

HISTORIC MARCH 7

# Bangabandhu's rapier-like words reflected his unswerving resolution

NAADIR JUNAID

**I**N the very first general elections of Pakistan held in December 1970, the Awami League won an absolute majority in the National Assembly. But for the Pakistani military junta as well as the Pakistan People's Party head Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the desire to retain control of the central government took precedence over the need to abide by democratic norms. The central government paid no heed to the Six Point demands presented by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1966, the implementation of which would have eradicated the economic and political disparities suffered by the Bengali majority since the inception of Pakistan. The Pakistani ruling minority became anxious about the Six-Point demands after the landslide victory of the Awami League. President Yahya Khan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the senior military generals became involved in machinations to prevent a political party led by Bengali politicians from forming the government in Pakistan. On March 1, 1971, General Yahya Khan postponed the inaugural session of the National Assembly for an indefinite period. The President's announcement provoked widespread public outrage and the people of then East Pakistan ran out of patience with the unjust attitude towards them by the Pakistani military-bureaucratic authority. A storm of protest erupted across Bangladesh. Declaring that the central government's manoeuvre would not go unchallenged, Bangabandhu initiated a Non-Cooperation Movement against the Pakistani authorities guilty of repudiating the democratic process. Strikes were observed on March 2 and 3, and a public meeting was organised in Dhaka on March 7. A few lines from the much-cited opening paragraph of Charles

Dickens' famous novel *A Tale of Two Cities* can aptly be drawn on to describe the disorienting situation of Dhaka in the first week of March 1971. Certainly, "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness." Since the postponement of the meeting of the National Assembly, a premonition of ominous events loomed large in Bangladesh. Yet, infuriated Bengalis took to the streets spontaneously, chanting the slogan *Bir Bangali osthro dhoro, Bangladesh swadhin koro* (Brave Bengalis take up arms, and liberate Bangladesh). The demonstrators often carried bamboos and sticks and did not hesitate to defy the curfew imposed by the military administration. On certain occasions, the army opened fire on the protestors and inflicted casualties. As a confrontation with the military administration seemed imminent, trepidation grew amongst people that innocent blood might be spilled in the days to come. Yet, thousands of Bengalis, especially students and the youth, were filled with an impatient desire to hear the declaration of independence of Bangladesh by Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In this tumultuous situation, the public meeting scheduled to be held on March 7 at Ramna Race Course became extremely important. People from all walks of life in Bangladesh were eager to know Bangabandhu's position in that perilous situation and to receive instructions. The meeting, held in the very heart of Dhaka city, was attended by millions. Even blind young men marched in procession to the meeting. Standing before a sea of people, Bangabandhu made a speech that was characterised by a sense of justifiable anger as well as incredible poise. The 19-minute long extempore speech has gone down in history as one of



Bangabandhu's historic speech on March 7, 1971.

PHOTO: JALALUDDIN HAIDER

the most memorable and powerful political speeches ever delivered in a grievously unstable situation. The speech also inspired people to remain resolved to fight for the much-coveted independence of Bangladesh. Because of its enormous success in instilling courage in people in a crisis situation and in rousing them to fight oppression, Bangabandhu's March 7 speech can rightly be considered the equal of the other greatest speeches of the world—such as "We Shall Fight on the Beaches" by Winston Churchill in 1940, "I have a Dream" by Martin Luther King Jr in 1963, "Give Me Blood and I Shall Give You Freedom" by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose in 1944, "The Hypocrisy of American Slavery" by Frederick Douglass in 1852, "I am Prepared to Die" by Nelson Mandela in 1964, and the Gettysburg Address, delivered by Abraham Lincoln in 1863. Many people anticipated and wanted that Bangabandhu would make a unilateral declaration of the independence of Bangladesh in

his speech on March 7. However, Bangabandhu and the senior leaders of the Awami League realised that declaring independence would provide the government with an opportunity to unleash a vicious military assault on innocent civilians on the pretext of protecting the integrity of Pakistan. So, the speech perspicaciously avoided making the declaration, yet Bangabandhu demonstrated his fierce determination to support and strengthen the struggle of the Bengalis for freedom by declaring that *Ebarer Sangram Amader Muktir Sangram, Ebarer Sangram Swadhinotar Sangram* (The struggle this time is for our liberation, the struggle this time is for independence). These valiant statements succinctly summed up the speech of Bangabandhu and also signalled his stand on the existing predicament. By describing the current rising up of the Bengalis as the struggle for freedom and independence, Bangabandhu made his directions quite explicit

