

Sarwar Murshid and Noor Jehan Murshid Memorial Lecture

**WHEN NEW VALUES BECOME OLD VALUES:
THE DECLINE AND REDISCOVERY OF PUBLIC REASONING**

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The senescence of New Values

In my memory Sarwar Murshid remains the quintessential gentleman stranded in an intemperate and divided society. His soft-spoken, cultured, diction, his quiet sense of irony, his invariable elegant sartorial sense, gave him the appearance of an alien from another age. If one were to trace such a genealogy it would possibly take us back to the Age of Enlightenment which appeared to have inspired Murshid's values.

The publication of *New Values* as a journal of ideas was intended not just as a statement of Murshid's beliefs but as a projection of his persona. The journal was presented as an intellectual challenge to the mindless orthodoxies of the post-1947 Pakistan. Within a year of the emergence of what was propagated as a faith-based society, the resort to a *faux* religiosity to mask the rampant greed of an emergent ruling elite, the frustration of the democratic process and the cultural identity of the majority region, assaulted the sensibilities of an entire nation. Unsurprisingly, hypocrisy emerged as the dominant mode of public expression.

Murshid's response to these flagrant affronts to what constituted a decent society were in keeping with his enlightenment persona. Not for him the clenched fist and raised voice mounted on a soap box. He proclaimed his new values as a voice for liberal politics, humane economics, a just jurisprudence and, above all, for a form of public reasoning which was civilized in content, decent in its expression, designed to persuade rather than bludgeon dissenters into a stupefied silence. For Murshid, liberalism with a small 'l' remained the dominant value and its complete absence in the state of Pakistan inspired his modest challenge to the abuses of the state, registered through the reasoned pages of *New Values*. Unfortunately, the Pakistan ruling elite remained deaf to the language of reason and pushed even well-mannered, reasonable academics such as Murshid towards a more activist role, as an advisor to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman then engaged in an existential challenge to the very nature of the Pakistan state that culminated in a war of national liberation.

My presentation before you seeks to commemorate the heroic lives of two public figures, Noor Jehan and Sarwar Murshid, who engaged themselves in the struggle for a Bangladesh state founded on the commitment to build a democratic, just, secular and self-reliant society. Noor Jehan participated in the struggle through political activism. She was elected as a candidate of the Jukto Front in the provincial election of 1954 and again in 1970 on the Awami League ticket in an age when few women participated in politics. She was also one of the pioneers in promoting women's rights.

Sarwar preferred to use his moderate voice and fluent pen as his weapons of choice to realize a decent, tolerant, non-violent society where power would change hands and change would be accomplished through peaceful, civilized, political transactions. For Sarwar the means were no less important than ends in his struggle for change. His values were reflected in the work of Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, in which he argued that a decent society should be realized through the instrument of public reasoning which expands the traditional concept of democracy through the ballot box to include free speech, full access to information and freedom of dissent.

I doubt that Murshid was naive enough to believe that his once new values would painlessly provide the intellectual inspiration for a newly emergent society, born in violence, consecrated with the blood of its founding fathers and exposed to long episodes of cantonment rule which sought to recreate the values of the Pakistan state which we had rejected. But the Murshid's throughout their lives continued to promote their values and lament, quietly as always, the dying of the light which they hoped would illuminate the path to a society close to Murshid's enlightenment values.

The paper seeks to explore the retreat from what was once proclaimed by Sarwar Murshid as his new values and the gradual closure of spaces available for public reasoning. Such an exploration requires that I revisit the foundational values of our state and discuss their sustainability within a world and society which remains in a state of constant turmoil. In the process I hope to track the decline of public reasoning which has emerged as a consequence and also a cause of our distancing from our foundational project. It may be argued that the once 'new values' have become old and outmoded in an age where development and change are considered by some to be the driving force of our society. In the concluding part of my presentation I would, therefore, aim to renew my faith in Murshid's old, new values arguing

that these once noble ideas still remain relevant to our quest for a democratic, just, more tolerant and indeed an economically transformative society, to be realized through public reasoning.

