

Prepared on 8 January 2020

A GREAT MAN OF THE WORLD OUR OWN BANGABANDHU SHEIKH MUJIBUR
RAHMAN OF BANGLADESH

Abul Maal Abdul Muhith

We are here today to celebrate the centenary of the birth of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

On March 17 in 1920 Bangladesh was fortunate to host the birth of this Great Man in our soil in a village Tungipara in the Gopalganj Subdivision of Faridpur Zila. In 1984 all Subdivisions, which came into existence as a geographical unit of administration in British India in 1854, were upgraded into Zilas or Districts. In 1947 when the Subcontinent became independent of the British colonial rule three states came up in the Indian Subcontinent viz: Indian Union, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon).

The Subcontinent has a history of various groups of people descending on it from time to time but making it their home. A horde, tribe or clan came to this land and made it their home. This was the way the human civilization flourished in the world. This deliberate choice of a group of people is most evident in the life of the founder of the Mughal India, Emperor Babur. Babur was born in Ferghana, a village in Samarkand of the state of Azerbaijan, but was exiled by powerful people who were not prepared to accept him as the ruler. He found shelter in Khorasan but could not forget his birthplace and as he grew up made many attempts to get back to Samarkand. He considered the shelter he received from the Persian monarch as temporary. Despite many attempts he could not get back to his birthplace with lasting supremacy even though he won it a few times.

From a territory near the Indus Basin he got an opportunity to move eastward and southward to Delhi and Agra in central India by defeating the Muslim Rulers of North India. Delhi was a prize conquest and there he began rethinking about his goal in life. He called all his kinsmen and followers to a gathering in Delhi and announced that he was not going to make further attempt to get back to Ferghana and India was their home from then onwards. He never regretted his decision and he established the great Mughal Empire in India which was the largest Empire in the World in the days of one of his successors Emperor Alamgir Aurangzeb. The Subcontinent had the proud tradition that many tribes, clans, races and many religions flourished here. Babur followed a new tradition of not compelling his subjects to adopt the religion of the Ruler and did not consider as his royal duty to preach the religion of the rulers. In fact, the Muslim Rulers were the first rulers in the world not to take up any mission to convert all their subjects to their own religion. The Muslims ruled here in the territories of Hindustan or Indian Subcontinent for more than a thousand years from 712 A. D. till 1756 A. D. but the country did not become a Muslim

land and the large majority remained Hindu who were a kind of pagans who worshipped many gods and goddesses whom they considered as various incarnations of the Great Creator. It is interesting that the name of the Hindus was coined by the Arabs as they called the citizens of Hindustan as Hindus.

The British were adventurous traders and the first British trader Buton obtained Mughal permission to set up their trading post in and around modern Calcutta that was created out of three villages of Kolikata, Sutanati and Govindpur situated at the mouth of the mighty Ganges River. Lord Robert Clive of Great Britain (1725-1774), a very bold but deceptive leader of the British traders set up a British colony in the Subcontinent for the first time in 1756 winning the Battle of Plassey through mostly deceit, bribes and conspiracy.

Initially they kept local conspirators like Mir Jafar Ali Khan and other stooges as the Rulers but Warren Hastings (1725-1774), the first Governor of the British Fort William in Calcutta decided in 1772 to give up the charade and actually set up the British colonial administration in India that was the first of its kind. He became the first British Governor General of India in 1773 and the British East India Company under essentially the control of the Government of U. K. ruled the colony till 1858. In that year following the failed Indian War of Independence (which the British downgraded as the Sepoy Mutiny), Queen Victoria became the Empress of India on 1 May 1876 and the British Government at White Hall took over the colonial administration that lasted for the next 90 years till 1947.

Thus the Indian Subcontinent had this legacy of a country where hordes, clans or ethnic groups came in search of arable lands and potable water and settled there and made it their home. Thus it presented a melting pot of various races, complexions, traditions, mores and faiths. This was very different from the way in which the American nation was formed after 1492. There people from Europe and Africa came from different countries and the weight of the early settlers from United Kingdom gave them one language that is English. There one language put all different Europeans into a nation of not a melting pot but a mosaic of different ethnic groups. Africans, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Greek and German remained dominant in certain countries but were broadly classified as English and Latin nations.

