

Bangabandhu and the liberation of Bangladesh

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TWICE in their history, the Bengalis united most solidly to chart the course of destination towards national emancipation once during the ascendancy of the Pala dynasty with the choice of Gopal as an elected king in the mid 7th century to rule over Bengal, and second, to make sacrifice to liberate Bangladesh in 1971 from the colonial yoke of the Pakistani regime. A very few nations have as decidedly made a revolt as Bangladesh against the tyranny of a military bureaucracy ultimately securing victory.

Democracy and Deprivation

The genesis of the liberation movement had a long root, indeed, shaping the course of events through the language movement, cultural emancipation of the Bengalis, and protesting economic disparity and political discrimination by successive Pakistani regimes against the eastern wing of Pakistan. But most potent was the situation related to economic disparity, often linked with cultural persecution. For instance, East Bengal (then known as East Pakistan), having a majority of population, used to provide for, earn till the end of 1960s, more than 60 per cent of Pakistan's exports, but was deprived of the benefits by an exchange control mechanism by the West-Pakistanis. The East-West ratio of percentage allocation of funds for development projects varied from 4:96 to 34:66. With one of the highest population densities per units area and one of the lowest levels of living in the world, and ruled from Karachi (and then Islamabad) more than a thousand miles away, the Bengalis justifiably felt little sense of identity with the central government.

The perennial Pakistani clash with India over Kashmir held no emotion for them, yet it consumed the state's revenues in military expenditure of which East Bengal contributed the lion share. And after the inconclusive war with India over Kashmir in 1965, East Bengal's plight was worsened by a ban on trade with India losing cross-border commerce. Economic disparity existed in every sector from trade to transport, health to education, and till late 1960s, the Bengalis were still trying to maintain Islamic brotherhood with the Pakistanis although the latter preferred to call them "non-Muslims or half-Muslims." Thus from the earliest years of Pakistan's creation the Bengalis felt themselves at the neglected end of the pantomime horse. For a decade under the 'benevolent' military dictatorship of Ayub Khan their grievances were suppressed. Yahya Khan replaced Ayub Khan, but problems remained the same. The Bengalis' resentment bubbled to the surface.

The apathetic attitude of the Pakistanis had been all pervading even it was reflected during the great coastal cyclone on the night of 12 November 1970. It left a mark of unbelievable destruction and death. But the Pakistani authorities were just indifferent about the aftermath of the cyclone and of the emergency relief operation in the affected area. It took them three days to react, before which a British relief team had already arrived in the scene of devastation. In such a situation, helicopter borne relief activities were the only answer. Pakistan Air Force had 25 helicopters 24 of which were stationed in the West. Pakistan was reluctant to bring in the helicopter to the East overflying and refuelling on the way in India for fear of losing prestige. That so called prestige and psychological allergy to India were more valuable to them than a crucial humanitarian need. Even the President visited the cyclone-hit area after six days a sign of complacency and neglect as viewed by many neutral observers.

Going back a little further that Jinnah's assertion in 1948 of making Urdu 'the state language of Pakistan' led to protests because it rekindled in the hearts of millions their cultural identity as Bengalis was, undoubtedly, a reflection of the people's self-esteem. It is the continuation of the same self-esteem that made them take up arms against the marauding Pakistanis against the military bureaucracy and religious hypocrisy. It is in this background that the stage of Liberation War of Bangladesh was set. The sequence of political and military events put Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the forefront as the undisputed leader of the Bengali nation. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman might not seem to be a revolutionary to many, but the strength of Bengali nationalistic feeling that crystallised around him had its repercussions almost in equal terms in the western half of Pakistan as well.

In 1970, post-election months showed the individualistic power-hunger of Bhutto who won majority seats in West Pakistan but did not even contest in a single constituency in the East. With Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's absolute victory in the eastern province and Bhutto winning a majority in the west, for the first time the two wings of Pakistan faced each other in naked division. The old thread of Islam and democratic principles patently snapped and only the conciliatory powers by threat of military force stood between the state and dissolution. Subsequent events showed that conciliation had gone forever and nothing but brute force remained, and that was what the Pakistani military junta had resorted to.

