

BANGLADESH 'SEPOY MUTINY' 1975

Colonel Abu Taher's Uprising

Peter Custers

It has been 35 years since Bangladesh's revolutionary leader Colonel Abu Taher died a martyr's death. Eight and a half months after leading a soldiers' insurrection which had spread like wild fire from Dhaka's cantonment to cantonments in different Districts of Bangladesh, Abu Taher on July 21, 1976 was hanged in Dhaka central jail. The uprising had been short-lived, since on the very day when the soldiers started rebelling, November the 7th, 1975, Bangladesh's bourgeoisie regained the initiative. Yet for two full weeks, as both army generals tried to restore 'order' and as Taher's forces tried to regroup, bourgeois rule had come to a virtual standstill. In the end, Taher, his close associates and thousands of activists of the party that had backed the rising, the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), were arrested and thrown into jail. He was tried before a secret military tribunal staged inside the Dhaka jail, and was given capital punishment. The execution by hanging was a cowardly act, by the military regime that was led by his former friend Ziaur Rahman.

It is quite appropriate to evaluate Colonel Taher's legacy by quoting Lenin on the Easter rising against British colonial rule over Ireland, which was staged in 1916. This rising, like Bangladesh's 1975 soldiers' insurrection, was a 'failed' uprising, it was crushed before it could gather full strength. Nevertheless, Lenin deeply respected the Irish fighters who had attempted to stage revolution some one and a half year before the Bolshevik revolution took place. As he argued: "Whoever expects a 'pure' social revolution will never live to see it. The misfortune of the Irish was that they rose prematurely, when the European revolt of the proletariat had not yet matured. Here was a 'great popular revolt' which undoubtedly had historical significance". The insurrection carried ideas and ideals which were and are unique. They stand out, in comparison with the ideas on military strategy and on social transformation which at the time were defended by other currents of the Bangladeshi Left.

Moreover, these ideas continue to carry great weight for the contemporary struggles of the oppressed, the male and female peasants and workers of Bangladesh.

A BRIEF WITNESS ACCOUNT

This evaluation of the soldiers' insurrection is partly based on personal experience. I therefore wish to first recount some of my direct impressions of the November 7th events. On that historic day of November the 7th, 1975, I happened to wake up early, and went for a morning walk from my Elephant Road residence, located close to the beginning of Mirpur Road. This was at 6 o'clock in the morning, and as I moved along the main road, I saw a whole series of trucks coming down from the cantonment area's direction, packed with soldiers firing gunshots of joy in the air. It was immediately obvious that the cantonment's soldiers that night had massively responded to a call for insurrection, and that, at this very moment, the attempt to stage a revolt from below, from within the Bangladesh army, was successful indeed. In the course of the morning I saw colonel Taher moving around in a jeep near the Race Course area, and as he stopped briefly when seeing me, he informed me that there would be a public rally later that day. Before that, at dawn, Taher's brother Anwar had solemnly declared from the Dhaka radio—then the country's principal medium of communication with the population—that theirs was a soldiers-people's uprising aimed at bringing social change. In the course of the day also, I saw groups of JSD supporters holding demonstrations in the city centre, in support of the rising. Yet the rally which had been announced, and at which both colonel Taher and Ziaur Rahman were to speak, never took place.

Nevertheless, in subsequent days, Dhaka was rife with rumours about soldiers' revolts in cantonments located in or near other cities. I received information, for instance, that pamphlets of the Biplobi Sainik Sangstha had been distributed in the cantonment of Chittagong, and that rebelling soldiers had started on a March towards Dhaka from the Jessore cantonment. Whereas these rumours were difficult to verify, it was evident that the state of Bangladesh had been paralyzed, and that Taher's daring revolutionary attempt to this extent had been effective. The situation was only brought under control for the bourgeoisie after a period of two weeks, when colonel Taher was arrested from the university area, and when a huge drive was launched to arrest political activists belonging to the JSD. It is true—as saddened JSD supporters later on were to insist—that the 1975 insurrection had a tragic outcome. The rising did not result in a transformation of the army, nor in emancipative change. Also, the abortive revolt was followed by the gradual demise of the JSD. However, let us not forget for a moment when evaluating the past, that the rising and its heroic leader were seen as a tremendous threat by Bangladesh's elite. Although Colonel Taher had been wounded and had lost a leg when leading a guerrilla force during the liberation war of 1971, his detention from late November till his hanging was accompanied by the most extraordinary security arrangements: the section of Dhaka central jail where he was detained was vacated so as to ensure that the state would not be brought down in another military rising under his lead!

