

Observing May Day

Ensuring workers' rights a far cry

MAY 1 remains a day of particular significance since it was the first time in history when 200,000 workers organised a nationwide strike in the United States in 1886 demanding an eight hour work day. We have to thank them for this and many of the other rights that we now take for granted – the right to minimum wage, safe working environment, leisure time, and the right to organise as a collective to demand to be treated with dignity. While most of these have been achieved in the more advanced economies of the world, our workers' hopes to those very rights remain unrealised.

Unfortunately, workers in the biggest segment of our economy, the readymade garments are still struggling for the right to unionise so that they may press home their right to work in a safe environment free of harassment and unlawful termination, and the right to due wage and festival bonuses. We look at the millions of our expatriate workers who brave seemingly insurmountable odds to reach foreign labour markets, only to find that they have been cheated out of a fair wage and face terrible human rights violations. Closer to home, the Domestic Workers Protection Welfare Policy 2015 was supposed to end domestic violence against household help but that has not happened. This is more or less representative of other sectors, both formal and informal.

Until we learn to respect workers as human beings who toil in our factories and our homes, there can be no meaningful change. We are a nation of laws and we have ratified conventions internationally, yet we remain averse to giving workers the rights that are theirs by law. The observation of May Day carries little meaning if we cannot make workers' rights a priority in the national context.

Congratulations climate champions!

Their examples are worth emulating

FOR their efforts to preserve the environment and mitigate risks of climate change, three companies, a rehabilitation centre for the paralysed and two individuals were recognised as climate champions by HSBC Bangladesh and *The Daily Star*. We congratulate all the winners of the awards and also those who were in the running for their laudable efforts and innovative initiatives.

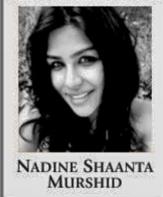
From reducing energy and water consumption in their factories, to planting and listing trees, these private companies and individuals have proven that through sincere efforts, we can, indeed, make a difference when it comes to protecting nature, which in turn protects us. And at a time of great environmental challenges, such as that which we are currently experiencing, these endeavours are certainly invaluable and cannot, in any way, be overestimated.

Over the years, we have witnessed many private companies adopting green initiatives and working hard towards minimising any harmful affects their businesses and their functioning may have on the overall environment. Encouragingly, we have also seen many individuals step up to the plate to safeguard nature as well. We believe that their examples are clearly worth emulating and hope that more private companies and individuals will do so in future.

And because these endeavours from private companies and individuals are so important for our future, we hope that they will also be better recognised and highlighted by the media, government and society in general.

Independence from tokenism

#ResearchMesearch



NADINE SHAANTA MURSHID

WE often lament, especially on days like our Independence Day, about how little our people (particularly the younger generation, always the younger

generation) know about our history. We talk about how people conflate the day with the Language Movement, or Victory Day. We talk about how the sacrifices of the martyrs have not been duly appreciated. Sometimes, we share stories of freedom fighters living in wretched conditions. Sometimes, we share a picture of a farmer in a jute hat, carrying a gun, fighting that war, on our social media profiles.

All this confusion, even though all we have to do is turn on a local television channel, any time of the year, to find at least a few talk shows or programmes being dedicated to the freedom fighters of our nation, invoking *chetona* of the War of Independence, Muktiyudhho, lamenting the loss of lives, and the human cost of war.

We are frequently exposed to advertisements that invoke ideas of nationalism via flag waving demonstrations that are meant to be patriotic. We even participated in a "human flag" competition for a couple of years, thanks to a telecom company's mission of becoming a household name. I have even found myself at conferences where presentations include sections where presenters bring up the War of Independence, revisiting the violence and the death toll, even when their work is not even tangentially related to this history.

But even then why do so many people have so much confusion about what happened when?

Maybe it's because of all this, I propose. Maybe because we are exposed to snippets of history from political leaders, but not from historians.

We hear personal stories of violence and trauma, but never a systematic review of the events that led to the War of Liberation.

We hear about our leaders, about individual men (never women) without whom we would never be independent from Pakistan, but rarely about the ordinary men and women without whom nothing would have been possible.

Maybe we are confused because when we think of our history, we think of 1971



PHOTO: STAR

as the beginning of Bangladesh, ignoring everything that we had been a part of before then.

We forget that we have had various forms of struggle for independence for decades, starting with, for example, the 1906 separation between East and West Bengal to the Language Movement in 1952. We forget the formation of Bengali Liberation Front in 1958. We forget that economic disparity between East and West Pakistan only deepened when East Pakistan was hit by a cyclone in November 1970. We forget the Agartala Conspiracy Case. We forget that Sarbadaliya Chhatra Sangram Parishad in 1969 were the first ones to shout *Joy Bangla* instead of *Pakistan Zindabaad*. We forget that Awami League won 288 of the 300 seats in the East Pakistan Legislature. We forget that the National Assembly that was to be held in Dhaka on March 3 1971 never took place because Yahya Khan cancelled it. We forget that independence does not only equal to national state sovereignty.

