**26 March: The Day of Bangali’s Freedom from Bondage**

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Some days in the thousand year-old annals of the Bangla-speaking people shall remain forever luminous and a source of inspiration for all Bangalis. These days are 21 February, 7 March, 26 March and 16 December. The declaration of independence made by the greatest hero of the Bangalis for all ages Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 26 March assumed a complete shape on 16 December 1971.

The nationality of the Bangalis has coalesced over a few thousand years from races like the Austric, Mongoloid and Caucasoid. At one time, this nation-entity became known as the Bangali race. Their habitat also came to be known as the land of Vanga. Bangla is the colloquial language of this nation-entity. The Bangla language got its preliminary shape from the Buddhist ‘Charya’ and ‘Donha’ dialects one thousand years ago. During the thousand year history of the Bangla-speaking Bangalis, many Kings, Badshahs, Sultans and Nawabs ruled this land, sometimes independently, sometimes as subordinates. The ordinary Bangalis always remained as subjects during those rules. They never became free citizens. The Bangalis became free citizens of an independent country for the first time following the victory of 16 December 1971.

Although there was freedom from the bondage of colonial rule in 1947, the Bangalis found that they were tied to a crueller colonial exploitation through the creation of Pakistan. This realization dawned on some people when they observed that the capital, central administration, and the centre of everything were located in West Pakistan despite the Bangalis making up 55 percent of Pakistan’s population. The Bangalis viewed the attempt to take away their right of language as an even ruder slap. The Bangali professors and pundits like Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, Dr. Qazi Motahar Husain and Dr. Md. Enamul Haque protested against this move. Vocal protests were also raised on behalf of the student community of Dhaka University. Then a youth leader, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman played a leading role in these protests. This dissent was floated when the then East Pakistan Muslim Chhatra League formed the ‘Language Action Council’ and called for a strike in Dhaka on 11 March 1948. Around 70-75 students were arrested during this student-strike. As the East Bengal Provincial Assembly was in session at that juncture, the Prime Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin released from jail the top leader of the ‘Language Action Council’ Sheikh Mujibur Rahman along with his compatriots on 15 March through a kind of compromise. Later, the language movement achieved fruition through the shedding of blood by martyrs on 21 February 1952.

This political subjugation of the Bangalis became intensely apparent when the cabinet formed by the Jukto-Front could not last even two months after achieving a landslide victory against the Muslim League in the provincial assembly election of 1954. The first constitution of Pakistan was framed in 1956 following 9 long years of its existence. But before any election could be held based on that constitution, Iskandar Mirza declared martial law all over the country on 8 October 1958. Then the army-chief Ayub Khan seized power from him three weeks later. Through this military rule, planned subjection and exploitation of East Pakistan assumed an even crueller shape. Almost all political leaders of East Pakistan were put behind bars. Among them, the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the first to be arrested.

The rule of Ayub Khan lasted for over one decade (October 1958 - March 1969). However, with the exception of some opportunistic individuals, the Bangali people of East Pakistan started to get organized much earlier against this colonial exploitation imposed by the military-civil oligarchy and bureaucracy of Pakistan through the establishment of Awami Muslim League on 23 June 1949.

The people of East Pakistan not only faced cultural and political oppression during the period 1947 to 1968, but also their economic exploitation reached an alarming level. About 60 percent of Pakistan’s annual export receipts, sometimes even 70 percent came from East Pakistan. But the province did not get any benefit from this income. Rather, those were passed on to West Pakistan. The average annual imports of East Pakistan on the other hand remained confined within 30 percent of Pakistan. The huge deficits in foreign trade that piled up over these two decades were met through the trade surplus of East Pakistan. This trade surplus was used in turn for massive industrialisation of West Pakistan. Besides, it was utilised for generating power, building roads and other physical infrastructures there.

It may be recalled that after the creation of the Pakistan state, annual output (GDP) of East Pakistan was 1237 crore rupees, whereas that of West Pakistan was 1209.10 crore rupees during 1949-50. These figures for the two provinces rose to 2271.30 crore rupees and 3156.30 crore rupees respectively in 1969-70. Their per capita income became 321 rupees and 546 rupees respectively at that juncture. Although the amounts may appear to be small in terms of present value of currencies, in reality they were quite big. This disparity between the two regions was created through transfer of incomes and assets of East Pakistan to West Pakistan by various ways and means. There was also a huge disparity in public cum private investments. Although the population of East Pakistan was much higher than West Pakistan, an amount of only 4,340 crore rupees was spent for East Pakistan in different sectors of Pakistan during the period 1950-70 covering the preliminary plan and three 5-year plans, whereas the amount spent in West Pakistan was 11,534 crore rupees during the period.

