

# BANGABANDHU AND HIS UNREALISED DREAMS

DR M M AKASH

## The murder and its political background

It's been a long, painful and rather eventful 46 years since Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated alongside his family in their Dhanmondi home on August 15, 1975. Some call it a "military coup", while others undermine the event further by claiming that just a few "misguided" members of the then army committed a "misdeed" or a "crime" due to personal reasons. It was a crime indeed, but it has a complex historical background with grave consequences felt even today.

At the time of the murder, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the President of newly independent Bangladesh, founder of the BAKSAL (Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League), and most importantly, the nation's father figure. But that night, nobody responsible for his protection except Colonel Jamil came forward when it mattered the most. The brave colonel alone rushed to the spot to protect the President and was killed by the merciless killers.

We also now know that on that night, the President of Bangladesh had reportedly asked the Army Chief of Staff, Major General KM Shafiqullah, to protect him. However, he failed to carry out his duties properly.

Even the independent militia, the Rakkhi Bahini, which the President himself formed for special missions against armed civilian miscreants and

war -- Jamaat-e-Islami, Muslim League (ML), Nizam-e-Islami (NI), Al-Badr and Razakars had gone underground after December 16, 1971. From there, they started to join hands with the conspirators against Mujib government in all manners. They were, therefore, only too happy to support the new Mostaq government. Some old ministers also joined the cabinet led by Mostaq, probably out of fear or to save their skin. But a few loyal men like Tajuddin Ahmad and others did not join and were immediately arrested and sent to jail, and later on, murdered inside the prison. Many others dedicated to Mujib were seeking safe hideouts in that uncertain time all over the country, and some even tried to flee to take political asylum in India. The pro-Moscow left was one of those who went deep underground immediately and started planning how to strike back. Many ordinary people were quite mournful, shocked and panic-stricken. But what happened to the wealthy elites of the society, especially the newly developed rich and the traditional Bangalee capitalists whose big industrial assets were nationalised by the Mujib government?

By the year 1975, a neo-rich class rapidly developed within and outside Awami League. They had been able to become rich at rocket speed after independence mainly through commercial speculation in the market, reselling the trade licenses they got due to their political connections, indenting business, hoarding, smuggling, monopoly trading and rampant corruption. When in 1975, Bangabandhu called for a "Second Revolution" against them, they had become quite apprehensive. They did not seem to appreciate Mujib's sharp left turn through the BAKSAL programme and his increasingly harsh pronouncements against corruption. In a famous speech delivered during that time, he made a strong indictment against the new middle class. Both the right-wing liberals and the left-wing radicals were pulling Mujib from opposite sides since the independence and assumption of his power in Bangladesh.

Just like all intermediate regimes, his responses were also often contradictory. As a result, the right-wingers thought that Mujib was against them. On the other hand, left-wingers thought that his BAKSAL move was uncertain and inadequate or did not like the nonhomogeneous composition of forces within BAKSAL. In addition, some extreme pro-Peking left groups working under Maulana Bhashani refused to join BAKSAL at that time. They had always believed that Mujib was a stooge of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and India. Consequently, both ultra-left and ultra-right became happy mates for some time after the death of Mujib. Some opportunists and beneficiaries immediately welcomed the brutal murder or at least preferred to keep silence!

## Human weakness of Bangabandhu

David Frost once asked Sheikh Mujibur Rahman what his greatest strength was. He replied that he loved his people a lot. Frost then proceeded to ask him about his greatest weakness. Quite surprisingly, Bangabandhu said that he loved his people too much. We do not know whether he could guess that his unconditional love would probably one day become the cause of his death and those dear to him.

Professor Rehman Sobhan, in his book "Untranquil Recollections: Nation-building in post-Liberation Bangladesh" (2021, SAGE Publications, New Delhi), highly acclaimed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's several progressive pro-socialist economic and foreign policies and achievements in post-liberation Bangladesh. Alongside, he did not forget to point out a single most crucial limitation of Bangabandhu. According to him, Bangabandhu did not judge individuals from an abstract point of view. He considered every person as a complex combination of both vice and virtue. According to Sobhan, "This was his (Bangabandhu's) greatest asset, but it was also a source of his vulnerability". [pg:305]

Some may question how such a truly balanced and humanist attitude towards human beings can be a source of "vulnerability" in real practice, especially in Bangladesh. In Bangabandhu's case, the specific arguments and inferences that Sobhan puts forward to support his general statement are worth quoting. He says, "With such an understanding, when a person commits a conspicuous 'wrong', Bangabandhu was willing to take action against the person. But after a while, when that same person's wife and three children came to him and fell at his feet, wailing copiously and pleading for forgiveness for their errant family member, Bangabandhu would dig up the memory of whatever good that person

once did and, motivated by compassion, would relent and release the wrongdoer. This human quality was exploited by the people and eventually led to the final acts of betrayal by some of those whom he trusted despite evidence to the contrary. This not only cost him his own life but that of so many he held so dear." [pg. 305]



Bangabandhu addressing the nation over radio on March 26, 1972.

Once in an interview with Bangabandhu, Fidel Castro suggested something similar to him. He had said if Bangabandhu wants to rebuild a society in socialistic principles, he should not reinstate the old state machine, especially the former Pakistani repatriated officers in the Bangladesh Army. The most crucial organ of the state machine containing people with old ideologies would be a significant source of trouble in the future. Many of those army officers did not join the liberation war in 1971 and waited in Pakistan to see the final outcome. The new Bangladesh Army was composed of such repatriated opportunist forces and forces who took all the risks and defected from the Pakistan Army in the earliest possible opportunity to join the liberation war. In this case, the compassionate attitude of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman prevented him from heeding to Fidel's judicious advice to purge the army clean before it was too late.

## Strong historical commitments of Bangabandhu

When Bangabandhu had visited China and seen the excellent system of managing one of the largest textile mills in Asia with his own eyes in 1956, he decided (as stated in his accounts) that he would follow socialistic principles. Later on, he became an influential proponent against monopoly ownership of the 22 affluent families of Pakistan. He also openly promised to establish an exploitation-free egalitarian society in East Bengal. He even pledged on several occasions to ensure fair income share for the workers and farmers, stopping all kinds of unearned income opportunities, arranging universal education and



Bangabandhu addressing the 29th Session of the UNGA on September 25, 1974

healthcare for all, and fulfilling many other dreams of the mass people. These promises were not mere words; he was ready for a radical redistribution of not only income but also wealth. To achieve this goal, he especially considered nationalising the privately owned large-scale industries and banks of the Pakistanis and the Bangalee capitalists. Such a programme is popularly known in socialist literature as capturing the economy's "commanding heights" and serves as the beginning of socialism. But he also used to say that his socialism will always be socialism with Bangladeshi characteristics. Until 1975, he had tried to build his promised socialism democratically.

In the 1954 election, Jukta Front's manifesto included the proposition to nationalise the large corporations. So did the 11-point charter of demands that had led to the mass upsurge of 1969 in the country. In the 1970 election, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in his election speech on the radio, had promised to build an economic system based on "scientific socialism" if he could win the election. History did not allow a peaceful democratic transition to our independence. And later on, all these promises were ultimately reflected in the original 1972 constitution of post-independence Bangladesh.

Under the original constitution, three types of ownership were permitted: State Ownership, Collective Ownership and Private Ownership. While the constitution had put no constraint against accumulating wealth through state and collective enterprises, certain limits were imposed against private accumulation. Before independence, the entire economic system of Pakistan was controlled by 22 monopoly houses that had concentrated a significant share of the nation's wealth in their hands. Bangabandhu had always wanted to avoid this monopolisation of wealth in his ideal "Shonar Bangla". He wanted food, clothes, education, accommodation and healthcare to be fundamental human rights for all citizens.

Most laypeople look at the formation of BAKSAL as a power grab and suspension of democracy. However, they often fail to perceive the more critical aspects of BAKSAL, i.e. its very radical programmes of decentralising the state, ensuring participatory democracy at the district level, and most significantly, establishing a far-reaching unique programme for agrarian transformation based on threefold sharing of the gross agricultural output. Bangabandhu also felt that the middle-class, educated bureaucrats (and not the poor working-class people) were the most corrupt factions in the country. So in 1975, when at last he decided to go for a radical programme of the second revolution, he was desperately in search of honest and committed educated cadres. While visiting the Moscow State University, he called on Bangladeshi non-resident students to return after finishing their studies and serve the country to build socialism.

At this point, it's evident that he wanted to dilute the power of the bureaucracy in favour of a decentralised governmental body primarily run by educated cadres, farmers and workers. To make democracy more participatory, he proposed the election of district governors instead of traditional centralised government. These district governors would govern the districts while the bureaucrats at the secretariat would provide them with necessary macro supplies and finances. This form of democracy can be referred to as "grassroots democracy" or "democratic

them to exercise their political rights without any economic threat or narrow political interest.

## Initial mistakes of Bangabandhu

Initially, Bangabandhu introduced a ceiling of only 100 Bigha of landholdings per family in the agrarian sector, i.e., no family could own more than 100 Bigha of land. That ceiling was too high, and Prof. Mosharraf Hossain from the planning commission prepared a proposal of redistributive land reform with a much lower ceiling. But even after introducing the high ceiling law, Mujib came under immense pressure from the landlords of North Bengal. As they were once his comrades in arms, Bangabandhu had to give in to their demands. He changed the definition of the family, suggesting each adult member in a family would be considered to form their own family. Hence, if a family had three adult members, they would be entitled to a 300 Bigha property. Consequently, the land reform initiatives were not much of a success.

In the case of nationalising urban industries, Bangabandhu injudiciously put the very people who used to own these companies in charge of the newly-nationalised ventures. Out of grievances for losing their proprietorship, most of these Bangalee owners never committed fully to the company's development. Conversely, companies previously owned by Pakistani capitalists were also nationalised and managed by some poorly paid Bangalee managers. But these ventures were relatively more well-managed as they did not have similar grievances over the nationalisation policy. This has been testified in the book of Prof. Rehman Sobhan mentioned before.

In the initial period just after independence, the economy was going through a short supply of essential products, and inflation was going beyond the reach of the laypeople. Bangladesh also had a dwindling foreign reserve, most of which would be spent on essential fuels like petrol and food imports. The nationalised ventures had to operate in a scarcity regime and could sell their output with high markup and profit. Unfortunately, the wrong policy of fixing a low factory price reduced the earnings of the nationalised industries and created an opportunity to earn substantial scarcity premiums for the middlemen in the market. They also quickly became the member of the neo-rich class at the cost of poor performance of the nationalised enterprises.

When Bangladesh achieved its independence, every upper-class bourgeoisie and top middle-class bureaucrat thought they could now take over the posts and properties left behind by Pakistani citizens and enjoy high salaries and profits. The working-class people felt they did not have to work as hard anymore since they fought in the liberation war and were treated inhumanly during the Pakistani regime. So, most people did not care whether the state-owned firms succeeded or not. Corruption entered into many fields of the state mechanism. The private greed was soon engulfing the short-lived social spirit of the liberation war.

## Tragic timing of Second Revolution

Bangabandhu understood that he could not attain his goals by being a soft-core leader and decided to initiate the second revolution for "economic freedom". By that time, his political allies were already disgruntled with him. The leftists in his own party left Awami League arguing Sheikh Mujibur Rahman wasn't socialist enough while the likes of Khondakar Mostaq Ahmad remained with him but thought that he was too left-leaning. Other profiteers of the corrupt bureaucracy and the neo-rich class were also frightened of losing most of the money and influence if stricter measures were introduced through the second revolution. The peasants misunderstood the programme of compulsory cooperative and saw it as a "plan to" abolish their ownership of land. These cultural and ideological gaps coupled with questionable economic policies and nonhomogeneous composition of BAKSAL fostered a precarious unstable political and economic environment and a high degree of isolation of Bangabandhu from his beloved people.

The cruel killers calculated shrewdly the time to kill him when he was isolated and had not yet started his campaigns for the second revolution in a full-fledged manner to dispel the cultural and ideological doubts of allies and regular people. Bangabandhu did brilliantly succeed in carrying out the first revolution for political independence, but history, unfortunately, did not give him a second chance. The second revolution might have been the key to the economic independence of a golden Bengal, for which we are still waiting.

The author is a Professor of the Department of Economics, University of Dhaka.



Painting: Shahabuddin Ahmed

political terrorists, failed to come to his aid. His political advisor, Tofail Ahmed, who was in charge of the Rakkhi Bahini, could not do anything due to a lack of orders from the top.

Major General Khaled Mosharraf and Colonel Shafaat Jamil attempted to avenge Bangabandhu's death three months later in November by carrying out an offensive against the tank and artillery units that carried out the assassination in August. They were forcing these murderers to flee from the Bangabhaban and eventually from the country. But before they left the country, their men carried out a gruesome killing of the four genuine leaders of the war of independence inside the Dhaka Central Jail. At the same time, the attempts to restore discipline within the army were only short-lived as Major General Khaled Mosharraf was also murdered by the unruly soldiers misguided by a wrong doctrine of so-called "class struggle" between soldiers and officers. The other faction of the military also captured Colonel Shafaat Jamil on November 7, 1975.

The questions were raised immediately: why didn't the other political followers and adherents of Mujib outside the army come out directly onto the streets protesting his assassination and the subsequent overhaul in the government? How could Khondakar Mostaq Ahmad, one of Mujib's own cabinet members, immediately assume power when he should have organised countrywide processions against the murderers? Why did he call the assassins "Shurja Shontan", i.e., brave sons of the nation? Also, why did The Daily Ittefaq, a well-known daily newspaper historically attached to the Awami League (AL) political line since the days of Pakistan, write that the country had been saved from the "Feraoon" (Satan)?

These are decades-old questions, but we can take a brief look at them again. The defeated forces in the liberation