

54 YEARS OF BANGLADESH'S INDEPENDENCE

March 1971 and the years that led to it

Anu Muhammad
is former professor of economics from Jahangirnagar University.

ANU MUHAMMAD

The Liberation War of Bangladesh, which officially began in March 1971, had its roots in events that unfolded many years earlier. The people of what is now Bangladesh played a key role in the establishment of Pakistan, primarily through their votes. They joined the Pakistan movement with the hope that the new state, founded on religious lines, would rise above communal conflicts and emerge as a true democracy.

However, the reality after Pakistan's formation gradually disillusioned the people in the erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). It became increasingly clear that the state structure was deeply flawed, especially for Pakistan's eastern wing. A powerful alliance took control at the centre, consisting of big business groups, the military and civil bureaucracy ("overdeveloped" as Pakistani social scientist Hamza Alavi termed it), and racially biased politicians. This triad consolidated power and blocked any meaningful democratic progress. When the military regime took over in 1958, it became the primary tool for these ruling forces to maintain control. Authoritarian rule was their chosen path.

In the 1954 provincial elections, the Muslim League suffered a decisive defeat. The United Front, led by three secular leaders—AK Fazlul Huq, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, and Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy—emerged victorious. Their 21-point programme called for greater provincial autonomy, land reform, public education rights, democratic rights, autonomy to universities, nationalisation of jute business, and scrapping of repressive laws. These demands laid the groundwork for future movements in the 1960s.

Even before martial law, and especially under it, regional and ethnic discrimination against East Pakistan worsened. Class inequality also deepened. In response, the people of East Pakistan resisted oppression, military dictatorship, and systemic injustice. Despite severe repression, the democratic

movement in East Pakistan gained momentum, and secular political aspirations took shape. The struggle against Pakistan's authoritarian rule strengthened both democratic and secular ideals among the people. One key example was the evolution of the Muslim League into the Awami Muslim League, and eventually the Awami League, under the leadership of Maulana Bhashani. Later, Bhashani established another all-Pakistan party, National Awami Party (NAP), to advance the anti-imperialist struggle. Through this transformation, people's aspirations for democracy and secularism found expression. This resistance was not confined to East Pakistan alone. Democratic forces in West Pakistan also joined hands with those in the east. In the 1960s, workers and peasants' organisations flourished, especially under left leadership.

Two political figures played pivotal roles during this time: Maulana Bhashani and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Although Bhashani was a religious leader by title,

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he never engaged in communal politics. Instead, he always stood for workers' and peasants' rights, opposed imperialism, and supported socialist ideals. He was a key figure in the 1969 Mass Uprising and played a crucial role in securing Sheikh Mujib's release from prison.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Mujib's Six-Point Movement demanded autonomy and stood against ethnic discrimination. The 11-point movement by the student alliance, in addition, raised issues against imperialism and class exploitation. The Pakistani establishment-dominated by powerful business families (including the Adamjees and Bawans), the military-civil bureaucracy, and authoritarian, racially

negotiations, culminating in the horrific events of March 25.

Until that night, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League's elected representatives continued negotiations with President Yahya Khan. However, threats from Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, fears among military generals of losing power, and anxieties of the big business families pushed the regime towards a catastrophic decision.



A child carries the flag of the newly born Bangladesh as he moves with his family during the Liberation War in 1971.

PHOTO: COLLECTED FROM ARCHIVE

biased politicians—was determined to retain control at all costs.

This ruling alliance consistently undermined democratic processes. However, the 1969 Mass Uprising challenged and ultimately broke their grip on power, leading to the fall of Gen Ayub Khan. The 1970 general election became Pakistan's final opportunity to remain united under a democratic framework. The Awami League's landslide victory opened the door for a new democratic leadership for all of Pakistan.

But the ruling triad refused to accept the election results. Their rejection effectively sealed Pakistan's fate. From March 1, 1971, instead of respecting the democratic mandate, the regime secretly prepared for military action under the guise of

On the night of March 25, the Pakistani military launched a brutal crackdown in Dhaka. Their primary targets included police and East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) headquarters, student dormitories at Dhaka University, slum areas, teachers, intellectuals, and journalists. Estimates suggest that over 25,000 people were killed in a single night.

The Pakistan Army believed this operation would crush all resistance within days. They arrested Sheikh Mujib and imposed a curfew on March 26. By March 27, large numbers of people had begun fleeing Dhaka. But the events of March 25 made one thing clear: Bangladesh could no longer remain a part of Pakistan. What began on March 25 quickly escalated into a full-scale national armed struggle for liberation.

