

# Bangabandhu's moment in history . . .

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

AS Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rose to speak before the million people gathered at the Race Course in Dhaka, indeed before the seventy five million people of Bangladesh on March 7, 1971, the moment turned electric with excitement.

For the preceding few days, reports and rumours had been making the rounds about an impending declaration of independence by the man whose party, the Awami League, had secured a clear majority of seats (167 out of a total of 313) in Pakistan's national assembly at the general elections of December 1970.

What should have been a journey to power as Pakistan's prime minister on Mujib's part had by early March 1971 been transformed into a movement for Pakistan's eastern province to prise itself out of the state created through the division of India in 1947. The reasons were all out there; and they necessarily had to do with the intrigues which had already been set in motion to thwart the assumption of power at the centre by the Awami League.

In the event, the speech Bangabandhu delivered at the Race Course served the very crucial purpose of bringing home the truth that

Bangladesh was on its way to political freedom. At an intellectual level, the speech was a masterpiece. Within its parameters, Mujib deftly negotiated his way out of a bind, one in which he had found himself in the days since President Yahya Khan had injudiciously deferred the scheduled March 3 meeting of the new national assembly in a broadcast on the first day of the month.

Almost immediately, the fiery student leaders allied to the Awami League cause moved miles ahead to demand that Mujib declare Bangladesh free of Pakistan. Over the next few days, such demands began to be echoed in other areas, eventually persuading everyone that the Bengali leader was actually about to give in to the pressure for an independence declaration. His rejection of an invitation to a round table conference called by General Yahya Khan for March 10 was seen as evidence of his intended action. Besides, there had been no perceptible move by him to restrain the students of Dhaka University when they decided to hoist the flag of what they believed would be an independent Bangladesh.

And yet those who stayed in touch with Bangabandhu, or watched the way he handled the situation in those tumultuous



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times, knew of the difficulties he had been pushed into. Caught between a rock and a hard place, he needed to find an acceptable, dignified way out of the crisis.

On the one hand, a unilateral declaration of independ-

ence would leave him facing the charge of secessionism not only from the Pakistan authorities but also from nations around the world. He knew that as the leader of the majority party, he could not have his reputation destroyed in such

cavalier manner. There were before him the poor instances of Rhodesia's Ian Smith and Biafra's Odumegwu Ojukwu, images he was not enthused by. Besides, any UDI would swiftly invite the retribution of the Pakistan military, at that

point steadily reinforcing itself in East Pakistan.

On the other hand, Mujib realised that as undisputed spokesman of the Bengalis he was expected to provide his people with a sense of direction, one that would reassure them about the future. Recall the slow, ponderous steps he took as he went up to the dais on that March afternoon. It was the very picture of a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders. There is every reason to believe that he was still shaping his ideas, those he would soon aim at that crowd of expectant Bengalis.

And then he began to speak, in oratory that was to prove once more the reality of why he had over the years gained the peaks in the politics of Bengal, of Pakistan. In that one speech he painted the entire history of why Pakistan had failed as a state. Even as he did so, he laid out his arguments in defence of what the Bengali nation needed to do. He mocked the conspiracies then afoot to deprive Bengalis of political power.

With prescience, he told his people that even if he were not around, not amidst them, they should move on to protect the land, its history, from those who would trifle with it. Every moment bubbled with excitement. Bangabandhu soared,

and we with him, as he defined our path to the future. The man who only minutes earlier had seemed wracked by deep worry now offered us a clear path out of the woods and into a very bright blue yonder.

"The struggle this time is the struggle for our emancipation. The struggle this time is for independence," declared Bangabandhu. We cheered. We whooped for joy. We knew that he had not declared independence, but we were made aware that he had set us on the path to freedom. He had refused to be a secessionist; and he had abjured all ideas of a UDI. He had told us, in precise, unambiguous terms, that liberation was down the road, that it was a mere matter of time. We were content. As we went back home, with loud refrains of *Joi Bangla* around us and in our souls, we told ourselves that life for us had changed forever.

On March 7, 1971, Bangabandhu gave us reason to believe in ourselves once again. Because of him, we remembered our heritage. Because of him, we were Bengalis again. And because of him, we reached out to one another, to the world outside the one we inhabited, to build our own brave new world.

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BITTER TRUTH

## Dhaka: An unlivable city indeed!



MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

OVER the last two decades, the country experienced phenomenal urban growth, and has now become an epitome of squalor and poverty and an environmental abyss. Despite the everyday trauma, rigours, and exhaustion, people are endlessly attracted to the city, for it seems to have work, livelihood and even prosperity on offer.

During the last one decade Dhaka has

pose, contamination remains as grave as ever. With about 300 factories throwing in toxic waste and people emptying human excreta and rubbish in the open rivers, the surface water has become extremely contaminated. In consequence, 85% of the water demand is met through underground water, causing the water table to drop by about 3 to 4 metres every year.

The rural areas are no better. More than 70% of the people live on a pittance, and more than half of them are completely illiterate, and have no access to sanitation, healthcare or even clean water. Things are so

and sewer lines run parallel or one close to the other and in many places they break down. The result -- piped water gets contaminated, which causes diarrhea, typhoid and other diseases.

While some effort has been taken to clean the Gulshan-Baridhara lake and evict illegal encroachers, Uttara lake is now a lifeless receptacle of human waste, raw sewage, and toxic effluents from industrial units around the area. Citizens hope that the prime minister's directive, followed by the works and housing ministry's instruction to Rajuk to resurrect the lake, might nudge the concerned authorities into action.

As population pressure increases, open spaces, except for Ramna Park and Chandrima Uddyan, are nowhere to be found in the vast city. But parks or open spaces are like lungs for a city. How could this fact be ignored by the City Corporation for so long?

Unsurprisingly, the slum and squatter population has been increasing at more than double the general growth rate of the urban population. It is reportedly learnt from demographic sources that the number of slum dwellers in Dhaka city will cross 10 million in the next 5 years as the rural poor, in absence of job opportunities and loss of far land in their areas, are continuously pouring into the capital city.

During the Cricket World Cup, the authorities have cleaned and decorated the roads and sidewalks running from Shahjalal airport to Sheraton to Mirpur to give the visitors a feeling that we live in a clean Dhaka, but how can we conceal the fact that vast areas of the city now bear a distressing resemblance to a filthy construction site, garbage spilling out of the houses, restaurants and clinics into the streets.

In the game of making money, mostly at the expense of peoples' suffering, city planners and utility agencies have forgotten the older part of the city. Cities like Tokyo, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and Singapore in the Asian region, with growing populations, are dazzlingly alive. To outsiders, Dhaka is an urban nightmare with skyscrapers thrown helter-skelter against a backdrop of exhaust fumes, snarled traffic in a tangle of winding streets and towering residential and commercial blocks mixed together.

Overcrowding, noxious fumes, power shortage, traffic congestion, water scarcity and contamination have all played a part in turning this once charming city into a choking hell now. And surely, unless the people take a determined stand, Dhaka will top the list of the worst cities in the world next time.

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## Prof. Yunus and Bangladesh

ZAFAR IQBAL

I like Prof. Yunus a lot, and more than that I respect him. I also know that there are many like me. I remember, on hearing the news of Prof. Yunus' Nobel Prize I jumped about and screamed like a person gone mad with happiness. There have not been too many such occasions in my life. My happiness was not because someone I knew got the Nobel Prize but because the prestige of Bangladesh went sky high. Only those who have lived abroad can truly gauge how cruelly, indifferently and disrespectfully Bangladesh is sometimes talked about, and it is Prof. Yunus and his work that have helped us enormously to counter that. The Wall Street Journal in a recent piece, pointing out the difference between Pakistan and Bangladesh, wrote, "Pakistan's hero is a rogue nuclear scientist who unlawfully smuggled nuclear technology, while Bangladesh's hero is Prof. Yunus, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for helping the poor with small loans".

