that it unites a nation through patriotism. Patriotism is indispensable for collective development. It reduces alienation and makes people aware and sensitive about their countrymen.

Nationalism has both external and internal enemies. External enemies attack and try to capture the nation. Now, global capitalism is carrying out this aggression. Capitalism has given birth to imperialism, which is the deadliest enemy of the people.

The internal enemy of nationalism is national parochialism, blindness and pride. It has an inner tendency of becoming autocratic. It looks for a leader and develops fascism by making a person the only leader of the people. These are the weaknesses of nationalism.

But the greatest internal enemy of nationalism is deprivation. Within the nation there is class deprivation. This gap stands on the way of creating unity. Rich people become rulers and exploit the poor. They agitate the people with nationalist euphoria to sideline the reality of class difference. Class deprivation is a result of capitalism. So that means capitalism attacks us from both within and outside. From outside, it is aggressive and from within, it is subversive.

I have tried to look at nationalism from the point of view of national liberation. I have focused on both the negative and positive aspects of nationalism and tried to show that capitalism is the real enemy of nationalism. That is, we have to continue our nationalist struggle to get rid of capitalism and to reach socialism.

In Bangladesh, both the major parties included nationalism in their manifesto. But none of them are anti-capitalist. They think they are the nation. Their nationalism does not work for the liberation of people. It is for the rich and always compromise with imperialism. Nationalist rulers are only friends to those in their class and not to the ordinary people.

The foundation of nationalism is language. During the British colony, the anti-imperialist struggle was weakened due to the replacement of linguistic nationalism by religious nationalism. If you carefully observe the situation, you will see that the rich have almost abandon their mother tongue in our country. It also proves that they are not patriotic.

We often hear about nation states. But it is not possible for only a nation to reside in a state. Several nations live in a state and will remain so. In Bangladesh, most people are Bengalis but there are non-Bengalis as well. If we deny this fact, it will

amount to fascism. We do not want a nation state but a democratic state where Bengali and non-Bengalis will get equal treatment.

TDS: Patriotism plays a vital role in state development and overcoming many problems. But it seems this consciousness is almost on the wane. Why?

SIC: I do not think patriotism has waned completely. People have patriotism but in different degrees. Among the rich, patriotism is going dry for two reasons. They do not think that poor people are equal to them. To prove this, they behave like foreigners within the country. Their lifestyle, luxury and overall negligence to their mother tongue prove that they are not patriotic. They think that they do not have future in it. They build their future abroad and deposit their money in foreign banks. But when they are embarrassed in foreign lands, their patriotism re-emerges. They try to find solace in their motherland but cannot do so.

But for the poor, they do not have any other land. The village they live in and the language they talk is their only solace. When they go abroad, they feel for their motherland. Local elites take advantage of the money they send back to their country and thus, this money is once again deposited in foreign banks.

The country is standing on the labour of the poor people. Without this, it would break down.

TDS: As a writer, do you think that the partition was a historic mistake?

SIC: Yes it was a great mistake. We should have fought to oust the colonial power. We should have established a language based multi-national state in the subcontinent in a federal structure.

This subcontinent was not a one-nation country. At the time of partition, there were at least 17 nations in the subcontinent, all of whom needed to have an independent state. The states would not have been nation-states but the foundation would be nationalism, not religious but linguistic nationalism. If the nation question could have been resolved, then the class question would be easy to resolve.

But the colonial rulers did not want that. They partitioned the country in an artificial manner and handed over power to their loyalists. Local elites were capitalist and loyal to the colony. As a result, we saw that the British left the country but their economic and political structure remained intact. The unfortunate reality is that the nation question was not resolved and collective freedom could not be achieved.

TDS: What is the direction of Bangladesh's reality when looked from a social philosophy?

SIC: The current course is heading towards a bleak future. Whatever development has been achieved is material and external. In between, deprivation is creeping up. It has become a rule that with more development comes more deprivation. Economic deprivation is causing more poverty and anguish to the poor people. The rich have become the ideal of the society. And this bad ideal has been influencing the whole society.

TDS: Even at this stage of life, you continue to be bold in your words. Where do you get this spirit from?

SIC: I prefer expressing myself through writing. I write as a habit as I do not have anything better to do. The inner spirit and external condition compel me to write, edit journals and build organisations.

Translated by Editorial Desk.

A New Nepal

Parties reach agreement on the new Constitution

BOTTOM LINE



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

SINCE 2008, after abolishing monarchy, Nepal has gone through a rapid and unprecedented transformation in its political history. For the first time, the Himalayan nation of about 28 million has turned into a secular democratic Republic. The total image and standing of Nepal has dramatically changed as people have struggled for democracy, sacrificed their lives and eventually succeeded through their determination and courage. Nepal needed a new Constitution after it abolished monarchy. However, the framing of the Constitution has been difficult because the parties had to (a) agree with the type of government (presidential or parliamentary) (b) find out whether the president should be directly elected by people or by members of the parliament (c) consider whether the parliamentary system should decide how much power would be vested to the prime minister and president and (d) focus on the creation of provinces in the country turning it into a federal system from the current unitary one.

In 2006, Nepal's Maoist rebels agreed to put down their arms and join a democratic political process. The Constituent Assembly was elected to a two-year term for framing a constitution

but that term was extended for several years. Despite the extension, rival parties failed to cut a deal on a new Constitution. The Nepalese people had been bitterly disappointed. Some journalists thought that "anarchy" was established in the country after abolishing "monarchy". Finally, on June 8, after almost a decade, Nepal's major political parties (the Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), United Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) and the Terai-based Madhesi Front) reached an accord, agreeing to a federal model with eight provinces that would allow them to form a government involving all major parties. The former Maoist rebels dropped their longstanding demand for a directly elected president, and agreed to a parliamentary system.

