

# The resolve of 15<sup>th</sup> August

Rise above divisive tendencies and build a prosperous nation

THIRTY-SEVEN years ago we lost the man to whom we owe so much as an independent nation. Even from his confinement in Pakistani jail, Bangabandhu's sway on the Bengali people remained as overwhelming as ever that guided them and the freedom fighters to wrest independence from the clutches of the Pakistani junta.

But there were enemies of the Bengalee people, who could never accept our separate nationhood. They could not put up either with Bangabandhu's towering personality and his undisputed leadership over the people. They never stopped their sinister designs to deprive the Bengalees of their leader, the very well-spring they derived their strength and energy from. So darkness fell on the fateful night of August 15, 1975 when they took their revenge by assassinating Bangabandhu along with majority members of his family and many of his close, life-long comrades in politics.

The sole aim of his assassins was to make the nation leaderless. It cannot be denied that they succeeded partially. The trail of blood that his murder left in its wake did not dry off so soon. The enemies of the people had their day and soon set to work to divide the people and play one group against another. Bloody revolts in the armed forces continued and one military dictator after another usurped state power.

The nation is still reeling from the shock of the unexpected end of Bangabandhu's life. But in the main, the killers have been meted out the punishment they deserved. Now the process remains to be closed with bringing the fugitives to trial.

The dream of building an exploitation-free, democratic and egalitarian society that he had infused among the Bengalee people is yet to be fulfilled. And that is where the struggle lies now.

True, Bangabandhu is not physically present amongst us. Yet his presence is felt every moment in the very fact that we are a free and independent people.

So, the only way to show real respect to his memory is through strengthening the institutions of democracy and working hard to realise the dream of a strong and prosperous Bangladesh.

## Reconsider option for admission test

### Manipulation in admission feared

THE Health and Family Welfare ministry in a decision taken on August 13 declared that no admission tests will be held for public and private medical colleges. Instead, this year's admission will be based on the basis of CGPA results. Such a radical decision has given rise to much contention among the tens of thousands of aspirants hoping to enroll in the medical colleges.

The sheer number of candidates having attained large numbers of CGPA 5 has brought to fore the credibility of the grading system which is yet to be fully established. With large numbers having gotten CGPA 5, precisely how the authorities will sift through deserving candidates is a very valid question, especially in light of the fact that medical college seats are very limited. The combined results of SSC and HSC examinations cannot be the only parameter for admission given the wide discrepancy in standards of education across the seven boards. Moreover, CGPA is a method of classification and not marking, so, by overlooking the marking system altogether there is no way to select the best performing students under the new system.

It is estimated that as many as 30,000 students attained GPA 5.0 HSC this year and based on last year's data, some 70,000 candidates may take part in the admission examinations to be held in the 22 government medical colleges for 2,811 seats and 53 private medical colleges that can accommodate a further 4,245 candidates. Furthermore, there are another 1,437 seats available in the 23 public and private medical and dental colleges. This translates into approximately 1 in 8 candidates getting admission and opens up the possibility of both corruption and manipulation on a grand scale.

We therefore strongly urge the ministry to reconsider its decision not to base enrolment on the basis of CGPA gradation alone. A fair system would be to base admission on a mix of both the criteria of CGPA gradation as well as marks obtained in admission test.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

August 15

**1947**  
India gains Independence from the British Indian Empire and joins the Commonwealth of Nations.

**1971**  
Bahrain gains independence from the United Kingdom.

**1975**  
Bangladesh's founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is killed along with most members of his family during a military coup. A group of junior army officers invaded the presidential residence with tanks and killed Mujib, his family and personal staff. Only his daughters Sheikh Hasina Wajed and Sheikh Rehana, who were visiting West Germany, escaped. They were banned from returning to Bangladesh. The coup was planned by disgruntled Awami League colleagues and military officers, which included Mujib's colleague and former confidant Khondaker Mostaq Ahmad, who became his immediate successor.

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## GROUND REALITIES



SOMETIME in the later part of the 1950s, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, then a young, rising politician, threw a question at a rather drowsy Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. Was it not possible, he asked Pakistan's prime minister, for East Pakistan to become independent someday? The question startled Suhrawardy wide awake. In a state of disbelief, the prime minister (he was in office only a year) admonished Mujib. Do not ever entertain such thoughts, he told his protégé. Pakistan had been achieved at a huge cost and its unity needed to be preserved. Mujib murmured, almost muttered: "We'll do our job when the time comes."

It was this spontaneity resting on decisiveness that sustained Bangabandhu in his political career. The trajectory he followed was clearly defined. There was no grey region in his politics, nothing to suggest that, like so many others before or during his time, he was ready to do flip flops. Never a fence-sitter, his overriding goal was ensuring the welfare of his Bengalis. His enthusiasm for Pakistan, a state for whose creation he had struggled mightily in his youth as a follower of the All-India Muslim League, had clearly begun to wane within months of its emergence. And by the time Ayub Khan clamped martial law on the country in October 1958, Mujib did not have any illusions about the future. Bengalis, he knew, had to find their own way to salvation.

Bangabandhu's thoughts were as robust as his persona. Arriving in Rawalpindi a couple of days after the withdrawal of the Agartala conspiracy case in February 1969, he was intrigued by the warmth in which he was welcomed in West Pakistan. He quipped, about himself: "Yesterday a traitor, today a hero." It was in that heroic mould that he met Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan, his tormentor for years. When the dictator, by then a lion in extreme senility, offered Mujib the prime ministership of Pakistan, the Bengali leader prudently spurned it. The back door was not for him. It was Bangladesh where his heart and mind lay embedded. Indeed, he took the first step toward restoring their land to the Bengalis when he told a memorial meeting on Suhrawardy's death anniversary in December 1969 that East Pakistan

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HE is the Father of the Nation. Let us not split hairs over this; as it is, the nation is dreadfully divided along entrenched lines, some so banal as to defy credulity in right-thinking persons. And a nation divided against itself cannot stand as a strong entity, with the attendant debilitating effects on its political and economic development. Not giving a person his/her proper due or proper place in history, or, on the flip side, giving overblown, or even non-existent, credit to a person are symptomatic of this malaise.

History, especially as events recede further in time, has a relentless way of passing neutral judgment, of revisiting an event if the unearthing of new information warrants it, and of evaluating and re-evaluating conclusions and estimations, but, ultimately, the truth will be revealed. People writing on and interpreting current history while giving little thought to objectivity are just being myopic; if they gain great satisfaction at misrepresenting facts in their writings, then they can rest assured that history will reveal the truth, and their writings and conclusions will be consigned to the dustbin of history.

So, let us not quibble about Bangabandhu's crowning achievement of being the galvanising force behind, and the leader of, the nationalistic feelings of the Bengalis of East

would henceforth be known as Bangladesh. His reasoning was unsailable: if Sind, Punjab, Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province could keep their old names, why not Bangladesh?

There was the indomitable about Bangabandhu. The state was never able to make him bite the dust. He kept going to prison, coming out of it briefly and then going back in. Following his release in 1969, he publicly demanded that Ayub Khan take



his "patway" Monem Khan out of the governor's office. During the election campaign in 1970, a time when almost every politician in both wings of Pakistan appeared to be directing their spears and arrows at the Awami League and its Six Points and spreading innuendo against Mujib, the Bengali leader told them in no uncertain terms: "If you can't speak the truth, don't tell a lie." Indeed, lies he abhorred, so much so that when the Indian journalist Kuldip Nayar narrated to him in 1972 Bhutto's version of the meeting between the two leaders after Pakistan's battlefield defeat in December 1971, Mujib's response was that Bhutto was a congenital liar. Bangabandhu remembered faces

and did not forget names. He and the late Indian journalist Nikhil Chakravarty knew each other in the 1940s. When partition came, they went their separate ways. In January 1972, however, Chakravarty was in Dhaka to cover Bangabandhu's maiden news conference as Bangladesh's prime minister. Chakravarty sat right at the end of the hall. Bangladesh's leader walked into the hall, greeted everyone with his customary smile and suddenly

spotted his old friend. They had not met after 1947, but the Father of the Nation had no difficulty recognising Chakravarty. *Tui Nikhil na* (aren't you Nikhil)? He asked. Chakravarty was overwhelmed.

In 1973, a young parliamentarian was busy delivering a rousing speech on the national budget in the Jatiyo Sangsad. As he spoke, Bangabandhu entered the chamber and took his seat. His arrival prompted a sudden change, tonally and thematically, in the young lawmaker's speech. He moved away from the budget and went headlong into a profusion of praise for Bangabandhu's leadership. Mujib stared at him, but the lawmaker showed little sign of stopping. Finally,

Bangabandhu intervened. *Ebar thaam* (finish it now). Like a punctured balloon, the young man sat down.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman could be harsh when the times demanded firmness from him. When Saudi Arabia's King Faisal griped that Bangladesh's emergence had weakened Pakistan and indeed Islam, the Bengali leader asked him, with few of diplomatic niceties coming in, where Saudi Arabia had been when Islamic Pakistan's soldiers went on a rampage raping tens of thousands of Bengali women and murdering Bengalis by the millions. That put Faisal in his place. In much the same way, when Nigeria's Yakubu Gowon asked Bangabandhu if Pakistan could not have been a powerful Muslim state had Bangladesh not broken away, Mujib's answer silenced him: "Pakistan would indeed be strong if it had stayed united; likewise India would have been stronger had partition not happened; indeed Asia would be a power if it had not been fragmented into so many diverse states. But, Excellency, do we always get what we want out of life?" Gowon said not a word.

Bangabandhu had a sure sense of destiny. When a foreign newsman asked him, at the height of the Agartala trial, what he thought his fate would be, his answer was emphatic. "You know," he told the journalist, "they can't keep me here for more than six months." He turned out to be almost right. He was freed seven months into the trial. After he was arrested by the Pakistan army on the night of March 25-26, 1971, an officer asked Tikka Khan over walkie talkie if he wanted the prisoner brought to him. Tikka Khan answered in disdain, "I don't want to see his face." Three years later, on February 23, 1974, Tikka Khan, as Pakistan's army chief, saluted Bangabandhu at Lahore airport when Bangladesh's founder arrived to attend the Islamic conference. Mujib smiled meaningfully, said "Hello, Tikka," and moved on.

Bangabandhu was a natural. His conversations were regular sessions in spontaneity. He identified as easily with a peasant or rickshaw-puller as he did with a political leader or academic or visiting statesman. His laughter was loud, came from deep within. His presence filled the room.

The scholar Khan Sarwar Murshid once asked the French philosopher Andre Malraux if he thought Mujib could lead Bangladesh to progress. Malraux said yes, and then qualified his answer: "If you don't kill him."

We killed him. And we go on paying the price for that gigantic sin.

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# Bangabandhu's legacy

Pakistan towards an aspiration for a sovereign independent nation-state of Bangladesh. These attributes alone qualify him to be anointed with the title of "Father of the Nation," but there are other tangible and intangible factors that reinforce that claim. He was instrumental, and even his detractors cannot rationally contradict it, in identifying the nationalist movement with the concerns of the masses. And he was successful in maintaining more than a semblance of unity between the moderate constitutionalists and the revolutionaries of the Awami League, whose indisputable leader he was. The two factions clearly existed within the party and, almost immediately after independence the split became apparent, with dire consequences for the new country's political, economic, and social framework, an outcome that contributed significantly to the killings of August 15, 1975.

Bangabandhu, judging from all that I have read on political history, was a moderate constitutionalist. In fact, David Loshak in *Pakistan Crisis* (1971) believes, and other scholars have come to the same conclusion, that he was "always the most moderate in his party." This might come as a surprise to all those who have viewed him as only a demagogue and rabble-rouser, but history will surely reinforce the assessment that he was a moderate constitutionalist. He was a spellbind-

ing and forceful orator, very charismatic, and, banking on these two characteristics, he was able to create national self-awareness among the Bengalis. Ekushey February 1952 had sown the seeds of Bengali nationalism, but Bangabandhu was the catalyst behind its acceleration leading to its climax.

It was as if the constitutionalist Mujib was forced by circumstances and the goading of the radical wing of his party into becoming at least the symbol of revolution, if not quite a revolutionary in the mould of Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, Ernesto Che Guevara, et al. Though the West Pakistanis used to vilify him as a fifth columnist out to break up Pakistan, Mujib was a moderate constitutionalist.

That was probably the tragic flaw in Bangabandhu: after independence, he could not synthesise his innate penchant for constitutional politics with the forces of radicalism, anarchy, and agitation-propaganda that were let loose on the country almost as soon as the ink of Lt. Gen. A.A.K. Niazi's surrender to Lt. Gen. Jagjit Singh Aurora had dried. All of that came later, when Bangabandhu took over the reins of a country whose citizens were no longer focused on facing a common enemy, and were now split into entities looking inward, many not sure what to do after waking up from the euphoria of having gained inde-

pendence, in the process rushing the country headlong into chaos, anarchy, and the challenges of intense poverty and unemployment that were exacerbated by rampant corruption. History will judge, and has already started evaluating him dispassionately, but the one thing it will maintain as a refrain, I dare say, is that the republic would not have merged without his leadership down the years, that, in fact, he is the father of the nation-state of Bangladesh.

Bangabandhu's death consigned the country and its citizenry to years of political turmoil. Coups, counter-coups, and political assassinations became a part of national life, even the psyche of a section of the population, the culture of rampant corruption has been institutionalised, political culture has become abysmal as the political institutions, existing in the constitution, have been debased in usage, and the constitution itself has undergone a succession of changes to suit individual and/or ruling party whims. The stark reality is that currently there is no political figure who can rise above petty partisan politics, and unify the majority of the people. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had that stature. And because he had it, Bangladesh came into being. That is his legacy.

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