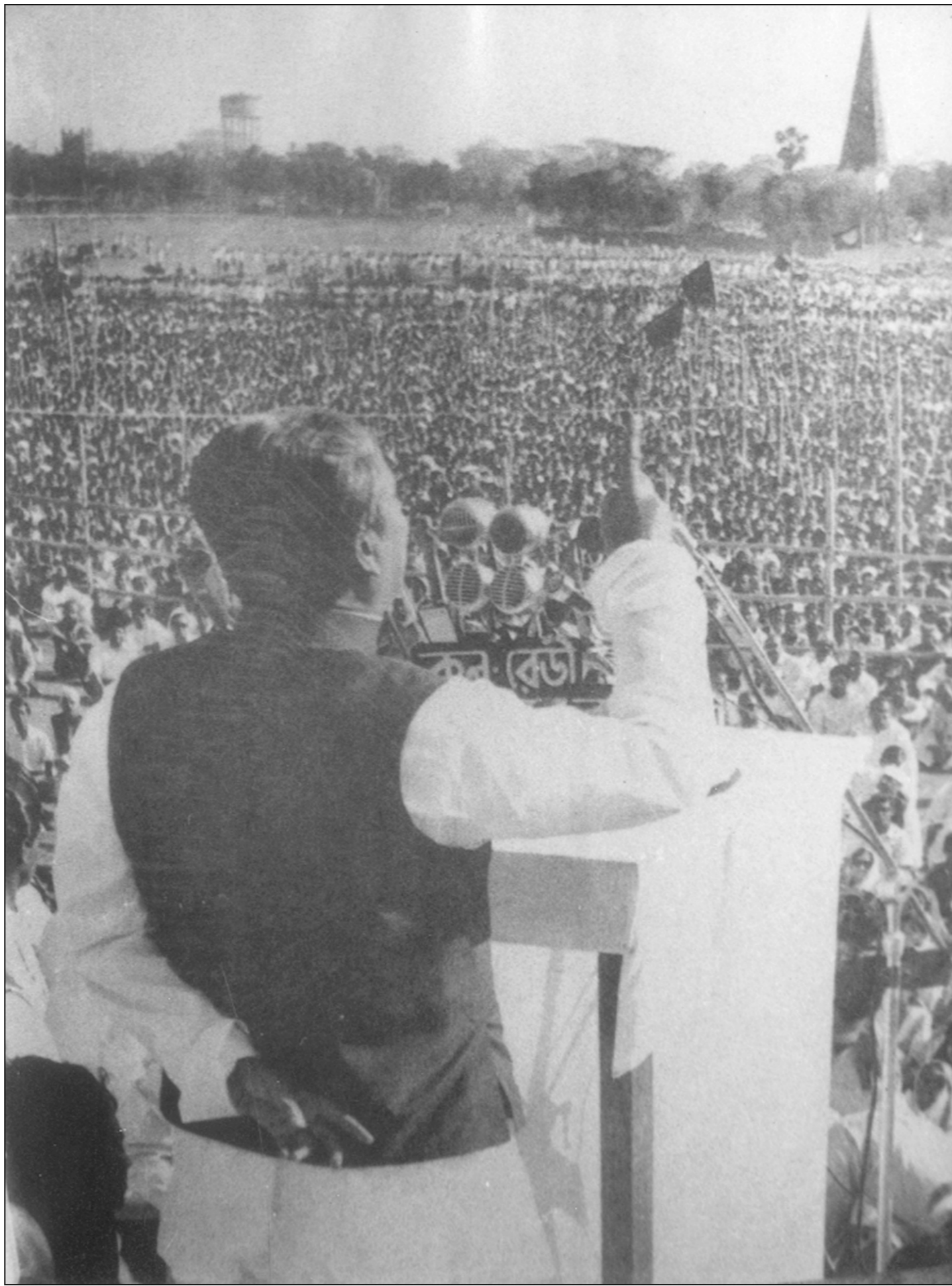
Indeed, it is ironic that the military regime's pre-planned option to impose their decision on the Bengalis was nothing but a decisive blow to the basis of Pakistan. For Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, it took him more than 20 years to reach this historical climax, the 'emancipation' of East Bengal from its status as a 'colony' of West Pakistan. He was not a political opportunist. Considerable part of his political career had always been directed towards winning freedom of his people first against their exploitation by non-Bengali elite and business classes of pre-partition India and then against the Punjabis and the Pathans of the west. Thus, though representing the essence of Bengali nationalism, he, while trying to deal with the Pakistani military regime for a constitutional solution under a democratic frame, was undoubtedly a greater patriot than many leaders from West Pakistan who supported the regime's undemocratic military stand. The days prior to 25 March '71 were crucial for Bangabandhu. He had a problem being a constitutionalist and not a radical or an anarchist. He addressed on 7 March, against the high expectation of the masses, the Bengali nation to defend themselves and fight for their salvation. But he had to measure his words and control his diction although knowing fully well that the people of East Bengal were with him. The message was clear! The people knew there was no turning back!