Democracy and its discontents

Our emergence as a separate nation-state was the direct outcome of the persistent denial of democratic rights to the people of Bangladesh by the Pakistani ruling class. In the 24 years of shared statehood never once was central power in Pakistan exercised through the outcome of a free and fair election. The first such election in December 1970, 23 years after the emergence of Pakistan, led to the Awami League, under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, capturing a majority of seats in the National Parliament, with an electoral mandate from the people of Bangladesh to establish self-rule. It was the attempt by the Pakistani military junta to frustrate this democratic mandate through the instrument of genocide, which inspired the liberation war. The liberation war was, thus, the final phase of our democratic struggle when the Bangali people were compelled to confront the reality that democracy could never be realized within the Pakistani state.

It is the tragedy of Bangladesh that our nationhood emerged out of our quest for democracy, yet we have spent most of our national existence frustrating its realization. In 1990, when the Ershad autocracy was overthrown through a mass mobilization, the nation experienced the excitement of a second rebirth of democracy. The very institutions which emerged out of our democratic renewal have now become controversial. Between 1991 and 2009 the people of Bangladesh were provided with the opportunity to express their political preferences through four relatively free and fair elections. The losing side invariably contested the fairness of each election, but the credibility of an election may be measured by the fact that in each of these four elections the incumbent regime was defeated and a party from the opposition was elected to office.

The positive outcome of our electoral process did not ensure its perpetuation through the system of caretaker governance which had been introduced in 1991 to oversee the first election after the overthrow of the Ershad autocracy. This *ad hoc* but serviceable institutional innovation to oversee an electoral system was institutionalized in 1996 through the 13th amendment to the constitution. This far reaching constitutional intervention was enacted as the end result of an intensive political movement involving a broad coalition of political parties and civil society, led by Sheikh Hasina, now the incumbent Prime Minister. The caretaker system, inspite of its

imperfections and rock strewn journey provided for an electoral process which ensured the periodic peaceful transfer of power. The system ensured the return to power of the Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina in 1996, after a lapse of 21 years and its re-election with an overwhelming electoral mandate in 2008.

The contested working of the caretaker system which eventually led to a return to two years of cantonment rule renewed the quest for a trouble free electoral system. The high powered parliamentary committee set up by the 9th *Sangshad* to review the caretaker system unanimously decided, after extensive consultations with eminent jurists and civil society, to persist with the caretaker system notwithstanding its imperfections.

In spite of its re-endorsement by the parliamentary committee the caretaker system was repudiated by the very leadership which had led the political struggle for its realization. The scrapping of the caretaker system through the 15th amendment and the return to a system of elections under an incumbent regime, precipitated an electoral boycott of the 2014 elections to the *Sangshad*, which escalated into an unacceptable exercise of street violence initiated by the BNP led opposition. In consequence over half the seats in the parliament which emerged out of the election remained uncontested thereby denying its voters the opportunity to exercise their franchise. Forty-six years after the independence of Bangladesh we still remain in search of an electoral system which is universally acceptable and yields credible outcomes.

We have learnt from painful experience, through the tenure of four elected parliaments, that free, fair and contested elections are a necessary but far from sufficient condition for the exercise of our democratic rights. Our practice of democracy has been characterized by confrontation and intolerance which has led to a virtual tribalization of our political society where public reasoning has virtually disappeared from political practices.

The party in power tends to function with complete disregard to the democratic rights of the opposition. The opposition responds by violating its democratic mandate through frequent boycott of parliament and periodically resorting to acts of violence. As a result, four successive parliaments, deprived for most of their tenure, of an effective opposition have been rendered largely dysfunctional through their inability to discharge their primary mandate of keeping the executive accountable. The current parliament, without exposure to serious electoral contestation or challenge within the house and even across the country, has perpetuated the

tradition of executive suzerainty over the legislature and the winner-take-all culture in every sphere of public activity.

The malfunctioning of our democratic institutions is compounded by the weakness of democracy in our principal political parties. As a consequence party organization and discipline have eroded and no signs of a new generation of leaders appears visible. Within organizationally weakened parties we have witnessed the gradual ascendance of money and muscle power as the driving force in party politics. As a consequence, politics has degenerated into a rich man's game, where both women and the financially deprived have been effectively disenfranchised. The dominance of money has ensured that issues of principle, policy and public service are no longer the motivating force for participating in politics. Rather, politics has become an extension of business and money has become the route to electoral office.