As agreed, the lower house of the Parliament will have 275 seats with 60 percent (165 seats) directly elected and 40 percent (110 seats) elected through the proportional representation system, while the upper house will have 35 members elected through the proportional representation system. A constitutional court will also be set up for 10 years to resolve constitutional disputes.

The elections for the president, vice president, prime minister, speaker and deputy speaker would be held after the declaration of the new Constitution. The compromise cleared the way for elections of village, municipal and district government bodies, which have been functioning without elected representatives for more than a decade.

The agreed pact will be passed on to

committees in the Constituent Assembly to be formalised and drafted. The Assembly will open a process for public comment, and then vote on the draft. K. P. Sharma Oli, chairman of the country's largest communist party, said the vote could come as soon as mid-July. The boundaries of eight provinces, which have not been named, have to be delineated, leaving unclear how much power will be accrued to small, marginalised ethnic groups of the eight provinces. A federal commission would take up the task of mapping the provinces, a process that could last years, according to informed observers.

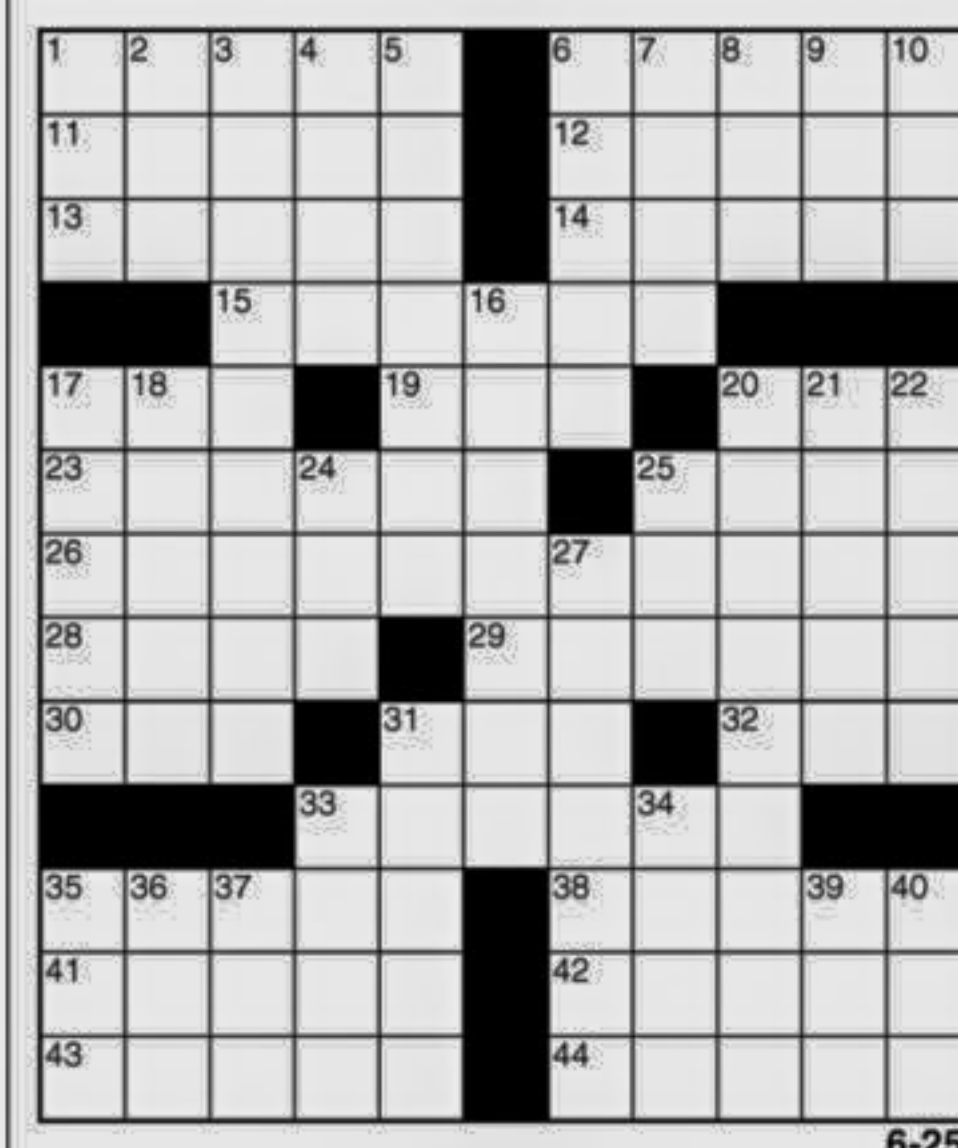
The political parties had to agree to a constitution after the deadly quakes that claimed nearly 9,000 lives in the country in April. Analysts say that the disaster put pressure on the parties to come to a deal. Political leaders, the civil society and armed forces in Nepal are required to take into account that they face a new challenge where cooperation and unity of purpose will be required at all levels to restore confidence of the public on the new political system.

The country is unfolding a new environment and South Asian nations must be ready to ensure that a new Nepal is a positive factor within its political, economic and social environment at a time when the sub-region is going through a dramatic phase of cooperation, including connectivity, ushering in a new era of relationships.

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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Yesterday's answer

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