**Where the Head is Held High**

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Today is the 15th of August. The Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated along with his family 45 years ago at dawn of 15 August 1975. We remember the Father of the Nation with deep reverence on the occasion of this National Mourning Day and pray for the salvation of his departed soul. We also extend our deepest respect to all those including the family-members of Bangabandhu, who were martyred on that accursed day.

We are observing the National Mourning Day this year amid a calamitous time owing to the deadly outbreak of a disease spread by novel coronavirus. Just as we are observing the birth centenary of Mujib by shelving all formalities, similarly we shall recall the Father of the Nation gently after adhering to all health-related regulations. Because of his farsighted leadership, we are today proud citizens of an independent country.

The lines of the poem ‘Where the Mind is without Fear’ composed by the Nobel Laureate Poet Rabindranath Tagore about 120 years ago appeared to be a reflection of Bangabandhu’s life. He could embrace death with fearless and silent sophistication even during the accursed dawn of 15 August 1975; while staying at his own residence on Dhamondi’s road-32 during the terrifying night of 25 March 1971, he could declare the independence of Bangladesh resolutely without any fear in the first hours of 26 March, “This may be my last message, Bangladesh is independent from today”; he could proclaim in a thunderous voice at Dhaka’s the then Racecourse Maidan (now Suhrawardy Udyan) in the afternoon of 7 March 1971, while helicopters of the Pakistani forces hovered above, “The struggle this time is a struggle for our freedom, the struggle this time is for our independence”; he could start a hunger strike while in jail on 16 February 1952 with the demand for making Bangla the principal state language of Pakistan.

Therefore, no Bangalis need to repeat what Rabindranath had hinted by saying “The great man is coming”, as that was fully synonymous with the brief but colourful life and mesmerising personality of Bangabandhu, which was full of struggles, suspense, and empathy for the liberation of humans. Bangabandhu is today recognized globally as the greatest Bangali of a thousand years due to his founding of an independent nation-state for the Bangalis and endowing them with a cohesive national identity.

The renowned British journalist David Frost had taken a long interview of Bangabandhu after coming to Dhaka in January 1972. At one stage, he asked the question, “[In the first hours of 26 March 1971) As you left your home at 32, Dhanmondi, did you think you would ever see it again?” In reply, Bangabandhu had said, “I didn’t, I thought this was the last, but if I die as a leader with my head up, at least they will not be ashamed; but if I surrender to them, my nation, the people of my country could not show their face to the world. It is better that I die keeping the prestige of my people”.

In reply to another question of David Frost, Bangabandhu had said, “A man who is ready to die, nobody can kill him. You can kill a man physically, but can you kill a man’s soul? You can’t. It’s my faith”. To another of Frost’s question, Bangabandhu responded by saying, “I love my people first. I know that a human being has to die one day. Therefore, every human should die like a courageous man”.

Bangabandhu was similarly calm, tranquil, bereft of worries and fear before the killers of 15 August 1975. He embraced death by holding his head high. Bangabandhu’s memoirs written in jail have now been published. His books ‘Unfinished Memoirs’, ‘Prison Diaries’ and ‘The New China as I Saw’ should be essential reads for the children of our new generation. I discern many unknown facts of history from these valuable books. We are forever grateful for the tireless effort and inspiration extended by Bangabandhu’s wife Sheikh Fazilatunnesa Mujib for her supportive role in the writing of these books as well as her important contributions toward our national life. Begum Mujib has indebted the whole nation forever through her timely and sagacious advices to Mujib during various critical junctures of the nation.

