



Under the banner of “Teachers Against Repression,” teachers from various universities across Bangladesh staged a demonstration on the Dhaka University campus on August 1, 2024. They demanded justice for those killed during the quota reform movement and protested the harassment of teachers and students nationwide. PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN/ THE DAILY STAR

“What have I done in July 2024?”

MIRZA TASLIMA SULTANA

During the Vietnam War, Noam Chomsky was critical of the role of intellectuals, identifying them as subservient to power while the US was abusing human rights in the war. US social scientists and technocrats provided pseudo-scientific justifications for the crimes committed by their state during the war. Dwight Macdonald, after the Second World War, questioned the responsibility of the German and Japanese people for the atrocities committed by their governments. Following Macdonald, Chomsky also questioned to what extent the British and American people were responsible for the vicious bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He emphasised that each intellectual must ask, “What have I done?”

There are many instances in history where intellectuals either took part in or supported the injustices of their state or colonial powers. At the same time, many intellectuals spoke truth to power. Indeed, intellectuals are most respected when they do so. Although we now understand that ‘truth’ is multifaceted, it is the responsibility of intellectuals to debunk these various truths. Moreover, power must be opposed whenever it acts against humanity.

The roles of intellectuals in 1971 and before were glorious. Many sacrificed their lives on December 14, just before our independence. We owe the existence of our state to their sacrifices. As the successors of the intellectuals of 1971, should we not ask ourselves in 2024, “What have I done in July 2024?” “What have I done in the last sixteen years?” “How did the autocrat manage to commit all these crimes—abductions, extrajudicial killings, money laundering?” “How has Bangladesh become a state run by mafias?” “What have I done when the right to free speech was silenced through three consecutive acts by the government, culminating in the ousting of the government on August 5, 2024?”

Some intellectuals spoke truth to power in the last sixteen years, yet many remained silent. They supported and nurtured the government as it became a demonic force that killed over 1,500 students and members of the public, leaving 22,000 injured during the July uprising. These are not just numbers but represent students, children, and ordinary citizens, each with unique life stories, relationships, and dreams. How they were killed, injured, treated—or not treated—and how they suffered, losing limbs and enduring untold pain, are stories yet to be fully revealed.

All of us have different ideologies and take stances according to them. However, the violation of human rights should be the dividing line, prompting us to act on behalf of those who do not share our ideological beliefs. Surprisingly, this basic understanding has vanished in recent times. Intellectuals have decided whether or not to act in response to human rights violations based on selective criteria tied to their vested interests. Intellectuals must urgently ask themselves how they can contribute to improving the situation.

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Rethinking the Role of Intellectuals

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The role of intellectuals in society has been extensively examined from both western and southern experiences, often categorising them based on their application of knowledge. However, in the age of global capitalism, traditional factory-based production systems no longer define who sells their brain versus labour. A significant portion of the workforce now operates in the service sector that is founded upon white-collar credentials which are necessary determinants of the new service class as non-blue collar, i.e., non-working class. Therefore, it is necessary to have a re-evaluation of middle class and their intellectual contributions, incorporating hybridity and neoliberal capitalism. However, not all contributors are deemed intellectuals, as many do not produce original knowledge.

Historically, Bengali intellectuals like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Rokeya Sakhaawat were pivotal in bringing social reform and advancing the cause of academic advancement for all. They

used knowledge to challenge societal norms and create transformative ideas, often through academic institutions that nurtured and legitimised their efforts. Modern educators, too, have the potential to earn the intellectual label by engaging in similar pathways of thought and innovation. While Bangladeshi teachers play a role in fostering new perspectives, the consistency and efficacy of such efforts remain questionable. Intellectual pursuits today are influenced by numerous factors, including motivations for generating insights, external pressures, and the dynamics of stakeholders such as the job market and beneficiaries. Global interconnectedness, driven by technology and shared sociological realities, underscores the responsibilities of contemporary Bangladeshi intellectuals. These individuals must navigate the challenges of global narratives, engaging with extended processes of knowledge creation and dissemination.

