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The Role and Vision of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the Making of the Bangladesh Nation State

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Introduction

New nation states traditionally emerge out of a prolonged historical process where both political circumstances and a variety of heroes and character actors play a critical role. In this article I argue that, while a number of important figures left their footprints on the journey to Bangladesh, it fell to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to emerge at the right time and in the right place, to play the role of torch bearer who led the Bengali people to their journey's end. In this defining historical role, he drew upon those various forces that serve to make up a nation and wove them together to form the intricate and durable fabric of a nation state that could withstand the most savage assaults to tear it asunder. Such a heroic task demanded great political skill, an impeccable sense of timing, a capacity for inspirational leadership, and a people who were made ready to move forward with Bangabandhu to take that historical process to its conclusion.

When we attempt to deconstruct the actions of a leader in giving direction to the historical process, it is no less important to also understand the process through which such a leader gives direction to the struggle. In the case of Bangabandhu, we observe that his own deeply held values influenced his actions. But, his actions and experience, in turn, were no less important in shaping his values. Bangabandhu's awareness of the need to forge a sense of identity within the people he wished to meld into a nation, his exposure to the vicious forces of communalism which were ruthlessly deployed to undermine his people's sense of identity, the importance of democratic mobilization on a mass scale to sustain the struggle against military oppression, and the need for broadening his vision to include not just the quest for a nation state but to also construct a just society, all came together to shape his vision. When Bangladesh eventually emerged as an independent state, Bangabandhu ensured that his vision, derived from both belief and experience, would be incorporated into the founding principles of the national state. Nationalism, secularism, democracy, and socialism eventually served as the four pillars upon which the Bangladesh state was to be constructed and were accordingly inscribed in our constitution.

This article is structured around four themes:

- The quest for national identity
- Democratizing the struggle
- The emergence of the Bangladesh nation state
- A vision for Bangladesh

The Quest for National Identity in Bangladesh

Competing National Identities in Bangladesh

Bangladesh emerged out of the state of Pakistan, which was born in 1947 to provide a homeland for the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent. Within the state of Pakistan, the people of East Pakistan found themselves in a peculiar dilemma. They had become part of Pakistan by proclaiming their Muslim identity, but at the time of the partition of India in 1947, 22% of the population of East Pakistan were Hindus, who expected to enjoy all the rights associated with a shared Pakistan nationality that were available to the majority Muslim population. Thus, having acceded to a Pakistan state defined by its religious identity, the political coherence of the polity in this region demanded that it recreate itself as a secular state where religious identity was no longer acceptable as the basis of national identity. This point was well recognized by Jinnah in his famous speech before Parliament, proclaiming Pakistan's secular character and defining religion as a personal matter, having nothing to do with the affairs of state.

However, the issue of the position of religious minorities in Pakistan applied largely to East Pakistan since West Pakistan had solved its own dilemma by “cleansing” itself of its own religious minorities. Also, since Pakistan had already come into existence based on religious identity, this could not be an available foundation for nationalism in East Pakistan. This was consistent with the logic of the Lahore Resolution which, in effect, sought regional autonomy for the North West and Eastern provinces of India, and not religious autonomy for the Muslims of India. Thus, in post-1947 East Pakistan, the national identity which came to the surface was defined by its territorial separation both from India and from West Pakistan. Since the fight for Pakistan was built around the demand for autonomy of the two Muslim majority states of North West and Eastern India, this demand for autonomy remained the central driving force of Bangladeshi politics throughout its tenure in the Pakistan state.

Within a united Pakistan, from the first day of its new nationhood, Bengalis found that their commitment for regional self-rule, as demanded in the Lahore Resolution, had been usurped by the central government of Pakistan. Had this central government been a democratic one, allowing the demographic majority of the Bengalis within the Pakistan state to be reflected in the shared exercise of political power at the center, the lack of the promised provincial autonomy for East Pakistan may have proved more politically tolerable. However, the denial of autonomy for this province, in practice, meant the exercise of central power by a non-Bengali dominated ruling elite drawn from the feudal classes of West Pakistan, allied with a military and bureaucratic elite from which Bengalis were virtually excluded.

This denial of shared power at the center for Bengalis, as well as their demand for provincial autonomy, was compounded by the assault on the cultural identity of the Bengalis and was associated with the proclamation by Pakistan’s first Governor General, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, of Urdu as the single national language of Pakistan. Urdu was a language of certain provinces of India, where it was spoken by both the Muslim and Brahmin elite. Urdu was, in fact, the mother tongue of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, derived from his birth in Allahabad; ironically, Mohammed Ali Jinnah could barely speak Urdu, and could neither read nor write the language. This quite fallacious association of Urdu with a Pakistani identity recreated a sense of Bengali identity for the Bengalis of the new state. They felt that this ethnic identity had been subordinated to their Muslim identity.

