

46 years of our independence

Gains made, grounds left to cover

TODAY marks the 46th anniversary of our independence. On this day, we pay our deep respects to the martyrs who laid down their lives and built the foundations for this country. We have, after all these years, come a long way, proving our detractors wrong and are perched at the threshold of becoming a middle income country. Yet, we must remember that we still have a long way to go and realise that what we have done so far may not be enough to get us there.

We have largely managed to cover the basic needs of most of our population. We should make it a priority to ensure that the basic needs of those who have been left behind are met as well, so that the country can maximally benefit from the progress and security enjoyed by all its citizens. Simultaneously, it will also assist us in guaranteeing long-lasting peace in our country, for which so many of the valiant freedom fighters laid down their lives.

But to achieve our aspiration to become a middle income country, good governance will have to be our core focus. And by good governance we do not mean 'good government' only, but something that is comprehensive and applied across all levels of our society. This includes fulfilling the basic rights enshrined in our constitution, freedom in all spheres of our individual and collective rights and accountability to the governed of those who have been entrusted to govern.

Let us now move forward to establish democracy, both true in spirit and form, and dedicate all our effort towards achieving our goal of good governance.

Expat workers in trouble

Will the authorities wake up?

TWO Singaporean non-government organisations have sent a report to the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and their Families (CMW) stating that Bangladeshi workers often face labour and debt bondage in that country. It is a shame because we have a consulate in Singapore which is apparently not doing enough to protect our workers there.

This brings to the fore precisely the question as to what our mission in Singapore is doing. Why must employment advice and financial assistance to thousands of Bangladeshi migrant workers in trouble have to come from foreign organisations? We have repeatedly highlighted the plight of our expatriate workers in foreign countries and the lack of support from our embassies or missions in those countries. The Singapore reports have done little to improve the image of the government, and it sends the wrong signal to the foreign employers who can and do get away with human rights violations when it comes to the helpless migrant workers from Bangladesh.

The report that has been furnished details how, over the years, our workers have been subjected to abuse, deception, restriction on movement, isolation and retention of identity documents, and sexual and physical violence. Indeed the list is a long one! So, now that these abuses have been exposed, will the authorities wake up from their slumber and take steps to rally our labour officers posted with our missions abroad? We take great pride in the sacrifices our workers make to send precious foreign exchange back to Bangladesh, but we do little to protect them from conniving employers and recruiters. This has to change.

Red sun and green earth

Those halcyon days



REBECCA HAQUE

WHEN, in March 1971, my eyes first beheld the radiant facsimile of the flag of Bangladesh – the small handprint of my deltaic birthplace, throbbing in the circle of the blood-red sun, safe, snug in the lap of lush green rectangular earth – I was physically a thousand miles away from my beloved

motherland. Spiritually, I was in limbo, in a state of stasis, unable to split the dawn with jubilant shouts of 'Joy Bangla', whispering the words of nationalistic glory in private ceremony, sheltered from the seething disbelief and collective humiliation of the vanquished. In solitary spaces, in moments of thoughtful communion with my own people, my psyche resonated to the remembered rhythm of the *dhol* and my heart lay palpitating in the bower of delicate petals of the red hibiscus, *roktokorobi*. I stood tall and proud. Fearless and independent.

Encircled, as I was then, by tall fair-skinned Punjabis, I was the proverbial outsider, the 'other'; a petite, precocious, dark-brown seventeen-year-old scholar among classmates whose ignorance of my race and culture was often ridiculously comedic, or sadistically racist and offensive, depending on the nature of the commentary or query directed at me. Most often, I would quietly contemplate the rows and rows of dusty volumes in the spacious, silent library of the college, comfortable in dialogue with the enlightening pages in my chosen place of refuge, away from the negativity and the narrow-mindedness of the boorish and the prejudicial.

