

Bangabandhu's finest hour

FROM PAGE J1

He stood far taller than ever before and with him we too stood tall, far taller than we could ever imagine or even dream of till that moment. He was known for being a powerful and spellbinding speaker. But that day he outperformed himself a thousand times over, and a thousand times more empowered we felt that day because of him.

During that crucial March afternoon, and especially through the electrifying moments of the speech, the young Bangabandhu stood towering above the nation, singly shouldering the burden of leading an unprepared people towards an independence struggle that was later to become one of the most brutal.

However bravely we may talk today about those events so long ago, at that time we really did not know how things would unfold. Yes, we all wanted our rights and our freedom and we wanted them right away. But how were they to come? Was freedom to come through negotiations or would it require us to wage an armed struggle? And what did we know or understand about armed struggle? Did we really know what it would entail? We romanticised about it, but knew nothing of it. I myself along with a few went towards Demra and practiced with a .22 gun and fired a few shots. This was the extent of our 'training' till then.

It was becoming increasingly obvious that to realise our legitimate rights we may have to split the existing country and seek independence. But how is one to start an armed independence movement? What would be the consequence of making a declaration of it right now? What is it that we needed to do in case we were to start such an armed struggle soon?

Though we all talked about it, and some may even have said so in public, yet it was for our elected leader, it was that man on the dais who was to speak to and for the nation on this day and who would have to take us through that uncharted path.

Many do not fully appreciate the complexity of those moments. A premature call for action or an unprepared move could precipitate counter moves that would nip all our dreams in the bud. Many a revolution failed because of that.

The man who should be the Prime Minister of whole of Pakistan by dint of his electoral victory had to take the right step at the right time. The critical question was, when would be the right time to make that bold move? That was the burden that was being shouldered by the man who

stood tall on that podium.

And this is where the uniqueness and the brilliance of the 7th March speech lie. One must fully understand the very critical nature of the speech and the crucial moment when Bangabandhu was making it. There was no question that the Pakistani government and especially its military were waiting to pounce on us with all their might for any wrong move that Bangabandhu would make.

The master stroke of the speech is that it said everything without giving the enemy elements that could be used to hold us legally responsible under international law for breaking up the formal Pakistan. Although by then we knew that the country had actually broken up in every sense, the nuances of the legal world had to be observed and Bangabandhu did so most dexterously.

To fully appreciate the magnificence of this speech one has to understand the context in which it was delivered. Awami League had fought an election and won the majority of seats in the parliament of Pakistan. Following the results, Gen Yahya had declared that Sheikh Mujib would be the next prime minister. It was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and some conniving army generals who did not want to transfer power to someone whose electoral programme was to realise the legitimate rights of the Bangalee people enshrined in the now famous six points. There were many indications about the impending betrayal of the verdict of the December '70 elections, yet it was not till the postponement of the session of the newly elected parliament that Bangabandhu could really give a call for an all-out movement.

When the session of the parliament was postponed on 1st March '71, the fatal shot to the existence of united Pakistan was fired right into its chest. And it was on the night of 25th March, when Pakistani military cracked down on the civilian population of what was till then one country, and started what was later to become a genocide of the Bangalees that Pakistan was killed and buried. It was in the midst of this highly charged transition period – which started from 1st March – when events were unfolding at a breakneck speed that Bangabandhu had to give this speech.

And here lies the beauty and the craftsmanship of this speech, which transforms itself into a classic in the annals of political oratory, which was rightly honoured by UNESCO later.

Rebellion was in the air and

Bangabandhu's speech had to capture it in full. It had to live up to the expectations of a frenzied mass that wanted their independence and they wanted it now. Bangabandhu understood, felt and wanted it from the core of his heart. Yet, there should be nothing in the speech that could give an outright excuse to the Pakistan army to start military action against the unarmed people of what was to become independent Bangladesh in 9 months. In fact, Tikka Khan's bands of killers would want nothing better than to be given a publicly announced excuse for an army action which we now know would be genocidal and which had already been decided upon by the army junta.

So Bangabandhu had to say everything, and yet not give the excuse that Pakistan military was looking for. He had to stand steadfast and yet keep open the doors for negotiations which he knew and we understood to be, nothing but a farce.

