

Recalling Bangabandhu

On the Eve of National Mourning Day

An Eye-witness Account of Indira-Mujib Talks on Bilateral Issues

by Md Matiul Islam

THE British Comet Jet plane carrying Sheikh Mujib on his triumphant return to his dreamland, Bangladesh, on 10 January, 1972, overflowed Calcutta, disappointing millions waiting in vain to have a glimpse of the great leader. The first official level talks between the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and India was, therefore, scheduled to be held in Calcutta.

My inclusion in the Prime Minister's entourage was a last minute decision. A few hours before the scheduled departure I was informed on telephone of this decision the reason for which became clear when Finance Minister Tajuddin told me that he had recommended my inclusion so that the Prime Minister would have with him a senior and trusted official during his talks with his counterpart. That the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister reposed so much trust on me was flattering, especially when it was only two weeks that the Finance Minister came to know me as his Finance Secretary.

The short trip to Calcutta by an Indian Air Force plane was uneventful. Years later when I was posted in Delhi as Chief of UNDO, I met one Air Vice-Marshall Malhotra who told me that he had the rare distinction of piloting the plane carrying the Bangladeshi Prime Minister to Calcutta. He still carried the old passenger manifesto and located my name there.

At the Calcutta Airport, Bangabandhu was received by Mrs Indira Gandhi and the West Bengal Chief Minister. We were informed that Prime Minister Mujib and the Foreign Minister, Abdus Samad Azad, would travel by a government helicopter and that others would have to travel by car. Since it would take anywhere between 2 and 3 hours to catch up with the Prime Minister at the Calcutta Government House where the entourage would be staying, I suggested that S A Karim, the Foreign Secretary, should be given a place in the helicopter. In case, there was any unscheduled meeting between the two Prime Ministers before we could reach Calcutta, Sheikh Mujib should have a senior officer by his side. A seat was managed for Karim in another helicopter and the rest of the party proceeded by car.

I shared a car with Tofael Ahmed, Prime Minister's Political Secretary. Perhaps for security reasons the government of India took a last minute decision to take the Bangladeshi Prime Minister to the Government House by helicopter. We found both sides of the long route to the Calcutta Government House lined up with citizens of all ages, four-five deep, to have a glimpse of Bangabandhu. As our car sped through the Calcutta streets, we were greeted with applause and slogan from the crowd still under the impression that the Bangladeshi Prime Minister was in one of the cars. I told Tofael that he should return

the greetings of the people to make them happy. Finally, we ended up waving to the crowd on both sides of the road until we reached the Government House.

At the Government House, the Chief of Protocol was very apologetic, as he had not been able to manage a separate room for me. The Indian Government was informed about my inclusion in the delegation only a few hours before and, therefore, the best he could do was for me to share a room with Tofael Ahmed, Prime Minister's Political Secretary. It was no problem for me, but perhaps embarrassed Tofael who was always very respectful to me. I was like his elder brother. He made a point not to enter the bedroom until I had gone to sleep and leave before dawn before I was awake.

The Prime Minister's programme included calling on the Indian Prime Minister, bilateral talks, public reception

statement. She redeems her pledge to the people of Calcutta.

Sheikh Mujib addressed the gathering immediately after Mrs Gandhi. He spoke for only ten minutes and he said:

বাংলা মানুষের জন্মতার পাখে বাংলাদেশের বিনিময়ে অঙ্গীকৃত হয়েছে বাংলাদেশের বাধিনাতা।..... ইসলামী দর্শনী বাংলাদেশের একটি ক্ষেত্রে তাদের প্রতিক্রিয়া দেখে বিভাগিত করেছে। এই নির্বাচন মানবসম্মত আৰ্থৰ দিয়ে, অন্য দিয়ে, বুক দিয়ে সর্বোচ্চ সম্মত আপনারা যে উপকার করেছেন তা অভিনন্দন। আপনাদের এই দল পরিবোধের সাথে আমাদের নাই। কবিত্বের ভাষায় বলতে পরিঃ

নিয়ে আমি বিন্দি আমি
দেবীর কিছু নাই,
আছে তথ্য তালুকা
দিলাম আমি তাই।

Bangabandhu's Calcutta visit was a monumental success. He dominated the proceedings all through. He knew what he wanted and got what he wanted.

