

BANGABANDHU

The namesake of Bangladesh

Emancipation for the many, and not for a few, became the cornerstone of Bangabandhu's transformational leadership. As a result, he became the namesake of Bangladesh, a country that was his noblest creation at a time when the world was sharply divided by the cold war. He led the War of Liberation, fighting all odds, global and local.

ATIUR RAHMAN

It may be more befitting to reflect on the egalitarian visions of Bangabandhu as a tribute to him on this day of his martyrdom. The highly regarded Bengali (and, in fact, global) academic Professor Amartya Sen rightly said, “Bangabandhu has been taken from us, but no one can rob us of his clear-headed visions, which, I will argue, can make a real difference to the lives we lead.” This he said while delivering the virtual talk on “Bangabandhu and Visions of Bangladesh” organized jointly by the High Commission of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh in the United Kingdom and the LSE South Asia Centre on 27 January 2021 to mark the Birth Centenary of Bangabandhu. Professor Sen recalled Bangabandhu’s concern about advancing equity. He went on, “ In seeking separation and independence from undivided Pakistan, the egalitarian concerns played a significant role in the thinking of the Awami League led by Sheikh Mujib. In the campaign speeches for the crucially important 1970 general elections, Bangabandhu did not hesitate to place the issue of equity between the different religious communities in front of the heterogeneous voting public.” He insisted that the people of the minority community were entitled to enjoy equal rights and opportunities as any other citizen. This thrust on equity as a part of secularism by Bangabandhu transcended beyond his belief in the religious freedom of all citizens and the struggle to achieve economic freedom. Emancipation for the many, and not for a few, became the cornerstone of Bangabandhu’s transformational leadership. As a result, he became the

namesake of Bangladesh, a country that was his noblest creation at a time when the world was sharply divided by the cold war. He led the War of Liberation, fighting all odds, global and local.

Initially dumped as a ‘bottomless basket case’ or a ‘test case ‘of development following its difficult birth, Bangladesh has come a long way through many ups and downs. In its formative days, the social capital, like the ‘fighting spirit’ instilled in the mindset of the struggling millions of Bengalis by Bangabandhu, Father of the Nation, has been Bangladesh’s greatest strength. One may certainly ask, what kind of Bangladesh did Bangabandhu want to achieve? The straightforward answer to this question is that a society without exploitation was at the core of Bangabandhu’s Development Philosophy. He pointed this out in his remarks on 09 May 1972, saying- “What do I want? I want the people of Bengal to be adequately fed. What do I want? I want that Bengal’s youth to get employed. What do I want? I want the people of Bengal to be happy. What do I want? I want these people to laugh and move freely.”

Bangabandhu started rebuilding Bangladesh with no resources except the alluvial land and entrepreneurial people. Thanks to his committed leadership, the Bangladesh economy kept moving forward by defying this acute resource constraint. Bangabandhu initiated his committed move to reconstruct war-ravaged physical and social infrastructures with virtually no regulatory institutions. He had to rebuild a central government from the broken structure of a provincial government, including

all the regulatory institutions like the central bank, public service commission, and University Grants Commission.

Also, he had to address the challenge of an acute shortage of food grains following persistent natural shocks and nasty international food aid diplomacy spearheaded by Pakistan. But Bangabandhu led from the front in rebuilding this devastated economy with meager domestic resources and international humanitarian support. His primary focus was rebuilding and modernizing agriculture, mobilizing primarily domestic resources, including the hard-working farmers. He also prioritized industry to keep the production of manufacturing goods intact. His other two farsighted policies were raising social consciousness for population control and promoting technical and humane education, including nationalizing primary schools.

Bangabandhu’s inspiring leadership quickly made a turnaround of the economy as he focused on the simultaneous development of agriculture and industry. He was rightly walking on two legs to reach his developmental destination. That economic freedom was at the core of his economic vision was vividly reflected in one of his early speeches in independent Bangladesh. On December 15, 1973, he said, “This independence will be meaningful to me only when the woes of the farmers, laborers, and the deprived of Bangladesh end.” These words echoed the same spirit he articulated at the Race Course Maidan on 10 January 1972 on the day of his return to independent Bangladesh when he pledged food security and

employment for the youth.

His First Five Year Plan aptly reflected his development priorities. Agriculture was provided with an allocation of 24% of the investment outlay. This was the plan’s highest allocation, followed by industry with a share of 20%. He correctly realized that agriculture would ensure food for the people and remain their main income source for many more years. To face the food shortage and fight against wrecked diplomacy on food aid, he knew that Bangladesh’s only viable policy option was the maximum emphasis on agriculture to produce enough food for the people.

Indeed, he recognized the merit of walking on two legs – agriculture and industry. Agriculture was then contributing 53% of GDP. Today it is 13%. That means an amazing structural transformation has already occurred in our economy without undermining food production. Thanks to the infusion of modern inputs and technology, a process initiated by Bangabandhu, agricultural productivity has increased many folds. Food production in Bangladesh increased four and a half times during the last five decades despite a falling area of cultivable land. The economy has been sustained so well based on vibrant agriculture, even during the pandemic. Agriculture has been thus safeguarding our macroeconomy to a large extent during and after the pandemic.

Apart from industry and agriculture, Bangladesh needed human resources for development. Bangabandhu knew this and stated that golden human resources could only achieve the Golden Bengal. So, he went for an Education Commission

led by veteran scientist Dr. Kudrat-e-Khuda. Bangabandhu gave prudent advice to this commission and worked very closely with it. Unfortunately, he did not get enough time to implement the policy suggestions of this farsighted Commission.

Bangabandhu led Bangladesh on the right track and took the country to the trail of prosperity from the ashes. In 1972, our per capita income was only USD 94, whereas Pakistan’s was USD 152. By 1975, under the leadership of Bangabandhu, the Bangladesh figure almost tripled to USD 273, while Pakistan’s increased meagerly to USD 168 (lagging behind Bangladesh by USD 90). But we lost Bangabandhu when the conspirators killed him. While Bangabandhu remained deeply enmeshed in our national spirit and culture, losing him physically cost significantly our economic and social advancement. Within one year of Bangabandhu’s demise, our per capita income fell to USD 138. It took nearly thirteen years to get that back to the level of per capita income left by his government. We wonder where we could have been had we not lost Bangabandhu on that fateful night of 15 August 1975. Indeed, Bangladesh could have become a developing country as early as 1985 if the transformational leadership of Bangabandhu continued. We must salute this aesthetic leader who remains at the core of our hearts. Poet Shamsur Rahman rightly said, “He is such an inexhaustible entity on whose name the wind never allows dust to accumulate.”

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Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's Meeting in Dhaka for the 1970 General Elections