

REMEMBERING MUJIBNAGAR DAY

An odyssey of self-determination and equality

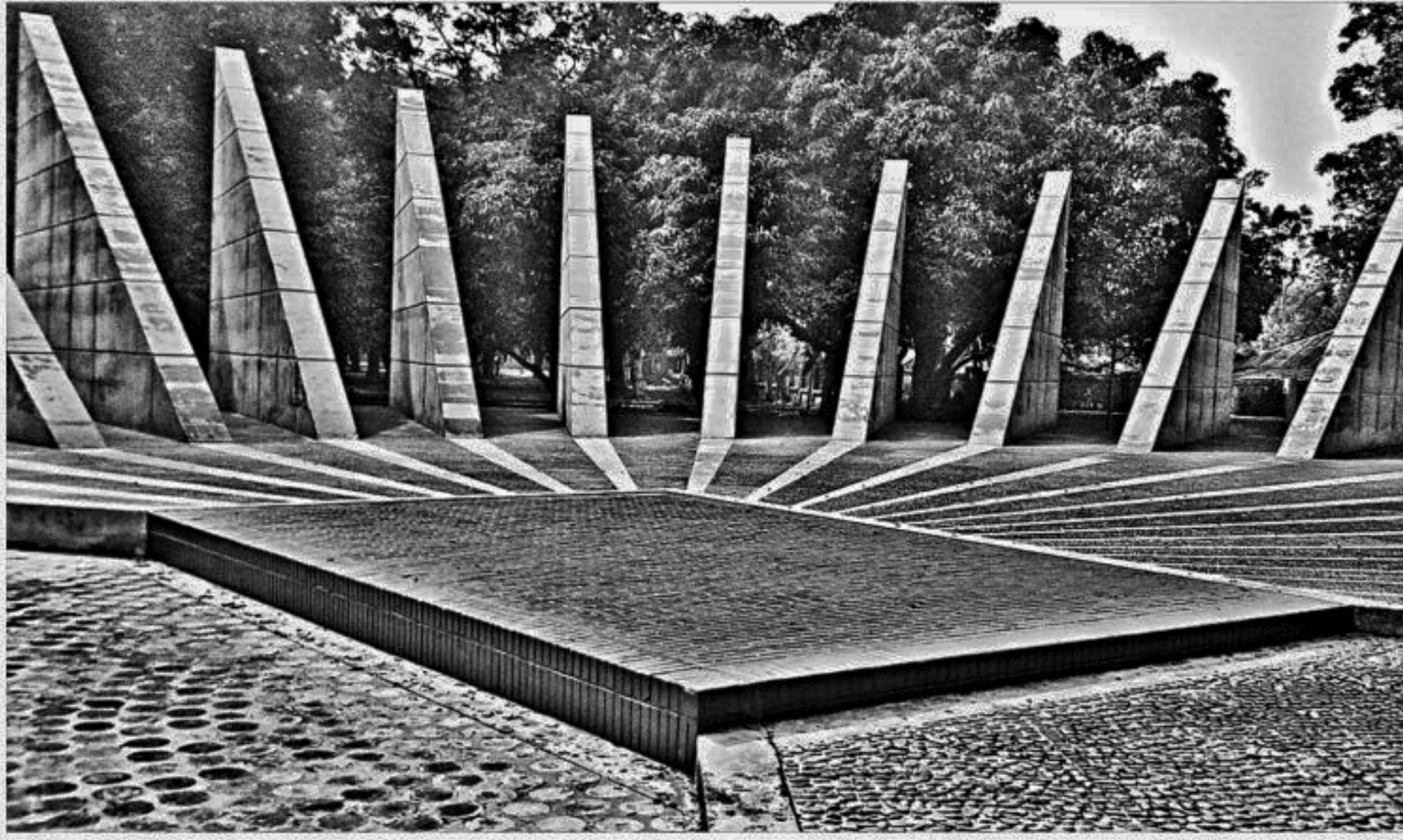
SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

WHEN in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation."

So begins the American Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776. After 195 years, Bangladesh was born. The strongest moral foundation of this new nation can be found in the Proclamation of Independence Order issued on April 10, 1971. The Proclamation was greatly inspired by the American Declaration (Barrister Amirul Islam's account in *Muktijuddher Dalilpotro*).

Following the Proclamation of Independence Order, the exiled government took oath at the Baidyanathatala mango grove of Meherpur District of Bangladesh on April 17, 1971. The Proclamation was formally read out by Professor Mohammad Yusuf Ali on this very occasion. The oath-taking was witnessed by hundreds of foreign journalists who had assembled there to hail the birth of a new nation. Tajuddin Ahmed named the place "Mujibnagar" after the indisputable leader of the Liberation War, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. It was the capital of the exiled government till December 16, 1971. The formation of the Mujibnagar government gave life and legitimacy to our liberation struggle both nationally and internationally.

