

National Mourning Day

Reflect Bangabandhu's ethos in our collective psyche

TODAY is a day that would be written in infamy in the annals of our history. We are happy that the killers of Bangabandhu have been tried but many are still evading punishment. We thank Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for the trial of Bangabandhu's killers, who otherwise might not have been brought to justice.

It is an incontrovertible fact that Bangabandhu's vision and selfless dedication for his people was matched by no one else of his time. The singularity of what he did to liberate the Bengalis from the hands of the Pakistani colonial masters is unquestionable.

We should remember that Bangabandhu is too big a phenomenon to be confined to certain geographical limits. Although he belongs to the ages, his struggle for independence was an inspiration for many beyond our borders seeking to smash the shackles of subjugation.

While the nation is observing National Mourning Day today, it is with great humility that we recall the fact that *The Daily Star* has been the newspaper that have demanded that 15th August be declared as 'National Mourning Day' in its editorial as early as 1993, when BNP was running the government of the day, and whose position on Bangabandhu was no different than the two previous military regimes, and well before AL's coming to power. It was thus a principled position and we are proud of it.

On this day, as we, along with the nation, mourn his death and that of his family, let us aim to rededicate ourselves to the fundamental mission to build *Shonar Bangla*, which Bangabandhu so dearly envisioned for his people. Let us reignite the spirit of 1971 in ourselves and emulate his ethos of love, compassion and respect for his peers as well as his juniors, in our lives.

Imminence of severe flood

More focus needed on preparation

THE first signs of the devastation of floods in the north have started to emerge. At least 17 people died in three days, while large parts of at least 14 districts were submerged by floodwater. Heavy rains coupled with an onrush of water from upstream have raised the water levels of most rivers in the Meghna, Brahmaputra and Ganga basins. Newspaper reports carrying pictures of people moving to safer locations are filled with heart-breaking details.

The severity of the situation cannot be overestimated. Things can get a lot worse if water levels rise further, which will mean inundation of newer territories. The immediate challenge, therefore, is to reinforce flood defenses in potentially risky areas, as well as succor for those already hit by the flood. Measures should be taken to reduce human casualties to a minimum, move the victims to safety, provide them with necessary supplies, and arrange for post-flood rehabilitation.

While floodwater will eventually have retreated in a week or two, as far as predictions go, there are bigger issues that need to be addressed, especially the increasing frequency of floods in Bangladesh and our response to them. So far the government has adopted mostly narrow, short-term policies to tackle flood but we need to understand that flood is not just a product of rainfall or onrush of water from upstream anymore. It also involves complex issues such as land use, river management and flood defense mechanism. The world has moved past blaming only climate change and taking short-term measures. It's time we did the same.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Flood in northern districts

The inhabitants of the northern region of the country have been affected by the devastating floods. Due to excessive rainfall and fresh onrush of water from upstream, cattle and arable lands are being washed away. The educational activities in many schools have been interrupted. The authorities concerned should focus on providing the flood-affected people with emergency relief materials.

Md Karimul Islam, *Khulna University*

When the protectors turn perpetrators

I've recently noticed a report published by *The Daily Star* detailing how an 8-year old student was brutally tortured by her teachers. Police arrested the teachers who whipped the girl 160 times and inserted needles under her nails for allegedly stealing Tk 100.

The brutality of the incident left me speechless. Physical and mental punishment in educational institutions has been prohibited by the High Court, but that didn't stop those so-called teachers from inflicting such pain on a kid. Those perpetrators must be punished in accordance with the law.

Teachers have always been respected in our society. Under no circumstances should they do anything that can have negative impacts on the psyche of their students. I would like to urge our teachers, especially those in the primary schools and madrasahs, to refrain from resorting to any kind of punitive methods to "teach" students. Kids can be made to do anything if they are treated with love and kindness.

Fazle Rabbi, *By email*

NATIONAL MOURNING DAY

In the company of THE GREAT MAN

MD MATIUL ISLAM

I first saw Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the future Bangabandhu and the father of a new nation, in 1946 when I went to Calcutta to begin my college education. He was then a final year student in Islamia College (now Maulana Azad College) where the formal attire of Muslim students was black *achkan*. A handsome man, Sheikh Mujib looked more handsome in his black *achkan*. He stayed in Baker Hostel, a dormitory for Muslim students, and sometimes frequented Elliot Road Hostel where a couple of my friends were staying.

As the right-hand man of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Bangabandhu, at the age of 26, took a leading role in the movement for the establishment of Pakistan. To give further momentum to the movement, Muhammad Ali Jinnah called for observing August 16 as the Direct Action Day at a public meeting held at the Calcutta Maidan (popularly known as Garer Math). I, along with a friend, Wahidur Rahman, proceeded to attend the meeting by tram from Park Circus. As we reached the Dharmatala crossing, we found that the Kamalaloy, a prestigious department store, was being looted. There was panic everywhere and people were rushing to take shelter in safe places.

At Calcutta Maidan, we saw hordes of people waiting for the arrival of HS Suhrawardy, the chief minister, who finally came two hours later, and briefly addressed the meeting. He said: "Riot has started and is spreading like wildfire. You should return to your home as soon as possible." By that time, all public transports had stopped plying and we walked back home. The next few days, all hell broke loose in Calcutta. There were merciless killings as Calcutta got divided into two zones—that of Hindus and Muslims—and there was large-scale migration from one zone to another.

Lady Brabourne College at Park Circus was converted into a relief camp for the Muslim refugees. It is there that I got the first glimpse of the courage and fortitude of Sheikh Mujib. He was working day and night and moved truckloads of people, both Hindus and Muslims, from danger zones to safety. It was a high-risk operation but Bangabandhu risked his life and almost single-handedly saved thousands of innocent lives. In *The Unfinished Memoirs*, he described the



The author (far right) with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Munier Chowdhury in Harvard.

incident in the following words:

"Arrangements had been made for refugees to stay in Lady Brabourne College; women would have to stay on the first floor and men on the ground floor. The workers were divided accordingly. I also helped in rescuing stranded Muslims in one or two places; I came under attack while trying to help in this work. We also rescued Hindus wherever possible and sent them to Hindu localities. It was obvious that people had lost their human sides in the violence and had regressed to their animal selves."

In 1956, Sheikh Mujib was appointed as the youngest Minister of Commerce, Labor and Industries in the Aaur Rahman government and very soon came to be known as a firebrand minister. His thinking process was clear and mature and the action followed was swift. The Dhaka Electric Supply Company was at that time under the management of a British firm, Octavius Steel, appointed by the Nurul Amin government. He thought that it was a waste of public money and that the local engineers were quite capable of running and managing an electric supply company. Without any delay, he initiated the process of

terminating Octavius Steel's contract with the government and soon took over its management. I was then deputy secretary of the department of finance, and the minister ordered me to go to Chittagong to thoroughly examine the accounts of Octavius Steel.

As the deputy secretary, I was responsible for placing demands with the central government for loans and grants for the development projects in East Pakistan. It was frustrating work as the central government would often deny or delay requests for funds on some plea or the other. It was, therefore, a big surprise when I received a telegraphic message from the central government sanctioning Rs 1 crore for setting up a Film Development Corporation and another Rs 1 crore for setting up a Small Scale Industries Corporation, for execution by the department of commerce and industries. There was no formal request for funds for these two organisations from East Pakistan. It soon became clear that it was because of the political clout of the firebrand minister that East Pakistan got funds to develop these two important sectors.

Bangabandhu had a clear perception

that the film industry in East Pakistan was in very bad shape and needed government support to survive and make quality films. The setting up of a corporation for developing small-scale industries was also his brainchild. He realised that skill development, access to funds and providing infrastructure are essential for developing small-scale industries in East Pakistan. Interestingly, West Pakistan followed suit and set up its own small-scale industries corporation.

I left for higher studies in Harvard in September 1957, and learned that Bangabandhu resigned as minister to devote all his time for the development of his party, another rare example. In December 1957, he went to the US under a leadership programme and his first stop was Boston where he underwent surgery in the Boston General Hospital. I had the privilege of looking after him in the hospital and was his constant companion during his recuperation. The lifelong friendship, love and affection that I got from Bangabandhu ended when he was brutally assassinated on this day 42 years ago.

Md Matiul Islam was Bangladesh's first finance secretary.

"The poet of politics"

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

HISTORY tells us that even when the ground realities are inexorable and objective conditions ripe for the political deliverance of a people, the actual delivery required the deft stewardship of a courageous and often charismatic leader. No wonder England had Sir Winston Churchill during war time, Vietnam had Ho Chi Minh, Russia had Lenin and China, Mao Zedong, to accomplish their historic tasks. In the same vein, it can be said that Bangladesh had Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, to arouse and prepare Bengalis for their ultimate emancipation.

