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Ariful–alive to reveal his ordeal

What if he didn’t make bail?

IT is a frightening thought that had Ariful Islam, the Kurigram correspondent of Bangla Tribune, not been granted bail, we may not have known the terrifying ordeal of a citizen being picked up, mercilessly tortured and even threatened with “crossfire”. It is because many individuals have been similarly picked up only to end up as bodies, either during “shootouts” or after “falling ill” while in custody. Thankfully, Ariful is alive to tell the tale of arbitrary arrest and torture.

According to news reports, Senior Assistant Commissioner Nazim Uddin of Kurigram, along with police and Ansar men, and two magistrates, broke into Ariful’s home, beat him up, blindfolded him and then dragged him into a vehicle. A mobile court then sentenced him to one year in prison on charges of possessing drugs. It has been alleged that Ariful was framed because of his reports on the alleged corruption of Kurigram’s DC.

It is reassuring to note that the High Court has taken some decisive steps after a writ petition was filed by the executive editor of the paper Ariful worked for. The HC has asked for the reason behind Ariful’s sentencing of one year in jail as well as the copy of the verdict, and challenged the legality of Ariful’s arrest and conviction. It has also asked the government whether rules about entering someone’s home at midnight was followed and whether it was necessary for the involvement of 30 to 40 people.

The details of Ariful’s arrest and the way he was tortured and threatened with death from crossfire gives a picture of how upholders of the law can become the biggest abusers of the law. The incident occurred after Ariful had written a report on how Kurigram DC Sultana Pervin had re-excavated and renovated a pond with government funds and individual donations and named the pond after herself. Ariful’s colleagues and family believe that this invited the wrath of the DC. The way he was picked up and tortured makes it difficult not to believe this allegation. Nazim Uddin, moreover, is notorious for torturing people—there is video footage of him torturing an elderly man.

So what are we to deduce from this terrifying incident? That anyone, anywhere, can be picked up in the middle of the night, be blindfolded and then beaten and left to rot in jail without due process? That it is very easy to incriminate a person on false charges? That a person may come out of such a situation alive only when he has some influence or if his case is widely publicised on social media?

The DC has been withdrawn from her post. We fervently hope that the authorities will be able to answer the questions asked by the HC and seriously take steps to address the human rights violations that take place when a person is picked up by members of law enforcement and taken away. The culture of arbitrary arrest, torture and death in custody of people who are denied due process of the law must stop.

Panic killed a young woman in DMCH

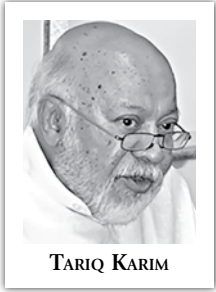
Raises questions about our preparedness for a coronavirus outbreak

WORDS are not enough to express our shock at the tragedy that took place at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) on March 14, where a 24-year-old female patient died because of the negligence of doctors and staff, all of whom fled the ward she was admitted to, suspecting her as a COVID-19 patient. The young woman, an undergraduate student at a university in Canada, returned to Dhaka last week and was admitted to DMCH with gastrointestinal complications. According to our report, the doctors and staff refused to approach the patient when they learnt that she was a Canada-returnee, since DMCH was not equipped to test patients for coronavirus and the medical staff did not have protective suits.

The incident again brings to light the fact that we—the government, medical staff, as well as people in general—are far from being prepared to deal with a possible coronavirus outbreak. It is simply not understandable why the DMCH, being the best public hospital in the country, does not have the protective gear ready, including masks and gloves, since they have to deal with various types of infectious diseases every day. Also, when the whole country is in panic about COVID-19—given the fact that a large number of Bangladeshis living in countries affected by the virus returned recently and that there are now some confirmed coronavirus cases here—how judicious is it on the part of the government to let only the Institute of Epidemiology Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) test people with signs and symptoms of the virus? Although the young woman was tested negative for coronavirus, it took a long time to get her tested because the doctors at DMCH had to first call the IEDCR officials to come and collect her blood and other samples. By the time the test result reached DMCH, it was too late.

We have some lessons to learn from this case. One, all the public and private hospitals must be prepared and have the basic protective gear to deal with an infectious disease like COVID-19. Despite the directives given by the Directorate General of Health Services to all hospitals in this regard, our hospitals do not seem to be prepared at all. Also, the government should reconsider its decision about giving the sole authority to test the disease to the IEDCR. If the DMCH had the necessary testing kits, they could have tested the young woman earlier which might have avoided the panic that led to her being left unattended. At the same time, the government should prepare specific hospitals to treat coronavirus patients without further delay. Panic might kill more people; only proper precautions can save us.

