The Historic Seventh: People Marching Forward

The Milieu, the Moment, the Movement

Epiphany, interpreted as a bright stroke of rich realization and a moment of inward illumination which suddenly provide a unity of things that remain otherwise desultory. does not occur only spiritually and stylistically, but also historically. Such a moment of historical epiphany with its unique force and frenzy was marked by the Seventh March in 1971, when our history was in the process of being made and shaped; when, also, one could have a feel of some sort of the second coming - not in the Yeatsian sense. But in the concrete, historical sense that blends aspirations with strug-

Now, what was so epiphanic about the Seventh March? What is so historic about it? To come up with a single, definite answer is a somewhat difficult task. Yet, the obvious does not escape one's vision, if one looks back not in mere nostalgia, but in an urge to understand. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Chief of the Awami League, responsive as he had been to the fever-pitch of the struggling, smouldering and also raging nation at that time, initiated a historic moment first with "words, words, words". Addressing a huge public meeting at the Ramna Race Course Maidan (now known as Suhrawardy Uddyan) in the politically fetching. glowing afternoon of March 7. 1971. Sheikh Mujib ardently, fiercely, boldly fastened on the moment - rather zoomed in on it with an effect historically irresistible, and also perhaps with a kind of realization of "ripeness is all". Mujib gave a call for all-out preparations for the independence of this part of the world now known as Bangladesh.

And that was the historic somewhat epiphanic in nature. But, then, this is not the whole truth. The moment was obviously charged with a certain amount of drama: though it was not so sudden, so dramatic as it might appear to be: for, the moment was in the process of being created in history through the flux of events, incidents and experiences that spanned a period of a thousand years- to reach that moment was to traverse a long history of struggle. Sheikh Mujib only intervened in the continuum: strategically positioned himself as a leader of the suffering masses, and struck while the

iron was hot. Yes, people were feverishly waiting for a programme towards the beginning of March. Already, in the general elections of 1970, the Awami League obtained an overwhelming majority of seats in the Pakistan parliament, dwarfing the then Pakistani ruling clique which, however, began to procrastinate - and. one can say, began to indulge in a political hanky-panky of sorts - over the very issue of transference of power to the elected representatives of people. Yahya Khan, for example, declared the postponement of the National Assembly session, which was scheduled to begin from March 3, 1971 to discuss constitutional issues and to facilitate a smooth transfer of power to the elected people's representatives, the majority of whom were from Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujib responded thus: "Only for the sake of a minority party's disagreement, the democratic process of constitution-making has been obstructed and the National Assembly session has been postponed sine die. This is most unfortunate as far as we are concerned. We are the representatives of the majority of people and we cannot allow it to go unchallenged." Then, Sheikh Mujib announced a sixday programme which included the observance of a complete strike on March 2 in Dhaka, and a country-wide strike on March 3 — the date earlier fixed for the National Assembly to meet. Mujib also mentioned that he would announce the final programme on March 7 at a public meeting

happening very rapidly though not rashly or recklessly outstripping the pace of Shakespearean fast-actions. What happened on March 2 was that "unarmed civilians" were killed at the Farm Gate. and that Sheikh Mujib immediately issued a statement, saying: "Unarmed boys have been fired upon today. At least two have died and several more are seriously injured. I strongly condemn such firing... firing upon unarmed masses amounts to genocide and is a crime

scheduled to be held at the

And things, indeed, were

Race Course Maidan.

against humanity. They should know that if Bangladesh is a fire, as it will be if such confrontation continues, then they will not be able to escape the

The metaphors of fire and flame were not merely rattled off rhetorically to tee-off a high moment of confrontation. The metaphors and rhetorics were seeking more concrete moments which Sheikh Mujib provided on March 7. deliver ing a historic address which rolled metaphors, rhetorics and realities into one — or into a historic epiphany of sorts.

