

National Mourning Day

We must put greater emphasis on implementing Bangabandhu's ideal

TODAY is the 46th anniversary of the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Within less than four years of the birth of Bangladesh, the founder of the country, the Father of the Nation, was killed along with all his family members, save his two daughters—Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her sister, Sheikh Rehana. The killers did not even spare 10-year-old Russell and the newly wedded wives of Sheikh Kamal and Sheikh Jamal.

The brutality of the killing shocked the world, devastated our morale, and shook the very roots of our belief in ourselves. What the Pakistanis didn't do, or wouldn't dare to do, was done by fellow Bangladeshis, many of whom, making the tragedy more unbearable, were freedom fighters. What did not happen in colonised Bangladesh happened after our independence. The man who united us and gave us the courage to stand up to the ferocious genocidal Pakistan army, now lay slain in the hands of a handful of ambitious, misguided and arrogant members of our armed forces driven by hatred.

What the assassins wanted to achieve—a total collapse of the newly born state—has most forcefully been negated by the success that Bangladesh has achieved in the economic field, which is due largely to the leadership of Sheikh Hasina over the last decade.

However, the economic success, which very few both at home and abroad actually believed that we would be able to achieve—a success that has made us the talk of the development community—now needs to be added to by our attention on the social and humanitarian fields. The corruption and the massive rich-poor gap that we now see, would definitely have pained him.

Bangabandhu's humanity, his concern for the poor and the downtrodden, and especially his respect for freedom of speech and fundamental rights, are also his legacy. The time has come for us to put stronger focus on these areas.

We join the nation in mourning the assassination of Bangabandhu.

Taliban rule in Afghanistan now seems inevitable

What should Bangladesh and the rest of South Asia brace for?

THE latest and most significant achievement of the Taliban has been their takeover of Kandahar—Afghanistan's second-largest city after Kabul—on Friday. Now, only Kabul and some other territories remain under the Afghan government's control. With this, the United States intelligence's recently reported assumption that it could take the Taliban up to 90 days to take over Kabul, is starting to seem grossly inaccurate. This newest acquisition of the Taliban's, paired with the speed with which they are nearing total dominance over the country, is somewhat of a shock to the whole world. But more than anything, it speaks to the incapacity of the US and of the NATO alliance as a whole.

The two-decades-long presence of the US in Afghanistan seems to have accomplished very little in terms of establishing peace and security for the Afghans. But what is more disappointing is how, now that the US is finally withdrawing itself—a move that has been hinted at for the last few years at least—their actions not only seem unprepared, but have left vulnerable both the Afghan people and American citizens deployed in Afghanistan.

While the Taliban started out with rural takeovers many months ago, it was not until early June this year that they began taking over the cities as well, and with surprising ease and speed. Just in the past week, they have managed to conquer at least 12 provincial capitals. Now, Kabul does not seem a far cry, given the fall of Ghazni on Thursday and of Kandahar on Friday—the former creating a pathway from the southern Taliban territories into the major highway leading to the capital city. Since the beginning of this year, around 400,000 Afghan civilians have been forced out of their homes, with 250,000 of them being evicted in May alone, a UN official conveyed in reports.

One thing that the Taliban's progress of the last couple of months has made certain is that the US's credibility as an ally to ailing nations has been greatly and strikingly dented. But, as the west fears the threat a Taliban rule of Afghanistan would pose for it, and many are busy only criticising President Biden's policy and its inadequacy, we in South Asia must start preparing for the real-life impacts that this takeover may have on our people.

It would unfortunately be safe to assume that the accomplishment of such a sizable feat by the Taliban would morally boost like-minded individuals and organisations throughout the subcontinent to act on their fundamentalist beliefs. Moreover, people being connected across borders has never been easier, which makes it hard to detect communication between fundamentalists of different countries and even continents. While the temptation of governments may be to meet such occurrences with force, the importance of physiological countering through de-radicalisation—of those likely to fall prey to recruitment by fundamentalists—needs to be established and practiced. We must remember, given the fifth anniversary of the Holey Artisan attack this past July, that Bangladesh itself has faced a handful of instances of militant activities and we have only seen those being dealt with by the police and other law enforcement agencies. However, we believe that an approach combining soft and hard power will be more effective in countering and eventually eradicating extremism of any origin and in any region.

