

17 APRIL 1971

# Mujibnagar . . . lighting a candle in the dark

They were men whose belief in constitutional politics had been total and unequivocal. And yet these were the men on whose shoulders fell the responsibility of steering a bewildered, frightened nation to freedom. They did the job marvellously well. They shaped a revolution that would underpin the rise of the first free Bengali republic in history.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

THE formation of the provisional Bangladesh government in Mujibnagar remains, and will remain, a defining moment in our lives. It came into shape in the grey region that served as the frontier between the sinister and the illuminating. The sinister was the programmed genocide launched with unprecedented viciousness by the Pakistan occupation army; and the illuminating was the truth that such a brutal assault on human dignity, indeed on the traditions of a people, could not go unchallenged and unbeaten. And so it was on 17 April 1971 that in Meherpur of Chuadanga, the senior leaders of the Awami League, close associates of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, came together to proclaim before the world that out of the debris of a fast enveloping war had emerged a government, the overriding purpose behind the deed being the liberation of the land.

And that said it all. Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmed, M.Mansoor Ali and

A.H.M Quamruzzaman informed their fellow Bengalis and then the world that occupied Bangladesh was ready for a twilight struggle against Pakistan. It did not matter that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had been spirited away in prison somewhere in Pakistan. But it did matter that he was the symbol of the struggle about to be unleashed by a nation brutalized by savagery. Long hours had been spent working out the details of the announcement of the government, its line-up and its objectives. Men like Amirul Islam, the eminent lawyer, had worked on the draft proclamation that would be read out on the occasion. And Yusuf Ali, teacher turned politician, was there to do the job. He would do it with finesse. Journalists from the global media had been told of the event and on the day would make sure they were there to take in the measure of Bengali resistance to Pakistan.

The moment was a first for Bengalis in their thousand-year history. Of course, Sirajuddouhah, the last independent nawab of Bengal, had perished in 1757,

waging war against the British and their local cohorts in defence of a lost cause. But here was Bengal, or the eastern part of a whole truncated already through the grim turn of events in 1947, ready to rise in defence of its self-esteem. There was a qualitative difference between Sirajuddouhah and the men about to transform themselves into a government in April 1971. It was simple: the political structure which Tajuddin Ahmed and his associates hurriedly cobbled into shape would be the first Bengali government in history. Never before had Bengalis governed themselves. Now, caught between a rock and a hard place, the rock being subjugation by Pakistan and the hard place being wiped off by Pakistan's soldiers, the government that would come to be known as Mujibnagar had chosen to strike back.

Much good and many unprecedented events flowed from 17 April 1971. The essence of it all was the creation of a sense of purpose among the Bengali nation. Students, academics, doctors, lawyers, artists, politicians, civil servants, journalists, diplomats, soldiers --- all rallied to the cause . . . because the Mujibnagar government was there. Thousands of young men simply marched from their villages and their towns and then trekked through woodlands and swam across streams and rivers to link up with Mujibnagar. What had till 25 March been the improbable turned out to be the eminently possible. Songs of revolution that Bengalis had never heard before became part of their existence through

Shwadhin Bangla Betar. Bengali officers of the Pakistan army, now no more with it and very much a moving force behind the resistance, forged a guerrilla force named the Mukti Bahini and let it loose upon the marauding men from the mountains of the distant west.

What if the Mujibnagar government had not taken shape? What if the men who would lead the armed struggle against Pakistan had chosen to spend the rest of their lives waiting for a negotiated settlement to the crisis? What if, in the absence of resistance, Pakistan had perpetuated its presence in Bangladesh and cast its ever-darkening shadow on Bengali heritage?