In an attempt to appease and at the same time control the threatening fission in the East, President Yahya Khan looked like giving all the provinces of Pakistan the maximum of 'legislative, administrative and fiscal' autonomy, but behind the promise laid the unspoken fear especially in the army bureaucracy that the dominant position of the Punjab might soon be undermined if it were ever carried out and the unspoken threat that the military would step in again if that ever looked like happening. The West Pakistani leader, Bhutto and others further nurtured this apprehension. There is now enough evidence that Bhutto deliberately sabotaged the negotiations between Yahya and Sheikh Mujib. He did so to protect West Pakistan's interest perhaps with the connivance of the army but it was also obvious that he did not welcome the prospect of playing second-fiddle to Sheikh Mujib in a united Pakistan.

Repression and Resistance

The military crackdown of 25-26 March 1971 mid-night was indeed a turning point in the history of the South Asian subcontinent. Whatever the immediate effect of Yahya Khan's attempt to reimpose his authority on the East, psychologically the East's secession was already complete. The only real surprise about the current situation was that it had taken too long to come. With Sheikh Mujibur Rahman arrested and imprisoned on the same night of the army crackdown, his last message declaring independence of

And it was becoming increasingly evident that the so-called marshal race of the South Asian subcontinent who fought invaders for centuries were going to be defeated in the soil of Bangladesh. The eventualities only reasserted the remarks once made by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: "History testifies that determined people can successfully resist and overcome forces of repression."



Bangabandhu delivering the historic March 7 speech at Race Course ground (now Suhrawardy Uddyan).

Bangladesh was immediately reported in a number of newspapers in the western world. Although there was a number of a spontaneous armed resistance by the Bengali paramilitary forces, it should be admitted that in real sense those were mostly unplanned and unorganised. To be precise, the people although politically conscious to the highest level, did not have any military preparation to counter the Pakistanis. On the other hand, the Bengali armed and paramilitary forces having military competence did not have precise political direction to face the Pakistanis' planned armed attack. Therefore, the Bengalis had to withstand military setback and suffer casualties, and the Bengali armed units took about two months or so to reorganize themselves to fight the Pakistanis back.

This period also saw the beginning of mass exodus of people from Bangladesh to India and the formation of guerrilla units to fight the Pakistan occupation forces in the country. By June '71, the resistance assumed a concrete shape for a prolonged war. And India indeed helped with training facilities and limited arms supplies to the guerrillas as well as humanitarian assistance to the refugees from Bangladesh. The refugees had poured into India through more than 500 different crossing points. With numb eyes they told their story of a village burnt, a family lost, a son shotdead, a wife or daughter raped.

During these months a new campaign of terror had begun the aims being to eliminate any possibility of further challenge to the existence of Pakistan. The military government in Dhaka had ordered a two-pronged offensive against pro-Bengali forces in the field. First, all public servants, teachers,

writers, journalists and industrialists were being screened. Second, anyone considered potentially dangerous was being 'eliminated.' Army intelligence had already begun arresting and interrogating these sections of the Bengali population at large. A list of suspects or sympathisers of the Awami League had been prepared and classified in three categories: white to be cleared, grey to lose jobs and/or imprisoned, and black to be eliminated.

Actions against the civil servants had already begun and 36 district magistrates and sub-divisional officers had either been killed or had fled to India. Civil servants on the grey list had been transferred to West Pakistan and some were imprisoned. A new element in the regime of terror was the Gestapo-style pick-up of victims mainly at night through on indication of members of local Peace Committee or Razakars. Others were called to the nearest army cantonment for interrogation. Most of them never returned. Roads and areas were sealed off by the troops and the Razakars went on the search for "Hindus, Awami Leaguers and students." Everyone must carry an identity card. Cars were stopped at the street check posts and searched, and the passengers were harassed or often taken out and also away for interrogation.

