

## NATIONAL MOURNING DAY

## A hero of the past, present and future

JUNAIDUL HAQUE

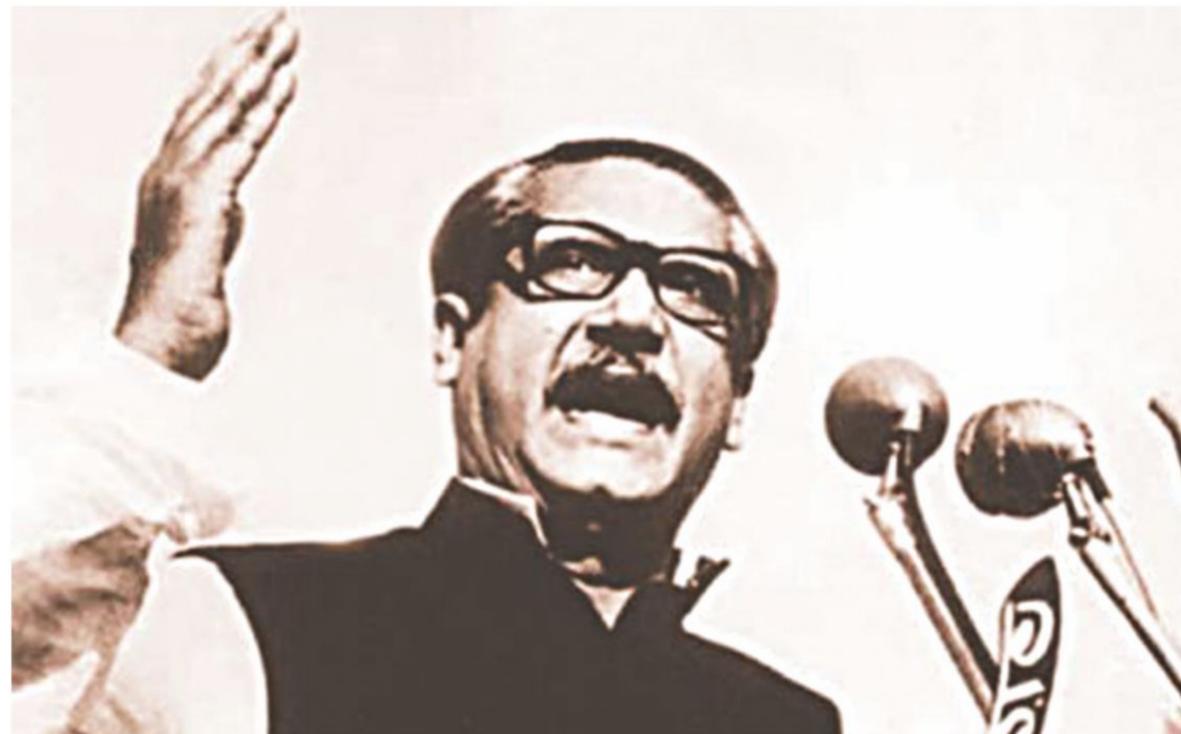
AFTER the killing of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Khandaker Mostaque's illegitimate government needed a foothold. He sent envoys to Moscow, London and such places to explain his position. Her Majesty the Queen of England refused to meet his emissary, a senior leader of Awami League. "You have killed your greatest patriot and you have come to meet me! I have nothing to discuss with you!" The Queen spoke words which soothed a million hearts in Bangladesh. Shaheed Quaderi, one of our finest poets, cited the killing of the great leader as one of the major reasons for his migration to Europe and later to the US. In a poem he expressed his great surprise that the killers of Bangabandhu were Bangladeshis. "I shall never hear anything more horrifying." How could Bangladeshis kill Bangabandhu, the man who loved his people to a fault? The man who fought all his life to free his people from colonial rule?

Did the Chileans kill Salvador Allende and replace him with General Pinochet, a military dictator who took his people a hundred years back? Were the great patriots of Africa, Asia and Latin America killed by their own people? But the final verdict is history's. A great patriot doesn't die, he returns with a thunder. His people keep him alive in their hearts.