The massacre turned the people's long-standing desire for independence into an unstoppable determination for freedom. There is some debate regarding the formal declaration of independence. Maj Ziaur Rahman, on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, made a radio proclamation referring to Mujib as the president. Similar declarations were also made by other Awami League leaders.

Actually, people did not wait for a formal announcement. Resistance erupted spontaneously across the country. The Pakistani military's assumptions were shattered as people from all walks of life—students, workers, peasants, and the general public—rose in what became a people's war. Except for a few war criminals, the whole population of the country participated in this war. Countless lives were lost, rape and the abuse of women reached horrific levels. Few events in world history compare to the scale of the genocide committed in such a short time and also the intensity of the resistance.

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However, in the years following the victory, people's expectations were steadily betrayed. Over the past 54 years, there have been severe deviations from the spirit of the Liberation War. Successive governments have failed to realise the dreams that fuelled the war. The Awami League, throughout its unelected ruling period (2014-2024), harmed the ideals of Liberation War more than any previous record.

Nevertheless, this war remains the most glorious chapter in Bangladesh's history. The people did not submit; against one of the world's most brutal and well-trained military forces, they showed extraordinary courage, dignity, and determination. As we stand at a new phase of political awakening, sparked by recent mass uprisings, we must remember that the Liberation War of 1971 laid the strongest foundation for a democratic, inclusive, secular, and just Bangladesh. Progress cannot be achieved by ignoring or diminishing the legacy of 1971.

The Liberation War must always remain our guiding light, our enduring source of strength as we move forward.

Would I be the kind of person to forget history?

Emran Mahfuz
is a poet and convenor of Abul Mansur Ahmad Smriti Parishad.

EMRAN MAHFUZ

Breaking the chains of years of subjugation, we gained independence in 1971. March 26, our Independence Day, is marked by the sacrifice and blood of our martyrs. Our founding aspirations were rooted in equality, human dignity, and social justice. In 1971, democracy was at the core of the spirit of the Liberation War. Similarly, in the 1990s, democratic values were behind the fall of autocratic ruler HM Ershad. Unfortunately, the spirit of democracy and social dignity was sidelined in the following years, which led to public grievances, culminating in the mass uprising of July 2024, which claimed at least 1,400 lives.

The greatest achievement of Bangalees is our independence achieved in 1971. But its backdrop is not limited to 1971. The uprising of 1969, 1990, and 2024—each struggle revolved around the question of our rights and deprivation. Driven by aspirations for democracy, ordinary people shed their blood and endured imprisonment. Yet, like a fleeting mirage, democracy slipped through our grasp.

Our struggle has always been against political domination and social inequality, spanning from British rule to the Pakistani regime. At the core of every struggle was the unwavering desire to live with dignity. Yet, those who rose to power repeatedly neglected the sacrifices of Shaheed Asad, Shamsuzzoha, Noor Hossain, Dr Milon, and Raufun Basunia. In the anti-discrimination movement, martyrs like Abu Sayeed and Mir Mugdho embodied the dreams of democracy and social dignity. To forget these heroes is to forsake the spirit of patriotism, an act that undermines the very essence of 1971.

In this regard, Rabindranath Tagore's poignant words come to mind. He did not see us merely as human beings but as Bangalees—whom he could not fully trust. Perhaps from this anguish, he lamented, "O enchanted mother, you have made seventy million of your children Bangalees, but not made them humans." For the poet, Bangalees lacked the essence of true humanity; they were consumed by self-interest and betrayed public trust. Forgetting history and dismissing sacrifices seemed ingrained in their nature.

I am reminded of the deeply reflective poem "Amar Porichoy" by poet Syed Shamsul Haque, which resonates with Kazi Nazrul Islam's "Samyobadi." Nazrul wrote, "I sing the song of equality, where all barriers and distances have dissolved into one." In Haque's poem, the thousand-year history and heritage of the country are invoked. He begins by touching upon that vast history, then speaks of the river-encircled land of Bangla. At the end of the first stanza, he poignantly asks, "Thirteen hundred rivers ask me, 'Where have you come from?'"

The poet responds to his own question by reflecting on generational legacies, rulers' legacies, religious traditions, and a heritage of revolution. He includes Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam as integral parts of this inheritance. His narrative of

this history? Am I such a person?"

