

Special Supplement



Sacrifice for Freedom of Speech

Rezauddin Stalin

The first condition for freedom of speech is self-sacrifice
The sound 'freedom' emerging from the tongue's oscillation
Infects the towns and villages like the sounds of sea,
But it was blocked constantly by the walls of blood-red eyes
Even the prisons became research-labs of imposters in twenty-first century
The years rolled on through the hands of my resistance
And my entries for the diary got edited incessantly
Like myriads of stars.

Where the humming of bees and the news of paddy-sheaf are not rare
Nor are the ripples of rivers and the cries of hornbill infrequent,
The sound of the farmer's footsteps wet with dew, unending stream
Of tears flowing from the eyes of a child waiting for father,
The fleeing of emperor, the shouts of grocery-owner,
Or the rise and fall of the share market.

The second condition is the stirring of beauty filled with victory's feast
Beauty implies love engraved on the letter of dedication for spring –
Those who returned for vengeance – riding on liberation war's wagon
Let them feel the caution of the secretive hunter while standing
Before the burning coal of sunrise on Asia's coast,
Let them see the fire in the eyes of wildcat, or read
My poem flooded with the moonlight of alkaline ice.

The third condition is to seek a crown adorned with the diamond of pledge
Removing the signal of traffic-rabbit on a path laid with tinsel of golden leaf
Searching like the squirrel through the gaps of tree-leaves –
And for that we need the self-sacrifice of Titumir or Khudiram –
In whose crystal-clear eyes the whole of Bangladesh can bathe and cleanse,
In real terms, the third condition is the inheritance of age-old tradition
A bright essence like the sizzling geranium
Made of copper, zinc, silver, and steel plates.

We shall have to traverse our path by turning the conditions centring
Beehives of lungs into noun at one point and adjective at another,
We shall have to take preparation like the ants' silent journey,
I believe the gold-plated crown shall be found in a termites' mound
Or inside the hole of rats, and then the time shall be transformed
Into an amazing rosy season – the spring.

Translation: Dr Helal Uddin Ahmed



Inspiration of Victory Day in the context of July Mass-Uprising

between 1971 and 1975 threw the newly independent country into total darkness. Whereas the country needed a development-oriented humanistic leadership during the period, the masses got an inhuman and undemocratic autocracy. Thousands of opposition political activists were killed. No progress was made in developing the country's infrastructure. Initiative was taken to throttle and kill the democratic aspirations of the people. As a consequence, a terrible famine struck the country in 1974. In terms of gruesomeness, it was comparable to the most horrific famines that befall this land in history. Widespread corruption at all levels and inefficiency cum mismanagement in governance exacerbated the impact of famine manifold.

The citizens saw in bewilderment that when children were dying on the roads due to hunger and people were trying to cover their body with whatever they could gather, the members of the ruling party were spending their days in luxury. As if the sorrows and pains of the ordinary people meant nothing to them! The situation became more and more intolerable due to these exploitations, brutality, and misgovernance. Silent revolts started to take shape gradually. For strangulating and killing this revolt, the ruling party forcibly imposed one-party misrule on the country. Apart from four government-controlled newspapers, all periodicals were banned. Attempts were made to establish the one-party Awami-Baksali rule by suppressing freedom of speech throughout the land. The blood-spilling changes in the political apparatus in August 1975 took place as a response to that.

This change brought the great declarer of independence Ziaur Rahman to the centre of politics. He ascended to state-power by riding on the crest of a successful Sepoy-People Revolution. He launched a new democratic journey after assuming power by lifting embargoes on the opposition parties and opinions. He started a new brand of development-oriented politics; it was aimed at building a new Bangladesh by involving

all citizens irrespective of their party or opinion, who were kept at the centre of this novel politics. Zia was a resolute administrator. He pursued liberalisation of trade and commerce and adopted policies that encouraged investments in the private sector for economic recovery. Readymade garments industry and foreign remittances, which are today strong edifices of Bangladesh economy were both initiated during his rule. He brought about transformation in the rural economy through the canal-digging program. But the conspirators became active just when this great son of the soil was carving out a leadership role for Bangladesh in the global domain through a modernistic, inclusive, and future-oriented leadership. He had to embrace martyrdom at the hands of a group of derailed military men in May 1981.

