

FOCUS

Mujibnagar Day

The First Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

by H T Imam

The need of the hour was our own independent and sovereign government led by highly motivated and selfless leaders. This is what the Government at Mujibnagar provided.

MARCH 7, March 26, April 17 and December 16 are historically most significant dates for our nation. It was Bangabandhu's call on the 7th March that galvanized the nation as one entity against the Pakistani oppression and tyranny; on early hour of 26th March Bangabandhu declared independence and sent out his message immediately before his arrest by the army; on April 17th the formal Proclamation of Independence was made and the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh took oath of office declaring Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the President of the new independent and sovereign country; December 16 was the Victory Day that saw the surrender of the Pakistani forces and the green and red flag of Bangladesh flying throughout its length and breadth.

April 17, Mujibnagar Day must be seen in its true historical perspective and its significance appreciated accordingly. Unfortunately, efforts have been made in the past to relegate its importance. In the grand design of the Pakistan-oriented people who came to power after August 1975 anything that had to do with our war of liberation and the defeat of Pakistan had to be gradually erased. All records connected with the first Government of Bangladesh were systematically destroyed. Text books were distorted. Books of history were written by people either opposed or indifferent to the liberation war. They forgot that by obliterating the memory of the Government at Mujibnagar they were denying themselves the ground for their own existence. It was the first Government that formally proclaimed independence through the

Proclamation of Independence. That is the foundation on which all subsequent laws have been enacted. The Laws Continuance Enforcement Order was one of the very first steps taken by the Mujibnagar Government to provide legal cover and validity to the laws then in force.

In the last week of March and first week of April, 1971 we were faced with an extremely critical situation. During the preceding months Pakistan Army had been bolstering its forces with a definite plan of action. By air and sea they augmented their strength almost daily. Talks with Awami League for a political settlement was only a smokescreen behind which they were building up massive strength to strike in force at a time most opportune to them. The night of 25/26 March was pre-planned.

Against this massive force of destruction equipped with the most lethal weapons we had only a handful of partly equipped battalions of the East Bengal Regiment and remnants of the erstwhile East Pakistan Rifles, Police, Ansars and Mujahids and half trained and ill-equipped, but highly motivated, students, political workers, labour, farmers, government employees and an assortment of freedom fighters who could be organized to resist the advancing Pakistani army. There was chaos and indiscipline all around. It was the initiative and imagination of the local administration and political leaders which kept these freedom fighters together.

The need of the hour was our own independent and sovereign government led by highly motivated and selfless leaders. This is what the Government at Mujibnagar provided. After the initial shock, the leaders gathered together promptly and es-

established contact with each other. All members of the National Assembly and of the Provincial legislature assembled and elected the new Government. In its turn, the Government swiftly established the military chain of command and set up a civilian administration on a war-time footing geared to support and sustain the war of independence.

Within the shortest possible time a highly mobile and effective government machinery was set up, which was both revolutionary and democratic at the same time. This small but

dedicated outfit achieved in nine months what otherwise would take nine years or even longer. To understand and appreciate this success of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, that is Mujibnagar Government, it is necessary to look at its character and organization.

The most important characteristic of our liberation war is that it was a people's war, fought by the people and led by a people's government. This fact has so long been suppressed in order to highlight the "heroism" of individual military leaders (some of whom nourished political ambitions). It is a shame for the nation that during the last two decades the Governments in power hardly made any reference to the Mujibnagar Government. No mention was made in official documents and functions about the patriotism, courage, leadership and integrity and the supreme sacrifice made by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed, Syed Nazrul Islam, Mr. Mansur Ali and Mr. Qamruzzaman. This country will never see leaders of this stature. Only a long struggle for independence and a liberation war like ours can create such leaders.

The unique thing about the Government at Mujibnagar was that it was both democratic and revolutionary. The Cabinet transacted its business on a war-time footing. But the political leadership was at the same time very active. Political leadership was involved in helping the war effort, in running and managing the youth camps (the source from which came the freedom fighters, the guerrillas), in the refugee camps, in the

field hospitals. This involvement was organized and structured. To help support the Sector Commanders and to run the local administration the Zonal Councils were set up. These were headed by Members of Parliament and included political

leaders, bureaucrats and professionals. The Youth Camp Organization played a key role in mobilizing the youth who volunteered to fight. Side by side, the actual conduct of the war, formulation of strategies and technical plans, allocation of

resources for the Mukti Bahini, cooperation and support from the Indian forces, training and equipping the freedom fighters and similar issues involving decision making process were left to the Prime Minister (also Defence Minister) and the Commander-in-Chief and his deputies. To project an image of national government, representing all shades of political opinion the all-party consultative committee was constituted with leaders like Moulana Bhasani, Moni Singh, Muzaffar Ahmed, Monoranjan Dhar).

