

## That dark, momentous night

### A nation galvanised for independence

IT was indubitably a defining moment for the Bengali nation, subjugated yet yearning to breathe free in those tumultuous days of March 1971. Finally, on March 25, the Pakistani military decided to bludgeon the Bengalis into submission forever.

It was the beginning of the glorious war of liberation and also a genocide that accounted for countless deaths which stunned the world with the sheer barbarity of what was being done in the name of protecting Pakistan -- a forlorn cause by the end of that explosive month.

They violated all norms of civility and democracy as they pounced on the unarmed civilians, instead of transferring power to the Awami League which had emerged as the majority party in the December 1970 elections. The rulers broke their promise when Bengalis for the first time in Pakistan's history were set to take control of the statecraft, and quite legitimately at that. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was leading the nation from the front and negotiating with the Pakistanis, with his typical firmness, as per the law and constitution of the country. However, the Pakistani rulers were prepared to negotiate on their terms only. It was indeed a diabolically treacherous exercise to keep the dialogue alive while bringing in war machines from West Pakistan. They were clearly preparing for a brutal assault on the people of the then East Pakistan.

The way Yahya Khan and ZA Bhutto left Dhaka, leaving people of East Pakistan at the mercy of a horde of killers, was a clear indication of how they viewed East Pakistan and its people and what a mockery it was on their part to negotiate with the leaders of the Awami League.

They did succeed in killing people. The "Operation Search Light" conducted in Dhaka on that dreadful night alone left thousands dead. They included intellectuals, students and the members of police and EPR. There were raids on many places like the University of Dhaka, a centre of progressive thinking since its birth, Rajarbagh Police Line, the EPR Headquarters at Peelkhana etc. The first night of the cowardly attack might have caught the Bengalees rather unawares. But soon the freedom loving people vowed to take up arms and drive the invaders out of this sacred land.

The enemy resorted to killing, rape, arson and looting but could not subdue the indomitable spirit that aroused the nation to resisting the attackers with everything at their disposal. Victory came, at a huge cost though, nine months later. We salute the martyrs but for whose supreme sacrifice the country would not have been liberated in just nine months.

## Amending ACC Act

### Keep it independent of executive control

WITH the government-formed committee reviewing the ACC Act 2004 having finalised its report concerning the amendment proposals submitted by it in March last year, chief of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) Ghulam Rahman along with two commissioners met law minister Shafique Ahmed on Tuesday. They reiterated their reservations over six of the 23 amendment proposals put up by the committee for consideration and mitigation.

Corruption has been an intractable problem for the country chiefly because we have not had an independent, fully empowered and clearly mandated body to fight or curb the menace. Whatever agency we had was structurally and functionally an appendage to the head of government's office, be it in a parliamentary or presidential form of government. The case in point was the anti-corruption bureau which by virtue of the 2004 act was transformed into ACC, supposedly a statutory body. During the caretaker government it was given more powers through ordinance which was not subsequently ratified by the elected government. On top of it, it's now bringing amendment to the act, some of which evidently, run counter to the heightened demands for an autonomous, powerful ACC.

To cite some examples, the commission may be required, according to an amendment proposal, to take permission from the government 'to begin proceedings in certain circumstances' and it seeks to exclude almost every category of people known to have been traditionally prone to corruption -- public officials, policy-makers, MPs, local body representatives -- whose offences are 'believed to have been committed in good faith'. First of all, it discriminates between corruption suspects and, secondly, it is reflective of retaining executive control over the ACC. As it is, the very fact of the 'listed offences' in the ACC schedule is a guideline or a safeguard for taking rightful cognizance of an offence and proceeding against it.

Speaking of executive control one has to refer to the ACC being made accountable to the president who acts on the advice of the PM except in two cases -- appointment of the prime minister and that of the chief justice.

For all we know, the act provides for the ACC's accountability since the formulation of the organogram and rules and budget of the organisation is controlled by the government. Actually, it should be a self-governing body accountable to the parliament in the ultimate sense through an annual report that would be subject to parliamentary dissection.

We endorse the concerns of the ACC chief and his colleagues for an independent anti-graft body and hope that the cabinet will take into account their views and have these duly reflected on the final shape of the act.

## The day before

Being far removed from Dhaka, patchy information and rumours were all that we could get hold of. A sense of impending danger of immense proportion took gripping hold of us. The small town of Meherpur was on the edge on March 25, 1971, in a void. A waiting that needed to be over -- come what may.

TAWFIQ-E-ELAHI CHOWDHURY

MEHERPUR is nestled in the far northwest corner of Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). Truncated out of Krishanagar district in India, it bore the ignominious burden of being the smallest subdivision, one of the many perverse legacies of the partitioning plan of Sir Cyril Radcliffe. Having finished the job, a contrite Radcliffe left India in a hurry before August 14, 1947 lest he had to answer for the communal blood baths that followed, which he himself had anticipated.

