

BANGABANDHU'S HOMECOMING DAY

# The momentous return of the Father of the Nation



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

**STRAIGHT LINE**  
JANUARY 10, 1972, shall remain a historic milestone in the annals of Bangladesh's political history because on this day the towering patriarch, fondly called Bangabandhu (Friend of Bengal) by ever grateful Bangalis, came home to his people after

suffering nine months of illegal incarceration in Pakistani prison. It was indeed a painful journey from all-enveloping darkness to bright light and freedom. The homecoming of Bangabandhu assumed special significance because the military victory on December 16, 1971, happened when the progenitor and emancipator of our liberation struggle was away in hostile distant land in unknown conditions. Thus, when the supreme leader came home as a freeman in an emotion-charged situation, the joy of the people knew no bounds.

Bangabandhu's homecoming was significantly different from that of Ayatollah Khomeini's return from France to Iran in 1979 or even the release of Nelson Mandela from 25 years of captivity in South Africa because his return meant the commencement of an epoch-making march of a new nation, which suffered one of history's worst genocide. A fledgling nation, badly bruised both physically and psychologically by nine months of unprecedented savagery of a rogue military junta, needed a commanding and caring stewardship. Fortunately, Bangladesh enjoyed providential blessings in having Bangabandhu in the tumultuous immediate aftermath of liberation, to provide the urgently required stability that in turn ensured Bangladesh's international recognition as a sovereign entity.

It is worth recalling that Bangabandhu

never wilted for a moment during his captivity in Pakistani prison and did not compromise his stance even when approached by the then president of Pakistan for retaining some links with that country. We also need to know that on his historic journey to Bangladesh via London and New Delhi he displayed statesmanlike acumen and farsightedness.

On January 8, 1972, at a news conference in London, Bangabandhu said that an independent Bengali nation was now "an unchallengeable reality" and appealed to all countries to recognise the new government and provide aid so that "millions of my people may not die". Prime Minister Edward Heath who was out in the country, quickly returned to 10 Downing Street to meet Bangabandhu. They talked for an hour and Heath promised Britain would do all she could to help in the economic emergency.

In the following press conference, Bangabandhu said: "Gentlemen of the press, today, I am free to share the unbounded joy of freedom with my fellow countrymen. We have earned our freedom in an epic liberation



Reaching Bangladesh on January 10, 1972, Bangabandhu once again delivered a memorable speech at the same Race Course Maidan where he gave the clarion call for emancipation and independence on March 7, 1971.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

*While the March 7 speech was heralded as the declaration of the struggle for emancipation and independence, the January 10 speech drew up guidelines for the new nation, on how to realise the spirit of those struggles with courage and patriotism.*

struggle. The ultimate achievement of the sovereign peoples' Republic of Bangladesh, of which my people have declared me president while I was a prisoner in a condemned cell awaiting the execution of a sentence of hanging."

Before reaching home Bangabandhu made a brief stopover in New Delhi where he was welcomed as the president of Bangladesh. Seventy five million jubilant Bangalis watched their head of state inspect an honour guard before setting off for the historic Race Course Maidan, the same venue where echoes of his March 7, 1971 clarion call to liberty was still being heard. The nation needs to know that during this brief stay in New Delhi, Bangabandhu succeeded in obtaining Indian premier's assurance about the expeditious withdrawal of Indian troops from the soil

of Bangladesh. By all accounts, this was an extraordinary feat of statesmanship.

Reaching Bangladesh on January 10, 1972, Bangabandhu once again delivered a memorable speech at the same Race Course Maidan where he gave the clarion call for emancipation and independence on March 7, 1971. While the March 7 speech was heralded as the declaration of the struggle for emancipation and independence, the January 10 speech drew up guidelines for the new nation, on how to realise the spirit of those struggles with courage and patriotism.