The Razakars and the Pakistani army were working in league with most non-Bengali and some Bengali collaborators. Inside Bangladesh many families received ransom demands from them. In particular, the Razakars had now extended their operation from murder and extortion to forced prostitution. In many towns, they ran camps of kidnapped young girls who were allocated nightly to Pakistani army officers. The pro-Pakistani religious

leaders or Mollahs and many members of the Peace Committee almost openly endorsed this as 'product of war practice' the 'Mal e Ganimat.' In the villages, the houses and property abandoned by the fleeing Bengalis were distributed among members of the right wing Jamaat-e-Islami and Muslim League. All Hindu bank accounts had also been frozen, together with those of suspected Awami League supporters. In most parts of the country, it was unsafe to wear a wristwatch while on the street, and transistor radios and television sets were kept hidden at home. Soldiers looted transistor radios, TV sets and watches at cheap rates. Almost all schools, colleges and universities were not functioning as most students had left to join MuktiBahini or were in hiding in the villages.

A number of situation reports in mass media released during this time speak of these events with most graphic details. In particular, the true range of atrocities perpetrated by the Pakistani in Bangladesh was revealed in a report by Anthony Mascarenhas under the title 'Genocide' published in the Times, on 13 June 1971. That shook the conscience of the world, while the others depicted the suffering of the refugees across the border, Pakistani, atrocities within the country, and importantly, the growing successes and valour of the MuktiBahini guerrillas fighting the occupation forces all over Bangladesh. Fully organised by this time, the successes of the guerrilla operations were a major demoralising factor for the Pakistani occupation army.

Diplomacy and Destiny

Meanwhile, the war was using up millions of rupees for Pakistan daily. If the cost of holding down 17 million Vietnamese nearly ruined the US economy, what would the cost of holding down 75 million Bengalis do to the fragile Pakistan economy? The foreign aid was showing signs of being dried up because no donor country would hand over money to a country in chaos. From mid-1971 onward, the world opinion was building up in favour of the Bangladesh cause. The World Bank put its aid mechanism to pressurise Pakistan to stop the acts of genocide in Bangladesh and to solve the problems constitutionally. Most world powers, excepting USA and China, supported directly or indirectly the cause of Bangladesh.

November and December 1971 were the most crucial months for both diplomatic and military points of view. Both India and Bangladesh started to win in international diplomatic fronts while there had been signs of an all-out impending war between India and Pakistan. But despite being in a disadvantageous position, the Pakistanis did not heed to their weaknesses. In November, there was a little bit of flurry in the diplomatic scene to salvage Pakistan's position. The US obtained Yahya Khan's approval to contact Sheikh Mujibur Rahman through his defence lawyer. Furthermore, the Indian government, in the 18 meetings US Secretary of State Mr. Rogers had with the Indian ambassador and during the seven meetings Mr. Kissinger held with him, was told that the US was convinced that political autonomy for East Bengal was inevitable and that US favoured it. The US informed India that Yahya Khan had agreed to negotiate with members of the Awami League in Calcutta and the US had eight contacts with them in Calcutta (later it transpired that most of these meetings were held with Mushtaq Ahmed secretly). However, India insisted that she would negotiate only with Sheikh Mujib, and only outside Pakistan for obvious diplomatic reasons. Pakistan did not agree to it.

By the first week of December 1971, it was becoming clearer that the Pakistanis were losing ground in all fronts because of their geo-strategic setback and increasingly lowering morale. The nightmare started to grow worse for Yahya Khan. Ahead of him was the prospect of losing the valuable part of his country, and his army's growing isolation in a hostile land encircled by seven Indian divisions. But Yahya was still hoping for some miracle to save the day. He made peace overtures to Mrs. Gandhi and then spurned on second thought. He tried to stir up the UN and the great powers to intervene. His actions were those of a man desperately anxious to avoid launching his country on a full-scale war that might doom his forces in the east with unavoidable consequences in the west. Militarily, an offensive in the west would mean throwing his outnumbered and relatively less equipped army against strongly entrenched Indian defensive position in one hand and the ever-growing pressure of the Bengali guerrillas on the other. But there were right-wing Muslim political groups who had been urging him to do it and to declare a Jihad (holy war) against India.