The Government was small, but highly effective. Defence, meaning the war-effort to liberate the country was the sole objective. With this end in view the Bangladesh Forces headquarters was set up and the Sectors were organized. The chain of command from the Prime Minister to the Commander-in-Chief and the Sector Commanders was tight and efficient. The training of freedom fighters and the Youth Camp Organization were closely knit with the Army chain of Command. Everything else required to be done to help the war were organized. Foreign relations to mobilize international public opinion and to enlist the support of Governments was organized. Trade and Commerce; Refugee Rehabilitation; Home Affairs; Police; General Administration; Information and Broadcasting (whose main thrust was the Swadhin Bangla Betar); Health Ministry and the

Planning Commission to plan for the future economy of the country, especially rehabilitation, were set up. These were manned by dedicated personnel, professionals and experts. Swadhin Bangla Betar was a big victory and morale-booster for us in the psy-warfare against the Pakistanis.

Another significant aspect of the Government can be seen from the name it acquired and the name given to its headquarters. Baidyanathpur in Meherpur district was chosen as the site for the inauguration and oath-taking of the new Government. The proclamation of independence was first read out here, which has permanently become Mujibnagar. It was named after the President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and its Supreme Commander. The name of the father of the nation has become synonymous with its first government and its headquarters. Mujibnagar was not just this small village of Meherpur. Mujibnagar was wherever the Government moved and transacted its business. It was the cluster of buildings on Theatre Road, Calcutta; it was also Rowmari where the Government moved or Feni or Belonia or Agartala. It was the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh at Mujibnagar.

The writer is Cabinet Secretary of the first Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.



Professor Yunus and Economics

by Mahfuzur Rahman

CONSIDER the scene. A celebrity social activist who also happens to be a well-trained economist delivering his philippic on economics from the high podium of the annual gathering of the Bangladesh Economic Association, rendered even higher by the prestigious presence of the International Economic Association. In the speech, which he entitles, "Towards a poverty-free world," he describes "text-book economics" as an "exclusive playground for blood-thirsty profit-seekers", excoriates it for its treatment of labour rather "like draught animals than human beings" and disqualifies it as a social science for its alleged inability to understand the importance of credit.

He is convinced that economics "miscreated this world" and has been the source of "many human tragedies". By the time he has finished, you could be forgiven for having concluded that economics as we know it should be laid to rest and the world would be none the worse for that. For a fleeting moment that conclusion did come to my own mind as I stumbled upon Professor Yunus' address on *The Daily Star* website. I confess it took me a little while to get back my bearing.

I confess at the outset of an evangelist, and in Prof Yunus' address there is plenty of that, as the above quotes suggest. Hyperboles such as, "I see no reason why anybody should remain a poor person" and that "Poverty should be a matter which will find its place in the poverty museum", neither inform nor impress a searching mind. But let us try to understand him and the issues.

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Eradication of poverty must be one of the most noble goals of any civilised society. There is dispute here. Is fighting poverty any business of economics? This may come as a surprise to those who have declared *Jihad* on poverty, but economics has always been concerned with the same phenomenon. It is only that there has not been anything evangelical about this concern. With so much poverty in the world, the idea is bound to provoke instant cynical reaction. But economics would be irrelevant in a world without want, and its preoccupation has been production and distribution of goods and services to satisfy human want. In fact it has concerned itself with nothing else. So why is Prof Yunus saying, "... seeds of poverty are planted firmly in the pages of economic textbooks"?

Because text-books economics does not have the "human being" at its centre. As he puts it, "It has abstracted away from the very essence of a human being", who is treated as a mere a factor of production. Since human beings are creative beings — and who can dispute that? — their neglect in economics is the essence of the problem. Since wage-earners are treated "more like draught animals than human beings" in economics, it is said to follow logically that self-employment is the form of activity that deserves the centre of the stage. This will release the full potential of human creativity and thus end poverty.

Self-employment by and large is an inefficient mode of production. If this is so, those who think that it is in some way the most dignified of human occupations, have also a duty to explain how much it would cost the rest of the society to maintain that dignity.

A second facet of the Yunus scheme is the "social consciousness-driven enterprise" which, as the name suggests, will be driven not by greed which motivates the capitalist, but by the goal of social good. He is confident that "social goals can replace greed as a powerful motivational force." The link between this idea and eradication of poverty is not clear. Perhaps Prof Yunus sees this as one other way to humanise economics and thus show that the marketplace does not have to be an exclusive playground for the "bloodthirsty profit-seekers" and offers it as a "challenging field for all good people who want to set the world in the right course."

