

MUSINGS

Folk Hero Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

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The process through which Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (1920-1975) became a folk hero in Bangladesh, that is to say, the way in which his name became imprinted in the popular consciousness of its people and became legendary began quite early in his life. In his *Ausamapta Atmajiboni* (translated into English as *Unfinished Memoirs*) we read thus how while campaigning in his constituency of Gopalganj to be elected a member of the East Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1953, he came across a very poor old woman who had been waiting by her hut to meet him for hours. Although almost destitute, the woman had been looking forward to not only offering him food in her hut but also some money. As she put it to the young politician then, "The prayers of the poor will be with you" in the elections. In other words, he had already become a folk hero among the villagers of his district because of the perception they had that he had the personality and the capacity to work for them and change their lot.

By this time, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had thus become legendary in his part of Bengal for his capacity to work tirelessly for Bengalis and their mother tongue, Bangla. He had endeared himself to his people by then and subsequently by his capacity to protest against injustice and the discriminatory policies of West Pakistani leaders and his ability to endure any kind of hardship and seemingly endless jail terms and to sacrifice all creature comforts for their sake. He had also come close to the hearts of East Bengalis in building up, first the Awami Muslim League, and then the Awami League, and in contesting for elections whenever he was allowed to do so. For these reasons he would travel the length and breadth of the country, leaving his imprint in the popular consciousness of his people throughout the fifties and the sixties with his eloquence and organizational capabilities. The culminating years of such activities that were making him a larger than

life politician came in the sixties, when he spearheaded the "Six Points Movement" for autonomy for East Pakistanis and endured years of imprisonment, until mass agitation to achieve autonomy forced the Pakistani authorities to concede to elections and release him as their undisputed champion. It was at this point of his life that he began to be referred to by his followers as "Bangabandhu" ("Friend of the People") and it is this honorific title bestowed on him by the overwhelming majority of East Bengalis that indicated clearly that a national hero had emerged among all Bangladeshis then.

But Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's elevation to a folk hero idolized and lionized by his people was fully consolidated in the epochal year of 1971. In the national elections held in Pakistan at the end of the previous year, the Awami League led by Rahman had won almost all the seats in the National Legislature and was in a position to form the government

of Pakistan. When the defeated leader of the second largest party, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, conspired with the military dictatorship controlling Pakistan at this juncture of that nation's history, and postponed the opening of the National Assembly, Rahman led the course of civil disobedience that had begun with the postponement, and in a historic speech delivered on 7 March, 1971 called for a movement that would lead his people to complete independence from Pakistan.

It is said, "cometh the hour, cometh the man", and for all Bangladeshis the time had indeed come to confront the West Pakistani rulers with only one option that would be articulated in that extraordinary speech delivered by the man who had been preparing himself for just such an occasion all his life. Like Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address or Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream Speech", this was a speech of a lifetime and came in Mujib's finest hour. The rhetorical

brilliance of the speech, the fiery tone and the determination it expressed of leading his people to full independence, and the image of a leader who had risen to the occasion grandly were all conveyed through radio and television and then taped recordings everywhere in Bangladesh throughout the year and afterwards. Photographs and sketches of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman exhorting his people and cautioning the West Pakistani leaders of the consequences of the confrontational role they had chosen also flooded the media. The speech became the subject of verses, ballads, songs, narratives and paintings and sculpture as well.

But there was more national drama to come that year where Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would figure as the larger-than-life protagonist to his people, and the West Pakistanis as the villains of conspiracies directed to wrest away their rights. When he realized that the Pakistanis had been making a show of negotiations with him and his party people, and were actually about to crackdown on all who opposed them, he gave another historical declaration at midnight on March 26 that unambiguously declared independence for all Bengalis of his country and war against the West Pakistani military forces. Although he would be captured in the early morning and taken to West Pakistan as a prisoner till the end of the year, his status as a living legend grew throughout 1971 as his speech was broadcast continuously in the Swadhin Bangla Betar ("the radio station of independent Bangladesh"). Clearly, he had become transformed by his acts of defiance and his oratory and leadership qualities as someone extraordinary and uniquely qualified to lead his people and speak for and about them. Clearly, too, he had become a folk hero whose image and voice had become imprinted forever in the consciousness of the people of Bangladesh.

