

Bangabandhu's 7 March Speech: Theory, Reality and Relevance

Professor Dr. Abdul Mannan Chowdhury

I had the good fortune of listening to Bangabandhu's speech delivered at Ramna Racecourse Ground (currently Suhrawardy Udyan) on 7 March 1971. Numerous people were present on the stage on that day; but the lone speaker was Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. I did not feel the necessity to know who presided over that meeting. Many slogans were raised repeatedly prior to the meeting that included: 'Valiant Bangali, take up arms, liberate Bangladesh', 'My lot, your lot, Padma, Meghna, Jamuna', 'Your leader, my leader, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib'. A pindrop silence descended on the audience in the ground numbering at least one million immediately after commencement of the speech. Bangabandhu started the speech by addressing 'My brothers', and then informed the audience, 'I have come before you today with a heavy heart'. He then said with the objective of drawing the audience's attention, 'Now, with great sadness in my heart, I look back to the past 23 years of our history and see nothing but a history of shedding blood by the Bangali people. Ours has been a history of incessant lamentation, repeated bloodshed and ceaseless tears'. The invigorated and inspired audience listened attentively to the 18-19 minute-long speech, captivated by the credibility of the speaker as well as the subject-matter. Not only did they listen, they listened with rapt attention. I recall that the zooming of fighter jets in the sky and the flight of a helicopter circling overhead could not cause the slightest disturbance in the audience's attention. Many slogans were also raised after the speech. It then seemed as if hundreds of spectators were returning home greatly satisfied after getting in their hands the desired object.

On that day, audiences like me sought a declaration, and a battle-strategy for implementing that declaration. Bangabandhu made us hear a part of his immortal poetry of freedom, 'The struggle this time is for our emancipation; the struggle this time is for our independence'. This sentence was in effect a disguised declaration of independence; and the cannons of the enemy were supposed to roar out after that. But that did not happen, as the revered speaker reined in his pronouncements, and then pursued a more tactful course.

In accordance with the pledges he made to his colleagues, the fiery students and youth leaders before coming to the meeting-venue, he put forward four demands by softening his voice and tone. He said, 'Martial law must be withdrawn. All military personnel must go back to the barracks. The way killings were executed must be investigated. And power must be handed over to the people's representatives'. In fact, it was a call consistent with the world conscience following suspension of the parliamentary session. On the other hand, he kept in focus even if partially the key constitutional and potential strategy for achieving independence.

Sheikh Mujib was obsessed with the dream of independence ever since the year 1947. He never deviated from that path. But he also had alternative plans for achieving the goal. One was a constitutional one, which was reflected best by the 6-point program. If the Pakistani rulers had accepted the conditions put forward through the 7 March speech, then he could bring about independence through a constitutional process based on the 6-points while remaining in power. He knew that the Pakistani rulers would not accept that. He therefore made a call for non-cooperation. He said, 'All the courts, offices and educational institutions of Bangladesh shall remain closed for an indefinite period from today'. And, 'payment of fees, taxes shall remain suspended till the freedom of our land is achieved – none shall pay'.

He mentioned about bloodshed from the very beginning; he wanted to make the audience understand that freedom and independence could materialise only by paying the highest price of shedding blood. He also repeated the war-strategy as well as supplementary strategy for a war, 'We shall finish them by depriving them of rice and water'. Alongside the Hindus-Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Bangalis, Non-Bangalis, he also addressed the killer army-men in the same vein as 'brothers'. He ordered the military to remain in barracks. By mellowing his tone, he said, 'You are our brothers, you stay in barracks, nobody will tell you anything'. And the next sentence was, 'But don't try to fire bullets on my chest any longer, that won't be fair'. He declared with huge self-confidence and faith, 'you shall not be able to suppress the seven crore people, as we have learned to die; therefore none can suppress us'. He instructed his fellow people, 'Please remain prepared with whatever you have'. 'Set up action committees under the leadership of Awami League at all villages, neighbourhoods, unions, subdivisions, and remain prepared with whatever you have'.

He raised the issue of blood again, 'As we have shed blood, we shall shed more blood, we shall liberate the people of Bangla by the grace of Allah'. And by adding the word 'our' instead of 'my', he said, 'the struggle this time is for our emancipation, the struggle this time is for our independence'. It is clear from here that although he did not want to declare independence directly, but the Almighty Creator actually made him utter the declaration of independence, which was desired by the lakhs of spectators. We could learn from the narratives of Pakistani spies after many years, 'Sheikh Mujib made the declaration of independence before our very nose, in front of our very eyes. We could not do anything about it'. Therefore, theoretically speaking, 7 March 1971 was the day of Bangalis' declaration of independence.