THE SOLDIERS' UPRISING VERSUS THE PRECEDING COUPS

I will now move on to record positive lessons to be drawn from the 1975 rising. There are basically three points that I wish to make. The first one relates to the difference between the soldiers' uprising and the two other army risings which had preceded it in the same year. The series of rising was opened with the coup d'état staged by young 'Turks', a group of junior army officers, on August the 15th against the rule of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman which had turned dictatorial. This uprising, precisely because it was directed against a government experienced as oppressive by broad sections of the population, was greeted with a sigh of relief: people in the streets of Dhaka, on August the 15th smiled. Yet the coup d'état had more than one shady side: it was accompanied by the murder of a large part of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's family, and it had the backing of US imperialism, as many suspected from the start. On the morning of August the 15th, I happened to be a silent witness to a confrontation which took place at the Dhaka radio, between Colonel Taher and Mustaque Ahmed, leader of the pro-American wing of the Awami League. As Taher realized immediately, sections of Mujibur Rahman's own party were either directly involved in the coup, or were ready to act in league with the Young Turks. Historical research has since confirmed that it was a pro-American coup.

The era of the rule of these young officers, however, was not to last for very long. On November the 2nd, Dhaka saw the beginning of another coup, when fighter planes were flown over the city in an apparent showdown between different factions of the army's leadership. I was able to collect data on this coup, when later I happened to be detained in the very same cell of Dhaka central jail, where air force officers were held who had played a prominent role in the unfolding of the November 2/3 events. These officers, all trained pilots, had entered jail as privileged personalities, being exempted from the harsh rules of submission that were imposed on other jail entrants. Subsequently, however, they were detained in a bullet-ridden cell, i.e. the very cell where four leading politicians of the Awami League had been killed in a bloody reaction against the November 3 coup. According to the air force officers, theirs had been a nationalist rising—contrary to the pro-imperialist coup of August 15. Yet the Dhaka public had unanimously interpreted the November 3 coup as *restorationist*, and its leader, Khaled Mosharraf, was seen pro-Awami League. In any case, just like its precursor, the November 3 coup was staged 'from above', by ambitious army officers who had risen to positions of military power in the wake of Bangladesh's 1971 liberation war.

Neither the first, nor the second coup of 1975 was inspired by ideals of social liberation, nor did the aspirations of the army's common soldiers play an active part in shaping them. And here is where the third rising led by Taher was radically different in kind. The November 7 uprising was both in intent, i.e. as conceived by its principal leader, and in practice, as implemented by its participants, a soldiers'

insurrection, —an insurrection which amongst others targeted abolition of the unjust privileges held by the officers of Bangladesh's armed forces. Abu Taher had drawn his inspiration from a long historical tradition of soldiers' insurrections, ranging from the first Indian war of independence against British rule in 1857, to the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, and the Velvet revolution which had brought down fascist dictatorship in Portugal in 1974. A clear line of demarcation thus does need to be drawn between the third rising of 1975—and the two army risings that preceded it. Whereas the first two events were 'palace events', theatrical acts played out between sections of Bangladesh's political and economic elite, the third event, the rising of November 7, needs to be interpreted differently. It was a festival of the oppressed, in which Bangladesh's army soldiers, in huge numbers, spontaneously took part. No matter its drawbacks—November the 7th was unique.

TAHER'S VISION OF A PEOPLE'S ARMY

The second evaluative point concerns Taher's vision regarding the nature of the new state army to be built by independent Bangladesh. Taher originally had chosen a career as a military officer in the Pakistani army. He had received training at an American military academy. His exploits started in 1971 during Bangladesh's independence war. Like other Bengali officers in the Pakistani army he rebelled to join the nationalist resistance. However, whereas a good number of officers could immediately cross lines, since they were stationed in (East) Bengal, Abu Taher could only join and participate after travelling a long way from an army garrison in Pakistan, via India's landmass, towards the borders of occupied Bengal. Further, contrary to other Bengali officers, Taher chose unequivocally to build a resistance army from within. In the far-Northern region he formed a guerrilla force recruited from among the local peasantry. One of the feats of this force was the famous Chilmari raid, in which the Pakistani garrison in the given town was attacked. It was very unfortunate that Taher got wounded, lost one leg, and ended up in an Indian hospital. Thus, his dream of promoting a true liberation 'from within', i.e. primarily through efforts made independent from foreign patronage, could not be fulfilled.

Abu Taher, however, was garlanded as hero of the liberation war, and was then reintegrated as officer in the state army of Bangladesh, formed soon after the country's formal independence in December of 1971. It was then that the second chapter in Taher's saga started. For whereas most commanding officers of the new army held conventional views regarding the place of the new army in Bangladesh's society, Taher's vision was distinct. In fact, the very first story which I recall having read about him was the story written by the American journalist Lawrence Lifschultz regarding his efforts to construct a production-oriented army. Being stationed as army commander in the Comilla cantonment, Taher instructed the soldiers to cultivate the soil, to grow pineapples so as to contribute to their own maintenance. Given the grinding poverty suffered by the majority of Bangladesh's population, the country in his view could not afford a colonial-type army without productive role. The experiment in Comilla, however, was not to last for long. Colonel Taher was dismissed from his army post. Although Mujibur Rahman in the following years continued calling him his 'golden son', Taher was sidelined and given a civilian task.

This in a nutshell was the path which Taher had followed since 1971, and which he continued to pursue via the soldiers' uprising staged on November the 7th. Surely, preparations for the uprising had been discussed with other leaders of the opposition party, the JSD, which Taher had secretly joined. Taher shared their broader vision in favour of a social revolution, a revolution to promote the emancipation of society's oppressed. 'Our revolution', so it was proclaimed on the 7th, 'is not a revolution aimed at replacing leaders, but a revolution in the interests of the poor'. But central to the programmatic message of the uprising was Taher's vision of a people's army. Although military preparations for the uprising were undertaken together with the *Gana Bahini*, the urban centred guerrilla force formed as armed wing of the JSD, —agitation within the regular army on the eve of the insurrection was primarily carried out by secret units of the Biplobi Sainik Sangstha, the Council of Revolutionary Soldiers established under Taher's lead. This Sangstha put forward a 12 point charter of demands, which notably included the demands: * that the differences between officers and soldiers be removed, * that officers be appointed on the basis of their merit, * that officers and soldiers be provided with the same

ration and housing, and * that the system under which soldiers worked as personal servants of officers, as batmen, be abolished. Via the soldiers' insurrection of November the 7th, Taher amongst others targeted a thorough internal transformation of the state army of Bangladesh.

MILITARY STRATEGY

The third point for evaluation—a point which is often overlooked—concerns the debate over military strategy within the Left of Bangladesh. In the immediate post-independence period of Bangladesh's history, the influence of the Chinese model of revolution over various sections of the Bangladeshi Left was still large. I recall heated discussions between and with activists belonging to different underground Maoist party groups, —debates over the strategy and tactics of revolutionary struggle which spilled over into jail. Mao's key thesis is surely familiar. Since under China's semi-feudal conditions the vast majority of the population was living in the countryside, where the presence of the reactionary state was weak, the party needed to surround the cities from the countryside, via a strategy of protracted people's war. The revolutionaries could best gather armed strength via a gradual process of accumulation, by building up a people's army via guerrilla actions in which selected units of the state's army were attacked and disarmed. Although Bangladesh's geographic and socio-economic conditions were rather different from those that had prevailed in pre-revolutionary China, —in the years before Taher's soldiers' uprising Mao's military strategy continued to be cherished by broad sections of the pro-Chinese Left in Bangladesh.

