

# Bangabandhu stands tall like the Himalayas

ABDUL MATIN

**B**ANGABANDHU Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was not born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He struggled hard and made great sacrifices to rise to fame and become the Father of the Nation of the newly created state of Bangladesh in 1971. The story of his life, the triumphs and the tragedies thus intermingle with that of the creation of Bangladesh.

As he grew up from childhood, he saw the tribulations of the poor in rural Bengal, the horror of World War II, the dying faces of millions of Bengalis during the famine of 1943, the sectarian riots in Kolkata and the creation of Pakistan in 1947 with its two parts, East Pakistan (formerly East Bengal) and West Pakistan, 1,200 miles apart and having nothing in common except religion. These events greatly influenced his thoughts and ideas in his early life and inspired him to champion the causes of the ordinary people.

Sheikh Mujib got involved in politics while studying at Islamia College (now Maulana Azad College) in Kolkata. After the partition of India, he came to Dhaka and enrolled as a student of law at the University of Dhaka. He could not complete the course as he was expelled for his support for the strike of class IV employees of the university in 1949. Interestingly enough, the order of expulsion was withdrawn last June, more than six decades later, by the University of Dhaka.

In 1948, Sheikh Mujib founded the Students' League that gave him his first political platform. When the Awami League (AL) was formed by Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani in 1949, he became its joint secretary. Sheikh Mujib took a leading role in the historic language movement. He was put behind the bar several times for his involvement in the language movement and other political activities.

Sheikh Mujib soon came to limelight for his superb oratory and charismatic leadership. In 1953, he became the general secretary of the Awami League. A year later, he was elected a member of the East Bengal Legislative Assembly. He served as a minister of the provincial government of East Bengal twice for brief periods. He was a member of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan from 1955 till 1958 when Ayub Khan imposed martial law and installed himself as the president of Pakistan. Sheikh Mujib was arrested for his opposition to the

military rule. After his release, he supported Fatima Jinnah against Ayub Khan in the presidential election of 1964.

Sheikh Mujib became the president of the Awami League in 1966. Being inspired by Bengali nationalism, he realised that time had come to fight for the political rights and economic emancipation of East Bengal. He put forward his historic 6-point demands in 1966 to make East Bengal a fully autonomous province. His six-point movement was, in reality, the first step in a political process to achieve the independence of East Bengal. Ayub Khan realised this and put him and other AL leaders behind the bar.

Ayub Khan brought charges of sedition against Sheikh Mujib and others in what is known as the Agartala Conspiracy case. During the trial, there was a huge uprising by the people of East Bengal in favour of Sheikh Mujib. Ultimately, he was freed from prison. The people of East Bengal bestowed on him the title of Bangabandhu, the friend of Bengal.

The political upheaval soon engulfed the whole of Pakistan. Ayub Khan was subsequently toppled and replaced by Yahya Khan, another West Pakistani military dictator. Yahya Khan held a general election in 1970 but was shocked by the result. Bangabandhu's Awami League obtained an absolute majority in the Pakistan National Assembly.

Yahya Khan refused to transfer power to Bangabandhu and postponed the first scheduled session of the National Assembly on March 1, 1971. The Bengalis revolted against this postponement. Many Bengalis were killed when Yahya Khan tried to suppress the agitation by force.

Bangabandhu called a public meeting at the Ramna Race Course (now Suhrawardy Uddyan) on March 7, 1971 and declared: "The struggle this time is for our freedom; the struggle this time is for independence. Joy Bangla (Victory to Bangladesh)." Implicitly, it was a declaration of independence. His speech of March 7 was a rare example of superb oratory that transformed a sleeping nation into a fighting force. He called for a peaceful non-cooperation movement. All civilian govern-



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ment offices in Bangladesh started to operate under his instructions. Bangabandhu thus became the de facto ruler of Bangladesh.

Yahya Khan came to Dhaka apparently to negotiate with Bangabandhu. He cooperated with Yahya Khan in order to find a political solution to the crisis. Yahya Khan deceived him and secretly left Dhaka on March 25, allowing the army to crack down on the Bengalis. The Pakistan army soon

started to kill unarmed Bengalis indiscriminately. The Bengalis in the armed forces, police and para-military forces together with civilian volunteers revolted against the Pakistan army.

Bangabandhu was left with only one option. During the early hours of March 26, 1971, he declared the independence of Bangladesh. He was immediately arrested and flown to Pakistan.

The rest of the leaders of the Awami League, including the elected members of the National Assembly and the provincial Legislative Assembly, fled to India and formed the Government of Bangladesh in exile on April 10, 1971. The new government with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as president, Syed Nazrul Islam as acting president in absence of Bangabandhu and Tajuddin Ahmed as prime minister took oath on April 17, 1971 at Mujibnagar in Bangladesh.

Tajuddin Ahmed formed the armed wing of the government in exile, known as the Mukti Bahini (Freedom Fighters). With assistance from the Indian army, they fought a guerilla type war, in the name of Bangabandhu, against the Pakistan army. During the war, three million Bengalis were martyred, two hundred thousand women lost their honour and ten million Bengalis took shelter in India as refugees.

Finally on December 16, 1971, the Pakistan army surrendered to the joint command of the Mukti Bahini and the Indian army. Bangladesh thus emerged as an independent state in less than nine months after the declaration of independence. The government in exile returned to Dhaka and took over the administration of Bangladesh.

Under international pressure, Bangabandhu was released from Pakistani custody. He returned to Bangladesh triumphantly on January 10, 1972. He formed a new government with himself as the prime minister on January 12. He successfully rehabilitated ten million refugees who returned to Bangladesh and re-built the infrastructures damaged during the war.

On Bangabandhu's request, Indira Gandhi withdrew all her armed forces from Bangladesh by March, 1972. The withdrawal of the Indian forces soon after the surrender of the Pakistan army was a triumph for

Bangabandhu's diplomacy and a display of great statesmanship on the part of Indira Gandhi. Bangladesh adopted a new constitution, based on the British parliamentary system of democracy. It came into effect on December 16, 1972, the first anniversary of the Victory Day.

It is the greatest tragedy in our history that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to whom we owe so much for the independence of Bangladesh, was brutally killed along with other members of his family on August 15, 1975. Some misguided army personnel were involved in the gruesome killings.

Bangabandhu had a heart large enough to love and shower affection on all whom he knew. I had the honour of personally knowing Bangabandhu through my brother Abdul Momin, a former minister in Bangabandhu's cabinet. Bangabandhu treated me with extreme kindness and affection every time I met him.

Bangabandhu had great respect for men of letters. I recall with pleasure his visit to my house in Karachi in August, 1969 along with other Awami League leaders. Prof. Abdul Matin Chowdhury, who later became the vice-chancellor of the University of Dhaka, and a few of my friends were present on the occasion. Bangabandhu sat beside Prof. Chowdhury, addressed him as "Sir" and treated him with great respect and courtesy, even though Prof. Chowdhury was not his teacher.

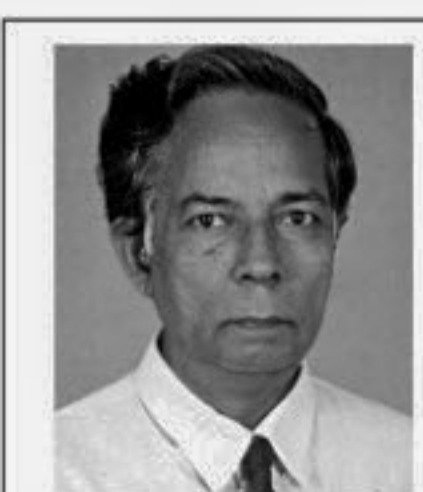
At one stage Bangabandhu came to my bedroom to see my five-month old daughter, Usha. He spent quite some time with her, fondling her and pushing her swing. This is just one example of Bangabandhu's love for children. No wonder Bangabandhu's birthday is celebrated as the National Children's Day in Bangladesh.

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Alive or not, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman indeed stands tall like the Himalayas along with other great world leaders who created history.

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## BITTER TRUTH



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kept track of the toll it has been exacting. Concerned citizens and the media have from time to time raised alarms, but they fell on deaf ears.

The people, of course, could see, smell, feel and sometimes choke on contaminated air and water. There is a seething anger at the poisoning of water and land. Environmentalists have raised public protests and urged the government to enforce laws to curb the soaring level of pollution. The government has directed industries that are polluting the environment, especially rivers, to set up waste or effluent treatment plants (ETP).

The pollution menace has been a long time in the making. So long ecological concerns were shunted aside in the rush toward industrialisation and growth. A survey conducted by the Department of Environment (DoE) found that 14,000 tonnes of solid waste and 16,000 cubic metres of chemical waste are discharged by the industries every year into the rivers of Dhaka and its adjacent areas, while 35,000 cubic metres of waste are discharged into rivers everyday in the country. The biggest environmental hazard perhaps comes from the 200 plus tanneries mainly located in the Hazaribagh area of Dhaka city.

According to the DoE, 20,000 tonnes of tannery waste, including some highly toxic materials, are released into the river Buriganga everyday, along with more than 60,000 cubic metres of toxic waste from

textile dyeing, printing, washing and pharmaceuticals industries. The consequences of this alarming pollution menace are horrifying. The process to fishless lakes and streams, dying forests and barren crop fields has started.

The pollution menace does more than degrade the quality of life, it dramatically cripples and shortens life of human beings. Community health physicians calculate that illnesses traceable to environmental pollution account for more than 30% of the country's health budget. One out of 20 people in the country dies of environmentally induced causes, officials estimate.

The government, overwhelmed by political and economic disarray in consequence of worldwide recession, can scarcely think about the environmental nightmare it has inherited. It might take millions of dollars to clean up the accumulation of industrial pollution. In India more than 10,000 industries nation wide were either shut down or asked to move out of cities, mostly by the courts, whom citizens approached as a last resort.

Respiratory ailments, allergies, skin diseases, diseases of the central nervous system and cancers have increased several times over the last few years in the cities near or around grimy smoke spewing industries. Sadly true, even the government's planners utterly ignored environmental concerns, so to say. People now realise that irrational industrial policies adopted in the past years made a mockery of environmental requirements.

The government policy of industrialisation vis-à-vis development of the country right from the Pakistani days is responsible for today's problem of chronic pollution. Tejaon industrial area was created right in

the heart of the city's residential areas and regulatory authorities did not stop the growth of industrial units in other densely populated areas. In consequence, we see growth of scores of many small scale industries all over Dhaka, even in Uttara, Banani, Gulshan and Dhanmondi.

The setting up of chlorine based industries, many of them in residential areas, has alarming consequences. Organochlorines are particularly damaging because they travel through the food chain and affect the liver and kidney, and may cause cancer and interfere with processes like brain chemistry. Treated effluent water containing organochlorines is widely used to irrigate crop fields.

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The pulp and paper industry has failed to invest in chlorine reducing technologies. The PVC industry plans to deal with the crisis primarily by promoting recycling. But that only converts plastics into more other plastics, ending in the ubiquitous multi-coloured polythene bags.

In the drive conducted by DoE in and around water bodies adjacent to a good number of polluting industries near Ashulia, it was revealed that the dissolved oxygen was just 0.16 mg per litre in place of the minimum required limit of 4.5 mg per litre. Industries contribute to more than half of the poisons that pour into the country's water systems, resulting in stretches of rivers devoid of life. A World Bank study said that four major rivers Buriganga,

Shitalakhya, Turag and Balureceive 1.5 million cubic metres of waste every day from 7,000 industrial units surrounding Dhaka and Narayanganj.

Why can't industry clean up the muck that engulfs us and other species? Why can't pollution be stopped before it begins? It can be. But it costs a good deal of investment, and most industries are loath to part with that money unless forced to.

Encouragingly, the drive conducted in many districts by Mr. Md. Munir Chowdhury, Director (Enforcement) Department of Environment, closed down 43 polluting industries and 17 brick kilns, along with realisation of fines, for their failure to set up ETPs jolted the industry owners and made them aware of the pollution control regulations that they have been violating since those industries were set up.

The country needs a lot more crusaders like Munir Chowdhury to clean up the environmental mess created by the recalcitrant industry owners. Green laws are ignored until the judiciary and government force compliance. Treatment plants are often shut down to save money and waste is blatantly dumped in residential areas with no regard for local people.

The government encouraged industries in the hinterlands without bothering to see if the land and water could bear the pollution load. Industries discharge their wastes at night, and because of such indiscreet action industrial hubs like Tejaon, Narayanganj, Savar and Ashulia have turned into disaster zones. In most areas of the country industrial zoning is still a long way off. When zoning was set up in some areas, it was with myopic government vision. The location of industries has little

to do with the load which the land and water can bear.

It appears that the regulatory agency, the Pollution Control Board (PCB) of DoE, is woefully ill-equipped to fight pollution. Moreover, they are not involved in the making of industrial policy, and are both numerically and technically unable to enforce the laws against pollution.

Experts now recognise that policing is not the solution. What is needed immediately is to ensure that environmental protection agency is set up; local communities are given access to industrial development plans and the concept of pollution control changes to profitable waste recovery during production. The pollution control boards must be armed with powers to control the location of industries, and prescribe clean technologies and a time frame.

Most importantly, we must seek the opinion of local communities who must know what kind of industries are coming to their areas. The blatant violation of pollution laws to the detriment of the local communities has had untoward impacts, which must be taken into consideration while selecting sites for such industries. However things are not easy for the small-scale sector. They simply don't have the expertise to wade through environmental regulation. Small-scale industries cannot be allowed to enter certain fields like chemicals.

The High Court directive to shift the Hazaribagh tannery industries without further delay, if complied with, will go a long way in reducing the pollution burden. At the same time, there must be proper laws regulating the location of industries and deterrent punitive measures that would force the polluting units into compliance.

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