When the deprivations imposed on the people of East Pakistan became clearer, we saw the presence of Bangalis or East Pakistanis to be quite negligible in the massive defence forces structure built during the first 23 years of Pakistan’s existence. The headquarters of all the forces of Pakistan were in West Pakistan. About 95 percent of the Generals, Lt. Generals, Major Generals, Brigadiers, Colonels, Lt. Colonels, Majors, Captains etc. hailed from West Pakistan. There were only one Brigadier, one Colonel, one Lt. Colonel and a few Majors from among the Bangalis. Similar discriminations were also observed in the Navy and Air Force. Not only in the military bureaucracy, the civil bureaucracy at the centre was also tainted by this discrimination.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman raised the 6-points demand in Lahore on 6 February 1966 against these inhuman colonial exploitations of East Pakistan. The silhouette of two states and an outline for two economies were depicted through these 6-points. It also called for separate currencies for East and West Pakistan and maintenance of two separate accounts in the central bank, so that the transfer of assets from East to West Pakistan could be stopped. The provincial governments were also to be accorded autonomy in the area of trade and commerce. Arrangements were kept for raising the provincial militia forces. The rule by the centre was to be limited to the areas of defence and foreign policy.

As the 6-points contained the vision for two states, this proposal could not be condoned by the West Pakistani ruling coterie. They ultimately did not accept it. Following the placement of 6-points, Ayub Khan commented that Sheikh Mujib did not understand the language of logic; that is, the language of weapons would be applied for making him understand if he did not withdraw the demands.

As Bangabandhu did not agree to sacrifice the right of freedom from bondage of the Bangalis at any stage, not even in exchange for the post of prime minister, the Pakistani civil-military bureaucracy and politicians applied the language of arms on the night of 25 March 1971 precisely for that reason. The Bangalis had to sacrifice 3 million lives at the altar of independence during the nine month-long liberation war. They snatched victory through a struggle that triumphed over deaths. For the first time in the thousand year history of Bangalis, it was announced that ‘the people were the owners of the state’. Through this constitutional declaration on 16 December 1972, Bangabandhu endowed the Bangla-speaking Bangalis with real political independence for the first time in their thousand year-old annals.

The Father of the Nation returned to the country from a Pakistani prison on 10 January 1972. The country he got was a completely destroyed one, looted and empty. Bangabandhu took numerous measures swiftly for turning the land into a golden Bangla. Among those, two deserve special mention. The first one was framing an extraordinary constitution within a span of mere 10 months for putting the country on a firm political footing. Secondly, the First Five-Year Plan was formulated in order to rid the country from poverty on an urgent basis. We should not forget that 60 percent of the population of a barren Bangladesh that Bangabandhu inherited due to colonial exploitations were living below the poverty-line. Moreover, the country had no industrial base with the only exception of the jute industry. Besides, although the main livelihood in the country was agriculture, that agriculture was so neglected that annual food-grain deficit stood at 2 million tons at the end of the decade of 1950s.

Bangabandhu therefore attached maximum priority to agriculture in the First Five Year Plan, so that the country could be made self-reliant in food. After that, he put emphasis on industrial production and education. The growth that Bangladesh witnessed in the area of industrialisation during his rule of three and a half years could not be attained even after seven years following the termination of his rule. The huge economic activities initiated by Bangabandhu would have amazed any knowledgeable person. He even made progress in demarcating the maritime boundary with India, the agreement for exchange of enclaves and the land boundary pact. It becomes clear when an analysis is made of his rule that it was he who laid the foundation for today’s journey towards development of the Bangalis, although the global context was quite adversarial at that juncture. It may be recalled that the fuel prices had suddenly sky-rocketed in September 1973 due to the Arab-Israeli War. Despite these obstacles, Bangabandhu could bring to light the luminous rays for economic revitalisation of Bangladesh by the middle of 1975. He also took measures for inclusive growth of the economy. There was bumper production in agriculture due to his initiatives within August-September 1975. But before that could materialise, the agents of the defeated Pakistani enemies assassinated him along with his family members through a huge conspiracy. The country was then pushed back in all areas for a few decades once again.

It was after a lapse of two and a half decades that Bangabandhu’s daughter Desh-Ratna Sheikh Hasina assumed the charge of running the statecraft. She strove to make the country free from poverty, ensure food and shelter for all, and develop the country’s health, education and culture. This has opened up the doors of extraordinary possibilities for the Bangladesh economy during the previous decade. Bangabandhu had spoken about this economic emancipation while addressing one million people on 7 March 1971. He uttered in the last line of that speech, which is considered to be the greatest speech for independence in world history – ‘The struggle this time is for our freedom, the struggle this time is for independence’. Author : Educationist

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