

THE DECLINING LEFT Bangladesh expects more



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SURANJIT Sengupta had been a stalwart of the Awami League for the last four decades or so. An articulate parliamentarian and a vociferous constitutionalist, Mr. Sengupta had been a robust voice in favour of socialist principles. Marred by a corruption scandal in 2012 which tainted an otherwise glittering political career, the former Railways Minister represented the progressive left-wing faction of the Awami League. With his demise, we are yet again reminded of the potentiality of this unique brand of politics. At the same time, we silently and sadly observe the severe ideological and partisan incoherence of those in the left end of the political spectrum.

Throughout the history of Bangladesh's political journey, left-wing principles have been a subsidiary attachment to the mainstream national story. During the 1960s, the *Red Maulana* Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani led East-Pakistan's struggle against Ayyub Khan's military authoritarianism. Although, some may rightly argue that Bhashani lit the fire which spurred notions of Bengali nationalism, it was the charismatic Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who wielded the baton of hope for East Pakistanis. During the 1971 Liberation War, the Awami League led the political struggle for freedom, while left-leaning student leaders of the Dhaka University Students' Union (DSSU), such as ASM Abdur Rab, Shahjahan Siraj and Nur-e-Alam Siddique, organised armed resistance against the Pakistani forces. It may be notable to state that the leaders of the DSSU played a critical role in enhancing the notion of Bangladeshi independence. Bhashani was still a prominent actor, and gave his blessings to Bangabandhu to lead Bangladesh to freedom. Sheikh Mujib, whose philosophy and policies could be best described as that of a left-leaning centrist, enshrined the values of secularism and socialism in Bangladesh's post-liberation Constitution. This was in no uncertain terms, the greatest achievement for the political left in Bangladesh.

Yet it is safe to say that the left never truly governed or led Bangladesh from the frontlines. Additionally, leftist principles fail to catch the imagination of the public in a way that it has in other parts of the world. Nevertheless, the left continues to have an enduring effect in our everyday politics. Firebrand leaders such as Rashed Khan Menon and Hasanul Haq Inu serve in PM Sheikh Hasina's Cabinet. Matia Chowdhury, the fiery protégé of Maulana Bhashani, is one of Sheikh Hasina's closest advisers.

The shift of leftist politicians towards mainstream political forces is not a new phenomenon. Former Prime Minister Kazi Zafar Ahmed, a proponent of Bhashani's Islamic socialism, had justified his participation in both the Ziaur Rahman and HM Ershad governments as being part of his intention to bring progressive

change from within the established system. A similar reasoning has been used by the likes of Menon and Inu when asked about their philosophical u-turn. Perhaps they are right. Or perhaps their actions represent the duopoly of our two largest parties. Without relying on the Awami League or the BNP, it is simply impossible to stand at the topmost stratum of political governance. And this fact entails that left-leaning progressives of the likes of Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and Nuh-ul-Alam Lenin, have joined political organisations whose philosophies might very well be different from those they share.

However, there is another side to the leftist story. The troubles of Bangladesh's two-party system have been brought forth by those left-leaning politicians who believe in bringing progress through activism. They have been dubbed unambitious, irrelevant and ineffective. The media gives them minimal attention. They rarely get electoral support. But the small group of prominent outsiders deserve respect from the public. The Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) is a decaying organisation. Yet it is headed by the widely respected Mujahidul Islam Selim who continues to be a voice of reason and anti-establishment politics. The CPB and other small leftist parties played a supporting role in ousting General Ershad and restoring parliamentary democracy in Bangladesh in 1991. They have been vocal in their intention to protect labour rights and ensure environmental protection in the last two decades. Due to their small support base, their voice has never truly been heard by the

mass public. In more recent times, the young Zonayed Saki put his name forward in an unsuccessful attempt at the Dhaka mayoral race. Yet Saki gives us hope. He provides us with an unconventional alternative. The left provides us with much needed competition in the political process. Suffice it to say however, as an amalgamated entity, the political left is in a precariously difficult position in modern Bangladesh.