Instead of discourse, what we see and hear around us is tokenism.

And, tokenism creates disparity. Because it makes us feel like we're doing something (about something) when we're not.

In this case, tokenism creates the illusion that we know our history, creating a disparity between actual history and stories that are repeated in the name of history. These stories have no real

meaning, no real information, but consist of emotional language and gory details. These stories give us the impression that we know our history.

An example is the term "*muktijudhher chetona*" and all the stories that go along with those two words. These two words are repeated ad nauseam by anyone who wants to make an impression on the ruling party, which means we hear these words without context. We hear these words as indicators of party affiliation. Which means these words lose meaning as they are co-opted by sycophants and the like.

So as we step into our 46th year of independence from Pakistan, let us make a few demands. Free country, after all:

We don't need or want to hear about any kind of *chetona* from every person who wants to impress the ruling power heads. We need to hear about the history from those who partook in the War, and historians who have analysed that history.

We don't need or want to hear about the nine-month war from celebrities who themselves have half-baked ideas about it – we need to read about them in our textbooks, our history books, alongside everything else we should be learning in school. This means we need to keep our textbooks apolitical, i.e. beyond the reach of party politics.

We need to stop treating ourselves as victims of Pakistan's oppression. Because we won that war, even if Pakistan claims it was an India-Pakistan war, even if they

don't apologise for it. We got what we wanted, albeit at high cost. We can forgive, for our sake. Because we can. Because that's the right thing to do.

This means we need to stop acting like Pakistan is our enemy for life. We know, too well, perhaps, that life is short. Too short. For grudges. For anger. For regret. We need to start living, start enjoying this hard-earned independence.

Let us own our history. The history of the People's Republic of Bangladesh should be owned and written by the people of the nation and historians who study this history. Not its political leaders with vested interests. Not sycophants of government in exchange for real or perceived political gain. The people.

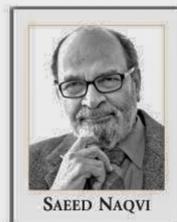
But, to be truly independent means to not regurgitate ultra-nationalistic tropes to oppress other groups. If we are to learn anything from our history, it should be this: that by marginalising our minority groups we can only become our own oppressors.

When we as a people, who fought for our own self-determination, stop behaving like the oppressor state that we freed ourselves from, and bring into our discourses, laws, syllabi, institutions, and legalese the rights, the self-determination of the minority peoples, and their languages, will we truly understand independence, and truly be independent.

The writer is Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, University at Buffalo, State University of New York.

Kejriwal, a dangerous idea

No establishment will let him survive



SAEED NAQVI

THE wag has a point. The 2017 Delhi Municipal Corporation elections, as we are being persistently reminded, were won by the BJP handsomely because of a single

factor: a Modi wave. Fair enough. But the BJP won the two previous Delhi Municipal elections also. Who generated the waves then?

The anchors were hopping on their seats in orgasmic ecstasy. "Kejriwal routed, Kejriwal routed". One of them, his mouth protruding like he was about to burst a *gole-guppa*, thrust his three fingers forward in a gesture of uncontrollable excitement. "Kejriwal is coming third; Kejriwal is third."

As it turned out Kejriwal was not third. He came second with 48 seats. Third was Congress with 30 seats. BJP, of course, was way ahead of both, with 181 of the 270 seats contested.

Terms like "routed", "swept away", "finished", "buried", "destroyed", "crushed", "smashed" were used for Kejriwal with such relish that one wondered what words would be pulled out from the Thesaurus for the Congress which had actually come third. Moreover, how can Kejriwal and AAP be "swept away" from the MCD where they never were. Yes, Congress was annihilated, but the anchors seemed uncomfortable with that reality. They would register that detail in tones of unbelievable politeness.

This visceral hatred for Kejriwal in the media remains something of a puzzle for me. Having been a pen pusher and TV anchor for decades, I cannot for the life of me understand "hatred" as an ingredient in a journalist's make up. In journalism, as in diplomacy, the cardinal principal always was to keep one's balance.

The high decibel, partisan hysteria which is the staple at all prime time discussions these days, takes one's breath away: the anchor shouts at inconvenient panellists and hands lollipops to BJP spokespersons.

I hesitate to lay all the blame at the door of journalists who man today's media. They operate in a particular system of media ownership; he who pays the piper calls the tune.

