

THE UNFINISHED STRUGGLE

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Shahabuddin Ahmed, Rayerbazar, oil on canvas.

An intellectual is a person who tries to understand the world and, not less importantly, to communicate his/her understanding to others around them. And in doing this they contribute, even if unsubstantially, to the difficult but very necessary task of changing the world itself. The martyred Bangalee intellectuals of 1971 were engaged, in their own ways, in that work. Bangalee nationalism was natural, Pakistani nationalism contrived. What is more, based as it was on the linguistic identity of its members, Bangalee nationalism was essentially secular; it had to be. In contrast Pakistani nationalism, which had its base in religion, was unnatural, and because of its unnaturalness it was unsure of itself. And being unsure, it had to make use of state violence at its command to safeguard its existence.

In that fateful year of 1971 some of the fanatical Bangalee promoters of Pakistani nationalism had made it their dastardly mission to eliminate as many outstanding secular Bangalee intellectuals as they could. They did their job on December 14. In this they were under direct patronage and protection of the Pakistani occupation army, engaged in the perpetration of an unprecedented genocide.

The turning point in the intellectual life of East Pakistan was the State Language Movement of 1952. That movement sought to replace the religion-based Pakistani nationalism by secular Bangalee nationalism. The upsurge was political; it was against the very *raison d'être* of the newly-established state itself and its ultimate objective was to establish people's control over state power. Whereas the Pakistan movement had aimed at, and had been successful in, winning a homeland for the Muslims, the anti-state Language Movement wanted to transform that homeland into a habitat of a people released from fetters of a bureaucratic-capitalist state, engaged as it was in protecting a class-divided society.

Pakistan was a semi-colonial state carved out of the colonial state of British India, and turned out to be no less exploitative than the one it replaced. The weak suffered in relation to the strong; the Bangalees were weak because state power was monopolistically wielded by the non-Bangalee military bureaucracy with the assistance of an obliquing civil bureaucracy. The martyred intellectuals carried in them the secular democratic spirit of the State Language Movement, which drew the people together. It became stronger as it moved on and ultimately found itself released in the Liberation War. These intellectuals were positively secular in outlook and secularism. One knows, secularism is the *sine qua non* for stepping into a democracy of rule by the people and not merely by the parliament.

Nevertheless, the democratic upsurge of 1952 did not set all intellectuals free from their faith in Pakistani nationalism. The reasons are not difficult to find. Many of them were beneficiaries and expected further benefits. The fear of erring was operative as well. The carrot-and-stick policy did not fail. But people suffered. They wanted a political revolution as the forerunner of a social revolution, which had not happened since 1793, the year the Permanent Settlement was enacted to protect an unjust economic

arrangement.

The spirit of our Liberation War has been found difficult to define. Much has been said about it, not without creating confusion. In substance it is a combination of an expectation of a social revolution embodying secularism and a hope for moving towards socialism through democracy. The Constitution of 1972 had in it the pledge of translating that spirit into reality. During our onward collective journey the ruling class has found it necessary to introduce corrections in the principles of secularism and socialism; it has raised controversies over the definition of nationalism, and failed to practice democracy worthy of its name. This has happened not because the people have changed. They remain where they were with their old hopes and miseries, but the ruling class that was at the official leadership of the Liberation War has taken up an anti-people role. In economic terms, the new rulers belonged to the petit bourgeois striving to acquire bourgeois status in material wealth if not in intellectual culture. The independence of Bangladesh has opened for the petit bourgeois avenues to rise, and that class is making full use of all opportunities, legal as well as illegal, of getting rich to the detriment of the well-being of the common man, without whose active participation, full commitment and untold sacrifice it would have been impossible to drive away the Pakistani hordes. The pro-liberation intellectuals should have stood against the destructive process; but they have failed. Some of those who could have been active in the field were killed by the Al-Badr; some have turned indifferent. Quite a few, both the potential and the active, have left the country. Others are working as collaborators of the rulers, contributing to the safe continuation of the social and political system.

The performance of the collaborating 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 system 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 unfaithful 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.

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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. 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.

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. 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.

The basic problem here in Bangladesh, as elsewhere in the world, is one of resolving class-relationship. Surveys are not always reliable, but what a recent one tells us seems to be true. It indicates that only 20 percent of the people belong to the middle class, which

signifies that the remainder, i.e. 80 percent are either unprivileged or underprovided. It would perhaps be correct to say that of the privileged, 2 percent are rich, some of them enormously so. These men and women are mentally and culturally deracinated and most of them are without patriotic feelings. The 8 percent below them are the real middle-class; they are dissatisfied and aspire to rise. The bottom 10 percent are, and feel themselves to be, members of the lower middle class.

The question is how will the gap between the 80 and the 20 be bridged? Failing to resolve the problem of inequality, we were obliged to partition the country and, later, to break the state, and now we find ourselves confronted by a greater inequality, the one between the rich and the poor. Nothing short of a radical transformation of the society will do. The 80 percent who suffer and keep the economy running through hard, almost inhuman labour, will not keep cool for long unless measures are taken to alleviate their misery.

Already there are signs of disintegration in most political and social relationships. Violence is rampant at both public and private levels. Drug addiction and the rise of Islamic militancy are phenomenal. Insecurity dogs the citizens at every step. Corruption has gone beyond control. Murder, abduction, disappearance, extra-judicial killing are in order.

Darkness in the inner life of the society of ours is nowhere better reflected than in the condition of women, who constitute half of the population. Over the years women have advanced remarkably and are competing with men ably and well in every walk of life, and yet they are being subjected to harassment and violence at a level that defies imagination. Women are even sold to transnational smugglers.

The question, again, is what is to be done? Despair and cynicism will not do. Running away will be impossible even for those who plan to leave the country because their identity and origin will betray them wherever they go. The need is to work for social transformation, a revolution we could call it more appropriately. This would require a well-organised and sustained movement at both political and intellectual levels. It has to come from that section of the middle class that feels the urgency and is capable of moving beyond the class barrier to identify itself with the working class. The leadership has to be collective and not personal. Moaning, foaming and fuming will only weaken the resolve, instead of strengthening it.

What is called for is a determination of the kind displayed in the Liberation War. The struggle for liberation did not begin on March 25, 1971 nor did it end on December 16 of that year. It has been a continuing undertaking, reaching an unprecedented height in 1971. The unfinished struggle has to be carried on.

This is what the martyred intellectuals tell us, reminding us that every right-thinking person has an obligation to make a contribution to our collective advancement.

The writer is Emeritus Professor at Dhaka University. The article has been abridged from 'Recalling the Martyred Intellectuals' published in The Daily Star on December 14, 2015.