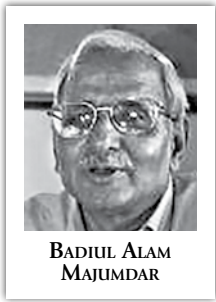


From Sheikh Mujib to Father of the Nation

Bangabandhu as I knew him



BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

IN 1964, I was enrolled as a student at the University of Dhaka (DU) and became active in student politics, although my involvement began during the education movement of the early 1960s. It is through this that I first got to know Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The 1969 movement was carried out from the then Iqbal Hall and I was the elected General Secretary of the Hall Union at the time, which gave me the opportunity to know many stalwarts of that movement, including then DU Central Student Union Vice President Tofail Ahmed, since we were elected from the same panel.

Sheikh Mujib, as a politician, began to distinguish himself from his peers from the early 1960s. He was then the General Secretary of East Pakistan Awami League and the disciple of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, the great proponent of liberal democracy. What distinguished Sheikh Mujib was that he was an ardent proponent of the “Bengali identity” of the people of East Pakistan. For that reason, he was hated by the political establishment of Pakistan.

There is no denying the fact that Pakistan was created on the basis of the “Muslim identity” of the Indian subcontinent. However, for various reasons, the attractiveness of that identity began to fade over time for our people, a milestone of which was the Language Movement. Sheikh Mujib, through his active involvement in that movement, provided leadership in bringing this Bengali identity into prominence.

Even after the Language Movement, Sheikh Mujib’s leadership in promoting the Bengali identity continued. In 1956, it was proposed in the Pakistan Constituent Assembly that Pakistan could be divided into two units—East and West Pakistan—in order to make the central government stronger. During this debate, Sheikh Mujib appealed for the recognition of the Bengali identity and language. In his speech, he stated: “You will see that they want to place the word “East Pakistan” instead of “East Bengal”. We had demanded so many times that you

should use Bengal instead of Pakistan. The word “Bengal” has a history, has a tradition of its own. You can change it only after the people have been consulted. So far as the question of one unit (of Pakistan) is concerned, it can come in the Constitution. Why do you want it to be taken up just now? What about the state language, Bengali? We will be prepared to consider one unit with all these things. So I appeal to my friends on that side to allow the people to give their verdict in any way, in the form of referendum or in the form of plebiscite.”

Clearly, in view of the burgeoning disparity between East and West Pakistan, our sense of Bengali identity began to be stronger. In that backdrop, Sheikh Mujib unveiled his six point formula, the goal of which was not only to end the disparity and deprivation, but also to gain the recognition of our Bengali identity. As a result, it caught the imagination of the people of East Pakistan and became included in the students’ 11 point formula. I was a small organiser in both of these movements and an eyewitness.

Because of the six point formula’s becoming the demand of Bengalis of all walks of life, Sheikh Mujib, a boy born in an unknown village in Tungipara, became Bangabandhu—the symbol of the hopes and aspirations of our people. In recognition, Tofail Ahmed, on behalf of all of us, bestowed on him this title in a mass gathering held in the Paltan ground.

The continuous ignorance of the legitimate demands of the people of East Pakistan, and the repressive measures against Sheikh Mujib and his associates by the Pakistani rulers, turned the demand for autonomy into a demand for self-determination. Sheikh Mujib became the undisputed leader of that movement. Through a bloody War of Liberation carried out in Sheikh Mujib’s name, Bangladesh became independent in 1971, and this 51-year old prisoner in a Pakistani jail became the father of independent Bangladesh.

It is clear that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became Bangabandhu, notwithstanding his lack of a dynastic heritage, by winning the hearts and minds of the people. During his time, there were many other politicians in East Pakistan who were in no way less talented. Many had higher educational qualifications, more family influence and greater financial strength; yet no



PHOTO: COLLECTED

one could come close to him in terms of achievements.

What did Bangabandhu have that his contemporaries did not?

In my judgment, he had some unique qualities that others lacked. He could feel the pulse of the Bengalis and articulate their hopes and aspirations. It was no wonder then, that many of his fellow politicians were critical of and created hurdles for him. Only for the support of the student community, and later the general public, could he succeed.

