

National Mourning Day Special

Keep Him Above Politics, Please

by Shah Husain Imam

He retained a middle class flair about him all his life instinctively bending over to the poor rather than to the rich. He had a sacrificing spirit that one rarely comes across these days among politicians.

TODAY we mourn the dastardly political murder of the principal leader in our nationalist struggle during the Pakistani days and liberator of the country, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The fact that he was done to death along with most members of his own household and the extended family, makes it into an episode of worst serial assassination as a means to seize political power ever recorded in the history of nations.

The annulment of the dark law that had indemnified the killers and the subsequent holding of their trial notwithstanding, there are lessons to be learnt from that grossly aberrant chapter of our history which saw military rule introduced in the country. That's where lies the importance of the mourning day as we see it.

The ruling Awami League party may draw satisfaction from what they are likely to view as the end of the de-mobilisation era marking a resurrection of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's image. But their detractors who have largely been the products of the post-Mujib phase in our political history hold on to an anti-theoretical system of beliefs.

The saving grace, however, is that when they were in power, they occasionally, if a little half-heartedly, reflected a certain mood to give Sheikh Mujibur Rahman his 'rightful place' in history. The rightful place would be truly accorded to him when they will have brought their minds to denounce the act of assassination

in the first place, regardless of the dissent they might have had over Sheikh Saheb's policies. It is only the extremists who can dub 15th August as a 'day of deliverance,' not certainly a well-established political party which commands a sizable electoral support to be more responsible and far-sighted in its utterances.

It can hardly be over-emphasised that with Bangabandhu's assassination, a trend set in for changing of the guard by violent means of which Ziaur Rahman evidently fell a victim. To stamp out that menacing possibility for good, the political parties need to enter into a covenant of understanding to first of all make a public denunciation of all assassinations so far enacted, and then affirm their resolve to hold trials of those responsible for such gruesome political murders, including that of Ziaur Rahman. This is highly imperative for exorcising current politics of various conspiracy theories that rake up dark memories of the past bedevilling relations between political parties and taking up much of their time in no-win unending recriminatory bouts.

We would like to latch on to the BNP's half-in and half-out inclination towards giving Bangabandhu his due place in our national life in the hope that the party will see the rationale of going forward with it to keep him above politics. If the BNP does so from out of power, it would send a more powerful signal of its positivism on this question to the

nation than when it chooses to do so while being in power. Should the BNP regard it as an 'impolitic step' because they are out of power now, the message the people might well get is that the staple of their politics is anti-Mujibism, which, for all one knows, cannot be the case for a party with other agenda to address.

His name should be kept not just above politics but also political vicissitudes. The worst thing we can do to denigrate a national symbol that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is — and all nations around the world have theirs — is to politicise his image at either end of the political divide. Doing politics at his cost is not only undesirable but is also pre-eminently avoidable. He should have an immutable place in our national history and psychosis, regardless of change of governments.

When we mourn the death of someone whose life was cut short by the assassin's bullet we do not sit down to write a critique on his works, rather we highlight the sterling qualities of head and heart he possessed. There are certain facets of his persona that are now coming to light as never before. That he had a mind of his own is being increasingly felt now through anecdotes used in the writings of people who knew him and interacted with him.

He retained a middle class flair about him all his life instinctively bending over to the poor rather than to the rich. He had a sacrificing spirit that one rarely comes across these days among politicians. He was a

potential ally of the socialists. We need to know more about him, that is what we look forward to, beyond the mourning day.



Trivialising the Hero

by Brig (Rtd) M Abdul Hafiz

If the Awami League is genuinely interested in protecting the heritage of Sheikh Mujib, let it toil for a Bangladesh that he dreamt of — a Bangladesh free from poverty, hunger, violence, insecurity and an yawning gap between the rich and the poor.

deny history.

But then, like any great man of the history he did have his imperfections. He could not be expected to be above his human limitations. Even if he bungled things after independence, it does not, in any way, affect his greatness. Napoleon was a great man in spite of his defeat at Waterloo and notoriety in private life. Despite failings, Sheikh Mujib continue to be our revered father of the nation and beloved 'Bangabandhu' who had once been the heart throb of the millions in this country. Yet, when his 24th death anniversary is being observed to day, it is, as usual, an Awami League spectacle rendering his status to be that of a distinguished Awami leader although the state media gives it the appearance of a national event. Is it the way we would pay respect to our national hero? Isn't it an insult to our national pride? After three decades of our independence we need to have an introspection what it was all due to.