It was Friday, August 15, 1975. It was one of the most tragic days of our history. It reminded us of the dark night of March 25, 1971. The Father of the Nation, loved and respected in Bangladesh and the world over as a great hero, lay dead on the stairs of his famous residence at Road Number 32, Dhanmondi Residential Area. He was only fifty-five.

At dawn on August 15, I woke up to hear from my parents that Bangabandhu had been killed along with his family.

Even ten-year-old Sheikh Russell was not spared. My initial reaction was of great shock. I was dumbfounded with sorrow. Bangabandhu didn't deserve a death like this.



He was our greatest hero. His love for his country and his people was unparalleled.

Announcements of his death were being made on radio and TV at regular intervals. A certain Major Dalim was claiming credit for his death. Who was he? We had never heard of him before! There was fear, there was confusion. There was a silent sorrow among his followers and people who admired him.

Years later, I learned that the first procession to protest the death of Bangabandhu was organised by the boys and girls of Chhatra Union in my own district of Kishoreganj. They warned the real killers that the death of

this great patriot would turn Bengal into Vietnam. Student leader Kazi Abdul Bari led the procession. Chhatra League leaders went into hiding because they were the most wanted people by the Mostaque government. Many were eventually arrested and tortured. We were not political activists but we were young and patriotic. We weren't cowards. A few of us got together and walked up to Bangabandhu's residence, which was less than a mile from our area.

There was army patrol on the roads and police guard in front of Bangabandhu's residence. We heard that tanks were guarding

Khandaker Mostaque in Bangabhaban. We were not allowed inside Bangabandhu's residence but nobody disturbed us when we stood silently in front of House Number 32 and paid our respects to the greatest son of the soil. The killing of the entire family (except his two daughters who were living abroad then) was too great a shock for us. We spotted bullet marks on the walls. An uncle of mine, who was a journalist working for BTB, had seen Bangabandhu's dead body the next day. We listened to him in rapt attention when he told us what he saw inside. Before the curfew was clamped again on August 15,

we also managed to see Sheikh Moni's residence. There were signs of machine gun fire on the walls. Even women and children were not spared in this house either. Why this mindless killing? To spread fear? To terrorise the people and silence them? Dhaka had suddenly gone back to the Pakistani days, it appeared. Had thirty lakh people embraced martyrdom for nothing? Was our glorious fight for independence meaningless?

The acting chief justice of the Supreme Court, Justice Syed AB Mahmud, had administered the oath to Mostaque. The vice president, ten ministers and six state ministers had also taken oath. There were a few respected names in the cabinet. Were they forced to join Mostaque? The three services chiefs were also present.

Members of parliament charged with corruption by Bangabandhu were present too. Mostaque, it appeared, wanted to tell the world that only Bangabandhu was corrupt and his ministers had no fault. The Pakistan government was quite happy. Bhutto's reaction said it all. Both Bhutto and Kissinger had visited Dhaka a year or so back. Bangladesh Betar had instantly become Radio Bangladesh. What was wrong with the Bangla name? The curfew helped Mostaque take control in less than fifteen hours. People talked about his cunningness. A few secretly called him the new Mir Jafar. He spoke to the nation in the evening. His words couldn't alleviate our fear and anxiety. We were happy to note that the stalwarts of the Mujibnagar government didn't join Mostaque. Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmed, Captain Mansur Ali and AHM Kamruzzaman didn't betray their leader. Abdus Samad Azad, Zillur Rahman, Abdur Razzak and Tofayel Ahmed didn't join Mostaque either.

That night we went to sleep with a heavy heart. But our love and respect for the martyred Bangabandhu grew even more. He was our greatest hero. He is a hero of the past, present and future.

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## The making of our Bangabandhu

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

AUGUST 14, 1947. The people of this subcontinent achieved independence from the British Raj. But this independence came at a heavy price. The communal conflict escalated to such a scale that the entire continent had to be divided into two countries based on district-wise Hindu-Muslim majorities which led to the displacement of 10-12 million people. Millions of people lost their lives during the riots. Bengalis were among the worst victims who not only became refugees, but were also decimated by the Great Famine of 1943 caused by mass transportation of food by the British Raj to feed its army. Starvation, murder and vandalism loomed over Bengal, and its people became the victim of one of the worst atrocities the world had ever seen.

