

Bangabandhu’s strategy and our independence

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India and China are two neighbouring nations. Both countries gained independence from colonial powers around the same time – India in 1947, and China in 1949. However, they achieved independence following two opposite ideologies. One via the non-cooperation movement, the other through the “barrel of a gun.” One was introduced by Mahatma Gandhi, the other by Chairman Mao.

Many nations and political and civil rights leaders around the world were inspired by Gandhi’s ideology and adopted it as a way of liberating their people. Dr Martin Luther King Jr. is a bright example. In the 1950s and 1960s, he sought to establish equal rights for the African Americans through the non-cooperation and non-violence movement. No doubt, the movement made the African Americans conscious about their rights. However, many doubt the success of this strategy in the realisation of rights.

Many nationalities and ethnic groups in Asia and Europe embraced Chairman Mao’s ideology in their liberation movements. Tamils in Sri Lanka, Spain’s Basque Country, and Northern Ireland have failed despite years of armed struggle and bloodshed. The Naxalbari movement in West Bengal, India, also failed.

Located between India and China, Bangladesh is much smaller than the two nations, in terms of both size and population. Under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, almost 25 years after the independence of India and China, Bangladesh gained its independence in 1971.

Bangabandhu was a people person. Once, when asked to comment on his strengths and weaknesses, Bangabandhu responded, “My greatest strength is the love of my people, and my greatest weakness is that I love them too much.”

Like Gandhi and Mao, Bangabandhu sought freedom for the masses from all forms of exploitation and injustice. He had profound faith in the power of the people and was committed to delivering their rights. These rights were not limited to

the right to vote only. It allowed people to be closely involved in the production and distribution of wealth in society. Can this assimilation and integration of elements, essential to redefine real democracy, be called “humanistic democracy”?

Two principles of Bangabandhu’s concept of secularism can be noted here – one, in the form of there being “no asymmetry” in the treatment of different religions by the state, and two, in the form of “no political use of religion.”

As emphasised by Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen in a recent presentation, “A good understanding of secularism, as explained by Sheikh Mujib is particularly important right now in many countries. This applies not only in India but also in other countries across the world.” And so, he rightly entitled Bangabandhu as “Bishwa Bandhu” – Friend of the World.

Ultimately, the ideals of humanistic democracy and secularism became the cornerstone of Bangabandhu’s politics.

What was Bangabandhu’s strategy in gaining the independence of Bangladesh?

It is known to everyone that the democratic movement was the primary strategy of Bangabandhu in achieving independence. However, waging an armed “people’s war” was Bangabandhu’s alternative strategy, the last resort.

On February 5, 1962, Bangabandhu went to Agartala via Asharambari. A recently published book highlights that “...the Awami League supreme Sheikh Mujibur Rahman arrived in Agartala secretly to meet Sachindralal Singha, the chief minister of Tripura, to seek assistance for a possible independence campaign” (Bhaumik, The Agartala Doctrine, Oxford University Press, 2016 pg. 13).

The matter reached the then Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru via the Chief Minister of Tripura but was not taken on board due to the prevailing tension on the Indo-China border at that time.

However, the efforts to gain India’s cooperation did not stop there. In the late 60s, Chittaranjan Sutar, an Awami League leader from Barisal, was tasked with liaising with the Indian administration to ensure cooperation if required (Karim,



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Bangabandhu delivering his speech to an enormous crowd at Race Course Maidan. January, 10, 1972.

Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy, The University Press Ltd, 2005, pg. 206).

The last contact in this effort probably took place in early March 1971 when the General Secretary of the Awami League, Tajuddin Ahmed, met the Indian Deputy High Commissioner in Dhaka.

“On March 5 or 6, at the behest of Sheikh Mujib, Tajuddin secretly met with the Indian Deputy High Commissioner K C Sengupta in Dhaka. The purpose was to find out if Pakistan would start a catastrophe in East Bengal, in which case the Indian government would provide political asylum to the affected leaders and

workers and provide any assistance in the possible resistance struggle”. Deputy High Commissioner Sengupta confirmed the news of assurance for assistance and support on March 17 by saying that “India will provide ‘all possible assistance’ to the affected people if Pakistan does attack” (Maidul Hasan, Muldhara 71, The University Press Ltd, 1986, pg. 10).

Bangabandhu saw the armed struggle as a “people’s war”, an extension of the democratic movement rather than a military war. That is why, in his speech on March 7, he called for a non-cooperation movement on the one hand, and on the other, directed people to turn

every home into fortresses, confront the enemy with whatever they had.

The fact that Bangabandhu firmly believed in the people’s war came to the fore when Abdul Ghaffar Chowdhury (then editor of Awaaz) came to Bangabandhu with a proposal from Lt. Commander Moazzem Hossain, one of the main accused persons in the Agartala Conspiracy Case. The meeting took place in 1966, right before Bangabandhu was preparing for the Lahore Round Table Conference. As soon as Moazzem’s name was mentioned, Bangabandhu said, “I know him [Moazzem]. I also know all about his proposal. He has recently been hobnobbing with Manik Choudhury (a businessman from Chittagong). I have told Manik not to have anything to do with this madness. I would also advise you not to get involved in it. Our struggle is for the establishment of democracy and the realisation of autonomy for the people of Bangladesh. I have always fought against the Pakistani military junta. It is not the purpose of my movement to replace it with a Bengali military junta” (Karim, Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy, The University Press Ltd, 2005, pg. 206).