Bangabandhu engaged himself in the struggle for establishing Bangla as a national language as early as the beginning of 1948. He was part of the movement which persuaded Khawja Nazimuddin, the first Chief Minister of East Bengal, to commit to the Provincial assembly of East Bengal that Bangla would be used as one of the state languages for purposes of administration. This initiative by Bangabandhu preceded the arrival and declaration by Jinnah, on the occasion of his first and only visit to East Pakistan in March 1948, that Urdu would be the national language. Bangabandhu was again actively involved in resisting this *ex-cathedra* declaration by Jinnah on the issue of language.

The Denial of Democracy and its Economic Deprivation

Political domination and cultural subordination of Bengalis was compounded by the denial of democratic access to the economic opportunities being created by the Pakistani state. In the 1950s and ‘60s, the state provided the dynamic of development in most recently independent countries, including Pakistan. A West Pakistani dominated central government used its monopoly of power to channel state resources and to manipulate economic policies, which served to accelerate the development of West Pakistan at the expense of East Pakistan. For example, a national import policy was used to channel East Pakistan’s export earnings from jute, the country’s principal source of foreign exchange receipts, to finance the industrialization of West Pakistan. In return, the Eastern province was to serve as a protected market for manufacturing exports from West Pakistan. Within East Pakistan itself, the exercise of administrative power was monopolized by non-Bengali bureaucrats and deployed to promote the growth of a non-Bengali business elite who came to dominate the modern economic sector of this province. It should here be kept in mind that from the earliest days of Pakistan, business activity in East Pakistan in relation to exports, internal and inter-wing trade, banking, insurance, and eventually private industry, had come to be dominated by non-Bengalis.

This denial of political rights and economic opportunities to the Bengalis of East Pakistan provided the dynamic of the demand for democracy and self-rule for that territory, constituting the central motivating force of Pakistan’s politics for the 24 years of its existence as a unified state. To sustain this denial of democratic rights to Bengalis demanded a projection of a Pakistani identity that would supersede a Bengali identity. It was argued that an economically and politically strong West Pakistan, ruled by an enlightened elite, should be tolerated by Bengalis in the name of Pakistani nationhood. To mask this usurpation of the spirit of the Lahore Resolution, the Pakistani ruling elite had to revive the notion of Pakistan’s religious identity. Virtually from the first year of Pakistan’s existence, this

elite maintained that the assertion of a Bengali identity was un-Islamic as well as anti-Pakistan. The reality of Pakistan's politics was that its rulers have always been driven by secular appetites for power and wealth, while religion has provided a convenient smokescreen behind which democratic rights of the people were subordinated.

The political struggles of the 1960's in East Pakistan were thus driven by four key goals. They are the:

- restoration of democracy, whereby Bengali people could share power in the central government through drawing upon their demographic majority through the franchise
- realization of self-rule through the acceptance of the principal of autonomy for East Pakistan
- channeling of resources appropriated by the central government towards the development of East Pakistan
- recognition of *Bangla* as an integral part of the culture of East Pakistan and as one of the two national languages of Pakistan.

These four political themes had a territorial base located in this Eastern province. Thus, the concept of democratic assertion coalesced with the notion of a separate identity for Bengalis. The physical separation between two wings of Pakistan had inspired the idea that Pakistan was a state where two economies, even two societies, co-existed within one polity. However, as the political aspirations of the two regions of Pakistan began to diverge, the notion of two polities also began to assert itself in the consciousness of Bengalis. A Bengali identity, associated with language and culture, within a state with differentiated economies, polities and societies and located in a country geographically separated by the landmass of India, established a unique sense of separateness amongst the Bengalis in Pakistan. This has few parallels in any other state encapsulating multiple national identities. Much of the political struggles of the people of East Pakistan, starting from the Language movement of 1952 to the democratic movement of the 1960s, were driven by these four salient concerns of the Bengalis of East Pakistan.

Bangabandhu and the Shaping of a National Identity

This emerging sense of distinctiveness between the people of East and West Pakistan did not automatically evolve into a sense of national identity because the Bengalis of Pakistan still thought of themselves as Pakistanis. A major political effort was necessary to weave together these various notions of separateness within the consciousness of Bengalis into a sense of shared nationhood. A number of historic political figures such as H.S. Suhrawardy, *Sher-e-Bangla* Fazlul Haq, and Moulana Bhashani had already played a vanguard role in the political struggles of the people of East Pakistan, but the catalytic act of political entrepreneurship needed to forge a sense of nationhood for Bengalis was provided by Bangabandhu. From the period in 1966 when Bangabandhu launched the *Six Point Programme* to the defining two-year period from March 1969 to 1971, in the course of an election campaign of unique historical significance, Bangabandhu played a dominant role in the struggle for self-rule for Bengalis. In this task, he was reinforced by the dedication of his senior colleagues, younger activists in the Awami League, as well as other secular political forces, including individuals within and outside politics. All these forces were brought and had to be held together by Bangabandhu during the two-year political campaign; it had to ensure that any division among Bengalis could not be used by the Pakistani elite to deflect the demand for self-rule for East Pakistan.