History came full circle again after 24 years; even this small township of few thousands became part of the momentous events that were unfolding at Dacca. Unwittingly, it well could have been a purgatory awakening since Meherpur was just hundred miles away from the battlefield of Plassey, where Bengal not only lost its independence in 1757 but also paved the way for the beginning of the British Colonial Empire. Had it not been for the treachery of Nawab Serajuddowla's military commanders, the history of India and consequently that of the modern world would surely have been scripted differently.

This time around in March 1971, East Pakistan, already christened as Bangladesh, was about to undo some of the aberrations of history.

Pakistan was an absurd stitching together of a country whose two disparate parts -- West and East Pakistan (euphemistically called wings to convey oneness) -- were not only thousand miles apart but also linguistically, culturally and ethnically even further removed. While so many independent countries with Muslim majority population existed, many of them geographically contiguous, representing variety of ethnicities, Pakistan was a British solution -- born out of political horse-trading -- of exiting India.

Against the deceit, intimidation and repression of the Pakistani regime that stretched over nearly three decades, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was tactfully preparing East Pakistan for independence through a non-violent non-cooperation movement; failing which, with an armed struggle.

March 7, 1971 was the tipping point.

It was a late spring afternoon bathed in bright sunshine. Procession after procession of hundreds of thousands of people kept converging at the Race Course (Suhrawardy Uddayan now) with banners floating like sails, chanting defiant slogans. Soon it became a sea of humanity. The Race Course was playing host to the most daring of all gambles -- the destiny of a nation.

There were whispers in the crowd that the Pakistan army may crack down; even an airstrike was not ruled out. I chose to stand on a sideline, across the TSC, ready to run if such an event were to take place.

The speeches had already started. The flag of Bangladesh, designed by the students, was raised on the podium amid thunderous applause. But all were waiting to hear Sheikh Mujib. Then came the thunderous voice: "Bhaiera amar" (my brothers). The crowd stood frozen.

In a spellbinding speech, laconic yet pithy, Sheikh Mujib, in his baritone voice and hallmark diction that made him close to the hearts of Bengalis, Sheikh Mujib gave the background of this historic crossroad. He recounted the litany of deceptions, exploitations and repression meted out to the people of Bangladesh by the ruling Pakistani junta whenever they stood up for their rights -- the story writ poignantly with the blood of countless many. Even after Awami League won the election in 1971, General Yahya was going by the urgings of Bhutto and postponed calling the Assembly. The date was set for March 25.

Sheikh Mujib roared: "When the people responded to the call for peaceful strikes, closed down factories and offices, spontaneously came out in the streets with the vow to continue their movement, they were countered with point blank shots from with the weapons bought by the sweat of their brow, presumably to save them from the external enemy! ... General Yahya, you are the President of Pakistan, come and see how your troops have fired upon the innocent people, butchering them, the air still heavy with the wails of mothers." Yet, Bangladeshis were being blamed -- what a travesty of truth!

Sheikh Mujib called for transfer of power to

the elected representatives, withdrawal of martial law and the return of troops to the barracks. I noted carefully -- not once did he use the term "East Pakistan."

Sheikh Mujib called for total shut down of Bangladesh for indefinite period. Government, semi-government offices, courts, including Supreme Court, were to remain closed. No taxes were to be paid. Employees had to be paid before the month was out.

Next were his directions for the future struggle. "Make each of your homes a fortress. You shall have to fight the enemy with whatever you have.... We shall starve them to defeat...our waters shall be their cemeteries...none can cow us down once we have learnt to lay down our lives for a just cause..... This Bengal is the home to all, we are brothers -- Muslims and Hindus. Its our sacred duty to take care of those who are not Bengalis...We have to live up to our ideals."

His final passionate call. Get ready to fight. "Ebarer shongram -- muktir shongram. Ebarer shongram -- shadhinotar shongram (this time, it's the fight for liberty, it's for independence)." Then his hand raised to the sky and gave one last clarion call: "Joy Bangla (victory to Bengal)." A million thunderous voices roared: "Joy Bangla."

The die was cast.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in my eyes, transformed from a brilliant strategist and politician to become the undisputed leader of the independent movement of Bangladesh, and was endearingly crowned as Bangabandhu, the Friend of Bengal. I was the SDO of Meherpur, the custodian of the powers of the central government of Pakistan, its pampered surrogate in a remote corner. That day, in the Race Course, Bangabandhu led me across the Rubicon. Like millions others I was drawn in to the vortex of the revolution. The freedom fighter in me was born.

Back to Meherpur from Dacca.

The news of the Pakistani army fanning out to cover the whole of Bangladesh was an ominous one. Sporadic encounters with the civilians, some being gunned down by the army, lent more credence to the belief that the Pakistani regime was hell bent to cow us down.

Recalling the guidelines, couched in the common parlance of Bangabandhu on March 7, weWe started were to preparing with whatever resources we could lay our hands on. As the SDO, I was in charge of the ansars and mujahids. Training camps were established and each one was given a rifle and a few rounds of ammunition. It was agreed in a series of meetings with the local MPs, Awami

League politicians and student activists that, in case of an armed conflict, we would send two armed groups to defend Meherpur, one against any advancing force from Chuadanga and the other against from any force from Kushtia.