Considering the then global political context, Bangabandhu applied Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement in a new way, in combination with Mao’s people’s war, as a strategy to achieving independence. That is the achievement of Bangabandhu. There are a handful of nations in the world that have achieved independence through a democratic non-cooperation movement in conjunction with armed war. This is of great pride for us.

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The day history was made

During the course of their meeting, Bangabandhu told Indira Gandhi that he would separately visit Kolkata to specifically thank the people of West Bengal for their shelter and help during the liberation struggle. He also invited Indira Gandhi to visit Dhaka at her earliest convenience and wished that the Indian Army, which had been to Bangladesh to assist the Mukti Bahini, would have left Bangladesh by then. Indira Gandhi reiterated that withdrawal would be completed soon and she would like to be present in Kolkata during Bangabandhu’s proposed visit.

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Immediately after the airport formalities, Bangabandhu, accompanied by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, drove in a motorcade to the place for a public meeting. Indira Gandhi warmly welcomed Bangabandhu, with a few words in Hindi. Bangabandhu had his written English speech in his pocket, but he started speaking in Bengali. There was great applause as he spoke. Bangabandhu’s formal English statement at the airport was drafted by Faruq Choudhury. However, his public meeting speech was mostly spontaneous. He deeply appreciated and thanked the Indian people and the government for their heroic role and sacrifices in our struggle for independence. He also passionately recalled the great sacrifices of our freedom fighters and the people. He bore no grudge against anyone and announced that his country will have friendship for all and malice towards none. He envisaged a South Asia of amity and harmony. He dreamt of a world where people would unitedly strive for peace, progress and prosperity. His Bengali speech, applauded greatly, was translated in Hindi.

After the mammoth public meeting, Bangabandhu’s motorcade proceeded towards the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi, driving through welcoming arches and cheering crowds. At the President’s House, after his formal meeting with President Giri, he and Indira Gandhi had an exclusive meeting. Thereafter, the Indian Chief of Protocol Mahbub khan announced that there had been some big changes in Bangabandhu’s itinerary. Initially, it was planned by the Indian government that (a) Bangabandhu, along with his entourage, would change planes, and instead of flying in the British PM’s plane, would travel by the Indian President’s “Raj Hansa” and accordingly their baggage had been transferred; (b) Bangabandhu, on his way to Dhaka, would stop in Kolkata, attend a public reception where he would speak. The revised plan was that Bangabandhu and his entourage would continue to travel in the British plane and their baggage would be brought back to this plane and that Bangabandhu, instead of stopping in Kolkata enroute, would fly straight to Dhaka. The decisions were revised as Bangabandhu thought it would be a breach of diplomatic etiquette if the British plane was forsaken on the way and that he should be in Dhaka well before the sunset so that he could address and see his people in daylight.
Bangladesh Chief of Protocol

was asked to find out from the Civil Aviation and Sir Terence, the British High Commissioner in Delhi, to find out if their plane could safely land in Dhaka. The answers were affirmative. During the course of their meeting, Bangabandhu told Indira Gandhi that he would separately visit Kolkata to specifically thank the people of West Bengal for their shelter and help during the liberation struggle. He also invited Indira Gandhi to visit Dhaka at her earliest convenience and wished that the Indian Army, which had been to Bangladesh to assist the Mukti Bahini, would have left Bangladesh by then. Indira Gandhi reiterated that withdrawal would be completed soon and she would like to be present in Kolkata during Bangabandhu’s proposed visit.

Everyone who saw and heard Bangabandhu were amazed at his sagacity, wisdom, ready-wit, knowledge of diplomatic norms and etiquette, and above all, his sense of patriotism, pride and self-confidence.

It was decided that in the British plane, besides Bangabandhu and his entourage from London which comprised Dr Kamal Hossain and his wife, a friend Mowla and a journalist Ataus Samad, only the Foreign Minister Azad and Chief of Protocol Faruq Choudhury would be there. The rest of the members of the original Bangladesh delegation, mainly comprising Prof Mosharrof Hussain and myself, would return to Dhaka by an IAF Plane a little earlier and hand some important papers to Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad. Accordingly, we reached Dhaka about an hour earlier than Bangabandhu and had the privilege of seeing his victorious arrival in Dhaka. There could not have been a moment of greater jubilation, joy and pride in the life of a nation.

For Dhaka, a city of importance through four hundred years, mostly as a regional capital, it was a most momentous event—the arrival of the founder of the city as a national capital.

It seemed as if the entirety of the population of Bangladesh was in Dhaka on that day—January 10, 1972. At the airport, all along the road, at the public meeting, on rooftops and tree branches. But it was so orderly. Everyone was keen on having a glimpse of the man who had given the Bengalee people a sense of nationhood, an independent country and a sense of identity in the comity of nations. He was the greatest Bengali ever born.

Enam Ahmed Chaudhury is a former chairman of the Privatisation Commission.

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