The July uprising illustrated this through evocative artwork. A metro rail pillar was adorned with a graffiti depicting

Abu Sayeed’s mother saying, *Hmar Cheleki Marlu Kene?* Such illustrations may not fit within the traditional category of aesthetic artwork, yet today they can be regarded as art of the highest order due to their profound influence on public consciousness. This is precisely what intellectuals do—they provoke thought and inspire action. Intellectuals paved the way for innovative ideas and critical thinking. Unfortunately, during the authoritarian Awami League (AL) regime, even celebrated intellectuals and artists often refrained from articulating the struggles of ordinary Bangladeshis. In contrast, the protests empowered previously marginalised groups, including lower-income communities and students, to articulate their grievances through creative means. This shift signifies a redefinition of intellectualism in the context of globalisation, where new-age thinkers and activists challenge long-standing hierarchies.

Following the fall of the AL on 5 August, fresh narratives have emerged, prioritising inclusivity and engagement with the masses. Intellectuals must now

move beyond middle-class confines, fostering thought processes that resonate with broader audiences. This is particularly crucial in Bangladesh, where intellectuals have sometimes misled the public, exacerbating societal divisions.

Today, public spheres are contested spaces, reflecting negative populist trends and constrained freedoms of the marginalized. Reclaiming these spheres demands intellectual engagement that serves both majority and minority interests to create a cultural mosaic with sharp and broken edges, that do not lose uniqueness of each piece but creates a unity in diversity. The path ahead necessitates genuine commitment to the collective welfare, ensuring that intellectual contributions address the needs of an evolving society.

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The article was transcribed by Nihad Nowsher of The Daily Star.

What should our intellectuals do now?

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Despite the widely-held non-agreement regarding the definition of such an overused but not-so-old word called ‘intellectual’, it is not difficult, I think, to map the overall role of the intellectuals in the society in any given context. This is common knowledge that they hail mostly from the middle class, though the upper class does not fail to produce one often, with the lower class lagging far behind. And according to Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, “All men are intellectuals, ...: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals.”

As regards the point of mapping the roles of the intellectuals, it includes, a sheer understanding – be it through academic study or general experience, or both – of the world and society they live in and of the power relations, and, above all, the mettle to speak the truth looking in the eye of the authority staying conscientiously away from its

gainful fold. And this reminds us of Edward Saïd who said that the “true intellectual is, therefore, always an outsider, living in self-imposed exile, and on the margins of society.”

But “there’s the rub”. Many an intellectual does an injustice to their names, thus proving themselves to be pseudo-intellectuals, with all the gear and no integrity. In Bangladesh, the recently toppled regime witnessed quite an astonishing number of them who, paying lip service to their vocation, did a mockery of their roles enumerated by Edward Saïd. Giving no heed to the regime’s misrule and crime spree and keeping mum about the excruciating sufferings of the common folks of the country, they just harped on the mantra of *unnayon* (development). In the name of Bengali Nationalism, the now-defunct regime practised othering, as a consequence of which a considerable number of people found themselves to be second rate citizens in their own land. Even

a significant portion of Muslims were thought to be militants by the authority, and ostracized as an enemy of the people, while the conniving intellectuals looked on.

The July uprising this year tried to put an end to all this, a very ambitious aim though. With those pseudo-intellectuals of the bygone regime now sidelined and a few brought to book, the ones who kept raising their voices through their talks and writings during the last 15 years, braving innumerable odds, as well as the aspirant ones, have a long way to go. In a land that is afflicted with sores all over making it a whole-body problem, with not a single institution running properly, the “true intellectuals”, it seems, need to push a huge boulder up a big mountain like mythical Sisyphus, but unlike him, can’t afford to let it come down to the ground as happened many times before.

Intellectuals of our country should keep raising their voice against our

starting from scratch again and again, help secure our achievements, and move forward in every sector of national efforts keeping aside factionist and personal gain. Like scientific research nowadays, intellectual activity also harvests best today when done in unison, as a group. Ideas spread quickly nowadays, and it is very easy to disseminate them, thanks to social media and modern technology. With their concerted efforts based on the priorities of the nation, namely rule of law under the aegis of a democratic government, top notch education, good governance, strong foreign policy, etc. the intellectuals need to remain alert so that the slacking in any of these areas is promptly protested by them and the dignity of an individual as a human being is never compromised.

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