There were other occasions afterwards that

also led to the halo Sheikh Mujibur Rahman acquired in the eyes of his people. His return to an independent Bangladesh on January 10 after a quite miraculous release from Pakistani captivity, another extraordinary speech that he gave in Dhaka on his arrival, and his attempts to direct his country towards peace and prosperity afterwards, also registered in the consciousness of the people of independent Bangladesh in whom the full extent of his contribution to their freedom had become obvious by then. When he was assassinated by renegade army men and malcontents of his own party on August 15, 1975, successive military governments tried to blot out his image publically. But their machinations to erase him from the minds of his people failed miserably. With the return of democracy and the freeing of the media and arts, his image as a folk hero, of the champion of his people, of the lead actor in the drama of Bangladesh's independence and the conqueror of hostile powers arrayed against them was on abundant display in folklore and literature, and in art and film throughout Bangladesh once again.

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Bangladesh During those Turbulent Days of March, 1971

The days after the historic speech of Bangabandhu Sheikh Muibur Rahman on 7 March, 1971, were full of action and unrest. The hearts of the Bangalis resonated with Bangabandhu's words, "The struggle this time is a struggle for emancipation, the struggle this time is a struggle for independence!"

Excerpts from *Bangladesher Swadhinata Shangram* (Bangladesh's Struggle for Independence) by Rafiqul Islam

TRANSLATED BY SOHANA MANZOOR

The historic announcement of March 7 by Bangabandhu was, in fact, the call for the independence of Bangladesh. The speech inspired the Bangalis all through those months of the Liberation War. Many a lives that were involved in the sacred war of freedom, sacrificed themselves for their motherland. The 7th March speech was supposed to be aired by the Dhaka Betar (radio), and the broadcasting had begun too at the scheduled time, but it was suddenly put to a stop by the Pakistani Army. In protest, the Bengali staff of the Betar walked out of the station. As a result, the radio stopped functioning altogether. Finally, the Military allowed the recorded speech to be aired the next day, 8 March. Until the 25 March, the radio and television were operated by the staff of the respective stations free from political constraints. The announcements were made on behalf of Dhaka Television and Dhaka Radio. On March 23, the so called Pakistan Day, the Pakistani flag was not hoisted anywhere in the country except the Governor House, President House and Cantonment. Everywhere else there was the green and red flag of Bangladesh alongside a black flag as a sign of protest of the killing and mourning.

YAHYA ARRIVES IN DHAKA
On 15 March, Yahya Khan arrived in Dhaka under strict surveillance with almost all the generals of the Pakistani Army. On that very day, the *Swadhin Bangladesh Kendriyo Chhatro Sangram Parishad* called for a public meeting at Baitul Mukarram. A.S.M. Abdur Rab declared, "Bangladesh is free today. No one has the right to enforce the Martial Law on us; the people of Bangladesh will abide by the words of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman only. All men and women have to become militants. The enemies of the people are trying to turn our country into another Vietnam or Hiroshima. We have to defend our country with everything we have."

At the meeting, Abdul Quddus Makhan said, "If any injunction has to be issued in Bangladesh, only Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman can do it." Shajahan Siraj said in his speech, "The opposition party is silent right now, but they are waiting to strike a fatal blow. Unless we repel them, the independence of Bangladesh cannot be sustained."

Noor-e Alam Siddiqui in his speech of the Chairman opined, "We can have no

compromise with those that have turned the golden Bengal into a burning ground. We did attempt to show solidarity and patch-up our differences through the Six-points and Twenty-one-points Movements, but they have repulsed all our efforts. Now no power on earth can demolish our independence."

From 16 March onward, a discussion session started at the President House under strict surveillance of the armed forces between General Yahya Khan and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The meeting was more of a farce than actual discussion because at the back of this discussion General Yahya Khan was holding meetings with the experts of his army about the strategies to be undertaken in the upcoming operation. On the other side, there were also numerous meetings and processions taking place throughout the country claiming independence for

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Bangladesh. At the behest of Bangabandhu, the Eastern Mercantile Bank started to accept taxes on behalf of the Central Government. The armed forces were ordered to deploy a campaign of terror. They attacked the civilians that participated in the non-cooperative movement in Rajshahi Medical College Hostel, Joha Hall, Munnujan Hall, Jessore and Rangpur Cantonment area, Khulna, Chittagong, Dhaka- Pilkhana, Farmgate, the second capital, Rampura and Kochukhet. They did not spare the women even.