Then at the end of a long autocratic rule by Hussain Muhammad Ershad, multi-party democracy was once again restored in Bangladesh at the beginning of 1990s under the leadership of Begum Khaleda Zia. Bangladesh Nationalist Party led by Begum Zia was at the helm of state power during the first halves of the decades of 1990s and 2000s. It facilitated not only a return to parliamentary democracy during those episodes, efforts were also made to strengthen the state-institutions and make the country stand on a firm footing by gearing up development activities.

But autocratic misrule once again descended on this country following assumption of office by Bangladesh Awami League through the Ninth Jatiya Sangsad Election held in December 2008. Far-reaching conspiracies were hatched for weakening the base of independence of this land through nullifying all significant achievements in all fields. Democracy was exiled by holding one unilateral cum rigged election after another. A cult was created around the autocratic ruler Sheikh Hasina and her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The only objective for creating this cult was to worship chosen individuals. By depriving the people of their democratic rights, an ethereal concept of 'politics of development' was floated. Behind this facade, a carnival of corruption was underway through nepotism, plundering of banks, and trafficking of money to foreign lands. All injustices, tortures, and misrule were perpetrated by packaging those with the so-called 'Spirit of the Liberation War'. Unbearable tortures were meted out if anyone dared to make minimum protest against this long autocratic rule. All instruments of state-machinery were indiscriminately used for the purpose. The people of Bangladesh even became familiar with a terrible nightmare called 'enforced disappearance'. Those who protested, especially the supporters of opposition ideologies, were abducted on a massive scale. Most of them could not be traced out again. After the fall of autocracy, people came to know that many of the abducted people were kept at a prison called 'Aynagar', from where only a handful of men could return.

The right of the people to express their opinion and choose their leaders was usurped through holding one-sided and fake elections one after another during 2014, 2018, and 2024. Attempts were made to silence the democratic movements of the opposition parties by applying muscle-power, filing cases, and attacking gatherings. But as the saying goes: the dawn comes nearer as the night deepens. A new sun of victory was rising beneath the dagger of the oppressor.

Great Victory Day



Song of Victory

Abdul Hye Sikder

Tears and rivers of blood brought about the tidings,
Triumphant song of Victory-Day in proud Bangladesh.
Song of triumph in fields and towns, victory-song at heart
That victory for freedom and ending exploitation.

After independence we had to bear unforgettable pain
Hunger and deprivations after so many years.
Even now spilling of blood, even now harsh deeds of misrule,
Please dye our hearts with red and green for ejecting that ghost.

Victory is unfettered air, clouds above the open window,
Victory is our terrain from Teknaf to Tentulia,
Let victory arrive at every home – the biggest among all,
Make this victory fierce and strong at every moment.

Translation: Dr Helal Uddin Ahmed

a political event; but the claims that are made in history, fine arts or politics of getting the whole in the partial mould of 'for and against' is akin to denying the huge expanse of the liberation war. It should also be said that the mistakes of those who provided leadership to the liberation war in various ways, or the crimes of those who opposed the war, are not sufficient for capturing the whole liberation war, as they represent only a tiny fragment of the story of liberation war.

This lack of comprehension has been devastating for our politics or state-building. The failure to utilise the extraordinary opportunity that we had and still have for forging the feeling of unity by discovering individual and collective lives in the shape of stories has been a terrible experience for our community. We are bound to be pained by this. But that is not the last word, nor is it a conclusive statement.

There are histories that remain beyond the ones written with pen and paper. It should also be said that aspects not captured in writing may be the real history. Only a small fragment of the stories in man's lived experiences are expressed through fine arts. It may often become impossible for fine arts to search for those complex knots in public domain that remain intertwined with the stories. But the tales of public lives endure. And to speak about politics, especially party-politics, it must be said that this arena usually remains active based on some narrow, self-centred, and motivated stories. Its objective most often does not include a commitment towards the stories of public lives. Therefore, what has been said about the liberation war in diverse forms and what would be spoken about it in future are only small parts of a whole – distorted in many instances.

