



Intellectuals of Bangladesh in and after 1971

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In the annals of the Bangladesh liberation war, let alone in a comprehensive history of the nation, a proper place of the intellectuals largely remains a desideratum. In the meantime, i.e., between 1971 and 1974, a variety of morbid phenomena have flourished, among them two histories of the liberation war. For the proclamation of independence (April 10, 1971), the cataclysmic events of the year stand all by themselves as a response to Pakistan's sudden and brutal military operation. The sudden and phenomenal election victories of Awami League in 1970-71, the founding event, erases all earlier national episodes.

A second narrative finds origins in the radical activities of the 1950s, and in the 1960s, when the country was led by the masses in an upsurge against the Pakistani regime and, a trifle later, when flags of freedom were seen flying in rallies giving a damn to the Awami League leadership. These two narratives, between themselves, define the political history of Bangladesh since 1971.

What Hasan Hafizur Rahman, prominent intellectual and editor of the first collection of documents relating to the war, scribbled in 1982 is indicative of the primordial dissension: "The principal consideration was to secure exact documents for exact events. We do not have any comment, we point towards nothing, we offer no explanations, no analysis of our own." This stasis is apparently a metaphor, i.e., a symptom, of what the primordial dichotomy eventually morphed to: civilian and military views of the liberation war.

The military view, which tends to see events primarily as a military conflict with Pakistan, still prevails. This account drives home the point that the freedom movement was ultimately a military duel. This argument's Achilles heel is plain enough: lacking comprehensiveness. A tree without roots rarely tempts you, subjects supposed to know.

The other narrative stresses the political nature of popular participation in myriad forms. In its absence, intellectuals appear rather as a frivolity, a missing link for that matter in the chain of events. With the supreme leader capitulating in the long night of 'Operation Searchlight,' almost all unprepared, inefficient, civilian cohorts catapulting into exile, who would deny the dismal nature of politics? Besides, many of these men were plain corrupt and, in the opinion of many, "the country won liberation not because of the civilian political leadership, but in spite of them."

Intellectual actors, however, claim a central place in the martyrology of national resistance, in the history of the struggle for cultural and political



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA/THE DAILY STAR

autonomy over two decades in old Pakistan, between 1952 and 1971. This narrative even endows intellectuals with a powerful founding myth: featuring student martyrs of 1952 and teacher, doctor, lawyer, journalist, and myriad professional victims of 1971 in the great drama that short-circuited the illusion that was old Pakistan.

Why Pakistan collapsed? For a simple (not simplistic) answer, we recall Antonio Gramsci's take on the Russian revolution (1917), in terms of state and civil society. Czarist Russia was only a special case, thought Gramsci, where economic crisis proved necessary and sufficient for erupting a successful revolutionary crisis. State and the civil society there entangled in an unjust relationship; intellectuals remaining primordial and gelatinous, it was the state which was everything.

The Russians won a lightning 'war of maneuver' without even rehearsing for a 'war of position' (siege warfare) because the Czarist state lacked

a cultural fortress, powerful enough to win over an irate and hungry populace. The post-Czar regime of Kerensky also fell for the same reason: it hardly had time to even lay foundations of a new fortress. In Western Europe, contrarily, prevailed an equilibrium between the state and civil society; when the state trembled a robust structure of civil society surfaced. In this perspective, Pakistan in 1971 looked more like Russia and less like the West.

It began, soon after a caesarean birth, to lose hegemony, effective control over the intellectuals, over culture, public opinion and in a word over the illusion of popular sovereignty. It faced, in other words, an 'organic crisis' risking the fabric of the 'historical block'—structure as well as superstructure—that in the first place brought the nation-state into being, with no civil society rearing head.

