

# Significance of Mujibnagar Day

ZAHID HOSSAIN

As we look back to the eventful and memorable Mujibnagar days and the role played by the Mujibnagar government during the nine-month long War of Independence of Bangladesh in 1971, our hearts glow with warm feelings of pride and glory. The country and the people will always gratefully cherish the memories of the freedom fighters and those political leaders who led them with deep affection and profound regard.

The formation of the Mujibnagar government and its pronouncement to the world at large on April 17, 1971 is really a red-letter day in our national history specially after a thumping victory of the Awami League in the elections of 1970 under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The 167 MNAs and 293 MPs who composed the Constituent Assembly in their boundless duty, right and constitutional obligation to the electors, gave it a true shape and constitutional perspective on this day making the dream of an independent Bangladesh a reality. From this point of view Mujibnagar day (17th April) is a landmark in our struggle for independence as well as in our national history.

The Mujibnagar government was formed on April 17, 1971 at the Baidyanathtala mango grove of Meherpur, a former subdivision of Kushtia district following the 10th April proclamation of Independence Order of Bangladesh. The oath taking was witnessed by hundreds of foreign journalists who had assembled there to hail the birth of a new nation. The President of the new nation was Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; Syed Nazrul Islam became the acting president; Tajuddin Ahmed, the Prime Minister; M. Mansur Ali, the Finance Minister; M. Quamruz Zaman, the Home, Relief and Rehabilitation Minister and Khandakar Mustaque Ahmed, Foreign Affairs and Law Minister. General M. A. G. Osmani who was then a ret'd Colonel and MNA elected from Awami League was made the C-in-C of the Bangladesh armed forces.

## Herculean task

It was a herculean task. Organizing civil administration and the freedom fighters, securing arms for the latter and training them, mobilizing international support for the liberation war through intense diplomatic action, ensuring speedy communication and effective coordination of various activities at hundred different levels, above all, keeping the morale of the freedom fighters high throughout the dark, difficult and strenuous days of the war. They called for extraordinary wisdom, dedication, patience, foresight, courage and tenacity on the part of the Mujibnagar government and all those connected with it.

The formation of the Mujibnagar Government had great significance for the fact that the great men who gave leadership to this great event in the absence of the supreme leader and continued the armed struggle for the following eight months, having allowed no breach in the unity of their people, which was one of the cornerstones of our total liberation war, fought valiantly involving everyone and above all

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kept the supreme leader alive in the minds of every freedom fighter as if he was fighting side by side with them.

17th April in fact, gave the total war effort a fuller meaning, it cemented the unity of the people, brought the world closer to the existence of freedom fighters and made the war efforts bloom in its full focus and realised the presence of Bangladesh in the comity of nations. It was in effect a formal introduction to the rest of the world of the nature of the political leadership that was set to guide the nation into a concerted and organised war of national liberation.

That Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the Paramount leader of the country, both in its struggle for constitutional legitimacy and military triumph was given political and moral sanction by everything that happened on April 17, 1971 in a spot of territory that was to be forever transformed in the annals of politics.

## An absolute necessity

Bangabandhu had never preached revolution and political terrorism had never been part of his platform. Therefore, when the assault of the Pakistani military machine came, it remained for him to inform his associates that a long and hard struggle on the battlefield had become necessary. The declaration of independence he made moments before his arrest by the Pakistani military forced upon his associates the need for armed struggle. And that was proof that while he awaited uncertain and terrible incarceration, he had briefed his associates on what needed to be done. The dispersal of the leadership out of Dhaka as the army went into action was a sign that there was to be no turning back from the course Bengalis had set for themselves. And thus the formation of Mujibnagar government was undoubtedly a rightful constitutional as well as logical and realistic step by the trusted and capable associates of the great leader.

The establishment of the Mujibnagar government was an absolute necessity for another reason. Had it not been put in place, it is reasonably certain that diffuse guerilla movements would have spawned all over the country without any form of central control. The danger inherent in such politics lies in an absence of legitimacy. And in Bangladesh's politics at that point in time, the absence of the Mujibnagar government would only have given the freedom struggle a clearly secessionist hue, to the immense delight of the Pakistanis and to the consternation of a Bengali population directly in the military's line of fire. Seen in such light, the presence of Acting President Syed Nazrul Islam and Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed with their colleagues deep in Meherpur in April 1971 was a clear, unequivocal statement of intent: that the elected representatives of

the people of Bangladesh had taken it upon themselves to give shape and substances to an independent statehood for them.

It was thus the global community that was left with hardly a choice. The initiation of the war of national liberation, given the fact that it was being waged by a leadership privy to the electorally acknowledged support of the nation, could not be dismissed as an insurrection or a secessionist enterprise. Moreover, the military's misadventure (swooping upon Bengali political aspirations through an exercise of brazenness) assisted the cause not a little.

## Flight to India

The killing of unarmed civilians, the razing of villages and townships and the atrocities against women only strengthened the cause of the provisional government. In the months between March and December 1971, the flight of ten million people to India convinced the global community of the necessity and the righteousness of the Bengali cause, and helped the

Mujibnagar government to inform the world that there was no alternative to an independent Bangladesh.

The provisional government undertook the onerous responsibility of moulding international opinion in Bangladesh's favour: the effort was assisted a great deal by the momentum of declaration of allegiance to the national struggle by Bengali diplomats stationed in Pakistani missions abroad. Placing the entire diplomatic efforts in the hands of a well-respected personality like Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury was yet another factor for the success of the efforts of Mujibnagar government in mobilising world opinion in our favour.

The speeches and statements made by the Acting President, late Syed Nazrul Islam, Prime Minister late Tajuddin Ahmed and other leaders of the exiled Mujibnagar government at the formal oath taking ceremony and other subsequent occasions were widely appreciated world over as those reflected really democratic and progressive

principles of the new government. The guiding principles and the state policies announced time to time by the government in exile were all fully democratic based on universal human rights principles and other widely accepted international norms and protocols.

Finally the formation of Mujibnagar government was the real birth of a new nation -- a nation imbued with the spirit of democratic value, nationalism, secularism and socialism obtained from the call of a man whose stature as a statesman had surpassed that of any of his time and most of his predecessors, who united the Bengali speaking people on a piece of land as one man and raised a nation of indomitable courage, powerful and splendid in its commitment that went head on to face a fiercely equipped army of Pakistan, bare-handed bred with conviction and valour and strength of insurmountable will and unity to be independent and ready to shed the last drop of blood of every individual born on this soil then called East Pakistan.

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Mujibnagar memorial at Baidyanathtala, Meherpur.

# Unearthing civility



KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF

THE reader was faced with two realities as she opened the newspaper few days ago. Old Dhaka has come to a near standstill over protests in the gruesome killing and more gruesome dismemberment of two businesspeople. In Narsingdi, not very far from Dhaka, the remains of a two thousand five

hundred old urban site have been unearthed. On the one hand, there is the erosion of civility, and on the other hand, the unearthing of civilization. Side by side, only seventy kilometers apart, and yet worlds, and not just the centuries, away.

The name "Dhaka" literally means concealed or hidden, suggesting a wry truth of its vague past. Not much is known with certainty about the happenings of the city or the region before the fourteenth century. What is its origin? Who were the people

yielded the walls of what appears to be a fortified citadel, as well as artifacts and some building remains. The most significant fact is that the archaeological remain of the site dates back to 450 BCE, a date apparently corroborated by carbon sampling of certain artifacts. In other words, the site is 2,450 years old!

What does an ancient road measure by itself? Apparently, no road has been found in the Trans-Gangetic Valley earlier. Professor Mustafizur described the road as

Mauryan empire which would be later in any case (324-187 BCE)? Perhaps 450 BCE is too early for a Buddhist base in this region! What about less grand stories? What sort of a community or society comprised the settlement then? How were social conflicts resolved? Did traders in the city get minced by assailants? Did women get beaten on the streets by the guardians of law? Did the citizens live in fear of shutting their business at the slightest coercion? Did children laugh? What was the price of ginger?

gal/Bangladesh has largely been seen as an agricultural milieu as there is little evidence of urbanity before the 10th century or so. Whether the vacuum is due to the destructive behaviour of nature, or whether the region was actually made of dispersed settlements coming out of the predominant agricultural ethos is hard to say. The discovery at Narsingdi changes that quite a bit, encouraging the possibility of more evidence of urbanity in Bengal.

Dhaka for the page, I wasn't quite contented to label Dhaka as a Mughal city with a chronology from only the 14th century. I pondered on how far should the urban history of Dhaka go back? I pointed to the 8th century Buddhist monuments in Savar as evidence of an organised social, even perhaps, urban life, even though not located in what we might call the epicentre of the city. Now Narsingdi changes that sharply. The urban history of Dhaka region now goes back to 450 BCE. Plato was not yet born (that would be in 428 BCE), the big Buddhist council at Vaisali would not take place until 440 BCE or even later. And, of course, Asoka who died in 238 BCE would be a couple of centuries later.

In the meantime, very close by, two thousand five hundred years later, businessmen vanish only to be found as severed parts, women lie beaten on the streets, river waters choke as stubborn encroachment continues, parks and lakes are plundered endlessly, and citizens watch helplessly as their last bit of dignity is usurped. In short, two thousand five hundred years later, in the twenty-first century, civility is not only in short supply, it is violently challenged.

