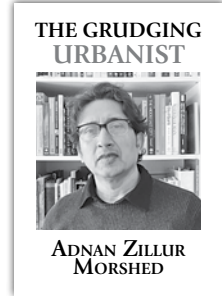


Bangabandhu and the Bengal Delta



ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

It is fascinating that Bangabandhu began his *Unfinished Memoirs* (published in 2012) with an existential characterisation of his birthplace in geographic relationship to a river: the Madhumati river, which divides or

connects the two southern districts of Faridpur and Khulna. Nobody in his clan, he wrote, knew how and why its founding patriarch, a pious man named Sheikh Burhanuddin, came to settle on the bank of the Madhumati many years ago, during the Mughal times. Some of Bangabandhu's ancestors were actually river-based entrepreneurs.

During the time of the East India Company, when indigo cultivation became a key conduit of extractive colonial economy in the Bengal delta, Sheikh Kudrotullah's boats used to carry merchandise from Faridpur to Kolkata through meandering rivers, often encountering an extortionist Englishman and his native cohorts. These confrontations led to violence and eventually a much-fabled court case in which Kudrotullah won. The colonial court ordered the insolent Englishman to pay a symbolic fine, although nominal but historically significant, as the case became part of local folklore.

The rivers of Bengal, it seems, were like a familial tapestry that epitomised the triumphs and tragedies of the Sheikh clan. In fact, not just rivers but the stories of Bengal's land were deeply interconnected with the lives of the Sheikhs. In the span of a few generations, during British colonial times, the Sheikhs lost their wealth due to a series of sensational court cases following land disputes with neighbours. The history of the Sheikhs, like those of other clans, was a saga of Bengal's pastoral land and the rivers that serve as its hydrological, social, and commercial membranes.

Bangabandhu's early political life was, in many ways, an epic of Homeric journeys across the Bengal delta, crisscrossed by rivers and canals. Many of these journeys were undertaken by boat, steamer, and railway.

Student politics and activism before and after the Partition—before, for a homeland for the subcontinent's Muslims and, after, for the rights of Bengalis, beleaguered by an oppressive Muslim League regime in East Pakistan—took him, many times, from Gopalganj to Kolkata, from Dhaka to Barisal, from Khulna to Faridpur, from Narayanganj to Tangail, and other destinations across Bengal. These political odysseys provided him with a deep understanding of the Bengal delta's hydro-anthropological pulse or its *genius loci*, the Latin term that denotes the spirit of place.

Gopalganj then didn't have a launch terminal. Bangabandhu sometimes had to arrive there by train, at the modest Haridashpur railway station, a few miles away from his ancestral home in Tungipara. This last stretch on the way home would often be covered by a boat on the Madhumati river. As some of his recollections reveal, during his boat journeys he would not only internalise the essence of riverine Bengal, but also strike a conversation with the boatman, learning from him about the struggles of everyday life in rural Bengal. Once Bangabandhu recalled his experience of a boat odyssey on the Madhumati river: "the people of this riverine country would never find it difficult to fall asleep on a boat." This simple but profound statement encapsulates his perception of an organic, harmonious bonding of Bengal's people with its riverine character, an existential philosophy that would slowly but steadily lay the foundation of his political philosophy of justice, coexistence, and sacrifice.

If, in *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* (1993), Richard Eaton is convincing about his characterisation of East Bengal's mass embrace of the Islamic faith as part of an agro-religious phenomenon—"a religion of the plow," inspired by the holy men who settled in this region and carried on agricultural activities with the service of native labour—Bangabandhu's understanding of the Bengali character as a derivative of Bengal's deltaic geography seems tenable. It was not surprising that in October 1970, before the election to the Pakistan National Assembly, as president of the Awami League Bangabandhu selected the boat as his party's election symbol. For him, nothing could portray the soul of the



Bengal delta more earnestly than the boat.

The author of *The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh* (2002) and American Consul General in Dhaka during 1971 (much denigrated by the Nixon administration for his pro-Bangladesh views during and after the Liberation War), Archer K. Blood marvelled at how Bangabandhu talked of "my people, my land, my forests, my rivers" like a messiah. On the rivers, Bangabandhu often became an effortless personification of a political jibanananda, seeing "Bengal's face" ... "incomparably beautiful and sad," where he yearned to return, not as a *shankhachil* but as a political saviour to serve the oppressed people of East Pakistan.

