

National Mourning Day

We recollect with deep grief the dark memories of assassination of the supreme leader of our freedom struggle and founder of the state of Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, murdered with his family members and immediate relatives twenty-two years ago. There is a marked spontaneity in the mourning this year because it is a declared state occasion that we universally condemn that dastardly swipe which did not even spare women and children.

The fetters placed on memorialising the blot and shame on our national conscience have been put away in the most salubrious wake, we believe, of the removal of the indemnity provision from the statutes book and a trial of the assassins already getting underway.

Hopefully, the absence of the opposition during the passage of the Indemnity Repeal Bill in parliament will be more than made up for by the party's partaking of the process heralded to give Bangabandhu his due place across the political divide in the country. There should not be any controversy as a contrived semantic after-thought over his being the architect of our freedom and independence. Because that is a universally acknowledged fact of history established unassailably. And what is of the very essence here is the tradition of the immutability and perpetuity of founding figures in the national halls of honour of countries gaining independence through do-or-die struggles.

Why was the Indemnity Ordinance promulgated and then passed into an Act of the Parliament in the first place during Mushtaq-Zia era? And then successive governments headed by Sattar, Ershad and Begum Zia allowed it to remain in the statutes book without any compunction whatsoever. It was warped on legal ethics and democracy and yet no qualms were felt while giving protection to those criminals. These were hardly honourable acts on the part of the professedly democratic governments otherwise so vociferously claiming to be serving the rule of law. If one were to discern a complicity in the perpetration of the injustice, could one be grossly wrong?

It is because of such failings on the part of governments that followed the 1975 change-over to right the wrong that the BNP should now feel obligated to give Bangabandhu a place above party politics.

Felicitations

On the golden jubilee of their independence Pakistan and India have a lot to celebrate, no doubt about that. India is definitely a nuclear power and Pakistan is also thought to have earned the capability to produce atomic bombs. That spectacular achievement is, however, no true reflection of their socio-economic development. With per capita GNP below 400 dollars as against 14,000 to 16,000 dollars for the developed nuclear powers, millions still languish in abject poverty on both sides of the borders. According to a survey conducted by a private organisation in India, 16 per cent of population there are yet to manage the ability to spend Rs three a day; another 19 per cent are barely in a position to boast a daily expenditure of Rs five.

Read against the backdrop of not just the nuclear capability or the launching of rockets in space but also of phenomenal progress made in areas like education, life expectancy and cereal production, the development picture is certainly a lop-sided one. One lesson both countries ought to learn from the carnage committed in the name of religion at the time of dismemberment of the subcontinent has remained unlearned. It is to overcome the communal, sectarian and caste hatred or intolerance. The discrimination between man and man is older and now appears to be stronger than religion and democracy.

Except for a brief period of emergency India has remained unswervingly wedded to democracy. The Indians have always given a good account of themselves whenever their politicians drifted away from set norms. Even today's minority coalition government is a reminder of a rebuff the electorate gave to the bigger political parties in the last polls. The trend is towards a federal system of government where no political party at the centre enjoys overwhelming influence over the whole country. Rather than going against them, this certainly goes to the common Indian's credit. They have preserved the soul of the country — democracy, that is — against all odds. Now the challenge before both India and Pakistan is not to go nuclear but to build on what they have achieved in terms of improved mutual relations, so that more wealth is created for rational distribution.

Sculptural Projection

The reported government decision to install sculptural pieces embodying our national culture, heritage and the liberation war legacy at different points of the city is laudable. So far we have hardly had any landmark, sculpturewise. The city's only pride sculpture work is the Shaheed Minar near the medical college but the Smriti Soudha, a unique piece of art-work, is located in a little far-away Savar. Then we have two more pieces of sculpture at the Dhaka University campus.

Now what we would like to see are creations like the Burghers in Paris. That would call for a talent like Rodin's. The problem, however, may arise concerning the choice of subjects. Undesirable controversies have been created about the role of some of the national events or heroes. We have been a witness to bitter wrangles over the hoisting of portraits of Bangabandhu. The disputes of political divisiveness over such issues tend to spill into ugly confrontations.

