

August 15 and the transformation of Bangladesh

Today we may seek to honour Bangabandhu's memory through a month of mourning. We may even bring his killers to justice. But can we reignite the message of his life by recapturing the values of democracy, secularism, nationalism and social justice which guided his political life?

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BANGABANDHU'S assassination on 15 August 1975 prematurely deprived Bangladesh of its founding father at a time when the process of nation building was still incomplete. This event both destabilized and created a fissure within the nation which has not yet been bridged. This division and destabilization of the polity deflected Bangladesh from the course set by its liberation struggle which had provided the basis for the foundational principles of the Bangladesh constitution: democracy, nationalism, secularism and socialism. Since that fateful day in August, each of these foundational principles has been exposed to contestation or even outright repudiation. This assault on the very principles of our nationhood has destabilised the nation, compromised the working of our democratic institutions and thereby weakened the process of governance. It could, thus, be argued that the bullets which killed Bangabandhu were also intended to destroy the very idea of Bangladesh for which the liberation war was waged. Let us briefly explore these long-term consequences which emanated from the events of 15 August 1975.

Assault on democracy:

One of the central elements of the Bangladesh liberation struggle was the centrality of democracy in our system of governance, built upon the principle of the supremacy of civilian rule established through free and fair elections. The last 13 of our 24 years of association with Pakistan were spent under substantive military rule which could only be sustained by the unbroken refusal of Pakistan's ruling elite to tolerate any form of popular rule established through free elections. The repudiation of the outcome of the 1970 elections, which provided Bangabandhu with an overwhelming mandate for self-rule by the Bangalis, took us into the final stage of the democratic struggle -- a war for national liberation.

The assassination of Bangabandhu set the stage for another 15 years of cantonment rule. As in the case of Pakistan, when Ayub Khan shed his uniform and transformed himself into a civilian leader, sustained by pseudo-elections and a political party fabricated in the cantonment, a similar political cycle was then repeated in Bangladesh. The generals who seized power over the dead bodies of Bangabandhu and his four colleagues assassinated in jail in November 1975, similarly transformed themselves into civilian rulers. They too needed to do so through elections of dubious veracity and the fabrication of political parties within the cantonment.

The ascendance of one such leader, General Ziaur Rahman, and his party inevitably set the stage for a replay of the same drama. One more president was assassinated in May 1981, again by army officers who thought they could change the course of our politics. However, these assassins were no more able to hold power than were their predecessors in regicide. Yet another general, Hussein

Mohammed Ershad, then Chief of Army Staff, seized power, under Martial Law, thereby perpetuating cantonment rule for another decade. Ershad went on to create his own party and stage his own electoral victories, thereby following a well established tradition set first by Ayub Khan, and perpetuated by his successors from the cantonment, whether in Pakistan or Bangladesh.

This compulsion on the part of some of our generals to reincarnate themselves as civilian leaders was instrumental in weakening the fabric of our democratic system. To construct a political party in Bangladesh, which would confront the Awami League, which served as the vanguard party for our democratic and national liberation struggle, over three decades and remained politically unchallenged among the people of Bangladesh, demanded some skillful political engineering within the cantonment. Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan had shown the way in the 1960s by reaching out to Pakistan's most purchasable political players, the Muslim League. Significantly, in later years, the ever saleable Muslim League provided a political base first for Ziaul Huq and later for Pervez Musharraf, when they decided to enter politics.

In Bangladesh, fabricating a party which could challenge the Awami League, demanded more complex reverse political engineering. Hitherto unelectable groups of leftists had to be forced into an unnatural marriage with the very political forces which had historically fought against Bangali nationalism and eventually collaborated with the Pakistan army to suppress our struggle for national liberation. Political parties which had fought unrelentingly against our national aspirations and were deemed to have been buried in the course of the liberation struggle had to be resurrected and legiti-

mized so they could join the mobilization against the Awami League. In consequence, a party which actively participated in the genocide of the Bangali people could eventually be invited to sit in the government of an independent Bangladesh and for some of its leaders to fly the national flag as cabinet ministers.

