

Remembered songs

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tried to convey to themselves and their friends—that the Bengali struggle was essentially a separatist movement sought to be implemented through means conspiratorial. In the end, it was a conspiracy of the men in what used to be West Pakistan that gave Pakistan enough rope to hang itself with. Bengalis had no business dismembering Pakistan. They only reclaimed Bengal for themselves, in its historicity as Bangladesh.

And Bangladesh is a good deal more than a patch of territory, a grouping of land and water and forests and people. It is that, of course. On a very grand scale, it is a state of mind. Look around, all these years after the attainment of liberation, and you will note the spiritedness of the young Bengali as he speaks about his legacy and the bearing it has on the history forever shaping up around him. There are millions of Bengali women who have found the voice to be themselves in the freedom that has meant Bangladesh. Our arts have thrived, our poetry has constantly reasserted itself, and our songs do not come to an end. Yes, there are political differences aplenty amongst all of us. That is as it should be. Indeed, the ethos of Bangladesh speaks relentlessly of the need for diversity in opinion, for that is how democracy comes to give itself shape and texture in a modern society. In Bangladesh today, for all the variations in thought, the cultural unity of the Bengali nation endures. The thrill of freedom, the colors of Baishakh, the intellectual appeal of a book fair—these are the hallmarks of the country we waged war for and turned free. Should I, should you, then not be proud of the legacy we are heir to?

Dreams are in need of re-energising if history is to be a

continuity. In Bangladesh, our dreams have been broken all too often, have cracked at crucial points in our political existence. We have endured. And yet endurance gains meaning and credibility if and when nationhood is enriched through the great moving force of politics. In the end, it is politics that one falls back on for the translation of dreams into the tangible. Our job—and it is everyone's job—at this point in time is to strive for the creation of a society that is caring and compassionate and rich in its flavour. Our young will need education of a superior sort, and then employment that makes full, happy men and women of them. Our elderly will soon require safety nets to deal with the insecurity of age. Our businessmen, noted for their acumen, have been calling for an atmosphere friendly to investment and production. It remains our task to heed their collective voice. In a land that still reverberates with the sounds of voices lost in the war of liberation, the music rising from the depths of our collective soul is a reminder, even as the generation of our teenaged freedom fighters slips quietly into growing, brooding middle age, that a colossal degree of work remains to be done.

Listen to the song of the Crickets coming over Bangladesh's villages as time hovers between the brilliance of day and the soot of the night. It is in twilight that the sounds of old battles, the cries of the dead and the unforgotten smell of blood and fire come rushing back into the consciousness. It is 1971 we recall. In that year we went through horrors unprecedented in shape and quality. In that year, by the self-same token, we as a nation spotted our annus mirabilis.

Poet of Politics

When Sheikh Mujibur Rahman proclaimed the independence of Bangladesh last week some of his critics declared that he was merely yielding to the pressure of his extremist supporters, seeking to ride the crest of a wave in order to avoid being engulfed by it. But in a sense Mujib's emergence as the embattled leader of a new Bengal "nation" is the logical outcome of a lifetime spent fighting for Bengali nationalism. Although Mujib may be riding the crest of a wave, his presence there is not accident.

Born just 51 years ago to a well-to-do landowner in a village near Dacca, Mujib went through his early schooling without distinguishing himself by intellectual accomplishment. He was outgoing and popular as a boy, fond of talk



and people and sports and by the time he went to Calcutta's Islamia College for a liberal arts degree he had come to the attention of his elders as a Moslem League activist. His mentor then was H.S. Suhrawardy, Prime Minister of Bengal under the British Raj, who later served one year as Prime Minister of Pakistan. Mujib studied law, but unlike Suhrawardy, a moderate, he soon developed a penchant for direct action. In the late '40s both men realize that their native state of Bengal was getting less than its due in the new nation of Pakistan. Suhrawardy in 1949 founded a new party, the Awami League, dedicated to a "united Bengal for the Bengalis." Mujib took to the streets and was twice arrested and jailed for leading illegal strikes and demonstrations.