Bangabandhu could understand the unexpressed feelings of the people because he loved them dearly. He was also in politics for their wellbeing, not for any personal gains. In his own words, he believed that: “Bangladesh, with its abundance of water and fertile soil, is full of wealth. Very few other countries in the world have such

fertile land. Yet they are poor. From time immemorial, they were exploited because of their own shortcomings (the most serious of which is envy). They do not know them and until they know and understand themselves, their liberation will not come”.

Bangabandhu not only loved the people and was in politics for them, he was also willing to make any sacrifice for them. He believed that “achieving anything great requires sacrifice and persistence. Those who are not willing to make sacrifices cannot achieve anything worthwhile”. Throughout his life, he paid heed to his father’s advice to show “sincerity and honesty of purpose” and spent most of his adult life in jail. If there was no mass movement to free him, he would definitely have been given the death penalty in the Agartala Conspiracy case and sacrificed his life for his people.

The quality that separated Bangabandhu from the rest was his indomitable courage. The intimidation and repression of the rulers could not deter him. He took a firm stand against the tyranny of the Pakistani rulers. He believed that “in a democratic country, there should be many political parties and the law is expected to have that provision”. He also believed that criticism of the government is an essential feature of a democratic polity and “if opposition party cannot be created, the country will have autocracy”. The strength of his courage helped him overcome all the hurdles in his path to reach the height he was able to reach.

Most importantly, Bangabandhu, in his lifetime, could transform himself. When he was growing up, communal politics was the order of the day and his incomplete autobiography, *The Unfinished Memoirs*, contains many such examples. He himself was a victim of communalism in his early life. In his childhood, when living in Gopalganj, he once heard that his friend Malek had been abducted and was being beaten up. He assembled a group and rescued Malek in the face of resistance. A case was filed and he was subsequently arrested. Even though he grew up in an environment of communal politics, Bangabandhu was able to overcome such a mindset. Instead, he embraced our Bengali identity and included secularism in Bangladesh’s constitution. We see such examples of transformation only in the lives of great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela.

As the leader of my early life, Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was able to make my blood rage and arouse patriotism in me. He was able to instill in me the values of telling the truth, showing courage in the face of adversity and making differences in the lives of others. On the occasion of the centennial of his birth, I offer my heartfelt respect to the memory of this extraordinary human being. I pray for his departed soul. At the same time, I pray so that I can, for the rest of my life, stay true to the principles and ideals he taught me as a young man. I feel that that is the most appropriate way to show respect to him.

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Recognition, as equals

Tracing Bangabandhu's role in forming the principles of diplomacy and garnering international support for the newly-founded Bangladesh



MANNAN MASHHUR ZARIF

recognition to Bangladesh, followed by India only hours later.

This particular Indian reaction to the developments in our struggle for freedom came in response to successive appeals made from the highest level of the Mujibnagar Government to the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, first on October 15, 1971 and later on November 23, 1971, to confer immediate recognition to the sovereign People’s Republic of Bangladesh. This meant that a milestone had been achieved—while the nation was struggling to attain victory in a war that was still raging, its independence was recognised by two neighbouring nations.

For those who had been campaigning on various political fronts for international support for the armed guerrilla struggle in hitherto East Pakistan, the focus had now shifted to securing acknowledgement of its existence as the youngest nation in the world, which, in a bipartisan globe of the post-World War II era, would be no easy feat.

The military hostility between Bangladesh and Pakistan that ended on the evening of December 16, 1971 saw new battle lines being drawn. From day one, Pakistan engaged itself in a smear campaign against the true case of the emergence of Bangladesh. For decades since independence in 1947, Pakistan found themselves an ally in the United States of America, and a longstanding friend in China. Their role in the Muslim world was an important one, as it had been the most populous Islamic nation of that time.

In the military conflict that spanned between March 25, 1971 and December 16, 1971, India had been our closest supporter; on an international platform, it was followed by assistance extended by the Soviet Union. This alone was enough for the world to perceive that the foreign policy of the new nation, if it ever saw the light of day, might be aligned to the socialist block.

During the Liberation War of 1971, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi travelled extensively around the world to present the cause of Bangladesh, and as time went by, made a wholehearted effort to justify the impending military action. Upon his release from jail in Pakistan, post December 16, the stage was set for the hero to return home.