If there is any possibility of subjecting any sculptural work to desecration, it is better not to proceed with the idea. The threat comes from both religious fanatics and political rivals. Better temper them with objective art forms and figures first and then introduce them to other familiar areas.

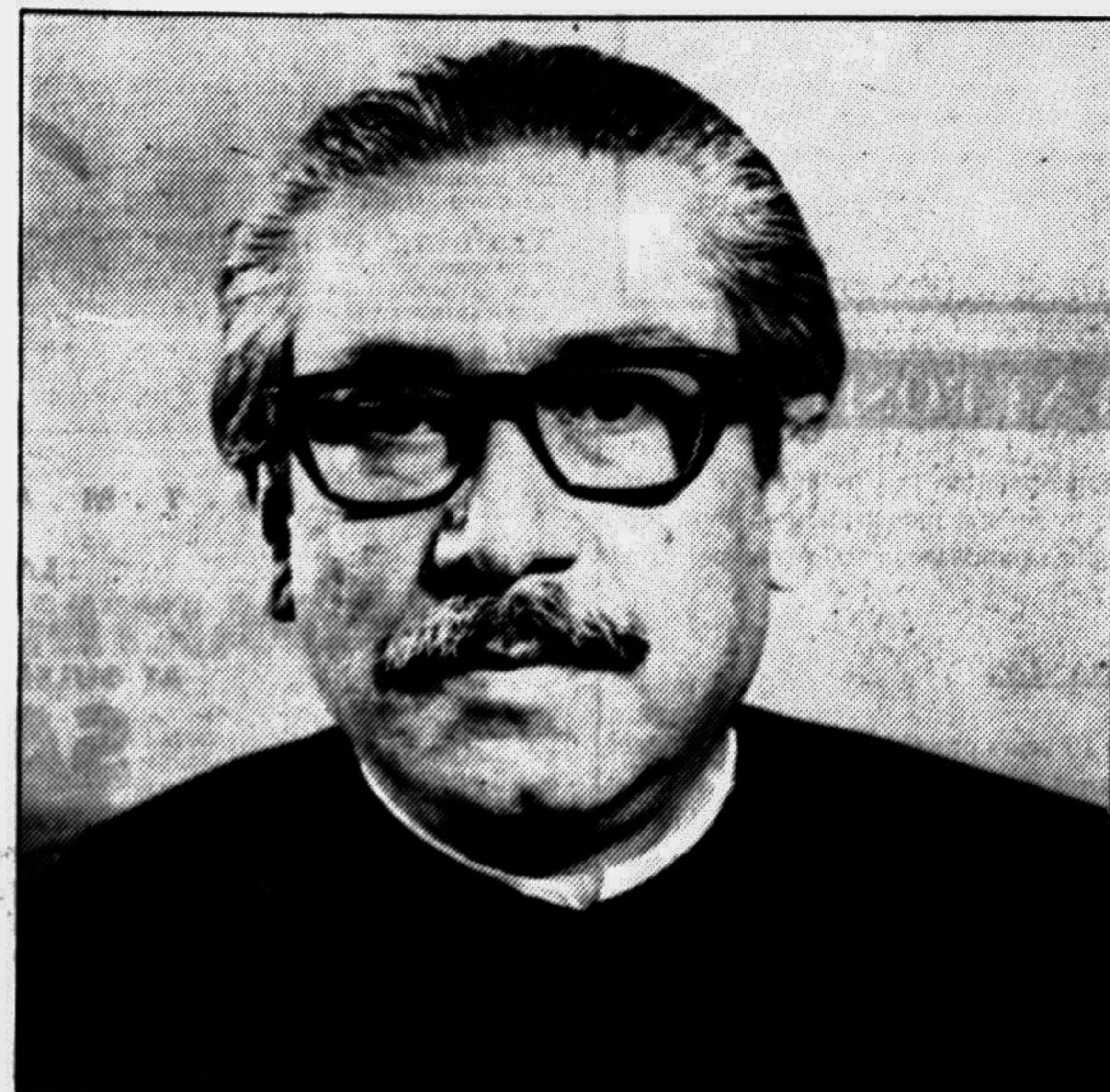
Can We Not Keep Bangabandhu Above Party Politics?

by Mahfuz Anam

We have talked a lot about national consensus. We think one place to begin such a consensus would be the place of Bangabandhu in the history of Bangladesh. For this to happen, Awami League will have to stop treating him as their party leader, and raise him far above that.