Out of prison Mujib became Suhrawardy's right-hand man within the Awami League but then destroyed his leader's efforts to compromise and form a coalition with other parties. Mujib's success enabled the Awami League to form a new East Pakistan provincial government in 1956, and he served in it for seven months as Minister of Commerce and Industry. After Suhrawardy died in 1963, Mujib apparently felt less hampered by the older man's principles of moderation. He revived the Awami League, pursued his "instinctive" style of politics, and demanded

not pretend to be an original thinker. He is a poet of politics, not an engineer, but the Bengalis tend to be more artistic than technical, anyhow, and his style may be just what was needed to unite all the classes and ideologies of the region.

A month ago, at a time when he was still publicly refraining from proclaiming independence, Mujib privately refraining from proclaiming independence, Mujib privately told Newsweek's Loren Jenkins that "there is no hope of salvaging the situation. The country as we know it is finished." But he waited for President Mohammed Yahya Khan to make the break. "We are the majority so we cannot secede. They, the Westerners, are the minority, and it is up to them to secede."

Two weeks later as the crisis deepened, hundreds of Bengalis crowded the yard and hallways of Mujib's home in suburban Dacca, and puffing on a pipe, ("the only foreign thing I use"), he cheerfully spoke to them all. After addressing one enthusiastic gathering Sheikh Mujibur Rahman turned to Western newsmen and said: "I have this sort of thing from 5 a.m. on. Do you think anyone can suppress this spirit with machineguns?" A few days later someone was trying.

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red circle of the flag which was surrounded by a deep green background. Nure Alam Siddiqui, Abdul Quddus Makhan and Sajahan Siraj were present during the meeting.

While briefing newsmen in the afternoon, Sheikh Mujib announced that there would be a public meeting at Paltan Maidan the next day.

March 3
At the call of Bangabandhu, there was a sea of people at Paltan Maidan. Vehicular traffic came to a halt in the streets. Sheikh Mujib started using the term East Bengal instead of East Pakistan. He asked his countrymen to be ready for any sacrifice, any eventuality in the coming days. He declared that the Cuckoo could not be allowed to eat rice over and over again, the time had come for its elimination. He urged the people irrespective of party or opinion to strengthen his hands for realizing the rights of the Bengalees. He pronounced in unequivocal terms that the responsibility of governing Pakistan must be placed at his disposal. There were then repeated slogans—"Bengalee heroes, take up



arms, liberate Bangladesh."

Sajahan Siraj read out the communique for independence at the meeting. The demand for an independent, sovereign and socialist Bangladesh was embodied in that communique.

A jittery Yahya Khan called for a round-table conference. Bangabandhu said, there were still blood-stains in the streets. Joining this conference by trampling this blood at gun-point would be an act of betrayal and hypocrisy. Bangabandhu concluded his speech by shouting the slogan, "Joy Bangla". He announced that the next directive to the nation would be given at the Racecourse Maidan on March 7.

March 4
There was no halt in Dhaka. Neither was martial enforced anywhere else. Heading to the call of Bangabandhu at the Paltan meeting, people from different professions and classes adopted the "Joy Bangla" slogan and started to assemble under the new flag.

March 5
The Bengalee members of the armed forces, EPR & Police started to support Bangabandhu in secret. Night curfew was lifted from Dhaka and other places. The soldiers remained confined in the Cantonments.

March 6
Deeply perturbed by the non-cooperation movement of Bangabandhu, Yahya summoned the session of the national assembly on March 25. The people could understand that it was a trick. Yahya changed the Governor of East Pakistan. Lt. Gen. Tikka Khan was posted in place of Vice Admiral Ahsan. The Chief Justice of the High Court B.A. Siddiqui expressed his inability to conduct the oath of office of Tikka Khan.

March 7
Standing in the midst of a turbulent sea of people in Racecourse, Bangabandhu declared "The struggle this time is the struggle for freedom, the struggle this time is the struggle for independence". Arriving at the venue at 3.20 p.m., Bangabandhu added an indelible chapter to the national history. The meeting was kept under surveillance from helicopter. Many Pakistani journalist were present in the meeting for gathering news. Although there was prior preparation, Bangabandhu's speech could not be broadcast live via the Dhaka centre of Radio Pakistan due to administrative obstruction. The people effectively withdrew all sorts of cooperation to the Pakistan regime from that day.