Forty-six years on, the seventeen-year-old is celebrating her forty-third Independence Day in her motherland, having been repatriated from the camps in Pakistan in December 1973. The long months of waiting were one of preparation for my life here. I have learnt to see an individual's life as a chiaroscuro, a portrait in shades of light and dark. It is as complex and enigmatic as a Picasso Cubist painting; the arc of one's personal journey cuts across the radius of the circle as it draws a perpendicular line along the vertical and the horizontal axes of the rectangle. And it has been so in my own journey, where fate and choice, circumstance and character have made me what I am today. For a long time now, my identity as a strongly vocal and, sometimes of necessity, belligerent Dhakaite has invisibly and inexorably melded with my identity as a graduate of the University of Dhaka. I have lovingly wandered through alien floors and gazed at thick old bound volumes of anthropology and psychology, and have taken quick detours into philosophy and sociology before coming back to my legitimate terrain - literature. Some of us now teaching in my department, and in other departments of my university and distant universities of the world, began our journey together. Classmates and friends and lovers, we spent hours of fun-filled time writing copious notes on reams and reams of paper in that time before the age of the Xerox machine. Learning was fun, being together was fun, and my university was the best in the world for me.

I remember that we lived at a time of such buoyant optimism that joy was visible in our jaunty footsteps on

the thoroughfares and avenues of Dhaka. Eyes luminous with the quest for knowledge, we were a loud, merry band traversing the open grounds of the beautiful campus. Future economists, historians, sociologists, and litterateurs, dear friends of mine studying the humanities and the social sciences, we would parade in groups up and down Fuller Road up to BUET, or down from TSC to the Fine Arts Institute for the sensual, visual experience of the latest art exhibitions and mounted displays, and oftentimes, we would sit awhile gazing at the artist breathing life into clay or canvas. Oh, what thrill it was to be alive at that dawn of our time! Creation was alive, and we echoed its creativity.

Sadly, so much of that buoyancy has been flattened, just as hundreds of flowering trees have been ruthlessly and indiscriminately cut down to make room for the haphazard sprawl of buildings on the campus. Sadly, in some spaces, ostentatious and grandiose architecture

if I have achieved a small success in bestowing upon my students a measure of my own veneration for art, culture and literature, and have planted in their receptive minds a deep respect for the enduring values of courage and integrity, it is because I too had teachers who led me to develop my own moral vision. I believe each individual of a community, within a social structure, needs to develop a secure moral centre, just as a healthy independent nation needs to maintain moral boundaries in all spheres. Today, my attitude towards my students grows more protective, even maternal, as I grow older. The light of intelligence shines forth from their eyes, and I want to embrace them and give them more, do more for them. So much potential only asking for the right kind of guidance, the deservedly adequate support, the truly ethical choice. But, everyday, I feel gagged and bound. How shall I fulfill my responsibility when partisan politics overrules academic achievement? When deserving faculty are cowed by political loyalists of dubious merit flouting



Aparajeyo Bangla, Dhaka University.

PHOTO: STAR

has eaten way the core precepts of realistic, practical planning necessary for permanent use by both faculty and students. And, sadly, it has not been easy, being a teacher of this university. It has been a sustained struggle to maintain personal integrity and scholastic independence in the climate of overt politicisation of academia. Pathetically declining standards have made me weep many a time, and I have found strength by seeking inspiration in the few glowing faces with whom I would do a delightful dance of dazzling eye contact as I spoke, and our minds joined in a symphony of lucid comprehension. Do I teach? No, I share. I love these select few; they have the facility, they have the insight. They speak my language. I believe the future is theirs to mould, to guard the legacy of the War of Independence. I believe it is not the violent league of students powerfully strutting on campus, but the dedicated few who shall uphold the foundations of our secular democracy.

Today, after thirty-seven years as a teacher and writer,

educational ethics?