We observe strange similarities in so many instances of human lives. The book ‘Unfinished Memoirs’ was written by Bangabandhu while in jail. Its preface was written by his daughter Sheikh Hasina on the 7th day of the grief-stricken month of August 2007, while sitting in the dark room of a sub-jail set up in Dhaka. His daughter Sheikh Hasina has been providing leadership to this country’s 160 million people by upholding the ideals of his father. In the preface to the book ‘Unfinished Memoirs’, Sheikh Hasina has written, “My father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s most precious times were spent as a prisoner. Those intolerable and secluded prison-days came up when he waged movements for realizing the rights of the masses. But he never compromised. Neither did he fear the gallows. The people were the inner driving-force of his life. The joys and sorrows of the masses made him cry. His lone vow in life was to bring smiles to the sad faces of Bangla’s inhabitants by building a Golden Bangla. For that reason, he had continued his lifelong struggles as an idealistic and self-sacrificing leader in order to realize people’s rights by shunning all happiness, comforts and luxuries in his own life, ultimately bestowing the Bangali nation with independence”.

Bangabandhu was always in favour of justice, truth and the fundamental rights of the common people throughout his life. What can be more powerful than the strengths of truth and justice? Therefore, Bangabandhu could say in 1948 while a student of Dhaka University, “We shall continue our movement till Bangla is made the principal state language of Pakistan. Whatever the eventuality, we are ready for that.” That tune of courage was embedded in that articulation. The Bangalis one day raised their clenched fists in protest for realizing the right of their mother language. The young students’ leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was taken to jail for the first time in newly established Pakistan on 11 March 1948. Since then, Bangabandhu had to spend over 12 years inside prisons during 24 years of the Pakistani colonial era. But whether staying in jail or outside, Bangabandhu’s constant worry was for overall freedom and welfare of the Bangalis.

The undisputed leader of the Bangalis, the leader of the masses Bangabandhu took oath at the huge Ramna Racecourse ground along with other elected members of the national and provincial assemblies on 3 January 1971 with the objective of remaining faithful to the 6-point and 11-point programs. Held before hundreds of thousands of people, the last sentence during the oath-taking of the elected people’s representatives on that afternoon was, “We shall build up a strong resistance movement against any quarters or evil forces who would dare to put up hindrances to our programs, and we shall always remain prepared for an uncompromising struggle by making any sacrifice in order to establish the rights of the common people”.

Pragmatic and wise, Bangabandhu could correctly realize that these elected representatives would probably not get the opportunity to take oath on the floors of the Pakistani National and Provincial Assemblies. Therefore, by taking oath on an open field alongside the elected members in front of the common people, he announced preparedness for making all kinds of sacrifices by upholding the rights of the Bangalis; he could carry forward our struggle for freedom a few more steps by dint of his captivating leadership.

Later, on 7 March 1971, when Bangabandhu declared before a million-strong people at the same spot of taking oath that the payments of fees and taxes would remain suspended, public and private offices of the country would remain shut, the High Court and lower courts, educational institutions and the secretariat would remain closed, and no money would be sent to West Pakistan until the Bangalis achieved freedom, then the countrymen could comprehend holistically the significance of Bangabandhu’s statements and utterances at different junctures before and after the oath-taking ceremony. When Bangabandhu shouted, ‘Build up fortresses in all your homes’, then the people took all preparations for frontal combats and the liberation war. Bangabandhu had mentioned about the frontal combats at one stage after the announcement of the 6-points – the charter of freedom for the Bangalis.

The 7 March speech of Bangabandhu was the guiding light of the battlefield freedom fighters and the mystical mantra of the countrymen during the nine months of the liberation war. Whenever the 7 March speech delivered by Bangabandhu’s thunderous, hypnotising and emotional voice was broadcast by the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra (radio station of independent Bangla), the hairs on the bodies of the Bangalis used to stand erect in a literal sense. They used to recall the revolutionary utterances of Bangabandhu, “The struggling Bangalis are invincible, resolute. The people of Bangla were not born to accept the unjust lordship of others, or to become their colony and market”.

When the Pakistani invading forces carried out barbaric genocides and mass-rapes, perpetrated various crimes against humanity like indiscriminate burnings of villages and ridding those of males at the behest of the Pakistani rulers, our guerrilla fighters then stood their grounds and achieved victory by fighting with all their might. The architect of this victory Bangabandhu had prepared his followers including these valiant heroes in this way over a long stretch of time. This can be articulated in the words of the poet Sukanta, “Bravo Bangladesh, this world/ Watches in amazement;/ Razed and burnt to ashes and death/ Even then would not bow down her head.” Bangabandhu has left us the enduring legacy of a political philosophy that makes us hold our head high. We should always remember that. Even by tolerating everything including jails, tortures, injustices and unfairness, the teaching of Bangabandhu’s uncompromising leadership had been to embrace self-sacrifice.

