

March 7 was a defining moment

We soared, with Bangabandhu

It was a defining moment for the Bengali nation when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rose before a million-strong crowd on the afternoon of this day in 1971 to speak to us of the future. In a very formal sense, the man who was soon to be Father of the Nation informed us, through twenty minutes of profound oratory, that freedom was the goal for the people of Bangladesh, that the spirit which underscored the non-violent non-cooperation movement in place since the first day of March 1971 was sure to propel the nation toward the attainment of absolute sovereignty.

Of course, when Bangabandhu spoke on that day, indeed even before he began to speak, it was the weight of the world he seemed to carry on his shoulders. And he did the job well, for through his long struggle, through the remarkable electoral victory he had obtained months earlier, he had earned his place as the undisputed leader of seventy five million Bengalis. In the event, the March 7 address turned out to be the finest in his long, tortuous political career. He spoke without notes. He came forth with a recapitulation of the history of Bengali suffering in twenty three years of Pakistan. And he was under no illusion that the struggle for liberty would be hard and long, demanding yet more sacrifice than what the nation had expended till that point of time. It was a speech laced with reason and underlined with necessary emotion. Bitterness had no place in it; and passion resting on patriotism was all. Bangabandhu did not give Pakistan's military junta a chance to pounce on his people on the ground that they were parting from Pakistan through secession or a unilateral declaration of independence. Neither did he leave his fellow Bengalis in any doubt about the course of freedom he was setting for them.

The struggle this time, he made it clear on March 7, 1971, was the struggle for emancipation. And then came the clincher: the struggle was for freedom. If politics immediately prior to March 7 had been at a crossroads, on March 7 Bangabandhu pointed, in firm, decisive manner, to the route we needed to take. And we did.

OMS alternative essential

Strengthen TCB

No doubt the government's open market operation has indeed helped ease the plight of the poor, and even the low middle income people have resorted to buying rice from the fair price outlets of late. This has been due primarily to a sharp increase in the price of the coarse variety of rice, which happens to be the staple for these people, during the last year on an average of nearly 30 percent. The price of coarse rice has recorded a fall recently, but only just.

It is just as well that the government has expanded the OMS operation by doubling the number of outlets that serves nearly 150,000 families per day in the capital. This has caused a saving of nearly Taka 50 on the purchase of 5 KG of rice. Given that there has been a corresponding increase of other essential items of food the saving do come in handy to defray other expenses.

There are several lessons from the current situation that the government can draw. It will be well for the government to find out why, in spite of a good harvest, we are facing a crunch. One of the reasons is because of the rise in price of rice in the international market due to shortage in output in the major rice producing countries. And we failed to build up enough buffers at home, going for international purchase only in the face of a shortfall. But there are perhaps other reasons too which need to be gone into.

While market intervention is one of the safety nets, there is need to address the possible truck between wholesalers and big traders and the practice of hoarding by speculating over international market behaviour. It is better to build up our stock from internal procurement which clearly did not happen. One would also expect the TCB to be made more robust to be able to intervene more

Bangabandhu's finest hour

MAHFUZ ANAM

It is this writer's view that the March 7th speech was Bangabandhu's finest hour. He stood far taller than ever before and with him we too stood taller. He was always known for being a powerful speaker. But that day, 26 years ago, he outperformed himself a thousand times over, and a thousand times more empowered we felt that day. During that crucial March afternoon, and especially through the electrifying moments of the speech he stood towering above the nation, singly shouldering the burden of leading an unprepared people towards self assertion.

However bravely we may talk today about those events so long ago, at that time we really did not know how things were to unfold. Yes, we all wanted our rights, and we wanted them right away. But how they were to come? Was freedom to come through negotiations or would it require us to wage an armed struggle? And what did we understand by armed struggle? We romanticised about it, but knew nothing of it.

Things were becoming increasingly obvious that to realise our legitimate demands we may have to seek independence. But how is one to start an independence movement? What would be the consequence of making a declaration of it? Though we all talked about it, and some may have even said so in public, yet it was for our elected leader to take us through that uncharted path. The man who should be the Prime Minister of whole of Pakistan by dint of his electoral victory had to take the right step at the right time. The critical question was when would the right time strike.