In Bangladesh, despite appearances, the social revolution in making is likely not repeating the

Pakistan experience. For, thanks to the war of liberation, the 'war of maneuver' is going around ever more as a 'war of position.' It bears stressing that "a state wins a war to the extent to which it prepares itself in peacetime." Where is this 'war of position,' the struggle for hegemony, more readily fought? Mostly in the vast terrains of civil society, those massive superstructures of modern bureaucracies, the 'trenches' of civil society. A struggle for hegemony thus turns into a 'war of attrition.' Antonio Gramsci wryly observes, "no social form is ever willing to confess that it has been superseded."

The struggle for class consciousness thus demands intellectuals. That infamous apathy of the masses, what the left used to dub 'false consciousness,' is not determined by structures (economic conditions) as by superstructures (cultural relations). It is more or less a product traditional intellectual hegemony. On the other hand, winning over traditional intellectuals by workers marks a victory of organic intellectuals.

Awakening to class consciousness (becoming hegemonic) is the product of a struggle led by organic intellectuals of competing social classes. Asserts Gramsci: "A human mass does not 'distinguish' itself and does not become independent 'by itself' without organizing itself (in a broad sense), and there is no organization without intellectuals,... without organizer and leaders..."

For Gramsci, political parties comprise three layers: a first layer of true believers, a second layer of political entrepreneurs (organic intellectuals) and a third layer of the ruling class or political leadership. "All three layers are necessary for a party but the organizational backbone is the second layer," a Gramsci scholar has put it. One function of intellectuals is achieving what the oft-cited, poorly taken, term hegemony signifies: the capacity to lead without coercion or with coercion plus legitimacy.

Successions of civilian to military, military-sponsored, and interim (not intermediate) regimes in Bangladesh are clearly a symptom of the failure to build on avowed premises of liberal hegemony: equity, human dignity and social justice. The latest autocracy, a manifestation of late fascism, in Bangladesh was no less than a direct result of this weak hegemony. The missing 'spontaneous' consent in civil society was responsible for obliging the fledgling state to resort to both plunder and murder.

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The Pen Against Power in the Fight for Justice



Panelists discuss the role of writers and poets in the post-uprising era during the "Write to Protest" session, organised on December 7 as part of the "36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts" exhibition, hosted by The Daily Star.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN/THE DAILY STAR

In a country emerging from 15 years of suppression, what should be the role of a writer in the new era? Additionally, is it solely the writer's duty to speak the truth, be the voice of the deprived, and stand for the nation when freedom is compromised?

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On the brink of victory in 1971, as the masses fought for freedom, Pakistanis stained December 14 with the blood of the nation's leading educators, journalists, doctors, and writers. Since then, the day has been marked as Intellectuals' Day, a reminder that true intellectuals, regardless of their beliefs, fearlessly speak and write the truth against injustice. It's important to remember that a society without questions is doomed to fall into darkness. In 1971, the intellectuals took on this crucial role.

Yet, for many years in Bangladesh, a large segment of intellectuals chose not to speak up for the people. Fear, a desire to stay close to power, and the allure of material gain often kept their voices silent. They avoided criticizing the policies and plans of the autocratic regime. This echoes the words of Nabarun Bhattacharya, who once said: "This valley of death is not my country." He continues, "The teacher, intellectual, poet, or clerk who does not seek revenge for these murders in broad daylight—I despise them."

July this year became a month of profound despair for the youth. What began as a peaceful movement quickly turned into a scene of brutal violence. Lives were lost, potential was cut short, yet the majority of university professors, journalists,

and editors chose to remain silent. The poet who once wrote "The country rides the strange camel's back" is no longer with us, while those who once spoke out against tyranny either stay silent or exploit the situation, turning into mere court poets.

In public universities alone, there are 15,236 teachers, including 4,661 professors. What keeps them so occupied? Hundreds of students have expressed their frustration at the silence of their academic leaders. Those who stood with the youth during this time are the true source of strength. Since independence, our society has failed to produce another martyr like Shamsuzzoha, as the temptations of power and material gain have prevailed.