But we knew long before coming to the meeting of 7 March that the declaration of independence would not be made on that day. We knew that Bangabandhu would speak out about our aspirations very eloquently. I came to know on 28 February that the days of struggle through a constitutional process had ended. We had no other alternative other than an armed war. Bangabandhu sat with the US Ambassador Joseph Farland for talks lasting about an hour at 9 in the morning on 28 February. I learned about that after going to the Awami League office as a companion of Sheikh Moni after mid-day. I heard words of reassurance that it was possible to achieve our independence without bloodshed. Farland telephoned Bangabandhu midway during our discussion. We went outside after getting a hint. After a few minutes, Bangabandhu called us in and said, 'If Yahya Khan cancels the parliamentary session of 3 March through a statement or speech on 1 March, then it would not be possible to achieve independence without bloodshed'. Yahya announced the suspension of parliamentary session for an indefinite period on 1 March – not through a speech, but through a statement. The statement was an ordinary event for the outsiders. But for the Bangalis who had been burning in fire for 23 years, it was a life and death issue that could be resolved incrementally only through bloodshed.

When he was repeatedly speaking about shedding blood during his 7 March speech, it occurred to me that war was imminent and spilling of blood was inevitable. But the strategy of the war was also declared alongside declaration of war. The lakhs of spectators who attended took it as a declaration of independence and a call for war, and undertook their journey home steadfastly with a contented mind. It seemed as if they got the direction for their destination and the path to follow. But the day of counter-attack was spelt out by Bangabandhu in this fashion, 'If another bullet is fired, and if my people are again killed,

then I have a request for you, build up fortresses in all your houses. You have to confront the enemy with whatever you have, and even if I am unable to give you orders, block forever all the roads and ports’.

After the speech, 18 days were spent in negotiations. Then the time arrived for the formal declaration. The opportune moment came on the night of 25 March, when not one but thousands of people were killed by firing lakhs of bullets. It was our good fortune that Bangabandhu made the declaration of independence in that backdrop. The liberation war emerged out of a war of resistance. I got involved in the war leaving behind my university job. War was not desirable, but we had no other option other than war. The call of Bangabandhu resonated in our ears constantly during the war, ‘The struggle this time is for our emancipation; the struggle this time is for our independence’. Or, ‘With whatever you possess...’. This speech of Bangabandhu repeatedly reminded and inspired us about his presence during the nine months of the war. We ourselves took turns to listen to it before trainings, during trainings, and while participating in the war. The dedicated freedom fighters who emerged victorious after descending onto the combative valley of death readily listened to it as well.

During the war, this speech publicised through Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra and the printed periodicals provided us direction and refreshed us for reaching our destination. Beyond my involvement in running the war, I also worked part-time as editor, publisher and column-writer of the weekly ‘Bangladesh’. There was an effort to present the 7 March speech as a reinvigorating potion, as much as possible. There were ingredients in this speech for transforming a non-martial nation into a martial one, uniting and bringing together a nation that was hesitant and fragmented. The warriors could feel the constant presence of the commander-in-chief among them through this speech. It introduced Bangabandhu as a non-violent and humanitarian leader in the international arena. He was crowned as the poet of politics.

UNESCO has accorded this speech the status of a collective asset for mankind after many years. The Bangladesh Government has also shown it due honour. The composer cum speaker of the address has been recognised as the greatest Bangali of all times. What is needed now is to accord it the status of the greatest speech of all times.

The sagacity, farsightedness and realism in the weaving of words and sentences in that speech can still be deciphered. Bangabandhu was familiar with the international law of the United Nations against secession. He was aware about the events surrounding the fate of Biafra in Nigeria, and the views and outlook of world leaders; he was respectful about world opinion, and apprehensive about the outcome of general election in India. India’s general election was held from 1 to 10 March 1971. There were infightings and uncertainties regarding Indira Gandhi’s return to power. He therefore had to wait. He was utilising the opportunity to take preparation amid negotiations, bargains, frictions, threats-shouts, and the possibility of a blood-bath from 8 to 25 March. He could more or less bring the world opinion to his side. He united and organized the country’s people and remained in wait for any counter-attack. When he made the formal announcement of independence on 26 March, nobody felt comfortable to term that as an internal matter of Pakistan, or a secessionist movement, or unilateral declaration of independence. The war then commenced. The whole country got involved. We finally became independent and sovereign through our own efforts as well as the help of our friends.

Our political struggle had ended on 16 December 1971. The struggle for economic and social emancipation is now going on, which will probably last till eternity. Obstructions would come, setbacks would happen, but Bangabandhu's speech shall endure for generations to come, as an inspiration for overcoming those hindrances. Not only in our country, the speech shall remain relevant for the freedom and independence struggles of innumerable people across the globe. We must preserve this priceless asset of ours properly; expand its inherent message, nuance, language and connotation. The venue of the speech and the architectures must be conserved. Moreover, proper recognition should be accorded to those who were involved in its recording, conveyance, preservation, highly risky transportation and broadcast.

Almost all contiguous objectives of this speech have been achieved. With regard to relevance, its goal was to reawaken the Bangalis for freedom and independence, make them united, and motivate cum inspire them for defeating the Pakistani army through widespread involvement and a craving for self-sacrifice, and ultimately establish an independent and sovereign Bangladesh. We have achieved independence, but emancipation is still far away. The speech also articulated what Bangabandhu had meant by political, economic and cultural emancipation. Therefore, Bangabandhu's 7 March Speech still inspires and shall continue to inspire us for the attainment of the impossible from generation to generation.

Writer : Valiant freedom fighter and educationist.

Translation: ***Dr. Helal Uddin Ahmed***