Against this background, colonel Taher put forward a radically different thesis. In his view, the Left needed to take notice of the fact that the Bangladeshi state which had emerged in 1971 was a weak state, a state which lacked consolidated strength. In his view, Bangladesh's revolutionaries needed to forge the iron when it was hot. This they could do, Taher argued, by not primarily relying on the building of rural forces, though armed squads in the form of the *Gana Bahini* needed to be formed outside the urban centres as well. No, the principal area of confrontation in Bangladesh should be the country's capital, where an armed rising was entirely feasible. Not the strategy of protracted people's war would bring liberation for the country's oppressed, but an insurrectionary military strategy. Taher—in meetings held regularly between us, to reflect on the country's conditions—could not openly express the fact that he prepared to stage insurrection in the form of a soldiers' rebellion. Yet his conviction that only an insurrectionary strategy would do was stated without hesitation. There simply was no need for a prolonged and bloody revolutionary war, since the road towards conquering state rule could be cut short.

I am recounting, re-summarising, the historic controversy over revolutionary strategy in order to underline the significance of Taher's experiment. As stated, at a time when the dominant view was that the state army should be combated from without, by forming guerrilla squads, Taher believed that instead the state army should be subverted from within, through agitation amongst the army's soldiers—agitating which should and which did lead to an explosion of soldiers' pent-up anger. Here, I may note in passing that a quarter century hence, even a section of Maoists have taken a more flexible view regarding the validity of protracted war. Thus, the party which has led the armed struggle for the abolition of the monarchy in Nepal, the CPN (Maoist), has admitted the possibility of a combined revolutionary strategy, one that includes both elements from the Chinese (*people's war*) and Russian (*insurrectionary*) experience. By staging a soldiers' insurrection, colonel Abu Taher propagated the vision, and demonstrated the potential, of an insurrectionary strategy. And although with hindsight it is easy to criticise him for some of the tactics employed in implementing the vision described, —it would be wrong to belittle the historical significance of Taher's revolutionary attempt.

IRELAND AND BENGAL

I now wish to draw a comparison between the soldiers' rebellion led by colonel Taher and another historical revolt which apparently failed, namely the Easter Rising in Ireland, staged in 1916. The comparison is for more than one reason valuable. To start, Ireland of course shares with Bangladesh a history of British colonial dominance. In fact, Britain's conquest over Ireland by long preceded the British

conquest over Bengal. Further, colonial rule in both cases deeply affected the social relations around, and the ownership over land. In Bengal, the *zamindari* system of feudal property relations, as we know, was founded in consequence of the Permanent Settlement, declared in the late 18th century. In Ireland, the British ruler Oliver Cromwell reportedly dispossessed every Catholic landowner in the middle of the 17th century, when a reported *eleven million* acres of land were confiscated and transferred to British ownership. Moreover Britain's contempt of the peasantry in both cases resulted in terrible famines. The long series of famines which accompanied British rule over Bengal is all too familiar, a series which culminated in the 1943 horrifying famine claiming 3 million lives. Ireland lived its most agonising crisis a century earlier, in 1846, when the cultivation of potato crop—the peasants' main staple food—failed for the second year in a row. Historical research on the 1943 Bengal famine has solidly established that it was mainly caused by Britain's war policies pursued during World War Two, —policies such as the withdrawal of food resources, feeding the soldiers at the population's expense, and the financial drain of colonial India. In the case of Ireland, it was Nature that played havoc over Ireland's agriculture. Yet Britain was equally to blame, for in the face of a looming crisis the British rulers refused to act. They stuck to free market thinking, *laissez faire*, and thus 'caused Ireland to starve'.

I have summarized these shared characteristics between Bengal's and Ireland's history in order to underline how much the two countries have in common, even if we abstract from their parallel histories of militant people's resistance. Yet differences there are, for instance in the forms of nationalism that were embraced by the Bengali and the Irish people, when struggling to overthrow British colonialism. In comparison with Bengali nationalism, the profile of Irish nationalism seems strangely *pre-modern*. Whereas Bengali nationalism matured after Partition, during Pakistani rule, as an outgrowth of the movement for recognition of Bengali language—Irish nationalism was not based on an indigenous language. For all sincere attempts to revive Gaelic in the later colonial period notwithstanding—by the time Irish nationalism reached its maturity, English language had triumphed over Gaelic. Again, whereas the Bengali nationalism that succeeded in bringing people together in a common cause was explicitly secular in character, championing religious tolerance, —Irish nationalism in contrast was a religion-based nationalism. Here, Catholicism functioned as the common cultural denominator, unifying the Irish in opposition against the British rulers and their Protestant faith.

The above discourse on Irish history may sound like a diversion from today's topic, yet it is very helpful towards understanding the significance of Irish history for an evaluation of the soldiers' uprising led by colonel Abu Taher. Ireland has seen a failed armed uprising, and in this sense closely shares Bangladesh's historical experience. This experience is the abortive Easter Rising of 1916. The rising was no soldiers' insurrection, but like Bangladesh's rising it was an armed attempt to capture state power, which in Ireland was then in the hands of the British. The bold uprising was staged together by two armed resistance forces, including the Leftwing Irish Citizens Army under James Connolly's lead. On Easter morning, April 24, 1916, armed Irish fighters seized key public buildings in the centre of Dublin, Ireland's capital, and hoisted the Irish republican, tricolour flag. The rising was crushed by the British, and its leaders were mercilessly executed. Yet the martyrdom of these heroes gave rise to a new wave of Irish nationalism, and helped pave the way for Ireland's war of independence, forcing the British to relinquish rule five years later (in 1921). What is specially noteworthy is the striking parallel between Taher's personal martyrdom, and the martyrdom of James Connolly, the Marxist thinker who had been a key commander of the Easter Rising. Connolly was arrested while wounded, with a leg shattered. As one of his biographers says, it was expected that he would not be killed, since one does not execute a wounded man. Yet Connolly, like Taher, had to die a martyr's death, because the oppressors saw him as too dangerous to let him live. Like Connolly, colonel Taher was leader of a 'pre-figurative' rising, like him Taher was a model of courage, a man who in spite of his physical handicap was too threatening to the oppressors' state to be allowed to live.

TAHER'S LEGACY AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

In conclusion I would like to state a few words about Colonel Taher's contemporary significance, the significance of his ideas towards the struggles for social liberation in Bangladesh today. Speaking with hindsight, or with distance from the moment of the events, it is perhaps not difficult to pinpoint some of the limitations of the 1975 soldiers' uprising. The soldiers, when moving through the streets of Dhaka on trucks, were surely welcomed by the public, offered flowers as liberators from the threat of 'restoration'. They were seen as heroes preventing the return of oppressive bourgeois rule. Some attempts were apparently made to mobilise workers in support of the insurrectionists. Thus, Haidar Akbar Khan Rono in his autobiography mentions that industrial workers were brought to Dhaka from Tungi – then a key centre of power of Bangladesh's industrial working class – to demonstrate their support to the uprising. Yet the very weakest aspect of the 1975 uprising was the fact that the gap between different sections of the oppressed was not bridged. The peasants-in-arms, the soldiers, were not supported by a rising of the peasantry who at the time constituted the overwhelming majority of Bangladesh's population. Nor were industrial wage labourers informed or alerted in time to join Taher's revolutionary attempt.

Nevertheless, the 1975 soldiers' insurrection was—to speak in line with Lenin's view of the Irish Easter rebellion—*a great popular revolt*. India had seen its first soldiers' uprising, in 1857, —an uprising which had completely shaken, destabilised British colonial rule. The uprising had had a limited, but significant impact on the colonial army units that were stationed in Bengal, and it surely contributed to the rise of nationalist temper amongst the colonised, both in British India at large, and in the province of Bengal. Again, the anti-colonial resistance which reached its climax in the period immediately after World War Two had its reverberations in the colonial army. History books have recorded the naval revolt of 1946, which illustrated that Britain's colonial dominance over the subcontinent was untenable. Still, the idea of a soldiers' uprising, when proposed by colonel Abu Taher, was beyond the imagination of most sections of the Left in Bangladesh. Taher brought out the possibility of subverting bourgeois rule from within the state apparatus. His primary lesson thus has to be upheld. We need a second version of the 1975 revolt, in order to achieve the social liberation of Bangladesh's oppressed.

A second version, however, will inevitably need to take account of the evolution of Bangladesh's society since then. This, primarily, means that we need to take stock of the larger presence of wage-labourers in Dhaka city. Along with the huge influx of uprooted peasants from the countryside over the last thirty years, the number of industrial workers and informal sector workers has enormously grown in the capital. Today, as well known, there are literally hundreds of thousands of readymade garment workers present in Dhaka and its surrounding areas who have an 'industrial' experience, as labourers in readymade garment factories. In 2006 – thirty-one years after the soldiers' revolt led by Abu Taher – they staged their first insurrectionary attempt. Since then, the sector has repeatedly been shaken by renewed upheavals, such as in June 2010, when militant struggles erupted in the Ashulia industrial area near Dhaka, and in Gazipur. Bangladesh's economy has undergone a dramatic transformation since the days of Colonel Taher's revolutionary attempt. So has civil society, the sphere of society where a counter-hegemony of socialist ideas needs being built. Yet as the country's workers and other sections of the oppressed resume their long struggle for liberation, they are bound to recall the one moment since independence, when bourgeois rule was thoroughly shaken – the days of the soldiers' insurrection led by the martyred Colonel Abu Taher.

POSTSCRIPT

Colonel Abu Taher died a martyr's death on July the 21st, 1976, when he was executed by hanging in Dhaka Central jail. The trial against him and other leading participants in the November 1975 rising was a farcical trial, and the execution was planned at the instruction of the country's then military dictatorship led by Ziaur Rahman. The farcical nature of the trial has belatedly been exposed by Bangladesh's High Court which in March of 2011, after a full re-hearing on the case, declared that the 1976 trial had been illegal and unconstitutional. The Court therefore set the trial aside as fictitious, and ruled that Colonel Taher henceforth will be treated as martyr and patriot. The unconstitutional nature of

the trial followed from the fact that it had been instituted under martial law which itself had been contrary to the country's constitution. Yet the High Court also noted numerous other irregularities, including the fact that the accused were not even told about the charges they were to face, the fact that they lacked access to lawyers and that they were barred from appealing against the then verdict. Undoubtedly, the High Court's 2011 verdict in the Taher case holds tremendously large significance. It not only is crucial in primary terms, i.e. in terms of justice to and rehabilitation of Colonel Taher and his associates. It also holds great positive significance for the cause of democracy, and for the emancipation of Bangladesh's oppressed. □□□

References:

- Ratan Lal Chakraborti, *Shipahijuddho O Bangladesh* (Bangla Academy, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1984);
Peter Custers, *Women in the Tebhaga Uprising. Rural Poor Women and Revolutionary Leadership (1946-47)* (Naya Prakash, Calcutta, India, 1987);
Abu Yusuf Khan, 'Deadline 7 November, 1975' (*Bhorer Kagaz*, Dhaka, Bangladesh, November 7,9,10,11,12, 1994);
Haidar Akbar Khan Rono, *Satabdi Periye* (Tarafdar Prakashani, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2005);
Richard Killeen, *A Short History of Ireland* (Gill & Macmillan, Ltd, Dublin, Ireland, 2005);
Lawrence Lifschultz, *Bangladesh : the Unfinished Revolution* (Zed Books, London, United Kingdom, 1979);
Karl Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy. Volume I* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, USSR, 1977);
Liam de Paor (ed.), *Milestones in Irish History* (Mercier Press, Dublin, Ireland, 1998);
Altaf Parvez, *Ashamapta Muktijuddho, Cornel Taher O Jashod Rajniti* (Pathak Shomabesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1995);
Bernard Ransom, *Connolly's Marxism* (Pluto Press, London, United Kingdom 1980);
Suprakash Ray, '1857 Khristabder Mahabidroh O Bongodesh' (in: *Baharater Krishok Bidroh O Ganatantrik Sangram* - Book World, Kolkata, 1990, p.342-469);
Suprakash Ray, *Bidrohi Bharat* (Book World, Kolkata, India, November, 1983).