

# FROM SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN TO OUR BANGABANDHU



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's March 7 speech

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ensured the foundation of the basic norms of Bangali nationalism, an ideology which Mujib tried to instil in the young leaders of the party. Elected as the party's general secretary in 1953, Mujib focussed on expanding the grassroots organisation of the renamed Awami League, whilst Suhrawardy aimed to bridge the gap between the socialist wing of the party and established mainstream figures. It was a working relationship which ensured that Mujib had a direct line to Suhrawardy, and as such one which prospered right until the latter's death. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had surely caught the eye of the Bangali leadership in East Pakistan.

The late 1950s witnessed Mujib getting a glimpse of what governance was like. As a member of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan and a coalition Government Minister, he understood the needs and demands that the people of East Pakistan required immediately. He vociferously observed as the increasing divergence between East and West Pakistan, in terms of economic, social, cultural and political issues, became evident. In 1958, when President Ayyub Khan suspended the Constitution, Mujib was arrested and imprisoned until 1961. In 1963, tragedy struck. His beloved mentor Husseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy had passed away. If anyone had a unique and singular effect on our Father of the Nation, it was the

towering Suhrawardy. Mujib was in all sense, in total awe of one of Bengal's most coveted statesman. Yet, Suhrawardy's death catapulted Mujib to the head of the Awami League. It is here where the transference of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to Bangabandhu truly began. In the 1964 election, the Awami League put its weight behind opposition candidate led by the spirited Fatima Jinnah. Mujib's support to Ms. Jinnah represented two broad ideas. Firstly, it showcased the Awami League's opposition to Ayyub Khan's severe violation of democratic rights. Secondly, by putting his weight behind a candidate related to Pakistan's Founding Father, Mujib internalised the notion, that given the direction Pakistan was taking as a country, the nation that was envisioned in 1947 was far from being realised. It was a smart and calculated move by Mujib the politician, and it catapulted Awami League to the forefront of Pakistan's national political life.

The 1965 War between India and Pakistan showcased the vulnerability of the Eastern wing compared to the West. The likes of Professor Rehman Sobhan and Dr. Kamal Hossain became closely affiliated with Mujib, and brought an intellectual dynamism to the Awami League. What Mujib said through his own voice and represented through his countless arrests, was brought forth in writing and journalism by intellectuals close to the Awami League. The disparity between the Eastern and Western wings was becoming an

increasing concern, and as such Mujib made a bold proclamation, that too at Lahore in 1966. The famous 6-Point movement became the focal structural basis for the East Pakistanis upcoming struggle in the next 5 years. Through this plan, Mujib openly demanded autonomy of East Pakistan in economic, governmental, paramilitary and cultural terms. It was the call for two-wings of East Pakistan to exist as a pure Confederation, and nothing more. These were demands which ensured that Mujib was enemy number one for the political establishment in West Pakistan.

All of Mujib's efforts had culminated into an extremely crucial moment in his life. It was the infamous Agartala Conspiracy Case, a legal battle which was aimed at destroying Sheikh Mujib's political career. Instead, it turned him into our beloved Bangabandhu. The date was 22 February 1969. With a team of firebrand lawyers and the weight of East Pakistanis behind him, Sheikh Mujib had successfully fended off President Ayyub Khan's legal battle against him. The Agartala Conspiracy Case had given East Pakistanis a credible segue towards autonomy and secession. The failure to make Mujib the villain in the unravelling tale of Bangalis versus the fragile Pakistani state, ensured Ayub Khan's political demise and the subsequent rise of Bangabandhu.

The Agartala Conspiracy Case embodied a sedition case brought forth by the Government of Pakistan in 1968 against

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. After a year and a half of legal battles, the case was withdrawn in the face of public revolt in erstwhile East Pakistan. If Agartala had one unique impact in the political story of Bangladesh, it would be in its construction of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman from the leader of the Awami League to the sole leader of East Pakistan. Mujib became our Bangabandhu. He was acknowledged as a populist figure who represented the very norms of democracy which the military generals in Pakistan despised, and his post-Agartala status essentially signed the death warrant for the Ayyub-regime. The public remained in awe.

In hindsight, if one was to observe Agartala intricately, it would be ignorant to deny how the prosecution itself construed Mujib to be a hero. The case was termed the 'State of Pakistan versus Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others'. The Pakistani Government had catapulted Mujib to the highest echelon of the political establishment, whilst simultaneously dubbing him an Indian agent. Mujib was also labelled detrimental to Islamic unity. The people of East Pakistan rejected these notions. The language of the case and the accusations brought forth formed the impression that it was a tussle between Pakistan and Sheikh Mujib. From mosques to temples, the initiation of Bangabandhu as the emblematic manifestation of the

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