The distortions in the democratic process which followed on the events of August 15 also administered a near fatal wound to the rule of law. The tradition set in motion after August 15 when the military rulers of Bangladesh, in clear violation of the constitution, pardoned the killers of Bangabandhu and elevated most of them into our diplomatic representatives, has haunted us ever since. This shameful act was subsequently upheld by the subsequent administrations of H.M. Ershad and Khaleda Zia. That this act of murder was then ratified by Parliament did not add to the lustre of our democratic institutions. That the killers of Bangabandhu can remain unpunished after 34 years has served as an invitation to all assassins to practise their trade in the hope that the rulers of the day will politically rehabilitate them. Ziaur Rahman, himself became the first victim of this condoning of regicide.

Erosion of nationalism

Bangabandhu, in his person, embodied the nation. He was a larger than life figure who even before he became Prime Minister of an independent Bangladesh, was a globally recognized figure. Even though incarcerated on death row in a prison cell in Pakistan in 1971, he was the recognized face of our liberation struggle and became a household figure throughout the world. In 1971, Bangabandhu symbolized our struggle for nationhood. There was no second person from Bangladesh who could have proclaimed our independence and invested it with credibility and legiti-

macy in the eyes of the world.

As a result of Bangabandhu's indelible association with the emergence of Bangladesh, he commanded a visibility and standing in the international community which no other leader of Bangladesh has since enjoyed. The notion that he was, by any word or deed, willing to subordinate Bangladesh's interest, even to a much stronger neighbour such as India, remains one of the great calamities of our history. He was a proud man who loved his country. He extended his pride to his country and in his lifetime saw that our flag was always held high.

Only a person of the stature of Bangabandhu could have persuaded Indira Gandhi to withdraw her troops from Bangladesh within three months of their entering our boundaries as an all conquering army who held 93,000 soldiers of the Pakistan army in their custody on Bangladesh soil. That moment, on 15 March 1972, at the Dhaka stadium, when the commander of the Indian forces in Bangladesh handed over the Indian flag to Bangabandhu to symbolize the withdrawal of his troops from Bangladesh, was one of the proudest moments in our history. Two years later it was again only Bangabandhu who commanded the courage and authority to travel to Lahore, to attend the summit of Islamic states, stand on the dais at Lahore Airport with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and take the salute of the Pakistan army as it marched past him while Amar Sonar Bangla was being played by their band and the Bangladesh flag stood high behind him. Wherever else Bangabandhu travelled on the world stage, he was greeted by such leaders as Brezhnev, Tito, Castro, Sadat, Boumediene, King Faisal and Heath as a respected equal.

In his relations with India, Bangabandhu recognized our great debt to that nation for their support to our liberation struggle, but he never let this influence his judgment when he negotiated with Indira Gandhi and she respected him for this. All outstanding problems were put on the table for resolution in Bangabandhu's lifetime. Such negotiations did not require loud talk but

were based on the authority Bangabandhu commanded in his relations with our neighbour and the unifying influence he exercised within the country. Our neighbours recognized that when Bangabandhu committed Bangladesh to a position in our bilateral relations, he could carry the country with him. Since his passing no leader could speak for the entire nation. This has weakened our stance in all sensitive negotiations and made it difficult for us to reach sustainable agreements on important issues.

End of secularism

Bangabandhu was a genuinely religious man who practised his faith out of belief and without ostentation. For him secularism did not mean the abandonment of religion. Brought up in the faith and traditions of rural Bengal, he knew full well the deep-seated faith which guided the lives of most Bangladeshis. What Bangabandhu had, however, learnt through long and painful experience was the dangerous consequences of the abuse of religion for political gain during the tenure of Pakistani rule. He was witness to the cynical opportunism of ambitious leaders who fed their secular appetites for money and power by assuming a religious identity in public. These same leaders thought nothing of repressing all forms of democratic struggle, in the name of defending Islam. The logical culmination of this mendacious abuse of religion for political ends was the genocide committed on the people of Bangladesh, under the leadership of a general who was rarely sober.

It was a central tenet of Bangabandhu's political faith that this deliberate manipulation of religious beliefs, by political parties and leaders seeking power, was fatal to the working of the democratic process and should not be replayed in an independent Bangladesh. Secularism, as it was conceptualized in the Bangladesh constitution, was exclusively designed to end this tradition inherited from Pakistan, of abusing religion for political gain.