One has to agree that in the political progression of a nation, the obvious has to be stated time and again. The fact that public memory is short and that there have been efforts to deliberately twist the history of our political struggle should, in fact, compel us to delineate the authentic course of our history.

It is my view that, in the above context, courage as an attribute was not in abundant supply in many of the leaders of East Pakistan, a region that has evolved into sovereign Bangladesh. This fact of history needs to be recorded and told in a forthright manner, because many in our midst have not quite realised the gravity of the mischief of distorting our political history, done at the behest of a motivated quarter.

The assassins of 1975 were able to physically do away with Bangabandhu, but did not realise that erasing him from the hearts and minds of Bengalis was practically impossible and morally indefensible. The immutable fact of history all Bangladeshis and the rest of the world ought to know is that, the towering courage of this Bengali was instrumental in the creation of a sovereign nation. So fearless and altruistic was this man that he spent nearly two-thirds of his youth in prison for the emancipation of his people.

Imagine the 1960s when Bengalis of erstwhile East Pakistan were subjected to the most humiliating treatment. It would be no exaggeration to state that they were experiencing the tribulations of a colonised people. In an atmosphere of all-pervasive fear and subjugation, it was



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman addresses the UN General Assembly on September 25, 1974.

Bangabandhu who confronted the mighty Field Marshal Ayub Khan and had the courage to forcefully advocate for the rights of his fellow Bengalis. During the trial of the so-called Agartala Conspiracy Case in Dhaka Cantonment, Bangabandhu took to task the rogue Pakistani army personnel and cautioned them to behave. He refused to participate in the Round Table Conference as a prisoner. The 1960s were, in fact, a time when all Bengalis could justifiably take pride in a courageous manner drawing sustenance from Bangabandhu's defiant disposition.

Bangabandhu was a real epitome of courage, both in the physical and moral sense. The historic Six Point Programme, an explicit embodiment of Bengali nationalism, was unfurled at Lahore, the heart of Punjab, by Bangabandhu. In

Lahore, the bastion of arrogant Punjabi power, Bangabandhu displayed admirable physical and moral courage during the course of a public meeting in 1970 that he was addressing.

It so happened that his speech was being purposely interrupted by some Muslim League-Jamaat hirelings. When these miscreants refused to stop even after being cautioned, Bangabandhu shouted at them, asserting that he had not come to Lahore to seek votes as he had plenty of them in his own constituency—they could either listen to him or disappear from the meeting area. No Bengali had ever publicly ventured to rebuke the power-obsessed high-nosed Punjabis in such a manner.

When Bangabandhu, the poet of politics, spoke, it had an electrifying effect on

the Bengalis whose spirit soared immeasurably in heightened expectations. Their support for their leader was total as evidenced in the historic landslide electoral victory of the nationalist causes in 1970. When the time came for tough talks across the table, Bangabandhu did not wilt. In fact, the cabal of Pakistani army generals that accompanied General Yahya Khan for the meeting in March 1971 were left in awe by the courageous presentation and assertiveness of Bangabandhu.

It is an irony of sub-continental political development that while the prescribed textbooks of social science and literature were supposed to turn Indian gentlemen taking to western education into rebels, in reality, scores of them joined the imperial service to obediently serve their colonial masters. Similarly, a large part of the so-called constitutional-methods-oriented politicians of undivided India were more occupied with their personal and material safety.

The post-partition scenario in Pakistan did not witness much of a change. The military-civil bureaucracy conspired with the business oligarchy and the landed gentry to protect their vested interests. People's emancipation did not figure seriously in the politician's scheme of things. It was in these circumstances that Bangabandhu could galvanise the people to unprecedented political activism for achieving real freedom.

Bangabandhu was gifted with extraordinary organisational acumen and had the inkling of the brutality of the Pakistani military junta. Accordingly, he exhorted the people for an imminent armed struggle. His historic 7th March speech bears an eloquent testimony to that. Precariously positioned as he was in the extremely demanding tumultuous days of March 1971, Bangabandhu, as a constitutional politician, acted with supreme forbearance.

Bangabandhu could never be covered into submission. The trappings of power did not allure him and he remained a solid rock in the shifting sands. It is time once again to gratefully remember and pay homage to the great patriarch.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former IGP and a columnist of *The Daily Star*.