Nation states in Europe were so many and ultimately they remained separate although got economically integrated into Europe. Great Britain perhaps because of its isolation but overwhelming dominance in discovering new lands is still having difficulty with an integrated Europe. In developing these nation states great leaders with foresight, administrative competence and tactful handling played crucial and critical roles. Such leaders are credited as builders of nations. Frederick Barbarossa in the Holy Roman Empire, Louis the XIV in France, Garibaldi in Italy, Otto Bismarck in Germany or Victor Emmanuel in Italy, became fathers of such nations at some crucial points of time which were created by other philosophers and statesmen who flourished before their times.

Bangladesh, however, emerged in a different manner. In the eastern end of Bengal there was considerable human habitation about 3500 years before the birth of Christ in what is now known as Sylhet of Bangladesh. The area was known as Barbakunda and it was green jungle inhabited by

wild animals including elephants and the Austroloid people. Islam came to Bengal through the Arab traders in the seventh century A. D. and strangely they concentrated from Chittagong to Dhaka and up to Sylhet of modern Bangladesh and Cachar of Assam state of Indian Union. Though far from Sind and Northern India where Islam came in early 8th century A. D. Islam moved eastward and southward to Delhi Agra and Gujrat regions. But strangely Muslims became a substantial population of this eastern border of India. When the Aryans moved to India they proved very efficient in agriculture and adept in producing grains which meant rice in Bangla region. The traditional rulers of the eastern region invited the Aryans to their land with land grants to convert jungles into human habitation centres and the strategy worked well. The Austroloid Bongs mixed with the Caucasians of the east and the Arab and Afghan traders from the Middle East and thus emerged the Bangladeshis in the seventies of the twentieth century. Bangladesh is ethnically an overwhelmingly Austroloid people with whom visitors and conquerors mixed freely. Most of the women were local converts to Islam. Somehow Bangladesh attracted Muslim saints and preachers from Arabia, Persia and Khorasan in large numbers. Besides Hazrat Shah Jalal of Yemen who joined an expedition to Sylhet in 1304 there were preachers and saints to almost all Zilas (districts) of Bangla. It was the crowding of these preachers and saints that secured large conversion from local Animists, Hindus and Buddhists from all strata of the local society forming a highly egalitarian population where social mobility was very high and simple.

Modern education was lacking in Bangla as it was a matter between learned scholars and their disciples, not necessarily living together but going to Tols and Makhtabs for study during fixed hours of a day. But Adam's survey of education of 1835 suggested that there were about 100,000 of them in 1833 when the population of the country was around 300 million. These Tols and Makhtabs were not state-run institutions but were developed by the teachers and the guardians of students. They also did not have standard books or subjects and the teacher of each school essentially decided as to what should be taught and possibly most of the teaching was orally conducted with some space for writing and calculating. Teaching was essentially on human dignity and technology. Islam preached that man was the 'Ashraf al Makhluqat' or aristocrat among all the creatures created by Allah and all the natural wealth of the world is there for ministering to the needs of man. The Angels were there to serve man and carry out the wishes of Allah. Man alone was free to be good or bad; he had a will of his own and there he could even be an agnostic or an ascetic. Secularism thus was the nature of Islamic teaching granting that the two fundamentals were faith in the unity of God and faith in Prophet Muhammad as the last apostle of Allah on earth. These two issues were not any matter for arguments; everything else was open to debate, consultation and consensus or agreement.

Bangabandhu was a rare breed of a great man. He was born in 1920 in a reasonably well to do family in Tungipara village in the Subdivision of Gopalganj in the Faridpur district of central Bengal. Generations back this family of Sheikh were big zamindars of the area. In the British India set up in 1772, he was the elder son of a well to do middle class family of Sheikh Lutfur Rahman and Sayera Khatun. They were four sisters and two brothers and he was the third child after two elder sisters. Fatema Begum was the eldest sister and Asia Begum was the next sister and then was born Bangabandhu. Younger to him were Abu Naser a brother and two sisters Helen and Laily. Bangabandhu was named Sheikh Mujibur Rahman by his maternal grandfather Abdul Majid. His