On March 23, at Jhenaidah, I joined a meeting of friends working in the neighbouring districts, in which Mahub (SDPO, Jhenaidah), Wali (SDO, Magura), Farid (SDO, RajbariGoolonda) and Kamal (SDO, Narail) were present. Ironically, on the Republic Day of Pakistan, we exchanged notes, reviewed with deep concern the dead-end the country was heading towards and agreed to work out own defensive strategies in our respective subdivisions in case of a military stand-off, and to keep in touch and coordinate our moves.

The control of the country had passed on to Bangabandhu, whose orders and instructions took on the force of law. Public offices, banks, utilities and even the private sector were taking daily instructions. The compliance with the call for non-violent non-cooperation was so complete that the province of East Pakistan ceased to exist. The students raised the Bangladeshi flag in my court building, lowering the Pakistani one -- I silently complimented them.

Modern history reverentially records Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King as the prophets of non-violent non-cooperation movement. But it is a fact that only once in recorded history a nation became free through such a movement, till brute forces were unleashed to silence their voices. And that was Bangladesh till March 25, 1971 under the leadership of its undisputed leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; Bangladesh was de facto independent.

However, we were convinced that there was a longer distance to traverse, and more blood spilled. The Pakistani army, which spread its net all over Bangladesh, was not going to return to the barracks without the pound of flesh they planned for. We knew that we were not trained nor equipped to fight against a professional army; but our dream, our spirits and our determination made up for that.

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## Upholding the spirit of March

Today, let our resolve be to give ourselves a government based on the consent of the governed, to provide for those who have little or nothing, indeed to do all that may help us uplift our dream of Golden Bengal into reality.

MOHAMMAD SHAHIDUL ISLAM

ON the night of March 25, 1971 began one of the most macabre and cruel episodes of human history that culminated in final victory on December 16, 1971. The Pakistan army started a military operation and attacked the unarmed but fearless population of the then East Pakistan. It was an attack on its own citizens merely because they belonged to a different ethnic lifestyle and culture. The observance of Independence Day is effectively a regeneration of freedom for the people of Bangladesh.

What followed after March 26 is the proud-est episode in the life of Bengalis. The resultant liberation of Bangladesh was by any standards a triumph in human history. What, on the other hand, was most shattering was the genocide that was carried out by the Pakistani army in every nook and corner of the country. Villages were annihilated to

destroy the Mukti Bahini and people were killed in the hundreds of thousands. Nearly three million people were killed and about 30 million people were made homeless. And yet that glorious history of the people of Bangladesh has been lost in the quagmire of opportunism and revisionist history, where even the status and the role of the founder of the country have been contested.

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that after about 4 decades of independence there is neither an objective history of Bangladesh nor a biography of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Bangabandhu, who led his people to freedom, instilling in them a pride in their Bangali identity and showing them the vision of a socially just, secular and democratic society.

Now is the right time to delve deep into the spirit of Bangabandhu's political vision, in the wake of persisting political deterioration. The father of the nation's message on founding a progressive Bangladesh can be a remedy

for the rampant maladies in present day Bangladesh.

The fact that we paid a very high price for freedom has always been a reminder to us of the unceasing need on our part to hold fast to our legacy. No, we are not about to suggest that political sovereignty has given us all that we need as a nation. There remains, thirty-nine years to freedom, the very crucial matter of gaining economic emancipation. Ours is a society yet dependent on foreign aid for its development. Within the country, we see all the telltale signs of despair.

The inability of our governments, one after another, to ensure political stability, a viable law and order situation and a progressive economic system has told on our health as a society. We might not appreciate being labeled as a corrupt society by others around the world, but we do realise that within ourselves, and based on the realities around us, we know just how many things have been going wrong for us.

Our political class has been running out of ideas for years together. The consequence has been a rise in mediocrity, to a point where it often appears pretty illogical to expect good governance from them. Parliament remains thwarted by the dogged determination of the ruling coalition and the opposition not to interact with each other.

Our struggle for liberation was based on our desire for a democratic society where equality, rule of law and an equitable distribution of resources would underpin our lives. In the nearly four decades since liberation, we have faltered and stumbled and picked ourselves up again. It is such resilience that has kept us going.

As we observe Independence Day this year, we recall the unrivaled contributions of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Mujibnagar government and all the soldiers of freedom. We also recall with gratitude the moral and material assistance provided to us by the government and people of India.

It would be pretty fair to say that the political legacy, which Bengalis had shaped one layer at a time in the years after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, was clearly leading to a radical new era for them. The upshot of it is that had Bengalis not attained freedom when they did, they would have come by it in good time.

Today, let our resolve be to give ourselves a government based on the consent of the governed, to provide for those who have little or nothing, indeed to do all that may help us uplift our dream of Golden Bengal into reality.

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