

EDITOR'S
NOTE

There are certain days in a nation's history that are celebrated with mixed emotions. In fact, in the annals of Bangladesh, there are more such days than those that we celebrate with unbound happiness. 16th of December is a day which returns every year with as much joy as pain. The pain would perhaps be slightly less this year because, with the execution of Quader Mollah, at least one of the Pakistani collaborators has been brought to justice after 42 years.

Our joy of freedom is mixed with grief. We recall sadness the thousands of freedom fighters who lost their lives in the field of battle between 25th March and 16 December 1971, and the millions that were killed by a rapacious and pillaging army that did not spare even women and children.

This is a day to pay homage to the martyrs, to the many

unknown and unrecognized men and women who laid down their lives to see the end of oppression and neglect, to allow the people of the country to be the masters of their destiny, to be the captain of their own ship. Thus we ask, if freedom is nothing but a chance to be better, are we better now than we were 42 years ago. Certainly, there are many achievements that we can be proud of, and there are many aspects that we could have done better in.

While we remember the martyrs, we also remember the person who inspired us to resist the Pakistani occupation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and also those that provided leadership to the nation during the nine-month long War of Liberation.

We also recall with gratitude the unstinted support of the people of India to our cause, and the sacrifice of the

Indian military which fought shoulder to shoulder with the Mukti Bahini to free our land.

We celebrate this day amidst an environment of uncertainty as to what the political denouement would be. There has been unnecessary bloodshed resulting from political violence and the people are hoping that they impasse would be addressed for the sake of the country. Notwithstanding political differences, it is imperative that on this Victory Day we resolve to work together for the country cutting across party lines so that the blood of the martyrs will not have been in vain.

Like in the past we bring our readers a mixed bag of articles -- from personal reflections to personal experiences to analysis of topical issues. We trust our readers will enjoy the special supplement.

42 years of Independence:
Reflections of a freedom fighter

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AT times it may be necessary to bury the past. Things change their meanings and justifications with the passage of time. But the past is never dead, it is not even past for some events, happenings, occurrences. The 16th day of December is such a date for the Bengalis of Bangladesh when we had won ultimate victory in our national liberation war in 1971. December is the month of final victory. Hence it is an occasion for great rejoicings and celebrations. On the other hand, this is also the month of wanton murders of our intellectuals, innocent citizens, children and women. For the families of 3 million martyrs of the war December is a month of sorrow, pain, cries and whimper, of hopelessness for their near and dear ones will never come back. It is also a month to renew our pledges and determinations to protect the hard earned independence. We reflect on our achievements and failures. The spirit of the liberation war or Mukti Juddho (liberation war), its philosophy, strength, driving force and the charismatic leadership of the father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his courage and sacrifice all get fully revived to inspire the nation on a sustained basis in the month of December. Hence it is a month of great mixed feelings and emotions which are not easy to describe.

Bangladesh has had many achievements since it won independence. It has come to be known to the world as a nation of hard working, resilient and innovative people who can produce miracles given an opportunity. On the 16th of December, 1971, Bangladesh was a rubble of devastation and destruction. Its physical, economic and social infrastructures were in shambles having been destroyed by the retreating occupation forces of Pakistan. The treasury was virtually empty, the warehouses and silos were empty and because of a protracted war of nine months the arable lands were empty too. All we had was a vast landmass of cries and lamentation, blood, sweat and tears. It is indeed amazing as to how quickly all this was changed by the people of Bangladesh under the leadership of Bangabandhu who returned in our midst on the 10th of January from a Pakistani prison where he was kept in confinement for the entire nine months of the war. I still remember vividly the unforgettable scenes of his homecoming. The area from Tejgaon airport to the river's end in Sadarghat was one solid mass of human beings numbering

maybe 10 million. They were crying, laughing, hugging one other, uttering words which had no real meaning. I had never seen such an ocean of human beings. It was the most amazing experience of my life. I was in a helicopter, which I had borrowed from the International Red Cross office in Chittagong, where I was Deputy Commissioner or district officer. History was being made on that afternoon in the once sleepy little district town of Dhaka! I did not want to miss that moment. In my humble view that was one of the most memorable events of independent Bangladesh--- the homecoming of our great leader, the dreamer, philosopher, architect and the father of Bangladesh. This event must go down in history as one of the great moments of truth. Bangabandhu was back in his independent home, Sonar Bangla!

The next events were the speedy relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction of buildings, bridges, culverts, infrastructures, etc. The speed was breathtaking. People were working on all seven days of the week. There was no law and order problem. 10 million refugees who were forced to take shelter in India during the war had all come back and were rehabilitated. No land disputes, no fighting, no thefts of left over belongings. The silver touch of freedom had transformed us from clay into pure gold.

The port of Chittagong was totally out of commission with mines and destroyed ships making navigation not only hazardous but extremely dangerous and impossible. According to experts' estimates it would take US \$ 2 billion to salvage and restore the port. We did not even have \$500 million as reserves at that time. Who would pay? At Bangabandhu's special request the then Soviet Union which had helped our cause in a huge manner during the war agreed to do the salvage work. A fleet of 128 ships under Admiral Zoenko came to Chittagong and did the job almost flawlessly in two years. This was a mega event and a mega accomplishment. As the economy was recovering and posting healthy growth around 1974 the world economic situation changed dramatically with the first oil shock and the commodity crisis leading to the deepest recession since 1933. The war ravaged economy of Bangladesh bore the full brunt of this severe economic meltdown. The propaganda machinery of the collaborators of Pakistan forces, the Razakars and the world outside created much difficulty for

the government. Finally came the darkest hour in our nation- the 15th of August 1975 when Bangabandhu along with nearly all the members of his immediate family was assassinated by the military in a dastardly coup which literally changed the course of history of Bangladesh for the next 25 years or so.

Awami League tried to regroup and consolidate her hold under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina who came back from years of exile in 1981. There was another military takeover by General Ershad in 1982. The struggle for democracy, freedom, human rights, and empowerment continued to be led by Awami League and some civil rights groups. In 1991, the military rule ended and there was a sort of elected government in place under the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). In the elections of 1996, Awami League won, after 21 years' of constitutional struggle and movements, and formed the government. Many socio-economic reforms programmes were undertaken by this government to raise the growth rate, remove poverty, eradicate injustice and inequality and empower the disadvantaged classes of the citizens. This was a benign and welfare focused approach. Growth touched 6% and there were significant achievements in education, energy, communications, infrastructures, social welfare, and foreign policy. From an international basket case, as christened by Henry Kissinger in 1971, Bangladesh became a virtual leader of the third world in regional and global arena, under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina, the prime minister. She won many international awards including the UNESCO and Gandhi peace awards for her leadership role in restoration of democracy, and for promotion of peace, gender equity, human development, livelihood and employment generation, and poverty amelioration.

The period 2001-2008 was marked by instability, unconstitutional governance, economic & social regression and secular stagnation. This I reckon as a very dark period in our national life. Religious bigotry, terrorism, violence were on the rise and there was very little countervailing force to combat them. Bangladesh became a corridor for illegal arms trafficking and other illegal activities. Awami League and its leaders were persecuted with a rare and previously unknown venom and many of them including the leader Sheikh Hasina were incarcerated and put on trial on false, concocted and politically motivated charges. The country

continued to be governed by an unelected government.

The rest of our recent history is known, for they are of very recent origin. What I have scribbled so far are rambling thoughts of a freedom fighter who at times got lost and failed to understand many of the things that did happen in Bangladesh after 1975. I feel that one dastardly and most cowardly event distorted our glorious history, our valour, courage, determination and resolve as a people of exceptional talent and imagination. Our creativity and innovativeness were impaired and many of our best sons perished like in 1971. Alienation is a medium to long term phenomenon. It does not happen overnight. Many of my freedom fighter friends never came back to Bangladesh after 1975. They felt that all the principles and values of the liberation war and our fight for freedom, dignity and honour were lost. But I am an eternal optimist and so I kept on coming back to Bangladesh and now I can breathe the free air and listen to the nostalgic music of Bangladesh and watch the forces of life exert themselves in what many had abandoned as a lost case, a basket case a never never land. But I say "never say never". A nation which was born in blood, sweat and tears cannot lose. The sacrifice of so many millions cannot go in vain. 16th of December our glorious victory day is a standing reminder of that. Bangladesh is now among the emerging markets, it is going to be in the set of next 11 countries to reckon with after the BRICS. It is one of the most convenient FDI destinations according to the World Bank. It has a vibrant civil society, complete press freedom and right of access to all public goods and services. Bangladesh is the largest contributor of troops to UN peacekeeping forces. It is the leader of the least developed countries network. It is the third largest exporter of readymade garments in the world. Its per capita income is Tk.1044 and growth rate 6%. This can easily go up to 8% with a little more effort.

We stand tall now under a democratically elected government with history's most massive mandate. We can only march ahead and move on. Bangladesh is there to prosper and live forever. 16th of December and the memory of the father of Bangladesh Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman are immortal and indestructible.

Bangladesh---- forever.

The writer is a freedom fighter. He worked as a zonal administrative officer in the Mujibnagar government (1971), has served as a personal assistant to