call name was Khoka but he was known among relations and villagers as Miabhai. His father was a Sheristadar in the Office of the Subdivisional Officer of a neighbouring Subdivision of Madaripur but he was soon transferred to Gopalganj as a vacancy occurred there. When Bangabandhu was born his father was in Madaripur and so as a young boy he lived in both Madaripur and Gopalganj. Bangabandhu was handsome and well-formed as a child and he grew up like other children in the lap of nature participating in all kinds of activities and adventures of children of his age. His education began with reading the Quran from his parents and elders and soon he had a teacher named Pandit Sakhawatullah. Bangabndhu was a small eater and he loved milk and rice with banana and was fond of rice and fish. His first School in 1927 was Gimadanga Primary School of Madaripur but two years later his father thought it better to put him into Gopalganj Public School from where he was moved to the Missionary School in Gopalganj, which had a better record of performance. At age 7 he had Beriberry and that cost him 4 years of schooling. He also had eye problems and for that he was taken to Calcutta for eye treatment and he became a patient of the most eminent eye specialist of Calcutta Dr Tossaduq Ahmed. He was prescribed heavy glasses at a young age and all his life he used these heavy glasses. His heavy glasses, thick hair and raised one finger in the right hand represented his commanding personality and the majesty of his will power which were evident even when he was a young boy.

As a young school student he was a leader and was loved by all. He was active in sports, especially in football, volley-ball and hockey. He always demonstrated his determination and courage as well as generosity and compassion for the poor. His schooling was rather long: at the beginning Beriberry cost him loss of 4 years, perhaps his eye problem took a toll so that in 1938 at the age 18 he was a student of class 8 only. In 1942 he matriculated from the Mission School of Gopalganj. He went to Calcutta in 1942 for higher education and stayed in the Baker Hostel till his graduation in 1947. Meanwhile he was a student leader but instead of leading them himself from a position of responsibility he selected the leaders who should lead them. But he could not escape all roles of responsibility and was elected the uncontested General Secretary of Islamia College Students' Union.

As a leader he demonstrated his gifted position in every possible way. His dislike for poverty and hence its removal was his primary commitment. He sincerely believed that blest with productive land and large population he had everything that was needed for a prosperous country -- his dreamland the Sonar Bangla. He based his strategy of ensuring public welfare on poverty eradication and finding work for the large manpower. His first target naturally was producing food from the vast arable land of Bangladesh, the name he coined for the country as early as 1962. It should be borne in mind that as a member of the Constituent Assembly elected in 1955 he gave this name to our territory, which was a part of Pakistan then. The next target was finding jobs for the new entrants in the work-force. At that time jobs at home were difficult to create but traditionally some section of the population - the Sylheties - had created a market for them in the United Kingdom since 1800. That year one Syed Ullah went to Scotland from Sylhet to kill Lord Lindsay who as British Collector of Sylhet had shot his father Muhammad Hadi and his uncle Muhammad Mahdi to death in 1772. But being convinced by Lord Lindsay that he was accidentally responsible for the death of his father and uncle, he became the Lord's lifelong cook and companion. In fact, it can be said that he showed the way to the reverse conquest of U. K. by the

Sylheties as the provider of their changed national diet of rice and curry in substitution of the ancient dish of fish and chips. Although migration to Great Britain by the Subcontinental citizens is not on now, the cooks from Bangladesh have the special privilege of controlled emigration to that country.

Bangabandhu was a very courageous young man with strong determination and no fear. What he considered right and just he never hesitated to take up that cause, however unorthodox or fraught with danger it was. He faced punishment from the law-enforcing authorities from his adolescent years and for about a total of eleven years in his life of 55 years he was a prison-house guest of the government of both British and Pakistani Rulers. In 1938 as a boy of 18 he had practically his first encounter with the Police. Some people were planning to protest against the visit of the Premier and his Supply Minister to Gopalganj, which Bangabandhu decided to resist and the Police picked him up and detained him for a week. As a child of 13 he had an earlier encounter with the Police but that time he was arrested for a while and released because of his childhood.

