

Bangabandhu, the 1947 Partition and Healing its Wounds

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In the intellectual evolution of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 played a decisive role. We can deduce this clearly from his prison book, *Oshompto Atojeeboni*, which I have translated into English as *The Unfinished Memoirs* (2012). In it, we view the young Mujib in 1937 taking his first major political move when he became the General Secretary of the Muslim Welfare Association in Gopalgunj, which was then in Faridpur district. A year later, he met two leading stalwarts of Bengali Muslim politics of that period, A. K. M. Fazlul Haq, and Hussein Shaheed Suhrawardy. Obviously excited at the prospect of meeting “the two leading leaders of the [Bengali] Muslim community” (10) coming to his part of the world, he even formed “a volunteer brigade with the help of the Muslim boys” (10) to receive them.

It was a time of communal tension though; local Hindus and Muslims were increasingly suspicious of each other then. Clearly, the young Mujib apprehends growing and unbridgeable divisions between the two communities. He also senses a growing rift between the two Bengali Muslim leaders where he would have to eventually take the side of Suhrawardy.

In *The Unfinished Memoirs* we find Mujib involved in a mission to rescue a class friend called Malek who had been abducted by a local Hindu Mahasabha leader. He was soon in the thick of the confrontation that ensues. As a consequence, he was taken to a police station and had to spend a week in a sub-jail. However, he was released soon after when Hindu and Muslim leaders of the locality decided to drop charges against those who had skirmished, having opted to settle the matter amicably. But this was Mujib's first of many such jail experiences, as anyone who has read *The Unfinished Memoirs* and *Karagarer Rojnamcha* or *Prison Diaries* (2017) knows. Mujib became even more motivated after it, or perhaps because of it, to involve himself in Muslim League politics. At this stage of his life, he believed in the necessity of creating Pakistan, for “without it Muslims had no future in our part of the world” (14-15).



Muslims, who considered by this time that the partition of Bengal was a necessary evil. Mujib and others like him felt that “of the Hindu leaders, only Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das and Netaji Subhas Bose in their politics as well as Rabindranath Tagore through his writings” understood the way East Bengali Muslims had been made to suffer because of “Hindu landlords and moneylenders” (24). Nevertheless, he is quite conscious even at this stage of his career that Muslim landlords were often culpable in this regard, albeit exclusively for financial reasons. And thus it was that under Suhrawardy's leadership we find the young Mujib campaigning in the pre-partition years throughout East Bengal

the trauma of the partition riots that he, like many others of his generation, bore within them. He felt some healing when his guru, Mr. Suhrawardy, began working with Gandhi to alleviate the suffering of ordinary people and remove tension between the two communities. Mujib records in *The Unfinished Memoirs* his own experience of the kind of curative power Gandhi had. At a Kolkata meeting, for example, he heard someone read out what Gandhi had written—“Muslims and Hindus are brothers” (86); simple words, he notes in his prison book, that transformed the tense atmosphere of the meeting decisively at that time.

But the partitioning of the subcontinent was an irreversible process. After Radcliffe had done his scissor work and divided it into two countries, Mujib resumed studies at the University of Dhaka. Here too, he became involved in student politics and even took up the cause of the lower ranking employees of the institution. At every juncture, he could see that the lot of ordinary East Bengali Muslims was not going to change drastically in a country that had—at least on paper—become totally their own.

On the one hand, the Muslim landlords of East Bengal who had been mostly exploitative and indifferent to the plight of lower class people everywhere in the region seemed to have joined the rulers of the western wing led by Jinnah to pursue policies to subjugate East Pakistanis. On the other, it was clear that actual power had been transferred to West Pakistan. Mujib felt that he could no longer be part of such politics. He had become convinced that he had not become part of the movement for Pakistan on behalf of his people to see it being ruled by remote control, as it were, and find it not a democracy but a kind of feudocracy, where the Pakistani upper class lorded it over ordinary Bengalis with the help of the feudal politicians of East Pakistan.

Mujib's response was to join other like-minded young people to form the East Pakistan Muslim Students' League. The response it evoked was very positive. And once the news came that the Pakistan Constituent Assembly meet in Karachi was talking about making Urdu the only state language of Pakistan, the response from these Bengali youths was overwhelmingly negative against the impending action. Mujib's activism, this time for the cause of Bengali, once again landed him in jail, but ironically now he was going to spend time there for a country he had striven for. Out of it soon, he resumed his campaign for his mother tongue with an ever-growing band of East Pakistani students. And why wouldn't their numbers increase? As Mujib puts it in *The Unfinished Memoirs*, “Every race loves its mother tongue. No nation has tolerated any attempt to insult its mother tongue” (104).

It was everywhere apparent in the province that whatever reversal had occurred in the secular side of Bengali Muslims of the region because of the partition of 1947 was now going to be reversed again. It would become apparent as well that Mujib would be taking a lead role in the breakup of Pakistan that would occur in the third partition of the region in 1971.

First the language movement, then the Six Point Movement of the sixties, and subsequently the events leading up to March 26, 1971, and finally in the succeeding 10 months, history would be reversed yet again so that the consequences of 1947 would be to a large extent undone. Bangladesh would be born in 16 December 1971 as a secular country, although one holding on to its Muslim identity since the vast number of its people were devout Muslims.

But what is also interesting is how in the Pakistan he had fought for politically, the divisions between Hindus and Muslims seem to have disappeared for him. Mujib reports approvingly in *The Unfinished Memoirs* that when the Pakistan Constituent Assembly met in Karachi in February 1948 and discussed the issue of making Urdu the “national language” and most Muslim League members from the eastern wing were inclined to support this move, it was Babu Dharendra Nath Dutt, member of the Congress Party of Cumilla at that time, who “demanded that Bengali should be chosen since the majority of the population spoke the language” (97). It is obvious at this point that Mujib supported this stance and was thus not willing to lean solely on the ideology that created Pakistan anymore. What he was beginning to believe was what was increasingly at stake was the survival of Bengali identity in Pakistan because of the threat to the Bengali language.

Mujib describes in his *Unfinished Memoirs* how in 1950 he had shared a room in Gopalgunj jail with two other political prisoners—Gopalgunj's Babu Chandra Ghosh of the Forward Bloc party, and Madaripur's Phani Majumdar, who was already active in the Awami Muslim League. The Pakistani government apparently had put them together in one cell since it believed they were all basically leftists as far as their ideological stripe was concerned. But what is particularly relevant for us here is Mujib's admiration for Ghosh, a leader who seemed to have imbibed Mahatma Gandhi ideology of non-violence and heroic passive resistance. Mujib points out how before being imprisoned he had tried to convince government officials not to punish men like Ghosh, for not only “society as a whole would benefit from such a selfless person” but also because “these people could be utilized to build the country now that it had become independent” (187).

Mujib goes on in this part of *The Unfinished Memoirs* to stress how he was no longer going to pay heed to any talk that tried to create a split between Bengali Muslims and the Bengali Hindus who had stayed back and terms such talk “nonsensical” (187).

Undoubtedly, Mujib had imbibed Gandhi's ideology of non-violence as well as passive resistance in this phase of his career fully. Undoubtedly, too, he was embracing secular values in this phase and was moving away from the kind of partition politics of an earlier phase where as a Muslim Bengali he was wary of Hindu domineering people. The Bangladesh Mujib now envisioned would be a secular space and one that had overcome the divisiveness between Bengali Hindus and Muslims created by partition.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had begun as a leader of Bangladeshis in a community where Hindu-Muslim tensions were palpable. He had worked for the partition of India zealously; however, in independent Pakistan he was no longer going to hold on to any view that would divide Bengali Muslims and Hindus anymore. This is clear in the section of *The Unfinished Memoirs* where he is describing his 10 day visit to “New China” in 1952 as a member of the Pakistan Peace delegation and in *Amar Dekha*

Noia Chin or “The New China that I Saw,” published in its original Bengali version in early February this year. In these works we have a number of references that suggest that Mujib's characteristic warmth is everywhere on display whenever he talks about, or to any, or all the members of the Indian delegation, whether Bengali, Hindu or Muslim, or whatever else their religious beliefs were. He is obviously delighted that the Indian and Pakistani delegates were mixing readily, freely and enthusiastically. He makes particular mention of the warmth of his encounter with the novelist Manoj Basu.

That the border should no longer keep people from mixing freely and spontaneously with each other because of differences stemming from religion and that the wounds created by it should be healed fully were Bangabandhu's beliefs from now on. He puts the matter, in fact, from a perspective that is truly international. It is with a quote from *The Unfinished Memoirs* testifying to that I would like to end this paper on Bangabandhu and the partition of Bengal with. What he suggests at one point of the visit to China is people from newly liberated countries like India and Pakistan had an obligation to come together for world peace. To quote him, “It was vital to build public opinion in favor of world peace” (237) and everyone everywhere, irrespective of religion or nationality, should do their part to achieve this goal. Surely, it is a goal that we all must adhere to at this time of the subcontinent's history as well!

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In Kolkata for higher studies afterwards, he continued to be active in Muslim League politics and the movement gaining momentum throughout East Bengal that would be leading Bengali Muslims of East Bengal towards Pakistan. Here he came under Suhrawardy's influence fully and moved away from A. K. M. Fazlul Haq's position since he had entered into a coalition with Shyama Prasad Mookerjee. Like many Muslims of East Bengal, Mujib was beginning to feel that partition was the only goal to be pursued by them, and that Suhrawardy was taking them in the right direction and not Haq. As an active supporter of the cause, he began speaking in meetings where he “concentrated on explaining to everyone why it was important” for Bengali Muslims “to fight for Pakistan” (23).

The Unfinished Memoirs thus reveals that the young Mujib in his Faridpur and Kolkata phase, like his father and innumerable other quite educated and reasonably well-off East Bengali

as well as Kolkata. He would even take a very active role in the pre-referendum weeks in Sylhet to persuade Sylhetis that their future was in Pakistan.

But Mujib witnessed partition's horrors in the streets of Kolkata firsthand in the pre-partition rioting that ensued. He was appalled by the violence and at the sight of Hindu and Muslim gangs battling in the streets and attacking vulnerable people with lethal weapons. Mujib even took up arms to patrol a Muslim neighborhood for a while. He got reports too of terrible riots elsewhere: first in Noakhali where Muslims “had started looting Hindu homes and torching them” (72), and then in Bihar “where Bihari Muslims were being destroyed” (73). He volunteered to be part of a relief mission to help those affected and driven to camps in Bihar. By the time he came back to Kolkata, he was literally sick as well as sickened by what he had experienced in the last few months.

Mujib began to recover slowly from