Post-1975, the very same propaganda which had infected the Pakistan polity about religion being in danger, was back in use in an independent Bangladesh, this time being used against the Awami League. The same variety of political adventurers, with strong appetites for material pleasures, again assumed public postures of piety, in order to make their political fortunes as defenders of the faith.

In this day and age, secularism remains the concern of a receding community of mostly aging liberals. Today, practising politicians, from all sides of the political divide, with aspirations for electoral gain, have to project their religious identity publicly, be seen to be observant in their religious practices and remain ambiguous about their commitment to secularism. The ultimate beneficiary of this new culture may, at the end of the day, be the cult of the terrorist who, in the final analysis, is willing to die for his ideology rather than merely seek electoral office.

Towards a just society?

Bangabandhu could hardly be termed a socialist in the conventional sense of the term. But he was certainly possessed of a socialist consciousness which enabled him to empathise with the concerns of the dispossessed and the working class. He reached out to this class during the crucial phase of the liberation struggle between 1969-1971 and drew upon their support not just for his massive electoral victory

but also to confront the mobilization against the forces of Bangali nationalism by the Pakistani junta. It was Bangabandhu's recognition of the role played by these people in the liberation war, as much as his sensitivity to the concerns of ordinary people, which underwrote his commitment to the construction of a more egalitarian society than he left behind in Pakistan. How this was to be realized was, for him, a matter of empiricism rather than ideology. He understood, as a person who had invested his life in retaining the support of the masses, that a society built on growing economic inequality and widening social disparities, was politically unsustainable in a democratic Bangladesh.

This vision of society, which guided Bangabandhu in the design of his economic agenda, remains a distant memory. The Bangladesh of today is built upon unjustly acquired wealth which has created unimaginable cleavages in what was, once, a relatively egalitarian society. Bangabandhu, himself grew up in a society where those at the upper echelons of the social ladder, such as himself, still shared the same universe of values with their less affluent relations in rural Bangladesh. This world no longer exists in Bangladesh. Today we have created an elite which aspires to first world lifestyles within a globalised society. This world is the outcome of the economic policy regime which has guided our fortunes since 1975. It may have given Bangladesh growth, modernization and even reduction of poverty but it has left behind a divided society, replete with social tensions, permeated with envy, anger and violence. This is a world which is likely to be challenged not by socialists but by the cult of the suicide bomber, committed to a quite different ideology.

Today we may seek to honour Bangabandhu's memory through a month of mourning. We may even bring his killers to justice. But can we reignite the message of his life by recapturing the values of democracy, secularism, nationalism and social justice which guided his political life? Can we build a society which can reestablish the rule of law, which punishes criminals irrespective of their political colour, which respects the right to political dissent and seeks to genuinely democratize the practice of democracy, which can let our minorities enjoy the same rights and opportunities open to the majority community, not just in principle but in practice? Can we look forward to a Bangladesh where the landless could aspire to cultivate their own land, the property-less could become shareholders in the corporate empires of the business world, the bustee dwellers could expect to own their own homes, our small farmers could share in the value created by their unrelenting toil on the land or our millions of women who sustain our garment industry could expect to share in the profits created by their long hours of labour? When the followers of Bangabandhu talk of implementing his dreams, they should keep such goals in mind. Otherwise Bangladesh will continue along the long path we have travelled since 15 August 1975, which has distanced us from Bangabandhu and his vision of a Bangladesh for which he and so many millions shed their blood.

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History was made on March 7, 1971

Bangabandhu at the helm and 1972

His was a life of sacrifice. It is such a pity that his efforts were snuffed out at such a relatively young age. His passing away introduced several detracting factors in our system of governance -- the principal being the lack of accountability. We owe it to his memory to try and do our best in achieving the dream of a developed Bangladesh.

MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

ON the 34th anniversary of the brutal assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Father of the Nation, and many members of his immediate family, I will recall the historic role that he played as the master helmsman during 1972 and how he safely guided our ship through troubled waters amidst a devastated post-war scenario. I will do so because many have forgotten his significant role and his commitment towards democracy and institution building.

