

“Manuscripts do not burn”: Mikhail Bulgakov and Shiekh Mujibur Rahman

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“Manuscripts do not burn”, is an oft-quoted saying from the book ‘Master and Margarita’ by the celebrated Russian author Mikhail Bulgakov. In Stalinist Russia, like many other authors with free mind he found it difficult to publish and survive. His manuscripts had gone through many ups and downs and finally saw the light of the day long after his death. The manuscripts have a strength

of its own, it can remain hidden, it can be suppressed but it will never burn, rather it illuminates when get published after many years, may be after decades. The fate of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib’s prison notebooks containing attempts to pen down his experience of life has a story of its own. He didn’t pay much attention to what he has written in prison. As a free man he had so many other works to do for his people that he had no time for himself. With repeated attack on his house and ultimately on his life the manuscript got lost forever. Sheikh Mujib was in and out of prison throughout the turbulent times of Pakistan. In 1966 when he announced the Six-points program as a charter of freedom for the Bengalis, the military dictator General Ayub Khan rightly understood that the greatest threat to his rule and dominance of West Pakistan over the land of Eastern Bengal will come from this charismatic and uncompromising leader of the Bengali people. On 8 May 1966 Sheikh Mujib was arrested after a rally at Narayanganj and put in jail for indefinite period. He rightly prepared for a long stay in jail. One year later, his wife Begum Fazilatunnesa Mujib gave him an exercise book to write down his memoirs. The prison administrator authorized him to use the notebook bearing the date of 9 June 1967 with certification that the khata contained two hundred fifty-two pages.

The second notebook with two hundred twenty pages was certified on 22 September 1967, which showed that Sheikh Mujib seriously engaged himself to write down his memoir. In three months, he has finished writing the first notebook and was given a second one. We do not know much about the fate of the manuscript written in confinement but from the seal and signature of the Deputy Inspector General of Prisons we can guess that Sheikh Mujib somehow managed to smuggle the manuscript out of the prison. If he did it formally it should have another seal and certification declaring censored and passed.

Sheikh Mujib knew the ins and outs of jail more than anyone else. He could take control of the situation even in most difficult situation. In this regard he can be compared with the Irish revolutionary De Valera, a political jailbird who couldn’t be subdued by prison. After his arrest in 1966 Sheikh Mujib had to be in jail without any trial. Moreover he was accused of high treason and transferred to the cantonment in January, 1968 to face trial before a special tribunal. The mass upsurge of people toppled the regime of Ayub Khan and Mujib was released with the case withdrawn in February, 1969. Out of the clutches of Pakistani rulers Sheikh Mujib was embraced by the people as ‘Bangabandhu’ and he again got engaged in his struggle of national liberation for his people. It can be assumed that he finished writing the second notebook while he was in the Dhaka Central Jail and successfully smuggled the two notebooks outside as they didn’t had the official stamping of “Censored and Passed”.

The two notebooks were under the custody of Begum Mujib and she preserved it with utmost care. But Bangabandhu never got time to get back to his memoir and finish the writing. His daughter Sheikh Hasina knew about the prison notebooks and the place where her mother preserved the notebooks. The house was ransacked after the arrest of Bangabandhu on 26 March 1971. Fortunately, the manuscripts survived. After independence, Bangabandhu devoted all his time and energy to reconstruct the devastated land. Again, he had no time to look after his writing. The house was again ransacked on 15 August 1975 after the brutal killing of Bangabandhu and Begum Mujib with members of their family including little child Sheikh

Russel. The two daughters survived as they were out of the country but had to live in forced exile for long years. When Sheikh Hasina returned to Bangladesh in 1981, her entry into the abandoned house was traumatic for her. Nevertheless, the first act of her was to search the place where the manuscripts were kept. She found few other writings but not the prison notebooks. She wrote, “I also found some typed pages which had been destroyed by termites, only the upper halves of these foolscap pages remained. Reading whatever was still intact in them I could guess that they were from his autobiography.”