Under no circumstances could he appear to be the one responsible for the breakdown of the talks. And yet he had to take his people forward and give them the right directions, maintain the militancy, ask them to take all the necessary preparatory steps, and clear people's minds about the final goal. It was a political and intellectual challenge of the highest kind, and it could be tackled only by a speech of the type that Bangabandhu delivered that day.

Take for example the content of the speech. In it he gradually builds up the whole rationale for the movement that has been going on. He argues, cajoles, pleads, demands and finally warns, not to take lightly the demand of a people who have realised their strength through struggle. He talks of peace and yet gives clear signals that peace cannot come at the cost of capitulation. He talks of sacrifice, but not in terms of a helpless people who are weak but in terms of a courageous and bold people who have knowingly taken upon themselves a task which they knew to be arduous and dangerous and for which they were ready to face any consequence.

There was superb cleverness in the construction of the speech in which he said all that needed to be said and yet the enemy could not hold him responsible for having said anything which was not within the legal limits.

The voice in the speech is one of its most magnificent aspects. It was so bold that the whole nation could, and in fact did, take strength from it. His voice was elevating us as if it carried the weight of the whole nation – 75 million at that time.



Bangabandhu addressing the historic March 7 meeting at Race Course Maidan.

PHOTO: NASIR ALI MAMUN/PHOTOSEUM

There was the unhesitant enunciation of everything that needed to be said. There was such a magnificent modulation of voice that every word uttered seemed to encapsulate our dreams. Every word seemed necessary and irreplaceable. By the way the words flowed it was apparent that it came from the heart and yet never lost that fine balance that a political speech of such significance had to have, especially at that moment in time.

Throughout it all the strength of the man came out and touched us all who heard him, drawing us all close to him and making us automatically and unquestioningly a part of him. We trusted and reposed our faith in him.

If ever a speech united, strengthened, enthused, inspired a people, and gave courage to them to become bolder and more determined than they usually are, it

was Bangabandhu's speech of 7th March 1971.

One single speech became the most effective motivational weapon for a nation soon to be at war.

This speech of our leader became the constant companion for every young freedom fighter (like myself and millions like me) facing an enemy known for their brutality and ferocity. It linked the people in a spellbinding string of words and sounds. For all of us, the freedom fighters, spread throughout the nook and corner of what was then our enslaved motherland, this speech was a constant companion and a never-ending source of inspiration and courage.

The above is an updated version of the article originally published 23 years ago as a commentary in this paper in 1997.

Bangabandhu's March 7 Press Statement

FROM PAGE J1

If what the President calls "minimum" use of force has resulted in thousands of casualties, are we to understand that what he calls "adequate" force would aim at extermination? I condemn such naked threats of force being held out against the unarmed civilian population of Bangla Desh. The armed forces have been armed at great cost to the nation in order to repel foreign aggressors and not for the purpose of mowing down civilian population. Today in Bangla Desh people require protection against the excesses being committed by the uniformed personnel from the other wing, who are acting like an army of occupation.

MACHINATIONS

It is said that the postponement of the National Assembly has been "misunderstood". I would like to ask the President whether or not this postponement was effected solely in response to the machinations of a single party--constituting a minority of the total members--against the declared wishes of the majority party and also those of numerous members from the Western wing? We had suggested the 15th February as the date for the first sitting, while the minority group question had indicated a preference for the first week of March. It was the minority group's view which was accepted and the Assembly was summoned on the 3rd March. But then the same minority group raised objections to participation in the National Assembly.

First, it took up the highly objectionable position that its members would be in "jeopardy" if they came to Dacca and that they would be "double hostages". Thereafter, this party took up the position that it would only attend the National Assembly on the terms dictated by it. It then went on to strike another posture when its members recorded a decision to resign from the National Assembly. What was particularly surprising was that almost simultaneously an amendment appeared in the LFO enabling members to resign before the first sitting. But then they decided not to resign. This party's intransigence reached its climax when on the 27th February it declared that it would launch a mass movement if the National Assembly was to meet without its participation. It went so far as to say that people would take full "revenge on those who chose to attend the Assembly session" and that "if the people failed to take revenge" then that party "would take action against them." It further threatened that if any members of its own attended, "the party workers would liquidate him."

SUDDEN POSTPONEMENT

By this time our parliamentary party had assembled at Dacca and members had already began to arrive from the different provinces of the western wing. The Chief Election Commissioner had reached Dacca and announced that the election of the women members was to be held on the 2nd March. The President himself was expected to arrive on the 1st March for the inaugural

session. Our own position on constitution-making had been clearly stated in our press statement on 24th February when we reiterated our invitation to each and every member of the National Assembly from all parts of Pakistan to cooperate with us in the historic task.

On the 27th February, we went to the extent of affirming that if any member presents before the Assembly anything just and reasonable, we would accept it. But even this was ignored, it would appear deliberately and with motive.

On the 1st March, by a radio statement there was sudden and unwarranted postponement of the National Assembly sitting sine die. The reason given was that there should be more time for "understanding," and it was said that there was "political confrontation between the leaders of East Pakistan and those of the West."

Did the people of Bangla Desh not have sufficient reason to feel that their democratic rights had been grossly interfered with at the behest of an undemocratic minority? Were there not enough grounds for them to feel that a minority group had aligned itself with certain forces to obstruct the constitutional process and to deprive the majority of the people of their rights? Indeed these apprehensions were further fortified by the steady military build up which became evident.

This showed that "political confrontation" was soon to be followed by "military confrontation," if the majority did not submit to the dictation of the minority group.

BENGALI PRIME MINISTER DISMISSED

Indeed, we had warned in our statement of the 24th February that dark conspiratorial forces had always intervened in our country whenever the people were to take over power through the democratic process. The microscopic minority, which represented the vested interest of the western wing, had by sabotaging democracy deprived the seventy-five million people of Bangla Desh, as they did the oppressed masses of the western wing, of their basic rights.

In 1953 the Bengali Prime Minister was dismissed by a conspiracy of the Punjabi ruling clique. In 1954, the elected Government in East Bengal was dismissed and the Constituent Assembly itself was dismissed by the same clique. When general elections were to be held in early 1959, the vested interests of the Punjab once again struck and usurped power.

Today the Punjabi ruling coterie is attempting to repeat this disgraceful history. But they should know that the awakened masses of Bangla Desh -- as also the oppressed masses of the western wing--shall resist their foul conspiracies by every means possible.

To set the record straight, I should make it clear that I had never conveyed any impression that a RTC-type of conference should be held. I had only conveyed to the President that he should come to Dacca in order to see the grave situation

prevailing in Bangla Desh in order to end the wanton killing of unarmed civilians. As for the earlier meeting proposed by the President, we had made it clear that our pre-occupation without Working Committee and parliamentary party meetings which had been fixed several weeks in advance would not enable us to travel Rawalpindi at that time.

Furthermore, we had pointed out that constitutional issues were best resolved within the National Assembly and its Committees rather than by secret negotiations, and that once a National Assembly had been brought into being, there was no justification for any RTC or secret parleys.

CHARGE REPUDIATED

I have recounted all these facts in detail to repudiate the charge that the Awami League has in any way obstructed the transfer of power. The majority party is certainly not the party which would stand to gain by such obstruction. It is only too clear to the people of the country and indeed the world that it is a minority group of the western wing which has obstructed and is continuing to obstruct the transfer of power. It would appear that the President has been considering it his "moral obligation" to submit to the dictation of this minority group. The democratic way of life cannot be established nor can power be transferred to the people if a minority group conspires with the vested interests to frustrate the democratic process. If the democratic way of life be the ultimate casualty and if the proposed transfer of power is aborted this minority group and those who colluded with it shall not escape responsibility.

Are these very elements not the "handful of people" whose actions have struck grievous blows to the efforts of the elected representatives of the people to evolve a basis for living together. The question which every right-thinking person must ask today is: whether the Armed Forces can be said to be discharging their duty of ensuring "the integrity, solidarity and security of Pakistan" by shooting down unarmed civilians all over Bangla Desh? By so acting are they not in fact acting as the principal force of disintegration?

Today after the elections the only legitimate source of authority in the country are the elected representatives of the people. No individual can claim authority superior to that of the elected representatives.

SOURCE OF AUTHORITIES

We, as the representatives of the overwhelming majority of the people of Bangla Desh, assert that we are the only legitimate source of authority for Bangla Desh. Indeed, by virtue of our majority position we are the legitimate source of authority for the whole country. The events of the last seven days have shown that all branches of government functioning throughout Bangla Desh have accepted us as the source of legitimate authority and have carried out our directives.