On the dreadful night of March 25, Bangabandhu, before being arrested, declared the independence of Bangladesh. Top political leaders of the non-cooperation movement, before Pakistan's crackdown, had to cross over to India. Though spontaneous



The Mujibnagar monument has 23 pillars, some of which are shown here, representing the 23 years of Pakistani rule over East Bengal before it became independent as Bangladesh. The brick square in the centre marks the spot where the Mujibnagar government ministers took their oaths.

PHOTO: MASUM AL HASAN/WIKIMEDIA

resistance arose in various parts of the country, it was too weak to counter the well-equipped Pakistani force. It lacked any clear war strategy as well as proper political guidance. The exiled political leaders felt the urge to form a government to continue the resistance and turn it into a national liberation struggle. On April 4, military leaders who revolted against the Pakistani Junta met at Teliapara, Sylhet. They also emphasised on the formation of a government to procure arms and aid for the national Liberation War. With the able leadership of Tajuddin Ahmed, a government came into being on April 10 with the Proclamation of Independence.

The logic behind the formation of a government was clearly delineated in the

Proclamation document: "Whereas the Government by levying an unjust war and committing genocide and by other repressive measures made it impossible for the elected representatives of the people of Bangladesh to meet and frame a Constitution, and give to themselves a Government, and whereas the people of Bangladesh by their heroism, bravery and revolutionary fervour have established effective control over the territories of Bangladesh, we, the elected representatives of the people of Bangladesh, as honour-bound by the mandate given to us by the people of Bangladesh whose will is supreme, duly constituted ourselves into a Constituent Assembly, and having held mutual consultations, and in order to ensure for the people of Bangladesh equality, human dignity

and social justice, declare and constitute Bangladesh to be a sovereign People's Republic," (Proclamation of Independence Order, *Bangla Desh Documents*).

The abovementioned words set the foundation of the birth of Bangladesh which continue to be a source of inspiration in the conduct of political and social life of its citizens.

The Proclamation substantiates Bangladesh's just cause in the war. It invalidates all the attempts to portray our liberation struggle as a secessionist movement. It delineates the ideals of self-determination: when a majority is denied its democratic right of forming its own government, the revolutionary right of the majority to dismember the country as a means of implementing self-determination can never be disputed. This is the inherent right of the people themselves. Since the Liberation War began, there were attempts to demean the liberation struggle by calling it a civil war, much like the American Civil War of 1861 and Abraham Lincoln has often been quoted to undermine the spirit of the Liberation War by portraying it as a secessionist movement. But they forget what Lincoln had expressed in his first inaugural address: "This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their constitutional right of amending it, or their revolutionary right to dismember or overthrow it."

The evocation of the principle of self-determination also lays the groundwork for Bengali nationalism which needs to be properly understood and respected so that the false debate of Bengali vs Bangladeshi nationalism can be done away with. Nationalism based on self-determination does not express superiority of a nation over other nations; rather it recognises the equal right of every nation. So when we see racial discrimination in the CHT, that is not the consequence of Bengali nationalism but the violation of the very

idea of Bengali nationalism.

The Proclamation also upholds the secular ideals of Bangladesh. It's the idea of "equality" that clearly abolishes the principle of religious difference and gives equal rights to every citizen irrespective of their religious identity. That's why religion-based politics is a contradiction to the spirit of the Proclamation of Independence.

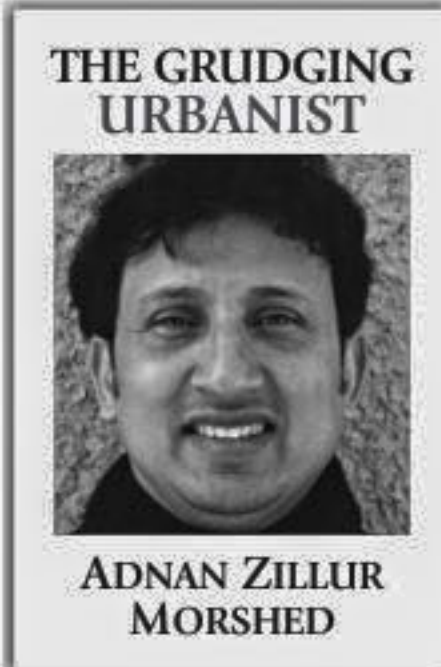
The Proclamation suggests that the whole purpose of the government is to secure people's rights and that the government gets its powers from the "consent of the governed." It discourages the idea of distributive equality where the state distributes equality to its citizens. That would be the liberal top-down theory of equality where it all begins with the state and then goes on to determine how people should be treated. Rather the Proclamation approaches the issue of equality as a bottom-up model. It starts from the people who engage in political action and bring changes in the state (or the economy, or the family, etc.) as a result. Though the current reality of Bangladesh suggests that we are yet to fully realise the ideals underlying our liberation struggle, we can take inspiration from the principles of the Proclamation of Independence and the history of the Mujibnagar government to carry out the unfinished revolution.

