

## Bangabandhu's finest hour

The voice in the speech is one of its most magnificent aspects. It was so bold that the whole nation could and in fact did, take strength from it. There was an unhesitant enunciation of everything that needed to be said. There was such appropriate modulation of voice that every word uttered seemed irreplaceable. Throughout it all the strength of the man came out and touched all those who heard him, drawing all close to him and making all trust and repose faith in him.

MAHFUZ ANAM

It is this writer's view that the March 7th speech was Bangabandhu's finest hour. He stood far taller than ever before and with him we too stood taller. He was always known for being a powerful speaker. But that day, 26 years ago, he outperformed himself a thousand times over, and a thousand times more empowered we felt that day. During that crucial March afternoon, and especially through the electrifying moments of the speech he stood towering above the nation, singly shouldering the burden of leading an unprepared people towards self assertion.

However bravely we may talk today about those events so long ago, at that time we really did not know how things were to unfold. Yes, we all wanted our rights, and we wanted them right away. But how they were to come? Was freedom to come through negotiations or would it require us to wage an armed struggle? And what did we understand by armed struggle? We romanticised about it, but knew nothing of it.

Things were becoming increasingly obvious that to realise our legitimate demands we may have to seek independence. But how is one to start an independence movement? What would be the consequence of making a declaration for it? Though we all talked about it, and some may have even said so in public, yet it was for our elected leader to take us through that uncharted path. The man who should be the Prime Minister of whole of Pakistan by dint of his electoral victory had to take the right step at the right time. The critical question was when would the right time strike.

And this is where the specialty of the March 7th speech lies. It says everything

without the elements that could be used to hold responsible for breaking up the legal Pakistan. For by then, the country had actually broken up in all other sense. To really appreciate the magnificence of this speech one has to understand the context in which it was delivered. Awami League had fought an election and won the majority of seats of the parliament of Pakistan. Following the results, Gen Yahya had declared that Sheikh Mujib would be the Prime Minister of Pakistan. It was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and some conniving army generals who did not want to transfer power to someone whose electoral programme was to realise the legitimate rights of the Bengali people enshrined in the now famous six points. There were lots of indications about the impending betrayal of the verdict of the December '70 elections, yet it was not till the postponement of the session of the newly elected parliament that Bangabandhu could really give a call for an all out movement.

When the session of the parliament was postponed on March 1st, '71, the fatal shot to the existence of united Pakistan was fired right into its chest. And it was on the night of March 25th, when Pakistani military cracked down on the civilian population of what was still then one country, that Pakistan was killed and buried. It was in the midst of this highly charged transition period -- from the 1st to the 25th -- when events were unfolding at a break-neck speed that Bangabandhu had to give this speech.

And here lies the beauty and the craftsmanship of this speech, which transforms it as a classic in political oratory.

The speech had to live up to the high expectation of the people who wanted their independence and yet there should be



Galvanising the Bengalee nation.

nothing in it that could give an outright excuse to the Pakistan army to start military action against the unarmed Bengali people. In fact, Tikka Khan's band of killers would want nothing better than to be given a publicly announced excuse for a genocidal action. So Bangabandhu had to say everything, and yet not give the excuse that Pakistan military was looking for. He had to stand steadfast and yet keep open the doors for negotiations. Under no circumstances could he appear to be the one responsible for the breakdown of the talks. And yet he had to take his people forward and give them the right directions, maintain the militancy, ask them to take all the necessary preparatory steps, and clear people's minds about the final goal. It was a political and intellectual challenge of the highest kind, and it could be tackled only by a speech of the type that Bangabandhu delivered that day.

Take for example the content of the speech. In it he gradually builds up the whole rationale for the movement that has been going on. He argues, cajoles, pleads, demands and finally warns, not to take lightly the demand of a people who have realised their strength through struggle. He talks of peace and yet gives clear signals that peace cannot come at the cost of capitulation. He talks of sacrifice, but not in terms of a helpless people who are suffering because they are weak, but in terms of a courageous and bold people who have knowingly taking upon a task which they know to be an arduous, and for which they are ready to face any

consequence. There was superb cleverness in the construction of the speech by which he said all that he needed to and yet the enemy could not hold him responsible for having said anything which was illegal.

The voice in the speech is one of its most magnificent aspects. It was so bold that the whole nation could and in fact did, take strength from it. There was an unhesitant enunciation of everything that needed to be said. There was such appropriate modulation of voice that every word uttered seemed irreplaceable. Throughout it all the strength of the man came out and touched all those who heard him, drawing all close to him and making all trust and repose faith in him.