Bangabandhu and his timeless exhortations to the nation



TARIQ KARIM

ONE cannot conceive of India emerging as an independent, modern nation-state without the leadership of Gandhi, who was “Bapu” to the Indian masses; or of South

Africa wrestling independence from a brutalising apartheid regime without the leadership of Nelson Mandela (or “Madiba” to his adoring people). Neither can one imagine the birth of Bangladesh without Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (endearingly called “Bangabandhu” by his people) and his towering and inspiring leadership that enabled us to triumph in our War of Liberation. All three nations were galvanised to seek independence by a combination, in varying degrees, of the potent mixture of cultural denigration, economic discrimination and deprivation, and political disenfranchisement inflicted upon them by their oppressive colonial or neo-colonial masters. While all of these elements had pre-existed in varying stages of gestation in each of the three countries for some time, and had been fulminating in varying stages of pre-explosion, each needed a leader of towering intellectual and moral stature and all-pervasive charisma to emerge at the right time, to provide the leadership required to give fruition to the raging socio-political process of national metamorphosis.

In Bangladesh, it was unquestionably Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s indomitable spirit, towering personality and larger-than-life charisma that transformed the Awami League party to provide the logical platform for espousing the national aspirations of the Bengalis of East Pakistan and lead the charge for final emancipation and independence. An extraordinary orator, unparalleled in our living memories, his impassioned speech on March 7, 1971 has been recognised by the UNESCO as an important part of world heritage, and rightly so—it was the inspirational spark for the birth of a nation. And so, unquestionably, Bangabandhu is truly and universally hailed as the “*Jatir Janak*” or “*Jatir Pita*”, the father of the nation that emerged as Bangladesh 49 years ago.

Today, as the nation celebrates his birth centenary, it would behoove us all, leaders and ordinary citizens alike, to revisit his speeches, reflect on his messages, counsel and exhortations, and seek inspiration to renew ourselves afresh. To my mind, after going through a number of Bangabandhu’s numerous speeches, his speech of March 7, 1971 and of January 11, 1975 leapt out from the past, larger than life.

On March 7, 1971, recapitulating the long history of perfidy and betrayal by

the oppressive military dictatorship and the cabal of self-serving West Pakistani politicians, and exposing their conspiracy in denying the people of Bangladesh their just rights and demands, he was putting the military dictatorship on notice: respect the results of the elections of 1970, or face the consequences. At the same time, quite aware of the imminent danger to him personally and to his closest associates, he was also fearlessly exhorting the Bengali people to be prepared to fight relentlessly to wrest their rights, with or without his direct leadership, with whatever they had, wherever they were situated. In that speech, the target of his wrath and outrage was external: the treacherous West Pakistani military junta. But in that rousing clarion call to his own people,

Westminster-form of parliamentary democracy, he had two weeks earlier on December 24, 1974, declared a state of emergency and assumed all powers as President of the republic. In that speech, he expressed a sense of gratification that his long-cherished dreams of an independent Bangladesh with its own military academy, to build up and train its army, had materialised after many decades of relentless struggle against successive West Pakistani-dominated totalitarian regimes. He revealed his deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty and a bursting pride that he had lived to witness, in his lifetime, the graduation of the first batch of cadet officers of this new national institution—something that he had not been sure he would have the good fortune to see. Congratulating

bureaucrats present he said, categorically: “Don’t blacken my face... don’t blacken the face of the nation... civil servants are not masters, they serve the people, don’t be oppressors.... No nation can grow without discipline.... Responsibility to oneself and the country is most important; without responsibility and discipline, no country has been able to achieve anything.” He urged all: his own countrymen, military officers and troops, and civilian bureaucrats, to fight against the scourge of corruption, cheating and oppressive administration. He had led the struggle against the Pakistani oppressors; he was now going to relentlessly lead the charge of this new struggle against these scourges. He exhorted: all must “learn to serve, be honest, be righteous, be disciplined, and stay on the right path”.

This repetitive and emphatic theme of discipline and responsibility takes us all back to the final words of his speech of March 7, when he was spurring his countrymen to embark on their struggle for liberation from the oppressive Pakistani military junta. The speech on January 11, 1975 completes the thematic circle. Then, the struggle was against the external enemy. Now, the struggle was against the internal enemy, within the nation itself. Nothing happens in a day—the struggle must be relentless, ceaseless, and ever continuing.