March 8
Thirty five regulations were issued by Tajuddin Ahmed on behalf of Bangabandhu to run the civil administration. The spark of agitation spread throughout the country. In the morning, Radio Pakistan broadcast the recorded 7 March speech of Bangabandhu which was heard throughout the country. The officials of Radio and

Television sat for a discussion at the initiative of Rao Farman Ali. General Farman Ali was forced to accede to the demand for broadcasting Mujib's speech on Radio and Television and showing his picture on Television. The Bengalee employees of PIA started work-abstention from the day.

March 9
Moulana Bhashani declared at a huge public meeting in Paltan Maidan "Bangladesh will definitely become independent. Even Yahya's father can't halt the independence of Bengalees." He further said that their could be no compromise with Pakistan; he would join Mujib in the struggle for independence.

As Tikka Khan could not become the Governor of East Pakistan, he was appointed the Chief Martial Law Administrator. The people started to look after maintenance

of law and order as per the directive of Bangabandhu.

March 10
All educational institutions of the country remained closed. Only Banks were kept open between 9 and 12 o'clock. The Awami Ulema Party offered gayebana janaza for those killed. In the evening news bulletin, Bangabandhu apprised how soldiers and ammunitions were being brought from Pakistan and how desperate the Pakistani rulers were becoming to keep East Pakistan under occupation. The UN Secretary General U Thant said: "East Pakistan was no more safe for foreigners."

March 11
With the help of UOTC at the university, the students started training with Dummy and 303 Enfield rifles. Four student leaders in a joint statement placed a demand that Yahya should immediately sit with Bangabandhu for discussion on an urgent basis. In a statement Bhutto said that he would arrive in Dhaka to talk with Mujib. Many people who were decorated by the Pakistani regime stopped using those decorations. Prof. Mozaffar Ahmed and Aftab Rahman Khan sat with Bangabandhu and expressed their solidarity with him.

March 12
The Students Action Council announced that under no circumstances, the military people would be allowed to purchase goods. Publicity was started on Yahya-Mujib meeting. Moulana Bhashani expressed the hope in Mymensingh that Sheikh Mujib would continue to provide correct leadership to the nation. The Chief of Terik-e-Isteklal Party of Pakistan said -if East Pakistan wanted division, that should be accepted. Those who were trying to suppress the Bengalees with bullets were making a great mistake.

March 13
The employees of the armed forces who were on holiday were asked to join duty with immediate effect. March 14
General strike was observed throughout the country to realise the 4 point demand of the non-cooperation movement. A long discussion was held between Wali Khan & Bangabandhu on the question of 6 points. The directive issued by students action council said that the Bengalee soldiers who were in East Pakistan on leave should join the war of independence. They would be re-appointed in service after the country's independence was achieved. The general strike was observed in the secretariat and all educational institutes.

Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin refused to accept the decoration Helal-e-Imtiaz. The students action council decided to set up checkpoints to stop smuggling of resources from East Pakistan.

March 15
Amid tight security, General Tikka

welcomed him. Talks were held for two and a half hours behind closed doors. After emerging from the talks at 1:30 p.m., Bangabandhu replied to queries from local and foreign journalists. After returning home Bangabandhu sat in a closed door meeting with the Awami League high command. Non-cooperation was started by the Dhaka High Court Bar. While performing Yahya's duty, black flag was hoisted on his police van.

March 17
Bangabandhu sat with Yahya for another two and a half hours of discussion. While returning, Bangabandhu told journalists at the gate of President's House that there would be more talks the following day and the discussions were of exclusive nature held without the assistance of aides.

March 18
No talks were held. Bhutto's effort to complicate the situation through different types of speeches at Karachi continued unabated. It was announced that Bhutto would arrive in Dhaka on 22 March. Bhutto declared that if any talks were held in his absence, he would reject those. Bangabandhu's discussions with his party high command continued.

March 19
The Pakistani troops were sent to Joydebpur to disarm the Bengalee soldiers of 10 East Bengal regiment. The people obstructed their movement through barricades. There were shootings and killings. In the face of opposition, the Pakistani troops failed to move forward. The Bengalee soldiers refused to surrender their arms.

Mujib-Yahya talks held. After the talks the journalists asked, "are you optimistic?" Bangabandhu replied, "wait and see".

March 20
The talks continued. As on other days, Bangabandhu wore black cloth on his hand. The whole city was alive with processions in protest against the firing at Joydebpur. The nation waited anxiously as another day passed.