If ever a speech united, strengthened, enthused, inspired a people, and gave courage to them to become bolder and more determined than they usually are, it was Bangabandhu's speech of March 7th, 1971. If ever one single speech became the most effective motivational weapon for a nation at war then this was it. If ever a speech of a leader became the constant companion for young freedom fighters facing an enemy known for their proficiency and ferocity and which acted to link us all in a spellbinding string of words and sounds, then this speech was so for all of us, the freedom fighters, spread throughout the nook and corner of what was then our enslaved motherland.

Mahfuz Anam is Editor and Publisher, The Daily Star.

The above is a reprint of the article published earlier.

## The spirit of March 7, 1971

There are lessons to be drawn from it

We recall today a moment of seminal significance in the history of our nation. On this day in 1971, as the Bengali nation was being made acutely aware of the sinister attempts to deprive it of the mammoth victory it had collectively achieved through the general elections of December 1970, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman prepared to show us a path out of the woods. And that came through the sheer eloquence of the speech he delivered before a million-strong crowd at the Race Course (today's Suhrawardy Udyan). What has come to be known as the March 7 address remains critically important for us because it was a protest against the reluctance of the Pakistan military junta to honour the results of the elections through letting a democratic government take over. And it was much more.

Bangabandhu's March 7 speech surely will rank as one of those epic moments when oratory can transform the thoughts of a nation. It is the quality of the oration that has mattered and all these years after Bangabandhu spoke it is the sense of direction the speech spelt out which remains one of its finest attributes. There are the reasons why that is so. There is the subtlety that underlined the speech, the many things that were said and those that were to be read between the lines. But that it was a clarion call for freedom Bangabandhu was making has never been in doubt. He did not go for a unilateral declaration of independence. That would be a precipitate and suicidal move. But he did tell the nation that the struggle was for emancipation and independence. There was thus no room for ambiguity about the course he was setting for the country. It was a course, again, that Bangabandhu justified through outlining the turbulent history of Pakistan between its establishment in 1947 and the gathering crisis in 1971. On March 7, therefore, it was a nation which stood galvanised through the strong leadership provided by Bangabandhu and his colleagues. The non-violent non-cooperation movement that had earlier been announced by the leadership was to be reinforced by the March 7 events.

Looking back at that defining moment on March 7, 1971, it is for us only fitting that we capture the spirit that went into it, the courage and fortitude and wisdom with which Bangabandhu prepared us for the tortuous struggle ahead. He had no illusion about the coming struggle. It would be long and it would be bloody. And so it eventually was. Today, the most important lesson we can draw from the March 7 address is that it was a bold call for freedom based on democracy. We are a free nation. It is the foundations of democracy, all too often under assault, that we now need to strengthen in order to proceed to a happy and prosperous future.

## Taking a good slice of the handicraft bonanza

All we need is focused, determined and organised effort

A columnist of Star Business writing out an impassioned appeal for a boost to textile handicrafts has helped fire the imagination to build up on her theme by way of editorialisation.

Essentially, as the global recession pans out rather inexorably with its knock-on effects starting to translate into lessened orders for our RMG products and a dip in remittance earnings we are having to think up newer avenues for export diversification. Therefore, prospects in tiles export are being vigorously talked about in the light of headway already made in this area. But we believe, it's the whole range of hand-made products that have a huge, largely untapped, potential to generate foreign currency earnings that would stand us in good stead through the economic meltdown phase leading up to an export-led growth we have always dreamt of.

One derives two ironical messages from the handicrafts situation in Bangladesh. First, handicrafts constitute only one percent of exports from Bangladesh whereas its bigger cousin garments account for 75 percent of the country's export. Secondly, our one percent contribution to the global handicrafts market valued at US\$ 100 billion is evidently just a speck. In other words, we have a plenty of scope to penetrate the world market of handicrafts, especially given the fact that we have had a very rich legacy of traditional crafts that have basically fallen in disuse over time.

Thus, the first imperative is to revive some of the old crafts like handlooms with latent potential for catering to foreign demands; the second task is to replicate the successes achieved in the existing crafts, such as the famous embroidery work *nakshi kantha*; and the third one relates to acquiring design and fashion driven skills to feed the changing tastes in the global handicrafts market.

