

The speech and those transformative days of March '71



THE THIRD VIEW

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March 7, the day Bangabandhu brought the nation to its feet and had us all shouting from the top of our voice "Joy Bangla" as he delivered a historic speech. It marked that unique moment when our dreams found a most powerful, articulate, and mesmerising expression which clarified our thinking and gave our voices a new level of confidence and power. The speech brought us nearer to what we were fighting for. It suddenly removed all residue of confusion and hesitancy and unified us all into one massive force for independence. The speech was a beautiful blend of clarity for us and calculated vagueness for the enemy. For us, it was a clear and unambiguous declaration of independence. But for the Pakistanis, they could not technically term it as a call for secession and trigger the genocide, which of course they did on the night of March 25.

The more I hear the speech, the more I am amazed by its magnificent balance, its inspirational message, its historical foundation, its rhetorical flare, its choice of words, the undulation of voice and the rhythm of its flow. What makes the speech a world treasure and brought it Unesco recognition is the magnetism of Bangabandhu's words and the brave, defiant, and flawless articulation of a nation's aspiration for freedom. The points of emphasis, bringing out the significance of some words over others, and the speech's poetic rendering makes it enduring, endearing, and something that resonates in our hearts even after 53 years.

Another history-making event that occurred in March 1971 was the non-violent and non-cooperation movement that took place following

Bangabandhu's call on March 7. The whole nation responded as one. The people of East Pakistan totally boycotted the Pakistani "state" in all its forms, which stood totally delinked from the people that it was supposed to govern. It was an unique instance—more effective than Mahatma Gandhi's similar calls against the British colonial state—which defied every branch of the state structure and accepted the directive of one man standing against a military state. Having lived through all those days, I can only marvel at the allegiance people in general exhibited for their leader. Bangabandhu's orders were the law which did not need a single policeman to be enforced. The ferocious and most coercive state machinery of Pakistan stood helpless, and people spontaneously and fearlessly followed Bangabandhu's directives to the dot.

Seldom can we witness such a sight in the annals of history when people's power stands in such dramatic, liberating, and defying contrast to the oppressive machinery of the state. Suddenly, Pakistan seemed like a house of cards, a farce of a state nothing more than a bystander to people taking power in their own hands. It was just a few words of one man that stood towering against the formidable bureaucracy, the vicious police force, the intricate intelligence network, and mountains of money ready to be spent to create chaos. What made the whole thing more unbelievable was the discipline of the masses. There was practically no looting, no breaking of the law, no breach of discipline, and no instance of putting personal interest above the collective interest of the people. Like men, there were thousands of women in our everyday processions and there was not a single instance of an

unlawful incident. It was the finest and brightest hour for the student community of the country, and especially for all the universities—epitomised by our Dhaka University.

As I recall—as an active member of East Pakistan Students Union (EPSU)—those days of endless processions around the city, of

directions; how enthusiastically the general people would extend their support, how spontaneously and invigoratingly shopkeepers, street hawkers, ordinary pedestrians would repeat our slogans. Many would take over from us to lead slogans as their messages—like "Bir Bangalee austro dhoro, Bangladesh shadhin

But while we united for freedom, our enemy was preparing for a brutal response. Under the guise of talks, Gen Yahya prepared one of the greatest betrayals in history. Seldom are there instances of a country's own army—whose very existence was paid for with our tax money—turning their guns towards their

Minar to connect with my fellow student activists upon the first lifting of curfew on the morning of March 27 and saw the dead bodies at Jagannath Hall and on the nearby railway tracks, on two sides of which were slums. (The railway line has now been turned into roads).

Much has been written on the genocide that started on March 25, 1971 and much more needs to be written to bring to light the true scale of the barbarity inflicted on us. We need to spend more resources and efforts to unearth the total story and then place it before the world.

Another day of significance was March 2, the day our national flag (later reformed) was hoisted in the arts faculty building of Dhaka University. I recall joining the gathering and seeing the green-and-red flag, with our map in yellow, fluttering in many hands. I distinctly remember ASM Abdur Rab, VP of DUCSU, standing tall in one corner of the roof of the portico with courage and pride which engulfed us with an overwhelming sense of purpose. Hoisting the flag marked a supremely important psychological moment that signified a snapping of connection with Pakistan. Loyalty to one's own flag is vital and its place in one's psyche is etched deeply. When that loyalty shifts to another flag, it marks the beginning of a new reality. Suddenly, we had a symbol, an insignia that became the repository of our deepest urge to be recognised for what and who we were. Raising that small piece of cloth told the story of our struggle and proclaimed the coming to life of our dream.

March '71 in our nation's lifetime is full of events to celebrate and lessons to learn from. For those of us who were part of those eventful days, it is like living through a life-transforming dream filled with purpose and participation. Those days were also filled with deeply felt sorrow and never-ending sadness. But for those of the succeeding generations, there are many lessons to be learned for the purpose of nation-building: sacrifice, determination, self-confidence and, most importantly, steadfast belief in our future.



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PHOTO: JALALUDDIN HAIDER

countless street-corner meetings, of mass contact to pass on the message of our independence and that of Bangabandhu, what love and warmth we received from all. Every street corner was a welcoming spot, a place of convergence, and a point of confluence of hundreds of processions coming from all

koro"—touched their inner core. The feeling was truly of being in the midst of an ocean of people, part of a tsunami of irresistible force formed not by nature but by each one of us. Pakistan's demise was written on the face of every one of the millions of us who were out on the streets back then.

own unarmed and helpless people. On the night of March 25, genocide began. It can be termed as one of the earlier instances of ethnic cleansing. I hid myself on that night at a friend's house, from whose rooftop I saw the first glimpses of the devastation that fell upon Dhaka University students and teachers. I went to the Shaheed

BANGABANDHU'S ICONIC MARCH 7 SPEECH

A linguistic marvel



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Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman is regarded as the undisputed leader of the independence movement, the main architect of Bangladesh. Thanks to his heroic leadership and unwavering efforts, the nation was born, and history epitomises his messianic identity by acknowledging him the rightful Father of the Nation. Today, we come together to commemorate and celebrate the life and legacy of Bangabandhu. As we honour him, we also honour the nation he loved and tirelessly worked for.

Nonetheless, is it enough to simply acknowledge his contributions to our nation, or to remember the important dates from his life? To truly comprehend the greatness of Bangabandhu, we must delve into his speeches, which were the cornerstone of his persona.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was an exceptional orator, whose words enthused and moved countless Bangladeshis and people beyond Bangladesh. Unesco's recognition of the March 7, 1971 speech as one of the world's most important documentary heritage adds validity to this claim. The speech, which continues to resonate to date and serves as a reminder of Bangabandhu's leadership and charisma, has also been featured in the book *We Shall Fight on the Beaches: The Speeches That Inspired History* by Jacob F Field (2014) as one of the most influential and significant political speeches of the last century.

So, what makes the March 7 speech unique? There has been a plethora of talks and discussions about the

politico-historical significance of the speech. Yet, less focus has been put on its linguistic artistry. This article is a modest attempt to this end.

The interplay between language and politics is well-established. The great minds, from Plato and Aristotle to contemporary scholars, have studied and still study the connection through multidisciplinary lenses of communication, critical discourse analysis (CDA), positive discourse analysis (PDA), and peace linguistics (PL). These scholarships offer a testament to the fact that political discourses play a crucial role in shaping our society during conflict. In the same vein, by scholastically delving into Bangabandhu's speeches, we can gain a profound understanding of his aspirations and visions.

Bangabandhu, as a fluent and extempore bricoleur, largely followed the classical organisation of a rhetoric speech in the March 7 speech, however, with some liberties. As such, the three elements of persuasive political speech—namely ethos, pathos, and logos—are evident in the speech. Additionally, an adept adoption of a dialogic pattern was present in the speech. In so doing, the speech used mood block (75 declarative, 13 imperative, and six interrogative clauses), modals (modal auxiliary verbs, such as "may," "must," "should," "can," "will," etc), and different modes of tense (31 percent present tense, 41 percent past, and 28 percent future tense) to represent Bangabandhu's leadership skills and rightful demands. The overall structure and impact of his speech, thus, make it a positive

emancipatory discourse embedded in resilience, optimism, positivity, encouragement, and determination.

Bangabandhu embodied the essence of ethos: a positive self-notion in the name of authority, reliability in telling the truth, and gaining trust as a leader to establish his ideological credentials. For

his audiences closer, fostering ingratiation and solidarity to resist injustice and aspire for the nation's liberty.

Next, pathos, an affective dimension of rhetoric, is evident in the March 7 speech. Through his passionate delivery, Bangabandhu asserted his unwavering commitment

The most powerful use of pathos in the speech came with the last two statements. These statements, on one hand, ignited the emotions of the public who had endured oppression for 23 long years, and on the other, served as a powerful declaration of independence for Bangladesh. The catchphrase in Bangabandhu's

him as a fearless leader standing against injustice and oppression; one advocating for humanity and freedom. For example, Bangabandhu effectively utilised the first seven paragraphs of his speech to substantiate his argument, support his reasoning, and persuade his audience to collectively consent to the declaration of independence: "We gave blood in 1952. After winning the election in 1954, we couldn't even form the government. Proclaiming martial law in 1958, Ayub Khan made us slaves for ten years. During the 'Six Point Movement', my children were gunned down on 7th June 1966. After the fall of Ayub Khan brought about the 'Mass Movement' of 1969 where Yahya Khan usurped power. He said he would give constitution and democracy to the nation. We Agreed. Thereafter the rest is history."

And now the world knows the new history. The supremacy of this 15-minute speech is that Bangabandhu called for independence and the Bangladeshis responded to the call.

Today, any discussion on the incredible journey of Bangladesh is incomplete without the mention of Bangabandhu. His contributions serve as a reminder of how visionary leadership can transform a nation's destiny. However, to fully illuminate the essence of Bangabandhu's vision, and appreciate his impact, it is imperative to study and understand his speeches more rigorously. In doing so, let us aid in strengthening the foundation for a better tomorrow for Bangladesh. Let us not simply remember Bangabandhu on certain dates, but actively strive to honour his legacy by emulating his leadership and fulfilling the vision of Shonar Bangla.

This op-ed was developed following the author's original research work on CDA of the March 7 speech (published) and PDA of the UNGA speech (under review) of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.



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PHOTO: ARCHIVE

instance, his articulation to address the countrymen in an emphatic way ("my brothers") included all ethnicities, religions, and professions. Such a notion plunges the audience immediately into the midst of hope and carries them along on the flow of assurance and actions. Additionally, the original Bangla speech displays a ubiquitous use of personal pronouns, particularly, "I" (23 percent), "we" (23 percent), "my"/"mine" (19 percent), and "our" (16 percent). This rhetoric strategy is a marker of similitude which brought Bangabandhu and

to secure liberty, justice, and peace for his people. His speech echoed a tone of hope and unity in the face of adversity. By identifying Pakistani colonialism as the conspiratorial enemy, Bangabandhu galvanised his audience by creating a powerful discourse of resistance and emancipation. The emotional intensity of the speech was palpable, evoking a strong sense of empathy from the audience. With his speech, he gave a voice to the oppressed and inspired a sense of solidarity that resonates to date.

last two lines provided the mantra to unshackle Bangladesh from their long-standing struggles and sufferings: "The struggle this time is the struggle for our emancipation. The struggle this time is the struggle for our independence."

Finally, Bangabandhu incorporated logos, the third essential element in persuasive speech, by employing historical events, reasoning, argumentative discourse, and critical cognition. His logic and stance, informed by facts and arguments, portrayed