

## Special Supplement

## Independence and National Day of Bangladesh

Wednesday, 26th March 2025

## Independence Day 2025 : A Different Kind of Feeling

movement, it is their first independence. They were the citizens of a country called Bangladesh, but they were not independent. Let us have a look at their age. According to the Population and Housing Census 2024, the projected population of Bangladesh in January 2024 was over 170 million. The number of females was found to be higher than males by 3.19 million during this count. This was not observed during the previous censuses. Therefore, the share of females in the population is now more than half. Females were lagging behind quantitatively in the past, but that is no more the case now.



And another important feature is that, 60 percent of the 170 million population belong to the age-group of 0-25 years. Of them, 27 percent are below 15 years. Therefore, the remaining 33 percent are the youths belonging to the age-group of 16-25 years. What an amazing demographic attribute. The youths of this age can cause explosion. Those who were on the roads during the July upsurge had a similar age-tag. Most of them belonged to this very age-group. A large segment of those who embraced martyrdom and those who are still in hospitals with injuries were of this age. If we look back at history, those who went to the liberation war in 1971 were mostly youths of this age. Those who fought against the British colonial rule were also youths of this age. What was the age of Khudiram? He was only 18 years 7 months 11 days old at the time of his hanging. Preetilata was 21 years old during her martyrdom. We can see them if we look at old pictures. The youths have always brought about changes and transformations. They made the impossible possible. This is happening even now. History is bound to repeat itself.

Neither them, nor their parents had witnessed the liberation war of 1971. They learnt about the war of liberation and independence from the one-sided narratives in text-books and television channels. And they saw that the people did not have the right of free speech in real life. They could not demand the realization of their rights despite passing their days in agony. They were arrested, imprisoned, murdered, and subjected to enforced disappearances. The lives of those who did not support the Awami League were in peril. They have witnessed these injustices since their childhood. Those who became eligible for voting after crossing 18 years wanted to vote. But they could not cast their votes during the farcical elections of 2014, 2018, and 2024. They could never see democracy except in the pages of their text-books. Many had hoped that a fair election would be realized through rigorous movement of opposition parties. But that hope never materialized.

Many of these youths were not previously seen much in social movements. They were not visible in women's movement, or health-rights movement – no, they were not seen. The number of older people were more in those movements. Many people then lamented: where is the new generation? The society could not progress without their awareness. However, when these youths become angry about something, then the situation becomes different. When they descend on the streets, they come down in groups. Now they have mobile phones in their hands, and they have Facebook.

## Independence, Sovereignty, and Freedom

independent state by freeing themselves from colonial rule in 1947. They sought the happiness of freedom by forming party, casting vote, and spilling blood. However, the people of this land were deprived of their civic rights in the state of Pakistan. They fought for realizing the right of autonomy in order to bring their deprivations to an end. But even this meagre demand could not be elicited from the autocracy that emerged in Pakistan due to the collaboration of civil-military bureaucracy and the dominance of a feudal outlook. Even the acquiescence of the people ascertained through a democratic process could not ensure the right of autonomous rule. The people were therefore compelled to move towards the path of total independence.

Undoubtedly, the onus of responsibility for the breakup of Pakistan – the independence that was obtained in 1947 – falls squarely on the West Pakistani ruling coterie and their supporters in East Bengal. However, there are many people inside and outside Bangladesh who feel that the people of Bangladesh also had some liability there. But this claim is not correct. The independence of Bangladesh was not a purely political event, it was in large part a military event. The responsibility of transforming politics into a military discourse does not fall on the majority population of Bangladesh. The chronology of events in the annals of history shows without any doubt that the community of Pakistani elites bore this responsibility; they were joined by a very small fraction of Bangladeshi population. It needs some elaboration.

The nationalist movement of the decade of 1960s was a political event. Its cultural part was also a component of that political expression. There was no deviation even when the six-point demand for autonomy and the eleven-point demand for additional rights were made. The lobbies after election alongside blood-drenched roads also did not cross the level of political language. But all political decorums were violated and the political language was replaced by the language of war on the night of 25 March 1971, when the military tried to subjugate the civilian population by the language of arms. It would have been called a dreadful genocide even if that destructive assault was perpetrated on selected political cum ideological opponents. But nothing like that happened on that night. All data and statistics indicate that indiscriminate killings were resorted to on that night without caring about the massive presence of people. That genocide took the shape of ethnic killings.

Not only declaration of war, when war is waged through mass-killings, politics cannot remain alive anymore. Many people speak about the trend of prior politics when speaking about the declaration of independence and the liberation war of Bangladesh. Many people claimed that efforts should have been made for preserving Pakistan, as the people of East Bengal had elicited Pakistan through their struggles. Many also say that the historical enmity of the neighbouring country should have been kept under focus at



They can come whenever called. It is also very easy to pass on news to each other. We observed that during the movement for quota reforms and the safe road movement waged by students in 2018; they spread in all directions after swarming the city of Dhaka. All eyes were on them. They demonstrated exceptional courage and intelligence. As the fascist regime became fearful, they not only suppressed the movement with the help of police, they also deployed the Chhatra League cadres and the Helmut Bahini terrorists to remove the children from the roads by applying brute force. We were silenced. We protested, but nothing came out of that.