During those days, a young man, full of determination, joined the movement against British Raj to free his countrymen from the clutches of colonial rule. His name is Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Born into a modest family in Gopalganj in 1920, Bangabandhu was quite familiar with the political events in British India from an early age. He was the key organiser of the reception committee that welcomed Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy during their visit to Gopalganj district when he was only 18. During this visit, Suhrawardy was so impressed by Bangabandhu's dedication and activism that he invited him to Calcutta. From that day on, Bangabandhu became a disciple of Suhrawardy whose influence shaped his progressive political ideology. In 1939, after paying a visit to Suhrawardy's office in Calcutta, Sheikh Mujib formed the Muslim Students' League in Gopalganj, which was focused on boosting support for the Pakistan movement. In 1943, Sheikh Mujib was made a member of the provincial council of the Muslim League, and in the same year the great Bengal Famine broke out. Millions of people died of hunger and disease. It was the first turning point in Bangabandhu's political career. He, along with his acquaintances, tried to collect food and clothes for the starving people of Bengal. He organised a huge conference in Gopalganj with prominent Muslim League leaders in a bid to arrange relief for the starving masses. Sheikh Mujib knew who was behind this famine and his resentment towards colonial rulers, who transported every single food grain from Bengal to Europe, reached its peak. However, since the famine, Bangabandhu also learned something significant about the Muslim League. He wrote in his book *The Unfinished Memoirs*, "Muslim League was not at all a pro-people organisation. It was an organisation of zamindars, wealthy businessmen and elite people who used

to be awarded honorific titles such as Khan Sahib and Khan Bahadur by the British government. Many of them stockpiled huge amounts of food for profit and fuelled the famine. They never allowed anybody else in the party. Under the leadership of Shahid Suhrawardy, we, the middle class people of Bengal, tried to turn Muslim League into the league of people from all walks of life."

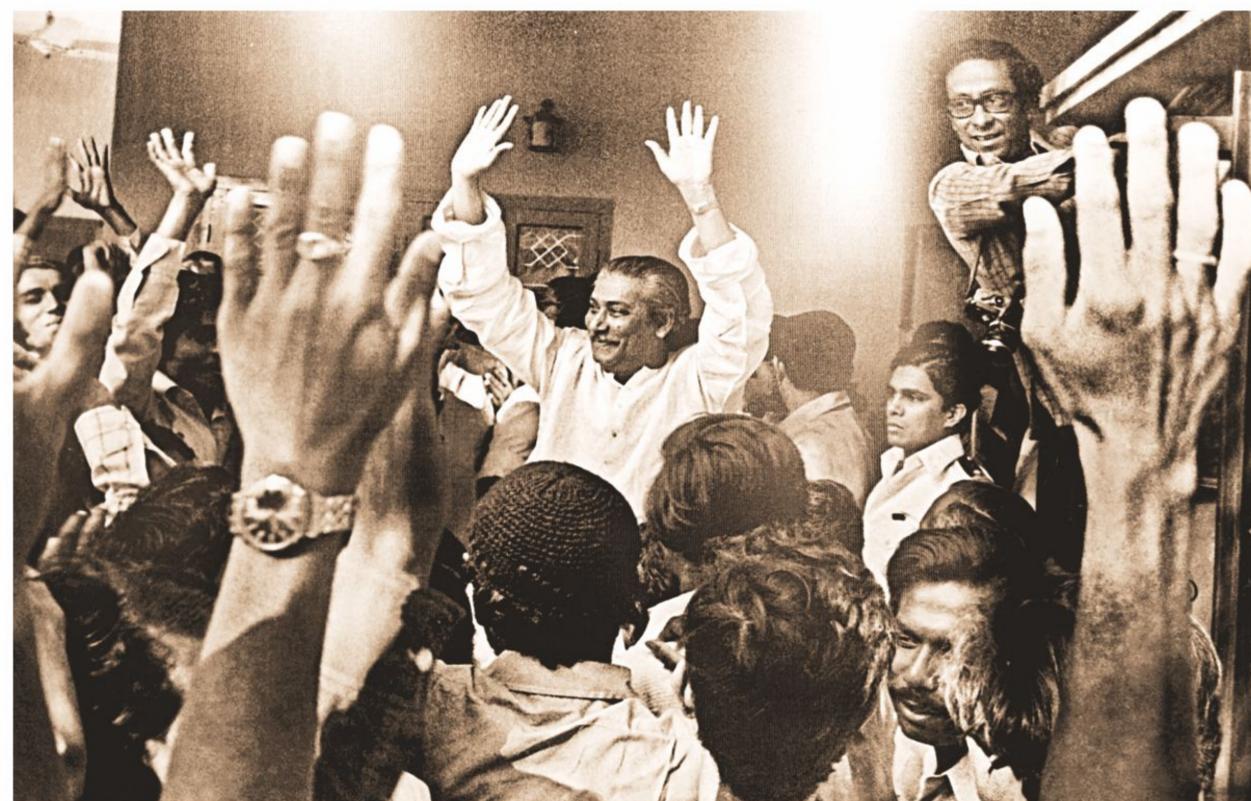
Thanks to Bangabandhu's conference in Gopalganj, Muslim League leaders paid attention to famine-struck Bengal and Sheikh Mujib was thought to be one of the most influential student