Circumstances were not dissimilar a few decades ago. A proprietor in the classical mould, Ramnath Goenka, for instance, had abiding political interests. He, along with the RSS's Nanaji Deshmukh, was one of the architects of what came to be known as JP's Bihar movement. Subsequently he had a proprietary interest in the Morarji Desai led Janata Government. But keeping these facts in mind, the paper's policy was enunciated by the powerful editor S. Mulgaonkar. There was credibility in the filtration process. The presentation was plausible.

It is not for a moment suggested that Kejriwal is God's gift to Indian politics, but he has been quite unambiguous in his opposition to corporate power, xenophobia, communalism and a general militarism. Surely this should be to his credit.

enveloped regimes in Greece, Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, US, Indonesia, India, Pakistan – any country boasting of an electoral democracy.

A suffocated electorate began to break out of the two party strait jacket. The Left surfaced in countries where economic issues dominated – Syriza and Podemos, both communist parties, in Greece and Spain, for instance. Islamophobia and anti-immigrant xenophobia were fuelled in Societies fearful of the biggest migration in history from West Asia and North Africa following America's 9/11 wars. Marine Le Pen is the direct consequence of such fears.

The post-Soviet global establishment, with the US as its central column, weakened considerably after the 2008 economic meltdown. But it is resilient enough to fight and contain the two extremities. The formula is simple: where

He alarmed the establishment, Modi, BJP, Congress, Lt. Governor, Police Commissioner and, above all, the corporate media. Kejriwal, unchecked, was a dangerous idea. He had to be waylaid at every turn.

won. But Emmanuel Macron is a crafty candidate of the establishment in disguise: his *En Marche!* (March ahead) party is brand new and yet as a former banker he is nothing if not the establishment.

Kejriwal's strength and weakness derive from the same fact. He is truly anti-establishment. It was extremely audacious of him to stand on that kind of a platform. The result is there for all to see. He stunned the nation winning 67 of 70 seats in the 2015 Delhi elections. He stood out all the more because his extraordinary success came within months of Modi's victory. He alarmed the establishment, Modi, BJP, Congress, Lt. Governor, Police Commissioner and, above all, the corporate media. Kejriwal, unchecked, was a dangerous idea. He had to be waylaid at every turn. He must be politically exterminated.

Providing free water and cheap electricity, *mohalla* clinics to Delhi's poor despite his hands having been tied behind his back, is no mean achievement. A fearful Congress and the Akali-BJP combine ganged up against him in Punjab but he came second, ahead of the Akali-BJP.

True, he does not have the please-all skills of a Macron. It therefore remains something of a pity that a duplicitous outreach in multiple directions has to be placed in the category of a virtue for success in today's politics.

The writer is a senior Indian journalist, television commentator and interviewer.



Kejriwal -- not the media's pet.

PHOTO: AFP

Little wonder none of this registers with the media which came into being in the wake of economic liberalisation and accelerated globalisation. It was designed to carry advertising which the neoliberal economic policies would boost. A media in the image of Rupert Murdoch became a vogue. This Murdochised media was placed supinely in the service of crony capitalism which revelled in the two-party systems. Whichever party came on top was owned by corporates. I have personal knowledge of even the mainstream Left having its hands in the same till. Rampaging corruption

possible, a right-of-centre formation should be supported. But in a situation where extreme Left is in competition with the extreme Right, it is the Right which will obtain the vote of confidence. In other words, xenophobia and racism are preferable to anti-austerity politics.

In the recent French campaign, the Communist Jean-Luc Mélenchon surged ahead of most other candidates. Supposing the run-off on May 7 was between Le Pen and Mélenchon, the establishment would have thrown its full weight behind Le Pen. She would have

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Gaps in workers' rights go unnoticed

Occupational health and safety service in Bangladesh is still in the developmental stage. Most of these services cater only to the needs of workers in the industrial and manufacturing sectors, ignoring the other professions.

Construction workers are at highest risk of accidents on the job. Yet billboard advertising companies are one of the many businesses that ignore workers' safety. Labourers can be seen without any safety gear, such as a harness, ropes and helmets, climbing over fifty feet high. Often, a simple plank of wood is the only support used.

Neither employers nor the government is serious about upholding workers' rights. The plans which were drafted after the Rana Plaza incident are yet to be implemented. Meanwhile, illegal and dangerous practices continue with brash indifference in factories. These damages have a three-fold effect - it translates into financial losses for a corporation, undermines a family's capacity to earn their bread and butter, and negatively impacts a nation's gross productivity levels. Labourers don't know how to demand work safety because they have been made to believe that they simply do not deserve it, while well-connected corrupt employers bribe policemen and medico-legal officers to evade the grip of law.

Many other health problems are commonly encountered and under-reported, such as skin conditions of workers in the carpet weaving industry and chemical factories, lung diseases in miners, silicosis in stone crushing sites, etc. The general well-being of employees, as well as their regular health and fitness checkups, mental health and performance evaluations are basic rights that should be offered by all employers.

Zubair Khaled Huq

By email