

# The Tiger of Bengal

SYED ASHRAF ALI

BA NGLADESH remembers today a great hero, a giant among men, who was born on this red-letter day in 1873. The whole nation honours and respects and admires this brave son of Bengal because he loved peace and did everything in his power to avert dire calamities; because he merited the high and exalted positions to which the suffrage of a grateful nation elevated him; because he was regardless of personal gains and cheerfully endured all toil and hardship so that he might elevate the masses of mankind; because he had a high sense of honour, respected the rights of conscience, and nobly advocated equality of privileges and the universal brotherhood of man; because he had an unshakable faith in Islam but never spoke ill of any other religion; because he was a man of the people. And Bangladeshis believe that he was one of us and that he was for us. Yes, Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq, whose birth anniversary we celebrate today, really gave enormously of himself to the people, and he really loved the people.

He came right from the heart of Bengal, not from its geographical heart but from its spiritual heart. He exemplified what millions of parents hope their sons would be: strong and courageous, intelligent and erudite, honest and compassionate. He personified integrity, he personified honour, he personified modesty, he personified dignity, he personified dedication, he personified loyalty, he personified patriotism. And with his qualities of head and heart, he personified the best in Bengal.

His was indeed an eventful life, his personality multi-faced and his achievements many. Many were the roles he had filled with distinction. At one time or another, he was one of the greatest legal luminaries the Indian subcontinent had produced, an unparalleled ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity, a great constitutionalist, a distinguished parliamentarian, a top-notch politician, an indefatigable freedom fighter, a fiery orator of the first water, a political strategist of the highest order, an educationist of rare caliber, a social reformer with foresight and acumen, and, above all, an indomitable champion of truth and justice.

No wonder the people loved him with all the warmth and sincerity under the sun, and every trust that the people of this country had in their power to bestow, he was given. And yet, he always retained a saving humility. His was the humility not of feat but of confidence. He brushed shoulders with the "greats" of both the subcontinent and Great Britain, and he knew that the "greats" were human. Yes, his was the humility of man before Allah and before the truth. His was the humility of a man too proud to be arrogant.

When Sher-e-Bangla was born in 1873, Bengal lay prostrate at the feet of the British, groaning from the wounds inflicted upon it. The Great Mutiny of 1857 had been ruthlessly quelled and the ancient ruling classes had either been wiped out or lay cringing in the dust. The poor and helpless people of Bengal were so hungry, ragged and unhappy that they thought with their stomach, saw with their nakedness and felt with their misery.

The Tiger of Bengal genuinely believed that he was one of them and that he was for them. He was driven by a mission to serve, to improve and uplift the toiling masses. He inspired them to go forward, to take their lives in their hands, fully and joyfully as he himself did. And the hundreds and thousands of hapless and downtrodden have-nots, who stood in awe of the mighty, very easily gave their heart to this person who renounced personal advantages and dedicated himself of the general welfare. It is true some differed with him, but all respected his sincerity, his wisdom, his solicitude for the toiling masses and his passion for truth and justice.

No one who knew Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq would attempt to describe him in a nutshell. He was many-sided, complex, full of conflicting enthusiasms and burdened by many sorrows. Yet, there has seldom been a public hero who was more open with his problems and his thoughts, in private letters and public prints, in speeches and conversations with friends and colleagues. He always seemed to talk fully and freely, to say just what he thought and felt, to make every effort to see that his listeners understood his viewpoint, regardless of what they might think of its merits.

Some remember the mastery of language, the gift of oratory that placed him in a class with Edmund Burke and Winston Churchill. Some remember that he was human and humane, a fully developed man who responded so keenly to the joy of life as he did to the cry of human distress. Some remember that he was a lover of people, a lover whose loyalty was

pledged to all mankind. Some remember that all his life he pleaded and strove for social justice, for the right of the lowly to dignity, of the poor to material well-being, of the citizen of self-government, of the ignorant to knowledge, of the child to unfettered development, of the chained Bengalees to consciousness and freedom.