The crisis in governance

In such a malfunctioning democracy which has evolved over three decades, our institutions of governance have been exposed to minimal accountability and transparency. This has weakened, the administrative machinery. Within such a system both recruitment and advancement of public servants have been exposed to politicization and distanced from performance norms. As a result, partisanisation has infected most public services as well as law enforcement agencies which have tended to become commoditised to a point where the capacity of the machinery of government to discharge its responsibilities as an instrument of public service rather than a market transaction has depreciated. The ineffectiveness of our regulatory and law enforcement agencies has facilitated the resort to rent seeking in the provision of public services as well as public procurements. Such weaknesses in oversight and accountability have contributed to significant delays in the implementation of development works which has substantially enhanced their costs.

The judiciary is also facing challenges. The protracted delay in institutionalizing the complete separation of the judiciary from the executive continues to constrain the independence of the lower judiciary while the upper judiciary has also been exposed to controversy. The more enduring threat to the rule of law appears to originate in partisan law enforcement. The cardinal premise of legal justice is grounded in the symbol of blind justice in the enforcement of the law. The abuse of law to punish opponents and exonerate the corresponding wrongs of one's

supporters ensures that one law does not apply to all citizens. This erodes respect for the law and encourage law breakers to seek protection not of the law, but against the law.

In a politically divided society the appointments to the Election Commission have also become controversial so that the credibility of the very institutions which are designed to safeguard the democratic credentials of our electoral process tend to be questioned. Politicized recruitment and postings in the local administration and law enforcement agencies as well as other public institutions that are entrusted with overseeing the electoral process serve as challenges to the authority of even a well-intentioned Election Commission. In such circumstance, the scope for containing the role of money and use of violence to influence the outcome of elections, remains limited. Within a system where electoral defeat is not just an episode in a candidate's political career but could endanger both their livelihood and even their lives the incentive to win at any cost becomes irresistible.

Civil society as an alternative centre of accountability for the unrestrained exercise of executive power has, over the years, become weaker because of politicized divisions in its ranks. Exposure to increasing pressure from successive regimes has further eroded their capacity for sustained advocacy. Some civic activism has always remained relevant as has been demonstrated through the remarkable impact of the citizen's movement challenging the location of the Ramphal project. The sustainability of such mobilizations becomes more hazardous particularly where broader support from civil and political society remains inhibited.

It should be kept in mind that our crisis in governance is not a recent recurrence but has been perpetuated by successive governments over four decades. Incoming regimes have argued that they needed to undo the political interventions of their predecessors in the governance process. Rather than move to correct the wrongs they have inherited, successor regimes have tended to compound the malgovernance on the grounds that they must first extract an eye for an eye as well as respond to the need to compensate their supporters against the deprivations and injustices inflicted on them under the past regime. This, in practice, means replacing incumbent administrators allegedly loyal to the outgoing regime with votaries of the incoming regime. This turnover takes place not just at all levels of the administration and field agencies but even in educational institutions. In all these institutions advancement depends less on probity and competence than as a form of reward for political loyalty.

Proclamation of political loyalty tends to be less motivated by ideological beliefs than by the career advancement and material interests of the public servant. Similar logic prevails in the law enforcement agencies. Wrong doers loyal to a regime are provided the latitude to violate the law with impunity. The moment a regime relinquishes power these same loyalists are declared as criminals for the crimes they were once free to commit. In such circumstance the cell phone or phone call to ascertain who is or is not to be charge sheeted for a crime tends to serve as an indispensable instrument of law enforcement.

The functioning of the system of governance has, thus, acquired a form of path dependence where each regime makes itself the captive of the past. When path dependence persists over decades each successor regime finds it more difficult to break out of the system which tends to remain frozen in its malgovernance. Under such circumstances improvements in governance demand exceptional qualities of leadership which can commit a government towards not just incremental but systemic change. This would need to begin with the rejection of the path dependent tradition.

From a Exclusionary to an Inclusionary Society

Systemic change in countries such as Bangladesh can only be contemplated through strengthening democracy rather than the resort to authoritarian measure whether under civilian or martial rule. This demands that the exclusionary system of governance which has emerged over the years needs to be challenged through a return to our foundational principles which were premised on the belief in social justice and democratic participation.

The struggle for social justice was central to every democratic struggle which inspired the politics of the people of Bangladesh from the peasant uprisings of Titumir and Nureldin, to the 6 point/11 point movement led by Bangabandhu which drove the election campaign of 1970. It was this same class of peasants, then joined by a nascent working class and the students of Bangladesh, who provided the vanguard for the liberation struggle. It was this same subaltern class which provided the foot-soldiers for the liberation war and bore the brunt of the genocide. Constructing an inclusive society is nothing more than a recognition of the blood debt owed to the deprived majority of Bangladesh who bore a disproportionate share of the heavy price we paid for liberating Bangladesh. It was expected that post-liberation Bangladesh would narrow disparities by enhancing the social and economic power of the deprived and prioritise their concerns.

Over the years, particularly during the 21st century, the Bangladesh economy has registered significant growth. The Bangladesh of today is far removed from the basket case once predicted as our destiny by Henry Kissinger. Notwithstanding our economic gains and improvements in human development Bangladesh remains a highly inequitable, unjust society which has graduated from the two economies which characterized Pakistan into two societies. Bangladesh's two societies are characterized by the emergence of an increasingly exclusive elite which has integrated itself into the process of globalization. The emergence of a self-perpetuating elite repudiates not just the spirit of the Liberation War but a century of democratic struggle of the people of this country.

The sustainability of a social order depends on its legitimacy in the eyes of society. Those who exercise political, social and economic power should be deemed to do so on the basis of a freely given electoral mandate as well as through demonstrable enterprise, efficiency and competitiveness. Societies where social power is deemed to be unjustly acquired remain exposed to instability because its social hierarchies remain under constant challenge which can only be contained by a monopoly of force, violence and money available to the elite. Such societies, founded on weak social legitimacy, tend to be more prone to crime, violence and possible social breakdown.

The manifestations of injustice in our systems of governance originate in the injustices embedded in the economic order which have been accentuated by the policy regimes put in place over the last several decades. Unjust governance further accentuates economic disparities. A policy agenda based on an indiscriminate belief in the allocative efficiency of the market place, notwithstanding the structural features of an economy, and the institutional arrangements which determine the working of markets as well as access to resources is likely to malfunction with serious implications for social justice in any country.

In such a system where markets either do not function or malfunction due to the capacity of those with power and access to resources to manipulate these markets, both justice and efficiency emerge as casualties. The reward systems of our society, in its present configuration, depend on access to power and influence, the capacity to manipulate the system for personal or sectoral gain and to escape from accountability either in the market place or through exposure to popular or legal institutions. Where power, access and immunity from the law are

distributed very inequitably, the values of a market driven system tend to aggravate inequalities and injustice.

Those who remain without productive assets, access to adequate education and health care, cannot expect to avail of the opportunities offered by the open market. Where availability of work lies within the patronage of those with privileged access to knowledge and resources, the system itself becomes whimsical since no competitive norms guide access to administrative decisions or economic opportunities. In such a situation those who produce goods and services do so in an unprotected and uncertain environment where price behavior and foreign competition, make an already unpredictable context even more erratic. In such a system access to capital is not based on market principles but on access and the cost of capital itself varies from person to person depending on their power to perpetuate their defaults. Law enforcement remains a hazard rather than a source of security where access to the law is determined by who you are and what you are willing to pay so that there is one law for the rich and one for the poor. Within the rich there is one law for those with political access and another for those who compete in the market for purchasing law enforcement. The system of justice at the lower levels remains negotiable and encourages contempt for the rule of law.

Illegitimately acquired wealth and malgovernance percolate down to private crime. Defaulters in Motijheel and political leaders patronizing these defaulters can afford to contract *mastaans*, who help them to contest elections and even grab public resources. These same *mastaans* use their political access to buy immunity from the law to extract tolls and use crime as an instrument of private enterprise. Such a trend is visible not just in Bangladesh but in our neighbouring countries, including India. In such a milieu crime becomes another form of entrepreneurship as well as an entry point into politics. Such a process reinforces the injustices of a system where the dividing line between the law enforcer and the law breaker remains opaque.

