

NATIONAL MOURNING DAY

BANGABANDHU

'... If you don't kill him', said Malraux

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

SOMETIME in 1957, 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 to be 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."

That objective was to remain uppermost in his thoughts. Fired by the idea of Bengali freedom, he crossed over into Agartala in 1962, came in touch with some Indian officials and through them sent out the word that he wished to see Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in Delhi. His goal was simple: he wanted Nehru's help in leading East Pakistan to freedom. In the event, Nehru declined to meet Mujib. The idea of freedom for Bengalis, the Indian leader thought, was premature. Mujib returned home, a trifle disappointed. His determination to lead Bangladesh to liberty was not to be lost sight of, though.

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 amused 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 Bengali political tradition when he told a memorial meeting on Suhrawardy's death anniversary in December

1969 that East Pakistan 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 subdue him. 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 'patwary' 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.

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 wireless if he wanted the prisoner brought to him. Tikka Khan answered in contempt: "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. We are all sinners.

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I remember the day

NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE

DOES anyone need to remember the sun, the moon, the Himalayas or, for that matter, the primordial oceans? Does anyone need to put in conscious efforts to remember the air that one inhales, the heartbeat that goes on unceasingly till death?

They are all there, always there, absolutely inseparable from one's life, one's surroundings and one's existence as an entity governed by one's conscience. We do not need to remember Bangabandhu the way we need to remember our mundane jobs because remembering is linked to forgetting that which is to be recollected only at some time or other. The phenomenon that is Bangabandhu is never a matter of forgetting even in the minimal which is tantamount to forgetting one's own identity in a green, riverine expanse of promising alluvial soil. Therefore, the rationale is since we do not, we cannot forget Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the question of remembering him consciously cannot arise at all because he is enmeshed with every breath of our life, merged with every bit of our sensibilities, and, therefore, he is not for us to be remembered on some days only. He is all around us and certainly with us, his own people. There has been no separation, no rift in this respect in spite of the willful determination of some conspirators for decades. The sun sets for a while only to rise in its full radiance and glory for all days to come. It does not set forever. Short sighted, ill-motivated people hardly realise this.

But I remember this day when early in the morning on BBC television we heard the news of his killing by some indoctrinated conspira-

tors who, immersed in their self-righteous way and unable to face him with moral principles, summoned up their cowardice to bring an end to his mortal life. Of course, my first reaction was feeling an ocean of grief. Nevertheless, I felt a strange kind of boldness in spirit inside me that told me that as earthly life is ephemeral for everybody so is an impulsive act of some wild marauders. And my intuition told me that was not going to be the end-all.

Next we called up Major Mustafizur Rahman, who later became army chief of staff and was then undergoing higher training at a military academy in Chatham, Kent, the hometown of the outstanding writer Charles Dickens, and drove to his place from Gravesend, Kent, where we lived. We met with his wailing wife, a first cousin of Bangabandhu. There was nothing we could offer her as solace. An avalanche of grief surrounded all of us, all Bengalis, one that knew no bounds.

For days together, I carried out household chores mechanically, managing to remain calm and be the same sincere teacher in a primary junior school in Dartford bordering Essex County. A grief that is your own may make others bored after a while. So the thought that the 'poet of politics' was no more could not be shared much with others at the workplace.

News and commentary went on BBC every now and then, narrating the gruesome story and at the same time covering the outbursts of some 'disgruntled' persons telling reporters about their 'grievances' that seemed to have been removed by the killing of Bangabandhu. Some of their gleeful assertions only exposed their crooked minds, a scene comparable to the jubilation of some Bengalis of East Pakistan in

London on hearing the news of Jawaharlal Nehru's death in 1964 and that I witnessed from the window of our room facing the street at Kensington Garden Square. Vandalising and ransacking our High Commission premises, pulling down Bangabandhu's portraits and stepping on them were some of the ugly spectacles that we watched in shame and sorrow. My conscience told me that those who had planted their feet on the portraits certainly had no right to put their feet on the soil of Bangladesh.