The emphasis should be on organising disparate groups of craftsmen and women, as far as practicable, under the umbrella of cooperatives. Apart from providing microcredit support, the crafts and trades that have grown bigger as medium and smaller enterprises would need working capital support from banks that would also see them through to the export phase. The development partners, multilateral financing agencies, international and local NGOs and elected local bodies could forge a common ground some along the line to assist the sector.

Handicraft is our way to reduce poverty, increase rural employment and empower women. The other handsome dividends are sustainable niche market in global economy, steadied forex earning and a good name for Bangladesh as a culture-driven developing economy.

## Bangabandhu soared, and so did we

On March 7, 1971, Bangabandhu gave us reason to believe in ourselves once again. Because of him, we remembered our heritage. Because of him, we were Bengalis again. And because of him, we reached out to one another, to the world outside the one we inhabited, to build our own brave new world.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

As Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rose to speak before the million people gathered at the Race Course in Dhaka, indeed before the seventy five million people of Bangladesh, on March 7, 1971, the moment turned electric with excitement. For the preceding few days, reports and rumours had been making the rounds about an impending declaration of independence by the man whose party, the Awami League, had secured a clear majority of seats in Pakistan's national assembly at the general elections of December 1970.

What should have been a journey to power as Pakistan's prime minister on Mujib's part had, by early March 1971, been transformed into a movement for Pakistan's eastern province to prise itself out of the state created through the division of India in 1947. The reasons were all out there; and they necessarily had to do with the intrigues, which had already been set in motion to thwart the assumption of power at the centre by the Awami League.

In the event, the speech Bangabandhu delivered at the Race Course served the very significant purpose of informing the Bengali nation and the rest of the world

that Bangladesh was on its way to political freedom. At an intellectual level, the speech was a masterpiece. Within its parameters, Mujib deftly negotiated his way out of a bind, one in which he had found himself in the days since President Yahya Khan had injudiciously deferred the scheduled March 3 meeting of the new national assembly in a broadcast on the first day of the month.

Almost immediately, the fiery student leaders allied to the Awami League cause moved miles ahead to demand that Mujib declare Bangladesh free of Pakistan. As the days moved quickly on, such demands began to be echoed in other areas, eventually convincing everyone that the Bengali leader was actually about to give in to the pressure for an independence declaration.

His rejection of an invitation to a round table conference called by General Yahya Khan for March 10 was being seen as evidence of his intended action. Besides, there had been no perceptible move by him to restrain the students of Dhaka University when they decided to hoist the flag of what they believed would be an independent Bangladesh.

And yet those who stayed in touch with Bangabandhu, or watched the way he

handled the situation in those tumultuous times, knew of the difficulties he had been pushed into. Between a rock and a hard place, he needed to find an acceptable, dignified way out of the crisis. On the one hand, a unilateral declaration of independence would leave him facing the charge of secessionism not only from the Pakistan authorities but also from nations around the world. He knew that as the leader of the majority party, he could not have his reputation destroyed in such cavalier manner.

There were before him the poor instances of Rhodesia's Ian Smith and Biafra's Odumegwu Ujukwu, images he was not enthused by. Besides, any UDI would swiftly invite the retribution of the Pakistan military, at that point steadily reinforcing itself in East Pakistan.

On the other hand, Mujib realised that as undisputed spokesman of the Bengalis he was expected to provide his people with a sense of direction, one that would reassure them about the future.

Recall the slow, ponderous steps he took as he went up to the dais on that March afternoon. It was the very picture of a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders. There is every reason to believe that he was still shaping his ideas, those he would soon aim at that crowd of expectant Bengalis.

And then he began to speak, in oratory that was to prove once more the reality of why he had over the years gained the peaks in the politics of Bengal, of Pakistan. In that one speech he painted the entire history of why Pakistan had failed as a state. Even as he did so, he laid out his arguments in defence of what the Bengali nation needed to do. He mocked the con-

spiracies then afoot to deprive Bengalis of political power.

With prescience, he told his people that even if he were not around, not amidst them, they should move on to protect the land, its history, from those who would trifle with it. Every moment bubbled with excitement. Bangabandhu soared, and we with him, as he defined our path to the future. The man who only minutes earlier had seemed wracked by deep worry now offered us a clear path out of the woods and into a very bright blue yonder.