On 17th March, Yahya Khan and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman sat for another bout of discussion. This was also the birthday of Bangabandhu. He addressed the



journalists thus:

I don't celebrate birthdays. What does my birthday matter, or even death anniversary matter when my country is going through such adversities?... For the people of this country, birthdays have no significance. Whenever someone wishes to kill us, we die. They have given us no security for life. The people of this country are breathing their last. What kind of birthday should I celebrate? I have dedicated my life for the people of my country. I am one of them.

Dainik Pakistan, 18 March, 1971

On 18 March, a press release by the *Swadhin Bangladesh Kendriyo Chhatro Sangram Parishad* urged the freedom aspiring world citizens to support Bangladesh's struggle for independence. The statement also appealed to the super powers like the United States, Britain, Russia and China to stop genocide on Bengalis by the Pakistani Army through their supply of weapons. Requests were made to other neighboring countries so that they would not allow the Pakistani aircrafts to fly over their countries carrying weapons and ammunition. At this time, the Teachers' Association of Dhaka University sent numerous telegrams to the governments, universities and intellectuals around the world, and drew their attentions to the conspiracy of the impending mass-murder of the Bengalis. They urged that the Pakistani Army is restrained from committing genocide.

On March 19, there were frictions in Joydebpur and Gazipur between the army and the people and the Bengali soldiers. The East Bengal Regiment flatly refused to fire on the unarmed crowd. People constructed barriers on the streets to hamper the movements of the West Pakistani Army. When curfew was declared and attempts were made to remove those barricades, there were skirmishes. The West-Pakistani Army used arms against the protesters, forcefully entered houses in the villages and tortured both men and women. As a result, a large number of people were wounded. People around Tongi were also affected severely that day.

THE UPRISING OF THE SECOND EAST BENGAL REGIMENT IN JOYDEBPUR

The Second Battalion of East Bengal Regiment was stationed at Joydebpur. On 19 March, the brigadier in charge, Jahan Baj Arbar ordered the Second Battalion to open arm on the local civilians involved in non-cooperation movement. The Bengali officers and soldiers refused to comply. Then attempts were made to disarm the Second Battalion, but that, too, failed. The mutiny of the Battalion was led by Major Shafiullah—later the Chief of Staff of Bangladesh Army, Major General Shafiullah. The incidents at Joydebpur caused much uproar in Tongi and Dhaka. The attempted mutiny on the part of the East Bengal Regiment and the attempts made by the Pakistani Army to take over the

Gazipur Ordinance Factory caused serious unrest and turmoil. Actually, the way the Bengali staff of the Gazipur Ordinance Factory, the villagers around Joydebpur crossroad, the Second Battalion of the East Bengal Regiment and the workers of Tongi Industrial area stood against the Pakistani Army on 19 March, it virtually heralded the beginning of the armed resistance of the Bengalis. Three people named Hurmat, Niamat and Monu Khalifa were martyred on this day. From Joydebpur to the crossroad—the two and half a mile road was packed with processions, resistance and agitation. People struck against the Pakistani Army with guns and sticks.

On 19 March, Yahya Khan and Bangabandhu held meeting for the third time. The Sheikh Shaheb protested the killings by the Pakistani Army at Joydebpur and Tongi, saying, "If they think that they can resist the people's struggle through bullets and force, they must be living in a fool's paradise... when ordinary people get ready to shed blood, no power in the world can suppress them." At a press conference on 20th March, and then again at a public meeting on the 21, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani urged Yahya Khan to allow a caretaker government to be formed under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He said, "This caretaker government will decide the relationship between Bangladesh and Pakistan." The Maulana Bhashani also added, "If Mujib declares the independence of Bangladesh, then all the freedom loving nations of the world will acknowledge Bangladesh." It is interesting to note that for the first time Maulana Bhashani uttered the name of Independent Bangladesh on March 21, 1971, at that press conference. Up until then he had spoken of the "freedom of East Bengal," and even before that, of an "Independent East Pakistan."

Notes: A.S.M. Abdur Rab was the DAKSU Vice-President, and Abdul Quddus Makhan, the DAKSU GS. Noor-e-Alam Siddiqui was the Chhatra League President, while Shajahan Shiraj was the Chhatra League GS in 1971.

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