Several phone calls came in for days together that spoke of two distinctive groups of people diametrically opposite to each other in mindset and who naturally could not see eye to eye. After a couple of days, I called up the residence of our High Commissioner, His Excellency Syed Abdus Sultan, owing to an irresistible desire to talk to Kulsum Apa, the High Commissioner's wife who had been my colleague at the Teachers' Training College for Women in Mymensingh. Syed Abdus Sultan himself answered the phone saying that she was busy otherwise and so could not be reached. He sounded distraught. The rest was understood.

An episode ends, carnage ends, but its legacy does not. Those who are blinded by their self-grown reasons rush into violence that gratifies only them. They eventually get lost in the dark alleys of life. Our Bangabandhu could not be pushed back into oblivion, and how could he? One should read and re-read those two famous lines in the poem by the great scholar poet Annada Shankar Roy to get an answer.

The writer is an educationist.

August 15:
Bangabandhu's
daughters

NAUMAN RASHEED CHOWDHURY

BANGABANDHU and most of his family were assassinated at about 04:45 Dhaka time (00:45 German as well as Yugoslav time) on Friday August 15, 1975. The news was muddled for quite some time and Ambassador Humayun Rashid Chowdhury first heard of the coup at about 03:30 (German time) from a telephone call curiously from an extraordinary 65-year old German journalist, Gisela Bonn. This was confirmed by other calls coming in from various Bangladesh Embassies in Europe in the subsequent hours. The last call was at 06:00 from the Late Sanaul Haq, Bangladesh Ambassador to Belgium in whose house Sheikh Hasina, her family and Sheikh Rehana were guests.

On hearing of Bangabandhu's death, Sanaul Haq asked his guests to leave immediately, (which in retrospect was most uncharitable and ignominious) and would Humayun Rashid Chowdhury take them. After some reflection, he agreed and asked that Sanaul Haq provide transport to bring them from Bruxelles as the Bonn Embassy would be short of transport because he had to go to Frankfurt to receive the Foreign Minister, Dr. Kamal Hossain who would be transiting on his way from Belgrade to Turkey. However, Sanaul Haq refused this as well. Finally, it was agreed that Sheikh Hasina and all her family would travel from Bruxelles to Aachen on the German-Belgium border and Ambassador Chowdhury would send two cars to Aachen to bring Sheikh Hasina and family to his residence in Königswinter (a village very close to Bonn).

The order of events as mentioned in Dr. Wajid Miah's book (quoted by Mizanur Rahman Khan in his May 24 article in Prothom Alo) is very accurate. Sheikh Hasina and family left Bruxelles for Aachen at 10:30 local time. They were picked up at Aachen at around 13:00 and they arrived in Königswinter at 16:30 on August 15, 1975.

Quite coincidentally, at about 12:00 on August 15, 1975, Dr. Kamal Hossain and the late Ambassador Rezaul Karim arrived as per schedule from Belgrade in transit to Turkey where they were to attend another function before returning to Dhaka. Dr. Kamal Hossain had heard of the coup just before leaving Belgrade and was not sure who had been murdered and who had survived (actually, no one outside Dhaka -- and very few inside -- was certain at that exact time).

Dr. Kamal Hossain decided at Frankfurt airport that his trip to Turkey was meaningless under the circumstances and that he would proceed instead to London with Rezaul Karim. As citizens of a Commonwealth country, no visa was required for travel to the UK for Bangladeshis in 1975. Tickets for travel from Frankfurt to London were bought but a problem occurred in confirming the flights. No seats on any flights were available until early next morning (August 16). Thus, they would have to spend one night in Germany. Ambassador Chowdhury invited them to stay at his house in Königswinter, which they accepted. German visas were quickly issued for a short stay. It was only at this stage in Frankfurt, that Dr. Kamal Hossain learned that Bangabandhu's daughters would also be staying in Königswinter. Indeed, both Dr. Kamal Hossain and Sheikh Hasina and family arrived at Königswinter within half an hour of each other.

Indeed, both daughters were extremely distraught and had to be comforted. Somehow the question of a press conference arose. Ambassador Chowdhury contacted Gisela Bonn who said that she would set it up and that indeed the press wanted to speak to him because a rumour was spreading in Bonn that the two daughters of Sheikh Mujib were being held against their wishes in Königswinter. Sometime in the evening of August 15, some members from Deutsche Welle, the German Broadcasting Authority and reporters from Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and Die Welt visited the house in Königswinter but they could get comments from no one except from Ambassador Chowdhury. Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana were too distraught. Dr. Kamal Hossain refused to talk or meet with the reporters.

Eventually, Sheikh Rehana was persuaded to come down and confirm that they were not being held against their will. This was aired on the West German radio on August 16 and in the newspapers either on the next day (Saturday August 16 or on Monday August 18, 1975. Please note that Saturday August 16 and Sunday August 17 were the weekend in West Germany. The archives of Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung or Deutsche Welle (DW) on either August 16 or August 18 can be checked for confirmation).

Dr. Kamal Hossain and Ambassador Rezaul Karim left the next morning (August 16) for London. Now the question of guaranteeing the safety Sheikh Hasina and her family arose. They obviously could not return to Bangladesh. Thus, asylum somewhere was necessary. Naturally, Humayun Rashid Chowdhury being the Ambassador to West Germany as well as Austria would try for asylum in West Germany and Austria. But asylums take a long time to be processed in most countries. It can be fast-tracked if someone influential gets involved but even that takes some weeks. It can be processed in a matter of days only if so desired by head of government and usually only if the asylum seeker is a public figure. Note that until August 15, 1975, although Bangabandhu was an international figure, Sheikh Hasina, Sheikh Rehana and Dr. Wajid Miah were mere family members. Presumably, this is why the obscure Yugoslav offer of asylum, if such offer was indeed made, was not heard of before Sheikh Hasina and her family had left Germany for India.

Again the extraordinary Gisela Bonn, who knew everybody who was anybody in Bonn, and apparently in Vienna and Berne too, was contacted to assist. But nothing moved very fast.

As almost an afterthought, the question of asylum in India arose. At a diplomatic function in Bonn, Ambassador Chowdhury asked the Indian Ambassador to West Germany, a very suave but elderly Mr. Puri, if India would provide asylum to Sheikh Hasina and her family. Mr. Puri said that he would find out.

The next day he met with Ambassador Chowdhury in his office and said that he (Mr. Puri) would have to go through his Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi and the asylum process would be long. He came up with the idea that Ambassador Chowdhury had previously built up quite a reputation in New Delhi when he was the Chief of the Bangladesh Mission in New Delhi before independence and a few months thereafter. He (Ambassador Chowdhury) was liked by the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi and her powerful advisors D.P. Dhar and P.N. Haksar. So in Puri's presence, Humayun Rashid Chowdhury booked a call to D.P. Dhar and P.N. Haksar (phone numbers provided by Ambassador Puri) but both were out of the country. He hesitated to call Mrs. Gandhi because of the difference in their status, she being the Prime Minister of India and he a mere Ambassador of Bangladesh. He indeed had met many times with Mrs. Gandhi in 1971 and in early 1972 but had no contact since. Three years is a long time in politics. Moreover, Mrs. Gandhi had a few problems of her own. Her infamous Emergency Rule of 1975-1977 in India had started only two months earlier.

But nothing was moving with any other country. So on August 18, he put in a call from the Königswinter residence to Mrs. Indira Gandhi's office in New Delhi, not expecting to get beyond the Indian telephone operator. He was immensely surprised when Mrs. Gandhi actually received the call. He explained the predicament of Bangabandhu's daughters and Mrs. Gandhi immediately agreed to offer them asylum in India and make the necessary arrangements as soon as possible.

The Indian Ambassador, Mr. Puri, called Ambassador Chowdhury on August 19 to say that he had received instructions from his Foreign Minister in New Delhi to immediately prepare for the safe travel of Bangabandhu's daughters and their family to India from Germany.

But one further problem remained. Dr. Wajid Miah was studying on a fellowship at one of the prestigious research faculties at Karlsruhe, a picturesque town in South Germany not far from the French border. So he had to wind up his affairs there and the family had to pack all their belongings before leaving for India. A question of security after they would leave Königswinter arose. Again Gisela Bonn was contacted and managed to get assurances for their security whilst in German territory, from the German Interior Minister the next day, August 20.

Thus, with assurances of asylum in India and of security whilst on German territory, Sheikh Hasina, Dr. Wajid Miah, Sheikh Rehana, Joy and Putul left Königswinter on August 21 for Karlsruhe and after less than a day, flew to New Delhi.

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