"The struggle this time is the struggle for our emancipation. The struggle this time is for independence," declared Bangabandhu. We cheered. We whooped for joy. We knew that he had not declared independence, but we were made aware that he had set us on the path to freedom.

He had refused to be a secessionist; and he had abjured all ideas of a UDI. He had told us, in precise, unambiguous terms, that liberation was down the road, that it was a mere matter of time. We were content. As we went back home, with loud refrains of *Joi Bangla* around us and in our souls, we told ourselves that life for us had changed forever.

On March 7, 1971, Bangabandhu gave us reason to believe in ourselves once again. Because of him, we remembered our heritage. Because of him, we were Bengalis again. And because of him, we reached out to one another, to the world outside the one we inhabited, to build our own brave new world.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star. E-mail: bahsanireq@yahoo.co.uk

## Remembering March 7, 1971

On the memorable day of March 7, he clearly stated that he was bitterly disappointed by the repeated betrayals and treacheries of Pakistan government and there was absolutely no point in continuing the link with that state any farther.

A.B.M.S ZAHUR

The month of March is one of the most memorable months for the people of Bangladesh because four important events occurred during this month in 1971. They were postponement of the Pakistan national assembly session on March 3, the famous speech of Bangabandhu on March 7, Pakistan army's treacherous attack on innocent civilians on the night of March 25 and declaration of independence on March 26.

Among these most memorable events is the speech by Bangabandhu in the then Race Course (Suhrawardy Uddayan now) on March 7, 1971. In fact, the speech changed the character of the people of Bangladesh and elevated him to new heights of leadership.

To some political analysts the speech raised him to the height of a statesman, and clearly brought together various strands of thought

that Bengalis happened to experience at that time. The speech touched the sentiment of the common people of the country so much that it is still heard throughout the country on March 7 every year.

In the speech, Sheikh Mujib spoke briefly about the state of Pakistan during 1947-71. To him, it was a period of bitterness, a period of martyrs. He referred to the shedding of blood in 1952, the treachery committed by refusing to show respect to the results of the elections of 1954, imposition of martial law in 1958.

The mysterious postponement of the Pakistan National Assembly session, scheduled for March 3, 1971, resulted in the raising of the flag of Bangladesh in Dhaka University campus. This resulted in fear throughout Pakistan that Sheikh Mujib would unilaterally declare independence of Bangladesh.

An eminent politician like Air Marshal (ret'd) Asghar Khan stated that Mujib was the

last link between the two wings of Pakistan. He pointed out that if Bangabandhu was not allowed to form the government Pakistan would be destroyed.

Truly speaking, by postponing the parliamentary session of March 3, 1971 Yahya destroyed chances for any sensible dialogue with the military junta. Bangabandhu rightly rejected the invitation of President Yahya for a round table conference on March 10. Certainly, he could not step on the blood of the martyrs. At the same time he considered the point carefully that it would not be proper for an elected political leader to take the road to secession. The consideration of such critical and sensitive points indicates his maturity as a politician.

On March 7 the Pakistan army was kept in readiness for pouncing upon Sheikh Mujib and simultaneously start publicising him internationally as a traitor. At this critical stage we found that Sheikh Mujib was an adroit politician fully capable of adjusting to any situation. On one hand, he let everybody know that he was no longer interested in having any link with Pakistan. On the other, he carefully considered a new plan for a parliamentary session on March 25. Thus, Sheikh Mujib showed his political wisdom and sagacity and came out successfully from the dilemma.

Sheikh Mujib placed four demands before

the military regime. Two of these demands were withdrawal of martial law and transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people. This move by Sheikh Mujib was supported by the people openly and vociferously.

After the conclusion of the discussion with Yahya, Sheikh Mujib disclosed his premonition and told the people that he might not be around to lead them. In that case, people should close down every thing, and starve the enemy of food and water.

On March 7, Sheikh Mujib in his own style asked the people to start throwing out the Pakistan army to free the country from the enemies of Bangladesh. This appeal for independence was not much short of declaration of independence. Thus there should not be any scope for ambiguity that Sheikh Mujib considered Bangladesh as an independent nation from March 26.

The way of his declaration was unique. As the greatest Bangalee, his language was well understood by all, literate or illiterate, rich or poor, Bengalee. On the memorable day of March 7, he clearly stated that he was bitterly disappointed by the repeated betrayals and treacheries of Pakistan government and there was absolutely no point in continuing the link with that state any farther.

A.B.M.S. Zahur is a former Joint Secretary