Archer Blood described Bangabandhu thus: "Mujib's very appearance suggested raw power, a power drawn from the masses and from his own strong personality. He was taller and broader than most Bengalis, with ruggedly handsome features and intense eyes." Experiencing intense eye pains early on in his life, and bespectacled since the age of sixteen, Bangabandhu learned to see things in life, as well as Bengal's pastoral beauty, with a melancholic gaze, in the process developing an innate faculty to listen. His tortured eyes heightened his ability to hear the sounds of Bengal's rivers, its wind, its verdant land, and,

most of all, its people. He could also intensely listen, hour after hour, to the plight of political prisoners who were jailed with him.

Before and after the Partition, when Hindus and Muslims were engaged in communal violence across the subcontinent, he was inspired by his mentor Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy's effort to visit numerous ground zeros of atrocities, himself touring many regions of East Bengal in order to spread the message of religious harmony. In many ways, these journeys throughout Bengal took on a larger meaning for Bangabandhu, inspiring his lifelong empathy for the downtrodden. For him, experiencing Bengal's land and water meant getting invaluable insights into people's everyday struggles, their suffering within the asymmetric economies of the two wings of Pakistan. Bengalis and the delta, for him, shared the same ethos of struggle and survival.

After the Partition, when in East Pakistan the repressive Muslim League government tried to silence the Bengali dissent and suppress popular discontent, Bangabandhu organised mass resistance on behalf of the East Pakistan Muslim Student League. During this campaign, he reprimanded his communist colleagues for their heavy-handed ideology by thundering: "People walk on

the ground, and you all fly in airplanes over their heads with your heady ideologies." It was of course a metaphorically coded critique of doing politics from the clouds like gods, masquerading as Karl Marxes. What Bangabandhu meant was that being with the people, on their boats and in their paddy fields, the sources of their livelihood, is to get their sympathetic ears and touch their hearts.

This was his quintessential philosophy of sacrifice. True sacrifice can never be bestowed from above. It occurs when one is within, on the water, on the boat, on the land, on the grass. For him, empathy grew from within, from below, where the survival stories of rivers, canals, lands and peasants intertwine. Real compassion, Bangabandhu believed, never flourished in the sky or by looking down on the little people from the pedestal of gods. Compassion needed getting muddy and wet.

Yet, Bangabandhu was also not afraid to criticise what he saw from the land, from the river, from where people actually lived, as he articulated the tragic fatalism of the Bengal delta's people. In his autobiography, he wondered how a land so fertile, so resourceful, could also be home to perennially poverty-stricken masses, who often unwittingly let outsiders exploit them, who could never take control of their own fate, because of their self-defeating infighting, jealousy, and treachery. This was perhaps a foreboding, haunting commentary on the tragedies of August 1975.

To understand Bangabandhu's activist worldview and his political evolution one needs to understand how he interpreted the Bengal delta's land-water geography and its shaping of a complex and contradictory people. It is not accidental that in Bengal's popular imagination he is memorialised as "rivers": *Jotodin robe Padma, Meghna, Jamuna bohoman, tododin robe tomar kirti Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman* (as long as the rivers Padma, Meghna, Jamuna continue to flow, the legend of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman will not cease to shine).

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Sadia Ahmed helped with the research for this article.

COVID-19 PREPAREDNESS

An initial guideline for factory workers

WITH the worldwide infections of COVID-19 (coronavirus) crossing 220,000 cases and the death toll rising above 8,900, it is crucial for the people to understand the urgency of the situation and prepare adequately for it. As seen with countries like Italy, Spain and the UK that are dealing with the pandemic after China, once there are cases in a particular community, COVID-19 has the potential to spread exponentially if drastic measures are not taken. This in turn overwhelms the medical system, leaving the elderly and people with chronic health conditions (e.g. respiratory problems, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer) in a highly vulnerable position.

While there have been detailed guidelines on how individuals can practice social distancing, regular hand washing and other sanitisation techniques to reduce the risk of COVID-19 infections, there has been less information on how to prepare for the COVID-19 outbreak in an industrial setting such as a factory or construction site. While I highly encourage businesses and industries to limit operations to essential processes and staff, and switch to working remotely when possible, I also have to acknowledge that for manufacturing and construction industries, it might be difficult to shut down operations immediately due to the nature of the industry, and also because of the large number of workers that often live on-site.

As such, I have compiled a small list using my engineering background to help various industries prepare their initial steps to deal with COVID-19. This is, however, only meant to supplement industry-wide actions that will be needed in the long term to successfully combat the pandemic. As a disclaimer, my recommendations



Industrial units should have their own guideline to tackle the spread of the coronavirus.

are by no means an exhaustive list, and it cannot replace advice and protocols from doctors, immunologists, industry experts and government policy makers. It is simply meant as a helpful starting list, because I have not seen any such information being passed around.