And this is where the specialty of the March 7th speech lies. It says everything without the elements that could be used to hold responsible for breaking up the legal Pakistan. For by then, the country had actually broken up in all other sense. To really appreciate the magnificence of this speech one has to understand the context in which it was delivered. Awami League had fought an election and won the majority of seats of the parliament of Pakistan. Following the results, Gen Yahya had declared that Sheikh Mujib

would be the Prime Minister of Pakistan. It was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and some conniving army generals who did not want to transfer power to someone whose electoral programme was to realise the legitimate rights of the Bengali people enshrined in the now famous six points. There were lots of indications about the impending betrayal of the verdict of the December '70 elections, yet it was not till the postponement of the session of the newly elected parliament that Bangabandhu could really give a call for an all out movement.

When the session of the parliament

transforms it as a classic in political oratory.

The speech had to live up to the high expectation of the people who wanted their independence and yet there should be nothing in it that could give an outright excuse to the Pakistan army to start military action against the unarmed Bengali people. In fact, Tikka Khan's band of killers would want nothing better than to be given a publicly announced excuse for a genocidal action. So Bangabandhu had to say everything, and yet not give the excuse that Pakistan military was looking for. He



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was postponed on March 1st, '71, the fatal shot to the existence of united Pakistan was fired right into its chest. And it was on the night of March 25th, when Pakistani military cracked down on the civilian population of what was till then one country, that Pakistan was killed and buried. It was in the midst of this highly charged transition period -- from the 1st to the 25th -- when events were unfolding at a break-neck speed that Bangabandhu had to give this speech.

And here lies the beauty and the craftsmanship of this speech, which

had to stand steadfast and yet keep open the doors for negotiations. Under no circumstances could he appear to be the one responsible for the breakdown of the talks. And yet he had to take his people forward and give them the right directions, maintain the militancy, ask them to take all the necessary preparatory steps, and clear people's minds about the final goal. It was a political and intellectual challenge of the highest kind, and it could be tackled only by a speech of the type that Bangabandhu delivered that day.

Take for example the content of the speech. In it he gradually builds up the whole rationale for the movement that has been going on. He argues, cajoles, pleads, demands and finally warns, not to take lightly the demand of a people who have realised their strength through struggle. He talks of peace and yet gives clear signals that peace cannot come at the cost of capitulation. He talks of sacrifice, but not in terms of a helpless people who are suffering because they are weak, but in terms of a courageous and bold people who have knowingly taking upon a task which they know to be a arduous, and for which they are ready to face any consequence. There was superb cleverness in the construction of the speech by which he said all that he needed to and yet the enemy could not hold him responsible for having said anything which was illegal.

The voice in the speech is one of its most magnificent aspects. It was so bold that the whole nation could and in fact did, take strength from it. There was an unhesitant enunciation of everything that needed to be said. There was such appropriate modulation of voice that every word uttered seemed irreplaceable. Throughout it all the strength of the man came out and touched all those who heard him, drawing all close to him and making all trust and repose faith in him.

If ever a speech united, strengthened, enthused, inspired a people, and gave courage to them to become bolder and more determined than they usually are, it was Bangabandhu's speech of March 7th, 1971. If ever one single speech became the most effective motivational weapon for a nation at war then this was it. If ever a speech of a leader became the constant companion for young freedom fighters facing an enemy known for their proficiency and ferocity and which acted to link us all in a spellbinding string of words and sounds, then this speech was so for all of us, the freedom fighters, spread throughout the nook and corner of what was then our enslaved motherland.

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KALEIDOSCOPE

Harbinger of independence



SYED FATTAHUL ALAM

THE spring is the time of the year when the Bengali people had many times in the past risen up in protest against oppression, injustice, betrayal and tyranny by authorities in power. Sometimes those oppressors were alien regimes, while at others they were home-grown autocrats. Bengali youths revolted against the Pakistani rulers' conspiracy to demean and relegate their mother tongue to a subordinate status on a spring day of February 21 about six decades back.