While in transit at London, Bangabandhu made a call to PM Gandhi, thanking her for the overwhelming support her administration and the nation of India had extended to Bangladesh and for the recognition that was accorded well in advance of eventual victory in the war. Upon his return to Dhaka, Bangabandhu took the oath as Prime Minister and unequivocally expressed his will that the nation shall maintain a non-partisan stance in international relations, along non-aligned lines. Bangabandhu expressed his desire to make Bangladesh the “Switzerland of the East”.

By the time Bangladesh applied for membership of the United Nations in September 1972, it had already been recognised as an independent entity by most nations of the globe, including strategically important recognition coming from the United Kingdom and the USA as early as February and April 1972 respectively.

The first people to establish diplomatic relations with Bangladesh were the countries of Eastern Europe, particularly the signatories of the Warsaw Pact. The German Democratic Republic (East Germany) took the lead on January 11; the USSR gave recognition on January 24.

This was followed by a series of successes with the nations of the

European Union, and eventually countries from all over the world—including Australia, Canada, and Japan. Malaysia acted in late January, followed by other ASEAN nations. Senegal was the first African country, and by the end of 1972 all global political powerhouses except Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and China had extended the courtesy of official recognition.

Bangladesh joined the Commonwealth of Nations on April 18, 1972. It was the first major global platform that the nation decided

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to be a part of. In a situation when Bangladesh could once again use all the foreign help it could garner, joining the Commonwealth has always been seen as one of our decisive victories in foreign policy.

It may now seem contradictory to the principles of international relations that the nation was hoping to cling to, but even in the first summit attended by Bangladesh, following her entry into the Commonwealth, in Ottawa, Canada in 1973, Bangabandhu

led the Bangladesh delegation and reiterated what this nation stood for when it came to global politics. In his statement, the Bangladesh Prime Minister highlighted the nation’s keen desire to pursue a non-aligned policy, adding that these objectives had been formulated on the basis of our political, economic and socio-cultural aims and interests, keeping in mind the needs of the time. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman expressed the same logical view while addressing the fourth Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit at the Algerian capital, between September 5–9, 1973.

As a young politician, Mujib was quick to realise the dynamics of power and how the poor are taken advantage of. His acumen as a politician made him the undisputed leader of the new nation, and he realised that the bipolar Cold War reality of the world cannot benefit Bangladesh. He understood quite rightly that Bangladesh must remain neutral but embrace the hands extended in friendship, by whoever and whenever. This was the Bengali way, and one the new nation adopted as its foreign policy.

By the beginning of the year 1974, Bangladesh had joined important platforms and made allies among developing nations as well as developed countries. Despite the fact that the matter of the prisoners of war and stranded Bengalis had been resolved, Pakistan had not recognised Bangladesh as a sovereign nation. But that was about to change.

In February 1974, the Summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), most of whose members had already recognised Bangladesh, was scheduled to be held in Lahore. The OIC volunteered to make peace between Pakistan and Bangladesh and sent the then Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Shaikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Sabah to Dhaka. Negotiations continued as Bangabandhu insisted on and ensured mutual recognition of both Bangladesh and Pakistan, instead of only Pakistan recognising Bangladesh. Talks were

fruitful, and the Bangladeshi delegation flew to Lahore.

Ever since September 1972, the country had attempted to become a member of the UN and for three consecutive years, China exercised its veto at the general council to prevent it. Although every failed attempt generated an air of discomfort in foreign relations, the entire experience generated no visible frustration on Bangladesh’s part. The administration of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto took rigorous measures to convince ally states to withhold recognition to Bangladesh; personal requests were made to several heads of states in this regard. At the prospect of Bangladesh gaining membership of the Commonwealth of Nations, Pakistan made a commitment to leave the forum if Bangladesh was indeed conferred membership. It was not until the 90s that Pakistan renewed its membership at the Commonwealth, after leaving it in 1972.

Pakistan also broke off ties with Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Poland as retaliation in the light of formal engagement at the highest level between the countries and Bangladesh. However, the nation had to back away from this belligerent tactic as more and more of its friends were impressed with the new leadership of the state of Bangladesh.

Between December 6, 1971 and August 15, 1975—the day Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was brutally assassinated—the Father of the Nation and a group of young, enthusiastic diplomats ran a campaign that brought one victory upon another in foreign relations. Bangladesh was quick to prove that it was possible, even for a state ravaged by the brutalities of war, and a struggling country trying to make ends meet, to stand with heads held high and achieve what is rightfully theirs—a position to stand along all nations of the world as worthy equals.

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