I was fortunate to meet Bangabandhu in Hotel Claridge's in London after his arrival from Pakistan. I was there at that time on political asylum after having arrived in that city from my previous place of posting in the Pakistan Embassy in Cairo, Egypt. I had met him many times before, but this time it was totally different. It was an overpowering experience, listening to him and his plans for Bangladesh. Consequently, when he asked me if I wanted to stay on in London in the Bangladesh Mission or come to Bangladesh and help build the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I had no hesitation in answering that it would be a privilege to be in Dhaka, in his proximity, and be able to contribute towards the creation of the new Ministry of Foreign Affairs under his guidance. He immediately agreed and gave the necessary orders for arrangements to be made so that I could return to Dhaka. I joined our Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the last week of January 1972.

A charismatic leader, dedicated and committed to the cause of Bangladesh, he encapsulated his vision for his new country at Palam Airport, New Delhi on January 10, 1972. He described his journey to a free Bangladesh as "a journey from darkness to light, from captivity to freedom, from desolation to hope."

A statesman, a gifted orator, Bangabandhu, quite naturally was overwhelmed with emotion after setting foot for the first time in independent Bangladesh. His speech delivered on January 10 at Suhrawardy Uddyan (within a few hours of his arrival) was masterly in its pragmatic approach and in the advice for the victorious people of Bangladesh. At this first opportunity, he did not fail to warn that no one should "raise their hands to strike against non-Bangalees." At the same time, he displayed his concern for the safety of the "four hundred thousand Bangalees stranded in Pakistan." While re-affirming that he harboured no "ill-will" for the Pakistanis, he was also clear in pointing out that "those who have unjustly killed our people will surely have to be tried."

In another significant assertion in the same speech, he pointed out to the Muslim world (to counter false and contentious Pakistani propaganda that Bangladesh had ceased to believe in Islam) that "Bangladesh is the second largest Muslim state in the world, only next to Indonesia." He also drew their attention to the fact that "in the name of Islam, the Pakistani army killed the Muslims of this country and dishonoured our women. I do not want Islam to be dishonoured." He also appealed to the United Nations to "constitute an International Tribunal to enquire and determine the extent of genocide committed in Bangladesh by the Pakistani army."

The above views were inter-related, and demonstrated his determination not only to hold a war crimes trial but also to point out that Islam had been abused by the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. It was also this outlook that led him later on to strongly express his regret on February 10, 1972 (in a message sent to Tenku Abdur Rahman, Secretary General of the

Organisation of the Islamic Conference Secretariat) and admonish the OIC that "during the last nine months (of 1971) when three million Bengalis were killed in cold blood by the West Pakistani forces you did not raise your voice to stop the killing of innocent Muslims and members of other communities in the second largest Muslim state." This riposte was fired after the OIC Secretary General expressed his anxiety over the treatment of "Biharis and non-Bengali Muslims" in Bangladesh.

Later, on April 17, 1973, after the completion of investigations into the crimes committed by the Pakistan occupation forces and their auxiliaries, it was decided to try 195 persons for serious crimes, which included genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, breaches of Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, murder, rape and arson. It was also decided that the trials of such persons and others associated in planning and executing such crimes would be held in accordance with universally recognised judicial norms. This argument and the related judicial process were to be central till his murder in August 1975. Unfortunately, his death also resulted in the setting aside of the entire judicial process. One can only hope that under the present government this trial will be activated and completed. We owe it to the millions who lost family members and the tens of thousands of women who were molested.

Many detractors of Bangabandhu have, after 1975, tried to portray him and Awami League as having given up Bangladesh's interest in the context of relations with India. This is far from true.

The Joint Communiqué issued at New Delhi on January 9 (before the return of Bangabandhu to Dhaka), following the visit of Bangladesh Foreign Minister Mr. M. Abdus Samad, thanked India for their contribution to the liberation struggle but

also emphasised that "the Indian armed forces which had joined the Mukti Bahini in the task of liberation at the request of the Government of Bangladesh would be withdrawn from the territory of Bangladesh whenever the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh would so desire." This premise was strictly followed later on. Bangabandhu, after his return to Dhaka, openly thanked India for its past assistance and then requested that country to withdraw all its troops from Bangladesh. This was complied with immediately, and belied claims by the then Pakistani leadership that Bangladesh was going to remain as an Indian colony.