Against this background, it would be useful to recollect what text-book economics does and traditional development economics says. Stripping the matter to its bare bones, we do find that text-book economics sees an important economic activity (production) as a process in which economic agents, driven by self-interest, come together. Those who bring them together are, of course, the entrepreneurs, whom economics allegedly considers as a royalty — Prof Yunus' term — while consigning the rest of the human race to the anonymity of mere factors of production. It is obvious that by this latter category of human beings Prof Yunus means only wage-earners who are "fated to serve others". Note here that there is another category of human beings who are also treated with equal anonymity — owners of capital, some of them filthy rich, many quite ordinary people — that Prof Yunus appears to have forgotten. Economics should have at least been credited with even-handedness!

Now, these entrepreneurs, text-book economics admits, are motivated by profit. But it also tells us that they cannot charge consumers any price they like. Competition, which

mainstream economics prefers, keeps profits — call it greed — in check. Consumers have a way of punishing greedy entrepreneurs by leaving him in droves. There are many exceptions to this scenario, but by and large this is not disputed in text-book economics.

Along comes another old acquaintance — prices. They act as a signal of what consumers want and therefore what to produce. At the level of the economy as a whole, they signal allocation of resources between different uses. Again, they are never perfect signals and in some areas they may not work at all. But in the general run of things, they work fairly well. More important, we do not have an alternative. The crushing failure of command economies in recent past should attest to that.

To bring in here something close to Prof Yunus' heart, since there is an inevitable lag between the beginning of a production process and the sale of the final product, the entrepreneur often has to rely on resource from outside the enterprise, which is what credit is. Far from being oblivious of the importance of credit, mainstream economics has given it a central place, both at the macro and micro levels. We, of course, know what he really means. It is the channelling of credit to very small producers that he is after, which is a matter of social preference, and is not something that disqualifies economics as a social science.

No description fits all

for self-employment can always benefit the unemployed and raise the income of the very poor significantly — certainly a laudable objective — there is as yet no explanation of how a heavy reliance on self-employment would generate income fast enough to reduce poverty for the society as a whole and how it would sustain a high pace of development.

While Prof Yunus' preference for self-employment can always benefit the unemployed and raise the income of the very poor significantly — certainly a laudable objective — there is as yet no explanation of how a heavy reliance on self-employment would generate income fast enough to reduce poverty for the society as a whole and how it would sustain a high pace of development. And, incidentally, has anyone asked a fully employed wage-earner whether she or he would rather be self-employed? Perhaps one should put the question to the average wage-earner at a garments factory in Dhaka. Joan Robinson's remark that "... the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all" may sound jarring but does contain more than a grain of truth and is not irrelevant here.

Self-employment by and large is an inefficient mode of production. If this is so, those who think that it is in some way the most dignified of human occupations, have also a duty to explain how much it would cost the rest of the society to maintain that dignity. It is not unlike that famous quip aimed at the plain-living Mahatma Gandhi: "If only the Mahatma knew how much it costs to keep him in poverty! Prof. Yunus' advocacy of social consciousness-driven enterprises appears even more utopian but we await an elaboration from him. A single point may be noted in passing here. If these enterprises are to compete with the capitalist ones, they will be pitifully short-lived. About his own Utopia Thomas More had this to say: "... [so must I] need to confess and grant that there are many things in the Utopian commonwealth which in our cities I may rather wish than hope for."

This brings me back to the question of the mind-set. The mind-set of the text-book economist is at worst neutral to human considerations — let us concede this to Prof Yunus. This notwithstanding, modern economics has witnessed great advances in human wellbeing, which suggests that one does not have to proclaim the dignity of human beings from rooftops to achieve the desired result. More important, that mind-set at least allows possibilities for examination of hard choices that an economy faces if it to grow fast and reduce poverty. Bangladesh today faces many such hard choices. It cannot afford the luxury of a cloud-cuckoo-land.

The author is an economist with a long career in the UN system. He lives in New York from where this article was sent.

Metropolitan

Musical programme 'Tomra Amar' tomorrow

'Security to remain a far cry if consumers have no access to food'

By Staff Correspondent

A special musical programme "Tomra Amar" and distribution ceremony of certificates of a workshop on "Liberation War Music" will be held at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University auditorium tomorrow, says a press release.