In retrospect, something significant happened on the night of 25 March 1971 when Mujib was arrested by the Pakistani authority. Whatever could have been its motivation behind the arrest it effected a physical separation between Mujib and his people during a crucial period of his struggle. When he returned home after nine and half months from Pakistan's prison a war of liberation had already produced new dynamics in the politics of post-independence Bangladesh where Mujib was instantly surrounded by sycophants cloaked as admirers and well-wishers. They wanted both to gain his favour and influence his course of action in the statecraft. Mujib inadvertently succumbed to this self-seeking bunch who succeeded in separating him from his people to whom he, throughout his political career, endeared himself as one of the folks the next door. He was overnight turned into an icon, a messiah and an infallible superman who never existed in flesh and blood. He gradually became a stranger to his people who watched in anguish their hero giving way to megalomania till he was led blindfolded to the brink by the sycophants. Sheikh Mujib fell to the as-

assin's bullet in 1975. Thereafter had begun his real assassination — the assassination of his character, his image and his heritage. It was done with a surgical precision. It is true that there were intriguers who never reconciled to the emergence of Bangladesh. But the only of his vilification was joined also by a 'progressive' political left and even the ranks of Awami League itself. In the process, along with Mujib the whole edifice built around the spirit of liberation war was cruelly pulled down. In a sharp U-turn all that Mujib did was systematically undone. Even his name was banished from the state media and it became a taboo in official circle. We saw with ignominy the name of the father of the nation lumped up with that of anybody else.

The divergence in opinion and approaches is nothing new in national politics. But never a nation disputes its independence and one who delivers it. Never an attempt is made to snatch the mantle deserved only by its supreme leader. It is something that comes through the process of history which is its dispenser. Mao-Tse-Dong was condemned for many of his blunders but his place in the history was never questioned. Indian hawks are severely critical of Mahatma Gandhi's pacifism but none attempts to dislodge him from the exalted height he occupies as the nation's founding father. Mujib's detractors however ventured all these. It is still a mystery why the post-1975 rulers of Bangladesh went out to destroy Mujib's legacy with so much of vengeance. There has been animated discussions on the subject but no convincing answer has really been found.

When the Awami League returned to power in 1996, it is an irony that it wanted to rehabilitate Sheikh Mujib in the same crude manner in which his legacy was destroyed and supplanted by another. For the purpose the present leaders of Awami League as the inheritors of late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's mantle, felt the need to turn the people's psychological clock back by stamping his name on the country's prominent landmarks. The government has formally renamed

Jamuna multi-purpose bridge as Bangabandhu bridge. Several other projects, still on the drawing boards, would also be named after him. The President's agricultural awards would now onward be known as Bangabandhu Krishi Padak. The army mess where Sheikh Mujib was confined during Agartala Conspiracy case has turned into Bangabandhu Museum. It has been decided also to protect Mujib's ancestral home in Tungipara as a national monument. Mujib's Dhanmondi residence is also a museum. These are apart from the roads and avenues as well as premier educational institutions already named after him. The naming spree is not confined to Mujib only. The names of most of his family members also have been taken care of.

It is a pity that Mujib's memory would now be preserved on the sign boards whereas his name once shone in the hearts of the millions when there was nothing known after his name. To revive the people's love for the great leader by completing his unfinished tasks could have been the most fitting monument to his memory! But the new brand of Awamis apparently do not want to tread that arduous path. Mujib's wisdom in creating this country would be appreciated and he would be gratefully remembered only if Bangladesh is made a little happier and prosperous place to live.

The heritage does not last on rhetorics and empty words. When imposed and sustained through regimentation it backfires and its reaction is that of repulsion. Look at the legacy of Lenin which crumbled like the house of cards. His broken statue was kicked about in Moscow after the fall of his creed. His mausoleum is abandoned in the Red Square where no more a honour guard is mounted. Anything that was known by his name is now stripped of it. There is hardly anything in a name game. It only trivialises a great man. If the Awami League is genuinely interested in protecting the heritage of Sheikh Mujib, let it toil for a Bangladesh that he dreamt of — a Bangladesh free from poverty, hunger, violence, insecurity and an yawning gap between the rich and the poor.

Remembering Sheikh Mujib

Who Defended My Honour in the Parliament

(Memoirs of a Civil Servant)

by M Matiul Islam

A few months after the promulgation of Martial Law by Yahya Khan in 1969, I was transferred to Islamabad as Joint Secretary, Economic Affairs Division from the position of Secretary, Commerce and Industry, East Pakistan Government. In December 1969, when I went to Islamabad for my last Import Policy meeting I would be attending as Secretary, Commerce and Industries. I was served with a notice by the Establishment division suspending me from the Civil Service under Section 58 of the Martial Law Regulation on charges of corruption. Dazed, shocked, and broken hearted, I left for Dhaka to join my grief stricken family and waited for the framing of the charges.

