

What happened at Bangabandhu's Burial Site

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NAIMUL HAQ

From quite a distance, the unagreeable vibrating sound of the rotor blades of a helicopter whirling around ominously alerted the inhabitants of Tungipara, 22 km from Gopalganj district town.

August 16, 1975 was a hot, humid day. It was well after midday when the giant Russian copter started circling above the dark bungalow of the village before delivering an unusual cargo. It was the coffin of the bullet-ridden body of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. A most unexpected way for a hero to come home.

"I was having my meal when I heard such an unusual sound of the copter", Abdul Makid Fakir, 52 recalls the day with visible emotion. "I ran out and found our neighbours looking up in the air with surprise. Then we saw the copter above the dark bungalow," said Fakir pointing towards the building, now a police station. It was a horrifying scene witnessed by hundreds of villagers.

"The copter stood still in the air until a platoon of troops armed with automatic weapons jumped off onto the ground and took up position in a circle to scare off any one daring to attack them. The copter slowly landed. We feared an attack on us by the troops. Words quickly spread that the copter was carrying Bangabandhu's coffin.

It was quite a surprise to see the coffin although, the whole village had already undergone a mortifying shock at the previous day's news of brutal killing of Bangabandhu, said Fakir.

Bangabandhu was killed in a bloody coup at his Dhanmondi residence in the capital in the early hours of August 15. Sixteen others, mostly Sheikh's family members, were also killed in the coup the same day marking the death of his entire family, except two of his daughters who were away in London. "We got the news of the assassination at around 9:15 am the same day. A wireless message first



Mausoleum of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

Meanwhile, the villagers forced to stand away from the scene, wished to have a last look at the great leader. Kazi Enayet Hossain, 66, was among thousands of villagers who encircled the area to see what was going on. "We were anxiously waiting to see the body. Some of us became angry at the decision that we would not be allowed to see our leader. However, our emotion subsided as we saw the troops suddenly pointing submachine guns at us," said Hossain who rushed to the spot minutes before the coffin arrived. "The situation was tense. We feared gun shots to be fired at us while the army team feared that they might be attacked by the villagers."

The troops thought the people there might take revenge on them for having killed Bangabandhu. So, they wanted to hurry through the burial. They assumed tension would die down as soon as they flew off.

In the meantime, the wooden coffin had to be broken as there was no easy way to open it. "I along with four others helped open it. At first, I saw pieces of ice covering the body, said Nazrul Islam, 50. The ice did not appear as crystal as they should. They appeared brownish. The body gradually emerged as we removed the ice with our hands. The bullet-ridden body was at last before us. Every one tried to have a look.

Coagulated lumps of blood remained at the bottom of the coffin. A white folded piece of cloth lay on the chest of the body. I removed the cloth, suddenly my eyes were filled with tears. The more I stared at the body the more I cried. I saw Mujib wearing a lungi, white kurta and a vest. The clothes showed more than 20 bullet wounds. There was blood all over, says Islam murmuring Sheikh's name a number of times. "We bathed Mujib's body with a soap secretly brought from the nearby hospital and then wrapped it with two white sarees. It was an irony that the troops provided only a small piece of white cloth for Mujib's burial. We, however, avoided that and quickly wrapped the body with the sarees before they noticed anything."

"We were now ready for janaza. The troops also joined. It took only few minutes. As soon as the janaza was over the commanding officer directed the volunteers to complete the burial in 10 minutes. The troops stood by. About 14 people helped lower the body in the grave. The emotion in us grew stronger and stronger as we put the body down," said Islam nodding his head and saying, "I still cannot accept that our great leader is buried in that grave."

As soon as we completed the burial the local police were ordered to clear the place. They were strictly forbidden to allow any visitor inside the area.

The helicopter lifted off carrying the troops. Thousands of mourners watched as the copter vanished into the sky.

The graveyard was sealed off. Police patrol guarded the boundary of Bangabandhu's home, automatic guns were fitted on top of the roof for further security. Those who looked after the house were also asked to leave and live somewhere else. Nirmal Biswas, 41, who served as a servant in the house since he was 12, "I was kicked out by the police. They threatened to lock me up if I ever

to earn the highest respect as a leader. I was once arrested for attempting to go near the grave."

Many however risked defying the warnings just to see the grave. A dozen or so people were arrested. "How could they expect that we would avoid seeing Mujib's grave", said Ekram, 47. "This is Mujib's home, he grew up here, stayed in that house and climbed the stairs

How could we forget him. I will regret for the rest of my life for not paying the last respect to Mujib, said an old man in his eighties.

Bangabandhu will be in the hearts of thousands of inhabitants of Tungipara and its neighbourhood. The Remains of Mujib's bullet-ridden body rest perhaps in peace in the

white marble grave only 20 feet away from his house where he grew up as a child and was destined to be the founder of an independent country. One wonders if Mujib really rests in the soil of Tungipara or in the hearts of unknown millions of his people.

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The final resting place of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

broke the news at Tungipara. It quickly spread across the village. It was terrible, few could absorb the shock of the death of the great leader," said Nawab Ali, 68, who often used to accompany Mujib to his public meetings.

Nawab Ali remembers how Mujib's grave was made. "A wireless message from the capital first ordered five graves to be readied. This confused us. As we wondered who were the five to be buried, a second message from Dhaka said two graves were needed. This was also confusing but we guessed that the second grave would be for Mujib's wife. We were halfway through the first grave when we were interrupted and told that only one grave was to be readied. We dug the grave only eight feet away from the graves of Mujib's parents.

Abdul Mannaf, 71, recalls how rough the officer in charge of the army teams was with them. Mannaf was among the 30 villagers selected to help in the burial. On arrival, the officer asked Maulana Abdul Halim of the village to conduct the funeral prayer for Mujib.

Halim enquired if the body had received a purifying bath. The reply was "no." Halim asked for permission to give the bath. "The request was turned down. Halim refused to conduct janaza unless the body was washed. The officer and Halim exchanged hot words for a few minutes. Halim stood firm on his decision to conduct janaza only if Mujib's body was bathed. From the very beginning the officer had been ordering the helpers to bury the coffin but Halim objected. At one stage Halim said the body would need no bath if it was given in writing that Mujib was a 'Shaheed'. The officer was in trouble and did not wish to waste any more time. He allowed the body to be cleaned before burial. The men were given only 15 minutes to complete the process. Halim asked for 30 minutes explaining that 15 minutes were not enough to complete the process. The officer agreed.

১৫ আগস্ট
জাতীয় শোক দিবস

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