

## BANGABANDHU'S HOMECOMING

# Iconoclast who became our own icon

When the sun went down on January 10, 1972, I made my way home through Ramna Park. Every Bengali was going home. And home was where Bangabandhu was. And he was right there, back home in our midst. He was president and would soon be prime minister. And yet there was a bigger truth that we wrapped ourselves in: he was the Father, he was the Liberator.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

WHEN the jetliner bringing Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman home gleamed in the afternoon sky over Dhaka, a deafening roar of Jai Bangla went up from the crowd milling outside the old Tejgaon airport.

I know, I remember, for I was in that crowd. There was an excitement about January 10, 1972, that men and women of my generation have not quite forgotten. In our teens, with most of us back from a war that would give us freedom, with many more having dreamed of that freedom in internal exile, Bangabandhu's return to a free Bangladesh was a point in history that Bengalis have consistently, and insistently, recalled.

He was, as someone noted at that point in time, a poet who had shaped politics in his mould. There was a new persona he had acquired with the fall of Pakistan. The transformation was all.

When the BBC World Service, in its late evening bulletin on January 8, 1972, noted "the Bengali political leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has arrived in London," there was little question about the larger than life figure that Bangabandhu had become through the nine months of a war his people had waged in his name.

He was the leader of the Awami League, and yet he was more than that. He had been elected majority leader in the Pakistan national

assembly, a phase he had now transcended to become the founding father of a new country.

It was the founding father we spotted alighting from the aircraft bringing him from London. I do not recall how I scaled that wall, but in that crowd of a million, of an eternity of humanity, I was there as Bangabandhu emerged from that flying machine and was conducted down the gangway.

He looked thinner than before, but there was no mistaking the old spirit. Streaks of grey peppered his ample hair. He kept pushing them back with his hand. We watched, awed.

If greatness was what we had read about in our school textbooks, here we were observing greatness firsthand.

In me there was an overpowering desire to rush up to him, to ask him if he remembered giving me his autograph nearly two years earlier. It was a thought, and remained that way. The bigger truth was that he was home, that with him back we did not need to worry about the future. The stars were within reach.

As I tried to clamber onto the truck that would take him all the way to the Race Course, today's Suhrawardy Udyan, I let images of the leader's tempestuous career flash by in the imagination. One of my feet was on the truck, on the threshold as it were. There was no space for the other, which simply scraped the metal road as the vehicle began inching its way out of the airport.

A stern-looking Colonel MAG Osmany shot some piercing looks at me, before telling me to get down because I could hurt myself. I looked the other way, did not get down.

It was history being made and I did not wish to be away from it. That truck, as it moved along, was history in the making. I hung on, all the way to the Race Course.

All these ages later, every time January 10 comes around, I travel back to teenage, to the moment when someone rushed into the reception at Bangladesh Betar in Shahbagh on January 8 to announce that Bangabandhu had gone missing.

Waiting for an audition to be a newsreader, I suddenly realized that the audition did not matter any more. Nothing mattered, except Bangabandhu. Where had he disappeared? He had been put on a plane by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in Rawalpindi, but no one knew where he had gone or been dispatched.

Once I rushed back home, through crowds as worried as I, I grabbed the radio and turned the knob through nearly every station that beeped. It was late in the evening that the BBC let us in on the news that Bangladesh's leader was in London.

It was pure, unadulterated thrill listening to him, a couple of hours later on the BBC's Bengali Service. He was speaking to the world for the first time since Pakistan's soldiers had abducted him and bundled him

off to Lyallpur.

Those of you who lived through that day of unending excitement will not easily forget the magnificence that came wrapped in Bangabandhu's opening words before the global media at London's Claridge's Hotel.

"Gentlemen of the world press" said Bangladesh's founding father, "I am happy to share the unbounded joy of freedom brought about in an epic liberation struggle fought by my people." The old firmness was there, firmness that reassures a nation.

Here was a politician who had miraculously emerged from the shadows of death, a man who would have gone to the gallows if Yahya Khan and Bhutto had been able to snuff out the Bengali struggle for liberation.

Throughout the months of the war, through the terrible loneliness of Ramadan 1971, millions of men, women and children had prayed for the well being of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. And here he was, proof that history always moved along the right tracks, evidence that God could and did dispense justice to suffering men and women.

On that morning when Bangabandhu, along with the family of Dr Kamal Hossain, landed in London, it was a sleepy MM Rezaul Karim who was alerted by the British Foreign Office about the impending arrival of the Pakistan International Airlines flight from Rawalpindi.

