



Recalling the Martyred Intellectuals

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intellectuals has been at times more blatant than that of their peers during the Pakistani rule. Needless to say, from the people's point of view collaboration is more harmful than surrender inasmuch as surrender signifies passive acceptance and collaboration calls for active support. The few, the very few, who have been working for the implementation of the spirit of liberation find it hard to make their position visible and to get their voices heard. The state is palpably against them. Most, if not all, of the measures taken by governments since liberation in respect of the press and the electronic media have been designed to curb freedom of expression and stifle the dissenting voice. Controlled by the ruling class, the media works against public interest and is unflinching in its support to the establishment.

The most important and the very first challenge before the nation was to achieve secularisation of politics. The task was not easy. To begin with, there was no clear intellectual perception of what secularism means and entails. Wrongly, and not unintentionally, it was interpreted by state power to mean equal right to practice religion. Almost apologetically, the rulers went on saying that secularism does not mean indifference to religion and that it only signifies religious tolerance. They were apprehensive of losing electoral support.

The time-honoured political device of offering religious satisfaction to assuage economic and worldly discontent and cover up the crude reality of heartless exploitation was geared up. That is one of the reasons why madrasa education was being promoted by the state itself. Prompted by their class interest, the rich vied among themselves to set up religious seminaries. Their children, however, did not go to these institutions; they went to the English-medium schools looking forward to going abroad.

The bourgeois political parties are not expected to work for the building of a secular state; the leftists are. In fact the responsibility is particularly and characteristically theirs. But some of them have already taken leave of that task and are speaking of non-communalism instead of secularism. Those who stick to their commitment confront opposition from almost all quarters.

The 1971 war had the potentials of a revolution. In joining the war radio workers at Chittagong had set up transmission centre. Initially, they called it Sadhin Bangla Biplobi Betar Kendra. But very soon they were obliged to drop Biplobi from the centre's nomenclature at the instance of powerful political forces. This was symptomatic of the abandonment of the spirit of liberation itself that would happen later. Many young men and women who were revolutionary at the prime of their lives became nationalists with bourgeois inclinations. The state was happy to accommodate them, and, if necessary, to offer rewards. Changes that were expected to come did not materialise.

Next to the challenge of secularisation of politics, there was the challenge of transforming the prevailing three streams of education into a unified system with Bangla as the medium at all stages, possibly from the primary to the highest. That challenge was not even



taken up in earnest. Today the three streams are as wide apart as they could be. The widening of their separation thrives on, and contributes to, the class-division in society. Instead of achieving unity among the people, education is dividing them. The end-result is likely to be disastrous.

The content of education itself is poor. Teaching of history is declining. Science education no longer attracts the meritorious; they throng into the Business Education departments. The old practice of measuring success in terms of performance in examinations instead of learning has gained momentum.

The universities themselves are not working well. Most of the private universities function like commodity shops. Public universities do not serve the public in the manner they ought to. It is only to be expected that together with creating and disseminating knowledge they should produce and nurture intellectuals. And that is precisely where they have failed and are failing. Teachers are not encouraged to read seriously and write earnestly. Recruitment as well as promotion depends more on extra-academic qualifications than on merit and aptitude. And then there is the abysmal failure of the university authorities to provide union facilities to the students. No university can be a proper university where the students cannot come together and develop their latent qualities through cultural activities and train themselves for leadership in political, intellectual and social spheres of the country. In the

absence of students' unions, the universities are turning into slums — intellectually as well as morally.

We have not been able to develop the Bangla language well. It is not adequately equipped to function as a medium of higher education. We have not written significant books on the liberal arts and the sciences, nor have we translated as many books from different languages as was desirable. The Bangla Academy had volunteered to produce text and reference books, but has, sadly, given more attention to other works, including that of organising festivals which could have been left to more appropriate bodies to take care of. And it is painful to note that taking on itself the unwarranted task of reforming the Bangla spelling system, it has been responsible for the mutilation of the words, falling almost mercilessly upon the acknowledged vowel lengthenings. The intellectuals, much to our regret, have not objected to this harmful action.

The group theatre movement was a gift of the liberation of Bangladesh. There was the promise that it would go very far; but it did not. Insidiously, the market invaded the theatre, with the result that the actors preferred to become stars and drama itself became the handmaiden of commercials. In a way, the rise and fall of the group theatre movement epitomises the germination and frustration of our collective expectations. With hindsight, it looks as if the seeds of the loss of vigour in the theatre were sown at the very beginning inas-

much as the performances seemed to be relying more on the spectacle than on the content. New plays ceased to be forthcoming, and many of those written were not rich in thought-content. This applies to our literary activities as well. Marketable writings discouraged literary productions to plumb the mysteries of individual and collective consciousness.

Cataloguing the ailments would be tedious. They are all well-known. Perhaps the pertinent point to make would be that most of our institutions, including the social ones, are not delivering. The most disheartening aspect of the matter is that the organs of the state have become mal-functional. The executive is authoritarian. It cares as little for public welfare as for public opinion. The judiciary is unreliable; the legislature unrepresentative.

Do these failures and maladies have a root cause? Yes, they have. At the centre lies finance capitalism. Once a progressive force, capitalism has lost its liberating qualities and has turned into a machine that crushes the weak for the benefit of the strong.

In Bangladesh today both health care and education have become commodities. Justice requires payment. Material interests dominate and profit-making determines, guides and controls most relationships. Plunder has become the order of the day. Wealth is being transferred abroad, and lack of investment has produced the frightening spectre of unemployment.