Some remember how he truly loved problems, and with an exuberant confidence that few politicians could match he thought that he could solve some of them, though not single-handedly. He delighted in leading and managing and inspiring people, all kinds of people, people in every walk of life, in every domain of thought. As he could persuade, he could also be persuaded. He had respect for others' points if he was persuaded that he had been wrong.

Tolerance and sympathy were elements of his character, and that character gained him the affection and esteem of millions of his countrymen. But let none forget even for a moment the single quality that made him unique, the quality that made him powerful, the quality that endeared him to the common masses: the qualities of head and heart, the quality of character. His greatness derived not from his office, but from his character, from a unique moral force that transcended national boundaries, even as his deep concern for humanity transcended international boundaries.

Sher-e-Bangla, the beloved Tiger of Bengal, is a part of history now -- he had shaded himself, in the words of Omar Khayyam, "with yesterday's seven thousand years." Once again we celebrate



Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq.

today the birth anniversary of the doyen of Bengal, once again the whole nation salutes the great personality, a fond salute to a man whose extraordinary life was dedicated to service, a profound respectful salute to a man larger than life who, by

any standard, was one of the giants of all times. The beautiful eulogy of John Maidston aptly applies to him: "A larger soul hath seldom dwelt in a house of clay."

Syed Ashraf Ali is a former D.G. of Islamic Foundation.

## Development conference at Harvard

The conference was attended by a phalanx of dignitaries that included the US ambassador to Bangladesh, two of our PM's advisers and two former advisors to the former caretaker government. Most notably, the participation of Bangladeshi economists and academicians made the conference a venue for engaging in lively discourses and disquisitions.

ABDULLAH A. DEWAN

BA NGLADESH Development Initiative (BDI) held its second annual conference at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government on October 9 and 10. BDI's president, Professor Saad Andaleeb raised two challenging questions in his message to the conference participants: How can the world's seventh largest populous nation "count itself as a more positive and productive force for its own development?" How can this nation stir itself up, boost its potential and "rebrand itself as a far more progressive nation?"

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recognisable figure representing the Bangladesh media was the editor of *The Daily Star*. Finally, it must be highlighted that enthusiastic participation and paper presentations by those of us living in the US made the conference a success.

The conference proceedings were set aptly to encompass scholarly paper presentations in five broad tracks pertinent to the two challenges premised above. They include (number of papers presented in each track quoted in parenthesis): governance and political development (9), investment and resource mobilisation (17), human infrastructure strategies and demographics and health (11), energy and environment (17), media and culture industry (3). Then there were plenary sessions on governance, media in development, investments and education. There were breakaway sessions for each of the five tracks designed for skimming innovative ideas considered germane to the development of Bangladesh.

Team leaders from each track pre-

sented the synopsis from all presentations in their tracks in the policy recommendation session. This session facilitated all conference attendees with a cursory exposition of what went on in the sessions they missed because of the unavoidable simultaneous scheduling of seminar sessions. The conference organising body will soon produce the final write-up for dissemination to various ministries, media and other stakeholders. The paper presentations in each track, the discourses in plenary sessions and finally the policy recommendation session were all impressive displays of scholarly exchanges and sharing of ideas.

Ever since BDI's founding in 1988, its founding president, Dr. Ashraf Ali, has embarked on an unremitting mission of facilitating the process of generation and dissemination of ideas and knowledge through annual conferences, an academic journal (*Journal of Bangladesh Studies*) and book publications.

I attended the conference both as an academic economist (chaired a session) and a columnist looking for issues and ideas that I could analyse objectively. Like everyone else, I could only attend a few sessions, which, among others, included the media plenary session and selected sessions on governance issues.

Dr. Zillur Rahman, among others, gave an upbeat portrayal of the country's pace of development and accomplishments. As expected, editor Mahfuz Anam reiterated the role of the media in a country's

democratic process and good governance through standing up for rule of law. I took a special note of his pronouncement that *The Daily Star* was thinking about adding a supplement focusing on financial market -- especially stock price analysis and guidance for investors.