Again, to be fair, were Sheikh Mujib's faults greater than that of many other liberators of their countries? Let us take Mao Tse Tung as an example. Mao was a great political theoretician which Mujib was not. But in terms of being leaders of move-

Great Leap Forward turn out to be disastrous for his people? Did not his Cultural Revolution cause the death and humiliation of thousands of his very comrades, not the least of whom was Deng himself, who is now revered as the builder of modern



ments that brought independence to their respective countries, the comparison may not be totally out of place. Did Mao not make any mistake in running the very country he helped to liberate? Did not his

China. Yet in today's China Mao, who was vilified once for his destructive policies, has been brought back to the place of honour that is his. Why can we not do this in our country?

Memory of Sheikh Mujib raises passion because of the fundamental injustice that has been done to him and to his memory — he was brutally murdered along with his whole family, except the two daughters. Equally sadly a special law was passed to protect his killers for the following 21 years. The Indemnity Bill that protected the killers from any acts committed by them, however heinous, was perhaps the only one of its kind to exist anywhere in the world that gave Constitutional protection to people who themselves loudly and proudly proclaimed to have killed the members of three families — that of Bangabandhu, Sheikh Fazlul Huq Moni and Mr. Sarniabat. This same group or their followers later killed four leaders inside Dhaka Central Jail. Yet we had a LAW (how farcical!) that prevented anybody or institution from punishing them for these crimes.

Why did successive governments, that of Gen. Ziaur Rahman, Justice Sattar, Gen. Ershad, and finally that of the elected government of Begum Khaleda Zia take it upon themselves to maintain this ignominious law and not try these killers? What prevented Khaleda Zia's government, which had no connection with the events of '75, from not repealing this notorious law and trying these self-proclaimed murderers? Nothing, except narrow and morally bankrupt politics. It is the same politics which is now driving the country down and down the economic and social ladder.

We have talked a lot about national consensus. We think one place to begin such a consensus would be the place of Bangabandhu in the history of Bangladesh. For this to happen, Awami League will have to stop treating him as their party leader, and raise him far above that. Bangabandhu, after the birth of Bangladesh can no longer be claimed as the monopoly property of any one party. If it is not done so, then other parties who are the political rivals, will naturally drag him into present-day politics and try to denigrate him. So for Bangabandhu to be above politics, the path must be shown by the ruling party itself.

Simultaneously, we appeal to the BNP that it should stop denigrating Bangabandhu as it customarily does and give him the place of honour and respect that history and truth have given him. To continue to deny Bangabandhu his rightful place is to continue to divide the nation which is bound to lead to disastrous consequences.

If the process begins with Sheikh Mujib, then we can expect that other leaders will also begin to be judged above and beyond party politics and we as a people will be able to venerate our leaders and give our children role models to follow.

Sheikh Mujib—the Architect of Bangladesh's Foreign Relations

In a short span of three and a half years, in spite of innumerable odds, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was able to establish Bangladesh in the comity of nations. This he did with courage, tact and great statesmanship.

1971, and most of the world waited and watched as Bangladesh commenced its quest for recognition. Sheikh Mujib's return to Bangladesh on January 10, 1971 eased the situation somewhat but did not, automatically, cause a spate of recognitions. Securing international recognition quickly and obtaining membership of the international agencies were therefore among the major challenges that Sheikh Mujib's Government faced.