We returned from Calcutta with our heads high.

at the Calcutta Maidan, banquet by the Indian Prime Minister and meeting with a citizens' group etc.

The public reception at the Calcutta Maidan was a mammoth event. Since morning, all roads leading to the Maidan which by late noon was turned into a sea of humans. After the usual welcoming address by the Calcutta Mayor, Mrs Indira Gandhi spoke. Addressing the gathering, the Indian Prime Minister said that she, on this very ground, some two months ago promised three things. First, that Bangladesh would be liberated, the second that the refugees would go back to their homes and the third that Sheikh Mujib would come before them and here was Sheikh Mujib standing before them. The crowd broke into a thunderous applause.

What Mrs Indira Gandhi referred to was her appearance at the Calcutta Maidan on December 3, 1971, the day Pakistan Air Force launched a sneak attack on some of the Indian air fields in the Western Sector. Mrs Gandhi came to the meeting more than an hour late and during her brief appearance made the above

Minister did not dispute this position of the Bangladeshi Prime Minister.

Prime Minister Mujib also held out categorical assurance to restore to the returning refugees their properties left behind during army crackdown.

This had an electrifying impact on the Calcutta crowd. The impact on us was no less. I had known Bangabandhu to possess a photographic memory, but that he could with such ease and spontaneity relate couplets was not known to many of us.

The bilateral talks took place in one of the cosy lounge of the Government House where both the Prime Ministers were staying. Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad was assisting the Prime Minister and I took a seat on the Prime Minister's side. The agenda covered in this meeting were: expeditious and orderly return of the Bangladeshi refugees, restoration of their properties, restoration of the properties vested in the government under the Defence of Pakistan Rules, withdrawal

of Indian troops, I, however, did not find any official agenda of the meeting which nevertheless covered the above grounds. The Indian Prime Minister was assisted by Mr D P Dhar, among others.

On the question of the return of the Bengali refugees displaced by the war of liberation, Sheikh Mujib gave his government's firm resolve to expedite and complete as soon as possible orderly return of the Bengali refugees who left their homes during the crackdown of the Pakistani army. A question arose whether Bengalis migrated from the then East Pakistan before the army crackdown should be allowed to return. The Bangladeshi Prime Minister was quite categorical in his statement that the question of accepting those who had migrated to India before the army crackdown should not arise at all. Sheikh Mujib's position on this was quite clear and unambiguous. The Indian Prime

Minister did not dispute this position of the Bangladeshi Prime Minister.

Nothing that I can give

Yet love within me is boundless

And that I offer with all my being."

(English rendering by A Z M Obaidullah Khan)

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The vexed question, however, was the restoration of the properties vested in the government under the Defence of Pakistan Rules during the 1965 war between India and Pakistan. Sheikh Mujib's view on this was that properties vested in the then government through the operation of rules and regulations valid during that time could not be returned to their original owners and that his government was not prepared to reopen this issue of restoration of such properties. Because of Bangabandhu's strong position on this, Mrs Gandhi did not think it appropriate to press this point and the subject was closed.

The question of withdrawal of Indian troops came next. The Bangladeshi Prime Minister's view on this was that the Indian troops should

I never asked Bangabandhu why he did not accompany D P Dhar to see the master plan. However, my guess was that he took exception to the fact that instead of the Indian Prime Minister, the request came from her Adviser.

I did not take any part in

the preparation of the draft

communique which I presume

was handled by S A Karim and Humayun Rashid Chowdhury, our High Commissioner in Delhi. I got a copy while leaving for the airport and had time to read it only on the plane. No sooner I finished reading it, then the Prime Minister stepped into the economy class cabin and asked me whether I was happy with the text. I replied: I was.

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