These are questions that need not be answered, seeing that history was to take an unambiguous course and was to lead

the Bengali nation to its supreme triumph. Yet, prior to 17 April 1971, these fears were all too real for the nation to dismiss out of hand. Bangabandhu had been commanded by the Pakistan army; and not one of us knew where the rest of the Awami League leadership echelon was at that point. We would, of course, know subsequently that even as we worried about the future, Tajuddin Ahmed and Amirul Islam were making frantic efforts to locate the other men who would form the core of the Mujibnagar government. Over a period of nearly a month, Syed Nazrul Islam, Mansoor Ali, Quamruzzaman, M.A.G. Osmany and a host of others would link up with Tajuddin Ahmed. The moment that would make history would be at hand.

It is that lighting of the candle in the

dark we celebrate this morning. The men who built the edifice of Bengali resistance little knew before 25 March 1971 of the huge ordeal that lay ahead of them. They were men whose belief in constitutional politics had been total and unequivocal. And yet these were the men on whose shoulders fell the responsibility of steering a bewildered, frightened nation to freedom. They did the job marvellously well. They shaped a revolution that would underpin the rise of the first free Bengali republic in history.

And we are better off today because of the great cause that the Mujibnagar men upheld, with fortitude and foresight, in our year of unmitigated tragedy and untrammelled triumph.

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# Barbarity at its worst

All segments of the society as a whole must try to root out the fast spreading cancer threatening to unsettle the very foundation of morality. Unfortunately the policy makers and law makers do not seem to have been seriously perturbed. Without contradiction, security of children should be considered sine qua non of any civilized order and must be guaranteed by the state.

MD ASADULLAH KHAN

THE entire area stretching from Dhaka to Barisal to Teknaf to Tetulia appears to be a huge tinder box of crimes -- killing, rape, burning, and violence. Most traumatic, the sleepy villages, once known as peaceful abodes have now been also rocked by gruesome incidents of sexual abuses that threaten to plunge the conservative people's paradise into identity crisis. So deep is the rot and so pervasive the cynicism that pious proclamations of intent no longer make a difference.

What has happened in Barabagh area of Uttarkhan in the capital city is hard to believe and harder still to comprehend. To violate a two and half year old girl is simply barbaric. The gruesome report of the sexual abuse of the three year old baby daughter of a domestic help on April 6 last has shuddered the nation. Even in a country where crimes are committed with such increasing frequency these days by young criminals, there was a feeling of revulsion about the macabre

crime committed. That morning of April 8 when the news broke once again a chill ran up the nation's spine. Just a year ago, it learnt about the rape of Sheuly, a five year old. She was strangled to death after abuse by a neighbour youth.

Sadly enough, both these vile crimes were committed in broad day light. The baby daughter of the domestic help in Barabagh area was taken to an abandoned house and the rapist was no stranger to the child. The child was abused while she was playing in the open place of their slum residence, while her mother was busy working as part time maid in a house, some hundred yards away from that place. The victim's mother has to work in three houses to make both ends meet as her father, crippled in one leg but works as a rickshaw puller, can hardly supplement the expenses of their living in the city.

Strangely enough, the rapist Nayan (17) a young hoodlum of the locality could not yet be apprehended. Reports quoting doctors in the 'One Stop Crisis

Centre' at DMCH who performed operation on the baby girl revealed that the girl's condition was still critical. To their utter shock and shame, as people learn about the dastardly sexual act through different media, they might comment: "There are no devils left in hell, they are all in Bangladesh now."

The spurt of violence against children and school going girls is more than alarming. Nevertheless, these sorts of fiendish crimes perpetrated with increasing frequency have threatened to knock the rock bottom of the society. Precisely true, crimes and criminality exist in every society, but sexual violation of minors manifests a sort of depravity which unless checked immediately will tear apart the entire social fabric.

Weeks before, Mariam Akhtar Pinky (16), a student of class ten and a gifted dancer of Tarail upazila high school in Kishoreganj who won Tk. 10,000.00 in a dance contest in her school was burnt to death by one Tobarak Hossain, 24, as she was persistently refusing his marriage proposal for last two years. Pinky's rickshaw puller father Alfaton Bhuiyan informed Tobarak's parents of the vile design Tobarak was nurturing about throwing acid on her daughter if she did not marry him.