Bangabandhu then took three steps that were to have a bearing on Bangladesh's rapidly gaining acceptance in the comity of nations. First and foremost was the withdrawal of Indian troops from Bangladesh. Sheikh Mujib allayed the fears of his countrymen by declaring on the very day of his return to Dhaka from Islamabad via the somewhat circuitous but safe route of London and Delhi, that the Indian troops would leave whenever Bangladesh so wished. In February, 1972, after his meeting with Madame Gandhi in Calcutta, the date of withdrawal of the Indian troops was announced and on March 12, 1972, the last of the Indian contingents left Dhaka. This, not only reassured the Bangladeshis, but also blunted the edge of the well-orchestrated propaganda, that Bangladesh was India's creation. It was then largely realised that though at that given point of time India's foreign policy thrusts and Bangladesh's national aspirations had coincided, it did not, in any way, negate the quality of Bangladesh's independence.

Second, the constructive and positive attitude that Bangabandhu took towards develop-

ing relations with Pakistan. "Let bygones be bygones" was the dominant tenor of his attitude towards Pakistan, although understandably it was not always totally devoid of bitterness. But on the whole, the responsible and mature attitude that Bangladesh displayed at the tripartite Indo-Pakistan and Bangladesh talks helped hasten the process of normalisation. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto even paid a visit to Bangladesh in 1974, when Bangladeshis welcomed him displaying a "forgive and forget" attitude. Economically those were very difficult days for Bangladesh.



Bhutto misread our mood, and viewed our eagerness to negotiate outstanding issues, as weakness, and as such displayed an attitude that adversely affected the healing process. By then, however, a working relationship had already been set in motion at the tripartite level and matters moved ahead, though not as quickly as one would have desired.

Third, Sheikh Mujib displayed a remarkable statesmanship by underlining the importance of developing regional cooperation. Regional cooperation is a "by word" now, but in the war ravaged situation of those days, it must have called for courage and foresight on his part to declare in Cal-

cutta on February 5, 1972: "It is my earnest hope that there will at last be peace and stability in the subcontinent. Let there be an end, once for all, to the sterile policy of confrontation between neighbours. Let us not fritter away our national resources, but use them to lift the standard of living of our people. As for us we will not be found wanting to cooperate with all concerned for creating an area of peace in South Asia where we could live side by side as good neighbours and pursue constructive policies for the benefit of our people. History will not forgive us if we fail in

this challenging task...."

Three years after Bangabandhu's death, President Ziaur Rahman's initiative in formally proposing the formation of SAARC was a concrete reaffirmation of this belief which aimed at fostering economic cooperation among the nations of the region.

All these three measures helped the dust of war to settle and enabled us to look beyond. Recognition poured in and Bangladesh established bilateral relations with many countries. It had become a member of the Commonwealth even when Pakistan quit it in 1972. Then again, cordial relations with India during those days were a matter of great strength to Bangladesh. At the same

time, Bangladesh's membership of the OIC demonstrated its willingness and ability to plough its own furrow when the occasion demanded. Sheikh Mujib was in time-able to establish, the basis of our relations with the Arab countries that thereafter stood us in good stead in obtaining much-needed oil with reasonable ease; and at the same time, propelled remittances from increasing number of Bangladesh workers in those countries.

The then Soviet Union was the first country to which Bangabandhu paid a state visit in March 1972, and that country's help in clearing up our two clogged up, war ravaged ports, facilitated the direly needed movement of goods across the seas.

Bangabandhu's visit to Japan in October 1973 was an eventful one. From a plethora of items in his brief, he focused on the Jamuna Bridge, that he said, would help "consolidate" Bangladesh's economy. This bridge, (to be completed by the middle of next year), woe a great deal to his initiative. The visit was a big step in making Japan, a consistent partner in our progress.

Bangabandhu took time from his pressing schedules at home to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government meetings in 1973 and 1975 in Ottawa and Kingston respectively and the nonaligned summit in Algiers in 1974, during which he was able to introduce Bangladesh and to establish rapport with a large number of world leaders.

