

Remembering that dark episode

The tragedy must strengthen resolve to build the nation

As we observe the National Mourning Day we recall the burden of pain and the blot on our conscience that we have collectively carried owing to the dastardly assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with most members of his family 35 years ago to this day. The process of redemption, although taken forward, is yet to be completed and that's where we still have an unfinished duty on our hands.

The reason why the hurtful legacy has been a long drawn one and all the more reinforces the need for internalising the lessons left by it is the whole set of events and trends triggered by the conspiratorial act of misadventure of August 15. The politics of assassination, change of guard by violent means, adoption of extra constitutional methods for the usurpation of power, indemnification of the misdeeds including killings, codification of antithesis to the basic principles of the Constitution through amendments -- all owed their origins to that single apocalyptic event.

That a trial has been held after the annulment of the indemnity act and under a due process of law and convictions have been handed to the killers is a robust affirmation of the assertion of the rule of law and the principle of inalienable human rights and vindication of justice. However, the process of bringing all the killers to justice is yet to be completed. Those awaiting gallows notwithstanding, six convicts are still fugitives in foreign lands and what efforts the government have been making to bring them back and with what results the nation is left in the dark about.

With the infamous fifth amendment which changed the basic character of the 1972 constitution having been invalidated by the highest court, an opportunity has presented itself for restoring the fundamentals of the constitution. There is an element of redemption in this development, but the fact remains the nation can only come to terms with itself when those who killed Bangabandhu, the perpetrators of jail killings and those who committed war crimes are made to face the full force of law.

On this day of our mourning as we pay homage to the Bangabandhu's memory, one resolve that we must take is to end all controversies to accord him his place in history that is incontrovertible.

The tragedy has left behind a legacy of lessons learned and eroded national values vindicated, so that the whole experience should help us strengthen our resolve to build the nation.

Schools closed down to ease traffic chaos!

Why education must suffer for administrative failure?

We are quite surprised to learn that in a desperate move to ease traffic congestion in the city the government has ordered all schools to close down with immediate effect. This can only be termed a knee-jerk approach to a colossal problem that required pragmatic planning to ensure solution rather than hopping from one ad-hoc or shortsighted measure to another.

When so many agencies are at the disposal of the government to deal with traffic problems, we wonder why education must be made to suffer for the failure of others. Is this where we place education in our list of priorities? Is it dispensable? There is doubt in our minds about how much the decision would help ease traffic chaos on Dhaka roads. Even if there is a whiff of relief, what good is it to get it for a week in advance since, after all, the schools and colleges are due to go on Ramadan and Eid holidays only a week or so later any way?

At what cost are we going to reduce the traffic pressure? The sudden decision to close down schools will leave teachers and students in the lurch, as they will be handicapped in completing the syllabus before the exams. One way would be to take makeup classes but that would again put extreme pressure on both teachers and students in a bid to meet exam deadlines. Usually, before long holidays, teachers brief students on unfinished syllabus and give them homework so that students can prepare well for the final examinations. But unscheduled closure would profoundly upset the normal school calendar.

The causes of traffic congestion lie in the faulty road structure, limited number of roads and unlimited number of vehicles including dilapidated ones that ply the Dhaka roads. It has been reported that there are over 70,000 unfit vehicles in Dhaka city and yet we have not heard of a single one taken off the roads. Unless and until these faults are removed, traffic snare will remain a daily affair. Therefore, sacrificing school education is no solution, rather it is a costly gimmick.

The founder of Bangladesh

He was the fearless fighter of the Language Movement of 1952; the pioneer of the democratic movement of 1962; the architect of the Six-point Movement of 1966; the life-force of the Mass Movement of 1969; the enviable victor of the election of 1970 and, above all, the greatest hero of the Liberation War of 1971. He is undisputedly the founder of independent Bangladesh.

RASHID ASKARI

FATHER of the Nation' is an honorific bestowed on individuals who are considered the most important in the process of the establishment of a country or a nation. They are instrumental in the birth of their nations by way of liberating them from colonial or other occupation. George Washington is the father of the United States, Peter I of Russia, Sun Yat-sen of China, Sir Henry Parkes of Australia, Miguel Hidalgo of Mexico, Sam Nujoma of Namibia, William the Silent of the Netherlands, Einar Gerhardsen of Norway, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Carlos Mammel of Cuba, Mustafa Kemal of Turkey, Sukarno of Indonesia, Tunku Abdul Rahman of Malaysia, Mahatma Gandhi of India, Don Stephen Senanayake of Sri Lanka and Mohammad Ali Jinnah of Pakistan. So is Bangabandhu, the Father of the Bangladeshi nation.