for the people eagerly looking forward to hearing the declaration of independence. Although independence was not formally declared in that meeting, these lines were equivalent to a declaration of independence. Bangabandhu's speech blended both agony and outrage. He lamented the cruelty and subjugation to which the Bengalis were subjected since 1952. He also informed people of the unwillingness of the Pakistani authorities at the time to ensure the creation of a democratic system. By expressing intense anger towards the way the Pakistani army had been shooting unarmed Bengalis, Bangabandhu requested the people to build fortresses in each and every house if a single more bullet was fired. He urged the people to confront the enemy with whatever they had. By mentioning in his speech the necessity of ensuring the rights of the Bengali population, the immense strength of the unity of the 75 million people of this country and

the killings of innocent civilians, Bangabandhu raised the courage and consciousness of the people of Bangladesh. He emphatically asserted that since we had given blood already, we would not fear further bloodshed but, we would liberate the people of this country by the grace of God. The unfair treatment of the Bengalis by the Pakistani authorities was scathingly denounced in this speech. However, Bangabandhu also requested the Pakistani authorities to be sensible enough to solve the problem in a peaceful manner. He requested the authorities not to try to govern Bangladesh via military rule, but later events revealed that these requests were bitterly resented by the Pakistani military junta. Apart from the use of incandescent and courageous words, Bangabandhu's extraordinary oratorical skills lent a phenomenal quality to the March 7 speech. In that confused and agitated time, the people of Bangladesh were badly in need of the able guidance of a leader. Bangabandhu's speech not only provided the people with explicit instructions but also inspired them to face adversity with courage and determination. The Pakistani junta ignored the warning of Bangabandhu that 75 million people could not be suppressed. They launched an all-out military offensive on the Bengalis on March 25, 1971. But the Pakistani military government had not bargained for the great fortitude of the people of Bangladesh. Bangladesh won its independence from Pakistani rule after nine months through a Liberation War involving much bloodshed. The unflinching resolution reflected in Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's historic speech of March 7 was an infinite inspiration to our freedom fighters.

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## The speech that galvanised a nation

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

**T**HE significance of the historic March 7 speech of Bangabandhu lies in the fact that it was extempore—that is, without any prior preparation—but which in effect prepared an entire population for an epic struggle leading to its emancipation from the shackles of a brutal, obstinate and autocratic establishment. The deprivation, desire, intent, anger and expectations of a rejuvenated population found an eloquent and poignant expression in the soul-stirring captivating speech of 19 minutes at the historic Race Course Maidan. As a public speaker, Bangabandhu never failed to appropriately capture the emotions and expectations of his audience and on March 7, 1971, he was at his eloquent best—stopping short of an outright declaration of independence, he said what needed to be said at that historic juncture. We have to bear in mind that he was a constitutional politician and had to be aware of the limiting factors. Although by March 7 many began to realise that independence was the only acceptable goal, the burden of responsibility rested on Bangabandhu. The full implications of an outright declaration of independence on March 7 had to be carefully weighed. The cynics who point to the absence of a unilateral declaration of independence on March 7 conveniently forget that such a



Bangabandhu's speech gave the Bengali people courage and inspired the birth of an entire nation.

PHOTO: ARCHIVES

declaration would have meant the direct engagement of the full force of the Pakistani military. Quite naturally, such a move would have given the army a pretext for applying force to impose their will. In such an eventuality, the premonition that an unarmed population could not have absorbed the shock of a massive onslaught cannot escape a rational strategist. There was also the issue of the holding capacity of Bengalis against an organised military operation; and given the different global and regional interests of the world powers at the given

time, there were credible doubts on whether recognition and acceptance of an independent Bangladesh could become a reality. For Bangladesh, it is indeed a matter of honour to know that on October 30, 2017, UNESCO added this speech to the Memory of the World Register as a documentary heritage. On March 7, Bangabandhu stood up at the Race Course Maidan and delivered a thunderous speech that laid the foundations of Bangladesh. His opening utterances effectively highlighted recent happenings and appealed to the audience when he said: "My dear

brothers, I have come before you today with a heavy heart. All of you know and understand how hard we have tried. But it is a matter of sorrow that the streets of Dhaka, Chattogram, Khulna, Rangpur and Rajshahi have today become coloured with the blood of my brothers. Today, the people of Bengal want freedom, they want to live, the people of Bengal want their rights." According to one observer, "if the contents of the speech are analysed, it is seen that it was basically a message about the emergence of a new State on the global map and a notification cum narrative on the winding up of the eastern region of the then Pakistani State as a natural progression." This speech was a psychological and morale booster during the nine months of the liberation struggle