Democratizing the Struggle

The Six Point Programme for Autonomy

Identity has to be consolidated through a process of democratic struggle. In this case, the mobilization around the demand for Bangla as a national language played a critical role in the national struggle. However, Bangabandhu recognized that it was around issues of the people's livelihood that the sense of deprivation rankled most deeply. Deprivation was made visible in the disparate levels of living between the people of West and East Pakistan. It was also visible in the disparity in levels of development resulting from the inequitable allocation of public resources in favor of West Pakistan.

Bangabandhu played a critical role in institutionalizing this growing sense of deprivation. In focusing on the issue of economic deprivation, Bangabandhu could draw upon a body of work on issues of regional disparity, presented both as academic papers and more popular presentations, by a group of Bengali economists, mostly associated with Dhaka University. Some of these economists had already propagated the idea that Pakistan should be

conceptualized as a state with two economies, with unique problems that should be addressed through a high degree of devolution of policy making, and resource mobilization, to the respective regional governments. Bangabandhu drew on these arguments regarding disparity and devolution in preparing and presenting his historic *Six Point Programme* before the people of Pakistan in the spring of 1966.

Here, again, timing was critical. Pakistan provoked and fought a war with India in the last quarter of 1965, and narrowly saved itself from military defeat by signing a peace treaty with India brokered by the USSR in Tashkent. During this short war, East Pakistan was left completely defenseless and was informed by Foreign Minister Bhutto that its defense had been outsourced to China. This was a fiction in 1965, and proved so again in 1971, with more fatal consequence for Pakistan. But Bhutto's message confirmed to the people of East Pakistan the longstanding duplicity of the argument of Pakistan's ruling elite that East Pakistan's export earnings were being used to build a strong Pakistani army that would assure East Pakistan's defense by destroying the Indian army in the West during any military confrontation.

The *Six Point Programme* provided the constitutional parameters for complete autonomy for the two regions of Pakistan. Four of the *Six Points* focused exclusively on the devolution of economic power. The *Six Points* reflected, for the first time, a formal recognition by a major Bengali political leader that political co-existence between East and West Pakistan, even within a democratic central government, was not a feasible political option for the people of East Pakistan. Only through a devolution of political power, policymaking, and administrative authority as well as command over economic resources, could the two provinces of Pakistan hope to survive within a single nation state.

Interesting to note, the *Six Point Programme* had a historical precedent in the *Cabinet Mission Plan* of 1946, based on a political mission sent by the Labor Party government, which had been elected to power in Great Britain in 1945. This mission offered a constitutional formula for post-independence India to resolve the Congress-Muslim League conflict which had stalemated negotiations for India's independence from British rule. The *Cabinet Mission* presented a constitutional formula before India's political leaders, based on a devolution of central power to three component regions of North West India, Central, and Eastern India. The *Cabinet Mission* plan was based on a recognition of a separate political identity dividing the Muslim and Hindu community in India, and thus chose to devolve power to the regions where each of these communities was respectively in a majority. This formula was initially challenged by the Congress Party because of the extreme degree of autonomy to be ceded to the regions and was subsequently repudiated by the Muslim League.

The partition of India, leading to the emergence of Pakistan as a separate nation state, thus originated in a breakdown in the constitutional negotiations over the extent of devolution under a prospective federal constitution in an independent India, and not because the Muslims were determined to proclaim themselves as a separate nation state. Ironically, Pakistan again broke up and East Pakistan emerged as a nation state, initially because of the reluctance of Pakistan's ruling elite to accept a new devolutionary federal constitution for Pakistan based on the *Six Point Programme*.

The *Six Points* were projected by the Pakistani leadership as a thinly veiled blueprint for secession by East Pakistan. Strangely enough, the Pakistani leadership, including Bhutto, never engaged in any serious dialogue with the Awami League regarding the implications of operationalizing the *Six Points*. They attempted to have such talks in the last few days of united Pakistan. The more substantive concern of Pakistan's ruling elite originated in their reluctance to relinquish their absolute power to rule Pakistan.

The attempt to suppress the mass political mobilization that the *Six Point Programme* brought about throughout East Pakistan in the summer of 1966, led to the arrest of Bangabandhu, along with most of the Awami League high command. He was later charged with inspiring the infamous Agartala Conspiracy and tried for high treason. Bangabandhu was kept in jail for over two years. It took a mass political uprising in both wings of Pakistan, culminating in the downfall of Ayub Khan, to obtain the release of Bangabandhu and his colleagues.

The failure of the Roundtable talks with the opposition leaders of Pakistan eventually compelled Ayub Khan to hand over power to General Yahya Khan at the end of March 1969. In turn, Yahya Khan had to seek a political accommodation with the opposition in both wings of Pakistan by promising national elections. Even though Pakistan was to be governed by Martial Law until the promulgation of the new constitution by the newly elected parliament, this arrangement was accepted by Bangabandhu. He was confident he could win an overwhelming mandate from the people of East Pakistan to frame a constitution based on the *Six Points*.

The Role of the 1969-71 Election Campaign in Forging a National Identity for East Pakistan

It was the election campaign of 1969-71 which came to play a decisive role in forging a sense of national identity for the Bengalis out of the separateness which underwrote the *Six Points Programme*. It was believed that such an overwhelming electoral demonstration of support would persuade the military *junta* of Pakistan that rejecting and suppressing the universal demand of the people would jeopardize the very foundations of the Pakistan state. This turned out to be a prophetic assumption on the part of Bangabandhu.

To build an overwhelming democratic mandate behind *Six Points* demanded total support from the people of East Pakistan, manifested in the polling response of the voters. Historically, all attempts to resist political domination by the Pakistani elite had been frustrated by divisions amongst the political leaders of the Bengalis in the country. Bangabandhu sought to go over the heads of his political rivals in the region and seek a comprehensive popular mandate for his *Six Points*. To build this popular unity, it was necessary to forge a common identity for the Bengalis. The main message of Bangabandhu's political campaign after March 1969 was to persuade Bengalis that not only were they separate in their social, political, and economic life from Pakistan, but that the Bengalis of East Pakistan were one people who should vote together to proclaim the right to live a separate life from West Pakistan.

The construction of this mass unity required a focus on identity politics, as well as a capacity to project this identity into the consciousness of every villager, and not only the urban masses in East Pakistan. It was not enough to build this shared identity within an urban, educated middle class, who had hitherto been the principal reference point for political activity in East Pakistan. It was essential to persuade the masses of people across the nation that all Bengalis were being politically oppressed by a Pakistani ruling elite. The key message, encapsulated in a political poster put up by the Awami League workers in every village in East Pakistan, *Purba Bangla Shoshon Keno* (why is Eastern Bengal a wasteland), itemized in simple language the statistics of disparity (and oppression) between East and West Pakistan. The role of the Awami League as a party should not be underemphasized in the delivery of this simple message to the Bengali people. Bangabandhu's message to the voters did not automatically land on their doorstep but required large scale party organization and dedicated work to carry the message of Bengali nationalism into the consciousness of every household of Bangladesh, rural and urban. The role of Tajuddin Ahmad, General Secretary of the Awami League and the right hand of Bangabandhu, as well as of other key figures and dedicated workers in the party should be recognized in this process.

From a Political Leader to a National Icon

Over this two-year period, Bangabandhu emerged as the unchallenged leader and the embodiment of the national will of the people of "Bangladesh". During this period, he graduated from being the leader of a political party into a national icon for the Bengalis of "Bangladesh". Wherever he went, the entire population of the area, men and women, old and young, assembled just to obtain a glimpse of this near mythic figure. Without his presence, the Awami League would have still won the election, but it was Bangabandhu who ensured the overwhelming support of the voters for the Awami League candidates because his person transcended his party and came to represent the aspirations of all Bengalis. This emphasis on the role of Bangabandhu should not detract from the growing receptiveness of the people to his message of self-assertion over a long period of time, and the groundwork of other Bengali leaders and activists in building this popular consciousness.

The total support of the Bengalis of East Pakistan for Bangabandhu was manifested in the election of December 1970, when the Awami League not only won 167 out of 169 seats contested from East Pakistan but also 75% of the popular vote. More to the point, the party won large pluralities in virtually every constituency where it was successful, thereby minimizing the contribution of such events as the cyclone of November 1970 in determining the size of the majority votes.

The Election of December 1970 and its Implications

The political outcome of the December 1970 election had given the Awami League an absolute majority in the National Assembly of Pakistan, as well as total control of the Provincial Assembly, and had clearly demonstrated that the voters of East Pakistan had unreservedly endorsed the *Six Point Programme* of the Awami League. The election had proclaimed to the world that Bengalis had forged a collective national identity, and that they had invested Bangabandhu with total authority to realize self-rule for Bangladesh. Thus, what had originally been a political

demand for constitutional autonomy had culminated in planting the seeds of a nation state in the hearts and minds of the people of “Bangladesh”.

These far-reaching implications, which had arisen out of the election campaign and its outcome in December 1970, were not fully appreciated by the ruling elite of West Pakistan, including Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Neither Bhutto nor Yahya had foreseen the decisive electoral victory of the Awami League, having been comprehensively misinformed by Pakistan’s Intelligence agencies about the facts of political life in East Pakistan. Both, however, recognized the threat to the bastions of power that had dominated the Pakistan state since 1947, implicit in the overwhelming electoral victory of the Awami League in East Pakistan and the authority commanded by Bangabandhu over the people of that territory. Both Yahya and Bhutto deluded themselves that the election results were an urban, middle-class phenomenon, fueled by Bengali sentimentality and influenced by the adverse reaction to the November 1970 cyclone.

Until both Bhutto and Yahya met Bangabandhu in Dhaka in early 1971, they believed that, like previous Bengali leaders before him, he could be persuaded to compromise his *Six Point* demand through inducements of power sharing at the center. The West Pakistani leaders failed to recognize the seismic changes which had been registered in the self-awareness of the people of East Pakistan between March 1969 and March 1971. They did not realize that as a result of the elections in December 1970, the *Six Points* had become a minimalist demand for a constitutional solution to the unfolding political crisis in Pakistan. As a consequence of this new-found sense of nationalism in East Pakistan, voices were being raised after the elections, even within the Awami League, for full political independence.

Yahya’s conspiracy with Bhutto, forged in their historic meeting in Larkana, in January 1971, occurred after Yahya’s visit to Dhaka and meeting with Bangabandhu, and put in motion the forces which culminated in the emergence of Bangladesh as a nation state. Bhutto’s sudden rhetorical assaults on the *Six Point Programme*, shortly after he met with Bangabandhu in Dhaka at the end of January 1971, suggested that mischief was afoot. A series of one-on-one meetings between Bhutto and Yahya in February, further elevated Bengali apprehensions of a conspiracy. Yahya’s decision of March 1, 1971, to, *sine die*, postpone the inaugural National Assembly session scheduled to take place in Dhaka on March 3, 1971, was viewed by all Bengalis as the end result of the conspiracy to deny them their democratic mandate registered in the elections of December 1970.

The Emergence of the Bangladesh Nation State

From Non-cooperation to Self-rule: March 1971

Bangabandhu’s response to the decision by Yahya to postpone the Assembly session was to call for a political mobilization throughout East Pakistan through a program of non-cooperation. The popular response in Bangladesh to his call registered a measure of support which remains without precedent in the history of democratic and liberation movements. The non-cooperation movement was spontaneously joined not only by the people of East Pakistan, but by the administrative and judicial machinery, the forces of law and order, as well as the business community. The non-cooperation movement eventually graduated into a formal shift of allegiance of the machinery of civilian government in East Pakistan away from the central government of General Yahya Khan to the authority exercised by Bangabandhu over the region. Eventually, the entire machinery of the state, which was located outside the military cantonments of East Pakistan, unanimously came forward to pledge their loyalty to the leadership of Bangabandhu.

This recognition of Bangabandhu’s assumption of power in East Pakistan was formally recognized by the Pakistan military, which was then ruling the province, and the country. Lt. General Yakub Khan, the then Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA) and Acting Governor of East Pakistan, declared in his letter of resignation dispatched to Yahya Khan on March 5 that,

“The control of the administration had now passed on to Shaikh Mujib who was now de facto head of government and controlled all public life. I am convinced there is no military solution which can make sense in the present situation. In consequence I am unable to accept the responsibility for implementing a mission, namely a military solution, that would merely lead to large scale killing of unarmed civilians and would achieve no sane aim, it would have disastrous consequences.”

By March 5, 1971, Bangabandhu had found himself to be the unchallenged ruler of East Pakistan, with the entire machinery of administration there behind him. In no other independence movement has such a shift of loyalty emerged prior to the formal recognition of national independence.

Bangabandhu's historic declaration of March 7 was, therefore, not only directed as a call to action for the people, but also as a message to Yahya that Bangladesh was now *de facto*, independent. When Yahya Khan finally flew into Dhaka on March 5 to initiate negotiations with Bangabandhu, he would no longer be dealing with a subject, but with an equal who also enjoyed the advantage of having a democratic mandate.

The non-cooperation movement was so total and pervasive that the economy and infrastructure of East Pakistan nearly collapsed, with life threatening consequences for the people of the region. Thus, it was necessary for Bangabandhu to escalate the movement from non-cooperation to self-rule in order to restore economic activity and maintain law and order.

Bangabandhu had to establish a rudimentary policymaking apparatus that could take decisions about the selective revival of the economy and establishment of administrative authority. A small cell was established, where a number of Bengali professionals met every day with bankers and bureaucrats to discuss a variety of operational issues. These included steps needed to restore banking operations, revive exports, pay salaries of public employees, collect public revenues, and resume the public distribution of fertilizer and the operation of tube wells in the largely agrarian economy. It was also essential to keep the transportation system within East Pakistan functional. Suggested administrative action to be taken in the name of the Bangabandhu regime were communicated every day by Tajuddin Ahmad and Kamal Hossain to a team of Bengali bureaucrats, who had been elected by their colleagues to liaise with the Awami League and act as conduits for transmitting the orders of Bangabandhu to the administration.

Many *ad hoc* problems of an administrative, political, or commercial nature which needed urgent resolution were directly presented to Bangabandhu at his private residence in Road 32, Dhanmondi, which, in effect, became the seat of authority in East Pakistan during March 1971. Delegations of businessmen met with Bangabandhu and selected colleagues to seek emergency decisions about how they should run their business during this period. The machinery of law and order was restored as the police began to take orders from Bangabandhu and to work in cooperation with Awami League political workers to restore a sense of security to the people of East Pakistan. While there were instances of persecuting non-Bengalis, the general law and order situation during March was remarkably stable, and Bangabandhu periodically declared that non-Bengalis should be extended appropriate and full protection.

The Emergence of a Sovereign Bangladesh

By March 15th, a functioning *de facto* administration and political authority began operating under the direction of Bangabandhu and under the administration of key Awami League leaders. However, it is arguable that Bangabandhu's authority was not just *de facto* but could be termed legal since his leadership enjoyed electoral legitimacy. This exercise of political and administrative authority by Bangabandhu over the entire geographical area what was to become Bangladesh was more than enough to meet the criterion for sovereign recognition by a foreign government.

This exercise of authority by Bangabandhu throughout the territory was projected before the world through a large contingent of the international press who were present in East Pakistan to cover what appeared to be the emergence of a new state. Bangabandhu was, at the same time, communicating with government leaders who were believed to exercise some leverage over the Pakistan government, to seek their assistance in persuading Yahya to accept the logic of the democratic process in East Pakistan. The world press regularly projected Bangabandhu's message to the ordinary people of these countries so that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, during March 1971, became one of the most globally visible personalities in the *Third World*.

When Yahya Khan arrived in East Pakistan in mid-March to resume political negotiations for a constitutional solution to the crisis, Bangabandhu was not only sovereign in the region, but commanded more authority in his own territory than Yahya did in West Pakistan. If such negotiations between Bangabandhu and Yahya had been carried out on the basis of the political realities which prevailed on the ground in East Pakistan, a peaceful solution to the political crisis might have emerged. Such a solution may have ended in a loose confederal arrangement which may have eventually led to a peaceful parting of Bangladesh from Pakistan.

Political rationality had, unfortunately, long since been abandoned in the negotiating arsenal of the Pakistani leadership. Yahya, goaded by Bhutto and some of the *hawks* in the *Junta*, persisted in his delusion that a show of force would bring these middle-class Bengali leaders to their "senses", or that some of them would come forward

over the dead bodies of their colleagues to seek a compromise with the military. The *Junta* did not believe that the Bengalis had the political cohesion, courage, tradition, or military capacity to sustain a war of national liberation. Until the end they could not comprehend that a nation state had been forged within East Pakistan during March 1971, and people there would be willing to fight spontaneously to protect their sovereignty. In their mind, both Yahya and Bhutto believed that the worst that could happen is that Pakistan would leave Bangladesh as scorched earth, where the Bengalis would have to pay in fire and blood for their presumptions of sovereignty. As part of his own fallback position, Bhutto believed that if Yahya could not survive the loss of Bangladesh, then he (Bhutto) would emerge as the new *Shahinshah* (ruler) of what was left of Pakistan.

As it transpired, Yahya used the cover of political negotiations to move troops into East Pakistan to build up enough force to suppress the forces of Bengali nationalism. Following Yahya's instructions, such a military option had already been drawn up by the Chief Martial Law Administrator in East Pakistan as early as in the first week of February. This plan was then known as *Operation Blitz*. This act of force was put forth as a reassertion of the political authority of the central government of Pakistan over a province of Pakistan. But by the time Yahya gave his final orders to General Tikka Khan to launch *Operation Searchlight*, an updated version of *Blitz*, his military code word for committing genocide on Bengalis on the night of March 25, 1971, it was Pakistan which was the usurper of authority from the democratically established sovereign state of Bangladesh. Thus, the armed assault of the armed forces of Pakistan on the Bengali people was seen as an act of military aggression by one sovereign state on another. This was how Bengalis viewed the assault on their sovereignty, and indeed how much of the world viewed the military aggression against East Pakistan.

During the month of March 1971, East Pakistan's sense of national consciousness evolved into an awareness of their sovereign status through the assertion by Bangabandhu of the right to self-rule. Thus, the concept of national consciousness, which was essentially an abstraction, consolidated itself through a political process which culminated in the emergence of an independent Bangladesh.

By March 25, 1971, Bangladesh was already a sovereign state in the minds of its citizens. The proclamation of independence by Bangabandhu on March 26th in response to the military assault on the Bengalis ordered by Yahya Khan, was a juridical act recognizing a *de facto* and legitimate authority. The post-liberation debate over who declared independence of Bangladesh is thus a largely irrelevant debate. It is self-evident to anyone that the operative issue is not who declared independence, but when Bangladeshis asserted their own independence, which they did during the month of March in 1971.

Bangabandhu and the Legitimacy of the Liberation Struggle

The legitimacy derived from the unchallenged authority of Bangabandhu was crucial to the sustainability of the liberation war. At the time that independence was formally declared on March 26, 1971, Bangabandhu commanded what almost no leaders of independence movements have commanded during their phase of struggle with an imperial authority, the freely given and overwhelming electoral mandate to speak for Bangladesh. Such a mandate was not available to Gandhi, Nehru, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Ben Bella, Nkrumah, Nyerere, or even to Mandela, all of whom obtained full electoral legitimacy only after independence. In the eyes of the world, Bangabandhu had already exercised *de facto* authority over the territory of Bangladesh when he proclaimed Bangladesh's independence. It was this universally recognized authority that persuaded Bengali judges, bureaucrats, and diplomats to extend their support to Bangabandhu and for Bengali members of the armed forces of Pakistan to break their oath of service and pledge their allegiance to the liberation of Bangladesh.