However, their dream of making the Muslim League a pro-people party was shattered. After 1947, Pakistan began ruling the people of Bengal in the same way that the British had ruled for 200 years. Bangabandhu directly opposed this and took to the streets when the Muslim League government declared Urdu as the only state language of Pakistan. He was arrested several times. Although Pakistan finally had to retreat from its decision in the face of countrywide agitations, Bangabandhu correctly realised that the people of Bengal were again under colonial rule.

of all people. Sheikh Mujib stated in this regard, "After 1947, there was no necessity of communal politics. Pakistan was supposed to be a democratic country. Every citizen of the country regardless of their ethnicity and religion should enjoy equal rights. Unfortunately, the Muslim League leaders remained stuck to their watchword 'Islam'. They did not pay heed to the economic liberation of the farmers and labourers who dreamed of an independent, prosperous country. On the contrary, the Muslim League leaders continued to help the zamindars

1954. The United Front inflicted a crushing defeat on the Muslim League and won 223 out of 309 seats. Sheikh Mujib was also elected as a member of the legislative assembly. However, the Pakistan government dismissed the United Front government, which aggrieved Bangabandhu and other political leaders. He was again arrested for leading a protest against the government's decision. After the retirement of AK Fazlul Huq, Sheikh Mujib became the undisputed leader of the Bengalis. In the years to come, he led the Bengalis to independence from

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Bangabandhu amidst a cheering crowd.

leaders of undivided Bengal. For the next four years, Bangabandhu continued his fight against the British. At that time, he was particularly appalled by the horrific consequences of communal violence.

Young Sheikh Mujib used to say, "Vilifying Hindus cannot bring independence. Muslim League must be free from the communal, reactionary force. It cannot be a club of zamindars and elite people. It should be the organisation of people from all walks of life" (*The Unfinished Memoirs*, page 24).

Utterly disenchanted by the corrupt, autocratic and oligarchic rule of the Muslim League government, the prominent leaders of East Bengal had already broken away from the Muslim League and had formed the Bangladesh Awami Muslim League in June 23, 1949. Sheikh Mujib became the party's first joint secretary. However, after the language movement, leaders like Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Shamsul Huq along with Sheikh Mujib decided to drop the word "Muslim" from the party's name in 1953 to make it a party

so that they can exploit the farmers and working class people" (*The Unfinished Memoirs*, page 241).

When the date of the first East Bengal Legislative Election was announced, the prominent Bengali leaders formed a coalition of political parties under the leadership of AK Fazlul Huq, Shaheed Suhrawardy and Maulana Bhashani called the United Front. Their goal was to oust the corrupt Muslim League regime. Bangabandhu played a key role in organising the countrywide election campaign for the United Front. The elections were held from March 8-12,

the oppressive rule of Pakistan through political struggles and a nine-month-long war.

Throughout his life, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman struggled for the rights of his countrymen, first against the British Raj and then against the Pakistani rulers. It is for his relentless lifelong struggle against the oppressors that we have, today, a free and independent nation.

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