The decline of public reasoning

The retreat from democratic values and good governance is manifested in the decline of public reasoning. The concept of public reasoning was seen by the philosopher, Immanuel Kant, as a byproduct of the age of enlightenment. Kant argued that ‘for enlightenment to occur people need to have the right to express their thoughts and opinions openly to the public without being

punished'. Murshid aspired to commit *New Values* to building a society where reasoned public debate would be the instrument of choice for constructing a democratic society.

The publication of *New Values* was, however, premised on a social order where the right to express opinions freely and openly without fear of punishment, prevailed. The world in which *New Values* appeared did not provide any such guarantee for unrestricted public expression. The media in the Pakistan of Ayub Khan operated under the Damocles' sword of the *Press and Publication Ordinance* which inspired a degree of self-censorship. It was only after the fall of the Ayub dictatorship and the changed political environment in the 1969-71 period that papers and journals began to more fully and freely express themselves. After the massive victory of the Awami League, under the leadership of Bangabandhu in the election of December 1970, for a brief, halcyon, moment most papers could give full expression to everything they wanted to say on politics and the problems facing the country. For those of us, who took up the challenge, as for example, in the weekly *Forum*, the sky was the limit. Once war was declared by the Pakistan state on the people of Bangladesh on the night of 25 March 1971, our paper was immediately closed down by a Martial Law edict issued by General Tikka Khan.

In response to the draconian edicts which threatened public reasoning in the years of Pakistani rule the unrestricted commitment to freedom of speech and the independence of the media were enshrined in the Bangladesh constitutions as a fundamental right. This freedom was exercised without risk or even self-restraint for the first three years of our independence. From 1975 onward even though the right to exercise the freedom of expression has remained inscribed in our constitution the exercise of this right has remained influenced by the varying climate of democratic practice under successive regimes.

In recent years freedom of expression remains constricted not just by apprehensions of incurring the wrath of the state but by threats to life by ideological forces who may not accept a particular view point. As a consequence freedom of expression is exercised under conditions of considerable self-restraint. Nor do ground rules prevail as to what is or is not acceptable, where particular subjects are placed off-limits. The prospect of abuse of the law as well as bodily threats serve as instruments of intimidation on both the freedom of the media and private expression.

In practice, the right to freedom of expression is rarely exercised by most organs of the media. The number of electronic and print media may proliferate but very few among the media remain inclined to address issues which may, even minimally, incur the displeasure of the state. More likely such media outlets prefer to promote the positions of the rulers and/or the political and business interests of their owners. In a number of cases particular media operators are used by organs of the state to abuse or defame opponents through resort to the vilest libels without fear of legal challenge.

This tradition is not unique to our country but has been in universal practice in our neighboring countries and indeed across the world. Under such conditions the conception of public reasoning, associated with the Kantian interpretation of the enlightenment, where reason is exercised without pressure or manipulation by public opinion forming organs of the media, remains an ideal rather than a part of a universal reality.

In recent years we have witnessed the emergence of social media as an instrument of mass communication. At its inception it was widely hoped that social media would greatly enhance opportunities for free expression which could bypass restraints on the media imposed by autocratic regimes and even non-official elements seeking to curtail public reasoning. Social media still remains serviceable to public causes. The cell phone can and is being used by ordinary citizens to capture the wrong doings of the state in electoral malpractices, expose misuse of public resources or publicise acts of state oppression.

In this age of instant communication and growing sophistication of expertise in extracting even the most confidential information cover up of misconduct, whether through administrative edicts or more menacing methods, remains an unsustainable enterprise. Public education of citizens about the new power held in their hands and effective ways to use this power in the service of public reasoning is emerging as one of the more liberating opportunities of the 21 century.

Unfortunately the enemies of public reasoning have also discovered the power of social media which is now used to abuse opponents, project fake news, even threaten the lives of exponents of public reasoning. We have observed how a powerful President has used his twitter account to continuously reach out to millions of his fanatical supporters with tendentious tweets to depreciate his critics and propagate his unreasoned prejudices. The abuse of social media

through 250 letter tweets effectively closes minds to public reasoning by eliminating any space for serious debate. Sadly, this abuse of social media is spreading across the world and is now a favoured weapon both of prospective *führers* to motivate their followers and as an instrument for promoting terrorism.

What sets apart more liberal from less liberal societies is the exposure of citizens to a variety of instruments of public expression, where ‘a hundred flowers bloom and a thousand thoughts contend.’ In more repressed societies the garden remains largely populated by withered flowers where its planters live in apprehension of both public and private chastisement through the media and even more corporeal hazards. In such a society the values of the enlightenment, as projected by Murshid, remain a receding aspiration.

Where the freedom of expression remains under threat, the voice of those who speak for the state tends to be amplified as the only voice which can be expressed without serious contestation. In a freer society, the voice of the state can and is challenged. The more independent elements of the media, without risk to their survival or security of its personnel, feel free to challenge each and every expression of opinion by the state. Even in more repressive societies, if individuals and the media are willing to expose themselves to risk, they can continue to challenge the actions and public declarations of the state. We need to keep in mind that limits to the freedom of expression are not necessarily set by the law but by the will of citizens to exercise this right upto the time that their voice is suppressed by the state.

These limits on exercising our freedoms tend to be determined less by what is said or written than by the credibility and amplitude of the voice of the writer as well as their media of choice. Regimes which remain secure in their exercise of state power can, paradoxically, be more tolerant of dissenting opinions particularly of intellectuals with limited public exposure. In contrast, the voice of major political figures who have access to large constituencies are more to be feared and where possible, silenced.

Public reasoning in the age of Bangabandhu

Insecure regimes remain less tolerant of the voices of even powerless intellectuals and react more strongly to their opinions than may be warranted by the size of their audience. Intellectuals are most dangerous, when they have access to the ear of popular leaders who can give voice to their once obscure views. In my own case, some of the most politically influential moments of my life as a writer were experienced during the days when our ideas were

serviceable to national leaders such as Bangabandhu who remained a strong believer in public reasoning rather than rhetoric, bombast and abuse as his mode of discourse.

In Pakistan, where the state always retained the monopoly of force to shut down democratic opinion Bangabandhu and other opposition leaders were left with no choice but to use public reasoning based on evidence and logic to lend credibility to their political or policy agendas. Bangabandhu's Six Point charter for self-rule for Bangladesh was no simplistic exercise in political rhetoric. It was a well-reasoned document which drew upon years of earlier work by professionals. The AL's manifesto, prepared for the 1970 elections by politically sympathetic professionals through intensive consultations with Bangabandhu and Tajuddin, was another well thought out, reasoned, document calibrated to the political needs and social concerns of the electorate.

Prior to the December 1970 elections it was believed by the Pakistani junta that Bangabandhu, like other opposition leaders before him, was using his 6 point based campaign manifesto to win votes and would, after the election, be persuaded to compromise his demands in exchange for a share of power. Bangabandhu was, however, no traditional leader. He remained committed to honour the massive mandate given to him to implement his electoral mandate. Immediately after the election he moved to discuss the operational implications of the Six Points programme and the AL manifesto so that he could defend its viability in political negotiations as well as through parliamentary debate. To prepare himself for such challenges he spent long hours with his professional advisors discussing all aspect of his electoral agenda. Once he had satisfied himself as to the viability of his agenda, Bangabandhu sought to engage with his political antagonists to persuade them about its validity and the inescapable need to implement it if a peaceful political transition was to take place.

Tajuddin Ahmed, who lacked Bangabandhu's unique charisma and his capacity to inspire the masses with his eloquence, was the quintessential exponent of public reasoning. His sharp intelligence and exceptional dialectical skills were his preferred weapons of choice for persuading his supporters and even his opponents to win them to his point of view. The combination of Bangabandhu and Tajuddin were the ultimate exponents of an age where public reasoning lent both elegance and intelligent content to political debate.

Few people recollect that Bangabandhu who could use his voice and words as heavy artillery in his public dialogue, never felt compelled to resort to abuse or indecorous personal comments about his adversaries. By giving voice to reason he did not just inspire people to support his cause but to also appreciate the justification underlying his advocacy for the cause. His historic speech of 7th March 1971, which was justly recognized by UNESCO, should be remembered not just for setting the direction for our liberation struggle but as a masterly exercise in public reasoning under the most difficult and dangerous political circumstances.