At one event, a senior journalist openly declared, "We stand with Sheikh Hasina, ready to do anything if needed," exposing the alignment between journalists and the ruling power, much like the role of the Chhatra League. Yet, where are they now? All have vanished, leaving behind a "marketplace of the blind." Wealth has been squandered, while countless lives are left forgotten. Sycophancy has infected journalism, prompting harsh condemnation from the new generation.

What responsibilities do writers bear in a post-uprising era? To explore this question, The Daily Star hosted a discussion titled "Write to Protest"

at the "36 July: Saluting the Fearless" exhibition on December 7. The exhibition featured photographs, videos, and news reports that captured the unwavering courage, resilience, and sacrifices of the student-citizen movement during the July uprising.

The discussants raised a profound question: In a country emerging from 15 years of suppression, what should be the role of a writer in the new era? Additionally, is it solely the writer's duty to speak the truth, be the voice of the deprived, and stand for the nation when freedom is compromised?

The session was chaired by academic and researcher Wakil Ahmed. Panelists included lyricist Shahidullah Farazi, novelists Ahmad Mostafa Kamal, Afsana Begum, Mohammad Nazim Uddin, poet Monirul Monir, and novelist Sabbir Jadid.

Sabbir Jadid shared, "I couldn't say much about Sheikh Hasina's autocratic rule. I wrote stories about RAB's crossfires but couldn't publish them as books. Writers cannot express themselves freely without liberty. We endured such difficult times. We demand freedom to speak and write."

Mohammad Nazim Uddin remarked, "Who should a writer seek freedom from? Freedom

Who should a writer seek freedom from? Freedom of expression is a fundamental right. When it is curtailed, resistance must follow. However, the development narratives peddled by the Awami League were lies, and we didn't challenge them. Not everyone remained silent for benefits; some genuinely aligned their ideals with the government. As writers, our duty was to awaken the people's voice. We failed, betraying our responsibilities.

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National Book Centre Director Afsana Begum agreed, stating, "Writers are the mirror of society. We are accountable to our future generations to document the truth, provide platforms for dialogue and understanding, and record current realities. Writers' roles must always remain clear. They are the voice of the people, and that voice must never be suppressed."

Poet Monirul Monir questioned, "Have we fulfilled our responsibilities as writers? During a fascist regime, when resistance was most critical, did we truly stand up? Do we, even now, have plans to confront oppression in society?"

Lyricist Shahidullah Farazi paid tribute to the martyrs of the July uprising, saying, "Even children opened our eyes and shamed us. Students sacrificed their lives to safeguard our freedom. What have we, as writers, done for them? Can we write for them? Remaining silent day after day is worse than dying on the front lines."

He added, "The Liberation War was fought for equality, human dignity, and justice. Following the July movement, Bangladesh must be built on the foundations of equality, dignity, and justice."

Bangladesh Open University Vice-Chancellor Saeed Ferdous echoed Farazi's sentiments, stating, "In the future, intellectuals must undergo rigorous self-reflection. Writing against visible enemies is easy; confronting hypocrisy or invisible adversaries is far more challenging. Yet, we must speak and write without compromise."

Ahmad Mostafa Kamal proposed changing the title of the discussion from "The Writer's Responsibility" to "The Writer's Duty Post-Uprising" for greater clarity. He added, "After Sheikh Hasina's departure, the country went three days without formal law and order, yet chaos never ensued. The people protected one another, showcasing our collective ability to safeguard the nation. We must ensure that fascism never takes root here again."

He outlined three urgent tasks for the interim government: dismantle market syndicates, restore law and order, and properly prosecute criminals. He stressed that the public will not tolerate political manipulation by leaders. Once these are addressed, the country should proceed to elections, transferring power to a democratic government.

Concluding the discussion, Wakil Ahmed emphasised the importance of writers in the uprising, stating, "I've stayed home for 15 years, uninvited. I've become disconnected from the younger generation and rely on newspapers to know what's happening. Still, the progress of our youth is astonishing. The success of the July uprising will be written for the future."

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