Bangabandhu said that his life's desire has been fulfilled as the people of Bengal have been liberated and Bengal would remain free. In an emotion charged voice he said: "I did not know I was sentenced to death by hanging. A grave was dug for me beside my cell. I prepared myself. I said I am a Bangali,

I am a Man, I am a Muslim—who dies once, not twice. I said, if death comes to me I will die laughing. I will not die dishonouring my Bengali nation, I will not beg your pardon. And will shout while dying, Joy Bangla, Free Bangla, Bengal is my nation, Bangla is my language, the land of Bangla is my abode."

One can see the extraordinarily unbounded love and deep commitment of the Poet of Politics, as Bangabandhu was portrayed by the western media, to his people. Quite explicit in the speech was Bangabandhu's firm realisation of his ethnic and religious identity. His humane self and vision was brilliantly manifest when speaking about the Urdu-speaking non-Bangali population stranded in Bangladesh, he said firmly, "I am saying to my brothers, do not mistreat them. We are humans, we love humans."

Bangabandhu also said, "my brothers, you know, we have a lot of work to do. I want all my people to begin work on the construction of the roads where broken. I want you all to go back to the field and cultivate paddy." He concluded by saying that, "We will remain independent if Allah wills. The struggle shall continue as long as a single living soul exists in Bangladesh."

The magnificence of Bangabandhu's persona continues to evoke enviable admiration from many despite the ill-conceived efforts of a mischievous quarter to downplay and erase him from public memory. History, however, has conferred such an immortal honour on Bangabandhu that long after his sad demise he exerts an authority over the nation which is unparalleled and majestic in its solitary history. He confronted life with a tight-lipped courage and his unquenchable spirit was to set sail beyond the sunset. The walls were crumbling and an obstinate military junta collapsed while Bangabandhu stood like a heroic figure at the gates of dawn challenging the new day.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former IGP of Bangladesh.

## 'A tumultuous and triumphal homecoming'



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

**BLOWN' IN THE WIND**  
ON January 17, 1972, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine. The cover illustration used a yellow diagonal label that cuts across the magazine's iconic red title "TIME" to write: "Bangladesh: From Jail to Power".

The image of a bold Sheikh Mujib donning a black prince coat with a splash of white collar peeking out of it complements his salt and pepper grey hair and moustache. His brown skin against the blue canvas makes the subtle Sheikh Mujibur Rahman synonymous to Bangladesh under the new azure sky. For nine months, the country was incarcerated just like he was in a jail in Lyallpur, Pakistan. Mujib returned from jail on January 10 not only to assume power but also to make his people feel powerful in an independent country. The illustration depicts worries in the brown eyes of the charismatic figure that capture the tenor of the cover story.

"The rape of the country continued right up until the Pakistani army surrendered a month ago. In the last days of the war, West-Pakistani owned businesses—which included nearly every commercial enterprise of the country—remitted virtually all their funds to the West. Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) left exactly Rs 117 (USD 16) in its account at the port city of Chittagong. The army also destroyed banknotes and coins, so that many areas now suffer from a severe shortage of ready cash. Private cars were picked up off the streets or confiscated from auto dealers and shipped to the West Pakistan before the ports were closed" (*Time*, January 17, 1972). The worries that are written on Bangabandhu's face then are no surprise.

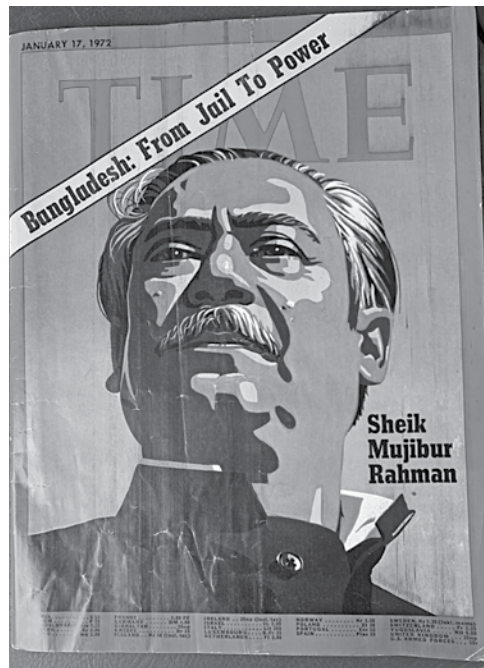
Only days before the story was published, Bangabandhu was allowed to leave Pakistan