I refused the advice of my well-wishers to seek political support, especially of Sheikh Saheb, against victimization of some innocent East Pakistani officers. Nevertheless, one of my brothers-in-law who was close to Dr. Malek, the then sitting Central minister, dragged me to meet the minister who literally rebuffed me when he said that Yahya Khan wanted the corrupt officers like us removed outright, but was prevailed upon by senior Cabinet colleagues to give them an opportunity to defend themselves. What an irony it was that two years later to the day, I, as Finance Secretary, accorded on the spot approval when approached by Dr. Malek's brother for release of Tk 20,000 to meet the expenses of defending Dr. Malek, who was in jail, facing the charge of a collaborator.

For giving replies to the formal charges under MLR 58, we were allowed to consult the relevant files in the presence of the anti-corruption officer concerned. In my case, the anti-corruption officer was joined by a Colonel of the army who kept sitting throughout the period of

consultation. I was allowed access to papers only with approval of the Colonel. I realized much later when I again met Sheikh Mujib as to why this special treatment was accorded to me.

Mr. Tofazzal Ali, the renowned advocate, and Dr. Kamal Hossain corrected and edited my reply to the Martial Law charges and I also appeared before the Martial Law Tribunal. However, in mid 1970s, when the country was in the midst of election fever and the political parties were frantically busy preparing to face the next election called by Yahya Khan, I was retired from service at the age of 39. With a plane ticket provided by Sadri Ispahani, I went to Karachi with him and was introduced to the President of Eastern Federal Union Insurance Company. During my negotiation for a job, Mr. Bhimji, the President of Eastern Federal, suddenly went to Dhaka and on return offered me a suitable position in the insurance company. Before I could make up my mind about the offer of Eastern Federal I was swept into joining Pakistan National Oil as a member of their Board of Directors. It was then that Mr. Bhimji told me that during his visit to Dhaka he sought and promptly obtained Sheikh Mujib's clearance before he offered me the job.

It was in January 1971 when I went to meet Sheikh Mujib, then acclaimed as the future Prime Minister of Pakistan, in the company of my other colleagues in the Pakistan National Oil, including Mr. Habibur Rahman of Bogra, he was standing in front of his Dhanmondi residence, seeing off somebody. Sheikh Mujib literally dragged me into the house, ignoring everybody else, and introduced me to all the senior leaders of Awami League,

including Tajuddin. It was then, sitting by his side, I learnt for the first time that Sheikh Mujib had interceded with General Yahya at least twice on my behalf and had made special request to spare me the harassment and the agony. Sheikh Mujib asked Khoka, his cousin, to keep my address and telephone number so I could join him in a moment's notice. It was apparent from his talks that Sheikh Mujib was preparing to take over as the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

I witnessed Sheikh Mujib's triumphant return to Bangladesh on January 10, 1972 on TV, as I was preparing to leave Bangladesh in search of a living abroad. By that time, almost all the industrial and commercial entities of the Group of which I was a director were vested in the Government under the Abandoned Properties Order and had become unemployed for the second time at the age of 42. Within a day of return, however, Sheikh Mujib sent for me and installed me as the first Finance Secretary of Bangladesh.

Pressure was built up on the Prime Minister to reinstate other senior officials who had lost jobs along with me under the so-called 303 action by the Yahya regime. The Prime Minister promptly set up a judicial committee to review all such cases, and decided to reinstate only those cleared by the judicial committee. It was a testimony of his mature and rational approach to resolve such an administrative problem through instituting a judicial process. In my case, however, Dr. Kamal Hossain, the then Law Minister advised that no further clearance was required.

It was during one of the session of the Parliament that the matter again surfaced. In the course of my official duty, I used to receive copies of all the questions raised in the Parliament

and one of the question that came to my notice was the policy of reinstatement of 303 officers retired and dismissed by the Yahya regime. The day the question was admitted for answer in the Parliament by the Law Minister, I happened to be there along with Tajuddin to discuss some important files with the Prime Minister who was in his Parliament office listening to the floor debate on the speaker.

I was more or less certain that the question of my reinstatement will somehow be brought up during the question hour, and therefore became alert when this question came up in the Parliament. I drew the attention of the Prime Minister to the proceedings in the House as the Law Minister, Mr. Manoranjan Dhar was trying to answer a supplementary question as to the basis of my reinstatement. The Prime Minister, livid with fury and anger, pushed me aside and rushed to the floor of the Parliament and moments later we heard his booming voice in the speaker saying that the Law Minister was not aware of all the facts of the case to answer the supplementary question, and that he would like to answer it himself. He said "Mr. Matiul Islam was thrown out of service for nothing else but that he was my man." There was stunned silence in the Parliament and that ended the debate on the subject.

