

July is Synonymous with Bangladesh's Self-Defence

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What July has achieved should not be the first question. The foremost question should be: Why July had to happen in Bangladesh by crossing a deep trench and sacrificing so much blood? July was not a project; it was another name for self-defence. July was honest and true for asserting the right of self-defence.

The famous Spanish artist Pablo Picasso used to live in Paris during the Second World War. When the Nazi forces captured Paris, one of the Nazi officers entered his studio one day. While inspecting the studio, the officer stood before 'Guernica' – the painting that depicted the fascist genocide in Spain. He asked: 'Have you done this job (meaning art-work)'?

Hiding his mind's loathing, Picasso's sharp reply was: 'No, you did this'?

The intolerable misrule of Sheikh Hasina had given rise to the epic fight and martyrdoms of July. July was not any project; it was a desperate attempt to rescue the country from the clutches of the killers. And the youths of that desperate Bangladesh proved that the country could be saved only by sacrificing lives.

Bangladesh was stuck in misrule and anarchy for three and a half years following the liberation war. But that did not make the liberation war futile; rather we now realize after 55 years that there was no alternative to independent Bangladesh. Compared to that episode, the uncertainties after July have been much less. It is certainly good news that Bangladesh could complete the electoral march peacefully, and the post-July challenges have been overcome by saving the economy, avoiding civil-war, and stopping revenges.

The biggest achievement of July has been to bring back the 'Bangladesh Dream'. That dream could again be presented before the nation by making it possible for those who remained out of reach, hid from view, and communicated through signs. The biggest contribution of July-24 has been that it could again present before everybody the Bangladesh that was lost. We certainly have not reached the pinnacle of success, but can we deny that our fear of losing our way is now gone?

July has also exposed the terrible humanitarian reality in Bangladesh. What do we see if the targets of bullets are tracked across the 36 days of July? The chest of Abu Sayeed was riddled with bullets; there were lamentations by the martyr Wasim's expatriate father. If you advance farther on the flyover of bullets, you will find the martyr Abdul Ahad (4), who was shot while on the lap of his mother at home; the motionless body of Rhea Gope (6) had anklets on her feet; the 2-year-old Rohit was hit by bullet while in his father's lap; Naima (15) was standing with her mother on their 4th floor balcony when hit by bullet. Bullet-hit Amir was hanging from the cornice; the lives of a grandmother and granddaughter were extinguished by a single bullet. The July fighters (dead and alive) were burnt together inside a van at Ashulia; or remember the trauma of that youth who lost 21 out of 22 of his comrades while fighting. That boy now spends more time with his martyred co-fighters than with those living in this world. These impossible,

unbearable, and glorious incidents were not the outcome of any plan. Those who embraced martyrdom in order to live like humans could not be stopped.

The bullets fired were nothing more than the vengeful hatred of a vanquished ruler! We shall testify by rubbing the eyes of time, how humanism faced a terrible destruction in this land. We shall testify about the legend of miraculous sacrifices of human beings for fellow humans?

The July Mass-upsurge has also shown the torn chest of Bangladesh that became a victim of the monster living at the mythical palace of King Shaddad. The whole world is now witness to the secret 'Yakshapuri' called glasshouses via the United Nations. The UN could count the deaths of as many as 1,400 fresh lives during the July mass-upsurge alone. But the counting is not yet complete. The Commission on enforced disappearances has confirmed as many as 1,569 incidents of enforced disappearances from 2009 to 2024. The number can rise to between 4 thousand and 6 thousand if all the complaints are taken into account. During the 15-year-long rule of Awami League, the number of extra-judicial killings was 1,926 (Prothom Alo, 4 November 2024). Each number means a human being having a name, a family, and the many lives terribly affected by his or her absence.

At the same time, an estimated 234 billion US dollar or about 28 lakh crore taka were laundered abroad from deposits kept by the people in the banking system. The Bangladesh Bank itself was looted. The whole of Bangladesh was plundered.

The record of political repression during that reign of torture would surpass even that of a subjugated country. The BNP leaders have claimed that its leaders and workers were made accused in around 6 million cases. The lives and livelihoods of millions of youths belonging to a few generations were destroyed. The country was mired in endless depression. The powerful people built their own paradises, own forces, and detention centres for the kidnapped and the killed in unliveable and extremely discriminatory, dirty and crime-ridden cities. Politics became fertile seedbeds for mafia 'legend', murderous 'godfather', colourful 'ammajan', 'elder brother' landlord, and the 'dabang' characters in government. In this way, they built up a crime-infested political economy. Its simple nomenclature was 'realm of fraudulence'.

Bangladesh passed through an era when the masses were made to vanish. It became almost impossible to remove the rulers who were entrenched in the seat of power like the ghost of Sindbad. When the people cannot change the rulers, the rulers engage in changing people. They create aggressive clientelism by inducting cronies. Prolonged misrule spoils the morale, moral strength, and awareness of people's right. Like rivers, humans also get polluted then.

The immortal martyrdoms in July of the students and masses rescued the country from that hell. The missing people of political science returned to the roads, drenched by the blood of martyred and wounded teenagers and youths from among the 'students and masses'. They came like the storms of small Ababil birds fighting against the gigantic Abrahams.

We shall not say that Bangladesh has become purified by the blood-bath of July; but this wretched motherland got an opportunity to return to her own historical orbit. This opportunity comes only once or twice in a century.

It is unfortunate that we could not utilise that opportunity fully. But the fear of losing our way has diminished even though we have not yet reached our goal.

When democracy is receding all over the world, authoritarian dictators are emerging in the east and west, the triumph of a mass-upsurge in favour of democracy is a global victory as well. Treading this same path, resistance and awakening among the youths have been observed in Nepal and India as well.

The main strengths of the July Uprising were the students and youths from the middle-class in towns and cities. They were frustrated and hostile towards the aristocratic middleclass. In other words, these students and youths could be termed as ‘precariat’ – the segment of the population facing risks with regard to livelihood. The urban proletariats like the hard-working rickshaw drivers, labourers, hawkers, garments and hotel workers also got involved with them. Lastly, the mass-upsurge assumed a national character when the democratic-minded intellectuals and artistes joined it. Its universality then became crystal-clear.

The history of this anti-discrimination national movement has become part of Bangladesh’s history because of its commonality. Although the struggle of the proletariat was continuing, it was never the principal driving force of our history. Rather, past movements repeatedly saw the class-struggles of the new-rich and the middle-class.

Bangla was partitioned in 1947 because of this conflict between the aristocratic Zamndars and the descendants of the middle-class. During the Pakistani era, the national struggle of the rising middle-class in Dhaka was waged against the discriminatory practices of the Punjabi elites. This struggle turned into a liberation war, and Bangladesh became independent as a result. The mass upsurge of 2024 was another victory of the rising middle-class who have been the victims of discrimination across a century. It saw the rise of rural youths who were first-generation university-students. It saw the fall of an arrangement involving the elite plunderers and overseas-oriented aristocracy, who had lost their patriotism, and rejected their social obligations.

Among the South Asians, Bangladeshis have a striking feature. Whatever religion, race, ethnicity or language they may possess, their family structure, values, food-habit, life’s aspiration, dresses, residential quarters, neighbourhoods, culture of marriage, etc. are more or less same. There are some common attributes among all, and they participate in one-another’s life together. Even the poison of racism and communalism is minimum in Bangladesh compared to other countries of the subcontinent.

This commonality has blossomed over thousands of years, particularly through agricultural and commercial revolution during the Sultani era. This has grown due to the intermingling of various races and religions in founding this settlement. This unity is manifested in two forms: cooking pans or utensils covered by red fabric; and participation in namaz, puja, fairs and processions by standing together in rows, shoulder to shoulder. ‘Shinni’ or ‘khichuri’ used to be cooked in the same cooking pan in mazars or courtyards of pirs; and all irrespective of their status used to eat that food. Through this, the spirit and shape of unity used to get merged.

Our homeland means a common Bangladesh. This commonality does not mean plurality; rather it is a unity of partnership among many. This spirit of a common partnership inspired people belonging to various paths and opinions to build up a pro-Bangladesh human-fortress in July.

July has succeeded in crushing the arrogance of fascism. But the task of building a new Bangladesh remains. It is impossible to repay the debt of lives lost in July. Those who have gone beyond the horizon shall never return. But care programmes drawn in line with the model of welfare-states have been undertaken officially. Vengeful and discriminatory policies are being carefully shunned. History has to be given more time to see what happens with regard to the remaining issues.

The interim leadership took insufficient measures to break the unholy nexus of old arrangements. There was also lack of foresight in the attempt to disrupt unity by hoisting the flag of ideology instead of executing a realistic program for politico-economic reform in the political arena. While attempting these, the multi-class, multi-centric, common and historic alliance of the masses built up in July became weak.

We live in the air that received the last breaths of our martyrs. Won't we be able to keep alive their yearning amongst us? Those who have lost their body-parts seek to lean on the foot of those who are capable; thousands of youths who became blind seek the address of light from those of us who can see. The twin sisters of hope and longing are in wait at the tomb of many expectations. Bangladesh is waiting for peace, prosperity, discrimination-free market, and justice. The country seeks the care of a gardener by freeing herself from the rule of a hunter. That is the only way for repaying the debt and arrears of July.

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