On board with the Bengali leader was a group of Pakistani military men, entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring Mujib's safe arrival in the British capital. Karim's arrival at Heathrow was a completion of the formality. The men saluted and left.

As Karim would subsequently note, on the way to Claridge's from

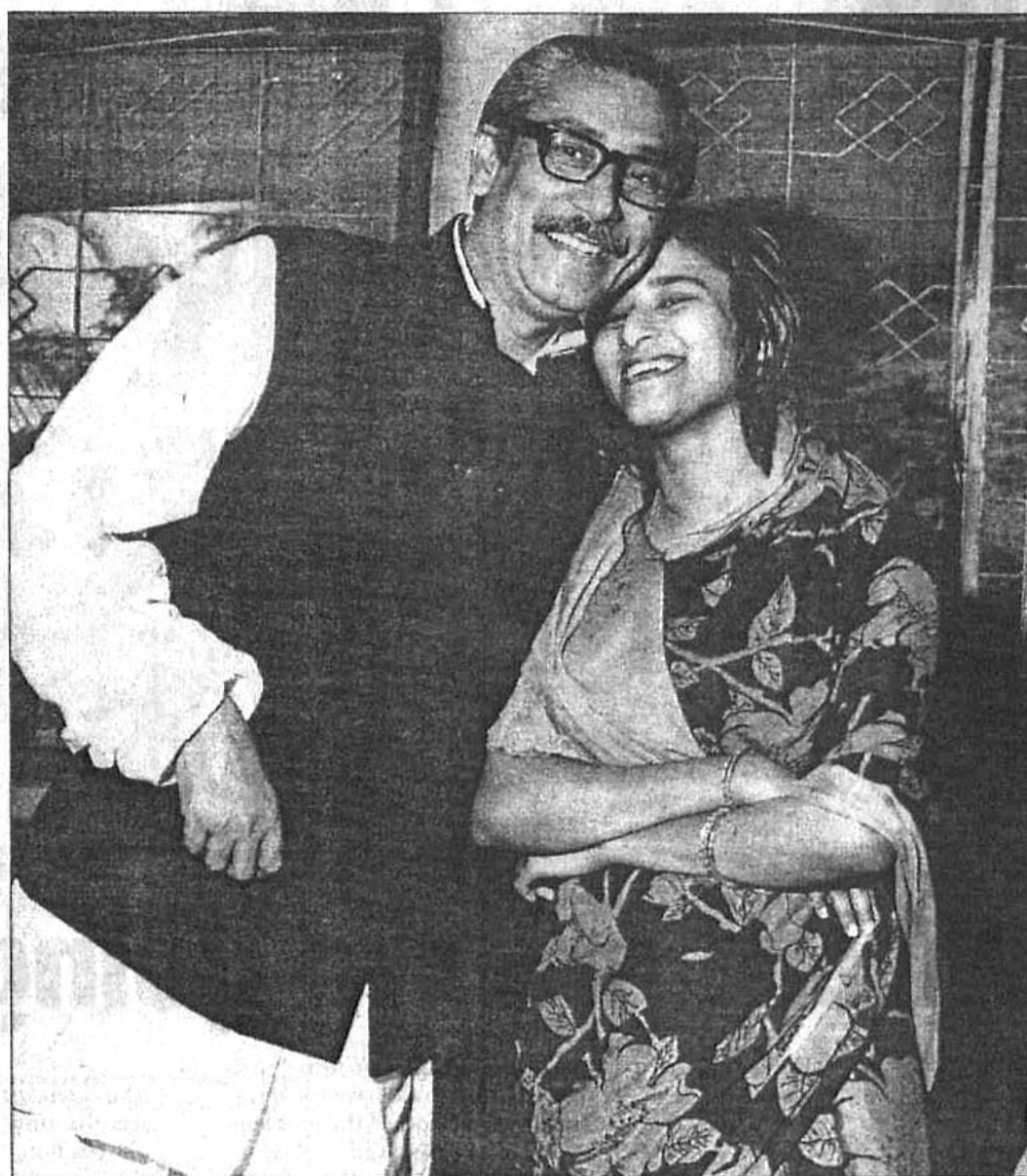
Heathrow, Bangabandhu overwhelmed him with questions about Bangladesh's emergence as a free state. "Rezaul Karim, are we really free?" Assured that we were, Bangabandhu called Tajuddin Ahmed and his family, did his homework, and moved to face the world's media.

He was finally the leader of a new nation, a truth that Bhutto did not pass on to him when the two men met in late December 1971 days after Pakistan's new leader had placed Bangabandhu under house arrest. Kuldip Nayar, whose account (in his 1972 book, *Distant Neighbours: A Tale of the Subcontinent*) of that seminal Mujib-Bhutto meeting remains the earliest and clearly the most poignant, tells us how Bhutto turned up to meet Bangabandhu.