With such harassment going beyond redemption, on Alfaton's persistent approaches to village matubbars, an arbitration was arranged but to no avail. The stark fact was that Pinky's father could not extract a remedy from the affluent and influential 'matubbars' of the village and so Pinky had to die.

Subjected to humiliation and harassment days in and days out by Rezaul, a local hoodlum, Elora, a school student of class eight in the South Banasree school in the city took her life by swallowing pesticide. On the basis of a complaint filed by Elora's father, as reports reveal, Rezaul has now been arrested by the police.

The list of victims continues to swell up. Unable to bear with the relentless teasing by one Murad, a driver by profession, Nashfia Akhand Pinky (13) a student of class nine killed herself by hanging from a ceiling fan in their west Agargaon residence in the city. Reports revealed that fifteen days before Pinky killed herself, Murad's mother had gone to her house with a marriage proposal on Murad's behalf which Pinky's parents did not oblige. And so Nashfia had to die.

Add to this the insecure working condition of the young garment workers. Report carried by a vernacular daily on April 8 last indicated that a young garment worker of the 'Sports Wear factory' at Tongi while on her way back to her mess after day shift duty on Jan 20 last was way laid and gang raped by eight hoodlums of Sataish area. The alleged culprits are still at large. The local Women Council formed a human chain and staged demonstration last week in front of the Tongi Press Club demanding arrest of the hoodlums.

Unhappily, sometimes our protectors are our perpetrators. Report carried by a vernacular daily on March 29 last revealed that at Bashkhali in Chittagong a police constable while trying to abuse a

young girl in a vegetable garden near her house was caught red handed by the villagers. Reports from thana sources reveal that the police constable has now been closed.

Such incidents of rape of minor and adolescent girls have always provoked violent public outcry, the moment these were published in the newspaper. In most of these cases, the offenders could not be apprehended because of police inaction. We might recollect that only in the last year in this city, 5-year old Sheuly and Moyna were first raped and then strangled to death when they screamed and tried to resist.

Undeniably true, the resentment generated in the conscious citizenry and the outrage stoked are far from ebbing even after days of the incident. As conscious citizenry hang their heads in shame, a nation with the slightest of human virtues still alive must go numb with shock and trepidation. True, not even the harshest words could measure up the indignation felt in the length and breadth of the country. These acts with such alarming frequency prove that a sizable section of the society is being fast criminalized.

The question one tends to ask is, "what ails our society"? Why such criminal and murderous instincts are increasingly getting better of self-restraint, ethics, religious values these days? If some deep rooted psychological factor is interfering with decent living and creating societal imbalance, it should be diagnosed, and remedy found out. Something seems to have gone awfully wrong with our society.

It is not very unnatural in our country that every time such dastardly act takes place people are naturally outraged and loud protests are voiced by all. But as it often happens, when the alleged offenders go away with impunity the perpetrators of crime feel emboldened to commit crimes of greater enormity.

The law enforcers' reluctance and indifferent attitude to tackle such crimes make the situation worse. In many cases, the law enforcers themselves, are to blame. If the present trend of criminalization of the society, including the defenders themselves, goes unabated then every democratic norm and value will be thrown to the wind.

All segments of the society as a whole must try to root out the fast spreading cancer threatening to unsettle the very foundation of morality. Unfortunately the policy makers and law makers do not seem to have been seriously perturbed. Rather they are locked in a battle of words in the parliament undermining each other, digging the past of the leaders and bringing in issues not related to burning problems like development efforts, deteriorating law and order situation and escalating crime situation. Without contradiction, security of children should be considered sine qua non of any civilized order and must be guaranteed by the state. Protecting them from abuse and violence is the first prerogative to good governance, peace and stability.