In a few months after the independence of the country of Pakistan in 1947 he moved to Dhaka and joined the Law classes in the Dhaka University. Here also he got involved in the cause of the Class IV employees of the University for higher emoluments. The University authorities with a view to suppressing the movement closed the University sine die and ordered the students to vacate the Halls and Hostels where they were residing. While the University was closed the authorities rusticated 27 students including Bangabandhu. When the University reopened these expelled students were allowed to get back to the University if they signed some bond declaring that they would not be involved in such undesirable activities in the future. All the students signed such bonds but Bangabandhu refused and never returned to it in his life. This rustication order was withdrawn years later and he was to be honoured on 15 August 1975 as an Emeritus Alumni of the University. It was on that dawn that some enemies of the nation and Pakistani agents of mercenary killers with bribes from Muammar Qaddafi, the dictator of Libya, attacked the unprotected private residence of Bangabandhu at Road 32 of Dhanmandi and gunned him down as he was descending from his bedroom on the second floor of the House. The battalion of soldiers who went to assassinate Bangabandhu were led by mercenary Colonels Rashid and Farooq. It was one Major Noor Husain who shot the father of the nation pointblank as he walked out of his bedroom to see why it was noisy downstairs. The killers were prosecuted and tried and most of them were executed. But five of the mercenary killers are still alive and two of them Col. Rashid and Major Dalim live in Pakistan and Col Noor Husain is in Canada financially supported by Muammar Qaddafi's successor in Libya.

To cite an instance of Bangabandhu's courage and determination let us recall that in 1938 the Premier of Bengal Presidency Khwaza Nazimuddin along with his Supply Minister Husain Shaheed Suhrawardy was on an official visit to Gopalganj. Bangabandhu at the age of 18 was a student of Class 8 then and he collected other students of the School and staged a demonstration in front of the School and stopped the vehicle of the visiting Premier and Supply Minister. When asked as to why they were gathered there, Bangabandhu stated that their School Hostel was in a dilapidated condition and when it rained the students got drenched by rain water leaking through the roof of the Hostel. He demanded that the Hostel should be repaired forthwith. The prayer was

favoured with a grant of Rs. 1200/ and the repairs were duly done. In this visit another momentous development was his acquaintance with Minister H. S. Suhrawardy. The Minister noted his name and asked him to see him when he would visit Calcutta next. Young Sheikh Mujibur Rahman during his visit to Calcutta next called on the great leader Suhrawardy and a life-long relationship as the Teacher and the Student was then cemented. Another instance I can cite from my own experience in possibly 1966. After the Indo Pak War of 1965, President Ayub travelled all over the country to seek support for his unwise move in the War and justify his Tashkent Agreement with India. He held a big meeting with the civil society in Dhaka where Bangabandhu was also invited. When he focused his attention on Bangabandhu the latter asked him about his logic in fighting with India for the rights of 2 lakh Kashmiris leaving the security of undefended 65 million or 650 lakh Bengalis to fate. The reply was not furnished by President Ayub but a couple of days later his Foreign Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto stated that it was agreed in Warsaw in Poland between U. S. A. and Soviet Union that India would not attack East Pakistan. Bangabandhu reacted to that statement with bitterness that to West Pakistan the limited interest of 2 lakhs of citizens of a disputed territory was more important than the security of 650 lakh Bengalis who spent days and nights not knowing when they would be run over by the much larger Indian military machine. Ayub who never liked nor met Bangabandhu before this meeting was not comfortable with the question and resented his defiant and confident style.

Suhrawardy was the leader of Bangabandhu till his mysterious death in a Beirut Hotel in 1963. Bangabandhu used to boast that he learnt politics from this great leader of Undivided India and later of Pakistan. H. S. Suhrawardy in my view was the most qualified leader of India to become the first Prime Minister of Pakistan. In my view M. A. Jinnah was fully aware of his quality but wanted an obedient Prime Minister and chose Liaquat Ali Khan instead. He became the Prime Minister of Pakistan on 12 September 1956 after having served a term as Law Minister of Pakistan in 1954. Most of the Constitution of the Federation of Pakistan that came into force on 23 March 1956 was prepared by Suhrawardy. However, with 23 members of his Party and others in the Opposition he voted against the passage of the Constitution for the three reasons that i. it did not grant sufficient autonomy to the states of the Federation in the list of subjects for the Provincial Government, ii. it gave the right of intervention by the Central Government in the name of coordination and consistency in any matter of all the three lists of subjects and iii. it did not lay down a road-map for removal of disparity within a stipulated period.

Bangabandhu and a close group of political thinkers in his circle believed in 1947 and even before that in the not too distant future East Pakistan must become an independent Bangladesh. Bangsam meaning Bengal and Assam would constitute one independent group of states in a Federal India of three groups of states - Pakistan in the North-West, Bangsam in the East and Indian Union of the rest of British India. The Princely states and other special territories had no place as independent states and they would be absorbed by the three independent states on the basis of contiguity thereof. They were hopeful that such a future map of British India would be a reality within their life-time. It is believed in many quarters that when Martial Law was declared on 7 September 1958 from Karachi, Bangabandhu would have declared immediately the independence of Bangladesh if he was physically in Bangladesh. Unfortunately he was in the plane travelling

from Karachi to Dhaka on that day. Thus the concept of an independent Bangladesh had its origin in the mind of Bangabandhu.