March 21
Talks started as usual, but ended within 7 minutes. There were three aides on each side. In response to queries from journalists after the talks, Bangabandhu replied, "there has been some progress." Bhutto arrived in Dhaka amid tight security. Surrounded by troops with raised guns, he was escorted to Hotel Intercontinental (now Dhaka Sheraton) where he stayed.

March 22
Zulfikar Ali Bhutto joined the talks. Bilateral talks became a trilateral one. President Yahya announced that the session of the National Assembly was being kept in abeyance to provide opportunity to the political parties to reach consensus through dialogue. While this announcement was being broadcast over Radio, it was announced that the President

would address the nation very soon and that may contain a framework for transfer of power.

Bangabandhu told the journalists that day, "we should not be too optimistic. Let's see what the President says."

March 23
The leaders of Swadhin Bangladesh Students Action Council arrived at Bangabandhu's residence along with a procession of one hundred thousand people and handed over to him the provisional flag of independent Bangladesh.

The session of the National Assembly at Dhaka on March 25 was again postponed. This Presidential announcement was conveyed to the waiting journalists by the President's PRO amid a heated atmosphere. It was disclosed that the President would address the nation over Radio and Television.

Talks were held between Bangabandhu and Yahya for one hour fifteen minutes. Bangabandhu told journalists, "we will not sit in the session if our demands are not met." When Bhutto arrived in the President's House amid tight security, he was severely rebuked and shown black flag. Bhutto could not escape the jeers even when he was returning to the hotel after the talks. The provisional flag of Bangladesh was raised in different foreign missions except the US embassy in Dhaka.

March 24
When the agitated people came to Bangabandhu's house and wanted to hear from him he said that when an injustice is forced upon the people of Bangladesh, they reject that. The people of Bangladesh and he himself did not accept anything which was outside the demand of the general masses. He said, -our demands are justified and those must be met. We are not afraid of red eyes. The people of Bangladesh are united and awake. We want peaceful resolution of all conflicts; threats will not work. The non-cooperation movement would continue as long as our demands were not met.

He said, "I do not know if I would be able to issue any more directives. Even if I can not do that, the seven crore people of the country would do that. The people of Bangladesh are not afraid of the Pakistani military. The Bengalees will persevere till their demands are realized. The Bengalee nation will tolerate bullets, but they will not live as servants of Pakistan in their cherished Bangladesh."

March 25
After ordering six division of troops to go into action to perform the essential job of punishing the Bengalees, Yahya declared at a press conference on reaching Karachi, "Allah has saved Pakistan." Monam Khan left Bangladesh on the same plane. Once the Chief Minister of East Pakistan-- Nurul Amin also followed the same path.

People came to know about Yahya's departure at five in the afternoon. The people of Dhaka became apprehensive that something might happen that same night. Becoming a defacto occupying force, the Pakistan Army went into all-out attack after 10.30 at night combing the Dhaka University, Rajarbagh Police Line and the EPR headquarters at Peelkhana with tanks and all kinds of ammunition. The slum-dwellers beside the old Railway colony were fired upon. The slums were set alight. The Dhakaites spent the night in great terror.

At midnight Bangabandhu declared the independence of Bangladesh via the EPR wireless. The declaration was as follows: "This may be my last message, from today Bangladesh is independent. I call upon the people of Bangladesh, wherever you might be and with whatever you have, to resist the army of occupation to the last. Your fight must go on until the last soldier of the Pakistan Occupation army is expelled from the soil of Bangladesh and final victory is achieved. Joy Bangla."

Translation: Helal Uddin Ahmed



lest we should forget the killers

Tribute

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heart with bullets. We know what followed in the aftermath of that shameful incident.