Power lures even the best away from their ideologies. It seems many left-leaning leaders have succumbed to this phenomenon. They may be right, however. One may question the practicality of sitting outside and doing nothing about a system which is not right. However, it is this very difference in structural opinions which is proving detrimental to the left. Factionalism, intra-party feuds and a lack of ideological consistency have created a scenario where it is impossible for them to be a united entity. Left-wing politics is different from centrist or right-wing politics.

In countries where socialist norms have succeeded, in almost all cases the left has stood up as a united face. Countries like Sweden, Norway and Denmark are classic examples. In Bangladesh, we have the exact opposite. Not only is the left divided on all sides, there is no interest amongst politicians sharing the ideology to unite. The two main political parties have capitalised on this, resulting in a growing third force from maturing. This is indeed sad for Bangladesh.

In an ideal scenario, Suranjit Sengupta would probably have been happy to depart

this world seeing a strong leftist political grounding in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, that is not the case. The evolution of the self-proclaimed Democratic Socialist and former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders in the USA is a refreshing sign for even those who do not necessarily share the views of the political left. The public of Bangladesh continue to put their weight behind the two main parties, yet they would welcome the growth of a strong, powerful and united alternative brand of politics.

Bangladesh is inherently secular, but the country also prides its Muslim heritage. It is an exclusive blend which requires an exclusive approach from political actors. As such, the basic principles of left-wing politics such as social justice, national welfare and equality are ideas, which should in theory, captivate the public mindset. Only if the left can strive forward as a single force and not capitulate to the constraints of our two-party system, only then would leftist norms truly be relatable to the common man.

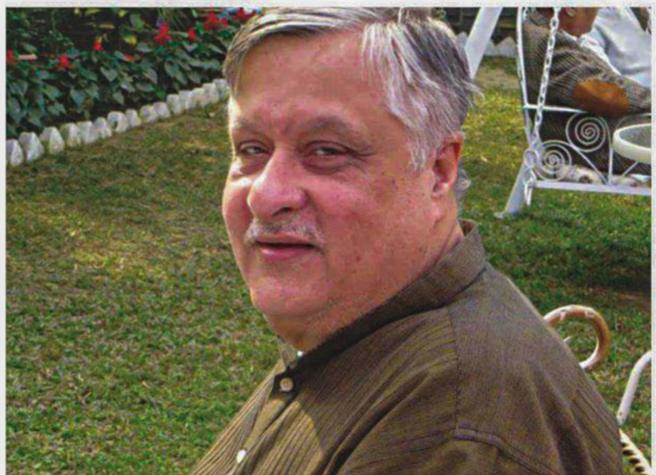
Bangladesh is stuck in a frenzy of the two main political parties. Although, these two parties deserve credit for playing a great political game, the failures of the left have only assisted in creating such a system. Now more than ever, the political left needs to adapt to 21st century Bangladesh, and take their rightful place in the highest echelon of the country's political system.

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A legacy worth remembering



SPAHANI Colony is one the last remaining places of greenery, serenity, and natural abode in the middle of an



Behrouze Ispahani

increasingly congested, recklessly urbanised, poorly managed, and environmentally hazardous Dhaka city. From honest and efficient government officers to teachers of public universities, from competent bankers to well-qualified professionals, the colony had a collection of some of the most well respected and cultured citizens of Dhaka.

The inhabitants of the colony have been equally complimented by the owners of the colony i.e. the Ispahani family, who have been as gracious and decent human beings as the people being leased out the houses and apartments within the colony. From the Late Mirza Ahmed Ispahani (popularly known as the Senior Ispahani) to his son the Late Sadri Ispahani to his grandsons – Behrouze, Salman, Sajid, Shakir, and Imran (who is mostly based in the UK), all have represented a face of a business house not so common in Bangladesh. A business family that is well educated, well-mannered, accomplished with whom the relationship between the owners and tenants have been more like friends and family as opposed to landlords and lessee.

Many of us have spent a significantly large portion of our lives in this pristine location well hidden from the eyes of many who even do not know that such an enclave of tall trees and green fields, meadows and lawns lie in the heart of the city. When the Senior Ispahani and later Sadri Ispahani passed away, it was almost like the ending of two eras; eras which saw the difficulty and challenges faced by the largest industrial and business house of the country in the aftermath of the independence of Bangladesh, when everything was nationalised by the post-liberation government. Those days, jute and tea were the main export commodities of Bangladesh and the Ispahanis were the industry leaders in each field. During those tumultuous years, Senior Ispahani kept his calm, maintained his perseverance, and successfully faced the test of patience until the government slowly started denationalising, and the Ispahanis started getting back their business and industrial units. In that process, there were people, including my late father Syed Amir Khasru who was then serving as a Secretary to the government, who extended their support to Senior Ispahani, as bonds between the business community and civil servants those days were guided more by national interest and personal integrity as opposed to the

prevalent culture of personal interest and unethical relationships.

Successive generations of the Ispahanis have run the business with the same ethical values and good business practices that were so consistently followed by Senior Ispahani and Sadri Ispahani. When the eighties onwards saw the rise of a new breed of entrepreneurs and businessmen who thrived more on shady deals and unscrupulous business practices fostered by corruption, brown envelopes, and speed money, the Ispahanis were among the few who persisted in their good old values of hard work, honest deals, and ethical transactions. In a business culture where loan defaulters, land grabbers, manpower agent cum exploiters of the poor, and commission and brokers have become the most powerful and influential business leaders, the Ispahanis are among the very few who still stand out as far as good business practices and ethical code of conduct are concerned.

Behrouze Ispahani was the social face of the Ispahani business house. A social and amiable person, he befriended almost everyone who came across him and was a warm-hearted and kind man. He was deeply concerned about the country in all spheres – politics, economy, business, sports, culture, etc. The people he helped run into thousands, and he did it with humility and grace with very few even knowing what kind of charity he was giving out and to whom. He was popular with people around him, from his immediate colleagues to the office staff whom he would always be the first to greet with a salam. For example, Sayed Hassan, one of the longest serving members of the senior management of the Ispahani house, was treated by Behrouze like a brother and not just as a colleague. I was told by Hassan bhai how from lunch to dinner, almost every meal was either shared or sent to his house by Behrouze. Zaheda, Behrouze Ispahani's wife, has done a remarkable job in managing the Islamia Eye Hospital

which is probably one of the few, if not the only, hospitals in Dhaka that provides eye care to the poor and needy at affordable price. In fact, the Ispahanis are one those business houses who do genuine philanthropic work meant for the deprived and underprivileged as opposed to doing such work for either publicity, CSR compliance or political motives.

After Senior Ispahani and Sadri Ispahani, Behrouze's involvement has been the longest in the business activities of the Ispahanis after Bangladesh came into being as an independent nation in 1971.

Behrouze was equally popular in the diplomatic community for his charming personality and social skills. He would not miss an opportunity to invite people to his home, and he and his wife Zaheda have been gracious host to so many people on so many occasions that it would be difficult for many to come to terms with the emptiness created by his sudden and premature departure. Although Behrouze moved out of Ispahani Colony some time ago, he strongly believed in the pristine values and refreshing environment that this unique place possesses, and the importance of preservation of the same at a time when Dhaka is being gobbled up by relentless, intricate mazes of countless apartment complexes. The pigeon holed structures that turn simple things like free space, clean air, play fields, green serenity, and open sky into rare commodities in this urban jungle that we live in. In a way, he has been saved from the ordeal of having to witness the transformation of the last remaining vestiges of sublime urban beauty of Dhaka being changed into columns and pillars of steel and concrete, and the crowd and noise that will replace the grace and silence that have been the hallmark of this place that used to reflect the values and spirit of the old school of the Ispahanis.

Behrouze led a full life free from any regret, he made lots of friends and admirers as evident in the outpouring of grief by people in the aftermath of his death. To that



Ispahani Colony -- a tranquil, pristine neighbourhood.

wonderful neighbour and the man who was approachable as well as kind and generous, we can only wish eternal peace. May the road ahead for him be as tranquil,

serene, and blissful as has been the road to Ispahani Colony, which beholds so many fond memories and cherished moments for many of us. May God be with him in the

land of no return.

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