Those exhortations of the great man, our Bangabandhu, our “*Jatir Janak*”, asserted almost fifty years ago are perhaps even more relevant today, when wanton indiscipline and brazen impunity against all sorts of authority, at every conceivable level, seems to have become endemically, pervasively, deep-set and deep-rooted. We won our War of Liberation, yes. But have we progressed anywhere close to winning the war of self-emancipation? Have we imbibed anything, at all, of what we had been called upon to follow and do, by that great man, who we all mechanically, like soulless robots, hail as the nation’s father? We have wrested independence, we are all “*shadhin*”, but are we free? We all demand our rights, for this, for that, for everything. Have we developed any sense of responsibility at all, not just to ourselves (in the very selfish sense), but also to our fellow citizens? Do we at all realise, or even comprehend, that one’s individual needs, and rights, end where the parameters of one’s fellow citizens’ rights and needs commence?

Bangabandhu, in his final days, laid a very onerous responsibility on our collective shoulders. It should hang even more heavily on those who inherited and carry his mantle today. I cannot imagine Bangabandhu’s soul resting peacefully in his heavenly abode when he looks down upon our many transgressions, at multiple levels, all across the beloved “*Shonar Bangla*” that he gave his life for.

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Sheikh Mujibur Rahman speaks at a news conference in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 1972.

PHOTO: LAURENT/ASSOCIATED PRESS

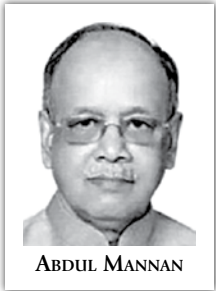
he also had a note of caution that a wise general would impart to his troops before launching them in battle: “The struggle this time is for emancipation! The struggle this time is for independence! Be disciplined. No nation’s movement can be victorious without discipline.”

On January 11, 1975, however, in his address at the passing out (graduation) ceremony at the Bangladesh Military Academy of the first batch of Bangladeshi army cadet officers recruited after the independence of the country in 1971, his message was first to his fledgling armed forces, then to the civil and military bureaucrats, and then indeed to the entire nation. This was also an impassioned speech that contained a lot of anguish and angst within it, deeply imbedded in his tone, tenor and choice of words. A committed, life-long votary of people’s rights and advocate of the

the cadets on successfully passing their rigorous training regime, he said: the end of training means the beginning of a new task (of nation-building), and a deep sense of responsibility to people and country. He asserted: “We are the owners of this land now, finally. Nothing (nation-building) can happen in a day.”

But then, the pent-up anguish within him burst out, spontaneously, palpably, emotionally. He recounted how he, over the three years since his return, had become increasingly distressed by the many signs of a malaise that he witnessed afflicting the new nation: of bribery, corruption, thievery and maladministration by the bureaucracy that all together, hurt the people. He lashed out against black markets, corruption and the shameless cheating that served to keep the ordinary man in deep poverty. Addressing directly the

SHEIKH MUJIB A natural born leader



ABDUL MANNAN

in Sonargaon near Dhaka, and another part settled in Gopalganj. Mujib was part of the seventh generation in the Sheikh family, the eldest son of Sheikh Lutfur Rahman and Saira Khatun.

From an early age, Mujib protested against anything which he thought was not right. In 1937, he was admitted into the Gopalganj Mission School. In this district, Muslims and Dalits were minorities and it was difficult for them to sit in the front row of any class. Young Mujib refused to take this easily. On the very first day of school, he sat in the front bench. Eyebrows were raised but Mujib remained defiant. The class teacher Girish Babu ignored the incident.

After passing high school, Sheikh Mujib was sent to Kolkata to study at the Islamia College (now Maulana Azad College) in 1942 and his days there shaped his political future, as he came into contact with politicians from both Muslim League and Congress. That was a time when Netaji Subhas Bose and Gandhi’s movement against the British rule in India was gaining momentum while the Second World War was destroying Europe. Just before Mujib arrived, Netaji Subhas Bose escaped India for Germany. Mujib’s early political life was influenced by politicians like Netaji, Gandhi, A K Fazlul Huq, Huseyn Suhrawardy, Sarat Chandra Bose and Abul Hashim.

In 1943, because of the flawed policy of the British Government, Bengal was ravaged by a devastating famine in which an estimated five million people starved to death. From his school days, Mujib was a good organiser, and he immediately organised relief teams to help the starving people of Kolkata and Gopalganj. During this time, Khajia Nazim Uddin of Muslim League was the Prime Minister (now called Chief Minister) of Bengal and Hussein Shaheed Suhrawardy was given the portfolio of Food Minister. Mujib’s humanitarian work brought him near to Suhrawardy, who later on became his political guru.