A 4-point Demand

The glowing, heated afternoon of the historic Seventh March presented before the nation a piece of oration which can, first, be read with an eye. on the four-point demand somewhat categorically spelt out by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman : 1) the withdrawal of Martial Law. 2) sending of troops back to barracks, 3) investigation into the killings, and 4) transfer of power to the elected representatives of people. These four points, taken together, might provide one with the idea that Sheikh Mujib's concentration was primarily laid on de-militarization, decolonization and democratization of middle-class politics in Pakistan. True. But. not wholly. For, these four points had somewhat latent structures of realities and references which were related to the overall social and economic freedom of Bangladesh. One may be reminded here of the way Mujib interpreted the slogan of Joi Bangla on February 28, 1971. He said that Jot Bangla was not a mere political slogan; that it was a slogan for the autonomy, economic and social freedom of Bangladesh. In his historic address, Sheikh Mujib announced the closure of all government and semigovernment offices in Bangladesh and urged people to stop paying all rents and taxes until the demands of the Bengalees were fulfilled. Noticeable as it is, Sheikh Mujib here zeroed in on the politicoeconomic issue, spelling a clear threat to the colonialistic make-up and ethos of Pakistani politics against which much of

A Seven-point Formula

his speech was directed

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, on March 7, suggested a sevenpoint formula, accommodating his four-point demand mentioned earlier, for immediate adoption, if the President sincerely desired that the National Assembly, as the sovereign body of the elected representatives, should function. The points included: 1) immediate withdrawal of Martial Law: 2) transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people: 3) immediate withdrawal of all military personnel to the barracks; 4) tmmediate cessation of the military build-up and the heavy in flow of the military personnel from the western wing: 5 immediate cessation of firing upon civilians so that not a single bullet is fired with immediate effect: 6) non-interference by the military authorities in the different branches of the government functioning in Bangladesh and direction to desist from victimization of the government officers and employees; and 7) maintenance of law and order to be left exclusively to the police and the Bengali EPR. assisted, wherever necessary, by the Awami League volunteers.

Zeroing in on People's De-

termination The historic Seventh March also brought to the fore people's determination steeled and strengthened in the pronouncements of a thundering voice that was Mujib's. He said ; "People have expressed their determination to be the free citizens of a free country. Our economy must be saved from ruination. Our toiling masses are to be saved from starvation, disease and employment If the ruling coteries seek to frustrate these aspirations, the people are ready for a long and sustained struggle for their emancipation.

It is also to be noticed that despite his bold imperatives for, and his charged stress on, continuing the struggle for emancipation, Mujib's pronouncements also appeared to be punctuated with a sertes of conditionals that, on the one hand, might border on adunata of sorts in the face of the Pakistani ruling clique's incurable hunger for power, and that, on the other hand, were confined to the typical middle-class political move for seizing and

by Azfar Hussain

capturing state-power in the name of people. But, then, people's unswerving, unvielding, historically unprecedented, politically and otherwise potential response pressed the moment ahead. and took the course of history along a direction much beyond the immediate comprehension of many middle-class political leaders including the Awami Leaguers active during those turbulent, history-making days.

A Ten-point Programme

On March 7, 1971, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman announced a week-long programme from March 8. The outline of this programme was' something like this: 1) No-tax campaign should continue: 2) the Secretariat including government and semi-government offices. high courts and other courts throughout Bangladesh should observe hartals; 3) railway and ports may function, but railway-workers and port-workers should not cooperate if railway or ports are used for mobilisation of forces for the purpose of carrying out repression against the people: 4) radio. television and newspapers shall give complete versions of our statements and shall not

suppress news about the people's movement; otherwise Bengalees working in these establishments shall not cooperate; .5) only local and interdistrict trunk telephone communication shall function; 6) all educational institutions shall remain closed: 7) banks shall not effect remittances to the Western Wing either through the State Bank or otherwise: 8) black flags shall be hoisted on all buildings every day; 9) hartal is withdrawn in all other spheres but complete or partial hartal may be declared at any movement depending upon the situation: and 10) a Sangram Parishad (Council of Action) should be organised in each union, ma hallah, thana, subdivision, and district under the leadership of the local Awami League

Thus, this week-long programme was well drawn-up and forcefully spelt out in an attempt to carry forward a non-cooperation movement throughout the country. But, this movement, with the par ticipation of people from all walks of life, began to assume broader scope, aiming at the eventual birth of Bangladesh as an independent, sovereign country. It was soon felt that there was no point of retreat and that there was no scope for retrogression, with a rapid

and inevitable metamorphosis of the movement into an armed struggle towards inde-

Conclusion

Looking back at those turbulent days seething and frothing with public determination, agitation and participation triggered by the emotionally charged but amply action-oriented speech of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who was initially moving from an anti-colonial, anti-military, middle-class political stand, one can say that the historic Seventh March was genuinely historic not only because of Sheikh Mujib's fine piece of oration not to be found for the second time in his life-time. but also because of the massive scale and space of people's allout participation which, in turn, led the leaders themselves to fare forward despite the aporta, tension and oscillation so much characteristic of the middle-class. For whatever historic epiphany that downed upon the rising and raging nation; people themselves - not only a single leader - were fundamentally responsible; though, the leadership provided by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman during those history-making days was more effective than it could be seen any time later in his life.

