

Becoming Bangabandhu

ENAYETULLAH KHAN

WHAT does it mean for a man, or a woman, to have 'a life led in politics'? Is it one in the midst or at the forefront of great events, fashioning them and in so doing, changing the course of the destiny of nations? Is it one spent embroiled in the chicanery and attendant skullduggery of court intrigue and manoeuvring, striking down opponents while forwarding the cause of allies, both forged largely as a matter of expediency, and with the ultimate aim of arriving at the pinnacle yourself? Or is it one spent privy to history as it unfolds before you, all the time doing your bit to ensure no great harm is done to the natural order of things, but mostly just being along for the ride, with no sway or influence over how the deck of cards was dealt?

Most of history's great men and women, in particular those who held the privilege of also at the same time being great leaders, would subscribe to one or a combination of those three outcomes. But in assessing the life of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, whose life was quintessentially political from any angle you look, we find all three of these descriptions falling short in the face of one simple epitaph: he led it for his people.

This is the single-greatest attribute that shines through, right from the start of his political education, that we may date to the visit in 1938 by Prime Minister A.K. Fazlul Huq and Labour Minister H.S. Suhrawardy of Bengal's provincial government to Gopalganj, during which Bangabandhu, aged hardly 18, first met and then subsequently started a correspondence with the latter that would continue till 1963, the year of Suhrawardy's death. The relationship they formed over the course of the quarter-century they knew each other would prove of acute significance to the lives of the people whose cause they espoused - the people of Bengal. As the founding father of a nation-state with a population touching 75 million at the hour of independence (now exceeding 160 million by most estimates), Bangabandhu may well be said to have surpassed his mentor in history's estimation. But for anyone to undermine the influence Suhrawardy had over the young Mujib would be sadly misguided.

Notably, Suhrawardy's name is the first to appear, indeed in just the second paragraph of Bangabandhu's revelatory *Unfinished Memoirs*, that finally came out in 2010, thirty-five years after his cruel and unjust assassination at the hands of some disgruntled army

officers on August 15, 1975 - a black date if there ever was one. In it, penning the words in the confines of his small room in Dhaka Central Jail, Bangabandhu credits Suhrawardy for having taught him 'the essentials of political life'. Yet the question remains, can anyone be taught to feel empathy for people you are not related to? Can you bristle with indignation at injustice when its brunt is faced by

women, even as he was their leader, that would end up characterising his words and deeds, the choices he made, in becoming Bangabandhu - the Friend of Bengal, as he was proclaimed upon his release from the jail term he was serving from 1966-69 in connection with the Agartala Conspiracy Case.

Can there be any greater recognition for a leader, than to be conferred with the title of

bhai-ra, pronounced with such sincerity in his speeches) first started making his acquaintance as a strapping, bespectacled youth with a genuine face that encouraged you to open up about your problems, their 'Mojibor', to the bitter but already triumphant end as the one who gave them their nation, history's Sheikh Mujib, here was a man who always stood by his people.

with *obhijaat* family histories, and to that end, people's efforts to glorify it and exaggerate even the good bits.

Bangabandhu, in describing the fortunes of the Sheikhs of Tungipara since their arrival on the banks of the Modhumati through one Sheikh Borhanuddin 'many years ago', almost denigrates it for how it had mismanaged wealth and property to be reduced to living, at the time of his birth, to "tin-roofed houses surrounding these crumbled buildings." It isn't self-deprecating as much as it is disarmingly honest. In addressing his people, Sheikh Mujib could never deign to lie to them. I have written elsewhere on the honesty that comes through in his speeches. Speeches, interviews, books and memoirs form the compendium of a leader's dialogue with his people. And in that dialogue, Bangabandhu never deigned to lie to them. It would rob him of the conviction with which he always pronounced, 'my people', in some of his English interviews, such as the one with David Frost, the great British journalist, or at that memorable press conference at Heathrow on January 9, 1972. And always, 'Amar maa-e-ra, amar bhai-ra'.

His people are what you can never take away from him. And his identification with them was, to be sure, innate. You learn this not just from his epochal deeds that feature in history's timeline, but in also noting some of his most casual ones, from people's private recollections. I was fortunate to be privy to a few such occasions, and also hearing about them from those belonging to my generation, or older ones. Just from how he would address them to how he would retain minute details relating to the life of people you would think so far removed from him. Little did one know, how he saw it so differently. In assessing Bangabandhu's leadership, the great lesson on the timeless art of leadership it delivers, is that it stems from those who succeed most, in thinking of themselves as part of the people they represent; in internalising the attachment that a leader must achieve in his relationship with the people. His was perhaps not a bookish sort of democracy, the word itself derived from the Greek demos, meaning people. And there can be no doubt from the life he led in politics, that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was always unquestioningly for, unflinchingly of, and unfailingly by, his people.

The writer is Editor-in-Chief, UNB and Dhaka Courier.



Bangabandhu among his people in Tungipara.

PHOTO: WWW.BANGABANDHU.COM.BD

others? These are instincts that would have to be innate to a person's self, to exert the kind of influence they did over Bangabandhu's life and actions, that we saw over the course of the life he led.

It is in the words he himself has written, even though they end up covering such a short period of his life - till 1955 - that we get certain hints of the humanity, that seamless sense of being at one with his fellow men and

your people's friend? A nickname itself denotes a kind of transcendent place even within the pages of history, and it can often be grandiose, in which case you know just from hearing it (Suleiman the Magnificent, Ivan the Terrible, the Mahatma), but it can never lie. And in the case of Bangabandhu, in its almost homespun simplicity lies the secret to its time-tested truth: right from the days that the people of Bengal (his maa-e-ra, his

In *Unfinished Memoirs*, this comes through in an early section on his birth and the house into which he was born in Tungipara of Gopalganj. Now in almost our fifth decade as an independent country, one cannot help but notice how our society still struggles to let go of an unhealthy bondage to regressive conceptions of status and self-worth, which are the definitive leftovers of a feudal and colonised past. We note the unhealthy obsession

Glimpses into Sheikh Mujib's ready wit

MD. MATIUL ISLAM

IN 1974, Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib went to Washington, D.C. to meet US President Ford and stayed in the Blair House used by the visiting heads of governments. I was then working for the World Bank, and the President of the bank, Mr. Robert McNamara, wanted to meet the Prime Minister for a one-to-one meeting, which I promptly arranged. In the meeting, Mr. McNamara was accompanied by the director of the bank, Bill Diamond, and I assisted the Prime Minister.

McNamara briefed the prime minister on various IDA projects that were being implemented in Bangladesh, and also apprised the prime minister on some new initiatives. As the meeting ended, McNamara rose, shook hands with the prime minister and was ready to go. Suddenly, he stopped and asked, "Mr. Prime Minister, when are you going to devalue the Bangladesh currency?" The prime minister's spontaneous response was, "Mr. McNamara, if, instead of Tajuddin, you were my finance minister and made this recommendation, I would devalue Bangladesh's currency today."

Mr. McNamara burst into laughter, saluted the prime minister and left.

In March 1972, Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib went for a state visit to the USSR. In the first leg of the journey from Dhaka to Bombay by Ilyushin-18, the aircraft sent by the Russian Government, I, along with Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad and Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission Dr. Islam, were sitting with the Prime Minister in his first class cabin.

At an opportune moment, I told the prime minister that Mr. Jalil of the Pakistan National Oil



Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, 'The Legend of Bangladesh,' by Saidul Islam

had called me in Dhaka and requested that I seek his permission, so that Mr. Jalil could visit the PM in Moscow. No sooner had I finished my statement, both the foreign minister and the deputy chairman expressed their resentment and

reservation, as they asked, "How can the prime minister of Bangladesh meet a Pakistani?"

I immediately retorted, "Friendship transcends national boundaries and is above politics. There is nothing wrong with having a Pakistani friend and

to have a meeting with him." The prime minister looked at me quietly and said, "Islam, if Jalil calls you tell him that my schedule in Moscow is full and that I will have no spare time to meet anybody outside my official programme."

It was a master stroke and I still wonder whether he agreed or disagreed with me. The foreign minister and deputy chairman must also have felt the same confusion.

In February 1972, the Prime Minister went for a state visit to India and the venue of the meeting was the Calcutta Government House. I was a part of the entourage and sat on the right of the prime minister at a bilateral meeting with Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The foreign minister, Abdus Samad Azad, was sitting on a separate couch.


On conclusion of the discussion on the official agenda, which included withdrawal of Indian troops in Bangladesh, Special Assistant to the Indian Prime Minister, D.P. Dhar, approached Prime Minister Mujib and requested him to step out to see the detailed plan of the railway rehabilitation prepared by the Indian Railways. The prime minister did not like this informal approach and had no intention to accompany D.P. Dhar, as he replied, "I am sorry but I need to discuss some important issues with my foreign minister. You should instead take my finance secretary Mr. Matiul Islam to see the rehabilitation programme and report back to me."

Understanding the prime minister's strong reluctance, I immediately got up to accompany Mr. Dhar, without giving him an opportunity to repeat his request to the prime minister for the second time. Without offending D.P. Dhar, the Prime Minister had his way.

The writer was the first Finance Secretary of Bangladesh.

The prime minister's spontaneous response was, "Mr. McNamara, if, instead of Tajuddin, you were my finance minister and made this recommendation, I would devalue Bangladesh's currency today."

QUOTABLE Quote



SHERMAN ALEXIE
American poet, writer, and filmmaker.

Poverty doesn't give you strength or teach you lessons about perseverance. No, poverty only teaches you how to be poor.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Rides the waves
- Pub game
- Basket-ball's Shaquille
- Boise's state
- Aristocratic
- Sub locator
- Son of Adam
- Even score
- Bahamas city
- Scottish lake
- "Sit down!"
- Friend of D'Artagnan
- Tour leader
- Tuckered out
- Rams' mates
- Demon-fighting priest
- Fido's foot
- Eye drop
- Hawaiian greeting
- Apple drink
- Common dice roll
- Blunt of "Sicario"
- Fragrance
- Tightly packed

DOWN

- Heir, often
- One, for Juan
- Yank's foe
- Misplaced optimism
- Doze
- Plate-cleaning cloth
- Commotion
- Tirade
- Bangkok language
- Tender
- Summit
- Airplane wing part
- Old newspaper section
- Cave sound
- "Ripped from the headlines" genre
- New Zealand native
- Mid-March date
- Final, for one
- Navigating aid
- Buck's mate
- Sprinted
- Fail to fail
- Guinness of film
- Made baskets
- Rooster's mate
- Big racket
- Overhead trains
- Deli bread

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

C	R	I	M	P	T	R	A	C	K
L	I	N	E	R	R	E	R	A	N
A	D	L	A	I	A	F	I	R	E
R	E	A	L	M	S	S	U	E	
K	I	N	T	E	M	P	R	E	S
E	N	D	T	O	R	I	N	O	
			B	I	K	E	D		
F	L	A	M	E	S	C	A	L	
C	R	A	T	E	R	S	A	V	E
R	U	T	S	T	A	V	E	S	
A	G	I	L	E	I	R	O	N	
M	A	N	E	S	M	E	R	G	E
S	L	O	O	P	E	A	T	E	N

KATALYST
Improving business. Improving lives.

swisscontact

Request for Proposal

Katalyst is a market development project that aims to contribute to increasing the income of poor men and women in rural areas. It does this by facilitating changes in services, inputs and product markets, which in turn increases the competitiveness of farmers and small enterprises. Katalyst is co-funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the UK Government, and the Danish International Development Agency (Danida). It is implemented by Swisscontact under the umbrella of the Ministry of Commerce, Government of Bangladesh.

Katalyst is looking to finance a project on the following topic:

Market Development Interventions to Mainstream Gender in Prawn Cultivation in Household Ponds

Katalyst wants to work with a consulting firm who can carry forward the work on implementing gender in prawn sector of Bangladesh.

Details regarding the Request for Proposal and the templates for submitting the proposals are available at:

<http://katalyst.com.bd/procurement-of-services/>

In partnership with — Implemented by — Funded by —