for London on a special cargo flight of the PIA. As the flight took off, the newly appointed Pakistan President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who came to see him off at Islamabad Airport, told his entourage, "the bird has flown" (SA Karim *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy*, pg. 254). Why they didn't kill the bird while it was in the cage is an issue often used by the opposition to muddy the waters!

According to the *Time* story, Bhutto didn't have any choice but to set Mujib free. "A Mujib imprisoned, Bhutto evidently decided, was of no real benefit to Pakistan; a Mujib dead and martyred would only have deepened the East Bengali's hatred of their former countrymen. But a Mujib allowed to return to his rejoicing people might perhaps be used to coax Bangladesh into forming some sort of loose association with Pakistan" (pg. 6).

Bhutto held two meetings with the imprisoned Bangabandhu to "coax" him into maintaining future bonds. The first foreign secretary of Bangladesh SA Karim gives some insights into the days preceding Bangabandhu's return. Bhutto tried to befriend Bangabandhu by posing himself as a saviour figure who allowed him to be released from Mianwali jail—a place where he himself was imprisoned by the Ayub regime—and brought to the Sihala Rest House in Rawalpindi on December 26, 1971. Bhutto even quoted his predecessor General Yahya, who had to hand over power to him after the inglorious surrender of the Pakistan army, saying, "Mr Bhutto, I've made the greatest blunder (of my life) of not killing Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Now kindly allow me, before handing over power, to kill Sheikh Mujibur Rahman giving ante-date, back-date hanging and then hand over power" (pg. 251). Bangabandhu's "personal experience" of Bhutto allowed him to treat his counterpart's statements "with a certain amount of circumspections" (Karim pg. 252).

Bangabandhu at that point of time had no knowledge of Bhutto's meeting with



The cover of *Time* Magazine's January 17, 1972 issue.

the Nixon administration that envisioned "a stabilising role [of Mujib] in emerging Bangladesh" (pg. 250). The released documents of the US government show that Bhutto told the US Secretary of State and President Nixon that he did not see Mujib's influence lasting in Bangladesh for more than three months. A clever Bhutto hid the international pressure by orchestrating public opinion before freeing Mujib. He addressed a rally of his 100,000 supporters in Karachi, asking, "Do you want Mujib freed?" The crowd roared a resounding yes, and the President acted like Pontius Pilate while deciding the fate of Jesus to say, "You have relieved me of a great burden."

Bangabandhu's return to Dhaka on January 10, in the words of Srinath Raghavan,

is both tumultuous and triumphal (1971: *A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh*). The day after India formally got engaged in the war, a military tribunal in Pakistan sentenced Sheikh Mujib to death. He was flown from Lyallpur jail to Mianwali jail in a helicopter, and was kept in a specially vacated accommodation in the female ward. The other Pakistani inmates stirred a raucous riot shouting they did not want to share their prison with "a traitor". From his cell he could hear the digging of a grave. The Pakistani officer denied the thought by saying that a trench was being dug in the event of aerial bombardments. Once the war was lost, Pakistan had to return Mujib—but they tried to hide the fact of their loss.

The Pakistanis decided to send Mujib to Dhaka through Tehran to avoid Indian air space. Later they decided to send him to London in an unscheduled flight at 5:20 in the morning on January 8, 1972. Mujib called up the acting head of the unofficial Bangladesh mission Rezaul Karim from the VIP lounge. The envoy could not believe his ears when he heard the voice that woke him up: "Rezaul Karim, this is Sheikh Mujib." It

was from Rezaul Karim, he heard from the first time Bangladesh had won independence. Mujib wanted to stay in a small hotel in Russel Square, but the expatriate students sponsored for his stay in Claridge's as it was a better fit for a head of state.

