NATIONAL MOURNING DAY

'People can never trust a government that issues press notes based on falsehoods'

—Bangabandhu, June 8, 1966, Prison Diaries

On June 7, 1966, the people of what was then East Pakistan observed a general strike in support of the Awami League's Six-Point programme of autonomy announced a few months earlier by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Bangabandhu was in jail at that time. On June 8, 1966, Bangabandhu made the following entry in his diary, revealing his deep love for the people who had come out on the streets and his loathing of the cruel treatment of those who were arrested and brought to prison the day after. We are printing the entry from the Prison Diaries, published by Bangla Academy in 2018.

AKING up in the morning, I heard that in the course of the night police had managed to fill the jail up with prisoners. A lot of people lay sprawling in the jail office in the morning as well. By 8 o'clock in the morning, approximately 300 people had been brought to the jail. Among them were six to fifty years old people! Some were boys who were crying for their mothers. They could not even feed themselves properly! They had been kept standing before the case table. They were not given any food throughout the day. Many young people had been brought in with wounds; some had injuries on their feet; others had cuts on their forehead; some even had fractured arms. The jail authorities apparently didn't think that they needed any medical attention. After their arrests they had been held elsewhere; in the evening they were deposited in the jail. Throughout the day they kept bringing more and more people; among them were really little children who had not yet been weaned! Some were school students. A few of the prison wardens were behaving well with them but others were treating them roughly. I was forced to let the jail authorities know that they should stop abusing them for otherwise there would be trouble. The government had sentenced them after trying them summarily in mobile courts. Some

Government?
I couldn't figure out how the jail

were given three months terms and

others two months in prison; some

boys were handed out one month

sentences. Even ordinary prisoners,

some of whom had come to jail on

charges of murder or robbery, were

sorry at the arrest of such young

people. The infants cried for their

hadn't even learned to take their

food properly. How could anyone

expect proper treatment from such a

mothers throughout the night. They

authorities would provide accommodation for all these people. Young children are supposed to be interned separately. After they had been brought in, news came of random firing in which a lot of people had died in Tejgaon and Narayanganj. Tear gas shells had been fired all over Dhaka city. They had also resorted to lathi charge. What could one do except sit silently and express sympathy wordlessly? Although I am prone to being emotional, I also have the ability to control myself. However, no one except a prisoner can understand how receiving such news in prison can affect a person.

Persuaded by my fellow prisoners, I sat down for breakfast. But I could not eat at all. At lunchtime I found myself in a similar situation. I was feeling very upset since I was not getting the full picture. I became impatient for the newspapers to be delivered. They were taking too much time to arrive. At two o'clock the newspapers finally came. Exactly what I had apprehended turned out to be the case. The government had

to be "freedom of the press"! Ittefaq was only four pages big this day and no news from the districts had been published in it. I didn't have the slightest doubt now that the hartal had been successfully observed in different districts.