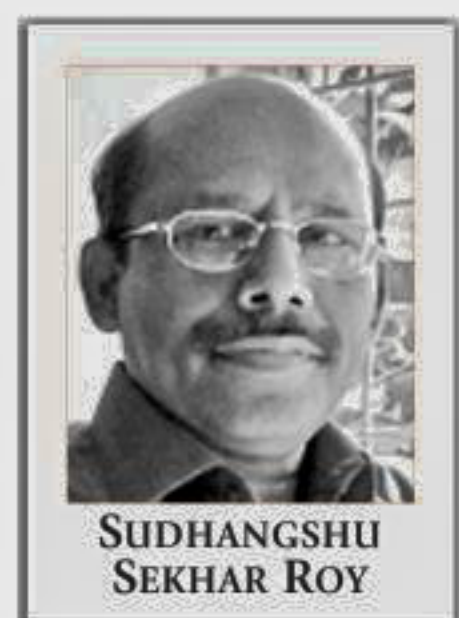
In a poignant short story, Ernest Hemingway cries out for "a clean well-lighted place", and today, I do too. The iconic Hemingway hero lives by the code of "grace under pressure": the Hemingwayesque struggle is against *nada*, against chaos, nothingness, madness. This must be our struggle too, my alma mater, if we are to survive with honour and leave a legacy of admirable grace under pressure.

Let us hold hands in the circle of blood and unite under the red sun. Let us dance to the thundering salute of the cannons to welcome our Independence Day. Let us meditate in harmony upon the arrival of a new age of progress in the new millennium. Let us celebrate the positive achievements of four decades. Let not strife pull us apart. Let each human life upon this blessed alluvial soil, let all its flora and fauna, and all its rivers, flow.

Only then shall we be truly worthy of our independence. Posterity awaits!

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My family's close encounter with death in 1971



SUDHANGSHU SEKHAR ROY

THE War of Liberation took innumerable lives away from families in Bangladesh. My family was fortunate enough to have been spared; but I came very close to

losing my father, a man who led not only our household but our entire neighbourhood. Having completed all his duties to his family and society, my father breathed his last at the age of 84 in January 2003. But he was nearly killed in 1971 when he was only 50.

On the rainy night of July 27, 1971, members of the Pakistani occupying forces, their accomplices, and local collaborators dragged my father out of our home, holding him at gunpoint.

My brother was an Intermediate student at the time, and I was supposed to take my SSC exams in April that year. But we had to leave our hometown of Tangail on March 31 for our village home in Maguria, Nagarpur. My parents decided to stay back in order to protect our home from being usurped by the anti-liberation forces, and for my father to continue providing for us as a senior accountant at the Tangail Collectorate. The Pakistani occupying forces, after establishing their stronghold in Dhaka, had begun to flex their muscles in other areas of the country. After capturing the Gazipur Ordinance Factory, they had entered Tangail on April 2. Nitai Chakrabarti, our neighbour in Biswas Betka in the outskirts of Tangail, was the first victim of the Pak Army's onslaught. His body was later dumped in a canal going through the town, and a few days later, his decomposed body was cremated in a rush in his adopted father's home.

The then military administration set a revised schedule to hold the SSC

exams later than planned in July, so as to show the world that a peaceful and congenial atmosphere prevailed in the country. An instruction (virtually a threat) was issued by the military-backed administration that everyone who failed to send their eligible children to the examination halls, especially government officials, would be sent to jail.

I was surprised one night when, at our ancestral home in Maguria, my father asked me to travel with him the following morning to Tangail to appear for my SSC exams. I had a congenial heart ailment and couldn't prepare for my exams, but I had to surrender to my father's decision.

The last exam on 'Pakistan and its

being kept in a small room at the Zilla Sadar Headquarters being used as a makeshift cantonment of the Pakistani army. Ironically, some of these men were people I had played with during my school life in our neighbourhood. We learnt that my father would be taken to a killing field that night to be shot, and that he had requested us to say the final prayers for him.