Bangladesh's leader, unaware that his nation was free and yet able to sense the change in the air, asked him: "Bhutto, how are you here?" There was no answer to that query, but Bhutto did tell Mujib that he (Bhutto) was president of Pakistan.

A surprised Bangabandhu fired his next question: "How is that possible? You know that position belongs to me." Then, as if to frighten Mujib (so relates Nayar), Bhutto said with a straight face: "I am also chief martial law administrator."

The rest is, of course, history. Bangabandhu was asked by Bhutto to travel to Tehran before flying on to Dhaka, an offer the Bengali leader quickly declined. The Shah of Iran had proved no friend of the Bengalis in 1971. There was, therefore, little point in being his guest at Mehrabad palace. Hence London. And from there on to Delhi, where Bangladesh's president Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was rapturously welcomed by VV Giri and Indira Gandhi.



When the sun went down on January 10, 1972, I made my way home through Ramna Park. Every Bengali was going home. And home was where Bangabandhu was. And he was right there, back

home in our midst. He was president and would soon be prime minister. And yet there was a bigger truth that we wrapped ourselves in: he was the Father, he was the Liberator. He was

an iconoclast who had become our biggest historical icon. He was our claim on history.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is former Executive Editor, Dhaka Courier.

## Wounded nation, still the dreamer

This paradoxes makes this nation vulnerable to emotion and wild mood swings. In the midst of a poverty scenario, somehow a global "happiness" survey pronounced Bangladeshis to be the "happiest in the world"! It is in this context that the Yunus Nobel was appropriated and turned into something much more. All the pent up desires for a hero, a cause, a pride flag, were projected onto one institution and moment.

NAEEM MOHAJEMEN

"You and I are of that clan  
The one that sings in the middle of pain  
That painful scream is the only song  
Of this dead century."  
(Humayun Azad, *Bangla Bhashar Shothru Mithro*, 1999)

ONCE again, Bangladesh on the front page of the *New York Times*. But this time, instead of Yunus surrounded by smiles, boys throwing rocks at a lethally over-armed police force. A professor at Cooper Union calls me up and tells me that old communist friends are saying there's "revolution" on the streets. I laugh silently. What are they smoking? "Revolution? No, nothing of that sort, just fratricide," I reply sadly.

From this perch, an exultant Nobel Prize Friday seems quite far

away. Back then, after I had sent the umpteenth SMS to various cell phones, one friend fired back: "Basta Ya! What is with this irritating display of nationalism! I thought you were above all this?" It's true, normally I'm quite skeptical of nationalism, and yet the prize announcement had swept away the typical self-restraint.

Why did that victory matter so much for Bangladesh? Why a nationalist project in this century, when these parochial feelings are supposed to be closed. All sorts of ummah identity are to be the new transnational glue -- South Asian, sub-continental, deshi, Asian, Pan-Asian, Muslim, Southern, Third World, pick your kurta. But suddenly back to the national borders. Or is it forward to...?

For my friends who moved beyond borders, it's hard to explain a psyche that still craves national

heroes. For decades, Bangladesh has struggled under the weight of the impossible, sky-high expectations created by 1971 and the rise and fall of demi-gods.

From the Dhamondhi massacre onwards, the roller coaster ride never ends -- Khondoker's Judas kiss, jail killings, Khaled Mosharraf's musical chairs, *Shipai Shipai Bhai Officer der Rocktho Chai*, the crippled war hero and a secret execution, "I will make politics difficult," Circuit House invasion, Manzur's mysterious "mob" death, Qamrul Hasan's World Shameless, Gulam Azam's returned passport, and the ongoing dogfight between BNP and AL. The surprises or *chomoks* are endless, but the game has grown quite tired. Hello? Is anyone still watching? Change the channel please.

Politics is not everything, but this endless battle has poisoned many



aspects of Bangladesh's trajectory. Even though the new generation would like to ignore all this, the politics of *harat* and confrontation has made it impossible -- everyone is hostage to the political turf war. Oh, if only they would settle their accounts inside Parliament -- imagine Kahn's masterpiece with a built-in wrestling ring. The victors would get to keep their red passports and

Pajeros.

