

Bangladesh Needs Liberation from “Political Totemism” **-Md. Saidul Islam**

Couple of years ago, a BBC poll made Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman the greatest Bengalee of all times. Although the authenticity of the poll was highly doubted due to its methodological flaws, we cannot deny the heroic role of Bangabandhu in bringing independence to our nation. The history of Bangladesh will not, perhaps, witness such a national hero in future. Hence, it is hard to draw a parallel to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

However, as a state-man, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had a huge record of failure. Nobody, even a hardcore Awami Leaguer, can afford to deny that. He failed to rebuild the war-wrecked country and to combat corruption of his own people. His move towards dictatorship and tyrannical rule by creating “Rakkhi Bahini” and eventual emergence of an acute famine during his regime faded his role as a state-man. Consequently, he had to embrace a gruesome assassination in the hands of some military personnel.

In purely unbiased and rational analysis, we have to draw a conclusion that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is indeed a national hero with both success and failure: an unparalleled hero of our independence movement and hence a person to be proud of, and at the same time, a failed state-man to be ashamed of. He is a man with extraordinary charisma and incredible oratory capacity more powerful than a bulldozer, but at the same time he had a record of an abhorrent failure.

We cannot deny any of these. Being true patriots, we need to cultivate and nurture a mind to appreciate and recognize the positive roles played by our heroes, while taking lessons from the mistakes committed by them.

Unfortunately, there are many people, who cherish a profound love for our country, but fall into the trap of narrow political railing. Their self-imprisonment in the shackles of narrow political ideology results in narrowness of views. It becomes a disease that submerges them into a dangerous quagmire, and they cannot see anything good that falls beyond their narrow political dogma. As the dogma begins to govern them, their sense of objective thinking, broad vision, and appreciative disposition gradually gets bogged down. Finally, they completely lose the sense to appreciating good deeds of their political opponents. In fact, their eyes get blurred and all good deeds of their political opponents become bad and destructive to them, while their own activities, be it destructive to the nation, are viewed and presented as something good for the country.

All these generate three Deviations: division, desolation and destruction, now a common phenomenon and a chronic disease in Bangladesh politics.

A true patriot should be above all the political narrowness, and guide the nation towards prosperity and cohesion, rather than hatred, division, and partisanism. However, due to

political dogmatism, some view Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as a “super man” who is beyond and above criticism, while others do not have minimum guts--as they have lost a superb quality of appreciative disposition--to recognize the enormous role of this hero during our liberation war. Both are pathologic and fanatic as one generates the ideology called Mujibism, while another also brings the image of their own leader, such as Shahid Ziaur Rahman, in a similar fashion to counter the former. This led to factionalism, hatred, extremism, and fanaticism.

Unfortunately, these traits have been dominating our political culture for more than three decades.

The situation does not stop there. The deceased political leader then captures the imagination of its followers. Then, some of them plunk the deceased in the place of worship. The deceased gradually becomes a sacred entity.

Emile Durkheim, one of the founding fathers of Sociology, calls it a “totem” that turns into a cult-like religion. As the totem needs enchantments through different rituals and celebrations, the followers then devote their entire efforts to glorify their totem. They write poetry, stories, and novels to eulogize their totem; make arts and sculpture to depict the venerated image of their totem; and organize different cultural programs as well as make different enchanting slogans to magnify their deceased totem. In fact it crosses the political boundary and penetrates into cultural and social arenas and finally enters into day-to-day activities of its followers. Their hearts, minds, imagination, and blood cells are imbued with a new colour, the colour of their totem.

All these are manifested in different celebrations, like, Mujib Dibash, Shok-Dibash, Independence Day, Victory Day; in different rituals, like offering garlands to the grave of Bangabandhu (or Shahid Ziaur Rahman); organizing Kangali Voz; in dresses like Mujib-Coat; in slogans and phases like Joy Bangla, Joy Banga-Bandhu, Jatir-Janak; and in different arts and sculpture. They feel proud to equate their names with the deceased like Mujib Sena. The deceased Mujib, the totem, becomes the centre-point around which other activities of its followers are drawn. The deceased then gets a new life as it gets a permanent place in the hearts of its followers. Then the Dead Mujib becomes stronger than the alive one.

In this juncture, claim for being patriot remains a mere claim. The whole society then witnesses their corrupted hearts as the huge gap between their speech and action is manifested. The notion of patriotism gets corrupted. They deliver rabble-raising speech; make so many promises to hypnotize the general masses, while they do otherwise. They repeatedly present themselves as great patriots, liberation worriers to cover their corrupted souls and actions.

The venom then permeates all over the society. The whole social fabrics experience corruption which gradually gets normalized and finally becomes an integral part of culture: The clerks in the office do not work without “bakshish”, a decent term to occlude the notion of bribery; the doctors do not perform their duties properly and tell their patients to go to their own chambers; the teachers do not teach properly in schools-colleges-universities and tell their students to go

to their own homes for private tutoring; and in this way these go on to the bureaucrats and ministers who work for the personal gain at the expense of nation's well-being.

Society then witnesses the highest level of deviation and destruction. There are different levels and degrees of deviation and corruption. Committing a crime by mistake is a general form of deviation. But when crime is committed knowingly and intentionally and then different ways are used to justify that crime- that is obviously a higher level of deviation. And when crime gets normalized and become an integral part of society, and who oppose that crime are, in return, stigmatized as criminals, society then falls into the quagmire of highest and worst level of deviation.

Political obduracy and retrogressive move are all the apparent legacies of political totemism. Bangladesh needs to liberate itself from this cryonic political disease in order to move forward in the 21st century. The current CTG government who are committed to political reform needs to take this issue seriously.

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