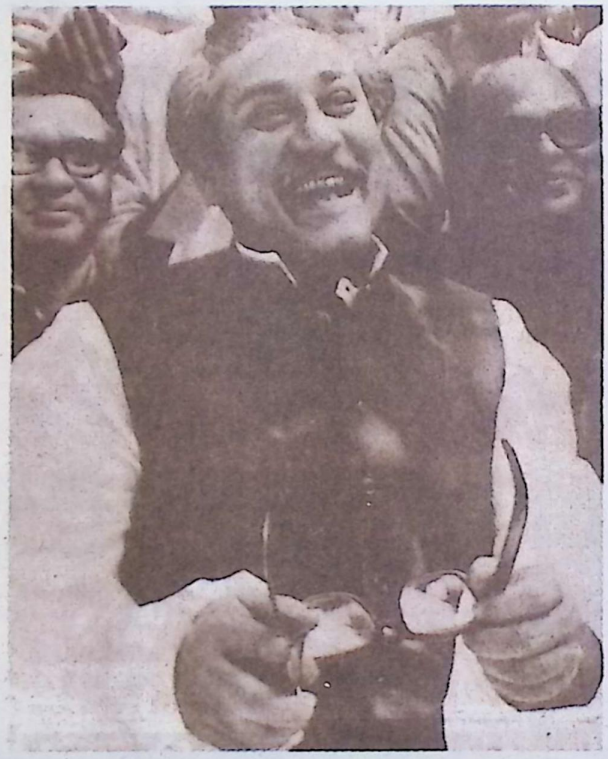
The statesman in Bangabandhu

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

There was a remarkable statesman in Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. An early instance of it came in January 1972 as he addressed the world's media in London only hours after his arrival from incarceration in Pakistan. He bore no ill will toward Pakistan, he said, and he wished President Bhutto well. It was a sentiment he would restate in Dhaka a couple of days later, when he told a rapturous crowd that he was happy with his Bangladesh and he expected Pakistan's new leader to be content with what remained of his country. For a political leader who had been in solitary confinement in an undisclosed location in Pakistan for nine months even as his people were being put to the sword and the gun in an unprecedented genocide, it was remarkable restraint on his part. Nowhere was there in him any sign of retribution. It was proof once again of the qualities that had raised him to the peaks over the years.



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And yet there was firmness, a huge degree of it, when it came to Bangabandhu's defence of the national interest before the global community. In 1973, when at a meeting with him Nigeria's military leader Yakubu Gowon grumbled that had Bangladesh not broken away from Pakistan, the old country would have remained a solid bulwark for Muslims everywhere, Bangabandhu cut him short, gently and ever so emphatically. "Mr. President", he told Gowon, "if we had remained in Pakistan, it would be a strong country. Again, if India had not been divided in 1947, it would be an even stronger country. But, then, Mr. President, in life do we always get what we desire?" Gowon said no more. Again, at a session with Saudi Arabia's King Faisal in the early 1970s, the Father of the Nation was visibly rattled when the monarch implied that Bangladesh's emergence as a secular entity had weakened the Islamic world. He calmly and firmly asked Faisal where the Islamic world was when millions of Bengali Muslims were being butchered by the Pakistan army in the name of Islam. Faisal fell silent.

Bangabandhu's statesmanship was quite removed from the pretence and hypocrisy which generally characterised diplomacy in the modern world. He was polite in dealing with the leaders of other nations and yet he remained keenly aware of what he needed to tell them about his people and their travails. On his way home