

SALUTE TO BANGABANDHU

Rare moments with Bangabandhu

by M Matiul Islam

On the occasion of Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib's first official visit to Calcutta in February 1972, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of India hosted a banquet at the Banquet Hall of Calcutta Government House where we were all staying. Minutes before the appointed time, as I went to Bangabandhu's suite to accompany him to the banquet, I noticed a big commotion there. The Prime Minister was fuming with rage and the attendants were running about not knowing what to do. The Prime Minister's closed-neck Mujib jacket, his formal attire for the banquet, did not fit. Indira Gandhi was waiting outside the Banquet Hall so that the two leaders could either the hall together and the time was running out. I decided to take charge. Standing in front of the Prime Minister, I could first manage to put all the buttons in place but the real problem was the neck — the two hooks were far apart. The Prime Minister could not go to a formal banquet with an open neck. My first two attempts to bring the two hooks together failed. I asked the Prime Minister to relax and raise his neck like a crane as far as he could, and simultaneously started putting pressure with all my might to bring the two collar hooks together. As I was almost giving up, the Prime Minister made a desperate last attempt and like a music in the ear I heard the click, the two hooks were now joined. Moments later, as the two Prime Ministers entered the Banquet Hall together, the national anthem of Bangladesh started playing.

On the second day of our visit I decided to stroll out of the Government House into the Old Court House Street, Dallhouse Square, City Road (renamed



The writer with Bangabandhu

Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Road) where my alma mater was when I was studying in Calcutta. I remembered my student days when I used to stand in front of the Government House, thinking about the mystery that lay inside this massive structure. After finishing my round I returned to the Government House and entered the elevator myself to get the Residential Quarters on the 2nd floor where we were housed. As I stepped out of the elevator, crossed the long corridor leading to our room which was occupied by me and Mr. Tofail Ahmed. I decided to peek into the Prime Minister's suite. As I entered the living room and was about to knock on the bedroom door, I heard voices inside and I froze. I realized that I was in the wrong floor and had stepped into Indira Gandhi's room instead. What a security lapse! I tiptoed out of the room into the corridor, ran to our floor, and was still panting when I met our Prime Minister. He roared with laughter when I described my misadventure.

On the last day of our stay in Calcutta, I decided to have my breakfast in the Dining Hall and met there a Colonel of the Indian Army, who was a Military Attaché of the Indian Prime Minister. He was a Muslim gentleman from Bihar. As we were talking, Bangabandhu strolled in and I introduced the Colonel to Bangabandhu. It was amazing how Bangabandhu instantly recognized and remembered the family of the Colonel and his home, which he visited during his days when he was a student leader of the Muslim League. After a while as the Colonel was leaving, he saluted the Prime Minister and said, "Kinda Hatiz". As the Prime Minister reciprocated, I looked at him and said: "Sir, it's a pity

that we had to come all the way to India to hear the traditional Muslim greeting for the first time in two months." The Prime Minister made no comment, smiled and left the room.

In 1974, Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib went to Washington to meet with President Ford of the United States to seek food aid for Bangladesh which at that point of time was in the grip of a severe famine.

The Prime Minister and his entourage were staying at the Blair House.

Robert McNamara, President of the World Bank, came to meet the Prime Minister to advise him on the Bank's assistance programme to Bangladesh.

As the World Bank President was leaving, he paused and said: "Sir, when are you devaluing your currency?"

Came the prompt and spontaneous reply from our Prime Minister: "If you were my Finance Minister instead of being

the World Bank President, and rendered this advice, I would have devalued Bangladeshi currency instantly." Robert McNamara seemed to enjoy the subtle way the Prime Minister rejected devaluation, took leave of him and left with his usual long strides.

In July 1975, when I came to Bangladesh on a month's home leave from the World Bank, full-scale drive for BAKSAL membership was on. I was also confronted with an application form which I declined to sign on the ground that I was still undecided about joining politics. I did not know whether Bangabandhu was informed of my refusal, but he never raised it during my meeting with him. He, on the other hand, entreated me to return to Bangladesh as when he needed me badly. During the one month that I was in Dhaka, the thought that I would not be able to comply with his wishes constantly tormented me. So, I raised the subject again when I met him on August 8 to bid farewell, but he instantly stopped me saying that I should not worry about it; he had a number of well-groomed officers to take care of the administration.

On my way to Dhaka from Washington, I visited Geneva where Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, our Ambassador, gave me a personal message to be delivered to Bangabandhu. As I was about to convey him the message, an usher came in and announced that Justice Chowdhury was waiting to see Bangabandhu. This surprised me but relieved me of my responsibility. As Justice Chowdhury was coming in and I was going out, I informed Justice Chowdhury that his message had not been delivered to Bangabandhu whose final words, as I stepped out of the room into the corridor, were: You should at least come to my Janaja.

It was on the midnight of 16 August in Los Angeles, on the last leg of our journey to Washington, that we learnt about Bangabandhu's assassination. For a moment I was hysterical, but soon recomposed myself. My thoughts were: Both in his life and in death, Bangabandhu made supreme sacrifice. He lived and died a leader. How else history would give him place alongside Julius Caesar, Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy?

Bangladesh Chhatra League and Bangladesh Chhatra Union was then a merged entity under the banner of BAKSAL. But the convenor of Jatiya Chhatra League and the nephew of Bangabandhu — Sheikh Shahidul Islam — himself remained absconding from the start. At this juncture, Ismat Kadir Gama was the most courageous Chhatra League leader who remained active even after the 15th August episode to infuse new life into the Chhatra League. Other leaders such as K M Jahangir, Obaidul Quader, Syed Nurul Islam, Rabiu Alam Chowdhury, Mukul Bose, Kazi Iqbal, Momtaz Hossein and Bahalul Mojun Chunnu were also active during the period.

Bangladesh Chhatra League and Bangladesh Chhatra Union was then a merged entity under the banner of BAKSAL. But the convenor of Jatiya Chhatra League and the nephew of Bangabandhu — Sheikh Shahidul Islam — himself remained absconding from the start. At this juncture, Ismat Kadir Gama was the most courageous Chhatra League leader who remained active even after the 15th August episode to infuse new life into the Chhatra League. Other leaders such as K M Jahangir, Obaidul Quader, Syed Nurul Islam, Rabiu Alam Chowdhury, Mukul Bose, Kazi Iqbal, Momtaz Hossein and Bahalul Mojun Chunnu were also active during the period.

The mainstream leaders who inspired other students after the August 15 carnage were the then Vice President of DUCSU Mujahidul Islam Selim and General Secretary Mambub Zamam. They were also the President and General Secretary of then extinct Bangladesh Chhatra Union. Other ex-Chhatra Union leaders who were active during the period were Nuhul Alam, Lenin, Kazi Akram Hossein, Quamrul Ahsan Khan, Ajoy Das Gupta, Khandker Shawkat Julius, Abdul Mannan Khan, Mrinal Sarker, Niaz Ahmed, Gias Uddin Chowdhury and others.

Former student leader Ajoy Das Gupta says that the first spontaneous gathering in protest against Bangabandhu's assassination took place on 20 October, 1975 at Madhu's Cantonment on the Dhaka University campus (Daily Bhoror Kagoj, 17 August, 1996).

But these gatherings never came out of the Dhaka University campus. The decision to bring out a procession outside the campus was taken a few days later. Initially, it was decided that the Bangabandhu memorial day would be observed on the 29th of October and a procession would head for Bangabandhu's house on the day. But the programme was later shifted by seven days to November 4.

Incidentally, a military coup took place in the country on 3 November under the leadership of Brigadier (later Major General) Khaled Mosharraf. That was purely a coincidence, but some of the miscreants who had planned to bulldoze such a huge number of people, Moshtaq's army could feel that the people who were in the procession had come to die, they could not be returned empty-handed. So, the procession again started to move forward.

When we reached Bangabandhu's residence, many reminiscences flashed inside my mind. I had seen the picture of this house so many times in the newspaper. Bangabandhu waving his hands at the victory procession of the people after the 1970's electoral triumph, the raising of flag of a new and independent nation by Bangabandhu on 23 March, 1971 in this very compound — all those episodes were still fresh in my mind.

If we want to make this day of advantage to us then we will have to cultivate in us the quality of Mujib as a great leader.

During the Liberation War, Colonel Jamil was a prisoner in Pakistani camps. He came back after Liberation and was called

Rakkhi Bahini which Bangabandhu himself created and put one of his trusted colleagues in charge of this special force failed to fire a single shot in defence of Bangabandhu and the threatened nascent democracy. What is appalling is that

the miscreants were not taken to task — everybody, even the most sincere members of Awami League did not raise their voice against the new government of Khondoker Moshtaq Ahmed. The only exception was Kader Siddiqui who put up an armed resistance before going across the border to India.

It is a pity that no effort has been made to keep alive the memory of this brave son of the soil. Shaheed Jamil has not received any posthumous National Award — nor has any posthumous military award been given to him. During the last 25 years, no government has taken any initiative to honour him. No street has been named after him. No one visits his grave on 15 August except his family members. It is a shame that this nation has shown such utter neglect to a brave soldier who did not flinch from his duty.

May we propose that Sheikh Hasina herself looks into the causes of this neglect. There are several things she could do for the man who laid down his life for her father. The road in front of Bangabandhu's residence could aptly be named 'Shaheed Jamil Ahmed Sharak'. The

children of the Defence Forces Intelligence office building could be named after him. There are several other things that could be done in his memory, provided there is a will to do so.

We, meanwhile, shall be waiting to see something happen. It would be a great pity if we fail to pay respect to this national hero who walked into the jaws of death while others shied away from their pledge and duty.

Incidentally, a military coup took place in the country on 3 November under the leadership of Brigadier (later Major General) Khaled Mosharraf. That was purely a coincidence, but some of the miscreants who had

The first procession protesting the assassination

by Dr Mohammed Hannan

We had just passed the higher secondary examination then, waiting to get admitted to the next higher echelon of education. Around that time, Bangabandhu was assassinated on 15th August, 1975. Throughout that day we could not believe that such an incident had taken place in Bangladesh. So, we were amazed when we saw Khandaker Moshtaque Ahmed taking oath as the President on BTV news in the evening. And we were surprised that the new ministers who took oath also did not come from outside the Awami League.

But it was slightly reassuring when I saw that leaders like Sved Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmed, Captain Mansur Ali and A H M Kamruzzaman were absent from the cabinet.

On the night of 16th August, there was

only one line on BTV news which said that 'the dead-body of the former President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has been buried at his village home today'. I finally became convinced from the news that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had really been killed and he is no more alive in this world.

I was then only an ordinary teenage boy. Otherwise, I should have been convinced about Bangabandhu's demise much earlier when I had seen the oath-taking ceremony of the Moshtaque cabinet on television. Who would have dared to revolt against Bangabandhu and take oath as minister while he was alive? No Bengalee could have mustered that courage. I later heard that even Moshtaque had asked the assassins before taking oath as President, 'Has Sheikh Mujib really died? Then show me the photograph of the dead-body'. And he took oath only after he was shown the photograph of the dead-body. In reality, the evil elements within the fold of Awami League could not be identified beforehand while they were living in the shadow of Bangabandhu's magnanimity.

On my way to Dhaka from Washington, I visited Geneva where Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury, our Ambassador, gave me a personal message to be delivered to Bangabandhu. As I was about to convey him the message, an usher came in and announced that Justice Chowdhury was waiting to see Bangabandhu. This surprised me but relieved me of my responsibility. As Justice Chowdhury was coming in and I was going out, I informed Justice Chowdhury that his message had not been delivered to Bangabandhu whose final words, as I stepped out of the room into the corridor, were: You should at least come to my Janaja.

It was on the midnight of 16

August in Los Angeles, on the last leg of our journey to Washington, that we learnt about Bangabandhu's assassination.

For a moment I was hysterical,

but soon recomposed myself.

My thoughts were: Both in his

life and in death, Bangabandhu

made supreme sacrifice. He

lived and died a leader. How

else history would give him

place alongside Julius Caesar,

Abraham Lincoln and John F.

Kennedy?

initially we were baffled by it. We thought that Mujahidul Islam Selim had fixed the date after consultations with Khaled Mosharraf. So, feeling very upbeat, my friends Mosharraf, Ilyas, Malik, Salauddin and myself took our position in the front row of that procession. We started our silent march (in reality, it was a mourning procession) from the *Baitul Falah* (shade under the banyan tree) of Dhaka University campus in two rows, heading towards Bangabandhu's residence at Dhanmondi Road Number 32. But very soon, we were disillusioned when we saw a police barricade near the Nilkhet check-post. I clearly heard a police officer shouting over his wireless set, 'Firing is not possible, firing is not possible, hundreds of students have joined the procession'.

Around this time, a tall police officer approached us and asked, 'Where is Salim?' I was taken aback, because I did not know that anybody by the name

of Salim was in the procession.

Friend Ilyas removed my confusion when he whispered into my ears, 'They are looking for Selim bhai, don't disclose his whereabouts, the police may arrest him'.

After a while, I saw that the police officer was really talking to the VP of DUCSU Mujahidul Islam Selim.

Selim bhai and Gama bhai were repeatedly assuring the police officer that they would take the procession peacefully to Bangabandhu's residence.

Finally, a compromise was reached that there would be no

slogans and the procession

would go to Bangabandhu's residence silently.

In reality, the procession was like a mourning

procession; slogans were not

required and the main goal was

to lay floral wreaths and offer

prayers after reaching Bangabandhu's residence.

At last the procession started to move forward crossing the New Market and the Science Laboratory and reaching Kalabagan. As it was advancing, its size was also increasing. A procession by hundreds

of students was soon trans-

formed into a mourning march

by thousands of grief-stricken Bengalees. Initially, we were in the front row of the procession, but as its size gradually increased, we could not see where it ended up front. Thus we could not notice at what point the valiant mother of Khaled Mosharraf had joined the procession.

We were now approaching Bangabandhu's residence, the Dhanmondi Lake stood nearby and on its bank lay the forbidden house of Bangabandhu.

I was apprehensive that we might

not be able to lay floral wreaths

there. Moshtaque's rogues

might cut our hands or gouge

out our eyes. I had by then

fallen much behind and could

not understand why the pro-

cession was again at a standstill.

A fellow hurriedly came to in-

form us that the soldiers of

Moshtaque had blocked the pro-

cession and were not allow-

ing it to go forward. He told us to

get ready for any possible fir-

ing. One of us shouted, 'Come

to Bangabandhu's house'.

In reality, although Khaled Mosharraf had mounted a coup, the Army was still controlled by the pro-

Moshtaque elements.

But it was not possible for

them to bulldoze such a huge

number of people. Moshtaque's

army could feel that the people

who were in the procession had

come to die, they could not be

returned empty-handed. So, the

procession again started to

move forward.

When we reached Bangabandhu's residence, many

reminiscences flashed inside

my mind. I had seen the picture

of this house