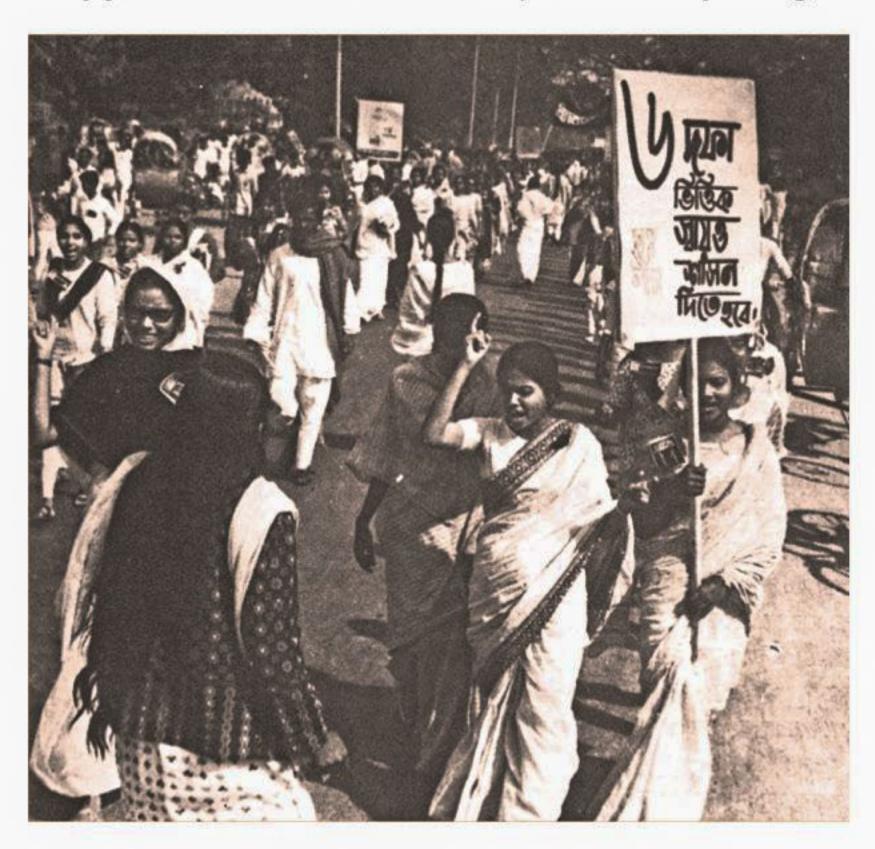
Glancing at the newspapers. I

broke into a sweat. How dreadful! The government press note acknowledged that ten people had been killed because of police firing. I am horrified to think how many more actually died since the Government itself has admitted to ten fatalities! The government press release does not even imply how many people have been injured. It is as if all the blame lies with the people! Wherever government representatives have been inciting people, the Awami League has been saying clearly, "we want to observer the Protest Day peacefully." It has been instructing its workers accordingly. There can be no sense in blaming the people now. Wherever policemen had not been present, no unpleasant incidents took place. In Chawk Bazar and

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blocked any news of the hartal from being printed. There was no news of the strike; only a government press note had been issued. It was the same case with the Azad, Ittefaq, and the Observer. And this was supposed other places the general strike had been observed peacefully.

Shooting took place just after the proclamation of Section 144 at 11 am. If it was announced beforehand then workers and the people would have



People take part in a procession as part of the Six-Point Movement spearheaded by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

known about it easily. When the Awami League announced its program in the newspapers, it was clearly stated there that a procession would be organised at 10:00 am, a meeting in the afternoon, and another procession subsequently. Section 144 had not been proclaimed then. It is easy to conclude that the mess has been engineered by some government agents and overenthusiastic staff members who had been egged on by some senior party leader or the other.

People can never trust a government that issues press notes based on falsehoods. All my life I have been hearing, "police resorted to firing out of self-defense." Who can ever believe such stuff anymore? What will happen to the parents and children of those who have been killed? The children had been eagerly looking forward to the return of their fathers; the fathers to the time when their children would be home. They looked forward to the money that would be sent to them at the beginning of the month when they got their pay; now they would not return anymore and the money would never ever reach them again. I felt totally down. I could not console myself in any way. Why do people take the lives of others so selfishly?

But the sacrifice made by the dead ones would not be in vain. Since the people of this country have learned to sacrifice their lives to achieve their rights, victory will surely be theirs; it

is only a matter of time before they emerge victorious. Workers had come out of their factories; peasants had stopped working; businessmen had shut down their shops; students had left their schools and colleges. Had protest of such magnitude taken place in Pakistan ever before? The Six Points Program comes from the heart of the people. It occurred to me in jail this time that the lackeys of imperialism and the extortionists from West Pakistan would not be able to exploit the impoverished people of East Bengal for long. In particular, I realised that the protest of June 7 had burst out spontaneously throughout rural Bengal; this suggested to me that no longer would their exploiters be able to suppress them through threats. For the sake of Pakistan, its rulers should frame a constitution based on the acceptance of the "Six

Points."

The blood that has been spilled from the bosoms of my brothers on the pitch-carpeted roads of Dhaka cannot go waste. The way students and the masses of this country had sacrificed their lives to make Bengali the state language had made it one of Pakistan's state languages; blood that is shed thus never can go waste! What can one do except express solidarity silently from the depth of our souls for those who sacrificed their lives smilingly or were injured, or arrested, or endured torture? To them and their children we must express our sympathy silently. Sitting in this prison I raised my hands and prayed to Allah for the peace of their souls. I promised myself that I would not let their deaths go in vain. We would carry on our struggle. We would await whatever fate had in store for us. People surely know how to value their sacrifice. The demands of the people of the land would have to be realised through such sacrifices.

Bangabandhu: The making of a great leader

SALEEM AHMAD KHAN

witnessed a number of revolutions and movements that brought enormous change in the social and political dynamics of the world, and above all, in the life of the common people. These revolutions were a response to the particular realities of their time. Bangladesh's independence struggle was a revolution that had been in the making for roughly 25 years, starting after the partition of Greater India in 1947 which led to the creation of Pakistan split into two wings (east and west). For 25 years, the people of the east wing suffered, without much hope, until they stood up and fought for their independence in 1971 under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Without any doubt, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is the architect of Bangladesh, the Father of the Nation. Mujib showed the first sign of being a people's leader in 1943 when he distributed rice to the famine-stricken people from his father's stockpile, without any knowledge of the latter. In the coming years, he grew up to be the leader he was meant to be, and steered his nation to their most glorious moment in history. He was—from that first sign of leadership till the day he died—a people's leader. Gary J. Bass, while referring to a cable from the US Consulate in Dhaka, mentioned, "Mujib's very appearance suggested raw power, a power drawn from the masses and from his own strong personality. He was tall and

sturdy, with rugged features and intense eyes."

