

On Youth Parliament and Literacy Campaign*

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1. One of the principal reasons of the crisis the nation is facing today is that the nation was dragged back from the many creative nation-building initiatives that the youth of the country had taken following the liberation struggle and taking inspiration from it, and a large section of the country's youth are being led into anti-social activities to serve political power interests.

2. After independence the then youth had initiated literacy campaigns in various parts of the country like the well-known "tip shoi chhi chhi" (shame for the thumb sign) movement of village Kachubari Krishtopur in thakurgaon. In order not to be a burden for their education upon their parents they had initiated farming on school/college lands and many cottage industry type activities to raise money for themselves. They had appreciated also that their guardians and the wider society were making immense contribution from their hard earned labour toward institutionalising education facilities for them; toward repaying this debt students had gone to villages in major vacations to help the farmers in farming, harvesting etc. Various types of cooperative farming and other activities had been initiated by youth freedom fighters in several parts of the country. Newspaper reports and assessments of such activities have been collected and published in the book "*Je Agun Jolechhilo, Muktijuddher Chetonar Shwatosfurto Prokash*" (*The Fire that was lit, Spontaneous Expressions of the Spirit of the Liberation Struggle*).

The patriotic youth of that time did not consider the nation to be 'poor'. Instead they had wanted to project the nation as a very creative one and had wanted to show to the world what impossible acts independent Bangladesh could accomplish. Their motto was : "*We are not a poor nation - we are liberated Bengalis*". And these youth had not wanted the nation to become '*tigers*' only in football and cricket but in overall socio-economic development as well, like some nations thus called in South East Asia.

These initiatives of our youth could not last, not only because the initial "jotdar" (land-power based) rulers of the country nor the so-called 'civil society' leaders of the country did not encourage their initiatives, but also because, subsequently and finally, the new regime who came to power in 1975 surrounded by 'rajakars' (collaborators with the Pakistan military

during the liberation struggle) pounced upon and destroyed many of these initiatives with ruthless force.

At that time progressive students of Dhaka University also demanded inclusion of their representatives in the state-formed Education Commission headed by Dr. Kudrate Khuda. Government did not agree, and the student leaders formed their own Education Commission. This Commission asked for complete change of the colonial education system that we have inherited and proposed rescheduling of vacations so that students could go to villages to assist their parents and other farmers when they would need extra labour for transplantation and harvesting of rice and other such activities. Very few present in this gathering today have seen that report as the 'jotdar' government of that time threw it in the dust-bin.

Sadly, the so-called 'civil society' of the country also did not join hands with such extraordinary patriotic nation-building initiatives and proposals - it seems as if their eyes were also fixed on what privileges they could extract for themselves from the gains of independence of the country.

From the very first 'jotdar' government after independence the practice of projecting the country to the world as an extremely poor nation extending a begging bowl started. We all know that the alms that started flowing has filled the pockets of upper layers of the society in a rather ugly way, the egalitarian principles in the country's constitution have been heavily trampled on the ground, national politics have become a captive of completely barbaric forces, and the country is today shrieking in acute pain being thrown into the ditch.

3. Since the seniors of the nation have thrown the country into the ditch and are at their wit's end as to how to pull it out from there, and the same old rogue forces seem to be bending over to recapture it seemingly to recycle the same old processes, will the saner elements of the nation's youth enter the field to save the nation, in effect meaning saving their own future?

What can the nation's youth do?

4. Some years back the then Prime Minister representing not democracy but 'feudal family rule' in the country had said that she would make the nation fully literate in ten years. In response I had written her a letter, saying that, first, there was no assurance that she would be in power for the postulated

ten years. Secondly, she could if she wanted make the nation fully literate in two instead of ten years, and if she did this her ten-year rule would also be assured. I asked her to give a call to students of all educational institutions from high school upwards to take the responsibility to make all persons in villages or hamlets near to them fully literate. She would tell these students: *"I have nothing to give you for this - only if some class informs me that it has accomplished this task I shall send independent journalists to verify its claim, and if verified I shall give the class a national honour - I have nothing else to give to my golden boys and girls."* I know that the golden boys and girls will respond to this call, and the whole nation will stand up a fully literate nation within two years, and no one would even dream of taking away your prime ministership.

I did not get any response from this Prime Minister who believed not in democracy - rule of the people - but in family rule. I heard that someone told her that she should listen to some advice of intellectuals, to which she had replied, *"How many votes do the intellectuals command?"* Of course!

5. In this hour of great crisis for the nation I propose directly to the youth of the country:

Instead of looking up to the 'murubbi's (seniors) any further you form a National Youth Parliament fully independent of political parties. This Parliament will meet once a year. For this you will not be dependent on any quarter financially. Even today there exists in the country some such programmes (e.g. the Ujjibak or 'animator programme of the Hunger Project) where youth from many parts of the country come and get together fully at their own expense and do voluntary social service and developmental work.

Some tasks of this Parliament will be:

(a) conduct a national campaign to make the country fully literate in two years, meaning that every citizen will as a minimum be able to read the daily newspaper and write 'letters to the editor'. In a second phase another national campaign may be launched toward computer literacy. No jotdar/barbaric government will initiate such a programme because this will stop the process of fraudulent transfer of land from its illiterate owner through the thumb-sign on the transfer deed without the ability to read and understand what is thus being given away. Those youth who will successfully complete their

mass literacy campaign by specially innovative methods will receive national honour from this Youth Parliament itself.

(b) discuss the future of the nation which is your own future, and present recommendations to the government, to other relevant quarters such as to the teaching class, toward brightening up this future.

(c) This Parliament of the youth will invite the Prime Minister of the country, any other minister, government officers, teachers and such other seniors, to discuss the future of the nation with them, to explain to them how policies being taken by the government and other relevant quarters will benefit this future, to explain the rationale of salaried teachers not taking their classes regularly or conducting their personal coaching classes and forcing students to take these classes paying for this, or for university teachers belonging to 'red' or 'blue' panels to kindly explain to them the rationale of working for such panels in their capacity as university teachers. If some of these seniors refuse to respond to their invitation to appear before their parliament to explain to them their policies and actions the youth parliament will most respectfully merely inform the nation of such refusal.

This parliament of the youth will not require any legal standing -- sons and daughters of the nation have a natural and moral right to ask such questions of their seniors that vitally concern their future and give their own views on such questions to them.

If the patriotic youth of the country do not initiate such a move then I do not see myself any other way of lifting this hapless nation from the ditch in which it has fallen and saving their own future.

I end with some lines from a song of Rabindranath Tagore on the youth:

*"let the unbound humour of the deluge of life
flood the barren river -"*

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*"wherever we are called -
in life, in death and in storm,
we are ready -*

...

we are restless, we are queer!

*Presented at the National Citizen's Dialogue at Dhaka, 6 April 2008.