As I recall the episode today, I also wonder whether I truly deserved the love and affection of this great man. He had given me so much when he was alive, and what did I give in return? An ungrateful creature, I have not even performed the simple and solemn task of offering Fateha by his graveside.

The writer is a former Finance Secretary



A family photograph: Bangabandhu with parents and other members of family.

Col Jamil Didn't Desert the Leader, Embraced Death

by Brig Anwarul Azeem Mallik (Retd)

TWENTY-four years ago on this day, the country lost its architect, a visionary and soldier, who stood against all odds to give his country independence and freedom. Bangabandhu's entire life was an embodiment of struggle but the end was tragic. In the absence of freedom of expression and due to the prevailing world order and superpower interest, killing of Bangabandhu remained an issue not to be discussed. No one could ever match his personality or challenge his contribution. But an important part of the history remained under the dark veil of authoritarian rule. A black spot in our history has taken a full circle. The sun now shines. Today's newspapers will be full of pictures and writings on Bangabandhu. I will discuss about a person, very simple and honest, who sacrificed his life proving that he did not belong to those who conspired. He was not one of those who flinched from performing their duties.

As the trial of Bangabandhu murder was going on, those senior officers of wavering loyalty and questionable character perhaps had to answer why they did not do what they were oath bound to do: "Observe and obey all command of any officer set over me even to the peril of my life." The soul of Col Jamil, now in eternal peace, does not have any such stigma. He was one, probably the only man in uniform, who rushed to save Bangabandhu. He was the only officer to answer the call of duty and Almighty Allah honoured him by taking the biggest sacrifice from him. Col Jamil a true

Muslim, a pure Bangali and a brave soldier, embraced Shahadat and accompanied his leader in the life hereafter. He upheld his faith in God, remained loyal and his courage drew him near Bangabandhu.

On that fateful day — Col Jamil was then posted as Director General of DFI — he was not in direct command of troops. He could do his duty by simply using telephone and inform the commander of troops. Military chiefs in charge of troops stayed home when some of their under command troops were involved in a very serious act of treason. Seeing no move by the senior military commanders to protect the head of the state, he became restive.

He went to the President's Guard Regiment barracks and instructed available senior officers to move with troops, and he himself moved out in his personal car. A small crowd near Shahbagh Mosque stopped him and advised him not to go near Road No 32. He knew what lay ahead. He knew that the task required armed intervention. But no armed personnel could be found anywhere. As time was running out he decided to use his persuasive power. He was a very nice person and everybody liked him. He hoped to convince the misguided officers and stop them. He thought that he would be able to prevail upon them and make them understand the implications of their act. Not that only the life of the head of state was at stake, the



Col Jamil

security of the nation also was threatened. He thought military officers being patriots would listen to reasons.

A soldier is paid, fed, nourished and trained for years for a day when he has to risk his life for the country and its people. Risk of life was there and Col Jamil took the risk. He talked to them, he demanded to know what was happening. It appeared that his conversation created some confusion among troops. The officer concerned at that stage again asked him to leave as he was not at all willing to get involved in any dialogue. Col Jamil did not give in. He knew that he had reached the point of no return. He could go back, then what? His honour and dignity would be soiled, his loyalty would be questioned, he

would be branded as a coward, finally it would be his failure to face the acid test of his oath. It was probably too much to live with it. He knew what was to happen. Ignoring the request and warning of the officer concerned he moved forward. He was shot.

Probably Bangabandhu in his last moment, felt that his friends and subalterns had deserted him. Guards did not resist. No help came from those in whom he had reposed full trust and faith. Did he feel betrayed? In the monumental failure of intelligence and the security forces, the sacrifice of Col Jamil glows like a bright star. The leader and his loyal soldier died in the hand of a group of disloyal officers and men who broke their oath. The Army should remain ever indebted to Col Jamil for his sacrifice. Because he by sacrificing his life had sent a message to the nation that there was a soldier who went out to save Bangladesh. By his action on 15 August '75 he passed the acid test with flying colours. He had defined the meaning of duty, value and honour and love for the country. Col Jamil had set an example by his sacrifice.

It is very good that accountability and rule of law are being established in the country. Killers of Bangabandhu have been tried. By this trial we have proved that we are not ungrateful, that we will punish the killers. But is it enough? What about those who had reaped benefit out of the 15 August tragedy? What about those who failed in their duty? What about rewarding those who made supreme sacrifice?



Banani graveyard, Dhaka: Laid to rest in a row the victims of August 15, 1975 night.