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Who was liberated by the war of 1971?

The freedom war of 1971, generally called the war of liberation, happened at the end of a struggle against national repression since the partition of the country in 1947. Mohammad Ali Jinnah as president and supreme leader of the All India Muslim League, in his constitutional struggle in British India, always stood for a federal system which for him meant autonomy for the provinces in some of which the Muslims were in the majority. On the other hand, the entire leadership of the Indian National Congress stood for a unitary system or a strong centre, because in India as a whole, the non-Muslims constituted a vast majority. Beneath this constitutional struggle lay the interests of the Indian bourgeoisie, particularly the big bourgeoisie who were mainly Marwari, Gujrati, Parsi, Memons and the houses of Tata, Birla, Ispahani, Adamjee, etc. Finally, India was partitioned in line with the interests represented by these as well as that of British bourgeoisie which ruled this country. That the basic interests of the Muslim and non-Muslim bourgeoisie were the same during their constitutional struggle was proved beyond any doubt when Jinnah and the central Muslim League leadership totally denied any provincial autonomy to East Bengal and unceremoniously scrapped the principle of federalism for which they had raised so much dust during the 30's and particularly since the passing of the Lahore Resolution in 1940.

As a consequence of this, national repression inevitably became a part of Pakistan's central policy of which East Bengal became the biggest victim. Thus it was no matter of surprise that the struggle against national repression began almost immediately after partition and continued to gather momentum with the passage of time. In place of Hindu-Muslim antagonism, there developed an antagonism between the people of East Bengal and the big bourgeoisie based in West Pakistan. But soon the basic contradiction was overshadowed by another form of contradiction – the contradiction between Pakistani big bourgeoisie based in West Pakistan and the slowly growing bourgeoisie of East Bengal.

The nature of this development influenced very greatly the character of the struggle against national repression in East Bengal. In fact, it had a very striking similarity with Muslim League's struggle against Congress and the British-Indian Administration. In both, the vast majority of working people actively joined and made the greatest sacrifice, but their interests were neglected as before by the newly emerged ruling classes who never hesitated to resort to any repression against the working people – the peasants, workers and men belonging to various professions in the rural and urban areas of the country.

The struggle against national repression in East Bengal was made to look like a struggle against the West Pakistanis, and particularly the Punjabis, or, in other words, it took the form of a Bengali non-Bengali struggle and gradually developed into a chauvinist attitude, i.e. antagonism against not only the West Pakistan but also the Urdu-speaking people who took residence in East Bengal after 1947. The central government of Pakistan also encouraged this development in both parts of Pakistan. The denouncers of economic disparity between the two parts of Pakistan having basically bourgeois orientation and politically inclined to or affiliated with the Awami League made considerable contribution towards this kind of development.

The national repression against the people in East Pakistan created political reactions among the people and, being goaded by bourgeois propaganda, they were moving towards a conflict which was basically non-constitutional. The Awami League leadership also realised this, which was reflected in the demagogic speech of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the Race Course Maidan on the 7th of March, 1971, in which he crudely called upon the people to build a fort in each house (mostly thatched huts) and resist the enemy with primitive weapons like bamboo sticks, etc! But the Awami League was no party to fight an armed freedom war against the Pakistani Armed Forces, and being a constitutional party, Sheikh Mujib announced a programme of Gandhian non-cooperation movement against the Pakistan government and asked the people to obey their instructions concerning the governance of East Pakistan!

After delivering his Race Course speech like a megalomaniac, Sheikh Mujib began to “run” the government peacefully without realising the consequences of what he said and did, and happily continued his constitutional negotiation with criminals like Yahya and Bhutto. In the meantime the people of Dhaka and East Bengal in general were kept in a state of complete unpreparedness to face any armed attack by the government, and Yahya, without wasting any time, began airlifting troops, arms and ammunition from West Pakistan and unloaded them at the Dhaka airport. Such was the efficiency of the grandiose “government” of the Awami League that they had no inkling of what was happening at the Dhaka airport under their nose! So, till the morning of March 25 “the great leader” and his partners in government were certain that they were going to have a bite of the carrot Yahya had been dangling before them for about two crucial weeks! Finally, the curtain was up and Sheikh Mujib with his Awami League outfit was confronted with a situation which they never really expected. The fascist Pakistani army began an all-out and indiscriminate armed attack on an unprepared and unarmed people and began to massacre them in thousands and it went up to millions in nine months. The central Awami League leaders and their followers down the line, in a state of utter panic, ran for their lives in every possible direction and reached Calcutta “as soon as their legs could carry them”! Their supreme leader and great hero, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, instead of leaving his beloved country like his fellow travellers, decided to stay back in his concrete “fort” and made a cowardly surrender to Pakistani Army without putting up any fight like Allende of Chile. He was dispatched to West Pakistan and remained in a state of hibernation till the end of the nine-month-long war of freedom in East Pakistan. Such was the moral fibre of the Awami League leadership that after doing all that they did, they had no hesitation to claim that they had declared a war of independence on the night of 26th March and called upon the people to go for that war. Whoever has heard of a general or a great leader who makes a cowardly surrender to the enemy after declaring a war against it, and whoever has heard of a revolutionary or even a patriotic party whose entire leadership leaves the country to save their own lives, leaving the masses of people under the most cruel and continued armed attack of a fascist enemy?

It must be proudly acknowledged that the heroic sons of the peasants and workers and of some middle-class families of East Bengal fought the freedom war with great courage and sacrifice, but what the great “freedom fighters” of Mujibnagar did during the period is known to all knowledgeable persons. In spite of that the ragtag organisation and leadership of the Awami League made a “heroic” homecoming under the umbrella of the Indian Army after December 16, 1971, and the hoodlums who accompanied them in their flight to India and their journey back, began to denounce all those who remained in their motherland during the very difficult days of the war!

It is neither possible nor necessary here to go into all the details of Awami League's "freedom fight", but what has been said so far clearly indicates that the shape of things which followed the establishment of Bangladesh as an independent state could not be any other than what is turned out to be. A rapacious, indigenous bourgeoisie fell upon the wealth of a helpless people and a reign of plunder was inaugurated. Thus in a free Bangladesh the common people, workers of all descriptions, instead of being liberated, found themselves in chains.

The 1971 war was a war of freedom, freedom from the rule of the Pakistani big bourgeoisie and the Pakistan state. But the liberation of the people was a far cry. In 1971 the Bengalis for the first time in their national history established a state of their own and it must be proclaimed in all fairness that this state was founded by the common people of Bangladesh and not by any "hero" as the propaganda goes. In all struggles like this the people fight and the leaders conspire, reap the harvest and come to enjoy the fruits of freedom. Thus for the leadership, freedom also meant liberation, liberations from the fetters which restrained them from freely exploiting and plundering their own people and making independent deals with imperialism.

But for the toiling people, for those who are the salt of the earth, liberation still remained distant and unreal. There could not be any liberation of the people without changing ownership of the means of production – land, machineries, factories, etc. and changing the relations of production which co-exist with the form of ownership. In independent Bangladesh both ownership of the means of production and the relation of production remained intact and nothing actually changed except the ethnic character of the exploiters and the oppressors.

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