Obviously, Bangladesh has advanced in almost all areas since Henry Kissinger's characterisation of Bangladesh as a "bottomless basket." Most success was achieved in food security, farm products (fisheries, poultry, vegetables, dairy products etc), education (nearly 100 private and public universities combined) and most notably female education. Development has been achieved in many other areas also. However, many of these may be considered as natural growth -- growing out of necessity and mostly engendered by private initiatives.

At the conference, some speakers expressed some frustrations about the lack of enthusiastic exposé of positive images of Bangladesh to the outside world. Not surprisingly, this is a carry-over whine from all previous administrations.

My rejoinder was: Who should we speak to about our success? Patting one's own back isn't the job of academics and columnists -- "academics" conduct data driven "analyses" while "columnists" make constructive "criticisms." None of us living abroad ever belittled Bangladesh in front of outsiders -- we also don't engage in self-serving and discomfiting

lip services among ourselves while discounting what the data tell us. The provenance of most of the negative images of Bangladesh is confrontational politics, political corruption, demeaning and self-aggrandising politics of "road to riches," recent religious extremism, and cross-fire killings.

During one of those chatting breaks, I raised the pace of the country's much talked about development and success stories with four Bangladesh economists (including a former Boston branch Awami League president -- also an academic economist from Boston university). I emphatically asked them to rewind the clock to Bangabandhu's days when he conceived of building Sonar Bangla. I constructed the following hypothesis ad lib and asked them if they could refute them with respect to their prevalence at time the dream of Sonar Bangla was conceived. The hypotheses are:

- Country's poverty level and unemployment rate have much worsened today;
- Governance (rule of law encompassing corruption, property rights, extortions, extremism, physical safety etc.) has deteriorated alarmingly;
- Political atmosphere, ill-qualified politicians, parliamentarians, and political corruption have harmed the country's overall progress, development, and hence the country's image;
- Student politics, campus violence, quality of graduates and civil servants have degenerated distressingly;

- Environmental conditions (water, air, waterways, forestry, industrial waste management etc.) degraded frighteningly;
- Non-market forces (syndicates, hoarders, extortions from businesses, tender manipulations by students etc) were unheard of before.

None of the economists could refute any of these assertions. Shouldn't we then raise these issues in all forums to influence the improvident decision process and the politicians?

The country's overall progress and development, as elucidated by Dr. Mustafizur Rahman of Bids on Channel I's October 20 "Tritiomatra" is that that each step forward has been associated with two steps backward, which has taken the country 40 years or so behind.

When Professor Andaleeb invited me to participate in the BDI conference, I asked him if participating would be worth our time and efforts given that the politicians we know would care less what we say or do. I was persuaded instantly when he said that we should do our job as ardently as possible and leave it for the next generation to know that we tried. In my last week's phone conversations with him, I proposed that we organise such a BDI conference in Dhaka to have most impact.

Dr. Abdullah A. Dewan, founder of [politicconomy.com](http://politicconomy.com), is a Professor of Economics at Eastern Michigan.

## A gift for the past

When the ageing but still incomparable Groucho Marx, now trundling into his eighties, was asked what he most wanted as a birthday gift, his reply was succinct: "Last year." Which year from their past would the BJP and Shiv Sena like as a gift? 2001. Since then it has been a steady trot downhill.

M.J. AKBAR

WHEN the ageing but still incomparable Groucho Marx, now trundling into his eighties, was asked what he most wanted as a birthday gift, his reply was succinct: "Last year." Which year from their past would the BJP and Shiv Sena like as a gift? 2001. Since then it has been a steady trot downhill.