Arranged by Abhijay Sangeet Angan, the programme will be attended by Minister for Forest and Environment Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury as chief guest while renowned journalist Santosh Gupta will grace the occasion as special guest.

Eminent educationist Prof Anisuzzaman will preside the programme which will be conducted by reputed artist Aji Roy.

Call for steps to face 'millennium bug'

Speakers at a meeting in the city yesterday strongly pleaded for immediate steps to face the global technological disaster called "Millennium Bug", reports UNB.

We are hurtling towards a technological disaster and there is no time to waste, they said addressing the meeting on "Millennium Bug" at the FBCCI auditorium in the city.

Organised by FBCCI, the meeting was chaired by its executive committee member Mir Nasir Hussain, Ahsan Habib of the World Bank, Dhaka and MA Matin of British American Tobacco in Bangladesh also addressed the meeting.

Nasir Hussain said if the problem cannot be addressed in time, it will paralyse the entire gamut of financial, pension, inventory, transport and communication systems and manufacturing plants.

Independence Day observed in Italy

A function in observance of the Independence Day of Bangladesh was held recently in the city of Brescia in Italy, according to a message received here yesterday.

Discussion meeting, cultural evening, exhibition of Bangladesh products and foods highlighted the day's programme. Besides, a documentary on Bangladesh's independence was also screened.

The visiting Nobel Peace Laureate, US agriculturist Dr Norman E Borlaug, said in the city yesterday that merely increasing production of cereals would not ensure food security in South Asia unless people of the region have also the capacity to purchase foodgrains, reports BSS.

"First we have to ensure their purchasing capacity so that they can have access to food," said 79-year old Dr Norman adding that if the consumers have no access to food, the security would remain a far cry.

Dr Norman, at present senior consultant of International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre (CIMMYT), won the Nobel Peace Prize 18 years ago, also described 'political will' as a prerequisite for food security in South Asia instead of depending on scientists to address the problem.

Dr Norman was addressing a symposium on "Food Security in South Asia: Vision for Research and Development," at the BARC auditorium in the city.

Food and Agriculture Minister Begum Motia Chowdhury

Australian MPs call on Speaker

The visiting four-member Australian parliamentary delegation led by Bill Thomas JP, MLA called on Speaker Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury at his Sangsod Bhaban office yesterday, reports BSS.

During the meeting they exchanged views on different aspects of functioning of parliaments in Australia and Bangladesh.

Speaker Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury informed the delegation that a Bangladesh-Australia parliamentary friendship group will be formed soon.

The Australian delegation has shown keen interest in matters relating to functioning of Bangladesh parliament, process of parliamentary election and the concept of care-taker government.

Inaugurated the symposium organised by BARC. Agriculture Secretary M M Shawkat Ali presided the function while BARC Executive Chairman Zahurul Karim and chief of Agrobased Industries and Technology Development Project (ATDP), IFDC Bangladesh, Ronald P Black also spoke.

Expressing his satisfaction over the progress of South Asia's agriculture through applying 'green revolution technologies' during the last three decades, Dr

Norman said mushrooming populations have eaten up many of the gains of the method. In this regard, he underlined the need for eradication of poverty as the major means of food security in the region. He also expressed his pleasure at Bangladesh's progress in wheat production since after independence.

The 1996-97 season had a record wheat harvest of nearly 1.7 million tons and it is expected to be more better in 1997-98, he pointed out.

But first, for a starter, is it entirely true that, as Prof Yunus puts it, "In a major way economics is responsible for creating the world we live in"? A more persuasive argument could be that modern economics is largely the creation of the modern economy and not the other way around. The chain of causality between economics and the "world" must be even weaker. Neither one should take too literally Keynes' famous assertion about practical men being "usually slaves of some defunct economist". One should not similarly exaggerate the power of economics to create a mind-set. I shall return to the latter question.

Second, I remind myself of Lionel Robbins' dictum that there is no "penumbra of approbation" around the concept of equilibrium, a dictum that emphasises the positive side of economics. Conclusions offered by economics need not be accompanied by advocacy even though nothing prevents an economist from offering one. On the other hand, the crop of normative economics that has come up in recent years has generally been on the side of "humanisation" of economics, if one can put it that way. This is certainly welcome. The problem with Prof Yunus' own concept of humanised economics is that it is only normative without being economic.

In his scheme of things, by economics he seems to mean the economic system as well as the discipline. This is confusing even though this enables him to sharpen his attack on traditional economics. I shall nevertheless use his convention.

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Visitors at the month-long exhibition of sculptures by Artist Novera Ahmed which was inaugurated at the National Museum Auditorium in the city on Tuesday. —Star photo