It is difficult to evaluate Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in his entirety, not because his contributions and achievements are too big to measure, but because they have transcended his own mortal self. Only Rabindranath could have said as he did in his poem 'Shahjahan' that he was grater than what he achieved and the chariot of his life leaves all such achievements behind. At the end of the festival of life, he discarded everything like useless earthenwares to pursue his endless journey to eternity.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is the synonym of Bangladesh. He dreamt it, conceived it, gave it shape and then finally brought it to reality. To make all these happen in only twenty-three years he had to engage himself in a state of persistent political struggle against the military dictators of Pakistan. He had a low but thunderous voice that was relentless in demanding restoration of democracy so that the people of the country could decide who should form the government and lead the Country. He raised the issue of regional disparity between the two wings of Pakistan and launched blistering attack against the ruling elite of Pakistan for their role in depriving Bangladesh of its rightful share in government and economic resources. Bengalis, being 56 percent of the total population of Pakistan, was relegated to the status of second class citizens. On the question of sharing the economic resources, Bangladesh had been pushed further behind. Less than 40 percent of the national budget was allocated for the eastern province while nearly 80 percent of the development budget was spent on various development activities in West Pakistan. This created an unbearable imbalance between the two wings of Pakistan. West Pakistan began to thrive in leaps and bounds while the economic condition of the people of Bangladesh deteriorated from bad to worse.

The Awami League under the leadership of Sheikh Mujib opposed the neo-colonial exploitation of the then East Pakistan and launched a democratic Campaign for realization of East Pakistan's rightful share of foreign aid and other development-related investments. He traversed the length and breadth of Bangladesh to mobilize the Bengalis to unite under the banner of the Awami League. His fiery speeches filled with nationalist spirit and irrefutable logic acted like magic in convincing the Bengalis that neither democracy nor development was possible under the military rule. They were also convinced that Pakistan was an artificial state based on religious faith rather than democratic norms. The ruling clique in West Pakistan and its henchmen in the East were deadly against putting the state under democratically elected civilian politicians. The army, with its vested interests in military rule was pathologically anti-people and hence anti-democratic. As the demands of Sheikh Mujib were igniting the minds of the Bengalis the ruling elites and the military and civil bureaucracy of Pakistan joined hands, with the vow to crush the nationalist movement of the Bengalis.

Mujib and his Awami League with stood the repression that followed. While the Pakistani rulers banked on the might of the

state apparatus to shun the growing nationalist movement of the Bengalis, the Awami League depended on the united strength of the people to face up to the atrocities unleashed by the state. The Awami League emerged as the majority party in the election of 1970. But the Pakistani Generals would not handover power to the elected representatives of the people. They feared that if the Bengalis were allowed to form government in Pakistan it would mark the end of the plundering of the resources by the military. The vested quarters of Pakistan also extended support to the military.

The result had been disastrous for Pakistan. The war of Liberation of Bangladesh broke out on the night of 25 March, 1971 as the Pakistani army launched an all out attack on the sleeping population of Dhaka that killed more than 20 thousand people in a matter of hours. The entire city was set on fire and the blood of the innocent flowed all in direction. Bengalis took up arms at the call of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib. The following nine months saw the most brutal genocide in the history of mankind. Three million people were killed during that period. Finally history gave its verdict in favour of Bangladesh. On 16 December, 1971, the Pakistanis signed the document of unconditional surrender. The new state of Bangladesh was born amidst a river of blood and tear.

What was the 'mantra' behind such an unprecedented victory of the Bengalis and that too within the span of only nine months? In Vietnam they took thirty years. In Algeria they needed more than that. In Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia, they required decades to free them from the shackles of foreign occupation. But in the case of Bangladesh, it took shorter than a year. The Bengalis had never been a trigger-happy nation. They love peace and always try to avoid bloodshed. So, what had happened to them in 1971? How could they bring one of the fiercest armies of the world to their knees?

It was not mere military might. Nor were there any superior war tactics that had made the miracle happen. It was the indomitable spirit of the Bengalis that had been ignited in them by their leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Although he was in jail during the war of liberation, the sound of his clarion call urging the Bengalis to turn every house into an impregnable fortress rang into every ear of the 75 million people of Bangladesh. His declaration of independence at the historic public meeting on 7 March, 1971 had kindled an eternal flame in the heart of every Bengali and it burned for the entire period of the liberation war. He was not in front of our eyes. But he was present all the time in our hearts. He taught us to dream and to demand and to fight for realizing our rights. We were just doing that.

And now, twenty three years after his tragic death, people who had fought the war of liberation in the spongy swamps and the green paddy fields of Bangladesh when there was nobody to inspire them but the imposing image of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, do not miss him the least. In the dark depth of our eyes, he is as alive as he had been in the trying months of 1971. In every blade of grass, in every sheath of paddy, in every grain of sand and in every drop of water one can not escape the fatherly face of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He will be with everyone of us as long as Bangladesh remains.