

The speech that emboldened us all



THE THIRD VIEW
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We need to remember Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech on March 7, 1971 simply because it is an inseparable part of our nation's liberation struggle. The speech brought us all together, gave us direction amid confusion, inculcated a new vision, empowered us with the courage to defy and the confidence to believe in ourselves, and set free a spirit that readied us to make the supreme sacrifice. The piercing power of the words, the conquering spirit of the voice, the rhythm of the oration, and the flood of energy that swept through us all—both those who were there and those who heard it on the radio—were extraordinary.

Together, the speech suddenly turned a desperate people into a unified bastion of courage, determination and bravery, with a clear and immediate goal of plunging into the struggle to free our motherland. That day cannot be compared, that hour cannot be imagined, that moment cannot be replicated, that speech cannot be duplicated, and its result cannot be understood except in terms of the birth of Bangladesh.

Many did not instantly realise it, but as

course, celebrate the man, but far more importantly, we bask in the glory the speech helped us achieve. There were all sorts of stigmatised stereotypes of the Bangalees being always disunited, unable to act with precision and, most critically, lacking the courage to withstand threats, power, and danger. But the speech told our enemies that we were not afraid, that we could unite and we were ready to defy.

The psychological impact of the speech cannot perhaps be fully understood by those who were not victims of what we had suffered through the years under the colonisers. When one is faced with overwhelming odds, the strength of the mind and the courage of the heart matter far more than can otherwise be gauged. March 7, 1971 did this most effectively. For those who did not hear it themselves, it may be difficult to appreciate its value. For the *Muktijoddhas* (freedom fighters) who carried the speech in their hearts, and for those who heard it repeatedly through its broadcast on Swadhin Bangla Betar, its value and capacity to keep us motivated were clear, and they felt its

walks of life attended the meeting—farmers, workers, daily labourers, street vendors, small shopkeepers, students, political activists from all shades of opinion and political commitment, and ordinary men and women. When the hour came, Bangabandhu took us on a journey towards a future where we would be free, able to laugh, play, live, and grow in a place that would be our very own.

As we recall that speech today, we must

arrogant, and too self-centred to accept the reality that Sheikh Mujib would be Pakistan's prime minister. Along with some Pakistani generals, he was determined not to allow that to happen. Bhutto invited Yahya to his home in Larkana, Sindh, where he spent several days persuading Yahya to postpone the convening of the National Assembly. On March 1, Yahya declared an indefinite postponement of the National Assembly's first session. Thus began

busy street corners and parks. The student artists would start singing patriotic songs and crowds would begin gathering. Once the crowd was large enough, we would interrupt the singing and start our speeches, informing people about the grand rally, stressing its importance and answering questions from the public.

Every morning, we would gather at the Teacher Student Centre (TSC) to be assigned to different processions touring various parts of the city. By March 6, we had covered the whole city several times and had held hundreds of processions, rallies and street-corner meetings.

As on all the previous days, the group I was part of—belonging to the East Pakistan Students Union (EPSU)—gathered at the TSC on the morning of March 7 at about 9am and reached the Race Course by 10:30am. The stage was at the northern corner of the huge field (renamed Suhrawardy Udyan after independence). By the time we arrived, the crowd had already reached halfway up to the High Court ground located on the southern side of the field. We found ourselves in the middle.

We watched the crowd grow within a very short time. I remember the endless streams of processions entering the field from all sides. Thousands marched, chanting slogans with sheer passion and energy. As they settled down, they continued their slogans. After a while, they began singing in groups, and we all joined in. There was an inexplicable sense of joy and pride. We had come together to defy the "enemy" and tell the world about our struggle for freedom.

By the time Bangabandhu arrived, we were an ocean of people united in spirit, moved by courage, and dreaming of a future of dignity. As he climbed the stairs towards the stage, he saw more than a million people intensely waiting for him. Here was a 50-year-old leader standing at the peak of his popularity, about to utter words that would determine our future and ensure our place in history.

The speech he delivered is now known to the world and has a place in the hearts of all proud citizens of an independent Bangladesh. Like all history-making leaders, Bangabandhu was not flawless. He, like many of his ilk, made mistakes and took actions that were not best suited to the welfare of the people. As a nation of 55 years, we must judge him in his totality. As is the global practice, let expert historians—not the instant ones we produce whenever political winds change direction—put the final judgement on Bangabandhu. The narrative of the day should not be allowed to cloud history.