Another important achievement of Bangabandhu and his government was the creation of confidence among the war-affected citizens within the devastated country and also among the 10 million Bangladeshi refugees who had sought sanctuary on the other side of the border in India. By February 8, 1972, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the Indian prime minister acknowledged in Calcutta that more than 7 million refugees had returned from India to Bangladesh in the short space of six weeks. The rest of them, that included hundreds of thousands who had been tortured by the Pakistani army, returned home within the following months, sure of a new beginning. Providing relief and rehabilitation to such a large population was a daunting task but handled efficiently by Bangabandhu and his team in cooperation with the United Nations.

Bangabandhu believed strongly in the sovereign equality of all nations. In this context (as Director of the India Desk in our Ministry of Foreign Affairs) I had the privilege of watching him stress on the promotion of close cooperation with India in the fields of development and trade "on the basis of equality and mutual benefit." He also believed in cooperation and consistently stressed on the development and utilisation of resources "for the benefit of the people of the region." It was this approach that led him eventually to persuade India to agree to the establishment of a Joint Rivers Commission on a permanent basis, comprising of experts of Bangladesh and India "to carry out a comprehensive survey of the rivers systems shared by the two countries and to formu-

late projects concerning both the countries in the fields of flood control and then to implement them." In the Joint Declaration of the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and India on March 19, 1972, at Dhaka, there was also a reference to examining the feasibility of linking the power grids of Bangladesh with the adjoining areas of India. The same Declaration also proposed that the two countries "shall have consultations and exchange information on peaceful uses of nuclear energy."

Today, 37 years later, we are proposing a regional energy grid and regional water management for South Asia. Such a proposition is consistent with Bangabandhu's vision of so many years ago.

Bangabandhu took keen interest in foreign policy and encouraged the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to undertake initiatives not only for obtaining recognition of Bangladesh by other countries and in the establishment of diplomatic relations but also in Bangladesh becoming a member of important international organisations. At every opportunity, during his own visits abroad, or that of the foreign minister, it was underlined that Bangladesh was determined to maintain fraternal and good neighbourly relations and adhere firmly to the basic tenets of non-alignment, peaceful co-existence, mutual cooperation, non-interference in internal affairs and respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty.

This vigorous effort enabled us to move forward in the arena of international relations very quickly. By March 26, 1972, when we were celebrating our first anniversary of independence, 54 countries had already recognised Bangladesh (as opposed to less than 10 before his return to Bangladesh). This number increased sharply by the end of 1972. I believe this was largely due to the positive measures undertaken by Bangabandhu and also because of the fact that he was able to persuade India to withdraw its troops from the territory of Bangladesh. Within a short time after that, Bangladesh became a member of the Non-Aligned Group, the Commonwealth, the ILO and the WHO and started playing an important role in the diplomatic arena. We obtained the status of Observer in the United Nations but were however unable

to become a member because of the veto power of China (a close ally of Pakistan). This was particularly disappointing for Bangabandhu as he held China with respect and often recalled his own visit to that country in 1956.

Our not being a member of the United Nations, however, did not deter Bangabandhu from seeking the humanitarian intervention of the then United Nations Secretary General Dr. Kurt Waldheim on November 27, 1972 in arranging the repatriation to Bangladesh of innocent Bangalees detained in Pakistan in different camps. He did so because Pakistan was trying to politicise the issue and link their repatriation to the release of Pakistani POWs who had surrendered to the joint command of Bangladesh and Indian forces. This concern on his part was an example of his love for his countrymen.

He believed in nationalism, democracy, secularism and socialism. He felt that they were required for the good of the common man and for the success of the social revolution. He also thought that his idealistic "new world" would be free from exploitation and injustice, have equality in the distribution of wealth and the presence of small and cottage industries would be a means of solving the unemployment problem. He also tried to reform the land ownership system by instituting family ceilings.

Bangabandhu was a firm believer in the rich cultural and literary heritage of Bangladesh, and for him that was the spring-board of the Bangalee ethos, its tradition and its nationalism. That instilled in him the pride of being a Bangalee living in Shonar Bangla.

His was a life of sacrifice. It is such a pity that his efforts were snuffed out at such a relatively young age. His passing away introduced several detracting factors in our system of governance -- the principal being the lack of accountability. We owe it to his memory to try and do our best in achieving the dream of a developed Bangladesh where there is equal opportunity for all citizens and the practice of rule of law.

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