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# AL siege of Hawa Bhaban

**The government does not have to react to every opposition action with heavy handed, tit for tat, reckless response. The party in power must necessarily try to resolve any inflammatory situation peacefully, act in a cool and composed manner, with extreme patience and tolerance.**

OMAR KHASRU

THERE is a simple way to defuse the looming AL-sponsored emblematic blockade (gherao) of Hawa Bhaban, the nerve center of BNP actions, activities and schemes (detractors might say, scams and scheming). On the designated day, 21 April 2004, Hawa Bhaban office staff should be granted a holiday. The office will be empty, doors locked and nary a pip from any living being from inside the premises. Unlike Alexander the Great, AL activists will come, see but not conquer. They will besiege the vacant structure, have a noisy rally, get bored stiff and leave disheartened, muttering to themselves.

Awami League may term this as a hasty and timid retreat by the party in power, sort of like the US forces at Falluja, but the discordant discord-seekers will be dejected and frustrated due to lack of dissonance. The government will be able to claim prudence and perspicacity. It can earn brownie points for averting significant friction and tension with statesmanlike behavior, for a change. Both sides can claim major victory and we can avoid significant turmoil and confrontation. This can be done without loss of face, favor, fervor or flavor. There will be peace, reassurance and hope for the general public.

If this suggestion seems immensely sensible, you can almost be certain that neither of the squabbling parties, sometime extremely immaturely so, such as the recent spate of competing public meetings, repeating ad nauseam the same set of primeval accusations, vitriol and prevarications against each other, will accept it, or even pay any heed.

This open-minded and tolerant idea, like others, will fall into deaf ears. They would rather flex the muscles, show up, show off and show down, exhibit power and authority, display aggression, antipathy and acrimony. To paraphrase Arundhati Roy, the author of *The God of Small Things* and *War Talk*, 'They want triumph at the cost of tranquility, dominance at the cost of dignity. And ascendancy at any price'.

In the upcoming ominous confrontation, emanating from opposition party declaring the gherao program of Hawa Bhaban, neither side so far seem to want to blink, or back out. Neither wants to heed to cooler heads or care for the anxiety or trepidation of the people. The one-upmanship seem to be more important than community comfort, domination more than rationality, control over confidence building, authority more than validity, confrontation over constructive engagement, and ultimately, show of force and power preferred over poise and purpose.

The question is, does Awami League have a right to besiege Hawa Bhaban? The democratic answer will have to be a qualified yes, as long as it is done peacefully without ulterior motive to create mayhem and frighten people. This may be a more imaginative and ingenious program, especially compared to hartal, albeit potentially tumultuous and inflammatory. If people think that party functionaries wield unwieldy and unconstitutional power, the opposition party has every right to point it out, even highlight and accentuate it. If a significant part of the general public feels that a certain wing of the ruling elite is using a building to foster narrow personal or damaging

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## ABOUT CITIES

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who lived here in early times? What were they like? Although the archaeological dig at Narsingdi unveils another historical layer -- a most significant layer -- of the region called Dhaka, the news is already non-news, while reports on the other event continues as protests, marches, arrests, and even a building demolition spin out of it. Yes, in the context of mayhem and murder, what does it matter if the urban culture of the Dhaka region is pushed back a few centuries making it one of the oldest in eastern India?

An archaeological team from Jahangirnagar University headed by Professor Sufi Mustafizur Rahman was responsible for unearthing the ancient site located in Wari village in the Narsingdi area. From what is reported in the newspapers, the archaeologists working in the area for the last four years have discovered an 18-meter length of an ancient road that is also 6-metre wide and 30 centimetre thick. Discovery has also

being made of crushed bricks and "potshots" (black slipped ware), and cemented by brick dust. Two layers were found for the road that might indicate that the road was renovated or used after being abandoned earlier. The walled precinct or what is being called a citadel measures 600 metres by 600 metres, an evidence of a planned building. That the citadel is a pure geometric figure gives credence to a sense of fundamental architectural organisation. The road implies a network of connections, something that could only flourish in an environment of civility and sociality. All in all, both the road and the citadel imply a certain civic purpose, the significance of which is that it will redefine the history of eastern India.

Since a study of the site has not yet begun, conjectures abound, that it was part of the Mauryan empire, that it was a major Buddhist centre. Was it part of the so-called Brahmaputra civilisation? How was it part of the

As historians, archaeologists and anthropologists consider these things, we can marvel at the simple fact that there existed an urbanised settlement 70 km from present Dhaka nearly two thousand five hundred years ago. This is a matter of utmost significance for it replaces Pundravardhan (Mahasthangarh, 370 BCE) in northern Bangladesh as the oldest urban site in the region thus pushing back documented urban history. The region of Ben-

Archaeological remains have always presented a fascinating prospect. Caught between the nexus of absence and presence, weaving a mythology of the missing, it nonetheless provides opportunities for revealing a new understanding. And, hopefully, as more evidence is unearthed in Narsingdi, the foggy past of the region of Dhaka will lift somewhat. I recently compiled the contents of a web page on Dhaka city for the Architectural League of New York. In chronicling the history of