Unfortunately our Pakistani adversaries, to the end, remained enemies of public reasoning. They continued to place their faith in force rather than reason. In the month of March 1971 Bangladesh eventually emerged as an independent nation state through the triumph of reason over the threat of force. The people of Bangladesh, participated in a freedom struggle because they were eventually persuaded by their leaders that this was the only route available to them to exercise their democratic right to self rule. Once an entire people embraced the logic of a powerful idea it was no longer meaningful to detain or even kill their leaders. The oppressor had no recourse but to declare war on the entire population and resort to the instrument of genocide to enforce silence.

This historic exposure to the power of public reasoning as an instrument of popular mobilization should have influenced generations of our political leaders that the resort to coercion through assaults on our democratic rights and the silencing of dissent is likely to be counterproductive. There may be some societies which have attained impressive development transformation under less democratic dispensations but the few sustainable success stories in this area were historically rarely exposed to a democratic tradition. For countries which have, over a prolonged phase of their history, been engaged in the struggle for democratic rights, developmental gains may be appreciated but rarely serve as an adequate compensation for the usurpation of their rights or the suppression of their voice.

Regenerating the spirit of the liberation war: Rediscovering public reasoning

Are there any serious possibilities, within an increasingly exclusive social order, to resuscitate the political inheritance of our liberation struggle? Four decades have gone by where not only Bangladesh but the world has experienced seismic changes. It may be argued by some that we need to reconceptualise our goals away from the philosophy of another era, however evocative its historic message. The tendency to make rhetorical genuflections to the values of a liberation

war fought in 1971, whilst living in a society which has moved away from such values in its societal practices, is a recipe for accentuating social tensions. Living with such contradictions between word and deed not only promotes disrespect for the vision of the old order but undermines the credibility of the contemporary political order.

Along with Noor Jehan and Sarwar Murshid and some remnants of an aging generation, I remain unashamedly loyal to the values of the liberation war. But I also firmly believe that the old values must have a contemporary relevance if we aspire to correct the variety of maledictions which infect our society and threaten the significant advances we have registered over the years. I will therefore conclude by exploring some pathways towards reinvigorating our faith in the values of the liberation war by constructing a more inclusive society.

So far much of the address has been presented as a cautionary tale on the hazards and challenges inherent in our departure from public reasoning in support of the values of the liberation struggle. I would, however, prefer to move towards a more positive perspective by pointing to some of the advantages and opportunities which are available to us in this day and age to revisit our foundational values in order to bring about a more sustainable transformation in our society.

Whilst I have pointed to the emergence of exclusionary forces in our society, we should also recognize that opportunities for corrective action, particularly in the economic sphere are more readily available today than at any time past. Today, the Bangladesh economy is far removed from the war devastated and impoverished economy we inherited at the time of our liberation. Over the last three decades but particularly in the years of the 21st century the Bangladesh economy has demonstrated robust GDP growth, which has increased per capita income whilst reducing income poverty. Economic growth has contributed to enhanced public revenues which have correspondingly led to rapid expansion in public development expenditures which has improved our physical infrastructure. Recent expansion in power generation capacity, initiated by the incumbent regime, is a case in point. We have also expanded investments in both public health and education which has considerably improved our human development indicators. The move to construct a digital Bangladesh has made impressive advances in connecting the masses with the modern world and its opportunities.

These noticeable improvement in our economy have been driven, in part, by public action inspired by visionary leadership. What has, however, made the Bangladesh development story distinctive is the emergence of agents of development which have been able to move the

economy forward, inspite of malgovernance and episodes of political instability. Our development gains owe in large measure to the remarkable creative capacities, hard work and unleashed entrepreneurial spirit of our farmers, wage workers, particularly women in the RMG sector, our overseas migrant workers, our micro entrepreneurs, our world class NGOs and an increasingly dynamic generation of professionals and entrepreneurs. All these forces have developed a capacity for autonomous action through insulating their activities from phases of political dysfunction and malgovernance. It is these forces for change which perhaps explain the so called *Bangladesh development paradox*, associated with the dissonance between malgovernance and economy progress. The availability of these dynamic agents of change, the strengthened capacity of the economy, the expanded availability of public resources and the remarkable expansion of connectivity, have opened up opportunities for both eliminating income poverty and stimulating growth through a strategy of inclusive development.