A Speech at its Oratorial and Substantial Best

N the throes of expecta tion, the nation held its breath on this day 24 years ago to hear a man speak. In those best of days and worst of days the possibility of anything and everything was in the air. The thin line between the good and bad could be crossed with the least effort. March 7 brought all things through permutation and combination to that deciding moment when a nation earns the greatest reward for its toil. Even years of painstaking preparation can go awry if a people and its leaders fail to respond to the demand of the

crucial moment. It is precisely for this reason that the nation breathlessly waited for the man to pronounce the verdict. For days the man's words were laws and the Pakistani military regime of Yahaya had no control here. It was this man of Promethean build and character who ran what was still known as East Pakistan. As the moment of truth was nearing. he not only had to make correct moves but prepare his people - Bangalees - for the momentous event. Every inch a leader. Sheikh Mujib had however been steeled into an uncompromising personality

by Nilratan Halder

through his political honesty and incomparable patriotism. Yet logistical support was

not in favour of declaring independence. Perhaps this thought might have crossed Bangabandhu's mind many times before taking the ultimate decision. His was however that superior knowledge to tell him there was no time to lose. The moments of making history do not come again and again. He knew that he had to take risk. So the nation found itself in a state of suspended animation until Banga-· bandhu's arrival at the then Race Course Maidan (now Suhrawardy Udyan), which by the time turned into a sea of

human crowd, was announced. The people who were fortunate enough to be present. witnessed the towering figure of a man on the rostrum getting taller as he delivered each words and sentence until he reached the sky. What he spoke was sheer poetry and that despite the occasional punctuations by Sheikh's special imperfect dialects. To be at his oratorial best, specially on such a demanding day, was not easy. But Shetkh was a personality of different mould. He could rise up to any challenge thrown to him. And this was the dearest cause he committed himself to.

It is said Bangabandhu did not prepare a text for the speech. No wonder he did not. But that was on paper. A man of extraordinary memory, he might have rehearsed through his mind the things he was going to tell the meeting and the nation. To a degree, the speech was extempore and yet Mujib had gone through it repeating before he uttered the ultimate. It is not for nothing that this speech has been ranked among the all time world best. A man can speak with that fiery lucidity only when his lifetime's conviction and commitment dipped in the hallowed sustenance of patriotism near the fulfilling experience.

The power of that utterance is so obvious that it becomes a revelation without actually having nothing to do with either religion or politics. It is the truth itself - the bare truth. Without this quality the speech of March 7 could not move the nation in a way no one ever succeeded. The truth of his heart touched the people in a special way, they were roused into a holy crusade that challenged their innate quality and thus worth as man. He has led his people towards sunshine and glory. It is precisely for this reason that Bangabandhu's speech aired on radio succeeded to do the miracle.

Some people still complain that it was a speech that fell short of declaring independence. Does it? So far as the content of the speech is concerned, it is both an evocation and an unambiguous assertion of the purpose. True, Mujib did not say. "Henceforth I declare independence of a country

called Bangladesh". But in his speech he left no room for imagination as to what he meant by 'ebarer sangram muktir sangram, ebarer sangram sadhinater songram," edesher manushke mukta kore chharbo insha-Allah," (This time the struggle is for liberation, this time the struggle for independence I will make the people of this country free, insha-Allah"). Admittedly he got hardly

any time to prepare his country for an all-out liberation war. But such wars are not always won by weapons alone. It is the national unity combined with patriotic fervour and boistered by moral courage that triumphs in the ultimate analysis. Mujib wanted to make his people morally superior to the mighty but rotten Pakistanis. Otherwise we would have been either swept away by the first volley of the Pakistani forces' fire power or brought to our knees by their atrocities, exterminating strategy and intimidation. Instead, the brutal and morally bankrupt, dehumanised and diabolic Pakistani forces bad to suffer one of history's most ignominous military defeats.

The defence strategy Mujib adopted could even be wrong. But that is a subject for the experts in that special discipline. We however can look at it from a political point of view. Even if he failed initially to have any idea of the sinister design of the Pakistanis at the early rounds of talks with the delegates from Pakistan, he became increasingly convinced that the Pakistani generals were buying time. So he also needed to buy time for the preparation of a full-scale war.

