

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 legitimized 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 legitimacy 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



Homecoming of the liberator: Bangabandhu returned to Dhaka from captivity in Pakistan on January 10, 1972.

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, Boumedienne, 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

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

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 that 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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The atonement still goes on

Bangabandhu's life is characterized by many of the traits of a tragic hero: his extraordinary personality, his greatness of heart and his awesome popularity were all like the strengths of a tragic hero. But did Bangabandhu have a tragic flaw that like Hamlet or King Lear ultimately transformed him to the victim of his own mistake?

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WHEN Bangabandhu was gunned down in the early hours on 15 August 1975, the Bengali nation to which he gave independence began a process of atonement for having committed patricide that continues even now. What can be crueler than killing the nation's father that gave identity to a people who remained colonized for twenty-five years after the British had pulled out of the subcontinent in 1947?

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a rare personality who is not born in every generation. It was because of his uncompromising and visionary political struggle for which Bengalis gained a homeland of their own, and it was also because of his unflinching courage to boldly face the persecution of the Pakistani leadership, Bengalis are today getting opportunities in all fronts to prosper and flourish. Why then was he so brutally killed, with all members of his family, only a few years after independence?

similar to the fall of a tragic hero. Indeed he was a protagonist in the political stage of the subcontinent unparallel to any other politicians of his own and the previous generation. Tragic heroes cannot be ordinary men, they have to be Kings or Princes, and therefore no tragedy has been written after the 16th Century. This genre of literature flourished only during the 5th century BC in ancient Greece and the 16th Century AD in England and France. With the advent of democracy, tragedy retreated to the background because ordinary men could not be endowed with the unqualified greatness of tragic heroes.

Bangabandhu's life is characterized by many of the traits of a tragic hero: his extraordinary personality, his greatness of heart and his awesome popularity were all like the strengths of a tragic hero. But did Bangabandhu have a tragic flaw that like Hamlet or King Lear ultimately transformed him to the victim of his own mistake? Bangabandhu is not a character of a Shakespearean play; he was a rare human being, a politician with an

extraordinary caliber. However like Prince Hamlet, procrastination partly led him to his tragic fall. Yes, he delayed like the prince of Denmark; his first reluctance was to form a government of national unity immediately after his release from Pakistani prison. Later when he declared the establishment of the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL), it was much too late, for the conspirators already had enough time to regroup and strike at an opportune moment to eliminate the towering man who had always outmaneuvered them in the past.

Bangabandhu's second delay was his inability to summarily try and punish those who had killed, raped, burnt and looted in the soil of Bengal alongside the blood-drinking Pakistani military. Like King Lear, he did not realize that evil men could never change; those without compassion could never love humanity. The magnanimous Bangabandhu allowed the killers too much time to reorganize and strike back at him. Like Shakespeare's King Lear, Bangabandhu also hurried.



Bangabandhu with parents.

Lear the old King hastily banished and disinherited Cordelia his daughter who loved him the most. Bangabandhu in all his glory, only in his early 50s, decided to prematurely visit Pakistan at the behest of some Arab leaders. His sudden decision to attend the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) meeting in Lahore gave the conspirators a renewed opportunity of plotting to kill a man who had to be

earlier spared because of international pressure. The crafty Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had managed to secure the release of the 195 listed war criminals of the Pakistani military as an outcome of the Shimla agreement signed by Pakistan and India in 1973. Why then was the hurry and the necessity of returning to a country whose military, fully supported by Zulfikar Bhutto, wanted the entire territory of

Bangladesh to be smeared in blood only a couple of years ago in 1971? What could have Bangabandhu asked from Pakistan? His trip to the humbled Pakistan of 1971 can at best be described as the journey of a proud victor to the land of the vanquished. Little did he realize that behind the glitter and the razzmatazz surrounding his arrival at the Lahore airport, and his participation in the OIC meeting, a plot was underway to avenge the defeat in the hands of the Bengalis in 1971.

Lawrence Lifschultz, one of the most dispassionate chroniclers of the history of our glorious war of liberation, mentions in his book Bangladesh: the Unfinished Revolution the link of the infamous Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan in the murder of Bangabandhu. The ISI mustered support of a few disgruntled soldiers of the Bangladesh Army and successfully carried out its sinister mission on that fateful morning of 15 August 1971. When Bangabandhu's body, riddled with bullets, lay lifeless at his home in Dhanmandi abettors to the conspiracy in the Pakistani army Headquarters, as Lifschultz states, were among the first to rejoice the news of this macabre happening.

The tragedy had turned full circle with the elimination of Bangabandhu, but the Bengali nation continues to atone for its collective guilt of giving birth to those who like cunning wolves stealthily moved from behind and felled a titan.

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