Today, the President and the government

at Islamabad should acknowledge this basic fact. It would therefore be in consonance with the declared wishes of the people of Bangla Desh that no one should interfere with the exercise of authority by the elected representatives of the people.

This brings us to the question of the sitting of the National Assembly announced for the 25th March. We had ourselves time and time again asserted the urgency in respect of an early sitting. But today a grave and abnormal situation has been created. A virtual reign of terror has been created in pursuance of the policy of military confrontation of the civilian population of Bangla Desh. Casualties in thousands have been reported and the cry of "genocide must stop" has been raised on all sides, including the common people of West Pakistan and right-thinking people all over the world. The members of the National Assembly cannot be expected to discharge their duties in an atmosphere of terror. So long as this state of confrontation as also the inflow of army personnel and arms from the western wing continues, so long as an atmosphere of repression is maintained, so long as there are daily reports of military firing upon civilians in different parts of Bangla Desh, the members from Bangla Desh could hardly be expected to contemplate participating in the National Assembly at gun-point.

SEVEN MEASURES

If the President sincerely desires that the National Assembly, as the sovereign body of the elected representatives of the people, should function then the following measures must immediately be adopted:

- Immediate withdrawal of 11 military personnel to their barracks;
- Immediate cessation of firing upon civilians, so that not a single bullet is fired with immediate effect;
- Immediate cessation of the military build up and the heavy inflow of military personnel from the western-wing;
- Non-interference by the military authorities in the different branches of the Government functioning in Bangla Desh and direction to desist from victimisation of Government officers and employees;
- Maintenance of law and order be left exclusively to the police and Bengali E.P.R assisted, wherever necessary, by Awami League volunteers;
- Immediate withdrawal of Martial law;
- Immediate transfer of Power to the elected representatives of the people.

If the military confrontation continues and our unarmed people continue to be mowed down by bullets, let there be no doubt that no National Assembly can ever function.

Our people have already proclaimed to the world that they shall no longer allow themselves to be exploited as a colony or a market. They have expressed their determination to be the free citizens of free country. Our economy must be saved from ruin. Our toiling masses are to be saved from starvation, disease and unemployment.

The millions in the cyclone-ravaged areas

are yet to be rehabilitated. If the ruling coterie seeks to frustrate these aspirations, the people are ready for a long and sustained struggle for their emancipation. We pledge to lead this struggle and ultimately to attain for the people their cherished goal of emancipation, for which so many martyrs have shed their blood and made the supreme sacrifice of their lives. The blood of these martyrs shall not go in vain.

The first phase of our struggle has been launched. Our heroic masses have displayed indomitable courage and determination. They have braved bullets and violated curfews in a planned manner. I also congratulate our people, and our Awami League volunteers, who have frustrated the designs of agent-provocateurs and anti-social elements to create communal tension between different religious groups and between Bengalis and so-called "non-Bengalis". I once again re-affirm that every person living in Bangla Desh is a Bengali and that his person, property and honour, are our sacred trust and must at any cost be protected. We are proud to note that since our volunteers have undertaken the task of vigilance and patrol there have been no untoward incidents.

Our struggle must continue. The objective of the present phase of the struggle is the immediate termination of martial law and the transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people. Till this objective is attained, our non-violent, non-co-operation movement must continue.

PROGRAMME OF ACTION

The programme of action for the week commencing 8th March, 1971 is as follows:

- No-tax campaign to continue;
- The Secretariat, government and semi-government offices, High Court and other court throughout Bangla Desh should observe hartals. Appropriate exemptions shall be announced from time to time;
- Railways and ports may function, but railway workers and port workers should not co-operate if railways or ports are used for mobilisation of forces for the purpose of carrying out repression against the people;
- Radio, television and newspapers shall give complete versions of our statements and shall not suppress news about the people's movement, otherwise Bengalis working in these establishments shall not co-operate;
- Only local and inter-district trunk telephones communication shall function;
- All educational institutions shall remain closed;
- Banks shall not affect remittances to the western wing either through the State Bank or otherwise;
- Black flags shall be hoisted on all buildings everyday;
- Hartal is withdrawn in all other spheres, but complete or partial hartal may be declared at any moment depending upon the situation;
- A Songram Parishad should be organised in each union, mahalla, thana, subdivision and district under the leadership of the local Awami League units.