*"The arms that were purchased with our money to protect the country from attacks by external enemies are now being used against the poor, sad and suffering people of my country."*

and Bengalis, young or old, were energised with the patriotic zeal to achieve the desired emancipation. One could say that this memorable address was a de facto declaration of Bangladesh's independence. If one sees through the lens of a mass communication expert, one would find that "it was a dialogue between the people of Bangladesh and their undisputed leader on the eve of Bangladesh's birth". In effect, the speech became a historic document of our liberty. One could not but be moved by the conversationalist style of the speech in which Bangabandhu raised five questions at different stages, and those were, "What wrong have we done? What did we get? What Round Table Conference? With whom shall we sit? Shall we sit with those who have taken the blood of my people?" When it came to the issue of giving orders, directives or warnings, the expressions in the speech were short and direct like "the employees will fetch their salaries on the 28th. Turn all your homes into fortresses. I say to the government employees: what I say has to be obeyed. As long as this country does not become free, no revenues/taxes will be paid. Nobody will pay." The speech placed on record undeniable facts of history and roused the patriotic zeal of the people when Bangabandhu, in an emotion-charged voice, said: "The arms that

were purchased with our money to protect the country from attacks by external enemies are now being used against the poor, sad and suffering people of my country. Bullets are being fired into their chests. We are the majority in Pakistan, but whenever we tried to assert our rights, they pounced upon us." Dale Carnegie has famously said that "The best argument is one, which seems merely an explanation." Viewed in this light, "A lucid and detailed explanation about the events unfolding at the time made this speech withstand the test of logic for all times to come." The last sentence of Bangabandhu's March 7 speech—"The struggle this time is for emancipation! The struggle this time is for independence!"—was effectively a declaration of independence expressed with a firm resolve, which had, in fact, defined the speech. The way he concluded the speech tallied exactly with textbook communication theory. It is said, don't drag out your conclusion. We often use words like "in conclusion" or "we must say one thing" while concluding a speech. But Bangabandhu directly entered the "speech definition" in his historic address—through an appropriate application of communication theory, which was quite unthinkable 50 years ago.

Muhammad Nurul Huda is a former IGP of Bangladesh.

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**CONFUCIUS**  
Chinese philosopher (September 28, 551 BC—April 11, 479 BC)

*It does not matter how slowly you go as long as you do not stop.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Singer Tori
- 5 Cowboy wear
- 10 Had supper
- 12 Ibis's cousin
- 13 Dull finish
- 14 San Antonio mission
- 15 "Believer"
- 16 Delivery company
- 18 Generous patron
- 20 Brewpub order
- 21 Bear in the air
- 23 Brick carrier
- 24 Parental warning
- 26 New Mexico resort
- 28 Agent, for short
- 29 Topers

**DOWN**

- 1 Let on
- 2 Marlins' home
- 3 Available
- 4 Filming location
- 5 Spiced drink
- 6 Beatles movie
- 7 Plains Indian
- 8 Big citrus fruits
- 9 Was a noisy sleeper
- 11 Dry areas
- 17 Day pts.
- 19 Bit or wordplay
- 22 Not nude
- 24 Regret
- 25 Best
- 27 Nile slitherer
- 28 Traveled the river
- 30 Exalted verse
- 33 Pitcher Satchel
- 34 Spanish hero
- 35 Insurance figures
- 37 Mosquito, e.g.
- 38 Baked buys
- 42 Oath

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**TUESDAY'S ANSWERS**

A	S	H	R	A	M	S	W	I	G
P	H	O	E	B	E	P	A	L	E
R	E	G	A	L	E	I	S	L	E
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**BEETLE BAILEY** BY MORT WALKER

**BABY BLUES** BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT