

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 reassured 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 Baishakhi, 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

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red circle of the flag which was surrounded by a deep green background. Nurul 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

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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

internal self-rule. When Mohammed Ayub Khan had him arrested again in 1966, on charges of plotting to make East Pakistan independent, East Pakistan came close to open rebellion, and the turmoil forced Ayub to release Mujib and resign. Mujib emerged as a hero to his people.

Tall for a Bengali (he stands 5 feet 11 inches), with a shock of greying hair, a bushy mustache and alert black eyes, Mujib can attract a crowd of a million people to his rallies and hold them spellbound with great rolling waves of emotional rhetoric. "Even when you are talking alone with him" says a diplomat, "he talks like he's addressing 60,000 people." Eloquent in Urdu, Bengali and English, three languages of Pakistan, Mujib does

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 as his style may be just what was needed to unite all the classes and ideologies of the region.

March 6

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 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 journalists 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

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. Do you think anyone can suppress this spirit with machineguns?" A few days later someone was trying.

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

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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."

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[Newsweek, 5 April, 1971]

Those turbulent days

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.

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Khan received General Yahya Khan in Dhaka. The Awami League leadership called upon the world community to keep an eye on the tortures and repressions that were being meted out to the Bengalee population by the Pakistanis.

March 16

Dhaka became a city of processes, protests and joy Bangla. The existence of Pakistan could be observed nowhere except in the military camps, cantonments, secretariat and the High Court. The flag of Bangladesh fluttered in all the districts with the exception of the offices of DCs and SPs. Hoisting a black flag atop his car at eleven in the morning, Bangabandhu entered the gates of Sugandha - which was the President's House between 1947 and 1971 (now state guest house) - to sit for discussions with Yahya. Yahya shook hands with Bangabandhu in the veranda and



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 hartal in Dhaka. Neither was hartal enforced anywhere else. Heeding 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

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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.

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[Newsweek, 5 April, 1971]

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 greater 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 earthenware 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.

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." Monaem 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 defunct occupying force, the Pakistani Army went into all-out attack after 10.30 at night combing the Dhaka University, Rajarbagh Police Line and the EPR headquarter at Peekhanna 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 Pakistani Occupation army is expelled from the soil of Bangladesh and final victory is achieved. Jai Bangla."

Translation: Helal Uddin Ahmed

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 tears. 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 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.



lest we should forget the killer