The Muktis and the Victory

Towards the end of 1971 while the guerilla warfare of the MuktiBahini was getting momentum inside Bangladesh, India's strategy seemed to be one of stepping up the pressure on the Pakistani army all around the border rather than going for any special targets. The Pakistanis started to be worried about their supply lines to the eastern wing. With formal declaration of the formation of Joint Command of MuktiBahini and Indian armed forces, Pakistan became all the more perturbed to save itself from the ultimate eventuality.

On 3 December 1971, Pakistan launched an air attack in the western front ushering a formal war with India; and by the second week of December, it became evident that in the east, Indian troops with the direct help of the MuktiBahini began to close in on Dhaka. The UN received an appeal from Rao Farman Ali, military adviser to the Governor of East Pakistan, asking for help in ending the war on terms that clearly admitted a Pakistani defeat. With an almost un-opposed advancement of the Joint Command forces, the Indians expected only threatening noises from China, which they only viewed as consolatory substitute for military assistance to Pakistan. And the US had to swallow its disapproval and learnt to live with the fait accompli.

At the UN, the Security Council was doomed to failure over Pakistan-Bangladesh-India issue. The joint forces of India and Bangladesh were moving too fast for the diplomats in New York. As Pakistan's Bhutto stalked out of the council session declaring that Pakistan would not be bound by its decisions, the whole exercise at the UN was looking more and more irrelevant. But even hardened cynics around the UN were bewildered by what looked like a deliberate American effort to highlight the council's impotence by reconvening it to consider a resolution after Pakistan had formally surrendered to the joint India-Bangladesh command and Bangladesh was already a reality!

Concluding Remarks

In retrospect, it may be observed that in Pakistan, the military junta had been on top for the last 13 years prior to the Liberation War of Bangladesh. Their original takeover was presented as a necessary step because of the civilian politicians' alleged mismanagement to run state affairs. But so far they were not instrumental to lose half of the country the military rule was. They made the mistake that turned East Bengal into a rebellious land under repressive military occupation, and then they lost the war. Yahya Khan's last-minute attempt, made after the Indian involvement, had been to erect a facade of civilian government headed by aging Nurul Amin and Bhutto could hardly be expected to relieve the soldiers of any of the onus of responsibility for the disaster though it might be counted among Bhutto's more important imprudent acts that he should have chosen to accept a share of that responsibility. And it was becoming increasingly evident that the so-called marshal race of the South Asian subcontinent who fought invaders for centuries were going to be defeated in the soil of Bangladesh. The eventualities only reasserted the remarks once made by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: "History testifies that determined people can successfully resist and overcome forces of repression."

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Fate of the elocutionist of the Quran at Mujibnagar

MUSA SADIK

THE sun of freedom of the Bangalees had once set over the mango grove of Plassey; it rose again the eastern sky over another mango grove at Mujibnagar on 17 April, 1971. In the morning of 17 April in the mango grove at Boidyanathala came the Acting President of the Government-in-exile, Syed Nazrul Islam, Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed, Home and Relief Minister Qamruzzaman, Finance Minister Mansur Ali, Foreign Minister Khondokar Moshatq Ahmed, Supreme Commander General Ataul Ghani Osmany, and others to take part in the oath-taking ceremony.

The ceremony would begin with recitation from the Holy Quran. But no elocutionist or Maulana or Imam could be found there. All had earlier sneaked away from Meherpur after propagating that the ceremony was of those who had deserted the faith.

In that crisis who would recite from the Holy Quran? The audience selected a youngster aged 15 or 16 years and fetched him. Baker Ali was good looking and a college student in the first year class. He had a sweet voice and was a good elocutionist. Professor Yusuf Ali who would read out the Declaration of Independence, had that youngster brought in front of the microphone and told him, "My child, in the name of Allah recite from the Holy Quran. Allah has sent you for reciting from the Quran."

Baker's home was at Moheshola, three quarters of a mile away from Boidyanathala. He had come in a group, chanting the slogan of 'Joi Bangla.' Now it fell to him to recite from the Holy Quran with his tremulous voice at the oath-taking ceremony of the Government of Independent Bangladesh. The historic ceremony ended after addresses by Syed Nazrul

Islam, Acting President of the newly formed government, Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed, and the Supreme Commander and the Guard of Honour given by the MuktiBahini and the Armed Forces and a Press Conference by the Prime Minister.