But the history of the sufferings of the Bengalis goes back even before Pakistan's creation. They endured suppression and subjugation since the British colonial times. By the end of the Second World War, up to three million Bengalis died of malnutrition and related diseases, which was considered a direct result of the extraction of Indian resources from the Bengal for British war efforts. Pakistan also treated its east wing (now Bangladesh) as a "colony". Pakistani historian Ayaz Gull argued, "Pakistan did not make serious efforts for the economic uplift of East Pakistan and thus disparities existed." Hamid Yusaf said, "Exclusion of East Pakistan from a share in political authority contributed to the rise of the movement for

regional autonomy."
In 1948, a revolution against this disparity and discrimination began, through the language movement, of which Sheikh Mujib



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman delivers his historic March 7, 1971 speech at the Ramna Race Course in Dhaka.

was a participant. This resulted in the arrest of Mujib, and he was sent to jail for the fourth time. Mujib was no stranger to prison. His thirteen prison experiences came in different periods starting in 1938, followed by 1940, 1948, 1949, 1951, 1954, 1958, 1961, 1962, 1964, 1966, 1968, and lastly in 1971. An analysis of his prison history indicates that during the 25 years of Pakistani rule, Mujib had to spend 12 years in prison and faced death sentences twice. Gary J Bass argued, "Mujib's lifelong activism had cast him into jail, making him a hero to the people."

In 1956, Sheikh Mujib was appointed as a minister when the Awami League formed the Provincial Cabinet. But he left the Cabinet to devote himself to the task of reorganising the party. Upon studying his memoir, it becomes clear that he decided to be with the people as a means to strengthen the party for an effective movement. This strategy paid dividends, which can be understood from the fact that a government-in-exile was formed in

his absence in April 1971. Such prompt formation of a government by his followers was a rare episode in world history.

With the "six-point" demand and mass uprising in 1969, Mujib turned into an invincible leader. The 1970 election, in which Awami League won a landslide victory, was a clear indication that the people of West and East Pakistan mandated Mujib to implement the "six-point" programme. Gary Bass termed it as "Pakistan's first truly free and fair democratic election." However, the political establishment in West Pakistan did not accept the results. This caused great unrest in East Pakistan which, under Mujib's leadership, resorted to a "non-cooperation" movement against the Pakistani authority.

Bangabandhu's historic March 7 speech deserves a special mention here. It was extempore, took only 19 minutes to deliver, but each word conveyed the strategic guidance for the final phase of the revolution and instilled patriotic feelings into the

people. David Ludden argued, "This speech inspired a popular revolution." The speech was rated as one of the world's best speeches. In his 2013 book, We Shall Fight on the Beaches: The Speeches That Inspired History, Jacob F Field underlined the rationale for the rating through a collection of extracts from the most inspirational speeches of the last 2,500 years, including speeches of leaders like Churchill, Lincoln, Mao, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Pakistan's well-planned crackdown on the night of March 25, 1971 on unarmed civilians in the east wing marked the beginning of a genocide. On that night, Mujib had dispatched his aides to East Pakistan Radio with a handwritten message declaring independence. Mujib wrote the message in English to draw international attention quickly. He had already conveyed his instructions to the people in Bangla during his public address on March 7. All this goes to show a visionary leader who had

realised that he might be arrested and might not get the time to convey his last message to the people.

The first government of Bangladesh was

The first government of Bangladesh was formed in exile on April 10, 1971, declaring Sheikh Mujib as the president in his absence. This speaks of the trust bestowed on a leader by his followers who believed in him and in his ability to deliver. His strategic guidance triggered the formation of the provincial government of Bangladesh to lead the country in his absence during the War of Liberation.

After the war, Bangabandhu returned to Bangladesh from a Pakistan prison on January 10, 1972. It was painful for him to witness what had transpired in his absence, which he described as the "biggest humanitarian disaster in the world."

Unfortunately, this genocide has not yet been properly addressed or recognised by the international community. According to Gary J Bass, "In the dark annals of modern cruelty, it [the genocide] ranks as bloodier than Bosnia. But the Pakistan's slaughter of its Bengalis in 1971 is starkly different.

Pakistan's crackdown was a colossal and systematic onslaught."

Four years later, on this day in 1975, a black chapter in the nation's history was opened when the great leader himself was brutally killed along with most of his family members by a group of junior army officers. After thirty-four years, a verdict on the murders was given, through a detailed procedure of the law of the land. But it's a tragedy that justice could not be ensured even after all these years as some of the convicted killers, living in different parts of the world, continue to remain outside the law.

The fact is, no country, not even the US and Canada, can and should be a "safe sanctuary" for such murderers. The world must come to a consensus to respect the law of the land and urge the host countries to hand over those killers to Bangladesh. Doing so would set an example before humanity and the next generation. Mujib's killers must not be given shelter by any nation considering the sentiment of the people of Bangladesh. Bangladeshis living in the US and Canada need to be engaged to create pressure, especially during the national elections of these countries, to hand over the killers to Bangladesh.

Brigadier General Saleem Ahmad Khan is presently doing a PhD in Canada.