The famine of Bengal brought about a total change, particularly in the thoughts of the politicians of Bengal.

The political leaders of Muslim League, Congress and other minor parties were convinced that to improve the socio-economic conditions of the common people, the British must leave India and give India its much deserved independence.

There were a number of alternatives as to what would happen to India if and when the British leave. Would India be one country as perceived in the Cabinet Mission Plan of 1946? Mujib wrote in *The Unfinished Memoirs*: “According to it (the plan), defence, foreign office and the ministry of communications would stay with the central government while the remaining ministries would revert to the provinces. Later, however, the Congress reneged on its commitment to the plan. As a result, the Cabinet Mission plan had to be abandoned.” Under this plan, India would be a federal state and the division of India would be avoided. Gandhi even proposed that the first Prime Minister of India should be Jinnah. Nehru was not convinced. Mujib writes, “The British, it seemed to me, were eager to hand over power to Congress (the larger of the two parties) and leave India as soon as possible. But Muhammad Ali Jinnah knew the Congress and the British government well, and it wasn’t easy to deceive someone like him. Jinnah declared that August 16, 1946 would be the “Direct Action Day”—a day to demonstrate Muslim solidarity for a separate land for them. He issued a statement urging everyone to observe this day peacefully. He wanted to show the British government that ten crore Muslims of India were determined to achieve Pakistan at any cost. The Congress and Hindu Mahasabha leaders began to issue statements claiming that “Direct Action Day” was really directed against them.”

The Muslim League leaders tried their best to maintain calm on that day but unfortunately the people of both communities got involved in riots where thousands of innocent people lost their lives. Mujib and his young political workers tried their best to protect people from both communities, but the toll was quite heavy. The rioting lasted three days. This one single incident changed the political career of young Mujib, and to him, the division of India became inevitable.

On the stroke of midnight on August 14, 1947, India—the land that had remained united for time immemorial—fell victim to the unholy intentions of selfish politicians and the shrewd British, and was divided into India and Pakistan. That single event destroyed the peace and harmony of the region forever.

Young Mujib relocated himself from Kolkata to Dhaka and for a while remained active with the Muslim League. However, Jinnah’s visit to Dhaka in March 1948

changed his vision of politics for ever. Jinnah, the first Governor General of Pakistan, did not speak a word of Urdu but addressed a public rally in Ramna racecourse in English to say that Urdu—a language spoken by only 5 percent of the people of Pakistan (mostly migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar)—shall be the state language of Pakistan. This declaration was the first nail in the coffin of united Pakistan. The people, and later the students of the University of Dhaka, protested this irresponsible statement. Mujib, although he was a brilliant organiser, knew very well that such sporadic protests would not serve any purpose. To turn the protests into an organised movement, they needed an organisation, and the East Pakistan Muslim Student League was born in 1948. This was Mujib’s first step into politics, as a student leader. The following year, East Pakistan Awami Muslim League (later to be renamed as East Pakistan Awami League) was born, and Mujib played a key role in making this happen.

Mujib’s political career spread over 23 years of Pakistan and he had to spend 13 years of it in prison. Awami League was banned on a number of occasions by the military rulers of Pakistan. This was the only party which was considered a threat to the unity of Pakistan. Mujib faced death on two separate occasions, once during the Agartala Conspiracy Case and second during the Liberation War in 1971. It was only his courage and the people who loved him that stood in between. After his release from prison in 1969, preceded by a mass movement, he earned the title Bangabandhu—the Friend of Bengal. After his unprecedented victory in the general election of 1970, followed by the nine-month bloody War of Liberation, Mujib was crowned as the father of a new nation. Mujib lived only 52 years before he, along with his family members, were brutally murdered on the fateful night of August 15, 1975. During his lifetime, not only did he see the history and geography of this subcontinent change; he was part of it. He lived under three flags, the British at birth till Partition, Pakistan until 1971 and later on, he lived under the flag of Bangladesh, which he was instrumental in creating. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a true leader who had vision and could see the future. May his soul rest in peace and his memories live forever. History remembers only heroes, villains are forgotten. Joseph Campbell, an American Professor of Literature, wrote: “A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself.” No words could be truer than these when one assesses the contribution of Mujib to the history of this nation.

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