Bangabandhu also prepared the country to accept the concept of an independent Bangladesh. He was the founder of Bangladesh Chatra League (B. C. L.) in East Pakistan but he did not offer himself for any office of the organization that he created. He had already decided to join a political Party to oppose the Muslim League which had become subservient to the wishes of M. A. Jinnah and other leaders who settled in Karachi and West Pakistan even though there was hardly any Muslim League Provincial Government in all of West Pakistan. Ayub Khuro of Sind managed to have a fragile coalition there with support of Sir Ghulam Husain Hedayetullah. The only Muslim League leader in British India who was successful in 1945 in forming a Provincial Government, H. S. Suhrawardy was not in the good books of Jinnah and was therefore bypassed as the Prime Minister of Pakistan and instead loyal Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan of limited experience and much less brilliance was installed as the Prime Minister of Pakistan. The early death of Jinnah in September 1948 and subsequent assassination of Liaquat Ali Khan in 1953 left the country politically leaderless while India had the long leadership of Pandit Jawhar Lal Nehru for 17 years. There was the chance to get Suhrawardy even then as the Head of the Government but it was again not done. He served as a Law Minister in 1954 and became the Prime Minister in September 1956 when Pakistan was already in a mess created by the parochial bureaucrats turned politicians of West Pakistan.

Bangabandhu after making known the concept of Bangladesh began to sell the idea to the Bengalis. He was the Secretary General of the Awami League from virtually the disappearance of the founder Secretary General and the theorist of the Party Shamsul Haque in 1953. He left the office in order to tour the country and set up the Party from the grassroots and it took him more than a year to complete his mission. Very methodically he clarified the idea that he originated of an independent Bangladesh and made it intelligible and popular with the vast masses of the country. The citizens were now enthused with the idea of having a country of their own. Thus he himself performed the job of nation builders who popularize the idea of a nation-state. This was his second job in the process of developing a nation.

His third job in the nation building effort was to determine the core values of the nation and he laid them down in the manifesto that he prepared for his Party Awami League in the first general election that was held after the adoption of the Constitution of the country in 1973. He selected Nationalism, Secularism, Democracy and Socialism as the basic elements of our National Identity. Socialism was further clarified as social protection and measures for social equity. Secularism is a very pregnant term; it is not simply religious neutrality, it is more importantly the idea that the wealth of nature is for ministering it for the good of humanity. It is not simply 'dharma niropakkota' and at the same time it is broader than 'hojagotika'.

There was still a fourth dimension and that is the happy marriage of democracy and development. You have to carry the willingness of the masses and score socio-economic progress. If there is a situation when the progress will follow some hardship then you have to convince your people to accept the hardship in the hope of progress after a timelag. All these four elements to undertake

the Bangladeshi nation building. Bangabandhu had no precedent to follow, nor some initial work waiting for intensification.

Before I conclude I have one more area to cover. That is about the laws that Bangabandhu passed during his 3 years and 7 months as Prime Minister. The legislature passed 519 laws and amendments to laws including the constitutional amendments and covered almost all the areas of public concern. My favourite area is the law of the sea: it was almost a decade later that the principles of the consensus for the Law of the Sea were adopted by the global conference on the Law of The Sea. But Bangabandhu passed a Maritime Law in 1974. In 2014 we had to amend this law when our position was amicably agreed with all the Bay of Bengal coastal countries such as India, Myanmar and Thailand. We found that the great man that our Bangabandhu was, he had prepared and promulgated a basic law on Maritime affairs some 40 years ago which we had to amend only in some limited sections.

I consider it a great privilege to have known Bangabandhu for quite a long period and work for him for a while. Then years later I came to know his illustrious daughter Sheikh Hasina and had the privilege of being her Finance Minister for ten years at one stretch. I sincerely think that working with her for two consecutive terms and guided by her world leadership talents we certainly have made some progress in shaping the Sonar Bangla of Bangabandhu.

Joy Bangla and Joy Bangabandhu!

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