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# Defining a Bengali work ethic

The Bengali work ethic can be defined as a belief system that provides the energy to work hard, remain honest, adapt when required, be resilient in times of disaster, relate to the family and community and envision a prosperous future for the entire nation.

GOLAM SARWAR CHOWDHURY

THE Protestant work ethic fuelled industrialisation in Europe and the USA in the nineteenth-century while the Confucian work ethic powered Japan's entry into the elite club of the rich and economically dominant nations in the early twentieth-century. The same work ethic catapulted the economies of many East and South East Asian countries like China, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Thailand in the recent past.

Many Indians also speak about an Indian work ethic that has given this massive South-Asian country a near double digit growth rate. What about Bangladesh in this scenario of growth and prosperity? Do we have a work ethic worthy enough to help us reach the goal of uplifting the nation to a middle-income country?

Bengalis were once viewed as idle, uneducated, and lacking in entrepreneurship skills. They were thought to be at best capable of working as clerks and farmers. This colonial attitude was in wide circulation during the days of permanent settlement in East Bengal, when the few lucky zamindars spent their time in exploiting the labour of the peasants and acting as sycophants of the empire.

Forgotten were the days, in earlier centuries, when Bengalis were engaged in trade and commerce, the weaving industry produced muslin, a fabric that earned fame throughout the world. Also suppressed was the fact that Bengal was affluent, where people worked hard and were content with what they produced on the land and netted from their ponds and rivers. Fish and rice were in abundance because the people were industrious and followed the right ethic that left them happy at the end of the day.

Following the independence of Bangladesh, Bengalis for the very first time got real opportunities in all sectors to work hard and prosper in whatever activities they were engaged in. There were newer openings in business and commerce, politics, civil service and the professions. After nearly forty years of freedom we can now be proud indeed of the achievements, particularly in the private sector, in spite of widespread corruption that began to spread out after the assassination of Bangabandhu and the subsequent extra-constitutional usurping of state power.

There is indeed a Bengali work ethic that creates real hope among us for the country's prosperity. At the turn of the twentieth century, men who jumped ship in London taught Bengalis at home how hard work could, over the years, bring fortune. Eventually thousands of their relatives, close and distant, settled in London in a big way and bought Brick Lane from its Jewish owners.

It makes us all proud to watch the achievements of Bengalis in the UK who have come up to their present level because of determination, hard work, and loyalty to their family and community.

Today, about 80,000 Bengalis work in New York City alone, proving that they

are capable of doing their very best in order to prosper. In other cities of the USA, you hear the same stories of Bengalis working hard and succeeding in their vocations and professions. Think also of the hundreds of thousands of wage-earning Bengalis sweating it out in the Persian Gulf countries. Their contribution has helped our Forex reserve to shoot up in a way that has never happened before.

In whichever country Bengalis were employed, they earned recognition for their honesty, determination and hard work. They abided by the law of those lands and brightened the image of Bangladesh.

Back home, consider the resilience of our common people, who have always turned around after every natural calamity! They have never given up their fight to make life better through sheer determination and the ability to face any kind of challenge. Let us also not forget the thousands of girls who work more than eight hours a day, sometimes without a break at the weekends, to make our garments industry flourish even in these days of stagflation in the developed countries.

If we look at our contemporary entrepreneurs, no amount of praise is sufficient for what they have done to our



Working hard for prosperity.

economy over the last twenty years. I personally know at least five top-ranking industrialists who began with virtually nothing. Today, they are among the first fifty investors and employers in the country because of their unwavering faith in success. They have reached the zenith again through hard work, honesty, and belief in their own capacity to bring about a change.

I must also speak about many of my students, friends and relatives who are now placed at the highest tiers in admin-

istration. They have gone up by virtue of their innate sense of integrity and honesty, and the attendant commitment to make it to the top.

The Bengali work ethic can thus be defined as a belief system that provides the energy to work hard, remain honest, adapt when required, be resilient in times of disaster, relate to the family and community and envision a prosperous future for the entire nation.

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