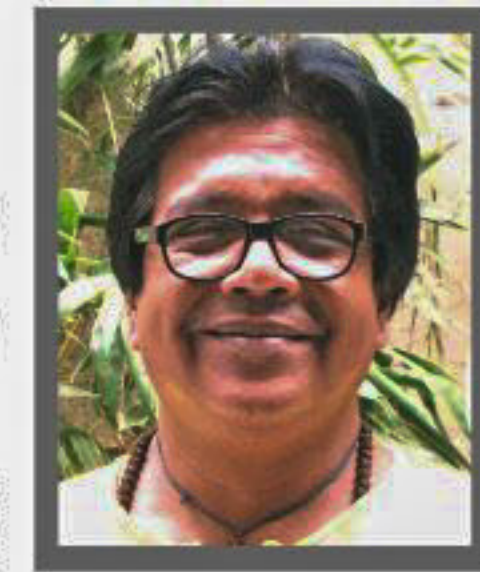


# The Culture of Intolerance and Resistance to change

OFF THE CUFF  
MAQSOODUL HAQUE



CONCLUDING PART

*It was immediately after the overthrow of the dictator H.M. Ershad in 1990 that our nation made its gradual progress towards representative democracy. Like all avenues of culture, dictatorship of nearly fifteen years brought in its wake several new and abominable cultures that the nation was least prepared for. The euphoria of freedom post 1990-91 led on to a democratic transition with open elections which on surface was 'free and fair'.*



However, what was in store for us was uncharted territory. There are no records of how many lives were lost due to political violence, but a guesstimate of over hundreds of thousands will not be inappropriate in the least. The same culture of mindless violence, impunity, blatant disregard for the law, violence, anarchism, cronyism and corruption that were the hallmark of dictatorial rule found its way and germinated like a cancer in our new trust with democracy.

Culture as we understand it, got pregnant on Bengali and Bangladeshi nationalism lines and pro and anti-liberation factions. The schisms and the paranoia of it all infected culture and likewise all our aspirations for peace and an egalitarian society. The public space needed by culture to function and flourish was all but overtaken by partisan jingoism. Major cultural events such as the Mother Language Day of February 21 and the secular Bengali New Year festivities on April 14 would get marred by senseless violence with rival parties jockeying for claims on how 'intrinsic and authentic' one was over the other. The resultant equation was Bangladesh TV and Betar deteriorated to mere propaganda organ of whoever it was in power. Every change of government saw many programming contents being scuttled and together with that, the list of artists whether they be drama, theater, music or even news presenters changed ritually. Party affiliation or 'like-mindedness' and not talent became the strongest contributor for survival.

Nonetheless, what did become matters of grave alarm for any democratic governments were public demands for autonomy of the media and free press, devoid of censorship regimes that was a legacy of our autocratic past. However, they were

no efforts to make the media autonomous and these demands became central when the elections of 1996 were announced. The spirit of election took a new and unexpected yet welcome turn when the Late Annisul Huq designed a program called *Shobinoy Nibedon* with the object of inviting our politicians and have them face the nation as well as a panel of experts and civil society stalwarts. The program was to be telecast live on BTV, and for the very first time in our lives we would be witness to our politicians being grilled vociferously. Their parochialism and cultural insensitivity was as clear as daylight. It was a momentous success and opened up an atmosphere of accountability that would ultimately pave the way for an Awami League victory after 21 years.

However, not much happened in terms of Bangladesh entering the fast changing 'global world'. The advent of the internet in 1995-96 channeled some public debates into an arena which the government of the day could easily overlook or ignore. Mainstream press, whether that be for business exigencies or keeping the regime happy, would indirectly toe the 'official line'. It is true that many debates did find the public space it required but time and again, freedom as the world understands and practices, was still a mirage we were chasing.

After endless ups and downs and many more lives lost – enter Awami League again into power in 2009 and seemingly we moved to the right track with private televisions permitted to multiply and its thrust sector Digital Bangladesh would usher in a new era of free expression and creativity - hitherto unseen!

Indian Satellite TV channels meanwhile overused its frequency to beam contents to us, and while culturally this may have been viewed as a 'grave threat',

the actual threat was to our home grown TV channels that neither had the budget, technology nor appropriate contents to take on the neighboring giants and their huge market. Our biggest failure culturally has been while our private TV channels can be accessed almost anywhere in the world, they cannot be viewed in India, not even in our Bengali speaking neighboring West Bengal. Over the years while our contacts and relations with India has improved significantly, the cultural question of access to Indian airwaves has strangely never been addressed. Consequently, barring a handful of local private TV channels most of them are operating with staggering losses.

However, on the flip side private FM radio stations took on the mantle of the ever growing youth culture. A music loving 'speak easy' new generation appreciation and addiction to radio shows was remarkable. Over a dozen stations nationwide with state-of-the-art technology and run mostly by the young have overtaken and in some cases challenged the existing and somewhat antiquated notion of radio. Not unsurprisingly the occasional gross diatribes and today's youth's insistence and preference to speak Bangla with a somewhat American 'twang' became a great source of irritation among the politically correct culture vultures and vigilantes. The generational divide got more focused as an older generation failed to realize that this 'new' Bangla was the tip of a changing 'soundscape' with a strong global resonance and as of now by default has become the lingua franca of the young of Bangladesh. This has since gone on to become the mainstay in music, writings and intrinsically a part of our ever changing dynamic culture.

However, it was the entrance of Facebook in our culture in 2005-2006

that proved the silver lining in our by then doomed and dark skies. It paved the way to freedom of expression in a manner that no generation before us in history had experienced and went on to usher in globalization and global trends. By 2015 when smart phones became cost efficient to own and operate, it opened up a flood-gate of pent up and suppressed emotions, hurt and foremost the freedom for every citizen in Bangladesh to be who they are and importantly to be heard. As in our history, it was the young who traditionally have called the shots that 'exploited' social media to promote their talents as well as making critical interventions in our politics, democracy and culture.

For instance the trial and eventual punishment by death of the war criminals of 1971 arguably could never have been accomplished without the all abiding strength of the citizen's direct involvement in social media. And there has been no denying that profanities and hate filled diatribes on religion, profanities and the culture of making propaganda 'viral' too have overtaken social media. That is a price we all have to inevitably pay,



because no technology, no change in culture comes only with 'benefits'. The dark side of technology together with unbridled freedom also teaches and preaches irresponsible behavior.

That leaves me to conclude this series of essays by hoping that the generational revolt led by school students to demand road safety in recent weeks, ends with all stakeholders specially the older generation acting in a more responsible fashion than what we are witness to as of now. Failing, we will leave history to judge our culture as I have long argued as intolerant and resistant to change. That in effect will derail us not from what we are – but who we are... proud Bengalis.

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