In today's context, this line carries profound significance. The truth is, we forget history—we have already forgotten much of it. At times, we have even erased it in our fixation on the present, and this has come at a great cost. Politicians have spent years mired in futile disputes, neglecting to honour those who fought and sacrificed for our nation. Their achievements have not been preserved or passed down to the next generation, which stands as a national disgrace.

If we too forget history, the future will be bleak. Forgetting history is a symptom of fascism. Sheikh Hasina has been labelled a fascist for disregarding the sacrifices that shaped this nation. Yet, there was a time when the nation was united to overthrow Ershad's autocratic rule. Over the years, however, the ruling class has steadily drifted away from the ideals of the Liberation War. They have manipulated the constitution at will and deviated from accurate historical narratives. They followed the paths of post-'72 Sheikh Mujib and Ershad.

Even if we set aside the struggles of the British era, our fight after the Lahore Resolution and the Partition has been ceaseless. The efforts of Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani,

War transformed into a people's war. We cannot forget them. But our politicians forgot them so easily.

In independent Bangladesh, poet Abul Hasan published his collection *Raja Jay Raja Ase* in December 1972. In the dedication, he wrote, "My mother/ as helpless as my motherland." From his socio-political experiences, he declared, "This king comes, that king goes / only the colour of

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history and tradition culminates in the figure of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Through his words, the poet unveils Bangalees' dreams and unyielding spirit. He expresses hope with these lines, "We are together, we live together, and together we shall remain. Erasing all lines of division, we shall paint the image of equality." Finally, he poses a poignant question, "Shall I forget

clothes changes... / but the days do not. How effortlessly he presented such complex truths. He painted our collective sorrow, vulnerability, and solemn immersion.

From the Kagmari Conference, Maulana Bhashani offered the people of Bangladesh a direct vision of independence. He bid "Assalamu Alaikum" to the West Pakistani rulers. A simple religious greeting became synonymous with the cry for independence. Through that conference began the movements for autonomy and self-determination in what was then East Pakistan. In uniting and awakening the people of this region against imperialist and hegemonic forces, that conference played a profoundly significant role.

Then came the historic March 7 speech, when Bangabandhu called out, "Turn every house into a fortress; resist the enemy with whatever you have." That call mentally prepared most of the people for war. In various places, many ordinary people participated in training. These unarmed civilians remained engaged in war efforts throughout. And finally, victory came to us.

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Neglecting the people, Ayub Khan used to say, "Development first, then democracy." He implemented development projects: roads, the national mosque Baitul Mukarram, and more. But development could not save him. Ayub Khan's fall sparked the first unified movement by people from both wings of Pakistan. From the very birth of the Pakistani state, East Pakistan endured ethnic oppression, exploitation, and discrimination. Eventually, the people rose.

"The death of a revolutionary does not mean the death of the revolution"—this is a timeless quote by Che Guevara. In the same spirit of 1971, Noor Hossain declared in 1990, "Down with autocracy, let democracy be free." That mass movement succeeded in toppling the military junta, but the trail of autocracy in the country's politics did not change. Initially, the uprising restored democracy, established the rule of law, ensured freedom of speech, expression and the press, the right to vote, and security—five vital wins. But now, none of these remain. Many of those who led the 1990 movement have since changed their principles and beliefs.

History suggests that, had there been a national government instead of a partisan one after 1971, it might have met the people's hopes and aspirations in line with the spirit of the Liberation War. But under successive partisan governments, those were trampled time and again.

We continue to fail the ideals of 1971. Autocratic laws and regulations have been used to keep people confined time and again. Economic, political, social and cultural disparities reached their peak, and in response, the youth rose. And they say, "A storm rages inside my chest, I've bared it—shoot if you must." In that rebellion, they took bullets to the chest in the hope of human liberation. Victory was achieved, but how long can we hold it? Our history is grim. We have a persistent tendency to ignore its lessons. Again and again, we stray from the ideals of the Liberation War. Restlessness cannot lead us to our destination.

I will end with a quote from Serajul Islam Choudhury, "Can we forget 1971 just because we want to?" The Liberation War continues to flow through us.

We have two tasks to undertake. First, we must develop the positive aspects that existed in the past. We must foster the democratic elements, the unity, and the spirit of struggles from the past. Second, we must eliminate the negative aspects—the narrowness, the backwardness—and build a secular, democratic state and society.