The ideals that Bangabandhu lived and died for



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

THERE was something ominous about the day in which Bangabandhu was laid to rest in his native village of Tungipara when, according to the village elders, the "skies were knowingly weeping tears" (Syed Badrul Ahsan, *From Rebel to Founding Father*, p. xv). Fourteen soldiers were in charge of what their commanding officer Major Haider Ali called "the bloody burial business" (SA Karim, *Triumph and Tragedy*, p. 379). The mission of Ali and his men was to separate the body of Bangabandhu from the other victims of the carnage and return to Dhaka before nightfall. The assassins feared that had Mujib been laid to rest with the other members of his family in the unmarked graves in Banani, the site might one day turn into a pilgrimage. The body was therefore flown to Tungipara. The army helicopter sent a wave of panic among the villagers whose memory was still rife with the way the Pakistan army charred down the ancestral home of the Sheikh family in 1971. The villagers feared a similar backlash and the place wore a deserted look.

The soldiers found a distant relative who identified the body riveted with 29 bullets as that of Bangabandhu's. A local imam was asked to bury the corpse in "five minutes" without any rituals. "Is he a shahid?", asked the imam. Only martyrs could be buried unwashed as the stains are believed to testify to one's sacrifice on the Day of Judgement. The Major decided to spare some extra time to dodge the ideological quandary. A bar of laundry soap was arranged for the last rites and four saris were collected from a nearby hospital as there was not enough time to get a proper shroud. When asked for joining the *janajas*, the officers declined, mentioning that they had not performed their ablutions (AL Khatib, *Who Killed Mujib?*, p.38). The body was then lowered to a dug-up grave next to his father, where Bangabandhu still lies today.

The day before, on August 15, 1975, Bangabandhu was standing at the top of the stairs of the two-storied house on

Road 32, Dhanmondi. The assailants had already killed his son Sheikh Kamal and an attendant as they stormed into the house around 4 in the morning. Bangabandhu's call for help was either a little too late or of no use. The silence speaks volumes of the treacherous plot. As he stood there in his white kurta and lungi, roaring his last words, "Where is Kamal? What do you want?" (Ahsan, p. 264), an officer was puzzled while another shot him in the chest and stomach. The body rolled down the stairs and dropped at the landing of the house from where he was once arrested by the Pakistan army on March 25, 1971.

For nine months, he was kept in a condemned cell in West Pakistan. He

only difference is the men who actually killed him were wearing the badge of an institution born out of the Liberation War. These "renegade" soldiers later killed four associates of Bangabandhu—Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmad, M Mansur Ali and AHM Qamaruzzaman—who headed the war-time government that defeated Pakistan in the name of Mujib. The flaw in this textbook tragedy lies in the generosity of Bangabandhu. He trusted his men to a fault.

The betrayal, the burial, the tragic flaw: all are well-known. Air is thick with many conspiracy theories. Was it the spectre of the Cold War? Did the losing party have a hand in it? Did he offend any powerful neighbour? Did a bullet really start

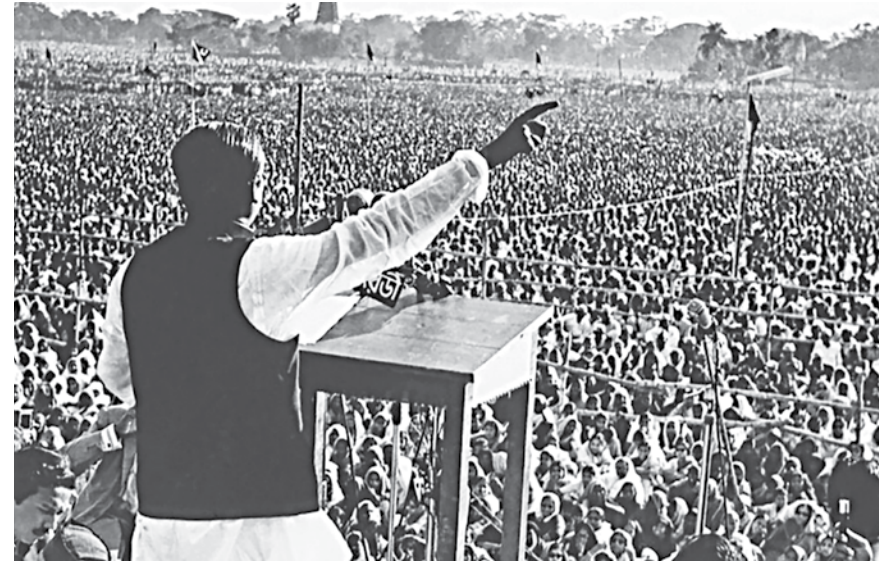


PHOTO: JALALUDDIN HAIDER

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was sentenced to be hanged, and a grave was dug nearby. He told his captors that he was not afraid of death; after all, as a man, a Bengali, and a Muslim, he can die only once. He had the opportunity to leave before being arrested, but he did not want to flee like a coward. He told his comrades Tajuddin Ahmad and Syed Nazrul Islam to keep on the struggle, and that he would rather die in that very house. "This will be the place of Bangladesh. I want to breathe my last in this house" (Speeches, January 10, 1972). His words proved prophetic. The

following him after his stance for non-alignment? Was it the dissatisfaction over the misrule in a war-ravaged country? The disgruntled officers had plenty of time to spew venom to claim that the tragic end of Bangabandhu was justified.

Born in a rural village, Bangabandhu came to the centre-stage of politics when the subcontinent was suffering from its birth pangs. Bangabandhu's love for his people was conditioned by his desire for a country without any oppression; a country that will protect its language and culture; a nation-state. But at the same

Understanding the tragedy of August 15, 1975



MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

ALL Bangladeshis, particularly those born after 1971, need to know and understand why the ghastly assassination of Bangabandhu on August 15, 1975, is such a massive tragedy. The significance of this appreciation lies in the unfortunate attitude of some quarters in seeing and evaluating Bangabandhu through the lens of political partisanship. The fact of his being the supreme leader of a political party that largely spearheaded our struggle for emancipation cannot mislead us into ignoring the epic dimension of his momentous contribution, and how his premature demise has adversely impacted the body politic of Bangladesh.

Very few would dispute the fact of history that Bangabandhu transcended conventional political reckoning and became a symbol in his own lifetime. His persona embodied an appeal that distinctly transcended class-barriers, and history chose him to lead our struggle for emancipation. In 1971, all Bangalis needed an extraordinary leader as the

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symbol of their aspiring nationhood and Bangabandhu fearlessly performed the catalytic act of political entrepreneurship required to forge a nationhood.

Bangabandhu's message after March 1969, was, quite clearly, to drive home the reality that Bangalis not only were separate in their social, political and economic life from Pakistan, but that as one people, they had to proclaim the right to live a separate life from West Pakistan. It was Bangabandhu who made the military junta and West Pakistani leaders realise the "seismic changes which had been registered in the self-awareness of the people of Bangladesh between March

1969 and March 1971". The new-found sense of nationalism gave rise to demands for full political independence.

It is an undeniable fact of history that for the Bangalis, "national sovereignty was inculcated into the consciousness of the masses through a deliberate process". This building of national consciousness was the result of Bangabandhu's epic organisational acumen. In fact, Bangabandhu came to personify Bengali nationalism, "just as Nasser personified

of legislation in our statute book. We have to only thank ourselves for the emergence of a sane political environment when this ignominious piece was struck-off.

The cruel assassination of Bangabandhu tragically impacted the process of transfer of power and the legality of the assumption of political authority was thrown to the winds. It is thus no wonder that the nation had to witness a series of military coups and counter-coups from 1975, leading to



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Arab Nationalism". The different aspirations of all classes of Bangalis were focused on him for leading "seventy million people into the promised land".

The historical context cited above should convince all right-thinking persons into believing that the killing of the supreme leader of the freedom movement and in fact, the cruel silencing of the patriarch of our struggle for emancipation, was done to emasculate the nation. This diabolic murder was planned and executed by quarters that could not reconcile to the reality of Bangladesh and were determined to extract revenge for their ignominious defeat in 1971. The proof of this belief laid in the fact "that since 1975, we have witnessed the resurrection of those very forces which remained deeply inimical to the historical processes which shaped the emergence of Bangladesh".

The tragedy of August 15, 1975, "lies in the fact that... [the] symbol of our nationhood was not only assassinated but was marginalised from our historical consciousness for 21 years. This single act of terrorism did not just murder a leader and his family, it was an assault on the inspirational sources of our nationhood for which we have paid an incalculable price".

Dispassionate analysts have to agree that the gory events of August 15 and the malevolence in granting the legal immunity to the killers were a crude assault on our jurisprudence in addition to being a satire on humanity itself. Perhaps some quarters still do not realise how low we stooped in the estimation of the civilised world when the then ruling cabal decided to insert this shameful piece

the bloody assassination of the head of the state in 1981. The compounding tragedy in this process was the loss of many promising military officers. Quite a number of soldiers were also executed without the benefit of a reasonably fair trial. Hapless Bangladeshis could see manifest arrogance at play to seize power by the sheer use of force.

The above illegal use of force to capture state power was on blatant display once again when in March 1982 the military usurper interposed between the nation and the polity as a great historical aberration. This was a time when Bangladesh's institutional decay started acquiring an ominous pace. Terms like "election engineering" came into circulation with many not realising the deep cracks occurring in the foundation of good governance.

The post-1975 governments in Bangladesh mischievously tried to demean and belittle Bangabandhu's accomplishments in governance by conveniently forgetting that in barely three years, nearly 10 million refugees had been resettled and a famine was averted, considerable progress made in restoring transport operations, most of the severed links restored at least on a temporary basis, and most importantly, handling of traffic at Chittagong Port was approaching pre-independence level. The production of Jute goods in June 1972 stood at 85 percent of the average 1969-70 level or at about 75 percent of the capacity. The World Bank reports of August and November 1972 testify to that.

Some quarters are oblivious of the fact that in July 1974, massive damage by a sudden flood of standing crops, estimated

time, he was alive to the changing world order.

On the independence day speech given on March 26, 1972, he said the following: "Our dream is to create a new world. We are working towards attaining a successful social reform." He went on to add later, "Awami League is a multi-class party. I have added peasants, workers, before it, but the characteristic of the party has remained unchanged. It cannot be done overnight. There are the nouveau riche in the party. The opportunity to loot for these people has increased manifold. I want to keep them in check in a socialist frame through the creation of BKSL. If this fails and if I die in the process, these people will engulf the party and indulge in further looting. They might even model themselves after the enemies and try to change the basic principles and characters of the Awami League. If that happens, I will die a second death. Let me warn you: if this second death happens in the hands of my party and its followers, then I shall have to be thrown into the abyss of forgetfulness for a long time. I don't know when I shall be able to return," (quoted in Bangabandhu's Political Life, *Kali o Kolom*, [my translation])

This speech once again proves to be prophetic. The resurgence of Bangabandhu and the celebration of his life and deeds in his centenary serve us an occasion to reflect on the analysis of the man and on what he wanted from life. He was never afraid of death. Death was his daily companion. He used to often recite the famous poems of Tagore, "Don't guard me from danger/This isn't what I pray for... Just don't let me be frightened by danger..." (*Prison Diaries*, p. 243).

When the assailants posed the ultimate danger at the time of his death, he cried out, one last time, "What do you want?" Today on his death anniversary, if we are to return the love that Bangabandhu invested in us, we need to ask ourselves, "What do we want?"

To answer that we need to return to the details of how Bangabandhu lived and how he died. And the ideals that he lived and died for.

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in the region of one million tons, was to create the condition which, "aggravated by the external factors... were to lead to the agonies of famine in the autumn 1974. The external factors which created this crisis and destabilised the state were to pave the way for the destructive assault that were to follow in 1975". Quite clearly, Bangabandhu was a victim of massive conspiracy.

Many in Bangladesh tend to forget that the fundamental task of structural change in agrarian sector could not be undertaken due to the political leadership's intense preoccupation with the urgent law and order issues and severe economic problems in the initial years. Structural change, to be effective, require a thorough reorganisation of the party, a process that could not pick-up momentum in the short period. However, Bangabandhu's signature achievement was in the making of a liberal democratic constitution, the holding of a general election and a general amnesty in November 1973 to the collaborators of the Pakistan Army.

Bangabandhu's magnanimity in advancing the interests of national reconciliation was not reciprocated as "many of the amnestied collaborators upon release began to undermine the unity that had been attained by rousing communal sentiment". We must not forget that it was due to Bangabandhu's stern and caring stand that a feared massacre of the collaborators did not materialise. His government very admirably took the firm position that collaborators would be dealt with in accordance with due process of law. Unfortunately, "a few summary executions carried out by some Mukti Bahini groups, however, received worldwide publicity". Nothing like the migration of two million collaborators to Canada after the American war of independence or the massacre of collaborators as happened in France and Belgium at the end of Second World War, took place in Bangladesh.

The overarching imperatives of public order and unhindered economic development in Bangladesh in mid 1970s may have given rise to the one party BAKSAL government, but it was not meant to be a permanent feature of political governance. Whatever may be the case, there cannot be any justification for killing Bangabandhu and his family, to restore or promote democracy, as many detractors wrongfully claim. Surely, the BAKSAL scheme could have been confronted in a constitutional manner. Sadly, annihilation of the opponent became the preferred option. The aberration that occurred with his assassination had deep-seated implications on the body politic and our democracy deficits has its root in that tragic event. Therefore, the murder of Bangabandhu was clearly a cardinal crime, ominously impinging on the ethos of our democratic progression.

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