

THE LEGACY OF MARCH 7

The speech that ignited a revolution



SUHRWARDY Udyan, or what was known as Ramna Race Course, has a close relationship with the history of Bangladesh. It was

where Bangabandhu, with a sense of passion, a vigour for democracy and an anticipation for change, made the most iconic declaration of his life on March 7, 1971, and subsequently wrote his name into the history books of Bangladesh unlike any before or after him. He showed his political guile, moved people with his captivating voice and in a matter of 19 minutes, went from being the leader of the Awami League to the country's greatest national asset.

The idea of the Pakistan as Sheikh Mujib and many of his colleagues had envisioned in 1947, had remained wholeheartedly unfulfilled. The efforts of the likes of Suhrawardy or Fazlul Haq in stamping the authority of the Bengali leadership in the national politics of Pakistan had culminated in Mujib's victory in the 1970 parliamentary elections. How could Mujib let his beloved mentor Suhrawardy down? How could he not respond to the increasing wills of his people? The debate whether Bengalis wanted independence or autonomy prior to 7th March is one for the resolution of which historians, not politicians, are required to perform greater research and analysis. But if one is to analyse Bangabandhu's speech, it becomes clear that the search for autonomy was very much enshrined with a subtle, if not vocal, ultimatum for independence. He did not encourage a military conflict, neither did he

push the country to the brink of war. But his address is surely indicative of his desire to achieve independence through a peaceful, cooperative and dialogical process. Mujib lit the fire in the hearts of the average Bengali. Yet it was President Yahya Khan's actions and Operation Searchlight which resulted in the grievous nine-month war, and Mujib's address motivated the country into defending itself unequivocally.

In his address to the masses, Bangabandhu acted in the most decent and humane way possible for him. By March 7, he was still unsure about the path his country was to take, and the dillydallying from the Yahya regime only made the situation more difficult. As such, Mujib tackled the question of independence in the most delicate way possible. He referred to himself as the leader of not only East Pakistan but of the majority party of Pakistan. He spoke respectfully of his dialogues with President Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Mujib's entire argument was based on how, when and why he demanded that the laws and constitutional requirements of the Pakistani state be fulfilled. None of the points he brought forth were utopian or unconstitutional, even in the fragile legal architecture of Pakistan. He demanded the basic democratic rights of lifting martial law, withdrawing military personnel to their barracks, transference of power to elected representatives and an inquiry into the loss of life during the prevailing conflict. In order to protest Yahya Khan's severe violations of democratic rights, Mujib gave several non-cooperation directives. He suggested that government officials and East Pakistani

institutions should observe strikes while the people should refrain from paying taxes. None of this explicitly mentioned a call to take up arms. Mujib understood how violent and repressive an armed conflict would become. Henceforth, his pronouncements on March 7 only go to show the gravity, political acumen and wisdom that made him such a great leader. His method of protest and the content of his address puts light on what Pakistan was lacking in its struggle towards democracy, and Mujib should have been a shining example to the entire country. Yet, Yahya Khan faltered terribly on March 25.

This entire country knows the allusive statement: "Our struggle, this time, is a struggle for our freedom. Our struggle, this time, is a struggle for our independence. Joy Bangla!" Even then there are those who question Bangabandhu's personal desire for independence. To suggest that Sheikh Mujib never wanted an independent Bangladesh is inaccurate. The man had fought his entire life for his beloved Bengalis. He had suffered in jail under military autocrats. In the end, his trust towards his own people cost him his life. Yet there are those who question his patriotism. It is indeed quite shameful. In a 1974 article, General Ziaur Rahman wrote about how and why Bangabandhu's 7th March address inspired him, and many like him, to join the liberation struggle. Today, President Rahman's son and many in his party would do well to remember that. It is also a shame that the Awami League deems it appropriate to monopolise Bangabandhu. It is indeed disgraceful that this country fails to have a



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consensus on the status of a man who single-handedly inspired millions to struggle for this country. It is a humiliation from which we need respite.

There can be debated around the idea of a pre-emptive war versus a defensive war. Debates can arise

about when, rather than if, Sheikh Mujib wanted independence. But in no uncertain terms, Bangabandhu did what was best for Bengalis. They were young leaders who were willing to jump into the battlefield and initiate their struggle for independence. On the other side,

Sheikh Mujib wanted a political and non-bloody route towards a settlement. On March 7, Sheikh Mujib did a political double. With the last sentence of his address, he gave the de-facto green signal to the young student leaders to prepare for armed conflict if needed be, whilst simultaneously prioritising a non-violent means to end the ensuing crisis. It was a political masterclass from Bangabandhu. But again, it is important to repeat, that historical evidence suggests that Sheikh Mujib did not want mothers to lose their sons in the battlefields, he did not want to leave Bengali children as orphans. He did his best to prevent a war. Which great leader would not? Nevertheless, when it came to it on March 25, he remained resolute and confident, that he may have done enough to spur the vigour which would allow the country to fight back and achieve independence. Sheikh Mujib remained in jail under military supervision throughout the entirety of the nine-month war. But his vision, aims, personality and influence directly guided Bangladesh to victory.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a patriot. He was undoubtedly the only person capable enough to vociferously inspire the country towards independence. His 7th March speech speaks volumes of the magnanimity and skill he had as a politician. People from all walks of life should not think twice in respecting the man for who he was a visionary, an icon, a leader.

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Where is our RMG sector headed?



THE second Apparel Summit recently took place in Dhaka, on February 25, after a series of dramatic and consequential events. It reflected the tensions of the protests in Ashulia that spurred the debate between illegal work stoppages and disregard of labour rights and dignity. The incident not only tarnished the image of the RMG sector and the country, but also substantially ruined the platform for dialogue between employers and workers. This was observed by the letter sent from 11 members of the US congress to the Prime Minister expressing concerns over the harassment of labour leaders and the near boycott of the summit by five top brands that account for majority of RMG exports from Bangladesh. Thus, the discussion among panelists at the event was definitely food for thought to understand where the RMG industry stands at the moment and what the future will look like for a sector that accounts for about 80 percent of the country's exports and employs more than four million people.

Naturally, during the discussion, the initiatives taken to improve the structural and fire safety of the garment factories in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza collapse were highlighted. The success of the work of Accord, Alliance, the National Action Plan, and ILO portrayed the sincerity of entrepreneurs and the government in making the sector more transparent and compliant. In addition, the minimum wage of RMG workers was increased from BDT 3,000 to BDT 5,300. Hence, shifting the scenario from a potential massive setback for the sector to now heavily driven towards a realistic export target of USD 50 billion by 2021.

However, this resulted in another debate: how will the remediation work be financed? This brings about the issue of fair prices or sustainable sourcing. This means that buyers will pay more as the cost of doing business becomes higher due to investment in compliance measures. Now, this is contrary to

the business practice of profit maximisation, as the price of the end product is decided by consumers. Therefore, a structure of competition is created in the supply chain causing a race to the bottom which hampers labour wages and rights as buyers will have to source from more economic destinations. Furthermore, there is the question of whether the minimum wage is the living wage and whether increasing it will result in an inflationary pressure, causing further rise in prices of rent and commodities and possibly reduce competitiveness.



These concerns have made the government and the RMG entrepreneurs advocate strongly for a level playing field. This means rules that apply for the structural, social and environmental compliance in Bangladesh should be adopted in other major RMG exporting countries. It will prevent any unfair competitive advantage they will have through manufacturing cheaper products by ignoring those standards. This is a justified claim because despite the efforts made by government and RMG factory owners in the

last years, any error or mishap has been received with substantial negative international press placing an undue pressure on the country and its economy. Contrarily, very little is spoken of competitor countries that are yet to take on similar initiatives matching the scale of Bangladesh. However, it is also noteworthy that the existence of Accord and Alliance that ensured transparency in the sector has presented Bangladesh as a relatively more reliable destination for sourcing, thus giving the industry an upper hand. Therefore in the

discussion that has emerged about what is the way forward after the expiry of these programmes in 2018, it must be understood that it is imperative, should a new local initiative succeed Accord and Alliance, it has to be as effective and internationally acceptable as its predecessors. Finally, it cannot be denied that in addition to the continuous sincere efforts of the entrepreneurs and the commitment of a hardworking labour force, the rapid expansion of the RMG sector is also due to

the support it received nationally and internationally. These are tough cash incentives, access to resources in low cost such as gas and water by the factories, bilateral agreements with 28 countries and the Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) of the European Union. As Bangladesh is a Least Developed Country (LDC), it enjoys duty and quota free access to the EU market under the Everything But Arms (EBA) provision of the GSP. This will cease to exist after the country graduates from LDC status, potentially by 2024.

Of the 27 conventions, Bangladesh is yet to ratify the ILO convention concerning "Minimum Age for Admission to Employment", and has often failed to provide timely reporting on the implementation of the ones it already ratified.

In order to continue to receive zero duties after that, the country will have to apply for GSP+, meaning the country will have to ratify and effectively implement 27 core UN and international conventions. In addition, the country will have to accept without reservation reporting requirements imposed by those conventions and cooperate with the extensive EU monitoring procedure. Of the 27 conventions, Bangladesh is yet to ratify the ILO convention concerning "Minimum Age for Admission to Employment", and has

often failed to provide timely reporting on the implementation of the ones it already ratified. Although this transformation is a matter of the next decade, yet consistency, coherent policy making, and maintained stability are fundamental to keep on this rapid expansion by enabling investments in the RMG sector in order to avoid any trade shocks and achieve the USD 50 billion USD export target on time.

To sum it all up, the RMG industry has come a very long way and has tackled major hiccups. Nevertheless, the road ahead is very challenging and to keep this sector vibrant, the stakeholders need to act simultaneously and coherently. There will have to be significant focus on reducing operational costs through efficiency in using resources such as gas, electricity and water. Workers will need to undergo skills development training to increase their productivity and a new set of home grown middle management will have to be developed who will be effective and compliant, enabling retention of the export earnings within the country. The RMG factory owners will have to collaborate with the international community in that regard in order to ensure effective technology transfer. There is also the need of social dialogue between owners and labour representatives to mitigate conflicts and reach common grounds. Both national and international media will have to be engaged to highlight the achievements of the sector. Finally the government must maintain stability and a favourable investment climate to finance infrastructure, in order to ensure efficiency and increase capacity of both production and transportation of goods, and also sustain an exchange rate regime that will keep our competitiveness. Last but not the least, the government will have to safeguard the rights, livelihood and dignity of the factory workers, and work to make their voices heard as they are the life and blood of the Bangladeshi RMG industry.

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A WORD A DAY



CHILIAD

(noun)

A group of a thousand things; a thousand years; a millennium

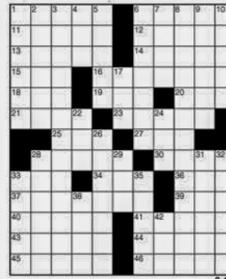
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Tent cities
- 6 Sonogram targets
- 11 Creamy colour
- 12 Folder's phrase
- 13 Caruso, e.g.
- 14 Violet's cousin
- 15 Powerful bunch
- 16 Spoon or spatula
- 18 Kook
- 19 Jotting spot
- 20 Ball point?
- 21 Turns right
- 23 Takes in
- 25 Dull life
- 27 For each
- 28 Iron output
- 30 Love, Latin-style
- 33 Sea, to simone
- 34 Low digit
- 36 Gold, to Coronado
- 37 Blew one's top
- 39 By way of
- 40 Model sticker
- 41 Hog holders
- 43 Sprain site

DOWN

- 1 Referring to
- 2 Broad street
- 3 They have oversized wheels
- 4 Debate side
- 5 Pancake topper
- 6 Cleaned with a sponge
- 7 Yemen neighbor
- 8 Halloween airings
- 9 Occupies
- 10 Flair
- 17 Young fellow
- 22 Take to court
- 24 Pod unit
- 26 Snitch
- 28 Venus' sister
- 29 "The Simpsons" bartender
- 31 Set straight
- 32 Sunday entrees
- 33 Olympics award
- 35 Bygone auto
- 38 Washed out
- 42 Dam org.



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

CASH CIVIL
ASTA CANINE
LIES ALTMAN
CAPSCREW
LAPBOARD
ALTERS LAY
FORDS RODIN
ALA DECADE
RAP SHEET
TAPDANCE
OBOIST GOAL
WEALTH ORBS
NATTY NASA

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott