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman addresses a massive crowd of people at the then Ramna Race Course ground (now Suhrawardy Udyan) in Dhaka, delivering his historic speech on March 7, 1971.

PHOTO: ARCHIVE

remember that it has earned a place in the gallery of the world's greatest speeches, included in Unesco's Memory of the World International Register. It is an inseparable part of Bangladesh's history. It is also an indelible part of that supreme pride that is ours as citizens of a country that came into being through the sacrifices of millions of men, women, youth and children, all being victims of unimaginable brutality that formed part of the genocide Bangalees had to endure.

In the general election of 1970, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman received the mandate from the people of Pakistan to govern the country as its prime minister. President Gen Yahya Khan acknowledged this and declared him to be the "future prime minister of Pakistan." Tragically, a conspiracy soon began. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who emerged with the majority of seats in West Pakistan, was too proud, too

the final act to deprive the Bangalees of their legitimate right to power.

Bangabandhu immediately launched the non-cooperation movement and declared that he would address the nation from the Ramna Race Course on March 7. That set the stage for the historic speech.

We, the students of Dhaka University belonging to all student organisations, became fully involved in publicising the call for the non-cooperation movement and for attending the meeting. There was no other way but to organise street demonstrations, continuous rallies, processions, and street-corner meetings to appeal to the public to attend the gathering.

We obtained dozens of trucks—most of them lent to us for the occasion—on the backs of which we placed student singers with a few microphones and a tabla player, accompanied by some political activists. We drove them to

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time unfolded, we felt that all the necessary instructions to earn our place under the sun were there. As we were facing totally unfamiliar situations, that speech gave us a sense of direction. And as we faced the possibility of death, the spirit of sacrifice triggered in our hearts and minds when we heard that speech gave us the courage to dive into the unknown without the least hesitation.

When we eulogise the speech, we, of

courage-giving power when going into battle.

Those of us who were there at the Ramna Race Course on that day have our own personal memories. Reminiscing them still warms our blood and generates that special feeling of pride that automatically holds our heads high. The outpouring of millions of people who turned up to listen to Bangabandhu gave us all an incomparable strength and a unique feeling that nothing could keep us oppressed. People from all

Let history breathe



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For 15 and a half years, between 2009 and 2024, Bangladesh was governed by a political culture that elevated Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Sheikh Hasina's father, to a status greater than history and closer to doctrine.

The transformation did not happen overnight. It was built brick by brick: murals across district towns, statues at intersections, Bangabandhu Corners in public institutions, commemorative volumes, state-funded films, endless seminars and anniversary programmes, and a proliferation of institutions bearing his and his family members' names. Crores were spent to ensure that Sheikh Mujib was omnipresent. So much so that he became indistinguishable from the Liberation War itself. Over time, the narrative hardened: to question the scale of his portrayal was to question the birth of the nation.

Yet, the Liberation War of 1971 was not the work of one man. It was the product of millions of freedom fighters, political leaders, student activists, cultural organisers, rural villagers, defecting officers, and ordinary

citizens who bore extraordinary costs.

When history compresses that vast, collective struggle into a single towering personality, it does injustice to everyone else. The more the state insisted on singular glory, the more frustration simmered beneath the surface. It became visible after Hasina's departure in the wake of the student-led mass uprising. Some of the reactions were extreme and indefensible. But beneath the excesses lay a message: people were rejecting overglorification. Mujib's historical stature did not require exaggeration. His role was already monumental. By inflating it beyond proportion, the state had rather weakened his legacy.

Now, Bangladesh stands at another political turn. The return of BNP after nearly two decades inevitably brings renewed attention to Ziaur Rahman, whose role during the 1971 war—including broadcasting the declaration of independence from Chattogram, and fighting and giving leadership on the ground—remains historically significant. During Hasina's regime, many of Zia's

contributions were marginalised or erased from official memory. It was, therefore, natural to expect that a democratic political transition would restore balance. But early signs suggest something else: inversion and sometimes sheer neglect.