At the same time he had to alert his people of the imminent carnage of a depopulating programme. That seemed to be his dilemma. So Mujib had to say everything without really being unduly explicit. There it was a most wise and well-crafted address to hispeople. It was enough to ignite the flame. Reading between the lines of his speech, the common people could make out the meaning. They knew what to do. People started leaving Dhaka and defence preparation was also afoot.

So it is pointless to dismiss

the speech, as a few would conveniently try to as something full of eloquence. It is unpardonable to refuse to accept the full significance of the event. Making the speech contentious is still more offensive. Let us rise beyond partisan politics to celebrate the day nationally. History has a harsh way to judge our capacity to recognise our moments of glory. By not according due recognition to our best of achievements we only belittle ourselves as a nation. Until we come out of the woods, the nation will find on either sides of a divisive line and never reach a much needed national consensus. The country will only reap benefits of a fractious policy not of healthy politics.



A Historic Day: Bengalee Magna Carta RESIDENT Yahya Khan

by Waliur Rahman

had already acceded to the principle of adult franchise, one man one vote and the abolition of one unit. in Pakistan prior to the election of 1970. By accepting this universal principle of adult franchise under joint electorate system, the Government of Pakistan beat a retreat and buried the hydra-headed monster of the two-nation theory based on religious fanaticism.

in some ways, Bangabandhu's six-point programme as announced in Lahore in 1966 contained the seeds of independent and sovereign Bangladesh, as Jinnah's 14point demand led to the creation of Pakistan; but, then, whereas Jinnah's 14-point was a framework for the Muslims of India only. Bangabandhu's six-point programme was dedicated to the efficuelpation of the 75 million people of the then East Pakistan irrespective of caste, creed and religion. As a foreign observer has said. "the natural outcome of Mujib's six-point was the War of Independence of 1971, fought on the basis of secularism and Bengalee nationalism". The fact that the Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Chakmas and all other religionists joined the glorious War of Liberation proves this point. Believers of all these faiths sacrificed their lives not for creating Muslim Bengal or independent East Pakistan, but to create a secular democratic and sovereign Bangladesh. It is no wonder, therefore, that the clarion call of the freedom fighters was Joi Bangla and not any religious slogan. The freedom fighters who laid down their precious lives and became shaheeds fell on the sacred soil of Bengal with a standard: green with the red sun on the background with a map

of East Bengal inscribed on it.

The music that inspired our

valiant fighters was Tagore's

song, "Amar Shonar Bangla",

and Nazrul's patriotic songs.

The constitution the founding fathers bequeathed to the nation imbibed quintessentially the hallowed spirit of secularism and Bengalee nationalism. The Race Course speech of

Bangabandhu on March 7, 1971 was manifestly the culmination of a 1000-year old struggle of Bengalee hopes and aspirations hitherto downtrodden by the alien forces. Whenever Bengal tried to assert itself, a combination of adversarial forces joined hands to suppress it. But, the indomitable Bengalees never accepted such defeat or domination. The defeat of Strajuddowla at Palassey drew to a close a particular chapter of Bengal, but the spirit did not die. The Sepoy Revolution (not mutiny), the indigo peasants movement against the British in Jessore, Kushtia and other parts of Bengal, Titumir's anticolonial movement, Surja Sen's and Kalpana Dutta's nationalist movement in Chittagong -- all were steps which led inevitably to the historic congregation of March 7, 1971 at Race Course.

The anti-Bengali conspiracy did not seem to end. Even the Lahore resolution of 1940. which incorporated references to the Muslim majority states became a victim of palace intrigues. Finally, at the Delhi Muslim League Convention of 1946, the more powerful leaders of the time succeeded in replacing STATES with the word STATE. Such Muslim leaders of Bengal as Shahid Suhrawardy and Abul Hashem opposed this amendment as illegal and unconstitutional. The latter did not falter on this issue till the last day.