The reason why this Independence Day is all the more important to me is because the womenfolk were at the forefront of the July-movement. Not only were they present, they led the movement. The independence that I am speaking about has been an achievement of the womenfolk. When the university students waged the anti-quota movement in 2018, the females participated in that and the leadership was in the hands of the students. The participation of female students in anti-quota movement was significant, because the women were also getting the benefit of 5 percent quota reserved for women. It could be said that they were the beneficiaries of quota system. No doubt, maintaining this quota for women in government jobs was advantageous for many females. However, even then the womenfolk chanted the slogan: "Not quota, but talent, talent". They said, "We seek jobs on merit, not mercy of anyone". This firm stand of the womenfolk geared up the movement. When Sheikh Hasina called the protesters 'Razakar', it was the female students of Dhaka University and Eden Girls' College who started the protests at midnight. The male students later joined them. They stood like shields when the police tried to swoop on their male comrades.

It is almost eight months now. A new situation, a new condition prevails now. An interim government 'selected' by the students and masses after the upsurge has been constituted, of which they are also a part. This is a new experience. The common people have accepted this, and they are hoping that improvements would be made to the vulnerable economic condition of the country. They would get some relief. But this task has become very difficult due to economic devastations caused by corruption and looting of the deposed regime. Besides, although the fascist regime was ousted, much of their system still remains. Many of its collaborators also remain, who are still bent on creating problems. However, opportunities have been created for many jobs under the changed circumstances, attention to which was not paid by the ousted regime. The regime raised slogans of 'development', but those were mostly confined to constructing huge buildings, roads, bridges, etc. But they did not pay attention to improving the living standard of the people. All humans seek honour and prestige in their lives. Taka in billions need not be spent for that. Proper planning and reaching its fruits to the marginalised population can bring about a different kind of development. That is, development



human beings. They live in remote places, hills, or char-lands (shoals) of rivers; where development does not trickle down automatically. But now, that effort has to be made, so that people live in joyous and healthy circumstances.

Whether male or female, rich or poor, people belonging to all religions shall live together harmoniously in this new Bangladesh. The honour of all citizens will be protected; this is our little expectation.

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the centre of political considerations. The logic of all these viewpoints is okay, but only when considered as part of the political language. There is also much scope to consider these as ideological standpoints. If the political language was not transformed into military language, then all these would have remained valid as cognizable logic. But just as politics became redundant through the declaration of war on 25 March, similarly these logics also became untenable. By then, the language of politics got transformed into the language of war.

The people of Bangladesh therefore pitched the historical justification of freedom by declaring independence while in the midst of an unjust situation. They fought back, sacrificed their lives, suffered indescribable pains, sorrow, and tortures. In the end, they earned their independence.

## Our Sovereignty

Behind the demand for independence remains the aspiration for sovereignty. It remains in considerable proportion. If independence is considered to be the realization of a map, then sovereignty is its life-spirit. People enjoy sovereignty by attaching priority to the collective, and by considering the individual self as its part. As pointed out earlier, there is complexity in this concept, in addition to the problems of abstractness and symbolism.

In our case, one of the probable problems is the idea of water rivalry on two sides of the border. It is difficult to say with certainty, but the experience of colonial rule, lack of faith arising out of that, and the sharing of borders amid lack of control can be the sources of that distrust. No country or population in the world enjoy an absolutely independent lifestyle that the word 'sovereignty' indicates. Apart from international politics and geo-political realities, people living on the borders have many mutualities. If these are not looked at in a more relaxed manner from the perspective of principle and law, then the lives of many people become complex. If the concept of sovereignty assumes a huge abstract shape, then this type of complexity undoubtedly increases!

Another big rival of the concept of sovereignty is financial poverty. It becomes very difficult for poor countries to maintain sovereignty. They have to borrow a lot, when they have to accept a package of conditionalities by suppressing their independent will. The financial transactions can be seen through the naked eye. But it becomes difficult to know about the known and unknown debts that remain invisible. These cultural, intellectual, and mental debts make us strangers in our own land. The domestic sovereignty then disappears. The feeling or display of self-control then becomes mere ostentations. In this situation, people focus more toward what lies beyond the border and the outside world instead of opting for self-actualisation.

The effective realization of sovereignty is not a simple event. We should rather focus more on the comparatively more tangible and realistic idea of freedom.

## Our Freedom

The people of Bangladesh have been fighting for collective freedom for a long time. There was poverty among the people of this region because of geographic location and features of production system. They also had to endure much exploitation owing to external parties. But if changes are observed over a long period, then it becomes apparent that the history of the people of this region is that of slow progress. These people identified themselves as a large Muslim-majority peasant population throughout the 19th century. This attribute started to find a different kind of direct political expression at the start of the 20th century. Through this, the aspiration for freedom through self-development can be identified as an unwavering objective.

The people of this region formed the Krishak-Praja Party during the third decade of the 20th century. This party received ultimate success overnight in the arena of political powerplay. During those days, parties having this kind of name or ideal were quite rare across the globe, with the exception of the communist parties. It was possible only because of the resolute aspiration for freedom of the peasant population. After finding a new direction for freedom in the Pakistan Movement, this very population-group reassembled under the shadow of the Muslim League. Their combined support snatched freedom from the clutches of colonial rulers in 1947.

Many people failed to get the message of worldy freedom through the independence of 1947. This failure was tantamount to a failure in reading history. The demand for Pakistan came about for attaining worldy freedom. An indirect proof of this was the support extended by the Communist Party and the scheduled castes to that movement. The fact that Jogen Mandol could not survive in Pakistan was a proof of the undemocratic and communal character of Pakistan; but that does not prove that the Pakistan Movement was unjustified. Similarly, categorizing the political settlement of Kolkata by citing the info that people like Syed Mujtaba Ali could not stay on in Kolkata is not fair.

## Prayer for Freedom

Hasan Robayet

Sweet river, sugary land, greenery galore  
Innocents of paddy and rice field oscillate.  
The peasants, fishermen and sailors beckon  
Betting their lives for the sake of children.  
Crops ripen, the seeds are burnt to ashes  
Fires reach the sky, cows and buffalo perish.  
The devil descends in the dark black night  
Demos of blood float on the boiled rice.  
The books are torn, the sermons of saint  
Rosaries of prophet are awash with blood.  
The friends of crematorium drift away, and  
Dirt piles up on the twisted rings of nose.  
The lines are occupied with resolute chests  
Farmers, workers and military men take oath.  
Let dawn descend with the colours of children  
O Almighty, please accept this prayer of mine.

Translation: Dr Helal Uddin Ahmed

## The Path to Freedom

Rumman Jannat

'One day this war will end, and I shall return to my poetry' – with this vision, I sit with a white paper before me. This is what my freedom is. When the Baksalite murderers were reddening the month of July – I used to think in the darkness of night: how were those days when our hearts longed for the radio? I cannot tread far by crossing the walls of dream. Reminds me of the halting of a river after coming near the bare feet of a man.

The moringa plant beside my home leans due to the weight of age, and a guava tree stands beside it like a brother; My grandma used to hide inside a hole dug in its middle along with her offspring. More than the darkness, human wants blackened their night. My mother does not recall a bigger war than that. Innumerable flowers have now blossomed on that moringa plant!

The distance between the homes of my maternal and paternal grandmas could be bridged by a run. The neighbourhood ended by crossing the very bamboo bush. Then there was the village of a different tradition after passing the mosque. On that path, my young father used to join the march of freedom with his double-barrelled gun. Telling this story, his face was moist with tears like the ripe fruit of fig!

Today, on this night of spring, we are carried away by the wind of crops, and the guava tree covers its own canvas with greenery –

Translation: Dr Helal Uddin Ahmed



However, the people of Bangladesh searched for a new direction of freedom during the election of 1954 after observing their limited prospects for freedom in the post-1947 political arrangement. During this long journey, there were not much variations in their worldview. Those who discover secular spirit only in the nationalistic movement of the decade of 1960s actually embrace their failure in reading properly the names and signs of the time. It can be said that the intense nationalistic movement of the 1960s was an intoxicated phase of this long struggle for worldy freedom. A golden independence was achieved during that journey. It was a lofty moment for relying on the self for achieving collective freedom based on comparatively intimate state-boundary and map.

The independence of Bangladesh has been the most important achievement in the long quest of the people of this land for freedom over many generations.

It is for this reason that the trend of terming the War of Independence as Liberation War or Liberation Struggle was set in motion. This naming is very significant. It reminds us that an event cannot be realized fully with the abstract concepts of independence and sovereignty. The word 'independence' cannot be illuminated to its full glory without the complementarity of freedom or fundamental rights. It also reminds us that the fight for freedom has to be continued if we are to realize even partially the honour and prestige of sovereignty.

The people of Bangladesh have continued that struggle. Whenever the narrow interests or partisanship of the ruling coterie appeared as something bigger than the rights and honour of the masses, people came down to the streets collectively; they framed the manifesto of a new nation. The 2024 mass upsurge of the students and masses was the latest manifestation of that trend. This mass upsurge reminds us that appealing a particular group by ignoring the message of freedom of the masses is a huge hindrance on the path of overall freedom. Its political significance has been higher among the upsurges, because it could bring forward the newer proposition of building a political community of the masses as opposed to divisive politics. But we should remember that this event materialized under a human society, a flag, and a boundary, which were already achieved in independent Bangladesh.

Our resolve during the Independence Day this year should be to make progress in the task of building a new Bangladesh by accepting with humility the newly realized message on freedom's path; and in this way, we shall be able to construct the collective preconditions for enjoying in relative visibility the abstract concepts of 'independence' and 'sovereignty'.

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