Bangabandhu became a member of the United Nations in 1974 when China withdrew its veto, but it has to be said to the

credit of Sheikh Mujib that from the very outset, he demonstrated his belief in the importance of Bangladesh having cordial and friendly relations with that country. He had, in his younger days as a politician, visited China twice and his political mentor Husain Shaheed Suhrawardy was the first Head of Government of Pakistan to have visited that country. Developing friendly relations with China had always been high on Sheikh Mujib's agenda — and soon after the creation of Bangladesh, a high level Bangladesh trade delegation visited the then Canton fair and established contacts with the Chinese authority, if only to underline the priority that Bangladesh attached to developing Sino-Bangladesh relations. To Sheikh Mujib, the Chinese veto against Bangladesh's membership of the United Nations was a passing cloud that had to clear up, sooner than later.

In 1974 when he went to New York to address the UN General Assembly, Henry Kissinger met him in New York and Bangabandhu went on to Washington to meet President Ford. Soon thereafter Kissinger, the US Secretary of State, visited Bangladesh and hopefully gained the impression that "baskets" do not always have to remain "bottomless". Early personal contacts with US leaders such as Senator Edward Kennedy gave Sheikh Mujib the opportunity of expressing his thanks for the warm support our independence movement received from the US public, which eventually laid the foundation of the very meaningful relations that Bangladesh now enjoys with the United States.

Thus it was that in a short span of three and a half years, in spite of innumerable odds, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was able to establish Bangladesh in the comity of nations. This he did with courage, tact and great statesmanship.

Why Not Place Him on Top of Politics?

by Shah Husain Imam

One prerequisite for reaching a bi-partisan consensus on his immutable place in our national history seems to be that there is no monopolisation of him by any single political party leaving other political parties a leeway to get in on it.

founding father of the state of Bangladesh; evidently deserved much better than the treatment he had been meted out during the last twenty-two years. He may not have been above criticism, but in all fairness to his contributions to our being what we are today, we surely owed him a debt not to denigrate his basic standing in our political history and national life.

The anti-thesis to the founding principles of democracy, nationalism, secularism and socialism propounded and propagated after his violent end not merely led to a plethora of constitutional amendments impregnating our national

history with malcontents but also reconditioned the national psyche along somewhat make-believe lines. The right-of-centre ideology which could be legitimately pursued by a political party alongside liberal political persuasions of other political parties, in a system of democratic pluralism, turned out to be downright chauvinistic and backward-looking.

Now, the BNP and Awami League both accuse each other of atavistic politics. This obsessive clinging to or living in the past would not have originated in the first place had there not been the violent political change-over we had seen on Au-

gust 15, 1975. It was at that point in time that a new analytical framework had to be contrived by the usurpers of power in an attempted bid to legitimise their illegal take-over. The murderous political coup on that date was followed by a couple of assassinations and constitutional coups with each one of them bringing in its wake an outright rejection of the preceding government but basically keeping to the pro-Islamic, pro-Chinese and anti-Indian lines.

This more or less explains why we have had this attritional tendency to dig into each other's past as the burning

problems of the day remained unaddressed.

The promulgation of the Indemnity Ordinance which ruled out any trial of the killers of Bangabandhu and members of his family was a blot on our national conscience. And none of the governments succeeding Mushtaq and Zia regimes ever made any attempt to strike out that pernicious law from the statutes book where it was embodied as an act of parliament. While the self-confessed killers were legally shielded, they went romping on to occupy high diplomatic positions abroad in a manifestly extended justification of the original just — the

assassination. All this was grossly antithetical to norms of justice and fair-play. This also explains how huggery came to rule the political roost down the line.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's image should be kept above partisan politics. For, he is the architect of the country in which we breathe, live and carry out our vocations, including, of course, politics for power. As a mark of discordance over this fundamental issue one can cite the absence of the opposition party in parliament when the Indemnity Act was being annulled at the initiative of the Awami League government.

One prerequisite for reaching a bi-partisan consensus on his immutable place in our national history seems to be that there is no monopolisation of him by any single political party leaving other political parties a leeway to get in on it.