In his 26-hour stay in London, Mujib suddenly became a leader of a potential Commonwealth country. The British PM Edward Heath returned from his weekend visit to Chequers to meet him at 10 Downing Street. A Royal Air Force jet was allocated to him for his return to Dhaka. The plane made a brief fuel stop in Cyprus before coming to New Delhi. At the Palam Airport, Indian President VV Giri and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi came to receive him.

A natural spokesman, Mujib addressed the crowd who came to see him, saying, "I decided to stop over in this historic capital of your great country, on my way to Bangladesh, for this is the least I could do to pay a personal tribute to the best friends of my people... I am at last going back to *Sonar Bangla*, the land of my dreams after a period of nine months. In these nine months my people have traversed centuries. When I was taken away from my people, they wept; when I was held in captivity, they fought; and now when I am back to them, they are victorious" (*The Voice of Freedom*, Bangla Academy, pg. 219).

Bangabandhu's diplomatic acumen is reflected in his polite refusal to take an Indian plane from New Delhi. He declined the suggestion by saying that it would be graceless for the RAF Comet to return to London without finishing its mission to return Mujib to Dhaka. On landing at Old Dhaka Airport, Bangabandhu received a tumultuous welcome. Instead of going to his residence, Bangabandhu went to the Race Course in an open Dodge truck, where he addressed a spontaneous gathering of thousands of people. Here in the race course, he told the Pakistanis, once and for all, "You have your independence. Let us have our independence."

Shamsad Mortuza is the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of ULAB.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR (1908-1986)**  
French writer and feminist.

*Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself and in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Finish off
- 6 Sink feature
- 11 Stood
- 12 Before dawn
- 13 Stopwatch button
- 14 Early Mexican
- 15 Item of little value
- 17 Morse bit
- 19 Chiding sound
- 20 Mrs., in Marseilles
- 23 Banishes
- 25 Get better
- 26 Traditional New Year's Eve site
- 28 Lofty poems
- 29 Not private
- 30 Ballot markings

**DOWN**

- 1 Spoil
- 2 Vein contents
- 3 When races start
- 4 Manual reader
- 5 Some dresses
- 6 Traded
- 7 Tear down
- 8 Gallery fill
- 9 - de France
- 10 Where the IRT runs
- 16 Hard-to-please sort
- 17 Addict's program
- 18 Rust, for one
- 20 Grace periods?
- 21 Opera's Callas
- 22 Put in office
- 24 "Misér-ables"
- 25 Wheel part
- 27 Showed fear
- 31 New Year's games
- 33 Foray
- 34 Baja boy
- 35 Spring month
- 36 Director DuVernay
- 37 Road sight
- 39 Vert for you
- 40 Call for help

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinon@gmail.com.

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

S	A	V	E	S	T	R	I	M
A	M	I	G	A	S	E	I	N
V	E	N	O	M	N	E	S	T
O	R	E	S	L	O	N	E	R
R	I	G	S	E	W	E	R	O
S	C	A	L	P	E	L	S	
A	R	E	A	I	A	G	O	
T	O	N	I	C	A	L	P	E
I	R	O	B	O	T	S	A	G
A	D	I	E	U	S	I	T	A
R	E	S	T	S	A	N	I	M
A	R	E	S	D	E	N	I	S

**BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER**

WHAT'S THAT CLOUD OVER THERE?  
PROBABLY BEETLE AND SARGE

A FIGHT?!

IT'S MORE ARM-WAVING AND FOOT-STOMPING THAN PUNCHING AND KICKING

**BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**

ZOE WANTS TO HAVE A SLEEP-  
OVER.

HOW MANY GIRLS?

NOT SURE YET.

WE'RE WAITING FOR THE LAB RESULTS.