

END OF AN ERA

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IN the study of war and revolution, the role of intellectuals has always played a central role. Historians and political theorists have rummaged through the past to trace the intellectual origins of the idea that ultimately galvanised a cause into action, a movement into a revolution. This is no mean feat. Any attempt to zone in on the major forces of a political and social upheaval necessarily means unpacking hundreds of years of history, one which is often fraught and contested. Amidst this apparent inextricable state of affairs, the role of the intellectual, too, conforms itself to a grey area (more so in some cases than others) and remains a point of debate in relation to power and ideology.

But what makes a true 'intellectual'? Marxist thinker and political theorist Antonio Gramsci, whose ideas centred on the revolutionary opposition to oppressive social relations in a capitalist system, categorises intellectuals into two dimensions: vertical and horizontal. The vertical dimension consists of the 'specialists' who primarily organise industry for the capitalists: managers, politicians, bureaucrats, etc. On the horizontal dimension lie the traditional intellectuals and the organic intellectuals. The traditional intellectual is one who is

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bound to institutions of the hegemonic order, has no basis in any social class and is removed from the economic structure of a particular society whereas the organic intellectual is one who speaks for the interests of a specific class by way of countering hegemonic ideas and ambitions and "gives his class homogeneity and awareness of its own function, in the economic field and on the social and political levels." According to Gramsci, "These organic intellectuals would come from within the working class and stay within the working class working towards a counter-hegemony by actively engaging and leading in social relations." An organic intellectual is often that 'lone intellectual' who is not afraid to speak truth to power and challenge the status quo in the face of great adversity,

and more importantly, puts the wheels in motion towards transformative action. Gramsci saw the organic intellectual as an essential component in raising the class consciousness of the working people.

Because of preconceived romanticised notions of the 'revolutionary intellectual', the role of traditional intellectuals who unflinchingly lent their support to government war efforts and propaganda is often overlooked. It is important to remember that the term 'intellectual' isn't synonymous with a 'force for good'. Countless intellectuals were either silent or direct advocates of mass slaughters carried out in WWI and WWII and memories of their complicity are fading. In Nazi Germany, the writings and ideas of philosophers, sociologists, scientists, physicians, theologians and thinkers advanced Nazi ideological creeds, including eugenics, racial hygiene and Lebensraum.

The mass killings of Bangali intellectuals in 1971 by the Pakistani army and their local collaborators are a testament to the formidable ideological power and sway held by intellectuals over the working class. When it became evident that erstwhile East Pakistan was inching closer to independence, the Pakistani regime orchestrated and executed the murder of academics and thinkers devoted to the independence movement to cripple the intellectual foundation of the soon-to-be-independent Bangladesh. Although the Pakistanis failed to prevent the rise of a free Bangladesh, the killings of the Bangali intellectuals that began on March 25, 1971 under 'Operation Searchlight' would paralyse the newborn nation of Bangladesh for decades to come. Never again would a

class of intellectuals so deeply committed to a secular, nationalist cause and the welfare of the proletariat emerge in the next forty-five years of the country's history. These martyred individuals were the organic intellectuals who dedicated their lives to the advancement of Bangali nationalism and laid resistance to the non-Bangali military-bureaucracy of the semi-colonial state of Pakistan.

In present day Bangladesh, it is almost impossible to foresee the rise of a grassroots movement for the working class spearheaded by organic intellectuals so deeply invested in the politics of class struggle because of an apparent absence of class consciousness and the channels to communicate that consciousness. An

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education system in shambles, the patron-client relationship of student politics, and the by-products of globalisation have given way to an environment unsympathetic for a unified class struggle. The lack of opportunities to obtain quality liberal arts education along with a lack of emphasis on it is an impediment at the very basic, individual level. The desire for employability skills and job security makes the hard sciences more appealing to youngsters as an intellectual pursuit.

Throughout history, the intelligentsia has been regarded with antipathy and distaste by the ruling elites, unless of course the intellectuals proved to be purveyors of the ideologies of the powers that be. Similarly, in East Pakistan, the landed aristocracy, army and bureaucrats held contempt for the intellectual class. Whereas the role of intellectuals in the birth of Pakistan is considered ambiguous by accounts of some academics, the contribution of intellectuals to the independence movement of Bangladesh is largely thought to have played a central role. The attitude of the Pakistani government towards Bangali intellectuals began to crystallise during the Language Movement of 1952 and became clearer still during the Ayub regime which did everything in its power to limit the political engagement of the intelligentsia—from disallowing university teachers to join political parties and contest elections to creating the Pakistan Council that kept watch on the intellectuals. The extent of the army's disdain became clear when Bangali intellectuals began to be systematically killed during our Liberation War in 1971 because they posed a threat to the power arrangement of the political leadership. For one, this new middle class of intellectuals—which was almost non-existent at the time of Partition—connected with the people in a way the old aristocracy never had.

The death of Dr. Mohammad Shamsuzzoha, one of the first intellectuals killed at the hands of the Pakistani army, in 1969, added a new dimension to the anti-Ayub movement and hastened the downfall of his dictatorial regime. Intellectuals like Shahidullah Kaiser and Munier Chowdhury among hundreds of others, laid the groundwork for a strong intellectual leadership that provided the ideological foundation and inspired millions of youths to take up the Bangali cause centred on an ethno-linguistic nationalist identity. It is because of the vision and selfless sacrifice of these organic intellectuals that as Bangladeshis, we proudly claim to enjoy the civil liberties, sovereignty, and economic and cultural autonomy that we have today. The martyrdom of Bangali intellectuals and Bangladesh's subsequent independence marked the beginning of its journey but also brought an end to an era dominated by a revolutionary intellectual class steadfast in its commitment to the well-being of the people.

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