Initial steps to prepare for the COVID-19 outbreak in an industrial setting:

Initial quarantine areas
Prepare areas on site where workers who fall sick will be initially quarantined and plan on how and where they can receive the necessary health care. Make sure all the shift managers know the designated quarantine areas and emergency plan.

Dedicated team for sanitisation
Assign a dedicated team for sanitisation

and give them specific instructions suited for your site/factory. For example, they can sanitise door handles, lift buttons, work stations and commonly used surfaces several times throughout the day.

Designated areas for sanitisation
Create designated sanitisation areas for common equipment and protective gear. One area could be dedicated for clean equipment and protective gear collection (by workers coming on-shift), and the other could be for dropping off used equipment and protective gear that need to be cleaned (for workers going off-shift).

Worker briefing
Have your safety managers or engineers brief all workers on COVID-19 and its symptoms.

Stress to the workers the importance of telling their shift managers immediately if they fall sick.

Practical demonstration
During this briefing, be sure to give a practical demonstration to everyone on how to wash hands properly, and how to cough or sneeze into their elbows.

Appropriate language
Remember that a lot of workers in Bangladesh go through immense hardships and simply telling them that they can fall ill might not motivate them to be vigilant and cautious. Be sure to tell workers that if they are carriers of the COVID-19 virus, it will not only affect themselves but also others around them, especially elderly relatives or family and friends with chronic health conditions.

Start of shift briefing
At the start of every shift, remind workers that the industry is in crisis mode because of the COVID-19 outbreak, and briefly

discuss the safety tips covered in the initial COVID-19 briefing. This should not take more than 5-10 minutes before each shift.

Awareness posters
Post COVID-19 Awareness Posters everywhere in the site or factory as reminders. There are both Bangla and English posters available on the internet.

Preparing the site/factory environment
There are many small steps you can take to prepare the site or factory environment for the COVID-19 emergency. For example, you can: 1) set up hand sanitiser stations in lobbies and common areas, so that people can sanitise after touching door handles and lift buttons; 2) fit doors with foot handles/kickers (if possible), especially in the bathrooms, so that people can open doors with their feet (While many pamphlets recommend using elbows for pressing buttons, I do not recommend this in an industrial setting because people could be carrying tools or be in a hazardous area); 3) make sure the bathrooms and worker dormitories have adequate soap and water supply, etc.

I hope this list helps construction sites and factories in Bangladesh prepare their initial steps for the COVID-19 pandemic. However, please do note, this list will only be helpful in situations where the COVID-19 patients and carriers in the community are well documented and quarantined. In situations where there is already community spread with undocumented and unquarantined COVID-19 cases, experts all over the world recommend closures and social distancing to prevent rapid spread of the virus.

In a pandemic, everything at first seems like an overreaction—everything afterwards seems inadequate.

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QUOTABLE Quote

NEIL GAIMAN
(1960) English author

Tomorrow may be hell, but today was a good writing day, and on the good writing days nothing else matters.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	33 Can. neighbor	9 Some coasters
1 Singer Tori	34 German article	11 Convention ID
5 Dentist's directive	35 Finger-paints	17 Classroom needs
10 Tycoon	37 Low card	20 Smart-phone picture
12 Record company	39 Cow of commercials	21 Drop in
13 Fight sight	40 Like seawater	23 Enjoys a favorite book
14 Tolerate	41 Canary chow	25 Steamed snack
15 Part of RSVP	42 Dick Tracy's love	26 Incite
16 Ran into		27 Small bump
18 Bankroll	DOWN	28 Puts up
19 Less complex	1 Degrade	29 Hands over
21 Dyeing tubs	2 Robin's love	31 Low cards
22 Peach's kin	3 Threat phrase	33 Purposes
24 Caravan stops	4 Abel, to Adam	36 Bridge action
25 Orange's kin	5 No longer fizzy	38 Pig out
29 Train units	6 Research site	
30 Snappy answer	7 Luke's mentor	
32 Moody music	8 Sober	

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

P	O	S	E	R	W	A	T	T	S
I	N	T	R	O	I	M	H	I	T
C	L	A	R	A	S	E	E	M	E
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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

CAN I HAVE AN EXTRA HOUR FOR LUNCH TO SEE MY DENTIST?
CERTAINLY.
GREG + MORT WALKER

ARE YOU GOING TO LUNCH WITH THAT DENTIST YOU MET ONLINE?
YEP!
I-15

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

SAY! WHAT'S THIS SHINY NEW QUARTER DOING BEHIND YOUR EAR?
SORRY ABOUT THAT. HE HAS A.D.D.
AWKWARD DAD DISORDER
MINE TOO.
WHAT?