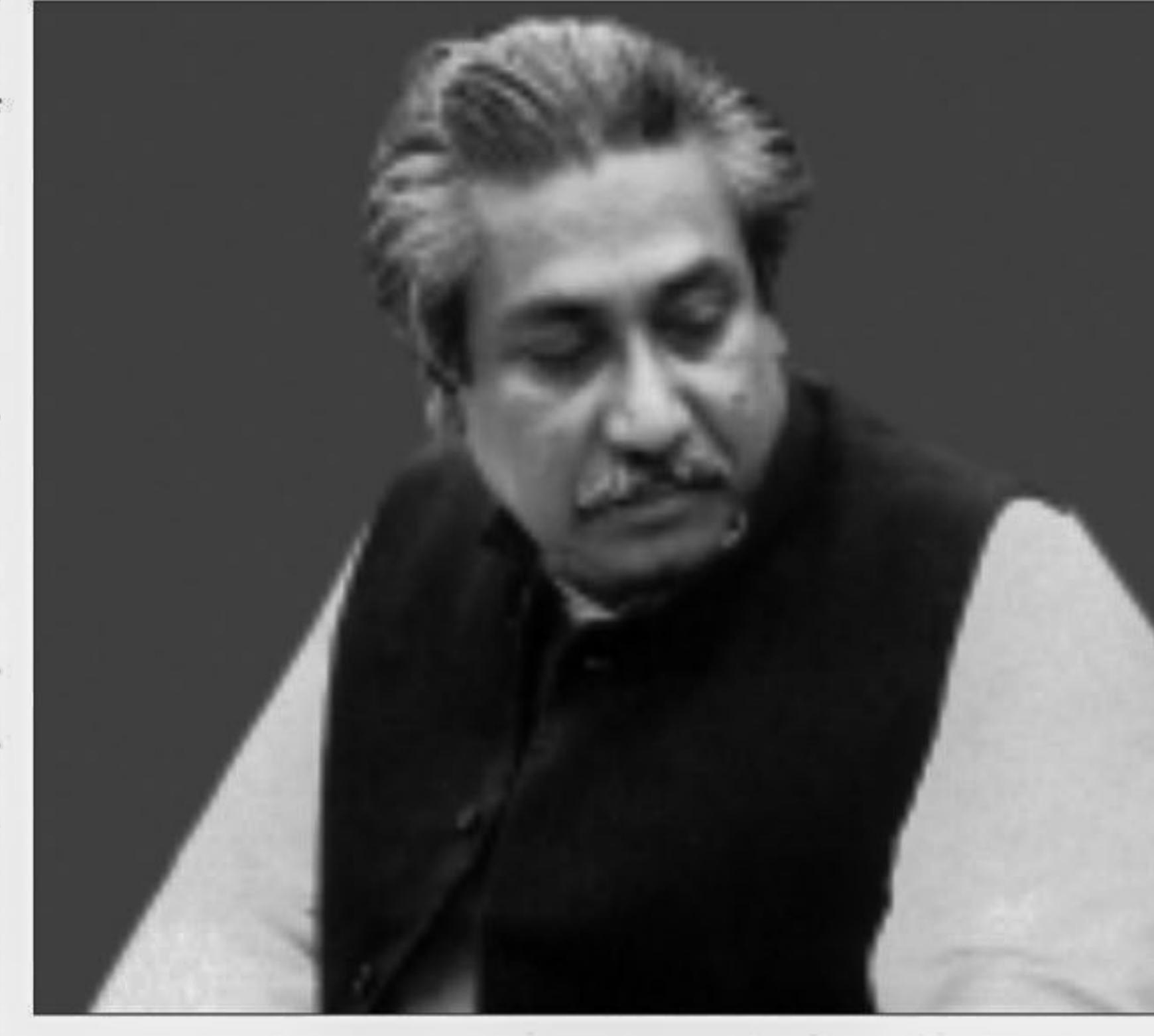
Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920-1975) is the architect of our country and the nation by all implications of the term. As a matter of fact, what we now call Bangladesh was never independent in the truest sense of the term before 1971. It was Mujib and only Mujib who gave the nation a real touch of freedom. It was quite a trek into the long way of freedom from all-out oppression through autonomy and home rule in which he gave the active lead. He was the fearless fighter of the Language Movement of 1952; the pioneer of the democratic movement of 1962; the architect of the Six-point Movement of 1966; the life-force of the Mass Movement of 1969; the enviable victor of the election of 1970 and, above all, the greatest hero of the Liberation War of 1971. He is undisputedly

the founder of independent Bangladesh and, therefore, the Father of the Nation.

It is really a matter of regret that we are not well aware of this greatest national leader. But who is to blame for that? As a matter of fact, there has been a long chain of conspiracy to make people oblivious of Bangabandhu. It began with his assassination on the inauspicious August night of 1975. Ever since then the country fell mostly under the sway of despotic military rule accompanied by the corrupt politicians, opportunistic bureaucrats, pseudodemocrats and religious fundamentalists. They had one thing in common i.e. Bangabandhu-bashing. They tried to indemnify the killers of Bangabandhu, and rewarded them with lucrative portfolios. They took sustained efforts to erase the image of Bangabandhu from the minds of the people by distorting history. They tried to obliterate the memories of Bangabandhu from the pages of history, inscriptions of monuments and from whatever holds the recollections of Mujib.