Dr Tawfik-e-Elahi Chowdhury BB, who, as the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) of Meherpur, played a critical role in organising the Mujibnagar ceremony, wrote in his diary upon his return from the oath-taking function: "On our way, we contemplated and realised that a nation had been born but it will be a long odyssey before we can establish this infant nation on the world stage."

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The wrong kind of fire



ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

germs. Like water and air, fire has been fundamental for human survival.

But fire, the wrong kind, has also threatened humanity across historical eras. The expression that "Nero fiddled while Rome burned" could very well be used to describe many fire-induced disasters in other cities and times. Fire has been used as a form of corporal punishment. Joan of Arc, the medieval French peasant girl, was tried for witchcraft and heresy, and burned at the stake in 1431. As I write this piece, the whole world watched in horror a fire-engulfed Notre Dame cathedral, a Parisian icon that inspired generations of artists, novelists, poets, and Francophiles.

Lately, Bangladesh has been bedevilled by the wrong kind of fires. Devastating fires killed scores of people in Old Dhaka, at Faruk Rupayan Tower in Banani, and other places in the country. Criminal negligence of fire prevention measures and inadequacy of fire response plans reveal how unprepared we remain for our middle-income aspirations. Most heartbreakingly, a young female *madrasa* student was recently set ablaze by the cohorts of a sexual predator because she sought to bring the culprit to justice. The frequent occurrence of the wrong kind of fires shows how unstable the country's collective moral backbone has become.

The time has come to discuss fire disasters in all their cultural, social, political,

environmental, and urban contexts. Nusrat Jahan Rafi, a student in Sonagazi Islamia Senior Fazil Madrasa in Feni, a southeastern town in Bangladesh, lodged a complaint against the *madrasa* principal who molested her. The deviant principal's burqa-clad accomplices took her to the rooftop of her school building, poured kerosene on her and set her on fire. They wanted her to die a violent, burning death.

But it was much more than that. It was an act of terrorism that was designed to set a brutal example of intimidation. That is, they rule and nobody should rise against them. Sexual predators, masquerading as teachers, operate with total impunity because they know how to position themselves in the fortified shelter of political affiliation, financial arrangement, and religious devotion.

Many would cite Nusrat's murder as a case of gender violence, allowed within the asymmetric and male-centric power structures of Bangladesh. But it is much more complex than how we conventionally understand gender violence as a conflict of male/female binary. Look at the processions that came out in Feni in support of the accused principal. Women are in the front row, demanding his immediate release. It is alleged that a few members of the group that set Nusrat afire were female students, who attended the *madrasa* with her. Nusrat's murder was preplanned, with a host of actors, and should not be seen merely as a case of patriarchy oppressing powerless women.

Her brutal death should alert us that gender violence, patriarchal domination, religious manipulation, financial nexus, and local politics create a variety of social chemical reactions that poison society in ways that black-and-white arguments often weaken or sever the path to justice. It is important to understand, for example, how



Criminal negligence of fire prevention measures and inadequacy of fire response plans, which became evident in the aftermath of the FR Tower fire, reveal how unprepared we remain for our middle-income aspirations.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

gender violence is simultaneously enabled and overlooked within the local tapestry of religious sentiments, political connections, and financial movements.

Seeing some of Nusrat's fellow female classmates demanding the release of the accused principal of the *madrasa* despite his direct complicity in the heart-wrenching death of the girl who sat with them on the same bench, read the same books, and possibly walked home together, should warn us about the ways in which religious patriarchy controls young minds with twisted interpretations of religion that suit their evil design. Would these girls still demand his release knowing that he allegedly orchestrated her murder from the district jail? In their

minds, these girls possibly think that they are defending their principal who represents Islam. Is there anybody who could convince them that he absolutely doesn't? Would the judicial court challenge the taboo subject of religious superstition and prejudice? What would it take to change the culture of ignorance and auto-manipulation?

By no means is this type of culture unique to Bangladesh. The rise of right-wing populism in the US, Brazil, Hungary, India, and other countries shows how a large number of people can be easily brainwashed to follow a false messiah. We are indeed passing through a troubling time. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's stewardship, in the wake of the Christchurch

mosque massacre, inspired hope that a leader's moral authority could transcend the petty politics of invested quarters.

It is time to fight for a better and humane Bangladesh. The increasing number of the wrong kind of fires suggests that Bangladesh needs to recalibrate its priorities to make "middle-income" aspirations more meaningful, beyond economic measures. I am sure Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was enraged by the tragic news of Nusrat's violent death. Like any other leader and mother, she would like to see the terrorists—who silenced Nusrat for good—brought to justice. This is both normal and hopeful.