When the people of Bangladesh took their message to the international community after March 1971, they had no difficulty in commanding support from ordinary citizens across the world, even when their governments remained lukewarm in their support of the sovereignty of Bangladesh. It was this popular groundswell of support for Bangladesh's liberation struggle, and against the genocide of the Pakistani army, that compelled some national governments to demand restraint from the Pakistan government.

Today the genocide unleashed by Yahya and the Pakistani Army would have been condemned by many governments and there would have been a global outcry for the trial of Yahya and Tikka Khan as war criminals. In 1971, most governments, with rare exceptions, still believed that a state, however weak its popular legitimacy, could massacre its own citizens with impunity. Thus, in 1971, Bangladesh needed to invoke the support of the people of these countries who would, in the normal course of their lives, have never heard of Bangladesh. The global campaign of Bangladeshis could also reach out to the elected representatives of many countries to exercise pressure on their

governments to stop the genocide and cut off aid to Pakistan. That people around the world took notice of the atrocities inflicted on the people of Bangladesh, owes in no small measure to global recognition given to Bangladesh during March 1971 and the visibility and stature of Bangabandhu as the unchallenged leader of Bangladesh.

The Unique Basis of Bangladesh's Nationhood

The emergence of Bangladesh must, thus, be understood as a unique historical event, where a nation emerged out of an intensive process of political mobilization, evolving through successive phases. The final phase of the emergence of Bangladesh was the most difficult because it required that a sense of national identity be brought to maturity within a sovereign state. This demanded an extraordinary leader who could be accepted by all Bengalis as the symbol of their nationhood, such that they could not only be persuaded to proclaim their sovereignty, but also remain united and willing to defend it.

At the same time, the emergence as a sovereign state required the complete involvement of the people of Bangladesh. Thus, the consolidation of a sense of national sovereignty in the minds of the people of Bangladesh was not the skin-deep process one associates with formal declarations of independence where ordinary people find one day that white-skinned rulers have been replaced by brown *sahibs*. In the case of Bangladesh, national sovereignty was inculcated into the consciousness of the masses through a deliberate political process. It was the mass character of this consciousness building that provided the underlying strength to the nationalist movement and gave enormous strength to the assertion of national sovereignty during March 1971 by Bangabandhu and the people of Bangladesh.

During March 1971, Bangladeshis at all levels, drawn from all faiths and social backgrounds, participated in the mobilization, repudiating the authority of Yahya Khan. In every village, a sense of Bangladesh's sovereign status took root and people became psychologically prepared to defend their sovereignty. In many places, villagers spontaneously came forward to interdict communications with the cantonment which might be used by the Pakistani army to move troops and participated in moves to deny supplies to the cantonments.

In those days of March 1971, citizens were acutely conscious of the threat of a military attack by the Pakistani army in the name of restoring their authority. Even within the cantonments, preparations for an attack were visible to all Bengali members of the armed forces. The Bengali rank and file, along with their officers, had, within their hearts and minds, proclaimed their loyalty to a sovereign Bangladesh under the leadership of Bangabandhu. Some officers were already in touch with Bangabandhu, and other Awami League leaders in the cantonments and were preparing themselves for an eventual confrontation with the Pakistani army.

When the Pakistani army launched its aggression on the people of Bangladesh on the night of March 25, 1971, the entire population spontaneously rose up to resist this, despite the absence of any coordinating military direction. Two years of political mobilization by Bangabandhu had made them conscious of their identity. The events of March 1971 had made them a nation. The intense process of national consciousness building throughout March 1971 politically equipped a people with no tradition of armed struggle or even the use of arms to take up arms and be prepared to shed their blood to defend their newly acquired sovereignty.

A Vision for Bangladesh

The Shaping of the Vision

The liberation struggle had a defining impact on Bangabandhu's vision for an independent Bangladesh. The struggle had inculcated a sense of national identity into the consciousness of all Bengalis. Ironically, the genocide by the Pakistani army, which did not discriminate between Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or Christian, further reaffirmed that sense of nationhood. Bangabandhu recognized the importance of sustaining this national consciousness by reemphasizing the importance of secularism, where religion could no longer be abused for political gain, and definitely not to commit mass murder.

The centrality of democracy was no less important in defining Bangabandhu's vision. But his idea of democracy embraced the inclusion of the masses of Bangladesh who had provided both width and depth to the liberation struggle, as well as the strength to withstand the might and extreme violence of the Pakistani army. In post-liberation Bangladesh, Bangabandhu accordingly envisaged a democratic order which would not be purchasable by plutocrats.

In the final analysis, all these dimensions of his vision were subsumed in his vision for a more just society. In reaching out to a mass constituency, which could draw in the working classes of the urban areas as well as the rural masses, Bangabandhu was conscious of the need to offer these new elements in his support base something more than only the prospect of self-rule. He had, at an early stage of his political journey, been made aware of how the Pakistan movement had been hijacked by a Pakistani ruling elite made up of landlords, an aspirant business elite, the armed forces, and the senior bureaucracy.