Prof. Yunus is now the victim of a cold and calculated harassment campaign of the government. I think it must be a very important agenda of the Awami League, and this campaign would have started now or later. The perfect opportunity came when the Norwegian Television released a documentary regarding a dispute between Norad and Grameen Bank that was settled in the nineties. Following that, our Prime Minister launched a most vicious attack on Prof. Yunus that left sensible people in the country stupefied and hurt. Our finance minister spoke sensibly in the initial stage but followed the same tune when pressure was brought to bear on him.

The worst attack came from the Students League whose language of criticism is too shameful to reproduce here. Soon we started to see another form of harassment with cases being lodged against the Grameen Bank chief in various places of the country and we saw the regrettable sight of him taking bail from various courts in the country.

That the man who is now one of the most respected individuals in the world should be so harassed by his own gov-

ernment is something I find difficult to believe even though I am seeing it with my own eyes. A few days ago Prof. Yunus was dismissed from the post of Managing Director of the bank that he conceived, founded and nurtured. Of course the government will find many excuses for its action. But I will bet that the people of the country will not believe anything that is being alleged against him and that all this is being done only to harass him.

The news of his dismissal has spread throughout the world with unbelievable speed and has been taken with immense seriousness. People across the world will be forced to conclude that our government is both ungrateful and vindictive. The man who has done so much to raise the profile, honour and respect of Bangladesh on the global stage is now facing a vilification campaign where the full force of the state is being used.

There exists a lot of debate about the micro credit programme launched by Prof. Yunus. There are many who oppose and many who support it. We all want that more serious and in-depth studies be conducted on this subject so that the real situation becomes clearer. But should such a debate become a vilification campaign against the founder of the micro credit movement, and that also in such a

crude fashion? In the decades of the seventies and eighties Bangladesh was known on the global stage through the name of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Whether this government believes it or not, in the present decade Bangladesh is known by Prof. Mohammed Yunus. So when Prof. Yunus is denigrated in front of the world, inevitably Bangladesh is also denigrated in front of the world. Does nobody inside this government recognise this simple truth?

It is discourteous to spit in public. If one has to, it is customary to do so facing the ground. Never should anyone spit upwards. Because inevitably it falls on the face of one who spits. Does this government know that they spitting upwards?

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AMDADUL HUQ/ DRINKNEWS

*Overcrowding, noxious fumes, power shortage, traffic congestion, water scarcity and contamination have all played a part in turning this once charming city into a choking hell now.*

faced proliferation of population, poverty and pollution. At the same time quality of housing, health and living has gone down. Unsurprisingly, Dhaka has again ranked second in the list of the world's most polluted cities, according to a survey by the Economist.

Conscious citizens have time and again voiced their concern about the way urbanisation was taking place, but the wheels of development defied reason and rational consideration. In absence of clear-cut policies, they complained, commercial establishments have mushroomed in residential areas.

Unscrupulous people, allegedly with political backing, have encroached on the rivers, lakes and haors. Shockingly, in spite of the HC directive to clean the Buriganga and Turag, and Tk.21 crore spent for this pur-

bad that hundreds of thousands of people pour into metropolitan cities, especially Dhaka, every day because life on the pavements in the city seems somewhat better to them than that in villages

But as population has swelled in the city, so has there been a surge in crimes because of administrative failure, inaction and lax enforcement of laws. Conscious citizens now say that Dhaka defies conventional notions of urban planning, human behaviour, rationality and environmental awareness. It is becoming an urban jungle where new waves of architecture and lifestyle -- not always pleasing to be sure -- are grotesquely on display today.

Dhaka's crumbling sewer network can hardly cope with the increasing load of sewage generated daily. Often, water pipelines