In a similar show of revolutionary fervour, on one spring day of March 7 1971, the people thundered in one voice against the Pakistani junta's betrayal and palace conspiracy to foil the verdict of the people that they pronounced through 1970's general election. And the voice of all the Bengali people was that of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

In the mammoth rally at the Race Course ground, the indisputable and unrivalled leader of the masses first recounted how the Pakistani junta had betrayed the Bengali people by breaking promises and resorting to falsehoods and palace intrigues, and thus denying them their legitimate rights and causes. The junta led by Yahya Khan promised that after the general election of 1970, they would transfer power to the political party that won majority of the seats in Pakistan's legislative assembly.

In fact, the Awami League clinched a landslide victory in the election. Though its main contender, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party won in the majority of the constituencies in the then West Pakistan, his party trailed far behind the Awami League when the number was totalled on all-Pakistan basis. Hence was hatched the historic conspiracy by the military junta in cahoots with Bhutto. And they turned a deaf ear to the call of reason and justice. They wouldn't listen to the people's verdict.

The leader made it clear before the sea of people at the rally that all the

was that conspiracy had no place in his life. In recent times, some of his followers in a misplaced effort to further glorify him, are but trying to portray him as a party to political intrigue.

The Pakistani junta had brought a charge of conspiracy against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the so-called Agartala Conspiracy Case. A section of his followers are trying to establish that he was really involved in the plot for the cause of independence. But it was against his grain to get into a plot to achieve the nation's independence. For the way to establish a right cause one need not be conspiratorial.

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options of peaceful and constitutional paths to resolve the ongoing crisis had been exhausted. And as a man with strong conviction in non-violent, non-conspiratorial, democratic and constitutional way of politics to go to power, he made his final call to the people to organise and prepare themselves for a war of independence, since that was the only choice open before the Bengali people to wrest all their legitimate rights from the junta.

The historic speech he delivered at the Race Course again bore out in unequivocal terms the kind of ideology and politics he stood for. And it

In fact, through bringing the false charge of conspiracy against him, the Pakistani junta was trying to tarnish his image as well as indict him for sedition.

That notwithstanding, there was indeed a conspiracy and that was against the Bengali people by the junta. The Bengali people stood up as one against that conspiracy and at the height of a popular movement freed him from imprisonment. And thus the attempt at portraying him as a conspirator by the junta was frustrated. So where is the point of reconstructing history and devaluing him as a conspirator whatever good rea-

son there might be behind such attempt? What is important here is to establish the truth.

So has the content of March 7's speech by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gone down in history as the Charter of Bengali people's independence. Another celebrated leader of the Bengalis, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, with whom the relationship of Bangabandhu was like one between a guru and his disciple, also spoke of our independence long before. But his famous utterance "Assalamu alaikum" actually meant "goodbye" to Pakistan. But that was only a warning shot. The moment of truth was yet to arrive at that point of time. The nation had to wait until March 7, 1971 for the final call of going all out for the war of independence.

The significance of March 7 lies exactly here. The answer to the question of who declared independence should also be looked for in that speech. Since he believed in non-violent constitutional politics, he would under no circumstances like to suddenly push the unarmed population unprepared for an armed conflict with Pakistani forces. This is why he called for doing first the groundwork for independence war by turning every home into a fort and then facing the enemy with whatever resources were on hand at the moment. And that struggle, he finally declared in no uncertain terms, was one of independence. There was no ambiguity in the speech to interpret it otherwise.

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THIS DAY IN HISTORY

March 7

1876
Alexander Graham Bell is granted a patent for an invention he calls the telephone.

1945
World War II: American troops seize the Ludendorff Bridge over the Rhine River at Remagen.

1971
Sheikh Mujibur Rahman delivers his historic "This time the struggle is for our freedom" speech at Ramna Race Course, calling upon the people of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to prepare for the freedom struggle ahead.

1999
8 Killed and over 100 injured in a bomb explosion at a cultural function of Udichi Shilpa Goshii at Jessore Town Hal, Bangladesh.

2007
British House of Commons votes to make the House of Lords, 100% elected.

Death
322 BC
Aristotle, Greek philosopher (b.384 BC)