The Shiv Sena's stagnation is easily comprehensible. After a lifetime of leadership by a dominant patriarch, it confused the man with the mission. The Shiv Sena has two dimensions. In rural Maharashtra it is the regional, Marathi-centric alternative to the Congress, playing the democratic game with a slant but within the framework of conventional politics. Its urban manifestation is different. In Mumbai, particularly, and in Pune, to a lesser degree, the Shiv Sena's success has been through the sharp articulation of grievance and local pride, through sensational rhetoric and, when required, violent agitation.

Balasaheb Thackeray has been, for some years now, unable to either breathe such fire or turn his rather mild red Uddhav into a fire-breather. His nephew Raj Thackeray walked into vacant space; the sound of broken windows was sufficient to persuade the young unemployed that they had found their voice. Raj Thackeray picked up 23.35% of the vote in Mumbai. Translate that figure into ground reality and it becomes more comprehensible.

If roughly half the vote of Mumbai is Marathi, then the nephew took around half the Marathi votes cast. This is a huge swing, with an impact extending far beyond the 13 seats that he won. The Shiv Sena, already down by 3% in the Lok Sabha elections from its support in 2004, dropped a further three percentage points. Balasaheb still gets respect, but that is really a homage to his past. The mission has passed on to Raj Thackeray.

The BJP has a larger dilemma. It is simply out of focus. It has nothing by way of a new narrative to offer, and its old one is so tired that it can't get out of bed. The



Back to the past!

party has gone through an identity crisis before. Its first incarnation, the Bhartiya Jana Sangh, submerged itself into the Janata, under popular pressure, in 1977.

The Janata never functioned as the sum of its parts, and proved so incapable of understanding the compulsions of power that it collapsed and split. The

Janata Party, preaching some strange form of pretend-Gandhism, and was promptly battered in the 1984 elections. It reinvented itself through the street politics of the Ayodhya temple movement, consolidated its gains with patience during the Narasimha Rao years and won unprecedented rewards in Delhi.

summed up quite succinctly. As long as the party followed Vajpayee's advice, it maintained a keel that was acceptable to the country.

When the party imposed itself on Vajpayee, the balance went awry. It was only a question of time before the keel broke.

Since then the BJP has been struggling to find the balance between regional demands and a national presence, emotionalism and shrill invective, communal rhetoric and the compulsion of social peace as the necessary bedrock of economic development -- and, finally, an image that reflects concern for the future rather than the conflicts of the past.

Such contradictions had a direct impact on the Maharashtra elections. When it joined the me-too Marathi *manos* agenda of the Shiv Sena, which is essentially anti-Bihari migrant labour, its Bihar unit publicly disassociated itself from the decision.

And so, typically, the BJP fell between the traditional two stools. The Marathi shrugged and moved to Raj Thackeray; and one can safely assume that not a single Mumbai Bihari voted for the BJP. BJP leaders have neither understood the reasons for their now prolonged stagnation or decline, which is why they embarrass themselves and their party with silly excuses on the day results are declared.

Some bright spark blamed the elec-

trend in Maharashtra pointed towards defeat. That leader had not lost an election, he had lost his mind.

The BJP's real problem is a sense that it has got lost in a time warp at a moment when young Indians, the decisive element in the vote, are either looking ahead or bursting with anger and frustration. The BJP has been unable to offer a road map for the next years, or -- unlike say Om Prakash Chautala -- become an effective mobiliser of voter resentment.

This has been a poor election for all major parties. The Congress actually lost 1% of its vote from five years ago in Maharashtra; while its embarrassment in Haryana was plainly evident. The NCP vote dropped 2.4% from 2004. The ruling alliance won not because it was better but simply because it was less worse.

Depression engenders an enervating lethargy. Government is of course recognised as a full-time activity, but opposition has become election season frenzy punctuated by a few forgettable speeches during parliament sessions. Opposition is the time parties use to expand their base; the BJP can barely protect what it had two decades ago in a volatile state like Haryana.

You can only dream of the gift of a past year. To survive in electoral politics you need to create a future.

M.J. Akbar is Chairman and Director of Publications of the