After it was broadcast by the world media including the BBC and Akashvani that the government of independent Bangladesh was formed on the soil of independent Bangladesh and the oath-taking ceremony was held, the Pak occupation troops rushed towards Meherpur in successive contingents.

Meherpur experienced its Doom's day on April 27. A large force of Pak Army with artillery and automatic machineguns entered by Churadanga-Meherpur-Monakhali route and rushed towards Mohishnagar, Gopalnagar, Anandabag causing indiscriminate destruction all the way. Boidyanathala, that is, Mujibnagar, was within half a mile of Moheshnagar. The assailants rained artillery and machinegun fire over an eight to ten miles area relentlessly burning the houses in the area. At a place in Meherpur court they gathered together a few dozen men, got them to dig a large pit, shot those men dead and threw them into that pit. The victims included Ayub, the OC of Chudanga. They killed many others in three or four houses at a little distance from Chudanga railway station. When the war was over the floors of those houses were still found coated with thick, dried blood and blood was also found spattered on the walls. The Pak occupation troops killed about 50 to 60 people in those ill-fates houses on 27 April. The Pakistani shimars punished the farm hands and children of Dr Shamsul Huda of the village Dariapur by holding them by the hair and bettering them against the floor.

And what fate befell the 15- or 16-year old Baker who with his resonant voice had recited the Holy Quran at the start of the ceremony that radiated

the first glow of freedom on the face of Mother Bengal in the morning of 17 April? What became of him? Does anyone know those who owe their present social status and position entirely to the freedom of the country, who preside over Bangabhaban, move around in flag-bearing cars, those who are secretaries in the Secretariat, multimillionaire business magnates at Motijheel, or owners of white marble edifices at Gulshan-Banani-Baridhara? None of them cared to know his whereabouts.

If freedom were not achieved, the flag would not flutter over their cars or houses, most would have to live as stooges of Pakistani leaders and the present multimillionaires of Motijheel would have to play second fiddle to Bawani-Adamjee-Dawood as they used to do before 1971.

Baker, the 15/16-year-old youngster of a poor farmer family was captured by the Pak soldiers for the crime of reciting from the Holy Quran. Their first asked him "Are you a Muslim? Take off your lungi, show your male organ, we want to be sure if you have been circumcised." Then they tied him to the root of a mango tree and in this helpless condition they with a knife inflicted long cuts on his body and poured down salt and powdered pepper on his wounds. His fault was that he had read the Holy Quran. While he was fastened to the tree-root and was being savagely tortured he read out aloud all the Surahs and Ayats of the Holy Book that he knew. But alas! This failed to soften the mind of the ruthless Pakistani infidels, those who claimed to be Muslims but held the reading of the Holy Quran to be a crime.

The louder the groaning boy recited the verses of the Quran the more intense grew the torture inflicted on him by the Pak hordes. They got the Jamaat workers to break anthills too many of them and collect ants. They then put the ants to his head, face, and his whole body. Swarms of ants covered his body. Eventually his body was completely obscured and all one

could see were the ants. The Pak soldiers shouted, "We will not kill you by shooting but we will have you consumed by ants. They were saying this and throwing anthills upon his body.

After thus being tortured for two hours Baker became still. Thinking him dead the Pak troops left the place to make an attack in some other direction.

When Pak soldiers left, a few brave youths of the village took the opportunity to untie Baker and carried him away and then themselves moved to safety. They then discovered that though hundreds of thousands of ants were put on his body there were no marks of sting. This miraculous happening amazed all!

Allah's ants did not sting the sacred body of the elocutionist of the Holy Quran. But in the name of Islam one hundred thousand Pakistani occupation troops killed three million sons and daughters of this country, raped two hundred thousand women. Know it, men of the Pakistani Army who have perpetrated genocide and rape, know it well that it is you who are the infidels. Allah did not approve of your activities in 1971, nor will He be with you on the Day of Judgment. After the Day of Judgment your place shall be in hell.

Baker, who was a student in 1971, studied Honours course in English at Rajshahi University after liberation. His poor father could not finance his MA studies. Then he looked for any kind of job and tried at many places but none was coming forward to his help.

Muhammad Musa who fought and suffered for the cause of Bangladesh is known as a writer by his pen-name Musa Sadik. At present he is a Joint Secretary of the Government of Bangladesh and Secretary General of the Freedom Fighter Officer-Employee Welfare Association.