As a student campaigner for Pakistan, Bangabandhu's own concept of the struggle extended beyond the exclusively communal perception of the Pakistan state. For Bangabandhu, the struggle for self-rule for Bengali Muslims was as much a struggle of the landless peasants and emerging Muslim lower middle class against the landowning elite of Bengal, who were mostly Hindus but also included Muslims, as well as the emergent non-Bengali Marwari classes which had hitherto dominated commercial life in Bengal. Bangabandhu was determined that his political struggle for self-rule, which had come to depend heavily on the engagement and commitment of the Bengali masses, should not, as in 1947, be appropriated by an aspirant middle class, hoping to take over the business empires of the non-Bengali bourgeoisie who had dominated commercial life in Bangladesh.

Bangabandhu's Vision for a Just Society

What most people tend to overlook is Bangabandhu's life-long empathy with the common people. In his own life and his campaign at the grassroots level to organize the Awami League party, he acquired first-hand exposure to the unjust and exploitative nature of the society in which the common people lived out their lives. From his earliest writings in his memoirs and prison diaries, he speaks of socialism as a possible social order to end this injustice. For Bangabandhu, the idea of a just society was not just about ending the exploitation of the Pakistan elite, but of eradicating it from the social order of a self-ruled Bangladesh.

When I was invited by Bangabandhu to work with Tajuddin Ahmed and Kamal Hossain to prepare the Awami League manifesto for the 1970 election campaign, Bangabandhu specifically alerted us to prepare a document which would construct a more egalitarian, exploitation free, society. In response to his mandate, working with fellow economists such as Nurul Islam and Anisur Rahman, we addressed distributive issues in the manifesto through proposals for institutional interventions based, *inter alia*, on public ownership, as well as worker participation in management and rural cooperatives. The belief among Bengali progressive circles that Bangabandhu was a mouthpiece of the aspirant Bengali bourgeois was put to rest once the 1970 manifesto was published, and subsequently validated by Bangabandhu's own actions when he assumed power. Needless to say, his increasing orientation towards building a just society generated misgivings among Bengali business and bureaucratic circles who entertained a quite different vision of a self-ruled Bangladesh. But it was Bangabandhu who personally piloted his manifesto through the Awami League high command, and eventually at the historic Council meeting of the Awami League in July 1970.

Both after the Awami League victory in the 1970 election, and after the liberation of Bangladesh, the expectation was that Bangabandhu would now moderate his views. It was presumed that he would revert to the traditional role of all post-colonial leaders, who make extravagant promises during the course of the struggle, but then settle down to deploy state resources and policies to build up an elite class in the image of the social order that had been left behind.

When the same economists who were associated with Bangabandhu in operationalizing his *Six Point Programme* and preparing the Awami League manifesto were invited to take on the role of Members of the Bangladesh Planning Commission, his mandate to us remained unreconstructed. His first words to Nurul Islam and me, when he invited us to set up the Planning Commission on January 12, 1972, was that he wanted to pursue a socialist policy. Bangabandhu's vision of socialism was expressed essentially as a metaphor for his vision of a just, exploitation free, more egalitarian, society.

Bangabandhu's compulsion to repudiate the inegalitarian, unjust society he had left behind in Pakistan was made stronger through the experience of the liberation war. He was conscious of the fact that the masses had been mobilized by him to participate in the struggle for self-rule. They had paid the heaviest price by directly taking up arms in the liberation war, and as the principal victims of the genocide inflicted on the people by the Pakistani army.

Bangabandhu believed that a monstrous injustice would be perpetuated if we were to construct a society built on privilege, where the fruits of independence would largely be appropriated by an aspirant elite, while the working people would once again end up at the wrong end of the socio-political scale. There is no scope in this article for me to elaborate on how far Bangabandhu's vision of a just society was realized or was realizable. I have discussed this,

in part, in the recently published second volume of my memoir, *Untranquil Recollections: Nation Building in Post-Liberation Bangladesh*. Whatever may have been Bangabandhu's vision for a just society, his assassins' bullets drew down a dark curtain over his vision.

Contemporary Perspectives on Bangabandhu's Vision

Since August 15, 1975, society and economy in Bangladesh have evolved in a direction which remains rather contrary to Bangabandhu's vision. In recent years, the economy has indeed demonstrated robust GDP and export growth, significant infrastructural development, considerable improvement in human development indicators, and a reduction in poverty. All such developments certainly demonstrate the many advantages we have realized through our independence, and particularly in recent years. But there is little argument that, over the years, Bangladesh has emerged as a more inegalitarian society. Growing concentration of wealth has metastasized into political power, and Bangladesh's elective bodies and regulatory institutions have been subjected to elite capture. What we need to explore in the days ahead is how far our high growth and impressive infrastructure development can only be realized within the framework of a hierarchical social order, based on a privileged business elite.

Perhaps more relevant to our commemoration of Bangabandhu's centenary and for honoring his vision, is the importance of exploring what can be done to reconcile our development ambitions with the mission of the founding father to build a just society. Such a perspective could serve as one of our guiding principles to set the direction for Bangladesh on its 50th anniversary, on its path towards a developed economy, genuinely democratic polity, and a more just society.