A nation that cannot define itself is forced to swallow others' definitions. Thirty years after Kissinger, every new government still feels the need to say to a foreign magazine interviewer, at least once: "Well, you know we are no longer that bottomless basket, we are self-sufficient in food." Lazy journalism and media caricature always needs a country to

be "Timbuktu" -- a symbol for distance, dystopia, mystery, poverty, or anarchy. In the last few years, Bangladesh also finds itself trapped inside the box of Islam. Fighting a rising militant Islamic threat, the country is now the focus of unwelcome external attention. A steady drumbeat of parachute journalism about "Talibanization." Another zero-zero image game.

There is, predictably, a roll-call of achievements that are ignored -- dramatic increases in food sufficiency, child vaccination rates higher than the US, drop in child mortality, accelerating literacy rate, increase in female education, exploding export sector, literal rags-to-riches garment story, a technologically savvy youth culture, construction boom, digital divide leap-frogging, fiercely free press, empowered women, and the largest number of NGOs and a huge number of successful development, social welfare and grassroots organizing models. But none of these are particularly sexy, or bite-size stories for the world.

This paradoxes makes this nation vulnerable to emotion and wild mood swings. In the midst of a poverty scenario, somehow a global

"happiness" survey pronounced Bangladeshis to be the "happiest in the world"! It is in this context that the Yunus Nobel was appropriated and turned into something much more. All the pent up desires for a hero, a cause, a pride flag, were projected onto one institution and moment.

Trying to explain a national pride project (while insisting to my skeptical friends that this is different from jingoism), I went back to my archives and dug out my diary notes written from Dhaka in December 2005. Filming back-to-back rallies by Islamist groups and secularists, and finding the latter small and outnumbered, I was in a blue mood reflecting the national tenor. The country was reeling from an unbroken chain of political violence, magnified by "suicide bombings" by militant Islamists. Those six months of chaos were considered the gravest threat to Bangladesh's future since 1971 (but soon, there was more to come).

Finally, on a gloomy December 16, known in more hopeful times as Victory Day, the weekly *Shaptahik 2000* mustered up impossible reserves of optimism to bring out their cover story.

Agreed, and cover. A cloud cluster of words, tracing the shape of the map.

Among the many words, I could make out the following:  
Terrorism, Cross-fire  
Bomb Blasts, Traffic Jam  
Murder, Poison Pen  
Militancy, Brain Drain  
Fundamentalism, Gas Crisis  
Bribery, Water Crisis  
Inflation, Scandal  
Monga, Fraud  
Bank Loot, Blackout

And underneath that long litany, an impossible defiance:

"Standing in the middle of a pile of smoke, we still dream of a prosperous, stable Bangladesh. A country where the Fundamentalists will have no space. Where we can smash their throne of blood to pieces. Bengalis are on a cursed journey, but we still dream among the ashes."

And then the seemingly impossible headline...

*Thobu bhalobashi Bangladesh*  
(and yet, I still love Bangladesh)  
"From a wounded land and people, who won't stop dreaming."

Naeem Mohajemen is co-author of "System Error: Wars! A Force That Gives Us Meaning."

## LEST WE FORGET

# Surya Sen -- the fiery freedom fighter

PREM RANJAN DEV

THE history of the Indian sub-continent's struggle for freedom will remain incomplete if it leaves unexamined an episode like the Chittagong uprising of 1930.

Hence the searching question: What was behind this unique phenomenon? The mere existence of common factors of colonial oppression was not enough. Had it been so, we would have witnessed similar resistances and similar instances of martyrdom all over the subcontinent.

The Chittagong Uprising did leave an enduring mark on our freedom struggle. The report of the Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee set up by the British government noted: "The news of this coup, unprecedented in the annals of terrorism, gave fillip to the younger section of the revolutionaries who were already fired with enthusiasm to drive the British from India by force of arms. Recruits poured into the various terrorist groups in a steady stream and these

included women and young girls".

Let us, therefore, try to find out the roots of this unique phenomenon in Bengal. Thanks to the emergence of mighty thought currents generated by the literature of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rangalal Banerjee, Dinabandhu Mitra, Vivekananda, DL Roy, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, Kazi Nazrul Islam and others -- in terms of patriotism, human dignity and sensitivity -- massive formations filled the spiritual and intellectual firmament of Bengal awaiting a precipitating agent to transform them into a phenomenal downpour of patriotic outbursts to secure freedom.

Surya Sen and others like him played a significant role in that precipitating process.

Coming back to the Chittagong Uprising of 1930, what were the circumstances surrounding us at that time? This historical event in the subcontinent's eastern port city of Chittagong overtook the whole country by surprise.

A bewildered public heard how a band of determined youths had

launched an armed rebellion against their colonial overlords! Their lightning attack immobilized all the centres of administration in Chittagong -- all the armories were in their hands -- all telegraph and telephone connections severed, railway lines uprooted -- the whole city was in the hands of the freedom fighters whom the British called insurgents.