To realize Bangladesh's full development promise and potential we must renew our faith in constructing a more inclusive democracy and society. It is argued by me that a country such as Bangladesh, with a long tradition of democratic struggle, cannot escape from its inheritance without endangering the stability and cohesion of society. Social cohesion and political stability remain integral to the quest for rapid, sustainable and eventually transformative development. The necessary policy measures, institutional reforms and mobilization of domestic and external capital depends on stability which originates in the strength and legitimacy of a regime's democratic mandate.

Furthermore, if the full political rewards from development gains registered under a particular regime are to be reaped, it will need to commit itself to end rampant political rent seeking which raises the costs of development, undermines competitiveness of the economy and inhibits both domestic and foreign investment. Corruption through rent seeking does more to undermine the credibility of a regime than anything that is propagated against them by their opponents. It was again indicative of Sarwar Murshid's values that in his last years he served as Chairman of Transparency International Bangladesh, which was then and today remains engaged in a courageous fight against corruption.

Our discussion has, made it clear that a democratic mandate cannot just be measured through the metric of free and fair elections. The democratic process which emerges out of this mandate must be made more inclusive both through widening political participation and through the inclusive outcomes of the development agendas legislated by its public representatives.

Some of the most dynamic segments of our society who have emerged as drivers of our economy, such as small farmers, wage workers, women, micro-borrowers and migrant workers, mostly drawn from the subaltern classes, come from the less privileged half of our population. These groups need to be incentivized through much larger shares of investment in enhancing their productive capacity and productivity. Significant enhancement in access to resources and skills will need to be accompanied by strengthening their capacity to compete in the market place through opportunities for enhancing their share of value addition. To move the lower income producers up the value chain we will need to design institutions which aggregate the strength of these groups through collective action. Such a strategy will not only be consistent with the values of social justice proclaimed as part of *mukti juddher chetona* but will stimulate growth and ensure its diffusion as well as sustainability.

Prioritizing investment backed by policy support for incentivizing our working people will ensure both political support and high economic returns for a regime which promotes such an inclusive development strategy. More participatory development will further strengthen democracy by expanding and democratizing the stake holders in the system. To ensure electoral pluralities a political party will not need to depend on candidates with money or muscle power but will be able to reach out to hundreds of thousands of dedicated political supporters, inspired at the grass roots to elect the most capable among them to represent their constituency. Such motivated party cadres will not only work for the election of their party but will also be willing to defend the democratic order against extra-democratic challenges.

Any leader and party who can be assured of the dedicated support not just of its myriad workers but of a much larger constituency of citizens, as was the experience of Bangabandhu in leading the liberation struggle, would be able to win massive electoral pluralities through free and fair elections against all contestants. Today, a political leader armed with such an inclusive vision, who commands mass support, can also expect to motivate the economic agents in society who have taken a lead role in taking Bangladesh forward. With such broad based support such a political leader can aspire to initiate a development process which transforms Bangladesh into

a dynamic country with a diversified economy built upon an inclusive development strategy backed by the freely given mandate of its people. Such a country may be expected to overtake such Asian success stories as Vietnam with the advantage of achieving this transformation through the democratic process.

In such an inclusive society the exercise of public reasoning remains integral to the sustainability of the democratic process and for transforming the quality of governance. A free, independent and accountable media, should be viewed as an asset rather than an antagonist to be oppressed and suppressed. In a system where those in office tend to be insulated from the malgovernance of the administration those who speak truth to power remain instrumental to public reasoning and indispensable to the viability and vitality of a well governed democratic society.

The world as it exists today remains far removed from the universe of public reasoning once imagined by Noor Jehan and Sarwar Murshid. My attempt to renovate Murshid's now old new values, to address our more contemporary concerns, may appear no less an exercise of the romantic imagination than it once appeared to the ancient readers of *New Values*. In the eighth decade of my life, which had once experienced fulfilment in the emergence of an independent Bangladesh, I continue to aspire, as did the Murshids, to seek fulfilment in the realization of a Bangladesh which gives substance to the spirit and values which inspired our liberation struggle.