My mother went straight to the then Deputy Commissioner of Tangail, Jalaluddin Chowdhury, urging him to help save my father. But the DC seemed more interested in earning the trust of the Pakistanis than dealing with the problems of a 'low-level official'.

That very day, my mother approached HN Ashiqur Rahman, the young

liberated, my elder brother told me something that shook me to my core. During the last month of the War of Liberation, the local *razakars* and members of the Shanti Committee headed by "Professor" Abdul Khaleque, a former lecturer of the Moulana Muhammad Ali College of Tangail, had drawn an evil plan to convert the entire Hindu community of Tangail town to Muslims. Accordingly, my parents and other Hindus of Tangail had been forced to "embrace" Islam. They were forced to go to the main mosque of Tangail to say their prayers. My father, Hiralal Roy, was forced to change his name to Helaluddin Khan. My mother, Hemangini Roy, was forcefully renamed Hamida Begum.

However, the collaborators were still unconvinced of the Hindu community's commitment to their new religion. They planned luncheon on Friday where all Hindus would be forced to eat beef after Jummah prayers. The plan was thankfully never realised; it was to be carried out on December 17, 1971, but Tangail was freed from Pakistani occupation on December 12, with the country gaining independence on December 16.

These incidents haunt me, my hometown neighbours, and my family to this day. I cannot fathom the extent of hatred against a religious community. But I feel very proud of my father, who never lost his nerve during that testing time. He was fortunate to have survived, but his resilience in the face of tragedy can never be measured.

'Professor' Abdul Khaleque lived in Narayanganj for some time after the defeat of Pakistan. He has never been brought to justice. Along with many other *razakars*, he too was responsible for turning Tangail into a killing field. I only hope that the International Crimes Tribunal investigates the atrocities committed by this so-called professor, and brings him to justice.

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Culture', compulsory for SSC students at the time, was scheduled to be held on July 27. I was due to go back home after completing the exam. But later that night, some armed men broke through our main gate, entered our house by force, and whisked my father away to an unknown place. We had no idea what his crime was, apart from the fact that he was Hindu. Our cries for help went unanswered; everyone was too afraid to step in.

My mother and I had to wait until the next morning to find out about my father's whereabouts, or whether he was even alive. At around 9 am the next morning, with the help of MI Chowdhury, the then magistrate of Tangail, we learnt that my father was

Additional Deputy Commissioner who later joined the Awami League, was elected a Member of Parliament in 1996, and is presently the treasurer of the party. Taking matters into his own hands, he convinced the in-charge of the District Military Administration of the imprudence of arresting a government official, especially while trying to present a scene of normalcy to the international community. After spending three days in confinement without food, water, light and with little air, thanks to Mr Rahman, my father was finally freed.

After that, I returned and stayed in my village for the remainder of the war, unaware of the horrors my family was facing in the meantime. On December 19, three days after the country was

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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This Independence Day, let us stand against terrorism

As a practising Muslim, I know that my religion teaches peace. Millions of Muslims, from the youth to Muslim scholars, are taking a stand against the so-called Islamic State. The terrorist attacks in London and Belgium have grieved all Muslims. We pray for those who have lost their lives in these incidents, and their families.

We are not immune to what is happening in the rest of the world. Some of the Islamic State's claims of responsibility for terrorist attacks in Bangladesh are disputed, but the destabilisation of society is unmistakable. Terrorism, instigated by political, religious, and racial discrimination, is a serious threat to the stability, development, and socio-economic progress of Bangladesh. *The Daily Star's* news reports spread out over several months have found over 30 religious militant organisations that have set up their network in Bangladesh since 1989, with the central objective of establishing an Islamic state. These are issues we must all be conscious of, all over the world.

We want to live in harmony, and leave a peaceful world for our future generations. But in order to do that, we must decry support of all destructive practices. We are a democratic sovereign country celebrating its 47th Independence Day, and on this day, the time has come to stand united as a nation against all forms of terrorism.

Zubair Khaled
By e-mail