We can feel the patriotism, the intense rhythm of human love, and the euphoria of liberation from all chains whenever we utter the name of Bangabandhu. The liberator of the Bangalis – Bangabandhu will forever remain luminous as a symbol of inspiration, faith, belief and sanctuary among the Bangali nation. The philosophy of life of Bangabandhu will remain forever as the ever-vigilant sentinel of our independence and sovereignty.

The relationship between Bangabandhu, Bangladesh and its people is an everlasting one, because Bangabandhu is immortal in the real sense. Even though the person Mujib could be killed, the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu cannot be assassinated. He will remain forever alive in the midst of the Bangali nation. He is the eternal kin of the Bangalis.

The main objective of Bangabandhu’s politics was the freedom of all exploited people of the world including the Bangalis, and overall progress of the world. He gave up his life after waging a struggle for freedom of the people, their mother-language, and the liberation of world-humanity.

The universal nature of Bangabandhu found expression through his many speeches-addresses delivered at various international conferences. As the head of state and government of a newly independent country, everything revolved around Bangabandhu whenever he attended any international conference. While attending the 20th Commonwealth Summit a few months before his death in Kingston of Jamaica on 2 May 1975, Bangabandhu expressed the optimism during his speech, “The Commonwealth states will work for a new international economic order based on justice and inter-dependence before it is too late.” While addressing the general assembly of the United Nations on 25 September 1974, Bangabandhu presented the then global reality in this manner, “Our humanistic sense of unity and the reawakening of our brotherhood can change this situation. The present challenge is to utilise the power of logic for building a just international economic order. This should entail the assurance of sovereign rights for all countries over their own natural resources”.

The late president of the United States John F. Kennedy had termed the younger generation of that country as the most valuable asset. Bangabandhu used to love the youths, held them in great affection, and had faith in them. During the first national conference of Bangladesh Awami Jubo League held on 4 February 1974 at Dhaka’s Paltan Maidan, Bangabandhu placed emphasis on the emergence and flourishing of an enthusiastic and self-confident youth community based on self-cleansing, self-belief, self-restraint and self-criticism. For ridding the independent country of corruption, Bangabandhu asserted with his characteristic sincerity, “Make a pledge, you shall fight against corruption.” Bangabandhu had spoken about honesty, patriotism, love for the people in all his speeches. He spoke about bravery and uncompromising attitude, dutifulness, and discharge of work responsibly. Not only during the mournful month of August, it is our responsibility to show our respect and reverence for Bangabandhu during all the days of the year. Offering respect to Bangabandhu implies embracing his philosophy of life, thereby keeping our own lives pure and clean.

It is expected that people who are dedicated to the study of Bangabandhu would continuously cleanse themselves. Bangabandhu had himself said, “It is not possible to cleanse oneself without self-criticism. I shall surely make mistakes, I am not an angel, neither am I a devil. I am a human being, I shall make errors. If I make any mistake, I should remember that and rectify myself. If I can rectify myself, that will be an accomplishment”. (19 June 1975)

To Bangabandhu, the men of gold were those who were refined, polished, pure, benevolent, averse to jealousy, and having a sense of proportion. Bangabandhu had also given a formula for building the Golden Bangla. He had repeated many times in his life, “I need golden people for building a golden Bangla.” Bangabandhu’s lifelong conviction and aspiration was to see all citizens become people of gold in a republic whose national anthem started with the sentence “My Bangla of gold, I love you”.

On the occasion of this National Mourning Day during the birth centenary of Mujib, come, let us make a pledge to change ourselves into men and women of gold by becoming united in order to transform the grief of the assassination of Bangabandhu along with his family-members into strength. Let the ideals of Bangabandhu and the spirit of the liberation war remain as our guide. Glory to Bangabandhu.

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