

LUNCH AT THE RESIDENCE

ZEENA CHOUDHURY

Dhaka, August, 1974

Faruq (Faruq Chowdhury, former ambassador and foreign secretary) and I were on holiday from his duties as Deputy High Commissioner in London.

The phone rang at midday at Surma House where we were staying. The phone call was for me and the caller was Begum Mujib, wife of the honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. "Bhabhi, do come for lunch tomorrow - both Faruq bhai and you." Then she added, "Bhabhi, what would you especially like to eat?" To say I was completely overawed would be putting it mildly. I was immediately struck by her affection and warmth.

The next day Faruq and I arrived at Rd. 32, House 10, Dhanmondi - the residence of the honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family. Begum Mujib greeted us with a smile as we entered the first floor. She ushered me into a small ante-room. Kamal her eldest son attended to Faruq. There was another lady present in the small ante-room. She was puffing away at a cigarette. I was curious. Begum Mujib introduced her to me as one of her very close friends. There could not have been a bigger contrast between the two. Begum Mujib - demure, her head covered with the *anchal* of her saree. This lady nonchalantly smoking one cigarette after the other. I myself was clad in a silk sari with my shoulders covered and my very short hair pinned below a false bun or *khopa*. Interestingly, the conversation turned to the latest hair styles young ladies were sporting in new Bangladesh. Begum Mujib affirmately stated, "I really don't like short hair at all, not at all feminine". "Bhabhi," I blurted, "I have very short hair, I pinned it up because I was coming to the prime minister's house, this *khopa* is all false". Begum Mujib laughed and said, "Don't worry bhabhi, everything looks alright on you". I was

relieved. Again she asked, "Bhabhi, what sort of saris do you like?" I replied, "Cotton saris, I can't have enough of them." Immediately, Begum Mujib turned to Rehana, her youngest daughter, and said, "Go bring some nice sarees of mine for this bhabhi", pointing to me. Rehana came back with a bundle of sarees. Begum Mujib chose three cotton and one brand new silk sari, and presented all four to me. I was overwhelmed by her generosity.

Then the conversation took another turn - people in power and people out of power. Begum Mujib turned to me and said, "You know bhabhi, all these people surrounding me now, singing like Koels (nightingales), they will all disappear the moment your brother is no longer in such a position. Where were all of them the nine months your brother was in jail in West Pakistan? That is why I now look at them and don't say much." I really did not know how to answer as we had never been in power; all of us were children of government servants married to children of other government servants.

Lunch was served and we all walked into the dining area. The table was covered with a plastic table cloth, very much like our own dining tables. I immediately noted the variety of food I had especially asked for. There were many types of *bharta* including *shutki bharta*, fish, both small and large. I was not a meat lover, but for Faruq, there was chicken and beef. Again I was touched and flattered. Both Faruq and I sat on either side of Begum Mujib. She plied us with food. The "cigarette" lady sat at the bottom, still puffing away. The children Kamal, Jamal and Rehana joined us. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib was away, overseeing the food ravaged districts of Bangladesh.

At one point during lunch, a young man entered. He greeted Begum Mujib as *chachi*, glanced at the rest of us and said, "Before you ask me, I will of course eat with you;

but when *chacha* comes I will not speak to him." I thought that this was very rude. Moreover, he appeared over confident and very brash. Then he looked at the "cigarette lady" and addressed her as *ma*. She was, I gathered soon enough, his mother-in-law.

Suddenly there was a gust of wind, a door opened and there in front of me stood Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, extremely tall,

terrible, my people are suffering so much and there are only twenty four hours in each day. I have to do something, anything to relieve them of their plight." Then he turned and went into his bedroom asking Faruq to follow. He wanted to discuss relief material for the worst affected people.

All of us were silent; the brash young man had disappeared as soon as he saw Bangabandhu. After fifteen

I cannot help my children if anything should happen to their father."

Bangladesh at that time was filled with war widows, living in insecurity. There were no jobs unless you were a graduate. The prime minister looked at me and heaved a sigh, "Yes, you are right. I will call Faruq back in a year's time; are you happy?" I was so relieved as I murmured my thanks. Then he saw me glancing towards his feet, all tucked in crosswise, as he sat on the bed. Now it is common custom for younger people to touch their elder's feet before leaving. I was just imagining how I could do that, no feet were visible.

"So what is troubling you now?" the prime minister asked.

"I cannot see your feet, how will I touch them before I leave?" I replied. For the first time he laughed and said, "No need for that, I will give you my blessings anyway".

We left soon after. As the car turned the corner I curiously asked Faruq, "By the way, who was that brash young man?"

"That was Major Daleem."

8 PM, London, August 14, 1975 I had got through my exams, and Faruq was asked to join President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's secretariat a few weeks later. We were all packed and ready to leave for Bangladesh in a couple of days. I had just picked up my BSc certificate from the university and was a little late coming home. As I entered, I saw Faruq talking to Viqarul, a very good friend. I greeted them and proceeded upwards to our bedroom. I had a very uneasy feeling; I came down and said ominously, "I just feel something really terrible is going to happen." Both of them said, "Zeena, you and your premonitions!" Soon after we had dinner, Viqarul left and we went upstairs to sleep.

4 AM, August 15, 1975 The phone rang shrilly. Faruq caught the phone, put it down and started howling loudly.

"All of them killed, the entire family gunned down, I cannot imagine Bangabandhu is dead, BBC has just informed me. I have to go to the

office now."

And how did I feel? That towering personality, killed by his own people. Begum Mujib, so loving and affectionate. The sons and their wives, newly married, little Russel, ten years old, all gunned down.

Just then the phone rang again. It was Hasina, "Bhabhi, I know my whole family has been wiped out". She was calling from Brussels or Germany. (Hasina and Rehana were visiting Europe at that time). "Tell me," she asked desperately, "My little brother Russel, is he dead? I brought him up *Kolay, peethay*". (In her arms she meant) I lied as I replied, "No, he is alive." I just could not tell an anguished elder sister that the killers had spared no one.

Then another bizarre phone call came "Zeena," said a voice on the line, "I am Naseem, is there anything I can do to help?" It was Naseem Aurangzeb, daughter of President Ayub, Pakistan's president for ten years, who I had met a few days earlier.

No one else called. I remained stunned; silent, trying hard to mutter some prayers. Faruq returned a few hours later. He answered my mute question, "The coup was carried out by a renegade unit of the army." Then I voiced another question, "But who were directly involved in the massacre of the whole family? Anyone we know?"

"Yes," he replied. "Major Daleem."

In Memoriam

Readers please note that the author of this tragic recollection herself now lives in Road 32, House 14, Dhanmondi, a couple of yards away from "The Residence", now a museum dedicated to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family, so brutally, mercilessly massacred that "Sharoday Prathay" - August 15, 1975. She poignantly remembers that "lunch" so lovingly served by Begum Mujibur Rahman, and especially her encounter with that towering figure -- Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

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handsome and charismatic. Since then as a diplomat's wife I have seen many of the world's leaders, but I have never again in my life seen so much charisma emanating from one person. The very walls seemed to stretch outwards as if to accommodate him. He just completely filled the room. Such was his presence. His eyes were very red, as if filled with tears. He turned and said, "It is too

minutes, I heard a cry "Jeena, Jeena come here, I want to talk to you". The prime minister was calling me, I wondered why? As I entered he said, "I believe you don't want to come back to Dhaka, so how will your husband help me?" I in turn mumbled, "Bangabandhu, I have one year left for my graduation (I was doing BSc in Sociology at London University) and if I don't complete it,

Secularism, Bangabandhu, Bangladesh

ANISUR RAHMAN

IT was none other than Professor Abdur Razzak who could read Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman correctly, and that is why he had considered him as "a symbol of Bangladesh". In a seminal talk at the University of Dhaka in 1980 Razzak said "... in those dark days, in that testing time, among the millions who would constitute the nation, there was no misunderstanding and there was no ambiguity. Bangabandhu alone was the symbol."

Professor Razzak was unafraid in those days to utter these words unambiguously. He further said, "But there have been other symbols in the long freedom struggle in the subcontinent. Between this one, the symbol in 1971, and others before him, there is a qualitative difference."

What influenced Razzak to consider Sheikh Mujib the best among those who had led the struggle for freedom in an undivided India? I would say that it is for his contributions; firstly, to develop a linguistic nationalism which translated into Bengali Nationalism later, and secondly, for establishing a nation state with the unity of the different religious communities (Hindu-Muslim unity, in particular). I should say, this latter accomplishment puts Sheikh Mujib on the top, even

above Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Mahatma Gandhi, as he is credited for establishing a true secular state - Razzak perhaps meant that as well.

This is interesting, as for Bangladesh 'nationalism' comes first; followed by 'territory'. The incidental integration of East Bengal with Pakistan, and the unimagined communal riots in 1947 perhaps brought about Islamic nationalism to rethink. It later influenced Sheikh Mujib to opt for a linguistic nationalism (based on language and culture mostly). It was not so easy for him, I would say, especially after the Islamic revival movements during the whole 18th century, and after the Pakistan movement in the early 19th century. In the end, he had won despite all the challenges.

He understood the process of Islamisation (Eaton: 1992) in the eastern part of Bengal (presently Bangladesh) better than that of Gandhi and Jinnah. The latter's political blunder only contributed to divide the people of India which culminated in hatred, killing, and persecution.

Coming from a Muslim middle class, Sheikh Mujib had united the people to establish a state where cultural identity (language and traditions mostly) of the people will rule over their religious identity. Consequently, common interests ruled out communal interests. The word

'Bangalee' which had been used by Bangabandhu frequently, was adopted in the Constitution to offer a 'non-religious' understanding of nationalism. In other words 'Bangalee' had been coined by him to mean anti-communalism.

Maidul Islam (2015:11-15) has, recently, suggested that Bangabandhu's idea of secularism was 'Eurocentric', which requires state not to act in terms of religious ascendancy/adherence in any form. I would argue that understanding Bangabandhu's secularism in this way is oversimplification. There is no doubt that he was in favour of segregation of religion from politics but his was opposite to anti-religious. His secularism was inclusive of all religious practices to ensure unity of the religious communities. (Recently Sugata Bose in his seminal talk at Asia Research Institute, NUS has argued that Gandhi was also in favour of this type of secularism since religion was never outside of politics in Indian history). Unlike Maidul Islam, I would argue that this indigenous idea (secular but sensitive to religious practice) of state offered him the hegemony over people, and which made him, in Razzak's tongue, 'Bangabandhu'.

Maidul has (2015:15) again compared the secular nationalist model of Sheikh Mujib with that of the 'western influenced' model of Kemal Ataturk of Turkey. I would argue differently than this proposition. While Kemalism required non-active role of state on the matters of religion, Mujib's model was to more active role to protect (and to encourage in some cases) religious beliefs and practices. Though Islam was not accepted as state religion, freedom of religious performances had been guaranteed, and application of religious law (sharia) had been ensured through in a

restricted way. (This restricted application of Sharia is almost common to all post-colonial states). Moreover, religious sensitivity had been protected in the public domain too with criminal punishment (protection of religious beliefs from defamation, punishment for fornication, prohibition of homo-sexuality are worthy to mention). Therefore, understanding Mujib's secularism in western sense (complete separation of religion and state) will be oversimplification.

In independent Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujib had to face two forces. On the one hand the religious forces (religious clerics as well as political parties) inside the country who were continuously misleading the people by arguing that secularism means absence of religion; and academics who had been continuously criticizing adoption of 'secularism' as one of the state policies in the national and international academia on the other. The internal religious forces were mostly influenced by the Maududi's thought, which was in favour of a state where Islam and sharia will be in the driving seat, and which was in favour of greater Muslim Ummah (Qasim Zaman 2001). It is worthy of mentioning that Bangabandhu was keen to the Islamic values though he was determined not to establish a sharia-based legal system. We should remember that even in Pakistan the demands to accept sharia fundamental to legal system was not fruitful until Zia Ul Haq's military regime when a host of constitutional changes took place which culminated in Islamisation of the Pakistani legal system (Martin Lau 2006).

Regarding academic debate Zillur R Khan, Emajuddin Ahmed, Nasreen Akter, Talukder Maniruzzaman's works may be mentioned. Their fundamental argument is that

Bangabandhu's adoption of secularism was counterproductive since it did not correspond to the aspiration of the people. Muslims in this part, to them, voted for Pakistan in 1947 to establish a society on the basis of their own religious values.

There are at least two limitations of their understanding. Except Khan, many did not take into account the transformation of the identity of the Bengali Muslims from religious community to a political community, and then linguistic-nation (Ahmed 1986). Their studies have not taken the Muslim renaissance after the emergence of East Bengal as an administrative unit in 1906, and the development of linguistic nationalism between 1950 and 1970 seriously. Their arguments correspond to the two-nation theory. Aysha Jalal (2015) has recently argued instead that it was failure to determine the share of power of the Muslims in the Hindu majority independent India which led to partition of India.

However, these criticisms were so effective that nascent Bangladesh had been considered by the Muslim world as anti-Islamic. The successive governments after the brutal killing of Sheikh Mujib had used it successfully. Under their direct patronisation a new form of Islamisation took place in Bangladesh since late eighties and 'religion' came up again as an important force in the politics.

I will conclude by saying that to understand Bangabandhu, one has to take these facts into account- what Professor Razzak did. That is why he found Bangladesh within Shaikh Mujibur Rahman. Is there any but Razzak to be credited to evaluate Bangabandhu correctly?

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