The anti-Mujib campaigners are not, however, as powerful as history itself. History takes its own course, maybe after quite a long time. But this is inevitable. So, the anti-Mujib campaigners have vainly tried to change the course of history eventually making a mockery of it. What they had done at best is that they had fooled some people for sometime or what they can still do is that they can fool some people for all time, but they can never fool all people into believing a false story for all time. People must be endowed with a true sense of history today or tomorrow.

To look into one's own history and culture and to go for the quest for national identity and cultural heritage have become



an imperative in these postcolonial days. Ours is not a poor socio-political and cultural legacy. We fought valiantly a war of independence under the leadership of Bangabandhu. We can very well come up with this political legacy and assert ourselves more. We can uphold the ideals of Bangabandhu to rebuild our nation.

Mujib is really Bangabandhu, friend of Bangladesh. And hence he could utter: 'Standing on the gallows, I will tell them, I am a Bengali, Bangla is my country, Bangla is my language'. On the black night of March 25, when it was suggested that he go into hiding, he flatly refused and retorted: 'I must share the sufferings of my people along with them. I must share. I cannot leave them in the face of fire. I cannot.' Really he did not flee to safety from the war-torn country. Rather he willingly became the first prey to the marauding force. Love for the motherland had prompted him to take such a risk. Afterwards, over nine long months, day after day and night after night in the dark cell of the prison camp, he longed for the freedom of his country. The

unbearable suffering of the dungeon could not sap the strength of his patriotism. On his return home on 10 January 1972, addressing a huge gathering in Suhrawardy Uddyan, Bangabandhu declared: 'Bangladesh has earned independence. Now if anybody wants to seize it, Mujib would be the first man to sacrifice his life for the protection of that independence'. His country was all important to him. He believed it was his calling to do good to his country, not to look forward to anything in return. He often used to mention the famous quote by President John F. Kennedy: 'Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country'.

Such a big man was Bangabandhu! The undisputed Father of independent Bangladesh. To be unaware of this is sheer ignorance. To deny this is an offence against history.

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The speech that steeled the nation

The Seventh March speech of Bangabandhu was immediately recognised as a great speech, a speech that liberated Bangladesh almost at that hour. But he also spoke directly to the people in simple, clear sentences, which were embedded in our hearts and minds.

MAHBUB HUSAIN KHAN

On 15 August 1975 Bangabandhu told the traitors, 'The people put me here and the only way I will leave this country will be as a dead person.'

This makes us recall the breezes of Bashanta on that day of seventh March, thirty-nine years ago, which spread all over the country, Bangabandhu's words: 'Ebarey shangram amader muktir shangram, ebarey shangram shadhinatar shangram'

These words of fire inflamed the hearts and minds of every Bengali at Suhrawardy Uddyan (Race Course at the time) on that day, and all other Bengalis who heard it over

the airwaves. This speech was the turning point in our history. In the words of another great man of this subcontinent, the Bengali nation was going forward to its 'tryst with destiny'. In a speech of about a quarter of an hour, the hour of the Bengali nation had arrived.

Since that day and that speech, many more have been made in the political and historical context of our country, some of them by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, but if one speech can be likened to the Gettysburg address of Abraham Lincoln, it was this speech and this speech alone. Abraham Lincoln and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were the true upholders of democracy and the liberators

of their peoples --- of all races and religions, colour and creed.

At the commemoration of a cemetery for Civil War soldiers in the little Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg on November 19, 1863, the main speaker of the day was not Abraham Lincoln, but the orator Everett. At 2 pm, two long, cold hours after starting, Everett concluded his speech and turned the dais over to President Lincoln. Lincoln rose awkwardly before an audience of perhaps fifteen thousand people, adjusted his glasses (as contemporary records show), held the paper on which his speech was written in front of his face, and in a high, reedy voice, delivered his address. He barely took his eyes off the manuscript, according to one witness, as he intoned those famous words, 'Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal...'. Towards the end, he noted that 'government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.'

The Gettysburg address contained just 268 words, two-thirds of them with only one syllable, mostly short, direct and memorable crystalline sentences. It took less than three minutes so little, according to several contemporary accounts, that the official photographer was still making preliminary adjustments to his camera, when the President of the United States sat down. Lincoln thought the speech a failure. Even newspapers sympathetic to Lincoln scarcely noted his address. Not until considerably later was it perceived as perhaps the greatest of American speeches, and one of the greatest in the world.

The Seventh March speech of Bangabandhu, on the other hand, was immediately recognised as a great speech, a speech that liberated Bangladesh almost at that hour. But he also spoke directly to the people in simple, clear sentences, which were embedded in our hearts and minds. When he finished, not a single soul disagreed with him. Two hundred years on, in our history, this speech will rekindle the fire of revolt, the aspirations of freedom, the establishment of human rights in our successor generations.

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