But we need a cultural sea change to combat the kind of wrong fires that have been plaguing Bangladesh lately. The spectacular inadequacy of the fire brigade, in the wake of the Faruk Rupayan Tower inferno, shows that we are not yet ready to face the challenges of a modern, industrialising society. It is expected that as we modernise, urbanise, and build taller buildings, we'll have more and more chances of fire in our buildings. People will continue to die if we don't abide by building safety codes and enforce them.

The culprits who burned Nusrat to death and the building owners who ignored fire safety measures in their property in order to lower building construction and operational costs are motivated by one deep-seated pathology: they can get away with murder because they believe they have the political, financial, or religious backing of their superiors. No society can genuinely prosper without a fundamental arrangement of the rule of law and an ingrained sense of the greater good.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



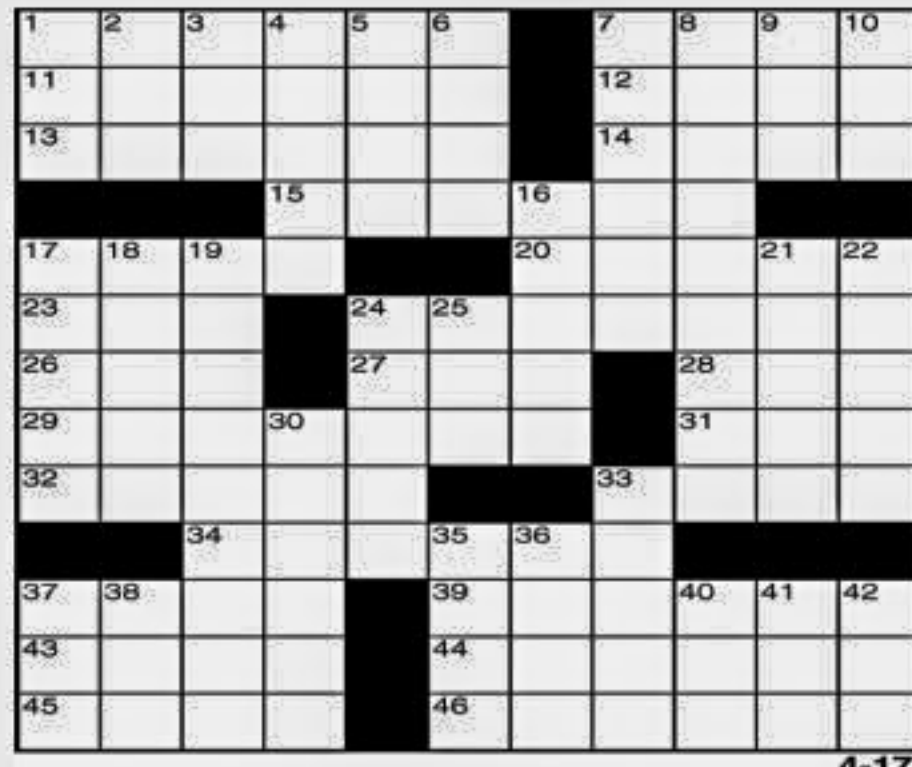
April 17, 1975 PHNOM PENH FALLS TO THE KHMER ROUGE

The regime under "Brother number 1" Pol Pot tortured and killed several million people. Amongst the communists' perceived enemies were intellectuals, anyone with a connection to the former government, and several ethnic minorities.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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| ACROSS | 33 Proofing note | 9 Gift tag word |
| 1 German city | 34 Neighbor of | 10 Sauna site |
| 7 Murders, in slang | Venezuela | 16 Beat at chess |
| 11 Source of wisdom | 37 Sting operation | 17 Parking pro |
| 12 Field yield | 39 Attack | 18 Unescorted |
| 13 Playing many venues | 43 Witch feature | 19 German city |
| 14 Scarlett's home | 44 God of light | 21 Novelist Alison |
| 15 Fish-tailed fellow | 45 Makes a choice | 22 "Cats" poet |
| 17 Bud holder | 46 German city | 24 Raid |
| 20 Sock site | DOWN | 25 Stunned wonder |
| 23 PC key | 1 Barn sound | 30 Blows one's top |
| 24 Portentous | 2 Caterer's pot | 33 Relish |
| 26 Rawls or Reed | 3 D.C. baseballer | 35 Obsessed captain |
| 27 Swiss canyon | 4 "Ready or not, here ..." | 36 Neck part |
| 28 Need to pay | 5 Detective's find | 37 Binary base |
| 29 Came in | 6 German mister | 38 Kanye's music |
| 31 Carnival city | 7 Pump rating | 40 Building wing |
| 32 Aquarium fish | 8 German city | 41 Noted pugilist |
| | | 42 Great weight |

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott

