

10 avril 2023, *The Daily Star*, Dhaka

Honouring André Malraux's Legacy - Mahmud Shah Qureshi , *The Daily Star*, April 10, 2023

Honouring André Malraux's Legacy - A Look Back at His Visit to Bangladesh



During the middle of the past century, two Frenchmen were known and admired around the world. They were General de Gaulle and André Malraux.

Malraux became a celebrity in the 1930s as a writer, adventurer, and orientalist. He was also a freedom fighter who fought for the liberation of Spain and France and advocated for most non-self-governing territories. We, the students in France during the 1960s, had great admiration for him.

In 1971, the first diplomatic mission for Arab countries was formed with Mollah Jalal, an MNA, and me. But before leaving Delhi, I had the chance to suggest several Frenchmen's names for the Bangladesh conference, including his name. However, in September, Malraux made a declaration that he would not join the conference.

It was in April 1973 that André Malraux (1901-1976), France's most legendary living figure in the domain of arts and letters, politics, and philosophy, came to Bangladesh for a short visit. Since his early youth, Malraux traveled around the four corners of the world, but the four days he spent here just 50 years ago were indeed an extraordinarily memorable voyage for him as well as for the country he visited. Why? Because he responded to the hearty invitation of people who had just founded the country which did not 'exist before' but in whose existence Malraux trusted miraculously. As a matter of fact, he wanted to fight for this country with a fragile body at the age of 70. He could not forget that he had earlier fought for Spain and France and remained all along a vigilant witness of decolonization. Once he wrote, "Nothing is more important, in the history of the world, than to be on the side of the people who had been capable of saying 'No'." The people of Bangladesh dared to say 'No' to the oppressors and usurpers of their sovereignty. But for this, they had to pay too much in the form of misery, and death.

On 18th September 1971, Malraux made a declaration to the media that instantly became a world event. He said that he would not participate in the conference called to support Bangladesh in Delhi. Rather, he would come to fight in a company of tanks as he had some experience in it, provided the governments of Bangladesh and India permit him. He also wrote a letter to the American President: "When the most powerful army of the world could not destroy the barefooted people of Vietnam, then how do you think that from a distance of twelve hundred miles, the army of Islamabad could get back a country desperate to achieve its independence?" (Le Figaro. 17th Dec. 1971) By mid-December, the fate of the war was decided in favour of Bangladesh. Even before things got totally settled, the intellectuals of the newly born nation wanted to greet this distant friend, and Malraux received an invitation from Prime Minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

On 21st April, Malraux, accompanied by Madame Sophie de Vilmorin, his last companion, Mr. Garofalo, photographer of the Paris-Match and two journalists of the French television, alighted at the old airport of Tejgaon. Foreign Minister Dr. Kamal Hossain with Mr. Arshad Uzzaman, the chief of protocol on the one hand and two renowned members of Bangladesh intelligentsia, Begum Sufia Kamal, poet and social worker, and Prof. Syed Ali Ahsan, Vice-Chancellor of Jahangirnagar University, waited on him. Indira Gandhi appeared alongside André Malraux at a press conference held at the Embassy of India in Paris in the Autumn of 1971.

After a colourful reception while he advanced amidst the lined-up school children who cried 'Vive Malraux' in lieu of the usual words of slogans 'Joy' or 'Zindabad'. Malraux lifted a boy from the ground and said, "As I cannot embrace everyone, so by doing this on this lone face, I wish to kiss Bangladesh". Instantly, he was taken to the Presidential Palace, where he was to stay during his visit and to meet the Prime Minister, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. When asked what he might expect from Monsieur Malraux, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman replied: "All that I want is the love, the affection and the respect that one should offer to my people. Have not you seen my beautiful people, my magnificent country, and my green fields?"

After the brief meeting, Malraux was brought to the Dhaka University campus, where he had an exclusive meeting with the Deans and senior teachers. Dr. Abdul Matin Chowdhury, the Vice Chancellor, offered him tea with 'pioneer'-the Bengali cheese, which he seemed to have relished but did not forget to tell his host that there are 236 varieties of cheese in his country. Then, on arrival at the Teacher-Students' Center, he was offered by the Vice Chancellor a silver boat, a symbol of the riverside of Bangladesh, as a token of love. Malraux made a very emotional speech while addressing the students: "For the first time, I speak in this University where there are more dead than living. Students of France know that your teachers and your friends embraced death for liberty, and they know that nowhere else ever before, students and teachers paid such a heavy price for liberty. They also know that among so many of the students who fought, there is one place where the students would rightfully tell those who would come later: 'We have fought with our bare hands' ... Your dead have rendezvous with the fate of Bangladesh, but now it is up to you to make the nation."

Then after the official luncheon offered by the Prime Minister, Malraux was taken to visit the National Mausoleum at Savar. He placed a wreath while the army bugle was being played. Suddenly there was a brief but torrential rain, and the former freedom fighter entered the hospital for war victims. As everyone there knew who the visitor was, he was profusely garlanded, but Malraux took a garland from his neck and put it on a young man who had lost one hand and one leg. He also visited the monument for the martyrs of the 21st February Language Movement and placed a wreath there. In the evening, there was a grand reception for him at the Alliance Francaise de Dacca. Malraux made a speech by highlighting the nobility of French culture that showed the world courage, justice, and thought for action.

At 7:30 P.M., a sumptuous dinner was offered by the President of Bangladesh, in which artists, intellectuals, and political personalities took part. No formal speech was delivered in the course of the discussion. Malraux opined that he knew that Bengali literature had a rich tradition, but he had only read Tagore. About Kazi Nazrul Islam, the National Poet of Bangladesh, he could learn while traveling from Delhi to Dhaka and was attracted by his personality. An interesting cultural show was presented to end up the first day's programs.

On September 19, 1971, Paris Jour featured a declaration made by Malraux, in which he conveyed his intention to participate in the Bangladesh Liberation War.

The following day was also a very special day as André Malraux was going to be awarded a doctorate Honoris Causa in a special Convocation at the University of Rajshahi. After two salutatory addresses by Vice-Chancellor Dr. Khan Sarwar Morshed and Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, the President of Bangladesh, André Malraux accepted the honor with a passionate speech.

Following the famous inscription of antiquity to honor them, Malraux advised, "On any of the graveyards of your freedom fighters, in the ditches filled with the dead bodies of your intellectuals, write in large letters: You, who shall pass later on, go tell all of ours that those who fell here were dead because during the nine months of suffering they accepted to fight with bare hands. Salute the dead of the surrounding forest! You have shown the world that one can never assassinate enough to kill the soul of a person who would not surrender.

"On the roads of the Orient, there are tombs of French knights; on all the roads of the Occident, there are tombs of the soldiers of WWII... And on your tombs, there are perhaps memories of the words of justice and of liberty with which the generals of the Revolution had set Europe on fire. Your culture holds to you in one lone and big word: Spirituality. Your liberation has attempted to unite the language of eternal Bengal with that of our Revolution."

After lunch at the Vice-Chancellor's residence, Malraux visited Varendra Research Museum in the town, three miles away from the campus. This was an extraordinary scene as he seemed to be in his own world with all the statues and the icons around, and he started a very elaborate explanation of the significance of their existence to Madame Sophie de Vilmorin in particular.

Returning to Dhaka, a quiet lunch with the President and his family took place at Bangabhaban. Justice Chowdhury and Malraux discussed the problems of family planning, as well as of China. In the afternoon, he visited the National Museum at Neemtoli (the old site) and then came to the Art College (now the Institute of Fine Arts of the University of Dhaka), where he discussed with the students and teachers. There was also an exhibition of paintings which he watched with care. Then he joined a small cocktail party in the hotel suite of the French Ambassador to celebrate the Easter festival. A sumptuous dinner followed by a musical soiree was arranged at the Foreign Minister's residence. Malraux seemed to have liked the Bengali songs with revolutionary themes and rhythm. He even asked to repeat a song twice.

The third day's visit was at Chittagong, where a festive reception was accorded at the airport. Then Malraux was taken to see the dilapidated war-torn port. A grand civic reception was held at the Chittagong Club. He was presented with an old manuscript, considered the most precious gift to be offered. His speech was very much appreciated, but it was the same as that of Rajshahi, with two excerpts, one in the beginning and one in the conclusion, where he lauded the role of Chittagong for her special contribution to the war of liberation. He reminded that an extraordinary effort of the people was needed to reconstruct the country, in which he would initiate the program of aid as an advisor to the Government of France.

As the ceremony was over, a grand lunch was awaited in the house of Mr. A. K. Khan, industrialist and a former minister. It was indeed an international festival there. Malraux enjoyed it very much and had an exchange of ideas with many. He also made his admirers happy by giving autographs according to their demand, and as per the advice of the ambassador of France, he had an exclusive discussion session on the economic situation of Bangladesh with his host for fifty minutes, along with the present writer as interpreter.

There were two more programs for the afternoon. A quick visit to the Alliance Française de Chittagong. There he liked the 'dab' (green coconut) water with ice cubes on a silver plate. Mr. Juned Chowdhury offered him a copy of the Etude sur l'évolution intellectuelle chez les musulmans du Bengale 1857-1947, which was written by his interpreter (Mahmud Shah Qureshi) who was also the President of Alliance in those years.

Malraux also had a look at the painting exhibition of the teachers and students of the University of Chittagong there. Then he rushed to inaugurate Chittagong Art Gallery and Folk Museum at Mehdibag, where another exhibition was installed. He was offered a painting of Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin, which he accepted with great admiration and respect. In a short speech, Malraux called upon the artists to draw scenes of the local culture on their canvas. He

was also moved by the gift of a painting from young Nayak, son of artist Sabih-ul Alam. André Malraux in Dhaka, 1973.

Then by helicopter, he was flown to Kaptai, where the houseboat of M.A.K. Khan was ready to show him the beauty of the lake in the middle of Chittagong Hill Tracts. Madame Sophie de Vilmorin, his companion, enjoyed it to the fullest, as she described vividly in her book 'Aimer Encore'. There was another surprise from a few sampan-loaded people who cried "Vive Malraux" (Long live Malraux). The present writer got some exclusive minutes from one of the most famous intellectuals in the world to answer his questions. In the Kaptai Guest House, Malraux left his suit and his tie. He wore a red shirt and enjoyed his dinner with Ruhi fish of the lake.

The next morning he reached Dhaka and faced a very energetic press conference. He insisted on more foreign help for Bangladesh as the actual loss of the country was unaccountable. He also lauded the role of the freedom fighters in liberating the country.

Before leaving Dhaka on a plane at 12.25 pm, he met the President and the Prime Minister. But he also got time to write his best wishes in two books as a gift to his interpreters. From Paris, he wrote an extraordinary letter on May 8, 1973 to this author.

"My dear Professor,

On return to Paris (with the book which you have so kindly presented me), I wish to tell you about the friendly memory that I conserve to our collaboration. You have helped me much, and without you, my relationship with my listeners in Chittagong would not have been what it was. The intelligence, the rapidity, and the tonality of your translations established a communication and sometimes a communion for which I am grateful to you. Let us hope that we can now put into realizing what we have undertaken for your country, which has become a little mine, and trust, my dear professor, to my sympathetic memory."

Here is not the end of the story. Shortly after his return to Paris, he appeared before the court to save the young man who wanted to hijack a plane for sending medicine to Bangladesh. I also met him after four months in his residence. He told me that he had done what he promised. He talked to the Education Minister of France not to disturb the teaching of Bengali as it was apprehended and to the Chinese Ambassador in favour of the recognition of Bangladesh to be a member of the United Nations. And needless to say that France would continue to help Bangladesh in a massive way, at least as was expected by the optimist humanist André Malraux.

Dr Mahmud Shah Qureshi is an eminent Bangladeshi scholar. He has been honoured with numerous accolades, including Ekushey Padak and France's Légion d'honneur.

Article : The Daily Star, April 10, 2023

<https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/focus/news/honouring-andre-malrauxs-legacy-3293296>

Dernière modification : 11/04/2023