The real liberation war exists in the public sphere; it will be even better if we say, 'in the stories of public life'. That story may sometimes hide itself after becoming cornered due to the signals of directly-experienced reality. However, it can never erode as it has been obtained from life. It can emerge with all its appeal and full force on the fresh ground of dynamic life in opportune moments, because of its deep kinship with life beyond imposed relationships. Therefore, this vast and diffused liberation war holds promises for us. If the learned society becomes collectively pledge-bound to conserve these stories in the liberal arena of history or fine arts, if the liberation war of the common people starts to get translated at a higher rate through direct involvement of politics, only then can we advance on the path of people-centric state-formation. That would not only be an indication of our development, it would also be the chief catalyst for progress. The latent potential of the liberation war of Bangladesh's human society has persisted over the past fifty-four years; it will remain in the coming days as well. □

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Translation: Dr Helal Uddin Ahmed

Just as the people of Bangla irrespective of their age built up resistance against the intolerable tortures of the Pakistani invading forces in 1971, the common people of this country once again confronted the autocratic dictatorship of Sheikh Hasina that stretched from 2009 to 2024. The agitating students and masses came down to the streets protesting excessive quotas in government jobs. It was soon clear that it no longer was a movement only of students; people's grievances accumulated over one and a half decades then flowed to the confluence of a struggle aimed at ousting the autocrat. As if, those unforgettable days of the liberation war had returned. People irrespective of their class, profession, and age came down to the streets again by getting imbued with the fiery mantra of a revolution. Ignoring the blood-red eyes of the autocrat, they sang aloud in a chorus similar to the fiery days of the liberation war:

During the terrible storm of Boishakhi
When the sky falls apart
The torn sail is shredded further
The lighting beckons;
Suddenly I hear the sound of conch
And I see the bird of dawn singing.

The victory of the masses through an unforgettable 36-day-long people's uprising during July-August was finally achieved. Just as the intense resistance of the students and masses during the liberation war dug the grave of Pakistani misrule, the July-August Movement of 2024 also led to victory of the masses. It proved that a nation which emerged victorious in 1971 was bound to triumph again through the mass movement of 2024. The spontaneous jubilation of the people in all corners of Bangladesh when the autocrat was brought down generated extraordinary scenes. As Alexander Hamilton had said, 'There is a certain enthusiasm in liberty, that makes human nature rise above itself, in acts of bravery and heroism'. Extraordinary heroes were born from among ordinary citizens during this anti-autocracy movement. They proved by spilling their fresh blood the claim made by William Shakespeare: 'Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once'. Innumerable heroes like Abu Sayeed, Meer Mugdha, Wasim Akram, Farhan Fayyaz brought back memories of valour witnessed during the 1971 liberation war. Extraordinaries was born out of the ordinary. They created a new history by opening up their chests before the bullets of the autocrat.

A one-sided narrative was prepared by keeping the War of Independence in the forefront during the 15-year-long autocratic rule of Sheikh Hasina. All anti-fascist initiatives were crushed through repression by labelling those as 'anti-liberation-war' and 'anti-independence'. The people's movement of July-August succeeded in rescuing Bangladesh from that narrative. This uprising has opened up a new possibility for fulfilling the unmet dreams of the peasants, labourers, porters, and workers who took up arms. The July Mass-Uprising has generated the inspiration for running Bangladesh in accordance with the real spirit of the liberation war. This inspiration must be nurtured and sustained at any cost.

The July Uprising has taught us that no particular party or group can claim the sole proprietorship of the spirit of liberation war. It belongs to all citizens, it is everybody's. Just as all Bangladeshi had contributed to the liberation war, similarly, the glory of victory belongs to the common people of this country. The people of Bangladesh shall never permit the reappearance of autocracy in this land under the garb of 'politics of development' or 'politics of spirit'. We shall have to take an oath on the occasion of Victory Day for building a Bangladesh that belonged to all its citizens by cherishing in our hearts the lessons of July 2024. □

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