The manuscript was lost and the copy eaten by termites was of no use. Sheikh Hasina lost all hope. She wrote, “Afterwards, I carried out an extensive search for the notebooks but found nothing. I looked for original notebooks, the typist and for whatever remained with whoever had taken them, but to no avail. At one point, I completely gave up hope of finding.”

But the manuscripts never burn, as said by Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940). His fiction ‘Master and Margarita’ depicted the oppressive life of people under Stalin’s iron fist rule. The book could not be published at that time and the author kept it hidden for obvious reason. It was first published in 1966, twenty-five years after the death of the author. Immediately the book got acclaimed as one of the major writing of the 20th century. The journey of the lost manuscript of Sheikh Mujib was different but also had a strong story. To her utter surprise Sheikh Hasina got back the prison notebooks in 2004, twenty-seven years after it was written. But the return of the manuscripts to light had a tragic and dramatic Shakespearian turn. On 21 August 2004, at a political

rally Sheikh Hasina was targeted by a horrifying grenade attack. Twenty-four people died in the attack while she survived miraculously. She wrote, “I was overwhelmed by grief, pain and depression, but it was then that my father’s invaluable notebooks containing his autobiography came to my possession. It was as if a light had suddenly been sparked in the midst of darkness. I had myself come back to life from the jaws of death. It was as if I had been given a new lease of life. One of my cousins handed over these notebooks to me. He had found them in an office drawer of another cousin, Sheikh Fazlul Huq Moni. In all probability, my father had handed the notebooks to their cousin so that he could have them typed.”

After careful and painstaking editing the book was finally published in 2012. While the turbulent journey of the manuscript and its survival is important, the book signifies historical narrative of the political prisoner who turned out to be one of the greatest leaders of the national liberation of the oppressed people. The book as a narrative of the turbulent time of 1940’s to mid-1950’s has thrown new light on history. The historical, political and literary significance of the book rightfully establish its claim as one of the significant political autobiographies of the 20th century. Mikhail Bulgakov and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman apparently had no relation, but both of them had shown that ‘manuscripts never burn’. The oppressive regimes tried to erase them out of history, but they made majestic comeback and showed us that ‘manuscripts never burn’, rather its illuminates.

The writer is a Trustee of the Liberation War Museum.

BANGABANDHU SPEAKS

FROM PAGE 4

Government might say that they will judge it; people might say that, no, Government is wrong in declaring another country friendly, she is not our friend, she is our foe. Similarly Government might say that such country is our friend and such and such is our enemy. The Government will say that we are not going to be guided by the wishes of the people in this respect.

So you can easily understand the position how a great deal of liberty of the people has been curtailed. I feel, Sir, that they do not even feel that there are other parties also in Pakistan. What they are trying to make is that there is only one party in Pakistan.

Sir, they want only one party in Pakistan, because if there is one party, there will not be any opposition or criticism about foreign relations. Our Government does not like criticism: whatever foreign relations make, you have to accept them. This is the fundamental point. The framers of this Bill say it is a small point and why we take so much time discussing it. But, Sir, it is a very important point. Mr. Yusuf Haroon is ready there with instructions from his party.....

Mr. Yusuf A. Haroon: It is all repetition. They are not putting forward any new argument.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: Sir, I request the Honourable Law Minister and the Coalition Party to accept this amendment so that the people will have some right to say something about our foreign relations with the foreign countries, which is the fundamental right of the people. Sir, this is an important matter, because if the Government formulates a wrong foreign policy, the country will be ruined. It is, therefore, necessary that the people should have right to speak about these matters. The country as a whole is responsible for the conduct of foreign relations. I, therefore, appeal to the Honourable Minister to accept this amendment.

An Honourable Member: The question may be put.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: Sir, I support the amendment.

Honourable Deputy Speaker: The question is.....

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: I got up first. How could they put this question? They feel that they can do whatever they like. They can speak in the middle of my speech, they can say, “you go out from the House”. Sir, my honourable friend, Mr. Hamidul Haq Choudhury, has raised a few points.....