The British government documents 'The transfer of Power 1942-1947, give uncanny 'apercu' to various facets of sub-continental politics of the time. Some are disconcertingly candid. The colonial policy of 'divide and rule' found strange bed-fellows to a

point, both in Mahatma Gandhi and Mohammad Ali Jinnah, when it came to the questions of Bengal and Bengali leadership. Thus, quite unwittingly, both these leaders felt uncomfortable with the rise of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das and Netaji Shubhas Chandra Bose as Congress leaders on an all-India basis. Similarly, Jinnah never tolerated the popularity of Sher-e-Bangla Fazlul Huq and Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy - not only in the All-India Muslim League but also in the politics of Bengal. This is amply proved by the entente between Jinnah and Sir John Herbert, the governor of Bengal against the progressive coalition government of Fazlul Huq in Bengal: Sher-e-Bangla was forced to resign on March 28, 1943, although he had a clear majority in the This was the Banga of Min-

haj-e-Siraj, the Banga of Mahafharata, the Banga made sanctified by the Buddhist monks who ran away to Nepal to save 'Bengal Puthis', the Banga of the Sufis, which waited for a thousand years for the arrival of the man of destiny: the apotheosis of Bengali nationalism Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, born in the remote village of Tungipara, where by the Madhumati chugs away with the history of the millennium writ large in permanent blocks never to be obliterated.

As never before in history. the 75 million of Bengal. former East Pakistan, tuned to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Their leader was face to face with the mammoth congregation of believers. They trusted him. They accepted him as their friend - Bangabandhu. They did not want to go back in halfknowledge, with half-truth. They wanted him to deliver them, to liberate them today and now - March 7, 1971 The day in the millennium had arrived. As the Ecclesiastes puts it: "To every thing there is

a season - a time to be born and a time to die...... The message was very clear. But Bangabandhu had a problem. He was constitutionalist, not a rebel; he was a reformist, not an anarchist. He was addressing the 75 million of Bengal which was a part of Pakistan He had therefore to measure his words and control his diction. Demosthenes had a freer hand, Cicero had the support of the powerful senators. Edmund Burke was backed by a powerful section of the British aristocracy. Lincoln addressed the dedication of the military cemetery at Gettysburg only after securing the defeat of the confederate forces of Lee Sheikh Mujib had the people of Bengal with him. So he crafted a speech that had no peer and no precedent. A wrong phrase, a misspelt diction would have brought the quick and sharp retribution of the overwhelmingly superior military might of Pakistan.

"Ebarer Shangram, Muktir Shangram, Ebarer Shangram — Swadhinatar Shangram". This is the struggle for liberation. this is the struggle for independence. The 75 million people of Bengal were mesmerised. The mammoth race course congregation slowly went back to their homes - a taller and prouder Bengalee, irrespective of their avocation. A nattily dressed civil servant, a merchant, a day labourer a political activist, a lungi-clad rickshawpuller - all had the same feeling. This time there was no going back. If need be, every house, every hamlet had to be converted into a fortress Time came to secure our rights, our liberty, our freedom. The thousand year old dream of Bengal was at long last to be realised: a sovereign independent Bangladesh was only 9 months away.

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The Historic Seventh: Support to a Four-point Demand

Compiled by Schrezad Latif

On the historic seventh of March in 1971, apart from the public speech delivered by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, a special prayer was offered at the historic Ramna Race Course for the peace of the souls of the martyrs. The prayer was led by Maulana Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish. MNAelect and former President of East Pakistan Awami League. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman arrived at the meeting wearing his trademark punjabi, payjama and Mujib coat. Bangabandhu looked very grave, and his eighteen-minute speech was choked with emotion. He appealed to all to obey the directive of his companions; if they did not find Bangabandhu amongst them during the movement

Sardar Shaukat Hyat Khan, President of the Punjab Council Muslim League said that all concerned must get down to constitution-making immediately. He also expressed support for Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's demands and said they should be conducted by judicial tribunal. He maintained that it would be advisable and proper to assist the elected majority of the country in running its affairs and restore the confidence among the people of the then East Pakistan.

Seven Karachi Awami League leaders urged the government not to take any half-hearted measures and allow the National Assembly to be held in a peaceful atmosphere.

In a statement issued in Karachi, the Awami League leaders reiterated that the already very tense atmosphere should not be allowed to grow worse. The statement continued. "It is an accepted convention the world over that while convening the National Assembly of a country, the majority party is consulted in this respect and all other affairs concerning the nation, but in Pakistan inspite of repeated advices of the Awami League, the National Assembly was not convened for two long months after the general elections. On the other hand, the Assembly was convened on March 3 at the advice of Pakistan People's Party which is a minority party having nearly 1/4 members of the total strength, and was postponed when it so demanded. When the democracy-loving people of East Pakistan protested against the decision of postponement, action was taken against them... We wholeheartedly support the four demands put forward by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. since he should be repository of all power in the country in view of the mandate given to him by the thumping majority of Pakistan.