The happening hit the headlines of newspapers. Was this a reenactment of the famous Irish Easter rebellion on Indian soil? This generated imaginary news.

The number of insurgents were imagined by some as "500" or at least "100" while the real number of participants was about 65 only, of whom 70 percent were teenagers.

On his mission, Surya Sen, who was popularly known as "Master-da," said in an interview: "Ours is not an easy life. Our primary emphasis is quality. The role of maximum sacrifice and dedication must not be underrated. You need not rush into any decision as to whether you want to join or not. If after serious self-searching there is

least hesitation, then it is far better to part company. There will be no ill feeling on our side. It is not our aim to swell our numbers by indiscriminate recruiting. The party must be strong enough to match the challenge facing us: The fight for freedom is going to be a long and exacting struggle. There is only one way: A dedicated band of youths must show the path of all-out organized struggle in place of individual terrorism. Most of us, perhaps, will have to die in the process but our sacrifice for such a noble cause will not go in vain. Whoever dreams of a push button revolution on one fine morning on a national scale in a vast country like ours, with varied cultures and languages, is a worthless dreamer."

Owing to the determination and organizational skill of Surya Sen and his lieutenants, Chittagong witnessed what could be truly described as an iron brigade of dedicated patriots whose motto was "one for all and all for one."

It was, indeed, a unique organization, which almost emerged as a parallel local authority. There have

been instances when the notorious goons and thugs were not only punished with utmost severity but the leading ones were even put to trial in their "swadeshi adalat!"

On the one hand the patriotic army of Surya Sen earned the gratitude of the victimized public at large and on the other, struck terror in the underworld gangs of goons.

Surya Sen was born in 1894. His political life started somewhere around 1916 when he was a student of Baharampur College (West Bengal) preparing for his graduation.

The police raided the college hostel and few of his fellow resident students were searched. These suspect students attracted his keen attention and gradually he was drawn into radical politics, the aim of which was to liberate the motherland by all possible means.

By then all his heart searching was over and he was determined to dedicate his life for the cause of freedom.

So he joined the Chittagong branch of the Indian National Congress and soon became the

leading organizer of the local youth movement.

His all out participation in the first non-cooperation movement left its mark on the people of Chittagong. He effectively led the movement for the boycott of the official schools and colleges and courts and took a leading part in organizing "swadeshi" schools known as "national schools" of which he was the most popular "Master" hence the endearing name "Master-da."

His involvement in the non-cooperation movement was extended to the field of mass movements. He and his lieutenants successfully led the Seamen's strike against the Bullock Brothers Co. and he also left his mark in successfully organizing the Assam Bengal Railway Strike in support of the national movement.

In due course, the inevitable difference cropped up between him and the leadership and officials of the congress party to whom the constraints of non-violence were inviolable even after the events of Chauri Chora.

Surya Sen and his radical colleagues insisted that any successful anti-colonial liberation movement must not be fettered by any inhibiting conditions. His next task was the formation of a radical wing inside the Congress with the help of the like-minded patriots -- a highly disciplined and dedicated band of youths.

He was arrested and detained as a state prisoner in 1926 and released in 1928. At last came the most memorable chapter of his life, namely, the Chittagong uprising of 1930.

The first (short-lived) free provisional government was formed in Chittagong and he was declared its president. Then came the most exacting period of his revolutionary career when he led a series of guerilla resistances, of which the pride of place belongs to the famous Jalalabad battle against overwhelming odds, thereby revealing the calibre of his leadership and stamina.

Months later, no less a person than Sarat Chandra Bose (elder brother of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose) offered his help to arrange for his safe transit to somewhere out of the country for his safety. His answer

was: "My place is right here in Chittagong -- here I will fight and die".

He was, ultimately, arrested in 1933 and was brutally tortured and eventually tried by a Special Tribunal. The final stage of his life was reached on 12 January, 1934 when he was hanged with his lieutenant Tarakeswer Dastidar at Chittagong.

His last letter to his comrades, written on 11th January, will remain enshrined in history as the most eloquent testimony of the excellence of his manhood.

"Death is knocking at my door. My mind is flying away towards infinity... this is the moment to prepare myself to embrace death as the dearest of friends. In this happy, sacred and crucial moment, what am I leaving for you all? Only one thing, my dream, a golden dream, the dream of a Free India. Dear comrades, march ahead; never retrace your step. Days of servitude are receding. Freedom's illuminating ray is visible over there. Arise and never give way to despair. Success is sure to come."

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