Honourable Deputy Speaker: If you

take even one-fifth more of the five minutes, I will pull you up.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: You have already taken one minute, Sir, I will now need six minutes.

Sir, my honourable friend, Mr. Hamidul Haq Choudhury, has said that this is for the first time that we are getting our fundamental rights. Sir, we are getting the fundamental rights for the first time after we took birth. During the British days we had the right to deliver speeches, address the public meetings and mobilise public opinion against the British Government. This is the first time that after independence we are getting these fundamental rights and therefore these rights should be granted.

Sir, Mr. Hamidul Haq Choudhury will remember that in 1948 when he was Finance Minister under Khwaja Nazimuddin, who was Chief Minister of Bengal, we had declared Bengali State Language Day. Then, Sir, we were lathi-charged, section 144 was imposed and I, along with many friends, was put in jail. He knows, Sir, how to curtail the liberties of the people...

Honourable Deputy Speaker: How did you escape?

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: Sir, many times I went to jail and escaped because I have got the courage. Sir, the members on this side of the House know that I have addressed the largest number of meetings...

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: Sir, my experience shows that the restriction under section 144 is there many times. Sir, the members from that side have said that if we accept this, there will be no section 144. Sir, we do not want 144. We want to save ourselves from section 144; we want to save the country from it. We have suffered, For example, Sir, if Mr. Suhrawardy wants to address a meeting a sub-deputy collector or a magistrate can go to Mr. Suhrawardy and can say: “There will be disorder, I want to impose 144; Mr. Suhrawardy you go back”. This is my first argument.

Honourable Deputy Speaker: What is your second argument?

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: Sir, my second argument is about provincial autonomy. What an argument has been given, Sir, by the Honourable Foreign Minister, who represents our country before the foreigners and who talks to the people from foreign countries. He discusses matters with all foreign diplomats in Karachi and abroad. Sir, where my countrymen will go if such a person represents

Pakistan. I feel that whatever prestige is left of my country abroad, he will finish it and will bring down the respect of Pakistan in the foreign countries. Sir, he is not giving us autonomy so far as financial allotment is concerned, so far as our sales tax and other taxes are concerned, so far as our industries are concerned; but he is giving us autonomy where the fundamental rights are concerned. Sir, this question of fundamental rights is not a question for the province, or for the Centre; it is a question which relates to all the provinces, it is a matter which concerns all the citizens of Pakistan. I cannot understand how it is provincial autonomy. Sir, restrictions are already there; now they are putting restrictions over and above them by giving power to the authorities.

Sir, our country is a democratic country. We claim that we are giving a democratic constitution. Then why deny this right to the people? Sir, you must have seen that in Italy’s Constitution they have given this right. This they included after experiencing the difficulties under Mussolini. Sir he was a Fascist. He destroyed all the opposition parties of Italy and he killed the Opposition leaders. When Mussolini was killed they called the Assembly to make a Constitution and they gave this right to save the country from another Fascist. Sir, I do not understand that when our country is not a Fascist country, when we claim that we are giving a democratic Constitution to the country, then what is the difficulty in giving this right to the people. Sir, the Honourable Law Minister is not here, I wanted to appeal to him. I do not know if I should appeal to Mr. Rashdi, and he will represent my case....

The Honourable Pir Ali Mohammad Rashdi (West Paki stan: Muslim): Yes, I will represent your case.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: Yes, you know how to represent. Sir, I wanted to appeal to the Law Minister, but he is not present here. I appeal to everybody to accept this amendment. I want to tell them that today you are in power; tomorrow you may not be in power, you may be in Opposition; then this 144 may be used in your meetings. In the name of Islam, which you utilize for vote, please accept this amendment and show to this country and to the world that this is an Islamic Constitution, and your country is a democratic country.

SOURCE: SPEECHES OF SHEIKH MUJIB IN PAKISTAN PARLIAMENT (1955-56). VOL-1. COMPILED BY ZIAUR RAHMAN. HAKKANI PUBLISHERS. 1990.