At this year's Amar Ekushey Boi Mela, much like last year, numerous "Zia Corners" and dedicated shelves featuring books on Ziaur Rahman are prominently visible—a commendable move. What is disappointing, however, is the relative neglect of other war heroes and the Liberation War itself, whether through dedicated corners, stalls, or newly published titles.

A report by bdnews24 noted that, as of March 3, the fair's management did not include any titles on the Liberation War in its regular bulletins of newly released books. However, at least nine new titles on the subject were available at the stalls.

More ironic is the programming of Bangladesh Television (BTV), long known to reflect the priorities of whichever party occupies state power. Since the beginning of March, BTV has been airing a segment in its news bulletins titled "Uttal March," a day-by-day recollection of the events of March 1971. The initiative is also praiseworthy, but its execution is problematic. The introductory montage and title card centre overwhelmingly on Ziaur Rahman's independence declaration, featuring multiple images of him, while offering little visual or narrative space to other central figures.

During the historical recounting, the pattern becomes subtler but more telling. Names like Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto are pronounced without hesitation. But when it comes to leaders and mass organisers within the then East Pakistan—those who mobilised, negotiated, declared, marched and defied—the script drifts into passive constructions. During the broadcast, actions occur, but actors dissolve. Protests happen; flags are raised; resistance builds. Yet, who did those things goes unspoken.

A passive voice is not merely a stylistic choice. In historical narration, it can be overtly political. When agency is removed, memory becomes blurred. When names disappear, accountability and contribution fade. Even ahead of March 7, there has been little effort to commemorate the day Sheikh Mujibur Rahman "effectively declared the independence of Bangladesh," as noted by Unesco on its official website.

Judging by the practices during the 15 and a half years of Hasina's regime and early signals on social media, the historical significance of March 7 is very much at risk of being politicised, much like the way Ziaur Rahman's radio announcement of independence was downplayed during the Awami League regime. If such patterns get established, Bangladesh risks sliding once more into a "specific narrative"—a curated version of history where only one camp's hero is glorified while another's presence is dimmed. The country has already witnessed how such monopolisation of memory breeds

resentment.

The Liberation War of Bangladesh is too foundational, too sacred, and too complex to be reduced to partisan ownership. Mujib's leadership mattered. Zia's actions mattered. So did Tajuddin Ahmad and Syed Nazrul Islam's wartime governance. So did the student leaders of 1969 and 1971, the unnamed freedom fighters in villages and border camps, women who endured unspeakable trauma, diplomats, cultural activists, the farmers who sheltered fighters, and the families who never saw their loved ones return. A mature nation does not fear multiplicity in its history. It embraces it.

After the July uprising, many imagined a new Bangladesh where truth would not carry a party label, archives would be open, and history would be written with evidence rather than expediency. That vision demands intellectual honesty from all sides, not merely a transfer of narrative control from one political camp to another.

The Ministry of Liberation War Affairs may not yet be fully attentive to how state media is framing the narrative, therefore shaping public memory. If so, this is the moment for correcting the course. A national broadcaster must serve history, not hierarchy. A book fair must celebrate scholarship, not proximity to power. And a government confident in its legitimacy should not need to curate history defensively.

Bangladesh's past is large enough to contain all its protagonists, but only if they are allowed to be named.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Plains tribe
6 Trivia fodder
11 Egypt's Sadat
12 Boise's state
13 Designer's asset
14 Eternal City resident
15 Fencing sword
17 Sty resident
18 Not too bad to tolerate
22 Avenue liners
23 Skewed views
27 Honolulu hello
29 Treasure stash
30 Swindle
32 Pine or palm
33 Preference, informally
35 Diet no-no
38 Realise

39 Suspect's defence
41 Sun-powered
45 Diner pages
46 Packing box
47 Tests
48 Really stoked

DOWN
1 "Krazy ___"
2 One ___ million
3 Hurt responses
4 Turning point
5 Corn pancake
6 Like a cabin at night
7 Commotion
8 Summer spot for some
9 Bangkok native
10 Ditty

16 Flow out
18 Pulsate
19 Singer Fitzgerald
20 In a frenzy
21 Soil burrower
24 Ticked off
25 At any time
26 Beholds
28 Hollywood greeting
31 Convent resident
34 Puccini opera
35 Renown
36 Baseball's Rodriguez
37 Singer Turner
40 Lazy fellow
42 Pet perch
43 Had breakfast
44 Stop colour

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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